

S
pro
begins
God's
and is
infi-
se his
leigh-
be no
at the
he is
Cru-
H bor-
Aaron
York
n two
t had
Cru-
bor-
g the
York
in the
christ-
t, the
orth -
to the
their
n the
ames
on the
nces
free
diae-
onge.
their
a, and
royal
ds of
being
epay-
lebis
mbar-
ivid-
iable
away
bove
mur-
on is
even
This
c can
g.

The

£1

Secular
Humanist
monthly

Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 114 No 5

May 1994



OLD NICK IS INNOCENT!

**Evangelicals to
blame for myth of
Satanic abuse
– official report**

**JIM fails
to fix it
for faithful
– see Page 75**

**Religious
scientists
amaze TV don
– see Page 76**

**144,000
virgins can't
be wrong
– see centre**

UP FRONT



with the Editor

How they framed Old Nick

SATANIC sex abuse is a poisonous myth. The witch-hunt of recent years was conjured from the sin-fevered nightmares of Evangelical Christians who sought – frenetically – to substantiate their beliefs by establishing a theologically indispensable Devil on the agenda of a world which had become largely indifferent to – or contemptuous of – their minatory Gospel.

Secularists have long said as much...but now it's official.

A three-year investigation funded by the Department of Health has "found no evidence to substantiate any of the 84 cases in which it was alleged that children were sexually abused during satanic, black magic rites," Rosie Waterhouse reported in a major "exclusive" for the *Independent on Sunday*, April 24.

(In three cases allegedly involving "ritual," it was found that the horrid pantomime was secondary to the sex, with perpetrators using "self-proclaimed" mystical powers to entrap, impress and silence victims, rather in the fashion, one supposes, of the scores of Christian clergy worldwide who have been punished by the courts – if not by their churches – for child sex abuse).

The report, commissioned in 1991 after children had been grabbed from their beds in dawn raids by social workers and police in more than one area of Britain, had not been published as *The Freethinker* went to press. But Rosie Waterhouse revealed that it blames Evangelical Christians and self-described "experts" for spreading the satanic scare.

And it suggests that social workers and others believed in it because involvement with the Devil provided an "explanation" of how adults in real sexual abuse cases could harm children, reviving "an age-old myth" of cults controlled by unknown, powerful, and dangerous strangers.

The official report explains: "Rites that allegedly include the torture and sexual abuse of children and adults, forced abortion and human sacrifice, cannibalism and bestiality may be labelled satanic or satanist.

"Their defining characteristic is that the sexual and physical abuse of children is part of rites directed to a magical or religious objective. *There is no evidence that these have taken place in any of the 84 cases studied.*"

The research was conducted by Jean La Fontaine, Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics, described as an expert on child abuse and on cults. Prof La Fontaine had access to the files of every police force and Social Services department which investigated allegations of satanic or ritual abuse in Britain since

1988. Allegations were investigated by police forces from Kent to Strathclyde, including Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Merseyside, but no evidence was found to corroborate the claims.

The La Fontaine report attempts to explain how the stories began: "The alleged disclosures of satanic abuse by younger children were influenced by adults. A small minority involved children pressured or coached by their mothers.

"The interviews during this period [1988 to 1991] were frequently poorly conducted. Too-frequent interviewing, leading questions, contamination, pressure and inducements to agree to suggestions, may have resulted from the anxiety of the interviewers to find out what happened.

"As a result of the way in which it was collected, recorded and transmitted, the evidence said to represent children's disclosures was unreliable and misleading. What is defended as 'what children say' may be nothing of the sort."

The report also explains how the satanic abuse scare spread: "*The Evangelical Christian campaign against new religious movements has been a powerful influence encouraging the identification of satanic abuse.*"

"Equally, if not more, important in spreading the idea of satanic abuse in Britain are the 'specialists', American and British. They may have few or even no qualifications as professionals but attribute their expertise to 'experience of cases.' Their claims or qualifications are rarely checked."

In some of the cases investigated, the children really had been sexually abused but treating them as victims of satanic abuse caused further problems, Rosie Whitehouse's narrative concludes.

We did tell them so...

WHAT *The Freethinker* said yesterday, the others are saying today. As far back as April, 1991, we quoted Bill Thompson, of Reading University, who said the campaign bore "all the signs of a classic moral panic, a scare promoted by a particular group to a particular end. *They need evidence of satanic activity to validate their religious beliefs.*"

The same issue of *The Freethinker* also recorded "an influx of evangelicals into the 'caring' professions. A prominent 'anti-Satan' crusader has given lectures to groups of social workers."

Our then Editor, Bill McIlroy, noted: "Like so many outbursts of irrationalism, the satanic scare has its origins in American fundamentalism. In the United States, Thompson encountered the 'end-timers,' Christians who are con-

vinced by their interpretation of the Book of Revelation that the Second Coming is not far off. But before that happens, Satan will spread his influence and eventually take over the government of the world."

Old Nick is currently attempting to do this, it seems, by undermining family and society through the agency of New Agers, Secular Humanists, gays, Friends of the Earth, evolutionists, transcendental meditators, single parents, couples "living in sin" and adherents to non-Christian faiths (to name but a few).

And the Evangelicals need him to keep busy because there's no show without Punch – no *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. The "reasoning" behind the creation of satanic scares seems to be: "We crave Jesus, but the Bible says he won't come until the Devil's done his bit – and, oh Glory, look, folks, it's the Devil...here...there... everywhere!"

Fools or liars...?

ARE the Evangelical Christians malicious, manipulative liars? Or are they dangerously self-deluding fools?

In May, 1991, *The Freethinker* reported: "It could well be that the whole basis of this nonsense is the involvement of the evangelical group," declared one Orkney resident, referring to the scandal that has caused so much pain and turmoil on the island of South Ronaldsay."

A number of social workers had associated with "drive the devil out" activists, and: "The witch-hunt in Orkney, and that in Rochdale...were the result of a campaign that has been gathering strength for some time. Its chief promoters are Evangelical churches, 'family' pressure groups, publicity-seeking politicians and self-appointed moral guardians who detect satanism everywhere.

"Their witch-hunting activities have led to an invasion of privacy, grief for parents who have been stigmatised as child abusers, unhappiness and possibly psychological damage to children who have been separated from their families... At a period when the social services are being slashed, they have sent police and social workers chasing will-o'-the-wisps, time-wasting operations which delay or prevent investigation of actual physical and sexual abuse of children..."

We returned to the topic in June, 1991: "Evangelical churches and American-inspired 'end-timers' are behind the satanic scare... The Christian witch-hunters claim that a large number of children are being ritually abused by satanists. But Sir John Woodcock, Chief Inspector of Constabulary, says the police have no evidence of ritual or satanic abuse of children."

Laura Norder poses new threat to civil liberties

WHEN the Government's Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill was published on December 16 last year, it provoked much adverse criticism from the Opposition and in the media.

This was based mainly on what it did *not* include – for example, a proper statutory framework for crime prevention and the establishing of an independent review authority for miscarriages of justice – and for its controversial provisions regarding the abolition of the right to silence without inferences being drawn (both, incidentally, quite contrary to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Criminal Justice).

However, regarding the provisions included in Part VII of the Bill, which concerns so-called "Obscenity and Pornography and

DAVID WEBB, Honorary Director of the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts (NCROPA), warns against the potential perils of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill's proposals on "Obscenity and Pornography and Videos."

Videos," hardly a squeak has been heard from anybody. The media has virtually ignored them and politicians of all political hues have either done likewise or presumptuously assumed universal approval.

Yet these Part VII provisions (clauses 64 to 68) contain some astonishing measures with truly alarming implications for human rights and civil liberties in this already grotesquely over-censored country.

Pandering to the baying hordes of its always unedifying right-wing "Laura Norder" faction and their familiar calls for quick-fix, over-simplistic solutions to "crime," a panicking Tory Government has, once again, targeted poor, innocuous "pornography" as its main scapegoat for all of society's ills.

If trouble brews, "sex" *must* be to blame!

Ever pressured too by the Mary-Whitehouse-Mafia group of MPs, the Government has swallowed, hook line and sinker, their emotive and dishonest propaganda in which they have been so improperly aided and abetted by over-zealous, bigoted, empire-building senior police officers who have absolutely no right to break Police Regulations by engaging in such public, political activity.

It has employed the well-tried tactic of Mrs Whitehouse by presenting the need for still more ruthless, catch-all anti-pornography legislation under the deceitful guise of protecting children. At face value, this may seem highly proper and commendable, but Home Secretary Michael Howard's savage measures in this area in the Bill are anything but that.

Most worrying are those measures regarding allegedly "indecent" photographs of children under 16, and the extension of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 to make it an arrestable offence without a warrant for any alleged infringement of Section 2 of the Obscene Publications Act 1959 (that is, anyone who "whether for gain or not publishes an 'obscene' article" – publishing includes simply showing); or Section 1 of the Protection of Children Act 1978 (that is, anyone who takes any allegedly "indecent" photograph of a child under 16 or who publishes, distributes or shows such a photograph).

At present, repressive and intolerable though the Obscene Publications Acts are, and although allegedly "obscene" material can be seized with a search warrant, no *arrest* of any person is possible until after the courts have

made a decision on whether the seized material is or is not "obscene," that is, whether or not the person publishing or hiring or showing it has broken the law.

That is the least to be expected when, as we all know, the legal concepts of "obscenity" and "indecent" are capable of only the most subjective interpretation, and people invariably disagree over what is or is not "obscene."

If the Bill's proposals become law, it will mean that any individual police officer will, potentially, initially be able to arrest anyone he (or she) considers has breached the provisions of the Act (that is, has published "obscene" material).

He will thus be entrusted with the formidable – not to say impossible – responsibility of categorically determining on-the-spot what the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts currently take months – often years! – to decide, and even then with constant disparity and non-uniformity.

Still more frightening are the attendant powers that will allow police officers to raid people's homes (or indeed anywhere else) *without* a search warrant if they have "reasonable grounds" to believe that such an offence is being or has been committed – and remember that UK courts have, in the past, convicted material of a distinctly non-sexual nature as being "obscene" – for example, "horror" videos and even books of a political kind.

The arming of the police with so massively oppressive a power, the kind of power used by Hitler's Gestapo in the 1930s, is horrifying.

It is not difficult to foresee the kind of nightmare situations that could so easily result from such legislation, especially in the light of the recent horrendous cases of celebrated child photographer Ron Oliver and internationally eminent painter, photographer and historian Graham Ovenden, both victims of monstrous police "search and seizure" raids under the other Act, the Protection of Children Act 1978, as amended by the 1988 Criminal Justice Act, which made mere *possession* of allegedly "indecent" photographs of children a criminal offence. Both these men would undoubtedly have been arrested too (that is, instantly deprived of their liberty) if the present proposals had been law.

But Mr Howard's proposals go further. He

THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

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

CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------|
| Up Front: | Page 66 |
| New threat to civil liberties | Page 67 |
| Obituary: F A Ridley | Page 69 |
| What's On | Page 70 |
| Gospels reconsidered | Page 71 |
| A B Lever on Heaven | Page 72 |
| Blast from the past | Page 74 |
| Down to Earth: Bill McIlroy | Page 75 |
| NSS annual dinner | Page 76 |
| You're telling us! Letters | Page 77 |
| Last Word | Page 80 |

Editor's address:

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

Subscriptions, book orders and Fund donations to The Publisher:

G W Foote & Co (Dept F),
Bradlaugh House,
47 Theobald's Road
London WC1X 8SP

Annual postal subscription rates

UK: 12 months £10 or £7 (unwaged). Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £13. Airmail £20 sterling. 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.

Printed by Yorkshire Web, Barnsley S70 2AS.

Laura Norder poses new threat to civil liberties

➔ From Page 67

now not only wishes to arrest people willy-nilly for exercising freedom of expression, something enshrined in both those great charters of liberty, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19) and the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 10), but also wants to widen still further his already viciously draconian powers to do so.

His Bill proposes the introduction of the new legal concept of the indecent "pseudo-photograph" of a child under 16 – surely yet another field-day for the lawyers! He maintains this is necessary "to keep up with new technology" because "computer pornography poses a particular threat."

What that "particular threat" is, and what potential damage it would inflict, he neglected to say during the Bill's Second Reading debate in the House of Commons on January 11. Neither did Home Office Minister David Maclean when discussing the new provision in Standing Committee on February 15. And Committee member Labour MP Mike O'Brien (now £30,000-a-year parliamentary consultant to the Police Federation and dutifully spewing forth the police's most emotive and hysterical vested interest propaganda to the Committee with dog-like obedience) openly declared that he was merely wildly prophesying on what might occur, but that at present there was no real evidence of any deluge of so-called "computer pornography."

Even Sir Ivan Lawrence, Chairman of the

Home Affairs Committee, accepted that this was so during his press conference for the launch of his Committee's report on "Computer Pornography" on February 22. (NCROPA was invited to submit a "Memorandum" to this inquiry, but its submission has, significantly, been omitted from the Report. Sir Ivan apologised for this, but gave the dubious reason of it being too general. It is interesting to note, however, that all the "Memoranda" published in one way or another subscribed unquestioningly to the imposition of State censorship controls and prohibitions. NCROPA's did not!

Just as the legal terminology was deliberately left vague and imprecise when mere possession of "indecent" photographs of under-16 children was criminalised in the 1988 Criminal Justice Bill, in spite of the expressed fears and protests of the NCROPA, and no legal definition of what is meant by "indecent" was thus included in the legislation, so now in this Bill the terminology is to be left deliberately vague.

David Maclean openly boasted of this in Committee when, on February 15, he said: "We have deliberately phrased the (new) law so that it is wide." He went on to say that the new concept of a "pseudo-photograph" is a "catch-all" phrase – just as "indecent" has become a "catch-all" term resulting in many innocent people scandalously being treated as law-breakers by the police and Customs, and stigmatised as criminal perverts.

There are other disturbing measures in Part

VII of the Bill concerning the extended enforcement of the iniquitous Video Recordings Act 1984; imprisoning for three months (now amended in Committee at the behest of Mike O'Brien MP and the Police Federation to six months!) for mere possession of an allegedly "indecent" photograph of an under-16 child; and the increase of penalties including the addition of prison sentences for making "obscene," offensive or annoying telephone calls.

None of these measures, like those already detailed, will substantively "assist in the fight against crime and protect the public," as stated according to the Home Secretary, is the "clear purpose" of his proposals in the Bill. They are inappropriate, unnecessary and above all, irrelevant.

But what most angers NCROPA is that either directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly, they all submit to an overly broad and disproportionate consideration regarding children.

Of course society, quite properly, will never condone the coercive abuse of children by whatever means. That does not mean, however, that everything in life has to be reduced to only that which is suitable in all circumstances. 100 per cent harmless for children in whatever circumstances.

In any case, there are many products available for adults but legally proscribed for children because of their potential danger. The Society expects, however, that parents will not permit their children to smoke their cigarettes. Parents who have alcohol in their homes are expected to allow their children to down whisky-gin-and-tonics.

It further expects that children are protected from the potential harms of a myriad of things, like domestic poisons, or household matches, or kitchen knives. The imposition of such parental discipline is demanded by society and in cases where it is not imposed and where society deems children are at risk, society legally and properly intervenes.

Why should we not expect the same criteria to be applied to sexually and/or violently explicit material, however packaged in whatever medium, including the medium of the VCR and the computer?

If parents genuinely consider the computer in their home is a potentially harmful piece of equipment for their children, the remedy is firmly in their own hands. Parents have the freedom and the right to remove it or at least to control its use.

It is not a Broadcasting Standards Commission or a Video Standards Council, or a Compton Standards Council we need – but a Parents' Standards Council. The sooner our legislators rid themselves of the crazy notion of a "Nanny State" must supplant individual parental responsibility, the quicker we will achieve true freedom of expression in a uniquely sexually repressed country.

Money the key to spread of freethought ideas

SOUTH Africa...Ireland...new assaults on knowledge by Education Secretary John Patten (militant RC) and Junior Health Minister Brian McWhinney (alleged Plymouth Brethren)...fundamentalist Islam's increasing influence and arrogance in the UK...

These are just some of the issues on which articles have been prepared or are in the process of preparation. We have a growing pile of excellent manuscripts on literary, philosophical and historical topics. As always, humour and satire abound in our "for publication" file.

We must have a bigger 'paper and it must be distributed to more people.

Money is the key. If you believe that *The Freethinker* should be made even

more effective, please support the fund. Literally, every penny counts. Send cheques, POs, stamps to: G W Foote & Co., Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: P Forrest and J K Hawkins, £2 each; Anonymous, M Henderson and T Quail, £3 each; Anonymous, G Strang, G F Clarke, L Stapleton, L T Ong, J E S Souster, S M Williams, L D Hall, D Pollack, R A Billen, G J Meaden and R Gauthier, £5 each; L Georgiades, J G Hillhouse and N Sinnott, £7 each; A Negus, P Jackson, D N Tower, D C Peacock, B Able, G Jamieson and Worthing Humanist Group, £10 each; H J Jakeman, G L J Lucas, S Trent and J P Staniforth, £5 each; I Campbell, £17; R Gerber, £40.

Total for March: £281.

F A RIDLEY: A GREAT VICTORIAN

by David Tribe

FRANK RIDLEY, who died on March 27 at the age of 97, was probably the last of that generation of freethinkers, including William Kent Bonar Thompson, who seemed to live on a hand-to-mouth existence, living the life of the mind and not the body. And, especially in Frank's case, what a keen and well-stocked mind it was. No doubt he took notes from his copious reading, but he thoroughly assimilated the material and not only spoke but also wrote without them.

He was born on February 22, 1897 (the comfortable Jubilee year of Queen Victoria) to a comfortable middle-class family in North Wales. Educated at Sedburgh, Yorkshire, he failed to gain entrance to Oxford and went to Salisbury Theological College. Destined like many 19th Century freethinkers for the Church, he became a Licentiate of Theology at Durham University. But, like them, he left God for Mammon and London.

In 1925 he began speaking at Hyde Park and is still remembered as one of its most colourful left-wing orators, despite the impediments of poor articulation and projection. But connoisseurs of urbane debunking and sparkling repartee knew where to come. One of his *mots* concerned a fraudulent financier who jumped from an aeroplane into the English Channel. When a heckler asked Frank said: "Because a shark cannot step out of water for long!"

He joined a number of revolutionary bodies, including the Trotskyists, and gloated that he was expelled by Trotsky himself. His most enduring association was with the Independent Labour Party. He joined it in 1938, became a regular columnist of its organ, the *Leader* (later the *Socialist Leader*) in 1941, and a member of its National Council in 1943. From 1947 he was co-Editor (with George Stone) of the *Socialist Leader* for two years and Editor of *Left* for five.

At the same time he was writing short books on a number of themes that combined his continuing interest in theology and his commitment to radical politics. These periods included *Mussolini Over Africa* (1935), *Next Year's War?* (1936), *The Papacy and Fascism*, *Julian the Apostate and the Rise of Christianity* (both 1937) and *The United States of Europe* (1944).

At Hyde Park and in many political organisations, radical Secularists more interested in freethought could be found cheek-by-jowl with freethinking radicals more interested in politics. So Frank also came within the orbit of the National Secular Society and *The Freethinker*.

In 1941 he began contributing to this journal. By 1951 he was contributing a weekly (usually front page) feature, which continued until 1965. Since many Secularists weren't

radical, let alone revolutionary, these articles mainly avoided contemporary politics. Likewise, many Socialists weren't Secularist, either because they were Christian Socialist or because they regarded the "religious issue" as needlessly divisive, so his *Socialist Leader* features were mainly non-religious. A remarkable balancing act!

Fortunately for freethinkers, Frank recognised "the permanent value and the powerful, though indirect, revolutionary character of British Freethought propaganda, also that no merely political revolution will get very far or make a permanent impression without a concurrent revolution in ideas. Ideas are themselves the most potent revolutionary dynamite" (*Revolutionary Tradition in England*, 1947).

When the great Chapman Cohen retired as President of the NSS in 1949 and as Editor of *The Freethinker* in 1951, there was a void in the Secularist Humanist structure. Though not previously active, save as a writer, Frank was asked to step into the breach after a presidential *interregnum* by R H Rosetti, 1949-51. So in 1951 he became both Editor and President. Not surprisingly, after his *Evolution of the Papacy* was published by the Pioneer Press (imprint of G W Foote & Company) in 1949, his flow of books ceased until after his own retirement as President in 1963. (He had retired as Editor in 1954).

Though his interests included boxing and generalship, he was personally unassertive and did not choose to exercise the executive powers bestowed by his presidential office.

'NO DEATHBED CONVERSION'

AS *The Times* obituary made clear, F A Ridley's mind "...remained as alert as ever until the last year, and his allegiance to the ideals to which he devoted his life was undiminished." He had said that he would like the National Secular Society's Secretary to be asked to officiate at his funeral, so Terry Mullins acted as officiant, calling upon the President of the NSS, Barbara Smoker, to read the well-known passage from Bertrand Russell's *Man on Himself*, in which an individual human existence is likened to a river: "...Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and, in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being..."

The officiant also called on four of Frank Ridley's friends to deliver personal tributes.

Ellis Hillman, who had first met Frank at a meeting of the Independent Labour Party in 1946, described him a "one of the great

These functions were carried out by General Secretaries P V Morris and Colin McCall, or by committees.

He made light of accusations that he had become a figurehead. On one occasion he said to me: "Some people say, my dear David, that you can buy the President for a pint of beer. But it's not true, it's not true. It would take at least two!"

Though he didn't become the Secularist personality in Britain that might have been expected, his writings made him a respected international figure, and not only within the World Union of Freethinkers. He was especially influential in movements for African emancipation, being a friend of George Padmore and Jomo Kenyatta and, with Fenner Brockway, a British delegate to the first All-African People's Conference at Accra. He is also remembered as having debated with the black American Marcus Garvey, a pioneer of Black Power.

An unfounded story depicted him in the British Museum Reading Room occupying the chair of Marx or Lenin. Its catalogue, strangely, describes him as a "sociologist." I doubt if he would have chosen such a vague term himself, nor was he interested in the *minutiae* of affairs beloved of sociologists. His great gift was as a macro-political analyst observing the broad currents of human activities.

Such concerns sometimes led him into unwarranted generalisations, while his Socialist sympathies obscured his judgements of fanatical Protestant sects that he saw as being in the revolutionary tradition. But his *magnum opus*, *The Rise and Fall of the English Empire* (yet to be published) showed historical mastery.

revolutionaries of the century – almost a revolutionary saint," and said Frank became a second father to him.

The next speaker, anarchist Albert Meltzer, recalled a youthful shared interest with Frank in, surprisingly enough, amateur boxing. Later, but still more than half-a-century ago, he was "led astray" by hearing Frank at Hyde Park deny the existence of God.

A younger contributor, Martin Page, said: "His brilliant conversation often sparkled with wit, humour, spontaneous insights and scholarly allusions." Martin also declared: "Let the world know that there was no deathbed conversion, no recantation, no renunciation of the Freethought and Socialist ideals that had sustained him through seven decades."

The final speaker, Al Richardson, spoke of the amazing range of Frank's themes and the breadth and depth of his knowledge, and described him as a "synthesiser." He also paid tribute to Frank's flowing and lucid writing style.

WHAT'S ON...WHAT'S ON...WHAT'S ON

Announcements are inserted in this increasingly popular column free-of-charge. However, voluntary contributions towards the cost of typesetting would be much appreciated. Cheques and postal orders, made payable to G W Foote & Co., should be sent with copy to: The Editor, *The Freethinker*, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ.

Birmingham Humanist Group: For information about Birmingham Humanist Group activities contact Adrian Bailey on 021 353 1189. Friday, May 27, 8pm, at 27 Shakespeare Avenue, Lichfield: a Lichfield Group meeting (please call Ifor on 0543 268647 to check venue and subject). Sunday, June 5, noon for 2.30pm: Annual General Meeting at 91 Nursery Road, Edgbaston (call Jones 021 454 4692 if lunch is required).

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: For details, please contact Secretary D Baxter. Telephone: 0253 726112.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, June 5, 5.30 for 6 pm: Margaret Boden: *What is Artificial Intelligence?*

Crawley, West Sussex: Charles Stewart is working to establish a Humanist group for the area. Interested readers should contact him at 50 Boswell Road, Tilgate, Crawley RH10 5AZ. Telephone: 0293 511270.

Central London Humanists: For details, please contact Cherie Holt on 071 916 3015 or Hilary Leighter on 0895 632096. Monday, May 16, 7.30pm, Conway Hall: Games Evening. Bring refreshments and a board game to share with others. Thursday, June 30, 7.30pm, Conway Hall: Dan Carroll leads discussion on *The Environment: Friend or Foe?*

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, May 16, 7.30 pm: Public meeting. Discussion on *Claiming the High Ground - How can we Promote Humanism?*

Devon Humanists: For details, please contact: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lypstone, Exmouth EX8 5HN; 0395 265529.

Ealing Humanists: Meetings at Friends' Meeting House, 17 Woodville Road, Ealing W5, 8pm. Thursday, May 26: Pamela Diffey: *Rivers of Blood - Prophecy or Provocation?* Thursday, June 30: Jim Mather: *Trade Unionism, Past, Present, and ?* Details: telephone 081-422 4956.

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

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

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

Haverling & District Humanist Society: HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, June 7, 8pm: Public meeting: Alan Shell: *Funerals as Seen Through the Eye of a Humanist Officiant*. Tuesday, July 5: Everyone bring a Press clipping to speak about! Friday, August

5, 8pm, at HOPWA House: Robin Squire, MP for Hornchurch and Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education, will speak on his work with the Department. For further information, contact J Condon 0708 473597 or J Baker 0708 458925.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Details: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; telephone: 0563 26710.

Kent Humanists: Meets at University of Kent, Seminar Room 11, Rutherford College, Canterbury. Sunday, June 5, 2.30pm: John White, BHA: *Education*. Details from Secretary John Payne, telephone 0843 864 645.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, July 12: Summer Garden Party.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Public meetings, Sunday at 6.30pm.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday May 26, 8pm: Barbara Smoker: *Bernard Shaw and God*.

Manchester Humanists: St Thomas's Centre, Ardwick Green. Public meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30pm. Information, telephone: 061-432 9045. May 13: Dr Andrew Read: *Genetic Engineering - Threat or Promise?* June 10: Dorothy Greaves: *The Rochdale Pioneers*.

National Secular Society: Individual membership costs £4 per annum. Special rates for organisations wishing to affiliate. Details from the Secretary, Terry Mullins, National Secular Society, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1. Telephone: 071 404 3126.

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Coleridge Gate, Norwich. Thursday, May 19, 7.30pm: Annual General Meeting.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, May 11, 8pm: Hilary Cave: *Family and Values*.

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 071-831 7724). List of events obtainable from above address.

Stockport Secular Group: Details of activities from the Secretary, Carl Pinel, 85 Hall Street, Offerton, Stockport SK1 4DE. Telephone: 061 480 0732.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, May 11, 7.45pm: Ron Surridge: *The Library Campaign*. Wednesday, June 8: Yvonne Brackwell: *Philosophy for Children*. Wednesday, July 13: Susan Dorrell: *Trading with the Third World*. Annual Garden Party: Sunday, July 3, 2.30pm to 5pm: 15 Manor Road, Cheam. Wednesday, September 14: George Mepham: *World Population Prospects*.

Tyneside Humanist Group: Meets on third Thursday of each month (except August), starting 6.45pm in the Library and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. May 19: *Samaritans*.

Ulster Humanist Association: Meets second Thursday of every month, Regency Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast BT7. For details write to the Secretary, Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE.

Worthing Humanist Group: Heene Community Centre, Heene Road, Worthing. Public meetings, last Sunday of the month at 5.30pm. Information: Mike Sargent, 0903 239823. May 29: Annual General Meeting.

The Christian Gospels reconsidered

REGULAR readers of *The Freethinker* will know that in several articles and letters published in 1993 (each issue from July to November) I commented on various views about the dates and order of writing of the canonical Gospels. I repeated the opinion most widely accepted during the past 100 years that Mark is the earliest Gospel and that Matthew and Luke used Mark in composing their Gospels. I referred to the pioneering work of D F Strauss (whose epoch-making *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* was first published in German in 1835, and the 1840 fourth edition of which was translated into English by George Eliot and published in 1846) describing him as "the Darwin of the New Testament." I added, however, the now widely-held view that "Strauss was wrong about the priority of Matthew's Gospel" (p.187).

Further careful study of Strauss's second, completely rewritten *New Life of Jesus* (first published in German in 1864 and in English in 1865; Second English Edition 1879) gave me pause for thought and made me reconsider the arguments about the relationship between the first three (synoptic) Gospels. I also read William R Farmer's book *The Synoptic Problem* (first published by the Western North Carolina Press in 1964; second edition 1976) which has now convinced me that Strauss and those who agreed with him about the priority of Matthew were actually correct. Farmer also



by Daniel O'Hara

demonstrates to my complete satisfaction that Luke was the second Gospel to be written, and that its author knew and used Matthew; and it is also evident on this view that Mark was written third and that he knew and used both Matthew and Luke. The evidence for this, carefully marshalled by Farmer, is, in my view, simply overwhelming. It represents a return to an earlier view, first put forward by the English theologian Henry Owen in 1764, but more popularly associated with the German New Testament scholar Johann Griesbach, who defended it in a book first published in 1783. It is therefore usually known as the Griesbach Hypothesis.

This view, of course, has important implications for the dating of the Gospels; and my revised opinion on this question is that Matthew was probably written between 75 and 90 AD, Luke about 95 AD, and Mark shortly after 100 AD.

I am, naturally, very sorry if my earlier, less well considered, views have misled any readers of this journal; but I am glad to be able to record my renewed and even stronger admira-

tion of that great rationalist and freethinker DF Strauss, who, I now see, was even more on the ball than I had previously thought!

It may be that I shall have opportunity in the future to work out some of the implications of this "paradigm shift" in my thinking in further contributions to these pages. In any event, those readers who are interested in these issues are strongly urged to study W R Farmer's truly magnificent book, mentioned above.

● Daniel O'Hara will be lecturing on the work of D F Strauss and its contemporary relevance at South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1, on Sunday, October 30, 1994, at 11am. Make a diary note, now!

Congress is postponed

THE IHEU Congress, planned to take place in Delhi in December, 1995, has been postponed because of "internal difficulties."

The decision to postpone was taken with "the utmost reluctance" by the IHEU Executive Committee when it met in Utrecht on April 21.

Meanwhile, when an alternative venue for the next IHEU conference is arranged, readers will be informed.

It is hoped that an international Congress will be held in India at a later date.

Memorial to conscientious objectors

WHEN Bill McIlroy, then secretary of the National Secular Society, remarked at the 1976 funeral of a World War I conscientious objector that the day might come when there would be memorials not only to warriors but also to those who suffered for their anti-war beliefs, he little realised that he was setting in train a sequence of events which would lead to the creation of just such a memorial.

For the ceremony which McIlroy was leading was for the uncle of Edna Mathieson - and she began a long campaign (described, along with a flavour of the life of her uncle, in the current issue of *Humanist News*) for the Memorial to Conscientious Objectors which is to be unveiled by Michael Tippett in Tavistock Square, London, at 3pm on May 15. Readers are invited to attend.

Ice star Curry chose a non-religious funeral

OLYMPIC and World Champion ice-skater John Curry had a Humanist funeral ceremony conducted by Nigel Collins at Oakley Wood Crematorium, Leamington Spa, on April 20.

The 44-year-old Gold Medallist died at his home near Stratford-upon-Avon following a heart-attack.

George Broadhead, Ceremonies Co-ordinator of the Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists, said John had been told about the existence of non-religious funeral ceremonies by a

member of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association when both were having hospital treatment for AIDS-related illness at a London hospital last year.

John decided that this was the type of ceremony he wanted for himself.

Gold

Nigel Collins made it very much a personalised celebration of John's life, with readings and music in keeping with the skater's tastes.

George Broadhead said: "The main part of the ceremony was a tribute to John's life and career and a personal tribute was made by choreographer Gillian Lynne. The family chose sections of music to which John skated in 1976, when he won his Gold Medal, and a poem with AIDS as its theme was read out."

Actors Millicent Martin and Alan Bates were among the 80 people present in support of John's widowed mother Rita, who had nursed him at home for the past three years, and his brothers.

Truth at last

I BELIEVE in the reality of our Lord's *Crucifixion, the Empty Tomb and His Risen Presence with us each day as passionately as I did when I offered for the Ministry 32 years ago, admits the Rev Timothy F Horsington in the Easter parish magazine for Highclere, Caux Easton and Ashmansworth, Berkshire.*

Heaven's above virgins can't

A B Lever talks of higher things to NEIL BLEWITT

GLAD I've seen you, Neil. I've just spent a whole week reading about Heaven and I'm dying to tell somebody what I've discovered. Not literally, of course.

I'm talking about the CofE Heaven. Every religion makes its own arrangements, but all the others seem a little short on credibility to me. You take the Indian one; it's a sort of clearing-house where souls are re-cycled. You might go up one day as a man and come down the next as a cockroach. Or Valhalla, where the old Norsemen believed you went – if you were a warrior that is; if you died in bed you didn't go anywhere. But the warriors were supposed to spend their time feasting on a freshly-killed boar and fighting each other – though their wounds were never fatal because each night they healed up miraculously and the boar got its flesh back, so the next day they all got stuck in again. Good fun for the warriors, I should think, but pretty rotten for the boar. But you don't hear of people going to Valhalla nowadays. I expect it's full up and not taking anybody else; or maybe it never existed in the first place.

But to come back to the CofE Heaven. Some people think that nobody goes there until the dead are raised on the Judgement Day; but, in my opinion, your soul leaves your body when you die and that's what goes to Heaven. I've found plenty of evidence for it – and not just in the Bible.

You take St Dorothea. She was a martyr, you know, and when she was taken to be executed, a chap called Theophilus, who fancied he was something of a comedian, asked her to send him a bowl of fruit when she arrived in Heaven. About an hour later, an angel came up to him with just that – a bowl of fruit! And there was a note with it that read "From Dorothea in Paradise." I should

love to have seen his face. I bet there was a big raspberry right at the top of the bowl!

And there are many instances of people who actually saw Heaven as they were dying, and describing it with their last words. Dwight Moody was one. He said: "I see Heaven opening and God calling me..." It's a pity he died at that point because we shall never know just what God was calling him. Then there was St Antony – the chap who used to preach to the fishes because normal people wouldn't listen to him. He had a similar experience. His last words were: "I see my God. He calls me." I found those quotations in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. Then there was St. Stephen in the Bible who saw Heaven opening too and Jesus on God's right hand.

Clairvoyant

Now if you think that's all too long ago to be believable, you should come with me to the Spiritualist church along the road and hear the evidence for yourself. Every Saturday, they have a clairvoyant there and she contacts people who've died and who want to pass on messages to friends and relations in the congregation. The clairvoyant sees their souls dressed up in the clothes they used to wear on earth and describes them, a little at a time, until somebody in the church recognises them. Then they pass on the messages. And they're so natural; things like "Give my love to grandad!" and "Tell Auntie not to go out without her hat on!" and "Don't worry about me, dear, I don't get those headaches any more!" It's very exciting, and everybody is comforted by it.

And then there's the Bible itself. Oh! and I must tell you this, Neil. I thought I'd make it easy for myself to study all the references to Heaven in the Bible, so I went to the library

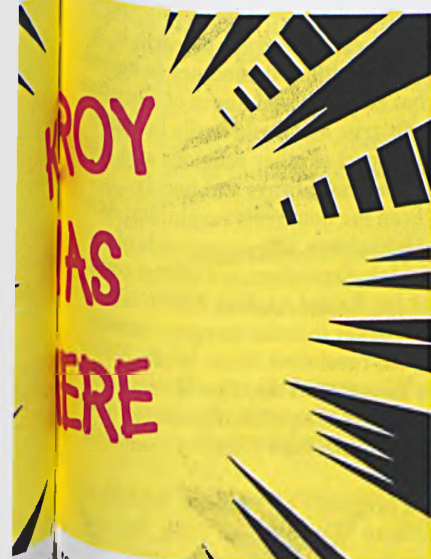


to look at a copy of Cruden's Concordance. I asked the old fellow behind the counter what it's had one and he said "Kruschen's was the best. Honestly – the ignorance of some people!" Funny thing happened to old Cruden the way. He died while he was in the middle of praying. I wonder if it was something he said? They buried him in Southwark in all places! – Deadman's Place. But that's the end of the story. Later on, they built a brewery on the site and I couldn't help wondering if ever there is a Resurrection whether the angel will call out "Time, men, please!"

Anyway – back to the evidence. It's a long time without Cruden because the authors of the Bible didn't set everything down about Heaven in the one place. They put a bit here and there – just to make sure, I suppose, that everybody read it right through when they wanted to find something. But old Cruden sorted out all the references to Heaven and put them together. More than 400 of them and I've read the lot, so I reckon I've got a good picture of Heaven as anybody.

First of all – it's a definite place in the sky. And it's a sort of kingdom that's like a treasure, a sower, mustard seeds, a king-

ove – 144,000 nt be wrong!



ten virgins – all at the same time. To be
I don't quite understand that but I
it's what scholars call paregorical. But
certainly has foundations and pillars
the Bible says they shake from time
the name. It has a temple, a gate, a door (and
to lock and unlock it with), windows,
signs (so that you can find your way, I
(name), a veil and – would you believe it?
opening and a closing time! St Luke and
John both said so and St Stephen and
Moody agreed – so it must be right.
there's a throne there too. Sometimes God
on it and sometimes a lamb. There's a
round it and there are lots of funny
there, like lions and calves with six
the horns each, a horse wearing a crown – with
coming out of its eyes, and a red dragon
and the seven heads. I expect it takes a bit of
pose being used to at first.
the Bible says they have fire and brim-
stone there, voices, water, bread, great won-
derful harps, trumpets, stones, hail, a spirit
like a dove; and Jeremiah – in The Lamenta-
tion – says there's a beauty there – though
I should lament that I'm blessed if I
in the tree! The tree of life is up there too and it's
like a tree flourishing – or at least it was when St
John was making his revelations. And Job

says they have bottles up there. That must be to do with the opening and closing times.

And I should think it's pretty crowded. There are spirits there, elders, armies, hosts, angels, 144,000 virgins and lots of famous people from the Bible, like Elijah. His mantle dropped off and he was taken up to Heaven in a fiery chariot. I expect that was so he shouldn't feel the cold... Abraham is there (with Lazarus in his bosom); so are Moses, Michael, Isaac, Jacob, one of the malefactors, Peter, Joy (she's to do with sinners that repent) and many more.

The other thing that interested me was how everybody spends their time there. And I couldn't really have found out without old Cruden and one or two hymn-writers. I didn't pick any old hymn-writer. Only the scholars. Like J M Neale, who reckoned we should all wear crowns in Heaven. And he was a Doctor of Divinity so he should have known. Then there was Katherine Hinkson and she said she knew there was a door-keeper in Heaven because she wanted the job; there was Thomas a Kempis, who was a Father Superior, a couple of bishops and Peter Abelard.

Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but I had to smile at his hymn. He wrote in one of the verses "Wish and fulfilment never shall be severed." I'll bet that was before Heloise's relations caught up with him!

There's always a need for people to act as angels and stand around the throne day and night – except that there isn't any night. They have to sing, play their harps, swing their censers and serve the Lord with gladness. I imagine the serving is to do with Job's bottles. I might apply for that department myself. There are processions going on where everybody is dressed in white and carries palms and sings anthems. Some people have to lie prostrate before the throne and just gaze – though that's not my scene, frankly. There are always feasts being held – unbroken and unending, Thomas a Kempis said. I hope he was right. And you don't have to worry if you die old and decrepit and at different times from your friends and relations, because everybody becomes young

again in Heaven and full of vigour. Mothers find their children, severed friendships are knitted up and lovers get together again, though why I don't know because the Bible says that nobody is given or received in marriage there. Perhaps it means they don't bother with being pronounced man and wife and everybody can do their own thing. Several writers say there's perfect freedom there.

The sun is always shining in Heaven, you never get tired and when you want a change from singing, feasting, gazing and swinging your censers you go for long walks in green pastures and beside still waters where there are springs and fields and everlasting flowers. And at some time, though I can't find out exactly when, you collect your reward and find some treasure. And the names of all those who go to Heaven are written on the wall. I'll bet old Kilroy's is there!

Epitaph

One hymn says that everybody who is anybody will be there: the holy prophets, the apostles and the bleeding martyrs, so I reckon you'll spend years in Heaven just going round and introducing yourself.

I must say I feel sorry for you, Neil, because, unless you change your ways, you'll never get there. I don't know if you've decided on an epitaph for your tombstone yet, but I think a good one would be: **HERE LIES AN ATHEIST – ALL DRESSED UP AND NO PLACE TO GO.** How about that? Except that there is a place for chaps like you. But that gives me an idea. Now that I've finished my studies on Heaven, I'll have a go at doing some research on Hell. I'll call in at the library again and get old Cruden out and see just what unbelievers like you can expect. I've a good mind to ask for Kruschen's to see what happens! Anyway, I'll let you know because you may want to change your mind about religion. So – hang about. And don't catch anything fatal before I've finished...

Blast from the past: Number 17

AS A Socialist and a Secularist, F A RIDLEY contributed to *The Freethinker* and to the *Socialist Leader* with equal brilliance and equal commitment. This month's Blast from the Past is edited from a pamphlet – *Socialism and Religion*, published by the Engels Society (no date) – in which he gave combined expression to his two philosophical passions.

IF, as is not at all unlikely, Christianity itself started as a “revolutionary” mass movement against Roman society...it was soon effectively captured by the ruling-classes of the day and became an instrument in the hands of the class-state.

In that respect, the “conversion” of the Emperor Constantine (4th Century AD) was the perversion of (the original) Christianity. Even reputable bourgeois historians now admit that the Roman Emperors of the Decline, in adopting Christianity as the state religion, were motivated primarily by political and economic motives rather than by considerations of a purely religious character.

They needed a “moral cement” wherewith to hold together their cracking administrative structure, and to arrest the decay of their exhausted civilisation in the era of the Barbarian Invasions. For a time it was doubtful whether Christianity or Sun-Worship (Mithraism) would best fulfil this social role...

Since its official adoption as a state-religion Christianity has faithfully acted as the docile instrument of the class-state; it was always for the classes against the masses; for the exploiters against the exploited.

Under the peculiar conditions of the Middle Ages the Church indeed became itself the dominant force in society and the exploiter-in-chief. According to a moderate computation, one-third of the land of Europe was ecclesiastical property throughout this period: and this in an agrarian society when land was (in feudal law) *real* property – that is, the kind of property which pre-eminently bestowed social prestige and political power.

It is well known how during this epoch, the golden age of (Catholic) Christianity, the Church waged the most frightful wars in the so-called Crusades (c1100-1300 AD), and that its “Gestapo,” the Inquisition, bloodily and most effectively suppressed every free movement of the human mind throughout this entire era...

And we may add there is strong reason to believe that the Inquisition was an engine of conscious social at least as much as religious repression. The heretical sects which it drowned in blood were the radicals of their period: indeed, some of them belong to the category of Utopian communist sects. The rack and stake of the Inquisition served both God and Mammon impartially.

As Kautsky has aptly remarked: “It was a

SERVING GOD AND MAMMON

fanaticism of avarice masquerading under the forms of faith.”...

Nor has the situation been essentially different in modern times, even though religion has, in general, not exercised the overwhelming power that it enjoyed during the preceding era.

From the time of that great “rebel” Luther, who urged the German princes to “stab and slay” their serfs revolting against intolerable oppression (1525) during the “Peasants’ War” (*Bauernkrieg*), “the social record of Christianity” has been one of almost unbroken subservience to the rich and powerful.

As Engels himself demonstrated, Lutheranism reduced the free peasants of Germany to the level of serfs. If Calvinism was revolutionary in its social effects, it was only so in the interests of the new bourgeois exploiters, the lords of money, against the older feudal exploiters, the lords of land. As Tawney and others have shown, it actually worsened the lot of the poor.

It is notorious how the (reformed) Anglican Church has always been the obsequious tool of the English ruling-class: “God bless the squire and his relations and keep us in our proper stations”!

And subsequent religious history is the same. Every social revolution from the French to the Russian has had to meet the full fury of the Churches. (According to some historians, it was the influence of Methodism

which prevented the French Revolution from spreading to England).

In both its ideology and its property-relationships official religion has only played one role in the class-war: that of chaplain, apologist, and, where necessary, active auxiliary to the ruling-class.

The lack of real democracy on earth is made up by a fictitious democracy in heaven.

And what has been said above of Christianity is equally true and could easily be duplicated...in respect of other religions also. For example, Islam has always stubbornly opposed even the bourgeois revolution: Arabia and Afghanistan, still strongholds of Mohammedan clericalism, are almost completely feudal. Kemal Ataturk had to suppress it in Turkey in order to carry through the bourgeois revolution there. While Hinduism, by means of its doctrine of reincarnation, has cleverly allayed the discontent of the Indian masses with their frightful conditions in *this* life!

Even the originally rationalistic Buddhism has, in modern Mongolia and Tibet, become an obscurantist and oppressive priestly despotism...

In dealing with the reactionary role of religion in past societies we are, of course, dealing with the official religion in such societies. In fairness we must add that another type of religion has existed on which Christian Socialists lay great stress. We refer to such movements as those of the Lollards and Anabaptists which were anti-ruling class, and in some cases even “communistic” in their tenets. It is undeniable that such movements existed, that they reflected their contemporary class-antagonisms and were, even, to a certain extent, revolutionary in their relation to contemporary states and society.

To that extent accordingly, they must be excepted from the strictures passed above on their official counterparts, the “orthodox” churches. We must not forget that in a pre-scientific society religion necessarily became itself an instrument of the prevailing revolutionary class-war.

We must add, however, that their “communism” was pre-scientific and therefore backward-looking: “When Adam delved and Eve span where was then the gentleman?”, as the Lollards phrased it: viz., in the beginning class-distinctions did not exist...



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



JIM fails to fix it

Everybody knows God is perfect...
Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnibenevolent,
Omnipresent and Eternal
- totally and completely perfect.

CHRISTIANS will agree that those opening words to Paul F Pfalzner's article, "The Perils of Perfection," in last month's *Freethinker* describe their deity to a T. Why, then, is The One Above not more choosy about those whom he selects to proclaim his glory?

That simple question is prompted by three lots of Christian propaganda which recently came through my letterbox.

First to arrive was a news sheet puffing yet another religious crusade by the odd name of JIM ("Jesus in Me," in case you are interested). According to its Pentecostalist organisers, the crusade's purpose is converting 250,000 to Christ and to "put the smile back on Britain's face."

The *JIM Times* certainly made me chuckle, but it is likely to make most Christians squirm. There is a distinctly non-ecumenical slant to its message. Reasons why our benighted land must turn to God include pornography, drugs, abortion, rape, homosexuality - and the existence of 1,800 mosques.

Like other detachments of the God squad, JIM enthusiasts unjustifiably claimed the support of leading public figures, including the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Their indignant disclaimers, not the JIM crusade, put a smile on Britain's face. A Downing Street spokesman said that Mr Major "has no connection with this organisation and has no intention of attending any of its services." Labour leader John Smith "at no time endorsed this campaign and the quotes attributed to him carry no substance."

Sir David English, Chairman of Associated Newspapers, said his company "has neither supported nor endorsed JIM" and any suggestion to the contrary "is without foundation... The JIM organisation has apologised to us and has taken our name off all future publications."

In a BBC Radio 4 programme, University of North London lecturer Dennis O'Keefe described JIM propaganda as "extraordinarily displeasing and vulgar." And dishonest as well, he could have added. *The JIM Times* issued an awful warning: "Coming soon.

There's this new book to carry on the JIM theme." And sure enough a copy of *From Minus to Plus - the Epic of Christ's Cross* duly arrived.

Written by German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke and published by Christ for all Nations (UK), the rather garish *From Minus to Plus* is a compilation of recycled "born again" waffle ("Jesus is alive... Sinners are forgiven. The sick are made well... Only Jesus can save us").

Although copies of the booklet have been sent to every home in Britain - or so it is claimed - Pastor Bonnke faced thousands of empty seats when he preached at Watford football stadium. Like Morris Cerullo, he advocates faith healing and invited testimonies from those who had been cured through prayer.

None had either grown a limb or recovered from a serious ailment. But one lady said that her memory was improving, while another, whose knee locked at times, was no longer in pain. Such moving tributes to the efficacy of prayer were greeted with *hallelujahs* and Pastor Bonnke called for "a big, big hand for Jesus."

From *Minus to Plus* contains a quote from an unnamed source: "People can't stand too much reality - that's why we have soap operas." It is also one reason why so much human energy and resources are wasted on the promotion of religious superstition. But not even the most far-fetched "soap" story can match "the old, old story" of Christianity for sheer absurdity.

Overblown and over here

FROM the flyblown to the overblown - JIM bumf was followed by the Mission to London *Newsletter*, announcing a return visit by Morris Cerullo and his road show. In oily prose peppered with exclamation marks, Cerullo greets readers "in the precious and most wonderful name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ... My heart is moved by the vision of countless thousands of souls delighting in the presence of the Lord!... I believe that our God will, again, pour out an awesome display of his Power on the people at Earl's Court!"

Having got that off his chest, the evangelist gets down to basics. Assisted by a team of performers, Cerullo is "personally committed" to filling 16,500 seats each night of his Earl's Court shindig. He may well succeed. Zombie-like, fundamentalist groupies turn up on these occasions and come forward (many

for the umpteenth time) to dedicate their lives to Jesus.

Mission to London is part of a project known as World Evangelism which aims "to bring a million souls to Christ by the year 2000." It endeavours to "undergird, support, strengthen, extend and conserve the vision God gave to Morris Cerullo." But visions alone butter no parsnips - and Earl's Court, vast quantities of glossy brochures, press advertising and hotel suites don't come cheap.

However, as every American evangelist knows, fools and their money are soon parted. In a circular letter, Cerullo told his followers: "Our God is a God who gives and gives and gives." Furthermore: "God wants Christian believers to be marked out by a spirit of generosity... Obviously I'd be delighted if you gave generously to this mission."

Perish the thought that financial support is invited for any reason other than that "God wants his children to be givers just like him."

While on a previous visit to London, Cerullo promised "some will see miracles for the first time." The only miracle at Earl's Court is that so many gulls fall for his sales patter.

Council won't splash out

AN Islamic gentleman must not be looking eastward when he points Percy at the porcelain. Apparently it is an insult to Allah if his followers face Mecca when answering a call of nature.

How this fascinating revelation came to the faithful is unclear, but they take it seriously in Blackburn - where the Council's housing committee received a petition from 29 Muslims requesting the realignment of their east-facing lavatories. The cost, £400 each, would have been met by the Council.

If devout Muslims wish to avoid aiming in the direction of Mecca - a rule which, if strictly observed, could on occasion bring tears to the eyes - so be it. But such quirkiness should not be a matter for local authority policy or subsidy.

It is gratifying to note that Blackburn's housing committee rejected the petition. "Spending a penny" may have become a thing of the past in these inflationary times. But £400 to spare Allah's blushes is beyond all reason.

We're children of chaos

TOO many scientists will simply not stand up and be counted on the side of reason, Dr Peter Atkins, Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, declared at the Annual Dinner of the National Secular Society, held at the Bonnington Hotel, London, on April 16.

In a wise and witty toast to the NSS, Dr Atkins, author of *The Creation* and *The Creation Revisited*, noted that "astronomers are particularly remarkable in this respect - I do not know whether their fascination with the heavens came before or after their spiritual corruption."

He said: "Here we are, with this extraordinary instrument, the human brain; here we are, at the consummation of the renaissance; here we are with the awesome power of human comprehension - yet here we are with the pusillanimous, the scientists who somehow continue to straddle the fence. I am utterly bewildered by the existence of religiously devout scientists: I suspect that they lack a *corpus callosum*, and that each of their cerebral hemispheres runs wildly free of the other.

"I think that we academics, particularly we scientists, have a grave responsibility: we take young minds and nurture them in our ivory greenhouses for three or four years. Some of these young minds, of course, become mildewed, largely through their experimentation with worshipping abstractions. Some even inhale! In my own College, I find it a deep source of embarrassment that it is my own chemists who spend so much time on their knees. A few, however, will see through example that an enquiring mind need not be barren of joy and wonder merely because it has not become a part of a sect.

"My message tonight...concerns the awesome power of science. We scientists are confident that we have discovered a method of exposing the inner simplicity of the world. Our procedure is to identify fragments of the world, to isolate them as much as possible from other fragments, to subject those fragments to close and careful

But the world is wonderful: Peter Atkins

scrutiny and then to try to understand the whole. We admittedly strip the wings off the butterfly; but we never, despite what people say, forget the butterfly's beauty. Such scrutiny takes place in as public a manner as possible, for truth must transcend prejudice - be that prejudice personal, political, cultural, religious, racial, national, or even merely human. It is that Samson-like bursting out of the shackles of prejudice that is one of science's most glorious gifts to the human condition. Truth is a truly harsh master, and pretence at truth and dissimulation will be washed out of false argument, even though it may take centuries.

"The wonderful thing about science is its admission of the possibility of error. That is the source of its strength, its vigour, and its progress. There is no such thing as error in art, and only the possibility of running foul of rules in religion.

"I suppose the most interesting recent example of the strength of science and its regulation of its own errors is the story of cold fusion. Everyone here knows the broad outline of the story, how two exuberant chemists thought that they had wiped the floor with all the particle physicists by showing that nuclear fusion could be achieved in a plastic bucket for about \$15.

"I was actually at the meeting in Dallas [which] heard at first hand the account of the results from one of the protagonists: the other had been called to Italy to explain his results to the President or the Pope - it hardly matters which. Then, of course, shortly after, it was shown that the plastic bucket was ineffective. Now, many took this

as a sign of the stupidity, gullibility, and cupidity of scientists. But I think it exposes the inner strength of science.

"Contrast the response of science to the response of religion. Had a child seen the Virgin Mary perched on a haystack, it would immediately have been accepted as unquestionably true, and a new airport would have been constructed within five years. However, desperate as all scientists - all mankind - were to believe in the achievement of cold fusion, the experiments were subjected to detailed public scrutiny. The world - scientists included - yearned for a comforting outcome, but they were thwarted by observation and the test of public exposure."

Dr Atkins said that the "stepwise progress" of science led inescapably to "the awesome recognition that this universe is devoid of cosmic purpose, that this universe is essentially a lucky accident, that we are the children of chaos, and that all our achievements will in due course be stretched into lifeless dead flat space time."

He added: "As soon as people can get it into their heads, and into their institutionalised collective heads, that we are a flame of intelligence that will flicker only for an instant of cosmic time, that the recent past was inorganic, and the long-term featureless future is empty, with not even a whiff remaining of our former presence; then perhaps people will have the courage to grasp the day, to *carpe diem*, and to break out of the shackles of prejudice and superstition that rule them.

"All I can do as a scientist is to share my vision of this autonomous, autogenic, purposeless, gratuitous, fundamentally empty, but oh-so-rich and wonderful world, and hope that people will, through shared insights, start to come to terms with their transience, and so enjoy what there so briefly is."

Turning to Barbara Smoker, who presided, Dr Atkins - well known to Channel 4 audiences for the *God, For and Against* series - described the NSS as "a splendid society, which in its way endeavours to keep the flame of intellect alive, despite the enveloping clammy fogs of superstition."

He said: "Being rational is such hard work. That is really the problem. It is so much easier to agree with written authority, to go along with the cascading crowd, than it is to sit back and endeavour to find a reasoned way through a social or personal problem."

Other speakers were Dr Michael Rodgers, of Spectrum Publishing, who publishes both Dr Atkins and Dr Richard Dawkins; Mike Howgate, founder of the London Student Skeptics (whose speech will be reported in *The Freethinker*) and Denis Cobell, Vice President of the National Secular Society.

24-page 'special' coming up

In June, *The Freethinker* will have 24 pages - a "one-off" special to mark the official opening of Bradlaugh House.

Alongside our usual features, it will carry articles on Charles Bradlaugh himself (Colin McCall), on the history of our movement and our 'paper' (Jim Herrick) and on the aims and principles of the organisations which make up the movement (Barbara Smoker).

Giving a copy to a friend (or to an adversary) will be a splendid way of introducing her or him to Secularism...Freethought...Humanism...Rationalism.

For eight copies of this special issue, send a £5 cheque or PO (payable to G W Foote & Company) to: Peter Brearey, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ. Please order now.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Drugs law

THANK you for publishing Professor Wilkins' article on the anti-drug laws.

Humanists and Freethinkers have a good record of seeing through the hysteria and myths that surround this subject. Among the signatories to a full-page advertisement in *The Times* of July 24, 1992, calling for reform of the law against marijuana (25 years since the famous original advertisement appeared) were: H J Blackham, Sir Hermann Bondi, Ludovic Kennedy, Bill McIlroy, George Melly, Professor Nowell-Smith, Barbara Smoker, Nicolas Walter, Dr Colin Brewer and H J Eysenck.

Professor Wilkins' analysis is spot-on, although, as he admits, his conclusions are perhaps unnecessarily cautious. Marijuana (and maybe other "soft" drugs) could be re-legalised immediately, perhaps initially on the same basis as alcohol or tobacco (it is safer than either). The use of all other drugs should be decriminalised, and supply wrested from criminal control. "Addiction" is an illness and should be treated appropriately.

Governments have no right to prevent people from ingesting whatever substances they wish. No victim: no crime. We should seek instead to improve society so that fewer people want to escape from it, and create the conditions for safe use of drugs by those who wish to do so.

The point cannot be made strongly enough: drug prohibition and drug control are mutually exclusive. An illegal drug is not a "controlled" drug - it is an out-of-control drug, abandoned to the ungovernable gangster economy.

DAN J BYE
Rotherham

MAY I express my joy on reading the article by Professor Wilkins on the proposals about the reform of the drugs laws. The selection of alcohol and tobacco by the government for legalisation has always horrified me. For a large group in society the abuse of alcohol leads to aggressive and anti-social behaviour. The less said about the effects of smoking the better! Many of us have lost a loved one who smoked.

There must obviously be a rethink about what drugs are harmful and what are not. Soft drugs must obviously be legalised. I wonder if anyone has worked out the moral equation resulting from legalising the hard drugs. Crime would be reduced but of course at a cost to the weaker members of society.

How lucky we have been to read the article by Professor Wilkins in our magazine.

ALAN MASON
Leominster

Bonnke's thinking

HOMES throughout the country have lately been flooded with copies of a glossy 28-page booklet entitled *From Minus to Plus: The Epic*

of *Christ's Cross*. It is written by the charismatic German preacher, Reinhard Bonnke, and published by "Christ for All Nations (UK)." Since the initial print run is claimed to be 25 million, it is obviously intended that practically every household in the country should have one. Supposing the unit cost to have been only 20 pence, then £5 million has been invested in the production, to say nothing of the distribution, of this evangelical loss-leader. Whatever their means of support, there would seem to be no shortage of funds here!

As for content and method, the booklet plays on people's fears about the horrors and disasters happening in the world, which it attributes to human sin, and offers Jesus and faith in him



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

as the "answer." It is a well-tryed formula. Convince people that the world they live in is evil, tell them that you have the only means of escape, and some will take the bait! It is a formula which works best when the outlook is bleakest, when some people will turn to almost anything, however irrational, if it seems to offer a hope.

The scam is more likely to succeed when folk are too busy running from some real or imagined horror to look very closely at what it is they are running to. And this booklet will give no one any idea that the credentials of Christianity are at best as suspect as those of the more unscrupulous used-car salesman. The Bible, selectively quoted, is presented as though it were an unanswerable authority. The reader is invited to "pull the rip-cord" of faith while there is still time, and thus avoid the certain destruction awaiting those who leave it too late!

Was there ever a cornier, more gimcrack appeal to the baser instincts? And yet this pitch apparently comes with the endorsement of none other than the Archbishop of Canter-

bury, described on the cover as "Rev. George L Carey" (not for them, it seems, the Most Reverend and Right Honourable George Carey!). The Archbishop (if it is truly he) is quoted as follows: "It is my hope that this booklet will enable thinking people [sic!] to discover the life-changing implications of the Christian faith."

Those who respond to the blatant sophistries of this nasty booklet are invited to return a postcard, affirming that they have prayed "the prayer of salvation," and asking to be included in "the follow-up programme." They can also, if they wish, be put in touch with "the closest Bible-believing church" in their area. No doubt the majority of Anglican churches would not qualify for this designation. What will Dr Carey think if enquirers are sent, not to their nearest Anglican Church, nor even to their nearest conservative evangelical Anglican Church, but to some fundamentalist house-church, or a conventicle run by Baptists or Brethren or the pentecostalist Elim Foursquare Gospel Alliance?

Surely the Church of England's finances are in too much of a mess for the Archbishop to be content for new converts to Christianity, those who will be its future supporters, to be directed to what in all probability will not be an Anglican church at all? On the other hand, Clive Calver of the Evangelical Alliance, who also commends the booklet, cannot, it would seem, lose. Most of the congregations, of whatever denomination, which support his line are likely to be included on the list of "Bible-believing churches" to which those who fall for Bonnke's pitch can safely be directed from the Post Office Box in Halesowen to which they are invited to apply.

DANIEL O'HARA
London EC2

Censorship?

MY son is now 16, but I well remember the occasion when he brought home from school, as his reading book, the Ladybird version of Abraham's almost-sacrifice of Isaac. A life-long atheist, I was a little irritated, but in accordance with my policy of toleration, I listened to him read it. When he got to the bit where Abraham is just about to kill his own son, my son's voice rose in horror and incredulity. Though we did finish reading the book later, we stopped at that point and talked about it. I confessed that I couldn't make sense of the story, but I explained my understanding of what I thought Christians make of it, in the same spirit as yesterday, 11 years later, we talked about the ideas of Buddhism.

The fact that we never censored our children's reading nor, for instance, stopped them going to church (which they did for a while) has not prevented them from becoming the atheists they are. So I say to Peter McKenna (Last Word, February): Give up censorship! The Bible stories are often sordid, but don't

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 77

spirit them away! Read them with your little boy and discuss the issues with him. He will be going to school soon and he will start to lose his innocence. You can't impede that process, nor should you. Say what you believe and say what you think others believe and, above all, discuss everything. There is more than one kind of indoctrination!

FRANCES WATKINS
Oxford



Plea from NZ

FREETHINKERS are repositories of all sorts of information, and I would like to hear from any reader who might have some interesting tit-bit about any aspect of Rationalism in New Zealand. I am writing a PhD on the history of the New Zealand Rationalist Association and am keen to hear from anyone with any memory or item that could be useful. My name is Bill Cooke and my address is 1A Monmouth Street, Arch Hill, Auckland 2, New Zealand.

BILL COOKE
Auckland

Trekkin'

KEITH Ackermann misinterprets the evidence in concluding that Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* is not Humanistic (February).

Starfleet is a voluntary organisation – not a draft. General obedience to orders is expected, but not blind obedience to illegal or immoral orders. The Federation does not colonise inhabited planets but exercises a great respect for life.

Star Trek is a celebration of diversity. The United Federation of Planets has overcome divisions based on race, religion, creed, and nationality. It advances a commitment to self-determination, self-reliance, freedom, equality, and individual rights. The crews are dedicated to using reason, science, logic and scepticism in understanding the universe, solving problems, and improving the human (and alien) condition. An examination of *Star Trek's* treatment of religious, ethical, and social issues further reveals Roddenberry's Humanism.

Sexism, one of the major flaws of the original series, has been largely remedied in *The Next Generation*, demonstrating the progression of Roddenberry's Humanist views. In my opinion, Roddenberry has been one of the most influential Humanists of the 20th Century.

For a more complete analysis of Humanism in *Star Trek*, please refer to my article in the Fall 1992 (Vol 12, No 4) issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine, published by the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, PO Box 664, Buffalo, NY 14226-0664).

KENNETH MARSALEK
Washington DC

● Kenneth Marsalek is President of the Washington Area Secular Humanists Inc., PO Box 15319, Washington DC 20003, USA.

KEITH Ackermann's belated claim to have discovered a militarist and racist agenda in *Star Trek* deserves further comment.

Strangest of all is his failure to recognise *The Way to Eden* as a satire on the religious irrationalism so characteristic of the counter-culture. The theme of naive utopianism, exploited by a sinister cult leader, has been played out all too often in reality. A Jonestown cocktail, anyone? If Keith Ackermann thinks Manson had nothing to do with hippiedom, I can only wonder which planet he's been living on.

Keith Ackermann and Ciaran O'Riordan seem still to be living in the 'Sixties. Hence the starry-eyed portrayal of "young people" opposing the Vietnam war. How many of those "young people" grew up to vote for Reagan and Bush, and cheered every military adventure they sponsored? Keith Ackermann is indignant that anyone should dare to satirise (of all people) Timothy Leary, who did so much to turn so many minds to mush.

Glorifications of the US military far less oblique than *Star Trek* have never been absent from US television. Frankly, given the fictional premise, the presence of weapons and a military rank structure on the *Starship Enterprise* strikes me as entirely plausible and desirable. If there are any large vessels run on lines that Keith Ackermann would approve of, I'd like to know about them, so that I can avoid them. Portraying the future as other than the fulfilment of pacifist hopes is not militarism. For some real SF militarism, read Heinlein's *Starship Trooper*.

The role of the alien in SF is problematic, and thoughtful representatives of the genre recognise the fact. The easy option is to use the alien to introduce the element of conflict necessary to drama. *Star Trek* (the flawed product of many writers) has often fallen into this trap. To read into this a racist agenda is a gross exaggeration.

In terms of SF for a mass (US) audience, *Star Trek* is notable for rejecting the cliché of the invariably hostile alien (and Spock was retained in the face of pressure from the network). The racist implications of the depiction of the Klingons were recognised to the extent of being incorporated as a theme (in one of the films). *The Next Generation* has its token Klingon.

Of course, having assimilated the Klingons, *The Next Generation* introduces the Ferengi (Hindustani for "European," actually) who "embody all the most negative aspects of predatory capitalism." Ciaran O'Riordan thinks this is tantamount to anti-semitism. Well, *Star Trek* isn't exactly Swift, but could it be, just possibly, that the intent is satirical?

Despite the foregoing, I'm not much of a Trekkie. I find the programme entertaining; the well-meaning muddle of its values is part of its charm. What really bothers me is the use by

Ackermann and O'Riordan of caricature and overstatement as their sole argumentative ploy.

MARTIN STOWER
Birkenhead

● *The Freethinker* really must have an attitude on this question, which has produced such a long and lively correspondence. ARTHUR CHAPPELL will provide it in a major article in next month's issue: Editor.

Atheist PM?

ALAN Stuart (April) should not believe everything written in the *Catholic Herald*. Although I did not hear the Nick Ross quote myself, I doubt very much that Mr Major would have given an unequivocal statement as to his atheism.

Alas that is not in the way of politics. Nor is it borne out by his actions. An agnostic/atheistic PM would not have kept the proselytising Roman Catholic John Patten at Education for as long as he has, nor would he have concluded a broadcast to the nation with a resounding "God bless," which I clearly recall him doing on at least one occasion.

It should also be remembered that the zealous Mr. Gummer, who has taken his baton to Rome, acted as his chief sponsor at the time of the leadership election. I think it unlikely that Saint Gummer would have supported John Major so ardently unless he was quite sure that his man was "one of us" in body and soul.

In fairness to Mr Major, he could hardly be described as evil; atheist or otherwise. He strikes me as a basically well-meaning, decent chap, buffeted and bullied by the fearful back-to-base sex element in the Tory party.

But enough of conjecture – let's hear it from the horse's mouth. Surely the Prime Minister would not mind giving a world exclusive to such a deserving, politically neutral journal as *The Freethinker*! So I am copying this letter to 10 Downing Street, with an invitation to Mr Major to step out of the philosophical closet.

It is often argued that people's religious views are their personal business, but in the case of politicians, who pass legislation affecting the ethical standards of the nation, I don't agree. I think we are entitled to know whether we are governed by independent, freethinking people, judging each case on its human merits, or by programmed dupes obediently following revealed truth falling from the skies and packaged this way or that by self-serving religion.

TONY AKKERMANS
Leeds

God's pancake

I ENJOYED reading Paul Pflanzner's article "The Perils of Perfection" (April). It is amusing, edifying and wide-ranging in its indictment of divine iniquity, from the roasting of

Turn to Page 79

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 78

Then he will be the pleroma of perfection; for nothing is perfect.

J T CALDWELL
Glasgow

● John Taylor Caldwell is the author of *Come Dungeons Dark*, a biography of Guy Aldred, Atheist and Anarchist, and also of the recently published autobiography *Severely Dealt With - Growing up in Belfast and Glasgow* (Northern Herald Books, 5 Close Lea, Rastrick, Brighthouse HD6 3AR; price £5.95), which we plan to review in a future issue of *The Freethinker*: Editor.

Cutting

CLEARLY the tip of the penis is a sensitive subject, as Mr Moreton's defence of circumcision shows (April), although I feel he is making a virtue out of his necessity. My criticism, to which he was responding, was not of the operation for medical reasons, but when it is carried out on children as a cultural fad or as a religious rite. It must be said, though, that some of the medical problems which are treated by radical circumcision could be solved with a little judicious trimming instead of sacrificing all those sensitive nerve-endings which reside in the foreskin.

Mr Moreton has a breadth of close contact with penises which I cannot match, but his statistics on the rate of circumcision may reveal little more than that surgeons in the UK have been over-hasty in resorting to the practice in the past.

Statistics to do with the transmission of venereal disease, too, are suspect, particularly those concerned with AIDS, where figures are distorted by the frequent inclusion of African Muslims in the sample: their lower rates of infection are much more likely to be caused by their leading less promiscuous lifestyles owing to their religious beliefs than by their being circumcised. AIDS is not exactly rare in the USA - despite the "rarity of foreskins there," according to Mr Moreton.

A clean foreskin is no more likely to cause offence than no foreskin at all. The idea that we remove parts of the body which require hygienic attention is ridiculous - ears, noses, toes would all be due for the chop. Why pick on the poor old foreskin?

The same could be said for routine removal as a form of preventative medicine. Should we remove girls' breasts at puberty and thus eliminate breast cancer? Pull out all teeth and avoid caries? Mr Moreton claims "the foreskin has as much use as the appendix"; it is, in fact, a finely evolved device to protect the thin and fragile membrane of the glans, not to mention the aesthetic advantages of its retention. But I am quite happy for it to be treated like the appendix: if there is nothing wrong with it, leave it alone!

D S LEE
Rochester

Slay the dragon

I AM writing with regard to some recent calls urging discussion on the topic of Buddhism. I am afraid I'll have to start by informing Eric Yaffey (March) that unfortunately there does seem to be a *lot* more to contemporary Buddhism than being "a freethinker."

Indeed, I would suggest that a consideration of the practices of the vast majority of Buddhists around the world today (that is, those following the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions) would reveal a greater affinity with subjugation rather than liberation, and superstition as opposed to science.

For instance, a quite unexceptional Buddhist practice is that of *worship*, which takes place at shrines and temples which usually house "idols." Now such behaviour, as Professor Rachels (Alabama) has quite rightly pointed out, "involves a total and unqualified commitment to obey doctrinal commands and such commitment is not appropriate for a moral agent since to be a moral agent is to be an autonomous or self-directed agent."

Another widespread and disturbing aspect of Buddhist practice is the monastic institutionalisation of young men (women are usually not deemed worthy), especially in Sri Lanka and Tibet, where from a very young age children are indoctrinated as "Bikkhus" (or "world renouncers") via strict rules of conduct and ceremonial duties - leaving little room for free action, let alone free thinking.

Additionally, there is a tendency among Buddhists - and this is perhaps the gravest error of all - to share with other religious people a view of the natural world based on superstitionist assumptions such as the primacy of "spirit," as well as such untenable notions as "life after death" and "reincarnation." Such frameworks can only lead to confusion.

For such reasons, I would conclude that even if some wish to ignore the bleak world picture by restricting their examination to a select band of Western "new agers" we are still unable to release the "*odium theologicum*" which hovers around Buddhism, and whose reign has always spelled obeisance, not freedom.

Thus to any "Buddhist Freethinker" I feel compelled to issue Lucretius' warning: "*Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*" and to remind them of the words of Bertrand Russell: "Religion...prevents our children from having a rational education;...prevents us from removing the fundamental causes of war...prevents us from teaching the ethic of scientific co-operation in place of the old fierce doctrines of sin and punishment. It is possible that mankind is on the threshold of a golden age; but if so, it will be necessary first to slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion."

BEN BOUSQUET
Stirling

witches to the hanging of Unitarians. But there is one point on which I would like to make an amendment.

He, and everybody else I have heard or read, credit God with having created the Universe - "teeming with stars and nebulae and galaxies and dust and comets - all was perfect." Not so.

What God made, intended to make, thought that he had made, was a pancake of earth, with bumpy bits, big puddles, bare bits and hairy bits, and the proposed site of Jerusalem in the middle. That is how his clerics drew the Earth for a thousand-and-a-half years, with a furnace beneath, where he put disagreeable people, and an abode of bliss above, where he took great pleasure in making folk who professed to love him sing his praises to all eternity - and serve them right, too.

And he made the Sun to shine on this pancake, circulating around it for ever, reflecting his glory by day, and at night the Moon and the stars took over, shining like jewels in his blessed crown.

This was God's creation, and, of course, the ultimate achievement was humankind, whose chief end" was to glorify him, and enjoy him forever.

With everything tied up so neatly, it must have been very annoying to God to find people daring to disagree with him. Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543) wrote a book asserting that the Earth went round the Sun and not the other way around as God thought. The fact that Nicholas died just after the book was published suggests that God called him to account and dealt with him, thereby pre-empting the priests, and roasting them in the provision of a fire that outlasted forever.

The idea did not die. It was revived with elaboration by Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), who was arrested in 1592 and put on a trial which lasted for seven years, resulting in his being burned at the stake in Rome in 1600. Then, of course, God sent his immortal soul to keep Copernicus company in the everlasting fire of perdition. They both must be there still.

The idea still did not die. About 30 years later, Galilei Galileo (1564-1642) put forward the same ideas with considerable embellishments. He was tried before the Inquisition and found guilty of blasphemy but was not burned because he knew the right people and, besides, the Copernican system was being seriously considered by learned priests. So he was sentenced to indefinite imprisonment. But one of the right people, the Duke of Tuscany, had this commuted to permanent house arrest. He became blind in 1637 and that prevented further studies and blasphemies.

Gradually, God got the message and now he probably agrees that the Earth is round and that it goes round the Sun. All that God knows comes from the human mind. He is a slow learner and is a century or so behind in some matters. But there is hope. He may keep on learning until he learns that he does not exist.

Anglicans' State role could be next to go

FOLLOWING the divisive issue of women priests – of great importance to those affected, including the Rt Hon John Selwyn Gummer, but of no interest to the majority of the British population – I believe that the next big issue to face the Church of England is disestablishment.

Britain alone among Western nations still tolerates the egregious oddity of unelected clergy sitting in the legislature. Although they are no more offensive to the democratic eye than are those hereditary folk who sit alongside them, there is still something incongruous – certainly in the latter part of the 20th century – about unaccountable bishops being able to determine, no matter how minimally, the laws that govern a free people.

This anachronism may now be approaching the end of its unnatural life. Disestablishment, the separation of Church and State, is now clearly on the agenda. The stupidity of these connections, where the current Archbishop of Canterbury was chosen by the Methodist (then) Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, clearly highlighted this need. That a politician (who may not be an Anglican or even a Christian) should have this right in the future highlights the absurdity of an Established Church.

The main impetus for change comes from some of the more conservative (or reactionary) elements in the Church. Disgruntled Anglicans of sclerotic temperament, including those against women priests, see the hand of Parliament in the accommodation of modern values. These traditional and ongoing resentments may finally drag Church-State relations into the modern age.

The mixing of politics and religion is now primarily a feature of backward and illiberal societies, and in its extreme form it produces the Mullah State. Mature democracies take great care to draw lines between Church and State at the constitutional level. The Americans from their inception, the French (from

LAST WORD

by Professor Stephen Haseler

1905) and Germany (in basic law) all shun the notion of a State religion or Church.

Even in Catholic Concordat countries such as the Irish Republic, Spain and Italy (where there is now no question of the Pope anointing the Head of State) there is, formally at least, a looser relationship between the Church and State than exists in Protestant Britain, where there is still an "official religion" and in the Coronation ceremony the Archbishop still places the crown on the Sovereign's head.

Paternalism

Ecclesiastical participation in the legislature is another insupportable mystery. The presence of 26 Anglican bishops in the House of Lords is ultimately harmful to the Church. By mixing the temporal with the spiritual, our Church leaders appear to want to have their cake and eat it. They further weaken their hand by appearing to be a part of the very power structure they seek to criticise.

This special Church of England role in the higher reaches of the constitution has always had an air of top-down paternalism about it, amounting to an unspoken assumption that there exists a single English national community needing established spiritual guidance. This is a view of the country which is both patronising and offensive to atheists, Muslims and all members of other faiths in a modern,

increasingly secular Britain.

The religious writer Stewart Lamont in his book *Church and State* suggested that the established Church had become "an empress without clothes." The Church, he argued, can only claim 39 per cent of the 13 per cent of the British who are churchgoers. He also pointed out that a new generation were no longer bothering to put "C of E" on official forms and had nothing in common with the religious heritage of England.

Recent polling suggests that more than 60 per cent of respondents (both inside and outside the Church) want both the final say of Parliament over Church affairs and the link between Church and State to be abolished.

At the top, a consensus looks like developing in favour of disentangling the Church from the coils of the State. The "Low Church" would welcome separation as an act of liberation which would allow the Church to conduct a proselytising mission more fulsomely. The "High Church" would want to be free to determine its own future, including its relationship with Rome.

Likewise in the political realm, disestablishment could appeal to both Tory radicals (as an extension of "privatisation") and to Labour (both the moderates and the left should welcome it as a necessary act of constitutional change). Only diehards in favour of the status quo would resist.

Very few so far seem prepared to raise the issue publicly. Christians restrain themselves due to the feeling that disestablishment, although right in itself, would weaken in some indefinable way Christianity generally.

The next anticipated crisis to face the Church will be the (possible) Coronation of Charles III. As they consider his marital separation and possible divorce, coupled with his highly-publicised adultery, they will be left with an unenviable task of explanation as they endeavour to drag him through outdated ceremonies and rituals to his role as Head of State and Head of the Church of England, a Church publicly and religiously opposed to the position he is now in.

The time has come for a clear separation of powers and roles. The Humanist movement can take a leading part in the highlighting of these age old connections and the need for their reform.

● Stephen Haseler is Chairman of Republic, a pressure group campaigning for the abolition of the hereditary principle in the selection of a Head of State and the Second Chamber. Republic can be contacted at PO Box 2698, London W14. New supporters from the Humanist movement would be welcome.

Professor Haseler is Professor of Government at the London Guildhall University; he recently published a book on the Monarchy called *The End of the House of Windsor*.

*A London memorial meeting for
F A Ridley will be held in
The Library, Conway Hall,
Red Lion Square,
on Sunday, May 29, at 3pm.
Further details from
NSS Secretary Terry Mullins
on 071 404 3126.*