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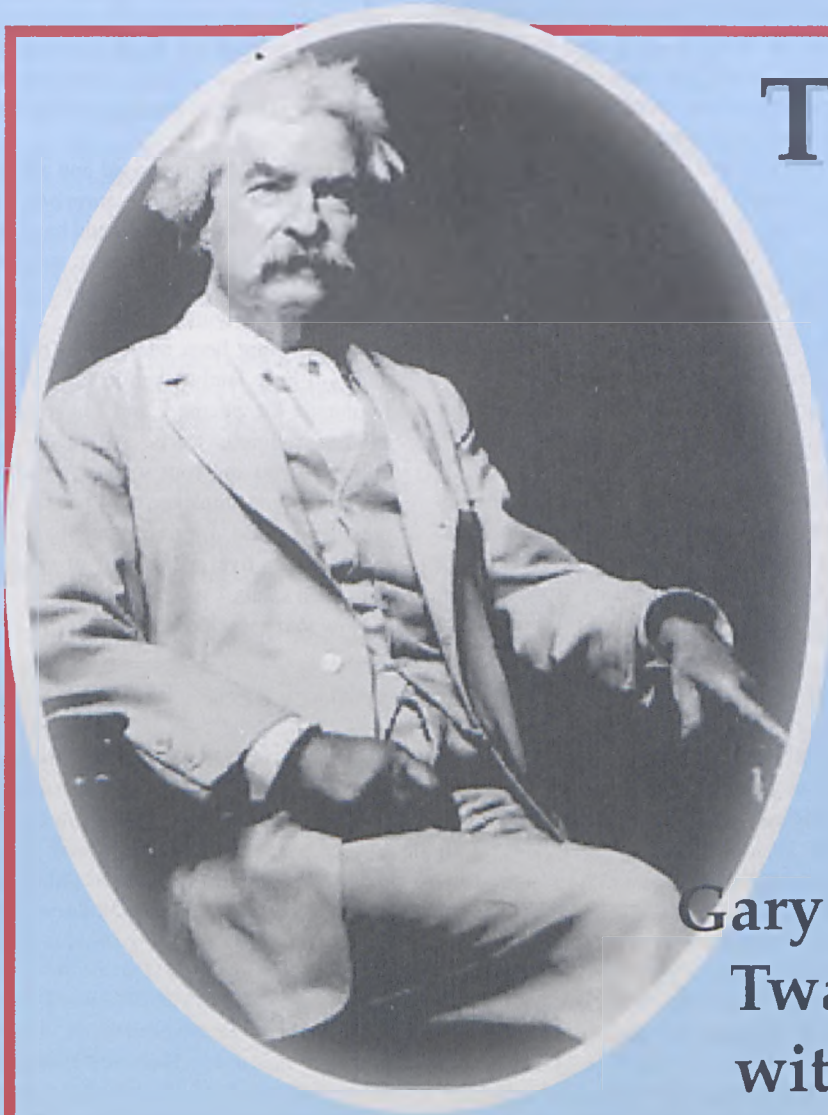
The

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June 2001

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



The man
who
raged
against
God

Gary Sloan on Mark
Twain's covert war
with the Almighty
– *see centre page feature*

Also in this issue:

Must taxpayers bail out an
ailing Church of England? – *see p4*

freethinking out loud: barry duke

WOULD you Adam and Eve it?

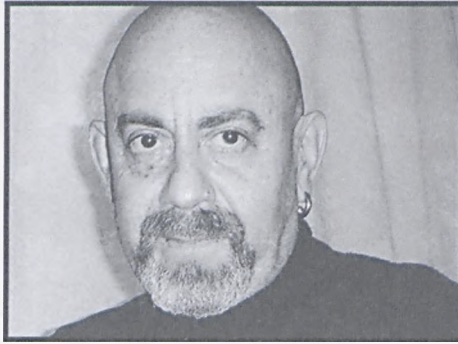
Not to be outdone by the American publishers of a "red-neck" Bible written in deep-South vernacular, the British-based Bible Reading Fellowship, whose President is the Archbishop of Canterbury, has just released a Cockney Bible.

Written largely in rhyming slang by London religious education teacher Mike Coles, *The Bible in Cockney (Well, Bits of it Anyway)* includes stories from the old Testament as well as Mark's Gospel and the Lord's prayer.

Thus Joseph becomes "the big boss geezer" in Egypt, where Pharaoh gives him "a beautiful weasel" (coat) and puts a gold chain round his "bushel" (neck). Joseph's "trouble and strife" (wife) is called Asenath, and he rides around in a "real cool chariot".

Asked what she thought of the enterprise, a hard-bitten East End hack of my acquaintance muttered: "A pile of old pony and trap!"

While on the subject of the "Good Book",



boy, did the Bible Society ever get it more wrong than when they sent this grizzled old infidel an appeal last month for a donation to help its work in foisting Bibles on some of the world's poorest and most dispossessed people.

In a covering letter the society's Director, Ashley Scott, lamented: "staggeringly, almost two-thirds of the world languages are without a single printed word of the Bible" and that my help was needed to "fund the translation, production and distribution of printed and audio Scriptures around the world".

Oh, and my prayers were requested for "those still waiting to experience God's word".

Yeah, right.

Mr Scott will have been disappointed by my response. Into the freepost envelope that accompanied his mailing I tucked a *Freethinker* 120th anniversary appeal flyer, together with a note stating "religion is the

problem, not the answer". And I asked that my name be immediately expunged from the society's records.

On reflection, I should also have enclosed a condom to make the point that victims of overpopulation and the scourge of Aids are in need of contraception and barrier protection, not useless superstition.

The Bible Society must be fairly resigned to receiving such rebuffs, but few, I bet, have been couched in as robust language as that employed around 100 years ago by the Earl of Orford, who blew a gasket after receiving an invitation to become President of the Norwich chapter of the BS.

He wrote: "I was surprised and annoyed by the contents of your letter – surprised, because my well-known character should have exempted me from such an application; and annoyed, because it obliges me to have even this communication with you.

"I have long been addicted to the gaming table – I have lately taken to the turf. I fear I frequently blaspheme – and I have never distributed religious tracts. All this was well-known to you and your society; notwithstanding which you think me a fit person for your president! God forgive your hypocrisy! I would rather live in the land of sinners than with such saints."

Now *that's* my kinda guy!

The Freethinker

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Freethinker Fund gets a big boost from generous supporters

WE HAVE had a tremendous response to our *Freethinker* 120th anniversary appeal. Sheffield Humanist Society was among the first to respond, with a wonderful donation of £200.00. Others have been very generous too. By the time this issue went to press, the *Freethinker* Fund was better off to the tune of £3,334.50. We would like to thank the following for their support. £190 Wm Marshall; £100 K Moore, J Witney, J A Markey, B J David; £85 D Broughton; £75 Glasgow Group; £52 N Moia; £50 M Morley, N Thompson, M Lofmark, W Donovan, M E Hart; £40 C Pinel; £35 A J Barnett, J E Fortes, S M Jaiswal, J Pickard, G L Lucas, S Trent, R Dennick, D C Hooley; £30 J Crowhurst, K Mason, A Beeson; £25 D Walker, R J Watson, A J Mutch, R Woodward, S C Chumbley, D Fraser, H J Jakeman, A Akkermans, N Thompson, T Morrison, A Watson, E W Sinclair; £20 J Radford, S Boyd, R S Parfitt, A W Briglin, I Brydon, R J C Fennell, J M Wood, G Brum, A Stevens, R Woodward, G S Mellor; £15 Anon, S B Geddes, T G Simon, B Corbett, D Bressan, I L Brydon, D Kirkland, J Walsh, L E West, G Verco, J R Rees, S C Chumbley, C Lovett; £13.50 Musical Heathens; £12 P A Forrest; £10 D Bennett, N C Palmer, L Smith, P Somers, S Dulson, B Layfield, L Wright, I Murdoch, H McDougall, A J Thorne, K A Monks, A Tiffany, E Fraser, J K Radford, R D Massey, L Thomas, D Lovelace, R M Howells, V S Petheram, G R Bigley, J Scaife, M J Skinner, D J Gibbard, B L Able, I Davidge, C R Fletcher, L T Ong, N Child, A R Kennard, P Ponting-Barber, M Levin, B A Burfoot, D P Earle, R Tutton, R C Baxter, M Fletcher, K Partington, J Dyke, T Milton, P Harvey, J Dobbin, R Le Sueur, K Rima, A J Ledger, L L Martin, J A Hood, G Coupland, K Haughton, R Fennell, M Kirby, B J Edgecombe, D Yeulett, G A Airey, J Tiplady, R K E Torode. I A Williams, P A Smith, S Eadie, B Albers, M F Savage; £9 A Harvey; £5 Anon, D Clamp, A Clunas, V Smith, C Hetherington, W Browne, C J Macdonald, T W Hill, G A Fraser, C Govind, R Mann, L M Moore, E Hillman, D R Hutchins, A E Ball, G Petruczuk, G V L Bond, D Simmonds, D P Haslam, J Beck, J Bosley, J R Hunt, B Layfield, J D Groom, B Luccock, M Reading, C S Malet, R I Raven, J Dent, J White, J Cass, J R Skoyles, A McQuaid, E Strauss, D S Lee, J Lippett, A Adler, P Gatenby, D G Mitchell, D Lennie, A J Brown, R Shayler, J I Hayward, P Hadfield, W Grant, C S Kershaw, R R Brown, R A Fox, P R Smith, J N Ainsworth, J Clarke, V Smith, J Chesterman, E T Rose, K Wingham, S Campbell, R Liggins; £4 N Levenson; £3 W A Smith; £2 G McGhee, P A Thomas, F Heffer, M P Prince, G Edwards, L Jordan, B A Smith, C I Alan. The donations mentioned include many received before the appeal flyer was sent out, and cover the period December 2000 to the end of April 2001.

First shots fired in latest battle over broadcasting

THE Good News Broadcasting Association (GNBA) has launched a drive to mobilise support to pressurise the Government to grant national radio licences to Christian broadcasters.

But the National Secular Society has countered with a call to the Government to resist the GNBA's demands.

GNBA manager Charles Dobson said: "It's time for Christians to tell the Government and each prospective parliamentary candidate that we wish to be heard ...

"No Christian broadcaster has yet been granted a national radio licence and Christians in many towns and countries are prevented from hearing the Christian message via the airwaves.

The National Secular Society responded with a call to the Government to "stay firm on its ban on nation-wide, as opposed to local, religious broadcasting".

As pressure mounts on the Government to lift the ban (Broadcasting Minister Janet Anderson was scheduled to meet 21 religious leaders as the *Freethinker* was going to press to hear their concerns) the NSS warned that religious broadcasters would "inevitably abuse the codes of practice set up to regulate broadcasting".

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, said: "A number of these Christian broadcasters are already operating on a local basis and have fallen foul of the regulators. The Christian Channel, for instance, was fined £20,000 after several warnings from the ITC

watchdog for persistent breaches of the Advertising Code relating to political impartiality, playing on fear, offence to human dignity and denigration of other beliefs.

"The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God has bought Liberty Radio in London. The Church is a global Christian sect that teaches its followers that diseases are caused by demons, and was recently in the news in connection with the Anna Climbie child abuse case. "The sect is surrounded by controversy in Brazil where it is reported to be 'a powerful ... media force'.

"The Church was criticised in 1997 by the Advertising Standards Authority for issuing a poster reading: 'Constant headaches, depression, insomnia, fears, bad luck, strange diseases...these are just a few symptoms caused by demons.'"

Mr Porteous Wood added: "We fear that, as in the USA, slick and affluent religious groups will misuse their platform to exploit the vulnerable and attack minorities, such as homosexuals. We must not allow manipulative televangelists to flourish in this country as they do in the USA.

"Another reason not to grant national licences is the minuscule audience share that these programmes attract. Scarce broadcasting frequencies should be allocated to much more popular stations."

•The NSS's recent submission to the Communications White Paper can be viewed on www.secularism.org.uk

The wacky world of religion

'Go forth as a vegetable'

AN EX-DRUG dealer who dresses as a red pepper says God told him to do it. For the past four years Kenny Carter, of Rosedale in Maryland, USA, has been dressing as Peppy the Pepper and greeting shoppers at the Super Fresh shop where he is a community relations manager.

Carter, 40, says God ordered him into the costume in the middle of a church service. "It was a very powerful worship – I was crying out in the middle of church: 'Oh God! Oh God!' And suddenly I heard an audible male voice that said: 'You will be a vegetable' .

"I looked round, I thought I was going crazy. I began to worship again. I said: 'Lord, speak to me.' And I heard it again: 'You will be a vegetable' ."

Earlier in his life Carter claims he was a pimp, a drug dealer and had spent time in jail and rehabilitation, reports the *Maryland SunSpot*.

After his message in church he asked a friend to make him a pepper costume, composed a song and asked his store manager to let him try out his act on shoppers. Apparently they loved it and he now travels around the company's different branches.

Witchdoctor gets it wrong

A MAN was shot dead by a fellow villager in Ghana while testing a magic spell designed to make him bulletproof, according to a Ghana News Agency report. Aleobiga Aberima, 23, and 15 other men had obtained the "protective" herbs from a witchdoctor. After smearing himself with the herbs, Aberima volunteered to be shot to see if the spell worked. One of the others fired at him and he died instantly, whereupon the villagers gave the witchdoctor a serious beating.

Hindus call 'fowl'

HOWLS of outrage from some British Hindus have led to the withdrawal of a Chicken Tonight TV advertisement which shows a woman sitting cross-legged and meditating in front of a chicken. She chants "om dina om" then tells the bird: "You cannot just sit there with your legs crossed, you're going to have to chant as well."

Faith-healing parents jailed

THE State Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, USA, has – in a 7-0 decision – upheld an involuntary manslaughter conviction of Dennis and Lorie Nixon of Altoona, who let their 16-year-old daughter die in 1996 from complications of untreated diabetes.

Shannon died at home of severe dehydration with a blood sugar level that was 18 times the normal, as her family prayed, read from the Bible, and coated her body with oil.

The Nixons, who were convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to two-and-a-half to five years in prison in 1997, have been free during their appeals.

They belonged to a Blair County branch of the Faith Tabernacle Church and have 11 other children. Another child of theirs, Clayton, died at the age of eight in 1991 from a treatable ear infection.



must taxpayers top up c of e's emptying coff

The Church of England's principal *éminence grise* made a rare appearance in the newspapers at the end of April. The Reverend Doctor William Beaver emerged to contradict an article in the *Independent* headlined "Is Dr. Carey presiding over a Church facing ruin?" Dr Beaver assured us that, contrary to the *Independent's* charge, "finances are not 'steadily deteriorating'". In more deferential times, placatory words from such an elevated source in our Established Church would have been the end of the matter, but all they have done is to draw unprecedented publicity to the Church's many woes. It almost seems as if the journalists have smelled blood.

The *Independent* article referred to a top-level summit and claimed that "senior officials nervously await the publication of two major reports on its steadily deteriorating finances". In reality, these fiscal problems plague every sector of the crumbling edifice that is the Church of England.

Perhaps the greatest problem area is assets controlled by the Church Commissioners. These assets largely consist of the investments which fund clergy pensions. In an article entitled "Churchgoers to find £12 million for clergy pensions," the *Daily Telegraph* quotes soothing words from Philip Mawer, Secretary of the Archbishops' Council: "There has been no mismanagement".

Most readers will remember, however, that in the 1980s the Church Commissioners saw a huge amount (£800 million) wiped off their investments through "disastrous property speculations". A consequence of this disaster was that the central fund had to require parishes to take on the burden of clergy pension contributions, an imposition which started around 1998. Handy solution, that. Yet even this expedient has not been enough to bail out the multi-billion pension fund, so once more the Church Commissioners are standing at the church doors with their bottomless begging bowls.

One of the problems is that retired clergy appear to live much longer than other men, and it seems the gap is widening. As they also point out, the investment climate has deteriorated, but isn't this after a long period of unusually high growth? "The problems we have are not something anyone would have predicted," Mr Mawer is quoted as having told the *Daily Telegraph*. Hmmmm.

Somewhat adding insult to injury, Mr Mawer continued: "This is not a situation which should make those contemplating a vocation to the ministry to think again. We need young people to come forward." Yet, later in the same article colleague Roger

Radford, chairman of the pensions board, admits that "if the money cannot be found, we will have to look at reducing the benefit level in respect of future service". Well that's all right then.

We can only assume that Mr Mawer's comment on "no mismanagement" was referring to the period after the "disaster". There have also been problems since. It was not well known that (according to the *Independent*) the First Church Estates Commissioner, in charge of managing the CC's assets, was until recently President of the insurance company Equitable Life, where many clergy pensions are invested. Equitable Life's troubles have made headlines in recent months, which must be a cause of deep concern to those whose pensions are managed by this company. In the circumstances, the Church might have been expected to look to the Estates Commissioners to tighten their belts, just a little; yet their administrative expenses rose last year by 227 per cent from £1.8 million to £4.1 million.

Bill Beaver is now seeing the problems arriving on his own doorstep. According to the *Sunday Times*, "Church bureaucracy is facing £1 million cuts". The paper referred to "immediate savings of £1-m at Church House" and redundancies leading to a cut of a third of employees. A lot must have happened there in the two weeks since his fateful letter to the *Independent*.

And then we move to the parishes. Just a few days after Dr Beaver's letter, the next shot came. The direction from which it was fired, the *Sunday Telegraph*, must have shocked those at Church House. Jonathan Petre penned an excellent investigative article which started: "C of E dioceses will be plunged £11-million into the red within two years, according to confidential figures which reveal that the Church's financial crisis is deeper than previously feared". The predominant mood of the long article is one of gloom; for example: "Some dioceses, including London and Chelmsford, have already cut dozens of clergy and lay jobs and others are selling off historic property and 'glebe' land". There is talk of bishops' palaces and their art collections being considered for the auctioneers' hammer. More disturbing however is that we may be about to see land being sold for new housing on what may well have been regarded by locals as common land. Another common theme for the parishes is typified by the *Guardian's* headline: "Dwindling congregations hit clergy in the pocket". Nor did even the ecclesiastical press hold back. The *Church of England Newspaper* led with the headline "Over half of parishes cannot afford priests" and the *Church Times* with "Clergy say their pay is unreasonable."

There is belated talk of dioceses amalgamat-

ing their administrations, but none of reducing the number of bishops – who seem to be some kind of sacred cows (or should I say bulls?) in all of this. As I have had cause to remark before, what other management positions in the country have survived a hundred years without any rationalisation? Remember too that Anglican membership here is now less than 40 per cent of what it was in 1930. And the Archbishop of Canterbury wants to appoint a third Archbishop.

The estimates of dioceses' deficits, referred to above, were almost certainly made before the announcement of a legal decision that could have a further devastating impact on some parishes. Some farmers in Warwickshire have been *unsuccessfully* sued by their parish for £95,000 for repairs to the chancel of its ancient church. The alleged liability arose (under the deeds) from their ownership of one of their fields. It would have been enforceable under statutes (probably going back to the time of the dissolution of the monasteries) which have been replaced by the Chancel Repairs Act 1932. The farmers claimed this unfair taxation was a breach of their Human Rights. Unless this case is overturned on appeal, the Church will no longer be able to make such demands, which, over the country as a whole, could have amounted to substantial sums.

In his *Independent* letter Dr B made a spirited, but ultimately unconvincing, attempt to dismiss claims of declining church attendance, asking "Where is this "ever dwindling" of congregations when studies show that we have been undercounting attendance by between 27 and 40 per cent?" Readers will realise that the wider the criteria, such as the inclusion for the first time of those who attend quickie weekday services, or all those who only attend just monthly, the greater will be the tally of attenders claimed. Such changes of bases tell us nothing about the trend of decline. When measured on a consistent basis, the decline is relentless, and will continue for reasons rehearsed often in these columns. Has the Reverend Dr Beaver noticed this yet, I wonder – or does he think *Independent* readers are gullible? Certainly *Sunday Telegraph* readers were left in no doubt; Jonathan Petre was back on the case with another searing exposé, this time a whole page on church attendance (not just the C of E's).

The headline says it all; "Revealed: the prayer map of a nation in religious decline". In 1998 only 7.5 per cent claimed to attend church compared with 11.7 per cent in 1979. I say "claimed" because Christian academics acknowledge that respondents over-state their religious observance, so even these will be exaggerated figures. Some counties' reductions are startling: Isle of Man

from 20 per cent in 1979 to 9 per cent in 1998; Derbyshire from 13.4 per cent to 6.5 per cent; Norfolk from 12.3 per cent to 6.8 per cent. South Yorkshire, from which two former *Freethinker* editors, emanated, was the least devout region in the country with 8.2 per cent down to 4.5 per cent in 1998. Merseyside comes top (or should I say bottom?) of the league with 20.0 per cent down to 12.1 per cent. In some counties the scale of these reductions over 19 years seems even steeper than could be explained by older churchgoers dying off and no new ones joining the flock.

Our own readers may remember that Dr Beaver was considered by many to be behind the C of E's reluctance to publish its attendance figures a year or two ago.

Perhaps we should be sympathetic to Dr B. In the current circumstances, the job of C of E Communications Director is perhaps one of the

hardest jobs in the country – if the object is to convince the public that all is well.

Dr Beaver and I agree on one point, however: that the Church's finances are not "steadily" deteriorating. They are, in my opinion, deteriorating very rapidly. This is because the latest deficits at every level are having to be borne by a dwindling number of ageing supporters – and the well is nearly empty.

Dr Beaver assures us the Church is in "good shape". I will leave readers to make up their own minds.

So what? you ask. What has this to do with non-believers who care nothing for the church? Well, the question arises about who is really going to pick up the tab. My own suspicion is that, in the end, it will be us all.

Take the Church's contribution to some new church school buildings. The Government is

about to reduce it from 15 per cent to 10 per cent, and is zero on many others. Most of the VAT on repairs to listed places of worship is to be refunded with effect from April 1, 2001, and repairs to cathedrals and other ecclesiastical buildings will continue to be subsidised by you the taxpayer. Judging by the foregoing, the level of taxpayer contributions will continue to rise.

In this parlous financial situation, the C of E has the nerve to push for a big expansion of its church schools. The Church will own them, run them and hog most of the resources for their own members. The rest of us will pick up the bill.

We are, in effect, paying a Church-tax-by-stealth to give all these privileges to a dying institution.

Was that in Mr Blair's manifesto?

C of E teacher wins maximum award for wrongful dismissal

A TEACHER at a Church of England-aided primary school in Gloucestershire has been awarded £14,200 by the Bristol Employment Tribunal who found that she had been constructively dismissed.

Margaret Hogan, according to a report in *The Teacher* magazine, had been the victim of a series of bizarre actions, false accusations and bullying when a new, inexperienced head teacher was appointed to Withington Church of England Primary School.

Up until the appointment of Adrian Atkins, Margaret had enjoyed an excellent relationship with staff, parents and pupils over the ten years she had worked at the village school.

But matters began to deteriorate when Atkins told her that complaints had been received about her teaching from two parents. Understandably concerned, she contacted the parents, who said that no such complaints had ever been made.

"After this experience, I lost all trust in him," Margaret said. "I could not work with a person who could not be relied upon to tell the truth."

The last straw came when she was off work ill, due to Atkins' treatment of her. The head teacher wrote to parents telling them that he would be taking over her classes permanently.

"He had bullied and humiliated me and finally, without prior consultation, had taken away my teaching duties. It was as if he was goading me into resigning," Margaret said.

Matter took a nasty turn when a brick was thrown through Margaret's window shortly after her resignation. Atkins was charged with criminal damage. He admitted lying to the police about his whereabouts on the night of the incident, as a result of which he was further charged with perverting the course of justice. The prosecutions, however, were not proceeded with, and in the interim Atkins left the school.

The tribunal found unanimously in Margaret Hogan's favour. The maximum compensatory award available for unfair dismissal (£14,200) was paid by Gloucestershire County Council, the responsible LEA.

Margaret's case had been taken up by the National Union of Teachers. "I was made to feel very much alone until the union gave me support. I am saddened by the fact that not one of the governors or local authority officials ever enquired after my safety and well-being since these appalling events."

A video treat for FT readers

THE LIFE of Thomas Paine is intimately entwined with some of the most dramatic moments in history. Now, in association with Global Visions, *Freethinker* readers have the opportunity to own a fascinating film about the life, times and thoughts of one of the most important – and most neglected – Britons of all time.


The son of a Norfolk corset maker, Thomas Paine went on to become one of the most important figures in two revolutions and the author of the most influential political books ever written.

His books, *The Rights of Man*, *Common Sense* and *The Age of Reason*, remain important and enlightened insights into both politics and human nature. Yet Paine's works were banned in his own country. He died alone and forgotten in exile in the USA. Today, few Britons even know Paine's name or his achievements.

In this unforgettable film, which cannot be bought in the shops, writer and presenter Kenneth Griffith sets out to put Paine in his proper place in history.

The film is available on video to *Freethinker* readers for just £14.99 inclusive of p & p. If you would like to take up the offer, please fill in the form below and send it to Global Visions (London) Ltd, 82/84 Hampton Road West, Feltham, Middlesex TW13 6DP.

Forename	Surname
Address	
Postcode	
Please send me _____ copies of Thomas Paine at £14.99 inclusive of p&p each	
Please charge my Visa/	
Mastercard No:	
Expiry date:	
Cardholder's name:	
with the sum of: £	
Signature:	



religious education: indoctrination or brain-washing?

THE whole question of religious teaching in state schools is currently the subject of debate owing to the Government's declared intention of extending the number of church schools at primary and secondary level. This is in addition to aggressive lobbying by the church authorities to encourage existing voluntary controlled schools to change to voluntary aided status.

A vigorous counter-campaign has been mounted by the NSS, the essence of which was set out with admirable clarity by our Executive Director in the March 2001 issue of the *Freethinker*. There does, however, seem to be a further need for secularists to focus on what, precisely, the Government, educationalists, and the churches mean by "Religious Education".

According to the DfEE publication *A Guide to the Law for School Governors* the Government does little more than lay down the requirement for religious education and daily worship, the actual content being left to a rag bag of people depending on locality and the status of any particular school. The guide quotes the following:-

Community schools and all foundation and voluntary schools without a religious character: "Teaching will follow the agreed syllabus for the area which is drawn up by a local conference of teachers, local churches and faith groups and the LEA."

Voluntary aided schools with a religious character: "Religious education in a voluntary aided school with a religious character must be provided in accordance with the school's trust deed or, where provision is not made by trust deed, in accordance with the beliefs of the religion or denomination specified in the Order* referred to above."

Foundation and voluntary controlled schools with a religious character: "Religious education in a foundation or voluntary controlled school with a religious character must be provided in accordance with the locally agreed syllabus for the area."

What, we may well ask, is "religious character" and "a faith group"? The only clear message that emerges from this DfEE subjective fog is that there is no real control over what our children are taught under the all-embracing title of "Religious Education". Statistically there must be among our large teacher population a proportion who are susceptible to religious fundamentalism or fringe cults which, under current arrangements, could all too easily feed their rigidly held beliefs to our vulnerable youngsters. After all, as we all know only too well, religious people never doubt that it is their belief that is the 'real truth'. It would seem, therefore, that, given the impending increase in religious emphasis in our schools, it might be prudent to give some thought to what religious

John Hunt poses the question

education we can expect to invade our schools in the near future.

Religious Education is seldom what its title says it should be. My pocket dictionary defines "religion" as "Human recognition of a superhuman controlling power" which is a pretty good thumbnail definition. So is it this that is widely taught during the RE lessons in our schools – I think not. So what do our children get for their RE money? The answer is that we do not know and the reason that we do not know is that matters are left to "Local Conferences", the membership of which is defined in the loosest of terms. Therefore we have a miscellany of people throughout the country deciding what our children should be taught. It would be interesting to learn exactly who sits on these "Conferences" and even more interesting to know who and/or what determines their selection.

I fully support the NSS's policy of ridding our schools of any religious input. Belief in supernatural faiths or no faith is not the business of the state; indeed, I do not even accept that it is the business of parents. Surely as parents it is our duty to teach and encourage our children to think, not what to think. Surely nothing can be more presumptuous than virtually forcing the young innocent minds of those we, as parents, purport to love, to believe in an abstract concept simply because we happen to believe in it. Belief in a religion or no religion is, I contend, the exclusive business of every individual child as a freethinking person who, in the fullness of time, will form its own conclusions and beliefs. However we have to be realistic and accept that this ideal is a long way off and whilst we must still pursue it with vigour it would seem sensible to seek more transparency over what is actually fed to our children during RE lessons.

It is at this point that believers will trumpet the right of parental withdrawal. There are two aspects to this. First, there is the stigma of exceptional treatment that could well dog the withdrawn child. Student society and peer pressure with their unwritten but ruthless rules could well ostracise withdrawn children and exclude them from every other aspect of social intercourse in the student community. Second, there is the worrying, even sinister, erosion of the withdrawal right. For example, the previous edition of the Guide referred to above imposed a specific duty on Governors to ensure that head teachers informed every parent of their right to withdraw their children from RE lessons. This obligation has quietly disappeared from the current edition. Someone somewhere has made a conscious deci-

sion to delete this important requirement. In fact I can find no reference in the current edition to the actual right of withdrawal. At the end of the sentence that states that every child must attend daily worship there is added, almost in the form of an afterthought, the words 'unless a child has been withdrawn by parents'. This is the nearest the Guide gets to stating formally that the right exists. However, the withdrawal right, which at least in theory no doubt does still exist, is often not a realistic option even if parents are aware of it.

As far as can be ascertained, the general subject matter that is taught in RE lessons falls into three categories. The first is the details of the beliefs of the various faiths, the second is the considerable effect that these beliefs have had and are having on world history, and the third, the moral codes so regularly presented as an integral part of "believing".

The first is valid material for RE lessons. The second simply belongs as a part of the history syllabus and accordingly should be taught exclusively by that department. It is the third that is the major cause for concern. It is this that perpetuates the still widely held and persistent myth that religion equals "goodness" and that believers have some sort of monopoly on morality. We are constantly encouraged by the Christian church for example to believe that it is not possible to live by a moral code that did not originate by some means direct from God. This ignores the fact that man throughout history has always organised his various communities in the light of his own experiences. There is no deep mystery to this process, indeed it is nothing more than commonsense. We all know what we would like, and not like, done to us and it follows that our fellows would feel the same and from this moral codes naturally emerge – no God required! Such codes predate the major "faiths" and furthermore were practised globally. The Christian religion amounts to no more than believing that Jesus existed and was God incarnate. All the rest might be expected of Christians by Christians but no aspects of the moral code are exclusive to Christians and ought not to be taught as though they were. Education, like so much in today's world, drowns in theories, jargon, directives, inspectors, and an interminable flow of "new ideas", all of which mask the simple requirement of teaching our children a few hard facts and, most important of all, the desire and ability to think. This latter goal is crucial but the current thrust of the establishment (spiritual and secular) to infiltrate more religion into our schools poses a real danger in that what was previously endured as relatively gentle indoctrination will become nearer to crude brainwashing. This we must resist.

**The Designation of Schools Having a Religious Character (England) Order 1999.*

I HAD a bit of a scare the other day. I had been plodding through Descartes' *Meditations*, following his arguments from the famous opening "I think therefore I am." I was rather smugly marvelling that such a clever chap should start off so well and end in such disarray, when I paused and – in a blinding flash – saw that my own counter-argument seemed fundamentally flawed and self-contradictory. For a moment, it seemed like I'd got it all wrong and the time had come to apologise to the Big G.

I am aware of two versions of the so-called ontological proof of the existence of God which are very similar in essence.

St. Anselm famously argued:

- 1 God is the greatest thing imaginable. (In fact, in a blatant attempt to obscure his fallacious reasoning with a screen of tortured syntax, he defined God as, "That than which no greater can be imagined.")
- 2 Existence is clearly a characteristic which would be possessed by the greatest thing imaginable.
- 3 That is to say, given two exceedingly great entities which were identical in all respects, save that one existed and the other did not, then the one which existed would be the greater.
- 4 Therefore, whatever other characteristics would be necessary for a thing to be the greatest thing imaginable, existence would definitely be on the list, probably right at the top.
- 5 Therefore, as God is the greatest thing imaginable, and existence is a necessary characteristic of the greatest thing imaginable, God must exist. Otherwise, he wouldn't be the greatest thing imaginable, would he? Obvious, innit?

Descartes argued in the same way, except that he defined God as a perfect Being, and clearly, a Being which did not exist would not be perfect. To lack something (eg existence) is to be imperfect.

In both cases, the argument can be summarised thus:

- 1 The definition of God includes that He exists.
- 2 Therefore, by definition, God exists.

Now, this seems to be fallacious, and a clear example of a circular argument. It can be reduced to absurdity by substituting evil hobgoblin, or any other fantastic creature of your choice. I've always been a hobgoblin man myself:

- 1 Snarg is defined as an evil hobgoblin who exists.
- 2 Therefore, by definition, Snarg exists.

But here's where my alarm started to grow. Is it *really* that simple? The existence of God is "smuggled" into His definition because it is

Mike Wilkinson has a brief moment of panic

"shown" to be part of His definition in that it is "necessary" for Him to exist to comply with the proposed definition. The definition of God does not simply include *existence*, but *necessary existence*.

So, if we try to refute this:

- 1 We start with: "God is a Being who necessarily exists, therefore he exists."
2. The premise is therefore: "God is a Being who necessarily exists."
- 3 The negation is therefore: "A Being who necessarily exists does not necessarily exist."
- 4 Panic! This seems to be like saying, "A red thing is not red," or, "A tall man is not tall." Or, with a pretence of formal logic: "X is not X."
- 5 When we say, "A red thing is not red," or "X is not X," we are clearly contradicting ourselves.
- 6 So, if our argument is based on an internal contradiction, then our argument is nonsense.

You can imagine my alarm. Having apparently proved that my cherished refutation of one of the standard proofs of God's existence was internally flawed and logically inconsistent, I found myself in the position of having to start shopping around for the one true religion pretty damn quickly. I might be run over tomorrow without having time to book my

ticket to the afterlife! After a while, however, I calmed down and thought a bit more:

- 1 We could say, for example, "Part of the definition of a hobgoblin is that his hat is red. However, we do not assert that a hobgoblin exists. We only say that if one does exist then his hat is red."
- 2 So, thinking of God, we could look at the Ontological Argument thus: "We define God as a Being who necessarily exists. However, we do not say that there is a real entity who corresponds with this definition. We only say that if there were a real entity which corresponded with this definition, then it would exist."
- 3 Which is the same as saying, "If God exists then God exists."
- 4 There's nothing controversial about that.

This must be the atheistic equivalent of a crisis of faith – fortunately only a brief one, and perhaps brought on by working too hard and reading too late. However, it only goes to show.

In the meantime, if any readers of the *Freethinker* are interested in joining me in giving thanks to the great red-hatted Hobgoblin whose hypothetical intervention saved me from my foolish ways, I will be starting a collection to build a local meeting place. All members of the Unchurch of the Hypothetical Hobgoblin will get a free red hat, and I promise we'll play loud tapes of discordant bells and ritual wailing at midnight on Saturday, when all good religionists are tucked up in bed.

Brighton man gets religion, cuts off mother's head

A BRIGHTON restaurant worker has been jailed for five years for the manslaughter of his mother who, he believed was a "devil figure".

After reading the Koran, Mostafizur Rahman, 24, got the idea that he was the Prophet Esa who had been sent to earth to wipe out evil. After his 52-year-old mother, Taher, had confessed to him that she had done "evil things", Rahman stabbed her 15 times in the chest, as well as the face and throat. He then decapitated her.

Later he told the police that she would not die because she had "special powers".

Lewes Crown Court heard that Rahman had been a "very jolly and polite" man who enjoyed drinking and clubbing.

But after a holiday in Bangladesh he became very religious. He gave up smoking and spent a lot of time praying.

The court heard how ambulancemen and police found the mother of five's naked body in the bedroom of her flat near Brighton.

In passing sentence, Mr Justice Wright told Rahman: "It is plain that when you committed this terrible crime, your responsibilities for that crime were significantly reduced. But I have to reflect the public horror at the crime of matricide."

When Mark Twain died in 1910, he was an international celebrity and an American institution. He was cheered at home and abroad for his droll wit, frontier bluntness, and corn-pone wisdom. He was America's knight errant against sham, cant, and pomposity in places high and low. His signature white suit, shock of grey hair, walrus moustache, and omnipresent cigar were etched in the national consciousness. Wherever he went, he drew exuberant crowds, journalists wheedled piquant quips, hosts vied for after-dinner remarks. He was toasted by royalty, wooed by moguls, embraced by the intelligentsia. Andrew Carnegie donated a thousand dollars to spread a new Gospel of Saint Mark (an anti-imperialist tract). Charles Darwin kept a Twain volume on his nightstand. William Dean Howells, a lifelong friend and esteemed arbiter of belles lettres, dubbed him the Lincoln of our literature.

Only a handful of intimates knew that this revered creator of Tom Sawyer, Becky Thatcher, and Huck Finn had died a bilious adversary of the Almighty. Even today, Beelzebub isn't a part of his popular image. In his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, billboards, advertisements, posters, T-shirts, mugs, and other memorabilia betray no hint of Twain's vendetta against God. In his twilight years, Twain's volcanic pen belched ceaseless vitriol against his Maker. Spewed into letters, notebooks, essays, dialogues, autobiographical dictations, and sundry fragments, none of this uneven gallimaufry was published in his lifetime. This was gospel for the future. Impressed by the magnitude of his naughtiness, he initially reckoned the world would need five hundred years to catch up. Later, in a flush of philanthropy, he revised the estimate to 2006 CE.

He had no wish to emulate the fate of Thomas Paine, whose *The Age of Reason* he had read in his cub pilot days. Because Paine openly denigrated the Bible and religion, he was skewered in pulpits across the land. Overnight, he went from national hero to national varmint. Since Twain liked to be liked, he opted for the better part of valor. At 72, he wrote: "I expose to the world only my trimmed and perfumed and carefully barbed public opinions and conceal carefully, cautiously, wisely, my private ones."

His private opinions had never been arrestingly pious. His father, who died when Mark was twelve, was an easygoing Hannibal lawyer and storekeeper, whom the son would later suspect of having had an agnostic bone or two. His Presbyterian mother showed flashes of heterodoxy. In his autobiography,

Twain recalls her sympathy for Satan because he never got to tell his side of the story. Like Tom and Huck, his alter egos, young Twain preferred smoking, cussing, spelunking, and lollygagging to sermons, Sunday school, and other heavy-duty moral cleansers. When he did attend to religion, his empirical proclivities threatened orthodoxy. After his Bible teacher had explicated the verse Ask and ye shall receive, Twain spent three days praying for gingerbread. When none materialized, he filched a convenient piece. He concluded that prayer is an inferior mode of acquisition.

As an adult, he adopted the Christianity of enlightened liberalism, compatible with his deism. He discarded heaven and hell, the immortality of the soul, and the divinity of Jesus Christ. From Paine, he had imbibed the idea that religions derive their authority from spurious claims by their founders that they had received revelations from God, transmitted to

Twain's volcanic pen belched ceaseless vitriol against his Maker

posterity as incontrovertible holy writ. Bibles diminished the grandeur of the real God by straitening him to the narrow confines of parochial imaginations. The true revelation was Nature, best apprehended through science.

As late as the 1880s, Twain could still view with equanimity an aloof, impersonal Creator: — "I do not believe in special providences. I believe that the universe is governed by strict and immutable laws. If one man's family is swept away by a pestilence and another man's spared, it is only the law working: God is not interfering in that small matter, either against the one man or in favor of the other. Though severe, this Olympian impartiality was without caprice."

Twain was quick to embrace Darwinism. *The Descent of Man* became one of his favorite books. Like Darwin, Twain was skeptical of the theological bromide that evolution is God's way of producing humans. At various stages, the oyster, the pterodactyl, and the kangaroo, Twain wryly suggested, had made similar assumptions about themselves. For a time, he believed evolution operated on a teleological principle of design, not chance. Later, he decided that evolution is a sightless giant who

Mark T Cover With the

by Gary

rolls a snowball down a hill. The direction of movement is unpremeditated, unforeseen, blind.

Twain touted science, reason, and logic as antidotes to ignorance, superstition, and humbuggery of every ilk. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the mumbo-jumbo of the enchanter Merlin is no match for the hard unsentimental common-sense of Hank Morgan, an enlightened technocrat pitted against medieval obscurantism. From Andrew White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, Twain gleaned many facts that found their way into his own writing. Adducing evidence from geology and paleontology, White demolished the Genesis account(s) of creation. The book reinforced Twain's conviction that God doesn't meddle in human affairs. When Dr Jacques Loeb proposed that life could be created from a mixture of chemical agencies, Twain publicly defended him against widespread skepticism in the scientific community. Historically, Twain noted, the *cognoscenti* had often scoffed at major breakthroughs. Privately, Twain hailed Robert Ingersoll, an outspoken agnostic, as an angelic orator and evangelist of a new gospel — the gospel of free-thought.

Twain's boon companion and biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, described the author's delight in cosmology: "He was always thrown into a kind of ecstasy by the unthinkable distances of space — the supreme drama of the universe. The fact that Alpha Centauri was 25 trillions of miles away, 250 thousand times the distance of our remote sun, and that our solar system was traveling, as a whole, toward the bright star Vega, in the constellation of Lyra, at the rate of 42 miles a second, yet would be thousands upon thousands of years reaching its destination, fairly enraptured him. In *Letters from the Earth*, Satan gives his angelic cohorts a tutorial on astronomy so they may be properly aghast at Jehovah's ignorance of celestial mechanics."

Compared with the majestic pageantry of astronomical phenomena, church creeds seemed insular, petty, and egoistic. In a letter

Twain's Art War Almighty

by Sloan

to Howells, Twain recounted the constricting effect of his sister-in-law's religiosity on his brother Orion: "She is saturated to the marrow with the most malignant form of Presbyterianism, that sort which considers the saving of ones own paltry soul the first & supreme end & object of life, so you see she has harried him into the church several times, & then made religion so intolerable to him with her prayings & Bible readings & her other & eternal pious clack-clack that it has had the effect of harrying him out of it again."

Despite his strictures on church and Bible, Twain long retained respect for Jesus. He told Orion: "Neither Howells nor I believe in hell or the divinity of the Savior, but no matter, the Savior is none the less a sacred Personage, and a man should have no desire or disposition to refer to him lightly, profanely, or otherwise than with the profoundest reverence. Twain always respected what he deemed to be sincere expressions of moral idealism."

When Twain married the wealthy Olivia Langdon, of Elmira, New York, in 1870, he wasn't averse to her conventional piety. At this time, according to Howells, Twain was still far from the entire negation he came to at last. Livy's ardor for church, Bible reading, and family prayers certified her virtue. Like many men of his era, Twain believed the female aptitude for spirituality exceeded the male's. Deferentially, he acquiesced for a while in his wife's faith. He offered morning prayers and daily readings from Scripture. He desisted from snide remarks about the Book. He regularly attended a church pastored by his friend Joseph Twichell – a progressive Christian, Twain enthused. Temporarily, at least, he slipped comfortably into the vestments of Christian respectability. Even after the punctilious phase of his piety had waned, he observed an extended truce with orthodoxy.

Prior to the 1890s, Twain's criticism of religion was more bantering than acrimonious. He poked fun at religious tracts, pious showboats, and bombastic moralizing. *Colloquy Between a Slum Child and a Moral Mentor* illustrates the mode. The supercilious mentor grows increasingly dithery when the child per-

sists in swearing and misconstruing the nature of hell.

"I'd like to ben in that bad place them times when I was cold, by hokey! "

"Don't swear, James. It is wicked."

"What's wicked?"

"Why, to be wicked is to do what one ought not to do – to violate the moral ordinances provided for the regulation of our conduct in this vale of sorrows, and for the elevation and refinement of our social and intellectual natures."

"Gee-whilikins!"

So, what turned this amiable wag and devotee of science into a closet Captain Ahab, storming at the scrutible malice of the uni-

'What this insane
Father requires
is blood and misery;
he is indifferent as
to who furnishes it'

verse and presuming God to scan?

Here, one must resort to conjecture. Whatever Twain's overt pretensions, he evidently never relinquished an anthropomorphic cast of thought about God. According to philosopher Paul Edwards (*Atheism, Encyclopedia of Philosophy*), few Westerners do. When most adults think about God unself-consciously, they vaguely think of him as possessing some kind of rather large body. The moment they assert or deny or question such statements as God created the universe or God will be a just judge when we come before him, they introduce a body into the background, if not into the foreground, of their mental pictures. In the fundamentalist Missouri of his youth, Twain absorbed by cultural osmosis, if not ecclesiastical injection, the idea that God is a merciful and just Father. No matter how much he derided the idea – and he did so *ad infinitum* – some part of him continued to believe this is the way God should be. Twain's disbelief and his pessimism, noted Bigelow Paine, were of his mind, never of his heart. Forty years of halcyon fortune shored up the subterranean optimism.

Then, in the 1890s, his fortune changed. He was buffeted by a series of blows from which

he never recovered. Speculative investments brought him to bankruptcy, his oldest daughter, Susy, died of meningitis, his youngest, Jean, was diagnosed an epileptic, Livy began a slide into lasting invalidism (she died in 1904), and Twain's own health was in eclipse. Having long derided the notion of special providence, said John Tuckey, a Twain scholar, he was now forced to consider himself the personal victim of a scheme of providential retribution.

When the crushing afflictions were visited on him, he reacted like an irascible Job. He struck back at the abusive Father with his best weapon, words – feverishly, obsessively, endlessly, but never publicly discharged. Firing these paper bullets of the brain momentarily eased his leaden grief.

For a time, his rancor was confined to the Old Testament God, whom he had intellectually, but never emotionally, sloughed off. Twain could never quite free himself from reading the Bible with fundamentalist passion, said Twainian Stanley Brodwin, even as he ridiculed it in the name of reason. Jehovah, Twain calculated, was statistically the biggest mass murderer in history. Offended, he reflexively slew everything in sight: "All the men, all the beasts, all the boys, all the babies, all the women and all the girls, except those that have not been deflowered. What this insane Father requires is blood and misery; he is indifferent as to who furnishes it. Nothing drove Jehovah's dudgeon higher than minor lapses in hygiene. Anyone who pisseth against the wall was sure to provoke a wholesale massacre. Despite recurrent bludgeonings, the pious persist in conferring on the brutal autocrat epithets of love and respect. With a fine sarcasm we ennoble God with the title of Father, yet we know quite well that we should hang his style of father wherever we might catch him."

There is only one Criminal, catechized Twain, and it is not man.

Before long, Twain's ire extended to Jesus Christ aka Jehovah after he got religion. The all-new Jehovah was not an improvement. He had added braggadocio and deceitfulness to his repertoire of defects. "His Old Testament self is sweetness and gentleness and respectability compared with his earthly self. In Heaven he claims not a single merit and hasn't one outside of those claimed by His mouth, whereas in the earth He claims every merit in the entire catalogue of merits, yet practices them only now and then,

(Continued on p13)

down to earth: colin mccall

The missing vision

IT was something like Princess Diana's funeral cortege, but the gold and silver casket in the six-tonne Mercedes contained the remains of a 24-year-old French nun, St Thérèse of Lisieux, who died over 100 years ago. And it was in Ireland. But thousands turned out to catch a glimpse as the vehicle passed along the flower-strewn roads. "She is a crowd-puller, no doubt", said Father Linus Ryan, the Carmelite priest co-ordinating the 75-day tour of churches across the country. But the Irish Church needs more than a 75-day wonder. Attendance is dropping, fewer young men are taking up the priesthood and, the *Guardian's* correspondent reports (April 30) that less than a quarter of Irish Catholics agree with the strict moral teachings of the Church.

Who is this saint, anyway? Thérèse Martin was born in 1873, the youngest of nine children, four of whom were already dead. She nearly died of a kidney infection when she was 10, but claimed she was cured by a vision of the Virgin Mary. At 15 she entered a Carmelite convent, where she lived a simple life until her death from tuberculosis at the age of 24 in 1897. Why there was no life-saving vision of the Virgin is not recorded.

Muriel Gray

I HAVE read various accounts in newspapers and books of atheists becoming more agnostic over the years, as though it were in some way a "natural" process; so it was interesting to read that Muriel Gray, who grew up an agnostic is now "more of an atheist" (*Observer*, April 29).

Gray, who fronted many arts programmes back in the 80s (when Channel 4 was at its best) now writes novels. She views with alarm "the dark clouds of religious fervour that are closing in again". And when Nicci Gerrard of the *Observer* interviewed her, she had just penned a vitriolic attack on Catholicism for the *Guardian*.

Watch this space.

Religious similitude

AFTER studying 6,000 reported religious experiences since 1969, researchers at the University of Wales have concluded that people of all religions share the same light. Muslims, Jews and Christians gave similar accounts of what they experienced – a sense of intensified light enveloping them. You can take this to mean a common spirituality, wrote Joan Bakewell in the *Guardian*, or "the

same chemicals affecting people's brains the same way". Which is a crude way of saying there are materialistic explanations of religious visions.

Joan Bakewell, who was considering the future of religious broadcasting, as the BBC searches for a new head of religion, took a look at *Son of God*, of which I saw only the first episode. It seems it got no better. Despite the hype and the praise for the graphics, "the praise quickly faltered". And Ms Bakewell rightly castigated Jeremy Bowen for his assertions that "we can be sure" and "we know for a fact", when he was talking of things about which we cannot be sure and certainly cannot know as facts.

"Moral pressure"

THE strict moral teaching of the Roman Catholic Church will not be forgotten in Scotland, as long as Cardinal Thomas Winning is in control. A pastoral letter read out at masses warned that taking the morning-after pill, authorised for sale to the over 16s, is the equivalent of a "chemically-induced abortion". The Church could not "remain silent on this issue, given the serious nature of what is being proposed".

There was a threat, too, of "moral pressure" on Catholic doctors and pharmacists, as well as parents and teenagers, to refuse to sanction the use of the pill. They were called upon "to reflect on what was being proposed and to exercise their conscientious right of objection" (*Guardian*, April 7).

Fortunately, for Catholics as well as non-Catholics, Winning is losing his fight to ban abortion.

Moral chasm

MEANWHILE, in England, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor equated opposition to abortion with the "common good" and urged voters to withhold support for pro-abortion candidates in the coming election. His 16-page document, "Vote for the Common Good", also listed euthanasia and embryo research as subjects on which would-be MPs' views should be sought before voting.

What he called a "moral chasm" had been opened up by "parliament's decision to permit the creation and destruction of cloned human embryos", and it was possible that in the next parliament attempts would be made to legalise euthanasia. "To do so would be both wrong and dangerous. Whatever the motive euthanasia amounts to murder".

Let's hope that if the occasion arises, parliament will open up another "moral chasm"

between itself and the Roman Catholic Church.

Fraud and error

PASTOR John Nduati believes that "God sent him to deliver Africa from sin". Which, you will agree, is something of a Herculean task. But when *Observer* correspondent James Astill visited the God's Power Church on the edge of a Nairobi slum on April 1, the Pastor was full of confidence. "May I remind you that you will be healed today?" he called out to the singing and shrieking congregation of Aids sufferers although, as Astill noted, few of them could have afforded a medical test on their condition.

Nduati claims to have healed cripples, barren women and cancer patients, as well as Aids victims – 50,000 last year. Not surprisingly, nobody at God's Power Church seemed to doubt him. That was left to Professor Tula Bowry, East Africa's only clinical immunologist, who said it was possible for a positive HIV antibody test to turn negative; but only when the immune system had packed up totally. The other explanations would be fraud or error.

U r saved

"GOD says fear not cos I've saved u". That is a rough translation of one of the short, snappy sentences in a mobile phone service relayed by text message throughout Germany, last month, by the Hanover Evangelistic Youth Church. Whether, as the Rev Stefan Heintz hoped, it would help to bring back those who haven't been to church since confirmation is, I should say, doubtful.

He aimed to bridge the gap between youth culture and the church via the limited mobile phone text. "The Our Father contains 325 characters but, as the text message can only carry 160, we've had to paraphrase it", he explained. Why he thought the prayer would have any more appeal in its succinct form than in the original is not clear. It's substance that counts.

Smoker slogan

COMING down on the side of determinism in the age-old freewill/determinism argument, Barbara Smoker has devised the following explanatory slogan:- "You may chose to act the way you wish, but you do not choose the way you wish to act."

If you have a slogan please send it to us.

I WAS not brought up in a particularly religious household. My parents observed the conventional C of E ceremonies for family hatches, matches and despatches but were not regular churchgoers. They had me christened in the local parish church because in the 1930s it was the done thing and it was probably also a good excuse for a family get-together.

Religion was not discussed much at home, but, from the little that I remember being said, I suspect my father was agnostic and my mother a sort of deist, although she would not have recognised the term. I recall her saying "there must be something: look at the animals. They all have their own methods of defence". I did not know enough then to argue about natural selection.

In childhood the closest I came to religion was probably in "Scripture" lessons, as they were called, at school. Looking back, I realise that Miss Roberts, who taught the subject, was rather exceptional for the time. She seemed to take the supernatural out of Christianity.

For instance, discussing the miracle of the loaves and fishes, she suggested that the food was not magically multiplied but the personality of Jesus was strong enough to encourage people who had food with them to bring it out and share with others who had none. This rational approach led me to regard the Bible in the same light as Shakespeare and our other English literature set texts. At that time I neither strongly believed nor disbelieved in God, but thanks to Miss Roberts I passed O Level in Religious Knowledge, among other subjects.

My paid employment was mainly in the

Anne Mills is the 17th contributor in our *My Atheism* series



field of disability. Although mildly cerebral palsied myself, I had not had much to do with this aspect of life before I started work but one of the main things I discovered was that disabled people are sitting targets for religious do-gooders. This attitude is exemplified in a letter once written to a national newspaper by the late Malcolm Muggeridge. He said in effect that the disabled were put in this world so that others could exercise their Christian compassion in caring for them. Although I did not personally experience much of this attitude I

found (and still find) the whole Muggeridge type idea profoundly insulting to disabled people in general.

It put me right off religion.

My mother died when I was only 30, and as I watched the life fade from her face I knew her soul wasn't going anywhere. This was really the end. It was a strong gut feeling, not exactly a deconversion experience such as Barbara Smoker has described but a confirmation of my disbelief.

I had the same feeling of finality when my father died, eight months later.

When the Open University started up in the 1970s, I decided to read for a degree. Courses such as "Renaissance and Reformation" helped clarify my ideas about religion. When I met my future husband at a social club for OU students one of the things that drew us together was a mutual disbelief in God. We married, naturally, in a Registrar's office, to the dismay of some relations on both sides.

Before I met my husband I was only vaguely aware that formal organisations for unbelievers existed. He belonged (and still does) to some of the national humanist associations and I have accompanied him to occasional meetings and social events.

Apart from a spell as newsletter editor of the Open University Humanist Society, I have not been active in the freethought movement myself, as I prefer to pursue interests near to home. However, I support the the National Secular Society and other humanist organisations for their work in promoting the idea that you can have morality without religion.

IN APRIL we launched the first of our Atheism in Action spots, and ever since examples have been pouring in from readers. This month we have picked one of a number of letters written to the *Jersey Evening Post* by *Freethinker* subscriber Dr R Le Sueur.

What annoyed Dr Le Sueur on this occasion was an exhortation by one Peter Cushen for Jersey residents to adopt the Ten Commandments. Cushen concluded: "To know the difference between right and wrong, it is essential that we know God's laws, not just in our minds but also in our hearts. Such knowledge leads to a full life before death, as well as after.

"Let us pay heed to the words of the great Lord Denning, who stated in *The Influence of Religion on Law* that 'without religion there can be no morality, there can be no law ... If religion perishes in the land, truth and justice will go also. We have already strayed too far from the faith of our fathers. Let us return to it, for it is the only thing that can save us.'"

Atheism in Action

Dr Le Sueur responded thus: "Peter Cushen's assertion, quoting Lord Denning that there can be no morality without religion, is an insult to the large number of secularists and atheists who are law-abiding, for the far better reason that we recognise the social origin of morality – and keep our trust with society and our fellow man, rather than just being good because we are afraid God won't let us into Heaven.

"The main reason for the breakdown in law and order is the tragic coupling of morality with religion. Now people are better informed, the absurdities of traditional beliefs are no longer compatible with the historical linkage

of morality with them. Unfortunately, the 'baby' of morality has therefore been thrown out with the 'bath-water' of an untenable belief system.

A generation of children that are barely able to read, write or count probably don't know or care what 'Thou shalt not' means, and are not likely to be impressed by out-moded commands not to worship graven images or covet their neighbour's ox or ass.

"I suggest amending one of the Commandments to: 'You will not attack old people in their homes, or pelt them with eggs; and if you do you will be locked up for a very long time and deprived of the normal childhood privileges of alcohol, ecstasy and violent videos.'"

As the police cannot be everywhere, I suggest people be allowed to defend themselves, instead of being penalised for it, if necessary by the use of fierce dogs and a liberal application of bird-shot where it hurts most.

MATTHEW Chapman is the great-great grandson of Charles Darwin. He is a Hollywood screenwriter who was born in Cambridge and now lives in Manhattan. Intrigued by the continuing fundamentalist opposition to evolution in America, he resolved to write a book about the notorious Scopes "Monkey Trial" of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee. So he left New York by Greyhound bus bound for Dayton, to find out how it had changed in 75 years and, particularly, if Daytonians still believed the world was made in six days and is only 6,000 years old. He went, he tells us in the prologue, as "a more or less cheerful and defiant atheist, suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of spiritual emptiness". "If I went down an atheist", he says in his epilogue, "I came back an agnostic". Whether this means that something had filled the "spiritual emptiness" is not clear.

Unfortunately Chapman missed the modern re-enactment of the trial and was unable to obtain a transcript, but a great deal of the book is devoted to the original prosecution, and this alone makes it a delight for free-thinkers. That, and the author's encounters with the fundamentalists of the Bryan College, who do believe in the literal truth of the Bible.

The college is named after William Jennings Bryan, three times Democratic Presidential candidate, and one-time Secretary of State, a fighter for minority rights, women's suffrage, a minimum wage, an 8-hour working day, and other just causes. He was a brilliant orator and a fervent Christian. As he grew older, the preacher replaced the reformer. Bryan's heart was in the right place: the doubts concerned his head. But America, then as now, had plenty of Christian fundamentalists and Bryan's syndicated newspaper column, the weekly "Bible Talks" reached an estimated 15 million people. His followers swallowed what H L Mencken called "theological bilge" and rejoiced "like pilgrims disporting in the river Jordan".

Bryan led the prosecution in the trial of John Scopes, a 24-year-old school teacher, who agreed to let his name be used to test the constitutionality of the Butler Act, which forbade the teaching of evolution in schools. Scopes was defended by Clarence Darrow, one of Matthew Chapman's heroes, whom he rightly describes as a compassionate humanist. Both Scopes and Darrow had freethinking fathers, and followed in their footsteps.

Each day of the trial began with a prayer, despite Darrow's objection that it was prejudicial to the case. Another objection – to a sign over the jury saying READ YOUR

Colin McCall reviews
*Trials of the Monkey: An
Accidental Memoir*, by
Matthew Chapman.
Duckworth £14.99

BIBLE in large letters – was successful. The judge also restricted the defence's expert witnesses, although one who was allowed, a zoologist named Metcalf, distinguished between theories of evolution and the fact of evolution itself. That organisms had evolved was "perfectly and absolutely clear", he said, though there might be different theories on its mechanism.

As he couldn't call his experts, Darrow decided to call Bryan, who consented, provided he, in turn, could question Darrow. And so came the famous interrogation on the literal truth of the Bible. Jonah and the whale, Joshua and the sun, and so on. Bryan believed in the Creation in 4004BC and the Flood in a calculated 2348BC. He confessed he knew nothing about the ancient Egyptian civilisation and "not a great deal" about other religions. He had been so well satisfied with Christianity that he had "spent no time trying to find arguments against it". Did he think the world was created in six days? "Not six days of 24 hours", Bryan replied to gasps from the crowd. The "Fundamentalist Pope", as Mencken dubbed him, had committed blasphemy. It didn't matter; the judge decided Bryan's testimony was irrelevant, and ordered it to be expunged from the record. John Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100, which was paid by Mencken's paper, the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, along with the bail. The verdict was later overturned on a technicality by the Tennessee Supreme Court. Poor Bryan died five days after the original trial.

One of the reasons for Chapman's trip south was to see if things had changed, and the answer seems to be very little. The highway leading to the town was "littered with ... warnings of Christ's imminent return"; and the place has 45 churches for a population of only 6,000. Indeed, Chapman found the religious mood was worse, more narrow. On a hill at the northern edge is the Bryan College which declares "Christ Above All", and which Chapman visited several times.

There he met his "favourite creationist", Professor Kurt Wise, who doesn't entertain any nonsense about the days of creation being long periods of time. No metaphor is involved here; they were actual "earth rotation days", because the same word for day is used in the

Ten Commandments: six days shalt thou labour and rest on the seventh. Wise also believes that the world is 6,000 years old and suggests that the fossil record was "formed catastrophically", possibly on the third day; and there was, of course, a Flood.

Chapman got into an argument over his great-great grandfather who, Wise insisted, "hated Christianity with a passion", because of the Beagle's Captain Fitzroy's fanaticism, which is ridiculous. But Wise was right to describe Darwin as "not a Christian ... not a believer in God"; and when Chapman asked if that meant the author of *The Origin of Species* was in hell, the answer was plain: "if he did not believe in Jesus Christ as his personal saviour, he went to hell, he is in hell". Instead of feeling sorry for Darwin, Chapman understandably felt sorry for Wise.

His is, indeed, a tragic story: his frantic attempts to reconcile the Bible and science, especially during his Harvard days under Stephen Jay Gould. Yet Wise had an unusual effect on Chapman who, while dismissing faith in God or "any of the fairy tales that surround Him" as absurd, finds a need for faith of some kind. "When you encounter someone like Kurt, you realise that faith is sometimes an absolute necessity", he adds unenlighteningly.

But the main effect on the author occurred during an expedition, led by Wise, to a series of dark caves, an extract from which appeared in the *Guardian* last November, entitled "Sermon under the mount" and described as a "revelation". What that revelation was is, again, far from clear. In his closing pages Chapman once more dismisses organised (and disorganised) religion, but admits to "a craving for a larger meaning" without any "theological junk". I leave it at that; it is not a hunger I share.

I only add that *Trials of the Monkey* is a memoir and to some extent an autobiography, much of which I have had no time to discuss. Particularly poignant is Matthew Chapman's relationship with his atheist and alcoholic mother, whom he loved, and to whom he dedicates this enjoyable book.

Freethinker Bound Volumes

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Mark Twain's Covert War With the Almighty

penuriously.”

With some historical legerdemain, Twain credited (or discredited) Jesus with the invention of hell. This was the most egregious rascality imaginable because it deprived the wretched human race of its lone solace, eternal death. Thus, the meek and gentle Savior was a thousand times crueler than ever he was in the Old Testament.

Eventually, Twain's odium encompassed the stolid Designer of the deists. He, too, was destitute of morals. As the author of natural law, he was culpable for the thousand shocks flesh is heir to. Twain was stupefied by the all-comprehensive malice which could patiently descend to the contriving of elaborate tortures for the meanest and pitifulest of creatures. The effectiveness of the traps, pitfalls, and gins, Twain mused, in no way depended on obtrusive intervention:—“He could invent the tortures and set in motion the laws and machinery which should continue them through all time without his supervision, then turn His attention elsewhere and trouble himself no further about the matter.” The cosmic Watchmaker could install automatic detonating devices. This absentee knavery was worse than Jehovah's in-your-face immediacy.

Twain's anger was aggravated by the supposition that God, were he genially disposed, could eliminate all unhappiness, yet sadistically declines to do so. Twain ridiculed the moral axiom that suffering builds character. He thought it more apt to destroy than to edify. He inverted Alexander Pope's cheery maxim that whatever is, is right. Since God is malevolent, Twain reasoned, whatever is, is wrong. Twain obsessively documented the wrongness:—“The day we are born he begins to persecute us. Even our littleness, our innocence, our helplessness cannot move him to any pity, any gentleness. Day after day, week after week, month after month, the wanton torture goes on.”

Twain frequently chanted litanies of ailments:—“Pain, pain, pain in the teeth, in the stomach, in the bowels; disease follows disease: measles, croup, whooping cough, mumps, colic, scarlet fever, ague, tonsillitis, diphtheria—there is no end to the list. In sum, the paragon of animals is but a basket of festering offal provided for the support and entertainment of swarming armies commissioned to rot him and destroy him, each army equipped with a special detail of the work.”

Twain oft rehearsed the ubiquitous malignity of the fly. God gives it its orders:—“Depart into the uttermost corners of the earth, and diligently do your appointed work. Persecute the

(Continued from centrepages)

sick child; settle upon its eyes, its face, its hands, and gnaw and pester and sting; worry and fret and madden the worn and tired mother who watches by the child, and who humbly prays for mercy and relief with the pathetic faith of the deceived and unteachable.”

He goes on for another four-hundred words.

In a fragmentary Twain fable, a monkey, hearing God praised, mumbles:—“My praise is that we have not two of him.”

Twain couldn't imagine himself as heartless as he supposed God to be:—“I often put a dog on the fire and hold him down with the tongs, and enjoy his yelps and moans and strugglings and supplications [in reality, Twain was kind to

‘Only unthinking
fools believe they
have an obligation to
God and owe Him
thanks, reverence,
and worship’

animals], but with a man it would be different. I think that in the long run, if his wife and babies, who had not harmed me, should come crying and pleading, I couldn't stand it; I know I should forgive him and let him go, even if he had violated a monastery. Other people are much like him: better, kinder, gentler, more to be respected, honored, and esteemed than the Deity they ostensibly revere.”

Viewing Satan as a heroic rebel against the real Archfiend, Twain came to identify with the fallen cherub and often used him as a mouthpiece.

In *That Day in Eden*, Satan commiserates with the fallen Adam and Eve, baffled by God's punishment:—“Poor ignorant things, the command of refrain had meant nothing to them, they were but children, and could not understand untried things and verbal abstractions which stood for matters outside of their little world and their narrow experience.” In *Letters from the Earth*, Satan says “The only person responsible for the couple's offence escaped, and not only escaped but became the executioner of the innocent.”

Twain deprecated the Moral Sense (he always capitalized it), a legacy of the mythic Fall, as the source of immorality. By allowing humans to distinguish good and bad, its sole effect was to

tempt and to enable humans to do evil. Without it, we would live in a state of idyllic innocence, unafflicted by conscience. With it, we are inferior to the creatures spared the accursed faculty:—“Whenever I look at the other animals and realize that whatever they do is blameless, I envy them the dignity of their estate, its purity and its loftiness, and recognize that the Moral Sense is a thoroughly disastrous thing.”

Twain was like a Calvinist in a universe shorn of grace. Deprived of free-will, proximately by temperament and circumstance, but ultimately by God, humans were servile mechanisms doomed to enact, generation after generation, to the last syllable of time, the deeds God had contrived, foreseen, and appointed to each.

Mentally, Twain dwelt in an absurd universe where human automations trick themselves into believing they are autonomous. All the while, the cosmic Puppet Master is pulling the strings:—“Man is a poor joke, the poorest that was ever conceived, an April-fool joke, played by a malicious urchin Creator with nothing better to waste his time upon. As programmed mechanism, man is not to blame for what he is. He didn't make himself and he has no control over himself. Only unthinking fools believe they have an obligation to God and owe Him thanks, reverence, and worship.”

His own perfervid blasphemies were part of the appointed absurdity. Occasionally, Twain sought refuge in solipsism. After his wife's death, he wrote to Joseph Twichell:—“There is nothing. There is no God and no universe, there is only empty space, and in it a lost and homeless and wandering and companionless and indestructible Thought. And I am that Thought. And God, and the Universe, and Time, and Life, and Death, and Joy and Sorrow and Pain only a grotesque and brutal dream, evolved from the frantic imagination of that same Thought.”

In his grief and despair, Twain arrived at an endgame of utter nihilism.

An atheistic observer might be tempted to descry in Twain's fate an *exemplum* on the perils of anthropomorphic theism. I'll resist. At the end, for Mark Twain, nothing short of death would do. He had been stretched out on the rack of the world too long. Fame, Love, Riches, Pleasure, these, he wrote, were life's false gifts.

Death was the only true boon.

O'Hair "a vulgar bully"

BARBARA Smoker's article in your April issue, about Madalyn Murray O'Hair, is not exactly "real life" as you title it. It is instead another of the attempts to convert the truth about Madalyn into something palatable for atheists and others who were fortunate enough never to have known her.

She was in fact a vulgar bully and a vicious authoritarian control-freak whose behavior damaged the cause of atheism in profound and subtle ways that are regrettably invisible to persons who, like Smoker, seem to fixate on the sheer quantity of publicity as a thermometer of an activist's effectiveness.

Smoker hopes there will be no more belief that the O'Hair family was absconding with hundreds of thousands of dollars. On the contrary, the fact that they were in the process of gathering up an immense fortune in *gold coins* just prior to their deaths points unmistakably to the reality: that they really were in the preparations to run out, but were interrupted by criminals. Other criminals, that is.

It is clear from the gathering of the fortune in these coins, that the O'Hairs were about to leave the USA and take up residence in some other country. There they could convert the gold to local currency, probably at an extremely advantageous exchange-rate, and live in luxury for the rest of their days. Very obviously it was while they were in the middle of this no doubt complicated and somewhat time-consuming manoeuvre, that their plan was cut short.

Even Madalyn's closest associates evidently believed this was what she'd done – after all, *they* didn't take any action at all except to nervously discourage efforts to find Madalyn, long after anybody else would have run for the police. They didn't want to be in the position of starting some inquiry that would ruin Madalyn's getaway, and then have her scream at them and kick them out of *her* organization for doing it; and this is why such a long time passed before any investigations were made.

To respond to all of the other blunders and varnishings of the truth in Smoker's article would take a very great amount of space. No doubt when you've accepted proudly the title of "the British M.M. O'Hair" as Smoker has, you have an interest in making sure that that's regarded as praise and not a disgrace as it actually is. Thus you ignore Madalyn's penchant for making false charges against other atheists – sometimes extremely serious charges – and you don't mention the lawsuits she filed against atheists she disagreed with, or most of the other foul and atrocious ways in which she Stalinized American Atheists.

Any atheist (or rationalist or freethinker or even humanist) will probably admit that mere disbelief in the absurd claims of the modern prevalent religions is not the reason for our activist work. After all, we don't believe in Zeus or Amon-Ra either, but we don't bother with the few remaining idiots who do perhaps still follow these dead gods. No, we're atheists because we strenuously object to the invasions on our lives and our freedom by religious lunatics who *happen* to be wrong.

Madalyn, however, had created a vile, authoritarian organization via her nasty, abusive and unethical behavior. In short, she acted just like many religionists, only she *happened* to be right about the non-existence of god; but in terms of doing anything that would exhibit a love of human freedom and decency, Madalyn might just as well have been the most hysterical maniac believer in "Jesus".

Atheist/freethinker circles will not benefit from trying to convert Madalyn into a decent person by covering up her ghastly actions, because persons who are thereby led to believe untruths will tend to stumble onto the *actual truths* after a while; and then they will withdraw from these ranks in disgust and disillusionment. No, the best thing to do is freely admit that O'Hair was a horrible discredit to our ideas. This is hard to do, for some persons, because in modern times the celebrity is almost a god in his or her own right, and people are flattered and exalted to have even a brushing contact with such a media-anointed entity. Everyone who is *not* a celebrity seems wormlike and insignificant by comparison; therefore those who get the chance to be guests in the home of a celebrity, or travel around briefly with one, or engage in any other basking in reflected glory, are not likely to want to level a realistic criticism at the hideous actual behavior of such a one. In other words, I see the Madalyn loyalists as, essentially, the embracers of a kind of secular religion themselves, an atheist cult.

They've touched the hem of her garment. They've broken bread with her and have traveled around in her car.

FRED WOODWORTH,
Editor, *The Match*
Tucson, Arizona

The Lesson of Afghanistan

I REMEMBER many years ago, just before the start of the Afghan War, hearing a BBC correspondent reporting from Afghanistan on the election of the communist candidate, Najibullah, largely as a result of the massive turnout of voters in Kabul. The vote, as he (the correspondent) reported, followed the implementation of programmes of health and educa-

tion and freeing of the women and children from restrictions of Islam, and the men of the Mujahadeen by the secular communist party.

Following the election, the Mujahadeen refused to accept the election result and took up armed opposition. Najibullah called upon the then USSR to fulfil its treaty obligations to Afghanistan, which it duly did.

Thus began the long drawn-out war from which the Taliban eventually took over, and I never heard any reference to this report of the events again.

Suddenly and completely the situation was thereafter described as a war by the USSR against the people of Afghanistan.

The US (Batman) and UK (Robin) enthusiastically supported the Mujahadeen and traditional Islam against the communists (Afghanistan and Russian). The rest as they say is history!

I wrote to the BBC to ask them to search out this *From Our Own Correspondent* programme, but they wrote back saying that they did not keep programmes back to that date. I had to accept this even though I did not and do not believe it.

A W F MAYER

Science and homoeopathy

ONCE again Jean Fawcett flaunts her ignorance of science (Points of View, May). I had hoped that the homoeopathy debate had been laid to rest but she insists on repeating her little anecdote even though I drubbed it in my response published in February. As I said before, anecdotes depend on memory, which is notoriously unreliable. Ms Fawcett has already demonstrated poor memory when it comes to homoeopathic matters (as I pointed out in February, she got the Nature study wrong). Now it seems that her recall is so poor she cannot even remember that she had been discredited just a few months ago!

As for science being profit-motivated, so what? Every research and development department in industry, every patent filed, every new invention brought to market is profit-motivated. Profit-driven research employs millions world-wide, brings us new technologies, medicines and comforts, and generates trillions of dollars in revenue. Without it we would still be living in the Middle Ages.

I wonder if Ms Fawcett realises the extent to which profit-driven science influences and improves our lives? We are surrounded by the results of profit-driven science, from the pigments in the ink on this page to the washing powder for our clothes. There are certainly downsides, nuclear waste is one, but it is often science that identifies them (eg ozone layer damage) and finds the solutions (eg hydrofluoro-



rocarbons). After all, the profits to be made by solving such problems can be immense.

DR STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

MS FAWCETT demonstrates the persistence and poor logic of a true believer. The ancient idea of "like cures like" to which she refers is still in evidence in Bach flower remedies, where, for instance, walnuts are said to fortify the brain. Why else would god have made them so similar in appearance? Hahnemann's version of this "law of similars" is based on symptoms (supposedly) rather than appearances. His methods were wholly unscientific. He attributed his "discovery" to divine revelation (see *Homoeopathy: What are we Swallowing?* by Steve Ransom who provides a thorough bibliography). Needless to say, there is no strong theory or evidence to support "like cures like" or indeed "less is more" which is the other tenet of homoeopathy.

Ms Fawcett claims that her doctor, from clinical evidence alone, can determine which of his patients has been treated homoeopathically. As this is an extraordinary claim the onus is on her to prove it. Well-conducted clinical trials repeatedly prove that homoeopathic medicines perform exactly as placebos (as published by *Bandolier* magazine for evidence-based medicine among others).

Within the cult of homoeopathy Hahnemann seems to be generally regarded as infallible. It seems fair therefore to refer to him as a guru figure. True scientists can expect their work to be scrutinized and corrected by future generations. One would expect true science to build upon and mesh with existing knowledge, whereas homoeopathy is now utterly at odds with it.

I'm sure that the profit motive does affect science for good and bad. Surely some of the science motivated by profit has been for the greater good of man, and some important and useful science is not yet done for want of incentive. If all the scientists in the world were actually mad and evil it would not increase homoeopathy's chances of working, nor would it cleanse homoeopaths of their normal desire for personal gain and status.

True knowledge can be put to good or bad use. The only possible argument for homoeopathy is that it is a falsehood being put to good use. This is the argument I have tried refuting, on the grounds of its social and economic "side effects" as well as resulting medical neglect.

Ms Fawcett's healer may not have told her that Hahnemann's preferred method of vibrating his preparations was to hit the container repeatedly with a Bible. If this doesn't make her feel better she might like to take a few "La

Luna" tablets from the homoeopathic producer Helios. They claim to contain "potentised" moonlight. That ought to do the trick.

STEPHEN PARK
Devon

MAY I correct Jean Fawcett's (Points of View, May 2001) bizarre ideas about the nature of science and scientists. Electricity was not "invented" by anyone. It simply arises from the fundamental properties of matter and was around, in the former of lightning and other phenomena, billions of years before the discovery of its properties by scientists such as Galvani, Volta, Ampere, Ohm, Henry and Faraday.

Neither do scientists invent deadly weapons nor nuclear power stations. Both of these are usually designed and developed by engineers, usually supported by governments - many of them democratically elected.

I suspect that it would be very hard indeed to find a scientist working in any UK University motivated primarily by profit or by "the good of humanity". Both scientists and engineers, in academia or industry, in the UK, are notoriously badly paid, compared with other educated professionals.

Many scientists do the work simply because it is intellectually rewarding and also, since they are just as human as the rest of us, because it might give them the opportunity to make a lasting name for themselves.

Finally, may I also respond to Ms Fawcett's question to Stephen Park, "What is true science?" Science is simply the development of models of nature and the universe that fit together consistently, conform to observation and allow reliable, accurate predictions to be made. Science also admits when its traditional model is incorrect or incomplete. It is self-correcting: so, when new evidence emerges, the model is refined so as to accommodate it. The far-fetched claims of belief systems such as homoeopathy, astrology and the like would, if they were true, have to be accommodated by making major changes to many well-proven scientific paradigms. This has happened before in science on many occasions; for example, think of Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein, Heisenberg, Crick and Watson, and it will continue to happen again and again. This is how science progresses and it is, after all, exactly how scientists become recognised for their work, as did the famous names in my first paragraph.

But extraordinary claims require extraordinary, hard evidence and not folksy anecdotes or hearsay. As far as homoeopathy and the rest are concerned, we are still waiting for this.

IAN QUAYLE
Burwell

Bigoted material

I HAVE subscribed to the *Freethinker* for about a year. I find it a useful source of information on the influence of religion in contemporary society. However, I have been disappointed to find that some of the material displays a bigoted, intolerant tone.

I am not religious. I would describe myself as sceptical but open-minded; a freethinker. What good is it, however, if a freethinker rejects religious doctrine simply to replace it with their own secularised form of dogma.

Certainly not all material in the *Freethinker* merits this accusation, but after reading "Ten Reasons to Ditch Religion" (March 2001) I felt I had to comment. The article is obviously heavily-biased propaganda and is very illogical. Is it supposed to be a joke? The ten "reasons" listed are highly selective, grossly over-generalized, and exhibit logical fallacy and spurious reasoning.

Through individual examples of bizarre and negative incidents are we supposed to conclude that all of religion is therefore bizarre and negative? If one priest is condemned for child-abuse are we supposed to assume that all priests must therefore be child-abusers? These examples tell of bizarre incidents perpetrated by people who are religious, therefore religion must be to blame! Obviously, non-religious people never do these things! Especially atheists, humanists or freethinkers. These points are not stated explicitly but the title of the piece makes the implication clear. Frankly, this sort of writing is patronising and juvenile, and is especially out of place in a magazine that is supposed to uphold logic, reason, and tolerance. How can the *Freethinker* be taken seriously if it is seen to promote woolly thinking? Sadly it is not the only example that I could mention in the year or so I have been subscribing.

The *Freethinker* is turning into a hate-mag full of closed-minded petty-mindedness. Rather it should be used to teach people the ways to think for themselves and make informed choices, instead of promoting its own brand of propaganda and dogma.

MICHAEL J RUSH
Chesterfield

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, July 1, 4pm. Tea party and Annual General Meeting.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnaley 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 Cleevelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel 01242 528743. Worcester House, Pittville Circus Road, Cheltenham.

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.

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, July 13, 7.30pm. Derek Lennard: *Mark Twain and Religion*.

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, July 3, 8pm. David Sames: *Genealogy – What's in a Name?*

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.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009.

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, July 26, 8pm. Confession Time: *Why I Am a Humanist*.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Literature and information stall at Lewisham People's Day, Mountsfield Park, Stainton Road, Catford, Saturday, July 14, 12 noon till 6pm.

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, June 21, 8pm. Martin Dyer-Smith: *Is There Life After Sex?*

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*. Wednesday, July 4, 8pm. Dave Jeffries: *Religious Functions*.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Literature & information stall at South Yorkshire Festival, Wortley Hall, Wortley Village, Saturday, July 7, 12 noon till 5pm. Sharrow Festival, Mount Pleasant Park. Abbeydale Road and Sitwell Road, Sheffield, Saturday, July 14, 12 noon till 4 pm.

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, June 13, 7.30pm. Debbie Chay: *Human Rights Legislation*.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Alice Munn's House (WRVS), 4 Gravel Hill, Ludlow.

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.