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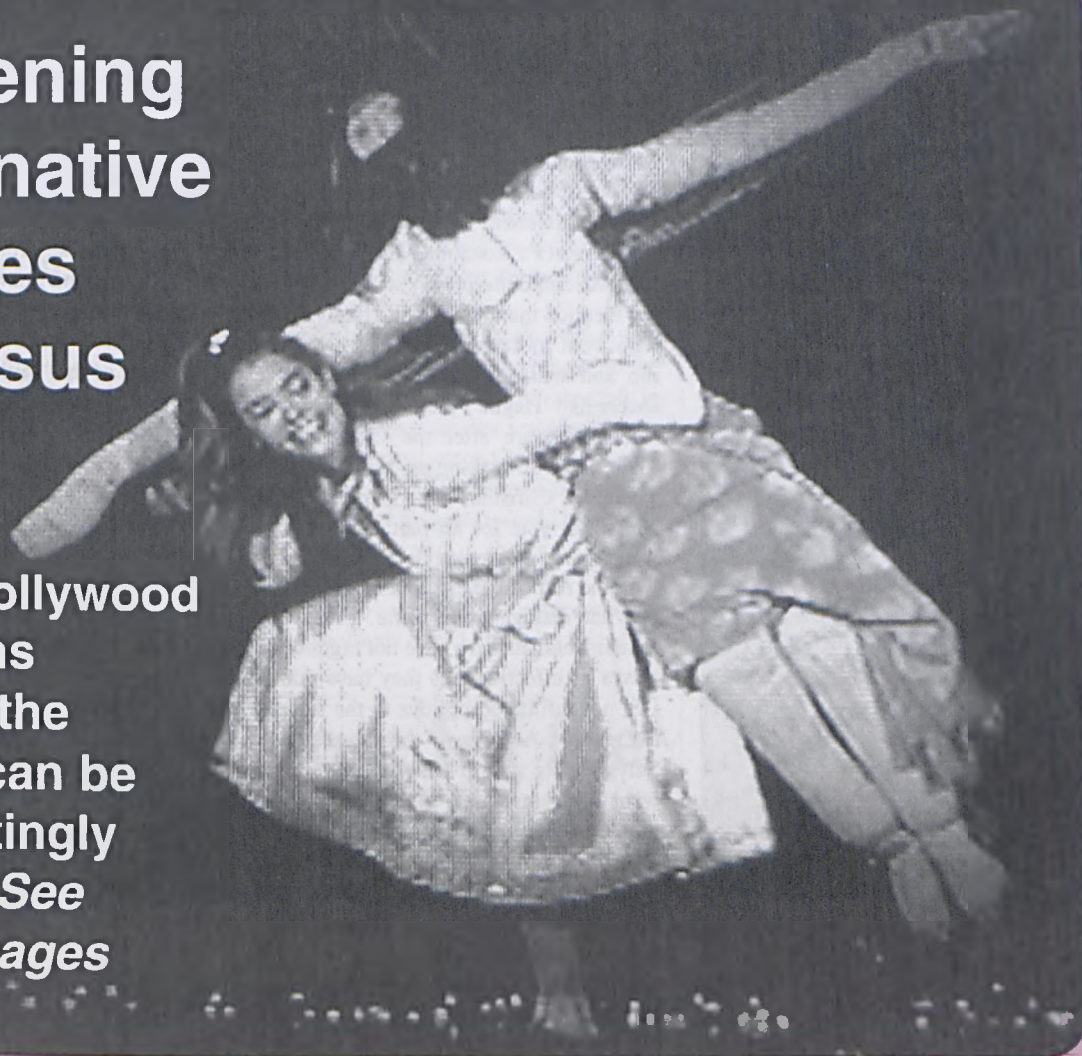
Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Screening Alternative Images of Jesus

When Hollywood
lampoons
religion the
results can be
devastatingly
funny – See
centre pages



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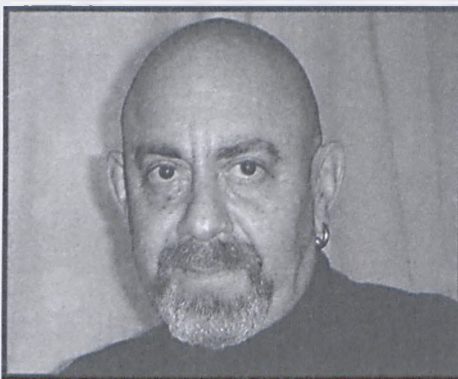
freethinking out loud: barry duke

PHEW! We can all breathe easier now that we know that the Tories, despite their persistent flirtation with the "faith communities" and, by extension, their endorsement of all the poisonous intolerance, hypocrisy and prejudice many of these "communities" represent, do not actually want to cultivate an American-type Moral Majority movement in the UK.

We know this because Shadow Secretary of State for International Development, Gary Streeter, said as much when the Tories last month published the findings of a consultation exercise which rejoices in the snappy title of *Listening to Britain's Churches: Renewing One Nation*.

At the Westminster launch of *Renewing blah-blah* – attended by, among others, Tim Montgomerie, Director of that bastion of reactionary sentiment, the Conservative Christian Fellowship – Streeter announced that the interviews with hundreds of faith-based community workers and volunteers would help shape Tory election policy.

According to a report in the February 3



issue of the Salvation Army paper, *The War Cry*, Streeter denied that the consultation exercise was an attempt to win the Christian vote. "I do not want to recreate America's right-wing Moral Majority in the UK. The day that happens I'm out of politics," he is quoted as saying.

In its comment column, *The War Cry* said that Streeter's assurance that "some of what the faith communities say will find its way into our election manifesto" will "likely rattle those who want to keep God out of how Britain is run and will stir the cynics. We can expect sneers like 'Hague's playing the God card' and 'the Tories are after the Christian vote' ... There is no such thing as 'the Christian vote'. There are Christian MPs in most parties and Christians vote for all parties. Christians will weigh party political style and substance along with the rest of the electorate."

What disingenuous piffle. True, Christian fundamentalists here have not organised themselves as effectively as they have done in the US, nor infiltrated politics to the same degree as their American brethren. But the Salvationists should know that this is not for want of trying, and, as has been frequently pointed out in the *Freethinker*, there is a determined push by a number of Christian organisations to establish precisely the sort of Moral Majority movement that Streeter claims he does not want to see in the UK.

The Christian Institute, for example, while asserting that "Christ's kingdom can never be identified with any particular nation or political party" says that "the state can never be neutral as regards values. Christians are to work for the state to adopt Christian values and to implement godly laws." In short, they want a theocracy.

The CI goes on to point out that, "as an important matter of fact, the Coronation Oath is an explicit denial of the secularity of the United Kingdom ... the establishment of the [Protestant Reformed] Christian religion in general and of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland defines the UK as constitutionally a Christian country. These constitutional arrangements will remain in force until there is intentional constitutional change to the contrary." It therefore sees its task as "promoting Christian faith in the UK"

and "challenging secular humanism, religious pluralism and other ideologies".

The Salvationists also cannot be unaware of the fact that Christians enjoy a range of privileges in Britain completely disproportionate to their plunging numbers, and that, through religious representation in the House of Lords, "non-existent" Christians are often able to subvert democracy, as was demonstrated when homophobes like Baroness Young successfully derailed the Government's plans to scrap Section 28.

Despite the Tory's protestations that they do not want a powerful, right-wing Christian movement to gain a foothold in the UK, champagne corks popped within Conservative ranks when George W Bush was confirmed as the new American President. The Christian Right played a key role in parking him in the White House, and I have no doubt that William "Holy Joe" Hague is pinning his hopes of attaining the Holy Grail of Downing Street on the support of the "faith communities" here.

If Hague *does* become the next Prime Minister, he will have to follow Bush's example in quickly rewarding the religionists. As President-elect, Bush made clear his religious leanings with the following sickening message directed at all Americans: "I ask you to pray for this great nation. I ask your prayers for leaders from both parties. I thank you for your prayers for me and my family, and I ask you to pray for Vice President Gore and his family."

Then, to underpin what could turn out to be an aggressive right-wing agenda, he appoints as Attorney General one John Ashcroft, a conservative Christian fundamentalist who is a lay preacher and a lifelong member of the Assemblies of God Pentacostal Church.

It is far too early to say to what extent the Bush administration will be manipulated by the Christian right, but one thing is certain: American atheists and humanists are not going to let Christians dictate Republican policy without a fight.

"Clearly George W Bush doesn't yet recognise that not every American prays," said Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists Inc. "I promise you that, in the next four years, he *will* recognise it. We will do all that we can to make it known to Mr Bush that we will not sit by quietly and be ignored. We are ready for the challenges to come."

She went on to say that American Atheists would make sure that religion and taxpayers' money were kept separate, and that they would work "to protect innocent children from the often deadly hand of religion".

With the way things are panning out here, it looks as if we'll have to shape up for a similar battle.

The Free thinker

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'Millennium Curse' strikes Bradford Faith Centre

IN KEEPING with the trend that enterprises containing the word "millennium" appear doomed to failure, the £5-million National Millennium Faith Experience in Bradford has shut up shop because of appallingly low attendances.

The centre, which opened last year with a £2.2 million grant from the Millennium Commission, used state-of-the-art technology to illustrate how faith and belief had guided lives and achievements.

It opened last July with predictions that it would attract up to 40,000 visitors a year. However, it drew only 62 paying visitors in its first week, and a spokesman for the project said "rather fewer than 10,000" people in total had visited the centre.

At the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, members of the Millennium Commission are meeting organisers of the project in an attempt to devise a rescue plan.

A spokesman for the Commission said: "Obviously we are very disappointed. We are working with the project to find the best way forward."

Four members of the centre's board have resigned since the beginning of the year, including the Dean of Bradford, the Very Rev John Richardson, who left on the grounds of ill health.

Freethinker reader Paul Edmondson, who brought the news of the centre's collapse to the *Freethinker's* attention, said: "The shortfall in attendance, though on a smaller scale, makes the Dome appear as a great success in comparison."

"It looks like the Millennium Commission forked out £220 per visitor!. I would have gone along for half that!

"I wonder how many of the 'fewer than 10,000' who attended the centre weren't actually school kids bused along by their R E teachers.

More trouble in store for the Peniel Pentacostal Church

A WOMAN who launched an internet campaign against the Peniel Pentacostal Church in Brentwood (see *Freethinker* report, January 2001, p3) has begun legal proceedings against twelve members of the church, including her former husband.

Caroline Green alleges that the evangelical church's leader Bishop Michael Reid "interfered" in her marriage and family affairs, encouraging generous financial contributions to the church which pushed the family into debt. The 33-year-old mother is seeking £160,000 in compensation.

However, the church, which is currently embroiled in a row concerning its alleged infiltration of the local Conservative Party branch, is being staunchly defended by the Evangelical Alliance, of which it has been a member since 1987.

A spokesperson for the EA said it was looking forward to the impending High Court

investigation, and was "confident that this will put these matters to rest once and for all."

Father, Son ... or Holy Goat?

A GOAT, said to be a reincarnation of Jesus, went berserk in a 15th-century church in Munich, Germany – and promptly put paid to a planned visit by a team of Vatican officials who intended investigating the miraculous beast.

The visit was cancelled when the billy goat butted a priest, ate an altar cloth, and peed on a pile of prayer books.

Church representative Helmut Wassermelon commented: "This is not a miracle, it is a nightmare. We can't have animals wrecking the sanctity of the holy church."

• **Editor's note: This report appeared in the *Sunday Sport* (Jan 21) and therefore must be true.**

Sharia law violates human rights

SAUDI Arabia's recent attempt to join the UN Human Rights Conventions "so long as they do not contradict Islamic Sharia laws" has failed, according to a report in the *Rationalist International Bulletin*.

A UN committee which met to consider the Saudi application observed that Sharia law applied in the Muslim kingdom discriminates against women and non-Muslims, and urged the government to bring its judicial system into line with international standards.

Especially alarming, according to the report of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, is the violation of basic children's rights. The Sharia law with its draconian punishments is strictly implemented against children.

Officials routinely harass and assault persons under 18 for dress code infractions. Brutal corporal punishment including flogging, stoning and amputation is meted out to children as well as to adults who are found guilty of offending Sharia laws.

In Saudi Arabia, children do not enjoy any protection and even the death penalty is imposed on them.

Plane crash prediction puts Indian officials in a tail spin

AFTER emerging from a trance, Indian "seer" Pallavi Sharma, called the Airport Authority of India (AAI) and informed them she had learned in conversation with the elephant God Ganesh that on February 10, at exactly at 7.40 pm a passenger plane coming from Canada was going to crash on Indian soil. The plane, painted red and white, had the number 1298.

Worried AAI officials, considering the possibility of sabotage, immediately contacted the police, and ordered a check into all incoming flights. As it turned out, no Canadian aircraft were expected that day, and 7.40 came and went without incident.

'Blasphemous' T-shirt seized

GLASGOW police raided a branch of Tower Records and seized stocks of a T-shirt depicting, on the front, a nun apparently masturbating. On the back were the words "Jesus is a c*nt". Designed to promote a band called Cradle of Filth, the garments were said to have sparked a number of violent incidents in the city's nightclubs.



secular case against church school expansion

AS THE National Secular Society was finalising its response to the Church of England's "consultation" over a material expansion of church schools, the Government issued a Green Paper. It proposes more diversity in State sector education, one aspect of which is the creation of more religious schools.

A key component of this encouragement to religious schools is a proposal to reduce materially the contributions to be made by religious bodies towards the schools they control. Where the churches' currently pay 15 per cent towards building costs, this will be reduced to 10 per cent – if the Prime Minister has his way. All other running costs, such as teachers' salaries (including those of RE teachers), are already entirely paid for out of the public purse.

Our draft response had anticipated such a move by the Government. One of our recommendations reads: "Because of the objections we have articulated to church schools and their expansion in this response, we urge the Government not to add further to the succession of concessions over the financing of religious schools that started with the 1944 Education Act and includes the School Standards and Framework Act 1998." The final version of the response refers to the above proposal, followed by a suggestion that schools' ability to select on religious grounds is withdrawn in exchange for the planned reduction in contribution.

Although the *The Times* ran a letter from the Society bemoaning the proposals, ours was not the sole dissenting voice. *The Times* also published an opinion piece by Patience Wheatcroft, tearing the argument for more church schools to shreds. The *Guardian* editorial was scathing. Meanwhile, on the *Today* programme, Polly Toynbee (one of the Society's Honorary Associates) demolished the arguments for more church schools in a lively exchange with the Secretary of the Church of England's Board of Education.

We hope that our response will provide useful ammunition for those articulating the counter-argument to these misguided proposals from the Church, and now the Government. The 30-page response, which was prepared over a period of two months, explores both theoretical and practical arguments against religious schools in general and their expansion. As well as quoting supporting opinion from high-profile opinion formers, it includes detailed evidence and personal experiences drawn from our newspaper archive, the Society's members, and also *Freethinker* readers (for which we are grateful). The response includes over a dozen detailed recommendations and opens with a summary which includes the following points:-

We draw attention to statistics demonstrat-

By Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary, National Secular Society

ing the dramatic and continuing decline in the Church's support and conclude that this decline does not give it a credible foundation from which to propose this enormous expansion in the number of its schools. We conjecture that these plans might be a last-ditch attempt to regain influence and support.

We explore evidence suggesting that the more religious schools there are, the more divided our society will become. We cite this as yet a further reason to reduce, rather than increase, such schools. Muslim commentator Yasmin Alibhai Brown opposes state-funded religious schools and religious education. We recommend an independent study be commissioned into this difficult but important area.

We question the human-rights aspects of religious schools.

We call for an independent survey on whether parents really want church schools, or whether (as we suspect) they really just want good schools. The claim that there is a genuine wish by parents for more C of E religion in schools – as opposed to simply good schools – is also shown to be unfounded. We provide powerful evidence from a consultation in Rochdale underlining this.

We call for much more democracy and public accountability in the management of church schools and the process by which the status of schools is transferred.

We note the attempts to bring back into the fold what are technically church schools but which clearly have no interest in the Church. We recommend that, where there is a "monopoly", such schools should be able to renounce their church school status.

We explore the worrying monopoly of Voluntary Controlled schools in some areas and give some examples of non-believers being disadvantaged. We recommend removal of any religious admissions criteria in such areas and ultimately the return of such schools to community status.

We call for a procedure to allow transfers from church schools to community school status. We also call for an end to discrimination in school transport on the ground of lack of faith.

We regret that, despite being almost entirely financed from the public purse, church schools are not open to many pupils who may wish to attend them, on the grounds of their faith (or lack of it).

We provide evidence of parents "passing as believers" to gain entry for their children, and

consider the implications.

We note copious approving references [in the Church's Paper] to what we interpret as proselytisation in church schools. We oppose this and recommend a more multi-cultural approach.

We demonstrate high levels of non-belief in pupils and recommend more consideration for the many of them who do not believe.

We recommend ending the statutory requirement for collective worship.

We call for an assurance that citizenship lessons do not become an extension of RE.

We regret excessive and successive financial concessions having been made to religious organisations in respect of schools, another of which is just being proposed by the Government. We recommend National Audit Office inspections of transactions and contracts in respect of school assets, to protect the public purse.

We explain why the Church's claim to be helping the poor through providing more church schools is, in some instances, tokenistic, at best. We quote in detail an extremely disturbing example of the transfer to Voluntary Aided status being used as a mechanism specifically to disadvantage the poor and needy.

After drawing attention to the proposal to reinforce the Christian domination of state funded further education colleges, we demonstrate just how few committed Christian teachers there are now, far less than would be sufficient for any expansion. We detail the unreasonable legal privileges afforded to these teachers and the consequent considerable discrimination against non-religious teachers.

We conclude with pleas that:

Such legal discrimination in religious schools against teachers who are non-believers is, if possible, reduced, but certainly not increased, as a result of enshrining into UK law the EU Directive, and for the reasons given throughout the foregoing pages, we ask the Government to think again before implementing its proposals announced on 12 February 2001 to provide even more finance to assist the Church to expand its church schools. The more that bright and well-behaved pupils with involved parents are moved from the community school sector, the more it will suffer.

The full response is available on the Society's website www.secularism.org.uk and available in print by post only by sending a large SAE to **Church Schools Response, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.**

The response is free to NSS members (although a 33p stamp on the envelope would be appreciated), non-members are asked to send £2 (by cheque, PO, cash or stamps) as a contribution towards printing and postage.

knock, knock, who's there?

She looks harmless enough as I open the door, but then she hands me the leaflet. "Everyone is going to get one of these," she tells me importantly. I imagine for a second that she is a Government official conducting a census. But of course not, she is one of the many Jehovah's Witnesses in our area – but one I hadn't seen before.

"Don't you think the world is in a terrible state?", she asks. "Yes, I do and most of it is to do with religion, if you ask me." I mention Northern Ireland and the Middle East.

"Oh, yes, I agree. We're very worried about it. But I am here to give you the Good News."

So I just say "Oh, what's that then?"

"God's Kingdom is very close and when it comes all the wickedness will stop. It's in the Bible" Or words to that effect. "But I don't suppose you've got a Bible have you?"

"Oh, yes I have; I've got three."

"Well then, don't you believe that God will stop the wickedness?" she asks hopefully.

"Well I am an atheist, so I don't believe in God, or the Bible. So, no, I don't believe God will do anything. It's up to us". Water off a duck's back. She carries on talking at me, showing me passages in the Bible to "prove everything".

"If your God is so marvellous", I say, "then why does He bring earthquakes, floods and diseases to innocent people?". At this point she starts explaining to me, as if I were a five-year-old, and a bit backward at that, about how Eve brought wickedness into the world. Apparently Eve would still be alive now if she hadn't done so."

"Oh I see. But you know the Bible didn't drop from the sky ready-written; it was written by people, so it's only their opinions you are getting, nothing to do with any god."

"But they were inspired by God. It says so". I don't think that she would understand if I start to explain about circular arguments. So I don't.

"There's such a lot of wickedness about" she continues. "Do you know, only two doors from me, there are two men living together and they had to go to America to get married?!". She is truly shocked, much more so than by what is going on in the Middle East."

"And you think *that's* wicked?"

"Well it is – it's in the Bible. God says it's wicked."

Ten weary minutes later, as I was looking at my watch, she announces "I could always come back and talk to you again."

(At this point I am reminded of a previous visit by another Jehovah's Witness with whom I tried to have a philosophical discussion.

Me: "So at the time of Noah's flood the water was up to the tops of the mountains?"

JW: "Yes."

Two readers give their take – one true, one fictional – on visits from Jehovah's Witnesses

Me: "All over the world?"

JW: "Yes."

Me: "Well, when the flood went away where did all the water go?"

J.W: "It went into the ocean of course".)

I tell my latest visitor: "I don't think there'd be any point in returning, do you? What you lot don't realise is that there are people who don't agree with you and don't want this door-to-door stuff. I am a humanist, I have read plenty, we've got plenty of our own literature, we have strong views but we don't believe in going around foisting our opinions on people who don't want them."

A pause, then "Well, I enjoy doing this work and I shall go on doing it for as long as it is necessary. "But if you don't want us to come we won't" she says.

"But you do come – lots of you – time and time again. We've asked many times for you not to come, but you take no notice. You keep on coming. I am a humanist and I'm not going to change my mind."

She goes.

– Georgina Coupland

Two JWs are visiting a run-down housing estate in the Midlands. A man, wearing a vest and jeans and smoking the remains of a cigarette, opens his door.

JW: "Good morning. Do you agree that there is something terribly wrong with the world and no-one seems to have any answers to the problems?"

Man: "Too right, mate. I was saying the same thing myself down the pub last night."

JW: "Do you realise that the answers we need are right here in the Bible which is the inspired word of God. All we have to do is read what God has said and follow his wishes."

Man: "Hang about, squire. How can we do that when the Bible is full of contradictions?"

JW: "I read the Bible every day and I've never come across any contradictions. That is a lie the Devil puts about to confuse people."

Man: "Must disagree with you there squire. With a book stuffed with violence, sex, obscenities, absurdities and contradictions, you don't need the Devil to create confusion."

JW: "I'd be interested to have an example of what you think is a biblical contradiction."

Man: "Try Genesis 1:31 where, as I recall, it says, "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." A bit later we get a different story in Genesis 6:6: "And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his

heart." Or you could compare Second Samuel 8:4 where it says David took 700 horsemen with First Chronicles 18:4 where it says he took 7,000 horsemen. And there's plenty more where these came from if only I could find my reading specs."

JW: "Well, isn't that amazing. You are right. You've really got me thinking. But of course these are not in the New Testament."

Man: "O.K. Just to keep you happy, what about Mark 15:25, "And it was the 3rd hour, and they crucified him" compared to John 19:14,15 where it says they crucified him about the 6th hour?"

JW: "I really can't see how I missed all this before."

Man: "Well, try this for a start. You say every word is inspired. But obviously if two statements contradict each other one at least must be wrong. And if one statement is wrong the Bible can't be inspired and any other statement could be wrong. Biblical authority is destroyed and with it all the religious outfits that just love telling the rest of us how we should live. Stands to reason, doesn't it?"

JW: "This is serious."

Man: "Too right, squire. Serious as in millions of people being conned into scrambling their brains for a couple of thousand years and killing and persecuting anyone who disagreed with their dotty ideas. Not to mention you dragging round this estate on a rainy morning when you could be in the pub enjoying a pint."

JW: "I must say these ideas are quite exciting. They give an exhilarating feeling of freedom although I do feel quite faint."

Man: "Well, after the kind of life you've led, using your reason must come as a bit of a shock. As a keen Bible student I suppose you are aware that all the major events of Jesus' life were all identified with pagan and mythical figures who lived before him. The early Christians just pinched them. There was nothing special about Jesus."

JW: "How fascinating. I had no idea. But there is still the historical evidence for Jesus."

Man: "Nice try, squire, but no cigar. Even the famous reference in Josephus which keeps being trotted out is almost certainly a later forgery. My wife had an argument on this very point at Bingo the other night. The discussion became quite heated."

JW: "This really is an eye-opener. They will be quite surprised when I tell them about this at Kingdom Hall. I seem to have been believing what is obvious nonsense. How can I thank you for putting me right?"

Man: "I don't suppose you have a fag you could spare? No, I thought not."

– Denis Watkins

christophobia - whatever next?

The never-ending whingeing that emanates from the "faith communities" about how badly they are treated in this country has a new word to add to its lexicon: Christophobia. It was coined last month by the *Church of England Newspaper*, presumably on the assumption that if the Muslims can have their own whinge word (Islamophobia), so can Christians.

The people at the *Church of England Newspaper* don't seem to have noticed that Christians are more or less taking over the country. Far from discriminating against them, this present Government seems to give them whatever they ask for.

The latest thing is church schools ("Excuse us Reverend Blair, but we've only got a quarter of the country's primary schools, so we'd like some more, please. Oh, and while you're at it, could you throw in a couple of hundred secondary schools, too.")

Before that, it was religious representation in the House of Lords – they wanted more, and Mr Blair is going to give them more. And they've got big promises both from Blair and Hague that after the election – whichever of them wins – the churches will be right up there with the big players in Government policy-making.

Gordon Brown even promised, in the last budget, that he would reduce VAT on church repairs from 17.5% to 5% so that the Churches could off-load the cost of their buildings on to the rest of us. Church bells rang out, trumpets sounded and the Bishops lifted up their skirts in celebration. Unfortunately for the Church, the festivities were a tad premature. The European Union refused to allow any change in VAT rates (not even for the Lord God Almighty) unless the Council of Ministers gives the go ahead. And they're not going to.

The response to this from the Church's resident moaning minnies was: "You led us up the garden path, Mr Brown, you knew all along you couldn't give us this concession. We'll make it an election issue!"

Given that there is hardly an iota of interest in religion in Britain, why is the Government so determined to shove it down our throats?

The answer, of course, is that like all believers, they want to give us the good news about Jesus, whether we want it or not.

Now we have another campaign from the churches, this time claiming that church welfare organisations are "discriminated against" because they can't get public money. A survey conducted by media vicar Steve Chalke purports to reveal that some local authorities will not hand over money to



**The more Christians get,
the more they want, says
Terry Sanderson**

"faith-led" initiatives, simply because they insist on making it clear that they are Christian in nature. On the face of it, this seems unjust. Some of these church groups do sterling work with the poor and disadvantaged.

But the other side of the coin – that Mr Chalke and his mob fail to mention in their pitch for more public money – is the discrimination that is practised by the faith groups themselves against those they are supposed to

**Given that there is hardly an
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be serving and the staff they employ. We have evidence that some of these groups refuse to employ atheists, unmarried co-habitees, adulterers and homosexuals. They also sometimes deny their services to people who don't fit into their idea of a Christian lifestyle.

What these people want, of course, is a copy of the American model. In Washington, President Bush has set up an Office for Faith-Based Action, even though the first amendment of the American constitution reads: "Congress shall make no law regarding an establishment of religion."

Under the new scheme, Government money would go to religious and community groups to help them run social services, rather than to the welfare state.

American non-believers are, understandably, up in arms about these developments. They complain that any public funding of religion amounts to a religious tax on the American people. They also point to the impossibility of separating the religious and

secular components in social-outreach projects, and are firmly opposed to religious groups being given more latitude to promote their own sectarian line.

Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists, said of the Bush proposals: "Religious groups simply cannot resist the temptation to incorporate their faith into any social mission they embark on, including those with public money. It's simply too easy for them to smuggle religion into these programmes, especially in the light of double-talk from Bush about using public money to assist groups and still permitting them to maintain their sectarian character."

Thomas Jefferson spoke of the "wall of separation between church and state", but in the USA it has been crumbling since 1947, when Roman Catholic school pupils qualified for Government help with transport and school lunches.

If there is any further proposal to push religion to the forefront of our own social services, let's hope we can make our opposition heard as loudly as atheists in the US are doing.

Now the good news, and it's from this country. The horrendous Christian Institute – a leading organisation on the religious Right – has suffered a catalogue of failures over the past few weeks. First, in the House of Lords, it tried through its patron Baroness Young, to ambush the Bill to permit research on cloned human embryos. She lost overwhelmingly. Then it tried to stop the provision of the "morning-after" pill, using a crafty parliamentary strategy in the House of Lords (once again fronted by Baroness Young). That failed, too.

The CI also went to the High Court asking for a judicial review aimed at stopping local authorities issuing sex-shop licences to an organisation called Xsensual, which runs "sex fairs" around the country. The court chucked out the Christian Institute's claim, and local councils can now issue blanket sex-shop licences to Xsensual. The idea had been to stop R18 videos (the most sexually explicit sort) becoming more widely available. Until that time they could be sold only through licensed sex shops, of which there are about 90 in this country. In the end, the Christian Institute's intervention made the interpretation of the law more liberal. Not a happy outcome from their point of view.

The Christian Institute regularly exhorts its thousands of supporters to pray for the success of its repressive campaigns. Methinks somebody up there isn't listening.

He's probably too busy salivating over his new video collection.

ten reasons to ditch religion

1. IT IS BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH: Rickets, a disease that had once been wiped out in the UK, has returned, affecting mainly children born to strict Muslim parents. The disease is characterised by softened and deformed bones caused by failure to absorb calcium and phosphorus due to a deficiency of vitamin D.

Medical experts in Britain say that the women who cover themselves from top to toe in traditional Muslim garb are starved of necessary sunlight and are likely to have children with vitamin D and calcium deficiencies. The problem is then compounded when the children are made to wear similar traditional dress.

2. IT MAKES PEOPLE THINK THEY CAN CHANGE THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION: Gay man Jeremy Marks believed that God could turn him straight, and so became leader of Courage UK, a body set up to "convert" homosexuals into heterosexuals through the power of prayer. But, after 14 years at the head of the ex-gay organisation, which is linked to the American parent body, Exodus, Marks decided that its conversion therapy was "futile".

"None of the people we've counselled have converted, no matter how much effort and prayer they put into it," said Marks. Of his own sexual orientation, Marks said that "in truth, it has not changed". But he intends staying remaining with his wife rather than "return" to being gay. "This is because I believe in keeping the vows I made before God, and my wife deserves to be loved, not deserted."

3. IT INDUCES A DESIRE TO VANDALISE FAMOUS LANDMARKS: Confidential 1930s government documents retrieved from the Public records Office reveal that the Home Office was forced to consider covering up the 26ft erect penis



sported by the Cerne Giant in Dorset because of complaints from the then Bishop of Salisbury. He objected to the "indecent pupus" and wanted it made "less objectionable". The civil servant who was given the task of investigating the Bishop's complaint wrote that this was a "serious charge of indecency against a prehistoric national monument," and he asked rhetorically, "What does the complainant want us to do? Commit a nameless outrage? We cannot contemplate that. Plant a small grove of fig trees in a strategic position? We have not got the power."

The civil servant pointed out that the chalk drawing had been in existence for over 2,000 years, and no previous complaint had been registered.

4. IT ATTRACTS THE DISHONEST: Californian rabbi Benzion Pill has been sentenced to nine months in a halfway house and fined \$10,000 for operating a used car scam. As director of the Jewish Education Centre in San Francisco, Pill used radio ads to ask people to donate their used cars to the needy. So successful were his appeals that the JEC became one of America's largest car dealers. But an IRS investigator discovered that hardly any of the cars were handed over to the needy, and that only \$1.4 million of the \$8.5 million raised was given to charities.

Compilation by Lynette van Dam

5. IT LEADS PEOPLE TO DO DOTTY THINGS: Chicago's only Porche showroom has received official blessing from the Catholic Church. The city's Cardinal, Archbishop Francis George, blessed the showroom as a favour to the owner, who sits on the board of Catholic charities. "I bless a lot of stuff. Usually it's school, and obviously churches, hospitals and people," said the cardinal, who each year is lent a £16,000 Buick Le Sabre by the blessed car dealership.

6. IT LEADS PEOPLE TO SAY DOTTY THINGS: Dianne Passno, Executive Vice-President of America's Focus on the Family organisation, claims that the feminist movement is "hurtful to women" because it encourages them to give up their natural roles of mothers, homemakers and nurturers. The women's movement, she said, had gone awry because of its "love affair with abortion and lesbianism".

"Many of the spokeswomen have never been married, never tried to balance the family and a career. Many are lesbians. That doesn't represent the majority of American women, so how can they address what women need today?", she wrote in a recent issue of *Focus on the Family* magazine.

Her attack continued: "Feminism discounts every bit of value the Lord has placed on living in relation to him. It's a movement that negates the pattern of marriage and importance of children and men. It says that women can determine their own futures; they're stronger, they're smarter, they're better than men. They should be able to kill their children; two women should be able to have a family, without male involvement. Everything that is ignoble is sanctioned."

7. IT MAKES PRIESTS THINK THEY HAVE THE

RIGHT TO MOLEST YOUNGSTERS: When San Francisco Catholic priest Bernard J Dabbene was found in his car with a 17-year-old boy by the local police, he said that he and the boy were discussing unspecified "job opportunities". As priest and boy both had their trousers unzipped, the police did not buy the story, but instead believed the teenager who claimed that he asked Dabbene, a member of the archdiocese's board of education, for a lift to a relative's home, but that the priest had forced him to stay in the car where he fondled him against his wishes. Dabbene has been charged with assaulting the boy.

8. IT LEADS TO CRUELTY: The head of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity order has admitted that one of her nuns had used a hot knife to burn the hands of four street children in Calcutta as a punishment for stealing.

9. IT ATTRACTS CHEATS: The organisers of a series of Julie Andrews look-alike contests, held in Yorkshire to commemorate the 35-year-old film, *The Sound of Music*, have banned nuns from entering the competition. A spokesperson for Limelight Entertainment said that when the contests were staged in London and Oxford, genuine nuns were walking off with top prizes of champagne, chocolates and videos. "This," he said, "was taking prizes away from those who actually dressed up for the night."

10. IT PREYS ON PEOPLES' FEAR: Police were reported to be investigating the activities self-styled Archbishop Gilbert Deya, who heads an evangelical church in south London, after claims that church members were being scared into giving money to his organisation, Gilbert Deya Ministries. Last year, according to a report in the *Independent*, Deya wrote to one woman follower:

"It was good talking to you on the telephone when the Holy Ghost revealed to me that the spirit of the Devil was sent to kill you ... It would be good if you could pay your tithe by direct debit. This will qualify you to receive a special prayer every month from the ministry."

The woman's brother said her behaviour had become increasingly bizarre after she joined the church. "They seek to segregate you from your family by making them seem demonic."

A promotional video supplied by the church shows Deya performing an exorcism on a young girl who was said to have caused her mother to suffer two miscarriages and being responsible for "supernatural" disturbances at their home. "This little girl is a witch," Deya tells the congregation.

Laughter about Hollywood mo

Censorious American Christians appear to be losing their their stranglehold on the film industry in the United States – and not before time. For years – indeed for as long as cinema itself has been around – producers and distributors have been far too intimidated by the power of religion to subject it to any form of serious critical examination.

Worse than this, they have been manipulated into depicting virtually every character in every movie as a Christian, albeit in some instances a wobbly Christian who may have a temporary crisis of faith. Only villains are allowed to be out-and-out atheists.

One can understand their reluctance to court controversy. The Christian Right has succeeded in mounting effective campaigns against films in the past, and it has always been safer to leave religious themes – particularly ones perceived to be taking the kick out of religion – to foreign film-makers.

A celebrated example of this was *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, which provoked squeals of protest both in Britain and America, and a later British film which faced a great deal of hostility in the US (and some here) was *Priest*. Set in Liverpool, this was a compelling examination of the turmoil suffered by a Catholic priest, Father Greg (Linus Roache), when he enters a gay relationship with a young man played by Robert Carlyle.

Then began a perceptible shift in attitude towards the way religion was being dealt with in America. As I am not, by any means, a film buff, I am unable to identify at what precise point this change occurred, but I gathered that something was afoot in, of all things, the American cartoon series, *The Simpsons*, and, in June 1998 I wrote a piece

for the *Freethinker* entitled "Subversive Simpsons Are a Sceptics Delight."

A year later this sceptic became more delighted still when a black comedy, *Drop Dead Gorgeous* hit the big screen. This is an unashamed, and extremely funny poke at American small town religiosity and hypocrisy.

Set in hallowed American heartland amidst the cow fields, pork sausage factories and Lutheran churches, the movie depicts spoiled little rich kid Becky Leeman (played by Denise Richards) going all out to win the Mount Rose, Minnesota, teen beauty contest. And Becky, who heads the Lutheran Sisterhood Gun Club, and her mother (played by Kirsty Ally) are prepared to stop at nothing – murder included – to achieve their goal. "After all," says Becky, "Jesus loves a winner."

In a scene which must have had devoted Christians choking on their popcorn, Becky mounts the stage at the final of the contest and cheesily sings "You're too good to be true" to a grotesque Worzel Gummidge-type figure of Jesus pinned to a huge cross. Then, in an hilarious bad-taste routine matched only by the *Springtime for Hitler* musical scene in Mel Brook's *The Producers*, she dances around the stage with an enormous grin and the cross on her back, as the cover picture shows.

I do not know what, if any, protests erupted around *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, but a later 1999 film – Kevin Smith's *Dogma* – certainly set the cat among the Catholics. Billed as a "comedic fantasy," this is the tale of two renegade angels, Loki (Matt Damon) and Bartleby (Ben Affleck), who were expelled from Heaven and banished forever to Wisconsin. (Oh, the shame!) They identify a way back to Paradise

via the portals of a New Jersey cathedral which is being used to spearhead a renewal campaign called Catholicism Wow!

Within minutes of the film's opening we hear Cardinal Glick (George Carlin) telling the press and supporters: "We all know how the majority and the media in this country view the Catholic Church. They view us as a passé, archaic institution. People find the Bible obtuse, even hokey. Now in an effort to dis-

But, asks Barry Duke, will there ever be a feature film can positively portray at (mundane) positions in society, and so shun churches, do not have their coffins, funerals, marriages and births are sh

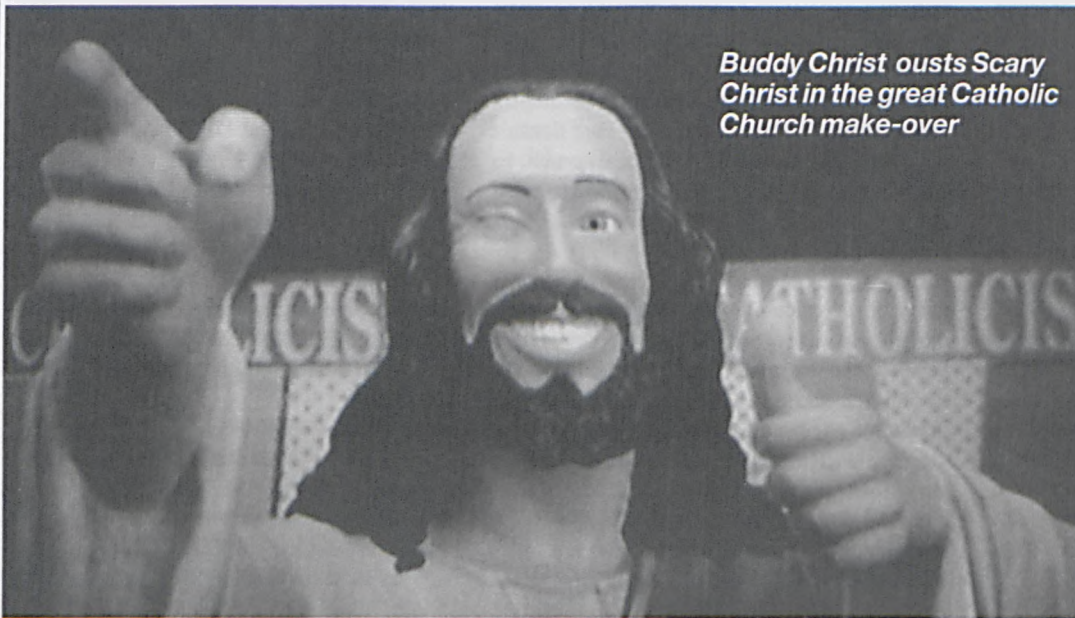
prove all that, the church has appointed this year as a time of renewal for the faith and of style. For example, the crucifix. While it has been a time-honoured symbol of our faith, Holy Mother Church has decided to retire this highly-recognisable but wholly depressing image of our Lord Crucified."

Then, asserting that "Christ did not come to earth to give us the willies", Cardinal Glick unveils a new symbol – the Buddy Christ, smiling, winking, giving a thumbs-up sign and looking every inch a character straight from a Disney Studio set.

One can appreciate how this – plus the fact that God is depicted as a pretty, if somewhat vacuous young woman wearing a short silver lamé skirt doing headstands near the cathedral's flowerbeds – might give offence. But add to this the central character Bethany (Linda Fiorentino) – a many-times great niece of Jesus Christ, who is enlisted by God's henchmen to stop the fallen angels from re-entering heaven – and you've got a whole mess of trouble on your hands. Catholic protesters saw this as a terrible insult: Mary, they complained, could not possibly have given Jesus brothers or sisters because she was a virgin both before and after the incarnation.

So great was the Catholics' rage that it forced the Disney-owned

Buddy Christ ousts Scary Christ in the great Catholic Church make-over



ounds when nocks religion

feature

Miramax company to renege on its agreement to release *Dogma*. Instead, it was put on release by Lions Gate Films.

But *Dogma* – for all its attacks on the Church and its wacky array of human and supernatural characters, including Rufus (Chris Rock), the black 13th apostle who claims he was written out of the Bible because of racism, and that Jesus was falsely depicted as white when he was in fact black (“It’s ok for

re ever come a time when an *ordinary*
ray atheists occupying important (or
and show families who consciously
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are shown as strictly secular events?

a black man to steal your stereo but not to be your Saviour”) – is by no means an offensive piss-take. Rather it is a thoughtful, if often very funny exploration of convoluted Catholic dogma.

Reviewing *Dogma* for the *Flick Filosopher*, a web-site dedicated to movie reviews, MaryAnn Johanson, wrote: “The Catholic organizations and individuals who continue to protest the film’s mere existence now that it has been released are precisely the people who need to see *Dogma*. They won’t, of course, fearing for their immortal souls: ‘Thou shalt not commit satire’ and ‘Thou shalt not use the brain’ are obviously two commandments the protesters are alone in their awareness of. And they’ll likely continue their diatribes aimed at a film, the contents of which they ‘know about’ only second- and third-hand.

“That’s a shame. For while *Dogma* is without doubt critical of organized religions – and the Catholic Church in particular – it is also one of the most religious movies ever made, a psalm to faith imbued with a wonder and awe of God and all of God’s creation ... if you believe in that kind of thing.

“And even if you don’t, Smith’s own deep belief (he is a practising Catholic), overflowing from the screen, is more than enough to sweep you in and keep you enthralled for a couple of hours.”

It will be argued, of course, that, while the Christian Right still has some clout in America, the only genre through which mainstream film-makers can sneak subject matter

such as this remains cartoon features like *The Simpsons*, spoofs like *Drop Dead Gorgeous* and out-and-out fantasies.

Which gives rise to the question: will there ever come a time when an *ordinary* feature film can positively portray atheists occupying important (or mundane) positions in society, and show families who consciously shun churches, do not have their children baptised, and whose funerals, marriages and births are shown as strictly secular events?

One film which may help in this quest is *The Contender*, written and directed by Rod Lurie. It was brought to my attention by the American monthly *Freethought Today*, and depicts a Vice-Presidential nominee, Senator Laine Hanson (Joan Allen) who declares her atheism before a Congressional hearing.

In reviewing the film, *Freethought Today’s* Annie Laurie Gaylor writes: “The movie’s

premise is that the hard-as-nails Democratic President (a convincing Jeff Bridges) wants to go down in history for choosing the first woman Vice-President ...

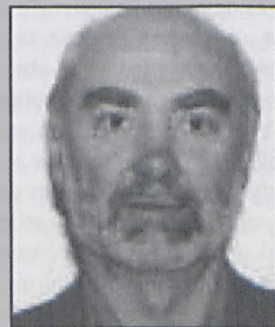
“Atheism rears its head during the nomination hearings when it is revealed that Senator Hanson was once quoted on the subject of the separation of church and state, saying ‘fairy tales’ should not be legislated.

“Apparently figuring she has nothing to lose Hanson acknowledges at the hearing’s conclusion that yes, she is an atheist. She eloquently states her strong support for strict gun control, abortion rights, and the Establishment Clause, and her opposition to the death penalty.”

While *The Contender* may not shake the *status quo*, especially now that George W Bush is ensconced in the White House, it may prove a gateway to more thoughtful and realistic depictions in cinema and on TV of non-believers in the future.

my atheism

Peter Richards of Southampton is the 15th contributor to our *My Atheism* series.



DURING World War II, my father served in the RAF and my mother in the Land Army. I was born in 1948 in Southampton, England, during the baby boom of the post-war years.

As a child I regarded myself as a Christian. I attended Sunday school; I marched on church parades with the cubs and later the scouts; I was educated at a C of E primary school, where I attended end-of-term church services.

I remember being filled with awe when inside a magnificent church, with the attendant feeling of being watched by the invisible eye of God, which at the time I thought must surely be present in God’s house. I also remember a feeling of disgust when someone threw a Bible across the room at a Youth Club; for it seemed to me to be disrespectful towards God, to treat the “Good Book” in such a way.

It was not until I attended grammar school aged 11 that I met someone who strongly expressed atheistic views. When this new friend told me he didn’t believe in God, I was so shocked that I questioned whether I should continue the friendship with this “bad” person.

All this began to change when I was about 15. I started asking myself questions like “If God made the world, who made God? Was it Super God – and if so, who made Super God?”

The seeds of doubt were sown, however, when I studied biology and Darwinian evolution. The process of natural selection seemed so simple and yet so obviously true. It was rather like having a conjuring trick explained; easy to understand once you know how it’s done.

Although evolution did not disprove the existence of God, it offered a more plausible explanation to that described in Genesis. On reflection it seemed strange to me that dinosaurs reigned on earth for more than 80 million years, and then all of a sudden died out, about 65 million years ago. Where was the plan in that? I also thought it was strange that humans had descended from apes in the near distant past; a curiously slow method of making man in his own image. And if God was love, why were so many creatures eating one another?

A turning point for me, against orthodox religion, came when I read a book which “proved” the existence of God by claiming

(Continued on p11)

down to earth: colin mccall

Misleading image

MARY Midgley is introduced as "our foremost scourge of 'scientific pretension' and a staunch defender of religion – although she doesn't believe in God", when interviewed by Andrew Brown who, as I have noted before in these columns, holds a similar position. I haven't read Midgley's book, *Science and Poetry*, due out this month, but Brown tells us that it takes its epigraph from Richard Dawkins' assertion that "Science is the only way we have of understanding the real world". Midgley argues that science is only one way among many open to humanity (*Guardian*, January 13). We read that Midgley attended an enlightened school where she "got philosophy" and lost her Christianity. More particularly, she thought Plato was "tremendous stuff". Still today she uses a variation of Plato's famous image of the prisoners in the cave from *The Republic*, changing the setting to "an aquarium which we never see fully from above, but only through various small windows unevenly distributed around it". Scientific windows – like historical ones – are just one important set and "if we refuse to put together the data from different windows, then we can be in real trouble", she says.

Plato's original image was pre-scientific and Mary Midgley's is no better. To compare the whole of modern science to looking through one small window is absurd. Our cosmological knowledge alone refutes it, as does our knowledge of the earth and living things, both areas where religion once held sway. Midgley misses the point, therefore, when she tells Brown that "the religions of the world can't simply be superseded because we don't like them". It's not a question of liking or disliking them: they have been superseded because they are false.

Fasting for God

THERE are, however, many reasons for disliking and even hating religion. Nothing angers me more than the harm it does to innocent humans like the four Irish women who died slow deaths fasting for God.

Three middle-aged Mulrooney sisters and an elderly aunt suffered terribly, and one sister, Ruth, suggested they should stop starving themselves and take an overdose of morphine. "None of us foresaw it could be this cruel and slow", she wrote. "It can deteriorate worse into a slow hell for the four of us (horrible loss of sight, great pain)... Let's think of exiting ourselves humanely" (*Guardian*, January 20).

They had hoped to ascend into heaven together.

Keeping his hand up

SUFFERING of another kind in the name of religion was noticeable in the extensive Channel 4 coverage of the Indian Kumbh Mela festival, which takes place every 12 years at Allahabad, at the confluence of two real rivers, the Ganges and the Yamun, and the non-existent Saraswati. Hindus believe that bathing where the rivers merge cleanses them of past misdeeds and helps them on their way to heaven. Many of them also take away bottles of the far-from hygienic holy water.

As the days went by, the cameras showed us many sadhus, or holy men, including the "one-armed" Mahant Amar Baharati, so-called because he has held his right arm up in the air for 24 years. He can no longer bend it, and his finger nails have become spiralling claws. A real-life Struwwelpeter.

Islamic law in Nigeria

THOSE sufferings, you may say, were self-inflicted, however misguided, but Bariya Ibrahim Magazu, a Nigerian teenager, had no choice in the matter. She was sentenced in northern Nigeria to be flogged for having premarital sex, although seven witnesses said that three married men had forced themselves on her (*Guardian*, January 23). The court dismissed her evidence and convicted her on the additional charge of making a false accusation. The sentence was deferred until after the birth of her baby, but was then brought forward to end the international controversy over the verdict.

The deputy governor of Zamfara state, Mahmoud Shinkafi, reported that Miss Magazu was bruised but "not badly hurt" by the flogging. Immediately after the punishment "she thanked Allah" for receiving it, and when she got back to her village "she was very happy".

All of which seems hard to believe, except where religion is concerned.

Getting the flavour

TWO successive Channel 4 television programmes, *Secrets of the Dead*, dealt with the two cities destroyed by the Vesuvius eruption in 79AD, Pompeii and Herculaneum, the second programme on February 8 revealing how modern technology is enabling experts to decipher scrolls from the famous library, charred, it was thought, beyond recognition.

Particularly noteworthy were fragments from the philosophical works of Philodemus, who was born in Syria, lived and taught in

Herculaneum and became a major influence in the dissemination of Epicurean philosophy, aspects of which were presented in the programme. Two fragments from Philodemus, epitomising Epicurus' first four "Principal Doctrines" will be found in John Gaskin's excellent *Everyman, The Epicurean Philosophers* (1995). One of them, rendered into English by Gaskin, reads: "God is not worth fearing./ Death is not worth a worry./ But good can be attained./ And evil can be endured."

"The Hidden Scrolls of Herculaneum" will have given some viewers their first taste of genuine Epicureanism.

Furthermore ...

LET me also mention Melvyn Bragg's morning Radio 4 programme on the same day, for its treatment of humanism, centring on Cicero, the Roman orator and philosopher who, although a Stoic, gave us important accounts of Epicurus' philosophy (again to be found in Gaskin). Book II of *De Finibus* extends the second line of the Philodemus quote as follows: "Death touches us in no way; for what has suffered dissolution is without sensation; and what is without sensation touches us in no way whatsoever".

A day too soon

WHAT a difference a day makes – to an astrologer. Claire Petulengro (a good old gypsy fortune teller's name that!), who gave *OK* readers the benefit of her stargazing, has accepted a similar job on the *Daily Express*, replacing the highly paid Jonathan Cainer.

I don't see *OK*, so I don't know whether Petulengro foretold her *Express* appointment, but I'd like to bet she didn't. My opening remarks, however, refer to the birth of her baby son, Paris, whom she expected to be a Libra, but came too soon and is thus a Virgo. Petulengro revealed that she gave birth "sitting in a bikini, with a glass of milk in her hand", although *Private Eye* (February 9-22) understandably wondered how Paris "fought his way through the swimsuit".

Continuing the line

IN their book *The Next Pope*, the late Peter Hebblethwaite and his wife Margaret suggested that no one is going to have more influence on the next conclave than "the one man who will not be there", Pope John Paul II. And with the naming of 37 new cardinals, he is doing his best to prove the Hebblethwaites right; to ensure, indeed, that his successor is as conservative as he is.

that it would not be possible or even necessary for man to know right from wrong, if the Almighty did not exist. The argument seemed so blatantly false that I started to think about the whole subject.

This triggered my interest in philosophy and I can remember buying, at the age of 16, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (1961), a book that I still treasure to this day. When I read the chapter entitled, "Why I am not a Christian", and in particular, when I read his refutation of the First Cause Argument, I was electrified, because here was this great philosopher mirroring my own independently thought-out view.

If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God, so that there cannot be any validity in that argument.

It is exactly of the same nature as the Hindu's view, that the world rested upon an elephant and the elephant rested upon a tortoise; and when they said, "How about the tortoise?" the Indian said "Suppose we change the subject."

The argument is really no better than that.
— Bertrand Russell

It was during this period that with the help of the local library I devoured as many books on philosophy as I could. A possible answer to the question of whether morality could exist without God presented itself when I read John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*, in which a non-religious moral creed is described, which states, in brief, "that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness".

In 1970 I married in a C of E church, and when my son and daughter were born, in 1973 and 1976 respectively, they were duly christened. These were primarily concessions to my wife's religious beliefs, although I was unaware at the time of any meaningful secular ceremonies that might be available as alternatives.

My parents were not church-goers and I was not aware of their beliefs during my childhood. I just assumed that they believed in God and was surprised to learn, when I discussed it with them, as an adult, that my father was an atheist and my mother was an agnostic.

By this time I had already come to my own conclusions on the matter and so I can honestly say that their views had not influenced me.

My interest in philosophy has continued throughout my adult life. I discovered new arguments, such as the problem of evil, which I found best expressed by Epicurus (c. 341-270BC):

God can either take evil away from the world and will not, or being willing to do so cannot. If he is willing and cannot, then he is not omnipotent. If he can but will not, then he is not benevolent. If he is neither willing nor able, then he is neither benevolent nor omnipotent. If he is both willing and able, whence then evil?

— Epicurus quoted by Lactantius

I read Charles Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* and Sigmund Freud's *The Origins of Religion*. I read Pascal's wager, that it is the safe bet to believe in God, and rejected it on rational grounds.

I read about the 18th-century theologian William Paley, who argued in his treatise *Natural Theology* that if you found a watch on the ground, you would conclude that it must have a maker, who comprehended its construction and designed its use. Nature likewise, he argued, because of its complexity and apparent purposefulness, must also have had a maker. This, I became aware, was known as the Argument from Design.

Later, in 1986, I read *The Blind Watchmaker* by Richard Dawkins and became convinced that natural selection, the unconscious and automatic process, discovered by Darwin, does in fact operate like a blind watchmaker, the title of Dawkins' book and has no purpose in mind. I realised therefore that a living organism has no need of a designer, because the watch analogy is false.

The other problem that has troubled me over the years is the Jesus question.

The Jewish and Roman historical records of the time barely mention him, which seems surprising for someone who is supposed to be the son of God. In more recent years I have discovered two books which take controversial views on the matter.

The first, entitled *Did Jesus Exist* (1975) by Professor G.A.Wells, argues that there was no historical Jesus. After examining much evidence, he concludes that it is most likely that Jesus did not exist at all.

The second book is one written by Barbara Theiring, a theologian and biblical scholar, who after over 20 years of close study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospels, developed a revolutionary new theory which concluded that Jesus was just a man, who became the leader of a radical faction of Essene Priests. He was not divine; he was not of virgin birth; he did not perform miracles and he did not die on the cross. All this is spelled out in her book entitled *Jesus the Man* (1992).

The fact that both these books are written by serious scholars requires us to consider their theories as real possibilities.

If either turns out to be true, that fact would

shake the very foundations upon which Christianity is built.

I now believe that our conscience is something which acts as a parental substitute, favouring good behaviour and disapproving of bad behaviour, and is not dependent upon the existence of God but develops in early childhood, when the emotional desire for parental approval and love and the fear of rejection are very strong.

All these thoughts led me to describe myself as an agnostic. I was mindful of the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper's view that certainty is not available to us. "All we can do is to search for the falsity content of our best theory."

I do now, however, describe myself as an atheist, since the discovery of Charles Bradlaugh's definition.

The atheist does not say "There is no God" but he says; "I know not what you mean by God; the word 'God' is to me a sound conveying no clear or distinct affirmation. I do not deny that of which I have no conception, and the conception of which by its affirmer is so imperfect that he is unable to define it to me."

— Charles Bradlaugh (1876)

I have always noted the absurdities of ritual in the church and find it strange that intelligent people go along with it. Nevertheless, I appreciate the importance of ceremony in the special events of people's lives, such as marriages, christenings, and funerals. My father died in 1982, my brother in 1995, and my mother in 1997, and their funerals served an important function, celebrating their lives and helping myself and others to come to terms with their deaths.

As an adult, I have lived my life according to humanist principles, although it is only recently that I discovered the various humanist organisations. In April 1997, I joined the British Humanist Association, and approve of the non-religious marriages, baby-naming ceremonies and funerals which they perform. I am also now a member of the Rationalist Press Association.

I started out as a Christian. For a while I adopted a definition of God as "the ultimate explanation of all existence" before moving on to the agnostic position of insufficient evidence. Finally I have settled with the negative atheism of Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society.

When I was younger I suffered from a reluctance to proclaim my non-religious views for fear of alienating Christians, but as the strength of my conviction has increased, so too has my courage. I am now saying, both privately and publicly, that I am an atheist.

THE recent volume *Can We Be Good Without God?* By Dr Robert Buckman, President of the Humanist Association of Canada, is a contribution to the debate on ethics within the freethought tradition. Buckman, in addition to being a professor of medicine specializing in oncology at the University of Toronto, is a best-selling author (*What You Really Need to Know about Cancer and Not Dead Yet*), and writer/presenter of medical information videos together with the English comic actor John Cleese. The current volume, answering the title's question affirmatively (of course), is an abundantly lucid and witty drawing on some interesting sources to explore the relationship between religion and ethics. What he does not set out to do is to discuss the existence or non-existence of God, preferring instead to develop the humanist premise that it is not only possible to have an ethics without a deity, but it is probably preferable that people check their religious beliefs at the door when it comes to behaving reasonably. Buckman thus organizes his book into two parts reflecting his principal thesis: part one on "believing" and part two on "behaving".

Can We Be Good Without God? Gives us a brief history of religion based on Sir James Frazer's book *The Golden Bough* (1908). This history treats the development of religion in human beings as evolutionary in nature beginning with its early roots in animism and ancestor-worship. To illustrate that aspects of this still exist today, he presents two very interesting and quite contemporary examples of myth-making that illustrate these phenomena. The first example is drawn from Peter Worsley on the "cargo cults" in the Pacific Islands of Melanesia where a series of myths and legends arose surrounding the visits by the Europeans. The arrival of goods by boat was interpreted by the Melanesians as gifts from the gods (whom they understood to live on another island), and they believed these goods which had been destined for themselves were intercepted by the Europeans. The second example deals with the population of Vailala, New Guinea, in 1919, where the aboriginal people decided to stop all productive work and wait for the future arrival of goods from the gods by boat. In this case, the Europeans arrested the "cult" leaders who had advocated the work stoppage.

Even more recently, the "John Frum cult" arose when the residents of Tanna, an island in the nation of Vanuatu, built an airfield, and replicas of an aircraft (out of wood) and a simulated control tower, in the belief that the European, John Frum, would return to their

Ellen L Ramsay
reviews *Can We Be Good
Without God?
Behaviour, Belonging
and the Need to Believe*
by Dr Robert Buckman,
Penguin Books, £14.00.

island, just like the revisitation of Christ. The expected date of arrival was February 15 and these people have held the belief that John Frum would return from 1940 until the present day. Since 1974 there has also been a "Prince Philip cult" which awaits the consort's return. While these may strike us as strange, they are no stranger, Buckman suggests, than waiting for the return of Jesus for 2000 years.

Buckman points out that humans create models of what they wish for and invoke a

transitional object. The evolution of the figure of god from a heavenly, omnipotent, man-shaped giant-in-the-sky to a more abstract and personal motive force or essence may perhaps be compared to the natural evolution of a coping strategy and to the way that we, as individuals, use a transitional object for a time."

He says that humans long to be rescued from death, adversity and persecution, and so hope becomes personified in a fairy-tale, myth, legend or religion as suggested by Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth*.

Myth, like religion, emerges as a coping strategy. In other words, he is arguing that our brains are "hard-wired" to interpret the world in a certain way and it is only over time as our knowledge increases that the myth also changes, diminishes, etc. Our tendency then towards aggression and dividing the world up into "us" and "them" means that religion may become associated with violence, as studies show that 6 per cent of people state they would kill for religion.

Buckman spends considerable energy warn-

'I am not, of course, suggesting that all belief in a god must inevitably and necessarily lead to strife and aggression, but I am stressing the fact that since the beginnings of recorded history that is what has happened'

deity who will reward them. Animism, he points out, survives in astrology today.

Buckman then goes on to develop one of his most important theses: that religion arises out of the neurology of the brain and may be seen as instinctual rather than conscious. Here the science that Buckman relies on is hypothetical because it is still in its early stage of development. He cites Dr Michael Persinger's research into the role of the right temporal lobe and its governance of perception of reality and self. When stimulated, the right temporal lobe produces feelings of peace, of deep understanding, and presence of another being amongst a range of other sensations. He explains that people with a particularly sensitive right temporal lobe (eg epileptics) will feel these more acutely than others.

Buckman related this right temporal lobe activity to the maturation process in a human whereby the baby transfers his love object from the parent onto the teddy bear or security blanket and then onto a god. He says: "The evolving role of religion in society (from the monolithic state of everyone-believing-the-same-thing-ism to the current range of widely varied and highly personal belief systems) may be analogous to that changing function of the

ing about the intertwining of war with religion.

Here Buckman turns to the second part of his study, the portion on behaving, in which he reserves his critique of theism. He is quite strident in his critique of belief which is acted on:-

"I am not, of course, suggesting that all belief in a god must inevitably and necessarily lead to strife and aggression, but I am stressing the fact that since the beginnings of recorded history that is what has happened." Here he suggests that ideologies like religions result from the herd instinct separating out the "them" from the "us". Pheromones (chemicals secreted in sweat) act as what he calls "herd glue". This is different from making a conscious choice to join in applause, join the army, or to fight in a war. This is a product of our biology, he says. Drawing on Desmond Morris' *The Human Zoo*, Buckman stresses the role of human overpopulation in triggering "turf wars" between humans. The herd instinct, he suggests, may cause people to distinguish themselves by race, culture, religion or politics. Religion may then act as a dangerous trigger, especially to those who would kill for their beliefs.

Chapter 7 of the volume is a presentation of ten humanistic principles of belief as published

by the Humanist Association of Canada in 1999. In it he makes the distinction between consequences and expectations:-

"The difference is that under the Golden Rule you project your own expectations onto the other person. If, on the other hand, you are guided by the principle of consideration of consequences, then you will try to anticipate the resulting effect on the other person (ignoring, if need be, the way you would respond if it were you)."

He then returns to his earlier point by posing the question whether the world would be a better place if we believed what we liked but "behaved as though there was no deity and no universal or heavenly plan".

Humans would have to sort out their own plans and act as if to improve the world.

The book concludes with an exposition on human psychology and how we might behave if we truly believed there was no god. He argues against any absolute answer to the human condition and only suggests that the meaning of life lies in what you bring to it. We only have the choice of how we react to what life throws at us, not more. This is an observation derived from Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1984).

At this point I wish to turn to some of the problems I had with the book as suggestions for improvement rather than criticism. Robert Buckman says he assumes most people, in answering the book's title, would answer "No". He cites the Canadian Census at one point where most people responded that they

believed in a deity. Herein lies a problem, because he spends so much time explaining the psychology of belief that he fails to make a strong enough case for rationalism in the last three chapters. He has in fact not argued a critique of religious belief except on the grounds that it may (or may not) affect "behaviour" in a detrimental way. Freethinkers might wish for a more strenuous criticism of religious belief, and some, of "belief" itself. He suggests instead: "Whether you believe in god or not, however, it does seem that the act of believing is in itself necessary to humans. The activity of believing (of holding some consistent attitudes towards the world extending beyond available facts) is an essential feature of human life."

The other major problem with the book for me lies in his explanation of the "evolutionary" nature of religious thought. A discussion of the biological tendencies for religion seem to me to be conjectural at this time and risks the charge of biological reductionism despite his attempts to avoid it.

The role of religion as a conscious precept handed down from one generation to another in the form of storytelling and in more coercive forms is not argued here. Buckman spends so much time being "reasonable" to religious readers in this volume that the concluding chapters seem misplaced. The result is that chapters seven and eight come across rather like a 12-step program towards recovery, only his 12 steps are now the Ten Core Beliefs of Humanists as espoused by the Humanist

Association of Canada (1999). More weighty discussion of a humanist outlook, coupled with an expansion of the chapters on the problems of belief, would improve the book.

A final problem with the book for this reader is its reliance on interesting but dated sources. The reliance on neo-Malthusian theory might strike some rationalist readers as somewhat problematic without a footnote as to which school of Malthus he is adhering. In the 19th century there were certainly adherents of Malthus within the freethought movement (as there are today); most notably Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh. But these adherents used the theory to promote progressive uses of science such as the promotion of women's rights through the advocacy of birth control. (See Anne Taylor's biography, *Annie Besant*, 1992, p122) This cannot be said of all followers of Malthus, however, for there are those who used the theory in conservative ways to argue against charity and social services for the poor.

Despite these criticisms, this book is eminently readable and provides some interesting and challenging ideas. It is certain to remain etched on the reader's mind for some time. Robert Buckman's deft handling of the English language and his welcome wit make this an enjoyable book and one which most freethinkers would feel pleased to grace their bookshelves. No doubt we may look forward to further volumes by the author.

points of view

The Jesus debate continues

STEUART Campbell (letters, *Freethinker*, January) ignores the most compelling of G A Wells' arguments against the existence of Jesus, namely that the early letters of St Paul make no mention of any events in Jesus' life. If the gospels are to be believed, it really is quite incredible that these letters, dated around 20 to 30 years after the supposed death of Jesus and around 10 to 20 years before the first gospel, do not use examples from Jesus' life (and death) to reinforce their author's aim of promoting a new religion around the image of a crucified/resurrected messiah. Paul's vision does not extend beyond a supernatural messiah based on Old Testament prophecies. Can anyone seriously believe that anyone with the reforming zeal of Paul would miss the opportunity to use the teaching and the rumoured miracles of a man (superman) who was central

to his message and who had been alive during living memory? By implication, Campbell casts doubt on the value of Wells's work because Wells "... is not a historian". Serious historical scholars would value a work for the way it uses sources and evidence to provide convincing and consistent conclusions, not dismiss it for the petty reason that the author cannot wave the correct certificates. Historical scholarship seeks to progress by way of argument based on the sources and how they are interpreted; anyone who has read Wells will know how meticulous he is in honouring this aim.

If Campbell really does object to non-historians dabbling in his discipline, he should direct his attention to those theologians who for almost 2000 years have heaped layer upon layer of unsubstantiated conjecture onto the Jesus myth.

Personally, I thank Wells for painstakingly chiselling away at these layers and pointing the

way towards a rational appraisal of early Christian writing.

GEOFF CHAMBERS
Derby

I AM currently working on a book manuscript in Norwegian in which I discuss the question of the existence of Jesus and what we can know about him. In the manuscript I go into the details of the views of E P Sanders, G A Wells, the Swede Alvar Ellegard, the Norwegian Jacob Jervell, the German Gerd Lüdemann, and many other scholars.

Having studied all this material I am convinced that Jesus was a man who lived in Palestine from about BCE 7-5 to about 30-33 CE. He was probably executed by the Roman authorities at that time, at the instigation of some leading Jews. Jesus himself was a Jew and did not want to establish any new religion, but he wanted to reform

Judaism. The available evidence indicates that Jesus was a religious leader with some followers. It is not known how many followers he had during his life-time. Jesus was no political leader. He probably did not have much education and he probably was no great thinker. He made a deep impression on some people who met him, but others were negative to him. Most people in Palestine who lived at that time did not hear about him during his life-time.

I do not think it serves the purposes of scholarship or popular discussion to continue to deny the existence of the Jesus of the gospels. Nor does it serve the cause of atheism. Jesus was a historical person surrounded by an enormous cloud of myths which have been spread mostly by people who call themselves "Christians".

FINNGEIR HIORTH
Norway

BEFORE the church establishment proclaims that even contributors to the *Freethinker* believe in Jesus Christ, let's be clear whom we are talking about.

As one of the earlier contributors to the debate, I was talking about the fiction of Jesus of the Christian Bible, not the speculative "Jesus, the failed leader of a revolt against Rome", or "Jesus the messianic political agitator". It's possible that there were such characters and they were named Joshua but that's speculation and does not alter the contention that the Jesus of the Bible, upon which a multi-dollar industry and widespread spiritual oppression has been built, is a myth.

Steuart Campbell says that historians are overwhelmingly sure that Jesus (the Christ) did exist. Is that any more convincing than the fact that some noted astronomers have believed in the existence of God? Is that evidence? When reason is abandoned, there is no limit to what man may believe.

Hundreds of years after the alleged existence of Jesus, the stories of King Arthur, William Tell and Robin Hood were woven. It could be argued that Robin Hood was more laudable than Jesus. He actively helped the poor. Jesus told them the lie, so convenient to their oppressors, that despite their suffering on Earth they would enjoy the Kingdom of Heaven, wherever that is, in an afterlife.

A moment's thought about the way in which the stories of these other heroes, much nearer to home, were created gives the clue to the development of the Jesus legend.

Unlike Mohammed, who didn't create the Koran or Islam, which were produced by clerics some 200 years before the prophet existed, Jesus the Christ was created by the clerics who wrote the Bible and he does not

appear in contemporaneous historical records, despite later attempts to create an historical context to the myth.

STEWART VALDAR
London

ROBERT Morrell, in his article in the November 2000 *Freethinker*, argues that Paul saw Jesus as divine and had no interest in the earthly Jesus. Paul states Jesus was crucified. Crucifixion was so abhorrent to Jews and gentiles, the Church would not have invented it.

To G A Wells, Paul, not Jesus, instituted the Eucharist, and he believes that 1 Corinthians 11 v 23-26, recounting the Last Supper, refers to an event long ago. Galatians 1 v 17 shows Paul knew Christianity was new.

To Morrell, Jesus as a Jew would have been appalled at drinking blood. Moreover, Morrell points out, in Acts 15 v 20-29 gentile followers are told not to drink blood – a repudiation of Christian teaching on the Eucharist.

Yet I do not believe Jesus' blood is included in the prohibition. Paul as a Jew would not have said Jesus required the drinking of his blood unless he had done so.

Wells and Morrell believe Paul received the Eucharist from what he believed to be the risen Lord.

In 1 Corinthians v 23, Paul writes "for I received from the Lord what I also handed to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took a loaf of bread". Paul clearly distinguishes between the heavenly Lord of Paul's revelation and the historical Lord Jesus rooted in history shown by "on the night he was betrayed", which is Judas' betrayal.

The Church would not have invented that Jesus chose a disciple who betrayed him. It could be added that Jesus designating the wine as his blood and bread as his body has multiple attestation (cf. Mk 14 v 17-25, Luke 22 v 14-38 and Matthew 26 v 20-2), thus resting on old tradition.

As well as the Last Supper, Paul quotes the historical Jesus on divorce and remarriage, 1 Corinthians v 11-23, cf. Mark 14 v 22-25. "The labourer deserves his wages" (1 Corinthians 9 v 14, cf. Matthew 10 v 10). "Eat what is set before you" (1 Corinthians 10 v 27, cf. 17 Luke 10 v 7). "Tribute to whom tribute is due" (Romans 13 v 7, cf. Mark 12 v 13-17). "Thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5 v 2-5, Luke 12 v 39-40). Despite his obsession with the risen and exalted Lord, Paul knew of the historical Jesus.

I feel that Robert W Morrell and professor G A Wells are too dismissive of Josephus. Josephus' *Antiquities* 18-63-64 was not quoted until the 4th Century by Eusebius, argues Morrell. In reply, I state the basic facts of Jesus' life and death were not disputed, so the Church fathers did not need to quote Josephus

(certainly, calling Jesus the Messiah and speaking of the resurrection, are Christian interpolations).

An entire Christian interpolation would have been placed beside the section on John the Baptist. Josephus puts more responsibility for Jesus' death on the Romans than the Jewish leaders (in my opinion rightly so). Christians blamed the Jews and virtually exonerated Pilate. Most of the passage is not typically Christian:

1. A "wise man" for Jesus – Christians would say more than that.

2. "For he was one who wrought surprising feats" – non-Christians could say that.

3. "He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks" – an observation.

4. "Those who had in the first place come to love him" is characteristic of Josephus' style.

5. He speaks of "the tribes of Christians". "Tribe" was not a Christian expression (see Edward M Yamauchi in *Jesus Under Fire*, Paternoster Press, edited by Michael J Wilkins and J P Moreland).

As the distinguished Jewish scholars Winter and Verines argue, the passage does in part derive from Josephus. In *Antiquities* 20-9.1, Josephus speaks of Herod executing James, "brother of Jesus". Christians spoke of "brother of the Lord" (Galatians 1 v 19).

A Christian interpolator would have made the passage of Jesus and James more praiseworthy and not reported in a neutral way

The Gospels record embarrassing incidents about Jesus. John the Baptist baptised people so their sins were forgiven, yet Jesus is baptised by John (Mark 1 v 9-11).

In Mark 6 v 5 we see Jesus could not always do miracles. In the meeting with the rich young ruler (Mark 10 v 17-31), Jesus denies he is good.

ANDREW HARVEY
Carlisle

STEUART Campbell (*Freethinker*, January) misrepresents both the scholarly consensus on Josephus' Testimonium, the longer of two references to Jesus in *Antiquities of the Jews*, and G A Wells's treatment of the shorter reference. Of the *Testimonium*, Campbell says: "Most historians accept that the passage may have been tampered with by Christians but that its origin is Josephan." In an exhaustive study of the literature on the *Testimonium*, Feldman and Hata concluded that "the overwhelming majority [of studies] question its authenticity in whole or in part" (*Josephus, the Bible, and History*, 1989). Many question it in its entirety.

More seriously, Campbell says Wells does not challenge the shorter reference, which reads: Ananus II "assembled the Sanhedrin of judges and brought before them the brother of Jesus, him called Christ, whose name was



James, and some others. And when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned."

In fact, Wells has challenged the passage many times, most recently in *The Jesus Myth*. Therein, he devotes four closely reasoned pages to it. He adduces plausible evidence that the passage in an interpolation.

He concludes: "Josephus probably wrote of the death of a Jewish Jerusalem personage called James, and a Christian reader thought he must have meant James the 'brother of the Lord' who, according to Christian tradition, led the Jerusalem Church about the time in question. This reader accordingly noted in the margin: 'James = the brother of Jesus, him called Christ'; and a later copyist took this as belonging to the text and incorporated it. Other interpolations are known to have originated in precisely this way."

Wells also notes that among early Christians "brother" needn't imply blood kin. Fellow Christians were "brothers in Christ."

GARY SLOAN
USA

Race and religion

JOHN Clarke (letters, February) says that racial discrimination and religious discrimination cannot possibly be regarded as the same animal. A man can change his religion, he says, but he can't change his race. That is true, but it is more complicated than that. Take, for instance the vexed question of Jewish identity. There are plenty of secular Jews who have no time for the religion on which their identity is based. But they still regard themselves as Jews. Their race and their religion are utterly inseparable.

Muslims, too, will insist that their religion is their identity. They are Muslims first, they will say, and Arabs or African or Eastern Europeans second. We shouldn't forget, either, that apostasy in Islam is regarded as a capital offence.

Whether we like it or not, a huge percentage of the world identifies itself by its religious beliefs first, and considers its racial identity a secondary factor. Indeed, the inclusion of Sikhs and Jews in the Race Relations Act came about because even though they were identified by their religion, they were regarded as racial groups.

Mr Clarke's opinions may make sense logically, but what has logic got to do with religion?

TERRY SANDERSON
London

Selective scorn

WHY does Barry Duke attack political religious posturing only on the political right?

What about Tony Blair equating Christianity with Socialism; or Clinton's public piety? I shall always treasure the memory of him

attending Church at the height of the Monica frenzy carrying a Bible the size of the London telephone directory. Vice-Presidential candidate Lieberman repeatedly invoked God in his election speeches; not that it did him much good.

Politicians of any party will do anything for votes, so how about examining the flaunted religious credentials of the Labour Party? And, while he's about it, its so-called ethical Foreign Policy.

Incidentally, I think Duke's car-sticker is tasteless. That frivolous and mocking attitude gives atheism a bad name and deters me, and I suspect others, from joining the National Secular Society. I'll bet he wouldn't dare carry a similarly slighting reference to Muhammed!

Duke seems to produce not so much free-thinking as selective scorn.

PAUL ALBRECHT
West Sussex

Science and religion

I VERY much enjoyed Chris Cumo's article chronicling the retreat of religion in the face of scientific development (*Freethinker*, February).

However, the writer makes the common mistake of non-scientists in thinking that science is "the surest path to knowledge" and "the arbiter of truth", etc.

Most scientists would not claim any rights to "the truth". Science simply develops a model of the universe that explains what we observe and can be used to make reliable predictions.

When we observe something that contradicts the model, then the model evolves to accommodate the new observations (eg from Newton to Einstein).

Science is powerful because it works, not because it is necessarily "true".

Religious "truth" is based on a different sort of model that is not supported by observation, experiment, or the need to make reliable predictions. That's why religion only "works" in ways that cannot be tested (or in the sense that it self-propagates abundantly due to its emotional appeal to the human psyche).

One further thought: why is it that the pictures, accompanying "my atheism" articles, often show the writers looking so miserable? They give atheism such a bad image!

IAN QUAYLE
Burwell

A less outspoken FT? No thanks

GEORGINA Coupland (*Freethinker*, January) asks if I am always 100 per cent rational, logical, sensible? I can assure her that I always try to be, given the appropriate context. For instance, when I am writing to a respected

journal of free speech such as the *Freethinker*.

The men who founded the *FT* were harassed and incarcerated for their intolerant, dogmatic and arrogant attacks against cruelty, injustice, superstition and ignorance. When I read of factions that request that the *FT* should be less outspoken, and transform itself into some sort of cosy chat forum, I find nothing to smile about.

JIM CASS
Bishop Auckland

MY copy of this month's *Freethinker* arrived this morning to brighten up a dull day and lift my spirits, as always. I was particularly glad to see criticism of the actions, or rather inaction, of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, whose sole response to the mute appeal of a horrifically tortured little girl was to hold a service of exorcism for her. As you comment, very few people have had the temerity to criticise a religious organisation, although there has been universal condemnation, rightly in my view, of the professionals involved in the case.

I have, however, unfortunately, to correct something in the article by Keith Porteous Wood. In the second column on page 4, he refers to a study conducted by the "University of Carmarthen" in 1995. Living, as I do, in West Wales, I am well aware that there is no such university. The nearest thing will be Trinity College, Carmarthen, a church foundation, as its name suggests, formerly a teacher-training college, now a degree-awarding college and part of the University of Wales.

This may be a small mistake, but I think it is important that we, in the Secular movement, should aim for the greatest accuracy possible for our own credibility.

Keep up the good work.

MAUREEN LOFMARK
Lampeter

Please address your letters (preferably typed) to Barry Duke, *Freethinker* editor, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH. E-mail: editor@freethinker.co.uk or fteditor@aol.com Phone/Fax: 020 8305 9603.

atheist & humanist contacts & events

Bath & Beyond Humanists: Meets at 7.30 pm on the first Monday of every month in Bath. Details from Hugh Thomas on 0117 987175.

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: Information: Ivor Moll, 6 The Brooklands, Wrea Green, Preston PR4 2NQ. 01772 686816.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information: 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove (buses 5 & 5a). Sunday, March 4, 4pm. Marguerite Laporte: *The role of the new spacecraft*.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnley on 0117 904 9490.

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 020 8777 1680.

Cornwall Humanists: Information: B Mercer, "Amber", Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Tel. 01209 890690.

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel 01242 528743. Worcester House, Pittville Circus Road, Cheltenham. Friday, February 23, 8pm. John Sutton: *Immigration and Tolerance*.

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

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, 21 Southdowns Road, Dawlish, EX7 0LB. Tel: 01626 864046.

Ealing Humanists: Information: Derek Hill 0181 422 4956 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group: Information: Carl Pinel, 41 Horsefair Avenue, Chapel-en-le-Frith, SK23 9SQ. Tel: 01298 815575.

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

Essex Humanists: Information: Brian Whitelaw, 66 Linnet Drive, Chelmsford CM2 8AF. Tel: 01245 265664. Monthly meetings, second Sunday, 7.30 pm.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel 01926 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. March 9, Brian Robinson previews the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

Harrow Humanist Society: Information: 020 8863 2977. Monthly meetings, December – June (except January).

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Secretary: Ivan Middleton, 26 Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5QH. Tel. 0131 552 9046. Press and Information Officer: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire. Tel. 01563 526710

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Hennes, 138 Lumley Street, Grangemouth FK3 8BL. Tel. 01324 485152.

Edinburgh Group: Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD. Tel 0131 667 8389.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Niall Power on 0161 2865349. Public meetings second Wednesday of the Month, 7.30pm. Friends' Meeting House, Mount Street, opposite Manchester Town Hall.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. The Swarthmore Institute, Leeds. Tuesday,

March 13, 7.30pm. Mike Granville: *From Religion to Rationalism*.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 2622250/0116 241 4060. Public Meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Programme from above address.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, March 29, 8pm. Joe Mankowitz: *Does Prison Work?*

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

Musical Heathens: Monthly meetings for music and discussion (Coventry and Leamington Spa). Information: Karl Heath. Tel. 02476 673306.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Information: Christine Wood on 0191 2763123. Literary and Philosophical Society, 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle. Thursday, March 15, 7.30pm. Judith Goodship: *Genetics*.

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. Information: Anne Toy on 020 8360 1828.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

Oxford Humanists: Information: Jean Woodman on 01865 760520.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, March 7, 8pm. Mike Cowdrey: *Is There a Place for an Agnostic in the Humanist Movement?* Information: Michael Granville 0114 230 9754 or Bill McIlroy 0114 250 9127.

South Hampshire Humanists: Information: 11 Glenwood Avenue, Southampton, SO16 3PY. Tel: 02380 769120

South Place Ethical Society: Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 020 7242 8037/4. Monthly programme on request.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess. Tel. 01458 274456.

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 020 8642 4577. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, March 14, 7.30pm. Annual General Meeting followed by social.

Ulster Humanist Association: Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264. Meetings second Thursday evening of the month at Queen's Senior Common Room, 1 College Crescent, Belfast.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Alice Munn's House (WRVS), 4 Gravel Hill, Ludlow. Tuesday, March 13, 7.30pm. Dan Bye: *The National Secular Society*.

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

West Kent Secular Humanist Group: Information: Ian Peters on 01892 890485 or Chris Ponsford on 01892 862855. E-mail address: C862855@hotmail.com.

Please send your listings and events notices to Bill McIlroy, 115 South View Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield S7 1DE. Tel: 0114 2509127.