

The

£1

Secular
Humanist
monthly

Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 115 No 4

April 1995



**'In
our hands now lies
not only our own future,
but that of all other living
creatures with whom we
share the earth'**

**- David Attenborough, quoted in
Humanist Anthology,
reviewed by Colin McCall Page 52.**

(Picture: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

UP FRONT

with The Editor

Green and unpleasant

HUMANIST and Green Party member Colin Mills seeks to create a Green Humanism Working Group, one of whose aims would be to amend a motion (C17) passed at the Autumn 1994 conference, which committed the party to accepting a "spiritual" dimension.

The resolution said: "Spirituality is a fundamental principle adhered to by a large section of Green Party members, whether they be Christians, Pagans, Buddhists, or those who follow no set belief system. Given that the Green Party recognises the spiritual element to human existence, we believe this should be a source of strength and celebrated as a statement in the Philosophical Basis of the Green Party."

The Green Spirituality Working Group has since come up with a form of words which it seeks to have made part of the party's Philosophical Basis – or declaration of principles, if you like:

"The seventh principle is that society should recognise the spiritual aspect of existence. Spirituality means different things to different people. In the Green Movement that quality should be respected without question. Many Greens feel that it only makes sense to talk of the future with reference to deeper values. Green Spirituality recognises and accepts a universal human need for meaning and the need to restore balance through recognising that our planet and all life are unique aspects of an integrated whole..." Etc. Etc.

The group also seeks to commit the Green Party to: "A social system where spirituality is recognised and respected."

Colin Mills tells me: "As a long-standing Humanist, I objected to this motion even being debated, never mind passed, but I was unable to prevent either. I am currently seeking to table amendments for the Autumn 1995 conference, which will limit the damage and make it clear that Humanism is a perfectly valid Green perspective.

"What appals me is not just that a motion was tabled, debated and passed which clearly commits the Green Party to a religious position, but that those who seek to defend motion C17 deny that spirituality has anything to do with religion. When it is put to them that dictionary definitions, and the generally accepted sense of the term, is clearly religious, this point is contemptuously dismissed.

"They seem to be unaware that using words in senses distinct from those used by everyone else (and denying the generally used sense) is not just nonsense, but dangerous nonsense as well, with ominous echoes of

Through the Looking Glass and 1984."

Colin would prefer all such daftness to be deleted altogether: "But I recognise that amendments recognising the Humanist as well as the religious perspectives may well stand a better chance of success."

Colin Mills' address, for those who would like to associate themselves with his proposed Green Humanism Working Group, is 70 Chestnut Lane, Amersham Common, Bucks HP6 6EH.

Mass support for Blair?

IT is not only the Green Party which is experiencing internal troubles of a theological nature. You may have noticed the odd media reference to the fact that Labour – which is now being led (light-years from its ancient principles) by an elfin called Tony Blair – is in turmoil over the proposed ditching of Clause Four of the Party constitution.

Opponents of the move might consider forcing a re-run of last year's election for the Labour Party leadership as a way of halting the organisation's Gadarene plunge towards mega-respectability: get rid of Blair and you undermine the threat to Common Ownership.

If the comrades can but force themselves into the courts of capitalist justice, the grounds for such an appeal certainly exist. Sorting through some newspaper cuttings the other day, I found one which provides proof that Blair enjoyed an unfair advantage in his contest with John Prescott for the top job: *God was on his side.*

A priest from Tony Blair's County Durham constituency confessed to the *Daily Telegraph* (August 16) that during the leadership campaign he offered prayers at Sunday Masses for Blair's success.

The intercessions were made by Father John Caden, parish priest at the church of St John Fisher, Sedgefield, where Blair sometimes hears Mass with his Roman Catholic wife, Cherie.

The *Telegraph* Peterborough column reported: "Although an Anglican (of the High persuasion), Blair is often recruited to read lessons."

"We prayed that the Holy Spirit would guide the election, and we're certain that that has been the case," says Caden. "We are all immensely proud of him."

That was on hearing of Blair's candidature for election. A few days after the result, Caden was celebrating a special Mass of Thanksgiving.

"I offered prayers to thank God for the result," he told the *Telegraph*, "and to ask Him to help Tony and his family cope with all the pressures leadership would bring."

Even at this late stage, that's sufficient material for a High Court challenge to the leadership contest result. What chance did sea-cook Prescott have against the Heavenly Host?

Eruv fight continues

WHICH reminds me... Jeffrey and Elizabeth Segall have dropped *their* High Court challenge to the Secretary of State John Gummer's decision to allow plans for the creation of an *eruv* religious boundary in North West London.

This is on advice that the relevant Planning Act applies only to land and buildings – *hereditaments* to lawyers, and a public street: the proposed site of the *eruv*, cannot be *included*. Or something.

However, the Segalls say: "We will continue to oppose the implementation of the proposed *eruv* boundary by working with other objectors to prevent the installation of the poles and wires."

And National Secular Society Treasurer David Williams adds that the appeal fund which he has been running on the objectors' behalf will remain open – at least until other possible legal measures have been considered.

An *eruv* is an area marked by poles and wire within which Orthodox Jews can avoid certain Sabbath restrictions such as pushing prams and wheelchairs. Inevitably, it will be socially divisive and must encourage a ghetto mentality among the Jews, objectors insist. Around 2,000 people in Barnet are opposing the creation of the six square mile *eruv*: the Segalls themselves will have a pole erected outside their home, if the barmy plan goes ahead.

A spokesman for the United Synagogue told the local Press after the Segalls announced their pull-back from the High Court: "I am optimistic that the *eruv* will be operational before the end of 1995."

We shall see; watch this space.

Jewish chronicles

I WAS reared in the Young Communist League to believe that Jewishness was synonymous with radicalism. Well, I was *not* a lad from t'West Riding – and who were my heroes but Dr Karl Marx himself, Rosa Luxemburg, Professor J D Bernal, Stepney Councillor Solly Kaye, Howard Fast...? All Jews!

UP FRONT

with The Editor

From Page 50

I was deeply disappointed to be shown, at the age of 20, that some Jews, believing Jews, could be quite as reactionary, as morbidly superstitious, as the rest of humanity.

The man who slapped me out of my naïveté was the late Cecil P Taylor, the Glasgow-Jewish playwright, then my closest friend, who, illustrating his theme with examples from his own background, convinced me that Jews could be grubbily racist, too – in insisting, for example, that their sons and daughters married only other Jews on pain of expulsion from the family. And, as we have since observed in the shameful treatment of Palestinians by Zionists, that sort of Jew doesn't keep racism in the family.

Now, very much older and perhaps a little bit wiser, I am only mildly surprised to learn that thousands of people from the former Soviet Union who sought "freedom" in Israel

face being denied a funeral – because rabbis do not consider them Jewish.

The latest case was in Haifa, where a 33-year-old woman died of cancer after being exposed to radiation from Chernobyl. Relatives searched for four days before a non-religious kibbutz agreed to bury her, the *Daily Telegraph* reported on March 18.

The woman, Jana Fasher, arrived in Israel two years ago with her father, who is Jewish, and her mother, who is Christian. She was considered to be non-Jewish by orthodox rabbis: Jewishness is handed down only through the mother, and so she could not be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

Recently, there was uproar in the Israeli parliament over the treatment of 92-year-old Claudia Peskinov's body, which was left in a mortuary for six days until it was buried in a kibbutz.

All matters of personal law in Israel are in the hands of religious authorities. Rabbis, mullahs and priests are exclusively responsible for looking after the needs of their respective communities. There are no civil weddings, no legal provision for secular burial.

But this outrageous situation is under unprecedented pressure with the arrival of 700,000 immigrants since 1989, mostly from Russia and the former Soviet republics. Many couples are of mixed religion – or of none.

Many of those refused burial in Jewish cemeteries have found a resting place in Christian cemeteries, but these are filling up. Others have been interred in small plots in secular kibbutz communities.

Last August, an Israeli soldier killed by Muslim gunmen was buried in a civilian section of a military cemetery because his Jewishness was in doubt. His body was later re-interred in the main cemetery after a national uproar. Similarly, an immigrant woman killed during a gun attack on an Israeli bus last July was buried away from other Jews.

The government has approved plans to open secular burial grounds but preparations are making slow progress because of opposition from religious groups. In the meantime, better not be seen dead in Israel!

Cruel, crueler, cruellest...

I HAVE to say, however, that if we were awarding points for sheer, gratuitous cruelty, committed over the past few centuries at least, the Jews would be beaten into a cocked hat by the Christians and the Muslims.

Last month I dwelt at length on a case in point – that of Salamat Masih, the illiterate Christian child from the Punjab, who was sentenced to death, and then reprieved from

death row after international protests, for allegedly having scrawled blasphemies on the wall of mosque.

Now 14, he has made it to Germany, from where he told *The Observer* (March 19): "We are not happy to leave Pakistan, but we have no choice. We were told by the extremists, 'We will kill you. You have been acquitted, but it doesn't matter, we will still kill you.'"

His uncle, Manzoor, was killed by the Muslims, and young Salamat's companion-in-exile, Rehmat Masih, took five of Allah's bullets in the stomach in the early stages of the sorry business – which turns out to have had nothing to do with blasphemy, really. It centred on a village row between Muslims and Christians over ownership of a pigeon, but Pakistan's barbarian blasphemy laws make it easy for Muslims to settle scores in property and family disputes by concocting allegations that the Prophet has been insulted in some way.

The danger now, I hear from Sanal Edamaruku, of the Indian Rationalist Association, is that fundamentalists in Bangladesh are seeking parity-in-backwardness with Pakistan: "Thirteen Islamic fundamentalist parties and groups formed an alliance to fight against anti-Islamic forces and to demand enactment of a blasphemy law with the death penalty if anyone criticised the Koran or Islam."

It would no harm, and it might do some good, if organisations and individuals were to let the Bangladeshi authorities know that people in other countries would regard such a cave-in on this issue as step back into the Dark Ages and would be prepared to kick up an international fuss if the mullahs were to get their way. The Bangladesh High Commission to the UK is at 28 Queen's Gate, London SW 7.

Incidentally, isn't it about time that we stopped talking about *fundamentalist* Muslims, as if they were some species apart? The fact is that *all* Muslims must accept the Koran as a record of the sayings of Mohammed. And the book is unequivocal about the way in which the faithful should behave towards "renegades" like Taslima Nasrin and Rushdie: "...seize them and slay them wherever you find them" (Sura 4:89). As for Unbelievers, a category into which most readers of *The Freethinker* must fall: "...smite you above their necks and smite all their fingertips off them" (Sura 8:12).

"Liberal" Muslims must either accept this stuff as part of their religion – or reject it, as so many *soi-disant* Christians float away from the wilder shores of the Bible. If they choose the latter course, they cease to be Muslims and are waging war against God – for which offence Sura 5:33 suggests an appropriate punishment is: "...the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides."

THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

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

CONTENTS

Up Front:	Page 50
Humanist Anthology	Page 52
Thomas Paine: Colin McCall	Page 53
What's On	Page 54
Son of the Son of God	Page 55
David Tribe on fundamentalism	Page 56
Six Counties schools	Page 58
Down to Earth: Bill McLroy	Page 59
You're telling us! Letters	Page 60
Last Word:	Page 64

Editor's address:

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

Subscriptions, book orders and Fund
donations to The Publisher:

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

Annual postal subscription rates

UK: 12 months £10 or £7 (unwaged). Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £13. Airmail £20 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.

Printed by Yorkshire Web, Barnsley S70 2AS.

Attacking religion's decayed foundations

"HOW horrible it all was," exclaimed Edward Blishen, recalling his Christian childhood, with its admonitions and threatenings, a veritable "moral nightmare." How different it would have been if he could have had Margaret Knight's *Humanist Anthology*. But it wasn't printed until 1961.

Now it has been revised and expanded by Jim Herrick, to include modern rationalists like Ayer, Medawar, Bronowski and Richard Dawkins, and it concludes with David Attenborough's "In our hands now lies not only our own future, but that of all other living creatures with whom we share the earth" – a fitting summary of the Humanist position today.

Blishen, who provides a preface to the book, launched it at a reception in the Conway Hall, London, contrasting its "refreshing" effect with the hideously disturbing state of the world, and with "humanity's failure to be at ease with its humanness." He chose passages from Cicero and Montaigne to illustrate his point.

Other readings by Vera Lustig, John White and Jim Herrick ranged from Confucius (including "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself") and Epicurus, through George Eliot ("The clergy are, practically, the most irresponsible of

Humanist Anthology, Edited by Margaret Knight; revised by Jim Herrick. Rationalist Press Association. £7.50. ISBN 0 301 94001 0.

Review: COLIN McCALL

all talkers") and Mark Twain (whose *Thoughts of God* contains a masterly satire on the invention of the fly) to Bronowski and Attenborough.

Epicurus, as we know, sought a life of pleasure, but he expressly rejected "the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind...not continuous drinkings and revelings". A teaching distorted at the time and still so.

The Romans are well represented by the Epicurean materialist Lucretius and the Stoics, and there is a single line from Pliny the Elder: "For mortal to aid mortal – this is God."

Averroës is in as an Islamic sceptic; Bruno, Spinoza and Voltaire (selection must have been difficult here) then the Scottish

sceptic Hume (four pages from the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*) and the Encyclopedist materialists Diderot and D'Holbach. Other outstanding German philosophers are Schopenhauer, Feuerbach and Nietzsche ("God is a supposition"); and Heine finds "sham holiness, hypocrisy and the gloss of outside piety among German priests, while with the Italians the mask is more transparent..."

Among the recent philosophers are the English – Russell and Moore, Ayer and Flew; the Americans – John Dewey (excellent on science versus dogma) and Sidney Hook; and there is an excerpt from Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism*.

Margaret Knight herself should be mentioned, especially by one who remembers the sensation she created with her BBC radio talks on "Morals Without Religion" way back in 1955. The flavour may be gauged from the two pages here.

Particularly interesting to me are two Indian contributions. M N Roy (1887-1954) whom I knew, was imprisoned by the British and later led the Radical Democratic Party. The fundamental task confronting young Indian intellectuals was, he wrote, "not to revive religion, but to subject religion to a dispassionate criticism...applying that test [of reason] to religion, and all that goes under the pompous denomination of our spiritual culture, and the whole structure of religion will collapse like a house of cards. Only it is not as easily collapsible as a house of cards. It still stands with apparent solidity, but on a decayed foundation. Drift into that foundation and the whole decayed structure will crash...Whatever may have been the greatness of our past it is dead. You cannot revive it. The prisoners of the past can never be the masters of the future."

Flourishes

The other Indian, Gora (1902-1975), who was unknown to me, lost his job as a lecturer for challenging religious belief. He set up an Atheist Centre in Vijayada, Andhra Pradesh, where counter-religious propaganda was combined with social work, and it is good to know that it still flourishes under his children.

There's Ingersoll, of course, and the National Secular Society Presidents Bradlaugh, Foote and Cohen, who denounces the preaching that pain and suffering develop character, whereby "the public conscience has been deadened to the extent of the mass of removable misery in the midst. Christian sympathy may have made its existence bearable; a healthy intelligence would have made its continuance an impossibility."

I am sure that is a view that Edward Blishen would share. And I share his enthusiasm for this most acceptable introduction to the Humanist tradition.

Australian tribute to a pioneer

THE first woman Premier (to 1992) of Victoria, Joan Kirner, has unveiled a monument on the hitherto unmarked grave of an Australian pioneer of birth control, feminism and freethought.

Brettana Smyth (1845-98) ran a drapery and druggist's shop in Errol Street, North Melbourne, and openly sold contraceptives. She supported women's suffrage organisations and the Australasian Secular Association, and advertised birth-control items in Joseph Symes's Melbourne paper, *The Liberator* (modelled on *The Freethinker*).

Brettana Smyth was one of eight children in a Catholic family, and had five children of her own.

Joan Kirner mentioned that Brettana started selling birth control products after a court case in New South Wales legalised the advertising of contraceptives. The case involved National Secular Society vice-president W W Collins and judge Sir William Windeyer, a friend of Moncure Conway's.

A freethinker who openly opposed orthodox religion, she lectured extensively on birth control for women, arguing that planned families would free women from the psychological and financial strains of unwilling pregnancy and motherhood. Among her publications were *The Limitation of Offspring* (1893) and *What Every Woman Should Know: Diseases Incidental to Women* (1895).

She formed the Australian Women's Suffrage Society in 1888.

Ironically, Brettana Smyth was buried in the Catholic section of the Melbourne General Cemetery.

Her grave was restored by the Labour Historical Graves Committee, and the unveiling ceremony on March 13 was well supported by the Melbourne branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. The freethought interest was represented by Ray Dahlitz (author of the *Secular Who's Who* and President of the Humanist Society of Victoria) and the Sinnott family.

Colin McCall on a new book about Thomas Paine, the man who insisted that the...

Gospels have 'every mark of fraud'

Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom by Jack Fruchtman Jr.
Four Walls Eight Windows, £20.

HERE'S irony for you, not to mention audacity. At the start of his second term of office, what he called the "second American revolution," Ronald Reagan quoted Thomas Paine's "we have it in our power to begin the world over again."

Jack Fruchtman Jr. Professor of Political Science at Maryland's Towson State University, rightly questions whether the President "fully understood the radical thrust of Paine's statement" but, whatever the limits of his understanding, the old actor appreciated a good line when he heard it. He quoted Paine frequently throughout 1981-84, leading Fruchtman to write (in the *Baltimore Sun*): "Reagan's Paine: Would Tom recognise himself?"

The contrast is between the most reactionary of recent American presidents and the man who "argued for many of the policies which twentieth-century moderns have associated with the liberal welfare state: free public education, public assistance, old-age benefits, and inheritance taxes on the wealthy." Paine argued for these policies 200 years ago, and it is a sign of his "modernity" that we are having to argue for them all over again. They are fast being dissipated (almost without a whimper) both here and in the United States.

Don't anyone think, then, that we have had enough studies of Thomas Paine and his works: each generation needs to be reminded of one of the greatest benefactors of humanity. Long-standing lies also need exposing.

Jack Fruchtman's interest in Paine goes back 35 years, when he first came across *Common Sense*; he has written about those two outstanding 18th Century Unitarians, Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, and is the author of a previous book on Paine and the religion of nature. In the title of his present work, he ascribes the word "apostle" (linked to freedom) to emphasise "the completely religious character" of Paine's writings. As Paine said in his *Rights of Man*, "I am fully satisfied that what I am now doing, with an endeavour to conciliate mankind, to render their condition happy, to unite nations that have hitherto been enemies, and to extirpate the horrid practice of war, and break the chains of slavery and oppression is acceptable in His sight, and being the best service I can perform, I act it cheerfully."

Even in his earliest work, such as *Common Sense*, "he used biblical and prophetic imagery to distinguish the natural inclinations of human beings from the evils of monarchy and aristocracy. But his views were never reli-

gious in the traditional meaning of that word."

Indeed, Fruchtman prefers to regard Paine as a pantheist rather than deist: a believer that the spirit of God is everywhere, not that God created the Universe then left it in the hands of humanity. It is, as so often, a question of definition. In front of me as I write this review is an etching of Paine with the lovely quotation, "It is wrong to say that God made rich and poor; he made only male and female, and he gave them the earth as their inheritance." That might well qualify as deistic.

But, however we may define his beliefs, Paine was in no doubt that the future of the world rested in human hands, and it would be a far, far better place if humanity had followed his example.

Rights of Man is, as Fruchtman says, "one of the most ardent and clear defences of human rights, liberty and equality in any language," and its arguments are "fresh and clear with each reading." Moreover, it was "one of the first expressions of why government must take care of its less fortunate citizens."

I doubt if any members of the present British Cabinet read Paine: they certainly show no signs of it; more likely they would join in the chorus of vilification that he had to endure in his own time. Much of this was political but much, too, was directed at the author of *The Age of Reason*.

No one reading the first page of that "notorious" book could have called Paine an atheist, for they would find the sentence, "I believe in one God and no more: and I hope for happiness beyond this life". They were right, though, to recognise him as an relentless critic of Christianity. No biblical story was safe, Fruchtman says: "They were all targets of his fully developed-contempt and wit. He was dealing with a work, the Bible, which he thought full of lies."

To quote Paine himself: "Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon than the Word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalise mankind; and, for my part, I sincerely detest it as I detest everything that is cruel."

If God were as powerful as the Christians

claim, there is no reason why he should not have created "a plurality of worlds," each with its own history and traditions, quite different from ours. This would make Christianity insignificant, even "ridiculous." And if there had been a multiplicity of creations, Christ would have had to endure "an endless succession of deaths, with scarcely a momentary interval of life." Not that Paine had any time for the Gospel account; it had "every mark of fraud and imposition stamped upon the face of it."

As for miracles, take Jonah: "The story of the whale swallowing Jonah, though a whale is large enough to do it, borders greatly on the marvellous but it would have approached nearer to the idea of a miracle if Jonah had swallowed the whale." And which is more probable, Paine asked, "that a man should have swallowed a whale or told a lie?"

Likewise, when Moses told the Israelites that he had received the tables of the Commandments from God, they were "not obliged to believe him, because they had no other authority for it than his telling them so; and I have no other authority for it than some historian telling me so."

The same principle applied to miracles in general. "We have never seen, in our time, nature go out of her course," said Paine, "but we have good reason to believe that millions of lies have been told in the same time; it is therefore at least millions to one that the reporter of the miracle tells a lie."

It isn't surprising, then, that he should incur Christian hostility, and this was often linked with lies from Chalmers' and Cheetham's biographies, especially the stories of Paine's excessive drinking.

Another libel against Paine, as I see it, is that he was dirty. I sometimes ask myself whether I am too touchy on this subject, but have to mention it here as Jack Fruchtman gives it credence. Can we really believe that "no one could stand to be in the same room with Paine for very long," because he was so filthy, because of "the brimstone odour"?

The statement is attributed to a Philadelphia named Elkanah Wilson who, we are told, "loathed the man but loved his ideas." It leads Fruchtman to refer to Paine's "physical rankness" and to make the entirely gratuitous remark that, in the Romney portrait, "he is dressed for the occasion and probably washed, though Paine did not necessarily hold that cleanliness was next to godliness."

The only answer to Wilson, at this stage, must be that numerous men far more eminent than he, were ready and happy to stay in the same room as Thomas Paine.

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

Birmingham Humanist Group: For information about Group activities contact Adrian Bailey on 0121 353 1189. Monday, April 24, 7.30 for 8pm: Discussion meeting at Harry Stopes-Roe's, 155 Moor Green Lane, Moseley. Wednesday, May 17, 7.30 for 8pm, AGM at Martineau Centre, Balden Road, Harborne. Monday, June 5, 7.30 for 8pm, Martineau Hall, Balden Road, Harborne: Jane Wynne Willson: *International Humanism*.

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, May 7, 5.30pm for 6pm: Public meeting.

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 01296 623730. 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, April 10, 7.30pm: Public meeting: *Promoting Humanism as a Way of Life*. 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: 01293 511270.

Devon Humanists: For details, please contact: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lymington, Exmouth EX8 5HN; 01395 265529.

Ealing Humanists: Friends Meeting House, 17 Woodville Road, Ealing W5. Meetings start at 8pm. Details: telephone Derek Hill 0181-422 4956 or Charles Rudd 0181-904 6599.

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 01926 58450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information and programme of meetings from N1 Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

Havering & District Humanist Society: HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. For further information, contact J Condon 01708 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, 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).

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, April 27, 8pm: Sue Aldridge: *Food and Mood*.

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: April 20: John Aldam: *The Dawn of Humankind*. May 18: AGM followed by evening in local pub. 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, May 3, 8pm: Dave Godin: *Animal Rights and Religious Wrongs*

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 0171-831 7723). List of events obtainable from above address.

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

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 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. April 20: Professor Grigor McClelland: *Quaker Faith and Practice*.

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

Worthing Humanist Group: Info: Mike Sargent, 01903 239823.

JOINT ANNUAL DINNER

The Annual Dinner of Secularist and Humanist organisations will be held at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, on Saturday, May 6, 6.30pm.

Main guests: journalist and broadcaster Polly Toynbee and Frances D'Souza, Director of the international human rights organisation Article 19.

Cost: £15 (cheques payable to the British Humanist Association). Enquiries to: Humanist Centre, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. Telephone: 0171 430 0908.

Robert Sinclair's Easter duty has been to meditate on...

How the son of the Son of God was saved

THE Synoptic Gospels, those foundation stones of the Christian religion, inform us that a man called Jesus was crucified to death and that he returned to life. Each year, an event we describe as Easter is celebrated as a central rite by millions around the globe. We are further told that the thread of our immortal souls hangs upon the hook of belief in this story.

Others say that the resurrection was nothing more than plagiarised pagan nonsense and that no such person as Jesus ever walked the bloodstained sands of ancient Judæa. If they are right, then the compilers of the Gospels stand condemned as barefaced liars – but were they? No, they were not. This man lived and was crucified, and he emerged from his tomb – just as the Gospels say he did.

It was from these actual historical events that the re-creators of the Gospels launched the flesh-and-blood man into the outer reaches of pure theological madness – with him went his mother, Mary, and the hopes and fears of millions of gullible Christians.

We can't be sure who constructed this glittering stairway that led up to the stars, but built it was, and the theologians set the foot of Jesus on it. It took him to the blue dome of the Seventh Heaven – and the cowering ignorant to the frozen basement under the boiler-rooms of Hell.

What were those long-ago events which the Gospels so disingenuously report?

At Bethany, Mary Magdalene (the wife of Jesus, I suggest, but that's another story) anoints him the Messiah King, and thus sets the stage for the most famous walk to "church" in history.

On the day we now call Palm Sunday, Jesus marches over the top of the Mount of Olives and down into the Kidron Valley, gathering his loyal followers and a donkey as he goes.

Now he is riding the animal, and the messianic crowd see him as the very Word made flesh in accordance with the prophesy of Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass."

With a mighty roar, the crowd goes wild, breaking down the date palm fronds and throwing them in the path of the King who will lead them in their battles with Rome.

Entering the Holy City of Jerusalem, Jesus and his gang – club and dagger-waving Zealots, you can bet – head for the Temple. Make no mistake – this mob

is not fooling: weapons in hand, they wreck the Temple.

They want the throne of "Judas Macabæus" restored, and they are going to put Jesus on it, or be crucified in the attempt. They fail – and Pontius Pilate later grants them the crucifixion option!

Well guarded, Jesus escapes the riot in the Temple, but his son, Jesus bar Abbas, does not; nor does Judas the Sicarii – you will find these, and others who made the insurrection with him, in your Bible, with their names slightly tarted-up.

The Romans, realising that the upstart King has escaped them, use the sprat, Jesus bar Abbas, to hook the mackerel King. They send Judas, who is no "Judas" at all, to strike a deal with Jesus the anointed King. The deal? The life of Jesus Christ in exchange for the life of his son, Jesus bar Abbas – remember the famous "gospelised" version of this event?

Don't forget that Jesus had every chance to escape, and he knew the penalty for insurrection: crucifixion. Had there not been a very compelling reason for hanging about after the events on Palm Sunday, Jesus would have been off! He may not be the Son of God, but let us not take him for an idiot: knowledge of the brutal Roman cross would have sent him over those sandy hills as fast as his sandals would carry him.

The deal done, and Jesus bar Abbas released (as the Bible tells us he is), Jesus Christ goes to the cross instead of his

son. He is later removed from the cross and later still emerges alive.

And then what? Ignoring the Ascension myth, what then happened to the man who was born to be King? Where did he go, and what did he do?

Jesus returned to the Essene community at Qumran (where the fantastic Dead Sea Scrolls were much later found in nearby caves) and the plot to put him on the throne was continued. The Romans were still after him, and in 68AD they destroyed the settlement at Qumran and massacred many Essene inhabitants.

Was it just before the destruction of Qumran that Jesus ordered the concealment of the holy scrolls in those tinder-dry caves to preserve them from the Romans?

Whatever, Jesus did not die at Qumran. His next and last stop was at Herod's old fortress, Masada.

We know that a Zealot force had booted the Roman garrison out of Masada in 66AD, before the destruction of Qumran. It was, I suggest, on the battlements of the fortress at Masada that Jesus learned – in 70AD – the dreadful truth: that Jerusalem had fallen and his plans to be King were in ruins. This provides an explanation for the tragic events which followed...

Turning to Masada, the fortress bolt-hole of the last Maccabæan King-in-waiting, the Romans literally walled him in, and from within this retaining wall they spent years battering their way in. In 73AD, they breached the wall – only to find the now famous One Thousand, including Jesus, dead. Lots had been drawn to decide the sequence of the mass suicide which Jesus, as Commander-in-Chief, had ordered. This was the final defiant act of the would-be King. His forces had decided: our King or no King at all!

In 1963, Israel's Government excavated the site of Masada. They found, remarkably, the bits of pottery used to draw that fatal lottery and the skeletal remains of 28 persons.

One skeleton proved to be the remains of a man of about 80 years – and to have been 80 in 73AD you would have been born at just about the time Herod was ordering the killing of infants to prevent one of them becoming King. Jesus escaped him, too; Herod did not quite eliminate all the pretenders to the Maccabæan throne.

And today? In 1967, the Government of Israel had this sad collection of bones buried at the foot of Masada. Among them were the bones of Jesus Christ, on a flawed memory of whom was built the whole edifice of the Christian myth.

GETTING DOWN

FROM its cover cartoon "Author! Author!" to its last piece on satanic child abuse, *The Raven's* second issue devoted to religion is likely to grab the attention. Most readers will find in it details of fundamentalist creeds they had never known or had forgotten, and opinions they enthusiastically support or strongly question. It's that sort of subject.

You will have guessed that the cartoon is not of an ecstatic first-night audience calling for a playwright but of a fanatic dagger-wielding Ayatollah Khomeini calling for Salman Rushdie; and Islamic fundamentalism gets its share of attention inside. But there are articles on Christian fundamentalism, Roman Catholic and Protestant, and a long essay on Hindu fundamentalism, which touches on Buddhism and Jainism. In passing, obsessive fundamentalist attitudes in Judaism, politics and even freethought get an airing. Yet the most controversial aspect of the booklet is a consideration (or considerations) of what induces and what inhibits various manifestations of religious fundamentalism.

In keeping with the journal's anarchist stance, the anonymous editor questions "to what extent the idea of fundamentalism is a media creation" but concedes it is a real political threat – brought about by the desperation of populations denied adequate economic support from the West – in places like Turkey.

Turkey is one of many countries whose secular constitutions are under attack. Most of them are Muslim, but the other major religions provide an example or two. Why has this happened when "from the French Revolution onwards society seemed to be growing more open, more secular, more rational"? George Walford blames secularism, which makes the devout feel threatened and turn to a "religion responding with fundamentalism rather as the body produces fever in defending itself against infection." He is not sanguine about "the probable course of future events. It suggests a persistence of the established social and religious base, with its tendency...towards fundamentalism and totalitarianism."

Colin Ward is equally pessimistic. He also fingers secularists (and Stalinists) "since we know that traditional anti-religious propaganda fails to change people's minds and since we know that enforced attempts to suppress beliefs simply encourages them to spring up again the moment the pressure is relaxed. He appears to endorse the analysis (if such a *mélange* of

instant sociology can be so called) of Gilles Kepel's *The Revenge of God* (1991). This purports to show that in 1975 "the whole process of secularisation went into reverse" as "a new religious approach took shape, aiming no longer at adapting to secular values but at last recovering a sacred foundation for the organisation of society – by changing society if necessary." The reedy trumpet call for this apocalypse was apparently Watergate and the reactive election of Jimmy Carter, followed by Ronald Reagan, with the support of the Moral Majority.

The real reasons for the election of Carter, and especially of Reagan, were, however, economic; but even if Kepel were correct, why should a religious revival in America have an immediate impact on the rest of the world, Christian and non-Christian? Ward himself speaks of a simultaneous rise of the "new religion" of Marketism, and in a later essay Bob Potter notes how the growth of fundamentalist sects in Britain has been accompanied by declining allegiance to the older (yet still major) denominations. Surely these facts suggest a continuing growth of secularisation, as distinct from secularism, among the *mass* of the population in the Western world. Even among the misnamed Moral Majority (neither moral, nor a majority) in America, otherworldly concerns give every indication of being subservient to the knockabout politics of the Almighty Dollar.

To secularists who believe with him that society now has – or is gaining – "a sacred foundation," Ward offers hope: "Perhaps the most effective counter to fundamentalist threats to the liberty of all will be the women's movement." While this may currently be true of Muslim countries, the women's movement in Christendom seems obsessed with issues doubtfully related to universal freedom: sexual harassment (of, not by, women); girlie (not boyie) advertisements; female (not male) pornography; affirmative action (for women, not men); female (not male) strip shows; female ordination. Yet insofar as the last aim is clearly anti-biblical, perhaps it is anti-fundamentalist.

Nicolas Walter's "Fundamentals of Fundamentalism" is the most fundamentally challenging. He observes that all religions have their fundamentals, whose rediscovery is "not necessarily bad." Anyone who has ever debated with Christian modernists (or whatever they are now called) will echo his comment: "At least you know where you are with" fundamentalists. Like some other contributors,

he recognises fundamentalism (or fundamentalisms) in various secular ideologies and bravely spells them out. He will not turn himself to his political colleagues (at any rate to their bourgeois defenders) observing that "fundamentalist anarchists...tend to become drop-outs of laws." And he broadens his approach to note that science and humanism are based on fundamental assumptions that have been taken for granted rather than argued.

In the narrow sense of religious fundamentalism, he explodes two widespread myths by observing that "many strict Fundamentalists oppose interventionist politics" and "there are many fanatical terrorists in religions which have no room for fundamentalism in the traditional creeds, confessions, canons and other ecclesiastical laws, and from *The Fundamentals* (1910-15), published in booklets in America and prompting the term "fundamentalism" in 1923.

A 1989 report in *Freedom* recorded that Walter and Barbara Smoker were attacked while demonstrating against Muslim fundamentalists in London. "Islamic Threats to Freedom" is the title of the latter's essay. Dealing with the issue in perspective. "In Britain...no more than one in thirty population is Muslim and only a small minority of those are fanatically fundamentalist." The position could, however, be changed through a combination of Christian intransigence and misguided do-gooder Religious education in county schools. England's Christian schools maintained by the state are Christian or Jewish; common law in my country protects only Christianity; the Relations Act debarring "abuse" and discrimination applies to Jews and Jainism to Muslims. Clearly Muslims have a right for complaint. But an extension of a reversal of these provisions would be socially progressive: "What the British race-relationshipes are unwittingly proving is that the moderates in each ethnic community be handed over to the tyrannical fundamentalists..."

Harold Barclay returns to Christianity. Few secularists will dispute his assessment (whose source he, and I, can't recall) "the Roman Church is a lamb in appearance and a fox in equality and a tiger in suppression and always poses the risk of 'a new secular dictatorship.'" Greater scepticism greet his quasi-Marxist assessment of

FUNDAMENTALS

DAVID TRIBE comments on a wide-ranging review of fundamentalist religion from Britain's anarchists – and presents his own thought-provoking definition of fundamentalism.

Tribe is a former Editor of *The Freethinker*, a respected historian of the freethought movement and a past President of the National Secular Society. He recently became an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association.

Fundamentalism: Religion 2: The Raven, Anarchist Quarterly 27, is available at £3, including postage, from Freedom Press, 84b Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX.

protestantism. This sees three "right-wing" versions, Anglican, Lutheran and Calvinist, and one "left-wing" strain embracing Anabaptists, Quakers, Mennonites and Baptists. The first three preach obedience to the state and are distinguished by different structures of church-state relations: the fourth is truly "revolutionary" and "freedom-loving" – at least by comparison with the others.

Instead of the usual romanticised version of C16 German and C17 English history, we are given a utopian picture of the founding of America; though Barclay is forced to concede that the political orientation of modern American Baptists does not fit with his scenario. This also ignores the facts that leaders of "revolutionary" sects formed enclaves where they acted, like Louis XIV, as if "I am the state"; that Calvinism was not "anti-intellectual" in a theological sense and owed much of its conservatism to a belief in predestination; and that an Anglican church like the Church of England has a capacity to reform as the state that controls it reforms.

But what is the key to fundamentalism, other than the polyglot tenets in *The Fundamentals*? Bob Potter's dictionary-based definition is "that style of religious belief that often takes as its 'starting point' a dogmatic insistence that the Bible is the literal 'word of God.'" Usefully, by this analysis, he identifies evolution as often the issue that defines the boundaries of fundamentalism." Whereas the other writers seek theological, political or historical motivations, as a research psychologist he looks for a "fundamentalist personality" and naturally finds one: rootless, inadequate, self-centred, anti-intellectual, insecure and psychotic.

Apparently based on his interaction with

(some) British Jehovah's Witnesses, this assessment at best is valid for middle-class drifters in a liberal democracy, and does nothing to explain how whole communities and ethnic nationalities can be infected. Moreover, if we exclude the sectaries of Jonestown, Waco, Salvan and Morin Heights (and assume they were not murdered), and a few people in mental hospitals claiming to be JC, what clinical evidence is there that fundamentalists are psychotic? Deluded, no doubt, but surely not victims of psychotic delusion, which denotes an inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy in ordinary life. Though he diagnoses the fundamentalist position as psychiatric, Potter outlines a lay treatment for "opening the closed mind."

John Shotton provides the study of Hindu fundamentalism promised in the first *Raven* religious special. Knowing only works on Yoga, Zen, theosophy and medi-

tation by Indian intellectuals or Hindu and Buddhist converts and sympathisers in the West, many readers may be surprised by this analysis. Indeed, though I made some study of these faiths and frequented film shows in London's India House some years ago, I was at times surprised myself.

Historians will certainly agree that, despite a strand of non-violence, "religious violence is not alien to 'Hinduism' despite the nineteenth century myth that the 'Hindus' are by instinct and religion a non-violent people." Non-violence was central to the Shramanic offshoots of Buddhism and Jainism, "not that the Shramanic tradition prevented violence" – especially in rugged places like Tibet. Do historians, however, agree that "Krishna was neither a Prophet nor a Son of God"; or that "the explanation of karma is not acceptable to lower caste groups," who traditionally resented the upper castes as much as they did the Muslim invaders? Most controversial of Shotton's claims is his basic thesis that Hindu fundamentalism began in the C19, when "Hinduism" was coined, as a middle-class, proselytising, nationalistic, Christian-influenced "garbled form of Brahmanism."

Silvia Edwards draws attention to Women Against Fundamentalism, launched in 1989 to "challenge the rise of fundamentalism in all religions." It does not object to religious observance but to "modern political movements which use religion as a basis for their attempt to win or consolidate power and extend social control," especially over women.

The 1990-91 mania about "satanic child abuse" is described by Donald Room. Judicial investigation of this unholy alliance between fundamentalist Christians and officious social workers found more humbuggery than buggery; but where there was ritual abuse, Satyr rather than Satan was the presiding deity.

Postscript

AS IT IS hardly possible to synthesise the diverse views in this thought-provoking volume, perhaps my own views can form the postscript. The term "fundamentalism" encompasses five other isms: (1) essentialism; (2) reformism; (3) activism; (4) evangelism; (5) fanaticism. The first, which is true fundamentalism, is theoretical; the others, which may arise among all ideologies of any persuasion, are practical consequences in ascending order of public

**AUTHOR!
AUTHOR!**



Government replies to NSS on Six Counties schools

THE Department of Education (Northern Ireland) has replied to the resolution passed at the National Secular Society's Annual General Meeting which welcomed the cessation of violence and proposed that segregated education should be discontinued in the Six Counties.

The letter explains that the law requires that every school is open to any pupil, regardless of religious denomination. The people of Northern Ireland are entitled under law to exercise their rights of conscience in religious matters and to have their children educated in accordance with their wishes.

The emergence and continued existence of two school sectors – one Catholic, one Protestant – therefore reflects the wishes of the parents of pupils in Northern Ireland as they have traditionally been expressed, not those of Government, and the Government

would not disregard parental wishes by imposing integration. A real danger in this is, of course, that such a move could be counterproductive to good community relations, the Department insists.

The Government is wholly committed to encouraging and facilitating integrated education where there is a demand for it, the letter continues. There are now 23 integrated schools in Northern Ireland and a number of other proposals are coming forward for both primary and secondary schools.

Schools of all categories are actively participating in initiatives which have been taken to promote mutual understanding. These initiatives have been further consolidated by including as compulsory elements of the new statutory curriculum the themes of Cultural Heritage and Education for Mutual understanding. These themes are interwoven with, and taught through, all the main curriculum subjects. In this way, schools can play a central role in breaking

down stereotypes and prejudices, affording new opportunities for pupils from both main traditions to appreciate the shared and diverse features of their cultural roots.

Grants

The Department operates a voluntary Cross Community Contact Scheme under which schools, colleges, further and higher education institutions, sport, youth and community groups can receive grants for participating in joint activities which bring together young people from both communities. The emphasis is on on-going, systematic programmes of work and activities which help to break down barriers and encourage the participants to work together for a common purpose. More than one-third of all NI schools are currently involved.

The Department also operates its own Cultural Traditions Programme. This seeks to bring groups together from both sides of the community and afford them opportunities to explore and understand their shared heritage and appreciate the diversity of their cultural traditions. The intention is that a better knowledge and appreciation of each other's traditions and background will lead to better understanding generally between groups from different sections of the community, the reply to the NSS says.

It takes courage – and cash

A READER notes this month that it takes "courage" to stand up to the mullahs – and we must modestly admit that, from the days of G W Foote to those of Wm McIlroy, that is one commodity which has never been in short supply in the offices of *The Freethinker*.

It also takes money to stand up to superstitionists, to show the world that there is an alternative to the fear and fog of religion, and money is in short supply – always.

Correction

IN Arthur Atkinson's March letter "Only Human" (Page 47) Cicero's daughter, Tullia, was wrongly named as Julia. This was due to a typesetting error, and we apologise to readers – and to Mr Atkinson.

Please, do your bit – help us to pay the bills; help us to expand. Send cheques, POs, stamps to: G W Foote & Co., Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: E V Chandler, G Huddart, D J Lummis, A J Murphy and G Shepherd, £2 each; B Able, N C Barr, R C Baxter, J D Coward, I Forbes, W Grainger, N Toon, J K Hawkins, N Huke, P Jackson, A Oldham, R Meredew, J F Wood, R Sartin, E W Sinclair, L Stirrup and C Williams, £5 each; K Haughton, £8; B Burfoot, J Cass, I C Chandler, N L Child, R J Fennell, G S Mellor, G Mephram, J Walsh, F Pidgeon, M P Powell, G R Verco and R K Torode, £10 each; J Paterson, £14; D Bressen, £20; D Harper, £45.

Total for February: £302

Ernie Crosswell

WE are sorry to report the death of Ernie Crosswell, of Slough, member of the National Secular Society and of the Rationalist Press Association and a long-time contributor to the columns of *The Freethinker*.

A Spitfire pilot in World War II, he became a pacifist at the time of the Suez crisis and later was associated with the anarchists, to whose journal, *Freedom*, he was also a regular contributor.

Infidels galore!

A POLL in the January 30 issue of *Time* magazine shows the "non-religious" at 18.5 per cent of the US population, outnumbering mainline Protestants (18 per cent) and outnumbered only by Evangelical Protestants (25.9 per cent) and Roman Catholics (23.4 per cent). Source: National Survey of Religion and Politics, Akron University.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



The Gospel According to Matthew

ONE suspects that most newspaper editors' belief in the supernatural is on much the same level as that of our Mr Brearey's. Yet every week the national, regional and local press devotes thousands of column inches to the promotion of astrological and religious superstition.

Though "What the Stars Foretell" probably attracts far more readers than do biblical commentaries, Christianity is the chief recipient of this enormous amount of free and misleading publicity.

So it was quite pleasing to read in *The Times* a spikey piece on Bible-based morality by Matthew Parris, former Conservative MP turned journalist.

After attending his godson's confirmation service, Mr Parris recorded his impression of the ceremony. The service was "lovely ... sincere," while the bishop's sermon was "kindly and intelligent." Indeed the bishop's persuasiveness almost convinced Mr Parris of

Christianity's ethical superiority. Almost – but not quite.

Admittedly Matthew Parris has been questioning Christian claims and entertaining heretical thoughts for some time. But unlike so many of the half believing and the unbelieving, he does not lard his scepticism with undeserved respect for religion.

So many non-Christians regard critical analysis of biblical precepts particularly the words attributed to Jesus, as rather tasteless. But Matthew Parris does not shirk the issue. He writes of "short, selected passages chosen for religious services. A layer of modern interpretation has intervened, obscuring the primary source. This enables us rather lazily to blame 'organised religion' for whatever seems difficult in the Christian message."

He has no such reservations, quoting passages from the New Testament that make sensitive Christians squirm.

Matthew Parris take a dim view of a moral code that is rooted in either craven fear of eternal damnation or selfish hope of heavenly reward. People should behave well because it is right to do so. He hits the nail on the head: "Christianity offers us a reason to be good, but a disgraceful one. We are asked to be virtuous in order to save our own skins."

Two Orange card tricks...

A RECENT newspaper photograph of the civil rights march which set off Northern Ireland's 25-year blood letting was quite revealing. Probably fewer than 200 people participated in a peaceful demonstration against discrimination and abuse that successive British Governments had ignored. Had it taken place in mainland Britain, the march would have passed off unnoticed. But in that most Christian corner of the British Isles, the concept of civil rights was anathema. So the march unleashed the fury of Orange thugs backed up by the Royal (for how much longer?) Ulster Constabulary.

Twenty-five years and several thousand deaths on, serious attempts are being made to pacify gun-toting followers of the "Prince of Peace." Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin bogey man, is being compared to erstwhile "terrorist" leaders who now preside over national governments and participate in international affairs.

On the other hand, Ulster Unionists, whether represented by a ranting windbag like the Rev Ian Paisley, or a cold fish like James Molyneaux, have few friends outside their constituency. Their brand of narrow Protestant bigotry has lost what appeal it had in Britain. While there may be rem-

nants of it preserved in Merseyside and Clydeside Orange lodges, few selection committees would regard an aspiring parliamentary candidate's religion as a deciding factor when making their choice.

In a recent *Guardian* article, Edward Pearce asserted, quite rightly, that it is not hard to take a dislike against Ulster Unionists. But they are also deserving of understanding, even sympathy, being victims of two monumental confidence tricks.

First, from their earliest years they have been subjected to Christian indoctrination of an intensity difficult to comprehend in Britain of the 1990s.

Secondly, Unionists have been hoodwinked into believing that they are regarded by London as grade one British citizens.

In fact they are colonial subjects whose much-vaunted tradition is rooted in bullying lesser breeds and kow-towing to the Imperial power. They are valued by the Establishment as a source of cannon-fodder – as in World War I – and by the Conservative Party as a right-wing bloc at Westminster.

Events in Northern Ireland since 1969 are a stark reminder of what happens when warning signs are ignored, or if reason is overthrown in favour of blind faith.

Hu'ism next?

"HAS any feminist yet objected to the designation of woMAN?," enquired Vivien Gibson in last month's Letters page.

Yes indeed, there certainly have been such objections. Take, for instance, something called "A Wimmins [sic] Peace Magazine," published in Sussex during the early 1980s by a men-hating collective. So far as possible, words that included the letter MAN or MEN were banished from its columns. In addition to "wimmin," there were abominations like "womin," wuman" and "wumunpower."

Anticipating political correctness, it referred to disabled women as "differently abled wimmin." As for the English language, "so much... is sexist and racist, like black or dark imagery to mean evil white or light to mean good or pure."

Curiously for a self-proclaimed "peace magazine," it oozed hatred for a large proportion of the population – men. One feminist correspondent wrote to express "anger, disgust and a deep sense of betrayal that a group of people who claim to be peace-loving and non-violent can be so utterly thoughtless, vindictive and foolish." Her anger and disgust were provoked by a cartoon carrying the legend: "Dead Men Don't Rape."

As the chip-on-shoulder, politically correct lobby prove by the day, religion is not the only irrational and divisive force in society.

Jews and Zionists

EIGHT years ago, author Jim Allen could not find a theatre which had, in his words, "the guts to stand up to the Zionist lobby." His new play, *Perdition*, was vilified without being seen. Even the Royal Court Theatre chickened out and withdrew it 24 hours before the opening night.

Racists-under-the-bed crusaders had a field day. Members of the cast were outraged by accusations of anti-semitism. Director Ken Loach commented: "What we got from the press was straight Zionist propaganda."

Zionist pickets were out when several performances of *Perdition* were staged at Conway Hall, for more than 60 years London's centre for freedom of expression. And now Jim Allen has received libel damages from Max Hastings, Sir Peregrine Worsthorne, Geoffrey Wheatcroft and the publishers of the *Sunday Telegraph* over an article saying the play's intention was to offend Jews.

Back to Ken Loach: "Zionists seem to think they speak for all Jews. They don't."

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Euro-style Humanism the answer?

I SUPPORT the ideas in Frank Holmes' article (Last Word, March issue), and I believe that opinion within the Humanist Society of Scotland is moving towards the position which Frank advocated.

I also think that the only way that the HSS can influence thinking within the broad Humanist movement in Britain will be by trying to develop a structure and ethos which will be something like the large, coherent and successful European organisations but on a much smaller scale.

I do not believe the opinion-formers within the BHA, NSS *et al*, nor the majority of members of these organisations, are ready to give serious attention to the idea of structural change on the scale needed to create Frank's brave new world.

I should like to see a serious debate on the idea of creating a coherent and influential Humanist movement in Britain, but it is much easier to dismiss any such suggestion as pie-in-the-sky, and I am afraid that is what will happen.

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

THE Freethinker with Frank Holmes' thoughtful proposals arrived by the same post as the *New Humanist* featuring Paul Kurtz' "Agenda for the Twenty-first Century," an apologia for free-market enterprise that Baroness Thatcher would have received rapturously.

That apart, the two submissions did share some common ground, especially on the need for publicity. "Making every effort," as Paul Kurtz put it, "to be heard in the mass media, to use the arts, drama and music more than we have done." Brave words, to be sure, and hardly likely to generate argument.

Frank Holmes' proposals are more to the point and deserve immediate consideration by all Humanist bodies in the UK. Fragmentation and duplication of effort are recipes for stagnation; they pave the road to irrelevance.

As he rightly says, a large unified organisation with all the advantages of a strong identity is overdue. This is the way forward. His proposed "quality publication at a reasonable price" would be the essential instrument to carry the Humanist message to the unenlightened.

That said, who, as a publicity manager might pointedly ask, is to be the target? Who indeed. There is no future – other than decline – in preaching to the converted. The first objective of a business is to stay in business. The future of Humanism rests in the minds and aspirations of unreached generations. But not exclusively. I told a man I was a Humanist and he agreed that there was "a lot to be said for homeopathic medicine."

If my own experience is representative – I am an octogenarian and a very long-time Humanist – if it is, then the average age of the active Humanist is high, so high as to put us in the endangered species category. So where are the future activists to come from?

In spite of the apathy towards religion, a majority of parents, most of whom see the inside of a place of worship only at official functions, still declare themselves in favour of RE in schools. Why is this?

My own limited research suggests that they feel "it might just do some good," but mostly, until asked, they don't think about it one way or another.

There is ample evidence to show that many teachers, if not a majority, are against RE for varying reasons. Some are passive unbelievers. Has Humanism reached out to them?

Here, then, is the market, the target for the new publicity. But the language of public relations must be used. Arcane "philosopherspeak" must be eschewed, the powerful morality of reason must be proclaimed in plain, honest English.

Humanism has its heroes, its martyrs, a history without myth, stories to capture the imagination, stories to inspire. The talent exists in the Ludovic Kennedys *et al* but the vehicle is missing.

The alternative is to carry on as now, creating no more noise than snow falling on snow. If that's what the various bodies want so be it. It's a free country – sort of – and *chacun à son goût* as some like to say. Passivity is clearly not Frank Holmes' *goût*.

He has shown the way forward. What now?

PETER ROGERS
Swansea

IT STRIKES me that some of Frank Holmes' hopes are rather over-ambitious at the moment, but I go along with his implied wish that there should be a more united voice from free-thinkers: let's drop our haggling over the subtle differences between *agnostics*, *atheists*, *humanists* etc, and knuckle down to our important business of opposing religion and the evils that go with it.

Following on from that, I take up his question as to why so few "drop outs" from the organised churches go on to join a freethinking group. Might it be that many of them don't now that such groups exist? Therefore what about *The Freethinker* taking out advertising space occasionally in the national press? Ah, costs, I hear you say. Right; then what about a subscription list for that particular purpose?

The time, it seems to me, has never been better for that, with school assemblies, fundamentalist persecutions, voluntary euthanasia, for example, all in the news. The Voluntary Euthanasia Society, as you will know, has increased its membership considerably in recent years, and it seems to me that there is good scope for us to do likewise.

K G SPENCER
Burnley

Silence of the clergy

I THINK that all Humanist organisations in this country should be warmly congratulated for their strongly-worded protest to the High Commissioner for Pakistan in connection with the utterly appalling death sentence [for alleged blasphemy] imposed upon a 12-year-old boy and his uncle (Up Front, March issue).

However, what I find so disturbing about this case is that as far as I am aware (and I would like to think that I can be corrected) the Archbishop of Canterbury along with the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster and other high church dignitaries in this country did not register any protest whatsoever with the Pakistan authorities, expressing their total horror at the sentence imposed upon this young boy.

If they have remained silent on this shocking case it is little wonder that respect for the ecclesiastical powers-that-be in this country is probably at an all-time low and that church attendance will plummet even further.

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Malvern Wells

Gay old time with words

THERE is nothing that invites comment from letter-writers so much as a supposed offence against canons of correctness in language. However, such commentators, especially when it comes to etymology, should examine the historical evidence as accurately as possible.

In Mr Atkinson's letter (March) on the word "homophobia," despite the erudite reference to Atticus' letter to Cicero, the nature of the first element has been misidentified. "Homophobia" has evolved as a shortened (syncopated) form of "homosexualphobia" from the common practice of referring to those, generally men, who are orientated towards the same gender as themselves as (among other things) "homos," even though the term "homosexual" technically applies to both genders. The late Kenneth Williams popularised this shortened form in his humorous broadcasts.

Had Mr Atkinson consulted his dictionary, he would have found that the first element in "homosexual" derives from the Greek word for "same," as we observe in words such as *homogeneous*, *homonym*, *homophone*, *homologous* etc., that is, "homosexual" means "inclined towards the same sex." This is perhaps appropriate, considering the general indulgence of the ancient Greeks towards such practices. The word has no connection with the Latin *homo*, with its stem *homin-* (shown in the oblique cases), from which come the derived adjective *humanus* and the abstract noun *humanitas*.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 60

Strictly speaking, these words apply to all members of the species; it was also Cicero who observed "*Nihil humanum a me alienum puto*" ("I consider nothing concerning the human race alien to me"). The word signifying "a man" specifically is *vir* (as *femina* and *mulier* apply to women).

But language is always changing, and perhaps in the popular mind there is confusion with the Latin *homo* misunderstood as "man." We see such change in the dramatic semantic shift of the word "gay" from its connection with prostitution only a century ago. English unfortunately has a real lexical gap: although there is the word "Lesbian" to signify female homosexuality (and you won't find this word so defined in the old *Oxford English Dictionary*, even though Swinburne wrote his infamous novel *Lesbia Brandon* in the 1860s), there is no corresponding male-specific word. Perhaps one should be coined, though I would not be so bold as to suggest any candidate after whom the phenomenon could be named.

BRIAN DONAGHEY
Sheffield

PEDANTRY is something I try often unsuccessfully to avoid but I must point out to Arthur Atkinson (March) that, as regards the word "homophobia," he has committed the ultimate embarrassment of being pedantic and wrong. It was the Greeks he should have tried quoting; then he would have put *same* instead of *man* – which is why lesbians are homosexual, of course.

It could still be argued that "homophobia" simply means "fear of sameness" but that would be silly. We have a living language and words mean what we want them to mean – unless we are called Arthur Atkinson.

There is worse to come. The tone of his letter suggests that he himself is suffering from that very fear, in his ironic use of the word "friends." We see this word used (less frequently, now) in such phrases as "our Commonwealth friends," "our dark skinned friends," "our Muslim friends" and so on – always meaning that the speaker has no such friends.

With friends like this...but then I try not to use clichés either.

I suppose someone will write and tell us you cannot "commit an embarrassment" – well you can now.

JOHN BOSLEY
Huddersfield

ARTHUR Atkinson is, I fear, etymologically confused in his analysis of *homophobia*; surely, the *homo* element is from *homosexual* and is therefore Greek *homos* for "the same" (that is, [loving] the same sex) rather than Latin *homo*, man?

I would agree that, if it causes such confusion, *homophobia* is an unhelpful word and ought perhaps to be replaced. But, while I am no apologist for the use (and coining?) of the

word *homophobia* by my fellow gay men and women, I haven't a ready alternative for something which does exist and therefore must be named. I'm not sure I would wish to be credited with paternity of *gay-fear*, for example, although I must say *queer-fear* (which would, I'm sure, appeal to the more radical of us, such as Mr Tatchell's organisation Outrage) has a certain euphony and should suit those who "prefer the Saxon to the Latin word"!

It seems to me one of the cruellest coincidences that the words *homo* in two languages from which English has borrowed so heavily should mean such different things!



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.

Homosexual is also, I suppose, one of those hybrids (like *television*) of Latin and Greek words that some people dislike, perhaps simply *because* of being a hybrid?

(Dr) **ALAN R HALL**
York

Pessimist Walter?

NICOLAS Walter's article (Opium of the Pupils, February) concludes pessimistically. Surely the pupils of secondary schools have minds of their own? Why are they so supine? Is "Sir" so very autocratic? Could they not enliven dead assemblies by displaying a dissenting placard, and supplement this by wearing a badge? Popular culture, by courtesy of Richard Wilson, offers the ideal statement: "I don't be-LIEVE it!" Or should we grasp the nettle and propose a GCSE in Hypocritical Studies?

KEITH AHLQUIST
Stockport

Fragile balance

IN the October, 1994, issue of *The Freethinker*, Nigel Meek wrote that world over-population is a myth, and that world production of food has outstripped the increase in population.

He prefers to forget that in almost every TV nature programme, the viewer sees how *homo sapiens* form the biggest threat to the fragile balance of the eco-system. In religious cults like Roman Catholicism, anti-abortion and anti-condom mania have become totally destructive. In the high-tech style of living, energy consumption has leapt way beyond our wildest nightmare. So, it is not only numbers we are arguing about, but also our greed in exploiting nature and fellow humans for our own ends.

Food production might have advanced above human growth, but the aggressive and intensive use of insecticides and all the other nasties to combat the threat to mono-culture agriculture will have a very profound and destructive effect on the whole system.

We are clearly subtly moving into self-destruction. It won't come with a bang, but gradually – and then it might be too late to save Planet Earth.

TECK ONG
London W6

Respect for animals

ROBERT TEE in his letter (March) fears that Humanists are going to "join with those who equate the life of an animal with that of a human." Their equality or otherwise is immaterial here: we all feel pain; we all merit consideration.

Dave Godin (February) is not saying that because Christianity has treated animals badly we, as Humanists, must do the opposite: he is explaining why our respect for animals has been slow to develop; Christianity's teaching over the years has been that only humans matter, for only humans have souls.

The eating of meat and dairy produce is not essential to our health but the habit is very deeply entrenched in our society. To many it would be inconceivable to give them up and they would concentrate instead on better conditions for farm animals. Future generations might find new eating habits less alarming!

We are all naturally "speciesist." I instinctively delay opening my *Amnesty* magazine, dreading pictures of human suffering much more than of animal suffering; the suffering human in the picture could be one of my family; animals are more comfortably distanced from me. When human animals are aware of this bias (gene-related?) they can

Turn to Page 62

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 61

develop the imagination to consider other species as well. Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* certainly did not advocate our giving in to our genetic selfishness.

I should like to ask this question of Robert Tee: should a race of superbeings, stronger and cleverer than us (and, of course, might be right!), tomorrow land on our planet, what arguments would he use to dissuade them from eating or experimenting on us?

HEATHER EVANS
Kenilworth

Atheism a matter of faith...

SURELY atheism is as much a matter of faith as religion. Being subject to human limitations we do not directly experience, or "know" reality.

"God" is, by definition almost, beyond human limits and thus also "unknowable." Does not the fact we can never "know" but only "believe" in either case, prove agnosticism as the only philosophical truth? And indeed the only philosophy which can claim to function independent of impressed belief?

Atheists are every bit as much "believers" as their religious counterparts, often showing the same missionary zeal in their endeavours to refute all but their own brand of bigotry.

It's not that I have anything against atheists; I just wish they'd stop pretending "Science" "disproves God," adopting and adapting "scientific arguments" as the dogma of what seems a rapidly growing "New Atheist Church."

"Science" explodes many religious myths. It "proves" nothing. Scientific "truths" are statistical, not absolute. Its rationale is agnostic not atheistic. How "scientific evidence" is viewed, however, is largely a subjective matter. The believer will always find "proof" to support their belief, whether in "God" or "Chance." Where "Science" runs counter to "Religion" this may disprove certain notions concerning the nature and role of "God," but does not disprove "God," or "Creator," in some form.

Why, for example, is evolutionary theory popularly taken as being "proof" against an original act of Creation? It is rank arrogance on the part of "believers" to deny an omnipotent entity the power to "plan in" evolution, just because they believe otherwise. If you are going to Create, it seems sensible, even elegant, to make things self-regulating, adapting themselves as your Creation progresses along the path you have chosen for it. In this sense, evolution is evidence for rather than against "God" – if not dogmatic religious perspectives of "God." Similarly, that many "natural laws" are matters of relatively straightforward statistical truths, by virtue of simplicity of design, suggests, not refutes, a "Grand Plan" (why make Creation unnecessarily complicated,

bearing in mind you only have a week to get it up and running?).

If "God" sets up the experiment, "Science" simply observes the work of "God," and, since "God" controls the experiment, will get whatever results "God" decides.

Does it matter if the label says "Reality" or "God"? It is still the same jar. In truth, any opinion is at best a "model." We may never be able to "prove" or "know" with certainty (unless we attain omniscience ourselves, in which case are we not then "God"?). In practice, we must do what we can with what we have, according to individual conscience. Which holds true whether "God" exists or not, doesn't it?

We are the source of most of the problems facing our species, and in us lies the solution. If, through our own efforts, we bring about a Utopian idyll, do we not effectively establish "God's Kingdom on Earth"? And we certainly don't need a "Devil" to explain "Evil": Greed, stupidity and lack of foresight or consideration will do quite nicely. There's nothing divine, or diabolic, in the origin of these endearing aspects of human nature.

I wonder, were "Science" to prove "God" existed, if both sets of fanatics might then unite in denial because it wasn't according to their respective dogma?

S J GULA
Leicester

The Truth

"FREEDOM is the most precious gift we are born with. But it is the hardest thing to keep" (*Quantum Leap*).

How can we maintain our freedom to think when we are constantly bombarded with the majority's viewpoint as if it is the complete truth? The truth with a capital "T" includes all viewpoints, the powerfuls' and the minority viewpoints, your viewpoint and mine.

ERIC YAFFEY
Bradford

Pro-Pope 'paper

THE pro-Pope *Sunday Telegraph* has a biased idea of economics. Setting aside moralistic considerations, the Leader writer (March 12) argues that the estimated £12 million a year spent on NHS abortions could be spent on other hospital services.

This discounts the cost of child benefit allowances, tax relief, municipal housing, payouts to single mothers, over-population, school overcrowding, clinics, midwifery – and nudges us towards Rio de Janeiro-type shanty towns.

Think rational, not Roman, *Sunday Telegraph*!

On another matter, congratulations on your comments on Islamic fanatics. It takes courage to tackle the mad mullahs.

Around here, by the way, the churches are

selling light pullovers with the inscription PASSION embroidered on the right breast. Naturally, ribald jokes are more rife than Easter converts. I don't suppose more than one in a thousand knows what they mean by PASSION. The logo is worn by those who have just drunk the blood and eaten the flesh of Jesus!

Aphrodisiac, I guess.

JACK F CHADWICK
Hornchurch

Partition

HAVING read in Up Front (March) your article on Pakistan and what is going on there, I wonder how many people realise that, in agreeing to a separated India, the 1945 British Government can be said to be responsible for the unlimited bloodshed in that unhappy country since 1945?

Apparently that Government had not learned the lessons of Ireland!

J H MORTEN
London WC1

Drugs comment is unfair to witches

DRUG users and sellers are prosecuted for breaking laws, which may or may not meet with our approval. There can be no comparison with the dreadful persecutions of "witches," who had done nothing wrong, but who were believed to have some supernatural evil powers.

Apart from those used for medical treatments, there are two drugs which are legally available. I do not pretend to know about the origins of alcohol, probably in prehistoric times. Tobacco was introduced after the European invasion of the Americas, and its harmful effects were understood only many centuries later.

Experience shows that it is virtually impossible to end the use of a drug which had been available – "Prohibition" failed in the United States, millions continue to commit slow suicide with tobacco.

Inborn instincts lead us all to drink, eat, sleep, make sexual contacts and so on. Nobody has to start on narcotics – nobody craves them until they are needlessly offered. Perhaps a drug proven to be non-addictive could be legalised with no great harm, but not those which lead to dependence. Who knows now whether harmful side-effects will be discovered several centuries hence?

We should not act to increase the thousands of users of various drugs to the millions of users of alcohol and tobacco, knowing that withdrawing these substances from the millions will later be found an impossible task.

PETER A DANNING
Richmond

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 62

Humanism
in action

LISTING his immediate objectives in "Way Forward For Humanists?" (Last Word, March), Frank Holmes anticipates "...a demand for a Humanist Helpline to give advice, on such subjects as funerals, weddings and other human situations."

He should be advised that such a telephone helpline, operating 24 hours a day, every day, was established by the British Humanist Association (BHA) in 1992. The number – 01608 652063 – is quoted on all BHA leaflets and fact-sheets dealing with Humanist ceremonies, and also in literature distributed by sister organizations and various other social agencies and consumer groups.

It is now a consistently busy line and receives calls from all over the country enquiring about Humanist ceremonies; from couples seeking information on weddings, affirmations and namings; from funeral directors, bereaved

families and bereavement agencies; from officiants and celebrants requiring advice and support; and from a seemingly ever-interested media.

All enquiries are answered promptly – the same day where possible – and, in bereavement situations, within an hour or two at most.

Such a service does, as Frank Holmes suggests, enhance the status of Humanism ...being perceived as Humanism in action by all who use it.

NIGEL COLLINS
National Ceremonies
Co-ordinator, BHA

GETTING DOWN TO FUNDAMENTALS

From Page 57

threat when they acquire a critical mass. Ironically, some of these consequences can be stimulated by faulty responses from outside, and each stage can arise without passing through the others – even without essentialism. While this analysis applies to all ideologies, it is most relevant to religion.

Internal, not eternal, forces lead to (1) as, say, the faithful themselves react to womanising popes and mercenary monks in C16 Catholicism or atheist bishops and lesbian priests (even if a small minority) in C20 Anglicanism. While the actual trigger is usually a "moral" response ("Are our leaders really sanctified by grace?"), perceived doctrinal laxity may be the cause. In any event, the first response is (2), again internal. If the organisation proves too resistant to reform, breakaway sects are formed. These may become large and stable, or fissiparous tendencies may continue and accelerate. The accompanying individual fervour leads to more worship and other displays of piety (3), a growing urge to proselytise (4) and a scarcely controllable hatred of infidels and especially apostates (5).

Danger

Public ridicule and particularly persecution of a sect may lead to the last three responses whether or not the first two apply, and free-thinkers must constantly remind themselves of this danger, even if they have no psychological barrier to giving offence. *Secularists* are, however, motivated to criticise religion publicly as untrue and pernicious by the observation that *secularisation* is making evangelism among adults, at least in the First World, increasingly difficult and so proselytisers are concentrating on uncritical children. If religion really were, as reverent agnostics (and some anarchists) profess to believe, beneficent or harmless and possibly true, who could reasonably object to religious indoctrination? The tactical fight between – as ratio-

nalists used to say – Rome and reason may be fought in the schools, but its strategic justification must be proclaimed in the wider community.

The form that fundamentalism is taking among different religionists, especially in its most pernicious form (5), depends not only on theological beliefs but also on socio-political factors (and in individual cases, psychology). Some *Raven* writers refer to JC's Second Coming as an essential plank of Protestant fundamentalism, and William Miller (the New York Baptist, not the Birmingham secularist) is cited as the first to name a precise date in modern times. The gospel writers themselves believed the event would occur in their lifetime, and elements of successive generations have been similarly egocentric. But millenarianism (which really refers to the Millennium of Revelation 20, 2-3 following the Second Coming) has become confused with Christian calendar millennia.

At the end of the first millennium AD, thousands sold all their possessions and climbed mountains to facilitate rapture. Whether or not there will be great property bargains at the end of the second millennium, there will certainly be equal or greater hysteria in the lead-up. For, outside the Jehovah's Witnesses, this date has long been the favourite among fundamentalists. It derives from two texts: Luke 10, 35 and Psalm 90, 4. The first comes from the parable of the Good Samaritan, who took the man who fell among thieves to an inn, gave the host two pence for his board and said "whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee." The second text states: "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night." Clear?...No? Well, the Good Samaritan is the Christ figure leaving wounded mankind for two days, which two pence are said to cover in biblical inns, but each day in God's sight is 1,000 years.

The agenda of Catholic fundamentalism is less biblical than theological, but also doctrinal. Essentially it is a reaction of the faithful who want certainty in faith and morals, ritual

and tabus, and also exclusivity. Since Vatican II, the liturgy has been vulgarised, nuns are showing their legs in the street, "charismatic" Catholics are fraternising with Protestant colleagues, despite reactionary encyclicals by Pope John Paul II, Catholics are resorting to artificial contraception and things more horrible, and nobody any more says *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church). It is all too much.

Peculiar

It is tempting to identify Jewish and Muslim fundamentalism with Christian, as all are said to be religions of "the book." Of course, every world religion has its scriptures, but outside the Abrahamic covenant (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) these writings are held to be less sacred or to be peculiar to individual sects. In practice, the fundamentalism of all religions outside Christianity appears to be politically inspired, though it takes the form of sterner, or better publicised, enforcement of religious law. The aims are for patriarchies to recover their power over uppity women, for religious political parties to gain ascendancy over secular rivals, for ethnic minorities to assert their identities and demands for independence, and for existing nations to show solidarity in the face of hostile Jewish, Muslim or Hindu neighbours. It is the multiplication of a lot of Northern Irelands throughout the world – as secularists have detected and predicted before.

Noisiest, and in many respects nastiest, is Islamic fundamentalism. Traditional Muslim countries had their Enlightenment centuries before Christendom, but seem to have derived no lasting benefit from it. This century, Islam has raged through Africa and other places – even among black Americans – representing itself as the religion of non-whites and citing white support of Christian imperialism, Zionism and India as its justification. This is no excuse for fanaticism but it may provide some explanation.

HUMANISM AND THE MORAL QUEST

THE TIMES on Monday, March 6, 1995, engaged us with a plethora of moral guidance. There was a substantial extract from a new book by Dr Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, in which he high-lighted the retreat from collectivism during the Thatcher years and the advance of individualism. He welcomed this change in that it would lead, in his view, to a rediscovery of mutual respect and responsibility for the pain, suffering and injustices of the world. He held that morality mattered because we cherished relationships, because we valued love, marriage and parenthood so much as to endow them with permanence, and, perhaps above all, because we remained moved by altruism and were moved by others' pain and felt enlarged by doing good. Decency, charity, compassion, integrity, faithfulness, courage and helping others mattered to us.

Then Matthew Parris, after attending his godson's confirmation, expressed his concern that the morality recommended by St Matthew's Gospel was a morality exacted upon pain of hell-fire and not to be followed for its own sake. "Are there really no better reasons to feed the hungry," he asks, than the fear of hell-fire? The reasons Jesus offers, argues this former Conservative MP, are worse than inadequate. They impoverish the spirit, promote cravenness and inject meanness into human motivation.

Ironically, this same issue of *The Times* draws attention to the slums amid the super-rich in India, to the 80 per cent of people who have no access to adequate sanitation, and to the two-thirds of under-

LAST WORD

by Leslie James

fives who are malnourished. Another report deals with the desperate poverty in sub-Saharan Africa and to the ethical dilemma facing the United Nations Organisation in that economic recession has made industrial countries meaner in giving help to the poor.

In the second leader, the Editor pays tribute to the Chief Rabbi since he remains confident that individuals are capable of taking moral decisions independently of social and economic and political forces. The Editor concludes: "This is as challenging a message as it is uplifting. To argue that the human will is a more important force than social circumstance is to make grave demands of people. But it is also to remind us that we need not despair."

What should hard-thinking Humanists make of this moral guidance and the human tragedies which confront us?

The Chief Rabbi may take satisfaction in the advance of individualism, but the widening gap in the United Kingdom between rich and poor, the massive unemployment and the social degradation of the inner cities provide no evidence of the ben-

efits of the free market trickling down to the poor. And the extravagant perks and pay of the executives of the privatised industries would suggest that individualism tends to manifest itself very often in greed. The replacement of Communism by market forces in the Soviet Republic appears to have led to a disturbing increase in crime and corruption and a lowering of the living standards of the poor.

The Chief Rabbi fails, surely, to take sufficient account of the fact that we are all the end-product of chance - the chance of being born male or female, white or black, strong or weak, clever or dull, raised in a rich suburb of Britain or on the pavement of Calcutta, motivated to succeed in school and university or neglected by illiterate and impoverished parents, tempted by sheer want or a sense of social injustice into crime or finding satisfaction in our virtue. The inequalities of the natural world are basically unfair and unjust. Even altruism is a privilege. Would the Chief Rabbi expect the Rwandan refugees, desperately short of firewood, pure water and food, and terrified at the prospect of being repatriated in their former homeland, to be moved by a sense of altruism?

Consequences

Matthew Parris is right to deplore a Christian morality prompted by the fear of hell-fire, for a sound moral code must be concerned with the interests of others. Making moral choices is a mental activity and some moral decisions are intellectually exacting. But they are concerned with results. And if we enjoy social security and can make our moral decisions in a truly and completely disinterested way, we shall no doubt have regard to the consequences for society at large, for the utilitarian benefit of the majority of the human race. These, we hope, were the considerations which Churchill gave to the bombing of Dresden and Truman to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. free of any notion of retribution.

For Humanists, therefore, whether we live in a collectivist state in which the government seeks to enforce a fair degree of social equality or in a liberal state in which the government is content to rely on the individual's sense of social justice, there must be a constant recognition of the basic injustices of the natural order of life and a need for compassion and altruism from those privileged to exercise them. And this calls for a concentration of the mind. There is no uncaused, transcendental freedom of the will which will lead us down this path.

● Leslie James is a retired barrister and a former Chief Officer of Police.

'Absurd' argument of Chief Rabbi

GERALDINE Bedell's interview with Jonathan Sacks...was too indulgent. The main thesis of his book *Faith in the Future* - that the family is "the arena of the central moral crisis of our time" - is ludicrous in a world which is divided by inequality, deprived of liberty, and destroyed by violence. His attempts to blur individualism and collectivism and to blame all the ills of our age on the Enlightenment and utilitarianism are ridiculous in the light of what progress

there has been during the past couple of centuries.

And his argument that Orthodox Judaism has something to teach us today is absurd in a society where almost no one believes in Jewish scriptures or Jewish law and where a third of the population doesn't believe in any religion at all: Letter from Nicolas Walter, a vice-president of the National Secular Society, in the *Independent on Sunday*, March 19.