

£1.25

Vol 128 No 7  
July 2008

# The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

## Islamic countries mount further attacks on free speech in Europe

LAST month saw Muslim countries mount their biggest attack on free speech in Europe since the publication of the Danish Mohammed cartoons by *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005.

An offensive “against acts that are offensive to Islam” was launched by Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary-General of the 56-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), who warned there seemed to be a growing “campaign of hate and discrimination” against Muslims by a small number of individuals and organisations.

In a speech to a conference in Kuala Lumpur on improving ties between Muslims and the West, Ihsanoglu praised Western nations for criticising acts such as the recent release of an anti-Koran film by a Dutch politician Geert Wilders, but said more should have been done.

“Mere condemnation or distancing from the acts of the perpetrators of Islamophobia will not resolve the issue, as long as they remain free to carry on with their campaign of incitement and provocation on the plea of freedom of expression,” he said.

Earlier this year, the release of the film *Fitna* by Wilders sparked protests by Muslims for showing images of terror attacks interspersed with text from the Koran.

Ihsanoglu also urged the media to reject “proponents of hatred and intolerance totally”, citing other incidents such as the republishing in Denmark of cartoons considered an insult to the Prophet. “It requires a strong and determined collective political will to address the challenge,” he said. “It is now high time for concrete actions to stem the rot before it aggravates (the situation) any further.”

Ihsanoglu did not suggest what action should be taken.

At the conference, Malaysia’s Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi appealed to world leaders to work together to nurture “common grounds in the interest of our common agenda of peace.”

“This biased view (of Islam) in the West persists, and, I must admit, it is not helped by the misguided actions of a discredited few from the Muslim side,” Abdullah said.

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s *Daily Times* reported that Pakistan was demanding that European Union countries amend laws

regarding freedom of expression in order to prevent offensive incidents such as the printing of blasphemous caricatures of the Prophet and films like *Fitna*.

A six-member high-level delegation comprising officials from the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Law visited the EU headquarters in Brussels to point out that the recent attack on the Danish Embassy in Pakistan might have been a reaction against such “blasphemies”.

And in a barely-veiled threat, they told the EU that if such acts against Islam were not controlled, more attacks on the EU diplomatic missions abroad could not be ruled out.

Following the recent publication of a new Mohammed cartoon in the Norwegian newspaper *Adresseavisen*, Pakistan’s

(Continued on p4)

### Muslim hair stylist awarded damages for ‘hurt feelings’



Bushra Noah v Sarah Desrosiers: See p7 report.

Police investigate N Ireland MP’s hateful outburst – p3

Atheist power forces an apology from a Christian car dealer – p5

Blasphemy laughed out of existence at London celebration – pages 11 and 11

‘I’ll email you when I get to heaven’ – p13





## Freethinker editor Barry Duke reflects on 'alcoholic' crisps and inhumane slaughter

BEFORE settling down to write this month's column I had around 1,000 reasons for not taking Islam seriously. Now, having just discovered that Turkish Delight and Smarties – the orange ones only, mind – are haram (forbidden) that figure has risen to 1,001.

The Turkish Delight and Smarties information came to light when I was examining what thoughts were going through the collective Muslim mind regarding alcohol used in the production of some Walkers' Crisps.

Yep, you read that right. Alcohol. In crisps. Not nearly enough to lead to slurred karaoke singing and impaired vision – no matter how many bags of the things you binge-crunch. But enough to send a ripple of horror through the ranks of Muslims who have snacked on them ... or were perhaps contemplating doing so.

Now the best places to find Muslim opinions on matters as grave as Turkish Delight, Smarties and crisps are the huge number of Islamic internet forums where, it would seem, clearly confused Muslims congregate in great numbers to feast off each other's frustrations, fears and insecurities; reinforce their victimhood status; and demand clarification from "scholars" or "clerics" on a wide variety of issues to which normal human beings would not give so much as a passing thought.

Concerning the alcohol content of Walkers', a number of people left messages on the Revival website messageboard.

One quite sensibly pointed out: "I don't know the rules on this, but alcohol used in the production of dry goods (and it is only the flavouring) would evaporate so you wouldn't be ingesting more than the tiniest traces. I think you'll find there's far more alcohol in an orange or tangerine."

To which another replied: "Best to ask a scholar about this instead of making our own verdicts which may (or may not) lead to sin." Intelligent enough to use a bloody computer to leave a message on the internet, but so stupefied by Islam as to worry that crisps may "lead to sin".

Pathetic! And yet another example of the paralysing effect religion can have on a person's intellect.

But it seems that the experts too are clueless, and cannot agree among themselves. This is probably due to the fact that crisps were beyond the lunatic hallucinations of the Prophet Mohammed, who would anyway have been far too busy throwing fits, pillaging, raping and beheading infidels to write a rule about the introduction of alcohol to potatoes sometime in the distant future.

Earlier this year, under the headline "Muslims divided over Walkers' alcohol

ingredients", *Muslim News* reported that the President of the Halal Food Authority, Massood Khwaja, "was not able to give us a clear answer regarding its view on the controversy as he was 'still awaiting to speak with Walkers' product development team'".

The Halal Monitoring Committee, on the other hand, said that; due to "a difference of opinion between the main schools of thought as to its permissibility", the HMC would not be able to certify Walkers' Crisps as halal (permissible), and neatly passed the buck by telling consumers to seek the opinions of local scholars.

This statement was echoed by Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, Chair of the Mosque and Community Affairs Committee for the Muslim Council of Britain, who said "My advice would be, if people are not sure, to speak to their local imam."

Is it any wonder that so many messed-up Muslims are seething with anger and resentment when their asinine, rule-obsessed religion makes it impossible for them to even reach for a bag of crisps before finding out whether or not a fatwa exists declaring it haram?

I pointed out once before that I regarded Islam more as an obsessive compulsive disorder than a religion. The Walkers' Crisp Controversy serves only to confirm that view.

CONTRAST, if you will, the howls of protest throughout the land when Muslims discovered that trace elements of ethyl alcohol can sometimes be found in certain varieties of Walkers' Crisps with the almost total silence that has greeted news that more and more halal meat is finding its way into the British food chain.

Are Brits waving placards outside Parliament, demanding that ritually-slaughtered meat be kept out of schools, hospitals and prisons and the like?

No – although they damn well ought to be raising their voices in fierce protest.

A few weeks back the BBC Radio 4 consumer affairs programme, *You and Yours*, reported – in an overall tone of approval – that an increasing number of supermarkets in the UK were stocking ritually-slaughtered meat to sweeten their Muslim clientele.

The programme contained not one word of criticism of this barbaric form of slaughter.

I was outraged. I blasted off an e-mail to the BBC to complain about this glaring omission, and a week later was somewhat mollified to learn that *You and Yours* had received a substantial number of emails and letters from people deeply concerned that halal meat was entering our food chain.

According to *You and Yours*, halal meat

"accounts for around a quarter of the UK's meat trade".

When Muslims make up only three percent of the UK population it follows that a good deal of this meat must be finding its way into institutional catering operations and food outlets not trading as halal establishments.

This is quite unacceptable.

Tim Buckley of Suffolk was one of those who complained to the BBC: "Nowhere was the point put that halal meat produce involves unnecessary cruelty. The animals have their throats cut when conscious ..."

And Dale Godfrey said: "I think many people who quietly note the rise of halal meat, especially in public catering, would be horrified if they realised what this meant in terms of animal welfare.

*You and Yours* spoke to Massood Khwaja, he of the Halal Food Authority, who gave an assurance that "slight electronic stunning" is permitted in halal slaughter. "The animal is only stunned to be immobilised. The animal should not be dead prior to slaughter (*sic*). All the flowing blood should be drained out of the animal because flowing blood is not allowed in Islam."

He pointed out that a Muslim prays over the animal at the point of stunning and slaughter.

So that's OK then.

But *You and Yours* also made clear that "not all animals are stunned prior to slaughter" and pointed out that "there is a debate in the Muslim community as to what constitutes halal meat. Some groups like the Halal Monitoring Committee do not consider stunned animals to be truly halal."

It is legal to kill unstunned animals in European Union countries because religious exemptions have been put in place to accommodate the dietary requirements of Muslims and Jews.

This is outrageous, and just another sickening example of how groups can get special treatment simply by playing the religion card.

*You and Yours* asked the Food Standards Agency whether there was a requirement to indicate that meat is halal, and this is the answer it received: "If a meat product is labelled and marketed to a consumer as halal, the animal would have to have been slaughtered using this method. If the meat is not intended for the halal market, there is no law that requires the method of slaughter to be on the label."

This no doubt means that institutions such as hospitals, schools and prisons would rather ALL their meat be halal. This would be more cost-effective than having to cater separately for Muslims, but such a policy is a clear violation of the rights of those who do not want to consume halal produce.

So what do you do if, like me, you are passionate about curry, but don't want halal meat? The choice is to prepare your own, bite on the bullet and go vegetarian – or walk into a restaurant and loudly demand pork!



## Police called in to investigate N Ireland MP's hateful outburst

NORTHERN Ireland's First Lady is being investigated by police following allegations that she committed a hate crime by launching a blistering attack on homosexuality.

In an outburst on a live phone-in on BBC Radio Ulster last month, DUP MP Iris Robinson, the 57-year-old wife of First Minister Peter Robinson, referred to gays as "disgusting, loathsome, shamefully wicked and vile".

Reacting to news that a local man, Stephen Smith, had been viciously attacked by a gang of youths because he was gay, she suggested that he should consider seeking help to turn heterosexual. She called homosexuality "an abomination" but said she knew of a cure. "I have a lovely psychiatrist who works with me, and his Christian background is that he tries to help homosexuals – trying to turn them away from what they are engaged in," she said.

Immediately after the broadcast Andrew Muir, 31-year-old co-ordinator of the pressure group Gays and Lesbians Across (County) Down, made a formal complaint to police.

He said: "They were reluctant to pursue the matter until I told them it was covered by the hate crimes legislation and I would not be leaving until they took a statement from me."

Playing the victim card, Robinson told the BBC: "I am defending the word of God. "I think at the moment there is a witch-hunt to curb or actually stop or prevent Christians speaking out, and I make no apology for what I said because it's the word of God."

Mrs Robinson pointed out that her criticism was directed at the practice of homosexuality, rather than homosexuals themselves. "I was very careful in saying that I have nothing against any homosexual," she said. "I love them; that is what the Lord tells me, to love the sinner and not the sin."

Meanwhile, the psychiatrist Robinson alluded to repeated his ludicrous claim that he can turn gay people straight. Dr Paul

Miller, a consultant psychiatrist and senior health advisor to Mrs Robinson, said he was working with a "small number" of gay people who were trying to become straight.

Dr Miller – who is a former member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Board and is an honorary clinical lecturer at Queen's University Belfast – claimed that he had seen hundreds of homosexual people become heterosexual.

"It is possible – I know these people and I've seen the outcome of the work in their lives so to say that it's not possible is simply not true," he said.

But the Royal College of Psychiatrists rejected Dr Miller's claim and said that it was not possible to change a person's sexual orientation.

Dr Phillip McGarry from the Royal College of Psychiatrists said: "People are born with sexual preference – that is a fact of life. Treatments that purport to change someone's sexuality can be harmful and there is no evidence that they can be successful."

Last night a spokesman for NIAMH said: "The Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health is committed to improving the mental health and well-being of every citizen in Northern Ireland and does not support discrimination or prejudice based on race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

"The Association believes that every person has the right to choose where and how they get emotional and psychological support, personally or professionally."



Iris Robinson MP

## Loony of the Month prize goes to Catholic exorcist Fr Jeremy Davies

THE *Freethinker's* Booby of the Month prize goes to Father Jeremy Davies, 73, exorcist of the Archdiocese of Westminster, who warned that atheism was becoming a key cause of demonic influence in the world. "Spirits inspiring atheism are those that hate God," he declared.

The Luton-based Catholic priest – a former medical doctor who was ordained in 1974 and who has been an exorcist since 1986 – also claims that "a contagious demonic factor" is among the causes of homosexuality.

According to *The Catholic Review*, in a new 56-page book called *Exorcism: Understanding Exorcism in Scripture and Practice*, Father Davies writes that Satan had blinded secular humanists from seeing "The dehumanising effects of contraception and abortion and IVF (*in vitro* fertilisation), of homosexual 'marriages,' of human cloning and the vivisection of human embryos in scientific research."

Father Davies also said atheism was largely to blame for entrapping people in states of "perversion." But, hey, heterosexuality can also be bad: "... Heterosexual promiscuity is a perversion; and intercourse, which belongs in the sanctuary of married love, can become a pathway not only

for disease but also for evil spirits."

He called occult practices such as magic, fortune-telling and contacting the spirits of the dead "direct invitations to the devil which he readily accepts." Father Davies said soft drugs, yoga for relaxation and horoscopes for fun, were just as dangerous.

And in a statement bound to enrage Muslims, he lumped Mohammed in with

### Abu Hamza to be deported

HOOK-handed Muslim hate preacher Abu Hamza has lost a court battle to block his extradition from Britain to the US where he faces terrorism-related charges. He had said the extradition request was founded on evidence obtained by torture. In dismissing the challenge, last month Sir Igor Judge said: "The 2003 Extradition Act must be applied and our extradition commitments honoured."

Abu Hamza, who is serving a seven-year jail term for inciting his followers to murder non-believers, is accused of attempting to set up a terrorist training camp in Oregon.

Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, and the Rev Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. They were, he said: "Heretical prophets and false messiahs who led their followers to a demonic bondage of conscience."

He also warned Catholics to be wary of what he called the "idolatrous demonic side" of Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism and the druidism that had its origins in ancient Britain.

His book also spells out the degrees of demonic influence a person may experience, ranging from temptation and sin to obsession, then possession, with perfect possession being the gravest and rarest form that usually entails a deliberate commitment to evil on the part of the person involved.

The priest, though, wisely refrained from linking the giant American Procter & Gamble Corporation to the Devil. The last people who did that were ordered to pay P&G almost £10-million in damages. A group of Amway employees had claimed that P&G's logo – a bearded, crescent man-in-moon looking over a field of 13 stars – was a symbol of Satanism.



## Islam's war on free speech

(Continued from p1)

ambassador to Norway, Rab Nawaz Khan, told TV2: "What is terrorism? Terrorism you commit an act, and thereby invite a strong reaction. And that reaction when it gets into spin it is uncontrollable. Similarly this hurts the feelings of the Muslim community all around the world, and therefore I think in a way it is an act of terrorism."

He went on to warn about the possible repercussions: "It also puts the lives of the Norwegian citizens in danger around the world. You must not forget that there are a number of Norwegian companies working in Pakistan."

And in a bizarre attempt to have Wilders tried in Jordan for insulting Islam, some 30 Jordanian media outlets last month sought court action against the politician.

The organisations, which set up a group called "Campaign for the Prophet", said in a statement that they had lodged their complaint with the Amman prosecutor.

One of the group's lawyers, Tarek Hawamdeh, said that the action was "based on the (film's) violation of publishing laws which ban insults against religions and attacks against Islam and the prophets", punishable in Jordan by a jail term of three years.

The lawyer said that he hoped the campaign would lead to a prosecution of Wilders In Jordan, which was among the first to condemn the film on its release. Some Jordanian MPs called for Amman to break diplomatic relations with The Hague.

Commenting on these developments on the Family Security Matters website, Los Angeles art dealer Leslie Sacks pointed out that previously, on January 18, 2006, "the enormously influential Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi had demanded that the United Nations act in accord with purely Islamic, Sharia-based laws and conceptions of blasphemy and punishment.

"Qaradawi is furthermore spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and the European Fatwa Council. Noticeably, his anti-Jewish pro-terrorism fatwas include the re-conquering of Spain and the imposition of Sharia, by all necessary means, on all humanity."

Qaradawi, who has been refused entry to the UK, much to the annoyance of the Muslim Council of Britain, said: "I support and hereby call, together with the OIC, for the United Nation's adoption of a law against blasphemy and strongly urge all to do likewise. Let us, however, use this golden opportunity to democratically broaden the scope of this law to give it more effect, more bite, more universality."

Urging the West to "call Islam's bluff", Sacks wrote:

"Let us require this broad all-inclusiveness to be adopted by the United Nations as well as the OIC and all related Muslim groups, councils and governing bodies that support this Blasphemy Law, this Universal Standard. Let us include specifically and irrevocably laws that disallow blasphemy against not only Muslim but also the Christian and Jewish Gods as well as their prophets, their messengers, holy books and holy places. Let us include the Buddhists, Baha'i and all peoples and sects (some Muslim) who are the subject of terrorism and oppression, hate speech and aberrant education. Let us even include in the wide swathe of these laws, Muslim women, those perennial second-class citizens, inhabitants of the invisible World of Burqas.

"This is a great deal, a wonderful trade off. No Left-wing, multicultural, pro-Palestinian anti-American believer could fail to support this all-inclusive fair and balanced legislation.

"I would absolutely support giving up our right to Danish cartoons and discussions of Mohammed (not usually central to most Westerners' lifestyle in any event) in return for the dismantling or reformation of the majority of the madrassas, educational forums and media outlets in the Muslim world and beyond.

"Imams and teachers, policies and agendas, books and media would naturally have to be replaced as they are often permeated by anti-Jewish, anti-Christian, anti-non-Wahhabist people and ideas. The dynamited Buddhist cliff carvings in Afghanistan, those lost wonders of the ancient world, could certainly be rehabilitated as an initial pilot project by these imams.

"Hundreds of thousands of these professional blasphemers would be without jobs, without an honourable means of support. It is only fair that we offer, as a corollary to this new and ground-breaking United Nations law, job re-training facilities for all these newly unemployed Jihadists.

"We can ensure Hamas gets to grow pure and spiritual tulips in the empty hothouses of Gaza for Amsterdam's flower markets; we can send Ahmadinejad and his cohorts to Kyoto to practise the ancient art of the Japanese tea ceremony with its inspiring atmosphere of peace, tranquility, and love for all mankind.

"The more I think about it, the better I feel. Imagine the hundreds of billions of dollars we could save in reduced Homeland Security and US military expenditure. With the help of the passionate OIC and their Wahhabist brethren we could legislate against hate speech everywhere, all the time, for everyone. And I won't even miss my Danish cartoons."

## Evangelists target Muslim area

A RAG-TAG of Christian evangelists converged on Birmingham last month after claims that two ministers were ejected by police for attempting to convert Muslims. Christian Voice supporters accused West Midlands Police of turning the predominantly Muslim area of Alum Rock into a no-go zone for non-Muslims.

Stephen "Stay a Virgin, Marry a Virgin" Green, National Director of Christian Voice, said: "We are coming to preach the Gospel and to show West Midlands Police that they cannot create a Muslim ghetto for the Gospel.

"If a West Midlands Police Community Support Officer and a police constable told the preachers to leave the area that sounds like a no-go area and they need to be told that this is just wrong.

"I'm sure that most Muslims would agree with having freedom of speech."

Earlier this month, evangelists Arthur Cunningham, 48, and Joseph Abraham, 65, claim they were told by Naeem Naguthney, community police support officer (PCSO), that they were committing a hate crime by preaching, and risked being beaten up if they returned.

Abraham claimed: "The officer said we



Christian barmpots Cunningham, left, and Abraham

were 'off-limits'. He said we were committing a hate crime, but who we were hating, exactly, I have no idea."

Cunningham, a fellow American Baptist missionary, added: "This is a free country and to suggest we were guilty of a hate crime for spreading God's word is outrageous."

West Midlands Police are currently holding an internal review following a complaint from the two preachers. A spokeswoman said: "West Midlands Police would like to reiterate its reassurance to all communities that there are not any 'no go' areas in the West Midlands Police area and we will defend the rights of all individuals' lawful rights to freedom of expression and religion."



## Atheist power forces an apology from Ford dealer

A CALIFORNIAN Ford dealer has been forced to apologise after his company, Kieffe & Sons, broadcast a deeply offensive, anti-atheist radio commercial.

The ad said: "Did you know that there are people in this country who want prayer out of schools, 'Under God' out of the Pledge, and 'In God We Trust' to be taken off our money?"

But did you know that 86 percent of Americans say they believe in God? Since we all know that 86 out of every 100 of us are Christians, who believe in God, we at Kieffe & Sons Ford wonder why we don't tell the other 14 percent to sit down and shut up.

"I guess I just offended 14 percent of the people who are listening to this message. Well, if that is the case then I say that's tough, this is America folks, it's called free speech. None of us at Kieffe & Sons Ford is afraid to speak out. Kieffe & Sons Ford on Sierra Highway in Mojave and Rosamond, if we don't see you today, by the grace of God, we'll be here tomorrow."

The transcript of the ad tore across the world, via the internet, and Kieffe soon found himself bombarded with angry emails and phone calls. And within days he was forced to issue an apology. He insisted that he did not remember approving the ad, which he said was written by his longtime advertising writer

and producer in Oklahoma.

"It's just something that went by us. We're obviously sorry that it offends a given segment who identify themselves as atheist.

Kieffe added that he had received "an incredible amount" of calls from people as far away as Australia and England, most, but not all of them, from "very articulate, nice people."

Still miffed, a number of aggrieved atheists wanted to know who actually penned the words. Very quickly they managed to flush out an individual called J W Horne, and, in effect, forced him to create a website on which to explain himself.

A defiant Horne posted this on his site: "For those of you who have been desperately searching for my real identity, here it is. I am a husband, father and grand-father. I served in the US Army and am proud of that. I own several businesses and [am] a true believer in the word of the Almighty God. If that offends you then that's tough. If you are a non-believer what do you think will happen to your soul when you die?"

Horne explains his motivation for the ad: "I wanted to get the attention of the 86 percent of Americans who say they believe in God. That includes Jewish Americans, Muslim Americans and Christians. I wanted to gauge

their response. The ones who chose to be a part of the 14 percent spoke first. Calls were loud, vulgar and profane. After a few days, the believers started to contact the client. The positive calls and emails were far greater in number than the loud obnoxious ones.

"The majority woke up and responded ... I wrote the ad and produced it to get the attention of the believers. It is as simple as that. It worked and the atheists helped. Thanks.

"PS. My relationship with the dealership is as strong as ever. Be sure to be listening for more ads."

To which Anna Lemma, of the excellent Underground Unbeliever blog retorted: "J W Horne, you stated in the ad that 86 percent of Americans were Christians, who believe in God, and those are the people who are allowed to state their opinions in your perfect, Christian America. All others need to 'sit down and shut up'. Well, you are incorrect in your figures. It's closer to 73 percent identify as Christian, and about 10 percent identify as atheist or agnostic, with the remaining identifying as Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, New Age, etc.

"You refer to a minority as if we are second-class citizens and placed your phone number on your blog, and now act surprised that you received a lot of calls? Poor, oppressed baby."

## Blind Muslim lad killed by his religious teacher

BLIND seven-year-old student at an Islamic school in eastern Pakistan died after his teacher punished him for not learning the Koran.

The police said that Muhammad Atif was hung upside down from a ceiling fan and severely beaten by his teacher, Qari Ziauddin, at the seminary or madrassa in Vihari, near Lahore on May 29.

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani ordered an inquiry into the death, according to an official statement. The Prime Minister expressed his deep sorrow and concern over the tragic death of Atif.

Police confirmed that the teacher had been arrested on charges of torturing and murdering the boy.

Local police official Akram Niazi said: Qari Ziauddin, who teaches Koran to boys in Qari Latif Islamic school, hanged Atif upside down from a ceiling fan in the school after beating him with sticks.

The teacher also failed to take the boy to hospital following the brutal assault. Police said a post-mortem examination report confirmed physical torture as the cause of death.

The incident served to highlight once again the widespread abuse of children in madrassas (religious schools) in Pakistan and other parts of the world....

Meanwhile, a 55-year-old Californian Muslim and polygamist was been convicted last month on charges of starving, imprisoning, torturing and abusing his two wives and many of his 19 children and stepchildren.

A Riverside County Superior Court jury found Mansa Musa Muhammed – Richard Boddie before he gave his life over to Allah – guilty on 25 counts. He faces seven life sentences.

According to Fox News, Muhammed told authorities that his Muslim faith gave him the right to take multiple wives. He was arrested in 1999 after one of his wives, Laura Cowan, managed to slip a 13-page letter to a postal service worker describing the horrific abuse.

His trial started last month after nine years of legal wrangling in which he changed lawyers four times and represented himself for more than two years.

Once the case went to trial, a string of his children and stepchildren, now adults, also

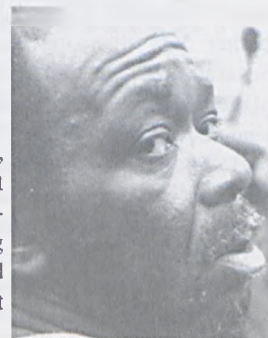
took the stand, telling the jury that they had been beaten, starved, strung up by their feet and forced to eat vomit and faeces.

A doctor who **Mansa Musa Muhammed** examined many of the children found they were suffering from malnutrition, according to this report.

Some were far below the normal height and weight for their age due to prolonged starvation, according to court records. One boy, who was 16 at the time, stood 4 feet, 6 inches tall and weighed 64 pounds. Another boy, 10 years old, weighed 55 pounds and was 4 feet, 1 inch tall.

Some of the children said they were beaten with boat oars until their feet were swollen. Others reported being forced to stand in a corner all night as punishment for stealing bread. Many were deprived of food for several days at a time as punishment.

In a sometimes tearful testimony Muhammed denied the charges, and blamed one of his wives for the abuse.





# Chris Barker: So, what's racist about pointing out that believers in God

IT was bound to happen. When Professor Richard Lynn claimed last month that people with higher IQs were less likely to believe in God many of those outraged by his assertion quickly tried to give his words a racist cast.

Professor Lynn, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Ulster University, said many more members of the "intellectual elite" considered themselves atheists than the national average. A decline in religious observance over the last century was directly linked to a rise in average intelligence, he claimed.

Professor Lynn, who has provoked controversy in the past with research linking intelligence to race and sex, said university academics were less likely to believe in God than almost anyone else.

A survey of Royal Society fellows found that only 3.3 per cent believed in God – at a time when 68.5 percent of the general UK population described themselves as believers.

A separate poll in the 90s found only seven percent of members of the American National Academy of Sciences believed in God.

Professor Lynn said most primary school children believed in God, but as they entered adolescence – and their intelligence increased – many started to have doubts.

He told *The Times Higher Education* magazine: "Why should fewer academics believe in God than the general population? I believe it is simply a matter of the IQ. Academics have higher IQs than the general population. Several Gallup poll studies of the general population have shown that those with higher IQs tend not to believe in God."

He said religious belief had declined across 137 developed nations in the 20th century at the same time as people became more intelligent.

But Professor Gordon Lynch, director of the Centre for Religion and Contemporary Society at Birkbeck College, London, said it failed to take account of a complex range of social, economic and historical factors.

"Linking religious belief and intelligence in this way could reflect a dangerous trend, developing a simplistic characterisation of religion as primitive, which – while we are trying to deal with very complex issues of religious and cultural pluralism – is perhaps not the most helpful response," he said.

Dr Alistair McFadyen, senior lecturer in Christian theology at Leeds University, said the conclusion had "a slight tinge of Western cultural imperialism as well as an anti-religious sentiment".

Dr David Hardman, principal lecturer in learning development at London Metropolitan University, said: "It is very difficult to conduct true experiments that would explicate a causal relationship between IQ and religious belief. Nonetheless, there is evidence from other



Professor Richard Lynn

domains that higher levels of intelligence are associated with a greater ability – or perhaps willingness – to question and overturn strongly felt institutions."

Writing in the *Guardian* (June 12), Giles Fraser asserted "Little wonder Dr David King, coordinator of the watchdog group, Human Genetics Alert, has said 'We find Richard Lynn's claims that some human beings are inherently superior to others repugnant'. The same thought applies to women with blond hair, to people with darker skin, or to those of us with religious belief."

"I don't much care if people think I'm thick because I believe in God. But what's really nasty here – and it's a part of a growing phenomenon – is the way religion is being used as a subtle code for race.

"Belief in God is alive and well in Africa and in the Middle East and declining in western Europe. Writing about the intelligence of religious believers has, for some, become a roundabout way of commenting on the intelligence of those with darker skins whilst seeking to avoid the charge of racism. Religion is being used with a nod and a wink, cover for some rather dodgy and dangerous politics.

"The debate between believers and non-believers ... is not made any more civil by the addition of this unpleasant inflection. Which is why believers and unbelievers ... ought to unite against this way of thinking about our differences. The only question worth debating is whether the claims of religious belief are true or not – or morally objectionable or not. And Richard Lynn's research does nothing to help us here."

I do not believe for a moment that it is racist to point out that, in those countries where religion dominates the lives of its citizens – countries whose populations are mainly of a darker hue – social, economic and technological progress is virtually at a standstill.

This paralysis exists not because these people are stupid, but because religion has

served to crush innovation and entrench primitive thinking. There can be no doubting that these people have been stupefied by religion masquerading as knowledge. The only cure for this boils down to proper education, free of all religious influence. That the decline of religious belief across developed nations in the 20th century led to more intelligent populations is indisputable, and I have no doubt that, if religion were to give way to better education in Africa and the Muslim states, the same trend would be observed there.

Now let me draw your attention to an interesting statistic. Twenty percent of the world's population – that's two out of ten people – are Muslims. That's a Muslim population of 1.4 billion people. But out of this huge population, only six Muslims have ever won Nobel Prizes.

They were Anwar El-Sadat (1978, Peace); Abdus Salam (1979, Physics), who, as a result of internal squabbles within Islam in Pakistan never got the recognition he deserved in the Muslim world; Najib Mahfooz (1988, Literature) and Yasser Arafat (1994, Peace), whose prize led to the resignation of Norwegian, Kaare Kristiansen, a member of the Nobel Committee. He protested that the prize was being awarded to a "terrorist."

The remaining winners were Ahmed Zewail (1999, Chemistry) and Shirin Ebadi (2003, Peace).

The world's Jewish population, on the other hand, totals around 13-million. Yet out of this comparatively tiny number, 165 Nobel Prizes have so far been awarded to Jews.

To suggest that this is the result of Jews being more intelligent than Arabs would, of course, be racist. But to conclude that Jews put a far higher value on a mainly secular education, rather than on religious indoctrination, is certainly not.

Nor is it racist to point out that Asians in the UK from a Hindu background perform far better in the academic sphere than those who are Muslims. Again, an example of education triumphing over religion.

It should also be pointed out that, when religion is allowed a foothold in areas in which it has no legitimate place, the results can be extremely damaging, as the United States is now starting to realise.

Chris Mooney's concern about this trend prompted him to write *The Republicans' War on Science*, in which he reveals that science and scientists have less influence with the federal Government than at any time since the Eisenhower administration.

The book points out that, in the White House and Congress today, findings are reported in a politicised manner; spun or distorted to fit the speaker's agenda; or, when they're too inconvenient, ignored entirely.



## God may be less intelligent than atheists?

On a broad array of issues – stem-cell research, climate change, missile defence, abstinence education, product safety, environmental regulation, and many others – the Bush administration's positions fly in the face of overwhelming scientific consensus. Federal science agencies, once fiercely independent under both Republican and Democratic presidents, are increasingly staffed by political appointees and fringe theorists who know

industry lobbyists and evangelical activists far better than they know the science.

This is not unique to the Bush administration, but it is largely a Republican phenomenon, born of a conservative dislike of environmental, health, and safety regulation, and at the extremes, of evolution and legalised abortion.

In his book *Mooney* ties together the disparate strands of the attack on science into a compelling and frightening account of the US

Government's increasing unwillingness to distinguish between legitimate research and ideologically driven pseudoscience.

It is the religionists (assisted by muddle-headed, pc-constrained liberals and leftists) who are quickest to equate anti-religious sentiments with racism, because they know that, by playing the race card, they can effectively stifle a debate they would rather not have because it is one they can never win.

## NSS renews its call for C of E disestablishment

IT is now a matter of urgency for the Church of England to be disestablished, says the National Secular Society. The call comes in the wake of a report commissioned by the Church, published last month, which demands more privileges, more money and more influence.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "We have predicted that with the rise of other religions in Britain there would eventually be a struggle for power among them and this is another serious warning of that coming to pass. The only way to curb this burgeoning sectarian battleground is to disestablish the Church of England and make government a secular, neutral space that does not favour any religion."

"The Church of England is a dying institution. Less than two percent of the population attend the CofE on an average Sunday. And yet it has an extraordinary amount of political clout.

Sanderson said that the Church's demand to run social services in Britain was a disaster waiting to happen. "Faith-based welfare has been a catastrophe in the United States and it would be in Britain. The Church of England secured religious exemptions on employment legislation after public consultation had closed in a behind-the-scenes-deal with the Government. It has opposed legislation giving equality to homosexuals. Last year it demanded and received additional licence to discriminate against non-religious teachers in publicly-funded faith schools. These are clear indications that it could not be trusted to deliver welfare services fairly and without prejudice."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, added: "These calls for yet more power come from an already over-privileged Church of England. Britain is the only Western democracy to give religious representatives seats as of right in its legislature. The Church of England alone benefits from this with twenty six bishops in the House of Lords. This gives it huge influence and access to power,

which it often uses for self-serving purposes.

"At the Church's behest many new church schools and academies have been opened, but funded almost entirely by the state. Yet they still complain. This is the last plaintive gasp of a Church dying on its feet. Church attendance has been in severe decline for seven decades and Christian Research has forecast that it will drop to 87,800 (eighty seven thousand eight hundred) by 2050. Who in their right mind would give even more power to an organisation in such terminal decline?"

"It is inevitable that other religious group-

ings will begin to feel hard done by – and despite the Church of England's jealousy over the Government's attempts to integrate the Muslim population – other religious groups are growing and cannot be sidelined in the way that the Anglicans want them to be.

"It has now become a matter of urgency that that state be secularised and these ambitious priests be put in their place. The British public has shown that it is not interested in religion, it is not concerned with the Church and it doesn't want its day-to-day business in the hands of the clerics."

### Hair stylist wins £4,000 for 'hurt feelings'

IN a bizarre judgement the owner of a London hair salon has been ordered to pay £4,000 compensation to a Muslim stylist who was turned down for a job because she insisted that she would have to work wearing a headscarf "for religious reasons".

Bushra Noah accused Sarah Desrosiers of religious discrimination when she failed to offer her a job at her Wedge salon in King's Cross, central London, last year – and last month an employment tribunal awarded Noah the cash after finding that she had been the victim of "indirect discrimination".

The 19-year-old wanted a whole lot more: £35,000 in fact, but the tribunal rejected her religious discrimination claim.

Desrosiers said she needed stylists to showcase alternative hairstyles – but Noah is hardly the embodiment of trendiness. Indeed, when the case first came before the tribunal, *Daily Mail* columnist Amanda Platell asked: "What next, Ugly Betty suing for not getting the top job at *Vogue*?"

During the hearing Noah, who lives in Acton, west London, told the tribunal that she was "devastated" that she was not offered the job of assistant stylist "due to my headscarf".

Desrosiers, 32, told the panel that Ms Noah lived too far away, but was persuaded to give her an interview in May last year.

Said Desrosiers after the verdict:

"I never in a million years dreamt that somebody would be completely against the display of hair and be in this industry. I don't feel I deserve it."

She added that she expected her staff to reflect the "funky, urban" image of her salon.

The panel found that Ms Noah had been badly upset by the 15-minute interview, and awarded her £4,000 damages for "injury to feelings".

Noah originally wanted £15,000, but upped that to £35,000 after claiming that her action against Desrosiers had resulted in her receiving hate mail. Earlier at the hearing Desrosiers said she faced financial ruin if she lost, but that she did not regret her decision. And she pointed out that she could not be blamed for Noah's hate mail.

Noah has refused to comment on the matter.



## John Radford: No Compulsion?

The great comedian Jack Benny had a scene in which he is accosted by a gunman. "Your money or your life!" he demands. Benny goes into one of his famous poses of mild puzzlement. "I said, your money or your life!" Benny (pause): "I'm thinking, I'm thinking!" Part of the joke is, of course, that there is no real choice.

Muslim apologists are fond of quoting the Koran, Surah 2:256, "There is [or let there be] no compulsion in religion". There are some other verses that seem to support this. We need not argue here that the Koran is unlikely to be the word of God, or that there is no firm evidence that it, or any particular part of it, even came from Mohammed himself. (My own amateur guess is that he probably did say most of it, though much was existing traditions or beliefs, and all must have been subject to changes from oral transmission and repeated copying.) Whatever its origins, it constitutes the most essential rules of Islam.

Can we accept the assurance that the verse gives us? The first problem is that the Koran exists in perfect form only in Arabic, but let us accept the English version here. The next problem is that the book consists of chapters or Surahs, arranged approximately in order of length, the longer ones first. There is really no way of knowing what order they originally appeared in, or under what circumstances. Even assuming they are all authentic, they were "given" over a period of twenty-three years, and contain many contradictory passages. This does not mean that God changed his mind. Rather, he released his message in stages. To resolve the contradictions, the device of abrogation is invoked. Verses thought to be later cancel and supersede earlier ones. It is estimated that only about 40 of the 114 Surahs contain no abrogated verses. But as we don't know for certain which are later, we do not know what the rules actually are.

There are some, however, which are not contradicted, but repeated many times. One of these is that there is no god but Allah, and that those who deny this will go to hell. This is the greatest of sins, the one which Allah will never forgive. It does look rather like holding a gun to our heads, admittedly one that will be fired after death.

There are some other possible ways of taking Surah 2:256. One is that Islam is so manifestly and undeniably true, that no compulsion is necessary. No one has to be forced to agree that the sun rises. The verse indeed goes on 'Truth stands out clear from Error'. A website, <http://www.missionislam.com>, helpfully gives six criteria by which we know that the Koran is true. Its teachings are rational, it is perfect, it contains no myths or superstitions, it is scientific, it contains true prophecies, and it cannot

be imitated by human beings. There is really no answer to this except to suggest that one should read this "true" book. To my prejudiced atheist eye, each of these criteria is repeatedly contradicted (I have not come across any actual imitation, but it would not be difficult, if there were any point in it).

Another interpretation is, that one can compel outward conformity, but not inner belief; at any rate one can never be certain of the latter. This is true, but it was his cash that concerned Benny, not his thoughts about it. I have no wish to be forced to accept sharia law even if I were free to disbelieve in private (which strictly I would not be). For example, I oppose the death penalty. The Koran accepts it, specifically for murder or "spreading mischief in the land" (Surah 5:32), however one interprets that. It is forbidden to question what the Koran approves, and thus the case against capital punishment cannot even be made. Yet another suggestion is that 2:256 applied to a specific situation, namely the Jews in Medina when Mohammed fled there from Mecca; or more generally to the "peoples of the Book", ie Jews and Christians. Others, presumably, can be compelled.

In that regard one might note that in present day Saudi Arabia it is strictly illegal to practise, at least publicly, any religion other than Islam, and indeed some varieties of Islam itself. In many other countries non-Muslims are more or less seriously disadvantaged. There are also various verses that seem to contradict 2:256, for example 9:5, "But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem of war". Which verse takes precedence? Does 9:5 amount to compulsion in religion, or is it merely political or military? Is it aggressive, or only defensive, as has been argued?

As so often with religious texts, quotations can support almost any view. Apologists regularly maintain that the bits they like are true while others must be interpreted, or referred to particular historical contexts. But they fail to provide grounds for distinguishing the two. And in the case of Islam, it was surely rather remiss of Allah himself not to do so.

Then there is the question of apostasy, publicly giving up Islam in favour of another, or no, religion. Islam is unlike that other most dogmatic creed, Roman Catholicism, in not having a central law-giving authority. Instead it depends on general acceptance of legal opinions, and the authority of recognised schools of law. There is no distinction, as in the West, between religious and civil law. There are four major Sunni, and one Shia, schools of jurisprudence. All apparently agree that apostasy is

punishable by death, if committed by an adult male who is not coerced. Opinions differ as to whether women should be killed, or imprisoned and beaten until they recant. Death for apostasy is not clearly prescribed by the Koran, though Surah 4:89 implies it.

It does appear in the Hadith, the collection of sayings and doings of Mohammed. It is said that the ultimate sentence is not often carried out, but that hardly alters the principle of compulsion. Punishment may be privately inflicted, or individuals ostracised. They will in any case go to hell.

A related point is, that compulsion is not an all-or-nothing thing. If one is brought up in a highly dogmatic culture it is extremely difficult to develop, still more to manifest, independence of thought. Hence all those variously attributed adages about "give us the child for the first (so many) years, and he will be ours for life". It is never easy to stand out against a group, even a small one, let alone a whole society with set beliefs, reinforced by law and severe penalties. It is no accident that learning to recite the Koran from memory is a highly honoured accomplishment. Children learn parts, sometimes all, of it. Not only does this reinforce the teachings, but learning one "true" book actually inhibits thinking, if it is at the expense of a more open education. And it encourages the mind-set that truth is to be found in authority, rather than in free enquiry.

There is another problem. It concerns free-will. Philosophers continue to debate this, but in practical terms it is usually agreed that an assumption of free-will is a necessary condition of responsibility. We don't hold animals morally responsible for their actions, and in humans, mental impairment (for example) is accepted as "diminished responsibility". Whatever the arguments, we act as though we normally have free-will. In the Abrahamic religions, free-will is a gift of God.

But God is also conceived of as all-knowing and all-powerful. In Islam, he is both all-seeing and responsible for everything that happens: "It is the will of Allah!" Nevertheless we are responsible if we disobey him, and will be punished. This does seem a bit unfair. More seriously, it seems nonsense, and as far as I can see, it is.

Islamic thinkers have tried for centuries to square this circle. One line is, that God allows us a little bit of free-will, enough rope to hang ourselves, as it were, which is jolly decent of him. Another, more ingenious, is that although God controls everything and knows what will happen, we do not. Therefore we can make right or wrong choices. This brings us up against the core problem, can a choice be free if it could not be otherwise? If God determines all that happens, there seems no room for free



choice. And knowing this, we can hardly even have the illusion of it. Islam, we are frequently told, means submission. This allows another "solution", namely that freedom consists in conformity with the will of God. This is not compulsion, since that is what we are designed and intended for. We are not compelled to grow, but then neither do we have a choice. There is a classic distinction between liberty and licence. The latter is often misunderstood to mean something like "going too far", probably by confusion with "licentious", but the difference is really that of everyday meaning.

I have, generally, liberty to walk down the road, but to drive a car I need a licence, that is permission from someone. Are we free to act, or only permitted to do Allah's will?

It is true that there are natural limits to behaviour. We are not "free" to fly without mechanisms, or breathe underwater. We can call these laws of nature. But these are descriptive, not prescriptive laws, stating what is observed to be the case, not what must be so. There is no reason to suppose they are imposed on us by God.

Of course there are many individual Muslims who do not seek to impose their beliefs on other groups. Many Muslim societies have tolerated other faiths, though often as subordinate minorities. And, of course, there are many other examples of compulsion, religious and other. Nevertheless maintaining that there is no compulsion in a religion that, it would seem, continually manifests it, is, to say

the least, inconsistent. But as cognitive psychologists have argued, our minds/brains have not developed to be consistent. Evolution has produced, as it always does, what works well enough for survival. Religion arises from the same mechanisms that operate in all our thinking. Religion, it has been said, is perfectly natural, but not naturally perfect.

It is no big deal for Muslims to hold that there is no compulsion in their religion while this is contradicted at every turn. To the outsider, a threat of death, or punishment in this life or the next, still looks like force, not freedom.

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

## Drs Thomas W Smythe and Thomas G Evans: The Absurdity of Exodus

WE will argue here that the Book of Exodus is plausibly interpretable as being absurd to any thinking person. It portrays God as irrational, immoral, and ineffective. This argument is part of the wider issue of whether the Bible is the infallible word of God. We contend that the biblical book of Exodus is full of inconsistencies and absurdly implausible claims if one accepts the conception of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and totally benevolent.

The plagues that God brings to bear on the people of Egypt in order to free the Israelites depict a God who is incompetent to free the people of Israel. The God of Exodus thwarts his own purposes and delays freeing the Israelites in a way that calls into question both his omnipotence and his omniscience. Further, Exodus represents God as a being who is immoral by any rational standard.

The plagues God sends to the Pharaoh and his people – consisting of the serpent, a flood of blood, frogs, hail, flies, boils, gnats, locusts, darkness, and the killing of the first-born of the Egyptians – is an anachronistic display of irrational punishments that cannot be taken seriously by a contemporary reader. Why would God have to use such a senseless series of ineffective measures that, being all-knowing, he knew wouldn't work? Surely, an all-powerful God could just force the Egyptians to release the Israelites without all the drama.

Another exercise in divine incompetence is embodied in the story of God continuously hardening the heart of the Pharaoh. As a literary device, it establishes the Pharaoh as a villain, but the upshot is that God thwarts his own attempt to get the Israelites out of bondage. In fact, it took him 430 years to manage to free the Israelites (Exodus 12: 40). If God is omnipotent and omniscient, why did it take him several generations to free his people?

And what was the purpose of hardening the Pharaoh's heart? A third-grader can tell you that this is not the best way to free someone from captivity. This is good and sufficient reason for regarding the book of Exodus as being apocryphal. It shows an omni-incompetent being rather than one who is omnipotent and omniscient. If, by some twist of history, the Book of Exodus is historically accurate, then the God it portrays is hardly worthy of worship. He is a colossal bungler.

If one supposes that the early idea of the deity was of only a fairly powerful being with a human personality, then the story makes more sense. Pharaoh may have been afraid that the Israelites would increase their population so that they could form an effective fifth column that would join with his historical enemies. So he worked the Israelites harshly to suppress any rebellious ideas they may have harbored. Such treatment of His people irritated God, who did not seem to have a "fair and balanced" view of the Egyptians, and he punished the Pharaoh by sending scourges that were familiar to people of those times.

We are obligated here to consider the suggestion that God gave the Pharaoh free-will and that his intransigence in the face of the many plagues was entirely his responsibility. Paul, for example, reasoned that God hardened the Pharaoh's heart "in a free and sovereign manner," making the Pharaoh morally responsible (Rom 9: 14-18). This reading raises problems of its own about what free-will is,



*Moses parting the Red Sea*

whether we have it, and, if it is so important, why it is not more abundant among mankind. We shall not enter into these thickets here. Although Paul's interpretation is plausible, our interpretation, which puts the blame on God, is equally plausible and does not stretch the common sense of the usual meaning of the word hardened. Actually, if one supposes that the Pharaoh has some reason to try and defend his land and people against malcontents, his sins may be considered ancient politics as usual, and God may be seen to have lost His cool in the political arena.

But even if the Pharaoh is fully free and responsible for hardening his own heart, which we seriously doubt there is sufficient reason to believe, God is still inept to use ten steps to release his people, and for taking 430 years to do so.

We must also ask why we should believe Paul. Paul could be covering up an absurdity, or Paul could be correct. We see no way to choose between these alternative views.

*(Continued on p10)*



# Barry Duke: Blasphemy is dead, so sod you God!

LIGHTNING failed to strike Terry Sanderson when he said rude things about Jehovah, rubbished his bastard son Jesus, and maligned the mad paedophile "prophet" Mohammed.

Sir Ian McKellen, who "survived an evangelical upbringing" did not turn to dust when he confessed to vandalising Bibles in hotel bedrooms by tearing out the pages of Leviticus, and comedian Robin Ince attracted no divine retribution, only hysterical laughter, when he punched holes in Christian thinking, and held pillocks like Christian Voice's Stephen Green up to ridicule.

And the venue in which a large contingent of atheists – both novices and fiery veterans still yearning to rid the world of superstition and religious privilege – gathered to say good riddance to Britain's disgraceful blasphemy laws was not reduced to rubble by a terrible quake.

Heaven, it would seem, had run out of thunderbolts and pestilence and plagues. Not even a locust was to be seen.

## Exodus

Interpreting ostensibly absurd passages from the Bible by citing other passages in the Bible is a business fraught with difficulty. The Bible says many things, so you can pick and choose as you please to make things turn out pretty much as you prefer. One thing we should be able to agree on is that nobody thinks the Bible says what it means or means what it says without our help.

Finally, Exodus portrays God as an immoral being. Killing the first-born of the Egyptian children is clearly immoral and wrong (Exodus 12: 29). This is one of the many passages in the Old Testament where God finds it necessary to massacre many people where no justification for doing so is given. The children of the enemy are clearly innocent human beings. God may have been justified in killing the Pharaoh and his men, but not their children. In killing children God is needlessly brutal and savage.

Throughout Exodus, God acts in ways – and the book suggests that we act in ways – that are morally repugnant, such as 21:17 where God tells us to kill children who curse their mother or father, 22:18 where we are admonished not to suffer a witch to live, 22:19 where bestiality is punishable by death, and 22:20 where the Lord destroys anyone who sacrifices to another God. Such behavior on God's part also raises the problem of evil: how can an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful being do these atrocious things? The things that people are rewarded or punished for in the Bible sometimes have little to do with what is morally

The long-awaited event – the culmination of efforts spanning well over a century by the National Secular Society, the *Freethinker*, and other secular bodies to rid Britain of this senseless "crime" – took place in a spacious Spanish restaurant off the Tottenham Court Road on June 21.

In a compelling – and frequently hilarious – audio-visual presentation, NSS President, Terry Sanderson, and Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood, took the audience through the history of blasphemy in the UK, and paid glowing tribute to the many brave parliamentarians who made the final push at the beginning of the year to have the law removed forever.

The Law Commission had, in fact, recommended blasphemy's abolition over 20 years ago, but despite frequent debates ever since, it was not until March 2008 that it was finally swept away.

Two of the society's closest allies in the fight for blasphemy's removal were Liberal

right or wrong. Consider the Great Flood or Sodom and Gomorrah where God puts people to death with no sufficient justifying reason being given for doing so. There are dozens of other such examples that we have no space to go into here.

It is to the credit of the Greeks, in particular, of Socrates and Plato in the *Euthyphro*, to have realized that if God is the sole standard of morality, the ultimate lawmaker that answers to nothing, then He can do anything, force His will on anyone, with no consequences. Is God's killing of children morally praiseworthy simply because He is able to do it? We think not. If God can wreak havoc on humanity, as He does in the Old Testament, only the credulous will take it all in as the will of an infallible being.

We conclude that the Book of Exodus is absurd. It cannot be considered a reliable moral guide or the portrait of a just and rational deity. As Sigmund Freud once wisely put it, "When a man has once brought himself to accept uncritically the absurdities of religious doctrines put before him and even overlook the contradictions between them, then we need not be greatly surprised at the weakness of his intellect."

**Footnote:** Indeed, God hardened the Pharaoh's heart several times. See Exodus 4: 21; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14: 4, 8, 11. It may be that hardened heart is simply a poetic way of saying what an intransigent character the Pharaoh was, but even so, one would think God could find a more efficient way to change his mind.

• Drs Smythe and Evans lecture at the Department of English, North Carolina Central University, USA.

Democrat MP, Evan Harris, and Lib Dem peer Lord Avebury – both of whom were warmly applauded for their efforts when they appeared on stage to describe their respective roles in the epic battle.

The last victim of this egregious law was Denis Lemon, editor of *Gay News*, who was convicted of blasphemous libel on July 11, 1977, as a result of a private prosecution by the nation's self-appointed nanny, that grim Christian busybody Mary Whitehouse.

If this awful woman wasn't already dead, the event would probably have hastened her demise.

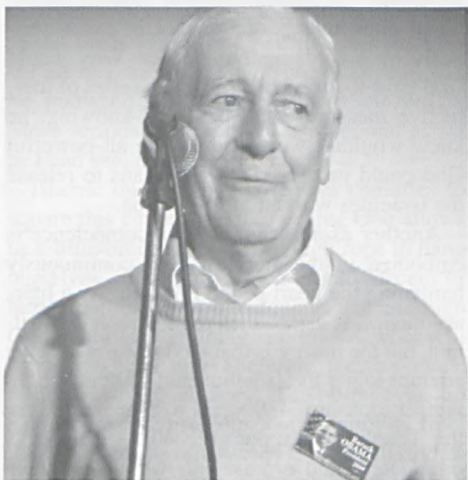
Lemon found himself in the dock for publishing a poem called *The Love That Dares to Speak its Name*. Prosecuting in what was the first blasphemy case in 50 years, counsel John Smyth told the court: "It may be said that this is a love poem – it is not, it is a poem about buggery."



Lib Dem MP Evan Harris

Lemon, alas, is no longer with us; he died in 1994 – but new life was breathed into James Kirkup's poem when leading British actor Sir Ian McKellen read it out to those at last month's gathering.

It is by no stretch of the imagination a good



Lib Dem peer Lord Avebury





**Pictured, from left, at the Bye-Bye Blasphemy party is Sir Ian McKellen, Freethinker editor Barry Duke, and NSS President Terry Sanderson with a bear called Mohammed.** Photo: Paul Christopher

poem, but this great Shakespearian actor lifted it brilliantly from mediocrity.

Among secularist veterans present at the event was Bill McIlroy, 80 on July 4, a former editor of the *Freethinker*, who formed the Committee Against Blasphemy following Lemon's conviction.

In defiance of trial judge Alan King-Hamilton, who ordered that the poem should never again see the light of day, Bill sent it by post all over the land.

He wanted to be charged with blasphemy, in the hope of putting blasphemy itself on trial, but instead was convicted of sending "obscene" material through the Royal Mail.

Bill received an ovation for his campaigning efforts on this and many other fronts, and a second veteran campaigner, Barbara Smoker, 85, past President of the NSS, was also enthusiastically cheered – in particular for the her vigorous defence of Salman Rushdie, whose book, *The Satanic Verses*, led to Muslims in 1989 calling for his death. In fact, they are still doing so.

Barbara, the audience was told, had accurately predicted that the government's failure



**Veteran campaigners Barbara Smoker and Norman Bacrac**

to prosecute those who were inciting Rushdie's murder would lead to further attacks by the Islamic world on free speech.

Another victim of the blasphemy law was film director Nigel Wingrove, whose 19-minute-long *Visions of Ecstasy* was refused a UK certificate by the British Board of Film Classification on the grounds of possible blasphemous libel.

After an appeal failed, the distributor took the case to the European Court of Human Rights in 1996 to consider whether the existence of a law of blasphemy was consistent with Freedom of Expression rights. The original BBFC decision was upheld and, to date, this remains the only film banned in the UK on the grounds of blasphemy.

However, Wingrove, also present at the celebration, has been invited by Craig Lapper, of the board's examining body, to resubmit the film for classification, because the board is no longer hamstrung by this stupid law.

Also at the event was Stewart Lee, who, with Richard Thomas, co-wrote the award-winning *Jerry Springer: the Opera* – a show which was dogged by Christian Voice supporters led by Stephen Green. Stewart rose to his feet to thank the NSS for having defended the show throughout its run.

When *JSTO* was shown on BBC TV, Green attempted to bring a private prosecution against the Corporation for blasphemy, but, to his intense anger, the rug was pulled from under his feet when blasphemy was abolished.

The long-overdue Bye-Bye Blasphemy party was an uplifting occasion – but the joy of blasphemy's departure,

the audience was told, cannot be shared in a great many other countries, where the "crime" still exists, and carries the death sentence or other harsh penalties.

Terry Sanderson pointed out that, on the eve of the party, "we received news that a man has been sentenced to death in Pakistan for passing derogatory remarks about the prophet and defiling pages of the Koran."

Shafeeq Latif, a Muslim in his early 20s, was arrested in 2006 in a village near the eastern city of Sialkot. Latif appeared in the court amidst tight security. Previous victims of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan have been lynched or killed by prison guards before their appeals could be heard by higher courts.

At least 25 persons have been killed arbitrarily after being accused of blasphemy, and 892 were accused from 1986 to 2007. While the majority of victims of blasphemy laws were Muslims, houses and places of worship of minorities were destroyed under the allegations, and seven Christians were murdered.

Blasphemy is dead in Britain. It's now time to abolish the "crime" wherever else it exists.



**Atheist comedian Robin Ince**



**Bill McIlroy, left, and Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS**



## Denis Cobell reviews *Nothing to be Frightened Of* by Julian Barnes

THIS is the funniest book I've read for a long time: it should be read by anyone who thinks they may die one day, believes in an afterlife or in God.

That should include almost everyone, I guess! Like other distinguished authors, Julian Barnes, "one of our most brilliant writers" according to the publisher's blurb, has written his "god" book, and combined it with his "death" book.

This is a "memoir", not an autobiography, which he introduces by stating: "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him". His philosopher brother John, when asked his opinion of this statement, responded with one word – "soppy". I think most readers of this magazine would concur.

On the publication page, details include the following, to me, unusual note: "The author has stated to the publishers that the contents of this book are true."

Barnes questions truth throughout the book, and even the apparently contradictory diary entries of his parents; just what is true?

As he has aged he has lost some of his loss of faith; he faced down his Oxford college

chaplain in student days when told he had the right to read in chapel by saying "I'm afraid I'm a happy atheist". He downed his glass of sherry and left the chaplain without evidence or disapproval, and no sign of divine intervention. He was an atheist at 20, but – post-50 – has adopted agnosticism. His mother said it was his age and his end looming closer! How right she was; mellowing reduces decisiveness. But Barnes observes what we all probably notice. His agnostic and atheist friends are indistinguishable from professedly religious ones on grounds of honesty, generosity, integrity or fidelity. Such features of character he deems more grounded in our genetic roots; he asks, how can we believe in free-will?

In answer to why Christianity has lasted these past two millennia, Barnes points to the manner of its imposition, its use as social control and the likelihood of punishment by the temporal authorities over much of this time. Montaigne is cited: "Religion's surest foundation is the contempt for life". One day, doubtless Christianity will go the way of other lost religions. Whilst there will be admiration of the cathedrals and (some) church buildings, maybe there will be as much speculation as surrounds Stonehenge today?

He looks at Pascal's wager as "Go on,

believe! It won't do any harm." As evidence of its falsity, Barnes refers to the crazy man who lowered himself into a lion's cage stating "if God exists, I'll come to no harm." The lion thought otherwise.

Richard Dawkins is defended against misrepresentation by a Catholic apologist who spreads fear among students in his rant against "Hategod Dawkie".

Unfortunately, this book, in common with Rowson's *The Dog Allusion* which I reviewed in the April *Freethinker*, gives neither references, nor has an index. Not an academic work?

As a novelist Barnes sees religions as the first great inventions of fiction writers; plausible explanations for confused and simple minds, "a beautiful shapely story containing hard, exact lies."

Fear of death is discussed: some are fearful of death itself, others – amongst whom I would include myself – at the events leading up to death; the before-death, not the afterlife. Barnes's mother was a devout atheist: "People only believe in religion because they are afraid of death". Officiating at secular humanist funerals I often quote Hazlitt – that in death we are only as we were before birth – with no knowledge. What need we fear?

Goethe was sceptical about an afterlife; but if he were to survive the grave he just hoped he wouldn't run into any of those folk who constantly harped on about immortality while on this earth, who would then shout out "We were right! We were right!"

Barnes claims to have seen only two dead people – family members – and has not been present at the time of their death; working in the medical field almost 50 years, I saw many more and often at the time of death.

I suspect all "death-bed" final words, though some do cry out in agony, most are already unconscious. Freud claimed it was impossible to imagine our own death; we could only perceive it as spectators. Few can choose their time or manner of departure from life. Planning our own deaths is possible, but such is the life force that few of us can face up to it even at the time of dire illness.

While there is life there is hope – and nothing to be frightened of!

• Published by Cape £17.99 pp250.

### Quotable Quote

DON'T get me wrong. I'm not saying religion doesn't have its uses. Personally I turn to it whenever I want my intelligence insulted.

– Pat Condell, comedian, atheist and YouTube cult figure whose videos can now be purchased at <http://godlesscomedy.com/index.html>

## Jesus and Mo





## Guy Otten reviews *Biblical Nonsense* by Dr Jason Long

THE subtitle of this book is "A Review of the Bible for Doubting Christians". The project is an important one: there is actually massive doubt among large numbers of thoughtful Christians, extending even as far as saints (we now know doubt affected Mother Teresa). A well-written book addressing and strengthening those doubts would be an important contribution to the enlightenment of such Christians.

This book contains a large number of valuable and meaty explanations as to why the Bible cannot be the divinely inspired word of a god such as is described by Christians. Dr Long deals with the Bible under various headings: (a) scientific mistakes: eg the Story of Noah is flawed, the ancients thought the world was a flat disc covered with a firmament, etc, (b) the immoral nature of God: eg the genocides he is responsible for in the Old Testament, the Bible's stance on women and slavery, (c) the evidence of scholarship showing the pentateuch could not have been written by Moses, biblical contradictions and absurdities, and (d) the reality that prophecies were generally wrong or such that the outcome was easily predictable.

He also includes a useful section explaining why most people follow their parents in matters of religion. His Bible references are all in the text and this is useful and impressive.

However, he misses the target audience. Doubting Christians need to have their doubts reinforced, explained and supported, in a gentle way that does not pour scorn on their prior cherished beliefs. The style of presentation should be primarily questioning and suggestive, leading the reader to stronger and stronger worries which mature into an uncomfortable decision that he/she must change his whole life stance.

But Dr Long's style is didactic: he says too often "you should realise that ..." and he regularly abuses Christian beliefs as ridiculous.

Of course many are ridiculous. But sharing this judgment is more appropriate with atheists and humanists than with doubting Christians.

I also found his style at times jarring. He uses an informal chatty style in which his use of some words and phrases leaves room for improvement. He also uses some words incorrectly in my judgment. For instance he uses the word "futuristic" in two places where I consid-

er he means "future".

Some of his arguments I found were a little ungenerous. For instance, he rightly criticises the Bible writers for describing the moon as a source of light, which of course it isn't in true scientific terms, but for a night traveller in ancient times it was a light which was useful as a "source" of light.

While his references to the Bible text are all present, he could have usefully given more precise references to passages in other texts such as the Epic of Gilgamesh.

I would love to see a rewritten and expanded text removing the more tendentious style and inserting a section reassuring doubting Christians that rejecting a false belief is safe and a worthwhile improvement to life, leading to a clearer view of reality and a more sophisticated personal philosophy of life.

Then I would like to see a companion volume giving the Koran the same treatment.

• *Biblical Nonsense* is published by iUniverse. Format: Paperback. Pages: 213 ISBN: 0-595-34182-9. Published: Jan-2005

## 'I'll email you when I get to heaven

JUST when you thought that Christians can't get any crazier, along comes a report to show that their capacity for kookiness is absolutely boundless.

Last month a website was launched to enable Christians taken up suddenly in the "Rapture" to send emails to godless "left-behinders", or the "unsaved".

The service is based on the ludicrous belief held by some evangelicals that someday all Christians will be physically lifted up to Heaven (Oh joy - if only!) leaving the rejects to spend a further seven years in relative peace and quiet on Earth under the dominion of the Anti-Christ.

This, of course, will leave the "unsaved" with a multitude of problems. For instance, bank account passwords and other secret stuff safely stored in the heads of those whisked off to paradise will leave "left-behind" partners with a major headache.

The obvious way to avoid such problems, of course, it to make sure that those nearest and dearest to you are atheists - or Muslims, or Hindus, or Jews or Pastafarians. Anyone, in fact, who isn't likely to be kidnapped by God with vital info locked up in their skulls.

According to [Youvebeenleftbehind.com](http://Youvebeenleftbehind.com): "We all have family and friends who have failed to receive the Good News of the Gospel ... Imagine how taken back (sic) they will be

by the millions of missing Christians and devastation at the Rapture. They will know it was true and that they have blown it."

"There will be a small window of time where they might be reached for the Kingdom of God.

"We have made it possible for you to send them a letter of love and a plea to receive Christ one last time. You can also send information based on scripture as to what will happen next. Each fulfilled prophecy will cause your letter and plea to be remembered and a decision to be made."

[Youvebeenleftbehind.com](http://Youvebeenleftbehind.com) offers users a facility to store emails and documents that are sent to up to 63 email addresses six days after the sender and fellow believers have been transported to Heaven. Some of the messages can be encrypted information such as bank account details and electronic passwords.

"The rest can be spiritual encouragement such as biblical passages intended to bring loved ones to Christ and snatch them from the flames."

The website is the brainchild of Mark Heard, a 49-year-old supermarket shelf-stacker from Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

He said he got the idea in 1999 while trading in shares online. It suddenly occurred to him that he would not be able to send his trading password to his wife if the "Rapture" sudden-



ly took him.

Membership costs \$40 (£20) a year but Heard would not reveal how many people had signed up.

Recognising when the "Rapture" has actually happened is obviously an issue for the email server.

The service will be triggered if any three of Heard's five employees fail to log on to their work accounts for six days. Said Heard: "We don't want these things to go out early."

Randy Maddox, a theology professor at Duke University, thinks the service hasn't been thought out properly. He told ABC News: "In one sense, they're arguing it will be a time of great disaster, but in another sense he's saying, 'I promise my website will be working'. There are logical incongruities with the model."



### The historicity of Jesus

THE fact that Stuart Campbell found my letter (May) obscure demonstrates his ignorance and lack of understanding of the political and religious climate of Judaea in the middle of the first century AD.

Over the years he has claimed that the views of historians should be of paramount importance, though he seems to prefer to quote theologians. I would therefore have expected him to accept the views of Robert Eisenman, a very eminent contemporary historian and a scholar with a deep understanding of early Christianity, in preference to the views of a Roman Catholic priest.

Eisenman has clearly demonstrated that the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls were people at the heart of Jewish political and religious life in the 40s and 50s AD and not a peripheral monastic sect in the second century BC as claimed by Father de Vaux, a priest answerable to Grand Inquisitor now Pope Ratzinger. The fact that Stuart Campbell clings to the views of de Vaux shows that his opinions are grounded in neither fact nor reason.

If Josephus is read in conjunction with the Dead Sea Scrolls we get a far better picture of Jerusalem in 40-60 AD than we can from Josephus alone, and one thing that becomes very clear is that the garbled fiction of the New Testament is completely irrelevant. It is also clear that there were no Christians in Judaea or Galilee at this period and that Christianity did not originate there but in Asia Minor or Greece. Saulus/Paul was making an attempt to hellenise the Jews, but was detested by his fellow Jews as a Herod and a Roman collaborator.

Stuart Campbell says, "Even a brief examination of the Gnostic Gospels shows them to be unhistorical". Since he has given them only a brief examination he is not qualified to offer a valid opinion. That he dismisses them in this way is to be expected, as they do not support his false hypothesis of a historical Jesus. What they do represent is evidence of an alternative version of Christianity, which flourished for 300 to 400 years before being suppressed by Catholic Christianity, whose gospels are equally unhistorical.

Further ignorance of early Christianity by Stuart Campbell is found in his statement "The idea that Jesus did not exist was first suggested about 200 years ago". If he had studied the early literature other than the Canonical Gospels, he would have known that the mythical case was first made about 150 AD by Typho, as recorded by Justin Martyr. Typho said "Christ is unknown ... But you, having got an idle story by the end, do form yourself an imaginary Christ".

That Stuart Campbell keeps refusing to answer questions, claiming that they are answered in his book, shows that either he cannot answer them or that he has a deep contempt for *Freethinker* readers, many of whom will not have to read it, but would like him to give an answer to his critics.

His book does not really answer any questions at all. It is merely a re-interpretation of the Canonical Gospels, which are just works of fictitious garbage; the end product is inevitably the same. I have in my bookcase or have read many books about early Christianity. I agree with some and disagree with others, but Stuart Campbell's is the only one I regard as complete rubbish, and it is not published by a mainstream publisher.

One final suggestion, if Stuart Campbell makes any further references to his book in letters, these should either be edited out or he should be sent a bill for advertising. I am sure the *Freethinker* could use the revenue.

CHARLES DOUGLAS  
Galloway

### Secularism and socialism

ALTHOUGH Diesel Balaam (*Points of View*, May) describes my article in the April *Freethinker* as an "intelligent response" to his article (December), and says that it "advances the debate", his reply quickly descends into playground taunts and patronising point-scoring.

I did Balaam the favour of taking him seriously; now I wonder why I bothered. When an opponent resorts to tired "arguments" like "you'll grow out of it", while at the same time calling my own tone "imperious", I know that meaningful debate is at an end.

I'm glad that Balaam has clarified – rather gracelessly – his position on "hate speech". I raised the question because it really wasn't clear to me what Balaam was trying to say. He, self-regardingly, thinks I was missing his article's "implied meanings, irony, witticisms and cognitive cues"; I think the relevant bits were just badly written. In any event, it's hardly appropriate to associate my identification of an ambiguity with "intellectual Asperger's syndrome"! Is this an example of the "maturity" Balaam thinks I am lacking?

Balaam's letter makes it quite clear that he is not interested in "debate". His aim is to "excise" the "socialist deadwood" from the secularist movement; since he doesn't have the power to do this, his tactic – to judge from his writing – is to shout at us in the hope we will get fed up and go away. But, as my article pointed out, there are still socialists who are committed to secularism, and we aren't about to let Balaam drive us away with noisy but pathetic hand-waving and childish insults.

I couldn't care less what Balaam thinks of what he presumes to be my political position. Suffice it to say that I have no interest in defending Class War in the pages of the *Freethinker*, or, indeed, anywhere else. They were mentioned in my article – alongside several other groups from across the spectrum of the Left – not as an "endorsement", but to illustrate that it is possible to maintain recognisably socialist or left-wing politics with a clear secularist stance.

Balaam thinks that "the Left" in general is "the principal obstacle to advancing secular-

ism". This makes no sense when there are plenty of left-wingers who are in favour of secularism and who are fighting to promote it; it also massively over-rates the Left's political influence! And when I read in his letter that "modernisers in the centre-Left and centre-Right parties have seized back all the secular initiatives from the Left", I have to wonder what planet he is living on. The centre-Left and centre-Right have been alternating in power for years, with few discernible secularist policies between them. If anything is a politically centrist cause, it's the promotion of religion in schools, welfare, employment etc, which has intensified in recent years.

But Balaam gives us an insight into the real issue when he refers to "pragmatic non-racist solutions to the immigration free-for-all and all its attendant problems, including religious extremism."

The Left, of course, tends to favour liberalising immigration, and that is probably why Balaam's strictures are aimed in that direction. As I said in my article, I agree that immigration is badly managed; but the idea that there is a "free-for-all" is nonsense. Again Balaam links immigration and religious extremism, and again he neglects to tell us what the link actually is. If there is no clear correlation, it's just another issue on which atheists differ and of no particular significance to the campaigns the *Freethinker* supports.

If there is to be a "debate", despite appearances to the contrary, then Balaam needs to explain the alleged immigration-religious extremism connection so that it can be discussed. But if posturing insinuations are all that Balaam is capable of, if his response to this challenge is more silly name-calling, then we will know that the "difficult but pressing questions" Balaam claims to want to ask are just so much hot air. If anyone needs "excising" from the movement it is time-wasting monomaniacs.

DAN J BYE  
Sheffield

THE faith of Tony Blair featured on the cover of *Time* magazine (June 9), with a photo of him pensively penning notes while seated in an executive jet somewhere up in the stratosphere. The accompanying article reported on Mr Blair's conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism and his unveiling on May 30 in New York of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, dedicated – if not to self-promotion and posterity – to reconciling the differences between the world's dominant religions. A lofty undertaking for someone who, when Prime Minister, "didn't do God", as his spokesperson Alastair Campbell declared, but now does so in spades by globe-hopping between sectarian hot-spots trying to change religious minds.

For the sake of world peace, it is not just compromise and accommodation between faiths that is needed – an impossibility in their mutually exclusive dogmas – but of shedding





religious belief altogether. In the worldwide absence of any inclination to fully secularise the education of children, where faith as a foundation of a culture is hard-wired into young brains in homes, schools and madrassas, with complicit national medias, any change in adult minds from the received norm is precariously dependent on objective knowledge independently gained from an understanding of science, and especially of evolution – the very solution that is being undermined by religious leaders.

A few weeks earlier I'd read *Inside the Neolithic Mind*. Its authors, David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce, do a sterling job in analysing the origin of 'spirituality' as subliminal expressions of the altered states of consciousness of humans some 10,000 to 5,000 years ago from an interpretation of symbolic markings, artifacts and archaeological remains in the Middle East and Europe – the earliest evidence yet that religion is a neurological phenomenon. From their bronze age and stone age mythological origins, evolved culturally disparate spiritual beliefs and narratives, whether inculcated into modern minds by psychological conditioning, parental and peer pressure, or by pathological temporal lobe triggers, can be of such profundity and obsession that those so deluded are dependent on them for their very identity, if not sanity.

Tony Blair included – hence his survivalist motivation. But rather than flying between faiths, faiths and more bloody faiths in a vain attempt at reconciliation – or, for the suffering in Iraq, is it redemption he's seeking? – he would better employ his egotistical energies if he came down to earth and returned to a secular call for (preferably science based) education, education, education.

**GRAHAM NEWBERY**  
Southampton

### Faith schools

NO Barbara. Peter Arnold does not think it is socially acceptable to segregate school children according to cock-eyed phantasies (*Points of View*, June).

It was not my touching faith but that of your government. I wrote that 'It' (The UK government propaganda that I quoted) says nothing about schools that encourage irrational beliefs. I should have made it clearer that irrationality is not a good educational objective but I am delighted that I prompted Barbara Smoker to come bursting out with that splendid letter. My faith school in 1940 was dreadfully divisive. We argued about everything, and those of us who survive still do.

**PETER ARNOLD**  
Alderney

THE Vatican complains that there are now more Muslims than Catholics (both claim over 1,000 million adherents) – "For the first time in the history of the world, we are no longer the largest religion". This is a hugely inaccurate statement of history which John Radford

reports (*Points of View*, May) and rightly derides as arrogant and ignorant.

The implied injunction to Rome's faithful is to breed faster. Most religions incorporate the ancient recipe for success by outnumbering the opposition – "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 2. 28) – and can achieve astonishing rates of reproduction (the Hutterites in modern times managed 10 children per woman).

Plato commended population control in the city of a few thousand citizens. Malthus warned (1798) that excess fertility would incur the checks of war, famine and epidemic, and this English cleric was duly denounced for blasphemy.

Freethinkers can be proud to count Bradlaugh and Besant (themselves accused of obscenity) as neo-Malthusians who sought to improve the life of the masses by making birth control widely available.

The world population is now around 6,600 million and so rapid is the increase that another 1000 million may be added in about a decade. This far outstrips any plausible growth in resources.

Most grave of all is the impact of this plague of people on climate change. It threatens to ensure that the crisis becomes a calamity. No rapturous ascents to assorted heavens, just squalid death amidst a desperate congestion. If only we could opt out.

**EDWIN SALTER**  
Norfolk

### Alpha Course

MY article about the Alpha Course (*Freethinker*, March) was packed with evidence and reasoned argument.

Dan O'Hara's response, on the other hand, was not (*Points of View*, June). Granted, Mr O'Hara's letter was only short. Yet in one short sentence he managed to combine those two favourite fallacies of religious apologists – the circular argument and the appeal to authority. "Two of the best recent assessments come from New Testament Professors at St. Andrews University". Why are their views better than mine? No arguments are given. What is the evidence that their position is "well-argued"? Again, no evidence is forthcoming. Mr O'Hara is merely assuming the points that he ought to be proving. Nothing in the letter substantiates its final claim – that "no-one with a serious interest in the subject can afford to overlook" his sources. Mr O'Hara (and the *Freethinker* editor) might like to reflect on what a complete waste of space that letter really is! Arguably, though, it falls into the "so bad it's good" category, and should be published after all.

Doubtless many *Freethinker* readers will be consumed with a burning desire to consult Mr O'Hara's conservative Christian sources. But they could save themselves money, time and effort by reading the web pages below. Both pages give examples of the arguments employed by one of Dan O'Hara's sources,

Richard Bauckham.

<http://tinyurl.com/2jtpnd>

<http://tinyurl.com/3dsnrh>

**ROBERT STOVOLD**  
Brighton

### Danish cartoons

IT is amazing how facts can be misrepresented. The Danish cartoons were not anti-Islamic unless to criticise suicide bombers can be objectively described as such. The "anti-Jewish cartoons" were crude racist material intended to stir up racial hatred, which is against the law, and publication would have been a criminal offence.

Just where is E Goodman coming from?

**Leslie Dubow**  
London

## 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](mailto: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 on 021454 4692 or see [www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk). Summer programme available.

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Society:** Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>.

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information and programme: 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](http://www.secularderby.org)

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

**Dorset Humanists:** Monthly speakers and social activities. Enquiries 01202-428506. Website [www.dorsethumanists.co.uk](http://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](mailto:secretary@galha.org). Website: [www.galha.org](http://www.galha.org). Conway Hall Library, Red Lion Sq, London WC1.

**Greater Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: John Coff: 0161 4303463. 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](http://www.hampstead.humanists.net)

**Harrow Humanist Society.** Meetings usually second Wednesday of the month (except January, July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. There will be no evening meeting in July. Instead, on July 16th there will be a daytime river trip to Greenwich. Non-members welcome. Further information from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Cresc, Gidea Park. Thurs Aug 7, 8pm. John Bridge: *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*..

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

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

**Aberdeen Group:** 07010 704778, [aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Dundee Group:** 07017 404778, [dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Jersey Humanists:** Contact: Reginald Le Sueur, La Petella, Rue des Vignes, St Peter, Jersey, JE3 7BE. Tel 01534 744780. Email: [Jerseyhumanists@gmail.com](mailto:Jerseyhumanists@gmail.com).

Website: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Jersey-Humanists/>

**Lancashire Secular Humanists:** Meetings 7.30 on 3rd Wed of month at Great

Eccleston Village Centre, 59 High St, The Square, Great Eccleston (Nr. Preston) PR3 0YB. [www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk](http://www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk). Information: Ian Abbott, Wavecrest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire FY6 0AZ. 01253 812308. Email: [ian@ianzere.demon.co.uk](mailto:ian@ianzere.demon.co.uk)

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

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

**Liverpool Humanist Group.** Information: 07814 910 286. Website: [www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/](http://www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/). E-mail: [lhghumanist@googlegmail.com](mailto:lhghumanist@googlegmail.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](http://www.MarchesSecularists.org). Contact: [Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org](mailto:Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org)

**Mid-Wales Humanists:** Information: Howard Kinberley 01982 551736

**Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group.** Information: Vince Chainey, 4 Mill St, Bradenham, Norfolk IP25 7QN. Tel: 01362 820982.

**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](mailto:enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk) website: [www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk](http://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.

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

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Information: 0114 2309754. The SADACCA Building, Wicker, S2. Wed June 4, 7.30pm. Public Meeting.

**South Hampshire Humanists:** Group Secretary, Richard Hogg. Tel: 02392 370689. Email: [info@southhantshumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@southhantshumanists.org.uk) website: [www.southhantshumanists.org.uk](http://www.southhantshumanists.org.uk)

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

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

**Suffolk Humanists & Secularists:** 5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828. [www.suffolkhands.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhands.org.uk). Email: [mail@suffolkhands.org.uk](mailto:mail@suffolkhands.org.uk)

**Sutton Humanists:** The Prince of Wales, Malden Rd, Cheam. Wed, June 4, 8pm. Naomi Phillips: *Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations*. Wed, July 2, 8pm. Keith Gimson and Alan Gandy: *Keep the Political Arena a Religion-Free Zone*. Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). E-Mail: [BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net](mailto:BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net).

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

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

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

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

website: [www.nirelandhumanists.net](http://www.nirelandhumanists.net)

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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