

The

40p

Secular
Humanist
monthly

Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 113 No 8

August 1993

NEW GAY DEMAND FOR EQUALITY

FOLLOWING a liberal revolution in the law relating to homosexuality in the Irish Republic, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) has targeted Home Secretary Michael Howard with a demand for further UK reform.

The organisation has called on supporters to lobby Mr Howard and their MPs, pointing out that there is the prospect of British MPs being given a free vote on reducing the homosexual age of consent in the next session of Parliament.

● **Almost 200 years after the publication of *The Age of Reason*, Tom Paine is still the victim of prejudice: Colin McCall reports on Page 119. There's a *Blast from the Past* by Paine on Page 124.**

In its letter to Mr Howard, GALHA compares the situation in the UK with that in Ireland following the reform brought about in Dublin on June 24. This legalises homosexual acts and puts them on a par with heterosexual ones, with an age of consent of 17.

The UK, says GALHA, is now left with the highest age of consent for gay men in Europe and is one of only two EC countries out of 12

to retain an unequal age of consent.

"Lesbians and gay men are not seeking special rights, only to be treated fairly like other minorities – not, as at present, as second-class citizens," says GALHA.

The GALHA letter to the Home Secretary concludes: "We ask that the Irish Government's example is followed, that gay men in this country are treated equally, and that the age of consent is lowered to 16."

GALHA has also urged kindred organisations in the Humanist movement, including the British Humanist Association (BHA) and the National Secular Society



Paine & prejudice

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New gay demand for equality

◀ From Page 113

(NSS), to support the lobby. The BHA and the NSS both have an official pro-gay rights policy, including lowering the age of consent to 16 from its present 21.

Expressing support for the GALHA campaign, NSS President Barbara Smoker commented, tongue-in-cheek: "If Ireland has now taken a more progressive stand than England... God help us!"

Ireland's ban on homosexual acts was found to be in breach of the European Convention of Human Rights five years ago but, until now, the dominant influence of the Roman Catholic Church has ensured that it remained illegal along with abortion, contraception and divorce (which are next in line for reform by Dublin's Coalition government).

In a top-level statement, the Catholic Church in Ireland has made it clear that homosexuals must still be chaste: "No change in the state can change the moral law." It also says that it fears the new law may have an adverse effect on the role of the family.

With this sort of outburst in mind, gay and lesbian Humanists have reacted angrily to the "Judaeo-Christian homophobia" of religious leaders, following widespread media exposure for preliminary findings by US researchers who say that homosexuality may be linked to genetics and that it could one day be possible to isolate a single "homosexual gene."

GALHA has issued a statement condemning Cardinal Basil Hume for his recent description of gay sex as "intrinsically disordered" and his reiteration of RC teaching that homosexual acts can never be morally right. And the organisation has attacked what it calls "the venomous recommendation" made by former Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits that if it became possible to prevent homosexuality by genetic engineering, it should be permissible.

"If we could by some form of genetic engineering eliminate these trends, we should – so long as it is done for a therapeutic purpose," Lord Jakobovits said in a *Jewish Chronicle* interview. This was because Jewish holy texts viewed homosexual acts as "an abomination." But he said that he was not advocating the abortion of foetuses known to have homosexual tendencies.

He added that a newly-born child who was known to have a homosexual predisposition should be "trained from an early age" to ensure that the inherited tendencies were not properly developed.

And on the BBC Radio Four programme *The Moral Maze* (July 29) Lord Jakobovits, asked whether the gene was not God-given, said: "We now know that certain tendencies towards violence are created by abnormalities in the genes – there is the XY chromosome, there's the XYY chromosome, which can influence tendencies towards violence – should we therefore say that, albeit it's a natural tendency, it derives from certain irregularities of nature, therefore it should be made legitimate?"

He added: "If that offending or errant gene can be removed, then in the same way as we would do this for, let us say, to heal, to overcome infertility or MS or other abnormalities, why shouldn't we use it for parents who seek it?"

Commenting on the views of both the Cardinal and the former Chief Rabbi, GALHA secretary George Broadhead said: "They show the complete moral bankruptcy and inhumanity of the Bible-based Judaeo-Christian teaching on homosexuality. Lesbians and gays who support the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Judaism to which Lord Jakobovits subscribes should think again.

"These religionists feed on guilt and fear while claiming to offer 'love' and 'good news.' The way to a life of happiness and self-acceptance is to reject all notions of gods, guilt, sin and salvation."

Quaker writer Jonathan Fryer also condemned Lord Jakobovits on BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme (July 24): "I assume that he would consider a world devoid of gay

men a more perfect place. I shall refrain from making obvious, painful parallels."

Barbara Smoker entered the debate in her own inimitable style, insisting that: "Those who choose to have their embryos screened for the 'gay gene,' so as to avoid having a child predisposed to gayness, should be allowed the procedure and allowed consequent abortion, *since such prejudiced people are unlikely to make good parents for such a child.*"

Miss Smoker made her statement on *Call Nick Ross* (Radio 4) on July 20. Pointing out that she was an inaugural Vice-President of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, she was the final contributor to the programme, and said she disagreed with the other pro-gays who had called for legislation against embryo screening for gayness.

She said she would not want to outlaw abortion in early pregnancy, even on grounds of the foetus not being of the preferred sex: far better this, she thought, than couples trying again and again for the wanted sex, thus adding to the birth-rate and possibly resulting in family favouritism – not to mention the sort of female infanticide that still occurs in China. But she added: "I don't think screening procedures for determining sex or sexuality should be carried out on the National Health: public funding should be reserved for the avoidance of disease or disability."

Studio guest Dame Mary Warnock was inclined to agree with Miss Smoker, but began to argue against allowing abortion "on demand" for frivolous reasons. Miss Smoker broke in to argue for it, provided it were restricted to the first 13 weeks of pregnancy. The programme ended with Dame Mary conceding that there was something to be said for Miss Smoker's viewpoint.

BELIEVING WORLD

PARIS: Two slivers of olive tree said to come from the cross on which Jesus was crucified were sold for some \$18,500 in a crowded auction house here... Accompanying the relic were two certificates, one dated 1855 from the Vatican authenticating the wood as part of Jesus's cross, and the other dated 1856 recording that it was a gift from the Patriarch of Jerusalem to Edouard Thouvenel, at the time the French Ambassador to Constantinople. *New York Times Service*, May.

TENNESSEE man Rodney Plumley faces charges over allegedly assaulting his eight-year-old stepdaughter. It is claimed the assault took place because the girl wouldn't pray during a Good Friday breakfast. *Weekly News*, June 19.

WORSHIPPERS at a drive-in church in Florida listen to the service in their cars – honking the horn once for amen and twice for hallelujah. *News of the World*, July 4.

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

Editorial address:

24 Alder Avenue,
Silcoates Park,
Wakefield, WF2 0TZ.

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

'A bunch of murderers'

NOW here's fighting talk for you: "Angry John Teeney branded Jehovah's Witnesses 'a bunch of murderers' last night for letting his ex-wife die rather than accept a blood transfusion..."

That's from *The Sun*, of June 16 – and hurrah for the fact that the paper's horde of readers has had its card so emphatically marked about these Christian goings-on.

The Sun reported that John, 28, "hit out" at sect elders who put "tremendous pressure" on mother-of-two Susan in hospital to make her refuse blood that would probably have saved her.

The "distraught dad, now caring for sons John, eight, and Vernon, seven," said: "No one has the right to take somebody else's life away. Because of the Witnesses, two children are left without a mother... This evil must be stopped before more lives are ruined."

John was speaking after an inquest heard how Susan, 27, was admitted to Newcastle's Royal Victoria Infirmary with a bowel complaint. Doctors told her she had only a ten per cent chance of survival without surgery and a blood transfusion.

Susan had the op – but refused blood and died from peritonitis and anaemia eight days later.

Surgeon Ross Taylor told the hearing that Susan had had "excellent" chances of survival if she had agreed to transfusions.

And consultant physician Christopher Record described seven meetings with Witness elders who "took over" Susan's care and advice. He said: "She was under tremendous pressure. They were never away from the ward."

Susan's mother, Christina Gates, said: "If the Jehovah's Witnesses had left her to decide for herself she would still be alive."

And *The Sun* added: "Susan became a Witness in 1987 after her brother was killed in a hit-and-run accident. She and John divorced in 1991. John said: 'The Witnesses are just a bunch of murderers.'"

Verdict: Natural causes.

What was Karl Heath saying in *The Freethinker* last month? Something about Christianity being evil?

Christian cruelties

FROM Australia, Nigel Sinnott sends me another item for Karl's dossier. It is taken from *The Age*, Melbourne, July 5, and concerns the Christian Brothers, an order long

feared and hated by working-class Catholics for its tradition of propelling youngsters into Godliness on the toe of its hob-nailed boot:

"The Christian Brothers in Western Australia [WA] have admitted that some boys were physically and sexually abused while in the care of the Catholic Church.

"The Catholic order has made an unreserved public apology to child migrants, orphans and wards of the state who were sent to church institutions from Britain, Ireland and Malta.

"The brothers, who have expressed 'heartfelt regret for the failings of the past' and 'beg the forgiveness of those who suffered,' say they do not know how many boys were abused.

"About 4,000 boys were sent to four church institutions in WA between 1901 and 1983. In recent years, many former inmates have alleged they were physically and sexually abused by some brothers at the institutions.

"An organisation representing the boys claimed it received more than 300 calls from former inmates during a phone-in five weeks ago. The callers identified 29 alleged paedophiles among institution staff. About 10 of the men are thought to be still alive.

"In an advertisement in the WA press at the weekend, the Christian Brothers admitted that some boys were abused."

However, Brother Tony Shanahan, the Deputy Provincial of the Christian Brothers in WA, said financial compensation was not being considered: "We ran the advertisement as a genuine attempt to bring about reconciliation, to recognise that wrong had been done and to get a balanced appreciation of the issue."

Brother Shanahan said about 10 or 12 brothers may have been involved in abuse at some time among a staff of 170.

In the advertisement, the Provincial, Brother Gerald Faulkner, said: "While the extent of the abuse appears to have been exaggerated in some quarters, the fact that such physical and sexual abuse took place at all in some of our institutions cannot be excused and is for us a source of deep shame and regret."

The Age talked to John Hennessey, 55, of Campbelltown, NSW, who lived at the Christian Brothers' Bindoon farm from 1947 to 1955. John says the experience damaged his life: "He said his stutter dates from the time he was publicly stripped and thrashed by a broth-

er after leading a group of hungry boys to steal grapes."

Comment from the godless would be superfluous – and probably too obscene for publication. We intend, however, to return to the story of how Christians in the UK, well within living memory, were transporting youngsters to lives of misery and slavery among their co-religionists in Australia.

Thought for the Beeb

CONGRATULATIONS to freethinking Tony Akkermans, of Leeds, who recently had a letter read out on Chris Dunkley's Radio Four *Feedback* programme:

"Why does the BBC, with its reputation for openness and fair play, see fit to resort to subterfuge when it comes to broadcasting religious programmes?"

"Take for example your item 'Thought for Today,' shoehorned, apropos to absolutely nothing, into the heart of a major current affairs slot.

"Since the thoughts there paraded are the predictable bland offerings of a procession of ministers, rabbis, imams, fathers and other peddlers of religion, are we to conclude that freethinkers are incapable of contributions worth listening to?"

"This slot patently no longer reflects mainstream thought in this country. It should be dropped or renamed 'Religious Thought for Today' so that at least we can recognise it for what it is."

Putting the boot in

ANOTHER friend of *The Freethinker*, Norman Green, of Sheffield, took exception to a report of the FA Cup Final which appeared in *Yorkshire on Sunday*, May 16. It said: "...there were no atheists left in blue-and-white at Wembley..." Reasonably enough, Norman took this to imply that all Wednesdayites believed some god or other to be on their side.

Norman banged off a letter which was published under the headline *A terrace atheist*: "I was an atheist before the start of the game, am an atheist now and remained an atheist throughout the entire match.

"Your remark 'there were no atheists left in blue-and-white at Wembley' is therefore patently untrue and I request that you have the decency to withdraw it through the columns of your 'paper at the earliest opportunity."

ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

Books, pamphlets and back issues of *The Freethinker*.

For full list, write to:

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

UP FRONT

with the Editor

◀ From previous page

In store for the Sabbath?

THE Government has published its long-awaited thoughts on the reform of our superstition-based Sunday shopping laws.

As expected, the draft Bill offers four options for reform: total deregulation, partial deregulation and regulatory schemes proposed by the Keep Sunday Special Campaign and the Retailers for Shops Act Reform.

MPs will be allowed a free vote when the Bill is debated in the next session of Parliament, after it has been announced in the Queen's Speech in November.

My view is that all laws which set Sunday apart from other days of the week should be scrapped – so long as shop-workers (like fire-fighters, nurses, media people, transport workers and others who must clock-in on Sundays) work only union-agreed total hours, spread over five days (and not five-and-a-half, as suggested by some reformers).

Any other option allows at least some credibility to the Christians' unsound adaptation of the ancient Hebrew tribal law, which permits the superstitionists to compel the rest of us to keep Sunday to some degree special.

But a complete striking-off of Sabbatarian shackles is unlikely to become law – this year.

The Shopping Hours Reform Council's compromise is the option most likely to succeed in Parliament. Under this plan:

ALL shops under 3,000 square feet would be free to open all day Sunday to sell their full range of goods without any restriction.

ALL shops over 3,000 square feet would be free to open on Sunday to sell their full range of goods for a maximum of six hours in the eight-hour period between 10am and 6pm.

SHOP-WORKERS would be protected by law if they refused to work on Sunday. They would have the right to withdraw from Sunday work at a month's notice. The standard week would be 39 hours in a five-and-a-half day week. There would be premium or enhanced pay for Sunday work.

It is, one must suppose, a start. Strictly in this context, it is a shame that John Major will probably be spending such a lot of time with his family when the matter is debated: he is said to favour the "Scrap All Sunday Laws" option, but by November who except Norma will be hearkening?

Big bang, Mk II?

ANGRY God will rock the universe with the

biggest bang in man's history next year – as a warning that he might destroy us with a massive asteroid, it says here (*Daily Star*, July 20).

The doom-laden message comes from mystic nun Sister Marie Gabriel, who says that a gigantic comet will smash into the planet Jupiter (get out those diaries) on July 25, 1994, as an ultimatum to the world – a warning from God to us to stop wars, cut the crime rate, and ban pornography, alcohol and TV violence. And American "space experts" confirm that there IS a 12-mile wide rogue comet out there, due to hit Jupiter next summer, says the *Daily Star*.

At her home in Cricklewood, 51-year-old Sister Marie announced: "God is not pleased with the way things are going on earth – and has ordered me make this prediction public. The biggest cosmic explosion in the history of mankind will be an ultimatum to get our own planet in order or face extinction by a massive asteroid."

So the nun, who – surprise, surprise! – claims the Virgin Mary is a regular visitor to her sixth-floor flat, launched a newspaper advertisement campaign to warn world leaders of the impending explosion. It won't mean the end of our planet: "But future disaster can be avoided if we start to lead peaceful, decent, honest lives... and NHS hospitals must stop killing old people with starvation and morphine."

Pausing only to wonder if geronticide is somehow OK in *private* hospitals, one turns with interest to Sister Marie's final injunctions: "Women must dress modestly, and we should adopt Saudi Arabia's successful system of law and order to combat crime."

An 'armless notion, the latter, you might think. But is Sister Marie any more sandwiches short of a picnic than all the others who have predicted cosmic calamity?

In *The Mask of Nostradamus* (Prometheus, ISBN 0-87975-830-9) James Randi not only hangs the world's most famous seer out to dry, but also he lists some of the other "great" prophecies of history.

Swedenborg said the world would end in 1757. Joanna Southcott insisted, no, it would be 1774. Lubricous prophet John Wroe, subject of a recent TV series, said Armageddon would come in 1977. And as ludicrous and as profoundly wrong as the rest, the Bible: "According to the New Testament, The End should have occurred before the death of the last Apostle. In Matthew 16:28, it says: 'Verily, I say unto you, there be some standing here which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.' One by one, all the apostles died. And the world rolled on for everyone else..." notes Randi.

So don't be too hard on Sister Marie Gabriel. She could be far more noxiously employed – heartlessly preaching the creation of even more mouths to feed among the malnourished masses of Calcutta, for example.

Welcome to the world

GO-AHEAD Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists have issued a leaflet which invites people to *Welcome Your New Baby with a Shared Naming Ceremony*. It notes that the ceremonies, held in Kenilworth, include words of welcome to the event, with stages including:

- Welcoming your child into the family and community and acknowledging your commitment to her or his development and upbringing.
- Lighting a candle by the child's Supporting Adults.
- Music and poetry.

There are free invitation cards, and the ceremony is followed by a tea-party. Cost is kept to £40, plus £5 for each guest at the party, because the expenses, as well as the ceremony are shared with other families.

The leaflet says: "The occasion is suitable for people who would like the ceremony to welcome their new baby into the family and the community and who are non-religious."

Further details from Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB.

This is all highly relevant to Diana Elvin's article on the back page of this issue of *The Freethinker* – and so is a new publication, *Rite Lines*, newsletter of the Officiants and Celebrants of the British Humanist Association, which is packed with information and opinion from the growing Humanist ceremonies network. Editor is Nigel Collins. Fosse Manor Farm, Stratford Road, Moreton-in-Marsh GL56 9NQ. I am confident that Nigel would let you have a copy, were you to send him two first-class stamps with your name and address.

Bound to be good

DON'T miss...the Joint Humanist Social which will be held in the Library of Conway Hall on Friday evening, November 19. The last one was a huge success, I hear. Further details later, but I can reveal that the guest speaker will be Paul Foot, of *Private Eye*, expert on two ornaments of the British literary scene: P B Shelley and Captain Robert Maxwell MC.

And don't under any circumstances miss the 1992 bound volume of *The Freethinker*, which will be reviewed in due course. It costs £10.50 (plus £1.25 postage) and is available from G W Foote & Co. Ltd., 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Self-abasement can make you go blind

THEY fuck you up, your mum and dad, wrote Philip Larkin in a memorable phrase. In the 200 closely-argued pages of this book, Dr Wendell W Watters reaches a similar conclusion – about the influence of religion on our upbringing.

He describes religion as an existential soother to which individuals, having been born atheists, are encouraged to become addicted as they grow up in our theistic society.

He sees Christianity, which is his principal target, as a pacifier *par excellence*, with its claim to alleviate cosmological fears – fears largely of its own creation – and to relieve guilt that has been inculcated in the believer by Christian mythology.

Throughout the book, Dr Watters is concerned about the impact of Christian doctrine on individuals in our society as that doctrine acts through the family, the educational systems and the churches themselves.

Whether the family does distil the Christian pathology into lethal doses, or acts to neutralise the toxicity of the Christian messages coming from society, depends largely on the degree to which parents themselves have matured beyond the need for the opiates of Christian doctrine and have successfully immunised themselves against its noxious side-effects.

Self-abasement through the doctrine of original sin is a basic tenet of Christian teaching. In Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* there are at least 37 passages explicitly warning Christians not to think well of themselves. Moreover, there are countless quotations from the Bible exhorting humility and self-abnegation. Such masochistic messages are not just medieval relics but are repeated week after week from the pulpits in mainline Christian churches.

All these prostrations are hardly compatible with the development of a balanced personality. They can readily result in conflict between human being and believer, leading to stress and ultimately to illness. Because Christianity is a stylised and socially acceptable way of resisting nature's demand for growing-up, it is a most powerful contributor to a feeling of worthlessness in children exposed to its doctrine.

The focus in true Christian tradition is on the child's innate badness rather than on the inappropriateness of the behaviour. In order for a growing child not to be damaged by repeated exposure to such messages, he would have to be equipped with an unusually high level of innate adaptive capacity.

To the Godly, a child allowed to think for itself is a loose cannon; he or she might start using reason to ask questions about

Deadly Doctrine: Health, Illness, and Christian God-Talk by Wendell W Watters MD, Prometheus Books (UK) £21. ISBN 0-87975-782-5.

Review: Tony Akkermans (pictured).



religion. Hence the Christians' need to establish their own schools in order to create a "learning" environment that places developing young minds in doctrinal strait-jackets.

Unfortunately, Christianity's advocacy of self-loathing as a strategy for currying favour with the Almighty is a strategy that too often finds its way to the psychiatrist's couch. There, Dr Watters, who is Professor Emeritus in Psychiatry, is in his element. He takes us through the whole field of human functioning, applying the full force of his professional expertise in exposing and analysing the pernicious influence of the Christian doctrine on people's mental and physical well-being.

He documents case studies and research to show that indoctrination with the teachings of the Christian church constitutes a form of mental and emotional abuse. He calls for in-depth desensitisation in all areas of life shaped by the doctrine, such as pleasure and guilt, sexuality and reproduction, interpersonal communication, expression of human emotions, self-actualisation and self-esteem.

This, he says, can only come through a process of education, which can unlock the doors of the religious prison we have built to help us cope with our existential angst. Many prisoners of religion would like to be sprung loose. In order for this to happen, it must become more widely known that religion is not the only existential game in town – the other one is Humanism. He follows up with as succinct a comparison of the Humanist and Christian outlooks as one is likely to find anywhere.

Dr Watters is pessimistic about the prospect of religion self-destructing. On the contrary, he points out that the church has thrived on conflict and division – from the great schism of the 11th Century onward – in the manner of a giant pathogenic amoeba that multiplies by cell division.

He counsels against the exercise of too much patience in the Humanist camp. To the less militant Humanists he poses the question: "When Christian indoctrination, which can be seen as a form of mental and emotional abuse, is inflicted on innocent children, do Humanists have the moral right to remain silent about it?"

Nowadays, the state plays an active role in

trying to prevent young people from becoming addicted to tobacco and alcohol. It has passed legislation to protect children from physical and sexual abuse; does it then not follow logically that it should also act in protecting them from stultifying mental abuse?

Anathema though it may be to many, he urges Humanists to operate as a political force to starve the religious dragon guarding the door to an enlightened future – or else there may be no future at all. The pronatalist sex code, still rigorously enforced by the Church of Rome, will see to that.

Dr Watters' book is a tonic. It is so full of pearls of insight and exposure of the machinations of organised religion that there is a constant tendency to reach for the notepad. He writes with clarity, humour and, at times, well-justified sarcasm at the antics of the acrobats on the religious high-wire.

The arguments in the book should stir the political decision-makers who complain about the high cost of health care while continuing to subsidise the very institution that is contributing to making the public sick.

And finally a sporting warning to the religious reader: this book is liable to seriously damage your faith.

BELIEVING WORLD

A WOMAN who had just given birth to a perfectly healthy baby girl died after refusing a blood transfusion on religious grounds. Doctors at Billinge Hospital, near Wigan, could only stand by helplessly as 42-year-old Maureen Spence, a Jehova's Witness, lay dying. A JW's spokesman said Mrs Spence's husband was "devastated" (he now has four young children, including a newly-born baby to look after), but: "He has our total support after this tragedy." *Daily Star*, July 6.

MISSIONARY POSITION: Hilda Schopp, 24, was given a divorce in Hamburg after a judge heard that her husband forced her to kneel and pray for 10 minutes before they had sex. *News of the World*, June 13.

A PRIEST found a tiny microphone in his confessional box in San Remo prison, Italy. "I'm shocked they could use such dirty tricks in the face of God," said Fr Guiseppe Stroppianna. But the Justice Ministry said: "The cops did right." *Daily Star*, June 16.

Archbishop seeks your help as moth and rust strike again

SO financial mistakes by the Church Commissioners have left a £50 million gap in funds needed to pay clergy pensions (*The Guardian*, July 23): "Pensions are calculated from residual income, which this year was £40 million, compared to £90 million in 1992..."

The Commission's top management has been replaced since £500 million losses in asset values, resulting from over-investment in development property, were revealed last year. Church Commissioners' assets have fallen by £674 million in two years.

Everybody say *Ahhh!*

You might like to send a donation in response to the appeal by one G Carey, who is urging the credulous – sorry, the

faithful – to help meet the shortfall, with a cut in the numbers of full-time clergy very much on the agenda.

On the other hand, you might prefer to send your money instead to *The Freethinker*, which needs it even more urgently – and is the one paper which believes that the world will have become a better place when large numbers of priests, mullahs, rabbis and similar holy drones find themselves infesting the Job Centre.

Please...*The Freethinker* cannot exist, let alone expand, without your generosity. Rush cheques, POs, stamps to: G W Foote & Company, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Many thanks to: Anonymous and R A Cobb, £1 each; J D Groom, C McNicholl, D Redhead and R W Simmonds,

£2 each; K H Bardsley and J C Fogg, £2.50 each; E J McFadyen, £3; M G Kamal, £3.40; F Hiorth and E Willis, £4.40 each; D Clamp, A L Clarke, B Clarke, D Elvin, W Grahamslaw, F M Holmes, H Jack, B N Kirby, M F Lofmark, P McKenna, B W Mills, M Mordew, A Negus, L T Ong, M Phythian, D Pollock, P Rowlandson, K C Rudd, D L Seymour, M A Shaikh and A Smith, £5 each; A N Blewitt, R Hopkins, R A Jahagirdar, E J Little, M Rosolkowska, J Ryan, L Stapleton and J C Wright, £10 each; W E Harman, C Kensit, Lewisham Humanist Group and R H Pierce, £15 each; A Akkermans and M Allison, £20 each.

Total for June: £315.20.

WHAT'S ON

Birmingham Humanist Group: For information about Birmingham Humanist Group contact 021 353 1189.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: 40 Cowper Street, Hove (nr Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, September 5, 5.30 pm for 6 pm: George Mephem: *Humanism Today*.

Chiltern Humanists: Autumn series of meetings on Tuesday, September 14, Wednesday, October 13, Wednesday, November 10. Details later – or contact Ralph Ison on 0753 644226.

Cornwall Humanists: Contact: "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road Kenilworth. Monday, September 20, 7.30 pm: Annual general meeting.

Devon Humanists: For details, please contact: 31 Ringswell Avenue, Exeter EX1 3EF.

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

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

Glasgow Humanist Society: Information regarding meetings and other activities from Hugh Bowman, 7 Elm Road, Burnside, Glasgow G73 4JR; telephone 041-634 1447.

Haverling and District Humanist Society: Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squir-

rels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, August 3, 8pm: Public meeting.

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

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, October 12, 7.30pm: *Youth Crime – is There an Answer?* Probation Services and Social Services Youth Court Team. Tuesday, November 9, 7.30pm: *Is Our Constitution Healthy?* Mr O Hartley, Department of Politics, Leeds University.

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

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 071-831 7723). List of events celebrating the bicentenary of SPES obtainable from above address.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, September 14, 7.45 pm: Fred Probyn, *Helping the Mentally-ill to Find a Role in the Community*.

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.

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.

Paine and prejudice

REPORTS of Thomas Paine's drunkenness have been "growing ever since" they were put out by Gouverneur Morris and Colonel Bosville, wrote Moncure Conway. Alas, they still are. I picked up David Freeman Hawke's *Paine* (W W Norton, £10.50) hoping for a fair assessment of "one of the best, humanest, wisest and bravest men of his generation" (John M Robertson), but found that much of the old prejudice persists.

Give Hawke his due: this 400-page book is well researched and detailed; but the author is completely out of sympathy with his subject. Paine the drunkard appears on page one and at regular intervals thereafter. "Drinking" is assigned a separate heading in the index.

There is no doubt that Paine did drink, in common with many other Englishmen of his time. Pitt, for example, was nearly always drunk after dinner, but with Paine that was exceptional. He did admit that, "borne down by public and private affliction," he had been "driven to excesses in Paris," when some of his political friends were in hiding and others had been guillotined. Prior to that, however, Conway could find "no intimation of excess...in any contemporary record."

Hawke finds one: that of Robert Aitken, printer and publisher of *Pennsylvania Magazine*, for which Paine contributed something like one-fifth of every issue and which, after he took over, increased its circulation from 600 to more than 1,500, making it, says Hawke, "the most popular periodical thus far published in America."

Years later, Hawke adds, "when the word got around that Paine was a drunkard," Aitken said that the first glass set up Paine's train of thought, the second "illuminated his intellectual system" and, with the third, ideas "appeared to flow faster than he could commit them to paper," all "perfectly fit for the press without any alteration or correction." It is impossible to check this story: it hardly depicts a drunkard, anyway. But it grew with the telling, through John Adams, who heard it from the Rev John Witherspoon, who bore a grudge against Paine and who, in 1777, was the only delegate to Congress to vote "with earnestness" against Paine's nomination as paid secretary to the Committee for Foreign Affairs.

Hawke knows full well the calumny Paine suffered in America after writing *The Age of Reason*: "the infamous scavenger of all the filth which could be raked from the dirty paths which have been hitherto trodden by all the revilers of Christianity;" "that lying, drunken, brutal infidel" were

Colin McCall reviews a new book and finds that, two centuries on, the Hawkes still gather around 'the greatest exile that has ever left England's shores'

just two of the Press reactions, when Thomas Jefferson arranged a return to the country for the man who had done so much to help create it.

Hawke also knows the unreliability (to say the least) of James Cheetham's biography. So why use it when it denigrates its subject? Worse still, why speculate further? "A drinking spree to celebrate completion of *The Age of Reason* may have helped to shatter his fragile health," Hawke writes, and goes on to quote: "At first he drank as he pleased, and therefore to excess" (Cheetham, "an unfriendly biographer"). And when, in France in January, 1793, Paine moved "into the country for his health, which by this time indeed was much impaired by intense application to business," as Clio Rickman recounts, Hawke comments: "This may have been a euphemistic way of saying Paine needed a 'rest cure' because the drinking had got out of hand." Yet Hawke knows it was "Partly to escape importuning visitors," one of whom, Conway tells us, was a British agent, Major Semple, who posed as an Irish patriot.

Consider the "may have helped" and "may have been," in the light of Hawke's own remarks on another "unfriendly biographer," George Chalmers ("Francis Oldys"), a hack hired by the British Government to search through Paine's past and print whatever dirt he could turn up. Chalmers "exposed all Paine's flaws in his book but one - his drinking." Apparently "no one thought he drank too much, otherwise Chalmers would have lingered with pleasure over the fact. In the second edition of his book, published in 1791, he did..."

Hawke is given to hypothesis, sometimes quite unjustified. When Paine was offered \$1,000 a year by Conrad Gérard, a French diplomat in Philadelphia, to write favourably of France and its American alliance, and unfavourably of England, he politely refused. Gérard later lied and said Paine could be bought. Hawke adds that Paine "had probably agreed...to write for Gérard," the reverse of the facts.

In 1782, Paine did agree to write for the American Government, for which he would receive \$800 a year from a secret fund, but the agreement was to be kept secret because it would "injure the effect of Mr Paine's

publication..." However, someone talked and: "Perhaps Paine broke the secret, for he felt honoured by the agreement," says Hawke.

The worst case, though, occurs when Paine was accused of being in the pay of the Bank of North America. He wasn't, and the charge was dropped. The year before, James Wilson had been paid \$400 to write in favour of the bank, and Hawke remarks: "There is no reason to doubt that Paine would have accepted a similar offer if it had been made..."

Possibly, probably, perhaps, presumably...there is no shortage of speculation, nearly always to Paine's disadvantage. Even when, in 1795, there were valid reasons for Paine's hesitation in leaving France for America, Hawke describes them as "his excuses for staying. The real reasons he kept to himself..." Hawke also disputes Paine's friendship with Jefferson ("they were only acquaintances"). Ten pages later, however, their "friendship" is "cemented."

We are constantly told, too, that Paine was indolent - although, when this is linked with "vacuity of thought," I suggest we can safely dismiss it.

Vanity we can concede, readily. Thomas Paine was justly proud of his unique accomplishments. As he told George Washington: "A share in two revolutions is living to some purpose." He was a pioneer engineer and experimenter, too, remember. Moreover, as Moncure Conway said, he was driven to self-vindication by endless vilification.

As for appearance, Hawke leaves us in no doubt that Paine was ugly and unkempt. His red nose features prominently, but not in a portrait by John Wesley Jarvis of 1803, which Conway considered the "truest" of the many he examined. Hawke has the answer to that: "Jarvis flattered Paine with a portrait that softened his flaming face into a healthy glow..."

Finally, dress. When Paine was invited to Jefferson's executive mansion another guest related how "a few moments after our arrival, a tall high-boned man came into the room. He was dressed, or rather undressed, in an old brown coat, red waistcoat, old corduroy, small clothes much soiled, wollen hose, and slippers without heels."

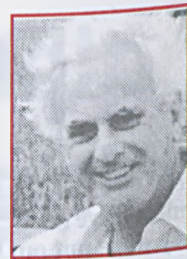
Hold on, though - that was the President himself!

BELIEVING WORLD

THE Australian Catholic Church has taken out a multi-million dollar insurance policy to protect itself against claims of sexual abuse...The move follows claims by a growing number of victims, particularly men, that they had been sexually assaulted by priests or brothers, usually in orphanages and schools. *Southern Cross*, June 30.

The terrible affliction of

BIBLE FATIGUE



described by Charles Ward

BORED by the Book? That could be described, no doubt, as Bible fatigue. It is hardly surprising that such topics as genealogies, archaic customs and beliefs of obscure Middle Eastern tribes (2,000 years ago and more, at that), whose literary types were obsessed with vituperations against their enemies and habitual agonising about their own people's misbehaviour, should be found less-than-riveting reading material.

However, there are folk who regard the Bible as even more than a good read. According to them, by enthusiastic thumbing of its pages, particularly the later part, which consists largely of sermonising epistles addressed to First Century sectarians, we should actually be encouraging another sort of fatigue, as the bindings of our copies loosen.

Since I've seen the light of reason, my interest has been switched to the metaphorical sense in which these "holy scriptures" are coming apart at the seams. More and more people are able to see their inherent flaws. For centuries, Christians have revered these writings as a source of divine authority, a pattern of belief and a sort of personal hotline from "God," who might contrive, following prayerful request, to give them a hint, by means of this text or that, what they ought to do in order to keep their names in his register. The Bible can no longer stand the strain.

We peruse this mini-library of 66 "books" much less than the monks and other scribes who punctiliously transcribed it one copy at a time – and considerably less avidly than those who pored over the first printed versions at the time of Gutenberg. A world best-seller, it is said. Bible-thumpers see to that, distributing the volume, or selected excerpts, by the tonne. But it is not the best understood, being an object of devotion rather than of study and with the remarkable power of arousing piety even among owners who do not read it.

Take "divine inspiration" on which its authority is based. This confidence trick has been so successful not only because it has been practised since the canon was compiled, but because its "salesmen" have for the most part sincerely believed in their "product." (In that sense it has not been a deliberate deception, but rather a delusion of which they became prisoners as well as promoters). The delusion is so widespread that Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons, for example, may start their play on your doorstep with the theme of what "God's Word" says. Constant reiteration of this label has proved a profitable evangelistic line. Oddly, the first "book" of the Bible which I studied with any thorough-

ness was *Ecclesiastes*. Having recently acquired a copy of James Moffatt's translation, I was intrigued by the way in which italics had been used to draw attention to the manner in which different manuscripts, or parts of them, had been fused in the course of their transmission. Also, my incipient agnosticism drew support from that of the Preacher.

Clearly, this put paid to any naïve doctrine of divine inspiration. However, if you are sold on the idea of "God's revelation," as I was at that time, you are not reluctant to swallow a *complex* doctrine of divine inspiration. Thus began the intellectual self-deceit from which it took me longer to escape than from my later addiction to tobacco. There were always kindred spirits at hand to support me in my attempts to "justify the ways of God to men," so that, while I despised the oversimplifications of fundamentalists, with their doctrines of plenary inspiration, I failed to perceive the sophistry of my own convoluted arguments about God's self-revelation through mankind's own improving insights.

The Bible is a progressive revelation, made in life and fixed in literature was a "definition" supplied by one teacher sympathetic to the difficulty of accommodating modern ideas with traditional reverence for Scripture. I enjoyed rolling it around my tongue. You will still find scholars of high academic standing doing their utmost to square this circle.

Then there is the question of the Bible's "unity." "The Bible says" has been a very successful slogan for which even critics of Christianity have fallen. "The Bible" actually says nothing; it is an anthology put together over a period of centuries. Abandon the absurd idea that it is a communication from a Supreme Creative Intelligence to members of a bipedal species on one of the universe's numberless planets – which does not say much for the clarity (let alone the morality) of "God's" thought or purpose – and what is there? Pieces by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Mark, Luke, Paul and other assorted characters, many quite unknown (which did not prevent ascription of quite a few false credits), so that all we are entitled to assert is that So-and-So said this and Anonymus wrote that.

Among the many misnomers concerning their activities, Christians' continual use of the phrase "Bible study" surely takes the biscuit. Over a period of many years, I tried to introduce a modicum of rational analysis into groups engaged in this exercise, and found the task frustrating. Study – in an impartial sense – it certainly is not.

While, depending on the level at which the group operates, there may be some degree of academic knowledge on the subject, as well

as some freedom in respect of interpretation, the assumption is invariably made that the purpose of discussion is to facilitate the assimilation of religious "truth" which is thought to be mysteriously locked inside the sacred pages until somehow released. Cross the undefined border between this magical rite and scientific sense and you are no longer welcome in that company.

Because the various Bible "books" were written at different times, in different places, under different circumstances and for different reasons by people of different personalities, an honest researcher may, with a little application, discover many "contradictions" and "inconsistencies." These are sometimes to be traced to the same writer and may be sympathetically considered as a common foible. As for the others (though I keep my own collection on file), I consider their usefulness in argument to be limited. After all, they merely illustrate diversity of views.

If one examines any "plan of salvation" or overall connectedness of Scripture put forward by believers as supporting the notion of Biblical unity, one finds that it is a product of adroit selection. This should not surprise. Except when we are being scrupulously considerate towards opponents in debate, our natural tendency is to draw attention exclusively to what appears consonant with our own opinions. Jesus did it. So, in the Temptation fable in the Gospels, did the Devil. With preachers, orators and writers it becomes a habit.

To show that the idea of the Bible's unity is an error is more devastating to the Christian myth than to quote only the nasty bits between its covers and ignore literary gems and inspiring thoughts which are also to be found there.

Finally, we come to the Bible's supposed relevance – as a whole, mind you – for the times in which we live. This has been reiterated in every generation, on occasion with direful effect, as when doom-messages have been interpreted as applying to the contemporary world. Quite recently a BBC announcer, introducing a speaker, told listeners: (*He looks at the Old Testament to see what relevance it has for us at the end of the 20th Century.* A passage from, say, Shakespeare might be quite as apt, but would lack the nimbus of sanctity placed around the Bible.

Christians are often eager to show how "modern" the Bible is. Look at *Job 26:7*, they may say. *God...hangs the earth upon nothing.* Is that not a scientific fact? A remarkable prophetic insight, or just a poetic turn of phrase?

Pope urged to drop family-planning ban

THE British Government is urging the Vatican to relax its artificial contraception ban in developing countries – a move which would have the effect of reducing priest-power in Catholic bedrooms in all other parts of the world.

Overseas Development Minister Baroness Chalker said early in July that she planned to meet Vatican officials to express concern about population growth in the "Third World."

Huge growth in population was something to be addressed by the Catholic Church: "The differences are about how one can persuade married parents to have children by choice and not by chance," she said during Questions in the House of Lords.

But Julian Filochowski, Director of CAFOD, told the *Catholic Herald* (July 16): "There is extraordinary concern to push population control measures on the Third World, whilst ignoring the choking debt and injustices in trade which block any development."

And a Vatican official told the *Catholic Herald* that although Baroness Chalker's request for an audience with Pope John Paul had been received, her meeting had not yet been "booked," and that it could not take place until the Autumn as the Pope was at his Summer residence, Castel Gandolfo.

Although Baroness Chalker "may bring up the issue of contraception in the Third World during her meeting with the Holy Father, she could not hope to affect Church policy on this issue," the spokesperson added, denying that any "softening" of the Church's line on contraception had taken place. This, despite a recent article in the Jesuit periodical *Civiltà Cattolica* which said that nuns in danger of rape should take the pill.

"That article was... the personal opinion of a Jesuit priest," the spokesperson emphasised.

Lady Chalker met Vatican representatives at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro last year and said she wanted to see the conference make real progress in resolving some of the constraints to providing wider access to good quality family planning services.

Britain's policy on the population issue in the developing world is outlined in *Children by Choice not Chance*, published by the Overseas Development Administration, which

Lady Chalker heads.

It says that British aid for population activities in developing countries should enable women and men to decide the number of children they have.

British aid will be directed towards helping to establish good quality reproductive health services and help countries formulate their own population policies.

The document estimates that 100 million people would like to use contraception but do not have access to it.

Secular funeral for major satirist

ROGER WODDIS, who has died aged 76, produced "scabrous parodies, satires and verse-doggerel" (*Daily Telegraph*). For years, he was perhaps best known as a regular contributor to the *Radio Times* and the *New Statesman*.

Political events and topical issues and the shortcomings and stupidities of public figures provided Woddis with his major source of raw material.

He was a compulsive writer who got up at 5.30 am to start work. Not long before he died, he said he would like his epitaph to be: "He always met his deadline."

Woddis was born at Hampstead Garden Suburb, on May 17, 1917. Educated at Christ's College, Finchley, he originally intended to become a doctor, and during World War II served in an Army plastic surgery unit in North Africa and Italy. Afterwards, he took the Civil Service exams but opted for life as a writer.

He joined the Communist Party as a young man — resigning after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. In the late 1930s, he worked with the radical Unity Theatre.

In the 1950s, he worked on the *Daily Herald*, and went on to contribute to *That Was The Week That Was*. In the 1960s, Woddis wrote for *Punch* and became a 23-year fixture at the *New Statesman*. He also wrote for TV on the cult series *The Prisoner*. In 1971 he wrote a play, *Sherlock Holmes Investigates*, for the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent.

There were several published collections of his verse, and he recently collaborated on a book with the cartoonist Steve Bell.

In 1953, he married Joan Hobson and they had two children, Naomi and Mark. The marriage was dissolved in 1975, but the couple remained close to the end.

National Secular Society President Barbara Smoker conducted a secular funeral service for Roger Woddis at Islington Crematorium on July 23.

In the course of a moving address, she noted: "In the Spring he was to have been guest-of-honour at the annual dinner of the National Secular Society... but he pulled out when the cancer was diagnosed as, he said, he didn't want to let us down by dying just before the event.

"Despite increasing physical frailty, he remained himself to the end. Only a couple of days before he died, he quipped: *Liverpool Road Is my present abode, But I cannot speak Where I'll be next week.*

"Although Roger had no religious belief in the usual sense of the word, he held fast to the Humanist faith that, since this life is the only one of which we have any knowledge, our efforts should be directed towards making the conditions of life as good as possible for everyone, everywhere — and that was the well-spring of his lifelong commitment to Socialism. In the religion of truth, integrity, generosity, reliability and public spirit, Roger was a believer."

The date of a memorial gathering to celebrate his life will be announced shortly.

BIBLE FATIGUE

➔ From previous page

We could turn instead to *Psalm 33:14* or *Isaiah 40:22* or *Job 37:18* — for all these texts (as well as others) represent primitive cosmology: a flat earth; the sky an upturned bowl; God, from his dwelling-place above, being able to monitor the behaviour of the human race.

Using "sacred" writings as "back-up" for preaching was well established in New Testament times under the guise of ancient prediction. Ignoring the meaning they had and still have for Jews, whose scriptures they are, Old Testament texts were wrested from their contexts to be used as pretexts for divine foreknowledge. Examples abound and their usual irrelevance is obvious on objective examination.

Self-persuaded that they cannot do without

revelation from on high, believers sometimes have no scruples about forcing "God's Word" to say what they want it to say. The fact is that the Bible's supposed general applicability to our lives is seen to be nonsense when its disunity is exposed. Likewise, the notion of its unity collapses when its theoretical divine inspiration is shown to be untenable.

In our ceaseless war with superstition, rational entreaty must remain our chief weapon. Countless Christians, unfortunately, and unlike Joshua's peculiar monolith (*Joshua 24:26,27*), appear stone-deaf.

But you never know. Some time in the future a little girl may look up, puzzled, from her *scholascreen*, pausing to voice her ignorance and wonder: *What on earth was the "Bible"?* before tapping the appropriate key to pursue her education.

Humanism and sectarianism

by Eric Stockton

THE basic Humanist idea is, contrary to most religious beliefs, that humankind stands in no need of guidance, authority or salvation emanating from sources outside of the perceived world of nature.

Whether there is, or is not, any creative or intervening agency outside of that world is, in our view, incapable of absolute determination so, *faute de mieux*, human beings have to do their best individually, collectively, tolerantly and democratically in "this" life – the only life we can be certain we have. (In Humanist terms, therefore, the word "this" in such a phrase as "this life" is strictly redundant).

There is nothing in modern Humanism to discourage people from asserting that there is indeed an over-riding reality outwith that natural order, but there is, in our view, no warrant for imposing such assertions upon people against their own free judgement. We are not against religion *per se* but we are against claims as to truth being imposed upon people. Therefore, we Humanists have no quarrel with the more liberal elements in the main religious communities. No quarrel! But we do have decently arguable disagreements with reasonable believers. Indeed, we often work happily with liberal Christians, in particular, on specific issues of public concern. That, broadly, is the liberal secular Humanist stance – a stance by which we may be judged and perhaps, on occasions, found wanting.

It is important to understand the relation between mainstream humanism of the kind I articulate and some more militant variants of atheism. Nowadays, we do not often mount elaborate arguments to prove the non-existence of God, any more than modern theists pay much attention to the classic metaphysical arguments purporting to prove that God is a reality. We are not so much doctrinal atheists as *laid-back* atheists. We do not make "no god" an article of negative faith; we simply do not see any sufficient *prima facie* reason to identify a God and so we pass the idea by as being of little first order interest to us. (The god-idea is, of course of enormous second-order interest to us; we are much engaged by the fact that so many good, wise people profess theism, and yet do not attend church, and we are much interested in the implications – logical, historical and cultural – of belief in God).

It is our *laid-back* atheism that enables us, so easily, to co-operate practically with liberal believers, people whose gut-feelings, that there is indeed a God, we can respect. The only people we cannot work with are those who, by reason of their beliefs, debar themselves from co-operation.

As to the state of Humanism in society, I think it is instructive to distinguish between what might be called default Humanism and conscious Humanism. Most people are now, I think, default Humanists. When faced with a challenge, a decision, a problem, few people, I suspect, ask themselves such questions as: "What is God's will in this matter?" or "What do the Churches say on this?" or "What has the Bible to tell us on the subject?" Rather,

people tend to ask questions that relate solely to "this" life, "this" world (I retain the word "this" for emphasis). These, essentially Humanist-style, questions may range from those based upon the highest altruism to those based upon the meanest forms of short-term self-interest; but they relate to "this" life.

In so far as people think as I have suggested they do, and have mostly not even heard of Humanism, they may be described as default Humanists. People are like this not because of the machinations of the small number of people like me but because the churches seem to them to be failing to talk meaningfully about life. People mostly "believe in God" but church attendance suggests that what is taught by the churches is unconvincing. It is arguable that adopting attitudes such as are found in the more overtly dogmatic religious tendencies may contribute to popular disenchantment with religion. "Shooting oneself in the foot" is often the penalty of piety.

The essential role of us conscious Humanists is to reassure people that if they reject religion they are not necessarily doing wrong, not necessarily being inadequate, but they are exercising a free choice that can also lead to wisdom and virtue. Humanism can match the best that religion can deliver in a world where people need no longer have beliefs – not even Secularist beliefs – imposed upon them.

The essential difficulty we Humanists experience is that of our not being recognised as a legitimate ideological trend. Religious people, and less-than-religious ones who are in awe of the religious establishments, have no difficulty in recognising that most people are more or less non-religious. Indeed, the more enthusiastic religionists are forever asserting this: it is their *raison d'être*, it gives them a stick with which to beat what they see as the cowardice of liberal religion.

What the religious part of the community has to learn to live with is the idea that non-religious views can be as good and as wise as any others. Insistent, persistent exclusiveness in belief is what I call sectarianism and it is not only in religious thought that it is found.

To put matters crudely, an explicit rejection of the First Commandment does not imply an automatic inability to see the value of any of the other nine. It is not true that "without God, anything goes." History shows that "anything goes" both with and without God. We only have to recall two chilling phrases to remind us that this is a historical fact: "Holy Inquisition" and "Stalinist Terror."

We *laid-back* atheists think that, God or no-God, it is up to us all, whatever our beliefs, to make sure that the idea that "anything goes" is ruled out of order by all of us and is replaced by an ethic founded upon human needs, human achievement and human self-confidence unburdened by contrived guilt-feelings.

What are the characteristics of sectarianism and in what way do they militate against peace, both in the community and at the inter-

national level?

The true sectarian is obsessed by verbal definition and the repetition of forms of words without much recognition that meaning is actually somewhat elusive because words, taken literally, can be very crude representations of thought. But it is of no use to go the other way and hide everything behind symbolism and metaphor. Words have to be used with proper regard for their normal meanings but tempered by the exercise of disciplined imagination.

Preoccupation with "definition" (and by natural progression, the hankering after a creed: "you have to believe in something for which there is no need for any evidence") is a tell-tale sign.

Sectarianism is an infantile disorder that is by no means always religious in the sense of spilling over from the natural to the supposed supernatural and back again. It is something which we in Scotland meet every day; it can be defined, at least operationally. Its characteristics are: *We know the truth – and if you don't, then you are ignorant, stupid or perverse. We are deeply suspicious of outsiders – the enemy without. Our sect must be forever on its guard against backsliding in its own ranks – the enemy within. Possessing truth, we have a duty to impose it upon others and if "our time has not yet come" we must close ranks and look inwards and stay pure until it does come. When it does come, as come it must, we will recast the world in our image.*

Those points add up to sectarianism. Sectarianism Triumphant equals totalitarianism or, to coin a phrase, the Singular Society. It is a sufficient definition of Humanism to say that it is the direct opposite of these things because Humanism values what is acceptably common to all humanity as against that which is necessarily divisive of humanity.

Sectarianism is always with us and, left unchallenged, will destroy us all. But a plural society can function without being self-destructive if there is something to come between the sects, to soften them. That thing is Humanism, the *lingua franca* of the plural society. Our scepticism is to tell people to go easy on their "certainties" so that our wounded world can be made safe for us all. That is the Humanists' job and it is one that we cannot do if we turn ourselves into just another sect "to identify with." Our life-stance is one that begins and ends by confronting all life-stances (including our own) with optimistic scepticism, tempered with custard pies as appropriate.

Humanism means accepting human variety consistent with there being a stable plural society founded on shared values – with plenty of space for values that are not necessarily shared but which are not incompatible with stable plurality. Peace can scarcely be founded on anything else. Sectarianism means imposed values that would not necessarily be shared voluntarily. Sectarianism is ultimately incompatible with peace.

● Part of a paper presented by the Editor of the *Scottish Humanist* to the 7th Edinburgh Peace Festival.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Preserve Sunday, Thou shalt fast on Monday!

IT IS no skin off my nose that K Porteous Wood should choose to attack me in last month's *Freethinker* and, in his own words, "agree with the Lord's Day Observance Society." But as Sunday trading has not been mentioned since the inception of this column, his criticism appears to be somewhat contrived.

Of course, he is perfectly free to "preserve Sunday on which as few as possible work." Others are free to assume that in pursuance of that principle he does not on Sunday use public transport, walk in a municipal park, visit an art gallery, concert hall, theatre, cinema, sport stadium or bar. Such activities require people to work and were opposed (successfully for a long time) by the Lord's Day Observance Society.

Furthermore, it may also be assumed that on Monday he does not buy a newspaper or any of the wide range of foodstuffs which are produced, packed and distributed the previous day, thus necessitating a considerable amount of Sunday work.

K Porteous Wood argues that Sunday opening increases staff and overhead costs which are passed on to the customer. Judging by the numbers who go shopping on Sunday, they appear to be unconcerned by his (unsubstantiated) assertions.

He also claims that "sales will not increase by Sunday opening." Are we to believe that retailers who already open on Sunday do so to provide a social service and operate at a loss or simply to break even? That does not seem to be the case in Scotland, where Sunday trading restrictions of the Shops Act do not apply. Nor, apparently, does it apply to food shops which open until very late.

Like religious opponents of reform, K Porteous Wood's declared motivation is concern for shop workers' welfare. But how does he know that a majority of them wish to cling to outmoded laws and restrictions? Has he conducted a detailed survey to ascertain their wishes?

Few will dispute that shop assistants work very hard and are not exactly overpaid. But any campaign to improve wages and conditions will not be advanced one whit by resurrecting the Sunday opening bugaboo. Nor will it be helped by there being three million unemployed (whose plight, by the way, seems to go unnoticed by Sabbatarian "friends of the workers").

Thou shalt not what?

IT HAS taken the British judiciary 40 years to admit that Derek Bentley should not have been hanged. Last month the High Court recommended a conditional pardon for the Londoner, who was 19 at the time of his trial and execution. Delivering the Court's judgment, Lord Justice Watkins said that "even by the standards of 1953, the then Home Secretary's decision was clearly wrong."

The judicial murder of a youth with the mental age of an 11-year-old for a killing which occurred some time *after* he was taken into police custody was probably the turning point in a long campaign to abolish capital punishment. But how many others were wrongly convicted and executed before Derek Bentley?

Gross miscarriages of justice at trials in which conviction would have carried the death penalty have come to light in recent times. Nevertheless, there is still a substantial pro-hanging lobby, tuggish elements of which are nurtured on *Sun* headlines and speeches by Right-wing politicians.

But the most consistent and vociferous supporters of capital punishment are Christian "pro-lifers" who denounce abortion and advocate the death penalty with equal vigour. Indeed, there may well be some "pro-life," pro-hanging zealots who would like to turn back the clock to 1810 – when the Archbishop of Canterbury and six bishops voted in the House of Lords against a Bill to abolish the death penalty for stealing five shillings.

Hands off the ayatollahs!

THERE are still those who hanker for a time when the parson stood six feet above contradiction. One such is Sir Sigmund Sternberg, who recently concluded a letter to *The Guardian* newspaper with a plea that "spiritual leaders should not be subjected to the same attacks as politicians."

Sir Sigmund was moved to protest against a *Guardian* feature which took a rise out of the Archbishop of Canterbury. He paid tribute to Dr Carey's charitable disposition and other qualities. That's as maybe; but, like those of politicians, the Anglican leader's beliefs and opinions on various questions are in the public

arena, making him a legitimate target for critics and *Guardian* feature writers.

In fairness, it should be said that while Sir Sigmund Sternberg's sensitivity does him credit, Dr Carey does not expect to be treated like a rare plant. And it is to the credit of the Archbishop of Canterbury that his sermons and speeches – unlike those of certain other spiritual leaders – do not have the tone of a handout from Conservative Central Office.

Observing the baneful influence of spiritual leaders the world over, it is clear that rather than being immune from attack, they should be even less trusted than politicians. In Britain, at least, the latter can be given the elbow at election time. But spiritual leaders cannot be got rid of so easily. Many of them are very political animals who, after a career in the house of the Lord, are unelected to the House of Lords.

Jesus marchers out-of-step with believers

AN ANNUAL March for Jesus was one of the soppiest gimmicks hatched in the fevered imagination of assorted fundamentalist weirdos to revive interest in clapped-out Christianity. Launched in 1989, the project's declared aim was to evangelise Britain by the year 2000. "A forlorn hope" *The Freethinker* declared – and with just another seven years to go that prediction stands.

Marchers for Jesus "prayed for nothing less than God's kingdom to come and his will to be done in this land." But if the impact of this year's marches are anything to go by, the God-botherers should have saved their breath to cool their porridge. The marches were generally ignored by the secular media. Even the religious press paid scant attention, with *The War Cry* according the event a derisory six lines.

No doubt there are still memories of the first March for Jesus when a *Christian Week* reporter told readers: "I squirmed with embarrassment at the banality of much of the material ... I was beginning to wish the earth would open up."

This year, the average number on Jesus marches was fewer than 200. What a comedown after the initial triumphalism – from bliss to blisters, so to speak.

Blast from the past: Number 8

Radicals the world over will next year celebrate the bicentenary of the first part of Tom Paine's *The Age of Reason*. Colin McCall, who defends Paine from his latest biographer in this issue of *The Freethinker*, suggested this month's *Blast from the Past*: the preface to part three, which was addressed *To the Ministers and Preachers of all Denominations of Religion*.

IT is the duty of every man, as far as his ability extends, to detect and expose delusion and error. But nature has not given to everyone a talent for that purpose, and among those to whom such a talent is given there is often a want of disposition or of courage to do it.

The world, or more properly speaking that small part of it called Christendom, or the Christian world, has been amused for more than a thousand years with accounts of prophecies in the Old Testament about the coming of the person called Jesus Christ, and thousands of sermons have been preached, and volumes written, to make man believe it.

In the following treatise I have examined all the passages in the New Testament, quoted from the Old, and called prophecies concerning Jesus Christ, and I find no such thing as a prophecy of any such person, and I deny there are any. The passages all relate to circumstances the Jewish nation was in at the time they were written or spoken, and not to anything that was or was not to happen in the world several hundreds years afterwards; and I have shown what the circumstances were to which the passages apply or refer. I have given chapter and verse for everything I have said and have not gone out of the books of the Old and New Testament for evidence that the passages are not prophecies of the person called Jesus Christ.

The prejudice of unfounded belief often degenerates into the prejudice of custom, and becomes at last rank hypocrisy. When men from custom or fashion, or any world motive, profess or pretend to believe what they do not believe, nor can give any reason for believing, they unshp the helm of their morality, and, being no longer honest

Pasting for pulpit power

to their own minds, they feel no moral difficulty in being unjust to others. It is from the influence of this vice, hypocrisy, that we see so many church and meeting-going professors and pretenders to religion so full of trick and deceit in their dealings, and so loose in the performance of their engagements, that they are not to be trusted further than the laws of the country will bind them. Morality has no hold on their minds, no restraint on their actions.

One set of preachers make salvation consist in believing. They tell their congregations that if they believe in Christ their sins shall be forgiven. This, in the first place, is an encouragement to sin, in a similar manner as when a prodigal young fellow is told his father will pay all his debts, he runs into debts the faster and becomes the more extravagant. Daddy, says he, pays

all, and on he goes. Just so in the other case, Christ pays all, and on goes the sinner.

In the next place, the doctrine these men preach is not true. The New Testament rests itself for credibility and testimony on what are called prophecies in the Old Testament of the person called Jesus Christ; and if there are no such things as prophecies of any such person in the Old Testament, the New Testament is a forgery of the Councils of Nice and Laodicea, and the faith founded thereon delusion and falsehood.*

Another set of preachers tell their congregations that God predestined and selected from all eternity a certain number to be saved, and a certain number to be damned eternally. If this were true, the day of judgment IS PAST: their preaching is in vain, and they had better work at some useful calling for their livelihood.

This doctrine also, like the former, hath a direct tendency to demoralise mankind. Can a bad man be reformed by telling him that, if he is one of those who were decreed to be damned before he was born, his reformation will do him no good; and if he was decreed to be saved, he will be saved, whether he believes it or not – for this is the result of the doctrine. Such preaching and such preachers do injury to the moral world. They had better be at the plough.

As in my political works my motive and object have been to give man an elevated sense of his own character, and to free him from the slavish and superstitious absurdity of monarchy and hereditary government; so in my publications on religious subjects, my endeavours have been directed to bring man to a right use of the reason that God has given him; to impress on him the great principles of divine morality, justice, mercy, and a benevolent disposition to all men and to all creatures, and to inspire in him a spirit of trust, confidence, and consolation in his Creator, unshackled by the fables of books pretending to be the word of God.

● *The Councils of Nice and Laodicea were held about 350 years after the time Christ is said to have lived; and the books that now compose the New Testament were then voted for by YEAS and NAYS, as we now vote a law. A great many that were offered had a majority of NAYS, and were rejected. This is the way the New Testament came into being.*

The great American Freethinker Colonel Robert G Ingersoll said of the book: "The *Age of Reason* did more to undermine the power of the Protestant Church than all other books then known. It furnished an immense amount of food for thought. It was written for the average mind, and is a straightforward, honest investigation of the Bible and of the Christian system. Paine did not falter, from the first page to the last. He gives you his candid thought, and candid thoughts are always valuable. *The Age of Reason* has liberalised us all. It put arguments in the mouths of the people; it put the church on the defensive; it enabled somebody in every village to corner the parson; it made the world wiser, and the church better; it took power from the pulpit and divided it among the pews."

YOU'RE TELLING US!

The Freethinker as curate's egg

HEREWITH cheque for subscription renewal now due, plus a small donation.

Congratulations on the new format of the publication and the extended coverage of events and reports from a secular humanist point of view.

We are certainly living in a momentous period in human history when escalating scientific progress is rapidly raising new moral and ethical issues hitherto undreamed of, perhaps more so in my own lifetime than in the previous 1,000 years. Hence the pressing need for the calm, cool, sane voice of reason.

I have been a pensioner now for more than 20 years, and a Humanist for at least half my lifetime, and for the last eight years a member of the Edinburgh Humanist Group. I appreciate the value of *The Freethinker* as a source of information and support for all "Freethinkers" and always pass it around among friends before filing for future reference. I hope it will get the increased distribution it greatly deserves.

FRANK HOLMES MBE
Edinburgh

WHEN *The Freethinker* produced its attractive new layout, some of us hoped for a broader, deeper, or even higher perspective from your contributors. Sometimes there is, but why on earth have you given four pages to Karl Heath's article "Christianity is Evil"? Twenty-five per cent of the magazine, Bradlaugh save us!

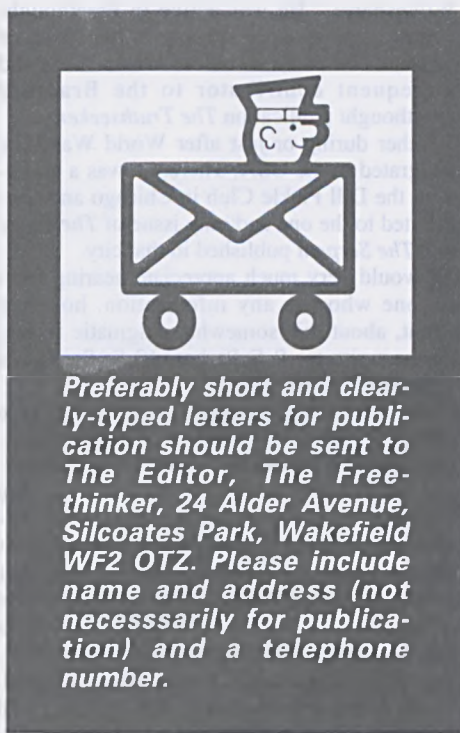
Freethinker readers have read this sort of thing *ad nauseum* for years. It is, of course, grossly unfair to "the opposition" and is obviously intended to be. It is the easiest thing in the world to rubbish a religion - or a nation, party, race or ethnic group - by listing its bad points and adding adverse comments. Julius Streicher did this sort of thing, highly successfully, in *Der Sturmer*...

Four similar, equally unfair, pages could be written about the recent regimes in Eastern Europe, in which Atheism could be rubbished in precisely the same way. On another page, you speak of "Militant Atheism." Surely Freethinkers should have open minds and not be militant about anything. Atheism is only a non-belief, in exactly the same class as our non-belief in the green-cheese composition of the Moon. Freethought is a better banner and, hopefully, should be marked by rational argument, fair treatment of opponents, and avoidance of confidence in our own rightness, which in other spheres is called fundamentalism. Also, and most important, not to attribute solely to religion the failings in which all the human race shares, Atheists included. On another page, a letter-writer blames religion

for the cruelty to animals in the world. How unjust can you get? Are Atheists any better? Do we have in our ranks no butchers, meat-eaters or hunters? Do Atheist scientists not experiment on animals? To claim all the virtues for ourselves is as absurd as to off-load all the vices on those with whom we disagree. It also makes us look very silly.

ELSIE KARBACZ
Colchester

IN *Blast from the Past, Number Seven (The Freethinker, July, 1993)* you reproduce Section 4 of Ingersoll's "The Foundations of



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

Faith." I was surprised to find in it the erroneous statement that the New Testament genealogies of Christ (wholly fictitious and contradictory as they are) occur in Matthew and Mark. It should, of course, be Matthew and Luke. I've looked up my own copy of Ingersoll and find to my relief that at least he got it right!

Karl Heath's splendid article ["Christianity is Evil," same issue] refers to a German theologian as "Boltmann." It should of course be Bultmann (Rudolf of that ilk) who was born in 1884 and lived into his nineties.

DANIEL O'HARA
London EC2

Loving God?

THE news in July that 79 people had been killed in a Japanese earthquake reminded me that, in 1988, 27,000 were killed by an earth-

quake in Armenia. Natural disasters such as these cannot be blamed on man's wickedness. Other readers besides myself must have wondered why an all-powerful, loving God allows his creatures to be killed in this way.

FRED WESTWOOD
Oldham

Ruff deal?

CHRISTIANS have the cross, but what do Freethinkers have as a mark of identification? Most of them probably don't want any symbol now that they are free from religious ones. They are without religion, without symbols; their withoutness conspires against such devices; yet without some way of identification, Freethinkers often feel alone. I have read letters to the editors of Freethought publications in which Freethinkers express delight in learning they are not alone.

I believe that Freethinkers, especially the vast majority who belong to no Freethought organisations, need a simple, modest way of recognising each other. Since many of them practice "religious correctness" (acquiescing to public religious practices and displays), it is difficult to distinguish them from religious folk.

Most of these people don't want to classify themselves as Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, Rationalists, etc. Therefore I suggest the letters R-F which stand for "Religion-Free" as a badge of identification. R-F can be used in many ways: on a personal stamp, on letterheads, on envelopes, on business cards, on lapel pins and on T-shirts.

The concept of R-F also carries with it a powerful message, one that religions will have difficulty countering. Their leaders, such as Pat Robertson, do battle against those "devilish" forces they can name such as Atheists and Secular Humanists, but standing against an array of millions who simply claim to be Religion-Free, what can they say?

And for those who want to inject a little humour into the matter, R-F can be pronounced "Ruff" which we can use to greet each other. It might even be said that life can be "Ruff." Ruff, Ruff!

JAMES L SANDERS
Flagstaff, Arizona

Word of God

WOULD someone enlighten me, Freethinker or not, as to why it is that a seeming large minority of Protestant evangelicals insist on the reading and study of scripture from the so called "authorised" version?



YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 125

They no doubt insist that it is the "word of God" but surely their word of God was originally writ in Hebrew and Greek? If the "Most High and Mighty Prince, JAMES, by the Grace of God" etc., etc., okayed his translators to change those two tongues into early 17th Century English, then surely it is permissible for the present monarch's Archbishops through the committee which included the Church of England to have reformulated those same two tongues into the *New English Bible* (1961 and 1970).

Might it be that both the *New English Bible* and the *Revised English Bible* included representatives of the Roman Catholic Churches on the translating committee(s)? Even so, the *New International Version* of the Bible might be acceptable to Protestants inasmuch as the preface makes no acknowledgement to the assistance of any Roman Catholic in the preparation of that work.

But NO. Not even the *NIV* is acceptable to certain Protestant sects. It has to be the "authorised" version whose version of early 17th Century English adds yet further confusion to the presentation of both Jewish and Christian theology and history. So tell me someone, please, even though he or she be an "authorised" fan.

CHARLES WILLIAMS
Bournemouth

Only children

DO you have an only child? If so, would you be willing to fill in a short questionnaire about what it has been like for you to be the parent of one child? I am writing a book on this subject and would be very interested to hear your experiences. Please send your name and address to: Ros Kane, 15 Matcham Road, London E11 3LE. Thank you.

ROS KANE
London E11

Alarming naïvité

THE letter from D Harrop (July) indicates an alarming naïvité on his part about hierarchical religion. The main religions, like governments, are political in the sense that they seek power over people.

The pacifist "love thine enemy" messages of the main religions are a deceit which never prevented them from supporting, or failing effectively to oppose, the militaristic policies and actions of their governments, in return for privileges in the form of rates reliefs, educational and media advantages and so on.

It should be sufficient to repeat that no genuine pacifist organisation could ever contem-

plate signing agreements with Stalins and Hitlers, advocate the lesser of two monstrous evils, or, as with Northern Ireland, refuse to excommunicate, and continue to give the last sacraments to, murderers of innocent people.

ERNIE CROSSWELL
Slough

Enigmatic figure

I AM engaged in research for a biographical study of a man who called himself "Malfew Seklew" and was sometimes known as "F M Wilkesbarre." He was active in Freethought circles as an outdoor speaker in the North of England and Scotland before World War I and a frequent contributor to the Bradford Freethought publication *The Truthseeker*.

Either during or just after World War I, he emigrated to the USA. There, he was a speaker at the Dill Pickle Club in Chicago and contributed to the one and only issue of *The Eagle and The Serpent* published in that city.

I would very much appreciate hearing from anyone who has any information, however slight, about this somewhat enigmatic figure. Please write to: S E Parker, 19 St Stephen's Gardens, London W2 5QU.

On an unrelated topic, in the July issue David Godin indicts religious attitudes regarding "non-human" animals. Whatever theological nonsense may be used to excuse "mankind's barbaric treatment [of] and attitude towards other species" the fact remains that we "human animals" have to use our power to "disadvantage" other species of life in order to survive. We kill some animals so that we can eat their meat or wear their skins. We shear others so that we can use their wool. Even those who eschew meat-eating and leather-wearing join the rest of us in plundering the plant-world for food. In other words, to live we need to dominate other forms of life and we can only do this by being "superior" to them. If this is "barbaric," then so be it. I have no wish to starve myself to death. It would be interesting to hear from Mr Godin just how we could survive without the continual exercise of superior power against our "biological" kin.

S E PARKER
London W2

Questions

ANOTHER query: Are these reported visions of the Virgin Mary *Jewish* in appearance?

With reference to Up Front comments on there being fewer marriages nowadays, while I have no moral feelings about couples living together in long-term relationships outside marriage. I'd have thought that *bureaucratically* marriage would make things simpler. So what is it that makes the decision not to marry

more than a somewhat empty gesture? After all, many people are married in Register Offices, so there is no automatic link with religion.

Brilliant Karl Health article ("Christianity is Evil" July issue). Pity that there are so many decent Christians to blur the issue...

VIVIEN GIBSON
Ealing

Touching faith

I ENJOYED Hugh Thomas' outrageously inaccurate piece on alternative medicine in the June issue of *The Freethinker*.

His touching faith in "orthodox" medicine ("it is the best hope we've got") reminds me of the very people who, for instance, conscientiously reject establishment Christianity only to become devout pagans, astrologers or whatever – in fact, some of the very people whom he's criticising.

He should know that the "leaps forward" against contagious diseases were made by public hygiene reforms, not by vaccination programmes; that life expectancy has not increased since the 1920s; that doctors are virtually the pawns of the colossal pharmaceutical industry and that at least one-in-ten of hospital patients are in there *because* of their treatment (iatrogenic disease).

I'm afraid that the whitecoats have become the shamans of our day and they've certainly taken in Mr Thomas. Of course, if I had a road accident I would want to be rushed to hospital (and by the same token, I am a blood donor). But if I get a disease I would far rather rely on my body's own healing capacity and my own common sense, than on anything produced in a laboratory.

I would certainly want protection from hospitals as illustrated in Dr Bourne's piece in the same issue of *The Freethinker*, where patients were pronounced dead by doctors but later recovered in the mortuary "one of them left hospital 13 days later on foot." Running, I should think.

KATH CLEMENTS
Sheffield

More stars

I AM afraid Lewis Jones is quite wrong in his defence of the self-styled Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims for the Paranormal (CSICOP).

The facts I quoted were correct. In a 32-page article CSICOP's former chairman, Dennis Rawlins, describes his former colleagues as "would-be debunkers who bungled their major

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 126

Sex problem

I HAVE never understood why every form of human activity is fully documented, both pictorially and written, with just the one exception of sex in its many forms.

The portrayal of sexual activity to some, including some of your correspondents, is obscene, filthy, demeaning etc., and yet, surely, it is most important of all as it alone ensures the continuity of the human race.

R A COBB
Rutland

Burning zeal

ONE of the most heartening signs of the general increase in moral sensibility over the centuries has been the way the public has reacted to the Waco affair.

Centuries ago, it would have been normal to have burned religious dissidents for the greater glory of God. Indeed, it was often the practice to have a stock of Jews or heretics in gaol – being tortured for the good of their immortal souls – only to be burned on occasions of public celebration.

For example, in Madrid in 1680, an auto-da-fé (an “act of faith”) took place as part of the festivities on the occasion of a royal wedding. This act of faith was to burn publicly 86 Jews. Anyone not keen to attend such an atrocity could be suspected of secret heresy and hounded accordingly.

One of the spectators, the Marquise de Villars, wrote to her husband, absent in France, to the effect that she had given some offence because “I failed to express enthusiasm for what was taking place” (Margaret Knight: *Honest to Man*, London 1974; pp 106-7).

In 1993, in Texas, 86 religious dissidents were burned by the decision of their own leaders and so far from this being a cause for religious celebration it has given rise to much bleeding-heart criticism of the poor old FBI for not preventing the slaughter.

The heartening thing is that, evidently, we are now so inspired by humanism that we care more about common humanity, even of the likes of David Koresh and his dupes, than we do about the “greater glory of God.” Nobody, even among the worst types of Christians, has said that the horrible fate of the 86 at Waco was a glorious and godly thing.

The horrors of fanatical faith are still with us to some extent in various well-known connections. Three hundred and thirteen years is a long time; the mills of God do indeed grind slowly – to a halt, one hopes.

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

Expurgated

THE amusing item on expurgated editions of the Bible (Bill McIlroy's July column) omitted the most hilarious example of all: the editor of a Victorian edition for schools, faced with the dilemma of preserving youthful innocence without resorting to censorship of God's Word, had the brilliant idea of putting the dirty bits in italics, with an instruction to the students not to read those passages. For some reason, the edition was never reprinted.

BARBARA SMOKER
London SE6

Quo Vadis?

THE last page of the July issue of *The Freethinker* is really a beauty!

Dan O'Hara's summary of the four G A Wells books should sell copies to those not familiar with them.

Karl Heath's pertinent little questions deserve to be answered – but not by the yo-yo story of up...down...up again. The correct answers are most interesting. They are as follows:

Q: Where did he go? A: Afghanistan, India and possibly also Tibet.

Q: What did he do? A: Joined up with Israelite tribes in Kashmir.

Q: How, finally, did he die? A: Of old age – at about 120 years.

The real and final tomb is in Srinagar in Kashmir. This fascinating story is in a number of publications by the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, published by, or available from, the London Mosque.

I can recommend *Jesus in India* (1978), with a summary of late 19th Century English writers on the lost tribes, or *Jesus Died in Kashmir* (Jesus, Moses and the Ten Lost Tribes) 180pp by A Faber-Kaiser, published by Gordon & Cremonesi ISBN 0 86033 041 9. It is all quite fascinating, showing parallels between Jesus and Buddha.

JOHN DOWDING
Witham

investigation, falsified the results, covered up their errors and gave the boot to a colleague who threatened to tell the truth.” If Mr Lewis would like a copy of Rawlin's report he has only to ask me for it.

Mr Lewis appears similarly ingenuous on the subject of Michel Gauquelin, choosing his quote from one of his earliest books. In fact, Gauquelin's continued researches convinced him of the basic validity of astrology. Anyone who doubts this has clearly not read his last book, *Neo-Astrology* (Arkana Books, 1991).

As to Shawn Carlson's double-blind test published in *Nature*, Mr Lewis appears unaware that it was the subject of a highly critical re-analysis by Hans Eysenck (see *Correction*, June, 1986) in which he concluded that it was one of several tests containing design faults that “would be obvious to a first-year psychology student.” It could prove nothing, for or against.

The subject of astrological research is complex enough as it is, without the injection of erroneous or unsubstantiated claims by either side. I hope that this letter at least helps to clarify one small part of the continuing debate.

MICHAEL HARDING
London NW6

The Elect

REGARDING supposed planetary influence on one's occupation, Michael Harding (July issue) asks rhetorically: “Are astrologers just choosing to make planetary connections when it suits them?” It would appear so – and as for Gauquelin's results, I would concur with *Ency. Brit.* 1989 (vol. 25 p84) that they are “at best inconclusive.” Like Biblical fundamentalists and phrenologists, astrologers are forever claiming there is overwhelming scientific evidence for their beliefs.

Christianity has its “Elect” and so, it seems, does astrology. Doctors, scientists or actors, for example, presumably have an over-riding astrological signature,” whatever that gobbledygook means. Those with “ordinary skills” do not. Mr Harding's argument is nonsense because terms like “ordinary skills” are so indefinable, and what is ordinary to one may be extraordinary to another.

The skills of the surgeon amaze me – but for me, to whom a car engine is one of the great mysteries of the universe, the car mechanic comes close to genius. The dentist with his drill and the TV repair man with his soldering-iron are both, in their own way, highly skilled. But which, if any, has an “over-riding astrological signature”? These planets of Mr Harding's are, I fear, just a pack of snobs.

RAY McDOWELL
Co. Antrim

Spread the word!

Send four first class stamps for a supply of *The Freethinker* for free distribution in your area.

Name and address, with stamps, to Peter Brearey, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ.

LAST WORD

by Diana Elvin

Why should God have all the best parties?

DOUBT has been cast, in *The Free-thinker* and at Humanist gatherings, as to whether we need, or wish to have, naming ceremonies.

Surely we do, or we should, for to miss out on the equivalent of a christening is to deprive parents, extended family and friends of the chance to celebrate a life and to share in both joys and responsibilities.

The universal need for this is so strong that an alarming number of non-believers and "not-sures" come to an arrangement with their nearest church.

Their only requirement is that their child be christened, but, if pressed, they will attend the minimum number of times in order to qualify.

They then go through a farce in which few of them, if any, believe. They don't really think the treasured new baby has been "conceived and born in sin" nor that original sin must be washed away with consecrated tap water. As for "renouncing the Devil and all his works..."

Reasoning, thinking non-Humanists may not believe all that but they go along with it just the same. It is expected, the done thing, the way to keep everyone happy and avoid arguments. Besides, parents see the godparents as a sort of gift-wrapped insurance for the child; prospective godparents see it as a special (well-deserved) honour and are likely to be greatly offended if deprived of their moment of glory. And, indeed, the relationship between godparent and child can be very special, and not something to be lightly discarded.

It is customary to have a party. But without some ceremony this is likely to fall rather flat and the air can be full of criticism, both spoken and implied. If only Jane Wynne Willson's book *New Arrivals* or the earlier *Welcome to Life* sheet had been available when my own children were born!

Being, at that time, a non-believer married to a "not-sure" (lapsed CofE), I couldn't decide what celebration would be suitable and so did nothing. This was not at all well-received.

Apart from the fact that we were thought to be denying the children



something important (if rather vague and unspecified), the hoping-to-be godparents, although not noticeably religious, certainly felt that we had deprived them of their rights.

All human societies have rituals. Not only human groups, either. Farmers who allow their cows to roam freely will probably have noticed the herd's awareness of a new birth. There is excitement, even over such a frequent occurrence, and the need to see and to acknowledge this latest arrival. The herd leader will lick the calf's face in welcome, initiation and acceptance. Brief it might be but it is still a public ceremony in their terms.

At a christening, promises are made *on behalf* of the child, and, in any case, much is immediately jettisoned without a qualm.

In a naming ceremony, where every word has been carefully considered, the participants are expected to keep their promises. The first example given in Jane Wynne Willson's guide *New Arrivals* is excellent. The parents are asked: "Will you do all you can to help (child's name) become a responsible, self-reliant, caring person and will you love and cherish his uniqueness and help him develop in his own way?"

Sponsors or "Supporting Adult Friends," or whatever term is used, are

asked: "Do you formally accept a commitment to (name), to offer friendship and sanctuary, so that he can turn to you in times of doubt or difficulty with confidence and trust? And will you give what support you can to (parents' names)?"

Short, simple, sincere and comprehensive. All sorts of additions can be made, particularly if there are older children who can take part. The main thing is that the existence of the child, whether new-born, older or adopted, is celebrated and all the adults know and agree with what they are saying.

My daughter was born in a religious NHS hospital. There were daily ward services, prayers of thankfulness over the new-born, once the mother was capable of paying attention (but before she was allowed out of bed), and the churching, in the hospital chapel, of every single mother – with just the one stubborn exception. I understand that the intention was to cleanse us of the sin of conceiving our children (before we went off home to do it again).

Once I discovered Humanism, it was much, much easier to defend my anti-Christian beliefs. I had something positive to fill the great void which appeared when I abandoned the training and indoctrination of childhood, the years of teaching in Sunday school, the earnest church work.

Friendly

Many non-believers join a church in the run-up to weddings and christenings. They profess to enjoy the services, say the vicar or minister is a nice, understanding chap and the congregation friendly.

Maybe. But if a good Humanist equivalent existed, perhaps they would join us instead, enjoy our meetings, and find us nice, understanding and friendly. They would also, of course, find that we talked a lot more sense.

Surely we should encourage the spread of secular ceremonies – as many as possible and as widely available as possible – to meet a strong, universal need that cannot be properly met in any other way.