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University 'segregation' probe

AUTHORITIES at the University of Westminster are investigating complaints made by National Secular Society General Secretary Terry Mullins about the conduct of the February 24 debate described in this issue of *The Freethinker* by NSS President Barbara Smoker.

Mr Mullins told University chiefs that the NSS objected to the hall being sex-segregated and to the fact that, while the NSS had asked for non-religious groups to be invited, the hall was almost full of members of the Islamic Society.

It appeared that Islamic Society supporters had been brought in from elsewhere, including other colleges.

Terry Mullins added the point that the main speaker had expressed himself in favour of the fatwa on Salman Rushdie and against democracy – with

both viewpoints drawing "roars of approval" from the audience.

Also, the event had been filmed, without the approval of the National Secular Society.

Deputy Registrar Dr Geoffrey Copland has told Mr Mullins that he is "most concerned" about the allegations and that the university management had not been alerted in advance to the fact that the debate was taking place.

"I am investigating the circumstances behind this event, its organisation and conduct," Dr Copland writes.



● **Twice in recent weeks, Barbara Smoker – arguably Britain's best known freethought activist – has faced hostile fundamentalist Moslem students in university debates. Barbara (pictured) tells her story, and issues a warning, on Pages 2 and 3.**

(Picture: *The Guardian*)

ISLAM ON THE ATTACK

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Free speech at risk in

TAKING part in university debates in this country over the past 25 years, I have often had the experience of the hall being packed by the Student Christian Union. Confronted by closed evangelical minds, I have been unable to develop an intellectual debate, let alone win the vote.

However, the substitution of Moslem for Christian fundamentalists – that is, Islamic fanatics comprising more than 90 per cent of the audience, without sight or sound of a single Christian fanatic – is a fairly recent phenomenon.

Those *Freethinker* readers who attended the Voltaire Memorial Lecture given by Dr Richard Dawkins at Conway Hall four months ago will recall the swathe of young Moslem men (no women) in the audience

by Barbara Smoker
(President of the
National Secular
Society)

who came to oppose the speaker's views. There, however, they found themselves outnumbered – not by Christians but by secular humanists.

Since then, I have been asked to take part in two university debates – one in Yorkshire, the other in London – and, in both, fundamentalist Moslems far outnumbered the rest of the audience.

On February 16, I went to Sheffield University to oppose a motion which suggested that a "moral" society needs religion. The motion did not specify any particular religion, and the occasion was obviously one of the regular debates organised by the Students' Union Debating Society, the President of which was in the chair.

Although my opponent was a Roman Catholic retired school-teacher, the audience was composed almost entirely of fundamentalist Moslems. No attempt was made to keep to the subject of the motion, speakers from the floor straying to creationism and the ontological argument for the existence of God-Allah.

In order to deal with creationism as briefly as possible, I recommended *The Blind Watchmaker* by Richard Dawkins – only to be greeted with hoots of derision. Remembering the Voltaire lecture, I realised that Dawkins is regarded by Moslem students as both an enemy and a fool!

However, the Sheffield audience did include a few non-Moslem students, two of whom spoke up well for secular humanism and an autonomous utilitarian morality.

Not so in London – where, eight days later, in mid-afternoon, I was engaged to debate at the University of Westminster (the old Regent Street Poly, under its grandiose new name) on the rather peculiar, non-exhaustive, non-motion *Islam or Secularism – Which Way Forward for Humanity?* Again, the organisers were ostensibly the general Debating Society, but this event was obviously in exclusively Moslem hands.

The large hall was packed – in both senses. Women (including a few white Moslem converts) sat on one side of the centre aisle; men on the other.

There were a few unoccupied seats on the women's side, but every seat was taken on the other, with crowds of men standing in the side aisles and at the back.

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THE FREETHINKER

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Secularist 'threatened'

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There is now some question about whether the "fixture" was a genuine Debating Society event, even though posters carrying the words "Debating Society" were issued. This point is also being investigated.

It has since come to light that a Barbara Smoker supporter who refused to comply with sex-segregation rules was spat at and threatened with violence.

And in a letter to the University Debating Society, Ian Buxton, a member of the South Place Ethical Society, has complained: "On arriving at the hall and seating myself on the left-hand side of the central aisle, a position which I had arbitrarily chosen so that I could get a good view of the proceedings, I was very rapidly surrounded by a highly vociferous groups of youths/men who strenuously asserted that I should 'respect Islam' and immediately leave my seat because of the apparently inevitable offence which the Moslem girls/women who had 'segregated' themselves on that side of the aisle away from the men on the opposite side would consider themselves obliged to feel.

"Now this would be a perfectly understandable – although perhaps a somewhat sad state

of affairs – were I actually in an Islamic state or even in some mosque on British soil. I would naturally expect to follow prevailing customs ('when in Rome...'), even in the absence of the legal status of such customs.

"However...here I was in an explicitly secular British building, prepared to listen to a debate facilitated by a secular University Debating Society...when I was, for a period of ten minutes at least, intimidated (the only really appropriate word) by a bunch of undeniable 'heavies.'

"Eventually, I acceded and sat on the opposite side of the aisle. However, a friend of mine, Graham Lyons, to give him his credit, 'sat his ground,' despite being actually jostled, and at least one attempt was made to drag his chair out of position. Is this an example of the great 'moral lesson' which Islam considers itself fit to teach the rest of us?"

Mr Buxton goes on to express the hope that, before any future meetings, "a prior commitment be extracted from them to behave in a civilised manner."

Leaving the debate early to keep another appointment, Mr Lyons was followed by a group of young men. He was spat at and threatened with violence.

UK university debates

◀ From Page 34

And they had to stand for the two-and-a-half hours that the meeting went on – fasting, moreover, since the previous evening, for Ramadan.

In fact, the meeting would obviously have lasted even longer had the time not come when the audience was allowed to break their fast at dusk by partaking of the dates provided in large bowls at the entrance to the hall.

Before the debate began, I asked the chairman why there was audience sex-segregation. He pointed out that I could hardly oppose it if I upheld the democratic principle – a secularist concept (rejected by Islam) – since the vast majority was in favour of it.

The word “Secularism” in the title of the debate was not, of course, meant in our narrow Bradlaugh sense of the word. It was used rather in the Holyoake sense and that of the usage of modern India, to denote “live and let live” and the separation of the State from religion.

One might have thought that this concept would actually commend itself to Moslems, who find themselves in a minority in many countries. For instance, Moslems would be far worse off in India if it were ruled by the majority religion, Hinduism, instead of its being a secular state. But Moslem fanatics do not see it that way.

As the title of the meeting indicated, to them Islam is the only real alternative to Secularism – and, if necessary to bring about the Islamic state, they would all, as they boast, be glad to die for Islam and be sure of their reward in Paradise.

Believe it or not, they insist that “the whole world is dominated by Secularism.” Even countries like Libya, Saudi-Arabia, Iran and Iraq are described as secularist, because they are capitalist and do not follow the Koran in everything.

So British fundamentalist Moslems dream of turning Britain into the first true Islamic state.

When my opponent mentioned that there are already three million Moslems in Britain, there were spontaneous cheers, reminiscent of a Nazi rally. Though this number is certainly an exaggeration – and, in any case, many Moslems in this country would not want to be ruled by their fundamentalist religious leaders – the ability to fill a London hall with Moslem student fanatics gives them a heady feeling of being on the brink of an Islamic Britain.

In both Sheffield and London, I was taunted with knowing nothing about Islam – and, when I protested that I had read the Koran, there were roars of derision because I had read it in English, not in Arabic, and translation is, of course, totally inadequate.

Since few, if any, of those present could speak Arabic (apart from religious phrases) with any degree of fluency, it is obvious that, like me, they could understand quotations from the Koran only in translation, not through Arabic exegesis.

In any case, the words translated as “merciful,” “compassionate” and “beneficent,” used throughout to describe Allah, could hardly have a completely different meaning in the original. Therefore, my ignorance of Arabic does not counter my contention that these words contradict the cruel commands attributed to him in the Koran and the fact of suffering in the world he is supposed to have created.

This problem of evil is one, of course, which Islam shares with Judaism and Christianity. But there is one aspect of Islam which makes it uniquely pernicious: Mohammed’s injunction against innovation. Ever. He must be the final prophet. Hence the persecution in Iran of members of the Ba’hai faith, who follow a prophet who lived after Mohammed.

There is no doubt that for several centuries Islam was generally more humane than Christianity. But whereas mainstream Christian sects have become more humane in the past couple of centuries – and especially in the past four decades – Islam can brook no such “innovation.” And its adherents, even those at a Western university, dare not think for themselves if that leads to any idea at odds with the Koran.

On the subject of Salman Rushdie, they all thought he deserved to die for his apostasy and blasphemy. But they did not think the late Khomeini had the authority to issue the *fatwa* against him.

However, the main target of the Moslem students, in both Sheffield and London, was the whole concept of freedom – for it is freedom that leads to “man-made” morality,

“man-made” laws and everything evil. Any Moslem guilty of serious crimes could not, by definition, be a *true* Moslem.

They were particularly obsessed with rape, insisting that Moslem women are not raped, as other women are (rape by the husband, needless to say, does not count), since Moslem women are adequately protected.

I pointed out that anyone could be protected against road accidents – by being kept off the streets.

For once, I almost wished for an equally fundamentalist contingent from the Christian Union – but, despite the proliferation of posters advertising the meeting, they were conspicuous by their absence. I would have welcomed, above all, a few public figures – such as MPs who support the Moslem demands for protection under the blasphemy law and for their own publicly-funded separate Moslem schools. (Roy Hattersley, Jack Straw and Max Madden come to mind).

I was, however, glad that a few National Secular Society and South Place Ethical Society members had come along to support me.

There were no more than half-a-dozen non-Moslem students present. All of them were silent during the meeting, but one did come up to me afterwards to say what a frightening experience he had found it, and to ask for details of the NSS.

While the genesis of the Moslem students’ identity crisis, anger and religious paranoia is understandable enough, something must be done to nip in the bud this upsurge of fanatical Islam in Britain – otherwise it will eventually be done by neo-fascists. That could mean a bloodbath, with many Moslems eagerly (or not so eagerly) heading for Paradise through martyrdom.

This believing world

CATHOLICISM KILLS: The Pope was accused in the European Parliament of “condemning people to death” by using his visit to Uganda to repeat his prohibition on the use of condoms. Professor Léon Schwartzberg, MEP and AIDS expert, said: “Black Central Africa is condemned to death if we leave things as they are. We think that between seven and 10 per cent of the population of Uganda in particular is contaminated by the [HIV] virus. We think that 80 per cent of those infected will develop AIDS and die. We must prevent further infection. The condom must be allowed and encouraged.” Glyn Ford, leader of the Labour group of MEPs, added: “Condoms are increasingly a form of medical protection, rather than contraception. It is bizarre that the Pope is asking people not to use medical protection.” By 2000, it is expected that Africa will have more than 100 mil-

lion Roman Catholics. – *The Guardian: February 11.*

DITTO DITTO: The Roman Catholic Church and President Fidel Ramos are doing battle over the promotion of condoms in the Phillipines. The Government is promoting condoms as part of its “safe sex” anti-AIDS campaign, but the Catholic Bishops’ Conference insists that this is tantamount to promoting promiscuity and that chastity and monogamy are the only sure ways to avoid AIDS. Eighty per cent of the population is at least nominally Roman Catholic. – *The Guardian: February 17.*

OOPS!: A magic potion prepared by a witch to help a woman ward off evil killed both practitioner and client. Police in Pistola, Italy, said the witch mixed up her recipes. – *Sun: December 23, 1992.*

UP FRONT

with the Editor

Green – or just cabbage-looking?

BEWARE of Greens bearing gifts. And when those gifts are enticingly labelled “human rights” and “freedom of religion,” be particularly cautious in your response. You’d hate to find yourself in some Green clink, condemned to a diet of sugar-free muesli and prune juice, subjected to daily visits from a relentlessly sympathetic prison chaplain.

What I am on about is – the Green Party has a Draft Voting Paper on religion on the First Agenda for its Spring Conference in April.

Its sentiments will delight those of a right-on disposition. Thoughtful folk, on the other hand, might see red, rather than green, over some of the paper’s proposals – despite its having been produced following “reference to national organisations working in the field of human rights and religion; the Commission for Racial Equality and the Subculture Alternatives Freedom Foundation, which has

produced a consensus echoed both without and within the Party, that formed the basis of a short-lived campaign initiated by Brent Green Party, and taken up by the Cultural Relations Working Group.”

Pausing only for a sharp intake of breath at the word “Brent,” and to wonder which humanist-secularist organisations were also consulted on what is to them a matter of great moment, I note that the Spring Conference “needs to consider whether this draft policy adequately addresses concerns raised.”

The Green Party, we are assured, supports the UN Declaration of Human Rights affirmation that “everybody has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” Well, yes, and who doesn’t? If you asked Saddam Hussein or Margaret Thatcher or the Prime Minister of Israel, they would probably say that they supported it, too.

The first tinkle of a warning-bell comes later: “In view of its commitment to create a society in which everyone has equal access to Rights and Social Justice, the Green Party wishes to remove anomalies in current law which prevents citizens in enjoying their right to freedom of belief, and from discrimination.”

AND? “In order to grant equal rights to persons of all persuasions, the laws against religious discrimination operating in Northern Ireland should be extended to include the entire United Kingdom.”

What else?

- The Green Party would legislate against discrimination on religious grounds.

- The Green Party would legislate against incitement to religious hatred.

- The legal offences of blasphemy and [presumably blasphemous] libel should be abolished.

- A constitutional right of reply should be introduced.

- The secular libel laws should be extended to include religious defamation.

Those are exact quotes.

Now, the Green Party is unlikely to gain power. But its dues-paying membership of perhaps 6,000 is influential: the party tends to attract teachers, doctors and nurses, university people, writers and artists and the odd journalist. Even readers of *The Freethinker*.

I find it rather scary that such notions are held by such folk.

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WHAT'S ON

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, April 4, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Denis Cobell: *Is Humanism a Way of Life?*

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road Kenilworth. Monday, March 15, 7.30 pm. Public meeting. Subject: *What is Beauty? A Study of Aesthetics.*

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, April 6, 8 pm. Annual General Meeting.

Leeds and District Humanist Group: Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, May 11, 7.30 pm. Brian Blackwell: *Life and Thought in the Former Soviet Union.*

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, April 29, 8 pm. Tony Mizen: *The Implications of Religious Rituals.*

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, April 15, 7.30pm: Chantal Finney: *The Third World – What Can We Do?*

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

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1; telephone 071 831 7723. List of events celebrating the bicentenary of SPES obtainable from the above address. Thursday meetings, 7.30pm. March 11: Richard Hoggart interviewed by John Miller. March 25: Christopher Hill speaks on the subject of his latest book, *The Bible in 17th Century England.*

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, April 14, 7.45 pm. Donna Pickerell: *Humanist Values in the Family.*

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.

UP FRONT

with the Editor

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In the first place, the laws against religious discrimination operating in Northern Ireland are infamously ineffective. What reason have we to suppose that they will work in the remainder of the UK?

And what is meant by "discrimination on religious grounds"? If an individual advertised a building but then declined to sell it for use as a single-sex denominational school, would that constitute "discrimination"?

If I put up a notice on my front gate, excluding from my broad-acres all hawkers, double-glazing salespersons and Mormon missionaries, is that religious discrimination, too?

What is incitement to religious hatred, against which the Green Party proposes to legislate? I believe, and frequently announce to anyone who will listen, that the Pope and his minions are knowingly adding to the toll of AIDS deaths by continuing to ban the use of condoms. Might a skilled and committed lawyer spin that into incitement of hatred against Roman Catholics?

Would it be "incitement to religious hatred" if I stood up and accused the Grand Muftis of the Jehovah's Witnesses of directing their simple-minded followers into suicide by prohibiting their acceptance of blood transfusions? What of my intention to point out in the April *Freethinker* which fanatics are hacking off bits of little girls in keeping with the time-honoured cultural and religious tradition of female circumcision? Where would that put me, under the Green laws?

Abolition of the blasphemous laws sounds good, but the suggestion is wholly negated by the Green call for our already devilish secular libel laws to be extended to include "religious defamation."

Surely any of those acts or statements mentioned in my preceding paragraphs could be so interpreted and could therefore get me dispatched to that Green jail, sewing coalsacks into frocks for Green maidens, plaiting straw for organic sandals until my fingers bleed?

And what of this "constitutional" right of reply? Would this mean that Mr Paisley, the Chief Rabbi, the Ayatollahs, Mrs Whitehouse and others who are recipients of *Freethinker* pleasantries from time-to-time would have the enforceable right to clog-up our columns with their superstitions, in reply?

And what about my right as a militantly atheistic hack to express my view of religion and its practitioners? Where's the section about freedom from discrimination regardless of belief or unbelief in religion?

I am not a member of the Green (or any other) Party, so perhaps I shouldn't suggest that truly radical Greens would be wise to vote this discussion document into the nearest paper-recycler.

I may mention, though, that the Party contact for the Draft Voting Paper on religion is

Bernard Ekbery, Flat 4, 15, Brook Road, Manchester M14 6UE. No doubt Bernard would appreciate knowing the views of free-thinking Greens, since the Party itself appears not to have consulted them.

Still suffering little children

AM I being defamatory of somebody's religion in saying that the extent of child sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests has been covered up by the Church authorities?

Or is truth a defence?

Our colleagues on *Free Inquiry* magazine report that following the arrest of a former Roman Catholic priest, who has been accused of molesting dozens of children during the 1960s, it is becoming increasingly evident that the Church had long been hushing up cases of sexual abuse by clergy.

Andrew Greeley, University of Chicago sociologist and a Catholic priest, has charged that the priesthood has been "an immune class protected *de facto*" from "sanctions of both church and state."

The Rev Thomas Reese of Washington, DC, a former canon lawyer at the Vatican Embassy, says that in the last ten years roughly 400 priests have been reported to the authorities for having sex with minors, in an estimated 100 of the 188 US dioceses. There has been an increasing number of lawsuits stemming from such cases, costing the Church an estimated \$400 million.

What has been troublesome to believers and non-believers alike is the knowledge that Church hierarchies have usually dealt with child abusers by transferring them to other parishes and swearing everyone, including the victims, to secrecy. The abuse was often repeated in the new parishes.

Father Greeley has identified this problem as "perhaps the most serious...the priesthood has faced" since the Reformation.

Jeanne Miller of Palatine, Illinois, has formed a new organisation, Victims of Clergy Abuse Linkup, to help those who have suffered from such abuse. At a conference in Chicago, she said that studies indicated that three to six per cent of the USA's 52,000 priests were paedophiles. Miller, whose son was sexually abused by a priest, remains a Catholic, adds *Free Inquiry*.

There is no reason to suppose that the situation in the UK and Ireland differs radically from that in the United States. Indeed, the Press cuttings which readers send to me (and do, please, keep them coming) suggest a broadly similar picture.

And the Church here not only admits – at last – that there is a problem but also implicit-

ly concedes that it has been covered-up in the past. Walter Schwarz reports in *The Guardian* (January 13) that RC bishops are to issue guidelines on dealing with child sexual abuse by priests, youth workers and other church employees.

They will help seminaries to detect sexual problems among ordinands during their training.

A spokesman for the Catholic Bishops' Conference said: "The new idea will be to screen people psychologically and make them aware of any hidden difficulties in their sexual identity or sexual relationships at an early stage."

Well he would, wouldn't he?

THE spokesman denied there was a link between clerical celibacy and child abuse: "But we must not cover up abuse when it happens and we must learn how to prevent clergy, diocesan officials, and volunteers from committing abuse, with the emphasis on early detection of problems."

He said child abusers could be people with arrested sexual development which could "go into hibernation for years and then surface at moments of stress."

The report adds: "We must appreciate that any abuser is suffering from a disease. Our response cannot, therefore, be simply punitive or vindictive. Treatment is essential."

Quite. But what the Church report does not even hint at is that Christianity's own grubby obsession with sex has itself created guilt, repression and sexual dysfunction on a terrifying scale.

The "diseased" priests mentioned by the Bishops' spokesman are home-grown – victims of what Dr Wendell W. Watters calls an "authoritarian pronatalist sex code."

In his Prometheus book *Deadly Doctrine: Health, Illness and Christian God-Talk* (to be reviewed in the April *Freethinker*), Dr Watters suggests that this "code" is characterised by:

- (1) tolerance, if not actual promotion, of sexual ignorance;
- (2) proscriptions against sexual awareness in childhood and adolescence;
- (3) phobic attitudes toward sensual pleasure;
- (4) prohibition of sexual pleasure over and above that necessary to complete the coital reproductive act;
- (5) prohibition of sexual behaviours that do not lead to conception (masturbation, oral sex or homosexuality);
- (6) rejection of individual rights in reproductive regulation;
- (7) rejection of individual rights in choice of parenthood;
- (8) down-playing of individual sexual responsibility in favour of rigid adherence to religiously prescribed laws; and
- (9) gender role stereotyping.

Growing out of the habit

IN the process of casting off religious chains, prayer can be among the last to be disentangled. This is partially an effect of having been brainwashed as children (if by well-meaning parents) into adopting the peculiar practice.

From the start it was a felt peculiarity because it involved unaccustomed behaviour – kneeling, or bending one's head, eyes closed, hands clasped together, remaining perfectly still and uttering not entirely intelligible phrases in a somewhat affected voice. Feeling ridiculous as well as uncomfortable made it into a sort of charade. However, charades of one kind or another were all an accepted feature of childhood.

Later it emerged that none of this was vital to prayer. The customary drill was merely a form of presentation, which people had got used to, and sometimes justified on practical grounds, such as that it gave dignity and order to the practice and minimised distraction. In essence, prayer was "getting into touch with God" and you could do that, I was relieved to learn, without all that kerfuffle.

As an adolescent Bible Class teacher, seeking to pass to the rising generation the drivel I had dutifully absorbed, it was tempting to suggest to the innocents who looked to me for guidance that any posture was permissible and eyes could be left wide open. But that would have been asking for trouble, quite apart from there being strong disapproval among the adults over any tampering with the rubrics.

When alone, that was another matter. Hooked on the bedtime review of the day's doings, I was soon on chummy terms with God, feeling no need for self-mortifying contortions and a reverential voice.

The snag was – I was left to do all the talking. Scripture stories gave a more exciting picture, but our mentors had told us not to expect audible replies and spectacular demonstrations of divine interest. Why we shouldn't was left unclear.

Still, there it was. From handy manuals on the subject, I gathered that, if you could keep Wandering Thoughts at bay, thinking would do just as well as talking. In any case, you had to have a silent time and wait for a divine thought to slip in by way of reply. Thoughts that did come actually looked like your own.

I sought advice from the minister of the church I attended. He told me he was sure it was God speaking when the idea was about something he didn't want to do. I found it rather depressing to think that God wanted people to do things they found disagreeable. I wasn't prepared to believe that and was convinced that if I were a minister I could do a better PR job. A drawback was God's apparent reluctance to come out into the open and show exactly the kind of person He was.

Under the circumstances, it seemed practical to select the best ideas you could about God and ditch those you thought were unreasonable. Inside this indoctrinated devotee, as you can see, was an enquiring spirit struggling to

Charles Ward (pictured) on chatting with the deity



get out.

More and more it appeared like a game of "Let's pretend." When what you wished for materialised, as sometimes happened, you could, if so inclined, put it down to coincidence or luck or chance or simply to the effort you had put in to achieving the result. Or you could say that God had answered your prayer.

Writers on the subject, like preachers, were always inclined to give God the credit. "Who rises from prayer a better man, his prayer is answered," they would remind you, failing to explain how to be sure that you were not deceiving yourself. Many of them were plainly suspicious of the new study of psychology, which was taking the lid off very devious goings-on in human minds. Auto-suggestion, also, appeared to be more effective than prayer.

Some mental images that slithered from the once-sealed box of the "subconscious" certainly looked very nasty indeed, but I was more interested in finding out what beneficial effects might be obtained by means of this new knowledge. Chief among these, I concluded, was the way in which modes of thought could, in many instances, be seen as related to effects. And that was something which, in all the anecdotal propaganda about "answered prayer," I had seldom found self-evident.

The insistence of religious teachers that one should depend utterly on God was typically ambivalent, since God could act through you, they said. They were most emphatic that it was not a question of: *Sit down, ye men of God, His kingdom He will bring; Sit down, let God do all the work; You need not do a thing.*

That was the trouble: you couldn't pin them down. All the same, "God helps those who help themselves," as a philosophy, only just kept religion in the picture.

A God who keeps out of touch and allows you to make the best decisions you can (and maybe some of the worst) is frustrating to anyone who is looking for guidance. A Deaf Ear can be distinctly off-putting.

Disappointed customers might think prayer should be among the first rather than the last of religious notions to be abandoned. Michael Frayn observed: "We look at the taciturn, inscrutable universe, and cry, 'Speak to me!'" (*Constructions*, 7). A more fundamental cry, however inchoate, could be rendered, Beatle-wise, as simply "Help!" The instinct of appeal is with us from our infancy. A child is

not concerned with absence of meaning, only with distress.

At a later stage, as a result of indoctrination, one tendency is not to ask why Nobody comes running, but to devise excuses for the lack of response to one's desperate cries. Another reaction is a violent rejection of all ideas tinged with religion. This may cover a hidden wish that religion might, after all, have been true.

Shorn of its associated mythology, any prayer is no more than a wish. Wishes – good, evil, sensible, absurd, or of indifferent character – are, as they always have been, inseparable from the human condition. From childhood to death, all of us indulge in desires of many kinds, ranging from passing fancies to compelling ideals. The religious exploit this ubiquitous fact by canalising their wishes in directions believed by them to be of "eternal" advantage to themselves.

Those who have strong wishes, of whatever sort, quite frequently appear to obtain what they have wished for. In most instances, no one suspects any magical or supernatural causation to have been involved. Strong wishes help to shape the lives of determined people who hold them. Their single-mindedness enables them to see possibilities and grasp opportunities which others less dedicated might not have noticed. Chance clearly plays a considerable part in life, but those who boast of their good luck, or bemoan their lack of it, may be unobservant of other factors.

An adequate response to what religious people describe as the problem of unanswered prayer is not to tell them bluntly that no-one is listening, for that is only a half-truth. Those who pray are listening to their own prayers, or expressed wishes, and that is what matters when it comes to the question as to whether these wishes are likely to materialise or not.

Things are not always as they appear. With the conscious mind one desire may be to the fore, while in the "subconscious" more powerful images are shaping effects. There can be conflicting and even self-contradictory hopes or wishes which, in effect, cancel each other out. Although the intensity of a desire is no guarantee of its fulfilment, many wishes are so casual, weak and puerile, it seems incredible that anyone should expect any consequence from them whatever.

Yet who would deny the great *potentiality* of thought? All that human beings can accomplish in the world begins with ideas – ideas which are turned into wishes, hopes, intentions and efforts.

To affirm this is one thing; to talk of the "power of prayer" quite another. This phrase puzzled me, since God was supposed to exercise His power in answering prayers – unless, of course, what was meant was that prayer, especially if constant, could coerce God into doing something He wasn't really minded to do. That seemed to me impertinent, to say the least.

➤ Turn to Page 39

TONY AKKERMANS STALKS THE

Crocodile in his palace



WHEN I was 17, I wrote to an uncle pointing out that if everybody else was irresponsible enough to match his feat of reproduction (16 children and rising) the world population would increase eight times within one generation.

Looking back, I am surprised at the depth of my outrage at that early age, risking my parents' displeasure if found out. Fortunately, no reply was ever received.

But, ever since, unbridled breeding has remained my number one concern about the human condition. Most pernicious of all is unplanned, unrestricted, mindless propagation at the behest of religious dogma. The "go forth

and multiply" command issued in some ancient obscure script, pointlessly and sheepishly obeyed at no advantage to anybody.

At one point in history, optimising fertility may well have been necessary to maintain the human race – but there is no case for limitless procreation in our time. The resources and space on earth are finite and cannot accommodate a doubling of population every 40 years.

The protagonists of "go forth and multiply" seem to me to be either amazingly ignorant or very wicked.

Mrs Gillick, the nation's Earth Mother, maintains that she can afford to bring up her 10 children and that therefore it is her choice and nothing to do with anybody else. Would

that we could live in isolation from such people. She overlooks that her ten offspring will expect five times more housing, food, water, clothing, transport and breathing space than anybody else's statutory two.

And what is the justification? Presumably her husband doesn't have worries about his masculinity? Is it really more enjoyable to bring up 10 children than two or three? And even if it were, is it right that this slightly increased enjoyment should be bought at a massive cost to the environment and at the expense of everybody else's reduced circumstances?

John Donne said "every man's death diminishes me" but would it not be truer in another sense that "every man's birth diminishes me"?

As millions must live in desperate poverty in ghastly, overcrowded shanty towns as a direct result of his preachings against birth control and abortion, all the Pope can do is stand aside and utter pious platitudes of "let there be no hunger, let there be love, let there be peace." Then the crocodile goes back to his palace and is short of nothing.

For the faithful the whole perilous enterprise is underwritten by the catch-all "God will provide." The trouble is God *won't* provide, as future generations will learn to their cost.

If it takes 30 days for a frog population, doubling in size each day, to fill a pond, then on day 29 the pond is still half-empty. When our day 30 arrives, the wretched Earthlings then alive will curse our generation for not having acted to spare their fate. I, for one, plead diminished responsibility.

Help crack the nuts – with cash

RELIGIOUS nuts everywhere.

One, in Waco, Texas, is claiming to be the Messiah and, as we go to press, finds himself besieged with his armoury and his harem. The bodies have been removed, but God has not yet made the waited-for contact.

Another, holed-up in his Italian palace for most of the time, claims to be only the Vicar of Christ but to be entirely infallible after he has spoken to Jehovah. Unmarried himself, this elderly Pole's latest relay from The Lord is to tell Bosnian women "impregnated by wartime rape not to seek abortions but to give birth to the children" (*The Guardian*, March 1, 1993).

The ravaged women, who could number up to 70,000, have been urged by His Holiness: "Do not abort. Your children are not responsible for the violence you have undergone...accept the enemy into you...make him the flesh of your own flesh."

Who is the nuttier – nut one, nut two, or the millions of fruit-and-nuts who believe what such people say?

There's no denying that the need for *The Freethinker* is quite as great now as it was in 1881, when the first issue rolled off the press under the guidance of G W Foote. But we do not have the vast resources of the religionists – of the Starvation Army, for example, with its £80 million a year income in the UK alone.

We rely on your donations to keep going – to step-up the fight against darkness.

Our thanks to the following, who understand this: J Bendall, C W Cope, J Dowding, T M Graham, B Hayes, A J Kendall and E J Rose, £1 each; R Power, £1.40; D J Blewitt, P B Godfrey, P K Underhill and I Young, £2 each; D Berman, £2.40; B Samuel, £3; R A Sage, £4; G B Stowell, £4.40; N Bruce, C M Burnside, B Catermole, M Ewing, M

Fox, R G Hayne, A P Hodges, A J Hoyle, J R Jaynes, H Levon, R Lewis, A B Mason, N R Metcalfe, J Molloy, M O'Brien, D O'Hara, G R Reece, S O Rose, E Stockton and two anonymous donors: £5 each; J Boyd, £7; C L S Howard, £7.50; J Lippitt and J Hazelhurst, £8 each. In memory of W M Ingram, £9.40; K Brown, G Govind, V C A Mitchell, V S Petheram and J Polak, £10 each; J Bleeker, £14; J Rapley, £14.40; K Haughton, A Liddle, R Pierce and A J Wilson, £15 each; B Aubrey, W Donovan and two anonymous donors, £20 each; J Vallance, £45; W Scott, £50.

Total for January: £488.50.

Please send donations for *The Freethinker* Development Fund to Terry Mullins, G W Foote and Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Growing out of the habit

• From Page 38

I was never happy with those "vigils" and marathons of prayer which enthusiasts would occasionally organise. Were we not told that God knew what you wanted before you prayed? Trying to square that circle brought you back to how you were helping yourself – in other words, what your thoughts were doing for you.

Some religious people go over to meditation because it avoids all this brain-teasing about prayer. When people talk about the "power of prayer" what they presumably have in mind is the "power of thought." By that they often mean things just as weird and wonderful as that there is Someone engaged in dealing with an endless succession of calls from Planet Earth.

They mean, for example, a paranormal force which may be applied with miraculous results by privileged folk initiated into the use

of secret techniques. Or perhaps a God-directed power for whose operation the faith of true believers is required.

In the pre-scientific past the fancy that a thought possessed integral power was translated into the incantations and rites of sympathetic magic. Jumping up and down and uttering wild cries was thought to encourage the crops to grow. Although this exercise was doubtless good for the circulation, the faith of our earnest ancestors was not of the slightest practical benefit to anyone.

To this day millions engage in prayer. Some of its practitioners have the effrontery to speak of the "science" of prayer, although it must be one of the most unscientific activities in which people engage. It is more than time that chains of superstition should be severed and proper appreciation given to the truly amazing power we have – the power to think rationally.

They are risen

IN the early days of the Christian Church, when one believer met another on Easter Sunday, he would often salute him with the cry: *The Lord is risen!* To which the other would respond: *He is risen indeed!*

These greetings are still exchanged, and I have never hesitated to reply if I am addressed in the way described. I know that many other freethinkers and, indeed, some Christians, find it difficult to do so because they are unable to accept the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I have no wish to appear complacent or supercilious, but the matter has never troubled me for a moment.

Of course Jesus rose from the dead. It was a perfectly proper way for a god to behave and he would have been failing in his duty if he had neglected to do so. Bel and Baldur, for example, were also gods and they were sufficiently aware of what was expected of them to rise from the dead. And if they and hundreds of similar divinities practised the art, then why not Jesus?

I am not asserting that all gods rose from the dead, since all gods did not die. But those for whom dying was uncongenial proved their divinity in a variety of other ways: by being born parthenogenetically; by controlling the elements; by performing miracles; by descending to hell or ascending to heaven (and in some cases both, but usually in that order); by changing their form...and so on.

What makes Jesus such an important god is that he is able to offer all of these proofs. Not that he ever claimed to be divine. He was far too modest. But there was no need for him to do so. It was plain for everyone to see, as the records testify.

Rising from the grave, therefore, would have presented no problem to a god of the calibre of Jesus. In fact, any god worthy of the appellation who was put to death and who had a proper sense of tradition and self-respect would have done it as a matter of course.

One could argue that the manner of Jesus' death and resurrection was, perhaps, mundane when compared with that of other gods. For example, Zagreus was re-created by his father from his heart, which had been rescued from a boiling cauldron by an amiable goddess. Thammuz, who was something of an exhibitionist, performed the feat every year, while Hercules rose after having been cremated – and still in such prime condition as to be able to

remarry afterwards, although whether he was able to add to the 80 or so children he had fathered before his cremation is not recorded.

It could also be argued that Jesus was not alone among Biblical personages who rose from the dead, and that the manner of his resurrection when set against theirs was, to put it bluntly, undistinguished. It is recorded in Ezekiel, for instance, that a valley-full of ancient bones rose from the ground and were immediately supplied with flesh and breath, reminding one, inevitably, of the imitative case of the dragon's teeth sown by Cadmus which rose through the soil as a magnificent and well-equipped army.

Then, of course, in the New Testament, Matthew testified that the bodies of long-dead saints rose from their graves after the crucifixion and visited their friends and relations. He did not elaborate on the effect this had on their hosts, nor on the popular reaction as they resumed their recumbent postures, but these are matters of no great moment.

Nevertheless, however mundane his method, the fact is that Jesus performed the feat efficiently and without undue delay; and he could at least claim to have succeeded where other would-be gods failed. Orpheus, for example, was torn to pieces by Thracian women before being flung into the river; but his head resurfaced and positioned itself in the cleft of a rock from where it delivered oracles for a while. Or Protesilaus, who rose from the dead and breathed for no longer than three hours before he returned to his grave.

It must be remembered that Jesus did not need to rise from the grave to prove his divinity. He had already done that – firstly, at his birth and, later, with a series of miracles. In any case, his father, who was a fairly important god, too, had declared their relationship on more than one occasion by calling down to Jesus' companions from a cloud. The cynic will point out that Jesus, in saying that he and his father were one, was laying himself open to the charge that this could not be, since it would mean that he had been talking to himself from a distance of several hundred yards. But this exhibits a total lack of comprehension of the nature of gods. With a god, as Jesus himself declared, all things are possible.

Perhaps some of the doubt that lingers in the minds of freethinkers and, I must repeat, of some Christians, about the truth of the death and resurrection of Jesus is because he was poorly served by his

**Neil Blewitt
notes that
the
superstitious
have not put
all their
Easter eggs
in one
basket-case**

chroniclers, and I would agree that the doubters have a strong case.

For example, let us examine the accounts given by the New Testament evangelists, plus Peter and Bartholomew, on the stone which was rolled across the entrance to Jesus' tomb. It was attested by Matthew and Mark that Joseph of Arimathea was responsible; but Peter ascribed it to the elders, scribes, centurions and soldiers, while Bartholomew insisted that it was Philogenes and some Jews. Luke and John refused to speculate on the person or persons responsible; it could only have added to the confusion. And it is worth noting that Peter, alone of the six, stated that the party fastened the stone with seven seals, although he does not reveal if the chief centurion uttered the Latin equivalent of *Get out of that, matey!*

Nor are the chroniclers any more in agreement over the names and number of the women who went to the tomb on the Sunday morning. John wrote that Mary Magdalene attended unaccompanied; Matthew said that another Mary was with her; Mark had Salome joining them; Luke declared for at least five visitors, and

Bartholomew included Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and Salome. Luke declared for at least five visitors, and

isen indeed!



Jesus and at the rolling away of the stone from the entrance to the tomb. Such disturbances are precisely what one would expect to accompany the death and resurrection of a god. Indeed, I would be suspicious of any account which did not include them.

A cynic once said to me that Hammer Films would have made a better job of it by including a full, blood-red moon during the darkness (with ominous clouds scudding across it), thunder and lightning, driving rain, foraging bats and an owl hooting eerily in the distance. But that belongs to the world of fiction, and here I am dealing with fact. It may be, although I am not in his confidence, that the god who arranged for the darkness and the earthquake may have felt that, by using all the elemental forces available to him, he would have laid himself open to a charge of over-reacting.

The fact that no contemporary non-Biblical historian recorded these disturbances, nor the resurrection of the saints in Jerusalem, cannot be held to throw doubt on their validity. What, one may ask, would be the point of anybody else reporting on them when Matthew had already done it so graphically?

That the stone was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb when the women attended on the Sunday morning presents a difficulty to some. Why, they inquire, when Jesus was able to enter the upper-room through a closed door, did he need to have the stone rolled away to facilitate his escape from the tomb? I agree that the progress of a god is not to be inhibited by a stone, a locked door or any other impediment. Zeus penetrated a locked door in order to impregnate Danae, and Odin transformed himself into a snake to enable him to slide through a minute hole in a rock to partake of a draught of hydromel secreted behind it. Jesus was no less of a god than they, so he would not have required the stone to be removed. That it was rolled away was obviously so that the messenger or messengers mentioned by the evangelists could await in comfort the arrival of the women, although it was not recorded that the weather was inclement at the time.

Cynics aver that the disciples stole the body, or that Jesus was not really dead when he was confined in the tomb and that he was revived by the coolness of the air and released by the sympathetic and astute centurion who had stood at the foot of the cross and acknowledged his divinity. But gods do not conduct their business in nat-

ural ways, nor on hypotheses. They rise from the dead, simply and unequivocally, as they have been doing from time immemorial.

If further proof were needed of the divinity of Jesus, it lies in the fact of his ascension to heaven, which is the proper location of gods – save, of course, for those like Pluto whose inclination is to inhabit the underworld. The conventional method of locomotion to heaven is by means of a chariot and the more fiery the better, as with Romulus, Elijah and Mithra. But others will choose their vehicle from an approved list which includes a lightning flash, a bird and a cloud, among many others. A god of an undemonstrative nature, like Krishna, will simply rise without using any of the aids of his more ostentatious peers. This is not to say that there may have been gods who rose in this way because they were not aware of what was expected of them or through sheer absent-mindedness – but I have not yet found records of such cases.

All of the methods listed above are perfectly acceptable, but there is a condition attaching to the use of a cloud. It must be white. Any other colour and the divinity of its passenger must be open to question. Jesus chose the less-favoured cloud, but this must not be allowed to detract from his importance as a god since Mark recorded that he was observed, after having safely completed the journey on it, to be sitting at the right hand of the god he referred to as his father.

And this brings me back to my starting-point: no god worthy of the appellation lacks the power to rise from the dead and ascend to heaven, although not all gods chose to exercise it. Jesus performed both of these feats – it is quite clearly stated in the New Testament – which demonstrates that he must be divine.

I, for one, have no doubt of it, and when the Baptist minister, who lives near me, greets me at Easter with his customary *The Lord is risen!* I shall respond right heartily, as I always do, that *He is risen indeed – with Krishna, Bel-Marduk, Osiris, Zoroaster, Adonis, Zagreus...*

My regret is that Uncle Tom Cobleigh was but a mortal. If I could only justifiably add his name, it would bring my response to a well-rounded conclusion.



Bartholomew raised this to nine. His party included Joanna, who had renounced the marriage-bed; Berenice, who was healed of an issue of blood; Leah, the widow, whose son had been raised from the dead, and an unnamed woman to whom Jesus had said *Thy sins, though they be many, are forgiven thee.*

Similar discrepancies occur over who awaited the women. Matthew had a solitary angel rolling away the stone, accompanied by an earthquake, and sitting on it (the stone, not the earthquake); Mark had one man sitting inside the tomb; Luke had two men standing, and John had two angels sitting. And only Matthew mentioned the earthquake.

A god deserves better than this. And I have no doubt that when the chroniclers appeared before the Judgement Seat, their heavenly father engaged in a little plain speaking. And one can almost hear them replying, like ancient forerunners of the late Dick Emery's incompetent lout: *Dad, I got it wrong again!*

I make no complaint about the reports of the darkening of the sun during the crucifixion and the earthquakes at the death of

Humanists' call to PM on Rushdie

THE British Humanist Association has called on Prime Minister John Major to lead an international campaign on behalf of Salman Rushdie. The call for greater government support for Rushdie will be taken up nationwide through the BHA's new Postal Action Scheme.

In a letter to Mr Major, the BHA congratulated him on his agreement to meet Rushdie, and suggested that the meeting take place as soon and as publicly as possible.

The BHA called on the PM to follow this up by placing Britain at the forefront of an inter-governmental campaign to increase pressure on Iran to withdraw the fatwa.

Network

In particular, the BHA urged the British Government to ask for the Rushdie case to be high on the agenda of the next meeting of the European Council of Ministers.

The campaign is the first to be taken up by the BHA's recently-launched letter writing network. The Postal Action Scheme aims to give a stronger voice to non-religious people in Britain.

BHA spokesman Matt Cherry commented: "It was Salman Rushdie's artistic expression of his Humanist view of religion that led to demands for his murder. The BHA has been dismayed at the influence exerted by the British supporters of this brutal religious intolerance.

"We have always argued that everyone who supports the right to freedom of expression and freedom from religion should act to defend Rushdie. It is particularly appropriate, therefore, that Salman Rushdie's fellow Humanists should be stepping up the campaign on his behalf."

This believing world

BURNING QUESTION?: A heresy trial is set for March 18 in Sydney's Presbyterian Court against Dr Peter Cameron, Principal of St Andrew's College at the city's university. He is accused of questioning the Bible's infallibility last March by supporting women's ordination, which Australia's Presbyterian Church bans, and suggesting that St Paul was not opposed to homosexuality.—*Daily Telegraph*: February 12.

BARE FACTS: Bridgeport, Connecticut. A major Pentecostal church is risking schism to uphold a code of conduct that disapproves of any apparel that immodestly exposes the body, mixed swimming, dances, women cutting their hair and television sets in members'

homes. The 500,000-member United Pentecostal Church has sent letters to its 7,500 ministers requiring them to recommit to its holiness code...or lose their ministerial licences. The letter has been interpreted by many ministers as an affront to their independence and "significant attrition" within the church is forecast.—*Natal Witness*: January 25.

NATURALLY: My main concern is that there are one-and-a-half billion women in the world of child-bearing age. If they all got pregnant at one time, the world population would go up by one-and-a-half billion — something very few people think about, says naturalist David Bellamy.—*Independent on Sunday*: January 17.

DEVIL TO P(L)AY: Twenty Filipino schoolchildren went into a frenzy after seeing the devil, a "gigantic man who has horns and tail" standing under a tamarind tree in their school playground. Joy Bolante, 12, kept screaming "There is no God!" before fainting along with five other girls. The local priest dabbed holy water on them, and school officials said the tree would be blessed and, probably, an exorcist hired to drive away any evil spirit.—*The Scotsman*: January 29.

ANOTHER VICTIM: A Jehovah's Witness bled to death after the birth of her second child because religious principles prevented her having a transfusion. Mrs Yvonne Leighton, 28, and her husband, Gordon, had signed forms refusing hospital staff permission to give her blood. A relative said: "Gordon...is totally distraught. He doesn't know what to do. His life is shattered."—*Daily Telegraph*: February 5.

MORE JOY IN HEAVEN: South African multiple murderer Louis van Schoor intends to become a church minister. Van Schoor, 40, who is serving a 20-year jail sentence for seven murders and two attempted murders, has applied to study theology. Prison chaplain Gert Walkers said van Schoor has "experienced a change of heart." He did not know in which denomination van Schoor wants to be ordained.—*Natal Witness*, January 23.

MINORITY VIEW: Only 2.5 per cent of the English population are weekly churchgoing members of the Church of England. That is a flimsy numerical foundation on which to base a claim that the Church of England's special relationship with the Crown is "necessary" for the good of society.—*Daily Telegraph* leader: January 26.

200 not out — and still batting strong

THE South Place Ethical Society, the oldest freethought organisation in the world, celebrates its bicentenary this year.

It began in February, 1793 in a chapel in Parliament Court, East London. At first, it followed Universalism (the doctrine that everyone shall be saved and no one shall stay in Hell for ever) and then Unitarianism (the doctrine that God is one and that Jesus was not divine). But later it moved through Theism towards Humanism.

In 1824 the Society moved to a new chapel in South Place, Moorgate, where it stayed for more than a century. In 1835 it became an independent society.

In 1888 it became an Ethical Society, which it has remained ever since. After 1897, it had no more ministers, but relied instead on a panel of Appointed Lecturers, as well as expert speakers from outside.

South Place became well known as a meeting-place for all sorts of radical organisations. There have been Sunday evening concerts since 1887, and a regular magazine since 1895. The Society moved in 1929 to Conway Hall, Holborn, where it has been ever since.

A programme of special events has been arranged to mark the bicentenary.

Thursday evening meetings, beginning at 7.30pm: March 25: Christopher Hill, on *The Bible in 17th Century England*, the subject of his latest book. April 29: Sir Alan Cottrell, on *Limits to Physical Explanation*. May 13: Michael Foot, on *H G Wells and the Humanists*. June 3: Harold Blackham, the "father" of modern Humanism, interviewed by Barbara Smoker.

June 24: Brenda Colloms on past minister William J. Fox. July 8: Frances Crook, Director of the Howard League for Penal Reform. September 16: Benny Green on *Humanistic Writers Who Influenced Me*. September 30: Claire Rayner, on *Rational Approaches to Personal Problems*. October 14: Penelope Lively on *Fiction and Unbelief*. October 28: James Hemming on *Instead of Confusion*. November 11: Ludovic Kennedy on his beliefs, euthanasia and miscarriages of justice.

Other special events. Saturday evening, March 20: Commemoration of Omar Khayyam, the Persian poet, and celebration of the Iranian New Year and culture, through poetry, music, theatre, and food (admission charge). Saturday, September 25: Day Conference on *The Contribution of Freethinkers to the History of Science*, with sessions chaired by Sir Hermann Bondi and Richard Dawkins.

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DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



PC = Perfectly Crackers!

THERE are strong elements of Bowdlerism and Grundyism in "politically correct" language.

Its devoted practitioners' influence is evident in journalism, broadcasting, publishing, education and the public services, their main targets being words which include the letters "man" or "men," books which they judge to be "sexist" or "racist," works of art and illustrations.

The spoken word is also being sanitised. Now only the foolhardy will refer to a committee chairman as anything other than a unit of furniture.

But defiance of the "politically correct" language lobby is growing.

For instance, the English Centre of International P.E.N. has published a report based on evidence received from writers, illustrators and publishers. It concludes that authors "resent what they regard as censorship of their work in pursuit of a bland, idealised and unreal world in which every minority, be it racial, domestic, sexual or physical, is dutifully represented."

Examples quoted include rejection of a manuscript because it was "too middle class."

One author was asked to remove a scene including a grassy lawn because "many children do not have gardens."

Others have been asked to avoid mentioning pigs in their stories in order not to offend Moslem readers.

Writers express annoyance over pressure to accept artificial impositions on their work.

Criticism is made of "the current fad for so-called feminist attitudes, when all women are shown as brainy and saintly superpersons and nearly all men as bumbling idiots."

There is concern that Christian fundamentalists in Britain will gain influence comparable to that in the United States, where they have succeeded in removing hundreds of titles from school libraries. *Hamlet, The Prince and the Pauper* and *Wuthering Heights* are among the banned books.

While it is unlikely that the American censorship experience will be repeated here, writers and publishers are justifiably wary.

"Politically correct" gauleiters in the United States can teach their British counterparts a thing or two. They recently celebrated a famous victory when Donna Ellen Cooperman fought a long battle through the New York courts and won the right to call herself Donna Ellen Cooperperson.

It is to Ms Cooperperson that the *Official*

Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook (Grafton, £4.99) is dedicated.

Consisting of four parts and more than 600 references, the Dictionary and Handbook is indispensable for those wishing to survive in this age of linguistic sensitivity.

Examples of correct, taboo and suspect words are drawn from the Left and the Right of the political spectrum.

What is alarming is that most such abominations originate in institutes of learning and their publications.

Here are a few examples: *involuntarily leisured* (unemployed); *chronologically gifted* (old); *motivationally deficient* (lazy); *personnel access structure* (manhole); *person of differing sobriety* (alcoholic); *discretionary fragrance* (perfume or after-shave lotion); *nondiscretionary fragrance* (body odour); *alternative dentation* (false teeth); *differently honest* (untrustworthy); *alternatively schooled* (illiterate); *nontraditional shopper* (shoplifter).

In American "politically correct" language dying is to become terminally inconvenienced or, as a Department at the University of California prefers, metabolically different.

But this will be of little concern to the chronologically gifted person who, in a state of differing sobriety, fell down a personnel access structure and was terminally inconvenienced.

Negative current?

CALL me an old softie if you like, but a tribute in last month's *Evangelicals Now* brought a modest blush of pride to the cheek. It declared that, during my editorial stint, *The Freethinker* "was very vocal in denouncing, exposing, ridiculing and lamprooning religion."

Evangelicals Now then spoiled it by hanging on about *The Freethinker*'s allegedly negative attitudes: "It seems to live an essentially parasitic existence...rather than putting forward a world view in its own right and on its own terms."

Our critic's knowledge derives from "a skimming" of *The Freethinker*, so ignorance of its history and positive, if limited, contribution to campaigns for social reforms and civil liberties is understandable.

While asserting that *The Freethinker* could not be expected "to discern between religion and Christianity," *Evangelicals Now* did not proceed to enlighten us on this point. However, if we turn to the *Oxford Dictionary* for guidance, it defines religion as: "Human recognition of a supreme

power and especially of a personal God entitled to obedience."

The wording in dictionaries varies, but in essence religion means the belief in and worship of a deity of one kind or another. Believers' perception of religions and deities range from the utterly pernicious to the pleasantly dotty. And Christians, from Romanists to Paisleyites, from High Anglicans to Exclusive Brethren, are no exception.

If it is negative to expose malevolent religious movements, criticise the privileged position of churches and their pressure groups, resist censorship and oppose indoctrination of captive audiences in the nation's schools – so be it. Similarly when we advocate the concentration of human energy on the betterment of this world and refuse a helping of evangelical pie-in-the-sky.

Monk-ey tricks

MANY Westerners who are unable to swallow the absurdities of Christianity turn to religions of the mystic East for fulfilment.

Buddhism is one magnet for these seekers after enlightenment. It emphasises the virtues of tolerance, gentleness and inner peace. So there was understandable dismay when a Buddhist monk in Thailand was arrested, unrobed and charged with damaging a coffin during funeral rites.

Police action over a damaged coffin may be deemed somewhat harsh. But there is no law in Thailand under which they could lay a charge for what most would regard as the real offence: the saffron-robed monk was having sex with a corpse.

In all fairness, it should be mentioned that the occupant of the coffin was a female corpse.

Nothing queer about the servant of Lord Buddha!

ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

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Blast from the past: Number 3

Edited from Who Was Jesus Christ, and What Did He Teach? by Charles Bradlaugh (1833-91), founder of the National Secular Society

JESUS had a disciple named Peter, who, having much Christian faith, was a great coward, and denied his leader in his hour of need. Jesus, though previously aware that Peter would be a traitor, yet gave him the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and told him that whatsoever he bound on earth should be bound in Heaven.

Peter was to have denied Jesus three times before the cock should crow (Matt. xxvi 34). The cock crowed before Peter's second denial (Mark xiv. 68). Commentators urge that the words used do not refer to the crowing of any particular cock, but to a special hour of the morning called "cock-crow." But if the Gospel be true the explanation is false.

Peter's denial becomes the more extraordinary when we remember that he had seen Moses, Jesus, and Elias talking together, and had heard a voice from a cloud say: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." As Peter could thus deny Jesus after having heard God vouch his divinity, and Peter not only escapes punishment but gets the office of gate-keeper to Heaven, how much more should those escape punishment and obtain reward who only deny because they cannot help it, and who have been left without any corroborative evidence of sight or hearing!

The Jesus of the First Gospel promised that, as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so he (Jesus) would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Yet he was buried on Friday evening and was out of the grave before Saturday night was over. Some say that the Jews reckoned part of a day as a whole one...

On the Cross, the Jesus of the Four Gospels, who was God, cried out: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" God cannot forsake himself. Jesus

WHAT A WAY TO SPEND EASTER!

was God himself. Yet God forsook Jesus, and the latter cried out to know why he was forsaken. Any able divine will explain that of course he knew, and that he was not forsaken. The explanation renders it difficult to believe the dying cry, and the passage becomes one of the mysteries of the holy Christian religion, which, unless a man rightly believe, "without doubt he shall perish everlastingly."

At the crucifixion of Jesus, wonderful miracles took place. "The graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose and came out of the grave after his resurrection and appeared unto many." Which saints were these? They "appeared unto many," but there is not the slightest evidence outside the Bible that anyone ever saw them. Their bodies came out of the graves. Do not the bodies of the saints decompose like those of ordinary human beings?

Jesus must have much changed in the grave, for his disciples did not know him when he stood on the shore (John xxi. 4), and Mary, most attached to him, knew him

not, but supposed that he was the gardener.

According to the First Gospel, Jesus appeared to two women after his resurrection, and afterwards met 11 of his disciples by appointment on a mountain in Galilee. When was this appointment made? The text on which divines rely is Matthew xxvi. 32; this makes no such appointment. According to the Second Gospel, he appeared first to one woman, and when she told the disciples they did not believe it. Yet, on pain of indictment now and damnation hereafter, we are bound to unhesitatingly accept that which the disciples of Jesus rejected.

By the Second Gospel, we learn that, instead of the 11 going to Galilee after Jesus, he came to them as they sat at meat. In the Third Gospel he first appeared to two of his disciples at Emmaus, and they did not know him until they had been a long time in his company - it was evening before they recognised him. Unfortunately, directly they knew him they did not see him, for as soon they knew him he vanished out of their sight.

He immediately afterwards appeared to the 11 at Jerusalem, and not at Galilee, as stated in the First Gospel. Jesus asked for some meat, and the disciples gave him a portion of a broiled fish and of a honeycomb, and he did eat.

Jesus was afterwards taken up into Heaven, a cloud received him, and he was missed. God is everywhere, and Heaven no more above than below, but it is necessary we should believe that Jesus has ascended into Heaven to sit on the right hand of God, who is infinite and has no right hand.

Was Jesus Christ a man? If limited for our answer to the mere Gospel Jesus - surely not. His whole career is, on any literal reading, simply a series of improbabilities or contradictions.

Who was Christ? Born of a virgin, and of divine parentage? So too were many of the mythic Sun gods and so was Krishna, whose story, similar in many respects with that of Jesus, was current long prior to the Christian era.

Was Jesus Christ man or myth? His story being fable, is the hero a reality? That a man named Jesus really lived and performed some special actions attracting popular attention, and thus became the centre for a hundred myths, may well be true; but beyond this what is there of solid fact?

**CHARLES
TURNER
GORHAM**

The grandchildren of C T Gorham (1856-1933), the eminent Rationalist and Freethinker, would be glad to know if they could obtain any copies of his published works

Please write with your offer price to:
Miss C M Lamont, 7 Lismore Road, South Croydon, Surrey CR2 7QA.

'Our Indian democracy depends on secularism'

THE events leading to the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya and their aftermath of communal carnage mark a watershed in the history of free India.

These traumatic events clearly expose the fragile nature of secularism in our country. The cost in human lives and property in December 1992 - January 1993 were beyond measure and may now take several years for those afflicted to restore their old means of livelihood.

However, the crises generated by the Ayodhya events go beyond the destruction of human lives and property.

An almost unbridgeable gulf has been created between the two major communities in India. There is greater distrust and feelings of hostility today between the Hindus and Moslems than ever in the past.

The militant Hindu is on the rise and has blatantly rebutted the belief that Hinduism is rooted in tolerance and compassion.

The Moslem community, on the other hand, considerably shaken by these events, has become more vulnerable to the blandishments

**From A Solomon,
President,
Indian Secular Society,
Bombay, February 20**

of their fundamentalist leaders.

The increasingly strident propaganda unleashed by Hindu fundamentalist parties has also affected a large number of educated Hindus, who have become more susceptible to the vicious arguments of the fundamentalists.

There is no denying that India is faced with a crisis of unprecedented gravity. It is a crisis which may not only destroy the delicate fabric of secularism in India but also the democratic framework. Democracy in India can survive only if secularism survives in this country.

One silver lining which we may discern in this dark and dismal scene is the newly-awakened consciousness among some Hindus, as also some Moslems, of the vital necessity of promoting secularism in this country.

Many have now come to realise that secularism is not just an abstract system of ideas but an essential prerequisite of a humane and pluralistic society.

The very survival of the nation depends on its commitment to secularism.

A large number of persons, particularly the young, have been startled into examining the basis of our society and the need to clearly define its nature and goals.

The Indian Secular Society welcomes this new awareness, and more so, because the struggle to realise a secular and humane India has now become more difficult and hazardous.

The fight is going to be long and protracted. Since its inception, the Indian Secular Society has insisted that the Hindu-Moslem problem is essentially an aspect of the larger problem of the liberalisation and modernisation of Indian society.

What is therefore necessary, in order to ensure that Hindus and Moslems will not merely live together but also enter into a dynamic co-operative relationship, is the relegation of religion to the status of a personal relationship between the individual and his God.

Unless this is done, both Hindu and Moslem communalists will continue to define the political and cultural identities of their communities exclusively in religious terms.

If this is to be prevented, we need to take urgent steps to separate religion-based identities from secular, political and cultural identities.

If this is not done soon, the future for India is indeed dark. To promote a secular democratic movement in India is therefore the first task of those who believe in the need for developing an open, liberal and just social order in this country.

● **The Indian Secular Society may be contacted at 850/A Shivajinagar, Pune 411 004, India.**

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Does God pray?

IN response to Fred Westwood's interesting question (January), "why did God create the universe?" there comes to mind two properties attributed to God which are both essential to a Christian understanding of his existence, and which both rather make it difficult to see how he could have created a thimble, never mind a universe or two.

These characteristics - omniscience and eternal existence - indeed make it difficult to understand whether God had a mind at all, still less what could have been in it before the act of creation.

When combined, these two properties would make God incapable of any action or thought, since all possible actions and thoughts would be known at one, instantaneous moment - a moment meaning in this case a period without measurable duration. The whole class of actions, if known in one moment, rather precludes the possibility of any further actions taking place.

Of course, it may be that God, like his poor siblings, may only be as up-to-date with events as they unfurl. If the latter is the case, then perhaps God prays too. But who to? Yours disbelievingly...

COLIN CHALLEN
Hull

Socialism's heart

ERNIE Crosswell writes: "The Crown is as strong as ever; the Established Church is still in place" (February).

Not without the strong support of the Labour Party, which never did stand for Socialism.

In the USA they have no Crown and no Established Church, but the capitalist system, rule by the super-rich, and religious mania everywhere proves that neither monarchy nor establishment are needed as indispensable props to an unfair oligarchical society.

Like Gandhi when talking about Western civilisation, I can safely say that Socialism has certainly never been tried - certainly not in Russia or China!

The Socialist Party [of Great Britain] is the only political party in this country which does not admit religious believers to membership.

Socialism and democracy are inseparable, and rejection of hierarchical and mystical views of the nature of things is the very heart of Socialism.

ROBERT J TAYLOR
South Shields

➤ More letters Pages 46 and 47

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YOU'RE TELLING US!

Pornography

YOUR correspondent Jessie Boyd has perhaps answered her own query as to why Rationalists "tolerate" pornography.

Her argument seems to be the well worn one of "any fool can see that..." and contains not one shred or suggestion of evidence.

Nor does such an argument differentiate between any particular types of pornography, but rather implies that displays of sexual activity between consenting adults, and displays of sadistic attacks, are synonymous.

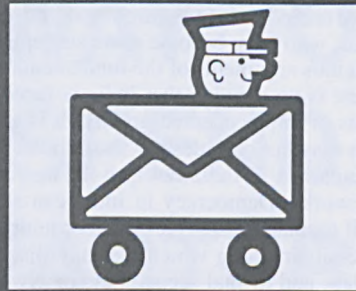
I cannot speak for any other members of the freethought movement but, for myself, I would be happy to see any objective evidence which: did not make tenuous links; did not appear to be generated to fit a pre-determined view; and did not revolve around the view that because one (say) sexual offender had a "dirty" book or video under his bed, pornography was *per se* responsible for his offence, and, by implication, all other sexual offences. (Are we to suppose that there were no sexual offences at all before videos or even books were published and made available to the masses?)

That I have not yet seen any such evidence is not, of itself, reason to suppose that none exists. What I find difficult to understand is that "evidence" should not need to be gleaned from research into sexual crimes, but that numerical evidence should be readily available. Actual figures of both population numbers and frequency of sexual crimes are available for those countries in which pornography is freely available, and those countries where it is not. While I would readily accept that comparisons between different countries would need to be weighted to take into account variables which may possibly affect the incidence of sexual crimes (population density, perhaps), there are also countries where pornography was once illegal, but is now legal. There must be figures available showing the incidence of sexual crimes both before and after liberalisation. If pornography is truly the driving force behind sexual crimes, why have we not had a vast increase in pornography-related crime shouted from the rooftops by those who would try to suppress pornography?

The only references to actual, real, numeric statistics which I have ever seen have not been scholastic analyses of what has actually happened. One was a brief reference in a book which mentioned that there had been a slight but "not statistically significant" drop in sexual crimes after pornography was liberalised in one of the European countries (I cannot even remember which one). The second reference was in a letter in a computer magazine which ended with something like (and I cannot remember the exact figures) "...in Britain in 198X there were 17 child rapes, in

France there were three. Where would you prefer your daughter to live?"

I do not believe that pornography is an isolated, backstreet affair. There appears to be a HUGE market for pornography; it would be surprising if the social rejects who commit sexual offences didn't participate in it. That does not mean that pornography causes the offences. Manufacturers and distributors of pornography are respectable businesses in



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.

mainland Europe, having suites of offices on the same business estates as household names.

Such a background to the subject of pornography leads me to believe that those people who are the driving-force behind the opposition to the distribution and consumption of pornography are not telling me the truth. Are they really trying to protect the innocents, or are they against it for some other reason? I can understand if they think it debasing or degrading, or that it is against their religious beliefs. I don't agree with them, but let's be honest about it, eh? Then they could at least have a sensible dialogue with anybody who cared.

None of this, of course, means that there would be enough justification to oppose the liberalisation of distribution of some pornographic material, even if a minimal correlation between sexual crimes and pornography could be proven. A thousand-fold increase in consumption of pornography, coupled with a one per cent increase in sexual crimes is not necessarily a reason to oppose pornography;

any more than the death of pedestrians from high speed car accidents is necessarily a justification for opposing the sale of such cars.

But that is a different argument.

BOB HAMILTON
Portsmouth

AS another newcomer to the humanist-secular movement, I would like to ask Jessie Boyd to reconsider her request that the movement should cease to tolerate pornography.

There is no evidence that the use of pornography causes people to rape others or to abuse children. Several almost desperate attempts have been made to show such a connection, both here and America, but they have not succeeded. When Denmark freed pornography from legal restriction there was a marked drop in sex crimes.

The belief that there is such a connection springs from our irrational fear of our own sexuality. We link this with our rational fear of, and revulsion for, sexual crimes. We should tackle both fears, but separately.

Our fear of our sexuality springs largely from our cultural conditioning, which is still dominated by Christianity with its cruel concepts of original sin, the fall of man, and the last judgement by a God who knows all our thoughts and actions. Christianity and most of the great world religions are hostile to human sexuality as a source of pleasure for its own sake.

This hostility to sexual freedom is shared by right-wing governments and dictatorships, for they know that apart from the sublime pleasure it can bring, good sex is anarchic and a prophylactic against political and social oppression. (Incidentally, such regimes are also very keen on the family as the building block of society, an institution where, in fact, most violence and abuse takes place). Britain has a right-wing government - and some of the most repressive censorship laws in Europe.

This baleful and profound conditioning by Christianity and a reactionary political system has left the British in a state of repressed anger which expresses itself in violence of every kind, against ourselves and other nations.

I would argue that access to pornography as part of a culture which celebrated human sexuality would reduce sexual abuse and other crimes of violence. Already many men and women use pornography as a stimulus to pleasure without going on to abuse others. (A million soft-porn magazines are sold in the UK every month.)

I think that the humanist-secular movement should work to extend freedom to create, distribute, consume pornography and the other products of a healthy sex industry.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 46

Let's hear more about the issue in *The Freethinker*, perhaps a series of articles, or news of the antics of Mary Whitehouse et al. A good starting point for discussion is *Pornography and Feminism, the Case Against Censorship*, available from G W Foote and Co.

HARRY HINCHCLIFFE
Malton

Astrology

NOT a single supporter of astrology attended the meeting of the Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists in January. Six months of preparation included correspondence with astrological associations, comments in national and local Press and three radio interviews.

During the week before the meeting the local radio stations Mercia Sound and BBC-CWR broadcast our challenge a dozen times. We had questions to ask, but found no-one brave enough to answer them.

Your two correspondents fail to answer the questions, offering instead unsupported assertions. Michael Harding sounds like a six-year old in an infant playground argument. He says that I have "also to learn the difference between stars and planets." Shame on you, Mr Harding.

He thinks I ignored the difference between "professionals" and newspaper writers. I wrote: "This type of astrologer usually professes to despise the newspaper horoscopes." There is certainly one difference. One can read *Mystic Meg* each Sunday for 50p, or buy her 800-page book for £6, but a horoscope from the professionals will cost at least £40.

He writes of a debate which has "been going on for thousands of years." My 20 years as a lecturer in the history and philosophy of science must have been ill-advised, since I never heard of this debate. Perhaps Mr Harding will enlighten me by supplying the names of well-known 20th Century scientists who contributed to it.

In fact, the debate came to an end with Copernicus. Since then, astrologers have been stuck in a geocentric time-warp somewhere before 1543, when *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* was published.

Michael Harding asserts that there is abundant scientific evidence for astrology. Strange that he should produce none of it.

He argues that because Michael Baigent, a believer in astrology, is commended by *The Freethinker* for his work on the Dead Sea Scrolls this is an argument for astrology: *Bill Smith believes in astrology. Bill Smith has written sensibly about something else. Therefore astrology is true.*

As a syllogism, this is as fallacious as: *All*

cows have brown eyes. Bessy has brown eyes. Therefore Bessy is a cow.

The most revealing remark in Michael Baigent's letter was: "The Humanist position appears underpinned by a fear of the 'irrational'. This fear is hidden by the consequent deification of so-called 'rational' science." I am not surprised that astrologers do not fear the irrational. That seems obvious. We rationalists do not 'fear' the irrational; we simply seek to avoid it. Astrologers, and their like, fear rational science because they do not understand it, and have made little effort to understand it. "Science" is not a "thing," but a method of trying to increase our understanding of the physical universe. Mr Baigent speaks of "data provided by the irrational." I did not know that the word "data" included Macbeth's "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

People with an emotional predilection for the supernatural and magic will naturally fear science because it shines light into their shadow half-world.

KARL HEATH
Coventry

IT would have to be a Virgoan deriding astrology (Karl Heath) for that is a judgmental sign. Putting aside the importance of the sign rising in the east at the time of any sun sign birth, the Virgo person can be characterised as:

- A person with capacity for working hard but mostly in background work, which would explain the talent for a writing career or the Civil Service.

- One who sets himself a high standard and expects others to be the same.

- Is a person with quiet eyes.

- Has a marked concern for his health and fitness hence the virgin-purity-fastidious nature. In fact, he can be a bit of an old woman in later life.

Mr Heath would have done better with a statement from Patrick Walker, an eminent astrologer, rather than *Mystic Meg*. Also the planets Uranus (change), Neptune (the unknown) and Pluto (death) do feature in astrological charts. Rearing, environment, education and subsequent life-style account for a lot in one's character but the basic traits from the birth-sign do help in self-understanding. The Chambers dictionary states that astrology is practical astronomy. It is not a superstition.

Congratulations on the new *Freethinker* layout. It is good.

DORIS DEAN
Ludlow

FIRST, congratulations on the new look; the first issue was hard-hitting and interesting.

Next, Karl Heath's debunking of astrology. My basic position is that there is far less in astrology than astrologers would like to

believe, and possibly a smidgin more than scientists are prepared to admit.

No rationalist could disagree with his conclusions concerning prophetic star sign astrology, common in magazines. He is, however, wrong to claim that astrologers take no notice of Neptune and Pluto; some even drag in Chiron! He had nothing to say about planetary astrology, which nowadays is concerned with character analysis based loosely on Jungian principles.

Scientists reject the claims of astrology because there does not seem to be a mechanism that could make it work. Yet in astronomy they are quite ready to invent mechanisms to make their equations work and then look for evidence to support them. The history of solar studies is punctuated by such inventions. They refuse to do the same for astrology because they "know" it will be a waste of time. There has still been no effective answer to Michel Gauquelin's exhaustive analysis of the birth records of sportsmen, showing a pronounced statistical tendency for them to be born at significant points in Mars' progress across the sky.

At least one astronomer has not been afraid to risk his scientific credentials by attempting an objective search for a possible mechanism – see Percy Seymour's book *Astrology: the Evidence of Science*.

B THORPE
Cheadle

KARL Heath forgot to mention some points: There are 13 constellations involved, not 12 (Ophiuchus). The sun is not "in" each constellation for about 30 days, but actually six-47 days! And the constellations have moved positions since this nonsense was thought-up a few thousand years ago.

Like the new format.

MICHAEL HILL
High Ongar

Republicanism

FURTHER to the "Citizen Benn or Queen Di?" commentary in January's *Freethinker*, readers may like to know that a Republican Movement does exist in this country. It is not party-political and membership is open to all "Democrats who believe that the Monarchy should be disestablished from the Government process."

The Republican Movement can be contacted at: Hudson House, Battery Road, Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, NR30 3NN.

I am sure the movement would be grateful for the support of *Freethinker* readers.

DAN J BYE
Perry Bar

LAST WORD

by Hugh Thomas



ACCORDING to the latest Gallup polls (*Hutchinson Gallup Info 92*), belief in God still appears to predominate among the population of the UK. In their survey of 1,000 adults, Gallup found that 64 per cent said they believed in God, with only 24 per cent saying they didn't, and the remaining 12 per cent being "don't knows."

The picture indicated is a familiar one, reiterated by Press and other media *ad infinitum*. Even one's own experience seems to bear it out. When the conversation gets round to religion, it is common for people to say that of course they believe in God, although in the next breath usually admitting that no, they don't actually go to church. A frank admission of one's own atheism then leads to them looking at you askance – and you can tell they're planting an imaginary "crank" label on your forehead.

But is the division of opinion on religion really so clear cut? Further examination of the poll indicates that the position is not so simple. Although 64 per cent said they believe in God, only 55 per cent said they believe in heaven, just 26 per cent in the devil and 24 per cent in hell. This presents a far from consistent picture of beliefs.

Stigma

The one thing that is clear is that it is not a simple swallowing whole of the Christian teaching: 27 per cent of the people asked even replied that they believe in reincarnation. The next question in the survey asked about how religious people regarded themselves as being. Revealingly, only 7 per cent replied that they were "very religious," 49 per cent saw themselves as "somewhat religious" and 42 per cent as "not religious." So it seems some of the people who profess a belief in God nevertheless regard themselves as not being religious. Clearly, something fishy is going on here.

Of course, one reason is that in any survey the answers obtained are a function of what questions are asked, and the way they are asked. Evidently, there is still a stigma in people's minds attached to not professing a belief in God. When the question is put another way, however, asking them to say how religious they are, a significantly lower incidence of belief is indicated. One is reminded of the Glaswegian who claims he is a Catholic, but when asked how often he goes to Mass replies that he supports Celtic but he isn't a fanatic.

Furthermore, it would have been interesting

Let's hear it for the real cranks

to compare figures if the survey had asked about other objects of belief. People will often admit to belief in the most unlikely things, including UFOs, ghosts, the Loch Ness Monster and fairies at the bottom of the garden. Such avowals, without the historical clout of religion, would not be taken as justification for a central role of such beliefs in the infrastructure of society.

Popular wisdom has it that there is currently a major revival of religion. The Gallup poll might be taken as evidence for this. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Certainly, the media constantly regale us with reports of public figures flocking to become "born again" Christians. For many, this is passing fashion, or simply a reversion to their early conditioning. For others, such as failed pop stars and US politicians, it is a career move.

Never mind what people say they believe in surveys: the overwhelming attitude to religion of people in modern Britain is better shown by the way they behave. They stay away from church in droves. On a visit to Coventry Cathedral, I found a lone cleric muttering a service with not one listener present. When they see the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses coming down the street, the average person pretends to be out when they call. Or if they do open the door to them, they soon slam it in their faces. We're just not interested in what these people are selling. I was once told by a Mormon missionary that in two years of

knocking on doors he had converted one person to his faith.

When attending church services, it takes only a modest amount of reading between the lines to see that even the clergy of our conventional churches have a healthy scepticism about the supernatural claims of their creed. The company line for the Bishop of Durham's new breed of atheist parsons seems to be: *Okay, we all know this stuff about God and angels is medieval mumbo jumbo, but it's important that we keep up the effort as this is the way to lead people to get on with each other.*

The feeling that a religious component to education is a "good thing" seems to be widespread according to Gallup: 81 per cent of parents replied that they wanted their children to be educated within a framework of religious teaching, and 71 per cent of adults said they believed the morality of society would suffer if religion was abandoned. These responses could be construed, though, as a product of grossly leading phraseology of the questions. No alternative ethical component to education was being mooted, merely the question of removing what passes for one at present. The current state of society shows how little pursuing that path has succeeded.

The gloomy show of weeping, wailing and snivelling by Christians at funerals is inconsistent with the beliefs to which they are alleged to adhere. If they really believed Aunt Doris had gone to a "better place," why the long faces? Everyone should be happy at the good fortune of the deceased.

Minority

The reality of the matter is, then, that the real faithful – those who genuinely believe in the whole gamut of institutionalised delusions. God, angels, cherubs and all – represent a tiny minority. Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists and the like genuinely have the courage of their convictions. Their supernatural belief is strong enough to lead them to allow children to die rather than let them receive essential medical treatment. The ridicule and frank contempt which these groups receive from the rest of the population is the true measure of the present status of Christianity.

So let's not listen when it is suggested that atheists are a minority. It is the believers who are the "cranks." Perhaps it would be appropriate to think of them as a rare and endangered species. Whether we wish to make efforts towards conserving them is quite another matter.