

The

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Secular  
Humanist  
monthly

# Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 116 No 4

April 1996



**Mad cow disease**

**Dunblane**

**Genetic  
time-bomb**

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

**How can we bear the shame?**

# The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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Editor: Peter Brearey

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

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# Up Front

## Deliver us from evil

THERE has been a great deal spoken and written about "evil" following the terrible tragedy at Dunblane. We can sympathise with primary school headmaster Ron Taylor, who said that evil had visited his school on that awful Wednesday morning, when Thomas Hamilton shot those little children and their teacher.

But his words sparked a debate in the Press which has been confused, to say the least, and in some cases deplorable. For its leader, the *Daily Telegraph* went to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and concluded (horrifically) that "Suffering, even the suffering of children is necessary for men to know the difference between good and evil."

This, as Henry Porter remarked in *The Guardian* (March 16), "is impossible for the non-believer to accept." If we accept that Thomas Hamilton's actions were a manifestation of evil and not the result of extreme psychological distortion, then, as Porter said, "we renounce the idea that a society may determine its own enlightenment."

Henry Porter then sought the views of a number of "leading thinkers," going first to one who wouldn't quite come into that category, on my reckoning: Geoffrey Wansell, author of a forthcoming book on Fred West. "I am absolutely certain there is such a thing as evil," said Wansell, it was an "extra dimension" in West's case. "Rationality is not enough," added the biographer, who "makes no secret of the fact that I have spent much more time in church on my knees recently."

No place for rationality there. But another of Porter's thinkers, Gitta Sereny, who has specialised in the study of the Nazis, didn't treat the matter as "evil in the religious or mythological sense." And the writer Richard Hoggart, while understanding why people use the word evil, found it "doubtful as a way of reacting."

There was little doubt in Christina Odone's mind: "if this was not evil what was it?" asked the Editor of *The Catholic Herald*.

Her fellow Roman Catholic, Paul Johnson, was in Madrid at the time of the Dunblane massacre, and watched a young Spaniard cross himself repeatedly as he read the news.

"So we, confronted by such an act of horror, turn instinctively to our beliefs for an explanation and reassurance," Johnson comments, "often in vain" (*Sunday Telegraph*, March 17). Surprisingly, he continues, "Those who deny the existence of an eternal authority ordering the universe are more bereft. They have to assume that any catastrophe, natural or man-made, is ultimately without any moral significance: a mere happening, which we must endure as best we may. They are no better off in providing comfort for themselves than Plato and the Stoics over two millennia ago."

I must pause here to reply to this absurd

paragraph. "More bereft" because we don't have to reconcile the Dunblane and other horrors with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and beneficent deity? Your "eternal authority ordering the universe" is a hindrance to our finding explanations, Mr Johnson. We must also distinguish between natural catastrophes and those for which human beings are responsible. The former are indeed without moral significance; not so the latter. Morality, however we view it, is a human province. And to suggest that atheists treat the murder of children and a teacher as "a mere happening" is as insulting as it is illogical. There is cold comfort, any way, over Dunblane.

Johnson admits that the problem of an almighty God's tolerance of evil is the most difficult in the whole of theology, and that "It has destroyed the faith of more decent men and women than any other aspect of existence." Because of the human agency, however, Dunblane "does not raise the problem of suffering in its most acute form." Had the children died of meningitis or in an earthquake, the responsibility for their deaths "would then rest solely with God, who permitted the natural forces to operate. But this is sophistry: either God is all-powerful or he is not; and if he is, he could have prevented Hamilton from shooting the children and their teacher.

Ah, but Hamilton "exercised his free will and chose evil," Johnson tells us. And that leads him to a remarkable human-divine comparison. "In short," he says, "just as God in his nobility gives us freedom of will which he knows must lead in some cases to evil, so we in Britain allow rights under the law which we know in some cases will lead to abuse. Both God and enlightened man put liberty before safety."

Which, I think, trivialises a terribly serious matter.

But worse is to come. "The true answer, though it is difficult to accept in the face of a disaster like Dunblane, is to trust God... God always has a purpose. That purpose is always for our ultimate welfare."

Always...always! Then follows the *denouement*. "The tiniest child, crushed by human wickedness or blind nature in this world, will live to enjoy God's bounty and praise his justice in the next." I must assume Paul Johnson believes this, but it offers cold comfort again to the Dunblane bereaved.

It remains only to point out the fundamental – and fundamentalist – error in this talk of evil. Our mistake is to reify, to give evil – and good, for that matter – an objective existence. It we want or have to talk about evil, we should do so adjectivally, not nominally. I don't think it tells us very much, but we might describe Thomas Hamilton as an evil man (it is probably more accurate to describe him as a very sick man). It was he, not any abstract evil force, that entered the Dunblane gymnasium and committed those terrible deeds.



Colin McCall

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As Christians celebrate the death and resurrection of their Saviour – and Pagans joyfully mark the festival of Eostre, the Saxon goddess of the East, of the Dawn and the Spring – *The Freethinker* presents BARBARA SMOKER'S contribution to the Cambridge Union Society's recent debate on the motion that "This House believes that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and the tomb was empty." Miss Smoker opposed the motion along with the National Secular Society's Daniel O'Hara. They lost the vote; who lost the argument is another question...

# 'All shook up' over the Resurrection

ONCE upon a time, a boy child was born in humble circumstances, and in poverty he grew to be a man. But his charisma was such that the multitude acclaimed him, hailing him as *The King*. Having suffered greatly, he died in torment, while still in his prime, and was buried. Whereupon stories began to spread of people having seen him since his death and burial, as though alive, and speaking with him; then hundreds more eye-witnesses added their like testimony. Death seemed to have no dominion over him, and many came to believe that he had indeed risen from the grave. And his name was called... *Elvis Presley, The King*.

I am sure that no one in this academic audience is among those simple Elvis believers, but it is apparent from contributions to the debate we have already heard that a number of you believe the same unlikely story about the man named Jesus; though in fact the alleged resurrection of Jesus is even less likely to be true than that of Elvis – for at least there is no doubt that Elvis did live, and we know his biographical dates, which would make him only about 60 years old today, whereas not only is it impossible for a human being to survive nearly 2,000 years but there is no satisfactory evidence that Jesus ever lived at all. Even Christian theologians admit that the references made to him in commentaries of the time are obviously later interpolations. So – though the preceding speakers this evening, on both sides of the argument, have assumed we are talking about an historical character – Jesus may well have been fictitious, or possibly a composite of a number of actual itinerant 1st-century faith-healers and preachers, such as are still found in India under the name "godmen" and in the United States under the name "televangelists."

However, the resurrection of Jesus, we are told, is a miracle, and a miracle has been defined as "a breach of the natural law." Now, the 17th-century pantheist philosopher Spinoza identified the divine will with natural law, and therefore had to declare miracles to be an impossibility. Dean Inge – known in my childhood as "the gloomy Dean" – was a liberal modernist Anglican cleric who, in 1930, wrote: "Miracle is a bastard child of faith and reason." And, more recently, the former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, was honest enough to deny the literal truth of the Resurrection, as well as the Virgin Birth and other alleged miracles.



● *Elvis – a rising star?*

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

In fact, many honest Christians in the present century, trying to reconcile their theology with scientific knowledge, have been forced to give up many of the former articles of faith altogether or else explain them away so that the storyline survives but its miraculous element is abandoned.

When we are told that Elvis Presley or Jesus Christ is still alive, is it more likely, in terms of common sense, that the statement is true, or that those who proclaim it are liars – or, at least, are gullibly mistaken? As for those who believe it at second or third-hand, or decades or centuries after the supposed witnesses, they are themselves too-willing victims of the original liars, and perpetuate the lie for later generations to swallow.

David Hume, arguably the most acute thinker of the 18th century, wrote that believing in miracles is "a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience." He also wrote: "The knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena that I should rather believe that the most extraordinary events arise from their concurrence than admit to so signal a violation of the laws of nature."

Today, with no fear of being tortured to death for heresy, we would express the view in more simple, direct words. To a Rationalist, accepting *anything* as a literal fact is a matter of probability based on the available evidence. And what could be more improbable than the story of someone rising from the death – not by

resuscitation within a few minutes, while the brain is still oxygenated, but days later, when *rigor mortis* will have set in.

When the forebrain of a victim of illness or accident is so severely damaged as to register no brain-waves on an encephalogram, it is generally recognised that the brain can no longer process a thought or a dream, and the person can no longer experience desire or understanding or any other facet of consciousness. How much more certain is it when the body that houses that brain is irretrievably dead, and the brain itself succumbs to the process of decay!

Consciousness depends on the functioning of a living brain – or possibly, in decades to come, on the functioning of a very sophisticated computer. But the computer will always need some sort of hardware, which is analogous to the brain, just as computer software is analogous to brain-waves, and the output to consciousness. How on earth could any sort of consciousness survive the disintegration of the physical brain? And the absence of consciousness when the brain is dead means there is no possibility of spirits existing – whether ghosts, gods, angels, devils, or the alleged "spirit guides" and contacts of mediums. Equally, there can be no future life, whether in Heaven or Hell, or through reincarnation, haunting, or resurrection from the dead.

An atheist friend of mine who was brought up in a devout evangelical family tells me that at the age of about six he became obsessed with the idea of death and resurrection, having seen funeral processions pass the house on their way to the cemetery, and already being familiar with the Gospel stories. So one day he decided to put his teddy bear in a tomb, for which he used a cardboard box, placing it upside down in the garden with Teddy under it and a large stone blocking the opening that he had cut in one end of the box. The next morning, he ran down to the garden to the "tomb" and to his amazement found that the stone had been rolled back and Teddy was gone. No doubt one of his parents had found it and had rescued the toy from the damp earth. To the little boy, however, it was a miracle, and he raised his childish eyes to the sky in religious fervour. But he is now a mature man, so he has put aside such childish notions, together with Santa Claus and goblins – as anyone who actually reaches maturity must.

There are no miracles for teddy bears, or for Elvis Presley, and certainly not for the alleged Jesus. So I ask you all to show your maturity and vote against the superstitious motion before the House.



# Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

## Gummer's dozen

"WE are not a large congregation for the lunchtime service," writes the absurd John Selwyn Gummer, under the heading "Strength in the unity of prayer."

He could say that again! They were "perhaps a dozen spread throughout" St Mary-le-Strand church in London. But they were "able to sing 'Fight the good fight' without seeming ridiculous" (*The Times*, February 10).

Showing no sense of irony, the beef-eating Environment Secretary of a cold-blooded Government goes on to tell us that the Bishop of London's chaplain to the homeless, Father Derek White, prayed "with clarity and directness for the needs of those outside." His language, says Gummer, "is simple and immensely effective."

But that depends on how you define "effective." Did it move Gummer to anything more than prayer?

## A humanist socialist

"LET not these religious people who acquiesced, passively or wrongly, with the inequalities of yesteryear, dare to condemn Joe Slovo, a humanist socialist who fought all his life for basic decency, to reinstate the dignity to which all human beings are entitled."

Joe Slovo's daughter, Gillian, recounts that the crowd at her father's funeral burst into spontaneous applause at the speech in which South Africa's Chief Rabbi, Cyril Harris, berated his own community (*The Observer*, February 11).

The speech is reprinted in *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* (Hodder & Stoughton, £18.99).

## The Jewish 'counterbalance'

ANOTHER rabbi, Dr Jonathan Romain of Maidenhead Synagogue, has some advice for Christians following the Church of England's official rejection of Hell as a place of everlasting torment. They can take comfort from the Jewish experience of "never having that spectre in the first place."

"There is a belief in a world to come, which the soul will inhabit after the death of the body, but its nature is undefined," he states (*The Times*, February 10). "The Bible itself provides no clear picture". (What he means is that it provides a contradictory picture).

"It is not until the very end of the Hebrew Bible (Daniel XII, 2) that reference is made to

a distinction between those enjoying everlasting life and those experiencing everlasting abhorrence."

To "counterbalance" that, the rabbis of the Talmud quoted Psalm 116, 6: "I was brought low and He saved me."

## The Jewish excommunication

THE absence of a real and permanent Hell did not mean that the rabbis lacked sanctions, Dr Romain continues. "A wrongdoer could be threatened with *herem* – "social excommunication" – in which he was ostracised by the Jewish community and banned from the synagogue.

Though the rabbi doesn't mention it, that was the sentence passed on Spinoza, "the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers," as Russell calls him. When Spinoza found it impossible to remain orthodox, he was offered a bribe of 1,000 florins a year to conceal his doubts, which he refused. So he was cursed with all the curses in Deuteronomy and with the curse that Elisha pronounced on the children who, as a result, were torn to pieces by the she-bears.

But, as Russell remarks, no she-bears attacked Spinoza.

## Plain truth

NEWS of the "moral and social decline" has filtered through to the depths of Hertfordshire, and the minister of the Croxley Green and Sarratt Baptist churches, the Rev David Walker, thinks it has been accelerated by the lapse in Christian beliefs. He finds "indications our society is getting into rough water." People want to know "why our prisons are full, why there is so much crime, why we have got so much hooliganism. They are thinking maybe we have gone off the rails and maybe the church has got the answer." (*Watford Observer*, February 9).

Ministers prefer metaphors to plain speaking, and Mr Walker is by no means the first to mix them. If, however, he could avoid going off the rails into rough water, he might realise that his religion has no answer to our social problems. Joe Slovo's was a much better idea.

## Ghostly presence

JAYNE IRVING, a presenter of *UK Living*, was raised by nuns, and her only sex education consisted of a leaflet from the Mother Superior which informed her that "your mother and father lie down together and are enjoined in the spirit of the Holy Ghost. Nine months later, they're blessed with a baby child."

"I remember looking 'enjoined' up in the

dictionary and being very disappointed, not to say confused," writes Ms Irving (*The Guardian*, February 20). As well she might. The Concise Oxford would have told her that *enjoin* means "prescribe, impose, (action conducted on person); command person to do..."

And for years she pondered over the role of the Holy Ghost in the proceedings.

## Out of focus

JUST imagine spending most of your days making communion wafers and not being allowed to speak while doing it! That is the voluntarily-chosen future for Stephanie Ducker, a trained psychiatric nurse, who has entered the Poor Clares, a closed order of nuns. Along with 32 other women in the convent, she will get up at 5.30am for morning prayers and go to bed at 9pm. And there will be six other "offices" of prayers during the day, according to the *Guardian* religious affairs correspondent, Madeleine Bunting (February 1).

Miss Ducker believes that entering the closed convent will enable her "to focus on the problems of the world and her relationship with God."

"We all need to turn away at some point in order to turn back with something to pour into the world," she says.

But what can she pour into the world from a convent cell?



## Undoubting Thomas

ACTOR Tom Conti (pictured above) attacked the idea that punishment makes for better people and deplored Michael Howard's "ghastly and dangerous" policy on law and order, when questioned by *The Big Issue*, the magazine that campaigns for homeless people (February 26-March 3).

And when asked, if you had a time-machine, when would you go and why? Conti replied: "Nazareth 35AD, to find Jesus the carpenter and tell him of the trouble he caused."

The autobiography of a warrior translated from the original by xvii scholars and published by Authority. Available with lxxv other volumes in the same series from all good book shops. Reviewed by NEIL BLEWITT.

# JOSHUA: HIS BOOK

**M**Y FIRST thought on reading this book was what a splendid film it would make. The dramatic action of Joshua's story occupies only 11 of its 24 chapters but there is, nevertheless, sufficient material there to satisfy even the most demanding Hollywood producer.

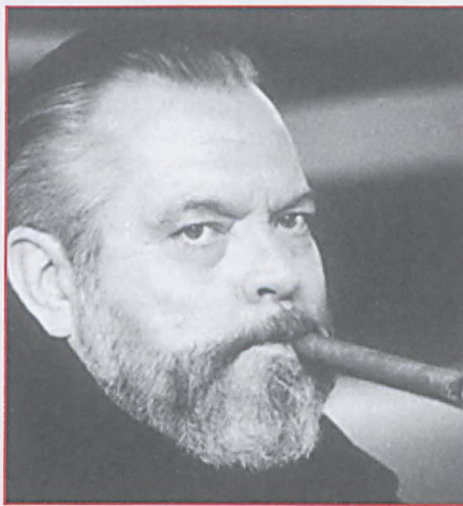
The book would also be of appeal to the general reader, although it is possible that he may question the classification of "autobiography" since the author concludes his narrative by describing his own death and burial. But this is to misunderstand the nature of early sacred literature. It was quite common among autobiographers of the period to describe the events surrounding the conclusion of their lives. Job, Moses and Samuel were just three others who did so – Samuel a full 30 chapters from the end of his two-volume work. Joshua, like Moses, wrote no more after describing his obsequies, and Job was content merely to record the fact that he died at 140. Samuel, possessing more imagination than the others, continued with his book long after his demise, contriving, in addition, to reappear in it as a ghost, summoned by a witch at the behest of the King of Israel, who had expressed a wish to converse with him.

Joshua's autobiography may conveniently be divided into three sections. The most important and demanding of attention are, as already indicated, the first 11 chapters, which give an account of the wars in which he was involved. Chapters 12 to 22 are concerned largely with the division of the spoils, and the final two record Joshua's valedictory speech.

I have but one criticism of the book. It is that with the virtual ending of the action at chapter 11, less than halfway through, the remaining chapters seem overly long. At the beginning of chapter 12, for example, Joshua is described as being "old and stricken in years" and although one imagines his demise therefore to be imminent, he is still alive and being identically described ten chapters later. But the tediousness is particularly apparent when the author deals with the allocation of captured land to the victorious warriors. To be perfectly candid, those chapters can be of interest only to historians of a certain bent, masochists and as bedside reading for insomniacs – although, on reflection, the police could find them of use when testing drivers for inebriety. I have always thought that the procedures involving breathalysers and urine and blood samples cumbersome, and it occurs to me that, instead, the police could invite those suspected of imbibing too freely to read aloud, and with perfect enunciation, from a list containing some of the towns mentioned in those chapters. This would be a cheaper and simpler method than the current one and just as effective. Few sots would escape their just deserts reciting a list comprising, say, Achshaph, Zarethshahar, Bethpazzez, Thimnathah, Ashdohpishgah, Misrephothmaim, Bethjeshimoth and Bizjothjah. There may be the objection that a policeman in court might himself stumble when attempting to recite what

the arrested driver could not, but the ramifications of that fall outside the scope of the present review.

The action in the first half of the book does compensate in large measure for the lack of it in the second half, although I suspect many readers will ask why it does conclude at so early a stage, given the Israelites' lust for strife. The answer is that they probably then believed there was nobody left in the Middle East for them to slaughter or enslave. Of course, subsequent generations were to find that they had made a mistake and took a particular pleasure in rectifying it. A leader of one such generation is commemorated to this day by a society bearing his name and whose members' lives are devoted to placing in public buildings around the world all lxxvi volumes in this series, one of which contains an account of his own attempt to dispatch those who had been overlooked by his predecessors.



● A job for Orson Welles: Citizen Og?

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsche Collection)

Joshua can not alone take the credit for the success of his warriors, for although he was always in the thick of the battles, the strategist and prompter was a character called The Lord, and this somewhat mysterious entity, who seems to be of no fixed abode, did not always confine himself to working behind the scenes. He was, at times, unable to resist the thrill of battle and would join in with a will, on one occasion dropping from a great height some huge stones on the Amorites, with whom Joshua was contending, to such effect that he, as Joshua readily admits, slew more with his missiles than the Israelites with their swords.

This battle would present Hollywood with a wonderful opportunity for spectacle – as would the incident which followed it when The Lord and Joshua combined to arrest the progress of the Sun for 24 hours so that the policy of slaughtering the indigenous population could be pursued to greater effect.

For the benefit of the cynical reader, it ought

to be explained that in Joshua's day the Sun was wont to travel round the Earth and it continued to do so until comparatively recent times when the Pope altered the arrangement and, incidentally, posthumously forgave those who caused certain of his predecessors some distress by pressing for a premature alteration to the system. Because the Earth now travels round the Sun as a result of the Pope's intervention, the circumstance described by Joshua is unlikely to be repeated since a sudden arresting of the Earth's progress might well precipitate its occupants from the surface, and no battle worthy of the name could be fought in such a situation. It would be undignified to say the least and positively dangerous.

There is, if the cynic is still not satisfied, other evidence that attests to the earlier arrangements in our solar system. Maui delayed the setting of the Sun in Hawaii, Hera hastened the process over Troy, while Jesus' crucifixion brought about a global eclipse. The movement of heavenly bodies has always been the proper concern of gods and their representatives.

Two other incidents in the book would afford considerable scope for the film-maker. The first – Joshua's parting of the waters of the River Jordan so that the Israelites could traverse it dry-shod; the second – the battle of Jericho. So far as the former is concerned, it is appreciated that this was not unique, Moses performed the feat before Joshua, and Elijah and Elisha after him. In fact, it remained a standard procedure for the divinely-protected until the time of Jesus, when it was amended to walking not through the water but on it.

But Jericho was unique – though not for the battle itself nor for the breaching of the walls by the sounding of trumpets and the shouts of the Israelites. What gives it its uniqueness is what preceded the battle, when Joshua demonstrated a nonchalance unsurpassed until Drake decided to complete his game of bowls before attending to the Spanish Armada. *Acting on the instructions of The Lord, Joshua paused to circumcise his troops.* I agree that, so far as Hollywood is concerned, this would be a difficult scene to film having due regard to propriety, but it could be shot with the troops on the skyline facing the rising Sun and with their backs to the camera. But however it is filmed, it would, at least, bring poignancy not to say a whole new meaning to the director's call of "Cut!"

There are many other characters and events in this book which command the attention. Apart from the slaughter in the battles (12,000 men and women in one alone) and outside them, there is a note about the death of Balaam, who achieved celebrity in an earlier volume in the series because of his articulate ass. No fewer than 31 kings are hanged, some of whom were slain by Joshua before their suspension; cities are razed to the ground, elaborate ambushes are set and sprung, cattle rustled, stoned and

# Carey under fire on morality

COVENTRY and Warwickshire Humanists have written to Dr George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, criticising his statement that faith is needed for a firm foundation of moral values.

Dr Carey, addressing representatives from 107 companies at St Paul's Cathedral on March 22, said that society needed the "nourishment of moral values," adding that there was no future for a society without a sense of right and wrong, no concept of eternal truths and an awareness of God.

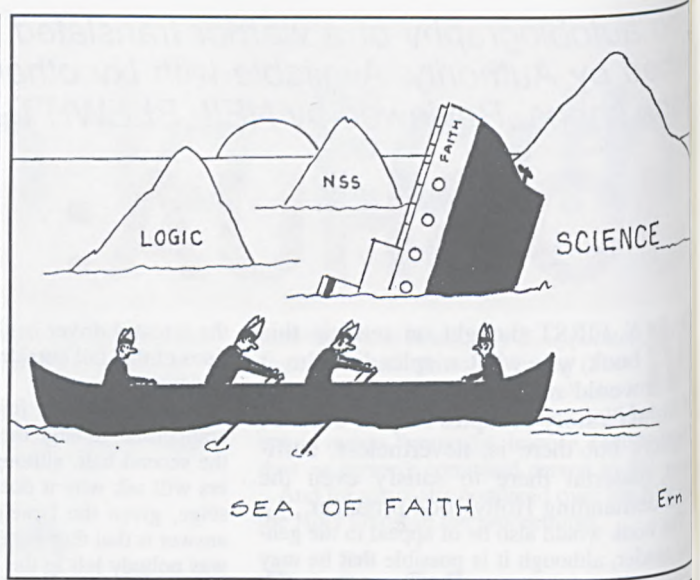
In their letter, the Humanists say: "Our concern is that such public statements undermine moral education in our schools. It influences people to discount morality when they cease to be religious believers.

"Morality is separate from religion and over-rules it. An action may be moral or immoral - and religious doctrine cannot turn an immoral one into a moral one. This has been accepted for centuries. Only mavericks say 'no religion, no morality.' Otherwise, non-religious people would have no moral base."

On behalf of the Coventry Humanists, spokesman Roy Saich tells the Archbishop: "Schools should surely provide a proper foundation for the concept of good behaviour. The appropriate study is 'moral philosophy and ethical traditions.' It is important that schools give this proper attention in a comprehensive and systematic way, which they cannot do at present in Religious Education.

"Should you not be using your political influence to ensure that the basic curriculum includes the proper study of all ethical traditions, secular as well as religious?"

Coventry Humanists may be contacted on 01926 858450.



## 'Timebomb' set to fizzle out

THE Methodist Church faces possible extinction early next century, reports the *Northern Echo*, March 21.

Sunday opening is listed as one of the reasons for the Church becoming an "institutional timebomb" and losing 26 members every day. Over the past three years, the number of young people aged 26 or under involved with the Church has fallen by almost 20 per cent, the report says.

So...the youngsters have washed off the Blood of the Lamb and headed for Sabbath supermarket and Sunday pub? Well, well - not very powerful stuff, is it?

Since *The Freethinker* was perhaps the most outspoken campaigner against Bible-based Sunday laws, it would be hypocritical (as well as somewhat premature) of us to suggest that readers send flowers to mark the demise of British Methodism.

Instead, rush a donation to the paper - this one - which does its best to ensure that young people rid themselves of religious contamination of all kinds.

Please make cheques/POs payable to G W Foote & Company and send them to: The Freethinker, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SS.

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Total for February: £495.

# JOSHUA: HIS BOOK

From Page 4

slaughtered, horses houghed and chariots fired. Og of Bashan, like Balaam, reappears in the book, and one can not mention him without referring to his iron bedstead which measured some 15 feet by 6 - not, it should be made clear, because he had bizarre sexual proclivities but because he was, in a word, a giant and, it is recorded, though not in this book, one of sufficient strength and resourcefulness to pluck up a mountain to hurl at the Israelites, and to survive the Deluge by clinging to the roof of Noah's Ark. Nor was Og the only giant at that time; Joshua, in his narrative, takes us through the valley where many dwelt.

I suspect Joshua knew that no book of this sort would be successful without a sexual interest, and he does not disappoint his readers. There are two ladies whom he particularly mentions. One is Rahab, a harlot, the other Achsah, a Judahite, whose father offered her as a reward to whoever would smite the city of Kirjathsepher, to whose existence he objected. His nephew duly smote it and was given Achsah's hand. She for her part was given a field and two springs to go with the uncommunicative ass which she already possessed. As for Rahab, she sheltered two of Joshua's spies whom he had sent from Shittim to Jericho and in the subsequent sacking of that city, because of her services, was spared by displaying outside her house a ribbon (not, as one might expect, a light) scarlet in colour. Her part in the book occupies one chapter and Achsah's four

verses, but there is sufficient in both cases to stimulate the reader with a good imagination and probably more than enough for Hollywood. They have produced full-length films with less material. I recall, for example, seeing Gunga Din as a child and discovering much later in life that it was based on a five-stanza poem whose relationship to the film was largely confined to the title. And the son of the outlaw Jesse James, on seeing a film about his father's life, remarked that the only similarity between the actual and the portrayed persons was that they both rode horses. But the poem and the horses were starting-points. So it could be for the development of the sexual interest with the information presented by Joshua about Rahab and Achsah. Rahab, after all, hid the spies under some flax on the roof of her house and visited them there. She also released them at dead of night. As for Achsah, the field sounds very promising. I say no more.

So with the reservation already expressed, I would recommend this book. I do not wish to labour the point about a possible film, but prospective producers would do well to bear in mind that it could beget several profitable sequels, as have such subjects as Tarzan, Dracula, Robin Hood and the Alamo. I do not suppose that my assistance will be required in this respect, but I am happy to conclude my review with a few suggestions. Perhaps: *Son of Og Meets Goliath/ Godzilla/Nora Batty; Road to Ashdodpishgah; Balaam Rides Again; Dr Who Goes to Shittim; Rahab and the Dirty Dozen; Carry on Circumcising.*

Why Charles III can't be an atheist

# THE ROYAL DIVORCE DEMOCRACY NEEDS

by Leslie James

**M**UCH discussion is currently being generated on the subject of the future of the Monarchy.

A Member of Parliament has had the effrontery to say that the Prince of Wales is not fit to be King, and there has been a call by both Tory and Labour Members of Parliament for a comprehensive debate on the whole question of the Monarchy.

One outgoing MP has questioned whether we should continue to defer to "duchesses and princesses," and the terms on which the Prince and Princess of Wales are to be divorced have details of royal extravagancies which have caused many to shake their heads in disbelief and disapproval. Is it fitting that the Princess of Wales should spend £70,000 annually on clothes and £15,000 on shoes, handbags and jewellery when thousands of inner-city folk are unemployed and subsisting on the bread-line?

Amid all this public debate, it is proper to ask: what should be the attitude of Humanists? Is there not a fundamental connection between the Monarchy and religion? Do they not both participate in and support what, for us, is an outdated mythology?

The Coronation ceremony confirms the close association between Crown and Church. It is conducted by the Archbishop of Canterbury assisted by the Archbishop of York. It involves the presentation of the Monarch to the people in the presence of the hereditary officers of state, the taking of the Coronation Oath, anointing by the Archbishop, crowning and enthronement, and homage by the Bishops and Peers.

Subsidiary ceremonies include presentation to the Monarch of the Bible and spurs, oblation of the Sword of State, investing with the Armills (bracelets), the Stole Royal and the Robe Royal, and delivery of the Orb. Then there is the investiture *per Annulum* (ring) and *per Sceptrum* (Sceptre with Cross) and *Baculum* (Rod with Dove), Benediction and Communion. The Coronation Oath includes an undertaking to maintain the Protestant reformed religion and, by implication, to repudiate Roman Catholicism.

The whole proceeding is thus essentially religious and could not be performed if the Monarch were an agnostic or an atheist.

The doctrine of Divine Right, by which it was held that the Monarch was a direct representative of the Deity and therefore owed obedience to the Deity alone, was abandoned in England after the suppression of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. The Monarch's title to the throne today is statutory and hereditary, and any alteration to

the law affecting the succession requires the assent of the Parliaments of the Dominions. Nevertheless, there are words in the Coronation service – as, for example, in the act of crowning, and the Benediction, which imply the authority of the Deity – and the act of anointing is a symbol of the Coronation's sacredness.

For Humanists, therefore, the Coronation is a religious ceremony in which they could not in all honesty participate. For them, the Crown should be divorced from the Church. It should be acknowledged that the Monarch is, like the rest of us, the end-product of genetics and environment, and he or she should have the humility to recognise that their succession was the consequence of genetic and environmental chance. Their religious faith should be a purely private concern of their own and not an obligatory feature of the Constitution.

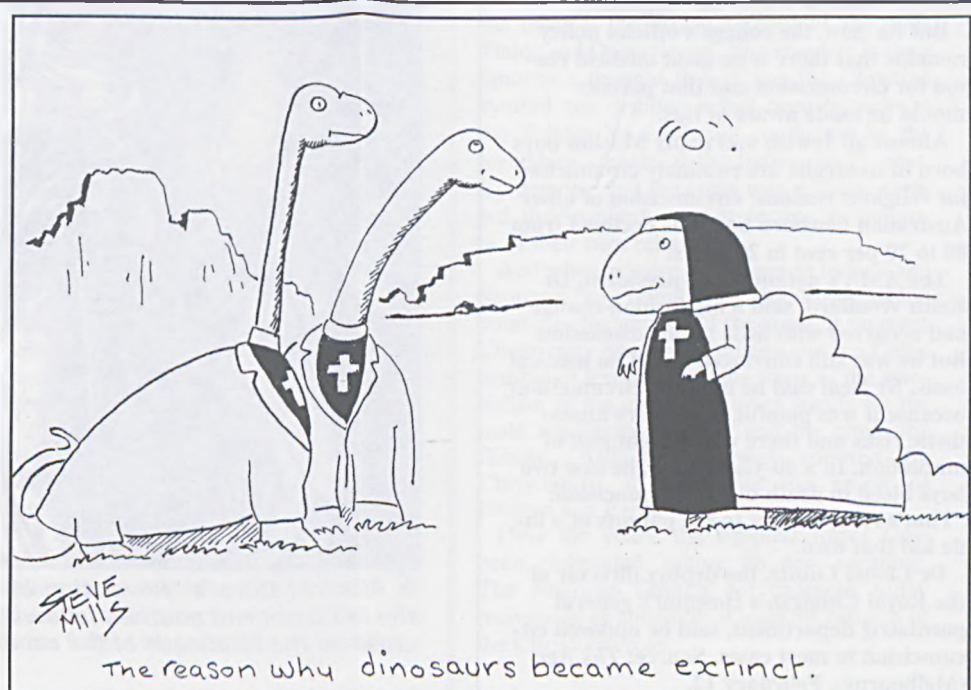
For this reason, Humanists should press for the disestablishment of the Church. If the Monarchy is to be simply a secular form of government, as distinct from a republic, the connection between Church and State is no longer justified. Some Humanists might well prefer a monarchical constitution to a republican one. And there are undoubtedly advantages of a non-political stability and continuity in the monarchical system. But the extent to which one system of government is preferred to another should be

based on strictly political considerations and have no reference to a particular religion, or a particular faith within a given religion, Protestant or Catholic. Crown and government should recognise the principle of freedom of belief or non-belief, and there should be no suggestion that those who hold religious beliefs are any more meritorious than those who do not. Collective worship in schools should be abandoned, as in America, and the National Anthem should be rewritten in secular terms. Religious oaths in court should be replaced with simple affirmation and secular marriage ceremonies accorded the same legal effect as religious ones.

It could be said, of course, that our present system of monarchical government also supports the existing aristocratic establishment in that the hereditary element in the Monarch's title also features in the titles of the hereditary peerage. And the political influence of the hereditary peerage is something on which the present Leader of the Opposition has recently made some controversial comment.

All this may sound somewhat revolutionary, but in a country in which regular church-going is practised by only two per cent of the population and 58 per cent of teenagers are said to be agnostic or atheist, change is inevitable and overdue.

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



## Circumcised boys 'may sue' parents

**CIRCUMCISING** baby boys may violate a United Nations treaty on children's rights, and those who have lost foreskins may be able to sue parents and doctors. Dr Bernard Neal, the College of Paediatrics' representative on the Australian Medical Association's ethics committee, said male circumcision had legal and human rights implications.

In a letter in the latest issue of the *British Medical Journal*, 20 circumcised men claim circumcision harmed them and that it violates the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes the right to make "informed personal decisions."

The Queensland Law Reform Commission found last year that circumcision appeared to have no legal basis because it lacked a medical basis.

"There's a possibility a child may be able to sue doctors and parents," Dr Neal said.

Debate on whether to cut has been raging in Australia since August, when a four-member working party from the College of Paediatrics produced a discussion paper that recommended softening the college's anti-circumcision stance.

The working party was criticised because the draft document suggested the college's policy be re-evaluated in view of new medical literature suggesting that among other problems, the failure to circumcise led to more urinary tract infections. It said the college could no longer be "dogmatic."

But for now, the college's official policy remains that there is no good medical reason for circumcision and that parents should be made aware of this.

Almost all Jewish and many Muslim boys born in Australia are routinely circumcised for religious reasons; circumcision of other Australian newborn boys has declined from 80 to 20 per cent in 20 years.

The AMA's national vice-president, Dr Keith Woollard, said a big fashion change had occurred with little public discussion. But he was still convinced it had no medical basis. Dr Neal said he opposed circumcision because it was painful, there were anaesthetic risks and there was a slight risk of mutilation. In a 40-year career, he saw two boys bleed to death due to circumcision: "That's rare, but not to the parents of a little kid that died."

Dr Lionel Lubitz, the deputy director of the Royal Children's Hospital's general paediatric department, said he opposed circumcision in most cases. Source: *The Age* (Melbourne), February 12.

# The crucifixio

**I**N Karnak, on the Nile, last year, I found brutal evidence of the impact of Christianity on the earlier religions of the area: it manifested itself in a war of symbols.

There, in beautiful Egyptian temples, on doorways and walls covered in hieroglyphs telling of the beliefs and history of an ancient people, I saw crudely chiselled crosses (each like a Maltese cross in a square), evidence that in the early centuries of Christianity these irreplaceable buildings had been taken over as Christian churches.

But there was worse. The religious vandals

had targeted images of the Egyptian falcon-headed sky-god Horus – pitting them with chisel blows, even seeking out the falcon symbol through the lines of hieroglyphs that stretched from ceiling to floor.

A clue to the date of the takeover by the cross-bearing militants in Egypt was provided for me by two Coptic Christian stelae (incised upright slabs, often gravestones) displayed side-by-side in the Luxor Museum of Ancient Egyptian Art. One depicted a stylised fish and the other the Coptic cross in a square. They dated to the 6th-7th Centuries.

The cruciform, of course, was not derived



● Albrecht Dürer's "Revelation of St John," in which a dominant angel carries the tau cross and another, following a pre-Christian ritual, makes the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the candidates.



# Crucifixion that never was

from the "Good Friday" crucifixion legend. It was long after the supposed death of Jesus that the Christ-on-the-Cross story became central to all Christian belief. The early Christians, in introducing the sign of the cross, were fortifying their rituals from the very fount of man's mystic symbols.

It is one thing to create a legend. It is another to expect an historian to date the events described. My sympathy is with the editor of *Dictionary of the Bible* (Brockhampton Press, 1995) who says of Jesus of Nazareth, the central figure of the most widespread religion of the past 2,000 years: "Almost nothing is known of his earthly life" and "it is impossible to put together an orderly account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth from the pages of the Gospels." And, let us be frank, there is no other source of information on the man-god.

Legends give endless scope for scholars to speculate (and sell books). Enoch Powell, not so well known as a Greek scholar, produced the theory last summer (*The Evolution of the Gospel*) that the Roman trial and crucifixion of Jesus was a later story inserted in place of an account of a Jewish execution by stoning.

St Paul is credited with first stating that Jesus was crucified (by the Jews or the Romans?), but he gave no dates or details; these were filled in by the writers of the Gospels, produced from 90-140 AD, and revised and augmented during the following centuries, each edition duly being declared the Word of God.

There are more problems than dates besetting the Christian story of the crucifixion, and curiously enough some of them are clearly depicted in examples of Christian art over the centuries. There is a major mix-up over the cross, for example.

The Romans used two methods of crucifixion: to an upright post or tree and binding to two beams (a *tau* or T-form), the arms twisted back over the cross beam. Victims were bound with cords, not nailed: nailed crucifixion was of Buddhist origin.

Crucifixion was also a mode of execution common among the Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, Carthaginians and Greeks. A role model for the Jesus execution story could have been, for example, the unfortunate Ariarathes of Cappodocia, in central Asia Minor, who rebelled against Perdiccas, who succeeded Alexander the Great as the empire was breaking up. Ariarathes, age 80, was vanquished in battle by Perdiccas, and after being discovered among the prisoners was flayed alive and nailed to a cross with his principal officers.

But Roman victims were bound to a tree or a *tau*. The elaboration of the story in the case of Jesus served other purposes. Prophecies in the Jewish bible (Old Testament) had to be fulfilled and earlier legends invoked. As Macleod Yearsley in his *The Story of the Bible* (Watts, 1936) put it: "An unbiased study of [James George] Frazer's researches into vegetation and sun-gods (often com-

bined in one and the same deity) leads one to recognise in the crucified Jesus an annually slain vegetation-god hung on a sacred tree. Some features were borrowed from the Mithraic cult." Christianity succeeded Mithraism in the Roman Empire after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine.

Other saviour-gods "crucified" – bound to, or hung on, a tree – were the Asian god Krishna and the Egyptian deities Osiris and Horus.

At the initiation of candidates of the Mithras cult was a ritual sacrament of bread and water and baptism with water when the forehead was marked: the sign of the cross being the universal symbol of life and immortality before Christianity began. It was particularly associated with the sun-god.

Mithras, an Aryan deity figuring in the Vedas and in Persia as the sun-god evolving with Zoroastrianism, became a saviour, redeemer and preserver, one of the many pagan christs. As in all religions, a simple cult becomes overlaid with ancient symbolism and ritual. Roman soldiers brought the cult to Britain. In the cellar of a Roman house

by Stewart Valdar

in St Albans (Verulamium) I have seen a secret shrine to the deity.

Before the crucifixion story evolved, the main symbol of the early Christians was the fish. The usual explanation for it is that, in Greek (the *lingua franca* of the Bible-lands at the time), the first letters of the designation ascribed to Jesus – Jesus, Christ, of God, Son, Saviour – spells "fish." A less convoluted explanation could be that Jesus's apostles were "fishers of men" and the Christians were the fish.

Other monograms used by the cult were an X on the upright of P, the first two Greek letters of *Christos*; and the *tau* cross with the Greek letters from the beginning and end of the alphabet on either side ("I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end"). The triangle (representing the Trinity) and the heart, sometimes pierced with an arrow, surmounted by a cross or crowned, are also symbols drawn upon to reinforce the Christian story.

But the simple cross, modified from the *tau*, has proved the most powerful and enduring symbol for the Christians.

The portrayal of the crucifixion by artists over the centuries is instructive. Since the Church has often been the patron – its supreme wealth over the ages is amply demonstrated in its buildings and artistic treasures – the artist has been obliged to follow the sanctioned but manifestly non-historic Christian cross in perhaps most cases. Yet there are notable exceptions. Sometimes the artist has fudged the protruding upright above

the cross beam by disguising it with a conveniently over-hanging branch of a tree or the top frame of the picture or by covering the offending finial with the legendary inscription "King of the Jews."

A notable exception is Albrecht Dürer's "Revelation of St John," in which a dominant angel carries the *tau* cross and another, following a pre-Christian ritual, makes the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the candidates. Others are "The Deposition" crucifixion painting in the St Bartholomew Altarpiece in Munich by a Cologne artist who was active at the end of the 15th and early 16th Centuries (Courtauld Collection) and Stanley Spencer's "Crucifixion," clearly depicting the rough *tau*, made from logs. For his pains, Spencer is described by one critic, reporting on the sale of the work for £463,500 last November, as "The erotic, possibly mad, heretical bigamist." I would add "but honest artist."

David Fontana, in his *The Secret Language of Symbols* (1993), quotes Jung's belief that symbols constitute a universal idiom. Abstract shapes, which arise directly from the unconscious without any allusion to the natural world, are indeed encountered worldwide.

The "Christian" symbol of the cross was a hieroglyph, used more than 7,000 years ago and is associated with the *ankh*, the symbol of life. It is the Chinese character for Earth and it was used by the Assyrians to represent the sky god, Anu.

From the dawn of history, the intersection of the cross has been the point at which Heaven and Earth meet, and the result of their union is mankind, symbolised by the cross itself.

When the Spaniards, led by Hernando Cortés, landed in Mexico in 1519, they found in the native temples numerous depictions of the cross – the Toltec symbol of the gods Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl. The invaders in their ignorance thought that it was the Christian symbol and decided it had been brought to the Toltecs by a mission conducted by the legendary apostle of the Indies, St Thomas. By denying that the cross was a Toltec symbol, the Spaniards were protecting the integrity of their own religion.

And when missionaries came to Ireland and Scotland they found the Celtic cross, which combines the circle and the cross. It predates Christianity by many centuries and is a Celtic symbol of fertility, carrying some of the symbolism of the *ankh*. The cross stands for the male regenerative power and the circle the female. Although it was adopted by Christianity, it represents the union of Heaven and Earth.

Over the years, the simplest forms have been elaborated, taking on new meaning. The Anglican Church, for example, today recognises as authentic at least 50 variants of the Christian cross.

# Man-made misery

by Peter Brearey

**A** DYSFUNCTIONAL man, turned grotesque by a society which not only spurned him from infancy but also gave him the guns with which to take his revenge, finally snapped – and destroyed 15 children and their teacher at Dunblane.

Priests and politicians then fell over themselves to get on television to brand the bloodbath and its perpetrator as *evil*. Perhaps some of them really believed what they sobbed across the ether – in effect, that the Devil was to blame, and not the way in which we order our way of life. Evidently, God had nodded-off.

We might well ask: was this God of theirs also napping as the child Hamilton's family fell to pieces...as he developed sexual problems which a Christianity-based society could think only of reviling and punishing, 30 or 40 years ago? We need to wonder, too, what sort of civilisation permits handguns to anyone, let alone a known "weirdo"? In my book, the mere fact of his applying for a handgun permit should disqualify a person – any person – from being granted one.

The horror at the primary school was entirely man-made, and it is a cop-out, an abdication of social responsibility, to suggest that *evil* had anything to do with it.

But given that there are many in authority who *do* believe in *evil*, I may go on to inquire why certain other recent occurrences – of far greater death-dealing potential than anything in the sick man of Dunblane's most awful nightmares – have yet to attract the description from Front Bench and episcopal palace. For example:

*How are we to describe the practice of feeding the remains of diseased ruminants to other ruminants, which sparked the present BSE scandal? This forcing of meat on herbivores was all too typical of the way in which we abuse animals for profit, for cheap food all round, for scientists' self-aggrandisement.*

*How shall we designate the authorities' continuing backing for beef, and encouragement of its use by young people – despite warnings from reputable scientists that this obscene method of feeding cattle caused bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease), which condition in turn was a likely source of the horrendous Creutzfeld-Jakob Disease in humans?*

*And what shall we call that minority of farmers who, with peasant guile, used up stocks of diseased feed, even after the Government made a partial U-turn and banned meat and bonemeal from cattle-feed – and who, reportedly until 1990, sold BSE animals into the food chain because Government compensation for prophylactic slaughter of beasts was too low?*

Reluctant as I am to give credence to the statement of any politician these days, I do agree with my own MP, David

Hinchliffe, when he says: "People believe the Government have disregarded the issue simply because they are more concerned with the interests of farmers and the meat trade than with the health of the nation."

Admittedly, those interests are vast, and many jobs are at stake: the beef-related industries are said to employ 40,000 people, including 5,500 in slaughter-houses. The beef trade is worth £4,000 million a year, with an annual export trade which amounted to £520 million until the foreigners slammed down the freezer-lid on Mr Major's fingers. Within and without Parliament, farming interests are strong in the Tory Party. The Government must have been under terrific pressure to practise its famous short-termism; to hope that something would turn up and in the meantime let's all go on making money.

But the fact remains that our rulers *did* know of this serious threat (mainly to children, say some scientists) long before they were forced by the prospect of huge publicity around new findings to admit early in March that 10 people under the age of 42 who had contracted a new strain of CJD had probably done so from infected beef. There is a worst-case estimate that up to half-a-million of us have been infected.

Six years ago, the microbiologist Professor Richard Lacey's call for the slaughter of six million cows was based on his researches into BSE. In 1990, Public Health Laboratory scientist Harash Narang warned the Commons agriculture select committee that humans could acquire CJD through eating meat infected with BSE. Dr Stephen Dealer, consultant microbiologist at Burnley General Hospital, who has been working on BSE and CJD since 1988, told officialdom in 1993 that beef was not safe to eat. Even Professor Bernard Tomlinson – no radical – was reported last December to have said that he would not eat beef.

Scientists who dared to speak out on the issue were ridiculed and slandered or sacked. Their warnings, by and large, were ignored.

Of course, the great and the good have ignored and then talked down and then acted upon many other threats to health and life – those posed to all and sundry by asbestos and to children's brains by the lead in petrol spring at once to mind.

What, one wonders, will they make of the latest man-made *evil* to be reported – that of our young people's right to reproduce allegedly being drowned in a sea of synthetic oestrogen which, according to the theory recently expounded on the TV programme *Horizon*, has caused a 25 per cent reduction in sperm count in men aged between 18 and 45 years over the past two decades – and which, if it con-



(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

tinues, could mean that males born in the 1990s will find their sperm count has fallen by *another* 25 per cent. This synthetic hormone is all around us – even in the cans which contain our convenience foods – but it seems the deluge results mainly from our use of a whole raft of pesticides, from DDT on.

It would be bad enough if this perceived scourge threatened to make only *human* males infertile, but, as in the case of BSE, other species are apparently reaping what we sowed (a thought which must be unbearable to members of the organised Secularist movement; we have had animal welfare as a basic principle from our earliest days). Experiments on a wide range of mammals, fish and birds have suggested the horrific effects of exposure to synthetic oestrogen, from malformed genitals to complete sex-reversal. As this truly apocalyptic theory develops, it will be instructive to see if the Government stays true-to-form and moves from a position of outright denial that a problem exists to crisis management.

Or will it learn from the BSE scandal? I doubt it: as late as March 25, the Commons was being told that it was OK for children to eat beef, after all, and that there was "extremely small" risk in the rest of us tucking-in, too. It seemed almost as though the Government was being panicked by the near-collapse of the British beef industry into back-tracking even on its earlier admission of a BSE-CJD link. As we go to press, there is talk that BSE might be affecting sheep and pigs, as well as cattle; the disease could be emerging as a universal side-effect of the already considerable barbarities of intensive farming. What goes around, comes around!

Searching the files for an illustration for the front page of this issue of *The Freethinker*, I decided that the picture of the bear hiding its eyes was most appropriate to Springtime UK, 1996. Is the creature unable to believe what we are doing to the planet and to all the living things on it? Can it not endure the prospect of *Homo sapiens* unbridled? Or in some primitive way is it expressing that shame to which mankind appears to be immune?

Whatever, I think I know just how it feels.

# When Reason took a big step forward

**R**ATIONALISM in India, as elsewhere in the world, is as old as civilisation itself, but no rationalist organisation existed there until the foundation of the Anti-priestcraft Association in 1930. Soon it was realised that the objects of the association were wider than merely opposing priestcraft, and the name was changed to the Rationalist Association of India. Many members of the association were also members of the Rationalist Press Association of London.

It was not long before a monthly journal made its appearance, published under the unambiguous title of *Reason*. Its first Editor, later to become President of the Association, was Dr C L d'Avoine. Dr d'Avoine was born in Mauritius in 1875. After qualifying as a doctor in Paris, he settled in Bombay to practise medicine. Born a Roman Catholic, he said of his transition to Rationalism: "I always thought that in my case nothing remarkable really did happen as it was a case of the gradual awakening of the mind, or in other words, the gradual illumination of the dark recesses of the mind by the light of reason and commonsense." This describes very well the path to reason walked by most Rationalists, and it contrasts sharply with the usual dramatics accompanying religious conversion.

## Offence

Around 1908, Dr d'Avoine started to promote the cause of Rationalism in earnest. He became the local corresponding secretary of the London-based RPA, whose distinguished members included Bertrand Russell, J B S Haldane, Julian Huxley, Joseph McCabe and Harold Laski. He took up the editorship of the *Reason* journal in 1931. In view of his combative style, it was only a matter of time before he fell foul of section 295A of India's Penal Code, which makes it an offence to publish any matter which "outrages the religious feelings of a particular community." The offending article appeared in the September, 1933, issue of *Reason*, under the title "Religion and Morality." This piece consisted of an articulate and lucid exposure of the fallacy that religion of necessity makes for moral behaviour – so well-written and modern, in fact, that it is hard to believe that it is now more than 60 years since its publication. It also included the following passage which was central to the subsequent trial:

"Some religions, Catholicism for instance, actually teach that devotion to ceremonial observances and orthodoxy are immeasurably superior to 'good works'. Catholicism holds that moral offences are trifling matters compared with any deviation from the faith taught

**The Reason Case. Published by the Indian Secular Society, 850/8A Shivajinagar, Pune 411004, India. Send cash with order: RS 20; £2.50; \$US 3.00.**

**Review: TONY AKKERMANS**

*by the Church. The average Catholic would attach more importance to not eating meat on a Friday or not attending Mass on a Sunday than to moral obligations of a serious nature. We see this also with the average Mussalman who is very particular about washing his fingers and toes before saying his prayers, about assuming the correct posture and position, while he would commit the most grievous offence the moment after he has said his prayers."*

On December 18, 1933, a charge of having "deliberately and with malicious intent outraged the religious feelings of the Catholics and Muslims by insulting their religion or religious belief" was laid against Dr d'Avoine by the Chief Presidency Magistrate at Bombay. A sentence of two years awaited him, on conviction. The chief witness for the prosecution was Inspector S Lyon, CID, who had confiscated the injurious material at the offices of the Rationalist Association at the behest of the Bombay Government. The witness was not a Roman Catholic but a member of the Church of England. He made short work of this little local difficulty by stating that his feelings were injured because "all Christians are Catholic"! An early example of ecumenical spirit of which John Gummer would have been proud.

The presiding judge was Sir Hormuzdiar Dastur, and to give the flavour of his lengthy judgement it is necessary to quote him extensively: "A person in the position of the defendant would naturally write articles attacking certain religious and social beliefs, not with the deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of others, but with the view to combat such beliefs and to endeavour to create a scientific and tolerant mentality among the masses, or to try to convert them to his own views...any criticism and particularly a vigorous criticism, of any religious belief was bound to hurt or insult the religious feelings of the classes of people professing that faith. It is also true that an intention of the writer is to be gathered from the actual words used and the effect they may have on the minds of those to whom they are addressed. As however that would stifle all honest attempts to introduce social reforms, legislature has not made a mere intent to insult the religious feelings of any class of His Majesty's subjects, penal under

this section."

The judge then issued a mild rebuke: "The writer is probably wrong in saying that the average Catholic would attach more importance to not eating meat on a Friday or not attending Mass on a Sunday than to moral obligations of a serious nature. But it is a matter of common observation that in almost all religious sects there will be found men who are very particular in the observance of certain rituals and ceremonies and yet who are guilty of grave moral delinquencies." Not much of a criticism – but perhaps a perennial reminder to those of us who have a tendency occasionally to go over the top.

The judge concluded his summing up: "The writer says that it is now generally admitted that religion has lost its hold on the Westerners and probably the thoughtless in India do not realise that it is precisely the preposterous claims of religion and the little influence it has on morality that have drawn most intelligent and thoughtful people out of the churches. The article merely represents the writer's views on Religion and Morality. I do not think that the article falls within section 295A. I therefore acquit the accused."

## Bigotry

The last word on the case should go to the *Bombay Chronicle*, commenting at the time: "There is too much superstition and fanaticism in India and sound rationalist propaganda alone can remedy the evil. One of the good effects of the prosecution of Dr d'Avoine is that it has attracted the sympathetic attention of thousands of rationalists all over the country. They will do well to organise themselves and combat superstition and bigotry by ceaseless rationalist propaganda. We have no doubt that all citizens in Bombay who give serious thought to questions that are being discussed in *Reason* were shocked to learn of Dr d'Avoine's arrest and prosecution and were wondering whether they were living in the twentieth century or the medieval ages in countries where the inquisition flourished."

Sentiments expressed, amazingly, before most of us were born and which would be just as appropriate today.

It is sobering to reflect that the enlightened Judge Dastur, sitting in his pre-war Indian court, would have had no hesitation in throwing out any such case against *The Satanic Verses*, whereas in the India of our time, approaching the end of the 20th Century, the book remains banned. All this serves as a powerful reminder to those of us who have been straining at the wheels of the secular wagon for longer than we care to acknowledge, that the path to secular progress and rationality is a slow and frustrating one, with many instances of one step forward and two steps back.

# You're telling us!

## Humanism and the Sea of Faith

HELEN COX (February) was concerned about the Sea of Faith movement and the use of the word "spiritual" by Humanists.

The British Humanist Association (BHA) has no formal link with the Sea of Faith, although we do have some members in common. The Sea's views seem quite close to those of the earlier Ethical Church, where "God the Reality" was defined as:

*By experience we discover that the supreme blessings of life come to us in their fulness, only when we keep equally near in spirit to the Ideal of truth, beauty and goodness in our souls, to Individual Human Beings in so far as their life and thought embody the ideal, and to the Group-Spirit of some company of persons who are trying to make the world more nearly perfect. These three ultimate sources of spiritual insight and strength, together with all the Tendencies in the universe that favour the actualisation of the ideal, embrace every manifestation and power of goodness, and are therefore the true and living God.*

Stanton Coit's *Principles of the Ethical Church* (ca. 1906) also defines "God indwelling in the British People" as:

*The Power of Righteousness, expressing itself in the moral evolution of the British people and now moving towards a democracy of Social Justice is God immanent in the British nation, and all British subjects should unite in revering and obeying it.*

Sea of Faith leaders such as Don Cupitt and Anthony Freeman also appear to maintain the notion of God as some sort of shorthand. Personally, I can neither understand nor empathise with the movement – although I recognise that religion is a human creation, I do not see why it has to be perpetuated in this nebulous way, when there is a sound naturalistic basis for morality and life contained in modern secular Humanism.

The impetus for the use of "spiritual" by the BHA arose out of Ofsted's new duty to inspect schools' work on "spiritual development." The Education Committee of the BHA did not want this to be the prerogative of the religions, and so pointed out that "spiritual" is used most often in a non-religious sense, not invoking an immortal soul but referring to the human spirit. It is thus in the domain of Humanism.

I acknowledge that, as a word, it is loaded with religious and "New Age" baggage. When I discuss the concept, I try also to break it down into what I perceive as the reality: the spiritual experience is a blend of intellect, emotion and memory.

**ROBERT ASHBY**  
Executive Director  
British Humanist Association

## Our own fault!

THESE days, in retirement, I have a little more time to listen to the radio than hitherto. Hence:

Irrespective of programme, it appears to me that when comparing Christianity with Humanism, the exponents of the latter seem at a disadvantage, due to their own fault, in my opinion.

It appears that their ingrained disposition towards religion, generally speaking, has prevented them from being adequately familiar with the differences now, in theology, and what it may have been at the start of the century.

When dealing with the creation of the world (as one example), although the "Big Bang" may be mentioned, the general atmosphere seems strangely akin to that traditionally related to "Darwinism."

Granted, the natural interpretation of the Bible leans towards a literal or "Fundamentalist" stance when the scriptures are read as they stand. It seems that this is what most Humanists appear to do, and consequently I primarily attack and annoy representatives of the minor sects of Christian Protestantism.

However, while the sincere, minor sects still entertain the conviction that the world was created in 144 hours, their literal "Creationism" is not shared by the mainstream Christian denominations. Through their "Critical" scholarship, the mainstream denominations realise that the early chapters of the Bible are parables and not scientific history. While many aged members of all congregations might be as ill-versed as those of the minor sects, everyone needs to realise that such people as the former Archbishop of York (to name but one) are far from literal. He being very highly qualified in both science and theology, sees no contradiction in the relevant issues.

The clergy and leading lay people of the mainstream Christian denominations realise that it was not until approximately 600 BC that the leading minds behind the Bible realised that the Creation was sacred and must be related to the God of History, whom they worshipped. The sanctity of human nature was recognised earlier.

Consequently, the Bible uses metaphorical, picture language to emphasise the significance of such sanctity, which the science of "Ecology" now endorses, and exposes its apparent gross neglect in the secular society of recent Russia.

Consequently, this recognition by the Jews concerning Nature became the basis on which Elijah fought the Canaanite enthusiasts for "Baal" worship. It also opposed the religious myths of Babylon. After the return of the Jews from their captivity there (56 BC) the first five books of the Bible were written from selected sections of earlier documents. (Book of Jasher-Joshua 10-13, etc.). Then "Creation" was written in contemporary literary style. It became the preface to the very early story about the unique sanctity of human life in comparison to other animal life, and repeated it. Granted, with reference to Ecology, this emphasis has on occasions been somewhat misunderstood, resulting in a tendency to diminish the importance of other parts of nature.

It might well be advantageous if many

Humanists soon read deeply in modern theology (perhaps becoming academically qualified degree level) to learn more about the significance of religious metaphors and other modes of theological thinking, etc. Then they might discuss differently in debates. Now, probably they are seldom contradicted, because so few of the listeners have done what has been advised above.

Here, I cannot blatantly advertise, but if a reader inquires from the Whitaker list of authors, through any large library or bookseller, perhaps they could link my name with some interesting reading.

T W M DARLINGTON  
Cornwall

## Awaiting the proof

ERIC Stockton (February) writes that we experience causation, choice and chance. All three of these concepts however assume that we live in a particular type of universe: one that unfolds in time. The concepts assume that only the present exists and that this present turns into tomorrow. Then, if determinism holds, there can be only one tomorrow – and choice or chance holds, there is more than one possible future.

There is however no physical evidence for the assumption upon which all three rest. The unfolding in time is not a measurable quality of the universe and is not incorporated in the laws of physics. The assumption derives from our perception of temporal unfolding but this is regarded as having no objective significance. The alternative view, the Static Interpretation of Time. This interpretation has it that today and tomorrow both exist, alongside one another and that the former does not become the latter. Thus the future is not made from and does not depend upon the past: it is already there. Einstein, at the end of his life held this view and indeed considered that to believe otherwise was not to take the four-dimensionality of Space-Relativity seriously.

The Static Interpretation is the simpler position in that the additional quality of unfolding is omitted and so it is for those who believe that this quality is real rather than illusory to furnish some proof of it. If Eric Stockton or others believe that there is determinism, chance or choice in the universe then I await that proof.

K BUCKMASTER  
Stockton-on-Tees

## Monarchy & religion

THE scope of *The Freethinker* should be limited to issues of superstition and religion, suggests Nigel Meek (March), and the journal should exclude items on such matters as republicanism, Green issues and so on.

Monarchy reached its modern form by 300 BC in the Near Middle East, and this predates Moses-Judaism 1250BC and Christianity AD30. Monarchy and religion can be considered

# You're telling us!

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modern theories... qualified... the significance... other models... might... probably... few of the... been advised... but if... ker list... books... with some... LINGTO... Cornw...

social inventions or – using Dawkins' meme concept – as mental viruses: the monarchy virus or the religion virus. If we consider the dictator sequence (dictator...hereditary dictator...god-validated hereditary dictator), then the critical step in this context involves god-validation. Deification implies semi-god status and eternal dynastic rule and absolute rule. The Ancient Egyptian people were tolerant of deification. The god-validation step involves the transcendent property function and elevates the ruler beyond the constraints of an earth-bound political system in theory and practice, for the gullible, and is thus the mother of all sales messages and confidence tricks!

The use of the coronation for the British Monarchy implies god-validation. It is amusing to observe a priest of the church crowning a human king, when their real king is supposed to be God. (Sweden abolished coronation in 1872, and later state opening of Parliament by the monarch). From a Judaic-Christian or scientific perspective, all humans are "equivalent" and thus Monarchy and God are both social fictions. To quote Murray Gell-Mann, the North American physicist, superstition is seeing patterns that are not really there – but not seeing patterns that are there.

Another transcendent step involves the use of the royal tools of the trade, or regalia. The regalia sequence involves taking ordinary objects like chair, rod, mace, royal hat, and declaring them to be special ceremonial objects like Throne, Rod, Mace, Crown, which act as magical key objects in assigning monarchy to an individual.

The Ancient Egyptian Menes, 3100 BC, would be familiar with regalia, deification, state religion and the concept of religion and monarchy propping each other up. That is, using analogy, the monarchy virus (physical control) living in symbiosis with the religion virus (mental/social control).

Monarchy and religion are symmetric: monarchy personifies the State and God personifies Reality, hence the Medieval hierarchy: people-Monarch-angels-God. Also the regalia/robes/ritual of monarchy are analogous to the regalia/robes/ritual of priests.

**BOB AWBERY**  
Reading

## For our comfort

I OFTEN look for words of "comfort" in the pages of *The Freethinker*, but they are often difficult to find. May I perhaps redress the balance by asking you to quote the following:

*A smile costs nothing, but gives much.  
It enriches those who receive without making poorer those who gave.  
It takes but a moment but the memory of it sometimes lasts forever.  
None is so rich or mighty that he can get along without it, and none so poor but that he can be made rich by it.  
A smile creates happiness in the home. It fosters goodwill in business and is the coun-*

*tersign of friendship.*

*It brings rest to the weary, cheer to the discouraged, sunshine to the sad and it is nature's best antidote to trouble.*

*Yet, it cannot be bought, begged, borrowed or stolen, for it is something that is of no value to anyone until it is given away.*

*Some people are too tired to give you a smile; give them one of yours as none needs a smile so much as he who has no more to give.*

I was struck by these words when reading a book recently reviewed in the pages of *The Freethinker* – a most excellent book, *The Flight of Peter Fromm*, in which it is said, and I quote: "There is, we all know, not a single reference in the New Testament to Jesus as having smiled or laughed."

Here endeth the lesson!

**P L ATKINS**  
Hornchurch

## Planting the seed

IS IT not time it was realised – or admitted, at least by honest folk – that the teaching of religion to the young is a form of brainwashing of the innocent, and therefore a form of child-abuse?

One has been reading recently that the Muslims of Birmingham and Sheffield are agitating to have their own primary schools. Their own – but paid for by the taxpayer, who is probably a secularist.

Primary schools are where the children are young enough to "get" for keeps – that fecund seven years; planting the seed. Secondary pupils nowadays tend not to be young: they know how to think for themselves, among each other. (street discussions can be most mind-broadening: educative, you might say).

But power-hungry (if not power-mad) religious know how to keep "new-got" youngsters – and older young men, too. A report in a recent *Guardian* told of how the British mother of a newly acquired Greek Orthodox monk was not allowed access to her son: the monastery on Mount Athos was on "holy" ground. Women were forbidden to set foot on it!

The young monk was said to be "cold and indifferent" about the embargo. All the mother wanted, she said, was to hug her youngest son. Human values are so often superior to concocted religious ones.

**NOËL RATCLIFF**  
Derbyshire

## Humanist 'Bible'?

THERE are not many things I envy Christians for. One of them, though, is the Bible. Not the contents, of course, although there are many stories and ideas in the text which are worth considering, whatever your beliefs. But it is the "convenience" of the Bible (and other religions' central books) which I envy.

The smaller ones, at least, can be carried around in the pocket and dipped into at any

moment. And, because of the amount of printed matter, the many writers, and the different topics and viewpoints, you can usually find something both interesting and relevant.

The Bible has many uses: it is a straightforward history/mythology of the Jews and Christianity; a collection of tales (of more or less relevance to the religion); a book of quotations and poems; a collection of wisdom; a guide for the Christian on how he should act...

As an atheist, I have no such handbook to turn to. There are many books, of course, which can substitute. Anthologies can supply plenty of interesting and meaningful stores; quotations can be found in their thousands in the appropriate books; poetry collections; books on philosophy; scientific and historical books to explain why we are here; sociological books to explain what to do...

The problem is immediately apparent. The Bible contains all these things in one volume, while the non-believer has many. And, while the specialist books would cover the subject in greater detail, it is almost inevitable that, when you fancy reading a few poems, you would have the history at hand, and, when wishing to consider philosophy, that book would be at home and you would be carrying the volume of quotations with you.

What is needed, then, is a single volume that contains the essence of all of these books. Not thousands of quotations, as a specialist book would have, but enough meaningful ones to suffice; not a deep treatise on philosophy, but a summary of the main ideas, proofs and disproofs to stimulate your mind. Like the Bible or Mao's Red Book, it would be something that could be carried around and dipped into whenever the occasion arose, as well as a general stimulus to conversation and debate, and even something that could be read to children. There would be a host of suitable uses.

Like the Bible, there could be quotes suitable for a funeral (particularly for the non-religious); there could be scientific evidence to counteract superstitious beliefs such as Creationism and life-after-death.

It is important to realise that the book should not be an anti-religion handbook. Although it is inspired by the idea of "a Bible for atheists," it would not simply contain arguments and evidence against religious belief. The philosophy section will consider the evidence against gods, but also the evidence for them. The scientific section would include evidence to counter Creationism but it would also show the Creationists' arguments as well. Scientists, humanists, atheists, etc., are generally very open-minded people and have no need to be force-fed only one side of an argument. Indeed, most of them would be insulted.

Although I am a firm believer in evolution, I have read much of the Bible and Creationist literature because I consider myself intelligent enough to sift the evidence myself and decide my own mind. In the same way, religion must not be barred from the book simply because it is religion. Jesus's "Golden Rule" may be of questionable value but it is worth considering, if only to define a better one, and other religious leaders have made many reasonable statements which do not need belief to validate them.

There are many decent quotations and

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proverbs in the Bible, and we must be careful not to throw out the baby when we ditch the religious bathwater. The parable of the good Samaritan is a pleasant enough story (although there are better) and can easily be viewed with no religious overtones at all.

My dream then is that someone would gather all of these guides to life and assemble them into an anthology for the humanist, an Anthology maybe. It would contain:

Poetry and proverbs applicable to a non-believer (not just relating to religion but life in general such as "Rules are for the obedience of fools and the guidance of wise men"). Quotations (as above). Arguments for and against the existence of God/gods (and opposing views). Detailed chapters on philosophy, philosophers and their books/views. Biographies and stories of Humanists and scientists who worked for the rational view (for example, Darwin's struggle against his religious upbringing when faced with the evidence of evolution). Creationist arguments and evolutionary evidence (useful for when one gets the knock on the door). Evidence for and against subjects of interest to Humanists (abortion, capital punishment, etc.) so that we can make up our own minds logically and have the facts available when necessary to support our views). Science and the scientific method. Items relevant to Humanist ceremonies (such as births and funerals). Possibly information on other subjects where rationality and common sense are needed (the paranormal, superstition, unexplained mysteries). Relevant quotations from the Bible, Koran and so on (for example, Luke 14:26) for the next time a Christian says that the Bible is such a wonderful book. Speeches of inspiration: for example, Martin Luther King's "I have a dream"? A bibliography for further reading (mainly referring to established books rather than new titles). A comprehensive index (which the Bible hasn't got!).

Imagine the pleasure of having all this in one handy volume, carried in the pocket and ready to dip into at a moment's notice. Imagine being instantly ready with a counter when anyone claims that the Ontological Argument proves God's existence. Imagine the pleasure in putting a volume next to the Gideon Bible in your hotel room.

Assembling such a book would be a formidable task, but with so many knowledgeable Humanists around who hopefully would supply accurate material for little cost, it might be possible to produce a comprehensive and relatively cheap volume. Until then, I'll just have to continue to type extracts that interest me into my Macintosh and wait until they produce a computer small enough to fit into the pocket.

**PAUL THOMPSON**  
Reading

## Healing thyself

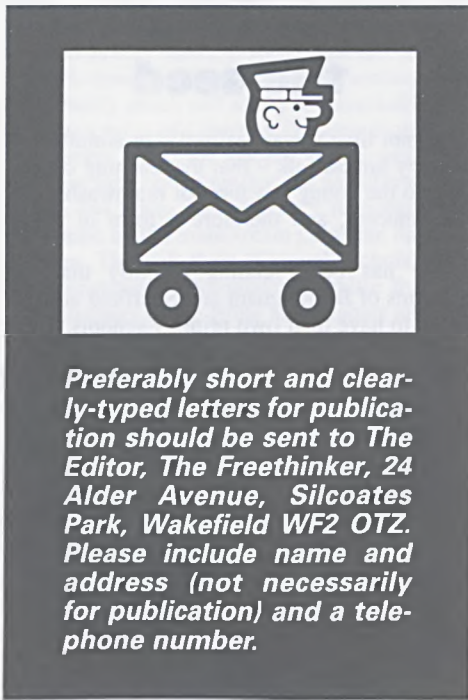
YOU quote Dr James Le Fanu's comments about "the hidden and mysterious ways in which the body sustains and heals itself," and the fact that it is incorrect or bad science to give so much credit to alternative health practices

(Up Front, January).

Ronald J Glasser MD wrote a book entitled *The Body is the Hero*, in which he explains in lay terms ("even your mother could understand it," someone said!) how the human body works and its amazing regenerative ability; in particular he explains the immune system. He also describes the saga of medical discoveries, and how they have usually been fought by the medical profession!

The last words of the book are: "The task of the physician today is what it has always been, to help the body do what it has learned so well to do on its own during its unending struggle for survival - to heal itself. To accomplish this we must remember what doctors have always had to remember, to 'look and observe, go back to the bedside, be suspicious of eloquence, ignore ceremony.' *It is the body, not medicine, that is the hero.*" (My emphasis.)

On an allied subject, euthanasia, it is interesting to note that far fewer British physicians than American physicians are in favour of euthana-



**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.**

sia, although - like the Americans - they admit to helping along certain cases. To me this means simply that British physicians are more authoritarian and more jealous of their power: that is, they believe in euthanasia but only if they play god! One finds similar attitudes in respect to abortion rights.

**HELEN COX**  
Porlock

## Nearer the mark?

IN YOUR March issue Up Front, you quote Nicolas Walter's reply to a typical Paul Johnson fantasy in which Johnson had alleged that "the number of atheists has declined since the heyday of organised atheism in the 1880s." Nicolas Walter said that the organised Humanist movement today is about the same size as the Secularist movement a century ago and he went on to claim that the movement now includes

many more leading members of society.

I do not believe that the latter part of claim is true. I believe that most atheists agnostics among academics, journalists and on regard the organised Humanist movement a loose confederation of minority hobby organisations which has no significant role in temporary life.

If Johnson had used the phrase "the influence of organised atheism" instead of number of atheists" he would have been much nearer mark; indeed it is the absence of an effective national Humanist organisation which allows religious apologists to play down the importance of atheism in contemporary society.

**JOHN CLUNE**  
Aberdeen

## Unauthorised version

*SEND him Victorious, One egg between four of us, Thank Christ there're no more o'us, Round the salt!*

The above lines came to mind when I read Harold Hillman's March article on the National Anthem. They are of significance to me because, while serving in the RAF during World War II, I was confined to barracks for one month for being caught singing them during the playing of the National Anthem at the end of an officers' ball celebrating the King's birthday!

Thanks for continuing to send me *The Freethinker*, which, of course, I pass on, usually to my local councillor. I enclose £5 towards the funds.

**JOHN F SIMPSON**  
Glasgow

## Who will join him?

I RECENTLY renewed my subscription to *Freethinker* after a break of some 12 months was difficult to recall why I had let my subscription lapse, but with the first couple issues it came flooding back.

I think the only thing we have in common is Atheism. I have never been fox hunting and support all field sports and have spent many happy years with greyhounds and fishing-rod.

I vote Conservative. I believe vivisection non-cosmetic research should be left in the hands of experts and with a monitoring system that is easily obtainable in report form.

I think *The Freethinker* is sexist: why publish a photograph of a Lesbian affirmation ceremony in your January issue, or is every sex act happening in line for a photograph and write up?

It strikes me that Gay and Lesbian Humanists would be better just being Humanists and getting on with their lives without all the flag-waving...unless, that is, I can manage to form a branch of the "North of England Conservative Field Sports, Vivisectionist, Anti-Sexist, Meat Eating, I Think There Is A Case For The Death Penalty Atheists Association." Will I be an only member?

**IAN FORBES**  
Chesham

# THE DEAD HAVE RIGHTS, TOO!

by Denis Cobell

the National Secular Society, with my assistance, persuaded a crematorium in Lewisham, but only after several years of protest, to install a moveable cross.

The *Charter* supports the right of everyone to have their wishes respected when they die, and proposes the appointment of a Funeral Guardian for this purpose. The Guardian need not be a family member, but someone appointed, who may be paid. My only query about the *Charter* arises here: will this not further increase funeral costs, which are already of great concern?

The *Charter* goes on to hope that survivors of the deceased will be supported and helped in the future. This includes proper ceremonies and celebrations for the dead, which need careful planning. Humanist ceremonies already take this into account; they are a far cry from the routine offered by many clergy. I have often been told by mourners that, after arriving late for a religious funeral and having missed hearing the name of the dead person, they realised they could have been attending just any funeral!

The final right demanded by the *Charter* is

for care of graves and memorials in cemeteries. We are all aware of the vandalised state of many cemeteries, and when Tony Walters spoke at the RSA he reminded his audience that in many other countries this state of affairs is avoided by the re-use of graves after a suitable time has elapsed.

The National Funerals College was founded by Lord Young of Dartington, who has spoken appreciatively of the work done under the Humanist banner for promoting ceremonies to mark the rites of passage of non-religious people.

The Rev Dr Peter Jupp, Director of the College, also readily accepted the need for diversity in funeral ceremonies when I took the opportunity to speak to him recently.

Readers who wish to read this document themselves – and to send their comments – may obtain it from Peter Jupp by sending £5 to him at the National Funerals College, Braddan House, High Street, Duddington, Stamford, Lincolnshire PE9 3QE, making their cheque payable to The Mutual Aid Centre.

When the input sought has been obtained, there is to be a national conference this autumn which will make recommendations to the Government and other groups involved with funerals.

## Not-so-holy spirit at Butcher's chapel

A BUILDING in the centre of Brighton's historic Lanes area has been a powerhouse of militant Christianity for more than three centuries. Union Chapel was erected in 1683 and reconstructed in 1825. For a time it served as an Elim Four Square Baptist Tabernacle. Latterly its congregation had dwindled to a small gathering of happy clappy enthusiasts.

A stone tablet affixed to the exterior is inscribed "to the glory of God and in loving memory of Henry Varley, the great evangelist who laboured for over 50 years in the Lord's vineyard." It goes on to recount how, in

1868, "he gave up business to devote his whole time to evangelistic work."

Varley's name is familiar to historians of the Secularist movement. The "business" he gave up was that of livestock dealer and butcher. But it was because truth and reputation suffered at his hands that he was known to freethinkers as Butcher Varley.

Together with Sir Henry Tyler, an avowed enemy of freethought and Tory MP for Harwich, Varley led a campaign to prevent Charles Bradlaugh sitting in the Commons as Liberal Member for Northampton. He addressed a letter to the town's electors, advising them to replace Bradlaugh as Liberal candidate or else vote Conservative.

When Varley's advice was ignored by Northampton, Bradlaugh's enemies tried another tack. A conviction for blasphemy

would have disqualified him from being a Member of Parliament. Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* was too circumspect, so it was decided to get him through the aggressively anti-Christian *Freethinker*, which G W Foote had started in 1881.

Although Bradlaugh supported Foote in this venture – their publishing companies shared premises – that was the limit of his connection with *The Freethinker*. So when the famous "blasphemy" issue of the journal resulted in the trial and imprisonment of Foote (12 months), W J Ramsey, company manager (nine months) and William Kemp, printer (three months), the prime target of Tyler's and

Varley's malevolence was in the clear.

Varley continued his evangelistic work, combining it with speeches against "social evils" like birth control. Shortly before his death on March 30, 1912, he preached three last sermons in Union Chapel hall.

The building has recently undergone changes that would horrify Butcher Varley and other preachers who thundered fire and brimstone sermons from its pulpit. There is live music in the evening, including Sunday, though the Lord's Day singalong does not feature Moody and Sankey favourites. Communion wine has been replaced by more stimulating liquids.

Yes, Union Chapel has been converted into a magnificent public house – the aptly named Font and Firkin. Cheers!

by Bill McIlroy

# What's On...What's On...What's On...

**Birmingham Humanist Group:** Information: Tova Jones on 0120 4544692.

**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, May 5, 5.30 for 6pm: Speaker from SOS – Secular Organisation for Sobriety.

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

**Bromley Humanists:** Information: D Elvin, 241 Pickhurst Rise, West Wickham, Kent; 0181 777 1680.

**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.

**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 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, April 18, 7.30pm: Barbara Smoker: *Godless Morality*.

**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 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 (Library, 1st floor). April 12: Nettie Pollard: *Liberty (NCCL) and its Contribution to the Gay Rights Campaign*.

**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, May 7, 8pm: Gordon Reid: *The Work of the Essex Wildlife Trust*.

**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. Conference 1996 will take place on April 20 at the Caledonian University, Glasgow.

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Hugh H Bowman, 25 Riverside Park, Glasgow G44 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 on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. April AGM and Supper. Tuesday, May 14: John Mellor, Leeds University: *The Family Today – Robust or Rotten?* Tuesday, October 8: Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies, Bradford University: *The Causes of Conflict*.

**Leicester Secular Society:** Information: Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622258. Sunday meetings at 6.30pm.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Unitarian Meeting House, Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, April 8pm: Ashley Hills: *Paradox in Voltaire*.

**Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: 0161 681 7600. Meetings at St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North, near Apollo Theatre. Friday, April 12, 7.30pm: Discussion "Becoming a Humanist." May 10: The Sea of Faith Movement. June 14: Kate Brown, of Manchester University: *Religion and Social Work*. July 12: Robert Ashby, Executive Director, British Humanist Association.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Information: Brian Snood 01603 455101. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, April 18, 7.30pm: Charter 88. May 16: AGM. June 20: Trevor Claxton, Minister, Norwich Spiritualist Church: *Spiritualism*. July 18: CRUSE Bereavement Care.

**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. Third Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street) Sheffield. Wednesday, April 3, 8pm: Carl Pinel: *Roots of Oppression*. Wednesday, May 1, 8pm: Dave Godin: *The Politics of Sex*.

**South Place Ethical Society:** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 0171 831 7723). 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:** Information: 0181 642 4570. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton.

**Teesside Humanist Group:** Information: J Cole on 01642 559418 or R Wood on 01740 650861.

**Tyneside Humanist Group:** Third Thursday of each month (except August), 6.45pm in the Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

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

**Worthing Humanist Group:** Information: Mike Sargent 01903 239823 or Frank Pidgeon on 01903 263867. Methodist House, North Street, Worthing. Sunday, April 28, 5.30pm: Eamon Fitzgerald: *Science and Religion*.

**Humanist Anthology:** Margaret Knight's magnificent work, extensively revised by Jim Herrick, with a preface by Edward Blighen. £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 for your public library.

**Foundations of Modern Humanism:** William McIlroy pamphlet is now reprinted. Price: £1 plus 25p p&p; but 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 please order a copy for your local public library.

## 'BERTIE'

**A dramatisation of the life of Bertrand Russell, performed by Trevor Banks**

**Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate, Leicester, on Sunday, April 14, at 6.30pm**

**A LEICESTER SECULAR SOCIETY EVENT**