

E

The

£1

Secular  
Humanist  
monthly

# Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 115 No 10

October 1995

## Field day for Bradlaugh at Northampton



**TOWN  
HONOURS  
ITS  
ATHEIST  
MP**

Milk 'miracle' demystified – Page 146



# UP FRONT

with the Editor

## Green tribute to 'a visionary'

AS a graffiti artist might put it: *Charles Bradlaugh lives!* Or, at least, his renown survives – and it is good to learn that this is the case among not only Humanists, Rationalists and Secularists, with our new Bradlaugh House, but also the folk of Northampton, the town which elected him to Parliament in 1880. I am delighted to report that “Bradlaugh Fields” is the name which has been chosen for Northampton’s newest park, on the old Northampton Golf Course.

A public consultation was held to select a name for the 150-acre site, and a panel of councillors and representatives of the local media made the final selection.

Councillor Roger Alder, Chairman of the Borough Council’s Planning Committee, told me: “Charles Bradlaugh is an important part of Northampton’s history and, together with the statue in Abington Square, there is now a fitting memorial for him – a park for all people. And as this will not be a formal park, we chose to use the word ‘Fields’ as this had been a popular choice with local residents.”

In March, people were invited through the media to submit their suggestions for a name for the new park. More than 280 proposals were received. A short-list was drawn-up, and at Northampton Town Show in July the locals were asked to nominate from the list. Public preferences were then considered by the judging panel.

Said Councillor Alder: “Charles Bradlaugh was a visionary who fought throughout his life for free thought, free speech, the freedom of the Press and human rights. This will be the biggest park in Northampton and a real asset to the town. We wanted to choose a name that reflected that importance for the people of Northampton, and I feel that we have chosen well.”

The new park will be very different from the traditional parks and open spaces which can be found around Northampton. It will combine a number of areas of high nature conservation value with recreational facilities such as informal grassed play-areas, traditional children’s play-areas, cycle routes, picnic sites and areas for appropriate sports.

The aim will be to make the place as welcoming as possible – and I hear that we of Bradlaugh’s movement might be allowed to contribute to the Information Point which will be sited at the entrance. Indeed, perhaps the National Secular Society and *The Freethinker* should hold an annual rally at the park – primarily to popularise Bradlaugh’s still-to-be realised ideas but also to help make up for the

loss of such traditional activities as the NSS ramble and its independent annual dinner.

No date for an official opening has yet been fixed, but I understand that sometime next Spring is a possibility: certainly, there will be a large contingent of readers of *The Freethinker* at any such event – for the legacy of Bradlaugh, as younger and newer readers possibly do not know, is extremely important to us.

Bradlaugh began to question the ideas of Christianity in his teens. A self-educated man, he devoted his life unstintingly to freethought, free speech and human rights. In his 20s, he founded the *National Reformer*, and his ceaseless defence of it in the courts helped to safeguard the freedom of the Press.

In 1866, he founded the National Secular Society, and in 1876 was prosecuted jointly with Annie Besant for the “obscenity” of publishing an essay on contraception. The case brought the subject to the notice of the public, especially working class people, and so helped to usher in widespread family planning.

Elected MP for Northampton in 1880, Bradlaugh was prevented from taking his seat for six fighting years. It is untrue that he refused to swear the Oath of Allegiance: though he would certainly have preferred a secular form of affirmation, he was willing to take the religious oath if this was required by law. But, as a known atheist, he was not allowed to do so, nor was he allowed to take his seat without it.

The seat was therefore declared vacant – but in succeeding by-elections the electors of Northampton returned him with increased majorities. Eventually, a new Speaker allowed Bradlaugh to take the oath – and his seat.

He forced through the House a Bill for the right of affirmation – but failed in his attempt to abolish the Common Law offence of blasphemy, which still disfigures our democracy.

## ‘Miraculous’ milk-drinking

BRADLAUGH’S reforming interest in the sub-continent earned him the nickname “Member for India.” One wonders what he would have made of the mass hysteria over milk-drinking gods – in particular the elephant-headed Ganesh – which thrust home-based Hindus and those in the diaspora alike on to the world’s front pages last month.

Surely he would have been disappointed that such prodigious credulity was possible, almost 50 years after India’s emergence as an independent, allegedly secular, state? But then he would doubtless have pointed out that its continuing prevalence actually underpins the other horrors of contemporary Indian life –

the widespread destruction of female babies, juvenile slavery, the enduring caste system, religion-based inter-communal mayhem, the dowry murders of young wives, the scandal of enforced arranged marriage. It does so by offering the spurious hope of a better life in the next world or in a subsequent incarnation.

The Hindu equivalent of “The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate...” is used to deflect attention from all manner of social evils – only in India they have 30 million gods (with Allah-Jehovah jostling for a place in the pantheon) enlisted in the ruling class battle to maintain privilege and the poverty that goes with it.

However, as an honest and a rational man, Bradlaugh would not have dismissed the Hindus as *especially* gullible primitives. He would have noted (with *The Guardian* editor of September 23) that: “It is only two weeks since Pope John Paul II visited the Holy House of the Virgin Mary in Loretto which, it is firmly believed, was brought by angels all the way from Nazareth. In the past he has worshipped at other shrines including the church at Chiquiquira in Colombia where, it is said, the Virgin stepped out of a painting in a blinding flash of light... many miracles have been claimed where her image sheds tears – or, less frequently, olive oil. The cult at Medjugorje in Croatia, visited by two million pilgrims in 12 years before the war began, also celebrates the Virgin’s appearance with tears in her eyes...” In other words, you don’t have to trek all the way to India to find examples of human idiocy. As you read this, somebody in a draughty hall two or three hundred yards down the road is jabbering in Tongues – and what of Sheffield’s Nine O’Clock Sausage?

As Dr D Mohan, Head of Psychiatry at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, said: “All people are vulnerable to such credulity because this was the season of *pitr baksh* when the devout offered milk for the souls of their ancestors.”

Still, the world’s Hindus were touched by a particularly virulent September silliness which disrupted government, business and school life in India as people flocked to offer milk to the gods. Milk stalls ran out of supplies and prices soared as the nation of 900 million seemed collectively obsessed.

And in the UK 600 Hindus holding milk tins, cans, cartons and bottles queued at the Vishwa Temple in Southall, where a statue was said to be absorbing the liquid from cups and spoons. In 24 hours, 10,000 “saw” it drink. In Liverpool, crowds gathered outside the Shree Radha Temple, everyone clutching cartons of milk, as word spread that a community worker at the temple had offered milk



Turn to Page 147



# UP FRONT

## with the Editor

From Page 146

to a statue of Lord Ganesh and had seen it imbued. There were similar tales from Leeds, Birmingham and Greater Manchester.

The drill at most of these places was that, one by one, worshippers held a spoon of milk underneath the elephant god's trunk and watched as the milk seemed to disappear. In some cases, it *did* vanish; in others it was simply lost to view on the conveniently milk-white face of the god. Sometimes it collected in a pool on the floor, but the worshippers failed to notice this: we see what we want to see, or what we are told we *ought* to see.

Cynics called it the hoax of the century, claiming temple monks used miracle stunts to attract backsliding Hindus back to worship, and this one simply got out of hand. Some speculated that priests had installed out-of-sight suction pumps to draw milk through the idols' orifices.

But the most likely explanation is a version

of that put forward to expose the chicanery behind blood-weeping BVMs in the August issue of *The Freethinker*. Indeed, the very scientist quoted in that story struck a satisfactorily sour note about the sacred milk-drinking. Dr Luigi Garlaschelli, Director of the Faculty of Organic Chemistry at Pavia University in Italy, has revealed how several celebrated statues of the Virgin have "wept" – and he said that the milk drinking seemed like "a weeping Madonna in reverse."

His latest debunking was of the Civitavecchia statue near Rome. The statues are hollow, made of a highly porous material such as plaster, and filled with water and a dash of olive oil. They are then glazed to make them waterproof, but the eyes are left untouched or slightly scratched to allow the fluids to be sucked through by capillary action and give the impression of tear-filled eyes.

Dr Garlaschelli told the Press that scientists should closely inspect the mouths of the Hindu statues to see if the glaze was missing or scarred...

It seems, then, that the milk was absorbed by capillary attraction – the movement of fluids through sponge-like material – just as Madonnas weep because water seeps out through scratches in the surface glazing.

Statues can be even "thirstier" when they have a core of highly absorbent materials, such as those used in cat-litter. This would increase the capillary action and thus the milk-drinking effect.

And according to Dr Julia Higgins, Professor of Polymer Chemistry at Imperial College, London, if statues are made of baked clay they will absorb water (or milk) prodigiously: "Break a flowerpot, dip it in water and the water disappears like mad."

Something like this is official view of the Indian Government, which dispatched a team of scientists to temples. They put the phenomenon down to elementary physics. "As soon as milk comes in contact with the marble surface of statues, it spreads quickly and appears as if it were disappearing," a spokesman said.

One of the most remarkable features of the "miracle" was the speed at which it travelled: the first example of global religious fervour propagated by mass telecommunications.

"This is a fantastic case of auto-suggestion," insisted Professor S K Shivpun, an astrophysicist at Delhi University: "Some people must be laughing all the way to the bank. The amount of money being offered to the deities is not amusing."

But Sanal Edamaruku, of the Indian Rationalist Association, has traced the roots of the phenomenon. He says that on Wednesday, September 20, in the holy city of Haridwar, several holy men covered in ash declared over loudhailers that Hindus should be prepared for a miracle the next day.

"The *sadhus* said that all of Lord Shiva's family would be taking milk in the temples," Mr Edamaruku explained.

And the same *sadhus* had protested against criminal charges being brought against a powerful holy man, Chandraswami (a spiritual adviser to the Indian Premier, the Sultan of Brunei and Elizabeth Taylor), who faces charges of harbouring a murderer in his "spiritual retreat." Sceptics claim he may have started the "milk miracle" to gain public support for withdrawal of the charges.

Early on Thursday, September 21, according to Mr Edamaruku, priests at major temples in India cities were woken up by anonymous callers saying: "Miracles are happening everywhere. Try to feed milk to Ganesh. He's simply drinking it." This same message was passed on to Hindu temples worldwide.

"This wasn't done by miracles, but by effective use of mass communication," said Mr Edamaruku, whose group has offered £2,000 to anyone who can convince its members that the whole thing was not a hoax.

Although the Government did not want to lose Hindu votes by debunking the "miracle," it did put up scientists to offer theories of "mass hypnosis" or even "psycho-mechanic reaction" to explain how the milk might dribble out of the spoon when offered to the idol.

The right-wing Hindu parties pounced on this and declared that the milk-drinking was a "prophecy" that they would win the general elections next year. Even if they did not spark the madness, they have certainly taken advantage of it, urging the masses to support the BJP or the VHP Hindu extremist groups rather than the "atheists and Communists" of Congress who questioned the miracle.

Amid all the hoo-ha, the *Indian Express* struck the crucial note, complaining that "a huge quantity of the precious commodity [milk] was put to a use which might seem strange in a country where millions of children go hungry to bed each night."

And Vasant Sathe, former Information Minister, said: "In the age of computerisation, it is an insult to human intelligence if we say that the gods are drinking milk. It will make no difference between us and cockroaches."

## THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

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

### CONTENTS

Up Front:	Page 146
Voluntary euthanasia	Page 148
Back to (Muslim) basics	Page 149
Religion and gays	Page 150
Book review: Ruth Blewitt	Page 151
Anglo-God Society	Page 152
What's On	Page 154
Down to Earth: Bill McIlroy	Page 155
You're telling us! Letters	Page 156
Last Word:	Page 160

Editor's address:

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

Subscriptions, book orders and Fund donations to The Publisher:

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

### Annual postal subscription rates

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

Printed by Yorkshire Web, Barnsley S70 2AS.

## Down-to-earth Bradfordians

MIND you, not all Hindus were taken in. At the Hindu Cultural Society in Bradford, the priest, Pinakin Guru, offered a spoonful of milk to the deity – and announced with true Yorkshire bluntness: "Nothing at all happened. The milk did not disappear. It stayed on the spoon." And the head priest at Delhi's central Hanuman Mandir temple declared: "What a waste. Many of our children do not even get a drop of milk to drink, yet does that move us? No."

But why this sudden, if short-lived, frenzy?



## Voluntary euthanasia:

# Northern Territory shows the way



**E**VERY battle won for birth control and abortion rights, for rational divorce laws, for the right to express one's sexuality in any way which does not harm others, is a victory over those whose lunatic belief that ownership of our bodies is vested in the tribal god of the old Jews still informs so many of the world's statute books.

Similarly, every move towards the right to voluntary euthanasia is a blow against the hegemony of Christian, Muslim and Jewish voodoo – which is why most readers of *The Freethinker* will have thrilled to the news that the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory of Australia had, on May 25, 1995, passed The Rights of the Terminally Ill Bill, writes Peter Brearey.

As Malcolm Hurwitt, member of the (UK) Voluntary Euthanasia Society Executive and Secretary of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies, says: "This is the first occasion anywhere in the world that a law has been passed which allows doctors to accede to a patient's wish to have his or her life ter-

minated because of unacceptable pain, suffering or distress."

It is permitted in the Netherlands (although it is against the law) so long as a strict procedure is followed. The US State of Oregon has a law permitting doctor-assisted suicide, but it is frozen by a court injunction and is working its way through the appeal system.

"The Northern Territory's Bill is, therefore, the first to embody the principle of voluntary euthanasia," says Mr Hurwitt. "It received the assent of the Administrator of the Territory in June, and is now an Act. The Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, Bill Hayden, now has six months to disallow the Bill. This power has never been exercised and is unlikely to be in this case, although the Right to Life organisations are calling for disallowance."

Mr Hayden is known to support the principle of euthanasia.

The final version of the Bill is not yet available, but the principal points are known. The patient must be over 18, suffering from a condition which, in reasonable medical judgement, is terminal; the illness is causing

the patient severe pain or suffering and the requirements dealing with the signing of forms of request for assistance in dying must have been complied with.

The Bill contains many detailed provisions to ensure that the patient's decision is a free and voluntary one and that doctors who comply with a patient's request will not incur any penalty.

Says Malcolm Hurwitt: "It also, perhaps inevitably, bears the marks of political compromise; in particular, two doctors (one of them a psychiatrist) must certify that they are satisfied that the patient is of sound mind and has been informed of the palliative care counselling and psychiatric support that is available and that the patient has considered the possible implications of the decision for his or her family. A doctor is prohibited from assisting a patient to die if, in his or her opinion, reasonable palliative care is available.

"The requirement that two doctors should be satisfied that the patient is of sound mind is contrary to the rule of English law that a person is assumed to be sane and that the burden of proving otherwise is on anyone who suggests it. To put the burden of proving sanity on the patient panders to those who argue that it is irrational to wish to end one's life in any circumstances.

"This provision and the one which, in effect, compels the patient to accept palliative care are intrusions on the right of patients to decide for themselves how and when they should die. It condemns them to die slowly, whether they wish to or not. The Bill should not, therefore, be hailed uncritically; but neither should it be condemned as useless as some disappointed supporters have done in Australia.

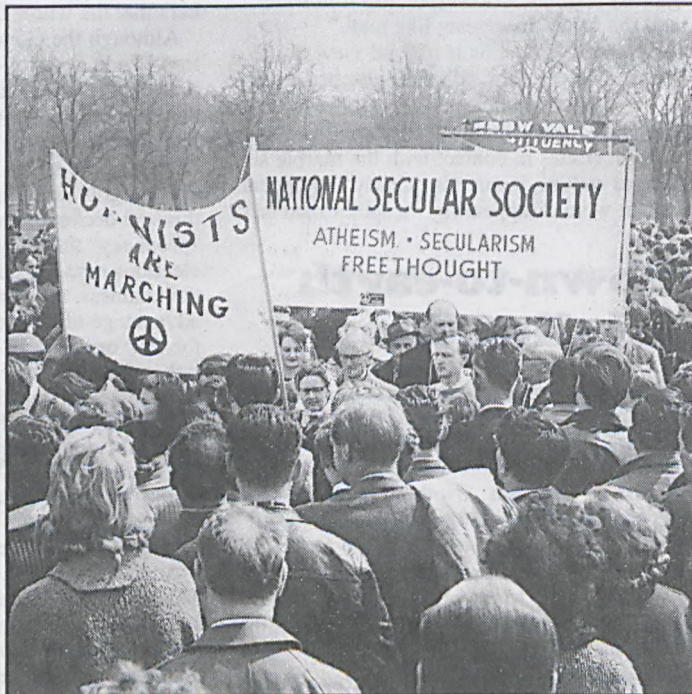
"It is true that it leaves too many aspects of the decision to the doctors involved; but we should recognise and welcome it as a major advance: the basic principle of a patient's right to choose has been formally recognised."

Meanwhile, in South Africa, a Law Commission working group is expected to come out in favour of voluntary euthanasia, and a Private Member's Bill for voluntary euthanasia has been introduced into the New Zealand Parliament.

● The Voluntary Euthanasia Society is at 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W9 5PG (0171 937 7770).

## NSS on the march

**SECULARISTS and Humanists on the Aldermaston March of 1962 (there's Barbara Smoker helping to carry the banner in Hyde Park). Thirty-three years on, and the fight against nuclear madness continues: at the AGM of the National Secular Society on October 14, G N Deodhekar will move that the gathering "condemns the French Government for resuming nuclear tests, and calls upon the British Government to declare that it will carry out no further tests and will support all legitimate efforts to persuade the French Government to abandon them."**





Embrace Islam' call from Hizb-ut-Tahrir

# Back-to-basics, Muslim style

by Govind N  
Deodhekar

Ahmediya).

● Five, that: "This final message is a complete guidance pertaining to every aspect of life and valid for all times and places." A proposition to which moderate Muslims may not subscribe – although they are usually unwilling to pinpoint their different interpretation for fear of unsophisticated Muslim mass opinion.

Based upon these articles of faith, the *Tahrir* have arrived at a number of conclusions:

"Democracy means the rule 'of the people by the people and for the people,' i.e., the sovereignty belongs to the people. This is completely contradictory to Islam. In Islam the rule belongs to Allah (SWT); all beings are servants of Allah and should abide by His rules and implement His system."

"Some (naïve) Muslims failed to differentiate between the 'Shura' system in Islam and the political system of democracy, for both rely on selection and voting. The function of 'Shura' is consultative, whereas that of the Parliament is legislative."

"The *Shura* Council is not allowed to legislate, for the legislator is Allah (SWT), no one is allowed to legislate or alter any of Allah's rules."

"Freedom of expression (opinion) has no place in Islam, and no opinion that violates the *Aqueeda* [creed – GND] is allowed."

"It is forbidden to have any thought contradicting the rule of Allah."

"Freedom of creed (belief). This has also no place in Islam; the apostate is killed after being given the chance to repent. The verse in which Allah (SWT) says 'there is no compulsion in *deen* [religion and way of life - GND]' means that no one would be forced to embrace Islam, but when he does he cannot apostate, otherwise he would be killed, as mentioned in the *hadith*."

Presumably, the death sentence on an apostate is to be carried out by the Islamic state and not by an individual Muslim. Even so, when *Tahrir* call upon Non-Muslims to embrace Islam, they ought to make it clear, in fairness, that leaving Islam merits death.

"Democracy has been introduced to the Islamic world when Western countries met in Berlin to dismember the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th Century, thus making sure that the Muslim world will never be able to establish the Islam rule."

The *Tahrir* do seem to look back with nostalgia to the days before the *Khilafa* system was abolished by Mustafa Kemal Pasha of Turkey in 1924. The Ottoman Sultan ruled

most of the Muslim world and was called the *Khaleefa*.

*Tahrir* say that "the states of the Muslim world are to be considered as being part of one country" and: "The *Khilafa* state is for all Muslims. To have an Iranian state, a Saudi state or a Pakistani state etc., is not acceptable in Islam." To others, this may sound an unrealistic aim – but not to the *Tahrir* because of their adherence to basic Islam.

How is the *Khilafah* state to be achieved?

"It is to the method of the Messenger of Allah that we invite all Muslims to work towards establishing the *Khilafah*."

This method of the Messenger is described in detail in a tract called *Foreign Policy*, and it deserves to be quoted at length:

"The root of interaction for the Islamic State and the other states is the duty to propagate the Call of Islam. Thus, the method by which to achieve this is the declaration of *Jihad*. This was the method of Mohammed (SAW) as soon as the Islamic State was established in Medina. The Muslims do not and did not start fighting with the enemy without first presenting them with the opportunity to accept and embrace Islam. If this offer is turned down, they are asked to pay *Jizya* (head tax) and to be part of the state. They would be treated as *Dhimmis*...the state would be responsible for their protection. They would be ruled by the Islamic *Sharia* and their land would become Muslim land and part of the state. If the enemy refuse both options, the Muslims proceed to the third stage and declare war on them."

"*Jihad*, contrary to the slander of the West, is not barbaric. The Islamic army are not allowed to kill women, children or the elderly. Neither are they allowed to mutilate dead bodies, cut down trees etc." [These rules are piously held; a sort of early Geneva Convention – GND].

"By principle, *Jihad* is offensive...the Muslims initiate it to spread the boundary and domain of Islam, and offensive *Jihad* is the responsibility of the State. According to the Iranian Constitution, *Jihad* is only for securing the national boundary! What contradiction?"

On this theory, no non-Muslim state bordering on the Islamic state can consider itself safe. It is liable to be called upon to embrace Islam or accept "protected status" or fight.

Indeed, a tract entitled *The Political System* states that "one of the distinctive features of the Islamic State is that it is a state that has no fixed borders."

Another tract, entitled *The Islamic State*,

**A**N ISLAMIC organisation called *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* – Organisation for Liberation – held a rally in Trafalgar Square on August 13 which was attended by between 2,000 and 3,000 Muslims. The purpose of the rally was to extend an "invitation from the Muslims in UK for Non-Muslims to embrace Islam." *Tahrir* leader Omar Bakri Mohammed spoke, and a number of recent converts came forward to make the Islamic pledge amid enthusiastic shouts of "Allah-ho-Akbar!"

On the east side, near South Africa House, the venue of past anti-apartheid demonstrations, there were small groups of demonstrators who distributed leaflets. They were separated (and protected) by a thin wall of police officers who ensured that there was no physical confrontation. These leaflets came from Iranian Women Opposed to Fundamentalism, the Worker-Communist Party of Iran, Alliance for Workers' Liberty, National Union of Students Women's Campaign. There was a sizeable contingent of gays and a small group of Jewish Socialists.

The *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* seems to have a committed following among Muslim students of post-secondary school age. The emotional appeal is based on the reverses which the Muslim cause has suffered in various parts of the world; the remedy suggested by *Tahrir* is to go back to the very basics of Islam and its early military triumphs.

Large numbers of tracts were available at various "Information Points" around the Square.

It will be highly instructive for Non-Muslims to understand what is being preached and advocated as the very basic Islam.

The *Tahrir* campaign and tracts also deserve to be studied by various shades of moderate Muslim opinion (disorganised as they seem to be) to decide how they wish to differentiate themselves from the *Tahrir* campaign.

The *Tahrir* ideology is based on a number of Acts of Faith:

● One, that there is a Creator, a belief shared with other religions (except by Buddhism and Jainism, in a technical sense).

● Two, that the Creator sends guidance through human Prophets (some religions believing the Creator descends to Earth).

● Three, that Mohammed was the Prophet, the message to whom is recorded in the Koran.

● Four, that Mohammed, the last Prophet, is the Seal of Prophets (a belief not accepted by some sects, such as the



# Religion is branded the enemy of gays

**A**UTHOR, journalist and media expert Terry Sanderson has branded religion "a potent enemy of the lesbian and gay community" and urged the Humanist movement to take a firmer stand on gay and lesbian rights.

In his keynote speech at the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association's conference at the Sandbeck Hotel, Whitby, September 8-11, Mr Sanderson said there was still a strong well of homophobia among the British public – and much of it stemmed from religious beliefs.

He declared: "On the basis of a few verses in their cruel book of fairy tales, religionists have constructed a whole crusade

against homosexuality.

"When our rights are opposed by secular politicians, there is usually some practical reason – with the Tories it is generally about money. You can argue with such opposition, and occasionally change people's minds.

"But this is not the case with religiously-inspired opponents. Their arguments are usually based on some sort of 'moral' precept, and when they speak about homosexuality no debate is possible. After all, they are quoting the words of their omniscient God, so all argument or evidence to the contrary is instantly dismissed."

Mr Sanderson – whose latest book, *Mediawatch*, was published by Cassell in

June – was not uncritical of the Humanist movement. He said it had insufficient real understanding of the threat that religion and other forms of unreason and irrationality posed to lesbians and gays.

Humanists of all sexualities had to take a firmer stand against religion's growing assaults on lesbian and gay lives, he insisted.

● GALHA was founded in 1977 in response to Mrs Mary Whitehouse's prosecution of *Gay News* for blasphemous libel. Secretary is Mr George Broadhead, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2HB.

## Divorce in Eire

**MU**INTIR na hEireann, a comparatively new political party in the [Irish] Republic, is seeking legal advice about launching a constitutional challenge against the Dublin government promoting a "Yes" vote in the November 24 divorce referendum... The Anti-Divorce Campaign group has separately rejected as "undemocratic and unfair" ministerial plans to distribute a leaflet to the electorate on anti-divorce views – campaign members say they are willing to fund their own lobbying. The Dublin government last week announced that couples living apart for at least four years could be granted a dissolution of marriage under the terms of the wording of its Amendment to the Constitution to remove the ban on divorce. *Irish Post*, September 23.

## What a lot of bullocks!

**AS** the Editor of *The Freethinker* ambled across Wakefield's Bull Ring the other evening, he was astonished to observe the 91-year-old statue of Queen Victoria, which is the city's pride and joy, begin to weep tears of blood.

Furthermore, from the orb in the Imperial hand there suddenly flowed a stream of what Our Man empirically established was Boddington's bitter. And then the statue moved – and the stone, starling-decorated representation of the great monarch plucked up its circus-tent skirts and displayed its bare bottom to the interested occupants of a passing bus...

*It's not going to work, is it?*

Since weeping Virgins and moving Madonnas and, now, Gold Top slurping elephants and bullocks, always bring

material as well as spiritual rewards to those who create them, we had imagined for a moment that if *The Freethinker* were to have its own miracle, we might be able to win at stroke our monthly battle with postal charges, printing bills, the ever-spiralling cost of newsprint and so on.

But who is going to believe us? We are well known as an avowedly atheist journal. We are secularist, rationalist in outlook. We exist specifically to oppose the superstitious nonsense of Hindu, Christian, Jew and Muslim alike – and to propose a better world than the one which their sacred cows have so disgustingly defiled.

We must therefore continue to rely on our readers to maintain *The Freethinker*. Please rush cheques, POs, stamps to G W Foote & Company, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: B Bensley, B Keeton and T Liddle, £2 each; C F Ablethorpe, G A Airey, G Blakey, M D Carter, Crangle, W Hill, S C Holt, H Hinchliffe, McKenna, H I Middleton, A Negus, Paterson, P T Rogers, C J Simmonds, M W Smith, C M Stewart, W A Stuart, S M Tyas, D Whelan, C M G Wilson and L R Wright, £5 each; M Ewing, £6; T R Bowen, H P Brooks, J Burman, T M Byfield, R J Condon, C M Cotton, Dawson, D Flint, A Glaiser, E Haslam, J Sloan, J A B Spence, D N Towers and L Wilkins, £10 each; P L Lancaster and M Ross, £15 each; M O Morley, £25; T N Risk, £40; Glasgow Humanist Group and D Harper, £50 each.

**Total for August: £452.**

## Back-to-basics, Muslim style

From Page 149

avers: "Any land which the Islamic state carries the Message to, and conquers by way of Jihad, that land becomes part of her land and under her authority and her rule, even if its people did not embrace Islam."

If a non-Muslim writer were to claim that basic Islamic theory consists of what *Tahrir* have described here, he would be accused of maligning Islam and its followers. It is therefore better that one reads and quotes the *Tahrir* tracts. In my acquaintance with

scores of ordinary Muslims, I have not come across anyone who subscribes to these extreme views. The point really is whether moderate Muslim intellectuals will develop a theory which moves away from the absolute applicability of 7th Century ideas to 20th Century life.

Is it not just possible that what was thought of as the voice of Gabriel, the invisible Messenger of God, was the inner voice of a charismatic personality, deeply moved by the vision of *Towheed*, the unity of the Divinity rather than its dispersal in a plurality of gods?



# The Flight of Peter Fromm

*The Flight of Peter Fromm.* A novel by Martin Gardner. Prometheus. Pbk. ISBN 0-87975-911-9. £13.50.

Review: RUTH BLEWITT

also the need for such a figure, becoming a theist in all but name. But he begins to show signs of stress because of the continual and rapid changes in his belief.

In 1947, he decides to apply for ordination as a Methodist minister (having become engaged to the daughter of a rich and worldly-wise man of that church). He gets sucked into materialism, which contrasts joltingly with the direct, unwavering fundamentalism of his mother. When Homer asks him to preach the Easter sermon at his chapel, the continuing stress comes to a head and, at the climax of the story, Peter has a complete nervous and mental breakdown while giving the sermon. In hospital later, he has time to re-marshal his thoughts. After a long rest and more discussions, he and Homer agree to differ – Peter remains a theist, Homer a humanist.

On this level, the story moves fairly fast and is gripping. Martin Gardner has created a totally believable “biography” with sensitive writing and subtle shifts of style which reflect Peter’s maturation.

At a deeper level, the book is not only a theological and philosophical discussion but also a picture of the mental journey many of us in the freethought movement have made – though not all of us will have had time and space to read and study as deeply, or been lucky enough to meet as stimulating a mentor as Homer Wilson. In my case, the rejection of orthodox CoFE teaching was sudden and instinctive – I did the logical thinking afterwards. However, the dissection of religious ideas, the debunking of theories, the exposure of hypocrisy and, more especially, the promotion of humanism in the format of this novel work very well. Would that more writers could do likewise!

Gardner’s prose is eloquent. For example: “Today, when a self-styled Christian res-

olutely refuses to inform himself about scientific truths which bear upon his faith, why is it that he can not see his refusal as an insult to the very God of Truth he fancies he is serving?” And: “I see no reason why I have to give it (the Cosmos) a personality similar in some way to my own. I’m part of nature. I enjoy existing. I don’t know why I exist. I don’t believe anyone knows. I’m not even sure it’s a meaningful question. Anyway, in the process of living I find enough meaning to satisfy me.”

There is a lightness of touch in the narrative and a great deal of humour. For instance, one of Peter’s former girl-friends recalls an occasion when she tried to get him to become amorous but “he talked for two hours about what he thought Jesus meant by the unpardonable sin!” One of the most amusing moments comes at the climax. As Peter breaks down he starts to “speak with tongues” – which turns out to be nothing more than Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky”!

Most of the philosophical ideas are expressed with clarity, in refreshingly un pompous language. A few passages, notably chapter 10, are opaque and tedious: deliberately so in my opinion to expose the theological convolutions which divinity students have to plough through!

From the least important to the most, the characters are clearly and sympathetically drawn. Homer himself is humane, caring and considerate, with a great depth of understanding of the frailties of humankind – a good advertisement for humanism.

Behind the lettering on the cover is a cross (which would have put me off had I picked up the book in a shop) but it is at one with the symbolism in the novel. It illustrates the shadow of the cross over Peter’s life and also enables the title to be read punningly as “The Flight of Peter from the cross.”

Within the book are a few examples of “Americaneese” – vest for waistcoat for example – and American spelling such as *catalog* – but they do not jar.

I found this a most enjoyable and thought-provoking book which I imagine many freethinkers would enjoy. It would make a good present for an enquiring young person, too. I would certainly want to read it again.

## Attack what’s cruel!

CONCERNING *It’s a Boy!*, Channel 4’s recent documentary about the horrors of circumcision, the Rationalist Press Association’s Nicolas Walter had the following letter published in *The Observer* on September 10: “Your report on Victor Schonfeld’s television documentary includes the predictable argument that it is ‘anti-Jewish’ because it attacks what is described as ‘a fundamental part of Jewish life.’

“Similarly it could be argued that it is anti-Christian to attack the doctrine of hell or the

burning of heretics, anti-Muslim to attack the doctrine of hell or the mutilation of thieves, anti-Hindu to attack the forced marriage of children or the forced suicide of widows, or anti-Chinese to attack the infanticide of girls or the foot-binding of women.

“Surely anything must be attacked which is cruel and unnecessary, whether it is a religious ritual or a social custom, and that the universal criterion should be the welfare of individuals and not the preservation of a collective tradition.”

WHAT an interesting and unusual work of fiction this is! It purports – most convincingly – to be the biography of a young man, Peter Fromm, by his erstwhile professor and friend, Dr Homer Wilson. Actual events and real people are mentioned in the story, fact and fiction being cleverly woven together. The story can be read on two levels – as an account of a young man during his university years and those soon after, and as a vehicle for exploring religious theories in contrast to humanist ideals. Peter Fromm, a Pentecostalist from Oklahoma, arrives at the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1938. He is a naive and intense young man with a burning ambition to start a new Protestant Reformation, once his studies are over. Not only does he study theology, he goes to science and geology lectures as well. He reads widely, pursues his thoughts and probes those of others no matter where they may lead. Dr Wilson, lecturer in the psychology of religion, befriends Peter, respects his inquiring mind, introduces him to the works of many writers, helps him compare Christianity with older religions and mythologies and is ready to discuss all ideas. Wilson, an ordained Unitarian minister, is an atheist in fact with an ability to deal fairly and sympathetically with other viewpoints. His lengthy discussions with Peter are not dry-as-dust nor do they feel contrived – they arise naturally from the situation of the novel. Over time, because of his questioning, Peter grows away from fundamentalism and explores other sects. He has a brief flirtation with Catholicism, later becomes a Christian Marxist for a while, continues to read widely (from Thomas Aquinas to Karl Barth, comparing various Christologies), expands his social and sexual life, becomes less of a puritan and begins to develop as a man. In 1942, he joins the US Navy, which gives him more time for reflection. His perspective on life changes and he matures, away from the hothouse of university culture. Homer writes that: “His letters were singularly free of theological pettifoggery. The salt sea air was continuing to scour and ventilate his mind.” With an increased awareness of space and time, Peter briefly explores the positivism of Auguste Comte. In 1946, Peter returns to Chicago, resuming his studies and wide reading (especially of liberal theology), aiming to complete his doctorate and be ordained. He discards miracles, objects to obfuscation in theological writing, dislikes compromises in preaching (preferring to be intellectually honest) and rejects the Pauline idea that faith is more important than works. Finally, he rejects not only the historicity of Jesus but



# All things Bria

**M**AN has created gods in his own image for as long as he has inhabited the earth, and the synthetic nature of these gods and their consequent lack of importance is reflected in the use of the lower-case g when referring to them. The one true God – the God of the Bible – created man in his image – a completely different arrangement and his uniqueness is indicated by the use of the upper-case G. In my speech this evening, I shall be using it on every occasion on which I mention him.

The Israelites did not deserve God. The Old Testament reveals that the relationship between them was not a happy one; it is a record of continuous insubordination by the Israelites punctuated by remonstrance and, where that failed, chastisement by God. Even in the New Testament, when he lived on Earth in the second of his known forms, he was no kindlier treated. Indeed, he was abused, contradicted and eventually slain, after which he had little alternative but to rise from his grave and return to Heaven, leaving the descendants of the original Israelites to shift for themselves as best they could. But such is the perversity of human nature that they have been bewailing their folly ever since – even to the extent of setting aside a wall as a focal point for their lamentations.

But God was not then friendless. We believe, as it is set out in our Society's Articles, that he found the British people altogether more amenable and transferred his affection to them where, it having been heartily reciprocated, it has remained to this day. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that when, as his own son, he was seeking disciples, he chose men with good, wholesome, British Christian-names.

The fact that there is this special relationship between God and Britain, and in particular the Church of England, indicates that his original choice of the Israelites was an aberration. W C Sellar and R J Yeatman were nearer the truth than they may have realised when they translated Pope Gregory's observation *Non Angli sed Angeli* as "Not Angles but Anglicans." And a successor of his, Leo X, although a Roman Catholic, was sufficiently aware of this relationship to bestow on Henry VIII the title of Defender of the Faith – a title held by every respectable British monarch since.

We owe a debt to Henry for founding the

**A speech given by the President of the Anglo-God Friendship Society at one of its weekly meetings**

**Recorded for *The Freethinker* by NEIL BLEWITT**

Church of England. And I will not ignore the charge that he did so to facilitate his divorce and adultery. But to those who make this charge and say that Henry breached at least two of God's commandments, I would answer that God moves, as he revealed to William Cowper, "in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." And if God frowned at Henry's conduct, we may be sure, as the poet also declared, that "Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face." Henry must have seen that smile and he may well have permitted himself a matching response.

William Blake – and how these honest British names keep appearing – knew that God wanted to rectify the mistake he made in choosing the Israelites, and in his poem "A New Jerusalem" he reveals how God set about it. He asked:

*And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?*

Of course they did! And, what is more, Joseph of Arimathea followed them shortly afterwards bearing the Holy Grail in which he had collected some of God's blood at the crucifixion.

That is why Augustine found Christianity already established here when he landed in 596. And the special relationship, once formed, was built upon by men such as Alban and Germanus but, in particular, by King Arthur and his knights. They had been practising godly virtues long before Augustine, and tirelessly seeking the Holy Grail which Joseph had unfortunately mislaid on the top of a mountain.

This relationship has been evident to many writers. James Thomson revealed how Britain was commanded by Heaven to rise from the azure main. Rudyard Kipling, always privy to the Almighty's thoughts, wrote "Beneath [God's] awful hand we hold dominion over palm and pine." And F S Pierpoint recognised God's bounty in a hymn in which he thanked him "for each perfect gift of thine to our race so freely given."

But God reserved his special favours for the monarch, and this was realised by the translators of the Authorised Version of the Bible for, in the dedication to James I, they

reminded him that "Great and manifold were the blessings which Almighty God bestowed upon us, the people of England when first he sent Your Majesty's Royal Person to rule and reign over us." Nothing could be clearer. And it should be noted that equal treatment was meted out to God and James I in that upper-case letters were used for both of their titles.

But God's goodwill in sending a monarch to reign over us did not end with James I. There is a prayer in the Book of Common Prayer used on the anniversary of the accession of every monarch which thanks God for setting him on the throne as well. And we believe that just as he selected all of our monarchs after James I, so he selected those before him. The translators were plainly referring to a long-established practice.

The cry "God Save The King!" at the Coronation Service – justifiably appropriated from the crowning of a polygamous monarch of Israel – is a formality. Of course God save the King. As to the cynics who ask "From what?" – the answer must be "God knows." And may God prevent this land from becoming a commercialised republic. "God Save the Chief Executive of Great Britain PLC!" does not rival the present invocation. Nor is it certain that God will save a Chief Executive anyway. There is no evidence that the Bible's translators held approval for anything other than the constitutional arrangements.

The words of the National Anthem, as they are uttered in the knowledge that the monarch's enemies are also God's enemies. So we sing:

*O Lord our God arise  
Scatter his enemies  
And make them fall;  
Confound their politics,  
Frustrate their knavish tricks,  
On thee our hopes we fix...*

This makes it perfectly clear that it is enemies who need confounding. We do not. Equally, it is only they who perpetrate knavish tricks. We do not. And you may be assured that God will scatter them when requested to do so. As, indeed, he will



# riend beautiful



photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection

not have escaped your notice that the expeditions had to be mounted because the descendants of the Israelites could not be trusted to protect the holy places themselves. No wonder God turned his back parts on them.

The founding of the British Empire is an example of the mission to civilise the world. We taught the heathen to cover his nakedness with decent clothing; we aroused in him a knowledge of the horrors of Hell and how to escape them; we instilled a proper appreciation of the fact that he was born in sin; and, above all, we weaned him, to quote the old hymn, from bowing down in blindness to wood and stone. And that hymn also makes the reason for our mission clear in the form of a question:

*Can we whose souls are lighted  
With wisdom from on high,  
Can we to men benighted  
The light of life deny?*

There is a cynical story told of an African who complained to a missionary that a hundred years earlier he had the land and the missionary the Bible whereas now the position was reversed. The truth is that that African did not know how rich he was. All that is necessary for salvation and eternal bliss lie within the covers of that blessed book beside which the land is of no worth. He should read Matthew Chapter 6, where he will find the very relevant words used by our Saviour himself – words which are repeated today in the Communion Service just before the collection: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon Earth where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven..."

And that, I think, is an appropriate point for me to conclude my talk and ask our treasurer to take up our own collection. Next week, I shall be speaking on the Union Jack with particular reference to the fact that it contains the crosses of no fewer than three saints – more than the flag of any other country on Earth.

And I hope that, at that meeting, we shall again have the pleasure of welcoming a reporter from *The Freethinker*... Oh, I beg his pardon. He is indicating that there are two reporters from *The Freethinker*...

the Good Book will know that this is no exaggeration. God was always in the thick of battles fighting, as we know, for a people who did not appreciate him. But we may use his experience in this field when we are involved in a war. A supplication is provided in the Prayer Book for this circumstance. In it God is requested to deliver petitioners from their enemies, to abate their enemies' pride, assuage their malice and confound their devices. And, as proof of the authors' faith in God to accomplish these ends, they thoughtfully provided, three pages further on, a prayer of thanksgiving to him for having done so.

I have spoken at length about God's part in the special relationship, but what of our responsibilities? They have been, and still are, to conduct a policing and civilising mission throughout the world. And I submit that we have kept faith with God in this respect.

The Crusades are but one example of the former, where we strove to wrest the holy places from – to use Kipling's words – "lesser breeds without the law." And it will

lo-G  
eting  
udyard  
ipling,  
ways  
rivy to  
e  
mighty's  
oughts,  
rote  
Beneath  
God's]  
wful  
and we  
old  
ominion  
ver palm  
nd pine."

ter mutinous Scots if ever we choose to  
the currently dormant fourth verse of  
Anthem:

and, grant that Marshal Wade  
by thy mighty aid  
victory bring.  
ay he sedition hush  
and like a torrent rush  
ebellious Scots to crush...

is true that Field-Marshal Wade has  
dead these 250 years, but the principle

may also invite God to deal with the  
monarch's foes by using one of several sup-  
plications to this end from the Prayer  
Book. For example, there is one prescribed  
use at Matins in which God is asked to  
strengthen the monarch so that he may van-  
quish his enemies. It is also included in the  
Prayer Book of Evensong and, if additional  
emphasis is required, in the Litany.

states in Exodus that the Lord is a man  
of war, and those of you who have studied



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

**Thomas Paine Society:** The Pump House, People's History Museum, Gartside Road, Manchester. Saturday, October 14, 2pm: Public meeting. Information from Eric Paine on 01243 605730.

**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, November 5, 5.30pm for 6pm. Robert Ashby: *Making Humanism Happen*.

**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. The Library, High Street, Wendover. Tuesday, November 14, 7.45pm for 8pm. Edward Blisshen: *The Trials and Tribulations of an Autobiographer*.

**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: Thursday, October 19, 7.30pm: Karl Heath: *Nothing - its Religious, Philosophical, Scientific and Mathematical Aspects*. Friday, November 17: Peter Atkins, Lincoln College, Oxford: *The Limitless Power of Science*. Information: telephone 01926 58450.

**Crawley:** Charles Stewart is working to establish a Humanist group for the area. Contact 50 Boswell Road, Tilgate, Crawley RH10 5AZ. Telephone: 01293 511270.

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

**Ealing Humanists:** Details: telephone Derek Hill 0181-422 4956 or Charles Rudd 0181-904 6599.

**Edinburgh Humanist Group:** Programme from secretary, 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD; 0131 667 8389.

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):** Information from 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HD; telephone 01926 58450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

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

**Haverling & District Humanist Society:** HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, November 7, 8 pm: Bob Tutton: *What Children Need to Know*. 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, October 15, 6.30pm: Keith Armstrong: *The Alternative Way of Dying*. October 22, 6.30pm: Lyn Hurst: *Off With His Head! Or should the Bust of Jesus be on the Secular Hall?* October 29, 6.30pm: Stewart Colley: *Outing - Does it Achieve Results?*

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, October 26, 8pm: Discussion, with Len Leonard: *Our Evolutionary Future*.

**Manchester: Greater Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: 0161 432 9045. Meetings begin at 7.30pm, St Thomas' Centre, Ardwick Green. Friday, October 13, 7.30pm: 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, October 19, 7.30pm: Tony Barnett: *Religion and Systems of Belief*.

**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, November 1, 8pm: Michael Goulder: *Confessions of an Ex-Priest*. 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, October 11: Edmund King: *Humanism and Education - an International Perspective*.

**Teesside Humanist Group:** Friends Meeting House, Norton Green, Stockton. Wednesday, October 11: Prof. Neil Jenkins: *Modern Humanism*. Contact J Cole on 01642 559418 or R Wood 01740 650861.

**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. October 19: Jean and Barrie Berkley present BHA Conference Report.

**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:** Margaret Knight's work, revised by Jim Herrick; preface by Edward Blisshen. £7.50 plus £1 post from RPA, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

**Foundations of Modern Humanism:** McIlroy pamphlet reprinted. £1 plus 25p p&p; bulk order rates from 0114 2685731. Payment with order to: Sheffield Humanist Society, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT.





# DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



## Laying on of hands, knees

## ...and whoops-a-daisy!

JOHN WESLEY recorded that during a visit to Sheffield he preached to "the largest congregation I had ever seen on a weekday." But that was in 1779, when a display of religious "enthusiasm" was, for most, one of the few exciting diversions from the sheer awfulness of everyday life.

Surges of emotion are now largely confined to visits by royalty, a rock concert, or when the Owls and the Blades are doing their stuff. As for religion, Sheffield's level-headed citizens can take it or leave it – mostly the latter. Certainly St Thomas's Church was a most unlikely setting for what became the city's unique contribution to the Decade of Evangelism.

St Thomas's is situated in the Crookes district, directly opposite a popular watering-hole which is aptly named The Noah's Ark. Consecrated in 1840, the church is typical in style and location of many Anglican churches built at that time.

### Wildest

It served the better-off manufacturing and professional classes who had moved to higher ground in order to escape the environmental ravages of the Industrial Revolution. Its graveyard contains the bones of Victorian worshippers who, in their wildest nightmares, could not have imagined the events which have shaken their parish church – at times literally – to its foundations.

This year's "silly season" was rather flat until news of the Nine O'Clock Service debacle broke. The rise and fall of cult boss and Anglican priest the Rev Chris Brain was a gift to the national media. For the Church of England, scarcely recovered from catastrophic speculation in the property market and an infighting scandal at Lincoln Cathedral, it was yet another excruciating embarrassment.

Chris Brain had been manager of a Christian pop band. But the Barnum of evangelism found his niche when he came to St Thomas's 10 years ago. He was a shrewd operator: his Jesus raves soon attracted hundreds of happy-clappies who waved their arms, sang, danced and chanted hosannas to the healing, revolutionary, punk-rocking

Nazarene. Nearby residents objected to the holy racket; after two years, Chris Brain and his witless followers moved to Ponds Forge Leisure Centre.

It was not consideration for the feelings of Crookes locals that prompted Chris Brain to launch his Nine O'Clock Service at the modern city centre venue. At Ponds Forge, he was able to install an incredible array of electronic gadgetry. Throbbing music, strobe lights, banks of video screens, wide-ranging photographs and disembodied voices required a 30-strong team to operate the sound and visuals. Celebration of something called The Planetary Mass brought in seekers after enlightenment, ranging from the gormless to the highly intelligent.

Church leaders – ever seeking that elusive formula which will entice their wandering flock back to the fold – also turned up at the Nine O'Clock Service. One of them, the Venerable Stephen Lowe, Archdeacon of Sheffield, says he "derived great personal spiritual strength from the services." Intellectual respectability was conferred on the proceedings in the form of sermons preached by Canon John Rogerson, Professor of Biblical Studies at Sheffield University.

At the name of Jesus, every eye shall glaze – and, sure enough, the Chris Brain outfit soon developed into a text-book cult. He was head of an hierarchical structure, with trusted cohorts to ensure obedience and conformity in the rank-and-file. They were expected to contribute up to 25 per cent of their income. Some gave up their jobs to devote themselves in a full-time capacity to the Nine O'Clock Service.

Money was no problem for the Rev Chris Brain. Anita Roddick, head of the Body Shop chain, was a financial backer. Nicole Campbell daughter and heiress of Lord Swathling, chairman of the Rothman Group, was another benefactress. The Sainsbury, Cadbury and Kirby Laing families are reported to have made contributions.

The Rt Rev David Lunn, Bishop of Sheffield, commented: "People gave him money. They can do that if they want. They are grown-up."

Pensioners Sheila and Bob Ingham are also grown-up. But they moved into a one-bedroom flat and let Chris Brain have their £200,000 house on permanent loan. They now feel "deceived and betrayed."

It is usually assumed that gullibility on this scale is confined to maverick religious groups or imported from the United States. In fact, the Nine O'Clock Service movement developed under the ægis of the Established Church in an English city that boasts two uni-

versities.

However, some churchpeople had misgivings about the charismatic Chris. And when, in 1993, he announced his intention to take up an appointment in the United States, Archdeacon Lowe's reaction was: "Great – he's going. America can have him." But he stayed and America was spared.

For months, there had been whisperings about "Chris's harem." The favoured ones were known as the "home base team". These attractive and alluringly-clad hand maidens – the term is not used loosely – cooked and cleaned the house and are said to have performed "other services" in order to "release him for his ministry."

The Rev Chris was enthusiastic about the laying on of hands, particularly his own, and not always to impart a blessing. It was claimed that he fondled, stroked and caressed more than 20 attenders at the Nine O'Clock Service. When these accusations became public knowledge, the diocesan authorities made a clean breast of it (metaphorically, that is).

After the bubble burst, there was recrimination on all sides. Chris Brain suffered a nervous collapse and was admitted to a hospital in Greater Manchester. On the bright side, there were reports that the *News of the World* was offering a substantial contract for his version of events.

### Distressed

What of the Jesus ravers who flocked to the Nine O'Clock Service? Many were in a distressed state of shock and embarrassment. A telephone help-line was set up and some of the women were taken to a church centre for counselling.

Secular Humanists know – or ought to know – that the dry rot of religious superstition can take a hold anywhere. It will not be eradicated by dipping toes in the Sea of Faith or through a charmed circle's quasi-philosophical concepts.

A campaigning Secularist Humanist movement, engaging in controversy and public activity, is essential to combat the forces of superstition and irrationality.

Having ignored warning signs for more than a year, the Church of England has, as one national newspaper editorialised, "been exposed to some of the most damaging publicity in living memory."

No doubt it has learned some hard lessons from the Chris Brain affair. And one important lesson is that any organisation, be it religious or secular, is courting disaster when it allows one individual to become a law unto himself (or herself, for that matter).



## YOU'RE TELLING US!

## Happy to be Humanists!

THE Editor is correct to describe Jim Ross's article in the August issue ("Make Humanism matter through political channels," Page 118) as important.

Some comment is necessary because the article is based on a misleading interpretation of Humanism. Jim Ross says that Humanism is "an approach to the analysis and organisation of life on this earth...and sits more naturally in the context of...political parties than in that of religious denominations." He goes on to describe Humanism "as relevant to the structure and conduct of politics." From this, he draws the conclusion that we "should aim to engage directly with political channels..."

This may be a good indication of what some Humanists think they should do, but it is not advice that can be applied to the Humanist movement.

The reason for this is that Humanism is concerned with specific beliefs and not actions. It may be claimed that actions derive directly from beliefs, but whereas the former are decisive, the latter that give rise to them may give rise also to other actions which are contrary to them. For example, some Humanists are Socialists and would say that their Socialism is a result of their Humanist beliefs. But others would announce that they are Conservatives for the same reason.

In other words, Humanism is best described in philosophical terms and does not lead to a specific policy. This, of course, contrasts with religion, which tells us how we ought to behave, as well as what we ought to think, stating in effect that only behaviour based on religious beliefs ("the good Christian life," say) is acceptable.

Why, then, should we advocate Humanism, if it gives us no specific guide to our conduct?

Humanists know the answer this - or they would not be Humanists. Put briefly, it makes us happy and results in a feeling of being at home in the world. Because we are social animals, we want to share this experience with other people. For vast numbers of us (perhaps the majority) the world is, or can be, a miserable place. We want to make it a happy one.

Here is the key message: mankind has evolved by natural processes. How this has come about is far from clear. Scientists are discovering more about nature all the time, but the ultimate mystery remains. What is perfectly clear, however, is that religion provides no answer. It merely adds a further mystery. An unconscious God does not make sense, so God must have consciousness. But Darwin has shown that consciousness has evolved since life began and is a function of animal nervous systems. It cannot be conceived of in any other context.

Thus Humanism is essentially an approach to the nature of human beings and other living organisms.

From this, we realise that, as there is no God

to help us, we must help each other. Civilisation depends on human co-operation. What is so difficult to determine is how this co-operation should be implemented. Most of us will agree that parliamentary democracy offers the best hope of social improvements, and so we work with the political party that we think most likely to bring about the desired changes. But unless we ear a label, we shall not be recognised as Humanists. We have no monopoly of good intentions. What we do have is a motivation which is lacking in religious people. For, as we have said, there being no supernatural assistance, we need to cultivate the assets that arise from our own nature: our social instincts which have enabled civilisation to reach its present precarious state.

If parliamentary democracy is to be effective, the electorate must choose their representatives and their policies with due discretion. An educational policy which, among other things, teaches people to think, is therefore a necessity. This is an area where religion can do most harm, and Humanists should be especially active in it. The make-believe of religion can be very damaging. To promise people heavenly rewards must divert them from achieving earthly benefits for all. On the other hand, Humanism helps us to come to terms with death. We shall never experience it. Only life can be experienced. This provides a strong motivation to make the most of the only life we shall ever know. Our social interests lead us to a feeling of fulfilment, if we co-operate with other humans in this effort.

Finally, should the movement as a whole set up a committee to consider what is the political message of Humanism, if any? An inability to define one would be useful - and reveal that we are not wasting our time in describing the personal assets of Humanism. People can hardly refuse them if we can but make them plain.

**ARTHUR ATKINSON  
Hayes**

SPURRED by Jim Ross, I should like to propose that we give more support to the idea of land value taxation.

The proposal is for the state to collect the majority of the free market rental value for all the land in the country. Land, that is, as distinct from buildings or other improvements made by the owner or his predecessors in title. The ethical justification for this is that nobody made the land. The first "owner" just walked in and took possession or enclosed it, so the title passed down by sale or gift is not good. All over the world, the common people have been dispossessed of that land which was once the common heritage of all and in many cases this has led to revolts and wars against the landlords.

The political justification is that here is a rich potential source of non-regressive revenue for the expenses of government of a magnitude comparable with that raised by income tax. Taxes on rental value of land could not be passed on to tenants because, if the market would stand higher rents, then rents would be

increased anyway. This can be seen in the case of agricultural land where subsidies intended to help farmers have been appropriated by land owners in the form of higher rents.

In the urban context, such a policy would result in vacant or derelict industrial or commercial sites having to pay just as much tax as similar sites in productive use. This would soon put an end to the scandal of valuable industrial or inner-city commercial sites being held idle in time of recession in the hope of windfall profits when things recovered. If the tax or business rate were calculated on the value of the land rather than on the buildings, there would be a powerful incentive for owners to get that land back into productive use and providing jobs for local people.

Unlike income, land cannot be hidden or moved offshore so a land tax would be easy to collect and hard to avoid. People or institutions with money to invest would no longer be able to buy land for profit but would instead be encouraged to invest in industry, thus increasing the real wealth of the nation and providing more employment for its citizens.

It seems to me that land value taxation would be an eminently suitable political policy for Humanists to support, being both economically beneficial and ethically sound.

**OWEN DUMPLETON  
Tyne & Wear**

## Don't let the past paralyse

THE problems listed in Frank Holmes' letter (September) correspond to worries that have long wandered through my own psyche.

His remarks about "people organising themselves into effective working parties" reminded me of a programme on the television some time ago which featured an influential American professor who is trying to organise a debate aimed at constructing a comprehensive body of modern ethical and moral principles. This in response to the failure of our traditional "tenets" to adapt. Nothing has been heard of him since, the discussion obviously being confined to academia.

Are we to have a war of the specialities - faiths, academia, the plebs and so on - to decide whose view of reality is to be imposed on humanity?

Any set of ethical and moral standpoints tends to degenerate into prepared solutions of hypothetical situations to be applied at some future date. However, these may not then be relevant, because the rules are invariably unmutated by the lessons of intervening experience.

This is the problem at the heart of our current religious moralities. What fitted the circumstances of 2,000 years ago is now inadequate. The right of USA citizens to carry guns, enshrined in their Constitution, is based on the premise that a regiment of early 19th Century



## YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 156

British marines might yet again sail up the Potomac and incinerate Washington.

Present problems should be addressed by answers appropriate to present need. Past experience should guide us in this exercise. It should not, by a laying down of rules, paralyse our intellectual processes.

"Treat others as you'd like to be treated yourself" is, I feel, the only precept which needs to be applied in morality. It has the virtue of universality, and is low on controversy.

**WILFRED GAUNT**  
Leicester

## A right load of Cock Lane

COLIN McCall's review of Carl Sifakis' book *Hoaxes and Scams* (September) refers to the craze for spirit rappings as beginning with the Fox sisters. This was, I believe, in 1848.

I don't know how long ago an event must be to be called modern, and I don't know if Carl Sifakis mentions the matter, but many readers will have heard of the "Cock Lane Ghost" which attracted a great deal of public attention as long ago as 1762, when a series of rappings and tappings in a house in Cock Lane (East London) were alleged to emanate from the spirit of a deceased resident of the house and to accuse her husband, a Mr Kent, of murdering her. These "messages" were eventually revealed as the work of an 11-year-old girl, whose father, a Mr Parsons, served a spell in the pillory for the fraud, apparently because he had put his daughter up to it with an eye to blackmail.

Charles Dickens refers to these events in the first chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities*, where he writes that although the "ghost" was exposed as fraudulent, it none the less had many imitators "supernaturally deficient in originality," as he puts it.

I wonder whether the Fox sisters might have read about the Cock Lane ghost – it was, I believe, written about quite extensively, so maybe they had, duplicating young Miss Parsons' code for interrogating a spirit – one tap for "yes," two for "no." In which case the supernatural lack of originality was worse than even Dickens was aware of!

**ELSIE KARBACZ**  
West Mersea

## Lawyers love law-breakers

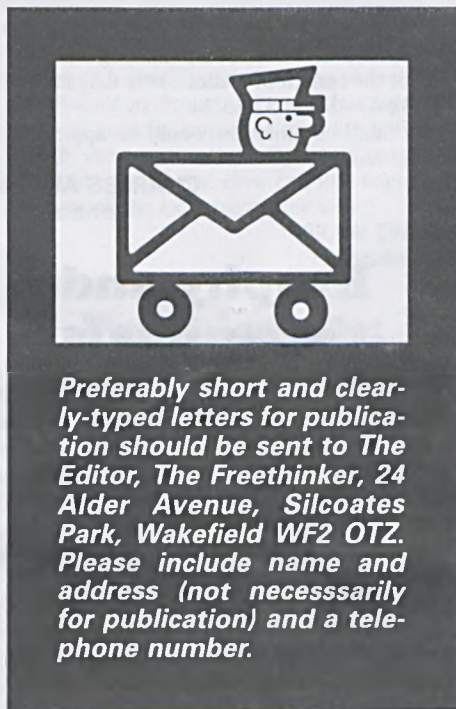
I WISH to comment on the letter in the August issue from Dr Stephen Moreton, of Warrington, on capital punishment.

May I ask if, in view of his call for capital punishment for all habitual offenders, the Once and for All method of doing away with criminals and criminality, has he ever paused to

think who would suffer most if, by whatever means criminals ceased to exist?

They would be judges, barristers, solicitors, prison officers, probation officers, with the ancillary "treaters" of criminals and criminal behaviour – psychiatrists, psychologists, doctors employed by the police, and, ultimately, all police officers.

Every one of the above, apart from those engaged in non-criminal branches of the Law, would lose their present lucrative scales of salary. And I can tell Dr Moreton that he'll not find a single one willing to relinquish his salary.



**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.**

What lies behind lenient sentences but a desire to hold on to the criminal population and thus ensure that the above ladies gentlemen will always be needed.

In similar vein, when the IRA ceased fire the British Special Branch, Secret Services, the Army, suddenly realised they had no further employment. Why do you imagine Private Lee Clegg was released when he was – except as a crude attempt to provoke the IRA to renew the war? Of course, the long-held myth that the Irish are moronic actually applies more to the idiots who used the ploy because the IRA refused to rise to the bait, and peace still obtains, despite numerous other provocations staged by the Orange Order backed by the Tory Government who would just love a new campaign aimed against them to start up.

Failing in their bid to provoke the IRA, they're now going their level best to heat the former Yugoslavia into open warfare between Russia, the champion of the Serbs and the NATO countries. You see, if there isn't a war, soldiers lose their jobs all up the line, right to the top echelon, and it is the hierarchy who are most loathe to relinquish their fat salaries.

**A G STEPHENS**  
Bradford

I AM loath to continue the death penalty correspondence but would like to correct Dan Bye's misunderstandings and misrepresentations (Page 141, September) of what I wrote in August (Page 127). I did state which crimes I was referring to – crimes of violence and/or dishonesty. I do not know why Bye chose to ignore this and refer to smoking cannabis. Perhaps he didn't want to expose the absurdity of his argument.

The cost of executions in the USA is primarily due to the machinations and stalling tactics of lawyers. By forfeiting the right of appeal after, say, five convictions, such costly delays could be eliminated.

Life imprisonment does not guarantee "no possibility of re-offending" as prisoners who riot, rip up prison roofs and assault warders prove.

If executing persistent shoplifters while sparing a mass murderer convicted only once is the price to pay for avoiding irreversible miscarriage of justice, then so be it. This is only a problem to those interested in revenge against murderers rather than those who merely "want the justice system to achieve tangible positive results." However, if it makes Bye happier, I could suggest a points system whereby the more serious offences incur more points than the lesser ones. Execution would follow when a certain value was exceeded. It would have to be scaled so that, even with serious offences, at least two or three such convictions would have to be acquired first. A single conviction, no matter how serious, should not result in death – remember Stefan Kiszko.

Perhaps an accountant or actuary could do the relevant calculations regarding the statistical likelihood and expense of further crimes and the cost of imprisonment in order to determine the level of points/convictions at which execution becomes cost-effective. I have only suggested five convictions to illustrate the point.

Most crime (94 per cent) is "property crime" rather than violent. Does Bye really think I don't know that? I would argue that many property crimes are as bad as, or worse than, violent ones. I would rather be punched in the face than burgled and robbed of all my possessions (I've experienced the former and I dread the latter). Besides, being the victim, even of property crime, can be devastatingly traumatic and lead to physical illness. Bye ought to think more about the effects on victims before he asserts that habitual criminals have "physically harmed no-one." He also ought to consider that these same harmless, petty crooks often turn thoroughly nasty and violent when caught in the act.

Finally, if Bye wants evidence that targeting habitual offenders works he should study the latest crime statistics. The annual report of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner reveals the biggest two-year drop in recorded crime for 40 years. This is a direct result of the police policy, backed by the Home Secretary, of targeting known persistent offenders and locking them up.

Turn to Page 158



## YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 157

I merely argue that, because they'll only start offending again upon release, it's more effective (and cheaper) in the long run to simply kill them.

[Dr] STEPHEN MORETON  
Warrington

## Radio fun

KEEP Sunday Special, they plead. All right by me...if the BBC keeps "Sunday" going on Radio Four at 07.40 to 08.50. It atones for early days in Sunday best, walking sedately to an interminable pre-war church service or two – when Shakespeare Cliff and Dover Castle and the harbour were calling.

"Sunday" is the best show of the week. The religious goings-on are unbelievably hilarious, absurd or tragic, and by the end of the programme I am in despair for human nature and the future of the world. But the amusement makes up for it and my "Freethinking" is reinforced.

JACK F CHADWICK  
Hornchurch

## Stress their false logic

A FREQUENT complaint is that many demand that their beliefs – religious or otherwise – must not be questioned. There is a simple logical answer which few seem to realise: "Truth will withstand any amount of questions."

Any attempt to avoid questions immediately raises major doubts as to the truth of the beliefs and also as to the genuineness of the claim of believing. Is he/she afraid that questions will disclose serious weaknesses and untruths?

Some USA Christians – on this basis – have stated that any preacher who demands that his claims cannot be questioned should be ignored. Could not Humanists and other critics provide a more effective answer to such demands by continually emphasising the falseness of their general logic, rather than trying to criticise individual beliefs?

R G SILSON  
Tring

## The Lottery

SOME reputedly non-caring person has just won millions of pounds; why not me? Can't God see fair play? Surely he can read my mind (my wife can)? I would have given nearly all the money to charity.

Large salaries are being taken out of the "kitty" by fat cats. What an insult to the public, millions of pounds being wasted on advertising, as though people are not aware of the facts. The media provides 100 per cent publicity. Of course, it's the fat cats feathering their nests (or should I say "boxes"?)

What sort of government allows this? Oh, of course, many members of it are fat cats themselves, or friends of same. After all, look at the pay rise they voted themselves – only to offer the nurses a mere pittance.

I have opted out of the National Lottery and will give direct without any deductions.

To begin with, here is a cheque £10 for *The Freethinker*. Secondly, I have sent £100 to Mark Maynard, who was the only person to stand up to some "jobs" who were molesting a girl. For his noble effort, Mark was badly beaten-up. I wonder how many people on the bus who turned the other cheek were Christians?

Oh Gawd! I've dunnit now! God can be so spiteful. My lucky numbers are bound to come up now, when I have stopped doing the lottery, so for the benefit of readers, here they are: 8 18 28 38 47 48 and 32 33 34 35 36 37.

A small commission would be appreciated. Good luck!

CHARLES ADAMS  
London N14

## Brophy and the animals

I ENJOYED Edward Blishen's article (September) on the late Brigid Brophy, but may I add that this "dramatically clever" woman who "believed passionately in the use of intelligence, and of reason" was totally dedicated to the cause of animal rights and, throughout her long illness, would use no drugs tested on animals. She has written a great deal on the subject, and brilliantly countered the well-worn accusation that animal righters are anthropomorphists or sentimentalists. Read *Don't Never Forget* or *Animals, Men and Morals*, to name but a few of her works.

HEATHER EVANS  
Kenilworth

THANK you Messrs Rick Savage and Dave Godin for their excellent recent letters regarding concern and respect for animals.

The Jain religion (or is it better described as a philosophy?), which Gandhi embraced, extends this compassion to insects and vegetation. Let us not deery all religions and philosophies – some do indeed have many good points, and let us remember the words of Leonardo da Vinci: "The day will come when men such as I will look upon the murder of animals as we now look upon the murder of men."

GEOFFREY MOSS  
Wirral

## David Tribe under fire

DAVID Tribe ("Might-have-beens and maybes of politics" September) complains of "selective" quotations from Marxism. My quotations were representative, not selective, and are

based upon reading.

Even "selective" quotations are better than no quotations at all. Failure to produce a single word from Marx or Engels in support of his arguments suggests that David Tribe has not read the "Marxism" which he presumes to attack.

KARL HEATH  
Coventry

DAVID Tribe should not be allowed to close the book before correction of a major misconception which, maybe accounts for the ejection of the baby with the bathwater.

Marx advocated revolution but never violent revolution. It is true that some of the major revolutions of this century (Russia, China, Cuba) have involved armed forces but this is not an essential feature of revolutions.

The Industrial Revolution was a peaceful one, as was the French Revolution until Napoleon seized control. The revolution in South Africa has so far progressed without the involvement of the armed forces. In its own tiny way, the revolution in Shell with regard to the Brent Spar oil-rig was also non-violent.

It is capitalism itself which introduces the violence, as in Russia in 1919, in Cuba (the Bay of Pigs), in Chile, in Central America, not to mention Korea or Vietnam. It is perhaps the very involvement of armed forces which causes the collapse of non-capitalist régimes: the transition from military control to democracy is fraught with difficulties. The so-called velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe could so easily have been put down by military force had not an intelligent Marxist (the one who introduced *glasnost* and *perestroika*) been in control. The sad feature about these revolutions is that the instigators knew what they were fighting against but had no positive ideas to put in its place and were consequently gobbled up by voracious capitalism. Herein lies the answer to the question: "Why the need for Communist parties?"

It is true that Marx predicted the ultimate demise of capitalism; it carries the seeds of its own destruction, he said. He did not predict how or when or where it would die – and wisely so in view of the fact that capitalism was still in its developing stages; the aeroplane, the telephone, the motor car, the wireless set, the nuclear bomb, the information super-highway, had yet to be invented. Hitler's aim was world domination lasting a thousand years; he went some considerable way towards achieving his aim; had he done so, would that not have been the end of capitalism? There exist already more than enough nuclear bombs which, if used, could destroy not only capitalism but civilisation itself. Were there really contingency plans to use them against Iraq?

Communist parties or, better still, Freethinker parties are urgently needed to ensure that capitalism does not come to a violent end and that when it does expire, there is something appropriate to put in its place.

R G SARGENT  
Cornwall

Turn to page 159



## YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 158

DAVID Tribe says of a possible German invasion of Britain during the Second World War: "If Chamberlain wouldn't or couldn't come back." Mr Chamberlain certainly could not have come back, since he died (of cancer) in November, 1940.

R L STRATFORD  
Hitchin

## 'Misleading' Smoker answered

DETERMINISM is the doctrine that every event, every thing, every entity of any kind, is what it is and can be no other because of its antecedents. There is, admittedly, a version of this called "soft determinism" but this, in my view, is the purest fudge.

Barbara Smoker (September, Page 142) is open to criticism when she writes of a "lingering belief in the theological doctrine of 'free will'." Misleading on two grounds:

1. Nobody thinks that they are entirely free to choose but most people experience choice in, admittedly, limited areas and most people actually act as though that element of choice were real. People who believe in determinism – as distinct from recognising that, of course, many things are determined – do experience the exercise of choice just like those who think that an element of free will is actually part of the way the world is. Operationally, some experience of choice is not "lingering"; it is a continuing part of most people's mental furniture, part of most people's perception of reality.
2. The use of the word "theological" is tendentious. The freewill/determinism debate is part of philosophy generally and there is, in any case, a theological version of determinism – known around these parts as predestination.

May I suggest that readers might do a lot worse than read Corliss Lamont's book *Freedom of Choice Affirmed*, which the RPA lists?

ERIC STOCKTON  
Orkney

THAT latter-day John Calvin, Barbara Smoker, implies that she believes that she has been predestined to be no more than a puppet on a string (letter, September). I submit that her creed is crazy: since, Frankenstein-like, her DNA has spawned an "I" as well as an "it," she exists – she is a percipient and responsible being. If not, what joker wrote the letter in her stead?

GORDON EASTON  
Oban

BARBARA Smoker appears to have got herself into a bit of a logical snarl-up over free will. If conscious behaviour is *determined* by nature and nurture, does not this rather put the

kybosh on Humanism which, if I understand it correctly, is based on respect for the human individual as a responsible agent? Moreover, her argument favours, rather than opposes, capital punishment. For what else should one do with something predetermined to commit perverse acts but destroy it, just as one should send a dangerous motor-car to the breaker's yard?

If nature and nurture determine the activities of criminals, they must *ipso facto* have determined the activities of those who (the conspiracy theory tells us) create the social conditions that lead to crime. So our world then is controlled by a predestinate causal sequence of natures and natures determining subsequent natures and natures *ad infinitum*, presumably leading to a steadily deteriorating social structure. But most of us would argue that the social structure actually improves over the long-run, though there are admittedly short-term and localised regressions. How can that happen, if not through the exercise of free will?

GLYN EMERY  
London N1

## Population: coercion not the answer

FIRST, I must correct Connaire Kensit's Disneyland vision of population apocalypse among lemmings (July letters). Philip Ward's *Dictionary of Common Fallacies* points out that lemmings "breed in larger numbers in certain years, and then if the food supply in the mountains is low, they...descend in varying numbers...The cosmic death wish is a fallacy, as is the regularity with which they are said to emerge from the mountains, as is their multiplicity. Most lemmings stay in the mountains."

The relationship between population, environment and scarcity is more complex than Kensit realises.

I am accused of generalisation for saying that "only the most violent, totalitarian régimes have ever restricted population," China being my only example. This is a simple statement of observable fact: coercive restrictions on fertility are not the actions of democracies (except by proxy in the "Third World"). An obvious point to make, surely? It is true, as Kensit argues, that you could equally accurately say that only violent dictatorships coercively promote population (there is an apparent paradox here: régimes committed to "keeping human life plentiful" also murder on a massive scale). We agree in condemnation of the pro-population policies of Stalin, Ceaucescu, Pol Pot and Hitler (who pursued anti-population policies against Jews, Gypsies etc.). The difference between us is this: Kensit is opposed only to state-enforced pro-populations measures – whereas I am opposed to all state interference in reproductive life, whether the policy is intended to increase or to decrease population levels. Both approaches are commonly justi-

fied by appeal to the principle that the interests of the state must prevail over those of the individual. Back in February, I quoted an anti-natalist and a pro-natalist to this effect. Liquidation of dissent is defended in the same way, hence the link with the Tianenmen Square massacres.

State-supremacism is the rhetoric of population controllers and promoters alike. I reject this, but support voluntary family planning, along with women's rights, education, health care. Humanist and anti-religious propaganda etc.

I remain sceptical about the dire warnings of impending population catastrophe. Scarcity cannot be blamed solely on "over-population" (whatever that may mean): there is almost always an identifiable political/industrial cause.

This is not to rule out the possibility that population levels could become a problem in certain localities over the longer term. But the situation does not now warrant compulsory anti-fertility measures.

Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Kerala have reduced their population growth by voluntary, progressive means.

Potential parents, armed with accurate information and effective contraception, are the best people to make decisions about the size of their families.

Kensit, meanwhile, supports the eugenicist population policies of a régime he knows, better than most, to be totalitarian – despite his own admission that these policies are likely to be brutally enforced.

The following statements are taken from the February 24, 1995, issue of *Renmin Ribao*, a Chinese Communist Party newspaper. I find them chilling:

*Family planning must be subordinate to and serve the central task of economic construction.*

*Births in contravention of policy stipulations must be stopped.*

*In order to raise the population quality in the minority nationality areas, efforts must also be made to practise family planning in these areas.*

*Severe blows must be dealt at crimes of disrupting birth control.*

If I am to be labelled a "libertarian dogmatist" for refusing to go along with this, then I accept the title with pride. Rather a "libertarian dogmatist" than an apologist for state terrorism.

Once again, I urge champions of coercive population control to reconsider their support for this dubious cause.

DAN J BYE  
Rotherham

## Bible truth?

I READ in the Bible (Psalm 116): "Every man is a liar." Was the writer telling the truth or telling lies? Was the Psalmist a woman?

DAVID YEULETT  
Greenwich



# THE VARIED TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST

**T**O suggest that Jesus Christ was subject to sexual temptations has always incurred the wrath of militant Christians. In 1988, Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on Nikos Kazantzakis' controversial novel, explored Christ's doubts in his ability to fulfil his ministry on earth. The most controversial and, to Christians, the most outrageous part of the film was the suggestion that Christ had erotic thoughts about Mary Magdalene while on the cross.

Earlier, in 1977, Mary Whitehouse brought a private prosecution against *Gay News* for publishing James Kirkup's poem, "The love that dares to speak its name," in which a homosexual centurion speaks of his love for the crucified Jesus and recalls Christ's love for other men. The Editor, Denis Lemon, was found guilty and sentenced to nine months imprisonment, suspended for 18 months, and fined £500.

## Normal

A man undergoing crucifixion would probably find that the experience concentrated his mind exclusively on the matter in hand, to the exclusion of erotic thoughts – either heterosexual or homosexual. But sexual desire is a natural human drive, at least under normal circumstances, and is necessary for the continuation of the species. Thus, if Jesus' physiology was normal then he would have experienced the heterosexual desire suggested by Scorsese or the homosexual desire suggested by Kirkup, unless he was bisexual in which case he would have desired both men and women.

It is likely that Christians object to suggestions of Christ's sexuality because of the claim that he had a divine rather than a human nature. But such a claim invalidates the revolting sado-masochistic sacrifice of the crucifixion upon which their faith rests. If his nature was not human, then neither was his suffering.

The temptations depicted by Kirkup and Scorsese are, of course, fictional: the myths

# LAST WORD

by Carl Pinel

and legends which obscure the life of Jesus (who may have been a fictional character, anyway) make it difficult to know whether he was married, celibate or a practising homosexual. For Rationalists, the sexual preferences of a man who died 2,000 years ago, and who may have been a mythical figure anyway, are largely irrelevant – except for the outrage that their discussion provokes among Christians. Attempts to explore the sexuality of Christ, whether fictional or scholarly, is to risk persecution under the outdated blasphemy laws.

Sexual desires attributed to Jesus may be dismissed by Christians as speculative, unsubstantiated or blasphemous, but there are other temptations to which Jesus was subjected. These are recorded in the New Testament and are presumably accepted by Christians as authoritative.

Both Luke and Matthew have Gospels attributed to them relating how Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. Fasting was a commonplace activity among religious ascetics, who were able to induce visions as a result of alterations in body metabolism caused by near starvation. These "visions" were no more than hallucinations, but to the superstitious all things are credible if they serve their beliefs.

While it is possible to understand why ascetics would feel the need to strengthen their faith by fasting, flagellation, vows of silence or any of the other masochistic devices to which superstitionists are prone, it is difficult to see why Jesus would feel such a need. If he was divine, then fasting to induce visions to strengthen his faith served no useful purpose. If he had a

human nature then he may have felt the need to strengthen his resolve. But if Jesus suffered from the doubts, lack of courage and human frailties experienced by the rest of us, then Kirkup's and Scorsese's work is quite legitimate and should not give offence.

Christians would do better to turn their attention to the strange temptations offered to Jesus by the Devil during his period of fasting in the wilderness. The biblical account states that the Devil took Jesus to "...a very high mountain" and promised him all the kingdoms of the world if he would break his fast. But if, as Christians believe, God had created the world and everything in it, to be offered a part of something which he already possessed (or, at least, which was in the family) was absurd.

## Tedious

And, presumably, the Devil could only have gained possession of the cities by stealing them or being given them. In view of God's supposed omnipotence and omniscience, neither explanation is credible. It is also unclear why Jesus would want to go to the top of the mountain with the Devil, just to be tempted. It is rather like enduring the glib and rather tedious talk of a double-glazing salesman when one already has double-glazing. But we are informed that the devil "...took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple" and challenged him to prove his powers by jumping off without hurting himself. Perhaps the Devil tricked Jesus into going with him the first time but, with all his super powers, he should not have fallen for the same trick twice.

It is interesting and revealing that Christians should be incensed by suggestions that Christ might have had sexual temptations, but the contradictions of his temptations in the wilderness are rarely examined critically. The established Christian churches have tried to control sexual activity: they have tried to dictate when, with whom and how we can experience (rather than enjoy) sexual activity. Much of this is quite deliberate to create guilt and fear regarding sexual activity. That is why Christians can explain Christ's suffering on the cross and his temptation in the wilderness in human terms – but are unable to believe that he would have had sexual desires.

Such ideas are illogical, but when blind faith in myths and legends takes the place of scientific enquiry, reason and logic, then we can expect little else.

## 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.