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Freethinker

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Founded by G W Foote in 1881

April Fools Special!

SHUDDER at the thought of holy rollers probing third world molars - see p2.

GASP at the dishonesty of creationists who have inflicted the 'warped' Genesis Expo on the people of Portsmouth - page 6

DIE LAUGHING at the headmistress who banned *The Three Little Pigs* because she thought the fairy tale would 'offend the religious sensitivities' of Muslim children - see p3



OH, how different my life might have been had I followed in the footsteps of the males on the maternal side of my family. A dentistry gene ran riot among virtually all of them, producing more dentists than is natural in any one clan, and, as a youngster, my life was made a misery at family get-togethers where I had not only to endure the moist embraces of slobbery aunts, but had to “open wide” for each of my dentist uncles, so that they could peer in and pronounce on the state of my teeth and gums.

One uncle in particular took what I regarded as a distinctly sinister interest in the interior of my mouth. This I associated with the fact that I had once broken his ankle. It was, of course, an accident. Horace was standing on a chair, reaching for a suitcase on top of a wardrobe, when I – aged around five – tricycled at great speed into the room, sending uncle, chair and suitcase ricocheting in three different directions. The chair *also* suffered a broken leg.

In what I to this day believe was a vindictive act of revenge, several years down the track he bullied my mother into sending me along to his surgery where, after poking about and prodding for an age, he decided that, while my teeth were essentially sound, they needed straightening. And straightening meant installing a brace, comprising a plate for the upper jaw and two narrow bands of steel designed to pull the crooked front teeth into line.

An impression was taken, and a week later the brace was fitted. I was mortified. Far worse than the appearance of the steel bands across my teeth was the lisp produced by the plate in my upper palate. At a stroke this sassy brat came to sound like a top-of-the-range cissy.

The brace lasted less than a week. After a row with my mother – who tried to convince me that my uncle had done the job free out of “the goodness of his heart” and not out of revenge for my putting him in plaster – I ripped the contraption out of my mouth and ground it under heel.

I bellowed that I would *never* follow the career path mapped out for me by my family, and that I would rather stick my head up a dead bear’s bum than poke about in other people’s mouths, and make them thpeak like Violet Elithebeth Bott. Which, on reflection, was a ghastly mistake, because every one of my dentist uncles went on to become very well off – and one actually fetched up as a millionaire.

One thing I did respect them all for was the determination they showed in studying for their profession. All, I seem to recall, went through *seven years* of study before qualifying. So you can imagine my surprise when I discovered that, were I to enrol in a special course tomorrow, I could be a practising dentist by the end of the month.

There’s only one catch. I would need to be a missionary in some deprived part of the world.

Oh yes folks, just when you thought that Christians had exhausted every avenue of

deception to win hearts and minds for *Jeee-sus*, along comes a new ruse – pin the poor buggers down in a chair, and while their mouths are open and their defences down, deaden their senses with novacaine and prayer.

“After all the time and energy invested in training to become effective in missions, missionaries nevertheless often find it very difficult to become fully accepted by the people they hope to reach,” declares a US-based outfit called Dental Training for Missions.

It goes on: “Gentle, compassionate dentistry can powerfully demonstrate the love of God, and opens doors for ministry.

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE – rues the day he turned down dentistry as a career



“Come learn a practical skill that can help you win the hearts of those you hope to reach for Christ. We welcome missionaries into our program from all denominations who love our Lord Jesus Christ and desire practical training.”

The course comprises “a minimum of one week home self-study and seven days of clinical training. A solid foundation can be laid in two weeks upon which one can build on the job of self-training ... We will cover the basics that you need to know to provide limited, but safe extractions”.

Was that Uncle Horace I just heard yelling AAAAAArrrrgh!

AS IF I had nothing better to do with my time, last month I spent several hours trawling through a variety of freethought publications to ascertain what proportion of their contributors were female. The result was depressing. I reckon that if we were to depend on women writers, the atheist press would be in a very sorry state.

What was the point of this exercise? It was occasioned by the latest – and the most bizarre – of a series of attacks from a reader of, and occasional contributor to, the *Freethinker*.

I stand accused by this person of sexism, and of operating the *Freethinker* as if it were “a men’s club” – an improvement. I guess, on her earlier allegation that it was being run like “a gay club”.

Her accusation is based on the fact that the *Freethinker* contains articles written mainly by men. In an astonishing display of twisted logic, she concludes that the absence of women contributors is the result of their being *denied* access to the pages of the *Freethinker* by a prejudiced editor, and she went so far as to write to the National Secular Society – an organisation which has nothing whatsoever to do with the publication of the *Freethinker* – to

complain that “the magazine is used by and advertised by the NSS, and is sent out to prospective members by the NSS” and that “while the prejudices of its editor may be acceptable to G W Foote & Co [the publishers of the *Freethinker*], I do not think it is acceptable for the NSS to be associated with such views”.

The truth of the matter is that I have *no* prejudices, and that during the time of my editorship, which began in 1998, not a single woman has been denied access to the editorial or the letters pages of the magazine. Nor has access been denied by any of my predecessors. Indeed, G W Foote & Co has just published the collected writings of one of the magazine’s most prolific and valued contributors, Barbara Smoker.

I do not know what efforts, if any, are being made by other editors to increase the number of female contributors to *their* pages, but what I *am* certain of is that they are not *conspiring* to stifle women’s voices. Why on earth would they? The secularist movement has always been in the vanguard of numerous progressive causes, not the least in the championing of women’s and gay rights, as well as animal rights, at a time when very few other journals would ever have dared to do so.

In *Vision and Realism: A Hundred Years of the Freethinker*, Jim Herrick notes that “the rights of women were always seen as part of the radical freethought tradition” and he quotes from the January 20, 1918 issue: “The triumph of the Women’s Suffrage Movement is a victory for Freethought, and the belated recognition of the rights of women is a tribute to the pioneers from Mary Wollstonecraft to John Stuart Mill.”

• THE following are the freethought publications, chosen at random, that I examined to ascertain the ratio of male to female contributors:

The Open Society, New Zealand, Summer 2002, 26 pages, male editor. Ten attributed articles, one by a woman; seven letters, all from men.

The Australian Humanist, Summer 2002, 24 pages, female editor. Ten attributed articles, possibly one by a woman (name is gender-neutral); two poems by a woman; five letters, two from women.

International Humanist News, Feb 2003, 24 pages, female editor. Sixteen attributed articles, five by men, six by women (the sex of the other five cannot be deduced from their names).

Church & State, USA, January 2003, 22 pages, male editor. Five attributed articles, none by women.

Humanist in Canada, winter 2002/3, 44 pages, male editors (2). Thirteen attributed articles, two by women. One contributor had a gender-neutral name. Four letters, two from men, two from gender-neutral writers.

Gay & Lesbian Humanist (UK), winter 2002, 20 pages, male editor. Sixteen attributed articles, two by women. Two letters, both by men.

New Humanist (UK), autumn 2002, 44 pages, male editor. Twenty-four attributed articles, four by women. Eight letters, two by women. One poem by a woman.

Rationalist hounded by Indian officials for exposing the phoney 'Hugging Mother'

MATA Amritanandamayi of Kerala in India is known to the world as the "hugging mother". She was also the subject of a television documentary in the "Weird Weekends" series on BBC TV, presented by Louis Theroux. She hugs people and passes on to them "energy". Reputedly she has hugged and healed some 20 million people all over the world as part of her mission. On Fridays she acts as the goddess Kali, and on many occasions she has claimed to be Lord Krishna himself.

She has many devotees: BJP leaders such as the Prime Minister of India, A B Vajpayee, Home Minister of India, L K Advani, and also Congress Party Chief Minister (of Kerala), A K Antony, are amongst them. Home Ministry records of the Government of India show that the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission is the second largest recipient in India of foreign funds – in 1998-99 alone about 11.5 million US dollars. Educational institutions established by this primary school drop-out enjoy "Deemed University" status; Penguin India published her authorised biography (*Amma, A Living Saint* by Judith Cornell) in which her miracles and her boundless love are highlighted. She even has a train in India named after her!

In 2002, rationalist leader Sreeni Pattathanam, General Secretary of Bharateeya Rationalist Association – the Kerala State affiliate of the Rationalist Association of India, a member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, (IHEU) and editor of the Malayalam language rationalist monthly, *Yukthirajyam* – published a 170-page book in which he revealed that Mata's miracles are bogus, and that there have been many suspicious deaths in and around her ashram which demand police investigation. The research work contains elaborate references to court records, newspaper reports and quotations from well-known literary figures, including statements from the Mata's close relatives, as well as an interview with Mata Amritanandamayi herself.

Last year, members of the Bharathiya Rationalist Association staged a protest outside the Government secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram, calling for an impartial inquiry into the allegations of these suspicious

Freethinker bound volumes

EACH year a limited number of bound volumes of the *Freethinker* are produced. All 12 issues of the previous year's editions are drawn together in a handsomely-bound hardback volume. Last year's editions are now available for £25.00 each, plus £2.00 p & p. If you would like a copy, please send a cheque/postal order to **G W Foote & Co, PO Box 234, Brighton MBN1 4XD.**

By IHEU Executive Director Babu Gogineni

deaths as well as the activities of the so-called charitable institutions being run by the influential "god woman".

Instead of investigating the allegations and examining the evidence produced, the state government – headed by the Mata's ardent devotee the Chief minister A K Antony – initiated moves to prosecute Mr Pattathanam for making "objectionable references" to the spiritual leader, and for "hurting the religious sentiments of her devotees". Immediately the state government gave notice of its intention to charge Mr Pattathanam with "insulting or attempting to insult the religion or religious beliefs of any class of citizens with an intention of outraging its religious feelings".

Rising to the occasion, a group of writers and social activists headed by eminent Malayalee author Paul Zacharia and Human Rights activist Mr Mukundan C Menon issued a statement condemning the vindictive nature of the government's moves. "Since certain ruling politicians, both at the federal and state governments, are known devotees of the Mata, we have reason to suspect that there is a sinister and malicious conspiracy behind the move to prosecute Mr Sreeni Pattathanam".

Both Mr Pattathanam and Mr C I Oommen, President of the Bharateeya Rationalist

Association, Kerala, met with IHEU leaders in January 2003 and recorded their fears that in view of the prevailing campaign against rationalists, and the rise of Hindu fundamentalism, the danger for them was still not over, and that efforts to prosecute would be re-started. Mr Pattathanam could be arrested and even tortured. "Custodial deaths are not uncommon in Kerala", they reminded us.

Mr Pattathanam said: "If the charges contained in my book are baseless, the devotees could have published a rejoinder. Instead, they have published malicious reports against rationalists in their publications."

At the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, we learned that Mr. Pattathanam was summoned present himself for questioning by a state government official.

IHEU is now calling upon rationalists around the world to write to Mr A K Antony to protest over the harrasing of the author of *Matha Amruthandamayi – Divya Kadhakalum Yatharthiyam (Matha Amrithanandamayi: Sacred Stories and Realities*, Mass Publications, revised edition). His full address is as follows:

**Mr A K Antony
The Chief Minister of Kerala State
Government Secretariat
Thiruvananthapuram 695 001
Kerala
India.**

Political correctness sees the *Three Little Pigs* banned from the classroom

The head teacher of a junior school in West Yorkshire has become a national laughing stock after she decided that books featuring pigs should be removed from the classroom.

The head of Park Road Junior Infant and Nursery in Batley, Barbara Harris, imposed the ban on *The Three Little Pigs*, *Babe*, and other tales about porkers, because she thought they would be offensive to Muslim children.

The ban came to light when a parent noticed that words relating to pigs had been removed from a homework sheet.

Another fuming parent said: "I have never seen anything so ridiculous. It is absurd."

The head teacher defended her action by saying that the books had only been removed from classes for under-sevens, and that they were still available in the school library.

Ms Harris's absurd demonstration of political correctness was even slammed by Muslim leaders in Yorkshire.

Inayat Bunglawala, of the Muslim Council in Britain, said: "This is bizarre – there is nothing to stop children reading about pigs. The ban is simply on the consumption of pork and pig products."

And religious leader Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra added: "It is rather sad. Muslims would not find *The Three Little Pigs* offensive."



The second week in March was a disastrous one for the Catholic church, both in England and in Scotland.

Cardinal Murphy O'Connor, leader of Roman Catholics in England and Wales, submitted himself to a gruelling interview on the *Today* programme about the way he had dealt with accusations of child abuse against his clergy when he was Bishop of Arundel and Brighton. The programme was prompted by the revelation of a new case that had not been sent for independent review. Following earlier cases coming to light, the Archbishop had already given an undertaking that all such cases had been sent away for independent review.

Murphy O'Connor had been advised not to take part in the programme. What mixture of misjudgement, arrogance or, indeed, bravery, caused him to ignore this advice we shall probably never know. It turned out to be the most embarrassing interview I have ever heard broadcast on *Today*. It was also, at about 15

minutes, the longest; the producer seemed to have taken the unprecedented step of clearing the decks after the eight o'clock news for this item to take as long as necessary. The interview

NSS Executive Director KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD reports on a 'disastrous week' for the Catholic Church.



was preceded by a detailed report which included a heart-rending account from the victim in this latest case and a commentary which pulled no punches and twice raised serious questions about the bishop's veracity. How humiliated the cardinal must have felt while listening to this, captive as he was in the studio.

In her account, the victim described with palpable emotion how she had felt as betrayed

by the bishop's handling of the affair as she had been by the priest who had allegedly molested her years before. In fairness, we should note that the police had been involved in the case earlier; accounts differ as to how old she was when the abuse started; and the victim had suffered from mental problems.

I am not suggesting for a moment, however, that I do not believe the complainant, but, even if she had completely misinterpreted what had happened, it would still not let the bishop off the hook. He admitted the omission and simply brushed it aside as a "filing problem". As would be expected, O'Connor had dealt with this case personally, and had even spoken to the victim on the telephone. He continues to maintain that there were just a few cases in his diocese. Given so few cases, his personal involvement and the huge furore over the last three years, it is difficult to understand how such an omission could be made honestly, even by someone as bumbling as he is.

What shocked listeners even more than the specifics of the case was "Murky" O'Connor's demeanour, which at times verged on the nonchalant. He described the latest relation more than once as "frustrating" (for being found out?), expressed no remorse or sympathy for the victims and seemed almost to be dismissing this as a historic case. Even a former editor of the *Catholic Herald*, Peter Stanford, let the Cardinal have it with both barrels: "The only heart that failed to be moved seemed to be that of Cardinal Murphy O'Connor...[he] could not manage to utter a single word of sympathy in the course of a 15-minute interview." He concluded that Murphy O'Connor has a "huge moral question mark towering over him".

I wish I could say I was surprised when later that very day yet a further case came to light.

Why we must stop Easter wandering around the calendar like a drunk

THE National Secular Society is lobbying for the Spring festival, hijacked by the Christians who call it Easter, to be observed on a fixed date. Certainly such a move would be welcomed by organisers of holidays, sporting fixtures, weddings and fetes. It will be resisted by traditionalists, though the World Council of Churches has declared in favour.

Until the reform is introduced, the date of Easter can be ascertained by consulting the

BILL McILROY examines the wizardry used to work out the date of Easter. And no, he did not consult Harry Potter!

Book of Common Prayer. (Every freethinker should have a copy.) This compilation of archaic ritual, Prayers and Orders contains a section headed Tables and Rules for Moveable and Immoveable Feasts. To know when the Moveable and Holy Days begin, "Easter-day, on which the rest depend, is always the first Sunday after the Full Moon, which happens upon, or next after the twenty-first day of March; and if the Full Moon happens upon a Sunday, Easter-day is the Sunday after."

The Tables include eight pages of mind-boggling calculations. The reader must "look for the Golden Number of the year in the First Column of the table, against which stands the Day of the Paschal Full Moon, then look in the Third Column for the Sunday Letter, next after the Day of the Full Moon, and the Day of the Month standing against that Sunday Letter is

Easter-day.

"To find the Golden Number, add One to the Year of our Lord, and then divide by 19; the Remainder, if any, is the Golden Number; but if nothing remaineth, then 19 is the Golden Number."

Still awake? It is also necessary to find the Dominical or Sunday Letter. Nothing could be simpler: "Add to the Year of Our Lord its Fourth Part, omitting Fractions, and also the Number 6; Divide the Sum by 7; and if there is no Remainder, then A is the Sunday Letter."

Many Christians will be praying for the ditching of this absurd rigmarole. One can feel sorry (almost) for the poor vicar striving to explain why the most important date in the Christian Year wanders around the calendar like an inebriated reveller who has missed the last train.

Jewish zealots attack postman

A POSTMAN delivering civil defence literature in the ultra-Orthodox district of Mea Shearim in Jerusalem was set upon by angry residents who found the leaflets objectionable because they featured a Jewish woman who was not wearing head covering.

The postman was pushed about, abused and had his leaflets – published by the military and entitled *Information About Civil Defence and the Family* – ripped up.

What the Church should reveal

If the RC Church really wants to convince us it has turned over a new leaf it should make public:

- an undertaking on the record from every RC bishop that they know of no cases of child abuse allegations against the clergy still alive for which the files have not been passed to external authorities in the last three years; and
- reports about the outcome of each one of these independently reviewed cases.

And perhaps those investigating these sorry affairs should start to turn more attention to these troublesome files. I wonder whether anyone will ever find out whether any sensitive files about historic cases were removed from O'Connor's old diocese after he was appointed as archbishop?

The tale the Scottish Catholic bishops have just told the Pope during their obligatory five year visit to the Vatican was so far-fetched that even the Catholic Truth Society (CTS) could not suppress its hoots of derision. The CTS is convinced that the bishops completely misled their so-called holy father by making out that Scottish youth was keen on his Church.

Such a vicious row between Catholic bodies in Scotland is unprecedented, certainly in public. For once, the CTS and I are on the same side. The leading Scottish Archbishop Mario Conti and his staff have hit a new low – quite an achievement, given how gaffe-prone his short prelacy has been so far.

The CTS demanded to know in which parishes these enthusiastically-Catholic young people are to be found. They wanted to know whether the bishops had mentioned that “the 90+ per cent who lapse from the practice of their faith even before they’ve completed their education in their ‘Catholic’ schools where holiness, the theme of the Pope’s address to you, is never mentioned except in mocking fashion?”

But back in Rome, His Infallibility had apparently swallowed the fairy tale, hook, line and sinker: “From your reports, I am pleased to see that the youth of Scotland are showing enthusiasm for their faith and a steadily increasing desire to meet and work with you their bishops.”

The CTS put the boot in even harder: “Unless and until the Pope is fully advised by those upon whose presumed integrity he relies, he cannot possibly realise the full extent of the decay of the Church in Scotland.” Could it be that the bishops simply took the cynical gamble that the management will have changed before their next visit, so it didn’t matter what they said very much?

While in Rome, the Archbishop Conti also told a Vatican news agency reporter that over the last year young people, especially, had responded to the Pope’s call for a new evangelisation. But he did concede that these groups of young people were “comparatively small” blaming “peer-group pressure, which so often leads people away from the faith”. Nevertheless, he emphasised (probably more in hope than in conviction) their “great potential”.

Understandably thinking of his own skin, Conti was quick to belittle the efforts of the man he had succeeded, that bigoted self-publicist, the late Cardinal Winning: “My predecessor gave a lot of his time and attention and considerable energies to a pastoral plan that had a lot of missionary drive and a very evangelistic agenda. We are presently reviewing that, because, sad to say, it has not been as successful as he had intended. ... I think probably that there has been a dislocation, and it is somewhat out of gear because it was a plan that was taken from elsewhere along with an attempt to adopt

it in a Scottish environment.” Or, translated into English, “Please, don’t blame me this for this silly idea which the old fool poached from somewhere else – it totally failed and we’re dumping it, but we don’t know what to do next”.

But maybe the bishops didn’t succeed in pulling the wool over the Pope’s eyes entirely. He wasn’t too far off the mark when he pontificated: “We may observe that in Scotland, as in

many lands evangelised centuries ago and steeped in Christianity, there no longer exists the reality of a ‘Christian society’, that is, a measure of its life and values.” That outburst, reminiscent of American televangelist Pat Robertson’s “Scotland is a dark land ...” a few years ago, succeeded in stirring up sectarian division. The moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland retorted angrily that the Pope had “gone too far”.

Scottish Catholics ‘increase the sum of human misery’

One of Cardinal Winning’s most manipulative media stunts was setting up “pro-life” centres to help unwed mothers. Archbishop Conti talked of these in glowing terms and one of his colleagues told the Pope that well over 500 babies have been “saved” as a result of that initiative.

What Conti failed to tell his boss was that this amounted to less than one per cent of the 60,000 abortions in Scotland that had taken place in the three years this dubious scheme has been operating.

Critics have accused the scheme’s leaders of “bribery”. Even for these 500 infants, far less the thousands in the future, the monetary implications are far from insignificant. In reality, the Church’s financial contribution, or rather that of their donors, to the infants’ upbringing, will be minuscule compared with that which will fall to the public purse for 15 to 20 years (and quite possibly even for some infants’ entire lives) as a direct result of the Church’s bigoted initiative.

One of Winning’s so-called successes, which he publicised widely, concerned a girl with severe learning difficulties from southern England who had become pregnant at the age of twelve. Critics were reported by the BBC to have expressed concern that “she may not be mature enough to have the baby” – on the face of it a gross understatement. Sadly, the infant’s prospects in life, especially if the grandparents become unable to look after him or her, seem dire.

The Catholic hierarchy’s misplaced pride in this deeply disturbing case raises crucial questions about their judgment. If this case is anything to go by, their dogmatic contention that abortion is always wrong seems to be leading to in an increase in the sum of human misery.

New Agers suckered by seller of ‘healing homoeopathic crystals’

A FURIOUS row which recently broke out on the internet has shown that New Agers can be every inch as gullible and dogmatic as those who hold more conventional religious beliefs.

Cyberspace turned blue with invective when one Gareth Thomas described as “transparent balderdash” the claims made for the special homoeopathic crystals being sold on www.the-crystal-chamber.net.

The website claimed that the crystals, while forming in caves over many thousands of years, picked up minute, homoeopathic qualities of substances beneficial to one’s aura.

The trouble, according to a report in the March 2003 edition of *New Scientist*, erupted when Thomas posted a skeptical message at www.ukpagan.com, a site “where believers in all things mystical gather to discuss matters of common interest”.

Using the pseudonym “Disturber” he challenged believers in such therapies to convince him that they had any effect whatsoever other than providing vague emotional satisfaction. Crystal homoeopathy, in particular, he said, was “transparent balderdash”.

UKpagan devotees reacted with fury. So rude were some of their responses that the messages had to be expunged by moderators. “All

insisted on the validity of their beliefs, some even referring to theoretical physics to support them. None questioned the claims of crystal homoeopathy,” reported *New Scientist*.

Thomas then copied the full crystal homoeopathy text from the Crystal Chamber site, and rubbished it, line by line, declaring it to be a “cynical, scientifically groundless scam”. This let loose a fresh flurry of outrage and abuse.

What the New Age believers did not know was that the Crystal Chamber site was Thomas’s own invention. The whole thing was purely a “credibility experiment” set up by Thomas who was “depressed by the abundance of absurd claims for quack alternative therapies”.

Thomas, in full mischief mode, also posed as the proprietor of Crystal Chambers, and enlisted help from UKpagan in the battle against the evil, destructive “Disturber”.

If you visit the Crystal Chambers site now you will get a message saying “nothing on this site makes any sense. It was all made up in a few hours to test susceptibility and gullibility”.

Thomas says his one regret, now all the fun is over, is that he did not claim that “the crystals had been mined by elves”.

ABOUT two years ago I happened to notice that a previously-empty building in a row of shops facing the ferry terminal at Portsmouth harbour had been refurbished and reopened, apparently as some sort of small museum.

It's a rather smart old building, a former bank I believe, with some grand stonework fronting it. In one of the windows a very large red LED clock had been mounted, displaying time and temperature for everybody to see right out across the harbour. There were a number of "bullet points" stencilled onto the windows, including (as best I can remember) "Origin Of Life On Earth", "Boris the 12ft Dinosaur", "Books and Videos", "Minerals and Fossils for Sale" and "12 computerised Displays". Some kind of miniature Natural History Museum, I thought, which struck me as rather an odd idea for the locale, but what the hell. It all looked very professional.

Above the windows, a maroon and gold sign proclaimed the name of the establishment: "Genesis Expo".

This rang absolutely no alarm bells whatsoever in my mind. "Genesis" is, after all, a perfectly legitimate word for "beginnings", quite apart from its biblical origin. It is used in everyday speech all the time; even by scientists, I'm sure.

A month or so after this, I actually stepped inside the foyer of the place for a quick look in passing. It was a small gift-shop area, with geodes and ammonites for sale, wooden model dinosaurs that you could build yourself, and some racks of books over the far side of the room. To the right, near "Boris", a rather crude-looking model dinosaur, was a doorway that led through. I presumed, to the expo proper, the actual displays.

A friendly middle-aged gentleman behind the counter had a hearty go at persuading me to

come in and have a look around, but I declined, as I wanted to get on with my shopping. I did permit him to show me some fossilised dinosaur eggs on display near where the expo finishes. We talked for a couple of minutes on the fascinating business of fossils – I cannot for the life of me remember the specifics – then I thanked him, and said my goodbyes for that day.

Any sympathy TIMOTHY ATKINSON may have had for religion and the religious evaporated after he visited the Genesis Expo in Portsmouth

I thought no more about the place for several months. Then, in the summer of 2001, I happened past the building again ... and decided to go in. The honeyed trap closed about me.

The people on the counter were different that day, but were every bit as friendly and welcoming as the other fellow had been. I was told once again that admission was free, and that all I needed to do was go round through the doorway to the right and follow the route past the displays. One of them led me round and briefly showed me the earpieces that were beside each of the glass windows giving onto the displays, then left me to it.

How do I begin to describe what turned out to be one of the most disturbing experiences I've ever had in my life? I can't, really. I simply cannot do it justice. Perhaps I shouldn't attempt to try. There were twelve displays in all, each behind a large, glass window, and I think it took me about three or four to start to

twig that I was being presented with a systematic attack on the whole concept of evolution, and a claim that the biblical creation was true. I felt my scalp begin to crawl and my stomach churn as I moved on through this bizarre, freakish display of cultic insanity.

One of the first displays had a couple of video monitors in it, one showing fossils of plants and animals and the other showing plants and animals still alive today that are identical. Another had an item about rapid sedimentation and the "fact" that all of the Earth's rock strata could easily have been laid down within a space of 6,000 or so years by such processes.

One display claimed that all human DNA has been shown to originate with just two individual human beings. I don't recall seeing any references to this, regrettably. Another debunked the similarity between human and chimpanzee DNA.

There were three items that I found more disturbing than any others. One was a tableau that ridiculed the term "primordial soup", and indeed the very concept of such, and made some joke that if life could arise from such things this would present a tremendous problem to the canning industry. Cue display of a soup tin with a hand reaching out of the top.

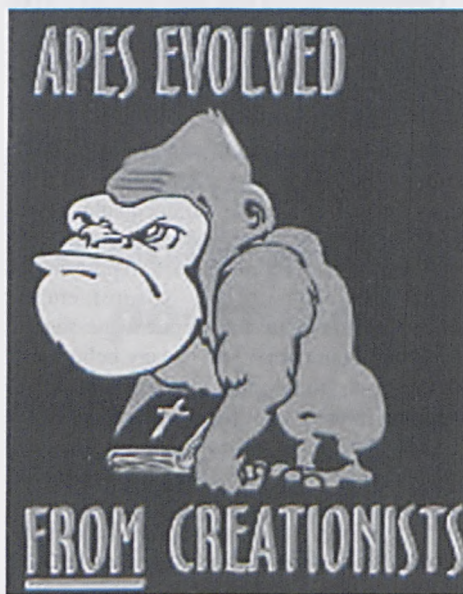
'The Expo was the most deeply warped thing I had ever witnessed. It amounted to a slap in the face to every good man and woman who ever did anything to drag the human race out of the dark ages.'

The second made some pronouncement about the imminent demise of the Theory of Evolution, and featured a mock-up gravestone with the word "Evolution" carved on it. The third item was a quote from someone saying something about evolution being for people who believe in ridiculous fairy tales.

That one *really* got me. Never before in my life had I seen such an outrageous instance of the teapot calling the kettle black.

As I slowly shuffled my way past this rubbish my every instinct screamed at me to run. All I could think about was how to get out of there.

Eventually it ended. I came out past the fossils I had been shown previously and found myself perusing the books while I thought furiously about how I was going to make a run for the door. It was creationist literature, all of it. There was even a computer logged onto a creationist website. I looked round at the foyer once again, with its fossils and minerals for sale, its wooden dinosaur kits, and Boris stand-



The "Biblesaur" (left) is the symbol of "Jesus, Dinosaurs and More, a webpage of scientific evidence supporting the biblical account of creation". The motif on the right was created for an anti-creationist website.

ing near the portal that led to the madhouse. I should have heeded his implied warning.

In the end I affected to stroll casually toward the door. I think somebody from the counter asked me what I had thought of it, and I managed some courteous nothing of a reply, that it was "very interesting", or something of that ilk. Then I was out into daylight, and free.

Only I wasn't free. I stumbled through my afternoon's shopping in a state of total brain-lock, unable to get my mind off this dreadful and bizarre assault I had suffered. The expo was the most deeply warped thing I had ever witnessed. It amounted to a slap in the face to every good man and woman who ever did anything to drag the human race out of the dark ages, and if I still had any sympathy left for religion and the religious, it was well and truly burned out of me that afternoon.

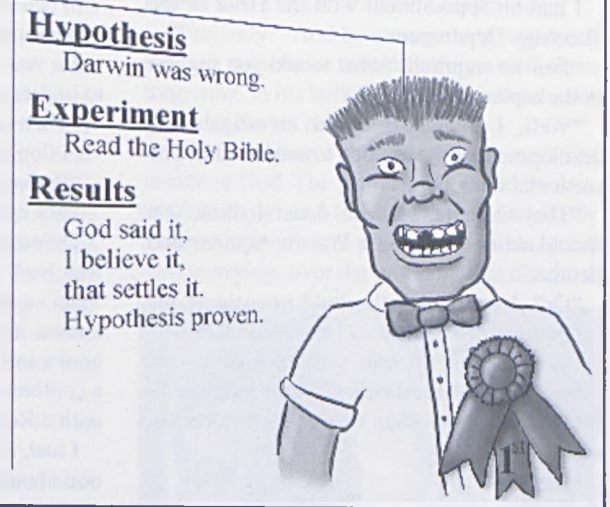
Perhaps I should be grateful to the Genesis Expo really, for that was the beginning of big changes in my life, and an enormous amount of learning. I was soon making very heavy use of the Internet to research all I could on creationism, and the best refutations of it, and I was soon quite satisfied that every one of the

movement's claims is nonsense.

After a few months this also led me into researching Christianity itself. If I had thought that that was nonsense beforehand, I would soon become more confident of such a view than I would have thought possible. I have unearthed mountains of genuinely scholarly critiques on the web of every single aspect of this religion imaginable. I've read books of Christian apologetics. I'm most of the way through the Bible – dreadful, unjust, tedious tome that it is – which alone puts me way ahead of most Christians, and I have now probably *forgotten* more about why religion is bunk than most theists ever "learn" to the contrary. And I have discovered, and joined, the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association, learning

Billy wins his first Creation Science Fair.

Fitz, 1996



through these organisations of the efforts *still* being made to turn our supposedly free nation into a theocracy.

Why I Am Not a Muslim by Ibn Warraq is an excellent book. It was first published by Prometheus Books in 1995, and was recently reprinted. Invaluable as it is, I would like to make a small correction. On page 205, Ibn Warraq writes: "There is enough evidence to show that slavery persisted in Saudi Arabia and the Yemen up to the 1950s.

"I do not know about the Yemen, but I know that up until 1961, and possibly a bit later, a public slave market was held every Friday in Mecca. The market ceased some time later in the 1960s, under pressure from the West. It simply wasn't there any more. As Ibn Warraq says, slavery cannot be made illegal in Islam.

In 1961, a young African Muslim of my acquaintance made the pilgrimage to Mecca. When she returned to England, she brought me a bottle of nondescript water from the well at Zem Zem, and talked at length about her experiences. She had found the slave market horrifying. A pitiful sight. One of the reasons for the market was to enable pious pilgrims, those with enough money, to buy a slave and then set him or her free, thus accumulating spiritual capital. In Islam, the freeing of a slave is considered a good action. What happened to the freed slaves I do not know but I do not imagine that they lived happily ever after.

The woman had undertaken the pilgrimage in a commendably scientific frame of mind. She wanted to know: Is there anything of real value there in Mecca, and do the pilgrims derive any benefit from their strenuous effort? Or is the whole thing a dead and empty ritual? She hoped to be strengthened in her faith, but she had her doubts, and had no trouble remain-

Enslaved by Islam

ing objective throughout the journey. On return, her considered opinion was that the Hajj was almost entirely unpleasant, the Meccans were hypocrites, pilgrimage a busi-

RASJIDAH ST JOHN examines the relationship between Islam and slavery

ness. Just on one particular night, when the pilgrims all stand until dawn on a certain hill or mountain, there the young woman felt something special. Standing for the first time in one's life all night on a hill anywhere, one would expect to have experiences one had

Muslim cleric jailed

ABDULLAH el-Faisal, 39, the east London-based Muslim cleric convicted at the Old Bailey on three counts of soliciting murder of Jews, Hindus and atheists, and three counts of inciting racial hatred, has been jailed for nine years. The court also ordered that El-Faisal, once a member of the Salvation Army, be deported to Jamaica on completion of his sentence.

never had before.

Unfortunately, the woman is no longer open-minded. She tells any captive audience that everything that has ever been discovered by scientists is already in the Koran. She claims she is descended from Muhammad. In Palestine, and I suppose in other Muslim countries, there are specialists who will draw up a family tree for you, elaborately written out on a wide scroll many yards in length. You may be pleased to find that you also are descended from Muhammad. Or perhaps you will not be pleased.

A Palestinian who showed us a photograph of his scroll recently in London thought it was very funny. He does not believe a word of it.

Slavery is again a problem all over the world, in Eastern Europe as well as in the Middle East. The police say that slaves are being smuggled into Britain as servants. It cannot all be blamed on Islam, but much of it can. In the 16th and later centuries, there was the white slave trade, where pirates from North Africa raided Europe for workers and concubines to sell back home, from Morocco to Turkey and further. In the 1930s in Australia, one still heard frightened mutterings about it.

During a debate on Iraq on BBC1 on 12 February, 2003, Prince Turki of the Saudi Foreign Ministry said that Muslim countries should develop "participatory governments". Asked twice by David Dimbleby, Not democracy? Turki said that there are elements of democracy which are not consistent with Islam.

Tony Blair please pay attention.

I had been accepted by the Faculties of Theology and Law at Edinburgh University as a PhD student. It was agreed that I should write a thesis on some aspect of Christianity and war.

I had an appointment with the Head of the Theology Department.

"So," he enquired, "what would you suggest as the topic of your thesis?"

"Well, I thought I could investigate the development of the attitude towards war of one particular church."

"That has already been done. I think you should write on the Just War in Aquinas and Grotius."

"Or", I continued, "I could investigate the extent to which the life and teaching of Jesus – in as much as we can truly assess it – is sufficient basis for a belief in non-violence."

"No, no, that wouldn't be a proper topic for a PhD thesis."

"But" –

"No, you must do your thesis on the Just War in Aquinas and Grotius, or not at all."

I felt that there was no alternative but to submit to such domination.

Aquinas and Grotius were merely names to me, and I soon wondered if I had bitten off more than I could chew. However, I soon made a plan of action. One task I set myself was to make an exhaustive study of the way in which Aquinas appeared to harmonise the justification of warfare with the teaching of the Bible and particularly of Jesus.

I would not merely study the biblical quotations he referred to in his "war" articles, the section in the *Summa Theologiae* where he dealt with the question. I would compare his understanding and use texts there with how he explained them in the *Catena Aurea* (*The Golden Chain*).

Edited by Aquinas, this book is a collection of commentaries of the Early Church fathers on the New Testament.

At the end of every section Aquinas added his own opinions. It was written in Latin, and no English translation exists. I had some Latin, but not enough to savour the full meaning and flavour of every word and phrase. The book had been lent to me by Father Hislop, a Roman Catholic chaplain, whom I had met in Edinburgh, and he suggested that I might go to Dominican priests for help with translation. I did just that.

While near Newcastle, I knocked on the door of a Dominican Priory and asked for such help. I was taken to Brother Frank, a dear, elderly monk who gave me invaluable help in extracting the true meaning of the Latin words and phrases. I was impressed – as I always was in my contacts with Roman Catholic priests – with the man's humility and unselfishness, and perhaps it was a mark of these qualities that I was never overawed by their saintliness or

their spiritual status.

When I left Newcastle I offered, as an expression of my gratitude, to pay him.

He was shocked. "Money? For helping you to understand the words of Jesus?"

"Then may I buy you a present?"

"I don't need anything, my dear."

"Perhaps a book?"

"My eyesight is getting very poor."

Defeated, I said goodbye and before long I was back in Edinburgh, where I met Gerald Vann, a Dominican priest who was a well-known author. I had read one or two of his books and had already met him years before at a conference on "the devil" that I had attended with a Roman Catholic friend.

I had, at that time, confided to him a hesitation about the doctrine of salvation.

"Why should I be 'saved', when I need forgiveness precisely because I don't do all I can to lead others to the forgiveness of Christ?"

He smiled, "You do take things seriously, don't you?"

This time, however, he didn't rebuke me for being over-serious about the question of war; he gave me encouragement and. I am sure, his prayers.

When I was in Oxford once, I consulted a Professor of Moral Philosophy at Blackfriars.

"If there is such a thing as just war," I said, "then only one side can be just."

He agreed.

"So wouldn't it be a good idea for the Pope to decide and pronounce – at least for Catholics – which side is just and which is unjust? It would clarify things for them. For example, in the last war there were many Catholics on both sides. At least then they'd have known where they were, and whether they were right or wrong according to the teaching of the church."

"You are oversimplifying things, aren't you?"

"How? I'm sorry!"

"Well, the just side is the side which defends itself against the aggressor. But as soon as the just side is defending itself, the aggressors are equally just in defending themselves against the defenders."

"So the just war theory operates only for the first split second, then disintegrates into the justice of individual self-defence."

"You can put it like that."

I thought of Jesus' reply to Pilate, "You say so." I went away, not so much confused, as even more clear-cut about my own position.

I was often, during my research, impressed by my own ignorance, and I wasn't at all hesitant about seeking help.

I was staying with Jewish friends Ulla and Aaron in Dulwich when, in one of the books

I was studying, I came across the word "synderesis". Neither had heard of it, so we searched all their dictionaries without success. Aaron, used to going to the top (being a top civil servant he was almost there), suggested I should phone the Jesuit community at Farm Street.

A deep voice answered the phone. "Good afternoon. Can I help you?"

"I am writing a thesis on Christianity and war, and I have come across the word 'synderesis'. I can't find out what it means, and it's holding me up ... could I ...?"

"Excuse me, madam. I'm only the porter. I'll put you in touch with someone who can – hold on please."

JOAN SIMKINS, former head of religious studies at the City of Leicester College of Education, and now a freethinker, examines the concept of the just war.

Another deep voice came on: "Can I help you?"

Again I explained my dilemma over the question of the vital word "synderesis".

"Can you help me?"

"I think I can, but it would be best if you could come and see me.

"Certainly! "

So we made an appointment.

"Whom shall I ask for?"

"I hope it won't embarrass you to ask for the Archbishop?"

"Oh no!" I said, as if used to hobnobbing with archbishops. I was indeed going to the top!

He turned out to be round and jolly, a warm and friendly man, who immediately declared an intense interest in the matter of Christianity and war. His archbishopric, I learned, had been in India, and in the course of his explaining synderesis as "that aspect of the conscience concerned with understanding moral principles and encouraging the will to apply them", we had a frank and warm discussion.

"I believe strongly in self-defence," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. If someone came to kill me I'd kill him first if I could. And if more came – one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten – I'd kill them all, one after the other.

"You mean you'd kill, say twenty, to preserve your own life, and yet you're a priest? I think that's wrong."

ty and War

Feature

"Remember, in the Old Testament, God commanded Samuel to slaughter the Amalekites, man, woman and child."

"You surely don't interpret that literally?"

"Why not?"

"You can't mean that! Christ is surely the criterion of what has truth and value in the Old Testament, and Christ would never have commanded that."

"If they were evil, it's better they were killed."



The Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224 – 1274)

"Surely not. Christ came, not to condemn, but to save sinners."

(I really ought not to be having to argue like this with an archbishop!)

"And what about the children?" I continued. "You couldn't call them evil. God could never have ordered them to be murdered."

"Ah, but God knew they were going to become evil, that they would grow up wicked."

"I think that's blasphemous."

I had never before, or since, accused an archbishop of blasphemy (I'd never thought of it or had the chance!), but he took it in his stride. We parted good friends and he offered to help me further if I wanted.

I was thinking of him about two months later. It was a dull November day; a bitter wind seeped into my clothes and was trapped there. I walked quickly, making a muff out of my coat sleeves, bending my head before the wind, my scarf flapping against my face so that I could see little more than some fading leaves whipped up by the wind.

I walked quickly for I had a destination: the Dominican Priory in Leicester. I wasn't quite

sure where it was, but I knew I was in the right area. It was planted somewhere among this medley of twisting disconnected roads, *cul-de-sacs*, lawns and brick walls. I saw I was coming to the end of the pavement, and brushing my scarf from my eyes, caught sight of a stalwart figure striding purposefully along, hesitating only for a second before he crossed the road and turned left. The wind was wrapping and unwrapping the thick skirt of his dingy, off-white habit. A Dominican monk – he could direct me to the Priory. I ran after him and said, breathlessly, as he turned round, "Excuse me, but I'm looking for the Priory. Could you please ... tell me ...?"

"Of course! I'm on my way there. I'll be delighted to accompany you."

He was a big man, with a strong, scarred face, and intelligent eyes, and he looked about 60.

We walked along and he slowed his stride to match mine: he was friendly and heartily conversational.

"May I ask why you are going to Holy Cross?"

"I've an appointment with the Prior. I'm writing a thesis on Aquinas' ruling on war, and as I don't own *Summa Theologiae* the Prior has kindly agreed to let me use the library to check my references."

"Aquinas and war?"

"Well, Christianity and war, but focusing on Aquinas."

"Christianity and war, that's very interesting; one of the topics I am most concerned about. What a pity I haven't time to discuss it with you. I'd enjoy a long talk about it, but the day after tomorrow I'm flying to Africa, and I've so much to do today, packing and all sorts of last-minute preparations."

"To Africa – are you going to do missionary work?"

"Yes, actually I'll be running a missionary centre and doing educational work. But to return to your subject: my main interest and study over several years has been earthquakes."

"Earthquakes are my stumbling block, theologically."

"Worse than theological if it happens to you, if the rocks split apart and swallow you up. Yes, I know what you mean. For three years earthquakes were constantly on my mind, I couldn't forget them and I battled with the problem they present. Earthquakes and a good God seemed to contradict each other. How could a good God determine or even allow such cruelty, the cruelty of natural forces crushing human beings like insects."

"Well I haven't solved the problem to my satisfaction," I said. "It's frankly one I have to live with and I don't think I'll ever find the answer. War is easier to explain theologically;

at least, you can blame man more completely. He doesn't *have* to fight; so many millions of men, Christians and others have lived without ever killing anyone; you can explain it too in terms of freewill and human responsibility and human sin. You can't blame God for that."

"Precisely." And he swung along with great strides, sometimes remembering, sometimes forgetting, in his bursting enthusiasm and energy, to bridle his pace to mine.

"That's it; that's it. There you have it! The justice of God. The justice of God and the love of God. I start and finish with that. I suddenly realised after years of praying and thinking and yes, worrying, over the problem, that of course



With Almighty God firmly on their side, Blair and Bush prepare for war

there is no problem. 'God is good'; that is the absolute. God therefore cannot permit anything which is not good. God permits earthquakes, therefore earthquakes are good."

"Good?" I had no such faith.

"...And," he continued with enthusiasm. "As war is a sort of human earthquake and God permits it then war is good too."

I was silent; such logic eluded me.

"After I had satisfied myself with that solution. I had no worries." Presumably hoping or thinking he'd solved *my* problem, he smiled as we approached the Priory. "Well, here we are. I wish you the very best with your research and as I said, I would dearly have liked to discuss it with you. Goodbye, my dear. God be with you."

I was puzzled.

"Discuss it with you," he had said; but what was there to discuss? The goodness of God pervaded everything, and everything was indiscriminately good.

So off he must have flown to Africa, no doubt to evangelise among other things the

(Continued on page 10)

INSOMNIAC? Here are a few techniques for beating the curse of sleeplessness. Try reciting the alphabet backwards. Or going through the alphabet in the regular way and putting a famous name to each letter – a composer, say, or a poet, philosopher or painter. If that fails, try playing “Opposites”.

Never done it? It’s very simple. Just think of something and come up with its antithesis. Don’t bother with the easy stuff, though – you know, wet/dry, tall/short. It’s too boring, and it doesn’t work (unless you’re so drunk that you can’t think at all – in which case you should probably be on your way to hospital and not playing word games anyway).

No, go instead for stuff that’s potentially perplexing. What’s the opposite of Plato? Or computer? Or curry? You get the idea? Hours of innocent amusement, unconditionally guaranteed.

I was playing it the other night and spent a happily soporific time working out the opposite of “Pope”. After eliminating quite a few candidates, I came up with one that seemed to fit the bill beautifully. Step forward please the “Reverend” “Doctor” Ian Paisley (please excuse the excess of inverted commas – they really are a necessary part of any accurate description).

I don’t know whether they are still in educational vogue, but I recall enough of my schooldays to remember those “compare and contrast” essays I was always being badgered to produce. In the days before the internet they could be a bit of a nightmare. Nowadays, nothing could be easier. In the present case, just open a couple of windows and type in <http://www.vatican.va/> and <http://www.freepres.org> respectively and marvel at the display of deep Christian unity therein. Secularists sometimes moan about divisions within

secularism, but these really take the biscuit!

Once this exercise starts to pall, investigate each site on its own for a while. I can especially recommend on the Vatican site the very amusing hagiographies. Never has so much abnormal pathology been elevated to the status of exemplar. Also entertaining are the descriptions of the “miracles” the various “saints” are purported to have performed. No matter how much the churches (any churches) may plead the contrary, when it gets to their basis in supernaturalism they’re back in the

NORMAN PRIDMORE

surfs the web for items of interest to freethinkers

Bronze age. Oh yes, don’t forget the papal biographies either. Like the owl of Minerva, you too will hoot. Mind you, once the laughter has died, you may well weep at the sheer stupidity of it all.

And the site of the Free Presbyterians? Rich material for connoisseurs of biblical ranting. A hate-site to savour.

In the latest copy of the (excellent) *New Humanist* I found a flier advertising a new on-line magazine and discussion forum called ‘openDemocracy’. It’s at <http://www.open-democracy.net> and is well worth a look. A quick visit suggests that it’s an enterprise with great potential. And, unless you want to download the various articles as PDF files, it’s mainly free.

Secularists have for many years been in the vanguard of the voluntary euthanasia movement. The cases of Diane Pretty and Reginald Crew have highlighted again the urgency and importance of changing the law in this area. The baleful influence of religionists has for too long prevented the simple and rational legislative changes that would prevent so much unnecessary suffering. Writing as someone who has spent many years working in the field of terminal care I can only urge freethinkers to support this cause. A good place to start is by visiting the Voluntary Euthanasia Society website at <http://www.ves.org.uk>

Now for something blasphemous, in the best *Freethinker* tradition. “LordCo” (motto – Repentance is Futile) is at <http://lordco.virtualave.net> Amongst various treats on offer is an e-mail greeting card facility. There’s also a section entitled “101 Uses for a Dead Messiah”. They’re up to thirty three, and could probably use a few suggestions. Indulge your inner Antichrist and join in the fun ...

Ever the optimist, I’m trying to work out ways of relieving my poverty by getting a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. There must be some project I can interest them in, and judging by their website (it’s at <http://www.templeton.org/>) the more barking the better. As long as I can bung in a “spiritual” element I should be OK. This organisation is yet another example of the ways in which religious thinking seeks legitimacy and influence. The purpose of the Foundation, it claims, is to “pursue new insights at the boundary between theology and science” using “the humble approach”. This may be claptrap, but it’s well-funded claptrap. Don’t apply for your grant yet, though. Not until I get my leaky roof fixed.

A while ago I nipped into a phone-box to make a call and discovered a Chick tract. For those who have not yet come across these wonders, I should explain that they are evangelistic tools of the most dismal kind. Each features a little cartoon story with a moral. The moral is always the same, of course – repent, sinner, or a flame-grilled eternity awaits you. With this in mind, I offer another “compare and contrast” exercise. Go first to <http://www.chick.com/> (the site of the real thing) then open up <http://sprinklerlife.tripod.com/sissy.htm> (the parody site). The first is as disturbing as the second is funny.

Just two to end with. Dave Pearson sent in a link to the “SmiteCam” of Martin Willett (who also runs the Meme Machine website) at <http://mwillett.org/SMITECAM.htm>.

He’s offering God the chance to convert him, a proud atheist, by means of an “online smiting”. See it all on his webcam. Me, I’m plumping for either a lightning-bolt or a gory hell-hound savaging. Either would make good viewing.

Finally, in order not to be accused of ignoring the Wonderful World of Islam, check out the online article “An Atheists’ Guide to Mohammedanism” at <http://www.atheists.org/Islam/mohammedanism.html>.

It’s not funny, but it is clever.

Suggestions for more sites, please, to norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk.

Christianity and War

good news that earthquakes are good, war is good – and he couldn’t stop at that: the leprosy bacillus, the tsetse fly, crime, corruption and chaos, all monotonously good. A committed man, dedicated to the absolute goodness of all that God allows, all that is.

The foundation and *raison d’être* of his whole being rested on the rock of this conviction. Presumably no earthquake, human or cosmic, could undermine the foundation of this faith, could blast this rock. What point was there in writing a thesis on the ethics of war? I could, of course rest assured it would be good.

I saw the Prior most times when I went to check my references in the *Summa Theologiae*, and he was always friendly and hospitable.

He would, with his own fair hands, make me a pot of tea and bring it in with a plate of digestive biscuits. He didn’t partake of them as he was too conscious of his profile, which was most obvious when he wore only pullover and trousers!

One day I expressed surprise at a passage I had found in Cardinal Newman’s writing; it emphasised that the individual conscience is the ultimate arbiter in all matters relating to morals and ethics.

“You mustn’t be surprised, it is true – overruling everything, the scriptures, the priest, the church, even the Pope, is the individual conscience.”

He didn’t merely confirm what Newman had written; he gave me an example.

“If a man – say, a member of my congregation – came to tell me that he was living in adultery, I should of course remind him of the teaching of Jesus, of the Church and of the Bible. Then I would ask him to go and pray; then if his conscience still told him that it was right to do so, I would tell him that he must obey it, but would add – please live some way away from the church so as not to create a scandal!”

“And has the same conscience the right to rule over matters of dogma and doctrine? I mean if I honestly could not believe in, say, the assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary – or if someone couldn’t honestly, in all conscience, accept any particular dogma or doctrine ...”

“No, that couldn’t happen ... You either have the faith, or you don’t have it. It is a gift from God.”

In his article in the March *Freethinker* Keith Porteous Wood rightly pointed out that the numbers of those apparently indicating that they view themselves as "cultural Christians" does not offer hope for the churches. Church attendance, despite creative data gathering, continues to fall. In this failing climate, not only is the requirement of basic belief constantly subverted to the primary objective of belonging, but the churches are also prepared to count amongst those who "belong" people who not only do not believe in the tenets of their faith, but also those who never actually attend church services.

This is indicative of desperation, yet as Keith Porteous Wood pointed out, there exists a vast residual currency of cultural Christianity which allows such slender claims to look credible when they really are far from it. Moreover, these claims have recently been bolstered by a flurry of articles and radio pronouncements, following the census results, which lend support to the well-worn fallacy that it is a good thing for religion to continue to exist and to exert a regulative function on our lives.

People who might otherwise call themselves secularists or rationalists, or who certainly have no time in their own lives for religious belief, continue to espouse the view that the Church should go on having political and cultural influence on the basis that it provides a kind of social glue. The Church, so this argument goes, provides a degree of moral regulation that society would otherwise lack and has historically been the medium of typical British moderation. "Order" and "decency" are the traditional watchwords of Anglicanism and these pundits express the hope that the Church, particularly the Church of England, will go on providing society with a moral lynch pin, despite its growing irrelevance in the lives of most people.

Whilst there are elements of truth in the historical analysis that the Church of England has played a role in curbing destructive religious fervour, especially after the religious excesses of the civil-war period, it is also a very partial view. It may always be wise and salutary to keep one eye on the history of religious war and persecution, but ultimately it is contradictory and irrational to look to the Church to provide both the bedrock of morality and proof against relativism as well as simultaneously providing moderation in all things.

The rise of evangelical Anglicanism is an apt example. This is the only sector of the Church that can really claim any "growth" in numbers. It is the most vociferous wing of the Anglican Church and certainly shouts long and hard about what it perceives as pressing moral issues. It is precisely in doing this, however, that it loses touch with traditional Anglican moderation. When moderation is in the ascendant in the churches then so is relativism and

the complaint from those who want to see the Church existing as a cultural and moral edifice is likely to be that the Church is not providing moral leadership that is expected of it. Conversely, when moral absolutism grips faith communities, then much of their so-called morality is bad news – for women, for gays, for liberal values in general. Culture and reason lose out either way.

The regulative principle (that Kant was fond of arguing for on behalf of religion) is hypocritical – it involves propounding a known myth as the basis of moral order rather than propounding reason itself and the search for rational objective truth as the underlying fabric of morality. The myth involves a pretence for the sophisticated (living "as if" there were a God in order to defend a moral and cultural order) whilst the gullible are duped.

**Former C of E vicar
DR JAN FORTUNE-WOOD
– now a rationalist – says
that when
moral
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values in general.**



This can only leave the bad taste of "bread and circuses" or even (to borrow Marxist terminology) "the opiate of the masses".

The fear is that without this injection of "regulating" religion, people will become either immoral (with a resulting decay in societal standards) or fanatical. It is certainly possible to point to sectors of society where there is a rise in relativism, as the growth industries surrounding New Age religions show. It is equally possible to point to the "non-moderate" outcomes of religion which arise when faith actually means believing in something, as the rise in fanaticism shows in differing sectors. The question is, why should either of these sorry outcomes constitute a reason to resort to myth and irrationality? In both these instances religion is as much the cause as the cure. Two millennia of the cultural dominance of Christianity and over a hundred years (or more) of an education system founded on Christian principles, in which a daily act of worship is still the staple diet, have not been proof against moral uncertainty. Even more alarming, fanaticism is alive and well and continues to be a predominantly religious phenomenon.

At what point do we stop resorting to so

called "moderate religion" in order to defend ourselves against the excesses of religion? In what sense is this credible? Surely we would do better to resort to rational truth seeking and to developing morality based on our tentative and fallible pursuit of reason?

The historical contribution of Christianity to the realm of culture and morality is unquestionable, but whether it was for good or ill or a mixture of good and ill is more debatable. More pertinently, those of us who champion reason need to be arguing that society is quite able to debate moral and cultural issues and develop a moral and cultural identity without any future injections of religion, moderate or otherwise.

Dr Jan Fortune Wood is a home educator and writer. You can find out more about her books on education and parenting at www.home-education.org.uk or visit her poetry magazine website at www.coffeehousepoetry.co.uk

Questions of belief

A TEXAS biology professor is being sued by a fundamentalist group because he refuses to write letters of recommendation for students who don't believe in evolution. The Liberty Legal Institute argues that Professor Michael Dini of Texas Tech University in Dallas is discriminating against students on grounds of belief.

The issue was first raised last year, when a complaint was made and the university defended Professor Dini, saying that a letter of recommendation was a personal matter between a professor and student, and was not subject to university control or regulation.

Professor Dini advises students seeking a recommendation to answer the question: "How do you think the human species originated?" And he explains that, if they cannot affirm a scientific answer to this question, then they should "not seek my recommendation for admittance to further education in the biomedical sciences".

Micah Spradling, the student at the centre of the legal complaint, said that he could explain the process of evolution, "maybe how some people say it happens, but I could not have said... I believe in it".

In which case he should not have sought Professor Dini's recommendation. Would he expect a theology professor to recommend a student who didn't believe in God?

– Colin McCall

Due to illness, Colin's regular column does not appear in this issue. We wish Colin a speedy recovery and hope he is soon able to resume writing *Down to Earth*.

In his presidential address to the Linnean Society in May 1859, Thomas Bell made what Janet Browne justly calls "one of the most unfortunate misjudgments in the history of science". "The year that has just passed", he told the members, "has not, indeed, been marked by any of those striking discoveries which at once revolutionise, so to speak, the department of science on which they bear". In fact, the science of biology had been revolutionised the previous July with the reading of papers by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace on their joint theory of evolution by natural selection.

The two authors differed greatly in status. Darwin was a university educated prosperous "gentleman", whereas Wallace came from the other side of the Victorian cultural divide: self-educated in the sciences, attending lectures at the Hall of Science in London and at Mechanics Institutes in the provinces. In Leicester he met Henry Walter Bates, "an enthusiastic entomologist" with whom he sailed for Brazil in 1848 to collect natural history specimens on the River Amazon. Wallace returned in 1852, but lost his specimens and notes in a shipwreck. He had no prospects in England, so he left again the next year, this time for Malaysia and Indonesia. These eight years of wandering, he later said, "constituted the central and controlling incident" of his life.

In the years that followed the publication of their papers, says Janet Browne, "no two authors thrown together in such a fashion tried harder than Darwin and Wallace to treat each other fairly. Each regarded the other with respect, admiration and generosity". While Wallace was away on his wanderings, Darwin was writing the book that dismissed the demiurge from biological process-

es. "I can entertain no doubt", he said in his introduction to the second edition of *The Origin of Species*, "after the most deliberate and dispassion-

COLIN McCALL reviews
Charles Darwin: The Power of Place, by Janet Brown, Jonathan Cape, £25.00 and
NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews
Life Without God, A Guide to Fulfilment Without Religion, by Nicolaos S Tzannes
PhD America House, 2002, \$19.95,
ISBN 1-59129-769-9

ate judgment of which I am capable, that the view which most naturalists entertain, and which I formerly entertained – namely that each species has been independently created – is erroneous".

What a book it was, exclaims Janet Browne. "Few scientific texts have been so tightly woven, so packed with factual information and studied with such richly inventive metaphor". "One long argument", Darwin called it, and it was; but it was an argument so convincingly and brilliantly presented as to make it in Janet Browne's words, "a lasting work of art". "Some parts must be dry & some rather abstruse" Darwin had warned his publisher John Murray, and he promised that if the book was a failure he (Darwin) would not prove "avaricious". Murray thought Darwin's theory absurd, but one of his advisers foresaw that it would be much discussed, so printing went ahead.

A "secular testament to the times" Janet Browne calls it, and Darwin's religious friends

were not slow to protest in private letters to him. His old teacher at Cambridge, Adam Sedgwick, for example, read it with "more pain than pleasure". To accept its argument, he wrote, would "sink the human race into a lower grade of degradation than any into which it has fallen since its written records tell us of its history". And Robert FitzRoy, captain of the *Beagle*, wrote personally and "tempestuously", then sent a letter to the *Times*. "It is a pity he did not add his theory of the extinction of Mastodon &c from the door of the Ark being made too small" was Darwin's sardonic comment to Charles Lyell. The Rev Charles Kingsley was a notable exception who was therefore cited approvingly in subsequent editions of the *Origin of Species* as a "celebrated cleric", although Kingsley posited a Creator behind the evolutionary process.

Murray's adviser proves right: Darwin's book received more attention than any other scientific work, and before the end of its author's life it had been discussed in more than one hundred newspapers and journals in Britain alone. Darwin himself kept two hefty volumes of newspaper clippings. And after six months of reviews came the famous debate at the British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Oxford in June 1860, where the chemist and historian John William Draper spoke "On the Intellectual Development of Europe, Considered with Reference to the Views of Mr Darwin"; but where all else paled into insignificance beside the legendary Huxley-Wilberforce clash.

"My book has stirred up the mud with a vengeance", Darwin wrote to his great supporter in America, Asa Gray, "& it will be a blessing if all my friends do not get to hate me. But I look at it as certain, if I had not stirred up the mud some one else could very soon ..." The sooner the battle was fought the sooner it would be settled, he said; but he didn't expect it to be settled in the lifetimes of him and his "four musketeers", as Janet Browne dubs them: Charles Lyell ("firm as a tower"), Joseph Hooker ("our best and most philosophical botanist"), T H Huxley and Gray himself, who had arranged an American edition of the *Origin*. No other person understands me so thoroughly as Asa Gray, said Darwin. "If I ever doubt what I mean myself, I think I shall ask him".

Huxley was, of course, the greatest propagandist of them all; equally at the Royal Institution or at the School of Mines, where he spoke on "The Relation of Man to the Rest of the Animal Kingdom" to a working class audience who, as Janet Browne notes, gave up their scant leisure time after a long working day and paid a sixpenny entrance fee out of a weekly wage of some thirty shillings.

These were the revolutionary days; but Charles Darwin had a long life to come, which Janet Browne conveys vividly to the reader.

To kill or not to kill?

THE Bush administration has an ambivalent attitude towards killing, as a few examples will show. In January 2003 both pro-choice and pro-life (anti-abortion) campaigners demonstrated in Washington DC, marking the 30th anniversary of the Roe v Wade decision in the US Supreme Court which, in effect, legalised abortion on demand. Pro-choice campaigners held a candlelight vigil and the six potential Democratic candidates for the presidency at the next election pledged to defend abortion rights.

Simultaneously some 50,000 anti-abortionists held a march addressed by George Bush, who declared the anniversary a "national sanctity of human life day" and said that America must "protect the lives of innocent children waiting to be born". This, while preparing for a war on Iraq that would prematurely end the lives of countless children already born. At present there is a broadly pro-choice consensus among the Supreme Court judges but, as soon as a vacancy occurs (probably this year) Bush will appoint an anti-abortion judge in his place. Attorney General John Ashcroft, who also shows touching concern for the unborn child, has overridden his own federal prosecutors and is seeking the execution of 28 defendants. Mind you, Ashcroft is selective in his decisions on who should die. According to a Texas defence lawyer, Dick Burr, 95 percent of the cases for which the Attorney General is seeking the death penalty and overriding his prosecutors involve black or Latino defendants. He seems to side with prosecutors who recommend no death penalty against white defendants.

And we can bear in mind what Michael Moore tells us (in his *Stupid White Men*) that since 1973, 95 death row inmates have been found innocent of the crimes for which they have been sentenced to die; and a recent death penalty study of 4,578 cases in the period 1973-1995, concluded that the courts found "serious, reversible error in nearly 7 of every ten capital sentence cases".

Life, one must conclude, is uncertain these days with Republican fundamentalists at the helm in Washington DC. And not just in America itself.

– Colin McCall

There were more books, notably *The Descent of Man* (1871), which made a handsome profit and was translated into five European languages in the same year and into three others soon after. Janet Browne gives us a taste of the reviews and of the illustrations of Darwin as an "ape-man". But as Darwin remarked resignedly, abuse can be as good as praise for selling a book.

One opponent, the Roman Catholic St George Mivart, who had published articles in the *Month* on "difficulties of the theory of natural selection", Darwin found "most cutting"; but Huxley "ruthlessly corrected both Mivart's biology and his interpretation of Catholic doctrine". Mivart infuriated Darwin further with a near-libellous attack on an article by Charles's son, George Darwin, that argued for easier divorce. Huxley again counter-attacked.

Although Wallace differed in several respects from Darwin on natural selection, he regarded *The Descent of Man* as "wonderful ... a marvellous contribution to the history of the development of the forms of life". It was Wallace's embracing of spiritualism that opened a gap between them. Darwin believed in "none of it". He did attend a seance or "scientific test" along with George Henry Lewes, George Eliot, Francis Galton, Huxley and others, but, as he told his son, it was "all imposture". Huxley concluded that the medium was a cheat and impostor. A little later he was, in fact unmasked as a fraud.

Darwin was a great letter writer, corresponding with experts all over the world in furtherance of his biological inquiries and experiments, which were seemingly endless and certainly fascinating to read about. (I might single out especially his work on insectivorous plants.) Janet Browne estimates that, in the decade that followed *The Descent of Man*, he wrote around fifteen hundred letters a year and received much the same number. He also received many distinguished visitors, among them Thomas Carlyle, Ernst Haeckel and William Ewart Gladstone. Interestingly, though, there is "scant evidence" for the story that Karl Marx asked permission to dedicate to him a future edition of *Das Kapital*. Janet Browne thinks it much more likely that it was Edward Aveling who asked if he might dedicate *The Students' Darwin* to Darwin—and was refused.

Aveling did, however, visit Darwin at Down House, accompanied by the German monist Ludwig Buchner, and asked Darwin if he was an atheist. The latter preferred the word "agnostic", whereupon Aveling told him "Agnostic was but Atheist writ respectable" and "Atheist was only Agnostic writ aggressive". I might add for the benefit of new readers that Aveling courageously edited this paper when G W Foote was imprisoned for blasphemy. And, while I greatly admire Janet Browne's two-volume biography, I can correct her on two minor matters. She is wrong to say

that Charles Bradlaugh "never" occupied his seat in Parliament. It took a long and taxing struggle, but he finally did. And *Half-Hours with the Freethinkers* was written and edited by "Iconoclast" (Bradlaugh), Collins and Watts, not Holyoake. Incidentally, Darwin refused to support Bradlaugh and Annie Besant in the Knowlton case and said, if called to court, he would testify against them. His argument here was uncharacteristically unsound; but then, he was a Victorian who had fathered ten children.

— Colin McCall.

Over the past week or so I have been dipping in and out of Richard Dawkins' latest book *A Devils Chaplain*. This is nice for me, but not so nice for Nicolaos S Tzannes, PhD. He's written a book called *Life Without God – A Guide to Fulfilment Without Religion*. Reading the two concurrently demonstrates the truth of the proposition that comparisons are invidious.

A family-imbibed rule of mine has always been that one always ought to find something nice to say about someone. In the case of Dr Tzannes, this is not difficult. He is patently sincere, and obviously thoughtful. And his book is short.

Above even these virtues, however, is one that shines even more brightly. Quite simply, he is funny. He is funny in two ways, one intentional, the other, not.

The book is essentially a series of dialogues (which he eccentrically calls Socratic) in which he attempts, as he writes in the prologue, firstly to "demonstrate the absurdity of religious dogmas, beliefs and practices" and secondly to "propose a simple and meaningful set of beliefs for those who sense that they have a mission in life but are unable to accept the existence of a supreme being".

The participants in these dialogues are a varied bunch, ranging from his long-suffering and pious wife Estelle to a Greek Orthodox theologian, by way of a miscellaneous collection of colleagues, students and friends.

When I put the book down after my first reading of it I had a curious sensation that I had read it before – or at least something breathtakingly similar in tone. I couldn't put my finger, though, on quite what the book in question was.

Perhaps readers of this review might catch on quicker than I did. Here are a few quotes to help.

"I knew that Estelle's last sarcasm was also her last attempt to save some face. I could give her that – no problem. I am quite magnanimous".

"His face twisted with the realisation that he had fallen for my simple trick. He collapsed back into his chair and remained there pensive and embarrassed for quite some time. I harboured no illusion, of course, that I had con-

verted him to my position. He was depressed because he had lost the argument. He had to rework his approach – open up a new angle.

"But I wouldn't let him. The best defence is a good offence, I thought to myself, so I'd better get ready for our next meeting. And I was".

Got it yet? OK, teasing over. It's none other than Charles Pooter, as lovingly portrayed in the Grossmith brothers *Diary of a Nobody*.

When I first realised this, I read the book again to see if it was possible to determine whether Tzannes' self-portrayal was deliberate or quite accidental and unconscious. Close analysis inclines me to the latter judgement.

Style is one thing, content quite another. An eccentric or wilful style may be tolerated if an author has something truly new or significant or interesting to say. I'm thinking here (to give just one example) of A N Whitehead, whose undetectable prose has put off many readers from tackling his important and stimulating works on history and science.

What is Dr Tzannes saying, then? Let me quote him again.

"Our mission in life is to give our best effort for the perpetuation and evolution of our species". Yup, that's it.

He breaks this down, *a la* Maslow, into a number of what he calls Primary and Secondary contributions. The Primaries include such things as "to individually survive in the face of all adversity", to "realise our maximum individual potential", "to go through the cycle of mating, producing offspring, parenting and grand-parenting".

The Secondaries require us to "contribute to the culture of the society", to "engage in philanthropic and altruistic acts towards the more needy members of society", and to "contribute to fields that improve life such as medical professions, teaching professions, engineering, food growing, etc..".

This is not new. It's little more than a kind of bland utilitarianism enlivened with Darwinist bells and whistles. There's a nod to both evolutionary and "person-centred psychology", both poorly understood, and some worrying implications regarding the kind of social agenda that might be implied by such a project. This is perhaps inevitable, given that Tzannes is a genetic determinist of the first order.

Dawkins has consistently asserted that nature and evolutionary theory have nothing to contribute to ethical thought, and that they teach no lessons from which humans ought to derive their behaviour. This book is an example of what can happen when a philosophical-unsophisticated mind makes the fundamental error of ignoring such warnings.

Dr Tzannes, as well as being an eminently qualified electrical engineer, is also big in the world of backgammon. I am sure that his advice concerning that amusing game is excellent.

— Norman Pridmore

G A Wells

MR Stuart Campbell (*Points of View*, February) is surely being less than honest when he says that he knows of "no historian who doubts" that Jesus existed. Or perhaps he is making a sly insinuation that he does not regard Professor G A Wells as a historian worthy of consideration?

The professor's three books – *The Jesus of the Early Christians*, *Did Jesus Exist?* and *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* effectively refute both the anecdotal and the manufactured "proofs" of the existence of such an individual at the time of Pontius Pilate. It is gracious of Mr Campbell to admit that we do not have to accept everything claimed in the gospels.

DEREK ROBERTS
Surrey

Religious extremism

FOLLOWING the exposure in January by the BBC of fundamentalist Christian values in the US, it is becoming increasingly clear that civilised values in our Western democracies are being dangerously undermined by religious extremism.

An analysis of the causes of religious fundamentalism suggests that they are probably rooted in the lack of a soundly-based broad education founded on the Humanities. The resulting ignorance is being exploited by religious leaders, especially those with extremist agendas.

The Humanities and the values which they encapsulated developed during the European Renaissance. These values have been dangerously eroded by the intrusion of political pressure from various religious bodies such as the fundamentalist Christian right, sections of the Church of England, Roman Catholicism and other religious groups supported by the present Prime Minister and his like-minded associates, as exemplified by Government support for "Faith Schools" and "faith-based welfare"; schools which teach "creationism" and deny the scientific validity of Darwin's soundly-based thesis.

Unfortunately there does not seem to be any serious counter-balance to growing educationally-bigoted religious beliefs, this at a time when there has been an unparalleled unveiling of abuses by religious organisations. We need independent schools free from both government and religious interference, such as an independent secular educational organisation funded by the National Secular Society, and/or similar bodies. Many parents do not want their children indoctrinated as the only means of obtaining a sound education. There must be many others like myself who would make a contribution towards the initiation of such a scheme, or am I a lone voice in the wilderness?

JOHN W MURRAY
Hereford

Heathrow chapel

I VISITED St George's Chapel at Heathrow a couple of days ago. I'm an atheist, but I like to keep up with the latest trends in Christianity. Besides, I had time to kill and churches are usually clean, quiet places, unlike much of England.

This chapel is unusual in that it's circular and underground, with a domed roof; it's built of concrete and feels much like a bomb shelter, and perhaps it is one. There are three altars: the main one has an altar cloth decorated with a trinity of golden aeroplanes embroidered on a dark blue background: they are depicted rising vertically so they look much like the Christian cross. Innovative and perhaps an appropriate homage to Heathrow, I thought.

While I was studying the Bible on the lectern to determine which version it was (King James I was glad to see) a young, Middle-Eastern man came in. Probably security, I thought – he had no luggage. He left. Then to my surprise he returned. "It's all right," he told me reassuringly, glancing around the chapel, "I'm a Muslim. I have to find the right place to pray."

"Yes, of course," I said, "you have to find the right direction!"

He chose a suitable spot, stood there for a couple of minutes, prostrated himself, then left with a light step, all smiles, admonishing me to "take care".

(Actually, he could have gone to the multi-faith prayer room across the way – it was empty, save for an old man meditatively drying his socks on the radiator. But it has no atmosphere, just chairs ranged around the walls. It reminded me of a waiting room – but perhaps that's appropriate.)

My question is: Do Muslims carry around a compass; do they know instinctively which way is East; or doesn't it matter that much which way they face?

Such a nice young man!

HELEN COX
Somerset

Catholic child abuse

WHILE I sympathise with Terry Martin's call for an end to witch-hunting against paedophile priests (*Points of View*, February), I cannot agree that the incidence of paedophilia in the Catholic Church has nothing to do with the Catholic religion.

The fact is that the Church has always had a perverse view of sexuality. I would recommend anyone interested to read *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality and the Catholic Church* by Uta Ranke-Heinemann.

The modern Catholic Church is apparently not fundamentalist: it has acknowledged its error over Galileo; it accepts Darwinian evolution. But the attitude to sexuality stems from a

much earlier and fundamentalist time. Instead of accepting that humans, like most animals, have a very strong and natural sex drive, the Church still basically equates sex with sin.

As one result, we have the imposition of celibacy on priests. This is cruel, not just in requiring the suppression of a most basic part of their physical nature, but also in denying them the important psychological comfort of partnership.

The Church's traditional view that the only legitimate end of sexual intercourse was procreation led to the ban on all forms of "artificial" contraception, which has caused much misery not only for Catholic couples but also for large numbers of non-Catholics denied proper reproductive health care by the energetic political manoeuvring of the Church. Even though the Church now grudgingly acknowledges that sex is not just for procreation, it still refuses to allow the use of condoms to protect against HIV infection. As far as I am aware, it still insists that a woman should not deny sex to her husband, even if he is HIV positive or if she has been told that another pregnancy will kill her. So she is forced to put her life at risk, because she must not protect herself with a condom.

Another target is, of course, abortion. The Catholic Church has been prominent in the anti-choice movement. There have been some truly horrible cases such as the recent one in Nicaragua, where there was opposition to an abortion for a nine-year-old girl who had become pregnant as a result of rape (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/2789279.stm>). Readers may also recall the Church's attack on the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) because, together with other UN humanitarian agencies, it was making emergency contraception (the so-called "morning-after pill") available to refugee women, many of whom had been raped. The Vatican made a big noise about withdrawing its annual donation to UNICEF, a gesture that misfired a little when it was shown that the amount given each year out of its trillions of dollars had been the splendid sum of \$2000.

As a lifelong atheist, I dislike and despise all religion, but none as much as the Catholic Church, which, not content with misusing its huge influence over believers, has used every possible political trick to impose its will on non-adherents.

I agree with Terry Martin that we should have sympathy for errant priests who are themselves victims of their monstrous church, but I part company with him when he writes that "most priests are decent human beings whose only mistake in life is to have opted for the supernatural in a mainly misguided belief that they serve a holy cause". If that is their "only mistake", it is still a huge one with important consequences for which they must take



responsibility. We could probably have said that most members of the Nazi Party were decent human beings whose only mistake in life was to have opted to serve what they believed to be a noble cause.

I think that the secular press should report the paedophile scandal within the Catholic Church, but the emphasis should be on the attitudes of the Church hierarchy to this scandal: its strenuous efforts at covering it up and its attempts to blame the victims rather than the perpetrators or the institution.

DIANA BROWN
Switzerland

Atheists in Wales

SOME months ago – probably a year ago now – I tried to set up a Yahoo group discussion list called Secular Wales. One person signed up. I had a story in the BHA newsletter, and contacted several people by phone, who all promised to put the word out. Still only one.

The group will be closed down soon because of lack of interest, although I've reactivated it temporarily by posting a message to it.

All that people need to do to join is to send an email to secularwales-subscribe@yahoo.com and wait for the reply to tell them what to do next.

There must be infidels here in Wales apart from the bloody sheep!

ANDY ARMITAGE
Pembrokeshire

Clumsy Notation

COLIN McCall (March 2003 p.13) says "a humanist writing in the 21st century should now be in the habit of using CE and BCE instead of AD and BC" in the writing of dates. But surely a clumsy notation such as this, using three letters instead of two is not an advance.

All that is necessary is to interpret AD as "After Datum" (or "After Dot"), the Datum being the zero point on the time-line. If it is to be taken as meaning "Anno Domini" ("in the year of the Lord") then it should in any case come before the year number.

We could then, if desired for consistency, use BD (Before Datum) instead of BC.

GEORGE JELLISS
Leicester

Devastating exposé of Israel

I HAVE just finished reading "Israel/Palestine – how to end the war of 1948" by Tanya Reinhart (Seven Stories Press, New York). This devastating exposé of Israeli ambition and duplicity should be read by all politically aware people in the West and be brought to the attention of our political leaders with the demand for positive action to end the wrongs visited on the Palestinian people.

Now that Mr Blair is, so we are led to

believe, the trusted ally and confidant of Mr Bush, perhaps he could make this the price of his support for the Iraq adventure on which they are both currently resolved?

Time and space would fail me in trying to repeat here the catalogue of cynical ploys adopted by the Israelis in avoiding compliance with the UN resolutions requiring their relinquishment of the occupied territories. Suffice it to say that by comparison they make Saddam Hussain seem a naive buffoon.

The one ray of hope in all this sorry affair is the existence of a vocal minority of Israeli Jews, including members of the armed forces, opposed to the tactics of the cadre of right-wing generals currently in charge and their poisonous fundamentalist religious ultra-orthodox allies.

It may be too much to hope that Americans, especially secular Jews, will wake up and throw their huge political weight behind a determined effort to resolve the Israeli/Palestinian impasse in the only realistic way, by insisting on a unilateral withdrawal from the occupied territories and cessation of the programme of settlements. The precedent set by successive US Presidents is not very promising in this regard, and of course the Christian fundamentalist crazies in the Bible Belt also sympathise with the Eretz Israel view.

Perhaps a fuller review of this book could be done by one of your regular reviewers, to highlight some of the less well-publicised issues involved?

IAN NORRIS
Chester

Anti-theist

ON Channel 4 last week there was a programme on Cliff Richard, the pop idol and born-again Christian. One of the contributors declared himself an "anti-theist", meaning someone who didn't just think that God didn't exist, but thought that theism was more dangerous than drug peddling, international arms selling, or whatever is the occupation that is most disreputable to you.

As such he believed that theism should be actively campaigned against and, as far as possible eradicated.

This is different from what I think, and what every other atheist I have met believes, which is that trying to convert believers is a waste of time; what chance has mere logic and reason when faced with faith!

Is "anti-theism" a new coinage?

MARTIN BOND
W Sussex

Gender discrimination

D A Langdown (*Points of View*, March) asserts that some of the phrases in reply to Sue Lord's letter (February) were "completely

unacceptable". As he does not specify the offending phrases, I am unable to answer his complaint.

However, I agree with Mr Langdown on two points. First, everyone in the secularist movement needs encouragement. For a start, Sue Lord should be encouraged to get off her "gender discrimination" hobby-horse.

Second, I agree that an apology is called for. An apology is due to the editor and publishers of the *Freethinker* for wasting their time and resources dealing with carping complaints by Sue Lord and her alter ego, A Shaw (*Points of View*, March).

Furthermore, an apology is due to readers who have been misled by her use of a *nom-de-plume*. This practice is justified in some circumstances, ie for personal security or protection of professional status. But it is completely unacceptable (to put it mildly) if a correspondent writes pseudonymously in support of views published previously under that writer's own name in the same journal.

BILL MCILROY
East Sussex

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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, Sunday, April 6, 4pm, Terry Liddle: Joseph McCabe, a Forgotten Hero.

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, March 28, 8pm. AGM and Jim Davies: *Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society*.

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, April 11, 7.30 pm. Jose Arroyo: *Pedro Almodovar, Award-Winning Spanish Film Director*.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Niall Power. Tel 0161 2865349. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Wednesday, April 9, 7.30pm. AGM.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: NI 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, April 3, 8pm. AGM.

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@dalcruie.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. Annual General Meeting at 14 Foxholes Crescent, Calverley. Tuesday, April 18, 7.30 pm.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Website: <http://homepages.stayfree.co.uk/lss>. Public Meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Programme from above address.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, April 24, 8pm. Public Meeting. Robert Morrell: *Thomas Paine and The Age of Reason*.

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, April 2, 8pm. Matthew Carroll: *The Woodcraft Folk Visit to the Earth Summit*.

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 8773 0631. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net. Wednesday, April 9, 8pm. John and Lucie White: *This Time Flies*.

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