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Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

'The *Freethinker* is an anti-Christian organ, and must therefore be chiefly aggressive.

It will wage relentless war against Superstition in general and Christian Superstition in particular'

– G W Foote, in his introduction to the first issue of the *Freethinker*, May 1881

**YEARS OLD – YET THE
FREETHINKER IS AS
RELEVANT AND
NECESSARY NOW AS THE
DAY IT WAS LAUNCHED
IN MAY, 1881**

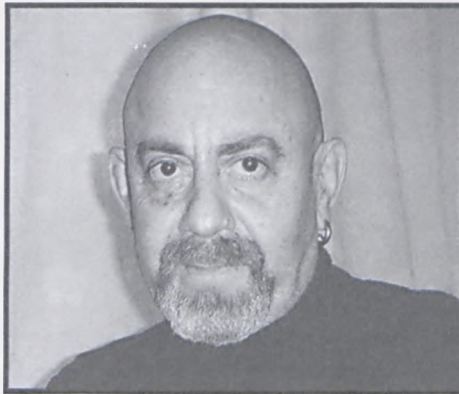
freethinking out loud: barry duke

WE live in a very different world from that inhabited 120 years ago by George William Foote, founder of the *Freethinker*, and editor of the journal until 1915 – the year of his death.

But for all the many changes – technological and social – that have overtaken the world since the launch of the magazine in May, 1881, some things have altered not a jot, and there is still no end in sight to battles Foote and his successors set out to win.

Take, for example, religious propaganda. From the earliest days of the wireless, the *Freethinker* had cause to complain that this new and exciting form of communication failed to reflect all views – and that secular views in particular were clearly being excluded.

In the February 22, 1925, issue of the *Freethinker*, Chapman Cohen, who succeeded Foote and edited the magazine until 1951, wrote: “The BBC explained in a recent issue of its journal how popular its religious services on Sunday are. We have a suspicion that if many complaints had not been made



about them there would not have been occasion for its attempted justification. For our part what has struck us about the sermons sent out by wireless is their unredeemed stupidity ...

“Someone has been writing to the *Manchester Guardian* protesting against the money raised from taxation of wireless licences being used for this broadcasting propaganda. At this the *Church Times* is vastly amused and explains that the BBC tries to suit all tastes in the matter of religion as in all other things. Now that is simply not true. The BBC merely tries to suit all *Christian* tastes ... religion should either be kept out of the wireless or views for and against should be permitted.”

I specifically homed in on the issue of religious broadcasting because of an “Easter Special” article last month in On Digital’s weekly TV guide.

The writer, Lucy Ryan, begins her piece by lamenting the fact that fewer and fewer people in the UK are attending church, then suggests that “television may play an important role in raising religious awareness. *Songs of Praise* and *Highway* still have their place, but more sophisticated offerings have hit prime-time slots. This Easter, the BBC series *Son of God* concludes as LWT’s 12-part heavyweight *The Apostles* begins”.

She then quotes the Church of England’s Broadcast Officer, Jonathan Jennings, whose role is to advise programme-makers and journalists about ecumenical matters in a wider social context, as saying: “It’s easier for the media to process sport and entertainment than it is to process religion. With religion, you are not dealing with black and white. You’re dealing with a world where the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth ... a weekly television schedule claiming to feed the cultural life of Britain but which omits to reflect religion is distorted.”

Ryan then turns to Melvyn Bragg, Controller of Arts and Features at LWT and producer of *The Apostles*.

Bragg, who is said to have spent the last decade “rediscovering” the faith he rejected as a young academic, agrees with Jennings: “Television should cover everything of impor-

tance, and that certainly includes religion. It’s not a niche area but an integral part of the arts.”

An integral part of the arts?

I thought the *Evening Standard*’s television critic, Victor Lewis-Smith, was being gratuitously offensive when, in a recent attack on Bragg, he said the man had taken to “talking out of his arts”.

I’m now beginning to suspect he has a point.

WHILE on the subject of Easter, I’m not sure whether I am delighted or depressed by a survey conducted just before the holiday in London.

Reporters took to the streets in the east and west of the capital and asked 24 people what the significance was of Good Friday and Easter Monday.

Of the dozen surveyed in west London, seven knew what Easter was about, “although sometimes only vaguely”. Only five got the significance of both days right.

The survey of Eastenders revealed a stark generation gap. The seven who knew what Easter represents, with varying degrees of accuracy, were almost entirely over 40. “Worryingly for the Church,” the paper said, “younger people dominated the ‘don’t know’ section.” More depressing still for the Church was the fact that one of the younger respondents who was clued up on the Easter story didn’t believe a word of it.

Simon Maunder, 28, said: “Christianity is a parasitical religion that has adapted a pagan spring festival for its own purposes. I’m a non-believer anyway, so it doesn’t matter to me.”

While it’s heartening to know that Christianity is continuing to decline in the UK, ignorance – even in matters pertaining to religion – is to be deplored, not celebrated, for it is only through knowledge that educated choices can be made, as Simon Maunder so succinctly demonstrated.

FINALLY, my thanks to Paul Stevenson, of Norfolk, who sent this photograph of a sign pinned to a local church. Ironically, it has overtaken the large plaque in the background which declares: “The Millennium is Christ’s 2000th birthday. Worship him here – now.”



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BBC unveils "a more realistic" image of Jesus

JESUS Christ was not the light-skinned, long-haired hippy-type portrayed in countless paintings. Rather, his face was much more likely to have resembled that shown on the right, which was reproduced in newspapers and magazines around the globe.

The face was created for the BBC series *Son of God* from a 2,000 year old skull found in the vicinity of where Jesus is said to have lived (see Colin McCall's *Down to Earth* on page

10). The series culminated at Easter with the reconstructed skull being shown in the final programme, which dealt with Jesus's crucifixion and subsequent "resurrection".

The presenter, Jeremy Bowen – the BBC's former Middle East correspondent – was at pains to explain that the reconstruction was not intended to be the face of Jesus, merely to show how the saviour was most likely to have looked.



Priests said to have raped nuns

By Keith Porteous Wood

THE Vatican has just admitted that it has been made aware over the last seven years of priests in 23 countries having sexually abused nuns. Most of the abuse has been in Africa where the priests were concerned about catching Aids, but, presumably, less concerned about infecting the nuns.

Some nuns have submitted sexually to priests in order to obtain preferment. Nuns who have become pregnant have had to leave their congregations while the priests responsible have not. Some priests have encouraged nuns to have abortions as a result of which at least one nun has died. The priest responsible for her pregnancy officiated at the requiem mass.

This information was reported in the *Independent* which carried a swingeing editorial headed: "A scandal too typical of this reactionary church".

The editorial asked "What is it with the Catholic clergy and sex? After all those paedophile priests we have a new scandal... This latest shameful phenomenon ... Catholicism's inherent insistence on the inferior position of women in society and the church. It also speaks of how authority is exercised by a hierarchy which ... issued no apology, only a curt dismissal."

This dismissal from the Pope's official spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls read, in part: "This problem is known and involves a restricted geographical area. Certain negative situations must not overshadow the often heroic faith of the overwhelming majority of religious nuns and priests."

An anniversary message from Denis Cobell, President of the National Secular Society

The NSS, of which I am President, is 135 years old this year, some 15 years a senior sibling to the *Freethinker*!

Having contributed to the *Freethinker* for a third of its existence – over 40 years – I thought now was a good time to reflect on how far it has come. In earlier days it was a weekly, and almost every front page was written by the then President of the NSS, F A Ridley, whom I got to know quite well.

Many of the "acid drops" of those days have in many ways changed their flavour. Forty years ago Sunday was still a day observed and encumbered with various laws; now, few of these are left and Sunday has become so much like any other day.

Abortion has been legalised; practising gays are no longer prosecuted. In the early 1960s, London Transport was prohibited from advertising family planning; contraception is now freely available, even though less effectively used by our teenagers than elsewhere in Europe.

The first time I wrote in the *Freethinker* my voice was raised against capital punishment, then still a retributive punishment.

Nowadays our views in this journal, and through the National Secular Society, are regularly heard on radio and in the broadsheet papers: this was almost unknown forty years ago. The Church still has considerable privilege, and what would have been called "church schools" in those days have increased in numbers. Hypocritically, parents send their children to such schools because they provide a better education: nothing to do with faith. But fewer and fewer folk attend church, and a law compelling church attendance on Christmas Day was apparently rescinded in the 1960s.

Apart from a few fundamentalists, the churches mean little to most people; even the use of vicars for funerals and weddings is in decline and the number of secular humanist ceremonies grows. Forty years ago the Church of England was still referred to as the Tory Party at prayer; this hardly rings true now. Many churches, priests, and their congregations, are little more than a replacement for the shortcomings of the "welfare state".

Despite our present Government's cabinet containing more professing Christians than many previous ones, their attitude to those in need is harsh. Strangely, last year I was invited by a Muslim, to speak, along with Christians, from a pulpit in the West London Synagogue, in defence of asylum seekers. Could those sellers of the *Freethinker* and speakers at nearby Marble Arch have anticipated this 40 years ago?

There is still a common law of blasphemy, though its use is seemingly thought unlikely – the Campaign Against Blasphemy Law has disbanded. So, while there are battles against superstition and unreason to be won, let us rejoice over those we *have* won in the past 120 years. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury declared Britain "a society of atheists" last year.

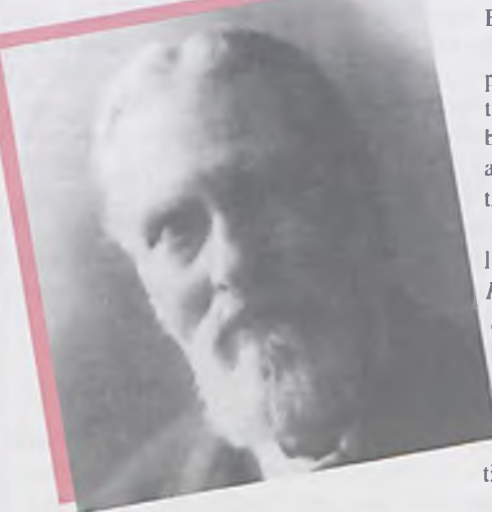
And in celebrating, readers should remind themselves of how improved their lot is today, when it is no longer unusual to hear someone describe themselves as an atheist.

Looking back over the 120-year

The saying "Let thought be free!" is most appropriate for the *Freethinker*. It is a journal in which thought should roam in all directions, in which there should be no barriers to thought on any subject, in which thought can be surprising and unexpected.

Now that we look back on 120 years of the *Freethinker*, we can see that it has been all these things, and even if there are themes and topics which come up again and again, that is because the pernicious power of religion is enduring and the folly of religious dogma is unending.

George William Foote, the first editor of the *Freethinker*, opened the first issue with strong words: "The *Freethinker* is an anti-Christian organ, and must therefore be chiefly aggressive. It will wage relentless war against Superstition in general, and against



George William Foote, who launched the *Freethinker* in May 1881

Christian Superstition in particular."

One hundred and twenty years on, those sterling words hold good – except we would perhaps now see the need for launching forth more strongly against non-Christian superstitions.

Foote, of course, soon introduced his notorious cartoons and ended up in the dock on charges of blasphemy and in prison on conviction for blasphemy. I have told the story more fully — in the history of the first century of the *Freethinker*. (*Vision and Realism: a hundred years of the Freethinker*).

Blasphemy was to remain an issue, although it went quiet for many decades. In 1977 the blasphemy case against the homosexual journal *Gay News* brought as a private prosecution

within the freethought movement, Barry Duke, a journalist who had contributed to the *Freethinker* for many years, became acting editor and was soon appointed to the position

Jim Herrick, a former editor of the *Freethinker* and current editor of *New Humanist*, writes on The *Freethinker*'s 120th anniversary

by the Christian campaigner Mary Whitehouse led to the conviction of the editor Denis Lemon. Fortunately, unlike G W Foote, his prison sentence was suspended. Also more recently there have been accusations of blasphemy from Muslims world wide against Salman Rushdie and against Taslima Nasrin in Bangla Desh.

The consequence in Britain may be a law to prevent discrimination against religion. But at the heart of blasphemy is the right not to insult but to challenge directly, analytically and, if appropriate, humorously and imaginatively, the claims of religion.

The *Freethinker* has had a remarkable longevity, with no break: even when the *Freethinker* offices were bombed during the Second World War an emergency issue was ready for use. The *Freethinker*'s endurance is due to a remarkable succession of editors. G W Foote and Chapman Cohen covered the 70-year period 1881 to 1951. Such dedication in radical journalism must be rare.

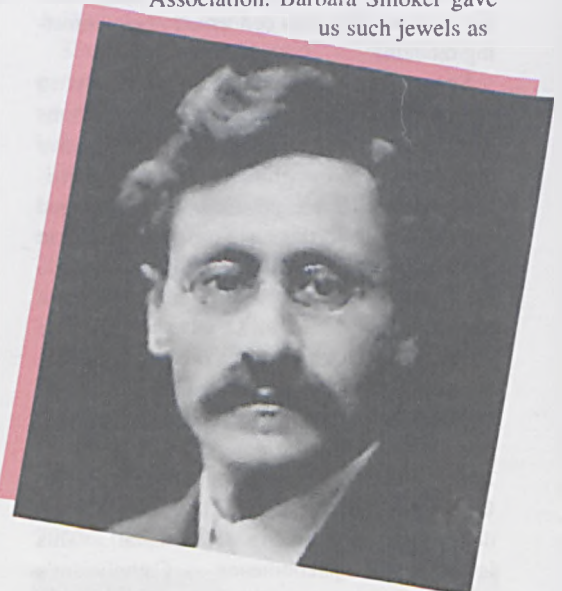
During the last 20 years a number of editors emerged who have demonstrated what a fund of enthusiasm and astuteness remains among freethinkers today. Bill McIlroy took over in 1981. It was his third stint and he continued until 1992. Bill's very wide range of interests were regularly demonstrated – as was his ability to call upon a galaxy of contributors. Above all, he was a master of the witty headline.

Bill McIlroy was succeeded by Peter Brearey, a journalist who had read the *Freethinker* since he was a youth and had always had the ambition of editing the journal. He brought all his journalistic skills to the paper, changing its format somewhat, but continuing it as an organ of forceful challenge and with a range of impressive writers. Sadly, his premature death in 1998 left a gaping hole. But once again to demonstrate what talent lies

of editor.

If we cannot thank Providence for such a provision of editors, we must thank the enthusiasm and dedication of freethought supporters.

Two writers contributing regularly during these years have been Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society for much of that time, and the late Nicolas Walter, the Managing Director of the Rationalist Press Association. Barbara Smoker gave us such jewels as



Chapman Cohen, who edited the *Freethinker* from 1915 to 1951

"Eggs Are Not People", sent to all Members of the House of Commons, and the criticism of Mother Teresa as "a sacred cow". Nicolas Walter, sometimes under a pseudonym, provided historical and legal weight, and was never slow to correct errors.

Among the themes recurring in the last twenty years are criticism of sects and cults

ear history of the Freethinker

The Freethinker 1881-1981



Pictured at the Freethinker's centenary party are, from left, Jim Herrick, Barry Duke, Barbara Smoker, the late Brian Parry, and Bill McIlroy

and growing criticism of Islam, especially state support for Muslim schools. Frequently covered are issues of freedom of speech, of sexual freedom, Sunday trading, ritual slaughter, the lack of freethought in the media, the inequity of

charity law, euthanasia, disestablishment and Creationism.

Margaret Thatcher was not a favourite *Freethinker* figure, although she was probably less pious than the current Prime Minister. She more likely saw religion as something to be used politically. She wanted a triumphant victory service after the Falklands war (of which the *Freethinker* was one of the very few journals to be critical) and appointed conserv-

ative Bishops.

Well, there is a wealth of material in the last 20 years and I commend to you many hours spent perusing the bound volumes.

As it gets older, the *Freethinker* does not get longer in the tooth. On the contrary, it seems if anything to get more lively. So may it long continue.



The late Denis Lemon, editor of *Gay News*, who was prosecuted for blasphemous libel in 1977, was the guest speaker at the National Secular Annual Dinner in London in 1978

VISION and REALISM

a hundred years of
The Freethinker

JIM HERRICK
foreword: Barbara Wootton

Vision & Realism, Jim Herrick's definitive history of the *Freethinker* which is available from G W Foote & Co, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH. Price: £5 inclusive of postage and packing

THE FREETHINKER

REGISTERED FOR [REDACTED] EDITED BY G. W. FOOTE. [FRANKLINIAN ASSOCIATION]

Vol. I.—No. 1.] MAY, 1861. [PRICE ONE PENNY.]

TO OUR READERS.

We will not bore you with a long introductory address, containing a catalogue of promises that may never be kept. The *Freethinker* is an anti-Christian organ, and must therefore be chiefly aggressive. It will wage relentless war against Superstition in general, and against Christian Superstition in particular. It will do its best to employ the resources of Science, Scholarship, Philosophy and Ethics against the claims of the Bible as a Divine Revelation; and it will not scruple to employ for the same purpose any weapons of ridicule or sarcasm that may be borrowed from the armoury of Common Sense. During the summer months special attention will be given to the out-door advocacy of Freethought. Our first number will give a fair idea of the style in which the paper will be conducted.

Any competent Christian will be allowed reasonable space to express his views, and if fuller communication is desired, he may apply to the Editor.

Shaking off all Theological prejudices, we turn to nature as expounded by Science; to human society in its necessary elements and workings. From these we draw all principles, freely availing ourselves of all that the workers and Thinkers have secured and exhibited for use of man. Whatever there is in human life which experience shows to be good and useful, that we adopt, shall strive to elaborate and illustrate it, to render it better known, and more useful still. Whatever we may evolve from Freethought, from present or future materials and claims which may be of use to man, that also we shall recommend as we shall all of the same description found and exhibited by others.

MR. BRADLAUGH'S ADVISERS.

ADVICE can always be had for the asking, and frequently.

Part of the front page of issue 1 of the *Freethinker*

christianity's outrageous core doctrines

CHRISTIANITY is often thought of as a power for good, even though some of its core doctrines, when critically examined, are found to be outrageous.

The most atrocious of these is the doctrine of eternal Hell (played down somewhat in recent times, probably due to humanistic influences). It is *such* a wicked idea, it makes a normally humane person recoil in horror.

To my personal knowledge, some children's lives have been blighted with terror because of it, and some adults (including many priests and nuns, also Bible-toting evangelical Protestants and so on) have felt justified in imposing severe punishments on children in their care, to keep them on the "straight and narrow" – deemed to be more important than their happiness and well-being. Morality underpinned by this doctrine is *totally* distorted.

Another utterly unreasonable idea is the doctrine of Original Sin, which lays upon humanity the *inherited* guilt of Adam and Eve's disobedience, even though, by Biblical account, it was God himself who set up the whole situation, then allowed the Devil to tempt Eve and, through her, Adam. Furthermore, there is no good reason to rate disobedience as necessarily against morality; according to circumstances, it could be a heroic protest on behalf of humanity, or, on the other hand, a foolhardy refusal to co-operate in a reasonable enterprise.

In any case, it is obviously unjust to blame people for something that happened centuries before they were born; yet it is a central feature of traditional Christianity. Indeed, until recently, the Jews were collectively held responsible for the part played by their *ancestors* in bringing about the crucifixion – even though the crucifixion was, according to the scriptures, the key event in God's "Plan of Salvation".

Incidentally, although the apple story seems to cast a shadow over human curiosity about sex, in another part of Genesis the newly-created man and woman are told to "be fruitful and multiply". How were they supposed to do *that*!?

Then there is the outrageous doctrine of Predestination, by which a person is said to be predestined either to eternal damnation or to eternal bliss. This is not a doctrine accepted by every Christian denomination, but the commonly held idea of God's foreknowledge supports it. It is, of course, a grotesquely unjust doctrine the ultimate fate of the soul being unavoidable; not a shred of choice is involved. The god who is revealed by this set of ideas is an absolute demon – cruel and sadistic toward some, endlessly indulgent

By Verna Metcalfe

toward others, according to his pre-ordained plan.

The so-called "Atonement Theory" is full of meaningless phrases. It derives from the ancient custom of sacrificing a lamb "without blemish" as an act of propitiation for sin; Jesus being considered the universal sacrificial lamb: "The Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the World". "Without the shedding of blood," we are told, "there is no Redemption". What can this possibly mean? How can something called "sin" be abstracted from people's thoughts and behaviour and become a thing, which can then be scrubbed out? And what difference can the shedding of blood make, except to appease a cruel and unreasonable God, strangely described as "perfect"?

The idea that the Creator is perfect while his human creation is deeply flawed is

intrinsicly contradictory. Furthermore, as a universal creator, he would necessarily be responsible for venomous snakes, tapeworms, river blindness, malaria, floods, tornadoes - in fact, everything that torments highly sentient beings (human and animal). One can hardly call such creative inventiveness "perfect". The scientific evolutionary explanation, painstakingly investigated and debated, is so much more convincing!

Finally, there is the doctrine that the Bible is the Word of God, despite the God-approved cruelties reported in its pages - a doctrine that has caused endless grief, by such texts as "Spare the rod and spoil the child" and "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live". Then there is the Roman Catholic doctrine that under certain conditions the pronouncements of the Pope are infallible – hence the opposition of that Church to sensible fertility control, causing much suffering and death, especially in the Third World.

A theatrical feast for atheists

AUDIENCES of thousands hung on to his every word. Presidents pleaded for his support.

Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899) started his career as a lawyer and politician, but it rapidly became clear that his skill at communicating his radical ideas would take him still further.

In days when newspapers were the only means of mass communication, Ingersoll travelled around the United States to give speeches, which attracted vast crowds. His fame rapidly grew and there were riots as people struggled to gain entry to the theatres and opera houses where he spoke. Some of the greatest of his contemporaries sang his praises, admired his oratory and embraced his philosophy. His popularity and skill at public speaking were such that presidents and presidential candidates competed for his services as a speech writer. His influence among the public was so great that politicians pleaded for his support.

Ingersoll was an atheist, and his savage attacks on the churches and religion upset many people. But others flocked by the thousands to hear "the great heathen" perform another of his witty and well-informed demolition jobs on a religious establishment that had grown too powerful for their liking.

Now, in Derek Lennard's hilarious and informative new dramatisation, *The Time To be Happy*, Ingersoll is brought to life once more. Using the great man's own words this entertaining exploration of Ingersoll's optimistic philosophy is to be part of the Brighton Festival. His wit, wisdom and courage will all be featured in this entertaining new play which will be performed at The Sanctuary Café, 51-55 Brunswick Street East, Hove, on Friday and Saturday, May 18 and 19 at 7.30pm. Tickets are obtainable from The Dome Box Office, 29 New Road, Brighton BN1 1UG (Mon-Sat 10-5.30pm and until 7pm from 5th May). Tel: 01273 709709. Fax: 01273 261543. email: tickets@brighton-dome.org.uk

God Only Knows is the title of another new play – a tale of one man's atheism woven into a plot of a Vatican cover up of a document revealing JC's resurrection to have been an organised stunt. The *Daily Telegraph* critic described Hugh Whitmore's play as a "theological thriller", noting mischievously "God knows, the West End usually shirks anything resembling serious debate... so ... [it] will be greeted by some as blessed relief." Derek Jacobi's portrayal of the atheist is described as "intense and intelligent".

We are convinced many members would enjoy this play, which after a nationwide tour, is now being performed at the Vaudeville, in London's Strand.

Credit card bookings available from 020 7836 9987 (without fee). Wednesday and Saturday matinees available at special rates for senior citizens.

Special rates also available from half an hour before the performance for "students, senior citizens, and the unemployed".

"COME quick Hugh," hissed my niece one day a couple of years ago. "He's lying on his back with his eyes open – he doesn't often do that." I followed the proud four-year-old into the living room ready to witness her gerbil performing this somewhat out-of-character trick.

I reported back the sad news to niece's mother in the kitchen: "It's dead".

"You don't know anything about gerbils," she accused.

"I know a dead one when I see one," I replied.

After having the situation explained to her, and going through the full ceremonial state funeral – humanist of course – in the back garden, death became the major subject of the week for niece.

"I know five dogs, and three of them are dead," she said on the way to playgroup. At the weekend she brightly informed her mum from the back seat of the car: "You'll be dead one day". After a pause she enquired: "Where are you going to be buried?".

Burial seemed to be a particularly fascinating aspect of it all. "Don't you get earth in your eyes?" she wanted to know later.

Such worries were partially allayed when mum told her that people don't usually die until they are very very old.

"What, like 30?" she asked.

Handled right, keeping pets is a good way of helping children learn about the facts of life and the facts of death.

Failing to break the news about death can lead to some peculiar effects. In *Killing for Company*, Brian Masters' fascinating book about Dennis Nilsen, an early episode about the death of the murderer's beloved grandfather is related.

"Do you want to see your grandad?" he and his siblings were asked.

"They were then carried one by one into the small room where they had been born, lifted up in their pyjamas and held to peer into the open coffin ... Mrs. Nilsen said that he was just asleep. She was afraid to tell the truth lest it be too shocking for the children to contemplate. As it turned out, the shock of not knowing was far greater." (*Killing for Company*, by Brian Masters, published by Coronet Books, chapter 2.)

This is an extreme case of course, and it would be a gross oversimplification to suggest that this memory was the direct cause of Nilsen boiling up people's heads on his kitchen stove years later and stuffing their dismembered bodies down his drains, but taken alongside other oddities in Nilsen's background, the episode is shown in the book to be at least not totally irrelevant.

It's interesting how often words like "not dead, just sleeping" appear on the stones in any

graveyard. How much more tempting it must have been to take this line in earlier times – or even now in countries less affluent than the UK – when infant mortality was so high that it was commonplace for families to keep a child-sized coffin permanently ready under the kitchen table.

Denial-based fairy tales of the dear departed having merely gone to a better place may well

"Birth, and copulation, and death.

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks" once wrote T S Eliot. The mental virus of religion persists by telling lies

about all three, says

HUGH THOMAS

have an appeal in terms of helping the bereaved cope with their grief, and with being reminded of their own mortality. Yet in the long term, the seemingly kind untruth, if persisting into adulthood with the aid of suitably tenacious social reinforcement, could have untold knock-on effects. As adults they may firmly believe that this world is merely a brief and unimportant preliminary stage to be endured before reaching the true eternal life to be achieved after death.

You might want to make out a case that such delusionals ought to have their belts and bootlaces removed and any sharp objects kept well out of their reach. In fact just such born-again Christians have filled the post of President of the United States of America in several recent administrations. That's the man with his thumb on the nuclear button. Far be it from me, though, to liken George W Bush to Dennis Nilsen.

But is the idea of death really so impossible to come to grips with for modern humankind? If you regard life as rather like a party, then would you enjoy a party more if you knew it had to go on all night and all the next day and on and on and on? Sounds like hell to me. I've found that most people at least claim to view the prospect of living forever with some horror. And as someone once said, the worst thing about death is that you're so bloody stiff the next morning.

If we're never told that Santa Claus exists, we're never disappointed or confused by the eventual realisation that he isn't real.

Just as myths about living forever are one stock-in-trade of religion, at the copulation end

of the spectrum it fosters another crop of untruths. I refer of course to the other big lie that props up the decaying edifice of religion, the myth of creation.

Recently a Christian with whom I work gave me a leaflet. It referred on the first page to God as being the one who made us. As I pointed out to my colleague, this was blatantly untrue. "I wasn't made by God," I told him. "I was created by my father and mother, and I can even tell you how, if you feel ready for the information."

More recently than the gerbil business, I've been called into service on this very front. Niece had matured enough to start asking awkward questions about what sex was. I was delegated the task of giving her a quick run down – thus saving her mum the trouble of doing so – on the grounds that I was "good at that sort of thing".

I approached this with some trepidation, recalling the occasion when as a child I had told my little brother about how babies were made. For several months he just wouldn't believe me. I quite understood his scepticism too; I mean really, on the face of it the whole thing's really rather preposterous.

Anyway, it turned out to be somewhat easier with my niece. "Well ... " I said with a deep breath, "you know how men and women are different in one place?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Well," I said, "sex is to do with that."

Before I could go on she stopped me and said: "You don't mean they ... PUT THEM TOGETHER?" Yes, I was forced to admit, as far as I'd been able to ascertain, this was substantially the case. "Ugh how DEEGUSTING," she said, and did a mock faint on the floor.

"My Mummy has to take pills to stop her having babies," I subsequently heard her chattily telling a little friend who was visiting.

How much better it is to tell the truth, rather than come out with a lot of nonsense about storks and gooseberry bushes that has to be unlearned later. How many young women have become pregnant due to lack of knowledge about sex and contraception?

It is said that the Victorian critic John Ruskin was so shocked by his first sight of his bride's pubic hair on their wedding night that he was unable to consummate the marriage, and never did.

We humans are big boys and girls now. We don't need to be told all these religious lies. Maybe we never did. Anyway, let's stop, right now. Give us the truth, and set us free.

Sorry God, you are the weakest link. Goodbye.

The wheels are coming off Bush's 'faith-based'

George W Bush's Big Idea is to subsidise religious groups with taxpayers' money to deliver social services. And to this end he has established a Faith-Based Office in the White House headed by Catholic John J Delulio Jr.

The idea is to give public money to church groups and others with a religious affiliation for such purposes as drug rehabilitation, job training for the unemployed, nurseries and after-school programmes and literacy classes.

But it soon became clear that this was by no means all that the American taxpayer might be asked to subsidise. Within months of the start of the new Republican administration, Delulio suggested that public money should also be channelled into the rehabilitation of churches and other places of worship used to provide social services.

Dilulio made his announcement on April 1, in a little-publicised talk in Philadelphia to a group known as "Partners for Sacred Places". Lamenting the dilapidated condition of many inner-city churches, he suggested that public funds be used to refurbish these and other religious establishments, telling his audience that the taxpayer was "behind the

curve in thinking of our older religious properties as civic assets."

Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists, was quick to respond: "First, Dilulio and President Bush want to tax us in order to operate faith-based social services, and now they want us to ante-up money for church repair and other maintenance costs. If this isn't the public funding of organised religion, I don't know what is."

Ms Johnson added that Dilulio was using a "wedge" strategy to dismantle the wall of separation between church and state.

"They keep telling us that the 'faith-based initiative' isn't about promoting religion or violating the constitution, but then they want Americans to pay for social services that involve prayer and worship, and they want money to fix up churches and temples."

Ron Barrier, Communications Director for American Atheists, said Dilulio's statement demonstrated how far the Bush administration

was prepared to go to put churches, mosques, temples and other religious groups "on the public payroll".

"Unless this is some April Fool's prank, we're way beyond having the government just pay for surplus food or job-training programmes taking place in church basements," said Mr Barrier.

"Dilulio is testing the waters to see if Americans will pay literally billions of dollars to subsidise religious property which is already tax exempt, while our national infrastructure is collapsing."

The danger that public funds might be demanded not just for "faith-based" social services but for all manner of really daft religious projects is demonstrated in a report in the March issue of *Freethought Today*, published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation Inc, which revealed that "hundreds of thousands of tax dollars" have been approved by the National Institute of Health to fund a Christian

"prayer intervention" study involving 80 African American women with breast cancer. In applying for the grant, thought to be in the region of \$800,000, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, said an earlier study had shown that African American women "preferred spiritual healing over allopathic medicine" and wants the money to fund studies to ascertain whether prayer can reverse the "abysmal physical and

We all learn through our mistakes, and to be drawn from the mistakes of others. Tony Blair and Tory leader William Hague have courted the religious vote with promises of "faith-based" welfare initiatives, but are oblivious to the fact that just such a thing is wrong in the USA, and are proving a bad originator, President

BARRY DUKER

psychological outcomes in African American women with breast cancer".

Freethought Today editor Annie Laurie Gaylor commented: "If African American women already disproportionately favour prayer and religion for comfort during illness, yet have 'a poorer prognosis at every stage of breast cancer', as the researchers point out, then the conclusion would seem to be that religion is detrimental, rather than beneficial. Ethics should dictate that medically sound methods, not superstition, should be proposed to improve medical outcomes for African American women suffering breast cancer."

While one would expect nothing less than total opposition to Bush's "faith-based" programme from secular Americans, more surprising is the vehemence exuding from the religious right. They are equally hostile to the scheme because they sense that the Government might prefer religious organisations to strip out the God element when carrying out state-subsidised social service programmes. They have begun to query what strings might be attached to the acceptance of public money and have expressed grave fears that church organisations would be saddled with reams of paperwork, regulations about



Coming off President Bush's welfare scheme

feature

what they might and might not teach, and unwelcome government scrutiny of their finances.

Reporting in the April issue of *Church & State* magazine, the voice of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Rob Boston quotes David O Treadwell, Executive Director of the Central Union Mission in Washington DC as saying: "I've heard the

... and very often there are lessons
of others. But, as both Prime Minister
William Hague continue chasing the
of "church-state partnerships" and
ives, it would appear that both are
t such schemes are going horribly
ving a major embarrassment for their
dent George W Bush.

DUKE reports.

President say he is intending to separate our religious work, but we are in the business of converting people to Christ. That's what we do. We believe that's the ultimate answer to their needs ... our purpose is to glorify God and make disciples." The Central Union Mission serves men who have hit rock bottom: drug addicts, persistent lawbreakers and alcoholics. At its rehabilitation programmes, Bible study and Christian worship are mandatory.

"Treadwell," writes Boston, "isn't the only religious leader expressing skepticism about the Bush plan these days. Since the President unveiled the proposal on January 29, a chorus of voices from all points on the religious and political spectrums has been raising concerns – and they just keep getting louder and louder.

"In addition to general concern about church-state separation, worries about the 'faith-based' initiative seem to fall into two major categories: Some religious leaders warn that the scheme will open the door to Government regulation of houses of worship, while others fret about tax money flowing to unconventional religious groups such as the Hare Krishnas and the Rev Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church."

Boston points out that even the right-wing TV

evangelist Pat Robertson, who, you may recall, recently incurred the wrath of the Scots by describing theirs as a "dark land" dominated by homosexuals, has taken a stand against the initiative. In an opinion piece for *USA Today*, Robertson suggested that Bush "overhaul" his plan, and he proposed ditching the idea of direct cash grants to religious groups in favour of tax credits to individuals and corporations that make donations to such groups.

But at least one person who seems to think there is merit in Bush's initiative is *Sunday Times* columnist Melanie Philips, who, on April 1, wrote: "In America, the faith-based agenda is largely pragmatic. Many religious anti-drug or crime projects are achieving stunning successes in dealing with social problems we have come to regard as intractable.

[This is nonsense. Rob Boston, in *Church & State*, points out that Bush and others who want to fund "faith-based" social services "frequently argue that religious groups do a better job than their secular or Government counterparts, but there is no evidence to support their claims. Even Stephen Goldsmith, a top Bush advisor on 'faith-based' approaches, admits that the evidence is wanting. During a January 29 interview with National Public Radio, Goldsmith was asked directly if there is 'hard proof' that religious efforts are more effective. He replied, 'No'"]

The brand of "faith-based" initiative launched in the USA, asserts Philips, "plays less well in Britain, where religious faith is far weaker and where our established church is far too feeble and apologetic to provide strong moral leadership; indeed, it has become largely secularised itself.

"So when Tony Blair brings faith into the pre-election conversation, there's a ripple of unease among those for whom religion is synonymous with bigotry, irrationality and fundamentalist intolerance."

She goes on to warn that "this most pious of prime ministers would in fact secularise religion. True, he spoke [at a meeting a week earlier of the Christian Socialist Movement] blandly about wanting to see more church schools or faith-based social services. But these will be in 'partnership' with the state, for which read central control. Religious projects will be nationalised, losing their independence and freedom.

"But there was a yet deeper problem with

Blair's position. As he made clear in answers to questions, he would treat all religions as equal. He seems to believe in a new type of human being, a global free-floating composite who embodies brotherly love and denies the fundamental differences that divide us.

"It's this refusal to face up to the hard cultural choices that lines him up with secular relativists on every moral issue. It's why he removed protection for teenagers and women against the risks of buggery; why he is presiding over a policy assault on marriage (despite his warm words about the institution); why he supports cloning and embryo research."

Whipping herself up to crescendo of hysteria, Philips goes on: "Even some prominent atheists have realised that religion is essential to society, particularly in democracies where political restraints are loose, because it is vital in keeping moral order.

"... In the 19th century, all progressive thinking and every social reform was inspired by evangelicalism, which wanted to liberate the human spirit by freeing it from moral degradation.

"Nevertheless, faith poses serious problems for a modern, pluralistic society. The great question is: whose faith? There's a real worry that treating all religions as equal, as Blair wants, will not only encourage dubious sects but will devalue the Judaeo-Christian ethic on which the country's values are based.

"For this is not a multicultural society but a Christian country, whose Protestantism underpins the liberal values that allow minority faiths to flourish. Where to draw the line: between allowing minority faiths the freedom to practise their beliefs and insisting they conform to the values of the majority culture is an extremely difficult problem.

"Already we can see the outlines of the dilemma. In Balsall Heath, Birmingham, Muslims spearheaded a drive against kerb-crawling that not only rid the area of a social nuisance but brought the crime rate down by almost a quarter. They performed a service for the whole of society in taking on secular indifference to social harm, promulgated not least by the Christian churches in the area, which denounced the initiative for depriving prostitutes of their livelihoods. Along with many other faiths, Muslims make valuable common cause against secular materialism.

"But Islam does not accept the position of a minority faith. It believes it is the one true religion and makes no distinction between church and state. Some Muslim radicals argue, for example, that refusing to allow them to prac-

(Continued on p13)

Ecce homo?

IT cost £1.5 million to make. Was it worth it? The BBC must think so, although I could suggest many better ways of spending the money. But, as readers know, I don't believe in Jesus Christ and regard any attempt to find his "real face" as a sheer waste of time. The producers of *Son of God* rejected traditional images of Jesus as fictitious constructs which, of course, they are; but the use of computers makes it no less a construct, and no less fictitious.

So much for the much-vaunted picture which appeared in every paper. What of the programme? I saw only the first one before going on holiday, but it was sufficient to rubbish the hype – by producer Jean-Claude Bragard, for example, who spoke of it as challenging the perceptions of agnostics, atheists and believers. And BBC controller Lorraine Heggessey, who described it as a "landmark" providing explanations for gospel stories "which many rationalists believe to have been mythical".

Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's former Middle East correspondent, the presenter, said he was not a religious person; but, he claimed, this series was not about belief but about "fact". Before embarking upon the project, he had never thought it would be possible "to understand the existence of Jesus as an activist and hero without believing in God". He was very sceptical about religion and his instinct was to disprove "a lot of this stuff". But it simply couldn't be dismissed. He didn't think you could deny that there was "this person called Jesus". Didn't the Jewish historian Josephus confirm that he was a "real man", as the programme announced boldly at the start? No, he didn't. The quoted passage is a blatant Christian forgery.

Spring cleaning with the stars

RICHARD Desmond, the new owner of the *Daily Express* is making the most of his astrologer Claire Petulengro, judging by the complimentary copy of the rag that came through the door on March 19. She had her usual page with its inanities ("There is a lot of friction in the heavens ...") and its platitudes ("Truthfulness and square dealing are sound foundations for living ..."); but March 20 being the Vernal Equinox and the astrological New Year, a double-page spread told credulous readers how "the stars can help spring-clean your life".

"You can expect to feel re-energised as you emerge from winter" was Claire's opening gambit, which applies to many other

species who won't be able to read the startling news. That platitude out of the way, we are ready for the inanities from the young lady whose picture accompanies the drivel. The planets, she told us, "continue to make new aspects" and "the stars prepare to help us to improve our lives". Surely you detected their preparations through your telescope.

Black mark Bagley!

THE University of Southampton is extending its research to cover astrology. It's called a "critical study", but it's funded by an astrology-promoting body called the Sophia Trust. The *Guardian's* Catherine Bennett noticed two projects, one on the "apparent relationship" between the position of Jupiter at the time of birth and subsequent alcoholism and drug dependency; and another, led by a "professional astrologer", to investigate whether the success rates of *In vitro* fertilisation could be improved by "coinciding treatment sessions with movements in the star charts of people hoping to conceive".

The leader of the research, Professor Chris Bagley, described himself as a sceptic; but he is, nevertheless, prepared to consider the topics mentioned, and give his accreditation to a disreputable venture. Research money is tight, and there are areas which a respectable university should shun.

God direct

A GATHERING of nine women and four men, including two designers from Nokia, a computer engineer for British Airways, a building contractor and a residential care worker at a "house church" in Camberley, Surrey, was described by Dee O'Connell (in an *Observer* supplement, "Britain Uncovered") as the latest manifestation of the evangelical movement springing up across south-eastern England. It is also known as a cell of the Beacon Church, itself part of a wider group called New Frontiers International, whose purpose is "to experience God most directly".

While O'Connell was there, some members of the group exhibited the "gift of tongues", by praying in a language she didn't recognise. Let's hope God did.

A question of priorities

FOR the same supplement, Burkan Wazir joined about 60 boys who had come straight from school on a Wednesday night, in the prayer hall of Whitechapel mosque in the East End of London, to recite the Koran before their teachers.

There were girls, too, but they were taught separately and the journalist wasn't allowed in on their tuition. He noticed that boys who arrived late were spoken to severely. "Being late at the mosque shows a disrespect for Islam", they were told. "You must never keep God waiting".

Wazir remembered his own "sometimes vicious, always public beatings at the hands of mullahs" as a teenager during the early eighties in Pakistan, and wondered if his presence had saved the boys from any summary punishment.

He then questioned two of the boys on their beliefs and practices. Mohammed, a 15-year-old who attends the mosque five times a week, and Ibrahim, who doesn't go any more because he "got bored" with it. "Religion doesn't really interest me", Ibrahim went on: "Who has time to pray five times a day?" It wasn't that he didn't believe in Allah, but he'd rather "play football". Who can blame him?

Bored God relents

DUNCAN Fallowell, who interviewed Barbara Cartland in 1995, alleged that his original piece was turned into a "Cartland press release" before being published. In the April edition of *Prospect*, he set the record straight.

"When I want a plot", she told him, "I say a prayer and God gives me a plot. Don't ask me how it happens, I don't know, it's absolutely amazing.

"The other day I said a prayer and nothing happened...and I thought perhaps He's bored with me". Which would hardly be surprising after more than 600 previous requests. After a while, though, he apparently relented. And the Dame got her usual trashy plot.

Anthony Storr

ON hearing of the death of Anthony Storr, I went back to his "study of gurus", entitled *Feet of Clay* (Harper-Collins, 1996) and read again his comment on Jung's remark that "Man cannot stand a meaningless life".

"But some of us cannot adopt a faith just because it may be psychologically desirable for us to believe", Storr wrote, "we need some evidence that it is true. Life is not meaningless to those who live it to the full, even if they do not believe in the immortality of the soul". And he reminded us that "Idiosyncratic belief systems which are shared by only a few adherents are likely to be regarded as delusional. Belief systems which may be just as irrational but which are shared by millions are called world religions".

We shall miss his wise, humane counsel.

BILL Clinton has had a bad press lately, so let's show him in a good light. Arkansas was one of the American states where Christian fundamentalists demanded – and got – “equal time” for what they called “creation science” in any classroom that also taught evolution. A consortium led by the American Civil Liberties Union challenged the statute, and Stephen Jay Gould testified as an expert witness at the trial in Little Rock, where Federal Judge William R Overton declared the “equal time” law unconstitutional. On the plane home Gould met Clinton, former governor of Arkansas, who said he would have vetoed that bill.

That is one battle won, but the war goes on. The well-funded creationists will not surrender. Instead, as Gould says, they change their tactics, often in ways that cannot be legally curtailed. They press textbook publishers to delete or weaken chapters on evolution; they agitate before local school boards or run their own candidates in elections; and, most insidiously, they make life difficult for the teachers. As the lawyer Clarence Darrow warned in his summary at the Scopes trial in 1925: “Ignorance and fanaticism are ever busy and need feeding. Always feeding and gloating for more. Today it is the public school teachers; tomorrow the private. The next day the preachers and the lecturers, the magazines, the books, the newspapers...”

I use the words battle and war but, according to Gould, we should not depict evolution versus creationism as “a major skirmish in a general war between science and religion. Almost all scientists and almost all religious leaders have joined forces on the same side against the creationists”. The enemy is not religion but dogmatism and intolerance, he says.

He tells us at the start that he sees no conflict between science and religion; the debate exists only in people's minds and social practices, “not in the logic or proper utility of these entirely different, and equally vital subjects”. Indeed, he disdains the two American histories, A D White's *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896) and J W Draper's *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* (1874).

White was a Christian, but he deplored the behaviour of his fellow religionists, both in the past and in his own time. Opposition to his setting up Cornell University as a secular institution “began at once”, he wrote: “from the good protestant bishop who proclaimed that all professors should be in holy orders...to the zealous priest who published a charge that...a profoundly Christian scholar had come to Cornell in order to inculcate infidelity...from the eminent divine who went from city to city denouncing the ‘atheistic and pantheistic tendencies’ of

the proposed education, to the perfervid minister who informed a denominational synod that Agassiz, the last great opponent of Darwin, and a devout theist, was ‘preaching Darwinism and atheism’ in the new institution”.

Far from wishing to injure Christianity, White and Ezra Cornell hoped to promote it; but, in White's words, they “did not confound religion with sectarianism”. Gould applauds White's intentions but regrets that his thesis in the *Warfare* has been superficially misread as “a claim that human progress required a victo-

Colin McCall reviews
Rocks of ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life, by Stephen Jay Gould
 (Jonathan Cape, £14.99.)

ry of science over the entire institution of religion”. Draper was far less friendly to religion and particularly “virulent” towards Roman Catholicism. Such virulence, I suggest, was justified in this context, despite Gould's suggestion of prejudice.

The author welcomes the present Pope's acknowledgment that evolution is now “more than a hypothesis”. Nor has Gould any trouble “understanding” why that earlier occupant of the papal throne, Urban VIII, “felt miffed, if not betrayed” by Galileo, a “hothead” who “moved too fast and too far in an unnecessarily provocative manner”. Gould's “revisionist rereading” of the historic case gives insufficient weight to the pre-election friendship of

religion in its generally accepted sense. What he does mean by it is far from clear. Certainly it is distinct from science, which “tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that co-ordinate and explain these facts”. Religion, on the other hand, “operates in the equally important, but utterly different realm of human purposes, meanings, and values – subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve”.

What he proposes is “respectful non-interference” between the two realms, each of which covers “a central fact of human existence”. So he enunciates the principle of NOMA, “*Non-Overlapping Magisteria*”, which is the theme of the book. He gets discouraged when some of his atheistic colleagues “caricature” religion, which “just can't be equated with Genesis literalism, the liquefying of the blood of Saint Januarius ... or the Bible order of kabbalah and modern media hype”. Whether the virgin birth, crucifixion and resurrection, and life after death are part of the “caricature” we are not told, although NOMA does “impose limitations on conceptions of God”. Elsewhere religion is equated with morals or “ethical inquiry”, which makes confusion dangerously more confounded. One of the essential needs of today is to relieve morality of its theistic trappings, to bring it completely into the secular world.

Scientists with theological commitments have “embraced NOMA” in various ways. Gould instances the Scottish physiologist J S Haldane (1860-1936), father of the biologist J B S Haldane, who maintained that “there is no real connection between religion and the belief in supernatural events of any sort or

‘Ignorance and fanaticism are ever busy and need feeding. Always feeding and gloating for more’

Urban and Galileo, which led the latter to think the time had come to tell the truth about heliocentricity. Instead, the scientifically-inclined Cardinal Barberini, who had looked through Galileo's telescope and written a poem to the physicist, mentioning the sights revealed by the “glass”, was prepared, as pontiff, to use torture to ascertain Galileo's “intent” on publishing the *Dialogue*. Galileo was the one to feel “miffed, if not betrayed”.

Gould has no religious beliefs in the generally accepted sense, and hints at his own atheism. The trouble is, he doesn't use the term

kind”. Behind the recognised churches, there was, he said “an unrecognised church to which all may belong, though supernatural events play no part in its creed”. A will o' the wisp, I must say.

It is hard to understand this insistence on retaining the word religion, with all its irrational associations. *Freethinker* founder G W Foote called secularism a religion on occasions, but he used the much more appropriate term philosophy in the title of his pamphlet on the subject. And “philosophy” or perhaps more specifically “morality” would

seem a better choice for Stephen Jay Gould.
— Colin McCall

Ellen L Ramsay reviews

*Exodus to Humanism:
Jewish Identity With
Religion* by David Ibry
(Prometheus, £12.50)

THIS book about Jewish identity without religion, by David Ibry, will interest many freethinkers who have a special interest in either Judaism or Jewish identity in the diaspora and the state of Israel.

The volume's author is amply qualified to examine the perplexing question of identity coming from a Jewish background. Ibry's father was a Zionist who dedicated his life towards building a secular Israel, however his mother was not Jewish — meaning that under orthodox Jewish law Ibry is in fact not a Jew. This undoubtedly accounts for Ibry's sensitivity to the question of identity in addition to a set of life experiences which have sharpened his knowledge of how important identity can be in civil and personal life.

He grew up in fascist Italy, remembers carrying false identity papers and attending a Jesuit school where he was discriminated against because he was not Italian. While Ibry sees the need for a homeland for the Jewish people, Israel has come to represent for him an "inward culture" where Jewish identity has become indistinguishable from Jewish religion. His experience of growing up as a Jew (he considers himself Jewish) was not without enlightenment. He recalls the many people who did not betray his identity to the authorities, a risk they took at great peril.

David Ibry's thesis, a humanist one, is that Jews can no longer rely on Judaism for their identity in a world where religion is increasingly becoming obsolete. He asks the challenging question of whether Jewish identity could survive after its separation from Judaism. He gives us an indication that he personally believes that it is important to retain a Jewish identity, but rejects the notion that that identity needs to be based on religious norms and beliefs. For him, Jewish identity is more a matter of historical, cultural and personal importance. However, like any good book, Ibry offers us questions rather than answers, declining to offer anything resembling the TRUTH, a phenomenon which he has come to doubt. His purpose

instead is to provide pathways through the challenging thesis with a series of personal contributions by leading humanists.

Undoubtedly at the time of writing, as well as now, there are those who would ask of Ibry and the other contributors what their feelings are towards Israel in the context of the upsurge of violence in the Middle East, and here Ibry addresses the question diplomatically. He says that he and his contributors deplore the current policy of the Israeli government (towards the Palestinians and the Occupied Territories) and he personally wishes for a secular Israel as did his father. Ibry acknowledges that at the present the Israeli state is far from being a secular one but asserts that Israel will continue to have a huge impact on Jewish identity worldwide.

Exodus to Humanism is structured as a series of questions put to respondents around the central thesis of the volume.

Jews can no longer rely on Judaism for their identity in a world where religion is increasingly becoming obsolete

David Ibry quite helpfully begins the book with his own personal story and his case for humanism before introducing us to other leading humanists. The questions placed before us are broad and include comments on humanism, on moral principles, on exclusiveness, on women and on being Jewish, each constituting a chapter of the book. His final chapter, quite appropriately, is entitled, "Conclusions" in the plural, as indeed a number of viewpoints emerge from the various respondents.

The book began as an announcement in the *Humanist News* of the BHA and expanded to include the comments of Herman Bondi, Harold Hillman, Claire Rayner, Geoffrey Elkan, Adolf Grunbaum, Wendy Hillary, Rose Hacker, Arnold Wesker, Ernest Poser and Henry Morgentaler, amongst others. There is a total of 26 contributors whose perspectives range from those arguing for assimilation of Jews through intermarriage and miscegenation to those who argue strongly that the special history of persecution and achievement of Jews must be passed on through the generations.

The book's title is taken from an idea of Ibry that Jews and Christians alike should embrace the new humanism and establish a set of secular rituals to replace the traditional religious ones. He believes that humans have an emo-

tional need for ritual and that humanists should provide that ritual through the different seasons and celebrations.

One recurrent theme of the contributors is the importance that the Holocaust has had in shaping their perceptions of themselves as Jews. Most of the contributors cite their atheism and humanism as coming out of the lessons of the Holocaust, and that while they may or may not consider themselves to be Jews, others see them as Jews and this has shaped their lives. For Jean-Claude Pecker of France, for instance, Israel and Zionism is necessary in a world in which anti-semitism still exists. He and others remember that under Hitler all Jews, even atheists and internationalists, were rounded up together. For this reason, for him Israel remains a homeland for Jews of the diaspora in times of persecution. For others, however, Jewish identity is more a matter of ethnicity than an identity tied to the nationhood of Israel. For still others Jewish identity is a cultural identity, as it is for Claire Rayner. In any event, all contributors make a strong case for the inclusiveness of Jews and, as Leonard Sterling suggests, extending a fraternal hand to the Palestinians.

An intriguing chapter for this writer is the one entitled, "Do Women Matter?". Ibry makes the case that while in most religions women are generally held to be more pious than men, this does not seem to be the case with Judaism. Herman Bondi, for instance, cites his mother's influence in his non-belief, and several female contributors confirm that the segregation of women in the synagogue was crucial to their forming non-belief. Wendy Hillary cites her long passage to humanism as simultaneously a growth in her awareness that she could not fill the role as a traditional Jewish wife. Rose Hacker cites the segregation of women and the Jewish belief that menstruating women are unclean as amongst the reasons for her coming to humanism.

Several men contribute to this chapter on women, including the celebrated Canadian abortion doctor, Henry Morgentaler, who cites humanism as the key to his advocacy of the reproductive rights of women.

As for the future of Jewish identity, the author suggests that unless it relies on cultural and historical traits it is destined to become obsolete under Judaism, as religion itself becomes obsolete in the modern world. He believes that the synagogue must be replaced with cultural, artistic, sporting and various other kinds of secular initiatives and he argues for an inclusive definition of Jewishness, one that embraces both the religious and the non-religious.

The book has a few shortcomings which the reader should be aware of. The first criticism

I have relates to the organisation of the sections within the book, some of which are separated by headings and others, internally, by asterisks. There were several points at which I was uncertain who the narrative voice belonged to, as the asterisks did not serve as very strong punctuation within the sections.

The second criticism I have relates to the depth of the discussion of Jewish identity. While the testimonials of various secular humanists add immensely to the central thesis, they tend to be rather short and, at times, taken out of context. Exceptions to this include the long and useful contributions by individuals such as Pearl Joseph, and I was left wanting more discussions of this length.

The third criticism I have of the volume is that it tends towards a kind of cultural relativism and pluralism. The interesting comments David Ibry makes about humanist alternatives in the early chapters might well have been extended to the end of the book without falling into the trap of seeming to offer a TRUTH. More direction from Ibry and longer, contextualized testimonials would have made for a fuller reading.

Exodus to Humanism is a timely volume given the current situation in the Middle East, and Ibry's call for secular alternatives are as poignant as ever. Towards that end this is a volume of interest not only to the "indifferent" and to secular Jews to whom it speaks but also to other freethinkers who wish insight into the dilemmas of being Jewish in the twenty-first century. The inclusiveness of Ibry's definition, the frankness of his discussion, and the diversity of respondents, are to be welcomed.

– Ellen L Ramsay

William Harwood reviews

Merely Mortal?

Can You Survive Your

Own Death? by Antony

Flew, Prometheus Books,

\$26.00

"TO suggest that we shall survive such total dissolution [death] is like suggesting that a nation would outlast the annihilation of all of its members ... To expect that after my death and dissolution such things might happen to me is to overlook that I shall not then exist." (p2)

"Given the undeniable and undenied fact that ... we shall die, then the not necessarily soluble, philosophical problem becomes to formulate some survival hypothesis which is not already known to be false." (p 8)

So much for religion. On the paranormal, Flew quotes J Beloff's definition, "A phenomenon is, by definition, paranormal if and only if it contravenes some well founded assumption of science," and adds his observation (p 169), "We still appear to be as far away as ever from any repeatable demonstration of the reality of any psi-phenomena."

"The more we make astral bodies like the ordinary flesh and blood persons from which they are supposedly detachable ... the more difficult it becomes to make out that it is not already known that no such astral bodies do in fact detach themselves at death." (p 16)

While Flew makes clear that the evidence

does not support the existence of "telepathy, clairvoyance and paranormal precognition ... (ESP)," he at no time appears to notice that two of the three capacities labelled as ESP involve information traveling backward in time, or that the definitive argument against such claims is the *reductio ad absurdum* to which all time travel hypotheses can be reduced.

I got the impression that, despite his disclaimers such as the above, he is not ready to acknowledge that the astral body/soul is so definitively unproven that further examination of the non-evidence cannot be justified.

He cites Socrates' alleged proof of the psyche's immortality, along with parallel arguments by Thomas Aquinas and other religious and secular philosophers, finds them all to be flawed, and summarizes (p 171), "We cannot, at best, reach about any such story any verdict stronger than a cautious, and appropriately Scottish, 'Not proven.'"

On both religious and paranormal beliefs that part of the human organism is immortal, Flew's conclusions will neither outrage nor convince believers, for the logical reason that philosophical arguments that the soul/psyche/astral body cannot exist will be met with the response, "Yes, but it does."

It is my view that, having reduced Flew's dissertation from 215 pages to less than 500 words, I have done readers a service, since they now do not need to read the long, meandering, hairsplitting and basically trivial full version. This is a book I can recommend only as a cure for insomnia.

– William Harwood

America's "faith-based" initiative débacle

tise polygamy is racial discrimination.

"All minority faiths must live under an overarching framework of cultural values expressed through the law. Certain things – freedom of speech, monogamy, protection for homosexuals – must be non-negotiable. But now, conversely, the law may be encroaching on the legitimate freedoms of religious groups to practise their faith.

"If a Muslim group doesn't want to employ a homosexual, or a Christian group an atheist, they may be pressured to do so by central or local government, which withholds funding unless they comply. And the Human Rights Act may make this even worse, since ail depends on the adjudication in these matters of largely secular judges.

"More and more, sanctions are being enforced not against actual harm, but against

(Continued from centrepages)

beliefs. We are moving away from our liberal Judaeo-Christian tradition to an intolerant secularism which, like the religious fanaticism it denounces, will not brook any deviation.

"This secular culture – aided by a Church of England cringing before multiculturalism – is likely to achieve two unhappy outcomes. It will damage the freedom of religions to put their beliefs into practice. But it will also make it more likely for liberal values to be superseded by illiberal doctrines, which will take advantage of the level playing field so helpfully provided by a society obsessed with anti-discrimination.

"Blair's religious mish-mash makes this secular betrayal much more likely. Rigorous faith-based projects might do a lot of good. But we

have to be very clear about their purpose. It should be to bring hope and self-discipline to solve social problems, not to create the kind of religious relativism which undermines our values."

KEITH Porteous Wood adds: The Catholic newspaper, *The Tablet* has published a revealing survey on voting intentions in the coming General Election.

Compared with the national average, a higher proportion of Anglicans intend to vote Conservative and a lower proportion intend to vote Labour; a higher proportion of Roman Catholics intend to vote Labour and a lower proportion intend to vote Lib Dem; and a higher proportion of those of no religion intend to vote Lib Dem and a lower proportion intend to vote Conservative.

Last words on Jesus's historicity

MAY I reply to several readers who criticised me in your March 2001 issue?

If Geoff Chambers had read my book, he would know why I discount the letters of Paul as evidence against the existence of a historical Jesus. Because their paths never crossed, Saul of Tarsus never met Jesus; when he became a Christian he developed a transcendental idea of Jesus with hardly any interest in his real life. However, it is not true that Paul makes no mention of any event in Jesus's life; he referred to Jesus's death, burial and resurrection (I Cor 15:3-4) and his betrayal and the Last Supper (I Cor 11:23-25), albeit as hearsay. Yet it is foolish to regard Paul as a historian; he was not interested in history, something which Wells should have realised.

Stewart Valdar suggests that we should take the views of historians on the historicity of Jesus no more seriously than the views of astronomers on the existence of God. But astronomers are not experts on God; historians *are* experts on history. It is perverse to ignore their view on Jesus.

Whether or not Jesus told the poor lies is hardly the point; he surely told them what he believed was the truth. In any case, how does Valdar think that an invented Jesus could have told lies?

I refer Gary Sloan, who challenges my claims about the Josephan testimony, to my book. Is truth to be decided by the majority? As to those who question only *part* of the Josephan testimony: presumably they allow that part of it is genuine – in which case they must accept the historicity of Jesus and cannot be counted as mythicists. On Josephus' second reference to Jesus, in 1971 Wells certainly expressed doubt that it was an interpolation. Since then he has naturally found some conviction that it is not.

Challenging it is one thing; proving that it is false is another. Those who believe that Christians subsequently interpolated Josephus' references to Jesus should ask themselves why these same Christians did not also interpolate some reference to Christianity itself, then a widespread religion which originated in Josephus' own country. Why were they so shy?

Subscribers to the Jesus Myth Theory, so pleased to be done with a historical Jesus and believing that this relieves them of any obligation to explain the life of Jesus as contained in the Gospels, overlook the problem they make for themselves – explaining how the Gospels came to be written at all without a historical Jesus. It is easier to believe that he really existed.

STEWART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

THE historicity, or otherwise, of Jesus seems to me to be an unimportant question. Is there so much practical difference between a purely legendary person and a historic person about whom little is known but around whom there has been much accretion of legend?

It is, after all, the legends about Jesus that are central to Christianity – the legendary 'virgin birth', the legendary 'resurrection' and so on.

Strip Jesus of objective historical status and the Christian religion would soon adapt itself to that development. Liberal religion has dehistoricised Adam and Eve; the Sea of Faith people have even reduced god to a notional "not a being but a moral focus" or to "the sum of our values". (These are quotes from the statements of Don Cupitt).

Dehistoricisation of Jesus would be no skin off the liberal Christian nose.

The question is of legitimate interest to academic historians but to nobody else, I suspect.

ERIC STOCKTON
Sanday

FORTY years ago as a cautious historicist I entered the Jesus controversy in these pages in opposition to that passionate mythicist Herbert Cutner. Subsequently I've largely ignored the issue, though in public debates and discussions when earnest Christians chat about Jesus as if he lived next door I'm often provoked to observe, "We're not certain that he even existed." The renewed *Freethinker* debate has, however, fired me.

The origin of religions is a fascinating, if largely academic, subject. Many freethinkers appear to believe that if the mythicist hypothesis were universally accepted Christianity would disappear. It wouldn't. Christians would merely revert to the ancient heresies of Eutyches and Docetism – that Jesus was really a spiritual being – and the organisation, whose current strength is in its material assets and not its beliefs, would continue. So too would its political support.

Despite the vast amount of recent study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient texts, the debate today is essentially the same as it was 40 (or 140) years ago: how much credence is to be given to the New Testament and the "testimony" of independent authors like Josephus? Here I find my background as a biographer, poet and fiction writer more valuable than that as a student of theology and church history.

Many of Andrew Harvey's parallel quotations from the Pauline epistles – especially the first four, undisputed ones – and the Synoptic Gospels are consistent with the view that Paul knew of a historical Jesus in his lifetime. Clearly he knew (and cared) little about him other than his divine pretensions. And why

should a citizen of Tarsus know anything much about one of Nazareth, only fleetingly in Jerusalem, dead for 20 or so years and already the subject of legend and fable?

Indeed, it's the prominence of Nazareth and environs in the Gospel story that I find the most convincing argument for historicity. For there is nothing in Jewish history or scriptures that would single the place out for the ministry of a Messiah. "Matthew" found this so strange that he invented a prophecy: "He (Jesus) shall be called a Nazarene." Of course, dedicated mythicists say (or at any rate used to say) there was no such place in Biblical times and the passage should read "He shall be called a Nazarite" (a sectarian like John the Baptist); but this is unconvincing.

Why invent a place a long way from Bethlehem, the traditional Messianic birthplace, and then have to invent a reason for the journey between the two? Embarrassingly for Christians, two mutually exclusive yarns were devised, one by "Matthew" and another by "Luke". After strenuously trying to remove all traces of early Christian brainwashing I find an underlying verisimilitude in the topographical Galilean details, albeit overlaid with miracle-mongering and other accretions, which is lacking in the incarnation stories of the "pagan Christs".

In my view, most mythicists, and many other rationalists, concentrate on the undoubted pagan elements in Christianity – Egyptian baptism, Babylonian sacrifice, etc – and ignore the fact that essentially it's a Jewish heresy and the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Among Gentile converts it may have become a eucharist or mass, though Protestants reject transubstantiation and insist on pronouncements like "This is my body" were metaphorical.

Another indication of an underlying historicity is the similarity, but non-identity, of genealogies in "Matthew" and "Luke", tracing Jesus's descent through Joseph – hardly evidence of Christian orthodoxy.

What of Josephus? A literary, rather than historical, analysis concentrating on the words around and not in the *Testimonium* surely makes it clear that the entire passage is an interpolation. It demonstrates the Christian belief that a Jewish historian *ought* to have recorded a famous Jewish personality, whether or not accorded divine status. That seems reasonable. But Jesus wasn't famous then, or for several decades later.

Finally, one should note what Professor G A Wells, justifiably prominent in this controversy, actually says: "Both the Galilean and the Cynic elements ... may contain a core of reminiscences of an itinerant Cynic-type Galilean preacher" (*New Humanist*, September 1999).

DAVID TRIBE
Australia



BEFORE the level of this futile debate degenerates even further, could we please stand back and attempt to look at the big picture?

If I get it right, this is what Christians are expected to believe:

- at some unspecified point in time many epochs ago, for unclear reasons, a benevolent, omnipotent, prescient and eternal creator set into motion a universe which is so vast that no human being can ever hope to survey it;
- millions of years elapsed without much happening;
- in a later era closer to our time, again for unclear reasons, the creator decided to populate the world with animals and humans, but soon afterwards regretted this decision and drowned the whole of each species except for a tiny number of selected individuals;
- thousands of years went by, Earth became gradually filled with mortals most of whom were totally unaware of their good fortune and of the existence of a benevolent creator, as the creator never, ever showed itself to them, but made an exception for a small, quarrelsome, guilt-ridden nation inhabiting the Middle East, who unfairly got all the info;
- some 2000 years ago, again for unclear reasons, the same creator decided it would be a good idea if its child were to visit Earth and be tortured to death; something no-one ever asked that creator to do, and only a tiny number of fellow humans seemed to appreciate or even notice at the time of its child's terrestrial experience;
- since then and arising from the child's visit, there has been no end of trouble, persecutions, mass slaughters etc, as well as learned disputes over doctrinal matters and other *minutiae*, such as whether a passage in Josephus is authentic or is an interpolation.

Since the relationship between creator and each human can be said to be based on a contract, or covenant, it is as if we were expected to buy a property (whose owner never shows her- or him-self) through self-appointed agents who keep insisting on us signing blank cheques; and were only shown a few blades of grass from the garden but had no idea where the property might be, how large it was and when we could reasonably expect to take possession.

Would it be ribald to suggest that even a dim-witted human could have organised the cosmos more efficiently and competently than this?

D BRESSAN,
Australia

Editor's note: This correspondence is now closed.

Victim of puritanism?

RECENTLY, in a *Guardian* article on the DOME, Polly Toynbee described the sculpture of the Body Zone as beautiful. Certainly it

attracted attention with a vast winding queue when I was there in September.

However the contents ranged from non-existent to inadequate. Where was the digestive system – too indelicate perhaps? The working of the brain was pathetically illustrated by a story told by Tommy Cooper.

The eye was represented by a large sphere with none of its parts shown whereas its lens, ciliary muscle and iris could have been shown in a working model. Similarly the intricate parts of the ear (stirrup, anvil) could have been demonstrated in action.

Most ludicrous was "reproduction" dealt with by a tape loop showing a flock of sperms pursuing an egg. This was displayed on the ceiling (don't let the children see this). Just think of the working models which could have been shown.

All of these topics are dealt with better in ordinary school-books. Were we all the victims of some puritan?

R K E TORODE
Kidderminster

Science driven by profit

IN his reply to my letter, Stephen Park (*Points of View*, January) has not answered my question, which was "How did the doctor at the hospital know I had been taking homoeopathic medicine if it has no effect?" Who is this guru he mentions? I have never heard of him. It is my understanding that Dr Hahnemann went back to ancient ideas that like cures like, and tried his medicines on people until he found the dose he considered to be the best. I have never heard that he got his ideas from God.

Mr Mackenzie says that I blame scientists for the way people use their ideas, but when they invent more deadly weapons, they must know what the only use for them is. I am very grateful that electricity was invented, but the scientists who invented nuclear power stations must have known that they would produce tons of nuclear waste which remain radioactive for a very long time. Also, it can be used for nuclear weapons. If they did not invent these things, they could not cause the harm that they do cause.

What passes for science these days is driven by the desire for profit, not for the good of humanity. I ask again, what does Stephen Park think is true science?

JEAN FAWCETT
Ipswich

Church schools

IT seems unlikely that we will be able to end the anachronism of church schools in the foreseeable future, but that need not stop us from working to end selection on the grounds of religious affiliation in our community schools, for which we all pay.

By challenging religious bodies to open the

schools they control to everyone on an equal basis we will put them on the spot. A general election will provide opportunities to tackle politicians on the issue. I suggest we campaign under the slogan Free Our Community Schools from Religious Control.

ROY SAICH
Kenilworth

NSS not party-political

I SUSPECT I may share some political leanings with Paul Albrecht (*Points of View*, March), but cannot follow his logic in shunning membership of the NSS because of his perception of political bias in the *Freethinker*. I am not sure I agree that it is "all Left is good, all Right is bad" – but it is of no consequence, because the *Freethinker's* editorial policy is not dictated by the NSS.

The NSS seems to me to demonstrate clearly its commitment to party political neutrality. It recently worked with the Conservatives to oppose a religious question in the Census in England & Wales and numbers Dr David Starkey among its Honorary Associates. Another of these is Dr Evan Harris, a LibDem MP with whom the Society often works. Nor does it hesitate to criticise the Government, whether it be over greater privileges for church schools, or privileged employment policies for believing teachers.

I suggest that those who care about such issues (presumably including Mr Albrecht) demonstrate their support by joining the Society. The more strident the demands of the religious become, the greater the need for contrary views to be articulated as widely as possible.

FIONA WEIR
London

Editor's note: Anyone wishing to check the NSS out or to join them (only £10 pa for individuals) can obtain an annual report and membership details by post by writing to NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL; emailing kpw@secularism.org.uk; or telephoning/faxing 020 7404 3126. Forms and information are also available on the Society's website www.secularism.org.uk

Please address your letters (preferably typed) to Barry Duke, *Freethinker* editor, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH.
E-mail: editor@freethinker.co.uk
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 9871751.

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, June 3, 4pm. Public Meeting.

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 01298 815575. Queen's Head Hotel, 12 Little Underbank, Stockport. Monday, May 7, 8pm. Carl Pinel: *Religion in Education*.

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 at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday, May 11, 7.30pm. Andrew Hodges: *Alan Turing, Gay Atheist Code Breaker*.

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 Rita Manton 01708 762575. Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, June 5, 8pm. Shirley Kerr: *Politics and the Changing Role of Religious Education*.

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 Henness, 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. Wednesda, May 9. Ivor Moll: *Living Wills and Voluntary Euthanasia*

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Tuesday, May 8, 7.30pm. AGM at 14 Goxholes Crescent, Pudsey, Leeds.

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, May 31, 8pm. David Porter: *Human Relationships and the Ideal of Universal Love*.

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, May 17, 7.30pm. Christine Butterworth: *Why the BHA Needs You*.

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, June 6, 8pm. Mo Laycock: *Religious Education in a Multifaith Society*.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Literature & information stall at May Day Festival, New Square, Chesterfield, Mondon, May 7, 10.30am-4pm.

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, May 9, 7.30pm. Barbara Smoker: *Moral Choice and Scientific Determinism*.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Alice Munn's House (WRVS), 4 Gravel Hill, Ludlow. Tuesday, May 15, 7.30pm. AGM followed by discussion.

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.