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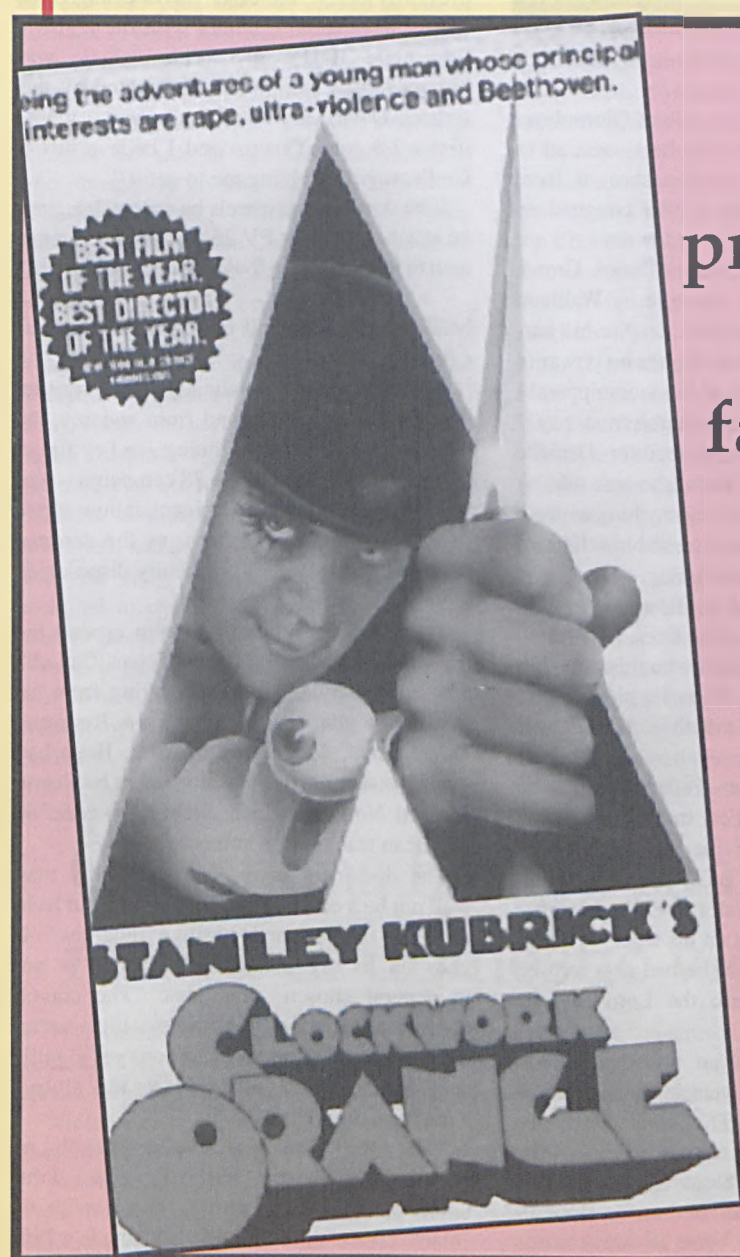
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The

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



Is brainwashing in prison – particularly of a religious nature – fact or, as portrayed in Stanley Kubrick’s controversial film, *A Clockwork Orange*, fanciful nonsense? Charles Hanson, an insider, offers his view on the centre pages

Also in this issue:

- Scrap the Church of England, says ex-bishop, p3
- Church schools: NSS sparks a national debate, p4

freethinking out loud: barry duke

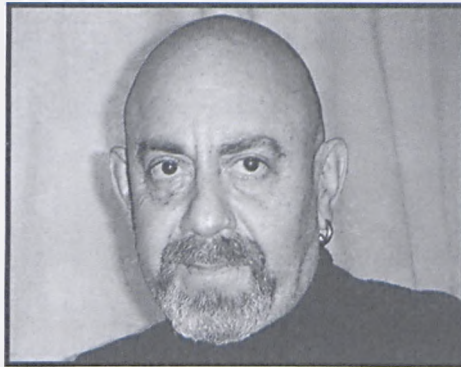
I HAVE never had too much of a problem with charismatic Christian churches. After all, the happy-clappy types who attend these services are generally wired to the moon, and the more time they spend filling the cavernous space between their ears with noise, the less likely they are to pose any great threat to the rest of us.

Or so I thought until I read of the antics of the Christ Apostolic Church in Leytonstone, in the East End of London.

The church holds services three times a week, and they are LOUD. So loud, in fact, as to drive everyone in the vicinity completely bonkers. Or, in one instance, completely out of the country.

Church neighbours Ivan and Hanna Biel have had all they can take of the amplified sermons, drumming and clapping, and intend to return to the Czech Republic.

In an interview with the London *Evening Standard* last month, Mr Biel described the deafening racket emanating from the church, which can be heard a mile away, as "a mad,



crazy noise. The pastor thinks he has the God-given right to do as he pleases."

The pastor in question is Albert Olorunleye, and, despite having recently been ordered to pay fines of £11,000 for breaches of local noise regulations, he has neither coughed up the cash, nor dampened down the din.

The pastor's appeal at Snaresbrook Crown Court against the fines, imposed by Waltham Forest Council, was rejected, despite his barrister telling the court that "he has no power to dampen the enthusiasm of his worshippers – why should he, and not the church trust, pay?"

When *Evening Standard* reporter Danielle Gusmaroli visited the church, she was told by Olorunleye: "We are not doing anything wrong." Ironically, he had to shout to make himself heard above the clapping and drumming.

He added: "We should be allowed to pray as we want ... I will not pay the fines."

Another defiant Christian who thinks he has the God-given right to do as he pleases also fell foul of the law last month – and he too is refusing to pay a fine.

Street-corner preacher Peter David, who claimed he did not need car insurance because God had given him "divine protection" from harm, was fined a total of £758.75 by magistrates in Neath, south Wales. David told traffic police that the Lord was on his side.

The court was told that he had also refused to buy road tax because the Lord said he "didn't have to".

David, 66, from Skewen near Neath, was stopped during a routine vehicle check and was found not to have tax, MOT or insurance. Police officers also found that he was using a false number plate on his Ford Sierra. The home-made registration DEUT 818 referred to the Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 8 Verse 18 which warns that God is the only source of power.

Pc Richard Coulthard said that after he had discovered the registration was invalid, David told him: "The Lord told me I could put verses for His praise and glory."

The officer told the court that when he asked David why he was not displaying road tax, he replied: "The Lord says I do not have to".

David admitted the offences to the police but refused to enter a guilty plea in court.

After being sentenced, David told the court that he did not expect to pay the fine.

Later he said: "I do not recognise the authority of the court or the Parliament in England. God's word is the only law I recognise."

"On February 15, 1996, God told me I didn't need insurance, over-ruling, in my case, a sensible law. I was to trust Him for His protection, which I did. He has delivered me from possible death twice since then – praise God."

Shortly before the case, David changed the car for a Vauxhall Cavalier with the registration plate JOHN 316. This vehicle was impounded by the police. Undaunted by this setback David said: "It's God's way. I would like a 2.8 Audi Quattro and I believe this is God's way of enabling me to get it."

If he does get the wheels he craves, I suggest he attaches the plate PV 26 11: "As a dog returneth to its vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly."

METHINKS it was all too much for the dear cardinal's dicky ticker.

Having fought so valiantly, albeit unsuccessfully, to save Scotland from sodomy, the late Cardinal Thomas Winning – a key figure in Scotland's Keep Clause 28 campaign – was then to learn from a prominent fellow cleric that homosexuality was not, as the cardinal had always insisted, "intrinsically disordered" but rather "divinely ordered"!

The man who made the claim around the time Winning, head of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, was recovering from his first heart attack, was The Most Reverend David Hope, Archbishop of York. Hope had given his support to a new document by Canon Edward Norman, which attempts to redefine Anglican teaching on homosexuality.

The document says: "Homosexuality may well not be a condition to be regretted but have divinely ordered and positive qualities." It goes on to say that homosexuality "is not in general chosen" and adds: "The church continues to classify homosexuality as an intrinsically disordered condition, yet significant numbers of Christians are and always have been homosexual."

Then the Roman Catholic Bishop of Middlesborough, the Right Reverend John Crowley, delivered a sermon at a service of "thanksgiving" for a London gay couple's 25th anniversary. And to compound matters, the following day an American nun, Sister Jeannine Gramick, on a visit to London, described the Pope's homophobia – and by extension, Cardinal Winning's – as "out of date".

Whether these events contributed to the silly 76-year-old celibate's fatal heart attack on June 17 will never be known, but one thing is certain: very few gay Scots rushed out to buy black ribbons of mourning.

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Ex-bishop speaks out against 'out-of-date, out-of-touch' church

It's time to scrap the C of E!

DR DAVID Jenkins, the controversial former Bishop of Durham, says in his autobiography, due out next year, that the Church is out of date, out of touch and needs to be dismantled.

In an article in the *Independent on Sunday* (June 17) reporter Sholto Byrnes said that, as Bishop of Durham, Dr Jenkins was a constant thorn in the side of Christian traditionalists who objected to his intellectual interpretation of Biblical events. "While he had already called for the Anglican Church to be disestablished, he has never before demanded its wholesale abolition.

The former bishop is quoted as saying: "I would like to see its disappearance. The Church is not getting to grips with the issues of today. People are realising that there is no case for an established church. So let's anticipate that fact and go further – let's say that the Christian churches should get together in a federation, and the Church of England can just disappear into that. At the moment we're anchored to out-of-date structures with their roots in medieval times."

Jenkins' autobiography, *A Cuckoo in the Nest*, which he is still writing, will give an account of his 10-year tenure as Bishop of Durham.

It began literally with a bang when York

Minster was struck by lightning and gutted by fire two days after he was consecrated there, an event his enemies took as a sign of divine displeasure.

His outspokenness on doctrinal matters and his readiness to criticise the Thatcher government attracted notoriety in the 1980s.

He was a hero to those who saw the official parliamentary opposition as ineffectual, but a hate figure to those who clung to the view that the Church of England was supposed to be the Conservative Party at prayer.

Lord Hailsham was typical of the traditional Anglican Tories who queued up to denounce him. "I much prefer the word of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John," he said, "because they were there and David Jenkins wasn't."

His carefully chosen words about the resurrection – that the risen Christ may not have had "a literally physical body" caused particular sneers. He was incorrectly labelled as the bishop who thought the resurrection was a "conjuring trick with bones".

Dr Jenkins seemed to revel in his role as the turbulent priest, to the point that some suggested he indulged in provocation for its own sake.

His publisher Robin Baird-Smith, Managing Director of Continuum, disagrees:

"When he talks about people he's very irrev-

erent and funny. But he has a serious agenda, and is serious about what he believes.

When Sholto approached the C of E for comment on the forthcoming autobiography, he received this reply from a "diplomatic" spokesman: "This will be another useful talking point from Bishop David Jenkins. He always gets people talking – and talking is a good Church of England tradition."

Monk charged with murder of nun

A YOUNG monk employed at a private religious school in Miami, USA, has been charged with first-degree murder, armed burglary and using a weapon while committing a felony following the discovery of the naked body earlier this year of Michelle Lewis, 39.

Miami-Dade County Police said that Mykhalo Kofel, 18, a Ukrainian national who was a monk of the Byzantine Monastic Order, had confessed to breaking into Michelle Lewis's home with the intent to kill her, but they declined to discuss a motive.

The nun was a teacher at the Holy Cross Academy, a private religious school operated by the Byzantine Monastic Order.

When Lewis missed Mass on a Sunday, a colleague went to look for her and found her nude body inside her home. She had apparently been stabbed and beaten.

At the time of Kofel's arrest Miami-Dade Police Director Carlos Alvarez said:

"I can tell you that they both worked at the Holy Cross Academy, that this was not a random act of violence, and that the victim and the subject knew each other. That's as far as I can go right now.

Christians have a shameful record of domestic violence

A FIVE-YEAR study of churches in 44 countries has revealed that "violence is prevalent" among church members. The World Evangelical Fellowship report, launched in May in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, accuses the clergy of deliberately maintaining "a holy hush" on the subject of domestic abuse.

"Violence is ugly and most churches and their leaders feel uncomfortable talking about it and ill-equipped to respond to its victims.

"Pastors would prefer to sweep it under the proverbial church carpet. We need to crawl out from under the church carpet and admit that we have been hiding from the problem, sometimes contributing to it and not very committed to being part of its solution."

Co-author of the report, Nancy Nason-Clark, said that while the incidence of domestic violence did not differ dramatically from the rest of the community, "when it did happen in Christian households, women are less likely to turn to their pastor or priest for help. That's why it is so important that pastors are trained in these issues."

The Rev Joel Edwards, Executive Director of the Evangelical Alliance, admitted that "abuse had been going on" in Britain's churches. "Abuse within the ministry is a sad feature of the way in which the church is caught up in modern life today. It's a reality of church life."

In Britain, 23 per cent of the 6,000 women questioned reported that their spouse had assaulted them, with 4.2 per cent saying this had happened within the last 12 months. Six per cent of wives reported being forced into sex by their husbands, although not necessarily with their current partner.



church schools debate: nss voice comes through

The Government's recent proposals for more faith schools in its Green Paper on education reform demonstrate just how much an uphill battle we are facing in our bid for a less divided and a more secular society.

On the plus side, however, the issue of church schools has gripped the public's imagination, and given the National Secular Society wide exposure in both mainstream and local media all over the country.

No other single issue in recent years has demanded so much of the Society time, and I have had my work cut out to keep up with the demands of journalists clamouring for the Society's views on the subject.

When the Church of England recently called on the Government to fund 100 new church schools, we immediately sprang into action with a statement which drew attention to an NOP survey which showed that 79 per cent of parents thought it was as wrong to separate children on the grounds of religion in schools as it was to separate them according to colour or accent.

Our statement pointed out that this survey totally undermined the C of E's report, and demonstrated that the survey clearly showed that the concept of religious schools is not as popular as the Government or the Church of England maintains. What parents want, we emphasised, are *good* schools, not religious schools. The success enjoyed by some Church schools can be put down to the privilege they have of selecting children from supportive and middle class homes – faith has nothing to do with it.

We also attacked the spread of faith schools to other religions and pointed out that as each religion makes a perfectly understandable bid for its own schools, society will become ever more splintered and segregated. We think that children should be mixing with each other at this formative age, rather than being separated. How are we to ever tackle racism and sectarianism when we are creating these religious and racial barriers in schools?

We also made clear that the 45 per cent of the population professing no particular religion are facing mounting discrimination. In some rural areas only church schools are available, so parents who are non-believers have no alternative but to send their children to them. In other areas, such parents are even feigning belief to have their children selected for the most suitable local state school, if it happens to be a church school.

The NOP survey also shows this practice to be widespread. It is unjust that, in a secular society, parents should be driven to such



**Keith Porteous Wood,
Executive Director of the
National Secular Society,
reports on a very busy month**

lengths to secure publicly-funded education.

It almost seems as if this proposal for more church schools is a last ditch bid by the ailing C of E to secure its none-too-certain future.

The National Secular Society's full response to the Government Green Paper is on <http://www.secularism.org.uk/schoolsreport.htm>.

Several prominent columnists threw their support wholeheartedly behind us, but none put our case more powerfully than NSS honorary associate Polly Toynbee. In an article headed: "We don't need the church to educate our children" (*Guardian* June 15), she wrote:

God may move in mysterious ways, but there is not much mystery in the way He runs His schools: he does it by selection. By ensuring a strong core of dedicated, ambitious parents who know how to congregate in the same schools, church schools mostly get better results. Now the C of E announces that it will open 100 more secondaries, with 20 already in the pipeline. The Government gave them a "welcome" saying the new schools will be "an important part of the new diversity". Christian sects already run a quarter of all state primaries in a country with only 7% churchgoers (a generous estimate).

Examining the league tables for my area, in Lambeth primary schools this is what I find. Invidious to give real names, but most of the schools that score 80-90 per cent for 11-year-olds in maths, English and science have names such as the Immaculate Vestal or St Canute the Apostate C of E. That is what made David Blunkett wish he could "bottle" the magic of faith schools. But the league table offers another telling statistic – the number of children in each school "eligible for assessment" – in need of extra help. It is

a rough-and-ready marker for social deprivation in a school's intake. Good heavens!

Immaculate Vestal, which tops the borough table with 100 per cent in science, has only 8% children "eligible for assessment", compared with some of the Bog-standard Primaries where half their children are "eligible". No wonder parents queue at the altar for the wafers and commute their mighty four-wheel-drives across the borough for a good Catholic education.

Closer inspection reveals some telling exceptions. There is, for example, Archbishop Beelzebub's which has no children "eligible" and yet gets very mediocre results. Or there is St Arbutnot's C of E that does have 27 per cent "eligible" children – but its results have mysteriously tumbled down to only around 60 per cent, despite God. Then there is one outstanding school with an astonishing 59 per cent of deprived "eligible" children and yet it gets results over 90 per cent: it is not a religious school but a Bog-standard. So why not bottle that instead? To be fair, one C of E also bucks the trend, with both high "eligibles" and good results. However, on average, the correlation holds across all types of school, God or no God.

If the government wants to introduce more selection, why not say so, instead of going through this religious rigmarole? It is just a fig-leaf for the simple and universal fact that the most motivated parents and the middle classes will always navigate every school (or health) system, to congregate in the same places, making them better as a result. Whether it means moving house or going to church; we will always do whatever it takes. The only reason the motivated congregate more in religious schools is because selection processes allow it to happen more easily within the house of God.

Not all religious schools do this, but the ones with best results and fewest "eligibles" do. The ones, for instance, that the Blairs bus their children across town to attend. Nothing wrong with that, unless Labour politicians are supposed to sacrifice their children to the worst inner city schools as a gesture: at least the Blairs are true believers.

But for the rest, the great majority of this now heathen nation (43 per cent no longer know what Easter celebrates), how absurd to use religion as the way to effect selection. Yesterday's C of E report proudly announced that 160 children apply for every 100 places, so there is a clear "demand". No-one with a straight face can pretend the demand is for religion: it is for results. For the established church, eager to fill pews, schools are the only product they have left to offer that people

actually clamour for.”

She ended with the words: “Keep religion in church, where it belongs.”

Pressure of work in the UK regrettably precludes me from attending the Libre Pensee conference in Lyon this month. I had been invited by Roger Lepeix, president of the French equivalent of the NSS, to address the conference, but, being unable to attend, I prepared a speech that will be given on my behalf.

In it I make the point that France is the secular state which freethinkers all over the world regard with envy and go on to say that although our two countries are just 35 kms apart and have similar populations, there are many differences between them. Principal of these is that the UK has not benefited from a revolution to cleanse the church from its institutions, or remove our monarchy. So, the Queen is the so-called Supreme Governor of the established Church of England; and even the Government is, albeit nominally, “her Majesty’s”.

I continue: “Another troubling historic relic in the UK is that some bishops are entitled to sit in our revising chamber (the House of Lords), originally in their capacity of being major landowners. I am ashamed to tell you that the UK is the only western democracy to have retained such an archaic and undemocratic practice.

“It was announced a few years ago that the House of Lords was to be reformed. We gave formal evidence to the royal commission which had been set up to consider the matter. We of course called for the bishops’ right to sit in the Lords to be curtailed. Not only has that call been ignored, but the Government even plans to extend religious representation in the House of Lords to other denominations and faiths.

“You will also be horrified to learn that the churches run a third of the UK’s schools paid for by the state. And if that were not bad enough, the Government has just announced that it wel-

comes proposals to build even more schools to be run by the churches, or those of other faiths. We have just published a 50- page report condemning this plan, but have little expectation of winning any major concessions.

“Unlike France, Britain has no regular programme for freethinkers on public radio. Every day there is a five-minute programme on a popular BBC radio channel at peak time called Thought for the Day. Only religious contributors are allowed to take part, so it seems that, until now, the BBC considers atheists are incapable of thought – or at least thought that is worthwhile.

“We have been fighting this symbolic exclusion for over 40 years, but just might be starting to make some progress.

“Why is secularism generally making so little progress, you may ask? The marked deterioration in the climate for freethinkers started with the election of the latest government, five years ago. That it is a Labour government (so-called “new Labour”) that has been so pro-religious has been a source of great surprise and disappointment to many secularists.

“The problem starts at the top; Tony Blair has been described as the most religious prime minister for 150 years. His wife is a practising Catholic, and although technically an Anglican, he can’t resist attending Catholic services. Every time he goes on holiday, the top priority is to visit the local cardinal, and Blair is a “disciple” of the theologian Hans Küng

“It is therefore little surprise that many of the Government ministers Blair chose are Christian socialists. The Government is not only keen on extending privileges to Christian institutions, it is just as enthusiastic to do so to those of minority faiths, partly in an attempt to integrate the minority ethnic population.

“Blair has talked in warm terms about the Koran, which he claims to have studied at length, and so has the next in line to the throne, Prince Charles.

“Our efforts to secularise society are often frustrated because of the Government’s love affair with religion. And matters could get even worse. Blair’s successor is likely to be Chancellor Gordon Brown, whose father was a minister of religion. His childhood ambition was to be Prime Minister – but only if he could not be the Moderator (the top position) of the Church of Scotland!

“Our setbacks are even more difficult to accept when it is borne in mind that church attendances are in terminal decline, probably more steeply than in France. I am pleased to be able to report that the number of non-believers is rising rapidly and is now about 30 per cent. A recent major survey showed that 45 per cent of the population has no religion. On an average Sunday, only 7 per cent of the UK population now attend church, with less than a million attending the Church of England. Its finances are rapidly deteriorating too.

“These deteriorating finances are not necessarily a cause for celebration. We are becoming increasingly concerned that we could all be required to contribute more and more to the Church through our taxes. We have just lost a fight to prevent the Government refunding VAT on repairs to churches that are of architectural interest while denying equivalent VAT refunds to secular buildings of architectural interest.

“We expect our Government to press for a change to EU VAT regulations to permit lower rates to be charged on repairs to fine churches, but not to other fine buildings. We hope you will help us to resist this.

“Ironically, the Society has probably made the most progress recently on the European front. EU Directive 565 forbids discrimination in employment on a number of grounds including religion and belief (or lack of it). As a result of the Society’s efforts, religious exemptions from the directive will be permissive, rather than mandatory. The governments of member states have until 2003 to introduce this legislation, so I hope you will fight to make sure that the French Government gives no concessions to the religious by permitting them to discriminate against others.

“I would like to turn now to consider some broader European issues. Let me start with some statistics. There were 204,000 Catholic Priests in Europe in 1995. Of these, 6,500 were in Great Britain and 29,000 were in France. Only Italy had more priests than France. While the total number of priests in Europe fell by 12 cent between 1995 and

NSS sets new record in media exposure

The NSS took part in a number of national broadcasts on Church schools, mostly on June 14.

These included a live debate on Radio 5 between Lord Dearing and Keith Porteous Wood, who also appeared on BBC1’s (TV) Breakfast News. Keith took part in six national programmes or recordings, many of which were played or quoted from several times for the rest of the day.

The NSS’s views were covered by all the major channels, including BBC Radios 2,3,4, and 5 and BBC News 24 as well as Independent News channels).

Keith and NSS council member Terry Sanderson also recorded interviews for the World Service and several local radio stations, some of which also carried quotes from the national recordings.

The *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Times Educational Supplement* all carried quotes from the Society and have been supportive editorially.

(Continued on p6)

MRS P A Forrest, of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, is a name that readers of the *Natal Witness* will be familiar with, as she rarely lets the opportunity pass to challenge religionists via the paper's letters page.

"They have always been willing to give a hearing to all sides, and have published all my letters – except one, rather near to Christmas, in which I pointed out that myrrh was used in biblical times as an abortifacient, and that abortion was not condemned anywhere in the Bible.

A recent one that the paper *did* publish was her response to one Ebrahim Haffejee, who, in an earlier letter, had pointed out that much of Christmas tradition was drawn from earlier religions now considered mythical.

"It would be interesting to know if he is able to follow his argument to its logical conclusion and acknowledge that all religions are man-made, drawing moral guidelines and comforting explanations for the unknown from folk wisdom of the time and perpetuated by well-intentioned people or by a hierarchy which stands to lose power if their followers start to think for themselves.

Many who can see that Greek, Roman, Persian or Babylonian religions lack any foundation in fact still manage to believe that their own religion is somehow different and really is divinely inspired!"

.....
AUSTRALIAN Unitarian Jan Tendys used the letters page of issue 61 of the *Australian Humanist* to attack the *Freethinker*. Of the *FT* he said: "I detect only hatred and a desire for revenge directed against the churches as the emotions animating it."

To which Nigel Sinnott, of Victoria, responded with a letter published in the following issue:

"I wonder how many issues Jan Tendy's has read.

"When I was editor (1972-73) of the *Freethinker* it certainly carried articles critical of organised religion, its doctrines and privileges. The paper was founded in 1881 to present the case against conventional religion, and the proper function of an opposition (as far as I am concerned) is to oppose: thoroughly, intelligently, fairly and sometimes humorously.

"However, the paper did not contain just irreligious polemics. There were articles (often quite scholarly) on a range of subjects, and also book and theatre reviews, and very lively correspondence columns. Not a lot, I suspect, has changed since then.

"As for hatred and revenge, what brought me to supporting the *Freethinker* (which I have been reading for 38 years) were my

In this month's Atheism in Action spot we have examples of *Freethinker* readers taking up cudgels in South Africa, Australia and England

experiences of the vindictiveness and petty oppression of religious people who preached the doctrine of 'forgiveness'. In my experience, a considerable proportion of right-wing religious people are motivated by a large charge of hate!

"The *Freethinker* had an exchange agreement with at least two Unitarian journals. I remember being taken aback by the political naiveté of such a journal from Melbourne, which included on its front page a eulogy of the North Korean megalomaniac, Comrade Kim Il-sung. I did not make the mistake of assuming from this that all Unitarians are devout Stalinists. (They are certainly not.)

"The *Freethinker* does not tell Unitarians how to conduct themselves. May I suggest that Jan Tendys reciprocates."

.....
MEANWHILE, back in Britain, Roger McCallister of Dawlish in Devon was growing increasingly irritated by the religious involvement over the foot-and-mouth crisis in the county..

"The outbreak has had particularly devastating effects here in Devon, causing human misery for farms and countryside communities" Mr McCallister told the *Freethinker*.

"In the local media, the churches have had a high profile, calling for prayers.

"Our regional daily newspaper, the *Western Morning News*, has particularly emphasised the religious response, on at least two occasions, displaying large headlines and photographs of children asking God to end the outbreak.

"I wrote a polite letter to that paper, commenting that, whilst sympathising wholeheartedly with people's concern over the devastation, I did feel that it was a waste of time asking God for help.

"I made the following points:

"Surely if there was a good god, powerful enough to respond to their prayers, he would not have allowed such unfairness in the first place.

"If he was punishing man for his greed, he would not have allowed the brunt of such punishment to be passed onto honest countrymen.

"Having allowed the tragedy to occur, there is no reason to suppose he would change his mind following a few prayers.

"Disease has been with us since life began, with no sign of a god stopping it.

"If I believed in a god, I'd be having a go at him now, for his cruelty and lack of compassion, not praising him in hymns and prayers.

"I ended by suggesting that instead of crying out to a make-belief supernatural deity, we must face the challenge of making the most of our human ingenuity to endeavour to resolve our problems in the natural world in which we live.

"My letter was not published.

"There have been letters in the local press, relating the disease to the wrath of God, and calling for return to the guidance of Jesus. I have seen none disputing a religious response.

"Is rural Devon is still too steeped in religious tradition to accept a humanist view?"

Busy time for the NSS (Continued from p5)

1976, just one country increased the number of priests – Poland.

"We have read with horror the plight of non-believers and homosexuals in Poland, and they are being discriminated against more and more as the Roman Catholic church becomes deeper involved in politics there.

"Even more disturbing is that, assuming it is admitted, Poland plans to use its influence to spread its cancerous church domination to the very fabric of the EU and members states. We must all be aware of that danger, and we must make sure that as many people of influence as possible are aware of it. We must also fight to ensure that tough pre-accession conditions are imposed on Poland, and that they are enforced.

"We of course would like France's secular model to be replicated in the European Union. We are horrified over the degree of resistance to this, and as a result, that France's unique and precious secularity could itself be under threat.

"We would like to offer you our support and will be happy to co-operate with you in an endeavour to extend the characteristics of France's secularity to the EU, and to minimise the role of religion in the EU."

"THE Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey last night urged Christians to pray that they might escape 'sudden death' in a train accident. Dr Carey, delivering an address entitled 'Change and Decay in All Around I See' said that the recent train accidents had brought home to him the fragility of life on earth, the 'chance of being wiped out through chance events'. He urged his audience to petition God for deliverance from sudden or unexpected death."

— from a recent report in the Times

I REALISED that the journey I intended to take – from Stockport to Manchester – was only a short trip, but I have always been a pessimist, believing that if you expect the worst you are never disappointed. So I decided to get my personal petition in straight away.

I don't have any internet connections nor do I have a fax facility so, despite my previous unhappy experiences with that medium, I made a phone call. As you might expect – and as I feared – I was answered by a taped message.

"Thank you for calling the Celestial Prayer and Petition Centre. We are sorry but all our Counsellors are occupied at the moment as various affairs on Earth – Wars, Famine and pestilence and the British elections – are creating an unusually heavy workload. You have been entered in a waiting queue and your call will be answered as soon as someone is available. Please hold."

I did as I was told. For the next five minutes I listened to "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty", not a jolly tune. When waiting, I

Alfred Challoner-Chadwick, a columnist and retired hotel owner who lives in Stockport, Cheshire, gets short shrift from the Celestial Prayer and Petition Centre

much prefer Mozart or even the Inkspots. Eventually, the tape continued.

"If you wish to offer thanks for some favour or other, please don't bother. We get quite enough of that from the supplicants of St Jude. And anyway, you're quite welcome to whatever it was, that's what we're here for. If you wish to speak to God, press One now.

I did that. There was a pause, then the voice came back.

"We are sorry but God says he is far too old and weary to deal personally with your problems and, anyway, it's nearly nine pm and he wants to go to bed. We are putting you through to his deputy. Speak clearly after the tone, giving your post code and for the purposes of security your full name, your date of birth, your National Insurance number, where and when, if ever, you were baptised and your mother's maiden name."

I did all of that. The voice that answered had the merest trace of a Galilean accent.

"Peter here. How can I help you?"

"Well, I intend to take a train journey and I have been advised on the highest authority to

petition God."

"For Christ's sake. You think this is some sort of ticket office?"

"No, of course not, but Archbishop Carey said that we ...

"Archbishop Carey? How are you spelling that?"

"C.a.r.e.y."

This Archbishop, he's a Protestant, is that right?"

"Yes"

"Has nobody told you that we're all Catholics here. You goddam Protestants don't amount to a pinch of sh... I'm sorry about my language. I do apologise. I've been watching a lot of American films on Sky lately."

"I could make a move or two in the direction of Rome. I wouldn't want to go as far as slaying my first-born, and anyway he's married and lives in Harrogate, but would it help if I learned to say a few Hail Mary's, lit a couple of candles, ate fish on Fridays and joined Tony Blair going to Mass?"

"Get wised up. Our relationship with Tony Blair is simply between us. Rome stated recently that the Church of England is nothing but a bunch of witless heretics who don't know their Paradise from their Purgatory, so get lost will you? Now I'm sorry but I'm wanted on another line."

"But what about my train journey?"

"Who gives a sh... Take the bus, and for God's sake, quit bothering us!" The line went dead.

Do you think I ought to let George Carey know about this?

Fatwa issued against Pokemon

THE highest religious authority in Pakistan has ordered a purge of the popular Pokémon cartoon characters.

The Higher Committee for Scientific Research and Islamic Law issued the *fatwa* (religious edict) earlier this year after concluding that the Pokemon video games and trading cards were promoting Zionism because they include "the Star of David, which everyone knows is connected to international Zionism and is Israel's national emblem, as well as being the first symbol of the Freemasons".

The fatwa resulted in all Pokémon games, videos and films being removed from store shelves in the Muslim country.

Another big boost for the Freethinker fund

The *Freethinker* Fund was given another magnificent boost last month with a total of **£2,305**. The biggest donation – **£1,000** – was made in memory of Keith and Doris Mack. We would also like to thank the following for their generous support:

£410 J M Wood; **£85** C Cunningham-Green; **£50** D Fox, D Tomkin, L E West, J Caldwell; **£40** D N Whyte; **£35** F Shayler; **£25** P Barbour, C I Ward, D C Hooley; **£20** D R Hutchins, P H Bayliss, M E Hart, R Torode, O Watson, P A Forrest, F Wright, J Boyd; **£18** P Gormley; **£15** R Melbourne, D Flint, P L Lancaster, A Akkermans, D Granville & K Harding, E Cartmel; **£10** N Henderson, R J Heinemann, G A Weerasinghe, A W Briglin, J M Ross, M F Campbell, C McCall, P Edmondson, G F Jackman, D Bennett, L Smith; **£6** A M Nicholls, **£5** B Smale, J E Lewis, N Green, G Taylor, A Rankin, J Camden, D Jenkins, C Williams, D Watkins, S Penoyre, R Watson, K G Spencer, D K Goringe, F Shayler; **£2** Wm Browne, G Connor, T Liddle.

These donations were received between May 1 and June 20, 2001.

The introduction to British prisons of the Christian-based Alpha courses is said to be playing an important role in reducing re-offending rates and improving the quality of life for prisoners. That is certainly the view of the one-time Prisons Ombudsman, Sir Peter Woodhead.

But what is the reality? I know of no programme – be it religious-based or otherwise – that stands the test of scientific scrutiny and proves beyond doubt that such intervention has any long-term impact in reducing offending behaviour, and that includes the highly-developed psychology-based cognitive skills behavioural modification programmes.

The National Audit Office is due to report to the Government later this year on the effectiveness and value of these latter programmes and nowhere in their remit does the value of religious-based programmes feature.

With over 57 per cent of released prisoners being re-convicted within two years – and the figure for young offenders being significantly higher – there can be little room for optimism in the efficacy of existing secular programmes. So it is incredible that Alpha, and indeed Sir Peter Woodhead, should be making such great claims in respect of the efficacy of religious-based programmes.

I would go so far as to argue that the Alpha Course in relation to prisoners is far from being about rehabilitation but more to do with religious conversion or “awakening”. It is simply a mechanism for Christian indoctrination. If indeed rehabilitation was Alpha’s main aim, then all religious beliefs would be accommodated, which, of course, they are not.

Certainly, as an atheist, a member of the National Secular Society and an outspoken critic of religious exploitation in our prisons, I doubt very much that Alpha would want to “rehabilitate” me through one of their programmes.

As a life-sentence prisoner having served more than 20 years in prison – from my beginnings as a Borstal boy when church attendance was compulsory – I am far too experienced to be taken in by these types of claims, most of which are based less on hard evidence than on anecdotes.

There are many reasons for offending behaviour, but I know of no discipline that supports the view that lack of religious belief is one of them.

In spite of the millions of pounds being poured into psychology-based programmes there is still an absence of concrete, independent scientific evidence that such interventions actually achieve very much at all in the



IN Stanley Kubrick's the novel by Anthony withdrawn from Bri powerful, and very finds himself in a p

“What’s it going and out of institutio are you going to att unrepentant sinner selling your birthri The urge to live ea proof – yes, incont friends. I have bee prison, hotter than you laugh. I see so skin rotting and p

“Alright, we’ll To which a priso Come on, sing u

Such hell ‘n’ d prisoners are be Courses, but are

CHARLES H Portsmouth, arg

Alpha Course Who's Kidd

long term. And if the Alpha courses actually worked, the Prison Service would hardly require the services of the vast army of psychologists recruited over the past few years to conduct secular rehabilitation programmes; they would all become redundant – a situation they would hardly tolerate. For, like those who conduct the Alpha courses, the psychology industry is anxious to consolidate its position as having the answers to criminal behaviour, and maintain a monopoly on crime prevention.

Theirs is an attitude I find remarkably arrogant.

I was not entirely certain what the previous Home Secretary Jack Straw’s views were in rela-

tion to the “mind-benders” approach to rehabilitation, be it psychological or religious. But I do know that he had proposed a prison-building programme that is likely to increase the present prison population of 65,000 to 74,000 by the year 2005, and this takes into account the increase in community-based sentences.

If the claims being made in respect of the efficacy of religious programmes like those of Alpha were true, then fewer prisons would be needed.

For me, as a convicted murderer, programmes like Alpha are best avoided. It’s a bit late in the day for the Christian religion to presume that they have the interests of mankind at

Brick's controversial cult film, *A Clockwork Orange*, adapted from Anthony Burgess and recently released almost 30 years after it was shown on British cinema screens by the late director himself, there is a very funny scene in which the incarcerated teenage thug Alex is in a prison chapel, listening to the ranting of a chaplain. "Is it going to be in institutions like this one – though more in than out for most of you? Or going to attend the divine works and realise the punishments that await sinners in the next world as well as this? A lot of idiots you are, birthright for a saucer of cold porridge. The thrill of theft, of violence. Live easy. Well, I ask you what it is worth when we have undeniable incontrovertible evidence – that Hell exists? I know, I know my have been informed in visions that there is a place darker than any fire than any flame of human fire ... Don't you laugh, damn you, don't I see souls like yourselves screaming in unendurable agony. Your and peeling. A fireball spinning in your screaming guts ... we'll end by singing hymn 258 in the prisoners' hymnal." A prison guard adds: "And let's have a little reverence, you bastards. Sing up, damn you!"

Al 'n' damnation approaches belong to a past era; nowadays are being exhorted to join the far more subtle evangelical Alpha but are they any more successful at rehabilitating criminals? LES HANSON, a prisoner serving a life sentence in Kingston Prison, North, argues that the Alpha approach is every bit as futile.

Prisoners in Prison: Building Who?

heart when history and current religious conflicts around the world prove the reverse. Make no mistake about it, Alpha is about indoctrination, pure and simple.

How can I be motivated towards a non-offending lifestyle by a mythology – a philosophy that is bound up in coercion, intimidation, genocide and inhumanity? Indeed, if it wasn't for the progress of science the church may well still be putting to death those who believe that the earth revolves around the sun.

Many inmates view the Alpha Course as a joke, but it is far too serious to be taken as such. Fortunately, however, Alpha does not have the coercive, threatening and blackmail-

ing elements of offending behaviour courses which are managed by prison psychologists and probation officers who use any means necessary to recruit and enrol inmates. I think we all know how resistant we can become when forced to engage in or undertake something against our will

No, Alpha operates from a different and more subtle position. It appeals to the vulnerable, and is also attractive for a variety of other reasons. Some inmates perceive it as a ticket towards parole or at least as means of getting favourable reports from the prison chaplain which might be used to some advantage not so readily apparent.

It may also appeal to those inmates without work who spend long periods locked in their cells, and even to inmates who are employed but can be excused to attend Alpha without loss of prison earnings. Prisoners in establishments that have few associations and recreational facilities might also take advantage of the Alpha course to get away from their cells; more so it, they are in overcrowded shared cells.

In return Alpha offers respite from the normal and often tedious and monotonous regime where they can meet up with other inmates perhaps coming from a different part of the prison with whom they are likely to have only limited contact.

With the added luxury of the coffee and biscuits which are often provided, it's an opportunity for socialisation and friendly interaction. It also provides the opportunity for prisoners to manoeuvre and carry out illicit activities out of sight of prison staff, who are likely to be more vigilant than Alpha tutors.

There are no pass or fail rates with Alpha; mere attendance is sufficient to guarantee a favourable response from the prison chaplaincy who is always a member of prison assessment boards where the future of the inmate will be determined, so it pays to have such a member of staff on your side.

Because Christianity is overwhelmingly focused on the individual – it's all me, me, me, *I* have found God, God loves *me*, *I* am born again, *I* have given my life to Jesus, the majority of inmates, and certainly hardened "cons" tend to be suspicious of those who take up the Alpha courses. They mistrust such people, whom they label as "God-squaders", because they believe that anyone willing to submit to religious indoctrination – or indeed attend church regularly – is a "dodgy character" who will do anything to advance their progress through the system.

Those in prison contemplating enrolling in the Alpha course should be aware that one has to be Christian to "benefit", failing which all the stops will be pulled to convert you.

At any rate, many who attend the Alpha courses are already practising Christians, so in most instances it is merely a case of preaching to the converted.

In the final analysis I am left wondering who is conning who. Perhaps government ministers who give credence to Alpha would be advised to spend a week or two living as a prisoner and acquaint themselves with the prisoner ethos, centred mainly on notions of trust and mistrust, before enthusiastically endorsing Alpha.

down to earth: colin mccall

Jewish takeover

IT must be 40 years ago now since I surprised a Jewish-born freethinker by telling him that my sympathies were with the Palestinians and against Israel in the unending conflict in the Middle East. I have had no reason to change my view: I wonder if he has changed his? I ask that because increasing numbers of "Jewish" people are questioning Israel's belligerent policies towards the people whose land they have expropriated. "How can a people that has for so long been oppressed allow itself to become an oppressor?" asked Ian Katz, after recently visiting the occupied territories; and that was a feeling which, he suspected, must "animate the attitude of most diaspora Jews" (*Guardian*, May 24).

Rarely mentioned in the press is the biblical basis for Israeli expansionism, as laid down by the powerful Rabbinate. One of Israel's (and the USA's) fiercest critics, Noam Chomsky, cited a selection of typical pronouncements in *The Fateful Triangle* (Pluto Press, 1983). The Palestinians are "a plague already written in the Bible" and we must "inherit the land" that was promised by God to Abraham. "The biblical commandment is to conquer the land of Israel in its detailed borders, to take possession of it and settle it" (which is still current policy); it is "forbidden" to "abandon it to strangers". "There is no place in this land for the people of Israel and for other nations alongside it". "You shall destroy them ..."

And after the Beirut massacres of September 1982, the influential Gush Emunim group, which spearheads West Bank settlement, published a statement praising Begin, Sharon (the same) and the chief of staff, describing the war as a "great act of sanctification of God's name" and making reference to the returning biblical tribes.

There is a disturbing footnote to this, which appeared in the *Guardian* three days before Ian Katz's article. After two reports for the BBC *The World Tonight* in which he presented the Palestinian case in a way that the programme makers acknowledged was "factual, fair and balanced", Faisal Bodi learnt that he will in future be labelled "an avowed supporter of Islamic causes". It transpired that the Corporation had bowed to complaints led by Mike Gapes, Labour MP for Ilford, who, although not yet labelled as such, is an avowed supporter of Israeli causes.

Blasphemy in Pakistan

SIX journalists on the English language *Frontier Post* in Peshawar, Pakistan, have been charged with blasphemy and, if convicted, face a mandatory death sentence. The

paper has been closed down and a magistrate has sealed the office and its printing press (*The Journalist*, May).

On January 29 the *Post* printed a letter headed "Why Muslims hate Jews", sent by an unidentified author by e-mail. The managing editor, Mahmoud Afride, conceded that it contained "blasphemous" material and apologised publicly for its publication, stating that this was not deliberate. Despite this, on January 30 several hundred Islamists broke open the iron gates of the press house, stormed the building and set fire to newsprint and machinery. The police were apparently present but didn't intervene. Three thousand students gathered at Peshawar University calling for the death of the newspaper's owner.

British Muslims want their religion to be protected by an extension of our own blasphemy law; but this must never happen.

You can't please 'em all

THE National Union of Journalists, of which I am a life member, passed a motion at its Annual Delegate Meeting in March condemning the jailing and general maltreatment of journalists in Iran. The decision was publicised in the international media; and the Iranian paper *Kayhan*, which is associated with the more fundamentalist faction of the regime, accused the union of "working for Zionism".

What *Kayhan* overlooked was that immediately after the Iran motion, another was passed without dissent, condemning Israeli attacks against Palestinians and expressing support for the Palestine Solidarity campaign. The NUJ has sent *Kayhan* the text of the second motion and awaits the paper's comments.

Pentecostal attorney

GEORGE W Bush was elected President of the United States with the help of Christian conservative groups, as well as big business, and he has already blurred the distinction between church and state by promoting measures to fund social welfare through religious organisations. Now comes the news that his Attorney General, John Ashcroft, is holding Bible study lessons each morning for his staff, despite a pledge not to bring his Pentecostal Christian beliefs to America's top legal job. "The purpose of the Department of Justice is to do the business of government, not to establish a religion", a justice department lawyer told the *Washington Post*. And Barry Lynn, director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, said Mr Ashcroft should have known better. He was running the justice department "like a church, complete with rituals and forbidden words". Lynn instanced new

departmental guidelines banning the use of "pride" (a sin in the Bible) and the phrase "no higher calling than public service".

The only light in this darkness is the defecation of Senator James Jeffords, which may restrict some of Bush's mad schemes.

The godless threat to goodness

THE Oscar-nominated documentary film *Long Night's Journey into Day*, which follows two years of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is getting a limited release in this country, and was shown at the Tricycle Cinema, north London in May. It tells the stories of four killers brought face-to-face with the havoc they wrought in the name of apartheid.

One Afrikaner policeman, Eric Taylor, was responsible for the deaths of teachers and community leaders Fort Calata and Matthew Goniwe, two of the Cradock Four killed in 1985. Taylor was one of five officers who struck them with an iron object "approximately where the head joins the neck", then set their bodies alight.

Taylor says he's always been a Christian and knew that many African National Congress activists were godless communists, that godlessness was the ultimate threat to goodness, "and that justified going for them". He has now seen the error of his ways.

Religion and sex

THE decision of Britain's film censors to allow the film version of Hanif Kureishi's *Intimacy* to be shown uncut signals the crumbling of important taboos against visual representation of erect penises and oral sex, according to Dr A C Grayling, Reader in Philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. Taboos which stem from the "religions of the book" – Judaism, Christianity and Islam (*Guardian*, May 17).

Early Christians believed the Second Coming was imminent and the faithful should meanwhile remain celibate. When the Second Coming didn't happen, "Christianity was already in the hands of philosophers who found it a welcoming home for Plato's view that spirit is good and must be cultivated, whereas body is bad and must be disciplined". Monasticism followed. Jewish morality is "the morality of the herdsman" with its overriding aim of reproduction; while Islam has become "as fiercely prudish as the worst kind of Christian Puritanism".

Grayling hopes that the censors' passing of *Intimacy* means the thawing of the "stranglehold and distorted sexual attitudes of the West" which originate in the "religions of the book". Other freethinkers will share that hope.

IT TOOK all the courage and determination I could muster when, at about the age of 15, I announced to my father that I would not be accompanying him to Mass that Sunday morning. "I don't believe in it anymore," I said.

The expected outburst of angry indignation did not materialise. Although obviously shocked and, I'm sure, deeply disappointed, he simply assured me he had been through a similar crisis of faith, investigated other beliefs and eventually returned to the "true church." He was sure I would do the same.

Somewhat disappointingly – for I was beginning to flex my intellectual muscles – the local priests made only the most desultory of efforts to lure me back into the fold. I sought to encapsulate one such fruitless attempt with this *senryu** many years later:

*God still loves you –
the priest's words
through clenched teeth*

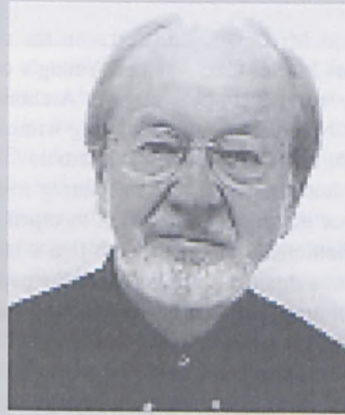
During the next few years, the immediate post-war period, I was fully occupied with such matters as exams, career choices, dating girls (or at least trying to!), under-age excursions to pubs, acquiring conspicuously gaudy ties and, in those days of course, National Service conscription. But I also found time for reading, widely but indiscriminately – art, poetry, music, philosophy, psychology and all sorts of fiction.

By the time I was approaching 30, I was married, and my wife and I had started a family. The hippy era was emerging and with it came the worry for parents that their offspring would soon be at risk of ensnarement into this strange new culture of idleness, promiscuity and drugs. I began to feel the need for some firm and reliable structure of values on which to base the upbringing of our children. So my reading now started turning to theology and various religious beliefs.

I became almost obsessive in my search for moral guidance and certainty. I flirted, mostly briefly, with Buddhism and forms of Eastern mysticism, evangelical Christianity, the charismatic movement, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian mysticism, liberal Anglicanism and the so-called New Theology. Finally, and somewhat ironically, I started investigating the claims of the Catholic Church from the perspective of what I had now become – an outsider. I later came to realise that, underlying my sceptical and argumentative approach, was "the will to believe".

I returned to the Church with all the enthusiastic conscientiousness of a new convert. My wife, although a nominal Methodist, willingly joined me in creating a "good Catholic family." We attended Mass together regularly and took an active part in the social and spiritual life of the parish.

Maurice Tasnier, the 18th contributor to our *My Atheism* series, is from Somerset. He was a newspaper sub-editor for many years before switching to social work. Now retired, he is an Alzheimer's Society voluntary worker and a widely-published *haiku* poet.



In furtherance of what I regarded as my spiritual development I set myself the task of reading the Bible – without skipping even a word of it! Inevitably, new questions arose in my mind: the savage excesses of the tribal god Jehovah and his people, the fancifully magic tales in the Old Testament, the inconsistencies and contradictions in the New. I turned to works of biblical exegesis for answers but found them woefully inadequate and unpersuasive.

For a while, I succeeded in keeping my most "awkward" questions confined in a sort of mental limbo – to be dealt with later. But, as my faith was so often being confronted by the findings of the sciences and the increased human understanding thereby being achieved, it seemed I was always wrestling with some fresh problem. Soon I was making mental reservations as I joined in reciting communal prayers or creeds at Mass or other church services, eventually even falling silent and thereby dissociating myself from the sentiments expressed when particular phrases or sentences cropped up in the liturgy.

All three of our children in turn drifted away from churchgoing, followed by my wife. However, I stubbornly tried to hold on to what faith I had remaining and was successful in doing so for several more years by a simple expediency: I began to cultivate my own brand of pseudo-Christianity that was so subtle, so sophisticated and so nebulous, that nobody could challenge it or refute it; there was virtually nothing to refute! Life was an insoluble

mystery at the core of which was God who could by intuitive faith be recognised as the God of Love made manifest in human terms in Jesus. QED.

It eventually became obvious to me just how utterly meaningless all this was – but not before it had somehow managed to maintain me in the clutches of the Church for several more years! Now, I sometimes wonder how many more "believers" are currently holding on to their faith by employing similarly unedifying self-deceits and sophistries.

Christians proclaim their god to be our "loving Father." They should take one coolly objective look at the world they believe he created for his beloved "children" and be thankful he is not subject to human laws. If he were, there is little doubt that these hapless creatures would promptly be removed from the dangerous environment for which he is responsible and be placed in the care of the local authority. And, as for the animal kingdom – well, he would long since have had an irate RSPCA inspector knocking at his celestial door ...

Then, having rejected Christianity – first its dogma and then my psychological dependence on its "spiritual" content - I still retained some feeling of affinity with those who, while dispensing with formal religious beliefs, nevertheless viewed life as somehow "sacred", to be approached in a spirit of awe and reverence. They sought to achieve, through such spiritual practices as meditation, a closer relationship with the essential mystery of life, to experience that elusive "oneness" with it.

But this, I was forced to conclude, was another version of my "self-made-to-measure" semi-Christian belief system of several years earlier – this time without the "Jesus bit". Also, it was again reliant on the vagaries of the imagination rather than on the certainties of demonstrable facts.

After several years of agnostic indifference over the entire subject, I realised one day that I was, in all but name, an atheist. So I finally "came out" as one!

In his memoir *The Cap* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), Roland Frister, describing his father's last days in a German concentration camp in Poland, refers to those who "believed in the Omnipotent Bastard called God, only to be abandoned by Him when they most needed Him."

Frister's depiction of his father's appalling physical and emotional wretchedness, shared by other dying inmates of the camp, provides a telling contrast with the lofty

(Continued on p12)

YOU may remember Muriel Gray, the elfin Scottish journalist, from her days on the television presenting *The Tube*. Now she is a columnist, film maker and best-selling novelist – and very anti-Catholic.

She really got the Vatican-lovers hopping with an article in the *Guardian* in April about the Nolan report which attempted to tackle the problem of clerical child abusers. She dismissed it immediately as “a toothless 35-page document that flaps about like the robes of a priest running from the vice squad”.

“The most unpleasant aspect of the report,” said Ms Gray, “is the respectful tone it adopts in dealing with the whole mess. There is little point in making suggestions to an institution whose arrogant behaviour both domestically and globally is so tainted with hypocrisy and duplicity. The only way to protect children is to introduce watertight compulsory legislation that is not up for any kind of debate among a bunch of bishops and cardinals, but must be enforced whether they like it or not. Since this is clearly not going to happen, it’s worth keeping in mind while mulling over the church versus state schools nonsense.”

But, of course, the Catholic Church does not like to be criticised. In the good old days, our Mu would have been cremated alive (after several weeks of torture, of course), Nowadays, they can’t do that (although they’ve kept the Inquisition open, in the faint hope that one day they’ll be allowed once more to demonstrate their love of “heretics” by disembowelling them).

Never mind, here come the outraged Catholic apologists, starting with Clifford Longley in the *Tablet*.

“Has a British national paper ever departed so far from accepted standards as an article published in the *Guardian* by Muriel Gray? She is entitled to her opinion. The real question is why the *Guardian* published it? It is an astonishing failure of the liberal ethos the *Guardian* stands for that it gives airing to such deep prejudices, amounting to bigotry, from which the rest of society has long moved on. Of course, the Catholic Church cannot be immune to criticism. All it is entitled to ask is that the facts be accurate and the comment be fair; and, over a period, balanced.”

The damned cheek of the man! I won’t take lectures from anyone connected with the Catholic Church about fairness and balance when it sports an authoritarian tyrant at its head who thinks nothing of forcibly silencing those who disagree with him.

Anyway, after further moaning from tother sensitive souls, the editor of the *Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, was prompted to respond to

Terry Sanderson looks at how bigots try to shift their guilt onto their critics

his critics.

Perhaps Mr Longley missed – in the same month as Muriel Gray – Hugo Young’s commentary on the Pope’s record, Archbishop Vincent Nichols’s essay on bearing witness to the truth, and Chris Hardwick’s article “Life, Liberty and the Lord”. He has surely missed altogether the paper’s campaign to repeal the Act of Settlement on the grounds that it is discriminatory against Catholics. And the paper’s policy of no-popey may come as a surprise to Hugo Young, the chairman of the Scott Trust, which owns the *Guardian*, and to its current and previous religious affairs correspondents, all of whom are Catholics.?

But that’s the point, Mr Rusbridger. Religionists simply assume that they’re entitled to space in the media to flog their tawdry wares unchallenged. It’s only when somebody comes along and says: “Just a mo - this is a load of old rope” that they start their war-dance. How dare anyone say that our blessed fairy-tales are similar in texture to tripe, they stamp. And how double dare the media publish such opinions?

Worried

I was getting quite worried about the pressure being put on the *Guardian* during this episode, and wondered whether – like the BBC which is under similar bombardment – it would start giving in and become another unswerving slave to the demands of religion.

I need not have worried. By June there was a well-deserved resumption of Vatican-bashing in the *Guardian*, this time over “Cardinal” Thomas Winning.

Many readers will have been annoyed by the reverential obituaries afforded to the cardinal, who was head of the Scottish Catholics until Jesus suddenly wanted him for a sunbeam. Those who aren’t fans of bigotry and religious fanaticism might have wanted something a little more – what shall we say? – *critical* of the old boor than the hagiographies that abounded. And it was left to the *Guardian* to provide it.

This time Joan Smith was given the job of

lacerating the self-satisfied, self-congratulatory tone of the obituarists. “Let us also record,” she wrote, “that the cardinal was an unreconstructed bigot who joined forces with a homophobic businessman, Brian Souter, to wage a fanatical campaign against the repeal of the pernicious Section 28. Tony Blair praised Winning for his ‘strong moral leadership’, failing to appreciate that it revealed precisely those anxious projections that have led the Catholic Church to persecute women, gay men and anyone who does not conform to its narrow definition of acceptable behaviour. This is not surprising, since Blair regularly shows himself to be a social conservative with a not-very-sophisticated moral apparatus.

“It is not homosexuality or sex outside of marriage that is perverted but the habit of cruelly and unthinkingly condemning them. So is the Church’s well-documented reluctance in the 20th century to condemn regimes that used torture and terror as instruments of political will.

“And the irony that all this was done in the name of a religion that claims to be based on love has played no small part in persuading millions of people to question the Church’s traditional teaching or leave it altogether.”

Great stuff.

Despite the Pope’s repeated condemnation of the death penalty, I’ll bet he’d love to have the power of his ancestors back. There hasn’t been a good heretic evisceration in St Peter’s Square for centuries now.

My Atheism

(continued from p11)

spiritual aspirations which had so appealed to me in the past. However, it by no means invalidates that human desire to transcend, and on occasion transform, the more primitive and brutal elements of our existence. Indeed, since I have adopted a humanist viewpoint, I have discovered that a life based on reality instead of superstition may actually enhance and intensify what I would call the “humanly spiritual” dimension, those moments of awe and wonder that can be induced by contemplation of the vastness and intricate complexities of our mysterious universe.

Additionally, along with atheism comes the bonus of no longer having to think up absurd excuses for a supposed God’s inexcusable behaviour!

**senryu*: traditional Japanese miniature poems, very similar to the better-known *haiku* and likewise now popular in the Western world.

MEMORY plays tricks with all of us, philosophy dons included. They and their students had crowded into room H3 of King's College, Cambridge, for a meeting of the university's Moral Science Club on October 25, 1946, and the clash between two of the foremost philosophers of the time. It was a historic occasion for British philosophy, although both of the protagonists were Austrian. Karl Popper and Ludwig Wittgenstein were there to exchange views on the very purpose of the subject: to discuss whether it dealt with real problems, as Popper thought, or just linguistic puzzles? Yet no one can agree on exactly what happened that night.

In his autobiography, Popper, the guest speaker, accused Wittgenstein of threatening him with a poker, then throwing it down and storming out of the meeting. But was this true? Certainly there was a poker in the room, which was heated by a coal fire. Whether Wittgenstein used it as a weapon or to drive home a point, is disputed, although there are several accounts that he was ordered to put it down. Certainly Wittgenstein left the room early, but that was his habit. At some stage Popper complained about visiting speakers being threatened with a poker; but was this before or after his opponent had left? Again there are varying views.

The authors of this enjoyable little book – two BBC journalists – expected that each of those present in the packed room would have slightly different recollections of the events of nearly 55 years ago, but loyalties also seem to have influenced the contrasting accounts by the surviving eye-witnesses. This, however, is of little consequence so far as the book is concerned. The 260-odd pages introduce the reader to the most prominent philosophical figures of the last century, set in social and historical context, together with something of their human side.

We learn, for instance, that Professor John Wisdom, who became “a fully signed-up advocate of the Wittgensteinian method”, although much more approachable than his mentor, sometimes cancelled his classes so that he could cycle to Newmarket for the races and – the authors add – “test his theories of probability”. And it is said that C D Broad scripted his lectures and read each sentence out twice; three times if they were jokes. That, according to one bored listener, was the only way you could tell what was a joke.

Broad admitted that he disliked attending the Moral Science Club: he was not “quick-witted nor quick-tongued enough to take a useful part ... and was not prepared to spend hours every week in a thick atmosphere of cigarette-smoke”, or “dance to the highly syncopated pipings of Herr Wittgenstein's flute”. Many regulars, however, hung on to every

Colin McCall reviews
*Wittgenstein's Poker: The
 story of a ten-minute
 argument between two great
 philosophers, by David
 Edmonds and John Eidinow.*
 Faber hardback £9.99

note, as well as aping the master's dress and actions, such was his powerful presence. And such is Wittgenstein's continuing influence that an American literary critic found eight novels and plays, 12 books of poetry and other pieces about him or prompted by him.

To many, though, he was exasperating. After Isaiah Berlin had delivered a paper to the Moral Science Club asking how could one have knowledge of others' inner mental states, Wittgenstein took over, saying “No, no, that is not the way to go about it. Let me. Don't let's talk philosophy. Let's talk business with each other. Ordinary business”. That would seem to justify Popper's comparing Wittgenstein with the Roman Catholic Church for prohibiting discussion of any topic on which he did not have an answer.

These two bitter opponents had a common origin as Viennese of Jewish extraction, although from different strata. Yet even here their attitudes differed, and Popper's was much the more rational. “I do not believe in race”, he told the editor of the *Jewish Year Book*, who had asked him to submit an entry. “I abhor any form of racialism or nationalism; and never belonged to the Jewish faith. Thus I do not see on what grounds I could possibly consider myself as a Jew. I do sympathise with minorities; but although this has made me stress my Jewish origin, I do not consider myself a Jew.”

Wittgenstein, in contrast, wrote astonishingly about the Jews' “secretive and cunning nature” and spoke of his own “100 per cent Hebraic thoughts”. His English biographer, Ray Monk, was shocked by Wittgenstein's remarks, which include slogans of “racial anti-Semitism” and, indeed, “many of Hitler's most outrageous suggestions”.

Neither Wittgenstein nor Popper ever attended the Vienna Circle, which so affected the young A J Ayer and led to his influential work on logical positivism, *Language, Truth and Logic*; but Wittgenstein was much admired by the Circle and its leader Moritz Schlick, who was brutally murdered in 1936 at the University of Vienna by a former doctoral student, a paranoid schizo-

phrenic, who shouted “Now you damned bastard, there you have it.”

Outrageously, much of the press in the Austrian Catholic corporate state attacked the philosopher rather than his assassin. One writer, a pseudonymous academic colleague, accused Schlick of representing “a new and sinister strain in philosophy, one hostile to metaphysics and supported by the basest elements in society – Jews, communists and Freemasons. Here was a philosophy – logical positivism – that denied the existence of God, denied the existence of spirit, and saw man merely as a cluster of cells. The bullets which killed Moritz Schlick were guided not by the logic of a lunatic but by that of a soul deprived of its meaning of life.”

Bertrand Russell who, like Wittgenstein and Einstein, was one of the Vienna Circle's “intellectual fathers”, was in the chair on the night of the poker and is thought to have ordered Wittgenstein to put it down. He receives mixed treatment at the hands of Edmonds and Eidinow. Can it be that they have relied on Ray Monk's hostile biography of Russell as well as the same writer's much more sympathetic life of Wittgenstein? The last-named (like his biographer) loathed Russell's popular books; considered Russell's philosophy to be too “mechanistic”; was offended by Russell's militant atheism and “appalled by his freethinking homilies on marriage and sex.” One quality, incidentally, that distinguishes Russell from both the main characters in the book is his wit. On receiving a letter from a woman who thanked God as well as him for his autobiography, Russell replied “I am pleased that you liked my autobiography, but troubled that you thanked God for it, because that suggests he has infringed my copyright.”

Nevertheless, Karl Popper greatly admired Russell and thought *A History of Western Philosophy* the best of its kind. Popper's first books were in German, and when he started to write in English he tried to imitate another of Russell's outstanding qualities, his style. Ironically, Popper's best-known work in English, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, was turned down by the Cambridge University Press, partly because of its length, but also because it was disrespectful of Plato. Popper's criticisms of Hegel and Marx were no doubt acceptable, but Cambridge had been the historic home of Platonism since the seventeenth century, when Cudworth and others strove to defend Christianity and refute the materialism of Hobbes. But in the 1940s! No matter: *The Open Society* was published by Routledge in two volumes in 1945, reprinted two years later, and is still in print.

Defining Jews

IN HIS letter published in April, John Clarke states that Jews are not members of the "white" race because they are Semites. Nonsense!

Semite is a linguistic, not racial, definition. Ethnic Jews (like Syrians and Turks) are members of the Caucasoid (white) race and were defined as such under apartheid in South Africa – eg Harry Oppenheimer and Helen Suzman. They were hated by Dr Verwoerd for their religion, not skin colour. The black Jews from the Sudan (Falashas) are a special case, being an African tribe who converted to Judaism.

CLLR E GOODMAN
Reigate

Speaking ill of the dead

IN HIS letter headed "OHair 'a vulgar bully'" (Points of View, June) Fred Woodworth of Tucson vilifies the late Madalyn Murray O'Hair, when she can no longer defend herself, and accuses me of being "flattered and exalted to have even a brushing contact with such a media-anointed entity", and therefore of varnishing the truth. That is absurd. In fact, my article on her murder, together with that of her son and granddaughter, was by no means



Barbara Smoker, left, with Madalyn Murray O'Hair in Helsinki, 1983

uncritical of her character and personality.

Yes, she did quarrel bitterly with some of her fellow American atheists – of whom Mr Woodworth was obviously one – but that is not to deny her bravery, her campaigning ability, and her indefatigable devotion to the causes she espoused.

As for "a love of human freedom", she certainly demonstrated that, in full courageous abundance – even at the time when most

other Americans were too scared of being charged with "unAmerican activities" to speak out on behalf of minority rights, atheism, world peace, disarmament, and so on.

My willingness to accept the American media's labelling of me as "the British M M O'Hair" was not, as Mr Woodworth suggests, based on pride, but was simply pragmatic. Anyway, it soon became clear that it was not a close parallel – for instance, I did not use such coarse language as Madalyn often used.

With regard to the exchange for gold coins of \$600,000 in organisational investments, the date on which Madalyn's son Jon collected the coins was September 29th, 1995, which was more than a month after the family's abduction; so it looks as though he acted under criminal duress. And the murders apparently took place within the next few days.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Nuclear power 'superstitions'

JEAN Fawcett (Points of View, May) is, unfortunately, trapped in various superstitions about nuclear power. Of course those who invented nuclear reactors (engineers and technologists rather than scientists) knew that they would produce waste which remains radioactive for a very long time. But her implication that there is a great amount of this waste is based on a misunderstanding.

The amount is, in fact, quite small compared with the huge amount of domestic and industrial waste (some of which itself is radioactive). Furthermore, only 3 per cent of "used" fuel is unusable waste; reprocessing recovers the other 97 per cent for re-use.

The waste is more carefully handled than any other industrial waste and is stored safely until the Government allows Nirex to put it out of harm's way underground (so far denied). The vitrified waste will remain dangerous for only a few hundred years.

The plutonium recovered from "used" fuel is unsuitable as an explosive and is handled in an oxide form which cannot be used in a bomb. Moreover, much of it is now being burned as a mixed-oxide fuel in reactors.

There is no evidence that anyone in the United Kingdom has been harmed by nuclear power. Indeed, without nuclear power, the world (and the UK) would be putting a lot more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and so making global warming worse. In that respect, phasing out nuclear power in this country will be a huge mistake.

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh.

Nauseating reverence.

I AM increasingly irritated by all references in the *Freethinker* to the god thing using the male 3rd person pronoun, with a capital initial letter. Why not get your typesetter to adopt grammatical accuracy and use "it"?

Apart from this, keep up the good work.

TERRY FRANKS
Hastings

Ignorance of Christianity

IN YOUR May "Freethinking out Loud" column, you deplore the ignorance of Christianity shown by young west Londoners. I would suggest that we should be more heartened than disappointed by this. I feel that there is a case for our more strongly portraying the currently active religions, in the same way as dead religions such as those of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Aztecs. The inevitable result would be confusion amongst more people as to which myth belonged to which religion, unless they were interested in the associated literature. This might be bad for literary studies, but it would be good for rationality!

RICHARD SAGE
London

Hate mag?

AFTER a year, Michael J Rush (Points of View, June) has decided that the *Freethinker* is turning into a "hate mag" and he delivers a series of somewhat pompous rebukes.

Michael, you should get out more because if you think the *Freethinker* is a hate mag you are leading a too sheltered life.

My objection to his views is that I don't want an even-handed, anodyne *Freethinker*. Supporters of religions don't hesitate to condemn and attack atheism. Why should we be even-handed towards religion? I want a *Freethinker* which is prejudiced against religious superstition and biased in favour of atheism. Furthermore, I would like the magazine to use polemic to argue its case. In my view the character of the magazine depends on this approach. I sometimes wonder about the extent to which my views are shared, or rejected, by other *Freethinker* readers.

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Taxpayers and the C of E

I ENJOYED reading Keith Porteous Wood's article in the June issue.

He asks "Must taxpayers top up the C of E's emptying coffers". On that issue I have a cutting from the *Independent on Sunday*, Jan



18,1998 which states: "The cost to the public purse of funding England's 110 bishops in 1996 was £13.7-m."

Given the low level of church attendance, it would be interesting to know the full cost of the Church of England to the taxpayer.

MICHAEL LEVIN
London

Putting the art before the course

ALL ART attempts to communicate emotion, using different methods. In the plastic arts the method includes, but is not limited to, the depiction of a recognisable world. Of painting, Tolstoy said: "The function of art is to make something understood, which in the form of argument would be incomprehensible." In other words, the artist seeks to communicate emotions that cannot be verbalised. Communication is the aim. Good art achieves this aim; but even good art cannot communicate with a closed or ignorant mind.

HELEN COX
Bath

I DON'T know much about art, but I know what I like. While some of what is said about "modern art" is indeed so much psychobabble and bullshit, Tony Akkermans' reduction of the creative impulse to "skilfulness" leaves me cold. If we have to have bullshit, better that it be hyperbolic and pretentious than dull and worthy.

If legitimacy in the arts constitutes "knowing the rules", if not necessarily always following them, then doesn't appreciation of the arts demand a similar level of knowledge? Well, I can't paint, draw, sculpt or compose. I haven't the faintest idea whether somebody is following rules or wilfully disregarding them. And, frankly, I want to be allowed to feel more than mere admiration for an artist's skill. I want to be moved, excited, surprised, perhaps shocked. I want to feel an emotional involvement. A picture of a tree might, at a technical level, be an extremely accurate and faithful representation – jolly good, ten out of ten, yawn yawn – but I have no emotional need nor use for a mirror of nature that only reflects.

According to Akkermans, the reason Tracey Emin's bed is not "art", is that it is too easy. Had she spent years making the bed out of matchsticks, then it would be art. Had she painted a tasteful picture of her bed, obviously that would be art too.

But really, talking about whether or not Tracey Emin's bed constitutes "art" is of little interest and no importance. Suppose we decide that it isn't art, what then? Is there nothing else to say about it?

Tracey Emin's "bed" – since it obviously is

not her actual bed, unless she sleeps on the sofa these days – is about Tracey Emin. Whether the rest of us find this of any interest depends on whether we find Tracey Emin and her life as fascinating a subject as Tracey Emin herself does. I don't, so I don't much like her bed, but that no more makes it a "con" than any other autobiographical piece of work. Does it deserve the label "art"? I don't see that it matters in the slightest.

It is no good trying to judge Tracey Emin by the rules of painting or sculpture, because she is not a painter or a sculptor. What she does has its own rules, and she is operating within them quite happily.

Likewise, Dave Simmons (Letters, April) writes, of music, "discarding too many rules leads to noise", as though noise were automatically a bad thing. In compositional terms, of course, "noise" has its own rules of organisation. But in any case, what's wrong with noise? I like noise. I find it beautiful. I've been known to listen to thunderstorms and even pneumatic drills for pleasure. I like tunes too, but you can hear too many of them in one short life.

I want chaos, strangeness, repetition, discordance, ecstasy and weirdness! Give me dribbling paintbrushes, the feedback from an electric guitar. the "squeaks, sawing sounds, and random sequences of notes" so disapproved of by Dave Simmons. I search out and soak up the "grotesque", the "impudent", and the "brash" that Akkermans dislikes. I can't get enough of the "loudest noises and the pottiest gimmicks". "Match-stick figures, squiggles, vivid colours, profound squares, fancy frames"? Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!

"There can be no identifiable meaning in a tangle of contorted paint strokes", moans Akkermans. As though being "meaningless" were synonymous with being "pointless". Life has no "meaning" either, but that does not stop us from glorying in it, from infusing it with a million or more "meanings" every day.

I don't know much about art, but I know what I like. I like things that remind me what it's like to be alive.

DAN J BYE
Sheffield

TONY Akkermans (February *Freethinker* seems to define it as a work that embodies skill in producing near-photographic representations. Now personally, or should I say emotionally, I have a lot of sympathy with that view. It's obvious that some art (eg artists' impressions of unbuilt buildings) should be judged on its accuracy. I understand representational work and I see how to judge it. Akkerman's view also allows me to declare that pickled sheep, unmade beds and apparently random squiggles on paper are not art and

therefore not worth serious consideration. Since I give them no consideration this satisfies me.

But, of course, it won't do.

It won't do because it implies that Munch's "The Scream" is either not art or poor art because it is not much like a photographic representation. And because it implies the same of impressionist works in general. Most of us would feel that a definition with this result was missing the point rather seriously.

There's a logical problem, too. Why should it matter that the work "embodies skill"? If the artist's proper purpose is to produce a photographic representation, why not just take a photograph?

No, in distinguishing art from mere hack-work we ought to look at the result, not the process. I suggest that a creative work should be judged a work of art to the degree that it evokes the intended emotion in the people who experience it. The artist may seek to create joy, fear, anger or contentment. He succeeds as an artist to the degree that his audience feel that emotion.

This has three merits. It applies to all forms of creative work, including writing, painting, music, film and gardening. It suggests an objective test of artistic quality, and thus of ability. And it allows me to continue to dismiss pickled sheep etc since the emotions they create in me (mainly amusement at the folly of the art world) are not those intended by their creators.

And in its focus on the human response and implicit democracy, it's a humanist definition too!

DAVID FLINT
Enfield

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

atheist & humanist contacts & events

Bath & Beyond Humanists: Meets at 7.30 pm on the first Monday of every month in Bath. Details from Hugh Thomas on 0117 9871751.

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Monthly meetings resumed in September. Summer programme obtainable from Joan Wimble on 01273 733215.

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 Cleavelands 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, August 7, 8pm. Diane Munday: *The Pain and Pleasure of Campaigning on Humanism and Abortion*.

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, July 19, 8pm. Pat Buckley: *Issues Concerning Organ Donations and Transplants*.

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, July 4, 8pm. Dave Jeffries: *Religious Functions*. Wednesday, August 1, 8pm. Annual General Meeting.

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, July 11, 7.30pm. George Hosking: *Violence in Society*.

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 Mclroy, 115 South View Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield S7 1DE. Tel: 0114 2509127.