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The Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

**'Everyone's doing a brand-new dance
now –
Come on baby, let's do the crucifixion...'**

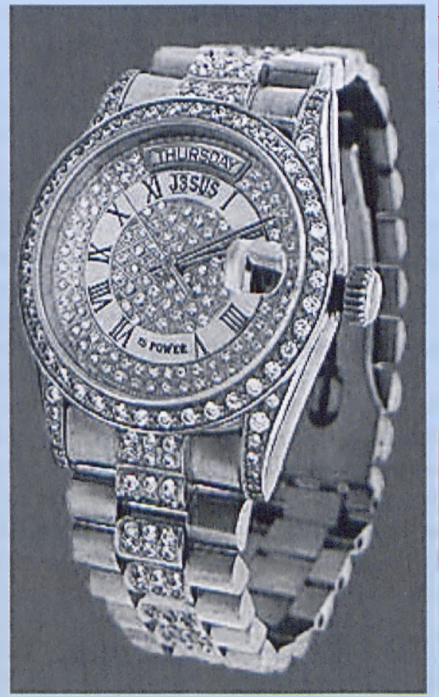


† *A fun alternative to fluffy dice swinging from your rear-view mirror is the 'G-Force Jesus'*
– £4.99

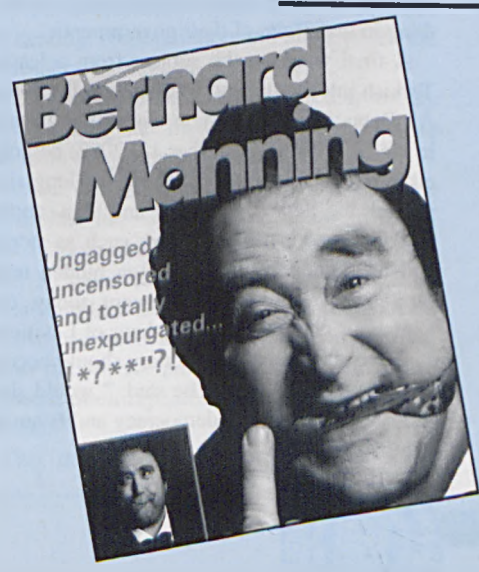
Weird, wacky, cheesy, tacky: We kick off the new year with an exploration of the world of Jesus gifts

– see page 6

† *A perfect match for a mouthful of miraculously-acquired gold teeth is this sparkly 'Jesus is Power' watch*
– a snip at £1,098.00



Also in this issue



Why foul-mouthed 'funnyman' Mr Manning has the hots for Jesus' little woman – Mother Teresa. (He also admires Hitler – but only for his economic prowess!)
– see p5



SIGNS are that, within the next few years, Turkey will be joining the European Union, bringing with it a population of some 70,000 Muslims – and this makes many nervous.

It is a perfectly understandable twitchiness. Discussions regarding Turkey's possible entry into the EU took place in a year when many countries in the West were having to face up to the uncomfortable truth that large numbers of Muslims who had established a presence within their liberal democracies were showing open hostility to the values of those who had taken them in – either as refugees or economic migrants.

One nation in particular which is learning to come to terms with the reality of such hostility is Denmark, once renowned for its open-heartedness and tolerance. That all appeared to evaporate in November of 2001 when a centre-right coalition came to power. For the first time since 1929 the Danish socialists were excluded.

The election results reflected the Danes' realisation that years of embracing "multi-culturalism" had saddled them with a serious problem: a growing population of Islamofascists whose actions have included a recent announcement that a bounty of around £18,000 would be paid for the murder of several prominent Danish Jews.

Denmark is home to around 6,000 Jews, who increasingly are having to depend on police protection, while anti-Israel marches have turned into anti-Jewish riots. The organisation that offered the bounty, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, openly calls on Muslims to "kill all Jews ... wherever you find them". Its hand has been strengthened by the establishment of a cell in Denmark of the fanatical British-based *Al Mahajiroun* organisation.

This sort of hatred and intolerance is entirely alien to Danish culture. And when you add other factors, such as Government statistics that around 40 per cent of welfare spending goes to five percent of mainly Muslim immigrants from countries like Turkey, Somalia, Pakistan, and Lebanon; and that, while Muslims make up only four per cent of Denmark's 5.4 million people, they constitute a majority of the country's convicted rapists (an especially sensitive issue given that practically all the female victims are non-Muslim) you may be saddened but you certainly would understand why the Danes swung over so far to the right.

The new Danish administration immediately announced that immigrants must now live seven years in Denmark (rather than three) to become permanent residents, and most non-refugees can no longer collect welfare as soon as they enter the country.

Meanwhile, in the United States – governed by an administration that foolishly believes "faith" communities have a role to play in

education – the penny has belatedly dropped that many Islamic schools are filling children's heads with dangerous nonsense.

A report in the *Washington Post* of February 25, 2002, revealed that one such school outside Washington, DC, uses textbooks teaching 11th graders that "the Day of Judgment can't come until Jesus Christ returns to Earth, breaks the cross and converts everyone to Islam, and until Muslims start attacking Jews".

Other accredited Islamic schools in America have world maps on classroom walls that exclude Israel. Some such schools promote class discussions that portray Usama bin Laden as "simply the victim of ... prejudice"

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE explains why it may be no bad thing for a country of 70-million Muslims to join the European Union



against all Muslims in America.

This sort of rubbish is, of course, a product of the close links between Muslim schools and the ever-increasing number of mosques being built in the US – mainly with Saudi Arabian money. Of the more than 1,200 mosques in America, over 80 percent have been built within the last 20 years – thanks in large part to Saudi cash, according to Reza F Safa, author of the book *Inside Islam*. And Saudi Arabia, let us not forget, is home to a radical and acutely violent strain of Islam called "Wahhabism," one that is spreading rapidly well beyond its borders.

"Saudi Arabia alone has spent \$87-billion since 1973 to spread Islam throughout the United States and the Western hemisphere," Safa says. It is hardly surprising then that so many of the American Muslim schools should be purveyors of hatred and superstition.

But back now to Turkey, and its impending entry into the EU.

Even though the electorate there recently voted in the Islamicist Justice and Development party, this highly westernised Muslim country remains firmly committed to the rigorously secularist principles laid down by Ataturk, who, in 1923, founded the modern state of Turkey.

He declared that he "wished all religions to the bottom of the sea" and followed this declaration through by changing Arabic script to the western alphabet, adopting the western calendar, and banning the wearing of headscarves and fez.

Arguing in favour of Turkey's admission to

the EU "club". Stephen R Norton, a retired US colonel and senior policy advisor at the Western Policy Centre, said: "Turkey is a prototype for Islamic modernity, providing hope and replacing the negative, repressive, xenophobic environment that has developed in some Islamic countries, where hatred, fear and ignorance are grist for recruiting terrorists.

"Moderate states, such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, could greatly benefit by following the Turkish model – so long as it works.

"The single, most important long-term threat to Turkey is the rise of radical Islam, which threatens the very essence of its democratic nature. The solution requires lifting the standard of living, and Turkey has concluded that EU membership is the best way to achieve this." (These words formed part of a lengthy article in the *Washington Times* of April 21, 2002.)

So the choice, it seems, is this: Keep Turkey out of the EU, and expose it to the danger of it eventually being Talibanised, or embrace it and provide the necessary economic or military help its leaders need to prevent the country ever falling prey to Islamic fundamentalism.

Bringing Turkey into the EU would also speed up the programme of human rights improvements which the Turks have already set in motion, and which recently saw the abolition of the death penalty.

And here are some further thoughts. The presence of a dynamic, *secular* nation of Muslims in the EU may help other European Union administrations to shake off their inertia and have the courage to square up to radical Islamic leaders in their own countries. This would lead them to take whatever steps are necessary to stop these firebrands from fomenting hatred and intolerance – even if it means shutting down certain mosques and schools, and imposing jail terms on people guilty of trying to undermine the values of the cultures into which they have settled but for which they have absolutely no respect.

Also, the presence of a country which has managed, against the odds, to keep religion out of the political arena since its founding should be an inspiration to those in other EU states who are valiantly trying to keep the religious from meddling in the affairs of *their* governments.

A final word on the subject from a leading Turkish intellectual and translator of the Koran, Ali Babuc. In an interview with Polly Toynbee in the *Guardian* (December 13, 2002) he pointed out that Islam in his country had long since passed the literalist phase, and that ancient Middle Eastern tribal customs such as stoning and hand-chopping, and women hidden under burkas, were no more relevant today than Christians obeying the weird laws of Leviticus.

He is passionate that Turkey should become an EU member. "This," he said, "would show the Islamic world that democracy and Islam are compatible."

Humans Rights Act invoked to bring the BBC to heel over *Thought for the Day*

THE BBC has been called upon to re-evaluate its ban on non-religious contributors to *Thought for the Day* spot on Radio 4's *Today* programme by solicitors as part of legal action threatened by a former President of the National Secular Society, Barbara Smoker.

In August last year more than 100 intellectuals and politicians wrote to the BBC – at the instigation of the NSS – demanding an end to the programme's exclusively religious character.

The BBC indicated then that it had no intention of changing its policy with regard to *TftD*, but Rod Liddle, former editor of the *Today* programme, invited Professor Richard Dawkins, the prominent Oxford biologist, to present a one-off "alternative".

Dawkins seized the opportunity to launch a vitriolic attack on all religion, arguing that it was time for humanity to "leave the cry-baby phase" and realise that belief in God as a creator of the world or guardian from disasters was "infantile regression".

The BBC's continued refusal to allow non-religious views to be aired on *TftD* prompted Barbara Smoker, as both listener and potential contributor, to serve notice in a private capacity



Barbara Smoker, who has threatened the BBC with legal action over *TftD*

on the BBC that, unless it changed its policy, judicial review proceedings would be taken.

Solicitors acting for Ms Smoker wrote to the Corporation saying that its position was

"unlawful and in breach of the BBC's obligations under the Human Rights Act".

Her barristers consider that the ban breaches Articles 9, 10 and 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

Ms Smoker points out that "these slots are shared out among all the sects of all the regions, but the non-religious part of the audience, which is larger than any single religious sect, is denied a voice. Although the mutually incompatible contributors never disparage one another, they often make snide comments on 'materialism'".

News of the intention to take legal action against the BBC was broken on December 15 by the *Sunday Times*, which gave the story prominent treatment on page 7. A lengthy report concluded with a quote from Labour MP Lynne Jones, who was a signatory to the original NSS letter. She said that the BBC should recognise its obligations to the range of beliefs of its licence fee payers. If it did not listen to "reasoned argument", she said, legal moves could be justified.

The next day Barbara was interviewed on the *Today* programme, and several newspapers covered the story.

Pope accepts Archbishop Law's resignation

THE Pope has accepted the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law as archbishop of Boston, the Vatican has announced.

Law's resignation last December came in the wake of a major sexual abuse scandal that rocked his Boston archdiocese.

"I am profoundly grateful to the Holy Father for having accepted my resignation as archbishop of Boston," Mr Law said in a written statement released by the Vatican.

"It is my fervent prayer that this action may help the archdiocese of Boston to experience the healing, reconciliation and unity which are so desperately needed.

"To all those who have suffered from my shortcomings and mistakes, I both apologise and from them beg forgiveness."

Abuse victims, lay members and even some priests had intensified calls for Law to resign after 18 years at the helm of the Boston archdiocese, as more cases of improper conduct by priests unfolded from the release of church files.

Law had been accused of having shuffled from parish to parish priests who were accused, often repeatedly, of sexually abusing minors.

The days before his resignation were

marked by some of the most shocking revelations in the year-old scandal in Boston, with the release of thousands of pages of the archdiocese's personnel files, and it looked as if Law might also have to face questions from a grand jury about his supervision of priests accused of sexually abusing minors.

Victims have accused him of being more mindful of his personal reputation than honestly dealing with the scandal, and dozens of priests under his command have demanded that he step down.

Whenever a bishop offers to step down, for age, illness or other problems, it is up to the pope to accept the offer or to ask the clergyman to stay on, as he did in April 2002 when Law travelled to Rome to seek his guidance.

Epicentre of scandal

In recent years, sex abuse scandals have engulfed dioceses across the US and in Ireland, France, Britain and the Pope's native Poland.

But Boston has been at the epicentre of the scandals rocking the church, because of the archdiocese's centuries-old prestige and Law's insistence that he stay at the helm.

Last November, Law, in an apology

delivered during mass at Boston Cathedral, acknowledged his responsibility for decisions that "led to intense suffering".

Setting the record straight

KEITH Porteous Wood has asked us to point out that the reference to the establishment of a super directorate for religion within the European Commission should have referred to the appointment of a fourth member to the Group of Policy Advisors to European Commission. President Prodi – one responsible for "Dialog with Religions, Churches and Humanisms". The other three advisors are for Foreign Affairs, Economic and Financial Affairs, and Institution Reforms.

He regrets this misunderstanding of remarks made by Dr Weninger at a meeting in Newcastle but considers it does not alter the tenor of the article, that there is considerable and increasing religious influence in the EU commission.

• Keith Porteous Wood's regular column in the *Freethinker* will be resumed in February.



'More people in Britain are prepared to define themselves as atheists'

WHEN historians come to chart the progress of secularism in the UK, they must surely conclude that one of the most exciting periods occurred in the dying days of the 20th century when a quaint old institution – thought by many to be little more than a late-Victorian hangover, and largely ignored by the mainstream media – showed itself to be dynamic, relevant, and the major force in the battle to prise the fingers of religion off the levers of state.

In the countdown to the millennium, hardly a week went by without the National Secular Society receiving a mention in the media. By 2001 the NSS had taken up the position of the country's most effective opponent of religious influence and privilege, and was sought after by all the media to comment on issues as diverse as "faith schools", blasphemy, the religious slaughter of animals, and the BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*. More important still was the fact that the NSS gained recognition from politicians and policy-makers who, on several occasions, called upon the society for its views on various issues ... and continue to do so ever more frequently.

In the NSS's latest, and most upbeat, annual report, the society's President, Denis Cobell, launches an introduction to the report thus: "You're on a roll at the moment."

"This," he explains, "was the comment made by the broadcaster Roger Bolton to Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood during a recording of the *Sunday* programme in August this year. And he was right. The NSS's profile has not been higher for many decades. It seems that our opponents think so too. The NSS has been identified by a number of evangelical organisations as their sole opposition."

Denis Cobell continues: "This past year has seen a significant increase in our campaigning activities, and in the attention that is being paid to our message. As a result, our membership is increasing at a gratifying rate, and interest in secularism is growing among politicians, journalists and opinion-formers.

"Our faith schools campaign engaged the public imagination beyond our most optimistic expectations ... our protest against the blasphemy law paid dividends in terms of publicity alone, and our attack on the BBC's exclusionary policy on *Thought for the Day* provoked a national debate. Our lobbying continues in an endeavour to ensure that the interests of non-believers are not disadvantaged in the raft of anti-discrimination legislation that the Government is bringing forward. Opinion polls suggest that, at last, our opposition to

Bishops in the House of Lords is now the prevailing view and our arguments are now seen in official reports and inquiries.

"New issues have surfaced. Perhaps the most disturbing of these is the Government's insistence on involving "faith communities" in providing publicly-funded core welfare services currently administered by local authorities. We have the gravest concerns that this "faith-based welfare" will lead to wholesale discrimination against the service users and employees, especially those who are non-believers or homosexual. And what is to become of the public employees performing these functions who – as will be the case for the vast majority of them – do not happen to adhere to whatever form of religious organisation takes over their work?

"A House of Lords Select Committee is considering whether to abolish the blasphemy law or to extend it, and whether to reintroduce the legal concept of "incitement to religious hatred", which was so roundly rejected the last time it was proposed in parliament. One provision that was not rejected was "religiously aggravated threatening abusive or insulting behaviour". This appears to be even more corrosive to free expression than the blasphemy law, given the wider scope of the offence, its even greater subjectivity – and the maximum tariff being a prison sentence of *seven years*. The Society will be following prosecutions with great concern.

"The disestablishment debate rumbles on and may take a new turn in our direction with the appointment of a new Archbishop of Canterbury who appears not to be averse to breaking the links between church and state. According to the *Church Times*, however: 'No Prime Minister in generations is more exercised about religious matters' than Tony Blair.

"The debate over religion and atheism has raged all year, and we have been in the thick of it. Since the day of the terrorist attacks on New York, a cultural battle has opened up, not so much between Christianity and Islam, but between those who believe and those who don't. In the light of relentless religious slaughter and repression, more and more people are abandoning their indifference and becoming hostile to the idea of the ever-increasing intrusion of religion into society. More and more people in Britain are prepared to define themselves as atheists.

"Although interest in organised Christianity continues to fall, the rise in Islam progresses rapidly. As noted in last year's report, the

Christian Research survey projects that the number of Muslims 'would exceed the number of Anglicans alone by 2013 on present trends, and the number of Roman Catholics at about the same time'. On the same basis, Christian/Muslim equivalence is projected for 2039.

"The NSS hopes that those who are alarmed by the intensifying attacks on our traditionally liberal society will join us in resisting Britain becoming a *de facto* theocracy.

"The Christian side of the above equation is, understandably, a cause of considerable hand-wringing. The following figures appear in a report enigmatically entitled *Hope for the Church*, which was almost certainly written before the latest schism opened up within the Church of England over homosexuality and women bishops. In the last ten years Anglican confirmations and church marriages have declined by 40-50 per cent in the UK. In the next 30 years the number of adult worshippers is projected to drop from 800,000 to 500,000. Sunday schools have now declined 'to the point of almost complete failure' and by 2010 only 0.6 per cent of children are expected to attend church.

"A rather different problem over children has beset the Roman Catholic Church globally, but particularly in Ireland and the United States, where there is a real possibility of dioceses being bankrupted by payouts for clerical child abuse, which in total will reach billions of dollars. The collateral damage extends to the enforced resignation of some, but by no means all, of the bishops and archbishops considered to have knowingly allowed the abuse to continue, which generally also involved the suppression of complaints by victims. While he was Bishop of Arundel, Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor appointed a known paedophile priest as chaplain at Gatwick airport, where he continued to offend. The Cardinal's standing seems to have been gravely damaged by his handling of this catalogue of abuse over many years.

"Since the recent death of Cardinal Hume and his Scottish counterpart Cardinal Winning, the public Catholic voice is no longer prominent and Catholic attendance statistics are following a similar precipitous decline to the C of E's. Seminaries and religious teacher training colleges in the UK and Ireland are failing through lack of recruits. Quite apart from sexual abuse, accounts of widespread and wanton physical and mental cruelty by priests and nuns, especially in the '60s and '70s, continue to emerge."

On the fast track to sainthood

By Barbara Smoker

IT IS more than five years since I wrote a joint obituary article for the *Freethinker* on Princess Diana and Mother Teresa, who happened to die in the same week. Now they are both simultaneously back in the news: the princess for below-stairs revelations that show in a bad light not only herself but also her "blood family" and the exalted family she married into; the nun for her rapid headway towards sainthood, which was her life's ambition.

So keen is the Pope to canonise her before he dies that he himself investigated the claim of a Bengali woman to have been cured of cancer through MT's intercession, so as to provide the requisite poshumous miracle for beatification, and has proclaimed it authentic. Without observing the traditional five-year gap, he will proceed to canonisation next October.

Meanwhile, the front page of *The Catholic Herald* of December 6 last year quotes long dialogues that MT (née Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu) purportedly had in 1946 and 1947 with Christ himself – who, addressing her as "my little spouse, my own little one", instructed her to leave her Loreto teaching order and set up the Congregation of the Missionaries of Charity. Naturally, supernatural voices invariably say whatever the deluded (or duplicitous) person who hears them wants to hear.

Teresa wrote down the divine messages verbatim, so as to get the permission she wanted from the then Archbishop of Calcutta, and they have now been published by the postulator of her cause, Fr Kolodiejczuk, on a website (motherteresa.info), together with revelations about her later "dark night of the soul". The content may look medieval, but no one can say that the Church doesn't keep up with modern communication technology – though it still has to contend with the work of the devil; or, at

least, of marginalised abrasive MT critics like myself.

However, the generally foul-mouthed comedian Bernard Manning, who might be expect-

Out of the mouths of Manning and MT

"A LADY like Mother Teresa brings you nearer to religion. What a wonderful person. All she had was what she stood up in – a bundle of rags. Holding children with all sorts of diseases, and loving them and kissing them – that's my kind of person."

– Bernard Manning, praising MT on the BBC's *Great Lives*.

"I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people."

– Mother Teresa

"Hitler was great for Germany at that time. There were eight million unemployed in Germany when he took over and he put them on their feet. That's not to say he didn't go the wrong way and went a bit potty in the end."

– Bernard Manning, lauding Hitler's economic policies on *Great Lives*.

"I should not allow any child entrusted to my care to be adopted by a woman who has had an abortion or used contraception. Such a woman is incapable of love."

– Mother Teresa

ed to be even more abrasive, not to say maliciously obscene, has melted to syrupy angel-speak on behalf of this "wonderful lady", to whom he would "pray every night when she is made a saint".

The first of Radio 4's new series of debates, *Great Lives*, was, at his choice, devoted to MT, and the transmogrified Bernard took the part of the proposer. The judicious opposer was the author Anne Sebba who, though a Christian and originally a supporter of MT's work, had changed her view when she visited some of the Homes for the Dying shortly before MT's own death. Witnessing the nuns' deliberately harsh, but sentimental, treatment of the abject inmates, she realised that the popular view of MT as a sort of dedicated social worker was utterly mistaken.

The use of effective pain-killers would only prevent people from sharing in Christ's redemptive suffering, and soft beds for the dying were despicable luxuries. Nor was prolonging life high on her agenda, except in such cases as the wretched child born with two heads who would serve as living propaganda against abortion. And she turned her acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 into the same propaganda.

The "living saint" never made a secret of the fact that she had no desire to relieve poverty or to enquire into its causes. Her favourite biblical quotation was "For the poor always ye have with you" – and she intended to keep it that way, since it was the abhorrent poor who lent her own life its meaning and would buy her a first-class ticket for the life to come.

They were, in the words of her obituarist in the *Calcutta Telegraph*, "stepping-stones in a relentless ascent to sainthood".

Christian charity 'promotes bigotry'

THE UK Charity Commission is to investigate a Christian group that issued a card reading "In the event of my death I do not want my children to be adopted by homosexuals."

The move comes after a complaint from the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA), which objected to the Christian Institute using money raised through its tax-exempt charitable status to promote bigotry.

Writing to the Charity Commission, GALHA Secretary George Broadhead said: "We fail to see how the issuing of such a card, riddled with prejudice and discriminatory in its intent, can be described as charitable."

"We would like you to inform us whether the publication of such material by a charity that gains its status from the fact that it is

supposedly a religious body, is within the rules".

The Charity Commission responded by saying that, although it recognises that a religious charity can articulate a view consistent with "its understanding of the teachings of the Bible", it has contacted the CI about the matter.

"We hope that this intervention by the Charity Commission will make the Christian Institute more circumspect about indulging in such bigoted excesses in the future."

Ex-altar boy shoots priest

A BALTIMORE, US, jury has acquitted a former altar boy of attempting to murder a

Roman Catholic priest he claims raped him in 1993. Last May Dontee Stokes, 26, shot Catholic priest Maurice Blackwell, 56, wounding him in his left hand and left hip.

Stokes' attorney, Warren Brown, spent much of the five-day trial trying to convince jurors that Stokes wasn't criminally responsible for the shooting because he was suffering a "mental disorder" as a result of the alleged sexual abuse by Blackwell.

Suspicion of Islam grows

A POLL carried out by America's ABC News last October showed that Americans are growing more suspicious about the basic tenets of Islam. More than a third of Americans now don't think it teaches respect for other beliefs, and nearly a quarter believe Islam encourages violence against non-Muslims.

Jesus gifts are this year's 'must haves'

OUT and about in search of stocking fillers for Yuletide 2002 (yes, even atheists can enjoy the odd winter solstice knees-ups and exchange of gifts), I discovered the "G-Force Jesus" – pictured on the cover – in Planet Gadget in Brighton. It tickled me no end and I cheerfully forked out £4.99 to acquire it.

I then got to thinking: what other gifts has the Man from Galilee inspired? An afternoon spent wandering the pre-Xmas-thronged streets of Brighton and trawling through religiously-themed gift sites on the internet produced an amazing number of goodies, offered either by Christian suppliers (mostly tacky) or by atheists (mostly hilarious).

But quite the most astonishing was a range of watches from a UK outfit called Jesus Watches (www.jesuswatches.co.uk), "a Holy Ghost filled Christian Company, which was formed in January 2001 to promote and further the work of GOD in this world. The main core of the company is to lift up the name of JESUS above every other name using high-quality products, especially watches through to leisure wear.

"As a Christian company we have founded

and built this company on the word of GOD, one of the scriptures, for examples, are Philipians 2:9-11 and Ephesians 1:22, which make it very clear to us that JESUS' NAME is



Jesus ear plug from Wildcat, Gardner St, Brighton, £4.00

above every other name and because of that, JESUS WATCHES will be above every other watch in terms of the name, excellence, beauty, design, durability, quality..." And on and on and ON in a brain-numbing mixture of verbal diarrhoea, uppercase

SHOUTING and bad grammar. Don't Christians ever know when to stop?

Examining some of their offerings – especially the blinding, top-of-the-range "Jesus is Power" gold gent's watch pebble-dashed with more than 300 "brilliant cut swarovski stones" (see cover picture) – my immediate reaction was not to cry out JESUS! but GANGSTAH! This is the sort of thing you'd expect to see on a man with a mountain of gold in his mouth, and several matching gold ropes and crucifixes around his neck. Why does Ali G spring to mind?

A mere mouse-click away from the

Jesus Watch site is www.divine-interventions.com, which is most certainly not a "Holy Ghost filled company", although "fillings" are definitely its speciality.

Divine Interventions are purveyors of novelty sex doo-dahs with – I kid you not – a deeply religious theme. Their most popular line is the finest quality silicon Jackhammer Jesus ("Jesus was a carpenter; he is now a power tool." says the blurb). The company also sells a "Baby Jesus butt-plug" (just don't ask!); a "Diving Nun"; and "Moses", who is designed to "part the pink sea".

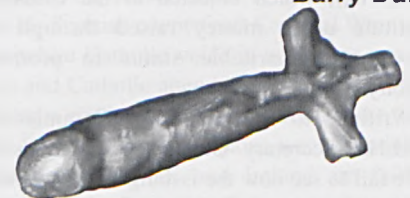


Black Jesus – also comes in white for Ku Klux Klan kiddies.

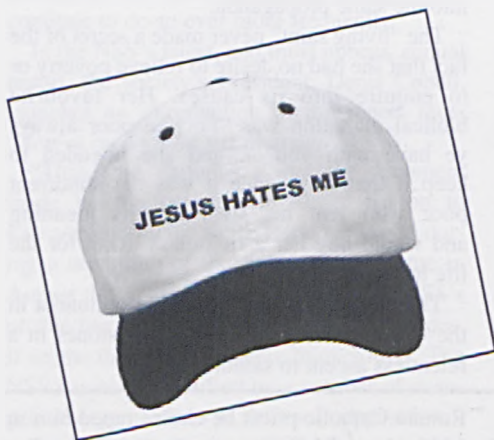
"What did people of the Bible look like? Scholars have debated this question for centuries, and opinions vary widely. Our purpose in creating Biblical Action Figures," says www.trainupachild.com, "is to help children identify with the Bible characters represented, and to inspire children to learn the teachings of the Bible". The company offers ten biblical figures (\$6.95 each or £59.50) for the entire tribe. But there's a curious – some would say very clever – twist to the offer. Each figure comes with either a light skin or dark – it's your call. Clearly an attempt to cover all bases, and a wonderful example of how black can be white and white black in the infinitely devious world of the religious. (Hunky Adam, by the way, is bare-chested, while Eve is covered with a curious, green Jean Paul Gaultieresque creation which has you staring hard at her boobs – something I really don't think was intended.

Finally to www.jesus.com for an antidote to all this tosh. Here we find a no-nonsense range of T-shirts, and baseball caps bearing the words "I hate Jesus" or "Jesus Hates Me." And a licence plate holder (\$14.99) says: "Honk if you Hate Jesus". It's at times like this that I really miss having a car.

– Barry Duke



No, not a model of a V2 rocket but the "Jackhammer Jesus" from Divine Interventions, \$60. Companion pieces include the "Diving Nun" and the "Baby Jesus butt-plug".



Baseball cap from Jesus.com, \$14.99.



"I'll be Back" T-shirt by Toxic from Into You, St John Street, London EC2 - £17.00



"Jesus is Coming" fridge magnet, £2.99. The same company produces one which declares: "Christians aren't perfect – they just want you to be!" Bought from Pyramid, Kensington Gardens, Brighton.

Biblically wrong

WHEN a friend sent me a cutting from the *Stornoway Gazette*, I expected it to be a contribution on the Sabbath air service problem which has been engaging the islanders of Lewis recently. Instead it dealt with the possibility that the Church of Scotland, the "National Kirk" might take the unprecedented step of appointing a female Moderator.

Iain D Campbell, writer of the piece in question, has no doubt that it would be a "wrong" decision. It might in that absurd phrase be "politically correct", "ecclesiastically expedient" and even generally welcomed, yet "wrong" nevertheless, biblically wrong. But nothing that the national Kirk did would surprise Mr Campbell, who lists a few of its previous transgressions: it has abandoned the creationism of Genesis: "the perpetual nature of the Ten Commandments"; and the virgin birth. So why should it heed Paul's fulminations against women in office?

According to Mr Campbell, when the Kirk comes to decide the matter, all the wrong questions will be asked: her record as a minister, her grasp of ecclesiastical affairs, her acceptability to the Kirk as a whole, and other things that reasonable people would regard as important in the post. The basic question, as he sees it, is whether the Bible sanctions the position that women may hold office in the Church. And only in a "massive reinterpretation or rejection of the Christian Scriptures can such a position be advocated". Indeed the Bible is against a woman being ordained, "far less being appointed Moderator".

A picture of Mr Campbell at the top of his column shows him in front of his computer. I had expected to see a quill pen in his hand.

Shared objection

THE cancellation of the Miss World contest in Nigeria after riots had left hundreds dead and thousands homeless, brought two opposing groups in agreement. As the broadcaster Joan Bakewell remarked, the feminist argument about exploitation of the female body was shared by the Muslim fundamentalists in Nigeria. It seems, though, that the violence really erupted when a young woman feature writer on the Lagos newspaper *This Day* made the outrageous suggestion that if the prophet Mohammed were alive today he would probably have chosen a wife from among the Miss World candidates. Muslim fundamentalists don't find such flippancy amusing: *This Day's* offices were burnt down and the offending journalist, Isioma Daniel, had to flee to America to escape a *fatwa* imposed by the Islamic state.

The paper's founder and editor in chief apologised, of course, and quoted tellingly on its

website from the Koran: "Whoever forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is with Allah". Whether that will lead to the withdrawal of the *fatwa* remains to be seen. For the present Miss Daniel would be wise to remain in the US.

Unreliable report

THE *News of the World* excelled itself with its report of the death of Myra Hindley. "Exclusive" it shouted, "Monstrous Myra Hindley went to hell this weekend with four searing words: 'I want my mother'". When asked by Rod Liddle how they knew her destination (*Guardian*, November 19, 2002), the *NoW* newsdesk said it wasn't to be taken literally, but if hell exists that would surely be where she was.

Further investigation by another *Guardian* journalist revealed that the "four searing words" weren't to be taken literally either. The *NoW* reporters claimed to have got the information from Fr Michael Teader, who administered the last rites. The snag is that the priest insisted that, not only did Myra Hindley not say any such thing, but that he himself had refused to speak to the *News of the World*. This is one deathbed story where I am prepared to take the word of a priest,

Modified stance

IN his little book *Stupid White Men* (Penguin £7.99), Michael Moore reveals that, in July 2001, Nancy Reagan sent two of her husband's henchmen to Washington DC with a private message to George W Bush and the Republican party leadership on the subject of stem cell research. The anti-abortionists, who included the Reagans and the Bushes firmly opposed embryonic research on religious grounds, regardless of its possibilities for treating diseases like Alzheimer's, from which Ronald Reagan was suffering.

Seeing the pitiful state of her husband, Nancy had apparently modified her anti-abortion stance over the past few years and was—in Moore's words—"coming out for the first time and saying, no, an embryo is *not* a human being", after all. Within days Bush's principles were disappearing, too. Perhaps there was nothing wrong with "certain" stem cell research.

Jesus the motorist

NOBODY in their right sense would approach an ethical problem with the thought "What would Jesus do?" although that's exactly what a moral education campaign in American schools advocates. But the slogan has been adapted to challenge America's—and to some extent our—love affair with the Sports Utility Vehicle or SUV by asking

"What would Jesus drive?"

Letters of protest about the "gas-guzzling" monsters have been delivered to the executives of Ford and General Motors by nuns from Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary; and Paul Gorman of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment declared "We are under commandment to be faithful stewards of God's creation. The letter asks companies and drivers to consider what 'the risen lord Jesus' would like them to drive" (*The Observer*, November 24, 2002). And Baptist minister the Rev Jim Ball explained: "We think Jesus is Lord of our transportation choices as well as our other choices".

But one company official responded (unattributably mind you): "If Jesus had been environmentally conscious, he would have driven a people mover, so that all his apostles could have travelled with him in one vehicle, instead of at least three".

Unfinished journey

SALMAN Rushdie's Booker prize-winning novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981) tells the story of Saleem Sinai, born on the stroke of midnight on the day that India was granted independence. His latest non-fiction book, *Step Across This Line* (Jonathan Cape, £20) deals with the disastrous partition of India, which "cut his family in half".

One of Rushdie's aunts, living in Pakistan at the time, was a close friend of the famous Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-84), the first great writer Rushdie ever met, who was also a communist and "outspoken unbeliever", dangerous things to be "in the days following the birth of the Muslim state, even for a much-loved poet". On one occasion Rushdie's aunt saved Faiz from an angry mob by hiding him in a cellar reached by a trapdoor; but, another time in the 1950s, he was obliged to spend four years in Pakistani jails which, as you might guess, "are not the most comfortable prisons in the world".

In his poem, *The Morning of Freedom*, written at the time of partition, Faiz begins: "The stained light, this night-bitten dawn / This is not the dawn we yearned for" and ends with the exhortation: "Continue your arduous journey. / Press on, the destination is still far away". Sadly, he was right.

Morality without God

IN his obituary of the political philosopher John Rawls, Ben Rogers says that when he set out to write a profile in the mid-1990s, Rawls's friends said that, "although not a believer", he "had retained an essential religious outlook" (*Guardian*, November 27, 2002).

Presumably they meant that he was a "good" man.

In conversat long-dead D

As if things weren't bad enough in the grim period that was my youth in the Netherlands during WW2 and in its aftermath, I had the dubious honour of counting amongst my extended family a Roman Catholic priest. He was my father's younger brother, and as was the custom of the time, he was held in almost godlike esteem. We were told to call him "Heerroom" (Sir-uncle) but thinking that this was his proper name we used to call him "Oom Heerroom" (Uncle Sir-uncle) – surely an example of Double Dutch.

My father referred to him as "Heerbroer" (Sir-brother). Because he had "studied" and was one of God's representatives on earth, my father and the other aunts and uncles treated him with great deference. Aware of his exalted status, Heerroom, at family gatherings, used to hold forth on matters moral and theological. In his company we children were allowed to be seen and not heard. Heerroom did not live to a ripe old age. Rich food and drink plus good cigars took a heavy toll. He died at 62, an age I have just attained myself. It has always been a regret that I was never able to "have it out" with him. To have a heart-to-heart to find out what really went on above and below that pristine collar. Heerroom manned the pulpit in an era when religion in the Netherlands was still dominant and brooked no challenge. Now that the winds of change have blown to the farthest reaches of the land and have cleared a path to rationalism, it is tempting to imagine a retrospective dialogue with Heerroom:

Tony: In days of yore you strutted around the village like an ayatollah on heat, and we weren't allowed a word in edgeways; do you think we can now have an adult chat on equal footing?

Heerroom: Of course, times have changed and we priests are past-masters of the art of moving

the goal posts. We move with the times so as not to lose the flock. In the old days there was less need for that, thanks to the church's rock solid position – we were comfortable with dogma. You would have to have been superhuman not to have taken advantage. In those days people were kept in line through fear and ignorance. Nowadays my successors must use popularity and gimmicks to achieve the same result. But even modern marketing methods are hard put to keep the punters sweet.

Tony: To turn the clock back a bit: what made you choose the priesthood?

Heerroom: There were a number of reasons: in large Roman Catholic families it was tradition for one of the younger sons to be put up for the priesthood. So you might say that my parents had the vocation. On top of that, from an early age, I was the sort of person who likes the sound of his own voice, relishes status and, last but not least, personal comforts. I also felt unsure about my sexuality, and the company of men felt attractive.

Tony: I don't hear anything about serving the Lord.

Heerroom: Oh, that one. To be honest that bit was a secondary consideration. A handy cover for the real motivation. Fortunately it always worked a treat. For example, I have known several chaps who turned missionary in order to lay their hands on cute brown boys in darkest Africa, but because it was done under the guise of saving souls, nobody twigged. That was in the days when paedophilia was just a twinkle in the Pope's eye. Nowadays people have rumbled that particular gravy train, hence the drop in vocations.

Tony: I appreciate that you are now telling it like it is. Pity that you didn't do it earlier. That would have saved my father quite a package. Do you remember that once, out of his hard-earned money, he bought you a gold-plated chalice?

Heerroom: Yes, your father was my greatest fan. It was pitiful the pride he took in me. He was very disappointed that you declined to follow in my footsteps. I do have a few qualms about that chalice but he took great delight in making the sac-

rifice and no doubt thought it would stand him in good stead at the pearly gates. By the way, why didn't you want to join the priesthood?

Tony: Although my parents tried very hard, it was always a non-starter. I am a natural-born sceptic. From an early age I have always asked "Where is the evidence?" before taking things on board. In your case it seems clear that your lifestyle and attendant status formed your chief motivation, but what exactly was your stance towards religion?

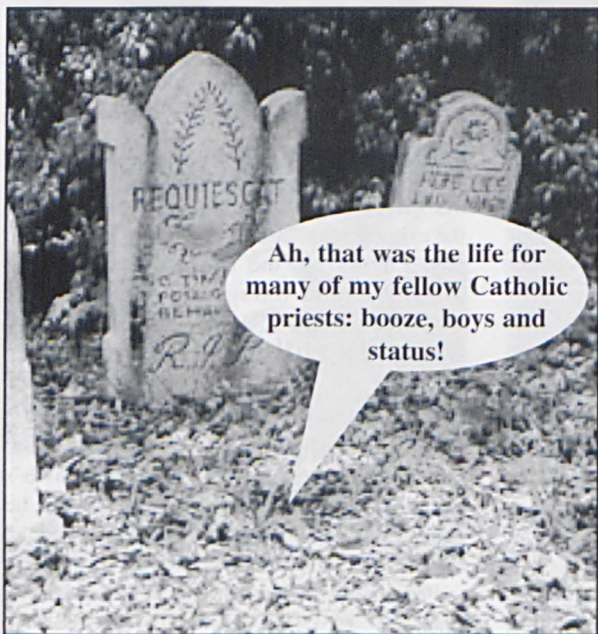
**Shropshire-based
atheist TONY
AKKERMANS picks
a bone or two with
his long-dead uncle
– a Catholic priest in
the Netherlands.**

Heerroom: Similar to that of most of my colleagues. I found the romanticism attractive but also saw religion as a vehicle towards the acquisition of status. Priests, in my view, may be roughly divided into three categories.

1) The less bright credulous who have had religion and priestly vocation spoon-fed from the cradle and who have had no option but to swallow. They go through life sacrificial and duty-bound. They genuinely do their best to make sense of a confusing doctrine, try to lead good lives and help others. They agonise over their sexuality and are trusting enough to think that all other priests are suffering alongside in good faith.

2) The smart manipulators, in the style of American televangelists, who selfishly seek to extract the maximum in personal benefit from their privileged position; their so-called faith is the smoke screen that makes it all possible.

3) The ostriches: a mixture of categories 1 and 2. Men who appreciate a pleasant lifestyle, wish to do some good in society but who prefer, when it comes to the tenets of their religion, the existence of God and the hereafter, to bury their heads in the sand for fear that intelligent reflection might undo their cosy make-



tion with my Dutch uncle

believe. I imagine that most of us can be found in this last category, including myself.

Tony: Not a strong launching pad, wouldn't you agree, for leading the flock heavenwards.

Heerom: No, but fortunately the flock was not very well informed. A bishop once remarked to industrial magnate Frits Philips "I will keep them dim so you can keep them poor". These days, in the Western world, it is becoming almost impossible to join the priesthood without negative repercussions. Respect and deference are hard to come by. All your actions are scrutinised. Secrecy and hypocrisy no longer protect. The papers are bulging with scandals.

Tony: According to revelations in Ireland and America, the priestly cassocks are bulging too. Is it not time that your successors were released from obligatory celibacy?

Heerom: This celibacy business is much overrated. Haven't you read *Clochemerle*? For a lot of priests the sap rises but slowly, many are homosexual and the heteros usually manage to find a discreet outlet amongst understanding parishioners.

Tony: Just as well my dear departed mother doesn't have to hear that. You used to honour us with the occasional visit and my poor mother would get into a dreadful state with worry about her level of hospitality. Father appeared in his Sunday best and we children were sometimes allowed around the table to form a respectful audience. This was the philosophy

hour, Ian Paisley style. I remember that you proved the existence of God because everything had to have a cause and God was the first cause. You also explained the role of Jesus and his virgin birth. The detail escapes me now, I never was good at remembering contortions. Your discourses were received with silent admiration. Now that you must know that none of your "proofs" have stood the test of time, how do you feel about the existence of God and the conundrum of God being simultaneously all good, all knowing, all powerful, alongside the existence of evil?

Heerom: Well, it was so easy then. There were very few lateral thinkers and people accepted the first superficial explanation that came along. Few people had enjoyed a proper education and philosophical problems were left to the specialists and that was us, or so people thought. Because we were not under any pressure we did not give such difficulties much thought either. Why give yourself a headache on top of the discomfort that might come with the excessive drink and cigar in prospect?

Tony: You haven't answered my question about almighty God and the existence of evil.

Heerom: Why would I change the habit of a lifetime? You atheists had better get used to the idea that there are certain questions we tend to skirt around.

Tony: Talking about skirts; what are your views on the current Pope?

Heerom: In my time I had mostly to do with Pius XII, the Nazi pope. Fortunately I always managed to keep the fascistic side of the Catholic faith from your parents because they had a hearty dislike of Hitler.

John Paul clearly has a problem with women. As far as he is concerned the only thing they are good for is to function as plant pots for germinating seeds. Earlier on I didn't have much time for women either. You probably remember that you used to be my altar boy when at a side altar, after hours, women who had given birth crept in to be "churched". I remember looking down on them with great disdain. In my final years when I shared a bed with my housekeeper I looked down on her from a different perspective.

Tony: If you could have your time over, would you be a priest again?

Heerom: No, definitely not. Many advantages we then had can now be enjoyed outside of the priesthood. Nor do I think that I would have died at 62 from throat cancer.

Tony: According to the British cardinal Basil Hume, one's whole life is a preparation for the hereafter. Where are you now?

Heerom: Cardinal Hume will now know, as I do, that he has sacrificed the whole of his precious life to backing a chimera. Like putting all your money on a single horse only to see it stumble at the last. I am nowhere. In other words I am where I was before I existed and I must say that it doesn't really surprise me. What human being, even if semi-rational, could seriously believe that it is possible to carry on in a different place, minus body and brain, as if nothing had happened?

By the way, I have to disappoint you. This discussion only took place in your brain. My brain, along with the rest of my body and soul (couldn't resist that last bit) is lying here, keeping the grass greener on the other side.

Mr Mapp's
Freethinker
collection
finds a home
in Salford

I SUSPECT, writes Ian Andrews, that Thomas Mapp would have been most surprised if he had been told that one day there would be an article about him in the *Freethinker*. Mapp was born in Warrington, where he lived through the depression of the 1930s and became an atheist, subscribing to the *Freethinker*.

By chance, his copies of the *Freethinker* from March 1939 through to March 1940 were put to one side and kept. Kept, that is, until Thomas's son Geoff found them a few months ago whilst clearing his parents' home.

Geoff contacted the Executive Director of the National Secular Society – Keith Porteous Wood – to inquire if the NSS knew of anyone who would wish to receive this collection of *Freethinkers* for reference purposes.

Keith then asked the members of the NSS Council, and they expressed the view that,

ideally, these *Freethinkers* should be lodged in a library near where Mr Mapp had lived – the obvious choice being the Working Class Movement Library in Salford.

As a result the library was contacted and Geoff Mapp asked if this arrangement was acceptable. And so those *Freethinkers*, bought by Thomas Mapp in the opening months of the Second World War, have now travelled from Warrington to a new home in Salford.

But what of Thomas Mapp the man? Born in 1916, he had an enquiring mind that was probably the catalyst for his becoming interested in politics during his teenage years. He joined the Young Socialists and the Co-operative Movement, where he met his future wife Edna. He was an individual who would always

(Continued on page 13)

AS rationalists and humanists we are committed to evolution, but it would appear that the commitment is not reciprocated. Evolution does not care all that much about rationality or logic. For the bulk of the population to survive and reproduce, a modest amount of reasoning power seems to be adequate. So for those of us who are sensitive to offences against rational argument and scientific method, it is perhaps necessary to curb our irritation and our expectations that other people will understand what we are concerned about.

Every human being is different, and we are not all equipped with the same senses and abilities. For example, one in four men and also some women, have some degree of colour-blindness. Quite a lot of people are tone-deaf, ie they do not hear any difference between the melodies of Happy Birthday and Auld Lang Syne, whereas others have perfect pitch. Clearly, our brains are all wired up differently. People who are tone-deaf or colour-blind, or without any sense of taste, can still lead rich and rewarding lives. There is so much in life to be experienced that no one person can explore it all anyway, so there's no need to feel that such people are seriously disadvantaged.

Nevertheless, these large differences in our capacities and abilities can lead to misunderstandings. People usually do not tell us, immediately we meet them, that they are, for instance, tone-deaf. So if we start to babble on about a superb performance of a Mozart flute concerto we heard last night, the tone-deaf person might say politely, "Oh, that's nice", leaving us to think that they are just not especially interested in music. But sometimes the situation is more serious and persistent faking can go on.

One rather clever young academic I knew, who was tone-deaf, was of the opinion that all this talk about the beauty of certain musical compositions and of the bliss experienced when listening to certain performances was just pretence, that indeed all so-called "music" was just meaningless noise. But if you belonged to a certain class, he reasoned, you knew you were supposed to revere Mozart, and so on. He thought he was above all that. That he could see through the sham and the posing. To such an extent that he seduced a professional musician into living with him, made her sell her piano and all her printed music, and bullied her, by means of black eyes and endless harangues, into giving up music. She escaped, with extreme difficulty and a lot of help from her friends, after five years, and took up her career again. When someone begins to suspect that they may be missing out on experiences that most of the rest of humanity take for granted, they can become vicious. Others of us accept our disabilities gracefully. It was surprising how many people in the circle of friends and acquaintances turned out to be deaf

to the charms of classical music, and took the man's side.

So what has this to do with evolution and rationalism?

It is my experience that not many people are sensitive to faulty logic. They think that people just have different opinions, and one opinion is as good as another. If all the big boys are plugging creationism, then one had better plump for that. For each one of us who finds the physical and life sciences fascinating, there are hundreds, or thousands, who cannot understand the attraction. They do not see what there is to be excited about. They are totally science-proof. They are often, however, thrilled by the

To most people, 'we rationalists are dreadfully unglamorous', says Rasjidah St John

idea of an omnipotent being who, by definition, can do anything he wants to do. That has glamour, apparently. To most people, we rationalists are dreadfully unglamorous.

Many people cannot read maps. Even drivers and bus conductors. Many people are innumerate. Especially radio and TV journalists. Some of them take pride in this disability. They think it is cute. "I'm very good with words, so of course I'm no good with numbers." This is another common example of poor thinking: the "either/or" fallacy. Journalist: "Well, what do you feel you really are then? English or Jamaican?" Madam, has it never occurred to you that one can be both? Many people *are* both, whatever you have bamboozled them into thinking.

So, if so many people cannot follow a logical argument, what is to be done? It is no use being angry with them, any more than it is any good being angry with someone who is tone-deaf. But if they start faking it, we can protest. Someone who is blind can lead a very full life – a richer life than many sighted people. But we are all in trouble if he insists that he can see perfectly well, or alternatively if he insists that none of us can see, that we are all only pretending, as he is.

People with no interest in logic do not feel themselves to be handicapped. As they perceive it, it is the rationalists who are making a lot of fuss about nothing. Splitting hairs.

This does not mean that it is hopeless to try and persuade people that, eg the theory of evolution is the best explanation that we have so far been able to arrive at. And, like every other theory, it is open to modifications by future researchers. Whereas creationism is simply a story, a myth, with no evidence to support it. We do have to try to find ways of getting the truth across. Perhaps, we need to demonstrate to the logic-blind that there is something here which they are not equipped to deal with. The god

botherers will, of course, retort that *we* are lacking in the sensitivity that permits *them* to be aware of God. I would reply to this, that some of the experiences they talk about are real, but they are part of the ordinary life of humans and animals, and there is no reason to believe that they come from a god. These experiences are not supernatural. Our brains and our nervous systems are stunningly complex and a great deal is yet to be figured out about how they work. But we are making progress.

When I am in front of someone who is depressed, I wilt, even if I haven't been told she's depressed. Some doctors feel in their own bodies the disease of the patient as he comes into the clinic. When I go into a room full of happy people, I am likely to find my own mood lifted. The giggles are very catching – as every actor knows. So is yawning. Researchers as well as ordinary folk have observed similar reactions in animals. Such awareness is no doubt useful for survival, and is passed on through the genes. Not to every human being, nor to every animal. Again, like being able to hear a tune, it is not universal. But also not uncommon. Normal.

When he was young, the philosopher A J Ayer did not believe that telepathy happened. He thought people were kidding themselves. Later in life, he told me that though he had never experienced telepathy himself, so many friends, people that he knew were not fantasists, had told him they had had telepathic experiences, that he had come to accept its existence. When I told this to a researcher, she laughed and said, "Yes, she had heard that. But Ayer was a very good ball-room dancer, he loved it. And one could not be a good ball-room dancer without having fluent telepathic responses." That's true. Dancing well with a partner is not a matter of simply going through the steps mechanically. I have experienced the Toronto Blessing. It is up uplifting. I found it a real shot in the arm. I am sure it does not work for everyone. But I did not need to believe in God in order to enjoy it. There is no puzzle here. The Toronto Blessing works in the same way as laughter, or despair, or anger, or panic. Human moods, states of mind, good and bad, are infectious. Many religious leaders and gurus give out pleasant, soothing or uplifting vibrations which followers find irresistible. One woman said of such a teacher, "Oh, I know he's a fraud, but I love him." Some people speak of feeling such hypnotic powers in Hitler's presence. Others found him repulsive. This is as real as giggling. It is not imagination.

In a recent humanist publication, a philosopher called for more education in logic and the meaning of scientific method. This might achieve something, but if the logic wiring is not in place, the student may just have to learn how to fake it.

NOW that the various and curious wintertime pagan-derived festivals are over and the level of religious humbuggery begins to fall back from the hysterical to the merely indecent, it's perhaps time to sharpen the knives of the critical faculties once again.

The name of Ted Honderich will be familiar to many rationalists both through his books and his appearances (not frequent enough, sad to say) in the media. A Honderich at full power is an awesome spectacle. I've had the pleasure of listening to several radio debates in which he has participated, and I certainly would not like to be on the receiving end of his withering and icy logic. He has a home page at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/> that's well worth a visit. As well as various essays and papers there are single chapters from some of his books, and a selection of interesting links. It also has a photograph of the good professor apparently supporting a Venetian palace on his shoulders. Most odd.

Another philosophical website worth a look is that dedicated to the work of Isaiah Berlin. It's at <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/index.html> Berlin's reputation as an original thinker has declined a little since his death, but as a historian of ideas his work is both rich and accessible and his writings on plurality, the importance of individual freedom, and the problems of reconciling incompatible ends seem ever more relevant in the face of the madness of dogmatic fundamentalism (in whatever form this may appear).

That's enough philosophical fun. How about a bit of religion instead? It has been amusingly pointed out by the late Carl Sagan and others that if one divides the number of "miraculous" cures that occur at Lourdes by the number of those who visit, one obtains the interesting statistic that a visit to that remarkable tinsel temple is less likely to result in a cure than would be obtained by simply staying at home. Cor, who'd have thought it? And a quick look at the shrine's own statistics of cures shows that the number seems to decline precisely as the science of medical diagnosis improves. Very odd. Still, the relevant page of the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09389b.htm>, explains these mysteries fully enough to be accepted by anyone in recent receipt of a lobotomy.

The official site of the shrine itself is at <http://www.lourdes-france.com.bonjour.htm> and is terribly amusing. Perhaps it would make a good destination for a rationalists charabanc outing ... And don't miss the LourdesDirect site for all your miraculous merchandise. Just click on <http://www.lourdesdirect.com/> to be engulfed by a tide of tastefulness.

Not quite sated with religion yet? Then I recommend a visit to the site of

JournalismNet. It's an accessible search and links site with a news slant.

The links on its page at <http://www.journalismnet.com/beats/religion.htm> will connect you to a whole world of religion. Try some of the links and marvel as the lumbering leviathans of the various religious bureaucracies attempt to waddle into the 21st century guided only by two-thousand-year-old maps. Hilariously depressing.

NORMAN PRIDMORE surfs the net for sites of interest to freethinkers

Still more? OK. The excellent crime writer Ian Rankin was exploring on TV last month some ideas of evil: what it is, where it comes from – that kind of thing. One scene showed him visiting an exorcist. This tubby, dewlapped hangdog comedian, gifted with a sub-Marty Feldman stare that unaccountably impressed Rankin, really believed in demons and all that bloated medieval hogwash. And he's not alone. Take a look at <http://www.logoschristian.org/demon.html> It's full of helpful advice. For example (I quote) "If you are being attacked in a dream or in person by a demon, devil, incubus, succubus, Satan, unclean spirit, unclean bird or alien, immediately cry out the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and bleed the Blood of the Lamb of God. If you have the mind, say the following: "The Lord Jesus Christ rebuke you.

The Lord Adonai rebuke you. I declare the Blood of the Lamb, the shed Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that you leave. In the Name of Jesus be gone."

Repeat until it leaves. It will leave." I propose to try this with all doorstep evangelists. In fact I'm thinking of having the quote printed on visiting cards in case I'm approached in the street by some conversion maniac. Handing that to them with a suitably wild-eyed expression should do the job. Good to know it works on aliens, too.

My recent search for sites on "radical atheism" was mildly disappointing. I did come across one small gem, though, in the form of "Eyal's Radical Corner". Eyal is a young secular Israeli with some strong anti-establishment ideas, central to which is his atheism.

It's at <http://www.carendil.ath.cx/radical/index.html>, and is passionate, political, and a bit of a voice in the wilderness.

Now a plea. A reader has pointed out something of an imbalance in many of the sites mentioned in Webwatch. For example, very few are by or about women. It's a reasonable point. There's not much, either, in the way of material from outside Europe and the USA, despite my best efforts. It just goes to show that Jesus's ridiculous assertion "Seek and ye shall find" is just another bit of biblical claptrap. Any readers aware of sites that might correct this imbalance might like to send the URLs to norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk Thanks, in advance.

"THE earth is flat. Whoever claims it is round is an atheist deserving of punishment."

– Sheik Abdel-Aziz ibn Baaz, Supreme Religious Authority Of Saudi Arabia, 1993 (quoted by Yousef M Ibrahim, *The New York Times*, February 12, 1995.

"WE all know that those who instigate those doubts are the enemies of God, the enemies of religion and the enemies of all humanity. Their hearts are full of hatred."

– Abdullah bin Mohammad al-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia Justice Minister, commenting on Amnesty International's criticism of his country's human rights record, May 9, 2000

"The rule of the Taliban was in agreement with Islam ... They didn't beat women who covered their faces. If there was a bit of ankle showing, yes, they beat them. If they went out without their brother or their mother they would also be beaten but that's reasonable. It was the Taliban's job. They were within their rights. ... It's a sin. It's a sin for them to show their faces and it's a sin for me to look at them."

– Qari Edi Mohamed Muezzin at Kabul's Central Mosque, the *Guardian*, November 16, 2001

JUST like what Nazi Germany did to the Jews, so liberal America is now doing to the evangelical Christians ... It's no different. It is the same thing. It is happening all over again. It is the Democratic Congress, the liberal-based media and the homosexuals who want to destroy the Christians. Wholesale abuse and discrimination and the worst bigotry directed toward any group in America today. More terrible than anything suffered by any minority in history.

– Televangelist Pat Robertson



THE year 2001 was notable for British science. Sir Paul Nurse, Director of what was then the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, and his colleague Tim Hunt, shared the Nobel prize for physiology and medicine with the American cancer researcher in Seattle, Leland Hartwell. And on the day Paul Nurse won the prize, Tim Radford reminded him of the irony of the situation. Nine years earlier Nurse had predicted that British scientists would not be winning many Nobel prizes in the future because of the Conservative government's attitude to pure research. Government and attitude may have changed, says Radford, but the warning remains as important as ever. "They thought it could be run by big business and they pushed it hard in that direction, in ways that were counter-productive", Sir Paul had said. "Indeed, we have to carry out research in the real world and that is absolutely right, but you don't do it, in my view, by not paying people enough, by letting the laboratories decay, by turning the universities into a disgrace".

This book, a series of essays by scientists and others on their various disciplines, has a foreword by another British Nobel prizewinner, Sir John Sulston, marking the start of "Science Year" 2001, celebrating "the excitement and achievements of science ... the joy of discovery and the curiosity that ensures that the answer to every question leads directly to more questions".

But Sir John also issues a warning with a commercial content. We are living through what he calls biology's "Klondike period—the gene rush"; and gene collectors are travelling the globe, plundering the heritage of local communities for specimens, then trying "to sell them back with nominal improvements to their original users". Like all genuine scientists, Sir John Sulston wants to keep as much knowledge as possible in the public domain, and humanity will forever be indebted to him for his defence of the international Human Genome Project against American efforts to carve it up and turn it into a multi-billion-dollar business.

In *Frontiers*, Tim Hubbard takes up the theme of the human genome: "a complete set of instructions describing how to make a human". Research is going on in thousands of laboratories worldwide with results that must be integrated into a system and organised in databases, he says. "Understanding the human machine has now become a project that involves all biologists, all over the world". (How Julien Offroy de La Mettrie would have smiled with satisfaction to hear that).

Not all the work of pioneering geneticists strikes one as desirable or even necessary, especially if we extend ethics into the rest of the animal world as we surely should; and in one of his news items, Tim Radford reports that a team at the Oregon Health Sciences

University in the US had bred a rhesus monkey which carried a gene that coded for green fluorescent protein isolated from a jelly fish. Transgenic mice are now regarded as "routine laboratory tools", and there have been transgenic pigs, sheep and cattle, but the rhesus monkey ANDi (backwards for inserted DNA) is the first transgenic primate and is said to represent "a step on the way to understanding human illnesses".

Cancer is, of course, the most feared of human illnesses, and Mike Stratton, who leads the

COLIN McCALL reviews
***FRONTIERS 01: Science and Technology, 2001-2002*. Edited by Tim Radford. Atlantic Books, £10.99; and NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews** ***The Autobiography of God as told to William Harwood*. Pub Xlibris 2002 ISBN 1-4010-5666-0**

Cancer Genome Project at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute at Cambridge and was responsible for discovering one of the two genes known to predispose women to breast cancer, would be surprised if, in 20 years' time, "there had not been a very substantial improvement in cancer treatment". Much of this, he predicts, will be based on the human genome sequence.

In a piece of particular topicality as well as permanent concern, Ben Wisner calls for action at national and local, not to say international level, to save lives in earthquakes. There were two catastrophic earthquakes in 2001, in El Salvador and India, the latter the country's worst in 50 years. Alas, even in India's large cities, Wisner notes, only one in ten structures is built according to the country's seismic code. Earthquakes will always occur and social action is urgently needed to protect lives.

Duncan Steel, a physicist at the University of Salford, tells us there were major advances in our understanding of asteroids and comets in 2001, but that "a whole new era is dawning" with several space probes to comets and other small solar system bodies: "the astronomy closest to home"; while the Astronomer Royal, Sir Martin Rees looks at the wider picture: the universe and, indeed, possible parallel universes, for our Big Bang may not have been the only one. He points out, too, that "if the recipe imprinted at the time of the Big Bang had been even slightly different, we could not exist. Many recipes would lead to stillborn universes with no atoms, no chemistry, and no planets; or to universes too short-lived or too empty to

allow anything to evolve beyond sterile uniformity". At present that is speculation but, in the course of time, other universes may become "part of scientific discourse, just as 'other worlds' have been for centuries".

Physicists must concede to the philosophers "any understanding of why anything exists, of why there is a universe (or multiverse) rather than nothing". Sir Martin concludes. Which is another way of saying the question cannot be answered: it is meaningless, although that may not prevent philosophers (and theologians) arguing about it.

There is a great deal more of enthralling interest in *Frontiers 01*. On dendrochronology (tree-ring chronology) for instance; and on magnetic resonance imaging, which enables doctors to detect and diagnose abnormalities in the brain. And University College, London neuropsychologist Professor Brian Butterworth recounts the case of a man who, although deprived of language through brain damage, could still read numbers. Amnesics do not forget everything. The man in question, an inveterate gambler on the horses, could no longer do so because horses have names which he couldn't say, so he turned to the dogs, where punters back on a greyhound's number in the race. That presented no problem for him.

I can think of no better place for glimpsing the glory of modern science than in this most attractively produced paperback.

Colin McCall.

IF BOOKS were beasts, this odd, hybrid volume would count among the stranger ones, up there with such wonders as the platypus and the golden mole. Why? Well, this animal runs on three legs. The first leg is that of postmodernism, a compound of such devices as multiple points of view and unreliable narration. The second is an intriguing mixture of history, theology and anthropology. The third is science-fiction, which provides an imaginative and curious background as well as much of the book's narrative energy.

Given its strange method of locomotion it covers a surprising amount of ground, and does so remarkably fleetly. It will offend and annoy all religionists and, I suspect, a good number of humanists too. It is clever, tricky, learned, frequently foul-mouthed (mainly down to Yahweh), and very full of ideas — many of which are (to say the least) highly controversial.

The book's author, William Harwood PhD, M.Litt. (Cambridge) was born in Australia. This may or may not be significant. He himself calls Australia "the world's largest culturally deprived environment", a place where "people... live in constant terror that some day, somewhere, someone might actually do something". He spent time

as a research student at Cambridge, during which period he discovered that England is "the world's largest insane asylum". He now lives in "what is politely called Canada's Bible Belt.... more accurately described as the redneck anus of the universe...".

There is in the book a photograph of the author with his grandchildren. I'm not sure whether his expression is irritable and peevish or phlegmatically remote. It could be both, I suppose: the photograph is somewhat blurry.

Harwood is the author of some highly regarded science fiction, a number of historical and more conventional novels, and various scholarly translations and histories. He is perhaps best known for his book *Mythology's Last Gods*, of which Bernard Katz wrote in the *American Rationalist* that it "demonstrates that the Judaeo-Christian Bible is full of errors of fact, bum guesses, prophecies *ex post-facto*, excuses, and deliberate lies. The blurb says 'It is the first book to critically analyse and take issue with, every section of the Judaeo-Christian Bible from a wholly skeptical, utterly scholarly perspective'. I agree."

The Autobiography of God is told through three voices, those of Hughie, Yahweh, and Pan. Hughie begins the book with a bang:

"I am Hughie; hear me roar,
a god like none you've met before."

Unlike any previous god, Hughie is sane and not evil. He is, he tells us, "intelligent, just, consistent, and morally evolved". Unlike all previous gods he is not "capricious, partisan, morally retarded, susceptible to flattery, afflicted with the human psychoses of jealousy and revenge-lust ...or ... scientifically illiterate ..."

Hughie has only one minor imperfection, he tells us: "I probably do not exist." Except, perhaps, as the voice closest to that of the author ...

Yahweh speaks next. He is the god of the religionists and is, frankly, barking. Harwood has used his vast knowledge of "holy" texts to put together a character who is both shocking and grimly plausible. There is nothing this god does, and no element of his personality, that does not derive from some identifiable religion-sanctioned source. He's a shape-shifting, devious, power-crazed, worship-addicted, psychopathic opportunist. And that's being *generous*!

Pan is Yahweh's brother. Logician, historian, rationalist, ironist, and pitier of humans, Pan is the figure that Christian mythology insists is Satan. Harwood is, in this respect, and like Milton and Blake before him, somewhat of the Devil's party. It's a novel and productive characterisation that, like the portrait of Yahweh, derives from considerable scholarship. Unconventional, yes – but well-founded.

The three voices speak in strict turn, each having a short chapter to itself. This avoids the tedium of the formal dialogue (which is always

best suited to shorter forms) but does allow a flow of argument, as when one of the gods wishes to comment upon something said or done by another. It's not an easy device to carry off effectively, the main dangers being those of the voices being insufficiently distinct in tone from one another, and of too much material being repeated. Harwood manages the difficulties pretty well and there are few *longuers* despite the book's length and its inevitably rather cerebral nature.

So what's it all about, then? Harwood's purpose is clearly didactic. The book is an attempt to convey to the reader a great deal of knowledge and opinion in as sprightly a way as possible. He is concerned to demolish all conventional religious notions of God, and offers much in the way of 'orrible 'istory (derived – where else? – from holy books) to support this demolition. Not only ancient history, either. By the end Harwood has navigated his craft right into the turbulent waters of the present, commenting on drugs, genes, population economics, sexuality and more.

He is concerned to demolish all those moralities that are god-dependent or god-derived. If this sounds Nietzschean, rest assured – it is. But it's not all destruction. He propounds ideas of his own that are at the very least startling. Harwood is a moralist and an extreme pragmatist, and about as tough-minded as they come. The point of demolishing gods and of sweeping away the rubble so comprehensively is not only because belief in gods is stupid, but because if the "old ideas" remain they will taint and distort any chance of working out a truly rational ethics based upon real human needs and behaviours. Harwood's ultimate principle is that the only true evil is the non-consensual infliction by one person upon another of actual and avoidable harm. If this idea is familiar, then it should be – it's both the oldest and newest on the block, running from the earliest codifications of law to the thought of Richard Rorty in the present. It's an idea that's easier to formulate than to apply, and Harwood's consistency in attempting to do so results in some very provocative ideas being outlined.

It's a libertarian and anti-paternalist project communicated with wit and imagination. Eccentric and angry, it demands attention.

Having praised the book I'd like to end with a pedantic quibble and take a pop at whoever read the proofs of this work. How the hell was the howler on page 290 of this book allowed to remain? It was not Julian Huxley (as Harwood appears to insist) that debated evolution with "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford, but his estimable ancestor Thomas. In a book so fact-dependent, such a mistake can tend to undermine the reader's trust in the author's less easily checked assertions. Indeed, I'd go further and say that the whole episode is rather less clear-cut than popular history insists

and that any serious historian should accommodate knowledge of such ambiguities and uncertainties. Stephen Jay Gould, for example, in his essay "Knight takes Bishop?" (collected in the volume *Bully for Brontosaurus*) suggests that this "most famous story in all the hagiography of evolution is, if not false, at least grossly distorted by biased reconstruction long after the fact".

Such mistakes are the straws that religionists will grasp at in their inevitable attempts to devalue and dismiss this book (and any others that offend them, for that matter). They should not be given such chances. They've had enough already.

Salford home for Freethinker collection

(continued from centre pages)

question the status quo and was committed to a society which rewarded endeavour, rather than one which was based on privilege and class.

He was also a strong and active trade unionist, who questioned the belief in any god and the role of organised religion. He felt that the route to a civilised society should be through each individual's respect for one another, rather than intolerance and animosity of those who have a different belief. He was a member of the National Secular Society for many years. He had a passion for knowledge and was an avid collector of literature.

With politics and religion he would always read articles which were contrary to his own views as well as those which he supported. He loved a good debate, even though he was generally a quiet, self-effacing man.

The collection of *Freethinkers* deposited with the Working Class Movement Library are those saved prior to his call-up for National Service during World War Two. Although no lover of the armed forces, or war, it did give him the opportunity to learn a trade (telecommunications), to travel – North Africa and Italy – and to make some good friends he corresponded with for the rest of his life.

Thus, Thomas Edwin Mapp (1916-1992) will be remembered. This bequest might appear to some as being quite small but there is an amazing lack of information on secularism in local archives and doubtless much has been lost.

If readers are aware of any collections of material, whether it be copies of the *Freethinker* or records of local Secularist groups, please do deposit these documents in a local archive and perhaps also let the NSS know.

• Ian Andrews is a member of the Council of Management of the National Secular Society.

Turning the other cheek

DEIRDRE Shaw writes (*Points of View*, November 2002) that "there is something to be said for parts of Christian philosophy, and turning the other cheek can be a strong position to take". I disagree with her Humpty Dumpty interpretation that turning the other cheek means "merely maintaining a quiet dignity and pitying them rather than ridiculing them".

Turning the other cheek is declining to defend yourself when an enemy hits you in the face while inviting them to do it again. It's not a philosophy either. Christians don't have philosophy; what they have is dogma backed by the apologetics of theology. Honest doubt, the keystone of philosophy, is for Christians the forbidden fruit – a sin. If any doubts about their dogma try to surface in a Christian's mind they must be suppressed in the name of a Christian morality that entails punishment for lack of obedience.

Thomas Aquinas, the medieval theologian, wrote in his *Summa Theologica* that the "sin of unbelief is greater than any sin that occurs in the perversion of morals" and he recommended that the heretic be exterminated from the world by death after the third offence.

Regarding the hypothetical existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God, I think it was Chapman Cohen who once said, more or less, that the defining characteristic for gods is their vulnerability; they are so easily killed. All it takes is a whiff of science, a puff of logic or a dose of common sense, and they are all stone dead.

JIM CASS
Bishop Auckland

Sexism and the *Freethinker*

I HAVE been monitoring the monthly "Webwatch" in the *Freethinker* for the last six months. The ones mentioned are mainly independent – some weird and nutty religious sites, others containing interesting atheist material. Some sites were good, others a waste of time.

Out of 50 web-sites mentioned only one was by a woman!

Out of 17 individuals mentioned by name, only one was a woman.

What, if anything, does this tell us?

- That here are hardly any women writing and designing websites ?
- That they are creating websites that are no good and not worth mentioning?
- That they are creating websites that are not interesting to men?
- That they are creating websites that are not interesting to atheists and freethinkers?
- That an individual reviewer is blind to sites of interest to or by women?
- That it tells us nothing?
- That it does not matter?
- That I am a paranoid and over-sensitive

feminist, a self styled "victim"? I don't think so.

I have done a similar exercise looking at the rest of the content of the *Freethinker* over the same period. Out of 75 articles, five were written by women. Out of 70 letters to the editor, ten were from women and four were gender neutral.

The September 2002 issue hit a new low; not a single item or reference was by a woman contributor.

Sad woman I may be to bother about such things, but I *do* think it matters. The atheist movement will get nowhere while women are not considered as part of the struggle against superstition. It will be no better than those religions whose doctrines have led to the exclusion of women.

I am a long-standing activist in the UK atheist secular humanist movement. I have worked, written and lobbied over many years, and for the past few years have been tireless in my promotion of the ideas and organisations, journals, and the work of other activists on the internet. I do this without any desire to gain any personal publicity, preferring to work in the background, frequently using pseudonyms. I have had articles and letters published in the *Freethinker* but my overwhelming feeling is that this has been done grudgingly.

None of the six UK websites I currently write or produce have been mentioned despite the fact that they promote the writing of UK atheist activists, several of whom have written for the *Freethinker* in the past, and the directory site lists some of the best sites in the UK and the US: serious and funny, including a few that I have picked up from the *Freethinker* reviews.

Now I see that the *Freethinker* reviewer has been asked to compile a list of links for the *Freethinker* website! These will, on present form, be a reflection of the *Freethinker's* current sexist leanings whether it is deliberate or not.

Despite my urgings, and offer of an interim site, the *Freethinker* web presence has been abysmal for the last two years or so. I have expressed my anger at the way the *Freethinker* excludes women activists, to no avail. It is high time for it to be brought out into the open. Sexism is no more acceptable than racism, anti-Semitism or homophobia, least of all in the secular humanist movement.

SUE LORD
www.secularsites.freeuk.com

- **Editor's note: The *Freethinker* has never sought to exclude women writers. If there is a paucity of female writing in the magazine, it is because women have chosen to exclude themselves, possibly because: (1) they are reluctant to be associated with the mainly radical anti-religious tone of the *Freethinker*, (2) they insist in writing under pseudonyms, often gender-neutral, which we are naturally reluctant to accept, or (3)**

they are not prepared to submit work for which no payment is offered.

Duncan was just a fraud

HELEN Duncan should have been imprisoned, not for mediaeval witchcraft or 19th century mediumship, but for timeless fraud. The "mysterious second degree burns on her stomach" (*Freethinker*, November 2002) were probably caused by phosphorus or radium used to illuminate her "materialisations". Her illness may well have been radiation sickness.

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

Smallpox vaccination

IN THE light of America's announcement that it intends to carry out a massive smallpox vaccination programme as a precaution against possible bio-chemical attacks by terrorists, I would like to make a few points about such vaccination.

The supposedly famous Edward Jenner's two original guinea pigs, Phipps and Jenner's own son, both died of consumption (tuberculosis) at the age of 20 and 21. "Consumption follows in the wake of vaccination as sure as cause follows effect" - Dr A Wilder, Editor, *New York Medical Times* and Professor of Pathology.

Jenner was an unqualified country apothecary who capitalised on a crazy superstition that a person infected with cowpox (which, like many diseases could be avoided by proper hygiene) would never get smallpox. As it turned out the smallpox vaccine, produced by prolonged torture inflicted on restricted calves, caused the deaths of thousands of people.

In 1838, after another fierce outbreak of smallpox due to inoculation, the authorities had finally seen enough; the practice was banned under threat of imprisonment in 1840. But the medical profession managed to get vaccination resurrected, resulting in the largest UK epidemic of smallpox when the noxious serum composed of mixtures of calves' skin, flesh, blood, pus and hair, scraped off the tortured animals was injected into the blood of the nation's children. There was a peak of 44,000 deaths in 1871-2 alone.

The towns which wisely rejected vaccination had fewer cases of smallpox than the towns which sadly accepted it. Vaccinated Warrington had a death-rate over eight times higher than non-vaccinated Leicester in 1892-93. Dewsbury also rejected vaccination and with Leicester had the lowest death-rates in the country. In the epidemic of 1887-88 no less than 98 percent of the population of Sheffield had been vaccinated. The public vaccinators had reaped a richer harvest of bonuses for "successful vaccination" than those of any other town, and yet they had 7,000 cases of smallpox.

Britain was not the only country to suffer from smallpox vaccination. In 1903 the USA seized the Phillipines and quickly enforced a



nation-wide vaccination drive. The Phillipinos had been a healthy people living naturally hygienic lives. But vaccination was forced on them and the first large epidemic came in 1905. Vaccination caused many thousands of deaths not only from smallpox, but also malaria, influenza, tubercolosis, dysentery, cholera and typhus.

(References: **Blood Poison – vaccine assault on the species**. Pat Rattigan, Nd. (Nemesis – Light on Medical Fraud.); **Slaughter of the Innocent**, Hans Ruesch, Civis Publications.)

FREDERICK BACON
Mansfield

Editor's note: In publishing a letter from Mr Frederick Bacon in the November, 2002, issue of the *Freethinker*, we referred to him in error as Francis Bacon.

Use of the word 'gay'

MY dictionary, like Michael Hill's, defines "gay" as lively, merry and light-hearted. He asks what this has to do with anal sex with another man. Well, sex with a man generally makes me feel lively, merry and light-hearted. At best it makes me feel loving, strong and energised.

"Gay" hijacked by the homos? You bet. And if Michael Hill has only just noticed, that's sad.

BOB DEACON
Wolverhampton.

I DO hope we can lay to rest for all time this nonsense about the changing meaning of certain words. I refer to Michael Hill's letter (*Freethinker*, December 2002), in which he bemoans the fact that homosexual men use the word "gay".

Mr Hill begins by citing a 1960 dictionary. He then goes on to ask "what anal sex with another man has to do with the meaning of 'gay'".

For starters, "gay" describes an identity, and not what gay people do in bed. Many don't do anal sex, but they're still gay. Some are celibate, but they're still gay. Some heterosexuals are celibate, too, but are still heterosexual.

Now let's have a gander at a little etymology. *Collins Concise* (revised edn., 1995) gives "homosexual" as the first definition; *Bloomsbury Encarta* (1999) gives it as first definition; *Concise Oxford* (1995) gives it as a subsequent one. It's a word that comes via Middle English from the Old French "gai", and, according to the above-dated *Concise Oxford* and the *Shorter Oxford* of 1983, is of unknown etymology.

The New Fowler's Modern English Usage (ed. R W Burchfield) has this to say: "At some point in the mid-20C. – though occasional evidence exists from about 1935 – homosexual men made it abundantly clear that they used the word gay of themselves, and wanted the public at large to use

it too instead of the traditional word homosexual, and instead of all the derogatory terms such as fag, faggot, fairy, homo, pansy, and queer. Their choice of word arose, it would seem, in part at least, from the constant application of the word since the 17c to a person, as the *OED* expresses it, "addicted to social pleasures and dissipations" (esp in gay dog, gay Lothario); and also to its use since the early 19c to mean "(of a woman) leading an immoral life, living by prostitution."

So it was a word used for frowned-upon sexual activity and a bit of loose living. Homosexual men took the word to apply to themselves in a jocularly self-deprecatory sense, and the word has stuck. We (homosexuals, that is) now use "queer", too, having taken it from the sphere of insult (chosen by heterosexuals) and claimed it for ourselves. If the heterosexuals who delight in selecting words with which to offend us didn't want it for its former purpose and were happy to see it change, then we might as well have it and use it as our own.

I wonder why Mr Hill doesn't single out some other words, such as those in the *Fowler's* quotation above, and question why those have changed their usage. Would he like to give back to the language an older meaning for "fairy", then, and for "pansy"? It was heterosexuals who used these terms to apply to gays (yes, it can be used as a noun, too).

Furthermore, is Mr Hill happy to be called "straight"?

What I detected was unashamed homophobia in Mr Hill's letter. I used to think people who called themselves freethinkers didn't indulge in such tedious practices, that they kept open minds, that they examined issues before shooting from the lip, that they were accepting of differences in others. If Mr Hill had sat down with a few dictionaries and a book on usage (even if it meant a trip to the library) he might not have laid himself open to accusations of homophobia.

ANDY ARMITAGE
Editor
Gay & Lesbian Humanist
(www.pinktriangle.org.uk)

ONE wonders why Linda van Dam (*Points of View*, December 2002) is in such a lather (to use her own phrase) over objections to the modern abuse of the lovely word, "gay"; why she thinks that self-opinionated intolerance carries the right to call fellow-readers "asinine old grumps", and how she would react in the event of being called a stupid old fart – likely enough, except that her letter suggests a precocious teenager.

One can "never ... ever" (to quote the lady again) disentangle any logical thread of continuity in arguments based on ridiculing others and spiced with random references to royalty. The correct message of that bright and sparkingly

optimistic word has never been "lost", only grievously distorted and arrogantly usurped. Linda seems to see such larceny as a triumph which must not be questioned. I see it as unsurprisingly barren sterility over devising a meaningful new term to replace the uncomfortably direct "homosexual", banking on people accepting that a state which makes others feel bright and gay must be a joyful thing.

Like Michael Hill's, my main dictionary (*Chambers' Late Century*), as well as two older ones, agrees that the prime meaning of "gay" is lively, bright, merry, full of fun. Chambers admits "homosexual" (as slang), and also offers "dissipated, dissolute, of loose living". So Linda's "triumph" still, and always, has to be seen as merely a distasteful interloper. My own distaste is not for sexual deviations but for foisting something on society which can make people uncomfortable over the perfectly valid use of a common word.

I use it myself as often as I can wherever it fits, despite Linda's didactic nonsense, and have never been misunderstood. And I am confident that a poll to confirm people's preferences would see "moderns" like Linda losing their deposits.

JACK WILSON
Altrincham

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Events & Contacts

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, February 2, 4pm. 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: 01959 574691. 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. Worcester House, Pitville Circus Road, Cheltenham. Friday, January 24, 8pm. Yvonne Williams: *Racial Equality Now*.

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. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday, January 10, 7.30pm. Adnan Ali, *Islam and Homosexuality*.

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, January 9, 8pm. Discussion: *In the News*. Thursday, February 6, 8pm. Eileen Collier: *Child Protection*.

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.

Dundee Group: Information: Terry Martin. Tel: 01250 874742. E-mail: terrymartin@dalrue.fsnet.co.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. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, January 14, 7.30pm. Patrick Murphy: *Schools Today – Success Story or Crisis*.

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, January 30, 8pm. Tony Milne: *The Threat of Space Debris – How Dangerous Is It?*

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.

North Stafford & South Cheshire Humanists: Information: Sue Willson on 01782 662693. Newsletter and details of programme available.

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, January 15, 8pm. Frank Abel: *That Was the Year That Was*. Wednesday, 5 February, 8pm. Barry New: *Ethical Green Issues*.

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, February 12, 8pm. A special meeting to mark Charles Darwin's birthday.

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: Maggie Fraser. Tel: 01892 523858. E-mail: melgin@waitrose.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.

Notices must be received by the 15th of the month
preceding publication