

The

Secular  
Humanist  
monthly**Free**thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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February 1993

**CONDOMS  
STILL  
RULE OK!**

● *Blow for the Belfast anti-Brook brigade. This 18th Century condom factory probably sparked the ire of their ancestors, too. But the fight goes on – and in the age of HIV/AIDS is ever more vital.*

(Picture: Channel 4)

**Victory in Belfast**

**D**OCTORS who failed in a court bid to close Belfast's thriving new contraception and counselling service for teenagers now face legal costs of around £50,000.

Belfast GPs Dr Ray Shearer and Dr Paul Corrie sought judicial review of a decision by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board to fund the Brook clinic, which specialises in providing confidential help to teenagers.

They were backed by more than 60 fellow-GPs of the "Medico-Legal Enquiry Group," which was established in late 1991 to prevent the opening of the centre.

The doctors claimed that the decision had been made without adequate research of alternatives. They argued that it would increase the number of teenage pregnancies.

GP magazine's Helen Reilly reports: "Dr Shearer had hoped the Health Board would be forced to review its funding of the centre if they lost the case..."

"But last week the judge ruled that the applicants had not made out a case and dismissed the application."

● Turn to Page 18

# Victory for Brook clinic

◀ From Page 17

Although agreeing that EHSSB Director of Public Health Dr Gabriel Scally had not consulted widely, the judge ruled: "A public body such as the Board and its officers cannot, in my view, be said to be acting unreasonably in the material sense in engaging the services of a nationally established organisation."

He awarded the Health Board costs: total expenses are estimated to be about £50,000.

Under the headline "GPs fail to shut Brook clinic," GP magazine reports that Director of Public Health Dr Scally is delighted by the decision: "He says the Brook clinic is vital if the serious problem of teenage pregnancies in the area is to be tackled...The decision has also been welcomed by the clinic's supporters, which include Royal College of General

Practitioners council member Dr Lotte Newman and RCGP deputy president Dr Alistair Donald.

"But Dr Shearer is very disappointed by the decision. He told GP: 'We have been vindicated in what we said - that Dr Scally did not consult widely, even among his own Board members. Given that, I have a lot to say about the awarding of costs.'"

Belfast Brook Centre's Mary Crawford said: "Client numbers have exceeded those at any other new Brook Centre, despite picketing since we opened."

In the first three months alone, 99 clients were seen: more than 50 per cent above the numbers attending over a similar period at a new centre in England. And that is despite threats from Society for the Protection of Unborn Children activists to photograph those seeking help

*The Freethinker* was told that, such was the

publicity generated by the court case, the day after the hearing client numbers increased from a normal five or six to 16.

Opened in September of last year, the centre was subjected to a campaign of threats and vilification by churches and religious pressure groups.

Bigots from both sides of the religious divide united in their opposition to the creation of the service - and as *The Freethinker* went to press, pickets were maintaining their siege of the centre.

Mr Ian Paisley said the opening of the centre showed "a complete disregard for the word of God," and a Roman Catholic fellow Christian of his saw the centre as being "totally opposed to the whole Christian ethos."

Brook Advisory Centres have a history of providing contraceptives and counselling services for young people going back more than 27 years.

## THE FREETHINKER

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*The Freethinker* was founded in 1881 by George William Foote. The views expressed in signed articles are not necessarily those of the publishers.

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## The right to know

**BRITAIN is one of the most secretive societies in the world. We have no right to the information which government and public bodies hold about things that directly affect us.**

For instance, we have no right to know things like: Whether the food we buy is hygienically produced; the safety record of the ferry on which we cross the Channel; how our local railway station would cope with a fire; how safe our car is.

Ludicrously, we can get more information about the safety of many British products - like the medicines we're prescribed or the additives in our food - from the USA than we can here.

Many countries, including the USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, France, Holland, Greece, Norway and Denmark, already have Right to Know or Freedom of Information laws. The Swedes have had them for more than 200 years!

The Right to Know Bill would give us such a law. It has been introduced by Mark Fisher MP, supported by MPs from all the parties. It will be debated on February 19.

If it became law, we'd have the right to know what's recorded in personal records held about us by our employers, the DSS or the local council. We'd be able to correct errors, add our views - and claim for compensation if we'd been damaged.

We'd be able to find out about air pollution, water quality, toxic emissions and acid rain. We'd be able to find out about safety on public transport, at work and at school. We'd be able to find out about the effects of government policies on our local hospitals, our employment prospects, the council tax, education, social services.

The Bill says we should have a legal right to see any information, on any subject, held by government departments, local councils, NHS bodies, nationalised industries and other public bodies. It could only be withheld if making it public did significant damage to defence, security, law enforcement, personal privacy or genuine trade secrets.

And even this information could be disclosed if there had been serious wrongdoing.

### Prosecuted

It says we have a right to see our employment records, and files held by employment "blacklisting" organisations, and that companies must publish more information in their annual reports - for instance, whether they'd broken any laws on the environment, consumer protection, health and safety at work or discrimination.

It says the Official Secrets Act 1989 should be replaced, and that anyone prosecuted should be able to argue that going public was in the public interest. And if we thought information had been wrongly withheld we'd be able to appeal - to an independent Commissioner and Tribunal who could rule that we had a right to know.

There is still time for freethinkers to write to their MPs at the House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA asking them to vote for the Right to Know Bill. Write to William Waldegrave MP, Minister of Public Service & Science, Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall, London SW1A 2AS, asking the government to support the Bill.

# UP FRONT

with the Editor

## Sense and censorship

CLIVE Soley's Freedom and Responsibility of the Press Bill had its Commons Second Reading on January 29. Were the Government to allow it to go forward (which Mr Major has said it won't), there would be an Independent Press Authority to act as "mediator and adjudicator" in the relationship between Press and public.

The Bill "establishes the public's right to swift correction of factual inaccuracies in editorial material," and the Authority "will have powers to insist that a correction is published."

Meanwhile, Sir David Calcutt QC suggests the creation of a Press Complaints Tribunal (headed by a judge) which would have the power to issue injunctions, fine newspapers and dictate corrections. Again, there is no chance of Sir David's proposals being adopted in their entirety.

But the fact that two sets of recommendations are currently being floated by the great and the good indicates that eventually there will be some sort of Government-engendered body to oversee the media.

I am uneasy. True, there is considerable anger – even among Secularists and Humanists – about the swinish behaviour of sections of the media.

And even people who believe that the Press must spill the beans when our rulers slip from the high standards of behaviour which they attempt to impose upon us, feel that "ordinary" citizens should be protected from tabloid deprecation.

My fear is that any official body, set up with the purest of motives, could in the right, or wrong, circumstances be misused.

Might not the powerful decide that one's writings on political or religious matters – on a Falklands, say, or a miners' strike – were "erroneous" and insist on "corrections"? To what extent would editors be frightened off the thalidomide or police corruption type of story by the threat of Calcutt's big stick?

I know that this is not the purpose of Mr Soley's Bill, or even of Calcutt's recommendations. What I am afraid of is that, in the hands of, let us say, a handbagging Prime Minister with an hysterical distaste for opposition, such bodies as those proposed could be twisted to sinister purpose.

As Barbara Smoker said in her introduction to Brigid Brophy's pamphlet *The Longford Threat to Freedom*: "Wherever laws have been introduced to repress freedom of expression on grounds of taste, such laws have been used sooner or later for political ends, through

selective prosecutions."

So – what is to be done? There is a problem related to intrusion and to downright fabrication. But there is a danger, too, that a body designed to protect Uncle George and Aunt Mary from door-stepping hacks could be adapted to stop *Peace News* or *Private Eye* or *The Freethinker* from publishing what is unpalatable to the Establishment.

We must have one of those debates-by-letter for which *The Freethinker* is justly famed...

## Rushdie is right

I INCLINE to the newly-expressed opinion of Salman Rushdie. In a speech which I did not see reported by Fleet Street, but which was covered by the *Irish Times* on January 16, Rushdie, who has borne a barbarian price on his head for four years, said that during his period in hiding he had changed his view on freedom of expression. Now, *he did not think there could be limits.*

At a conference on censorship and freedom of expression at Trinity College, Dublin, he said he had believed in the sort of laws which made racist language illegal in Britain, and in the law which made incitement to murder illegal.

Now he thought differently. The point of freedom of speech was that it allowed uncivilised speech, and allowed to be uttered that which one loathed.

Mr Rushdie warned against blasphemy laws, which put a limit on ideas and on what could be said.

**SPREAD IT AROUND!**  
You can help spread the Secularist message of *The Freethinker* by supporting the paper's vital development fund. Please send a donation today to: Terry Mullins, G W Foote & Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.  
**SPREAD IT AROUND!**

He added that the attacks on him and *The Satanic Verses* should not be seen as a struggle between the enlightened and free West and the intolerant and unfree East.

He warned against setting limits on freedom. He heard arguments in the West, he said, that there could be limits, and that this group or that group should be protected. But the people who said this never had to "live with the end product of censorship."

Blasphemy laws led to witch-hunting, and that was what had happened to him.

"Someone pointed across the world and said 'Witch.' At the end of the day if somebody thinks something you say is blasphemous, 'so what?'"

The fatwa which threatened his life was not new. It was part of what happened to writers in Moslem countries, he said.

The year *The Satanic Verses* was published, 10 or 11 Iranian writers were killed and buried in unmarked graves.

"This is the way thought is killed, the way of the Inquisition. To a European audience, I say: 'remember your history.'"

## Meet the Editor

READERS of *The Freethinker* are invited to meet the new Editor and members of the Board of G W Foote & Company at a get-together in Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1, on Monday, March 15, at 7pm.

Ask questions...make suggestions...criticise. Help to shape the future work of your militant Secularist monthly. Enjoy yourself.

## South Place celebration

CELEBRATING their bi-centenary, our colleagues at the South Place Ethical Society are staging an impressive range of Thursday evening meetings (beginning at 7.30pm).

On February 25, Dr Jonathan Miller will be interviewed by Elizabeth Kondal and on March 11 Richard Hoggart will be interviewed by John Miller. On Saturday evening, March 20, there will be a commemoration of Omar Khayyam and celebration of the Iranian New Year and culture through poetry, music, theatre and food (admission charge).

Full list of events in the next issue of *The Freethinker*.

# UP FRONT

with the Editor

◀ From Page 19

## We're absolutely positive

COLLEAGUES, passingly curious about my defection to the scurrilous *Freethinker* after a lifetime in the clean, honey-sweet air of "straight" journalism, are continuing to insist that I have thrown in my lot with a negative people.

Despite my attempt (in last month's notes) to answer the point in advance, they hold that we – the Secularists, Humanists, Atheists and such – are agents of destruction who have nothing to replace what we would grind underfoot.

So – let's run that one around the Stations of the Cross and see if anybody genuflects...

*The Freethinker* is closely associated with the National Secular Society – and my view of the Secularists I have known over the past 40 years is that they are, above all, positive folk.

Secularists believe that this life is the only one of which we have any knowledge and that human effort should be wholly directed towards its improvement.

We assert that supernaturalism – religion – is based upon ignorance and we oppose it as the historic enemy of progress.

And we insist that progress is possible only on the basis of equal freedom of speech and publication and that the free criticism of institutions and ideas is essential to a civilised state.

Believing that morality is social in origin and application, Secularists aim at promoting the happiness and well-being of humanity.

We demand the complete separation of Church and State (see last month's front page) and the abolition of all privileges granted to religious organisations.

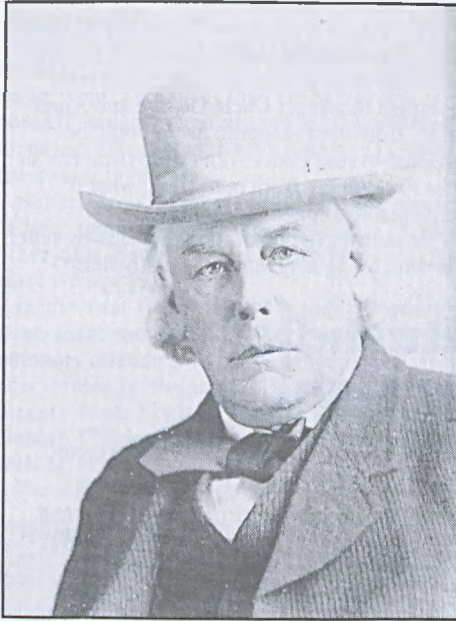
Secularists seek to spread education, to promote the fraternity of all peoples as a means of advancing universal peace, to further common cultural interests and to develop the freedom and dignity of mankind.

Fighting on these principles, the National Secular Society is generally regarded as the most militant organisation in the Humanist movement.

It was founded in 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh (before he embarked on his spectacular parliamentary career) to provide a national forum for the many local groups in the Secularist movement.

Nowadays, in addition to direct individual membership, some local Humanist groups are affiliated to the NSS.

Since its inception, the NSS has worked consistently for the promotion of freethought,



● **Charles Bradlaugh: Founder of the National Secular Society.**

civil liberties, and independent rational ethics.

If it had nothing else to its credit but pioneering the birth-control movement, that alone would merit the support of everyone of a secular outlook who is socially concerned.

But it has also campaigned, and still campaigns, on a wide range of issues, including:

Animal welfare, the rights of oppressed minorities, racial equality, sex equality, safe and legal abortion, voluntary euthanasia, universal affirmation in place of the oath, literary and artistic freedom, abolition of blasphemy laws, abolition of Sunday observance laws, an end to religious education in state schools, an end to ecclesiastical exemption from the provisions of various statutes and from most taxation, disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of England, an end to the provision of prison and hospital chaplains at public expense and a less excessive proportion of radio and television time allotted to religion.

The subscription is a mere £4 a year (plus a derisory £5 per annum for *The Freethinker*, if you don't already subscribe). Applications for membership should be addressed to: Terry Mullins, Secretary, National Secular Society, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

## Ducking and diving

WITH the lifting of the Red knout from the Ukrainian neck, it is inspiring to observe the Christians of that country exercising their new-found religious liberties – in particular, the

oldest and most basic of them all: the freedom to fight over the loot.

A *Guardian* report of January 5 notes that there have been violent clashes between Russian Orthodox and Ukrainian Orthodox brethren-in-Christ over ownership of churches in central Ukrainian towns, while the poor old Greek Catholics, often reduced to meeting in God's open air, "have so far been outmanoeuvred in Kiev in a battle for property with three other religious hierarchies – Ukrainian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic."

The RCs are not doing too badly – the new Papal Nuncio in Kiev has been given a suite of offices in a former KGB school – but so far the main winner in the property dispute is the newly-created Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which claims to have been "given" 15 churches in Kiev.

It has been joined by the fun-loving Metropolitan Filaret, defrocked former head (Supreme Governor?) of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Ukraine, whose reputation has suffered as a result of (one hopes exaggerated) reports that, in defiance of his monk's vows of celibacy, he lives with a common-law wife and children.

The *Kiev Gazette* recently splashed one of those "I am Filaret's daughter" stories.

However, as the allegedly faithful servant of officially-controlled Russian Orthodoxy in Soviet times, Filaret must know all about ducking and diving to survive, and my money is on his staying on top.

Meanwhile, back in our own sun-kissed Channel Islands...

Few people to whom I spoke last month were even mildly surprised when newly-released official documents showed that Guernsey bobbies had stumbled over their size-elevens in their keenness to serve the occupying Nazis. Bobbies the world over tend to be like that, is a generally expressed view.

Likewise, could one really be cross with Guernsey's then Bailiff, Victor Carey, for having handed over undesirables to the Fuehrer's finest? By all accounts, he would be an odds-on candidate for Mrs Bottomley's Care in the Community, were he with us today.

But a parson...Some folk were shocked to learn that Methodist minister the Rev John Leale joined with Carey in passing the names of Jews to the German commander.

Why the wonderment? Surely, His Reverence (like Brother Filaret in Stalinist days) was behaving in an entirely Scriptural manner: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's." And if the "things" to be rendered include at least three Jewish women believed to have been deported to death in Auschwitz, well, nobody said that serving the Lord would be all communion wine and skittles.

# Blessed Saviour – or a spin-doctor’s package?

WE have the four Gospels (which may well be faulty translations of corrupted sources) and no other original sources accepted as definitive by believers.

It is therefore open to anyone to speculate what Jesus may have been like as a person. Equally, it is true that firm conclusions about him as a person are very hard to draw.

The same uncertainties are not present in considering the teachings attributed to him. These are contained in statements written by the Gospel authors (and “passed on” by the selectors and translators) and would remain there in print to be examined even if the Gospels were wholly fictional stories and Jesus a wholly fictitious character into whose mouth ideas were put by his creators.

Although most scholars accept that Jesus is a genuine historical figure, comparatively little of Christian teaching depends upon Jesus having actually lived as a human being.

Indeed, his disciples were charged with carrying on after his departure. If it were proved conclusively that Jesus never existed, the pious would not be deterred for very long. If his main teaching goes on without him it could as well have started without him. His, just possibly, being a fictional character in the first place need not make any difference to the value of the utterances attributed to him or to the myriad interpretations that can be placed upon them.

More or less serious theological considerations and shallow sentimental propaganda about him are both current. What, from reading the Gospels simply as stories, can we infer about the character, Jesus, and what questions can properly be asked in the light both of what is contained therein and of what has happened, or not happened, since?

There are many statements attributed to Jesus which throw flashes of light on his personality — and the result is a picture of a complex and not very lovable person. Indeed, he emerges as a typical example of what we can describe as a prickly, high-minded, domineering enthusiast, rather than as a gently persuasive guide.

Apart from the question of liking the Jesus who steps out of the pages of the Gospels, the question of trust in him is all-important for believers. Christian faith is based upon such trust, not upon arguments about historical authenticity, and any Christian who feels this trust to be slipping away senses trouble.

Jesus did not claim to be “a nice chap” and it is no detraction from the act of trusting him to say that, in many ways, he seems to have been rather hard to take. The main question is — can we accept his status at the believers’ valuation?

**Eric Stockton, Editor of the Scottish Humanist (pictured right) asks: Can we really trust Jesus?**



The essential claim is that Jesus came as God Incarnate as the fulfilment of an ancient prophesy, a happening foretold in the Scriptures.

The foretelling and the fulfilment are presented as supporting each other’s authenticity and there is often a hint of circular argument in the way believers seem to see this. The prophesy has turned out right so it was genuine: the outcome is what Christians say it is because the prophesy, which is genuine, said it would be.

In view of the whiff of circular argument in this matter, perhaps it would be as well to consider foretelling the future as a general possibility.

Suppose I, ES, in 1999 foretell that there will be a major earthquake in Italy around about the year 2140 and that many people will be killed by it. Suppose that, when 2140

mentioned would be on offer — ES did foretell the event accurately, or he got it right by chance.

But in this second, Joan of Arc, prediction there can be a third possibility: that the woman is not genuinely the Reincarnation of Joan. Perhaps she has heard of the prophesy and decided to act the part. Perhaps other people may have heard of the prophesy and put her up to it. Perhaps she allowed herself to be persuaded, genuinely but mistakenly, that she was the authentic reincarnation of Joan.

The fact of an earthquake causing many deaths, or the fact of no such earthquake, speaks for itself. People in Italy in 2140 cannot pretend that there is a major earthquake when there is not. Those people cannot pretend that there is not such an earthquake when there is one. The genuineness of a major earthquake, or its absence, is not in doubt at the time or afterwards.

The genuineness of a claim to be Joan Reincarnate is less obviously confirmed (or exposed as false as the case may be). It will be a matter not of observable fact but of acceptable belief.

The possibility arises: “Was Jesus a genuine fulfilment of the prophesy or was he a fake who had perhaps been put up to it by others?” The twin facts, that the prophesy was made and the claim as to its fulfilment was made, do not settle the question one way or the other. They may be mutually-supporting non-senses.

During the several days (according to Luke) when the boy Jesus gave his parents the slip and stayed in town, discussing serious matters with learned people, he might have been told about the old prophesy and perhaps half-jokingly advised: “You are a bright lad — suppose you are the fulfilment of that ancient prophet’s words?” (We have no authority for supposing that April 1 gags are of modern invention).

The “con trick” theory of the supposed divinity of Jesus has to be examined. It cannot, of course, be proved after this lapse of time: all the possible witnesses and direct evidence are long since lost.

**“We can know more about the lives of many ancient Caesars and many modern prize fighters than we can know about the life of Jesus of Nazareth.”**

*(Encyclopaedia Britannica 1973).*

comes round, it actually happens. People at that time, and presumably thereafter, would have two opinions open to them: first, that ES was really able to foretell the event, or, second, ES was unable to do so but got it right by chance (if enough people foretell enough events then some of them are bound to turn out right).

Now suppose, instead, that in 1999 ES foretells that in about the year 2140 a woman will come to public notice as the Reincarnation of Joan of Arc and that in 2140 a woman claiming just that does indeed appear on the public scene.

Clearly the two possible opinions already

# A spin-doctor's package?

From Page 21

But since, as the encyclopaedia says, we can know so little, we might try guessing. That, after all, is what believers do much of the time.

To pull off a confidence trick (possibly one that involves self-deception as well as the deception of others) you must have huge confidence in yourself and you must have accomplices as well as dupes.

Jesus certainly had plenty of self-confidence. As a boy, when retrieved by his parents from his discussions with the learned men in Jerusalem, he gave no feeble shame-faced excuse, no childish plea of ignorance, no complaint that *they* had lost *him* carelessly rather than *his* having evaded *them*. He simply said that he was about "his Father's business."

## Secular farewell to Willis

**TED WILLIS** (whose obituary appeared in the January *Freethinker*) was probably the most well known among the Distinguished Members of the National Secular Society.

He had requested a secular funeral, and this took place on December 30 at Eltham Crematorium in South-East London; Denis Cobell, a National Secular Society Council Member officiated.

The well-attended ceremony included readings of several of Ted Willis's favourite poems, including one he had written on Che Guevara, by Karl Howman and Louise English.

Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* was played at the conclusion. This typified Ted Willis's lifelong Socialist convictions, which have been demonstrated by a debate in January on Keir Hardie in the House of Lords. This debate had been initiated by Willis, and retained in his honour by fellow peers, with the aim of reminding the Labour Party of its roots.

There will be a public memorial meeting later this year.

## The young ones

REBECCA WOOD has joined the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group - at the age of 13. Is this, as they say, a record?

That may be what he gleaned from those days of discussion. Where else did he learn about his "Father" as distinct from his Dad, Joseph? This could be a mighty whopper from a precocious youth — a big one is more likely to be believed than a small one.

Later on, if Matthew and Mark are to be believed, he displayed the same supreme self-importance when he induced the fishermen to drop everything at a moment's notice and follow him. Many parents would be horrified by such precipitate response to a plausible stranger especially when it involves deserting a family business. Margaret Thatcher would not have run out on her father in like circumstances. She would have clobbered the stranger with her handbag and given him an earful of "family values"!

Again, there are other assertions of self-importance — *there is no way to the Father but by me*, and the like. Where this leaves all the good people BC who wrote the Law, that Jesus started from, we may well wonder.

There are repeated threats of eternal torment in store for people who question his authority. There is the harsh brush-off of Peter on the occasion of Jesus anticipating his own death. Peter says something like "surely not yet, that would be terrible." The instant reply is a dismissive put down ("stumbling block" and "Satan" are words quoted) of the poor fellow who had, only seconds before, been fulsomely described by Jesus as the "rock" upon which the future would be built.

What are we to make of the reported last words of Jesus? According to Mark and Matthew (now thought to have been in that chronological order) his last words were: "My God why hast thou forsaken me?" This very human reaction, to an agonising imminent death, is consistent with the disillusionment of one who has been kidding himself or perhaps of a "con man" who realises that the game is up. It is scarcely the sublime utterance of God Incarnate speaking his last words with his human voice to snatch spiritual victory from the jaws of bodily defeat.

Luke evidently saw the incongruity of God Incarnate, in his extremity, making so truly pitiful a statement. Luke (who tried, on his own testimony, to write-up the already confused stories about Jesus in a coherent and, he thought, definitive way) reports the last words as being altogether different, altogether more appropriate to a divinity undergoing sacrificial temporary death, on our behalf, as a prelude to resurrection and ascent to the right hand of God.

Luke attributes to Jesus the most selfless utterance reported of a human voice: "Forgive them Father; they know not what they do." The words reported by Mark and Matthew were perhaps not suited to Luke's purposes.

Whether Luke is a more reliable reporter than Mark and Matthew, or whether he, Luke, is a party to a continuing "con trick" and making the last words ring true to the divinity of Jesus, we do not know.

When you come to think of it, Luke's version of the recruitment of the fishermen to discipleship is much more flattering to the Christian position than are those of Mark and Matthew.

The two latter simply present the fishermen as credulous men responding instantly to a commanding stranger. Luke has it that Jesus establishes some sort of credibility in their eyes by telling them to try once more after a fruitless night's fishing. They do try again and they succeed. This version portrays Jesus as much more followable and the fishermen as far more rational than do the other two accounts.

Luke has been described as "beloved physician." It is at least arguable that he was a tireless spin-doctor!

So the hypothesis that Jesus was a deceiver or a self-deceiver about his true status, and that Luke was an accessory after the fact writing up the life of Jesus in flattering terms, begins to take shape if you let it.

But it is the lame anti-climax of the conflicting accounts of the bodily resurrection that add most weight to the self-deluded of the "con man" theories about Jesus.

If such an event as a miraculous bodily resurrection had occurred, then it would have been a truly gigantic turning-point in human life. Historically, there seems to have been no such turning-point at the time of Jesus and in the years immediately following his ministry.

The world went on much as usual. His reported bodily resurrection is represented briefly in the Gospels as a passing and furtive affair, directly concerning a tiny number of people. It is not described in any of the Gospels as the huge public event that it would have been had it really happened.

One would have expected perhaps to read that the resurrected Jesus had remounted the donkey and ridden again into Jerusalem saying — in the best King James English — words to the effect that: "You crucified me last Friday and here I am back again! Pick the bones out of that, you sceptics!"

The Second Coming, which might well have authenticated the whole preceding story, has simply not happened.

The only "turning-point" we have had since the time of Jesus was somewhat more than 1,000 years later — the emergence of the modern world. The Renaissance, the rise of Europe and the scientific revolution have more to do with the decline of institutional Christianity than they have with its reputed "Good News."

The deception (or self-deception) theory of Jesus cannot be proved, but it cannot be disproved. We are hasty indeed to try to build a moral order in our lives by taking Christianity at its own valuation.

Ultimately, we cannot really trust the Jesus of popular, or sophisticated, religion, or the stories about him, even though many of the utterances attributed to him are of undeniable value.

# Round 1 goes to Galileo

ALBERT EINSTEIN is quoted as saying: "I cannot believe that God plays dice with the cosmos." Stephen Hawking, one of today's leading cosmologists, has commented: "God not only plays dice but sometimes he throws them where they cannot be seen."

We know – or think we know – the import of these remarks. Despite the language used, both men were intent on framing laws to describe natural, not supernatural phenomena.

And both are in direct line of intellectual descent from Galileo, "the first scientist to actually start using his eyes, both figuratively and physically," Hawking says, and in that sense, "responsible for the age of science we now enjoy."

As John Boslough puts it in his little book *Stephen Hawking's Universe* (Fontana): "Newton repaired and refined Galileo: Einstein honed and broadened Newton's basic laws to include the entire universe. Now Hawking and other cosmologists are trying to do the same to Einstein's general relativity..."

And when Hawking impishly amended Einstein's dice-playing metaphor, it was a direct reference to the so-called Black Holes which, although their existence is purely speculative, are invoked by physicists, including Hawking, in their search for a unifying cosmological concept. At present, Hawking admits: "It's a little like using the unexplainable to explain the unexplainable."

Whether Hawking believes in God in any traditional sense of that word, I don't know. He certainly opposes attempts that have been made by some physicists to link modern physics with Eastern mysticism.

"The universe of Eastern mysticism is an illusion," he says. "A physicist who attempts to link it with his own work has abandoned physics." And while acknowledging that "there are clearly religious implications whenever you start to discuss the origins of the universe", he thinks "most scientists prefer to shy away from the religious side of it."

Philosophically he adopts what has been called the "anthropic principle." Asked: "Why is the universe as we observe it?" he replies: "If it were otherwise, there would be nobody to ask the question."

Galileo used his eyes to good effect, Hawking says. "He knew what he had seen, and he acted on it. He knew how to draw the right deductions. Once he knew he was right,

he stuck with it."

True. But, as we all know, under threat of torture Galileo was forced to recant and "swear that I have always believed, do now believe, and by God's help will for the future believe, all that is held, preached, and taught by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Roman Church." He had to "abandon the false opinion that the sun is the centre of the world and immovable, and the earth is not the centre of the world, and moves," and declare that "I must not hold, defend, or teach in any way whatsoever, verbally or in writing, the said doctrine..."

## ... but fanatics fight on, warns Colin McCall

Last year, 1992, 359 years later, the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Roman Church admitted that the "errors and heresies" which it compelled Galileo to "abjure, curse and detest", were correct and that it, the Church, had been wrong.

Writing in *The Guardian* (December 17, 1992) on "Let's call a truce with God," Colin Tudge was therefore able to say "no one now believes in a flat earth at the centre of the universe", although, in other matters, the Roman Church still stuck to its "stark, unequivocal, copper-bottomed medieval theology of the kind that assumes that God is literal."

So "the arguments between religion and the materialist, no miracle view of the universe — a view that we can loosely equate with science — are going to continue" into the 21st Century. And Tudge fears that "these arguments will lead to at least as much bloodshed in the future as they have in the past; not necessarily as the direct cause of conflict, but at least as the excuse for it."

It is a terrible thought, but one that cannot be dismissed. A few years ago no one could have predicted the religiously-fomented wars in the former Yugoslavia or parts of the former USSR. Who, indeed, could have foreseen the widespread resurgence of militant Moslem fundamentalism?

Tudge suggests an agenda for a debate "to

take the heat out of the discussion." The "out-and-out religious...should forget miracles, and render unto science that which belongs to science" which, he says, "would deprive God of none of his dignity."

In return, "Science should concern itself, as Karl Popper has suggested, with questions that are theoretically subject to experiment and disproof."

But "this leaves a lot of important questions unaddressed" and Tudge believes that religions "provide the best methods...for cultivating and refining emotional response." Furthermore: "Prayer, ritual, congregation, and in particular meditation, the techniques that are common to all true religions, are ways of getting the mind into a state in which matters of morality (in particular) can most fruitfully be addressed." And what he calls "the metaphor of God" provides "a way of focusing difficult ideas, for which there is no entirely satisfactory vocabulary."

A conjunction, then, of "a more humble science, which admits the value of religion; and a more generous religion that allows science to replace the outmoded aspects of its theology" is, in Colin Tudge's view, the best hope for the future.

My first — and most important — criticism is that Tudge's conclusion bears no relation to the problem. If we were only dealing with a "discussion" between scientists and a clergyman like the Bishop of Durham (who is mentioned by Tudge), there would be little heat anyway. Even a discussion with Cardinal Hume (also mentioned) might be conducted at normal temperature, though with little illumination.

*Dialogue is not the danger: it is religious behaviour.*

We are witnessing a resurgence of religious fundamentalism in many parts of the world which is not susceptible to "discussion." We are not contending with metaphorical deities but with fanatical followers of "stark, unequivocal, copper-bottomed, medieval theology," to which all must be subject. There is no more possibility of their rendering unto science that which belongs to science than did the Roman Church in its treatment of Galileo.

Against Tudge's advocacy of religions for "cultivating and refining emotional response," I would set the case for Humanism, as eloquently outlined by writers like Corliss Lamont and Harold J Blackham.

In preference to prayer and meditation, I would have recourse to reason, believing as I do that there is no need for God, even as a metaphor.

# The doubter's dilemma

I AM an Atheist who has doubts. When a Christian has doubts, he can talk to a vicar or a priest. The Atheist has no counterpart to turn to and is thus more likely than a Christian to end up on that intellectual "skid row" known as agnosticism, writes a Correspondent.

My first "drink" of doubt was harmless enough as I accidentally came across Voltaire's comment that: "...Doubt may be a very unpleasant mental state, but certainty is a ridiculous one..."

For all my Atheist life, I had equated the Christian certainty with insanity. I appealed to my Christian associates to admit, just once, that they had doubts. Did they honestly believe in virgin births, Noah's ark, forbidden fruits, talking snakes, dead people coming to life etc. Could they not at least admit that these unlikely things could have been invention or exaggeration?

No! These things certainly happened!

I try to be as polite as possible when I tell them that they must be mad. I committed myself to Atheism because I thought it the only alternative to being a fool.

Yet once the Atheist has made his commitment, like the believer, he too must blot out any doubts he may experience. He must be certain that there is no life after death, no god, no purpose to existence. He must be certain that everything can be explained though reason and rationality.

But this alternative certainty is only slightly less ridiculous than the Christian's. This I discovered as my "thinking problem" worsened. In an Agnostic stupor, I read the doubts of eminent scientists such as Alfred Russel Wallace - that hardly mentioned biologist who "discovered" evolution at the same time as Darwin.

Wallace wrote about a number of human aspects that he felt could not possibly have come about through natural selection, concluding that: "...a superior intelligence has guided the development of man in a definite direction..." (*Contributions to Theory of Natural Selection, 1875*).

I assume that Wallace is now considered a bit of an odd-ball by modern biologists. They can account for the entire animal and plant kingdoms without such mysticism, yet they have their own equivalent "virgin births," "talking snakes," and "Noah's ark," ie, that life began by chance alone despite the inconceivable odds, that the absence of fossil "intermediate species" or giraffes with shorter necks does not damage evolutionary theory, that we are all here because a

certain species of fish managed, by chance, to breathe on land.

After a heavy night of Agnosticism, Creationism and Evolutionism seem equally unlikely.

Really hitting the "hard stuff" now. I do not pretend to know what modern physicists are talking about, but, from what I can gather, it seems that the old tools of "reason" and "rationality" are rapidly becoming obsolete.

Physicists now talk about parallel universes, time travel, consciousness making a difference to physical reality, the universe being like a giant thought. Physicists and astronomers admit that life on earth is only possible because of numerous "lucky accidents" and that it is perhaps more logical to believe that these "accidents" are more than accidents.

Compelling evidence exists for telepathy and reincarnation. Both Christians and Atheists reject the latter simply because it does not fit into what they already believe, not because the evidence is too weak. (See Jeffrey Iverson's *In Search of the Dead*).

If Voltaire is correct, perhaps my creeping Agnosticism is not such a bad thing. But then again, perhaps I'm really clinging to any vague hope that life is not pointless, short and final. There is a very strong possibility that it is, but it is not certain. The only certain thing is uncertainty: to assert otherwise is dogma (perhaps?)

## CENTRAL

## Poles apart on Catholic anti-sex teachings

**ALTHOUGH 97 per cent of Polish citizens describe themselves as Roman Catholics, between half and two-thirds refuse to accept Church teachings on abortion, contraception and pre-marital sex, according to a survey by a polling agency reported in *The Universe*, Britain's RC weekly.**

And now a former leader in the Solidarity trade union, which sparked-off the move towards Western-style democracy, has accused the Catholic Church of conspiring to turn Poland into a theocracy.

Wladyslaw Frasyuniuk, a top man in the Democratic Union political party, accused church officials of threatening to excommunicate critics and of working to have church doctrine written into law.

Frasyuniuk told a Polish newspaper that it was time for political parties to "clarify their positions and stop meandering" around the church.

According to the (US) *National Catholic Register*, Frasyuniuk was particularly irked over church leaders' attempts to ban most abortions in Poland, in accordance with Catholic doctrine.

"Poland will soon remind us of Ireland," he declared. "This is just the first step on

the path to a confessional state and could soon be followed by a ban on contraception and sex education. I am afraid of church censorship."

Also in Poland, a slanging-match has arisen over a proposed new broadcasting Bill which would compel television and wireless stations to "strengthen the family" and show "respect for the Christian system of values."

Polish journalists condemn the Bill as a church-motivated bid to stifle media criticism of increasing Catholic power. Church leaders accuse broadcasters of running an "organised campaign" against the Church.



# Noddy's winning on points

**FREETHINKER** readers are invited to an exhibition of black and white works on paper by avowedly Atheist artist D.P. Haslam, *Noddy v's the Real World*, at the Alfred East Gallery, Kettering, on February 20 to

March 20, and the Moot Hall, Daventry, March 27 to April 17.

Working in graphite, Haslam tackles head-on such subjects as politics and religion, racism, lust and sexism. Described by one critic as "master of line," he is perhaps best known for his *We Have Become a Grandmother*, which was used by the Liberal Democrats as the basis for a poster in their Euro election campaign.

His *All the Fun of the Fair* has been chosen for publication here because it seems perfectly to capture the hypocrisy of so many religionists. Whether Haslam sought to express anything of the kind is another matter... he tends to see his humourous, detached and frequently cynical works as asking questions, not delivering answers: "I wish only to present the observer with situations that they may assess for themselves."



## POINTS

# Mainstream Christians vote with their feet

**CHURCHGOERS** are turning their backs on mainstream religions in their droves.

Membership of traditional churches and long-established voluntary groups is hitting the floor, the recently published *Social Trends 23* (HMSO, £26) makes clear. But people are embracing minority religions and joining environmental groups.

Between 1975 and 1990, adult membership of the Church of England fell 19 per cent; the number of Presbyterians declined by 12 per cent; Methodists and Baptists by 11 per cent and Roman Catholics by a significant 23 per cent.

But membership of other non-RC churches rose 32 per cent. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses increased by 50 per cent, Hindus by 40 per cent. The number of Muslims doubled and Sikhs tripled.

Trinitarian churches' membership fell from 8.1 to 6.8 million; among non-Trinitarian churches it rose from 330,000 to 460,000 and among other religions from 810,000 to 1.9 million.

Membership of the Anglican Mother's Union dropped from 308,000 in 1971 to 169,000 in 1991, and the Church of Scotland Women's Guild membership fell from 127,000 to 66,000.

Among environmental groups, membership of the National Trust shot up from 278,000 in 1971 to 2.2 million in 1991; of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds from 98,000 to 852,000; of Friends of the Earth from 1,000 to 111,000; and of the Ramblers' Association from 22,000 to 87,000.

● The document discloses that only one-in-two conceptions now occurs inside marriage and results in a birth. In 1990, 3.9 per cent of conceptions were outside marriage and led to a birth inside marriage (after a "traditional" shotgun ceremony) compared with 8.1 per cent in 1971.

# Councils face snags on Sunday shop bans

CURBS on Sunday shops opening would prove unpopular and expensive for local authorities to enforce, according to a report published on January 26.

Council officers responsible for upholding the shopping laws also believe that plans to restrict Sunday opening have little chance of surviving long-term shopping trends.

Chief Environmental Health Officers in 138 local authorities in England and Wales completed a questionnaire which asked their views on all three shopping law reform options proposed by Home Secretary Kenneth Clarke.

Mr Clarke has said there will be a free vote to decide between deregulated Sunday shopping, a limited trading option supported by the Shopping Hours Reform Council and a plan proposed by the Keep Sunday Special Campaign to severely restrict Sunday shop opening.

The last option is also the basis of Ray Powell's Private Member's Bill which was given a Second Reading in the House of Commons on January 22.

But as the Shops (Amendment) Bill enters committee stage, it is of little comfort to Chief



● **Home Secretary Kenneth Clarke: Free vote promised.**

Environmental Health officers, for the new survey found that:

● 65 per cent believe that the Keep Sunday

Special Campaign plan would prove the most expensive option for local authorities to enforce effectively.

● 76 per cent believe that this option has least chance of surviving gradual changes taking place in shopping trends.

● Only 11 per cent believe that it would prove most popular with the public.

Roger Boaden, Director of the Shopping Hours Reform Council which commissioned the survey, said that MPs would do well to listen to people "on the front line."

## Message

He added: "We must resolve the Sunday trading issue once and for all, and the message for MPs from the council officers with direct responsibility for the matter is that attempts to turn back the clock will simply create a whole new batch of problems."

The survey was carried out by the Research Consultancy between December 18 and January 15. Chief Environmental Health Officers of every local authority in England and Wales were invited to complete the questionnaire.

## WHAT'S ON

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group:** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, March 7, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Leslie Scrase: *The value of the Bible.*

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group:** Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road Kenilworth. Monday, February 15, 7.30 pm. Public meeting: *The physical basis of mind and morals.*

**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, 7.30pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1.

**Glasgow Humanist Society:** Information regarding meetings and other activities 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, March 2, 8 pm. Brian Tolman: *The Selfish Gene - the Ideas of Richard Dawkins.*

**Leeds and District Humanist Group:** Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, March 9, 7.30 pm. Dr Brian Burkitt, Bradford University: *Work, Employment and Society - A View of the Future.*

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, February 25, 8 pm. Michael Newman: *Humanism and Science Fiction.*

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, February 18, 7.30pm: Public meeting.

**Preston and District Humanist Group:** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, telephone 0772 796829.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, March 10, 7.45 pm. Barbara Smoker: *The Threat of Fundamentalism.*

**Worthing Humanist Group:** Heene Community Centre, Heene Road, Worthing. Public meetings, last Sunday of the month at 5.30pm. Information from Mike Sargent, group secretary, telephone 0903 239823.



# DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



## No sallies in blind alleys!

WRITING in the current issue of *The Scottish Humanist*, Editor Eric Stockton asserts that many liberal religionists "are tedious windbags who cannot even decide on which fence to sit."

Those kind words came to mind while I was reading an article by Alan Ruston in the Unitarian fortnightly, *The Inquirer*.

Mr Ruston's piece is really a survey of A N Wilson's pamphlet, *Against Religion*. He is careful not to tangle with the eminent author but instead contrives to take a swipe at the National Secular Society.

Our liberal religionist has a way with words. So rather than campaigning and propagandising like other organisations, including religious pressure groups, Alan Ruston declares that the NSS has "howled" against religion.

He complains that the Society "denigrates all religious practices quoting examples from the long distant past." And while he believes that religion should be "crisp and meaningful" (like "the ground of our being," perhaps?), criticism in Secularist pamphlets makes him cringe.

Of course, Alan Ruston makes no reference to recent NSS campaigns on school religion, censorship and blasphemy law, or to its active support for other groups endeavouring to secure social and legal reforms.

The NSS was the first and, until the Salman Rushdie affair, the only voice to warn against the menace of Islam. No doubt Mr Ruston cringed.

It is not necessary for Secularists to justify their criticism of religious practice by "quoting examples from the long distant past." Current events in the Middle East, Central Europe, the Indian subcontinent and Northern Ireland are evidence of how religion aggravates divisiveness, intolerance and hatred.

So while defending a person's right to choose liberal religion, we decline either to sit on the fence or to meander in the blind alley of watered-down superstition.

## George had Jesus taped

DAVID TRIBE enquired in the December, 1992, issue of *The Freethinker* if Alliance Hall, Westminster, has survived the developers.

Yes, it has. But its venerable neighbour, Caxton Hall, long empty and deserted, is up

for grabs. The only reminder of its many years as a popular venue with debaters of human affairs and seekers after "spiritual truth" is a plaque recording that Winston Churchill spoke there.

Of course, Churchill was only one luminary – and some would claim not the most eminent – to address a Caxton Hall audience.

On one occasion, the voice of Jesus was heard.

This momentous occurrence was arranged by The Aetherius Society, one of the nuttier religious outfits to surface during the 1950s.

The Aetherius Society was founded in London by George King. Until he was contacted by "the Cosmic Masters," his pattern of living was based on a series of mundane jobs and a fascination with the mystical. Plain Mr King became the Rev Dr King and is now His Eminence, the Metropolitan Archbishop of The Aetherius Churches.

It happened thus: a visitor from outer space arrived unexpectedly at Mr King's bed-sitter. After announcing himself as a representative of the Interplanetary Parliament, the celestial caller imparted some astounding news, viz: the Parliament had recently convened on the planet Saturn and had resolved that George King should be its terrestrial spokesman.

While no doubt feeling unworthy of this great honour, Mr King gallantly accepted the awesome responsibility. He followed the usual procedure on such occasions and organised a meeting at Caxton Hall.

In no time, George King attracted a following of fantastists. Their weird and wonderful beliefs included that Jesus and other great religious figures were living in a spiritual co-operative on Venus. This godly assembly included Master Aetherius, who regularly addressed devotees (via George King) gathered in Caxton Hall's Tudor Room.

Little notice was taken of these shenanigans until it was announced that Jesus was to be a guest speaker. The press and the churches were outraged. George King and his followers were denounced as dupes, Communists and blasphemers.

The Jesus homilies turned out to be something of an anticlimax. His message, tapes of which sold well, consisted for the most part of platitudes delivered in a tone that could hardly be described as Churchillian.

Nevertheless, some will regard it as strange that WC rather than JC should

have a plaque. Others will think it is even stranger that the Son of God should choose to speak at the rather shabby Caxton Hall instead of at nearby Westminster Abbey.

## Nothing like a Dame

THE Royal Family has had its share of problems in recent times.

Fergie's frolics and separation from the Duke of York set the pace. The divorced Princess Royal remarried. The Prince and Princess of Wales' separation was announced by the Prime Minister. An alleged telephone conversation between the heir to the throne and his married lady friend was bugged and published in two Sunday newspapers.

Timid republicans, lying low since the fearsome spectre of a President Thatcher stalked the land, are again peeping over the parapet.

Could things get worse for the Royals? They could and they have. Dame Barbara Cartland has rushed to their defence.

Dame Barbara churns out romantic novels at the rate of one a fortnight. "I'm on my 567th book," she recently told an interviewer.

In her spare time, assisted by five secretaries, Dame Barbara writes letters to the Press.

Before the last General Election, more than 900 newspapers received her missive denouncing Labour leader Neil Kinnock as "an atheist."

In another flurry of letters to editors, she demanded reinstatement of that old-time religion in the nation's schools.

Her latest letter writing campaign is in praise of monarchy. Editors with republican sympathies or a wicked sense of humour have published the Dame's gems of wisdom.

"The Church of England is not pulling its weight in support of religion and the Royal Family..."

"If we do away with the Royal Family which has served us so well since 1066, we will no longer receive the enormous number of tourists..."

"The monarchy is a great British institution that will survive and prosper despite petty attacks from the Archbishop of York."

The celebrated writer of fiction concluded her epistle: "The Royal Family need all our support and prayers in their present difficulties."

So all together now:

"God save the Queen – from Barbara Cartland!"

## Blast from the past: Number 2

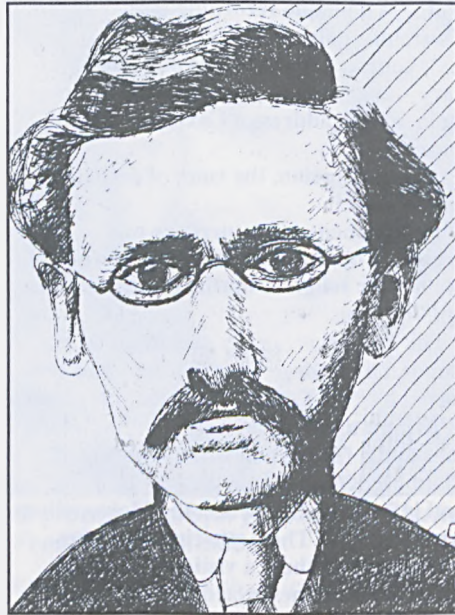
Edited from *Is Religion of Use?* published by the Pioneer Press (1923) in *Essays in Freethinking* by Chapman Cohen. Cohen – sketched below by Geoff Day, of Sheffield – was Editor of *The Freethinker* from 1915 to 1951.

TODAY there is not even the theoretical importance that once attached to religious beliefs. While natural forces were believed to be either supernatural in character or under the direct control of supernatural beings, there was at least a theoretical importance in forming right beliefs concerning these assumed powers.

The gods then punished or rewarded men as their beliefs concerning them were sound or unsound. But this view is no longer held by the great mass of educated believers. God, they say, no longer interferes with the action of natural forces. He works through them, and their effects on believer and unbeliever alike are identical. And what is this but saying in a round-about manner that the belief in God does not matter? If natural forces operate on all alike, if prayer is powerless to alter them, if God does not modify their incidence to meet the needs of believers, if these things are true, in what essential does the position of the believer in his dealings with Nature differ from that of the unbeliever?

I do not believe in God, says the Atheist. I believe in God, but he does nothing, says the Theist. What substantial difference is there between the two positions? Practically none. Our whole welfare depends upon our knowledge of Nature and its processes. The theory of God minus this knowledge is of no value. The knowledge minus the theory of God is none the worse. And all history enforces this lesson. Individuals and nations flourish or decay in proportion to their understanding and use of natural forces. Nothing else matters.

The God who sent harvests and plagues, health and disease, victory and defeat, was someone to reckon with. But a God who does nothing may safely be set on one side...



The sober truth is that religious doctrines never trouble those whose minds have not been specially prepared for their reception. Left alone, no one born in a modern society would experience any difficulty concerning them ...

The professed interest in religion is an artificial, a manufactured one. It is the result of thousands of preachers impressing it upon the public; of parents, acting as the unconscious tools of the pulpit, impressing it on their children. The prominence given to religion in State functions helps to perpetuate the illusion, and the result is, not the creation of a living conviction of the value of religion, but a divorce between theory and practice that makes our public and political life a mass of insincerity and mental crookedness.

Long ago, Emerson said: *Our young people are diseased with the theological problems of original sin, origin of evil, and the like. These never presented a practical difficulty to any man – never darkened any man's road who did not go out of his way to seek them. These are the soul's mumps, and measles, and whooping cough – a simple mind will not know these enemies.*

But a simple mind – that is a free mind – is precisely what we are not allowed to have. Our education, our social environment, is so arranged that the dice are loaded against us from the start...The "Black Army" is in occupation, and our chances of a free life in a free city are small

while we give the leaders of the Army an honoured place in our homes and in the schools.

It is an old complaint with the clergy that people "forget God." The wonder is that it is never asked why God is forgotten! A God who did something would not be ignored in this way. People could not, even if they were inclined to do so.

But the suggestive thing is, not that God is ignored, but that no one is the worse for ignoring him. In every other direction the pressure of insistent facts is such that they command attention.

Society cannot retain bad drains and keep free from disease. We cannot eat bad food and drink impure water without paying the price. Natural facts, real facts, cannot be ignored with impunity.

Sooner or later we are brought up against the facts of existence. Why is it, then, that people can go on year after year, not merely blind to God's existence, but convinced that their disbelief in his existence is justified by the facts, and feeling no need for the assumption of his being? That is the real question the believer has to face, and never does.

The truth is that God is not forgotten. He is found out. People have become aware of the fact that "God" is no more than one of those primitive ideas that were framed in the childhood of the race, and which have become utterly discredited by more mature thought. It is the hypothesis of God that is ignored, and the reason for that is precisely the one that justifies the rejection of witchcraft or demoniacal possession.

It is not true that the question of religion is of vital importance. It is only needful that people should understand it, and that chiefly because to understand it is the surest way of leading to its rejection. For the rest there are a hundred and one things in life that are of greater importance than religion. The...housing question, sanitation, education, are all of infinitely greater importance than any of the questions about which theology concerns itself.

Yet...We starve our scientific workers while we squander millions on a priesthood that has left its evil impress on every page of European history. We allow that priesthood to retain a footing in our schools, and thus deliver up the new generation mentally shackled and ready for exploitation.

We...refuse to recognise that the most pressing reform of all is to learn to take things in the order of their importance; to deal with this life while we have it, and with any other on its emergence.

### HUMANIST HOLIDAYS – EASTER 1993

Hotel in Chester – all rooms with en suite facilities, TV, etc. Car parking and a few ground-floor rooms available. £120 per person for dinner/bed & breakfast, commencing dinner Friday, April 9, ending breakfast Tuesday, April 13. Booking by February 28.

Further information/bookings: Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, Glos. GL52 5AA. Telephone 0242 239 175.

TONY AKKERMANS SEES RELIGION AS...

# An ego-trip to heaven



**WATCHING** athletics and other sports, I have frequently seen competitors crossing themselves (and no doubt saying a silent prayer) before the start of an event.

What are we to make of this? Is it an innocent expression of touching religious faith?

Not the way I see it. I consider it a demonstration of what religious faith and prayer is basically all about. It is first and foremost an ego-trip. It is saying to the other competitors: *Me first, not you.*

The egocentric nature of prayer first struck me hard, many years ago, when I was watching a news item on television.

A reservoir dam somewhere in the United States had given way during the night and in the resulting flood some 20 people, including a number of small children, all part of a bible study group camping nearby, were drowned.

When one of the survivors was interviewed, he said that, far from his faith in God having been damaged, it had been strengthened – because in the nick of time he had heard voices urging him to get up and save himself. *The Lord be praised, I at least live to pray another day!*

On reflection, this blatant *I'm all right Jackism* is at the heart of all religious faith and prayer.

It is made use of by all manner of insecure people, unable to cope with life unaided. A crutch, an insurance policy, just in case.

Of course, they don't really believe in it. If they did, they would not wear crash hel-

metts or fasten seatbelts. A mere prayer would suffice. Sick people would pray instead of running to a doctor. If there were clear proof of the effectiveness of prayer, there would be discounts on insurance premiums for people giving a solemn undertaking of prayers three times a day, along the same lines as discounts given for abstinence from alcohol and cigarettes.

Insurance actuaries trained in statistics would be aware of the slightest differential in, say, the incidence of traffic accidents suffered by the devout – and by the depraved.

Clearly, to date they have been of the opinion that a good set of brakes is of more practical use than a tankful of Hail Marys!



Humanity's desperate need to believe in something or other can be catered for in many varied ways – by mainstream religion, cults, spiritualism, reincarnation, UFOs, crop circles, Loch Ness monsters and many other goodies from the superstition larder.

A hardy perennial among these, and ever popular, is astrology, as Karl Heath noted in the *January Freethinker*.

Few people can resist the intrigue of their personal horoscope. *You never know, there may be something in it.* And can you blame them? There usually is a lot in it. A lot of money for a start.

Horoscope writers are the masters of the being all things to all men. With them, fuzzy abstraction has been perfected to a

form of art. So much so that, by comparison, politicians become paragons of plain speaking.

The technique used is readily exposed by test. Ask astrologers to draw up horoscopes for two specific people, secretly swap them round . . . and the recipients will still claim pertinence.

This has been demonstrated many times. A French astrology researcher, Michel Gauquelin, once handed 100 people a horoscope, supposedly their own. In fact, they were all given the same one belonging to an infamous mass murderer. The result was that 95 per cent of the sample was quite happy with the description and could recognise themselves.

Why do horoscopes always seem appropriate? They take advantage of the fact that many judgments about our character are largely subjective. Nobody sees his or her personality in terms of simply black or white. Sometimes we are kind, sometimes not; one minute we can feel secure, the next we are lacking confidence. And so on throughout the whole range of our character make up.

Moreover, horoscopes are careful to avoid specifics, and the generalities, if couched in sufficiently vague terms, are bound to have some relevance. Then there is the tendency to skip the parts that are less befitting and to concentrate on what appears most appropriate.

All this makes a mockery of some people's insistence on basing their relationships on the compatibility of signs. I don't know whether any studies have been done to measure the incidence of marital breakdown based on horoscopic harmony, but I promise to eat my hat if any clear trends are found one way or the other.

However, as long as people remain preoccupied with their destiny – and as long as other people recognise the potential earning power in pretending to supply the answers – this particular circus will run and run.

## The believing world

BANGLADESHI villagers buried a woman up to the waist and stoned her to death for refusing to marry the head preacher of a mosque. Nurjahan Begum, aged 30, was killed by a barrage of 101 stones on January 10 after being condemned by an unofficial village court. – *The Guardian*, Jan 14.

PRIEST Ennio Zani has been reimprisoned by his bishop for celebrating Mass to 300 people at Massa, Italy, in five minutes, four seconds. Father Zani explained: "I just wanted to get into the Guinness Book of Records." – *Daily Star*, Dec 31.

A MAN of 56 was killed and 15 people were injured after poisonous heater fumes filled a church in Plan-de-Baix, France. – *Sun*, Dec 26.

FOUR men – a child sex abuser, a murderer

and two drug smugglers – were recently beheaded in public squares after midday prayers in Saudi Arabia. – *Sun*, Jan 3.

JEHOVAH'S Witness Bob Bain, 54, father of two, died in an Oxford hospital on January 7 after refusing a blood transfusion following a car crash. – *The Independent*, Jan 8.

THE Catholic Evidence Guild, on the other hand, has said that it will fold if it doesn't get an infusion of new blood. At one time, there were Guilds in virtually every diocese, with members best known for their soapbox oratory. Now, only two survive – at Westminster and Liverpool. – *The Universe*, Jan 10.

TEN thousand homosexuals are estimated to have been executed in Iran since the Ayatollahs came to power. – *Gay and Lesbian Humanist*, Winter issue.

**National Secular Society  
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# YOU'RE TELLING US!

## Seeing stars

KARL Heath's piece "debunking" astrology revealed nothing but his own credulity. If he believes that a journalist called Mystic Meg can contribute something useful to a debate that has been going on for thousands of years – and has involved such believers as Plato, Kepler and Goethe – then he has clearly yet to learn that serious research does not come from reading popular newspapers.

He has also to learn the difference between stars and planets. The zodiac astrologers use has nothing whatever to do with the visible zodiac of the fixed stars. The astrological zodiac is an artificial division of the ecliptic into 12 equal segments, starting at the precessing Vernal point – as any basic book on astrology will confirm. However, planets are visible against the fixed or sidereal zodiac that we see in the sky, and when Heath says "it is childish nonsense" to describe such a geocentric arrangement he reveals that he has never perused any astronomical almanac: for this is precisely how the solar and planetary positions are laid out.

He is similarly quite wrong in claiming that "there is no scientific evidence for astrology." There is abundant evidence, and has been for over 30 years. Much of it has been replicated by scientific bodies hostile to astrology – much to their chagrin. In some cases, such as the correlation between planetary position and occupation, odds against chance can be as high as five million to one. No scientist has managed to discredit this claim, despite many attempts. All this is a matter of public record, and one wonders how Heath has failed to come across it.

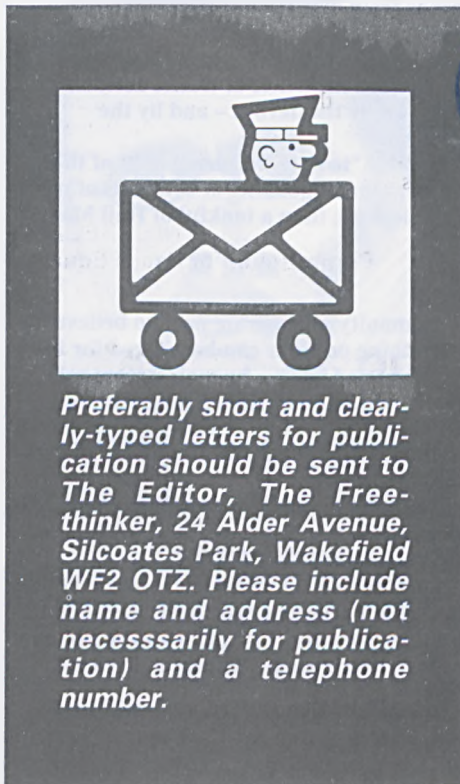
This does not mean that astrology preaches a fated or finitely predictable philosophy. Quite the reverse: free-will exists in every moment. It just suggests that our relationship with the cosmos is slightly more complex than many of us are able to comprehend. Indeed, it may be, as Heath suggested in a previous issue of *The Freethinker*, that we exist in a Universe of which "we are ourselves a part, not just dwellers but part of the structure."

In this structure, even astrologers have their uses. For example, elsewhere in the same issue of *The Freethinker*, Colin McCall praises the "excellent" academic research of Michael Baigent in exposing the Dead Sea Scrolls fiasco. It should be noted that Michael Baigent is a practising astrologer and co-author of *Mundane Astrology* – the standard reference book on political astrology. Now, why was that not mentioned?

**MICHAEL HARDING**  
Association of  
Professional  
Astrologers  
London NW6 4BP

I WAS very pleased to see your review of a book I co-authored *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* in which you very effectively summarised the inhibitions with which the primarily "Rome" oriented theologians approach the historical, political and theological facts contained within the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is truly a scandal.

I was less pleased to see what appeared to be similar inhibitions emanating from yourselves:



**Preferably short and clearly-typed letters for publication should be sent to The Editor, The Freethinker, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ. Please include name and address (not necessarily for publication) and a telephone number.**

I refer to your article on astrology entitled "Astrological Moonshine."

It seems to me that the Humanist position appears underpinned by a fear of the "irrational." This fear is hidden by the consequent deification of so-called "rational" science.

To my mind, calling a discipline unscientific – as you call astrology – is no criticism at all. It is no more than a statement of opinion.

The basis of science is itself founded upon an opinion regarding the reality within which we live and an approach to understanding that reality which has been encoded into a series of precepts: notably, the ability to repeatedly and methodically test hypotheses under controlled conditions. It is this which is used to exclude the irrational.

To me, this runs counter to science's primary and original motivation which was, and I believe still is, to provide a means of understanding our reality. Such understanding necessitates an openness to all data. Yet, it would seem from the position which you take,

science excludes all that data provided by the "irrational" and I might add in passing, the "anomalous" which also finds itself rejected under the same title.

I think that one treads upon very thin ice when one accepts such artificial – and dare I say, irrational – restrictions upon incoming data.

**MICHAEL BAIGENT**  
London NW1 9PP



## Religion on trial

THE letter from Michael Darlow (January) helps to show what is wrong with the general television coverage of humanism, and in particular what was wrong with his series *Beyond Belief: Religion on Trial*.

He attacks my statements that "the people who commission and produce television programmes will not let anyone challenge religion or champion humanism on screen without the other side being given a hearing at the same time" and that the same people "will not let anyone explain any serious idea for more than a few minutes on screen without being interrupted." He says that they "beggar belief," but he has missed the point. I was making factual statements, based on my impression of the present situation – an impression reinforced by his series. He answers not with facts but with personal insults and false accusations. I shall not reply to the silly remarks comparing me with Norman Tebbit or the Ayatollah, or connecting me with "totalitarian atheism," but I shall take up the more sensible points.

He says that both my statements are "untrue," but he gives no evidence to the contrary. I still question whether any recent television programme has allowed anyone to challenge religion or champion humanism without contradiction or to explain any serious idea without interruption. He says that my statements reveal an attitude towards debate which is "incompatible" with free thought. I am trying not to discourage debate but to encourage serious treatment of serious ideas. I say not that humanism should be protected or that religion should be restricted, but that humanism and religion should both be taken seriously, and that it would be desirable and should be possible to have programmes about such subjects in which responsible people can express themselves properly without being cut down to sound-bites or forced into cross-examination.

# YOU'RE TELLING US!

• From Page 30

He accuses me of being "rather less than totally open" about my own involvement with the series. I naturally didn't and don't wish to break confidence derived from my position as consultant during the early stages, but I must say that it is quite untrue that I "appeared to want" programmes like *Songs of Praise* or party political broadcasts; I never suggested anything of the kind and I have always opposed such an idea. I was mainly concerned to ensure that the discussion of both humanism and religion should be based on fact, which I failed to do, and to suggest topics and participants, which I did do (alongside the British Humanist Association).

He reveals his own contradictory views of the series when he calls it both "a series devoted to humanism" and "a confrontation with religious believers." It couldn't be both, and my complaint is that what may have begun as the former ended as the latter. I note that he doesn't attempt to answer my specific criticisms, and I must add that the people with whom I watched them were far more critical than I was of the bizarre courtroom format and of the bewildering profusion of participants and topics.

The real point is that there has never been fair treatment of religion and humanism on television, and that it won't come through artificial debates between the two. There are plenty of serious programmes about religion — in *Everyman*, *Heart of the Matter*, *The Human Factor*, and so on — and after half a century it really is time to have equally serious programmes about humanism. *Beyond Belief: Religion on Trial* was a different kind of programme altogether, which didn't begin to grapple with the problem. I hope that "there will be other programmes on humanism," but I also hope that they will learn some lessons from these.

NICOLAS WALTER  
London N1

## Blasphemy law

MY attention has just been drawn to your editorial, Protection of Religion or Back Door Extension of Blasphemy Law? (October, 1992). There is no danger, I can assure you, of the Commission for Racial Equality allowing itself to be used by repressive religious groups to promote their special interest.

The blasphemy law, as it stands, is manifestly unfair and unacceptable in a multi-cultural society since it protects only the established Christian religion. The Commission argues that it must either be abolished altogether or extended to cover other religions. We do not spell out the detailed arguments for and

against these alternatives, for this is a debate which goes far beyond our remit as a Commission. But the present law must be changed.

We do believe that there is an argument in principle for making religious discrimination unlawful, but once again there are issues here which go far beyond race relations, and in your editorial you rightly point to some of the practical difficulties. What we have done, therefore, is to ask the Government to consider the question more broadly and to open up an extended debate with all those who might be affected.

I welcome the encouragement which you give to your readers to send us their views. I hope soon to be meeting humanist leaders to discuss these matters in more depth.

MICHAEL DAY  
Commission for Racial Equality  
London SW1

## The Freethinker

POLITICS has been a very dodgy subject in *Freethinker* circles. There is a reason for this, and despite Karl Heath's objections in this journal about a year ago, it is party politics that is, quite reasonably, frowned upon.

The answer to Karl Heath's question "Why should (party politics) be disreputable?" is that the British Constitution is designed to exclude from Government office any party that refuses to abide by the rules and ritual of Parliament.

In effect, as many Socialists have found to their horror, Labour leaderships have always veered to the "right" when a General Election has approached, in order to stand a chance of gaining office.

In his much-reprinted book, *The British Constitution*, Sir Ivor Jennings wrote: "The British Constitution provides no check against a Conservative Government which really intended to go 'authoritarian,' because a Government which has majorities in both Houses can do what it pleases through its control of the absolute authority of Parliament."

Now, whether Ivor Jennings realised it or not, this foolproof system obtains even when a Government is "Conservative" with a small "c," as it was when Attlee, Wilson, etc., were Prime Ministers. Interestingly, in the same paragraph, Sir Ivor tells us: "Even a written Constitution, however, is but a slight check — as Hitler showed in Germany — and the foundation of our democratic system rests not so much on laws as on the intention of the British people to resist by all the means in its power — including sabotage, the general strike, and if necessary civil war — attacks upon the liberties which it has won."

Strong stuff from a man who could hardly be described as an Anarchist! He must surely

have had a special place in his heart for Guy Fawkes.

When, after serving as a fighter pilot, I was demobbed in 1946, I was swept along on the wave of Socialism that gripped the British electorate, to vote Labour, full of hope — hope that has been cruelly crushed by a system of party politics that cannot break out of the confines which are set by the British Constitution.

The Crown is as strong as ever; the Established Church is still in place; secrecy is everywhere; Parliament is still only a talking shop; back-bench MPs are ineffective. Worse still, Socialism is now a dirty word, contaminated by party politicians who have abused its name for the purpose of getting into power.

Yes, yes, yes. Party politics is disreputable, whether it is one-party dictatorship or multi-party "democracy." Let's keep party politics out of *The Freethinker*!

ERNIE CROSSWELL  
Slough

IN welcoming your new format and Editor and congratulating you on the tone of *The Freethinker*, I would like to be allowed to join the party of readers in writing tributes to your last Editor, Wm McIlroy, who it is good news to know will still be with us by his writing in the new *Freethinker*.

Bill McIlroy's job could not have been easy, but he nevertheless attempted to make it so, and that the old style *Freethinker* succeeded in apparently "keeping its head above water" for so long was, I happen to know, due almost entirely to his tireless efforts in conducting what at times must have resembled a veritable "one man band." In welcoming the new, we must remember with warmth and appreciation the old, and having benefited greatly down the years from the advice and personal friendship of such notable Freethinkers as Chapman Cohen and David Tribe — there are others, too, whom I always read with interest but did not always know personally — I can only now say: "The Editor is (not) dead — long live the (new) Editor!"

PETER COTES  
Chipping Norton

## Info wanted

I AM currently writing a dissertation on the English philosopher and mathematician William Kingdon Clifford (1845-1879), focusing on his essay *The Ethics of Belief*. I would appreciate receiving any information your readers may have on his life and thought. I can be contacted at: Tim Madigan, Executive Editor, *Free Inquiry*, PO Box 664, Buffalo, NY 14226, USA.

TIM MADIGAN

# LAST WORD

by Ernie Crosswell

**Y**OU can be thrown out of the Brownies, expelled from the Party, sent home from school, and suspended from police duty, but your chances of being kicked out of Church are minimal.

This, I understand, is because Jesus not only loves everybody, but also he is just crazy about sinners.

However, it is not only Jesus who welcomes sinners. The previous Archbishop of Canterbury, in an interview with the deputy editor of *The Director* magazine, said that it was not the job of the Church to make people good, but to make them Godly: "Godliness and goodness are not the same thing," explained Robert Runcie.

Confirmation of that attitude comes from the former Bishop of Birmingham, Hugh Montefiore, who, in the *Sun* newspaper, commenting on the sentencing of two priests, a choirmaster and a server, on charges involving sex offences against choirboys, wrote: "People put the clergy on a pedestal and they like to know when one falls off. Perhaps this is because people think that Christianity is primarily about being good. It's not – the Gospel is primarily about our relationship with God."

My personal reaction to these top churchmen is that they are as good as inviting all the hypocrites and criminals in the land to come inside and have a ball.

It seems the only bar to joining in the blessed fun is to belong to a different religious faith. From my "conversion" to Christianity at

## Church offers crooks' charter

the age of four years, to my decontamination at 18 years. I had conscientiously kept to its code, never stealing or coveting anyone's ass, nor wishing to kill anybody unless they were Germans, and, in my innocence, I thought the other Christians were doing the same.

I soon learned that I was in a minority of one! My mind still boggles at the way I was taken in by my holy mentors. Forgive thine enemies: I tried my best to forgive those school bullies who took advantage of my small size, but it did not come naturally.

I cannot understand how anyone can forgive a wrongdoer if forgiveness has not been solicited. "Do not be judgmental," they would

**Every month, a contributor is given the freedom of the back page to express a personal view on a current topic.**



say if I referred to someone as being a hypocrite – for Christ's sake, I was only giving an opinion, not passing sentence!

I remember a parson on television expressing his forgiveness for a multiple murderer who subsequently committed suicide before anyone had a chance to get near him, let alone speak to him. How crazy can you get?

But, of course, all this confusion and illogicality stems from their Bible, where a spade is a shovel and black is white, depending on your convenience. So you are welcomed by the Church whether you be Labour or Tory, millionaire or claimant, arms dealer or pacifist, perfect or perverted, so long as you believe, or say that you believe.

One of the biggest cop-out clauses in their holy manifesto is "Render unto Caesar....", which allows for more options than a lucky bull gets in a china shop: Hitler was only one of many tyrants to profit from that questionable clause.

Just in case you miss that one, we are enjoined by Peter to: "Be subject therefore to every human institution..." which, taken along with the other injunction, makes you a model citizen of the Third Reich and Stalin's Russia all in one go!

Recently, in Slough, an Anglican clergyman said: "The Bible says that everyone must submit to the supreme authorities, and there is no authority but by Act of God, and anyone who rebels against authority is resisting a divine institution."

Sieg Heil to that!

I think I have sussed out the reason for all these Christian conundrums. Churchmen would like us to be subservient to the authorities wherever they are and whatever they are like because they themselves depend upon the authorities for their wellbeing, in the form of rates relief, educational and media privileges and so on.

This applies most forcibly in the case of the Anglican Church, where disestablishment would almost certainly mean disaster for them.

The churches' reliance on the support of the State is matched by the State's need for compliant religious authorities who provide moral (and immoral) support for its policies. It is a great advantage to any government to have priests who will bless its guns no matter what the cause.

And on the matters of forgiveness and not judging people, I can understand that if we are ready to forgive any old Tom, Dick or Harry, we can forgive the churches for all the monstrous things they do.

There lies the method in their madness!

## Startling fax about religion

**FROM** Jerusalem comes the interesting news that a fax machine has been installed at the Wailing Wall.

This union of religious observance and modern technology will enable Jews in almost any part of the world to fax their prayers direct.

Black-garbed, hirsute gentlemen bobbing and bowing at the aforementioned Wall may eventually become a thing of the past.

Here is a development that opens up endless possibilities and poses serious questions. Why fax prayers to a wall instead of direct to the intended recipient? Would it not be more convenient for all concerned if

Jehovah, Allah, Jesus and the Heavenly Host installed their own fax machine to receive supplications and thanks?

No doubt interested parties like priests, rabbis and imams would be peeved at being bypassed. But the benefits would be enormous, particularly to Roman Catholics.

For a start, it would no longer be necessary to insert advertisements in the Personal Column of the *Daily Telegraph* thanking St Jude for favours received. Just send a fax to the saintly benefactor. What could be more convenient?

Bill McIlroy