

£1.25

The

Vol 125 No 3

March 2005

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

Darwin Day Special Issue



To mark Darwin Day in London last month, Fire and Brimstone productions staged a play examining the relationship between Charles Darwin and Robert Fitzroy, captain of the Beagle. Author of *Sea Change*, Terry Sanderson, is flanked by the two actors who played the key roles. Ian James, left, was cast as Fitzroy, and Sebastian Roughley played Darwin – see page 12

One way of countering the anti-scientific propaganda of creationists and ‘intelligent design’ pedlars is to raise the profile of Charles Darwin and his work. In this edition we examine the issues involved in the escalating battle between creationists and evolutionists

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WHILE millions are praying for the Pope to maintain his precarious perch on life, there are others praying just as fervently for him to snuff it. By clinging to life with indecent tenacity, Il Papa is costing the world's media moguls millions. And they cannot be happy about that.

As far back as four years ago when the Pope was 81, a British newspaper, under the heading "Make Way for the Poperazzi", reported that "broadcasting companies from across the world – the American networks and the BBC in the vanguard – are falling over themselves and their chequebooks to secure the best vantage points for recording the ceremonies for the demise of one pope and the election and enthronement of another."

The writer, Robert Fox, revealed that "hundreds of thousands of dollars are said to have changed hands for the prime pitches. The exact amounts are guarded by a code of *omerta* worthy of a Mafia godfather. The roof of one hotel and accompanying apartments are alleged to have been bought for \$200,000 for three months by one American network."

One can only surmise that the "hundreds of thousands" spent to secure prime positions for the vultures has now inflated into millions – and, four years on, the old dictator still refuses to budge.

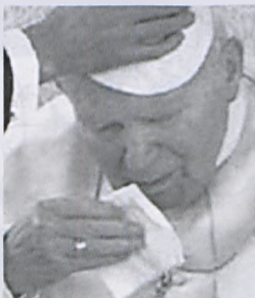
While this may be a source of profound irritation to the media and their accountants, it is a satisfying source of wealth for anyone owning property close to the action. Fox reported that "several families have already signed contracts to move out of their flats temporarily as soon as the death of the Pope is announced".

The tenant of an apartment who possessed "a critical balcony", and had struck a deal with ABC News, popped his clogs last month – and sent the network into a tailspin. ABC was forced to take up negotiations with the apartment's owner, who is probably now laughing all the way to the Vatican Bank.

CBS, meanwhile, is getting twitchier by the moment. It struck a 10-year deal for a prime rooftop location, figuring that would be more than enough time to ensure their place for the Pope's death and funeral. But that deal is set to expire next year, and should medical (if

not divine) intervention keep the Pope going beyond that time, CBS faces another huge outlay.

Meanwhile, various wags with unusually warped minds have been capitalising on the Pope's impending death and have set up a variety of ghoulish websites.



Pope John Paul II: teetering on the brink and costing the media millions

www.popedeathwatch.com – which touts itself as the "official tracker of the Pope's failing pulse". There's not much of particular interest or amusement on that site, but I did find an a chuckle-inducing link to a company selling "Pope on a Rope" soap.

You will be delighted to hear that the same company is promising the launch of a "Dope on a Rope" in the likeness of George W Bush.

A considerably more interesting site is

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE reports on the 'poperaZZi' gathering in the Vatican for the 'Big Story'

www.deathlist.net, which describes itself as "an expertly compiled list of 50 celebrities selected for their likelihood to die during any given year". The first deathlist was drawn up in 1987 and each year since then has achieved varying degrees of success. Deathlist 2002 had 10 successes – equalling its record performance for the fourth year in a row. The only main rule in compiling the deathlist is that no more than 25 of the candidates must have appeared on the previous year's list and that the candidates must be famous enough to ensure that their deaths are news-worthy (in the United Kingdom at least)."

In 2002 the Pope occupied position no 15, moved up to no 3 a year later, and has been in no 1 position in 2004 and 2005. In no 2 position is great train robber Ronnie Biggs, aged 76. Ninety-year-old Chilean dictator General Pinochet occupies position no 40.

So far this year deathlist has only scored two successes: The German boxer Max Schmeling who died aged 100 (he stood at no 3 on the list) and Sister Lucia, aka Lucia de Jesus dos Santos, who died in Portugal aged 97.

Lucia, no 10 on the list, was the last surviving member of the group of children who reckoned they saw an apparition of the Virgin Mary in 1917. She was apparently given three secrets, the third of which was given to the Pope in 1960 but never revealed.

I HAVE always regarded Stephen Green, director of the evangelical Christian Voice, as a complete pillock. But last month he exposed himself as something a great deal worse when he stooped to deprive cancer victims of a £3,000 donation simply because the money had come from an West End musical he – but very few others – regards as "blasphemous".

Green unsuccessfully orchestrated a campaign of intimidation against the BBC when it decided to screen *Jerry Springer, the Opera*, and is now bringing a private blasphemy prosecution against the corporation.

Then last month he used similar low grade terror tactics against the cancer charity, Maggie's Centres, forcing them to turn down a

donation from the *Jerry Springer* cast and audience attending a gala charity night.

Green said that if the donation was accepted, "it would upset Christians all over the world. We explained they were in grave risk of alienating Christian donors and Christian patients by accepting money that had been raised from a performance of filth and blasphemy."

He added: "Christian givers are known to be the most generous. The charity ... would have lost an enormous amount of goodwill, and would have alienated Christian givers, Christian staff, and a whole load of cancer patients who draw a great deal of comfort from their Christian faith."

And he threatened to organise protests if the charity accepted the cash – a clear cut case of demanding the *rejection* money with menaces, if ever there was one – and the charity should be ashamed of having allowed itself to be cowed by this unscrupulous bunch of religious fanatics.

Actor David Soul, who plays Springer in the musical, responded by saying that the donation was "just an act of goodwill", and added that he resented "strong-arm, mob-type tactics".

It was the Greens and the Mary Whitehouses of this world that Nietzsche had in mind when he wrote: "I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, and the one great instinct of revenge, for which no means are venomous enough, or secret, subterranean, and small enough – I call it the one immortal blemish on the human race"

THAT hackneyed old phrase "Jesus is coming" has taken on a whole new meaning, thanks to a new product that has hit the shelves in the United States.

"His Essence" is a candle which claims to capture the smell of Jesus Christ. It retails for \$17.99 and is guaranteed to burn for 80 hours.

"His Essence" is the brainchild of a "devout Christian couple" in Minneapolis, Bob and Karen Tosterud.

While reading the Bible, Karen learned that when the Messiah comes again, his garments "will smell like myrrh, aloe and cassia".

So they made a candle that would smell like Jesus Christ – and before you could say "hand over the dosh, you fools", gullible Christians were clamouring for "His Essence", which hit local stores just before Christmas, 2004.

Enthusiasts say that essence of Jesus gives them "a warm, fuzzy feeling".

But one person, on an internet message board, was less than impressed. "'His Essence'? Ya know, for a religion that hates homosexuals, they sure have some gay ideas. First there was 'eat my body, drink my blood', now they've come up with something that sounds like the stuff you mop off the floor of a porn theatre. Why not just call it Jesus Jizz?" Another wrote: "Ewww! Having smelled man 'essence' before. I don't think I want it permeating my house. That's why we use Fabreeze!"



AN Athens court has banned a comic book portraying Jesus as a pot-smoking hippie who surfs across the Sea of Galilee, and sentenced its author to six months in jail for insulting Christianity. The book's Austrian author, Gerhard Haderer, did not attend the trial and the court suspended the sentence. He described the decision as "absolutely scandalous".

Haderer's *The Life of Jesus*, was removed by police from bookshops in February 2003. A separate case on the book's seizure is pending in Greece's Supreme Court. "If the ban is not lifted, we'll consider appealing to the European Court of Human Rights," Haderer's lawyer Minas Mihailovic said.

The book depicts the Last Supper as a drinking binge and shows the late Jimi Hendrix as a heavenly friend of Jesus. Publisher Fritz Panzer said: "Greece is a member of the European Union and, so you would think, not a religious state in which an artist's freedom of expression is kicked to the ground."

The case against Haderer was started after the Greek Orthodox Church submitted a complaint when the volume first appeared in Greece in February 2003.

Meanwhile, the Islamic sultanate of Brunei has banned Keanu Reeves' new film *Constantine*, an apocalyptic thriller that depicts demon possessions, visions of hell and a renegade angel. The movie has been deemed unsuitable for public viewing. Brunei has some of Southeast Asia's strictest censorship guidelines for movies and songs, especially involving material that might be considered offensive to Islam.

Constantine is steeped in Roman Catholic mythology and features Reeves as a chain-smoking exorcist who dispatches demons back to the underworld in the hope of erasing a "mortal sin" he once committed. In one scene, Reeves' character lashes out at heaven, calling God "a kid with an ant farm."

In real life Keanu Reeves is an atheist.

Another example of censorship imposed to avoid offending Muslims comes from Sweden where a museum dedicated to world culture has removed an erotic painting plastered with verses from the Koran. Part of an exhibition which focused AIDS, the painting was withdrawn after Muslims labelled it "obscene".

Sweden is home to 400,000 Muslims. The

Comic, paintings, films and a poster banned because they offend the religious

row over Arab artist Louzla Darabi's painting comes amid tensions in Europe about a perceived increase in Islamic militancy since a Dutch filmmaker was murdered in the Netherlands late last year. Theo van Gogh was brutally murdered after completing *Submission*, a film highly critical of Islam. It was to be shown at the recent Rotterdam film festival, but at the last moment it was pulled "for security reasons".

The decision drew criticism from some directors and artists at the festival, who argued that limiting free expression was giving in to terrorists. At about the same time, a Moroccan-Dutch painter went into hiding after a show of his work opened at a modern art museum in Amsterdam. The museum director said the painter, Rachid Ben Ali, had received death threats linked to his satirical work critical of violence by Islamic militants.

The two incidents have reinforced fears among many Dutch that fast-growing non-

Western immigration is having a negative impact on social attitudes in the Netherlands.

"It would be very regrettable if we had to start accepting self-censorship, if we could not show this kind of protest art," John Frieze, the curator of Ben Ali's show at the Cobra Museum, said.

In Amsterdam, a city known for its ebullient cultural life, local people say that threats to painters have not been heard since the occupation by the Nazis during World War II.

Finally, to Milan, where the authorities have banned a billboard featuring an all-female version of Leonardo Da Vinci's Last Supper created by the French fashion house Marithe et Francois Girbaud, The billboard ad features women surrounding a female Christ, with the only male sitting on a woman's lap.

Italy's advertising watchdog said the billboard's use of Christian symbols – including a dove and a chalice – "inevitably recalls the very foundations of the Christian faith."

US Christians target another cartoon character

BUSTER Baxter is a cute cartoon rabbit. His best friend is Arthur, the world's most famous aardvark. Buster is the main character in an American TV series entitled *Postcards from Buster*, which combines animation and live action. The series, aimed at elementary schoolchildren, shows Buster travelling around America with his father, and sending video postcards home.



Buster appears briefly on screen, but mainly narrates these live-action segments, which show real children and how they live. One episode featured a family with five children, living in a trailer in Virginia, all sharing one room. In another, Buster visits a Mormon family in Utah. He has dropped in on fundamentalist Christians and Muslims as well as native Americans. He has shown the lives of children who have only one parent, and those who live with grandparents.

But the makers of *Postcards from Buster*, PBS, a private, non-profit media enterprise owned and operated by the nation's 349 public television stations, enraged Christian groups by packing the rabbit off to meet the children of a lesbian couple in Vermont, where civil unions of same-sex couples are allowed. In the face of Christian intimidation, currently rampant in the US, PBS decided to pull the episode, which was scheduled to be screened by 350 PBS stations at the beginning of February.

Yet, a few days before its decision to withdraw the episode, PBS officials, among them the company's 's president, Pat Mitchell, declared it "appropriate". But then, under pressure from Christians, including Education Secretary Margaret Spellings who denounced the programme, it was withdrawn. Spellings said many parents would not want children exposed to a lesbian life style.

Marc Brown, creator of *Postcards From Buster*, and its predecessor *Arthur* said in a statement: "I am disappointed by PBS's decision not to distribute the episode to public television stations. What we are trying to do in the series is connect kids with other kids by reflecting their lives. In some episodes, as in the Vermont one, we are validating children who are seldom validated. We believe that *Postcards From Buster* does this in a very natural way." A month earlier the cartoon character Spongebob came under fire from Christians because he featured in a video called "We are Family", made to teach tolerance to youngsters. The American Family Association described the video as a "cunning way of celebrating homosexuality".

WASHINGTON, DC – Galvanized by a tsunami that wrought incalculable devastation to villages, homes, and resorts and claimed more than 160,000 lives when it swamped the coastlands of southern Asia, a multinational consortium of renegade theists has filed a class-action suit against God.

Opening arguments in the case are provisionally scheduled to begin in early 2006 in an *ad hoc* court in the nation's capital. The aim of the suit, according to Barry Dirkowitz, attor-

ney for the plaintiffs, is twofold: "to compel the defendant to restore all property and lives lost in the tsunami, and, secondly, to obtain a writ of interdiction barring further acts of God." The plaintiffs, said the attorney, would not seek compensatory damages for their own vicarious suffering while viewing raw footage of the calamity.

Reverend Harvey Culbert, president of Word Ministries, an interdenominational organization for the promotion of Biblical literacy, has criticized the suit. Characterising the plaintiffs as "irrational and ill-informed," Culbert issued the following statement on behalf of Word Ministries: "Since God is the Creator of all that exists, it necessarily follows that He has proprietary authority to dispose of life, limb, and property in whatsoever manner He deems fit. Moreover, contrary to the allegation of the plaintiffs, the tsunami took no innocent lives. 'Innocent victims' is an oxymoron. Owing to Original Sin, we are all culpable in the sight of God."

GARY SLOAN reports on a ground-breaking legal case

Similar strictures were voiced by Imam Ali al-Badr and Bishop John Newland, spokesman for the Vatican. In a prepared statement, Newland said: "While we mourn the tragic loss of lives and grieve with the grieving, we must recognise that our heavenly Father always transmutes apparent evil into good. They err who doubt His providential wisdom." Outside a mosque in Jakarta, al-Badr said, "Glory be to Allah, the eternal fount of all good and all ill. The pot doesn't dictate to the potter."

Interviewed in his Washington, D.C. office, Dirkowitz gave short shrift to the "proprietary-right" defence. He said it lacks standing in secular courts of law "when felonious acts have been perpetrated or threatened." He cited as a relevant precedent the recent case of *Dudley v Dudley*. In response to a harassment suit brought by his wife, the court ruled that John Dudley, an inveterate bully, had no legal ground to make good his recurrent threat to drown Mrs Dudley and their six children even though the existence of the children was, as Dudley argued, contingent on his procreative acts. The court found no merit in Dudley's contention that since he had brought the children into the world, he "could take them out." No civilized society, the judge said, could tolerate such a brute axiom. The court issued a writ of mandamus enjoining Dudley from all contact, "distant or proximate," with the aggrieved wife and children. Dudley was later committed to a mental institution for the criminally insane.

Dirkowitz said the defendant would be tried *in absentia*. "Given his exalted status," the attorney said, "his presence in the courtroom might be unsettling for all concerned." The attorney questioned "whether *habeas corpus* can be applied to an incorporeal litigant."

According to Dirkowitz, the plaintiffs do not wish to circumscribe the legitimate uses of divine power. "God can continue to heal the sick, comfort the weary, bless the virtuous, chasten the wicked, answer prayers, and what have you. Miracles are fine if salutary. What my clients seek to interdict are gratuitous exhibitions of indiscriminate mayhem, depredation, rapine, and annihilation."

The attorney said the demands of the plaintiffs were feasible: "Since God is omnipotent, he can easily undo the damage done by the tsunami and curb further catastrophic intrusions into human habitats." Should the plaintiffs win the case, Dirkowitz added, "they will have to rely on the defendant's voluntary compliance with the judicial directives. Enforcement is inconceivable."

Contacted by phone at a seaside resort in the Bahamas where he was vacationing, Merv Bailey, God's attorney, previewed the line the defence would take.

"While one empathises with the outrage of the plaintiffs," said Bailey, "my client cannot possibly satisfy the stipulated mode of redress. Contrary to folklore, he isn't a miracle worker. He can neither suspend nor modify the laws of nature. For eons, he tried without success to do so."

According to Bailey, the universe in which we live was the first of several created by his client: "Having had no previous experience in this sort of enterprise, our universe, you might say, got away from him. When he set the initial conditions, he neglected to incorporate a manual override parameter. As a result, when things began to go awry, he was unable to intervene in the universe as it automatically unfolded. Unwittingly, he had created a monster he couldn't control."

Bailey said his client had had noble intentions: "He meant to create a terrestrial world without pain, anxiety, conflict, and death. In his blueprint, nature was temperate and tame, devoid of cataclysmic irruptions, arctic cold, desert heat, and infertile soil. Humans were to be a contemplative species dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, untainted by base passions, foul imaginings, and savage impulses."

In a second universe, said Bailey, his client had eliminated the flaws of the first. "Cold comfort to victims of the tsunami, but the gospel truth nevertheless," Bailey added.

• Gary Sloan, a frequent contributor to *American Atheist* and the *Freethinker*, lives in Ruston, Louisiana.

Muslims Unhappy with Child Trust Fund

WHEN the Government launched its Child Trust Fund initiative earlier this year, it failed to take into account British Muslims, who, under sharia law, cannot use the £250 vouchers.

All children born from 1 September, 2002, will get £250, and the poorest third of families will get £500, which must be invested in a special CTF account.

Announcing details of the CTF, Chancellor Gordon Brown explained the aim was to give "not just some, but all children. ... the best possible start in life". A second payment will be made when the child reaches seven.

But Muslims are not happy with the scheme, because, according to a BBC report, no providers have yet committed to offering a suitable account for Muslim families.

Islamic law forbids all forms of financial interest and has strict rules about the kind of products Muslims can invest in.

And if the industry does not respond to the demand, in a year the Inland Revenue will invest on behalf of these families, against their religion.

The Inland Revenue told the BBC it hopes the finance industry will set up a sharia compliant account as there is nothing in the rules to prevent it from doing so.

There are currently 29 CTF accounts available in the UK, with some allowing parents to save in interest-paying cash accounts, and others which invest in shares.

But, as Ibrahim Mogra, a Leicester Muslim explained: "Unfortunately, at the moment there is no CTF where I could invest that money on behalf of my child because the places where the government has recommended are not sharia compliant."

Faysal Sattar of Britain's only firm of Muslim financial advisers, 1st Ethical, and a member of the Muslim Council of Britain's economic steering committee which advises the government on such matters, said "We are hoping we can bring this matter up and try to think about a fund that will be able to cater for the Muslim community."

Greek Orthodox Church engulfed by sex, drugs and corruption scandals

THE conservative government of Greece has rejected calls for a separation of the state from the Greek Orthodox Church, which is racked by scandal and corruption charges.

Left-wing political parties had called for the constitutional change after it emerged that some high-level clerics had corruptly influenced the results of court cases.

The call by PASOK, the main opposition party, and the Communists, was followed by a poll showing that 65 percent of the population favoured separating church and state.

There are around 10,000 clerics in Greece and the church is one of the richest institutions in the country. The parliament starts each day with prayers from religious leaders, and the president, prime minister and ministers make an annual oath before officials of the church.

Following the Government's rejection of church-state separation, the Greek Orthodox Church met in an emergency session last month to try to resolve the worst crisis in the church's modern history. Its embattled spiritual leader, Archbishop Christodoulos, convened the rare meeting as allegations of skulduggery, sexual improprieties, trial-rigging, drug and antiquities smuggling engulfed the institution.

The scandal deepened when one newspaper published photographs of a 91-year-old bishop naked in bed with a young woman.

"I humbly ask for forgiveness from the people and the clerics who, for the most, honour ... the cassock they wear," said Archbishop Christodoulos, addressing the 102-member Holy Synod, the church's ruling council.

Greeks have watched dumbfounded as allegations of their priesthood's dissolute lifestyle have unfolded on television screens.

Snatched tape-recordings, aired nightly, have revealed rampant homosexuality among senior clerics who, unlike ordinary priests, are under oaths of chastity.

Claims emerged earlier last month that Metropolitan Theoklitos of Thessaly, a leading churchman, had been arrested on suspicion of drug dealing in a police raid on a notorious nightclub in Athens.

The priest was reportedly rounded up with Seraphim Koulousousas, the archbishop's former private secretary, also implicated in another "unholy affair" involving gay sex with a bishop. The Greek Orthodox church sees homosexuality as an "abomination", with the archbishop recently describing it as a "blatant, crying sin".

The revelations follow the suspension of two high-ranking clerics for "ethical misconduct"

in February.

Metropolitan Panteleimon of Attica, who headed Greece's richest diocese, was withdrawn from duties after allegations of "lewd exchanges with young men" and charges that he had embezzled about 4.4 million euros.

Snatched tape-recordings, aired nightly, have revealed rampant homosexuality among senior clerics who, unlike ordinary priests, are under oaths of chastity

The bishop is one of several eminent priests whose names have been linked in a widening trial-fixing and corruption scandal involving at least 20 judges currently under investigation.

In the wake of suggestions by fellow members of the synod that he resign, Panteleimon's reaction was less than charitable.

"If I speak, there will be an earthquake. I'll take many with me to my grave."

US Catholic Church abuse allegations keep rolling in

THE Catholic Church in the US received 1,092 complaints of sexual abuse by priests last year, and paid more than \$157 million in compensation, according to an audit of the continuing paedophile scandal.

"The crisis of sexual abuse of minors within the Catholic church is not over," the head of the US church's Office of Child and Youth Protection, Kathleen McChesney, said.

"What is over is the denial that this problem exists, and what is over is the reluctance of the church to deal openly with the public about the nature and extent of the problem."

According to a Reuters report, the audit – the second – on the church response to the paedophile scandal that erupted in 2002, was released last month, four days after one of the most notorious paedophiles, defrocked priest Paul Shanley, was sentenced to 12 to 15 years for raping a boy in the 1980s.

The audit tallied the number of new complaints, the amount spent on them and the percentage of dioceses that are complying with a 2002 charter aimed at ending priest sexual abuse.

David Clohessy of the Survivors Network of

Also in February, Archimandrite Iakovos Giosakis was suspended after being charged with antiquities smuggling following the disappearance of valuable icons from his former diocese. Under public pressure from media determined to expose the shenanigans, the church is investigating four more clerics, including a 91-year-old metropolitan bishop who was captured on camera cavorting in the nude with a young woman. The picture was splashed across the front page of the mass-selling Avriani.

But with the revelations showing no sign of abating, Greeks were doubtful whether the cleanup would go far enough.

In yet another embarrassing twist, the fiery leader has been accused of procuring the services of a convicted drug smuggler, Apostolos Vavylis, to help elect a favoured cleric to the post of Patriarch of Jerusalem in 2001.

Unsurprisingly, the allegations have severely dented the reputation of the church in a country where 97 per cent are baptised Orthodox.

those Abused by Priests criticised the report for failing to measure how effectively the church helped victims and prevented offences.

"We owe it to innocent children and vulnerable adults to insist on hard evidence and solid data before determining progress is being made," Mr Clohessy said in a statement.

Of the 1,092 allegations made in 2004, most involved incidents between 1965 and 1974, Ms McChesney said.

The charges involved at least 756 priests and deacons, and the vast majority of victims — 78 per cent — were male. Most were between the ages of 10 and 14 when the abuse began. Children under the age of 18 made 22 allegations last year and all these were reported to law enforcement agencies, Ms McChesney said.

Quotable quote

"Religion ... comprises a system of wishful illusions together with a disavowal of reality, such as we find in an isolated form nowhere else but in amentia, in a state of blissful hallucinatory confusion." — Sigmund Freud

A SCHOOL friend of mine had a mother who was a prominent activist in the local Conservative party. When I visited him, I would often see her in the kitchen, drinking from a mug labeled "Tory Tea", and would chuckle at the thought of tea holding political opinions. Of course, what it meant was *the owner of this mug is a Tory*, but the amusing implication was *in this house, even a cup of tea is right-wing*.

We laugh, because claiming opinions for entities plainly incapable of holding any is amusing. So let's change the context a little, and see if we are still chortling. What about when activists on countryside marches attach pro-hunting slogans to their pet dogs? Or when banners reading *Paedophiles Must Die* are jammed into the push-chairs of children dragged along by their parents to vigilante mob demonstrations?

I hope we all agree that this is not so jolly. But the problem is the same: it is a kind of intellectual hijacking, an attempt to reinforce one's own views by additionally ascribing them to individuals incapable of contradicting or assuming any position of their own. It is especially disturbing in the case of the child, of course, because they are only temporarily unable to assert their own view. When fully grown they may well resent having extreme opinions ascribed to them when unable to refuse. (It is of course important to note the additional irony that paedophiles themselves often attempt to excuse themselves by claiming that children are fully sexual, and adult in their ability to understand and consent to sexual relations: a view of their victims that is false in exactly the same way.) For this reason, we recognise such behaviour as morally unacceptable.

I'm sure you can guess what's coming next. As has been pointed out many times by other writers, there is one sphere in which this form of abuse is widespread and entirely tolerated. This sphere is, of course, religion. Writing last year in the *Guardian*, Richard Dawkins spoke optimistically of some future time in which the use of such phrases as "a Christian child" or "a Jewish child" will raise the hairs on the back of everybody's neck. It should do, not because of one's opinion of religion *per se* but because it is offensive and wrong to weight down children with the prejudices of their elders.

After all, you have to join the Young Conservatives – your father doesn't put your name down for it at birth. But he can drag you to his place of worship, make you pray and fast, encourage you to refuse life-saving blood transfusions and generally shape your view of the world in which you are finding your feet, in whatever manner he chooses. And to say "hang on a minute, but isn't that rather a creepy way to treat a child?" is to violate his human rights.

Fascinatingly, Dawkins's comments drew several grumpy replies, all taking the same weary, heard-it-all-before tone. Yes, we understand what you're saying. Yes, you've sort of got a point. But telling your children they can't go out on a Sunday is not abuse. When they get older they'll be able to think for themselves, no harm done.

No harm? In raising a child to believe that their parents' way of seeing the world is correct and that everybody else's is wrong? That other little children, who believe something else, are to be shunned? That hellfire and eternal torture awaits anybody who does not toe the line? That absurd fads and customs are to be scrupulously adhered to, on pain of the same fate? That science is wrong and in league with Satan? (Look on the internet if you think nobody is stupid enough to make that claim.)

It is offensive and wrong to weight down children with the prejudices of their elders, says MATTHEW CONIAM

I have personal knowledge of an individual driven to mental illness by the certainty that they were bound for Hell and whose symptoms were interpreted by their family as evidence of demonic possession. In expressing my boiling rage over this story, I have on numerous occasions been accused of racism and lack of respect for another, perfectly legitimate culture that just happens to adhere to standards and ideals alien to, but no less valid than, my own. I'll admit that this has indeed led to my revising my opinion of these matters. I thought that there was no kind of person on earth that I resented more, and had less respect for, than a parent so corrupted by their faith that they would send for a priest rather than a doctor when their child is having a nervous breakdown. I now know that there are individuals far more blinkered and perverted. They are the kind of dismal western liberals who think that my boiling rage over this story betokens racism and lack of respect for another, perfectly legitimate culture.

And that's why this is a real, serious wrong that needs correcting. If a religious upbringing merely meant brainwashing a child with ludicrous ideas about the universe I would still be appalled, but the whiners might have more of a point. But there's so much *more* to religion than crazy cosmology. Each of the great faiths comes wheezing under the weight of a vast pick-and-mix bag of anachronistic and thoroughly dangerous laws and attitudes that poi-

son their adherents' relationship to human society at every level. Instead of encouraging their victims to think through issues and form their own opinions, they simply prescribe rules that invariably have no practical application in a modern society and are, as often as not, ignorant and hate-filled.

What use is this nonsense? What can it do other than harm? At the very least it promotes an unhelpful gang mentality, an absurd tribalism that encourages exclusionary views of others that certainly do amount to racism (and of course speciesism, which it justifies and, in most of the major faiths, hails as a virtue).

At worst ... well, we all know what religion can do at its worst. Yet we also know that, for some odd reason, religions are only accountable for the behaviour of their adherents when that behaviour is altruistic. When they fight bloody crusades and bomb innocent people in the name of their faiths, religions are suddenly not to blame, even when the injunction to do exactly those things is there for all to see in their execrable holy books. Another religious mystery for us all to ponder, there. (Along the lines of: do Catholics truly believe in transubstantiation, or are they just being silly?)

The problem is that religious attitudes are so deeply ingrained in all of us, you and I included. Sometimes even I have to remind myself how strange it is that I live in a society where a largely unreadable old book written by middle-eastern tribesmen advising that adulteresses should be stoned to death is routinely cited as the ultimate source of wisdom, virtue and good conduct. And that its claims that the universe, and everything it contains, was made on a whim by a being that lives in the sky are taken seriously by people entitled to vote, drive cars and bring up children.

At the very least this is pretty childish, daffy-sounding stuff.

I often imagine an experiment in which a child is somehow raised in a perfectly normal manner with one exception: he is raised not as a religious person or as an atheist but in complete and total ignorance of religion. Then, when he reaches the age at which he begins to experience existential problems, tell him the creation myth of any religion of your choice. My guess is that, denied the brainwashing that comes not just from having religion forced upon you but also passively, simply from growing up in a world in which some people take it seriously, his only concern will be to wonder whether you are joking or insane. Give him Darwin too and is there really the slightest doubt which will get his vote, or which will best answer the questions he is asking?

The irony is that even those of a mystical turn of mind don't actually need these crazily irrelevant old books to support religious attitudes. It is entirely possible to hold spiritual or religious

views, to believe in human uniqueness and a divine creator, without feeling the need to cling absurdly to any of these creaking and corrupt old texts. Some people do just that. But the vast majority of religious people have signed themselves up squarely as a member of one of these nasty old clubs. Why is that? Why can't they just be religious in their own way? I think we know the answer. It's the same reason that a religious person in Tennessee will probably be a Christian and a religious person in Baghdad will probably be a Muslim. It's called brainwashing. *It's because that's the way they were brought up.* Didn't you believe everything your parents told you?

Imitating our elders, and accepting their views, is an essential component of growing up, and not just in human cultures. It is our Darwinian inheritance; a basically invaluable survival tactic that just happens to have gone off-course here. Religious instruction is not a lifestyle choice that the child can glibly shrug off when he is of an age to think for himself. It goes

much deeper. Yes, there are strong, lucky people who were able to see the faiths into which they were indoctrinated for what they are, and break free. But there are so many who never do.

The reason why rationality cannot be trifled with, or necessarily picked up in later life after a childhood filled with conditioning to the contrary, is that it is not an innate human talent. It has to be learned, painstakingly and counter-intuitively, and like riding a bike or speaking a foreign language, it is much, much easier acquired when the mind is young and supple. To see what I mean, go out tonight and look at the night sky. As you observe the stars, you will know in your mind that they are an almost unimaginably vast distance from you and, as my dictionary has it, of great mass, giving out light and fuelled by nuclear fusion reactions. But that is not what you actually *see*. Our earliest ancestors looked at the stars and saw tiny lights, almost touchably near, spread across a dark blanket in the sky. *And so do we.* We know differently, but we perceive the same.

Our rational minds appear to have been a kind of Darwinian accident, a by-product of some other, more immediately useful form of mental evolution. Indeed, much blood has been spilled in their acquisition, so sternly have their sobering insights been resisted. Instilling this hard-won rationality in our children is one of the kindest, most useful things we can do for them. To wilfully do the opposite in the name of corrupt monotheistic religion is an intolerable wrong. We need to see instinctively that "a Catholic child" is every bit as silly as Tory Tea, but far more sinister. The influence of one's parents, and the importance of childhood as the time in which one's outlook on life is formed and shaped, cannot be overestimated. We warn our children about strangers and lighted matches, then blithely fill their enquiring minds with superstition, obscurantism and terror. Or else look away when others do so.

Call me a blinkered atheist, but I think that matters. In fact, I think it matters like hell. So to speak.

Suicide bombers: Damn 'em to Hell, Karol!

"I'M giving you the keys of the kingdom in the sky. Whomever you indict on the land will be indicted in the sky, and whomever you pardon on the land will be pardoned in the sky." Those are the words the anonymous author of the Christian gospel known as Matthew (16:19) put into Jesus' mouth. And ever since Siricius invented the office of Pope in 384 CE, by declaring himself the four coexistent popes' superior, popes have been claiming that the promise was made to the disciple Peter, whom the Catholic Church retroactively designated as the prototype pope, and to all of his successors. Accordingly, under Catholic dogma, the current pope has the authority to send anyone he chooses to Hell, without passing GO and without collecting \$200.

So why is he not doing so, when the suicide-murder of noncombatants, including children, is clearly the kind of "sin" the pope pretends to have the authority to judge? And as a guarantee that any such action cannot be a mistake, he has the 1870 Bull (apt name) of Pius IX that any ruling by a pope on matters of belief or morality is infallible. Therefore Catholic dogma unambiguously declares that, if a pope chooses to sentence any person or persons to Hell, he is able to do so. So to repeat, why is he not doing so?

The first answer that comes to mind is that Pope John Paul II is too compassionate to inflict such an evil punishment even on monsters. That answer is immediately falsified by the observable reality that he is not too compassionate to sentence millions of children to a slow death from malnutrition and starvation by prohibiting birth

control. Nor is he too compassionate to sentence millions of Africans in particular to the living Hell of AIDS, by prohibiting the most effective form of disease prevention. When the victims of the current pope's no-condoms tyranny are tallied, it becomes evident that he is the most prolific serial killer in human history, with Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler a distant second and third.

The Pope has the power to damn suicide bombers to hell. So why does he not do so?
WILLIAM HARWOOD poses the question

So if he extends no compassion to obedient Catholics, is it believable that he feels compassion for Muslim murderers? Anyone who would answer that question in the affirmative probably owns a lot of swampland in Florida.

So what is the alternative explanation? In one word: expedience. Karol Wojtyla may well believe his own lies. He is, after all, not the brightest candle on the Christmas tree. But at some level he is also aware that he can only exercise totalitarian power over gullible believers. He has never sentenced condom users to Hell because he, and more important his puppetmasters, are fully aware that such an action would cause millions of Catholics to defect to an opposition mythology.

However, that consequence does not exist in the case of Allah-worshippers. They cannot secede from Wojtyla's cult, for the obvious

reason that they do not currently adhere to it. So where is the problem? The answer is credibility. Wojtyla's Geppettos comprehend, even if their Pinocchio does not, that damning, anathematising or excommunicating non-Catholics would turn him into the same kind of public laughing stock as the theologians who are on record as declaring that extraterrestrials, if they exist, are subject to "original sin," and therefore need King Jesus' salvation to save them from the Christian Hell.

Pope John Paul II believes, or claims to believe, that he can send suicide bombers, past and present, to Hell by issuing an infallible Papal Bull. Do they deserve it? Even moderate Muslims would agree that they do. So why does he not do so? The only conceivable explanation is that doing so would make him look like such an idiot that the Catholic Church's income would be diminished by billions and billions of dollars. And like every totalitarian tyranny past and present, policy is determined by the bottom line. So what else is new?

Quotable quote

"There was a time when I believed in the story and the scheme of salvation, so far as I could understand it, just as I believed there was a Devil ... Suddenly the light broke through to me and I knew this God was a lie ... For indeed it is a silly story, and each generation nowadays swallows it with greater difficulty ... Why do people go on pretending about this Christianity?" — H. G. Wells

A week after a federal judge in Atlanta, Georgia, ruled as "unconstitutional" school textbook stickers which referred to evolution as "a theory not a fact", the *Washington Post* ran the following comment piece, entitled "God and Darwin":

With their slick websites, pseudo-academic conferences and savvy public relations, the proponents of "intelligent design" – a "theory" that challenges the validity of Darwinian evolution – are far more sophisticated than the creationists of yore. Rather than attempt to prove that the world was created in six days, they operate simply by casting doubt on evolution, largely using the time-honored argument that intelligent life could not have come about by a random natural process and must have been the work of a single creator. They do no experiments and do not publish in recognized scientific journals.

Nevertheless, this new generation of anti-evolutionists, arguing that children have a "right to question" scientific truths, has had widespread success in undermining evolutionary theory.

Perhaps partly as a result, a startling 55 percent of Americans – and 67 percent of those who voted for President Bush – do not, according to a recent CBS poll, believe in evolution at all. According to a recent Gallup poll, about a third of Americans believe that the Bible is literally true. Some of these believers have persuaded politicians, school boards and parents across the country to question their children's textbooks. In states as diverse as Wisconsin, South Carolina, Kansas, Montana, Arkansas and Mississippi, school boards are arguing over whether to include "intelligent design" in their curriculums.

Last week, in Pennsylvania's Dover School District, an administrator read a statement to ninth-grade biology students saying that evolution is not fact. Over the objections of ninth-grade science teachers and of parents who have filed suit, he offered "intelligent design" as an alternative.

Also last week, a Georgia county school board voted to appeal a judge's decision to remove stickers describing evolution as a "theory, not a fact" from school textbooks.

In both cases, the anti-evolutionists have been very careful in their choice of language, eschewing mentions of God or the Bible. Nevertheless, their intent was clear. As the lawsuit filed by Dover parents states, "intelligent design is neither scientific nor a theory in the scientific sense; it is an inherently religious argu-

Anti-evolutionists battle for the mind

ment or assertion that falls outside the realm of science." Discussion of religion in a history or philosophy class is legitimate and appropriate. To teach intelligent design as science in public schools is a clear violation of the principle of separation of church and state.

The deeply religious nature of the United States should not be allowed to stand in the way of the thirst for knowledge or the pursuit of science

It also violates principles of common sense. In fact, the breadth and extent of the anti-evolutionary movement that has spread almost unnoticed across the country should force American politicians to think twice about how their public expressions of religious belief are beginning to affect education and science.

The deeply religious nature of the United States should not be allowed to stand in the way of the thirst for knowledge or the pursuit of science. Once it does, it won't be long before the American scientific community – which already has trouble finding enough young Americans to fill its graduate schools – ceases to lead the world.

In ruling that the Georgia stickers violated the constitutionally mandated separation between church and state, Judge Clarence Cooper declared that labelling evolution a "theory" played on the popular definition of the word as a "hunch" and could confuse students.

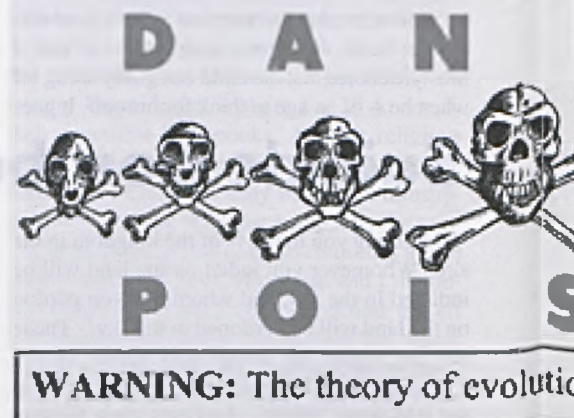
The stickers read, "This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully and critically considered." The disclaimers were put in the books by school officials in 2002.

"Due to the manner in which the sticker refers to evolution as a theory, the sticker also has the effect of undermining evolution education to the benefit of those Cobb County citizens who would prefer that students maintain their religious beliefs regarding the origin of

life," Cooper said in his ruling.

The judge said he was ruling on the "narrow issue" of the case, brought against the Cobb County School District and Board of Education by four parents of district students, which was whether the district's stickers violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

His conclusion, he said, "is not that the school board should not have called evolution a theory or that the school board should have



*Typical of Christian anti-evolution pro
the answersingen*

called evolution a fact."

"Rather, the distinction of evolution as a theory rather than a fact is the distinction that religiously-motivated individuals have specifically asked school boards to make in the most recent anti-evolution movement, and that was exactly what parents in Cobb County did in this case," he wrote.

"By adopting this specific language, even if in the direction of counsel, the Cobb County School Board appears to have sided with these religiously motivated individuals."

The sticker, he said, sends "a message that the school board agrees with the beliefs of Christian fundamentalists and creationists".

"The school board has effectively improperly entangled itself with religion by appearing to take a position," Cooper wrote. "Therefore, the sticker must be removed from all of the textbooks into which it has been placed."

Five parents of students and the American Civil Liberties Union had challenged the stickers in court, arguing they violated the constitutional separation of church and state.

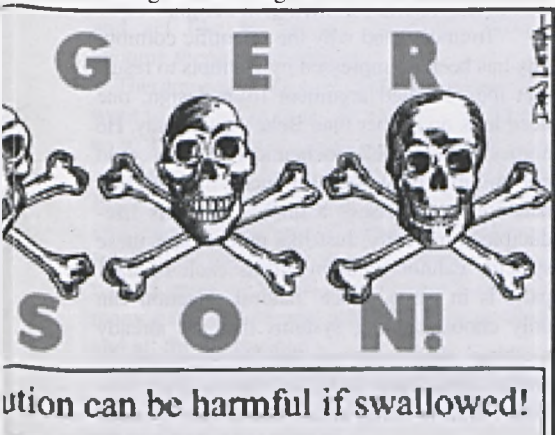
The case was heard in federal court last November. The school system defended the warning stickers as a show of tolerance, not

Creationists are winning the hearts and minds of Americans

religious activism as some parents claimed.

"The Cobb County school board is doing more than accommodating religion," Michael Manely, an attorney for the parents, argued during the trial. "They are promoting religious dogma to all students."

Lawyers for Cobb County, however, argued that the school board had made a good-faith effort to address questions that inevitably arise during the teaching of evolution.



Propaganda is this poster, found on a creationism website

"Science and religion are related and they're not mutually exclusive," school district attorney Linwood Gunn said. "This sticker was an effort to get past that conflict and to teach good science."

The schools placed the stickers after more than 2,000 parents complained the textbooks presented evolution as fact, without mentioning rival ideas about the beginnings of life.

One of the best ripostes to those fundamentalists who insist that Darwinism "is only a theory" is to point out that gravity, too, "is only a theory" – then invite the creationist to test the theory by jumping from the top of a skyscraper.

G N G Tingey takes the point further in a recent letter published in the National Secular Society's on-line magazine, *Newsliner*: "What seems to have happened, is that they [the fundamentalists] have used the strict scientific definition of a theory, as opposed to what might be called normal usage of the word. A scientific theory is usually the one normally used in (scientific and engineering) practice – it is no longer an hypothesis, but a theory, supported by available facts and evidence, and is usually the simplest possible explanation to fit

those facts. They use the word theory to imply 'airy-fairy speculation'.

"I am suggesting that we turn their spurious arguments around, in a fashion similar to this: 'Yes, Darwinian Evolution is a theory, or even only a theory, but in the same way that Gravity, Quantum Mechanics, the Gas Laws and Mendelian Genetics are only theories. They are the best explanations available that fit the available facts, and have repeatedly passed the many tests that have been made over the years to either falsify them, or to look for simpler explanations. Furthermore, these theories are intimately inter-linked with other experiments, observations and known facts, to make a coherent, structured whole. Any attempt to replace evolution with an alternative theory – only a theory remember! –

must fit all the available facts equally well. It must be not only subject to all the same falsification tests that Darwinism has passed, and also fit in with all other presumed valid theories and observations, and preferably (almost essentially) be simpler."

He suggested that the point that should be made to creationists and intelligent design proponents is: "Your so-called theory of intelligent design presumes a designer. Therefore, a simple test for this theory would be to detect or show the presence of this putative designer. Unless and until you can produce some evidence for the existence of this designer, your theory of ID must remain an unproven hypothesis."

"The last sentence, is of course, a re-statement of my testable principle, namely that God is not detectable.

"Please note that there are two very important pieces of scientific theory and practice which must be included in this argument, as they are both well-founded in theory and practice, and intimately tie in with evolution: the aforementioned Mendelian Genetics, and the DNA/RNA coding for life here. Any attempt to invoke ID must account for these phenomena also."

More clap-trap than mouse-trap

The preface to *Science and Creationism: a view from the National Academy of Sciences*, states: "This booklet considers the science that supports the theory of evolution, focusing on three categories of scientific evidence:

- Evidence for the origins of the universe, Earth, and life
- Evidence for biological evolution, including findings from paleontology, comparative anatomy, biogeography, embryology, and molecular biology
- Evidence for human evolution.

It goes on to state: "The tremendous success of science in explaining natural phenomena and fostering technological innovation arises from its focus on explanations that can be inferred from confirmable data. Scientists seek to relate one natural phenomenon to another and to recognise the causes and effects of phenomena. In this way, they have developed explanations for the changing of the seasons, the movements of the sun and stars, the structure of matter, the shaping of mountains and valleys, the changes in the positions of continents over time, the history of life on Earth, and many other natural occurrences. By the same means, scientists have also deciphered which substances in our environment are harmful to humans and which are not, devel-

oped cures for diseases, and generated the knowledge needed to produce innumerable labour-saving devices.

"The concept of biological evolution is one of the most important ideas ever generated by the application of scientific methods to the natural world. The evolution of all the organisms that live on Earth today from ancestors that lived in the past is at the core of genetics, biochemistry, neurobiology, physiology, ecology, and other biological disciplines. It helps to explain the emergence of new infectious diseases, the development of antibiotic resistance in bacteria, the agricultural relationships among wild and domestic plants and animals, the composition of Earth's atmosphere, the molecular machinery of the cell, the similarities between human beings and other primates, and countless other features of the biological and physical world. As the great geneticist and evolutionist Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote in 1973, 'Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution'.

"Nevertheless, the teaching of evolution in our schools remains controversial. Some object to it on the grounds that evolution contradicts the accounts of origins given in the

(Continued on p10)

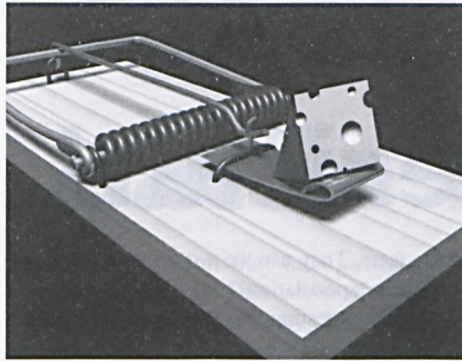
first two chapters of Genesis. Some wish to see 'creation science' – which posits that scientific evidence exists to prove that the universe and living things were specially created in their present form – taught together with evolution as two alternative scientific theories.

"Scientists have considered the hypotheses proposed by creation science and have rejected them because of a lack of evidence. Furthermore, the claims of creation science do not refer to natural causes and cannot be subject to meaningful tests, so they do not qualify as scientific hypotheses. In 1987 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that creationism is religion, not science, and cannot be advocated in public school classrooms. And most major religious groups have concluded that the concept of evolution is not at odds with their descriptions of creation and human origins."

Two years ago, on April 10, 2003, the *Guardian* carried a report entitled "The battle for American science" in which reporters Oliver Burkeman and Alok Jha put forward evidence that "Creationists, pro-lifers and conservatives now pose a serious threat to research and science teaching in the US."

The article stated that "one of the first signs that something was changing came in March last year in the suburbs of northern Atlanta, when people started talking, a little more frequently than might be expected, about mousetraps. It was hardly unprecedented in the US that a group of local parents should be lobbying for their children to be taught that evolution was a disputed theory, not a fact. But the way some of them were doing it was new, which is where the mousetraps came in. Unlike some of the openly evangelical Christian lobbies, they didn't want schools to teach creationism – the theory that God created the universe in seven days – they only wanted to air a theory known as Intelligent Design. ID holds that the living cell is 'irreducibly complex', like a mousetrap. Remove the spring from a mousetrap and it isn't just an inferior mousetrap; it isn't a mousetrap at all. It had to have been created by an intelligent designer. It was the same, they said, for cells, and so life must have been designed by some kind of intelligence. Critics called this 'stealth creationism' – religious dogma masquerading as science – but the ID proponents got their way, thanks partly to wording in President Bush's new education bill. Schools in Atlanta are now theoretically entitled to 'teach the controversy' (though officials have urged teachers to stick to evolution for now, sparking a lawsuit)."

The mousetrap argument was put by Michael J Behe in a debate published in *Natural History Magazine*. Behe, who received his PhD in biochemistry from the University of Pennsylvania in 1978, is a professor of biological sciences at Pennsylvania's Lehigh University. His current research



The mouse-trap argument is "just plain wrong"

involves the roles of design and natural selection in building protein structure. His book *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* is available in paperback (Touchstone Books, 1998).

In putting his case for ID, Behe poses the question: "Does natural selection account for complexity that exists at the molecular level? How can we decide whether Darwinian natural selection can account for the amazing complexity that exists at the molecular level? Darwin himself set the standard when he acknowledged, 'If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down'.

"Some systems seem very difficult to form by such successive modifications – I call them irreducibly complex. An everyday example of an irreducibly complex system is the humble mousetrap. It consists of (1) a flat wooden platform or base; (2) a metal hammer, which crushes the mouse; (3) a spring with extended ends to power the hammer; (4) a catch that releases the spring; and (5) a metal bar that connects to the catch and holds the hammer back. You can't catch a mouse with just a platform, then add a spring and catch a few more mice, then add a holding bar and catch a few more. All the pieces have to be in place before you catch any mice.



"Natural selection can only choose among systems that are already working so irreducibly complex biological systems pose a powerful challenge to Darwinian theory."

This argument was countered in the magazine with a response by Kenneth R Williams, a professor of biology at Brown University. His research work on cell membrane structure and function has been reported in such journals as *Nature*, *Cell*, and the *Journal of Cell Biology*. Miller is co-author of several widely used high school and college biology textbooks, and in 1999 he published *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution* (Cliff Street Books).

In an article entitled "The Flaw in the Mousetrap: Intelligent design fails the biochemistry test, Miller says: "Behe fails to provide biochemical evidence for intelligent design.

"To understand why the scientific community has been unimpressed by attempts to resurrect the so-called argument from design, one need look no further than Behe's own essay. He argues that complex biochemical systems could not possibly have been produced by evolution because they possess a quality he calls irreducible complexity. Just like mousetraps, these systems cannot function unless each of their parts is in place. Since 'natural selection can only choose among systems that are already working', there is no way that Darwinian mechanisms could have fashioned the complex systems found in living cells. And if such systems could not have evolved, they must have been designed. That is the totality of the biochemical 'evidence' for intelligent design.

"Parts of a supposedly irreducibly complex machine may have different, but still useful, functions. Ironically, Behe's own example, the mousetrap, shows what's wrong with this idea. Take away two parts (the catch and the metal bar), and you may not have a mousetrap but you do have a three-part machine that makes a fully functional tie clip or paper clip. Take away the spring, and you have a two-part key chain. The catch of some mousetraps could be used as a fishhook, and the wooden base as a paperweight; useful applications of other parts include everything from toothpicks to nutcrackers and clipboard holders. The point, which science has long understood, is that bits and pieces of supposedly irreducibly complex machines may have different – but still useful – functions.

"Evolution produces complex biochemical machines. Behe's contention that each and every piece of a machine, mechanical or biochemical, must be assembled in its final form before anything useful can emerge is just plain wrong. Evolution produces complex biochemical machines by copying, modifying, and combining proteins previously used for other functions."

What God Wants: the Case for Theological Atheism

EVERY practising believer needs to know what God wants – it's the most fundamental question to be answered if the believer wants to live as God wishes.

According to theological atheism, God doesn't want us to believe in him. He created the world – and us – in a way that deliberately excludes any proof that he had a hand in it. For example, he used evolution as a tool to make himself undetectable.

Now that we have attained enough wisdom and knowledge, God wants to retreat from the limelight we've forced him into during most of our ignorant past. It would be wrong, presumptuous, and illogical to continue active belief in him. We should respect God's wishes and act like he doesn't exist. We should become theological atheists.

Theological atheism is ideal for those who want to believe in God, but who have difficulty with the religious baggage associated with it, like having to go to church, pray, obey the Bible, and generally please God. All of that is unnecessary. Theological atheism leaves you free to live your own life on your own terms, without guilt — but also without the bleakness many people associate with rejection of God and all things spiritual.

As a theological atheist, you can have it all – the comfort of secretly knowing that God exists, belief in an afterlife if you want, and the confidence that you're doing exactly what God wants by living without him.

All religious people can adopt theological atheism – from "deists" who believe in an impersonal creative force that set off the Big Bang 15 billion years ago but has done nothing

Theological atheism: The belief that God exists, but he does not want us to believe in him.

God created evidence to prove that the universe, earth, and life came into existence and developed slowly by natural processes, without any apparent divine intervention. He left this evidence everywhere for us to discover – in the rocks, in fossils, in the DNA of all living things, and in outer space. Since God chose to hide his divine creative powers by using only natural processes that make him redundant, we can conclude he wants to remain invisible and not be acknowledged or worshipped.

Note: The common definition of atheism is "disbelief in or denial of the existence of God". At its root, however, atheism literally means "without God". Therefore, if you reject God from your life while still accepting that he exists, you could be called a theological atheist.

since, to Catholics who accept the findings of science but also believe God interacts with the world, and to scientific creationists who claim that God made the world in six days about 10,000 years ago.

Ironically, the most extreme believers, scientific creationists, are especially justified in adopting theological atheism. We might label them "fundamentalist atheists" as a sub-category of theological atheists (we can also have "deist atheists" and "Catholic atheists" etc.)

Believers should respect God's wishes and act as if he does not exist, says JOYCE ARTHUR



Scientific creationists use the tools of science to try and show that the Biblical Genesis story is factual. Although they generally believe in a young earth (only 10,000 years old), they also respect scientific evidence that the earth is much older. To explain the contradiction, they've invented an "Appearance of Age" hypothesis. That is, God purposely created the universe and the earth as if they evolved over billions of years. For example, God created Adam and Eve fully grown but complete with misleading belly buttons, and he created light already *en route* to us to make it look as if it's been travelling for 15 billion years.

Let's allow a scientific creationist, Don Stewart, to explain this for us: "This theory recognises that God created Adam with the appearance of age. When Adam was thirty seconds old he looked like a full-grown adult. He did not have to grow up or learn a language — he was created fully mature. If God made the remainder of the universe along this same line, then the actual age would not be the same as the age that things appear to be. Trees would have been created fully mature, animals did not have to grow up, and the stars were already shining in the sky. If this is the case, then the universe could look millions or billions of years old but actually be relatively young. Therefore, there is no conflict between the Bible and science because God made the universe to look old when He created it a relatively short time ago."¹

(Ironically, under this theory it doesn't matter whether God actually created the universe 15 billion years ago, ten thousand years ago, or one second ago. The past and all evidence for it are created all at once, so God could have

done it any time.)

Stewart goes on to say that this does not make God a "deceiver", because "there is no deception on God's part if He created everything fully mature and then revealed that fact to humanity." What Stewart means is that God revealed the old earth through scientific evidence, a clear admittance by creationists that there is no evidence for a young earth or a sudden creation of life.

Stewart fails to mention that humanity only found out about our old, evolving earth about 200 years ago. Up until then, we had to take God's biblical word for it that the earth was created all at once not too long ago. But if God created an appearance of age, why didn't he just say so in Genesis? It wasn't even God who finally told us about the old earth. We had to find out the hard way all by ourselves, with our scientific methods and tools. Why didn't God want us to find out about the old earth and the evolution of life? Perhaps he preferred to bask in the glory of being the master creator of everything in one fell swoop. Maybe God doesn't really like science, because it makes people question his word, his abilities, his very existence.

But this line of reasoning makes God seem not only deceptive, but selfish and egotistical. Surely that can't reflect the real God, who in reality is good, wise, and all-knowing. God has always known we were going to figure things out – it was part of his grand plan. He made us naturally curious so we would develop the scientific method and use it to find out the truth.

Remember that God purposely planted evidence showing that everything evolved slowly by natural processes, without his intervention. He must have wisely decided we should discover this evidence for ourselves, when we were ready to understand and accept it.

Now that we've reached this state, God no longer expects us to believe everything happened by sudden divine fiat 10,000 years ago, a second ago, or even 15 billion years ago.

God was never a deceiver because he's a perfect moral being – even humble. He just prefers to be invisible, and evolution was his way of achieving that. He himself had to slowly evolve towards invisibility, in step with our own ability to comprehend his true nature. Now that we know better, we should respect what God wants – ignore his existence and live without him.

We should adopt theological atheism.

Reference 1. Don Stewart, Blue Letter Bible. Frequently Asked Questions. www.blueletter-bible.org/faq/nbi/661.html

Darwin Day events increasing year after year

AMONG the many events held across the globe this year to mark Darwin Day – on and around February 12, Darwin’s birthday – was a play staged at the Conway Hall library entitled *Sea Change*, a dramatisation of the relationship between Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Robert Fitzroy (1805-1865), captain of the *Beagle*, the ship that took them on their fateful voyage to the Galapagos Islands.

Written by NSS Vice-President Terry Sanderson, and presented by Fire and Brimstone Productions, the play explores the effects of evolution on the two men. While Fitzroy’s faith grows ever more extreme, Darwin finds himself less able to accept the biblical concept of creation in the light of his observations of the natural world. An epic conflict of views develops between them, as Fitzroy sees the whole basis of world view under challenge



Robert Fitzroy

from “Darwin’s dangerous idea.”

Presented under the auspices of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association and South Place Ethical Society, the play featured Ian James and Sebastian Roughley in the parts of Fitzroy and Darwin.

Fitzroy, highly-strung and deeply religious to the end, committed suicide at the age of 59.

Darwin Day is the name used for a growing number of loosely-associated events whose aim is to acquaint the public with the works of Charles Darwin who provided the first coherent theory of evolution by means of natural selection.

The events are usually organised locally. It is thought that the first Darwin Day was organised by the Humanist Community of Palo Alto, California in 1995. It featured a lecture by anthropologist Donald Johanson on Darwin and Human Origins. Starting in 1997, a series of larger events were organised at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville by members of the biology department. This came about in reaction to the consideration by the 1996 Tennessee legislature of a bill aimed at restricting the teaching of evolution in the public (state) schools.

Some advocates would like to have a public holiday declared for 12 February 2009. That day will be the 200th anniversary of Darwin’s birth, and the year will also mark the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*.

While some in the scientific community view the Darwin Day events as educational,



Charles Darwin

and some in the secular humanist community view them as a celebration of the advance of rationality and science, many creationists and “intelligent design” advocates regard them as “worship” of Darwin.

Creationist Museum to open in Kentucky

A MUSEUM dedicated to the Book of Genesis and the story of the creation is under construction in Kentucky.

The \$25m venture is hoping to pull in around a quarter of a million visitors a year.

They will be taken on a journey 6,000 years back in time, to the Garden of Eden, to a time when the creationists believe dinosaurs and man roamed the earth side-by-side.

The museum has been a 20-year dream for Australian Ken Ham, a Biblical-creationist who is taking on the scientific establishment.

He says evolutionists are scared to admit the possibility of intelligent design because that leads to the possibility of God, the Bible and what he calls “a whole different world view”.

From rural Pennsylvania to Bible-belt Kentucky there is a struggle in America over how much religion to admit into public life. Ken Ham presents a stark choice:

“Who’s gonna win this culture war, between secular humanism and Christian morality, or as one of the newspapers put it, between Godly America and Worldly America?” Mr Ham asks.

Ovulation versus cretinism

TWO different theories exist concerning the origin of children: the theory of sexual reproduction, and the theory of the stork. Many people believe in the theory of sexual reproduction because they have been taught this theory at school. In reality, however, many of the world’s leading scientists are in favour of the theory of the stork. If the theory of sexual reproduction is taught in schools, it must only be taught as a theory and not as the truth.

Alternative theories, such as the theory of the stork, must also be taught.

Evidence supporting the theory of the stork includes the following:

- 1 It is a scientifically established fact that the stork does exist. This can be confirmed by every ornithologist.
- 2 The alleged human foetal development contains several features that the theory of sexual reproduction is unable to explain.
- 3 The theory of sexual reproduction implies that a child is approximately nine months old at birth. This is an absurd claim. Everyone knows that a newborn child is newborn.
- 4 According to the theory of sexual reproduction, children are a result of sexual intercourse. There are, however, several well documented cases where sexual intercourse has not led to the birth of a child.
- 5 Statistical studies in the Netherlands have indicated a positive correlation between the birth rate and the number of storks. Both are decreasing.
- 6 The theory of the stork can be investigated by rigorous scientific methods. The only assumption involved is that children are delivered by the stork.

– Attributed to Erkki Also, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Helsinki University.

Quotable quote

“As editor of the largest newspaper in West Virginia, I scan hundreds of reports daily ... and I am amazed by the frequency with which religion causes people to kill each other. It is a nearly universal pattern, undercutting the common assumption that religion makes people kind and tolerant.”— James Haught

'No God, No God!'

WHAT is secularism? This was the question asked at a conference in Hyderabad. Just as it might be in Conway Hall in London – but in a quite different context. For India, since independence, has had secularism written into the constitution.

JIM HERRICK, Chairman of G W Foote and Literary Editor of the New Humanist reports on two humanist conferences in India he attended in January

This does not mean that they are all good supporters of the NSS, but that the state takes a neutral stance towards religion and a strict separation of church and state is observed – a means of keeping the different religions, especially Hinduism and Islam, from tearing at each other's throats. This is only partially successful and the conference was concerned that separation of church and state was in danger of crumbling in Europe, in North America and in India.

The President of the Indian Radical Humanist Association, the Editor of *The Secularist* and the Editor of *Humanist Outlook* all thrashed out the knotty question of the progress of secularism in India.

A few days earlier in Vijayawada there took place the Fifth World Atheist Conference run by the Atheist Centre. The topic was *Atheism and Social Progress: Are the two necessarily connected?* Certainly they are in the case of the Atheist Centre – which runs a hospital, rural development projects, a woman's hotel and a criminal reform programme.

But it is quite possible to be an atheist and have not the slightest interest in social reform, though it is good to be able to demonstrate to those Christians who constantly flaunt their good works that, quietly, atheists can be very concerned with social reform. Members of the Atheist Centre had been helping in the devastation following the tsunami; there were reports that different religions were competing to show which religion was giving the most effective aid.

Among the presentations at the conference was one by a police chief who had been working with the Atheist Centre to eradicate witchcraft in the region. There was also a scathing critique of the guru Sai Baba not only for his fake mystification but also for his alleged nefarious financial

activities. Music and dance also figured in the programme, which pleased me since I gave a talk on the value of the arts to humanists and, indeed, to society as a whole.

As well as attending these two conferences, I visited a humanist school in Chirala. I talked to a class of youngsters telling them about London and asking them about their lives. Most of those who didn't want to be engineers or doctors aspired to be cricketers.

I asked one seven-year-old if he knew what humanism was. He held up his fist and banged it on the palm of his other hand: "No God! No God!"

Well that's a good start. Now that in the UK we have a government obsessed with increas-



Children pictured at the humanist school in Chirala.

Photo: Jim Herrick

ing the number of faith schools, perhaps we should think of starting a non-faith school.

Help take the Freethinker into a new era

Ever since it was launched in 1881 to support the non-religious and to reflect their views, the Freethinker has depended on the support and generosity of supporters who, through their donations and bequests, have kept the magazine going without a break for more than 124 years.

Since August 23, 2004, we have received £2,647.50 in donations from generous readers, and we are also extremely grateful to have received a bequest earlier this year of £7,972.24 following the death of Mr J van Slogteren, a long-time supporter of the magazine who lived in Spain.

Through your forethought in leaving us a legacy; you can help us carry on the fight for the secularisation of our education system, the ousting of the Bishop's Bench from the House of Lords, and the giving of equal rights to non-believers in employment in hospitals, in the armed forces, and in prisons. By promoting reason, tolerance, humanity and good will, we can offer an alternative to the religious authoritarianism that has blighted the world for millennia.

With the Freethinker's 125th anniversary looming – it takes place in May, 2006 - we need to take steps to ensure its continued publication for future years to come, and to this end we will be launching a 125th anniversary appeal in the April, 2005 issue.

We thank the following who made donations to the Freethinker fund between the end of last August and February 23.

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Daydreams misunderstood

GRAHAM Noble's response to my article "Can the secular church save your soul?" is rather like those reactions to my original piece in the *Skeptic* magazine which I discuss in the first couple of paragraphs.

As I bent over backwards to make clear, my ruminations were purely on the daydream level and not intended to be read as practical suggestions. Noble therefore willfully misses the point by showing how actual attempts to apply the same ideas did not "seem to produce the effect Matthew Coniam envisages", since I envisaged no effect (other than probable failure) and said so.

Similarly, my thought experiment concerning the enlightenment of prisoners through scientific education was not an attempt to suggest that human nature can be altered. On the contrary, the sobering insights of sociobiology would be high on the curriculum. To change (and open) the mind of an individual is not the same as altering human nature. I'm glad to say it happens all the time, whenever someone in thrall to religion throws it away and embraces reason (how many of us are born atheists?) The point of the piece was simply to illustrate how science has the monopoly on decency and morality as well as good sense.

I must say I felt a little uneasy reading his reference to "the beheading of a handful of westerners". Perhaps this time the misunderstanding is mine, and the dismissive tone not intended. Let's hope so.

MATTHEW CONIAM
London

Tolerate or attack?

MAY I comment on two points in the February *Freethinker*. The first is "do we tolerate or do we attack?" Of course these are not necessarily alternatives. I suggest that religion is rather like tobacco smoking. Each is both addictive and harmful, and the harm extends to non-practitioners, especially children. They yield vast profits for, and are relentlessly promoted by, huge multinational corporations. It is beneficial to give them up, at any age. At the same time there are individuals, particularly the elderly and disadvantaged, who derive comfort and pleasure from them. It would seem needlessly aggressive to deprive them, even though in a wider context that is in their own best interests. Perhaps the line should be to protect the weak and discourage the practice, especially in public places.

Second, Graham Noble's point that "people are ... a variety of ape", and human nature cannot be changed by science lectures or sermons. With respect, we are not apes, any more than apes are a variety of humans. We are two species with common ancestors, sharing much but having significant differences. Apes do not

give either lectures or sermons. It is true that these will not change human nature, but they can certainly greatly affect behaviour. Sermons have often roused crowds to frenzy and violence, and no doubt on other occasions pacified them. There are many autobiographical accounts of scientists who were inspired to a life's work by lectures or teaching. The particularly human task, I suggest, unlike apes, is to accept our nature but modify our behaviour. And remember that human nature is the result of some millions of years of evolution. Science is at most some three thousand years old, and has been part of common education for less than two hundred.

JOHN RADFORD
London

For love ... or money?

MANY gay men like myself who reject the whole concept of marriage (whilst, in the interests of equality, supporting the right of homosexuals to be as silly as heterosexuals) are being nudged by our partners into marrying for purely financial reasons.

After managing to happily squire Mrs Parker Bowles for decades without benefit of clergy (and whilst married to someone else), is it perhaps the passing of *anno domini* and the thought of an horrendous death duty bill that is moving Prince Charles in this direction too?

At least he has the option of a real marriage (even if the Church of which he may one day be head isn't going to get his business on this occasion despite changing its rules largely to accommodate his position). Thanks to our caring and equal opportunity promoting NuLabour government, I will have to make do with a second rate "civil partnership" when the new legislation eventually comes into force.

JOHN HEIN
Editor
ScotsGay Magazine

Tsunami comments

I WAS puzzled by early comments on the Indian Ocean tsunami, that science could explain how it occurred, but not why. How it occurred, every commentator agreed, was that an earthquake in the sea had caused a great wave. Why earthquakes occur, according to the current scientific paradigm, is that tectonic plates move about. So what did it mean, to say science could not explain the tsunami?

The answer came serendipously from a policeman at the end of a "True Crime" TV show: "[The murderer] described in detail how she killed [the victim] but gave no indication as to why".

People who say we do not know why the tsunami occurred evidently suppose that natural events do not occur naturally, but are produced by an all-powerful Being, who has not only methods of producing events, but also

motives for producing them. Science describes the method by which this Being killed 150,000 people, but we must use other ways to discern the motive. An added complication is that the motive for the horror must turn out to be somehow benevolent.

No wonder so many who believe such stuff are miserable and angry. The mystery is that many of them appear to be happy and amiable.

DONALD ROOOM
London

Secular bling

I AM very concerned at the considerable advantage members of any religious groups have in the workplace. They can easily identify each other and so give preferential treatment, even promotion, to members of that religion. Openly worn jewellery, items of clothing and even names can indicate to which group a person belongs.

So what can we do to redress the balance? How about a piece of jewellery that indicates we are of a secular point of view? Might I suggest a simple, eight point star, constructed by four lines crossing each other?

We can make up any amount of reasons for this symbol but I rather like the idea of secular folk as glimmers of light in the darkness of religious thought. Whereas I would not advocate promotion on the grounds of being like thinkers it would be so good to know with whom I could enjoy a "secular" joke.

Could I also propose the sale of such jewellery as an excellent way for the NSS to raise money? And if we could get a top designer to make them a must have fashion statement ... Anyone else for a Star of Secularity?

DORRY LEWIS
Surrey

Dark designs

COMPLAINT has reached me that Dark Designs (October *Freethinker*) is insufficient when directly confronted by a proponent of godly or other intelligent design. Some such are armed with the wonderful woodpecker. Stephen Fry drew attention on QI to its popularity with creationists (name dropping permitted because he has connections with Lynn where we are otherwise quite undistinguished and struggle to gather even the smallest secular group).

Actually the Heath Robinson adaptations required by a wood-banging bird point instead to evolution, as did the Galapagos finches for Darwin. Recall the familiar joke about a stranger asking directions from a local and being told "Well it would be easy enough to get there, but you certainly shouldn't start from here".

An example of special appeal to the USA, land of food and the Heimlich manoeuvre, concerns the larynx. Developed from the primitive gill-bar system merely to close the air passage,

the later much adapted larynx now enables speech. The cost is an absurd vulnerability to choking which gave Mr Bush his brush with terror while engaged in the complex task of relaxing, eating and watching television. Had he perished he would surely have been eligible for one of the Wendy Northcutt Darwin Awards which are bestowed on individuals who improve the gene pool by removing themselves from it in a spectacularly stupid manner.

An alternative antidote to the charm of woodpeckers etc is to proclaim the splendour of the strangely unloved mosquito. Godlike in seeming everywhere at once with fateful power, its astonishing proboscis and keen host detecting senses clearly evidence disease carrying as a universal purpose.

Another complaint has come from a religious friend who points out that severe pain is a problem for the scientific account as it is for a moral god. I do not know of a satisfactory standard response, but a plausible conjecture is that further disabling the disadvantaged effectively promotes the reproduction of the more fit (a rough calculation seems to work at least for monogamy).

On the largest design scale there is much more good news for a least one non-supernatural explanation of the origin of life on earth (anxiety about which now persuades Prof Flew towards a mysterious intelligence). Observation reveals that there are many other planetary systems in the galaxy and, given the possibility of cometary or other transport, therefore many more geological-chemical systems on which replicating protolife may have occurred.

To finish back at my doorstep, missionaries have been calling to announce Final Days – a sad exploitation of the recent disaster. Resisting an inclination to tell some of them to go home to the land which generates much of the pollution that may indeed be terminal, I have instead remarked that building a globe out of ill-fitting fragments is surely ungodly and designed in the dark.

Glaring omissions

WHY did your guest columnist Graham Noble (January *Freethinker*) fail to mention that the Chechen Muslims had re-introduced the barbaric sharia – including death sentences for apostates and other unbelievers, the stoning of raped women, and amputations for theft (not to mention maltreatment of animals)? Just as Afghan women had it far better under foreign (Soviet) rule than under the tyranny of the Taliban, so Chechen women would suffer greater oppression under the thumbs of their Muslim brethren than under Russian law. But a Noble will never bother about women.

My heart-felt thanks, on the other hand, to brave Barbara Barrett for her earlier article. And to Tony Akkermans for his forthright January letter on Islam in Holland, especially

for his defence of the assassinated Pim Fortuyn. As he says, Pim was certainly not right-wing: the misogyny of Islam was one of his targets, and a few days before he was murdered he used his political platform to expose the fact that in Rotterdam and elsewhere there are whole areas where Muslim women have not been allowed out of doors in twenty years and their children are educationally disadvantaged by not speaking Dutch. He also supported such causes as the legalisation of abortion and voluntary euthanasia.

NELLY MOIA
Luxembourg

Vegetarianism v constipation

ACCORDING to mystical and esoteric teaching archives, the entire human race was vegetarian before the Ice Age covered massive areas of the earth's land surface, and some of them were forced to resort to eating animals.

The long-intestined human species cannot easily cope with eating indigestible fibreless matter like flesh; consequently it happens that some people may constantly carry around about 20 pounds or more of rotting waste matter in their intestines (modern junk food does not ameliorate the problem). But the short-intestined predator and carnivore animals are quite different. Their internal systems are evolved to easily evacuate any and all parts of dead bodies they swallow.

But even these take in a proportionate measure of vegetable stuff; cats and dogs need to chew on a bit of green grass occasionally, and don't object much to eating the household dinner leftovers of spuds and greens.

But household pets have been virtually forced to acquire the many diseases that the human race have produced for themselves (largely by animal experimentation). They get things like tinned food and vaccination shoved on them. Household dogs have become fifty times more liable to cancer than human beings – and that's saying something. But again, the poor things get vaccinated a lot, and can't refuse it any more than human babies can.

It is recorded that individuals who have been declared *incurable* by several doctors in a row (20th-century sort – not Hippocratic devotees) have actually succeeded in curing *themselves* by means of such diets as uncooked green vegetables and fruits, from which they have become fit enough to climb mountains. One naturopathic writer reckons that all the diseases humans suffer come from the eating of meat; the acids it produces can clog up every vital part of the body.

As regards divine precedent for the eating of flesh by people, there is no evidence that the master Jesus ever ate the stuff, and in all probability he was strictly vegetarian.

An oddity of the English language is that of calling only flesh by the term meat; meat

means food of any sort. Perhaps there could at some time have widely arisen a certain guilt feeling over the killing and eating of animals, so it became customary to describe dead flesh as meat, instead of flesh (German *fleisch*).

It might seem significant that the religious holy communion does not offer its participants say, a sizzling greasy pork chop washed down with some famous branded brew. Nevertheless, some of us might take consolation about our flesh-devouring from Jesus reputedly saying that "It is not the things a man takes into his mouth that defile him, but the things that come out of his mouth". (There were clever politicians and traders in the first century who were just as adept at cursing, pretending and lying to the masses as there are in this 21st century.)

FREDERICK BACON
Mansfield

**The
Free thinker**

UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

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

Letters, subscriptions, book orders and fund
donations to the publisher:

Freethinker/G W Foote & Co Ltd
P O Box 234
Brighton BN1 4XD
Tel: 01273 680531

E-mail: fteditor@aol.com
Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00 unwaged. Overseas
surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18.00
sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Overseas subscribers
are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their
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contacts: £5.00 for six months. Send name and
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made payable to G W Foote and Company to the
Freethinker, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

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 461404. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Meetings first Tuesday of the month, 7.30pm. April 5, Denis Cobell, President of the National Secular Society.

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. Wendover library, High Street, Wendover. Tuesday, March 8, 8pm. Annual General Meeting.

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 Pinel 01298 815575.

East Kent Humanists: Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

Fens and King's Lynn. New group being formed. Information: Edwin Salter on 01553 771917.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel. 01926 858450.

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).

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597.

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428506.

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, Spiershill, St Andrews, Fife KY16 8NB. Tel: 01334 474551. Email: humanist@spiershill.fsworld.co.uk.

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

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

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, March 8, 8pm. Martin Schweiger: *Globalisation – Fair or Foul?*

Isle of Man Freethinkers. Information: Muriel Garland, 01624

664796. E-mail: murielgarland@clara.co.uk. Website: www.iom.free-thinkers.co.uk

Isle of Wight Humanist Group. Information: David Broughton on 01983 740421 or email davidb67@clara.co.uk

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Website: <http://home-pages.stayfree.co.uk/lss>. Public meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Winter solstice party.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, March 31, 8pm. Terry Liddle: *J W Gott - Serial Blasphemer*.

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Information: the Secretary on 01434 632936.

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. Information: Linda Wilkinson. 0208 882 0124.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, April 6, 8pm. Rosalind Eve: *Age Discrimination*. Wednesday, May 4, 8pm. Chris Pilkington: *Humanism and Religion in Northern Ireland*.

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 programmes on request.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess. Tel. 01458 274456.

The Thomas Paine Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Saturday, March 5, 2pm. The Eric Paine Memorial Lecture by Brian Walker, former Director of Oxfam: *Thomas Paine – Empire, War and other threats in the 21st Century*.

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. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. Email: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

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: brianmcclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com

Please send your listings and events notices to:

Bill McLroy, Flat 3, Somerhill Lodge, Somerhill Road,
Hove, Sussex BN3 1RU.

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