

nority of the faithful, they will have to shout a lot louder.

Jack Hastie
Renfrewshire

LIBERTARIANISM

IT IS often said that the man who stands in the middle of the road gets hit by the traffic travelling in both directions. So it has proved with my stance on libertarianism, as while I call myself a libertarian, I can't quite go along with Mark Taha's refusal to differentiate between private prejudices (which we all have the right to hold and express), and public obligations, which we all have a duty to uphold to make society function properly, as well as make it fairer and more bearable.

Mark's stance comes close to endorsing Margaret Thatcher's foolish "There's no such thing as society!" remark – which even she thought better of and later retracted.

On the other hand, Terry Liddle, who admits to a communist past, goes too far in his calls for more collectivism and intervention (including a written constitution). Written constitutions are always products of their times, with unforeseen consequences, hence the "right to bear arms" millstone around the necks of our American cousins, which makes gun-control well nigh impossible. We would do well to avoid this obvious pitfall and maintain the flexibility and perpetual change our unwritten constitution offers, including, of course, the potential separation of church and state.

Terry's participation in the ideologically-driven strike to oust BNP member, Malcolm Skeggs, from the Hither Green DSS office, is nothing to be proud of. As Mark Taha rightly says, no one should be bullied out of employment merely for holding unpopular political views, be they communists or nationalists.

If Skeggs abused his position for political purposes, then he would be dismissed by his employers. It really isn't acceptable for high-handed trade union bullies to dictate who may, or may not, be employed when they have done nothing wrong. To this extent, Mark Taha is absolutely correct, though, ironically, this story also illumines my central point, that people like Skeggs have a right to their private political views, but not necessarily the right to exercise them, publicly, if to do so imperils the security and freedom of others. In my view, libertarianism has to be tempered by responsibility and consideration for others, as well as a somewhat sceptical view of human nature.

As for Bill McLroy, I am at a loss to explain the purpose, or motivation, of his latest bile-spitting letter, aimed, as usual, in my direction. As a lifetime of rather sterile atheism seems to have left him mired in bitterness,

I suspect he is gearing up for a full-blown deathbed conversion and is making peace with the Almighty by attacking the secularists around him.

I suppose I should be flattered that the "Victor Meldrew of secularism" should regard me worthy of such personal attacks, after all, he is well known for going out of his way to offend and insult leading lights of the NSS and BHA, whose luminosity far outshines my meagre candle. I guess this means I have finally made it to the top flight of secular superstardom!

Diesel Balaam
London

BORN BELIEVERS

I THINK freethinkers should be quite receptive to the ideas of Justin Barrett (*Born believers*, May *Freethinker*) for two reasons. They avoid the temptation to think of most people as credulous fools. And they are based on actual research.

Dan Dennett and others have drawn attention to the "over-active agency detector" we inherit from our pre-human ancestors. This is one mechanism that predisposes people to believe in invisible spirits but I believe that Barrett and other scholars have found others.

Let's be clear what this does NOT imply. We do not inherit a "religion-shaped hole", if only because different religions have different shapes. We do inherit tendencies to see agency and purpose where there is only random action, to resent and deny the death of loved ones, to respond to ceremonies and to feel entitled to help in adversity. Religions arise from these tendencies and exploit them. Religions would not be so popular if they were unable to draw on powerful drives.

And it does not imply that religion must win the battle for hearts and minds. Right across the developed world – yea, even in the USA – freethought is on the rise. Science, engineering and medicine all testify to the power of reason and improving social conditions enable people to make up their own minds without much risk. And as they do they abandon the follies of the faith they were raised in. Many stop there, professing a faith but ignoring its traditional rules. They are Catholics who use contraceptives and Jews who eat milk and meat at the same meal. Some, and more in subsequent generations, cease even to profess a faith.

David Flint
Redhill

THE BURQA DEBATE

PROFESSOR Radford is correct when he says that there are other garments that are oppressive; however, two wrongs don't make a

right. I also think that he is correct to find oppression (and discrimination) objectionable, but what is the point of holding that principled position if he is not willing to object when that oppression is put into practise?

Where I strongly disagree with Professor Radford is when he suggests that there is little evidence of the burqa being forced within faith schools. Please can he research schools like the Madani Girls' School in East London, Jamea Al Kauthar in Lancaster and the Jameah Girls' Academy in Leicester, to name but a few. And it is on the increase. What damage is being done to those young minds?

I also disagree with the notion that the burqa is part of a woman's "Islamic identity" as this completely ignores the multitude of Islamic women's voices who are against the burqa; cultural relativism should never excuse immorality.

And I was shocked to read that he gives credence to the notion that the burqa "offers protection". This misconception should not be condoned nor should a woman's insecurities be used to justify patriarchal discrimination.

I know that if I had said to a feminist in the 1980s that a woman should cover herself in a blanket if she is worried about how men behave, I would have lost my testicles! Why have we stopped moving towards becoming an egalitarian nation?

I concur with Professor Radford that there is a line to be drawn over what is acceptable. I draw that line at discrimination.

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