

£1.25

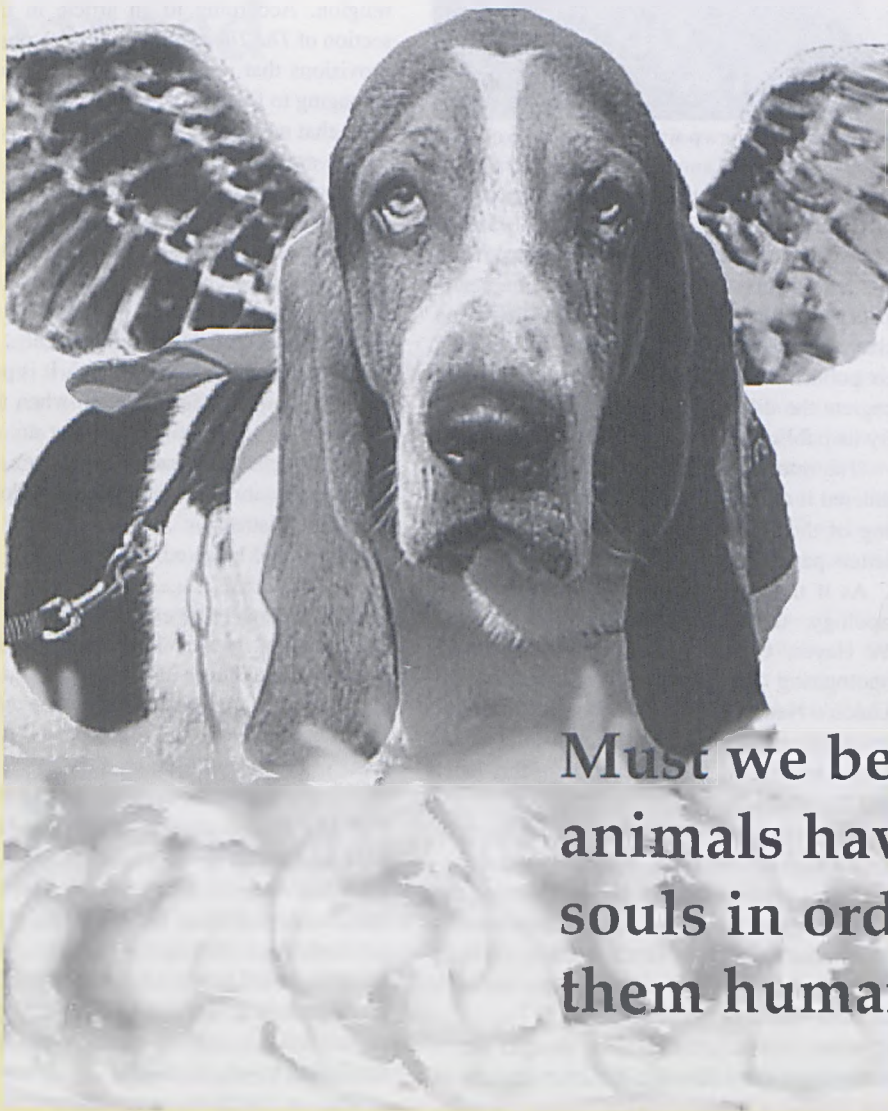
The

Vol 122 No 4
April 2002

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



**Keep on
barking,
but you
can't
come in!**

**Must we believe that
animals have immortal
souls in order to treat
them humanely?**

– see centre pages

Also in this issue:

April fools: Police may charge broadcaster with blasphemy – p3

Creationism: Christians monkey with the education system – p5

Why do the religious cling to their delusions? – p6

Points of View - p13

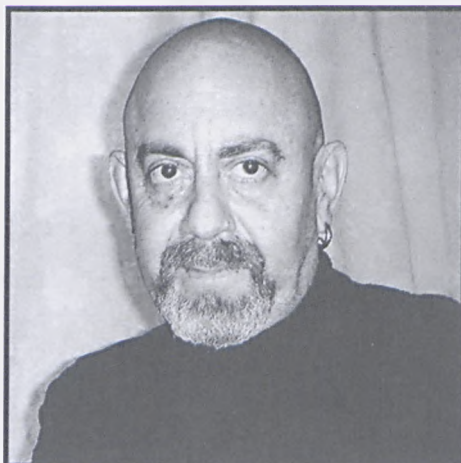
freethinking out loud: barry duke

WHO would be an editor, huh? One “wrong” move and the whole world wants your head on a pole and your guts for garters. Or that’s how it must seem to the poor, beleaguered Head of Communications for the CWU.

Earlier this year Chris Proctor, of the Communication Workers Union, took the decision to publish a letter, critical of Islam, from one T Karayiane, in the Union’s national newspaper, *CWU Voice*.

The letter, in the February issue, was a response to an earlier article in the paper entitled “Islam – a Religion of Peace”, which the writer thought gave “too much credit and respect to this corrupt religion”.

One gathers from stupid phrases like “Islam is an evil spirit”, “Afghanistan and other Muslim countries are poor because they are all cursed and faraway from God (almighty God)” and “only a tiny percentage [of Muslims] have repented and become true Christians (and I don’t refer to Catholics or the Church of England either)”, that T Karayiane was not attacking Islam from a



rationalist’s viewpoint, which, goodness knows he/she had ample opportunity to do, but from a rabidly evangelical Christian one.

Howls of indignation came in the wake of this hysterical little rant finding its way into the letters page of *CWU Voice*, and the newspaper was forced to declare in its March issue that “Chris Proctor ... who made the decision to publish ‘that’ letter last month, sincerely regrets the distress caused to many members by its publication.

“His intention, although many readers considered it misguided, was to encourage an airing of these issues by the members on their letters page ...”

As if this was not enough of a grovelling apology, the paper carried a piece from W Hayes, General Secretary of the CWU, apologising “unreservedly” on behalf of the Union’s National Executive. “In this instance, in an attempt to encourage a serious debate on Islam, regrettably the publication of this letter did the reverse.

“It was an error of judgement, and the matter is currently being investigated. We recognise how profoundly and deeply upsetting the publication of this letter was to all our members, whether they be of the Islamic faith, or any other faith – or for that matter, no faith at all ...”

What I found truly chilling, though, was a letter from Gary Heather, branch secretary of the CWU’s Central London branch. In it he stated that “at our branch meeting on January 31 a member raised this issue and the following motion was passed: *This branch is appalled by the letter ... and calls on the CWU General Secretary to dismiss the editor, or whoever was otherwise responsible for the letter’s publication ...* In the Central London branch we tackle equality very seriously ... The correspondence referred to is against the letter, as well as the spirit, of Rule 2 of the CWU. *In addition, had the original version of the anti-terrorist legislation gone through as the government wished, it would probably have been*

illegal. (My italics).

True. But even if it had been written in a far more rational and considered manner, it might *still* have been seen to be in contravention of the ridiculous “incitement to religious hatred” provisions that Home Secretary David Blunkett tried, and fortunately failed, to have included in his anti-terrorist legislation.

This is not to say that publications like the *Freethinker* (and, for that matter, *CWU Voice*) are entirely out of the wood when it comes to religion. According to an article in the law section of *The Times* of February 19, one of the provisions that remained could be even *more* damaging to freedom of speech than the provisions that were removed.

The article referred to a new offence of “religiously aggravated harrassment”, and cautioned that “any newspaper that runs a series of articles on any religious cult could find itself prosecuted or sued, as could the journalists and anyone else involved”.

It even warned that “Harrassment ... is far easier to prove [than blasphemy]. It is possible to cause someone distress even when there is no intention to do so, when they are not an intended victim, and have merely been told by a third party about something said or done that they find ‘distressing’”

Who would be an editor, huh?

OUCH! Satan fights even dirtier than Pastor Paul Scanlon, of the Abundant Life Centre in Bradford, could ever imagine.

Pastor Scanlon was recently quoted as saying that sickness and homosexuality were signs of “the Devil fighting dirty”.

His remarks were made on the eve of TV’s *Pop Idol* final, and were apparently designed to boost support for 17-year-old Gareth Gates, who, together with his parents, is a member of this fecund-sounding but blisteringly intolerant evangelical church in Bradford.

Despite the Church’s insistence that “a vote for Gareth is a vote for God”, pious dialling fingers failed to register sufficient phone votes for Gareth to win the final.

That, in itself, was very disappointing for the squeaky-clean little Cliff Richard wannabe and his squads of admiring god-botherers.

But they gulped their bitterest pill when they learned that Gareth had lost to one of Beelzebub’s own – Will Young, a proud, good-looking, talented young man who ‘outed’ himself as being gay soon after winning the final.

Of course, Satan could have fought dirtier still – by swinging the vote in Gareth’s favour, then having him tel the tabloids that he intended joining the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.

Stranger things have happened, you know.

The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

Subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher:

Freethinker/G W Foote Ltd
PO Box 26428
London SE10 9WH

Editorial office 020 8305 9603
E-mail: editor@freethinker.co.uk
or fteditor@aol.com

Website:

<http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15 or £10 unwaged. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland) please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.

Special trial subscription for readers’ friends and contacts: £5 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to the *Freethinker*, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

Blasphemy: broadcaster may be charged



THE Metropolitan Police in London have confirmed that they are investigating allegations that veteran broadcaster Joan Bakewell, 68, committed an act of blasphemy by reading extracts from James Kirkup's poem *The Love that Dares to Speak its Name* during the course of an episode of a TV series called *Taboo*.

Met officers disclosed that they may charge Bakewell with blasphemous libel after she recited part of the erotic poem about a Roman centurion's affection for Jesus.

Taboo was reported to the Department of Public Prosecutions by Mediawatch-uk (formerly Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association which funded a private prosecution against *Gay News* and its editor, Denis Lemon for publishing the poem in 1976.)

"I couldn't believe what was being said on my TV set," Mediawatch-uk director John Beyer was quoted as saying. "It is unthinkable that the BBC should have repeated part of a

poem already found by a jury to be a blasphemous libel."

The police investigation is said to have been ordered by Sir John Stevens, head of the Metropolitan Police and a leading evangelical Christian.

Denis Lemon was given a nine-month suspended jail sentence and told he had come close to serving it. "If Bakewell is prosecuted, it will be a major test of Britain's controversial blasphemy laws which protect only Christians. They were introduced in the seventeenth century, when questioning the existence of the state religion was akin to treason. They have remained unamended ever since," wrote the *Observer's* Ben Summerskill.

"I was making a point," said Bakewell. "You need to show people how sensibilities are offended. It was the very fact that it was to do with Jesus and the disciples that shocked religious people. If you're going to say, 'This is a tacky poem', you have to show it."

Bible belt victory for US atheists

AMERICA'S Freedom From Religion Foundation has notched up a significant victory when a federal judge in Tennessee declared that weekly Bible lessons in Rhea County public schools were illegal, and ordered that they be stopped immediately.

The Bible instruction, carried out for more than 50 years among children of kindergarten age had been given during regular school hours for 30 minutes each week without parental consent. The Bible programme, operated by students from Bryan College (a Bible-based institution named in honour of creationist William Jennings Bryan, who defended the anti-evolution law in the infamous Scopes trial in Dayton in 1925), were designed to help public school students become "exposed to the Bible".

The argument that since "Rhea County is a place that they respect the Bible" and that it ought therefore to be at liberty to teach the tenets of the Bible in its public schools as truth, was dismissed out of hand by Judge R Allan Edgar. "This argument," he said, "reflects a misunderstanding of the Constitution of the United States. It is probably true that the citizens of Rhea County who are of the Christian faith are in the majority. This, however, does not give them license to teach their religion in the public schools."

"The Bible Education Ministry programme was a flagrant and atavistic First Amendment violation. It's tremendously satisfying to see the wall of separation between church and state being reinforced by such a strong decision," said Dan Barker, public relations director of the Freedom From Religion Foundation which, together with John Doe and Mary Roe, initiated the action..

The weird world of religion

A NEW ZEALAND woman has been awarded £900 after her employer, who considered her to be "possessed", forced her to receive a religious blessing.

The woman said she did not feel comfortable after receiving the blessing in front of her colleagues, and quit the job a few weeks later.

A CLERGYMAN who was a personal adviser to a former Archbishop of Canterbury has resigned as Dean of Portsmouth over falsified qualifications.

The Very Rev William Taylor stepped down after being confronted by his bishop over false claims published in *Who's Who* and *Crockford's*. Mr Taylor was listed as having a PhD from Cambridge University, but he left there in 1983 after two years with a Master of Theology. He was a former advisor to Dr Robert Runcie.

A WOMAN claims her drug addict son used his own blood to make a religious statue appear as if it was crying. Thousands of people flocked to see the statue of Padre Pio in Sicily after reports that it had started weeping blood.

The unnamed woman phoned a newspaper claiming the blood on the 6ft statue in Messina was that of her son.

A SINGLE strand of "holy beard" hair has sparked another inter-religion controversy in India. Hindus are claiming the "holy" strand of hair held in a Muslim shrine in Srinagar belongs to one of their prophets. Muslims revere it as a hair from the beard of the prophet Mohammed.

A Hindu politician says he will go to court to get the hair back for the Hindus.

CHRISTIANS in Calcutta are begging the mayor not to rename a street housing night-clubs, bars and pubs after Mother Teresa.

Members of the Lovers of Mother Teresa Group say renaming Park Street would be an insult to her memory.

They want Mayor Subrata Mukherjee to rename another road after her instead.



Webwatch: Norman Pridmore

I'M sorry, but you're going to Hell. That's according to Betty Bowers ("America's Best Christian"). She has her own site at <http://www.bettybowers.com/> and a visit is a must. She is, it seems, so close to Jesus that he's even given her his "loaves and fishes" recipe.

She's connected with the good folk at the Landover Baptist Church ("Where the Worthwhile Worship") who have their own fine and very uplifting site at <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/>

For the good of your immortal souls I urge you to visit both. Of course, Betty Bowers would not agree with this suggestion. She would prefer to keep atheistic freethinking humanist trash out of Heaven ...

At Landover Baptist, as well as reading sermons and checking out one's spiritual standing, one can also buy the medication "Salvacil".

Developed by Creation Scientists, these handy tablets are designed to help one

believe when doubt assails. All theological contradictions and absurdities can be overcome thanks to a course of this invaluable pharmaceutical. There's no mention yet of putting it in the water supply, but it can only be a matter of time.

That's enough satire. How about a dose of the real stuff? The next offering is a really ugly example of the kind of poison that the first two sites try, by ridicule, to neutralise. It's the (in)famous "God Hates Fags" site of Pastor Fred Phelps, a fine god-fearing USA fundamentalist (that is fundamental as in arse).

Visit this breathtakingly awful site at <http://www.godhatesfags.com/main/index.html> and be appalled. Never has so much venom and stupidity appeared in such concentrated form. It's hard to imagine that people out there really believe this stuff, but they do. And, atrociously, act on its despicable message.

In need of a dose of sanity and some good clear thinking? Atheist and conjurer James Randi has a site at <http://www.randi.org/>. It's that of

the "James Randi Educational Foundation" and features writings by the man who makes fakes and fraudsters the world over tremble and run for cover. Because he clarifies rather than mystifies he seems strangely unattractive to the mass media, despite his being a brilliant performer. That's why this site is so important. It makes reports of his work, both ongoing and in archive, easily available. He also has a wicked sense of humour and writes well.

Two more sites to go with James Randi's. Taken all together, they provide a great resource for freethinkers of all kinds. The first is The Skeptics Dictionary at <http://skeptic.com/> It calls itself "A Critical Survey of Questionable Therapies, Eccentric Beliefs, Amusing Deceptions and Dangerous Delusions".

The second is the "Quackwatch" site at <http://www.quackwatch.com/index.html>. This is a huge and growing searchable database of articles and features on health matters of all kinds, and is highly sceptical about claims made on behalf of many (most?) "alternative" therapies. All these three sites are hard-headed, and none the worse for it.

Now for some "links" sites. I've been asked to draw attention to the updated links on the GALHA site. This is now such a big list that it's now got its own page. Find it at <http://www.galha.org/dir/humanist/uk.html> Don't be in a hurry to leave, either, because the whole site is well worth a good look. There's a request on it, too, for information about a variety of "lost" websites for a large number of humanist and secularist local groups. One of them may be yours! Do help, if you can.

Check out, also, the links at <http://www.secularsites.freecuk.com> and at <http://www.atheistalliance.org/directory/esw.htm>. I'll be using these myself soon for a concentrated exploration of British sites in the next month or so. There's some good home-grown stuff about, as I hope to be able to show. In the meantime, have another look at the NSS website at <http://www.secularism.org.uk/index.htm>. Fans of Woody Allen will certainly enjoy his "helpful" guide to the paranormal ...

Lastly, take a look at the site of the Institute for the Secularisation of Islam (ISIS) at <http://www.secularislam.org/Default.htm> This is a brave, serious, insightful and intelligent site that deserves to be better known. Anyone wanting to know more about whether a secular Islam is possible should visit it. It seems to me something of a beacon of hope. Still, it's a long road...

As before, thanks for your suggestions. Don't hesitate to send your own favourites to me at norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk.

Creationists free to peddle their myths

THE Government has no power to stop Emmanuel College in Gateshead from teaching creationism alongside evolution – even if it had a mind to do it. This fact emerged last month following press reports that the college might be in breach of the National Curriculum.

Also revealed last month was that Sir Peter Vardy, the millionaire who financed Emmanuel College, has pledged £12 million to fund five more City Colleges on the same lines, and that fundamentalist schools from other religions are also teaching anti-Darwinian creation myths.

Emmanuel College – a City Technology College – is one of only two dozen schools in the country that are state-funded but not bound to teach the National Curriculum. It is effectively an independent school and as long as it teaches the ten core curriculum subjects it can abandon the lesson plans laid down by the Government. This means Emmanuel College is much freer to pursue the creationist agenda being promoted by the clique of fundamentalist Christians who are presently in control.

Leading scientists, including geneticist Stephen Jones and National Secular Society Honorary Associates Professors Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins, have called for the school inspectors to return to Emmanuel College and examine what is being taught.

These demands have, however, been rejected. It now emerges that even if a re-inspection found Emmanuel College to be teaching creationism as being as valid as evolution, nothing could be done to stop it.

Over the entrance door to Emmanuel College stands a stained-glass window that reads: "In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth."

The school's prospectus states: "Christian Truth must play a vital part in any genuine attempt to educate young people, not force belief on people but to ensure proper consideration is given to the Bible and its claims."

In a lecture to an adult audience given at the college last year, the college's vice-principal, Gary Wiecek, said: "As Christian teachers it is essential that we are able to counter the anti-creationist position... it must be our duty... to counter these false doctrines with well-founded insights."

The head teacher is an evangelical Christian called Nigel McQuoid. He says he favours the introduction of creationism into the classroom, but at present it is still being evaluated and the earliest it could be introduced would be in September.

Mr McQuoid makes no secret of his sympathies. He is a close friend of John Burn, his predecessor, and one of the founders of the Newcastle-based Christian Institute, set up in 1991 to "promote Christian Values in a Secular World".

THE lead story of the January issue of SPUC's free paper *Pro-Life Times* hysterically denounced the new legislation to regulate human cloning, because it merely banned implantation in a womb, not the production of embryonic clones for research. The Pro-Life Alliance had been successful in the High Court in November in putting a stop to the whole cloning programme, but the new law enabled the Government to get the November judicial decision reversed in the Court of Appeal in January. This was a few weeks before the final report was due from the House of Lords Select Committee on Stem Cell Research. (Stem cells are the master cells that have the potential to grow into any kind of body tissue.)

The *Catholic Herald* of February 22, just one week before that report was published, devoted both its front page and its editorial to the same subject – though bizarrely concentrating on the alleged financial corruption involved in bio-tech funding.

On February 27, despite all this hoo-ha, the House of Lords Select Committee – chaired surprisingly by an Anglican bishop, Richard Harries of Oxford – gave the green light to the creation of human embryonic clones for the supply of stem cells for therapeutic purposes.

Licences for such experimentation and use are likely to be issued almost immediately – thus putting Britain in advance of the USA, and every other country with the exception of China, in a very important development of medicine, which will probably enable diseases such as cancer, diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, as well as paralysis through damaged nerves, to be treated radically in as little as five years from now.

It is sheer common-sense to meet medical needs in this way, and opposition to it turns either on general ignorance or on the religious superstition of "ensoulment".

Embryonic stem cells (ESCs) can be harvested either from fertilised human eggs or from embryonic clones. The great advantage of the latter method for transplantation is that the patient's immune system will not reject self-cloned tissue.

The US Government, which has bowed to religious pressure at home against human embryo cloning (though, illogically, allowing the destruction of spare embryos in IVF programmes) aims to persuade the UN to ban human cloning world-wide, and is itself concentrating instead on doubtful attempts to obtain patients' own adult stem cells of comparable versatility to ESCs.

The fundamentalist religious lobby opposes any experimentation, on, and the ultimate destruction of, all human embryos, whether

fertilised eggs or artificial clones.

The first source is embryos left over from fertility programmes. These would otherwise be wastefully destroyed – but pro-lifers are opposed to IVF anyway, unless every embryo,



An egg, argues
BARBARA SMOKER,
is not a chicken, and
an acorn is not an
oak-tree

even if defective, is implanted into the mother for gestation. (One wonders how they rationalise the high rate of spontaneous early abortion, for which their god must be logically responsible.) In the second method, doctored fertilised eggs are treated with a chemical to start cell division.

In both methods, after five days (ie at the blastocyst stage), the inner cell mass is separated and the stem cells cultured to develop into whatever type of cells are required.

Squeamishness about using human embryos is due to the absurd notion that eggs are people. No one thinks that a chicken's egg is actu-

ally a chicken or an acorn is actually an oak-tree, so why confuse a human egg – even a fertilised human egg – with a human being. Since it has no nervous system, it can have no feelings, and an entity without feelings can have no intrinsic rights. Before becoming a human being with human rights, the fertilised egg would have to be given time to develop in the requisite environment – that is, in a womb, or possibly in an artificial womb.

Technically, a cloned embryo could probably be developed into a full-term human baby, but the new British regulations do not allow this.

Even if it were to be carried out one day, would that be so very terrible? There are already millions of human clones in the world – called identical twins – and they are more alike than a clone would be if born into a different environment in a later generation. But of course the exploitative replication of a large number of clones, as in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, is another matter altogether.

A related controversy concerns those parents who, having a seriously disabled or dying child, use IVF to try desperately for another child with the prerequisite DNA to provide the first with a compatible transplant of, say, bone marrow. The one real moral imperative here is that the second child be wanted for itself and be treated equally with the first.

However, a common misunderstanding about it is that the intention is to sacrifice the second child for the first. Actually, the new baby would donate nothing except stem cells from the umbilical cord, which is generally thrown away. In fact, if stem cells were routinely collected from umbilical cords for properly computer-catalogued storage, they would always be available for everyone who needed them.

Death threats for patriotic Muslim

A BRITISH Muslim says he'll ignore death threats and display the Union Flag to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee.

Mohammed Usman claims his family has been terrorised by Asian youths for displaying the flag in the windows of their Bradford home. He says the flag started to attract unwelcome attention after he first put it up during Euro 2000.

Mr Usman, 60, says he was also told to "return to Islam" or die after displaying the Stars and Stripes to teach his children about America last year.

During the city's riots last summer, youths smashed his windows night after night, according to a recent report in *The Times*. Mr Usman says immigrants should be patriotic and adopt a British lifestyle. "I was born a Muslim but I am very patriotic," he said. "I am British, I feel British and my children are British."

Why do the religious cling to their delusions?

A RECENT letter to the *Freethinker* from Graham Newbury raised a very interesting question – that of “why worshippers of an external god hold on to their delusions”.

The question is immense. It addresses, at its widest, issues of how we know what we know (if indeed we can be said to know anything), and of our rationality itself.

I offer the following thoughts as a contribution to the debate, in the hope and expectation that others more qualified might address the same question more effectively and render my reply redundant.

I'll begin by saying that clearly there is no one answer to the question. This is both a trivial and an important truth. It is trivial because it is what we would expect – we know too much about the world to hope for simple answers. It is important because it will help enable us to be brave in exploring areas of complexity and difficulty, and to resist the seductions of simplicity.

Four areas of knowledge mainly contribute to an understanding of the problem and help to suggest what an answer might begin to look like. These areas are

- Brain science (neurology, neuro-anatomy, brain chemistry)
- Psychology
- Sociology, and
- Philosophy.

I shall look briefly at each of these in the course of this piece.

Firstly, though, it is essential to address “initial conditions”. These are that as humans we are systems within systems, embedded in a world of systems. Each system influences others, and all change through time. Rationality itself (as presently understood) is one system among many and is itself a recent thing. The laws of thought described by Aristotle were a novelty when he first outlined them. Socrates' rationality was seen as something of a new departure, a break with less rational and more instinctual modes of thinking. Nietzsche considered it something of an unfortunate departure ...

Our own bodies “tell” themselves things below the level of conscious awareness. They mainly act without reference to consciousness or rationality. Think of the nervous system, of proprioception (which keeps the body informed of its own position in space and of the relations of its limbs to each other and to the whole), of our complex and interactive biochemical systems. We are fundamentally operating sub-rationally.

Again these are trivial truths. However, my point in making them is to show that we are far more familiar with, and conditioned to, irrational and unconscious modes than to the ratio-

nal. Our thinking skills themselves evolve. The work of Piaget and many, many later developmental psychologists has shown that our ability to think in abstractions and to move from the specific to the general is a contingent process. The neural pathways laid down during childhood are not inevitable, but are strongly affected by experience and environment.

In the February edition, Graham Newbury asked: “Why do worshippers of an external god hold to their delusions?” The challenge of providing an answer was seized upon by three subscribers – NORMAN PRIDMORE, IAN NORRIS and ALBERT ADLER

We have high expectations of rationality because on the whole it appears to work. Rationality is, however, ultimately far from being reliable. Neither is it a sufficient explanation for what may appear to be itself entirely and exclusively rational. Karl Popper pointed out that even the most rigorous science may rest upon insights and hunches that originate elsewhere than in the operation of logic and reason. Thus the building (science) may be a child of order and reason whilst the foundations are accidents of happenstance and serendipity. The anarchist philosopher Paul Feyerabend took this somewhat further, into the thoroughly paradoxical realm of absolute relativism ...

How is this relevant to the original question?

Let us look for a moment at psychology. Freud, in so many ways discredited, remains important for two insights. The first is that the human person is “strongly determined” – that what he or she does and says is done and said for a purpose, and has therefore an explanation (which may or may not be discovered or discoverable). The second is the insight that much of what does determine behaviour is not conscious or “rational” and that the role of rationality may be quite limited: and that where rationality does operate, it might even so be relatively ineffective.

This is gloomy stuff indeed if one's habitual view of the world is the kind of “enlightenment” view that insists that reason is upon the

throne and is the lawgiver, and that the problems of self, life and living can be addressed and solved rationally. Leibnitz, I believe, was of the opinion that it would be possible one day to sit down and “reason” and to arrive at indisputably correct answers to problems, no matter what the dispute. Our familiarity with computers may reinforce this view. It is plausible. After all, do we not see everywhere the power of reason made manifest? Reasoning, however, is not purely “processing power”, a kind of exercise of logical force. The “computational model” is seductive but not accurate.

Isaiah Berlin (amongst many others) pointed out in contradiction to Leibnitz (and utilitarians and rationalists generally) the difficulties in their position. He simply raised the fact of irreconcilable ends. Justice is good, but so is liberty, and so is equality. We desire all, but the enjoyment of one necessarily limits enjoyment of the others. How then can we decide between them, or balance them?

The selection of premises from which to reason are crucial. In mathematics there are axioms which are held to be self-evident. Reasoning proceeds from these axioms, or is at least ultimately dependent upon them. Now while much mathematics looks complex and is often very difficult, it is in fact a huge simplification of the real world. It is reasoning made easy! This, the fact that mathematics does rely upon selection and limitation, is why it has only been possible relatively recently to begin to model the “real” world mathematically. Not until the processing power of computers was available could really big problems be subject to mathematical processing.

We, operating in the real and complex world, are dealing with problems that are essentially far more difficult than the hardest mathematics, demanding far more reasoning and processing.

Even more annoyingly, we are denied access to simple and basic axioms on which to base our thinking, and denied by biology the raw power and speed and “monomania” of computers. Which is where god comes in ...

To some minds it is self-evident that the idea of god, however defined, is an absurdity. But how do we come to this conclusion? It may appear to be reached entirely rationally. But what are our premises? How did we choose them? To what extent are they self-evident? Are they axiomatic in that they are self-evident to all? If they are not, then they are not axioms ...

Can we even trace the chain of our own reasonings! How complete is it? Is it a simple process, a progress of the kind – “If A, then B, then C”? An honest examination will usually indicate that this is rarely the case. The quest for “clear reasoning”, and the difficulty of

achieving it in a world of complicated interdependencies can be seen and best understood by simply looking within history for "cause and effect" – indeed, into one's own autobiography! One very soon comes to realise (as Tolstoy did) that what begins as a rational quest in the clear light of the mind soon becomes a kind of grubbing about in darkness in a tangle of interlaced roots ...

Reasoning of inordinate subtlety has been employed in the effort to support and justify the idea of god, and much is very difficult to counter. Russell, for example, found Berkeley's position deeply problematic. He "knew" it was nonsense, but rationally, it stood. Accept Descartes' first premise at your peril – god becomes a logical necessity. The thought of Spinoza is as tight as a drum. David Hume dissolved as with acid the old forms that certainties could once claim, the connectedness of causation – and in legitimising scepticism allowed precisely the possibility of that about which we are most sceptical: god. And as for Kant removing the debate into the realm of the transcendental, well that created yet more difficulties ...

I may choose to believe that the best explanation of the world and of myself is that suggested by science. In fact, this is my position. But I can equally well imagine myself believing that there is a creator and that the world was made in six days of twenty-four hours each, and feeling that it is a coherent and rational position to take. It may seem perfectly reasonable to me to explain things in terms of my "god-myth" – and far more "comforting" and meaningful too. Nor need I experience any contradictions between my belief system and "reality", if my explanatory myth is powerful enough and sufficiently widely accepted. By means of it I can appeal to authority, logic, social sanction, history, custom and the rest. I may well, embedded in my "myth", find other "rational" opposing positions thoroughly irrational.

I wrote at the beginning that belief is not a simple matter of "right" and "wrong". Even so, I believe that science does offer the best explanation of the world. I am a "strong" determinist. I am a rationalist. It seems to me that all the evidence supports my position. It reassures me that many people far more intelligent and better-informed than I share my opinions about science, and share my rationalist stance.

Even more than this, I am sure that I am "right" in quite an "absolute" sense – and that those who believe in god are "wrong". For me the logic of Charles Bradlaugh's attacks upon the inconsistencies and self-contradictions inherent in the idea of "god" is conclusive and unanswerable. But were I a "believer" I would feel quite confident in saying that for me faith is

prior to logic. I would feel quite confident too in pointing out that perhaps the first attribute of "god" is his (its?) essential undefinability. The fact that definition therefore fails to comprehend the "mystery" thereby becomes (paradoxically) a rational support for my belief. More than this, it makes redundant Bradlaugh's attacks, dependent as they are upon pointing out inconsistencies between definitions ...

It is perhaps interesting that many important thinkers have not addressed the "god question" at all – or that they have side-stepped it, believing that metaphysical speculation is ultimately pointless. We should not forget, either, that many "religious" figures (beginning with Gautama, the historical Buddha, and extending right up to the present day) have thought and taught the same.

Perhaps we should not waste our breath on arguments about god's existence but concentrate instead on exposing and ridiculing "god as moralist" (a nasty, furtive, vindictive busybody) or "god as intervener" (an arbitrary monster of cruelly trivial intent), or "god as prescriber" (a mean-minded dictator with a fearful lack of humour and imagination) – or any of those other manifestations of the divine that plague the human mind.

Or perhaps we should simply ignore him/her/them/it until the grim ghost folds itself up in air and, unlamented, disintegrates into the nothing at all we always knew it to be ...

- Norman Pridmore

GRAHAM Newbery's question voices the incredulity with which many atheists regard the beliefs of religious people. Surely, goes the argument, anyone of even average intelligence living in enlightened Western society cannot possibly persevere in such far-fetched beliefs?

Well, I got my A-levels in pure mathematics, applied mathematics, physics and chemistry, and went on to gain an engineering degree and became a Chartered Engineer – and yet for nearly twenty years, from age 19 to 38, I was trapped in the evangelical Christian mind-set. So can my experience, and subsequent thinking on the subject, cast any light on the phenomenon?

From a typical nominally C of E background I was "converted" through the efforts of a fellow student at a time when I was experiencing the psychological upheavals not untypical of emerging adulthood. This chap pursued me relentlessly using (as I now recognise) all of the techniques common to the cult movements. My eventual submission to this onslaught did indeed bring a kind of peace, resolving the mental turmoil that had been created.

It has been suggested that humans may have

what might be termed a "religious gene" explicable in evolutionary terms. In times of great stress, be it personal or communal, an ability to rationalise things in a way that provides an answer and a source of comfort ("underneath are the everlasting arms") may aid survival. Certainly it has been observed that great natural or man-made disasters provoke outpourings of religious sentiment even from communities normally luke-warm in this respect. And as believers are often reminding us, there have been plenty of instances of persons turning to religion *in extremis* and gaining from this the strength and resolve to endure and overcome great adversity.

It has been demonstrated that our unconscious mind sparks into action in advance of conscious volitional thinking, and it is not known what "pre-wired" programs may be involved in this. Could there be something akin to the Jungian "symbols" hidden there from evolutionary ages, that surfaces as the religious predilection?

Then again, no-one should underestimate the fascination of theological study. This was one of the things that kept me tied up for so long. Wrestling with the great philosophical problems in a religious context has provided meat for the intellectual appetites of many great thinkers, including the likes of Newton and others highly regarded in scientific circles, as well as many highly intelligent churchmen. When the mind is fully engaged with the intricacies and complexities of theological study it is all too easy – and, perversely, satisfying – to blank out the basic absurdity of the existence of God. Once allow that possibility and you are in a maze from which you may never emerge.

Another factor which influences many well-meaning persons – humanitarians, but not necessarily humanists – is the help and comfort that religion can bring to the ill-educated and less psychologically robust members of the community.

As a lay preacher and Bible teacher I found that I became a prop to such people, frequently being thanked profusely for the help that my words had given them. Of course, this is a great boost to one's self esteem, but, putting that aside, it is easy to have some sympathy for the reasoning of the type of cleric who, despite his/her doubts about the absolute validity of the articles of faith, feels it a humanitarian duty to minister to the needs of such people.

Perhaps we are not all mentally robust enough to face the stark facts of our situation

(Continued on p12)

MORE than 1,000 Turks have been injured while slaughtering sacrificial animals for Islam's *Eid al-Adha* festival, say reports.

Most of the injuries involved stab wounds on hands and fingers.

Some people were gorged or kicked by sheep, rams or bulls, which are customarily killed during the three-day religious holiday.

Eid al-Adha commemorates Abraham's sacrifice of a lamb instead of his son Isaac and is a time when the devout sacrifice a cow, a ram or a sheep and give some of the meat to the poor.

— *Ananova news report, February 22, 2002*

"THE senator's daughter is flirting with blasphemy by suggesting humans have souls"

— quotation from Planet of The Apes, 2001.

What does an Ananova news report and an atrocious remake of the original *Planet of the Apes* (1968) have in common? It is this: both — in very different ways — focus attention on the fact that animals can fare very badly under the baleful shadow of the three main religions.

The worst treatment of animals bred for consumption is occasioned by Muslims and Jews, and for years animal rights campaigners have been pushing vigorously, but so far with no success, for the outlawing in Britain of ritual slaughter. To their eternal shame, no British Government has dared offend against the dietary demands of those who "require" halal or kosher meat, and these dreadful methods of killing continue unabated.

With mainstream slaughter, an animal is usually bled out after stunning by a stab incision into the major blood vessels anterior to the heart. In religious slaughter, the cut is across the neck from one side to the other and is meant to sever the major blood vessels, according to a recent Vegetarians International Voice for Animals (Viva!) report entitled *Going for the Kill*.

A number of slaughtermen were interviewed for the study. Their evidence makes for very harrowing reading. Here are just two excerpts from a number of testimonies of men identified only by their first names:-

"Down in Bristol, at Ramadan, they go and pick their sheep out from the market or from a dealer and dress it in ribbons. Traditionally they just cut its throat but the EC rules say that the head has to come off. This has caused a lot of outrage among the very militant Muslims down here. They won't have

any interference with their methods. Corruption is incredible in abattoirs. A *shochet* (Jewish slaughterer) might knock out 20 steers but will pass only ten as kosher. The other ten are sold as ordinary beef but not labelled. The Jews won't eat anything below the kidneys so two-thirds of every beast is also sold on the ordinary market. If abattoir owners see a good quality kosher animal on the line they will swap it for a non-kosher one so that they can sell it and make more money. So it's all a complete bloody nonsense — all this insistence that the animals are cut while conscious and half the time the meat Jews are eating isn't kosher at all.

"They claim the animal dies instantly but I have seen animals trying to get up at least a minute after they were cut — *Paul*.

"Jewish and Muslim slaughter is cruel — it's barbaric. I'm used to seeing animals die, Christ I kill them every day, but to kill them this way is disgusting.

"I work in a big metropolitan slaughterhouse where they do kosher slaughter and I've seen animals still trying to get up two minutes after they're cut and released from the crush. There is no way they die instantly — ever.

"My experience of halal is even worse. The slaughterers often come in with knives that are so blunt they're like bread saws. They saw away at the animal's throat and haven't got a clue if they're severing the arteries or not. They don't know what they're doing and usually don't have a knife sharpener and ask us to sharpen their knives for them. The animals count for nothing in their book" — *Steve*.

If halal slaughter, when done by professionals, sounds barbaric, consider how much more of an abomination it is when conducted by ordinary Muslims who haven't the foggiest idea of how to effectively kill an animal.

Eid-al-Adha, a festival of great spiritual importance in the Islamic calendar, has, according to Hamid Ahmad, of the Pakistan Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, turned into an event dominated by commercial trading in animals. Almost all Muslims (male and female) who can afford to take part in the ritual will kill, or have killed, a sheep or goat. As an option, says

If the a
could sp
would s
your re

Mr Ahmad, seven Muslims can jointly slaughter a cow or camel. The festival is celebrated with a similar fervour throughout the Islamic world.

This ritual slaughter is connected with the Muslim festival of Hajj. At Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the largest annual gathering of Muslims takes place to perform the Hajj and the ritual slaughter. On this occasion, in Saudi Arabia, the world's largest slaughter of animals takes place.

**Freethinker editor Barr
badly animals ca
baleful shadow of the**



A touching scene in 20th Century Fox's *Planet of the Apes* (1968). Astronaut George Taylor (played by Charlton Heston) says to Dr Zira (Kim Hunter): "I'd like to kiss you goodbye." "Alright," she replies, "but you're so damned ugly!"

animals speak they say 'stuff religion!'

Something like two million animals are slaughtered over three consecutive days.

"Millions of sheep, goats and other live animals are exported from Australia, New Zealand and other countries to meet the demand," says Mr Ahmad.

Other countries, according to the Viva! report also import live animals for their annual requirements – for example France imported live sheep from Britain for the festival of *Eid-*

erry Duke finds out how can fare under the the three main religions

el-Kabir. It quotes Alan Dearman, of MAFF, as saying: "The scenes of slaughter of sheep by Muslims in the fields of France over recent years have been distressing. But enforcement of welfare laws on French territory is a matter for the French authorities."

Following BSE and Britain's recent outbreak of foot and mouth, the live export of animals was stopped. However, British farmers are now pressing for this trade to be resumed, and it looks as if they might soon get their way.

One witness to the slaughter in France was Rosie Catford, who, in an article for Viva! in 1996, wrote: "As we approached the killing fields, hundreds of Muslims thronged the streets. The atmosphere, if we hadn't known better, was like that of a wedding party. It felt as though we were stepping back in time by several centuries. The men walked around carrying plastic buckets which contained an array of knives, screwdrivers, hammers and black bin liners ...

"These people were bewildered by our presence. We tried to explain why we were there, but they laughed saying 'They're only animals!'. Many of us stood in stunned silence, knowing what was happening only metres from us, but unable to communicate the terri-

ble suffering of the animals to these people. One of us read extracts of the Koran, as it is very specific about how animals must be slaughtered. It says that the knife should be straight, smooth and extra sharp. No animal should be killed in the presence of others or be able to see the knife.

"Only a skilled person should cut through the major blood vessels in a single sweep. Animals should be restrained with the minimum of force. Failure to comply means the sacrifice will lose its spiritual meaning. This means that the sacrifice was in vain because people did not follow the instructions of the Koran. Sheep were trussed up with their front and hind legs tied together and kicked along to a killing station. The sheep were placed on a cradle and family members – sometimes children – with no experience in killing, would cut at the throat. "These were not clean cuts and the sheep would take many minutes to die, jerking and writhing ... The animals could see one another and were not treated with kindness and consideration."

The Viva! report says the annual massacre has become big business. For example, in Lahore, the second biggest city in Pakistan, with a population of six million, about 230,000 animals were killed on the eve of *Eid-al-Adha* in 1996, worth \$42 million – the sums paid out for these sacrificial animals was about \$19 million higher than the meat value of these animals in the open market. According to Muslim spokespersons on radio interviews with Viva! in April 1997, animal sacrifice has taken the place of human sacrifice. Viva! says "This proves that a religious faith can change and adapt with the times in order to act in a more civilised and compassionate fashion. Human sacrifice was once seen as an essential component of worship and yet is now seen as barbaric, brutal and completely unacceptable. It is of course illegal. Perhaps one day, the same attitude will be extended to other animals."

Now to *Planet of the Apes* – and the question of whether animals have "souls". By far the majority of non-believers dismiss the idea of the existence of souls in either human beings or in animals, and do not accept the idea of an afterlife for man or beast. What is accepted is that all animals have a life force and, being capable of feeling both pain and pleasure, are in many respects similar to human beings, and should therefore at all times be treated humanely.

For the most part religionists believe that humans have a "soul" that will transcend death, and, depending on one's behaviour on earth, will either ascend to heaven or will spend eternity in hell. But no such certainty

exists where animals are concerned. Some believe that animals are imbued with a divine spark, others do not.

For those of you unfamiliar with *Planet of the Apes*, this is the gist of the plot: A party of American astronauts land on a planet which, to their amazement, is governed by apes. The security forces are made up of gorillas, and the judiciary and the clergy – oh yes, they too have developed a theology – comprise orang-utangs. The rest of the population – those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder – are the chimpanzees.

The indigenous humans cannot speak, and live in the wild. Those not captured and used by the apes as slaves (and sometimes pets) are regarded as vermin. This is how humans are alluded to in the *Sacred Scrolls of the Apes*: "Beware the beast man, for he is the Devil's pawn. Alone among God's primates, he kills for sport or lust or greed. Yea, he will murder his brother to possess his brother's land. Let him not breed in great numbers, for he will make a desert of his home and yours. Shun him, for he is a harbinger of death."

At one point in the original film the question of whether humans have souls is addressed. A female chimp scientist Dr Zira, reckons they do, and is accused of having heretical thoughts.

According to American film critic James Berardinelli, *Planet of the Apes* is "almost too obviously allegorical. With little evidence of subtlety, the production tackles issues like racism, class divisions and the dangers of close-mindedness ...

"Social criticisms are levelled at the racist mentality that still permeated significant portions of the United States at the time. Other aspects were thinly veiled attacks on the government's militaristic policy in Vietnam... the movie also has a strong anti-nuclear undercurrent."

Surprisingly, Berardinelli, in an otherwise brilliantly-observed review, does not pick up on a key pillar of the film – the clash between science and religion.

Other mainstream reviews ignored this aspect too. But then I came across a website devoted to reviewing films from a *Christian* perspective, and it was here that I hit paydirt.

A review by Eric Paddon warns that "the cautionary note for Christians when viewing this movie has to do with a reverse evolution/creation debate. The religious apes come across as intolerant bigots, and this can be seen as a hidden slam against the traditional theological Christians of our own world."

Another Christian thought the film "Anti-God", adding "It pokes fun at Christianity by

(Continued on p10)

If the animals could speak ...

showing Christians as unenlightened, superstitious bigots." A third wrote: "I saw this movie when it was first released in theatres. I can still hear my mother gasping in revulsion when one of the human characters kissed Zira, the chimpanzee."

As I mentioned earlier, great confusion exists among Christians as to whether or not animals have souls – and nowhere is that confusion more evident than in cyberspace. One can find endless arguments on the internet for and against.

This is what an American Catholic theologian, Rev Kevin Quirk, says in answer to the question do pets go to Heaven?: "This question comes up rather frequently and, in years to come, given the heated pace at which the Animal Rights Movement is working, it can be expected to be more often repeated.

"Several years ago the well-respected theologian Peter Kreft answered this same question by saying, "Why not?", signalling his opinion that the Pearly Gates will be open to my dear departed Golden retriever Randy, the literally thousands of cats inhabiting the Roman Colosseum, and even Ms Dorothy Parker's bird Onan. And while the thought of spending the hereafter with Randy makes me quite happy (though, being allergic to cats makes me hope that an altogether separate part of Heaven be reserved for them), I am forced to disagree with the learned Kreft's (emotional?) opinion.

"Animals, sad to say, do not go to heaven. Why not? Because animals lack a rational soul. It is the possession of a rational soul that separates us from the animals (and not merely, as the character in *Steel Magnolias* asserted, "or ability to accessorize"). It is this rational soul, a pure gift from God the Almighty, which grants us free will – that is, the capacity to choose for ourselves. This capacity to choose, at its most radical, is the capacity to choose God and to choose life with Him forever. This choice is made at baptism which, as Christ himself says, is absolutely necessary for salvation ...

"Since animals lack this rational soul, they are incapable of choosing life with God and incapable of the reception of sacraments. Therefore, they do not go to Heaven. This is why Job says 'the souls of men return to heaven, while the souls of animals go into the ground'. We must remember, though, that none of this entitles human beings to treat animals with unnecessary cruelty, as we will all be judged on the way in which we have used God's world and the many gifts to be found within it.

But a book entitled *Will I see Fido in Heaven?* written from a Christian perspective,

states that animals *do* have souls. "In the Old Testament, the soul means 'living being.' The soul is the living being of a person or an animal".

The book claims that animals also have a spirit. "The word 'spirit' (*ruach* in Hebrew) means 'wind, breath - the living power of God's will at work'. The spirit is the essence and will of God given to all humans and animals."

Will I see Fido in Heaven? goes on to claim that animals were meant to live forever, just like humans. "The Scriptures tell us that animals *do* have an eternal existence with God, along with the children of God. They have a soul and a spirit, just like we do." The publishers of *Will I See Fido in Heaven?* claim it "will bring peace, great joy, enlightenment, and contentment to all who truly love their pets and hope to see them in Heaven."

The question of an afterlife for animals periodically comes up in other media too. For example, a couple of years ago the subject surfaced in the letters column of *The Times*. In reply to Dr J Ewart who had queried the Christian status of animals, Colin McKelvie wrote: "The Roman Catholic countryfolk of my Irish childhood were in no doubt. On calling at a stranger's house, their conventional salutation

Holy Week means torture for oxen

IN Santa Catarina, a state on the southern coast of Brazil, Holy Week is a time for violence and torture. *Farra do Boi*, or Ox Fun Days, is a violent ritual that consists of chasing an ox through the streets and tormenting it, sometimes for days, and then finally slaughtering it.

Though the tradition was officially banned by the Brazilian Supreme Court in 1997 after a long, arduous battle fought in part by the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), Santa Catarina's local government has not fully complied with the ruling, even though Santa Catarina's governor, Esperidio Amin, has issued a public statement condemning *Farra do Boi*.

Although several polls show that the vast majority of Santa Catarina residents are against these rituals, they are still practised in several communities. Last year, Samuel Silva, the mayor of Governador Celso Ramos, a coastal community that still holds *farra*s, declared, "For us, *farra* is a cultural tradition."

was: 'God bless all here, saving the dog and the cat' – the implication being that, having no souls, the animals were not candidates for divine blessing, and that it would be blasphemous or heretical to wish it upon them."

Another correspondent, Mike Lawlor, added this to the discussion: "My Yorkshire terrier, Max, exhibits that ultimate Christian precept, namely that of being non-judgmental of the sins of others.

"As many Christian people appear to be far more intolerant than Max. I must conclude that he is, indeed, a Christian. It is hard to say whether he is Episcopalian, Dissenter or Papist. I suspect that he may be Quaker, due to his silence on matters of dogma."

To non-believers, all this comes across as monumental twaddle, albeit it fun, but the fact remains that human beings can – and frequently do – have intense, complicated and often very loving relationships with their pets, as these two pieces indicate:-

A Dutch poodle has been given a special permit to prove he's welcome to attend Mass in a church.

Edgar Deno told priests he never goes anywhere without his three-year-old pet Motril, so they decided to allow the dog to accompany him to St Pieterskerk Church in Leuven and have given him a special pass.

Mr Deno said: "We always sit in the back of the church and I always see to it the dog has gone to the toilet before church, and that he has something to nibble during mass."

But he admits the poodle has attracted nasty remarks from other churchgoers. "That is why I asked the priest for an official pass. And if people say something about it, I just answer the dog is Catholic and the priest approved.

"I've asked the priest to baptise the dog, but he refused, saying he was afraid that I could come to ask him to marry Motril within a few years as well."

– *Het Nieuwsblad* newspaper, February, 2002.

Shane 1972 – June 1990

I can't believe it's two years since you left me, but in my heart you live on forever. We have had 18 wonderful years together. You helped me grow up and taught me so much with your love. We will be together soon, wee man. Wait for me son, love Mum XXX (Michelle).

– From the memoriam column of a 1992 edition of the *Dogs Today* magazine.

Mixed marriages

ROMAN Catholic-Protestant marriages are difficult enough in England, especially if the Catholic spouse invokes the *Ne Temere* decree whereby only unions celebrated in a Catholic church are recognised and both partners promise that all children will be brought up Catholics. Entrenched religious attitudes make the situation far worse in Northern Ireland, where research by Gillian Robinson of the University of Ulster's School of Policy Studies reveals that mixed marriages now make up ten per cent of the married population, compared with 6 per cent in 1989. That is still not a large number, but Laura Haydon, writing in the *Guardian* (February 6) thinks it might grow as tolerance is increasing.

It certainly needs to. Take some examples: The Protestant Orange Order doesn't allow its members to enter a Catholic church, let alone marry a Catholic; Mary Godfrey's Protestant family has refused to speak to her since she married a Catholic in the 1950s; when Catholic Liam Murray wanted to marry a Methodist his parish priest refused him a letter of dispensation because he wouldn't sign a pledge to bring up his children as Catholics.

The Catholic position is now softening, according to the spokesman on mixed marriages, Canon Brendan Murray, who accepts that both partners have equal rights on the religious upbringing of children. And some Protestant churchmen like Harold Good, president of the Methodist Church in Ireland, are prepared to perform ecumenical marriages in conjunction with a priest.

These developments have been welcomed by the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association, which is grant-aided by the province's Community Relations Council, in recognition of its potential to bridge the sectarian gulf. But that gulf will continue as long as there are sectarian schools.

Religious violence in Nigeria

THE same day's paper reported religious and ethnic violence in Lagos, Nigeria, where at least 100 people died in three days and over 400 were wounded and taken to hospital. The killing began on the Saturday and, at its peak, gangs of Yorubas, who are mainly Christians and animists indigenous to Lagos and south-western Nigeria, and Muslim Hausa youths from the north of the country roamed the streets armed with machetes, cutlasses, knives and bows and arrows.

In a television appeal for the killing to stop, the Lagos governor said "We are one nation, one people, one God".

A bloodthirsty god, alas.

Larkin's legacy

WHEN he died in 1985, the poet Philip Larkin left the bulk of his estate to his longest-standing woman friend Monica Jones. When Ms Jones died she left £1 million to be split between St Paul's Cathedral, Durham Cathedral and Hexham Abbey in Northumberland. Interest in this story arises because Larkin himself had no time for religion, which he described in *Aubade* as "that vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die". The Bible was, he said, "a load of balls, of course, but very beautiful". And he told John Osborne, secretary of the Philip Larkin Society: "I am not somebody who has lost his faith. I never had it."

But one doesn't have to be religious to appreciate fine buildings, and Larkin probably wouldn't have minded his money going indirectly to the churches. He did say "I am an atheist – an Anglican atheist, of course."

Cows and mad bulls

ON January 20 the *Observer* gave advance notice of a book by a Delhi University professor of history entitled *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, to be published here this month, which would shock the Hindu community in Britain. It was first published in India, where it was compared to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in its effect and was burned outside the home of the author Dwijendra Narayan Jha. "There is a very strong Hindu fundamentalist organisation in Britain", said Tariq Ali, who recommended the book for the British publisher Verso. "As soon as I read this brilliant study I felt it should be read here too. The only thing is to fight back and not hide away".

In his book, Professor Jha proves that beef, which is taboo for Hindus, was once a part of the ancient Indian diet and has not always been held sacred. He supports his case with early texts and has so inflamed religious feelings that a court in Hyderabad has banned the book. The Hindu government's "cow protection wing" has even called for his arrest; and, like Salman Rushdie, he has received death threats.

Jha, who is a vegetarian, has nothing against

Atheist plate 'objectionable'

A US man must get rid of his number plate because it reads, "ATHEIST".

An angry Steven Miles says his right of self-expression is being trampled on.

But the state of Florida has declared the number plate "obscene or objectionable" and is refusing to re-issue it after receiving ten complaints.

cows but doesn't believe they are sacred, nor does he see why only this animal should escape slaughter. He was undecided in January whether he would travel to Britain for the book's launch. "I am like a man in red clothes surrounded by mad bulls", he said. Such is religious fanaticism.

Sin and sickness

"SICKNESS is the consequence of sin", Monsignor Paul Cordes, a Vatican theologian, told a press conference recently. "Jesus heals illness and banishes sin. He therefore tells us there is a link between sin and sickness", he said. "Jesus highlights this fundamental law."

When his remarks were questioned, Mgr Cordes insisted that the link was not his invention but was embedded in the Roman Catholic Church's teachings, and, he added, "one cannot deny that death, of which sickness is an anticipation, has always been seen as a consequence of sin".

Provocative words considering the storm that followed the suggestion by some Catholic clerics that Aids was a form of divine retribution.

Banishing the ghost

"NO one, even those who believe in an immortal soul, now expects to find it in the brain", wrote Susan Greenfield, Professor of Pharmacology at Oxford University in *The Human Brain* (Phoenix 1998). Like most religious ideas, that was based on ignorance. "At last", Professor Greenfield continued, "we have the expertise to tackle what might arguably be regarded as the final frontier in human understanding", although she acknowledged that "the more we learn, the more there is still to learn."

Now a new system known as Vivid (for Virtual in-vitro interactive dissection), enables researchers to see "with extraordinary clarity" the patterns of nerve connections inside the brains of living people. Developed by a team at the Institute of Psychology, part of King's College, London, under physicist Dr Derek Jones, Vivid is already being used to study the brains of British sufferers of schizophrenia in an attempt to find if they are "wired up" differently from the rest of us.

Early results are said to be encouraging, but the team is saying nothing more until its work is published. But that work and the science of the brain generally puts paid to philosophical speculations about a mysterious "mind", what Gilbert Ryle aptly called "the Ghost in the machine".

Delusional beliefs (continued from p7)

in the cosmos?

It may be of some interest to readers to know what eventually led to my rejection of religious belief.

When I was 16 (no kidding – that was the sort of lad I was) I read Darwin's *Origin of Species* from cover to cover, as literature, not as supporting any particular paradigm. Later, as a committed evangelical I studied extensively in the apologists for the fundamentalist position but, unable to arrive at a satisfactory explanation, remained a "closet" evolutionist. For as long as I could, I put this matter to the back of my mind and it was only when another time of personal stress broke up this cosy compromise, that I saw clearly that the two positions are incompatible. Once admit that the Bible is mythical in some respects, and the edifice of fundamentalism collapses, the whole becomes susceptible to rational enquiry, and the rest follows.

Whilst I fully endorse the rejection, ridicule and revulsion that freethinkers have for the absurdities of religion, we should not label all its adherents as imbeciles nor assume that their motives are necessarily bad. We understand little enough of the wellsprings of our own thoughts, and at least some religious people are engaging their brains in something a bit more taxing than the antics of the football industry or Pop Idols.

– Ian Norris

GRAHAM Newbery does indeed raise an interesting and important question when he asks how it is possible for people to believe (or at least affirm their belief) in "God" – with all the consequences that can flow from that belief, such as adherence to a religious sect and the observation of its practices.

Given the tone of some of the articles that appear in the *Freethinker*, its readers might well assume that the whole notion of religious belief and practices is little more than a gigantic confidence-trick or swindle, invented by the clergy and imposed by them (and other interested parties – for religion can be such a strong support to the powers that be) upon a credulous people for the benefit of these reverend gentlemen (and, one might add nowadays, reverend ladies) and their secular supporters.

But such a view is, to say the least, rather simplistic. Nonetheless, one should still note that the state permits religious bodies to play a very large role indeed in public education – chiefly, of course, at the public's expense – in addition to requiring *all* state schools to engage in religious indoctrination. The state, too, affords religion special legal protection and is no doubt happy to allow the state-dependent BBC to broadcast daily religious

homilies and other frequent religious programmes.

But I would like to suggest that, in addition to a self-interested clergy, its equally self-interested (and well-resourced) backers, and, in this country at least, enthusiastic state support, the following factors are even more important, because they provide the seed-bed in which the seed of belief can plant itself.

These are:-

1) The child's experience of dependency upon and subordination to (giant) authority-figures, in particular its parents, especially in babyhood; which must tend to implant them with a sense of quasi-godlike power as a fact of life. One might guess that the more loving that child-parent relationship is, then the more strongly this sense of dependency, of what it is to be dependent on a superior and benevolent power, is likely to instill itself and persist – especially if the parents themselves be believers.

Religion can then be seen as putting the adult in touch with his or her childhood certainties and freedom from responsibilities – providing a sort of comfort-blanket against the slings and arrows of outrageous circumstances! Indeed, has it not been said that "unless ye become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of God". (God bless such "innocence"!)

2) Clearly, a highly significant factor to be taken into account with regard to the propagation of religious belief is the effect of what is often a prolonged indoctrination, sustained over many of a child's most impressionable years, when the immature mind is least able to resist ideas that are (sometimes relentlessly) advanced by family, church (or synagogue or mosque), school (especially if it be a school controlled by a religious body), and media, above all the BBC TV and radio.

3) Given this protracted conditioning, then to renounce religion and religious authority might well be experienced as an act of rebellion, prompting a sense of guilt and betrayal and the apprehension of dire consequences; and not only as regards authority but also with regard to friends and family who maintain their belief and their expectations as to how others should behave, and might well be expected to subject backsliders to quite strong disapproval or even ostracism.

4) Likewise, one has to take into account the fact that the believer is or has been actively involved with a congregation of like-minded believers from whom he receives the benefit of mutual support and regard, to say nothing of the attendant advantages of belonging to a sect which quite probably affords a wide array of social benefits to members of the congregation. (Not the least of these benefits may be first consideration for enrolment in religious

schools, with their "magical" ingredient of self-selection – on both sides!)

5) Nor should one overlook the effect, the consciously designed effect, which the beauty and magnificence of religious buildings, art, music and literature, and the impressive qualities of "sacred" services, provide.

6) Note too should be taken of the fact that believers may well have, probably unconsciously, taken "God" to be a synonym for Life or Nature – hence to renounce religion might well seem an act of unnatural sacrilege simply on this account, for who would renounce *these* abstractions?

7) I would suggest also that religious belief may well spring from the fact that, being the centre of his own world – as each of us is and must be – the individual may, again unconsciously, have the feeling that he himself exercises or at least experiences a godlike power, and hence be predisposed to the idea of a god.

8) And of course, very importantly, nothing is so conducive to a belief in a divine power as the experience, to which all are subject at one time or another, of one's helplessness in the face of severe adversity of any kind. This can deliver such a shock to our system of beliefs that it may well completely undermine our self-confidence and make us turn to succour from a "Higher Power".

9) Perhaps not the least important consideration is man's tendency to look for any "explanation", however improbable, of the (currently) inexplicable – and in these cases "God" acts as a sort of cover-all answer for all "mysteries", a rag-bag to hold all "portents and wonders".

10) Finally, one must not overlook the fact that religions typically promise their adherents the beguiling prospect of an eternity of life and happiness in another and better world – the more beguiling perhaps as one enters upon one's own decline or witnesses that of others.

These then are the factors which I would suggest tend to the propagation of religious belief.

Finally, despite T S Eliot's admonition, it is not reality as such that human-kind cannot bear very much of but rather doubt, uncertainty, and loss of control. Hence arises man's propensity to invent and practise such irrational faith-systems as religion, astrology, palmistry, and I know not how many other weird and wonderful fabulosesities – all designed to remove or at least quieten his sense that he is or can be at the mercy of forces inimical to his needs or desires!

But it is not by prayer and propitiation that we attain our objectives but by a rational assessment of what is required in order that we may succeed.

– Albert Adler

Absurd belief in memes

IT IS with interest that I read Norman Pridmore's letter on memes as a way of explaining "delusional" beliefs (*Points of View*, March). While memes are currently a trendy idea and are very much in vogue in atheistic circles, I feel that I must express a degree of doubt as to their scientific worth.

First, there is NO evidence for the existence of memes. No experiment has been carried out proving their existence or detecting them. Indeed, it would appear that meme claims are unfalsifiable. It is ironic that memes are often used to describe religions, as memes, like religions, postulate the existence of entities for which there is no empirical evidence whatsoever. I would remind all mimetic freethinkers out there that "godidit" can explain the success of the church too.

Second, despite Dawkins' role as a cheerleader for the "science" of mimetics, articles postulating their existence are almost never (if indeed ever) passed through the peer review process, that so magnificent guardian of the levels of rigour in academic and scientific debate. At best, memes thrive in the borderlands of science and in popular texts. In this respect the similarities with creationism are intriguing.

On the whole, the popularity of memes concerns me. I suspect that the success of such theories in freethinking circles has less to do with the actual merit of the theories themselves and more to do with the proponents of the theories (Dawkins and Blackmore both being pillars of the atheistic and sceptical community) and the medium through which such ideas are propagated (popular science books on memes as opposed to academic texts on sociology, psychology and anthropology).

J V M McCALMONT
London SW3 6EA

Tackling the Apparatchiks

THERE will be many readers who, sympathising with the attempt of Mr Armitage (*Points of View*, March) to encourage us to have a go at the apparatus when it is being unreasonable, will remain rueful at best.

I mention my experience. Over the signature of a race relations *apparatchik* at the Home Office, an "A Flores" whom I take to be genderless, there was a strong hint that I could be brought to book under "the existing Public Order and the related Crime and Disorder Act" for arguing, at the time of the Oldham disturbances, that Islam is subversive of the British constitution – as it is of any national State. KSA included.

How I would have fared if I had done a crit-

icism of the Wealth of Nations on September 12th I hate to think.

Anyway, we, at least, have to be logical. Though I do not suggest that it is futile trying to draw attention to something which was neither in a party agenda nor is causing a media spasm, I think we have to accept that no party, once in power, is going to go off its chosen path. Similarly, before a general election, if a major party felt it would lose ground by a commitment, say, to compulsory scientific education with logic in state schools, it would be unheard of for it to set out on such a venture. Suddenly, Qur'an and Bible – though not the Vedas – would be read three times three, media opinionators would ape their betters and government would be legitimated by a marriage between the comfortable, who in our system never lose out, and saints in serried array. With its solid 25 percent of votes cast, no government leader – here as in Zimbabwe – has even to pretend to listen to criticism and, if half you hear about advisers is true, the current one doesn't. In these circumstances, it is worth considering whether a constructively spoiled ballot paper might be a better way of criticising a dictatorship – or, if you like, a "democratic deficit" (Mr Porteous Wood) – than an X against one name. All spoiled papers – here; I can't speak for Zimbabwe – are certainly examined by candidates.

Satyagraha at election times could serve better than a million post-poll letters. During the three campaigning weeks, candidates might also see such as "No Jehovah's Witnesses and I'm not voting for you either" plastered all over the place. The recent Education Bill demonstrates my point. It was, despite the activity of the NSS, a crushing defeat of those outside that marriage, ie of the majority. What's more, there will be no cease-fire this side of the general election unless there is a terrific media spasm. The comfortably-off and the saints will be charmed by what has happened. They might even start attending church in droves to improve their game. The harmless naughtiness of it all, like the peccadillos of Ali Baba and the urchin of *Stories Toto Told Me*. Bribeable but in a good cause. Such wickedness! Never knew faith could be like this! After all, if the Prime Minister and those other Christians can remain on the best of terms with conscience ...

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Freewill

W TIERNAN ("Freewill does not exist", *Freethinker*, March) seeks to deny freewill on the basis of seriously outdated science. He argues for this purpose from the belief that

"Science relies on the notion that experiments are repeatable ...". Unfortunately for that argument science moved far away from determinism several decades ago, with the concept of "chaos", with a logic deriving from the French mathematician Poincare writing a century ago. Events – or, rather, "scenarios" – can, and usually do, unfold from essentially the same "initial conditions" in an infinite variety of ways, and formally unpredictably.

Deconstruction of the notion of "freewill" calls for rather more subtlety, and does not depend on whether the world is, for scientists, regarded as linear and deterministic or non-linear and largely indeterministic. Whether or not the notion of freewill can usefully be regarded as a "virus", it surely is of an entirely different nature from the "virus" of religion.

SIDNEY HOLT
Crickhowell

HOW do I know I am actually making a free choice? If I imagine walking along a path until it divides into two, I know from experience that if I choose to take the right hand way, my body will proceed to the right. I never choose to turn right and find my legs are taking me to the left. My decision is always followed by an appropriate action by my body. I am also aware that I could have chosen an alternative action.

When I am making a difficult decision, I say I am agonizing over it, which means I feel the weight of responsibility for the outcome.

When I say that I am making a conscious decision, it is because my consciousness is involved. It is the mechanism that can imagine alternative future scenarios to enable me to select what is in my best interest.

If it were possible to know my genetic make-up, my whole life history to date, the details of the situation in which I need to make a decision, and my general state of health and mind at the time, it is very probable that in most cases my choice and subsequent action would be predictable.

I do not believe that this predictability proves that the future is somehow fixed.

If I really believed the future was fixed I would be more inclined to "go with the flow" rather than be "pro-active". I would disregard punishments and rewards as irrelevant. I would become lazy and choose randomly rather than expend energy on logical thought.

It is because I don't believe that everything is predetermined from the Big Bang onwards that I am able to operate rationally.

I accept that if we look back over time we

will find causes of human actions in the form of motives but I think the idea that the future is settled for good and all is a dangerous one because it demotivates human beings and devalues humanity.

PETER RICHARDS
Southampton

IT IS a pity that W Tiernan's science education stopped before getting to quantum physics. It is simply not true that if "all the ingredients of experiment A are the same as those in B, the results will be identical".

In the quantum world, particles can and do appear/disappear/decay in an entirely random way. Examine a given space for a given time and certain quantum events will occur – go back in time, look at the same space again and the results will be different. Experiments are generally repeatable because at the macroscopic level such events are "smoothed out" – think tiny ripples on huge ocean swells.

The world is not predetermined. Einstein's famous "God does not play dice with the universe" was more of a plea in the face of conclusions drawn from quantum theory than a statement of fact. (Incidentally, Einstein himself "ignored an axiom" in his development of Relativity, so W Tiernan shouldn't get too attached to the "most basic axiom".)

So, can quantum fluctuations impact on us? Well, I'm going to sit here with my Geiger-counter and lump of uranium and if, in the next minute, there are less than sixty counts I'm going to send this letter. If there are sixty or more, I'm not.

I have, of course, decided to do this test – would I have anyway? Is there freewill? It might be that my mind is awash with hundreds of preconscious thoughts just waiting for some quantum fluctuation – with a bit of chaos-induced inflation to make the micro event a macro one – to push one of them into my consciousness, rather than some other thought. Just a thought. Fifty-nine!

IAN ANDREWS
Oldham

W TIERNAN'S attempted demolition of freewill does not convince me – an old and very rusty professional scientist.

There are many basic notions involved when we do science, and which notions are most important depends upon the field of work. Repeatable experiments are fundamental to physics and chemistry but, when studying geology and cosmology, the scope for repeatable experiment is rather limited.

Unperformable thought experiments (such as notionally re-working the Big Bang) are of

no evidential value and are therefore no substitute for real experiments that we might wish to do.

Two precepts seem to me to be basic to the practice of science. 1) Do not lose sight of empirical data. 2) Practise rigorous economy of hypothesis when attempting to interpret the data and thereby construct tenable models of whatever aspect of presumed reality we are investigating.

The only hypotheses that seem to me to be worth entertaining are those which can be confirmed to the extent that they resist feasible falsification. An inherently unfalsifiable hypothesis is nothing other than fantasy out of control.

Empirically I experience choice, chance and causation. when, for instance, I light a fire in my sitting-room grate. I experience choice in the matter – choice made by me in according to the circumstances; it is a matter of chance which match I take from the box; I know empirically the cause/effect chains relevant to lighting and sustaining the fire. These are matters of raw experience.

Thinking about such matters ... I can assert, *dogmatically but on no other basis whatever*, that choice and chance are illusory – that what I think I choose is predetermined and what I perceive as chance is really determined by factors not open readily to inquiry. That dogma is inherently unfalsifiable – as is the rival dogma that we have some genuine freewill.

If there is such a thing as a basic notion underlying all science then it is that, in general, dogma is free but corroboration comes expensive. Dumb fatalism is a likely mindset among the cornered, the ignorant and the unthinking. Philosophical determinism is, on the contrary, a dogma that some free and educated people choose to proclaim as a result of thought.

That particular dogma seems to me to be quite without useful outcome. Have those people who adopt that dogma ever wondered whether it is coherent to choose to think that they have no choice?

ERIC STOCKTON
Sanday
Orkney

I SUPPOSE that from the moment that W Tiernan chose to write saying that freewill does not exist it was inevitable that I would write to disagree.

W Tiernan writes: "If it were possible to repeat the Big Bang [identically] the same results would occur." This firstly assumes a universal law of causality, and secondly ignores the random element at a quantum level. More importantly, it is impossible to test

this hypothesis, so it can never be more than speculation.

We cannot prove that god(s) do(es) not exist; we cannot prove that an identical Big Bang would produce an identical universe. W Tiernan presumably agrees that any statement asserting the existence of god(s) is unscientific, but feels able to make an equally unscientific assertion.

Speculation into the existence of free will is interesting but ultimately pointless, depending pretty much on how we define our terms. There always seems to be a paradox somewhere in the argument.

In real life, most of us apply the "duck test". It feels like I have free will, and it looks like others are struggling to make decisions, and we cannot possibly see all the causal links, stop time and work out in advance what we will decide, so we assume we have free will. Is this important? Yes, because the idea that our actions are the inevitable result of genetics, upbringing and environment (etc) becomes a cause in its own right – a cause of many of our social problems and, more particularly, a "justification" for unthinking acceptance of religion and other dogmas.

MIKE WILKINSON
Nottingham

Compatibility of science and religion

JOHN Radford's excellent and thought-provoking article started off by listing five common views regarding the compatibility of science and religion. He then goes on to defend the last of these: that science and religion are in conflict. In arguing in favour of only one of these views, he implies that they are mutually exclusive; but they are not. While holding the fifth view, it is also perfectly reasonable to hold the fourth view: that science and religion deal with separate questions. Professor Radford calls these questions "what is?" and "what ought to be?". I feel one could also call the science question "what is?" and the religion question "why is it?". The reason that these two views can co-exist is that religion covers a lot of territory and only part of this, the least important part I suggest, overlaps the domain of science and justifies the fifth view. Mostly, the domains are separate, so the fourth view can also be held.

Professor Radford says that religion is incompatible with science, first, because of the way each approaches "the truth". But science will never be in a position to proclaim "the truth" (whatever that is). All you can say about science is that it produces a current model of the reality that we observe; this model is consistent with our observations and



allows certain predictions to be made. Whether this model represents "the truth" or not is impossible to say.

He says that: "There are objective facts that exist, and truth consists in describing these accurately." Anyone who understands the Heisenberg uncertainty principle or who has tried to understand quantum mechanics or chaos theory will realise that this statement is nonsense. Furthermore, however successful and complete scientific theories become, there will always be an irreducible set of laws or fundamental particles that must be taken as given, without cause. Even when there is a unified theory of everything, there will always be something, the basic postulates that justify that theory, that will remain unexplained by science.

His second argument is that some fundamental religious assumptions are contradicted by science. His first example is the assumption of original sin and he says that there is no universal built-in sin that must be "redeemed". I wonder if he would accept the original sin concept simply as an allegory for our pre-programmed behaviour that arises from our "selfish genes", mitigated (redeemed?) by the social behaviour that young people learn from their parents and others? His second example of an unfounded religious assumption is that of a supernatural creator. I agree that there is no valid argument or scientific evidence for such an assumption, but that does not invalidate it as a theory, albeit an unlikely one. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

The physical laws and constants that govern our universe were determined at the time of the Big Bang. These could have been anything, but we find they are extremely finely adjusted to give rise to a universe in which life could start and evolve to produce intelligent beings. Science cannot tell us how this fine tuning came about and all current hypotheses are pretty fantastic. The existence of some external agency (eg God) responsible for the tuning, is just one of these.

Finally, Professor Radford tells us that religions make untenable assertions and gives a number of examples, including that of life after death. I agree there is no evidence for this, but, once again, absence of evidence is not . . . etc.

In his conclusion, Professor Radford returns to his first point and says that morality has to be based on knowledge about ourselves, not on unchanging faith or dogma. Here, I would start to agree with him, but he has said nothing to show that science alone can provide this kind of knowledge either. It seems to me that our understanding of humanity arises from the accrued wisdom of the human race and comes to us primarily from the philosophy, the art and

the science too, that arises through civilisation. It is understanding and wisdom that is important, not just knowledge, and, for differing reasons, neither science alone nor religion provide us with these; so they cannot be in conflict over it. Because of the wide scope of religious beliefs, religion does sometimes stray into the domain that is properly that of science; then there is conflict, and science always wins. But I would maintain that these small areas of overlap are mostly of little fundamental consequence. Science and religion are not generally incompatible as they are mostly operating within their own domains and occupy little common territory.

If it is civilisation that gives rise to the philosophy, the art and the science that inform our rational and intelligent understanding of ourselves and hence our moral decisions, then it is with civilisation that religion is incompatible.

IAN QUAYLE
Burwell

"Flesh and blood" houris

I WASN'T trying to convert Barbara Smoker (*Points of View*, March) and I'm surprised that she thought so. See any dictionary for the definition of a "houris". The Koran certainly gives the impression that those who live in Paradise possess "flesh and blood" bodies and that the houris ("dark-eyed maidens") are there for the entertainment of and marriage to the (male) faithful as a reward.

There is no indication of a reward for the female faithful. Sex is implied rather than stated. This contrasts with the Jewish (Christian?) Heaven, where sex is off the menu.

Barbara asks some relevant questions about the origin of these houris, but unfortunately the Koran does not supply answers.

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

Missionaries

GREG Owens (*Points of View*, February) purports to censure my January letter, while actually expressing his own opinions on the subject.

My comments about Christian missionaries were made in the aftermath of the massacre of some Christian churchgoers in Pakistan. I pointed out that "Conversion is disruptive and divisive and often results in great suffering", a statement that Greg says "is no doubt right".

But Greg goes on to attribute to me attitudes and opinions I did not express or imply: he sets up a man of straw which he proceeds to knock down in a retributive and self-righteous manner; indeed, Greg's letter is defamatory.

Clearly, it would be pointless to refute – or defend – opinions I never expressed.

To set the record straight, in addition to the statement in paragraph two above, my letter said that religions are a product of individual cultures, that converts in non-Christian countries are often naive and impressionable, and that it is understandable if some non-Christian countries discourage proselytising.

HELEN COX
Bath

Mary Whitehouse and censorship

I AM intrigued to see that John C Beyer pf Mediawatch-uk (*Points of View*, March) supports Mary Whitehouse's censorship standpoint of quoting the law, on a matter concerning democratic freedom of speech.

Isn't this pretty much the same attitude shown by Pontius Pilate towards J Christ?

As to Mr Beyer's query as to whether South African anti-apartheid protests were really the clinching factor in undermining that Nazi-like policy, I would say "yes" – in view of the shrewdness of the protesters in taking the whole argument into the field of sport, which helped strip apartheid of its slick – and often Christian-supported – propaganda tactics.

JOHN CLARKE
Uxbridge

A new affirmation battle?

DAVID Blunkett wants immigrants to swear by Almighty God to be loyal to the Queen. Oh dear, it looks like we will have to fight for secular affirmations all over again.

STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

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

Abolition of Divine Sadism (ADS). Contact Charles Sayer on 0207 683 0615.

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

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, May 5, 4.30pm. *Remembering Evelyn and Bill Brown.*

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. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

Chiltern Humanists: Information - 01494 771851.

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.

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: Secretary Alex Hill 0208 741 7016 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.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel 01926 858450. Monthly meetings at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday, May 10, 7.30pm. Terry Sanderson: *Nelly on the Telly* (illustrated).

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Niall Power. Tel 0161 2865349. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

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.

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. Website: www.humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Henness. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. The Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Tuesday, May 14, 8pm. Mike Clemit: *Hypnotism - for Good or Ill?*

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. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, April 25, 8pm. George Watson: *Living as a Quaker.*

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: The Secretary on 01434 632936. The Literary and Philosophical Society, 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle. Thursday, April 18, 7.15pm. Will Sweetman: *What can Humanists Learn from Buddhism?*

North Stafford & South Cheshire Humanists: Information: Sue Willson on 01782 662693.

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.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, May 1, 8pm. Geoffrey Thomas: *Non-animal based Research – Ethical and Scientific Issues Involved.*

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. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Wednesday, April 10, 8pm. Public Meeting.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282.

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.

Ulster Humanist Association. Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: (028) 9267 7264. E-mail: brian@mcclinton.to website: www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com

Please send your listings and events notices to:
Bill McIlroy, Flat 3, Somerhill Lodge, Somerhill Road,
Hove, Sussex BN3 1RU.