

The Freethinker

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WIDE SUPPORT FOR APPEAL TO ABOLISH BLASPHEMY LAW

Over 200 eminent writers and others have signed a statement against blasphemy law which has been sent to the Home Office and the country's chief legal officers. This latest protest has been organised by the Committee Against Blasphemy Law which was formed in 1977 following the Gay News trial. Its immediate aim is to prevent the extension of blasphemy law as proposed by Christian, Judaic and Islamic leaders.

The signatories declare that they "oppose the current campaign for the extension of the common law of blasphemous libel to cover religions other than Christianity, since it would involve an undesirable restriction in our precious freedom of inquiry and expression and an equally undesirable encouragement of dangerous fanaticism in our pluralist society. Nevertheless, we recognise that the present English law does discriminate between the various forms of belief in this country, and we therefore support the proposal that the blasphemy law should be suspended with a view to its complete abolition, in accordance with the majority recommendation of the Law Commission in 1985".

Not surprisingly, the statement has received wide support from writers and publishers. Signatories include Martin Amis, Sybille Bedford, Edward Blishen, Marion Boyars, Malcolm Bradbury, Brigid Brophy, William Cooper, Margaret Drabble, William Golding, Michael Holroyd, H. Montgomery Hyde, Mervyn Jones, Ludovic Kennedy, Christopher Logue, Michael Moorcock, Marina Warnock and David Yallop.

Support for the statement has also come from distinguished figures in the theatre. Among the actors, directors and playwrights who signed are Lindsay Anderson, John Arden, Michael Bogdanov, Edward Bond, Eleanor Bron, John Cleese, Peter

Cotes, Michael Frayn, Margaretta D'Arcy, David Edgar, Richard Eyre, David Hare, Michael Hastings, Glenda Jackson, George Melly, Harold Pinter, Arnold Wesker and Ted Willis.

Other signatories include Lord Avebury, Sir Alfred Ayer, H. J. Blackham, Tessa Blackstone, Sir Hermann Bondi, Humphry Burton, Professor Bernard Crick, the Rev Don Cupitt, Richard Dawkins, Sir Raymond Frith, Professor Antony Flew, Michael Foot, MP, Christopher Hill, Lord Houghton, Lord Raglan, the Earl Russell and Barbara Smoker.

Nicolas Walter, CABL press officer and spokesman, declared: "The response has been very gratifying, although there are a few regrettable omissions.

"We hope that even if we cannot get rid of the existing law immediately, this will at least prevent it ever being extended".

The Committee Against Blasphemy Law and other organisations have already warned that an extension of blasphemy law would lead to censorship, injustice and religious conflict. One danger is that it would allow fanatics — as in the current case of *The Satanic Verses* — to manufacture indignation and use the law to enforce their sectarian views.

There are also indications that thoughtful Christians are becoming concerned over proposals to extend blasphemy law.

Correspondents writing in the *Methodist Recorder* have expressed such misgivings.

One feared that if the law is changed, "Christians will not be allowed to speak out against the false gods of pagan religions".

Another wrote: "I can see that if such an extension was to be made to the law, we as Christians could well be in breach of it. . .

"In the end, all religions would suffer, not being able to preach anything without legal advice".



The Freethinker

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NEWS

JENKINS AND JESUS

Expression of religious dissent has always been a risky business. In the ages of faith, the Bishop of Durham's latest pronouncements concerning the resurrection of Jesus would have led him to the stake. So far, not even his writings have been consigned to the flames.

Dr Jenkins is no stranger to controversy. He will not be surprised if his statement that the alleged ascension of Jesus into heaven was a spiritual, rather than a physical lift-off, attracts scorn and derision. True to form, traditionalists like Dr Graham Leonard, Bishop of London, soon became hot under the dog-collar. And of course there was the predictable knee-jerk reaction by backbench Members of Parliament who are dismissed by the *Church Times* as being "not famed for their theological acumen".

Christians become extremely touchy when the New Testament of the birth, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is queried. Most rigid of all is their unshakeable belief that "he rose on the third day", highlighted in the Bishop of London's Easter sermon: "If Christ be not raised from the dead, our faith is vain".

Dr Leonard is being somewhat rash when he deposits all his eggs in the resurrection basket. Many Christian scholars have accepted that the tradition in many lands of a ghost-fathered, virgin-born, resurrected saviour of mankind pre-dates by centuries the Biblical account. Moreover, Christian resurrectionists are unable to explain why the anniversary of such a momentous event is on a movable date, or why their resurrection rites so closely resemble those of religions which were ancient when Christianity was in its infancy.

Dr Jenkins's episcopate has been controversial from the start. His enthronement coincided with the disastrous fire at York Minster. A bolt of lightning struck that historic edifice, the resulting fire causing extensive damage. Dr Jenkins's opponents perceived this event as an act of God, not as insurance companies understand it, but as the Almighty expressing disapproval of the new Bishop of Durham.

Of course Dr Jenkins is not without his supporters, the Bishop of Manchester among them. But many Anglicans and other Christians would be relieved if the Durham dissenter resigned, or failing that, left them undisturbed by his convoluted theology. Most critics realise that it would be over-stepping the mark to call for his excommunication. The last thing the troubled Church of England wants on its hands is another Bishop Colenso.

S AND NOTES

FOOLS AND THEIR MONEY

Financial and sexual scandals which hit the evangelism industry in the United States a year or two ago have not thinned the ranks of the gullible to any great extent. But instead of financing Jimmy Swaggart's and the Bakkers' high jinx, many "born again" Christians are setting up shop on their own account. Nothing could be easier in a country where "instant ordination" is readily available to all and sundry.

One of the many flourishing ordination factories is the California-based World Christianship Ministries, described in its sales brochure as a Christian non-denominational ministry. "We will be more than happy to ordain you", aspiring ordinands are assured by the WCM's "International Administrator". All that is required of a candidate is the ability to write his name, address and age on an application form; affirm his belief in Christ; and send what is delicately described as "an offering" of two dollars. In return, he receives a card confirming his ordination.

Of course there are extras available — to those prepared to send further offerings. If a labourer in the Lord's vineyard is willing to splash out another 15 dollars he will receive an ordination certificate specifying his status as minister, evangelist, missionary or chaplain. It is printed on "high quality heavy-weight paper and bears a gold seal. This is a magnificent document which is suitable for framing".

For another 15 dollars he may also join WCM's "growing family of Independent Chartered Churches". Benefits include "being associated with a larger group of Christian churches . . . free advice concerning any aspect of your church or ministry". And of course "a magnificent Church Charter Certificate . . . printed on fine quality paper which bears the gold seal and ribbons of your ministry . . . a document you will be proud to cherish and display".

Perhaps the newly ordained minister would also like to be a "pastoral counsellor". Nothing could be simpler. "This is certainly one of our rights as religious ministers", he is informed by WCM. For an offering of ten dollars the newly appointed if unqualified counsellor receives a Pastoral Counsellors' Certificate, with gold seal and ribbons. ("You will be proud to display this certificate next to your ordination certificate".)

Few could resist what the WCM describes as "a unique opportunity" to obtain, for an offering of only 15 dollars, a Doctor of Divinity degree. All that

is required of the applicant is to "feel qualified through Christian experience and belief in Jesus as Lord and Saviour". With the degree comes yet another certificate complete with gold seal and ribbons. The degree confers on its holder the entitlement to be addressed as "the Right Reverend", and he is promised "all the rights and privileges of your new title". Perhaps the "rights and privileges" relate to tax relief, for if the "Doctor of Divinity" had read the very small print on the application form, he will know that his degree "may not be used on academic courses or in obtaining a position where an academic degree is required".

Never mind; the Right Reverend Joe Soap has acquired an impressive collection of certificates, each one printed on good quality paper and tastefully adorned with a gold seal and ribbons.

STORY TIME

We may sometimes have thought it possible to be too stridently feminist, but we have never before now thought it possible to be too anti-religious. However, the two campaigns seem to have come together at an infants' school in the London Borough of Haringey — where, we are informed by the anxious parents of a five-year-old attending the school, no Bible story is sacred. For instance, the children have just been taught the story of Norah's (sic) Ark.

This militant tendency is converting the most irreligious families of Haringey to traditional religion. Anyway, it would surely be more effective, even from the ultra-feminist standpoint, to tell children the story of the Deluge in the traditional way and follow it up with suitable comments, such as the fact that the story is hardly likely to be literally true and that in the days when it was first told all the best parts were given to men.

The same poor children have been further confused with such fairy-stories as "Jill the Giant-killer"; and another story in which a princess, having chosen from among three suitors for her hand, kisses the man of her choice, who promptly turns into a frog. It is an amusing satirical twist for older children who already know the original, but the small children of Haringey, most of whom have never heard the original version of the story, will not only be deprived for ever of the satire, but are growing up in a state of uneducational muddle, as unwary victims of their teachers' literary jokes.

The piddling issues over which some feminists get their dungarees in a twist may add to the gaiety of nations, but also provide ammunition for opponents of equality. That is bad enough, but worse still is the practice of inflicting their obsession on young children.

THE SUN OF GOD

Press baron Rupert Murdoch is presently dispensing largesse among America's fundamentalist Christians in the form of free air time on his Sky Channel. "The Hour of Power", already screened by 185 stations across the United States, will go out on Sky Channel every week. A spokesman for the programme said: "Mr Murdoch was introduced to our church by mutual friends. He and his wife came to worship with us here at the Crystal Cathedral".

Here in Britain, Mr Murdoch's most notorious muck-raking newspaper has become increasingly aggressive in its promotion of Christian superstition. Readers who are prone to bowel disorder are warned that what follows comprises the *Sun*, a concoction known as Pepsi-Cola, and the pop star Madonna.

The *Sun* has editorially commended the Pepsi-Cola company for withdrawing a £3 million advertisement featuring the singer. Objections were raised because of her video recording, "Like a Prayer". Arising from the mud, the *Sun* spluttered: "She parades herself in a raunchy outfit, parodying the Crucifixion and mixing crude sex with Christianity. . .

"One day when Madonna is older and has a little more sense she may realise that religion is not something to be mocked.

"And that people who have faith enjoy riches beyond even her dreams".

We wish British believers joy of their fellow-Christians in the Murdoch empire.

JESUS SAVES CRIMINALS

It is frequently claimed that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor. Be that as it may, it certainly appears that there is one law for the religious and one for the unredeemed. Two recent cases illustrate the point.

A heroin addict financed his addiction by carrying out an admitted 156 burglaries and stealing property worth £350,000. Daniel Hamer's defence counsel described him as a drug addict and a criminal by occupation. But he told the judge at Oxford Crown Court that he had found Jesus and a place was reserved for him at a Christian centre in Reading. He left the court a free man.

Hamer had what was described as "a horrifying background". It is highly unlikely that a custodial sentence would have been in his or society's interest. But it is also highly unlikely that such understanding would have been shown if he had been wearing an "I am a born again atheist" badge.

The second case concerns a teacher who sexually assaulted a 13-year-old boy at a Benedictine school near Bath. After Father Nicholas White, a monk and former Army officer, committed the offence, his victim informed the house warden. White was

"tried" at a secret meeting which ruled that he should be exiled to a monastery for eight years.

Two questions arise here. Can a person who has been convicted of a serious crime escape the consequences by announcing that he has accepted Christ as his saviour? And are members of religious orders immune to prosecution for offences that would land lesser mortals in court?

PHILISTINES' BAN LIFTED

A collection of paintings by D. H. Lawrence, valued at over £2 million, has been declared suitable for public display — 60 years after they narrowly escaped destruction by order of Marylebone magistrates. The Customs and Excise Department announced last month that it would raise no objection to the paintings, which are at present in the United States, being returned to Britain.

During a 1929 court case, the paintings of nude men and women, singly and embracing, were denounced by magistrates as "gross, coarse, hideous, unlovely and obscene". They were seized by the police a few days after going on display at a London art gallery. The paintings were saved from destruction only because Lawrence, better known as a writer than a painter, promised to keep them hidden forever. On the death of his widow, they were bought by an American collector.

Their whereabouts — and the fact that a banning order still applied in Britain — came to light when the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, tried to arrange an exhibition in conjunction with its production of Lawrence's play, *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*. The Haymarket management arranged for the paintings to be photographed in New Mexico, but hope to exhibit the originals at a future date.

British art lovers and admirers of D. H. Lawrence will welcome the opportunity to see this collection of his paintings. The fact that they could have been destroyed and were hidden from public view for many years, should prompt questions concerning P C Plod's and magistrates' qualifications as art experts.

An event we are sorry to have missed. Last month a group of Christians known as Reachout Trust turned the tables — or rather the doorsteps — on Jehovah's Witnesses. They turned up at the sect's London headquarters "to declare the true Jesus of the Bible".

Newspaper reports are always required by The Freethinker. The source and date should be clearly marked and the clippings sent without delay to The Editor, The Freethinker, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield, S6 3NT.

In Praise of Secularism

This article was published as an editorial in *The Economist*, 11 March 1989. It appears in *The Freethinker* by kind permission of The Economist Newspaper Limited.

Though the weeks go by, the Rushdie affair has lost none of its capacity to surprise. First came astonishment at the intemperate reaction of Muslims the world over to a work of fiction that few can have read. Now it is time to be astonished at the attitude of those who are trying to understand that first reaction. This is leading some people in the West, including many who should know better, to call for the censors. In other words, the Rushdie affair is showing not just that some Muslims do not understand the merits of free speech. It shows that many western clerics do not either. Amazingly, it seems necessary to explain to Christians and Jews, as well as to Muslims, that believers and non-believers and everyone in between all stand to gain from a secular government that protects freedom of speech as vigorously as freedom of religion. The only losers are bigots and autocrats. Here beginneth the sermon.

The urge to ban comes from the urge not to cause offence, or to see it caused. Since *The Satanic Verses* is a difficult book, congested with impenetrable prose, few people had read it when the Muslims of Bradford first brought it to Ayatollah Khomeini's attention. Those who have now struggled through it realise that the book is deeply offensive to Muslims; it was clearly intended to be.

For some, such as Britain's chief rabbi and one of Israel's, that is too much. They want the book banned. The semi-official voice of the Vatican, *L'Osservatore Romano*, comes close to taking the same view. Without wasting sympathy on Mr Rushdie or even bothering to condemn the arrow of death aimed at him by the Ayatollah, it has chosen to side instead with those whose religious sensibilities have been wounded, and implies that freedom of speech should not apply to blasphemers. Rabbis, priests and mullahs are, it seems, uniting to restrain free speech lest any member of their collective flock should have his feelings hurt.

Two points. First, there are few ideas that do not, or did not once, cause offence to someone. Manners maketh man? Bunkum. From Socrates to Galileo to Gorbachev, mankind has advanced by ruffling feelings. A world in which only the inoffensive could be expressed would not merely be bland, it would be sterile. Is blasphemy uniquely awful? No. Most religions began as a blasphemy against another. Obnoxious ideas are more likely to be seen off by the free expression of more powerful ideas than by

suppression. And non-believers have rights too.

Second, secularism is not inimical to religion. In Britain, a country with not one but two established churches, barely 14 per cent of people go to church on Sundays. In America, a country with a strict separation of Church and State, 44 per cent of the population go out to worship every week — and 67 per cent believe in angels. There are several reasons why the British are less devout than Americans, but clearly the special constitutional place Britain gives to the Christian religion is not one of them. Nor, presumably, is Britain's law against (anti-Christian) blasphemy. By the same token, the secularism entrenched in American law has done nothing to inhibit religious fervour in American society.

Church and State are best kept apart. Islam makes no distinction between secular and spiritual authority, so an offence against religion is an offence against the state. If other religions were to apply this standard, it would open the way to the persecution of Muslim minorities everywhere. In totalitarian countries, people of conscience, whether driven by religious or other motives, will often earn the admiration of freedom-lovers when they break the law in defence of their beliefs. In democracies, bad laws are best changed by peaceful protest and by argument. Those who would suppress argument merely make it easier for tyrants to impose their will — on believers and non-believers alike.

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Religious Terrorism in India and Egypt

The Press Trust of India has announced that M. M. Kalburgi, a respected historian, has been given round-the-clock police protection. He has received death threats from Hindu militants who claim that his book, *Marga Ondu* (One Way) is blasphemous. It is about a 12th-century saint named Basaveshwara.

Hindus belonging to the Lingayat community in the state of Karnataka are enraged because Mr Kalburgi concluded that the saint's relationship with Nagalochane, his second wife, was platonic. The author claims that Nagalochane's writings indicated unfulfilled sexual desires rather than spiritual enlightenment.

Hindu militants are also angry over the historian's claim that Basaveshwara's sister married someone from a low caste rather than a Brahmin of the traditional priestly class.

A group of over 40 writers and academics have rallied to Mr Kalburgi's defence. Their spokesman declared that threats against him were part of an "increasingly widespread trend of fundamentalist

attacks on literary and academic expression”.

It is not only writers and academics who are being threatened by religious terrorists.

The latest issue of the *Mirror*, a quarterly journal devoted to Catholic overseas missions, carries the following report of a particularly brutal atrocity carried out by Islamic fanatics.

“Islamic extremists have murdered a Coptic Rite priest in the Egyptian capital, Cairo. The incident

in fact took place at the end of last year, but only became known after the arrest of the murderers.

“The motive given by the killers was that they were enraged that the priest should be studying comparative religion, and thereby ‘placing the Bible on the same level as the Koran’. According to reports, they knocked out their victim’s teeth, stabbed him in the left eye and broke his fingers and ribs, in order to punish his ‘presumptuous attempts at dialogue’”.

More on Religion and Politics

T. F. EVANS

The long-running argument about religion and politics shows no sign of abating. It was recently given further impetus when the *Guardian* invited five religious leaders to contribute to a series of articles on “The Politics of Faith”. In January, a distinguished cleric and academic, Dr Edward Norman, wrote an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* with the arresting title, “Beware Moral Guardians”. Last month the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Kenneth Baker, was reported to have “launched the strongest attack yet by a Government Minister on mounting Church criticism of social policies”. There have been other items of interest on different aspects of the general theme in various newspapers, and it is a subject that frequently creeps into discussion programmes on radio and television.

It might be asked whether the readers of a humanist and free-thinking journal, who, in the main, are by definition wedded to no religious belief or members of a religious communion, are entitled to take an interest in matters from which they have more or less excluded themselves. There are two answers. First, whether they like it or not, the majority of citizens contribute large sums to the upkeep of churches and the maintenance of those who hold office in them. Secondly, and probably more importantly, we are always being told that Britain is “a Christian country”. Even if some of us may doubt this, it is a good thing to know what is in the minds of those who make such an assertion.

The *Guardian* series did not add much to the sum total of human knowledge. It did not solve any problems or mysteries and, even if this could not have been expected, it failed to throw a great deal of light on the subject either. The Bishop of Durham, Dr David Jenkins, began in what is by now a recognisably characteristic style. He found the essence of the Christian message to be “that individuals are called to love one another as they love themselves within the community of humanity and, hopefully, the church”. Not surprisingly, he had little time for the Prime Minister’s interpretation of Christianity which appeared to suggest that “individual choice was the essence of the faith”.

The second contributor, the Bishop of Hull, Donald Snelgrove, was less outspoken than Dr Jenkins in his condemnation of Government policies. But he did deplore what he thought the whole trend of society, “that there is a market price for everything”. He also regretted deeply that such a large proportion of bishops (about 80 per cent) were public school and university educated, while none was of working-class origin. He thought that they were “unlikely to challenge the system that had produced them”.

Contrasted with these two was the Chief Rabbi, recently raised to the House of Lords as Lord Jakobovits. While sharing the Bishop of Durham’s view that churchmen should speak out on politics, he nevertheless agreed with the Prime Minister on most issues and could not accept that some features of Thatcherism were wicked or evil. Lord Jakobovits expressed the very political opinion that “making the richer less rich doesn’t make the poor less poor”. He thought that many people in the country were “work-shy”. It was his belief that “more damage than good is done to the interests of religion by politicising religion”. Finally, he drew comfort from Mrs Thatcher’s views “about the family and most other matters”.

The Roman Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor, Dr Cathal Daly, kept away from party politics, but declared his active concern for the problems of Northern Ireland. To some extent, he based this on the pronouncement of St Paul, who, when calling on his followers to live a life worthy of the example of Christ, used the Greek word *polijouste*, from which the English word “political” is derived. This helped Bishop Daly to justify his support for ecumenical developments in Ireland, and also for movement towards political association, if not actual union, between North and South.

The Bishop of Birmingham, Mark Santor, fairly recently appointed and thought to be the reverse of a “tub-thumping bishop”, firmly believes that “in social terms, love means justice”. At the end of the interview he asked: “Are we to run a society in which there is no God, nothing beyond what you

can count, and eat and measure? It is a caricature of an attitude, yes, but there's more than a little of it about".

The headnote to Dr Edward Norman's article in the *Sunday Telegraph* referred to him as having established "a reputation as a conservative with his Reith Lectures in 1978". It went on to say, to the surprise of some readers, that "the bishops and Mrs Thatcher are wrong about Christianity — and both for the same reason".

Dr Norman begins with a reference to the Viraj Mendis incident. (He was the Sri Lankan who took sanctuary in a Manchester church from which he was removed by the police and returned to his native land.) In the ensuing conflict, Dr Norman thought that the bishops were marked by "partisan political passion". In parenthesis, one may query the use of the term "the bishops". He cannot mean that all bishops think as one. It is a dangerous argument for such a highly placed academic. The main purpose of his article, as suggested in the headnote, is to explain that both the Prime Minister and the bishops are wrong in their attitudes to the interactions or relationship between religion and politics.

Dr Norman is, to some extent, on the side of the bishops. In his view they recognise that society is now "a plurality of often competing cultures", whereas the Prime Minister appears to look back to the certainties of previous periods of "cultural and moral conditioning" and now wants the bishops "to offer clear-cut and hard teaching about right and wrong". He finds a contradiction in her policies. On the one hand she diminishes the interference of the State in many of the national operations of society; on the other, she wishes to extend the role and authority of the State in the sphere of personal moral choice. This is the case even when there is no clear agreement throughout society on the moral basis of that choice.

Dr Norman puts clearly a paradox in the present situation. It is this. Members of the Government, like the Education Secretary, who address themselves to the subject, rebuke church leaders who, in their opinion, drag politics into religion, or religion into politics. Yet, as the conservative Dr Norman contends, it is the Prime Minister who is "preoccupied with establishing a Christian basis for her view of the State's functions and presumably, therefore, with the legislative programme". By this, he means such enactments as Clause 28 and the establishment of a censorship system for television.

The paradox is, as Dr Norman argues, that the bishops and the Prime Minister are both trying to do the same thing, and belabouring each other all the time. The joke is that it is the wrong thing. He writes: "They both appear to embody the popular English supposition that religion is all about moral conduct and decent behaviour. In fact, of course,

Christianity is addressed to sinful men and it knows that what is out of joint with human society is not a consequence of wrong moral choice or wrong behaviour but of something permanently defective in human behaviour".

If Dr Norman really believes this, however, and the use of "in fact" or "of course" may be interpreted as either underlining his certainty or attempting very hard to bolster it up, there is no point in discussing religion or politics or anything else. Of course, to use Dr Norman's phrase, he does not really believe any such thing. He believes, if a guess may be made, that despite the appearance of "something permanently defective", salvation may be found by accepting the right faith, saying the right words, joining the right church.

This particular controversy will clearly continue for a very long time; it goes around and around without touching the central point. It is remarkable that, even if the series to which they contributed was called "The Politics of Faith", there was hardly a reference — certainly no explanation — relating to what the various contributors thought was meant by "faith" and how it affected their views. The opinions which most of them expressed would have been more or less the same whether they believed in the existence of a God, a divine Being, old Nobodaddy in the sky (after William Blake) or any other anthropomorphic symbol of man's uncertainty and yearning.

Strangely enough it was the Education Secretary, for whatever reason, who seemed eager to tell his audience what to think on this subject. (Telling an audience what to think may be an Education Secretary's main purpose; it is certainly one to which the present holder of that office dedicates himself with vigour and enthusiasm.) Carrying coals to Newcastle, or possibly new angles to Canterbury, Mr Baker faced squarely the task of telling the Church of England, or that proportion assembled at a General Synod fringe meeting, exactly what Christianity is and is not. He said: "In my view Christianity should not be interpreted as a public manifesto for putting secular matters right or as a blueprint for social policy. It sets out the path that mankind must take to get to heaven".

In other words, let the bishops keep to their mitres as the shoemaker to his last. The Church has no more right to interfere in the way society is run than the shoemaker has to interfere in the payment he receives for his work. One thing will be decided upon by people properly fitted for the task, and so will the other. In short, the Government will decide both. This conflict certainly represents a great shift in emphasis from the usual situation in those apparently far-off days when the Church of England was accepted as the Tory Party at prayer.

The Book of Genesis and the Dome Theory

KEN HUDSON

Man's quest to understand the universe can be traced back into prehistory; it is as old as man himself. His enquiries into the nature of his surroundings have been continuous and have led to the development of many theories both reasonable and absurd. One of these theories — the Dome Theory — was adopted by the Jews as their model for the structure of the universe in the Book of Genesis, although at the time the theory was already obsolescent.

The Dome Theory itself is easy to understand, and must have been the earliest widely accepted explanation of the structure of the world. It must be remembered that until comparatively recently the earth and the sky were considered to be the whole universe. Early man could not have known that the earth was round — all the evidence pointed to it being flat. Its size and shape could only be guessed at. And as the night sky appears to be a dome (or would have to early man, who did not have any city lights to contend with), the earliest astronomers constructed a universe with a flat earth and a dome for the sky. Without any more information, this is what it appears to be. The sun, moon, planets and stars were simply lights stuck on the dome at an unknown height.

This model for the universe was not simply a piece of abstract art, but served a practical purpose. The reckoning of time, of the seasons, of a calendar, all depend on the movement of the heavens, and in order to predict this movement you need a model. Until very recently, accurate navigation was only possible by measuring the position of the stars, and we must not forget that most powerful reason for celestial research — foretelling the future. The weather was also believed to be influenced by the stars, as were the seasons and agriculture. The phases of the moon offered a simple method of noting the passage of time, and the earliest calendars were lunar.

When man began to settle in communities, the seasons became more important than lunar cycles. The moon lost its importance in favour of the sun, whose position in the sky determined the length of the day and the time of the year. Furthermore, man's settled existence allowed for more careful study of the stars which were given names and formed into constellations. Modern astrology can be traced back to the Babylonians in Mesopotamia, who passed it on to the Egyptians. Away from the equator, the position of the rising and setting sun was more difficult to determine, which necessitated the construction of huge monoliths.

Even though the "dome of heaven" was widely accepted, descriptions of it varied. To the Egyptians, the sky and the earth were the bodies of gods. The Polynesians and Mexicans had similar ideas. The

Chinese considered the heavens to be an upturned bowl. To the Babylonians — from whom the then comparatively uncivilised Jews appear to have borrowed at least some of their biblical history during their enforced sojourn in Babylonia — the heavens were thought to be a solid dome with holes to allow the rain through, supported along the rim by a ring of mountains separated from the flat earth by a vast encircling sea.

It was not until about 700 BC that the Dome Theory began to fall out of favour. A new idea began to emerge in the eastern Aegean. The new theory still predicted a flat earth, but asserted that the heavens were part of a giant hollow globe or sphere. Unfortunately, one thing marred the beauty of this theory — and the Dome Theory — and that was the strange behaviour of five stars which wandered all over the sky and sometimes disappeared altogether. The Egyptians appear to have ignored these wandering stars — or planets as we now know them — but the Babylonians formulated quite accurate astronomical tables from careful observation in order to predict their position at any given time.

However, the Babylonians were unable to come to any definite conclusion about why the planets behaved so strangely. The Greeks did, however, beginning with Pythagoras (c570-500 BC) who believed that the sun, moon and planets circled the earth in fixed orbits at set speeds, and ending with Ptolemy (second century AD), whose ideas remained in favour for over a thousand years. Other influential Greeks include Eudoxos (b.408 BC), who devised a system of homocentric spheres with each celestial body controlled by three or four spheres of different sizes surrounding the earth at their centre. The spheres spun at different speeds on different axes to account for the movement of the planets. Aristotle (384-322BC) increased the number of Eudoxos's spheres from 27 to 55, with the outermost sphere being turned by a god. These ideas appeared perfectly sensible in the fourth century BC, and to do him justice, Aristotle did conclude that the earth was round.

Aristotle's ideas had considerable influence on later thinkers. The multiple spheres theory was improved upon by Apollonios (c 265-200 BC) who introduced the idea that the planets themselves circled about fixed positions on their own spheres to account for the irregularities in their orbits. Ptolemy devised a very complex system of spheres and epicycles to account for all the planetary motions then observable, which was far superior to anything that had come before, but which relied heavily upon earlier Greek ideas.

The death of Ptolemy after 150 AD marked the

end of the Greek period of research into the structure of the universe. The subject stagnated until the Renaissance in western Europe when Copernicus (1473-1543), Galileo (1564-1642) and Kepler (1571-1630) helped to finally unravel the mysteries of planetary motion and explain for the first time how the real universe was constructed. Unfortunately, the ideas of Aristotle had by now become so ingrained that gaining acceptance for the new ideas was always a struggle, and sometimes a painful one. The Greek theories had first to be proven wrong and rejected. This was done by Copernicus in 1543 when he published his *On the Rotation of the Celestial Spheres* which suggested that, mathematically at least, it simplified things enormously if the earth circled the sun and not vice versa.

Galileo was also dissatisfied with Aristotle's theory. In 1632 he published his own views which agreed with those of Copernicus, in that he thought that the earth rotated about its own axis and revolved around the sun. Galileo also developed earlier ideas concerning the laws of motion, although he did not apply these ideas to planetary motion.

Johann Kepler, working from very accurate observational data supplied by Tycho Brahe (1546-1601), had no alternative but to discard all previous theories when he discovered that Mars orbited the sun in an ellipse. Further study confirmed that the other planets behaved in similar fashion. Kepler was able to formulate three laws of planetary motion and also theorise on the existence of a universal force (later known as gravity). Kepler's determination to be guided by observation and calculation only to the exclusion of all preconceived ideas, must make him one of the first true empirical scientists. Following his example, it remained only a matter of time before man was able to construct an accurate model for the whole universe.

And what of the Dome Theory today? Well, anyone can find it simply by turning to Genesis 1.1-1.18. Despite attempts by later translators to interpret the Book of Genesis in modern terms, the biblical version of creation remains pathetically hamstrung by its complete reliance upon the Dome Theory for its model of the universe. The modern trend, even amongst atheists, seems to be to accept that Genesis has the structure of the universe right and merely to question how it was created. This is, to my mind, a very dangerous tactic especially as the Bible is so explicit about how the universe is structured and can therefore be easily refuted.

According to Genesis, the universe was originally a vast dark raging body of water in the midst of which God made a dome or vault. God then drained the water from below this dome to form dry land in the midst of the water which still lurked threateningly below the land and above the dome. God then placed the sun, moon, and stars (no mention of the

planets) as lights in the dome, thus creating a picture of a flat earth sheltered by a large dome in the midst of a raging ocean. This model is confirmed in the story of the flood at Genesis 7.11 and 8.2, when outlets in the sky and floodgates in the ground were opened by God to allow the surrounding waters to flood the dome and then again later to drain it. At Job 9.6, 26.11 and 38.6, and also at 2 Samuel 22.8 there is reference to pillars supporting the earth and foundations of heaven suggesting a structure somewhat reminiscent of the Babylonian model. For heaven to have foundations, it must touch upon the earth in the shape of a dome or an arch. Further references to water (2 Peter 3.5) and the flat earth (Revelations 7.1) can be found elsewhere in the Bible, in which it is always assumed that heaven is above and hell is below, a circumstance which can only exist if the earth is flat.

This brief history of the Dome Theory illustrates an interesting conflict in man's quest for knowledge about the universe. On the one hand, there is the ever present desire to know the truth, and on the other, an all too easy acceptance of previous misconceptions even when these have been disproved. Let us hope that our children will have the courage to doubt.

Bloody Easter

Easter has become a gruesome affair for many Christians. Re-enactment of the crucifixion is now an annual event in parts of the Philippines, Asia's only predominantly Catholic country. Once again this year, seven men allowed themselves to be nailed to crosses at a village near Manila. Children were among those who looked on as the volunteers writhed in agony when they were impaled by long nails.

An Easter Sunday ceremony at the Spanish village of Robledo de Chawella caused a visitor from England to send a video film to the Pope. Mrs Vicky Moore, from Southport, Lancashire, filmed a crowd stoning pigeons in clay pots suspended from an effigy of Judas.

Mrs Moore, an animal rights campaigner, said that her visit was partly a success. Villagers were persuaded not to celebrate Easter by stoning small animals as they had done in the past.

However, Roman Catholics in the United States town of Ambridge provided a note of comic relief. They claimed that during Good Friday Mass in Holy Trinity Church the eyes on a life-size crucifix closed.

We announce with much regret that Christopher Brunel, chairman of the Thomas Paine Society, has died. Tributes in next month's Freethinker.

BOOK

TESTAMENT: THE BIBLE AND HISTORY, by John Romer. Michael O'Mara Books, £17.95

Sacred books are both strength and weakness to religion. The "two and seventy jarring sects", which Omar Khayyam attributes to Islam, may dispute philosophically a set of moral precepts communicated by God to the Prophet. But if, like the Bible, the Sacred Book contains history, places, people and events, how can the normal processes of archaeology, historical research and cross-reference with external sources be avoided? For those, Christians or otherwise, who do not shrink from such investigation, John Romer's *Testament* is invaluable, being neither an attack upon religion nor unacceptable to non-believers.

Fundamentalists whose blind faith excludes reason do not want to know that there was no Bible among the early Christians, only a collection of Gospels, Epistles and other texts. They do not want to know that the Word of God is the work of scores of men over centuries. They do not want to know that anthologies, like the Bible, must have had editors who chose what to include and what to exclude. They do not want to know why the Books of today's Bible have been accepted, included and declared "canonical", or why the excluded books are declared apocryphal or pseudepigrapha.

The TV series, *Testament*, based on the book, was discussed on Channel Four's "Right to Reply" where a fundamentalist parson complained that the programme mentioned more than four Gospels. In fact Romer only mentions a fifth, the Gospel according to St Thomas or "The Sayings of Jesus". The parson had apparently never heard of this. Romer might have mentioned the scores of other texts which circulated in the early Christian era. There were Gospels attributed to Nicodemus, Peter and Matthias, and a Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus. The "Acts of the Apostles" in the Bible are attributed to St Luke, but there are excluded Acts of Thomas, Paul, John and Andrew. Excluded Epistles were those of Polycarp, Ignatius and Barnabas (and even Pilate!). In addition to Revelation there was the Apocalypse of Peter. "The Shepherd of Hermas", the Didache, the Apostolic Constitutions and "The Harrowing of Hell" all circulated among the early Christians. The latter describes how Jesus descended into Hell where he wrestled with Satan and rescued the souls of sinners. There is nothing about this in the Bible, but, nevertheless, the Apostles' Creed still contains the line: "He descended into Hell".

The first anthology, a truncated New Testament, was prepared by the heretic, Marcion, in the second century AD. Marcion completely rejected the Old

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Testament. Subsequent compilations included those of the Muratorian Canon, Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius and Bishop Ulphilas the Goth. Finally, around 400 AD St Jerome completed his Latin "Vulgate" which has remained the basis of the Roman Catholic Bible to this day. But no serious and honest Bible scholar would assert that all the struggles about which texts were to be declared "canonical" centred only upon the issue of "inspiration", authenticity or revelation. There was a great deal of politics involved, those who succeeded becoming orthodox and the defeated becoming heretics, the latter having to take with them the rejected texts upon which they had relied.

John Romer sees the Old Testament as reflecting truth about the way of life in the Fertile Crescent, about the life of pastoral semi-nomads and their relationships with the city-dwellers. Also about the transition from Bronze Age to Iron Age (the Philistines had iron!). But when it comes down to people and events he finds no external corroboration before King Ahab and the Battle of Qarqar in 853 BC, with a possible reference to Ahab's father, Omri. So not only Adam, Eve, Noah and the Flood, not only the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not only Joseph, Moses, Aaron and the Exodus, but also Saul, David and Solomon are unsupported legends.

The archaeology, architecture, museums and art galleries which formed a splendid visual background to the text in the television series figure uneasily as written descriptions in the book and interrupt the narrative flow. But this is a minor criticism. There are also a few minor misprints and errors. The date of Diocletian's abdication on page 204 should be 305 AD, not 205 AD. Riots in Tripoli in 403 BC are attributed to St Jerome's translation of the Book of Jonah on page 236, but it becomes the Book of Job on page 240. A more serious error appears on page 78 which refers to David's Lament for his friend Absalom. This, of course, should be Jonathan. Absalom was David's son, with whom he was not at all friendly much of the time.

Incidentally, the scandalous behaviour of Absalom on one occasion provides an interesting example of the Israelite transition from tent-dwelling to urban civilisation. Even after they began to live in houses they still liked to put tents on the roof to relax in the cool breeze. David had left ten concubines to look after his house. Ahithophel suggests to Absalom that he might shame his father by entertaining these ladies in the public view. And so he did, all ten of them. The Second Book of Samuel, chapter 16, verse 22, reads: "So they spread Absalom a tent

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upon the top of the house; and Absalom went unto his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel".

The Bible is indeed a strange book, especially if it is the Word of God. What, for instance, do the fundamentalists make of Deuteronomy, chapter 25, verses 11-12: "When men strive together one with another, and the wife of the one draweth near for to deliver her husband out of the hand of him that smiteth him, and putteth forth her hand, and taketh him by the secrets:

"Then thou shalt cut off her hand, thine eye shall not pity her". I must acknowledge that these two scandalous titbits are my selections, not John Romer's.

Testament: the Bible and History is a scholarly and worthy book. It is a pity that Bible Belt fanatics are unlikely to read it or possess the wit to understand it if they did.

KARL HEATH

Peter de Rosa's book, *Vicars of Christ*, reviewed in the January *Freethinker*, is now a Corgi paperback. It is available at most bookshops, price £4.99.

Melbourne's Hall of Science

NIGEL H. SINNOTT

"The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley." — Robert Burns, often quoted by Joseph Skurrie.

During the last century secularists and other freethinkers leased, bought or constructed a number of buildings for their use. Names like Hall of Science or Secular Hall were common. Perhaps the most famous — in their day — were Charles Bradlaugh's Hall of Science in Old Street, London, and the Thomas Paine Memorial Building in the United States (Boston, Massachusetts). Very few of these buildings have survived to the present day and I know of only one nineteenth-century Secular Hall, that at Leicester, England, which is still used by the society which built it.

In 1884 Joseph Symes (born 1841), a vice-president of the National Secular Society, arrived from Britain in Melbourne, capital of the booming colony of Victoria, to take up the position of appointed lecturer to the Victorian branch of the Australasian Secular Association. He was made president and given the means the same year to launch his own journal, the *Liberator*.

From its foundations in 1882, the Australasian Secular Association had used rented halls or theatres

for its public meetings. Each in turn was usually called the Hall of Science. Symes, however, realised that it would be of value for the Association to have its own premises, particularly as his fame — or notoriety — as a public speaker on atheism, birth control and republicanism attracted both large audiences and bans from respectable hall proprietors. Outdoor meetings were also fraught with difficulty, and the ASA was even prosecuted for holding a meeting in a tent. An appeal was launched for gifts and loans, and a site obtained in Victoria Parade, Fitzroy, near the central business district of Melbourne. A large marquee was used on the site for a few months.

Symes laid the foundation stone of the new Hall of Science on 31 March 1889 and the two-storey building, designed by an architect called Roper, was formally opened on 12 May¹ the same year. It could hold over a thousand people. A caretaker was appointed: he was Joseph Skurrie (1858-1949), a Glasgow-born gold miner who had been brought out to Victoria as a child. He was a teetotaler and vegetarian whose interests included Esperanto, feminism, secularism and socialism.

Although the new Hall was a fine feather in Symes's cap, all was not well with secularism in Melbourne. The local ASA had split, in May 1888, into pro-Symes and anti-Symes factions (each claiming to have dismissed the leadership of the other) and, although the Symes party seems to have funded and built the Hall, three trustees at the time the land was purchased sided against him. Symes took legal advice and said he was assured that the "run-away" trustees had not secured any title to the land.

On 19 June 1890 the anti-Symes faction struck and tried to take possession of the Hall by force. What follows seems like something from a tragedy-comedy of the silent films era.

The assault party, of six or more, led by Thomas Trewin Phillips, included Montague Miller (survivor of the Eureka Stockade and later pioneer communist) and Frederic Upham (a prominent anarchist). While Phillips engaged Skurrie in conversation the rest rushed in about 3 pm and seized all of the building except the caretaker's office at the rear, to which Skurrie retreated and barricaded the door. "I told them I would certainly shoot anyone who attempted to force an entrance", he recalled fifty years later, "but my only gun was a poker". An elderly man, Charles Frederick Roberts, who had been helping Skurrie in the Hall, ran off for assistance: John Love, secretary of the Symesite ASA, organised a relief force.

Around 1 am on 20 June, with the aid of a ladder, Love, W. J. Brown and two colleagues climbed in through the caretaker's window. Once reinforced,

(continued on back page)

LETTERS

VOICE OF MODERATION

So I am not alone in my increasing dismay at seeing **The Freethinker** converted from being a journal intended to "combat religion and promote atheism", as Justin Griffin puts it in his letter (April), to one increasingly concerned with the promotion of political, socialistic and communistic ideas and beliefs.

The article by James Sang in the same issue is a good example. It is, quite simply, a socialist attack on the education policy of the present Conservative Government and nothing more. If I wished to read socialist material (which I most assuredly do not) then I would take a socialist journal.

Socialism (or communism, which is merely a pseudonym for unopposed socialism) is virtually a form of non-deist religion. It is based not on facts but on beliefs (and I stress the word **beliefs**) which, if not wholly erroneous, can most certainly be described as owing little to reality and being based very much on wishful thinking. It also shares with religion the distinction of being one of the major causes of war, bloody revolution, and general human misery and suffering. It is based in reality on envy, malice, lack of enterprise and, from my observation of a lot of its proponents, downright stupidity. You only have to witness the likes of Scargill, Benn, Todd, Livingstone, etc., not to mention Stalin and friends to understand this.

No wonder the Russian and Chinese Empires are now desperately attempting to shed the religious cult of socialism after seeing the successes of natural human society as practised in the free, democratic countries of the world.

If you are becoming upset at this political tirade, I am glad. If, on the other hand, you are pleased at seeing something in opposition to the Left-wing pap to which so often we have been subjected in these pages, I am also glad.

Hopefully, I will never again feel obliged to write in this vein. It is the result of pent up feelings at seeing the only real journal of atheism so misused.

If you do not (or will not) understand that there are a great many non-socialist readers of **The Freethinker** who wish to see this journal used properly in the fight against religion, then perhaps it is time for us to begin asserting ourselves more frequently and making our presence felt — in the National Secular Society as well as in these pages.

M. R. NORTH

ORWELL AND SOCIALISM

Robert Sinclair seems to be somewhat confused (Letters, April).

First, on the matter of definition, his definition of "political" would exclude local government and anarchists from the realm of politics; better would be "of the form, organisation, and administration of a state or social organism, or part thereof". On a less trifling matter, Karl Heath has never to my knowledge concealed his political views.

Secondly, he ignores Orwell's long-standing socialism, to which he adhered to the day he died. Orwell was a member of the Independent Labour Party, which was consistently on the left of the Labour Party, and well to the left of the Communist Party. It remains so today as Independent Labour Publications. Orwell fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, in which he was wounded, in the militia of the **Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (POUM)**, which

translates as the "Workers' Party of Marxist Unification". POUM was a sister party of the ILP, and a Left-wing splinter-group from the Spanish Communist Party, which later joined the PSOE, the Spanish Socialist Party. He described this war in **Homage to Catalonia**: the cover notes describe how it "started as a genuine workers' revolution and ended as a tragic waste of life and ideals".

Orwell's books, **Animal Farm** and **Nineteen Eighty-Four**, were an expression of his democratic socialist convictions, in which he attacked the way in which working-class revolt was manipulated to serve the personal ends of their leaders. **Nineteen Eighty-Four** was an attack, not on English socialism, but on Leninism, particularly the Third International and Stalin. Trotskyism and the parties of the various Fourth Internationals have never been free from the gross vulgarisations of socialism which Orwell satirised, but Stalinism was his main target. The perversions of socialism and the anti-working class sentiment which Orwell excoriated, are still noticeable in Leninism today.

Thirdly, socialism is not something alien to the freethinking tradition; it has been an integral part of that tradition from the first. In fact, I would argue that socialism, freethought and republicanism are the fulfilment of one another in their separate fields. I realise that to many freethinkers, and also to many socialists, this is a profoundly disturbing thought, blasphemy almost. But if the freethought movement is to be united, viewpoints like mine and Karl Heath's must be accepted as worthy of debate, rather than anathematised.

The idea that I would wish to creep into bed with Mr Sinclair for nefarious socialist purposes is laughable. For that matter, anyone attempting to compromise the independence of **The Freethinker** or its editor gets short shrift without any help from Mr Sinclair.

COLIN MILLS

ORWELL'S DENIAL

Robert Sinclair's assertion (Letters, April), that George Orwell's **Nineteen Eighty-Four** "is a direct attack on Socialism", was categorically denied by the author himself. In a letter to Francis A. Henson, of the United Automobile Workers in the States, dated 16 June 1949, Orwell stated: "My recent novel (i.e. **Nineteen Eighty-Four**), is NOT (capitals Orwell's), intended as an attack on Socialism or the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter), but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable, and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism". (*The Collected Essays, Journals and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol 4, p.564).

JOHN L. BROOM

POLITICS AND FREETHOUGHT

I am sorry that Justin Griffin should think that "political matters should not be included in **The Freethinker** unless they touch on religious issues" (Letters, April), and I question that political arguments are "unrelated" to the purpose of **The Freethinker**.

My understanding of humanism is that it involves the development of each individual's personality and potential, not only for his or her benefit but for the ultimate benefit of society as a whole. Politics by definition sets out to make changes in society, for good or ill, and it is precisely this which places political issues firmly within our concern as humanists.

TED McFADYEN

POLITICS AND THE FREETHINKER

Justin M. Griffin (Letters, April) makes a tall order when he asks for political matters not to be discussed in *The Freethinker* unless they touch on religion. In fact it is virtually impossible to discuss most issues of interest to freethinkers without impinging on politics. This could take the form of supporting the Government's 1986 Shops Bill, which I recall *The Freethinker* did to the annoyance of some on the Left, or being critical of its civil liberty record, thus upsetting Mr Griffin.

In a recent *Sunday Times* article, John Mortimer wrote: "Hell must be a place where you are only allowed to read what you agree with". I strongly suspect that some of your correspondents would regard such a place as heaven.

PETER ASHBERRY

FAITH AND FREETHOUGHT

It was, perhaps, inevitable that my article *Let me be ME — and Free* (February), in which I claimed that freedom of thought gives me the right to believe in God, should bring angry response from atheist and secularist readers.

Significantly, perhaps, when I wrote elsewhere defending the view of the Bishop of Durham that the resurrection need not be thought of as a historical, physical happening, I also received a number of strongly worded — though not so unfriendly — protests, mainly from Roman Catholics. Which seems to prove my opening point that many supposed freethinkers are as much entrapped by their own dogma as the most conservative religionists.

Let me pick up for specific reply just a few points from your readers.

David Blackmore accuses me of misusing the word "faith" and then goes on to say that the word means different things in different contexts. But in fact I speak out precisely the meaning I attach to the word: "To behave as though something is true even though we cannot know it for certain".

If Mr Blackmore attaches an entirely different meaning to faith in the religious context, that is his problem. The fact remains that all of us act on faith, in one respect or another, every day of our lives.

Then N. Blackford asks: "If I wrote a book and claimed divine inspiration, would John Bray believe me?" The answer is: "Not automatically; even if it were Morocco-bound and accompanied by a papal edict adding it to the biblical canon". But I would read it, test what it said against my own experience and reasoning ability, and believe whatever stood up to that test.

Mr Blackford, however, goes on to say: "Mr Bray believes in a supernatural spirit, somewhere out there in the universe. This spirit is human-like and benevolent and can act in defiance of all the known laws of nature. It is always watching over us and rewards us when we behave ourselves. Finally it has even appeared on earth in a human embodiment. . .". Which leads me to believe that Mr Blackford was reading the wrong article. I said nothing of the sort.

Then there is K. Hudson who says: "As there is no real evidence for the existence of 'mind' and no observable phenomena which require its existence we must conclude that, until such evidence or phenomena is found, the existence of 'mind' has not been proved. . .".

Nevertheless, I suspect that Mr Hudson behaves every day as though he had a mind; that he **thinks** he makes his own decisions and choices, not the pro-

grammed responses of a machine.

In other words, the existence of "mind" may not be proved, but I think Mr Hudson has faith in his share of it.

My body is a machine; my brain is a computer; but I am me, the one in charge.

JOHN BRAY

CENTENARIES

There is a surprising error in T. F. Evans's article, *April Centenaries*. Charles Chaplin was born on 16 April 1889, i.e. four days before Hitler.

Although Neville Cardus always gave that month and year as those of his birth, it has recently been suggested that it was, in fact, one year earlier.

Another arrival in the world in April 1889 was the future Portuguese clerical fascist dictator, Antonio de Oliveira Salazar.

R. J. M. TOLHURST

"SHALL WE STANCE?"

The proponents of life-stance, recently debating in *New Humanist*, might reflect that W. S. Gilbert's aesthetic poet, Bunthorne, in *Patience*, would have included a stance for living among his "platitudes in stained-glass attitudes". One can imagine him practising poses, postures and stances before emerging with a coterie from Prince of Wales Terrace to "walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily".

The Pharisees, too, were professional life-stanceers. The Talmud lists, among their stances, scraping their feet on the ground and standing like statues in the market place, so that people might think them absorbed in holy thought.

KARL HEATH

Freethinker Fund

This month *The Freethinker* celebrates another birthday — its 108th — at a time when religious fundamentalism has taken a particularly menacing turn. It is not so long ago since we were chortling over the discomposure of American televangelists like the creepy Jimmy Swaggart, and the embarrassment of Vatican Bank officials. But Allah's terrorists, with their book burning and murder threats against a writer and his publishers, are a far more serious matter.

Since its earliest days *The Freethinker* has been consistently fair to all religions, not having a good word for any of them. This policy has ruffled ecumenical feathers, even among squeamish unbelievers who will not accept that religious faith, be it Christian, Judaic or Islamic, is socially mischievous, superstitious rot. Perhaps recent events in Bradford and elsewhere will persuade some of them to withdraw their heads from the sand.

Meanwhile, *The Freethinker* enters another year promoting and defending "the best of causes". Our thanks to all who have supported the paper in any way, including those whose names are listed below.

F. A. Avard, G. W. F. Edwards, J. K. Hawkins and S. Kuebart, £1 each; A. G. Bailey, £1.10; E. V.

Hillman and A. Pallen, £2 each; N. Sinnott, £2.10; N. D. Collins, £2.50; H. K. Campbell and D. A. MacKintosh, £3 each; R. Power, £4; D. Bressan, £4.40; Anonymous, I. C. Chandler, G. F. Clarke, L. J. Dawson, D. Dick, S. and F. S. Eadie, S. R. Farrelly, P. A. Forrest, L. Georgiades, W. B. Grainger, T. Green, K. C. Grierson, G. N. Huddard, D. Hunter, G. Jamieson, B. N. Kirby, D. Rookledge, P. A. M. Smart, A. L. Steer, R. J. M. Tolhurst and J. E. Westerman, £5 each; In Memory of William Ingram, £6.40; H. J. Jakeman, £7; P. Ponting-Barber, R. J. Schilsky and R. G. A. Stubbs, £10 each; Anonymous, £11; N. Barnes, £12; Anonymous and C. Brunel, £20 each; D. Behr, £22.50; W. D. Eaton, £25; J. Kaminkow, \$5.

Total for March: £302 and \$5.

Science Under Attack

ERNEST F. CROSSWELL

It is quite amazing that 400 years after Copernicus, science should need to be defended. Nevertheless the need is urgent. Products resulting from scientific research and discoveries are threatening not only the health of human and animal life, but the ecological balance of the world in which we live. From the outer atmosphere to the forests, it is evident that we can no longer carry on business as usual. The possibility of global catastrophe, quite apart from war, is so alarming that people are willing to grasp at any straws for comfort and reassurance. They are in a very vulnerable state, and therefore a soft touch for religious fundamentalists and other distributors of "truth".

The assault on science comes from a wide range of mutually antagonistic groups, ranging from the religious to self-styled scientists and educationists who call respectively on the "word of God" and scientific theory to rubbish the methods and findings of science. Stuck for a rational argument, anti-science elements are compelled to resort to a dirty tricks strategy in their efforts to convince the general public that science is bad for them.

First, they confuse science with scientists in the hope that their audience will blame science for hydrogen bombs and chlorofluoro aerosols, instead of the politicians and financiers who produce them for profit and war. The discovery of nuclear fission was a huge success story until governments paid some scientists to use it to the detriment of humans. Having smeared scientists (and by implication, science), critics then proceed to misrepresent them by putting words into their mouths. They might claim, as did the editors of a supposedly educational journal, that science was at fault 1900 years ago in stating that the sun revolved around the earth when,

in fact, it was Ptolemy, a scientist of ancient times, who made a mistake. Fortunately for us, and those editors, the method of scientific investigation survives the mistakes of some ancient (and modern) scientists. Unlike religion, science deals in probabilities, not "truths". Religion has declined over the centuries because it cannot recover from the battering its "truths" have taken from science.

Many people are taken in by travesties of the scientific position because they do not appreciate the difference between the "truths" (i.e. certainties) of religion and the facts (i.e. extremely high probabilities) of science. Scientific facts are the result of universal experiments under rigid controls and using a common technical language; whereas religious "truths" are by no means universally accepted, are not amenable to controlled validation, and have no meaningful language. The views and language of the anti-science brigade, which include the strangest ideas from Scientology to Surrealism, are quite irrational. Aldous Huxley found a quick (and profitable) way to find "truth" by taking "Mescaline"; some of us find a bottle of Scotch more than adequate.

Scientists do not claim to reveal the unknowable; they simply insist that the scientific approach is the only way to reveal that which is knowable. If, for instance, there is such a phenomenon as telepathy, it can be certified only by the scientific method. Should the theory of evolution come unstuck, science will be the cause of its rejection.

But what of the lifestyles of these anti-science crusaders? Do they live in accordance with their beliefs? Do they reside in revolving houses in case the sun decides to rise in the south? Do they choose a faith healer instead of a doctor when they get ill? Apart from a tiny minority, they accept willingly, if not appreciatively, the benefits resulting from science. By misrepresenting science, they endeavour to persuade the layman that they have debunked it.

Planning authorities have rejected an application to convert a property in Ottery St Mary, Devon, into a detached house. Andrew Ellis, who belongs to the Plymouth Brethren, wanted to create a 15-inch gap between his house and his neighbour's — on religious grounds. A local councillor said it was the most ridiculous reason he had ever heard.

Holiday accommodation to let: a self-catering chalet to sleep a maximum of six, situated eleven minutes from the sea at Mablethorpe. March to May and October to November, £40 per week; June to September, £70 per week. Further details from Secular Properties Company, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB, telephone (0533) 813671.

NSS Annual Dinner

Over a hundred guests from all over Britain — and one from Australia — attended the National Secular Society's annual dinner in London on 15 April. Barbara Smoker, president of the Society, was in the chair.

Benny Green proposed a toast to the guest of honour, Jonathan Miller.

In response, Dr Miller described himself as a secular Jew. As for religion, he said that as a cradle atheist he never knew what people were talking about.

Referring to the victims of mindless religious fundamentalism, Dr Miller said: "The Rushdie affair is one example, but the most lurid. American fundamentalism is another.

"There is a growth of irrationalism in the late 20th century", he added.

"If you go to the holy city of Jerusalem you see mad Muslims and crazed Jews banging their heads against the wall. . .

"There is belief in all kinds of ideas, like the speech and wisdom of whales. Whales, we are told, are twittering to each other and if we would only listen to them could learn something. If they were in a field they would be like the lowing of cattle. They only seem important because they are under water".

Dr Miller urged unbelievers to stand firm at a time when the forces of irrationalism are on the offensive.

Proposing a toast to the Society, Daniel O'Hara, a former Anglican priest, paid tribute to the NSS and other sections of the movement for their resistance to measures like Section 28 of the Local Government Act. They were also notable in opposing the introduction of religious clauses into the Education Reform Act by the ultra-conservative Baroness Cox and the Bishop of London.

"The NSS and all secular humanists recognise the danger to society of conservative and fundamentalist pressure groups.

"It is being true to the principles of its founders in opposing moves towards a less tolerant society".

Chris Morey responded on behalf of the NSS.

The Post Office evidently took notice of protests over the "Jesus is Alive" slogans it franked on envelopes last year. It has rejected suggestions that a stamp is issued to commemorate the 500th anniversary in July of Thomas Cranmer's birth. The quincentenary will, however, be commemorated in the village of Ashlockton, diocese of Southwell. But as the martyred Archbishop of Canterbury was burned at the stake by his fellow-Christians, it may seem rather inappropriate that the Ashlockton celebrations will include a mediaeval-style pig roast.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 4 June, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Lucie and John White: Youth and Age, a programme of poetry and prose.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30 pm.

Glasgow Humanist Society. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-942 0129.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 6 June, 8 pm. Public Meeting. Speaker from SHELTER, Society for the Homeless.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 25 May, 7.45 pm. Daphne Liddle: Marxism.

London Student Sceptics. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Monday, 29 May, 7 pm. Public Meeting. Cult Bashers (speaker from an anti-cult group).

Norwich Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone Norwich 47843.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 14 June, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. John White: Wholly or Mainly Christian — the New Education Act.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sundays: Lecture, 11 a.m.; Forum, 3 pm; Concert, 6.30 pm. Tuesdays and Thursdays, Extramural Studies, 6.30 pm. Please write or telephone 01-831 7723 for details.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 15 May, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Bernard Phillips, 16 Highpool Close, Newton, Swansea, SA3 4TU, telephone 68024.

ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

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Melbourne's Hall of Science

Skurrie opened the door and he and his "stalwart band of fighters" sallied forth and cleared the building. Skurrie was hit by a flying chair, but was saved from serious injury by a hard hat. The victors then enjoyed a late supper of their opponents' stock of food and drink. (Skurrie scrupulously refrained from the beer.)

The anti-Symes faction decided to try to secure the Hall by legal means. In the meantime, Symes's people kept a regular guard, but their decision to have real firearms available led to tragedy when, on 26 June, a revolver being unloaded or checked by Brown accidentally discharged and fatally wounded his comrade, Thomas Abbot.

The brawling, the accident, and the court case over the Hall did nothing to enhance the prestige of secularism in Melbourne. To Symes's horror the courts, in May 1891, found against him: he and his supporters were summarily evicted from the Hall and he was obliged to lecture again in rented premises — albeit those vacated by the Young Men's Christian Association. Further legal action was of no avail and wasted precious funds. Soon the lectures were in the open air. Skurrie had to go back to mining, in Bendigo and elsewhere. He eventually settled in Western Australia and did not return to Melbourne until during the First World War, when he became active in politics.

Having obtained what they renamed the Secular Hall, Symes's enemies were not able to make a financial success of it. Eventually they rented it to the Victorian Association of Spiritualists, proof to Symes's satisfaction of their perfidy. In reality, Melbourne was sliding into the worst financial depression in its history.

Eventually, in October 1897, the Victorian Supreme Court allowed the anti-Symes trustees to sell the building. At the auction in November the successful bidder was a Mr Muir, but he was an agent for Dr Samuel Peacock, a land investor and shady medical practitioner³ (originally from Ulster), who promptly leased the building back to his old friend Symes. The exultant tenant announced the formation of a Melbourne Freethought Society, renamed the building the Freethought Hall, and announced that he would reopen it on 5 December 1897 with a lecture on "Freethought: Its Nature, Struggles and Triumphs".

It was a Pyrrhic victory. Melbourne in the late 1890s was a pale shadow of a decade earlier. Symes's new society never really got further than its formative meeting, as his sympathisers were forced more and more to leave the city in search of work.² The lectures and the *Liberator* continued. Finance became so difficult that, in about 1901, Symes was obliged to house his family in the Hall, making room for them by buying £5's worth of timber and

installing a staircase and makeshift partitions. "Elegance was out of the question", he recalled. "though the essentials of life were pretty fully realised".

In 1904, in declining health, Symes was obliged to close down the *Liberator*. He left the Hall in June and retired for a while to a small farm at Cheltenham, south of Melbourne. In 1906, however, bored by inactivity, he returned to England and a busy round of speaking engagements at National Secular Society branches. He was no longer a match for the British winter and died of pneumonia on 29 December. He was 65.

Back in Victoria the old hall passed through a number of hands. For a while it was a skating rink, the Austral Hall. Finally, in 1913, it was bought by another controversial and colourful character, Melbourne's Catholic Archbishop Daniel Mannix, for St Vincent's Hospital. The building was used as an out-patients' department for many years until it was refurbished as a hall in 1956.

The Melbourne Hall of Science can perhaps be seen as part of a morality tale about how promising societies can waste their strength by internal squabbling. Of course, a lot of organisations in Melbourne, including churches and banks, went under in the 1890s. Skurrie thought that a united ASA might have survived the depression, but I wonder. Anyway, even if Symes was not always wise — particularly in his dealings with people — no one can doubt his abiding loyalty, and that of Skurrie, to the free-thought cause.

By a curious twist of fate the old building, with its iron roof, still survives as Brennan Hall, nestling incongruously among the taller structures of a modern hospital. How many people who use it or pass by know of its turbulent history? If only walls could speak! When I have occasion to pass its grey façade I think of the roaring days or golden age of secularism, the 1880s, and remember with pride and sadness the hardships endured by the two Josephs: Skurrie and Symes, and — in the words of the Australian poet, C. J. Dennis: "I dips me lid".

1 I prefer to accept the dates for the foundation laying and opening given in the *Liberator* (issues of 6 April and 11 May 1889; also — for foundation — issue of 4 December 1897) to those of 29 March and 15 May 1889 respectively which Symes gave much later (*Freethinker*, 21 October 1906).

2 The population of Melbourne fell by 46,000 between mid 1891 and the end of 1893. By 1897 Symes also had to compete with rival Sunday attractions, such as concerts and socialist lectures.

3 Peacock (1839-1933?) was a well-known East Melbourne and Fitzroy practitioner and a shrewd investor in land. He was believed to be an abortionist and in 1911 was put on trial for the death of a patient. He was acquitted as the body was never found. He was an indulgent landlord and excellent friend to the Symes family.

