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Secular  
Humanist  
monthly

# Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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## Windsors in the soup



Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection

*'It is charged against me that I have unfairly touched private character. In no instance have I done so, except when the conduct of the individuals attacked affected the honour and welfare of the nation...I have only pleaded against the White Horse of Hanover. I loathe these small German breast-bested wanderers, whose only merit is their loving hatred of one another. In their own land they vegetate and wither unnoticed; here we pay them highly to marry and perpetuate a pauper prince-race. If they do nothing, they are "good." If they do ill, loyalty gilds the vice till it looks like virtue.'*

*— Charles Bradlaugh MP, founder the National Secular Society, Impeachment of the House of Brunswick, first published 1872.*

# Republicanism on the menu

# UP FRONT

with the Editor

## Right royal pantomime's not so funny

*I have always considered monarchy to be a silly, contemptible thing, I compare it to something kept behind a curtain, about which there is a great deal of bustle and fuss, and a wonderful air of seeming solemnity, but when, by any accident, the curtain happens to open, and the company see what it is, they burst into laughter.*

WELL, yes, Bro Paine, up to a point. But the hilarity is often tinged with uneasiness. True, the goings-on around the Wales's marriage have a bedroom-farcical aspect – but comedy was entirely absent from the November 23 Channel 4 *Secret Lives* revelations about the wartime treachery of the former King Edward VIII.

When we consider the enormity of his true crime, we can almost forgive his being a common little spiv, with that profitable line in illegal currency speculation. As Duke of Windsor, he was a Nazi sympathiser who advised the Germans that prolonged bombing of England would bring about peace on Hitler's terms (with what fortitude these Royals have always faced the prospect of wholesale death among their subjects). The Fuhrer accepted the recommendation and began mass bombing of Britain on the very day that Edward set sail from his Portuguese bolt-hole for Bahamas exile.

Edward had, of course, been forced into truculent abdication because of his attachment to the grotesque Mrs Simpson (or Shanghai Lil, as she was known among the Upper Classes on account of her sojourn in the Far East, where, it was rumoured, she learned the tricks of the Oriental working-girls' trade). But Hitler promised to reinstate Edward on his throne when a peace acceptable to Germany was secured, and the erstwhile monarch expressed his appreciation in many ways.

In Franco Spain and in equally totalitarian Portugal, whence he fled on deserting his military post at the Fall of France, he advised the Germans about the state of affairs in Britain and later went to great lengths to try to keep the United States out of the war against Nazism. It would be tragic if Hitler were overthrown, the Herzog von Windsor told the Americans: the Fuhrer was "a great man."

After the war, fearful for its image and its future in the Brave New World, the Royal Family created a conspiracy of silence around Edward's treachery, even despatching a distant relative – known to history and MI5 as Comrade Sir Anthony Blunt – to Europe to

grab documents which incriminated the Duke.

Alongside such criminality, the Princess of Wales' carefully-scripted *Panorama* programme seems small beer. Surely, it was an act of revenge on her husband and his bit of skirt – but also it was by way of being an insurance policy, I guess. Her aim – to place on record that The Enemy (as she termed her husband's camp) was out to get her. She wanted the world to know the facts about her mistreatment – intercepted mail, bugged telephones – should she be confined to a high-price lunatic asylum at a future date or suffer some other horrid fate.

Hack-instinct tells me that the interlude about her having dropped her knickers for a close friend was interpolated to spice-up the story – to ensure full public and media attention and perhaps to win the hearts of the "he can extra-maritally bonk; why shouldn't I?" feminists.

The real message of the programme was: "I have done daft things in the past, *but I'm all right now*. If the Prince's friends lock me up, or worse, it will be because they want me out of the way to make space for Queen Camilla."

And indeed, comments from friends of Prince Charles made soon after Di's broadcast seemed to confirm that someone, somewhere, requires her to be thought a trifle mad.

Of course, this kind of thing is par for the course with royalty. Among Charles's close ancestors, George I discarded his wife and had two mistresses publicly installed in their Court rights and privileges. George II was a libertine and absentee King who spent most of his time in Hanover. George III was narrow, ignorant and clinically insane. George IV was a drunken debauchee. William IV was "feeble of purpose and little of mind," and Queen Victoria, who only came to the throne as the 13th child of the Duke of Kent because the other 12 were illegitimate, was described by that pillar of Toryism, Disraeli, in 1871 as "physically and morally" incapable of performing her regal functions.

And so many contemporary Royals have felt the breath of scandal hot on their private lives. You might say – so what? How many of us could afford to open our own lives to public scrutiny? Quite. But these are our rulers, in office by the Grace of God himself. They are supposed to set the example in everything from Family Life and religious observance to patriotism, social probity and skill at polo.

But does it really *matter*, all this flummery and mummery and empty Orders and dirty phone calls after hours? Wouldn't we be wasting our time on trying to prick the bubbles of a mere soap opera, if we were to revive Freethought's ancient republicanism

POLLY TOYNBEE answered that one, brilliantly, in *The Independent* of November 22:

"If royalty is an emblem of the state of the nation, then its dysfunction is a symbol of the chronic dysfunction of the state and the constitution. What does monarchy stand for? It is the apex of a hierarchy and that is not a fitting model for a pluralistic democracy. The royal insignia stamps a notion of absolute sovereignty on all that politicians do in the name of the Queen. It diminishes us, turning us all into subjects.

"The trappings are not trivial. They trap us all in an infantile fairyland of yesteryear heritage. We may not line the streets, but gazing in our millions at our screens on Monday night, we play the subject, absorbed, bewitched...It breeds Eurosceptics and little Englanders, constitutional bigots and yobs with Union Jacks painted on their faces as they rampage through the streets of Europe. It tells us lies about ourselves and our proper place in the world. It prevents us from seeing where we stand, though the rest of the world understand us well enough and laugh up their republican sleeves..."

"Why would abolishing the monarchy change anything? Because all the power exercised in the Queen's name would have to be reconfigured, from the system of appointing judges and bishops to the establishment of the Church England. The House of Lords would have to be turned into a second chamber with more power and so it would become at least a partially elected body. It would mean a written constitution, which in turn would lead to a Bill of Rights..."

Abolition of the monarchy also would ease meaningful devolution – even independence – for Scotland and Wales. It would cut the Loyalist ground from beneath the feet of the more outrageously Orange Prods of the Six Counties.

There are many such reasons why we must force republicanism back on to the agenda – most fundamentally because it is simply *wrong* that a person should enjoy power and pelf and privilege through a mere accident of birth and regardless of his or her abilities or personal qualities.

More people are coming to believe this: of 7,725 polled by Teletext (November 26), 58 per cent answered "No" to the question: "Is the Monarchy worth saving?"

A long editorial in *The Observer*, November 19, began promisingly enough, describing it as "outrageous that the Queen maintains the fiction of ruling over us," and adding: "For too long, politicians have used her as a puppet to dignify their trade. Last week, she mouthed a speech that was all too clearly an election programme for the Conservative Party. In the next 18 months,

# THE SHADOW IN THE CAVE

**W**HAT do we mean by spirituality? In terms of common usage in today's English, spirit – from which spirituality is derived – is essentially a religious concept. Indeed, it is a direct translation from the Old Testament Hebrew *ruach* and the New Testament Greek *pneuma*. For example, Yehosua bar-Yosif (better known as Jesus Christ) is reported as saying "God is a spirit." And so it has been for many centuries, both in Christendom and among Jews and Moslems. Pagans too are concerned with hypothetical, supernatural beings and the ways of serving them. Sadly, even such critical philosophies as Taoism and Buddhism have degenerated into religions. Thus the overwhelming evidence drawn from some 10,000 years of recorded human history is that spirituality is a religious idea, concerned not with this world, but with other worlds for which there is no solid evidence.

Those claiming that spirituality is something

**Autumn Conference of the Green Party removed the need for members to accept the word "spirituality" as part of the Philosophical Basis of the organisation. But the matter is likely to come up again at the Spring Conference. Green Humanists with a view on what the Philosophical Basis should – or should not – contain are urged to contact Colin Mills at 70 Chestnut Lane, Amersham Common HP6 6EH. Here, a well-known radical journalist explains why he feels that "spirituality" is not acceptable in the lexicon of Humanism.**

other than a religious concept are at best misinformed. If what is really meant is values, ethics or morals, ideals, finer and higher feelings, altruism, philanthropy, biophilia (the love of life), the most human qualities, then why not say so? If, however, what is really meant is something religious, again why not be up-front and say so? Post-modernist deconstruction of language may have some

merits, but to avoid confusion, our language and use of language must not be that of academics, or mystics, but that of ordinary, everyday folk. As a party of political activists in search of the power to implement our political philosophy, and establish a just and ecologically sustainable society, the Green Party must communicate effectively. By using words to mean other than that which most people take them to mean, we can't communicate effectively with the common run of men and women. We may be thinkers (and doers) ahead of our time, but we are not cast in a special mould. As good democrats, we should be of the common folk, and our language should be theirs. To think otherwise is elitist arrogance; it can lead us down the path taken by those who have become pushers of anti-Jewish filth and far-right conspiracy paranoia, and at worst end with something akin to Nazism.

Tolerance and compassion are Green values. Presented and defended in an attractive way by such religious personalities as Gandhi, Tolstoy and Dorothy Day, in the final analysis such

values can only be secular: of this world rather than others, regardless of whether such other worlds exist or not. Tolerance and compassion are essential to any philosophical basis for a Green political movement. Philosophy means love of wisdom (*sophia*), not mysticism. It follows that any values which underpin Green

**by Terry Liddle**

philosophy have, if they are to have any real meaning in human terms, to be secular values – values which have their roots in real human experience, which can be understood and analysed by humans through their ability to reason. Biophilia is an essential component of any Green world-view; while it is a good thing in itself, it stems from an understanding that biodiversity is necessary to the on-going evolutionary process. Members of the species *Homo sapiens* are not lords of the Earth because of their creation by Yahweh or some other hypothetical being in their own image, but share the earth as a common home with other species with which they can live – not in competition but in a mutually sustaining relationship.

Part of being human is a quest for meaning. We may sit by the shore or on the grass looking at the sky, the sun and the sea, and ask ourselves what it all means. At some point in the early evolution of man after early hominids had parted company with our simian cousins, this question must have been asked. Due to ignorance of causation – hunter-gatherer societies do not breed natural scientists, or scientists of any kind – the only answers our ancestors could have come up with were supernatural ones. Given that the relationship between sexual intercourse and reproduction was not understood, and given the short life-expectancy (Neanderthals died at about 30 years old), it seems likely that early humans thought that life existed outside and beyond this earthly life. Veneration or fear of dead ancestors, who were thought still to be in some way living as spirits, gave rise to both gods and religions. Eventually, those claiming direct descent from the most powerful of the ancestors demanded both tribute and worship in this life and were worshipped after death, as was the case in ancient Egypt. The concept of spirits, then, is the product of lack of knowledge on the part of humans of this life, and of the processes going on in the natural world. The veneration of the relics of saints, and of dead teachers who in time became gods, shows that we have a long way to go to overcome a satisfying but nevertheless

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

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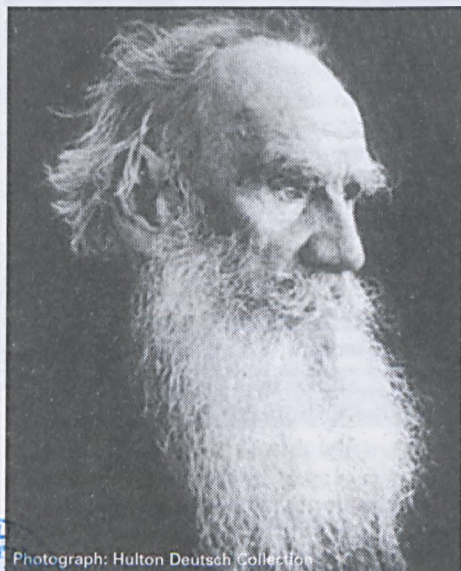
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Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection

• Leo Tolstoy: Of this world

• Turn to Page 180

# Time to end 'coat-hanger' euthanasia horror

"COAT-HANGER euthanasia is taking place under the most cruel and appalling conditions. Sometimes, these assisted deaths are far worse than the disease they were intended to defeat."

These are the findings of sociology researcher Russel Ogden, whose uncovering of the "grim reality" of assisted death within the AIDS population in British Columbia was described by *Canadian Lawyer* magazine as sending "shock waves through Canada's medical and legal communities."

Speaking in Britain at a symposium, "AIDS and Assisted Suicide: End-of-Life Decisions of Patients with Progressive Diseases," held by the Voluntary Euthanasia Society at the Royal Society of

by Meredith MacArdle

Medicine, Russel Ogden estimated that up to 20 per cent of AIDS deaths in Canada involve euthanasia or assisted suicide.

It is an open secret that there is a similar practice in Britain among terminally-ill adults. But British authorities pretend not to know about it. Police and prosecutors often turn a blind eye. And there are no research-based studies into how often or how it happens.

Ogden's ground-breaking research showed that horrific circumstances and botched acts are common. He told the story of an AIDS patient, near the end of life, who wanted to die at home in the time and manner of his choosing: "With the help of

his friends, he ingested a potpourri of diluted drugs through a drinking straw. This itself was an extraordinary trial because it was unaccustomed to being able to swallow even small amounts of liquid.

"Once he lost consciousness, two of his friends secured a plastic bag over his head with the expectation that he would soon be asphyxiated. Sadly, the fellow regained consciousness for a moment. You can imagine the distress as his friends hastily removed the bag and comforted him until he lost consciousness once more, and then they reapplied the plastic bag. Once more, they had to patiently observe their friend until he finally stopped breathing. Now, years later, they are left with this haunting legacy."

Russel Ogden concluded: "There is a need for legal, regulated euthanasia, not because coat-hanger euthanasia is already taking place - that merely shows what happens in a climate of prohibition. Rather, we must regulate euthanasia because we respect the moral choices people make in their lives. How we choose to die is very much a part of how we choose to live."

Ordinary people support the right to die. Speaking at the symposium, Cleon Gardner, who witnessed a friend's suicide and Annie Lindsell, who has motor neurone disease, appealed for wider choice at the end of life. And the latest National Opinion Poll, in 1993, showed 79 per cent of British people in favour of legalising voluntary euthanasia.

Perhaps ordinary people with incurable illnesses feel let down by the groups supposed to help them. Annie Lindsell started a new charity, the Motor Neurone Disease Care and Research Society, when she could no longer support the anti-euthanasia stance of established motor neurone groups.

Chairman of the symposium was the Rev Alastair Haggart, former Bishop of Edinburgh and currently convenor of the Scottish Voluntary Euthanasia Society. Other speakers were Dr Colin Brewer, VES committee member, on "Factors, Figures and Fashions in European Suicide," and hospice doctor Dr David Oliver on "Palliative Care of Patients with Advanced Disease - an Alternative to Euthanasia?" The symposium was organised by the London VES to help break down the taboo surrounding assisted dying.

The Voluntary Euthanasia Society was set up in 1935 with the aim of changing the law so that a competent adult, who is incurably ill and suffering unbearably, can receive medical help to die, if he or she makes a considered, persistent request for such help. The VES also distributes advance directives (living wills) for the refusal of unwanted, life-prolonging medical treatment.

## THE SHADOW OF THE CAVE

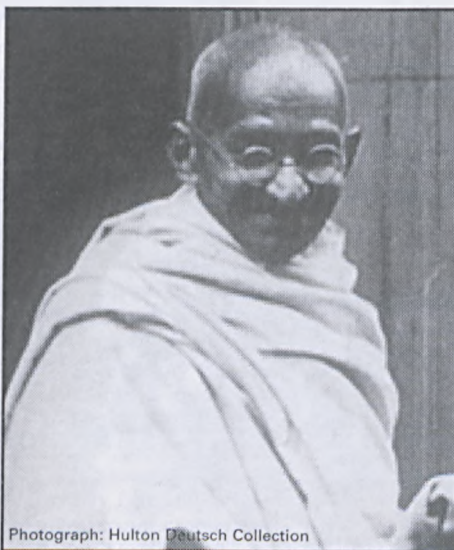
• From Page 179

erroneous ignorance.

Since our remote ancestors first tamed fire and chipped stone tools, thanks to our ability to use our large brains to good effect, we have come a long way in our understanding of the world and our place in it. In the last two centuries, in much of the world we have moved from a situation where idealist, spiritual, religious world-views predominate, to one where materialist, secular, scientific world-views predominate. In many places the religious or spiritual has moved from the realm of the public and political into that of the private. Attempts to restore theocracy usually met with stiff resistance. Where theocracy has been restored the adverse effect on large parts of the population, particularly women, has been severe. Green Humanists argue that to meet the needs of a quest for meaning, what is required is not god-bothering or ghost-dancing, but a rigorously scientific approach: acquiring, analysing and applying knowledge. This is not to belittle feelings or emotions, or the need to encourage proper attitudes. The rejection of science in favour of mysticism is not a step forward, but backward-looking. It may seem obvious, but the only way forward is ahead. The issues are - how we get the proper knowledge and the right attitudes to get there.

Humanism is just as compatible with Green ideas as religion or spirituality, and we feel Greens should proceed on the basis of respect for one another's personal beliefs. Green Humanists do not want to fight against or exclude believers - people have a right to their beliefs, just as others have a right to criticise such beliefs - any more than we want to be excluded or victimised. What we object to are attempts to impose a spiritual world-view - which will be taken to be religious - as part of the philosophical basis of the Green Party. We object to using words to mean other than what

most people take them to mean: regrettably, the current proposals on "spiritual development" in the Humanist movement also seem to do this, giving this label rather than, for instance, "intellectual and moral development" to a clearly secular objective. While believers and unbelievers have much in common, we oppose attempts to create a spurious and empty consensus between them, or any attempt to impose an atheist, materialist or Humanist world-view on the Green Party, in this way. In a party where diversity is rightly seen as a plus rather than a minus, there must be room for the ideas of believers, from Mohandas Gandhi to Lao Tse, as well as those



Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection

### • Gandhi: Secular values?

of unbelievers such as William Morris, Peter Kropotkin or even Karl Marx. There are many approaches to the truth, and we should have nothing to fear from criticism. In our efforts to build one Green world, be our methodology spiritual or scientific, let us exercise the Green virtues of tolerance and compassion.

# Acceptable means to laudable ends

**How are we to live? Ethics in an age of self-interest** by Peter Singer. Prometheus Books (UK). £14.99. ISBN 0-87975-966-6.

**Review: ERIC STOCKTON**

This is a book about explicitly secular ethics – hence the rejection of Heaven/Hell sanctions. It is also about consequentialist ethics – hence the writer's aversion to Kant's idea of duty as the be-all and end-all of ethical inquiry. Singer advocates the ethics of generously interpreted common sense and social cohesion of a non-totalitarian sort. Ethically, suffering (both human and animal) is what needs to be lessened and the emphasis is practical – do the good that is there to be done and so derive satisfaction from doing it. "Use acceptable means to achieve laudable ends" seems to sum up the author's position.

Singer can be criticised for two omissions in his general acceptance of consequentialist ethics: there is no explicit treatment of the acts and omissions doctrine (the notion that an act and an omission having identical consequences are ethically equivalent) and there is little reference to the ethical problems of the "double effect".

In passing and considering the author's Humanist leaning towards consequentialist ethics, there is some rather incongruous throw-away thought in the book – an uncritical allusion or two to the formidable Mother Teresa. This woman may well have begun by selflessly getting her hands dirty in aid of some of the most unfortunate of human beings. But the fact remains that, on any view of ethics that includes some reference to consequences, the strident Pro-Life flotilla, of which Mother Teresa is the fêted flagship, does a great deal of harm just where there is much good needing to be done.

So much for generalities; individual chapters are commented upon briefly as follows:

*The ultimate choice.* This chapter is well and good but it is not entirely free from amiable windbaggy – "an ethical life is one in which we identify ourselves with other, larger, goals thereby giving meaning to our lives" – this seems to be ambivalent. What are these larger goals, what are they like? I may see the killing of my ethnically different neighbour as part of the larger goal of "ethnic cleansing" – larger than the smaller, less exciting, goal of accepting him as a harmless neighbour.

*What's in it for me?* This chapter includes telling data about gross inequality in the US and chilling facts about children co-ordinating looting in Los Angeles riots with the use of mobile phones as means of telling looters the whereabouts of police patrols.

*Using up the world.* Many facts about environmental plunder and pollution are cited. The fallacy that GNP measures real well-being is exposed.

*How we came to be living this way.* This is a pointed history of the emergence of "What's in it for me?" from ancient times to Reaganism. Greed becomes a perceived virtue.

*Is selfishness in our genes?* A useful and searching discussion that leads to the conclusion that altruism is not a disadvantageous trait in evolutionary terms.

*How the Japanese live.* This is an inquiry into the price paid for selfless team-work in a highly successful national economy.

*Tit for tat.* A most valuable discussion of, among other things, the Prisoner's Dilemma – a significant "thought experiment" (Robert Axelrod) that seems to expose the disadvantages, to the egoist, of egoism.

*Living ethically.* Vivid case histories of ethical endeavours of various kinds.

*The nature of ethics.* A critical account of the ethical positions both of Jesus and of Kant; going beyond these positions.

*Living to some purpose* and *The good life* are the closing chapters. Readers might well read these first; they are a fair summing-up of the essence of the earlier chapters.

There are useful notes and a copious bibliography.

## G W Foote appeal

**AUTHOR** currently completing major scholarly book that centres on the 1883 trials of G W Foote and *The Freethinker* (*Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, Fiction in Victorian England*) makes an urgent last appeal for any

information readers may have, or know is not commonly available, about Foote or the trials. Please write to: Professor Joss Lutz Marsh, Department of English, Stanford, CA 94305-2087, USA.

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

**Birmingham Humanist Group:** Information: Adrian Bailey on 0121 353 1189.

**Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group:** Information: D Baxter on 01253 726112.

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group:** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, January 7, 5.30pm for 6pm: Welcome to the New Year.

**Bristol Humanists:** Information: John Smith on 01225 752260 or Margaret Dearnaley on 01275 393305.

**Central London Humanists:** Information: Cherie Holt on 0171 916 3015 or Hilary Leighter on 01895 632096.

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01296 623730. Friends Meeting House Berkhamstead. Tuesday, December 12: Public meeting, 7.45pm for 8pm.

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

**Cotswold Humanists:** Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Telephone: 01242 528743.

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: 01926 58450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, December 21, 7.30pm: Coventry Friends: *The Quaker Movement*.

**Crawley:** Information: Charles Stewart 01293 511270.

**Devon Humanists:** Information: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lympstone, Exmouth EX8 5HN; 01395 265529.

**Ealing Humanists:** Information: Derek Hill 0181 422 4956 or Charles Rudd 0181 904 6599.

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

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

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, December 5, 8pm: Norman Bacrac: *At the Edge of Chaos*.

**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.

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Hugh H Bowman, 25 Riverside Park, Glasgow G4 3PG; 0141 633 3748.

**Edinburgh Group:** Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD; 0131 667 8389.

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

**Leeds & District Humanist Group:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Saturday, December 9, 2pm: Robert Ashby, Director of the British Humanist Association: *The New BHA Strategy Plan*.

**Leicester Secular Society:** Information: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622250).

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6.

Thursday, December 21, 8pm: Come and enjoy our Winter Solstice party.

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

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Information: Brian Snoad on 01603 455101. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, December 21, 7.30pm: A T Cadmore: *How the Norwich SACRE Works*.

**Preston and District Humanist Group:** Information: Peter Howells on 01257 265276.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Information: Gordon Sinclair, 9 South View Road, Barnsley S74 9EB; 01226 743070. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, January 3, 8pm: Meeting and New Year social evening, with speakers Frank Abel and Barry Johnson.

**South Place Ethical Society:** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 0171 831 7723). Thursday, January 11, 7pm: 70th Conway Memorial Lecture. Dr David Starkey: *Equality or Diversity? The 'Natural' Foundations of a Democratic Morality* at Conway Hall; all welcome. Full list of lectures and Sunday concerts (6.30pm) from the above address.

**Stockport Secular Group:** Information: Carl Pinel, 85 Hall Street, Offerton, Stockport SK1 4DE; 0161 480 0732.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Meetings 7.30pm for 8pm. Wednesday, December 13: Stephen Pryor: *Prison Management*.

**Teesside Humanist Group:** Information: J Cole on 01642 559418 or R Wood on 01740 650861. Friends Meeting House, Norton Green, Stockton. Wednesday, December 13, 7.15pm: Solstice Evening.

**Tyneside Humanist Group:** Third Thursday of each month (except August), 6.45pm in the Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. December 21: Discussion on the campaign for a Northern Assembly.

**Ulster Humanist Association:** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Meetings second Thursday of the month, Regency Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast BT7.

**Worthing Humanist Group:** Information: Mike Sargent, on 01903 239823 or Frank Pidgeon on 01903 263867.

**Humanist Anthology:** Margaret Knight's magnificent work, extensively revised by Jim Herrick, with a preface by Edward Blishen. £7.50 plus £1 post from the Rationalist Press Association, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. ISBN 0 301 94001 0. Please order a copy at your public library.

**Foundations of Modern Humanism:** William McIlroy's pamphlet is now reprinted. Price: £1 plus 25p p&p; bulk order rates from 0114 2685731. Payment with order, please, to: Sheffield Humanist Society, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT. Quoting ISBN 0 9525644 0 8, please order a copy at your local public library.

**The Missionary Position:** Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice by Christopher Hitchens (see William McIlroy's review, page 187, this issue) is published by Verso, 6 Meard Street, London W1V 3HR and 180 Varick Street, New York NY 10014-4606 at £7.50. ISBN 1-85984-054-X (pbk). Please order a copy at your local public library.

# Ploughing on into non-belief

**Charles Darwin: Voyaging, Volume 1 of a Biography by Janet Browne. Jonathan Cape. £25.**

**Review: COLIN McCALL**

**W**HEN Charles Darwin sailed on the *Beagle* on December 27, 1831, he expected the voyage to last two or three years, after which he would settle down into the comfortable life of a country parson. As we know, it turned out rather differently. The voyage stretched to just over five years, and Darwin came back a non-believer, bent on a scientific life.

In fact, as Janet Browne points out in the first of her two-volume biography, although Darwin was away from home for five years, he was only at sea for a combined total of 18 months, the longest single stretch aboard being 47 days. It was "not so much a voyage at sea as a series of miscellaneous travels on land." He rode across the pampas, crossed the Andes, and witnessed two volcanoes and an earthquake, the last with mixed feelings, "the most awful yet interesting spectacle" he had ever beheld.

It was, he recorded in his *Diary*, "a bitter & humiliating thing to see works which have cost men so much time & labour overthrown in one minute." Yet, he added, "compassion for the inhabitants is almost instantly forgotten by the interest excited in finding that state of things produced at a moment of time which one is accustomed to attribute to a succession of ages."

## Impact

At that stage, there was "nothing like geology." He had acquired a taste for it while still at home and the *Beagle's* captain, Robert FitzRoy, had presented his "scientifically inclined gentleman-companion" with the first volume of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* before they sailed. Darwin obtained the next two volumes during the voyage.

Without Lyell, as Janet Browne says, "there would have been no Darwin: no intellectual journey, no voyage of the *Beagle* as commonly understood. His influence – and his impact – on the young traveller can hardly be overestimated."

Darwin's achievement, she adds, "was to provide the first detailed information supporting and extending these [Lyell's] essentially theoretical assumptions, supplementing Lyellian dynamics with his own case histories drawn from the southern hemisphere."

Lyell's "secularised science" also affected Darwin's religious development. Natural history began to replace the church as his chosen field. In Janet Browne's words, "As the parsonage among the palms crumbled, there was the figure of Lyell beckoning behind it."

Darwin recalled in his *Autobiography* how, at the start of the voyage, several of the ship's officers had laughed at him for his

orthodoxy; how he gradually came to find the Old Testament "manifestly false"; then to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation, and to regard everlasting punishment as a "damnable doctrine."

In later life, Janet Browne says, "Darwin was the first to see the paradoxical side of this situation and remarked how ludicrous it was that he had once planned to take Holy Orders." She emphasises, though, that "The process of abandoning a church career that took place during the *Beagle's* travels round the world was gradual, gentle, and silent; it was barely chronicled in his diary and letters." "The clerical vocation died a natural death," he said afterwards.

But it was inevitable once he began thinking along evolutionary lines, developing the theory that "firmly drove the idea of God out of nature."

In midsummer 1837, he wrote what Browne calls "his first halting words about evolution – or transformism, as he tended to call it" in his "B" notebook. He saw sexual reproduction as the means whereby species adapt to a "changing world" (his italics). And from his Galapagos experience, he recorded, "Animals differ in different countries in exact proportion to the time they have been separated. Countries longest separated, greatest differences". He supported

the words with a rough "tree of life," which is reproduced in *Voyaging*, one of the many fascinating illustrations.

He speculated, too, on human origins and animal links and, suggesting that human thoughts were little more than secretions from the brain, no more wonderful than inert matter being subject to gravitation, he exclaimed "Oh you materialist!"

His brother Erasmus reminded him of Plato's belief that "necessary ideas" arise from the pre-existence of the soul. Darwin's amendment was "read monkeys for pre existence."

The present book ends before the publication of *The Origin of Species*, but Darwin had already made his great breakthrough: natural selection was the driving force behind evolution. Janet Browne describes how, at Maer in May, 1842, he wrote a brief sketch of his theory in "page after page of scribbled pencil sentences, with arrows and insertions everywhere..."

He revised it over the next year and in July, 1844, sent it off to be copied neatly. He demurred at publishing it, but he wrote a long letter to his wife, "in case of my sudden death, as my most solemn and last request, which I am sure you will consider the same as if legally entered in my will, that you will devote £400 to its publication..."

Fortunately, he lived on, turning his house into another *Beagle*, "a self-contained, self-regulating scientific ship" Browne calls it, "methodically ploughing onward through the waves outside."

In 1856, he began the book which he planned to call *Natural Selection*, which will be featured in Janet Browne's eagerly-awaited second volume.

## National Secular Society PUBLIC MEETING

### *Why Secularists and Humanists Should Support Bosnia*

Speakers:

Branka Magas, author of *The Destruction of Yugoslavia*, and Melanie McDonagh, *Evening Standard* leader writer and visitor to former Yugoslavia

Friday January 26 1996 7.30pm  
Conway Hall

## Let's spread the word!

NOVEMBER'S front-page quotation from the Prime Minister's Conservative Party Conference speech on education – and the accompanying reaction to it of the National Secular Society AGM – prompt Cornwall reader Beryl Mercer to ask: "Does John Major receive regular copies of *The Freethinker*?"

Mrs Mercer adds: "I usually enjoy reading the magazine, even if I don't always agree with some of the views published in it – but I can't get away from the conviction that most of its material is preaching (if you will pardon the word!) to the converted. It would be heartening to think that copies were being sent to politicians, priests, prelates – and to the Pope. All the bishops, archbishops etc., of all the Christian sects in Britain and Ireland; the leaders of the ethnic religious minorities in this country – in fact, any person or body which is furthering the cause of religion and its brain-washing techniques of the young. And not forgetting Mother Teresa!"

The straight answer to Mrs Mercer's question is that yes, we do despatch dozens of copies of *The Freethinker* to individual, carefully selected "targets," including some of the ones she mentions. This is, in fact, one of the many "back-room" jobs performed by former Editor Bill McIlroy – who will certainly not forget Mother Teresa this month.

It is a splendid way of making our views known and of spreading our influence. The problem – wouldn't you know? – is money. It costs around 25p (*five shillings!*) in post and packing to send out just one copy of Britain's atheist, secularist, rationalist, humanist, freethought journal. And so...if you are unable to be active in the wider movement, why not ensure the kind of wider audience for *The Freethinker* suggested by Beryl Mercer by contributing to the fund which is so vital to the paper's expansion? Rush cheques and POs, made payable to G W Foote & Co., to *The Freethinker*, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: Anonymous, H Evans, K J Hadler, V C Mart and C J Tonkin, £2 each; A Aitken and N H Divall, £3 each; J N Ainsworth, J M Bell, P A Brown, K Byrom, J H Charles, G Coupland, J M Crowley, R Delaurey, D T Harris, M G Kamal, L MacDonald, M McIver, R A Moorhouse, J Moreton-Williams, A Negus, R T Savage, R W Vicars and R A Wood, £5 each; Anonymous, Anonymous and C Minary, £7 each; J Clunas, L Dubov, J A Lance, A J Mutch, A W Newton, M J Sargent, F A Saward, M Schofield, C Wilshaw and Worthing Humanist Group, £10 each; J R Bond, J Dobbin and E McCann, £15 each; C A Bearpark, £17; Anonymous, £20; Apra Books, £25; M J Essex, £40; S Dahlby, \$29.

**Total for October: £374 and \$29.**

# Courageous his life

*Why I am not a Muslim* by Ibn Warraq.  
Prometheus Books UK. ISBN 0 87975 984 4. £22.95  
Rationalist Press Association members: £15,  
including postage, from RPA, Bradlaugh House

Review: Daniel O'Hara

**M**Y OWN attempt to engage with Islam has, before reading this book, mainly been through talking with a group of Islamic students from Kings College, London, who regularly set up a lunchtime stall outside their college gates in The Strand, opposite the church of St Mary Overy. Their views are extreme, but appear entirely within the mainstream Islamic tradition.

I have put it to them that it is ironic that they should be using such a platform to complain about the denial of "freedom of speech" for themselves inside the building (this after the college authorities had banned a debate they planned to hold on the execution of heretics and blasphemers) while admitting that they do not believe in freedom of speech for others. They agree with me that they would not be allowed to set up such a stall (even to promote Islam, let alone to criticise it) in Riyadh, Tehran, Islamabad or Dacca. But the irony that they should demand freedom of speech in order to denounce freedom of speech is entirely lost on them. They agree that they despise "Western Democracy" and the freedoms it guarantees: but they are not above using those very freedoms to denounce and call for the abolition of freedom. They are as convinced as any Marxist, and perhaps with better reason, of the eventual triumph of their creed. At least Marxism is falsified by the failure of its prophecies concerning the withering of the state and the collapse of capitalism. Islam, for better or worse, admits of no falsification.

The Muslim students to whom I have recently been talking have not heard of Ibn Warraq or his book. If it came into their hands, they would probably want to burn it publicly, as their co-religionists in

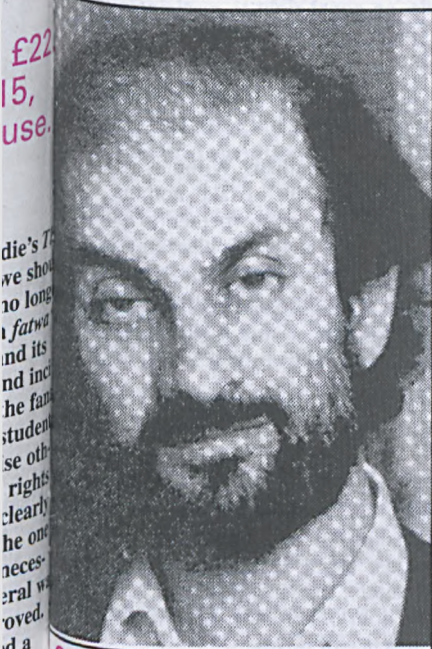
Bradford did with Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1989. Perhaps we should at least be grateful that there is no longer an Ayatollah Khomeini to issue a *fatwa* against *Why I am not a Muslim* and its author, put a price on his head and invite the faithful to murder him. But the face of the faithful intolerance of those Islamic students who demand their right to criticise others, yet who accept no reciprocal rights for others to criticise their position, clearly shows that and why a book like the one under review is both timely and necessary, even if one can think of several ways in which it might have been improved.

Mr Warraq was born and raised a Muslim, but is now a secular humanist, freethinker and rationalist critic, not just of Islam but of all religions, regarding them, in David Hume's words, as "sick men's dreams." As an apostate, he is, in Muslim eyes, guilty of a crime far more heinous than murder or even genocide. Indeed, murder and genocide have traditionally been the preferred methods of rooting out dissent, heresy, unbelief, rival religions and philosophies in all Islamic cultures. And this is as true as it was in the 7th or the 9th Century. So we must salute *Why I am not a Muslim*, as R Joseph Hoffmann does in the Foreword, as a "courageous" work. The author has, quite literally, put his name on the line.

Mr Warraq tells us in his Preface that the Rushdie affair which galvanised him into writing his book, though he tells us later, that he is "not a scholar or specialist." He has at any rate read widely and deeply, and succeeds in conveying a great deal of information about both the history and the tenets of Islam, and of his treatment of dissenters. I am unable to comment on the accuracy or balance of this part of the work, though it has the appearance of being thoroughly



# ews author puts it on the line



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**Salman Rushdie: Fatwah on Islam inspired Why I am not a Muslim.**



● **George Orwell: Couldn't have dreamed-up a more terrifying perversion of truth than Muslim propaganda.**

of relativism, of the spinelessness of Western liberal intellectuals in the face of Islamic totalitarianism, and of our too-ready capitulation to extremely one-sided left-wing criticisms of the Western Democratic tradition. As one who currently lives in America but grew up in a country which now calls itself an Islamic republic, Mr Warraq is well placed to judge just how much is to be lost by the surrender of entirely justifiable pride in the real achievements of Western democracies. For this, he suggests, an insidious relativism and misplaced "political correctness" is largely responsible.

I shall quickly pass over the very extensive critical work on the Koran and other traditional sources of Islam which Mr Warraq relates, and his detailed history of the banditry, bloodshed and terror which chiefly characterised the early centuries of Islam, and which are resurgent in our own. It may come as a surprise to most readers to learn that the Koran did not achieve anything like its present shape until about two centuries after the

death of Muhammed – roughly the same time it took the Christian Church to finalise its New Testament canon. And many of the traditional, extra-koranic sources for the life and teachings of the Prophet have been shown by recent scholarship to be extremely unreliable. So much for the basic Islamic dogmas of an infallible Prophet and an inerrant God-authored holy book. What the traditional sources tell us of the Prophet, however, make him seem as unappealing as any other manipulative and power-hungry opportunist in history. It is good to know that opposition to the Prophet and his teachings, and the totalitarian religion which grew out of them, goes back to his own time and peoples, and has never been entirely silenced, even though so many gain-sayers have paid with their lives, as they still are doing. While Christendom has much to be ashamed of, Mr Warraq suggests that Islam has been even more brutally culpable.

Even today, the social teachings of Islam perpetuate the inferiority of women and their subjection to absolute control in all aspects of their lives – even as to whether and when they may leave the house – of their husbands (to whom they must remain constantly available, except when "unclean," as objects of unrestrained sexual gratification), or if unmarried, their male guardians. Such unequal treatment of the sexes is defended in the literature I have picked up outside Kings College as "elevating the situation of the people from the level of animals (as is the case in the west), to one where the dignity and honour of all human beings is preserved and respected (as would be the case in an Islamic State)."

George Orwell and Franz Kafka together could surely not have dreamed up a more terrifying perversion of the truth. I commend Ibn Warraq's book as a much needed antidote and corrective to such shameless propaganda. Even if some of its chapters can be safely passed over by the general reader, there are others which will amply repay careful study by virtually everyone.

# Reason – the cure for fanaticism and folly

*One whose name deserves to be remembered by all who value freedom of thought.*

*Richard Paterson  
on a pioneer  
freethinker  
of Wales*

**I**N THOSE words, Ron Davies MP, Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Wales, recently paid tribute to Zephaniah Williams, the Chartist who may justly be called Wales' first free-thinker.

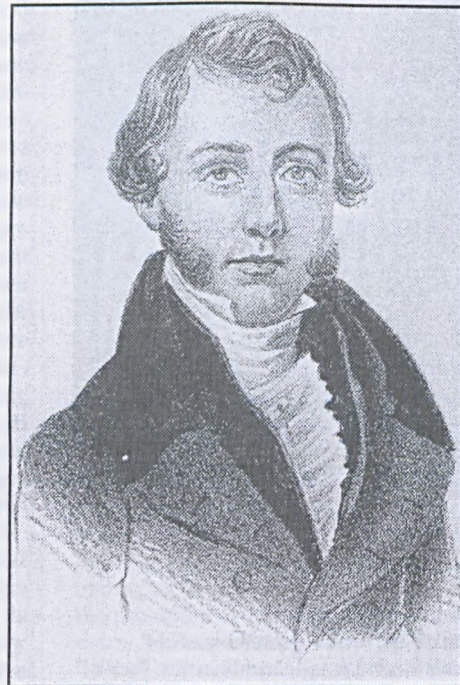
Speaking on November 4, at the annual re-enactment of the march on Newport in 1839 by some 5,000 Chartists, Mr Davies reminded a large audience outside the historic Westgate Hotel that 1995 is the bicentenary of the birth of "this admirable man of Gwent."

Born of farming stock in Monmouthshire, Williams was largely self-educated in English and his native Welsh. He became a master collier and mineral agent, securing coal supplies for the rapidly expanding iron industry around Tredegar that was drawing in workers from all rural Wales. The area became a hotbed of radicalism and unrest, with Williams prominent by 1830 in local branches of the National Union of the Working Classes. His convictions and powers of oratory in both languages made him an inspirational leader of those agitating for the Six Point Charter. He was able to assume a leading role by leaving the employment of the ironmasters to take over a public house, the Royal Oak, in the industrial village of Nantyglo.

Crippled by late changes of plan, confused objectives and appalling weather, the march on Newport proved to be a fiasco. At least 12 Chartists were shot and killed by soldiers garrisoned in the Westgate Hotel. Williams, delayed by the late arrival of one contingent, led his local column, though declining to bear arms and urging others to do so only in self-defence. He was captured after some weeks and, with Frost and the other ringleader, William Jones, was tried and sentenced to be hanged. A public outcry secured commutation of the death sentence on a technicality and Williams, Frost and Jones were transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1840.

Over the next decade, Williams endured floggings, hard labour and news that his wife, back in Wales, thought him dead. After many frustrations, he received, in 1854, a conditional pardon which enabled him to discover coal near Launceston. His wife and daughter were eventually able to join him, and he died in 1874 "full of years and prosperity," without ever having returned home.

Zephaniah Williams' standing as a free-thinker, and the importance of his rationalism as the bedrock of his other principles and activities, have not attracted historians concentrat-



● **Zephaniah Williams**

ing on labour history or the events of November 1839, while historians of freethought have tended to overlook the tenuous Welsh connection.

Williams' avowed views on religion led to attempts to discredit him, and partly accounted for some local hostility to workers' organisations and to Chartists – regarded as "infidels" and "levellers." Williams considered Christ to have been simply a good man who, had he been living in that time and place, would have had his house pulled down by the "friends of order." It was said, however, that Williams kept at the Royal Oak a large portrait of Christ crucified, with the caption "The Man who stole the Ass."

Fortunately, an open letter to one opponent, printed in Newport in 1831, has survived to give a clear exposition of Williams' views. The "Letter to Benjamin Williams, a Dissenting Minister" reveals education, insight, sincerity and a concern for justice, equity and the well-being of others. Asking for tolerance, he says:

"While you place your reliance on that religion, which you believe to have been given by God, you are free to enjoy the full benefits of such a belief; but you must permit me, on the other side, an equal right to participate in my full share of that happiness, which the practice of love and equity can afford...I think it the greatest of all comforts, to know, that there is in the heart, an inward principle, to sustain and direct our conduct."

In a plea for rationalism, Williams states: "I would advise all men, to take nothing upon trust, but all upon trial; whether in politics, religion, ethics, or any thing else: to sit down with a determined resolution; to examine closely; and to be directed by that which reason most approves."

There is a sideswipe at hypocrisy: "Strange, indeed, that men, when called forth to wage war against errors, should never be permitted to examine on what ground they themselves stand. And still more strange that those who distrust reason so much in matters of faith, should deem its free and unshackled exercise, notwithstanding all their concessions in their pious moods, as of essential importance in worldly matters; in which, they forget not to use the wisdom of serpents, however wanting in the innocence of doves."

## Chains

Finally, there is one part of the "Letter" which draws together all of Zephaniah Williams' conviction and passion, yet which reminds us how much still remains to be striven for, two centuries after his birth: "The profoundest desire of my heart is to effect the emancipation of those, whom I see struggling under those chains, whose galling weight, I have so severely felt. Truth, experience, reason and reflection will not fail to do this – to cure ignorance, fanaticism and folly. I am well aware, indeed, that the admission of truth is opposed to the temporal interests of some, and the prejudices of others; it is, however, worth any sacrifice: and though that important word FAITH once sounded in my ears as the only thing needful, I am convinced that that is but a will-o'-th'-wisp, which leads men to bogs and fens: but that truth like the regular return of the sun in its gradual process, exposes both sides of every object for inspection."

Those working to promote Humanism in Wales, through local groups and the recently established Humanist Council of Wales, want to ensure that there will be due and lasting recognition of Zephaniah Williams' place in the history of freethought, as in the continuing struggle for social justice.



# DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



## Sacred cows demystified

LONDON Weekend Television's entire *South Bank Show* on November 12 was given over to the life and times of Dame Barbara Cartland. It was an over-the-top production number. Viewers saw her huge collection of dresses and jewellery enough to stock a Bond Street emporium. Dressed in pink, her favourite colour, the 94-year-old "Queen of Romance" – or of bodice-ripping slush, as some regard her novels – teetered through the show, dispensing words of wisdom on love and life.

Interviewer Melvyn Bragg occasionally got a word in edgeways. Dame Barbara was in full flood throughout, pontificating on all manner of subjects, most notably sex ("so sordid and bad for the children"). Not given to false modesty, she claims credit for bringing prayers back into the nation's schools.

But for all her ludicrous ego-tripping and snobbery, the Dame is a sparkish and at times an endearing old party who adds to the gaiety of nations. Certainly she is a more attractive and colourful personality than the grim-faced patron-saint-in-waiting of the breeders' lobby, of whom more anon.

Dame Barbara has written more than 500 books – not, as one spiteful cat remarked, one book more than 500 times. She has a huge following and the sales figures to prove it.

However, the public can be capricious. Time was – and not so long ago – when to question the humanitarian motives of Mother Teresa of Calcutta was regarded as tastelessness on a par with accusing Barbara Cartland of over-dressing.

But not any longer. Gradually it is being realised that for many years Mother Teresa has been exploiting human misery as a means of enriching her Missionaries of Charity order. Furthermore, the mask of humility and unworldliness conceals a shrewd financial operator and religious demagogue who is fiercely loyal to a reactionary papacy.

Much credit for debunking the jet-setting friend of the poor and destitute is due to Christopher Hitchens. His *Hell's Angel* on Channel Four Television last year was the first major assault in Britain on the Mother Teresa cult. It received wide press coverage, thanks in part to a campaign by Roman Catholics to prevent its transmission.

Now Christopher Hitchens has published

*The Missionary Position* (Verso, £7.95). Subtitled "Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice," it exposes the humbug and deception practiced on her credulous admirers. Rather than a life of selfless dedication to others, Mother Teresa is revealed as an unscrupulous and, unfortunately, a highly effective promoter of Vatican decrees on sexuality and population control.

Despite the evidence before her eyes in India and elsewhere, Mother Teresa denounces any form of contraception "because God always provides." So breed like rabbits for his greater glory and take no thought for the morrow! Christopher Hitchens rightly says that such an attitude "sounds grotesque when uttered by an elderly virgin whose chief claim to reverence is that she ministers to the inevitable losers in this lottery."

Perhaps the most nauseating side to Mother Teresa's character is her callous glorification of poverty and suffering. At one press conference, a scribe had the temerity to ask if she taught the poor to endure their lot. She replied: "I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people." Small wonder that Mother Teresa has been feted by friends of the poor like Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and the Duke of Edinburgh.

Mother Teresa has no qualms about hobnobbing with dictators, exploiters and crooks. For example, her Missionaries of Charity's bank account was boosted by substantial donations from one Charles Keating. He is now serving a 10-year prison sentence for his part in one of the biggest swindles in American history.

Through his Lincoln Savings and Loan operation, Keating defrauded small investors and savers of \$225,000,000. He contributed more than a million dollars to Mother Teresa's order; it is easy to be generous with other people's money. In return, she presented the fraudster – a devout Catholic – with a personalised crucifix.

During Keating's trial, Mother Teresa had the gall to write to the judge pleading that he "has always been kind and generous to God's poor." In fact, most of Keating's victims were people of modest means whom he robbed of their life's savings.

Paul Turley, Deputy District Attorney for Los Angeles, replied in less reverential terms than Mother Teresa has come to expect. He concluded his letter – the full text of which is given by Christopher Hitchens – by requesting her to return the stolen money. He offered a helpful suggestion: "If you contact me I will

put you in direct contact with the rightful owners of the property now in your possession."

Three years later, the Deputy District Attorney for Los Angeles is waiting for Mother Teresa's reply.

## Humanism over the Border

THERE is hardly an abundance of journals promoting "the best of causes." *The Freethinker* alone appears without fail every month. A few others are published quarterly, and newsletters are issued intermittently by local local groups. So it was gratifying to welcome a newcomer, *Humanism Scotland*, the third issue of which is now available.

Contents include Robin Wood's fascinating article on another "forgotten freethinker," Frances Wright, whom he describes as "a most remarkable lady by any standard." Born 1795 in Dundee, where her wealthy father arranged the publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, as a young woman she mixed with freethinkers and radicals. She lived in America for a time, publishing articles on birth control and equal rights for women. She attacked organised religion as a barrier to human welfare. Other contributors to *Humanism Scotland* include Eric Stockton, who edited its forerunner, *The Scottish Humanist*, Nigel Bruce and Frank Neville. Editor Jane Fox should be congratulated on a job well done – but not finished!

This well-written and attractive journal should have little difficulty in realising its aim to "enhance the content and influence of Humanism in Scotland." But it needs support from further afield.

Annual subscription to *Humanism Scotland* is £4 for four issues (£5 outside the UK). Cheques payable to the Humanist Society of Scotland should be sent to 11A Strathkinness High Road, St Andrews, KY16 9UA.

This is Bill McIlroy's last *Down to Earth* – a feature which he has contributed, brilliantly, for exactly three years. He will continue to write for the paper, and will remain involved in "backroom" work. He has asked for more time to develop his already considerable workload for *Freethought in the North*, not least as an officer of Sheffield Humanist Society. His successor as regular columnist will be Colin McCall who, like Bill, is a former Editor of this journal. Peter Brearey.

## YOU'RE TELLING US!

## More power to Mrs Wentworth

APART from our opposition to Radio 4's "Thought for the Day," there is a far bigger hurdle which Humanists and Secularists have to overcome in the shape of that same radio station's "Morning Service," which is broadcast every Sunday at 9.30 am. I am not seriously suggesting that we might expect to get this dropped, but as a result of leaving my radio set on at this time I have heard some interesting perspectives.

On one occasion recently this summer, the "Morning Service" came from a large marquee. There were more than 1,000 worshippers at this evangelical service; the minister introducing it commented that the field in which the broadcast was coming from was usually full of sheep!

More recently, the Rev Barry Overend, a clergyman from Leeds and winner of *The Times* Preacher of the Year award, gave the sermon when the "Morning Service" was broadcast from Spurgeon's College in South London.

His winning sermon had been chosen for being "committed, exciting, humorous and poignant," but, I wondered, how is one selected to enter this competition? Is one chosen by one's congregation, or does one submit oneself? This latter course would seem not very humble – and in view of Mr Overend's subject, based on the sixth Beatitude about purity of the heart, this would seem to be rather out of keeping.

Mr Overend seems to be stuck on the subject of purity, for his "Morning Service" sermon was also on this topic. He asked what parishioners considered purity of the heart meant. He got the expected definition from most – honesty, sincerity and lack of hypocrisy. But one said "Mrs Wentworth," who is apparently a well-respected local lady.

According to this definition, Mrs Wentworth is an exemplar of all the virtues commonly associated with purity of heart. The only trouble, said Mr Overend, was that Mrs Wentworth did not believe in God. Just as the irony of the sheep in the field was lost on the previous minister, so this irony was lost on our Preacher of the Year. But Mr Overend found no difficulty here, as religious folk don't; they manage to turn any situation to their own advantage. Of course, according to him Mrs Wentworth really *did* believe, only she was not yet aware of the light within her! All will be revealed in God's good time.

These folk really cannot come to terms with the idea that man created God and not *vice versa*.

Listening as a Humanist, I thought "Well, here's a good finale to the sermon." Mr Overend was extolling the virtue of morals without religion.

More power to Mrs Wentworth!

DENIS COBELL  
London SE6

## Shopped!

AS I was leaving the local Safeway after my obligatory late Sunday morning, pre-pub, shop I noticed the Nissan Sunny in front, its rear emblazoned with stickers. "Jesus is Lord" proclaimed a fish symbol on the bumper, and "Jesus is for life not just for Christmas" adorned the rear windscreen. Look as I might, I couldn't see "Jesus shops on Sunday"!

MIKE HOWGATE  
London N21

## Demonising Max Stirner

MAX Stirner's treatment of crime and criminals in his main work, *The Ego and His Own*, is wide-ranging and complex. It trenchantly challenges the received ideas of conservatives, reformers and revolutionaries alike. However, I can find nothing in it that amounts to an "exaltation of the criminal as the anarchist *par excellence*," as Carl Pinel asserts in his article *The Humanism of Albert Camus* (November). Perhaps Mr Pinel could indicate the passages in Stirner's book that support his assertion.

In *The Rebel*, Camus has a section on Stirner (omitted from the British edition) in which he mixes melodrama with misinterpretation. For instance, he locates Stirner in a desert of isolation and negation "drunk with destruction," whereas *The Ego and His Own* is a joyous celebration of its author's egoism. Again, he states that Stirner was a direct ancestor of "terrorist anarchy," whereas Stirner regarded terrorists as possessed individuals.

Camus, like too many commentators, is more concerned to demonise Max Stirner than to understand him.

S E PARKER  
London W2

## Living in the real world

WHAT a strange world J H Morten lives in (November letters). A world in which 90 per cent of crime is burglary. (What? Car crime, shoplifting and vandalism all amounting to less than 10 per cent of the total? Pull the other one, Mr Morten). A world in which residents of respectable neighbourhoods with doctors around (medical or PhDs?) are more likely to be murdered (so Manchester's Moss Side is quite safe then?).

His remark that we "have nothing to fear from the criminal classes" has got to be one of the most stupid ever made on the subject of crime. If we've "nothing to fear" then we can relax, turn off our alarms, leave valuables on car seats and keys in the ignition, and go off to crowded places with fat wallets prominently protruding from rear pockets (provided there are no doctors about, of course).

I live in the real world, a world in which the public has so much to fear from the criminal classes that it spends billions of pounds a year on security and insurance, a world in which many criminals do not "come quietly" when caught – as Les Reed found out when he was kicked to death on challenging some vandals (*The Independent*, March 23, 1994) and as I found out on being attacked when once I went outside to investigate breaking glass. If Mr Morten is so secure in his belief that habitual criminals "offer no violence," perhaps he'd like to try and catch one himself.

As for murders, I never implied that most murderers are habitual criminals. As is generally the case with my critics, the only way they can attack my arguments is to misrepresent me first. Even so, because Mr Morten seemingly approves of "constantly studying the newspapers" here are some results of doing just that:

John Penfold (21) murdered by a robber and hardened criminal (*The Independent*, July 21, 1995); Lillian Notley (88) beaten to death by a habitual burglar (*Daily Telegraph*, September 17, 1995); Jayne Harvell (26) raped and suffocated by a 41-year-old who had 123 previous convictions (*Daily Telegraph*, July 30, 1993); Sarah Burke (99) battered to death by a criminal (*The Times*, July 28, 1993). Presumably she had "nothing to fear" from him as he was only a habitual burglar. Taxi driver Fiaz Mirza (44) certainly had "nothing to fear" from his two passengers. After all, they had no history of violence – just car theft and burglary. They beat him to death (*Daily Telegraph*, September 25, 1993).

I could list many more (and not a doctor among them) and, if I had time, I'm sure could dig out cases of child abuse by habitual criminals. Although my previous letter did not cover the subject, Mr Morten mentioned it anyway. If he's so confident that habitual criminals can be trusted with kids, perhaps he'd care to invite one to baby-sit for him. After all, he'd "have nothing to fear."

Finally, I do not wish to continue this correspondence beyond this letter. My opponents' arguments are easily refuted, but the anti-death penalty (pro-criminal) lobby are not swayed by logic. I thank those Humanists who have written in support of me, and hope I've made it clear that there are good arguments for the death penalty and that it cannot be taken for granted that everyone in the freethought movement is opposed to capital punishment.

[Dr] STEPHEN MORETON  
Warrington

## Jesus and temptation

GOOD to have the Last Word – not mine, Carl Pinel's, in the October issue. It is so devastating (or should be) in its treatment of Jesus and the Temptations that one wonders how on earth normal people can resist it. There, in fact, and

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ironically, we have a (kind of) miracle: masses of intelligent people *not* devastated but accepting and supporting the patent absurdities of the Temptations story: now He's human (like us), now He's divine (like God knows!). Pick and mix, according to what seems best to fortify your determination to make a fool of yourself.

Top religionists' self-interest takes very good care that the Pinels, the Smokers, Walters of the Humanist movement are not allowed to confront apologists for religion in public – on TV or wherever.

NOËL RATCLIFFE  
Buxton

## Free-will and determinism

HAVING mislaid October's issue of *The Freethinker*, I have arrived half way through the discussion on free-will and determinism. If this has not been said already, I would like to lay out some of the consequences of determinism for the concept of free-will and show why this is not something to be frightened of.

Our actions are determined by our decisions and our freedom to carry them out. I can decide to flap my wings and fly, but my decision cannot make it happen. My decision, in turn, is determined by a number of factors, including the information at my disposal and my ability to reason about this information. In addition to these is an attribute that is probably unique to humans: my consciousness of my own thinking.

Leslie James asks about hypothetical identical twins subjected to identical genetic and environmental influences down to the last detail. They would not behave in the same way. Professor Roger Penrose, in the *Emperor's New Mind*, demonstrates that the processing of the brain is subject to influences at a quantum level which are non-deterministic. Although there will be extremely small differences, their impact will sometimes be reinforced by feedback. Also, there will be circumstances where the consequences for thinking are governed by "chaotic" formulae where a very small change in an input parameter can lead to a massive difference in outcome.

Although some of the input to our thinking, at the synaptic level, is subject to non-deterministic quantum effects, this does not make our behaviour non-deterministic. The small differences at this level merely form a part of the total input that we process in a deterministic manner. Our illusion of free-will is maintained by our consciousness and our ability to empathise with others. I see a man leave his wallet on a table. Do I call him back, or do I pocket it? The information at my disposal leads me to believe that my own life might be improved by the money in that wallet, but I call the person back. Although "free" to choose either option, I am conscious of my behaviour, aware that loss of the wallet would probably

cause him distress.

Of course, my consciousness, my abilities to reason and to empathise with other people are inherited abilities that have evolved due to their obvious advantages to humans. My "feeling good" in doing something helpful for another person and his gratitude at my behaviour are also inherited or, perhaps, learned from the society around me. Other factors might also influence my decision: my risk of getting caught, or his apparent relative wealth or poverty compared with my own. I do not mind this not being free-will: I think it is even more wonderful that I, as a human being, am



*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.*

capable of synthesising this wide variety of information and responding within seconds.

However, a critically important part of this reasoning process is my acceptance in taking responsibility for the consequences of my own action. If I take the wallet, it is no good my saying to the police that my action was externally determined. It is this self-responsibility that accounts for a large part of what we like to think of as free-will; it is also what those who abuse the concept of determinism attempt to remove.

Both left and right wing political movements have used deterministic arguments in a disreputable manner. The discovery of a gene that appears to predispose people towards violence has been used as defence argument in a recent court case in the USA, while books such as *The Bell Curve* seek to use genetic arguments to condone racial prejudice and discrimination. Conversely, those on the left often try to blame all crime on poverty, discrimination and urban decay. Although my genes and my environment are part of the deterministic mix that dictates my actions, I still have "free" will in being able to reason about these influences and the consequences of my actions. My genetically determined consciousness and reasoning

ability give me the ability to deny my environment, to deny my genetic impulses and to take a rational route. Determinism may exclude free-will but it does NOT exclude self-responsibility.

CHRIS CONDON  
London W3

## 'Red Wellie' of religion

IMPRINTING implies indelible marks made on us. As such, I dismiss it and turn to "conditioning" as an exact word for my purposes and trust its use will not nullify but rather illuminate the "Big Red Wellie" debates around the Last Word article by Hugh Thomas in the September issue [and see letters page, November].

Anecdotes may not convince, but they certainly indicate early attempts at free thought nourishing tiny buds of scepticism about the nature and relevance of organised religion, irrespective of being "imprinted" by it.

Being a choirboy for four years, I experienced four different clergymen – including a Pickwickian figure, who gave us sixpence each after we had bathed in front of the fire, a minister who had an unfortunate squint that made me feel funny when he looked at us choirboys as we disrobed in the vestry, and then a hunchback who delighted me by caressing my legs underneath my surplice. I regarded him as the cleverest and the most humanitarian of them, as he was bold enough to express love instead of talking about it in abstract terms which I did not at that time understand.

The workaday world in a Manchester factory supplied more data about the "conditioning process" as there were neat holes drilled through the toilet walls so that there need not be total isolation while performing one's essentials. This I regarded as an important but rather low grade attempt at democracy of viewing, if not democracy in government or church.

And of course one learned a lot from one's workmates and the journeyman one was apprenticed to. A clout round the ear from a steam-hammer blacksmith because I said "fucking" as a descriptive term for the tools I was asked to collect led me to believe that working people have vastly different sets of values but are as variously imprinted or "conditioned," as I prefer, as ministers of religion or vulnerable choir-boys.

I would submit, therefore, that discussions as to whether or not we are remorselessly imprinted or conditioned are fatuous and unhelpful. It is quite obvious that people react in a unique way to every experience, if they are in good health and in a clean environment. People are extremely reluctant to become morons or hooligans and most have a surprisingly well thought out set of imperatives if allowed to express themselves freely.

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## YOU'RE TELLING US!

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From multitudes of miscellaneous impressions, it is likely that we evolve a set of value judgements. As in the anecdotal story of the young apprentice and the tough old blacksmith. He obviously thought that a clout was a superior form of correction to that of a minister of religion's rebuke – and probably it was, in that particular instance, because his assault was tempered by a warm hug and a quick whisper that “decent lads like you should not lower your standards to those of the herd.” I was flattered, and felt this to be another indication of the variety and wonder of individual moral-structures, which are anything but conformist, as I had imbibed from earlier church encounters. This added fuel to my growing belief that total responsibility for one's actions, at the level of one's conscious awareness, clears the way from being manipulated by church or state! Helping us to become motivated more, by seeing social injustices, legal cruelties, pollutions, deprivations and urban squalor, rather than being too bothered but never indifferent about objective influences of a grotesque technical culture. Now, in our technical culture, people are matched to over-production of trivia, rather than industry being tailored to fit genuine basic human need on the one hand, and, on the other, diverted from effective action due to preoccupation with the various categories of religious holiness, which is the very opposite of objective scrutiny of our society.

In poetry, subjective approaches are sometimes essential to appreciate a flower, a mountain, or a piece of music. But if applied in our day-to-day “everydayness,” the culture we presently live in would eat one alive, bones an' all! We seem unable to make the distinction between the technical morass we are drowning in and the need to preserve our humanity at all costs, whether we embarrass strangers and those cynics who believe there is no “middle-ground” (between orthodox religion mongers and the barbarity of the football hooligans) worth fighting for. Before we lose what few human values we have left in this fetid realm, let us recognise that this middle ground is there to be won by “freethinkers” applying rigorous examination of our total experience, whether objective or subjective ones! Perhaps, in so doing, we'll discover that spiritual power can overturn the present climate of apathy, which is fostered by clinging to the comfort and security of a consumer rather than to risk being a creator of a more generous and humane society.

The battle is on – and “freethinkers” have vital contributions to make in dispelling superstitions of all varieties, as well as “Red Wellie” imprints.

**GEOFF BROADY**  
Derby

I CHALLENGE L Dunoyer's conviction [November letters] that atheism along with theism can be a “Big Red Wellie.” Theism is dogma; atheism is rejection of dogma. Since atheism is a negative approach, it is futile to try to prove it; theism, positive though it is, can be

challenged only by another branch of religion, not by logic or reason because theists can not accept rational argument.

My atheism was realised in my youth – I am now 74 – through thought processes, not childhood imprinting. Atheism cannot be imprinted; it can be achieved only through hard work. The indoctrinated child is intellectually crippled before (s)he has developed a critical faculty. I was extremely lucky – I wasn't got at either way and feel fortunate that I can call myself a freethinker.

**DONALD WOOD**  
Brecon

## Flawed logic

DAVE GODIN'S letter under the heading “Do unto other life-forms...” (November) displays the flawed logic of his other “recent writings for *The Freethinker*.” It well illustrates the old saying: “Ask a silly question – get a silly answer.”

Does he think that if man-made robots thought it to their advantage to treat their makers badly it would make any difference whatsoever whether we eat meat or not? Of course, any such robots would not be all that intelligent if they ill-treated the only beings that could repair them and keep them “alive.”

His point is quite irrelevant and has no bearing on the relationship of species that have evolved together.

**R G TEE**  
Leeds

I WAS horrified to see both a “guru” and an Indian Rationalist engaging in a cruel animal experiment, each to try to prove his point to a crowd of spectators, on Channel 4's *Equinox: Guru Busters* on September 10. For those who did not see this programme, the details are as follows: A poisonous snake was forced to bite a dog, and the Rationalist challenged the guru to heal the dog by faith alone. This failed, and the dog suffered a painful lingering death. No treatment was given. It is also reasonable to consider that the snake suffered, the way it was squeezed and roughly handled. Of course, it is a matter of belief for me that the dog suffered, but this is based on knowledge that a dog has a nervous system and will try to escape something painful. I do not base my concern for animals on any beliefs to do with souls or spirits, but that they are composed the way they are, with reactions and responses that appear to indicate pain and suffering.

I am aware that a many Indian “spiritual types” have great respect for life, for different reasons than a Rationalist's, but I would expect a Rationalist also to have plenty of reasons not to harm a sentient creature. We would prefer to avoid suffering, so why should we consider that dog has any less interest in avoiding it? Debunk the so-called gurus if you wish – but by a cruelty-free method, please.

I would consider myself an agnostic, but a respecter of life. If this is the only life we (and the animals) have, with no reincarnation or after-life, as may well be the case, it is all the

more important to respect it and to make it as pleasant as possible for others. I strongly believe that we don't need religion to be caring and altruistic, towards other species, too.

**LESLEY DOVE**  
Harrow

## Fibbing

WHETHER we quote “scripture” in or out of context is immaterial and beside the point (Ray McDowell, November letters). The fact is that “every man is a liar” (Psalm 116) is included in the Bible canon and we are informed by said Bible (2 Timothy 3.16): “All Scripture is inspired by God,” from the first word of Genesis to the last dot of Revelation! Should this be true, it doesn't say much for Jehovah's opinion of his “creation.” I have yet to meet a man who would openly confess to being a born liar – yet lying is stock-in-trade for politicians...hence the recent allegations of sleaze in the “Mother of Parliaments” at Westminster!

**DAVID YUELETT**  
Greenwich

## Not impressed

I USED to subscribe to *The Freethinker* many years ago. I recently took out a trial subscription because I felt I needed to clarify my secularist views in relation to religions other than Christianity and, in particular, in relation to Islam.

I found your October article about *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* very useful, but otherwise I'm not impressed. The November issue has made me quite cross. For example, the brief remark about Islamic inheritance laws and how they affect women (page 162) seems to be from somebody who knows next to nothing about Islam and is made outside any context. There is no religion and no part of the world where women get a fair deal out of inheritance laws.

In the first few paragraphs of the same article, you discuss part of the Prime Minister's speech to the Conservative Party Conference respecting proposals for an extension to the Assisted Places scheme and Direct Grant status. It's quite appropriate for you to inveigh against “superstition on the public purse” and to point out that the main area of unmet demand in this respect is from Muslims. But you explain why this is so only in your 11th paragraph, having made three earlier specific references to Muslims and none to any other religion. You leave the impression that the main thing wrong with Government policy is that Muslims will benefit from it and/or that they are somehow responsible for it.

Moreover, your cover cartoon is a parody of what British Muslims actually want to see. Parody is seldom helpful in *real* debate. It is most often employed, I find, by those whose intention is not to debate with others who disagree. Rather it is to compose themselves into a sect of the like-minded.

**ROBERT DEACON**  
Wolverhampton

# UP FRONT

with the Editor

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she will be instructed by Major to dissolve Parliament based on his calculation of when the Tories can best win an election. She dispenses the royal prerogative, which serves as nothing more than a cloak for ministerial power and was used to force the Maastricht Treaty through Parliament. She graciously hands out gongs to Conservative Party donors.

"The monarch must be freed from these absurd, pretend-powers so that British subjects can become citizens of a modern, open and accountable democracy. It is time to separate the Crown and State. The same applies to the Crown and Church. How can Prince Charles serve as the nation's future spiritual leader when he has broken its most basic tenets? By what divine right could he pretend to appoint bishops? The days of the royal prerogative, of the royal head on stamps and the royal head of the Church are over.

"The Labour Party has promised to reform Britain's antiquated constitution, introduce a Bill of Rights and abolish the voting rights of hereditary peers. It may not wish to admit it, but these measures, if implemented, will have a profound effect on our relationship to the monarchy.

"For the first time, 'We the People,' as the American constitution puts it, will have entrenched rights, which will also bring us into line with our European partners. Labour's challenge to the hereditary principle, from which the monarchy derives its legitimacy, could affect the Crown's long-term survival. Divorce and adultery do not pose as great a threat to the Crown as constitutional reform."

Sadly, *The Observer* then went on to spoil itself, to draw back from the full implications of what it had said: "...the Royals could still serve as a Disney dynasty, attracting visitors and satisfying members of the public who still banker for the days of deference and royal scandals."

Freethinkers will feel that even a "Disney" monarchy would be humiliating in a modern Euro-democracy. Put at its most mercenary, how can politicians and, especially, business people going out into the world claim that Britain is at the cutting-edge of modern capitalism when trading partners know that the feudal remnant of monarchy remains a power in the land? It is embarrassing.

The Royal "firm" must be put into liquidation; it no longer has a useful function, even for the ruling class. In the 19th Century, the monarchy was virtually recreated by the more astute money-men, who realised the great value of the Crown as a symbol uniting the Empire; the Empire is no more. It was also useful as a point behind which to rally the forces of exploitation against the growing working class movement; now, the workers

have been cowed by a culture of mortgage and debt in an economic environment which includes the permanent threat of redundancy.

Much depends on Labour's leaders. We know how fearful they are of the tabloids – see how they ran from even discussing the question of legalising cannabis because of what the *Sun* might say – and only the "loonies" have dared to talk republicanism.

But now could be the time for Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition to stop cringing and to restate the old republicanism of their movement. They would doubtless be joined by some Liberals and the Nationalists – and even by some Tories for, as I say, many business people see the monarchy as an anachronism (lots of modernising, privatising Thatcherites are closet republicans). The Australian move towards a republic is helping to make the notion respectable. The latest MORI poll shows more people in the UK (55 per cent) think we would be better off, or no different, without a monarchy.

*The New Statesman*, November 24, editor-

ialised: "Of course, Labour has no intention of putting reform of the monarchy – let alone its abolition – anywhere near the political agenda, but it increasingly looks as if, in the long run, it won't have any option but to do so." Yes, and it could be that Republican Labour would have more friends than Blair's minders presently think – especially if the disclosures about the Duke of Windsor and the current interest in the Charles 'n' Di pantomime are fully exploited (we pay the Princess £200,000 a year to play Cinders, by the way).

Freethinkers who have influence in the political parties and the trade unions – and the media – should seize these opportunities, taking as our text, perhaps, the letter of one of our own, Thomas Jefferson, to George Washington: "I was much an enemy of monarchies before I came to Europe. I am ten thousand times more so since I have seen what they are... There is not a crowned head in Europe whose talents or merits would entitle him to be elected a vestryman by the people of any parish in America."

## Terror in Israel, continued

THE destruction of Yitzhak Rabin at the behest of land-grabbing, Jehovah-crazed zealots illustrates – yet again – that the Jewish brand of superstition can be quite as bloodily terroristic as its johnny-come-lately offshoot sects, Islam and Christianity.

Nicolas Walter, of the Rationalist Press Association, made a number of timely and pertinent points in a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle* (still not published as *The Freethinker* went to press):

"Not everything said about such an event as the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin should be taken too literally, but aren't some of the things you report (November 10) open to very serious question?

"Assassination is treated as alien to Jews; but hasn't it been recorded in Jewish scrip-

ture and history, and wasn't it used by Zionists first to win and then to keep power?

"Jonathan Sacks [the Chief Rabbi] says that Rabin was not a religious Jew "in any conventional sense," but that "in an ultimate sense, he was a very religious Jew indeed"; but shouldn't the man be remembered as what he was, a Jew who wasn't religious in any sense?

"Chaim Bermant asks God to save us from self-styled men of God; but shouldn't we seek salvation from all so-called men of God?

"Jonathan Sacks says that the Torah was given "not to wreak vengeance, but to create kindness, compassion and peace," and Chaim Bermant says that we should "pay more attention to the actual text of Scripture"; but shouldn't we accept that the scriptures of the Jews, as of other peoples, contain much vengeance, cruelty, hatred and violence, explicit as well as implicit? And shouldn't we question above all the doctrines of the Chosen People and the Promised Land, with the terrible consequences of bigoted intolerance and ethnic cleansing, whether 3,000 years ago or today?

"There must be many Jews who feel that the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin is one more item in the overwhelming argument against religious and political fanaticism of every kind; but isn't this true of all faiths and all peoples?"

## Holy orders

THE Vatican said that the Pope's 1994 ruling against the ordination of women priests was a definitive and infallible part of Catholic teaching. Source: *The Observer*, November 19, 1995.

# How they ruined old Herod's Christmas

**T**HERE are some eight hundred million Christians on earth today – and on December 25 most of them will celebrate what they claim to be the birthday of a man they say is the Prince of Peace...Son of God...Messiah.

They will mark this event unreasonably confident that they understand the real meaning of the birth narrative of Jesus Christ, unaware that the global importance that Christian theology has given him is misplaced.

They are wrong because they are not aware of Jewish history or of the meaning of the word "Messiah."

Jewish life at the time of the birth of Jesus, who was born in the last two years or so of Herod the Great's reign, was a period of violent revolution. The Christian Gospels give the impression that at this time Israel was "quiet" and that it was possible for a holy man to wander from place to place preaching a heavenly message and performing what are described as miracles. Nothing could be further from the truth.

## Drenched

At this time, the whole land of Israel was in a state of war against Roman occupation and dominance. Towns and cities were fortified and the holy sword of Israel was lifted against the Roman legions. The land in which Jesus was born was drenched in the blood of revolution.

The Jews were determined to achieve one goal – the restoration of the throne of the Maccabæan High Priest Kings of Israel, which Herod the Great had stolen. He had killed each claimant to the throne as he came across them.

To understand the history of the Jewish restoration, we have to understand the meaning of the word "Messiah" or "Christ."

Messiah was not a *name* given to a person: it was the *title* of a position in Jewish society, in the same way as the word "King" is in our own. In fact, they mean exactly the same thing.

The Hebrew version of the word is *Masiach* - to anoint; the Jews believed that their King would be anointed of God, so we have, simply, a God-given and God-approved King. "Christ" is the English version of the Latin *Christus*, which translates

## LAST WORD

Robert Sinclair has been doing some seasonal thinking. This is his personal Yuletide message

into the Hebrew *Masiach*. It is as simple as that.

Therefore, when "...there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem" saying "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?..." they meant exactly what they said – that is, where is the King lately born into the royal household of the Maccabæan Kings of Israel?

Herod certainly understood who the wise men had come to find – and he reacted in his own best interests.

What did Herod do? I believe that he did exactly what Matthew Ch.II v. 16 reports: "Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth and sent forth and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men."

We need have no doubt that Herod was capable of such a murderous act in order to keep his throne from the rightful Maccabæan owners. In about 6 BC, a couple of years before Herod's death, a Maccabæan Zealot, Judas the Galilean, put together a

royalist force and attacked the state capital of Galilee, Sepphoris. Herod's reaction was both swift and bloody. General Varus stormed into Sepphoris and captured the upstart Christ, then, accusing the inhabitants of collusion, he burned and demolished the capital. Judas "Christ" and two thousand of his royalist supporters were crucified on a forest of crosses. It was here at Sepphoris that crucifixion became the official punishment for zealot rebels and those whose royalist aspirations they supported. Christians might like to think about the implications of this historical fact.

Herod went to elaborate lengths to keep his throne. It was he who fortified the mountain top stronghold of Masada – made famous as the last stand of Jewish revolutionary resistance against Roman power in Israel. He actually used Masada as a bolt-hole: in times of trouble, he would retreat there so that the rebellious Jewish masses could not push him off his throne and restore to power the royal household that had preceded him.

So, anyone born at the time of Herod who acquired the title "Christ" or "Messiah," and was therefore a legitimate claimant to the royal Maccabæan throne, had the duty of pushing Herod off the throne and restoring to power the Jewish Messiah.

It is quite clear that Christian theologians have from the very start deliberately misrepresented Jewish history at the time of Herod and Cæsar. They now misrepresent the meaning of the word "Christ" and pretend that the messianic office of King of the Jews did not have a long history. The fact that there were many messiahs, dating back to at least the time of Moses, is ignored by promoters of Christian theology.

There is no reason for thinking that the Christ Jesus occupied a unique position in history; the birth narratives in the relevant New Testament Gospels are distorted and interpolated Jewish history. They originally told the story of a man born to be king, who struggled to restore a throne that Herod the Great had stolen and that Rome had abolished.

Herod's son executed Jesus's cousin, John the Baptist, for his violent attempt at restoration, and Rome, during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate, crucified Jesus for the crime of claiming to be King of the Jews, Prince of Israel and Messiah.