

The

40p

Secular  
Humanist  
monthly

# Freethinker

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## THE 'A' WORD UNDER A CLOUD

**H**IGHLIGHT of the European Humanist Congress, held in Berlin from July 25 to 30, was the presence of around 40 delegates from Russia and Eastern Europe, where Communist régimes have collapsed, reports **Govind N Deodhekar**.

Indeed, the central theme of the conference was *East-West Dialogue on Democracy, Human Rights, Humanism...*

It is impossible to do justice in a short report to what was said by the Eastern European delegates. But, in a nutshell, they reported that "Atheism" had been brought into disrepute by the Communist régimes, which made them feel that "Humanism" might be a more acceptable word to describe their beliefs.

They told of the rise of nationalist conflicts, and of religions and cults, and of the serious attempt by the Roman Catholic Church to abolish women's right to abortion.

I had gone to the congress primarily to meet with and listen to these East European delegates, rather than to speak. But I was inspired (or provoked) into making a contribution to the debate on the very first day, following a speech from Rajko Djuric, President of the Roma (Romany or Gypsy) World Union, a Yugoslav Romany living in Berlin.

The main thrust of his speech seemed to be that the blame for the turmoil and carnage in Yugoslavia should be laid at the door of Slobodan Milosevic, who had a suicidal family history, his father, mother and brother having killed themselves.

● **A Saint on The Freethinker front page? That really is Roger Moore with Joan Miller in A Pin to See the Peepshow, directed by free-thinking Peter Cotes in 1951. The play may have helped to end capital punishment in Britain. Cotes's new book is reviewed on Page 133.**



# SCOURGE OF THE CENSOR

➔ Turn to Page 130





# Spotlight on Russia, the Balkans, India

From Page 129

I thought this was a simplistic view. My perspective was on the following lines: In a Humanist congress, one could hardly ignore the havoc played by religion in the conflict – the Croats being Roman Catholic, the Serbs Orthodox, the Muslims having assumed, or been granted, the status of a nationality (although they all spoke the Serbo-Croat language).

Nor could one ignore the fact that the Second World War Croat Fascist regime had tried "ethnic cleansing" of the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia by a policy of extermination, expulsion and forced conversion to Roman Catholicism under the leadership of Roman Catholic priests.

The Croats in Bosnia joined the Muslims to declare secession, knowing full well that they would later betray the Muslims in order to carve out a Croat-Bosnia. The Muslims must have known this – as did the politicians of Central Europe. The premature recognition of these states by the EC under a German ultimatum helped to precipitate the crisis. The Bosn-

## Our man in Berlin: Govind N Deodhekar

ian Serbs have been more successful in grabbing territory and transgressing human rights – the Croats a little less so, and the Muslims least of all.

But vindictiveness towards the Serbs while whitewashing the Croats will not solve the problem. A negotiated settlement based on realities and attempting to obtain some approximation to justice is now in process, and it will be helpful if the EC accepts its own share of the blame.

Some delegates spoke to me after the session, approving my forthright contribution. It was odd that someone of Indian origin, though British by nationality, should have been the one to put forward these views. The media have built up such a one-sided hype that these aspects of the situation rarely get an airing.

Later in the congress, I asked to speak at the "workshop" on "Atheism and Humanism," led by Finngeir Hiorth, of Norway, and Yuri Pishchik, Editor of *Dispute*, Moscow. I suggested that no matter if "Humanism" was now a more acceptable label in the former Communist world, if the God question was raised in any dispute Humanists would have to take an atheistic, agnostic or non-theistic stand. In fact, the IHEU defines itself as an organisation representing a democratic and non-theistic lifestyle.

In the session on Religious Fundamentalism, a speaker made a passing reference to Hindu Fundamentalism. The Chairman, Thomas Meyer, invited me to speak about how Hindu Fundamentalism was allegedly resulting in Islamic Fundamentalism in India.

Right at the beginning of my short contribution, I made it clear that, in my view, it was the other way around – with Islamic Fundamentalism giving rise to Hindu extremism (not Hindu Fundamentalism). The Chairman interjected to ask if I was expressing a Hindu viewpoint – and I replied that it was the viewpoint of a reasonably objective long-term Secular Humanist.

I said that people in Europe, in the monotheistic Jewish-Christian-Muslim atmosphere, have great difficulty in visualising the Hindu pagan atmosphere, which is polytheistic, pantheistic (sometimes even atheistic!) and in which the Divine is thought to be approachable in many ways.

That is why the basic Hindu religious attitude is highly tolerant, while at the same time being highly superstitious. That is why thousands of Hindus can visit the tombs of Muslim saints or follow the procession of Our Lady of Fatima. That is also why the Hindu mass accepted a Muslim President of India within ten years of independence – while it took the democratic but White Anglo-Saxon Protestant USA more than 170 years to accept a Roman Catholic President.

This tolerant, jelly-like mass had a trauma

inflicted upon it in the form of Muslim Separatism, leading to the secession of a large part of its ancestral territory (Pakistan, Bangladesh). Having paid this awesome price, the Hindus find the Muslims still stuck in the same groove of Separatism, opposition to a uniform civil code, no reform of the Islamic Personal Law and so on.

The politicians of the Centre and the Left have appeased this Separatism (now taking on the ideology of Islamic Fundamentalism) in order to build Muslim vote-banks.

The nadir of this process was reached when the Congress Government under Rajiv Gandhi changed the law of the country to appease the Muslim Fundamentalists by truncating the rights of Muslim women to support following unilateral divorce by their husbands. The Centre and the Left have now precipitated a substantial Hindu vote-bank as a reaction.

It is likely that the Hindu-orientated Rightwing may become the alternative Government. There may be a setback, but, even so, the Secularist and tolerant basis in the Hindu mass is of sufficient strength to preserve the Secularist institutions in India.

Out of 320 delegates at the congress, 40 were, as I have said, from Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Poland, Hungary, Rumania, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Estonia. From Western Europe, Germany sent 125, Norway 50, Holland 45, UK 30, Belgium 30, while France, Luxembourg, Austria, Sweden, Finland and Switzerland together accounted for 15. Fraternal delegates came from the USA, Canada, India, Bangladesh, Nigeria and even Egypt.

Conspicuous by their absence were Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece. There were none from the Balkans, except those mentioned above, and there were no Turks – not even from among the million in Germany. From the Northern European liberal democracies, Denmark and Iceland were unrepresented.

The congress held a main session in the morning and split up into "workshops" for the afternoon. Mercifully, there were no report-backs from the workshops. There was a delightful concert one evening, a dinner on another, one afternoon for city walks, and one day (somewhat disorganised) at Potsdam.

There was a great variety of happenings and, all in all, I vote the congress a most successful event – even though I had thought that my international conference-attending days were over. The final session of the congress was devoted to the presentation of the Humanist Award to Karlheinz Deschner, a writer and church critic from Germany, including readings from his work.

He is writing a ten-volume tome on *The Crimes of Christianity* and the extracts he read showed the breadth and depth of his research. My earlier reference to the Croatian Ustashi régime was more than confirmed during his reading, as the crimes he revealed were more horrific than I had known about. I hope that an English translation is available soon.

## THE FREETHINKER

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

### CONTENTS

The 'A' Word under a cloud	Page 129
Up Front:	Page 131
Smoker on schools	Page 132
Peter Cotes's new book	Page 133
What's On	Page 134
Letter to the Lord	Page 135
Burying the Miracle Myth	Page 137
Reply on 'fainting' Christ	Page 138
Down to Earth: Bill McIlroy	Page 139
Blast from the past	Page 140
You're telling us! Letters	Page 141
Last Word	Page 144

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# UP FRONT

with the Editor

## Silly old celibate

THE Pope's a silly old fool (© Clare Short MP and former Catholic, *The Guardian*, August 5).

Well, that's as may be. But he remains an infallible silly old fool, if we are to believe leaked excerpts from his new encyclical (still to be published as *The Freethinker* went to press) which have appeared in *The Universe* (August 8): "Pope John Paul II is expected to make an unequivocal call to Catholics throughout the world to obey the teachings of the magisterium on moral questions when his new encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (*The Splendour of the Truth*) is published in the autumn.

"Dissent of any kind is firmly ruled out in the draft document...The publication of the encyclical will mean a clampdown on controversial moral theologians such as Hans Kung, Leonardo Boff and Bernard Haring..."

We are assured, however, that despite speculation in the Italian and British Press that the new doctrinal encyclical will deal with sexual matters, the draft copy makes no direct reference to artificial birth control or any other specific moral teaching.

But: "A second encyclical on 'questions of life' is currently being prepared which, it is believed, will restate the Church's traditional teaching on birth control, which is also reaffirmed in the *New Catechism of the Universal Church*."

Neither document will endear the Holy Father to the 73 per cent of US Catholics who, according to a *USA Today* and CNN Gallup poll (August 11) "would sooner follow their own consciences rather than Papal doctrine," nor, perhaps especially, to the 84 per cent of US Catholics who reject the ban on artificial birth control. (Roman Catholic writer Auberon Waugh has dug up from somewhere or other the interesting statistic that 66 per cent of his UK co-religionists use contraception.)

As *The Independent* noted (August 12) on the occasion of the Vicar of Christ's recent crossing of the Atlantic: "They may wave and cheer, but many of the tens of thousands of American Catholics who turn out to greet the Pope today will be honouring a man whose views are about as similar to their own as the Popemobile is to a Porsche."

But all the waving in the world will not save them from an eternity spent stoking the fires of Hell alongside Kung, Boff and Haring, for, in the words of *The Universe*, the new encyclical "enforces the doctrine of infallibility and calls on Catholics to 'recognise and follow the specific moral prescriptions that are declared and taught by the Church in the name of of the Creator and Lord.'"

Does it matter? I hear you ask. Should we

give a damn what the Pope says or does? Well, yes, actually we should, if the figures given in the new *Statistical Yearbook of the Church: 1991* are to be believed.

According to this publication, the number of Catholics in the world rose by 16 million to 944 million in 1991, and that's an awful lot of folk who are in some way touched by the Papal poison on family planning, divorce, homosexuality, abortion and all the other vital matters pertaining to events south of the tummy-button which so obsess the silly old celibate.

There is some good news in the *Yearbook*, however. The number of nuns and monks continues to decline, and the number of priests increased worldwide by only 858 over 1990 – to 404,031 (it is not stated whether this number includes Their Reverences who are in jail or waiting trial for the sexual abuse of their parishioners).

Does this suggest that, while the Poor (predominantly brown) Bloody Infantry – the 135.2 million Catholics in Brazil, for example, or the 52.3 million in the Phillipines – continue to do their religious duty and breed like bunnies, fewer people who actually think and read and wonder – those who might have been expected to become priests and nuns – no longer fall for the superstitious, planet-threatening claptrap which oozes from the Vatican?

## Dawkins in fine fettle

RICHARD DAWKINS, he of *The Selfish Gene*, expertly unpicked a woolly editorial in *The Independent* (August 10) which had crocheted a typically comfy approach to Government threats to "improve" the teaching of religion in our schools, with working parties ensuring that the differences between faiths are taught. (The Department of Education will this autumn issue new guidance aimed at improving the current "poor status" of RE).

Dawkins told *The Independent*: "You are so right. We need to open our children's minds to the rich human perspective of the spiritual dimension. They must be taught that there is only one God and, simultaneously, that there are many; that Jesus is the Son of God and, simultaneously, that he isn't; that we survive death and, simultaneously, that we don't..."

"Tailoring our instruction to local needs, all Northern Irish children should be taught that the Pope is the Infallible Vicar of Christ and, simultaneously, that he is the Antichrist. Children must learn the rudiments of the exciting new *Contradiction Theology*: that all religions are simultaneously true and false, and that this is (don't you feel?) a very positive thing – a

glorious manifestation of the deep mystery at the heart of human spirituality.

"We should not, of course, stop at the religions so broadmindedly embraced by Gandhi. What about the Moonies; voodoo; Wacoism? The failure of our schools to devote hours each week to shamans, witch doctors, ancestors, totems, cargo, the dreamtime and all great spirits that dwell in rocks, mountains, rivers, chameleons and shrunken heads amounts to a racist insult to countless peoples throughout the world. And think what a spiritual treasury will have been lost if we do not revive the worship of Thor and Odin, Apollo and Zeus, Mithras, Baal and the Sun. The special needs of girl pupils today would be met by amalgamating the motherly Isis with the more butch Artemis in a neo-Marian theology.

"Finally, we mustn't neglect the creative side of spiritual witness. Children should work together in mixed classes to devise their own brand new religions, paying special attention to theology, liturgy and ritual. To help raise the status of RE, these new faiths could all enter an annual competition, the winner being adopted as the established church for the following year."

Don't you just hate it when somebody turns out to be not only erudite but also electrifyingly witty? Thank Thor that Richard Dawkins is on our side!

## Well done, hinnies!

TYNESIDE Humanist Group has recently conducted its first Humanist naming ceremony and its third Humanist wedding. Following a letter-writing campaign, Group membership now exceeds 30, from a low of six only two years ago. The Tynesiders recently welcomed their first ex-Muslim member.

Details of the Group from Owen Dumpleton, 36 Partridge Close, Washington, Tyne & Wear NE38 0ES.

## NSS – AGM

MEMBERS of the National Secular Society are asked to note that the AGM will be held in the Library of Conway Hall, London, from 2.15pm on Saturday, October 30, 1993.

All paid-up members are entitled to attend. Further details from General Secretary Terry Mullins, NSS, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.



# Tragedy if Government backs ghetto schools

HAVING separate Muslim schools (not to mention Jewish and Sikh and the rest) paid for out of taxes may seem a progressive step, but in fact it is most divisive, and the National Secular Society views the prospect with alarm.

The extension of voluntary-aided status to such schools would mean their rapid proliferation, and this means segregating the children of ethnic minorities (the parents often being under pressure by their religious leaders) from the rest of the population and from ideas at variance with those of the home background.

Their girls, in particular, would be segregated from virtually the whole of society.

This would be not only a disaster for these youngsters personally; it would also be most divisive socially – inevitably building up for future generations a greater degree of animosity and violence than we have seen in Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, children are segregated on grounds of religious background only. *In this case there would be the additional criteria of race, skin-colour, and sex.*

How, then, can this tragedy be averted, without blatant discrimination? Only by Parliament taking the step of beginning to phase out state subsidies to denominational schools of every kind: Anglican, Roman Catholic and Jewish.

This would encourage integrated schooling – which, incidentally, would make economic sense, since at least 85 per cent of the capital cost and 100 per cent of the running costs of voluntary-aided denominational schools are paid for out of the public purse, and this dual system of education is notoriously wasteful of resources.

The National Secular Society – which, since its inception in 1866, has urged the abolition of all church schools – now points to the added danger that their existence poses today,

**The decision of Lady Blatch, the Education Minister, to turn down an application for voluntary-aided status from the Ismailia School, Brent, has sparked wide public debate. One aspect of this is the threat by the Jewish Yesodeh Hatorah School, Hackney, the Zakariya Muslim Girls' School, Batley, and Oakhill, a Christian school in Bristol, to form a fundamentalist united front to campaign for public funding for religious schools (*The Observer*, August 22). There is, however, a solution to the problem, says BARBARA SMOKER, President of the National Society: phase out public funding for ALL religious schools.**

since it is impossible, in the name of equity, to refuse newly immigrant religions the same right to state-subsidised segregated schooling as Christians and Jews.

Our opponents plead the principle of parental choice; but the law does not allow parents to deprive their children of physical necessities, so why should it allow them the choice of depriving their children of mental and social necessities?

In addition to separate schools, Muslim religious leaders are demanding more adequate provision in the state sector of education for their traditional faith and practices. But it is not a proper educational requirement for the school to provide any religious teaching or worship. Schools should not be used as part-time mosques – nor, for that matter, as part-time churches, chapels, synagogues, or temples.

*There are enough out-of-school hours for religious instruction and services without trespassing on the time required for legitimate school subjects.*

If religion is taught at all in our "county" schools (as required under the present law, which the NSS wishes to see repealed), then certainly Islam should take its place alongside other world religions: provided that the teach-

ing is objective and that alternative world views – disbelief (including Secular Humanism) as well as a representative range of beliefs – are accorded comparable time and respect.

Of course the ethnic minorities should have parity of rights with the rest of the population, but this can, and should, be achieved by Parliament's setting a timetable to phase out the public funding of all religious schools.

We agree with a recent *Times* leader that the grounds on which the Islamia School application was turned down (there already being sufficient school vacancies in the area) are dodgy, especially in view of the recent award of voluntary-aided status to a Catholic school and a Jewish school, both of which could have been refused on the same grounds as the Muslim school.

There is, however, one difference between Muslim schools and those of other religions which the Department of Education could exploit if Parliament is too pusillanimous to phase out all of them: *Muslims consistently assert that Islam is not just a religion, it is also an ideological political system; and schools explicitly set up on political lines have never been recognised for public funding in this country.*

## Sheffield plan for new group

AT the BHA annual Group Representatives' meeting and the BHA Annual General Meeting, both held in the Secular Hall, Leicester on July 17, I expressed my interest in helping to start a Humanist group in Sheffield, writes GORDON SINCLAIR.

As a first step, I am contacting BHA members to arrange two initial meetings. These will take place in the upstairs main room in The Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield, at 8 pm on Wednesdays, Sept 8 and Oct 6.

The *ad hoc* meeting in September will explore our general and specific ideas for the development of the group, identify particular issues and set the agenda for the inaugural meeting in October.

It would be very helpful if you could write to me at 9 South View Road, Hoyland, Barnsley S74 9EB, to inform us of your views and to give some information about yourself.

This would be especially valuable should you be unable to attend the September meeting.

My personal hopes are that Sheffield and

district produce an active centre of organised Humanism which has some impact on the community, providing a service to committed Humanists and Secularists and informing others about the Humanist position. I associate completely with the statement printed on the BHA letterhead and envelope stickers which says: "The British Humanist Association is concerned with moral issues from a non-religious viewpoint and with the achievement of a more open, just and caring society."

I hope to meet you in the Autumn.

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# Scourge of the Lord Chamberlain takes a bow



THE name Peter Cotes has been known to readers of this journal over many years. Despite the constant pressure and demands of his professional commitments, this veteran freethinker – probably the last surviving close friend of Chapman Cohen – has always found time to assist “the best of causes.” He also contributes to *The Guardian* newspaper obituary notices of stage folk which reflect a vast knowledge of the theatre and recognition of genuine but often undervalued talent.

Peter Cotes has now published a second volume of autobiographical “fragments.” *Thinking Aloud* is an eminently readable account of a life in the theatre by a discerning judge of plays and players.

Theatre was in the blood of the Boultings (Peter Cotes’s family name). His father was an actor and toured his own company. Brothers John and Roy became the cinema’s famous Boulting Brothers. Peter started his career as a child actor, making his first West End appearance as a page boy at a Drury Lane charity matinee attended by King George V and Queen Mary. (He was to meet the latter under very different circumstances many years later).

Peter Cotes’s renown as a director in the theatre should not obscure his amazing versatility. Actor, singer, dancer, his stage work ranged from Eugene O’Neill to late-night cabaret. He directed and acted in films, while his career in television is in itself worthy of a volume.

In 1952, Peter Cotes directed a play which opened in Nottingham first before transferring to the West End, attracting unanimously excellent notices for his production, although the “little thriller,” as its author called it, had a mixed press. More than 40 years later, Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap* is still running. So is a disagreement between the play’s director and its presenter, Sir Peter Saunders.

“Little” venues like Norman MacDermott’s Everyman Theatre at Hampstead in the 1920s, provided a stage for actors and writers whose work did not find favour with strictly commercial managements. Peter Cotes ran two such theatres in London: the New Lindsey and the New Boltons. Both were designated “theatre clubs” so that good plays, banned from public perfor-

*Thinking Aloud: Fragments of Autobiography* by Peter Cotes. Peter Owen, £18.95. ISBN 0-7206-0900-3.

Review: Bill McIlroy.

mance by the theatre censor, could be performed. (Younger readers will be incredulous that until 1968 meddling fuss-pots at the Lord Chamberlain’s office, often people with scant knowledge of or interest in the theatre, could censor the work of writers and directors).

From its beginnings, Church and State endeavoured to control the English theatre. Licensing and other restrictions “for the better regulating” of companies were imposed. Walpole’s Bill of 1737, deputing extensive powers, including that of play censorship, to the Lord Chamberlain, was reinforced by the Vagrancy Act 1744 and the Disorderly Houses Act 1751.

Opposition to theatre censorship intensified during the 19th Century. If the Lord Chamberlain could not be persuaded by reason, it was possible to outwit him by giving “private” performances of banned plays, which included works by Shaw and Ibsen.

Peter Cotes became embroiled in a dispute over *Pick-Up Girl*, which he directed at the New Lindsey in 1946. The play contained references to juvenile sex and venereal disease which the Lord Chamberlain decreed were too strong for the sensitive British public.

*Pick-Up Girl* was a most unlikely choice for a Royal command performance. Yet it had one when the aged and awesome Queen Mary arrived with her entourage at a matinee. A keen playgoer, she knew about *Pick-Up Girl* and stipulated that it be given without cuts, four-letter words included. She was impressed and approving.

Queen Mary was more enlightened than our latter-day Mary, of the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association. Her visit to the New Lindsey was followed by the unbanning of *Pick-Up Girl*. It played two West End theatres and a national tour.

There was more trouble with the Lord Chamberlain in 1951. The execution of

Edith Thompson 30 years previously was the most obscene and harrowing episode in the annals of capital punishment this century. *A Pin to See the Peepshow* was a dramatisation of F Tennyson Jesse’s novel based on the Thompson-Bywaters case.

Peter Cotes had originally intended to present it in Manchester, but once again the Lord Chamberlain exercised his authority to determine what the theatre-going public could see. Manchester’s loss was London’s gain and *A Pin to See the Peepshow* had a highly successful run at the New Boltons.

Peter Cotes’s scrupulous attention to detail – the last wardress to see Edith Thompson alive advised him during rehearsals, thus ensuring authenticity of procedure in the condemned cell – and Joan Miller’s legendary performance in the central role, made an impact far beyond the little theatre in Kensington. Leading politicians came to see the play. Peter Cotes writes: “No one will ever know how much *A Pin to See the Peepshow* helped to influence the Government’s decision to abolish capital punishment in 1965.” What we do know is that its director was a distinctive influence in the movement that led to the Lord Chamberlain being asked to leave the stage.

Peter Cotes is rightly numbered among the most significant and innovative figures in the 20th Century theatre. Even in the inherently bitchy and ungenerous world of show business, there are few who question his total commitment to the theatre and his passionate concern to achieve the highest professional standards.

Don't miss the

## Joint Humanist Social

Friday evening,  
November 19  
in the Library,  
Conway Hall,  
London

Guest-speaker:  
PAUL FOOT  
of Private Eye



# Keeping our powder dry

BILL McILROY'S column is on top form this month, dealing with, *inter alia*, the Irish woman who won millions by picking largely religion-related numbers in a national lottery. Perhaps we could attempt a similar coup, but, as Neil Blewitt reveals on another page, God is a reader of *The Freethinker* and as such may be disinclined to divert riches to a paper which so consistently opposes, exposes and ridicules His and His minions' doings.

As always, then, in our efforts to keep

*The Freethinker* afloat, the only thing of which we may be certain is the support of our readers. Please send cheques, POs, stamps to G W Foote & Co., 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL - soon.

Many thanks to: Anonymous, W Ben- nison, D M Harris, J E Fortes, A Gore, P N Irving and K M McLeod, £1 each; E Wakefield, £1.30; E Crosswell and J Lamptey, £2 each; J Payne, £2.50; A J C Forde, C J Hemming, P Proctor and J D Pybus, £3 each; K Moore, M McGill and J Kaminkow, £4.40 each; J Aldam, D S Andrew, J Barr, C Bayliss, M A Betts, P Payne, N Blackford, A W Briglin, J R Case, R Chadwick, C R

Challin, A Chapman, R J Condon, R Crangle, K Hudson, E Douglas, H N Feather, M Kirby, W B Grainger, D A Hartley, M J Gregory, A Negus, I G Norris, B L Plack, W H Seagroatt., M W Smith, B J Van Der Sloot, C I Ward, "Professor Whimsey," G Williams, C M G Wilson and R G Wood, £5 each; J D Humphreys, £5.20; J D Baum, £ 6; L D Hall, £7; R E Davies, A Glaiser, H Madoc-Jones and O Thompson, £10 each; W B Curry, £15; L Dubow, £16; D Brierley, £20; R Gerber and J S Man- ley, £50 each.

**Total for July: £409.20**

## 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 (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, October 3, 5.30pm for 6 pm: Eric Paine: *Thomas Paine, the Man They Could Not Contain*.

**Chiltern Humanists:** Autumn series of meetings on Tuesday, September 14; Wednesday, October 13; Wednesday, November 10. Details: 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 (GLHA):** 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. Friday, October 8, 7.30pm: Avedon Caro: *Feminists Against Censorship*.

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

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, October 5, 8pm: Kathleen Frith leads a discussion of Barbara Thierling's *Jesus the Man*.

**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.

**Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Events start at 6.30pm. October 3: AGM. October 10: Dick Lobell: *Writers Who Become Socialists*. October 17: Mike Howgate: *Is There a Future for Socialism?* October 24: Bill Alexander: *International Brigade Association*. October 31: Paul Deacon: *Trans Europa*. November 7: Michael Gerrard: *20 Years of Lib/Ed*. November 14: Bill Johnson: *John McLean, Revolutionary Socialist*. November 21: Frank Freadman: *Cuba*. November 28: Dr Stephen Coleman: *What's Happening to History?*

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Tuesday, September 16, 7.30pm: Douglas Harding: *Voluntary Euthanasia*.

**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. Thursday, September 16, 7.30pm: Benny Green: *Humanistic Writers Who Influenced Me*. Thursday, September 30, 7.30pm: Claire Rayner: *Rational Approaches to Personal Problems*.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, October 13, 7.45pm: David J Coffey: *The Role of Science in Animal Welfare*.

**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. October 21: AGM. November 18: Speaker from Body Positive, the AIDS charity. December 16: Talk by Nigel Collins, BHA Ceremonies Co-ordinator. January 20: Professor Neil Jenkins introduces the revised version of his book *Modern Humanism*.

**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.



# A LETTER TO THE LORD

DEAR SIR or Madam: I hope you will forgive the formal mode of address, but we have not yet been introduced and a natural reticence prevents me from using anything more familiar.

I hope, too, that it does not cause offence. My original assumption was that you were male since that is how you are characterised in the Bible; but knowing how shabbily some of your chroniclers have served you (and I am not thinking simply of the two books in the Old Testament which do not even mention you) I have lately begun to doubt its correctness.

This uncertainty has not been lessened by the utterances of some of your putative representatives here who, I understand, are in fairly frequent contact with you and who declare that you must be thought of as male and/or female.

You may wonder at my choice of medium. When I decided to write to you, I found myself in a difficulty similar to that experienced by another freethinker. I refer to Chapman Cohen who may have been – is, perhaps? – known to you. He wrote some letters to you in 1935 (and if you missed them they may still be inspected at the National Secular Society's office) but he was unsure how they should be addressed. He rejected *C/o Heaven* since Dean Inge had informed him that Heaven was a figure-of-speech and not a place; and the practical Mr Cohen considered it would be impossible to address letters to a figure-of-speech. He also rejected the idea of inscribing them *To God* and slipping them into a pillar-box for fear they should be returned marked *Address Unknown*, thus exposing a Post Office worker to a possible charge of blasphemy. So he published them in the hope, as he put it, that angels would draw your attention to them, although he was uncertain of Biblical authority for their ability to read English.

However, I find myself in no such dilemma. I am asking the Editor of *The Freethinker* to publish my letter in his journal knowing that you will spot it. One of your Witnesses, with whom you converse regularly apparently, told me the other day that you not only read everything in such publications but also you enter notes against the authors' names in your Book of Life. Of course, as soon as she mentioned that book, I recalled reading about it in St John's Revelations, so I know she had scriptural authority. And I must say, in passing, how I envy St John for being given a sight of Heaven. It sounds almost too fantastic to be true.

This brings me to the purpose of my letter, which is simply to request that my beliefs may be recorded in the Book of Life against my name. As you will discover, I am among your staunchest defenders here on earth and I want to feel certain that the fact

## from Neil Blewitt

does not pass unnoticed.

I apologise for the length of this preamble. Perhaps, in mitigation, I may claim, like Chapman Cohen, that I do not otherwise encroach on your time and patience. I have always taken the view that you do not need to be told what is going on in the world and what needs amending and how.

If your Witness was correct in stating that you read *The Freethinker* religiously every month, you will be aware from previous contributions of mine that I do not doubt your existence. Further, that I will not yield to those who insist your name is Ultimate Reality or Ground of Being. You are, as you always have been to me, Jehovah – and as real as Minerva and Momus.

I believe, too, that the author of the 39 Articles was correct when he wrote that you possess infinite power, wisdom and goodness, although how he equated the latter with his earlier opinion that you are without passion – goodness only knows. And as far as power is concerned, it seems self-evident. A god without power would be a poor god indeed.

So I do not doubt that you created the earth. There are those who state that it is impossible to make something out of nothing, but this only shows an ignorance of the nature of a god. And I do not spend my days – as many do – contemplating how you passed the time *before* the Creation. It is obvious that much planning had to go into the enterprise and I am surprised that it is not more generally realised.

Because I believe that you possess infinite power, wisdom and goodness, I want to state categorically that I do not accept much of what I read about you in the Bible nor, therefore, as some of your critics here insist, that it was inspired by you.

I deny, for example, that you created harmful bacteria and viruses, even though Isaiah suggested that you did. A god of goodness would do no such thing. Nor, indeed, would he allow the development of painful degenerative processes, like my own spondylosis which, at the moment, is giving me hell – if you will pardon the expression.

The Bible indicates that you approve of murder, incest, polygamy, slavery, human sacrifice, adultery, cruelty and even foolishness, but I say that, to a god of goodness and wisdom, it would be unthinkable.

I deny, therefore, that you killed thousands of Israelites with fiery serpents for complaining about their diet; that you allowed two people to be the progenitors of us all; that you accepted Solomon's marital arrangements; that you ordered Moses to take neighbouring peoples as bondmen and

bondmaids; that you allowed Jephtha to immolate his daughter; that you excused David's liaison with Bathsheba; that you visited the inhabitants of Ashdod with haemorrhoids and that you commanded Ezekiel to eat a holy book so that he could preach on its contents.

I do not believe, further, that a god of infinite power and goodness would have gone to the trouble of making such trifling rules over diet, dress, sacrifices and temple fittings as it states in the Pentateuch. No such being would have forbidden the eating of black pudding and crab paste, nor would he have required the slaughter of innocent lambs and doves for the sins of human beings. He would not have decreed what priests' trousers should be made from and he would not have prescribed the number of loops for the temple curtains, the use of badgers' skins for the covering, shittim wood for the frame and almond-shaped ornaments for the candlesticks. It is too ridiculous.

I could adduce other examples, but I am sure that you know them as well as I do and they must be a source of constant embarrassment to you. I am surprised, by the way, that you have not yet denied them personally; but I imagine there is a perfectly good reason for your silence.

I should add that my observations do not concern the Old Testament alone; they extend to the New. And not only to the text, but also to some of your critics' views on it.

Many deny that you came to earth in human form. But I would like to record that I am not among them. I say that if Zeus could come to earth as a bull and Pegasus as a woodpecker, you were entitled to visit it as a man.

But I cannot accept that you were born of David's line. No god of infinite wisdom, not to say infinite self-respect, would select such a disreputable ancestor. In any case (and this is another example of your chroniclers serving you ill) David was Joseph's forebear, not Mary's, and you decided, quite properly, that it was a god's duty to be born of a virgin.

And this brings me on to the Trinity. I am not one of those who dismiss it as a chimera or a sort of celestial Freeman, Hardy and Willis. I believe that you, with infinite power, could transform yourself into a ghost and your own son as easily as you once transformed yourself into a disembodied voice, a cloud and fire. This is no less acceptable than that Proteus, himself the son of a god, appeared as a dragon, a flood, a panther, a tree and fire.

So far as morality is concerned, I believe that you would have been proud to deliver the precepts in the Sermon on the Mount.



# LETTER TO THE LORD

From Page 135

But I deny that you would then declare – as your chroniclers maintain – that you came not to bring peace but a sword; that men should hate their mothers; that your critics should be slain; that self-castration was proper; that, having preached forgiveness, you would refuse to grant it yourself – even to the extent of casting sinners into a furnace, there to gnash their teeth for all eternity; and that you would be capable of the invective in the 23rd chapter of St Matthew.

I do apologise for the length of this epistle, although it is no longer than most of St Paul's – which themselves contain further calumnies on yourself, but I will not advert to them now.

I would be grateful if you would acknowledge this letter and confirm that my defence of you will be entered in the Book of Life. As to the medium of your reply, perhaps I may make a suggestion. The Editor of *The Freethinker* is a decent chap and I am sure that he would give you space in the journal if you would address your reply to me c/o him. There is no need to be as demonstrative as you were when you delivered the Commandments to Moses, although if you were to choose to employ trumpets, fire and earthquakes as well as your own finger I am sure he would not mind – providing, of course, that you warned him beforehand. It could otherwise be quite an unnerving experience.

I have one other request to make, and I hope you will not consider it impertinent. The new Editor (I assume you know that Bill McIlroy has retired) has taken to printing photographs of contributors and I thought he may be pleased to have one of yourself. Your features have not been too well delineated in the Bible and you may be surprised to learn that there is considerable curiosity among readers of *The Freethinker* as to your likeness.

Assuring you of my continuing support,  
Yours faithfully,  
Neil Blewitt.

PS. Who *did* create harmful bacteria and viruses?

# BURYING THEM

The case against miracles was proved (the  
examines Hume's *Of Miracles*, from *EntCo*)

**I**N HIS *Of Miracles*, Hume questions their veracity on the basis that they can never be proved. His characteristically sceptical arguments are not methodologically dissimilar to those employed in previous enquiries. In broad terms, he continues to apply the principles of a science of man and he remains consistent for the most part in questioning the efficacy of the miracle.

His ideas on causality and induction prescribed in his chapter on *Necessary Connexion* find their place again in an essentially empirical response against the grounds for ever believing in miracles.

His maxim (Sect X, Part II, 93) by which human nature conducts itself in that "the objects of which we have no experience resemble those of which we have," is used here in the context of miracles and bears striking resemblance to Hume's ideas on causality and human "belief" in matters of observed and unobserved fact.

For instance, miracles are always an (unnatural) imaginary extension of a natural experience. Again, in this context Hume's underlying concern is to know how and why we make certain inferences of fact – the parable of the re-animation of Queen Elizabeth in 1600 is perhaps the most extreme example in *Of Miracles* of what lengths human nature will go to extend events to the point of incredulity.

Throughout the enquiry, Hume consistently encourages empirical evidence provided by our own past experiences when evaluating matters which require us to assess probability of miracles. As we shall see, he takes these ideas further by bringing into question the state of mind of the individual behind the testimony, for: "A man delirious or noted for falsehood and villainy has no manner of authority with us." (Sect X, Part I, 88).

The issues contained in *Of Miracles* are of no less interest to us today than they were in the 18th Century. Philosophically, because of our continued inclinations towards anything which threatens the natural order or laws of nature, but also as we are still treated to regular doses of miracle-watching by contemporary evangelists on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, the issue still remains in the theological domain and such acts as are reported continue to be performed either by god or his agents.

Hume tackles the veracity of miracles

head-on by taking on board the burden of proof by showing how they are not proved and therefore undermining the religious edifice which they are based. He does this, not by producing theological arguments but by building a strong philosophical argument recalling our inductive reasoning or "impressions" of the world and evoking "ly) substantiated miracle. This will ultimately lead us to Hume's conclusion in these terms that: "If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the miracle which he relates, then and not till then he pretend to command my belief or assent." (Sect X, Part II, 90).

**H**ume offers us a number of arguments against miracles or, more accurately, against the foundations of their testimony. In his opening of *Of Miracles*, he takes as his starting point the veracity of the Scriptures: a testimony of the Apostles. Our evidence suggests, for the truth of the Christian religion: "...is less than the evidence for the of our senses." (Sect X, Part I, 86).

Quite clearly, for Hume, experience us that the evidence contained in Scriptures must have diminished from the simple passage of the telling and re-telling from one Disciple to the other. He states: "A weaker evidence can never be a stronger." Hume here is simply saying "Stay firm!" When comparing such stories with your own experiences, the evidence of your own inductive reasoning

Hume continues his argument along empirical grounds because of his fundamental concern with the definition of the miracle: laws of nature and their consequent violation

The germ of his overall argument is contained within Section X, Part I, 90 and is most compelling in arguing for disbelief: a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature and to Hume these laws are "firm and inviolable" because they have been based on inductive reasoning. They are as solid as the extent of our experiences on earth can make them. His statement of one solid law of nature, "That fire consumes wood and is extinguished by water," impresses upon us earlier imagery and ideas of causation: all matters of fact are founded on cause and effect, arriving as we do at this knowledge from experiencing the constant conjunction between them.

Taking this knowledge further then



# MIRACLE MYTH

ed than 250 years ago. **CHRIS TEMPLETON**  
 Ent. **Concerning Human Understanding.**

burden of inquiry into the veracity of miracles, we can not prove that the required violation of the laws of nature would be so great that the magnitude of the miracle would be on a par with reversing the natural laws of nature – equating the illogical process of wood consuming or rearing and being made to disappear upon cooking with water. The only way to refute such a logical argument, would be to invalidate the ultimate premise and if we do that, we might as well say we didn't have a law of nature at all. For every miraculous event, Hume says there must be a uniform experience which in itself amounts to full proof against the existence of any miracle. In other words, we will never find that the proof in the miracle will ever be greater than the full proof provided by the laws of nature founded on experience and inductive reasoning.

At this point (Sect X, part II, 91), Hume takes his argument away from a concern with human testimony and at the same time argues epistemologically, as opposed to logically. In balancing the improbability of miracles with the probability that human testimony is somewhat corrupt, Hume again employs ideas of causation and induction as our true foundation of belief, making parallels between questioning of the "appellation of a miracle" and the "impressions" of "unobserved effect." Hume has no more right (or no foundation of knowledge) to assume that the sun will shine tomorrow than we have to expect a dead man to come back to life.

These lines of argument are not without logical contradiction. If we are to take a pure empirical view and accept the ultimate standard of experience, what if the testimony itself becomes experience? What foundation in argument does Hume have in attempting the question of veracity on causation? Hume shows that he is aware of this inconsistency (Sect X, part II, base 2) and goes as far as allowing the testimony to stand in order to re-assess his own empirical reasoning. In assuming that a testimony of a miracle does amount to proof, Hume advances four further and distinct arguments continuing to discredit belief.

Firstly and equally simply put, he writes that in all history no miracle has been attested by a significant amount of men "of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond suspicion of any design to deceive others." (Sect X, part II, 92).

Secondly and more originally, Hume isolates aspects of human nature which underline our natural propensity toward the "absurd" and the "miraculous." He notes how people conceive "ideas" from objects (he could even say events) of which they have no experience from those which they have. He has shown in previous enquiries how easy it is for the mind to maintain quite abstract impressions (the imaginative faculty), imagining a flying cow, for instance. Thus, with the potential of these sorts of "ideas," at least, we have necessarily the potential to accept these "ideas" as "belief."

Hume continues to target his argument on this sole aspect of "belief," using causal inferences in this way to question belief. He concludes with the maxim: "...that which is most usual is most probable." (Sect X, Part II, 93).

Impressions upon the mind are further corrupted by the human characteristics of "surprise" and "wonder." Hume attests that in the mind of the witness where impression becomes "belief" (in other words, he has believed his own tale) the listener – equally affected by the same characteristics being "an agreeable emotion" – will partake in the conspiracy and rebound the untruth. Finally: "their credulity increases his impudence and his impudence overpowers their credulity."

In his third argument, Hume says that the supernatural and miraculous chiefly abound in "ignorant and barbarous nations." In such countries, Hume observes, the framework of nature in which the laws of nature themselves are empirically perceived - have been corrupted.

In the parable of the false prophet Alexander, Hume checks the progress of miracles in this way among the people of Paphlagonia and emphasises the important role of the "wise and learned" in having to rationalise mass delusions stirred by the people.

In his fourth argument, Hume cites how miracles are often used to introduce and support new or existing religions. In the main, most miracles are opposed by a greater number than supported. It necessarily follows that the miracle will finally not only serve to destroy the credit of the testimony but also the testimony will end up destroying itself.

In short, not all the religions of the world can each be founded on the same foundations, founded as they are on their own brew of miracles. Thus, each has the potential of



overthrowing each other's system of belief. It follows that, in destroying each other's systems, it must also destroy belief in miracles (Sect X, Part II, 95).

Therefore, Hume is convincing us that no testimony of any kind has ever amounted to a probability, much less a proof. Again: "It is only experience which gives authority to human testimony." (Sect X, part II, 98).

To that end, Hume reiterates that our trust should be placed in impressions derived through a reasoning based upon empirical evidence. And yet, towards the close of *Of Miracles*, Hume appears finally to concede to the unimaginable by seemingly accepting that a miracle of sorts may yet still happen (Sect X, Part II, 98). With this concession, Hume is effectively tying up his overall argument within the greater theories of causality – if we can't have knowledge and certainty that the sun will rise every day, why can we not say that miracles will never happen? In the instance of a violation of the natural laws, the event could come within reach of human testimony. However, in this case, as Hume finally points out, miracles would be incontrovertible because they would be experienced on a world-wide scale. The testimony therefore would be self-evident as it would be shared uniformly and extensively throughout the world and would probably exist as a new law of nature itself.

In *Of Miracles*, Hume has directly pitted the testimony of men and the violation of the laws of nature by miracles and judges that: "violations of truth are more common in the testimony concerning religious miracles than in any other matter of fact...this must make for a general resolution never to lend attention to it."



# Doctor replies on 'fainting' Christ

FELLOW of the Royal College of Anaesthetists Dr J G Bourne published a major article in *The Freethinker* in June suggesting, with a wealth of medical evidence based on the observations of himself and others, that Jesus may have merely fainted on the cross, surviving the crucifixion.

Describing himself as "a Christian Atheist," Dr Bourne expressed his belief in Christ's ethical teachings, however, and said: "Crucial to Christianity is not the myth but the message."

In July, Daniel O'Hara replied, insisting, again with a wealth of evidence, drawn largely from the Bible, "that the whole Passion story is an invention, concocted not less than half-a-century after the events it purports to describe."

Karl Heath weighed-in with a demand to know where Jesus went and what happened to him after the "fainting," while Robert Sinclair had no doubt that "whatever Christian Atheists imagine the 'message' to be in these foolish tales, they are best tossed in the bin - with the resurrection rubbish." Vivien Gibson wondered where Jesus obtained the clothing

he wore when he appeared to his disciples.

Now, Dr Bourne replies:

Daniel O'Hara asserts that the story of the empty tomb and the resurrection was a work of fiction invented and first mooted many years after the crucifixion. I do not think this proposition can be advanced with such certainty.

Dame Iris Murdoch, to whom I had previously sent a shorter and less well-developed version of my *Freethinker* article, found my medical evidence "certainly impressive" and my explanation of the post-crucifixion reappearance "not an impossible idea."

"There are," she added, "perhaps other non-supernatural ways of explaining the figure in the garden, such as those suggested by A N Wilson in his recent book *Jesus*." (This is a scholarly and well-acclaimed book by a theologian, due out in paperback this September).

From this, it would seem that both she and Wilson would disagree with Daniel O'Hara.

It is worth noting also that, in the very considerable volume of correspondence, both in the newspaper and in my mailbag, that followed my 1965 article in the *Sunday Times*, nobody suggested that I was explaining a

non-event. Most of the correspondents fought for belief in the miracle. But even the few who supported me and could have said, "he need not have worried; it's all a myth anyway," did not do so.

Robert Sinclair asks in *The Freethinker* what remains of Christianity if the resurrection myth is rejected? An answer is partly given in a letter by the Rev R Lawrence Jones, printed in the *Sunday Times* two weeks after my article appeared: "Your report of Dr J G Bourne's theory of Christ's 'resurrection' was most illuminating. For some years, I have felt sure that this was the only reasonable explanation; and it is exciting to read of such convincing medical corroboration.

"There must be many, both inside and outside the church, who will welcome this new evidence, and who will agree that it need be no obstacle to Christ's teachings. As Dr Bourne says: 'His life is sublime without physical myths; nothing can take away the miracles of the spirit.' And these are what matters.

"I am convinced that millions could be converted to the Christ-ideal, the Christ-spirit, the essential Christ-teachings. Yet, if they come to church, they are likely to be met by something quite different. What confronts them is a theology created on the basis of Hebrew theories of sacrifice and tailored to fit the story of Christ's death; a myth of a divine justice that can be satisfied only by a perfect sacrifice, a shedding of blood, without which God's forgiving mercy cannot be available, etc.

"I can but hope that Dr Bourne's paper will further stimulate the ferment of new thinking that is going on in religious circles."

This valiant avowal might almost have been the writing of a Humanist. I do not think that Christianity is discredited or humiliated by rejection of the resurrection myth, as Robert Sinclair suggests. Jesus was undeniably a most significant, some would say the most significant, figure in history. His power, his brilliance, his courage, his greatness as a man, a human being, and the greatness of his message will be revered and will exercise a powerful influence on men's minds after the last fading glimmer of a supernatural religion has finally flickered out.

To a Humanist, the sooner this happens, the better.

The questions raised by Karl Heath and by Vivien Gibson will probably never be answered. To an historian, their guesses would be just as worthless as mine. That no answers can be given to questions arising from events that occurred nearly 2,000 years ago is not sufficient reason to deny the occurrence of those events.

## Death of a grassroots Atheist

**DOREEN (Jean) Morrell**, who died at Nottingham on August 4, aged 78, after a long illness, was a reader of *The Freethinker* for much of her adult life, also being for several years a member of the Nottingham branch of the National Secular Society.

Born in Largs, Scotland, of a French mother and an English father, she was brought up in Liverpool, where her father had a building firm, and where she purchased her first copy of *The Freethinker* and other Freethought works.

In recent years the onset of macular degeneration robbed her of the ability to read, but her son used to read *The Freethinker* to her from cover-to-cover. Doreen Morrell was essentially a "grass-

roots" Atheist: she never sought to impose her opinions in matters of religion on others, but if the subject did come up in conversation she never hesitated to express them.

Doreen Morrell was married twice, her first husband being killed while serving in the RAF in the last war. By her first marriage she had a son and a daughter - both of whom came to share her unbelief - but to her great sadness her daughter met with a fatal accident not long before being due to take her nursing finals. It is doubtful if Mrs Morrell ever really overcame the loss.

Her son, along with the late Christopher Brunel, helped to found the Thomas Paine Society.

### Humanist Holidays: Yule, 1993 Weston-super-Mare

Friday, December 24 (dinner)  
to Tuesday, December 28 (breakfast).  
Half-board, with full-board on the 25th.  
Cost: £165 per person shared and £175 single.  
All rooms en suite.

Details from: Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham,  
Glos. GL52 5AA. Telephone: 0242 239175.







# DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



## More blood on believers' hands

COLUMNIST Nigella Lawson attracted the wrath of a London *Evening Standard* reader, Ian Flintoff, when she slated the "crassness, selfishness and arrogant obtuseness" of a Jehovah's Witness named Maureen Spence.

True, it is considered bad taste to speak ill of the dead. But, as reported in last month's *Freethinker*, Mrs Spence died needlessly of her own and her husband's choice, by refusing, on religious grounds, a blood transfusion following the birth of their fourth child. Doctors at a Wigan hospital watched helplessly as her life ebbed away. As for the widower, Miss Lawson commented: "To get over his grief, he, like many of those who turn to religion, is finding solace in self-delusion."

Such plain speaking was not at all to the liking of Mr Flintoff, who is a professional actor (in the theatre, not the pulpit). He denounced this "gratuitous insult" inflicted upon "the solemn and private relationships that people may feel they have with their God, their soul, or their own immortality." Such feelings "should be spared the supercilious venom of newspaper columnists." In other words, criticism of religious superstition and the consequences of blind faith should be disallowed.

Ian Flintoff whinged on about his great sadness because he is "unable, in utter sincerity, to find the kind of faith and belief that I have seen in others." He asserted that "all societies need 'religion' in some broad and accepted sense to hold the vagaries of human nature together in some kind of harmony. Without it, people regard each other as natural enemies, to be exploited, condemned, derided – or mugged, beaten and raped as the case may be."

Reading such guff makes one wonder if Mr Flintoff is aware of what goes on in the real, off-stage world outside the theatre.

Far from uplifting humanity and creating harmony, historically and contemporaneously the common features of religions are aggression, intolerance and the creation of disharmony. Communal riots in India are invariably sparked off by some religious observance or demonstration. In the Middle East, Islamic fanaticism poses a serious threat to peace and stability. Religion is a major factor in Central European conflicts.

We have a religious Jurassic Park within sight of parts of mainland Britain. Northern Ireland is plagued by an extremely high level of solemn and private relationships with God, belief in the Resurrection, a bliss-or-blisters

existence after death and other fundamentalist tosh. There is little social harmony in that outpost of time-warped Christianity, where the Protestant and Catholic faithful regard each other as natural enemies.

Twentieth-century Christians smile patronisingly when reminded of their history. Agreed, they say, the churches behaved very badly in the past. When not butchering each other over absurd theological differences, Christians waged war against those of different faiths and cultures; conducted anti-Jewish pogroms and witch hunts; condoned slavery and subjugation of colonial peoples. And yes, of course, they were conned into believing that performances of the Mass (at a price) would save them from eternal damnation, and the touch of a (usually bogus) relic would effect a cure from illness.

Nowadays, deluded gulls hand over their money to fire-and-brimstone televangelists and "faith healing" charlatans. Others succumb to the blandishments of doorstep missionaries from the local Kingdom Hall who proffer copies of *The Watchtower* and *Awake*.

Four young, motherless children are tragic evidence of Jehovah's Witnesses' "crassness, selfishness and arrogant obtuseness." Nigella Lawson's comments were, if anything, rather restrained.

## Pennies (and punts) from Heaven

MAURA Burke, who lives on the island of Lettermore, off County Galway, has given the gambling fraternity something to think about. She won top prize in Ireland's national lottery, a whopping IR£3,031,527.

How did Mrs Burke pull it off? Rather than selecting numbers with the aid of a pin, she chose the dates of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (August 15), the Immaculate Conception (December 8) and Christmas Day (December 25). Three family birthdays completed the winning combination.

Perhaps Mr Clarke, Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is even now preparing his first Autumn Statement, should consider using dates relating to the saints in his quest for a solution to the Government's economic problems. There is a wide range of appropriate choices, including St Brieuc who is the patron saint of purse makers; St Matthew of tax collectors; St Julian of jugglers; St Yves of bailiffs; St Killian of whitewashers.

Best avoid St Giles, though. He is patron saint of "those struck by some sudden misery," an embarrassing reminder of the Chancellor's immediate predecessor, Norman Lamont.

Maybe Mr Clarke should stick to the pin method.

## A right load of... bulls

CORRESPONDENTS in the *New Internationalist* journal have been touching on an interesting feature of papal elections with which *Freethinker* readers may not be familiar. However, if you are about to partake of a meat tea it may be advisable give the rest of this item a miss.

Guy Lambert, of Oxford, enquired if it is true that during the ceremony assembled cardinals are still required to take a peep at a prospective pontiff's genitals. This precaution is said to have resulted from the lamentable case of Pope Joan who according to a *Catholic Herald* of recent date "dressed as a man to gain a classical education in Rome, where her reputation as a scholar won her the position of Pope."

The *Catholic Encyclopaedia* recorded that for seven centuries after Pope Joan, "all candidates for the papacy had to undergo a physical examination to prove their sex." If everything was in order the cardinals proclaimed – whether in a spirit of boastfulness or envy we know not – *testiculos habet en bene pendentes*; a (very loose) translation being "testicles he has and well-hung ones."

There is another, and probably more likely reason, why it was believed that the Vicar of Christ's testicles must be unblemished. It is found in Leviticus, chapter 21, wherein the Lord speaks unto Moses concerning those who should not, because of physical defects, "come nigh unto the altar." They include "a blind man or the lame or he that hath a flat nose ... or hath his stones broken."

Of course, Holy Mother Church has moved on from Old Testament times. Why, only last year the Vatican announced that Galileo (1564-1642) was right after all. The lame, the blind and the flat-nosed may now come nigh unto the altar. And it is highly unlikely that a modern Pope must submit to the ordeal of having his nether parts peered at by elderly celibates in drag.





# THE HUMANITY OF GEORGE ELIOT

FELLOW mortals must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people – amongst whom your life is passed – that it is needful you should tolerate, pity and love. It is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people, whose moments of goodness you should be able to admire, for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience – the real breathing men and women who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice, who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken brave justice.

I have come to the conclusion that human nature is lovable; the way I have learned something of its deep paths, its sublime mysteries, has been by living a great deal among people more or less commonplace, of whom you would perhaps hear nothing very surprising if you were to inquire about them in their neighbourhoods. For I have observed this remarkable co-incidence – that the select natures who pant after the ideal and find nothing in pantaloons or petticoats great enough to command their reverence and love, are curiously in unison with the narrowest and pettiest!

## Rascal

I want to have feelings of love and reverence for my everyday fellow men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude whose faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy. It is more needful that I should have a fibre of sympathy connecting me with the citizen who weighs out my sugar than with the handsomest rascal in red scarf and green feathers; more needful that my heart should swell with loving admiration at some trait of gentle goodness in the faulty people who sit at the same hearth with me, than in the deeds of heroes whom I shall never know except by hearsay.

So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem bet-

*... as shown in an aside to the reader in Chapter 17 of Adam Bede, first published in 1859.*

*The piece was selected and abridged for The Freethinker by RUTH BLEWITT, who comments: "On re-reading it I don't really think it is a 'blast,' but rather a gentle, refreshing breeze!"*

ter than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. Examine your words well and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is very hard to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings – much harder than to say something fine about them which is *not* the exact truth.

It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous, homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn from angels, prophets, sibyls and warriors to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary meal while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel and her stone jug

and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessities of life to her. Or I turn to that village wedding, kept between four brown walls, where an awkward bridegroom opens the dance with a high-shouldered, broad-faced wife, while elderly and middle-aged friends look on, with very irregular noses and lips and probably with quart-pots in their hands, but with an expression of unmistakable contentment and goodwill. Things may be lovable that are not altogether handsome, I hope.

There is a great deal of family love amongst us. I have seen many an excellent matron, who could never in her best days have been handsome, and yet she had a packet of yellow love-letters in a private drawer and sweet children showered kisses on her sallow cheeks. And I believe there have been plenty of young heroes of middle stature and feeble beards, who have felt quite sure they could never love anything more insignificant than a Diana, and yet have found themselves in middle life happily settled with a wife who waddles!

## Carrots

Human feeling is like the mighty rivers that bless the earth: it does not wait for beauty – it flows with resistless force and brings beauty with it.

Let us cultivate divine beauty of form in men, women and children – in our gardens and in our homes. But let us love that other beauty, too, which lies in no secret proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy.

Paint us an angel if you can – or a Madonna; but do not banish from art those old women scraping carrots with work-worn hands, those rounded backs and weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world – those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs and their clusters of onions. It is needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy and frame theories which only fit a world of extremes.



# YOU'RE TELLING US!

## Thomas Paine

CONGRATULATIONS on putting the photograph of the splendid Thetford statue on the front page of *The Freethinker*, and for including the preface to Thomas Paine's *Address to the Ministers and Preachers of all Denominations of Religion*.

Regarding Colin McCall's review of D F Hawkes' paperback, *Paine*, which I suspect is a rehash of the hardback I read many years ago, the reviewer is quite right in pointing out the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the biography. One of many instances is the statement that Thomas Jefferson arranged for the return of Thomas Paine to America in 1802. In fact, his fare was provided by two English admirers: Sir Francis Burdett MP, later, in 1810, imprisoned in the Tower, and William Bosville.

In being true to Thomas Paine, I personally feel that Atheists should not overlook the fact that Thomas Paine in his own way did fervently believe in one God, whom as a Deist he saw as the creator of the beautiful and bounteous universe and hoped for happiness in an after-life. Whether he would still do so today, in the light of all the later scientific discoveries, is a matter of conjecture.

His exposure of all the myths, fallacies, inconsistencies and barbarities of the Bible was a great boost to freethought, and guiding principles of morality and conscience, opening the way in a more practical way than Voltaire, perhaps, to a revolution in political and religious thinking which we still have to carry on today.

While writing, may I draw readers' attention to an International Symposium we are organising in conjunction with East Anglia University and the Centre for the Study of Democracy next February 18-20 at Norwich to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the publication of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* and his great life generally.

For further information regarding the Symposium, readers please contact myself: Eric Paine, Hon. Secretary, Thomas Paine Society, 43 Wellington Gardens, Selsey, W Sussex, PO 20 0RF. Those wishing to submit a paper are asked to write to Professor John Keane, 70 Great Portland Street, London W1N 5AL, with a statement of not more than 500 words on their theme by September 30, 1993.

**ERIC PAINE**  
Selsey

When I reviewed the book in the *Bulletin* of the Thomas Paine Society, I drew attention to the manner in which the author sought to blacken Paine's character by accenting claims about his drinking habits and appearance. Later, after the *American Rationalist* published a somewhat eulogistic review of the work by R Retter, I responded with a letter critical of the review, asking why a journal like it should publish a review which ignored or glossed over the faults in the Hawke biography (AR, Sept-Oct. 1979)? The reviewer, in commenting on the points I raised, did not answer this, but resorted to the old tactic of

the case of some Bible-thumping ignoramus, but not in a university professor said to be "a historian of high repute."

Perhaps Hawke was playing for safe when he wrote, for it was a time of anti-Communist hysteria in the United States, and Paine was a writer towards whom many Communist historians and political activists were favourably disposed.

**R W MORRELL**  
Nottingham

## Rituals

DIANA Elvin (*Last Word*, August) is entitled to air her opinions about naming ceremonies for babies, and to explain her strong feelings in favour of such rituals. She is, however, quite unwarranted in claiming that we all feel the same way as she does ("surely we do") and especially in claiming that "we should."

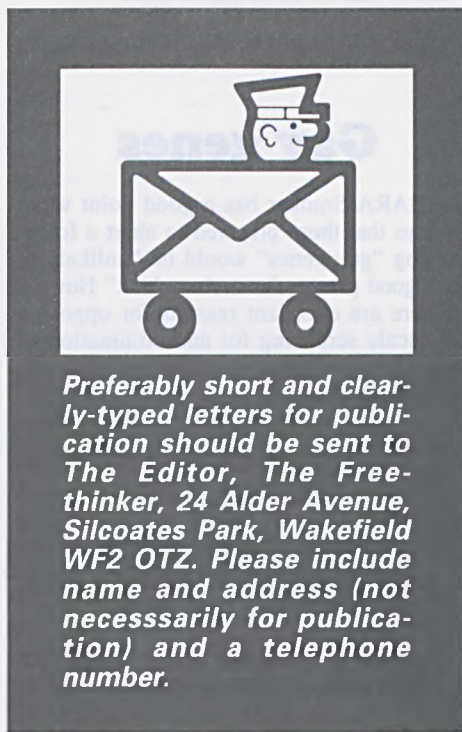
Yes, ritual – to some degree – has an almost universal appeal; but the need for ritual in general varies from individual to individual, and personal responses to particular rituals vary enormously. A significant number of Christians, for example, disapprove of infant baptism – an important family occasion for others. Practices such as circumcision, bull fighting and fox hunting have a strong ritual appeal to their followers; but to others of different persuasions these practices are repugnant or immoral.

I do not feel I missed out by not attending family christenings when I was younger. My absence at such events merely served to convince my relatives that my freethought views were seriously and conscientiously held.

Later on, when my own children were born, my pleasure in helping to name them was more than satisfied when my wife allowed me to register the births myself, rather than leaving the job to a hospital official. I felt no need to link the bestowing of names with celebrating – as informally as possible – the arrival of each baby, nor did I find the air, at such celebrations, to be "full of criticisms, both spoken and implied."

Diana Elvin quotes some suggested wording for a naming ceremony and sums it up as "short, simple, sincere and comprehensive." For her, I am sure the wording is; for me it comes over as unctuous, contrived and about as necessary as a chocolate teapot.

Diana Elvin's views and mine almost certainly reflect our different paths to freethought, and our different reactions to orthodox Christian rituals. We are, I suspect, at near-opposite ends of a spectrum of opinions.



**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.**

accusing admirers of Paine of being "super-sensitive" about criticism of him. He did say he would pass a copy of my letter to Hawke, who he described as "a historian of high repute," but, as might be expected, the "historian of high repute" did not deign to descend from his ivory tower.

Hawke's book is not without merit, particularly in its treatment of Paine's years in America, but its defects stand out – not least its continual and irksome reference to *The Rights of Man*, as against the correct title of Paine's great book, *Rights of Man*. It hardly encourages confidence in a historian's ability when he perpetuates such a glaring error (as I have not seen the latest edition, I have no means of knowing whether this has been corrected).

It has long puzzled me why certain historians (and others) still trot out all the unfounded charges made against Paine by his political and religious opponents. I can understand it in

IT WOULD seem, if Colin McCall's review is anything to go upon, that Professor D F Hawke's biographical study of Thomas Paine has been re-issued without the author having bothered to take any note of criticism made of it when it was first published in the late 1970s.



# YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 141

The idea of naming ceremonies may continue to give some people a warm inner glow, but it will also make others wince.

**NIGEL SINNOTT**  
Alexandra, Vic., Australia

## Cruelty

IN HER letter (August issue) Elsie Karbacz uses the irritating device of upstaging a perfectly good general assertion by quoting the exception that proves the rule, in the manner of smoking apologists who always know a sprightly 92-year-old who has been smoking like a chimney all his life.

Since I am the one who committed the "injustice" of claiming that religion has a poor track record as far as cruelty to animals is concerned, I had better remake the fairly obvious point that such statements and other criticisms of religion in *The Freethinker* are intended as broad observations, in the full awareness that there are plenty of decent religious people who are kind to animals and who, in a wider sense, don't indulge in the hypocritical, self-serving practices so often exposed on these pages.

Our disapproval is mostly directed at the religious institutions and the cynical manipulators who exploit religious belief for personal gain.

Of course, not all Atheists are beyond reproach either. But I don't see why I should be muzzled just because occasionally an irate freethinker may be driven to kick the cat. If Ms Karbacz were to conduct a survey she would no doubt find a much higher proportion of vegetarians among Humanists than among the religious, and there certainly isn't a Humanist equivalent of Hallal slaughtered meat.

**TONY AKKERMANS**  
Leeds

## Those stars

I SEE that you are still allowing Michael Harding to use your letters page as a free monthly ad for the wonders of astrology, and I wonder why.

In response to his implied queries, I should say that I am well acquainted with Eysenck's writings on the subject, as well as the details

### Bound to be good!

The 1992 bound volume of *The Freethinker* (Edited by Bill McIlroy) is now available at £10.50 (plus £1.25 postage) from G W Foote & Co. Ltd., 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

of the Dennis Rawlins saga. (Harding appears to be so deeply committed to the notion that Rawlins was chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal that I am reluctant to deprive him of the solace of his delusion).

As I feared, Harding has gone for the standard ploy of side-stepping into yet another airing of the Gauquelin material, which has nothing to do with general astrology, and I decline to take the bait.

Space is precious enough in your little magazine without the inclusion of puffs for half-baked systems of superstition, and I for one would be glad to see an end of them.

**LEWIS JONES**  
London SE26

## Gay genes

BARBARA Smoker has a good point when she says that those prepared to abort a foetus carrying "gay genes" would be "unlikely to make good parents for such a child." However, there are excellent reasons for opposing large-scale screening for and elimination of "gay genes," as Jacobovits seems to want. Consider the following:

1. The problem is not homosexuality but attitudes to it. Aborting gay foetuses is merely giving in to prejudice.

2. Reducing the number of homosexuals would make it more difficult for those who remain to find partners, thus increasing their loneliness and frustration. Humanists should seek to decrease human suffering, not increase it.

3. In an over-populated world, people who do not reproduce are obviously highly desirable. By this argument we should actually be trying to *increase* the incidence of "gay genes"!

4. Gay people are disproportionately represented in music and the arts and have made massive contributions in these and other fields. Do we really want to eliminate a source of creativity and diversity in our society?

5. There is no evidence that "gay genes" are defective. Homosexual behaviour arises in many vertebrate species, including our closest relative the bonobo or pygmy chimpanzee and serves beneficial functions (social ones in the case of the bonobo). Until more is known about the prevalence, origins and functions of "gay genes," it would be extremely foolish to try to eradicate them. Indeed, genes for homosexuality would hardly be tolerated at such a high level of prevalence by natural selection unless they conferred some advantage to the species that compensated for the loss of fertility. It would be a tragedy for the human race if such genes were to be eliminated only for it to be later discovered that in certain combina-

tions or environments they cause, not homosexuality, but a doubling of IQ or immunity to cancer!

(Dr) **STEPHEN MORETON**  
Warrington

WHILE I am not completely satisfied that homosexuality is environmentally conditioned, the absence of homosexual behaviour, in the wild, in our genetically closest relatives, the apes, seems to support that view.

It may be argued that where conditions approaching captivity prevail, as in single-sex institutions, homosexual penetrative behaviour is inevitable, but this in no way confirms that it is natural.

By all means decriminalise homosexuality ("New Gay Demand for Equality," August issue) but that should not be taken as encouraging the notion that sodomy is natural, or an expression of love.

**ERNIE CROSSWELL**  
Slough

## The Balkans

WE are being subjected, quite rightly, to emotional appeals on behalf of the Muslim population of Yugoslavia whose plight is obviously deplorable and an offence to humanity. Are there not three factions at war in Yugoslavia? We hear very little of the suffering and deprivation among the Croat and Serbian populations. Can someone enlighten me on this?

We hear much from America on the need to bomb Serbian positions. Can this be yet another emotional appeal by politicians, possibly to keep the spotlight from Israeli attacks on other Muslims or, more likely, to pacify Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria and maintain their orders for armaments from American and British companies?

Normally when politicians highlight human suffering, it is for their own political ends.

The Yugoslavian problems, as ever, are historical and complicated by religion. I have not read of an instance where the Roman Catholic Church, with its so-called pro-life policy, has urged restraint on Croat Catholics in their dealings with Muslims. Nor have I read of the Greek Orthodox Christian Church urging restraint on Serbs, nor the Muslim hierarchy on Bosnian Serbs. The only comment I can recollect having been allegedly made by the Muslim leader was that they were engaged in a "holy war." Is this yet another case of religion adding its own intolerance to an unstable political situation, and far from being a unifying factor has fostered division in the Balkan peninsula?

**JAMES TIPLADY**  
Langdon Hills

Turn to Page 143



# YOU'RE TELLING US!

◀ From Page 142

## Past imperfect?

"I JUST can't stand intolerance!" "I am utterly and absolutely opposed to dogmatism!" These two statements sum-up many people's attitudes to religion. While I share these attitudes to a degree (because of a personal encounter with fundamentalism), I am aware also of a need to understand religion in modern evolutionary terms.

According to Darwinian Evolutionists, the latest thing to have evolved is a "sense of purpose"; only man can understand "design" and can make and use tools to achieve his purposes (chimpanzees can make rudimentary tools, such as twigs to fish out ants from crevices, but nothing as sophisticated as our language; there is no moral judgement implied here). Religion is (was?) the practical answer to man's question about life which he may ask at crucial stages, such as birth and death: "What is the purpose of life?" The ultimate justification for any answer is "God." Answers may be simple descriptions of what people actually do, dogmatic assertions about what one must do or something in between. The particular religion one belongs to may be a matter of "design," personal choice or upbringing. In the case of very old religions, traditions have grown up concerning themselves and who does or does not belong.

So religion itself has evolved and its purpose, I suggest, was philosophical. I say "was" because religious clinging to the past is being superseded by evolutionary advance into the future. The past exists and has shaped the present. The future-present will be shaped by its past, which includes the present. So we now have the future in our hands. We need not choose it to be like the past.

**ERIC YAFFEY**  
Bradford

## Heath & evil

CHRISTIANITY evil (Karl Heath, July)? Well, so it may be by canons of Judaism or Islam. After all, if the word has any significance deeper than mere absence of good, evil becomes the difference between the other fellow's religion and your own. The Devil is portrayed as the god Pan, and Bogeyman derives from the Slavonic word for God. If Humanism recognises the concept of evil, though, doesn't this make "Secular Humanism" a contradiction? I submit that a proper Secular view should be non-judgmental. It should see religion merely as a product of the evolutionary process. In Dawkins' terminology, a meme, or rather a bundle of memes, a memosome perhaps.

Religions survive because they confer, or have in the past conferred, competitive advantage upon the tribes that follow them. It is not difficult to see how this happens. Several religious customs are little more than health rules, while others ensure fertility. The much reviled "family values" provide an environment in which the next generation can develop in a balanced way. We might even infer that the supplanting of "female" religions by "male" religions, which seems to have happened at about the same time as a settled agricultural lifestyle was adopted, simply reflects the greater advantage of effective territorial defence over fertility.

Religion reinforces cohesion within the tribe; and God is a personification of the cohesive forces. The Christian speaks of God as love. To the Muslim, Allah is compassionate and merciful. Combining the two, Judaism has the concept of *hesed*, translated in the AV as loving-kindness. Religion introduced law; and without law people could not live together in societies. Moreover, religion prizes selflessness, the subordination of individual needs to those of the tribe. The selfless believer may be open to manipulation by the unscrupulous; but the tribe, sect, or what-have-you is immeasurably stronger for his selflessness. Christianity has even chosen a symbol of self-sacrifice for its emblem – what Karl Heath, neatly reversing the viewpoint, calls gallows.

Christianity evil? Poor George Carey and John Habgood evil, when they are Humanists in all but confession? But the Humanist ideals they have tried to introduce into their Church have rebounded on them. Adherents are leaving in droves because the church has made women equals of men. A more liberal attitude to sex has turned charity for the widow and orphan into subsidy for the one-parent family, whose offspring account for much of crime; and when, in the name of humanity, they call for the tired, the poor of other tribes to be admitted to their country, they find only rejection from the huddled masses already here. Tolerance they extend even to wrong-doers, whose errors are blamed instead upon "social conditions" (whatever that means); but that does not stop the wrong-doing.

Replacing "evil" Christianity with Humanist ideals (or, if you prefer, paying better than lip-service to those ideals) does not seem to have produced a community any more at ease with itself. Why not? The "evil" Christian would answer (though I cannot speak for him authoritatively) that Man is sinful *ab origine* and may not be trusted with heady draughts of freedom. What does the Humanist answer?

**GLYN EMERY**  
London N1

KARL HEATH makes many points which I heartily endorse. There are, however, two items which need correction. The first illus-

trates the perpetual peril of irony, ie, the peril of being misunderstood not just in one's own time but, indefinitely, into the future.

The poet John Greenleaf Whittier was a noted abolitionist (the poet and the politician of the anti-slavery cause) and the reference to slave ships speeding along "Fanned by the wings of the Holy Ghost" was heavily ironical!

The other item, wherein Christianity is stated to be "a religion which pretends to drink the blood and eat the flesh of its God," entirely overlooks the fact that to many Protestants such an idea (the idea of transubstantiation) is tantamount to idolatry and is totally repudiated! They point out that Jesus said, at the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me."

Incidentally, poor William Cowper (who wrote about the "Fountain filled with blood") suffered from depression from the age of 22. He became convinced that he had committed the "unforgivable Sin" and even his religious friends recognised that this delusion was a product of mental illness and did their best to alter it. I don't think, in relation to religion, that he was ever hypocritical: "God moves in a mysterious way" is a desperate attempt to keep doubt at bay.

**VERNA METCALFE**  
London NW3

## Gospel truth?

AS TO Charles Williams' query (August issue), the reason why probably most Protestants who still read the Bible still do so in the Authorised Version (1611) is because of the conservatism and inertia of such people. That was the version their forebears used. And God ought to speak archaically – anything rather modern would be beneath his lofty station. A few such Protestants are attracted by the AV's literary merit. Freethinkers sometimes read it – as they do "uninspired" books – for this reason.

Catholics are forbidden to use Protestant Bibles. And so the New English Bible (1961 and 1970) is as unacceptable to them as is the AV. For, quite apart from translation, Catholics and Protestants cannot even agree on what is the canon of the Scripture. For Catholics include in it the Old Testament Apocrypha, which Protestants (and the Eastern Orthodox) believe not to be "inspired."

Though the New English Bible was claimed to be the last word in accuracy and felicity, there has been a plethora of English versions (both British and American) published since. In some of these – deferring to "ecumenism" – the Apocrypha has been inserted in a distinctive manner, and they are acceptable to both Protestants and Catholics. Subterfuges will never cease.

**R J M TOLHURST**  
Great Baddow



# LAST WORD

by Daniel O'Hara

**P**ERHAPS I can offer at least a brief outline of an answer to the intriguing question raised by Charles Williams in the August *Free-thinker* about the continuing preference of many Protestant evangelicals for the Authorised (King James) Version of the English Bible which was published by Royal Warrant in 1611.

The AV superseded all previous English translations of the Bible, such as those of William Tyndale (started in 1525) and Miles Coverdale (1535), though Coverdale's translation of the Psalms was retained in the Book of Common Prayer (1662).

Apart from the 1582 Douai/Rheims translation, produced by Roman Catholic scholars, largely based on Jerome's Latin Vulgate from the late 4th Century, and used exclusively by Roman Catholics, the Authorised Version of 1611 was without any serious competition in the English-speaking world for more than 250 years. It was the only version permitted for public use in the Church of England for over three centuries.

## Hunt

All these early English versions of the Bible depended heavily on a Greek text of the New Testament established by Erasmus in 1516. Unfortunately, Erasmus had at his disposal only a few relatively late manuscripts. Even when his text was revised by Beza late in the 16th Century, the value of the few 5th and 6th Century manuscripts that were by then available was still not recognised. Nor was that of very early translations into Syriac, Coptic and other Semitic languages.

By around the middle of the 19th Century, scholars had begun to unearth much earlier biblical manuscripts than had previously been generally known. Most important among them was the great *velum Codex Sinaiticus*, dating from around the end of the 4th Century, and now in the British Museum, which was discovered in an ancient monastery on Mount Sinai by the German scholar, Tischendorf. The hunt was on, and other ancient codices turned up in some of the great old libraries of Europe, including the Vatican. Their variant readings began to be studied systematically.

In addition, archaeological excavations in Upper Egypt later began to unearth papyrus manuscripts of parts of the NT; some even dating back to the 2nd and 3rd Centuries. These old manuscripts often

# Shifting sands of the gospels

provided quite different readings to those familiar from the *Textus Receptus* (received text) of Erasmus and the Authorised Version. A close study of New Testament quotations in the writings of the early Church Fathers had likewise earlier revealed that they had been familiar with versions that were sometimes significantly different from what by the Middle Ages had become the received text.

It thus became clear, perhaps under the influence of newly-influential Darwinian ideas, that different textual traditions of the NT had evolved in different parts of the Christian world. The science of textual criticism was thus born, and critical Greek texts of the NT, with variant readings in footnotes, began to appear. Notable among these were versions produced in Germany by Tischendorf and Eberhard Nestlé, and in England by Westcott and Hort. It was upon the latter that the English Revised Version (1881-85) was based.

In time, a plethora of new versions of the Bible, in English and other European languages, began to appear, reflecting the advance in critical study of the older manuscripts then coming to light.

For about 250 years, prior to the end of the last century, most English-speaking Bible scholars had little reason to doubt that the Authorised Version was definitive. Doctrines based on such a view were thus sorely challenged by the discovery that it was based on a late and rather corrupt text.

I ask readers to consider for a moment how much anxiety would be engendered in the breast of an old-fashioned Bible-believer by the discovery, to give just one

example, that the story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery, which occurs in the AV at John 8.2-11, does not occur in any of the oldest and best manuscripts, that it first occurs in a single 5th Century codex in the same place as it appears in the AV, and at different places (including in the Gospel of Luke!) in some other later manuscripts. And as Professor J K Elliott has observed: "If we were to ask what is Paul's view on death and resurrection, the answer we can get from 1 Corinthians 15.51 may be: 'We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed' or 'We shall all sleep but we shall not all be changed' or 'We shall not all sleep nor shall we all be changed' or 'We shall all rise but we shall not all be changed' depending on which manuscript is consulted."

## Footnote

How disturbing it must be for anyone of the fundamentalist mentality to have to admit that there is a great deal of uncertainty about the text of the New Testament, upon which the whole scheme of Salvation was believed to depend!

Any such admission of doubt about the text of the New Testament would thus very naturally be seen as potentially corrosive of the absolute certainty which religious faith craves and demands. The uncertainty is reflected in the many variant readings adopted by some of the more modern English versions of the NT, and is underlined by the fact that, in the Revised Standard Version (NT:1946), for example, the story of the woman taken in adultery is relegated to a footnote! So is the ending of Mark's Gospel.

The obvious remedy for the terminally insecure is thus that allegedly adopted by the ostrich: burying one's head in the sand.

Just as the "old time religion," piously regarded as "good enough" for the saints of yore, is today considered "good enough" by the modern fundamentalist, so the good old AV, which stood alone for two-and-a-half centuries, and does not trouble the reader with variant readings, or appear to admit of any doubt about the integrity of the sacred text, is the bastion upon which the anxious fundamentalist of today takes his stand.

● Daniel O'Hara, a member of the National Committee of the National Secular Society, is a former priest of the Church of England.