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Secular
Humanist
monthly

Freethinker

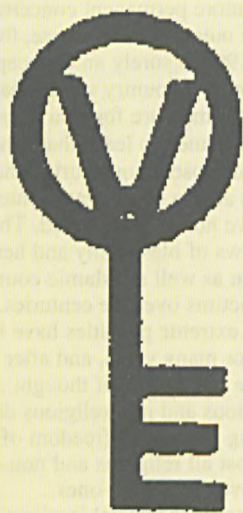
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Vol 115 No 3

March 1995



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UP FRONT

with The Editor

Lion who is scared of lambs

GOD, it seems to me, is a less cuddly Cowardly Lion on the celestial Yellow Brick Road who is frightened of children – *Wizard of Oz* fans will get the picture – and He and his representatives on earth must be protected from them by blasphemy laws.

(True, He is also an obsessive child-killer – compared to Him, the Bradys of this world look positively Blyton-esque – but He strikes at night, when the kids are safely asleep: "...at midnight the Lord smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon...")

As Nicolas Walter pointed out in an unpublished letter to *The Times* in February, the last person put to death for blasphemy in this country was a teenage boy – Thomas Aikenhead, who was hanged in Edinburgh in 1697.

And now we have the case of Salamat Masih, the Pakistani Christian child who, despite the slight drawback of illiteracy, wrote anti-Islamic graffiti on a mosque wall and was sentenced to death.

No thanks to "liberal" Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was "saddened and unhappy" at the sentence but non-interventionist, Salamat was reprieved from death row on appeal. But God's people are still intent on killing him – barbarian mobs have thronged the streets of Pakistan's big cities howling for blood. Clearly they are aware that Allah is far too sensitive a creature to withstand the (alleged) ridicule of a child.

Blasphemy still on the books

THERE is no doubt that, the "independence" of Pakistan's judiciary notwithstanding, protests from around the civilised world resulted in little Salamat and his uncle Rehmat being cleared (a third member of the family, similarly charged, was murdered by Muslims last April after being released on bail).

But in their written judgment on the case, even Lahore High Court Justices Arif Iqbal Bhatti and Chaudhry Khurshid Ahmed dismissed the blasphemy charges, saying there was no evidence.

The offending slogans had been immediately rubbed off the wall and witnesses (at least one of whom reportedly shared Salamat's illiteracy!) had refused to repeat them in

court, saying they were too offensive.

Muslims threatened to kill the judges and lawyers, if Salamat and his uncle were set free. Defence lawyer Ms Hina Jilani was naturally worried about her clients.

"Their security is at risk," she said. "It is a very serious, a very dangerous situation."

But the mob need not worry too much. Pakistan's vaguely worded blasphemy laws, introduced by the dictator Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, remain on the statute book. Miss Bhutto can offer not their repeal but possible "amended legislation."

Amnesty International has said that "the abuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws can occur because of the lack of adequate legal safeguards," and Ms Asma Jahangir, Chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, goes further: "The blasphemy laws have now reached their ultimate conclusion, by unleashing religious terror, allowing people to take the law into their own hands and undermining the legal system by scaring off judges."

Ms Jahangir is defending several Christians and Muslims in blasphemy cases and has received dozens of death threats from believers.

"The Government has abdicated its duty to protect people like judges and victims," she said.

Mandatory death law

THE statute simply (and, for the malicious, conveniently) states that anyone can register a case against anyone else, if the person has blasphemed the Prophet by word or deed.

In 1992 the death penalty was made mandatory for blasphemy and the following year the law was extended to include the names of the Prophet's family.

The law has been used largely by people with personal grievances against Christians and the minority Ahmedi sect, who have been declared non-Muslims.

Since 1986, more than 100 Ahmedis have been charged with blasphemy, five of them last year. Four Christians charged with blasphemy were killed by Muslims in 1993.

Gul Masih, a Catholic, was the first person to be sentenced to death for blasphemy, in 1992, after he argued with a neighbour over the use of a communal water tap. Mohammed Javed, a Christian who has been certified insane is also on death row.

No one has been hanged – yet – but President Farooq Leghari cannot issue any pardon against a death sentence for blasphemy because it is an Islamic punishment.

After months of criticism by human rights groups and the American government,

Benazir Bhutto promised to amend the law last year. But she back-tracked when religious parties opposed any amendment. (I remember spending some time with her in Bradford a decade or so ago: I came away convinced that she was strong enough to turn Pakistan into a free, secular state. Ah well – what innocents we journalists are!)

Humanists protest

THE protest which most adequately summed up civilised feeling on the Salamat case was that from our own Secularist and Humanist organisations to the High Commissioner for Pakistan. It said:

"...It is contrary to all rules of civilised behaviour for a boy of 12 to be accused of a serious criminal offence on account of actions which does not involve personal violence, and it is contrary to all normal law and custom to subject anyone so young to imprisonment, let alone capital punishment, for such an offence. Whatever the legal facts of the case, Salamat Masih should surely receive mercy at once.

"Our equal concern is that even the harshest law should be enforced in a proper way, free from outside pressure on lawyers and judges, and from the threat and use of force by extremist individuals or fanatical mobs. Whatever the political implications of the case, the Masih family and their lawyers should surely receive justice and security at once.

"Our more permanent concern is that, whatever the outcome of this case, the blasphemy law of 1992 is surely an unacceptable phenomenon in a country which managed without such a measure for nearly half a century. We are alarmed to learn that it has led to scores of prosecutions during the past couple of years and to other death sentences, even though they have not been executed. There have been harsh laws of blasphemy and heresy in Christian as well as Islamic countries, with many victims over the centuries, but in this country extreme penalties have been abandoned for many years, and after a long struggle there is freedom of thought and action for all religious and non-religious denominations including Islam, and freedom of expression for almost all religious and non-religious doctrines, even offensive ones.

"Whatever the social implications of such cases in your country, all religious and non-religious minorities should surely receive fair treatment at once."

The letter was signed by Sir Hermann Bondi, President, British Humanist Association; Barbara Smoker, President,

UP FRONT

with The Editor

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National Secular Society; David Pollock, Chairman, Rationalist Press Association; Norman Bacrac, Editor, *Ethical Record*; Peter Brearey, Editor, *The Freethinker*; Jim Herrick, Editor, *International Humanist News*; Nicolas Walter, Secretary, Committee Against Blasphemy Law.

But it is not only the goddess who have intervened in this matter. *The Times* of February 25 noted in a strongly-worded first Leader: "At the root of the problem is the country's blasphemy law, under which a person can be sentenced to death for 'insults by imputation or innuendo against Islam' and for 'derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet.' All the prosecution need furnish as evidence is the testimony of a single Muslim man. As the valiant Hina Jilani defence lawyer for Salamat and Rehmat, stated after the acquittal of her clients, 'the Government

and the legislature must take this case as warning of what can happen as long as the blasphemy law stays on the statute book.' There are more than 300 cases of blasphemy pending in various courts across Pakistan. While the majority of the accused are members of 'heretical' Islamic sects, some 30 cases involve Christians."

The Times insisted: "Britain should offer immediate asylum to Salamat and Rehmat, as well as to their families. Let them find refuge in our gentler traditions." However, Denmark has already offered asylum and as this issue of *The Freethinker* went to press there was news that they had escaped to Germany.

But although young Salamat's life *may* have been saved – mullah-style "justice" knows no national boundaries – the matter cannot be allowed to rest. We must keep up the pressure on the Pakistani authorities until the law is changed to prevent a recurrence of such an abominable set of circumstances.

grounds that health and safety concerns had not been met, Education Secretary Gillian Shephard held open the door to a revised bid.

Of course, the Muslims have a case when they say that all they are asking for is parity with Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans and Jews, many of whose schools are state-funded.

But the answer is not the creation at public expense of little islands of Dark Age thought and practice – gender *apartheid*, as proposed at Bradford, for example – but the abolition of state-funding for *all* religious institutions.

Worship of Jehovah, Allah, God should be transferred to where it belongs – church, chapel, mosque, synagogue or home – just as His "protection" from naughty children and horrible infidels should cease to be a matter for the statute books of any land.

Horrors and absurdities

WHAT are we to make of this God – this Jehovah, this Allah – in whose name so many horrors and absurdities are perpetrated? We know that fundamentally (however the theological Wonderloaf is later sliced) this same Entity is Supreme Being to clement Quaker and Islamic terrorist alike – to Orthodox Jew, Paisleyite ranter, Popish prelate and doty Anglican bishop.

Does He deserve such near-universal veneration? Well, it seems to me that, outside His specialist field of wholesale slaughter, He is an incompetent. He is to Creation what I am to DIY carpentry. Everything he makes is a bit skew-whiff.

I once made a bookshelf. It looked splendid on the wall of the spare bedroom. I summoned females to admire...and, as they walked into the room, the thing collapsed in a storm of plaster and derision.

That's the sort of thing which God does all the time.

The eye, for example, seems like a clever wheeze – but it tends to seize up with cataracts or glaucoma. Teeth appear to make sense, since we must eat to live – but they rot so easily; a little sugar in the mouth, a too-hot or a too-cold drink, and you are writhing in such agony as you wouldn't wish on Margaret Thatcher. Rain, life-giving, sweet: until Bangladesh finds itself disappearing beneath two yards of it, while Ethiopia has not a thimbleful. Christians say He creates AIDS to punish horrid homosexuals, but – oops! – there's a slip-up and new-born babes and faultless haemophiliacs are smitten, too. He always gets it slightly wrong – rather as I do with jobs around the house.

What can we make of this inadequate bully? And what can we make of those who worship Him – and who are prepared to die and to kill for Him?

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

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Editor's address:

24 Alder Avenue,
Silcoates Park,
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● The finest recent blast against blasphemy laws remains Nicolas Walter's *Blasphemy Ancient & Modern*, which is obtainable from the Rationalist Press Association, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP (£3.95, plus 43p postage) or on order from any bookseller (ISBN 0 301 90001 9).

State-aided bigotry?

I MAY have missed it, but I have been unable to find any media reference to an authoritative *British Muslim* condemnation of the Pakistan blasphemy laws in the wake of the Salamat case. And that is worrying.

When Muslim schools in Britain become state-aided, what will they be teaching about such matters? That death is an OK response to an insult to the Prophet and his relations? Will they become a publicly-funded instrument for keeping the minds of young British Muslims under the control of the mullahs?

The Observer (February 5) reports that young British Muslim females are already being warned by Muslim men "of the after-life fate of women who wear 'the corrupt dress of British women.'" and because it is evil to make representations of the human figure, "many girls wishing to study art have been told they have taken the path to hell."

The Tories – almost as nervous as the Labour Party of criticising Islamic excesses, and slobbering at the thought of the Muslim vote – have agreed that there is no fundamental objection to the creation of such schools.

Although she turned down an application for voluntary-aided status for a single-sex school in Bradford on February 16, on the

Why James Bulger died

THIS is a splendid book and it merits a wide readership. It will give particular pleasure to Secular Humanists who acknowledge the validity of the behavioural sciences and reject belief in any transcendental, God-given freedom of the will which monitors our thought processes and keeps us in the path of virtue, regardless of our genes and environment.

The task which David Jackson set himself was to identify the several causes – emotional, biological, environmental – which operated upon the minds of John Venables and Robert Thompson and led them to kill the infant James Bulger. And he has done this with a convincing analysis of all the surrounding circumstances.

There is the confusing domestic situation of absent fathers and excessive mothering, a mixture of battering and cuddles. Then there is the pressure of school life on two low achievers, academic failure, resentment of authority, rebellion, disruption and truancy. Then there is the search for an idealised masculinity, the disturbing influence which might have been exerted by violent videos, and the sexual implication of this, the need to act out a fantasy of sexual domination. There may even have been some sexual abuse. And finally there is the need to escape from infantilism and to kill in order to destroy “the baby in themselves.” So where in the light of all this

Destroying the Baby in Themselves: Why did the two boys kill James Bulger? by David Jackson. Mushroom Bookshop, 10-12 Heathcote Street, Nottingham NG1 3AA. ISBN 0 907123 31 7. £3.50.

Review: LESLIE JAMES

is moral responsibility? Surely all that concerns us is the thoughts that arose in the boys' brains and the causes of them? There is no evidence here of Cartesian dualism, of one half of the boys' brains telling the other half what to do.

Yet many did no more than clamour for retribution, “to hang the bastards,” and saw nothing in the nature of the two accused than pure evil. After protest from the Bulger parents, the Home Secretary, Michael Howard, saw fit to increase the eight years imprisonment recommended by the trial judge to 15 years. We might ask – to what end? Reform or retribution?

Is it not high time that society accepted the fact of genetic and environmental determinism and demanded a criminal law free of retribution, concerned only with prevention, deterrence and reform?

Unfortunately, the State is concerned with entrepreneurship and with the concept of a meritocracy in which we can crow about our virtue and material success. It is reluctant to accept that, whether we are born rich or poor, strong, or weak, clever or dull,

in Bath or Brixton, motivated by ambitious middle-class parents or by poor underprivileged ones, is purely a matter of chance. Even today, February 15, as I write, the second leader in *The Times* is at pains to minimise the link between unemployment and crime and boldly declares that “every crime is the result of a moral decision to commit it...poverty and disaffection may tempt individuals to commit crimes. But it is themselves who yield to such temptations. The true causes of crime are criminal. This is the convenient doctrine of the police, but what uncaused mental elements reach a moral decision, where in the psyche it resides and what determines its strength is not explained.

The question we all need to ask ourselves – if two boys with exactly the same genes and the same environment down to the detail had found themselves in the same position as John Venables and Robert Thompson could they have behaved differently? And if they could not, then the passionate philosophy we should all adopt – “there but for the chance of a different genetic and environmental fate go I.”

Some may ask – if I am not ultimately morally responsible for my behaviour, should I not commit crime? The answer is that is that, as intelligent human beings we can contemplate the social consequences everyone became a criminal, we are persuaded to behave correctly – unless we consider ourselves to be so much the victims of social injustice as not to care!

A Reading reader writes...

LONG-STANDING reader of *The Freethinker* Bob Tutton writes from Reading:

“Why do you receive such a poor total to *The Freethinker* fund most months? I enclose a cheque for £20, which I imagine is near to the amount which many of us can afford to keep alive such an important journal.

“I am obviously aware that many subscribers can afford little or nothing beyond the basic subscription and that some can afford more, but why do you names anyway?”

“Maybe I sound like the minister denouncing the old silver sixpenny-piece on the plate, but we can do better in order to pay our bills and expand our activities.”

There's nothing we need add to Bob Tutton's remarks (except to say that some gifts are from “Anon”).

If you agree with him that it is important to keep alive this journal of atheism, humanism, secularism, freethought, rationalism...rush cheques, POs, stamps to: G W Foote & Company, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: R H Barr, Broady, L D Griffiths, J D Groom, Pinel, R I Raven, E Rose and Kaplan Von Lang, £2 each; Eagle and C L Hoard, £2.50 each; T Caldwell and F Evans, £3 each; M Ashton, P R Brown, G Coupland, B Garrington, I F Griffiths, Joseph, F McKay, M Perkins, Petherham, G Reece, B W Soole, A Smith and G Strang, £5 each; Akkermans, P Barbour, D S Bax, D Brown, J C Gale, J Hazelhurst, Lippitt, H Madoc-Jones, J Rapley, Taylor, G T Walker, I A Williams, V Wilson, £10 each; G Bear, £12; S H Boyd, £13; J A Phelps, D and J Baker, W Donovan, Tutton and S Trent, £20 each; Melbourne, £25; V D Brierley, £40; Moia, £87; W Scott, £90.

Total for January: £586.

SIR HERMANN BONDI ON TYNESIDE

PROFESSOR Sir Hermann Bondi will address a public meeting of Tyneside Humanist Group on March 16, at 6.45pm at

Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, Westgate Road, on *Humanism as the Only Acceptable Basis for Ethics*.

Taslima Nasrin at Oxford: Barbara Smoker reports

Bangladeshi women find a voice



● Taslima Nasrin

lims. However, her hair was short, in Western style, and she wore a touch of lipstick.

The main theme of her lecture was the three kinds of oppression experienced in Bangladesh within living memory. First, her parents' generation had experienced imperialist oppression, as Indian subjects under the British Raj – which, "as a parting kick," was mainly responsible for partition of the sub-continent along religious lines in 1947:

It invented the idea of physical partition and, unfortunately, both the nationalist and religious leaders of the time endorsed it. The idea was ridiculous. Millions of Muslims remained in India after the partition, despite their having been granted a homeland, itself divided into two. And not only was it absurd. Millions of Hindus and Muslims were uprooted from their homes and had to migrate to another part of the country. Even after four decades, the curse of this decision retains its power.

Until Taslima herself was nine years old, the country was under the oppression of West Pakistan, which has a completely different language and culture from Bangladesh. It was then reborn as an independent country in 1971. Her father had thus, in a sense, been born three times, with three different nationalities, and she herself had been born twice:

The birth of Bangladesh demonstrated the absurdity of the partition of the country on the basis of religion. The common factor between the two parts of Pakistan was that the majority of the people were Muslims. Otherwise their language, culture, dress and way of life were completely different.

In its attempt to hold on to its eastern province, West Pakistan emulated the British in trying to drive a wedge between Hindus and Muslims. They even tried to "purify" the Bengali language according to Islamic tradition. But Islam could not hold its children together. Though they professed the same faith, the oppressed threw out the oppressor.

However, the women of Bangladesh are still oppressed – by their own menfolk, under the Islamic creed. For the Islamic god is not for women. But the fact that the two other kinds of oppression were historically overthrown gives hope that the feminist cause will also be won, and, indeed, with the emergence of a Muslim middle class, more awareness of the wider world, and the spread of women's education, signs of change are now beginning to appear:

It used to be said of the Bengali girl that even though her heart rends, her lips never part to speak. Well, she has started to speak out now.

The Asian woman is now demanding a mind and body of her own, but the pace of progress in a Muslim society is comparatively slow, since Islam is not amenable to change:

Raising questions or discussing subjects that are considered taboo for women may lead one into great trouble. I myself am perhaps a case in point. Compared to my feminist sisters in the West, I have written little about patriarchy, religion, man-woman relations and the rights of women. Nevertheless, I have been marked out as an enemy of Islam and of my own society.

● Barbara Smoker is President of the National Secular Society. Taslima Nasrin's novel *Lajja* (*Shame*) published by Penguin Books India (ISBN 0 14 024 051 9) is distributed in the UK by SOMA, 38 Kennington Lane, London SE11 4LS; telephone: 0171 7352101. It costs £5.95.

NATO chief's warning on fundamentalism

ISLAMIC fundamentalism poses just as great a threat to the West as Communism did, Willy Claes, the NATO Secretary-General, said in a newspaper interview published yesterday.

"Fundamentalism is at least as dangerous as Communism was. Please do not underestimate this risk," Mr Claes said in an interview in Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Source: *The Times*, February 3, 1995.

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

Birmingham Humanist Group: 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, April 2, 5.30pm for 6pm: Daphne Selsby: *Voluntary Euthanasia*.

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. March 14, Wendover Library (opposite the Swan & Brewer pub) at 7.45pm: Ted Skoyles: *Confessions of an Atheist* and AGM. April 11, Friends Meeting House, Berkhamsted (near The Lamb pub) at 7.45pm: Diane Munday: *Reminiscences of a Reformer*.

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, March 20, 7.30pm: Public meeting: *Buddhism and Humanism*. Information: telephone 01926 58450.

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, Lypstone, 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. March 10: Steve Cook, publisher. April 14: Video and discussion.

Havering & District Humanist Society: HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, April 4: AGM followed by sale of books and plants. For further information, contact J Condon 0708 473597 or J Baker 0708 458925.

Humanist Society of Scotland: 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, March 14: Peter Millican: *David Hume - A Key Figure in Humanism?* Tuesday, April 11: AGM and supper and video of Richard Dawkins interview on Channel 4. Tuesday, May 9: Wendy Formby: *The Feminist Movement Today*.

Leicester Secular Society: Details from the Secretary, Lyn Hurst, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB (telephone 0533 622250). Meetings start at 6.30pm. March 19: 114th Anniversary Lecture: Bill Johnson: *Robert Burns - a Man of the People*. March 26: half-AGM.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, March 30, 8pm: Daniel O'Hara: *What Was The Enlightenment?*

Manchester: Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: 061 432 9045. Meetings begin at 7.30pm. St Thomas' Centre, Ardwick Green. April 21: Group Discussion: *Animal Rights - Animal Wrongs*. May 12: Arthur Chappell: *Do Humanists Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich: March 16, 7.30pm: Speaker from Pottergate Office: *The Matthew Project*. April 20: John Aldam: *The Dawn of Humankind*. Information about group from Brian Snoad on 01603 455101.

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, April 5, 7.30 for 8pm: Rodney Marshall, former Anglican vicar: *Religion and Humanism*.

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 071-831 7723). List of events obtainable from above address. March 19, 11.00am: Colin Darracott, Charter 88: *What is a Citizen?* 3.00pm: Suzanne Long: *The United Nations Association* (this lecture will be attended by Dr Paul Kurtz). March 6, 11.00am: David Woodward: *The Ethics of the World Bank* 3.00pm: Kurt Flexner: *The Economy is Doing Well, but the People are Suffering*.

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, April 12, 7.30pm for 8pm: Charles Searle: *The Work of the Sutton Conservation Group*. Wednesday, May 10: Debbie Chay, Lecturer in Constitutional Law: *Charter 88 - a Bill of Rights*.

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. March 17: Professor Sir Hermann Bondi: *Humanism as the Only Acceptable Basis for Ethics*. April 20: Open Forum.

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.

JOINT ANNUAL DINNER

The Annual Dinner of Secularist and Humanist organisations will be held at Conway Hall, London, on Saturday evening, May 6, when the main guest will be journalist and broadcaster Polly Toynbee. More details later.

Drug-users are authority's 20th Century 'witches'

DISCUSSION: 'Illegal substances' problem pales into insignificance compared with the toll of alcohol and tobacco, insists ADRIAN ZAKRZEWSKI

amphetamine and numerous other intoxicants. The number of deaths attributable to that other popular and quite legal drug, tobacco, is somewhere in the region of 100,000 a year!

The "drugs" problem pales into insignificance when compared with tobacco and alcohol. Yet surely no one would propose that the solution is to outlaw them and persecute users?

Thomas Szasz, the radical American psychiatrist, said that "there is only one political sin: independence; and only one political virtue: obedience. To put it differently, there is only one offence against authority: self control; and only one obedience to it: submission to control by authority." Why is autonomy such a threat to authority? Because, says Szasz, the person who controls herself, who is her own master, has no need for an authority, thus rendering authority redundant.

When supporters of our liberal democracy advocate freedom of choice for the individual, what they are actually advocating is a particular economic and social system which, while granting freedom and reward and privilege for the winners in its competition, grants far less to the vast majority. The "freedom" so much lauded refers purely to lack of restriction in commerce!

The Establishment cannot tolerate freedom of consciousness, however – freedom of thought to a limited extent, perhaps, but not the freedom to alter one's consciousness, which is itself frequently a precursor to original thought. For thousands of years, people of various cultures have been interfering with mood and consciousness via the medium of drugs. Much has been recorded about the effects of the various preparations but none so captivating as that about psychedelics. It has occurred to me that throughout civilised history drug-users have fallen into two broad camps – those

who are serious about experiencing meaningful new states with a view to gaining wisdom and self-awareness and those for whom the experience is purely pleasure – the hedonists.

Politicians, the media, educators and the health authorities, and the law, invest much time and energy attempting to deter people from engaging in behaviour which really ought not to be of concern to the State. To prevent me from smoking cannabis, the media, police, politicians and parents bombarded 60s youth with the message that it causes brain damage and transforms the user into an uncontrollable maniac. We discovered from our own experience that they didn't know the first thing about the subject. LSD, I was informed, would make me want to leap out of a window to my death, and if it failed to get me that way, it would get to me by way of brain damage, and failing that it would attack my progeny through chromosome abnormality. Never were we told about the positive impact of such compounds, and never did the Establishment ask of itself why so many people experimented with them if these substances were really so bad, and why has such a catalogue of glowing fantastic imagery been written about them over the centuries, in particular the 20th?

Societies may need criminal codes to punish those who harm others but a simple rule should suffice to ensure a pragmatic and just society in which all could feel truly free. True social freedom includes the right to do to yourself whatever you like so long as you harm no other in the process. No action should be outlawed unless there is a clearly identifiable victim. This would criminalise neither prostitution nor drug-user; nor would euthanasia be a crime. Special provision obviously has to be made for the protection of children, but I am here interested only in establishing the principles, rather than the details.

Szasz attempts to identify the conceptual realm and logical class into which the subject of drug prohibition belongs – the realm of religion and politics. Users and pushers are, along with the other marginalised groups, scapegoats for all of society's ills. Mrs Thatcher declared drugs to be the scourge of society – the single biggest threat to civilisation. The ritual persecution of these pharmacological and human agents has to be viewed against the historical backdrop of the ritual persecution of previous scapegoats such as non-believers, witches, Jews and madmen.

IN BYGONE ages, those in authority in both Church and State persecuted not only witches – but also those who dared suggest that the threat posed by witchcraft had been exaggerated. Orthodox wisdom on this matter simply could not be questioned.

We no longer persecute witches – but we do persecute the new heretics just as relentlessly. These are the drug-users and suppliers. There are other marginalised and persecuted groups – New Age travellers, gypsies, ravers, homosexuals, atheists – but the drug scene constitutes, I believe, the largest group of heretics in the late 20th Century.

After 25 years observing drug subcultures, studying the literature (and having ingested a few of the prohibited intoxicants), I am drawn to the conclusion that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with drugs. To admit this is itself a heresy. Many people consume illicit compounds, but few are prepared to speak in their favour – Dr Timothy Leary being an exception. Those who have dared do so have discovered, as I did some years ago, that the repercussions are worse than if one had actually broken the law. So much for freedom of speech!

Almost everyone in a position of authority, political or religious power "knows" without doubt that drugs and drug-users are "evil" and need to be dealt with accordingly. There can be no challenge to this view. Media, employers, neighbours and family can apply considerable censure, ridicule and direct threat against the expression of views on the subject. While there has been discussion of the merits of decriminalising cannabis, more radical positions on the legal status of drugs have been seriously muted. Few individuals, including rock stars, have been prepared to declare that the perceived "drugs menace" is a gross exaggeration, the "war against drugs" a waste of public money, and that the most effective way to prevent casualties is to legalise not just cannabis but all drugs. In other words, to remove the Criminal Justice system in its entirety from the realm of individual or consensual actions. After all, no one is forced to take drugs.

Approximately 400 UK deaths are attributable to all illegal substances each year (35 attributed to Ecstasy since 1989) – but some 10,000 die each year as a direct result of alcohol consumption. Consider also that the alcohol toll would probably be even higher if it were not for the fact that this substance is legally controlled and hence quality guaranteed. No such guarantees exist for the consumer of LSD, cannabis, heroin,

20th Century 'witches'

◀ From Page 39

The significance of psychedelic experience for society, or rather for those whose hands hold the reigns of power, is that it brings people together in peace and mutual respect. It diminishes the desire for competition, greed and hatred of others; something that cannot be tolerated in a world where one person's disadvantage becomes another's opportunity and where huge profits are to be made from warfare. The day we achieve freedom of consciousness, freedom to literally change our minds, will be the day that the World Order and economic system is turned on its head.

The truth is that drugs are basically OK and relatively few people ever come to any harm through using them. No real harm would come from legalising all drugs – and if they were freely and cheaply available, crime-related traffic in them and drug-related crime would cease.

Now entering middle age, rather than becoming more conservative I find myself agreeing with that 60s guru, Timothy Leary, who said that everyone should try a consciousness-altering chemical at least once in their lives. The result, I have become convinced, would be a much better world.

Drugs and the desire to experience "altered states" have been a feature of human history since the dawn of humanity, and will continue to occupy a position of some controversy in the foreseeable future. Ravers use drugs now; the hippies used them in the 60s. The Beats of the 50s (William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg *et al*) proselytised drugs. In the 20s, Oxford University students experimented with nitrous oxide (laughing gas), while in the 19th Century Thomas De Quincey wrote of his experiences with opium, and Gautier and Baudelaire consumed copious quantities of cannabis at the Hashish Club in Paris. Hindus have used cannabis for centuries...North American Indians peyote...South American Indians belladonna and other hallucinogenic plant extracts.

If we consider the biblical notion of "forbidden fruit," it becomes clear that the "drugs war" encourages precisely that behaviour which its supporters claim to want to discourage. What is much less obvious is why such counter-productive social policies continue to hold such currency, particularly in Britain and the US. Perhaps this is testimony to the power of propaganda by the State and to deeply entrenched modes of thought which derive originally from intolerant religious institutions.

People will consume drugs for both pleasure and enlightenment for centuries to come – and they will continue to be persecuted for it unless we have the courage to speak out against the nonsense that is purveyed, ostensibly in our interests, by a paternalistic State which is intent in reality in satisfying its own perverse needs.

Cosmic flat sweet ry

OLDIES like myself may recall a ditty with the line: *At last I've found the secret of it all! We were young then, and struggling to make sense of life, which the religions and philosophies we were offered hardly did, so the lyric was appealing.*

But while the tune was catchy, the song was less than lucid, it has to be said. The secret, we were told, was love. It was not clear whether the warm, emotional glow, which the words, allied with the melody, aroused, should be occasioned by indulgence in sentimentality, erotic fantasy, or indignation at being fobbed off with such palpable sophistry. You could take your pick. One thing only was certain. The revelation was accompanied by no intellectual illumination whatever.

Hippies in the '60s rediscovered this unenlightening avowal, adding spice by demonstrating that it had to do, apparently, with social drugs and uninhibited sex.

Meanwhile, serious-minded folk stirred the pot (if you will overlook the pun) with a psychological spoon. Bodies for research were set up, in Oxford and elsewhere, for the study of what might be called spiritual *highs* or *trips*, were it not for the suspect religious nuances of the adjective *spiritual*. Not only was it evident that these experiences could be undergone by people not in any way religious, but also that they were much more common than had previously been realised. No longer was it possible to regard them as the preserve of saints and mystics. And they might be induced by artificial means.

From the assumption that such mental states, as those labelled *cosmic con-*

sciousness and *the oceanic feeling* appeared to indicate that life, at its best, was sweet, the religious derived comfort. Some who were philosophically inclined avidly consulted works by authors who, as Dr Alex Comfort might have said, "plausibly, sub-scientific guff, seeking to harmonise, in heart-warming style, disturbing modern notions with traditional views."

Such readers were trying to find what is widely believed, to this day, to be a universal craving for meaning and conviction, though meeting with increasing scepticism – it was amusingly satirised, for example, in *The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* – commends itself to theologians. Experts on matters relating to divinity are only too eager to point out that if Nature (or, as they prefer to call "God") has endowed the race with an appetite, there should, logically, be provided from the same source, a means of appeasing it – if not in this life, then in the next!

Phrases like *heightened awareness*, which are liable to be used by those describing their experiences, bear these are of a seductively uplifting nature, are felt to give credence to the supposition that they are a form of cognition, despite consistent failure to replicate this in any intelligible form and to fall back on quasi-mystical much too important to recognise that a state of exaltation embraces no guarantee that it is a higher mental state (in terms of value) than sober, rational assessment or any other. The converse could be said: One is entitled merely to say that different.

False conclusions follow from such premises.

No one can quarrel with the state of that curiosity is a primal urge. So

Flashes won't solve mystery of life!

**Charles Ward's thoughts about life,
the universe and everything are
inspired by an old song...**

There is nothing mysterious about this. Each and every one consists of interpretations, necessary to adapt the *blooming, buzzing confusion* of the total information to the use to which the receptor vehicle is capable of putting them. The brain acts as a filter, selecting what, according to given parameters, is to be allowed through. In doing so, limited comprehension is made possible.

Discovery of the micro-cosmic sub-realm of atomic energy was a triumph of intellect. But our *consciousness* is adjusted to the macro-world which we interpret differently from the way in which we interpret other levels – such as those of cellular and molecular structure. Reason enables us, by means of symbols, in some measure to understand and utilise the propensities to be found therein, but our consciousness in this macro-world is not transferable to the “lower” or different worlds upon which it is built, although, in respect of physics, they are one.

Looking in the opposite direction (assuming that there is somewhere to look), we should acknowledge that comparable limitations apply.

Reality is filtered to us through our senses and shaped by the processes in our brains into some sort of cohesive system. We know in part. Always. The next stage in what we understand – about anything – will also be partial. The horizon of complete understanding

(*knowing the secret of it all*) can never be reached on the intellectual globe which is the *milieu* of all our intelligible experience.

Perfect knowledge/understanding would, paradoxically, be meaningless to a human possessor, since that by which human beings live is, without exception, of a spasmodically-acquired, step-by-step, variety – related to what has been understood, or misunderstood, in the past, and to contingencies yet to be experienced.

The classic example of that, with which everyone is familiar, is the legend about Archimedes shouting *Eureka!* (*I have discovered it!*) – perhaps having realised that a discrepancy between the smudges on his bath gave him a clue to the solution of the mathematical problem which had been engaging his mind.

All knowledge, as someone once said, is revelation – in the sense of being a discovery of what is already there. But there is nothing supernatural about the *modus operandi* of discovery.

While we do not yet fully understand the “machinery” of the shifts and motions which are constantly going on in the mind, whether its possessor be awake or asleep, it is in that direction we should look for explanation, not in imaginary “higher states” or supernatural intrusions.

If, somewhere in the galaxies, there happen to exist beings whose order of intelligence is vastly superior to ours, we may reasonably assume that they have attained such in the course of a longer, or speedier, evolution. Also, if the order of our own is to be raised, that will occur by similar means. Flashes of cosmic illumination, whether regarded as divine or not, are sensibly ruled out as featuring in that process.

Death with dignity moves up agenda

MARCH 1 saw a major step towards the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia – long a major cause on the freethought agenda.

The Law Commission issued a report proposing legal force for advance directives (living wills), which will delight the estimated 200,000 people who have asked the Voluntary Euthanasia Society for advance directives since the VES introduced them into Britain in the mid-1970s.

With an advance directive, competent adults can make it clear that they do not wish to be kept alive artificially if they become incurably ill and are in great distress. Doctors and nurses are not asked to do anything illegal – such as actively end life – but simply to withhold or withdraw futile life-prolonging treatment.

VES General Secretary John Oliver told *The Freethinker*: "Modern medicine has a downside. Many people dread the thought of falling into its clutches at the end of life, when they would prefer to be allowed to die peacefully and naturally.

"Those of us who have made advance directives need the power of law for our decisions. And doctors and nurses deserve the protection of law for allowing us to die. It is no surprise that we fully support the Law Commission's proposals."

The VES sees the Law Commission's report as an important breakthrough. John Oliver said: "This is real progress. It is the first time that we actually agree with a respected official body. At last, people's demands for autonomy at the end of life are being taken seriously. It is a triumph for choice – and we hope that all MPs will now sit up and take notice."

Many advance directive supporters also trust a loved one to speak for them if they become incompetent, so the Commission's proposals for legal Continuing Powers of Attorney for health care matters are also welcomed by VES.

● Doctors' leaders are drafting a new code of practice, making clear that health professionals should respect the wishes of patients

who want treatment withheld or withdrawn. Whether proxies' opinions should be legally binding or advisory, and at what point proxies should become involved, will be debated at a conference on advance directives organised by the British Medical Association for April 5.

The BMA is also preparing a booklet for patients, setting out the pros and cons of making advance directives and appointing proxies.

Dr Fleur Fisher, Head of Ethics at the BMA, said public opinion was shifting against the prolonging of life where there was no prospect of recovery: "Surveys of older people have shown that most would very much like to make an advance directive, but no one has ever spoken to them about it. They don't know how to go about it... We want patients to decide how their lives should be ended.

"Personally, I want to die at home with my daughter there. I want to be held during my last moments – not handled."

● The doctor who bravely admitted that he had hastened the death of two severely-handicapped babies with overdoses of pain-killing drugs has come under fire from Roman Catholics.

Liberal MP David Alton told *The Universe* (February 19) that the BMA should consider striking-off Dr Richard Nicholson, Deputy Director of the Institute of Medical Ethics and Editor of the *Bulletin of Medical Ethics*, who made the admission, and said details should be sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Dr Nicholson said the incidents had taken place "20 years ago at hospitals which have been closed for 10 years or more." On each occasion he had merely brought forward the inevitable death of babies who were without hope.

To bring about the deaths of the babies, he said: "I would increase the amount of pain-killing drugs fairly quickly, say over the course of a weekend and by the end of the weekend, the baby would be dead."

On both occasions, the babies were suffering from both extreme spina bifida and increasing hydrocephaly – water on the brain. They were

expected to die in a matter of days, but had hung on for several weeks, before he administered drugs which could have accelerated their deaths.

The BMA's Fleur Fisher said that it was widely acknowledged that this kind of euthanasia was practised. A survey in the *British Medical Journal* last May showed that more than 30 per cent of doctors in hospitals had "taken active steps" to hasten the death of a patient.

● The VES has welcomed a survey in *Doctor* magazine showing that nearly half of doctors think the law should change to permit voluntary euthanasia.

VES spokeswoman Meredith MacArdle said: "We are not surprised by these results. There is a swelling tide in favour of wider choice at the end of life, and we are very pleased that *Doctor* magazine has uncovered the facts.

"People want the option of voluntary euthanasia, and many doctors are willing to give their patients this merciful release.

"How long will the law continue to make compassionate doctors into criminals? How long will the law ignore the suffering of ordinary people?"

The VES pointed out that all recent surveys – of doctors or lay people – show greater acceptance of voluntary euthanasia: "But all we want is permissive legislation – to allow those people who want help to get it, and to permit those doctors who are willing to give it to do so legally. No one else is affected at all."

Details from Voluntary Euthanasia Society, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG (telephone: 071-937-7770).

● "Pro-Lifers" tried to ban it, but a death from voluntary euthanasia will be shown on BBC2, at 9.15pm on March 15 as part of the *Modern Times* documentary series.

Death on Request follows the last weeks of Cees, a Dutch man who is dying from a degenerative illness.

There are discussions with his wife and doctor, and when Cees finally decides his time has come, Dr van Oijen administers a lethal injection.

"Sensitive and moving, *Death on Request* is unlike anything previously seen on British TV," said Meredith MacArdle.

"So powerful is it that anti-choice groups have asked the Prime Minister to use his influence to stop the BBC showing it. They have crassly compared it to 'snuff' movies.

"Why can't British people have the same choice of medical help to die as our Dutch neighbours? *Death on Request* will push the euthanasia debate to the forefront again."

Humanism anthologised

AN UPDATED and attractive edition of Margaret Knight's fascinating *Humanist Anthology*, revised by Jim Herrick and with a preface by Edward Blishen, has been published by the Rationalist Press Association. It costs £7.50, plus £1 postage, from the RPA,

Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. Alternatively, the book, which will be reviewed for *The Freethinker* by Colin McCall, may be ordered from any bookseller: ISBN 0 301 94001 0.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



In a right pickle

RAFFLE tickets at the village hall were going like a bomb. A good cause – installation of a lift at the local old people's home – would benefit from the proceeds. Prizes for the lucky winners included cakes, jars of home-made chutney and bottles of wine.

Everyone was happy until a representative of the constabulary arrived. Observing the decadent scene, he informed the Women's Institute ladies that by offering wine as raffle prizes they were in breach of licensing regulations. Moreover, they were risking prosecution if the bottles of red and white (all four of them) were not removed pronto.

All this occurred only three months ago at Northleach, in Gloucestershire. But don't blame the boys in blue. The police were forced to act when an upstanding, socially concerned citizen informed on the licensing law breakers. Narks and informers, almost always motivated by religious "principles," have a history of resisting change and rationalisation of the law.

Daft anomalies in the Shops Act 1950 were a source of hilarity, playing no small part in

Missionary position on love?

FOLLOWING last year's rash of JIM ("Jesus in Me") posters, a new publicity wheeze has been thought up by a group of Christians. Taking advantage of a ruling which prohibits posters advertising cigarettes being displayed within 200 metres of a school, Christians in the advertising industry have replaced them with others (in two-tone purple) announcing that "Christians make better lovers."

A Baptist minister, detecting sexual innuendo, was suitably miffed. But the Salvation Army's newspaper, *The War Cry*, carried an approving article which pointed out that there is more than one sort of love. "And the love that Christians have for others is the purest and highest there is," it enthused.

Coincidentally, the "Christians make better lovers" publicity exercise took place during events to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp. The ground for the Nazis' "final solution" programme was prepared by a Christian crusade over any centuries. Catholic and Protestant churches vied with each other in vilifying the Jews, confining them to ghettos, initiating pogroms and, in the last resort, creating an atmosphere that made Auschwitz, Belzen and Buchenwald possible.

The systematic extermination of Jews and other "inferiors" at Auschwitz was described in a joint declaration by heads of State as "the

ensuring passage of the Sunday Trading Act 1994 and almost total abolition of Sunday shopping restrictions. The farce at Northleach should stiffen the Government's resolve to make a clean sweep of absurd licensing laws.

As a first step, the Licensing (Sunday Hours) Bill has had its Second Reading in the House of Commons (another bloody nose for the Lord's Day Observance Society and the Keep Sunday Special Campaign). Public houses and off-licences will no longer be compelled to close on Sunday afternoon. Restrictions on drink sales in supermarkets – at present confined to noon till 3 pm – will be abolished.

While reforming the licensing system, the Government should examine the role of licensing magistrates. These imperious answerable-to-nobodies not only regulate opening hours, but can, and often do, refuse a drinks licence for a restaurant, club or social function. Could opposition to such licences come from "interested parties" who are afraid of competition? Does the request for a licence fail because the applicant had not proffered the correct handshake or greased certain palms?

Just about anything is possible in sleaze-riddled Britain.

biggest crime in history." Signatories to the declaration included Lech Walesa, President of Poland, and a faithful son of Holy Mother Church. That same church collaborated and connived with the Nazis throughout the 1930s and 1940s until it became evident that Germany would be defeated.

The future Pope Pius XII was Papal Nuncio in Berlin during the rise of Nazism. He must have known that Hitler – another faithful son of the church – was rousing the Germans to a frenzied hatred of the Jews. At the same time, church dignitaries were publicly giving the Nazi salute, while parish priests assisted those who were hunting down non-Aryans.

But that is history and we are constantly assured that the "purest and highest" form of Christian love flourishes in the contemporary ecumenical environment. Indeed? Despite the "peace process," Northern Ireland's Catholics and Protestants live in an atmosphere of mutual loathing. And in the United States, "pro-life" Christian mobs exult outside prison gates when an execution takes place.

Fortunately, the churches are something of a joke in Britain. But in those parts of the world where they are still a force, the faith is characterised by murderous intolerance and bigotry. Just as cigarettes can damage your health in the bronchial region, Christianity can damage it in the cerebral.

Ghosts busted

LONG before Uri Geller or even Doris Stokes were performing, there was that other famous sideshow – the haunting of Borley Rectory. Built in 1863, "the most haunted house in England," as it became known, was situated in a remote Essex hamlet. Attractions included a nun's ghost, a spectral coach with a headless driver, mysterious writings, rappings and lights.

In the early 1930s, parties of journalists and spiritualist odd-balls descended on Borley. Mystery-mongers were agog, sceptics were amused. Local trades-people had a field day.

Inevitably, Borley Rectory attracted the celebrated "psychic investigator" Harry Price, who did more than anyone to foster the "most haunted house" legend. He founded journals, wrote extensively and granted interviews at the drop of a fiver. Yet he did not believe that the house was haunted. Price was, as one local writer put it, "an astute and agreeable old fraudster who saw that there was money to be made if the matter was handled with care."

Most of those connected with the Borley Rectory saga have, in spiritualist parlance, "passed over." But one survivor, Louis Mayerling, of Thetford, still sojourns in this vale of tears and recently published his account of the affair in *Psychic News*. In a letter headed "Borley Rectory wasn't haunted" – rather bold for *Psychic News* – Dr Mayerling writes: "From 1930 on I spent much of my time at the rectory... From that date as an associate of Harry Price who was involved in the case for many years, I think that everybody in Borley was aware that the whole story of the hauntings was a cleverly documented hoax."

Describing himself as "one of the many jokers throughout that heady period," Dr Mayerling confesses: "I would be much happier if all those recorded events were true."

Dr Mayerling need not be regretful. The gulls are always with us. Moving statues and weeping madonnas draw vast crowds to Catholic shrines. Even the Church of England still investigates supernatural phenomena.

Last month a gathering of Anglican clergy at Scarborough – just down the coast from Whitby where Bram Stoker's vampire landed – heard the Rev Tom Willis speak of his work as the Archbishop of York's adviser on the occult.

But it was something of an anti-climax. After investigating ghosts and apparitions for the past 30 years, Mr Willis admitted: "I've never seen one myself." However, on one occasion someone shouted "Quick, there she is behind you!"

It sounds like something of a pantomime to me.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Priorities wrong?

WHILE being firmly in favour of women being allowed complete control over their own bodies, and free access to contraception, abortion, voluntary sterilisation, and so on; and while deploring the disgusting and violent antics of those whom Connaire Kensit (January letters) calls "the natalists" – the Pope, "Mother" Teresa and the rest – I have for many years thought that the medical researchers and authorities have, in a sense, got their priorities in the wrong order.

At the publicised end of the life-scale, we have the aforementioned contraception in various forms – abortion, sterilisation, vasectomy, etc. – all aimed at reducing the birth-rate.

At the other end of the scale, the medical profession seems to be working itself to a frazzle in the effort to prolong human life, by sometimes ludicrous means. (The 84-year-old father of a friend of ours has been in hospital for several months awaiting major open heart surgery...) Quite apart from the moral (or immoral) aspect of "striving officiously to keep alive" elderly invalids, disabled, and Alzheimer's sufferers (Ronald Reagan was 84 the other day...), it doesn't seem to occur to those working to curb world birth-rates that, if the proportion of elderly people continues to rise, we are going to need more younger people in future years to look after them.

I freely admit that, apart from pressing as hard as possible for the legality of euthanasia – and, perhaps, setting an upper age-limit for the aforementioned major heart surgery, or organ transplants (except for cornea transplants into otherwise reasonably healthy oldsters) – I really don't know what can be done to stop the ominous increase in the number of Struldbrugs, particularly in the Western world. One of the pensioners quoted in your article about euthanasia (January) obviously has thoughts in the same direction, believing that "mercy killing" already, goes on unofficially: "We're costing the country too much money and I believe it definitely goes on."

Changing the subject, Mary Skelton (January again) describes herself as "a freethinking Christian humanitarian" – the mind reaches the ultimate in bogglement...even for a freethinking reincarnationist humanitarian, like me. She claims that "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 the rabies virus, again it is Man letting it get out of control."

Well, it certainly isn't obvious to me, Mary, dunderheaded MENZA drop-out though I may be – and I probably won't be the only one to point out that Man did not invent the rabies virus: your God did, if anyone did! You creationists can't have it both ways and Man did not invent the four-year droughts which destroy crops and cause famine, the floods and

hurricanes which destroy people's homes and livelihoods, the earthquakes which devastate places like San Francisco and Kobe, or the volcanic eruptions of Pompeii and Krakatoa! Why do you think that insurance companies include the phrase "Act of God" to cover such disasters?

Beverley Nichols once said: "The core of all sin is cruelty." I have never found cause to refute that – and, according to the Bible, that makes God the greatest, most proficient sinner in history – and pre-history, for that matter. He's had longer at it, for one thing, and the "redeeming sacrifice" of his son doesn't seem to have had much effect on him, either.

BERYL MERCER
Cornwall

Thou shalt believe

AS ONE who ministers to a congregation of the Unitarian Church (a body which has no creed or doctrines) I find myself at one with Noël Ratcliffe when he condemns "beliefs" (February). What troubles me is that so many freethinkers equate beliefs with religion.

Beliefs are dangerous, because they are blind assumptions elevated to the status of truths. As Noël implies, the use of the word "belief" demonstrates a lack of actual, first-hand knowledge. People believe what cannot be proven or demonstrated. Being aware of this weakness and of their self-deception, at least unconsciously, they are impelled to defend their beliefs. They do this by aggressively trying to compel others to accept the same doctrines, thus quieting their own inner doubts. Worse, people are so insecure in their beliefs that they cannot deal with the disbelief of others, so they persecute "infidels" and "blasphemers."

I have never understood why an all-powerful God needs puny men to defend his honour. How can any blasphemy possibly injure the omnipotent? The truth needs no defence. The truth is invulnerable!

I would suggest that it is possible that there are verities which lie beyond the comprehension and competence of the mechanisms of the human brain. Religion – real religion – is an attempt to investigate this, empirically or experientially. Surely there can be no harm in such a venture, freely undertaken? Is it not legitimate to look for some super- or meta- physical phenomena, which search requires the discovery and utilisation of extra-mundane sensitivities (similar, perhaps, to intuition)? Such experiences, if they exist, will be self-evidently valid for the individual, but probably incommunicable. This, however, does not render them invalid; and, if there are no such fields of experience, looking for them will do no harm.

It is my personal experience that a "religious" dimension does exist. Therefore, I don't believe anything: I know some things. Because I know a little, I feel no urge to inflict this knowledge on anybody else: indeed, it is

impossible to do so. I do not need to defend such knowledge, however bitterly others may mock it: it simply is and cannot be harmed.

So, can we perhaps recognise the difference between most so-called religion, with its beliefs, and real religious exploration?

PETER GALBRAITH
Northampton

Brain-damaged by 'truths'

WE read in Jane Marshall's February "Last Word" (how's that for progress: woman having last word?) of Iran's refusal – the only country so to do – at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, to allow its team to march behind a woman!

That's determination for you: sticking to one's principles. Most admirable. What is not admirable are the principles (syntactical confusion there?). That intelligent men (women's intelligence is of no account) can hold such principles is a most telling confirmation of the brain damage resulting from the mental distortion caused by dutifully, or mandatorily, trying to accept "truths" embodied in a book written centuries ago (before the Age of Enlightenment/Renaissance) by a man claiming to be the prophet of God (I hate "having" to put in the capital G!). There we have human tragedy of cosmic proportions. And still the virus burrows deep into vast numbers of people as a result of initial infection injected into children before they have a chance to grow up and think for themselves. So much for such as former singer Cat Stevens talking about such barbaric treatment in terms of *education*. What a mockery!

One is tempted to say "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do," but in *The Freethinker* one must resist the temptation. Sufficient to say that "holy ignorance" is no defence of spitting in the eye of natural law – sometimes known as common sense

NOËL RATCLIFFE
Buxton

Dynamism is needed

READING *The Freethinker* is like talking to yourself; it may be true but it's all trivial. Surely we should be more direct, more dynamic in the way we mean to clear away superstition.

Who wrote to the Archbishop and told him he was teaching stories that were untrue? Who wrote to the headmaster and told him he was teaching untruths?

Children at school may get one lesson in biology about the meiosis of chromosomes, where each gamete having a haploid number, combine to form the zygote. All human and

YOU'RE TELLING US!

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animal life starts in this way. This knowledge makes nonsense of the virgin birth of Jesus, yet day after day in school assembly children can be indoctrinated with this untrue story.

It is wrong to teach children what is not true.

It is a crime to indoctrinate children with erroneous beliefs.

J F HORSEMAN
Tynemouth

Animal rights

AT LAST *The Freethinker* (February) is raising the issue of animal rights. G W Foote 91 years ago was advocating "most drastic regulation of the slaughterhouse and the cattle-ship" so it seems incredible that present day freethinkers have not yet taken this on board and become the pioneers of this movement.

We are tardy, unimaginative and backward-thinking: not at all the clever people we think we are. Richard Dawkins, meanwhile, is urging more respect for animals (live exports); Marian Stamp Dawkins is doing studies to show they have greater consciousness than we might think (and thus hoping to raise their status in our eyes).

I would recommend anyone still scornful of the animal rights movement to borrow from their library a copy of the most mind-changing book I have come across: Professor Peter Singer's cool and logical *Animal Liberation*. The first chapter alone should do the trick.

HEATHER EVANS
Kenilworth

TO JUDGE by the front-page leader and the Up Front article by Dave Godin (February), the Humanist movement is about to be hijacked by the Animal Rights lobby.

Most Humanists would agree with the need to maximise animal welfare and minimise suffering, but are we really going to join with those who equate the life of an animal with that of a human? Are we going to join those who want to outlaw the drinking of milk, the eating of meat and the use of animals in medical research?

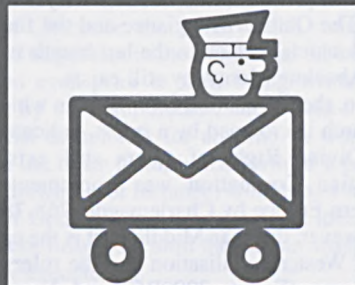
Those are the messages carried by the protestors at Coventry and Brightlingsea (incidentally, where were the good burghers of Brightlingsea when their port was used to import coal to help break the miners' strike, and thus led to the destruction of mining communities?).

If the Editor has read *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, he will know that the only "brotherhood" in Nature is the literal one of siblings who share half their genes. Those who do not accept the "Animal Rights" viewpoint are accused of being "specist," but Nature itself is "specist." The great difference between the 19th Century arguments against slavery and the views of today's Animal Rightists is that the slaves were members of the human

species. The basis of the idea of the "Brotherhood of Man" and Human Rights is that we are all members of the same species. If our ancestors had not been meat-eaters, with the need to make and use tools to cut flesh and break bone, then the species *Homo sapiens* would not have evolved.

I cannot see the logic in saying, as Dave Godin does, that because religionists do not recognise animal rights, Humanists should. Surely the case should be argued on human considerations; if that is "specist," so be it!

ROBERT TEE
Pudsey



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

Population problems

YOU put the misleading heading "Sexual Freedom" over a letter from Dan J Bye (February) which wasn't about sexual freedom at all, but about "freedom" to reproduce. Sexual freedom means being able to make love with mates of one's own choice: done responsibly, such mating is not wholly cost-free, but puts no more strain on resources than, say, solving jig-saw puzzles. Producing a new person, on the other hand, if done responsibly, costs tens of thousands of pounds. To give everyone the right to have as many offspring as they have been doing means taking away from millions of people – from most people, actually – other freedoms, such as being able to eat, drink, or wash.

Wherever we do things that use up limited resources, state intervention (tax incentives, restrictions, subsidies, rationing) is demanded by all decent citizens, and resisted by selfish, delinquent scum. Such state intervention is

what states exist for.

Bye mentions China. But has he anything to say about Chinese famines? Like does he admit they happened? Millions died in misery in the north-western famine of 1929, the Henan famines of 1942 and 1960-61, and in numerous unreported local disasters such as one in southern Anhui mentioned in my January letter in *The Freethinker*, whose victims I encountered as I happened to be passing their way (I've never seen a published account); only the bigger famines in poor countries are news. Similar hellish disasters happen elsewhere, like Bengal, under British rule (1942-44).

Famine – too many people for the resources to sustain – has killed more in my time than all the genocides of Jews and Armenians, Nazi death-camps, Stalin's Gulag, and all the wars in the world. And the deaths are neither quick nor pleasant.

To forestall more of such horrors, we need to make contraception, abortion and sterilisation freely available to all who want it – a massive gain for individual freedom – then apply suitable incentives, and in severe cases rationing, to keep populations at sustainable levels. Bye calls Chinese rationing of reproduction "brutally-enforced". My experience of feudal-despotic attitudes in Chinese local administration makes me guess there is some "brutality" in their administration of *anything* from national defence to child immunisation – but it isn't the enforcement that exercises Bye, but the principle of rationing at all. Actually, I did not mention the one-child policy, merely that China has curbed its breeding, but since Bye raises it, let us note that the one-child-per-couple policy has brought immense benefits, among them weakening of the patriarchy underlying the attitudes of local officials that think they own the people they serve. Bye cites a work called *One Woman's Fight Against China's One Child Policy*. In my youth we had rationing here in Britain, and freedom-loving heroes and heroines who fought that policy. We called them spivs.

CONNAIRE KENSIT
Portsmouth

Romans had right idea

I WAS too young to experience the desolation and spiritual confusion of the '30s (H D Corbishley, February), or to qualify for a fighting role in World War II (I was 16 when it ended). But having learned to read at the age of three, I have been able to read accounts of those times written by all manner of folk, from so-called world leaders to the humblest of soldiers, sailors and airmen...

As to myself, it may surprise you to know that I've never physically attacked anyone, being a life-long pacifist – but I'd defend myself vigorously if attacked.

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The between-the-wars gang turned the other cheek too, and almost succeeded in handing Britain over to the Nazi tyranny, with their "let's pretend it isn't happening" attitude. I agree that pressure resulted in the demise of Czechoslovakia, but it bought us time in which to start rearming. Omelettes need broken eggs, perhaps your pro-Conscientious Objector correspondents would have preferred making a moral point...inside a concentration camp?

Of course, Mr Corbishley's father did not return to a "land fit for heroes." Lloyd George was a liar, too busy feathering his own nest to care about returning-from-the-war personnel.

Finally, the "Soft Underbelly of Europe" campaign referred to by Mr Corbishley tied up, for 32 months, 30 German infantry and SS Panzer divisions which Hitler really needed to defeat both Russia and the Allied landings, thus freeing France and Belgium. Hardly a campaign of no consequence!

Far from the lessons of Passchendaele being lost on me, I have to say that sacrificing people for no good reason has ever been a non-starter with me. But continually giving in to naked tyranny isn't the correct answer. As the Romans said, "If you desire peace, prepare for war," since no one tries attacking those with the ability to defend themselves.

A G STEPHENS
Bradford



Humanist, not atheist

I AM not an Atheist. I believe in my own personal God. This God encompasses all those things which I believe as axioms but which I cannot prove.

These include a belief in the ultimate reasonableness of things, the needlessness of supernatural intervention and the unreliability of revelation. My God also embodies compassion and the milk of human kindness. My espousal of these beliefs is for me as satisfying and inspiring an experience as any that religion has to offer. (And I have tried that first).

Therefore I am neither Agnostic nor Atheist but Humanist.

OWEN DUMPLETON
Washington

More on monarchy

BRADLAUGH'S political action removed the requirement to swear the Oath of Allegiance on the Bible, says Barbara Smoker (January). However, no MP has been brave enough to reject the Oath of Allegiance. In Sweden, State Public Officials, including the Monarchy, swear allegiance to the State and People. A modern, neutral Oath of Allegiance would obviously assist the peace process in Northern

Ireland.

Why should the Oath of Allegiance be sworn to the Monarch by MPs, since Parliamentary forces won the battle with Charles I – and there has been no re-match!

If MPs swear the Oath of Allegiance to the Monarch and the Monarch checks Bills passed by House, then this does not look like democracy but vote-rigging. A voter does not expect something to obstruct his choice of MP. Also, an MP said recently that anybody and everybody is discussing the Monarchy outside Parliament, but MPs cannot raise the subject in the House. An elected MP should be able to discuss any issue in Parliament.

The reason for this peculiar system is that democracy was grafted on to a Henry VIII system. The Oath of Allegiance and the fact that the Monarch goes on to the last breath suggest that Absolute Monarchy still exists.

Also, the Coronation ceremony, in which the Monarch is crowned by a priest, indicates that the Divine Right of rulers still exists. A Christian Coronation was implemented in Western Europe by Charlemagne, 768-784.

However, the near-Middle East is the epicentre of Western civilisation and the rulers such as Menes (Egypt, 3000BC) and Naram-Sin (Iraq, 2254-2218BC) were aware of the Divine Right of rulers.

It is important to realise that many social inventions and concepts flowed from this area. For example: phonetic language, place-position in numbers (tens system), national astrology, Tarot cards, Hammurabi eye-for-eye, tooth-for-tooth code (1792-1750BC – the Moses Code was 1250BC), legal business contracts using clay tokens in a clay ball (3000BC, Iraq), monotheism (Sun God, Akhenaton, 1370BC, Egypt), the number 60 as used in clocks.

But the point I want to make is that the feudal and Henry VIII elements in government should be replaced by a modern political system, housed in a modern, purpose-built building containing modern electronic systems.

ROBERT AWBERY
Reading

Lessons in double-think

AS PART of Public Perception, I am beginning to feel very stupid and guilty. According to the Government, we so frequently get it *wrong*. Perhaps one answer could be mandatory courses in double-think in all schools, preferably from infancy.

A recent instance of Public Perception going sadly astray was in our seeing as Gee Bees (Gee stands for Greedy...) certain individuals – happily immune to the politics of envy, a charge to be levelled only at inferior beings – believing themselves to be worth *so very much* more than their fellow human beings and awarding themselves colossal salaries. Shame on us all...

Mind you, I can't help thinking that the

Christian values so beloved of the present Government have not permeated all areas of society. After all, Jesus did say "love thy neighbour as *thyself*" – not 10 times less.

On another matter, what *are* we poor females to believe? On the one hand, we have Coun E Goodman (February) claiming that males need the stimulation provided by porn – and on the other we hear that men think about sex every few minutes. Perhaps heterosexual males – and I write not in condemnatory vein – come (*double entendre* accidental) in two varieties?

What nonsense is contained in *Sex and Dating: the Official Politically Correct Guide*, referred to by Bill McIlroy (February). Actually, I feel quite sorry for the emotionally constipated contributors who wish to outlaw spontaneity and generosity of spirit. As for Susan McClary, the "feminist musicologist," I dare say that certain other parts of classical music have her battling between succumbing to sexual stimulation and reaching for a pen to register her horror at the devious way yet another medium has been used by vile man to express his dastardly nature.

Incidentally, has any feminist yet objected to the designation of woMAN?

VIVIEN GIBSON
Ealing

E GOODMAN'S letter in the February issue, although brief and witty, does not really answer Vivien Gibson's letter in the January issue. As I understand it, she was not referring to outright porn, where at least you know what you are getting, but to the dismally frequent custom of pornographic scenes being inserted willy-nilly (no pun intended) into mainstream films, which, presumably, are intended for female as well as male viewers.

I would guess that most viewers, male as well as female, are bored by these interminable bonking scenes which have become a cliché in modern cinema, along with car chases, fights and the interminable use of guns. A reasonably good story is ruined, while an excruciatingly dull film sinks without trace.

Ms Gibson is apparently old enough, like me, to remember Hollywood's Hayes Code, according to which scarcely anything of a sexual nature could be portrayed, so I suppose the present situation is a reaction against so much suppression – the pendulum swinging from one extreme to the other. In which case, we may eventually get a better balance.

This is not, of course, to support any form of censorship; to paraphrase Voltaire, one may dislike something intensely while defending its right to exist.

E M KARBACZ
West Mersea

Support for Taslina

AS A black atheist, I fully give my support to

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to Taslima Nasrin in her struggle for freedom and freethought.

The Editor has asked (January) why nobody is concerned about Taslima. I think this is because (a) according to what I read in the December, 1994, issue of *International Humanist News*, few people will believe her because she is a "militant" feminist; (b) among Humanists and Freethinkers, Taslima is accepted, but in the outside world she is seen as a trouble-maker, a radical, a "downright atheist" and, because she is an atheist and non-white, an "anomaly"; (c) as far as others are concerned, Taslima has only her book, *Shame*, as evidence.

The Editor has also asked: where is the Left? What I want to know is: where are the feminists?

DINSDAH JONES
Hackney

Matters of fact

WHATEVER one may think of his opinions, H D Corbishley (February) is in error in two factual details.

Neville Chamberlain did not negotiate the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935. He was at that time Chancellor of the Exchequer. Ramsay MacDonald was then still Prime Minister in the National Government. He was very soon to change places, as Lord President of the Council, with Stanley Baldwin – already the "de facto" Prime Minister.

The Geddes "axe" of Government expenditure cuts had been imposed during the slump of 1921-22 – and so was not among the massive cuts of the '30s.

R J M TOLHURST
Chelmsford

Only human

READING your announcement that the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association has issued a briefing on gay sex, I note the use of the word "homophobia."

Our homosexual friends use it to denote "fear of homosexuality." I think it should be pointed out to them that the word cannot possibly mean that. It does not even mean "fear of man," as the Latin word *homo* means "human." So it must mean "fear of humanity." To illustrate the way the Romans used the word, the letter from Atticus to his friend, Cicero, is often quoted. On the occasion of the death of the latter's daughter, Julia, Atticus reminded him: *Homo est* (She is human).

ARTHUR ATKINSON
Hayes

All in the mind

WE would be grateful if you would let us correct an unfortunate phrase in our review of the book *Does God Exist?* (February).

In writing about Richard La Croix's strange argument regarding effects preceding causes, we referred to a "work of Art" already existing *as such* if present in the mind of God. However, instead of a "work of Art," we should have written a "work of Literature" (that is, a work consisting of words – La Croix listed "a play, a poem, a story, an essay, a novel, a review and the like"). In the case of a work of Literature, the words which comprise it would be present in the mind of an all-knowing God even prior to their being written or spoken by a human creator, and would therefore exist completely for all time. A work of Art, on the other hand, in the form of a painting or drawing (for instance) would exist in the mind of God only as an image or an idea and would not fully exist until the human artist had actually executed it.

We're sorry about the mistake but, as we hope you can appreciate, the ideas concerned are rather elusive!

VERNA METCALFE
RONA GERBER
London NW3

Ought for our comfort?

I OFTEN remember the thought police of my youth. Usually these were tyrannical senior males but religious except for "Communists" and similar sputniks at Young Communist

League and Marx House meets; there, only non-religious thought was allowed.

Nowadays, after 70 years of compulsory atheism and a strict control of thought within State Socialist norms, it is interesting to see that many Russians are turning to fundamentalist sects, TV hypnotherapists such as Korbachievski and even to paid "koldun." *Koldun* is translated as "witch," but really means "wizard."

Male and female *koldun* appear on Russian TV. Some, apparently, earn more from one spell or cantrip cast than medical doctors do in a year.

"White" magic is used for good purposes, such as healing and the return of stolen cars, and "black" for destroying thieves and kidnappers. The *koldun* working "black" magic may include a warning to the client: that his or her immortal soul may never again be clean.

No doubt most freethinkers will consider the use of paid *koldun* unfortunate, but it raises interesting questions:

- How effective is the control of thought enforced from the earliest age? Presumably most users of *koldun* were brought up as atheists, at least ostensibly. Now that the former Soviet Union is in economic difficulties, no longer able to extract value from countries such as Poland, some citizens turn to witchcraft and religion. Comments, please, from believers in State Socialism, Communism, Soviet-style régimes and others.

- Perhaps early training into atheism is not always adequate when a measure of freedom of thought appears?

- If religion/superstition, as defined, can ever comfort the "distressed creature," to paraphrase Marx, should a freethought perspective allow the distressed creature living in post-industrial, post-progressive states to accept this comfort?

B L ABLE
Croydon

Schools should be told to meet needs of non-religious, say Humanists

EDUCATION Secretary Gillan Shephard has been urged to act over a recent survey of teenagers' beliefs which suggested that more than 58 per cent are non-believers.

The survey questioned 15,361 British schoolchildren aged 13 to 15 and found that one-in-three described themselves as agnostics and a further one-in-four chose the term "atheist."

The survey, *Teenage Values and Religion*, is by Professor Leslie J Francis and Dr William K Kay, of Trinity College, Carmarthen.

"It provides further evidence that there is now a significant majority of pupils in schools who have no religion," said Roy Saich in a Press release issued on behalf of Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists.

The group has written to the Education Secretary asking her to issue a circular to schools to draw attention to the needs of non-religious pupils, be they agnostic, atheist or Humanist. The letter also asks her to ensure that such pupils are given a thorough understanding of the nature and foundation of their beliefs equivalent to the provisions which have to be made about religious belief.

WAY FORWARD FOR HUMANISTS?

THE universal dissemination of knowledge, especially of the subjects of astronomy, geology, physiology, and the origin of species, has, in most civilised countries, led to the complete rejection of the "flat earth" theory – and that of the "separate creation" is not far behind, along with many other religious myths and legends which are no longer credible.

The result has been that many thinking people have lost faith in religion, and have become more or less inclined towards a secular point of view. Consequently, there has been a great falling off in church attendance and many churches are in grave financial difficulties. Nevertheless, only a very few non-churchgoers and non-believers in Britain have become identified with the Humanist movement, and many have continued to give nominal support to their original churches for social reasons, especially "hatches, matches and dispatches." The question arises: WHY?

Perhaps it would help to consider the situation in some other countries. For example, Norway, a country with a population of just over four millions, which has many thousands of registered Humanists, compared with Britain, which has a population of more than 56 million, of whom only a few thousands are members of the various Humanist organisations. (The exact number is not readily available as we have no united corporate identity. There must be a reason for this disparity).

Unlike Britain, Norway is a purely democratic secular state. In Norway, religious bodies, have no direct voice in the government and hence cannot, in this way, influence policy to their own advantage. In Britain, on the other hand, the "Upper House" of Parliament, the House of Lords, is not democratically elected but consists of the descendants of an hereditary aristocracy, in which the governing members of the Church of England are entitled to sit by virtue of their office. It could be argued that they do not make the laws. These are made by the democratically elected House of Commons and need to be signed by the Queen. But the Queen is the Head of the Anglican Church, which is a part of the State and is subsidised by the Government in which

LAST WORD

by Frank Holmes

it has a vested interest. The result is that the State church has a unique advantage over all other religious and social bodies when it comes to allocating taxes for purposes of state, social and cultural institutions.

The situation in Norway is entirely different. As in Britain, proportions of the taxes are allocated to various cultural and social institutions, including religious bodies, but it is recognised that it would be unfair to allocate funds to the latter from taxes paid by those who have no interest in, and derive no benefit from, the services of the religions concerned.

The Norwegian government, therefore, has arranged to compensate those people who have no church connection *in proportion to their total number in the community*. They have also made it conditional that this group will undertake to provide social services similar to those traditionally provided by the churches, employing adequately trained and qualified officiants to perform such services where necessary, including institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons and social and public welfare fields in general.

It follows, therefore, that non-believers and non-churchgoers in Norway have a personal interest in uniting to form a corporate body, in order to arrange to meet such statutory requirements. In the absence of such a legal situation in Britain, where can we go from here?

It seems to me that, pending the time when the increasing number of people who are now campaigning for separation of Church and State (including Humanists) achieve their aims, we should concentrate on several feasible objectives of our own.

It is obvious that we need a larger representative organisation, with a much larger total membership than we have now, but there is no incentive, at present, for anyone to join the Humanist movement other than for mutual support or social companionship. The average person does not feel any need for moral support for having lost interest in religion and can probably find more socially attractive company elsewhere.

I therefore propose the following objectives:

To unite to form a corporate organisation with a distinctive title and logo, representing all existing Humanist bodies in Britain, with the possible exception of any who may be using the term Humanist to promote ideas incompatible with logical reasoning. This would immediately enhance the value in the media of any "Humanist" viewpoint, if only by the total number of people represented.

That this unified association of Humanists should concentrate on providing, voluntarily, and in accordance with their means, at least some of the social services such as our Norwegian counterparts are required to provide to meet their statutory obligations. Payment for such services, could reasonably be expected, provided these are rendered by suitably trained and qualified persons. This would not only greatly enhance our own public status, but also could possibly attract some charitably minded people to participate. (Some groups have already been doing so for years, to the best of their limited ability).

By pooling resources, the various constituent bodies could also achieve many other aims which would be beyond their individual means. For example, the publication of a "quality" periodical for public distribution at a reasonable price. This could deal with topical moral and ethical issues from a Humanist point-of-view, in addition to some of the articles from individual Humanist publications, with perhaps some cartoons and light-hearted humour as well, similar to Humanist magazines in other countries. For example, the Norwegian *Humanist*, (six issues a year, Kr 35 a copy, and the German *Diesseits* (quarterly, DM 3.50 each). Given adequate public response, this could also result in a demand for a Humanist Helpline to give advice, on such subjects as funerals, weddings and other human situations.

It seems to me that all of these proposals are feasible, if only in a small way to begin with, and would greatly enhance the status and influence of Humanism in this country. Some such future arrangement seems inevitable. Is there any good reason why such proposals should not now be seriously considered, if only as an objective at which to aim?

● Frank Holmes MBE, 85-year-old Edinburgh Humanist and officiant, submitted this article for discussion. Readers' comments are invited.—Editor.

Mcllroy lecture in print

SHEFFIELD Humanist Society is soon to publish a pamphlet, *Foundations of Modern Humanism*, by a distinguished former Editor of *The Freethinker*, Wm Mcllroy. It is based on a fact-packed lecture delivered by Bill to the Society on February 1. A review will appear

shortly. The pamphlet will cost 75p plus 25p post; two copies £1.50, including post. Bulk rates on application. Advance orders please to Sheffield Humanist Society, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT. Telephone inquiries: 0114 268-5731.