

Secular
Humanist
monthly

Free thinker

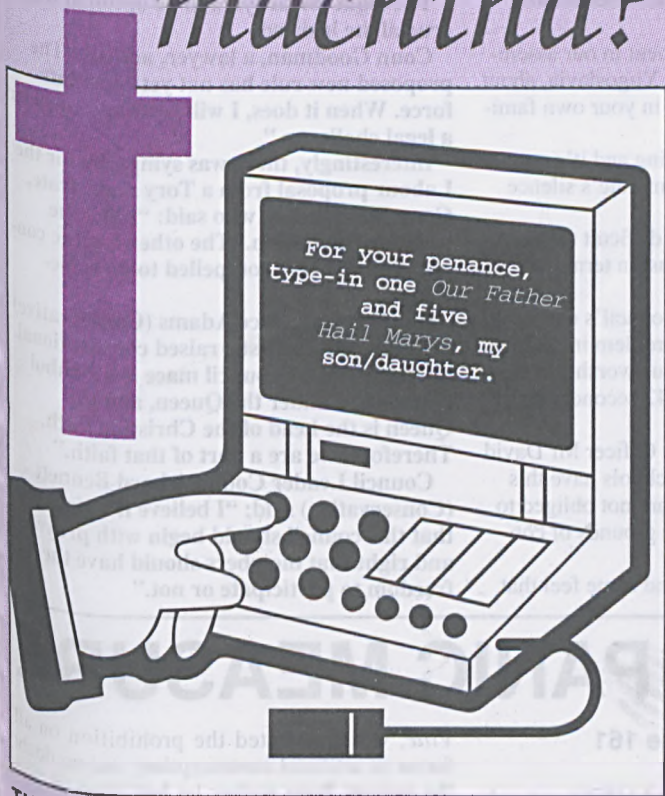
Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 113 No 11

November 1993

PAPAL PANIC MEASURE

Deus ex
machina?



HORSE-trading between traditionalists and modernists changed the emphasis of the recent Papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Barbara Smoker suggested in her presidential address at the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society, held in London on October 30.

Miss Smoker, who was re-elected President, said: "Though the mass media have dwelt almost exclusively on the intransigent sexual prohibitions – the Pope's personal obsession – cited in the encyclical as an example of moral truth, this was not intended to be its central message.

"It was, in fact, a panic measure against the loss of authority suffered by the Church in the past quarter-of-a-century. As its title makes clear, its real purpose was to denounce the 'illusory freedom' of relativism and scepticism and to strengthen the claim of the Church to be God's mouthpiece in matters

of faith and morals, and thus the one guarantor of Truth.

"However, as the encyclical went through its various drafts (several of which were 'leaked' to the Press), this claim was gradually watered down.

"In particular, the intended emphasis on the doctrine of Infallibility – and even, it is rumoured, its extension, and possible application to this encyclical – was dropped from the final version, and we can only speculate on the horse-trading between traditionalists and modernists that brought this about.

THE *New Scientist* reveals that Catholic priests could be replaced by an Automatic Confession Machine. The software is incorporated in a traditional black booth with crucifix and kneeler. Sinners tap in details of their transgressions (mortal or venial?) and the machine calculates the relevant penance (three *Hail Marys*, get thee to a nunnery). The machine's creator, Greg Garvey, denies that his intention is to make fun of religion. American televangelists heal over the TV and Jews fax prayers to the Wailing Wall, but a real priest will have to step in to give absolution, as you can't actually ordain a machine: *Personal Computer Magazine*, September, 1993.

SCHOOL AND COUNCIL FACE THE QUESTION:

PRAYERS have been dropped from assembly at a Gloucestershire secondary school because teachers could not be found to lead Christian worship, the *Gloucestershire Echo* reported on October 1.

As we went to press, *The Freethinker* had been unable to contact the school because of the half-term holiday, but the *Echo* reported that head teacher Mr Alan Folliard said he would prefer American-style assemblies. (Acts of religious worship are specifically banned from publicly-owned US schools because of the Constitutional separation of church and state).

The problem came to light following a report on Brockworth from the office of HM Chief Inspector of Schools, which said: "A large majority of staff are unwilling to lead worship of a broadly Christian character."

It added that a fortnightly service was attended by only 30 of the 1,008 pupils when inspectors visited in March this year.

Mr Folliard is quoted by the *Gloucestershire Echo* as saying: "The governors asked me to ask teaching staff to lead the worship, but they wouldn't. Local ministers weren't interested in

To pray – or not to pray?

coming in every day.

"We are required by law to provide a daily act of collective worship, but we have pupils of many different religious backgrounds and we don't want parents to take them out of assembly because they are offended by their religious content."

He said he would like the 1944 Act changed to match changing views on religion and have an American system where assemblies were not religious.

"We provide a moral element in our assemblies. We have talked about Yugoslavia, about thinking about other people in your own family," said Mr Folliard.

"It's very thought-provoking and it's not unusual to see us holding a minute's silence for contemplation."

He added: "It is also very difficult to get people together every day just in terms of rooms and organisation."

Gloucestershire County Council's education authority confirmed that a problem in finding staff for daily acts of religious worship was widespread in the county's 42 secondary schools.

Assistant Chief Education Officer Mr David Cook said: "A great many schools have this difficulty. Teachers by law are not obliged to be at the acts of worship, on grounds of conscience.

"Many are not religious and some feel that

worship is not really that accessible for the children. We have sympathy for the schools' problems."

● **WHAT** the local Press predictably dubbed an "unholy row" has broken out at Reigate Borough Council over proposed new council standing orders which lay down that all its meetings "shall" begin with prayers.

The new rule has been challenged by the minority Labour Group whose leader, Coun Dr Mike Ormerod, declared: "I do feel that, in this day and age, to assume we are all Christians is objectionable."

Labour believes that the idea of "forcing people to pray contravenes the European Convention on Human Rights," and moved an unsuccessful amendment to that effect.

Labour councillor and National Secular Society member Ted Goodman told *The Freethinker* that the group wanted the wording changed so there would be a mere "invitation" to pray, instead.

The right for prayers to be optional was crucial, he insisted.

Coun Goodman, a lawyer, added: "The proposed new rule has not yet come into force. When it does, I will certainly consider a legal challenge."

Interestingly, there was sympathy for the Labour proposal from a Tory magistrate, Coun Bob Garfitt, who said: "I like the wording 'invitation.' The other has the connotation of being compelled to do something."

But Coun Maurice Adams (Conservative) believed that the issue raised constitutional questions: "Our council mace is a symbol that we are under the Queen, and the Queen is the head of the Christian faith. Therefore, we are a part of that faith."

Council Leader Coun Richard Bennett (Conservative) said: "I believe it's right that this council should begin with prayers and right that members should have the freedom to participate or not."

THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

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

CONTENTS

Presidential address	Page 161
To pray or not to pray	Page 162
Up Front:	Page 163
TV review: Nicolas Walter	Page 165
What's On	Page 166
Bans can backfire	Page 167
Diderot: Colin McCall	Page 168
Blast from the past	Page 170
Down to Earth: Bill McIlroy	Page 171
Sea of Faith	Page 172
You're telling us! Letters	Page 173
Last Word	Page 176

Subscriptions, book orders and Fund donations to The Publisher:

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

Editorial address:

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

Annual postal subscription rates

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

Printed by Yorkshire Web, Barnsley S70 2AS.

PAPAL PANIC MEASURE

From Page 161

"The First Vatican Council (1870) not only upheld the claim of Infallibility (which many of the hierarchy had been disputing) but vested it in the person of the Pope, provided he is speaking *ex cathedra* to the universal Church on faith or morals.

"Only Infallibility, it was argued, can preserve certitude and avoid chaos. Strangely enough, however, this essential safeguard has been called upon only once in the ensuing 123 years – by Pius XII, when declaring the Assumption of the BVM (hardly, one would have thought, the most world-shattering of Papal pronouncements in that period).

Had Paul VI been more sure of himself, he might have claimed Infallibility for *Humanae*

Vita, which restated the prohibition on all forms of artificial contraception; and no doubt the present Pope wishes he had done so. But most Catholics – including almost all the theologians – are very glad that he did not."

Death with dignity

SEVENTY per cent of Canadians believe doctors should be allowed to assist terminally-ill patients to end their lives, according to an Angus Reid – Southam News poll of 1,500 Canadians, with only one-in-four opposed to any form of doctor-assisted suicide.

Doctor-assisted suicide is still a crime in Canada.

UP FRONT

with the Editor

A better sort of evil

SATURDAY, October 23: With nothing but *The Independent*, a mug of black coffee and a small heap of hand-rolled cigarettes to sustain me, I face up to the challenge of trying to unravel the latest intelligence from Yugoslavia as was.

The breakaway Muslim enclave of Bihac has recognised the secessionist Serb state in Bosnia...there is a similar deal in the offing between the Muslims and the President of Croatia...the shooting goes on.

My eye strays down the page – and I am stunned to find that someone from the British Press has actually noticed that Serbs are capable of suffering, too. Marcus Tanner, of *The Independent*, has been to a refugee camp in the village of Kovilo, North of Belgrade, where 170 Serbs are living on canned food provided by the Red Cross, their hopes of work or a return to their homes in Croatia virtually nil.

Refugee Pero Zajelac, 55, is quoted: "It is better than in the Second World War. Then we spent the winter hiding in the forest. Now I have a bed. This evil is better than that evil."

I put aside the paper and pull a few books from the shelves, reflecting that Mr Tanner's younger readers would probably assume that the "evil" from which the World War II Serbs had hidden was the Germans, the Nazis...

An understandable error. But the record shows that the Serbs had reason to fear the Roman Catholic Church quite as much as they feared the SS, if not more so.

Catholic war hero

WHEN the Yugoslav army surrendered to the Germans on April 17, 1941, the country was partitioned, with Croatia, together with Bosnia and Hercegovina, becoming an independent Fascist state under the good Catholic boy Ante Pavelic.

As Patrick Brogan relates in his *Eastern Europe 1939-1989* (Bloomsbury, 1990) Fascist Croatia "was one of the most vicious states in those vicious days. One third of the population was Serb, and Pavelic set about converting them to Catholicism; those who refused were killed. The killers made films of these attempts: congregations of Orthodox Serbs, lined up with their priests, and ordered to convert; they refuse, and the Croat machine-guns mow them down. The demonstration was effective: tens of thousands of Serbs besieged Catholic priests, demanding to be converted to save their lives..."

"Pavelic and his Minister of the Interior,

Andriya Artukovitch, set up concentration camps for Serbs, Jews and Croatian democrats. In due course, many Serb and Croat prisoners were sent to slave labour camps in Norway, and the Jews were shipped to Auschwitz.

"Pavelic recruited Bosnian Muslims to join in the massacre of the Serbs, and the Germans raised a Muslim SS division there, which was inspected by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. In the end, the Croat regime was responsible for the deaths of some 700,000 people, out of a population of 6.3 million."

Fitzroy Maclean, who knew a thing or two about the Balkans, made similar points in his *Eastern Approaches* (Penguin Books): "The Ustase [the Croatian Fascists] were fervent Roman Catholics. Now that they were at last in a position to do so, they set about liquidating the Greek Orthodox Church in their domains. Orthodox villages were sacked and pillaged and their inhabitants massacred; old and young, men, women, and children alike. Orthodox clergy were tortured and killed. Orthodox churches were desecrated and destroyed, or burned down with the screaming congregation inside them (an Ustase speciality, this)."

A campaign of genocide

IN THEIR book *The Fourth Reich* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), which is based largely on official records, Magnus Linklater, Isabel Hilton and Neal Ascherson show that Pavelic's régime "committed war crimes so terrible that even today, in the full knowledge of the Nazi holocaust, they have a deep capacity to shock...the Ustase carried out a calculated campaign of genocide against more than two million Serbs of the Orthodox faith.

"Their aim was spelled out with brutal precision by Dr Mile Budak, Pavelic's Minister of Education, who spoke in 1941 of the necessity for killing one third of the Serbs, expelling one third, and forcing the remaining third to embrace the Roman Catholic religion."

"Thus," said the pious Budak, "our new Croatia will get rid of all Serbs in our midst in order to become 100 per cent Catholic within 10 years."

(The technical term for this sort of activity is, you will recall, ethnic cleansing...)

A Pavelic sermon to Ustasa troops in Zagreb urged: "A good Ustase is one who can use his knife to cut a child from the womb of its mother."

From June, 1941, bands of Ustase stalked Bosnia with knives, clubs and machine guns, slaughtering men, women and children. Entire communities were massacred.

Conditions in RC-run death camps were so horrid that prisoners died of dysentery or other afflictions within days of arriving.

It takes a good Christian to create Hell. In one camp prisoners were lashed to each other with wire and pushed to the edge of a precipice, over which one of them would be hurled, pulling his comrades with him. Grenades were lobbed down on to the smashed bodies.

The Fourth Reich records: "Even German officers who had seen extermination camps in Poland were horrified by what they witnessed. One who was taken round the camp at Zemun, where a prison population of 70,000 had been reduced to 20,000 in a matter of weeks, was told by the camp commandant: 'We Ustase are more practical than you. You shoot, but we use hammers, clubs, rope, fire and quick lime. It's less expensive.'

"Some of the atrocities were carried out by, or under the supervision of Catholic priests, with the Order of the Franciscans often among the worst offenders. They included a Franciscan who was commandant for six months at the concentration camp of Jasenovac where tens of thousands of prisoners died, and another at Alipasin Most, where a massacre of 180 Serbs was recorded."

The only alternative to this treatment was forcible conversion to Roman Catholicism. Whole villages would be received into the Church by a single priest, with armed Ustasa guards looking on.

But occasionally – a little RC joke, this – a congregation of newly-converted Catholics would be hauled from the church and shot anyway.

The Bishop of Mostar, reporting on these atrocities to the head of the Croatian Church, Archbishop Stepinac, in Zagreb, said: "They go to Mass; they learn the Catholic catechism; they have their children baptised. And then...while the new converts are in church attending Mass, they seize them, young and old, men and women, drag them outside, and send them to eternity in droves."

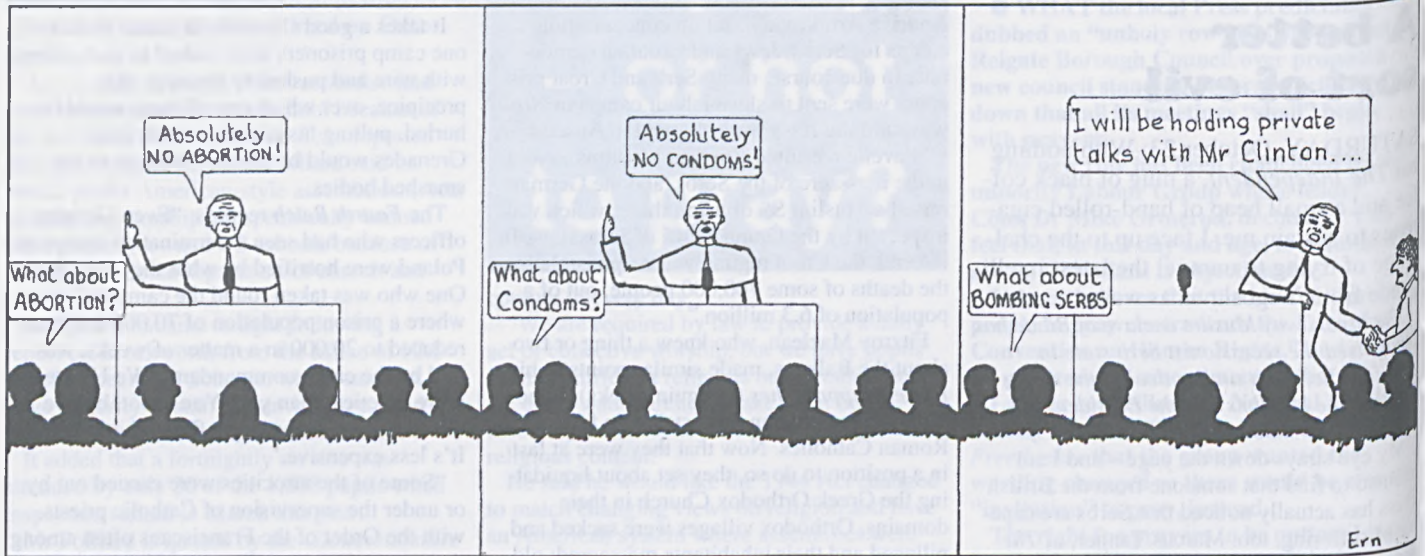
Even that sensitive soul Dr Joseph Goebbels was shocked (*The Goebbels Diaries*, Secker and Warburg, 1978): "According to one report submitted to me, dreadful confusion reigns in Croatia. The Ustase are conducting a régime of terror which defies description."

Propagation of the Faith

PAVELIC'S representative in Rome was Dr Krunoslav Draganovic, a Croatian priest who worked for the Croatian Red Cross and, after the war, used his Red Cross status to help the Americans spirit from behind the descending Iron Curtain not only former Allied agents but also Fascists and Nazis who might be useful in

UP FRONT

with the Editor



From Page 163

the new war – against Communism – and who needed a change of air for pressing health reasons.

The mangy priest was secretary of the Confraternity of San Girolamo in Rome – a Croatian religious institute – and he enjoyed the patronage of the Vatican.

The fact that he was also a Fascist, wanted for questioning about war crimes, and an active supporter of a régime whose atrocities had often outstripped those of the Nazis themselves was not relevant to the US Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC).

According to *The Fourth Reich*, a CIC agent, Vincent la Vista, demonstrated how the Vatican and the Red Cross were helping many Nazis and Fascists to flee to South America with false passports:

“The justification of the Vatican for its participation in this illegal traffic is simply the propagation of the Faith [he reported]. It is the Vatican’s desire to assist any person regardless of nationality or political beliefs, as long

as that person can prove himself to be a Catholic. The Vatican further justifies its participation by its desire to infiltrate not only European countries but Latin American countries as well with people of all political beliefs as long as they are anti-Communist and pro-Catholic Church.”

Rome’s lips were sealed

IT GOES without saying that Pope Pius XII uttered no direct condemnation of Croatian atrocities. When the British Minister to the Vatican, in private audience, dared to refer to events in Croatia, the Pope called Pavelic as “a much maligned man.”

Which is at least consistent with what His Malignancy had to say on the murder of Jews by the Nazis – that is, now!

The former Dean of Theology at Corpus Christi College, London, Peter de Rosa, notes in his *Vicars of Christ* (Bantam Press, 1988)

that long before the end of 1942, the mass extermination of Jews was common knowledge. But: “Throughout Italy and the Reich, Jews were being systematically victimised and, in many well-known cases, killed. Not one unequivocal word of condemnation issued from the Vatican. This silence, many say, was worse than any heresy. Usually so swift to correct and condemn the slightest deviation from faith, any ‘mistake’ in, say, sexual morality, Rome’s lips were firmly and, it turned out, permanently sealed.”

And this despite the fact that Pius was by way of being an expert on Nazism and Germany: he had been Papal Nuncio in Munich and Berlin during Hitler’s rise and his “house-keeper,” Sister Pasqualina, was a German Franciscan nun.

But as Peter de Rosa tells us: “In spite of seeing Nazism at close quarters, he always feared Communism more.”

Long-ago reasons

STILL, why dwell so much on the past, and in such a negative fashion to boot?

I re-read Derek Tangye’s charming *The Winding Lane* the other day and was struck by his comment, made in a vastly different context to the one we have been discussing, but nonetheless apposite: “I do not understand those who say never look back. By looking back, the years are not wasted, and one can place the present in perspective. It is too easy to forget the facts, the incidents, the emotions which have built one’s life, long ago reasons which determine today’s actions.”

And, on the matter of negativity, our own Colonel Robert Ingersoll remarked: “The destroyer of weeds, thistles and thorns is a benefactor whether he soweth grain or not.”

Bouquet from Texas

I AM very impressed with the new format and look that you have given *The Freethinker*. Its inclusion of photographs and colourful print definitely enhances its already colourful articles! *The Freethinker* is a rare treasure in the world of freethought literature, for it is both informative and entertaining with just the right amount of irreverent humour to bring the point home without apologies. Keep up the sensational work!

STEVE
Austin, Texas

● UK readers who feel that more people should see the “sensational” *Freethinker* may send four first class stamps for a supply for free distribution. Name, address and stamps to: Peter Brearey, 24 Alder Avenue, Wakefield WF2 0TZ.

No real challenge

by Nicolas Walter

GOD: For and Against, made by Chameleon Television and transmitted on Channel Four on successive Saturdays last month (October 9 and 16), was the second recent attempt at a serious critical discussion of religion on television, following *Beyond Belief: Religion on Trial* last year.

This time it consisted of a pair of hour-long debates filmed at the Divinity School at Oxford University, but the quasi-academic disputation was just as unreal and unilluminating as the previous quasi-legal hearing. The reasons were the usual reluctance to let anyone make a real challenge to supernatural religion or to let anyone discuss any difficult subject for more than a few minutes at a time. And the result was the usual muddle with too many people trying to say too many things in too little time and ending by saying little for a long time.

The first debate was opened by Karen Armstrong, a former Roman Catholic nun, and Herbert McCabe, a Dominican intellectual, disputing the motion: "There is evil,

therefore there cannot be God." The case against what was called "theism" was directed only against Judaeo-Christian monotheism – the doctrine of a single all-good all-powerful personal deity. It assumed that the only alternative was atheism, without considering equally plausible alternatives of a God who is evil rather than good or weak rather than strong, or more subtle alternatives of polytheism or dualism, either of which make better sense of evil than monotheism (or indeed atheism). Armstrong and McCabe bandied ancient points, joined by various other academics and intellectuals, to little purpose. The conclusion for intelligent and informed viewers was that this particular debate hasn't advanced for several centuries.

The second debate was opened by Peter Atkins, a lecturer in physical chemistry, and Richard Swinburne, a professor of the philosophy of religion, disputing the motion: "Is science good evidence for God?" This time the arguments were at a rather higher level, though there was still no proper consideration that, even if the

universe was initiated or is sustained by some kind of creative force, there is no reason to believe that it has any kind of personality or has any kind of interest in us. But some good points were made by some of the distinguished scientists and philosophers present, especially that the abstract arguments for God are not the real reasons why believers believe but only attempts to give intellectual support to an emotional conviction. And one of the best interventions was made by a young student who raised the old point of the "God of the gaps," that as the gaps in our knowledge are closed there is less need to use "God" to fill them.

The conclusion was that modern science leaves little room for old-time religion.

When I discussed the previous series a year ago (News and Notes, *The Freethinker*, November 1992), I was criticised for being too critical of what was at least a serious attempt to put our case on television. I can only repeat that, while we must be grateful to have so much attention given to our ideas, we may still regret that the result was so unsatisfactory again.

Ten people died in Belfast on October 23 in an IRA action which went wrong. The bomb was said to have been intended for Protestant terrorist leaders, but they escaped harm. Up to the day of the bombing, Protestant terrorists had killed 30 people this year; the Irish National Liberation Army two; the IRA 18 (The Guardian, October 25). In last month's *Freethinker*, a correspondent argued that the situation in the North of Ireland which gives rise to such bloodshed amounts to a "squalid little colonial war," rather than a religious conflict. But IAN G NORRIS insists that...

Religion's at the heart of The Troubles

D HARROP'S energetic rejection of the supposed religious basis of the "troubles" in Northern Ireland rightly points out the political aspects of the situation but is misleading in swinging to the opposite extreme – thus obscuring the fact that the religious dimension is an integral and very significant element of the whole complex situation.

I am no expert on the Northern Ireland situation, but I can recognise partisan rhetoric when I see it. Unhappily, there is no scarcity of that on either side of the Irish divide, nor in Mr Harrop's letter.

While the partition of Ireland was, it may be agreed, an imperfect compromise, it was intended to provide the means whereby the predominantly Protestant community of Ulster could be persuaded to desist from the physically violent rejection of absorption into an avowedly Catholic state. That, having achieved their separation, they proceeded to dominate and discriminate against the residual Catholic minority, while not morally admirable was politically comprehensible, as

also was the inevitable Catholic backlash.

That British governments since that day have attempted, in however misguided and heavy-handed a manner, to keep the lid on Northern Ireland is, I submit, due more to a sense of obligation to what is still constitutionally a part of the UK than for any political or economic desire to retain possession of part of the island of Ireland. As far as the vast majority of mainland Britons are concerned, I am sure that the consensus view is "a plague on both their houses." It is quite incomprehensible to most people that the two communities in Northern Ireland find it unacceptable to coexist.

Which brings us back to the religious facts. If both the Republic and the Ulster Protestants could be brought to see the advantages of a purely secular state and world view with the common bond of their "Irishness," there need be none of these problems. But as long as the Catholic Church holds its constitutional position in the Republic, and life there is perceived by the Ulster Protestants to be dominated by priestly superstition and adherence to irrational teachings emanating from Rome,

there is no hope of reconciliation.

And as long as Ulster is represented by religious fundamentalist Protestant extremists who fill their followers' ears with emotional bombast about supposed Antichrists, there is equally no hope of reconciliation.

The position is, of course, complicated by the supposed advantages to the North of association with the traditionally (relatively) more prosperous UK rather than with the traditionally poorer Republic, but the cultural (essentially religious) differences provide the emotional fuel for the hatreds so much in evidence

So religion is, after all, at the heart of the Northern Ireland problem. Recounting the alleged mistakes and heavy-handedness of the British authorities does not address the problem, any more than would a catalogue of the murders, knee-cappings and other atrocities committed by the violent men on each side.

If Britain didn't have to keep Irishmen from one another's throats, there would not need to be any troops or militia-type police in Northern Ireland.

Let's prove Him right!

EVERY one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth.

Which is good news for *The Free-thinker*.

We ask, monthly and urgently, that our readers dig deep to maintain this atheist journal in its mission to de-mist the minds of the superstitious.

And especially at a time when religion is committing one of its periodic assaults on the UK educational system, we seek a society in which myth is no longer taught as fact, as history, to captive infant Christians, Moslems, Jews.

Many thanks for their support to: W O Keeton, D G Mitchell, J Woodman and G Sanders, £1 each; J Fawbert, E Fleury, N Green, E H Robbins, W A Stuart, R J Tolhurst, W S Watson, F Westwood and B C Whiting, £2 each; M Hakeem, £2.50; T J Davies, B Morgan, M Palmer and K Williams, £3 each; D S Lee, £4; I Forbes, £4.40; Aberdeen Humanist Group, A E Ball, W and E Brown, K Byrom, E M Carson, M Crewe, P Danning, P S Deans, O Dumpleton, H Hinchcliffe, C J MacDonald, K Mack, H Madoc-Jones, J H Morton, A Negus, C J Newton, C S Pinel, R B Ratcliff, M J Rogers, B Thor-

pe, K P Spencer, G Taylor, O Watson, V Wilson, B E Woodcock and K R Wootton, £5 each; M Kirby, £6; J Lavety, £6.50; T Loughran, £8; N Everitt, J Mehta, O J Scott and J P Stainforth, £10 each; D T Llewellyn, £14; J R Bond, W E Butterworth, K J Manning and P Somers, £15 each; E C Hughes, £27; A G Stephens, £45; W A Smith, \$10.

Total for September: £381.40 and \$10.

Please send cheques, POs, stamps to: G W Foote & Co., 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

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, December 5, 5.30pm for 6 pm: Forum discussion.

Chiltern Humanists: Friends Meeting House, Berkhamstead. Wednesday, November 10, 7.45 pm for 8 pm: Chris Horrie: *What is Islam?*

Cornwall Humanists: Contact: B Mercer, "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Telephone: 0209 890690.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road Kenilworth. Monday, November 15, 7.30 pm: Public meeting. Subject: *Crime and Punishment*.

Devon Humanists: For details, please contact: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lymington, Exmouth EX8 5HN.

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, November 12: Nigel Collins: *Humanist Ceremonies*. Friday, December 10, 8 pm: Annual Winter Solstice Party. Details from George Broadhead at Kenilworth address above.

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

Harvering & District Humanist Society: Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, December 7, 8pm: Seasonal music and readings.

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

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, December 14, 7.30pm: J Jackson: *Moral Dilemmas in Medical Science*.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Events start at 6.30pm. November 14: Bill Johnson: *John McLean, Revolutionary Socialist*. November 21: Frank Freadman: *Cuba*. November 28: Dr Stephen Coleman: *What's Happening to History?*

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, November 25, 8pm. Chris Finley: *Humanism and the New Physics*. Friday, December 17, 8pm: Winter Solstice Party.

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, November 18, 7.30pm: Cliff Johnson: The BHA Conference.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: The Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, November 10, 8 pm: David Godin: *Censorship in the Cinema*. Wednesday, December 8, 8 pm: Howard Sykes: *Sunday Shopping - the Only Permanent, Practical and Popular Solution*.

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. Speaker on November 11: Ludovic Kennedy.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, December 8, 7.45pm: Melodie Shelbourne: *Magistracy in a Changing World*.

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. 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.

As Indians prepare to go to the polls later this month, Govind N Deodhekar warns that...

BANS CAN BACKFIRE

THE Congress Party, which is in power in India, is proposing a Bill in the Lower House which would punish parties or candidates who used religion as a vote-catching device during elections. Presumably the parties will divide, with Congress, Janata and the Communists on one side, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), against whom the Bill is aimed, on the other.

The Secularist-Rationalist movement in India will most probably welcome the Bill. After all, if your central objective – a secular state – is virtually permanently entrenched by law, it would seem natural for you to support such a move. The more enthusiastic a campaigner you are, the more vigorous your support.

And yet, when legislative and punitive action is being proposed in connection with religion or politics, it behoves cool-headed Rationalists to consider the side-effects, the snags, the practicalities and the possibility of flaws in the very concept.

Since a seat in the Legislature brings power (and opportunities for monetary gain and even corruption for some), defeated candidates would be tempted to use litigation to unseat the winners.

Harassed

If a candidate greeted his audience with a *Ram-ram*, the normal greeting on Marathi speakers' tongues, he could be charged with using religion. If a candidate said he hoped to win *Insha-Allah*, with the support of his audience, would he be using religion? Or a Christian candidate, seeing a large number of Christians in his audience, might invoke the name of Jesus and fall foul of the law.

The Muslim League in Kerala puts up candidates in elections, wins many seats and has been a Coalition partner of the Congress and even the Communists, at times. Is the Muslim League to be barred altogether, because of its very name? The Akali Party in the Punjab is known as a Sikh party, but is technically open to non-Sikhs; the BJP, though Hindu-oriented, has some Muslim members, including their Leader in the Upper House. The Akalis in the Punjab and the BJP all over India are serious rivals to Congress. Are their candidates to be harassed with law suits during elections, or unseated after winning? The whole idea is absurdly impractical and an invitation to disaster.

The possibility of absurd judgements is not mere guesswork. The charismatic Congress Chief Minister of Maharashtra,

Govind N Deodhekar (pictured) was a left-wing activist in India. He came to the UK in 1951 and has been active in the Freethought movement for many years. He retired as Chairman of G W Foote & Co, publishers of *The Freethinker*, and as Treasurer of the National Secular Society, in 1992.



Sharad Pawar, was convicted of malpractice during an election because his speech in support of a candidate was extravagant, unjust or abusive of the other candidate. Pawar was allowed to remain in the Legislature but was debarred from voting, and the candidate he had supported was unseated!

Indeed, in my view a somewhat similar judgement against Indira Gandhi, much taunted by liberals and secularists of Janata persuasion, was also absurd.

Apart from practicalities, there is an even more basic objection in principle to such a Bill. And for this exposition it is better to come away from India, which is a secular democracy by its constitution.

Britain is obviously a constitutional monarchy, although it has no written constitution. Would we in Britain put obstacles in the way of a Republican Party wishing to contest elections? Obviously not. We have an Established Church, the Church of England. We do not and cannot bar an Islamic Party from contesting an election.

Although the original "white" inhabitants constitute about 95 per cent of the population, sections of it have misgivings about recent immigrants and their growing numbers as British citizens because of the ethnic conflicts they see all over the world and the strident separatism of a vociferous minority among the British Muslims. The major parties may tacitly agree to set aside the issue for election purposes – but there cannot be a ban on a political party or a candidate wishing to fight on this issue. I believe that such a ban would be undemocratic and counter-productive. Apart from incitement to actual violence, there must be full freedom of expression during any democratic elections.

To return to India, if candidates are penalised for touching upon religious issues or conflicts, the same logic could apply to linguistic or regional "nationalism." Would the Congress then ban Telugu Desam or the Dravidian parties in Tamilnad from con-

testing the elections? As for the Communists, who may be tempted to support the Bill, they might ponder the fact that their philosophy and propaganda are based not on peace and amity between all citizens, but on class conflict, the liquidation of *kulaks* as a class and so on.

Views suppressed tend to erupt destructively elsewhere, and it is neither practical nor desirable that they should be banned during elections.

The existence of a secular democratic state presupposes equality of all citizens before the law. Despite the aspiration expressed in the Indian Constitution to enact a Uniform Civil Code, applicable to all irrespective of religion, the Congress has failed to make any progress towards it. That is why Muslim women alone are still subject to arbitrary divorce by their husbands.

For the Congress, secularism seems to equal "tolerance," which equals appeasement of reactionary Islamic ideas in order to build vote-banks. That is why Rajiv Gandhi agreed to enact a Muslim Women's Protection After Divorce Bill, to remove the protection of the Criminal Procedure Code and return the Muslim women to Islamic law, which tells them to seek maintenance from the father, brother or uncle after only three months' maintenance from the husband.

If the Prime Minister of India is serious about secularist ideals, let him forget the Bill which would ban religion-based electioneering and announce his intention to abolish this law relating to Muslim women, thus restoring the *status quo ante*. Let him promise to take steps towards a Uniform Law for marriage, divorce and adoption, while a Uniform Law of inheritance, because of its myriad complications, can remain a distant prospect at least.

Finally, it would also help build a secularist climate if Congress leaders stopped ostentatious visits to Hindu temples at state expense.

Quotes of the month

THE ideas expressed by Naomi Kerr... are false. She states that without a belief in a creator there is no reason for morality. The fact is just the opposite. Religious people can engage in any kind of behaviour and then have their sins expiated in the church, allowing them to go and sin again. On the other hand, one avoids immoral behaviour if one believes that there is no way to wash one's sins away and that one has to live with them. I was a group counsellor for eight-and-a-half years at the State Diagnostic Clinic, then at San Quentin. During that time, I seldom found a non-believer among the inmates. Their religious beliefs did not keep them from immoral behaviour: Letter in *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 14.

EVEN more basic, I would suggest, than either of the questions "Does God exist?" or "What do we mean by 'exist'?" is that of "Do we really any longer care?" I for one do not... A god who gives every indication of having been out to lunch for nigh on the last two centuries, consistently failing to answer our communications with regard to famine, war, poverty, injustice, inequality or any other major human concern (let alone take action) is frankly of no relevance or interest to me. There is a view that this apathetic ineffectual male chauvinist requires me to worship him. I can't say I'm totally surprised but he hasn't got a hope. And if I get to meet him, I'll tell him so myself. Anna Freeman. Letter in *The Guardian*, September 21.

I WAS living in a hostel in Manchester while attending Bible college. A particularly devout student in the room above would keep me awake every night by praying at the top of his voice at 4 am. One night, I turned on the amplifier of my electric guitar – which had an echo-effect built in – plugged in a microphone and started answering his questions in a booming voice. I said: "Bless you, my son, continue the good work – but keep your voice down. If you must shout, go to Switzerland and holler at the mountains. The following day, brother Jacob stood up in chapel and said he was leaving college and heading to Switzerland – on God's advice. I didn't have the guts to wish him well and I never heard of him again. Letter in *The Sun*, October 2.

It took 50 pries

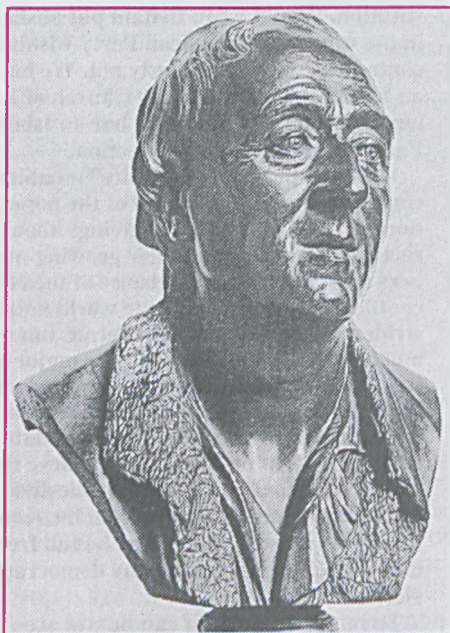
“IT IS incredible how many roles I play in my life,” Diderot told his mistress, Sophie Volland. And it was. As a materialist and determinist, he wrote extensively on philosophical matters; he was an influential critic of art and acting, as well as writing plays; and he was an original novelist.

He was, in Comte's view, "the greatest man of the 19th Century," and, in the words of a contemporary editor, "the most naturally encyclopedic head that perhaps ever existed."

The great 17-volume *Encyclopédie* was to be no vain monument, no sterile compendium. Contributors were expected to sense the present mood of the nation – must try, even, to outstrip it and write as if for future generations.

It set out to cover the sciences, arts and trades and, in connection with the last, Diderot, the son of a master cutler, visited workshops, interviewed workmen and studied machines and processes at first hand, so that they could be accurately described.

And P N Furbank, in his surely definitive English critical biography, *Diderot* (Minerva £7.99), points out that, in chemistry, for example, Diderot foresaw "the enormous leap forward that would be taken...over the next 30 years, a peri-



● **Bust of Diderot by Jean-Baptists Pigalle, 1777 (Louvre)**

CONFE MYSE

od culminating in Lavoisier."

Denis Diderot was born on October 1713, in Langres, Champagne, and educated first by the Jesuits and then Jansenists; he graduated as Master of Arts at the University of Paris and, at or 20, thought of becoming a Carthusian novice. Instead, he seems to have had something of a Bohemian existence with other young intellectuals in Paris, with whom he first met and became friendly with Rousseau: a friendship which, Furbank says, "would be of enormous importance to both of them but which ended, as with most of Rousseau's friendships, in havoc and recrimination."

Diderot's first work was a free adaptation of the English deist Lord Shaftesbury's *Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit*, in 1745; but in the following year, with his *Philosophical Thoughts*, Diderot had expelled "all superstition and matter from his system." A counterpoint to Pascal's *Pensées*, it made a considerable impact, and was condemned and burned by the Paris Parlement, as Diderot sent to restless and reckless spirits the venom of the most criminal opinions that the depravity of human reason is incapable of."

From that time on, as Furbank says, Diderot was a marked man, known to a freethinker, and described in a dossier as "a very dangerous man who speaks of the holy mysteries of our religion with contempt."

He went on to write his *Letter on the Blind: for the Use of those who can See*, in which a blind mathematician uses his blindness as an argument against the existence of God, an argument that too strong for Voltaire, the deist, who he promptly invited the author to meet him in a "philosophical repast."

It was too strong for a panicky government, as well, and Diderot was imprisoned at Vincennes.

Furbank devotes a chapter to the one that followed a year or so later, *on the Deaf and Dumb*, and

es to bury the man with...

ATTEMPT FOR THE HOLY SERIES OF RELIGION

Colin McCall
on Diderot,
great atheist,
materialist,
determinist

at meeting an atheist, and the Baron told him there were 15 around the table.

D'Holbach also contributed numerous scientific articles to the *Encyclopédie*, which was under the joint editorship of Diderot and d'Alembert until the latter quit. On January 11, 1758, he told Voltaire: "I do not know whether the *Encyclopédie* will be continued, what is certain is that it will not be continued by me."

If the Diderot-d'Alembert partnership was one of "opposites," says Furbank, "they could well have regarded it as an advantage. Indeed, when one looks at what they achieved together, one may agree it was." From 1758 onwards, Diderot was sole editor, and in August, 1761, "working ten hours a day for 25 days," he revised the final text volumes (there were also 11 volumes of plates).

He had always to contend with censorship and spying by the police and had continued to work in defiance of a royal prohibition; but he found to his horror that his printer, Le Breton, had secretly censored and emasculated the text. The extent of Le Breton's censorship could be seen at the bi-centenary exhibition in Paris, which I was able to attend in 1951, and a plate in the catalogue shows at least two-thirds deleted from a proof of 144 lines.

Diderot was furious, of course, but there was nothing he could do about what he called "an atrocity without parallel" in the history of publishing.

Meanwhile, he had been writing plays and art criticism and had, in Furbank's words, "two masterpieces of fiction in his desk-drawer, reserved for his eye alone." These were *D'Alembert's Dream* and *Rameau's Nephew*, probably Diderot's best known works in English translation, and both considered at some length in this exemplary and engrossing book. "Re-read *Rameau's Nephew*," advised the Goncourt Brothers. "What a work that is, what an inspired plunge into the human consciousness."

Furbank also draws attention to the "experimental" short stories (which he has translated), where Diderot found "new and urgent things for fiction to say." Then there is *The Nun*, which was banned in 1824 and 1826. Even as late as 1968, Mme de Gaulle forced the French Ministry of Information to ban the film based on it.

"What need has the Bridegroom of so many foolish virgins?" Diderot asks. "Or the human species of so many victims?"

Favoured

Nor should we forget *Jacques the Fatalist*. If *D'Alembert's Dream* was Diderot's "fanciful treatment of materialism," says Furbank, "*Jacques the Fatalist* is his fictional rendering of determinism" and in many ways an apologia. "For it was important in Diderot's mind that, buffeted as he might be by Fortune, he had been favoured by his birth. He was one of those mortals who are endowed by Nature or destiny with a whole array of virtues, talents and good qualities." He "might just as easily have had the misfortune to be born an imbecile or a criminal."

Denis Diderot died what Furbank calls "a cheerful and becoming death, very unlike the tortured scene that religious zealots liked to imagine for an atheist," on July 31, 1784.

The censorship of his work continued, however, at the hands of his daughter Angélique and her husband. But thankfully, though they bowdlerised freely, they didn't obliterate the offending passages.

Finally, consider the irony. They hired no less than 50 priests for the funeral of the great atheist and materialist, who wrote: "And with the guts of the last priest, Let us strangle the last king."



Edited from *Socialism & Religion*, published by the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) in 1911 and 1925. The SPGB bars religious believers from its ranks.

WHAT, then, is religion?

It is generally accepted that the earliest form is that of ancestor worship... what is called animism, or the accrediting of things, both living and non-living, with indwelling spirits, is but a side development of ancestor worship...

The fundamental idea of religion is a belief in the persistence of life after death. Originally, and in essence throughout, religion is a belief in the existence of supernatural beings, and the observance of rites and ceremonies in order to avert their anger or gain their goodwill... How did this arise?

[T]he member of a petty tribal settlement was restricted to a very narrow circle of human intercourse, limited in speech, without industry, science, or literature, and all the accumulated knowledge of Nature's working that these have brought; and consequently the disquieting phenomena of death, loss of consciousness, hallucination, insanity, trance, and dream, together with the awful and seemingly capricious powers of the elements, presented a problem to primitive man that could not be correctly solved on the basis of his slender knowledge and experience.

He read his own passions and motives into the elements about him, and thought he saw in Nature's working the activity of beings like himself. Moreover, his dreams were realities to him. He believed that the dead man he had dreamed of had really visited him, or that in his sleep he had really hunted in some distant forest – yet the savage had not left his companions, and the dead were still covered with earth.

The idea of a ghost that could leave the body was, therefore, irresistibly forced on him. The loss of consciousness of an injured man was to be explained by the temporary absence of the spirit from the body. Madness was possession by an alien spirit. The dead man, to the simple mind of the savage, still lived as a spirit, and might return. Fear therefore took possession of his mind; fear of the evil power of the dead and of their spirits in the trees, streams, and elements that surrounded him. This fear gave rise to religious observance.

Primitive man buried his dead, put heavy stones upon them or even drove stakes through their bodies to prevent their ghosts troubling the tribe; or he gave them their weapons and ornaments and made offerings of food and drink to them (even after the decay of the bodies had demonstrated the fact of death) in order either to appease

Paralysing hand of the dead past

the anger or gain the goodwill of their spirits. Thus in his ignorance of causality other than personal, the savage projected his own characteristics into the world about him and imagined its working as due to the activity of spirits, mainly malignant, who had to be conciliated or kept away.

From these early superstitious fears there also arose a belief in sorcery, miracles, and witchcraft. Herbert Spencer states that:

"The primitive belief is that the ghosts of the dead entering the bodies of the living, produce convulsive actions, insanity, disease and death and, as this belief develops, these original supernatural agents conceived as causing such evils differentiate into supernatural agents of various kinds and powers... Along with a belief in maleficent possession there goes belief in beneficent possession which is prayed for under the forms of supernatural strength, inspiration, or knowledge. Further, from the notion that if maleficent demons can enter they can be driven out, there results exorcism. And then there comes the idea that they may be otherwise controlled – may be called to aid, whence enchantments and miracles."

Thus religious legends of miracle, when adduced as proof of the divine origin of a religion, are actually evidence of its earthly origin and of its community with the crudest superstition of the lowest savage. Primitive man's knowledge and experience were not sufficiently extensive to give him the idea of an inviolable natural order. He believed that all things were swayed by the

ghosts of the dead, and consequently the "miracle" was his explanation of a normal happening. So the whole of man's early religious beliefs were due to the limitations of his knowledge and experience. Religion, therefore, has a natural, not a supernatural, genesis...

A great warrior kinsman... after his death, tended to become a chief object of tribal propitiation and worship. So gods began to be.

The burial-place of a great chief (often his abandoned hut) became the abode of a god to whom offerings were brought and before whom reverence was made. Thus the temple originated – it was originally a covered tomb, and retains that characteristic to this day.

Tribal custom as applied to satisfying the supposed wants or appeasing the ire of the deceased became religious rites. And with the lapse of time and the flattery of his worshippers, the glorified personality and power of a great dead chief became magnified into the attributes of a great tribal god.

At the same time, his nearest of kin became naturally the mediators between him and the rest of the tribesmen. They became the keepers of the temple, the guardians of religious ceremonial, and consequently the early priesthood...

...With the development of the religious idea, ancient and mysterious custom began to merge into "law" by becoming attributed to the glorified ancestor or god. So god became the "law-giver," and tribal custom became divine ordinance... This phase is illustrated in the Old Testament, which, indeed, is valuable as an illustration of the later and transitional forms of ancestor worship; and much of it portrays clearly the religion and customs of a people living in what Lewis Morgan, the great American ethnologist, defines as the "upper status of barbarism."

...By the "inertia of the mind," religion tends to persist, even through vast changes in the environment in so far as it serves some interest and does not directly conflict with the new conditions. But in spite of this tendency to independent existence, religion has been modified continuously as the result of changing conditions and interests; while, notwithstanding repeated endeavours to adapt the ancient legends to modern requirements, its influence has waned. Nevertheless, in the degree that it survives, religion reacts upon society; it is the paralysing hand of the dead past upon the living present.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Off-whited sepulchre

"THE Tories are the party that is clean-cut, that sets standards ... We stand for the family. We believe in clean living and family values." That lofty spiel was delivered last month by a Conservative MP, David Evans. The Member for Welwyn and Hatfield was commenting on a lapse from virtue by another Conservative MP, Steven Norris (Epping Forest). Mr Norris is also Transport Minister – an appropriate appointment in this Government for the former dealer in second-hand cars. It turns out that Norris, married with two children, had at least five mistresses. A man of steely nerve, he even tried to bed fellow-Conservative MP, Edwina Currie.

Did these revelations embarrass the family of clean living and family values assembled in Blackpool for their annual conference? Not particularly. Mr Norris was warmly applauded when he appeared on the platform. The Toadying Tendency was, as usual, strongly represented. They are quick to forgive when one of the upper crust transgresses, as Lord (Cecil) Parkinson will confirm.

But toadies are invariably the worst bullies. The Blackpool conference was an ugly display of collective vileness by elements determined to eliminate any vestige of decency and social conscience still surviving after 14 years of Conservative Government.

Speeches by Ministers which drew ecstatic applause showed that the Conservative Party does not value all families. Among others, the spectacularly obnoxious Peter Lilley, Social Security Secretary and patron of the Conservative Christian Fellowship, courageously announced measures that would make life more difficult for unmarried mothers and their children.

No one dared to suggest that cuts in funding birth control and advisory services may have contributed to the number of unplanned pregnancies, particularly among teenagers.

As always, the "law and order" debate transformed the Conservative conference into something akin to the Nuremberg Rally. Blood lust is not even under Tory skin; demands for the hangman's reinstatement and barbarous treatment of offenders received strongest approbation. And expressions of sympathy for victims of criminal activity sounded rather hollow when not matched with concern for the victims of cock-ups or frame-ups who spend years in prison.

Representatives were well-drilled and obedient to party managers. The pro-Conservative *Daily Telegraph's* man said the conference "had about it as much spontaneity as Trooping the Colour, with most speakers showing all the critical argumentativeness of the people who come forward to declare themselves for Jesus at a Billy Graham rally."

The party of traditional standards is also the party of double standards. Loud in denouncing those who illegally receive Social Security payments – however small and whatever the circumstances – Conservatives keep mum about mega-fraudsters in the City of London and company board rooms. Hardly surprising – they are usually party benefactors.

One of them received a letter before doing a bunk to Cyprus: "Dear Mr Nadir, I cannot thank you enough. It was marvellous encouragement to know that you are so committed to the cause in which we believe." Margaret (now Lady) Thatcher was graciously acknowledging a substantial donation from Asil Nadir, who is now described as "a crook" by Lord MacAlpine, the former party treasurer. Between 1987 and 1990, Mr Nadir contributed £315,000 to Conservative funds.

But, then, big money has a particular attraction for Lady Thatcher. Since unwillingly leaving office, she has dedicated herself to the accumulation of wealth. With lecture tours, interviews, speeches and writing, she now has more money-making strings to her bow than have the Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro.

However, it was with her memoirs, *The Downing Street Years*, that Lady Thatcher made a real financial killing (£3 million). The book was due for publication immediately after the Blackpool conference, but the *Daily Mirror* leaked extracts from her volume of bile and spite directed against former Cabinet colleagues. That livened the proceedings more than somewhat.

On her arrival at the conference, Lady Thatcher and party big-wigs exchanged wintery smiles that barely concealed mutual loathing and contempt. But to her host of admirers on the Right, she is the acceptable face of treachery in a party that constantly prates about loyalty.

Armageddon outa here!

LONDON actor James Purefoy may occasionally forget his lines – which the-

pian doesn't? – but he will not forget his encounter with one of those nice Jehovah's Witnesses who turn up at inconvenient moments.

Their discussion started amicably enough. Unfortunately, Mr Purefoy expressed innocent surprise that dinosaurs are not mentioned in the Bible.

With that, the pilgrim from Kingdom Hall clocked him. On no account should the divine word be queried.

Things got out of hand. In addition to a black eye, Mr Purefoy suffered a slipped disc which probably resulted from throwing his assailant to the ground while expressing the hope "Jehovah witnessed that!" He had to withdraw from several performances of *Present Laughter* at the Globe Theatre.

So if you enjoy baiting Jehovah's Witnesses on the doorstep, remember that there is less to their gushing friendliness than meets the eye. And don't mention dinosaurs!

Baptism of ire

LAST month I poured cold water on the proposal that humanist naming ceremonies for babies should be encouraged. Perhaps I should have stayed my hand – a thought prompted by events following a Christening at St Agnes's Roman Catholic Church, in Huyton, Merseyside.

After the unfortunate infant had been sprinkled, relatives continued the celebrations at a local public house. But as is often the way with families, a difference of opinion was expressed and the ensuing brawl spilled on to the roadway. Two disputants received stab wounds; three were beaten into insensibility; a girl was hit on the head with a glass.

The vicar of a nearby Anglican church said it was "a scene of carnage like the aftermath of a traffic accident. There was blood everywhere." A spokesman for Merseyside police described the display of family feeling as "absolute mayhem, with bodies all over the place." The religious "pro-family" lobby made no comment.

So perhaps there is, after all, something to be said for humanist naming ceremonies. At least they are unlikely to provoke anything more violent than a fit of the giggles.

Sea of Faith – or faith all at sea?

THE Sea of Faith phenomenon has attracted some press comment in recent months, both in the form of articles and in letters to editors. This tendency should be of great positive interest to sceptics; too often, in my opinion, SoF is the object of our incautious derision, an attitude that seems to me to smack of sectarianism on the part of those of us who adopt it. My intention is to inject a little non-dismissive sceptical inquiry into our freethought on this matter.

The Sea of Faith ideas came to public notice some years ago by way of a broadcast series given by Don Cupitt – an accomplished scholar and an accredited Christian luminary. The next step was the publication of the book and, subsequently, the formation of a “network” of interested persons. That network numbers some hundreds of very serious people, mostly, but by no means exclusively, members of the Anglican clergy and laity in what is left of middle England. (According to their list, there is one Scottish member, living in Falkirk).

The network produces an impressive quarterly magazine; its editor is perfectly willing to entertain letters and articles from Humanists (for reasons which will become clear). There is also an annual meeting of those who feel the urge to navigate the sea of faith, sailing thereon to who knows where?

The central aim of SoF is “exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation.” A favoured term in SoF-speak is non-realism as applied to God (or do they, should they, say “god?”). This term is in direct line of succession from *God as an old man up there somewhere watching us down here to see what we are up to and, mostly, to stop us doing it* and the opaque, abstract but still presumably

Eric Stockton (pictured) discusses the phenomenon of Don Cupitt's faithful followers.



real (not just “real to us”) *God is the ground of our being.*

The SoF tendency has broken with the idea of a real god and Cupitt says as much. For example, in his book (page 269, *The Sea of Faith*), he writes: “God, and this is a definition, is the sum of our [my italics ES] values representing to us their claims upon us...Mythologically, he [not He ES] has been portrayed as an objective being because ancient thought tended to personify values in the belief that important words must stand for things. Plato, whose thought was still half-mythological, considered that words like truth, beauty and justice must designate real beings existing in a timeless heavenly world above.” Notice that Cupitt does not say *the sum of values independent of us but incumbent upon us to respect*. Cupitt is nothing if not a scholarly writer and so, clearly, the values he refers to are not “objective.” In avoiding the metaphysical minefield hidden in the objective/subjective dichotomy, perhaps it would be better to assert that the values Cupitt has in mind are not humanity-independent values. Cupitt's view is entirely compatible with the classic short statement of atheism that man creates god in his (man's) own image.

I do not wish to labour this matter, but in a

letter to *The Independent* recently Cupitt stated: “Non-realism sees a god [not God:ES] not as a being but as a moral focus...” It is precisely the theist view that God IS a being who reveals to us a “moral focus” and this I submit clinches the proposition that Cupitt, and by extension, his followers are atheists. When we consider their stated aim (quoted above) we can identify it as none other than an atheist critique of religion mounted from within the Anglican ranks. This critique has now reached the stage of not only stripping “god” of any “objective” status – god, the very word itself, is being edged out of SoF comment. In personal correspondence with one of their leading members, I have seen the words: “The big philosophical question for SoF, I think, is whether it makes sense to go on using *the God metaphor* [my italics, ES] in the late twentieth century and on into the third Christian millennium. Come on in and join the debate!”

From the theist standpoint, it is fitting to condemn SoF as the enemy within and an article in the *Daily Telegraph* (September 10, 1993) by a mainstream Christian, Clifford Longley, says so in polite but unmistakable terms. From our secularist point of view, SoF is a timely rethink of traditional religion moved by the imperatives of sceptical analysis. We should take up my correspondent's invitation and converse with these people, and I shall certainly expect to get a critique of SoF into their magazine. I may even include a few custard pies – those indispensable aids to sceptical clout. I am as human as the next chap and I dare say I could do a bit of religion-creating if I put my mind to it.

But seriously though, as David Frost used to say, we ought to formulate a credible theory of SoF that is a little more sophisticated than dismissing them as two-faced wimps or incorrigible woolly-heads. It may be that they see the religious traditionalists in the light of the opium of the people idea; perhaps they see religion, in some of its time-worn aspects, as a disorder describable as an addiction to a dangerous solace called traditional faith. In dealing with addiction, bull-at-a-gate methods are not always best. Perhaps SoF is a bit wary of withdrawal symptoms, such as brainless evangelism, that their more conservative friends might display if too many disturbing questions are asked too quickly.

Is this so far from our view that religion is essentially an addiction to illusory certainty? Would we try to cure physiological addiction in a way that pays no heed to the agony of withdrawal symptoms? Why should we, and they, not be equally wary when dealing with ideological addictions?

Why should we get uptight when SoF uses god metaphorically? At least some of them are trying to abandon their deceptive metaphor. Some of us are hoping that the British Humanist Association will abandon its latest deceptive metaphor – *spiritual*. It will be interesting to see who comes clean first, SoF or BHA.

The believing world

WHAT has been called the Virgin Bill was approved by French MPs at the weekend, giving the go-ahead to all 36,000 city, town and village councils to allow shops to open on Sundays. The measure arises out of a battle over the Sunday opening of Virgin music megastores. Without the National Assembly vote, Virgin would have refused to move into a huge leisure complex under the Louvre which has been overseen by the Gaullist-led Paris city council. Once the act has gone through the senate, shops in tourist areas will have an almost automatic right to remain open seven days a week. *The Guardian*, October 4.

A 75-year-old priest has been jailed for leaping on a 61-year-old woman parishioner “like a wild, passionate beast” in Fermo, Italy. *News of the World*, October 3.

PRIEST Antonio Battistello has been

jailed in Sardinia, Italy, after putting a curse on a policeman who fined him for a traffic offence. The cop broke his leg the next day. *Daily Star*, October 19.

GOVERNORS at a Roman Catholic sixth form college in Birmingham have banned Muslim pupils from praying in the college. Staff at St Philip's Sixth Form College have been told to direct non-Catholics to a nearby infant school, where a room has been rented for £50 a week. Only a third of the 960 pupils at the co-educational and multi-racial school in Birmingham are Catholic and 200 are Muslim. One teacher, who did not want to be named for fear of losing her job, said: “The staff have been instructed to tell students that non-Catholics are no longer allowed to worship within the college. If they see anybody praying, they must tell them to stop.” *The Guardian*, September 2.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

NT documents

IN HIS letter in the October *Freethinker*, C R Wason is in places somewhat misleading about the dating of the New Testament documents. He suggests that Justin Martyr, who wrote his *First and Second Apologies* and his *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, between 150 AD and his death in about 167 AD, did not know any of our canonical Gospels. There is, however, clear evidence from quotations in his own writings that he knew our first three Gospels (the Synoptics). It is, nevertheless, quite true that he never mentions them by name: the names by which we now know them are late Second Century guesses, and the first to name all four of our canonical Gospels was Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, in about 180 AD.

The oldest extant fragment of any of our Gospels is known as P62 and it is owned by the John Rylands Library in Manchester. I saw it there in 1965, laminated between two pieces of Perspex: I was even allowed to pick it up! It is scarcely larger than a postage stamp, and covers parts of a few verses only from John's Gospel.

It is usually dated between 135 and 150 AD, though some have thought it as early as 125 AD. We cannot, of course, assume it to be the original autograph! It was found in Upper Egypt, though the Gospel is not thought to have originated in that area, so time has to be allowed for its spread and local acceptance.

Though Mr Wason seems to think John the earliest of the four Gospels, a view defended in the last work of Bishop John Robinson, this is not a view which commands much support; but there is no good reason for dating it much later than the Synoptics. Indeed there are very good reasons, summarised by G A Wells (*Did Jesus Exist?*, Chapter 3) for thinking that all four canonical Gospels came into being in the period between about 90 and 120 AD. Mark is certainly the oldest: and if one had to pick a date out of the air: 95 AD, plus or minus a few years, seems most likely. Matthew and Luke were probably both written within about ten years of Mark; and John, though harder to date, was possibly written about 110-115 AD, plus or minus a few years.

Though it is probably right that Marcion was the first to make a collection of Paul's letters (ten of them) round about 140AD, there is no doubt that some of them were well known before that. Clement of Rome, writing in about 96 AD, knew at least Romans and 1 Corinthians. It is probably the case, however, that at least some of even the genuine Pauline Epistles (ie, not all of those in our NT) have been edited, conflated and otherwise modified. Thus 2 Corinthians is thought to contain extracts from at least three different letters, and 1 Corinthians has probably also been substantially edited and interpolated.

The so-called Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timo-

thy and Titus) are, however, not by Paul, and are probably later than the Gospels, but were known to Polycarp who wrote in about 135 AD. Likewise, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians are not by Paul, but probably date from later in the First Century.

The genuine Pauline material was, however, almost certainly all written before about 60-65 AD. It is this (and other early Christian writing which can confidently be dated before about 80 AD) which is totally ignorant of the time, place and circumstances in which Jesus lived.

The "biography" of Jesus which we find in the Gospels is thus almost certainly an original

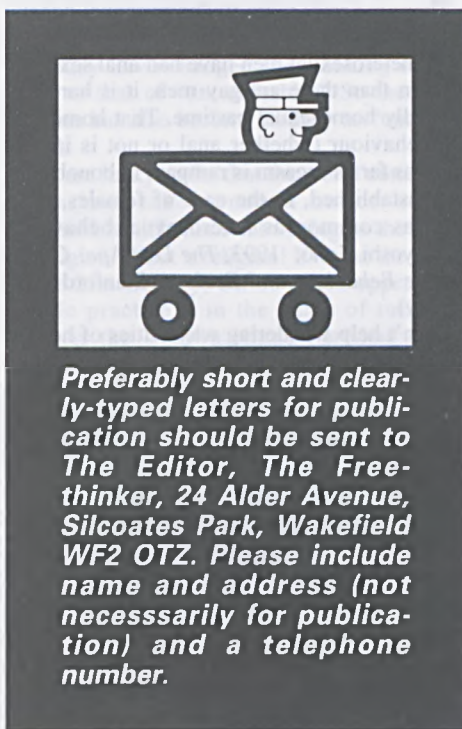
this way.

I can't fault Wason on dating of early Christian writings, as I haven't looked at the evidence, and without bibliographic references we can't! But in a sudden change of gear on to the origin of the alphabet, an unrelated topic (a warning sign to any alert editor!) Wason strays into my professional territory as a linguistics lecturer; and when he calls the alphabet "a unique invention which democratised literacy" I have to say that if you swallow that kind of pig-swill, you end up pig-ignorant. If Wason were used to reading documents in a morphemic script (such as Ancient Egyptian or Sumerian, or modern Chinese), or had even understood how the Rosetta Stone helped decipherment of hieroglyphics, she or he would know that such scripts are just as easy to learn, and rather more legible, than handwritten alphabetic writing (ever tried 15th Century English hand-writing, or even print? I have!), and would also know that every morphemic script incorporates a set of phonetic signs (effectively an alphabet) used for foreign names, noting pronunciations in dictionaries etc. How else would Chinese newspapers report "Clinton backs Yeltsin's Moscow bloodbath"?

Alphabetic writing starts with the use of such pre-existing conventional phonetic signs as the readily-available way to write a neighbouring language which hasn't yet got its own conventional script - this has happened many times in history. The resulting scripts are clumsy, laborious both to write and to read, and in no way democratic: they are better than nothing, that's all.

"In the Bronze Age," Wason says, "literacy was a valuable possession." It still is if you bother to check out what you read, and avoid presenting romantic speculations like Wason's "Semitic intellectuals deported for subversive activities" as the unavoidable "obvious answer". Used as Wason uses it, literacy becomes the stuff that cults are made of...

CONNAIRE KENSIT
Southsea



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

product of the final decades of the First Century, though much worked over by later hands. One really needs to look at the apocryphal Gospels to appreciate the lengths to which fantasy and imagination can go. In one of them, the infant Jesus makes birds out of clay, and with a clap of his little hands brings them to life. But when you come to think about it, that's no more improbable than turning water into wine!

DANIEL O'HARA
London EC2

The alphabet

TO DEVOTE most of a page to C R Wason's letter was an editorial error. Those who peddle pseudo-intellectual twaddle should do so at their own expense, via publishers who exist for the purpose, known in the trade as the "vanity press": as a contributor to *The Freethinker* Fund I protest at our paper being used

Homosexuality

I AM a member of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association and wish to comment upon the letter in the September issue from Ernie Crosswell, of Slough.

From his letter, I take it he is not Gay. Well, I AM - and I do take great exception to the idea carried by heterosexuals that theirs is the only true manifestation of love.

I could mention the abhorrence felt by many Gay men at the thought of expressing love by insertion of a vital part of the body into the

YOU'RE TELLING US!

◀ From Page 173

urinary tract of the female. But that is by the way. The main point I wish to make being that Gay people, whether they're male or female, meet the person of their choice, with whom they fall in love, just as wholeheartedly and hopelessly as any hetero couple.

What physical expression they give to that love is their own choice. And sodomy, to which your correspondent takes such exception, is actually fairly rare. Since each person is an individual, and his or her needs must be respected and catered for, many go no further than mutual fondling or masturbation.

What they all do, however, is to cleave to each other in a life-long commitment, caring for each other throughout life.

Heterosexuals, by and large, are fixated on the idea that sodomy is the sole routine of expression, since for them penetrative sexual expression of love is the only routine followed.

But Gay couples don't need to ape heterosexuals. Nor do they. Nor does there have to be a dominant and a passive partner. Each can alternate in role-playing.

And as for stating that in Nature animals do not exhibit homosexual behaviour: I can see Ernie Crosswell isn't a countryman; he hasn't observed many wild or domesticated animals, many of whom do indulge in homosexual behaviour. Cows often mount other cows. Dogs, particularly puppies, mount dogs in order to emphasise their place in canine society. None of these are in conditions of captivity, which, I do agree, lend themselves to coercive sodomy – but merely as a substitute for sex with females. Such men are known as "Nick queers" as, on release, they return to heterosexual penetration of females. And they, funnily enough, being predominantly the dominant partner, never regard their relationships as Gay, since to their peculiar set of values, the man who accepts the penis is the Gay – not the one using it on his willing, or unwilling, partner.

As to things being either natural or unnatural, everything in the world is a product of Nature, so how can anything be deemed unnatural, since whatever form it takes, it stems from Nature?

And as to Gay men asking Mr Crosswell's permission to use a particular technique, I'm afraid he is set upon a non-starter.

He subscribes to Freethought...with exceptions which fit in with his own narrow views. I, on the other hand, do not wish to interfere in any way with how others achieve satisfaction in life and their own personal happiness and fulfillment.

If Gays ruled our country, and heterosexual expression was banned, would he be willing to give it up? I think not. If the rulers said "It's OK to be heterosexual, as long as you remain

celibate," would he think that a fine ruling, or wouldn't he say "Go to hell!" and carry on in secret? This is what we were forced to do, until we got partial freedom in 1967. Yes, partial freedom – but not from constant sniping by such as Mr Crosswell, who pretend to be Freethinkers but who have not yet rid themselves of rampant homophobia.

A G STEPHENS
Bradford

IT IS rather impertinent of Ernie Crosswell to tell me to retract something I did not say – that bonobos practise anal sex.

There is vastly more to "homosexual behaviour" than just "anal penetration" and, since more heterosexual men have had anal sex with women than there are gay men, it is hardly a specially homosexual pastime. That homosexual behaviour (whether anal or not is irrelevant) as far as orgasm is rampant in bonobos is well established, in the case of females, is at least as common as heterosexual behaviour (Takayoshi Kano, 1993, *The Last Ape: Chimpanzee Behaviour and Ecology*, Stanford University).

I can't help wondering why critics of homosexuality have such an obsession with it being "unnatural." Apart from the fact that the claim is both false and irrelevant (as Antony Grey so amply demonstrated in his letter) it makes one wonder where they draw the line between "natural" and "unnatural." Suppose our hominid ancestors practised sodomy (and why not? – it had to start sometime), could Ernie (I hope I may call him Ernie since it appears we are now friends) please tell us at what point between apes and men it would cease to be natural? In humans would it be natural if practised by Stone Age hunter-gatherers?

Humans have a large natural repertoire of behaviours, good and bad: how can anyone be confident that homosexuality and sodomy are not a part of them?

Finally, in an earlier letter (July), Ernie claimed that male bonobos only copulate with mature females. Maybe so, but that does not rule out other sexual activity. In a recent Channel 4 series, *The Sexual Imperative*, an adult bonobo was shown rubbing his genitals against a tiny infant. It was not clear if penetration was achieved (probably not) or what sex the infant was, but the adult had an obvious erection and was making vigorous pelvic thrusts. In humans this would have resulted in a lengthy prison sentence for the adult. Ernie had used his claim to suggest (citing Franz de Waal) that child sex abuse may be "uniquely human." Perhaps Ernie should retract.

STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

I AM grateful to Antony Grey (October) for informing me of the existence of Wainwright

Churchill's book on homosexual behaviour. I will get it and see for myself just what he means by "homosexual" behaviour. Konrad Lorenz (*On Aggression*), reporting on homosexual behaviour in male geese, writes: "their behaviour is far less 'animal' than that of most human homosexuals, for they seldom if ever copulate or perform substitute actions." I hope that Antony will agree that we must be as specific as Lorenz and the zoologists I quoted in my letter of July last.

Regarding sex and love: forget Mills and Boon. You cannot "make love," "fall in" or "fall out" of love, or kill for love. Nor is a child that is conceived in a moment of passion necessarily a "love child."

If sex had anything to do with love, there would be no need to use the distinguishing term "sexual love," which of course means love of sex.

Yes, Antony, let us be rational – and let us be definitive and specific!

ERNIE CROSSWELL
Slough

● This correspondence is drawing rapidly to a close. Any future, and final, contributions, must be very short indeed: Editor.

Selfish gene

THE purpose of this letter is to express my own opinions on the subject of "Humanism." They are coincidentally the same as Richard Dawkins' (cf. *The Selfish Gene*, OUP, 1992, p.9).

Individuals have not evolved to behave for the good of any group. All apparently altruistic acts can be seen as genes continuing reproduction using individual organisms as vehicles for their own survival. This new way of seeing can explain how selfishness at the gene level can manifest as apparent altruism at the individual level. This is because a gene consists of all copies of itself and these may sit in different organisms. A mother caring for her child is not behaving for the good of the "family unit." The degree of genetic relatedness between mother and child is high, therefore maternal care can be seen as gene selfishness.

Since when did any human behave for the good of all humans or any sub-set of us? Some individuals claim that Mohammed, Jesus and Socrates did. Some Humanists aspire to themselves. But none of these individuals can explain why their selected group – be it species, race, nation, or family – should have priority over any other group.

ERIC YAFFEY
Bradford

▶ Turn to Page 175

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 174

Ceremonies

I BELIEVE that Britain needs a large, "broad church" Humanist organisation rather than a small purist sect holding interminable internal debates which have little effect on the outside world. In short, the traditional Freethinker line is necessary but not enough.

I totally disagree with Bill McLroy's remarks (October) about "ritual Humanists." He writes about "straining to create a demand" and says "People who eschew Christian ceremonial are unlikely to replace it with a Humanist equivalent."

He is wrong in both these statements. It is not necessary to create a demand for non-religious ceremonies – the demand for secular funerals and weddings already exists and is growing. There is overwhelming evidence that as people learn of the existence of these ceremonies, the demand increases. None of the techniques of the persuasion industry are necessary; people merely have to be informed that these things are available.

In the case of secular funerals and weddings there is empirical evidence of this fact. It is not unreasonable to suppose that there is a latent demand for secular naming ceremonies as well.

The provision of Humanist ceremonies is quite compatible with "actively campaigning against religious superstition and privilege." Look at Norway and Holland. Bill McLroy is rejecting one of the means by which active campaigning can reach a much larger audience due to (to quote Nigel Collins) "increased awareness and appreciation for the Humanist movement."

The difference is that active campaigning on behalf of a large and influential organisation could produce tangible results – but perhaps the shock would be too much for Bill McLroy.

JOHN CLUNAS

Aberdeen Humanist Group

Harijans

REFERRING to the President of India's message on the occasion of Republic Day, I beg to quote the following from his speech: "Long before the Constitution was framed, Mahatma Gandhi, addressing the Second Round Table Conference said (and I quote): 'I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice; an India in which there shall be no high class or low class of people; and an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such an India for the curse of untouchability...'"

Yes, untouchability has been abolished by law; but the question is: has it been abolished by so called high-class people? The answer is: No.

Law remains in the law books, and Gandhiji's high ideals remain his unfulfilled dream. We take pride that Gandhiji, Mahavir, Buddha, Guru Nanak and others of that calibre were born in India with such high ideals. We pay lip-service to them by uplifting them to Godhood. But in practice our apartheid against Harijans is a thousand times worse than South African apartheid.

(*Hari plus Jan means Man of God* – this word was coined by Gandhiji; but because we did not want to accept *Harijan* as equal to us, we today have changed the meaning of this word to that of "untouchable." So the word *Harijan* has also become as dirty as "untouchable").

We are lucky so far that the world community has not taken enough notice of our apartheid, which came into being in the name of religion. What a religion! Even at the dawn of the 21st Century, our so-called upper-class people practise it in the name of religion. What is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad doing about it?

Regarding poverty, the gap between rich and poor has widened enormously since the days of Gandhiji. The gap in India is perhaps the highest in the world. In India, on the one hand you have a 30 cror rupees wedding taking place – and on the other hand people sleep on pavements. It is a matter of utter shame that our leaders who shout slogans like *garibi hatao* ("remove poverty") at the time of elections are the same people who are the main instruments in widening the gap.

Harijans and poor people: no one is going to help you. If you want to remove the colossal injustices committed against you, you have got to revolt. Until you revolt you will have to keep on suffering. That is how Human Nature works.

K P SHAH

London NW3

Thomas Paine

WHILE not wishing to detract from the honour due to Thomas Paine, I am at a complete loss as to how the great man could propagate the idea of a "Divine Creator" after his demolition job on the Bible!

This work shows that he was aware of earthquakes which strike willy-nilly, indiscriminately destroying men, women and children. Surely he was also aware of floods, disease and wars etc., which have the same results?

He offers no evidence that such a being exists, save that he *believes* it to be so!

Only recently we have read about the case of Siamese twins and of a baby born with two

heads. There must have been "freaks of nature" in Thomas Paine's day, as well as in ours.

In principle, I approve his appeal to humanity to adopt a benevolent disposition to all men (and women) and to all creatures. But surely this can be done without dragging in an alleged "Creator"?

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

Summing it up

IN REPLY to B Morgan's question, did G H Hardy prove the non-existence of God: Hardy was a pure mathematician and it is said that he used to have annual toasts that "may pure mathematics always be useless." If Hardy managed to produce a proof, it would have been logical in form and thus similar to classical atheistic non-proofs of God.

Applied mathematicians/physicists/non-Hardy mathematicians could produce a physical proof against the non-existence of God. Humans can see only 10 per cent of the matter in the Universe and 90 per cent of that matter is hydrogen and 10 per cent is helium, and the rest of chemical elements amount to nothing at all. There are about 103 chemical elements and the fact that the Universe mainly consists of only two of them suggests that the Universe is in a premature state.

The chemical elements hydrogen and helium, acting under gravity, form gas balls called stars. Nuclear reactions which are analogous in form to chemical reactions and use the same chemical symbols, produce the heavier chemical elements from these lighter elements. This means that at least one star cycle must have existed to make the matter found on earth, and also that a creator god/gods were not necessary, as the process is quite natural.

Since the 1960s, particle physics and cosmology have combined so that we now have physical cosmology. Cosmology is now a branch of physics, rather than philosophy. The free lunch Big Bang Model is the current favourite to account for the initial creation of matter in the Universe, so again a creator god is redundant.

The Big Bang Models can only improve, if new data can be obtained from particle accelerators, and also if new theories such as Superstring unites macro-events and micro-events in the cosmos.

We live in a physical Universe that has developed quite naturally as a result of matter evolution, biological evolution and cultural evolutions, and applied mathematicians have had a large contribution in elucidating its structure.

ROBERT AWBERY
Reading

LAST WORD

by Charles Ward

ABANDON hope, all ye who enter here. In *La Divina Commedia* that fearful statement surmounted the portals of Hell.

The poet Dante was only partly right, in my opinion. Total despair, I imagine, must be an unspeakably diabolical experience. But he was surely mistaken if he thought that the warning could be of benefit. For those who are, or are about to be, in any hellish state, the suggestion that hope is to be consciously discarded upon entry does not ring true. Hope, like breathing, is something to which we are remarkably attached and extremely reluctant to relinquish. Hope may falter, flutter, gasp and finally expire, but we shall rarely, if ever, have had a willing hand in its demise. However much neglected, hope is a virtually irrepressible human disposition.

Much of what we long for is inevitably prompted by personal considerations. As products of the "selfish gene," to borrow Richard Dawkins' phrase, we are born to a life of self-interest. Eventually, of course, we come to realise that our desires cannot be satisfactorily achieved without a large measure of co-operation, willing or otherwise. Moral development proceeds when we become aware of, and sensitive to, the wishes and needs of others. Social ideals, in fact, are seen in the end to be in our own best interests.

We all know what it means to hope, but representing the experience by means of other terms is another matter altogether. Dictionaries, reflecting as they do common usages, but under obligation to use other words in the attempt to provide intelligible definition, are unreliable when it comes to subtler nuances.

Hope, for example, is usually allied with

HELL, DANTE, NO!

expectation, but the words are not synonymous. To expect fulfilment is in many instances an unreasonable supposition. The hoped-for event may or may not happen; expectation is totally irrelevant. That we should like it to happen seems the main thing.

Yet to leave the matter there would leave "hope" and "wish" or "desire" wholly synonymous, which hardly seems satisfactory either. When we hope for something it appears to be implied that there are at least grounds for considering the possibility of a fruitful outcome, which is not invariably the case with wishes. However, let us cease to weary ourselves by wandering in this semantic wilderness and merely acknowledge that, elusive as it may be of accurate definition, hope is not a disposition to be undervalued.

Consider what our world has owed to hope. True, on its journeys of exploration and discovery, to which all science is indebted, hope

has not travelled alone. Hope's companions have been a motley crew. Ambition to acquire wealth, to achieve fame or power over one's fellow-creatures, have been widespread motivations. Hope has always been an essential partner in commercial enterprise. As in more modest endeavours, such as earning sufficient to provide for one's family. Fishermen cannot set sail without this mate, nor the farmer sow his seed. Whatever we are engaged upon, a successful or pleasing outcome is what we have in mind.

The need to hope is common to us all. Some of the hopes of the religious (as well as their mythological ways of expressing them) are unacceptable to humanists. Plain speaking is to be preferred and so are objectives which can be rationally justified and shown to be truly beneficial to the majority. Because we disagree in respect of our fundamental approaches does not mean that we disagree on everything.

On all sides are found both optimists and pessimists. The latter, who prefer to be described as realists, will admit no hope which does not conform to their rigorous requirements. They regard optimists as impractical dreamers.

Undoubtedly some of them were and are, yet wild hopes have occasionally materialised. Not only certain inventions and discoveries with which we are all familiar, but also great social achievements, have owed much to the persistence of optimists despite weighty opposition. What is often not realised is that in every age, including the scientific present, some of what is taken to be established knowledge, or "the way things are," turns out to be merely assumption based, it may be, on tradition, false premises or mistaken reasoning.

We are constantly made sorrowfully aware that, because of "man's inhumanity to man" and catastrophic natural events, or by a combination of both, vast numbers suffer circumstances so appalling that to speak of hope in such contexts appears a mockery. Nothing we feel, in terms of pity or troubled conscience, can undo what has been done, or prevent what cannot be dealt with by the most urgent palliative efforts. Remedies, tragically, have to be long-term because they involve radical political and social changes. And an even more radical change, it is sometimes felt, in human nature.

But no hope could be more unreal. Fellow-humans have shown us how "sick" and warped we may become, and some have wrung their hands, so to speak, at the mindless disregard of nature for life and intelligence it has itself produced, but other fellow human beings have demonstrated what may be done with patience, courage and goodwill. How can it ever be sensible to abandon hope?

THIS AND THAT

Charles Darwin

A VALUED overseas correspondent – a grammar school teacher – is keen to obtain a copy of a British colour film on the life of Charles Darwin which she saw about 20 years ago in London. She would like to show it to her students, "as they know next-to-nothing of Darwin, the latter being conveniently ignored by the curriculum in this Catholic country." Anyone with information about the film (in video form, nowadays?) is asked to contact The Editor, *The Free-thinker*, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ.

Heretic cards

"Can you name the father?" demands the First Century Child Support Agency official of the BVM: a topical addition to the Heretic Cards Yuletide greetings range of about 25 designs, at 12p per card, plus 3p for envelope and 25p postage (whatever the quantity), from Barbara Smoker, 6 Stanstead Grove, London SE6 4UD.