

Secular
Humanist
monthly

The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 113 No 6

June 1993



'Scorner of God's words'

ON the 400th anniversary of the death of Christopher Marlowe, *The Free-thinker* is proud to endorse the poet's tendency to *iest at the divine Scriptures, gybe at praiers, and strive in argument to frustrate and confute what hath byn spoke or wrytt by prophets and such holie men.*

The debt which freethinkers owe to Marlowe is confirmed in Tom Owen's major article on pages 82 and 83. It gives the lie to those impudent Christians who claim the playwright as one of their own.

Indeed, Marlowe was "on the point of being arrested for disseminating atheistic opinions when, in May, 1593, at the age of 29, he was fatally stabbed at Deptford in a tavern brawl" (*Chambers Biographical Dictionary*).

Four hundred years on, however, and the war against superstition and censorship has lost little of its urgency. Maintaining the Elizabethan flavour to this issue of *The Free-thinker*, Colin McCall notes on page 87 that Shakespeare is still being censored by bigots in the United States, and on page 85 Neil Blewitt rightly "iests" at the dangerous clowns here in the UK who would make our children swallow biblical filth along with their school dinners. At *The Free-thinker*, we do our best to keep up the fight. But Marlowe, old infidel, thou shouldst be living at this hour...

HELL
OF A
POET

The Editor

Breathtaking blasphemy of Christopher Marlowe

ACCORDING to the most reliable sources that we have at our disposal, on May 30, 1593, Christopher Marlowe – poet, playwright and “forward wit” – spent a day in a Deptford tavern owned by the widow Eleonor Bull.

He was with a party which included Ingrain Frizier, a political “agent,” Nicholas Skeves, a swindler, and Robert Poley, a perjurer and double-spy.

In the course of a row over the reckoning, Marlowe attacked Frizier – who retaliated by driving a dagger over Marlowe’s eye, killing the dramatist.

Some literary detectives now claim the date to have been June 1, 1593, but, whatever the exact date, this sordid episode in the political and criminal underworld of late 16th Century London prompted one of the most remarkable legal depositions in the history of what we

by Tom Owen

now define as “English Literature.”

Marlowe has bequeathed us four major plays: *Tamberlaine* (Parts 1 and 2), *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II* and *Dr Faustus*. There are also less distinguished dramatic pieces: *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, the badly “preserved” *The Massacre at Paris* and the long narrative poem *Hero and Leander*.

Marlowe’s associates have left us an extraordinary insight into that “other” side of English Renaissance culture in their “depositions” and accusations concerning Marlowe’s “atheism.”

Marlowe had already been in hot water when he shared a room with the playwright Thomas Kyd in 1591: the room was searched and discovery made of “certain atheistic documents.”

A short time before Marlowe’s death, whether out of malice or expediency, Kyd claimed under “examination” that Marlowe had constantly dared “to iest at the divine Scriptures, gybe at praiers, and stryve in argument to frustrate and confute what hath byn spoke or wrytt by prophets and such holie men.”

Two weeks following Marlowe’s death, a certain Richard Baines lodged his deposition against Marlowe. Whether it be mendacious or otherwise, the Baines “deposition” contains the most sustained and outrageous passages of iconoclasm that we are to encounter in the legal history of English Literature.

Baines testified against “damnable judgement of religion, and scorning of God’s words.” Marlowe had claimed, it was alleged, that Moses was a “juggler” who hoodwinked a primitive people, that the human race was older than Genesis, that Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest, that the 12 disciples were “base fellowes neyther of wit nor worth” and, most succinctly and memorably, that “the first beginning of Religioun was only to keep man in awe.”

He was also said to have claimed, with some justification, that he could have written the Bible more elegantly himself. Other outrages included: “They that love not tobacco and boyes are foolles...”

If we cannot ascertain the veracity of the statements of Kyd and Baines, we can be certain that the daring wit of these statements had their provenance in a vigorous, sceptical and atheistic counter-culture.

In his public, dramatic discourses, an “atheistic” Marlowe would have had to be more circumspect. But in his plays he seems to relish the presentation of Christians as venial, hypocritical and bloody-minded.

But the question of Marlowe’s “point-of-view” is complex and fascinating. Since his literary “canonisation,” he has been claimed by Christian, Humanist and Marxist critics. Because of our fragmentary knowledge of his short life, our judgements must necessarily be of a literary critical and interpretive nature, rather than of a historical, biographical nature.

What we know of his life allows us a general narrative outline, but the gaps and inconsistencies have led to numerous myths – the most preposterous being that he was a Catholic spy and that he feigned his own death, fled to France, ghost-wrote Shakespeare’s plays.

He was born in Canterbury in 1563, the second son of a reasonably prosperous shoemaker. Before his 15th birthday, he obtained scholarships to King’s School and from there to Corpus Christi, Cambridge. His university career seems to have been uneventful and undistinguished. He took his Bachelor of Arts in 1583 and his Master of Arts in June, 1587. Both his scholarships and his course of studies suggest that he intended to take Holy Orders.

But the university authorities seemed reluctant to confirm his further degree until the Queen’s Privy Council insisted. Against a charge that he intended to join a Catholic seminary in Rheims, they insisted that “in all his accions he has behaved himselfe orderlie wherebie he had done Her majestie good service to be rewarded for his faithful dealinge.”

It appears from this powerful statement of support that Marlowe was initiated at an early stage into the *demi-monde* of political intrigue.

After leaving Cambridge, Marlowe had less than six years to live, and what we know of this period is hazy. He did not enter Holy Orders, but like many of his contemporary “university wits” sought a precarious living in the political and literary underworld of the 1580s and 1590s. He made a living by doing hack work for the burgeoning theatres of London or in the production of scandalous pamphlets.

The company he kept included the writers Nashe, Chapman, Kyd and Greene – the latter two he seems to have offended by his quick and impulsive temper. In 1589, he was involved in a fatal brawl, and two years later a constable and an under-constable sought legal protection against Marlowe.

It also seems that the turbulent playwright had powerful political allies, such as Thomas Walsingham and the freethinking poet and adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh.

The play that has excited most controversy is his greatest: *The Tragical Historie of the damnable life and deserved death of Doctor Iohn Faustus*, as the first manuscript of 1592 is titled, which survives to this day in the British

THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

Views expressed in signed articles are not necessarily those of the publishers.

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Subscriptions, book orders and Fund donations to The Publisher:

G W Foote & Co (Dept F),
702 Holloway Road,
London N19 3NL

Annual postal subscription rates

UK: 12 months £5. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £5.60. USA: 12 months \$12. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3 (total \$15).

Printed by Yorkshire Web, Barnsley S70 2AS.

UP FRONT

with the Editor

Sins of the Fathers...

THE most eminent Anglican lay churchman to defect to Rome in the wake of the decision to ordain women as priests has "become disillusioned with the Church of England and attacked clergy who denied basic Christian principles" (*The Guardian*, April 10).

Dr Sheridan Gilley, who graces the chair of theology at Durham University, said that the decision to allow the ordination of women had been the last straw: "But I had felt increasing estrangement from the Church as many of the hierarchy have been failing in proper Christian teaching and morals..."

I am taken by Dr Gilley's reference to Christian morals. Possibly he expects to find some among the RC hierarchy and priesthood.

I wish him luck.

He may have missed the report from Albuquerque which noted the resignation of America's first Hispanic Catholic archbishop following charges that he had had sexual relations with up to five women.

The *Independent on Sunday* (March 21) reported: "The women's accusations are the latest in a series of allegations of sexual misconduct that have rocked the archdiocese in recent years, most involving claims that priests sexually abused boys." WHICH brings us back to Britain, to Birmingham, and another report (*News of the World*, March 28) which may have failed to reach Dr Gilley: "The family sexually abused over many years by their evil parish priest are to sue the Roman Catholic Church for hundreds of thousands of pounds in damages. They will claim the church was responsible for the actions of Father Samuel Penney... The parish priest who befriended the parents and then crept into bed with five of their seven children

was jailed for seven-and-a-half years last week."

Another of Father Penney's victims, now 24, commented: "I was 13 when that bastard started on me... Now someone's had the guts to get Penney to court, I'll be speaking to a solicitor to see if it's reasonable for me to sue the Catholic church... *He was their employee and they must be responsible for what he did.*" My italics.

On May 22, BBC's *Everyman* ran a programme which claimed that Father Penney had been at it, as they say, for 20 years. *Everyman* talked to parents of his victims and asked why the church took so long to recognise what was happening.

I believe that the Church knew fine well "what was happening." Six years before the muck hit the fan, a parent warned the Church about Penney. She was told that it would be "sorted out."

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Crushing the rationalist spirit

➤ From Page 82

Museum. There is a considerable industry of source-hunting and verification, but we do know that the play was performed on many occasions between 1594 and 1597.

The enduring achievement of this play is that it is the first powerful synthesis of a myth which has embedded itself in the heart of the dilemma of European Enlightenment and scientific culture. The symbolic potency of the Faustian myth is still with us, enriched by a tradition that includes Goethe and Thomas Mann.

The narrative of the play centres on a deal made with the Devil by an early Renaissance scholar, John Faustus. In return for his soul, Faustus demands 24 years in which he has access to infinite knowledge and power and ultimate sensual gratification.

The dramatic format of this Renaissance tragedy is the medieval morality play, and Marlowe transforms this historically redundant allegorical dramatic parable into a sophisticated and highly individuated *tour de force*.

Faustus' crime is "curiositas" – the desire for "forbidden knowledge." In this sense, Faustus replays the lapsarian myth of Christianity. It is the rejection of divine authority embedded and encoded in scholasticism which affords Marlowe the mechanism for the breathtaking iconoclasm of his dramatic verse.

Faustus, "born of parents of base stock," first "profits in divinity" until "swollen with cunning and self-conceit" he "surfeits on

cursed necromancy." Faustus dismisses each branch of medieval learning – "analytics," "medicine," "law," and finally divinity, "the queen of the sciences" to conclude that...*a sound magician is a demi God. Hence tire thy brains to gain a deity.*

The most breathtaking blasphemy in the play is Faustus' sealing of his pact with the Devil with *consumatum est*, the "last words" of Christ on the cross.

Faustus comes to a nasty end, his body torn to pieces and his spirit sucked into Hell. The gloating Mephistophilis, who had previously given us a surprisingly modern view of Hell as a state of mind, resorts to the instruments of the Inquisition.

Christian critics have presented this play as a cautionary tale of the inevitably tragic and catastrophic consequences of secular knowledge without the moral constraint of divine governance.

Humanists have read the play as the tragedy of the emerging scientific and rationalist spirit crushed by the power of temporal authority and spiritual obscuritism.

Some Marxist critics have seen the play as symbolising the necessary rise of nascent bourgeois individualism, a demonstration of those living forces which were to break the dominion of feudal absolutism some 50 years later.

The enduring power of the play encompasses the optimism and pessimism of these readings. Faustus' will to power through knowledge and sensual delight is bought at a terrible price and should deepen our view of human history. When Marlowe's Faustus unfolds his

desire to send his demonic agencies throughout the world in his speech:

*I'll have them fly to India for gold
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all the corners of the new
found world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates*

he is not only indulging in the literary commonplaces of European Renaissance hyperbole.

The expansion of the European spirit has its other side – its "light of reason" is accompanied by a "heart of darkness." In the Americas, there is genocide; in Africa, there is slavery; in Europe itself, there is the carnage of war as our heritage.

Walter Benjamin, himself a tragic victim of the fascist "will to power," has a fitting comment on the progress of history which may illuminate the tragic awareness of Marlowe's work: "Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror...there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

UP FRONT

with the Editor

◀ From Page 83

But an ancient Tradition of the Church (there have been scores of cases in the USA) is that "sorting out" means moving the offending priest to another parish – and a fresh set of kids to go at. This is sometimes preceded by a period of "treatment" and, according to a Church spokesman, in Father Penney's case "time to repent and put his moral house in order."

HOW can we avoid the suspicion that the Church bosses have been desperate to avoid police and media interest in their priests' extra-pastoral activities? That they have cared more about ducking bad publicity than about the children's misery or, indeed, their holy minions' illness-of-mind?

As a one-time PR man, I have been reading the professional runes – and it is clear to me that a "spin doctor" who knows his job has created a PR strategy for the Church: "Yes, we humbly confess that in the case of Father XYZ, we slipped up, we made a mistake. But we are putting our house in order... there will be an inquiry... a working party... And do remember that priestly sexual abuse of parishioners is a new phenomenon... mumble... Orkneys... mumble... Nottingham... mumble... Cleveland..."

I predict that you will be hearing that line trotted out more and more often, until they find a better one.

It is, of course, a deliberate lie. Priestly abuse is a time-dishonoured phenomenon (what about the lengthy career of the Rev Father Penney himself?). But fear of the Church has kept the lid on the mess for generations – I remember a West Riding priest who, without punishment in this life, regularly had sex with selected parishioners while their husbands were toiling at the coalface.

Now, along with their increasing acceptance of family planning and abortion, educated lay Catholics are speaking out.

Our freethought colleagues in the USA have gathered a massive file of evidence about sexual abuse of parishioners, infant and adult, by clergy (six tabloid pages of well-documented small print in the January-February issue of *Freethought Today*, for starters). Over the past eight years, more than 400 sexually-abusive priests have been jailed in the US and \$400 million has been shelled out in compensation and legal fees.

And in Canada, 4,000 people who claim they were physically and sexually abused by orphanage nuns are demanding £640 million compensation (*Mail on Sunday* April 4). Many of the men have sworn under oath that they were molested by the nuns. Others say they were forced to bang their heads on a brick wall until they bled.

Exposure of the much less harmful but unepiscopally potent antics of fun-loving Bishop Casey, late of Galway, was sympto-

matic of the fact that more Catholics are daring to blow the whistle. (Daley, by the way, is now working with wealthy Catholics in the USA, where Teddy Kennedy is said by the *News of the World* (March 21) to be one of his benefactors).

Their name is Legion, too...

BUT priestly sex with children is the activity which grabs the headlines. By the seaside at Whitley Bay we had the priest who (*Daily Star*, March 12) "watched paedophile videos with names like Lesbian Lolitas... to cope with strains of celibacy" until his name was discovered in a porn dealer's books and he was put on probation for two years.

And so it goes... with sections of the Church trying to pretend that piety still rules OK: "Roman Catholic newspapers have banned advertisements for a book by Father Andrew Greeley, America's best-selling novelist-priest, because it deals with the sexual abuse of children by priests.

"The advertisements describe *Fall from Grace* as a candid story about paedophile priests and battered women... Father Greeley... said the decision showed it was refusing to face up the problem: 'We are not going to have reform, much less healing, until the priests are ready to acknowledge what has happened and promise to reform and do all they can to police themselves'" (*The Times*, March 24).

SO WHY scabble about in this can of worms? Merely to ridicule Dr Sheridan Gilley's admittedly laughable quest for "proper Christian teaching and morals" in the Roman Catholic Church? Not a bit of it.

I believe that the sex lives of grocers, plumbers, architects, nurses, even journalists, is the concern only of themselves, their partners and, if people are actually hurt as a result of their activities, the professions of law and medicine.

But priests are *different*. They tell us so themselves. They are Called by God; they are awarded Vocations. So – in the case of these sinners has God made a mistake and Called the wrong people? Is He a fool when it comes to personnel selection?

The Guardian (May 24) reports: "Three British Catholic priests have been convicted of child abuse in the past year, with two more awaiting trial. Another was moved to a retreat after the family decided not to prosecute. Yet another is wanted by the police but has fled the country." Did God nod over his computer at the time he was compiling their Vocations? WHAT BILGE! The teaching of "Christian morals" has simply meant that the Church from its inception has presented sex as a sinful, dirty activity. Backed by the lunatic,

woman-hating ravings of St Paul, its celibacy-crazed priests have muscled their way into our bedrooms, consigning us to perdition for our pleasures: "Outside marriage any use of sex is wrong. Hence thoughts, actions, words pictures, books, or anything which is used deliberately to stimulate sensual powers outside marriage are sinful."

This is what these proper moralists teach and "... the Church can never go wrong in her teachings as to faith or morals."

And if we are guilty of a mortal sin – "for example, blasphemy, a denial of God, murder, real hatred, a great injustice, *adultery or other sexual sins*" – then we go to Hell: "Christ spoke of hell in terms of fire: At the last day, He said, God will say to the wicked: Depart from Me ye cursed into everlasting fire that was prepared for the Devil and his angels. (Matt. xxv)."

Unless, that is, we receive absolution: "But mortal sins must normally be forgiven in the confessional." By that very special man, the priest – Father Samuel Penney, for example, or jovial Bishop Daley – who also has the power to withhold forgiveness.

(The quotes, by the way, are from the Catholic Enquiry Centre; the italics are mine).

Can't these people, even when chosen by God, stick to their own rules? Can we allow them the right to behave like mere grocers and journalists and housewives – while seeking to guide, to chastise, to judge us? I would love to know, for example, how many gay RC priests – who comprise 20 to 30 per cent of the total according to a recent study – have imposed penance on parishioners for confessed homosexual activity!

Loathsome attitude

BUT back to child abuse. I accept that we are dealing with sick men, but we must hope that the priests' victims and the priests' victims' families are asking fundamental questions which will lead to them shuffling off the shackles of superstition: "When this was happening to me... to my little boy... my little girl... where was God? Why did God allow one of his holy men to bugger... rape... seduce me?"

What I find loathsome is the official Church attitude to the problem, which might almost be being described by Wilde as he sends Dorian Gray for a glimpse at the portrait after performing some uncharacteristically good deed: "He could see no change save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite..."

Moral education and the Bible

THERE has been a strong demand recently for moral education to play a more prominent role in our schools – an education, moreover, based not on a modern, secular view of the world, but on traditional, spiritual values and particularly those offered by the Holy Bible.

I should like to make a small contribution to the debate stimulated by this demand by offering to the Secretary of State for Education and the National Curriculum Council a selection of passages from the Holy Bible which might profitably be used in our schools to instill certain principles into the minds of their pupils.

These are not the passages that would normally be used for such a purpose – and for a very good reason. Educationally, it would be of little value simply to present pupils with a well-known story where the moral is obvious – as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example. They would be better served by being confronted with less familiar stories, the points of which may not be immediately apparent, so that their imaginative faculties may be stretched to their limits.

Of course, these stories are not the only ones which could be used, but I am convinced that they would provoke lively discussions in the classroom. And if the Secretary of State wishes to use my selection of morally-improving tales, he may do so freely. Like him, I want to see moral standards raised and I hope to indicate the part the Holy Bible may play in the process.

THE STORIES

LOT AND HIS SEED: Many years ago, it seemed that all the wicked men on earth had gravitated to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. This displeased God to such an extent that he destroyed them and all but four of their inhabitants with brimstone and fire. The four were Lot, his wife and their two daughters – but this number was reduced to three when Lot's wife looked back at the burning cities and was transformed into a pillar of salt. God, in fact, had warned that evil would befall any of the four who turned about after they had left Sodom.

Lot and his daughters travelled on to a mountain near Zoar and abided there. Soon, the elder daughter realised that, as Lot was old and there were no other men in the vicinity, the only method of perpetuating his line would be for him to impregnate her. So she plied him with wine one night until he was drunk, and then seduced him. The following night, her sister did likewise and in the fullness of time they each bore a son whom they named, respectively, Moab and Benammi.

EZEKIEL AND THE SIEGE OF

A MODEST PROPOSAL

from Neil Blewitt

JERUSALEM: God instructed Ezekiel to take a brick, trace on it a map of Jerusalem and then lay siege to it. He was, further, to lie on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 more. During those periods, he would be bound with cord, and by God himself, to ensure that he did not move until the specified time of the siege had been completed.

JOSHUA: A MIGHTY WARRIOR: Joshua was a mighty warrior and, under God's direction, he and the Israelites sacked Jericho, slew all the inhabitants (save a harlot and her family) and their animals. Then, having propitiated God by stoning to death Achan, his sons and daughters and their animals, the Israelites fell upon Ai, slew the inhabitants there also, sacked the city and hanged the king. Next, they slaughtered the people of the five kings of the Amorites, a carnage in which God himself participated by sending down stones from heaven upon the Amorites, slaying more by this method than the Israelites did with the sword. At the conclusion of the battle, Joshua hanged the five kings upon a tree. Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish and many other cities were also sacked until, in all the country round, all that breathed had been destroyed as God had commanded.

MIRIAM DISPLEASES GOD: Miriam and Aaron spoke against their brother Moses for marrying an Ethiopian woman. God heard their murmurings and called them and Moses to the tabernacle; and, having descended thither on a cloud, he berated them for not being afraid to criticise their brother. As a punishment, he visited Miriam with leprosy although he allowed Aaron to go free.

SAUL AND GOD'S SILENCE: When Saul and the Israelites met the Philistines to do battle with them, Saul was apprehensive at their superior numbers. He inquired of God as to what he should do but, receiving no answer in any of the customary ways – in a dream, by sacred lot or through a prophet – he asked a witch to raise the spirit of Samuel from the dead to discover the reason for God's silence. This she did, and Samuel, after complaining bitterly at being disturbed, revealed that God was silent because Saul had offended him earlier by not obeying in full his command to exterminate the Amalekites. Saul, in fact, had spared Agag, their king, and their livestock

and this was unacceptable. Samuel further revealed that not only had God withdrawn his favour from Saul and given it to David, but also that Saul would die during the battle with the Philistines. This indeed came about, although Saul was not slain but committed suicide. He was, nevertheless, beheaded and his body fastened to a wall.

THE OLD MAN AND THE CONCUBINE: A Levite was travelling from Bethlehem to Mount Ephraim with his servant and concubine. When he reached Gibeah, he sat down in the town square, wondering what he should do next. An old man approached him and offered him and his companions shelter for the night – an offer which the Levite gratefully accepted. But while they were eating their evening meal, some lewd citizens of the town pounded on the door of the house demanding that the old man send out the traveller to them so that they might sexually abuse him. The old man refused, but sent out the concubine instead. She was seized by the lewd citizens and violated throughout the night, so that in the morning when her master arose he found her dead on the doorstep. He placed her on his ass and made for home. Once there, he cut her body into 12 pieces and scattered them throughout Israel.

DAVID AND BATHSHEBA: David had an adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and she became pregnant. He wanted to marry her, but this was impossible while Uriah was still alive. However, at the time, David's forces were besieging Rabbah and he was able to arrange for Uriah to be placed in the front line where, a little later, he was killed as David had planned. Then, after Bathsheba had completed her period of mourning, the two were married. But God was angry with David and threatened to stir up evil against him, take his wives, give them to a neighbour and incite him to lie with them openly. David thereupon repented of his wrongdoing and God withdrew the proposed punishment and struck his new-born baby dead instead.

GOD AND PHARAOH: Pharaoh held the Israelites captive for many years. But God wanted them to be set free so that they could inherit the land he had promised to their forefathers. So he instructed Moses, their leader, to go to Pharaoh and demand their release. But, so that God could prove he was a mighty worker of miracles, he deliberately hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would refuse the request, thus giving God the opportunity to demonstrate his powers. In the circumstances, Pharaoh had no option and God turned the waters of the Nile to blood. Subsequent refusals were answered with plagues of frogs, lice, flies and locusts; murrain and boils; hail, fire and thunder and then darkness.

Moral education and the Bible

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In a final demonstration of his awesome power, God slew the first-born of all the men and cattle in Egypt. At this point, he ceased to harden Pharaoh's heart and the Israelites were released. But Pharaoh, even though his heart was now free, pursued them, only for God to drown him and his army in the sea.

GOD, MOSES AND ZIPPORAH: When the King of Egypt died, God told Moses to go back there since all the men who would have killed him were also dead. So Moses took Zipporah, his wife, and their sons and started for Egypt. On the way, God met him and strove to kill him, but Zipporah

took a sharp stone and circumcised one of her sons throwing his foreskin at Moses' feet and saying: "Surely a bloody husband art thou to me!" whereupon God let him go.

NOAH AND NUDITY: When Noah and his family emerged from the ark, Noah planted a vineyard and he came to love drinking the juice of the grape. One day, while completely naked, he became so drunk that he fell asleep and he was observed in this condition by his son Ham. Ham told his two brothers and they, alarmed but with an admirable sense of propriety, walked backwards into their father's room so that they should not see his unclothed body and covered him with a cloth. When Noah awoke, he discovered that Ham had seen his nakedness and he placed a curse on him and his posterity for ever.

THE TRIAL OF JEALOUSY: God decreed that if a man should become suspicious of his wife's behaviour, he must take her to the priest who would examine her for infidelity – and in the following manner: He was to place some dust from the temple floor into a vessel of holy water, write out a series of curses in a book, and wash the words into the vessel. The woman had then to drink the liquid. If she had been faithful, the liquid would have no ill-effects upon her, but if she had not her thighs would rot and her belly would swell forthwith.

MOSES AND THE MIDIANITES: God ordered Moses to go to war against the Midianites and he collected 12,000 men for the purpose: 1,000 from each tribe. The Israelites burned the Midianite cities, slew

their men, including five kings and Balaam (who had achieved some celebrity by holding a conversation with an ass) but spared the women and children. These they brought before Moses who was enraged that any of the Midianites should have been taken alive. He commanded, therefore, that the Israelites should slay all the male children and the women who had had sexual intercourse. Virgins could be spared and his soldiers permitted to keep them for themselves. But he insisted that the men remain outside the camp for seven days; and those who had slain a Midianite or touched a corpse should purify themselves on the third and seventh days in the approved manner. And such items of their clothing as were made of goatskin, leather or wood had also to be purified.



This completes my selection of Biblical stories, which I hope the National Curriculum Council may find of some use when deciding which parts of the Holy Bible shall be included in the curriculum for the moral advancement of our children.

I would expect class-teachers to lead discussions on the stories and try to guide their pupils towards a clear understanding of their worth and purpose. But I recognise that teachers themselves may not necessarily be able to deduce the reasons why these particular stories were included in the Holy Bible. And here I would have some sympathy – for, to be frank about it, I am somewhat at a loss myself.

Larkin about

THE recent excellent biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (Faber £20) is a big book which may be of only marginal interest to some readers of *The Free-thinker*.

Although Larkin never had any religious faith, his outlook and life would not altogether endear him to humanists. His poem *Head in the Women's Ward* first appeared in *New Humanist* in 1972, but much of his life I will draw a polite veil over.

His stated position on religion, the Bible and church are nevertheless worth quoting, as the views of one of England's finest poets of this century:

"Ever since childhood Larkin had followed his father's advice – 'Never believe in God' – without the slightest hesitation or guilt, while at the same time retaining an interest in the value of ritual. 'I'm an agnostic, I suppose,' he habitually said to anyone who asked."

"In July, 1983, Larkin bought for £120 a large Oxford University Press Bible and 'set it up in my bedroom on a hideous office lectern to remind me of matters spiritual.' He read a few pages every day while shaving, beginning at the beginning and working steadily through. He also began to toy with the idea of going to church.... Larkin finally attended evensong at St Stephen's (Hull)... the congregation numbered seven... 'I tried to be devout, and really quite enjoyed it.' The experiment was not repeated, and the possibility that Larkin would 'get God' came to nothing."

"He was too resolutely less deceived, too certain of extinction to expect more. 'It's absolutely bloody amazing,' he said soon after he had finished reading the Bible in his bedroom, 'to think anyone ever believed any of that. Really it's absolute balls. Beautiful, of course. But balls!'"

I doubt if there are any readers of this journal, most of whom have also probably read the Bible, who would not concur with this last critical review of the divine book.

Denis Cobell

Quote of the month

IT IS time to act to save the country's unity and integrity. If the communal forces are not checked, the very existence of the country is in peril.

It is the democratic and secular character of the country that is the best guarantee to save it from disintegration. United we stand, divided we fall. Let us not forget the lessons of the past. Pastor Niemoller, the German intellectual, bemoaned the Nazi ascendancy: "First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew. Then they came for Communists. Then I did not speak out – because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Catholics and I did not speak out – because I was not a Catholic. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me."

When bad men contrive, good men must combine to fight the evil forces of communalism. The intellectuals and the educated must play their rightful and patriotic role to save the country from the impending communal

calastrophe. Let education be a powerful instrument of social change.

As India is a democratic country, people have the most potent weapon in their hand – the right to vote. The future of the country can be safeguarded by bringing awareness, education and enlightenment among people. The future of the country is at stake. Let us be decisive and say "no" emphatically to the forces of disruption, disunity. Let us fight casteism, and communalism with all our might. The future India belongs to those who dare and act against fundamentalism and communalism. Let us strive to reassert the supremacy of the people – all people – and make India a better place to live in without fear or favour. We need social and economic progress, not disintegration and regression of India into religious fanaticism, and superstition. Let humanity and humanism triumph over the communal and sectarian forces.

Dr G Vijayam, *The Atheist* monthly magazine, Atheist Centre, Vijayawada-6, India.

NO LOVE FOR JOHNNY

IT WAS her experience when teaching at a summer course in literary classics for American high school teachers that spurred Professor Joan Delfattore, of the University of Delaware, to research *What Johnny Shouldn't Read*. In considering *Romeo and Juliet*, two of the teachers using high school texts found that more than 300 lines of the play were missing.

Some of these contained sexual material, but not all. Neither copy had Romeo's lines:

When the devout religion of mine eye / Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to fires, / And these who, often drown'd, could never die, / Transparent heretics, be burnt for liars!

BOOKS

Professor Delfattore has since found that this speech is "routinely removed from high school anthologies because it associates religion with falsehood and violence, thus offending people who demand that religion must always be presented favourably."

It is mainly these people who set out to censor American elementary and high school textbooks: ultra-conservative creationists who bring lawsuits against a school district for using books that offend their fundamentalist beliefs.

And: "Apart from lawsuits, there are hundreds of incidents every year in which parents or teachers try to convince school boards to include or exclude certain materials," with the fundamentalists "effective out of all proportion to their numbers."

Significantly, the first election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980 gave particular impetus to the fundamentalist campaign.

Joan Delfattore details the case of Bob Mozert, a fundamentalist minister and director of a group known as Citizens Organised for Better Schools, versus Hawkins County Public Schools, appropriately in Tennessee. Mozert and his supporters presented more than 400 objections to the Holt, Rinehart and Winston Basic Reading Series, one woman's testimony alone adding up to 1,117 pages.

Concern for the environment was humanist propaganda; free enterprise was God's will; international co-operation would lead to the reign of the Antichrist; religious tolerance was unthinkable; Protestant fundamentalism was "the one true religion on which the United States was founded."

Furthermore, Joan Delfattore says: "Imagination, like independent thinking and tolerance for diversity, has no place in the Hawkins County protesters' world view. They alleged that the *process* of imagination, regardless of its content, distracts people from the Word of God. Once the mind is open to imagination, all kinds of alien thoughts may enter, and the soul may be lost." (Italics in original).

Such was the Mozert party's approach to

***What Johnny Shouldn't Read: Textbook censorship in America* by Joan Delfattore, Yale University Press, £18.50. Review: Colin McCall.**

education. Several of them stated that they wanted their children to read functionally and that was all.

Not surprisingly, Jack London was out, but so too were *The Wizard of Oz*, *Cinderella* and *Goldilocks*. There were to be no fairy tales except, of course, those in the Bible.

The protesters eventually lost their case in the courts, but Holts removed the "offending" passages from their books.

"When you're publishing a book," they said, "if there's something that's controversial, it's better to take it out."

As a *Rutgers Law Journal* article observed: "From a business standpoint, self-censorship makes sense." And profit precedes education, with ethics nowhere.

Had Mozart been unique, it would not have been so important; but it was typical of federal lawsuits in the 1980s which, in combination with market forces, have "helped to shape today's textbooks."

In another case, where "conservative" Christians challenged the use of 45 social studies, history and home economics textbooks in Alabama schools, the plaintiffs argued that secular humanism was a religion and "should either be removed from the schools entirely or balanced by the inclusion of Christian teachings in the curriculum."

They were supported by Pat Robertson, then a candidate for President, and George Wallace, who said: "I don't want to teach ungodly humanism in the schools where I'm governor... Let's get 'em out of here."

In this case, the judge, who likened secular humanism to "a pernicious cancer," ruled that it did violate the First Amendment ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."). His decision was over-ruled by the appeals court but the Association of American Publishers decided to include more information on the "positive" contributions religion has made to history and leave out any fact suggesting that its role has ever been anything but benign.

In 1988, a representative of the Texas Society of Daughters of the American Revolution wrote 90 pages against literature books recommended for use that year, among them Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, because it would incite Texas youth to eat people!

We may laugh at that. More serious are the changes made to Texas history books which begin with pre-history. The publishers were ordered to omit the fact that fossil records go back millions of years; a favourable reference to Renaissance humanism had to be altered to

read "many Renaissance humanists were also devout Christians"; and a mention of Luther's siding with the princes against the peasants had to be deleted in favour of a more sympathetic and much less accurate one.

Then there are the surreptitious changes. Joan Delfattore discovered "more and more of the modifications required by Texas have been handwritten in the margins of textbooks that are then returned to the publishers, leaving no clue as to what has been done to them."

Responding to "left-wing" censors who would, for instance, remove *Huckleberry Finn* from the curriculum, Professor Delfattore remarks that, while eliminating racism and sexism from cultural life is a worthy goal, "omitting or expurgating all mention of past attitudes falsifies history, waters down literature, and does nothing to guarantee future improvements." What is needed is careful handling in the classroom to explain the historical and social context.

When she gives talks on textbook censorship, the author is often asked: "How do we stop pressure groups that affect textbook content?"

Schools can go a long way towards offsetting the effects of censorship, she says, but they must be actively supported by parents and other taxpayers, who realise that "textbook censorship affects students in all American schools, public and private alike."

What Johnny Shouldn't Read provides both the ammunition and the incentive for the fight.

Humanist Fork Supper

Saturday, June 12, 1993,
7.00pm

A social gathering organised by the Humanist Liaison Committee on behalf of the Humanist Movement

A chance to meet fellow Humanists in convivial surroundings and with good food and drink

Speakers to be announced

£5 bookings to be made in advance to:

The British Humanist Association, 14 Lambs Conduit Passage, London WC1R 4RH (071-430 0908)

Conway Hall Humanist Centre
Red Lion Square, London WC1

The Apparent Resu

by Dr J G

THE bodily reappearance of Jesus after his crucifixion is put beyond doubt by what he said and did when he first came among his disciples, who were terrified, thinking they were seeing a ghost: "Why are you so perturbed? Why do questionings arise in your minds? Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself. Touch me and see; no ghost has flesh and bones as you can see that I have." (St. Luke in *The New English Bible*); and he asked for food, which he ate before their eyes. The question is: was he raised miraculously to life after being dead some 40 hours or did he survive his crucifixion?

THE MIRACLE

Consider the miracle in medical terms. When the heart stops, death follows because without oxygen the brain is destroyed. The brain consists of more than 10,000 million interconnected nerve cells. After being without oxygen for two or three minutes, progressive disintegration of cells sets in. If the heartbeat is restored at this point, when damage is minimal, a short period of coma follows before normal consciousness returns; but if the cardiac arrest is prolonged by only a few more minutes, consciousness will never return, so massive is the destruction.

By the time the Resurrection is said to have taken place, the entire brain would have long since disintegrated, and general putrefaction of the body would have set in. The miracle, therefore, requires us to believe that the brain was re-made and re-programmed and the body healed – except for the wounds. What was the origin of this belief?

As Christians we recite the Nicene creed... *was crucified, buried and rose again*. That creed was formulated at Nicaea in the year 325. The people of 1,600 to 2,000 years ago knew nothing of the brain's complexity or of its dependence on oxygen; indeed they are unlikely to have thought of death in terms of the brain's destruction.

Those who witnessed the crucifixion were convinced they had seen Jesus die on the cross. The soldiers were ordered to break his legs, but found him already dead. One of them prodded him with a lance, and there was no response.

He was entombed. Then, with them again was their great leader. Although it would seem from St. Luke's account of his first meeting with his disciples that he looked so pale and ill as to be scarcely recognisable,

once his identity had been established his reappearance would most certainly have been seen by them as a miracle wrought by God; no other thought could have possibly entered their heads. The question is: when all the eye-witnesses were convinced he had died on the cross, could they have been mistaken?

FAINTING

In the London *Sunday Times* of January 24, 1965, in an article headlined *The Resurrection of Christ: a remarkable medical theory*, I gave reasons for thinking that Jesus in fact fainted on the cross, was believed dead, and recovered after a period of coma. (At the time of reaching this conclusion, which was based on evidence, I had not heard of the "swoon" theory, which was of ancient origin, but not so based).

The fainting and recovery conclusion struck me in 1955 while investigating a known potential danger with dental anaesthesia. I stumbled on an unknown one: patients sitting up in a dental chair not uncommonly developed an ordinary but unrecognised fainting attack while an administration of gas was actually in progress. In typical cases they suddenly appeared dead, and were often thought dead. (No other condition than fainting so closely resembles death).¹

After anxious minutes, they were lifted from the chair and put on the floor or carried to a couch and lay there unconscious, deathly pale, limp and motionless. The coma lasted minutes, hours, days or, in one extreme case, nearly two weeks and was followed by recovery, seemingly to normal. Such were the cases described to me by 99 dentists in my survey.²

The coma resulted from brain damage caused by the brain's being starved of blood and oxygen through the patients' being kept upright during the fainting attack, with its precipitous fall in blood pressure. Nationwide, some cases were fatal.

Later in 1955, with the help of the late Professor Sharpey-Schafer, we obtained a laboratory tracing of the onset of such a faint during an administration of gas to a man sitting up in a dental chair;² his blood pressure fell to a level at which, in the upright position, the brain's blood flow is brought almost or completely to a standstill. Had we kept him sitting up, the low blood pressure would have continued, the oxygen shortage would, after two or three minutes, have begun to damage the brain, and coma would have followed.

Meanwhile, I had come across a 1935 statement by Professor Weiss,³ an American

**J G Bourne MD (Camb),
College of Anaesthetists,
The Editor of The Freethinker
Atheist," a believer in the
Jesus but not in the myth
uralism associated with h
ers of The Freethinker wi
way of life which is entire
possible and desirable.
'paper of ideas – and do
aspects of Dr Bourne's
strength and colour to se
with Christians.**

authority on fainting and syncope [loss of consciousness due to a sudden decrease in cerebral blood flow], that the usual cause of death in victims of crucifixion was fainting while the upright position was forcibly maintained, a view now generally accepted among medical scientists.⁴

That statement instantly forced on my mind this explanation of the resurrection: the fainting cases I had uncovered bore a remarkable resemblance to the sequence of events in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

The following case, reprinted here from the 1957 *Lancet* article, was typical, although the coma was often more prolonged:

A pale woman of 28 was given gas for the extraction of one tooth. She did not seem nervous and took the gas well. As the dentist picked up the forceps to make the extraction her face became grey. He quickly extracted the tooth, the gas was stopped, and she was left sitting in the chair to recover. Her pallor was now extreme and she was sweating profusely. Her pulse was slow and difficult to feel. After about five minutes, being still unconscious, she was carried from the chair to a couch in the recovery room. For more than half an hour she remained deeply unconscious, and after a further hour was stuporous and able only to stagger. She had to be assisted downstairs and sent home in a taxi. Her pallor and sweating, and especially the slowness of her pulse, strongly suggested to me that she had fainted during the administration of gas. When I put this to the dentist he agreed that the signs were

Resurrection of Christ

J G Bourne

(Bourne), Fellow of the Royal Society, described himself to his readers as "a Christian-rethinker in the ethical teachings of the Bible, free of the mythology and supernaturalism with his name. Most readers will feel that an ethical approach entirely Jesus-free is both possible and desirable. We are, however, and doubtless the medical profession's argument will add to the secularists' exchanges

suggestive, but thought the condition was too severe for fainting.

It was this case, which came early in my investigation, that prompted the fainting diagnosis and led me to make an extensive study of the common fainting attack, the outcome of which was later published.^{5,6}

THE COMMON FAINTING ATTACK

Fainting is ordinarily trivial and harmless: the subject falls down or is laid flat, regains consciousness at once and soon recovers completely. During the Second World War, more than 25,000 blood-donors in the United Kingdom fainted, and all recovered.

In dentists' surgeries, some patients faint directly their mouths are propped open, or even the moment they sit in the chair. Most of the faints that dentists see follow the injection of local anaesthetics; until 1955 it was overlooked that the patient may also faint while he is being given gas. Fainting is then dangerous because its onset is easily mistaken for the onset of anaesthesia, and the vital step of laying the patient flat may be taken too late: as a result, he may die or his brain may be permanently damaged.

The essential feature of fainting is a fall in arterial blood pressure, caused by active dilatation of the smaller arteries of the body, mainly in the muscles. Blood then gets away from the arterial side of the circulation with greatly decreased resistance. At the same time the heart is slowed, and may stop for several seconds. The onset may come without

warning, though not usually, and there may be a sense of impending death.

Blood pressure falls precipitously, the brain's oxygen supply is reduced, consciousness is lost and the subject falls down. Breathing is shallow, the pupils are dilated, and the appearance death-like: not even the deepest coma so closely resembles death.

The abolition of muscle power which causes the fall is a safeguard to the brain, which is readily damaged by oxygen-lack. In the horizontal position, blood pressure is restored, and consciousness returns. However, deathly pallor may continue for an hour or more — due to release of pituitary hormone, part of the reflex response.

If a person is kept upright during a fainting attack: (a) blood pressure may spontaneously return above syncopal-level. This is unusual; (b) he may recover momentarily and faint again, perhaps repeatedly; (c) he may continue in the faint, with progressively falling blood pressure, but still with a survival chance; or he may die instantaneously because the heart stopped beating at the onset and did not resume.

Depending on the blood pressure level and the length of time he is kept upright, the survivor may suffer stupor or coma, with recovery after a few hours or days, various degrees of permanent intellectual impairment, or profound dementia and delayed death.

The blood pressure level determines the degree of the brain's oxygen lack. On the cross, some advantage would be gained by the fact that on fainting the head would fall forward, thus lessening the lift from heart to brain and improving the blood flow.

Next, how did it happen that blood flowed from the lance wound? In a dead body, blood will ooze from cut veins, but there is not the flow of blood suggested by St. John's description. (In operating for cardiac arrest, a flow would rightly be taken as evidence that the heart was still beating, and the surgeon would not proceed to open the chest). In fainting, this is just what would be expected, with the small muscle arteries dilated, as they are in a faint. The lance could hardly have failed to pierce muscle, and the wound was probably well below heart level, where blood pressure would be appreciable even in a faint.

Apart from the likeness of the faint to death, death is not always easily diagnosed; mistakes are made even today. I know personally of two persons pronounced dead by doctors after careful examination who revived in the mortuary. One of them left hospital 13 days later on foot.

In Jesus, death appears to have been diagnosed by soldiers: what could be more under-

standable than a mistake during the tumult of this terrible event?

I ended my *Sunday Times* article with these words: "If there was nothing supernatural about the reappearance of Jesus, need that be an obstacle to the acceptance of his teachings? His life is sublime without physical myths: nothing can take away the miracles of the spirit."

In their recently published book, *The Bible: Medicine and Myth*, Dr and Mrs Lloyd Davies express their belief that Jesus survived his crucifixion and was not raised miraculously.

CONCESSION

"No longer are miracles credible explanations of events observed long ago," they write, and add: "Belief in the supernatural is not necessary for belief in Christ. Indeed, without the supernatural he is the greater." ⁷ In common with perhaps a growing number of fellow Christians, I share these views.

Surely, it is no longer necessary to insist on belief in a supernatural resurrection simply because people long ago were convinced of it? I fear that unless theologians and Church leaders make this concession they will find themselves ever more widely distanced from ordinary, common-sense people. Church attendance will decline still further and Christianity will suffer. Crucial to Christianity is not the myth but the message.

For ten years, from 1955 to 1965, I refrained from committing my theory of the resurrection to print for fear of giving offence. We should not be reluctant to publish outrageous views; rather should we heed a well-worn sentence of St. Jerome's: *If an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come than that the truth be concealed.*

References: 1 Weiss S. Vasovagal syncope. In the *Oxford Medicine* 1935; 2(1) Chap. VIII-A, p.250 (13). 2 Bourne J G. Fainting and cerebral damage: a danger in patients kept upright during dental gas anaesthesia and after surgical operations *Lancet* 1957; 2:499-505. 3 Weiss S. The differential diagnosis of syncope. In the *Oxford Medicine* 1935; 2(1), Chap. VIII-A, p.250 (63). 4 Sharpey-Schafer E P. Syncope *British Medical Journal* 1956; 1: 506-9. 5 Bourne J G. *Studies in Anaesthetics*, London. Lloyd-Luke (Medical Books) Ltd., 1967; pp 131-143. 6 Bourne J G. The common fainting attack: its danger in dentistry. *British Dental Journal*, 1980; 149: 101-4. 7 Lloyd Davies Margaret and T A. *The Bible: Medicine and Myth*, Cambridge: Allborough 1991, p237.

STOP PRESS

GALHA has organised a political forum on the present state of Gay rights issues and prospects for further law reform, with particular reference to the age of consent. **Place:** Conway Hall library. **Time:** 7.30pm, Friday, June 11. **Speakers:** Ken Livingstone MP (Labour), Professor the Earl Russell (Liberal Democrat), Coun Peter Evans, Deputy Leader of Lambeth Council (Conservative). **Everyone invited: questions and discussion.**

The true 'porn'

"THOSE who eat My flesh, Jesus said, and drink My blood, live in Me and I live in them," it says in a young friend's *My Sunday Missal*.

What a deeply obscene thing to teach little girls and boys! It makes much "pornography" read like *The Beano*. Do your bit against cannibalistic propaganda - give to *The Freethinker* fund, like the following:

J Ancliffe and G Harper, £1 each; J Bridle, H G Easton and F R Evans, £2 each; M Neilson, £2.50; A P Allen, T Cornish, C S Kershaw and J R Smith, £3 each; G Shepherd, £4; H Barrett, R D Birrell, G Blakey, C Cotton, L J Dawson, C R Fletcher, J Fuller, M D Gough,

K C Grierson, R J Hale, S Jacobs, G J Meaden, J Millichamp, A Negus, H A Pugh, J Radford, P R Shakespeare, C M Stewart, J Theobald, R K E Torode and A E G Wright, £5 each; N A Blyth, £5.60; Anonymous, C A G Bearpark, S M Jaiswal, D K Stubbs, R J Tutton and S Williams, £10 each; Apra Books, £12; B A Burfoot, £15; Edinburgh Humanist Group and M Hill, £20 each; T R L Barrett, £25; S Dahlby, \$40.

Total for April £289.10 and \$40.

Please send cheques, POs, stamps, to: *The Freethinker*, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

WHAT'S ON

Birmingham Humanist Group: Thursday, June 10, 8pm: Talk and discussion at Stockland Green Leisure Centre. Monday, June 21, 3pm: Midsummer Social at 1 Stencills Road, Walsall. Saturday, June 25: Canal walk near Lichfield; contact 0543 251390. For full information about Birmingham Humanist Group contact 021 353 1189.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, July 4, 4.30 pm: Tea party followed by annual general meeting.

Chiltern Humanists: Tuesday, June 8, 7.45pm, The Library, High Street, Wendover. Daniel O'Hara: *My Road to Humanism*.

Cornwall Humanists: Little Trembroath, Stithians, Truro. Sunday, July 4, 5pm to 8pm: Summer Barbecue. (If wet, postponed to Sunday, July 11). Contact: "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. And see Devon Humanists, below.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road Kenilworth. Monday, June 21, 7.30 pm: Public meeting. Subject: *Genetic Engineering or Natural Selection?*

Devon Humanists: 9 Thornton Hill, Exeter. Friday, June 4, 7.30pm: Planning and social evening with Henrietta Quinnell. George Mephram will speak on *Religion in Schools* at Quaker Meeting House, Moresk, Truro, on Monday, June 21, and at Swarthmore Adult Education Centre, Room 5, Mutley Plain, Plymouth, on Thursday, June 24; both at 7.30pm. Contact: 31 Ringswell Avenue, Exeter EX1 3EF.

Edinburgh Humanist Group: Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the secretary, 2 Saviile 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 regard-

ing meetings and other activities from Hugh Bowman, 7 Elm Road, Burnside, Glasgow G73 4JR; telephone 041-634 1447.

Havering and District Humanist Society: Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, July 6, 8pm: Public meeting.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, June 24, 8 pm: Public meeting. Subject: Lewisham's Environment.

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, June 17, 7.30pm: Public meeting.

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

Humanist Society of Scotland: Details: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire.

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 above address. Thursday evenings, 7.30pm. June 24: Brenda Colloms, *William J Fox, Past Minister*; July 8: Francis Crook, Director of the Howard League for Penal Reform.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, July 14, 7.45 pm: Patrick Imrie and Stewart Brown, *The Woodcraft Folk*.

Tyneside Humanist Group: Meets on third Thursday of each month (except August and December), starting 6.45pm in the Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. July 15: Amnesty International.

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



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



So that's why God's a Liberal

THE Conservative Christian Fellowship is one of those far-Right religious groups formed over the last dozen years to defend Christian privilege and resist any measure of liberal reform.

It consists in the main of Members of Parliament and local councillors. A list of Patrons includes the predictable mix of compulsory breeding enthusiasts, capital punishment lobbyists and supporters of about every reactionary cause imaginable. How some of them regard having the black-skinned John Taylor as an honorary president is known only to the fly on the wall.

Considerable emphasis is placed on the importance of prayer. This is reflected in the current issue of the Fellowship's journal, *The Wilberforce Quarterly*, which carries a "Prayerline" section.

The first supplication opens with an unctuous appeal to "Eternal and Gracious God, who art slow to anger and of great kindness." No doubt that prayer was cobbled together before last month's ballot-box slaughter in which the Tories lost more than 3,000 council seats. At the Newbury by-election, their General Election majority of 12,000 disappeared like snow in the Sahara. On that occasion, God graciously bestowed his great kindness in the form of a 12,000 majority on the Liberal Democrats.

An anonymous writer in *The Wilberforce Quarterly* quotes Romans, chapter 12: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." Conservatives have never been noticeably devoted to one another, particularly any regarded by Party managers and bankrollers as an electoral liability. Publication of former Government minister Alan Clark's venomous attacks on ex-colleagues moved Julian Critchley MP to comment: "What is so remarkable about the Conservative Party is the extent to which we hate each other."

In his article, "The Breakdown of Society," the edited text of a talk given during the Party conference, Dr Adrian Rogers urges fellow-CCFers to "spread the Faith, for every child imbued with Christian values is a child protected from crime, drug abuse, truancy and illegitimate pregnancy." Police and court records give the lie to such twaddle.

Dr Rogers also asserts that "every marriage imbued with Christian values is a marriage safe from divorce." The Supreme Governor of the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury, both with divorced offspring, will find that one hard to swallow.

Plane speaking from the Lord?

"AND, you know, I sometimes think that God is rather like that..."

Thus the religious broadcaster, oozing relevance and autocue sincerity as he strives to put a new slant on the old, old story.

The genre was exploited with hilarious effect by Alan Bennett in *Beyond the Fringe*. Irreverent theatregoers still gleefully recall Mr Bennett's prissy voice and owlish countenance atop a dog collar as he struggled to relate the profoundness of human existence to the last sardine in the tin.

There have been many variations on the theme. For example, the Rev Stuart Brindley, Vicar of Rotherham, recently told readers of his *Rotherham Advertiser* column how God came to the rescue when he was stricken by that alarming condition known as "writer's block."

Mr Brindley implored the Almighty: "Please make something for my weekly column out of the blankness of my brain." It was a tall order. He then betook himself to a local cemetery and while conducting the burial service over a casket of ashes received inspiration from above (literally).

Praying all the way to the bank

Dear Friends, There is a great sense of prophetic destiny in my spirit as we prepare to assemble together at Earls Court this 15-22 August ...

WITH outspoken modesty, evangelist Morris Cerullo announces a return visit of his road show.

In addition to "this unusual and unique man of God," performers will include Benny Hinn, author of *Good Morning Holy Spirit*, Larry Lea, "the apostle of prayer," and R W Sambach, described as a Holy Ghost revival preacher. A touch of glamour will be provided by Marilyn Hickey, co-pastor of The Happy Church, Denver, Colorado.

Dear friends are invited to send their "small registration fee of only £25" (minimum, non-refundable) to register for the All European School of Ministry.

They are also invited by Cerullo to "send me the names of your unsaved sons and daughters, your spouse, your cousins, aunts, uncles - anyone you care about and do not want to spend eternity in hell." For "this unusual, unique man of God" is an emotional

"It was a tiny thing really," the Vicar of Rotherham writes, "but while we were at the graveside there was a little plane buzzing around above us. We couldn't see it because the clouds were low. But up there we could hear this thing.

"And although there was no real connection, it almost seemed to me like a symbol of resurrection."

How come, Vicar?

"The body of the person who had died had been reduced through cremation to the 'nothing' from which God had created it ...

"But all the time there was this other something buzzing around above us, very much alive."

Mr Brindley concludes that "there is evidence of resurrection in all sorts of unexpected places." Like others who hold that belief, he is short on evidence and long on wishful thinking.

The Vicar of Rotherham also manages to reduce a central tenet of the Christian faith to a tiresome irritant like "a little plane buzzing about."

And, you know, I sometimes think that God is rather like that.

blackmailer who preys on the fearful and the gullible.

His current project involves distributing 200,000 books in Israel. He announces: "For only £5 we can print, ship and distribute one book ...

"If you send £10 for the salvation of two Jews, then I believe God will return to you the salvation of two of your family members."

The Morris Cerullo World Evangelism organisation is a UK registered charity. However, he is not flavour-of-the-month with many British Christians. *Evangelicals Now* describes Cerullo's fund-raising methods as "nauseous, to say the least." The evangelical monthly advocates "a move back to simple grass-roots evangelism, away from the big venue, hyped-up crusade."

But simple evangelism produces simpletons who are ripe for exploitation by the likes of Morris Cerullo. And occasionally it leads to a tragedy like Waco.

Blast from the past: Number 6

Edited from A Letter on Superstition, addressed to the "multifarious sects of Great Britain" by William Pitt (the Elder; 1708-78), first Earl of Chatham, who was described by Austin Holyoake as "a Deist: but one singularly free from the superstition which usually accompanies a belief in the supernatural."

WHAT the greatest part of mankind have agreed to call religion, has been only some outward exercise, esteemed sufficient to work a reconciliation with God.

It has moved them to build temples, slay victims, offer up sacrifices, to fast and feast, to petition and thank, to laugh and cry, to sing and sigh by turns; but it has not yet been found sufficient to induce them to break off an amour, to make restitution of ill-gotten wealth, or to bring the passions and appetites to a reasonable subjection... the more superstitious they are, always the more vicious; and the more they believe, the less they practice...

We will... show you the true reason why men go on in sinning and repenting, repenting and sinning again, through the whole course of their lives; and the reason is, because they have been taught, most wickedly taught, that religion and virtue are two things absolutely distinct; that the deficiency of the one might be supplied by the sufficiency of the other, and that what you want in virtue you must make up in religion.

But this religion, so dishonourable to God, and so pernicious to men, is worse than Atheism; for Atheism, though it takes away one great motive to support virtue in distress, yet it furnishes no man with arguments to be vicious! but superstition, or what the world means by religion, is the greatest possible encouragement to vice, by setting up something as religion, which shall atone and commute for the want of virtue.

We complain of the vices of the world, and of the wickedness of men, without searching into the true cause. It is not because they are wicked by nature...but because to serve the purposes of their pretended soul-savers, they have been carefully taught that they are wicked by nature, and cannot help continuing so.

It would have been impossible for men to have been both religious and vicious, had religion been made to consist wherein alone it does consist, and had they been always taught that true religion is the practice of virtue in obedience to the will of God, who presides over all things, and will finally make every man happy who does his duty...

But this religion of reason, which all men are capable of, has been neglected and condemned, and another set up, the natural consequences of which have puzzled men's

Hating for God's sake

understandings, and debauched their morals, more than all the lewd poets and atheistical philosophers that ever infested the world; for, instead of being taught that religion consists in action, or obedience to the eternal moral law of God, we have been most gravely and venerably told that it consists in the belief of certain opinions, which we could form no ideas of, or – which were contrary to the clear perceptions of our minds, or which had no tendency to make us either wiser or better, or, which is much worse, had a manifest tendency to make us wicked and immoral...

We know there is a God, and we know his will, which is, that we should do all the good we can; and we are assured, from his perfections, that we shall find our own good in so doing.

And what would we have more? Are we, after so much inquiry, and in an age full of liberty, children still? And cannot we be quiet, unless we have holy romances, sacred fables, and traditionary tales, to amuse us in an idle hour, and give rest to our souls, when our follies and vices will not suffer us to rest?

You have been taught, indeed, that right belief, or orthodoxy, will, like charity, cover a multitude of sins; but be not deceived; belief of, or mere assent to, the truth of propositions upon evidence is not a virtue, nor unbelief a vice; faith is not a voluntary act; it does not depend upon the will; every man must believe or disbelieve, whether he will or not, according as evidence appears to him.

If, therefore, men, however dignified or distinguished, command us to believe they are guilty of the highest folly and absurdity, because it is out of our power; but, if they command us to believe, and annex rewards to belief, and severe penalties to unbelief, then are they most wicked and immoral, because they annex rewards and punishments to what is involuntary, and therefore neither rewardable nor punishable.

It appears, then... unreasonable and unjust to command us to believe any doctrine, good or bad, wise or unwise; but when men command us to believe opinions which have not only no tendency to promote virtue, but which are allowed to commute or atone for the want of it, then are they arrived at the utmost reach of impiety, then is their iniquity full, then have they finished the misery and completed the destruction of poor mortal men.

By betraying the interest of virtue, they have undermined and sapped the foundation of all human happiness... A gift well applied – the chattering of some unintelligible sounds called creeds – an unfeigned assent and consent to whatever the Church enjoins – religious worships and consecrated feasts – repenting on a death-bed – pardons rightly sued out, and absolutions authoritatively given – have done more toward making and continuing men vicious than all their natural passions and infidelity put together; for infidelity can only take away the supernatural rewards of virtue; but these superstitious opinions and practices have not only turned the scene, and made men lose sight of the natural rewards of it, but have induced them to think that, were there no hereafter, vice would be preferable to virtue, and that they still increase in happiness as they increase in wickedness...

But these doctrines, of the natural excellency of vice, the efficacy of a right belief, the dignity of atonements and propitiations, have, besides depriving us of the native beauty and charms of honesty, and thus cruelly stabbing virtue to the heart, raised and diffused among men a certain unnatural passion, which we shall call religious hatred; a hatred constant, deep-rooted, and immortal.

All other passions rise and fall, die and revive again; but this of religious and pious hatred rises and grows every day stronger upon the mind as we grow more religious; because we hate for God's sake, for our soul's sake, and for the sake of those poor souls too, who have the misfortune not to believe as we do.

And can we, in so good a cause, hate too much? The more thoroughly we hate, the better we are; and the more mischief we do to the bodies and estates of those infidels and heretics, the more do we show our love to God. This is religious zeal, and this has been called divinity; but remember that the only true divinity is humanity.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Secularism and Islam

ON Monday, April 26, I attended a meeting at Aldgate, London, organised by Moslems, which was a debate between one of their representatives and Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, on the proposition That Islam Oppresses Women.

It was rather unfortunate that I was one of only five people who went along to support Barbara, and also unfortunate that all five of us were men.

The Moslems were very insistent on using their own definition of the meaning of such words as "Moslem" and "Islamic."

On the face of it, fair enough. However, what this meant in practice was that it was impossible to criticise Moslems who have committed crimes because we were simply told that that was because they were failing to behave in a truly Islamic way. (We are all familiar with the equivalent of this argument from Christians, of course).

This may not have been so bad if they hadn't also insisted on using their own definition of the meaning of the word "secular." Surely Barbara and her supporters ought to have had the right to define that!

But no! They constantly clung to their own definition of the meaning of this word, too. On this basis, because they use the word to mean anything which is not Islamic (even things which we would consider to be so but which they maintain are not one hundred per cent Islamic, and therefore cannot be considered to be Islamic at all), they blame Secularism for everything from the disastrous siege involving David Koresh and the Branch Davidian sect (who were, of course, fanatical Christians) to the fact that a survey of British men apparently revealed that one-third of them would be prepared to commit rape, if they knew that they could get away with it!

They also blamed secularism for colonialism, and made disparaging remarks about Lord Cromer and his attitude towards colonialism. This man was a Christian.

It was a great pity that no one had the opportunity to inform them of the fact that the founder of the National Secular Society, Charles Bradlaugh, became a Liberal Member of Parliament in the 19th Century and fought tooth-and-nail in the British Parliament to get rid of colonialism in all its forms.

Unfortunately, because time was limited, none of the points raised was able to be debated in any depth. This was a great pity because it meant that the Moslems were seen to win virtually all the arguments.

It was stated by their spokeswoman that problems in the modern world were caused by the fact that they were "man made." For example: there are men who oppress women. Then

women get together and form feminist groups – and end up becoming too dominant themselves. The solution was to obtain all answers on how to behave from the Koran, because this is the word of the Creator.

Of course, the real reason that such problems have only surfaced in recent times is that formerly everyone had to behave as they were told by political dictators (usually backed up to the hilt by one theological regime or another). So such problems have arisen recently in the Western world as a result of more freedom, purely because they are problems of life

Presumably, we can take this as a true indication of the real attitude of the representatives of Islam towards women?

DAVID WRIGHT
Holborn

Thoughts on free speech

I WAS pleased to read Barbara Smoker on free speech in UK university debate (March issue). It reports relevant experience and makes a cogent analysis. So often you publish snippets that are difficult to relate to larger ideas. She poses a problem to which I have not found an answer.

These Moslem students seem to challenge the "concept of freedom." Freedom is basic to man-made morality. It also threatens any supernatural order. What bothers me fully as much is that the concept of freedom is basic to any democratic social order. Were it to be voted out, our opinions would not even count.

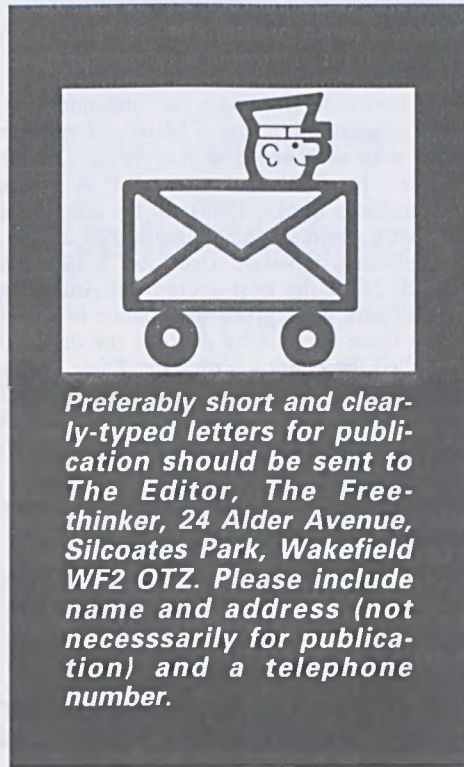
If that seems remote, it is very much part of the experience of my generation. As an American in Germany 1933, I saw the vote that struck down democracy. Parliament was disbanded. An inner circle ruled; you know the outcome. The very safeguards we prize so highly are not as secure as history would seem to make them.

Some Moslem neighbours, mine too and others, raise a serious question. Should a democratic society, committed to its preservation, admit as citizens those who do not subscribe to personal freedom as a basic commitment? If they renege, should they be asked to move to a more congenial society? Does that impose but another form of fundamentalism?

Must freedom, by the nature of its commitment, leave itself perennially open to displacement? For years I thought so. I do think a democratic society, left to its devices, would almost certainly raise new generations that value freedom. Yet this no longer is the world we live in. Mobility is transforming it into a polycultural world. In it, the past traditions of any society no longer are assured.

Right you are if you say: but this was not the case in Germany, Cambodia, Yugoslavia, where pogroms occurred. They were self-generated. What then? Dare we say to our fellow citizens: unless you subscribe to personal freedom you no longer deserve the rights of citizenship? Have I now come full circle? Have I traded places with your Moslem neighbours? Should one rise in protest against this?

I am trying out new thoughts. We cannot tolerate those with infectious disease, whatever their wish, unless they seek help.




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

itself and are not man-made.

The Moslem solution, on the other hand, looking for the answers in a book alleged to have been written or inspired by the "Creator," is purely man-made because the whole concept of the "Creator" is man-made.

If this point could have been forcibly made, it would have undermined all their arguments.

Barbara attempted to undermine the Moslem argument by talking about Science having shown that the world and life came about in a different way, as a result of the Big Bang. As a response to this, a young Moslem woman went up to the microphone and denounced the Big Bang theory by telling Barbara to "Get Real." This was the sum-total of her argument, and this great intellectual point was supported by great cheers of support from the Moslem side, during which time I heard one Moslem man call Barbara "a silly old cow," a remark which resulted in great hoots of laughter from other Moslem men.



YOU'RE TELLING US!

➔ From Page 93

Should we provide full liberty to those known to be insane, delinquent, violent or with convictions that threaten the freedom of others? Should we uphold action groups who systematically undercut freedom for diverse reasons: political, religious, economic, ethnic etc? Is this full cycle and/or is it justified?

FRANCIS MARBURG
Virginia, USA

Where's the evidence?

NO, NO, no, no! I refuse to have my examples of poor statistics (on pornography) attacked by your correspondent Jessie Boyd (April issue) as being poor statistics; of course they are.

My point is that we don't need to have poor statistics: we could have crisp, objective, clear statistics. But we haven't.

I also emphatically reject that I claimed that the occupation of suites of offices confers respectability on anybody. I did not even imply this, but rather made clear that not all people and governments consider the "porn business" to be a back street, under-the-counter affair.

It is important when discussing pornography that all parties know that we are not discussing something which is automatically considered to be "dirty" by "everybody."

It is perhaps indicative of the kind of feelings evoked by pornography that Jessie Boyd has not only still not presented any evidence, but also has stated that any evidence that access to pornography would reduce sexual crime would automatically be not convincing.

BOB HAMILTON
Portsmouth

Medieval tea-leaves

MICHAEL HARDING (April issue) uncritically passes on the claim that members of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal rigged data sets to nullify pro-astrology findings (wrong).

He would have us believe that they were exposed by their own chairman (wrong); and that the chairman was subsequently fired (wrong). He also asserts that "no re-analysis has failed to break the Gauquelin data," though my best guess is that his double negation has tripped him into saying exactly the opposite of what he means.

It is highly fashionable among astrologers to flourish the name of Gauquelin in the hope that the unwary reader will interpret this as

implying Gauquelin's approval of this medieval version of reading tea-leaves.

In fact, Gauquelin expressed his contempt for astrology on many occasions: "It is now quite certain that the signs in the sky which presided over our births have no power whatever to decide our fates, to affect our hereditary characteristics, or to play any part, however humble, in the totality of effects, random or otherwise, which form the fabric of our lives and mould our impulses to action." (*The Scientific Basis of Astrology*, 1969).

He pointed out (in *Cosmic Clocks*, 1967): "Whoever claims to predict the future by consulting the stars is fooling either himself or someone else."

As a counter-balance to some of the unreliable books on Harding's recommended list, your readers might make better use of their time with such books as *Astrology: True or False?* by R B Culver and P A Ianna (Prometheus Books, 1988). Or the account of Shawn Carlson's double-blind test of astrology published in *Nature* (December 5, 1985), in which 28 of the best-accredited American astrologers were given the chance to select from three personality profiles the one that matched the client's birth date. Their results could have been equalled by throwing dice.

LEWIS JONES
London

Where's the BVM?

SURELY the ending of the war in what was Yugoslavia ought to be had from prayers to Our Lady of Medjugorje (Bosnia-Herzegovina)? One miracle can hardly be any more difficult than another.

R J M TOLHURST
Chelmsford

Almighty nonsense

WE are informed by the Book of Common Prayer of the "Church of England" and the Apostle's Creed (sanctioned by an Act of Parliament, never repealed) that Jesus Christ ascended to Heaven and sits on the right hand of God!

It is a well-known fact that if the blood supply is shut off from a limb for more than half-an-hour (never mind 1,900 years!) mortification of the flesh sets in, and unless immediate medical treatment is applied, such as amputation, the patient is doomed, as the condition is irreversible and death is certain.

The above is quite ridiculous, as we are further informed in the same Book of Common Prayer, under the heading "Articles of Religion," that the alleged "God" has neither body, parts nor passions! This being the case,

we are confronted with a one-handed "God" (assuming he had medical treatment), a dead God (who had no medical treatment) or the simplest of all explanations (Occam's Razor) that the compilers of the Book of Common Prayer were telling plain lies!

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

Spirited talk

YOUR correspondent Ron Smith's concern (May issue) about the use of words like "soul" and "spiritual" by non-believers is needless. The problem with the transatlantic obsession with politically-correct language is that consistency leads to absurdity.

If it is wrong to say "chairman," why is right to say "human"? Why not "huperson beings" and "Personchester United" winning the League Championship? "Man" as a prefix or suffix is not exclusive. Like the German "Mensch," it includes both men and women.

If humanists cannot bear to say "Merry Christmas," how can they say "Good-bye," which once meant "God be with you"?

"Spiritual" is animistic in origin, the primitive explanation of living things moving of their own volition. If humanists had to stop using the word, they should also avoid "animal," derived from the Latin word for "spirit."

Language is enriched by metaphors. They may come from religion, fairy tales, Shakespeare or comic literature. Let us not emasculate our speech by silly censorship.

KARL HEATH
Coventry

Republicanism

I READ David Hayward's letter on republicanism and secularism (May issue) with interest. I agree with Dave's sentiments, but I should point out that another republican organisation was formed in 1982 after a letter from Julia Atkinson expressing republican sentiments was published in *The Freethinker*.

Republic (of which I am Assistant Secretary) aims to modernise the British constitution through the abolition of all hereditary public office, by democratic, lawful and peaceful means. The arguments against monarchy and for republicanism are cogently set out in a book by Dr Edgar Wilson, a member of Republic, entitled *The Myth of British Monarchy*, published by Pluto Press at £6.95. David Misell, our membership secretary, may be contacted at 14 Harvington Drive, Solihull B90 4YN, and he will be pleased to supply a membership pack for anyone interested.

COLIN MILLS
Amersham

FAO MISS WIDDECOMBE

Ann Widdecombe, the junior Social Security Minister, made a very public entry into the Catholic Church yesterday in ceremonies at Westminster Cathedral and the Crypt Chapel of the House of Commons: *The Guardian*, April 22

I AM still gently smouldering at the havoc wreaked upon my youth by the Roman Catholic faith.

I am reminded of it whenever I hear the unctuous, logic-bereft prattling of the likes of John Selwyn Gummer, John Patten and other political luminaries appointed over us to guide us towards morality and family values.

Patten, in charge of education, tells us that the slipping standards in society are due to a diminishing fear of hell-fire and damnation among the young. As far as he is concerned, it has nothing to do with the snout-in-the-trough standards propagated by a heartless government.

Gummer, interviewed by Ludovic Kennedy, proudly professes his belief in the virgin birth and the resurrection: "The world is full of mysteries and there is no reason not to believe in a couple more."

Well, it is certainly quite a mystery how people with this level of judgement can be elected to Parliament. It does not leave room for a great deal of respect for the electorate at large.

That awful realisation has long ago driven me inside the besieged castle of freethought and sceptical enquiry where a rearguard action is perpetually fought against the forces of superstition and religious oppression.

And do not underestimate the evil that the RC church is still capable of inflicting, given half a chance.

Its history is shot through with intolerance, persecution, witch hunts and holy wars. And where it has not actually gone to war itself, it has created the conditions for conflict to become inevitable. Its male-dominated hierarchy through the ages has displayed misogyny of such proportions that no woman aware of the detail could possibly justify belonging to that club now.

At the behest of fat cats in the Vatican and Bishops' palaces, women have served as plant-pots to supply the numbers necessary for the upkeep of wealth and influence.

And how were they thanked for supplying this sterling service? I remember as an altar boy being an unwitting accomplice to the degrading ritual of cleansing. This is a process designed to cleanse a woman of the sin associated with conception and childbirth. The utter contempt shown by the bachelor priests on such occasions is etched upon my memory. I assume that such barbaric practices have now been quietly dropped, but there are plenty of other ways in which the RC church can still give vent to its hatred of women.

Its opposition to abortion and birth control for example – see last month's *Freethinker* front-page story – and its insistence that God's



An open letter to a Government minister from TONY AKKERMANS

sacraments can only be administered by way of male genitals.

Or at least I think it must be that – for it seems hard to distinguish between men and women by other means.

A quick test readily confirms that it is sup-

pression of women and not concern for foetuses that is the real issue. The sanctity of life quickly becomes the sanctimony of life once it is discovered that most "pro-life" anti-abortion campaigners have no difficulty with the death penalty and that the people who agitate the loudest against abortion – surprise, surprise! – are the same people who fight birth control and sex education tooth-and-nail.

There can be only one conclusion: women, having indulged in sin, must not be allowed to escape without punishment.

As far as the RC church is concerned, all forms of sex which do not involve the transfer of bodily-fluids into unprotected Christian wombs are to be condemned. What unfettered RC power can lead to was demonstrated in that stronghold of bigotry the Irish Republic, where a 14-year-old, pregnant through rape, was prevented from travelling abroad for an abortion.

So much for women. Men, priests that is, on the other hand have always flourished under the RC system. Plenty of food and drink. Women to do for them. In the case of the Bishop of Galway and countless others, to do for them other than in the normal sense of cooking and ironing.

The large proportion with no weakness for women can enjoy the many benefits of understanding male coteries, carefully cloaked by hypocrisy and secrecy.

Even the blood of Christ is conveniently symbolised by wine and not by something so boringly unalcoholic as apple juice.

Despite this blatant self-indulgence, these "first deluders of mankind" have managed successfully to portray themselves as holy men devoting their ascetic lives to the service of others.

Some of us are not taken in.

Secular funeral for a popular artist

ROWLAND HILDER, the popular landscape water-colourist, died recently, aged 87.

He was noted for his paintings of Kent scenes, especially in winter, featuring leafless trees. These "Hilderscapes" were as distinctive a mark of his style as Suffolk Stour scenes were of Constable; they were widely reproduced on greetings cards and calendars.

He collaborated with Shell in a celebrated series of motoring posters in the 1930s. After illustrating an edition of *Treasure Island*, he became better known through his drawings for Mary Webb's *Precious Bane*. Rowland Hilder and his wife, Edith, who painted the flowers, produced *The Shell Guide to Flowers of the Countryside*, which included a text by Geoffrey Grigson.

Although Rowland Hilder provided illustrations in the 1940s for the Oxford UP publication *The Bible for Today*, he nevertheless remained sceptical on religious matters. He used to question Jehovah's Witnesses at length in his studio, without this interrupting his work, as he continued to draw and paint.

This reminded me of one freethinker who, having time on his hands, used to engage Jehovah's Witnesses in long dialogue, on the grounds that while they were talking to him, this was delaying their endeavours in further proselytisation!

Denis Cobell

● National Secular Society Council member Denis Cobell conducted a secular funeral for Rowland Hilder.

LAST WORD

by Hugh Thomas

THE media in the Bristol and Avon area was filled recently with features prompted by an "Alternative Therapy Awareness" (ATA) campaign orchestrated by local practitioners, culminating in an ATA week of events.

The widely-distributed free booklet provides contact details, and conveys implied legitimisation, of local therapists in such hilarious sounding methods as astrological counselling, colonic irrigation (hold me back!), rebirthing, rolfing (Harris?), music therapy, and the inevitable healing by laying on of hands.

The problem with scientific or rational medicine, its critics tell us, is that it treats illness as if it were a mechanical fault in an engine.

A different approach is necessary, they argue, in order to treat the patient as a person and not as a machine.

This requires, typically, a time-consuming analysis of their personal history and life-style, their diet and possibly an inventory of current personal problems. This holistic approach is precisely what most of the alternative therapies profess to provide.

Prince

The Royal Family, it is often said, recognises the truth of this, and opts for alternative treatments accordingly. No doubt Prince Charles could recommend a good remedy for carbuncles, but the time when the Royals could be taken seriously in setting examples to the rest of us is surely over.

Homoeopathy is one of the most popular (and one of the barmiest) manifestations of the current host of alternative cults.

The core of homoeopathic theory is that the way to cure someone of an illness is not to give them the medicine that would alleviate their symptoms, but to administer instead the very substance which would bring about those same symptoms in a well person.

A case of galloping dysentery would warrant treatment with a laxative. This would surely be enough to finish many patients off, if it were not for the fact that the homoeopath believes that the potency of his treatment is maximised

What the doctor didn't order

by diluting the effective constituent to an incredible degree.

It has often been pointed out that the successive dilutions involved in preparing the treatment in this way actually produces a final "medicine" containing fewer molecules of the supposedly active constituent than would be present in an equal measure of tap water.

Aromatherapy is another science, or art, which has rocketed in popularity recently if we are to believe the press.

Over last Christmas, I was given a present of an anti-snoring pillow based on such "traditional" herbal cures. I would be pleased to send any aromatherapist a cassette of the undiminished cacophony which I still (I am informed) produce nightly.

For all those who spend their money on such mumbo-jumbo, I would bid them ask themselves one question. Next time they fall down and break an arm or a leg, will they waive away offers of setting the bone in a hospital, insisting instead on a holistic approach, analysing their diet, personal problems and so on?

I know where I would wish to be taken, and I suspect a large proportion of them would be there with me in the same queue.

Perhaps what the alternative practitioner really offers to you, then, is that rarest of commodities in today's society: a listening and sympathetic ear.

As for your condition (if any) if it gets better (as most conditions eventually do) they've cured you; if it

doesn't, then you haven't had enough treatment. And if you die? Well - end of story.

True enough, scientific medicine, or "allopathy," as the alternative practitioners prefer to term it, does not offer a universal panacea for all ills. Nor does it claim to. Many conditions are still incurable or only the symptoms can be treated.

But the enormous leaps forward over the last century or so should not be minimised - for example, with respect to smallpox, polio and measles. Even several forms of cancer can now be treated successfully, provided they are diagnosed early enough.

Medicine is not perfect, but it is continually making progress and it is the best hope we've got.

In fact, doctors recognise that psychological factors play a role in the aetiology and prognosis of many physical illnesses.

Psychosomatic disorders - physical symptoms brought about by psychological causes - have been well accepted phenomena since Freud.

Similarly, extensive research has been carried out into the placebo effect. Doctors fully recognise that patients benefit from personal attention rather than instant diagnoses and prescriptions in conveyor-belt style. Unfortunately, most of our hard pressed doctors do not have the time or resources available to provide a service of this nature.

Unintentionally humourous the Bristol ATA booklet may be to most of us, but there are very real dangers in all this for the unsophisticated.

For instance, what of the patient suffering from the early stages of an illness, who fails to see a real doctor in time to give treatment a chance of success?

This is why editors should think very carefully before using alternative medicine as a cheap and cheerful means of filling column-inches.

Religion is not the only dangerous outdated nonsense we need to eradicate in the modern world.

● **Editor's note: Yes, I know... I know... colonic irrigation cured YOU. But do keep your anti-Hugh Thomas broadsides as short and to-the-point as possible.**