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The Freethinker in **Cuba**

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UP FRONT

with the Editor in Cuba

It's Socialismo o Muerte, Bill!

THE current crusade to starve Cuba into 51st-statehood will be no more successful than US attempts to gain permanent ownership of the country in 1848, 1854, 1897-1901, 1906, 1913, 1933, 1960...

Nor would another military invasion show much profit: there would be a "scorched earth" resistance which would leave little to exploit by Washington's dream-régime of a local dictator sponsored by *Yanqui* big business and the CIA. Ordinary folk scrawl *Socialismo o Muerte* on their garden-walls; Bill Clinton should understand that many of them mean it.

I believe these things after an entirely uninhibited tour of major cities and the countryside of Cuba. I spoke to citizens of all sorts, randomly chosen.

I found the people – particularly the children – looking healthy and surprisingly well-fed. (Life expectancy rose from 59 years in 1959 to 75.7 in 1992, and infant mortality fell from 60 per thousand live births in 1959 to 10.2 in 1992 – figures which compare well with those of any EU country, I was told when I found myself somewhat bizarrely caught up in a convention of environmental health officers at Santiago de Cuba).

Rationing allows everyone a reasonably fair share of whatever is going: as in wartime Britain, it is not much, but it is enough – just. Beef has been missing from the ration-card for the past three years, but pork, a little chicken, and certain other once unobtainable foods are now available from 200 government-organised free price food markets, in which private farmers and agricultural co-ops may sell their produce, after meeting a quota to the state. Milk is rationed to ensure that all children under the age of eight and the old and the sick receive a regular supply. Fruit such as mango and pineapple is almost given away.

There is a black market, but most foods are now legally available in the new dollar shops, which bring in hard currency and serve the burgeoning tourist industry – good news for the many Cubans who, working in or around tourism, are well tipped in dollars.

Shortage of oil

BUT the US ban on trade with Cuba, its effects grossly exacerbated by the loss of Soviet economic support as the USSR fell to pieces, has resulted in severe shortages of manufactured goods – from tractor spare-parts

to toothbrushes, from pens and pencils to soap and cement.

And I must say that the entire archipelago could do with a couple of coats of paint and a total rewiring job – not to mention a thorough going-over by an army of brickies to assess what more fundamental damage has been suffered by the fine colonial buildings while money and materials have been unavailable.

The trade and financial embargo includes clothing, raw materials, manufactured goods, foodstuffs and medicines. Americans are banned from travelling to the country: a group of 34 high school and university students who planned to visit Cuba recently received a letter from the US Treasury Department "threatening them with 10 years in jail and \$250,000 (£160,000) fines if they went ahead with the trip" (*The Independent*, June 22).

Washington has also been leaning on the countries of the former Soviet Union to stop trading in Cuban sugar. Big sugar dealers were forced to cut economic links with Cuba.

But such irritants pale alongside the dearth of oil. The end of the USSR led to a 60 per cent reduction in oil supplies to Cuba, and "Our Friends to the North," as the Cubans wryly describe the Americans, launched an offensive on oil-producing countries in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East to stop them selling to Cuba.

Lack of oil for the irrigation pumps, tractors and transport has slashed food production. Cubans had created a mechanised agriculture, but ploughing and harvesting today rely upon the machete and oxen, picturesque but ineffective by 1995 standards of production; from one end of the country to the other I saw modern equipment lying idle, rusting.

I lodged at hotels ranging from a homely bungalow complex, where lizards on the curtains were a bonus because they kept down the mosquitoes, to a 15-storey luxury affair in Santiago de Cuba which would not be out of place in Paris. What they all had in common was a proneness to power-failure because of the oil drought.

Some industrial enterprises have been closed altogether, and those workers laid-off have been receiving 60 per cent of their former wages, but there is little available for welfare payments. Professionals seem to have suffered the greatest loss of income and status, with doctors and engineers, who in more prosperous days might have been despatched to help out in Africa or South America, working as couriers, hotel porters, musicians or touts for tourist attractions.

Dare I say that the crisis has some acceptable side-effects? Demand for alternatives has created a greener, cleaner land. Production of biological pesticides and organic fertilisers is being pursued. There is no litter to speak of – because just about *everything* is used for something. And the bike is ubiquitous.

Sometimes adapted to carry mum, dad and the baby, it may also be fitted with a trailer to become a "lorry." Some buses in Havana have been adapted to carry bike and worker for part of the journey. Most bikes are assembled from Chinese parts – and especially hard workers get first call on them, a fact which inspired me to create a new Marxist principle: *He that does not work, neither shall he get a Chinese bike!*

For me, the activities of the Yellow Policeman sum-up the "Dunkirk spirit" of Cuba. Actually, he is not a policeman, but a civilian in a yellow suit who stands at the main crossroads at morning and evening rush-hour. Workers and soldiers, peasants and students, gather to announce their destinations to the Yellow Policeman. He steps into the road and stops the first empty car, lorry or van to rattle along. He asks where the driver is going, and on being told, say, Baracoa, he ushers aboard as many people who are bound for that town as the vehicle will accommodate. Nobody complains; nobody is coerced. It is just *done* as part of the campaign for survival.

The sight of crowds of people – some in business suits, some in jeans and sweatshirts, some in uniform – careering along a rutted highway in the back of a truck is one of the great cultural shocks which Cuba offers. The point is, though, that it works – and there is something intrinsically *ethical* about it. I wince to imagine the reaction of the droves of one-person-one-car travellers who daily rage through our cities, were they invited to show similar community spirit!

Another pleasant surprise is the apparent total equality between blacks and whites: I was told that it is the *fashion* nowadays to have a sweetheart from a different racial group to your own.

I felt safer walking around Havana than I did in parts of Leeds: Fidel has naughtily allowed his *lumpens* and his crooks, as well as genuine political opponents of the government, to "escape" to the USA.

But always we must return to the enervating impact of Cuba's energy crisis. In 1989, Cuba was importing 13 million tonnes of oil from the former Soviet Union; by 1992 it was getting just six million tons – and paying for it at four times the pre-Yeltsin rate.

Cuba has no coal, gas or nuclear power (plans for a nuclear power plant were dropped after Chernobyl, a militiaman told me matter-of-factly). Its sole energy source is oil. Abandoned industrial and building projects scar the superbly green and fertile countryside, which from a distance looks curiously olde English – until closer inspection reveals orange groves rather than apple orchards, acres of pineapple plants which you thought

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with the Editor in Cuba

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were turnip fields, great royal palms where the oak and the ash should be, all lush under a blue Home Counties sky.

Nuns with Party cards

THE shortages and general frustrations of life have prompted a return to religion among a small part of the population. I was assured by a woman doctor that Catholic priests in the country areas are once again quietly, insidiously, influencing the peasantry to have no truck with contraception, abortion and divorce.

And although the pious are known to have organised armed resistance against the Revolution during the Bay of Pigs invasion,

Fidel appears to have patched things up with the Church, arguing that this is necessary to the creation of national unity in the face of economic and political assault from the North. There are priests and nuns who carry Communist Party cards!

Fidel described the party in a 1985 talk with the Brazilian Dominican Frei Betto as "...a confessional party to the extent that it's an atheist party that denies the existence of God." He must be aware of the Church's potential for bloody mischief and, it seems, in the current "special period" he prefers to have the priests inside the tent peeing out rather than outside peeing in. One must hope that he doesn't live to regret it. Getting into bed with the Catholic Church is like snuggling up to a big, brown bear. It is all warm and cuddly...until the bear gets peckish.

And, yes, I have heard of "Liberation Theology," but my view is that of the theologian-turned-atheist Dr Joachim Kahl who, in *The Misery of Christianity*, observes: "It is true that, in Latin America, there are members of the Catholic Church, priests, who have joined the side of the exploited masses. But in doing so they are not primarily motivated by a burning desire to be politically at one with those who are striving towards the social emancipation of the 'damned of the earth.' They are aiming, in a spirit of opportunism, to keep the people faithful to the Catholic religion they have inherited. If a socialist revolution seemed inevitable, the Church would at least side with the victorious power and do everything to prevent the new society from moving towards atheism."

As a traditional enemy of women, the Church opposed the Cuban Revolution at least in part because, as it progressed, it brought them literacy and education, employment, equal pay, nursery care for working mothers and straightforward divorce laws. Within the health service, contraception and family planning advice are provided, and abortion is readily available. Changes in women's lives helped to halve the birth rate: now the average number of children per female is a UK-comparable 1.82. Part of the programme of sex education for young people confronts prejudices about homosexuality, discussing it as a valid expression of love and sexuality.

One wonders if the Church, as partner of the Government, will be allowed to curtail such activity.

I saw numbers of people gathering at churches, and economic hardship is propelling the desperately ignorant towards that mixture of Catholicism and Voodoo which is endemic to the Caribbean area. At the peak of a mountain in Holguín, there is a house-high cross. It has been there for generations – and now at its base is a magical shrine into which people who desire babies stuff booties and

those seeking spiritual healing put a handkerchief which has been used by the afflicted person. On the paved area around the Christian totem I found two magic circles, complete with the arcane symbols of European occultism.

In a vast, marble necropolis at Havana, I saw the tomb of Amelia Goyri de Adot, who, although she has been dead for 94 years, is cleverly able to grant the wishes of believers who place a supplication before her. Soldiers in search of promotion cast chevrons on her tomb; students seeking degree success lay strips of parchment. The faithful have little stones engraved with their thanks for favours granted.

For proof that religion really is the opium of the people, come to sunny Cuba!

And, as always, hand-in-hand with Christianity as a means of escape from hardship is prostitution. Around the tourist hotels there are now a number of working-girls. I saw no actual beggars – the rationing system provides some food for everyone and there are no homeless people. However, there are squads of young hustlers who solicit dollars, but who are happy to receive instead a Bic pen and the opportunity to use their English. Mostly robust school-truants who fade when the tourism police arrive, they are not so persistent or so miserable as the youngsters who accost travellers around Kings Cross.

Possible invasion

ANOTHER US-backed invasion is still regarded as a *possibility*. Senator Jesse Helms, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, warned in April: "I don't care if Fidel leaves horizontally or vertically, but he's leaving." Helms has introduced a Bill to extend the US trade embargo to penalise international institutions, companies and individuals from third countries who gave aid to, or did business in, Cuba.

The EC and Canada have called for Presidential veto of the Helms Bill, with the Europeans warning of "legal chaos" and "retaliation" if it becomes law. The Bill would make citizens of other countries subject to US law. Directors of Unilever, which has launched a joint venture in Cuba, would be refused visas for the US! The IMF, World Bank and the UN aid organisations would suffer reduction in US backing if they gave any aid to Cuba.

Helms, 73, has supported politicians linked with death squads in El Salvador and the Nicaraguan Contras; he is a homophobe and a spokesman for the US tobacco industry. Why are people like him so keen to boost an

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UP FRONT

with the Editor in Cuba

From Page 115

embargo which has been condemned by the UN General Assembly...by 23 heads of Latin American governments...by 13 members of the Caribbean community?

There is a long-term desire for US ownership of Cuba. When the US intervened in Cuba towards the end of its war of independence against Spain in 1901, the commander of the US forces, General Wood, wrote to Theodore Roosevelt: "With the control which we now have over Cuba...combined with other sugar producing lands which we now own, we shall soon practically control the sugar destiny of the world...I believe Cuba to be a most desirable acquisition for the United States. She is easily worth any two of the Southern States, probably any three with the exclusion of Texas."

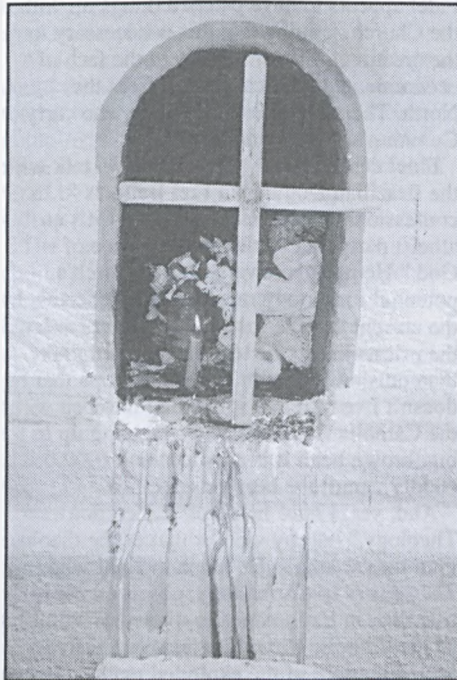
And the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959 ended a situation in which more than half of Cuba's most productive land was foreign-owned and 200,000 peasant families had no holdings. By 1926, sugar production in US-owned mills had increased to 63 per cent of Cuba's total. Thirty years later, US capital accounted for 90 per cent of investment in the telephone and electrical services and half of the railways. Most banking and the main industries belonged to US capital. There were 300 brothels, 700 bars and casinos and a prostitute population of 15,000 in Havana – all good little earners for US interests.

And then – the Fidel Revolution, just 90 miles from Florida, and all this is swept away. The US government has never forgiven Cuba its appropriation of all this "American" wealth...and for setting a bad example to the rest of South America.

On April 17, 1961, President Kennedy took time out from Ms Monroe's embraces to send more than 1,400 Cuban exiles, backed by B26 bombers, to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. Today, the Bay is an idyllic spot for sun-seekers, but it was there that I spoke to young Cubans, some of whom had seen military service in Angola, who left me in no doubt that the *Socialismo o Muerte* slogan is taken very seriously.

Recalling that within three days the invaders had been defeated by thousands of armed Cuban volunteers (of the 1,400 attackers, 114 were killed and 1,189 were captured), a taximan-cum-missile-specialist told me that 80 per cent of those over the age of 16 (including two million women) train with the volunteer militia (I met a 63-year-old who still turns out for monthly military exercises).

Wondering what kind of "dictatorship" dares to arm its people to such an extent, I saw that a US invasion could succeed only by using weapons which would eradicate not only the goose of "Communism" but also the golden egg of potential profit. Hence the con-



● A Christian-cum-pagan shrine at Holguin: Cuba's opium of the people?

tinuing attempts to destroy Fidel by economic means.

Ignoring blockade

IT is not all bad news, even on the economic front. More countries are simply ignoring the US blockade. Commercial relations now involve more than 2,500 foreign firms from 109 countries. In 1994, 28 countries invested capital totalling \$1.5 billion dollars in Cuba, with Canada, Mexico and Spain setting the pace; with the economy now open to foreign investment, there are more than 600 foreign enterprises in the country.

Tourism is the big growth area: just before I arrived there was a convention at which 1,400 deals were struck by 1,000 tourism professionals from 50 countries.

Certainly the country has much to offer visitors: uncluttered beaches...warm oceans...friendly and genuinely curious people...streets full of colour and music (there is music, live *salsa*, everywhere – in cafés and hotels, along every street in the larger centres). Facilities for golf and water-sports are being developed apace. You want dolphins...sea-lions...coral reefs with multi-coloured fish you can swim with? Cuba's the place. The Hemingway industry *pulsates*.

I met tourists from Canada, Holland, Italy, Germany, France and – whisper it not to

Senator Helms – from the USA (they travel via Canada or Mexico; the Cubans keep the secret by not stamping US passports). In 1994, visitors spent \$850 million, a figure which will rise to \$1,000 million this year.

Awful lot of Coke!

SOME US business types resent losing out to international competitors on a considerable market – all those visitors would drink an awful lot of Coke, smoke an awful lot of Camels – and Cuba has many natural resources (sugar, fruit, tobacco, nickel and wall-to-wall sunshine spring to mind) which could make the enterprising a lot of money.

US conditions for ending the blockade include Fidel's removal, a wholesale privatisation of the Cuban economy and the return of so-called US assets. But that impossible package could be a mere hangover from the Reagan régime. Clinton could veto the Helms Bill, under pressure from those who want to do business with Cuba: at a press conference on April 12, he said of the Helms proposals "I know of no reason why we need further action."

Having watched on CNN as Fidel Castro and Clinton effectively "negotiated" through a TV reporter, I feel that progress could be made, given a face-saving formula. Will Fidel agree on some sort of "compensation," payable over a long period, for US losses in the Revolution? And will Clinton, selling this to the Americans as a victory, also get them to accept a lifting of the blockade as an act of "Christian charity" or some such nonsense?

But for now there are grave shortages. Books and learned journals on all subjects and in any language are sought. So, ironically, in a country world-renowned for its production of medicinal drugs, are medications of all types. I spoke with a GP who had run out of antibiotics that very afternoon – and who grabbed our proffered bottle of 90 Boots' paracetamol tablets as though they had been gold. Work-clothes and footwear have been requested by the Cuban equivalent of the TUC.

If you decide on a Cuban holiday, take along ballpoint-pens, pencils, toothbrushes, clothes-pegs, needles, soap and bandages for random distribution. Anyone who can donate goods now may contact the Cuba Solidarity Campaign at 129 Seven Sisters Road, London N7 7QG.

For the future, I came home convinced that most Cubans will defend their Revolution, come what may. I travelled with an Essex businessman who, after three days in Cuba, said to me: "We may not like this sort of society, but it seems to work for *them*."

Christian togetherness prompted by panic

by Barbara Smoker

THE Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomeos I – the titular head of the Orthodox Church, world-wide – visited the Vatican at the end of June, at the invitation of the Pope.

At the Mass which John Paul celebrated in St Peter's on the Feast of Sts Peter and Paul (June 29), both religious leaders preached from the high altar and both recited in Greek the Nicene Creed. They then exchanged the kiss of peace, to great applause from the congregation, and appeared together to a wider audience, in an historic show of unity and photo-opportunity, on the famous central balcony of St Peter's – the Pope giving his blessing in Latin, and the Patriarch his in Greek. The same day, in an historic attempt to end the breach between their churches by the end of the millennium, they signed a joint declaration that called for collaboration between their followers and for further efforts to reinterpret and reformulate the positions which have hitherto divided them.

Dating from 1054, the East-West schism between Orthodox and Catholic has, of course, lasted more than twice as long as the South-North divide between Catholic and Protestant, and may therefore be thought the more difficult to patch up. But this move by the Pope is made at a time when hopes of bringing the Anglican and other Protestant churches within the Roman fold (boosted a few years ago when Canterbury agreed in principle to accept the Pope as head of the Anglican churches, in return for certain doctrinal compromises on the other side – and seemingly quite close at that time) have been dashed by the widespread ordination of women priests, which is as repugnant to the present Pope as it is to most Orthodox prelates.

In any case, the Pope's Polish background has always tended to make a possible rapprochement with Orthodoxy a dream closer to his heart than union with Protestantism, and he is now openly looking mainly towards Eastern rather than Western Europe for the greatest event of his Pontificate – an important step towards Christian unification, destined to highlight the reign of John Paul II in the history books and leave a significant Wojtylan stamp on the future of Christianity.

He is now obviously feeling his age, and has actually said that as he does not expect to live to see the year 2000, he is, for that personal reason, particularly eager to accelerate moves to bridge the chasm between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. These proposed moves, which were announced in the Vatican at the beginning of May this year by Cardinal Silvestrini when launching the Pope's new Apostolic Letter on Orthodoxy, *Oriente lumen*, include such initiatives as instituting chairs at Catholic universities for Orthodox professors, experience-sharing by monks of both faiths, and parish twinning.

It is generally agreed that the region of greatest intransigence in the rift between the Vatican and the Orthodox authorities is the former Soviet Union and its satellites, where a hardening of old religious hatreds immediately followed the collapse of Communism.

In Russia itself, the post-Communist ideological vacuum has led to a proselytising race between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The Patriarch of Moscow, Alexi II, making no attempt to conceal his irritation at what he has called Catholic "poaching" on Orthodox territory, has lobbied the Russian government for laws to restrict it.

In *Oriente lumen*, the Pope seeks to repair the damage done by these over-zealous Catholic evangelists. Not only does he specifically warn them to lay off, but also he urges them to participate in inter-faith projects and give positive aid to Orthodoxy's efforts to "re-Christianise" a long-time atheist society – efforts which, he says, "are all the more worthy of merit considering their precarious resources." It is thought that the Vatican is even planning to give financial assistance to the Russian programme, as a sweetener to Alexi and his followers.

caused the Orthodox schism in the first instance have been resolved in the past few decades, since the Second Vatican Council.

At Pentecost – only a few days later, and only one month after the Ukrainian junketings – there followed the celebration of Norway's 1,000th anniversary of its conversion to Christianity. Bartholomeos, in his official speech in Norway, lamented the "tragic division" between the Eastern and Western Churches, while declaring himself delighted with the progress of ecumenical dialogue.

At the same time, the sacred jollifications in Norway provided the opportunity for pally conversations between him and Cardinal Edward Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, as part of the preparation for the Patriarch's imminent visit to Rome.

The whole phenomenon of top-level ecumenism is a panic response to the common enemy of disbelief and to the widespread rejection of ecclesiastical authority. It was this that gave rise, 30-odd years ago, to the historic Second Vatican Council's far-reaching ecumenical reforms, passed in the teeth of blind traditionalists within the Church, to paper over the earlier schisms within Christianity, and even to form an extended religious family with the non-Christian religions of Judaism and Islam. Any belief must be better than none.

As for John Paul himself, he seems to have become primarily a writer – though not, of course, going so far as to give up his day job of being Pope. Always prolific with his pen, he now seems to be writing at breakneck speed, to beat his literal predicted dead-line.

Not only were *Oriente lumen* and *Ut unum sint* both published in the month of May, but also the collected Polish poems of his youth, *The Place Within*, appeared just a few weeks later in an English translation, and, rivalling the sales of the autobiography of Mother Teresa, immediately became a best-seller – though more, one suspects, for the Pope than for the Poet. And now, in mid-July, another of his Apostolic Letters is published – this time, a letter of 17 pages, uniquely addressed to women. And in very flattering terms, too.

In it he actually praises the pioneer feminists, and insists that "there is an urgent need to achieve *real equality* in every area" – though, needless to say, "every area" does not, somehow, include the area of the Catholic priesthood.

That very fact, however, will facilitate his continued urgent wooing of the other top drag-queen, Patriarch Bartholomeos I of Constantinople.

Make Humanism matter through political channels

MAKING Humanism Matter is the title of a document recently approved by the British Humanist Association, as a strategic plan to cover the period until 1999. However admirable the intention, and however efficient the administration, I do not think the objective will be achieved unless the nature of the Humanist message is changed.

The advance of secularisation and the diminution of active support for the churches is not currently paralleled by an advance of Humanism. Membership is not enlarging *ποροτα*, nor is the public exposure of Humanist thought. And the Government shows no sign of reflecting in public policy the implications of current scepticism. There are well-founded reasons for all this and they imply that the impact of Humanism will not be noticeably increased by doing more energetically what we are already doing.

Modern Humanism has been seen, particularly by non-Humanists, almost entirely as a refutation of religion. However, there is a considerable gulf between the erosion of religious belief and the application of a Humanist approach. The scepticism about religion which has become widespread owes only a limited amount to Humanist influence and has proved compatible with Humanism being a tiny and almost disregarded sect.

As personal psychological crutches, religious dogmas are both more readily grasped and more reassuring than Humanism. It is thus much easier to dispute them than to replace them, especially as many of those who have welcomed the undermining of religion have been more concerned to escape its oppressions than to fill any gap its erosion might leave.

In any case, we cannot copy religious techniques as a means of securing members and winning influence. Humanism does not lend itself to the repetitive public rituals which do so much to reinforce the religious message and group solidarity around it. We can have group meetings and we do. But one can't imagine these ever having the broad-based, cheerfully (or in some cases mournfully) mindless appeal of Moody and Sankey hymns! On the present basis there is no prospect of Humanists acquiring influence simply through the scale of their membership and the range of their ancillary activities. And it was through that membership and the influence it gave in the past, that the churches built a wide-ranging tranche of social activities which continue to give them public support, even when many of those participating in the activities are devoid of religious convictions.

Against that background, the advance of sec-

by Jim Ross

ularism, and with it the relaxing of religious sanctions, may work against rather than for Humanism. When the Churches were strong enough to oppress, those who opposed religion had a powerful incentive to be active in their opposition and to join with others of like mind for the purpose. Now that few have anything to fear from being irreligious, even if they openly carry it to the point of blasphemy, there is a general feeling that there isn't much of importance left to fight for in this field.

The stagnation, or even decline, of positive and organised Humanism is, therefore, a real possibility, and there are good reasons for thinking the movement to be currently in the doldrums. Granted the demand for our services in advising on, or officiating at, personal ceremonies is increasing. Granted that, if we can meet the demand, some spread of awareness of Humanism will take place. But awareness from this source is likely to be passive rather than passionate and to bring us only limited active support. Even if the BHA and the Humanist Society of Scotland, who are making comparable plans, achieve the recruitment targets they have set themselves for the next five years, which is by no means certain, this will make little new impact unless the nature of the message going out from Humanist organisations is changed.

There may be a question as to what we mean by "making Humanism happen." There is a comfort zone which we may be content to occupy; running our present organisations in roughly our present way; maintaining our present or a modestly increased membership; fuming in our own magazines about the follies and privileges of religion; rejoicing over an occasional marginal media indulgence in our direction; but in general operating the Humanist organisations primarily as a club for those who want such a thing.

There is nothing discreditable in this but does it constitute "making Humanism happen"? I am taking the phrase to imply creation of a social climate in which Humanism has a permeating effect comparable to that which religion used to have. Our present methods will not achieve that no matter how often Nicolas Walter wins the votes as well as the debates at the Oxbridge Unions. We need to break out of the religious corral and present Humanism as something far more comprehensive, and more relevant to the man in the street, than an antidote and alternative to religion.

The recognised means by which small, well-organised and clear-thinking groups can offset lack of numbers, lack of material resources and

lack of an established and accepted presence in society lie in the effective exploitation of political channels. If we seek to transform the impact of Humanism on society, this is the direction in which additional effort should primarily be channelled. There should be no inherent difficulty. Humanism is an approach to the analysis and organisation of life on this earth and, as such, sits more naturally in the context of political than religious thought, in the context of political parties than in that of religious denominations.

This is not to say that, at this juncture Humanists should either give their support to a particular existing political party or try to form a new one, though either of these courses might prove appropriate eventually. The need is to articulate a message which shows Humanism as relevant to the structure and conduct of politics. I believe this can be done and I suggest that our priority in producing new publications should, until further notice, be directed to this end. As we have hardly attempted such a thing hitherto, no doubt it will initially be the cause of much controversy within the movement. That may be no bad thing. We need some new controversies. But if the job can be done, it will open the way to our seeking public impact around topics likely to evoke much more public interest than those in which our current efforts are concentrated.

While this task is undertaken, we ought to exploit past and present activities in the political sphere persistently, even if they do not appear likely to yield immediate results. But we should aim to engage directly with political channels at as high a level as can be contrived. In a sense, we are trying to explore political channels when our members write to the newspapers. My observation, however, as a practitioner of government in my past professional life and a political activist in retirement, is that letters in the Press rarely have any impact (except on other keen writers to the Press) unless they are associated with some extraordinary initiative or emanate from persons nationally recognised as Very Important.

It happens that, in the past year, the Humanist Society of Scotland, with the moral support of the BHA, has dragged out of the Prime Minister's Office a curious and constitutionally vulnerable statement in the context of church disestablishment and religious education. It is impossible to predict what could be made of this in further correspondence, but nothing can be lost by continuing it and the united authority of all the British Humanist organisations should be put behind it and whatever publicity can be generated in the context of it.

● Jim Ross is a Perth-based Humanist

Ms GRUNDY UNDER FIRE

AVEDON CAROL is an active member of the feminist movement, the objects of which are to give women social and economic equality with men and to give women the same measure of control over their lives as men. She is also a founding member of the Feminists Against Censorship organisation, and in this book she aims to set out the arguments vindicating her vigorous opposition to the censorship of pornography.

She contends that censorship of pornography gives enormous and dangerous powers to the State. For her, laws suppressing freedom of discussion serve only to enable the Government to distract attention from legitimate grievances and to silence dissenting voices. So, she says, the Government is happy to attribute crime to video nasties and hard pornography rather than accept that unemployment and social injustice are the major cause.

Avedon Carol sees the censorship of pornography as a continuation and endorsement of the traditional repression of feminism conducted over past centuries by religious moralists. She regards anti-pornography campaigners from the religious Right as the perennial foes of feminism. She wishes women to be free to explore their sexuality and to question their role in society, and she considers censorship of pornography a subtle attempt to frustrate the feminist movement and keep women in subordination to men.

She believes strongly that neither soft pornography nor hard causes sex crimes such as rape or sex violence. She questions the reliability of the research which has been carried out to test this theory. She rejects it as being too preoccupied with laboratory experiments and as having little or no relation to behaviour outside the laboratory. She considers the employment of university students as subjects in this research as unsatisfactory and leading to bias. Paradoxically, she suggests that the censorship of pornography may itself be a cause of sexual violence in that it prevents men from resolving their difficulties with sex. "Violent sex offenders," she writes, "are most often men who as boys had been punished for sexual expression and - disproportionately - punished for looking at pornography, although they see more of it (and perhaps less of it) than other boys. They have learned that there was something wrong with sexually expressive women. Women who seem to be attractive or sexually active are 'asking for' violent sexual assault and 'deserve' to be raped."

The significance for Humanists of this impassioned book is difficult to determine. I suppose most Humanists and certainly female Humanists will support the feminist

Nudes, Prudes and Attitudes: Pornography and Censorship by Avedon Carol. New Clarion Press, Cheltenham. ISBN 1 873797 133. £11.95.

Review: **LESLIE JAMES**

movement. But the Humanist attitude to pornography may be somewhat uncertain. Humanists would agree, however, that the Church has long opposed the dissemination of knowledge of sex among people or the recognition that there can be joy in sex quite apart from the business of procreation. Happily today, a knowledge of sex is freely available to all.

As regards the possibility of an abuse of power by the State, I would think it unlikely, in the light of previous attempts to censor literature (for example, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) that Parliament would seek to restrict the publication of soft pornography. The case against truly vicious hard pornography involving masochism or child abuse is more controversial. Parents are rightly anxious to protect their children from hard pornography, and its censorship would seem to support them, but Avedon Carol claims that harm to children has not been established and she opposes censorship.

Does the censorship of pornography discourage feminist discussion of sexuality or restrict women in the control of their own

lives? I would accept Avedon Carol's point that pornography is essentially a man's pre-occupation and is marketed towards men. But she accepts that men seem more disposed to fantasise about sex. Could this not be a reflection of man's different biological nature? Do women really need pornography to promote their interest in sexuality and to confirm their independence of men? It has been said that soft porn may help some young men who have psychological difficulties in their sexual relations. Perhaps some young women might also be helped. Are there not now some soft porn magazines marketed towards women?

For myself, I am inclined to take the view that soft porn probably does little harm and perhaps some good, but that hard pornography is potentially dangerous and corrupting and justifies censorship. I believe that a not insignificant proportion of the population is disposed to mental defects of one kind or another, and that, insofar as all our thought processes are influenced by our environment, hard porn may have a destabilising effect on those who suffer from such defects.

Since it is only hard porn which is attracting government attention and censorship, there seems to be little immediate danger to the feminist movement, but Avedon Carol's book serves as a timely warning against any further repressive measures.

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

Banish our holiday gloom

THERE is no excuse for allowing the fund total to fall so dramatically at holiday time. The bills do not stop coming in - and the price of newsprint does not halt its mad spiral - just because the sun is shining. Nor do the idiocies and cruelties of the superstitionists abate with the summer - as a browse through this issue of *The Freethinker* will demonstrate.

Atheists, Freethinkers, Secularists, Rationalists, Humanists...we simply can't cope without your donations, despite all the voluntary effort which goes into producing the journal. Rush cheques and POs to: G W Foote and Company, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. And then enjoy your holiday.

Many thanks to: H T Butterworth, J Gibson, F Hiorth, R W Simmonds and S Teasdale, £2 each; E K Beeson, M Butterworth, J F Claydon, A C Fonseca, W Grahamslaw, W H Grey, A Hayes, F M Holmes, R Hopkins, R Hopkins, R H

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How Church fakers

AN ITALIAN scientist has shown how cynical – if sophisticated – chemical trickery can be applied to create the “weeping Madonnas” which are used by the Church to keep artless Roman Catholics in thrall to superstition.

He is Dr Luigi Garlaschelli, a research scientist at the University of Pavia's Department of Organic Chemistry, who has even manufactured his own copiously lachrymose icon of the BVM.

Dr Garlaschelli says: “In the first few months of this year, Italy has been inundated with peculiar ‘miracles’: a number of statues and icons of the Blessed Virgin Mary have reportedly wept tears of blood.

“The actual flow of tears has never been recorded, although many believers, having seen icons just badly smeared with blood, swear that they have really witnessed them weeping. (The unreliability of witnesses in highly emotional situations is well known to psychology).

“Sceptics claim that a simpler explanation for these paranormal religious phenomena might be put down to ‘pious hoaxes,’ generated by an ill-intentioned faith, or even tricks (on April 1 a statue of Lenin was also found weeping!). Extensive media coverage of these stories very likely helped to spread the phenomenon.”

In the specialist journal *Chemistry in Britain* (July, 1995, Vol 31 No 7), Dr Garlaschelli reveals: “People often ask chemists how they would make a statue weep, sometimes suggesting the possible use of deliquescent, hygroscopic or other chemical compounds [those which dissolve in, or absorb, water from the air – PB].

“Thus, while realising that much cruder methods can be used (and have indeed been used in the many documented cases of exposed trickery) to make a statue ‘weep,’ I wondered how I could produce a statue from which tears seemingly materialised out of the blue.

“As a possible solution to this challenging task, I propose a very simple technique which does not require holes near

by Peter Brearey

the eyelids, nor mechanical, electronic (or even chemical!) gimmicks.

“What is needed is a hollow statue made of a porous material, such as plaster or ceramic. The icon must be glazed or painted with some sort of impermeable coating. If the statue is then filled up with a liquid, the porous material will absorb it, but the glazing will stop it from flowing out.

“If the glazing, however, is imperceptibly scratched away on or around the eyes, tear-like drops will leak out, as if materialising from thin air. If the cavity behind the eyes is small enough, once all the liquid has dripped out there are virtually no traces left in the icon.

“When I put it to the test, this trick proved to be very satisfactory, baffling all onlookers. I would welcome other sensible suggestions for better effects.”

Dr Garlaschelli notes that, among “weeping Madonna” miracles, the only one officially accepted by the Catholic Church happened in Syracuse (Sicily) in 1953. “This is the best documented case so far, with many eye-witnesses to an actual case of weeping, and even a couple of amateur films showing watery tears appearing on the face out of the blue,” he says.

Vacuous

This particular mass-produced plaster-of-Paris plaque wept from August 29 to September 1 – on the wall above the marital bed of a Communist worker and his wife. The Catholic writer Marina Warner says in her study of the cult of the BVM, *Alone of All Her Sex*: “It is a vacuous artefact that shows Mary proffering her burning, immaculate heart, crowned with fire. Tears welled in her eyes, and soon crowds were flocking to the tiny house, miracles were acclaimed, the tears examined by scientists and pronounced human. The plaque – *La Madonnina delle Lacrime* – now hangs aloft in a vast underground garage of a shrine in Syracuse, the focus of a flourishing cult.

“The walls of the ramps that lead down into the church – to enable the crippled to

enter – are festooned with the grisly trophies seen in all wonder-working shrines: braces, crutches, artificial limbs, surgical collars as well as lurid snapshots of wounds, sores, and growths. On the altar, in an ugly and costly reliquary, a ton wool soaked in the tears the Virgin shed is carefully preserved. The faithful can take away tiny pieces of other objects of wool that has touched the Madonna’s ducts.”

Sadly for the credulous, however, Dr Garlaschelli has turned the spotlight of science on Syracuse: “A careful examination of an exact copy of this *bas relief* (from the same manufacturer as the

THE GREEN

THE essence of the Green is the claim that the capacity of the Earth to continue to provide a viable home for our species is finite and that the planet has only a limited ability to withstand the plundering and pollution to which we subject it.

We may, of course, assume either that we have already messed up the planet irrecoverably or that we are determined to do so and that nothing can be done to stop our rake's progress down the riuin.

Assuming that we are neither blind mists nor impotent fatalists, we must pose that political action – be it via ideologically Green parties or via cross-party perhaps single-issue, pressure groups – is required. We do not know how much is left to us to take effective action, but we have to make a nice guess that it is not so short as to precipitate scaring panic but not so long as to encourage complacency.

There are two special points in Green politics: (1) that it ought to overcome other sorts of politics and (2) it indeed has to be if it is not to be self-defeating futility, based upon demonstrable and probability as to fact.

The overriding of other sorts of politics arises from the simple fact that it is the only use whatever for people to adopt a system about socialism, liberty, justice, the identity of the nation, our duties to one another and to other species, the promotion of peace and so on...it is of no use whatever

... blood from a stone

...however, proved it to be made of
...ing shod plaster, and to possess a cavity
...bs. sup... the face..."

Garlaschelli told the *Independent on Sunday* (July 9) that the original
...onna of Syracuse is kept behind a
...partition and he is unable to inspect
...azing for himself: "I think permis-
...on't be granted to examine it.
...y of these relics are not allowed to
...amined."

...ever, course, Syracuse is only one of
...tlight... places where the Virgin has wept in
...il exam... memory. Twenty-three years ago, a
...s relat... was touring the USA with a weep-
...s the... statue of the Virgin – carved, he

insisted, according to the instructions of Lucia, the remaining survivor of the three children who saw Mary at Fatima in 1917. In 1975, as the Vietcong chased the Americans out of Saigon, the city's Catholics said the Virgin's statue in the cathedral wept.

And Italy in particular has been going through a craze of weeping Madonna sightings. Last year there were only two or three, but this has risen to more than a dozen in the first few months of this year, Steve Connor, Science Correspondent of the *Independent on Sunday*, reports.

One of the most famous is at Civitavecchia, near Rome, which sheds

tears of "blood."

Dr Garlaschelli believes the bloody tears are more a fashion statement than true miracles: "Nowadays Madonnas weep blood. In my opinion, this is because we now have colour TV."

He has more recently turned his attention to several officially accepted sightings of "bloodied hosts" – red spots which appear on the wafers used in Communion.

He thinks this phenomenon is caused by the microbe *Serratia marcescens* which lives on starch and exudes a bright red, jelly-like pigment.

... THE HUMANIST AND THE 'SPIRITUAL'

...The Green Party's Autumn conference will debate an attempt to commit the Party to
...a social system there spirituality is recognised and respected." ERIC STOCKTON has
...other ideas...

...adopt such precepts if we are not going
...t it. ... surviving to promote and practise

...for this reason that Green parties
...stick firmly to ideological minimal-
...Caring for our survival, rather than
...to our destruction, is not helped
...adopting divisive ideologies and using
...rganisations to further them.

...is perfectly legitimate for Green per-
...to sustain their hopes, to quiet their
...by adopting a dualist model – the
...that there is a "spiritual dimen-
...somehow utterly distinct from, but
...eriously intertwined with, our mater-
...ing. If people like to think that way
...why shouldn't they?

Evolved

...most Humanists, I suppose, tend to
...new dualism and to see the human per-
...in a simpler – one might say "holistic"
...According to this view – which is one
...perhaps not articulated as often as
...ould be – the human person is a par-
...rior kind of impermanent matter/ener-
...system in a state of persistent change
...having a range of observable func-
...from the automatic "bodily" func-
...of respiration, digestion and the like

to the "higher" functions of giving and receiving affection, appreciating "values" and achieving "creativity." These "higher" things are not best described as "spiritual" because they do not depend upon dualism being "true" – they do not depend upon our having a distinct spiritual dimension. They can as well be described as functions, among many and various others, of the highly evolved matter/energy package identifiable as the human person.

It seems to me to be very unfortunate that the Green Party (of England Wales and Northern Ireland) has appeared to endorse the idea that philosophical dualism is essential to the Green view. I claim that it is not and I shall do my best to prevent the (separate) Scottish Green Party from taking a similar step. I can only applaud the action (reported in the April issue of *The Freethinker*) by Colin Mills in trying to steer the English Greens clear of this fogbound sandbank.

If "spirituality" is a valid option for Green individuals, but a divisive burden for the Party as a whole, then it must be said that empirical science is in exactly the opposite case.

It is a matter of opinion that any given policy is, or is not, democratic, socialist, liberal, patriotic or whatever. These any-

thing but minimalist ideologies are infinitely flexible; we only have to consider the connotations of the word *socialism*, which has been taken to mean anything from the tyranny of J V Stalin, to the nationalist rabble-rousing of A Hitler to the beaming bright-eyed "Tony will fix it" ethos of our possible future government.

Green policies, to be actually Green as distinct from just feeling Green, have to be based on the ascertainable facts of *what impact does this proposed step have upon the viability of the planet as our human home?* In many instances the requisite facts will prove to be elusive but, in so far as we can ascertain them we are in a position to be truly Green; if we can't – we're not.

Scepticism

Humanists, with their habit of scepticism and their respect for science, are uniquely placed to help keep the Green organisations from wandering off into ideological dead-ends and, while we are about it, a cool look at some Humanist statements might not come amiss.

Good luck to Colin Mills and his Green Humanism Working Group. We have to curb the "cosier than thou" tendency in both Green and Humanist circles.

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: 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, September 3, 5.30pm for 6pm. David Morris: *The Top Culture: Humanism*.

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. New season of meetings opens on September 12 at Wendover with an address by Robert Ashby, Executive Director of the British Humanist Association.

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, August 21, 7.30pm: Public meeting: *Is There Too Much TV Violence?* 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. August 11: Social and discussion.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information and programme of meetings from NIBarnes, 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: Details: 0113 2585748.

Leicester Secular Society: Details from the Secretary, Lyn Hurst, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester

LE1 1WB (telephone 0116 2622250).

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. 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, September 6, 8pm: Peter Brearey, Editor of *The Freethinker: Cuba As I Saw It*. Details of Society 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.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Meetings 7.30pm for 8pm. Wednesday, September 13: Alex Lea: *The Logic of Vegetarianism*.

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. 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, on 01903 239823.

Humanist Anthology: Attractively produced, updated edition of Margaret Knight's fascinating work, revised by Jim Herrick with a preface by Edward Blighen.

Published by the 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: Former Editor of *The Freethinker* William McLroy's new pamphlet is now 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 in *The Freethinker*: "...an enlightening read."

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DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Thought for food

We recommend that all meat offered for sale which derives from animals slaughtered by religious methods which do not use pre-slaughter stunning should be clearly labelled.

THIS statement by Sir Simon Gourlay, Chairman of the National Farmers' Union, echoes demands made by Secularists at least a decade ago. Still, better late than never.

The NFU may not go so far as those Secularist and animal welfare groups which advocate abolition of religious slaughter. But it is significant that an organisation representing a section of society not noted for radical, or even unconventional views, should make a public, if limited, declaration on this issue.

Even some carnivores who prefer to forget what goes on in all abattoirs would draw the line at eating meat from an animal that was fully conscious when its throat was cut. But they inadvertently do so, because a large proportion of such meat is unidentified when it goes on sale to the public.

The motive for such deception is clearly economic. The Farm Animal Welfare Council

has estimated that only a third of the weight of an animal slaughtered by the Jewish method is distributed through Kosher shops. Jews do not eat the hindquarters of an animal unless it has undergone a process which involves removal of veins, lymphatics and the sciatic nerve. All unacceptable parts of a carcass are sold through alternative outlets.

A large quantity of meat from animals slaughtered by the Islamic method is sold to the public in non-Halal shops.

Despite this latest statement by the NFU, it is unlikely that much will change. Even if this Government is slaughtered at the next General Election, Labour is more concerned about the religious sensitivities of Jews and Muslims than the fate of animals who don't, after all, have a vote. And in the interest of fairness, the Glib Dems will run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

Furthermore, there is a lingering suspicion that some opponents of religious slaughter are motivated less by compassion for animals than hostility towards believers. Indeed many such critics have no qualms about tucking into a plate of roast corpse and two veg.

Ealing comedy

THE Rev Mike Starkey has embarked on a mission to banish dowdiness and poor dress

sense among Anglican clergy. A former radio journalist, Mr Starkey is now curate at St Mary's, Ealing, in west London. He has just published *Fashion & Style*, described by the *Church Times* as "a theological view of the way we look."

Mr Starkey told a *CT* reporter that in matters sartorial "the Church has tended to be 20 years behind the times." A cynic might retort that to be only 20 years behind the times is good going for the C of E.

The Ealing curate, who wears psychedelic socks and other fetching little numbers, admits that he dresses "more for adornment than for practical purpose." Mr Starkey also thinks it would "be nice" if more clergymen sported nose-rings and green hair.

All this caused the Muse to descend on your columnist. So here goes.

*To a trendy young curate of Ealing,
Nose-rings and green hair are appealing,
He wears socks psychedelic
And colours orchilic,
That modish young curate of Ealing.*

Well, what do you expect for £1? The Poet Laureate?

Orange disorders

NORTHERN Ireland's Orange institutions have been taken down a peg or two in recent years. The Stormont Parliament, their stronghold of political power, has gone; the B Specials, their thuggish minders, have been disbanded; the mainly Protestant police force brought to heel.

However, the Orangemen and their supporters have maintained the arrogant triumphalism that did so much to create conditions which led to 25 years of mayhem. And the threat of mob rule returning when they took to the streets last month, insisting on processing through Catholic areas, was very real.

The colourful regalia was in marked contrast with sour faces, dark suits and bowler hats. Clergymen participated as usual. There was much chatter about "scriptural truths" and fervent prayers were offered at rallies throughout the Six Counties.

Press photographs showed some lodges being led by an official carrying an unsheathed sword. How would the authorities in mainland Britain react if trade union branches adopted this practice at May Day demonstrations?

Blair-faced nonsense

LABOUR leader Tony Blair is flavour of the year in religious circles. His very public adherence to Christianity has made him acceptable to elements not previously noted for their pro-Labour sentiments.

Even the current issue of our local church magazine carries a long extract from Mr Blair's interview with the Scripture Union. He copes manfully with questions of mind-blowing inanity. ("What keeps you awake at night?" "What would you like for your next birthday?" "What are you most looking forward to asking God?")

Apart from the Bible, he was asked, "which book on your shelf have you most often read?" Not *Venus in Furs*, as one reader of *The Freethinker* (not this one) rather naughtily suggested, but *The Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens.

Like the Bible, *The Pickwick Papers* is a popular work of fiction and a useful "dipper" from which Mr Blair can select curious tales, poems and anecdotes. One chapter, however, may be a little too near the bone for a politician. It records the famous election contest at Eatanswill.

The reader is informed that adoption

speeches by the two candidates "though differing in every other aspect, afforded a beautiful tribute to the merit and high worth of the electors of Eatanswill. Both expressed their opinion that a more independent, a more enlightened, a more public-spirited, a more noble-minded, a more disinterested set of men than those who had promised to vote for him never existed on earth; each hinted darkly that the electors in the opposite interest had certain swinish and besotted infirmities which rendered them unfit for the exercise of the important duties which they were called upon to discharge...the prosperity of Eatanswill would ever be dearer to their hearts than any earthly object; and each had it in his power to state with the utmost confidence that he was the man who would eventually be returned."

Sounds familiar. Today's party speech-writers and spin-doctors don't depart all that far from the standards set in the loyal and patriotic borough of Eatanswill. The political stodge is made even more unpalatable by Tony Blair's nostrum of Christian Socialism.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Turning truth on its head

IT IS a pity that David Tribe did not read anything by Marx and Engels before writing his "Last Word" in the May issue of *The Freethinker*. If he had, he might have avoided so many errors.

Three times he uses the phrase "historical determinism." He should produce the textual evidence. In fact, he turns truth on its head. Marxism is the least determinist of any major school of thought. Religion is determinist, subjecting us to the supernatural. Advocates of capitalism are determinist, subjecting us to "market forces." But Marxism extols the human spirit, as Corliss Lamont acknowledged in his *Philosophy of Humanism*.

In the 18th Brumaire, Marx says: "Man makes his own history." In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx emphasises conscious human activity. In a well-known passage from Volume I of *Capital*, Marx contrasts the free activity of "the worst of architects" with "the best of bees." In *Anti-Dühring*, Engels looks forward to a free human society when "the government of people will be replaced by the administration of things." In *The Origin of the Family*, Engels, attacking the State, says that future historians looking for the State will find it in "The Museum of Antiquities, together with the spinning-wheel and the bronze axe."

David Tribe misunderstands historical materialism. It can be described as scientific because it takes into account all material factors, unlike previous historians who merely wrote narratives, or put forward "Great Men" theories, like Carlyle.

In a letter to J Bloch, 1890, Engels acknowledges that he and Marx could be accused of over-emphasising the economic factor. He writes "we had to emphasise this main principle in opposition to our adversaries, who derided it." He goes on to recognise the importance of culture, tradition, religion, law, philosophy etc., in contributing to the historic process.

David Tribe does not understand the Marxist dialectic. It owed more to Heraclitus ("Nothing ever is; everything is becoming") than to Hegel. Humanists, who do not accept absolutes, should welcome Engels: "No matter without motion, no motion without matter." In his *Dialectics of Nature*, he anticipates Einstein's relativity.

Perhaps David Tribe can tell us where Marx and Engels ever said that Socialism was inevitable. If they thought so, why bother to create a revolutionary movement?

Where did they say that the social revolution must occur first in the most advanced capitalist countries? In their correspondence, they refer frequently to the revolutionary potential in Russia, seeing great significance in the "mir" or commune development among the peasantry.

Humanists could well ponder the most

famous and most misquoted passage from Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875. He anticipates a future society in which people of different talents will be equal if they each do their best. In return, society will acknowledge them, not merely by meeting their material needs but also their "spiritual" needs, and, above all, recognising the "significance" of all members of society as human beings.

KARL HEATH
Coventry

● David Tribe will reply to his critics in the next issue of *The Freethinker* – Editor.

Animal rights and wrongs

DAVE GODIN, in his June letter, does the old trick of misquotation. I wrote (May): "If we could communicate with a race of superior beings to the extent of arguing a case." That is far different from communication on the "simple basic level" that he describes. Vets, as well as vivisectionists, have to use restraining devices, so any communication is certainly basic.

However, all this is really by the way. Barbara Smoker, in her book *Humanism*, published by the National Secular Society, says that Humanists "...put people first. That is what 'humanism' means. And they put other animals – not possessions – second..." (page 32).

Those who put people and other animals on the same level of importance in their moral values perhaps should found a "British Animalist Association" to represent their belief in a "brotherhood" of the animal world.

ROBERT TEE
Pudsey

PEOPLE in general have a hard time grasping new ideas. There are three stages of reaction, slowly and tediously to be got through: ridicule, discussion and, finally, acceptance.

If I am to judge by the response to a talk on animal rights at our local Humanist group some months ago, the subject is still largely at the "ridicule" stage amongst Humanists, with perhaps a handful at later stages.

Often those most scornful of the religious for being so addicted to a faith that they will not listen to rational arguments against it fail to notice something: that they themselves are similarly unwilling to put aside for a moment their own vested interests, their own emotionally-charged addiction, namely flesh-eating, and consider the sound arguments against that. Having this insight could serve them a dual purpose!

Not many Humanists are seriously studying the subject, perhaps in case the arguments are too powerful for their liking, perhaps because of a genuine lack of imagination. These people

are taking refuge in the *status quo*, and this ill-befits a Humanist.

HEATHER EVANS
Kenilworth

King of the Jews?

CONTRARY to what Daniel O'Hara suggests (July), there is good reason to think that the Gospels, at least those that entered the Church Canon, have been reworked from an older report citing Jesus as Messiah and thus warrior-warrior Lord and King of the Jews.

In 132 AD, Simon bar Kosebah (Son of the Star) styled himself and was accepted as "Prince of Israel" and Messiah. He did exactly as Jesus did – rebelled against The Great Whore Who Sits on the Seven Hills (Rome). Incompetent Christian forgers, interpolators and rewriters should this to be the case – for example: "Think not that I come to bring peace, but a sword" makes no sense in our rewritten Christian "pretend" life of Jesus. But it makes good sense if Jesus actually lifted the Holy Sword of Israel against Rome.

The same rehash is shown in the case of the Virgin Mary. She remains, to the faithful, *virgo intacta* – with her many children listed in the Gospels! On the face of it, this scrap of Christian theological madness seems valueless but it does prove the change from historic Jewish sexual ethics to Christian theology, whatever Mary was or however daft the theology. If Jesus was to inherit the throne, he would actually have been virgin-born, in the original Jewish meaning of one of their two words for "virgin": a womb that had not yet borne fruit. Those who were to rewrite the Gospels, and thus invent Christianity as we know it, got hold of the Greek translations (which had only one word for "virgin"), read "unimpregnated pregnancy," proclaimed "God did it!" and changed monotheistic Judaism into pagan look-alike Christianity with its foolish theology which they are stuck with today.

ROBERT SINCLAIR
Coventry

WHETHER Jesus was a myth or not depends. I suggest, on one's definition of the word. There were certainly itinerant preachers in first-century Palestine; and the odds are that at least one was named Yehoshua (hellenised to Jesus), a common enough Hebrew name, which incidentally means Saviour. They would have been sons of middle-class families, which would have included those of master craftsmen such as carpenters. Some would surely have identified themselves with freedom movements, and thereby risked suffering the penalty of crucifixion, which was reserved by the Romans for the crime of sedition. There may have been those who claimed descent through the Israelite royal line, and were therefore regarded by their followers as anointed (Heb.

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messiah, Gk. *christos*) kings. Thus all the components of the "historical" Jesus would have been present; though whether in one individual is a matter for speculation.

The Gospels appear to have been an attempt on the part of monotheist missionaries to synthesise their teaching with the beliefs and rituals of the peoples they were trying to convert. The sophisticated semi-secular citizens of the Empire or Rome, but the simple people of the countryside. Fraser tells us that it was common practice among the latter for a sacred king to be sacrificed, either in person or by surrogate, at the Spring festival, which probably also involved a feast during which the body and the blood of the victim (human, animal or symbolic) were consumed by the whole congregation (the original meaning of *carnival*). It therefore seems scarcely coincidental that the Gospels tell of a semi-divine king who allows himself to be sacrificed for the redemption of the people at a date later identified as Easter. It is still a coincidence that the central rite of the Church, the eucharist (lit. *willing offering*) involves a symbolic consumption of body and blood.

GLYN EMERY
London N1

Complicated conspiracy

IF Michael Hill (May) seriously believes that drugs are banned because they are harmful, then perhaps he can explain why it is that alcohol and tobacco are permitted? I can see no convincing evidence to suggest that the Government has our best interests at heart. If the Government was truly concerned about our health and welfare, then cars would be banned, health and welfare services would be adequately funded, and opportunities for employment would be increased.

Indeed, a conspiracy is exactly what it is. Not a simple one but an extremely complicated and largely invisible conspiracy that has evolved over decades and has involved some powerful and influential individuals, corporate bodies and governments in the manufacture of myth for political and economic purposes. Study the history of drugs legislation to find out. A primary and very readable source is Jack Herer's *The Emperor Wears No Clothes*, a book which traces the early forces and events that culminated in world-wide marijuana (hemp) prohibition.

For a "freethinker," Mr Hill seems singularly unable to think freely, trapped instead by the same old myths, clichés and assumptions that are trotted out by the media and Government at frequent intervals. Indeed, his final comments are so absurd that they don't need to be challenged. It is obvious to anyone who has studied the subject that he knows little about the realities of drug sub-cultures. Come along, Mr Hill, do try and open your mind to some alter-

native ideas.

I have recently been studying the Rave scene, and I would be very happy for Mr Hill, or any other reader, to contact me via the Editor to arrange a visit to such an event, where you will be able to see for yourself just how well-behaved, healthy and sane are those who consume cannabis, amphetamine, LSD and, in particular, Ecstasy. I can assure you that a person on E is far better company and far less anti-social than the average drinker.

V ZAKRZEWSKI
Poole



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.

MR MICHAEL HILL seems rather confused in his letter advocating the retention of illegality on some drugs. He gives as one of his reasons that some women and men become prostitutes to pay for their illegal drugs, these not being cheap and freely available like alcohol and nicotine.

Surely this must be a pertinent reason to decriminalise these drugs!

He carries on about a woman student who could work out intricate calculus in her head when young, but after years of drug use could no longer do so. This is also known as the ageing process - which I, at 71 years old, with no drug use, know full well.

"Why are drugs banned," he asks, "if they do not harm people?"

Yes indeed - why?

Make no mistake, Mr Hill, banned drugs will always be available at a price through the criminal world, with all the attendant horrors as polluted America when they banned alcohol.

R A COBB
Rutland

YOUR correspondents Don Langdon and Michael Hill assume that those of us who do

not support current drug law enforcement must, therefore, approve of the use of such prohibited substances. This inference is illogical and suggests to me a naive and pitiful faith in the efficiency of coercive means of behavioural control.

To what extent any person or social system should seek to protect others from perceived harms is a difficult moral problem. The issue may seem clear for extreme cases such as suicide. No one would normally encourage suicide. However, it is decades since attempted suicide was a crime. Typically suicide is carried out by rapid means: guns, car exhausts, ropes, high buildings and many more available devices. Suicide may also be committed more slowly by the use of tobacco, alcohol or even mind-altering drugs. There seems to be no logic which could support coercive law as the method to control the uses of slow-acting means for suicide while expecting other controls to work for methods which act quickly! If distinctions are to be made, they must be on other grounds.

The concepts which can be derived from thought experiments which focus on suicide are useful and relevant to many logical issues raised by the drugs problem. For example, I might consider it my duty to stop a person taking their own life, but what if the cost of saving that one suicide was the death of others: or, if not the actual death of others, then say, their reduced quality of life? It is obvious that the law enforcement approach to prevention of drug misuse (that is, slow-probable-suicide) results in the certain, fast death of many others. (for example, gun battles over territory and against law enforcement personnel). On what moral grounds can it be claimed that a probable-slow-death-suicide is more reprehensible than a certain-fast-death-suicide and (hence!) that only the former requires legal sanction? If your correspondents were to think through this and other analogies I doubt that they would come to the conclusion that the law enforcement approach maximises the good which they (and others with whom they claim to disagree) would wish to achieve.

As Humanists we cannot accept the simplistic logic "it's wrong, therefore it must be punished." We must accept the inevitability of "trade offs"; being prepared to make moral judgements under uncertainty. It is not for us to claim to know absolute values and to seek popularity in simple moral posturing.

Drug misuse, which we deplore, is a complex problem which first requires careful specification. The main element traded is not the physical drug but a secondary factor created by law - namely, risk. The law has created a *compound commodity* which offers those depraved enough to exploit the market far more profit than striking gold. Reducing the supply serves mainly to increase the profit potential. It would help, as a first step, if Messrs Langdon and Hill could tell us how they would go about reducing these profits. Clearly specifying new crimes

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and increasing police powers is not a satisfactory answer.

LESLIE T WILKINS
Cambridge

Traitors or not?

KARL HEATH (Last Word, June) thinks it's outrageous to call Burgess, Maclean, Philby and Blunt traitors because they passed on secrets to our ally, the Soviet Union, during the Second World War.

Fair enough. But what about *before* Germany attacked the Soviet Union, when the Soviet Union was actually supporting Hitler – or after the war, when Stalin was busy stuffing millions into the gulags – and these four individuals were still passing information to the Soviet Union? Were they not traitors then?

K BYROM
Isle of Wight

KARL HEATH attacks the potential British collaborators with Nazi Germany as "traitors," but defends the actual collaborators with the equally objectionable régime of Communist Russia.

He describes the Soviet Union as "our ally," but doesn't mention that this was the case only during the four years from the German invasion of Russia to the German defeat and that the Soviet Union was the enemy of Britain before 1941 and after 1945. He refers to the Phoney War of 1939-1940, but doesn't mention that during this period the main ally of Nazi Germany was the Soviet Union, which conquered half of Poland, then Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Bessarabia, and much of Finland, and stood by while Germany conquered Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Greece; nor does he mention that the Communist Party of Great Britain obeyed instructions from Moscow and opposed the war until Germany turned against Russia. He alleges that in 1943 the British failed to give the Russians information about German war plans, but doesn't mention that in 1941 the British did give the Russians such information which they ignored.

This kind of political bigotry is just as bad as religious bigotry, and is out of place in a paper called *The Freethinker*.

MARY LEWIS
London E1

Excellent argument

CARL PINEL'S article "Whatever Happened to Lazarus" (July) is an excellent argument against certain people's assertions of so-called "near-death experiences."

I would suggest that the constructs of the

world that the person holds is how they will relate them to other people.

As a life-long atheist and freethinker, I endorse the contents of Pinel's article.

I had strange fantasies and peculiar dreams when I had a serious car accident some 17 years ago. I put them down to the drugs I was having at that time and the unusual circumstances I was in.

I have never had a repetition of these strange feelings, so judge them to be because of the peculiar nature of my state of mind at that time – and no more or less.

IRENE CHANDLER
Hitchin

Catholic 'logic'

FURTHER to Barbara Smoker's article "A matter of life and death" (May), I can't understand the logic behind the Catholic Church allowing "natural" birth control while opposing artificial birth control.

It's no more natural using calculations to determine safe periods than it is to use a condom or a pill.

The *intention* underlying both methods is to allow intercourse without producing a child. Both methods are the result of human ingenuity and owe nothing to any instructions from some mythical god.

PETER PULLEN
London N3

Life's meaning?

"WHAT can it all mean?" In the final analysis – *nothing*. Absolutely nothing!

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

Reply to a 'serious objection'

I HOPE you will permit me to respond to Eric Stockton's charges of lack of coherence and internal inconsistency in my article "Humanism: the compassionate philosophy" (June). I am sorry that he was not persuaded.

He contends that my major incoherence is that while I claim to espouse determinism, I also require us to make choices as between good and bad options. I see nothing incoherent in this. Life confronts us continually with options of various kinds: intellectual, and moral, domestic and trivial, to do this or that, to say this or that, to eat this or that, to buy this or that, to smoke or not to smoke. But if there is a decision to be made, it is surely the thoughts that pass through our minds which

determine our decision, and there is no uncaused mental agency which intervenes and over-rides those thought processes.

Eric Stockton says that deterrence can only be meaningful if the person to whom it is aimed chooses or chooses not to be deterred. But I would think that the effect of deterrence upon an individual depends on the extent to which the arguments advanced support or conflict with the preconceptions which he holds. The outcome is a matter of ratiocination in the brain, not of some transcendental or extra-scientific free will intruding. Man is either a part of the natural cause-effect nature of the world or something superior to it. I would hope that Humanists accept the first alternative.

Eric Stockton says that unless we accept free will, the moral sense of the words "ought to" lose their ethical significance. I think not. The ethical significance of a moral rule depends, in my view, on a logical and intellectual appraisal of the alternatives, not on some random choice made without mental deliberation. What of abortion, euthanasia, or capital punishment?

My compassion for the unfortunate of the world, even for criminals, is the outcome of my conviction, after serious study, that we are all the consequences of change, whether we are born male or female, black or white, strong or weak, rich or poor, clever or dull, in England or Bosnia or The Sudan, motivated to study for our A-levels in a prosperous middle-class home or motivated to commit crime in a depressed inner-city; and my conviction also that the thoughts and behaviour of men are the causal end-product of genetics and environment, and that therefore in the final analysis they are not morally responsible. For this reason, I believe that retributive punishment of the criminal is misguided and that prevention, deterrence, reform and compensation are the only proper objects of the criminal law.

Eric Stockton asks: How can a Humanist be compassionate unless he is free to withhold compassion? My answer is that a Humanist will be compassionate or withhold his compassion according to his reasoned assessment of the need to be compassionate or otherwise. But if he is compassionate, he has no grounds to brag about it. He should give thanks that he has the sense to recognise the need for compassion and the capacity to make some contribution to meet the need.

I wonder, was Eric Stockton motivated to question my deterministic argument by a reasoned assessment of it, or was he simply responding to the uncaused random bidding of his free will?

LESLIE JAMES
Peterborough

I AM 99 per cent convinced of determinism but do not think that those of us who share this perception should feel totally helpless. We should press the government of the day to pursue policies which bring out the best in human nature, and thus play a part in providing the environmental influence which helps to determine

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VIVIAN GIBSON
Ealing

the individual's moral and ethical outlook on life.

IS Leslie James (June) saying that the ability I have to make decisions or to perform actions is genetically determined, or does he make the stronger claim that the specific decisions or choices I make are genetically determined?

If the former, he allows free will, in that I can choose to act thus or otherwise; if the latter, he makes an undemonstrable hence absurd claim.

D HARROP
Sheffield

Hanging matters II

I AGREE with Charles Marshall's sentiments on the death penalty and the cost of prisons. Whether it deters or not is really a red herring as capital punishment works in a completely different way – it stops its recipients committing more crimes.

Judging by the anti-hanging sentiments that abound in freethought literature, most people calling themselves freethinkers are soft and emotional when it comes to criminals (and rarely express much sympathy for their victims). This is one of the few things I dislike about the freethought/humanist movement. We are supposed to be rational but reason seems to evaporate when dealing with crime and punishment. When looked at in a strictly logical way, the case for execution of persistent offenders is overwhelming.

A disproportionate amount of crime is committed by a minority of habitual criminals. I cannot remember the precise numbers but it's somewhere in the order of two-thirds of crime being committed by under 20 per cent of criminals. Elimination of this persistent minority would lead directly to a precipitous plunge in the crime rate, not to mention a massive saving to the nation – the annual cost of crime being £17 billion, according to a recent documentary. I'd hazard a guess that the number of innocent lives saved if even half of that were to be spent on worthy causes would be greater than the number of guilty lives ended.

I might also add that the only objection to capital punishment that carries some weight – miscarriage of justice – does not apply to execution of habitual offenders. If one kills only those with, say, five convictions, from separate trials, for crimes of violence and/or dishonesty, the chances of killing an innocent become vanishingly remote. He (and it's usually a "he") may have been wrongly convicted once, or even twice, but not five times.

Finally, before I am subjected to a deluge of emotional (and I confidently predict that much of it will indeed be emotional) criticism from "freethinkers," I ask them to consider the following. Take, say, persistent car thieves

(although burglars, muggers, rapists etc., would do just as well). Either treat them in whatever way is currently done in this country (prison, fines, safari trips or whatever) or execute them. Now answer the following: Which method of dealing with them results in 100 per cent success at stopping reoffending every time it is used? Which method is cheapest in the long run? Would any other method whatsoever rival capital punishment in both questions 1 and 2, above? If so, tell us about it.

[Dr] STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

YOUR correspondent Charles Marshall writes that the cost of keeping a convicted murderer in prison comes to about £2,000 a month, and that the money would be better spent on helping OAPs to keep warm. But surely the crucial issue of capital punishment is a moral one – are we justified in taking life in cold blood? Another relevant issue is that of deterrence (both of the criminal before he commits the offence and of other like-minded persons).

The financial cost of the alternative (a long term of imprisonment) is an economic matter. It is no doubt a factor to be considered, but it should not dominate the issue of whether or not to inflict the death penalty. By all means, try to find the money to make indigent OAPs comfortable, but let us not kill our worst criminals in the attempt.

RALPH SIMMONDS
Edinburgh

AS far as I am concerned, the one and overwhelming argument against the restoration of the death penalty is the possibility of an innocent man being hanged. The very finality of the sentence precludes the rectification of a grievous legal error and I have yet to discover for whom a posthumous pardon is designed to give comfort and solace.

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Malvern Wells

CHARLES Marshall expresses some horrifying views. It would have been of no comfort to the "Birmingham Six," or any of the other wrongly convicted people of the last few years, to know that if they had been hanged then their miscarriage of justice would have been cost-effective. It is also naive to assume that money saved by hanging criminals instead of locking them up would be spent on pensioners. After all, the pensioners were not the recipients of increased pensions when capital punishment was used.

CARL PINEL
Stockport

CHAS. MARSHALL'S invocation of the Market Forces Theory to the subject of the death penalty applies equally to all costly imprisonment; why not amputate thieves' hands, castrate rapists, kill corrupt policemen (double criminals, these). The savings would be enormous.

DONALD WOOD
Brecon

Priestly passion

MANY thanks to Barbara Smoker for her lengthy and, in the main, accurate review of my book, *A Passion for Priests*, concerning women's relationships with Roman Catholic priests.

However, I would just like to set the record straight on a couple of matters. First, this book was not the result of "a publishers' boardroom brainstorming session." It sprang out of my own Roman Catholic upbringing and was initially registered as a PhD research project. Once I'd started to contact women in this situation, however, the journalist took over from the academic and the research was used first for a Yorkshire Television documentary, then a Radio 4 documentary, which was heard by the Headline editor who immediately commissioned the book. And yes, the research really did take four years and remains ongoing.

I admit that the cover of the book emphasises the heady "sex and religion" combination but, as Barbara Smoker comes to realise, you can't judge a book by its cover.

As for the support group Seven-Eleven: this was not, as Barbara suggests, set up "as a means of feeding this research project." If anything, the reverse is true. As I began to contact women in relationships with priests, they began to realise they were not alone. At their request, I put some of them in touch with each other. The result was Seven-Eleven. I would, therefore, like to think we have been mutually helpful in the cause of changing the law on compulsory celibacy.

CLARE JENKINS
Sheffield

Rethinking

I HAVE been a regular contributor to your letters page for some time and I am now seriously considering giving up this practice. My consistent theme has been the need for some radical rethinking about the whole thrust and direction of the broad Humanist movement in Britain, and I still have no idea whether there is any significant body of support for this proposition. If I believed that the consensus within the various constituent organisations was against this idea, I would of course immediately stop wasting your own and your readers' time. But it is one of the characteristics of the British Humanist movement that one can never be sure what most members and supporters think. Most people do not write to newspapers or magazines, but it does not follow that they are content with the status quo. Is there not a case for conducting some sort of poll to find out the degree of discontent among readers of *The Freethinker*?

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

● Many of the points raised by John Clunas (and others) over past months are being addressed at a national level – certainly by the National Secular Society and *The Freethinker*. So...watch this space. – Editor.

Time to scrap Islam's medieval laws

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.

LAST WORD

by Govind Deodhekar

THE Abu Zeid case is an extremely serious matter – possibly far more so, in its way, than the Salman Rushdie affair.

Rushdie is a British national, resident in Britain. His *Satanic Verses* purports to be and is a work of fiction, and his condemnation for blasphemy was announced by a highly-regarded religious authority in a foreign country – not by a civil court of law.

In contrast to Rushdie, Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid is an Egyptian national, a Muslim, and a Professor of Arabic in Cairo. On the basis of

his serious writing about the need for reforms in Islamic law, he is being condemned as an apostate by a civil court of law. Presumably, Egypt has a statutory offence of apostasy, punishable by death.

Normally, apostasy is understood as the rejection of the faith after submission, or the breaking of an oath of allegiance. It is understandable that, in the early days of Islam, when the tiny band of Muslims settled in Medina were in frequent conflict with their fellow-Arabs in Mecca, a pagan Arab who had solemnly joined the new faith of Islam would

be regarded as a traitor by the Muslims if he renounced the brotherhood and went back to Mecca to rejoin the hostile Meccans. This is hardly the situation in 20th Century Egypt.

Professor Abu Zeid was charged with apostasy by a fundamentalist Islamic group which lost its case in a lower court. On appeal, the court at the next level found him guilty on June 20. Pending a further appeal by him, the court directed that his present status as an apostate obliges him not to cohabit with his Muslim wife on pain of death for adultery!

Abu Zeid had not renounced Islam. He has written that angels, devils, jinns and the evil eye are merely legends; he had written that Imam Shafei, one of the four great Islamic jurists, had imposed a narrow interpretation of Islam; he had also said that Islamic laws of inheritance, giving daughters only half the share of sons, were unjust and unsuitable for the modern age.

The expression of these opinions now amounts to apostasy, punishable by death – unless the highest court quashes the verdict.

The very next day, the Mufti of Egypt opined that the denial of the truth concerning inheritance as laid down by the Koran amounted to apostasy. Presumably, the Mufti is based at the prestigious Al Azhar Islamic University.

Such a catch-all, wide definition of apostasy is most likely to be resisted in different parts of the Islamic world. After all, Shia rules of inheritance are quite different from the Sunni rules and the four great jurists differ from each other on many points.

Imam Shafei (767-820 AD), divergence from whom is supposed to amount to apostasy, differed on many points from the first great jurist, Abu Hanifa (699-767 AD). Islamic law which has evolved, cannot be put in a straight-jacket forever at the dictates of one fundamentalist group.

Nevertheless, a threat to all freedom of expression remains if the judiciary is susceptible to fundamentalist Islamic influence or even infiltration.

Under traditional Islamic jurisprudence, the apostate loses all civic rights, his marriage is annulled, and he is put to death.

It is not enough for international opinion and protest to concentrate only on individual cases. The time has come, now, to press the Islamic countries to abolish from their statute books the offences of apostasy and heresy (and blasphemy – remember Pakistan!) so as to root out the sources of medieval intolerance and oppression.

NSS looks to the future

THE General Secretary of the National Secular Society, after 16 years' service, will retire in April, 1996, on reaching his 65th birthday.

The Council of Management sees this as an opportunity for examining the activities of the NSS and seeing how best to continue and to expand its work. They will be seeking new staff who might in various ways administer and promote the Society.

Naturally, in this transitional period the members of the Council will wish to take into account the ideas and opinions of the members of the Society. There is considerable scope for reorganisation and renewal.

Fork supper

A FORK supper is being organised to meet members of the International Humanist and Ethical Union Executive Committee on Saturday, September 16, 1995. Two speakers will talk about IHEU's activities.

The event will take place at 6.30pm in Conway Hall. Tickets will be limited and will be allocated on a first-come-first-served basis. Cost: £5.50. Please send bookings to the BHA, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.