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Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881



There's no Pope without Fire in Lewes

A flaming row
erupts in
Sussex over
the annual
burning of an
effigy of Pope
Paul V

See full report on page 6

So, what are
prayers really
for?

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pages



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- Religious observance plummets in Australia – p 7
- Shelley: Angelic Atheist – p 10

HAD I got wind of their intentions earlier, I would have immediately contacted the people of Navatusila, on the Fijian island of Viti Levu, and assured them that there was absolutely no reason for them to apologise for the death of the Playden, East Sussex missionary, the Rev Thomas Baker, who ended up, poor dear, in one of their cooking pots.

Of course, he had it coming to him. He was, after all, intent on destroying their culture and beliefs and supplanting them with his own pernicious brand of superstition.

The apology for Baker's death was made late last year – 137 years after after his death in the remote mountain community.

The locals got it into their heads that a series of misfortunes that befell their village over the years were the result of their ancestors killing and eating the Wesleyan Methodist Church minister.

Nonsense. Any bad luck the villagers may have suffered was just that – bad luck, and nothing more.

It was suggested that the meddling missionary had come to a grisly end because he made the mistake of touching the head of a Fijian chief. Baker is thought to have removed a comb from the chief's hair, believing it had been stolen from his belongings. Touching the head of a chief was taboo in Fiji, once known as the Cannibal Isles.

Baker, 35, subsequently went down in history as being the only European to have been cooked and eaten in Fiji. A contemporary account of death quoted villagers as saying: "We ate everything but his boots." Had this taste of Christianity given them acute heartburn, then this surely would have been punishment enough

for this rather inhospitable act.

One of those boots, by the way, is on display in the national museum in the capital, Suva.

Alas, his death did not serve as a warning to other missionaries, who continued peddling their dangerous myths among non-Christians throughout the world, and in the process destroyed societies who would have been far better off without their silly, intolerant religion.

Five years ago a pair of entrepreneurs caused an uproar on the islands when they announced a

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE considers the sad fate of the Reverend Thomas Baker, and discovers the pleasures and the pitfalls of digital radio



plan to sell "cannibal chutney" based on a traditional recipe which would have accompanied the meal the Navatusilans made of Baker.

Fiji, alas, is now staunchly Christian and many Fijians regard their cannibal heritage as primitive and embarrassing. But given time, they will, no doubt, come to regard *Christianity* as primitive and embarrassing, in much the same way as most of us in Britain do today.

ALTHOUGH I made it known last year that a foreskin restoration manual would be most welcome in my Winterval stocking, no-one responded to the hint. What I got instead – and which has so far given me more fun than a restored foreskin ever could – was a DAB digital radio, which has been tuned for the past few weeks almost exclusively to BBC Radio 7.

This station specialises in wall-to-wall broadcasts of the best of British comedy and radio drama – much of it delightful stuff that I first heard on the World Service when I was a teenager living in South Africa. Programmes like *The Navy Lark*, *The Clitheroe Kid*, *Round the Horn*, and *The Goon Show* are broadcast alongside more modern offerings such as *Yes Minister*, *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*, *The Benn Diaries*, Sherlock Holmes dramatisations, and the delightful Alan Bennett monologues, read by the late Thora Hird.

Laughing out loud all day, or finding oneself utterly immersed in a 50s science fiction episode is so much better for the blood pressure than yelling abuse at some pontificating politician or bishop hogging the air waves, or shaking one's head in despair at the bilge that passes for *Thought for the Day* – but there is, I have found, a downside: you can't have fun and keep abreast of current affairs at the same time.

Thus it was that I missed the recent kerfuffle over the dotty Bishop of Chester, Dr Peter

Forster, one of the most senior bishops in the country, whose diocese stretches as far as Stockport and Dukinfield. But for a spoof advertisement submitted to the *Freethinker* by Alistair McBay, (see page 4), the Forster incident would have passed under my radar completely.

Forster, a member of the House of Lords, and well known for his conservative views, prompted squeals of outrage when he declared "Some people who are primarily homosexual can reorientate themselves. I would encourage them to consider that as an option but I would not set myself up as a specialist on the subject – that's in the area of psychiatric health."

Immediately after this ecclesiastical eye-wash was reported in his local newspaper and later appeared in the *Manchester Evening News*, police received complaints saying he had committed a "hate crime". Martin Reynolds, spokesman for the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, joined in the furore, saying he "welcomed a police investigation".

For pity's sake, why? Don't people like Reynolds realise that Forster is a bloody bishop, and is paid good money to talk crap? Dammit, it's his job after all! And, as far as I know, New Labour hasn't yet declared stupidity illegal.

Soon, the whole thing – like the Kilroy-Silk episode – found itself getting far more attention than it ever merited, and even saw the likes of Paul Vallely, Associate Editor of the *Independent*, weighing in – with tongue firmly in cheek. Or at least I assume that's where it was when he declared: "I would not set myself up as a medical specialist on the subject – to borrow a phrase from the Bishop of Chester – but it is clear that some people who feel themselves to be religious can, with psychiatric help, reorientate themselves. Being a Christian is now a curable condition.

"There are those deluded folk who assume that Christianity is not a lifestyle choice, but a gift from the Almighty. I want to help them on this. Modern mental-health care has a number of techniques, including aversion therapy, which can significantly reduce religious cravings, or, at least, stop people acting on them in a way that is unnatural ...

"Even the most ardent gay campaigners accept that homosexuals are a minority of the population. Religious people may also be in a minority, but they are a far more sizeable one. If they were to undergo a similar psychiatric re-orientation, how much greater would be the impact on the well-being of society in general."

I LEAVE you with an observation by comedian Charlie Chester, who, in a variety programme hosted by the late Frankie Howerd in the early 70s, and re-broadcast on BBC Radio 7 yesterday, said: "It's a funny old world. If the queen has a baby they fire 21 guns. If a nun has a baby they fire a dirty old can(n)on."

Freethinker Fund

THE Freethinker fund has received a welcome boost of £1,661 between November 1 and January 23, £500 of which was a bequest from Colin McCall, the *Freethinker* columnist who died last year.

We are grateful to the following subscribers who donated so generously to the fund in during this period: K Abbas, A Adler, I Andrews, C Baker, J Bassett, D Bayly, J Beaven, K S Belfield, Bell, R Bollans, J Boyd, A Bradley, R Brown, I Brydon, K Budden, B Burfoot, S Campbell, E Carim, H Carter, J Cass, R Child, S Chumbley, J Clarke, N Collins, J Craddock, R Danielian, J Davis, D Dawson, N Divall, P Doubleday, C Douglas, E Durbridge, S Eadie, R Eagle, R Evans, S Farrelly, G Fellows, R Fennell, F Fish, B Forbes, P Forrest, M Fox, G Francis, E Fraser, P Gatenby, N Geddes, D Giddings, B Hall, M Harding, A Harland, R Harrison, D Harrop, M Hart, J Hayward, F Heffer, V Hennessy, S Hill, J Hood, D Hooley, R Howells, C Jacot, M Johnson, C Kershaw, I Kirkland, R Le Sueur, B Lewis, D Lippiatt, C McDonald, P McDonald, A McGee, M Maclachlan, A Manser, R Manton, L Martin, G S Mellor, T Morrison, E Napier, G Noble, O'Brien, J Onyett, G Otten, C Pinel, S Rayment, B Rima, G Robins, S Rose, B Sanders, A Sittampalam, J Skoyles, D Still, H Stamp, G Strang, C Thomas, R Torode, T Turner, G Verco, S Ware, G Weerasingha, L West, C Williams, I Williams, S Williams, F Woodhead, R Woodward.

Muslim Council of Britain and Commission for Racial Equality accused of 'appalling hypocrisy'

THE Muslim Council of Britain and the Commission for Racial Equality have received a letter sent to them last month by *Freethinker* subscriber Alistair McBay in the wake of the Robert Kilroy-Silk controversy, accusing them of "appalling hypocrisy".

Both the MCB and the CRE have called for Kilroy-Silk to be prosecuted for "racist" remarks he made about Arabs in his newspaper

Mary was a 'frigid bitch' according to 'Jesus diary'

OUTRAGED Christians have called for a novel depicting Jesus as a foul-mouthed, promiscuous, pot-smoking youth to be banned from shelves of a local bookshop in Yeovil, Somerset.

According to a report in the *Western Gazette*, a row broke out within days of *The Utterly, Utterly Private and Confidential Teenage Diary of Jesus* by cult author Paul Murphy going on sale at Ottaker's.

Murphy's account of Jesus' adolescent years is vastly different from that of the Bible, portraying him as a typically-confused teenager. In the diaries Jesus calls the Virgin Mary a "frigid bitch", and describes his experiences of taking marijuana and LSD and having sex with Mary Magdlene.

Murphy, of West Camel, believes most people will not take offence and is a fierce defender of free speech, but church leaders in Yeovil have condemned the book as blasphemous and threatened to boycott the store.

He said: "Times have relaxed, you walk into any pub on Saturday and there will be somebody telling a joke about Jesus or the Pope.

"I personally find sawing sheep in half offensive but I would fight to the death for people to be able to do that in a democracy.

He added: "I am sure God had a sense of humour, how else do you explain the Welsh?"

"If one looks past the surface, the book makes pointed remarks about religious intolerance, holy wars, blind faith in leaders, even the Gulf War; and to be frank, I have used the lowest common denominator to make some sincere comments."

Steve Hart of the Yeovil Community Church said "From what I have heard of it, it sounds very offensive to Christians. Anything which is contrary to the Bible is heretical. If it is contrary to what is taught in the scriptures then it should not be on sale in Yeovil."

column in the *Sunday Express*, and the *Kilroy* programme on BBC TV has been suspended.

Mr McBay wrote: "In trying, for the sake of my sanity, to get some perspective on the Kilroy-Silk affair, I found it useful to compare his treatment at the hands of the MCB and CRE with that handed out to Sheikh Abu Hamza al-Masri, the one-eyed, hook-handed Islamic zealot. We need no reminder of Abu Hamza's public statements – vitriolic anti-Jewish, anti-gay, anti-Western, anti-infidel rants in general – a genuine incitement to racial and religious hatred if ever there was. Abu Hamza hits the top spot by a country mile when it comes to arousing anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain ...

"For his opinions on the Arabs, and by inference Muslims, Kilroy-Silk was vilified by the Muslim Council of Britain as a racist, and was the demonised subject of four (yes, four) press releases from the MCB in the space of ten (yes, just ten) days. The CRE issued a statement that it had referred the opinion he expressed to the police to see if there was a charge to answer for incitement to religious and/or racial hatred, and called on the man to apologise and donate a portion of his earnings to Muslim charities. Trevor Phillips at the CRE condemned Kilroy-Silk for "the extreme and violent terms" in which the media pundit expressed himself, because it created "a danger that this might incite some individuals to act against someone who they think is an Arab".

"And Abu Hamza, the man who has publicly stated that it is OK to kill non-Muslims? Well, he has never been denounced by name by the Muslim Council of Britain, and nowhere does his name appear on their web-site, unlike that of Mr Kilroy-Silk.

"The CRE has never issued any press release or statement specifically in relation to or about Abu Hamza. It has never called on the police under the Public Order Act to investigate Abu Hamza's comments for incitement to religious or racial hatred. It has never demanded that Abu Hamza retract his remarks, apologise or donate some of his personal wealth to charities among the communities he has offended, eg Jewish or gay.

"In October 2001 the CRE issued a press statement entitled "Attacks upon Muslims", in the name of Gurbux Singh, the then Chairman of the CRE.

"The CRE tows the MCB line that Abu Hamza, and others like him, is just 'an undesirable fringe extremist given undue media coverage relative to his status and influence in his community'. The message to the 'infidels' among us is clearly that the Abu Hamzas of the

Muslim world are cranks, best ignored.

Does Phillips really expect us to believe that the manner in which Abu Hamza has expressed his opinions over several years has never carried the danger of inciting his followers to act against someone they thought wasn't an Arab – say, Jews, homosexuals, or non-Muslims in general?

Couldn't he have persuaded the Arab and Muslim communities to ignore Kilroy-Silk, perhaps as 'an undesirable fringe extremist given undue media coverage relative to his status and influence in his community'? Why hasn't he taken similar action against Abu Hamza?

"This sorry affair makes it hard not to believe that expressions of racism and incitement to religious hatred in Britain are only heinous crimes if committed against Muslims, and nothing more than the rantings of marginalised extremists, and therefore best ignored, if the targets are Jews, gays, Christians, Sikhs or "Westerners" in general.

The affair should tell us that it is no longer enough for organisations like the MCB and the CRE to wash their collective hands of Abu Hamza and deflect the blame onto the media for giving him exposure, if they are then going to indulge in torrents of self-righteous indignation and moral high-grounding over the musings of the likes of Kilroy-Silk. The MCB and the CRE will never win their respective battles if they continue to manifest this appalling hypocrisy.

In the interests of balance, could I suggest the *Sunday Express* now employs Abu Hamza as a regular columnist, and the BBC uses him to fill the vacancy for a day-time chat show host it now has available? That would then make interesting grounds for comparison, I think."

• Journalist Brendan O'Neill, in an article in the radical online magazine *Spiked*, commented thus on the Kilroy-Silk affair:

"Like other British institutions, the BBC is petrified of being accused of Islamophobia, of being in any way associated with criticisms of Islam and its followers. In multicultural, pluralist, tolerant Britain, ridiculing religion is frowned upon and causing offence or undermining the self-esteem of communities is a cardinal sin.

Whatever you might think of Kilroy-Silk's views, it is a ridiculous notion that religious beliefs, or anything else, should be above criticism for fear of upsetting people: in an open, democratic society, we should be free to offend the sensibilities of anyone who peddles superstitious nonsense and irrational theories, be they Muslims, Christians, Jews or Scientologists.



I AM so sorry, so very sorry. I didn't mean to persecute all those lovely Christians, it just sort of happened.

I didn't even know I was doing it until I started reading the papers over Christmas, and then I realised that we atheists are taking over the world and crushing religion ruthlessly beneath our jackboots.

What with Tessa Jowell sending out non-Christian Christmas cards, and the Red Cross "banning" nativity scenes from its charity shop windows, no Christian message on the stamps, and then—to cap it all—that library in High Wycombe refusing to let the local church put up a notice for the carol service, it's nothing

short of a pogrom.

Christianity has never been under such a harsh and evil regime as the one presently at large in this country. (I know this because a Catholic bishop said so.) No doubt the atheist police will be standing at the doors of the churches on Sunday turning the innocents away and ordering them to go home and *consume*.

Exaggerated? Of course it is. Religion has never had it so good for centuries, benefiting from all kinds of privileges that are denied to the rest of us.

Like 26 bishops in the House of Lords, and a third of all schools being under the control of "the faith communities" (where the church-

goers get first shout for places and jobs, even though we all have to cough up the cash to run them). And the free buses to "faith schools" for the children of believers, while the children of non-believers struggle on the regular bus at their own expense.

Oh, and did I mention the "faith working party" that has been set up by the Government to look at ways of making sure the religious voice is heard in policy making? Or the opt-outs granted to religion from the new anti-discrimination Employment Regulations? Or the tax advantages enjoyed by clergymen? Or the hundreds of padres in hospitals and the armed services – all paid for by the believing and unbelieving taxpayer alike? And if a cathedral is unable to pay its debts – are you listening Bradford? – there is no mechanism for declaring it bankrupt, and creditors left out in the cold have no recourse to the Church's billions?

Advertisement

Anglican Reorientation Service Enterprise (ARSE) Ltd

DO YOU know a man living near you who claims to be a Bishop or Archbishop in the Church of England? If you do, he may be suffering from severe delusions and in need of reorientation treatment.

Key symptoms of his disease are usually:

- Having an imaginary friend who lives in the sky, and with whom he claims to converse several times a day;
- Belief that a collection of ancient myths in an old book, whose authorship is unknown and which contains stories of the most horrid violence, torture and persecution, is in fact the "received word" of this imaginary loving friend of his, and the basis on which we should all live our lives;
- Belief, in spite of a complete lack of proof and compelling scientific evidence to the contrary, that this imaginary friend created the world and everything in it, including men, women and a talking snake, then destroyed it again in a fit of pique by causing a massive flood, but not before getting a man and his family to build a huge boat in which to save all the animals (fish presumably were OK in the circumstances, but no mention of dinosaurs);
- Belief that this imaginary friend got so angry a second time with the human beings he had created that he somehow impregnated a virgin with his seed, causing her to give birth to a son whose painful death he then orchestrated, only to raise him subsequently from his death chamber to lift him up into the sky beside his father. This the imaginary friend apparently saw as a means of saving the world from sin, which he had clearly also created;
- Occasionally conducting a remembrance service for this poor man's violent death at the hands of his father by drinking wine and eating bread, during which cannibalistic tendencies are exhibited by those taking part believing that they are actually drinking the son's blood and eating his flesh. These occasions may be referred to as a "celebration".

Other symptoms of the condition include occasional cross-dressing, calling people "dearly beloved", claiming that these bizarre beliefs must convey special privileges with regard to taxation, education, scientific research, employment and government, and finally claiming that the loving imaginary friend approves of and encourages discrimination against women and homosexuals and others who don't share these same bizarre beliefs.

Should you come across such a man (note: no women are affected) please contact your local ARSE. We can cure the bishop or archbishop concerned of these delusions, not with aversion therapy, not with electrodes on the genitals, but with a simple, humane and painless treatment – just make them wake up and smell the coffee.

Find two Bishops or Archbishops and take advantage of this month's two-for-the-price-of-one offer.

Please note: We only accept Anglicans for treatment. We have yet to devise a treatment to work on Roman Catholic bishops and other Roman Catholic hierarchy, who sadly are just too far gone.

Additional note: Please book early if you wish your chosen Bishop or Archbishop to be treated around those times of year traditionally known as Easter and Christmas, when we are usually inundated with calls for help.

Anglican Reorientation Service Enterprise (ARSE) Ltd, the Real World, London Borough of Lambeth

e-mail: helpmeiamanarchbishopgetmeoutofhere@arse.ltd

KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, apologises to down-trodden Christians, and offers an update on the Bradford Cathedral debacle

The hoo-ha over Christmas was a small indication of the religious conflict yet to come. We live in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society, right? Fine – everyone has the right – guaranteed in umpteen laws and charters – to worship and express their religion as they please. But we are no longer a one-religion country. The Muslim population has found its voice and wants to be included. How long before imams start demanding – and getting – places as of right in the House of Lords along with the C of E bishops?

How long before Muslims realise that there are as many of them worshipping each week as there are Christians and beginning to ask – why are the Anglicans given special privileges that Muslims can't have?

And so, despite the hollow cries of persecution, it is right to be sensitive about people who are not Christian – whether they are of another religion or no religion. What's wrong with sending "Season's Greetings" and a snowman instead of angels and crosses?

Look at the anachronism of the nativity play in a multi-faith school. Picture it: scene one, the stable. The Three Kings announce: "Behold the son of God is born." The Muslim kids respond: "No he isn't – he's just a minor prophet." The curtains close and then open on scene two, The Crusades.

Religions are naturally arrogant. Despite attempts at ecumenism, they always end up scrapping. How can it be otherwise when they're mutually contradictory? The Christian

chauvinism on display this Christmas is a little precursor of what is to come as religions jockey for superiority.

And right at the bottom of the heap are we atheists, who have to watch our increasing taxes being spent on appeasing religious demands, and see our rights being sacrificed on the altar of religious arrogance (atheist teachers can now be sacked from religious schools on the whim of an evangelical head teacher).

And it is no better in Scotland. In 2002 the hierarchy of the RC Church in Scotland chose Christmas to steal the front page headlines by declaring a "war on secularism". In 2003 the apparently mandatory Christmas religious triumphalism headlines were generated by First Minister Jack McConnell himself. He publicly lambasted a hospital for sick children for having had the temerity not to distribute a CD of Xmas carols to every child, presumably whether they wanted it or not. "We cannot and should not take Christ out of Christmas", he preached – sounding more like a First Minister of the Wee Frees than of the Scottish Executive. A deluded commentator lamented that this episode was indicative of a "faithless Christmas"—if only. Maybe he had started his celebrations before writing his absurd column.

So please you whingeing Christians, give it a rest. You've got hour after hour of television and radio devoted to your fairy tales, especially over the Christmas season, you've got one of your kind running the country (and another one in the USA running the world) and nobody is going to interfere with your arcane incantations in your houses of worship.

Just spare a thought for us poor old atheists – we're the ones who are *really* on the receiving end.

Could it be riskier to trade with the C of E?

Last month's *Freethinker* drew attention to the spectacular problems Bradford Cathedral is exhibiting in repaying debts arising from a millennium exhibition which opened in 2000 and cost £5 million to mount but closed prematurely having attracted hardly any paying visitors. The National Lottery paid £2.2m towards this folly and the Church Commissioners are owed a few hundred thousand pounds.

Barclays Bank is also owed a significant sum, and of the remaining commercial creditors the one with the largest debt is a firm, based in York, that helped design the exhibition. It is still owed around £100,000, but despite its obtaining a court judgment against the cathedral, the debt remains outstanding.

The MP for the City of York, Hugh Bayley, has asked the C of E representative in the Commons, the newly-knighted Sir Stuart Bell, some probing questions. Bell's response was that: "Legally and financially, cathedrals are



NSS activities in 2003 culminated in a rally calling for a secular Europe, held in Paris in December, in association with its sister organisation in France, *Libre Pensée*. The rally was enthusiastically supported by the International Humanist & Ethical Union (IHEU) and the European Humanist Federation, who both sent their leaders to speak at the event. The rally was organised as a counter-offensive against those wanting the inclusion of God or Christianity in the European Union constitution.

independent bodies governed by the Cathedrals Measure passed by Parliament in 1999. The Commissioners have a very limited statutory role in relation to cathedrals and have no authority to compel Bradford Cathedral to reach a settlement, nor do they have power to provide funds to enable such a settlement."

There was no word of regret in his answers, although he appeared to offer a crumb of comfort: "Nonetheless [the Church Commissioners] are in contact with the Bradford Cathedral Chapter and recognise that efforts are being made to find a solution."

The cathedral's dean was challenged on the *Sunday* programme and I will leave readers to judge for themselves whether what he said would have raised creditors' hopes an iota – and to mark out of ten this senior preacher's ability to speak unequivocal and comprehensible English: "In any situation of injustice, of course the Church is concerned. I think the question here is to look very carefully at, if you like, how we have been responding, to ask if actually we have been perpetrating injustice or in some ways have been ourselves – not so much a victim because I think that's a totally inappropriate way to cast it – but in some ways have our actions been constrained by others."

We believe that the Millennium Commission is entitled to demand its grant back over this debacle. It seems reluctant to do so, and this is a major question in itself. If the Commission does call in its grant, it appears to be better placed than other creditors – as its debt is secured on assets.

The problem in principle is that C of E institutions falling into debt are immune to the legal mechanisms that apply elsewhere. While the Cathedral claims all the benefits of a charity, the Charity Commissioners have no power to discipline it.

When it comes to enforcing debts, it seems the C of E is little more than a brand name. Cathedral is separate from Diocese, and Diocese separate from the Church Commissioners, whose assets run into billions – albeit they have substantial liabilities for pensions, etc. Yet it is the Church Estates Commissioner that speaks

for the whole of the C of E – dioceses and cathedrals included – in Parliament.

It is just a matter of time before another arm of the Church gets into debt. The generally downward spiral of attendance will bring with it increased financial pressures, and these will be exacerbated by the impending splits between liberals and evangelicals. Both factions can be expected to vie for what assets there are, and doubtless the lawyers will do well out of it.

Bell was challenged by Hugh Bayley MP as to whether the Commissioners had not made representations to the "Government about changing the law to enable the courts to declare bankrupt a cathedral or other church or body that becomes unable to pay its debts." The answer was negative. Bell showed no interest in initiating any move to improve the creditors' lot in the future where Church institutions become unable to pay their debts.

Surely our moral guardians cannot be thinking of preserving the Church's pockets first?

We are working with lawyers, Hugh Bayley and other parliamentarians to bring this lamentable issue out more into the open and seek to improve the lot of those brave enough to become creditors of the Established Church.

'Blasphemy' doctor is released from prison

Dr Younus Shaikh, under sentence of death for blasphemy, has been released from prison in Pakistan, where he has been held in custody since October 2000.

Dr Shaikh was first brought to trial in the summer of 2001, where he faced a crowd of hostile Islamic fundamentalists baying for his blood. In October 2003 the appeal court ordered a retrial, which led eventually to his release. Speaking in London last month, Dr Shaikh, declared a Prisoner of Conscience by Amnesty International following a worldwide protest spearheaded by the International Humanist & Ethical Union, described his ordeal as "Islamic terrorism through the abuse of law and the state apparatus".

THE hottest issue in East Sussex last year was not the burning down of Brighton's landmark West Pier, the skeleton of which now pokes forlornly into the sea, but the burning of an effigy of a pope – not THE Pope – in the historic town of Lewes.

By the size of the headlines in the local press, and the heat of the arguments contained in the letter pages of papers like the Brighton *Argus*, any newcomer to these parts would think they had stumbled into a hotbed of sectarianism – especially now that Catholic firebrand and Tory MP Anne Widdecombe has joined the fray, all guns blazing.

The controversy is somewhat puzzling, for the good folk of Lewes have been setting fire to large papier maché effigies of Pope Paul V – who became Vicar of Christ in 1605, the year of the Gunpowder Plot – for hundreds of years.

Furthermore, Pope Paul V is by no means the



Quotable quotes

A MAN'S ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death.

– Albert Einstein

THERE is no reason why good cannot triumph as often as evil. The triumph of anything is a matter of organisation. If there are such things as angels, I hope they are organised along the lines of the Mafia.

– Kurt Vonnegut, from his novel *The Sirens of Titan*

Moral indignation is in most cases two percent moral, 48 percent indignation and 50 percent envy.

– Vittorio De Sica, influential actor and filmmaker who died in 1974 aged 72.

only one to be burned in effigy each bonfire night in Lewes. Apart from Guy Fawkes, who, like the Pope, goes up in smoke annually, others who have been torched as “Enemies of Bonfire” during the November 5 spectacular include George W Bush and Osama bin Laden.

The brouhaha over the blazing pontiff began when local resident Joe O’Keefe last year launched an international campaign to stop what he said was the “anti-Catholic symbolism” central to the annual Lewes display. He described the event, which includes a parade of 17 burning crosses, as “reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan.”

BARRY DUKE explains why the annual burning of effigies of Pope Paul V has suddenly become a hot potato in East Sussex.

Last month, his campaign was given additional impetus when Anne Widdecombe, MP for Maidstone and The Weald, announced her support for Mr O’Keefe. She said: “I think it is inappropriate and I wish it didn’t happen. If you cannot see why burning an effigy of the Pope is inappropriate, what can I say?”

But Bill McIlroy, a former editor of the *Freethinker* and a National Secular Society council member who lives in Hove, disagrees with the campaign to have the annual event curbed or banned.

In a letter to the *Argus* he called on the authorities to ignore Mr O’Keefe’s demands. He said “burning an effigy of the Pope may be a bit silly and even offensive to some but it is preferable to burning real people at the stake, a frequent occurrence in the ages of faith when Catholics persecuted Protestants, Protestants persecuted Catholics, and both persecuted Jews. Mr O’Keefe would do well to remember that where there is religion there is religious intolerance.”

Support for Mr McIlroy came from an unexpected source three days later when a Catholic, Bob Sellwood, in a letter to the *Argus*, described Mr O’Keefe’s campaign as “absurd.”

“These celebrations,” he said, “commemorate a long past time when the hand of the papacy



Anne Widdecombe, aka Doris Karloff: will she be declared “Enemy of Bonfire” and burned in effigy?

was clearly visible behind the burning alive of the Protestant martyrs in Lewes, the attempted Spanish invasion of England at the time of the Armada, and the gunpowder plot ... most Catholics see the bonfire celebrations for what they

are: a fun-filled annual festival to which it is perfectly safe to take their children.”

Bonfire night in Lewes logically focuses on the burning of 17 Protestant martyrs, symbolised by the 17 burning crosses, between 1555 and 1557 during the reign of Catholic Queen Mary.



The Tudor queen, looking to reverse the attacks made on Catholics by her predecessors, embarked on a drive against Protestants.

The first of the Lewes martyrs was Deryk Carver, a brewer from Brighthelmstone (now Brighton).

Toward the end of October 1554, a Bible-reading was taking place at his home (now the Black Lion pub in Black Lion Street) with John Launder, Thomas Iveson and William Veisey. Under the command of Sir Edward Gage, the High Sheriff of Sussex, the four men were arrested. They were brought before the court of Bonner, the Bishop of London in Newgate, London. They were kept there until June 8, 1555. After forced confessions were signed, their fate was sealed. On July 22, 1555, Carver, was taken to Lewes town centre to be burned outside the Old Star Inn, where the Town Hall currently stands.

On June 6 1556, more Protestants were taken to Lewes to be burned.

The first elaborate anti-papal celebrations in the town took place in 1679, the year an effigy of the Pope was burnt on the bonfire as a demonstration of Protestant loyalty to monarch and country.

Today’s pageant has become a spectacular family event. The streets around the town centre close to make way for colourful parades and firework displays arranged by members of the five Lewes bonfire societies, and enjoyed by crowds of up to 70,000.

Australians falling victim to 'creeping secularism'

THE head of the Anglican Church in Australia has hit out at government schools that refuse to stage nativity plays and carol concerts for fear of offending students and families who are not Christians.

Archbishop Peter Carnley's year-end sermon said the playing down of traditional Christian Christmas gatherings in government schools was due to a "creeping secularism" in Australian society.

And the Anglican Primate finds the censorship of references to the birth of Jesus, and the replacement of carols with "the mythology of a red-nosed reindeer", unbelievable.

Dr Carnley pointed out that the Koran included explicit references to Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

"The subconscious motivation for deleting the Christmas story as an item in the education of some Australian children may be less a matter of religious or cultural sensibility, and more an instance of creeping secularism," Dr Carnley said.

"If we are nervous about politically radicalised, fundamentalist religious terrorists, then surely an education in world religions is exactly what is needed right now.

"It is pure ignorance – the very largely unsubstantiated fear of other religious tradi-

tions – not a knowledge of them, that is our problem."

Dr Carnley's sermon said carols and nativity plays should be as acceptable to a Muslim as a Christian, as Jesus is celebrated in the Koran as a great prophet. "It is sobering to observe that from this point of view we Christians have much more in common with our Muslim brothers and sisters than we have with the secular materialists who are our closest neighbours in our streets," he added.

Meanwhile, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, complained that many Christmas cards and decorations didn't reflect the true message of Christmas.

"It is not difficult to miss the message of Christmas (as) many of the clues in our decorations and Christmas cards point in another direction," he said in his Christmas message.

- Just 68 percent of Australians classed themselves as Christians in 2001, down from 96 percent at Federation, according to the country's latest census. In the 100 intervening years, the biggest change in people's religious affiliation was the emergence of those who class themselves as having no religion at all – 25.3 percent of the population.

Dr Laura slammed over anti-Islam rant

A CONTROVERSIAL American Islamic group is demanding an apology from radio counsellor Dr Laura Schlessinger for an alleged "anti-Muslim tirade" on her programme. Schlessinger, whose coast-to-coast show is heard by 12 million listeners, "crossed the line from legitimate commentary on terrorism to Islamophobic bigotry," according to the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).

The comments, aired late last year, came in response to a mother who asked whether her 16-year-old daughter should take part in a Catholic high school class's field trip to a local mosque. The visit was part of a "moral themes" class that aimed to help students learn how "Muslims are treated" in the United States.

Schlessinger's reply was: "This is a class on morals. What is the point of going to a mosque? ... You're joking of course. How many Americans have tortured and murdered Muslims? I think you ought to stand up against this class and this teacher. This is despicable. You tell him you are willing to go to the mosque only if it is one that has done its best to rout out terrorists in its midst.

"I am horrified that you would let her go. I am so sick and tired of all the Arab-American groups whining and complaining ... What culture and what religion were all the murderers of 9/11? They murdered us. That's the culture you want your daughter to learn about?"

In 2002 CAIR asked Schlessinger to clarify her claim that there is a "Muslim plan" to take over the world.

"When Schlessinger's extremist views have been confronted in the past, she has often responded by attacking the source of the challenge, instead of dealing with the substance of the complaints," CAIR said. The group's communications director, Ibrahim Hooper, said "Dr. Laura's anti-Muslim tirade demonstrates a level of hostility toward Islam that should be of concern to her programme's audience and sponsors.

"It has been our experience that one-on-one interactions with ordinary American Muslims are the best way to dispel Islamophobic stereotypes and promote religious tolerance," Hooper said. "It is a pity that Dr. Laura would interfere with that learning process by dissuading a student from visiting a mosque."

However, CAIR itself has helped cast doubt on Muslim groups that purport to be mainstream promoters of peace and tolerance. CAIR is a spin-off of the Islamic Association For Palestine, identified as a "front group" for the terrorist organisation Hamas, according to two former heads of the FBI's counter-terrorism section.

QUESTION: My six-year old grandson keeps asking who God's dad and mum are. What should we tell him?

Answer (supplied by Louis Henderson of the C or E Communications Unit in London) : It is hard enough for an adult to grasp concepts such as infinity, let alone a six-year-old, but I hope this might help. God doesn't have a mum or dad, because he wasn't born like the rest of us. He is simply far too big for that, and always has been there. God is not just on our planet – he is the one who made all the stars in the sky. He has always been in touch with everything he has made.

God is a bit hard to understand and he knows that. That is why he made things easier for us at the first Christmas by coming to us as the baby Jesus. Jesus did have a real mum, called Mary, and God was his dad.

– From the "Answers to Correspondents" column of the Daily Mail (December 16, 2003)

BIRTH control is morally wrong, intrinsically and inherently evil. The fruits of birth control include fornication, adultery, sterility, homosexuality, AIDS, the breakdown of family, divorce and abortion. Birth control is intrinsically evil. It is evil because it violates the very purpose and nature of the sexual act. In attempting to destroy the possibility of new life, birth control destroys the total self-giving of the couple to each other. The parties, instead of giving themselves fully, withhold from each other their fertility.

It is evil because it violates the dignity of the human person. It is evil because it promotes premature and promiscuous sexuality, which prevents many from establishing good marriages and good family life. Premature and promiscuous sexuality leads to unhealthy and unhappy people, to people crippled by neuroses and psychoses, to people so preoccupied with their own problems that they are unable to be strong leaders who can tackle the problems of society.

– Part of a letter by Michael J Pallid published in the Wisconsin EagleHerald, (November 21, 2003)



Focus on Prayer

In an article entitled "Prayer Wars" published in the American magazine *Skeptical Inquirer* in 1994, Robert A Baker, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Kentucky, reminded readers that three years earlier the *Inquirer* reported that Larry Dossey "assured us in his book *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (Harper, 1993) that prayer cannot only heal, but also makes those who pray feel a whole lot better.

"This idea made so many people feel better that they rushed right out and bought his book. This made Dr Dossey feel so much better that he sat right down and produced another book, with the title *Prayer Is Good Medicine: How to Reap the Healing Benefits of Prayer* (Harper and Row, 1996).

"It was, therefore, somewhat surprising in the face of all this upbeat hype to open the March/April 1997 issue of *Psychology Today* and see a special report from Dossey informing us that both words and prayer not only have a negative side, but in many situations words and prayer can actually harm!

"According to Dossey, the old nursery rhyme "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me!" is wrong. It should be changed to "Sticks and stones can break my bones and words can also hurt me!"

"Moreover, Dossey says he has the proof. In a series of allegedly 'scientific' studies, Dossey argues that negative prayers from human beings can harm micro-organisms. He stresses that while most everyone is familiar with the place-

bo effect, few are aware of the nocebo effect – the ability of negative beliefs and expectations to actually cause harm. Though far more complex, we humans share many identical biochemical processes with micro-organisms and we harbor billions of microbes within us. Therefore, if negative prayers can harm lower organisms, would it not be possible to exert a nocebo effect on humans as well?

Professor Robert A Baker considers the implications of 'negative' prayer

"Dossey says, 'Yes, indeedy!' and he even goes so far as to suggest that negative prayer not only works but that everyday ordinary 'harm-meaning folk regularly engage in it, especially in athletic contests, where the opposing teams gather in their respective locker rooms, praying that they will beat the beJesus out of their opponents. In such a situation, God must be very puzzled, but Dossey tells us such prayers work, citing a comment from Michael Murphy, founder of the New-Age Esalen Institute in California, as proof:

Witness the many hexes aimed at games via radio and television sets. If rooting channels or triggers powers of mind over matter, it is no wonder that during certain contests balls take funny bounces and athletes jump higher than ever or stumble inexplicably...



An American high school basketball team prays the opposition

Please Go the Opp

Although scientific studies of the effects of purposeful negative prayer on human beings have not been attempted because of their obvious illegal and unethical implications, there is little doubt that the range of negative power is enormous, especially in the form of

So, what are pr

John Radford, Emeritus Professor
University of East London

HAVING once stepped into a church in Prague, I came across, in a glass case in an alcove rich with gold leaf, what seemed to be a female doll, about 18 inches tall. A dress, fastened around the neck, fell in a conical shape to cover the feet, while on the head was balanced a very large crown, of the papal tiara type. A notice explained that this was, in fact, the famous Holy Infant of Prague. It came into the church in 1628 and allegedly soon began working miracles. Two young women and one man were kneeling devoutly in front of it. It is of course intended to represent the child Jesus.

My first thought was of pity for these three. If they were seeking a miracle, perhaps desperately needed, they would be disappointed. My second thought was that this scene is replicated all over the world, in vast numbers. (The Templeton Foundation estimates that some three to four billion prayers are said every day.) My third thought was, why?

I want to suggest a few tentative answers.

The first question is, perhaps, what are prayers for? I found that there are over seven million websites on the subject of prayer. One of the first listed, however, conveniently summarised the functions of Christian prayer as ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanks and

Supplication. An Islamic site was rather different. As I understood it, the main functions are spiritual development and moral elevation. Supplication, in particular, is ruled out because God disposes of us as he thinks fit (though for our own good) and it is impious to question his will.

Still, most if not all religions, advocate and practise prayer, with more or less the same purposes. Not all of these depend, for possible effectiveness, on the reality of the deity prayed to. One can clearly argue that it is useless to ask a non-existent being to cure an illness. But it is not necessarily psychologically ineffective to confess one's "sins", or tell one's troubles, to such a being. An imaginary friend may never answer, but at least he or she does not criticise. Some forms of therapy rely largely on such non-evaluative listening. Spiritual development, however one defines this complex process, may be aided by devotions, and many people are very strongly motivated by this. It need not imply anything about the truth or reality of a particular doctrine.

There have been attempts to assess the efficacy of prayer, the first probably being that of Francis Galton in 1872. With his typical literal-mindedness and passion for counting, he argued that there is one class of person whose long life and well-being were (then) prayed for repeatedly and in very large numbers, namely royalty – especially reigning sovereigns. He therefore compared their life spans with those of other well-off groups.

The royals came out worst, averaging only 64.04 years against 70.22 for gentry. God, in fact, did not seem to Save the Queen, or King. More recently, there have been some studies attempting to show that prayer helps the ill, even when they are not aware of being prayed for – a crucial point. These have been criticised on various grounds, and as far as I can tell there is little, if any, sound positive evidence. Of course, prayer of which the sufferer is aware may well function as psychological support, with some beneficial effects. Praying



praying in their locker room for victory over

od, Smite position!

curses on those we hate and those who have done us wrong.

"Referring to primitive cultures where hexes, spells, and voodoo can have tremendous negative effects – even death – on those who are victims of such powerful suggestion, Dossey says

that 'after years of study, I'm convinced that the malevolent use of prayer is quite common, woven into our society and our lives. In a 1994 Gallup poll on the prayer habits of Americans published in *Life* magazine, five percent of people confessed they'd prayed for harm to come to others. And that was only the number that admitted it.'

"Dossey summarizes his position by suggesting that negative prayer is nothing, after all, but the devil in us and the evil side of the two-headed human coin we keep flipping, hoping that good will turn up.

"Dossey raises some very intriguing questions. What happens when the same number of people pray for something as pray against it? How does God decide whose prayer to answer? Does the total number of people praying for or against something matter? How about the righteousness of the supplicants? Are positive prayers answered more frequently than negative ones? Does God take the positive ones and Satan the negative? Does the intensity of the praying have any effect on the outcome? Does the length of time one devotes to praying have any effect on the frequency with which one's prayers are answered? Do the words and phrases used in the prayer – either positive or negative – have any bearing on the success rate? Does the nature of the thing or things prayed for have any bearing on the prayer's success rate – either positive or negative prayers? Why or why not?

"All of these questions, and more, have a very particular relevance and application when we come to the realm of athletics. Just for example,

this spring when a small Kentucky town in Eastern Kentucky won the State High School Girl's Basketball crown, the town's newspaper, as well as the largest newspaper in Kentucky, gave credit for the victory to God's answering their prayers. Why their prayers were answered and the prayers of the losers were not remains unknown. One possibility is that the Hazard team had a better 'pray-er' – in the form of their principal, who was also a minister. If it turns out that the higher one stands in the religious hierarchy the better the chances that one's prayers will be heeded, then it certainly behooves every athlete and every athletic team to employ the most religious 'pray-ers' possible. Certainly no one should ever enter any contest unprayed!

"If Dossey is right then we have an exciting future ahead of us! Not only will we have the game itself, but the prayer game within the game – another exciting and dramatic contest between the opposing praying ministers and the opposing praying fans. Special prayer meetings will be held before every game, featuring the top clerics striving to outpray each other and guarantee victory for their team. In fact, I think this is what Dossey had in mind all along – a movie epic with Spielberg as producer and Chris Carter as director for a billion-dollar blockbuster called *Prayer Wars*.

"If you take the time to ponder this issue, you may come to the surprising conclusion that maybe we are all better off if many of our prayers are ignored and never answered, especially the negative ones," asserts Baker.

Prayers really for?

Professor of Psychology at the London, poses the question

oneself could help in principle. Much prayer is similar to meditation, which has been found to be helpful in reducing tension etc, though the evidence suggests that systematic relaxation techniques are as good or better. Recent reports find increased activity in the left frontal cortex, which is associated with happiness, in practising Buddhists. It may be that those of more equable temperament are attracted to Buddhism rather than to more aggressive faiths (though at least one study seems to have controlled for this). Quakers should be studied. Religion here overlaps with folk medicine, which *sometimes* incorporates things that do work even though the reason is not understood. A recent convert to Islam reports (on the internet once more) that regular prayer as ordained had enabled him to lose 65 kilos in weight and brought his high blood pressure down to normal. A change of life-style and diet (alcohol is forbidden to Muslims) and regular devotions may well have worked, or helped.

More generally, no doubt much prayer, like other religious practices, persists on a basis of custom or obedience. Prayer is one of the pillars of Islam and regular daily prayer is insisted on. Less rigid faiths routinely incorporate it. Of course, how devout the prayers actually are doubtless varies with the individual. Casual observation of repetitive bowing, head-nodding, bead-telling and so on suggests a pathological element akin to a compulsive disorder.

Still, it does seem on the face of it odd that each of the four ACTS, or any other functions of prayer, continue indefinitely even though directed to an entity that never responds. There would seem to be at least two well-established psychological mechanisms involved in the persistence of prayer, although I have not found any direct demonstrations of this. One is that of intermittent reinforcement. If one prays in the expectation of some return, such as relief from problems, chance will every now and then provide it without the intervention of a deity. It is just the same mechanism as gambling. The fruit

machine spins at random (actually not, as the odds are stacked against the punter), with the result that one sometimes wins – often enough to keep one playing, and in some cases to become seriously addicted. Such intermittent rewards or reinforcement have frequently been shown to be more effective in maintaining behaviour even than rewards every time. The other mechanism is a general tendency to find positive evidence easier to deal with than negative. This is seen in prejudice. Those who think that all Martians are good at mathematics will tend to notice each case that supports this view, and neglect those that refute it.

Any apparent answer to prayer confirms belief in it; non-answers are less influential. And for some of the ACTS, the answer may be all in one's own mind anyway. One may feel that adoration or thanks have been received even without evidence of it (one can write a "thank-you" letter without expecting acknowledgement). And many religious people maintain that their god does answer them in some way or other, basing this on chance happenings or subjective experiences. I don't suggest that the above is anything like a total explanation. And I guess the Infant of Prague will be in business for a good few years yet.

Though in his lifetime his poetry was rarely acclaimed, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) is now ensconced in the pantheon of English poets. His *Ode to the West Wind*, *Ozymandias*, *To a Skylark*, *The Cloud*, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, *Mont Blanc*, *Adonais*, and *Prometheus Unbound* are entrenched in anthologies of literature and studied throughout the world. He had a rare facility for lyricism. In English Romantic Poetry and Prose, Russell Noyes enlarges upon Shelley's "profuse strains of unpremeditated art".

No one has come nearer to capturing in words the inexpressible surgings of human emotion. When he is exultant his song shoots upward in a joyous flight like that of his own skylark; when he is dejected it sinks downward, expiring like his own winged words before the flame of love. But whatever his emotion – whether joy, sorrow, desire, or regret – he clothes it in vibrating, persistent, haunting overtones of song.

Shelley was no idle songster, singing for singing's sake. He was an ardent philanthropist who wanted to rouse a soporific world from its moral stupor. In *Ode to the West Wind* he voiced his messianic aspirations:

*Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!*

A visionary anarchist, he decried the enslavement of the mind by church, state, law, custom, and tradition. He inveighed against priests, kings, soldiers, magistrates, and other wielders of institutional authority. In *Prometheus Unbound*, he envisions an autonomous race unshackled by external coercions and mind-forged manacles:

*The loathsome mask has fallen, the man
remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself; just, gentle, wise.*

Despite his invective against organized oppression, Shelley spurned violent modes of redress. True emancipation, he believed, ensues from the cultivation of tolerance, fairness, benevolence, honesty, austerity, temperance, and unfettered discussion, not from armed revolt. Like Socrates, he thought knowledge begets virtue because nobody is wittingly iniquitous.

Shelley's exhortations were ignored when not derided. A scorned prophet, he was fitfully despondent: "I have," he confided to his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg, "sunk into a premature old age of exhaustion, which renders me dead to everything, but the unenviable capacity of indulging the vanity of hope." A half century later, Matthew Arnold characterized Shelley as a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."

Few, in his own day, reckoned Shelley an angel. He was the notorious apostle of atheism, an affront to God and man. His nefarious reputation sprouted

early with the *The Necessity of Atheism* and *Queen Mab*. The first, a pamphlet, was published in 1811 when Shelley was a freshman at Oxford University, from which he and Hogg, his collaborator, were expelled for "contumacious conduct" when they declined to recant their wicked views. *Queen Mab*, a poem published in 1813, contains a stinging critique of Christianity (later elaborated in *Essay on Christianity* and *A Refutation of Deism*) and copious footnotes plumping for atheism. The notes include a modified version of *The Necessity of Atheism* and skeptical passages from Lucretius, Pliny, Bacon, Spinoza, Hume, and Holbach.

GARY SLOAN reminds us that, apart from his atheism, Shelley 'was an ardent philanthropist who wanted to rouse a soporific world from its moral stupor'

On the title page of *The Necessity of Atheism*, Shelley stated his purpose and invited rebuttals:

"As a love of truth is the only motive which actuates the Author of this little tract, he earnestly entreats that those of his readers who may discover any deficiency in his reasoning, or may be in possession of proofs which his mind could never obtain, would offer them, together with their objections to the Public, as briefly, as methodically, as plainly as he has taken the liberty of doing. Thro' deficiency of proof – *An Atheist*."

Shelley sent copies of the privately-printed work to Oxford dons, clergymen, and his father. The remaining copies were burned in the print shop when the printer realized he was vulnerable to a charge of blasphemous libel. Shelley's father, a country squire, implored his wayward son to abjure the impious tract:

"The disgrace which hangs over you is most serious, and though I have felt as a father, and sympathized in the misfortune which your criminal opinions and improper acts have begot: yet, you must know, that I have a duty to perform to my own character, as well as to your younger brother and sisters. Above all, my feelings as a Christian require from me a decided and firm conduct towards you."

Mr Shelley issued terms for rapprochement: The son must apologize to Oxford, seek reinstatement, "abstain from all communication with Mr Hogg," and place himself under the moral tutelage "of such gentlemen as I shall appoint." Should the son reject the terms, he would be left "to the punishment and misery that belongs to the wicked pursuit of an opinion so diabolical and wicked as that which you have dared to declare."

Unrepentant, Shelley juxtaposed his own fidelity to reason with the obduracy of the Oxford dons:

"A train of reasoning & not any great profligacy has induced me to disbelieve the scriptures. We [he and Hogg] found to our surprise that the proofs of an existing Deity were, as far as we had

observed, defective. We therefore embodied our doubts on the subject & arranged them methodically in the form of *The Necessity of Atheism*, thinking thereby to obtain a satisfactory answer from men who had made Divinity the study of their lives. No argument was brought forward to disprove our reasoning, & it at once demonstrated the weakness of their cause & their inveteracy on discovering it, when they publicly expelled myself & my friend."

Shelley's unwillingness to repudiate atheism precipitated a lasting rift between father and son. (Shelley's mother, as the poet noted in a letter to Hogg, was tolerant of his atheism: she "is quite rational – she says, 'I think prayer & thanksgiving is of no use. If a man is a good man, atheist or Xtian, he will do very well in whatever future state awaits us.'")

In 1814, Shelley's infamy mushroomed when he abandoned his wife, Harriet Westbrook, and their two children to elope with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, whom he married two years later after the forlorn Harriet had drowned herself. Shelley was now ostracized throughout England, even by friends and family. He was "a herd-abandoned deer struck by the hunter's dart."



Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

His alleged turpitude was regarded as a consequence of his atheism. Robert Southey, poet laureate of England, admonished his erstwhile protégé: "Look to that evidence [for God] while you are yet existing in Time, and you may yet live to bless God for bringing you to a sense of your miserable condition. I can think of you only as of an individual whom I have known, and of whom I had once entertained high hopes."

After Harriet's death, Shelley was denied custody of his children. His atheism rendered him unfit for parenthood. The bill in chancery stated:

"And the Orators [plaintiffs] shew that the said Percy Bysshe Shelley avows himself to be an Atheist and that since his Marriage he has written and published a certain work called *Queen Mab* with notes and other works and that he has therein blasphemously derided the truth of the Christian Revelation and denied the existence of God as the Creator of the Universe."

In critiquing his poems, reviewers were wont to substitute epithets for analysis. They branded him "degraded, unteachable, unamiable, querulous, and unmanly." He "perverted his ingenuity and knowledge to the attacking of all that is ancient and venerable in our civil and religious institutions." He was "a hideous blasphemer" who "indicted pages of raving atheism." As Ellsworth Barnard notes in *Shelley's Religion*, the *ad hominem* attacks made "Shelley's name a byword among the majority of middle-class readers for nearly three decades after his death."

In reality, Shelley was nothing like the *bête*

noir of public opinion. He was gentle, self-effacing, candid, sincere, courteous, generous, affectionate, idealistic. (He left Harriet because he deemed it immoral to live with a spouse when love had died.) In *Portrait of Shelley*, Newman Ivy White recounts the impression of an Englishman, William Baxter, who visited the poet in 1817, not long before Shelley moved to Italy, where he spent his final four years.

Baxter had expected to find in Shelley "an ignorant, silly, half-witted enthusiast" with "morals that fitted him only for a brothel." Instead he had been astonished and delighted to find him "a being of rare genius and talent, of truly republican frugality and plainness of manners, and of a soundness of principle and delicacy of moral tact that might put to shame (if shame they had) many of his detractors; and, with all this so amiable that you have only to spend half an hour in his company to convince you that there is not an atom of malevolence in his whole composition."

Shelley's tracts on religion aren't sensational or bombastic. They are erudite disquisitions tailored to reflective minds. They are grounded in Shelley's voluminous knowledge of philosophy, history, languages, literature, logic, and science. He was an omnivorous, fast, and extraordinarily retentive reader. The following excerpts from *A Refutation of Deism* illustrate his manner. In the first, Shelley argues that a supernatural creator is an unnecessary hypothesis, a violation of

A FEW years ago I was given by a good friend a method of gambling on horses that would lead me to riches beyond my wildest dreams. He explained the method to me and I could see no flaw in it. The maths seemed correct and "intuitively" (and what a weasel word that is) it made nothing but sense. It required no knowledge of horses or courses and was entirely risk free. I never actually tried it, but I know that it did not work because despite having had knowledge of the great secret for some years my friend remained skint. If it had worked, I reasoned, he should surely by now be richer than Croesus and the nation's bookies would be weeping into their threadbare sleeves.

Mark Perakh is Professor Emeritus of Physics at California State University. He has published four books, over three hundred scientific papers, and has behind him a history of significant and important research. He was born and educated in Russia, where he later taught. He has also taught in Israel, Germany and the United Kingdom, as well as in the USA. His latest book, *Unintelligent Design*, is a detailed and devastating critique of the ideas of the Intelligent Design movement and of a number of authors whose works insist that they have discovered patterns in nature or in created artefacts (such as "holy books") that are so improbable that they could only be of divine origin. He dismantles these claims with something like conclusive finality.

Perakh writes with exemplary clarity and

Occam's razor:

"Design must be proved before a designer can be inferred. It is not permitted to assume the contested premises and thence infer the matter in dispute ... The greatest, equally with the smallest, motions of the Universe are subjected to the rigid necessity of inevitable laws. These laws are the unknown causes of the known effects perceivable in the Universe. Their effects are the boundaries of our knowledge; their names, the expressions of our ignorance. To suppose some existence beyond, or above them, is to invent a second and superfluous hypothesis to account for what has already been accounted for by the laws of motion and the properties of matter. The hypothesis of a Deity adds a gratuitous difficulty, which, so far from alleviating those which it is adduced to explain, requires new hypotheses for the elucidation of its own inherent contradictions."

Next, Shelley notes that the putative attributes of God mirror human cognition, their source:

"There is no attribute of God which is not either borrowed from the passions and powers of the human mind, or which is not a negation. Omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, infinity, immutability, incomprehensibility, and immateriality are all words which designate properties and powers peculiar to organized beings, with the addition of negations, by which the idea of limitation is excluded."

Finally, Shelley observes that pervasive theism constitutes no evidence for the existence of God:

Book Review

often with wit. Even so, *Unintelligent Design* is at times not an easy read – especially so if the reader is not as comfortable as he or she might be with mathematical ideas.

NORMAN PRIDMORE
reviews
Unintelligent Design, by Mark Perakh. Published by Prometheus Books 2004.
ISBN 1 59102 0840, hardback
459 pages



Despite this, however, it is a book that must be recommended unreservedly. Additionally, it is not only well written, but also well indexed and well printed. It has a sound bibliography and is put together with proper care. The reader will fall apart long before the book does.

The world of "Intelligent Design" has its own trinity, though I'm not sure whether it's a holy one. The claims made for it, as for the Christian trinity, are not modest. Its ideas, according to its own estimation and that of its supporters, con-

"That the frequency of a belief in God (for it is not universal) should be any argument in its favor, none to whom the innumerable mistakes of men are familiar will assert. It is among men of genius and science that atheism alone is found, but among these alone is cherished an hostility to those errors with which the illiterate and vulgar are infected."

With David Hume, Shelley held that belief in God derives from three sources: sensory experience, inferences therefrom, and testimony. None of these confirms the existence of a supernatural creator or designer. Such was Shelley's belief when he was a schoolboy at Eton, where he acquired the enviable moniker "Shelley the Atheist"; such, presumably, was the belief he took to his early grave.

Like many atheists, Shelley used the word "god" in a metaphorical sense. God was the "personification of ideals"—the enduring quest for beauty, truth, love, freedom, wisdom, joy. God was also the universe or the totality of natural phenomena. Because of his ecstatic effusions on nature, Shelley is sometimes called a mystic or a pantheist. He, more honest or accurate, preferred his Eton moniker.

• *The Necessity of Atheism* has been republished by G W Foote & Co, and is available at a price of £2.50. Orders can be sent to the *Freethinker*, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4ND.

stitute the most serious challenge to evolution that has ever been formulated. Darwin's notion of evolution by natural selection, proclaims this trinity, is, intellectually speaking, mortally wounded. It may even, like Monty Python's parrot, be utterly defunct. This trinity uses methods mathematical, statistical and Jesuitical to demonstrate the truth of this contention. As with the Christian version its parts seem inseparable. I might have been tempted to see them as constituting an example of one of ID's central theses – that of "irreducible complexity" – had this book not shown me that the notion was (to say the least) pretty much half-baked. The name of this trinity is William Dembski, Michael Behe and Phillip Johnson.

Given that the vast majority of scientists who understand something about evolution dismiss their ideas rather comprehensively, why do they matter?

Most creationism smacks of "flat-earthism". On the whole, the claims of the "old" and "young" earth creationists are so preposterous, so ill-founded and so incoherent that real scientists can hardly bear to address them. In an appendix to his 2002 introduction to evolution *What Evolution Is* (publisher Weidenfeld and Nicholson), the great Ernst Mayr, to give just one example, wrote simply and magisterially: "The claims of the creationists have been refuted so frequently and so thoroughly that there is

(Continued on page 12)

no need to cover this subject once more.” Though there are honourable exceptions, most scientists of stature and significance simply are not prepared to waste their time combating palpable gibberish.

Intelligent Design is different. To begin with, Dembski, Behe and Johnson are not fools. Compared with their naive creationist brethren they appear paragons of sophistication and subtlety. They hold posts at prestigious universities, and have real academic qualifications. Some of these qualifications are even relevant to the matters about which they write (some, but not all). Where naive creationists will generally only venture into mathematics when discussing the dimensions of Noah’s Ark or the generations of Adam, the proponents of “Intelligent Design” (especially Dembski and Behe) do not hesitate to stiffen the sinews of their arguments with all manner of formulae, equations and excursions into the realms of symbolic logic. Neither are they afraid of long words, technical vocabularies and complicated syntax.

A simple rule of thumb is that “if it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and swims like a duck – then it *is* a duck”. In the case of the ID trinity, what it insists certainly looks like science and sounds like science. And if it is, then – Hey, then shouldn’t it be taught in schools? Shouldn’t it be given “equal time”? It’s an argument going on all over the USA – and, with less noise, here in the UK. It’s the thin end of what we know is a very fat wedge.

That’s one reason why Mark Perakh has written this book – to provide some ammunition, some counterweight to the arguments of ID. But he has a deeper purpose. Throughout the book he makes it clear in many ways that he is offended by irrationalism and pseudo-science. He plainly detests the aping of the procedures of science for purposes other than the scientific – especially when in support of agendas that are manifestly irrational. Unfashionable as it may be, he is committed to the notion of Truth. It is surely significant that among the plaudits he has received for this book, two are from Paul Gross and Norman Levitt, both major figures in the fight against the postmodernist, Feyerbandian take on science. I bet Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (authors of the sublime *Intellectual Impostures*) would like it too.

On opening the book for the first time I must confess that my heart sank. I am not a mathe-

matician or a logician, and I feared that with its apparent plethora (in places at least) of mathematical terms the book would be well beyond me. I need not have worried, however. In the first section (on Dembski) Perakh uses symbols as Dembski does – but in order to demystify them. One of the book’s joys is that Perakh shows how Dembski’s use of symbols is, depending on the context, superfluous, eccentric or self-contradictory. He goes on to contrast Dembski’s arguments with those of Behe and with great verve exposes all manner of contradictions both within and between their respective positions. Given the extent to which their criticisms depend upon internal coherence and “logic” (unlike Darwinism, which stands or falls largely to the extent to which its formulations find support in the “real” world) this criticism is well-nigh unanswerable. Not that this will bother Dembski much, as readers of his paper *Skepticism’s Prospects for Unseating Intelligent Design*, contained in the recent Prometheus collection *Science And Religion* (2003, editor Paul Kurtz) will realise. Just about his strongest argument in defence of ID in that paper boils down to the fact (oh, really?) that “Gallup poll after Gallup poll confirms that about 90 percent of the US population believes that some sort of design is behind the world”. Well that’s it, then. ID must be true!

The chapter on Phillip Johnson is called “A Militant Dilettante”. Johnson is a lawyer, and Perakh pulls no punches in contrasting “lawyerly” methods and arguments with those of science, to the extreme detriment of the former. As with Dembski and Behe, Perakh’s method is straightforward. He takes the words of the writer and scrutinises them closely and very critically. Nietzsche wrote of “philosophising with a hammer”. This is commonly held to refer to something destructive. In fact the reverse is true. Philosophy with a hammer means the “tapping” of a notion in order to see whether it rings true or whether it is cracked. Perakh taps Johnson’s ideas and finds them quite literally crazed all over.

Leaving the ID trinity, Perakh moves on in parts two and three of the book to investigate how (as he puts it) “religious writers prove the compatibility of the Bible with science”, to examine matters of probability and chance, and to explore the nature of science itself.

Over the years (centuries, indeed), religious apologists have maintained that the “sacred texts” of the Bible and the Quran relate in extraordinary ways to events in the world and that these relations at least suggest and in many cases prove the “divine truths” that the “sacred texts” are supposed to contain. Many of the claims depend upon the discovery of patterns, the fulfilment of prophecies, or the foreshadowings of modern knowledge by those writing at a time when such knowledge would have been impossible were it not for “divine inspiration” (so the claims go). Patiently and calmly, Perakh

dissects some of these claims and exposes their fatuity. As in the first section of the book a great deal of close analysis is the tool he uses.

Much interest has been taken by “Woo-Hoo’s” (James Randi’s amusing term for the pathologically credulous) in so-called “Bible codes”. For those not familiar with the subject it works like this. Take the Hebrew Bible in the original language, take out all the spaces and punctuation, and then see what happens when every, say, tenth letter is highlighted. Or twentieth. Or whatever. Concentrate, now and... Woo-Hoo! It’s a message. Look, it’s the names of a few dozen Rabbi’s together with their places of birth. It’s a prophecy! A veritable miracle!

Like the ideas of my gambling friend, it all looks remarkably convincing. Perakh, however, was not convinced. He tried the same trick with other entirely secular texts and got some equally astounding results. So he looked at the maths. His conclusion? The patterns really are there, certainly – but those who make statistical claims in respect of their unique significance have simply got it wrong. He backs up his conclusion very thoroughly by means of some very clear, though at times difficult, explanation. He does the same elsewhere in the book in a discussion of Canadian Grant Jeffrey’s ideas (described in his book *The Signature of God*). Jeffrey is a preacher-man who is unaccountably dazzled by the frequency with which the number seven appears in the Bible. Perakh shows it to be all dazzle and no illumination. He does the same with the work of a number of other writers to similar good effect.

Mark Perakh has an enviable gift for writing very, very clearly. This is a distinct advantage when he comes to the subject that lies at the heart of the book – which is the nature of probability itself. He suggests, and it seems to be true, that most people have only a limited grasp of the matter, and that the conclusions we reach (if we ever manage to) are frequently wrong. I have certainly never read a more thorough non-specialist account, nor one that was more comprehensible. It’s true that it is frequently hard going – but that is not Perakh’s fault. One can only absorb so much that is counter-intuitive (as much to do with probability is) without succumbing to bouts of sheer bewilderment.

A long section of the book is devoted to an explanation of some of the basic ideas behind probability. It’s one I shall be reading a few more times in the hope that my mental bluntness may be sharpened by exposure to the hard stone of Perakh’s rationality.

After finishing the book one question remained. What is the probability that it will find its way into the hands of those who would really benefit – the IDers (or “Idiots”, as they are sometimes called), or into the hands of the host of the other puzzle-fixated credulists he writes of. I don’t know. But I won’t be betting on the outcome.

Eric Paine

Memorial Lecture

THE Thomas Paine Society’s Eric Payne Memorial Lecture takes place at 2 pm on March 6 at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Entitled “Thomas Paine’s Republic of Opinion”, the lecture will be delivered by Dr David Nash.

Studies in illusion

STUDIES supporting claims that people who live constantly in reality are less content than those who step outside reality and believe in hypothetical super-beings, reported by George Thomas in his article (*Freethinker*, January), must surely be studies in illusion, predicated as they are on believers keeping reality at bay. When they cannot, they are far from happy. Mr Thomas provides a prime example of this, describing the anger of fundamentalists when challenged by secular rationalism: "... watch the murderous hatred leap into [their] faces."

The anger is probably to mask fear when religious "knowledge", and its concomitant subconscious denials of reality, is confronted by contrary and irrefutable scientific evidence. Their wires are crossed. Neuroscientists could say it better, but how about this: The neuro-pathways of their religious ideas are too exercised for the circuitry to switch gestalt, and when their confabulated rationalisations aren't convincing enough, especially to themselves, they feel threatened and get angry. An involuntary reaction to objective truths by fundamentalists and anyone with strong subjective convictions.

Denial seems to be the brain's first line of defence, and is humankind's Achilles Heel. Perhaps the scientist who finds the key to unlocking the neurology of denial will be doing the world as great a service as did Sir Isaac Newton, for as he unlocked the door to the stars, so the neutralising of denial will open the door to ever greater truths.

Then watch the feathers fly.

GRAHAM NEWBERY
Southampton

Circumcision

STEPHEN Moreton (*Points of View*, January 2004) is using an out-of-date argument when he justifies circumcision as a means to reduce HIV transmission. The so-called "studies" to which he refers have subsequently been shown to be deeply flawed by methodological errors. Moreover, a report by the Royal Society of Medicine has shown that HIV transmission in Africa is mostly caused by contaminated needles and medical equipment, with only about a third transmitted sexually.

Anybody who relies on a lack of foreskin to protect him and his partner rather than safer sexual practices is a fool. If he really believes it will protect him he can choose the procedure for himself when he is an adult and able to give fully informed consent.

The recent history of the routine circumcision of non-consenting infant boys arose out of the masturbation hysteria of the Victorian era. The quack doctors of that time believed that masturbation caused a host of disorders including imbecility, blindness, hip joint disease and epilepsy. Circumcision failed to "cure" the

habit but new reasons were invented to continue the practice, and more modern medical "studies" were financed to "prove" the imagined "benefits". The momentum increased massively, particularly in the USA where as recently as the 1970s ninety percent of baby boys were parted from their foreskins.

The American Medical Association in 1999 reviewed the studies of the previous 40 years and found that the health benefits of the procedure were at best marginal compared to the risks to justify it as a routine. However, they left a loophole by allowing parents to decide in consultation with their physician. Parents then continued to choose the procedure supported by lame excuses such as "to look like Dad" or "it's cleaner" – have they not heard of soap and water?

It is estimated that in the USA, over 200 baby boys die each year as a result of circumcision, although the true number is unknown since the deaths are not usually recorded as due to circumcision but to another reason such as "haemorrhage".

In Britain, the practice was abandoned soon after the introduction of the NHS with an investigation that showed that the operation was unnecessary.

The situation in the USA is now gradually changing with many men now "coming out" to complain of what was done to them and many choosing to undo the damage by restoring their foreskins using tape to stretch the remaining skin. If, as Mr Moreton insists, the operation is at worst harmless when properly done, then why are so many men complaining about what was done to them, and why are lawsuits being filed against their medical mutilators?

Studies have been done to show how men who want to restore their foreskins are psychologically disturbed, unjustifiably feel bad about their bodies and require psychiatric treatment. Oddly, no studies have been done on the psychological problems of people who want to mutilate the genitals of little boys.

The arguments used in support of male circumcision are the same as those used in support of female genital mutilation. The feminist movement has had success in getting the procedure banned in the developed world and is making some progress in those countries where it is still practised. Regrettably, it seems that this rather sexist distinction has left boys unprotected. People seem to fail to understand that strapping down an infant and mutilating their most intimate parts is child abuse, whether the child is a girl or a boy.

AIDS is the latest disease for which circumcision is a supposed preventative measure, unsupported by any reliable facts. When this excuse dies out, don't worry, another one will come along soon, as it always does.

STEWART WARE
London

AS a sub-editor I would have enjoyed dealing with Stephen Moreton of Cheshire's rant on "advantages" of circumcision, and cutting his letter short.

I am reminded of the Aesop's fable about the fox who lost his tail then ranted to the others about the advantages of not having one, until one old fox said: "Ah, but would you be saying this if you hadn't lost your tail?"

The God Squad soon jumped on the AIDS (the American laboratory-created disease) bandwagon to urge abstinence, now it seems the circumcisers are exploiting it.

STEWART R VALDAR
London

Secular moral values

IN his feature "Defining Secular Moral Values" (*Freethinker* December), Adrian Bishop correctly notes that morals are now big business. Surely this has always been the case. It is a standard ploy of politicians, religious leaders and the popular press to raise anxieties in order to claim popular support for the political change that they wish to bring about. Notions of morality have been invented expressly to serve this purpose. An evangelising secular moralist would simply be climbing on the same bandwagon.

The rise of Nazism in the 1930s was largely fuelled by a demand to clean up a supposedly decadent society. (With hindsight, we can see that there was inadequate regulation of the economy.) Alas, the cure was infinitely worse than the disease.

The actions of individuals are motivated by emotions, not moral principles. How else can the atrocities committed in the name of God be explained? Murder, rape and pillage are universally held to be wrong, but they still happen. When people are sufficiently aroused, moral principles are blown away like chaff on the wind.

Certainly reason can modify or neutralise emotion, but this often comes too late. Could Adrian Bishop guarantee always to hold to his Value No1 (I will not harm people) in the face of any provocation? If so, I doubt that he would be able to respond appropriately in an emergency situation. Would the manufacturers of and the dealers in weapons and explosives be granted special dispensation to ignore this value? What moral values would be appropriate for a manufacturer of behaviour-modifying (and potentially behaviour-controlling) drugs like Prozac and Ritalin, now prescribed in considerable quantities? A mark of a decent society should be that individuals can hold moral Value No 3 and be personally responsible for their actions even in employment, but this could be difficult for someone in financial straits and impossible under a totalitarian regime.

Ordinary people with well organised lives

are not likely to want the additional complication and worry of being an amateur criminal. Minor bad behaviour tends to be self-limiting because of its unpleasant consequences. On the other hand, people who have fallen into a life of crime don't give a fig for moral values. In any case, moral values could not be any more binding than the law, and indeed this is another of their advantages; a person can be branded as immoral on the basis of malicious rumour, suspicion or surmise, without the tiresome inconvenience of having to produce evidence and present a convincing case in court. For the ordinary person, moral values are either superfluous or irrelevant.

Getting people to subscribe to some sort of moral quality control system as a way to a harmonious society can only lead to a divided society (or no society at all when all trust has been eroded). Even a prolific serial killer like the late Dr Harold Shipman could never, single-handedly, outperform the likes of Stalin, Hitler or Pol Pot. Only people in positions of power and influence can do any significant good or significant harm.

An advanced society, ie one that is dependent on a vast array of complex technologies, can only be organised from top down, not bottom up. Only the people at the top of the hierarchy can have a bird's eye view and thereby organise the activities of people lower down. What was so offensive about the Thatcher regime was the implication that the people on the ground should form themselves spontaneously into efficient organisations and know how to set their incomes at competitive rates in order to make their employers fabulously rich. The people at ground level need comprehensive direction, support and clear terms of engagement, not contempt. Problems cannot be solved by kicking people around at the bottom of the pile, they can only be solved where they originate, at the top. Not surprisingly, the Thatcher regime declared that there was no such thing as society.

I would therefore suggest that the Winchester Centre for Defined Ethics concentrates its efforts in offering independent and objective comment on the ethics of government policy and legislation and on the ethics of corporate practices. It should also ensure that the ball of moral responsibility always remains firmly in the court of politicians and the captains of industry.

A H BRADLEY
Cleethorpes

Atheism and morality

AS Adrian Bishop explains (*Freethinker*, November 2003), religionists claim to know the absolutely true moral codes revealed by supernatural entities, and therefore they imply that non-believers are amoral if not necessarily immoral.

Such accusations of amorality have created a

complex in humanist non-believers whereby they have felt the need to prove their moral standards.

In my opinion, in our day and age of democracy, it is not up to whoever claims to know the codes revealed by superhuman entities, and not even up to mere human bodies, to define the moral codes society should live by.

Definition is certainly a useful step towards a debate leading to society deciding by majority voting, the moral codes they want to live by.

In some countries and even in some states, referenda are already being used to decide on important moral rules for society to live by.

I think that right and wrong are issues for members of society to debate and then take a majority vote on how they want their lives regulated.

DAVID IBRY
London

SLADE Penoyre (*Points of View*, January 2004) does humanist ethics less than justice. As well as pleasure and pain it is necessary to exercise prudent judgment. There are three "p's": pleasure, pain and prudence. These must be within the context of the "open mind in the open society".

In the example he cites he only considers the interests of the husband. The "mature wife" may be thoroughly tired of her husband and only too glad to get rid of him onto his unsuspecting young secretary. The secretary may want the husband's income and status, not him for himself. If the husband deceives his wife he will be unhappy with guilt and so will the secretary if she connives. Complications will ensue. Only if all of them are open with each other can they decide what action they should take.

Few pleasures come without any pains, so prudence is more important than either. This is why I stress our three priorities as freedom, happiness and virtue.

The "advice to our children" is to consider others. Robert Green Ingersoll expressed it as, "the time to be happy is now, the way to be happy is to make others happy".

Please suggest a better alternative if you can.

ROY SAICH
Kenilworth

F A Ridley

ROBERT Morrell (*Points of View*, January) criticises "sweeping generalisations" and "factual inaccuracies" in my review of his biographical study of F A Ridley (*The Gentle Revolutionary*, published by the Freethought History Group, secretary Terry Liddle). He complains that I confined my comments "almost exclusively to four paragraphs on a single page out of a total of 27." This is a section of the pamphlet dealing with F A Ridley's presidency of the National Secular Society.

I apologise for writing a piece that is both "devoid of fact" and characterised by "factual

inaccuracies". Denying there was an unscrupulous campaign to drive the NSS secretary, Colin McCall, from office, Robert Morrell declares "There is no evidence in the minutes of there being one."

But he is well aware that not every untruthful accusation, insult or expression of contempt is recorded in the minutes of a committee meeting. Unlike Messrs Morrell and Liddle, I was a member of the NSS executive committee and witnessed the treatment that Colin McCall was subjected to by the Ridley-Ebury faction

It is true that I did not comment on the section of *The Gentle Revolutionary* dealing with F A Ridley's political activity. That was an aspect of his career of which I had general but not detailed knowledge. Robert Morrell's analysis may be faultless. But confidence in his judgment is not inspired by his regarding it even worthwhile to mention that Len Ebury, Hyde Park orator and Ridley's most sycophantic admirer, "is said to have been personally commissioned by Lenin to defend Communism". *The Gentle Revolutionary* is not devoid of humour.

Terry Liddle's association with Ridley was tenuous ("we both wrote for the Independent Labour Party's weekly *Socialist Leader*") a decade after Ridley resigned the NSS presidency.

However, it is to Terry Liddle's credit that he has the good grace to admit that he was not a party to the events I described and therefore feels "unqualified to comment" – an example Robert Morrell would do well to follow.

BILL MCILROY
Hove, East Sussex

I HADN'T intended to comment publicly or privately on *The Gentle Revolutionary*, to which I contributed sympathetic reminiscences. But now the issue of his secularist role has become a matter of controversy and he and other players are dead, observations from me may be appropriate.

Whether or not Jim Herrick was "being diplomatic" in his *Freethinker* history, I must plead guilty to diplomacy. Bygone history, like my *President Charles Bradlaugh, MP*, is certainly a place to tell all about everyone involved, but can still cause consternation. In describing contemporary history, I don't believe in revealing personality clashes, internal feuds and chicanery unless they impact on policy. Thus my *100 Years of Freethought* (1967) told what I believed to be the truth and nothing but the truth, yet certainly not the whole truth.

I was also anxious not to be seen using this account as a vehicle for self-promotion and so don't appear in it by name. Unfortunately, this essay in presidential self-effacement, aided by the absence of fan clubs enjoyed by my predecessors, has succeeded so well that my contribution to the society is entirely forgotten. So be it.



At the end of Chapman Cohen's long "domination" in 1951, as Robert Morrell says, "Both the NSS and the *Freethinker* had somewhat fossilised and there was a real need for a shake-up". Alas, this was even truer when the Ridley era expired in 1962.

As he generally kept politics out of his secularist activities, his "refreshing internationalistic approach" had little opportunity to shine other than in his condemnation of the Vatican's alliance with fascism in pursuing its geopolitical ambitions. (*Freethinker* correspondents who did not share his conviction about "the dangers of Roman Catholicism" were unlikely to have been active secularists.)

True, Ridley was better known internationally than his predecessor, but not only was Cohen better known and admired in Britain, his standing among freethinkers attracted legacies on which all freethought bodies depend for viability.

As far as I am aware, Ridley attracted no legacies and, as shown by his asset-shrinking involvement with Valentia Steer, would have been quite incapable of administering them if he did. It was lucky for the integrity of past legacies to the society and the paper's publisher that Bill Griffiths, denounced by critics as "the establishment", was the treasurer of one and chairman of the other at this precarious time.

Nor was Ridley interested in modern promotion and publicity on which voluntary societies are increasingly dependent. Partly this was a matter of temperament, partly inertia and partly the desire of a "revolutionary" not to compromise with capitalism. (Perhaps some supporters thought his teenage scar had been incurred at the barricades.) Like Karl Marx, Ridley was a brilliant diagnostician of social ailments but a woeful and self-deluded therapist. If he had spoken and written more on politics in secularist circles, the impact would have been topical but subversive of credibility especially in the international movement towards "humanism".

When I became *Freethinker* editor in 1966 I introduced that "suspicious word, giving the paper a subtitle of "Freethought and Humanism Weekly". At the same time I was disturbed that Ridley's front-page articles were much more likely to be about Julian the Apostate or the Great Schism than about modern Catholicism. Perceptive and finely-written though these pieces were, they were quite unsuited to lead a campaigning weekly. So I relegated them to inner pages and wrote a topical front page myself. Happily Ridley never complained to me about this. Such and other changes made to the paper were not, however, as radical as those I initiated in the modus operandi and activities of the NSS.

To come to his controversial voice and man-

ner of speaking, whatever they were like in his youth, by the 1960s they were effective only in small indoor meetings and quite unsuited to both the outdoor platform and broadcasting. His voice lacked resonance, his articulation was poor and even his fluency was a negative as hearers not on his wave-length missed most of his ironic humour.

I can understand his pique at being bypassed by BBC Radio since the NSS Constitution at that time designated the President as sole spokesman for the Society, but everyone agrees Colin McCall was a more suitable broadcaster vocally. Had BBC TV been involved, a similar judgement would have been passed on appearance.

Here I have a confession to make. In *100 Years* I said Ridley "retired" from the NSS presidency, believing this to be true. Though I was on the executive at the time of his resignation, prior teaching engagements at an evening institute prevented me from attending many meetings. (I was, however, donating several hours weekly to speaking on NSS outdoor and indoor platforms, and resigned my institute work on becoming President.)

Thus I was unaware of the Ridley-McCall controversy. From informal contacts I was aware of sundry plots (not all left-wing) to unseat McCall and Griffiths. I don't believe Ridley was involved in any of them but regretably his slack presidency allowed them to flourish. And I still don't think he would quixotically have abandoned his (modest) presidential honorarium over one broadcast had he not then become eligible for the old-age pension. But such a retirement would not have been heroic. Prospective saints and martyrs need a cause.

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

Sins of the cloth

CONGRATULATIONS on the item *Sins of the Cloth* by Peter Richards in the January *Freethinker*.

May I suggest that readers photocopy this page and send it with a *faux-innocent* covering letter to their local Catholic priest, saying something along the lines of: "Dear Father. I was shocked and saddened to read the enclosed article in the *Freethinker*. Can there be any truth in it? I anxiously await your reassuring reply." Then, perhaps, you might print a selection of the more interesting responses!

JOHN MARSON
London

Jesus was not a Buddhist

PROFESSOR Hassnain may have claimed that Jesus was a Buddhist, but that does not make it a historical fact (Letter from Nick Jenner, January 2004). Not only is it intrinsically unlikely, there is no evidence to support the

idea. Jesus' teaching is entirely consistent with contemporary Jewish ideas. It does not contain any of Buddhism's vague notions, especially not about pain. Mr Jenner sees significance in the fact that the New Testament is silent about Jesus' life between the age of 12 and 30, and suggests that, during this time, Jesus visited Buddhists in India.

While the evangelists may claim to know something of Jesus' early life, in fact it was all invented for understandable reasons. Other than he came from Galilee, nothing is known of Jesus' life before he began to preach.

If he was influenced by Buddhism, this would be evident in his teaching. The idea that he survived crucifixion and escaped to India is even more fanciful and betrays a serious misunderstanding of his intentions. For the truth about Jesus' life, see my book *The Rise and Fall of Jesus* (1996).

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

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Events & Contacts

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, January 4, 4.30pm. Public Meeting. Sunday, February 1, 4.30pm. Robert Stovold: *Life: How Did it Get Here - Evolution or Creation?* Sunday, March 7, 4.30pm. Public Meeting.

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

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 01959 574691. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851. Friends Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamsted. Tuesday, February 10, 2pm. Cheryl Gillan MP: *International Problems*.

Cornwall Humanists: Information: Patricia Adams, Sappho, Church Road, Lelant, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 3LA. Tel: 01736 754895.

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel. 01242 528743.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: Tel. 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. Email: info@devonhumanists.org.uk. Website: www.devonhumanists.org.uk.

Ealing Humanists: Information: Secretary Alex Hill Tel. 0208 741 7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group: Information: Carl Pintel 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, February 13, 7.30pm. Darwin Day: Dramatisation of the Huxley-Wilberforce Debate.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: June Kamel 01925 824844. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

Harrow Humanist Society: Information: 020 8863 2977. Monthly meetings, December – June (except January).

Hasving & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgore Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, March 4, 8pm. Robert Morrell: *Thomas Paine – Man of Reason*.

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428502. Moordown Community Centre, Bournemouth. Saturday, February 7, 2pm. Ros Cole: *Freedom and Determinism*.

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.

Humanist Society of Scotland – Dundee Group: Contact secretary Ron McLaren, Spierhill, St Andrews, Fife KY16 8NB. Tel: 01334 474551. Email: humanist@spierhill.fsworld.co.uk.

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, February 10, 7.30pm. Louise Mycroft: *The Community - Flourishing or Failing?*

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.

Perth Group: Information: perth@humanism.scotland.org.uk

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. Thursday, February 26, 8pm. Robert Morrell: *Frank Ridley, the Gentle Revolutionary, Socialist and Secularist*.

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.

Plymouth Secular Society: Information: Jenny Hynes on 01752 516272 (evenings only). Website: www.plymouth-secularists.org.uk. Monthly meetings and other events.

Reigate & District Humanist Group. Information: Roy Adderley on 01342 323882.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, February 4, 8pm. Uri Cohen: *Islam, Politics and the Middle East*. Wednesday, March 3, 8pm. Katie Drake: *Asylum Seekers – the Ethical Issues*.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Exhibition at Central Library, Surrey Street, Sheffield, till February 14. Monday-Saturday, 9am-5pm. Information: Mike Granville on 0114 2309754.

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: 0208 773 0631. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

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: Ken Allen . Tel: 01892 863002.. E-mail: ken@kallen14.fsnet.com.

Ulster Humanist Association. Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264.

E-mail: brianmccinton@btinternet.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freesevers.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