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Secular Humanist monthly

# Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection

## Religion's just a big red wellie

psychologist  
Hugh Thomas  
on imprinting  
– back page

‘ Konrad Lorenz was able to demonstrate his ability to lead a line of happily cheeping chicks around a farmyard, “imprinted” on his red Wellington boot.

Once imprinted with an object, no amount of effort could get the young bird to shift its affections to a more appropriate object.

In the same way, I suggest, the young human mind may undergo a similar sensitive period where particular objects – people, ideas, habits, vices, political or religious ideologies – become the subject of fixations which may be life-long in influence. ’

**Blishen on Brophy – see Page 132**



# UP FRONT

with the Editor in Ireland

## On the road in the 'new' Ireland

IN THE gents' lavatory of a bar near Kinnegad, Irish Republic, the other day, I admired (but, no, did not patronise) a £1-a-packet condom dispenser: *Pop in a Punt and defy the Pope*, its message seemed to be.

The bar's sausages were not up to much, and the tea was lukewarm, but, for me, that buy-me-and-stop-one, patriotically green slot-machine more than compensated for any culinary deficiencies. It symbolised the way in which Rome's grip on Ireland is being prised off – with difficulty, finger by white-knuckled finger, admittedly – and, coast to coast, I was to encounter many more such tokens of the "new" Ireland.

Among the estates of new homes and factories – and the old homes, done up with Eurocash to look like icing-sugar cottages – amazing changes are taking place, largely because younger people see religious terrorism of the type traditionally practised in the Republic as not only intrinsically humiliating to grown-up folk but also economically harmful to a nation which is, suddenly, benefiting from – and contributing greatly to – modern capitalism, EU style.

The Irish last year exported IR£5,535.5 million worth of goods to Britain, compared to IR£4,890.7 the previous year. Germany is Ireland's next best EU customer, having bought IR£3,207.9 million worth of goods in 1994. A feudal Church is an embarrassing anachronism in such a society. When you're out there selling – when you're keen, for example, to become a world centre for computer-related manufacture – you can do without that old image of your having a great, black, clerical crow perched on your shoulder.

## Divorce, Dublin-style

IT IS well known that the Republic's laws on homosexuality are now more liberal than those of the UK (with an age of consent of 17 years); the Pill is easily obtainable, and even on abortion there is forward movement.

The Regulation of Information (Services Outside the State for the Termination of Pregnancy) Act 1995 is now law. This means that women may now legally receive information about the abortion services which are available outside Ireland, and can leave the country to take advantage of them without attracting the attentions of The O'Bill.

(Around 4,000 females from the Republic and 1,000 from that part of the island still under British rule now cross the Irish Sea for abortions each year).

True, I was told that the issue of making the operation itself legal is now dead in the political water – but who is to say that it will not be resurrected after the progressives' expected victory on divorce, later this year? These battles are all part of the same war and it doesn't do to fight on too many fronts at once.

The Government plans a November referendum on whether divorce should be made constitutional, with the John Bruton administration seeking a "Yes" vote. I gather from polls and personal conversation that the change will certainly be made – with most people favouring a three-year interval between separation and divorce: an imperfect solution to marital breakdown, but certainly a huge advance on the current total ban which afflicts everyone except the very rich, who have always been able to hire a Pope to annul an inconvenient marriage.

Even euthanasia is now being openly discussed. Indeed, while I was in the Republic it was *the* main talking-point, for on July 27 the distraught family of a 45-year-old brain-damaged woman had been given permission to let her die. Four Supreme Court judges in Dublin, in what was seen as a landmark ruling, upheld a High Court decision that the feeding-tube sustaining the woman in a near-permanent vegetative state for the past 23 years could be removed.

The Irish Council for Civil Liberties welcomed the decision as "both just and compassionate," with spokesman Tom Cooney calling for a political debate on euthanasia and insisting that legislation was needed to deal with the whole issue of "living wills" and the power of attorney in life-or-death situations.

## Even the hacks...

AS A newspaperman, I was particularly interested in the way in which the media has changed in its attitude towards the Church. Just a decade ago, it would have been *impossible* for an Irish newspaper, particularly a piously provincial sheet, to hint at a criticism of the institution, let alone highlight a row between bishops. Still less would a newspaper have dared to call for an end to priestly celibacy. And as for coming out in favour of *women* priests...

But there I was, sitting in a café in Ballina, Co. Mayo, reading the July 26 Editorial of *The Western People*: "The row between Cardinal Daly and Bishop Comiskey, resulting in the latter being summoned to Rome, would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

Then no one would have dared speak out of turn. But times are changing. It is sad to see a Cardinal and a Bishop at odds. Especially in the wake of recent child sex abuse and other scandals which have rocked the Church in this country. But there is no longer any point in the Church burying its head in the sand, either.

"Bishop Comiskey's 'crime' is that he has called for a debate on priestly celibacy. No more. No less. He has not said he supports its retention or wants it removed. The reaction to that very reasonable suggestion, set against an emerging view that clerical celibacy should be optional, is what has shocked so many people. And it is an approach that no longer works. The surprising thing is that the Church thinks otherwise...Down the road, again whether we like it or not, priests will be allowed to marry. And we will even, eventually, have women ordained as priests..." And so on.

Those who know their Holy Ireland will understand why I almost choked on my Mayo wild salmon as I read those comments.

## God is 'less important'

SO WHAT am I saying? That the power of the Church is already broken? No, sadly. Control of education is still firmly in the priestly grasp, for example. There are no publicly-owned primary schools whatever – and, since we all know how the men of God love to have access to children, we can expect this area to be the scene of the final battle between the Church and the 21st Century. It is true also that there remain great dark stains of mindless faith, among the older end in particular – the product of generations of intellectual abuse.

But we should be accustomed to the unthinkable becoming overnight reality: the USSR collapsed, the Berlin Wall fell, the "People's Democracies" disappeared – and it all seemed to happen at some point between the Six o'Clock News and Jeremy Paxman as we nodded in our armchairs.

And the facts show that Irish people's belief in the importance of God in their lives has declined sharply. The results of a new EU survey, revealed on July 27, showed that over the past 10 years 23 per cent fewer Irish people have come to rate God as being as important to them. The decline is the largest in Europe. Just over half the Irish surveyed said they believe God is important to them. But 11 per cent insist that God is not important – a doubling of the number holding that view in a comparable 1985 Euro-survey.



# UP FRONT

with the Editor in Ireland

From Page 130

Admittedly, 91 per cent of Irish people said they still consider themselves as belonging to the Catholic religion – a figure matched only by Portugal. But only 4 per cent of the Irish say they are disturbed by the presence of people of other religions in the population – a vital point when we consider the inexorable movement towards a United Ireland.

## Sex and Economics

AS well as hard economics, has played its part in all this. We have reported (*ad nauseum*, according to some readers) on the sexual peccadilloes of scores of Irish priests, highlighting their predilection for children as sexual partners, and these revelations, having,

again unprecedentedly, found their way into the Republic's newspapers, have had a profound effect on Irish people's attitude to the Church.

But, as the case of the fun-loving Bishop Eamon Casey showed, the clergy go in for "normal" sex in a big way, too. For example, we recently learned of the bizarre personal life of Father Michael Cleary, a fearless opponent of contraception, who ran a refuge for pregnant teenagers. He fathered two sons by a nurse, Phyllis Hamilton, after seducing her when she was 17 (he was 37). Cleary forced her to put the first up for adoption, but they later set up home together with their second son, with Phyllis playing his housekeeper. In 1985 she had a daughter by a trainee priest, who, she claims, knew about the relationship and blackmailed her for sex.

And according to Pat Buckley, a rebel priest who marries divorced couples, up to a third of all Irish priests are in, or have had, relationships.

"The support group I set up has counselled 88 women who have been involved with priests. Six of these women had children by them and four have had abortions paid for by their lovers," he told *The Guardian* recently.

Vocations are falling off, rapidly. Aidan O'Keefe, who runs a group called Leaven for former priests, brothers and nuns, says more than 1,000 people have quit the Irish ministry in recent years. "The church is in danger of dying out," he says.

For me, all this points to an unstoppable development of democracy in the Republic, coupled with secularisation of Irish society, and to a United Ireland.

So many of the predictions made in this column in October and November, 1994, have come true. Sinn Féin is talked to on equal terms with other political parties. Economics is driving the two sides of the Border together (EU grants totalling £253 million in "peace aid" were announced last month to facilitate cross-Border development and the like).

Some British barracks in the North of Ireland are being closed – and even Scotland Yard's Anti-Terrorist Branch is being cut by 20 per cent. Prisoners are being released or transferred to more amenable gaols.

Who can doubt, then, that the Brits are on their way out of the Six Counties – not only to save the £4,000,000,000 a year it costs them to stay there but also because, with the failure of the old industries, there is no longer any profit to be made by staying, and the place is no longer important, strategically, to British generals?

The social, cultural and religious changes I found in the Republic go a long way to easing the British road from Ireland – for the ancient *Prod* case against their being handed over to Rome Rule will become irrelevant.

Given the passing of our generation of big-

oted Protestants and priest-benighted Catholics, the monster of religious hatred and bloody fanaticism which has for so long divided the island will surely disappear – just as the Border itself has, to all intents and purposes, been swept away with no fuss by EU abolition of customs restrictions.

As I say, in the Republic the Roman religion is being sidelined, and the frantic efforts of the Papal Nuncio to influence the Dublin Government are merely laughable. Small wonder that in Mary Murray's back kitchen, at Grangecon village in Wicklow, a graven image of the Holy Mother of God is, even as I write, weeping tears of blood: "Our Lady is crying for Ireland and for her church," says Mary.

## 'Christian' name ire at Sheffield

SHEFFIELD Humanist Society has condemned the City Council practice of asking for the "Christian" names of voters.

A Society Press release issued on August 23 says: "Residents eligible for inclusion in the 1996 Register of Electors have received a form on which to provide the Electoral Registration Officer with personal details.

"Information requested includes 'First Christian Name.' This is quite inappropriate. Many Sheffield electors adhere to non-Christian faiths or have no religious beliefs.

"We urge that in future the authorities responsible replace the term 'First Christian Name' with 'Other Names' on Electoral Registration Forms."

A Humanist Society spokesman urged through *The Freethinker* that other groups should check their local council practice in this regard – and perhaps make appropriate representations.

## Correction

THE computer gremlins got into Jim Ross's important article "Make Humanism matter through political channels" on page 118 of our August issue. Somehow, the words *pro rata* in the second paragraph became Greek, and the word "the" was wrongly repeated in the final paragraph. Sorry.

## THE FREETHINKER

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

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Brigid Brophy:

# Great brightener of the scene

HERE she is in this photo, taken in 1967: she's wearing a fairly startling black and white check jacket, the checks very small, and a cap of the same pattern tilted on her head; her elbow's on a table, she's holding a cigarette, and a thumb is pressed against her upper lip. Behind sunglasses her eyes are not quite with you, the effect being distinctly mocking. One thing is certain: whatever she's looking at, her views of it are complex, and she has theories to offer about it. The theories will all be brilliant, some of them startling, dismaying, upsetting; some will be so incisively fresh you'll want to cheer; some so ingenious that you'll have to go away and brood over them before you can be sure if you agree with them or not – but meanwhile, they'll be expressed with such elegant bravura that you'll cheer anyway.

What shall we do, now Brigid Brophy has gone, when people accuse freethinkers of being solemn, puritanical? To point to her was so much the easiest and best answer. I was in awe of her before I met her because she was her father's daughter; and it was in reading one of John Brophy's novels, *I Let Him Go*, that I became (between one page and the next) an adult. It was the first book I'd read that suggested that our moral existence was not to be explained in terms of black and white, and that most shades of grey were useless, too. Then he was the originator of that demand for justice for writers that led to the establishment of a public lending right. In both these matters, the eschewing of moral simplicities and the struggle for honest literary justice, she was her father's daughter. She believed passionately in the use of the intelligence, and of reason; and not simply because she happened to be so outstandingly, even dramatically, clever herself. She was more easily rational than a great many of us manage to be: but the roots of her general argument in favour of reason, humanism, the rejection of the superstitious and the shallow, were deep ones. As she showed in her pamphlets, her sparkling speeches and her work for the British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society, the Rationalist Press Association, she held that the need that human beings should seek to be rational must be pressed home in every possible quarter. If ever there was a rare creature, it was Brigid Brophy:

**BRIGID BROPHY died on August 7, after a long illness. She was, as Nicolas Walter wrote in *The Guardian*, "a committed and valued member of the Freethought movement for more than 30 years, an active speaker and writer for the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society, a helpful supporter of the Committee Against Blasphemy Law and an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association, the author of eloquent pamphlets and articles on religious education and sex education, marriage and censorship, and a good friend."**

but she was one who'd choose, when there had to be fighting, the most ordinary arenas she could get herself booked into.

I have an oddly fond memory of a magistrates' court – the one at Highbury, Islington – where once Bill McIlroy was to be arraigned for (with contentiousness aforethought) sending a condemned blasphemy through the post. Brigid and I were to speak in his defence; and Maureen Duffy was our manager. It was very much like being boxers under cool, firm tutelage. Brigid's statement in the witness box was so beautiful that I couldn't think of anything better to do than virtually to repeat it. Bill, as I recall, was fined; as Maureen and I agreed afterwards, his not ending up in the Tower was wholly a result of the persuasive intelligence of Brigid's testimony. It was so done that the magistrate, ignoring it, would have felt an ass. She'd have made a brilliant advocate.

by Edward Blishen

But, of course, instead she became, first, a novelist whose every book offered, in a spare, sparkling way, an idea accommodated in a narrative of deliberate brevity that moved around on its toes. *The Snow Ball* is my favourite; but I think maybe the most enduring will turn out to be *Hackenfeller's Ape*. In the course of telling a perfect witty story, Brigid Brophy here, and typically, offered a rational discussion of two or three vital humane issues. It was, in the end, her tremendous gift: being able to make ideas dance for us; making our ribs ache for pure pleasure in the force and elegance of reasonable argument.

But then, when it comes to the point, the Brigid Brophy I love best is the critic. As a critic, she was the best of detectives: reading her marvellous books on Ronald Firbank (*Prancing Novelist*) and Mozart (*Mozart the Dramatist*), I imagined her, from page to page, saying: "Elementary, my dear reader!" Asked to point to evidence of the broad nature of her reason-

ableness, I'd appeal to the study of Firbank: the hugest and most pugnaciously clever of books devoted to (in terms of his output) the slimmest of writers, whose own intelligence operated below the levels of examinable rationality. What she valued in Firbank brings us back to the chequered fantasia of the suit and cap she was wearing in that photo. She saw his work as a triumph of the æsthetic spirit over the philistine rules of English conduct. It's why, I guess, there's that mocking look in her eye. Out there you can bet on it, as she looks out from under her tilted cap, are philistines.

Her book on Mozart is one of the best I know on Mozart. Enjoyably, as always, she points to what is amazingly great in him: the "unusual combination of word-fluency and music-fluency." (I imagine, reading that judgment, the detective, Pernod to hand, through her sunglasses consulting her notebook). "His genius was an innate universality." Say it better, whoever can! "In Mozart's case" (she calls for another Pernod) "opera was carrying the psychologising burden of literature."

Then came, 12 years ago, to this great brightener of the scene, the sickening horror of multiple sclerosis. Taking books down from my shelves in preparation for writing this, I found a postcard falling out of *Mozart the Dramatist*. I'd reviewed it for *The Freethinker*; and she'd liked what I'd said. Typically, writing with obvious pain and difficulty, she had set to work to analyse her pleasure in this review. Perhaps she had felt it for her own sake: but also because it seemed to her perceptive and delectably written. "It falls," she wrote, "like dew on my torments. THANK YOU."

I think back to my original point of obligation to the Brophys, that moment when, reading *I Let Him Go*, I realised that, in closing the novel, I wasn't the same person who'd opened it. I'm more glad than I can say that, over half a century later, I turned out, against all likelihood, when she was being unbearably tortured, to have, a little, relieved the agony of John Brophy's daughter. I'm sure humanism can get along perfectly well (and must do) without more than the occasional flash of remarkable brilliance and sparkle. But it's good when it's there; and sad when it's gone, as with Brigid's death our best modern example of it has. I may not, of course, as a rationalist, allow myself to be being welcomed, with great expectation of profoundly sensible enjoyment, in some excellent meeting-place (a Mozart *divertimento* is being played, and her companion has borrowed her chequered hat), by Michael Montaigne.

## Death of a former Editor

A FORMER Editor of *The Freethinker* has died at the age of 65. Karl Hyde edited the paper from November, 1967, to August, 1968. It was then published weekly.

Karl Hyde was involved in local Humanist activity where he lived in the Kingston area

of south west London. After editing *The Freethinker*, he worked in a full-time capacity for the British Humanist Association.

Eventually he left the London area and lived for many years in Penzance.

Cremation took place without ceremony at the Penmount Crematorium, Truro.



From Spirit Rappings to Piltdown Man...

# There's always a bull market for fraud

*Hoaxes and Scams* by Carl Sifakis. Michael O'Mara Books Ltd. £9.99.

Review: COLIN McCALL

READERS of this "compendium of deceptions, ruses and swindles" may find it hard to understand why so many people fall for an often preposterous hoax or fraud, says the compiler. Financial or other gain is an important factor, and Carl Sifakis finds "considerable evidence" for the conviction's defence that his victims are "the dishonest." On the other hand, we know the W C Fields film title *Never a Sucker an Even Break*; and Sifakis rightly adds that, as a consequence, many innocent persons get swept up in it.

The first story in the alphabetical *Hoaxes and Scams* concerns Albert Abrams, a medical quack who fooled Upton Sinclair among others, leading H L Mencken to comment that the same rebellious traits that produce political radicals frequently find a similar outlet in quack medical opinions. The last item in the book is the spurious Zinoviev letter, which helped bring down the Labour Government of 1924.

More recently, the Gulf War produced "a bull market for fraud" in the United States. People were lured into investing in bogus oil and gas wells, and persuaded to contribute \$10 for water purifiers for soldiers. The tens poured in, but no water purifiers went out.

Dr Johannes Beringer (1667-1738), Dean of the Medical School at the University of Würzburg, "discovered" hundreds of fossils which he described as "capricious fabrications of God," together with clay tablets, some signed by Jehovah. Some of the fossils were genuine, but others had been fabricated – not by God, but by antagonistic professors. When he realised he had been hoaxed, Beringer tried to buy up all the copies of his book announcing the finds, which he had printed at enormous expense.

Another "scientific fake" in these pages is Piltdown Man, which Sifakis summarises well. Most experts, he says, consider Charles Dawson the guilty party, but Stephen Jay Gould thinks (plausibly, in my view) that he was assisted by the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. A more novel theory has Sir Arthur Conan Doyle as the villain. Whatever the truth, there was certainly "skulduggery afoot."

There was too – with the pun this time switched – when Rant Mullens, of Toledo, Washington, planted "evidence" of Bigfoot near Mount St Helens, in the form of over-

sized feet.

Books can be, and have been, written exposing spiritualist frauds, though nothing like so many as those by defenders. The modern craze began with the Fox sisters and their "spirit rappings," believed by many thousands to be from the departed but actually caused by Margaret Fox cracking her big toe! In a final confession, Margaret told how she and her sister Kate had concocted their hoax to tease their parents, and especially their mother, who was superstitious and gullible. The sisters discovered that there were many more like mother.

Another late 19th Century spiritualist hoax was perpetrated by the Bostonian Mrs Hannah Ross, who not only "materialised" dead babies but also allowed bereaved parents to touch them and kiss them. She worked in a dark room, of course, and from inside a curtained cabinet. As she called the baby back, its image would appear at the front of the cabinet and, as the parents kissed it they found it had a warm skin. Hardly surprising, as they were actually kissing Ross's breast, with a baby's face painted on it, poking through a slit in the curtain.

There is, as Sifakis says, nothing telepathic about stage mind-readers: they "rely on an estimated 200 signal systems" to pass the information. But one American couple employed "an intricate code of about 500 innocent phrases and apparently normal gestures" to bewilder their audience.

Ghosts, Sifakis believes, are embedded in British culture. He traces them back to the 1500s and the many bloody attempts to prosecute clergymen on both the Catholic and Protestant sides. A hunted man, hidden away in a priest hole, would emerge at night and "haunt" the house. Whatever the reason, "the United Kingdom to this day undoubtedly remains the most ghostly inhabited area on earth."

We also have our share of poltergeists, and the three examples cited are all British. But we yield to America when it comes to "messiahs."

One of the most charismatic of recent

years, according to Sifakis, was Oric Bovar, who told his followers to celebrate Christmas on his own birthday, August 29, rather than December 25. When a New York Bovarite died, Bovar and five of his flock spent a two-month vigil over the corpse, trying to resurrect him. Finally, the police broke in and charged the group with failing to report a death.

On April 14, 1977, Bovar, who had claimed he could slip out of a window, flutter about and then come back inside, slipped out of his 10th-floor apartment window and disproved his own claim: he plunged to his death.

Voltaire, whose most famous quotation ("I do not agree with a word you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it") was invented by E Beatrice Hall early this century, denounced the Donation of Constantine as a forgery. And he was right: it was written by monks in the 700s. But popes used it throughout the Middle Ages to claim temporal power.

Lorenzo Valla (c1407-1457) demonstrated that the document could not have been written during the time of Constantine; and Thomas Cromwell had Valla's text published in 1536 as part of his propaganda campaign against Rome.

Let us stay with religion for our final example from *Hoaxes and Scams*, and "a glorious miracle coming out of World War II," the restoration of the Gothic frescoes of St Mary's church in Lübeck, which was destroyed by bombs in 1942. When the church was reopened in 1951, "The sight was one of magnificent inspiration, with 36 figures of saints, all 10 feet high and positioned 60 feet up the nave. The figures in the choir were Romanesque, dating from 1275, while those in the nave were Gothic, dating from 1337."

Worshippers and sightseers flocked to see "the miracle of Lübeck" which was, in fact, the work of an artist named Lothar Malskat and a restorer, Dietrich Fey. Malskat had painted all the frescoes using historical figures and modern German starlets as models, one of the starlets serving as a model for the Virgin Mary.

These are just a few of the hundreds of exposures assembled by Carl Sifakis in nearly 300 well-illustrated pages.

It is a revealing – and salutary – volume about which I have only one regret: its lack of references. General warnings against twisters don't need them, but specific cases do.



# NEWSDESK...NEWSDESK...NEWSDESK...

**Humanism in Wales:** Thanks to the work of four active groups, Humanism in Wales is attracting more public attention than ever before, reports Zonia Bowen, Secretary, Humanist Council of Wales. Recent achievements include:

- West Glamorgan Humanist Group securing participation by Maureen Duffy and Michael Foot in the UK Year of Literature programme at Swansea;

- Cardiff Humanists hosting a training course for 12 funeral officiants at a local crematorium;

- North Wales Humanists obtaining regular and extensive coverage in the Welsh-language media;

- The Humanist Society of Mid-Wales being included on the consultative committee of the new private crematorium at Aberystwyth;

- An active network of 16 ceremonies officiants and celebrants meeting regularly.

As well as running a stand at the National Eisteddfod of Wales, August 5-12, where Humanist literature was distributed alongside Welsh-language material already prepared, Humanists are following up Sir Hermann Bondi's recent letter to the eight Standing Advisory Committees on RE in Wales – and consequent media interest – by pressing for SACRE representation, with a sustained campaign if it is not forthcoming.

They have launched a Humanist Council of Wales to speak with a single voice on behalf of Humanism and the four groups in Wales, so that more effective representations can be made to the Welsh Office (which handles education in Wales), the media, Welsh teaching unions and other relevant organisations.

Said Zonia Bowen: "We are determined to make the case for Humanism, but we are now badly in need of funds to finance our proposals. An immediate target of £500 has been set to cover the hire of a stand at the Eisteddfod and printing costs for literature.

"Donations of any amount will be welcome, but we should especially like to show our gratitude for any gift of £12 or more by sending a copy of an audio tape of a recent BBC Wales radio programme *All Things Considered*, where Richard Paterson, BHA Vice-Chairman, was interviewed in-depth on Humanism. This half-hour tape illuminates questions about Humanism which the uninformed public might ask. The tape is guaranteed to stimulate a fascinating and rewarding discussion and debate within Humanist groups, as an alternative to an outside speaker, and provide ammunition and food for thought for anyone who may be called upon to explain the Humanist viewpoint."

Make cheques payable to Humanist Council of Wales and send to the treasurer, Nia Owens, Pen Aber, Lon Priestley, Caernarfon, Gwynedd, LL55 1HP.

**Atheism for all:** In his new publication *Introduction to Atheism*, the Norwegian scholar Dr Finngeir Hiorth not only gives an introduction to atheism, but also further develops the theory of atheism

Considering the contemporary importance of atheism, the literature on the theory of atheism is still rather limited, says Dr Hiorth: "There are many people who do not believe in any god, but who instead of calling themselves atheists, call themselves freethinkers, humanists, rationalists or agnostics. These names have their advantages, but also their weaknesses."

In his book on atheism, Dr Hiorth discusses the views of a number of people who have emphasised that they are atheists, including the Indian Gora, the Canadian Kai Nielsen, the Englishman Richard Robinson, and the Americans Michael Martin, George H Smith, and Madalyn O'Hair. In an introductory chapter, Dr Hiorth gives his answer to the question: "What is atheism?" and in succeeding chapters discusses concepts of atheism, the justification of atheism, critics of religion, Kai Nielsen's atheism, secularisation, materialism, and the views of the German atheist and materialist Carl Vogt. In a concluding chapter the author treats of ethics and positive atheism.

*Introduction to Atheism* was published in May by the Indian Secular Society, Aboli, 850/8A Shivajinagar, Pune 411 005, India; paperback price US \$30, post free.

The Indian Secular Society was founded in 1969 by A B Shah, who remained its President until his death in 1981. Since then, Abraham Solomon, a veteran of Indian rationalism, has been President. The society publishes *The Secularist*, Membership, which includes *The Secularist*, costs US \$10 a year; life membership US \$100.

Finngeir Hiorth is a life member of the Indian Secular Society, which recently has expanded its publishing activities and also intends to publish his *Introduction to Humanism*. Earlier publications include *Religion in History* by Winwood Reade; *Secularism, Report of a Seminar*, 1993; *Sense and Nonsense* by Shakuntala Paranjpye; *Affirmations of Humanism and a Declaration of Interdependence: Bertrand Russell's Philosophy of Values*, by D D Bandiste, and *A Secular Humanist Declaration*, edited by Paul Kurtz.

A German translation of *Introduction to Atheism* has been published by the Angelika Lenz Verlag, Fasanenweg 8, D-31535 Neustadt, Germany, as *Atheismus – genau betrachtet, eine Einfuhrung*, DEM 25. Residents of Scandinavia may obtain the book from Finngeir Hiorth, Kirkehaugsveien 3, 0283 Oslo, Norway, to whom all inquiries from UK readers should go. Please make contact with the author before sending money.

**Sobriety without God:** The inaugural meeting of the Central London Group of SOS – the Secular Organisation for Sobriety – is to be held at 7.30pm on Tuesday, September 26, at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

SOS takes a rational approach to attaining sobriety – without religion – based on individual responsibility and reason for people's "sobriety priority."

It has proved a success in the USA and there is one group already functioning in this country – at St Albans. Organisers hope to start a Central London group as part of the national development of SOS, which is a non-profit network of autonomously, non-professional local groups dedicated solely to helping individuals achieve and maintain sobriety.

Members share experiences and encouragement in anonymous and supportive groups making "sobriety the priority...no matter what."

Details, in confidence, from 42A Marble Road, London SE23 2AD (0181 291 5572) or 28 Newgate Close, St Albans AL4 9JE (01763 851266). Please enclose SAE.

**Support for poster:** Expressing a view which will be shared by most readers of *The Freethinker*, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) has declared its support for the British Safety Council over its controversial "Eleventh Commandment" poster which urged the use of condoms and the implication criticised the Roman Catholic Church.

Secretary George Broadhead told *The Freethinker* that GALHA had obtained a quantity of the posters from the British Safety Council and would be distributing them at its meetings and in its mailings. The poster would also be featured in the next issue of *Humanist*.

George Broadhead added: "The Roman Catholic Church deserves all the hostility it gets, considering its prehistoric teachings on sexual practices. Its stance on contraception with its ban on the use of condoms, contributes to poverty and starvation in Third World countries in which it is the dominant religion.

"The RC Church is directly responsible for the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS, because of its ban on condoms. It is also responsible for much of the guilt and misery experienced by lesbians and gays worldwide."

GALHA may be contacted at 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2HB.

**'No' to nukes:** The Norwegian Humanist Association has condemned the French decision to resume nuclear testing at Mururoa in the Pacific. As a leading organisation within the International Humanist and Ethical Union, the Norwegian association has urged all Humanist organisations in all countries to take action against the French resolution.

In a letter to the French Embassy in Oslo, the organisation's Secretary General, Yngvild Kvaale, says: "The current negotiations on a complete nuclear test-ban will have a diminishing chance of success, and thus there is a great risk that the non-proliferation treaty of nuclear weapons will break down. The resolution to resume nuclear testing is a provocation against the international work towards a complete nuclear disarmament. We implore the French government to reconsider its resolution."



# WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN

**R**USSELL and others have written essays under this title and this one is not an attempt to duplicate or amalgamate them.

I am an atheist and so the question of my being any sort of Christian does not arise. But in this essay I take the stand, hypothetically, of being a theist in general. By theist, I mean one who proclaims the *real* existence of a benevolent loving creator whose ways, in total, we do not understand fully – because of our own limitations – but to whom we can relate positively without doing violence either to reason or to decency.

Referring to the Gideon New Testament – which is provided for our instruction in every hotel bedroom in the land – we find “The Most Famous Verse in the Bible,” viz John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* I take this, on the authority of the Christians – who have not repudiated this verse and have not denied its special importance – to be the very core and kernel of the specifically Christian view of things.

## by Eric Stockton

As a theist – in the terms defined above – I would have difficulty in deciding whether this verse is the more remarkable for its silliness or for its immorality. In either case, I, were I a theist, would characterise it as blasphemous, as speaking ill of God.

The silliness is perhaps the more quickly identified. Jesus supposedly died on the cross, after an earthly life of little more than 30 years, and within a few days came back to that life and subsequently ascended to be installed “at the right hand of God.” The gift was thus a mere loan extended and was retrieved by the lender. Such a to-and-fro transaction can hardly be regarded as of importance; it is no big deal. “Gave” is simply false; *loaned* would be a true account of what is claimed.

The wickedness of it is more complex but more harmful to our well-being. Even supposing that the deity does/did have a son in the same sense as human parents have sons (and if the deity does not then the analogy, the parallel, the very point of the matter,

collapses) then it is horribly immoral to imply that a son is the property of his father to be disposed of (given away) by the father in any connection whatsoever. It is especially heinous to present a father as giving his son as a blood sacrifice and it is a staggering case of narcissism to give one’s son as a *sacrifice to oneself*. The crowning wickedness is that this narcissistic atrocity is something in which decent human beings should own to having a vested interest. If one wished for eternal life – a crazy wish indeed – one would be eternally conscience-stricken for having secured it on such appalling terms.

The god that I might have believed in, had I been a theist as defined above, would need all his powers of forgiveness to take the incoherent immorality attributed to him in John 3:16 without losing his cool altogether.

I am glad I am not a theist because, if I were, I would have to fight Christianity tooth-and-nail. As it is, I am an atheist and, to me, one bent faith is much like another, even if Christianity is, in some ways, the worst of them. But in any case one ought to love the Christians while hating the Christianity, ought one not?

## SEPTEMBER SONG

SEPTEMBER! We’re near the end of one of our hottest summers on record – which means that many of our readers must be feeling quite well-off: think of what they’ve saved on gas and electricity bills and on not having to travel in search of the sun.

Come on – before the leaves fall, before reality sets in, let *The Freethinker* share in those summer savings. Your atheist journal simply can’t manage without generous contributions to the fund. Rush cheques, POs to: G W Foote & Company, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald’s Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: D Clamp, O Kaplan von Lang, S H Meszaros, P Proctor, H Shapiro and J Wimple, £2 each; G Neilson, £2.50; F R Albers, R Bell, R A Billen, A W Briglin, J E Dyke, H N Feather, R Lamb, M D Hallett, A Negus, B T Norris, P Payne, F Pidgeon, E M Stone, B J Van Der Sloot and R Wood, £5 each; R Sartin, £8; C Adams, W P Curry, D A Hartley, R Lewis, A Jagger, J Kouri, H Madoc-Jones, I G Norris, I G Payne, M P Portainer, H C Stewart, O Thompson, E Wakefield and J P Witney, £10 each; N Everitt and A J Wilson, £20 each; SKP, £75.

Total for July: £356.50.

## SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

THE Annual General Meeting of the National Secular Society will be held at 2.15pm on Saturday, October 14, in The Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. All members are urged to attend.

## Down Under

MUSLIM George Shoukan arranged for his teenage daughter, Rima Tawil, to marry a boy from the same religion; she “disgraced” the family by living with an Australian boyfriend instead. Shoukan chained her to a bed and beat her with a piece of garden hose, saying: “This is what you get for love. You’re a slut.” He made her write a “suicide” note – and then made a \$1,000 down-payment to have his daughter killed by two “professional assassins,” who turned out to be undercover policemen. Shoukan, who had pleaded not guilty at the committal but guilty at the Supreme Court, was jailed for 10 years. Source: *The Age* (Melbourne), August 12.

A FORMER Catholic priest whose sex offences began half-a-century ago was sentenced to a non-parole jail sentence of 15 months. John Kevin O’Donnell has become one of the oldest prisoners in Victoria. He had pleaded guilty to 12 counts of indecent assault on 10 boys and two girls under the age of 16 between 1946 and 1977. One girl was told by O’Donnell that no one would believe her if she complained – because he was the parish priest. All the victims were students at schools attached to his parish. Some were altar boys. Source: *The Age* (Melbourne), August 12.

FROM an account of the autobiography of Australian Charlie McAdam – half-European, half-Aborigine – quoted in *The Age*, August 14: “Moved to a Catholic mission even further from his mother, he cried himself to sleep for more than a month. A priest told him: ‘You haven’t got a mother, you haven’t got a father. Go back to sleep...otherwise I’ll flog you.’” Charlie doesn’t know how old he is: some sheep station owners noted Aboriginal births in the stud book “along with the foals.” His owner – who happened to be his father – didn’t bother, and wanted his black mother to “knock me on the head because he didn’t want me.”



## THE VATICAN:

# Contraception's OK – as a form of 'self-defence'

by Barbara Smoker

CONTINUING the correspondence in *The Freethinker* (June and July) on the nature of the dispensation (for contraception or abortion) given 35 years ago by Pope John XXIII to nuns who suffered rape during the Simba revolt in the Belgian Congo, a reader has now sent me Internet print-outs on the similar situation in Bosnia (1993), with flashbacks to the Belgian Congo.

It seems that the recent Vatican response to mass rapes of Catholic women, especially nuns, in Bosnia is that, while the ban on abortion remains absolute, the normal ban on artificial contraception may be disregarded by a woman in danger of rape – for it is now recognised that the dispensation cannot justifiably be restricted to nuns. The reason given (in the Vatican-approved Jesuit magazine *Civiltà Cattolica*) for allowing contraception in these circumstances is that: "It is not then a refusal of a gift of love, but a form of legitimate self-defence." However, they do not apparently accept the possibility of rape within marriage.

A rape victim may also, say some Catholic theologians, "get rid of the semen in the hours immediately after the act of violence." But if it is really as easy as that, why has any woman ever succumbed to an unwanted pregnancy?

A Catholic medical ethics spokesman in London, Luke Gormally (who, incidentally, contributed the theological chapter to my book on Voluntary Euthanasia), has said that a woman who believes she may ovulate after being raped may take a "morning-after pill" to inhibit ovulation, though not as a form of very early abortion. In the Catholic Church, women are apparently expected to be aware of the exact moment of ovulation – and may suffer guilt feelings if they are unsure about it. Small wonder that most of them now disregard the Church's ruling on artificial birth control altogether!

It is predicted by many Vatican-watchers that the next Pope is likely to bow to the inevitable and reverse the ruling against contraception. Fortunately, infallibility has never been claimed for that ruling – only papal authority.

# Might-have-bee a

**R**ESPONSES to my "Last Word" of May make it very clear that it wasn't the last word. Further interesting questions have arisen of political might-have-beens and maybes and of the real meaning of Fascism and Marxism. Some of the points raised are based on misreadings of what I actually wrote. While I had naturally concentrated on Marx himself, "Marxism" has come to embrace not only the writings of Marx but also of Engels, Lenin and, as Carl Pinel points out (July), Bernstein. Then there are Luxemburg, Trotsky, Mao and others.

Heretics of course add to the inconsistencies of the true faith, but there are contradictions within Marx's own writings as he saw events unfold in Germany or Russia not to his liking or expectations. Yet could things in his lifetime and later have turned out otherwise?

Many, perhaps most, freethinkers today would describe themselves as philosophical materialists and determinists but not as dialectical materialists and historical determinists. C R Wason (July) implies there's no essential difference between the two positions as he makes the interesting claim that biological evolution is a manifestation of the dialectic at work. He alludes to some recent cosmologists who have resurrected the argument from design in apparent support of vitalism rather than mechanism. If I understand him correctly, Wason is saying that those who reject dialectical materialism must embrace vitalism.

While interesting, this claim is in my view, totally wrong-headed. Vitalism and dialecticism are, in reality, bedfellows. They're both manifestations of teleology: a belief that the cosmos has not only a plan but also a purpose. Religionists and Marxists of course detect a different purpose; one spiritual or otherworldly, the other material or this-worldly. This parallelism in thought processes led Bertrand Russell and others to equate Christian theology with Marxist dogma: Yahweh, dialectical materialism; the Messiah, Marx; the Bible, *Das Kapital*; the elect, the proletariat; the Church, the Communist Party; the Second Coming, the Revolution; and so on.

Karl Heath (August) displays other similarities between Marxist pundits and religious fanatics: arrogant and false assertions that opponents know nothing about the

"truths" they are attacking; reliance on sacred texts to the exclusion of subsequent history; eagerness to demonstrate any opinion, fundamentalist or revisionist, by selective quotation. Ironically, in trying to deny the existence within Marxism of "historical determinism" (which I didn't say was a derivation from Marx, any more than "humanistic ethics" was). Heath quotes Engels observing that *future* historians will find the State in "the Museum of Antiquities." More recently, Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders told the West: "History is on our side. We will bury you." That's historical determinism, if ever I heard it. And, of course, it's totally discredited by events.

The antithesis of vitalism is non-dialectical materialism. According to this materialism, life and thought aren't produced by "spirit" or "soul" but of molecular organization in a way still dimly understood. They didn't come into being through "sudden dramatic changes" but incrementally over millions of years. In our own lifetime, we can detect the emergence of new plant species by natural hybridisation. Though many of these are sterile, some can perpetuate themselves through inbreeding, as Darwin found on the Galapagos Islands. Sudden dramatic changes in the fossil record do result from some biological act of special creation or dialectical caprice but from physical intervention like a meteorite impact, comet close passage, tilting of Earth's axis, massive volcanic activity of the like, leading to climatic changes that favoured some species over others.

## Quality

The advent of mind is more complicated but also didn't appear in 4004 BC or with the emergence of *Homo erectus* a million or so years ago – as any study of the visit to the zoo can show. The more one studies biology, the more difficult it is when quantity turns into quality. Not that matters whether or not one uses this Marxist (or Heraclitean) dialectic is the belief that the changes were foreordained and can be predicted.

In Volume I of *Capital* and elsewhere Marx declared that "the monopoly of capitalism" (that is, advanced capitalism) "becomes a fetter upon the mode of production



# ees and maybes of politics

**Marxism – a theory so wrong in its practical consequences. The words of DAVID TRIBE in our May issue certainly set the political cat among the pigeons. Here, Tribe – one-time Editor of *The Freethinker*, historian of freethought and a distinguished former President of the National Secular Society – replies to critics**

emphasises the gulf between posses- and dispossessed and makes a proletari- quities. "Revolution possible; whereas peasant rever- Soviet... to ensure permanent success. Pinel... recognises this. But, say Pinel and... if Marxists believe capitalism will... ably collapse, why the need for... munist parties? The answer is that... 's sophisticated dialectic isn't entirely... canical. It needs the mediation of politi-... conscious, motivated and mobilised... iduals. After all, even predestinarian... ysterians and Jehovah's Witnesses... or theoretically redundant missionary... ty.

ther biblical nor Marxist prophecies... come close to predicting the extraordi-... political changes we've experienced in... th Century. J H Morten's letter and... Heath's Last Word (both June) usefully... nd us that at one stage in Britain the... hirts were much more than figures in... ghetti Western. Had the Great... ession been a little deeper and longer, ... ot interrupted by World War II, Mosley... ell have come to power. After the... his posturing in the Union Movement... vsume the unreality of a filmic farce.

however, Hitler, Mussolini and... hito had won the war, Mosley's egoma-... prospects wouldn't have been

I agree with Heath that we should... igher than the Mosley rabble for a... ing government. As the recent film *The... ns of the Day* shows well, support for... was significant in the upper echelons... tish society, chiefly as a bulwark

Not the Soviet "Communism." (The film... ver American ambivalence in this... Hitler was no madman but an evil... es who recognised the benefits of pre-... ing an appearance of normality in the... ries he overran. Had he invaded... he would probably, at least for a

have perpetuated both the Monarchy... the Westminster system, suitably eas-... King Edward VIII could have been... ed to return with Queen Wallis; and... Edward VI, Bloody Mary and... eth I were able to find tame prelates

of the erastian Church of England to bless their very different theologies, I have no doubt a divine would have emerged to consecrate a divorcee's third husband. As for Parliament, if Chamberlain wouldn't or couldn't come back, there were plenty of other Tory captains of industry or knights from the shires willing to form a puppet government.

But this is all speculation, and of the past. What of the present and the future? Elsie Karbacz is mistaken in saying I think "that Fascism can never make a comeback" (July). I merely observed that it was discredited in 1945 and I strongly suggested that Nazism could come to power again in Germany at some future time if that country experienced the humiliation and economic collapse of the 1920s. And the same could apply elsewhere. If the present chaos in the old Soviet Union continues, Fascism could arise there. Alternatively, Marxism could stage a comeback since many of the old *apparatchiki* are apparently still in power, wearing different hats. Unlike the historical determinists, I hold no blueprint of the future.

Nevertheless, I repeat that the existing fragmented Nazi groups, lacking both a Messiah and a *Mein Kampf*, have "minuscule chances of coming to power nationally" (May). After all, what have they achieved? J H Morten tells us (June) that they succeeded in stopping a "friendly" football match between England and Germany "for fear of rioting," and a similar one between England and Ireland. I know nothing of the details, but my ignorant impulse is to congratulate them. English football fans on foreign soil have the proud reputation of being the greatest threat to peace since the Vandal invasions of 1,600 years ago.

At home, what are the signs of contemporary British Fascism? Morten (June) and Karbacz (July) indict the Conservative Government for increasing police powers, interfering with local government, curtailing the trade union movement, promoting quangos and so on. No doubt these measures are reprehensible – though Britain's "loony Left" must try any government's patience –

but can they really be called a manifestation of the Corporate state? I doubt it.

Admittedly, a crypto-Fascist government might begin in this way, but true Fascism has rarely been crypto. While we must display eternal vigilance, to denounce every Right or Left action of which we disapprove as "Fascist" or "Communist" simply devalues the language and can ultimately enact the fable of the boy who cried "wolf."

Such an attitude places too much stress on leaders. We also have the fickle "masses." While praising them for opposing Mosley in the 1930s, Morten censures them for preserving "the organs of oppression" in the 1940s. Karbacz asks: was Marx "hopelessly Utopian in his belief that violent revolution could produce a perfectible society?" The overwhelming evidence is that he was. And no student of psychology need be surprised. What dictatorship ever voluntarily renounced its power, and why should a dictatorship of the proletariat be any different?

## Gangster

It may be said that the real leaders of the Russian – and many another – Revolution were bourgeois, and lawyers to boot. (It seems the more you know about law, the less you respect it). But how can "the public" *en masse* own and direct the means of production, distribution and exchange? So was the Soviet system "state capitalism" after all? And are ordinary people – as distinct from intellectuals, who are apparently no longer sent to gulags – better off under the current Russian system, which has been called gangster capitalism?

R G Sargent asks where would I "direct our attentions for a full understanding of what capitalism does to us and to the world at large" (June). Unhappily, I would probably have to say – the *Communist Manifesto*, and with that express some concern over the worldwide trend towards "small government" at the behest of taxpayers and associated "deregulation" or "self-regulation." This is the path that leads to more Robert Maxwells under liberal democracies. But if applied Marxism leads to state capitalism, then Marxist self-regulation leads only to more Joseph Stalins. If, instead, we turn from "scientific" to "Utopian" socialism, we find communes whose lives were nasty, brutish and short.

This really is my last word on the subject.



# 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, October 1, 5.30pm for 6pm. Jan Shamin: *Alternatives to Violence*.

**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, September 18, 7.30pm: Annual General Meeting. 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, Lymptone, 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.

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

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, October 3, 8 pm: Questions and discussion. 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, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB

(telephone 0116 2622250). Sunday, September 24, 6.30pm: Fred Whitehead (USA): *Freethought on the American Frontier*.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, September 28, 8pm: Discussion on *Making Humanism Happen*.

**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:** Meetings at Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Information from Brian Snood on 01603 455101. Thursday, September 21, 7.30pm: Public meeting.

**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, October 4, 8pm: Chris Pike: *The Woodcraft Folk, Co-operative Youth Organisation*. 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 Blisshen. Published by the Rationalist Press Association. £7.50 plus £1 postage from RPA, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

**Foundations of Modern Humanism:** Former Editor of *The Freethinker* William McIlroy's new pamphlet is now being reprinted after a speedy sell-out of the first edition. £1 per copy plus 25p p&p; bulk orders on application to 0114 2685731. Payment with order to: Sheffield Humanist Society, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT. Colin McCall in *The Freethinker*: "...an enlightening read."





# DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



## Medics strike myth-mongers below the belt

ONLY the most belligerent opponents of abortion, contraception and sex education openly admit that they are motivated by religious beliefs. The majority parade a phoney concern to conceal their real aim – which is promoting fear and ignorance.

The compulsory pregnancy lobby – a disparate band of “pro-lifers,” Protestant traditionalists and career celibates – have long since lost the battle on two fronts. Most couples, religious or non-religious, married or

unmarried, control their fertility by artificial means.

And every year, thousands of Mass-attending, bead-telling women travel to British abortion clinics from Ireland (a land fondly described by Pope John Paul II as “the rock of faith”).

What of sex education? The subject is a bugaboo of those who regard ignorance as being preferable to knowledge and sexual activity as an unpleasantness necessary in the cause of procreation. They do their worst to frighten parents about the alleged danger, even inevitability, of sex education leading to experimentation, intercourse, pregnancy and abortion among the young.

That myth has been knocked on the head by two studies, results of which have been published in the *British Medical Journal*. The

first, conducted by researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who interviewed 19,000 men and women, reveals that such fears are unfounded. They report in the *BMJ*: “Our survey does not support the claim that provision of sex education hastens the onset of sexual activity.”

In fact, young people who attend sex education lessons at school tend to become sexually active at a later age than do those whose information on sexual matters is acquired from other sources. They have fewer partners and are more responsible regarding contraception. Of course, it is knowledge of, and access to, methods of contraception that infuriates opponents of sex education.

The findings of this study are supported by data compiled by the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles. It shows that males who were informed in sex education lessons are less likely to have sex before the age of 16.

Researchers agree that good quality sex education is not cheap. But it is sound economic sense, representing a saving in health care and social services, reducing the incidence of unplanned pregnancy, abortion and sexually-transmitted disease.

Of course, many parents will still have misgivings about entrusting their children's sex education to the school. And if the school is one to which Roman Catholic priests have access, such apprehension is understandable.

## Sabbath law in terminal decline

SABBATARIANS in the Western Isles are celebrating a victory – albeit a minor and probably temporary one – over the forces of darkness. The new passenger ferry between Stornaway and Ullapool on the Scottish mainland, will not operate on Sundays.

The ferry and new terminal cost more than £15 million, much of it taxpayers' money. But islands like Lewis are still dominated by Protestant churches determined to impose their standards on society as a whole. Social activities, including travel, are taboo from Saturday midnight until Monday morning.

Finlay Macleod, an independent television producer, has protested against knowing to “a very vocal minority of Sabbatarians.” This caused the Rev Angus Smith, of Cross Free Church, Ness, to offer a kindly prayer which will be “for Dr Macleod to know the glory of God and learn to love the Sabbath.”

But ochone. Prayer appears to be somewhat ineffectual, as Sassenachs who laboured in vain to “keep Sunday special” will aver. Rather than God-bothering, the Rev Angus should take the hint from a representative of the ferry operators: “You don't build an asset of this worth and leave it lying idle one day of the week.”

Meanwhile, south of the Border, Sunday observers have suffered another set-back. Legislation has been passed allowing for public houses to be open all day on Sunday. They were prevented from doing so by laws dating back more than a hundred years. These have been swept away in the latest round of reform.

Restrictions on Sunday drinking have long been a source of annoyance and mystification. An Act of 1872 decreed that public houses could open for two hours at middle day and up to five hours in the evening. During the 1914-18 war, Sunday opening hours were reduced to five. This was intended to reduce absenteeism and slacking by workers in munitions factories. Nothing was allowed to hinder production of armaments, the biblical Commandment against killing notwithstanding.

Unable to prevent reforming legislation on Sunday shopping and leisure activities, John Roberts, secretary of the Lord's Day Observance Society, has yet another reason to feel peeved. Referring to ungodly behaviour by the Very Rev Stephen Smalley, Dean of Chester, and members of the Cathedral staff, Mr Roberts fumed: “I think it's disgusting. There are not many worse examples the Church could set to a world in desperate need.”

Oh dear! What shenanigans have they been getting up to at Chester? Canoodling in the cloisters? Groping in the graveyard? Shagging in the Sanctuary? Worse, much worse. The Dean and his colleagues went to the races on – horror! – a Sunday.

The first race of the day was the Cathedral Appeal Conditions Stakés, so named to publicise a drive to raise £2 million for the Cathedral. The Rt Rev Michael Baughen, Bishop of Chester, did not approve of his underlings' day at the races, even for a good cause. But he was on holiday, and when the Bishop's away...

## Selective Saviour

IT IS a cause for rejoicing when a baby who is born seriously underweight survives and develops normally against all the odds. No one will begrudge the parents of Philip Barber, who weighed only 30 ounces at birth, their happiness.

However, it is rather off-putting to read gushing comments made when Philip was put on display at a Holiness Convention in Southport. The assembled worshippers, according to the *Methodist Recorder*, “celebrated God's goodness” towards the “miraculous survivor.”

The boy's mother told the Convention: “A reason why Philip is here with us tonight is because of the prayer and love that was shown here last year.”

The report did not mention any words of praise for the doctors and nursing staff who cared for Philip – nor did the *Recorder* record any expression of sympathy for those parents whose babies the all-loving, all-powerful God decides should *not* be miraculous survivors.



## YOU'RE TELLING US!

## A Humanist 'reappraisal' called for

I FEEL I must congratulate you on the August issue of *The Freethinker*, for its wide range of subjects covered, its exceptional collection of well-written articles of outstanding interest, and, as we have now come to expect, an extensive coverage of thought-provoking readers' views and comments, which engenders a feeling of social unity and for me is often one of its most attractive features. It deserves to be on the public bookstalls, because it contains topical, readable material of interest, not only to committed Humanists, but also, I feel sure, to a significant number of others for whom religion already plays no part in their lives.

With reference to "You're Telling Us," I was sorry to read that John Clunas was thinking of giving up the practice of contributing to this feature. I hope that he has a "rethink," because I have found his contributions usually reflect some original and carefully considered ideas. I can understand his feelings of being on his own at times, because I have sometimes felt the same myself. Perhaps it is like straying from the beaten track and an inevitable result of having strong convictions which some others do not share, such as the need to bring our public image up-to-date to cope with the great changes taking place in the world around us. I hope that John will find encouragement in the assurance that he is not alone in this respect.

I feel that the time has now come for the Humanist movement to reappraise its position if it hopes to become a progressive social influence with the support of a substantial number of discriminating people. Circumstances are changing rapidly, and our views and policies must change accordingly, not by abandoning our principles, but by modifying their application in the light of experience and the general increase in knowledge of all kinds. For example, religion is no longer the powerful force that it was in the days of earlier Humanists. It now plays no significant part in the lives of, at least, one-third of the people of Britain and of the remaining two-thirds, many only revert to their parent church for "match, hatch and dispatch" ceremonies, leaving only a comparatively few regular church-goers. It seems to me that emphasis on an anti-religious role could now be counter-productive, when so many are already so disposed, and devout church-goers are unlikely to be convinced otherwise. To many of the remainder who are indifferent or lukewarm, anti-religious arguments may now appear to represent a negative philosophy, which does not appeal to them.

Furthermore, the Humanist philosophy is mainly concerned with morals and ethics and it is already popular knowledge that religious "leaders" have failed to give a lead in this respect. In fact, many of the greatest ethical problems of our time arise from technological progress in which religion has had no active

role. For example, environmental pollution resulting from selfish and short-sighted exploitation of technology, the millions of former "workers" now rendered permanently unemployed by "labour-saving" devices, and the monopolisation of about of two-thirds of the earth's resources by one third of its population. Vital ethical problems also arise from the demographic and other side-effects of abortion, contraception, IVF, and other medical and surgical innovations, atomic energy and the atomic bomb, information technology, space exploration, and so forth. There is an endless list of innovations, many of which present vital ethical problems calling for a rational and humanitarian approach.

Should it be said that Secular Humanism has no part to play in dealing with such "political" problems? If so, what are we aiming to achieve? If not, what should we do about it? Should we play the part of impartial observers and await developments, and do nothing but perhaps express our opinions? Political and religious organisations seem to be blindly ignorant of the possible consequences of the universal application of new scientific technique and continue to profess power and influence they no longer possess, while the organisations engaged in Research and Development shape their new world order, without inhibition, in accordance with their own personal interests.

However, there is a growing number of people organising themselves into effective working parties to combat some of the most obvious and disastrous consequences of this selfish and short-sighted exploitation of modern technology. I feel that if we do not support them in these aims, or devote similar efforts from a Humanist standpoint, the Humanist movement may become only a historical phenomenon.

FRANK HOLMES MBE  
Edinburgh

## Questions of free-will

D HARROP (August) seems to argue that: (a) the ability to make decisions or to perform actions – even if genetically determined – "allows of free-will" and (b) the claim that specific decisions or choices genetically determined are "undemonstrable – hence absurd."

Determinism allows for choices to be made and acts to be performed; what is relevant is why a particular outcome emerges from a range of options. This does not reflect "free-will" but the arena of pre-existing causal determinants, of which genetics is but one. That we cannot observe the synthesis of forces at play (genetics-environment-socialisation *et al*) does not make the claim "absurd." As Hume pointed out, we don't observe the force(s) that make physical actions occur, either – we live in a world of probabilities, not absolutes.

The Libertarian must describe the mechanism that would make a truly "free-will" act possible – one that suspends all pre-existing

variables – and give concrete examples of same – to an acceptable degree of probability.  
[Dr] LARRY WRIGHT  
Swindon

## Greatest tyranny

I READ your excellent and harrowing report "Hand of Islam tightens grip on women" (July) with great foreboding. The thought that even the freedom of Speakers' Corner is being sacrificed to religious demagogues to avoid just the risk of fisticuffs with the police reminds me of Benjamin Franklin's observation: "they who would give up essential liberty for a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Sadly, the behaviour of the erstwhile liberal régimes of the West should be no surprise. The Pope has made an alliance with the Iraqi mullahs and the "Waco" Christians have the ear of the Republican Party in the US Congress. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment and, ultimately, the revolution that gave rise to the USA in 1776 is under threat from the irrational/religious tide that began when David Hume demonstrated the illogicality of scientific induction in 1739. The situation was saved by Karl Popper in 1934 but the 195-year stall in the progress of Reason has allowed the irrational forces of religion and fanaticism to regroup, helped in this century by the social disruption of two devastating world wars. Unless the religious tide in America (fuelled by their 'Holy War' on drugs) abates, there's soon going to be little to choose between them and the Mullahs as masters. The one will put us to death for not believing in Mohammed (who'll save us), the other will put us to death for taking drugs (which might kill us). Truly no tyranny is so great as that exercised ostensibly for the good of its victims. (This is why John Clunas [July, p109] is wrong).

[Dr] J A MARKS  
Liverpool

## Aberration of creation?

BEING a new recruit to modern Humanism, I've come in half way to the argument, in your letters' column, of whether or not atheism is a faith: my entry into your ranks being delayed by the too militantly expressed atheism in your literature set against my reasoned agnosticism. As your correspondent Ben Hayes has it: "This debate is the equivalent of arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin..."

To think about the origins of this "Creation" (for want of a better word) takes us outside the limits of our understanding: just as Cantor discovered that concepts of infinity lie beyond our comprehension's boundaries. And we've no



## YOU'RE TELLING US!

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way of knowing if the reality out there is truly reflected by our inner imaginings. Just as the earth's shape was not affected by belief in its flatness, so our belief cannot affect the existence or non-existence of any God.

Whether you regard atheism as a faith, or not, depends on definitions; and "words mean exactly what you want them to mean: nothing more and nothing less." But since Alan R Bailey's "without evidence to the contrary" could equally well apply to the followers of any religion, then he is defining his atheism – *ipso facto* – as a faith. And Z Finkelstein's "give my love to the Pier Head" implied insistence that pink elephants can exist – presumably along with everything else – only by the intervention of some supreme being, makes me wonder about his suitability for membership of this organisation: with its insistence on man-made solutions!

Vivien Gibson suffers from the delusion that what is good or bad for us must necessarily be so for God. Is God required to be good before we will believe in Him/Her? Our refusal to believe must be a source of great consternation to any Being capable of forming this infinity of which we are so insignificant a part. Judging by man's nature, as expressed through the ages since his evolution, perhaps we are the sickness threatening the universe; and the pathogens are the Creator's medicine, sent to try and expunge us: just as we send drugs into our bodies to exterminate the micro-organisms threatening our existence. I wonder, do bacteria and viruses refuse to believe in Us because we are so "evil" in their eyes: after all, since they know that they are made in Our "image," they should be able to comprehend Our motives: shouldn't they?

When one looks at mankind, with his lethal mix of high intelligence coupled to still-functioning primordial "kill-first-and-ask-questions-after" dominance drives, one wonders if we're not an aberration of creation programmed to self-destruct in perversity. Don't look too hard at the asteroid belt!

WILFRED GAUNT  
Leicester

## One small step...

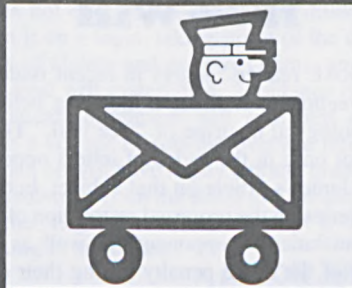
WHEN I was a boy I was taught that man had been created perfect but had fallen. I remember a feeling of doom and gloom at the time. When I became a man I learned that man had evolved from the lowest forms of life and that hopefully the process continues. This and similar knowledge cast doubts in my mind on the integrity of religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, it gave me hope and faith that man with all his faults will one day solve such problems as mass starvation, over-population and war. Democracy and United Nations might help. It could take a million years but what is that compared with the 3.5 billion years it has

taken for him to get where he is? Such a hope is not incompatible with faith in an Almighty God or mysterious creator.

The Universe, Life and Evolution are an awe-inspiring miracle of which we all are a part. Perhaps God, Nature, The Almighty and the Universe are all one thing. Is it possible that one day believers and unbelievers worldwide could take one small step towards agreement on such a definition? One small step to end wars? One small step towards a better world?

ERNEST CRAPPER  
Carterton



**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.**

## Hill's reply to critics

TO ANSWER some criticisms against me...

**R A Cobb:** If drugs were decriminalised, might we not see millions of users, rather than thousands? Smokers smoke, knowing that there is a one-in-two chance of it killing them – so, possibly believing the lies of the drug trade, they may switch to what they are told is a safer smoke.

And the student. She was in her 20s (I don't know many 71-year-old students) and her teacher, the guy who said drugs were OK a decade earlier and was responsible for thousands of deaths by this lie (which people like V Zakrzewski still believe and point to).

**V Zakrzewski:** Two wrongs don't make a right. We all know the legal drugs (tobacco and alcohol) should be banned, but that's no reason why the illegal drugs should be legalised – although they could be if enough addicts get into Westminster, as happened in the case of the now-legal drugs.

Ask a drunk – he'll tell you that booze is OK. It doesn't hurt him or other people he knows who also drink. And it doesn't affect him...even helps his driving. It's the same with drugs. If you mess with the brain, then you change all that your outlook is based on. I'm sure V Zakrzewski believes what he says, as I'm sure that the drunk does also.

**Leslie T Wilkins:** If we followed his arguments on stopping drug addicts, crime would run riot because any action taken against criminals may hurt them or someone else.

Suicide is still against the law, but you've got to catch them first! Taking drugs isn't regarded as suicide since death is not a 100 per cent certainty (the major drug, tobacco, is only 50 per cent-ish).

As to solving the problem – easy! The West buys up all the drugs and burns them. It's a lot cheaper than the present method. If people were unable to get drugs, the addict problem would solve itself before the drug barons could grow far larger amounts than the West could afford.

**S J Gula (July):** What is the square root of minus-one? Even God, with all his supposed power, cannot solve that! Obviously, Gula didn't understand the proof I gave. The infinite cannot live with the finite, or any part of it.

Gula got so much "fan mail" because of his Christian viewpoint. Atheists hate people who believe in fairy tales (Christians) telling us what we can and cannot do, so we find zeal.

MICHAEL HILL  
Crystal Palace

## Reformation v revenge

DO Stephen Moreton or Charles Marshall (July and August letters) have any evidence that the death penalty is cheaper than the alternatives?

If they were to study the situation in America, they would find, as the US General Accounting Office did in 1989, that "death sentence cases cost more than non-death penalty cases."

Recent studies have found that the costs of capital punishment can greatly exceed the costs of life imprisonment.

In the March-April 1995 issue of *Index on Censorship*, Richard Dieter wrote that: "If a programme is highly cost intensive, given to years of litigious expense, focused on only a few individuals, and produces no measurable effects, then it should be replaced by better alternatives."

Life imprisonment guarantees no possibility of re-offending, and is more cost-effective over the long term.

Stephen Moreton advocates the liquidation of the "hard-core" of habitual criminals. He claims that this follows from a "strictly logical" appraisal of the situation, but fails to explain how. He admits that he doesn't remember

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the statistics in any detail. Surely, if (as seems to be the case) the majority of crime doesn't involve physical violence, and if Moreton's "habitual criminals" are responsible for the majority of crime, then we'd be executing people who have physically harmed no-one, while sparing the lives of mass murderers because they are a tiny minority of criminals. Moreton doesn't tell us which offences comprise the "two-thirds of crime" (some of which probably shouldn't be illegal anyway) he wants to kill people for committing. Either he doesn't know, or he doesn't want to expose the absurdity of his argument.

Moreton argues that, to avoid killing the innocent as part of his bloodbath of petty thieves, only those convicted five times would be put to death (if the police can lie once, they can lie a dozen times). So, someone convicted half-a-dozen times for minor offences (shoplifting? smoking cannabis?) would die, whereas someone convicted once for a string of brutal terrorist bomb attacks resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people, would live.

"Reason seems to evaporate when dealing with crime and punishment," says Dr Moreton. It certainly does in his case.

But really, all this talk of costs, deterrence, and miscarriages of justice is subordinate to the real debate between those who are ideologically committed to retributive punishment, and those who want the justice system to achieve tangible positive results, in concert with efforts to improve social conditions.

Some object in principle to giving the state the legal right to kill. Some have radical disagreements with the concepts of "crime" and "punishment." Some believe that if killing is wrong, then so is judicial killing.

Restitution and reformation versus revenge is the substantive issue here.

DAN J BYE  
Rotherham

## Facts...or prejudice?

CORRESPONDENTS should prefer facts to ill-informed prejudice. Mary Lewis (August letters) says that the Soviet Union was only our ally during the German attack. On May 26, 1942, Britain and the Soviet Union signed a 20-year treaty of alliance and mutual assistance, pledging full collaboration in peace and war.

She makes the astounding statement that "the Soviet Union was the enemy of Britain before 1941."

The Soviet Union never attacked Britain; we attacked them.

Winston Churchill, the chief architect of the War of Intervention, 1919-1922, wrote, with characteristic candour, in his *World Crisis - the Aftermath*: "Were the Allies at war with Russia? - certainly not, but they shot Soviet Russians at sight. They stood as invaders on

Russian soil. They armed the enemies of the Soviet Government. They blockaded the ports and sunk its battleships. They earnestly desired and schemed its downfall.

"But war? - Shocking!

"Interference? - Shame!

"It was, they repeated, a matter of indifference to them how Russians settled their own affairs. They were impartial - BANG!"

KARL HEATH  
Coventry

## Barbara Smoker on free-will

SEVERAL readers' letters in recent issues of *The Freethinker* indicate a lingering belief in the theological doctrine of "free will." This is seen not only in the series of letters opposing Leslie James's article on that subject, but also in the series on the proposed restoration of capital punishment - opponents as well as supporters of the death penalty basing their comments on the question of guilt or innocence. But this distinction can have no place in rational argument, since conscious behaviour is determined by a combination of nature and nurture.

If the question of guilt is simply taken to mean whether or not an accused person carried out a criminal act, then that is a matter of (sometimes) ascertainable fact, which will underlie both the penal element of deterrence and assessment of the likelihood of future offences, so that the public may be adequately protected; but it has little to do with the notion of justice. Indeed, few judicial systems impose punishment (as distinct from restraint) on those who are clearly mentally deranged - but that is surely a matter of degree. We do not choose our subconscious compulsions. "But he should have used more strength of will," people say - apparently not taking into account the fact that strength of will is as much the outcome of nature and nurture as anything else.

When using the term "free will," it is all too common to switch imperceptibly from the rationally acceptable meaning that in the absence of external coercion one has the *feeling* that one is free to make personal choices, to the theological meaning, implying that unconscious neuronal activity culminating in conscious decisions is under the conscious control of a personal monitor (the soul - the essential self) and one is therefore blameworthy or praiseworthy. Hence hell and heaven.

In practice, there is something to be said for generally responding to conduct as though conscious acts that are free in the first sense are also free in the second. But that does not make them so.

BARBARA SMOKER  
London SE6

## Pornography

IN HIS review "Ms Grundy under fire," published in the August issue of *The Freethinker*, Leslie James says that "hard pornography is potentially dangerous and corrupting and justifies censorship." Why, then, do Continental countries survive happily without censorship? It seems to be the old, old story of "No sex, please - we're British!"

COUN E GOODMAN  
Chairman  
Campaign Against  
Censorship

## Sentient beings

ROBERT TEE (July) on the authority of Barbara Smoker claims that Humanists put people first and animals second, and that is what "Humanism" means. If this is so, Mr Tee ought to ask himself what makes "people" different to "animals." He presumably does not believe it is because we are made in God's image, so he must be able to differentiate by reason alone. All animals, including humans, are conscious, are able to feel pain and can reason to varying degrees; indeed, the connection between all living things - from plankton to ourselves - is obvious by our sharing the same chemical coding mechanism (DNA). While it is true that animals cannot understand or participate in the human code of morals, this is equally true of babies and the severely mentally-handicapped.

For myself, I accord animals the respect and consideration they warrant as sentient beings. I therefore refrain from all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose.

RICK SAVAGE  
Kingston upon Thames

I THINK Robert Tee is splitting hairs somewhat when he accuses me of misquoting him since I argued that animals do communicate with us to the extent of arguing for their own survival.

If sophistry and the ability to philosophise are a prerequisite to kindly treatment, then Robert Tee's argument taken to its logical conclusion would sanction abomination on handicapped human subjects. In fact, even rational argument has not in the past prevented vivisectionists from experimenting on human subjects, and "informed consent," (if it indeed is obtained), is only valid pro-rata to the extent of information given to the subject.

Of course we have to put people first, but I cannot see how this precludes us from also doing our utmost to respect and sustain other life forms. I feel distress when I see an animal that's ill or injured (let alone ill-used), and being a freethinker makes me want to know why I feel this way, while other members of the human race are perfectly prepared to inflict



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illness and injury out of scientific curiosity or in the name of sport. This strikes me as not only immoral, but also downright crackers. And it also deeply worries me as to what effect this has on our own moral matrix; time and again, history has shown that "rational argument" can, when it suits, justify the most terrible atrocities against members of the human race, and I argue the case for animals as much for our own well-being as for theirs.

Perhaps it is our definition of the word "rational" that puts us at odds with each other! But I think the rationality of my argument is strengthened by the fact that when we transfer what we do to animal-beings on to the human animal, it touches such a raw nerve and seems unthinkable to even contemplate. Not very "rational" in my view.

The universal horror of blood (rational or irrational) is an atavistic phenomenon against which I sincerely hope we never develop an immunity, and as I argued in my original piece, assuming we are "The Lords of Creation" is essentially an arrogance born of religious superstition and the in-built cruelty that is such a part of it. Like racism, cruelty (of which racism is another manifestation), has to be carefully taught. I don't deny that this dark appetite lurks within the depths of the human psyche; my concern is that we must seek to eradicate it rather than kid ourselves it is "natural" or, when it is to our own selfish advantage, rational.

DAVE GODIN  
Sheffield

## Keep it dark!

I HAVE been reading your periodical for a year and have yet to discover whether any of your respondents hold views as radical as my own.

Very briefly: endless answers to endless questions about so-called religious practices offer no resolution, and I feel there can be no hope of one for the following reason. The terminology employed is invalid. Words such as theist, atheist, gnostic, polytheist, deist etc., convey no meaning either via ice-cold rationalists or fire-brand fanatics. An acolyte who emerges from a priestly institution avowing belief in God is really saying: "I believe in priestcraft." A more extreme instance is that of the suicide bomber. Does he set off to die for belief in God or in the holymen inciting him? The man-in-the street and the supremo-of-religion can both be ascribed social incentives for claiming belief in God. These ulterior motives are as diverse as the social matrix in which they spawn.

There is no reason to believe *anything* people say for or against a chimera. The language of preaching is the gobbledygook of preachers, and the moment we start using it they have landed a pre-emptive strike. We are set adrift in a maze of their making.

A revised terminology with which questions

of religiosity may be addressed is bound to start with a re-definition of God. If it is not what it *does*, what can it be? The thing is a synonym for the clustering instinct. Devoid of it, no religion could even begin to form, and here's the rub – the life-blood of human congregations flows as strongly in birds and animals, perhaps strongest of all in insects. God then appears to be gods, rivals in the bids for group coherence more tragically self-defeating than apartheid; *vide* Yugoslavia.

Re-definition on this scale may serve to pacify iconoclastic anger. Instead of destroying places of worship (a pogrom which failed against each and every religion in the USSR) the aim should be to absorb them into the natural order. The impracticality of such an agenda does not concern the individual thinker. If he runs it on a logic, taking it out of the circular ruts of claims and counter-claims, an individual goal will materialise. Avoidance of terminological entrapment will give him a fair start on a voyage of self-discovery, a freedom for which he will have to pay a price; greater or lesser isolation. If on the Road to Damascus he sees the Light, he should keep it dark. Preaching is invidious.

AARON JUDAH  
Ashford

## Bully-boys

HOW about sending a copy of The Editor's article on Cuba (August) to the American Ambassador? The bully-boy tactics operating in this area I find pretty disgusting. And there is no sense of proportion at all! One would think that Cuba was a major threat to the USA.

VIVIEN GIBSON  
Ealing

● Actually, I hear that a Blackpool reader has sent a copy to President Clinton himself. Bang goes my visa for Disneyland! *Editor.*

## Socialism or Humanism?

EUPRAXOPHY (Page 104, July)? Well, I cannot see much joy in a secular society divided up into classes, so I prefer Socialism!

Religion says it does not matter if you live as a prince or a pauper. God or Allah or Karma will sort it all out in the after-life or in some future life.

If Humanism can only come up with a vague feeling of goodness without Godness, then it cannot answer the physical and existential dilemmas facing humanity.

Socialism is not a magic formula; it is a practical affirmation that humankind can have a good try at dealing with humankind's problems – and in doing so save much of the rest of living things from harm or destruction.

Liberal Humanism can be satisfied in a society of plutocrats and proles. Yet religion itself arose from unequal and oppressive states of being. I would, for example, like to see India

liberated from its caste system and its hunger among the have-nots. Humanism *per se* would only accomplish the first objective.

Religion in itself argues inequality: winners and losers, masters and slaves.

Socialism does not mean the state capitalist dictatorship which once dominated Russia and Eastern Europe. Nor does it mean the Toryism Mark II of Labour. Socialism is the secular alternative!

ROBERT J TAYLOR  
South Shields

## Hanging matters III

I WAS pleased to read Dr Moreton's letter (August) under the heading "Hanging Matters II." In general, I am in support of his proposals. However, there must be more humane methods of eliminating murderers than hanging. Those found guilty of terrible crimes against females, whether young girls or mature women, will almost certainly receive very rough treatment from other prisoners during imprisonment. I would propose that such offenders be given the option to take a poison. This would ensure that they do not commit similar crimes in the future.

DON BAKER  
Hornchurch

## Why a pansy?

YOU were kind enough to print my letter in a recent issue of *The Freethinker*, and in response to my request regarding a Secular Society badge I was contacted by John Dowding of Rivenhall in Essex. John went to all the trouble of tracking down my telephone number – just as well my name isn't Smith or Jones – to tell me that he had a badge with the words FREETHOUGHT and SECULARISM circling a poppy and which he very generously sent to me. I would like to thank John through the pages of *The Freethinker*, and on John's behalf make a donation to the fund. Only now I am wondering – why a pansy?

BEN HAYES  
Upper Norwood

## North of the Border

The new-look journal HUMANISM SCOTLAND, edited by Jane Fox, is a must for Scots at home and abroad. Obtainable at £5 a year, including post, from 11A Strathkinness High Road, St Andrews KY16 9UA (cheques payable to Humanist Society of Scotland).



# RELIGION AS A BIG RED WELLIE

I'D LIKE to pose a question: why do people become religious? Anthropologists are said to have found that all societies yet discovered have a concept of God, seeming to imply that it must therefore be somehow natural and therefore true. Yet I'd be prepared to bet that if you looked into it, all tribes on record would also have a concept of piles, athletes' foot and lumbago. Just because it's ubiquitous doesn't mean it's desirable, natural or right. So just how do the believers get their religion?

My own experiences in growing up yielded a number of interesting but inconclusive case studies. One 12-year-old classmate was converted to born-again-dom by a blinding flash of inspiration he experienced during a performance of the rock opera *Godspell*. When relating the tale, he even attached the revelation of God's existence to the hearing of a particular line in Act 2.

Another contemporary turned up to school a couple of years later announcing that he was now a Scientologist. He proceeded to try to recruit peers to L Ron's ranks by promising that if they started spending all their pocket money on Dianetics books he'd show them how they could fly like birds. Few of his mates seemed impressed, and a previously popular boy became widely shunned.

## Junk

Such instances apart, religion figured little in my formative years. Never mentioned by my tacitly yet robustly atheist parents, it cropped up in a certain amount of the usual Jesus Loves Me junk at school, but I took this for the story book stuff it always obviously was. Clearly, I saw, religion was silly, old fashioned stuff, dying out in all but a few backward places.

Then in a sixth form RE lesson I was surprised to find that a show of hands yielded a sizeable majority of professed believers. The teacher, a former minister, expressed (to seemingly general nods of approval) the opinion that those of us in the atheist minority should have "grown out of that" by now. Sixth form girls referred to "their faith" in the ensuing discussion.

The teacher even accused us of having closed minds in comparison to his own, open, one. When I asked him when he had last changed his opinion on anything however, he changed the subject.

"Have you ever wondered how your arm works?" a glassy-eyed American student asked me in my first week at university, flexing his forearm with a look of wonderment and relishing the obvious expectation of chalking my soul up on his belt. "Have you ever heard of biology, physics, chemistry or

# LAST WORD

by Hugh Thomas

the theory of evolution?" I would answer now, but at the time the diffidence of youth led me to make my excuses and leave at the earliest opportunity.

The question began to nag at me: how the hell do these people – some of whom seem quite sensible, normal types – get that way? Why do they seem so completely sold on something which is so clearly nonsensical after even a moment's application of logical thought? Faith, as someone once put it, is the capacity to believe in something you know is not true.

Then in my second year at university I happened to take a subsidiary course which started to lift the scales from my eyes. The course was Experimental Psychology, and it was the lectures in Animal Behaviour which I found of particular interest. What I learned there all fitted perfectly as an explanation for the propagation of religion.

The lecturer told us about the work of people like Konrad Lorenz on the process of imprinting. Imprinting, briefly, refers to the habit of young animals like newly-hatched ducklings or chickens to latch on to and follow around the first thing they see after birth. Normally, this is their mother so the behaviour is highly adaptive as the young stick where it is safe and they are looked after. But Lorenz showed that the power of instinct could be misdirected – for instance, if the mother was removed and another object substituted. Lorenz was able to demonstrate his ability to lead a line of happily cheeping chicks around a farmyard, "imprinted" on his red Wellington boot.

Once imprinted with an object, no amount of effort could get the young bird to shift its affections to a more appropriate object.

In the same way, I suggest, the young human mind may undergo a similar sensitive period where particular objects – people, ideas, habits, vices, political or religious ideologies – become the subject of fixations which may be life-long in influence.

"Once a Catholic, always a Catholic," it is said, and this may reflect the tenacity with which the more successful religions go in for imprinting their young on the red wellie of

religion.

Catching 'em young with the maximum impact is the approach: making sure the first thing the chick sees as it leaves the shell is that big, red wellie. Churches know how few they'd have in their congregations if they left it till people were at the age of consent before becoming eligible for joining.

Someone once did a correlational study comparing people's religion with those of their parents. Surprise, surprise, there was of course a near 100 per cent correlation. Sudden conversions in the front stalls apart, the biggest determinant of your religious beliefs is the beliefs of your family before you: otherwise we'd be finding Christians, Moslems, Buddhists and the rest scattered randomly around the world, instead of within the obviously sectarian boundaries where we actually find them.

It is far fetched in the extreme to suppose that people choose particular religions because they have wrestled with their consciences and worked out which is the right one. In fact, the realisation may be shocking to some, what happens in the vast majority of cases is they believe what they are trained to believe in their critical early years when their minds are most impressionable.

## Imprinting

Seeing religion in this light can be most informative. It explains the tenacity with which believers cling to their creeds in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Just as Lorenz's chicks would prefer red wellies to their own species as partners when they grew to sexual maturity, the impact of maladaptive religious imprinting can have knock-on effects well into adulthood. Overpopulation, wars, sectarian hatreds and prevention of scientific progress are some of the symptoms we see around us.

This view also has significant implications for our education systems and child rearing practices, for what we are dealing with here are the deeply entrenched beliefs determining how people live their lives and see the world.

Should individuals and institutions be allowed the right systematically to programme – brainwash even – the impressionable young with demonstrably false ideas? Yet to suggest otherwise seems to deny the right of people to bring up their children in the way they wish.

The solution, if one exists, requires that a substitute be provided to society to replace that big red wellie of religion.

Our job, as Rationalists and Humanists, is to try to change people's beliefs and inbred attitudes, and make sure that the big red wellie is given the order of the boot.

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