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The voice of atheism since 1881

Holland scraps its blasphemy law

But there are fears that it might be replaced with something worse

A CAUTIOUS welcome was given last month to Holland's decision to scrap its law on blasphemy, but the champagne corks won't be popping until secularists and other proponents of free expression are given the assurance that it won't be replaced by something worse.

The move to abolish the law, according to Radio Netherlands, "is remarkable as two of the current three members of the ruling coalition are Christian parties who originally wanted to maintain the law".

But, as an alternative, the cabinet is now seeking to strengthen anti-discrimination laws to encompass groups of all stripes. Justice Minister Ernst Hirsch Ballin says the law will now offer equal protection to all.

There has been much discussion in Holland in recent years about the balance between freedom of speech and the right not to be discriminated against, particularly in regard to the role of Islam in Dutch society.

Populist politicians like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who has now left the Dutch political scene, and Geert Wilders, have been constant critics of what they see as the negative influence of Islam on society.

Wilders released a ten-minute web film in March this year – *Fitna* – in which he interposed verses from the Koran with footage of terrorist atrocities committed around the world, including the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York. His message was clear: in his view Islam is a violent religion which is out to destroy freedom and democracy.

Muslim groups in Holland demanded that the blasphemy law be used to prosecute Wilders – and stand-up comedians and cartoonists who satirised Islam have also found themselves being threatened with possible prosecutions for blasphemy.

The discussion about the use of the law, which dates back to the 1930s, worried many who felt that the right to freedom of speech was being eroded, and that the rights of the religious not to be offended was being given far too much attention.

A majority in parliament, who also felt that the religious deserved no greater protection than non-believers, shared these worries.

The current law, known as article 147, was famously tested in the 1960s when Dutch author Gerard Reve found himself in court. He had written a piece in which God comes back to Earth as a donkey. Reve described, in great detail, having sex with the animal.

(Continued on page 5)

'Jesus Erect' prosecution hits a brick wall

A PRIVATE prosecution of Gateshead's Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art for allegedly outraging public decency was discontinued last month by the Crown Prosecution Service in Northumberland.

Nicola Reasbeck, Chief Crown Prosecutor, said: "The CPS recognises the right to bring a private prosecution and we do not take over a case unless there is a good reason to do so. Under the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985, which set up the CPS, we have the right to take over a private prosecution and prosecute it ourselves; take it over and stop the case; or allow the private prosecution to continue.

(Continued on page 7)



Terence Koh's hard-on messiah

Priests in Ireland abused hundreds of children – p3
The 'wilderness years' begin for the Religious Right in the US – p5
Spineless Waterstone's caves in to Christian bullies – p7



Does lying come with the territory in Islam? Freethinker editor Barry Duke poses the question.

ONE of the most comical scenes ever presented to me occurred in the '80s in the enormous foyer of a grand hotel in Park Lane in London. Some incompetent charged with choosing a new carpet for this cavernous space had foolishly opted for a nightmarish purple creation featuring heavy black half hoops. These played merry hell with the optic nerves, as the hoops appeared to rear up in an alarming fashion, causing those walking across the foyer to lift their feet up high to avoid being tripped up.

They were the *sober* ones. Imagine the havoc sown among those emerging from the bar, filled to the gills with overpriced cocktails. They would weave, stagger around and – on occasions – try to skip over the hoops, much to the merriment of the reception staff. Or, at least, those not suffering a migraine from staring too long at the hideous optical illusions the carpet created.

I was sitting on a plush banquet in the foyer when I spotted a figure gingerly descending the grand staircase. He was thoroughly bladdered, and clearly having great difficulty negotiating the hoops as he headed unsteadily to the reception desk. Wearing full Arab gear – pristine white robe, sandals, and an ornate red-and-gold headpiece – the guest was not a happy bunny.

When he managed, finally, to weave his way around the hoops and stagger up to the desk, he waved his bill at a receptionist, and demanded to know why he was being charged for having necked the entire contents of his minibar. The receptionist – a friend of mine who was about to join me for lunch – politely explained that, as the bar had been comprehensively plundered, he had to pay for what he had sipped.

"I am a Muslim. I do not drink alcohol!" slurred the guest – one of hundreds of Arab "princes" who regularly used the hotel at that time. Without argument, my friend produced a revised bill that contained no charges for booze.

When I later quizzed him about this swift, and remarkably sanguine climb-down, my friend just chuckled. "Oh, they do it all the time. If they think their bill might be seen by officials or family, we simply rearrange the figures and transfer the cost of the alcohol to some other service, like the telephone."

I was reminded of this stupendous instance of lying and hypocrisy when the case came up last month of a mendacious Muslim doctor who found himself before a medical disciplinary hearing.

Dr Muhammad Siddiq, former President of the Islamic Medical Association, was ordered to attend a General Medical Council Fitness to Practise hearing in Manchester as a result of a hateful letter he sent last year to the medical

magazine *Pulse*. In it he said: "There is punishment and fine if you throw rubbish or filth on the streets, the gays are worse than the ordinary careless citizen, they are causing the spread of illness and they are the root cause of many sexually-transmitted diseases. They need neither sympathy nor help, what they need is the stick of law to put them on the right path."

The letter went on to call a depressed transsexual awaiting gender reassignment "twisted." Siddiq also claimed that 99 percent of Muslim GPs shared his views.

Siddiq, who was working as a GP at the Walsall Teaching Primary Care Trust when the letter was sent to *Pulse*, claimed he did not write it.

So who did? "It was my son what did it" the GP claimed in this fabricated explanation:

"I have discovered that the whole situation has arisen due to a hoax by my son. I asked my son to prepare a letter for me in relation to an article dated June 28 and say that I agreed that gay patients were not being afforded the care they needed."

He said his son drafted the letter for him, but wrote a "spoof version" which he signed and sent to the magazine without reading.

Siddiq then dismissed his barrister at the hearing, and stormed out of the proceedings when he was refused an adjournment to find new counsel. In his absence, a journalist working for *Pulse*, Anthony Lithgow, told the panel that Siddiq had confirmed in conversation many of the views he expressed in the letter.

Lithgow testified that the GP thought homosexuality should be illegal, that gender reassignment surgery was a waste of money and that gays "prey on society."

After the magazine published extracts of the letter in an article, his employers asked him to explain his views.

He then apologised for the letter: "I categorically and unreservedly apologise for the hurt and offence I may have caused to anyone who may have read my letter. I have practised as a GP for more than 30 years and have never discriminated on any grounds. I would never refuse any treatment because of someone's sexuality. I just cannot understand how or why I could have said this in my letter."

Said prosecutor Bernadette Baxter: "All the documents I have referred you to and Mr Lithgow's evidence should leave you in no doubt that Dr Siddiq knew the content of the letter because he had written the letter, and it must appear obvious to anyone that the views in it would be recognised as both homophobic and offensive."

She added: "The GMC's case is that when

Dr Siddiq realised that his letter retracting his statement was not going to do the trick and bring an end to the matter, he strayed from the truth and set out a new explanation."

Siddiq was suspended for a year for bringing his profession into disrepute.

Not only is Siddiq a lying toad, he is also a serial mutilator of young Muslim boys – and is apparently not very good at it either. On April 1, 2007, a competency assessment was carried out of Siddiq's practice in undertaking circumcisions in his surgery. Following the assessment, a report was produced in which Siddiq was ordered to suspend circumcisions until certain criteria were implemented.

In reply, Siddiq said he considered the assessment of his competence in minor surgery to be "null and void", and that he would be continuing "circumcision clinics from May 2007". In a further defiant letter, Siddiq stated that the assessment was biased, and that he had a duty to his patients "not to refrain from recommending circumcision procedures".

Dr Siddiq then admitted that his actions were inappropriate, and a panel found that they were not in the best interests of his patients.

So, if, as the Siddiq states, 99 percent of Muslim GPs share his bigoted views, is it not time now for all NHS patients to thoroughly grill their Muslim doctors about their religious hang-ups before agreeing to be treated?

Or was Siddiq lying through his teeth about this statistic as well?

AS we approach 2009 – which sees the *Freethinker* enter its 128th year – I thought it appropriate to take the opportunity to wish all our readers a very happy festive season, and to point out with pride that 2008 has been a really momentous period for the magazine.

It began with a sudden increase in new subscribers who came to the *Freethinker* via a website launched in the middle of the previous year by ardent supporter Dave McKeegan.

These are difficult times for print media, but "niche" publications, such as the *FT*, appear still to have a future. However, in order to survive, we have to move with the times.

To this end we are planning a root-and-branch overhaul of the magazine's design, which will come into effect from January. We are also planning a make-over of the website to reflect the new-look print edition.

Improvements such these don't come cheaply, so we are extremely grateful for the generous contributions that our readers – even in these difficult times – have continued to make.

These, plus two generous bequests we received last month, will help us continue to serve readers, existing and new, for many years to come.

The magazine was launched with a grand mission: to bring about a more rational world by weaning people away from the absurdity of religious belief. We have a long way to go yet, and there are many battles ahead. With your support we may win some of them.

Pope accused of 'taking God's name in vain' in Pius XII beatification row

RICCARDO Di Segni, the chief rabbi of Rome, has accused Pope Benedict XVI of "taking the name of God in vain" and reversing the policy of apologising for past Christian errors, adopted by John Paul II, his predecessor.

Referring to Pope Benedict's support for the beatification of Pius XII, who is held by Jewish and other critics to have "turned a blind eye" to the Nazi Holocaust, Rabbi Di Segni said it had aroused "indignation in our community". He said the Pope had described the wartime pontiff as a gift from God, "but he certainly was not that for the Jewish people. There is no need to take the name of God in vain."



Chief Rabbi
Riccardo Di Segni

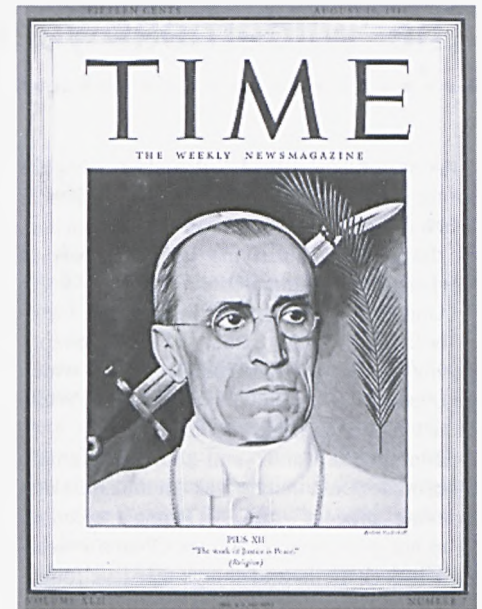
The chief rabbi accused the Vatican hierarchy – "especially those close to the Pope" – of using the Pius XII controversy to reverse John Paul's *mea culpa* policy of apologising for past Christian misdeeds, instead of aiming at "a total self-absolution by the Church". The prevailing tendency was to "paint a picture in which the Church was always perfect, has nothing to apologise for and has never betrayed its mission." The aim of those

around Pope Benedict was to "wipe out at a stroke anything which requires a severe and honest examination of conscience."

This included "the Vatican's diplomatic accords with Hitler, centuries of anti-Judaism and the entire responsibility of the Christian world during the *Shoah* (Holocaust)." Not only had Pius XII not visited the Jewish ghetto during Nazi and Fascist persecutions, he had "failed to stop the trains taking Jews to the concentration camps."

His comments drew a rebuke from a former papal nuncio to Israel. Cardinal Andrea Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo, who is now archpriest of the Basilica of St Paul without the Walls, said he had read the chief rabbi's remarks with "astonishment and displeasure". It was "absolutely untrue" that Pope Benedict had taken "a step backward" regarding past Christian errors. "Every Pope has his own character and way of doing things, but on the inter-religious dialogue and the great questions there is no discontinuity between the two pontiffs" he told *La Stampa*.

John Paul II had embarked on a "purification of memory" with the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at his side as his principal adviser as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the cardinal said. The process of beatification and canonisation was "rigid, tough and complex", and those who accused Pius XII of being



Time magazine cover boy Pope Pius XII

unworthy were "entering into a matter beyond their competence". Pope Benedict was speaking for the whole Church when he indicated that "we are tired of these attacks."

Those who accused the Vatican of not opening historical archives forgot that "there are rules. We do not open archives until a certain time has elapsed in order not to involve people who might still be alive." Jewish criticisms of the beatification of Pius XII were "ungenerous" and motivated by the "inadmissible external interference" of Israel in an internal Vatican process, the cardinal said, adding: "We all hope to see Pius XII beatified." He said there were "thousands of witnesses" who had testified that Pius had been "a strenuous defender of the Jews during the Nazi persecutions."

Priests abused up to 400 children in Dublin diocese

SHOCKING new figures show that 400 children have been identified as possible victims of sex-abuse by priests in the Dublin Archdiocese – proportionately even higher than the catalogue of horrors found by a Government investigation into the Diocese of Ferns, according to the *Independent* last month.

Settlement claims paid to suspected abuse victims over the last 68 years has soared to more than 12-million euros. 152 priests were involved.

"It is most likely that this is not a final figure," Archbishop Diarmuid Martin conceded, when he disclosed the revised figures showing the horrendous scale of clerical paedophilia in the archdiocese since 1940.

The Ferns probe identified more than 100 allegations of child sex-abuse between 1962 and 2002 against 21 priests.

Archbishop Martin, who earlier this year openly clashed with his predecessor, Cardinal

Desmond Connell, over making full public disclosure of abuse cases, said he was issuing the updated figures as part of his policy of getting to the root of the full extent of clerical child abuse.

Last February Cardinal Connell withdrew his High Court action to prevent Archbishop Martin from handing over allegedly privileged documents to the Government Commission of Inquiry into the archdiocese of Dublin headed by Circuit Court judge, Yvonne Murphy.

He withdrew the action after a huge public outcry supported Archbishop Martin.

Archbishop Martin's ongoing discovery of new complaints – which are now far higher than first found by Cardinal Connell before his retirement – clearly indicate the huge volume of files being investigated by the Commission, which recently received Oireachtas approval to extend its work until next year. Fifteen more priests and members of Religious Orders

against whom allegations were made, or suspicions raised, of child sex-abuse since 1940 have been found by the archbishop since his previous count in May 2007, bringing the total up from 147 to 152.

Archbishop Martin explained that the figures constitute a record of allegations made and suspicions raised since 1940 irrespective of the eventual outcome.

"They include allegations which have been substantiated, and those which have not, and allegations which are demonstrably false or mistaken," he said. To date, eight priests have been convicted in the criminal courts, and three others who have been the subject of allegations of child sexual abuse are currently before the courts.

A total of 120 civil actions have been brought against 35 Dublin priests or priests who held appointments in the diocese; 94 have been concluded and 26 are continuing.

The 'wilderness years' begin for America's Religious Right

BARACK Obama, the US President-elect, has hit the ground running, signalling a reversal of much of G W Bush's faith-driven agenda, and, in the process, horrifying large numbers of Christian fundamentalists.

Among those hit hardest by Obama's victory is James Dobson, founder of the hate-mongering Focus on the Family group which enjoyed a close association with the White House under the Bush administration.

Homophobe and anti-abortion fanatic Dobson declared that he was "in the midst of a grieving process" after Obama's election. "I'm not grieving over Barack Obama's victory, but over the loss of things that I've fought for for 35 years."

Dobson said he understood the excitement over election of the country's first black President and that he wished he could have voted for Obama for that reason.

"But to be honest, I have to say that his win causes me enormous concern, because he will be the most committed pro-abortion president in our history, even supporting infanticide for babies who survive botched abortions. He's in favour of much of the homosexual agenda, and he's going to appoint the most liberal justices to the Supreme Court, perhaps, that we've ever had. So there are many reasons why I'm struggling today over the likely path that the nation has taken."

At the same time, ailing veteran US evangelist Billy Graham, 90 and not long for this world, announced that he would not be counselling the President-elect. His son Franklin indicated that his father was not best pleased with Obama's liberal agenda, particular in regard to abortion and gay rights, and that the preacher, who has counselled every president beginning with Eisenhower, was not in line to mentor Obama.

Said Franklin, who now heads the Charlotte-based Billy Graham Evangelistic Association: "Those positions that [Obama] hold are contrary to biblical teaching. I hope that God will change his heart. President-elect Obama heard our position. And I told him that this was very difficult for us ... It's a moral issue that we just can't back down on."

Commenting in the *Associated Baptist Press* on America's re-formed political landscape, David P Gushee – Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University – said that "the evangelical right's white-hot anti-Obama rhetoric places it in a poor position to function as anything other than an opposition voice during the Obama years."

"After eight years of access and influence in the Bush administration, this will undoubtedly come as a shock.

"The coming wilderness years will provide

an occasion for the Christian right to rethink its approach, as will other branches of the tattered Republican coalition in the years to come."

He added: "I am eager to see the Obama administration reverse the Bush administration's detainee policy as decisively as possible; sponsor necessary climate-change legislation and alternative energy measures; press for effective abortion-reduction strategies; spearhead comprehensive immigration reform; posture the United States as an adherent of international norms and practitioner of creative diplomacy; lead the world in the reduction and eventual elimination of nuclear weapons; ensure that every American has access to needed health care; and jump start our economy in a way that especially benefits those who most need help now.

"These would all, in various ways, be significant steps toward justice, human dignity and a livable planet. They would all fulfil government's mandate to advance the common good and promote the sacredness of life. It is exciting to contemplate participating in the achievement of such goals in the days to come."

A week after the election, shares in companies developing therapies based on stem cells rose sharply, after confirmation that Obama planned to reverse an existing executive order against federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research.

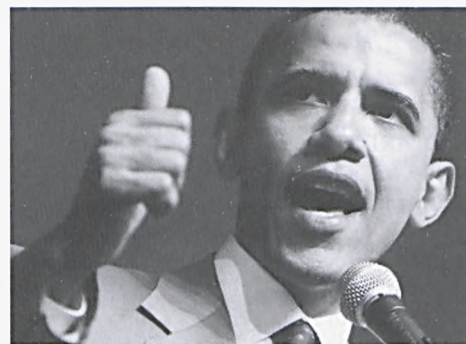
"People now know what the future executive landscape is going to look like, and they are trying to figure out how to profit from it," said one US securities analyst.

Stem cells are the body's master cells, giving rise to tissues, organs and blood. Scientists hope to harness their power to transform medicine, to repair devastating injuries, replace the brain cells lost in Parkinson's disease, cure juvenile diabetes, or treat diseases such as Alzheimer's.

Bush had vetoed bills to expand federally



Pastor Mark Holick, of the Spirit One Christian Centre, in Wichita, Kansas, was so upset over Obama's victory that he posted this offensive message outside his church



America's President-elect Barack Obama

funded embryonic stem-cell research, and showed a preference toward adult stem-cell research that is considered more ethical by many conservative voters.

A reversal by Obama of Bush's long-standing policy, which restricts funding for stem-cell research, would give a boost to companies seeking to develop therapies based on that research.

Catholic bishops in the US, meanwhile, are furious that, despite their warnings not to vote for Obama, more than half of all Catholics did so anyway. Now the church leadership is in "a tailspin", according to Jon O'Brien, president of Catholics for Choice.

"These people represent a minority view of Catholics in the United States and in the world. These are people who don't even believe contraception can be used."

O'Brien was speaking after the bishops approved a statement declaring that if the Democratic-controlled Congress and the incoming Obama administration enact proposed abortion rights legislation, they would see it as an attack on the church.

The statement attacks the proposed Freedom of Choice Act, which would remove most state and federal restrictions on abortion. President-elect Barack Obama pledged during the campaign to sign the legislation.

The annual meeting of 220 bishops came a week after the election of a Democratic ticket that supports abortion rights and includes Vice President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr., who is Catholic.

Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Chicago warned of "devastating consequences" to the Catholic health-care system if the act nullified conscience laws that allow providers and institutions to decline to perform abortion-related procedures. He said it could force the closure of all Catholic hospitals.

Auxiliary Bishop Robert Hermann of St. Louis added that "any one of us would consider it a privilege to die tomorrow – to die tomorrow – to bring about the end of abortion."

Sussex hotel gets cold feet over euthanasia workshop

WITHIN hours of declaring that it had no problem hosting a euthanasia workshop, the Langham Hotel in Eastbourne suddenly got cold feet and cancelled the event.

Earlier, hotel spokesman Neil Kirby declared: "We took it as a business booking. It's a free country." But when local media demanded to know why the plug had been pulled at the last moment, the hotel's general manager would not say. Andrew Coy tersely told the press: "We have decided not to pursue the event. We are not going to declare our reasons."

The euthanasia workshop, designed for older people, was organised by controversial Australian doctor Philip Nitschke, from Exit International. But when he got wind of it, Eastbourne MP Nigel Waterson, who is opposed to euthanasia, condemned the workshop, saying he would ask police to investigate.

Dr Nitschke had a similar workshop in Bournemouth cancelled following local controversy.

The planned workshop was to be split into two parts: a public meeting outlining euthanasia and why it makes sense, and a workshop proper where people learn about drug and non-drug methods of suicide and assisted suicide.

It seems clear that this latest cancellation was the result of Waterson telling the local newspaper, the *Argus*, that he would be contacting the police to check if Dr Nitschke was breaking the law by telling people the best way to take their own lives.

He said: "It's perfectly OK to have a debate on the ethical issues and it's perfectly OK to hire a commercial venue – but that's as far as it goes I think."

"If he is going to step across the line in instructing people how to break the law, I think Sussex Police would have a close interest in the matter."

Immediately afterwards, council officials, the police and – unbelievably – even the chief executive of the euthanasia group Dignity in Dying, fell over themselves in their rush to tell the *Argus* how pleased they were over the hotel's craven decision.

Sarah Wootton, chief executive of Dignity in Dying, said: "It is irresponsible and potentially dangerous to provide information on how to end life without safeguards or control over where the information goes. Dignity in Dying believes terminally ill adults should have access to better care and treatment, and the option of an assisted death within strict legal safeguards."

Chief Inspector Dick Coates, Eastbourne's district commander, said: "If it was allowed to take place, the organisation, and possibly the hotel where it was to take place, could have been committing offences. It would be difficult

Suicide workshop venue withdrawn

'DOCTOR DEATH' BANNED



to make a decision based on assumptions but I would be very concerned if anyone was running an event like that."

A spokeswoman for Worthing Borough

Council and Adur District Council said: "Neither Adur nor Worthing councils would agree with any sort of event which is about teaching people how to kill themselves. We would hope local hoteliers would feel the same way."

And the Leader of West Sussex County Council Henry Smith waded in with: "When it comes to individual organisations which hold a very controversial position on something in terms of life, we reserve our right to refuse rental of premises to the individual or organisation because of the offence it could cause to the community."

Dr Nitschke was outraged: "I'm disgusted frankly. This is the third one now pulling out at the last minute after publicly saying they were OK. Elderly folk and those who are seriously ill who have a lot to benefit from this sort of event are the ones that are going to lose."

After the *Argus* carried news of the cancellation, the paper received a huge number of letters from the public – virtually all condemning the hotel's decision to cancel the workshop.

Blasphemy scrapped in Holland

At the time, this proved too much for Dutch Christian political parties who raised questions in parliament, and Reve was eventually prosecuted and convicted. But he was cleared after an appeal – the passages were indeed found to be "blasphemous" but not in such a way as to be "malicious and deliberately offensive", the precise definition needed to secure a conviction.

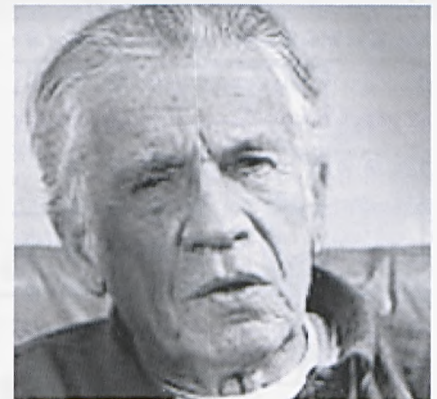
The assumption was that after the Reve case, the law was a dead letter. Other attempts to use it in the years that followed failed.

Proposals to replace the law could, however, leave the Dutch with legislation far worse than the blasphemy law itself. The anti-censorship **Mediawatchwatch** blog reported:

"The intention is to introduce the concept of 'indirect insult' and expand an existing law which protects people on the basis of race, age, disability, and sexual orientation to include protection on the basis of religion or 'conviction'. This means that remarks directed at Islam, Christianity, Buddhism or – depending on your interpretation of 'conviction' – even homeopathy and astrology, could be interpreted as indirect insults to people, and prosecuted as such."

According to one Dutch commentator, the proposed new law carries a maximum sentence of 12 months, whereas the original defunct blasphemy law carried a maximum three month sentence.

Said MWW: "This whole scenario looks very similar to what we went through here in



Dutch 'blasphemer' Gerard Reve

the UK with the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill – when we came very close to getting a universal blasphemy law imposed on us. We won that battle by a narrow margin, thanks to an alliance of convenience between artists, secularists and Christians."

Jan de Wit, who is a member of the opposition Socialist Party in the Netherlands, said: "The blasphemy law was already a dead letter, but it is wrong in principle that believers should have more protection than non-believers. Thank goodness this has now come to an end. And anyway, who decides if God feels offended or not?"

Dutch secularists, and other supporters of free expression are hoping that that Mr de Wit and his allies will manage to nip this dreadful new proposal in the bud.

How an Amazonian tribe turned a missionary into an atheist

A COMPELLING and hugely satisfying report on BBC Radio 4 last month told the story of an evangelist who was charged by an American missionary group with taking the Gospel to the little understood Pirahã tribe in the Amazon – only to realise how ridiculous his faith in Christianity was.

Daniel Everett, 57, a linguist in the Departmental Chair of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Illinois State University, told presenter John McCarthy on the *Excess Baggage* programme, that he had travelled to the Amazon in the '70s to bring the tribe "the joy of faith" only to discover that they were already deeply contented people. In fact they seemed far better contented than he was.

The Pirahã wanted to know whether Jesus was "brown, like them, or white like Everett". When the missionary confessed he didn't know, they demanded to know whether he had seen or experienced *any* of the things he was telling them about. He had to admit that he hadn't; that he was simply passing things onto them that were told to him by people who had-

n't seen or experienced them either.

The Pirahã, he said, "believed that the world was as it had always been, and that there was no supreme deity". Furthermore they had no creation myths in their culture. In short, here was a people who were more than happy to live their lives "without God, religion or any political authority".

Despite Everett translating the Book of Luke into Pirahã and reading it to tribe members, the Pirahã sensibly resisted all his attempts to convert them.

According to a report in the *New Yorker*: "His zeal soon dissipated ... Convinced that the Pirahã assigned no spiritual meaning to the Bible, Everett finally admitted that he did not, either. He declared himself an atheist ...

According to Wikipedia, Everett "was having serious doubts by 1982, and had lost all faith by 1985 after having spent a year at MIT. He would not tell anyone about his atheism for another 19 years; when he finally did, his marriage ended in divorce and two of his three children broke off all contact."

Everett's account of his life among the Pirahã is told in his book *Don't Sleep There are Snakes*. BBC Radio 4 chose it as its Book of The Week, which it broadcast last month.

DON'T SLEEP THERE ARE SNAKES

Daniel Everett



David Tribe: The Sinner

"OH, father, dear father, I've sinned a great sin."

"Take comfort, my child; only sinners drop in.

"Now tell me about it, just what have you done? ... Is it treason, or murder, or arson?"

"No, none of those."

"Have you burgled, or can it be rape?"

"Can't you tell I'm a woman?"

"From sin none escape. But there's one deed so vile I can't give it a name:

It is loathsome, repugnant, a cesspit of shame,

And through it we court every species of ill ...

"You haven't ..." "... I have": "you've swallowed ..." "... the pill."

"Oh, hell and damnation, what evil is here! Such wretched abandon confounds me with fear! ...

"Now tell me, my child, it was all a mistake;

You thought it was aspirin. "My brain was awake.

"I've had sixteen kids and we've only one floor."

"If you've had sixteen babes you won't notice one more."

"The doctor says no with the state that I'm in."

"Let the doctor fight germs while I wrestle with sin."

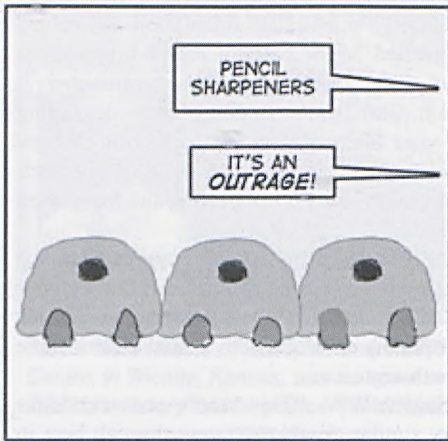
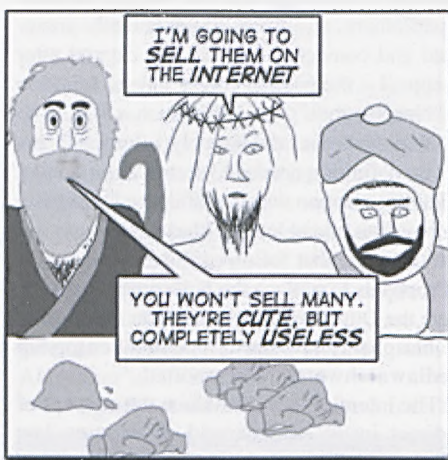
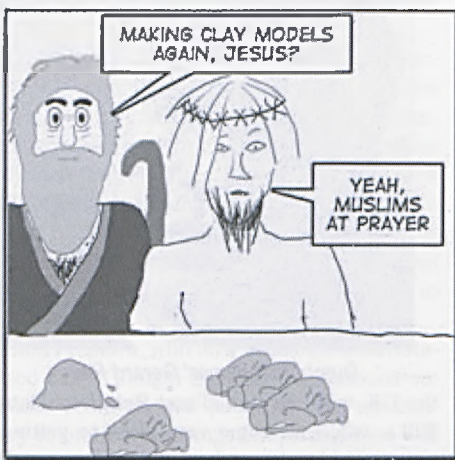
"But what shall I do?" "You must learn how to cope."

"My husband's demanding." "So is the Pope."

"But surely, dear father, there's some other way."

"The Franciscans say yes – but I cannot say."

Jesus and Mo



© Jesusandmo.net

Christian zealot's Taliban tactics blow up in his face

THE threat of disruption by low-level Christian terrorists "put the fear of God" into the management of a Welsh bookshop, who promptly cancelled a book-signing event by poet Patrick Jones.

Deranged zealot Stephen Green, of *Christian Voice*, boasted "just the knowledge that we were on our way put the fear of God into the opposition."

Jones was due to sign copies of his *Darkness is Where the Stars Are* last month at Waterstone's in Cardiff but the shop cancelled the event at the last moment.

The poet was then forced to launch his new collection in the street.

According to a BBC report, *Christian Voice* said the book was "obscene and blasphemous" and called on the chain to remove copies from stores.

The company said it was not a censor but felt it was "prudent" to cancel the event because of its duty to customers.

Darkness is Where the Stars Are is a collection of poems from the Welsh publishers, Cinnamon Press.

Jones, the brother of Nicky Wire of the

Manic Street Preachers, said: "I'm really proud of this book and I'm really sickened.

"There shouldn't be censorship of this sort - [the book] doesn't set out to be offensive."

He said he had not singled out Christianity in his poems, but was questioning beliefs in society.

Green trumpeted that the decision was a triumph "for the Lord, not for us."

"God's triumph" proved remarkably short-lived. Immediately after the controversy broke, Pete Black, the LibDem's culture spokesman in the Welsh Assembly invited Jones to read his poems in the assembly on December 17.

Green was beside himself with rage, saying: "This is a creepy event at which Jesus-hating Assembly Members can swoon over poems packed with hatred for Christianity and which speak of Mary Magdalene and the poet having sex with the Lord Jesus Christ.

"They will also hear Jones' unfettered hatred of Christianity, which he has somehow managed to convince himself is



'Christian Voice sabotaged my book-signing!' Patrick Jones with his 'blasphemous' collection of poems

indistinguishable from Islam. Christians in Wales must not take this lying down. We need to stand up for our Lord against this attack on His honour and on the Church itself by Peter Black. He has gone out of his way to show contempt for Christians in Wales. As he is the LibDem Culture spokesman, that means insulting Jesus Christ is now official LibDem policy. The LibDems have thus become a political party Christians can no longer in conscience vote for or take any part in."

'Muslim men think they have a God-given right to beat their wives'

A CONSULTANT in obstetrics and gynaecology, Dr Fatima Husain, last month revealed how she sees Muslim women coming for treatment with strangle marks around their necks and bruises on their pregnant abdomens.

She also claimed that problems develop because many followers of Islam are fearful of discussing sex, contraception and infertility.

Dr Husain, who works at Heatherwood and Wexham Park Hospitals in Berkshire, told *Muslim News* that many women ask to be referred to her specialist clinics because she is a hijab-wearing Muslim, thus allowing her to discover the true scale of domestic violence in her religious community.

She said: "I've seen injuries on some of my patients that I wouldn't dream would happen to pregnant women. I've seen strangle marks, finger marks on their necks and bruises on

their pregnant abdomens."

She added: "Domestic violence is supposedly equally divided amongst the various groups but I get the impression it is more common among Muslims. Some Muslim men think they have a God-given right to be physically violent to their spouses. I see the result of all this when they are admitted as my patients."

The photo used to illustrate this report is by

controversial Iranian artist Amir Normandi, who lives in Chicago. In October, he ran into trouble when another of his pictures, on display at the Pilsen, was removed after threats had been made against the gallery. Just weeks later, a gallery in London was vandalised by angry Muslims after it mounted an exhibition by Sussex artist Sarah Maple (see front page report in last month's *Freethinker*).



Amir Normandi's photo of an abused woman holding a Koran

Jesus erect trial hits a brick wall

(Continued from p1)

"It is necessary to construe the offence of outraging public decency in a way that is compatible with the right of freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

"Having considered the evidence in this case with great care, we are satisfied that there is no case to answer. We have taken into account all the circumstances, including the fact that there was no public disorder relating to the exhibition and that there was a warning at the entrance to the gallery about the nature of the work on display. The case has therefore been discontinued."

The private prosecution was commenced at Gateshead Magistrates' Court in July 2008 by Emily Mapfuwa, who alleged that an offence

of outraging public decency had been committed by exhibiting Terence Koh's statue of Jesus Christ with an oversized erect phallus at the Baltic Art Gallery.

At a hearing on 2 September 2008, the representatives for the Baltic Flour Mills Visual Arts Trust elected trial by jury and proceedings were adjourned for a committal to Crown Court.

Mapfuwa's solicitor Michael Phillips said that "Although it is right to say that there was no actual disorder, there was potentially such disorder, which was evidenced to the CPS in the witness statements provided. In particular one witness felt like smashing the object. The decision is simply not in accordance with the facts and is unsustainable."

John Radford: Looking for loopholes

It is told of W C Fields, perhaps apocryphally, that while in a sanitarium towards the end of his life, he was found by a friend reading the Bible. Asked what he was doing, he growled, "Looking for loopholes".

True or not, this, in effect, is what many people seem to do with that book, and no doubt with other sacred texts. The Reverend Canon Dr John Polkinghorne, KBE, FRS, is a particle physicist, a theologian and a winner of the Templeton Prize (currently £820,000). In *The Times*, September 20, 2008, he complains about misuse of the word "creationist". He, he says, is a creationist "in the proper sense of that term", since he believes, as a Christian, "that the mind and purpose of a divine Creator" lie behind the universe which we see and which science explores.

He rejects "the curious North American sense", which takes the book of Genesis literally. This is not only false, he says, as shown by science, but is theologically mistaken, because what Genesis really means, properly interpreted, is that "everything that exists does so by the will of the Creator".

Dr Polkinghorne says that we have to interpret any kind of "deep literature", for example when Robert Burns says that his love is like a red, red rose, we do not expect to see leaves and thorns. Well, perhaps that is why he wrote "is like" and not "is". It is true that poets may leave out the "like" sometimes, but it is usually rather obvious when a metaphor is being used. It doesn't seem particularly obvious to me, or to the wrongheaded creationists (who are not confined to North America), that the author of Genesis is using metaphors. To them, it seems that the account is a true history of events. To me, it seems one of the innumerable creation myths that probably every society has imagined, presumably to make sense of how things came to be as they are, and how we ourselves came to exist.

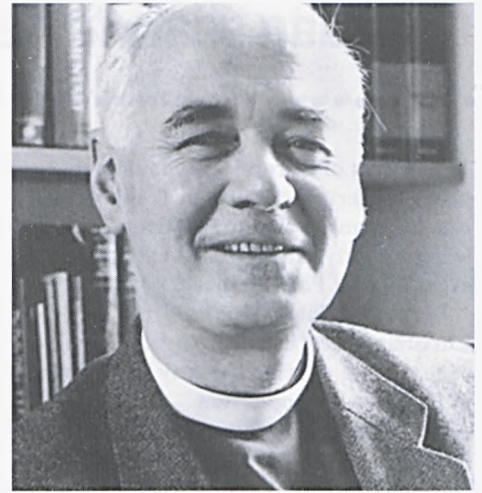
The book of Genesis combines two myths, one about creating the world and one about creating human beings. Scholars suggest these were written down, probably in the sixth century BCE or earlier, by authors they name 'P' and 'J' respectively, both drawing on much older oral accounts, in which creation is seen as the victory of a deity over the forces of chaos. Judging from what we know of how such traditions are transmitted, it is likely that P and J heard various versions, and attempted to set down what they thought the best, or the truest, perhaps combining different elements. Their versions were combined into one story, and later copyists and editors will have made further changes, with the same aim. According to the *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (1995), the P account presents creation as "brought about by the separation of the ele-

ments of the universe, which produces an orderly and habitable world. Hence creation is not so much dealing with absolute beginning, creation from nothing ... as with the world order as perceived by human beings". Psalm 74 tells how Yahweh, in a contest with the waters, smites the many-headed Leviathan before creating day and night, which echoes an earlier Akkadian creation myth.

The J account of Adam and Eve, which is thought to be older than P, is a folk-tale. God moulds the first man from the dust of the ground, as in many similar tales elsewhere. It is rather unclear from Genesis what is actually supposed to have happened. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." (Gen. 1:2) "And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters". (Gen.1:6). It is not obvious from this that God created all that exists. (Quite apart from the old conundrum of how God himself came to exist.) These stories are a stage in the move of the Israelites to monotheism, from the polytheism which they originally shared with their Middle Eastern neighbours. The move seems to have been closely related to the political process of identifying themselves as a nation. Yahweh began his career, as did Allah, as one among a host of local tribal gods, only much later becoming unique, at least to the Israelites, a doctrine enforced by the state.

Genesis is not literature in the normal sense, though in the King James version it uses magnificent language. It was surely not written as literature, so why should we interpret it as such? It may be said that various translations are not accurate, but that only pushes the problem back a stage, and in any case we no longer have the "original" oral versions. In folklore such things rarely exist. If we do try to interpret the Genesis account, where exactly do we look for the true meaning? Did it lie in now lost earlier versions? Did P and J know it, but conceal it, or were they unaware of the significance of what they wrote? Then again, if the Bible is the word of God, or inspired by him, we might expect it to mean what it says. And as the curious North Americans point out, it says quite clearly (in my King James version) that God created the heaven and the earth and all the creatures in them, and the sun, moon and stars, and so on, over the space of seven days. These were all separate acts of creation. You have to stretch it considerably to make it mean that the Creator is responsible for the continuing existence of everything.

Dr Polkinghorne's ground for saying this is



Dr John Polkinghorne

that the phrase "And God said, 'Let there be ...'" is repeated eight times. But letting a series of things be, is obviously not the same as being responsible for everything that exists, nor as being behind everything as it continues to exist. But then, if P and J, and anyone else involved, either did not know the real meaning, or decided to conceal it, how does Dr Polkinghorne know it? Why is his interpretation to be preferred to that of anyone else? I can't help feeling that he is searching for loopholes to allow what he would like to be the case.

More widely, we may wonder why we should suppose that God, having decided to let us know that he is the Creator, should reveal this, apparently in garbled form, to a small desert tribe in the Middle East, some two or three thousand years ago, and not to the multitudes of humans elsewhere. Except for Dr Polkinghorne, of course, though to be fair other theologians take the same view, and indeed have done since the Middle Ages. As another poet said, *How odd / Of God / To choose / The Jews*. The whole thing seems another example of a frequent Christian / theological strategy, to assert that the Bible is somehow divinely authoritative, but straightforwardly true only sometimes. Which bits are true, which have to be interpreted, and which can be ignored altogether (like the detailed instructions for burnt offerings in Leviticus), appears to depend on the desires of the reader, a series of personal loopholes.

One might recall that the Bible itself is an arbitrary selection from a large corpus of various writings of different ages and purposes, most of which have themselves undergone many revisions. The number of books that are held to comprise it varies from five (the view of the Samaritans, not the counselling service but a still existing tiny Jewish community) to 81 (in the Ethiopian church). "Literal creationists", writes Dr Polkinghorne, "actually abuse scripture by the mistaken interpretation that they impose on it". In just the same spirit, the Venerable Bede, 13 centuries ago, bewailed the error of those brethren who mistook the

true date of Easter. And so it has always been when people rely on a "divine" source of truth, and so theologians and believers will continue to argue, never reaching agreement since there is, in reality, nothing to agree on.

Dr Polkinghorne is quoted (on www.polkinghorne.net) as saying: "Physics, at least at the undergraduate level, is a subject on which the dust has settled. In theology, the

dust never settles". Perhaps that is why it remains perpetually obscure. The stories of Genesis are just that, of interest to anthropologists, historians and indeed psychologists, but giving no guidance as to how the world came to be or continues to exist, whether you take them literally in every detail or interpret them to suit your own fancy.

A loophole is originally a narrow aperture in

a wall allowing one to shoot at enemies. The wall protects from attack, but the size of the loophole restricts the view. Sheltered behind the wall of their beliefs, theologians fire at those whose views they dislike, even if they cannot see them very clearly, let alone gain the wider perspective of reason and evidence.

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

Faye Flam: Eternity is a long time to go without sex

TO many Americans, eyebrows rise at the very idea of suicide bombers believing their heavenly reward will include sex with beautiful virgins. But aren't the 75 percent of Americans who believe in an afterlife concerned that there might not be any sex in their heaven?

Mark Twain considered the problem. In *Letters From the Earth*, he writes of humankind: "He has imagined a heaven and has left entirely out of it the supremest of all his delights – the one ecstasy that stands first and foremost in the hearts of every individual of his race – sexual intercourse!"

For any sane person, he wrote, heaven would be an intolerable bore.

Not so in Islam. The Koran describes a lush garden-like heaven in which each man can be married to a bevy of beautiful, dark-eyed females called *houris*. The passage is open to interpretation, but scholars say these are not earthly girls who died but heavenly creatures, and, it would appear, they can be deflowered and then automatically reflower.

"Obviously the *houris* are there for a reason or they wouldn't be described as ever-virgin," said Tim Furnish, a professor of history at Georgia Perimeter College and author of *Holiest Wars: Islamic Mahdis, Their Jihads and Osama bin Laden*.

One of the inflammatory Danish cartoons that offended some Muslims played on this idea with a voice from the clouds yelling to would-be suicide bombers to stop, because the supply of virgins was running low. Many articles in the US press refer to a reward of 72 virgins – a number that's not in the Koran, Furnish said, but comes from supplementary writings.

"If you take the opposite sex out of the picture, that would not be a heaven where I'd want to go," says Alam Payind, director of the Middle East Studies Centre at Ohio State University and a part-time imam. Yes, it's a male-dominated vision, he said, but that was woven into the fabric of Middle Eastern culture.

Many scholars say it's misleading to harp on the virgins. The prospect of sex in the hereafter has cropped up across other traditions,

including Christianity, says religion professor Alan Segal, of Columbia University's Barnard College.

Whether anyone gets to hook up in heaven depends on whether you believe in immortality of the soul or a full resurrection of the body, said Segal, who is author of *Life After Death: The Afterlife in Western Religions*.

Plato and Aristotle taught that the body dies but a conscious soul lives forever.

There would be no sex for the Greek philosophers, but they could continue to do what they really loved – to learn, to teach and to think.

Segal said that while modern Judaism focuses more on this life than the next, early Jews introduced the notion that martyrs would be bodily resurrected in the hereafter.

Early Christians believed that after the end of the world they'd all get their bodies back in heaven, and this led inevitably to questions about sex and marriage. On pondering resurrection of the flesh, St Augustine decided we'd keep our sex organs for aesthetic reasons but wouldn't use them.

In the New Testament, a man asks Jesus what happens if you've been widowed and married several times. Which of your spouses will you be reunited with in heaven? Jesus says no one will marry or be given in marriage but we will be as angels.

So do angels do it? Milton asked the question in *Paradise Lost*, and the angel Raphael told him that when angels embrace, it is "easier than air with air" – not exactly a clear answer.

Still, heavenly sex is problematic in Christianity, he said, since intercourse for pleasure was considered "depravity". That changed somewhat for Protestants after the Renaissance. They loosened some of the sexual prohibitions and some started to consider a sexier afterlife, Segal said.



In Islam and Judaism, sexual pleasure is not considered filthy, he said, making its possible appearance in heaven less shocking.

Zoroastrians, he said, believed there was sex in heaven but people would wean themselves away from both food and sex as they got used to being dead.

A more relevant question may be whether there's sex in the Other Place. There certainly will be lots of interesting souls, so it may depend on how well the underworld is supervised.

In the end, the desire for our sexual selves to live beyond our short time on Earth isn't so shocking. Eternity is a long time to remain celibate.

While many motivations have been attributed to suicide bombings, the 72 virgins are sometimes used as an inducement, said Payind. "It is one of the more important enticements for the desperate, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised living in miserable conditions."

Segal points out that the virgins are used to appeal mostly to teenage boys. If you're a grown man faced with the prospect of 72 heavenly wives, he said, "you'd want some of them to be experienced."

Faye Flam writes a column called *Carnal Knowledge* about sex and science for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, where this article originally appeared.

Report on Some Social Practices on Planet MWG/S42000/3

THE main purpose of the voyage of Starship Egaleb is to add to the record of the astonishing variety of life forms in our home galaxy, but time has also been spent in examining social structures of comparatively intelligent beings on a number of planets. A recent discovery should benefit from further study.

Our expeditions onto the surface of Planet 3, the only satellite in System S/42000 still supporting life, noted many buildings of various sizes that conform to a generally uniform plan. Almost every settlement of the planet's dominant species, a particularly aggressive mammal, has one – and they are clearly maintained at great expense.

Their purpose is to house assemblies of a weird cult of these relatively intelligent creatures that gather in cycles of seven Planet 3 days to perform rituals, prescribed by an unelected hierarchy, which they hope will cause a mysterious source to confer benefits on them and save them from harm.

No records are kept on how many believe their efforts to have succeeded, but those who claim to have received a benefit are more likely to mention it than those supposedly spurned.

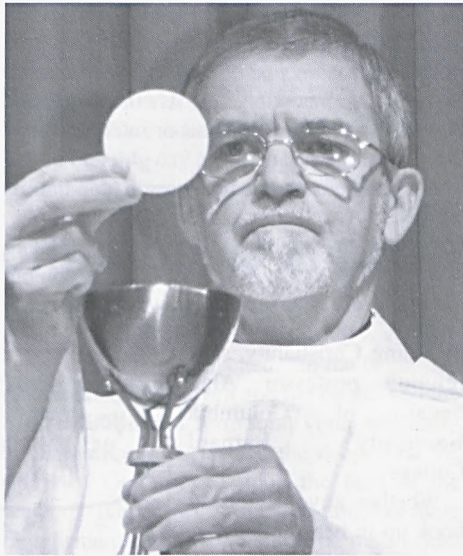
A strange feature is that their ceremonies are performed before an archaic instrument of torture and execution, and often an image of a young male dying in agony, flayed and bleeding, is nailed to the grim structure, the whole being apparently regarded as an object of reverence.

Curiously, many of the creatures, though not practising cult members, wear expensive trinkets of this cruel icon for personal adornment, which suggests custom rather than credulity. The victim is said to be an avatar of the cult's god, who, like many of the planet's other gods, is claimed to have created the universe; including presumably us, though the cult in its early stages vehemently denied our existence and burnt alive those who asserted it.

It seems their god decreed that this unfortunate avatar had to become "mortal" by means of an egg fertilised by the god in person (an intervention popular with other gods in the region of the cult's origin), then suffer and die to save their species (but no other) from an ill-defined menace devised by the god itself.

Why the god should have devised this threat, and why nothing but torture, blood and death could avert it are not explained. The only clues are in relatively ancient texts of doubtful provenance that the cult reveres. They derive from a time when sacrifice, even of their own species, was a common form of worship in the region, and show that their god has a taste for slaughter, vengeance and punishment.

In spite of these traits and although Planet 3 is a crumbling, dangerous one beset with



A Planet 3 cult leader engaged in the consumption of the 'flesh' and 'blood' of a dead avatar

famine and disease, doomed to early destruction, worshippers continually thank this god as their creator, praise it for its kindness, and implore its forgiveness, presumably for transgressions arising from the natures with which it has imbued them.

This "benign" entity is believed to punish the souls (whatever *they* may be) of all unforgiven transgressors with eternal torment. There is no attempt to explain what "eternal punishment" could be intended to achieve nor to fathom the motives of the deity for imposing it; the obvious one, a deranged desire for vengeance, would hardly fit other attributes invented for the god.

The avatar after dying under torture is said to have returned to life, thus supposedly comforting the faithful by purportedly demonstrating that they too will live forever, with at least a chance of doing so untormented. But this has the perhaps unintended consequence of diminishing the value of the life now enjoyed, and of encouraging some, on slender pretexts, to sacrifice their own lives or to take the lives of others. Oddly, the cult's texts declare that only a few "souls" will escape eternal torment in lakes of fire, so the majority ought to feel better off without a "soul" at all, but doubtless, as in most immature societies, bad things are expected to happen only to those who deserve them – that is, to others.

In or about six thousand Planet 3 years, roughly half the time since this dominant species began to ascend from a largely bestial existence, tales of the death and resurrection of gods have been common in many regions.

This fairly recent one, which is split into numerous sects, has currently a larger number of at least nominal followers than many simi-

lar superstitions, thanks mainly to its successful propagation by military and commercial means; but it has an unusual and distasteful element. The ceremonies vary but often take a complex form prescribed by the hierarchy and involve archaic costumes, much kneeling in submission, bell ringing, burning of incense, chanting and singing, all of which have been laid down as essential to achieve the worshipper's objectives, though no evidence for the efficacy of these rituals is available.

The most bizarre part involves the eating and drinking of unleavened wafers and fermented liquor which represent the flesh and blood of the dead avatar; perhaps an echo from sacrificial bonding superstitions of a savage and cannibalistic age. But, and this is such a grotesque notion that it is hard to credit even in these primitive creatures, in some sects of the cult the members are *commanded* by the hierarchy to believe that if a suitably qualified celebrant performs these rituals exactly as they have laid down, then the wafer and liquor become *in fact* the avatar's flesh and blood.

It's hard to see how these creatures, even though they are only superficially intelligent, can be commanded into holding beliefs unsupported by reason, let alone this one that their senses must tell them is false, or be commanded into performing macabre acts, even symbolically, but the hierarchy have evidently had a considerable measure of success in doing so. It is significant that sectarian squabbles about arcane trivia such as this once led to slaughter and appalling cruelty, and even now cause social discord.

The majority in most of the advanced populations no longer believes in these remnants of a more superstitious and gullible age but finds it convenient to profess to do so in order use some of the buildings and rituals for various social ceremonies and rites of passage that are mostly harmless.

But some communities, though relatively sophisticated and advanced, are still gripped by them and the cult even seems to be spreading in areas of poverty and low education. It is surprising that civil authorities allow the dissemination of these strange beliefs and the gruesome rituals that they inspire, which are known to have had a brutalising effect in the past and which could well be harmful to the impressionable young; but presumably the elders have some secular influence, and as no real flesh and blood are involved it is easier to tolerate this cult and wait for it to fade, as many others have done before.

The research leads to the following conclusion. These creatures have an emerging ability to reason but they remain susceptible to blind faith, to belief on command and to conformity

to preemptory instruction. Possible causes are impulses acquired in their distant past deriving from fear of death and disease, apprehension of inexplicable misfortune, and a useful instinctive urge to be part of a social structure. Knowledge of these mental processes should be helpful in controlling any societies at a similarly early stage of development encountered in other planetary systems. The threat of eter-

nal suffering in a lake of fire is an inexpensive sanction to administer.

I recommend that we harvest for study a sample of 20 of these creatures of varied age and gender. It should include a member of the hierarchy of at least one cult, preferably of the one described as it is the most popular. Our emissary should be able to catch one by administering a mild hallucinatory drug and

proclaiming himself to be the Archangel Gabriel. Displaying his vestigial wings, though normally thought impolite, should help this ruse.

– *Herlcas Dranwi Chief Naturalist Starship Egaleb. In orbit MWG/S42000/3. Dated 157/65/37894.*

Editor's note: Herlcas Dranwi's terrestrial name is Paul Albrecht.

Shroud Of Turin turns pink in mixed-wash cock-up

VATICAN CITY – The Shroud of Turin, an ancient linen cloth believed to bear the image of Christ and considered by many clerics and devotees to be one of the holiest relics of the Christian faith, was inadvertently dyed a light shade of pink after being washed with a red T-shirt, sources have reported.

The holy antiquity, thought by some to be the very garment Jesus Christ was buried in, was discovered in 1354. Though it has suffered oxidation and fire damage over the centuries, this is the first time that the shroud has been harmed in a laundry-related mishap.

"Simply because the shroud has been given a slight pinkish tint does not in any way diminish its sanctity," Vatican spokesman Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo said during a press conference held to address the spiritual repercussions of the shroud's staining. "It is still very much the icon of the suffering of the innocent of all times."

The Vatican stressed that nothing out of the ordinary happened to the shroud during the initial preparations for its monthly laundering in Rome. As is custom, on the third Sunday of the month, the priceless relic – which is kept in the royal chapel of the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in Turin, Italy – was taken from its hermetically sealed, bulletproof glass case and stuffed into the Blessed Papal Laundry Sack, and it was then transported by a retinue of Swiss Guards to Vatican City without incident.

According to Lajolo, the damage occurred when Pope Benedict XVI, whose turn it was to do the Vatican laundry, did not notice that a brand-new, bright-red Hanes Beefy-T belonging to Cardinal Angelo Sodano had been placed inside of the consecrated cleansing vessel, the Holy Whirlpool 24934 top-load washer.

The Pope then started a load of white vestments, including the shroud, only realising what had happened when he returned to remove the sacred artifact, which is always line-dried.

"His Holiness was distracted with trying to scrub a tough Blood of Christ stain out of



Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo assures reporters at a Vatican press conference that it is far too late for club soda to remove the stain

Cardinal Nicora's mitre," Lajolo said. "Not that this was some sort of mistake on his part. The Pope is still infallible. We have to keep in mind that this is all part of God's greater plan."

"And who are we to question or reject the ways the Lord works through our laundry?" Lajolo continued.

Church officials said that the shroud's staining was not in any way due to negligence on the Vatican's part. An investigation into the matter showed that the detergent had been properly blessed before the laundering, and the holy water softener that was installed last summer was working perfectly.

"We must not allow ourselves to fall into despair, for, as sinners, we are flawed and must seek forgiveness in the Lord alone," said Lajolo, who later hinted that the damage to the shroud was possibly God's response to the sins of the world, and especially homosexuality. "As Christ teaches, let he who has never over-

ly starched, shrunk, or rent his garments cast the first stone."

Though the discolouring of the Shroud of Turin has come as a shock to many Catholics, it is not the first time that a holy relic has been damaged. In 1983, several pieces of the True Cross were water-stained after being used as coasters during Pope John Paul II's birthday party, and in 1572, the knucklebone of St Olaf was accidentally thrown out with a plate of half-eaten chicken wings.

In the wake of the incident involving Christ's death shroud, the Vatican has been exploring possible ways to restore the raiment back to its original color.

"We do not want to attempt to use caustic cleaning agents for fear of turning the blessed shroud an unholy bright orange," Lajolo said. "We continue to look to God for divine guidance as to the purity and virtue of using a color-safe bleach."

• This article first appeared in the satirical online magazine, *The Onion*

Secularist of the Year presentation

THE £5,000 Irwin prize for Secularist of the Year will be presented at a central London venue on February 7, 2009, following a three-course lunch.

The event will centre around the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, and will feature appropriate entertainment.

Tickets are £45.00 (reduced price for students) and can be booked on-line at the National Secular Society shop (<http://www.secularism.org.uk/shop.html?eshopid=82186>) or by post from NSS Tickets, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL (please include the names of all attendees, and state whether vegetarian fare is required).

James Merryweather: Ignorance jolly well isn't bliss

HOW strange it is that people so freely claim that ignorance is bliss. Do they really mean it – literally? When they state “Ignorance is bliss”, are they actually thinking about what that means? Are knowledge and thought so unimportant, or even as this platitude implies, actually detrimental to happiness? If so, education must be a pretty evil waste of time. Do they say it with irony? Most, I think, do not. It seems that many people simply believe it, which is a shame.

Actually, a lot of the time, people don't think about what they say; they just say it. That, too, is a shame.

The phrase “Ignorance is bliss” was coined in *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* by Thomas Gray (1742), but it does not consist of three words. The phrase actually contains four: “...where ignorance is bliss”, and signals a need to explore its context, to discover the poet's true meaning. The relatively mature 26-year-old Gray seems to have been heaving a poetic shrug of resignation about younger men at Eton College who evade worldly cares by not thinking about the unpleasant alternatives to their scholastic paradise; rather they wallow in the fallacious bliss of their ignorance.¹

Gray actually wrote:

*Yet, ah! why should they know their fate,
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies?
Thought would destroy their Paradise.
No more;—where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise.*

No matter how you interpret or misinterpret this passage by Gray – in context, isolated or the classic three-word fragment – ignorance is not bliss. There is a much more direct truth in Sir Francis Bacon's *Knowledge is Power* (1597). I wish Bacon had said *Knowledge is Potential*, but I suppose in that form its impact might have been lessened. The word “power” is closely related to “potential”, but it carries unwelcome overtones of domination and disempowerment. When not referring to geological forces, big and fast machines or energetic people, power is too often associated with despotic rulers, totalitarian states and, in modern times, multinational corporations, and the consequent disenfranchisement and poverty, even torture and murder, of those who do not have that power. “Potential” conveys a more benevolent (though no less powerful) message without those unpleasant connotations. “Potential” strongly suggests that something is capable of coming into being; that a person can be able; that things are possible. Knowledge can provide that potential, and potential promotes progress.

This was amply demonstrated by the

Mechanics Institute movement² (motto: *Knowledge is Power*), one of those people-beneficial products of the 18th century European enlightenment. It acknowledged the fact that the better educated people are, the more likely they are to rise out of poverty and lead a decent life, and thus promoted the emancipation of the “working classes”. Knowledge was seen to be the key to respectability.

Of course, some of those fortunate enough to find themselves in power know full well that, for them, ignorance *is*, or rather assures, their bliss: their power is maintained by the people's ignorance. They must strive to suppress knowledge in the masses, ensuring their uninformed obedience by preventing them from enjoying independence of thought.

People are difficult to govern because they have too much knowledge.

– Lao-Tsu (604-531 BC)

History loudly proclaims that, to the unscrupulous powerful few in state and church, a free-thinking, knowledgeable proletariat is a (potential) threat that must be controlled through totalitarian authority and, if expedient (or perhaps it provides the perpetrator with some vicarious pleasure), brutality. Being an intellectual under the wrong political or religious regime has proved painfully fatal for numerous individuals who showed academic potential. In such circumstances ignorance might ensure survival, though hardly bliss. In such circumstances 'tis indeed folly to be wise.

Knowledge gives people self-confidence, self-esteem and self-respect. Self-respect is a major contributor to contentment – arguably a

basic human right – and there are two, it seems mutually exclusive, ways to create it:

Certainty: Unchanging, steadfast, fixed, safe, complacent and stagnant. More than rudimentary (received) knowledge is not necessary. Faith in and obedience to authority replaces the need for individual understanding. The way of certainty is simplistic and easy to follow. Deprived of knowledge, the masses are unable to make choices. The contentment of certainty is attained through obedience.

Knowledge: Constantly changing, increasing, improving, flexible, adaptive, sometimes risky, exciting and progressive. Certainty is a handicap because it stifles curiosity and inhibits the accumulation of new (experienced) knowledge. The way of knowledge can be complicated, perplexing and laborious (even frightening), but its pursuit is a constant source of delight and we make progress. Provided with knowledge, the masses can make choices. The contentment of knowledge is attained through freedom.

Self-respect is surely a vital component of a worthwhile life. To obtain it, people may decide to follow the straightforward path of certainty that is most easily obtained from state-controlled society and organised religion. Others, like me, choose the independent accumulation of knowledge of which I have gained an above average amount in my fields of interest associated with, in consequence, a broader kind of wisdom. I regret that many people in the world today do not have that privilege of choice or access to limitless knowledge. It is up to those of us who have that knowledge to share it with those who do not, and promote universal education so that we may all have the opportunity to realise our potential at the individual, corporate and species level.

Enlighten the people, generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like spirits at the dawn of day.

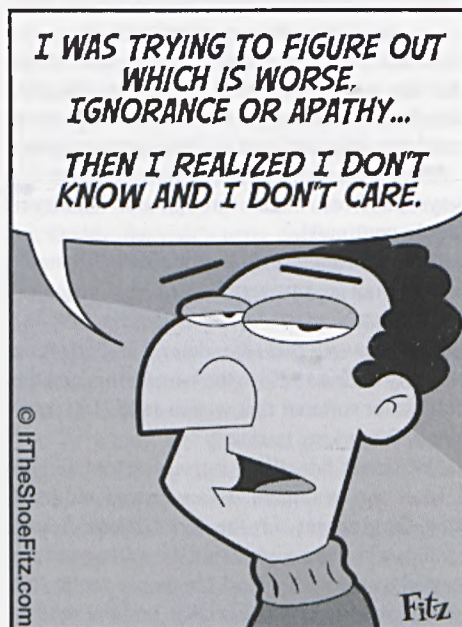
– Thomas Jefferson (1743 - 1826)

Coda: This article has depended heavily on the precise meanings of several key words. The more often I re-read and improve it the more I see that two words stand out as paving slabs along the route towards true bliss: “knowledge” and “freedom”. Then a third, that sums this all up admirably, comes to mind: “FREETHINKING”.

Notes:

1. *Gaudeamus igitur, Juvenes dum sumus, Post jucundum juventutem, Post molestam senectutem, Nos habebit humus.* For the complete texts in Latin and English see <http://www.newfoundations.com/Gaudeamus.html>

2. <http://www.infed.org/walking/wa-birb.htm>; <http://www.r-alston.co.uk/mi.htm>



Alister McGrath

IN his article on the cut-and-paste theology of Alister McGrath (*Freethinker*, November), Dan J Bye accuses the “theology-generating machine” of self-plagiarism and deception. Quite so. Yet despite a daunting programme of writing, lecturing, broadcasting and debating, Professor McGrath found time to provide a puff for Amy Orr-Ewing’s *Why Trust the Bible?* (Inter-Varsity Press).

McGrath describes the author as “one of the finest young Christian communicators of our day”, whose book “confronts ten difficult questions about the Bible with honesty and conviction”.

One example of the young Christian communicator’s honesty is found on page 79 of *Why Trust the Bible?* Incredibly, she includes Ernestine Rose in a list of “the greatest Jewish and Christian pioneers”¹. It prompts the question why trust Amy Orr-Ewing?

Ernestine Rose was the daughter of a rabbi. There was dissension between them because of her scepticism in religious matters and refusal to marry a man selected by her father. Eventually she left home and settled in London where she married William Rose in a civil ceremony.

They emigrated to America and Ernestine embarked on speaking tours when she denounced slavery, gender discrimination and religion. One of her lectures was published under the title *A Defence of Atheism*. “You ask how it is that Man wrote or talked about God”, she declared. “The answer is very simple. Ignorance is the mother of superstition.”

Ernestine Rose and her husband returned to England where she died on August 4, 1892. There was a non-religious burial ceremony at Highgate cemetery, north London.

In future, Alister McGrath should exercise caution when requested to endorse the work of a minor Christian scribbler.

BILL MCILROY
Hove

Is the NSS atheist?

DAVID Tribe (letters, October 08, p 15) claims that “though I and all the secularists I know personally are atheists the NSS has never been an officially atheist society”. That may technically be so – David has known the NSS for longer than I have.

But the NSS has long been seen as the voice of militant atheism because that is how it behaved and behaves.

Atheism was a key element of the NSS from the start. On the NSS website (<http://www.secularism.org.uk/charlesbradlaugh.html>) we find “In [1860] Bradlaugh ... became co-editor of *The National Reformer*, which ... became dedicated to atheism ... In 1866 he conceived and founded the National Secular Society, and became its first president.”

Atheism was certainly to the fore in the 60s when I joined the NSS (the contrast between

the NSS and the BHA was starker than it is now). I think it’s still true – a quick scan of the NSS website shows many anti-religious items.

As the Yanks say “If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck – it’s a duck”.

The NSS looks like an atheist organisation and speaks like an atheist organisation: so I say it IS an atheist organisation. And none the worse for it.

DAVID C FLINT
London

CE v AD

WILLIAM Harwood claims that CE dating is scientifically neutral but this is simply not true. The politically correct claim that it stands for Common Era, but it is the same old Christian system starting with the virgin birth of the mythical Christ and CE can therefore be construed as standing for Christian Era. The use of CE just shows how easily the politically correct can be duped by the religious.

I make no apology for continuing to use the designation AD and will do so until there is an agreed designation that does not use a word beginning with C for Christian. A few possibilities might be ME – Modern Era, PE – Present Era and for BC dates AE – Ancient Era or AT – Ancient Times.

The offensive language he uses in his letter about those with whom he disagrees suggests he is a PA, AF, SP or AH, but probably the best description of him is in his own words a “brain

amputee” who “is a bigot by definition.”

I agree with most of the criticisms of his article by David Flint and it is clear that he has a very poor understanding of practical politics and the way political systems work.

CHARLES DOUGLAS
Galloway

IT IS not necessary to be stupid in order to disagree with me. There are points on which I have disagreed with Richard Dawkins, Isaac Asimov, and Michael Shermer. It is in spelling out his reasons for disagreeing with me that a writer demonstrates either that he is not stupid, as was the case with David Comings, or that he is stupid, as was the case with incurable believers in pseudoscience such as parapsychology, and pseudomedicine such as homeopathy.

BILL HARWOOD
Canada

Cowardly publishers

Can I add a further example of a cowardly publisher (*Freethinker*, September)?

Speeches that Changed the World (Quercus Publishing, 2005) is an anthology of speeches by eminent statesmen. Each is preceded by a brief note which sets it in its historical context. Surprisingly the first three orations are attributed to Moses (Ten Commandments), Christ (Sermon on the Mount) and Mohammed (Turn Your Face to Mecca).

The blurb on Moses states, “The Ten Commandments are *acknowledged* in Judaism,

Quotes of the Month

.....

Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God’s will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.

– US President-elect Barack Obama

RATHER than bemoan the disintegration of Cardinal Newman’s corpse, the Catholic hierarchy should have recognised it as a blessed miracle, which could expedite his canonisation -- for Newman’s holy body has evidently been assumed into heaven, like that of the Blessed Virgin, to join his soul. However, the identical disintegration in the same grave of his life-long gay partner does, admittedly, strike a somewhat dissonant note

– Barbara Smoker, in a letter to the National Secular Society’s Newslines

People don’t like being preached at.

– Stephen Green, of *Christian Voice*, commenting on the atheist bus campaign.

Throughout the day, Jews gather in office-building stairwells and conference rooms to pray, and while sometimes you might not remember your prayer book, no one goes anywhere without their BlackBerry.

– Jonathan Bennett, co-founder of Jewberry, a an American service designed to send prayers to BlackBerry phones.

Ban religion! Ban Religion! Ban religion!

– Gilbert and George’s manifesto for the 21 century, as declaimed at the Serpentine Gallery in London.

Christianity and Islam as the summary of the central rules of behaviour that God expects.”

Of Christ we are told “Christians believe him to have risen from the dead.”

Of the Koran, however, it is stated, “Mohammed was a means for the transmission of the word of God to the people. *There is no word of Mohammed's in the Koran.*”

Italics in all cases mine.

This is a book in which it is appropriate to introduce the alleged words of Moses, Christ, and in later chapters Churchill, Hitler and Stalin, with a critical discussion of the circumstances in which they came to be written. Yet the same cannot be done for words spoken by Mohammed.

Freedom of academic discussion was not easily won in our society. It is now under threat from an intrusive ideology with no such tradition. The battles of the 17th century may have to be re-enacted with Muslim fundamentalists playing the role of absolutist Stuart kings.

JACK HASTIE
Scotland

Censorship

AT THE end of your article “Shame On Them” (*Freethinker*, September) you report the “banning” of a book by the holocaust denier Michael J Hoffman by the online bookseller Amazon, and imply that this is also an example of religious-inspired censorship.

In fact it is NOT censorship because it does not prevent the book from being otherwise sold. While I hold no brief for Amazon, being a fan of local independent booksellers, I applaud what I see as a principled stand in refusing to sell this vile racist rubbish.

Booksellers have the same right to refuse to sell the book for whatever reason as I have to refuse to read it (or would you regard this as censorship?)

I would urge all booksellers to refuse to either stock the book or order it on request. This is an ethical stand they are entitled to take; it is not censorship because censorship means that the book is banned by the State, and cannot be distributed at all. The refusal of booksellers to stock/order the book, or a reputable publisher to publish it, is not censorship because Mr Hoffman is still free to self-publish and sell his filth via his website.

A belief in free speech does it not imply an obligation to facilitate it, otherwise you, Mr Editor, would have to fill every other issue of the *Freethinker* with religious diatribes and I don't think that would go down very well with your readers.

ED MCARTHUR
London

Cardinal Newman

I COULDN'T help thinking the Catholic Church missed a trick or two in its abortive attempt to dig up the remains of Cardinal Newman, (Ghoulis reburial plans for Cardinal Newman turns to dust, *Freethinker*,

November).

What about the soil into which he has disintegrated? Quantities could be packaged up, labelled “Cardinal Compost” and sold to the faithful to help nurture appropriately pious plants, examples of which are Angelica, Rose of Jericho (also known as the Resurrection plant) and the intriguingly named Holy Grass (whether the latter makes a satisfactory Holy Smoke I am unable to say).

And then there is the Cardinal's DNA. If it were possible to rescue some of this from the soil, it could be used to produce Cardinal Clones, the New Men of Newman – devout, durable (except when dead of course), but apt to change direction in middle age. Normally, of course, the Church would frown upon such interference with the basic building blocks of life, but in this case a Papal Dispensation would surely be readily forthcoming.

I have no doubt that there would be suitable nuns and priests eager to take care of the remarkable progeny and ensure they received an education suitable for the religious life.

My exciting marketing dreams were rudely shattered when I listened to Radio 4's Sunday programme on November 9. An expert on the decomposition of bodies opined it was highly unlikely all of the Cardinal's remains, including his entire skeleton, could have decomposed completely since his death in 1890, even in a damp, acid soil. This raises an intriguing question: what did happen to his body? Was it carried off and eaten by marauding foxes, dogs or badgers? Was it disinterred by medical students, desperate to find a cadaver to practise their skills on? Did a religious fanatic dig the Cardinal up for some nefarious purpose?

My theory, for what it is worth, is that representatives from the Church itself were instrumental in removing the body from its grave, because when he died and was prepared for burial the Cardinal's terrible secret was discovered: he had been a woman in disguise! His remarkable resemblance to Dame Sybil Thorndike has frequently been commented upon. In order to ensure the truth was never discovered, soon after the funeral his body was exhumed and disposed of by paid agents of the Church.

If I am right, this throws a whole new light upon the Cardinal's relationship with Ambrose St John. The intrigues and machinations thus exposed are worthy of investigation by Dan Brown, and I eagerly await the publication of his next novel.

DINAH FOWERAKER
Bristol

Electricity

IF IT is as pathological to believe that one is influenced by electricity as it is to believe that a favoured few would be taken up into a spaceship in the wake of comet Hale-Bopp, as proposed by Prof John Radford in his “Credo” article (*Freethinker*, September), may I suggest he demonstrate the first by inserting a fin-

ger into a light socket and switching on the power! I'm sure he could light up a lecture room in less dramatic fashion.

Perhaps Prof Radford meant (if he'll excuse my pedantry) the electromagnetic field generated by electricity. But low-power household current has no evidential effect, although some research does implicate that high-power electric transmission can have adverse health effects (*Wikipedia*: Electromagnetic radiation hazards). Or then again, perhaps the good professor meant – and here he would be spot on – that it is pathological to believe that one can be influenced – receive messages or be controlled – remotely by electricity from power sockets or radio masts independent of appliances such as radios or cell phones, which receive and decode electromagnetic radiation from terrestrial transmitters as radio telescopes do that emanating from stars, deep space and the Big Bang.

It is no coincidence that this is very similar to what religionists believe, for it – electromagnetic radiation in its various subatomic particle forms and frequencies – is the only means by which God could communicate with His followers here on Earth, and they with Him. But then there is the problem of overcoming intergalactic distances for, assuming in His wisdom that God locates Himself near the centre of His cosmic creation – conservatively 5-billion light years away (without space-time warping) – a prayer made today would take ten billion years to get a reply. How about that!

If anyone doubt the veracity of these facts, Victor Stenger (2007) details the physics and disproves, if disproof were needed, God's alleged existence.

GRAHAM NEWBERY
Southampton

Alternative Therapy

WHILST mainly agreeing with Bausell's *Snake Oil Science*, reviewed by William Harwood in the September *Freethinker*, I think it is mistaken to lump all the so-called alternative therapies together and denounce them equally. Homeopathy, which is obviously based on screwy science (not far removed from prayer!), nevertheless uses some beneficial practices.

The Chiropractic theory of subluxations may also be a bit on the screwy side, but its practical manipulations can certainly cure muscular impairment, for which orthodox medicine generally relies on merely palliative anti-inflammatory pain-killers.

As for Osteopathy, in my opinion its theory is as sound as its practice, and I myself have benefited from it for several conditions during my long life. One day, attending the School of Osteopathy for treatment for a leg injury, I was touched on the neck by the osteopath, who said “You've got a stiff neck today – but I can soon put that right”. A couple of clicks, and it was cured – for I had indeed woken up with a stiff neck that morning, and had not even men-

tioned it.

Osteopathic techniques have, in fact, been adopted, without acknowledgment, by the National Health Service – as I can testify from personal experience. More than 30 years ago, I was subject to intermittent sharp pain in the upper part of my back. X-rays showed the cause to be osteo-arthritis of the spine, and I was referred to King's College Hospital, where I was handed over to a young woman physiotherapist. She started me on a course of what she called "mobilisation" – which I recognised, however, as osteopathy. One day, when I asked her if she knew the words "osteopath" and "osteopathy", she said she had never heard them before!

I attended her clinic every weekday morning for two or three months, during which time the pains gradually eased off, and finally ceased altogether. Moreover, they have never recurred, in all these years.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Islam and anniversaries

SO the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia thinks that birthday and anniversary celebrations are un-Islamic, putting Muslims on the same level as the lower orders, such as Jews and Christians. Is this the same Grand Mufti who recently confirmed – for once and for all – that the Earth is definitely flat?

DAVID CARR-ALLINSON,
Oxford.

Parapsychology

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

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

My view is that there exists a natural phenomenon which sentient life-forms experience, albeit faintly, and whose manifestation has fed the imaginations of prophets, visionaries, soothsayers and witches for centuries. The Christian religion hijacked paranormal experiences and barred ordinary people from expressing them at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE under the direction of the Roman Emperor Constantine. Since then the paranormal has been associated with Satan, evil spirits, fallen angels, etc. That connection is totally false.

Paranormal phenomena are just that – paranormal. We haven't invented the machines yet that can detect the causative agent, though I suspect that quantum physics may find the answer soon.

RICHARD A BATCHELOR
Fife

The writing on the wall

MOUNTAINS like a painted stage-set surround a lake of turquoise sparkling waves. The engine of the paddle steamer is the only sound as it progresses peacefully, criss-crossing from one boat station to the next. This is picturesque Switzerland, land of tourists and the cuckoo clock, and I'm looking forward to a day on the water.

But first, before the boat ride, a stroll along a lakeside path, five minutes from the hotel. Then I see it, on one of the massive pillars that support the road above, graffiti, writ large, writ carefully, cornflower blue letters on a white background. A solitary message. Capitals for the first word, lower case for the second.

"JUGEN Raus."

A Nazi slogan in this beautiful place. Oh my goodness, I must hurry to the Tourist Office without delay, they open at 8.30 am and they'll be so pleased when I tell them, perhaps ask a junior to come with me to pinpoint the exact location of the offensive words. Probably send someone to clean it up immediately.

I tell the manager about it and she doesn't care. I can see it in her eyes, she doesn't care.

"The graffiti department will be informed later but they are always busy."

I hear myself shouting and demanding its immediate removal. NOW. TODAY.

Outside in the street I am trembling. Don't they know about Hitler and the Nazis? Don't they know about the tanks thundering into all the little countries of Europe? Don't they know about five years of slaughter?

Tomorrow I go home. Today I'll take the boat ride to another place and try to forget what I have seen.

When I come back the graffiti is still there. What to do? I could look for a café with a blackboard menu outside, ask them for a piece of chalk and try to write over the awful words.

Instead I visit the police station. Such a nice official comes to talk to me, friendly and concerned.

"In my country it's against the law to write such things."

"It's against the law here, madam" and he takes down full details of the visit to the Tourist Office.

"Thank you. Can I now go back to my hotel knowing I am not spending the night in a Nazi town?"

"Of course, madam, and be assured I will deal with it."

For the first time that day I feel much better.

The hotel bedroom looks down on the path and I keep watch expecting to see one of the cleaning vans going past, or perhaps a police-

man on a bike with some sort of spray. It crosses my mind to go down and wait near the pillar so that I could thank them.

Next morning after packing I take an umbrella and walk the path. Reader, you're ahead of me. It's still there. Perhaps they need to take a photo for evidence. Yes, and perhaps this is a country that welcomes all tourists, and perhaps cows dance the tango.

My letter to the burgermeister was to the point – that's what happened, that's why I'm not coming to Switzerland again. His reply was apologetic,

"We are generally against racism." An unfortunately worded sentence. Perhaps he meant the general public is against racism, but I wouldn't bet on it. I'm not going again, they can stuff their cuckoo clocks.

What can I do to let people know that fascism is alive and well in the Lucerne area of Switzerland? Well, I can write this.

MARY ROGERS
Leicester

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Events & Contacts

Birmingham Humanists: Information: Tova Jones on 021454 4692 or see www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Summer programme available.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.nntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Dec 3, 8pm. Ken Humphreys: *Ripping Yarns from the New Testament*. Wed, Jan 7, 8pm. Robert Stovold: *Spiritual Care on the NHS – Chaplains or Charlatans?*

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: The Court House, High St Berkamsted. Wed, Dec 10, 7.30pm for 8pm. Yule Celebration.

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 Multi-faith Centre, University of Derby. Full details on website www.secularderby.org

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

Dorset Humanists: Monthly speakers and social activities. Enquiries 01202-428506. Website www.dorsethumanists.co.uk

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available, Details: 01268 785295.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): 1 Gower St, London WC1E 6HD. Tel: 0844 800 3067. Email: secretary@galha.org. Website: www.galha.org.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: John Coff: 0161 4303463. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Wed Dec 10, 7.30pm. Review of activities marking Darwin's 200th anniversary.

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

Harrow Humanist Society: Meets the second Wednesday of the month (except January, July and August) at the HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow at 8pm. December 10: Grand Victorian Yuletide Party, with a quiz, games, a pantomime and prizes. All welcome, but please let our Secretary know (0208 907-6124) in advance if you are coming.

Hasving & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Cres, Gidea Park. Tues, Dec 4, 8pm. Mike Howgate: *Tackling Creationism*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Isle of Man Freethinkers: Information: Jeff Garland, 01624 664796. Email: jeffgarland@wm.im. Website: www.iomfreethinkers.org

Isle of Wight Secular and Humanist Group: Information: David Broughton on 01983 755526 or e-mail 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.

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. Information: Ian Abbott, Wavecrest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire FY6 0AZ 01253 812308. Email: 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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Thurs Dec 18, 8pm. Non-Xmas Party.

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

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

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

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Maureen Lofmark, 01570 422648 mlofmark@btinternet.com

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 Ollie Killingback on 01933 389070.

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: Meets third Thursday of month (ex. August) 8 pm at Ruth Winston House, 190 Green Lanes, Palmers Green, N13 5UE. Plus social events. Contact Sec: 01707 653667. email enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

website: www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk email: enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

website: www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

North Yorkshire Humanist Group: Secretary: Charles Anderson, 01904 766480. Meets second Monday of the month, 7.30pm, Priory Street Centre, York.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: 0114 2309754. The SADACCA Building, Wicker, S2. Public Meeting first Wednesday of the month, 7.30pm. No meeting in January.

South Hampshire Humanists: Group Secretary, Richard Hogg. Tel: 02392 370689. Email: info@southhantshumanists.org.uk

website: 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. Monthly programmes on request.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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