

The

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2m viewers see Humanism

in action on

THE BIG BREAKFAST wedding



● Mandy Yarker and Jamie Davidson wanted a non-religious wedding on TV. They got one – thanks to The Big Breakfast show on Channel 4 and Secular Humanist David Williams (right). Full story on Page 146.

Humanist wedding on television

AROUND two million early-morning viewers saw David Williams create what was – at the very least – an important footnote to the history of British Secularism by celebrating a Humanist wedding on nationwide television.

The wedding of Mandy Yarker and Jamie Davidson took place on *The Big Breakfast* (Channel 4) on September 10, with David telling the audience – a record for the year-old show – that: “Mandy and Jamie...felt that by adapting the traditional wedding service they could highlight the similarities rather than the differences between their beliefs and those of some of their families and friends.”

That the event was not in any way intended as Secularist propaganda goes without saying. But there can be no doubt that it brought a fresh view of the vital matter of matrimony into hundreds of thousands of homes.

For as Mandy and Jamie faced each other with joined hands, David offered a flavour of what is meant by Humanism, asking the young couple to confirm that they aspired to “...love each other and to live together in a spirit of tolerance, mutual support and concern for each

other’s well-being, sharing your responsibilities, your problems and your joys.”

He asked also: “Do you aspire to help each other to provide a loving and stable home for your children; to co-operate in bringing them up to be caring, honest and happy people?”

“Do you aspire to work together for the welfare of the community to which you and your family will belong, and to share with each other a wider concern for all humanity?”

At the request of Mandy and Jamie, David also read some moving lines from an American Indian ceremony: “*Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter for the other. Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other. Now there is no more loneliness. Now you are two persons, but there is only one life before you. Go now to your dwelling, to enter into the days of your life together, and may your days be good and long upon the Earth.*”

Reference to the rain was made with a touch of humour – because just before the start of the alfresco ceremony it had been pouring heavily, with the show’s presenter, Chris Evans, playfully asking “God up there” for some meteorological co-operation. In fact, fun and laughter and hectic enjoyment predominated throughout.

David has been conducting Humanist ceremonies for around 25 years. He is, of course, well qualified to represent the movement on TV. Managing Director of G W Foote & Company, publishers of *The Freethinker*, he is also treasurer and a Council member of the National Secular Society, treasurer and Executive Committee member of the British Humanist Association, recently treasurer and General Committee member of the South Place Ethical Society, and a member of the Rationalist Press Association and of Berkshire Humanists.

After the ceremony, he summed-up for *The Freethinker*: “It was exhilarating! When the call came, we were there, we were able to respond; it was high risk but a risk worth taking.”

“The marrying couple had said they wanted a ‘non-religious’ wedding. We have achieved something when an average couple like Jamie and Mandy regard it as normal to ask for a ‘non-religious’ ceremony and, what is more, the production team regarded it as perfectly normal and acceptable to screen such an event.”

David’s involvement began after *The Big Breakfast* team searched around for advice on holding a non-religious ceremony. *Brides and Setting Up Home* magazine staff steered them towards the BHA, and: “I was fortunate to be in the office at the time. But there are many in Nigel Collins’ Humanist celebrants and officiants network who could and would have risen to the challenge.”

“In spite of the necessary compression of the ceremony and other demands of *The Big Breakfast* format and its fast pace, the team did everything possible to ensure that, out of it all, there was a real wedding for the happy pair and for their families. I believe they suc-

ceeded.”

For David Williams, it was an extended encounter with the TV world. There was not only the ceremony on the Friday but also a preliminary slot on the previous Wednesday – which gave him the chance to say ‘Humanist’ twice!

He explained: “The ceremony itself was actually put together by cut-and-paste from Jane Wynne Willson’s *To Love and to Cherish*, plus some furious scribbling, in a one-hour session on the Wednesday morning. I had the facilities at home and in the BHA office to turn out the final script. We faxed it back to *The Big Breakfast* on the Thursday and they accepted it unchanged.

“The fact that we had an organised BHA office, with the staff and the technology to interact with the TV team at the furious pace required, made the whole thing go smoothly.

“There was no dress rehearsal. On the day, it was all for real, live, unedited, uncut. There wasn’t time to worry about it, or the weather.”

Members of a movement long denied access to the mass media will agree that it was a worthwhile achievement to get a Humanist wedding on national television.

“Perhaps we need to come down the mountain and be a little bit less stuffy,” said David. “*The Big Breakfast* team found an ordinary couple and their ordinary families, and reached out to an ordinary breakfast audience. It all helps spread the word.”

It is, of course, perfectly legal to have any kind of ceremony, in any place and at any time. A Humanist wedding is the celebration of a marriage or partnership. For *The Big Breakfast* wedding, the couple registered their marriage the day before, in their home town in Yorkshire.

David commented: “I have heard some Humanists complain that there ought to have been a big ‘health warning’ to viewers about the nuances of legality and registration. I’m afraid they don’t understand the art of presentation, whether on television or not. You don’t undermine the confident, happy and ordinary human joy of such an occasion by worrying your audience about the small print.”

But what about the Gospel Singers who appeared at the end? Said David: “I felt sorry for them. They didn’t quite know what they were supposed to be doing and they were somewhat left out on a limb when everybody’s attention was on the bridal party as they left the ceremony. It is in the nature of the show that bits like this get included if there is time on the day. There is no weighty deliberation as to whether or not this or that is a good idea.”

“They were there because Jamie likes the sound of Gospel music. It was not done to give religion the last shot. Surely, now that we have arrived at the point where a Humanist wedding is presented as the role model to this huge viewing audience, we can tolerate a bit of folk music at the end?”

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UP FRONT

with the Editor

Religion IS evil

KARL HEATH, who so distressed sensitive souls with his *Christianity is Evil* essay in the July *Freethinker*, ought to be feeling quite pleased with himself. Evidence to support his thesis has come not only from an article in the world's leading medical journal, *The Lancet*, but also – in effect, if not intention – from the Vicar of Christ, the Supreme Pontiff, the Servant of the Servants of God, the Man With a Full Set of Testicles (© W McIlroy, *The Freethinker*, September) – from the Bishop of Rome himself!

For, seriously, what could be more evil (“...causing harm or injury...” *Collins*) in today's world than restating the Papal ban on artificial birth control by linking it with genocide, as does the new encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*?

Mind you, the Pope ought to know a thing or two about genocide. The horrid legions of his Church have excelled in that area of activity throughout their sanguinary existence: the priestly role in the eradication of native South Americans and in the World War II massacre of non-Catholics in Yugoslavia, to name but two instances, are horribly well-documented.

And today Church policy on birth control is absolutely responsible for a form of genocide more insidious, more effective, than anything achieved in the past, as the aforementioned article in *The Lancet* (August 21) shows.

The work of a Member of the Royal College of Gynaecologists, Douwe A A Verkuyl (Unit of Bulawayo Hospitals, Zimbabwe), it opens with the truism that it is very difficult to “love thy neighbour” when basic resources such as clean water, energy, land, work, health care, and food are severely limited.

These resources become daily more scarce because of the policies of the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and Islam. A huge “under-class” exists on a global scale and is evolving even within the richest nations, the doctor states.

The Lancet article adds: “In large areas of the world, health care is provided by the RCC and the Church's powerful position prevents effective access to reliable contraception. In Rwanda one-third of the health facilities are administered by the RCC. The bishops refuse to discuss the possibility of promoting condoms for contraception or even for AIDS prevention purposes, while 40 per cent of the under-five population are malnourished, the population doubles every 19 years, and HIV prevalence in urban areas is more than 20 per cent. As in sub-Saharan Africa, so in Latin America and the Philippines.”

This fully-documented essay is sadly

abounding with case histories like that of Tsitsi, 25 years old, married with one child: “Her second child died in her arms recently after months of suffering. Both she and her husband were found to be HIV positive. The uncertain but terrifying future has brought them much nearer to each other and the RCC. They certainly do not want to have another pregnancy but the RCC forbids them the use of effective contraception...”

“Nthabiseng is a recently qualified nurse...she is happy to get a job in a remote RCC hospital even though her husband is obliged to stay in town to look for work. At Christmas her husband visits her, there are no condoms at the mission. At the end of her six months' probation the nuns in charge of the hospital will make her have a pregnancy test. If she is positive she will not get the job. Six weeks before the urine test she misses her period. A traditional doctor in a nearby village tries to help. She dies of a perforated uterus.

“Hajira is 12 years old. Her father, a staunch Muslim, thinks that education is not important for girls. She has had her menarche, so a marriage is arranged. She never had sex education and has no idea about antenatal care and what is supposed to happen during a delivery. Her mother cannot tell her; she died during her eleventh delivery. After three days' labour at home she is encouraged with hot irons on her back to push harder. In the end a dead baby is born. Three months later she is able to walk more or less normally and is rejected by her husband because the huge hole in her bladder causes her to smell and leak. Her family does not want her back.”

RC doctrine ‘irrelevant’

SUPPORT for safe and effective contraception by Church leaders could prevent many of the 200,000 deaths, 98 per cent of them in the third world, from clandestine abortions: “The irrelevance of the RCC's family planning doctrine is obvious in Europe. The population doubling time in Ireland is 122 years, in Poland 187 years, and in Italy 1,386 years. In Kenya, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Mexico it is 19, 28, 29, and 30 years, respectively. The nearer to the Vatican, the less hungry and the better educated the people and the less seriously the Church leaders are taken.”

Hundreds of thousands of women with induced abortions admitted to hospitals all over Africa, Latin America, and Asia leave hospital without being advised on contraception. This situation is allowed to continue because the Church or Mosque does not define such omissions as malpractice – though it is like discharging a patient without insulin after treatment for diabetic coma, *The Lancet* article comments.

Dr Verkuyl has found that: “Leaders of Islam and the RCC are united in the feeling that women should not take the important decisions. On family planning there is no clear support in Koran or Bible for the clergy's position, and there are many dissenting opinions in the RCC and Islam.”

But: “Barring disasters, the natural increase of five per cent would see the world population in December 2100 at 1,049 billion. Not a cockroach would be left of nature.”

This courageous polemic says that the “position of Islamic leaders is that children are a gift from Allah, and who are we to interfere? Lack of information, widespread misinformation, and fatalism are important factors. There is an enormous unmet demand in the Islamic world for family planning.”

But there is a hint of hope. Gynaecologists and midwives from the third world, realising “the harm being done by the RCC and Islam to the standards of living, joy, health, and ecology,” have started a letter-sending action to the Pope and Islamic leaders: “Every time we see a severe complication of the unavailability or bad reputation of contraceptives where the religions are implicated we send a letter to the relevant leader. We invite readers to join us

“Readers living in areas or economic/educational circumstances where religious teachings are irrelevant could support us by sending a letter to the Vatican or an Islamic leader requesting them to think again.

“Central and eastern Africa will see six million live births in 1993. At least one million of the parturients will be HIV positive. It is only ‘natural’ that 300,000 of the babies will be dead because of AIDS by 1995; a further 700,000 will be orphans a few years later. In 1994 nature will repeat this exercise.”

Here at home, I am told by the far-Left, which is prepared to ignore reactionary “cultural” attitudes in the hope of “politicising” the oppressed minorities – and by the bleeding-heart liberals, their common sense drowned in all that milk of human kindness – that I must at least “respect” the religious beliefs of others. I can't do it.

You might with equal justification ask me to “respect” the virus which causes AIDS or the spirochæte of syphilis. The knowledge that our schools still teach “respect” for these killer superstitions infuriates me – and now there is the threat of *new* avowedly religious schools being allowed to infect an already unhealthy educational system.

Moral education

WHICH leads us to Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, who continues to agitate on the question of

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◀ From Page 147

ghetto-ised schools.

Her latest broadside – a missive to *The Independent*, which published a piece on “Faith in the curriculum” on September 6, with a NOP poll on religious education showing that “half of all parents want their children to be taught that the Bible is true.”

I acknowledge that my initial reaction to the article was one of despondency. But BS is made of sterner, more positive stuff: “...the actual finding of your poll was that such parents are in the minority, since 45 per cent do not want it and 9 per cent ‘don’t know.’”

“As for school prayers, there is no justification for making school a part-time place of worship. Anyway, is Parliament competent to guarantee the existence of a being to hear prayers?”

“Parents who want their children to learn the tenets of a specific creed – including the 46 per cent in favour of the Bible – can surely teach their children at home whatever they themselves believe; and if they want help in this, they should seek it from their particular church, chapel, mosque, or synagogue, outside school hours – not from the state. School is

not the place for religious teaching or practice.

“It is ironic that both the USA and most European countries, though they are generally far more religious than Britain, not only do not make religion compulsory in their schools, they actually prohibit it. Why, then, must we make it legally compulsory in this country?”

“Rather than have RE on the school timetable, the National Secular Society would like facts about religion to find their natural place in such lessons as history, art, literature, and sociology. However, as long as religious myths and doctrines are taught in our schools, then, in the name of the principle of education itself, they should surely cover a representative range of both religious and non-religious views. For children to be presented with contentious beliefs as though these had the same sort of consensus as mathematics or geography is hypocritical and anti-educational.

“It is also self-defeating, and we are almost tempted to welcome it as being likely to increase sceptical inquiry and support for Secular Humanism; but we do not welcome it, as we are committed to honesty and good educational practice.

“What is really needed, instead of RE and school worship, is sound moral education,

which should not be squeezed into the RE slot and falsely associated with religious beliefs, since social morality must be equally applicable to those of all religions and of none.”

We must have more space

I HAVE again devoted an additional page to readers’ letters – and still I have a great stack of lively correspondence and excellent articles which have yet to see the light of publication. Do keep them coming – but do keep them short.

I promise you – most will appear. Eventually. But there are so many vital issues unexamined, or touched upon only in passing, by *The Freethinker*, with its restricted number of pages.

And the only way to make the ‘paper bigger, and therefore more effective, is to swell the fund and, most important, to sell more copies.

The Board of G W Foote & Company will soon have recommendations to make. In the meantime, what will you do to help?

The believing world

AN APPLICATION to allow more than 250 writs to be lodged for compensation over alleged sexual abuse of young boys by the Christian Brothers was made yesterday in the Supreme Court of New South Wales. A Perth lawyer, Mr John Gordon, co-ordinating the applications, said the case could become one of the biggest class actions in Australian legal history: *The Age*, Melbourne, September 1.

SOCCER legend Pele claims he has faith-healing powers that can cure children suffering from cancer. “Parents call me saying their kid has only a month to live – I go to the hospital and the kid recovers,” he says: *Daily Star*, August 28.

A SOCIETY Catholic priest who was sentenced yesterday to eight years’ jail for stealing \$1.8 million from a charitable trust wanted to be seen as a worthwhile person

and feel the power that came from donating large contributions, a County Court judge said yesterday. In sentencing Father Vincent Kerin Kiss, with a minimum of six years’ jail, Judge Mullaly described him as narcissistic. He said that Father Kiss was seduced by the rich life: *The Age*, Melbourne, August 20.

CONDOMS have been banned from the mainly Catholic Scottish isle of Barra’s after a vote by islanders, who jointly own the store: *Daily Star*, July 7.

A MAN died of a heart attack and 5,500 needed first-aid as the Pope held mass at high altitude and searing heat in Aurora, Colorado, yesterday: *The Sun*, August 16.

A GALLUP poll commissioned by the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) found that 95 per cent of a representative sample of the population approved of abortion when a woman’s health was at risk, 93 per cent approved in cases of rape, 76 per cent approved in cases of fetal handicap, 38 per cent approved in cases of poverty, 34 per cent approved when both parents decide they do not wish to have a child and 36 per cent approve when the woman decides on her own she

does not want a child. However, only eight per cent approved of abortion after sex-selection tests: SPUC News Release, April 26, quoted in *Abortion Review*, Summer 1993.

CRICKET-mad vicar David Pennal has removed a “Pray for English cricket” sign from his [Spetisbury, Dorset] church after the fifth Test defeat: *Daily Star*, August 12.

THREE folk from the London organisation People Unlimited – whose members say they are immortal – have died: *The Sun*, August 9.

A MONK in charge of a home for boys was jailed for seven years yesterday for indecently assaulting them. James Raymond Garragher, 53 – known as Brother James – had admitted his conduct was “disgraceful.” Hull Crown Court heard. Garragher admitted 12 charges concerning boys aged 11 to 16 between 1973 and 1980 when he was Principal of St William’s community home at Market Weighton, Humberside. Two months ago, a chaplain at St William’s was jailed for three-and-a-half years for assaulting and taking photos of naked boys at his holiday home: *Daily Star*, August 10.

Spread the word!

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

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

Brave book from an honest priest

THIS slim paperback was published in a blaze of publicity on September 1. Even before it appeared, the note on the back cover announcing that the author is "the Bishop's Adviser for Continuing Ministerial Education in the Diocese of Chichester" was out-of-date. On learning that the author of the forthcoming book no longer believed in God, his Bishop, the arch-conservative Dr Eric Kemp, had relieved him of his responsibilities for what, in my day, used to be known as Post-Ordination Training (usually shortened to POT, or "Potty Training"). He has, however, been allowed to remain as priest-in-charge of St Mark's, Staplefield, for a year while he considers his position.

The first thing to be said is that this is a brave and very well written little book, which its author sees as a plea for Christian Humanism. Through his association with the "Sea of Faith" movement, taking its inspiration from Don Cupitt (author of an eponymous book, and Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge), Mr Freeman has had what he describes as a "conversion experience" from a fairly traditional liberal Anglo-Catholicism to a radical rejection of all forms of supernaturalism and an admission that religion is entirely a human invention.

Unlike the late Bishop John (*Honest-to-God*) Robinson, who shrouded his rejection of traditional theism in a miasma of obfuscating verbiage drawn from Tillich, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer, Anthony Freeman writes with a direct and disarming simplicity, as refreshing as it is unexpected from a stipendiary clergyman of the Church of England. Thus we get no hyperbolic appeals to the "ground of our being" or "ultimate concern": rather Mr Freeman readily concedes that "Isaiah's God and the Christian God are just as much human creations as the idols of Canaan...by saying that God is my own creation - my ideals personified - I am doing nothing new, but only acknowledging what has always been the case" (emphasis added).

It is not to be wondered at that a conservative Bishop should find such a view incompatible with continuing responsibility for the further education of newly ordained clergymen: one can only wonder whether,

God in us by Anthony Freeman. SCM Press, £5.95.

Review: Daniel O'Hara (pictured right)



had David Jenkins of Durham been his Bishop, he would have been treated any differently.

Anthony Freeman has been a priest for many more years than I was, and it is tempting to think that, had he been 27 rather than 47, he might have opted to leave the ministry and train for a new secular profession. Nevertheless, many of his avowed motives for wishing to remain are very creditable, even if ultimately misguided. He wants to preserve what he has found of value in the Christian tradition and to be able to help those in the Church who think

like himself. He does not want to make way for a more conservative and intolerant replacement. He wants to be in the forefront of a radical re-interpretation of Christianity in humanistic, this-worldly terms. He is quite frank about there being no God, no life after death, no ultimate reference point outside human judgement on ethical questions.

Mr Freeman's views are clearly those of a basically honest and forthright man. Whether, in the longer run, he will be able to continue (or be allowed to continue) as a priest in the Church of England, remains to be seen. Though there may be many who share his views, none, so far, have been as forthright in expressing them. Had he waited until he became a Bishop before coming out as a crypto-atheist, he might have kept his job. But I cannot help thinking that men of such refreshing candour are not the stuff that Bishops are made of.

● A former Anglican priest, Daniel O'Hara is now an active Secular Humanist.

World role for Jane Wynne Willson

JANE Wynne Willson has been appointed first British President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union since Sir Julian Huxley (founding Director-General of UNESCO) was IHEU's first President in 1952.

IHEU has more than 100 member organisations from 33 countries with more than three million members. It champions the rights and beliefs of non-religious people and promotes godless morality. It has representative status at the UN, UNESCO, UNICEF, the European Parliament and Commission, and the Council of Europe.

Mrs Wynne Willson will be one of three Co-Presidents, who are executive officers of IHEU as well as acting as international ambassadors for Humanism.

She formerly chaired the British Humanist Association. Her contributions to Humanism include a series of best-selling books on non-religious ceremonies.

A major challenge facing Mrs Wynne Willson is helping to put into effect the decision to hold the next congress of the IHEU in India in 1995-96.

She told *The Freethinker*: "Although it will be run by the Indian Atheist and Rationalist organisations, it will be subsidised and underwritten by the IHEU since there are no available funds in India.

"The cost of air travel is likely to be between £400 and £500; prices for accommodation and other costs once you are in India are modest. Delhi has been chosen as the international communication centre of India with good conference facilities, a cooler climate than further south and accommodation to European standards.

"It is also more prestigious to hold a congress in the capital of India, and thus easier to get good media coverage and high-ranking political leaders to speak at the opening ceremony. Details have yet to be worked out, but satellite meetings and visits to such place as Hyderabad and Vijayawada will be arranged.

"It would be an enormous help to have an idea of how many Humanists from other countries are likely to be able to attend, and anyone from the UK who would like to go, or who wants more details, should contact me at 96 Wentworth Road, Harborne, Birmingham B17 9SY."

Hot and bothered?

HOLIDAYS took their toll of our vital fund – but our production expenses do not melt in the August sunshine.

Also, the space we are able to allocate to this monthly appeal is being eaten-up by the ever-growing *What's On* column – a good sign, surely, because it means that more and more Humanists and Secularists are coming to regard *The Freethinker* as an effective

means of making contact with those of a like mind.

If you, too, feel we are doing a good job, please help us to continue: rush cheques, POs, stamps to G W Foote & Co., 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Many thanks to: N G Ball, T Butterworth, G Heathcote and K P Shah, £1 each; M Dearnaley, £2; D M Carter, £3; S Anderson, £4.40; C F Ablethorpe, G A Airey, R Bell, M Ewing, P Fell, A C Fon-

seca A Hawkins, N Haemmerley, W Hi11, J R Hutton, L T Johnson and N Ratcliffe, £5 each; Anonymous, N V Cluett, R Lewis, M R Ribiere, A Canadian visitor (to Salisbury Cathedral!), V Sangharashita and J A B Spence, £10 each; Anonymous, £11.60; M Hill, £14; P L Lancaster, £15; J L Greenhalgh, £20; Glasgow Humanist Society, £50.

Total for August: £254.

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, November 7, 5.30pm for 6 pm: Rick Evans: *The Drug Problem*.

Chiltern Humanists: Friends Meeting House, Berkhamstead. Wednesday, October 13, 7.45pm for 8 pm. Harry Stopes-Roe: *The Roots of Humanist Morality*. Wednesday, November 10 (same venue and time): Chris Horrie: *What is Islam?*

Cornwall Humanists: Contact: B Mercer, "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Telephone: 0209 890690. Meetings at Truro Quaker Meeting House, 7.30pm. Monday, October 18: AGM.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road Kenilworth. Monday, October 18, 7.30 pm: Public meeting. Subject: *Humanism and Civilisation*.

Devon Humanists: For details, please contact: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lymington, Exmouth EX8 5HN. Swarthmore Centre, Plymouth, October 21, 7.30pm: *Human Suffering and Veritatis Splendor*.

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

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

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, October 28, 8pm: Mary Stott: *Never Too Old to Care*.

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 Humber-

stone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Events start at 6.30pm. 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. Thursday, October 21, 7.30pm: Brian Turner: *Is This the Damascus Road?*

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: The Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, October 6, 8pm: Formal inaugural meeting. All *Freethinker* readers invited. Meetings also November 10 and December 8.

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 meetings 7.30pm. October 14: Penelope Lively: *Fiction and Unbelief*. October 28: James Hemming: *Instead of Confusion*.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, October 13, 7.45pm: David J Coffey: *The Role of Science in Animal Welfare*. November 10, 7.45pm: Bernard Soole: *Science and Religion*.

Tyneside Humanist Group: Meets on third Thursday of each month (except August), 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.

BIG G COMES CLEAN

OF COURSE I read *The Freethinker*. It's essential for somebody in my position. So your Jehovah's Witnesses were right about that – though I've never known them to be right about much else.

I saw your letter in *The Freethinker* and I'm asking the Editor to publish my reply as you suggested, but I thought I'd have a word with you first to answer personally the points you made.

To set your mind at rest about Peter Brearey, my reply will not be accompanied by earthquakes, fire and brimstone and lightning. They're old biretta nowadays and I don't indulge myself, though your fundamentalists blamed me for York Minster and Windsor Castle, didn't they? But I have immaculate alibis for both.

You mentioned the 39 Articles. Did you know there were 42 originally? You'll want to ask what happened to the other three, won't you? Well, I would have said "God knows!" but, to be perfectly honest, I don't.

I'm sorry to say it, but Cranmer and the others got it wrong in the first of their Articles. I may have infinite power but I don't think I can be infinitely good and infinitely wise at the same time if I allow all you chaps down there free-will to sin away to your hearts' content. I don't even exercise my infinite power now. In fact, I suspect I'm redundant.

As for the remaining Articles, it says in the Prayer Book that they were formulated in accordance with my word. Well, that was the first I'd heard of it. And there's no set prayer giving me an invitation to suggest amendments. So – as far as they reflect my position, I'd say that Christians would be better off reading *The 39 Steps*.

Dean Inge was wrong. Heaven is not a figure of speech. It's a place and I should know. I live here. And everybody who dies comes up to see me. I've met some very surprised atheists in my time. Though none of them half as surprised as Christians – particularly the clergy.

As for Chapman Cohen – he is very well known to me. We have had some splendid arguments since he arrived, most of which, I'm afraid, I've lost. He keeps proving that I don't exist – almost to the point of convincing me of it.

Take no notice of St John's Revelations. There never was a St John so there was nothing to reveal. It was written by a 2nd Century ascetic as an entry in a competition for a piece of what you would now call science-fiction. He won, by the way. Then he was executed for blasphemy.

You wonder about my silence. It's deliberate. I love to hear theologians arguing about what I think of their doctrine. But I don't think they'd like to hear what I think about what they think I think. If you see

Letter from
the Lord
to Neil
Blewitt
(pictured
right)



what I mean.

I rarely listen to prayers and never answer them. I thought everybody would have realised that by now. Of course, freethinkers have always known it and it's a pity Christians don't learn from them. It would save them wasting their time and making asses of themselves by adopting those ridiculous postures and using antiquated language. "Thy will be done" they say. If only they knew it, I don't have a will; and if I did they wouldn't do it, especially if it was to their detriment.

The doctrine of the Trinity is, in a word, to quote an old freethinking friend of yours up here, tripe. I'm no mathematician, but even I know that three times one isn't one. And as for Athanasius' creed, it's as incomprehensible to me as he said I was to him. But I suppose one shouldn't be too hard on the man. He was always running off into the desert, you know, and the sun got him in the end. It was all terribly sad. Still – I've put him right now and we don't hear any more of his uncreates, coequals and coeternals.

Now, about Isaiah. I always thought that as a prophet he was a dead loss. But as to who is right over who created bacteria and viruses – well, neither you nor Isaiah, and yet both of you. Let me explain. I must confess that it was I who created the earth, though not in the way described in Genesis. For example, how could I have created light on the first day and left the sun till the fourth? And it took me six seconds not six days. And I didn't rest afterwards. Imagine a god of infinite power resting! All I did was to take a handful of cosmic dust and toss it into space. That's how the earth was formed. As simple as that. I've spent the rest of my life watching the consequences. And I must say it has all been very interesting. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. So you see why you and Isaiah were both right and wrong? I only created the earth. And yet, because I did, I must take some responsibility for what has happened since. Or evolved if you like. Yes, that's a better word.

You were wrong about Ezekiel. I did make him eat that scroll on the pretext that he'd preach the better for it. But he was so naive, really it was unfair of me to take advantage. But I couldn't help it; I'm not without a sense of humour. I also got him to

make bread from dung. You can read about it in Chapter 4 of his book. But you'll know that already. I've generally found that freethinkers know their Bibles as well as I do. They certainly know them better than the clergy, who are making Balaam's ass sound like Bertrand Russell up here.

I often had a bit of fun with Old Testament characters. It was I who whipped away Elijah's mantle so that he was naked when he left earth for heaven. By Jove, that brought the water to his eyes five miles up I can tell you! I got Jeremiah to walk about naked too. And Isaiah. For three whole years. And, between you and me, I'm going to have a go at John Selwyn Gummer for force-feeding his daughter with a hamburger. I'll get him to eat Cruden's *Concordance* on the grounds that he'll be able to produce a digest of the Bible on demand. And if he swallows that I'll have a go with the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*.

Which reminds me. If he joins the Roman church over women priests, it won't make a scrap of difference to me, though the Church of England may be relieved. And if he'll believe in transubstantiation, then he'll believe anything. There never was a person called Jesus Christ, so bread and wine can't be transformed into his flesh and blood. In fact, they don't change into anything at all. And I know. I've had a peep. I was going to say I've had a squint because I love puns but in my position I shouldn't use colloquialisms, should I?

You were right about my having nothing to do with the murder and mayhem in the Old Testament. It reminds me of the earth-story concerning the chap in the restaurant complaining about his egg and being told by the waiter that he'd only laid the table. Well – I only laid the cosmic dust. I've rarely intervened since. Anyway, the Israelites were such a murderous lot that even if I had intervened it wouldn't have stopped them and I should only have been accused of anti-Semitism. So I thought I'd just let them get on with it. But they're still at it, aren't they?

I said there never was a Jesus Christ, so you'll know that I didn't come to earth in his form. Neither, seeing as you mentioned them, did Zeus as a bull nor Pegasus as a woodpecker. Well, not so far as I know.

I agree about having David as an ancestor. Not my type at all. And I never have understood why they still print those genealogical tables in the New Testament. They contradict each other so blatantly, and Jesus wasn't supposed to have descended from Joseph anyway. It's beyond belief as one might say. I'm reminded of a phrase Ernie Entwistle's father used to use every week in the *Knockout* comic (yes, I read that too, but I rather think the Witnesses

LETTER FROM THE LORD

From Page 151

wouldn't have spoken of it). The weekly episode always ended with Mr Entwistle saying: "Daft I call it!"

Now - although there wasn't a person called Jesus Christ, there was one called Paul. And it was he who started the church and wrote those interminable and incomprehensible letters about salvation, circumcision and women wearing hats. But I've never said too much about it. When the poor fellow fell down on the road to Damascus, he injured his head and he was never the same after that. Happened to all sorts of men in the old days. I've mentioned Athanasius. Simeon Stylites was another. He had a lot of trouble before he finally bought his pole and went up it.

Sorry, but I've never had a photograph taken. And I don't think I'll bother now. I'm getting to be an old man, you know, and besides, I'm rather a large subject. Tell you what. There are many clues scattered about in the Bible as to how I look. Why not collate them and build up a composite picture of me for your next article in *The Freethinker*? You can keep the copyright and I'll find some way of letting you know how accurate the picture is. Just one word of warning, though: don't believe everything you read about me in the Bible.

One thing more and I've done. I've been many things to many people over the years: primitive man scratching his head, hallucinations, a bogey-man, a dustbin for responsibility, a celestial Pooh-Bah, the grandfather someone never knew, a vivid imagination and, in your case at the moment, I suspect, the strong cheese you had for your supper. But if you think this is all just a dream - well, you look in the next issue of *The Freethinker*!

Eternally yours,

G

PS: Sorry about the spondylosis. You may think me a pain in the neck but I'd rather not do any more for you than I do for those people who go to Lourdes which, I'm afraid, is nothing at all. Somebody might accuse me of favouritism, and that's caused quite enough bother for one lifetime. But keep the spirits up. *A merry heart doth good like a medicine*: Proverbs 17, verse 22!

OUR WORLD

THE first Secular Humanist wedding to be conducted at Down House - Charles Darwin's home for about 40 years from 1842 - took place recently.

Jeffrey Turner and Johanne Pulham chose this appropriate venue for their Humanist ceremony, in the garden of the house at Downe, near Biggin Hill in Kent.

Included in the marriage ceremony was reference to Darwin's residence there when he published his great works on evolution, and the part they played in challenging traditional attitudes towards religion and science.

Darwin was quoted as one with an Agnostic approach, who had "no assured and ever-present belief in the existence of a personal god or of a future existence with retribution and reward."

Humanism as a concept for happiness, well-being, tolerance and individuality was stressed by the celebrant, Denis Cobell, a member of the National Committee of the National Secular Society.

The Curator warmly welcomed this "first." She is pleased to show people around the house and grounds each Saturday and Sunday from 1-6 pm.

Gay Humanists' demands

IN A resolution carried at its Annual General Meeting at Morecambe on September 12, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) called on the UK Parliament to make the age of consent for gay men the same as that applicable to heterosexuals, and to remove all other legal discrimination against lesbian and gay men, reports GEORGE BROADHEAD.

It also called on its kindred Humanist organisations to do their utmost to help achieve these goals.

GALHA also urged all lesbian and gay and Humanist organisations to oppose attempts to reduce the age of consent for gay men from 21 to 18, "since this is likely to postpone the attainment of an equal age of consent for many years."

A further resolution deplored the homophobia which continues to emanate from religious sources, "in particular the statement made recently by Cardinal Hume that homosexual acts are 'objectively disordered,' the recommendation by the former Chief Rabbi, Lord Jakobovits, that genetic engineering

should be used to prevent the birth of homosexual children, and the Methodist Church's refusal to allow their hall in Westminster to be used for a public meeting on the age of consent for gay men."

Finally, the group urged those lesbians and gays who give their moral and financial support to homophobic religious institutions to reconsider their position "since such institutions oppress us all."

The AGM was held during GALHA's tenth gathering in various parts of the country since its founding in 1979.

In his annual report, Chairperson Stuart Draycott declared that the group had "another active and successful year" and could look forward with confidence to its 15th anniversary in 1994.

Keynote speech at the gathering was given by Peter Brearey, Editor of *The Freethinker*, which is, of course, closely associated with the National Secular Society (NSS).

The NSS's National Committee has already voted in favour of proposing a supportive motion on the age of consent issue at its AGM, to be held at Convent Hall on October 30.

Blackpool Humanists

HUMANISTS, Secularists, Freethinkers living in and around Blackpool are urged to contact secretary D Baxter for details of the Blackpool and Fylde group: 0253 726112.

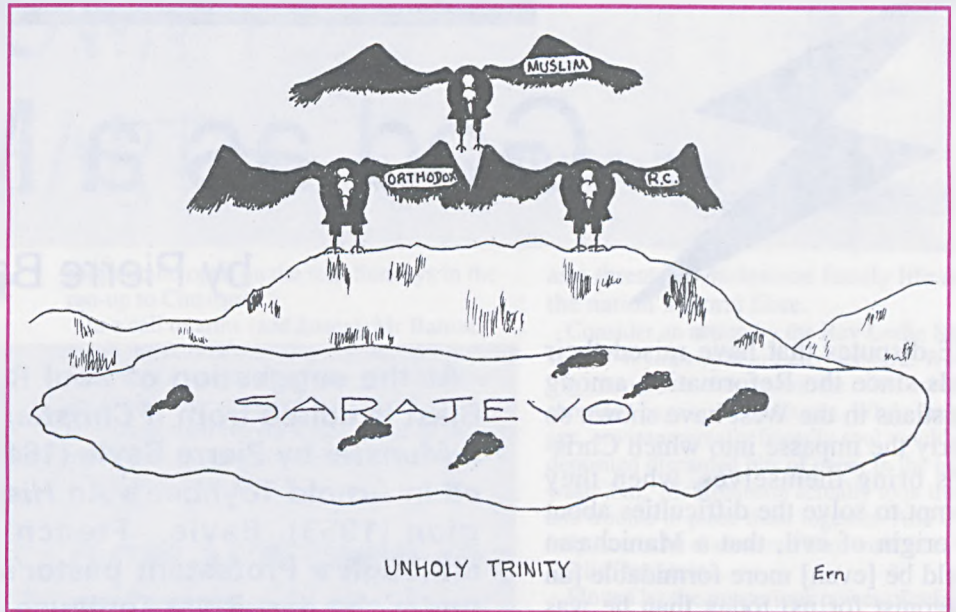
It's all happening

THE annual Lewisham People's Education took place in Mountsfield Park, Catford on July 17. The Lewisham Humanists

AND THIS

A JEHOVAH'S Witness seriously hurt in a car crash refused blood transfusion which might have saved his life, an inquirer heard yesterday. Robert Bain, 45, had a severed and lost large amounts of blood. But his faith prevented a transfusion. Oxford hearing was told: *The Sun*, July 27.

PRIEST Emilio Susa, 45, was killed by lightning as he tried to cover the new painted steel crucifix outside his church in Valdobbadiene, Italy: *Daily* July 27.



Londoners busy

CENTRAL London Humanists – a new and welcome group for those living or working in the metropolis – has an interesting programme of events coming up.

October 23 (3.30pm at Conway Hall) will see not only the AGM but also a brainstorming session on how members would like to see the group develop.

On Wednesday, November 10 (7.30pm at Conway Hall) Avedon Carol from Feminists Against Censorship will present what promises to be a lively talk on pornography.

And the Winter Solstice Party will be held on Saturday, December 4 (7.30pm at Conway Hall). Entry is £6, which “includes a feast and drink,” with further further drinks available at lower-than-pub prices. But if you intend to swing along you must contact Cherie Holt on 071 430 0908 by Wednesday December 1. Membership details from Cherie Holt at Central London Humanists, 14 Lamb’s Conduit Passage, London WC1R 4RH.

IN JERSEY, where abortion is illegal (although the law is under review), 23 per cent of pregnancies ended in abortion in 1991. The vast majority took place in the United Kingdom: *The Tablet*, June 19.

ONE of the country’s largest cathedrals, Winchester is breaking Sunday trading laws by selling Bibles. The Bishop of Winchester, the Rt Rev Colin James, once described Sunday trading as “as real danger” to family life: *Daily Star*, September 6.

Rome truths about Yugoslavia

CONGRATULATIONS to Govind N Deodhekar on the home truths which he spoke at the Berlin European Humanist Congress concerning the calamity in what was Yugoslavia (report in September issue).

It is indeed odd that someone of Indian origin, though British by nationality, should have been the one to put those views. And Mr Deodhekar is still more to be commended for that.

Behind this very tragic conflict – which has flared intermittently for eleven centuries – is the sinister and poisonous influence of the Vatican in seeking to further its dominion through its historic Eastern Policy.

Over some 30 years before I left Australia in 1948, I could see at first-hand this policy in action. The Catholic fascist Ustasha flourished openly among the Croatian immigrants, its terror including bomb attacks on the Yugoslav Embassy and against the Orthodox Yugoslav immigrants and their property.

The genocidal World War II Ustasha dictator of Croatia, Dr Ante Pavelic was championed openly. When he died (in Spain) in 1959, a Requiem Mass for him was celebrated in St Christopher’s Co-Cathedral in Canberra.

Nothing about the present Yugoslav war should have surprised us at all.

I do not forget to congratulate Mr Deodhekar for his illuminating contribution concerning the Indian situation, also.

R J M TOLHURST

RD

birth and a stall which proved very successful, both for raising funds and supplying information about Humanism to a wide audience, reports **DENIS COBELL**.

Considerable interest was shown in Humanist ceremonies: these provide an alternative to religious rites for naming children, marriages and funerals.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) has proposed a system of partnerships between Humanist organisations in the West with groups in developing countries. Lewisham Humanists are hoping to partner with a Humanist group in India; the aim is to co-operate with them and provide assistance.

To spread the idea of Humanism to a wider public, the group mounted a display of posters and literature in the Public Libraries at Catford SE6 between September 13 and 27, and will do so again at Manor House SE12 from October 11-25. We hope members and friends will show an interest and visit these displays.

Our Chairperson, Barbara Smoker, celebrated her 70th birthday earlier this year. At a meeting to mark the occasion, Barbara spoke about her young life and conversion from Roman Catholicism to Humanism. At the conclusion, she cut a cake iced with “70” inscribed on the Humanist “happy person” symbol.

As part of our season this year, we are specially pleased to welcome Mary Cott on October 28. Mary is well known as the former women’s editor of *The Guardian*. She is also the author of two books about her life and experiences: *Forgetting’s No Excuse* and *Before I Go*.

The group is hoping to provide a Humanist video and copies of Barbara Smoker’s book *Humanism* to the local education authority or use throughout Lewisham schools.

HRS

IRELAND has so many Catholic priests and many are squabbling over places on the clergy golf circuit and scurrying round in search of work, it has been blamed [by] Father Brendan Hoban, Director of Communications for the Killala Diocese: *The Times*, August 26.

CORES for everything from arthritis to new mania were credited to a Mexican miracle well – until it was found the water had spiked with home-made tequila: *Daily Star*, September 6.



God as a Monster

by Pierre Bayle

THE disputes that have raised their heads since the Reformation among Christians in the West have shown so clearly the impasse into which Christians bring themselves, when they attempt to solve the difficulties about the origin of evil, that a Manichæan would be [even] more formidable [an antagonist for us] today than he was in the past.

Today he would refute us all by playing us off one against the other. You have exhausted, he would say, all the forces of your intelligence. You have invented *Scientia Media* to serve as a *deus ex machina* come to clear up your chaos. But this invention is a chimæra.... It does not prevent all Man's sins and sufferings from still being products of the free choice of God. It does not prevent us from being able to compare God... to a mother who, knowing for certain that her daughter would sacrifice her maidenhood if, at such and such a place and at such and such an hour, she were to be solicited by such and such a seducer, did nevertheless arrange for the meeting, bring her daughter to the trysting-place, and leave her there after putting her on her honour.

(This comparison has shocked a number of religious-minded people but I beg them here to take into consideration the fact that I am simply paying the Jesuits and Arminians back in their own coin. These gentlemen draw the most horrible comparisons in the world between the god of Calvinists, as they are pleased to put it, and Tiberius, Caligula, and so on. It is a good thing to show them that one can meet them in battle with weapons like their own).

Some people say that God has permitted sin because he could not have prevented it without trenching on the free will that He had given to Man – a gift that was the finest of all that He had conferred on him. Those who say this are exposing themselves egregiously... We do not need to have read Seneca's fine treatise *De Beneficiis*; we know by the light of nature that it is of the essence of being a benefactor that he should not bestow graces which he knows that the proposed recipient would abuse so thoroughly that their only effect would be to ruin him....

No good mother who had given her daughters permission to go to a dance would fail to cancel this permission if she knew for certain that, if they went, they would be violated and would lose their virginity; and any mother

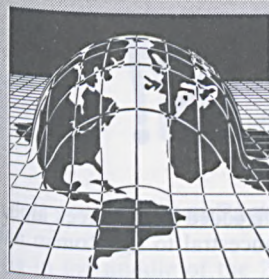
At the suggestion of Paul Rowlandson, this month's Blast is edited from *If Christian Theology is True, God is a Monster* by Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), as it was reprinted in Arnold Toynbee's *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (1953). Bayle, French philosopher and critic, although a Protestant pastor's son, studied philosophy under the Jesuits at Toulouse, and for a year and a half turned Catholic, records *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*. To escape censure, he went to Geneva, where he studied the philosophy of Descartes. After a few years he returned to France, and in 1675 was elected to the chair of Philosophy at Sedan, in 1681 at Rotterdam. In 1684 he started *Nouvelles de la république des lettres*, one of the most successful attempts at a popular journal of literary criticism. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes led Bayle to write a strong defence of toleration; but accusations brought forward by the theologian Jurieu, who regarded Bayle as an agent of France and the enemy of Protestantism, led to his dismissal in 1693. Bayle now devoted his leisure to the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam 1696). In it he discussed the great speculative themes and the literature of his day in a detached and comprehensive manner. His detachment was the basis of his scepticism, which greatly influenced the literature and philosophy of the coming age of enlightenment, says *Chambers*, adding: "His claim that morality is independent of religion caused him to be persecuted to the end of his life."

who, knowing for certain that this could not fail to happen, did let them go to the dance all the same, after having contented herself with putting them on their good behaviour and with threatening them with disgrace if they came home other than they had been when they had started out – well, any mother who behaved like that would, at the very least, incur well-deserved censure for having shown no love either for her daughters or for the virtue of chastity.

If you say that God has permitted sin in order to manifest His wisdom, which shines out more clearly in the disorders that human malice produces every day than it would do in a state of innocence, the answer that you will

receive is that this is tantamount to comparing the Deity either to the father of a family who would let his children break their legs in order to bring to the notice of a whole town his skill in mending broken bones, or else to a monarch who would let seditions and disorders grow, throughout his dominions, in order to gain the glory of having put them right....

Let us imagine to ourselves two princes, one of whom lets his subjects fall into distress in order to extricate them from it when they have wallowed in it sufficiently, while the other prince always conserves his subjects in a state of prosperity. Is not this second prince better than the other? Is not he, in truth, the more kind-hearted of the two?



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Royal flush over Sabbath selling

WHEN the Queen opened Buckingham Palace to the public in August, facilities included a gift shop where punters could purchase souvenirs of their visit to the royal abode. But by "an innocent oversight" the Shops Act 1950 was breached.

Perish the thought of a sabbatarian sneak informing Westminster City Council that books, soap, perfume and mugs decorated with soldiers in period uniform were on sale. Certainly someone contacted the Council and, as the law stands, it had to act. An official was sent to investigate. On establishing that the aforesaid articles were being sold, he confirmed that prosecution could follow if they were not withdrawn.

Although small traders have been penalised for being in contravention of the Sunday law, there was little danger of Her Majesty being hauled before the beak at Horseferry Road. Nevertheless, it is a safe bet that, like her illustrious great-great-grandmama in a different situation, she was "not amused" by petty interference in royal business affairs.

This is not the first occasion on which royalty has been in the dog-house for neglecting to observe the sabbath. In his younger days, the Duke of Edinburgh enjoyed a Sunday game of polo, much to the chagrin of those resolute defenders of "our Lord and His Day," the Lord's Day Observance Society.

"We shall not cease to criticise him for his regrettable example of Sunday sport," it proclaimed. "What can we expect when the first gentleman in the land sets so bad an example by playing polo on the Lord's Day?"

Unfortunately, the rather crusty Duke of Edinburgh's answer to the sabbatarians' rhetorical question is not available.

In 1956, the Queen's reception (after watching a game of polo) of two Soviet statesmen on a Sunday was denounced by the LDOS. Its quaintly named *Joy and Light* journal described the royal gesture as "an affront to the King of Kings by misusing the hallowed hours of his day."

It is certain that the Monarch and Supreme Governor of the Church of England will be taking a particular interest in proceedings when the Government's draft Bill on Sunday trading comes before the House of Commons a few weeks hence. So will the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, whose representative, Alasdair Barron, has expressed alarm lest any reform will enable travel agents and antique shops to open on Sunday.

"More significantly," he added darkly, "all

shops could open on the four Sundays in the run-up to Christmas."

In a call to arms (and knees), Mr Barron urged the faithful to "pray urgently for Sunday to be kept a special day." Much good will that do. Despite the sabbatarians' prayers and supplications, their retreat which began at the turn of the century has become a rout.

Will they ever learn?

Now it's time for extreme unction

EARLIER this year, television newscaster Martyn Lewis suggested that more good news should be reported. So how's this for a start?

The future of BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*, an early morning puff for the assorted gods of Anglican vicars and Jewish rabbis, Islamic and Sikh divines, earnest Quakers and Unitarians, is decidedly dicey. Several years ago it was reduced from five to three minutes' duration. Now another half-minute is to be lopped off.

"It's not the beginning of the end, it's the continuation of the end," lamented Dr Westwood, Bishop of Peterborough.

Of all the God slots, *Thought for the Day* probably raises most hackles. An artificial adjunct to the Today current affairs programme, it offers homilies that are as helpful as water to a drowning man. Contents are characterised by triteness, shiftiness and oily unctuousness. One regular contributor usually manages to incorporate all three into his *Thought*.

Defenders of religious broadcasting assure critics that if *TFTD* is axed, the nation's old, blind, sick and disabled listeners may lose the will to live. But we suspect there will be national sigh of relief - in which many religious believers will join - when *Thought for the Day* is given the last rites.

Vicar boobs over magazines

ALTHOUGH not for a moment believing the rumour that Mary Whitehouse has television and wireless sets installed in every room to ensure that no blasphemy, profanity, irreverence or four-letter word escapes her notice, a suspicion remains that the pure in heart *enjoy* being shocked. Certainly some go out of their way to discover material which they then denounce

as a threat to wholesome family life and the nation's moral fibre.

Consider an action by the Rev Leslie Robinson, of Wymeswold in Leicestershire. Walking through his churchyard, he came across shredded pages of a magazine. While the average, environmentally friendly soul would have deposited discarded bits of paper in the nearest waste-bin, Mr Robinson actually took time and trouble to piece them together. And to his holy horror he discovered they were from a "girlie" magazine.

Moved by the mysterious power of religious enthusiasm and political correctness, the hot and bothered man of the cloth embarked on a cleansing crusade. He denounced "girlie" magazines, paid a pastoral call on the newsagent and rededicated the churchyard. But all to no avail. The locals obdurately refuse to recognise the perils that lurk on the newsagent's top shelf and the vicar admits that his is a one-man effort.

The Rev Mr Robinson said that the pages from *Knave* which defiled the churchyard "make *Playboy* look respectable." Not being so widely read in this field, one can neither endorse nor reject his verdict.

Fundamental beliefs of Islam

"OOPS! Sorry, Allah! Do pardon my posterior. No offence meant."

When Kuwait Airways recently refurbished nine of its aircraft, the designer of passenger seat covers inadvertently caused distress to the faithful. One observant Muslim noticed that lines and squiggles in the pattern could be mistaken for Arabic characters that spell out the word "Allah." He complained to Kuwait Airways chairman - and the covers have been replaced at the company's expense.

An imam at Regent's Park Mosque in London explained: "It would be a great humiliation and very disrespectful for people to sit on the word 'Allah.'"

The hapless designer of the seat covers has - so far - escaped mutilation or execution.

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.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

NT Dates

IT MAY help to simplify the arguments about the dates of the New Testament books if I summarise the evidence available. The earliest list of canonical books, substantially the same as our New Testament, is the Muratori canon, generally dated about 190 AD. This fits so well with the early history of the Roman church that it should probably be accepted. The probable compiler was Irenæus. The list was not originally accepted generally, and was still unknown to leading Christians in the West about 200 AD.

The compiler selected books which he thought authentic from a very large selection of Christian documents in circulation: for instance, four Gospels from a dozen or more. Irenæus explains that the reason there are only four Gospels is that the compass has only four cardinal points. The question is, how far back can these documents be traced? The earliest guidance comes from Justin Martyr (middle of 2nd Century), although his knowledge cannot be traced to any of our Gospels. Eusebius (4th Century) quotes a passage from a Syrian bishop, Papias (date uncertain, but approximately 140 AD) mentioning two Gospels: Mark and Matthew. It is clear that his Matthew is not our Gospel, which was presumably unknown to Papias. Mark is probably our Mark, but the original text has been much altered. The account of the Resurrection in Mark is a later addition, and a recently discovered letter written by Clement of Alexandria describes the raising of Lazarus, which is not in our Mark. John was probably in circulation before 140.

To sum-up, Matthew and Luke are probably later than 140. John is probably early 2nd Century. Mark can only be dated by considering at what date such a book is likely to have been written. Most historians suggest late 1st Century; my own preference is c. 112-115, but we are only guessing. The Gospel story was unknown to the writers of the letter called 1 Clement, generally dated to the last decade of the 1st Century; but a date of about 70 for this does not seem impossible. The Pauline epistles were first collected by Marcion about 140. He did not include the Pastoral epistles, which are later; 1 Timothy warns its readers against being led astray by a book published about 140. Marcion held certain opinions about Paul's theology which modern critics do not agree with, but perhaps Marcion knew more than critics. Anyway, he rejected many passages, and these were replaced by the official church. It seems impossible that any epistle can have been written entirely by the original Paul. For instance 1 Corinthians, usually regarded as authentic, contains quite incompatible views on eating meat offered to idols,

and on permitting women to speak in public.

Anyone interested in Christian origins should read Leigh and Baigent, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*. It should added that their interpretation was anticipated by Archibald Robertson, five years before the first discoveries of the Scrolls. Unfortunately, Robertson was a classical scholar and not a Hebraist, and was unable to refute the incorrect dating put forward by the Catholic cabal which controlled the publication.

It may be of interest to add a note about the origin of the alphabet, which was not invented by an otherwise unknown tribe, the Phoenicians, no doubt so called because they were keen students of phonetics.

The oldest known alphabet is found in short graffiti written by slave workers in the Sinai mines. Albright, a leading Semitic scholar in the USA, was successful in determining that the language is Semitic and that the writers were familiar with Egyptian hieroglyphs. The inscriptions are rather uncertainly dated around 1550 BC, with some about 50 years later. (For convenience, I use the standard dating, though it is tempting to accept a recent revision which lowers Bronze Age dates by about two-and-a-half centuries).

No one seems to have asked the obvious question. In the Bronze Age, literacy was a valuable possession. "Learn to write," says an author of that period, "so that you may become a high-ranked civil servant and avoid any kind of hard work." How did these literate people become slave miners?

The obvious answer is that they were Semitic intellectuals deported for subversive activities in the Delta after the Theban conquest. The alphabet, a unique invention which democratised literacy, would have been invented in the Nile Delta during the Hyksos period.

In Egypt it was suppressed by the Theban scribes, who wished to preserve their valuable monopoly. Its later spread can only be conjectured. It may have been carried by trade to the Philistine country, where the official scribes were literate about 1100. Perhaps a more likely suggestion is that it was preserved in Sinai and then transmitted to Palestine by a handful of Egyptian upper class intellectuals escaping from the persecution which followed the collapse of the Amarna revolution, an escape which was eventually expanded into the story of Exodus. It is probable that about 1000 AD Palestine was the most literate country in the world. Thence it was spread by the Phoenicians, whose main cities were Tyre and Sidon. All modern alphabets share this ancestry. The documents found at Ugarit (Ras Shamra) are in cuneiform but use an alphabet inspired by but not copied from the Semitic alphabet. This is a freak, and has left no descendants.

Semitic languages depend on consonantal roots, and the early alphabets did not write

vowels. These were added by the Greek alphabets, which are ancestral to the Roman and Cyrillic alphabets.

C R WASON
Bridgwater

Christ's 'swoon'

DR J G BOURNE has elaborated a "swoon" theory of what happened to Jesus on the cross, and thinks that the revival of the fainting man was misinterpreted by naive early Christians as a "supernatural" resurrection event. Such theories are nothing new. They were first advanced by sceptics in the early centuries of Christianity, as is evidenced by the need felt by early Christian apologists to answer them. Such views have more recently been given elaborate fictionalised form in such avowed works of the human imagination as George Meredith's *The Brook Kerith* and D H Lawrence's *The Man who Died*.

Dr Bourne has, however, provided a wealth of medical evidence that some revivals of the apparently dead are indeed possible. For this we should be grateful, and I would not dispute his medical findings for a moment. What I do dispute is that we have adequate reasons for thinking that the Gospel accounts of the resurrection and the empty tomb are historically reliable, or even that they are close in time to the events they purport to describe. If they were basically reliable, Dr Bourne's theory of what really happened might have some plausibility. But that begs the question of whether they really are to be taken seriously as history. And on that question, even Christian scholars are now openly sceptical. I consider that a thorough appraisal of the available evidence entitles us to return a resounding no!

It is thus wholly inadequate for Dr Bourne to seek to confute me (*The Freethinker*, September) by simply stating that neither Dame Iris Murdoch nor A N Wilson would agree with me. It truly astonishes me that Dr Bourne should feel able to reach any conclusions without having investigated at all the historical process by which the Gospel tradition came into being. Not only has he ignored the works of the rationalist scholar G A Wells, to which I referred in my July article: he takes no account either of the works of such serious modern Christian scholars as Dennis Nineham (for example, his *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, published by Penguin) or Ernst Haenchen, to name but two, who take a thoroughly sceptical view of the traditional idea that the Gospels are the works of eye-witnesses, or their followers, of the events which they purport to describe.

The traditional view, which can be traced back to figures like Papias, Bishop of Hierapo-

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lis in the middle of the 2nd Century, was shown to be completely untenable as long ago as 1835 by David Friedrich Strauss. Though subsequent work has shown that Strauss was wrong about the priority of Matthew's Gospel (which he mistakenly thought earlier than Mark), his work has generally stood the test of time, and he deserves to be considered the Darwin of the New Testament.

I need to say a little more to correct the oversimplified account of my views which Dr Bourne now puts forward. While I do indeed consider the Gospel accounts of the resurrection and the empty tomb fictitious, I do not want to suggest that these were simply invented *in vacuo* by the Evangelists: clearly these were spawned out of imaginative reflection and fantasising on both real and imagined events, in the light of what were considered Old Testament "prophecies," within a faith community of early Christians. But there is no reason to believe that Christians in the period 50-65 AD (that represented by the genuine Pauline and some other early epistles in the NT) believed the same things about Jesus as we find in the Gospels, and later NT epistles, written probably in the last decade of the first century and early in the second.

The disparity between the beliefs of these two generations of early Christians is truly staggering, though this is seldom noticed by traditional Christians who, not unnaturally, emphasise the similarities rather than the differences between these two stages of Christian tradition. There is no better guide to these differences than G A Wells in the four books I cited in the July issue. Until Dr Bourne has come to terms with them, he is really disqualified from pursuing this debate. As for his opinion of Jesus the man, I can think of no better antidote to his exaggerated and misplaced reverence than Margaret Knight's *Honest to Man*.

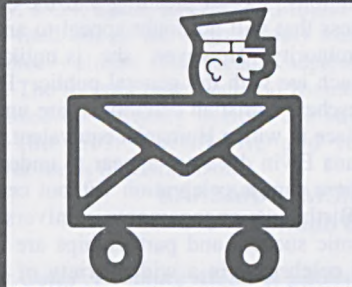
DANIEL O'HARA
London EC2

I FIND Dr J G Bourne's fulsome adulation and assessment of Jesus as "the greatest and most significant figure in history" to be very wide of the mark indeed. The truth is that the Jesus of the Gospel narratives (if he existed at all) was neither the wisest nor the best of men, and I have long subscribed to the view that the Platonic Socrates towers above Jesus morally and intellectually as a beech tree towers above scrubland.

It comes as something of a shock on re-reading the Gospels in adult life to realise the sheer vindictiveness of Jesus's utterances and, in fact, he preaches about hell fire as a punishment for sin with the kind of ferocious enthusiasm that would not disgrace the Marquis de Sade. I believe a very good case can be made

for the point of view that Jesus was one of the earliest exponents of mental sadism – for history and biographies tell us of the mental torture endured by many people about "sinning against the Holy Ghost" and the terrible fear about spending eternity in a ludicrous Christian hell.

The poet William Cowper is a case in point, for that distracted man almost drove himself to the verge of insanity in his fear of everlasting punishment. As the great Bertrand Russell rightly pointed out in a famous lecture delivered in the 'twenties: "I do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in



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his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world."

In regard to the so-called "wisdom" of Jesus, his repeated assurances that he would return to earth to establish the Kingdom of Heaven during the lifetime of his followers conclusively proves the absurdity of his messianic pretensions. I suggest that Dr Bourne should re-read the Gospels in a strictly objective frame of mind and perhaps he may then understand that Jesus can be bracketed with countless "messiahs" who are now lost in the mist of time.

Jesus survives purely and simply because a very powerful and tyrannical church (embodying the fanaticism and intolerance of its putative founder) was created around his name. But by the end of the present century – and given the current dissensions in both Rome and Canterbury – one wonders what indeed will be left of that rapidly-declining institution.

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Malvern Wells

DR BOURNE in his reply is mistaken in thinking that Jesus (if he existed) was a most significant figure in history. Had it not been for the political manufacture of Christianity, this insignificant preacher-man would have sunk without historical trace.

Dr Bourne seemed unwilling or unable to let us know what was left of Christian superstition once the alleged resurrection was rejected. Apparently, one blossoms into "Christian Atheism." What a bed of nails! And the other fantastic claims, more hogwash? Who would feel confident to visit their doctor if casting-out devils was recommended as their treatment? Medical science long ago demolished these foolish beliefs, so why the respect for a man who is alleged to have taught that they were true?

Christian Atheists have taken a step in the right direction, so long as they don't frighten the horses should anyone complain. What preposterous notion will be ditched next? What will be left in Christianity's rag-bag of mythology?

ROBERT SINCLAIR
Coventry

Heath hits back

THREE quotations from my July article *Christianity is Evil*: "I have not said that Christians are evil. Most are innocent and many are victims."

"Can Christians face squarely the possibility that there is something in their doctrine which may generate hatred, cruelty and excess?"

"When will pastors and flocks perceive the evil which stems from their doctrines? How can it be right to believe that human beings are innately sinful and require a supernatural act of faith for their salvation?"

Your correspondents have ignored all of this with their laments about "poor George Carey and John Habgood."

Of course, many Christians are good people. I asked what this has to do with Christianity. I ask again – what ethical doctrine is peculiar to Christianity? What ethical doctrine did Christianity propound that had not been enunciated before?

Christianity's second-hand goodness has to be set against the vile doctrine of "Original Sin," which has been responsible for 2,000 years of oppression and misery. Have the Christians yet repudiated their doctrine that human beings are sinful from birth?

Glyn Emery says that "religion prizes selflessness." On the contrary, the Christian emphasis on individual salvation has been profoundly selfish, diminishing the concern for the "social conditions" which Glyn Emery says he doesn't understand.

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Glyn Emery says that "religion introduced law." A dubious statement, and the tribal customs of primitive societies may appear to some of us to be far more healthy and wholesome than the class-oriented property law of "civilised societies."

Glyn Emery clearly hankers after "Original Sin." He asks: "What do the Humanists answer?" I do not speak for other Humanists, but my answer is that *Humanity* took a wrong turn thousands of years ago with the invention of private property. Since then, society has been divided between owners and workers and greed has been the order of the day.

Verna Metcalfe surprises me. Of course, it was obvious that Whittier's sails "fanned by the Holy Ghost" was ironical. How could I have thought otherwise? William Cowper's mental condition is well-known. But this does not explain why Christian prelates should continue to bathe in blood, and God's mysterious ways, if a "desperate attempt" by Cowper became hypocrisy when employed by more rational persons.

As for transubstantiation, Protestant symbolism is not much of an improvement upon Catholic belief.

KARL HEATH
Coventry

Rites of passage

NIGEL SINNOTT, writing in response to Diana Elvin's *Last Word* article (August) about naming ceremonies for babies, shares the same blindspots as some other Free-thinkers I have come across regarding Humanist "rites of passage" ceremonies.

He is, of course, right to point out that the need for ritual varies considerably from individual to individual. But even in a great number of religious services, these days, the amount of ritual – certainly compared with previous generations – is very small. In Humanist ceremonies it is virtually non-existent, as personalisation, achieved with a sincere and straightforward style normally avoiding the cloying sentimentalism abhorred by your correspondent, takes the place of overbearing or inappropriate ritual.

Also, those dubious about Humanist involvement in ceremonies rarely seem to give consideration or credit to the public interaction it achieves, which usually results in increased awareness of, and appreciation for, the Humanist movement. This is no small thing – and though, rightly, we do not use our activities for the purpose of proselytisation, it would be foolish not to recognise that Humanist ceremonies generally do provide a subtle yet effective advertisement for our cause.

Those still not convinced about the efficacy

of ceremony might care to consider the question posed by the poet W B Yeats in these eloquent lines: ... *How but in custom and in ceremony / Are innocence and beauty born? / Ceremony's a name for the rich horn, / And custom for the spreading laurel tree.*

NIGEL COLLINS
Moreton-in-Marsh

WE HAVE had pastoral Humanists, positive Humanists and even Christian Humanists. Now there are ritualist Humanists.

Diana Elvin typifies the latter. Her article on naming ceremonies, *Why Should God Have all the Best Parties?* was a hodge-podge of assumptions, special pleading and toe-curling tweezeness that will no doubt appeal to an airy-fairy minority. However, she is unlikely to cut much ice with the general public. People who eschew Christian ceremonial are unlikely to replace it with a Humanist equivalent.

Diana Elvin does not appear to understand that there can be celebration without ceremonial. Birthdays, engagements, anniversaries, academic success and partnerships are informally celebrated in a wide variety of ways. Probably the most popular of these is known as "wetting the baby's head."

Those who strain to create, rather than simply meet a demand for ritual, are usually reluctant to soil their fingers on the issues which should be of real concern. They prefer Secularist-Humanist organisations to be surrogate churches, rather than a movement actively campaigning against religious superstition and privilege.

BILL McILROY
Sheffield

Homosexuality

ERNIE CROSSWELL (September) is unaware of the extensive cross-species researches into homosexual behaviour reviewed by Wainwright Churchill (*Homosexual Behaviour Among Males: A Cross-Cultural and Cross-Species Investigation*, Hawthorn Books, 1967), who reports such conduct having been observed by scientists among monkeys, dogs, bulls, rats, porcupines, guinea pigs, goats, horses, donkeys, elephants, hyenas, bats, mice, lions, rabbits, cats, raccoons, baboons, apes, and porpoises – adding that "homosexuality among the apes is highly significant since man is in the same order of animal life."

So same-sex intercourse would not seem to be "unnatural" – but so what? Playing the violin, eating cooked food and wearing clothes certainly are. Not to mention contraception (*pace* the Pope).

As for being "an expression of love," who other than the participants in any sexual act

(homosexual or heterosexual) can judge its emotional significance to themselves?

Do be rational, Mr Crosswell!

ANTONY GREY
London NW2

STEPHEN MORETON'S statement that "Homosexual behaviour arises in...the bonobo or pygmy chimpanzee" (September) contradicts the findings of zoologists Franz de Waal, Leonard Williams, and others – if by "homosexual behaviour" Stephen includes anal penetration (see the quotations in my letter in the July issue).

The distinction is important because it is the hygienically and physically dangerous practice of sodomy which justifiably offends the general population, and has been officially warned against by health authorities.

If Stephen has any evidence to refute the findings of those zoologists, he should produce it or retract.

ERNIE CROSSWELL
Slough

Form and essence

MAY I first thank the Editor for his courtesy in sending me a copy of *The Freethinker* and drawing my attention to Bill McIlroy's page on which he mentions my recent correspondence in the London *Evening Standard* in reply to Nigella Lawson's views on Jehovah's Witnesses?

I have now read *The Freethinker* with interest and a sense of enlightenment. It is essential that in an age of multiplying superstitions of many forms, there should be a clear voice for those who look at superstition with robust and unflinching scepticism.

I equally enjoyed the robustness of Bill McIlroy's response to my published views. I suspect that we have a great deal in common regarding the metaphorical certainties some people hold about divinity and the after-life. However, I must envy, without being able to share, his evangelical atheistic self-righteousness. I also wish he had had the time to examine my words more closely.

He correctly quotes me as saying that "all societies need religion" in some broad and accepted sense to hold the vagaries of human nature together in some kind of harmony." I used the word "religion" deliberately in quotes, qualified it with "broad" and "accepted" because I was appealing to a newer kind of human self-understanding than anything that has gone before. Words are great betrayers when one is striving to be both truthful and exploratory, but what I meant to suggest was that human beings (this curiously individualistic, isolated, lonely, independent, yet sociable,

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gregarious, mutually supportive and destructive species) requires an agreed inter-personal bonding of some sort, a recognisable and acknowledged structure, to which we can all willingly adhere but which transcends our separateness.

Now (to use Mr McIlroy's word) if anything sounds like guff that certainly does, and I can only apologise.

I want to impose nothing on anyone. On the other hand, I find that if others – Jehovah's Witnesses included – have made their own way to a mind-set that suits them and makes life bearable, I must somehow honour their choice. As I entirely honour the readers and supporters of *The Freethinker*.

Misunderstanding me, Mr McIlroy goes on to parade (with scrupulous truth) the many atrocities perpetrated in the name of religion. But what is done in the name of religion is not the same as religion. What is done by football hooligans may not necessarily be fairly blamed on the club they support. Hitler called his movement "National Socialist," but the holocaust does not even remotely connect with the Labour Party.

People may label themselves as they wish, but the wise will distinguish between form and essence. I am no authority on Christianity, but I feel confident in asserting that all forms of behaviour which dishonour the instruction to love your neighbour are non-Christian, however many crosses they bear, dog-collars they sport, or hymns they sing.

We must judge ideas on their own terms. Not on the corrupting and corrupted basis of their exploitation for other ends.

IAN FLINTOFF
London SW6

Peter Cotes

THE review (September) of *Thinking Aloud*, the new book by Peter Cotes, led me to a train of thought about the various kinds of personal association that we experience through life. As well as close friendships, long and short, and acquaintanceships, long and short, there are certain people whom we seem to bump into repeatedly in different circumstances, almost coincidentally. Peter Cotes comes into that category as far as I am concerned.

The first time I ever went to the New Boltons Theatre, ignorant of the fact that by law one had to become a member beforehand, Peter Cotes came out and invited me to see the play free of charge. When he was compiling his book on the amateur theatre in the early 1950s, I was asked, through our mutual friend the late Eric Batson, to contribute to it the chapter on Shaw and the Amateur Theatre. And there have been many other such associa-

tions with Peter from time to time over the years, including a visit to his home shortly before the death of his wife, the actress Joan Miller.

But the two latest came within a few days of one another, and both concern obituaries written by him. When preparing to officiate at the funeral of Roger Woddiss on July 23, I read the obituary notices of him in all the serious papers, and drew upon the very moving one by Peter Cotes in *The Independent*. Then, only a day or two later, I began writing the Foreword to a forthcoming American one-volume publication of Chapman Cohen's *Pamphlets for the People*, and by way of research turned up the obituary notices of the author published in February, 1954; again, amazingly, I found one of them (and one of the most useful) was by Peter Cotes – almost four decades separating the two. The records of respect and friendship represented by obituary notices are surely among the most worthwhile and least ephemeral forms of journalism.

BARBARA SMOKER
London SE6

● Peter Cotes' *Thinking Aloud* is published at £18.95 by Peter Owen: a useful and entertaining addition to any library, public or private.

By numbers?

G H HARDY, the world-renowned mathematician, listed as one of his most ardent ambitions to prove mathematically the non-existence of God.

Does any reader know whether he succeeded?

B MORGAN
Folkestone

In our name

ERNIE CROSSWELL is correct in pointing out that the main religions seek power over people (August).

In the North of Ireland, all the main churches use their influence to complement the power of the British state in its attempts to suppress these who deny the legitimacy of British claims to sovereignty in Northern Ireland.

Our Anglo-Norman forbears invaded Ireland in 1169. More than 820 years later, our involvement – that is, our interference – in Irish affairs continues. We still torture (in Castlereagh Interrogation Centre), we still brutalise, we still violate civil rights and trample on human rights, in order to maintain our hold on a piece of territory to which we have no right – and to which we have never had any right.

This power is not exercised by the Church, in this context, at this time, but by Government – our Government. It is an exercise of power which profoundly, and in many cases catastrophically, affects the lives of very many people living in the North of Ireland.

We understand the ways in which religious bodies operate in the social and political domains, but no equivocation can transform this squalid little colonial war into a religious conflict.

The killing of 14 people in Derry in January, 1972, by a British Army regiment, was not an act of religious intolerance but an attempt by the Government to destroy the burgeoning Civil Rights movement.

The deaths of 10 men on hunger strike in 1981 were not acts of religious animosity but an attempt to gain political status for Republican prisoners.

The execution by a unit of the British Army of three people in Gibraltar in March, 1988, did not destroy a cell of religious zealots but eliminated a group of active opponents of the Government and was meant to convey a message to all those taking up arms against that Government.

When 17 and 18-year-old Belfast youths are imprisoned by the Royal Ulster Constabulary, held on remand for two years, charged with attempted murder, and have confessions extracted from them by beatings and threats of serious violence against members of their families, it is not because of overwhelming religious bigotry but is part of the continuing programme of harassment and intimidation of the Nationalist communities in the North of Ireland.

The whole range of repressive measures used by successive British governments to defeat uprisings in their former colonies have been, and are, used in Ireland against its Nationalist, specifically its Republican, opponents. The list of abuses suffered by them – political, cultural, judicial, civil – is endless. And it is done in our name.

D HARROP
Sheffield

Don't miss the

Joint Humanist Social

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

Guest-speaker:
PAUL FOOT
of *Private Eye*

LAST WORD

by Colin McCall

AFTER reviewing Joan Delfattore's book on textbook censorship in America, *What Johnny Shouldn't Read* (*The Freethinker*, June), I turned to Stephen Jay Gould's *Bully for Brontosaurus* (Penguin 1992), the fifth collection of monthly essays which the Harvard Professor of Geology and Zoology writes for *Natural History* magazine, and which he describes as further reflections in natural history.

They are, in fact, much more than that, ranging widely in subject matter as well as content, taking in such topics as baseball (mentioned in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*) and the typewriter, with its absurd QWERTY keyboard arrangement. What infuses – and enthuses – them all is Gould's evolutionary humanism.

I should like now, however, to pick up a couple of items which illuminate two recent articles of mine in these pages: the Joan Delfattore review mentioned above and that of Garry Wills' *Under God* in November, 1992.

Gould was amused but sad about the loss of integrity in American education when, after spending several hours at a National Science Teachers Association convention in Washington DC in 1987, surveying "evolution as treated (if at all) in major high-school science textbooks" he found "some evidence of adulteration, pussyfooting, and other forms of capitulation to creationist pressure." In one book, trilobites are merely "believed to have lived 500-600 million years ago," and mammoths, now discovered frozen, are "thought to have roamed the tundra 22,000 years ago." My italics.

Most books, though, contained material at reasonable length about evolution. What worried Gould here was the copying of outdated material. Students were receiving a "virtually Xeroxed version with rationale lost in the mists of time."

He cites an analysis by Diane B Paul of sections on hereditability of IQ from 28 textbooks on introductory genetics published between 1978 and 1984, nearly half of which still used Sir Cyril Burt's discredited data on identical twins raised separately.

Paul blames commercialisation for "this virtual cloning of contents," a point also made by Joan Delfattore. Most publishing houses are now owned by conglomerates – CBS and Coca-Cola among them – and the emphasis is on more elaborate designs, more colour, and more aggressive marketing. I repeat my recent comment that profit precedes education, with ethics nowhere.

Cloning, as Gould says, is "the easy way out, a substitute for thinking," and will continue so long as "authors cannot shape content but must serve a commercial master as one

Gould mine of evolutionary humanism

cog in an ultimately powerless consortium with other packages."

A favourite case study is, of course, the evolution of the horse, a subject which Gould takes up again here, and wonders, incidentally, how many modern readers have seen a fox terrier to which *Hyracotherium*, the horse's ancestor, is generally compared. (He hasn't). In this, as in other cases, evolutionists in the past have tended to simplify and equate evolution with progress. We can, it is true, trace an unbroken continuity between *Hyracotherium* and *Equus*, the modern horse, but "genealogies are copiously branching bushes – and the history of the horse is more lush and labyrinthine than most."

Humiliated

A chart showing a simplified evolution of the horse appeared in George W Hunter's *A Civic Biology of 1914*, which John Scopes assigned to his classes in Tennessee. And this provides the link with my review of *Under God*.

For Gould tries "to understand with sympathy" the motives behind William Jennings Bryan's "last campaign," the trial at Dayton in 1925, when he was humiliated by Clarence Darrow. How could a political progressive, who advocated woman's suffrage, opposed war, capital punishment and big business, and won the Democratic presidential nomination in 1896 with the "most leftish" campaign in American history, join forces with "the cult of biblical literalism...to stifle the same free thought that he had advocated in so many other contexts?"

This is not just a historic question. Bryan's legacy lives on (remember Ronald Reagan?), though Gould hails the Supreme Court judgement of June, 1987, as the defeat of the "legislative strategy against evolution" by funda-

mentalists.

Gould doesn't regard Bryan's "last campaign" as inconsistent with what had gone before. Bryan described himself as "using a double-barrelled shotgun, firing one barrel at the elephant as he tries to enter the treasury and another at Darwinism – the monkey – as he tries to enter the schoolroom." And he told the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1923: "There has not been a reform for 25 years that I did not support. And I am now engaged in the biggest reform of my life. I am trying to save the Christian Church from those who are trying to destroy her faith."

Bryan hadn't always been so bitterly opposed to evolution. "While I do not accept the Darwinian theory," he once said, "I shall not quarrel with you about it."

Emotion rather than intellect ruled with Bryan, and his approach to evolution rested on a threefold error, which Gould summarises as follows: "First, he made the common mistake of confusing the fact of evolution with the Darwinian explanation of its mechanism. He then misinterpreted natural selection as a martial theory of survival by battle and destruction of enemies. Finally, he made the logical error of arguing that Darwinism implied the moral virtuosity of such deathly struggle."

Bryan was rightly appalled at the way some German professors justified World War I on neo-Darwinian grounds, and was influenced by the English idealist philosopher Benjamin Kidd, who regarded Darwinism as rekindling our atavistic pagan soul. And when Gould looked into *A Civic Biology*, he found (in a different chapter from that which Bryan quoted) a most disturbing passage in favour of eugenics.

"Bryan had the wrong solution," is his comment, "but he had correctly identified a problem," the answer to which is that scientists must be socially responsible.