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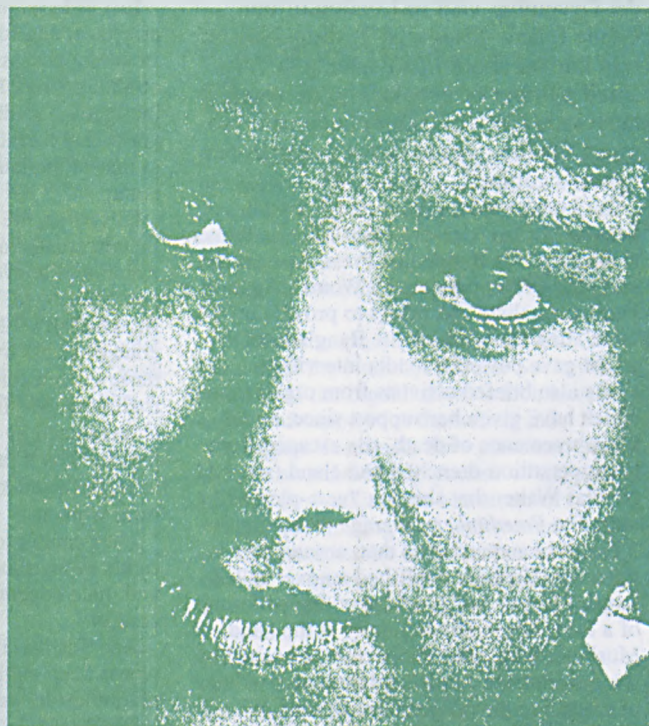
Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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Taslima Nasrin shows:

A SPECIAL KIND OF COURAGE



Mullahs' men in Iran:

- Bury women to the neck and stone them to death
- Rape virgins before execution
- Flog pregnant women (80 lashes a time)
- Disfigure unveiled females with acid

ALL IN THE NAME OF ALLAH

UP FRONT

with the Editor

Malice of the mullahs

LIKE the spirochæte of some foul disease, the bloody malice of the fundamentalist mullahs threatens life and limb far beyond the seat of its incubation – and so the December visit to London of our heroic fellow-Secularist Taslima Nasrin was known about in advance to a very small number of people. Her movements here were likewise semi-clandestine; so much for the right to move freely in our nation's capital!

But I am proud to report that National Secular Society vice-president Nicolas Walter, manager of the Rationalist Press Association, was able to co-operate with Women Against Fundamentalism and others to provide a "safe" base from which the Bangladeshi writer gave powerful media interviews.

She also briefed activists from organisations which have given her support since, under Islam's sentence of death, she escaped from her superstition-drenched homeland (she told Nicolas Walter that she was "very pleased" with *The Freethinker* coverage of her fight).

It will be remembered that, around two years ago, Taslima published a novel called *Lajja* (Shame) which described the sufferings of a Bangladesh Hindu family at the hands of Muslims. Soon after the book was banned by the government, fundamentalists accused her of offending the religious sentiments of Muslims and offered blood money of 50,000 taka to anyone who would murder her.

There were riots in Dacca, hysterical calls for her public hanging – and even the threat of 10,000 snakes being released by piously uncharming charmers.

When a Calcutta newspaper inaccurately claimed that she had called for the Koran to be rewritten, the crisis grew deeper and darker, with strikes and protest marches demanding her death – and a warrant for her arrest from a pusillanimous government.

Taslima went into hiding and then escaped from the country. She was invited to take up exile in Sweden with the support of the international writers' organisation, PEN.

Tagore thou shouldst be living at this hour!

Mediaeval muck

THE mullahs – determined to suck their country even deeper into its mediaeval muck – have used Taslima's case as an excuse to demand the introduction of a blasphemy law like that of Pakistan, which carries a mandatory death penalty.

Both the main parties in Bangladesh rely for their support on fundamentalists, and the

in absentia court case against her, which had not opened as *The Freethinker* went to press, is really about keeping the forces of darkness sweet (if that is not a horrible contradiction in terms).

The mullahs link their persecution of Taslima with a demand for the exclusion of Western aid agencies, which they say create "decadence" and "anti-Islamic practices."

Just as here, in earlier times, Christian priests, acting for the ruling classes, understood the necessity of keeping the lower orders ignorant and illiterate and therefore ineffective, so this mangy crew in Bangladesh know that literacy is threat to their power and to that of the landlords and sweatshop proprietors.

Of course, the Industrial Revolution in Britain created a demand for a labour force which was conversant with the 3Rs and the policy changed, but around 80 per cent of Bangladesh's 120 million people are still illiterate peasants living under the control of these village conjurers – who know that the traditional Muslim society of the countryside is threatened by aid-backed development initiatives which facilitate social progress through the education and empowerment of rural women.

They cannot tolerate literacy and human rights awareness alongside the superstition and male hegemony which underpin priestly control.

And Taslima is the enemy because her words keep alight the slow-burning fuse of a revolution-in-waiting.

"Some men would keep women in chains – veiled, illiterate and in the kitchen," she says. "Everywhere I look I see women being mistreated and their oppression justified in the name of religion.

"How can Bangladesh become a modern country and find its place in the world when it is dragged backwards by reactionary attitudes to half its people? It is my conviction that politics cannot be based on religion if our women are to be free."

Meanwhile, she adds, in obscure villages, women are all the time being killed as a result of *fatwa*, and that, of course, is a fact of life – of death – in countries other than backward Bangladesh.

Indeed, subjugation, killing, rape and mutilation of females are *typical* accompaniments – rather than foul aberrations – of Muslim fundamentalism.

Hatred of women

I HAVE reports from Afghanistan, Algeria, even Turkey (once a great hope of Secularists everywhere) which add new material to the

great body of proof of the women-hating nature of militant Islam.

There is no space for it here, this month, but a newly-published report on the continuing suffering of Iranian women cannot be ignored: it seems so exactly to underline Taslima Nasrin's message.

The report, by the all-party British Parliamentary Human Rights Group, gives examples of torture, oppression and executions. Much of the information – expertly summarised by Margaret Coles in *The Observer* on December 4 – is being revealed for the first time in the West.

The MPs say that Iranian women are treated by the regime as subhumans, and that the law – death for adultery and for women failing to cover themselves from head-to-foot – is routinely enforced in practice.

The penalty for adultery is flogging for a single man but stoning to death for an unmarried woman. All married offenders are liable to be stoned to death, but while men are buried up to their waists during stoning, women are buried up to their necks. Those who escape are allowed to go free!

Two women named as Nahid Karami and Zahra Fat'hi were stoned to death in public in Langroud in 1990 after being convicted of "spreading corruption, vice and adultery."

In May, 1993, Roya Ansari, 24, had acid thrown in her face by agents of the Revolutionary Guards during a campaign against veiling in Isfahan. Reportedly, she is now blind.

Sarmast Akhlaq-Tabanderh, a former interrogator for the Revolutionary Guards in the central city of Shiraz, has revealed numerous accounts of the brutal rape of Iranian women political prisoners.

He said: "Once they had arrested a couple along with their eight-year-old daughter. Separated from her parents, who were undergoing interrogation, the girl was crying uncontrollably. One of the interrogators, Zolghadi, pretended to calm and soothe her. He took her to the prison storehouse where he raped her."

I have it at the back of my mind that Islamic law forbids the execution of virgins, but that problem is easily solved by the faithful. The former interrogator said: "Virgin women prisoners must as a rule be raped before execution. The prison officials would write down names of guards on the firing squad and the names of officials present and would then conduct a lottery draw. The night prior to execution, the woman is injected with a tranquilliser and the 'winner' conducts the rape."

The next day, after execution, the religious judge at the prison would write out a marriage certificate and send it to the victim's family



UP FRONT

with the Editor

From Page 2

along with a box of sweets.

Kati Ghazi, the American-educated, Iranian-born correspondent of the *New York Times*, was stripped of her press credentials because a little of her hair showed in public.

Faribah, aged 53, was putting groceries into her car. Stopped by a guard, she realised that "my headscarf had slipped back a little from my forehead... but I didn't have a hand free to adjust it."

Faribah was taken to prison with more than 100 women aged between 15 and 62. She and the others were held for seven hours, then released and later taken to court.

Each of the women, including one who was five months pregnant, was sentenced to receive 80 lashes.

In 1993, at least 3,600 people committed suicide across Khorasan province alone by taking tranquillisers and poisons. Among

them were 2,530 women. That year, 59 people tried to commit suicide by setting themselves on fire. A senior official at an intensive care unit for burn cases at Mashhad's Qaem Hospital said that nearly all were women, and nearly all died.

Ignorance, slavery

SUCH outrages as these are never far from Taslima Nasrin's mind. When journalist Linda Grant (*The Guardian*, December 14) pointed out that Muslim fundamentalists say that humanism is an import from the West, Taslima said: "Humanism is not western or eastern or southern or northern. It is just humanism. They protest against me but I am surprised that they don't protest against inequality and injustice. What I have done is protested against the system which is against women. I have seen that, in the name of tradition, society wants to keep women in ignorance and slavery..."

"I realised from childhood that women were treated as childbearing machines or decorations, not human beings..."

Keep up pressure

IF TASLIMA is not to spend the rest of her life as a fugitive, Freethinkers throughout the world must keep up the pressure on the Bangladesh authorities for the restoration of human rights in their country.

Happily, this message has been potently conveyed by the European Parliament through their award to Taslima of the £12,000 Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought.

Klaus Haensch, the Parliament's President, who presented the prize, said the writer "had been a symbol of the international struggle for freedom of expression," and Taslima said the prize gave her strength and encouragement in her struggle: "I will go on fighting for human rights as long as necessary."

Previous recipients of the prize have included Nelson Mandela and the former Czech leader Alexander Dubcek. It is to be hoped that Mandela and others who benefited in their hour of suffering from the support of freedom-lovers throughout the world are making known to the Bangladesh government their abhorrence of the way in which Taslima is being treated.

We might wonder, indeed, when the world's liberals and leftists plan to mount their great campaign against the excesses of fundamentalist Islam in general, and for Taslima and Salman Rushdie in particular, now that the

Boers are vanquished and the Soviet bloc is no more? Surely the fact that the perpetrators of "religious" acts equally as murderous as anything the *apartheid* regime could dream up are brown-skinned will not be allowed to stand in the way? Are you there, Mr Hain? Where are all those devotees of liberty who maintained decades of noisy pressure on Russia and Eastern Europe?

Please buy the book!

READERS of *The Freethinker* can help create pressure on the mullahs and their colluding government by arranging for resolutions of solidarity with Taslima – and individual letters of support – to be sent to the Bangladesh High Commission, 28 Queen's Gate, London SW7.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union and the National Secular Society are just two of the organisations which have expressed support for the writer, and Norwegian Humanists have presented her with an award. Most important of all, perhaps, is the backing she has received from unsung freethinking men and women on the sub-continent itself: it takes a special kind of courage to put one's life on the line for a principle, which is what they, like Taslima herself, have done.

Taslima's book, by the way, is now available in Britain. Published by Penguin Books India, *Lajja* (Shame) is translated by Tutul Gupta, costs £5.95 and is distributed here by Soma (ISBN 0 14 024 051 9).

In buying it, we will not only provide ourselves with "a good read" but also we will cock a snook at the mullahs and help to support Taslima financially.

For, as I have said before, she is most assuredly *one of us*. In an interview with Sara Whyatt (*Index*, September-October, 1994), she declared: "I am an atheist. All forms of religion are anachronistic to me. I dream of a world without religion. Religion gives birth to fundamentalism as surely as the seed gives birth to the tree. We can tear the tree down, but if the seed remains it will produce another tree. While the seed remains we cannot root out fundamentalism."

Writers in exile

IN October, 134 writers in Iran sent an open letter to the government, demanding freedom of expression and announcing an independent professional association of writers. Now, Iranian PEN in Exile exists in London to represent writers outside Iran and the Humanist Centre at Bradlaugh House has granted use of its facilities.

THE FREETHINKER

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Fundamentalists seek to put university clocks back

THE intellectual agonies and economic consequences experienced by those unable to free themselves from styles of thinking engendered by their religious upbringing permeate the essays in this book.

At first the work seems to be of interest wholly or mainly to readers in the United States. "The September Six" (Ch 1) are most unlike any groups recently

BOOKS

allotted similar designations in this country. They are (or were) members of the staff of Brigham Young University, and standard-bearers for academic freedom. Their views are not shared by the university and the related Mormon authorities. Their hope is that "the Mormon community will recall (return to?) its heritage as religious humanists, a heritage of freedom of conscience." The problem, as seen by this group (who still accept the Mormon faith) seems to be that their Church does not now (as in the past) adapt its teaching to accommodate contemporary issues and knowledge. They think that such accommodation is possible, and probably this thought motivated this "gathering" of September 1993 in Salt Lake City which provided the material of this book.

Professor (philosophy) Paul Kurtz in a supplementary introduction or "overview" presents an essay on academic principles (*lernfreiheit*) and humanism. His first topic includes material which, in this country, should cause much concern. Currently anti-intellectualism has less powerful support in the United States than here, but as noted (p 144), until recently in the United States "the public rhetoric of religion...had been largely the property of liberalism. Suddenly and immutably the realms of religion have been ceded to the conservative right... so that by 1992 one had the eerie sense that the right was asserting ownership of God." Most academics at the Mormon University yielded superior allegiance to their Church and at least superficially deferred to authority, but a minority (represented here) tried to hold both to their academic freedom and their faith. To achieve this, arguments based on religious authority were invoked. Cecilia Farr (Ch 12) quotes freely from the Bible and states: "As a Latter Day Saint I am bound by that

Religion, Feminism and Freedom of Conscience: a Mormon-Humanist Dialogue edited by George D Smith. Prometheus Books (UK). £25.50. ISBN 0-87975-887-2. Review: Professor LESLIE T WILKINS

which I hold sacred to support an intelligent, radical feminist position in social, economic political and religious philosophy." However, she also notes: "I am being forced to leave the university..."

In addition to the introduction and overview, there are 12 chapters and an Epilogue. The chapters are divided into three sectors: i. Freedom of Conscience, ii. "Academic Freedom," iii. "Feminism," while the Epilogue is a reprint of a famous essay (1939) by Walter Lippman titled "The Indispensable Opposition."

Kurtz (Overview) supplements his defence of academic freedom with many statements which put the humanist's case most elegantly and concisely. There are, he says, those who "believe that...free inquiry would endanger faith, upset dogma, imperil the body of church doctrine...Surely if one has little hope that an analysis of belief will survive critical scrutiny, or if one believes that questioning beliefs will lead to their destruction, then so much the worse for the beliefs." Yet Billy Graham is reported as saying that: "If the Bible told me that two and two made five, I'd believe it." He, and unfortunately many others, probably would.

Though most of the essays were born out of this religion/academic conflict, the troubles are not limited to the Mormon church. Robert Alley (Ch 2) reports that, following a news story that he was maintaining that "Jesus never claimed to be God," pressure developed in the local Baptist community against his continuing employment in the local university. "The president of the university began to meet with me regularly. He finally told me that I couldn't be fired because I had tenure...but that he might lose his position." Alley agreed to a lateral transfer to ensure that the president was not replaced. He notes that since 1962 the Supreme Court has silenced school-sponsored classroom prayers, and states that "this silence protects the most pre-

vious possession of every citizen; human conscience." "Multiple cultures and religions," he says, "are secure as long as none is allowed pre-eminence."

Allen Roberts (Ch 5: Free Inquiry in Religious Context) claims that Brigham Young University would get few points on the academic criterion outlined by Professor Pelikan. Though a professor of religious studies at Yale, Pelikan nominated, "free inquiry, scholarly honesty, civility in discourse, toleration of diverse beliefs and values, and trust in rationality and public verifiability." Vern Bullough (Ch 6), however, says that: "Religious orthodoxy and the intellectual freedom necessary for higher education are simply contradictory components." In this chapter Bullough also comments upon the history of academic endeavour from early times, observing that a few hundreds of years ago universities were all religious establishments and that the pursuit of learning had forced secularisation. On his account, one might suggest that today religious fundamentalism is now putting the clock back towards the Middle Ages.

Currently, attempts by the rigidly orthodox to control what is taught in seminaries have been renewed. "Some churches have established colleges where the whole faculty must adhere to narrow guidelines of orthodoxy, but they do this only by refusing tax money." (p 68)

There is no doubt that religion underpinned much that was good in American politics in the past, and it "has returned to the political realm with a vengeance since the 1980s - but only on the conservative right." (p 148). Some, it seems, blame the left for "shedding religious rhetoric like a useless skin." It is interesting to ask how thick is the religious skin of those who are now, and who would aspire to be, our government.

Those who have any interest in religion, academic principles, research or teaching should read this work and, in the light of the tragedies it reveals, take note of the way this country is moving - indeed has moved. Threats to academic tenure in the US are still almost unthinkable; here it was abolished overnight by an edict from Number 10. And no one really objected!

● Reviewer Leslie T Wilkins, now living in Cambridge, has held a number of academic posts in the USA, including that of Professor and Dean of the School of Criminology, University of California at Berkeley.

Darwin's bulldog – and a whole lot more

Huxley: the Devil's Disciple by Adrian Desmond. Michael Joseph. £20.
Review: COLIN McCALL

He also saw a lot of suffering and death, including that of Captain Stanley who, unstable at best, had a stroke, then a fit, and died in the assistant-surgeon's arms.

But the young man had done an enormous amount of scientific work, which Desmond describes vividly and knowledgeably. Moreover, Thomas had fallen in love in Australia and, indeed, become engaged to Henrietta (Nettie) Heathorn, who was to join him and marry him in England, when the financial situation allowed.

Huxley "brought back 180 sheets of drawings, and page after page of salty, sweaty description of diaphanous sea nettles and planktonic molluscs, of the blood system of transparent crustaceans, of the anomalous bristle-jawed arrow-worms, of two new orders of sea squirts and 40 genera of jellyfish."

On returning home, aged 25, he found that every thinking man he met was "in a state of doubt on all the great points of religious belief. And the unthinking men...are in as complete a state of practical unbelief."

He joined the first group, comprising men like George Henry Lewes and Herbert Spencer, and it can truly be said that he did as much as anyone to broaden the minds of the second group with his popular scientific lectures. He was, as he put it, equally at ease with the artisan and the squire.

Elected to the Royal Society in 1851, he found his true vocation as a populariser of science three years later as professor of natural history at the Royal School of Mines. Through the British Association for the Advancement of Science he met John Tyndall, who became his friend for life. And Herbert Spencer introduced him to John Chapman, publisher of the *Westminster Review* and of books like George Eliot's translation of Strauss' *Life of Jesus* and Francis Newman's *Phases of Faith*.

Offered his own scientific column by Chapman, Huxley began by slating spiritualism, that "Witch Sabbath of mesmerists, clairvoyants, electro-biologists, rappers, table turners, and evil-worshippers in general."

But he and his young fellow scientists, Tyndall, Joseph Hooker and Edward Forbes, were also attacking the scientific establishment, epitomised by Sir Richard Owen, for whom nature had a divine purpose. Huxley slated Owen continually, from a naturalistic, though not an evolutionary standpoint.

Darwin had not then published *The Origin of Species*, though he had been sitting on his theory for nearly two decades. He invited

Huxley and Nettie to Downe in 1856, for a meeting which first set his "bulldog" on the evolutionary path, becoming "my good & admirable agent for the promulgation of damnable heresies," as Darwin phrased it.

Darwin particularly appreciated "the clear and condensed vigour" of Huxley's prose, the capacity – in Desmond's words – to make "the profoundest science exciting to workers."

Man's Place in Nature, with its skeletal frontispiece, gibbon, orang-utan, chimpanzee, gorilla and man (a "grim and grotesque procession," the Duke of Argyll called it) was published by Williams & Norgate "at a bad time" in 1863. Written in "punchy street prose," says Desmond, "That prickliest subject, humanity's origin from ape-like ancestors, was being broached first among the people. And they loved it, even at six shillings."

Darwin loved it, too, with its rousing finale. "I declare I never in my life read anything grander." Like a fine day, a book should end with this sort of "glorious sunset." Engels also thought it "very good" and told Marx so. And it signalled "a revolution of mind" for the "old troopers" who "joyously ran extracts in the *National Reformer*." Within a week, Williams & Norgate were preparing a second thousand.

Evolutionary naturalism dominated the BAAS meeting at Norwich in 1868, with Tyndall presenting a materialistic view of consciousness and Huxley ending his scientific "odyssey" with the option, evolution or creation? "Choose your hypothesis," he told his audience, "I have chosen mine." Whereupon a man got up and declared they "had never heard anything like this in Norwich before."

Meanwhile the essays, often based upon Huxley's lectures, were breaking all records. "On the Physical Basis of Life" in the *Fortnightly Review*, which sent the magazine "into an unheard of seven editions," had inaugurated a Sunday evening series in Edinburgh in 1869 when, Desmond says, "Huxley made 'Protoplasm' a household word." And a listener familiar with the scientific greats of France and Germany, announced that "Mr Huxley surpassed them all."

Darwin told him: "There is no one who writes like you."

A pity that he coined "agnostic," but it seems to have died its natural death; and outspoken though he was in science, he remained a little timid in philosophy. At times, Desmond points out that he used materialistic terminology while abjuring materialism. But he had no equal as a scientific writer and lecturer. In 1862 he travelled 4,000 miles by rail fulfilling engagements. "No one in history had commuted like this and still held down a regular job."

It's a splendid story, excitingly told and delightfully illustrated.

HERE is a contrariness about this book. While narrating how dock-side-boy Thomas Henry Huxley assaulted and overcame the Victorian elitist religio-scientific establishment, it continually disparages the working class and freethinking followers who helped him to do so. For Adrian Desmond, they are disreputable army, "the great unwashed," "the cloth caps," with their "gutter press." Robert Cooper and John Watts are "atheist demagogues," and George Jacob Holyoake "toed the line of his gutter rag the *Oracle of Reason* (penny trash...)" when he defended himself against the blasphemy charge at Gloucester.

There was no such snobbery about Huxley, who called himself a plebeian. He could be sedate on the platform of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, but he was equally at home in the Hall of Science and the Working Men's College. And on Sunday, January 7, 1866, two thousand people were turned away from a hall in Long Acre, London, packed to suffocation, where he gave that Jenny Marx called a "genuinely progressive" sermon on "The Desirableness of Improving Natural Knowledge."

It was too progressive for the Lord's Day Observance Society, which stopped the remaining series of "Sunday Evenings for the People."

But if I jib at Desmond's snootiness, I am captivated by his scientific lore, and his coverage of the Rattlesnake voyage couldn't be better.

How different it was from Darwin's in the *Beagle*, a decade earlier, as self-financed companion to Captain FitzRoy, able to hire a horse or borrow an elephant at ports of call, and dine with ambassadors.

As assistant-surgeon, Huxley had his own cabin, but there was scarcely room to turn in it and, at 5 feet 11 inches, he measured over a foot more than the lower deck. "Happily, however," he reported, "there is a sort of skylight into the berth, so that I shall be able to sit with the body in it and my head out."

In the Atlantic storms the shoddy ship was lashed and tossed for days, leaving the lower decks flooded, the water sloshing from side to side carrying everything that was movable.

By the time they reached Sydney, *Rattlesnake* and her tender were in a terrible state. Nine months in the tropics had left them rotting and cockroach-ridden.

During the voyage Huxley had an attack of dysentery and experienced gloom and despair.

BOOKS

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

Birmingham Humanist Group: Saturday, February 18, 11am to 4pm: University of Birmingham Theology Day School: *The Roots of Morality - Christian or Humanist?* Harry Stopes-Roe debates with a moral theologian. Prior payment (£10 or £7 concessions) to School of Continuing Studies, University, Birmingham B15 2TT. Monday, February 20, 7.30pm, Martineau Centre, Balden Road, Harborne: David Green: *Jesus Versus All The Christians*. For information about Group activities contact Adrian Bailey on 021 353 1189.

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, February 5, 5.30pm for 6pm: Marguerite Laporte: *Update of the Solar System*.

Bristol Humanists: For details, please contact John Smith on 01225 752260 or Margaret Dearnaley on 01275 393305.

Central London Humanists: For details, please contact Cherie Holt on 071 916 3015 or Hilary Leighter on 0895 632096.

Chiltern Humanists: Details of group from 0296 623730.

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

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Monday, January 16: *The Arms Trade - the Ultimate anti-Humanism*. Monday, February 20: The International Humanist Movement. Meetings start 7.30pm.

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.

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

Ealing Humanists: Friends Meeting House, 17 Woodville Road, Ealing W5. Meetings start at 8pm. Details: telephone 081-422 4956 or 081-573 1235.

Edinburgh Humanist Group: Programme from secretary, 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD; 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, London WC1.

Havering & District Humanist Society: HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, February 7, 8pm: *The Development and Work of the United Nations and the Role of the United Nations Association*. For further information, contact J Condon 0708 473597 or J Baker 0708 458925.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Details from secretary: George Rodger, 17 Howburn Place, Aberdeen AB1 2XT (telephone: 0224 573034). Convener: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; telephone: 0563 26710.

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

Kent Humanists: Meet at University of Kent, Seminar Room 11, Rutherford College, Canterbury. Details from Secretary John Payne, telephone 0843 864 645.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Meetings at 7.30pm. Tuesday, January 10: Fred Davies: *The Influence of 19th Century*

Quakers on Modern Society. Tuesday, February 14: Peter Wrigley: *Overseas Aid - a Hand-out or a Hand-up?* Tuesday, March 14: Peter Millican: *David Hume - A Key Figure in Humanism?*

Leicester Secular Society: Details from the Secretary, Lyn Hurst, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB (telephone 0533 622250). January 22: Lorna Chessum: *Development of the Afro-Caribbean Community in Leicester from 1945*. January 29: Against the Criminal Justice Act. February 5: Bill McKeith: *Close Campsfield Prison for Asylum Seekers!*

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, January 26, 8pm: Don Langdown: *Isaac Newton, Solitary Genius*.

Manchester Humanists: Information, telephone: 061 432 9045.

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich, 7.30pm. January 19: Paula Grierson: *Themes of Freedom and Beauty in Buddhism*. February 16: *Talking to the Quakers* (at Friends' Meeting House, Upper Goat Lane).

Preston and District Humanist Group: Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Peter Howells, telephone 0257 265276.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, January 11, 8pm: David Rogers: *Community Building: Something for Humanists to Study and Act Upon?* Wednesday, February 1, 8pm: Bill McIlroy, former Editor of *The Freethinker: Foundations of Modern Humanism*.

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 071-831 7723). 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, January 11, 7.30pm: Hilary Leighter, BHA EC: *Equal Opportunities for Women - a Humanist Concern*. Wednesday, February 8, 7.30pm for 8pm: Michael Round: *If God Does Not Exist, How Can Children Worship?*

Tyneside Humanist Group: Meets on third Thursday of each month (except August), starting 6.45pm in the Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. January 19: Prof Neil Jenkins: *Can Religion and Science be Reconciled?*

Ulster Humanist Association: Meets second Thursday of every month, Regency Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast BT7. Details: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE.

Worthing Humanist Group: Info: Mike Sargent, 0903 239823.

FREETHOUGHT HISTORY

Fascinating paper in danger of closure through lack of support: \$10 a year to any address in the world. Details from Fred Whitehead, Box 5224, Kansas City, Kansas 66119, USA.

Laughter in Geordieland, but...

AS President of the National Secular Society, I am often invited to participate in university debates on religious themes, and I have previously described in *The Freethinker* some of those debates which, in the past couple of years, have been taken over by Muslim students. But, with the exception of Sheffield, that does not apply in my experience to any of the old universities, only to the old polytechnics – a name that has confusingly been replaced by “universities” (in order to attract paying students from oil-rich countries).

There have been a few changes even in the most traditional universities – for instance, dress is less formal than it was when, first starting on the debate circuit more than 20 years ago, I always had to take a long skirt with me. But one is still entertained to an excellent dinner beforehand, preceded by a Latin grace; and while our side of the debate naturally wins the argument, God still wins the vote – partly because theology students preponderate in the audience.

The best venues, in my estimation, for the quality both of the dinner and of student oratory, are not Oxford and Cambridge but the Northern universities of St Andrew's and Durham.

On my first or second visit to Durham, I was opposed by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, who had retired up there. What he lacked in intellect he made up for with his benign personality, and you couldn't help liking him.

My latest appearance in the Durham debating chamber – my fifth, I think – took place on November 25, when I was asked to second the motion that: *This House believes that God is man's most dangerous creation*. The name of the proposer, John Bach, was (among the living) unknown to me, and I was puzzled at its being preceded by “Rev.” I assumed he must be an atheist clergyman, in the mode of Anthony Freeman.

The opposer was George Austin, Archdeacon of York, and his seconder a lay professor; the third speaker on each side was a student.

The proposer, however, was no atheist priest. His argument was against “false” ideas of God that were man-made, as opposed to a true God that was not man-made. However, he was very well-disposed towards me personally, as I had apparently officiated at the funeral of a friend of his, and also towards the National Secular Society. He began his speech by extolling the NSS, which, he said, was wrongly thought to use disbelief as an aid to immorality, and had in fact been founded because of Christianity's failure on social issues.

My student supporter, I had been told, was also a Christian. Seeing that the panel comprised one atheist and five believers, I felt justified thereafter in redressing the balance to some extent by intervening with barbed points of information.

GOD WINS AGAIN!

**Barbara Smoker
reports from
Durham University**

The Archdeacon hardly dealt with the subject of the debate at all: in fact, he used half his time on his well-known hobby-horse of opposition to women priests in the Established Church.

I began by saying that I would not follow the Archdeacon down the irrelevant path of women priests, except to say that I found it difficult to understand why any woman would want to be a priest in such a misogynist church. This received wild applause from the students – but that was the end of my popularity, apart from my getting a few laughs along the way.

I said I was sorry that I could neither endorse Mr Bach's line of argument nor repay his generous remarks in kind, for man's most dangerous creation was the whole God-idea, not a mere aberration. A pre-scientific man-made concept, it arose when the human brain had evolved sufficiently to ask searching questions but not to answer them scientifically. God-belief held up scientific progress for the centuries that are now called the Dark Ages – and the Dark Ages linger on. Since the time of Darwin, at least, the God hypothesis has been redundant; but it persists as wishful thinking, and continues to do immeasurable psychological and social harm.

The Archdeacon had said God is love; but, I pointed out, the Old Testament, on which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are based, does not bear this out. The God it portrays is unjust, capricious, cruel, and bloodthirsty. Though the story of Abraham and Isaac marks

the end of human sacrifice, it is hardly a moral story: the father is ready to kill his only son in obedience to Jehovah, without even consulting the boy's loving mother. (Not to mention the ram). Besides, the cessation of human sacrifice extends only to the tribe of Israel – and only to its believing, obedient members. Even 2,000 years later, in 17th Century Christendom, it did not extend to “witches” or “heretics” – nor to black people – while orthodox Muslims still regard apostasy (as well as adultery) as a capital offence, and demand the death of authors Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin for being too outspoken.

The divine hero of the New Testament, far from being “meek and mild,” is shown to be a bad-tempered fanatic. Not only does he believe in eternal punishment, but also he delights in threatening his opponents with it. As for the Koran, it contains even more graphic accounts of hell and other nasties, supposedly dictated by God – who, at the head of each chapter, is paradoxically styled “Allah, the beneficent, the merciful.”

The inculcation of worship of so perverse a God distorts people's moral sense. For instance, it was Christians who initiated and supported the black slave trade. To this day, most religions put more stress on sexual propriety than on the avoidance of cruelty, and many oppose gay rights, voluntary euthanasia, abortion, and even contraception.

Sado-masochism is engendered by depictions of the crucifixion, based on the utterly irrational and immoral doctrine of vicarious atonement. This gave rise to whipping-boys in the Middle Ages, and may still play a part in enabling our police to close their files with convictions of innocent people.

As for the rest of the prison population, statistics show that some religions are very much over-represented in it – for example, RCs (in all Western countries) by a factor of three, and young male Muslims (in this country) by a factor of five or six. So an intense religious upbringing based on God-belief does not seem to produce law-abiding citizens – unless non-believers are cleverer at evading arrest! Many God-believers do nevertheless lead decent lives, despite their creeds, because they pick and choose among the biblical injunctions – but at the cost of mental integrity.

I went on to detail other social damage associated with God-belief – especially justification of the most horrific atrocities if the perpetrators regard themselves as agents of the supreme being. This is seen in every war and civil conflict where there are differences of religion between the peoples on each side.

My student supporter spoke very well in expanding on the social harm spawned by religion, though he basically took the same theological line as my proposer.

The size of the student audience was, I was told, much larger than usual, and the discussion from the floor was generally of a higher standard than usual. A few of the participants were keen and well-informed secularists, but when it came to the vote (by acclamation), God, of course, won hands down.

Paper packs a punch

A WEDDING was cancelled when the bridegroom punched the priest for looking down the bride's dress as she said her vows in Fernan, Spain (*Daily Star*, November 24).

What makes this news is that the object of the priestly leer was an adult female. Most victims of dog-collar concupiscence here in the British Isles, as *The Freethinker* has repeatedly shown over the past 12 months, are children, the younger and the more vulnerable the better. Latest example: the Catholic Church in Scotland has just admitted paying £42,000 to a Strathclyde man who was abused by a priest at a Scottish college when he was 14 – and then abused again by a priest to whom he complained (*The Independent*, December 7).

What also took our fancy about the snippet from Spain was that the bridegroom had actually belted the priest – it is likely that his father, and certainly his grandfather, would never have dared do such a thing.

Figuratively speaking, Catholics in these islands are at last punching priests, too (see *The Freethinker*, December): they are taking legal and political action to show the men in black that they do not have a God-given right of access to the bodies of their flock.

The Freethinker, of course, has never pulled its punches in this particular arena – and can claim some of the credit for having influenced the new climate of opinion. Help keep up the momentum: we can continue the fight only with the financial support of our readers. Send cheques, POs, stamps to: G W Foote & Co., Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: R J Beale, W H Brown, P Godfrey, A Green and C G Tonkin, £2 each; C Govind and Bristol Humanists, £3 each; J H Brindle, F Campbell, A C F Chambre, R Power, L D Hall, A Hills, J Holland, S R Norton, S Sanders and H R Sherman, £5 each; M Kirby, £8.50; L A Harling, B J Harrison, R C Harrison, T Morrison, A J Ringer, S O Rose, J T Ryan and J A Spence, £10 each; D Yeulett, £13; A Beeson, £15; J Koumi and C Wilshaw, £20 each. Correction to fund list in November issue: "H Bondi" should read "C Bondi."

Total for November: £222.50.

UNTO ONE O

THE Evangelists were agreed that Mary was the mother of Jesus. There was no argument about that. But the identity of his father was a different matter and they nominated several candidates: Joseph, David, God and a ghost. And one wonders what a contemporary Child Support Agency may have made of it all, if Joseph had declined to take Mary to wife, despite the angel's best endeavours.

That Jesus was the son of Joseph was attested by several of his neighbours and suggested by Matthew and Luke who seem, however, to have been a little confused since they also declared him to be the son of a ghost, with the latter adding yet a third candidate in God himself. This he justified by tracing Jesus' ancestry through Joseph and David back to Adam, whom he identified as the son of God.

Mark also stated that Jesus was the son of God; so did John the Baptist, an unnamed centurion and an unspecified number of devils who recognised him where normal people apparently could not. Peter, however, who told Jesus to his face that he believed him to be the son of God, later changed his mind, declaring in a sermon after the Ascension that he was only the son of David after all. This volte-face may have been precipitated by the rushing mighty wind and Peter's reception of the Holy Ghost prior to his delivery of the sermon which, it must be added, appeared not to have the same effect on him as it had on Mary, although it may be thought that the visitation presented a splendid opportunity for a miracle without parallel.

Paul, perhaps the first to write of Jesus, had no knowledge of a ghostly father. Indeed, he insisted that he was born "of the seed of David according to the flesh." Unfortunately, as with Jesus' other chroniclers, it is difficult to check such assertions since none of them was a historian. They made no footnotes, cited no authorities and appended no bibliographies to their work.

Of course, there was also the unidentified voice which called from behind a cloud at intervals in Jesus' life claiming to be his father. And then there was the angel who told Mary that Jesus would be called the son of The Highest which, from a purely physical point of view, would seem to fit the disembodied voice behind the cloud. But there is no record that anybody ever addressed Jesus thus. The same angel prophesied, too, that God would give Jesus the throne of his father David and he would reign over the House of

Jacob for ever, but this was no more than if the angel had forecast that he would reign over the House of Usher for ever, at least until its fall. Not that the angel should be censured for making faulty predictions, nor Luke for recording them, for Isaiah made an unfulfilled prophecy in this connection – that Jesus would be called Emmanuel – whereas Luke and the angel were not in prophecy (Luke's specialities were the virgin and being beloved, and angels were more familiar with swinging their censures than was Isaiah's job and he ought to have done better).

Readers of *The Freethinker* will not be reminded of the incompatibility of genealogical tables in the Gospels which assert that Jesus' father was a ghost, in other, containing, as they do, 28 and 40 generations respectively between David and Jesus; nor, indeed, that Joseph's father was almost as remarkable as that of Jesus himself in that he had two fathers. But such curiosities and paradoxes are not to distinguish scripture from more conventional literature.

There are many who believe that the Holy Bible story is nothing more than a fantastical circumstance. It went with the grain. But whoever devised this particular tale must, at least, be credited with some imagination. A ghost is rare, unique, on these occasions. There are of a pigeon, a herb, a feather, a shoe, gold and even fire. But never a ghost.

Paul was not alone in the view that Jesus was born of the seed of David for it was dictated in the Old Testament too. The might comment that this would be surprising since David sprinkled it fairly, though not to quite the same extent as the indefatigable son, Solomon. There is reference in John's Apocalypse to the son of David which some commentators find incomprehensible, but this need not be since it is in the nature of apocalyptic

incomprehensible. But what is so perplexing about the fact that Jesus was David's son is that he made as though the relationship conferred some honour on Jesus. But David's name left so much to be desired that any respecting Messiah descended from him would have turned his portrait to the wall immediately upon becoming aware of the fact. Not to put too fine a point on it was disreputable; and, when reading the Testament story of the man whom Jesus commended to keep certain commandments he would inherit eternal life, I have

WHEN A CHILD IS BORN!

With the putative father a god or a ghost, even a Department of Social Security DNA test wouldn't have helped. NEIL BLEWITT is as perplexed as the rest of us when it comes to naming Jesus' real Dad

state and, what is more, in the seventh heaven. Now it may be held that Paul, who was very competent, if verbose, at writing epistles, was inexperienced in the matter of apocalypses and ought to have left them to those better qualified. But that is what he wrote. And if he was not deceived, then there is hope even for the freethinker whose only offence may have been to exercise his intellectual faculties.

It can only be conjecture whether Jesus knew he bore a relationship to David or, knowing, whether he thought him a worthy forebear. But if he had felt some pride in the relationship one would have expected him to refer to it. He had many opportunities. For example, at the Transfiguration he could have referred to it quite casually. All he had to say to Moses and Elias was something like "How's my forefather David?" Or he could have uttered an Eighth Word from the cross. Perhaps: "And to think my forefather David died in bed of old age."

Relationship

For all we know, he may have said one or both of these things, but the recording of them in the Gospels may have subsequently been excised by protagonists of the ghostly-father story. Editors lay in wait over many centuries for every new edition of the Bible to appear so that they might examine the words of God and, where necessary, amend them. Obviously even he could not be trusted to get it right all of the time.

On the other hand, Jesus may have been so ashamed of his forefather David (and his foremother Bathsheba) that he felt unable to acknowledge the relationship, although he did use David's name when he disputed with the Pharisees. Equally, he could have made his disgust manifest, but examples may have been removed by editors anxious that Jesus should not be seen to malign David gratuitously. For instance, when blind Bartimeus cried out "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus may have replied to the effect that "The next supplicant to state that I was begot of David shall be cast into outer darkness where the worm dieth not!" Or, when the woman of Canaan beseeched him "Have mercy on me, son of David, for my daughter is vexed of a devil," he may well have said, with the anger he usually reserved for the Pharisees: "She'll be vexed with a damned sight more than that

if you call me son of David again. My father was a ghost!" But, alas, we shall never know for sure.

Of course, it would have been better from Jesus' point of view, even if the ghostly-father story were an invention, for it to be accepted as truth since it would be extremely difficult for anybody, however resourceful, to claim to have found skeletons in a spectre's cupboard.

And just as Jesus is not recorded as acknowledging his relationship to David, nor is it recorded that he passed an opinion, except obliquely, on the opposing view – that he was the son of God. If one wonders why this was so, the answer must surely lie in the fact that Jesus was so well-versed in the scriptures that he would have been aware not only of David's murderous proclivities but also that the God who was supposed to be his father was the very same God who had incited David to decimate the population of the Middle East, although one may be forgiven for thinking that he had achieved that earlier with the enthusiastic assistance of Joshua and Gideon.

He would have known, too, that God had not objected to David's behaviour except in two instances. One was his adultery with Bathsheba – and even then he had not meted out the punishment prescribed by his own law given to Moses which required that both parties to an adulterous act should be put to death. Instead, he slew the child of the relationship. The other was a census where David's unacceptable behaviour led not to God's chastisement of him but to 70,000 other Israelites whom he slaughtered summarily – even denying them the opportunity to say in their own defence the contemporary equivalent of "It wasn't me, guv!"

With opinion divided over the identity of his father, it would be surprising if Jesus himself were not totally confused. But I suspect that he considered the various titles applied to him before rejecting them: Son of David for decency's sake and Son of God either on the same grounds or in a rare moment of modesty. He made no claim to be the Son of a Ghost nor was such a title ever applied to him but I think, even if it had been, he would have rejected that too in the interests of his own credibility.

Instead, he chose as his title Son of Man. Wisely, one feels, for nobody could argue about that. It was not vainglorious, ridiculous, compromising nor the punishable offence that Son of God was. It was exquisitely neutral. So much so that it signified, as it may have been expressed by the late Dino Galvani many years ago, "nothing at all; nothing at all!"

'Euthanasia' is milestone verdict

A CORONER has made history by recording a verdict of "euthanasia" on a grandmother who killed herself.

Lucy Vines, 87, left a note asking for her death not to be treated as suicide but as "death by euthanasia." The Avon Coroner, Paul Forrest, granted her wish when he recorded the milestone verdict.

Mrs Vines suffocated herself in September, 1994, by slipping a plastic

bag over her head and fixing it in place with an elastic band. Her son Anthony, 60, found her body when he went to visit her at a residential home in Chipping Sodbury, near Bristol.

In a statement read to Bristol Coroner's court, he said: "Mum and I had several in-depth conversations about euthanasia over the last four or five years.

"She was worried about Alzheimer's

disease and had developed a couple of symptoms. She left my wife and I a five-page note."

The Coroner said: "I am conscious of her wish to have her death not recorded as suicide. As a result, I am recording a verdict of her taking her own life as a believer in euthanasia."

A spokesman for the Voluntary Euthanasia Society said: "We have never heard of a verdict like this before. The Coroner has acted responsibly in respecting this lady's right to take her own life."

Meanwhile, a number of pensioners in Gwent added their support to calls for "mercy killing" to be legalised after a national magazine survey suggested that 90 per cent of pensioners would want a loved one to decide that a doctor could end their life if they were too ill to communicate.

Alan Bolt, secretary of the Gwent branch of Wales Pensioners, said that he wasn't surprised by the results of the survey by *Yours* magazine.

"I agree with it, although I can't speak for anyone else," he said.

Following in Bradlaugh's footsteps

by Barbara Smoker

THE Derbyshire Humanist couple, Roy and Sheila Hartle, ousted from the Scout movement after many years of dedicated service to it (*The Guardian*, December 15) because they could not honestly include the words "duty to God" in the Scout Promise, have, of course, been treated abominably. But once confrontation has failed, why persist with it?

When faced with intransigent bigotry on the part of petty officials, one is surely justified in going along with the letter of their law in such a way as to expose it for what it is. Such pragmatism is not hypocrisy, since duress is clearly indicated.

More than 100 years ago, the founder of the National Secular Society, Charles Bradlaugh, on being elected a Member of Parliament, was required to swear the Oath of Allegiance on the Bible in order to keep his seat. At first he suggested that, as an atheist, he might be allowed to use a non-religious form of affir-

mation instead, but when told that this was against the law he agreed to take the religious Oath, saying that although the wording held no meaning for him, he would regard it as a binding affirmation.

However, the Speaker refused to allow this, because Bradlaugh, unlike other atheist MPs, was generally known to be an atheist. His seat was therefore declared vacant for six years. After three by-elections and another General Election, in each of which Bradlaugh was re-elected, the new Speaker let him swear the religious Oath. Later, Bradlaugh succeeded in getting the law changed so as to allow MPs a non-religious alternative.

I suggest that the Hartles follow his example - making the prescribed Promise, tongue-in-cheek, so as to be able to continue doing the work they wish to do in the Scouting movement, at the same time using their position inside it to try to get the Promise rules changed. This is certainly overdue since a third of the population now eschews god-belief.

Further back to basics

THE bad news for creationists is that scientists have announced the discovery of a 4.4 million year old fossil of a chimp-sized creature considered the earliest known link in the chain connecting humans with the ancestors of apes.

The Ethiopian fossils are 800,000 years older than the earliest firmly established remains of *Australopithecus afarensis*, which had been the oldest known link.

The discovery was announced by Tim White, of the University of California at Berkeley, in the September 22, 1994, issue of the journal *Nature*.

Safeguards

On the streets of Newport, the views of pensioners doing their Christmas shopping seemed to support his view.

"I believe in it and so does my husband," said a woman from Rogerstone, who declined to be named. "He has Parkinson's disease and he has often said he'd be better off out of it."

Mr A Brown, of Kirby Lane, Newport, said: "I would support any move for it to be legalised providing there were safeguards in place to stop it happening without people's consent."

Mr Kenneth Bowers, from Llanfrechfa, reflected the concern over the power it might give to doctors: "They are in a privileged position and could abuse the trust placed in them." He believed that it should be allowed in cases of extreme suffering, however, saying: "It's better that someone dies with dignity."

Another Newport pensioner who declined to be named believed that "mercy killing" already goes on unofficially. "We're costing the country too much money and I believe it definitely goes on," she said.

And a pensioner from Beechwood, Newport, echoed the majority view that euthanasia should at least be an option. "It's what I would want for myself," she said.

Sources: *The Independent*, October 7, 1994; *South Wales Argus*, December 1, 1994.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Religion on the rates

THE Commission for Racial Equality is in serious danger of making a collective chump of itself. It has threatened prosecution of Michael White, a Conservative councillor in Havering, Essex, who opposed a £200 grant to the county's Islamic Education Trust to buy copies of the Koran.

Mr White argue thus: "If the Islamic Education Trust wishes to purchase copies of the Koran, then it should pay for them out of its own fund-raising, not out of hard-earned council tax-payers' money."

However, he tries to justify his protest by producing that old chestnut, "the United Kingdom is a Christian country." Few Christian leaders, even of the Established church, would care to argue that claim. It is of doubtful legality and, socially speaking, went down the plug-hole decades ago.

Admittedly the Christian faith still holds a privileged place in national life, not least in the education system. Church schools are heavily subsidised by non-Christian tax-payers, including Muslims. While that situation prevails, it will be exploited by religious zealots and racists alike.

Christians have nothing to learn about plundering the public purse at national or local level. And promoters of other brands of religious superstition are catching up fast.

Bad News is good news

WE are constantly assured that the Bible is a megaseller, and it may well be. But how many purchasers or recipients of a gift copy actually read beyond the familiar passages? David Voas, for one, certainly does, and has been moved to record his impressions in two books.

The first, *The Alternative Bible: The Old Testament*, caused one critic to advise godparents they "should know what they are letting themselves in for before they buy *The Alternative Bible* as a confirmation present."

Not letting his Bible lie on the shelf collecting dust as so many copies do, David Voas subjected it to another vigorous examination. The result, *The Bad News Bible: The New Testament* (Duckworth, £18.99), is an uncomfortable or a highly amusing read, depending on your point of view.

Even if they do not actually bow the knee at the name of Jesus, many otherwise sensible

people nod the head when his unique status and supremacy are proclaimed. To do otherwise is regarded as a lack of good taste and sensitivity. David Voas avoids that trap. He makes his position clear on page one: "The scriptural Jesus does not live up to his Good Shepherd reputation... We are fascinated by personalities, and celebrities don't come any bigger than the son of God, even if disguised as an itinerant Palestinian exorcist."

David Voas takes the New Testament apart, book by book. Here is the Word of the Lord – not with knobs on, but covered with malignant warts.

Patron saint of fat-cats

THE tenth anniversary of the disaster at Bhopal, when a cloud of toxides from the Union Carbide plant enveloped the Indian city, coincided with the continuing hoo-ha over Channel 4's screening of *Hell's Angel*.

Already entered in the sainthood stakes by the compulsory pregnancy lobby, non-mother Teresa of Calcutta, like the Holy non-father in Rome, seeks to undermine population control projects, particularly in Third World countries. But when "mother," as pious devotees insist on calling her, was asked what advice she had for Union Carbide's victims, she replied: "Forgive, forgive." No doubt the American-based multi-national was suitably grateful.

What of the people of Bhopal? When poisonous gas drifted over the city, Union Carbide spokesmen assured doctors and health authorities that it was non-toxic; if those affected washed their faces they would not be harmed by it.

Within a week, more than 5,000 had died and it is estimated that since then that figure has doubled. Ten years later, half-a-million are still suffering chronic illnesses.

Under pressure by the Indian Government, Union Carbide paid £470 million compensation in an out-of-court settlement. But little of the money has found its way to victims, mostly illiterate and unable to press their claims.

Mother Teresa could have taken time off from praying and propagandising to help the people of Bhopal. She could have used her undoubted influence to help victims of the disaster secure justice and adequate compensation. Instead, she advised them to "forgive" the killers and destroyers of Bhopal.

A humble jet-setter, Mother Teresa mixes easily with the rich and powerful. It is small wonder she is feted in Western countries by industrialists, financiers and friends of the poor like Ronald Reagan and Margaret

Thatcher. Her baneful influence in Third World countries helps to maintain a vast pool of docile slum-dwellers and peasants from which multi-nationals like Union Carbide draw their labour force.

Bum's rush for Brother Morris?

THE Evangelical Alliance is an umbrella organisation comprising churches and groups of the "born again" persuasion. Not surprisingly, it attracts some rum customers.

Occasionally the membership line has to be drawn, like when an associated body attracts damaging publicity. Several years ago, the Jesus Army was given its marching orders. Moves are now afoot to exclude the "faith healing" windbag Morris Cerullo and his World Evangelism outfit.

Cerullo's fund-raising methods have caused others in the evangelism business to squirm – with embarrassment or envy. According to one commentator, his technique "makes the most aggressive time-share salesman look second-rate."

Take two recent schemes to bring in the dosh. Instead of a conventional greetings card on his 63rd birthday, Brother Cerullo requested the faithful to send him a cheque for £63. (If that idea catches on, one will face old age with a light heart.)

In his birthday message, Cerullo declares: "God told me to release His Endtime Financial Anointing... It's awesome. Incredible." Then comes the carrot: "I wouldn't ask if I didn't know God was going to return it to you... miraculously increased by the release of His Endtime Financial Anointing."

In another letter, the great evangelist promises to release seven steps to seven miracles – on payment of £7 per household.

Cerullo's promises and pleadings prepared the ground for an awesome and incredible revelation: "World Evangelism is being held in bondage by a £2 million debt." Even so, its troubles are secondary: "Many of you are struggling with highly visible bondages... drugs, alcohol and overeating. Others are struggling with temper, lusts of the mind" (and to keep a straight face when reading Cerullo's guff).

Worried relatives of people who handed over money to World Evangelism have sought the advice of counsellor Graham Baldwin. Accusing Cerullo of pressuring people to give money they can ill afford, he said: "To make requests and say you're under God's anointing is a shabby con trick."

Morris Cerullo? Shabby con trick? Perish the thought!

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Silly - and very silly

AS headteacher of a small Southwark primary school, for the past year I have had the additional responsibility for co-ordinating RE as the previous RE co-ordinator emigrated to Canada last year (not because of her RE responsibility - her partner got a job there!).

As a Humanist for 35 years, I strongly believe that young children should know about the major faiths of this country to undermine racist attitudes, to show respect for religious groups but, above all, to make a rational choice in their teenage years to reject them all for the superstitious nonsense that they truly are.

So I am now busily educating myself learning about these faiths. Last week I went to a short talk, "Growing-up Muslim," presented by a convert to Islam. It was both interesting and informative. However, the final part of the speaker's delivery consisted of us RE teachers being shown pamphlets (and a comic!) produced by fundamentalist Christian groups which were aimed at converting Muslims to Christianity. The speaker was genuinely upset at such libellous attacks on Islam. My own view (not voiced, as I did not wish to appear rude) was that this was a wonderful example of the silly being attacked by the very silly.

I am looking forward to "Growing-up Sikh." Perhaps in the New Year I might do my own talk: "Growing-up Humanist."

MARTIN KIRBY
London SE15

North of Ireland

YOUR correspondent Brian McClinton (November) gives the misleading impression that the province of Northern Ireland is democratic.

In fact, it is world-famous for gerrymandering and other electoral frauds. Even the boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic is fraudulent, trapping many republicans in an unsuccessful attempt to create a viable province. Judged by old election results, the counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone and the city of Derry might well join the Republic if democracy ruled. What would happen to the remainder? What would become of Northern Ireland if the British subsidy were removed?

Perhaps I should add that I have no Irish blood in me and that I would not like living in a priest-ridden society.

R K E TORODE
Kidderminster

I AM sorry to return to the subject of *The Freethinker* Editor's line on the current situation in the six counties of Northern Ireland, but I do not believe that the aims of the broad Humanist/Rationalist movement in Britain are being served by his stance.

Eric Stockton's phrase in his letter in the November issue "I wonder whether the front cover headline 'SIX COUNTIES SELL-OUT' was altogether wise" is a masterpiece of understatement. Clearly, Brian McLinton, of the Ulster Humanist Association, was equally unhappy with the treatment of a subject which he can be expected to know something about.

When I suggested that the Editor should "have another go" at dealing with this issue, I meant, of course, that you should reconsider your presentation and emphasis. For example, the NSS resolution on desegregation of schools (November issue, Stop Press) would have a slightly better chance of being implemented in the present climate than it would have had either before the ceasefire, or in a post-settlement phase when the Ulster Protestants had been bounced into a Catholic-dominated united Ireland against their will.

I do not think that it is necessary to spell out the full case against your argument, it is enough to say that "Naive, bleeding heart liberalism and simple faith in the assurances of our sleazy governors" do not come into it. All that is required is a perspective which recognises the slight but real opportunity which the people of Ireland now have to learn to live with each other peace and mutual tolerance. This opportunity would not have existed without the present ceasefire.

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

I HAVE been a member of the NSS for nearly 40 years and am a regular subscriber to *The Freethinker*. I disagree with your summing-up of the Irish situation and want to give you a totally different point-of-view.

All the IRA are Catholics and must listen to their priests and the Pope. Although most of their killings were of Protestants, their methods were such that several Catholics were also killed.

On the Protestant side, all the reprisals have been against selected Catholics, and in larger numbers than the IRA. This must have been obvious to the Catholic priests and the Pope, and the only way to stop the killings was by influencing the IRA. Governments have tried and always failed; the Church was the only other way to stop the killings. They also had the power of excommunication, which they could have used.

In my opinion, Protestants would rather have a separate state of Ulster. Why cannot all militant Catholics go to the Irish Republic?

G MILLER
London SE19

Not sure

I HAVE read Eric Stockton's November article "Agnosticism - a redundant word?" four times. It would seem that I am epistemologically disadvantaged and am therefore unable to comprehend the conceptuality of his model. I think that I have understood most of what he has written, but it is empirically the case that I

am not sure.

My problem is that, despite a treatise verging at times on Gongorism, Mr Stockton has not, it seems to me, explained why it is facile and misleading to admit uncertainty. It is gratifying to learn that he finds all theism unbelievable. I happen to share his view. But I do not see why my own conviction should entitle me to pour scorn on anyone else who thinks I may be right but is not sure about it. Doubt is surely an acceptable conceptual model; and if there is a word that has for decades been used to describe that doubt in connection with divinity, I see no reason to discontinue its use.

DEREK ROBERTS
Mitcham

THAT I should be so lucky! Mr Albert Mitchell (December) read my article on agnosticism four times; many a writer thinks he is lucky to be read once. But he has a valid point; some of us are too academic by half. I wonder what Mr Mitchell made of Peter Lancaster's letter of what seems to be support for my opinion about agnosticism.

My position briefly is this: we know rather little about many difficult areas so we are all more or less agnostic about very many things - so agnostic is not a very useful word; nobody knows that there is no being describable as god so why bother to use the word atheism to describe such pretension? An atheist is a person who has no time for theism simply because, in his opinion, the theist has no good ground for his belief.

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

Stubborn Yeulett?

AS a freethinking Christian humanitarian, I refer to David Yeulett's letter (October). It is typical of the stubborn, single-minded man who professes that there is no God, and yet in theory admits that there is a God by blaming him for the rabies virus.

It is obvious to the biggest dunderhead that the deterioration of the world in which we live is due to Man's ignorance and mismanagement - for instance, how he puts into use his own inventions. In the case of rabies virus, again it is Man letting it get out of control.

I suggest that David takes a look at Genesis, which gives a symbolic description of the Creation, how God made the world and all that is in it; how he gave it to Man to control and enjoy its perfection. Follows the "Fall of Man," and since then it has been proven, again and again, that we are not worthy of the honour to be living on this Mother Earth.

We tend to blame anyone rather than ourselves, be it war or whatever. Man is his own worst enemy. It is a case of Man against Man, and Man against God.

MARY SKELTON
Nottingham

YOU'RE TELLING US!

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Undesirable residence?

IT IS to be hoped that the correspondence under your rather sensational heading "Population Doomsday" will continue. The problem being discussed is vast, with many complications and grave implications for individual human beings, for societies and for evolution.

Vivien Gibson suggests that we imagine a day when every adult owns a car (who is to say "no"?). This illustration of human ingenuity and aspiration points to only one out-of-balance situation that can make the world an undesirable residence.

Just how many people can be supported at what level of freedom and affluence without the planet becoming, for the majority, an unpleasant place on which to live? Genetic impoverishment due to extinctions and monocultures, pollution of life-support systems, scarce natural resources leading to rationing by expense and/or conflict for control, are just a few of the inevitable problems ahead.

In other words; what is the planet's reasonable, safe, human carrying capacity? Optimum regional population levels have to be agreed, soon, if confrontations are to be avoided.

Humanists have the responsibility to take part in, and *The Freethinker* to lead, this debate.

BRIAN KINGZETT
Carmarthen

WE must express contempt and disgust for the natalists who pretend that humans can breed like lemmings without suffering the periodic massive population crashes regularly experienced by lemmings.

Within my lifetime, tens of millions of people have died miserably from lack of the resources to sustain them. Thousands of women die in childbirth annually after under-nourishment in childhood has left their bodies inadequately developed.

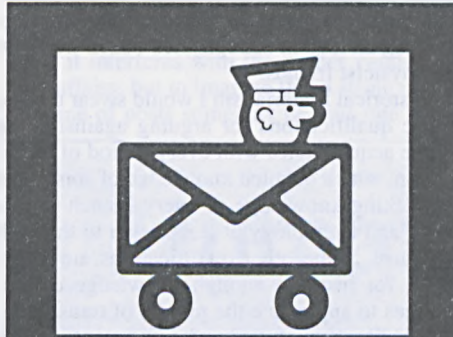
Rational concern about population did not begin with Malthus; the Chinese statesman Shang Yang pointed out in the 4th Century BC that increasing population leads to wars over resources.

Natalists like to say that with every extra mouth to feed, the Lord sends a pair of hands to work. But he doesn't send an extra pint of water, nor a square yard of forest, nor an atom of extra carbon. Sure, food production is rising: the big crunch may come with lack of water for washing, drinking, and industrial use.

Sure, we never get to an unsustainable population on a world scale – nor do lemmings. The megadeaths happen earlier, in regions of local shortage, and they are happening now. I recall meals in Hangchow restaurants (April 1966) where famine refugees, apparently from southern Anhui province, came round with permission from the management to beg food from

our tables: China learned its lesson and has curbed its breeding. Incidentally a surplus of births in rich families (for example, Lord Pakenham's brood) has a disproportionately large impact on resources, but it is the poor, mostly children, who die.

Natalists are guilty not merely of intellectual error, but of moral turpitude. With the hatred of sex education, birth control, homosexuality, free un-owned women etc., that always accompany it, natalism is a filthy sexual perversion – but a perversion with an economic motive, namely the desire to keep labour cheap by ensuring that some children, all the time,



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starve. So long as more are born than resources can sustain, the surplus are culled by deaths from poverty and desperate parents will work for a pittance: market forces then lower wage "costs" world-wide. Recall the prosperity of working people after the Black Death, and the anguish of the well-to-do at the time over "disastrous" rises in what they had to pay people!

Incidentally, it is only Soviet-style white man's Communism which, after half a century of welcoming the population explosion and giving medals for feckless breeding, suffered failure. China, where most subjects of Communism have lived for the last 45 years, is doing rather better, having for some decades restricted its birth-rate, saved millions from miserable death and provided steadily rising living standards – earning intense vilification from the western natalist propaganda machine.

Malthus did not favour birth control. His view was there was no point in trying to make the masses better off: they would only keep more of their children alive and re-impoverish themselves, so one might as well enjoy the cheap servants and have five children, like him. So long as Pope Woytila, "Mother Teresa," Stalin, Ceaucescu and other natalists

have their way, the Reverend Malthus will go on being right, children will die and servants will be cheap. If rationalist environmentalism wins out, population will stay well below what resources can sustain and we can have a golden age of plenty. But we'll all have to polish our own boots – there's the rub!

CONNAIRE KENSIT
Portsmouth

Barbarity

THE letter from A G Stephens (December) is (a) absurd in demanding that conscientious objection to war be confined to peace time and (b) amoral in requiring principles to be discarded when governments extend politics to warfare.

I need no lecture on the tragedies caused by war, having lost dozens of friends in Malta and over France (could I contact my dead colleagues, how could I tell them that our Government sells arms to dictatorships all over the world; that Russia has been our deadly enemy; that the Germans are now our allies?).

Above all, my conscientious objection is based upon the barbarity of involving innocent children and powerless mothers. War is irrational, immoral, and, in these days, quite unthinkable.

ERNIE CROSSWELL
Slough

ERNIE CROSSWELL (December) tells us that Hitler "was defeated, mainly, by the Red Army," but he doesn't say what contribution was made to this by conscientious objectors. Ernie goes on to assert that Hitler's "ghost is alive and well and living in this country." More reason why we should keep our powder dry.

PETER BROWN
Glasgow

Survival of the fittest

WITH respect to the letter on Darwinism (November), the Right's abuse of his scientific theories is not due to a flaw in the theory but to misunderstanding of the idea of natural selection and survival of the fittest. This is concerned not with the survival of the individual but with the survival of its descendants; thus it cannot be used as an excuse for the behaviour of an individual trying to ensure its own survival.

The other problem concerning Social Darwinism is that the present environmental and cultural influences on mankind are not, for the most part, those that have been responsible for our present genetic make-up. We are surrounded by environments that we have made and they have nothing much to do with those responsible for our natural selection. These influences have been made by man; they have

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YOU'RE TELLING US!

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not made man. It is put very clearly by Richard Dawkins in his example of the moth and its attraction to the candle flame; apparently suicidal behaviour. The candle flame did not play any part in the natural selection of the moth's genes, so it is an effect for which the moth has no programme. We should be asking a different question: not why does it do it, but what is the effect of doing it? It is the same with us; we should be asking questions about our behaviour in our present environment, not necessarily trying to interpret them in terms of natural selection. Our success in having descendants is not now entirely a Darwinian mechanism

While on the subject of misinterpretation of survival of the fittest, this and a lack of understanding of simple genetics was of course one of the failings of Hitler, with devastating consequences. Peter Brown's letter (October) asks if laughing at Hitler would have defeated him. Well, if it had been done soon enough by the rest of the world then perhaps he might not have been the figure of authority he was. If a few more people laughed at pompous figures of authority, such as Popes and Paisleys, Cardinals and clerics, then their influence would wane. It might stop us from taking ourselves too seriously as well, something too easily done. Poking fun can have its uses!

A S EDWARDS
Fife

Marxism as a science

I USUALLY restrict contributions to questions of religion, but David Tribe's comments on Marxism in his obituary on Karl Popper (November) demand some correction.

Marxism is a convenient though misleading name for a body of theories first formulated by Marx and Engels in the middle of the 19th Century. In fact, a scientific theory is never the work of a single individual, and it requires modification after the work of its originator. Marxism has suffered from becoming the sacred Scripture of politicians, who seldom have the training or experience for understanding science. The great weakness of the Communist Party of Great Britain has always been its fear and hatred of Marxism.

Marxism consists essentially of three nested theories: a general theory covering every branch of science, called Dialectical Materialism; a more detailed study of one particular branch of science, Historical Materialism; and a still more specialised study of one part of history, the Economics of Capitalism.

Dialectical Materialism proposes that matter is the only basic reality, and that such manifestations as Life and the Soul are ultimately forms of behaviour of matter. But matter is not just solid objects, but an inseparable combination of matter and motion; the modern phrase is mass-energy. Owing to the tension between

these, matter is liable to change, and all change follows a basically similar pattern. This last property is surprising, but no exception to it has been noticed. Fifty years ago, when I occasionally lectured about Marxism, I suggested a possible reason, which is still dubious, though it has recently received some observational confirmation.

I would cheerfully trust my life to the truth of Dialectical Materialism, but I could not swear to it, because I have not sufficient knowledge in depth of every branch of science to stand cross-examination. I do not think history is intelligible without it, and I have used it for other purposes such as speeding up the polishing of optical glass during the war, and suggesting an idea in astrophysics which was new to physicist friends.

Historical Materialism I would swear to. The basic qualifications for arguing against it are some acquaintance with every period of civilisation, with a detailed knowledge of some, and a working knowledge of every branch of science and technology at least down to the 19th Century. Some other qualifications are desirable, for instance enough knowledge of languages to appreciate the pitfalls of translation.

I dislike economics, and any economist can tie me in knots in five minutes. But if I use Marxist economics I can understand what is happening in the world today. This seems beyond the capacity of contemporary politicians who are guided by economics professors.

C R WASON
Bridgwater



My Mum

LET ME tell you about my Mum, who died recently, aged 85.

She was a lovely person. She was kind and good humoured. She kept my father and myself happy and looked after her own invalid mother with endless patience. She ran the domestic side of home life with great efficiency and was a marvellous cook. She taught me that being considerate to others was right and that vices like rudeness or stealing were wrong. These things were self-evident to her.

She wasn't, however, an intellectual and rarely read books. She didn't talk about religion or politics.

Although she never went to Church except for weddings, funerals and christenings, she insisted that she was Church of England. When asked why, she said because her father and mother had been C of E and that, as a child, she had been taught at her Church school that Christianity was the right thing for good people. She did not feel a need for any further justification or to consider any alternative.

When I said I wasn't convinced that there was a God, she couldn't understand me. She would never think to question such matters. She did not have any thoughts on the Resurrection, Virgin Birth or other such Christian concepts. She took for granted that all her family would have Church christenings, weddings and funerals – because that was “the

done thing” and a matter of respectability. I believe that if she had been born in a Muslim, Hindu or Humanist family, she would have accepted their beliefs just as unquestioningly.

I tell you this about my Mum not because you would find anything special about her, but because I feel she was like a large section of the population whose priority is to get on with the basic practicalities of life, and who accept religious creeds taught to them in childhood. They accept them because of a trust in their parents or teachers and for the convenience of respectability and social stability. A vague sense of something being beyond their knowledge and control is enough for them to accept whatever religion is offered to them.

These people are entitled to their own peace of mind. They should not be accused of religious apathy just because they are not intellectual thinkers.

What Humanists must oppose, however, is the use of such people by others as support for arguments that Britain is a Christian country and that Christianity should therefore retain priorities in education, law and other public affairs.

I think my Mum would have been a good Humanist at heart.

ROGER McCALLISTER
Dawlish

One foot on the ground

I WOULD be genuinely interested to know why certain contributors to *The Freethinker* debate on pornography like to watch simulated (or is it actual?) sexual activity on screen.

The now obligatory sex scenes which have become so boringly repetitive don't arouse outrage in me but I'd prefer their absence so that we could get on with the story-line – or that they were longer, thus allowing me time to make a cup of tea. After all, we didn't really feel deprived (did we?) – or were unable to imagine what was going to take place – in the days when the couple remained upright just inside the bedroom door, or had draped themselves on the bed with one foot on the floor.

And however enjoyable the sex act may be, it is singularly lacking in aesthetic appeal, so no justification can be made on that score. Moreover, I am never so aware of the camera “being clever” as during these scenes – or so diverted by wondering how the actors had coped...

Perhaps my friends and I are in a minority? Perhaps it's really that we're just stuck with the quaint notion that sex is an intensely personal and private matter? However, *chacun à son goût*.

VIVIEN GIBSON
Ealing

YOU'RE TELLING US!

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'Dark heart' of religion

I LIKE *The Freethinker* because it is imaginative in its criticism of religion. Most people realise the Bible is composed of ridiculous stories, but how many have considered the savage nature of the blood sacrifice on the cross which is the dark heart of Christianity? The message that we are all condemned until saved by this sado-masochistic sacrifice is such an evil one that I am surprised that more people do not reject it. Outside your magazine, I have never heard this said or written by anyone!

If you read any popular psychology books on improving your life, you are likely to find the following ways of bettering your lot: set yourself goals you can achieve; learn to like yourself; rid yourself of guilt and be nice to yourself; do not depend on others too much for self-esteem; forgive yourself for being imperfect. Is this not the total opposite of what religion preaches?

Does religion not say you are not up to God's standard, that you have much to feel guilty about, that you must depend on a deity for self-esteem and without this you are worthless? This is a recipe for feeling massive anxiety and depression, which are the commonest mental health problems everywhere! I think that the psychology of religion is so warped and dangerous that I am glad you have written about it.

I once had a conversation with an evangelical Christian who said all non-believers like myself would burn in Hell. I asked him if his parents were believers and he said they were not. I then asked him if he went to Heaven might he not feel some anger towards a deity who was torturing his family. He merely replied that God would save him pain by wiping them from his memory. This shows to me that the poor man's mind was so twisted by religion that he spent his whole life inventing mad fairy tales to support his absurd faith.

As Carl Pinel said last month in *The Freethinker*, such people are kept from seeing how absurd their beliefs are by fear. Even to question these beliefs would be a sin against the Big One.

I think the main sin our society commits is to indoctrinate children with such rubbish.

DAVID LEVETT
York

Vaccination

BY F Bacon's method of reasoning (Vaccination, December) one could prove that the moon is made of green cheese. You do *The Freethinker* no good at all by publishing that sort of stuff.

H G EASTON
Connel

The Eruv

YOU are incorrect when you say that the AGM of the National Secular Society was unanimous in favour of the *eruv* resolution. I was present and, though I have to say this myself, a lone voice of sanity amid the hysteria that the subject seems to have engendered. I both spoke and voted against this silly resolution. My view was then, and still is, that, rather than oppose the *eruv*, we should welcome it as a perfect physical demonstration of the idiocy underlying so much of religious observance.

Religious people are pretty crazy to go on obeying an ordinance, the original purpose of which is lost in the mists of time, particularly when it interferes with the proper conduct of their affairs; but to imagine that a string on top of a line of posts somehow permits one to act

in a rational manner even on the sabbath is the sort of lunacy that even the *Monty Python* scriptwriters would be hard put to it to invent.

To my amazement, instead of doubling up with laughter at the ultimate Jewish joke, members of the NSS, who ought to have a lot more sense, are taking it seriously.

I will go so far as to accept that some people may find the idea of the *eruv* threatening; though I cannot understand why. Do they perhaps imagine that it radiates some sort of force field? Or are we seeing the age-old anti-semitic conspiracy theory in a new guise? In neither event, I submit, is this anything that the NSS should have truck with; and I am most disappointed to see an appeal for funds defacing the pages of *The Freethinker*.

GLYN EMERY
London N1

Humanists and genetic engineering

GENETIC engineering, the artificial speeding-up of evolutionary processes, has immense potential for changing the way we live – but it must be handled with care, based on knowledge, reason and concern, rather than by reference to ancient scripture, Owen Dumbleton, Press Officer of the Tyneside Humanist Group, told listeners to Wear FM Radio in December.

He added: "One of the very early Humanists, the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, made a conscious effort to free his mind of religious ideas following his observation that religious people would tend to regard sickness or early death as the will of God.

"Even today, children are told following the loss of a family member or even a pet 'He's gone to be with Jesus.' Humanists regard sickness and suffering as evils to be resisted and if possible avoided, and not, like Mother Teresa, as opportunities for piety to be accepted in faith and humility.

"Genetic engineering, like most things, can be misused. The modern dairy cow is a travesty of nature, bred to produce far more milk than is needed by her children, prone to mastitis and other painful diseases, yet still sensitive enough to cry real tears when her young ones are taken away from her.

"There is unfortunately far too little concern for the suffering of non-human animals and at the same time far too much concern for unborn human embryos. An embryo, even relatively well developed, still has less consciousness or intelligence than a dog or a sheep.

"Much has been made by the religious lobby of the observation that a fetus about to be aborted can move away from a surgical instrument and open its mouth in what they call the 'silent scream.' But they seem to ignore the ability of a mouse or a spider to move away from danger or the very real screams coming from slaughter houses, not only in foreign countries but also here in Britain."

Owen Dumbleton went on to "plug" a Humanist meeting in Newcastle at which a specialist was to give an informed review of the present state of genetics research and to lead a discussion on its ethical implications for everyone.

He concluded: "Humanists believe in open debate based on honest motives, true reporting and human compassion. We hold meetings for discussion every month at the Literary and Philosophical Society in Newcastle, where all are welcome. Just so long as you are prepared to listen to the views of others, we will be glad to listen to you. For further details please call me, Owen Dumbleton, on 091 416 3448."

Humanism – a recipe for happiness

FEW of us can fail to have been moved by the circumstances of the death of the entertainer Roy Castle and his attitude towards dying: "Don't cry for me... I am going to Heaven."

But how different is the emotional reaction of Humanists to that of religious people. We are saddened that comfort and gladness should be based on make-believe. Priests and other organisers of religious life usually have very well-meaning intentions. They are unaware of the damage they inflict on people by conditioning them to believe in fairy stories. But they bear a heavy responsibility for this, and their mischief is in no way mitigated by the fact that they are deceiving themselves as well as others.

So what do Humanists say? Have we an alternative to Heaven? Of course we have. Humanism is a recipe for happiness because:

- It abolishes the fear of death, enabling us to come to terms with the fact of our mortality without illusion or distress. Sensation ceases when we die. Why should we fear death, as we will never experience it?
 - It provides the additional bonus of intellectual integrity and satisfaction. Religious believers think at their peril, and soon have to abandon the exercise when faced by the absurdity of an anthropomorphic God. Faith is their only way out.
 - Further, Humanism replaces faith by hope. Unlike faith, hope deals with realistic possibilities. Given reasonable health, the main obstacle to the enjoyment of life consists in man's aggressive animal instincts, and we see that, over the course of evolution, more recently acquired social instincts have gradually gained sufficient power to make civilisation possible. We are unlikely to see the fulfilment of our vision of a good society in our lifetime, but our hope is that one day it may come about, and meanwhile we can have the satisfaction, by kindly word and deed, of being its citizens here and now.
- To sum up, Humanism implies that, as there is no God to help us, we must help each other. How we are able to do this is, of course, a

LAST WORD

by Arthur Atkinson

matter of human consensus. Humanism does not define a political programme – only the motivation to work one out.

Misled by make-believe, they need our sympathy

WHAT a terrible problem religious people needlessly invent for themselves when they try to reconcile God's care with what actually happens in the world.

Priests who were present among those trying to comfort the bereaved after the *Estonia* ferry disaster had an unenviable task, and the memorial service could hardly have satisfied those puzzled survivors who asked why they should have lived while others died. Human error was suggested as the cause of the tragedy, but many must have wondered why God allowed it to happen.

For Humanists, of course, the question is not why suffering exists, but how we can best help each other to avoid it.

Speakers on the BBC's *Thought for the Day* on the Sunday following the ferry sinking were undismayed, and produced a programme designed to illustrate God's care.

We heard from Tony Phelan who, in a new series, was setting out on a journey through the Celtic fringe. On this programme, he focused attention on the ancient ruins of a Christian church at Galloway with a modern restoration alongside it. We were invited to consider the continuity of the faith.

Next came a session on Methodism and we were reminded of the occasion when John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed and he became aware that God's love was for every one.

We were then transported to a pinnacle of granite rock in Cornwall on to which clung the remains of a chapel. According to the speaker, it inspired a sense of mysticism and mystery, and with its spectacular view of Cornwall was a place where he could get away from it all and feel at peace. Being a simple believer, he said, he could not put his feelings into words, but he had a rich experience of God's grace. The old-time religion satisfied him.

For good measure, we were then introduced to a group of parents who had found a way of reconciling the love of God with the loss of stillborn babies. Anger against God had subsided when they discovered that the church was really able to help them. As a previous speaker had pointed out, in the divine providence everything fell into place and God knew best.

Finally, the programme told of the experiences of a novitiate nun. She was coming to realise that enclosure with God embraced the whole of her. The inmates of the convent were working towards a consensus in which they found silence and prayer rewarding. But we were left wondering why "a couple of hours' recreation" should be felt necessary.

It is obvious that the church has conditioned many intellectually and emotionally vulnerable people to believe absurdities. They ignore all rational attempts to disprove their beliefs and are, indeed, very easily distressed. Humanists too are sorrowful, not to say offended, when they encounter all the rubbish that the clergy spread around them. But we are more able to take an objective view of human credulity and can avoid emotional strain. It certainly seems, however, that we would do well to have more understanding of and sympathy for those who are deeply committed to religion. The case of one Humanist who has always used a pen-name because of the shattering effect that knowledge of his unbelief would have had on his parents may seem ill-advised. But his motive is understandable.

The God-slot invades the lives of millions of people, and some of its irrational assumptions must influence those who disregard the formal demands of religion and appear to live without it. We hope that the day will come when cathedrals and all that they stand for will have no more "spiritual" power than the pyramids do today.

But in the meantime we must not despair of finding a way to bring the comforts of Humanism to those who have been misled by make-believe. To be more successful, we need to avoid cynicism and extend sympathy, so that we can show that the real affection of our fellow human beings, though not perfect, is vastly superior to that of a non-existent God.

Victory for women

OVERLOOKED by many reports on the Vatican's failed attempt to bully 1994's United Nations Cairo Conference on Population and Development was this victory for women over religion:

"Governments are urged to prohibit female genital mutilation wherever it exists and to give vigorous support to efforts among non-government

and community organisations and religious institutions to eliminate such practices," read an adopted declaration.

Two million times a year, according to *New York Times* columnist A M Rosenthal, girls are subjected to the torture of female genital mutilation without anaesthesia, producing 80 million living victims.