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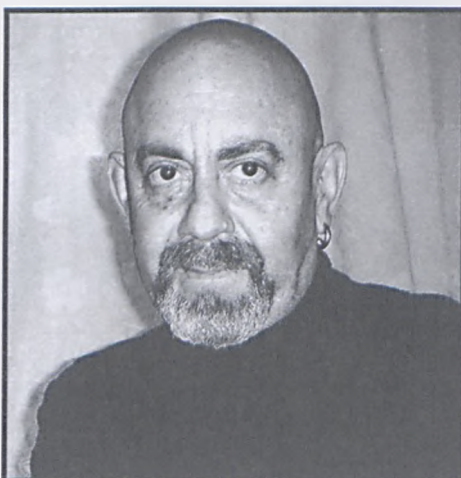
EVERY now and again I commit an act of vandalism in tube stations or on Underground trains. I rip down religious posters.

There are many I know – secularists among them – who would disapprove of this action on the grounds that free expression, including public religious exhortation, is the right of everyone and should not be tampered with.

I agree. But I regard religious advertising on the London Underground system to be a special case, and I'll tell you why.

Sometime during the late 1970s, a poster appeared in stations and tube cars stating that "Pornography Poisons the Mind." It was sponsored, if I remember correctly, by some crackpot evangelical Christian outfit calling itself the Festival of Light.

I wrote to the London Underground's advertising department requesting permission to display a poster declaring "Religion Poisons the Mind." They turned me down flat, saying my slogan would be regarded as "grossly offensive" to millions of tube passengers.



I wrote back, saying that "Pornography Poisons the Mind" was grossly offensive to millions of tube passengers, and, anyway, my statement was a damned sight more accurate.

I was politely told to sod off and and not to bother them again.

Ever since, I have made a point of tearing down religious posters in the Underground without a single pang of remorse.

I was reminded of my battle with London Underground by something said to me recently by my partner Marcus, who works in a Government building in London.

"You would not believe," he said through gritted teeth, "how many religious flyers appear on the staff notice boards every month."

As he is sub-contracted to work in the building, he is not at liberty to remove such flyers or counter them by posting any atheist slogans. However, anyone *directly* employed as a civil servant should have the right either to complain about religious notices or post atheist flyers as an antidote.

Which raises the question: what would one put on an atheist flyer?

If I were asked to produce one, I would use the NSS President Denis Cobell's recently coined phrase "Just Say No to Religion" as the heading, followed by the words "Although Britain today is largely an atheist country, non-believers are constantly having their intelligence insulted with public displays of religious propaganda and sentiment. To add insult to injury, atheist taxpayers are being milked to fund an increasing number of faith schools, which can only lead to dangerous sectarianism. If you want to know more about atheism and how to combat religion, read the *Freethinker*."

If you have any ideas for a flyer using roughly the same number of words, please let me know. I would then have a few thousand copies of the best flyer printed and make it available to readers to post in libraries, on staff noticeboards and in other public places.

GOD, under English law, is deemed to be an employer. Even more ridiculous than that, the deity, under English law, is deemed to be *above* the law and therefore cannot be brought to account before an industrial tribunal, nor, for that matter, any other court.

This astonishing state of affairs came to light when, in 1999, the Rev Raymond Owen, from Stoke-on-Trent, claimed that he had been wrongly dismissed by the diocese of Lichfield from his post of team rector for Hanley. To his amazement, he was told that, under legislation dating from 1911, he was deemed to be "employed by God" – an employer placed by law outside the jurisdiction of the English courts. So he could not bring his complaint before an industrial tribunal.

Understandably miffed, the good reverend took the matter to the Court of Appeal, claiming that his contract had been terminated by a church kangaroo court. His appeal failed. But in a critical observation about the church process, the words of Mr Justice Fortesque, in a case from 1723, were quoted with approval in the judicial review in 2000: "The laws of God and man both give the party an opportunity to make his defence, if he has any ... Even God himself did not pass sentence upon Adam, before he was called upon to make his defence." Cold comfort for Rev Owen, who has now taken the matter to the European Parliament, and Court of Human Rights.

Commenting on the case in the February issue of *Tribune* magazine, Glyn Ford, Labour MEP for the South West, said: "Despite all the images to the contrary – and there are many – Britain is Europe's most backward state. It is not the fault of the present Government, nor even the previous Conservative one, but of Britain's history. Britain was the first country to make the transition from feudalism to capitalism. As such, in order to dominate the globe first through manufacture and finance culminating in empire, it was never really needed to force the political changes logically consequent through to completion. So, there was a partial revolution that did enough but no more.

"Thus Britain still has a Royal family, an unelected House of Lords, and collaborationist relations between church and state that prop up court judgements that blight the life of the Rev Owen and allow the Prime Minister of the day to effectively choose the head of the Church of England ... Whether the Rev Owen's dismissal was right or not is irrelevant. He has not had the same opportunities to appeal as any other worker would have had. Even the absurd decision of 1911 does not prevent them [the C of E] from treating their employees in the manner expected of Tony Blair rather than Queen Victoria."

I could not have put it better myself.

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Monarchy, Church and State form 'a perfect pyramid of superstition'

BOTH America and Britain "have leaders who are addicted to religion and who feel that their faith must colour their politics". That was the message imparted to the American Atheists organisation by Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, who was guest speaker at the AA's annual convention in Boston in March.

"From what we can see from our vantage point over the water, the majority of the US pop-

ulation seem to accept – even encourage – your president's religious posturing. But the very fact of this conference, and your presence here, indicates that it is far from being a universal acceptance," Keith told convention delegates.

"In Britain, Prime Minister Tony Blair's protestations of faith are received rather differently from those of President Bush, I'm glad to say. When Tony starts sermonising, the electorate do one of two things – they shudder or they mock. The leading satirical magazine in Britain has nicknamed Mr Blair the Reverend Tony and it's an image that has stuck."

He went on to say that "the chief difference between us, of course, is that you have a secular constitution that separates church and state and we have the complete opposite, church and state closely – but we hope not inextricably – intertwined. Add to this equation an antiquated system of monarchy and you have a perfect pyramid of superstition.

"I suppose we should take some comfort from the fact that, at last, the issue of disestablishment is being seriously discussed, both inside the church and out. Regrettably, the motives for these discussions are not a belated recognition of secularist ideals but an attempt to appease religious groups outside the Church of England and a conviction that disestablishment will actually strengthen the Church.

"The C of E still enjoys many quite unjustifiable privileges – all the more outrageous given that it has suffered more than 60 years of continuous decline, and now only about 2 per cent of the population are members.

"Britain must count as one of the most – if not *the* most – atheistic countries in the world. Less than 7 per cent of the population darken the doorway of a church on an average Sunday.

"The British have, as the Archbishop of Canterbury so vividly put it, 'an allergy to religion'. We now have a whole generation that has never entered a church in their lives – except perhaps to go to a wedding or a funeral. Most people are wholly ignorant of religious observance. People would much rather spend their Sundays visiting home improvement stores or going to a pub or football match. Going to church is about as popular as going to the dentist."

• *This report replaces Keith Porteous Wood's regular column, which will be resumed in June.*

The wacky world of religion

The Catholic Church in the Philippines has appealed to followers not to crucify themselves during Holy Week. During Lent many Filipinos whip themselves with blades, and some are nailed to crosses to repent for their sins. Said one senior Catholic official: "We are discouraging those practices. They are a misrepresentation of our Catholic faith. The ritual, meant to commemorate the suffering and death of Christ, has become a tourist attraction and not a genuine act of penance. Tourists normally flock to places where people have themselves crucified during Holy Week." He added that those who wanted to repent for their sins should go to a priest and confess.

A Spanish priest fed up with mobile phones ringing during Mass has installed an electronic jammer to keep his flock in tune with God. The Reverend Francisco Llopis, pastor of the Church of the Defenseless in Moraira, is the first Spanish priest to install the device, which transmits low-power radio signals that sever communications between mobiles and their base stations. The controversial technology is designed to create quiet zones in places like restaurants, cinemas and libraries. Commercial jamming systems are illegal in the US, Canada and Britain, but some countries such as Australia and Japan allow limited use.

A Chilean clothes factory owner is becoming a full-time preacher after finding Jesus Christ's face on a pair of jeans. Juan Carlos Arellano says the image in the dyed fabric spoke to him – advising him to preach the gospel of true love. He says he noticed the image when one of the workers at his Santiago factory said the jeans were stained. Mr Arellano told *La Cuarta* newspaper last month: "Christ's face hasn't faded since then, although we have passed the jeans about." He says the image "told me to leave here, leave my five children, and all my friends and the factory", to spread the word full-time.

NSS calls for a fixed-date Easter

A SUGGESTION by the National Secular Society that Easter should be a fixed-date holiday has angered the Church of England. Following a call from the NSS to the Government to fix the date in early spring, the Church said it was strange that the NSS should want to be involved in the timing of a religious festival.

C of E spokesman Steve Jenkins said: "What's it got to do with them – they don't believe in God. The fact is that Easter is a religious festival based on the crucifixion, not on when people would like a bank holiday."

NSS President Denis Cobell, said: "It would make far more sense to have an early spring holiday at the same time each year. Having a variable Easter is very inconvenient, and plays havoc with holiday planning and school terms. The old Whitsun bank holiday provides a precedent for making such a change. Whit Monday used to be a bank holiday but has been replaced by the fixed late spring holiday.

"And why do we have this ludicrous arrangement in which Easter Sunday can vary from 22 March to 25 April? Because the churches' bizarre formula, fixed in 325 CE, for setting the date is based on the ancient lunar calendar. The ultimate irony is that both Easter and midwinter festivals long pre-dated Christianity, so it is entirely inappropriate for the church to be dictating the dates on which they are held, especially in a society that has largely abandoned religion."



Webwatch: Norman Pridmore

FIRST, the kind of completely trivial and pointless site that makes the internet such fun. Go to <http://www.wordsmith.org/anagramhttp/> and tap in a word or phrase of your choice. In a very few seconds all possible anagrammatic combinations will pop out! "Catholic" turns into the very contraceptive "Coil Chat". "Episcopal" becomes "Pepsi Cola". "Creationists" reshuffles into the sensible alternative of "Or a Scientist". Even the innocuous phrase "Editor Barry" is somehow transformed into the robust injunction to "Roar! Be Dirty!".

A word of warning, though: long words or phrases, especially those with lots of vowels, generate immense lists. My own favourite, especially in the light of the recent regal send-off at the Abbey, is the transformation of the gloomy "Funeral" into the delightfully vivacious "Real Fun" ...

Nostalgic for the days of grunt and grapple? Miss those heroes of the ring like Kendo Nagasaki, Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks? Don't worry – a solution is at hand. Visit the "Museum of Hoaxes" at <http://www.museumofhoaxes.com> and from there find your way to the site of "Christian Women's Wrestling". Marvellous stuff. You'll doubtless be distracted on your way by the other exhibits, but you'll get

there in the end. From the spoof wrestling site itself there is a link to another "Christian wrestling" site which really should be visited – if only because it looks so disturbingly genuine. Is it? I don't know – you can never tell with Christians. The "Museum" itself is a highly educational place. Readers familiar with Charles Mackays' wonderful book "Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds" will especially relish it!

Take a look sometime at "Poppy Dixon's site at <http://www.jesus21.com/> Now this is the real thing: top quality satire with bells and whistles and serious, intelligent and informed comment. One of the associated sites is that of one "Sister Taffy", at <http://www.sistertaffy.com/>

There are all sorts of useful things here – advice on Christian home decorating, an essay on "Why is that Man in the Black Dress Winking At Me?" (of special interest to Catholics), another called "Mommy, Why is That Man Skinning Our Cat?" (subtitled "Teaching Your Child that Atheism and Satanism are the Same Thing") and a very fine Jesus look-alike photo gallery (if you look like Jesus, you too could post a picture).

Now on to other matters. Visit <http://www.communigate.co.uk/london/> and check out two headings. One is for "Charities

and Voluntary Groups". There you will find a listing for the "Humanist Bereavement Project". There is a brief description of it, and contact details. On the same site, but under the heading "Clubs and Societies" look for the "Saving the Jewish Identity" and the "New Exodus" groups. These two are concerned with the secularisation of Jewish identity and with redefining Judaism in non-religious terms. All three were recommended by, and are connected with David Ibry, author of *Exodus to Humanism* (Prometheus Books) and of the review of *The Torah and its God* in the most recent (Spring 2002) edition of *New Humanist*. As he says to anyone interested in the idea of a secular Jewish identity – "let us exchange views on this theme". These are all new ventures. Be there at the beginning!

Now how about a visit to "The English Atheist" at http://www.geocities.com/missus_gumby/? It opens to the moving strains of "Always Look on the Bright Side" and just gets better ... It's er, quirky – and none the worse for it. There's a little button on the opening page that invites you to click it if you're a Christian. Do it anyway, and enjoy a good cyber-harangue!

All concerned with education should take a look at the site of the Campaign for the Promotion of Secular Education at <http://www.c.s.e.freeuk.com/> This major issue is addressed here fully and clearly. It's an important campaign and this site gives some helpful pointers to how anyone interested can get involved.

Two sites to end with. One is called "The Christianity Meme", and it's at <http://www.christianitymeme.org/> It's a great example of how a single idea can stimulate thinking well beyond the conventional. Politics, ethics, education – all here. The site is well organised and literate, invites discussion, and has good links, insights and connections, a broad humanistic perspective and plenty of ideas. If that's what you want, give it a try. For those doubtful of whether the idea of "memes" has anything to offer, this site may just give food for thought.

Lastly, visit "The Edge" at <http://www.edge.org/>. I was especially grateful for this recommendation as it's a site I had come across then promptly lost!

It's about thinking and ideas and science and culture and... Oh, you know. As Keith Corrie who recommended it pointed out, amongst the names of contributors are those of Dawkins, Pinker, Dennett, Rose, Shermer, Humpries, Diamond, and Mayr. No further recommendation required!

Thanks for all your suggestions. More, please, to norman@npidmore.fsworld.co.uk

Irish clergyman accused of heresy

A CHURCH of Ireland clergyman is to be tried this month for heresy by the church's Court of the General Synod.

It's the first time in over a century the court has had to investigate such a matter.

Andrew Furlong, the Dean of Clonmacnoise in County Offaly, first appeared before the court last month.

His appearance came after he allegedly expressed a view that Jesus Christ wasn't the son of God.

It is also alleged he argued on his website that Jesus and John the Baptist were "mistaken and misguided, 'endtime' prophets".

If the Court of the General Synod finds against Dean Furlong, it has the power to suspend him, sack him or defrock him.

His legal representative, Joe Revington, asked the Court for the adjournment saying the matter was very serious and substantial.

Mr Revington says Dean Furlong had spent his entire life working for the Church of Ireland and now his good name and livelihood were in jeopardy.

Mr Revington also says he objected to the court's rules allowing no more than two witnesses to be called, says the RTE website. He

says that, because of the seriousness of the matter, he should be allowed to call as many witnesses as necessary and he says the hearing could last weeks. The Church of Ireland Primate, Archbishop Robin Eames, who is also, Chairman of the Court, agreed "with great reluctance" to adjourn the proceedings until May 10. He says the judges were taking the matter extremely seriously.

ICO Day and Humanist Lunch

THIS year's International Conscientious Objectors' Day gathering in London will take place on Wednesday May 15 at 12 noon in Tavistock Square around the Memorial Stone.

The gathering is supported this year by several organisations, including the National Secular Society.

The annual Humanist Lunch will take place on Saturday, June 22 at Conway Hall, 12.15 for 1 pm. The event includes jazz and a speaker. Tickets are £15. Further Details available from the British Humanist Association. Tel: 0207 430 0908

Devout Catholic mum drowns her five kids 'to save them from Hell'

A TEXAS woman who believed that her five children were destined "for eternal damnation" last month began a life sentence for their murder.

Andrea Yates' plea of insanity was rejected by a Houston jury, who spared her the death sentence so that she could spend the rest of her life contemplating the terrible act she committed on June 20 last year when she systematically drowned Noah (seven), John (five), Paul (three), Luke (two) and six-month-old Mary.

In a jailhouse psychotherapy session held three weeks after she drowned the children in a bathtub, Andrea Yates said she had to kill her children because they were destined for hell if she didn't.

Yates told psychiatrist Phillip Resnick in the videotaped interview that her children were misbehaving and doing things God didn't approve of and she drowned them to ensure they'd go to heaven instead of hell.

She added that she believed that if she killed them, the state would execute her, Satan would be eliminated from the world and the children would be saved.

"These were their innocent years," Yates, 37, told Resnick. "God would take them up."

Yates was a successful young woman who worked as a post-operative nurse. She enjoyed regular swimming and jogging. Then she met and courted Russell Yates – and the couple prayed and read the Bible together.

After they married, they took on board the idea that they should not use birth control; that they would lovingly accept as many children as God saw fit to give them.

In her eight years of marriage, Yates had five children and suffered one miscarriage. Following instructions from her church, Yates gave up work, her swimming and her jogging, and lost contact with many of her friends as she struggled to care and educate her children at home.

Her lifestyle was a damaging one, and she developed severe mental problems. She began having delusions in 1999 following Luke's birth, and attempted suicide twice that year. The voices and delusions again grew intense after Mary's birth in November 2000.

Killer pastor jailed for life

A BELGIAN pastor, Andras Pandy, has been jailed for life for murdering four of his children and two wives, then dissolving the bodies in chemical drain cleaner.

At the conclusion of the trial in Brussels earlier this year, a 21-year jail sentence was also imposed on Pandy's daughter Agnes, 44, who was implicated in five of the murders.

Brussels prosecutors said Pandy, 74, raped his daughters and stepdaughters, then turned to murder between 1986 and 1989 to cover up the incest after one stepdaughter became pregnant.

Pandy told the jury his two wives, two sons and two stepdaughters were still alive and he was in contact with them through angels, even though no one has heard from them for years. Lawyers for Agnes had hoped for a lighter sentence after claiming she was under the "overwhelming irresistible spell" of a father who had raped her. "I had no way out. I was completely in his grip," she said.

She was instrumental in bringing the case against her father, admitting to being an

accomplice in five of the six murders. Agnes said all the victims were first cut up, with the body parts dumped in a powerful chemical dissolver. When the remains were reduced to a thick sludge, they were dumped in the gutter.

No bodies were ever found.

Sacrificial animals spared

AN INDIAN government minister has helped save the lives of 1,000 animals that were to be sacrificed on Maha Bishuva Sankranti day to appease a Hindu deity.

Federal minister Maneka Gandhi managed to convince priests to abandon the ritual at the Bayani Thakurani, or Goddess Kali, temple in Orissa state. Some warned it would bring ill fortune, but they agreed to spare the goats and sheep despite protests from thousands of devotees. A number blocked the road in protest. One animal was sacrificed as a symbolic ritual, according to a *Sify News* report.

Briefly...

THREE trainee rabbis were last month fined for beating up a homeless man in Australia. The American teenagers, who were attending a Jewish college in Melbourne on exchange, had claimed they were acting in self-defence. But the judge believed witnesses who said the men deliberately kicked and punched Shane Davis as he lay on the ground.

Yitzchok Brody, 19, Aaron Richler, 18, and Aaron Notik, 18, who were attending the Australian and New Zealand Rabbinical College at the time, claimed homeless Davis had shouted anti-semitic abuse and was threatening to kill all Jews.

But witnesses said Mr Davis had his head down, listening to music, when he bumped into the men. They said they saw the three men repeatedly kick and punch him in the head and torso, reports the *Melbourne Age*.

They were each sentenced to two months' jail suspended for 12 months and fined £400 plus costs.

TEACHERS in this country are calling for a ban on new faith schools and have voted for a move towards a totally secular state education system.

The Government's plan to allow the Christian churches and other major religions to set up more state-backed schools has come under heavy fire since last summer's race riots and the September 11 attacks. The National Association of School-masters and Union of Women Teachers last month voted in favour of ending a long-standing tradition in England and Wales. The NASUWT voted by 66,461 votes to 51,300, (majority 15,161) in favour of a secular state school system, as exists in the US.

A NUN in Chile spent £800 of her convent's cash buying a forged lottery ticket from a stranger in the street. Sister Alicia Flores says the seller told her she needed money urgently but was too ill to cash the ticket.

The nun from the Congregation of Missionary and Catechist Sisters claims the woman told her it was worth £2,000.

Police in the city of Temuco revealed that two other people fell for the scam on the same day. The 71-year-old's superiors say they're relieved she lost the cash to a fraudster rather than to a mugger.

Science and the Koran

Asked to participate in a dialogue with a muslim cleric about the existence of God (see *A Close Encounter with Islam*, March 2002 *Freethinker*), I found myself exploring his website (www.islaminfo.com). This is the website of the Islamic Information & Da'wah Center International based in Toronto.

The cleric in question was Shabir Ally, originally from Guyana but a Canadian resident for the last 20 years. It appears that he is the author of the website text, a view confirmed by statements he made during the dialogue.

This showed that he and others are engaged on a mission to convince the world that the Koran is compatible with modern science and that Allah revealed scientific truths about the world to Mohammed in the 7th century, well before the rise of science. The website claims that its mission is "To establish the correct Islamic belief among Muslims, to convey the message of Islam to non-Muslims and refute all stereotypes and allegations against Islam, particularly against the Qur'an [Koran] and Prophet Muhammad..."

It also claims that Islam encourages the use of science and the scientific method. However, as I show below, this is false.

What shape is the Earth?

Ally claims that the Koran reveals that the Earth is a spheroid. The claim is based in particular on *surahs* such as 39:5 ("He coils the night upon the day and He coils the day upon the night"). It is claimed that "coils" here is the Arabic word *kawwara*, used to describe the action of coiling a turban around the head, so expressing the idea that day and night coil around the Earth as it turns.

However, in Dawood's translation of the Koran (1), this sentence is translated as "He caused the night to succeed the day and the day to overtake the night". Nothing about coiling, which in any case hardly suggests the shape of the Earth.

What holds up the sky?

Definitely not pillars; that would imply a flat Earth. Consequently Ally makes much of a *surah* 13:2 which claims that God "raised the heavens without any pillars that you can see" (Dawood has "without visible pillars"). On this basis, the Koran is thought to anticipate the beliefs of modern science, although the idea is spoiled by the mistaken claim that "gravitational forces ... hold the heavenly bodies apart from each other". However this *surah* can just as well mean that the heavens are held up by pillars which cannot be seen. Indeed, mention of the pillars being invisible implies their existence.

How old is the Earth?

Ally appears to rejoice in the fact that the

Koran fails to follow the Bible in appearing to claim that the Earth was created some 6,000 years ago. He sees this as proof that the Koran is superior and without error. But while he claims that it contains no chronology, he does claim that a reference to God measuring its "sustenance" in "four periods" (41:10, Dawood has "in four days provided it with sustenance") is a reference to "the four geological periods described by modern science, with man's appearance ... in the quaternary era [sic]". In fact there are at least eleven geological periods in the Phanerozoic eon and the "quaternary" is merely the fourth period of the Cenozoic era. Dawood's translation indicates that the Koran did in fact follow Genesis.

Stuart Campbell demolishes an attempt to turn the Koran into a scientific document

Gaseous mass

Ally claims that the Koran reveals that heaven and Earth were created from smoke (*surah* 41:11, but Dawood has "cloud of vapour"). This is seen as being consistent with the belief of modern science that the universe was formed from a gaseous mass. However, the *surah* merely refers to the sky emerging from a cloud; it does not claim that the Earth came from this cloud. The translation "smoke" has been chosen to allow the existence in the vapour of solid particles from which the Earth could be made.

While there is some resonance with modern ideas about the formation of stars and planetary systems from dust and gas clouds, the universe has a more mysterious origin, possibly from nothing. Clearly the Koran throws no light on the matter.

Interstellar Galactic Material

One can hardly imagine the Koran making any reference to the tenuous dust and gas that exists in galaxies between the stars. However, Muslims can. They see *surah* 20:6 ("To him belongs what is in the heavens, on Earth, between them and beneath the soil") as a reference to material not just between heaven and Earth but outside heaven and Earth (whatever that means). They ask how a man living 1400 years ago could have known about interstellar galactic material. We might ask what makes them believe that the *surah* is referring to such material and not objects which lie between the sky and the earthlike clouds!

The Sun and Moon and their orbits

In an attempt to show that the Koran correctly anticipated modern understanding of the cause of the movement of the sun and moon, Ally quotes a *surah* (36:40) which reads "Each one is travelling in an orbit with its own motion". A more accurate translation, which Dawood confirms, is "Each swims in its own orbit".

We might see this as consistent with a geocentric cosmology in which it is the sun which moves and not the Earth. Indeed, coupling sun and moon together in one *surah* rather implies that. However, ignoring both heliocentricity and Newton's laws of motion, Ally claims that the sun and moon are indeed "in part animated" by their rotation.

He also thinks he sees differences between the description of the sun and moon as if the author knew that one is luminous and the other merely a reflector. He quotes *surah* 10:5 ("who made the sun shine and the moon a light") in evidence. But Dawood has "gave the sun his brightness and the moon her light", a statement which merely acknowledges that the sun is brighter than the moon. Ally is also excited by *surah* 25:51 ("placed therein a lamp and a moon giving light"). He thinks this distinction significant.

Christians are sometimes discomfited by the discoveries of astronomy, particularly by the discovery of extra-solar planets. The Bible is strangely silent on the universe and its structure and Jesus made no mention of the fate of people on other planets (if there are any).

Mr Ally is not so silent. He claims that the dedication ("exordium") of the Koran recognizes Allah as "Lord of the Worlds" and he interprets this as recognition of the existence of many "Earths" in the Galaxy, so making the Koran anticipate modern cosmology (not that we have yet found any Earth-like planets).

However, Dawood translates the exordium as "Lord of the Universe" and Ally's interpretation falls. His idea is also undermined by *surahs* which speak of God creating seven heavens and seven earths (e.g. 65:12). This not only echoes the New Testament, but rather limits exploration of the universe. There are surely more than seven Earth-like planets in the universe.

Most of these strange interpretations derive from Dr Maurice Bucaille, author of a book called *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*. Although Muslims describe him as a "scientist", he was in fact a French surgeon, scholar and author. It is evident that his scientific knowledge was elementary.

Evidently the Koran anticipates modern science no more than the Bible does; both reflect the primitive pre-scientific beliefs of their time.

• *The various English translations of the Koran differ slightly. I quote Dawood's version.*

What price a black pope next?

This month (May 18) marks the Pope's 82nd birthday, and his visibly declining health suggests that he cannot be lagging far behind our late Queen Mother in the universal race to life's end – to everlasting oblivion or the pearly gates ... or whatever.

The election, in the second conclave of 1978, of this Polish pope, John Paul II, *née* Karol Wojtyła, was the first election of a non-Italian pope for 455 years. Though it came as a surprise to everybody, this departure from precedent had been facilitated by a significant drop in the proportion of Italian cardinals.

Aged 58, Wojtyła was young for a pope, and he was a very fit athlete. This may well have counted in his favour, as the last thing the Vatican wanted was another untimely papal death followed by yet another expensive conclave.

Less than three years later, however, he was seriously injured in an assassination attempt, and has never fully recovered from the injury. In almost any other high-level job, it would have earned him industrial compensation and early retirement on a good pension; but the papacy is literally a life sentence. Now, his worsening disabilities include not only Parkinson's disease but a particular occupational scourge – arthritis of the knees, said to be aggravated, if not caused, by all that kneeling in prayer. (A self-inflicted addiction malady?)

Next time, the conclave will be less keen on choosing someone young and fit: a reasonably short pontificate is what most of the electors will be looking for. The Italians make no secret of their desire to win back the papacy: the present incumbent has always remained in their eyes a meddling foreigner, and they are not alone in resenting his "presidential style of government". (A familiar phrase to British ears!) The decline of collegiality, they insist, can be reversed only by returning to a traditional Italian "Bishop of Rome".

Meanwhile, however, the Italian tranche in the College of Cardinals – the source of the papal electorate – has plummeted to the all-time low of 15 per cent. (Half a century ago it was about 60 per cent.) So it would come as no surprise if the Holy Spirit were to pick another non-Italian for the job. But what sort of non-Italian? Certainly not another east European – the political motive for that evaporated more than a decade ago – but possibly a man from another continent altogether. And that continent could well be Africa.

After all, it is in the developing world that Catholicism thrives today, and Africa is top of the league, with a twenty-fold increase in its Catholic population since 1980.

Besides, a black face under the triple crown would surely look politically correct.

The still powerful Cardinal Ratzinger, German-born doctrinal prefect of the Vatican,

paved the way for this a month ago by suggesting, in an interview published in the German newspaper *Die Welt* on April 3, that an African papacy would be a "wonderful sign for all Christianity" and would be "to the Church's benefit".

Since most of the 12 African cardinals are on the theologically conservative wing, they chime well with Ratzinger himself – and, should there be a conclave in the near future, he is (though too old, at 75, to have a personal vote) the most likely king-maker. The African favourite is clearly the 69-year-old ultra-conservative Nigerian, Cardinal Francis Arinze, who, already leader of several of the Vatican congregations, councils, and committees, is the only one of the 12 Africans considered to be realistically *papabile*.

Barbara Smoker poses the question

Ratzinger may have become something of a joke among the younger and more progressive prelates of the Church, but they too are likely to favour a contender from the Third World – though they would presumably prefer some liberation theologian from Latin America, or possibly an Asian, to a conservative from Africa. However, a compromise is the best they can hope for – and it is this sort of incongruous alliance that invariably plucks a new pope out of the hat after a number of inconclusive ballots, in which one faction blocks another from reaching the requisite two-thirds majority. (The Holy Spirit moving, as always, in mysterious ways.)

Anyway, theological progressives are under-represented in the College of Cardinals, largely because new cardinals are chosen by the reigning pontiff. While he is constitutionally precluded from nominating his successor, he does choose those who will elect him – and Papa Wojtyła has been distributing red hats like paper headgear from Xmas crackers. So, in spite of the age limit introduced for papal electors, there is at present an electorate of 126 (six more than the rules lay down). However, most of the 126, being diocesan bishops who have lost authority to the curia, are progressive on, at least, the issue of decentralisation, which has been one of the broken pledges of the second Vatican Council.

If Arinze, or any other conservative, is elected to the top job, his conservatism will presumably include immutable opposition to contraception – and the dire social consequences to the Third World of the perpetuation of this policy could endure for decades. Not only is birth control needed most in the very countries where Catholic influence is strongest, the imposed lack of condoms in Africa is a major cause of the

prevalence of AIDS there – so uncannily reminiscent of the plagues to which Yahweh subjected Egypt at the time of Moses.

My research for this article has included approaching leading firms of bookmakers for a price on the next pope being an African. (After all, bookies are the professional experts on applied probability.) But Ladbrokes refused to offer odds for this event at all, while William Hill's were willing only to quote for named contenders – and then very cautiously.

For Arinze, Hill's offered me (after 24 hours' deliberation) only 25-1, with a £50 stake limit. (Perhaps I was suspected of insider knowledge, or even a hot line to the Holy Spirit!) I turned down the quote with derision, but asked to be informed when an official book is opened on the event – which, for the sake of decorum I was told, will not happen until JP II dies.

The huge papacy field will include many dark horses, making a pin-selected bet on the Grand National look like an odds-on certainty. However, there is one conclave certainty: there will be no woman in the line-up – not only next time but for the next half-dozen conclaves, to the end of the century.

First, there will have to be a truly progressive pope with collegiate backing to introduce the ordination of women; then pioneer Catholic women-priests will need time for promotion to bishop, archbishop, and eventually cardinal, before there can be even a potential Pope Joan in the betting.



Mehmet Ali Agca, who tried to assassinate the Pope in 1981. Agca, now in prison in Turkey following his pardon in Italy in June 2000, claims that God had willed him to shoot the Pontiff. He said the assassination attempt had been predicted by the Virgin Mary – a revelation that constituted the so-called Third Secret of Fatima.

I have been reading the *Freethinker* for over a year. I have not seen very much about evolution in it. That is understandable. At the same time, however, Charles Darwin's discovery of the process of evolution and the furore it caused must be part of the background against which the humanist/secularist movement and the *Freethinker* came into being.

Evolution in general does not need us to protect its interests, but man's conscious evolution does. I think, in fact, that a good peace-cry (to coin a phrase) for humanists/secularists/freethinkers would be "Long live conscious evolution".

Darwin taught us how life on earth evolved, and although some biologists seem to think that evolution applies to biology only, there is a growing idea that evolution should be seen as a single process that began at the Big Bang. Man evolved into the idea of religion and for the last century or two Western man has been evolving out of it. Religion itself evolved from its primitive beginnings to the complex forms we know today. The religions lay claim to the invention of human morality, but this morality belongs to humans, not to the religions, and the evolutionary history of human morality goes back to and through the social and moral structures that existed in the lives of man's pre-human ancestors, literally millions of years before religion was

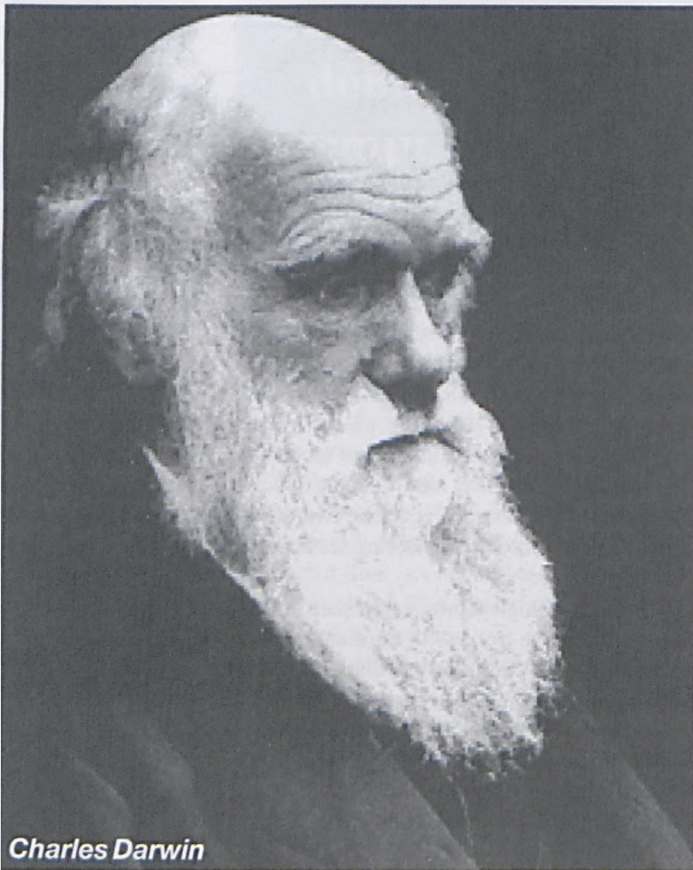
thought of. Human morality was not suddenly "given", it evolved. Human morality and social structures have always been a matter of necessity because the phenomenon of human consciousness is a collective one. The collective basis of human consciousness means that individual consciousnesses can scarcely exist outside the moral/social system that evolved as part of the phenomenon. Familiar ideas of "society" only scratch the surface of the understanding of the human consciousness system. Some idea of the deeper significance of this system is shown by studies in psychology, the discovery of the language instinct, and also by the discovery

that a large part of the human brain exists precisely in order to read, memorise and recognise faces.

In 1976, Bede Griffiths wrote this (in *Return to the Centre*):

"The evolution of matter from the beginning leads to the evolution of consciousness in man; it is the universe itself which becomes conscious in man ... It is the inner movement of the Spirit, immanent in nature, which brings about the evolution of matter and life into consciousness."

Anyone uncomfortable with the word "Spirit" can legitimately translate it into "evolutionary force of the Universe". No one is in a position to deny the existence of whatever it is that makes the universe evolve.



Charles Darwin

I must add that C G Jung had already written something very like this and that an American cosmologist has recently said on television "We are the consciousness of the universe". Also, someone said much the same thing in the televised Oxford science v religion debate some years ago. This was admittedly in an informal aside, but thousands must have heard it. I wonder what they made of it.

In the old Judaeo-Christian view, humans are God's children. That view dies hard and has left many people who now see themselves as being outside religion with a sort of secularised version of it: they do not see themselves as children of God any more, but neither

Long consc evolu

By Jonathan

do they quite see themselves as "beings on a planet, in and through whom the universe comes into consciousness".

The experience of living on Earth teaches man that he can only survive through his own efforts. Events such as those of September 11th are clear examples not only of how God does not save people from such horrors but of how it is the different symbolic and metaphorical interpretations of the meaning of the evolution of the universe, life and human consciousness – in other words, the different religions – that create the hatred that causes such events.

Incidentally, one badly injured survivor of September 11th said that God saved her. Many thousands of people, while glad that she survived, must feel that her God's behaviour was grotesquely unfair.

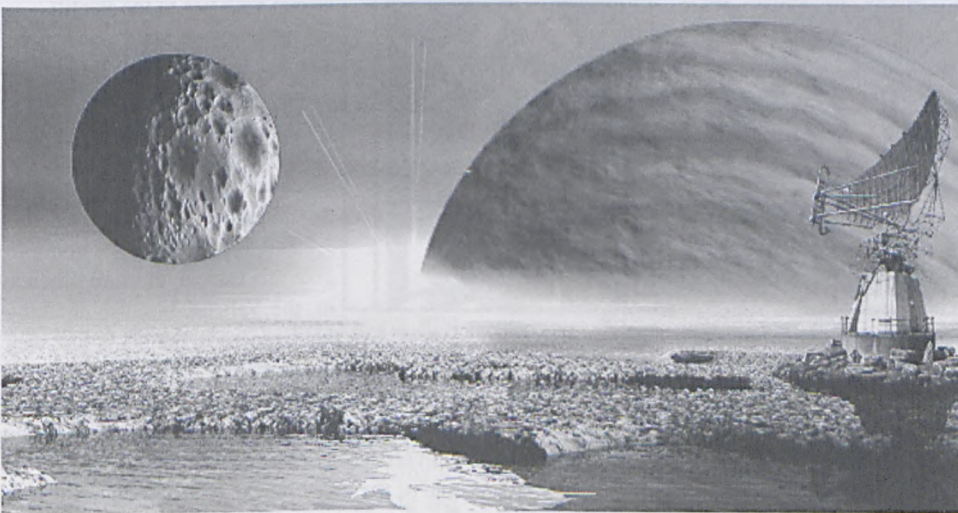
Man is still in the process of learning that he only survives through his own efforts, and these efforts include the taking of responsibility for himself. The religions fail to stress this fact of life and they even deny it. Some Christian spokespersons deny it with considerable force. The realisation that human consciousness is the universe itself in conscious mode places the responsibility for himself, and for the ecology that he lives within, squarely upon man. It is the weight of this responsibility, by the way, that squashes any megalomaniacal tendencies that might arise from the idea that one "is the universe".

The failure to acknowledge man's responsibility for himself has the side effect of denying him the credit for his achievements. This denial has the effect of moving the focus of attention away from the realities of life on Earth, and it thus endangers man's future.

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Biological evolution is unconscious evolution – as is the evolution of the universe itself – but the evolution of the overall phenomenon of human consciousness, once it emerged from biology (that is once man became conscious),



'It is only the realisation that man is the universe in conscious mode; that man is the universe's conscious representative on Earth, that drives home the knowledge that man is responsible for himself and for the global ecology that is his home – a home that is, in fact, an indispensable part of his being'

with its simultaneously evolving and intertwined moral/social human consciousness system, and civilisation and technology, are conscious evolution – even though the process was very slow for a very long time.

Human consciousness brings the unconscious, passive information that exists in the universe into conscious mode. The uncon-

scious, passive information in the universe includes the information that exists in all the processes and matter of the universe, from the universe's origins to the details of life on Earth. By bringing hitherto unconscious information into consciousness, man transforms it into knowledge. "Knowledge" means information that is "consciously known". This knowledge transforms the evolutionary processes of humans from unconscious processes into conscious processes.

In the past, it was not easy to see human consciousness as (whatever else one might think of it) a mechanism for transforming the unconscious information of the universe into "consciously known" information, but today there is irresistible evidence to support this idea.

The National Secular Society rightly addresses the pressing problems of the moment. At the roots of the NSS's and the *Freethinker's* existence, however, is the idea that humans must think for themselves; that human experience and accumulated knowledge must take precedence over belief in the symbols and metaphorical interpretations (the

religions, that is) that are mistaken for realities, and that humans must take responsibility.

Responsibility for global ecology is one of the most crucial aspects of the point of view that I have wanted to express here. It is only the realisation that man is the universe in conscious mode; that man is the universe's conscious representative on Earth, that drives

home the knowledge that man is responsible for himself and for the global ecology that is his home – a home that is, in fact, an indispensable part of his being. Children of a transcendent God cannot be responsible for themselves or for ecology, but beings that are the universe itself in conscious mode cannot evade these responsibilities.

Speaking on BBC Radio 4 recently, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "God says, 'I wait for my human partner and I am as weak as my human partner.'" This statement is well on the way to expressing the idea that God is (but I prefer to say symbolises) an immanent, rather than a transcendent, force. As it stands, however, the statement leaves the transcendent God in place, and his supposed presence, which gives the impression that it can help, while it cannot, weakens rather than strengthens man's position.

All these realisations have their origins in the understanding of the principle of evolution. The evolution of the universe and of life is a process that is made possible by an immanent, not a transcendent, force, and this calls for the realisation that the conscious life of man, with its integrated human consciousness system, also evolves but does so through a process of conscious evolution.

Once, the idea of a transcendent God was useful as a symbol for all the evolution that preceded and "created" man, but now the idea that this transcendent God symbol can have any direct influence on anything that happens on Earth is dangerously misleading. It is through processes of evolution – with an immanent rather than a transcendent force in the universe – that human consciousness comes into existence and does so, necessarily, as the universe itself in conscious mode, there being nothing else for human consciousness to be the conscious version of.

Some people say that evolution is brutish, in contrast to some glowing symbol- and metaphor-based picture of creation that includes a ready-made and specially presented morality. This view, however, shows an absence of any idea of the immanent, evolutionary force of the universe. I cannot think of anything more inspiring of awe and wonder than the realisation that the universe has evolved, that life on Earth evolved, and that human conscious life is the universe itself evolved into conscious mode.

Conscious evolution should be the watchword and the peace-cry for those who want to protect and promote human conscious life, for it is only through mankind knowing the reality of its situation that its consciously evolving life, civilisation and technology will survive.

Long live conscious evolution.

Big Trouble in Celibate City: Barry Duke

MY LOCAL pub, the Rose & Crown, recently hosted a St Patrick's Day event, which culminated in a fancy-dress knees-up on the Saturday night. A high old time was had by all – and the Dublin contingent, all dressed as Catholic priests, were the merriest of the lot. The “cocks in frocks”, as we gleefully dubbed them, each wore a name badge. I only managed to read one – and had to laughed out loud. It identified the wearer as Father Pete O'Phile.

Of course, the state of affairs which has given rise to piss-taking of this magnitude is certainly no laughing matter – it has in fact reached such proportions that whatever the Catholic Church says or does nowadays is overshadowed by news, breaking practically daily, of yet another sexual abuse scandal involving Catholic priests.

And it has prompted a frail and ailing Pope John Paul II to declare that the “grave scandal” of sex abuse “has cast a dark shadow of suspicion over all priests”. In his annual message to priests worldwide in March, he said: “As priests we are personally and profoundly afflicted by the sins of some of our brothers who have betrayed the grace of ordination.”

Just a day before putting the *Freethinker* to press I received news that a Catholic diocese in Illinois, USA, has been forced to apologise after a priest said he wanted to attack sex abuse victims with a baseball bat! A local newspaper quoted Reverend Richard Ross of Joliet near Chicago as saying he had no sympathy for victims. His brother Reverend Anthony J Ross had been suspended by the Diocese of Santa Rosa, California, after an allegation that he sexually abused a teenage boy.

The *Joliet Herald-News* quoted Ross as saying: “I don't have much sympathy for people who somehow couldn't stop whatever happened. I'll take all of these people who were abused and I'll abuse them with a baseball bat. You can quote me on that.” They did – and he is now on “administrative leave” while the matter is being investigated.

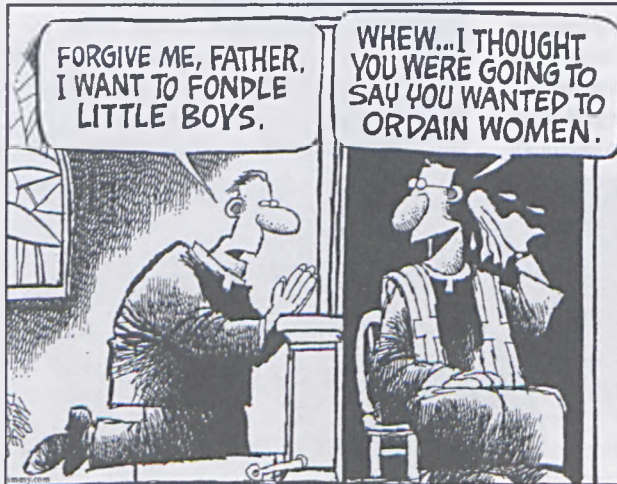
So serious has the whole abuse scandal, centring mainly on the USA, become that the Pope was forced in mid-April to summons American cardinals to Rome to talk about the issue.

The Vatican call came just days after the top US bishops were in Rome for talks with the pontiff. Sex abuse scandals were said to have dominated the discussions.

Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, said then that the Pope wanted to help. “The Holy See has demonstrated an extraordinary openness in understanding the particular situation that we face in the United States,” he is quoted as saying in an Ananova news report.

Allegations of abuse threaten to swamp the Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church in the US and elsewhere has been under heavy fire for its handling of a series of allegations of sex abuse by priests. And in the UK, the way the Church has covered up misconduct by priests has been roundly condemned by the National Secular Society, which, in a letter to Beverley Hughes MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Community and Custodial Provision, said:-



Cartoon by Mike Peters. Reproduced courtesy Tribune Media Services. Copyright 2002

“There were several news reports reported around January 9 that the Vatican has issued guidelines on how to deal with cases of paedophilia. We are disturbed to learn that they require that these matters be dealt with in secret and initially only locally.

“News reports say that ‘The new rules ... also say victims must come to make their accusations within ten years of turning 18’ and ‘Only priests should be involved in the handling of the cases, including those serving as judges, prosecutor or defence advocate in church tribunals, according to the new rules’. If these reports are correct, the Vatican appears to be assuming authority to limit the right of victims to make complaints and to exclude investigation by the arms of the secular law. The Roman Catholic Church appears to be putting itself above the law, and this is totally unacceptable in a secular society.

“Previous experience has shown that child abuse is not uncommon in the Catholic Church, and there have been numerous cover-ups and denials. These have frequently resulted in abuse continuing unchecked and much

additional distress for the victims who have, often unsuccessfully, sought justice.

“We hope that the Home Office will consider writing urgently to all the senior figures in charge of dioceses and religious institutions of the Catholic Church operating in the UK about these guidelines. We suggest that their written assurance be sought that they acknowledge that they are aware of the law and that it has been and will be followed in respect of any suspicions or accusations of paedophilia against any employee or official of the Church.

“We also ask that the Vatican be informed through the appropriate channels that these guidelines appear to invite dioceses and religious institutions of the Catholic Church to breach the requirements of UK (and doubtless many other states) law, insisting that the guidelines be reissued promptly making clear that the overriding requirement is to follow the law.”

Up until March, abuse was thought to be mainly “an American problem”. Then a bombshell fell uncomfortably close to the papal home. A prominent Polish archbishop with ties to the Pontiff was forced to resign amid accusations that he had sexually preyed on young clerics. Archbishop Juliusz Paetz of Poznan denied the allegations against him, but said he needed to leave “for the good of the church.”

“This is huge, and it's going to give this issue a lot more salience in the Vatican, because anything that happens in the US is just seen

as ‘those Americans,’ but Poland is the native land,” Maryjane Osa, an assistant professor of government and international studies at the University of South Carolina who studies the role of the Catholic Church in Poland, told the *Boston Globe*.

“And it may have some significance for what's happening in Boston, because this will increase the pressure on Cardinal Bernard Law to follow in Paetz's footsteps.”

What happened in Boston was this. In January it came to light that a former priest, John Geoghan, had sexually abused 86 people. Lawyers acting for the victims were paid large amounts in damages by the the Boston Archdiocese. Court documents released at the time showed that Cardinal Bernard Law and other Roman Catholic church officials knew Geoghan had been accused of abuse but kept moving him from parish to parish.

Since then, 250 more people claim they were assaulted by Geoghan and other priests and the lawyer representing them said “the Geoghan case has opened up the flood gates.”

Another saint?

SPAIN'S Roman Catholic bishops are making fresh efforts to have Queen Isabella of Castile (1451-1504), *la Catolica*, canonised. The process began in 1958 under the right-wing dictatorship of General Franco and is being "reactivated" under the present People's Government of Jose Maria Aznar, one of Tony Blair's new-found conservative friends.

Isabella, with her husband Ferdinand II, expelled the Moors and effectively established the Spanish Inquisition, which, according to its general secretary and canon of Toledo Cathedral, Llorente (1756-1823), claimed 341,042 victims (see Joseph McCabe's *Rationalist Encyclopaedia*).

A Catholic lay order, Miles Jesu, which backs Isabella's case, has declared that her beatification would give final recognition to "the Church's splendid role in the evangelisation of the indigenous people of America", but many Latin Americans expressed rather different views, recalling the invasions of the Spanish conquistadores and the later arrival of the Inquisition to enforce Catholicism with violence.

The only mitigating factor in Isabella's favour is that she was wasn't as bad as her husband, and might be excused, in McCabe's words, for her genuine religious fanaticism and poor ability – which may well be qualifications for sainthood.

Like to be a psychic?

"AS LONG as you're not among those who cry when they're told Santa Claus doesn't exist, you're sure to find their many tales entertaining", wrote Umberto Eco in his piece on psychics and the power of persuasion (*Guardian*, February 12). He was referring to the report on ten years of investigating the paranormal by Massimo Polidoro and Luigi Garlaschelli, two members of the Italian Committee for the Verification of Paranormal Assertions and its magazine *Scienza & Paranormale*, website <http://www.cicap.org>.

Eco treated the subject in the dismissive style that it deserves. "If you're not satisfied with your financial situation and want to switch careers, why not become a psychic", he began. It's profitable and easy. "All you need is a certain degree of friendliness, a minimal ability to understand others, and a thick skin. And even without these traits, there is always the law of probability to work in your favour". Then he explained the various techniques. "Nothing is easier than convincing a parent who has just lost a child or someone who is still crying over the death of his mother ... that

the loved one's good soul ... is still sending messages from the great beyond". The pain and belief of others works in your favour. Unless, that is, there is someone present from *Scienza & Paranormale*.

But Eco ended on a more serious note. The fact that the Italian Committee for the Verification of Paranormal Assertions is so busy means that "believers are more widespread than we thought". And that's the case in Britain as well as Italy.

Ominous signs

ACCORDING to the *New Straits Times*, religious teachers in a Malaysian school have told their students not to cross the letter "t" because it represents a crucifix; or in exceptional circumstances to slant the bar so that the letter wouldn't look like a cross. The teaching of English is also forbidden in some schools as against Islamic law.

For some decades now, over zealous Muslims have been particularly sensitive to "signs" that their religion is under threat. This affects people in varying degrees, said Professor Ibrahim Bajunid, a dean of humanities and social sciences; and causes them to see symbols, icons and messages which they think will destroy their religion.

"The only way to combat growing attempts to police religious practices is to acquire more knowledge than they", he added. "When you look at the world through different languages, you widen your mental horizon." His acquisition of English had enabled him "to step out of the Malay 'box'". Unfortunately many of his country folk are still boxed in by faith.

Catholic priest demands proof of virginity

A CATHOLIC priest in Brazil is refusing to marry women without a certificate to prove they are virgins. Natal Antonio Mella, from Petrolina of Goias, only accepts certificates from doctors nominates, and he publishes his decisions on whether he will marry brides-to-be in his church newspaper.

Residents of the small town in the north of the country are said to be angry at his actions, and his bishop, Manoel Pestana, has asked him to drop the practice.

The priest told *Terra Noticias Populares*: "The church doesn't allow women who are not virgins to get married."

He says he will allow other priests to marry non-virgins in his church but says he won't perform the ceremonies himself.

Parental resistance

FOUR in five Scots believe that the country's segregated education system, which separates children by religion at five, should be abolished; but Roman Catholic parents are mounting a campaign against a local authority which plans to bring Catholic children and those from other communities closer together.

In Dalkeith, the local authority, Midlothian, wants to rebuild two run-down high schools, one Roman Catholic, the other non-denominational, side by side. Each would retain its identity, but they would share some facilities such as an assembly hall and a canteen. The head teachers are in favour and the Catholic Archbishop of Edinburgh, Keith O'Brien, has given his support (*Guardian*, March 13), but a group of Catholic parents is implacably opposed and is going to take the matter "all the way to Rome".

Peter Kearney, spokesman for the Catholic Church in Scotland, denied that its schools provoke bigotry: "They don't in countries like France or England", he said, although he didn't mention Northern Ireland. Clearly, though, Catholics shouldn't take all the blame: it's the separate schooling that lies at the root of the problem, as Rangers Football Club have told MSPs who are examining sectarianism. And anyone who has attended a Rangers v Celtic match will have seen plenty of bigotry on both sides.

Mis-education

MUCH has been written about the teaching of creationism at Emmanuel College in Gateshead. I am glad, at least, that the point has been well made that, as I have insisted in these columns, evolution is not a theory but a fact. The worst aspect of the case is that Tony Blair should have so little concern for education that he should defend the school because it gets good examination results.

Liberal Democrat MP Jenny Tonge has rightly said that the Prime Minister needs to make clear his own position on the subject and whether he intends to turn a blind eye to the creation of more schools like Emmanuel which, as a City Technology College, is partly funded by the private sector. According to the *Observer* (March 17), plans for another six institutions are known to be in the pipeline, funded by the same entrepreneur, Sir Peter Vardy, owner of the Reg Vardy retail car empire and an enthusiastic evangelical Christian.

There are times when "enthusiasm" needs to be curtailed, and this is one of them.

WHEN we speak of the Enlightenment we think first of France and especially of Denis Diderot and his Encyclopedists. Yet the French *philosophes* recognised England as “the birthplace of the modern”; and the great 28-volume *Encyclopédie* itself, launched in 1751, originated in a bookseller’s scheme to translate Ephraim Chambers’ two-volume Cyclopaedia which had appeared in 1728. It is strange, then, that historians have had so little to say about the role of English thinkers in the European Enlightenment as a whole, and Roy Porter set out to remedy this oversight. I use the past tense because, while I was reading this engrossing book, the author died suddenly at the age of 55, only a year after he had retired as Professor in the Social History of Medicine at the Wellcome Institute in London.

Those who knew him described Porter as a secular man, and for him the Enlightenment was distinguished by “the secularity of its model of mankind”. It turned the ultimate question “How can I be saved?” into “How can I be happy?” And of course, one of its outstanding reformers was the Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham with his “greatest happiness” principle and his detestation of the churches. “A man who after reading the scriptures can bring himself to fancy the doctrines of the Athanasian Creed” was, he declared in 1777, in a “state of prepared imbecility”.

Earlier, though, it was the experimentalist Francis Bacon and the empiricist John Locke (elected FRS in 1688) who led the way. “Alongside his defences of toleration and political liberty”, says Porter, Locke “set the enlightened agenda with his endorsement of the mind’s progressive capacities”. He dismissed Platonic and Cartesian apriorism and “replaced [philosophical] rationalism with reasonableness in a manner which became programmatic in Britain”. He was “the presiding spirit of the English Enlightenment”.

But there was a great flowering of deism. The third Earl of Shaftesbury, Locke’s pupil, identified philosophy with the study of happiness, in which all could engage, rather than “all that Dinn & noise of Metaphysicks, all that pretended study”. Having witnessed the antics of Pentecostals speaking in tongues, Shaftesbury ridiculed “enthusiasts” of all kinds. And there was Viscount Bolingbroke, who compared Plato to “a bombast poet and a mad theologian” who had “diverted men from the pursuit of truth”. Gibbon, too, of course; and that often neglected determinist friend of Locke’s, Anthony Collins, whose *Discourse of Free-thinking* exposed the “vile arts” and feuds among the divines; who disputed the credibility of Scripture and the

Colin McCall reviews *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World,* by Roy Porter. Penguin £8.99.

clerics who touted it; and defended reason against authority. Praise there is here, too, for Joseph Addison, “the first great media man”, and others who took advantage of the print boom.

Needless to say, the dominant scientific figure was Newton, who immersed himself in alchemy, but “convinced himself earlier than Locke, and far more radically, that the doctrine of the Trinity was false”, and became “a closet Arian”. But it was Bacon who had set the scientific tone: “The Human Understanding is unquiet”, he said; “it cannot stop or rest, and still presses onward”. In the 1720s and 1730s the Newtonian view that force was an expression of divine intervention was challenged and, says Porter, “later theorists increasingly assumed that matter was inherently active and that Nature was sustained independently of God’s immediate will.”

Erasmus Darwin, “a materialist through and through”, as Porter calls him, was even bold enough to suggest that “all warm-blooded animals have arisen from one living filament, which The Great First Cause endued with animality”. As a physician, Darwin also dismissed the supernatural as a cause of madness. Rather than the Devil driving you insane, belief in the Devil and hellfire was for him a mark of madness.

Scientific developments were demonstrated to the public, at first in London’s coffee houses, by lecturers with globes, orreries and other instruments. Porter tells us, for example, that in 1713, the Royal Society’s official experimenter, J T Desaguliers, offered a course in Newtonian science in twenty-one lectures for “such as are altogether unskilled in Mathematics”, experimental proof of the reality of the vacuum and “mechanical engines in general.” Later in the century, Adam Walker, who was befriended by Joseph Priestley, put on a lecture series each winter in London which brought him to the notice of the intelligentsia, although Fanny Burney found him vulgar in conversation. About 1781 Walker built a 20-foot orrery of luminous globes of various sizes to represent the planets and demonstrate the workings of the solar system in a darkened auditorium. He was also a visiting science lecturer at several public schools;

and at Eton one member of his audience, Percy Bysshe Shelley was completely captivated. Along with the atheist poet, mention must be made of another Enlightenment atheist, Shelley’s father-in-law William Godwin, whose Calvinism was shaken by reading the French *philosophes* and then by Joseph Priestley’s teachings. Godwin’s wife, Mary Woolstonecraft, was foremost among the women, although there were many others.

With the rise of science went the rejection of astrology, which, during the Renaissance had been acceptable in all circles. By 1700 such Fellows of the Royal Society as had been sympathetic to astrology, like John Aubrey, were dead, and its influence waned among the enlightened, although, as we all can testify, it retained a popular following; and in a review of this book in the *Guardian*, Nicholas Lezard singled out that paper as the only broadsheet today without an astrology column.

So far I have dealt only with the English Enlightenment, but Roy Porter’s subtitle indicates a wider range, and it would be invidious to overlook the contribution of the Scots, pre-eminently David Hume. Porter takes us through the important points of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, whose own subtitle was “An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects”. Francis Hutcheson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow, was another pioneer of Utilitarianism; and then there were the Scottish “Common Sense” philosophers Adam Ferguson and Thomas Reid, although Joseph Priestley regarded their “common sense” as a euphemism for mystification. No such criticism could be levelled against the author of a work of that title, the incomparable Thomas Paine.

The period was also notable for the secular demystification of approaches to madness (which Roy Porter has considered extensively in another volume), suicide and death. There was, as he says, a move away from the pious “good death”, a move epitomised when the Christian James Boswell imposed himself on the dying David Hume and was amazed that the unbeliever should have an “easy” passing. Indeed, Hume further outraged the intruder by denouncing religious morality.

In short, the Enlightenment in Britain, as elsewhere, was a triumph of freethought over ecclesiasticism, its heroes being some of the greatest freethinkers our country has produced; and Roy Porter has done them proud in a fine flowing narrative, supported by extensive learning, as revealed in the 130 pages of notes and an 80-page bibliography. This is a most attractive book, delightfully illustrated, which all readers will enjoy. Because of his untimely death, it could be Roy Porter’s last work. If so, it is a splendid legacy.

Religious delusions

MY thanks to Norman Pridmore, Ian Norris and Albert Adler for their ideas towards understanding religious delusion (*Freethinker*, April). Their comments and propositions have prompted me to do a little exploring.

Common to all religions is the alleged communication between the believer and his gods: they speak to him personally or collectively, and he speaks to them (so they say). How? Prayers have only acoustic range, no instrument demonstrates the human brain to be a radio transmitter or receiver with local, let alone interstellar, range, and EEG tests have not, as I am aware, decoded electrical brain activity as language. More pertinent: why this communication with a god? Indeed, why a god at all?

In a life-changing situation, or even when deciding what train to catch, believers will answer: "for guidance". Decision-making is difficult and, as Ian Norris mentioned, can cause stress. When "fight or flight" is not possible, stress from losing control over our lives, such as that caused by the shattering of trust in the reliability of our surroundings, can lead to mental illness. When having to make those difficult decisions, we each learn as adults that we really are alone in the world. How much easier it would be if there was something in time of need to guide us. Perhaps there is, and it is a facet of ourselves – a function of our subconscious.

Often we encourage ourselves. "C'mon, you can do it", we inwardly say, as if instinctively knowing there is an inner self that, as sports coaches know, can be cajoled into raising our performance. Professor Susan Greenfield in *Brain Story* (2000) says actions that necessitate snap decisions are subconsciously controlled and says "It feels as if there's a control centre in the head ..."

A function of the brain similar to this suggested control centre seems capable, within the locus of our learning and experience, of solving abstract problems – that is, without conscious volition. Perhaps subconsciously, within the same locus, it can make decisions should we be but able to heed them. I often have a feeling nascent or latent of an internal calculator that acts like an adjunct to my consciousness: in restful periods solutions to pondered questions will suddenly enter consciousness, or related ideas will. Artists try to connect with theirs, as do poets and writers, and for scientists it can be the ultimate synthesiser of reflected learning. "Eureka" Archimedes exulted when his insight arose from this specialised function of the brain, which seems to behave at times as would – for want of a less emotive name – an internal god.

Inheriting genetic definition, its character is unique; it is shaped by nurture, modified by experience and, besides providing insight, produces visceral feeling to guide us. Its frailty is that it can be tricked and seduced by illusion and, blind to reality it cannot comprehend or assimilate, it invents explanation.

In such a way, perhaps, ancient man came to believe that if the sun was worshipped enough and appeased by human sacrifice it wouldn't cause too much woe, and the modern god up there still in heaven and still worshipped is simply its adorned metaphor. But that, as I expect Norman will agree, is far too simple. Now for a little controversy. Perhaps ideas in Professor Julian Jaynes' 1976 book, which has been marginalised (it is difficult), should be given more credit. In an earlier draft of this letter I tried to detail his ideas, but it grew too long. All I can say, for those who are unaware of his hypothesis, is that the brain function that was requisite for, and the cause of, man's civilisation from a hunter-gatherer proto-conscious mentality, which in response to the stress of indecision produced auditory-hallucinated quasi-rational directives (heard internally – voices ascribed as gods, later collectivised into one: Yahweh "spoke" to Moses), could have a muted evolutionary echo in the specialised brain function that in modern man seems on occasion to solve abstractions and provide insight. In other words, this subconscious function could be a vestige of an earlier mentality, but operates in a neurologically different and more benign way.

Perhaps sensing this loss, believers now as for millennia intuitively pray to a fantasised god in hope for its (personally heard vocal) return. One way to progress secular rationalism is to better understand brain architecture and the brain function that gives insight by which to ween believers off its historical metaphor, then its delusion will evaporate into the ether.

Three generations? five? for secular knowledge to bring sanity to the world? If not, then the human predilection for religious delusion could cause it's prediction to come true. Woommph! Armageddon.

GRAHAM NEWBERY
Southampton

Free Will

I WRITE this letter of my own free will, in the sense that nobody forces me to write it. The causes of my decision to write include my genetic constitution, my past experiences, and my present circumstances. The question is whether my free will is an additional cause.

I believe that there is no such additional cause, that what I do of my own free will is

wholly determined by my genetic constitution, my past experiences, and my present circumstances. I also believe that this belief is determined by my genetic constitution, my past experiences, and my present circumstances. I cannot prove the non-existence of an independent something called free will, because it is logically impossible to prove a negative. But I am happy to assert dogmatically that it does not exist.

DONALD ROOM
London

Which Master's Voice?

A RECENT survey shows that 85 per cent of people in this country agree that medical assistance should be available to terminally ill patients who wish to cut short their suffering during a protracted and agonising death.

Yet at the end of the last debate on this subject in the House of Commons, 234 members voted against a proposal to that effect; only 89 voted for.

I don't believe that parliamentarians' thoughts and feelings concerning a problem like this can be so very different from those of the population in general. There must be some politically motivated dishonesty at work here. Are MPs afraid of losing Christian votes? Or could it perhaps have something to do with the fact that all the three major parties are led by men whose Master's Voice in matters like these is the Voice of the Vatican and not the Voice of the British People?

When these leaders were elected, I don't suppose any attention was paid to their religious allegiance. Perhaps that was a mistake?

YNGVE BAUTZ
Newcastle upon Tyne

Crisis in India

WHAT is happening in India is something that is not unexpected. Although the constitution says that India is a secular state, the leaders of India from Nehru onwards did not create the atmosphere and the infrastructure needed to maintain a secular state. India is secular only in theory. In practice it is in no way different from the other theocratic states in the Middle East or some Catholic countries or even Sri Lanka where the Buddhist clergy is powerful. In India it is the Brahmins, beginning with Nehru, who have been ruling the country since independence.

They say India is a Hindu country. But what is Hinduism? Can anybody define Hinduism? The word Hinduism was coined by the British to include the various forms of

worship practised by the people of India with their different varieties of deities. In Hinduism there is a multiplicity of gods and goddesses with different names and brands, and different temples are built for them, and in each temple there will be Brahmins officiating as priests. The prayers are recited in Sanskrit, an artificial language created by the Brahmins to communicate with the gods.

In addition, there are many godmen appearing now and again who claim to be the incarnation of saints gone by. These frauds too thrive on the ignorance and credulity of the people like the temple Brahmins.

Coming to the question of building a temple for Rama, I would like point out the following facts:

(1) Rama is a legendary god and not a historical person like Buddha, Mohammed or Jesus. To say that Rama was born in Ayodya is utter nonsense.

(2) Ramayana and Mahabharata were written by the Brahmins with the sole purpose of denigrating the Dravidians who had a very advanced civilisation long before the Aryans came to India.

(3) It is the RSS (the organisation that assassinated Ghandi) and the VHP (an extreme Hindu organisation) and the Home Minister Advani with his famous yatra who were responsible for the demolition of the historic monument Babri Majid. By their shameful act they have shown the world that they are in no way different from the Taliban leaders who demolished the famous Buddha statues. They have now created a monster which they are unable to control.

(4) No one will condone the setting fire to the railway compartments in which some VHP members died. The civilised way of dealing with it is to charge the culprits and punish them, and not to go on a rampage and kill innocent Muslims who had nothing to do with the incident.

(5) India is not a secular democratic state as the constitution shows. Under the the BJP government supported by both the RSS and VHP, it is becoming more and more a Hindu fascist state.

Unless the leadership changes, there is going to be only anarchy in India.

YAL N ALAGAN
London

Memes and more

TWO writers in your April *Points of View* reveal serious ignorance of technical matters to which they refer. Ian Quayle (claiming religion needn't conflict with science) imagined that quantum uncertainty and chaos the-

ory somehow imply that there are no objective facts! Also that "selfish genes" are genes for sin! Before scattering scientific terms like confetti, to decorate his writing, he should find out what they mean.

Ditto J V M McCalmont, who wrote of "memes" that "no experiment has been carried out proving their existence or detecting them". Clearly McCalmont has no idea what a *meme* is. The word is no more than a newish (1976) term for something everyone knew about long before it was coined, namely a piece of information residing in an animal's brain, which gets into that brain as the animal imitates or learns from other animals in whose brain the information already resides. The information is thus *replicated*.

A meme, like a gene or a poem or a photo is a replicator, a thing that gets copied. The word was coined for its convenience in animal behaviour studies by the biologist Richard Dawkins, in his books *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and *The Extended Phenotype* (1982), where on page 109 he gives as examples the words and music of songs (replicated from one human brain to another), how to peck open a milk bottle (replicated from one blue-tit brain to another), and some food-gathering behaviour by monkeys. One might add hunting skills learned by young wolves from older wolves. McCalmont insists "there is no evidence for the existence of memes". No evidence that people learn songs from other people, nor that birds learn milk-bottle-raiding from other birds?!

Memes, like genes, commonly benefit the animal in which they reside. Without memes wolves starve, and people would get lost. I don't need a meme to tell me Outer Mongolia exists; I have been there. I haven't been to Blackpool, but I think it exists because other people tell me so. Some folk believe Heaven exists for the same reason I believe Blackpool does: in their brains resides information to that effect, replicated. from other brains.

CONNAIRE KENSIT
London

J V M McCalmont expresses some doubts concerning memes. I share some of those doubts. That's why I said in my earlier letter only that the notion of memes might "be fruitful as an explanatory principle ..."

It may be that memes are/is simply another and quite unnecessary layer of explanation, and one which ultimately obscures rather than enlightens. Against that there is the possibility that Dawkins has hit upon something important. I think it's OK to be pragmatic and to see how the idea develops, to play with it and see if anything helpful comes of it. Master Ockam's razor is always available should the

meme beast grow too surly or intractable.

It was suggested by J V M McCalmont that the popularity of the idea (and I'm not sure that it is especially popular) is more to do with Dawkins' and Blakemore's roles within the "atheistic and sceptical community" than because of any merit the idea itself has. Maybe this is true. On the other hand, Dawkins does have a pretty good record of generating interesting ideas and insights and of explaining hard science and complex ideas using language that is accessible to non-specialists. Blakemore, in her role as a leading researcher in the field of parapsychology, has made herself pretty unpopular with "true believers" in the psi fraternity because of her sceptical stance and her insistence upon rigorous methodology and analysis. The two of them have earned, I suggest, a degree of credibility. Could this be the reason why some of us are inclined to give their ideas a (not uncritical) hearing?

Turning to the issue of the idea of memes being spread by means of "popular science books" – so what if they are? Just because a book or article is "popular" rather than "academic" doesn't mean it isn't serious or intellectually respectable. Look at *The Origin of Species*. It was and remains a "popular science book". Darwin wrote for an intelligent readership of non-specialists. He wanted to communicate widely. So do writers like Dawkins, Blackmore, Steve Jones, Stephen Jay Gould, Steven Rose, Jared Diamond and E O Wilson (to give just a few vaguely relevant names from the many I could have chosen). They are all "serious" scientists of considerable repute – as well as being popular: and they have all been subject to stinging and very effective criticism – often from each other! Peer review has its place, and these writers understand that (they've been there and done it and still do it) – but it's not the only forum that matters. In fact, sometimes the peer review process gets pretty close to being one of outright censorship. Some recent evidence suggests (to no one's real surprise, I expect, that it's a process capable of considerable manipulation and distortion. The dead hand of Capital can still massage statistics with its icy fingers when its own interests are at stake ... Objective? Truthful? Only up to a point, Lord Copper ...

Concerning the status of memes themselves, I suggest the problem may be more subtle than that of whether it's possible to "prove" that they do or do not exist. After all, in what sense do nouns and verbs "exist"? Or the numbers from one to infinity? What about "the mind"? To get really physical, how can a car be said to exist? After all, it's only an accumulation of parts, none of which is itself a "car". A car is, at one level, an abstraction, a construction, a



mental object. It may be that memes "exist" in this kind of way – within language, as ideas, as units of information. They are inherently no more and no less odd in principle than the notion of "ideas" themselves. Good grief, look at the trouble poor old Plato got into over the idea of Ideas!

The principle of falsification doesn't help much, either. It can help to determine what is and is not science – but it's of limited utility. At the end of the day it's sometimes just a way of deciding what goes in which definitional box! It's the beginning, not the end of the story ...

We should look at ideas themselves rather than where they come from. We should be critical and sceptical, and highly suspicious. But above all, we should fight against constraining or censoring the free flow of ideas in the name of any authority, whether religious, academic, or political. Freethinking means the freedom to be wrong and silly as well as to be right and wise – and to communicate freely and without fear of obstruction. That's why it's the tough option, and always will be, and why freethinkers have so often been ahead of the game when it comes to embracing new and important ideas in science and history and social thinking.

By the way – I meant in my previous letter to mention the William James essay *The Will to Believe*. James puts forward some very stimulating ideas about belief that anyone interested would probably enjoy thinking about ...

NORMAN PRIDMORE
Lincs

Science and religion

I AM glad that Ian Quayle found my article on science and religion thought-provoking, and should like to comment briefly on his similar letter.

(1) I don't agree that science does not address "why" questions. What I wish to understand as a psychologist is precisely why people are as they are. A religious person may not find my answers satisfactory, nor I theirs.

(2) I don't pretend to understand quantum mechanics, but I assume that physics, like other sciences, seeks as accurate a description of its subject matter as possible – "the facts". The uncertainty principle is presumably part of this. I take science to be endless, but nevertheless cumulative. There is no point at which we have to say, thus far and no farther .

(3) I would not take genetics and/or environment to be the same as original sin. This doctrine seems to mean that we are all necessarily wrongdoers. Genetics, psychology and anthropology show, to my mind, that this is not so.

(4) I see no reason not to accept the (to me) obvious idea that the particular state of our uni-

verse came about by chance. It might have been designed, but I see no reason to assume this.

(5) I agree that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. But it is a good ground for initial disbelief. I think in fact that there are good grounds for rejecting belief in a deity, and better ones for dismissing life after death.

(6) I think that morals and ethics must be based on self-knowledge, which includes our social and cultural heritage. This too is part of science. Of course we still have to exercise individual judgement.

I realise I may not have taken up all Ian Quayle's points, still less satisfied him. And I apologise for the very high ego quotient of "I"s.

JOHN RADFORD
University of East London

No invective needed

ON several occasions I have almost put pen to paper to contribute to your magazine, and hope to do so in the future as time permits, but I feel I must start by commenting on the April edition.

Like a number of your readers, although I thoroughly enjoy the *Freethinker* and look forward to its arrival every month, I have felt that its message has somewhat all too frequently been tarnished by the occasional relapse into vitriol against certain personages or *ad hominem* attacks on our opponents in a manner clearly devoid of any rational basis. Oftimes to a degree such that I would feel embarrassed to share the magazine with friends for fear of the detrimental effect these would have on their opinion of both our case and our integrity. A recent example is the cover "celebrating" the death of Mary Whitehouse. Make no mistake, I held no brief for the woman or anything she stood for, but when we are reduced to such mockery it does the cause of rationalism no service.

In the light of these concerns, it gives me great pleasure to write to you to state how much I enjoyed the April edition: a superlative synthesis of commentary, rational argument and review, without being marred by any of the – I'm afraid there is no other word for it – diatribe which has surfaced all too frequently in the past and overshadowed the many sterling contributions to your publication. It just goes to show that we can argue our case purely on a logical and rational basis, without resorting to entirely unproductive – and frequently offensive – invective.

May I presume to speak on behalf of a silent majority of your subscribers and say: "Long may it continue!"

M C GRANT
Aberdeenshire

Creationism

LEAVING aside the blind hard creationists at Emmanuel College and their ilk, who ultimately will just get laughed off stage by most thinking people, we have a bigger problem with the softer creationism which exists amongst the more intelligent of those who still want to hold on to the cuddly toy of a god. This is encapsulated in the often heard views:-

"Oh yes, of course the Bible is an allegory and evolution is a marvellous and true mechanism and the genetic codes determine the players over the time-scales suggested by scientists, but God the Creator was the one who put it all in place and lit the blue touch paper of the big bang. Molecular structure and the resultant genetic code is God's randomiser of future events and science is an important way of finding out about God's mechanics, the better to worship him."

What do we say about that? Have the intelligent religious now retreated to where we can't get at them?

Physics is unlikely to say anything in an experimental (and therefore scientific) sense about anything further back than the initial singularity, and thus we are likely to have the God enthusiast's suggestions on how to lead a good life unchallenged for millenia.

Having forced them back over recent centuries ultimately they have us beaten! Are we simply to be left like two children confronting at each other "My Dad's better than your Dad – nah nah!"

PAUL STEVENSON
Norfolk

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, June 9, 4.30pm. Public Meeting.

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

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 020 8777 1680. 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). Friday, June 14, 7.30pm. Graham Robb: *Move Over, Sylvester Stallone*.

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. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, June 6, 8pm. Ian Wilkes: *Havering's Heritage - the Need for a Local Museum*.

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, May 30, 8pm. Denis Cobell: *Bertrand Russell - His Influence on My Life*.

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, May 16, 7.15pm. Members speak on a subject of their choice.

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, June 5, 8pm. Public Meeting. Subject: *Evolution*.

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, May 8, 8pm. Monty Alfred (Electoral Reform Society): *The Democratic Deficit*.

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.