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Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

July 1995

Vol 115 No 7

Near-death
afterlife
myths
exposed



**Jesus at
the
pictures
- Page 98**

**Forbidden
passion
for priests
- Page 99**

**Living
without
religion
- Page 104**

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UP FRONT

with Dave Godin



Scorsese's Act of Devotion

I REMEMBER when, some years ago, I worked in the entertainment business, a colleague of mine mentioned in passing how disastrous the box-office receipts were for Lew Grade's film *Jesus of Nazareth*, which was then daily emptying the huge Dominion cinema in Tottenham Court Road.

"I'm not surprised," I replied. "Films with themes like that could, in my view, only hope to attract any sort of an audience if they were directed by a known atheist."

My thinking was that only a non-believer would not be over-awed by the subject matter, and constantly looking over their shoulder to ascertain if they were giving any possible offence to any possible grouping.

Martin Scorsese is not an atheist, and his film *The Last Temptation of Christ* was based on a novel rather than the Holy Gospels, and was, quite patently to my mind, an attempt to make the gentle teachings of Our Lord and Saviour more relevant to our present times.

The film was really an Act of Devotion. For his trouble, however, he was berated and scorned – and yet those same religionists who attacked him and his film had been strangely mute over a previous attempt present a Swinging Jesus – via the stage and subsequent film versions of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

When Scorsese's film was first shown, our chief film censor cravenly consulted with, and screened it for, just about every religious bigwig in the country before finally passing the film uncut with a restrictive "18" certificate. (In the United States, children of any age could see it if accompanied by a person over the age of 17, but then, this equally applies to *Pulp Fiction* and *Natural Born Killers*, and again, one never hears US holy-rollers questioning the wisdom of allowing children to see those kind of movies).

The film when finally exhibited in British cinemas met with only moderate box-office success, despite all the free publicity its "controversial nature" had given it, and, again after some more kerfuffle, the film was eventually passed uncut on video.

Naturally, like nearly all other films made nowadays, it needed television screenings to recoup its production costs, and when Channel 4 announced they had scheduled a screening of it, the usual cries of "blasphemy" and "irresponsibility" went up from the credulous, although it had previously been screened on born-again Christian Rupert Murdoch's Sky channel on several occasions without a word of protest from anyone. At least this time, however, the godly didn't resort to archly pointing out that Channel 4 chief Michael Grade is Jewish, whereas when the film first came out "the Jews of Hollywood" syndrome was cited on many occasions with regard to this alleged travesty of the Life Of Our Saviour.

So, the film went out on UK television in June – and Sodom remained intact, and even Mold awoke to a normal dawn chorus of birds singing, despite the fact that councillors there had forbidden any public exhibitions of this film... And when the work is viewed objectively, one has to wonder just what all the fuss was about.

Wayward holy willie

THE treatment was evidently sincere, even if we, as freethinkers, would consider it misplaced, but the use of realism in both visuals and dialogue certainly provided some scenes which even humanists could relate to.

The attempted stoning of the woman taken in adultery, and Jesus' reasoned intervention, provided a parable on hypocrisy that few could fail to be moved by, and, by depicting the doubts and the pressures, one could well see that being a Messiah is no undertaking for the faint-hearted!

But namby-pambyism prevails, it would seem, and the thought of a Christ with balls and a wayward willie would appear to be incompatible with Christian belief. Thus proving that if he was given a special Lust Exemption Certificate from on high, then the whole theological basis of his special mission was undermined and rendered pointless by this very fact.

Oddly enough, just after *The Last Temptation of Christ* was first shown (and I always write the title in full ever since I heard that the Jehovah's Witness manager of a cine-

ma near where I live advertised the film on both his marquee and in the Press simply as *The Last Temptation!*), a French-Canadian film, *Jesus of Montreal*, was shown, and which didn't elicit even a murmur from the pious.

This struck me as very odd since here was a film that actually did question both the historic and religious base of Christian nonsense, and genuinely subverted so much of the New Testament text as it is taught as accepted fact. Maybe the fact that *Jesus of Montreal* had French dialogue with English sub-titles convinced the faithful that, despite its genuinely heretical ideas, it would in all likelihood only be seen by moral degenerates anyway, and thus was hardly worth attacking. The very, very secular fact that you get more publicity mileage by going for a major Hollywood production than you do from an art film coming from Quebec is certainly not lost on religionists.

Just as in 1966 they raised little objection when the avowed Marxist, atheist and homosexual Pier Paolo Pasolini made a bizarrely reverent Italian version of the same events in his *Gospel According to St Matthew*. Some even went so far as to call that film "inspired," even though the director might well have got his inspiration from performing fellatio on some bit of rough trade in a back alley, or similarly mysterious ways! Whereas poor Martin Scorsese only wanted to make Jesus more human.

For superstitionists, however, *The Last Temptation of Christ* could have been worse. Originally, Scorsese, in his quest for no-holds-barred realism, had planned the crucifixion scene to include casual, naturalistic, full-frontal male nudity, but when Willem Defoe (the actor playing Jesus, and who is notoriously well-endowed) was hoisted into position onto the studio cross, Scorsese was reported to have looked up at him and exclaimed: "Christ, we can't show the Son of Man hung like a donkey!" and he subsequently shot the scene with the actor's legs coyly placed sideways. Personally, I can see no theological basis whatsoever as to just why the Son of Man should not be "hung like a donkey," and certainly such a vision would be far more blessed and inspiring than that of the namby-pamby-no-dick wimp Mother Church has promulgated as "Our Lord" throughout the ages.

The fact that we atheists didn't proclaim *The Last Temptation of Christ* as a cinematic masterpiece probably, more than any other single consideration, undermines the Christian case against it. But, then, since when has religion ever encouraged people to think? And since when have we atheists had the opportunity or the right to thoroughly enjoy a bit of honest-to-goodness blasphemy? Not in my lifetime.

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BITTER TASTE OF FORBIDDEN FRUIT



***A Passion for Priests: Women talk of their Love for Roman Catholic Priests* by Clare Jenkins. Headline, London, 1995, 279 pp. £9.99.**

Review: BARBARA SMOKER

the resulting text – a collection of first-person case histories plus a lengthy Introduction, a survey of cases in other countries, and a concluding warning to the Catholic Church – is conscientiously compiled, well written, and often moving as well as informative.

It claims to be the result of nearly four years of wide-ranging research, covering more than 50 contacts, into “a subject which remains taboo within official Church circles, yet which is gathering momentum as more and more women worldwide speak out about the injustice – for both sexes – of enforced clerical celibacy.”

Some had known their priests for 20 or more years, longer than many marriages last. Others had had briefer affairs. One had married the man concerned. By no means all the relationships were sexual.

Common characteristics, however, are fear, bitter confusion, deceit, and the strain of “invisibility.” Worst hit of all are those women with children fathered by their priests, who have abandoned them both in favour of their first love, Mother Church.

A sin against chastity, after all, can be seen as a sin of the moment, a temporary fall from grace. Celibacy, for a priest or a member of a religious order, is a lifelong commitment... Hence the belief among some priests that sins against chastity are less serious than the abandonment of their celibacy, and that the priest who leaves to marry is more of a failure than the ones who remain, even if they are conducting clandestine liaisons.

When a priest repents and gives up the relationship, he receives plenty of ecclesiastical support and counselling; but there is none for the woman or her child.

A few of the women tape-recorded or wrote down their stories, and, on the understanding that all names would be changed, Clare Jenkins interviewed them separately at length. A number of the interviewees backed out of having the greatest secret of their lives exposed in print, even pseudonymously, but Ms Jenkins nevertheless includes brief abstracts in her Introduction, with general comment.

inadvertently send out misleading messages of intimacy and understanding that we don't often come across in casual encounters – the held gaze, the warm handshake, the tender touch, which can be very attractive to a woman; the animus/anima appeal of a man with feminine qualities...

This book gives only the women's side of the story; none of the men involved were willing to tell their side of it apart from a few who had already left the priesthood – and their stories must wait for a possible sequel.

Here are a few quotes from some of the women themselves.

On the one hand, there's this idea that, in being celibate, you dedicate your life to many people instead of perhaps one or two. So you are more able to give of yourself to your community, your parish. But there's a real need for human contact that's very spiritual as well, and there is a denial there which takes its toll.

If celibacy is going to cause so much heartache and become such a burden to some priests, and destroy children's lives, they should look again at making it optional.

I am not in control...I am, in a sense, kept at arm's length so as not to disturb the status quo of his life, and in this way I feel diminished.

I don't know what I believe any more but I know I still want to stand up in the middle of Mass and say, "Do you know what the Church has done to me? Do you know how I was treated because I loved a priest?"

Scarlet Woman, Jezebel, Eve – all these labels are stuck on a woman who has a relationship with a priest.

I don't feel bitter towards him. My anger and resentment is towards the institution, the Church.

I don't think I've ever been so happy, yet so unhappy at the same time.

Many of the contributors came together in a group called Seven-Eleven (because its first

AN incorrigible streak of cynicism immediately suggested to me that the genesis of this work was a publishers' board-room brain-storming session deciding to commission a journalistic book on “the lure of the forbidden fruit,” so as to combine the two best-selling themes, sex and religion. The cover illustration – of a pair of nail-polished female hands reaching out to touch a pair of male hands that are joined in prayer and dangling the crucifix of a rosary – did nothing to dispel my scenario. Only the fact that the book is British, not American, came as a surprise. However, on dipping into it, so did the quality of the contents.

Even if my first suspicions were accurate,

THE FREETHINKER

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Editor: Peter Brearey

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

CONTENTS

Up Front:	Page 98
Forbidden Fruit	Page 99
Joe Hill anniversary event	Page 100
Women and Islam	Page 101
Final superstition	Page 102
Near-death experiences	Page 103
Living without religion	Page 104
What's On	Page 106
Down to Earth: Bill McIlroy	Page 107
You're telling us! Letters	Page 108
Last Word:	Page 112

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Because of their altruistic role, priests can

➤ Turn to Page 100

Pie in the sky when you die

GATHERING the information for last month's notes about capital punishment, I was interested to read that the Mormon state of Utah still retains the firing squad as its official method of killing people, writes PETER BREAREY.

It was in Utah that Joe Hill was executed by firing-squad in 1915 on a trumped-up murder charge. He had aggravated the local establishment by organising on behalf of the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies), whose union militancy was often expressed in lyrics sung to hymn tunes.

Hill wrote many of those songs, which were frequently anti-religious and had a huge impact when sung on street-corners in those pre-TV days. He it was who created the phrase "pie in the sky," in a parody called *The Preacher and the Slave*, which was sung to the Christians' *In the Sweet Bye and Bye*:

*Long-haired preachers come out every night,
Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right;
But when asked how 'bout something to eat
They will answer with voices so sweet:*

*[Chorus] You will eat, bye and bye,
In that glorious land in the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.*

Joe Hill's *There is Power in a Union* was sung to – what else? – *There is Power in the Blood*:

*Would you have mansions of gold in the sky,
And live in a shack, way in the back?
Would you have wings up in heaven to fly
And starve here with rags on your back?*

*[Chorus] There is pow'r, there is pow'r
In a band of working men,
When they stand hand in hand,
That's a pow'r, that's a pow'r
That must rule in every land:
One Industrial Union Grand.*

To mark the 80th anniversary of the death of Joe Hill, Sheffield Socialist Choir is organising a major event on the weekend of November 17-19: "Raise Your Banners."

It aims to promote and publicise the songs and musicians of the protest movement down the years, and will feature major con-

certs, a range of musical styles, workshops, exhibitions, discussions, poetry and film.

As one who can still become tearful on hearing for the umpteenth time Paul Robeson deliver his golden tribute to Joe Hill, I certainly wouldn't miss such an affair. Further information from "Raise Your Banners," 100 Leader Road, Hillsborough, Sheffield S6 4GH, or telephone 0114 239 525.

Antidote to superstition

IT'S nice to be appreciated. Reviewing the June issue of *The Freethinker*, our venerable contemporary *Freedom* comments: "At a point in time when Premier Radio – a dire unashamedly Christian broadcasting outfit – can get on the air full-time in the face of declining belief and church attendance, I have the feeling that we are going to need this magazine more than ever..."

"This issue takes to task the BBC's 'God Squad' who have yet again repulsed attempts to abolish Thought for the Day on Radio 4...also in this issue is a very good article on capital punishment, patently motivated by the ancient Christian principle of revenge, as laid down in the Old Testament...16 pages of antidote to superstition..."

Well, *Freedom* thinks we're doing a good job. Do you? Translate friendly feelings into fund support. Send cheques to: G W Foote & Co, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: J Priest, £2; W H Simcock, £3.50; Anonymous, P Brown, M P Carlisle, G F Clarke, A L Clarke, Gaunt, N Gibbard, J F Glenister, Hamilton, W Hutton, P J Langford, Lester, D N Levett, K P Shah, A Mercer, L Millard, A Negus, P Paris, Redhead, R J M Tolhurst, H Walkley, J C Wyn-Lewis and A Zakrweska, £5 each; K R Wingham, £7.50; C Bayliss, J A Blackmore, G R Brum, J R Case, E Cecil, F N Fish, R M Kempe, J Little, E Loughram, N J Potter, M Sargent and H J Wagerfield, £10 each; D C Cranford, £20; J S Manley, £30; Anonymous, £31; and O D'Arcy, £50.

Total for May: £379.

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

From Page 99

meeting was held on November 7, 1992), set up to give mutual support to women emotionally involved with priests – and, cynically again, probably as a means of feeding this research project. There are similar groups in a number of other countries.

Before reading the book, I had not even questioned the myth that priest-affairs are isolated cases – as, indeed, I think they were before Vatican II. But it seems they are now very common.

American researchers reveal that some 42 per cent of Catholic priests in the USA are leaving the priesthood within 25 years of ordination – 90 per cent of them because of the celibacy mandate. Moreover, there are 40 per cent (in some countries up to 60 per cent) estimated not to be celibate at any one time, mostly contriving to have their cake and eat it – often with the connivance of their bishops, more than half of whom favour an end to obligatory celibacy.

One may sympathise with the bishops in their dilemma, faced as they are with an acute shortage of priests: during the past three decades (since the Second Vatican Council), no fewer than 100,000 priests in the Latin rite have left the priesthood, while the number of "vocations" (seminarians) is down from 48,000 to just over 10,000; and two-fifths of parish churches have no resident priest. (The proportion is expected to be up to a half by the end of the century). Yet the Vatican obstinately refuses to solve the manpower problem either by abolishing the 800-year-old rule of clerical celibacy or by permitting the ordination of women.

These changes were confidently expected by many Catholics in the wake of Vatican II, but the liberalism of John XXIII gave way to the indecisiveness of Paul VI and then the sexual intransigence of the present Pope – for whom this book, and similar books from other countries, should be compulsory reading.

• A former Roman Catholic, Barbara Smoker is President of the National Secular Society.

Hand of Islam tightens grip on women

by Peter Brearey

WHEN, as part of the universal disintegration of the Soviet system, the Red Army withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988 – after eight years of supporting a secularly-inclined government against US-backed, Pakistan-supplied Islamic guerrillas – Western liberty-lovers, secure in study and library, nodded approvingly over their copies of *The Guardian* and the *Washington Post*.

But you didn't have to be Brain of Britain to suspect that the "liberation" process would end in tears – if not in the terrified screams of Afghan women which have become the norm.

Women are the special victims of the armed Islamic political groups which operate not only within Afghanistan but also in the refugee camps in Pakistan.

It is clear from Amnesty International's new report, *Women in Afghanistan: A Human Rights Catastrophe*, and from despatches reaching this office from The Times of India News Service (TINS), that females are targeted for killings, abduction and rape – by both government forces and armed political groups.

"Although those engaged in the fighting frequently claim they wish to restore religious, ethnic and humane standards, they have persistently abused human rights," Amnesty International says.

The organisation has turned its attention to the violation of the human rights of women as part of a special campaign before the UN summit on women in Beijing in September.

According to the Amnesty report, mothers have been forced to watch their young daughters being raped, while children witness their parents being beaten and killed.

Thousands of women have looked on helplessly as their homes have been destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of women have trekked with their children across hazardous mountains, only to suffer sexual or physical abuse at border posts and in refugee camps in Pakistan.

(TINS comments: "Amnesty International and other human rights organisations have been criticised in the past for ignoring the activities of terrorists and extremists. They may one day pay heed to India's complaint that some of these Mujahideens have also been deployed in Kashmir where they are treating Kashmiri women the same way.")

The report is based on in-depth interviews with Afghan refugees recently arrived in Pakistan and other countries. It provides detailed testimonies by women about deliberate killings, rape and other forms of torture, abductions and sexual abuse, and political

persecution of those who try to promote women's basic rights.

A family which left Afghanistan in mid-1994 recounted how members of General Abdul Rashid Dostum's army entered their house and shot their daughter dead when she refused to go with them. Another family which left Afghanistan in mid-1994 told Amnesty International how, one night in March of that year, General Dostum's men entered their house in Kabul: "There were about 12 of them, all carrying Kalashnikov rifles, with their faces covered. They asked us to give them our daughter. We refused. They then asked us to bring our daughter to talk to them. She came and told them she did not wish to go with them. One of them lifted his Kalashnikov and shot my daughter dead in front of our eyes. She was only 20 and was just about to finish her high school. We buried her body."

Scores of Afghan women have been abducted and detained by Mujahideen groups and commanders for sexual purposes, then sold on into prostitution. Others are forcibly taken from their families in exchange for money, or for marriage to Mujahideen commanders.

Screaming

A woman told Amnesty International that her 13-year-old niece was abducted by armed guards of a Hezb-E Islami commander in late 1993: "They said their commander wanted her and took her away. She was resisting and screaming but they dragged her away. We were frightened that if we did anything we would be killed."

Amnesty International has called upon the transitional authorities of Afghanistan and the leaders of all armed political groups to stop their forces from abusing human rights and to ensure that women's human rights are respected. It urges the international community to take urgent action to help end the human rights disaster which continues unabated in Afghanistan.

Amnesty international says such violations could be prevented by strong action at the UN conference on women which should reaffirm governments' commitment to international human rights standards. It says all governments should ensure that no military equipment or training is supplied to any force in Afghanistan without guarantees that it will not be used to commit human rights abuses.

But The Times of India News Service points to Pakistan's continuing role in training and equipping Mujahideen groups with American support: "An entire new generation of extremists has been groomed in Pakistan and it operates under the banner of the Taleban."

The Taleban (religious students') political force has taken control of nine of Afghanistan's 30 provinces. They are intent on establishing a strict Islamic system of government.

Until early this year, there were two major political alliances fighting for control of territory in Afghanistan. One was the Shura-E-Nezar (supervisory council) made up of all warlords belonging to Jamiat-e-Islami.

The other major political alliance was the supreme co-ordination council, an alliance of General Dostum's forces, the Hezb-e-Islami party of Islam led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the Shi'a party, Hezb-E Wahadat.

Soldiers of both alliances have been involved in human rights abuses against women.

Amnesty International says that women have been prevented from exercising basic fundamental rights such as the rights to association, freedom of expression and of employment by the Taleban and Mujahideen groups, who consider such activities to be un-Islamic for women.

These groups are reported to have threatened women to stop them from working outside their homes or attending health and family planning courses held by non-governmental organisations. Educated women have been repeatedly threatened by the Mujahideen groups.

Remembering the headlines and the demonstrations generated by such events of the past 40 years as Suez, Hungary, Bay of Pigs, Czechoslovakia, Sharpville, US aggression in Nicaragua – not one of which compared, for volume of horror and for quantity of blood shed, to what is being perpetrated in the name of Allah throughout the world today – one must ask: *Where are the protests?*

Are they smothered by Western politicians' awareness of the strength of the Islamic vote in France, in the UK, now even in the USA? Are they muffled by the cotton-wool dogooding of liberals and lefts who dread the "racist" tag, and who will "respect the culture" even of women-hating mullahs and their mindless disciples?

Is it that when a foul deed is committed in the name of God it qualifies for automatic political sanitisation? Or is new-born protest simply and cynically drowned in oil before it can find its lungs?

THE FINAL SUPERSTITION W

ST PAUL is reported to have told his readers that they should be ready to give a reason for their faith. Many have tried to do so and spawned generations of apologists, producing mountains of books, pamphlets and tracts. Even if we reject the many where the logic has only the qualities of the child-quietening phrase *Because I say so*, there are extant hundreds of arguments for the existence of a/the deity. Most apologies are not popular reading material, but few of us have been able to avoid the door-step religious salespersons who peddle their selection of these wares.

Most readers of *The Freethinker* probably do not consider these materials worth a second thought. It seems that few of us regard it as necessary that we pro-actively attempt to destroy or replace accepted beliefs in comforting myths unless these beliefs have undesirable consequences. We neither command nor commend proselytising. Belief, for example, in the virgin birth does not seem to have any logical relationship to world problems of population.

Rationalism is neither a moral nor a belief system which may be formalised into a catechism. Until recently, I was willing to take a relaxed view – if they want to believe that, let them! But while there are innocuous beliefs, there are certainly many which can be dangerous. Furthermore, it is not so much the content of belief which may constitute the danger, but the degree of subjective certainty with which it may be held.

Believers, it seems, need continually to read their Bibles or devotional books and

The Final Superstition: A Critical Evaluation of the Judæo-Christian Legacy by Joseph L Daleiden. Prometheus Books UK. ISBN 0-87975-896-1 pp 490. £28.

Review: Professor LESLIE T WILKINS

partake in other reinforcing rituals in order to sustain their faith. Is it heresy to suggest that unbelievers should reinforce their scepticism by reading works such as this journal and, indeed, this book?

In the first 366 pages the author presents a dialogue between himself and "G" in the role of advocate for Judæo-Christian belief systems. Much of the dialogue attributed to the Almighty is similar that which is also characteristic of both contemporary door-step evangelists and classical apologists. "G," however, does not constrain his defence to the bounds of any particular denomination; he is presented as willing to take up any argument which has ever been used to defend Deism. From Page 367, the imaginary dialogue is dropped and the work ends with discussions of (a) the origins of religions, (b) why some religions have survived and (c) some alternatives to theism. The final paragraph is a tribute to, and quotation from, our own David Tribe: "The influence of freethinkers is not to be seen in the number who join their organisations...it is the way people's secondary beliefs have been affected..."

The author is neither a professional philosopher nor an academic. He is (or was) director of corporate planning for Amertech. It is, then, not surprising that his writing is clear and powerful because it is direct and driven by his personal experiences rather than constrained by genuflections in the direction of an academic discipline.

The absence of the need to fit in with any particular school of thought does not mean that the analysis is lacking either in depth or rigour; indeed it is impressive in its scope and thoroughness. Of course, any attempt to disprove a thesis as unspecific as religious belief is extremely difficult because no agreed structure of rules of evidence can be invoked. It is rather like striking a bag of jelly: the faithful can usually wobble into some different corner and hide. Daleiden goes after them! But, as the sub-title makes clear, only those who fight in the Judæo-Christian arenas. But as he points out, underlying much of this superstructure (that is, superstition) are bits and pieces from many other mythologies.

Until the age of 26, he tells us, he never deliberately missed Mass and the spell (of the Roman Catholic faith) was not broken until in 1968 external demands made atten-

dance impossible. "The edifice of superstition and archaic beliefs held together only by the cement of inertia collapsed." It is a pedantic point, but, had this work been submitted as a doctoral dissertation, the somewhat heavy reliance on secondary sources might have been questioned. For example, some secondary (context-free) quotations seem to place their authors in the opposite camp! But who (other than reviewers) read footnotes and prove their effort by noting that some cited names (for example, *Thouless* for *Thouless*) are not correctly spelled!

This was a fun book to read. I found that I was alternatively casting myself as advocate for the role of prosecution and then of defence and testing my arguments against those provided by the author. It was like a day in the visitors' gallery of the Central Criminal Court! Would I elect to have the author as my counsel? I do not think I could find (let alone pay for!) a better advocate whether I was the accused or the defendant.

All the usual arguments in favour of the Christian or Judaic deity seem to be here and well presented, though I admit that perhaps I am not the best authority on this point.

It is, in any event, quite impossible to summarise the content of this book. The stated arguments are certainly well responded to by the author. Readers of this journal could probably, find it possible to provide other refutations of some of the stated deistic claims, but they will also find much useful ammunition. The author makes frequent and sound references to contemporary scientific work and theory: including quantum mechanics, chaos theory and genetics. From my personal bias, I would like to have seen a greater exploitation of decision theory and perhaps a few notes from recent works on philosophy of values and ethics.

As a statistician, I used to find Pascal's argument appealing but not convincing. Certainly the stated odds are stacked and the pay-off from a bet that God exists is reinforced if he is a nasty one. However, Pascal does not discuss the cost of the betting. Gambling is not free. Furthermore, if the bet is reasonable for one person, it must also be reasonable for all. But if all bet in the same way, there is more than a mere change of scale. What may seem plausible in the micro (individual) scale collectively takes on a totally different perspective. The failure adequately to consider macro situations (or the tendency to misapply the logic of micro systems) is most common among believers of the Judaic Christian persuasion. This is an error of the same kind as that of adopting as an economic model for the whole nation, an economic model which fits a village grocery store! Models (representations) which may have been successful in developing tribal systems are no longer appropriate when we have only the resources of one earth.

South Place Ethical Society

ANNUAL REUNION

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Refreshments

ALL WELCOME

N WHATEVER HAPPENED TO LAZARUS?

by Carl Pinel

THE possibility of survivors of near-death experiences being able to relate what happened to them – however fleetingly – and to report on what lies on the “other side” has for long exercised and fascinated the human imagination. But until recently such people were extremely rare. Cardiac and respiratory arrests almost inevitably led to irreversible brain damage and actual death. Even today, with modern methods of medical treatment and resuscitation techniques, only a small proportion of cardiac arrest victims survive to be able to attest to the possibility of a life beyond this one – or so some adherents of the idea of life after death would have us believe they do.

Of necessity, any glimpse that survivors of near-death experiences might have of what lies beyond is only very brief – for, if the brain is deprived of oxygen for more than four minutes, irreversible damage starts to occur. If the damage is not too prolonged beyond this time, the patient may survive with some degree of intellectual impairment. Others may have gross impairment of the intellect or live on in a helpless, “vegetable” state. Obviously, these unfortunate people are unable to contribute anything to our understanding of the experience of death or of near-death happenings.

Fortunately, the majority of survivors of cardiac arrest are not brain-damaged and their testimony can be of interest.

Most survivors of cardiac arrest are completely unaware that they have had such a close brush with death, and it is most unusual for them to be able to describe anything at all. The few who claim to be able to recall what has happened usually describe a sensation of floating out of their bodies and of being in a dark tunnel with a bright light at the end. A sensation of being in a state of blissful peace is usually described as well.

Christians sometimes like to claim that this proves that there is an existence beyond our earthly life – but if the majority of survivors of near-death experiences have no recollection of anything at all, then it would tend to prove the opposite (if such evidence were to be regarded as reliable): that there is nothing at all after death.

The sensations described by the minority of those who recover from near-death episodes are consistent with changes in the supply of oxygen to the brain which can give rise to hallucinations and delirium. In addition, if the near-death episode has been caused by the ingestion of poisonous substances, or if there has been the administration of therapeutic drugs during resuscitation procedures, these

may contribute to the hallucinatory process or cause delusions.

It is possible to produce the feeling of floating out of the body by consuming several alcoholic drinks while in an emotionally agitated state, or during the stressful physical tests which astronauts undergo to determine their suitability for space travel.

Of those who survive a near-death experience and have a tale to tell, it is remarkable how they almost invariably assume that they have had a glimpse of Heaven. Survivors who claim to have had a vision of Hell are rarer than snowballs in summer. Is it arrogance that makes Christians assume that they are going to Heaven – or do only the virtuous survive life-threatening illnesses? A study of the past behaviour of the survivors who claim to have had such visions would probably prove most interesting!

The descriptions of Heaven and, occasionally, angels bear uncanny resemblance to cultural and religious stereotypes handed down over the centuries. They conform too closely to popular artistic impressions to be credible.

In addition to the varied and peculiar religious groups which claim that there is an after-life, the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena has members who research the possibility of survival after death. Although this group is free from theologically dogmatic ideas about God, Heaven, Hell, sin, redemption and punishment, it too relies on selective, anecdotal evidence and fails to explain why the majority of survivors of near-death experiences have no knowledge of the event or recollection of their “journey,” or why getting drunk can sometimes produce the same out-of-body sensations.

Death is like virginity. Both are absolute conditions; there are no degrees of either. Whatever the near-death survivors may

claim to have seen, it could not be a glimpse of the “other side,” even if it existed, for the simple reason that they did not die.

But there is one person who is supposed to have died and to have been entombed for four days before having life restored to him. St John’s Gospel records how Lazarus of Bethany was saved from the grave by Jesus – but, amazingly, none of the others mention the incident. Can it be possible that Matthew, Mark and Luke had not heard of such a miracle? Did no one mention it to them – or, having heard it, did they not believe it?

It would seem strange that nobody asked Lazarus what life after death was like and that his subsequent history should go unrecorded. Such a lack of curiosity is even less credible than the story itself. And, if Heaven is such a wonderful place, why would Jesus want to return Lazarus to this harsh world of suffering? Taken in such a context, Jesus’s intervention was an act of cruelty.

The most likely explanation is that the story was made up when the Gospels were written about a century after the deaths of their alleged authors. St John may not have heard of Lazarus, who may not even have existed anyway.

The belief in life after death is mere wish-fulfillment – a combination of indoctrination and the need for psychological support for those who cannot accept reality.

Primitive humans accepted the “evidence” of vivid dreams about the dead as proof of life after death. Today, this is not accepted by most people, but believing accounts from those who have had hallucinations as a result of their brains being temporarily starved of oxygen cannot change the finality of death, either. All of the contemporary “evidence” for life after death provides no greater justification for believing in it than that accepted by early human beings – and, in a scientific age, there is even less excuse for doing so.

● Carl Pinel is a nurse by profession

Divorce – or else, says Muslim court

PUSHED by Muslim fundamentalists, an Egyptian court ruled yesterday that a happily married couple must divorce because the husband’s writings showed he was an apostate while she was a Muslim, court sources said. An Egyptian human rights activist said

that the judgement meant that the two must live apart until a final appeal. If they were caught together alone, they could be considered adulterers and the man killed.

Fundamentalists took the case to court in 1993 – without consulting either the husband, Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid, a lecturer, or Ibtihal Younis, his wife. *Reuter*, June 15.

LIVING WITHOUT

FOR thorough-going Secular Humanists who deplore any suggestion that their Humanism is a religion and resent the attempts made by religious organisations to attribute religious qualities to Secular Humanism, this book – recently republished – will give enormous satisfaction. They will return to it from time to time for logical reinforcement of their stand.

Professor Paul Kurtz begins by seeking to give Secular Humanism a new distinguishing title, namely *Eupraxophy* – a coined word, a combination of the three Greek roots *eu* (good), *praxis* (action or conduct) and *sophia* (wisdom). He hopes that this title will distinguish Secular Humanism as a non-theistic belief and practice from any other system. It is his wish that eupraxophy should provide a coherent ethical life stance, a cosmic theory of reality based on the best knowledge of the day, and a set of social and political ideals. It will involve a cosmic perspective and a set of normative principles by which Secular Humanists may live.

Paul Kurtz then moves on to set out the essential characteristics of eupraxophy – characteristics which will establish its Secular nature. The first of these is a commitment to free enquiry. This involves scepticism (the testing of every hypothesis), probabilism (the degree of certainty required to test a claim to truth), and fallibilism (a willingness to modify a belief). Eupraxophy will extend the methods of objective inquiry to all areas of life – religious, philosophical, ethical and political.

Its second characteristic is the adoption of a cosmic world-view, the acceptance of a scientific interpretation of the universe free from any divine or transcendental features.

The third characteristic of eupraxophy embodies a life stance, the adoption by individuals of an ethical code based on an intelligent, rational analysis of human needs, a logical reflective choice of ethical principles aimed at achieving the good life.

The fourth and final characteristic of eupraxophy is its concern for social polity, the realisation of a good society. This is not to be identified with any particular doctrinaire political platform, but with basic values and principles, the application of empirical research to social problems and social change by democratic methods of persuasion.

In seeking to establish that Secular Humanism is not a religion, Paul Kurtz enu-

Living Without Religion: Eupraxophy by Paul Kurtz. Prometheus Books UK. 159pp, pbk. ISBN 0-87975-929-1. £8.50.

Review: LESLIE JAMES

merates the essential elements of religion, none of which can be associated in any way with eupraxophy.

These are:

- (1) *the belief in some realm of being which transcends experience or reason, is sacred or holy, and provides the world with an ultimate cause or final purpose.*
- (2) *the notion that human beings have an obligation to the sacred which they may discharge through various beliefs, rites and rituals.*
- (3) *the idea that religion provides a solace, a promise of reward, or psychological release.*
- (4) *a codification of rites and rituals into an institutionalised dogma administered by a priestly caste.*
- (5) *belief in a special revelation received from a prophet, mystic or disciple.*
- (6) *the existence of a literature of sacred books.*

Secular Humanism, since it contains none of these elements, is clearly not a religion. And though it bears one feature in common with religions, namely its concern with morality and social polity, it is wrong, as Paul Kurtz emphasises, to label it a religion for this reason. There are many institutions with social and moral objects – Marxism and Socialism, for example – which are not religions, and no religion can claim to have an exclusive access to morality or assert that morality is bound up inextricably with the supernatural. Sound moral codes can be purely intellectual in origin, and such is the case which Secular Humanism would advance.

Religion, Kurtz acknowledges, has certain functional properties which may be beneficial to society. Its beliefs may play a supportive psychological role within the internalised self. It can provide a motivation for moral conduct. It can have sociological significance. It can be a source of aesthetic inspiration, and it can provide an existential function in celebrating the key features of human life. But these same features can

have a deleterious effect. Religious beliefs are often out of touch with reality and can only be sustained by the censorship of dissenting views. A religiously bound ethical code can repudiate enlightened ethical principles, such as divorce or birth control, which may impede social progress and even encourage conflict, as in Ireland, Pakistan or India. It may proclaim compassion for the underdog and yet discourage social change promising salvation in the next world. It can be a sufficient compensation for ill-fortune.

Humanism can exercise some of the functions without their deleterious religious implications. It can prescribe a moral code free of bigotry. It can take a disinterested view of religious conflict. It will not offer immediate practical solutions for social deprivation.

In the remaining chapters of his book

Wat

THE "Thought for the Day" programme every morning, which has received much attention in recent months in *The Freeman*, caught my attention one morning in Spring. The Rev Dr David Stone, speaking about non-religious and wedding ceremonies. He said that there was no equivalent non-religious naming ceremony which could replace baptism in churches.

Dr Stone is no rural curate. Church of England clergyman in inner-city parish of St Jude's in Court. So there was little excuse for ignorance of Humanist and non-religious naming ceremonies.

This item was followed by a report from Frank Field MP and Lord Young of Dartington – Michael Young, Director of the Institute of Community Studies, co-sponsoring a Bill which would allow civil naming ceremony by Registrars as an alternative to Christian baptism.

I wondered why a Bill for naming ceremonies was needed. The Registration of Birth at a Register Office is a quite separate event from a church baptism. (Apparently, the number of children baptised in church has fallen from 68,000 in 1968 to 10,000 in 1998.)

OUT RELIGION

Kurtz examines the prospect for the emergence of eupraxophy. Can it develop values which can be held with conviction and which inspire us? The answer is emphatic *Yes*. It is important to Humanism in that it has expanded our understanding of the universe and replaced supernatural mystery with causal explanations, but science must be open-minded and all its specialisms properly integrated. Even philosophy can help to clarify and validate the principles of eupraxophy. And eupraxophy has a role to play in identifying ethical principles and providing a philosophy of life which can encourage intelligent conviction and stimulate passionate commitment. Eupraxophy is not a dry intellectualising but a stimulating life stance and a source of

inspiration to attain new heights in human happiness.

So eupraxophy should seek to create new institutions, to encourage critical intelligence, to provide a critique of religion, to free ethical education from religious dogma, and establish centres for the free discussion of its principles in a rational, social atmosphere, where the major events of human life can be celebrated in a secular manner.

I would like to think that the title eupraxophy might be adopted by Secular Humanists to emphasise their determined isolation from other ambiguous brands of Humanism, but I fear the word may prove a linguistic hurdle. I applaud Paul Kurtz's splendidly argued identification of Secular Humanism and his recommendations for its future development. My only slight personal reservation is that he has not given more consideration to

the tragic circumstances, genetic and environmental, which beset vast numbers of the human race and the need to enlist compassionate practical aid on a world-wide scale. As Humanists deny any divine concern for the human race and accept that they are no more than a chance evolutionary feature of the natural world, they can rightly insist that "this life is all and man is on his own." The circumstances of our lives, even our thought processes, are but the causal end-product of impersonal scientific forces. So the abiding interest of all Humanists should be compassion for those less fortunate than themselves – the poor, the social inadequates, even the moral defectives, not to mention the victims of genocide, civil war and terrorism.

It is for man on his own to seek to remedy the blind forces of chance.

What's in a naming?

by Denis Cobell, vice-President
of the National Secular Society

in 1950 to 29 per cent today). The naming ceremonies conducted by those of us who are Humanist celebrants are quite separate from birth registrations. It seems that Mr Field and Lord Young are hanging on the coat-tails of Lord Brandreth MP, who sponsored the allowing civil weddings outside the Registrar Office premises, which came into effect on April 1. I fail to see the connection of a salvo of enquiries to the parties involved, enlightening them about my involvement in non-religious ceremonies and about the British Humanist Association's publication *New Arrivals*, which provides a comprehensive guide for naming ceremonies.

It was also pointed out that namings were often conducted in gardens, accompanied by the planting of a "naming tree," and also included the appointment of Mentors or Supporting Adults, who in my experience often showed more interest in their charges than some godparents I have met. Eventually I received a reply from the

BBC. Their Managing Editor, Programme Complaints, Fraser Steel, had contacted the BBC's Head of Religious Broadcasting, the Rev Ernie Rea. The letter said: "I am grateful to you for pointing out that non-religious naming ceremonies have been in existence for some time, contrary to the impression given by Dr Stone. A summary of your complaint, making this clear, will be published in a future edition of the BBC Governors' *Programme Complaints Bulletin*." So now all those listeners who were misinformed by Dr Stone will be made aware of the error – I can see them now, dashing out to buy a copy of the *Bulletin*!

Lord Young responded: "I am of course an admirer of the British Humanist Association for all it has done and done so well. The idea of a Bill is that Registrars should be empowered to conduct naming ceremonies as they already do civil weddings. This would provide another option for people who are uncertain where to have the ceremony and of course the fact that it was generally available should make it altogether better known in the

country." Pity there was no mention in his Bill of the alternative already available.

Frank Field, as may be imagined, made a less warm response: "All that Michael Young and I are trying to do is to present another alternative from which people can choose. We have no wish at all to prevent people using the services of the Humanist Association, or any other, if they so wish."

In my complaint to the BBC, I had said that it was unfortunate that there seemed no direct way to redress the misinformation transmitted over the air-waves by Dr Stone about naming ceremonies.

I added that despite repeated requests from Humanists to talk about "morals without religion" on "Thought for the Day," the Rev Ernie Rea and his department had still turned us down.

Fraser Steel's reply concluded: "Since its inception 'Thought for the Day' has been a moment in our current affairs coverage where concerns related to issues of the day are discussed from a religious viewpoint. Humanist contributors are not invited to take part because, whatever the claims of Humanism as a belief, it is difficult to see how it can be considered a religious viewpoint."

I leave readers to take up the point from here. The more of us who knock at the door...

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

Birmingham Humanist Group: For information about Group activities contact Adrian Bailey on 0121 353 1189.

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: For details, please contact Secretary D Baxter. Telephone: 01253 726112.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: Summer programme obtainable from Joan Wimble, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove BN3 2TL. Telephone: (01273) 733215.

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 0171 916 3015 or Hilary Leighter on 01895 632096.

Chiltern Humanists: Details of group from 01296 623730. July 30: Summer Social at Farnham Royal; details later.

Cornwall Humanists: Contact: B Mercer, "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Telephone: 01209 890690.

Cotswold Humanists: For details, please contact Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Telephone: 01242 528743.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Monday, July 17, 7.30pm: Public meeting: *Birth, Marriage and Death: Humanist ceremonies*. 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: 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; 0131 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. July 14: Maureen Duffy: *A Humanist Approach to Animal Rights*. August 11: Social and discussion.

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 01708 458925.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Secretary: George Rodger, 17 Howburn Place, Aberdeen AB1 2XT (telephone: 01224 573034). Convener: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; telephone: 01563 526710.

Humanist Society of Scotland, Glasgow Group: Information regarding meetings and other activities from Hugh H Bowman, 25 Riverside Park, Glasgow G44 3PG; telephone 0141 633 3748.

Kent Humanists: Information from M Rogers, secretary, 2 Lyndhurst Road, Broadstairs CT10 1DD; telephone 01843 864506.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Tuesday, July 11, 4pm to 8pm: Summer Social at 15 Victoria Crescent, Horsforth. Details: 2585748.

Leicester Secular Society: Details from the Secretary, Lyn Hurst, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB (telephone 0533 622250).

Lewisham Humanist Group: Saturday, July 8, 1pm to

6pm: LHG stall at People's Day, Mountsfield Park, Stainton Road, London SE6.

Manchester: Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: 0161 432 9045. Meetings begin at 7.30pm, St Thomas' Centre, Ardwick Green. September 8: Barry Thorpe: *Democracy Ancient and Modern*. October 13: Eric Paine, of the Thomas Paine Society.

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich: Thursday, July 20: Simon Rathbone: *Unitarians' Beliefs*. 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 01257 265276.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, August 2, 8pm: Public meeting. Details obtainable from Gordon Sinclair, 9 South View Road, Barnsley S74 9EB. Telephone: (01226) 743070.

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: 0161 480 0732. Monday, July 10, 8pm, "Railway," Wellington Road North: Carl Pinel: *Christianity - Opium of the People*.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Meetings 7.30pm for 8pm. Wednesday, July 12, 7.30pm for 8pm: Don Pincham: *The Case for the Disestablishment of the Church of England*.

Teesside Humanist Group: Friends Meeting House, Norton, Stockton-on-Tees. Meetings second Wednesday of each month. Contact J Cole on 01642 559418 or R Wood 01740 650861 or write to J Cole, 94 High Street, Norton, Stockton-on-Tees.

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. July 20: David Boulton, Sea of Faith: *Humanism in the Churches*. September 21: Freddie Everett: *David Hume, Philosopher, 1722-76*.

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

Worthing Humanist Group: Information: Mike Sargent. 01903 239823.

Humanist Anthology: Attractively produced, updated edition of Margaret Knight's fascinating work, revised by Jim Herrick with a preface by Edward Blisshen. Rationalist Press Association. £7.50 plus £1 postage from RPA, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. A "most acceptable introduction to the Humanist tradition" - Colin McCall, *The Freethinker*.

Foundations of Modern Humanism: William McIlroy's new pamphlet is rapidly going out-of-print. Last few copies £1 each, including post, from Sheffield Humanist Society, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT. Colin McCall: "...an enlightening read."



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Over-the-brush off for Church

TWO reports published last month bode ill for the "faith and family" lobby.

Research by the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys has revealed a marked decline in the popularity of marriage. The OPCS report, *Population Trends*, shows that the number of marriages is at its lowest level since the mid-1920s. On the other hand, there has been a huge increase in the number of couples cohabiting. Trial marriages have increased by 14 times in the past 25 years. Seven-in-10 young couples live together before getting married.

More than half of all marriage ceremonies now take place in a register office. And with the Marriage Act 1994, which allows marriages to take place in a wide range of buildings – the Royal Pavilion in Brighton was the venue for the first such ceremony – the number of couples processing to the altar is certain to decrease.

Just like Co-ops, which are usually situated just off a main shopping street, the Church of England lags behind social realities. Thus its report, *Something to Celebrate*, which jettisons some of its traditional teachings on marriage, is a belated attempt to come to terms with what is happening in the real world.

The Board for Social Responsibility's working party, which prepared the report, recommends that "living in sin" should no longer be used as a description of cohabiting couples. But the term has long since lost any meaning for the parties concerned or for the public at large. There are few who haven't got relatives or friends living together without Church blessing or State endorsement.

The Rt Rev Jim Thompson, Bishop of Bath and Wells, said the report "wrestles with the reality of contemporary society." In fact, the wrestlers are disparate factions within Anglicanism. Society is merely watching the fun.

"Living in sin" is a conventional slur on couples who, for whatever reason, cannot, or prefer not to, formalise their union. The "sin" is enjoyment of a sexual relationship, usually with no intent of producing offspring. Although the earliest use of the term was probably when it appeared in Bath City Mission's annual report for 1838, today's traditionalists and evangelicals blame the "Swinging Sixties" for the decline in marriage and for other social changes they regard as immoral. They look back at a golden age of innocence, sexual abstinence outside marriage and conjugal bliss thereafter. Broadly speaking, it supposedly reached its zenith during

Queen Victoria's reign.

But every golden age is a product of wishful thinking and lack of imagination. In Victorian times, the poor had few illusions about the married state. Cohabitation was common enough and living conditions meant that from an early age they lived in close proximity with copulation. Juvenile prostitution and sexual abuse of children were widespread.

The Victorian middle and upper classes had their courtship handbooks, rules of etiquette and social rituals. Their daughters often were, in the words of one observer, "reared like Pekinese pups for the market... led to the altar from the classroom." Sons were expected to lose their virginity wherever they could – if necessary with full- or part-time prostitutes. Couples frequently embarked on married life with a serious health problem.

Something to Celebrate has drawn flak from various quarters inside and beyond the Anglican fold. Cardinal Hume, head of the Roman Catholic Church in Britain, said: "Full sexual relationships are only permissible inside marriage." With a reticence unusual for one of his calling, he admitted it was difficult for a celibate to comment on the subject of cohabitation (no doubt causing wry smiles in some presbyteries).

Cardinal Hume added: "We believe strongly in the family in the traditional sense." Here he speaks with the voice of the hierarchy. The flock has taken a different direction.

Certainly the C of E is beset by problems of which *Something to Celebrate* is the latest. Ordination of women, defections by clergy and lay people, internal disputation and public indifference have seriously affected the Established church's standing and influence.

Free speech, Islam-style

TIME was when Speakers' Corner at Hyde Park was a popular venue for those seeking enlightenment and free entertainment. Every day, particularly at the weekend, Londoners mixed with visitors from the sticks and further afield to hear a bewildering variety of beliefs and subjects expounded from rickety platforms. Orators ranged from the intelligent and articulate to the plain barmy.

It took courage to face a Hyde Park audience of hecklers and questioners, wits and wags. But the banter was generally good-natured, with seemingly bitter adversaries often to be seen, later, taking tea together in a local cafe.

All that has changed. Chief Inspector Alastair McLean, of the Royal Parks Constabulary warns: "What's happening at Speakers' Corner now is fanatical bigotry.

Some Roman Catholics – in particular, converts from Anglicanism – are gloating over their fellow-Christians' state of crisis. But only the blinkered or starry-eyed fail to see that increasingly Catholics are cohabiting, divorcing and practising contraception. It is a safe bet that Cardinal Hume's successors will also find themselves "wrestling with the reality of contemporary society" – and losing.

Selective Saviour

BACK in 1930, the town of Marion, Indiana, was the scene of an atrocity recalled in the BBC's *Everyman* (June 18). James Cameron, a 16-year-old black youth, escaped lynching by a mob which had dragged him and two others from the town jail. They had been accused of killing a white man and raping his girlfriend.

Two of the youths were hanged from a tree. When the noose was put around his neck, James Cameron claims that he heard a voice above the crowds: "Take this boy back. He had nothing to do with the killing or raping."

In an interview, James Cameron said: "I don't think any human voice could have stilled the hanging-fury of the mob that night. For those who believe in God, no explanation is necessary. For those who don't, no explanation is possible."

Asked in another religious programme where "the good Christian people" of Marion, Indiana, were that night, Mr Cameron replied: "They were in that mob." He did not explain why his and their God did not raise his Almighty voice to save the other victims.

People who go there believing it's a day out are naive."

This situation has been brought about by religious zealots, mostly the disciples of Allah, to whom free speech and debate are anathema. Groups of Islamic militants surround any speaker of whom they disapprove and shout him down. Others jostle and assault anyone who challenges any of their speakers. The Royal Parks police are reluctant to intervene for fear of being branded racist.

Lord (Donald) Soper, who has been speaking in Hyde Park since 1926, says "there is a great deal of potential violence. There is a certain group of people who, if they had their way, would destroy the whole value of the forum."

Ecumenically-minded wimps involved in "Christians and Muslims together" groups should take note.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Welcome change

YOUR report of Polly Toynbee's address on the BBC's God-slot (June) reminded me of past battles and how little has changed over the years.

One aspect of this address does, however, represent a change, and one to be welcomed. This is the fact that it was given at a dinner jointly sponsored by the British Humanist Association, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, the National Secular Society, the Rationalist Press Association and South Place Ethical Society. The dinner was held in Conway Hall adjoining Bradlaugh House, the HQ of these Humanist bodies.

As Bradlaugh's biographer, let me belatedly say publicly how pleased I was that the NSS and its associated publishing companies acquired such a well-located building, named it in honour of Bradlaugh and attracted the offices of the other Humanist bodies. The fate of the Bradlaugh Memorial Hall Co Ltd., established after the great freethinker's death was a sad chapter in Secularist annals, but it should be recorded that the current Bradlaugh House isn't the first. That was at 103 Borough High Street, an interesting (see 103: History of a House by Elizabeth Collins) but poorly located building which, despite its heritage significance, may no longer exist.

Inevitably, joint offices and joint functions suggest to newcomers to the movement the desirability of a merger of Humanist bodies, despite the evidence of unscrambled industrial conglomerates and political federations in the world at large and the proliferation of Christian, Muslim and Hindu sects in the religious world. As G N Deodhekar pointed out (May), "our separate organisations often represent a separate approach or a separate mood," and unions could be followed by splits. There's also the PR point that, while joint social events attract a worthwhile turnout, separate bodies, publications, promotions, campaigns, etc maximise impact.

DAVID TRIBE
Sydney

Nuns on the Pill?

AS Jessie Boyd's query in *The Freethinker* (June) rang a vague bell in my memory, I wrote to the Catholic Enquiry Centre about it, as follows:

"In a review of the papal encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, I said that it left no loopholes for abortion: 'Direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder.' (My emphasis).

"Now a reader has asked me how this can be, since Pope John XXIII specifically gave permission for abortion to the Belgian nuns

who became pregnant as a result of being raped during the transition from the Belgian Congo to the independent state of Zaire.

"Is the answer that John Paul II is taking a more absolutist line on this than John XXIII? Or have I misinterpreted the new encyclical?"

Here is their reply:

"You have not misunderstood the new encyclical. Abortion always constitutes a grave moral disorder. However, your reader has done a great disservice to the memory of John XXIII. How on earth anyone could think Pope John XXIII would have allowed and even encouraged such an absolute evil is beyond me. I think your reader has got confused with a permission to use the contraceptive pill."

What? As a remedy for rape? Anyway, I think I share Jessie Boyd's memory of those events of 35 years ago. Do any other readers? And if so, can they quote date, chapter and verse, to enable me to confound the Catholic Enquiry Centre?

BARBARA SMOKER
London SE6

Serious objection

THE article by Leslie James, "Humanism: the compassionate philosophy" (June), is, I submit, open to serious objection; it seems seriously to lack coherence, to be internally inconsistent.

Our raw experience suggests that we live in a world of causation, contingency, chance and choice. We can often identify, with some confidence, cause and effect and we can often see that something we might call B is contingent upon something else we can call A – meaning that, while A does not actually cause B, it is the case that, but for A, B cannot exist or cannot happen. Very often we experience things that seem to be based upon chance and very often we experience the making of choices. Those are empirical data – they are part of what we experience.

It is, of course, possible dogmatically to assert that, say, things do not happen by chance and that when we think they do it is simply that we have not identified their causes; it is equally possible dogmatically to assert that we make no real choices, but merely the illusions of choices, because the way we "decide" is determined by circumstances beyond our control. These dogmas are parts of the larger dogma of hard determinism and, like all dogmas, they are so constructed as to be unfalsifiable – but, unless we take liberties with induction, they are unverifiable, too.

Empirically, we do have free will and, without it, the concept of morality is void. Morality means making choices on the basis of what are held to be moral values applied to actual situations by ethical reflection. The major incoherence in Leslie James' article is that he claims to espouse determinism and also requires us to make choices – as between good and bad options. His analysis is full of moral aspiration

– full of instances where, in his very reasonable view, we ought to choose one course rather than another. He speaks of "moral demands," the need for "massive altruism," "over-riding duty to be accepted," that it is "difficult to abandon self-interest," the efficacy of deterrence in regard to criminality. These things Mr James mentions are simply void UNLESS the agent can choose – to reject moral demands, not to be altruistic, to shirk over-riding duty. Deterrence can only be meaningful if the persons to whom it is aimed choose to be or choose not to be deterred.

It is of not the slightest use to espouse morality – however it be defined, from whatsoever source it may be held to come – and simultaneously to deny free will – "to jettison free will." (Barbara Smoker).

If we do not accept that a degree of free will is part of our lives – and hence that "ought to be can be ethically meaningful and not merely prudential – then we are saying that morality is no more than an account of the way people behave. That, I am sure, is not what Mr James means by morality.

To accept free will as given (I mean given in the logical sense – not given by a giver) does not, of course, imply that free will is unlimited. Of course it is not; it is limited by logical possibility, natural possibility, our genetic make-up, our past history, the cultural pressures and norms to which we are subject...to quote Barbara Smoker again, "the interaction of genes and environment."

My critique of Leslie James' article can be summed-up by asking a question implicit in his title: *How can a Humanist, or anyone else, for that matter, be compassionate unless that person is free, at least to some degree, to withhold compassion?*

In the absence of that freedom, compassion is not a moral value but is merely a comment on what we may perhaps display and perhaps feel. Without that freedom of will, compassion becomes descriptive rather than prescriptive. I don't think Mr James is asking us to say that, is he?

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

Meaning in our lives

IN A universe 15 thousand million light-years across (writing 100 years ago, I would have said "In the great scheme of things") our lives may seem insignificant. Yet the need to put meaning in our lives is a definite human characteristic. How can we resolve this paradox?

We perceive the world through our senses. We pattern our perceptions and construct a mental picture of "reality." We project this picture on to the world. We are in a constant process of testing our model (our "picture") and making minor modifications to it. This is the way our brains work. Our mental model

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 108

also includes a self-image (our ego).

Sometimes we need to overthrow our whole model in the light of new evidence. We could cling religiously to our old model and ignore the new evidence. But this is ignorance (obviously) even if we do admire the commitment. The need for our lives to have meaning conditions the way we see the world. Whatever we may perceive we can give meaning to by incorporating it into our "reality." Basically, the world is important because we perceive it but not because we perceive it as important. We may perceive parts of it, even ourselves in it, as unimportant, wrong, false, bad, evil. But the whole remains important and meaningful and ceases to be so without the perceiver. This is the human perspective. The perspective of the universe is that the whole of life on earth is just a particular arrangement of atoms.

Both perspectives are true.

ERIC YAFFEY
Bradford

Historical Jesus?

THE question of whether there really was an historical Jesus of Nazareth in First-century Palestine is never going to be finally settled, because the evidence is insufficient. Assuming, however, that there was, the further question of what, if any, of the information about him in the Gospels is reliable is even more problematical.

When Robert Sinclair (June letters) writes scathingly: "If Jesus were a myth, how come he is mixed up in the affairs of: Pilate, Herod, Herod Antipas, John the Baptist etc? Were they mythological too, or did some Gospel 'Editor' insert this phantom among them?" he oversimplifies and misrepresents the problem.

It is only in the later NT documents (that is, those composed after the genuine letters of Paul and his near-contemporaries) that any connection between Jesus and those undoubtedly historical figures is alleged. The few late first and early second century Jewish and Pagan references are either too disputed or too vague to provide any worthwhile corroborative evidence.

It is, however, not in the least difficult to conceive that, late in the first century, those who wished to give their mythical Christ an historical *sitz im Leben* could have invented connections between him and genuine historical figures. This is precisely the technique used by the author of *Forrest Gump*.

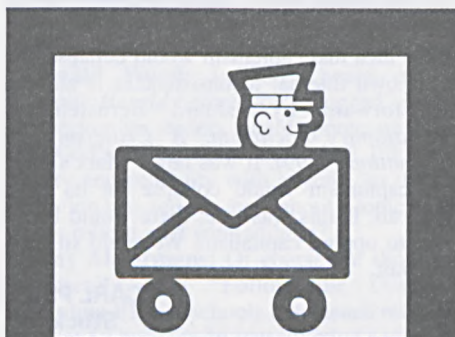
It is also misleading of Robert Sinclair to suggest that, though the Gospels "are now...a farrago of myth," they are "not exclude(d) from (having) once reported...the restoration attempts made by the Messiah Kings of Israel." Even though such scholars as S G F Brandon and Hyam Maccoby believe that such was the true nature of Jesus of Nazareth, there is no good reason to think that the canonical

Gospels represent a revised and distorted reworking of a once-reliable historical record which would have supported such a view.

DANIEL O'HARA
London EC2

Circumstances are different

IN YOUR statement clarifying your editorial position (June, page 82) you quote G W Foote writing in the first issue more than 100 years



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.

ago: "The Freethinker is an anti-Christian organ, and must therefore be chiefly aggressive." You then go on to say that you have been compelled to extend the range of your "aggression" beyond Christianity. One of the characteristics of the 19th Century Freethinkers was their ability to engage with the problems of their time; their attacks on the religious establishment of the day were appropriate to their circumstances, since organised religion was then an important impediment to the spread of intellectual freedom. Your own rather cryptic remark that "you have been compelled to extend the range of your aggression" is at least a partial recognition that we now live in different circumstances.

Those of us who wish to see a broad-based and effective Humanist movement in Britain could wish that you would take your thinking a little further. In Britain to-day, about one third of the population are non-religious, not vigorously anti-religious, and much of your anti-religious polemic leaves them cold, but the need for an effective Humanist movement is greater than it was even in G W Foote's time. If sinister thought control in all its forms is to be effectively opposed in the 20th Century,

then we need a broad-based Humanist movement which is more than a fragmented and marginalised hobby organisation. Not long ago, I had a correspondence with a highly intelligent life-long Humanist who saw no reason to join any of the existing Humanist organisations. I suggested that it might be possible to build a broad-based British movement along the lines of the Norwegian or Dutch organisations. His reply was that people who were happy with the present state of British Humanism were unlikely to try to do this. The more I read *The Freethinker*, the more I come to fear that he was right.

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

Communism & Fascism

I AM grateful to David Tribe (Last Word, May) for causing me to clarify one or two points which, owing to the need for brevity, were unclear in my first letter.

I said the Communist Party of Great Britain failed mainly because it drove away anyone who took Marxism seriously. I could give examples from former friends: Gordon Childe, Archibald Robertson and JBS Haldane. To understand Marxism needs some intellectual effort, and political leaders find it easier to quote from sacred scriptures. This is a common feature of most religions.

I mentioned the CPGB because this is the only Communist party of which I have intimate knowledge. But I think the same criticism applies elsewhere. A few years ago I had the opportunity of confirming it in Alma Ata. Incidentally, I believe the Scottish Communist party still survives, as do some others.

The adjective Dialectical is unfortunate; in Marxism it defines a general law of evolution. This is a very strange idea, but no exception to it has yet turned up. Fifty years ago in discussions with a group of Marxist scientists I suggested it might be due to the curvature of space time in the presence of matter; a few recent observations agree with this. If David Tribe wishes his attacks on the dialectic to be taken seriously, it is very easy. He need only describe some example of evolution which is not broken by sudden and dramatic changes of quality.

Materialism which does not accept the Dialectic is in serious trouble. Life has arisen from inorganic matter; human beings have qualities not possessed by other animals. To explain changes of this type the alternative to dialectical materialism is to assume that a new spirit has appeared, Life, or the Soul. That is why we find Nobel prize winners writing books which are a recall to some kind of religion.

To explain most of these questions, for instance the relation between philosophy and science, would require a book, and *The*

Turn to Page 110

YOU'RE TELLING US!

➔ From Page 109

Freethinker is not primarily concerned with these questions. But I am always prepared to try to answer questions, and suggest that anybody interested could reach me through Talking Heads, c/o Channel 4.

C R WASON
Bridgwater

LET us hope that David Tribe is right in thinking that Fascism can never make a comeback. I wonder. History never repeats itself exactly, but already in Britain we have many elements of the "corporate state" which so characterised the Fascist regimes before the war. We have oppressive laws against strikes and demonstrations; neutering of trade unions; curtailing the rights of accused persons; reducing the powers of local government and "capping" their right to raise money, while ruling from the centre not only directly but also by means of hugely powerful quangos. There is no effective opposition; the main political parties are distressingly similar in policies.

And just as Hitler needed a scapegoat and found one in the Jews, so they may be found here. Does anyone recall a recent party conference at which a Cabinet Minister made jibes at foreigners, immigrants, and single mothers? Which were received with rapturous applause. A demagogue who could channel this hatred and combine it perhaps with patriotic renewal and a promise to end unemployment might well gain considerable support. There is massive discontent in the country and disillusion too. And other countries have openly Fascist and racist parties, which may not yet command a very high proportion of public support, but that could change – Hitler and his Nazi Party was pretty insignificant in its early days.

Of course, any revived Fascism or Nazism will not use those discredited names. Just as former Communists seem eager to call themselves something else. But if the "dwindling faithful" hold that what the Soviet Union practised was state capitalism they are only belatedly realising what perceptive people were always aware of. The workers were betrayed right from the start; there was no workers' rule as Marx rather optimistically predicted, but rigid and tyrannical rule by a monolithic state and party. Does this mean that Marx was wrong? Or just hopelessly Utopian in his belief that violent revolution could produce a perfectible society?

ELSIE KARBACZ
West Mersea

IN AN otherwise interesting article, David Tribe repeats the same tired and inaccurate arguments that Marx was wrong because the Russian economic system failed.

There have been all sorts of revolutions in history: Fascist; anti-slavery; anti-feudalist etc., but Marx stated that for a revolution to be Socialist it had to have certain features: it had to be a revolution of a politically-conscious working class and not be led by a revolutionary vanguard; it must be a world-wide system

as capitalism is world-wide; advanced capitalism is necessary for the establishment of a Socialist revolution, otherwise the necessary productive forces to satisfy human needs do not exist; money and the wages system would be abolished.

The Russian revolution had none of the features defining it as Socialist, whatever name may have been used to describe it and the Socialist Party of Great Britain criticised it in 1918. Even the Trotskyist groups, with their own brand of revisionism, recognised the state capitalist nature of the Russian economy by the early 1930s. Indeed, Lenin stated that "State capitalism would be a step forward for us," in *The Chief Task of our Times* in 1923.

The idea that capitalism would collapse due to its own internal inconsistencies is an idea put forward by Eduard Bernstein in *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation* (1899). It was never Marx's view that capitalism would collapse on its own. After all, if this was true, there would be no need to oppose capitalism. We could sit back and wait.

CARL PINEL
Stockport

Hanging matters

THE Up Front feature (June) about capital punishment was very interesting. However, its omitted a fact which, in my opinion, is the best-ever evidence that a death sentence is not a deterrent.

About 30 years ago, we had in this country the Homicide Act, a compromise which abolished the death penalty for murder by some weapons but retained it for murder by other weapons. Was it followed by any change in the weapons used for murder? NO! It was impossible to detect even a slight change in the statistics.

The Act lasted very few years before its replacement by life imprisonment for all murder.

PETER A DANNING
Richmond

OK – let's accept that the death penalty does not deter people from committing murder. However, think of this: once that murderer has been strung-up (or whatever) he (or she) won't perpetrate that crime again. The alternative is to spend £2,000 a month (Home Office figures) on incarcerating the average criminal for, in the case of murder, perhaps 30 or more years. *Vide* Hindley *et al.* I'd sooner 100 old age pensioners currently freezing in British winters were to receive an extra £20 per month fuel allowance than allocate it for the maintenance of one convicted murderer.

I wonder if the average *Freethinker* would agree with me?

CHARLES W MARSHALL
Wimborne

Famine and freedom

UNRESTRICTED population growth, humans as in lemmings, continues until lack of resources raises the death rate to match the birth rate. There may be a sort of steady state, as in my childhood, when half the world's infants died before they were five. Or it may involve famines: unlike the steady state, these make news. Famines tend to be accompanied by action from local élites and foreign creditors to ensure that, however many die, "important" people get their usual share of available produce. This enables pseudo-Left natalists to claim that "Modern famine is largely a political problem: population levels have not been a significant factor" (Dan J Bye, May letter). In fact, population is always a significant factor: war and greed bring famine sooner – without them it comes later. To a great extent the poor starve because there are too many of the rich well-to-do rabbit men (the US Kennedy, Saudi princes, President Welesa of Poland...etc) effectively starve five or ten times many poor children as they beget rich one.

Bye generalises, "Only the most violent totalitarian regimes have ever restricted reproduction" but a generalisation needs basing on more than one example, and Bye can cite none other than modern China. He espouses the dogma "concern for over-population goes with tyranny," but real history teaches the opposite. The most murderous régimes (Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, Ceaucescu's Romania, Pol Pot's Cambodia – you name it) have mostly praised fecundity and restricted contraception and abortion: keep human life plentiful and you keep it cheap. As it happens, I lived in China at its most totalitarian (mid-sixties) but it then had more reproductive freedom than anywhere else on earth: it was (maybe still is) the only country with no restrictions on any form of birth control; there was abortion and sterilisation on demand and people had as many babies as they wanted. Over-rapid urban growth was tackled by forcible resettlement of city-dwellers to remote regions: restricting them to one child per two adults seems to me a kinder approach. Bye maintains, "there is an ideological continuity between the Tiananmen Square massacre and the one-child policy." Which massacre? April 1976 or June 1979? Probably the latter: I doubt if Bye heard of the former, there were no foreign TV crews on hand to cover it. I think these massacres stemmed not from ideology but from the tendency of persons with power to get vicious when challenged: ditto the US massacre of 1,000 Panamanians while capturing their former protegee Noriega in the name of suppressing narcotics traffic. Libertarian dogmatists might claim an ideological continuity between the Panama massacre and denial of the divine right to consume what substances one wants:

➔ Turn to page 111

YOU'RE TELLING US!

• From Page 110

there was at least some connection. Between Chinese massacres and population policy there was none.

Re population densities, I suggest Bye research how much food (for example, fish-meal to feed their pigs) the world's most densely-populated countries, Belgium and Holland, import. Density has little to do with resources.

Bye asks why I put the word "brutality" in quotes in my March letter: it was because I was quoting someone else. I have not myself heard of brutality associated with the Chinese one-child policy, though it could occur without my knowing. There is nothing brutal in the policy as such, which is bringing about massive extensions of individual human freedom (as does the UK policy of suppressing car theft – though shooting the thieves, as in Belfast and in south-west London, may be a bit brutal).

Incidentally, I am not a Chinese government spokesman. I disapprove of both Tiananmen massacres, and of the 1978 invasion of Vietnam. The victims of these were, of course, vastly less numerous than those of the 1960-61 famine, for which I feel the regime also had some responsibility: a two-child-per couple policy in the 1950s would have been helpful.

CONNAIRE KENSIT
Southsea

In response to S E Parker (June letters). In claiming that the resources of this planet are finite, he makes the mistake of confusing amount of extractable raw materials with their amount of potential subsequent use; that is, that individual "bits" of matter can be and are used over and over again. I believe it's called re-cycling. In any case, it seems likely that, in relative terms, we haven't even begun to extract what raw materials there are.

Yes, the population capacity of this planet probably is finite in practical terms, but we haven't yet come near to approaching that limit. Anyway, why take such a shortsighted view? I am sure that our present inability to move beyond the confines of this planet (in any meaningful sense) will one day be regarded as most of us now regard the condition of medieval peasants who lived their entire lives in squalor and ignorance without travelling further than the local market town's fair.

NIGEL MEEK
Bromley

Seeds of doubt

READING in *The Freethinker* (June) of Bill McIlroy's experience with a Jehovah's Witness in his garden reminds me of a story told by Bernard Miles in one of his rustic monologues. It concerned an old countryman who took over a sadly neglected piece of land and, after several months' unremitting toil, transformed it into a beautiful garden.

He was working there one day when the Vicar walked by and said: "It's wonderful what God can do with a little help, isn't it?" To which the countryman replied: "Arr! But you should 'a' seed it when 'e 'ad it to 'is-self!"

NEIL BLEWITT
Attleborough

'Unproven' is verdict

IN responding to my "fan-mail," I've tried to avoid restating points made elsewhere, but there was a fair bit to scrape off, so apologies if this is somewhat long-winded.

Donald Wood: I hadn't heard of the *Catholic Herald* before you "plugged" it! Do you reckon its readers would appreciate being told God's existence is unproven? I'll argue inanity and profanity with anyone, so if your invitation was serious, how about a topic to set things rolling, and your address?

Tony Akkermans: Of course we shouldn't uncritically play "Follow the Dogma"! Regarding RE – if schools must teach religion, let's have a broad overview covering a range of ideologies, including non-spiritual ones. If people want to indoctrinate their children further, let them use their own time and money and not subject other people's children to similar brain-washing. I'd prefer religion be left out of schools altogether. Something as central to identity as faith should be a matter of informed adult choice, not childhood indoctrination.

Concerning intolerance. Fanatics will use any excuse. Provided you don't share the "in thing" and are relatively defenceless, you'll do. Religious and irreligious alike have suffered for their beliefs. Who makes most smoke: atheists, heretics, "conchies," Jews? Conversely, the oppressed seemingly make accomplished oppressors, given the chance. Take Christianity's shift from Roman underdog to Medieval monopoly on European fanaticism; or the rise of Islamic intolerance, its own Prophet once a fugitive. Personally, I don't much care what an individual believes, but I'm ever suspicious of zealots.

Michael Hill: If atheists lack zeal, why such fervour among the faithful refuting my spurious missives? Some declare me "Christian" – despite my not dropping phrases like "Jesus loves you," as might *prove* such (mis)assumptions.

Although not possessing sufficient faith to declare as fact the opinion "God can't possibly exist," neither do I presume that inability to disprove God substantiates religious claims. I don't know whether God exists, or in what (if any) form – hence my describing my stance as agnostic. Contentious I may be, even offensive, but Christian I'm not.

In my opinion, Scripture presents metaphor at best, at worst wild misrepresentation. Why God, if existing, might care more (or less) about us than Andromeda, comets or anything else in Creation defies me, but my IQ only

qualifies me to join Mensa not to second-guess omniscience. While agreeing that, if God exists, the implication is towards the impersonal bastard Hill identifies, I disagree with his assumption that God must obey "natural laws." God is omnipotent, remember? Science and religion are products of "human understanding," providing equally suspect accounts if God is "unknowable" in "human terms." Parodying the Taoist, "...the Way that can be named is not the constant Way" – anything we can explain isn't God.

Refuting one "model" only destroys one "God." The next just has to be more "Almighty." Discredit Jehovah, and Krishna smiles. While churches stand empty, evangelism proliferates. Make God big enough and science won't shift it. Nor will science dissuade religionists. Some don't "believe" in science.

"God" may exist only as Ernest Wakefield's "abstract mental concept," but should "God" merely equate to "Belief in God," isn't that enough to be going on with? How tangible must ideas be to have impact? Morality seems a better measure than "reality" in judging God, being the one area where – by the religionist account – we are equipped to speculate, "knowing Good from Evil," like God.

Real or conjectural, I can't reconcile "Evil," war, earthquakes and so on with a "Good" monad. The problem isn't so much God existing but whether God, if existing, is the fluffy bunny portrayed by the hopefuls, or a psycho. By analogy, the "problem with religion" reflects practice more than faith, the "enemy" more Church than Churchgoer.

Bad practice overshadows good principles. Take Communism: ostensibly irreligious, possibly "Good"; but how have Communist régimes fared in the persecution stakes? Arguably, failure "disproves" Communism, but does that reflect the ideology or the system applying it? Are the ideals echoed by "From each according..." also invalidated? Is "scientific" Capitalism any "better"?

While not anti-faith *per se*, I'm not keen on dogma resulting in rape victims being denied abortions, or abjuring birth control amid population crisis. Fruitfulness may be part of the pact – but trees whose growth is controlled are most fruitful.

Similarly, I'm suspicious of faiths so weak they can't take criticism – to the extent where "believers" feel obliged to kill "blasphemers" in the name of a God of Mercy.

Ideas should be tested by their ability to survive critics – not *vice versa*. The contention "God" v "Not God" has persisted since antiquity. Depending on bias, it is as valid to say "prove God exists" as "prove God doesn't." Absolute proof settles the argument either way. Until then, the accepted opposing proofs liken to sides on a spinning coin. The question should be what the coin buys, not whether it'll come down heads or tails.

S J GULA
Leicester

• Many letters have been held over to the next issue.

Chiselling off the royal barnacles



Secular
Humanism
month

Vol 1-

AT a Humanist conference some years ago, I was taken mildly to task by a fellow Humanist for my expressed opinion that Humanism and support of a monarchy are largely incompatible. Admittedly, this was at a time when British republicanism was little more than a gleam in Willie Hamilton's eye.

At first glance, my interlocutor raised a perfectly reasonable objection: What has rejection of superstition to do with the manner in which a democratic state chooses to represent itself? I would counter that Humanism is not just about a non-religious life-stance; it also aims to bring about an open and just society. A proper system of government and representation of the people, based on merit and choice – not privilege and birthright – forms an essential component of such a society.

Moreover, the conditions conducive to religion and monarchical rule are uncomfortably similar. To survive and flourish, both Church and Crown require a servile population which holds itself in low esteem, knows its place and is prepared to look up to and take directions from its "betters." For this, it has been necessary to keep the people poor and ignorant – for as soon as they stop doffing their caps and start putting on their thinking-caps, the spell is broken and another dupe is lost to the establishment cause.

Fortunately, this process has been gathering momentum of late. There is rapidly growing dissatisfaction with the conduct of some members of the Royal Family. Three actual divorces and one pending have put paid to their role of the model family. Their unwillingness to pay taxes and their selfish behaviour in the pursuit of private pleasures in times of economic hardship have exposed them to the nation for what they are: a privileged group of unprofound people, unable to keep up the pretence of virtue.

Intense scrutiny by the media has revealed what we sceptics have always known: elevate a group of ordinary people to the rarefied atmosphere of super-stardom, surrounded by privilege and sycophancy, and you will eventually have a group of people out of touch with reality, unable to cope. Excesses and eccentricity become the norm. We now have an heir to

LAST WORD

by Tony Akkermans

the throne who has an expressed ambition to become a tampon.

Yet it is not so much the personalities involved that are the problem; it is the institution that is so wrong. I once had occasion to meet my future King, Willem Alexander of Orange, then aged 16, to help him with an essay on Anglo-Dutch trade. He seemed a pleasant and ordinary enough young man and I would wish him no harm. But that, of course, is precisely the point. Why should an ordinary, spotty-faced student of average ability suddenly be elevated to a status of near divinity and grotesque privilege, just because he happens to have been born into a family whose forebears long ago were particularly adept at waging war?

Cross-dressing

I have kept these long-held subversive views mostly to myself over the years, fearing myself in a tiny minority. But now I am glad to say a republican bandwagon is rolling in this country and it will take a bit of stopping. Since 1983 there has also been a republican magazine, entitled *Republic*, and not being aware of it, I was delighted to receive my review copy.

The Editor, Edgar Wilson, gives us a fascinating insight into the weird and wonderful ways of Church and State. The fact, for example, that cross-dressing in the Lords is actively encouraged. When recently the Bishop of Chester tried to sneak into the Upper House in his civvies, he was firmly turned away and told to put on his skirt! Apparently the Queen undergoes a miraculous conversion to Presbyterianism each time she sets foot on the road to Balmoral.

There are very interesting articles on religion and the monarchy, an idiot's guide to

disestablishmentarianism and a brilliant piece by Piers Brendon on the same topic. He opens with: "I do not advocate strangling the last king with the entrails of the last priest. But my message is equally simple. It is that Britain should become a secular republic." He goes on to tell us why: "Crown and mitre participated in pageants – coronations, marriages, funerals – to foster the loyalty of the multitude and, as Tom Paine said, to quiet them into paying taxes. The royal ecclesiastical Establishment was, in fact, the legitimate Mafia. It exercised power and grew fat on the proceeds. The monarchy feathered its nest and the Church of England concentrated on the temporal plums while neglecting the spiritual pie."

Brendon explains how more recently the C of E is bending over forwards to keep up the popularity stakes: "The Church has become doctrinally so latitudinarian that it is in danger of being a pale reflection of secular society. Dogma has become a dirty word. Anything is possible in the C of E, it seems even Christianity. But at the same time, the Establishment, royal and ecclesiastical, clings to its position like a colony of barnacles. It perpetuates official mystagogy. It glamorises worn-out tradition. It tries to sustain a Ruritanian pantomime of pomp which encourages national *folie de grandeur*. It seeks to unite the nation through a modern version of royal thaumaturgy and theocratic kingship."

Elsewhere, there is an interview with Colin Buchanan, the former Bishop of Aston, who has written a book advocating the separation of Church and State, and an article by Tony Jones, a life-long Anglican Christian, who believes that there is no theological basis for the monarch of the day being the head of the Anglican church and who argues that non-conformist denominations have come about because of the un-Christian policy and practices of the C of E over the years: "...not least because the clergy have seen it as their God-given purpose to ensure that those at the bottom of society stayed there and were properly respectful of those of a 'higher' station; with the monarch, of course, at the top of the pile."

On the whole, a very pleasing collection of seditious common sense which most free-thinkers will have no problems in endorsing. I think I will take out a subscription (£12.50); the issue I saw was Spring-Summer, 1995, which costs £3, post paid, from *Republic*, PO Box 2698, London W14 9TZ.