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# The Freethinker

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## PATTEN LINKS CRIME RATE WITH DECLINE IN FEAR OF FIRE AND BRIMSTONE

"The link made so dogmatically between the rise in crimes against property and 'the loss of belief in damnation and redemption' flies in the face of all the known relevant facts", declared Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, in a press statement on a widely publicised article by the new Secretary of State for Education and Science.

Writing in *The Spectator*, John Patten who is a practising Roman Catholic, said that loss of religious faith "has had a profound effect on personal morality — especially criminality". He deplored "loss of belief in the fundamentals — redemption and damnation", on which he blamed "growth in secularisation, so evident since the second world war".

One of the relevant facts to which Miss Smoker referred concerns those of John Patten's faith. She said: "People who give their religion as Roman Catholic are heavily over-represented in all penal and rehabilitation centres in this country and throughout the Western world, while those who have no religious beliefs are considerably under-represented in such institutions. Since Mr Patten was Minister for Law and Order in the last Government, he must be well aware of this statistic, yet he ignores it.

"Mr Patten, who supported the religious clauses of the Education Reform Act 1988, now wants ever more religion in schools. What is really needed, however, is surely moral education. At present it is generally squeezed in under the heading of RE, thus falsely associating morality with religious belief. One result is that some teenagers throw out the teaching with the theology.

"The National Secular Society would like to see both the religious assembly and RE give way on the school timetable to neutral, universal, moral education, without labelling it 'religious'.

"Genuine morality, which is based on social concern, is, and always must be, independent of religious belief

— if only because, unlike belief, morality is universal. And the laws of the country — to which we are all subject, whatever our religious beliefs — should ideally be based on a universal, secular morality."

According to John Patten, "there does seem a clear relationship between the growth of 'Victorian values', church attendance and low crime figures." This glib analysis overlooks several basic facts. The population of Victorian England was much smaller than that of today. Methods of crime detection were far less sophisticated. And in the heyday of Victorian values, most British towns and cities had an army of criminals, with brothels, thieves' kitchens and churches operating cheek by jowl.

Mr Patten asserts that "the best gauge of secularisation available to us statistically is church attendance." He sorrowfully admits this is "falling steadily" throughout the United Kingdom. But there are signs of hope. Church attendance remains "relatively high" in Northern Ireland and at churches "which have allowed much abused fundamentalism to creep in again."

When he bemoans the "dwindling belief in redemption and damnation", the Education Secretary inadvertently pays a glowing tribute to secularists and freethinkers. For well over a century our movement has doused the flames of hell with the cold water of rationalism. People are no longer haunted by the fear of eternal damnation, "a message reinforced through attendance at church every Sunday." Except for those unfortunates who are dragged by their parents to churches where fundamentalism has been allowed to creep in again, children no longer hear fire-and-brimstone sermons.

Affirming his belief in God, Mr Patten continues: "I worry about Him. I think he probably worries about me." With John Patten as education supremo, parents, teachers and others interested in children's welfare should also be worried.



# THE FREETHINKER

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# NEWS

## SPIRITED AWAY?

Seventy years ago the then editor of *The Freethinker* attributed an upsurge of interest in spiritualism to the appalling death toll in the 1914-18 war. Chapman Cohen wrote: "There is a quite natural desire among the bereaved to seek consolation through any channel. . . The emotional strain has been great, and nothing multiplies the chances of delusion and illusion as that."

Practitioners of what Cohen called "the shadiest of shady businesses" are again cashing in on grief. It appears that a growing number of homosexuals are consulting mediums in the vain hope of contacting friends and partners who were AIDS victims. This prompted Terry Sanderson, a regular *Freethinker* contributor, to lambaste the "life" after death con artists in his *Gay Times* Mediawatch column.

Terry Sanderson was particularly scathing about the late Doris Stokes, describing her as "that doyenne of the celestial switchboard" whose weekly column in *Women's Own* was "as raw and repellent as uncooked tripe". Unfortunately the gullible and bereaved "lapped it up and Doris became very rich". But all she did was "prevent the healing process and acceptance of loss".

This cool appraisal of the dear departed Doris gave *Psychic News* editor Tony Orzen a touch of the vapours. In a letter to *Gay Times* he said Terry Sanderson "is either brave enough — or fool enough — to dismiss the recognised religion of Spiritualism with a wave of his poison-filled pen". Of course Spiritualism is recognised as a religion by its adherents. And like all religion, it is superstitious bunkum.

Writing as "a close friend of Doris Stokes", Mr Orzen denied she became very rich, having spent her last years in an "extremely ordinary" south London house and leaving only £13,000 in her will. Terry Sanderson's claim was "sweeping and damaging".

Certainly someone — or perhaps some institution — made a great deal of money out of Doris Stokes's best-selling books, articles, personal appearances and television shows. Could her seeming modest assets have been the result what is known as "creative accounting"? Or did she take it with her?

The Rev Andrew Taggart, chaplain to Torquay United, led prayers in his church for the football club's success in a match against Reading. Torquay United lost 6-1, their worst defeat of the season.

# S AND NOTES

## SCEPTICAL PREMIERS

Unlike Northern Ireland, the religious dimension seldom enters party politics in Britain. When it does, it is usually not as a tragedy but as a farce, like in the recent General Election campaign.

Most election propaganda is slush. But the queen of slush, Dame Barbara Cartland, managed to combine the political and religious varieties in her contribution to the great debate. The ancient Dame's fragrant missives descended like rose petals on newspaper editors, a number of whom, either through unthinking loyalty to the Conservative cause or a warped sense of fun, shared the romantic novelist's profound thoughts with their readers.

Dame Barbara implored the electorate to reject the Labour Party because its leader is something of an agnostic. "If you vote for Kinnock, you are voting against Christ", warned the authoress of several hundred knee-tremblers. Of course the same could be said of Paddy Ashdown, the Liberal Democrat leader, or Michael Heseltine, the Conservative leader in waiting for John Major to drop his guard, while the Prime Minister has, at best, only a nominal allegiance to the Church. (It would be nightmarish for the Dame if, at some future election, Antony Flew stood as the Conservative candidate in her constituency.)

The celebrated novelist is apparently unaware that many Prime Ministers during the past two centuries were either lukewarm in the faith or rejected it completely. Thus in the eighteenth century several Whig leaders were private sceptics, while William Pitt, father and son, were both public sceptics. The pattern prevailed in the nineteenth century. Lord Melbourne, Queen Victoria's favourite Prime Minister, rejected Christian doctrine, though not the Christian Church. After hearing an Evangelical sermon he said: "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade the sphere of private life." On taking office he said: "While I cannot be regarded as a pillar, I must be regarded as a buttress of the Church, because I support it from the outside." Melbourne took a poor view of his duties of ecclesiastical duties, remarking: "Damn it all, another bishop dead! I verily believe they die to vex me." Palmerston was also a religious sceptic, and Disraeli was a romantic cynic.

In the twentieth century unorthodox views were held by some Conservative leaders — Balfour and Churchill — and also by Liberal leaders like Asquith and Lloyd

George. Labour leaders have included several unbelievers — Ramsay MacDonald, Hugh Gaitskell and Michael Foot, as well as Neil Kinnock — though only MacDonald (who had been active in the Ethical movement) became Prime Minister and none of them won a General Election.

Another person who complained about Neil Kinnock's unbelief was Maurice Wood, the former Bishop of Norwich. He was more worried about the power of the Prime Minister — who could be anything from an atheist to a Zoroastrian — to appoint bishops of the Established Church. A solution to this dilemma would be Disestablishment of the Church of England. This would free it from the power of the State, of whatever persuasion, and also free the State from the power of the Church, to the mutual benefit of both parties and the rest of the community.

Of course religious unbelief in a Labour leader makes little difference in the practical policy of the party. Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock have both opposed reforming the law on Sunday trading. The Labour Party is much too favourable to Muslim demands for public money to finance their private schools. This has not led to Mr Foot being drummed out of the National Secular Society nor would it prevent Mr Kinnock being accepted into membership.

It is regrettable that so few party leaders dare to be open and honest about their unbelief. But what we want is not so much an atheist Prime Minister as an impartial Government in a secular society, prepared to support policies for the general good of the community and the particular freedom of its individual members, regardless of political, social and religious affiliation.

## GOD GETS HIS P45

Richard Dawkins, the eminent biologist and author of *The Selfish Gene*, debated the existence of God with Dr John Habgood, Archbishop of York, at the International Science Festival in Edinburgh last month.

Dr Dawkins said that religious beliefs are largely transmitted in infancy. "These are arbitrary, hereditary beliefs which people are told at a critical stage, passed on from your parents like a virus."

He asserted that evolutionary theory has exploded a "proof" of God's existence, i.e. that the natural world is so beautiful and complicated that there must be a superhuman intelligence behind it.

Dr Dawkins replied: "If you're deeply steeped in evolution, you see that it is a way to get complex designs out of nothing. You don't need God."

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Pilgrims to the shrine at Walshingham have been requested to go easy on the water. The drought in East Anglia is threatening to dry up the supply.

## FRANKIE AND BENNY

A feeling of profound sadness in Britain at Easter had nothing to do with the biblical man of sorrows. Two great comedians, Frankie Howerd and Benny Hill, who died within hours of each other, had between them contributed more to human happiness than all the saviours, saints and prophets of the world's religions put together.

For Frankie Howerd it was a long haul from a small part in a nativity play to becoming the monarch of low comedy and high camp. Whether relating the saga of the Roman soldier who got too close to the wheels of Boadicea's chariot "and had his retreat cut off", or as the conniving and salacious Lurcio in *Up Pompeii!*, he employed the leer, innuendo and double-take to hilarious effect.

Benny Hill specialised in saucy, seaside postcard-style humour. He wrote the madcap sketches which featured fat ladies, bald-headed men and mischievous children. And of course there were the decorative dancing girls, Hill's Angels. This made him a target for the dungarees-and-army-boots "anti-sexists" whose protests almost certainly influenced Thames Television's decision to drop the Benny Hill Show in 1989. It did him no harm. He had a worldwide following and was a millionaire many times over.

Remembering Frankie Howerd and Benny Hill, we should be grateful that neither the "clean-up" cohorts of Mrs Whitehouse — herself something of a comic — nor their allies in the "politically correct" language department, have succeeded in imposing their po-faced dullness on all and sundry.

## MORE "BLASPHEMY"

When the recruitment agency Recruit Media received a letter from the Advertising Standards Authority last month complaining about an advertisement which showed cartoon characters saying "Oh Christ!" and "Oh God!", they saw it was dated 1 April and assumed it was an April Fool joke. But no, Kelly Matthews of the ASA was seriously complaining that the phrases were contrary to the British Code of Advertising Practice because they are blasphemous.

When you think of some of the stuff that appears in advertisements nowadays, you might have thought such language would hardly be noticed. But some busybody somewhere thought differently and made a complaint which the ASA supported. Fortunately Recruit Media is run by Victoria Lubbock, the very forthright daughter of Lord Avebury, who answered that the advertisement is not blasphemous, since it hasn't been prosecuted, and asked how it could possibly offend the BCA. She also passed the case on to the civil liberties

organisation Article 19, which approached the Committee Against Blasphemy Law.

The fact is of course that the common law of blasphemy, ludicrous though it is, couldn't possibly be used against such a trivial item, which could hardly even be called profane. But as Nicolas Walter, secretary of CABL, pointed out, this kind of case represents the real danger of the blasphemy law, in threatening freedom of expression in religious matters by pressure behind the scenes rather than action in the open.

## Freethinker Fund

This is another birthday number of *The Freethinker*. Since it was first published in May 1881, the paper has been fighting the good fight against religious superstition, social divisiveness and privilege. Although many battles have been won over the past 111 years, we must still resist irrational and intolerant elements, be they in evangelical church or Government department. And it is not only from Christian sources that threats to liberty and freedom of expression emanate.

The fact that *The Freethinker* has survived for over a century is due to the loyal support of its readers and unpaid writers. There is a constant struggle to balance the books and donations to the Fund help considerably towards that end.

Our thanks to all contributors, including those on the latest list which is given below.

R. J. C. Hall, £1; N. H. Sinnott, £1.90; E. W. Clapton, G. J. Meaden and J. R. Smith, £2 each; A. P. Allen, £3; S. Buckwell and L. E. Meszaros, £4 each; R. P. Bailey, R. A. Billen, H. Bowman, D. J. Bye, G. F. Clarke, G. S. Gamgee, M. I. Gibb, N. Gibbard, D. R. Leighton, C. Lovett, H. Madoc-Jones, A. Negus, P. Pamphillion, I. G. Payne, J. R. Radford, J. Schwiening, L. Stapleton and D. Swan, £5 each; N. A. Blyth, £5.60; E. C. Hughes, £7.60; R. J. Condon, M. Hill, M. O. Morley and L. T. Ong, £10 each; D. Bressan, £13; G. Jamieson, £15; I. Campbell, £19.40; D. Eaton and J. E. Rupp, £20 each; A. C. Charles, U. and H. Neville, A. D. Stevens, £25 each; Anonymous, £35.

Total for March: £360.50

Devout Muslims are describing the case of shoes bearing an inscription in Arabic as more serious than that of *The Satanic Verses*. The shoes, which are manufactured in Italy, have the words "There is no God but Allah" in the pattern. When they went on sale in Leicester, shop owner Diana Lewis started getting threatening telephone calls. Then in the early hours of the morning a car was driven into the shop front and set on fire. The shop and its contents were destroyed.

# Isaac Asimov, Humanist Polymath

KARL HEATH

Isaac Asimov, who died last month, was president of the American Humanist Association and a member of the *American Humanist* editorial board, the Academy of Humanism and the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. In the video, *Humanism Making Bigger Circles*, he gave a masterly presentation of the humanist case.

Most obituaries have spoken only of Asimov's science fiction. This is rather like restricting Sibelius to *Finlandia*, Saint-Saëns to *Danse Macabre*, or Ravel to the *Bolero*. But not quite. Asimov's science fiction was considerable and consistent. Perhaps he never equalled Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*; but *Nightfall*, written when he was only 21, is widely considered the greatest SF short story of this century.

Born in Russia in 1920, Asimov was taken to the United States when he was three. Helping out in his parents' candy store he became a child aficionado of SF from 1929. Much the same happened to me around the same time. By the age of 12 I had read all the H. G. Wells scientific romances, and, for a time, found little else. Jules Verne I found stodgy and Edgar Rice Burroughs with his Warlords of Mars intellectually inferior to Frank Richards with his Harry Wharton and Billy Bunter. Then, visiting Woolworths one Saturday afternoon, I was poking around among the heaped pile of remaindered American pulp magazines. Most were called *Snappy Stories* and *Breezy Stories*, with long-legged young women on their lurid covers. At the time these did not interest me, but among them I came across a strange magazine called *Amazing Stories*. There followed *Astounding Stories* and *Science Wonder Stories* and I was hooked. Asimov, however, was inspired to write, and published his first story when he was 19.

But why have the obituaries ignored his major achievements? He graduated at Columbia University at an early age, gained a doctorate in Bio-Chemistry and became a Professor in the School of Medicine at Boston University. But his academic record does not indicate that he was a supreme polymath, probably the greatest of this century. More than half his 500 published works were on science; covering astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics. The word "populariser" is sometimes deprecatory, but I believe that a clear understanding of one's subject involves being able to explain that subject to the intelligent layman. As a student I remember the lecturers with an undeserved reputation for erudition and profundity, who concealed their own confusion behind a screen of obscurantism and polysyllabics. The cool clarity of Asimov was like jumping into a pellucid spring. I first

read his *Short History of Biology* at a time when I was almost wholly ignorant of the subject. I was so stimulated that I filled fifty pages of an exercise book with a summary of it. There are about six books which I always keep close by. Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* is one. But by it is Asimov's *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Science and Technology*. In 773 pages there are 1195 biographies chronologically from Imhotep, circa 3000 BC, to Carl Sagan. This may seem peculiar, but by using the detailed subject index it is possible to trace the historical development of scientific ideas, discoveries and concepts. Its value is incalculable; it reads as if compiled by twenty world-renowned experts, but every word is Asimov's, and crystal clear.

His extraordinary range of books included mythology, Shakespeare and the Bible. *In the Beginning* is a 227-page study of the first eleven chapters of Genesis in which he analyses the text line by line, an exercise of critical exegesis carried out with exemplary scholarship.

Finally, Isaac Asimov was a great humanist. He never wrote a book on humanism, but it shines through all his work. While his name will always be linked with science fiction he was a thorough rationalist, an opponent of superstition, bigotry, modern New Age-type fads and astrological nonsense.

Isaac Asimov personified enlightenment.

## "Holy" Killers Jailed

Two Muslim "holy men" have been jailed at Manchester Crown Court for killing a 20-year-old girl during a ritual exorcism. Mohammed Bashir was jailed for life and Mohammed Nourani for five years.

Kushor Bashir (no relation) died after eight days of violence during which she was deprived of food and sleep. She had become depressed and her parents called in Bashir who decided that she was possessed by an evil spirit. In the days that followed, he and Nourani, described as "a saintly man of great distinction in the Muslim religion", beat her with sticks. A Home Office pathologist said the girl's injuries, which included 15 broken ribs, were consistent with her being jumped and stamped on. The "holy men" told her parents that it was the evil spirit, not their daughter, who was suffering.

Describing the case as "bizarre", Mr Justice McKinnon told Bashir: "The photographs give some indication of what she suffered in the presence of various members of her family who believed you were giving her treatment to rid her of an evil spirit."

# God "More Dead Than When Nietzsche Said so"

Guests from many parts of the country and a wide range of organisations attended the annual dinner of the National Secular Society at the Bonnington Hotel, London, on 11 April.

Proposing a toast to the NSS, Professor Ted Honderich said it was a pleasure to be among atheists in earnest. He expressed a trust "there are no lurking deists, holding onto some metaphysical idea, and no pious agnostics, still hedging their bets or wanting not to offend.

"It is a special pleasure to be among people of whom it is possible to hope that none are bemused by those wisps of argument left over from the past. I mean by wisps of argument, of course, the proofs of the existence of God. No doubt it is a good idea that books keep on coming out disproving the proofs. But the proofs are surely done for. So are the religious replies to atheist arguments against the existence of God.

"The atheist argument that seems to me more overwhelming with every passing year is what used to be called the Argument from Evil, or the Argument from Suffering. It could better be called the Argument from Injustice, since the catastrophes that really stick in the mind are those owed to what we ourselves do to others, or do not do for others.

"The Christian reply at its centre, as all of you will know, has to do with Free Will. God rightly gave us Free Will, which he could not do without giving us the power to make others suffer. One good rejoinder to that is that if he did give us Free Will he certainly put a lot of limits on it. For a start, we might have been winged angels, and so had no further use for the 24 bus. So, if he put limits on our Free Will, why didn't he add another? Why didn't he arrange for us freely not to savage the poor and starve the already wretched?

"No doubt some theological thought has gone into that. But all discussions will rightly end in silence, I think, if those in it come to have a proper and not a distant awareness of suffering. Talk of Free Will in this connection can only seem serious to those who have a weak awareness of what has been and is being done to people. That came to me when I was unwise enough to pay a visit to Auschwitz.

"If it is a pleasure to be among atheists in earnest, is that pleasure a little touched by the thought that atheists in earnest are just a little dotty? Many think so. Many think what I am sure members of the National Secular Society have heard a lot more often than they have had annual dinners. It is that they are the paradigm case of flogging a dead horse. God really is dead, more dead than when Nietzsche said so. Religion, anyway among people you are likely to run into socially, is over. So why go on about it?

"I admit to sometimes having been tempted in the direction of that response. Even for sympathetic persons, it is a little hard not to be tempted. After all, the churches are still pretty empty, and some are being converted into vegetarian takeaways. It no longer seems worthwhile pointing out to anybody, even American tourists, that the one on the corner of Gordon Square, which calls itself the University Church of Christ the King, isn't the official church of the university, since the university doesn't have one. Also, we in Europe haven't got an Ayatollah, and it isn't exactly religious zealots who are in command of us.

"But all that one can really be tempted to, in truth, is boredom with the arguments for and against the existence of God. There is something else with which one cannot in conscience be bored. It is that collection of awful social and political facts which owe something or other, maybe a lot, to religious feeling. We all know them.

"In America, those who call themselves the lambs of God are still going about their business of trying to close down the abortion clinics. The lambs are persuaded that other people should actually bear children so that the feelings of the lambs are not offended. Closer to home, it is not unthinkable that the Irish will in their next referendum on the subject again decide that they should remain a primitive society. Here at home, Lord Lane takes it upon himself to say that some gays should go to prison for what they get up to in private and by agreement with one another. No doubt some of his successors will be of the same mind.

"Somewhere in a safe house in this city is Salman Rushdie, unable to come out on the street. In a large part of the world, the Islamic part, no author who does not want a similar fate can write as he wishes of religion or the religious past. That medieval fact is worth thinking about by anyone who is bored with argument about the truth of religion — or, by the way, John Stuart Mill's defence of free expression in *On Liberty*.

"To take but those two examples, suppression of sexual freedom and suppression of freedom of opinion, they provide more than enough reason for the existence of the National Secular Society. Indeed, they give us reason to celebrate it."

Professor Honderich said he may try the listeners' patience for a bit, but it was hard to get the General Election out of mind. While aware that not all atheists are socialists, he believed that most of those present "are in some way or another, on the left in politics, and it is to you that I mainly speak.

"What has happened to lovely England? The past month of election campaign had in it some hope. It was

hope darkened by the denigration of Mr Kinnock by the vermin press, that same vermin press once gave its attentions to Mr Foot in similar circumstances. There was also the calling up and the use of that denigration by Conservative politicians. Still there was hope for a while.

"The end of the month, the other night, still resists thinking about. An electorate so abysmally gulled that it does not see facts of victimisation apparent even to *The Financial Times*. The prospect of more government by dim ideologues and moneyed demagogues. A Government which has already lied about more or less everything and been only refuted in a kind of ineffectual way because the lies have got a kind of ascendancy. They have already dragged down England, preyed on its ignorance, told the pushers in it not to feel embarrassed about being selfish. We now have a democracy which has not even the low recommendation of giving a majority of the people what they have been led to want. They will not even get that, let alone anything rationally chosen or any kind of justice in a society.

"I know that we earnest atheists will continue to do what can be done against the end-products of religion, in connection with sexual morality and the free expression of opinion and more. I hope we will also take time to struggle a little against something separate from religion. That is the vile march of selfishness led by Conservative politicians."

Jim Herrick, editor of *New Humanist*, proposed a toast to the guest of honour, Michael Foot, who has just completed a long and distinguished parliamentary career.

After referring to the veteran politician's wide range of interest and activities in and out of Parliament, Jim Herrick said: "One of the remarkable facts about Michael Foot throughout his career is that he has never been shy of supporting what might seem to be unpopular causes, like the National Secular Society or the Thomas Paine Society. He not only gives nominal support. He is prepared to turn out and speak out. He was branded as an atheist, as though that was an insult rather than a talisman of integrity, by the gutter press during the 1983 election.

"It is to Foot's credit that he has been so public and firm in his honest admission of his atheism.

"As an admirer of Thomas Paine, Michael Foot is naturally a defender of free speech. Only recently, on the third anniversary of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, Foot, together with Fay Weldon, placed a wreath in Smithfield, where the last religious martyrs were executed. For me, one of the tremendous things about Foot's support of Rushdie has been his continual emphasis that *The Satanic Verses* is a very fine work of literature, not just a cause célèbre."

The toast was drunk to Michael Foot, described by Jim Herrick as "a politician of great integrity, a writer

whose future books we look forward to reading, and a humanist of great inspiration to us".

Responding, Michael Foot spoke of the continuing need to campaign in defence of freedom of expression.

"Jim Herrick referred to the whole battle around Salman Rushdie. I see him quite frequently and I believe it is very important that we should sustain support for him, particularly at some moments when the British Foreign Office has occasional lapses into appeasement."

Michael Foot told his audience that he had been reading Anne Taylor's new biography of Annie Besant, describing it as a more personal and persuasive portrait.

"Some of the changes of mind she had were ones which freethinkers were concerned and outraged about. But this does not alter the fact that she made a tremendous contribution to the founding of the freethought movement in this country, nor does it alter the fact that one of the great themes in the whole history of freethought in this country was that she was the first woman to defend birth control publicly. She did it with tremendous courage, with power and conviction.

"It must have been something tremendous to hear her on the platform at a time when women weren't supposed to speak on platforms at all, and on the same platform as Bradlaugh, one of the greatest speakers in a century of great speakers."

Mr Foot said he had also been reading lots Byron, "and he sometimes puts things better than anyone else.

"It was he who said 'God will not always be a Tory'. It was thought to be an extremely blasphemous remark. The blasphemy was thought much more reprehensible than whether he was speaking the truth or not. As is often the case with such matters, Byron knew exactly what he was saying, and I am sure he was aware 150 years after his death we would be quoting him at a meeting of the National Secular Society.

"I hope you will ask me to come again. I am at present writing a book on one of the greatest freethinkers of all time, H. G. Wells. He educated himself and sought to educate everybody else."

Michael Foot wished the NSS every good fortune and hoped it would prosper until the end of the century and beyond.

Terry Mullins, secretary of the Society, also spoke. Barbara Smoker was in the chair.

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Report from the Taking Coal to Newcastle Department: David Thomas, one of Britain's few professional story-tellers who describes himself as "a teller of tales, stories and elaborate lies", has been engaged to assist at a course for trainee clergymen at St John's College, Durham.

# The Way to the Stars

NEIL BLEWITT

Readers of this journal will be aware that Ascension Day falls on 28 May. In her book, *Honest to Man*, Margaret Knight quotes *The Expository Times* as stating: "No festival of the church is so hard on the preacher as Ascensiontide." But the clergy could find their difficulties resolved if only they would extend their scrutiny of the ascensions recorded in their own literature to include those of other religious and tribal traditions.

Readers may recall an article of mine which appeared in the May 1991 issue of *The Freethinker* to coincide with the celebration of the Feast of the Ascension. Under the title, "Those Magnificent Men. . .", it featured accounts of the translation of ten assorted gentlemen from earth to heaven.

I have good cause to remember it myself since it led to my being castigated by certain ladies of my acquaintance who enquired, with varying degrees of vigour, why I had chosen only male subjects for my article. I pointed out — I thought with some justification — that, as my contribution was headed "Those Magnificent Men. . .", I was severely restricted as to the number of sexes I could refer to; and, in any case, it was my intention to offer the editor a similar article in 1992 devoted exclusively to the ascension of an equivalent number of ladies to heaven.

But my critics were unimpressed and unappeased. Were not, they demanded, apotheosised ladies respectable enough? Were not their ascents sufficiently spectacular?

Of course and of course. And, as proof, I have collocated ten cases of ladies being promoted from earth to heaven. Well — to be honest — *eight* cases. But before my critics reach for their pens or flex their tongues to demand complete parity, I hasten to add that of the two remaining cases, one is an unrivalled instance of the most beautiful part only of a lady being exalted, while the other is a rare example of the process being dramatically reversed.

Observant readers will have noticed that the title of last year's article came from the world of the cinema. In the interest of even-handedness between the sexes, this year's title has been drawn from the same source.



Helen of Troy (or, more properly, Helen of Argos) was reconciled to her husband, Menelaus, after the fall of Troy. But what happened to her on his death is not entirely clear. Some believe that she was despatched to the Islands of the Blessed (like the mortal Minnehaha) but others are convinced that she was placed by Zeus in a constellation with her brothers, Castor and Pollux.

The latter seems the more probable since all three had been hatched from eggs laid by Leda, the wife of Tyndarus; and Zeus bore an especial responsibility here in view of the fact that he is known to have fathered at least one of the eggs.

Breath of Wind was the daughter of Ataensic and Chief Who Owns The Earth. One night she was visited by Master of The Winds and, as a result, found herself to be pregnant with twins. They were named Ioskeha and Tawiscara and became involved in a heated argument while still in their mother's womb. So violent was the dispute in fact that Breath of Wind died. Ataensic, however, extracted the twins alive and then, from her daughter's corpse, formed the sun and the moon, although she decided that the time was not propitious for them to be set in the sky. But Ioskeha stole the orbs from his grandmother and threw them away. They rose miraculously towards heaven and eventually came to rest at the locations where they may be seen to this day.

Callisto was a beautiful nymph who attracted the attentions of Zeus. She was soon changed into a bear — either by Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus, or by Zeus himself to protect her from Hera's wrath. What followed is a matter of dispute. Some say that she was killed by one of Artemis's arrows; others that she was about to be killed unwittingly by her son, who was on a bear-hunt at the time, but was saved by the intervention of Zeus. However, all of the chroniclers are agreed on what happened next: that the god arranged for Callisto to be transported to heaven where she was set for ever among the stars as the Great Bear.

Queen Maya dreamed that an elephant had entered her womb. It was later discovered that she was pregnant, and no fewer than 64 priests predicted that she would give birth to the Buddha. In time the prophecy was fulfilled and the boy emerged from his mother's side to be received on a golden net held by four angels who had brought it from heaven for the purpose. He was acknowledged by Brahma and the other gods and, as if to underline the significance of the moment, the Buddha's wife, his horse, his squire and the Bo-tree, under which he was to receive enlightenment, were all born at the same time. As for Queen Maya, she died of sheer joy seven days later and was taken up to heaven to be reborn among the gods.

Andromeda, the daughter of Cassiopeia and Cepheus, was ordered by an oracle to be chained to a rock, there to await devourment by a sea-monster, because her mother had boasted that her beauty exceeded that of the fifty daughters of Nereus. But Perseus slew the monster and claimed Andromeda as his bride. After her death,



she was taken up to heaven and placed among the stars in the constellation which stills bears her name. As for her mother, the sea-nymphs never forgot her boasting, and when she died she too was placed among the stars, but so near the Pole that she is forced to sit with her head held downwards in a permanent gesture of humility.

Berenice was the wife of Ptolemy III and she vowed to sacrifice her hair to the gods when her husband returned home as the conqueror of all Asia. She left her hair suspended in the temple where it had been consecrated, but it was stolen by the wind and wafted to heaven where it was transmogrified into seven stars and placed at the tail of the constellation Leo.

The White Woman, who conquered and ruled Honduras, remained a virgin throughout her life, but still contrived to give birth to three sons. When she became too old to rule her queendom, she divided it between them. She then commanded that her bed be placed on the roof of her palace, and no sooner had this been done than she was transformed into a beautiful bird. She rose, singing, into the sky and quickly disappeared from view, never to be seen on earth again.

Icarius, king of Attica, was murdered by some of his subjects who, at the time, were intoxicated as a result of drinking wine which he, somewhat unwisely, had given them. The murderers buried his body beneath a tree where it was eventually located by his daughter Erigone and his dog Moera. Erigone, distraught, hanged herself. Dionysus, the god of wine, feeling a certain measure of responsibility for the death of Icarus (since it was he who had taught him the art of wine-making) punished the people of Attica with blindness for the regicide and then took Erigone up to heaven where she was metamorphosed into the constellation Virgo. And — if this were not an article devoted entirely to ladies — I would add that Icarus and Moera were also metamorphosed — into, respectively, the Waggoner and the Lesser Dog Star.

With Nokomis, the pattern is reversed. She dwelled on the moon quite happily; but one day she fell (some say pushed by jealous rivals) and descended in the form of a star to the earth, there to live the life of a mortal. She, of course, became the mother of Wenonah who, having been impregnated by Mudjekeewis posing as the West Wind, gave birth to Hiawatha. He, it will be recalled, followed Minnehaha, his wife, to the Islands of the Blessed.

When the Virgin Mary died, her body was covered by three palms brought from heaven and three branches taken from the olive-tree from which a dove had carried a sample back to Noah in the Ark. Her body was placed in a stone coffin and buried, but her soul was taken by her son, Jesus, to Heaven where he presented it to his father and a resident ghost. After 206 days, Jesus

returned on a chariot bearing the soul to where his mother was buried. His arrival was greeted by the singing of a heavenly choir accompanied by David on his harp. Jesus ordered the body to come out of its coffin, which it promptly did, to be reunited with its soul. The Virgin then boarded the chariot with her son and, accompanied by cherubim, was whisked away to heaven.

It is evident that several of my subjects *were* placed in the sky since they may still be observed there (e.g. Andromeda, Callisto and Erigone) but nobody has yet discovered the whereabouts of some of the others, such as Queen Maya, the White Woman and the Virgin Mary. But it should be pointed out that, in the case of the Virgin Mary, she has at least attempted to compensate for this by returning to the earth on a number of occasions since her assumption and appearing to divers people — although, it must be added, not yet, regrettably, to an atheist.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

And so are completed my accounts compiled from published sources of the journeys made by ten ladies, in whole or in part, between earth and heaven, — nine ascending and one descending. But as with last year's accounts, I am not asserting that they are all necessarily true. I am, rather, leaving it to you, dear readers, to decide which, if any, are factual representations and which are merely fiction.

Answers, as before, on a postcard, please. Addressed to my wife.

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Welcome to a modest but lively new magazine called Thomas ("Seeds of Doubt") which is published in Lusaka, Zambia. In the March issue it replied to a Sunday Times of Zambia columnist who wondered if there are any books on how to pray — for instance if you don't believe in God, Allah, ancestral spirits or the Third Force. Thomas replied: "The answer is easy for a rationalist. You pray to no one, because praying is very irrational behaviour. It has its origins in primitive times when men believed that words had magical powers... Prayer may very occasionally appear to work — by coincidence, or by focusing attention on one's goals and on methods of attaining them, so that they can be followed up by a plan of action. This is very different from supposing that simply as a result of materialising one's thoughts into words can make them come true." We hope that the seeds being planted by doubting Thomas will take root and flourish.

**CENSORSHIP: THE KNOT THAT BINDS POWER AND KNOWLEDGE**, by Sue Curry Jansen. Oxford University Press, £9.95

Language is always changing: it is a process we cannot prevent, even if we wished to do so. But as Orwell so powerfully demonstrated, language can also be manipulated. And it is always the ruling powers who manipulate it to their own advantage. As Sue Curry Jansen puts it: "The way the powerful say things are is the way they are, or the way they usually become because the powerful control the power to name." They use their power "to generate and enforce definitions of words and of social reality that enhance their sovereignty". They are the censors; they possess "power knowledge".

At different times in history that power has been in different hands and in the first part of her book Ms Jansen examines censorship under ecclesiastic, state and market controls. The second part is devoted to what she calls "the dramaturgy of censorship", though theoretical ideas "invade, colonise and inform the historical chapters"; and occasionally, I feel, the first verb takes precedence.

A recurring symbol is Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*, a circular prison with a central observation and control point. Today, according to Ms Jansen, panoptics has been revolutionised by electronics and has penetrated the home in the form of television, the current medium for the message.

More serious, to my way of thinking, are the computer storage systems which Ms Jansen turns to next. I recall the horror with which I learnt about covert police surveillance methods a quarter of a century ago, now an accepted feature of life in a "free" country, along with information — and misinformation — on all aspects of our private lives. Ms Jansen may exaggerate the harmful effects of television, so that "even if we turn the switch off there is nothing left to fill the void", but the dangers of unknown and largely inaccessible records in largely unknown hands cannot be overstated.

In opposition to the *Panopticon* symbol Ms Jansen sets the Platonic Socrates, far the most famous but, according to J. B. Bury, not the only victim of Athenian censorship. In his *History of Freedom of Thought*, there is a reference to the Sophist Protagoras, who wrote a book *On the Gods*, beginning "Concerning the gods, I cannot say they exist nor yet that they do not exist". Bury says that Protagoras was charged with blasphemy and fled from Athens to avoid persecution, while copies of his book were collected and burned, but Bertrand Russell discredits this.

Roman censorship, too, sometimes resulted in the burning of books (though the original censors were more concerned with civic matters), but the "Golden Age of Censorship" was born when the Christians — in Gibbon's words — "finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol".

It was the coming of printing that destroyed the Church's monopoly over "sacred" texts and, indeed, facilitated the scientific revolution, but Ms Jansen draws attention to print's "dark side". It made possible the rapid communication of diabolical as well as progressive ideas. *The Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of the Witches) by the Dominican inquisitors Kramer and Sprenger, spread the "witch craze" throughout Europe and fully deserves Ms Jansen's designation as "the most malignant misogynist document ever to attain statutory recognition in Western legal conventions".

Ironically, one of the two most terrible censorships of modern times was imposed in the name of Karl Marx, himself a victim and critic of censorship, and the subject of an excellent section in the present book.

Marx described the American press of his day (for which he wrote) as the freest in the world but subsequently in Ms Jansen's telling phrase: "The free press was not crushed, it was sold." Likewise: "Free speech did not lose its franchise, it lost its resonance." Ours is a period of "ultracapitalism", a period during which "America the liberator" has become "transformed into America the conqueror".

Sue Curry Jansen, who is an American professor, is scathing about her country's "restructuring of the world order". American capitalism is, as she says, "as deeply implicated in the graves at Dimbaza and the prisons in Chile as the power-knowledge of Marxist-Leninism is implicated in building the camps of the Gulag Archipelago. The primary difference is that US political capitalism exports its most heinous atrocities."

What is to be done? Ms Jansen finds little basis for optimism, but she urges all citizens to engage in what Umberto Eco has described as "semiotic guerrilla warfare", though the struggle may be one of "words against warheads" with human societies continuing "to measure progress from scaffold to scaffold".

It would be unrealistic to disagree, despite the developments in Eastern Europe, where Ms Jansen's caution not to throw out the baby with the bathwater has gone unheeded. But we can turn back the pages of *Censorship* and recall how its heroes fought against worst tyrannies in the past.

COLIN McCALL

# REVIEWS

THE LITERARY COMPANION TO SEX, edited by Fiona Pitt-Kethley. Sinclair-Stevenson, £18

Another anthology; and after dissent (January) and death (February), how nice to turn to sex as spring comes. It is a strange thought that a book like this couldn't have been published until the time when "sexual intercourse began" — according to Philip Larkin and censorship law — about 30 years ago. But it is a sad thought that few people have made good use of this recent and rapid shift in cultural and legal fashion, and this book raises the question of why this is so.

To begin with, sexual material raises problems of definition. There are many anthologies of "love" or "romantic" poetry and prose, and several anthologies of more explicit "erotic" poetry and prose — including two pairs edited by Alan Bold and Derek Parker just over a decade ago. There have also been more explicit anthologies — such as *The Sphere Book of Improper Verse* (1979) edited by Alan Bold, or *The Faber Book of Blue Verse* (1990) edited by John Whitworth — consisting of material which once would have been labelled "obscene" and banned. But it is often hard to distinguish between what is moving or arousing or amusing or shocking or disgusting or boring, and to decide how to treat it — though a particularly successful example is *Erotica*, "An Anthology of Women's Writing" edited by Margaret Reynolds, first published by Pandora Press in 1990 and now available in paperback (£9.99), which includes in 400 pages an extraordinarily wide selection of material.

Fiona Pitt-Kethley has tried to include all kinds of material concerning sex without distinguishing between them, except that she looked for "realism, humour, or the unusual — preferably all three", and she offers few judgements on the results. She is herself well known as a writer (and reciter) of very explicit poems on sex — recalling Samuel Johnson's remark that "a women's preaching is like a dog's walking upon his hinder legs; it is not well done, but you are surprised to find it done at all" — but she actually does it very well. She has made the most of her well-earned reputation to produce a big ambitious collection which contains hundreds of familiar and unfamiliar items in roughly chronological order from the ancient world to the present day.

The book was rejected by the original publisher but has been beautifully produced by another, with a pretentious title and prestigious appearance, and was published on Valentine's Day. It has had mixed reviews, and unfortunately it is rather clumsily edited, with an amateurish discussion of the subject, an eccentric selection of items, and a cavalier treatment of sources.

This doesn't matter much, because the readers' interest is guaranteed and much of the material is interesting on its own account. The main trouble is that, like most anthologies concerned with a single topic, this one quickly becomes tedious. Its content, like its subject, is best taken a small amount at a time rather than all at once — though it is too thought-provoking to be a mere bedside (or bedtime) book.

Two things that emerge clearly are how few people can write both explicitly and well about sex, and how many of those who can do both tend to write unpleasantly. It is depressing to note how little of the material in these 400 pages actually shows much pleasure, let alone happiness, coming from an activity which is one of the main sources of both — rather as though a book on food or drink emphasised sickness or drunkenness. It is also depressing to note that the most recent items are the least successful — or is this just because copyright problems have excluded the most successful?

Is it the case that people who describe sex don't really like it, or that descriptions of pleasure are unconvincing or unappealing, or that descriptions of this particular pleasure are actually impossible, or just that the editor has chosen rather unattractive material? Is it relevant that the best things in the book are the ones which are indirect or funny, rather than direct or serious? Freethinkers have always favoured freedom and openness in sex as in all areas, but much of the material which has come to the surface in our more or less permissive age makes one wonder whether freedom without fun is an empty possession and whether openness without art is a mixed blessing. One consolation is that there is plenty of good sexual material which isn't in this book but is easily available — including the work of Fiona Pitt-Kethley herself — and another is that even if this book doesn't arouse much else it certainly arouses thought.

NICOLAS WALTER

The 300-odd congregation at the Roman Catholic church in Hoetmar, Germany, stood and applauded Father Karl Lenfers when he announced from the pulpit that he was getting married. A priest for 32 years, he will have to resign because of the church's celibacy ruling.

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# The Satanic Verses in Paperback

MARGARET McILROY

It is good news that at last Salman Rushdie's brilliant novel is to be brought within reach of a wider public by its issue in paperback, in defiance of the threats by Muslim fundamentalists. It is no easy read. It is very long, packed with fascinating characters, with literary and historical references drawn from Britain, the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East. The action ranges from continent to continent, from present to past, from realism to fantasy. The two central figures are simultaneously actors and archangels — and if we find this confusing, how much more do they!

No doubt it is unfair to the late Ayatollah Khomeini to suggest that the decision to issue his infamous fatwa was due to the extremely unflattering portrayal of a character clearly based on himself — an exiled Imam in Kensington, deliberately cutting himself off from his surroundings so that he can return to "Desh" uncontaminated by any knowledge of, or contact with, his place of exile. In a fantastic sequence we watch unnumbered people, inspired by the Imam, advance to be mown down by the Empress's guns, till the mass of humanity smothers the gunners. Then we see "the Imam grown monstrous lying in the palace forecourt with his mouth yawning open at the gates; as the people march through the gates he swallows them whole." Fantasy, but I remember rejoicing at the fall of the American-backed Shah and the bursting open of the prisons where opponents of his cruel regime were tortured and killed, little realising how soon these prisons would again be crammed with the victims of an equally cruel tyranny.

It is sad that so many British Asians have been led to see Rushdie as an enemy, rather than as a spokesman and a fellow-sufferer from prejudice. Perhaps the most memorable sequence in the whole book describes the abuse of one of the protagonists by immigration police, who, after gleefully ill-treating him in a Black Maria, realise that his claim to be a British citizen is genuine, and knock him out so that they can claim to have found him wandering, sick and incoherent, under suspicious circumstances.

One can understand how Muslims can find the book blasphemous. The Prophet Muhammad and the origins of Islam are portrayed not unsympathetically, but without the respect their devotees have been brought up to think proper. They complain that British laws on blasphemy give the sensibilities of Christians a consideration denied to Muslims. This seems a reasonable complaint, but in fact the blasphemy laws are very rarely invoked (the last major case was 15 years ago) and anyone who calls for them to be used is likely to end up by looking ridiculous. Most Christians probably agree that these

laws are outdated, and could well be dispensed with. Some Christians felt the film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, was blasphemous. They distributed leaflets saying so outside the cinema where it was screened — a proper way of showing disapproval in a democratic society.

The way to make the situation fair is not to extend the blasphemy laws to cover Muslims (and who else?) but to abolish them altogether. Presumably Allah/Jehovah/God is well able to deal with the situation if he feels himself offended!

Rushdie says of one of the central pair, the highly successful film star, Gibreel Farishta, "the avalanche of sex in which he was trapped managed to bury his greatest talent so deep that it might have been lost forever, his talent, that is, for loving, genuinely, deeply and without holding back, the rare and delicate gift which he had never been able to employ." Rushdie has perhaps hit on a deep truth here, which our "liberated" society needs to take note of. The rich and famous frequently have unhappy lives, and one of the reasons is certainly that would-be sexual partners queue up for their attentions. The most popular sixth-former may often be in a similar situation. The consumer society urges its victims to demand instant gratification, never mind the consequences — be they debt, divorce or the destruction of the ozone layer.

Rushdie writes about love and hate. We catch glimpses of him through the pages of his book as a wise and deeply human man, one who detests cruelty of every kind, to man, woman, or animal. How sad that such a man should be pursued by murderous hate! Those who condemn him, condemn themselves.

*The Satanic Verses* is published by The Consortium at £6.99. Shops which stock the paperback may not display it because of threats by Muslim extremists.

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A plan to form a Freemasons' lodge at the police training centre in Hendon, north London, has been scotched by Sir Peter Imbert, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. Freemasonry has long been rife in the police force, particularly among ambitious CID officers. But Sir Peter Imbert made it clear when he took up office five years ago that membership of the brotherhood should not be a means to promotion. A Freemasons' lodge at Hendon was described as "the most disastrous example possible" to recruits. A spokesman said: "A whole generation of young PCs would have started their careers in the shadow of a secret society which the public regards as a dangerous influence on policing."

Once upon a time, more years ago than I care to think about, London's Whitechapel Road was graced with a Mission to the Jews, a forlorn Christian raft amid a sea of synagogues. On holy days the latter were packed, not a few beshawled worshippers having to sit or stand outside. The Mission was a complete contrast. I passed it most days, but never once saw anyone enter or leave.

Now comes another hopeful outfit, Jews for Jesus, of US origin but active also in Britain. Its aims and arguments are set out in a little book, *The Universe is Broken*, by one Moishe Rosen.

Who broke the Universe? Our first parents — yes, it's that kind of book — and our own behaviour does nothing to mend it. We can agree that our planet is in a mess and a lot of the damage is man-made, but it is a bit much to blame humanity for meteors and black holes! Bad as we are, we don't have that much cosmic influence. The sin of Adam and Eve "tilted the entire Universe", sabotaging God's perfect Creation. Tilted relative to what, and at what angle? Mr Rosen doesn't say, but he knows how to mend matters. The answer is in the Bible, where else?

"Can we trust the Bible?" he asks. "Does it correspond with what we know of the real world?" Were Adam and Eve in the real world?

Can we trust Mr Rosen to quote the Bible correctly? He cites Ezekiel's prophecy that many nations would war against Tyre. It would have been a pretty safe bet, for Tyre was a rich prize. In fact the prophet urged Nebuchadrezzar, King of Babylon, to take Tyre, and that warlike monarch needed no second bidding. It is not true, as Rosen claims, that the king invaded Tyre and chased its citizens away. He besieged the city for thirteen years, retiring defeated as Ezekiel admits.

Wonderful things happen when sinners get religion. "The harlot becomes as a virgin! The thief steals no more! The wealthy become concerned about social justice! And the poor have their distress relieved!" Not much of the real world here, either.

The author reminds us that all the animals in the Garden of Eden were vegetarians. Presumably those now carnivorous had the necessary dentition and digestive systems at that period. I like his neat disposal of the fires of Hell. The term just means that souls therein grow hot with anger — at themselves because they are eternally separated from God. He admits that Heaven is indescribable, but he has a go: "Heaven is millions, even billions, of people singing together in perfect harmony", and no choir practice either. God, by the way, "doesn't have toe-nails, hair or eyebrows", but he does have a right hand, because Jesus stands alongside it. Really, this stuff is too tedious to keep ridiculing it.

Bad as things are now, they are going to get very much worse. Eventually a dictator will appear, with supernatural power, and things will improve for a time. But he will be only a counterfeit. Who is to be the real Deliverer? You guessed it first time.

Many people missed his first arrival, "for he did not present himself as a conquering king. He did not appear in a resplendent manner. . ." For all we know he never appeared at all, but that option is not discussed here. Mind you, he was easy to miss, for he looked and acted just like anyone else. What set him apart was his "remarkable" teaching — little of which was original. As for his miracles, they really happened, just as the Gospels tell us. Then how come so few spotted him?

Isaiah chapter 53 is hailed as a prophecy of Jesus Christ, as if it were not obvious that the Gospel writers simply took Old Testament passages out of their contexts and wove their fictitious stories around them. They were a bit careless with this one, as it happens. "He openeth not his mouth" cannot be applied to Jesus, while "he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death" is the exact opposite of what is said to have happened.

An attempt is made to justify the repulsive doctrine of animal and human sacrifice. The victim is a substitute, you see, paying the penalty for our sins. The point was made in fewer words by the African chief who thought it "better to hang wrong fella than hang no fella".

Historically, the Jews have had little cause to admire Christianity, and even today most of them steer clear of it. The promoters of this piffle may be praying for a mass conversion, but they would be well advised not to set up shop in the Whitechapel Road.

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When a student at Colchester Institute, in Essex, had an epileptic fit, she was surrounded by members of the Christian Union who started praying and chanting over her. An investigation has been ordered into the Union's links with the Colne Valley Community Church. Pastor Peter Prothero claimed that epilepsy could be cured by exorcism. He said: "We are simply dealing with demons as Christ did." The church is trying to buy a 130ft water tower for services so that worshippers "can be nearer to God."

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.

# Christian Nutters Lose Battle Against Veggies

"The whole thing has gone very well", declares Janice Butler, owner of the new Nutmegs Wholefoods Store in Stockton Road, Houghton-le-Spring. "All the publicity has worked for me, instead of against me."

Janice Butler was referring to the campaign against her shop which was conducted by Christian fundamentalists who nowadays tend to see Old Nick under the counter. News that decorative panels at the vegetarian shop and cafe depicted scenes from an Egyptian religion alerted witch-hunters who claimed that Nutmegs was a front for a devil worshippers' centre. Bible-toting boobies held prayer sessions outside the building and there were plans for a petition urging local authorities to stop the shop being opened.

This is the latest episode in a rather nasty nationwide campaign by fanatical Christians. They foster rumour about "satanic ritual" and "threats to children" in order to arouse hostility towards "alternative" shops. A number have been attacked and at least two seriously damaged.

Why should the "Jesus saves" fraternity lump veggies with satanists and pagans? Perhaps it is because Christianity is (and not just in historical terms) a bloody religion. Its fundamentalist adherents are blood-obsessed, believing that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission" and aspiring to be "washed in the blood of the Lamb". Their holy book, the Bible, contains over four hundred references to blood, while compassion and kindness are mentioned approximately thirty and fifty times respectively.

Nutmegs Wholefood Store is proving a great success, thanks partly to the publicity generated by Christian bigots. The premises back on to the Civic Centre, near to the Polytechnic Colleges of Education and Art. There is an arts centre and gallery nearby. All very ordinary, except for one rather mysterious building with a dark brown door and impenetrable windows. Within its wall the spirits are raised and "contact" with the dead takes place. It is called the Spiritualist Church.

## Letters

### GREENPEACE DISCLAIMER

I am writing in response to your article in Vol. 112 No. 4 of *The Freethinker*, which I am grateful to you for bringing to my attention.

In fact, I was very surprised to hear that a representative of Greenpeace had attended a "pro-life" conference at Ushaw College, Durham. Greenpeace, as you know, is a non-political international environmental organisation which campaigns only on issues of environmental concern. We have no policy at all on the issue of abortion and would under no circumstances have been represented at such an event.

The person who was claimed to represent Greenpeace at the weekend is not an employee of Greenpeace, nor speaking on our behalf. Greenpeace has over 400,000 supporters in the United Kingdom alone, but we do not have members. I assume that the person concerned was a supporter of Greenpeace but I can assure you that he had no mandate or authority to speak on behalf of this organisation nor to represent us in any capacity.

I hope that this clarifies the position for you. Your own scepticism, expressed in the article "Greenpeace Nobbled?", was absolutely correct.

PETER MELCHETT, Executive Director, Greenpeace UK, London N1

### A BLEAK OUTLOOK

Whilst press barons smirk and Majors preen, many *Freethinker* readers, reflecting upon the campaigns and election result of the General Election, will inevitably arrive at a dismal conclusion. Presupposing the continuance of our corrupt electoral system, the Boundaries Commission proposals and the selfish, craven element of the electorate, the nation has in effect declared itself a one-party State. If in a period of prolonged and severe recession with record levels of unemployment, widespread

poverty, deprivation and fear, voters choose to re-elect the very architects of those conditions, there can be no other conclusion. This means the continuation and, if necessary, an expansion of hardship and suffering (for others of course) in order to assert dogmatic principles intended to benefit only the successful minority.

The greed and grab brigade will continue to prosper, calculated neglect in the public domain practised, whilst the spiritual values cherished by a civilised society will be spurned as an irritating irrelevance. Mr Major's reiterated wish to create a classless society should be seen against his record of having wittingly played a leading role in the creation of social divisions deeper than we have seen in decades.

Has the British character undergone a metamorphosis or is it revealed for the shallow reality it always was? Certainly the future is bleak and perhaps secularists should now reconsider the main thrust of their objections, for their values will be under increasing threat by an arrogant, materialistic minority.

ROBERT BARR, Enderby, Leicestershire

### MR PATTEN'S OPIUM

What Education Secretary John Patten really means is that religion is to be used once again as a means of social control of the lower orders. And on past performance, religious leaders will acquiesce in this misuse. It marks a return beyond Victorian values to the Middle Ages.

Nearly four hundred years on, the words of Gerrard Winstanley seem as appropriate as ever: "This divining spiritual doctrine is a cheat. For while men are gazing up to heaven imagining after a happiness, or fearing a hell when they are dead, their eyes are put out, that they see not what is their birthrights, and what is to be done by them on earth while they are living. . .

"And indeed the subtle clergy do know that if they can but charm the people by this their divining doctrine to look after riches, heaven and glory when they are dead, that they shall easily be inheritors of the earth, and have the deceived people to be their servants."

NORMAN WOOD, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands

# EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49a). Sunday, 7 June, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Public Meeting.

**Edinburgh Humanist Group.** Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD, telephone 031-667 8389.

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA).** Information from 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HD, telephone 0926 58450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

**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, 2 June, 8 pm. Karen Fisher: Secret Diary of the Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch.

**The Humanist Society of Scotland.** Cowane Centre, Stirling. Saturday, 25 April, 10 am until 5 pm. Annual Conference. Details obtainable from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, KA3 2JD, telephone (0563) 26710.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 28 May, 8 pm. Sid Goldstein: Identity, Sectarianism and Pluralism.

**Norwich Humanist Group.** Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 21 May, 7.30 pm. Annual General Meeting.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 10 June, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Ann Syred: Buddhism Past and Present.

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It should never be forgotten that for long-term survival, in a world of limited resources, each individual requires only one replacement. The trend of evolution has been for small numbers of well-reared progeny rather than millions left to fend for themselves.

In social species sufficient progeny may be produced if a few reproducers are aided, directly or indirectly, by others in their group. Gene survival depends on overall efficiency.

In older smaller human societies cousin marriages were common. It is significant that, in all social species, individuals forming natural social groups always tend to be closely related. "Primitive" societies, whether hunter gatherers or small farming communities, were typically large, extended families. Human rearing extends over many years and is assisted by mutual cooperation.

Progeny survival would, as in other social species, benefit from any non-reproducers who provide more group resources than they consume. Homosexuality may well be one mechanism that supplies the need. Benefit to reproducing relations would increase the relevant genes in the population. There is little hard evidence on the subject since social attitudes actively discourage any serious research.

Modern Western societies are anomalous. The old extended family is disappearing and close relations are widely scattered. Marriages between even distant cousins are now rare. This change has major implications, in the long term, for future social instincts.

R. G. SILSON, Tring, Hertfordshire

## A PUZZLE FOR THE RELIGIOUS

Terry Sanderson's persuasive and enlightened Cruelty in the Name of God (March) reveals, contrary to anti-gay Christian prejudice, how recent research strongly suggests that biological and genetic factors are likely to be of far greater significance than environmental ones in accounting for the causes of much homosexuality.

This not only confirms what many homosexuals have always known but certainly also poses religious homophobia with its most formidable ever challenge. God is, after all, the author of all creation, not just those aspects of it with which homophobe is comfortable. And if homosexual destiny is underwritten by the forces of nature rather than by those of society, the Christian has no option but to conclude that these forces are inexorable and that God has ordained them.

It is easy enough to see why Neanderthals like George Harvey and the Rev Tony Highton are desperately trying to resist these conclusions, but less easy to understand why intelligent gays and lesbians should still be craving acceptance and forgiveness from a religious tradition as ignorant and illogical as Judaeo-Christianity, which has misunderstood and oppressed them so cruelly for centuries and which, given the least pretext, would continue to do so for many centuries to come.

LAURA E. MESZAROS, Bunwell, Norfolk

## NOT A MATTER OF CHOICE

Most bigots would be content to use either false premises or faulty logic to justify their prejudice. Not so Glyn Emery, who uses both tricks in his letter (April) to "prove" that gays choose to be gay.

Emery should get himself a GCSE in Biology before he launches his next genetic theory. It is not true that homosexuality would have died out if it were genetically determined, even if homosexuals never reproduced (which of course they always have). It is perfectly possible for offspring to exhibit genetically determined characteristics that were not manifest in their parents. The continuing presence of many genetic conditions which prevent reproduction (for example by causing early death) is evidence of this.

His conclusion, that if gays don't inherit their gayness they must have chosen it, is nonsense. We all have many characteristics that are neither chosen nor encoded in our DNA. Environment shape us in ways we can't control. I certainly don't feel that I have any choice about my gayness. Perhaps Emery can choose whom he fancies, but I can't.

Emery's argument is not merely a harmless piece of eccentricity; it is potentially a very dangerous lie. If it is believed that gays choose gayness then some people will feel they should attempt to reverse that choice. The tools of punishment, "therapy", social pressure, ridicule and anything else our oppressors can dream up could quickly be brought into action to correct our "wilful deviation".

Lesbians and gays are not being bloody-minded; we are simply trying to be ourselves.

DAVID CHRISTMAS, Northampton

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Glyn Emery (letter, April) repeats the fallacy that homosexuality cannot be transmitted genetically. Geneticists know numerous qualities that never reproduce directly yet reappear generation after generation. Perhaps he has overlooked the honey bee with its sterile workers.

A parent gives a random 50 per cent of its genes to each of its progeny. All our relations share our genes and, if we assist them to reproduce we are, in effect, reproducing some of our own genes.

## "Yogic Flying" Candidates Land With a Bump!

An extraordinary feature of the General Election was the emergence of the Natural Law Party. An offshoot of the Transcendental Meditation Movement, its programme is based on the teachings of "His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi" (the "giggling guru" of the 1960s).

In its manifesto, the NLP declared with commendable modesty, "... we, who hold the key to knowledge, feel that we should offer our services to the nation. . .

"All candidates of the Natural Law Party have demonstrated greater orderliness of brain functioning, as indicated by increased EEG-coherence, and greater command of Natural Law by their improved mind-body co-ordination in their achievement of Yogic Flying. . . The integrated brain functioning of our candidates will enable them to remain balanced and steer the course of progress under all situations and circumstances. . .

"The ultimate goal of the Natural Law Party is for everyone to enjoy Heaven on Earth through the

implementation of Maharishi's Master Plan to Create Heaven on Earth."

The NLP's first political step towards the creation of heaven on earth proved expensive. Two-page advertisements in national newspapers don't come cheap. And the £500 deposit for each of its 300-odd candidates all went down the plug-hole.

The Islamic Party also made a very poor showing. Its three candidates in Bradford, centre of the campaign to ban *The Satanic Verses* and extend blasphemy law to protect Islam, polled less than a thousand votes between them. Muslims are evidently prepared to act independently of the mullahs in the privacy of the polling booth.

There was a new but almost unnoticed departure from tradition. Candidates of all the main parties campaigned with unabated fervour on Sunday. This involved a great deal of work, travelling and disruption of family life. But there was scarcely a squeak of protest from the Keep Sunday Special Campaign.

## Manx Christians Defeated on Gay Law Reform

Britain's Sexual Offences Act 1967 decriminalised homosexual activities in private between males over the age of 21. But it has taken the Isle of Man almost 25 years to bring its legislation into line with that on the mainland. In effect reform has been imposed on the offshore island. When the House of Keys voted in favour of a change in the law it did so largely to avoid a confrontation with Westminster. There was a vote of 13 to 11 in favour of reform at the end of last month's debate.

Until this reform was grudgingly accepted, Manx homosexuals were branded as criminals who could be sentenced to life imprisonment. They were compelled to keep a very low profile and in constant danger of being framed by the police. Some left the island and there were several suicides.

Even with a change in the law, the lot of Manx homosexuals will be anything but "gay" in the intolerant and illiberal environment of the island. They will still be harassed by the police and castigated by religious bigots.

Resistance to reform came mainly from the police and the Jesus Saves brigade. It is generally agreed that the atmosphere became more repressive with the arrival of a new Chief Constable. Robin Oake is a "born again" Christian who once shared a piece of woodwork with James Anderton, another Chief Constable who purported to be on speaking terms with The One Above.

Edgar Quine, a Methodist, former Deputy Commissioner of Police in Hong Kong and a Member of the Manx Parliament, strongly opposed reform. Outside parliament opposition was led by Mel Cheetham, a preacher from Oldham who moved to the Isle of Man. He has bought a hotel and is converting it into a church and nursery school.

Alan Shea, a representative of Ellan (Isle of Man) Gay Group, said the reform brought the island into the 20th century. "All we have been asking for is privacy in our own homes", he added.

In Britain, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association welcomed the change in Manx law. GALHA played a significant part in the campaign by lobbying the Manx Parliament's Legislative Council and the British Home Secretary.

George Broadhead, GALHA secretary and himself a Manxman, had not been hopeful about the outcome of the debate. He expected that the British Government have had to compel the Isle of Man to toe the line and glad that the Manx Parliament "has come to its senses". But the decision was taken by a small minority, and the island's homosexual community still faced the hostility of the police and religious bigots.

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**The Gideons, who distribute bibles to prisons, have discovered that prisoners are using the leaves to roll cigarettes.**