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Free thinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

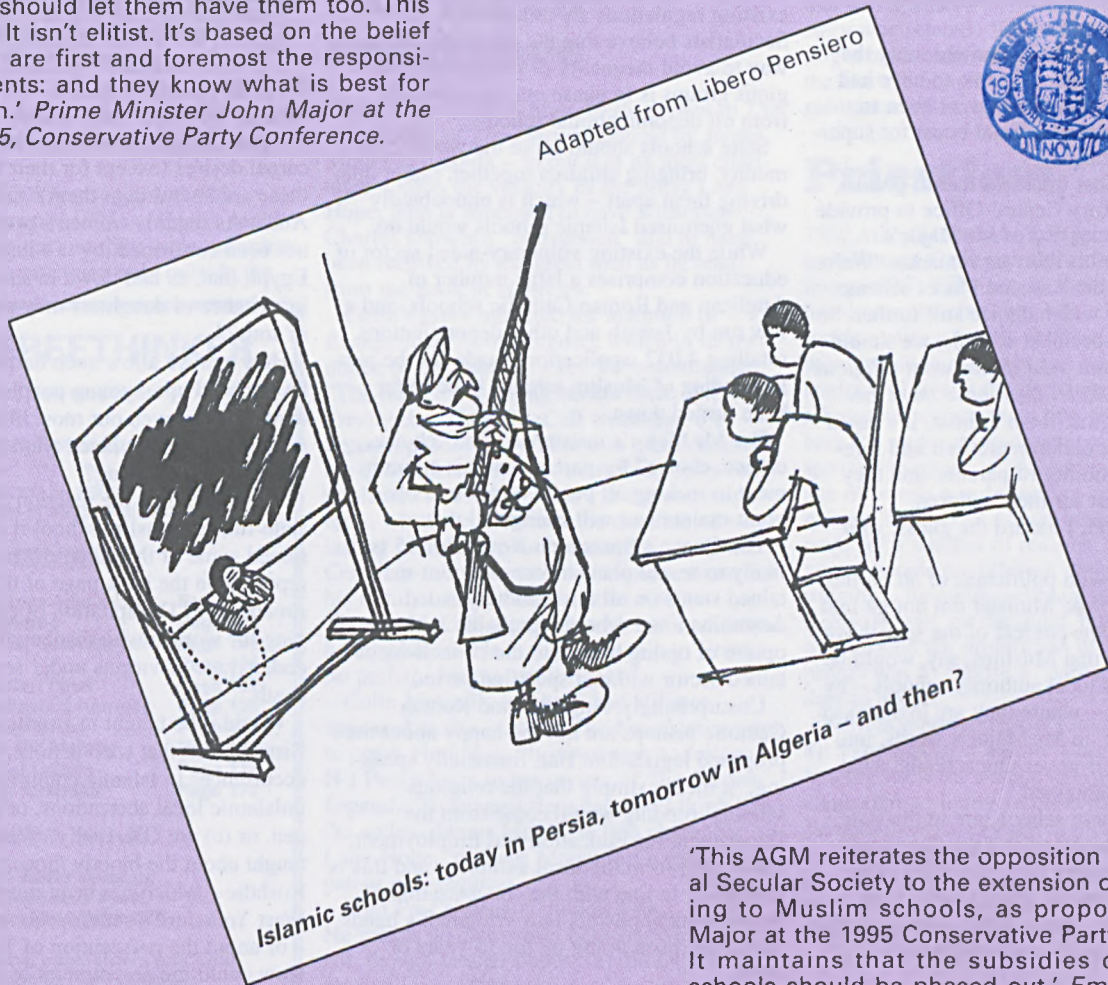
Vol 115 No 11

November 1995

'We're going to double the Assisted Places scheme. But I want to widen choice still further. So if parents want specialist schools, we should let them have them. And if they want religious schools, we should let them have them too. This isn't dogma. It isn't elitist. It's based on the belief that children are first and foremost the responsibility of parents: and they know what is best for their children.' Prime Minister John Major at the October, 1995, Conservative Party Conference.



Adapted from *Libero Pensiero*



Islamic schools: today in Persia, tomorrow in Algeria - and then?

'This AGM reiterates the opposition of the National Secular Society to the extension of public funding to Muslim schools, as proposed by John Major at the 1995 Conservative Party Conference. It maintains that the subsidies of all church schools should be phased out.' *Emergency resolution passed unanimously at the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society, London, October 14.*

Tory green light for new religious school grants

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UP FRONT

with the Editor

Superstition on the public purse

IT IS now Government policy to allow more religious groups – Muslims spring at once to mind – to add to their social segregation by receiving public funds to run their own schools. That is the conclusion which must be drawn from the Prime Minister's speech at the Conservative Party Conference last month.

As these notes are being written, only the National Secular Society seems to have had the temerity to comment upon, or even to notice, this threatened official boost for superstition in our society.

To be certain that the Press hadn't got it wrong, I asked Tory Central Office to provide me with the official text of Mr Major's speech. Here are his relevant remarks: "We're going to double the Assisted Places scheme.

"But I want to widen choice still further. So if parents want specialist schools, we should let them have them. *And if they want religious schools, we should let them have them too.*

"This isn't dogma. It isn't elitist. It's based on the belief that children are first and foremost the responsibility of parents: and they know what is best for their children."

My italics – and, I hazard the guess, your astonishment!

As is the way with politicians of all parties nowadays, the Prime Minister did not go into detail. But from the context of the speech we may safely infer that Muslims, say, would be able to take over local authority schools – by ballot of parents – where they are in a majority and turn them, in Mr Major's words, into "independent, self-governing schools: what we call grant-maintained."

He added: "These schools are in the state sector. Run by the Head and the Governors. They get their money from government to spend as they think fit. Their results have been outstanding. That's why I want to enable all schools to become grant-maintained."

Regulations are unfair

NOW IT may be that Mr Major was talking political horse-feathers: we'll have Respect for the Culture of Others coming out of our ears in the vote-hungry run-up to the General Election. But at the Annual General Meeting of the National Secular Society on October 14, members were under no illusions about what all this could mean, and they passed an emergency resolution: "This AGM reiterates the opposition of the National Secular Society

to the extension of public funding to Muslim schools, as proposed by John Major at the 1995 Conservative Party Conference. It maintains that the subsidies of all church schools should be phased out."

It is scarcely necessary to repeat – but I had best do so anyway – that we are *not* opposed to public funding for Muslim denominational schools only. It is simply that, of all groups which are not party to the present carve-up of funds-for-religion, they have been most vociferous in demanding their own schools.

They are quite right, too, to insist that the existing regulations are unfair – but we Secularists believe that the most acceptable way to avoid inequality of treatment of religious groups is to phase out the subsidies from *all* denominational schools.

State schools should serve the whole community, bringing children together, rather than driving them apart – which is undoubtedly what ghettoised Islamic schools would do.

While the existing voluntary-aided sector of education comprises a large number of Anglican and Roman Catholic schools, and a few run by Jewish and other denominations, totalling 4,032, applications made for the public funding of Muslim schools have so far been turned down.

But Mr Major's insistence upon "choice, choice, choice" for parents and his commitment to making all public sector schools grant-maintained will change all that.

The Queen's Speech on November 15 is likely to reveal plans to impose grant-maintained status on all the voluntary-aided denominational schools (probably with the option of opting back into the council-maintained sector within a specified period).

Unsurprisingly, Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops are not too happy about the proposed legislation. But, financially speaking, it means simply that the religious schools' funding would come from the Department for Education and Employment, rather than from the local authority, and this is absolutely in line with the concentration of formerly local powers into Whitehall's hands which has been going on for 15 years or more.

And, I repeat, the Prime Minister's Conference speech makes it clear that it would also result in many more parents being free to choose religious status for their children's schools – which would still receive Government funding in the form of grants.

Enormous problems

MUSLIM activists in the field of education have repeatedly made plain that they seek schools for their children in which not only

formal religious teaching but also the whole curriculum conforms to the Koranic ethos.

Quite how this would be accommodated in the National Curriculum to which any future Muslim grant-maintained schools would have to conform is a matter for conjecture.

But the problems would be enormous.

For example, to back up his opinions on a letters exchange which he has been having with a Muslim in the *Northern Echo*, our Tyneside Humanist Group colleague Owen Dumbleton has been delving into the Koran (which must be accepted as literal truth by all Muslims) and has come up with such gems as: "Men have authority over women. For those from whom you fear disobedience, send them to beds apart and beat them" (*surah 4 v 34*) and "Blessed are those who restrain their carnal desires (except for their slave girls, for these are lawful unto them)" (*surah 23 v 7*). And: "As regards women's property, has it not been confirmed, by a Muslim court in Egypt, that, as laid down in *surah 4 v 1*, the inheritance of daughters may only be half that of sons?"

How can we allow such barbaric "values" to be imposed upon young people at public expense? Do even our most liberal Respecters of the Cultures etc., etc., want their taxes to finance such teaching?

What would be the reaction of teachers in a state-funded Muslim school if a student questioned some of the Islamic state practices reported on the back page of this issue of *The Freethinker*? Decapitation of criminals... flogging for women who disobey the dress code... rape of virgins under sentence of death...

Would it be taught in Bradford or Birmingham that such actions, though daily occurrences in Islamic countries, are (a) unIslamic local aberrations, or (b) never happen, or (c) are OK, really? What would be taught about the bloody *fatwah* on Salman Rushdie – which has been much discussed in West Yorkshire's senior schools, I can tell you – or about the persecution of Taslima Nasrin? How could the perpetrators of such outrages be criticised without a cornerstone of Islam – death to the apostate – being questioned?

Why should Islamic teachers behave any differently to the (thankfully mostly old-style) Christian teachers who in my C of E school spared not the rod to make me believe driven about Noah's Ark, burning bushes, perambulations on water, a virgin birth, dead men being brought back to life?

The answer is that they would not behave differently, if they were true Muslims, or if they wanted to keep their jobs, or both.



UP FRONT

with the Editor

From Page 162

Step up the pressure

OUR view is that religion should be presented as fact only in the home, the chapel, the mosque, the church, the synagogue, the temple (it would be *too* cruel to suggest that its proper milieu would be the mental hospital). Mr Major's recent remarks should give us a springboard from which to step up our campaign to MPs and councillors for the phasing out of all state subsidies for all religious schools – old-style voluntary-aided or new-style grant-maintained – and, while we're at it, for school worship to be made genuinely voluntary.

As Nicolas Walter has suggested (*The Freethinker*, February, 1995): "Pupils could opt-in rather than opt-out, like trade unionists; worship could be practised only outside the

formal timetable, like other voluntary activities; worship and assembly could be separated, as in higher education."

And, as Barbara Smoker has said in this journal, the objections of Muslims and others to state schools thrusting the Christian brand of superstition down their kids' throats should be met by timetables being changed to allow observations about religion to find their natural place only in such lessons as history, art, literature and sociology.

Not much substance

COLIN McCALL'S May, 1995, review in *The Freethinker* of *The Darwin Legend* by James Moore cast doubt – to put it at its most charitable – upon the veracity of the noisy Lady Hope, who is supposed to have witnessed Charles Darwin's "conversion" and to have been received by the great man as he read from the book of Hebrews.

Colin's piece attracted the attention of *Evangelicals Now* (August), which in its own notice of the book by J H J Peet commented: "The book drew a long review from *The Freethinker*. Colin McCall writes out the account produced by Moore in great detail. He quotes from Darwin's autobiography (only published in 1958) by Darwin's granddaughter in which he describes the doctrine of everlasting punishment as 'a damnable doctrine.' Certainly this doctrine and its implications for his family caused Darwin great distress. Though McCall appreciates Moore's account, he concludes: 'He is too charitable to Hope.' So perhaps Moore got it right!"

Colin McCall's response had still not appeared as this issue of *The Freethinker* went to press. Here it is: "It is not easy to follow J H J Peet's logic in his review of *The Darwin Legend*... To suggest that, because I think that the author, James Moore, is 'too charitable' to Lady Hope, 'perhaps Moore got it right' is a patent *non-sequitur*.

"But Peet's piece is muddled from the start. He makes no distinction between two different, though related issues: (a) did Darwin receive Lady Hope? (b) was Darwin converted to Christianity?"

"We can dispose of the latter immediately. In his *Autobiography*, Darwin describes how 'disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress and have never since doubted even for a single second that my conclusion was correct.'

"Moore doesn't doubt this either. Where he and I differ is on whether Darwin received Lady Hope at Down House. And the evidence, as opposed to the speculation, is on my side. The members of Darwin's family without exception refuted the story. Indeed, Moore's researches show that Francis Darwin

'tackled Lady Hope at least five times and once publicly accused her of falsehood.' He also probably made her stop publishing the story. Even Lady Hope's fellow evangelist in the area, James Fegan, called it a 'fabrication.' Bear in mind, too, that the account didn't appear in print for 34 years and – in Moore's words – 'bears all the hallmarks of Lady Hope's anecdotal imagination.'

"As for 'the ring of truth' that Moore purports to see in it, he concedes that 'some of this inside information was scattered about the *Life and Letters* and in other publications that had appeared by 1915,' when Hope's story was printed. 'The more intimate titbits might have been winkled out of members of the Darwin household...' There's not much substance left after that."

Priestless

THE AGE (Melbourne), September 21, tells how Roman Catholics are testing the "priestless parish": "The severe shortage of priests has driven the church to test a lay person looking after a parish. It doesn't have to be a man, let alone a man of the cloth... The new leader will live in the parish and take care of all pastoral duties, including preparing members for weddings and baptisms and providing spiritual ministry..." A bishop said the shortage of priests was becoming critical: "A significant number of priests have left the ministry, for a number of reasons, and hardly any young people are offering themselves for training... for some, celibacy is a real issue." It always was, on the quiet, but the traditional way around the prohibition of sex for many priests was to choose a "partner" who didn't dare to object.

As was reported in *The Observer* (October 8): "The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland is bracing itself for a spate of compensation claims from victims of child sex abuse by the clergy. If the experience in other countries is anything to go by, these could amount to millions of pounds. Last week it was reported that sums of £50,000 and £30,000 were paid to victims of priests in the Dublin diocese..."

"In most cases, the money was paid through solicitors, with no liability formally admitted. But the Catholic hierarchy fears they could be the tip of an iceberg. Of all the scandals which, in the words of Cardinal Cahal Daly, have 'raged terribly' around the Church in recent weeks, by far the most shocking have involved the sexual abuse of children, often stretching over many years. Over the past three years, between 30 and 40 priests and monks have appeared in court or been investigated by police on both sides of the Irish border. Half the 26 Roman Catholic dioceses have been affected."

Priestless parishes? The notion must seem an attractive one to Irish victims of abuse – but, sadly, one which has come too late!

THE FREETHINKER

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Editor: Peter Brearey

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

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Editor's address:

24 Alder Avenue
Silcoates Park
Wakefield WF2 0TZ

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Secularists' AGM

French tests and religious schools move condemned

RESOLUTIONS opposing the extension of public funding to Muslim schools and condemning the French Government for resuming nuclear tests were carried unanimously at the National Secular Society's annual general meeting, held in London on Saturday, October 14, under the chairmanship of Jim Herrick.

The schools resolution is given on Page 162, this issue; the motion on nuclear tests said: "This AGM condemns the French Government for resuming nuclear tests and it also calls upon the British Government to declare that it will not carry out further tests but will support all legitimate efforts to persuade the French Government to abandon them."

On being re-elected President of the Society, Barbara Smoker chose as the theme of her address the fourth United Nations Women's Conference, held in Beijing in September, which she described as being "of the greatest magnitude and importance."

She said: "Fifty thousand women converged on Beijing for the conference, including such

big names as Hilary Clinton, Winnie Mandela, and Benazir Bhutto. The British Government was represented by Baroness Chalker.

"The choice of venue alone was of unprecedented interest and significance, bringing China into contact, for the first time, with an enormous influx of people from very different cultures. And since contraception and abortion were among the most important items on the conference agenda, the radical Chinese stand on population control could not but influence the visitors and the whole discussion.

"These women's conferences are held at ten-yearly intervals, the venues for the first three having been Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi. The main difference this time was that human rights for women were at the top of the agenda – not just with the usual glib aspirations for future improvement, but, thanks largely to the official recognition of women's rights at the 1992 UN Human Rights Conference in Vienna, with detailed demands on governments to change laws with regard to rape, domestic violence, abortion, infanticide on grounds of sex, female genital mutilation, health care, and discriminatory property laws.

"The greatest controversy was, as expected, on the campaign for greater access to contraception and for legal abortion, predictably opposed by delegates from several Islamic and Catholic countries. The Vatican itself sent a large delegation – surprisingly headed by an American woman law professor, Mary Ann Glendon – which loudly proclaimed equal rights for women, while aiming to deny them rights over their own bodies; and the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children had two British delegates to represent the same 'pro-life' policy. But they were severely trounced by the liberal camp, spearheaded by Platform for Action and backed by a large majority of the delegates, including those of the European Union.

"At the end of the Conference, the Vatican delegates claimed that 'disproportionate attention' had been given to sexual and reproductive health. A number of conservative Muslim countries backed them in this – Kuwait objecting to 'every phrase which runs against the sharia and value system of Islam,' and Sudan stating bluntly that it intended to ignore the global agreement on women's rights wherever it conflicted with its fundamentalist interpretation of the Islamic faith.

"In other countries, some policy changes, with legal and social repercussions, can be expected as a result of the Conference. However, UN conferences are less about effecting immediate concrete change than they are about putting issues on the global agenda, raising consciousness, and fuelling people's quest for justice.

"The real outcome is that 50,000 women have returned to their homes with greater expectations, inspired and strengthened by the people they met at the Conference and what they learned from them. And they will spread the word."

Three new members were elected to the Council of Management: Mike Howgate, Mike Pinsker and Richard Savage. Don Baker joins the Council on being elected Treasurer in place of David Williams, who resigned, as did Vice-President Nicolas Walter (the other members are Barbara Smoker, Denis Cobell [Vice-President], Jim Herrick, Peter Brearey, S Lal, Norman Bacrac, G N Deodhekar, Daniel O'Hara).

After heated debate, a vote of confidence in the Secretary was passed by a two-thirds majority, with the hope expressed that the Council – who have the final word in the matter – would allow him to continue his employment after reaching the age of 65 next April.

'Secularisation' hits Mass attendance

WEEKLY Mass attendance in the Catholic Church is falling, according to new figures. The United Kingdom Christian Handbook claims that churchgoing in the nation's most active denomination has dropped 13 per cent in just five years.

It says the decline is almost matched by the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches, while attendance at Orthodox and evangelical churches is on the up. The handbook has been compiled and published by the evangelical Christian Research Association.

Kevin Thomas, of the Catholic Media Office, said: "Any decline is mostly to do with the fact that there are many distractions from the practice of the faith now than there used to be. Society has become

more secularised and this has affected the Catholic Church as it has other mainstream churches.

"It is true there is an overall increase in interest in the new evangelical churches but this number remains rather small. It is important to remember that the 'decade of evangelisation' is not measured by the number of people in the pews but the increased presence of Gospel values in our society at large."

The 4,413,000 UK Catholics make up some nine per cent of the total population. About 1,226,000 go to Mass each week and one-in-eight children is baptised a Catholic. Catholics and evangelicals both continue to open new churches and attract converts with more than 3,600 adults received into the Church last Easter. Source: *The Universe*, October 8, 1995.

Unravelling mystery of the Dead Sea Scrolls

Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls? The Search for the Secret of Qumran by Norman Golb. Michael O'Mara Books Ltd. £19.99.

Review: COLIN McCALL

A former, non-Christian member of the scrolls team, Dr John Allegro, of Manchester University, who arranged for the delicate *Copper Scroll* to be opened – and then translated it while the rest of the team were procrastinating over the various texts assigned to them – was one of the first to fall foul of de Vaux and his Roman Catholic associates.

An inventory of hidden treasures, the *Copper Scroll* posed a threat to the Essenic hypothesis. How could possession of such wealth be attributed to a small wealtheschewing sect? The “official” way out was to declare the scroll an imaginative product, or forgery, and to discredit Allegro, who had regarded it as genuine.

There is no doubt in Norman Golb's mind that Allegro was right; that the description “in straightforward bookkeeping fashion” of “the burial of great treasures and scrolls in the Judæan wilderness” is authentic. The trouble was that it didn't meet the “ideological agenda” of the *École Biblique*.

The *Copper Scroll* was not alone in this. The very assumption that Qumran was the site of an Essene monastery was irreconcilable with the archaeological evidence mentioned above, which indicates a military fortress occupied by Jews and then Romans after its capture cAD70. Coins found there show that the attack could not have taken place before AD68, and Golb makes the reasonable assumption that it was “part of the general offensive against the Judæan Jews following the capture of Jerusalem in AD70.”

Twelve hundred graves were found in the adjoining cemetery at Qumran on the same horizontal level and apparently dug at the same time: more likely to be those of war-

rriors who had defended the site against the Romans than pacifist Essenes, especially as some 10 per cent of the skeletons had broken bones.

A further problem for the traditional theorists was the presence of women's and children's graves when, as Pliny says, all the Essenes of the Dead Sea shore “had no women, had renounced all sexual desire” and, additionally, that “no one is born” into their “race.”

Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh have already described (in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*) how de Vaux and his team jealously guarded the manuscripts and refused to allow independent scholars to see them. Norman Golb shows how texts were “bent to the needs of a rampant hypothesis...the urge to find traces of the long-lost Essene sect, whose mystique and religious appeal had been enhanced by a tradition of learned and semi-learned writing stretching back several centuries.”

The Essenic attribution of the Dead Sea Scrolls had been based on only seven texts. As more caves and scrolls were discovered, the traditionalists had to make “hundreds of texts on an increasing variety of subjects” fit their hypothesis. Contradictions were ignored, extravagantly interpreted or kept secret.

There were, for example, at least 400 different compositions from cave 4 alone. And Golb asks: “Who had written and read this dizzying variety of literary types and genres? Were all these texts only written by and destined for the members of a small sect living in the desert – or was the entire phenomenon in reality a much broader one, reflecting various elements in the Jewish society of intertestamental times?”

The former view cannot withstand Norman Golb's scholarly assault: it must fall as Qumran itself did to the Roman might. Much more likely, he suggests from internal and historical evidence, the scrolls originated in Jerusalem and, with the imminent Roman occupation, were hidden in desert caves.

Man...maybe, Christ...no!

PROMETHEUS Books (UK) have republished the 19th Century classic *The Christ: A Critical Review and Analysis of the Evidence of His Existence* by John E Rensberg.

The book addresses the question: Was there a Christ who was born of a virgin, worked miracles among the masses, and was tried, crucified – and later resurrected to ascend to heav-

en? According to Rensburg, while, for all we know, there may be some historical evidence for the existence of a man named Jesus, neither he nor anyone else could have been the Christ.

Rensburg offers a detailed analysis of both religious and pagan sources to ascertain how the Christ myth came about. The book (ISBN 0-87975-924-0; 437 pages, cloth) costs £25.50, on order from all booksellers.

“ON THE west side of the Dead Sea, but out of range of the noxious exhalations of the coast, is the solitary tribe of the Essenes, which is remarkable beyond all other tribes in the world, as it has no women and has renounced all sexual desire, has no money, and has only palm trees for company.” So wrote Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* cAD74.

This passage was seized on, along with others from Philo and Josephus, when the Dead Sea Scrolls were first discovered at Qumran in 1947. Among the earliest finds was what is now known as the *Manual of Discipline* which, with its “initiation rites, curses, blessings and regulations,” has, in Norman Golb's words, “dominated all discussion on the origin of the scrolls.”

Qumran was on the west side of the Dead Sea and, in accordance with a further description by Pliny, En Gedi was to the south (“below,” as he put it) and Masada was “next.” Surely, then, Qumran must be the Essenic site?

Secretive

Except that, in the same passage, Pliny refers to Jerusalem as “a heap of ashes.” This statement, Golb points out, must have been written “after Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans in the wake of its capture in the summer of AD70” (his italics). And, “By this token the Essenes living above En Gedi could not have been identical with the group of people then living in Qumran, who in and after AD70, according to the archaeological team's own findings, were Roman soldiers, not Jewish sectarians. Pliny's Essenes would have had to be another group living elsewhere...”

Golb, who is Professor of Jewish History at the University of Chicago, worked on the scrolls as a graduate student 40 years ago and, at first, accepted the Essenic hypothesis. But he later came to question it, and to call for free discussion and debate on the issue. What he encountered were closed minds and closed doors, under the guardianship of the head of the Dominican *École Biblique*, Father Roland de Vaux.

“I will be glad to give you access to the published texts,” de Vaux wrote to Golb in 1970. “I am sorry to say that I cannot let you study the unpublished fragments, unless you have the explicit permission of the scholar who is in charge of their edition.” There was no chance of that, as the scholar in question was Father Josef Milik, who was as secretive as de Vaux himself.

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

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

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

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, December 3, 5.30pm for 6pm. Beatrice Clarke: *A E Coppard, Brighton Poet and Freethinker*.

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 Blishen: *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: 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.

Havering & District Humanist Society: HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, November 7, 8 pm: Bob Tutton: *What Children Need to Know*. Tuesday, December 5, 8pm: Norman Bacrac: *At the Edge of Chaos*. 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: Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Tuesday, November 14, 7.30pm: Arthur Beales:

Mental Illness - What Makes us Mad? Details: 0113 2585748.

Leicester Secular Society: Details from the Secretary, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB (telephone 0116 2622250).

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, November 30, 8pm: Public Meeting: *Why I Am Non-religious*.

Manchester: Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: 0161 432 9045.

Norwich Humanist Group: Meetings at Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Information from Brian Snoad on 01603 455101. Thursday, November 16, 7.30pm: Michael Bland: *Radical Anthropology*.

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, December 6, 8pm: Dan J Bye: *Religion, Humanism and Language*. 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, November 8: Harold Stern: *Do We Need the United Nations?*

Teesside Humanist Group: Friends Meeting House, Norton Green, Stockton. Wednesday, November 8, 7.15pm: Public meeting and discussion on BHA General Statement of Policy. 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. November 16: Ray Wood: *Humanist Ceremonies for Rites of Passage*.

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: Small Lounge, Methold House, North Street, Worthing. November 26, 5.30pm: Don Park: *All Things Bright and Beautiful*...Information: Mike Sargent, on 01903 239823 or Frank Pidgeon 01903 263867.

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

Foundations of Modern Humanism: William McLroy 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.

THE HUMANISM OF ALBERT CAMUS

by Carl Pinel

ALBERT CAMUS (1913-1960) was an Algerian of French-Spanish descent. Most of his working life was spent in journalism and his output of novels, essays and plays is comparatively small. Nevertheless, he became the youngest French writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1957. He died in a road accident.

Camus' books span a period of approximately 20 years and tend to be divided into novels of the absurd in the first half and liberal humanism in the latter, although the two tendencies overlap considerably.

For a writer who consistently attacked Christianity and depicted the alienation of the individual in a meaningless and often hostile universe Camus is, surprisingly, admired by Christians.

Camus' first novel, *The Outsider* (1942), tells the story of Mersault, a young clerk, who shoots an Arab in self-defence and is condemned to death.

The question of Mersault's innocence is not an issue at his trial: he is condemned because he showed no emotion at his mother's funeral, refuses to be hypocritical and is an atheist. After his arrest, the examining magistrate asks Mersault if he believes in God; he replies that he does not.

That was unthinkable, he said; all men believe in God, even those who reject Him. Of this he was absolutely sure; if ever he came to doubt it, his life would lose all meaning. "Do you wish," he asked indignantly, "my life to have no meaning?"

At Mersault's trial, his defending lawyer finds that his own principles are threatened by his client's refusal to be hypocritical – and this places him, despite his duty to his client, on the side of the prosecutors. The prosecutors are forced to defend their principles and the meaning of their lives. Mersault, the outsider, who refuses to follow the rules of the game – to lie, or be hypocritical or believe in God – is incomprehensible to them and they must make him conform or destroy him.

Camus joined the Resistance movement after the Germans executed a workman, Gabriel Peri, on December 19, 1941. His detestation of capital punishment is depicted in the thoughts of Mersault: "...the machine dominated everything; they killed you discreetly, with a hint of shame and much efficiency."

Despite Mersault's refusal to see a priest, he is visited by the prison chaplain, who says:

"...I'm sure you've often wished there was an after-life." Of course I had, I told him. Everybody has that wish at times. But that it

had no more importance than wishing to be rich, or to swim very fast, or to have a better shaped mouth.

The Outsider was immensely popular and struck a chord with intellectuals during the wartime occupation of France. Camus denied that he was an existentialist but the themes of alienation and the uniqueness of individual experience found favour with the growing number of people interested in existentialism at the time.

The book also found favour with anarchists because of its rejection of bourgeois values, but it is a book with an apolitical hero; he rejects conventional society but does not offer an alternative.

George Woodcock in his study of anarchism (*Anarchism*, 1962) compares Camus' rejection of revolution in favour of rebellion with Max Stirner's ideas in *The Ego and His Own* (1845). But there the similarity ends; Camus' humanist ideals expressed in *The Plague* (1947) are the antitheses of Stirner's amoral exaltation of the criminal as the "anarchist *par excellence*."

The Plague tells the story of a plague caused by rats in the port of Oran in Algiers in the 1940s, but it is also an allegorical novel of the German occupation of France in the Second World War.

The themes of alienation and separation are continued in this book as the town is cut off from the outside world in an attempt to limit the spread of the plague.

Camus' rejection of the sado-masochistic elements of Christianity are expressed more fully. Brée (*Camus and Sartre*, 1972) states: "...one of the things most deeply alien to him in Christian thought was its glorification of the gratuitous sufferings inflicted on a human being by other human beings, exemplified in the tortured figure of a man hanging on a cross."

In *The Plague*, a priest, Father Paneloux, preaches a sermon in which he calls the plague "...the flail of God" and tells the people that they deserve their suffering. Shortly afterwards, Father Paneloux and Dr Rieux, the narrator, witness the painful death of a small child. Rieux declares passionately: "But that boy at least was innocent. You know that as well as I do."

Paneloux says: "...perhaps we should love what we can't understand."

Rieux replies: "My conception of love is different. Until the moment of my death I shall refuse to love a creation where children are put on the rack."

Roland Barthes criticised *The Plague* because it replaces the struggle against Nazism by a battle against the impersonal microbes of the plague. Camus has also been criticised for ignoring the moral problems that arose from the execution of civilians as reprisals for acts of sabotage carried out by

the Resistance movement.

The Plague is essentially a humanist novel in which the atheistic Dr Rieux and his companions struggle heroically against the plague, which contrasts with the *laissez-faire* attitude of Father Paneloux who sees the plague as God's punishment.

In the short story *The Renegade*, a missionary tries to convert a savage tribe. He is tortured by them – but this merely fuels his masochism and erotic fantasies, and he murders the missionary who comes to replace him.

During Camus' lifetime, some reviewers claimed that a conversion to Christianity was imminent. There is no evidence for this and he continued to express his revulsion of it until his untimely death.

Camus' humanist novels and plays have sometimes been seen as "sanctity without God." But this is because Christians fraudulently claim that morality is religious in origin. Their belief in a vengeful God and the human sacrifice from which they draw inspiration has led to a long and bloody history. While they continue to believe in these absurdities, then they will fail to live up to the humanitarian ideals depicted by Camus in his outstanding novels and plays.

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AIDS BENEFIT

IN association with the South Place Ethical Society, the Terrence Higgins Trust and the National AIDS Trust, the Jo Beck Theatre Company will present two benefit performances of *Tongues* and *A Mother* at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, on December 6 and 7 at 7.30pm. All proceeds will be donated to AIDS-related charities.

The pieces explore the ways in which we cope with alien situations – the voices and visions which might present themselves in the moment between life and death, and a mother's sudden realisation that all the ideals and aspirations which she has held for her son have resulted in opposite, and, in her mind, terrible consequences. For further information, contact Ray Goodman on 01502 724 902.

Religion and intell

Origin of gods and priesthods: One may surmise that primitive people revered the earth and animals because they were the sources of water and food. They concluded that their best hope of survival lay in assuaging the forces of nature – by deifying them. However, these gods which they created were unpredictable and difficult to understand, so a priesthood developed which could interpret their wishes. These earlier gods were gradually superseded by more powerful but invisible gods who could influence the whole lives and environments of people.

Development of the gods: As the gods continued to act unpredictably, the priests, who claimed they could understand them, increased in power. The people realised that the best way of assuaging the gods was to attribute all good to them. The question then arose as to the origin of evil. Early thinkers decided that there must be at least two deities – a god and a devil. These were in continued conflict with each other – not only in the world but also in the minds of the believers. Some religions, such as those of the ancient Greeks and the Hindus, had whole pantheons of gods, each with their personal *repertoire* of heroic and mischievous proclivities.

Problem of gods who create good and evil: The Jewish and Christian religions had a real problem. How could a god who created *everything* escape responsibility for the presence of evil in the world? So they decided that their god had given “free will” to each human being, who thus acquired personal moral responsibility for what he or she did. The monotheistic religions then ignored, or obfuscated, the question of how their god could escape some responsibility for the misdemeanours of his creations. They did not want to talk about the fact that their god was ceding some of his omnipotence when he gave man free will. How could he create people whom his omniscience would tell him would do some evil? Why did he programme them to do it, and why did he not stop them?

Scriptures: Although the prophets of most of the great religions are dead, the wishes and codes of their gods and prophets have been recorded in holy scriptures which can be most accurately interpreted by the priesthods. The believers are wholly convinced that their scriptures were written under the direct inspiration of their gods. However, the facts that mere mortals recorded them, and that priests – who were also

‘...the important differences between religion and science are that the experiences of science are provable, repeatable and communicable, which the experiences of religion are not...’

by Dr Harold Hillman

mortal – interpreted them meant that different believers *in good faith* had to use their own understandings to find their meanings. By definition, the “correct” interpretations were those due to the current senior members of the hierarchies. Any important deviations from current accepted orthodoxies became heresies which could lead to schisms.

Religious education: Religions have active organisations, either running schools and universities or providing religious education in secular schools and universities. They inculcate children and adults with the current orthodoxies. The earlier children are taught theology, the more firmly the ideas are likely to be ingrained. The fact that the scriptures were written down and interpreted by human beings is used by educators. On the one hand, they can ignore or disown an interpretation by their predecessors on the grounds that earlier interpreters were not expressing the “true” intentions of the scriptures; on the other hand, they can assert that their critics or questioners do not have the knowledge or insight to understand differences of interpretation. Such thinking begs the question of how a sincere believer can know the “correct” attitude or course of action when the hierarchy changes its views. For example, can a Jew justify the genocide of the Canaanites by the Israelites? Do the Catholics now believe that the Inquisition was a sin? Was it right of Cromwell to massacre the Irish?

Strategies of religious historians and apologists: As secular views have evolved, religious people have (a) attributed the previous policies to the fact that they occurred in more violent times – although, of course, they were the official orthodox views in these situations; (b) their historians admit privately that their leaders acted wrongly in the past – but they have not apologised publicly and officially, they have not incorporated condemnation of their past misdemeanours in their religious instruction, and they have not sought forgiveness from the descendants of their victims; (c) they have

defended past actions by dubbing their enemies unbelievers, infidels or heretics, they have alleged that their god had chosen them or that their followers were under threat, they have pointed out similar practices of other religions; these are all examples of special pleading; (d) with few exceptions such as the Vatican’s apology to Galileo, 350 years late – most religions have ignored and refused to discuss their past crimes. They continue to do so. In the past, they have actively supported slavery, persecuted women, tortured and killed “heretics,” encouraged genocide and justified imperialism. A religion cannot claim to have a moral tradition unless it is prepared to discuss and apologise for the crimes it carried out in the past.

The acceptance that the hierarchies may have supported immoral acts in the past, justifying them by reference to the barbarism of the times, is an implicit admission that present ruling hierarchies are now reinterpreting what they still maintain are the eternal values of the religion. Religious historians sometimes try to blame secular forces for their past crimes – because they do not like to admit that their own views are strongly influenced by secular morality. How much for their eternal values.

The influence of Secularism: The struggles against slavery, the Inquisition, religious discrimination, torture, sexism and homophobia have usually succeeded following the decline of religious power. Much later, the religions have discovered their own morals, and frantically searched their own scriptures for support for causes against which they have fought for centuries. The heterogeneous nature of their scriptures usually ensures that they can find a few such texts and they can ignore many more with different messages.

Religion and politics: Religion and politics have always been inextricably bound together in history and in scriptures. The separation between the church and the state is a recent one, and even today is by no means universal. It arose at the time of the

Intellectual honesty



Photo: Hulton Deutsch Collection

Jerusalem's Wailing Wall: "Prayers are often enmeshed in complex rituals of religious services and ceremonies."

an War of Independence and the Revolution, probably as a result of widespread religious persecution in the Middle East. Nevertheless, even today, major wars are going on in the Middle East, Kashmir, Northern Ireland, Sudan and Herzegovina. Often, the savagery of these wars has been reflected in the degree to which different religions have been persecuted. I am afraid that – for this purpose – Communism and Maoism must be considered as persecutors, along with Judaism, Islam, and Nazism.

Prayer: Prayers are often enmeshed in complex rituals of religious services and ceremonies to mark birth, initiation, marriage and death. The prayers consist of oral texts, sometimes in languages which the celebrants do not understand. In many religions, prayers can hardly be regarded as sincere.

Religious people believe that their gods sometimes respond to their prayers. They give various explanations for the prayers apparently have no effect: (a) they have a large portfolio of their past sins may prevent the favours that they could reasonably expect of their god; (b) it is selfish of them to expect their god to do them favours, when he has so many other important things to do; (c) their god's apparent injustice to them is a test of their belief in him; (d) they are too backward intellectually, or do not have enough education or faith, to

understand their god's mysterious ways; (e) they believe that they will be compensated in the world to come (that is, after they are dead) for the injustices they suffer in this world.

However, a believer does not know at a particular time which of the latter explanations is relevant to their case. Nevertheless, a person may sometimes know if their prayers are answered. A relative might recover from a grave disease; a student might be admitted to university; a fan might win a sum of money in a football pool. On the other hand, a person praying for someone who is dying has no way of knowing whether the prayer prolonged life, had no effect on it, or shortened it. Those who pray at funerals will never know if their intervention did, indeed, result in eternal peace for the soul of the dead.

Uncertainty about prayer: The uncertainty which even believers have about the efficacy of prayer means that those who want to believe that it works can continue to believe so – while non-believers have no way of proving or disproving the contrary. The same uncertainty bedevils claims of revelation, supernatural experiences or the authority of the scriptures. These can not be demonstrated, proved, disproved or communicated. Anyone may believe that someone else's profound religious experience is a delusion or a fantasy – even if it is shared by millions of others – and, of course, strict

adherents to one religion regard as misleading or nonsensical the profound insights and revelations of another religion. Thus, the important differences between religion and science are that the experiences of science are provable, repeatable and communicable, which the experiences of religion are not usually.

The tolerance of Rationalists: Rational people are, and should be, totally tolerant of those who believe, for example, that the animals went into the Ark two-by-two, that thousands of loaves and fishes generated spontaneously, that fairies influence our lives or that the Earth is flat – because such beliefs do not affect the lives of other people. However, if one's beliefs include the ideas that women should be subservient to men, that one person has a right to enslave another, that torture is an acceptable instrument of policy, or that a mother does not have the right to decide if she wants a baby, the actions resulting from these attitudes affect other people profoundly. One can not justify them in general, but some may merit consideration in particular cases. In general, rational people should be against them, although not necessarily against a whole ethical system of which they may be a part.

Universality of moral systems: One can start with Kant's "Categorical Imperative," that any system claiming universality must accord equal rights to all human beings. This attitude can be derived logically from the Golden Rule, and is a central view of all Rationalists. It is proclaimed by modern progressive religions. Their advance to a formal position of tolerance of other people's religions has been taken over from the Buddhists, Quakers and Rationalists by the main modern religions, especially since the Second World War.

The question which has been asked is whether modern religious Christians, Muslims or Jews really believe in their hearts that adherents of other religions are equally entitled to their own beliefs – that is, that they are equally sincere people travelling on different roads to Heaven or Nirvana. Religious people really believing that would be admitting – perhaps not explicitly – that their own religion was no better than others; or they would have to admit that their own social, geographical and physical environments play a large role in their beliefs.

They produce their own brand of fertiliser, too...

THE Mormon Church has spent up to £14 million to buy about 10,000 acres of British farmland as part of its global expansion in agriculture, reports the *Financial Times* (March 6).

Building on the traditions of its farming founders, the church has sizeable agricultural assets worldwide and is looking to add to them, the newspaper says. Since last August, the church has bought six farms in the prime agricultural regions of the Midlands and East Anglia.

These mark the institution's first big foray into British agriculture after running a 300-acre holding in the Midlands as a pilot project for the past 10 years.

The farms are run by professional managers; income from the British holdings is likely to be about £100 to £150 an acre per year, which will go to the church's welfare fund. The British branch of the church has 168,000 members (who says *The Freethinker* should change direction because the fight against superstition has been won?). Mormons give one-tenth of their income to the church – and here are we, appealing month-by-month for a few pounds to keep afloat the voice of rationalism, secularism, humanism, freethought!

True, the Mormons' Joseph Smith was given the

priestly powers of both Aaron and Melchizedek when he received the Book of Mormon from the angel, back in 1830, so they began with a considerable advantage. Please, help to redress it with a contribution to our vital fund. Rush cheques and POs to G W Foote & Company, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: I G Andrews, J Beavan, R A Burt and J R Hutton, £2 each; N Green and A Marshall, £3 each; D K Bracken, D S Lee, J Fawbett, A J Forde, B C Carrington, A Hawkins, G F Jackman, K Mack, K M MacLeod, A Negus, J R Radford, G H Robbins, N M Sandieson, R Sharman, W G Stirling, G Taylor, B Thorpe and B C Whiting, £5 each; S Anderson, J G Millhouse and A Varlett, £7 each; M Crewe, J Mehta, M J Irvine, E D Lawson, E P Muggridge, C Pinel, R T Richardson and T R Richardson, £10 each; J P Staniforth and L Taylor Harrington £15 each; P M Housego and N Ratcliffe, £20 each; M Jaiswal and D Plumb, £25 each; J A Marks, £30; A G Stephens, £40; O D'Arcy, £50.

Total for September: £445.

Religion and intellectual honesty

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Tolerance of other religions and viewpoints: Therefore, it would be fair to say that the apparent tolerance of deeply religious people for other religions is an operational device, partly because they can not really believe it, and partly because nearly all religions favour their adherents in their scriptures, teachings, prayers, publications and sermons. I think that it is fair to say that religious people today speaking of tolerance mean that one should not persecute believers of other religions or non-believers, and that one should collaborate with them in pursuing mutually-agreed policies. This represents an important advance of the 20th Century.

Not only religious people pretend that they respect other people's opinions as much as their own. Anyone who supports the Democratic, Republican, Conservative, Labour, Socialist, Liberal or Communist parties must believe that if their party's policy were carried out, the world would become a better place. One would not espouse a cause unless one believed that. Therefore, it seems inescapable that anyone who supports a cause strongly believes themselves to be a better person than someone who does not. Most of us even indulge in the pretence that our opponents have viewpoints as valid as our own. This may be regarded as one of the unstated hypocrisies of democracy, which extends to religion, politics, clubs and academia.

Rituals: All religions have rituals, usually accompanied by prayer. Ceremonies, such as festivals, and parties for birth, initiation, mar-

riage and death bind communities together. Both in the past and still in some societies today such ceremonies have sometimes been associated with genital disfigurement, torture, execution or cruelty to animals. These practices are objectionable to any liberal person and can usually be abandoned without loss of occasion. Religious people often claim that the cruelty is a result of the culture of a particular society, and not a necessary part of the religion. In my opinion, this should require them to condemn, rather than to celebrate, acts of cruelty traditionally associated with their rituals.

Religion and intellectual honesty: Without doubt, the vast majority of religious people, like Rationalists, are personally upright – but it is virtually impossible for religious people to be intellectually honest. They start out with a theology and a code of conduct which come from their scriptures. These were written hundreds-to-thousands of years ago, and consist of accounts of particular events in rural societies at particular historical eras. Thus they reflect the values of those societies. Sacrifices, stoning, slavery, misogyny and autocracy were the accepted rules of the societies in which the scriptures of the monotheistic religions were written. Religious people today have to ignore those texts which recount the misdemeanours of their gods and prophets and all references to acts which are regarded as immoral today. Nevertheless, they still say that the whole book of scripture is divinely inspired and true.

If one takes as an example an event that happened in a totally different society at a totally different epoch, one ignores the devel-

opments of morals, attitudes and science since the scriptures were written, while at the same time affecting to compromise with modern thinking. Believers then must select those texts which support their current opinions. For example, Christians and Jews are pleased to quote archeological findings which support the accounts in the scriptures, but ignore them otherwise. When medical evidence shows that oral contraceptives may be harmful to women at some times, the evidence is publicised by those who oppose birth control – but they are not interested in the effect of such evidence on the morale of women who want to decide when to have babies.

'Bridge' words: Certain events in the scriptures are described as "parables," "legends," "stories" or "miracles." In the Middle Ages, Christians could be burnt for not believing that the Earth was created in six days, that Jesus was born of a virgin, or that he was reincarnated. Nowadays, orthodox theologians say that many of the stories in the Old and New Testaments are parables or legends. One then asks: "Did they actually happen?" but the answers are equivocal. People who allege that they *did* happen are regarded as fundamentalists, since they are so obviously absurd. Those who deny that the events really occurred are throwing doubt not only on the truth of a particular story but also on the truth of the whole scripture. Words such as "parable," "legend" and "story" are "bridge" words – because they join truth and fantasy. They enable one to avoid answering the question about whether the Bible is true or not. How strange!



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Woman - get thee back to the washboard!

FATHER Stephen P De Lallo is yet another unlovely religious import from the United States. Apparently he has taken up a post with the Society of Pope St Pius X. This ultra-traditionalist organisation is a focus for those Roman Catholics who watch and pray for a return to the pre-Vatican II age of faith and to whom liberalism and personal freedom are anathema. De Lallo's outlook is summarised in the blurb to his book, *The Sword of Christendom*: "The chaos produced by liberalism is from the refusal to apply the principles of the Catholic Faith to Society."

The Sword of Christendom includes the thoughts of such religious and political dinosaurs as the pro-Nazi Pope Pius XII and Archbishop Lefebvre. De Lallo's contribution includes anti-Jewish smears like: "What could possibly be the demonic force behind Communism? The answer is: the same force that was behind the crucifixion of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ almost 2,000 years ago: the Jewish leaders."

He continues: "Because of their hatred for Christ, the Jewish leaders and their

successors have incited their people (and everyone else if possible) to turn against Christ and Christianity too."

Centuries of such propaganda - emanating from the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches alike - fertilised the soil in which Nazism flourished.

De Lallo gives short shrift to that strange species known as "Catholic feminists." He asserts that man should be the head of the household, "not only as breadwinner, but also as spiritual leader... Mothers should be the heart of their homes, devout and modest, teaching their children how to love God and practice virtue."

The reader is informed that Catholic feminism results from "a lack of spirituality and humility." But there are other reasons for such uppishness: "Women tend to have too much free time on their hands. This is due to the existence of so many industrial machines, which greatly lighten their workload. It is also due to the fact that many mothers are refusing to have many children, thus eliminating the sanctifying work of raising a large family."

So there it is. Catholic traditionalists - and Protestant ones too, it should be added - believe that "it is not a woman's place to get involved in political activism." Neither should she make use of labour-saving luxuries or attempt to control her fertility. She should confine herself to mentally stimulating activity like scrubbing floors, washing clothes by hand, mangling and child-bearing.

On wider issues, De Lallo does not beat

about the bush: "The right of acting in accordance with one's conscience in public can and must be restricted by the State in order to protect the true religion and not allow false religions to propagate. The Church teaches liberty of religion (ie the true religion), not liberty of religions."

While the Church may officially dismiss followers of De Lallo as a cranky minority, their influence is growing, even in Britain. And it's a safe bet that they are not without friends in the Vatican itself.

Salman, don't worry so...

WALSALL Quakers recently held an inter-faith talk by a Shi-ite woman named Amra Bone. Reporting the occasion in *The Friend*, the Quaker weekly, Peter Levesley enthused over how the speaker "dispelled a great deal of fear and prejudice... She also impressed on us that the word 'Islam' means whole-hearted surrender to God and that 'Jihad' means the struggle for truth... We found this all very enlightening and encouraging."

How very cosy! And how typical of a propagandist speaking on behalf of a minority faith.

The Friend correspondent may not read reports on the persecution of Christians, particularly converts to Christianity, in Islam-ridden countries. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, made some forceful comments on what he called the Islamicisation of Sudan, which he recently visited.

Christians in Southern Sudan face a grim future of oppression and persecution. Islamic political and religious leaders are conducting an intensive campaign to impose a fundamentalist régime on the non-Muslim population. The same is happening in other countries on which the shadow of the crescent has fallen.

British Quakers have a long and honourable history of resistance to injustice and oppression. It is regrettable that some are so gullible and befuddled by starry-eyed ecumenism that they accept Islamic propaganda as "very enlightening and reassuring."

Does she only think she's dead?

THE death at 102 of actress Dorothy Dixon was marked by lengthy and, for theatre buffs, extremely interesting obituary notices. She was a West End star in the 1920s, mainly in musical comedies but also in plays by Edgar Wallace and J M Barrie and as Princess Katherine in Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

Some obituarists implied that Miss Dixon's longevity was due to her belief in Christian Science, adherents to which, according to *The Times* writer, "do not like to recognise age or illness." In fact it is impossible not to recognise age and dangerous to ignore illness.

Certainly it is remarkable to have attained the age of 102. But the number of centenarians has steadily increased and people are generally living longer. This is due to medical science, not religious quackery. And how many would have lived longer if they had reported symptoms of illness to a doctor, rather than to a Christian Science practitioner.

While on the subject of longevity, greetings to Jeanne Calment, of Arles, in southern France, who has achieved the longest recorded human lifespan. She was born in 1875. Her health is described as "exceptional." She is *not* a Christian Scientist.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Humanism and free-will

I AM sorry that Barbara Smoker's logical rejection of the notion of free-will and my endorsement of her stand have proved unacceptable to some Humanist readers of *The Freethinker*. For me, determinism is a fundamental ingredient of Humanism. Since, for Humanists, man is no more than an evolutionary outcome of the natural cause/effect universe, his thought processes must obey the same cause/effect law. To argue that man has the ability to rise above this cause/effect process and make free, uncaused decisions would, of necessity, involve some extra-scientific, some transcendental or quasi-religious spirit (dare I use the word *soul*?) existing independently of his brain.

Eric Stockton (letter, October) suggests that we read Corliss Lamont's *Freedom of Choice Affirmed* (Pemberton, 1971), but I find Lamont's effort to reconcile free-will with Humanism poorly argued and unconvincing. He writes (p 16) that free-will "means that a man who consciously comes to a decision between two or more genuine alternatives is free to do so and is not completely determined by his heredity, education, economic circumstances and past history as an individual. While a person's choices are always conditioned and limited to a marked extent by such factors and by the situation that currently faces him, he possesses a decisive element of freedom in determining whether to do this or that." But if our choices are conditioned and limited to a marked extent, how does this free-will operate? How can the free-will, at one and the same time, both accept the arguments prompted by heredity, education, etc., and make a purely random decision not based on an argument at all?

One of Lamont's arguments in favour of free-will is intuition. Because Lamont feels that he is free to choose, it follows for him that he must be free. And he quotes Boswell: "We know our will is free, and there's an end on't." But this is surely a questionable hypothesis? Feelings and reality are two very different concepts.

Lamont complains that determinism involves fatalism and predestination, that all human thoughts, choices and actions were totally predetermined billions of years ago. I would readily acknowledge that determinism involves inevitability in that we could, in theory, trace retrospectively the cause of every physical and mental event, but this does not imply that the future has already been set down. The future is a matter of contingency or chance. The genes which I inherit from my parents are unpredictable, as unpredictable as the way the balls fall in the National Lottery. It would be possible, in theory, to predict the way the balls fall, if we knew the position of every atom at every relevant moment in time. And how I came to choose the winning numbers, whether by thought association or completely

at random, could in theory be explained. But predestination contemplates foresight or intention – a quasi-religious concept. No determinist will quarrel with Lamont's argument that the *Titanic* liner was sunk because its causal progress across the Atlantic intersected contingently and fortuitously the causal progress of the iceberg drifting south. But the determinist would not concede that the collision had already been ordained. Past events can, in theory, be shown to be inevitable; future events are a matter of chance, though a study of history, of causes, can enable man to shape his future to some extent.

Lamont even suggests (p 173) that those who believe in free-will are likely to have better moral standards than those who do not – as if the determinist were disposed to say that as he is not ultimately responsible for his behaviour he might as well do ill. But the determinist is well aware that good behaviour is of utilitarian importance for the welfare of society and is not tempted by such illogical arguments.

Leaving Lamont aside, I think it is incumbent upon those who advance the notion of free-will to say precisely what they mean. If they believe that there is some agent independent of the brain which can override our thought processes, they must say where it resides and how it operates. If it is not subject to the cause/effect order of the natural world, they must explain how its free, uncaused operation makes us morally responsible for our choices. Do we have a *persona*, an individuality, independent of our brains? I think not. I believe that human individuality is no more than the idealised image which we each form of ourselves – a combination of the physical body which we occupy and the behavioural repertoire which we have acquired through training and education. I think it is arrogant to suppose that we can take credit for some unique personality which reigns over our thought processes and prescribes our moral decisions.

The crucial question we must ask ourselves is – if there were two individuals, identical twins, who, hypothetically, had the identical genetic and environmental inheritance, down to the last minute detail, could they differ from each other? Of course, two individuals could never occupy the same space and time, have the same experiences, the same personal contacts, exchange the same conversations, witness the same visual events, but if, hypothetically, they could, could they differ, and if so, how? And if some unique feature resided in them and made them different, how could this feature make them responsible for what they were?

LESLIE JAMES
Peterborough

THE letters opposing mine on free-will all overlook one essential element in the theological type of anti-determinism I was describing: the element of praise or blame, deserving reward or punishment – usually eternal. As Eric Stockton points out, my philosophical position is "soft determinism"; certainly not

Calvinism. Incidentally, how do Calvinists justify hell?

BARBARA SMOKER
London SE6

IT IS, I suppose, a simple truism that every event has a cause. Causeless events would probably be arbitrary and erratic and no-one, I presume, is arguing a strict, non-causality thesis.

Yet there are mysteries.

A neurophysiological tic initiates a brain process with which an ensuing thought-pattern is said to be correlated. Are we to equate correlation with causation?

An event in the external environment elicits a response from the person upon whom that event impinges. Is there a causal relationship here and, if there is, how are we to describe it?

We can accept, with Leslie James, that human decision-making processes, motives, intentions are events in the causal chain, or in a causal chain, yet the determinists' inability to describe the mechanism whereby "a particular outcome emerges from a range of options" does not strengthen the determinist case.

As "we live in a world of probabilities, not absolutes," perhaps we have to settle for a compatibilist position. In a probabilistic universe, both the hard determinist and the free-will apologist may have to be satisfied with arguing the weak version of their respective cases.

The free-will case does not depend upon, does not require, that we argue for a world in which events are uncaused. It would be impossible to negotiate a way through such a hypothetical world.

Professor Honderich has written that "...on every occasion when we decide or choose, we can only decide or choose as in fact we do. So with our actions. The ones we actually do are the only ones that we can do."

If true, this is trivially true. What is more to the point is that we are able, as rational human agents, to make decisions, and to perform actions which are appropriate to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and to the ends in view we strive to pursue and achieve, albeit our intellectual processes are caused, in some obscure neurophysiological sense. It is the intervention of human purposes, motives, decisions to act or to not act, into a universe of conditioning and causation, which comprises free-will. That is what it is to have free-will.

To argue otherwise, it seems to me, would be to argue a case that is not adequate to an understanding of the human experience.

D HARROP
Sheffield

Facing reality

I WELCOME Arthur Atkinson's suggestion (letters, October), in response to my article in the August issue, that a committee be set up to

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consider whether Humanism has a political message and if so, what? If such a committee is set up, I can offer it a draft document as a starter basis for discussion.

Some of the rest of his letter, however, poses problems. I'm glad Humanism makes him happy. I'm lucky enough to be able to count myself happy too, but not necessarily because of Humanism. Humanism is about facing reality, and reality can't be guaranteed to be cheering. Happiness is quite as likely to spring from illusion, which is why religion and ideology are such successful recruiting sergeants.

Humanism does offer the satisfaction of basing one's personal position on a set of arguments as impregnable as are likely to be found. But I don't think I share Arthur Atkinson's confidence that we have only to make plain the personal assets of Humanism in order to have Humanism generally adopted. Getting Humanism across is not easy and in attempting to get it across we need to exploit all its assets.

Further, the distinction Arthur Atkinson draws between beliefs and actions is surely invalid. One must act sometimes and if one's beliefs are not the basis of the action, what is? My belief, based on my own homework to date, is that a serious attempt to analyse the political message of Humanism would show that it lends itself to a much narrower range of political positions than Arthur Atkinson seems to suppose.

JIM ROSS
Perth

Rapping the rappers

ELSIE KARBACZ (letter, October), writing about the Cock Lane ghost makes a re-re-discovery of a re-discovery which Harry Price made in the late 1930s. In his *Fifty Years of Psychological Research*, he asserts that: "Modern spiritualism is supposed to date from the American 'Rochester knockings' of 1848, with the Fox sisters as mediums. I suggest that it dates from the Cock Lane knockings of 1762." (Price, 1939, p. 11).

But it seems to me that both Price and Karbacz miss is that the massive growth of "professional mediums" did not occur until 1848 and in America. That this movement was launched by two rural lasses. (The age of the girls is uncertain - Price gives them as 12 and 15. Although the children did come under the direction and influence exerted by their married sister, Leah Fish).

Reading about the London knockings, as Karbacz appears to imply, seems to me rather fanciful to say the least. A more plausible account resides in the growth of various psychological movements: phrenology, mesmerism, and the like. Also relevant is that the Fox family lived within a plethora of religious cults, sects, and the like.

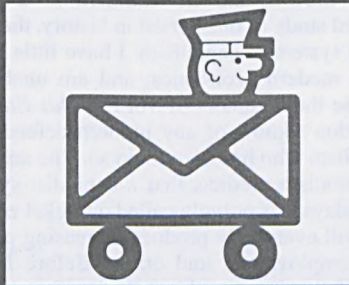
What is significant, it seems to me, is the social delay between Cock Lane goings-on and

those at the hamlet of Hydesville, where the Fox family lived, as is the delay between Hydesville and the foundation of the first psychological research society in London in 1882.

JOHN LINSIE
Coventry

Share work - or else!

FRAUD, and consequent criminality, with respect to welfare payments, are states defined



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.

by the rules attached to eligibility.

Since, even if you send people to jail you're forced to support them, why not do it with a good grace, rather than a bad, and broaden the rules to avoid criminality: paying sufficient to cover normal living costs?

If a person's contribution in some social sense is required in exchange for this largess, then the means of contribution should not only be defined, but also be attainable.

Modern technology is producing ever more goods for an ever decreasing labour input; therefore, entrepreneurs have a diminishing need of labour in order to achieve the same goals.

In such circumstances, to regard finding paid employment as the only contributory means to obtain respectable welfare entitlement is a nonsense. It follows that the means of social contribution to achieve acceptance must be broadened beyond the present narrow remit of becoming a source of profit for someone else.

The traditional way of dealing with people who are surplus to requirements is to denigrate them, preparatory to their exclusion or extermination. The initial stages of this course of action are currently being embarked on by our political and media leaders. But under present

circumstances it is self-defeating because it reduces the number of consumers which, in turn, reduces the need for workers; and so on, until the society disappears: like the dot on a television screen when the picture goes off.

This is not surrealist speculation: the present lack of population in the Scottish Highlands is a direct result of this syndrome. And there are plenty of examples in this century of attempts, by régimes of both left- and right-wing persuasions, to wipe out whole societies after suitable besmirching propaganda has provided the excuse.

There is now a tendency to regard capital as more important than society. But society existed before capital - or any other "ism" - and still has needs which cannot sensibly be costed: such as motherhood and child-rearing. Society is the "end," and capital only one of a number of possible "means": not the other way round.

The present dilemma can be solved only by sharing the work out equitably: either cutting the hours in a working week, or reducing an individual's working "life-span" or both. Reducing the number of years an individual spends at work enables more time to be devoted to preliminary education and training, and makes an earlier and, therefore, more productive retirement possible.

Public service - waste disposal, fire service, police and law etc., - should be part of every citizen's duty: a national service to be performed by every person at some time in their lives. This would give everybody a stake in society and remove alienation.

Society needs more measures of success and failure than the purely economic ones. Money was invented to facilitate trade, not to put mankind in bondage.

WILFRED GAUNT
Leicester

Psalmist's off-day?

DAVID YEULETT (letters, October) wonders if the Psalmist was telling lies when he wrote: "Every man is a liar." Well, the remark was prefaced by the words: "And in my dismay I said..." (NIV) or "I said in my haste..." (AV). Maybe he was just recalling an off-day when he felt at odds with everyone. Common feeling! We heathens must be careful lest we be accused of quoting the Bible out of context.

RAY McDOWELL
Co Antrim

What Marxism is - and isn't

MARXISM is a misleading name to describe a group of theories, but it is so generally recognised that it is difficult to abandon it.

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A subject becomes a science when a number of facts become combined into a pattern. The pattern is never perfect, and will become modified by later investigators; also it will probably have been partially anticipated by earlier thinkers. The pattern becomes accepted, usually with some difficulty, when it is found that new, or previously unknown facts can be fitted into it, as Newtonian astronomy was confirmed by the discovery of Neptune, and the theory of evolution predicted the discovery of archaeopteryx. But we do not call modern astronomy Newtonism, or biology Darwinism; and no one would try to settle arguments in either field by quoting from the Sacred Scriptures of Newton or Darwin. But the strength of Fundamentalist Marxists has prevented the proper development of scientific Marxism. Any interpretation, especially if expressed in simple terms, must be regarded as provisional and open to criticism.

Marxism includes three theories: a general theory, awkwardly called Dialectical Materialism, which covers every branch of science; a special case of this, the study of history (Historical Materialism); and a special study of one particular period of history, Capitalism.

The general theory states that the only reality is matter; but it differs from older materialism in saying that matter is not composed of solid bodies, but is always combined with motion; the modern equivalent is mass-energy, but this was formulated only a generation later. Owing to the dual nature of matter, it is mutable. The most surprising idea is that all evolution known on earth follows a similar pattern; I find it convenient to define this in its simplest form by saying that it approximates to a spiral. The idea that change always forms a similar pattern is strange; fifty years ago, when I used to lecture, I suggested that it might be due to the curvature of space time in the presence of a massive body. This suggests that evolution might be modified in the neighbourhood of a binary star, and also that the rate of evolution would depend on the mass of the body. The second idea seems to be true.

An important feature of the spiral is that if one of its coordinates is replaced by time, the curve periodically takes a violent jump. Marxists describe this by saying that any change in quantity, however gradual, will eventually produce a sudden change in quality. If you wish to disprove Marxism you have only to find any example of evolution which does not illustrate this rule. If you succeed, you could probably name your own salary from the governing class, so there is every inducement to try.

The test of Dialectical Materialism is that it is useful. During the war I was able to break a bad bottleneck in production by using it to change the method of polishing optical glass, and since then I have suggested a new idea in astrophysics which was strange to my scientific friends.

Historical Materialism is certainly correct, but my first encounters with Marxists were

mainly concerned with pointing out that Marx's analysis, while correct for the last thousand years, was certainly incorrect for preceding periods. I use a modified form, which agrees better with basic Marxist principles and also does not conflict with the facts. I learned it originally from reading Mommsen's *History of Rome*, from watching the British government in the 1930s deliberately creating World War II, and finally from lecturing on Greek history. I have since used it to reconstruct the original story of Moses and the Exodus. Even if we did not have the Pentateuch it would be certain from the Egyptian evidence that the Exodus really occurred, though it is certainly quite unlike the Biblical account.

The third strand in Marxism is a more detailed study of one period in history, the economic system of capitalism. I have little interest in modern economics, and am unable to criticise the argument of Vol I of *Das Kapital*, but I don't know of any modern defender of capitalism who has tried to do so. The analysis of capitalism predicts that a capitalist system (nowadays it is politely called a market economy) will eventually produce increasing poverty, unemployment, and crime. Before I read Marx I used a simple analysis of my own, which gives the same predictions, and also explains in a simple form the periods of remission which sometimes interrupt the capitalist development.

C R WASON
Bridgwater

Beyond Belief

I HAVE for some time been attempting to obtain a copy or to have shown the series *Beyond Belief - Religion on Trial* by Anne Kelleher, I believe it was shown on your Channel Four. The station which shows such programmes from Channel Four in Australia is SBS but it will not co-operate on this one. Do you know of this programme? Is it a very good presentation from our view? Can you assist in any way? Does anybody have it on video - VHS or Beta? Thanking you. Can you ask around other organisations there please. I may be contacted at the Rationalist Association of New South Wales, 58 Regent Street, Chippendale, NSW 2008, Australia.

PETER HANNA
Chippendale, NSW

Do unto other life forms...

WHEN in my recent writings for *The Freethinker*, I speculated as to how we might fare in relationship to the arrival of aliens of infinitely higher intelligence *pro rata* to our standing with non-human beings, little did I realise that terrestrial science was on the threshold of vindicating me!

Speaking of developing artificial intelligence in the form of cybernetics, Professor Kevin Warwick, of Reading University, when recently asked how we might fare at the hands of this superior, man-made intelligence, replied: "How do we treat other animals that are less intelligent than ourselves? We can't rely on intelligent robots being nice and generous when we ourselves are not nice and generous to life forms less intelligent than ourselves."

Quite!

DAVE GODIN
Sheffield

Milky way?

THE reported consumption of milk by artefacts, deemed to be in some sense holy and possessing supernatural attributes, can only have first-order significance if it be assumed that those artefacts have some physiological features in common with human, or other, animals.

Perhaps a little experimentation to enhance our knowledge of this intriguing reported phenomenon might be undertaken. In the case of animal experiments, we perhaps ought to be restricted to relatively painless and non-lethal procedures. Surely to feed these artefacts, say, cyanide, would get one into trouble with the Gods' Rights activists but some gentler investigations might be worth a whirl.

How about giving the statues *heavily watered* milk and see if they complain; how about a dose of diuretic and see what appears on the floor beneath; how about a slug of vodka to see if the poor things get a wee bit unsteady; how about a shot of some mild aphrodisiac to see if the artefacts get - well - a little unowot?

When faced with something unexpected, we should be ready, open-mindedly but kindly, to investigate. Smart-arse sneering is not good enough.

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

When abortion is nothing of the kind

IN *The Freethinker* (July 1995) Barbara Smoker asks if readers recall the 1960 events in the Congo. I remember the chaos well, having just arrived in this neighbouring country. However, I do not specifically remember the rape of nuns, or the permission to abort.

In *The Freethinker* of April, 1992, Concorde Cruise O'Brien was quoted, from an open letter to Ireland's Catholic bishops, as saying: "I don't know what sophistries were invoked to pretend that abortion was not abortion in those cases." I referred to O'Brien's criticism in a letter to the local Press concerning Catholic

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"imprinted" religious views, we have witnessed a decline in religious belief in the Western world. How could this have come about? I surmise that it can be attributed to the fact that religion has traditionally been very closely associated with most areas of everyday life, so that when long-established customs and attitudes are abandoned, religion goes with them.

The decline in religious belief may have come about as a kind of by-product of events and activities not always primarily directed at overthrowing religion. For instance, the advances in scientific knowledge, the social repercussions of two world wars with women leaving the home to work in munitions factories or in the forces, the Suffragette movement, and other campaigns that have brought about new attitudes to such issues as birth control, abortion, sexual equality, homosexuality, etc.

Other events may have been the "Monkey Trial" case in the USA, Bradlaugh's struggle to enter Parliament, the Oscar Wilde trial, and the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* case, as well as the work of untold poets, writers, artists, filmmakers who have been prepared to question the social values of their day.

But perhaps the decline in religion is more a decline in church-going, for many people still seem to believe in a God of some sort. Religion has lost much of its influence but nothing seems to have taken its place. There has been no great influx into the ranks of Humanism – perhaps because this viewpoint is seen to lack any emotional appeal and seems somewhat negative, even though the Humanist is motivated by love of his fellow creatures.

G W R COPE
Derby

REGARDING the question of the early and unconscious acquisition of deeply entrenched ideas, attitudes and beliefs etc., I am in, almost, total agreement with Hugh Thomas.

At the same time (and more especially in the light of atheist Hugh's "robustly atheist parents"), I am equally convinced that the piece would have been more aptly and truthfully headed thus: "Theism and atheism can both be big red wellies."

L DUNOYER
Manchester

Having a go at the God Squad

I WAS pleased to see that Polly Toynbee had had a go at the BBC's "God Squad" (Vol 115 No 6). I wrote to the BBC to find out how it justified its policy concerning "Thought for the Day." I wrote to Lee Rogers of Viewer & Listener Correspondence. The justification, which I found wholly unconvincing, was nonetheless interesting and ran as follows:

(1) He said that TFTD was "the only item in the whole of the 'Today' programme which

treats events from other than a secular perspective." I asked (in reply) why a serious current affairs programme needs anything other than a secular (that is, unbiased) perspective. I said it was rather like trying to maintain that there ought to be a religious slot in "Newsnight" or "The World at One."

(2) He stated that "as many as 75 per cent claim some adherence to a religious body." So what about the other 25 per cent who don't? Why shouldn't they be given a say in a democracy?

(3) He claimed, no doubt correctly, that this 75 per cent contrasts with the 0.2 per cent of the population who belong to Secularist or Humanist organisations. I pointed out that what must be borne in mind here is that it is not in the nature of most agnostics or atheists to affirm their lack of faith by joining organisations.

(4) He said that only 2 per cent of airtime was occupied by religious programmes. I said that this had nothing to do with it and that I didn't suppose that any Humanist would object to religious programmes in their proper place; what I, and many others, object to is the quasi-official sanctioning of religion in the middle of a (necessarily) secular and otherwise excellent current affairs programme.

As Polly Toynbee said, the power of the God Squad at the BBC seems to remain phenomenally intact. I think their spiritual home is Palermo rather than Broadcasting House.

D K GORRINGE
Monmouth

Habitual criminals come quietly

DR STEPHEN Moreton's lengthy letter on capital punishment (August) conveys the impression that most murders are committed by habitual criminals. This is not so. In fact, from the Victorian period onwards most murders – usually for greed, hatred, love and jealousy – have been committed by very respectable people, including doctors, all of whom live in very respectable neighbourhoods. Some of them – doctors especially – have committed more than one murder before being caught.

It is a fact that habitual criminals – burglars, for example – if caught red-handed usually come quietly and offer no violence. The public in general usually have nothing to fear from the criminal classes, unlike the danger of mugging and murder in very respectable neighbourhoods. This can be proved by constantly studying the newspapers. Beating and starving children to death is not committed (and I defy contradiction) by habitual criminals.

Last but not least, a high-level policeman has said that 90 per cent of crime is burglary, to the chagrin of the popular Press.

J H MORTEN
London WC1

'Red wellie' of religion fits us all

IN RESPONSE to Hugh Thomas's article "Religion as a Big Red Wellie" (September) I offer the musings of one still searching for answers (Humanist/Unitarian/attracted to Buddhism).

The article sees similarities between Konrad Lorenz's work with the imprinting of chicks and the human acquisition of religious belief. I would strongly suspect that he is on the right track: that we usually acquire our religious views through a kind of imprinting at a particularly impressionable period in our early years.

And just as "no amount of effort" can change the chicks' imprinting, so the same applies to many religious people, who throughout the ages have been prepared to die rather than give up their religious beliefs. Their religion is not the result of any mere intellectual exercise, but by "imprinting" is part of the fabric of their very being – an attack upon their beliefs becomes an attack upon their integrity as persons, hence I always think that ridicule of religion (which sometimes occurs in *The Freethinker*) is uncalled for. Besides which there is religion and religion: at one extreme narrow fundamentalist views, it seems, and at the other quite progressive views.

But Hugh Thomas's article has many implications. For instance, if religious views can be "imprinted" at an early age, can not Humanist/atheistic views be similarly "imprinted"? If so, then both parties are tarred with the same brush (of imprinting), and in what kind of light does that put our so-called reasoning abilities? If on the other hand the Humanist/atheistic view is arrived at through purely intellectual reasoning with no hint of "imprinting," then we are wasting our time arguing with people who have been ineradicably "imprinted" with religious views – they are not going to change. It is an unequal contest.

Yet despite the ineradicable nature of these

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Rape, torture and death in religion's name

FRIDAY the 13th of October was certainly an unlucky day for bigotry in Australia. For it was then that one of the country's most respected newspapers, *The Age* (Melbourne), published a major article by Pamela Bone which might have been (but of course wasn't) lifted directly from the pages of *The Freethinker*, so exactly did it draw together the strands of our recent reports concerning Islamic fundamentalism.

It is reproduced here to show that even the commercial Press – following the lead of campaigning, specialist journals like *The Freethinker* – is not only becoming aware of the threat posed by fundamentalism but is also daring to say so.

Pamela Bone wrote:

'Why, I asked at a news conference of the Iranian delegation to the recent women's conference in Beijing, should the world respect segregation of the sexes in Iran when it did not respect racial segregation in South Africa?

"I have to correct the misunderstanding of the sister who asked that question" an Iranian woman delegate replied. "In South Africa, racial segregation was forced. In Iran, women choose this system." I've met some Iranian women here who did not choose it, I would have replied, but the time was up.

The Iranian news conference did not get through many questions because each answer was prefaced with: "In the name of Allah the merciful, the compassionate..."

Robert Fisk in *The Independent* this week wrote of a big increase in the numbers of people being put to death after Islamic trials in Saudi Arabia this year. Among the more shocking cases was one of a mother and daughter who were decapitated together before an audience of men in a public market place for allegedly killing the elder woman's husband.

In another case, a 19-year-old Sri Lankan girl stood weeping in a prison courtyard before a seven-man firing squad shot her dead for allegedly killing her employer's child, a crime she denied having committed.

"Not a single Western embassy, however, is reported to have protested at the beheading of women nor at the increasingly ferocious lashings of hundreds of foreign female workers in the Gulf for alleged misdemeanors," Fisk wrote. (A spokesman for

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the Foreign Minister, Senator Evans, said Australia makes representations to governments on every case of "cruel and unusual punishment" it hears of. About 30 such representations have been made to Saudi Arabia this year, he said.)

Australians burn flags in front of Indonesian and French embassies over human rights abuses in East Timor and bombs in the Pacific. Who will protest for Sarah Balabagan, a Filipino woman under sentence of death in the United Arab Emirates for stabbing her employer – in self-defence, she said, when he was trying to rape her? Where are the protests at United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabian embassies over human rights abuses in those countries? Why is the Australian Left seemingly apathetic about one of the worst regimes in the world, in Iran? It's politically incorrect to go to France but Iran is tipped to become a trendy new tourist destination.

A message from Paris to the Beijing women's conference from Maryam Rajavi, the president of the Iranian Resistance's "Parliament in Exile," said in part: "As a Muslim Iranian woman, I declare that the mullahs ruling Iran are the worst enemies of Islam, the Koran and the Prophet Mohammed.

"Not only has the religious terrorist dictatorship ruling Iran violated the most basic individual and social rights of the Iranian people but...it has also become the primary exporter of terrorism and backwardness to other countries, especially Islamic nations." The message was not, of course, delivered, because Ms Rajavi is not part of any official government. It was a revelation to me to see, at the conference, the numbers of Muslim women demonstrating against Islamic fundamentalism, carrying banners decrying the abuses of women in Islamic countries of the Middle East and North Africa, telling the world to wake up to the

danger of religious fundamentalism.

An exiled Iranian woman told me that in Iran, women who disobey the dress code are punished by up to 74 lashes. Women – pregnant women, old women, young girls – are executed on the most trivial charges.

There is a law that a virgin cannot be executed, but the authorities get around that problem by raping them, she said. However, they don't call it rape, they call it marriage: the woman is married, usually to a prison guard, raped, then executed; the next day a box of wedding sweets is delivered to the dead woman's family. This woman said: "I want to tell that Islam is a religion of tolerance, and rape and murder has nothing to do with Islam or any religion."

In Egypt, converting from Islam to Christianity will earn a death sentence from Islamic fundamentalists.

In the United States, where the young black men who make up the majority of the prison population are being converted to Islam in large numbers, the leader of the Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan, hopes to lead a million black men in a march on Washington on Monday.

Farrakhan, who requires the women members of his organisation to veil themselves, is an anti-Semite and a racist, which probably has nothing to do with his Muslim faith. There are plenty of Christian racists in the US.

There are one billion Muslims in the world, and the vast majority of them are not fanatics. Australia, in particular, is fortunate that its Muslims are mostly moderate, decent people. All religious fanaticism is dangerous. Yet it is Islamic fundamentalism that is most evident all around the world, and among Western liberals there is a curious politeness about it.

Why? A kind of reverse racism? The upholders of apartheid were former Dutch and British, people just like us. Perhaps it was easier to say to them, "Chaps, what you are doing is beyond the pale" than to Iranians and Saudi Arabians. Perhaps the rulers of abhorrent Middle Eastern régimes are seen as so far beyond the pale that nothing we say can make any difference.

Or perhaps, to be kinder, it is a fear of cultural imperialism. If so, it is misguided. Tolerance may be a fine thing; but torture and rape and public executions should not be tolerated in the name of any religion or culture.'