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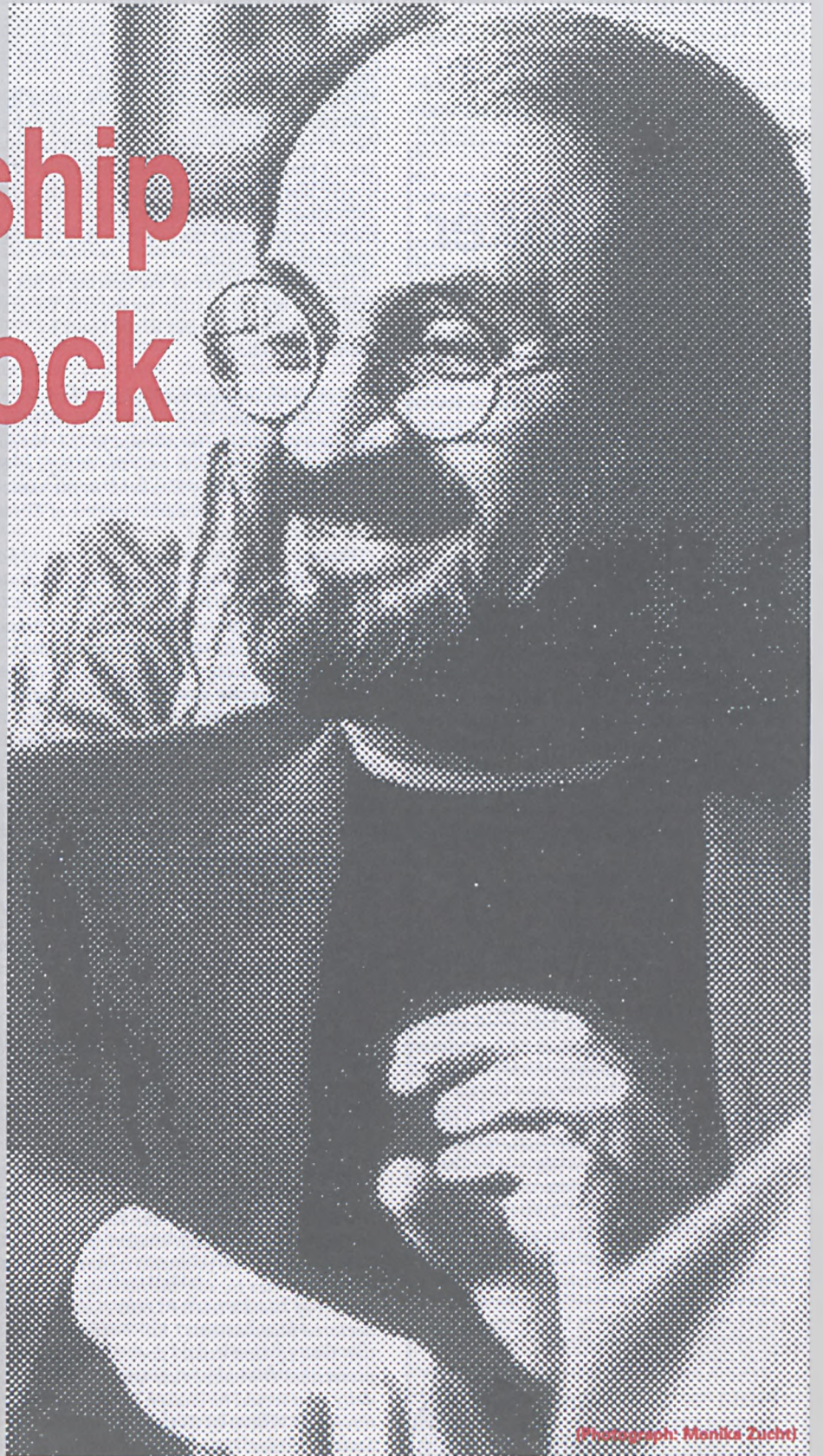
Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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Censorship in the dock



(Photograph: Manika Zucht)

...while it is surely proper that our laws should protect people's right to believe in whatever they may choose, it is just as surely wrong to privilege the beliefs themselves, by protecting them against dissent, critique, satire and disbelief. Any society that erects such barriers, such intellectual no-go areas, around particular ideologies, no matter how well-liked, even respected, those ideologies may be, has taken the first step towards giving up its freedom, not only of expression, but of thought. - Salman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses*. See Page 2.

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Up Front

'Intellectual no-go areas' under fire

THE blasphemy law has raised its muddled head again. On March 27 the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg at last heard the appeal by Nigel Wingrove, the maker of *Visions of Ecstasy*. Back in 1989 this video was refused a certificate by the British Board of Film Classification on the ground that

it might be found blasphemous, and this decision was upheld by the Video Appeals Committee.

The new hearing revived media interest in this ludicrous act of censorship, and although most of the comment on the history and content of the law was inaccurate, some of the coverage of its effect was interesting and revived the question of its abolition, which was the main point of the argument in the court.

The judgement will probably not be given until late summer and, even if it finds that the refusal of a licence infringed Nigel Wingrove's freedom of expression under the European Convention, it will probably avoid direct confrontation with the English common law of blasphemy. The double danger is of course that any judgement may persuade the authorities not to abolish but either to formalise or to extend the law covering critical comment on religion.

The detailed record of the hearing is not yet available, but meanwhile we publish the text of an eloquent statement to the court by Salman Rushdie:

In 1989 an attempt was made to ban my novel The Satanic Verses under British blasphemy legislation. The attempt failed, because that legislation protects only the beliefs of the established Church of England. In the same year, distribution of the film Visions of Ecstasy was indeed prohibited.

Various groups, including my novel's opponents and the Commission for Racial Equality, have since argued, in the name of fairness, that British blasphemy laws should be broadened to include all religions. I would like to join with such groups in deploring the imbalance of the present British situation, but to argue strongly that the interest of justice would be better served by abolishing the offence of blasphemy altogether.

Freedom of religious belief is as important a concept as freedom of speech, which is no doubt why the two are jointly protected in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. But while it is surely proper that our laws should protect people's right to believe in whatever they may choose, it is just as surely wrong to privilege the beliefs themselves, by protecting them against dissent, critique, satire and disbelief. Any society that erects such barriers, such intellectual no-go areas, around particular ideologies, no matter how well-liked, even respected, those ideologies may be, has taken the first step towards giving up its freedom, not only of expression, but of thought.

If the blasphemy law were to be extended, insuperable problems of definition would also arise. Would, for example, cults like David Koresh's Waco group, or the Japanese Aum sect, be able to demand classification as religions, and thus be protected against criticism? Would ripostes to, say, the hate-speech of the Nation of Islam's leader Louis Farrakhan be declared blasphemous? Far better to agree that God (if God exists) does not require legal protection. It would be an unusually insecure deity who would be shaken on the divine throne by Visions of Ecstasy, or indeed The Satanic Verses. If God does not exist, of

course, there is even less reason for continuing to call blasphemy a crime.

The modern European concept of freedom of expression was developed, by the intellectuals of the 18th century Enlightenment, in a struggle, not against the State, but against the Church. Since then, Europe has resisted the idea of Inquisitions, and has agreed that religious orthodoxies must not impose limits on what we think and say.

It is worth recalling that the trials of Galileo, Socrates and Jesus Christ were all blasphemy trials, and a guilty verdict was returned in each case. Yet one could argue that those "blasphemies" laid the foundation for European science, philosophy and religion. Visions of Ecstasy, a poor film, may not seem to merit the invocation, in its defence, of such mighty names. But the principle involved is as important as ever. The concept of blasphemy has always been a weapon by which the orthodox have sought to silence the unorthodox. The legal offence of blasphemy has long been an anachronism. I urge the Court to declare the British blasphemy law incompatible with European ideas of free expression: SALMAN RUSHDIE

WEARING his Committee Against Blasphemy Law hat, Nicolas Walter has been busily firing off letters to editors, correcting whole raft of factual errors about blasphemy which have appeared in the broadsheets.

We thought his missive to *The Times* particularly useful: "The letter from the Archbishop of York (March 29) contributes its own share of misinformation to the ill-informed community on the current blasphemy case before the European Court.

"The English (not British) law of blasphemy is surely more unsatisfactory than he admits: it is anachronistic, in that it is not 'on the statute book' but consists of judge-made common law, based not on present issues but on precedents going back more than three centuries. It is discriminatory, in that it covers only the religion of the Church of England, and not other forms of Christianity or other religions. It is oppressive, even if it no longer 'constitutes a significant curtailment of freedom of expression', in that it represents a constant threat to free comment on religion, as in the present case. It is illogical, in that it embodies 'a general presumption in our society that there are things which are sacred', but assumes that they need to be protected through the criminal law.

"The abolition of the law would not weaken 'the spiritual dimension in our sense of national identity', but would assume that this is now strong enough to stand on its own. The extension of the law to other religions would alter the terms of discrimination in favour of all supernatural beliefs and against all other beliefs. And the introduction of a law against incitement to religious hatred would open the field to sectarian fanatics of all kinds.

"It is time that we grew up, and joined the many mature countries which have no further need for legal protection for religious any more than for other controversial ideas or for religious any more than for other sensitive feelings.

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Religious zeal sparks segregation in schools

by Keith Porteous Wood

WITH the full knowledge – and apparent approval – of the Secretary of State for Education,

the first segregated RE classes have recently started in a state school. An imam is teaching Muslims while the few non-Muslims at the school are receiving conventional multi-faith lessons. It is likely that this will be the start of a trend, and perhaps not only for Muslims.

Gillian Shephard, together with the local authority, agreed in February to permit segregated Islamic religious teaching at Birchfield Community School, near Aston, Birmingham, after Muslims boycotted religious education. The lessons are being permitted by the Government "on condition that Christianity remains part of the syllabus" broadly as required by the 1988 Education Reform Act.

MP Lady Olga Maitland has called for inspectors to visit Birchfield to establish the facts. Some local Muslims say that the lessons are legal despite being 100 per cent Islamic. They appear to be relying on Section 26 (4) of the 1944 Act, as amended. It permits pupils withdrawn from normal RE classes to receive RE on school premises "in accordance with the tenets of a particular religious denomination" if the parents desire them to receive, *provided costs do not come from public funds*. Until now this Section has been predominantly used for small numbers of children being withdrawn because they belong to minority sects.

Around 1,500 Muslim pupils have already been withdrawn in Batley and a further 600 are expected in Dewsbury, in a dispute with the Government about the Education Act. They object to the inclusion in RE lessons of some Christian aspects which they find "blasphemous." If segregated Muslim RE goes ahead, the Association of Christian Teachers has already suggested that it will be pressing to replace the despised "multi-faith" lessons with solely Christian ones. I expect Birchfield to become a model that will be widely replicated.

The force of opinion is moving inexorably in favour of segregation. Even if she can find a legal way of doing so, there seems little motivation for Gillian Shephard refusing to permit attempts to introduce segregated religious education. In the unlikely event she were successful in preventing segregated RE, it could spawn the establishment of many more schools outside the state sector exclusively for Muslims, and perhaps, born-again "New Christians." Many believe that such new schools, born out of frustration, would be likely to be much more fundamentalist in approach than those in the state sector. Even more disturbingly, many pupils in these segregated schools would be subjected to uninterrupted religious indoctrination at both school and home. Inevitably, these pupils' integration into the wider community would be impeded.

Meanwhile, outside the State sector, a new pressure group representing mainly "New

Christian" and Muslim schools – the Third Sector Schools Alliance (3SSA) – has been set up to push for state funding for its members. The Alliance has already begun a sophisticated campaign to obtain such funding by contacting every bishop in the House of Lords and sending all MPs literature outlining its aims. It has also been on national television.

This Alliance has also included under its umbrella less contentious educational philosophies, such as Steiner Schools and "Human Scale Education." (Steiner schools have a low-key, non-denominational, non-hierarchical religious approach that aims to "create responsible citizens and give greater emphasis to pupils' artistic development," while Human Scale Education promotes the virtues of small schools.) These groups lend more legitimacy to 3SSA and make its campaigning easier.

3SSA's clarion call is that its member schools would provide parents with more "choice." At the same time, the Alliance distances itself from extreme fundamentalists, claiming, for instance, that "Schools that have been started for Muslim girls are not seedbeds of reaction. The girls have as role-models well-educated, successful Muslim women. In fact, such schools are likely to be seen as a threat by narrow fundamentalists." The Alliance's criteria for membership require that participating schools should be open to all, irrespective of creed (but do not say "or none") and that they will not attempt to convert pupils to a particular religion.

But it states that "all the major faiths are committed to the pursuit of truth." It adds that "Even those [schools] that are committed to the Creationist explanation understand the need to

teach the *hypothesis of evolution as well*" (my italics). It is revealing that evolution is described as a hypothesis and the creation as an explanation. Also, "understanding the need" to teach evolution is not necessarily a commitment to do it.

Meanwhile, parents seem largely happy with the Government-funded church schools that are educating several million pupils. Mounting a campaign for the withdrawal of funding for these schools would, I believe, be difficult – and unless we are careful, it could even be counter-productive.

The Humanist Forum (the small working group which represents all the main UK Humanist organisations) is to convene a special meeting to debate these issues in more depth. Particular attention will be paid to quotas and enforcing Ofsted's policing on Creationism, women's roles, sex education and art. We should use all means in our power to ensure that school inspection procedures are effective (for example, unannounced visits) and that they root out all RE, as opposed to RE.

In the longer term, there may be opportunities to press for inclusion in the compulsory National Curriculum of moral and philosophical issues. But with no Conservative MP prepared to identify as Humanist and Tony Blair reportedly carrying a Bible everywhere – as well as a torch for Christian Socialism – it is unlikely to happen this millennium.

There seems scant comfort in all this for those opposed to religious teaching in schools, but a report published in April by the Association of Christian Teachers suggests that the majority of pupils are indifferent or antagonistic to RE, their parents typically telling them that RE is "rubbish." It suggests that only one-in-20 classes are "responsive and rewarding to teach" and that most RE lessons are mayhem.

NOW ANGLICAN YOUNGSTERS VOTE WITH THEIR FEET...

YOUTH membership in the Church of England has dropped by more than a third in seven years, according to a report from the Church's Board of Education.

"Snapshot" surveys conducted on the same Sundays in 1987 and this year showed attendance at Sunday worship by young people aged 14-17 to have fallen by nearly 35 per cent to around 60,739. Attendance among 18 to 21-year-olds fell by 34.1 per cent to just under 40,000.

The report comes in the wake of last month's membership returns for the Methodist Church, which showed a rate of decline among young people under 26 of nearly 20 per cent over three years.

Church of England-based uniformed youth organisations and youth clubs and

groups have also gone into decline. The number of 18 to 20-year-olds linked to Anglican youth clubs has fallen by more than 40 per cent.

The Chairman of the working party, the Rt Rev Ian Harland, Bishop of Carlisle, described the picture as "bleak" and called on the Church and young people to find common ground.

The working party urges more resources to be pledged for youth work and says young people must be taken more seriously in the life of the Church.

It calls for more decentralising of power to allow young people a greater role in decision-making and says traditional church services and styles of worship risk excluding young people

Source: *Methodist Recorder*, April 18.



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Nine days' wonder?

MONARCHISTS are hoping that the death of the Queen Mother can be used to reverse the republican leanings of the British public. But if, as is rumoured, the period of official mourning is to be extended over nine days, it could well put paid to any chance of a royal popularity recovery.

John Naughton, who broke the news of this so-called Operation Lion in *The Observer* (March 31), offers two possible reasons for the nutty idea: one, the people responsible have lost their grip on reality; two, they aim to exploit the people's affection and sympathy in the hope that "it will rub off on an institution which is looking increasingly threadbare."

Both could well be true, and the second reason only confirms the first.

Merciless Sisters and...

I REMEMBER, years ago, seeing the religious exercise book of a girl at a convent school, and being appalled at the graphic depictions of the devil and hell fire. That was mental cruelty to children, as I reported in *The Freethinker* at the time.

Guardian writer Peter Lennon tells now (March 20) of the physical cruelty inflicted on Irish children at the Dublin orphanage of Goldenbridge, run by the Sisters of Mercy, under Sister Xaviera, now 76, who retired two years ago.

Children were "regularly, ritually beaten with the legs of chairs"; some eight-year-olds "were whipped with rosary beads"; "infants strapped to potties were beaten if they did not give quick results"; and "Children who misbehaved – or were 'bold' – were trussed-up like chickens and hung upside down on high oak doors, so that every time the door opened their heads would bump on the floor.". One girl was often locked in a spin-dryer as punishment.

That is only part of the barbarous story. The father of an 11-month-old baby which died while in temporary care at Goldenbridge "found deep holes in the inside of both knees, the kind of wound that could be caused by a hot poker." The cause of death was recorded as "acute dysentery."

As Peter Lennon says, "a terrible logic ruled the nuns' behaviour." They serve a God who showers the "good" with favours "promising a Ziegfeld Follies heaven for all eternity." But the same God is merciless to the sinners, who would burn in hell for eternity. And the merciless Sisters of Mercy gave the "sinner" (the orphan) a foretaste of that hell – on earth.

...their Day of Judgment

INDEPENDENT film-maker Louis Lentin, who exposed some of the horrors of Goldenbridge in a documentary, *Dear Daughter*, announced at a Dublin Film Festival seminar that he intends to make a sequel, examining the lives of women after they left the orphanage.

One such, Kathleen O'Neill, who now lives in London, recalls working for hours after lessons making 60 rosary beads a day, using sharp wire and pliers, and not being allowed to stop, even when the wire bit into her bleeding fingers. She was glad to see that "the nuns' day of judgment" had come.

Send not to know...

DR KALIM SIDDIQUI, leader of Britain's Muslim Parliament, recently insisted that the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie remained "an order that must be carried out as and when it becomes possible to do so" (*The Guardian* April 1).

Opening the same paper on April 19, I read that Dr Siddiqui himself had died of a heart attack; and while I am as sympathetic as most, I cannot shed any tears for a man who was guilty of incitement to murder.

With unconscious irony, one of Dr Siddiqui's colleagues commented: "It was unfortunate that he got tied up in the Rushdie affair which led him down a dead end."

Holy egg-plants!

FROM Muslim tragedy to Muslim farce. "Hundreds of devout Muslims have been turning up at a terrace house in Leicester to gaze in awe at a miraculous object." So wrote Bill McIlroy in these pages six years ago. After removing their shoes as a mark of respect, the faithful were ushered in to Mr and Mrs Fassam's front-room to behold an aubergine which, when sliced by the good lady of the house, revealed seeds arranged in the Arabic inscription, *Yah-Allah*, "Allah is everywhere."

Farical history has now repeated itself, this time in Bolton where, we read in the *Sheffield Star* (March 13), Salim and Ruksana Patel had a similar revelation. Their sliced aubergine is now an object of veneration at the local Masjide-Gosia mosque.

Military cross!

SHOULD a Chaplain to the Forces betray a confidence? Yes, says the Ministry of Defence;

"especially on the subject of homosexuality, is obliged to report to his commanding officer." No, say the Anglican and Roman Catholic Bishops to the Armed Forces. John Kirkham and Francis Walmsley.

Confidentiality is "paramount" for the former; "utterly inviolable" for the latter.

Former army major the Rev Niall Johnston, now a senior chaplain to the National Health Service, agrees with the Bishops. But some commanding officers put strong pressure on chaplains "to reveal information relating to soldiers' sexual orientation," he told the House of Commons Select Committee reviewing the Armed Forces Bill.

Homosexuality should not have to be a matter of secrecy, anyway, but many personnel in the Falklands and Gulf conflicts, as in earlier wars, unburdened themselves to chaplains on the understanding that what they said would go no further (*Daily Telegraph*, March 20).

If the chaplains had followed the MoD line those gay soldiers, sailors and airmen who were lucky enough to come back alive could well have faced dismissal.

Waffler – by Appointment?

BRITAIN'S Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, backed the Prince of Wales' appeal "to consider the spiritual dimensions of renewal ahead of the millennium."

"The new century heralds an era of immense and destabilising change," he said, in a lecture at Manchester Business School (*The Guardian* March 21), and "it becomes ever more important to draw a moral map in the midst of what seems like chaos..." He proposes a task force

of religious leaders – or cartographers? – teachers, judges and leaders of voluntary organisations set up (variously) to revitalise morality in Britain, to articulate and mobilise (our) moral reserves, to recharge civil society.

How much more moralistic waffle do we have to take from rabbis, royals and clerics? What needs changing is our "competitive, scrambling, selfish system," as Henry Hetherington termed it 150 years ago.

Movie queen?

HOMOSEXUALITY again. *Modern People News*, which is based in Illinois, plans to make a film depicting Jesus Christ as gay, with the role of Mary Magdalene played by a French prostitute.

Captain Tony Martin of the Salvation Army in Watford, who seems to be leading the campaign against it – at least in Watford – thinks that "the scriptures have been pulled apart and people have suggested the gospel is a *fairytale*."

Well,well.

H J Blackham and the upshot of history

ORIGINALLY entitled *The Upshot of History, The Future of Our Past* is H J Blackham's comprehensive thematic essay, completed in his 92nd year. It is the synthesis of a lifetime spent immersed in Humanist philosophy and action. The enigmatic quality of the new title encapsulates the nature of the challenges of today. We have the responsibility to learn from the legacy of the past to guide us in the future of humanity.

Following the break-up of the Bronze Age, the peoples of pagan Greece, Yahweh's Judea and Christian Rome each made a claim to universality as an outcome of many generations of experience and development. Their examples have exerted a formative influence on present-day Europe.

These three universalities Blackham labels *Hellas*, or Greece, "the school of the world"; *Romanitas*, Rome, the masters of government. Rome conquered Greece, but Greek culture had captivated Rome, and Constantine chose the heretical Jewish sect of Christianity as the religion of the Roman state. The two became indivisible under the rule of Theodosius, the last effective Roman Emperor. The combination of law, religion and culture thus formed the Roman Empire. The essay then guides us, in considerable detail, from the fall of Rome to the rediscovery of art and culture in the Renaissance and through the Enlightenment in rationality where "God is put

Elliptical

These sections of the book I found quite difficult to read. The volume of factual information is not sufficiently interpreted for my liking. Blackham's vast knowledge would have been more easily absorbed had there been more critical commentary. His style is somewhat elliptical and here demanded a level of attention to detail which often distracted me from his overall train of thought.

However, I was soon to be pleasantly surprised. In the following sections of the book Blackham deals with the two World Wars and the Cold War and brings his essay in to the mid-1990s. Here, I was able to read with enjoyment and even excitement as he explained the legacy of the past in current examples. Put in this context, I was better able to appreciate the earlier sections of the book.

The themes in the tumultuous historic development of Europe have moulded our present. We now live in what Blackham calls the "One World." This is the present universality, and the essay provokes the questions *What will be the future of this legacy?* and *Is there a future for humanity in this non-religious One World in the third millennium CE?*

Here Blackham discusses topical issues of warfare and the state, the trend towards individuality and the demand for dignity by women,

***The Future of Our Past: From Ancient Rome to Global Village* by H J Blackham (Edited by Barbara Smoker). Prometheus Books 1996. ISBN 1-57392-042-8. c 400pp. £27.**

Review: MALCOLM REES

youth, race and self. Humanity is coming of age and it appears that optimism for the future would not be unwarranted. But the present in which everyone starts life is a legacy of the past. What is relevant from the past is still with us and is at hand in the present. It is only if we discern and grasp the shape things have taken that we will be able to make informed responses for the future of humanity.

In the past, primitive societies learned successful behaviour by rote instead of learning from it by reflection. Now we are better equipped.

In today's secular world, the development of science and the understanding of history has

enabled humanity to be sufficiently self-aware to determine the future. Science has provided the tools, even to the extent that the re-shaping of genetic inheritance is within our power – but history has shown how often human behaviour has disregarded human nature and welfare.

Today, this One World, made so small by rapid transport systems and information technology, obliges us to think globally. But there are evident disorders in over-population and in the unfairness between the industrial nations and the plight of the Third World. Ecological damage is threatening the species, and the availability of weapons of total annihilation is inadequately controlled. These are the challenges of today and for our future.

Blackham argues that to secure our future, if there is to be one, responsibility for consequences must be shared individually and collectively world-wide. But, he asks, will human behaviour and economic pressures betray or defeat this moral obligation that bonds humanity? Will we accept and act upon our responsibility as human beings for the benefit of humanity's future? We have these choices to make and we make them with the precious legacy which is the knowledge of our past.

Let's have more fivers for Freethought

LOOK through this issue of *The Freethinker* – and then ask yourself: "Isn't it worth a fiver to help spread a rational view of blasphemy laws...of religious indoctrination in schools...of God Himself (and of His Ten Commandments)?"

Of course it is! Whenever you send us £5 (and we do like to receive more from those who can afford it), we try to spend it like this: £3 to help pay the ever-growing print and postal bills; £2 to send out eight free copies of this atheist journal to people who might otherwise never come into contact with our ideas, with *your* ideas.

So – even if you haven't the time or health or energy or freedom to

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Total for March: £252

Straight or subtle, the latest handouts from the deity's PR persons on Earth fail to persuade NICOLAS WALTER.

THERE is an annual prize for bad writing about sex, and there is always strong competition for it. There should also be a prize for bad writing about religion, for which there would also be strong competition. Three strong candidates have already appeared this year.

Paul Johnson's *The Quest for God* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £14.99) would be the favourite if it weren't so predictable. Johnson is a historian of repute but also a journalist well known for writing the most cock-eyed things in the most confident way. The remarkable thing is not that such nonsense gets written, since this is all too common, but that it gets published. As with his columns in several papers, almost everything in this book is open to the most obvious challenge, from religious as well as non-religious people, and it has received not only wide coverage but also harsh criticism in the media.

The title of the book is misleading, since it describes not *the* quest for God but one highly individual view of the subject, and this is not really a *quest*, since Johnson has always been a strong Roman Catholic. One of his first sentences is that "the existence or non-existence of God is the most important question we humans are ever called to answer", though many if not most people find it an unimportant or impossible question and live and die without bothering about all the strange beliefs which fill the rest of the book.

The first three chapters consist largely of ignorant sneers at atheism, insisting that it is irrational and unpopular, at a few individual atheists from Bertrand Russell to Richard Dawkins, and at alleged political expressions of atheism such as Communism and Fascism. This negative material is both annoying and amusing, and the positive material, when Johnson sets out to describe and defend his own beliefs, is even more so. His God is that of traditional Christianity and in particular of orthodox Roman Catholic theology, though he is occasionally unorthodox (with some heretical ideas about women and animals). His ideas about good and evil, beauty and ugliness, are just banal. He is much opposed to "moral relativism," but he is very confused about his "moral absolutism" (as emerged when I challenged him about it on the Radio 4 *Afternoon*

Oh, God!

Shift). His ideas about God's relationship with human and other possible intelligent beings are quite batty. His defence of his Church is emotional rather than rational. He is ecumenical towards non-Catholic Christians and Jews, but not Muslims. His ideas about the four last things – death and judgement, heaven and hell – are old-fashioned, and his view of hell is especially crazy. He ends with some embarrassing thoughts about and examples of prayer.

Richard Swinburne's *Is There a God?* (Oxford University Press, £7.99) is a surprise entry, since it looks like a serious book. Swinburne is an academic philosopher (Nolloth Professor the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford University), and this is a shortened and simplified version of a series of books about God which he has been producing for more than 20 years, designed to answer the latest attacks on theism by sceptical scientists. Again the title is wrong, since he is discussing not a god of some kind but *the* God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, not pantheism or deism or ditheism or polytheism but strict monotheism.

He begins with new-fangled versions of old-fashioned ontological arguments, that God is somehow essential, and of design arguments, that God is somehow necessary to explain the existence and order of the world, and he goes on to the associated arguments, that God is everlasting, all-powerful, all-present, all-free, all-knowing, all-good, and so on. The double trouble is that arguments for a creator are also arguments for a creator of the creator or indeed for several creators, and that even if the argument for a creator were accepted this wouldn't mean that any of the arguments about its nature would have to be accepted as well. There are good reasons to believe that a creative deity might have limited existence or power or knowledge, even better reasons to believe that a deity who created and controls the world is either both good and evil or neither good nor evil, and no reason to believe that such a creator deserves or desires worship from the creation.

The fact is that all arguments for the existence

of God, far from giving any answers to questions about the world, simply add further questions. Swinburne's search for God has a strikingly traditional – even medieval – flavour, though it is spiced up with modern phraseology. It ranges widely in science, adopting forms of the anthropic principle, of soul/body dualism, of quantum indeterminacy, and so on; but he can't escape (though he doesn't quote) the answer which the French scientist Laplace gave Napoleon when asked about the place of God in his view of the world – that he had no need of that hypothesis. He ranges less widely in philosophy, but he can't escape (though again he doesn't quote) the devastating criticisms of theism which many philosophers have made since atheism became safe to hold in public. He denies that he is postulating a "God of the gaps", just filling holes in scientific knowledge, but he is actually doing something even cruder: postulating the old-time religion of the Bible with revelation, miracles, the lot. It is hard to believe that anyone who isn't already a firm believer in God will be convinced by anything he says.

Irritating

However, Russell Stannard's *Science and Wonders* (Faber & Faber, £8.99) is the finest winner of the booby prize. Stannard is an academic scientist (Professor of Physics at the Open University) who has found God and has produced a series of books for children explaining elementary science with the addition of elementary religion. This book is based on the BBC Radio 4 programmes broadcast during April, consisting of interviews with scientists and theologians. The title yet again is misleading, since the subject is not "science and wonders" but science and *religion*. Most of his interviewees do have need of the hypothesis of God – though he has also rounded-up some of the usual sceptics (Peter Atkins, Hermann Bondi, Richard Dawkins, Steven Rose) – and his repeated attempts to drag irrelevant religion into otherwise interesting discussions of current science are simply irritating. Stannard ends with the reminder that Jesus said we must become like little children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and the remark that he prefers to talk to children than to adolescents or adults. No wonder, since his infantile arguments can be seen through by anyone who has learned to think properly.

The discouraging thing about this whole business is that so many seemingly intelligent people can talk such obvious nonsense, and that such poor treatment of such important subjects can be produced by a leading journalist, a leading philosopher and a leading scientist and circumsulated by leading periodicals, publishers and broadcasting organisations. The encouraging thing is that most people – including most scientists and philosophers – remain unaffected by such stuff and get on with their lives without worrying about where they came from or where they are going or what, if anything, it all means.

Broad Acres holiday

EIGHTEEN members of Humanist Holidays had a very pleasant holiday at the Elmbank Hotel in York from April 5 to 9, reports DONALD G BAKER. On the Sunday we had an interesting coach outing, which included visits to Harrogate and Haworth. Haworth was, of course, the home of the Brontë family: I learned that Emily Brontë, who wrote *Wuthering Heights*, rejected the religious beliefs of her father, Patrick, who was a Church of England priest.

The hotel was very comfortable and the food was excellent. We had interesting talks about Robert Ingersoll, the famous

American freethought orator and writer, by Philip Beeton and about Alexandra Palace by Roy Tremlett. Richard Benjamin presented a Humanist perspective on the European Union. There were also many more light-hearted discussions. It was a very pleasant experience, spent with like-minded people at a time when Christians were very involved in devotions.

Our next holiday – at the time of the Winter Solstice – is likely to be somewhere on the South Coast. For details, please contact Mrs Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham GL52 5AA. Membership is £3.50 a year for a family or single members.

We're beetling along in the Age of Insects

WHEN asked what one could conclude about the Creator from a study of his creation, J B S Haldane is famously said to have replied: "An inordinate fondness for beetles." Stephen Jay Gould is not sure that Haldane uttered the quip in that form, but he certainly made it several times in casual conversation and public addresses.

Gould goes on, in one of the 34 essays in *Dinosaur in a Haystack*, to validate the basic point. Because of their small size and favoured habitats, beetles are the most under-counted of animal groups. But they represent about 25 per cent of all named species of animals and plants, and there are probably millions more to be discovered in the tropical rain forests. In 1982, the American entomologist Terry Erwin found 1,200 beetle species in 19 trees of the same species in the Panamanian forest, and estimated that some 50,000 species of the world's tropical trees could house 8,150,000 species of beetles.

This latest collection of monthly "Reflections on Natural History" – the seventh to be published – ranges as widely as ever, for Gould is much more than a natural historian. "I love pristine nature," he tells us, "but I am a humanist at heart, and I revel more in complex interactions between fellow members of *Homo sapiens* and the great external world."

Note that "great external world." To the evolutionary biologist, humans are not the end-result of any progression, "but rather a fortuitous afterthought, a little twig on the enormously aborescent bush of life, which, if replanted from seed, would almost surely not grow this twig again..."

How absurd, then, to designate recent geological times as the "age of man"! If we have to use an eponymous term, we live and always have lived in an "age of bacteria." In the multi-cellular world, humans are one of about four thousand species of mammals; insects represent more than 70 per cent of all animal species. The "age of insects" would therefore be more appropriate.

And notice that Gould speaks of humans. One of his pieces throws light on some of the nineteenth century's invisible women. John Gould's wife, for instance, who drew most of the plates in the much sought-after *Birds of Europe*; Mary Anning, of Lyme Regis, premier collector of vertebrate fossils, including ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs; Mrs A W Griffiths, of Torquay, collector of marine algae (who, according to Charles Kingsley, had "masculine powers of research") and Mary Roberts, author of a dozen or so books on natural history.

Mary Shelley was, and is, far from invisible. Her *Frankenstein* is readily available in paperback, and has been the subject of sev-

Dinosaur in a Haystack by Stephen Jay Gould. Jonathan Cape. £18.99.

Review: COLIN McCALL

eral Hollywood films. Indeed, Gould reminds us that the 1935 *Bride of Frankenstein* had a prologue in which Mary tells Shelley and Byron: "My purpose was to write a moral lesson of the punishment that befell a mortal man who dared to emulate God."

Which is nonsense. Mary Shelley's "monster" was "fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy"; he becomes violent because he is rejected. "I am malicious," he says "because I am miserable; am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?" His misery arises, as Gould indicates, "from the moral failure of other humans, not from his own inherent and unchangeable constitution."



● *Frankenstein's monster: the Hollywood version.*

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

The essay closes with a relevant quote from Gould's "resident hero," Charles Darwin: "If the misery of our poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin." (John Major, please note).

Tennyson, who was born in the same year as Darwin, 1809, wrote of "Nature red in tooth and claw"; and Gould has a centennial essay on *In Memoriam*, from which, by the way, Queen Victoria derived much comfort.

The comfort Tennyson derives from his voyage from religious doubt, is the confidence that he will meet Hallam (the subject of the tribute) in heaven, which Gould considers "a lame resolution after so much struggle."

Another poet born in 1809, the American Edgar Allan Poe had nothing like the success of Tennyson. He lived a tortured life, died when only 40, and had only one book reprinted during his lifetime. Not a poem or a detective story, but *The Conchologist's First Book*. A piece of hackwork, his biographers call it, and Gould agrees. But it succeeded because "it filled a need."

Yet one more poet, though not really remembered as such, was Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles. The 238 pages of heroic couplets, *The Loves of the Plants*, by personifying stamens as male and pistils as female humans, illustrate Linnaeus' "sexual system" for botanical classification. And Gould's excerpts are evocative.

Of the Dioecia, for instance, where male and female flowers are on different plants, we read:

*Each wanton beauty, tricked in all her grace,
Shakes the bright dew-drops from her blushing face:
In gay undress displays her rival charms,
and calls her wondering lovers to her arms.*

Charles Darwin made no attempt at lyrical writing, and called *The Origin of Species* "one long argument"; but he used metaphor when appropriate, as in this contrast between outward appearance and inner reality: "We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey."

This view is not shared by the "all things bright and beautiful" brigades in Stephen Jay Gould's native America, who are fighting against evolutionary science in the public school classrooms. It is a little surprising, therefore, that he – a "non-theist" – should refer to such a war as mythical, and ask: "How can a war exist between two vital subjects with such different appropriate turfs – science as an enterprise devoted to discovering and explaining the factual basis of the empirical world, and religion as an examination of ethics and values?"

The answer is patent: religion is not an examination of ethics and values, it is a supernatural view of "the great external world."

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS:

'Museum piece' no voyage into new

by Charles Ward

TAKE away the Ten! Down with the Decalogue! Yes – all the Commandments. Bin the lot. Not to cause freethinkers to be worse thought of by believers than they are, I'll explain why if you can bear with me.

Apart from the unpopularity of moral exhortation, it is foolish to seek to impose the ethics of a primitive agrarian society, let alone its extremely unethical middle-Eastern theology, on today's Westernised scientific and commercial world. I don't mean that murder and theft should now meet with approval, but we do need to re-think their significance in our own society, ambivalent as it is about killing and the acquisition of property in ways not defined as illegal. We have already had to rethink the morality of sexual relationships. A proposed code of behaviour for today should be concerned with today's needs and be couched in a form that makes sense to the modern generation.

Because the Decalogue played a notable part in the formation of our culture and civilisation during the last two thousand years or thereabouts is no justification for dragging it with us into the next millennium, except as a museum piece.

This nation's enslavement to tradition has, of course, much to do with the unholy alliance between State and Church. Preservation of the Commandments as part of that tradition is bolstered by the assumption, among devotees of Judaism and Christianity, that these religions have proprietary rights over what is presented as an authoritative moral code. The corollary of this belief is that, refusing to believe in God, the presumed source of this authority, you deserve to be viewed as an unrepentant sinner, if not downright wicked.

It's a funny thing...when I was one of the religious, I seldom came across the passionate interest in ethical principles which I have encountered at every turn since I became a humanist. The embarrassed avoidance of the subject among the devout may have much to do with their habit of taking so much for granted. Such an attitude provides no incentive to think.

According to *Exodus, chapter 20*, the Decalogue was a divine revelation to Moses. That's more than a fable – it's a falsehood. Neither God nor Moses owned the copyright. The Commandments were plagiarised from social ideas that were swilling about all

round the Middle East. The tribal Hebrews put their own imprint upon them, that was all. Does anyone still think that Cecil B de Mille's film showed how it happened – words supernaturally inscribed by a thunderous deity on stone tablets which were carried from the shrouded mountain-top to misbehaving rascals at its foot? You may find it difficult to credit, but I have met such folk.

The first three Commandments (Have no other gods; don't make idols; don't be disrespectful to Me) are theological. They are irrelevant in the field of morals, which has to do with the relationships of humans to themselves and other non-imaginary beings. Much is made, in both Judaism and Christianity, of a fictional relationship between Yahweh (Jehovah) and those who conceive themselves as his People. That the relationship is regarded by believers as actual does not alter the fact that the whole concept was, and remains, a human creation.

You shall have no other gods before me reflects Yahweh's prior claim to attention, according to his PROs, the prophets and priests. As Hebrew hymns showed, polytheism was slow to bow out. *The LORD is a great God...above all gods Ps.95:3*). Monotheism arose for a political reason. Having rival deities in cobbled-together empires increased the risk of disunity and rebellion. It is interesting to find that, as late as the 7th century of this era, Mohammed shrewdly practised what military leaders had long since learned and, in polytheistic Arabia, struck a Unitarian note: *There is one God, and Mohammed is His Prophet*.

You shall not make for yourself a graven image... (the second Commandment) was another idea that found favour in Islam. Many centuries before, its introduction had been a master-stroke. The effect was to make God more mysterious and thus more likely to remain of continuing interest to worshippers who were gradually becoming more sophisticated.

Mind you, a certain naivete lingers, when believers cling (as they do) to literal, or even metaphorical, interpretation of the texts describing man and his mate as *made in the image of God*.

Actually, God is created in the image of man who, as we know, is a product of a long, involved evolutionary process. Deity is thus

ascribed characteristics (frequently the least admirable) with which human beings are familiar among themselves. The third Commandment, about taking God's name in vain, reflects the exception we take to people who are disrespectful to us. Venting annoyance on their progeny is typical of bad-tempered hyperbole.

Next came the sabbath rule, which wasn't purely ritual observance. Its social spin-off – workers refreshed by their break – hardly needed the mythology of Yahweh's day-off. His work of Creation, according to the description in *Genesis*, was not strenuous – consisting of saying *Let there be...* and so forth, then looking with satisfaction on the magical consequences which were all very good, as if no improvement were required.

I was intrigued to discover, in *John 5:17*, that the Jesus of that Gospel – a Jesus who knew how his heavenly Father occupied his time – appeared to contradict the old story. *My Father has never yet ceased his work* (NEB). It is tempting to speculate on what Jesus imagined as spurring all this continuing activity.

However, let us return to the theme in hand – and come to the only positive injunction – all the rest are "don'ts." Honour mum and dad, the fifth enjoins.

That was an easy one for me, as I was fortunate to have excellent parents. I could see, though, what an impossible demand that must be for some children, considering how they are treated. I wondered whether God had thought of that. Of course, he hadn't. The Commandment was something that had grown out of the long-forgotten switch from being hunter-gatherers to farmers and traders. The rule, in fact, was more pragmatic than moral.

In their nomadic days, with the urgent need to reach pastures before seasonal conditions prevented them from doing so, the weak and frail had often to be left behind. Survival of the tribe was a matter of greater urgency than survival of the individual.

When a settled existence as agriculturalists became the norm, attitudes changed. The elderly could be given a function in the community. Self-interest was involved in social approval of an interest in the old folks' welfare. *Honour your father and your mother* so that, when it comes to your turn, your days may be long.

Half of the Commandments have gone before we find those that might be described

not wanted on new millennium

ethical, negative as they are. These five focus on murder, lust, theft, lies and envy. As a sin thesis this is far from exhaustive. There is no mention of slavery (which was practised), of equality of the sexes, or of opportunity (which were not), of cruelty, hatred, malevolence, self-aggrandisement, scurrility, gluttony or avarice, to give some examples.

Do not kill. How idealistic it sounds! All it means is, Do no murder. It is no more than a legal requirement. What was classified as murder was killing a fellow-Israelite. Judicial execution was not included.

Beyond the parameters of "murder" a great deal of carnage went on. It wasn't merely that it was no crime, let alone deemed immoral, to slaughter thousands of animals and birds as sacrifices to a deity who would have been appropriately addressed, not as *Holy, holy, holy*, but as "Gory, gory, gory." Their Lord of Hosts (armies) commanded slaughter. Women, children and even babies were victims of a ruthless pseudo-moral policy that claimed theological justification (see, for example, *Deut.13:6-11; 1 Sam.15:2,3; P.137:9; Jer.13:14*).

Neither human nor animal rights were on the agenda. Conscientious objection to anything was not considered. Today, for all the exploitation, crime and immorality which darken the planet, you will find serious consideration being given to ethical problems, including those that modernity has itself produced, and although selfish interest, blind prejudice and ignorance impede progress, some advances have been made.

Do not commit adultery. The causes of our changed attitudes concerning intimate relationships cannot be gone into here, but we must note that, in our society, the word "adultery" has lost meaning.

The eighth Commandment, likewise, draws attention to our contemporary situation, rather than to any inadequacy it may have had in the distant past. Crimes against property figure prominently and the excessive attention they are often given (as it may seem) doubtless exposes the materialistic nature of our culture.

We don't have to be "red" to see the moral sickness in our world of haves and have-nots and to recognise injustices in an economic system which unjustly favours the former.

The remaining two Commandments may be cynically honoured at the present day more in the breach than in the observance. Lies and deceit are so much a part of everyday experi-

ence that, to resist the moulding of our opinions, great effort has to be made to reinterpret what we see, read and hear, especially where commercial interests are involved. In our courts, guilty people can plead "not guilty"; their barristers having no qualms about being economical with truth in attempts to have them discharged. Politicians have made "sincerity" an art form, especially on television. Persuasive presentation is the modern lubricant for wheels-within-wheels.

As for coveting our neighbour's possessions, if not his wife (who would certainly not appreciate being thought of as a piece of property, or grouped with the family quadruped) – that is part of our consumer culture. Advertisers are bent on giving us green eyes. Of course, we should prefer to speak of commendable initiative to raise our standard of living, seldom high enough for our contentment.

Although Christians commandeered the Jewish scriptures, the Decalogue was not what they were after. They were interested in using supposed predictions as back-up.

"New Covenant" Christianity discarded the legalism of the old *Torah*. Christians in a Jewish *milieu* spoke of the Hebrew Law as leading to Christ, but their ethical stance was quite differently founded. The view that the Decalogue is part of Christianity has persisted only because of the ill-understood association with Church and Bible.

Questionnaires, intended to gather information about the state of religious commitment, perpetuate this notion by being misleadingly phrased. When, for example, the question is asked, "On what do you base your idea of Christian morality?" not only churchgoers may need to take away the ten they first thought of. Habits of thought die hard.

"If you take away the Ten," proponents of "traditional values" are inclined to plead, "what will you put in their place?" Three rules at most, I'd say. Maybe just one.

Want the best for yourself. "I do that already," each of us is inclined to believe. What I've learned is that, by and large, we don't, while we like to think that we do. A monkey, able to consider the notion, might well come up with a wish for an endless supply of bananas. We, too, would like satisfactions of our various cravings. But are they what we need most?

Desire is fundamental. "I want" is probably our first intelligent remark. Moralists are appalled at this gross selfishness. "Stamp on

it! Kill it!" is not uncommonly their message. I don't agree. Asceticism is not what is needed, any more than self-indulgence. What is needed is to learn what is truly best for ourselves. There's no better teacher than experience – although it is jejune to depend on no other experience than one's own.

To discover what is best demands a degree of mental honesty hard to achieve. I have to stop pretending to know, when I

don't. The ninth Commandment (not to bear false witness) is of meagre help. It is easier to stop dissembling to others than to stop deluding oneself.

I'm ineluctably drawn to the conclusion that the best that I can be is a responsible person (real sincerity can be painful). Although being centred upon oneself seems to carry with it a blissful indifference to the mere idea of responsibility, it eventually becomes clear that true self-interest is exercised in turning outwards, not inwards.

After that, you might say, the sky's the ethical limit, depending on how fast we develop as human beings, how far we have the nerve to go.



Colin McCall visits Shelley's...

PARADISE OF EXILES

PERHAPS it will yield an article, the Editor said, when I told him I was going for a holiday in Tuscany. And as you see, it has. Not all that surprising really, because Italy is treasure trove for the student of religion and related matters.

We were staying in the small hilltop town of Barga, which boasts its own cathedral, 1300ft above sea-level, dedicated to St Christopher, whose wooden statue may be seen in the apse, beyond the medieval altar. Of special note is the 13th Century rectangular pulpit, with its four red marble columns. Two of these rest on lions, which are said to symbolise the strength of Christianity. One lion, with a satisfied look on his face, holds down a dragon, the representation of evil, which he may already have decapitated; the second lion stands over a man who is stroking it with one hand while stabbing it with the other. This, to me perfectly rational action in the circumstances (wouldn't you try to placate the beast while making sure you strike first?) is that of a heretic; and one of the rear columns rests on the back of a dwarf, who symbolises the pagan world. But there the symbolism ends: the fourth column rests on the floor.

This pulpit is in the Pisan style, and in Pisa itself, 37 miles to the south, which once controlled the area, the cathedral and the baptistery both house similar 13th century pulpits, though with hexagonal bases, supported by 11 and seven columns respectively, several resting on lions.

Galileo was born in Pisa in 1564 and did his first scientific work there. As the well-known story goes, it was in the cathedral that he watched the swinging of a chandelier, which air currents shifted in varied arcs. Using his pulsebeat as a timer, he found that the time of the swing was the same, whatever the amplitude. He later tested pendulums of equal length swinging in large and small sweeps and confirmed his finding.

A bronze lantern hanging in Pisa Cathedral is reputed to be the one that first attracted Galileo's attention.

Measuring small intervals of time was always a problem for him, and he had to continue using his pulse or the rate at which water trickled through a small orifice into a container. It is ironic, therefore, as Isaac Asimov has pointed out, that after Galileo's death, the Dutch physicist and astronomer Christaan Huygens was to use the principle of the pendulum, discovered by Galileo, to regulate a clock, and so solve the timing problem.

Galileo also studied the behaviour of falling bodies (though not, it is now thought, from the famous leaning tower), showing that objects heavy and compact enough to reduce the effect of air resistance fell at the same rate. And he conjectured that in a vacuum all objects would fall at the same

rate. It wasn't possible to produce a vacuum in his day, but when it finally was, he was proved right.

Another Pisan church, that of Santa Maria della Spina, rightly described as a little jewel of Gothic art, is so called, "church of the thorn," because "it preserved one of the thorns in Christ's crown."

How many of these there were and how many others are still in existence, I don't know. There may be some in the Vicariate in Rome where, the former priest Dr Anthony Kenny tells us, "in a room full of antique filing cabinets, a monsignor

would...open a drawer, and take out a tiny bit of hair or bone dust or, if the worst came to the worst, cloth. He would then fill out a certificate that this was the genuine bone, hair, or clothing of the saint in question." (*The Path from Rome* pp92/93).

At another Tuscan cathedral, that of Lucca (birthplace of Puccini) a small octagonal marble temple in the middle of the nave contains the Volto Santo (Holy Visage), a wooden crucifix "carved by Nicodemus, who helped to bury Christ." After lying hidden in a cave for centuries, says *The Visitors Guide to Tuscany*, "the crucifix was found and put onto an unmanned ship, which drifted to Luni. At Luni the crucifix was put on a cart drawn by unbroken steers which, according to the legend, immediately made their way to Lucca."

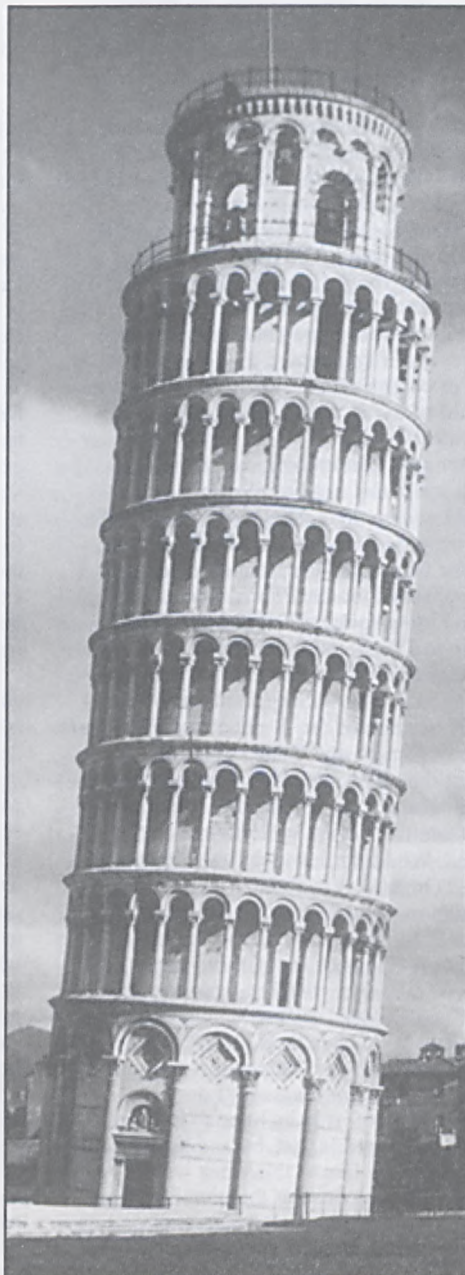
The same guide recounts another "legend" from the area, that of the 14th Century Ponte della Maddalena or "Devil's Bridge," as it is popularly known. The Devil agreed to build it in exchange for the first soul to cross it, but the townsfolk cheated him by sending a pig across. They erected a statue of Mary Magdalene at one end of the bridge to protect it from the Devil's retribution (hence its name). Presumably the townsfolk now consider that the Devil has forgotten – or forgiven – because the statue has been moved to the parish church.

Plenty then, as I say, of religious interest in this part of Tuscany. The additional attraction for me was the association with Shelley. Italy was for him "The Paradise of Exiles – the retreat of Pariahs," and he particularly liked Pisa, built along a curve of the river Arno, on which he could sail. He arrived there in January 1820 after two years constantly on the move, and he stayed there (with frequent trips to Livorno on the coast and to other places in Tuscany) for over two years. Indeed, as his biographer Richard Holmes says, "Pisa became the nearest thing Shelley ever had to a home anywhere since leaving Field Place."

During his stay, he wrote probably 60 complete poems, including *Adonais*, his tribute to Keats; the *Ode to Liberty*; and *Hellas* which, though often misinterpreted, is in Richard Holmes' words, "one of the most sophisticated and historically mature statements of Shelley's atheism." (*The Pursuit* p 678).

That atheism, as Paul Foot says in *Red Shelley*, "stayed with Shelley until he died (only nine months after *Hellas* was written)." In a letter to his friend Horace Smith on April 11, 1822, the poet made his position clear. Explaining that he had "not the smallest influence over Lord Byron" on the question of religion, he added "if I had I certainly would employ it to eradicate from his great mind the delusions of Christianity..."

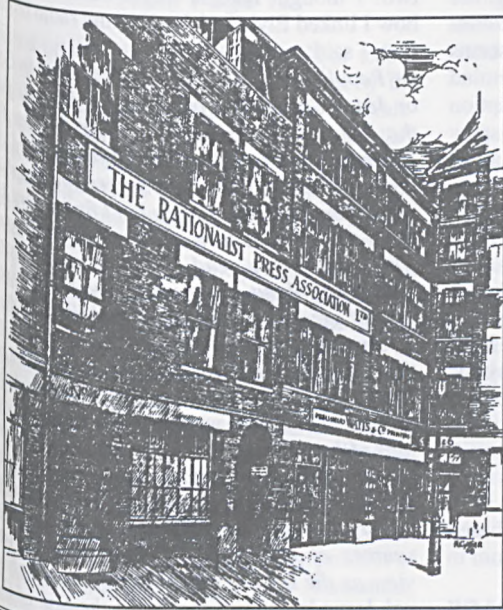
On July 7, 1822, Shelley, Edward Williams and the boat boy, Charles Vivian, were drowned in a storm in the Gulf of Spezia, farther north up the coast.



● Galileo studied the behaviour of falling bodies (though not, it is now thought, from the famous leaning tower of Pisa)

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

Tribute to a Rationalist pioneer



● These illustrations – of Charles A Watts and Herbert Cutner's 1948 sketch of 4&5 Johnson's Court, Fleet Street, home for many years of the Rationalist Press Association – are taken from *Rationalist Review* 8. Produced by Nicolas Walter, the *Review* (the first for five years) contains a lengthy tribute to Watts, to mark the 50th anniversary of his death. Watts spent his whole life working for the Freethought movement, and was the main founder and then the first manager of the RPA from 1899 to 1930. Walter recently contributed the entry on Watts to the *New Dictionary of National Biography*. Copies of the *Review*, and details of Rationalist Press Association membership, are obtainable on receipt of a stamped, addressed A4 envelope from RPA, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.



Ritual slaughter

Death by the bread-knife, for the glory of God

TWELVE million food animals in Great Britain fall victim to inhumane ritual slaughter every year, according to the newly-formed International Standard for the Welfare of Animals at Slaughter (ISWAS).

The group's first major campaign is for the repeal of the law on exemption to stunning. It says: "The practice of slaughtering live conscious animals, known as religious slaughter, is undertaken inside Great Britain by Jews, Muslims and, to a lesser extent, Sikhs. A large proportion of this ritually slaughtered meat is sold on to the open market for general consumption by members of the public.

"ISWAS is campaigning to halt these cruel and archaic ritual slaughter practices, which are wholly inappropriate for a modern day civilised society to undertake on humanitarian grounds. We demand that the law on exemption to stunning be repealed as a matter of urgency and that the British law which requires all food animals to be stunned before slaughter so that they are instantaneously rendered insensible to pain until death occurs should be upheld. No exemptions!

"Support and backing for this campaign is sought from MPs, MEPs, producers, the meat industry, members of the public and also from members of the Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities to stop religious slaughter on humanitarian grounds."

Campaign booklets are available at £1, plus A4 SAE, from ISWAS, PO Box 96, Barnsley S75 4YX. Please mention *The Freethinker*.

On a related topic, *The Sunday Telegraph* for April 21 reports: "Thousands of British sheep have been illegally shipped to France for a Muslim festival of ritual slaughter which contravenes European standards of animal welfare and hygiene.

"The French are investigating the disappearance of more than 5,000 sheep which arrived at Channel ports but 'have not gone to their declared destinations.'

"Instead, *The Sunday Telegraph* has discovered, they have been smuggled to sacrificial sites around France and are being kept in makeshift pens ready for the Muslim celebration next Sunday to mark the end of *Ramadan*. The sheep will then have their throats slit by untrained slaughtermen.

"The festival of *Eid-el-Kebir* was condemned last night by the RSPCA, which is monitoring sites, as 'totally inhumane.' Franz Fischler, the European Agriculture Commissioner, has launched an investigation into the ritual because he is 'concerned' it breaches European rules, which state an animal must be stunned if it is killed outside a slaughterhouse.

"Sixty thousand sheep will be slaughtered around Paris for the festival. The French government, under pressure from the country's four million Muslims, has set up official sites, but many killings are carried out by untrained individuals with bread-knives.

"French farms can provide only 40 per cent of the animals needed for the hundreds of seasonal sheep markets. The rest must be imported, and British sheep are popular because they are cheap.

"A team of undercover RSPCA investigators has identified British sheep in four Muslim sites around Paris. Only one of the locations was the legal destination of the sheep. Last week, *The Sunday Telegraph* found dozens of sheep with British ear tags being marketed specifically for the festival.

"The French government has launched a nationwide investigation with its Veterinary Service. The most recent shipment of sheep travelled from Dover to Boulogne on March 28. There were 28 lorries, containing 8,577 animals...According to the Ministry of Agriculture Food and Fisheries, five of these lorries are now 'missing.' Maff wants to take the exporters to court because it says it is their responsibility, however difficult, to check the final destination of animals.

"Some of the sheep...were legally delivered to a licensed Hallal abattoir in Jossigny, near Paris. The owner, Dominique Dupas, said that he had received 543 sheep from Herifor for the festival. But, he said: 'Most of the sheep have gone to clandestine dealers. The slaughter there is cruel.'

"RSPCA inspectors toured the Paris area last week looking for British animals. They found some in Montreuil, at an address not listed on the travel documents. Last year, the RSPCA filmed the slaughter at this site. One inspector said: 'Although the throat should be cut with one swift move, we saw people hacking away with a bread knife. It was a slow and painful death.'"

You're telling us!

Dunblane massacre

THANK you for Colin McCall's April article on the Dunblane massacre. The Sin/Salvation Tendency has had a field day and even people who ought to know better have taken this horrible event to be a good excuse for castigating the human race in general. For some people, a perversely titillating orgy of vicarious guilt is irresistible. Mr McCall's words are simply sane.

The believers in OMNIGOD – the god with every positive attribute one might wish for in a divine being and all of them infinitely – are in disarray. The problem of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" (the title of an honest little book by Rabbi Harold Kushner) usually surfaces in the minds of less honest believers in the form of *Excuses For The God We Have Invented*. That just won't do and we must never tire of saying so.

When the "good people," cited by the Rabbi, are sane adults it is always possible to claim, and never possible absolutely to disprove, that the "bad things" are their own fault; not so in the case of little children – one must suppose.

Two specious arguments, presented by the dishonestly pious when bad things happen to innocent little children, need particularly to be countered.

One is related speciously to freedom. It runs thus – that, in order to show that really we are free, we have to choose to do bad things. This is specious because, assuming that such freedom is real, it necessarily entails freedom to refuse to do any given bad thing; to *have* to choose something is the very negation of the freedom we are held to possess in these matters.

The other is the *it's all for the best in the long run* argument. This is none other than saying that OMNIGOD can do, morally, what we cannot do, morally – proceed on the basis that the end justifies the means. Whatever moral theory you subscribe to in detail, no such theory can do other than require us to pursue laudable ends by acceptable means. To attribute any less exacting standard to "God" is vacuous if there is no such being or blasphemous if there is such a one.

Interestingly, Rabbi Kushner subscribes to the view that his god is all-good but not all-powerful. That is at least capable of corresponding to what we actually observe. Atheism, in my opinion, corresponds to experience even more closely and rather more simply.

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

Forbes is not alone

UNFORTUNATELY, Ian Forbes (April letters) is not alone in being a supporter of the Conservative Party, field sports, capital punishment and vivisection. However, anyone who has rejected religious superstition cannot be all bad.

CARL PINEL
Stockport

REGARDING the letter from Ian Forbes, one hopes that he may be the only member of the society of illiberals he envisages.

As one is still obliged in one's daily life (albeit now in the mid-90s) to point out the confusion of morality with religion, so it seems also necessary, by the same token, to remind oneself of the equally erroneous assumption that an atheist/humanist will necessarily display the virtues of empathy and compassion but can be as prejudiced as any religious fanatic.

JANE SPOTTISWOODE
Bala

I CAN'T say that I would agree with Ian Forbes on everything, but he certainly has a point that organised atheism in this country has a definite association with ideas usually espoused by the left-wing. More generally, why is it that political organisations in Europe and North America either believe in individual freedom in social matters with compulsion in economic ones ("left-wing"), or in economic freedom with social compulsion ("right-wing"). Class-based protectionism? As I want individual freedom in both spheres, whom should I vote for?

RICHARD SAGE
London WC2

Moses in Egypt?

WHY is Irene Chandler (March letters) so sure that Moses (presumably the Moses of the Bible) was educated in Egypt? In *The Archaeology of the Bible Lands*, Magnus Magnusson pointed out that in all the records that have been unearthed in Egypt there is not one reference to the presence of the Israelites in that country. We know that every Pharaoh made a point of covering every available blank space with carved records of what was happening in his reign. If the biblical accounts of all the goings-on had been true, it is inconceivable that no record of it would have been left in Egypt.

In the same issue of *The Freethinker*, Leslie James omits one argument in favour of keeping Myra Hindley in prison: the effect her release would have on the surviving relations of the children she helped to slaughter. Some of them are able to continue living with the memory of what happened to their children because they feel that there is at least some continuing retribution. To free Hindley would be to torture them all over again. Her repentance or "repentance" is irrelevant.

DEREK ROBERTS
Mitcham

Elvis and atheism

I WAS very interested to read the article (April) concerning Barbara Smoker's contribution to the Cambridge Union Society debate and the way she made reference to Elvis Presley. I too have made reference to Elvis Presley when invited to talk to students at school and, recently, when invited to make a contribution to "Pause for Thought" on local radio.

I became an Elvis fan in 1957 – when I was 16 – at about the same time as I started to formulate my humanist views, although I don't believe there is any connection between the

two! I thought readers might be interested how I linked Elvis and Jesus in my radio broadcast. I said:

"People often ask why I don't believe in Jesus or Jesus Christ. The trouble with Jesus is the facts of his existence are so thin on ground. For example, Elvis Presley died years ago and I have read several biographies about him. I know his voice but I find it very difficult to get a picture of the man. It depends which books you read and who you listen to. And this is about a man who lived recently in a time of great communication and literacy."

"Jesus Christ was alive 2,000 years ago – the only literature on him we have is in the Bible. The Gospels were not even written in his lifetime. They were written some years later by fans of Jesus who believed he was special. It is very difficult to obtain independent assessments of his life and character. If I was studying history I would be expected to produce sources of information before accepting any view as the truth. People who accept the biblical Jesus have faith that he is the Son of God. Humanists are sceptical and weigh up the evidence and find the case unproved."

I wonder what Elvis would think of Humanists using him to further their arguments – since he was a typical Southern States Christian with no understanding of the non-religious point of view?

ROBIN WOOD
Kilmarnock

Animal rights

I AM pleased to see that there is an area of common ground between Eric Stockton and myself on animal rights issues (February). I hope I have participated in one of the actions for World Day for Laboratory Animals in April. I'm sure it's a painful, unnecessary and scientifically fraudulent experiment, and not only cosmetics testing, on animals are something all Humanists abhor and want to see ended. For more details of anti-vivisectionism, please contact BAVA, PO Box 82, Kingswood, Bristol, BS15 1YF.

With respect to guide dogs for the blind, most of them are volunteers. Like hunting dogs and police dogs, they perform this function because they have been made to by humans. Surely it is possible to cater for the needs of blind people, for example, with human guides – by which I means that the use of dogs which in the wild would be hunting and scavenging for food (March), would have no contact with humans at all. I have demonstrated against both Mr Blunkett and his last I find his opposition to the equalisation of the of consent for gay men utterly wrong – not an argument for bullfighting and admire neither.

Do we really have to compete with other species to grow food crops? Surely, the problems are centred on numbers and we should perhaps be looking at reducing our own numbers rather than those of other species which have evolved before us, may have a better claim to the Earth and its food.

I do not regard the introduction of natural predators as an evasion but a safe and sound

You're telling us!

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set up, and it is only those readers willing to put aside self-interest for a moment who will learn - and mature in the process.

HEATHER EVANS
Kenilworth

Wrong house

KING George I was of the House of Hanover or Brunswick – not, as stated by Robert Awbery (February), of the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, which was that of Queen Victoria's husband, Albert, the Prince Consort. King George V changed the name from House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to House of Windsor on 1917, in order to distance himself and his family from their German relations.

R J M TOLHURST
Chelmsford

'Free will is impossible'

ON free will and determinism, I think that free will is an impossibility in the literal meaning of the words as we are limited by genetic inheritance, effects of past experience and circumstances of the moment.

In my view, our actions are the result of a universal law which, being universal, brought about the evolution of the universe (whether involving a Big Bang or whatever) and the evolution of species, and brings about all behaviour. The universal law being, as I see it, that objects move along the line of least resistance (with objects being seen as sub-atomic elements as well as more solid substances). The theory of evolution requires there to be no beginning, first cause or creator of the process, as any state of evolution could be said to have evolved from an earlier state and so on *ad infinitum*.

In human behaviour, the effects of action in brain cells (which no doubt would have been affected by past experiences) and the circumstances of the moment would be pertinent.

Let's hope the effects of secular organisations' actions and publications such as *The Freethinker* quickly help bring about a world free of supernatural beliefs.

LEN BERGIN
Victoria

Religious jargon

ROBERT Ashby (April) seeks to justify the BHA's misuse of the word "spiritual."

The BHA Education Committee is mistaken in asserting that "spiritual" is most often, or even significantly often, used in a non-religious or atheistic sense. The proper and general sense is as a term of religious jargon, as Robert Ashby acknowledges by referring to the religious and New Age baggage with which it is loaded. In this context, it solves nothing to try to claim that spiritual experience is a blend of intellect, emotion and memory.

The phrase "human spirit" involves a metaphorical use of the word "spirit" which

could just as well be replaced by "essence." "Spirit" has been used metaphorically for centuries without affecting its core meaning of "immortal soul."

Enormous damage has been done to the Humanist movement in the past by opportunist attempts by Humanists to jump on the religious education bandwagon and to co-opt religious believers into the Humanist movement.

Similar damage will be done if it is asserted that Humanist spirituality is other than a contradiction in terms. If Humanists allow themselves to be involved in spiritual development, they will have been co-opted into a form of religious education, and will find it harder to claim there is any distinction between religion and Humanism.

COLIN MILLS
Amersham

Union Flag 'is a lie'

YOUR item on the National Anthem (March) prompted similar reflections on the Union Flag. In any display of national flags, this motley banner stands out as an example of bad taste and confused design. Heraldically, it is a mess, because of certain rules about colours. Briefly, and avoiding heraldic terms such as "gules" for red, objects may be shown in colour (red, blue, green, black, purple), metals (white, yellow), or fur (ermine and vair - a squirrel fur). However, a colour may not rest on a colour, nor a metal on a metal, nor a fur on a fur.

The crosses of George for England (red on white), of Andrew for Scotland (white saltire or X on blue) and of Patrick for Ireland (white saltire on red) each obey the rules, but in combination they would break them without some sleight of heraldic hand. Thus, the red cross (a coloured object) retains its white (metal) field as a narrow border which can rest on the blue field of the Scottish flag, and similarly for the others. The result is such that many Britons cannot tell when their national flag is upside down, in itself a distress signal. The Proclamation of the Act of Union in 1801 ended with the Herald's blazon: *On a field azure, the crosses saltire of St Andrew and St Patrick, quarterly per saltire, counterchanged argent and gules, the latter fimbriated of the second, surmounted by the cross of St George of the third, fimbriated as the saltire.*

It was not, apparently, considered necessary to represent Wales on the Union Flag; nowadays, the flag is a lie both by omission of Wales and by inclusion of a country no longer part of the Union.

As for the crosses: I seem to remember reading somewhere that the cross of Patrick was invented for the purpose, there being no previous tradition, but I cannot find the reference. In any case, do we really want a national flag proudly displaying ancient instruments of torture? But then, given our present trade priorities, perhaps the flag could be blazoned (in plain English): *On a field green, scattered with anti-personnel mines, two crossed machine-guns; in the top third, a Challenger tank rearing.*

A constructive proposal for a new flag might

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method of achieving a desired end. For example, in Grenada damage to food crops by the mealybug was contained by the introduction of the Chinese wasp. In Orkney, a place about which I know very little, the answer to the "rabbit problem" may well be the introduction of birds and mammals which eat rabbits, rather than shooting them.

Not being a vet, I've no way of knowing if an animal is in terminal pain or how to kill it painlessly. Would Eric kill humans who are in terminal pain – and if he wouldn't, where does he draw the line between humans and other animals?

Let me assure Eric that my hold on absolutes in relationship to animals is neither uncertain nor slippery but is the result of observation, study and a decade of participation in the animal rights movement. Nor is my opinion lifted from "some *a priori* creed" but is the product of my own thinking and doing. As for Humanism, because it is heterodox and pluralistic, it can accommodate both of our views and give us space to discuss them. And, relatively or absolutely, that can be no bad thing.

TERRY LIDDLE
Eltham

ALTHOUGH I sympathise with Terry Liddle (February letters) as regards cruelty to and exploitation of other species, I can't help feel that he is inconsistent as regards food. Why should it be all right for "natural predators" to eat the species which threaten our crops, or for humans to eat antelope, and yet all wrong for humans to eat cattle or sheep? The very fact that we do not claim to be set apart from all other living species by any god, surely means that we have the same right to kill for food as they do. In any case, plants are also living things and we do not really *know* that they are unable to feel pain. Fortunately people have become aware of the damage they have been doing to the planet and it is important that we should all campaign against waste, cruelty and needless destruction. This is not the same thing as pretending that particular species of omnivore have a moral obligation to become herbivore.

PENNY FORREST
Pietermaritzburg

WHEN I challenged R G Tee to report back on his findings from the first few pages of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, I expected him to pin-point the flaws in his logic. Instead, while telling us his view remain unchanged (March), he has sidestepped the issue by accusing me instead of not using rational argument in my last letter. (No, indeed: my last letter was not an argument, but a challenge to him).

R G Tee insists that the whole idea of animal rights is "fundamentally flawed" but he fails to notice that Professor Singer does not – and liberally does not – use the animal rights argument: "In the argument for a radical change in our attitude to animals, it is in no way necessary." He bases his arguments on the idea of speciesism.

Singer is well aware that most of us have an in-built resistance to accepting what he points out: we most of us have an interest in eating meat. His task is to break through the barrier we

You're telling us!

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consider one of the strengths of this country – outstanding scientific research. The old road traffic sign for a school used the symbol of the torch of learning. Unfortunately, the Tories, who have starved scientific research of funds and reduced it to the servant of industry, have appropriated something very like it as their party symbol. I wonder if they have registered it as a trademark?

B THORPE
Cheadle

Humanism's unifying core

BOB AWBERY (April) writes an interesting letter showing the connection between monarchy and religion, but I think that what Nigel Meek objected to was that he felt that he was landed with the views of the Humanist organisation he joined on a number of issues, such as Socialism or the environment, with which he did not agree.

My own view is that the central unifying core of Humanism is a denial of a spirit world. From this it follows that man is alone in the world and should try to find the best way to live with his fellows, animals and the environment, unencumbered by ghosts, gods, demons, angels or an afterlife. But we have our own individual views on other matters; we like to discuss the monarchy or euthanasia with others, but may not always agree.

If an hierarchy emerged in a Humanist organisation which sought to impose its ideas on members, that is the time I would leave!

EDWARD GWINELL
Yeovil

Flaws of the jury system

NO! *The Observer*, as reported by Colin McCall (March), was wrong to oppose replacing juries in serious fraud cases. The jury system is fundamentally flawed. Juries can be incompetent, indifferent, intimidated, prejudiced, biased or corrupt. How would a working class, black youth feel (and fare) facing a jury of mostly white, middle class, middle-aged citizens? Or a gay man facing a totally straight jury which, if truly representative of "ordinary people," will regard him as a pervert? Or an atheist facing a jury of believers, including fundamentalists?

Single, domineering jurors may bully the more meek into agreement, others may just want to go home and don't give a damn about the verdict. Some are known to have resorted to ouija boards. Half the population are of below average intelligence, some are downright thick. Should matters affecting lives and careers be entrusted to such people? Friends or enemies of the accused, finding themselves on the jury by chance, may fail to declare themselves in order to have a chance to influence the verdict. Others, bamboozled by complex technical evidence, may simply plump for "not guilty" to play safe.

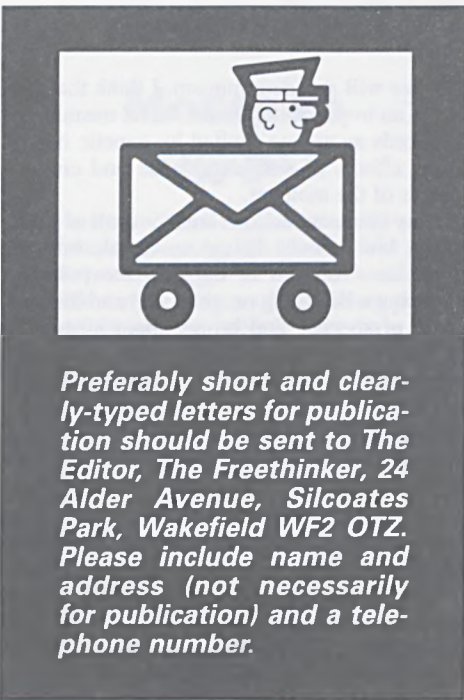
If juries are to be used, I would suggest a system of professional jurors. Applicants would need basic qualifications (a few A-levels or equivalents, say) and receive basic training in law, forensic science and so on. Some could specialise in, for example, fraud cases. In the meantime, there is surely a case for allowing only those with at least the equivalent of a few A-levels to serve on juries.

[Dr] STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

Buddhist?

THE April article by Stewart Valdar, "The Crucifixion that never was," said that "nailed crucifixion was of Buddhist origin." How intriguing. Can Stewart Valdar please supply us with the source of this information.

TECK ONG
London W6



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.

Thank who?

THANK God for *The Freethinker*! Just an expression...Your magazine helps to keep me sane, and many thanks for an excellent March issue: Byron, the God-awful Anthem, and the latest news on the never-ending "religion-and-schools" question.

I don't read *The People*, but it was good to know that its readers were being fed the wisdom of Carol Sarler, stating that we should not respect beliefs which hinder harmony between human beings. The same goes for Melanie Philips, whom I usually detest, for emphasising that "schools should provide children with the habits of rational thought."

At the local SACRE meetings of all the religious types, I have had to put up with some inane, irrational arguments. I tell them that children mostly dislike RE lessons and that it is time they were replaced by discussions about moral issues and ethical positions. The proper place for RE is within the History-Anthropology areas of study.

For many years in primary schools, across many teachers who told five-year-olds about the burning bush and nine-year-olds about the virgin birth and the empty tomb though they were all proven facts.

My open atheism was generally regarded with amusement, but one day I was told by one of the teachers – after she had read an article from *The Freethinker*, which I had left about in the staffroom – that I was not a fit person to teach young children.

I assured her that everything was in order since I had qualified at the College of St Mary and St John and that I had the Archbishop's Certificate for the teaching of RE!

BOB TUTT
Reading

Dealing with Christians

I WASN'T surprised that Barbara Smoker's argument (Page 3, April issue). Her argument wasn't up to the standard one expects from such a seasoned campaigner.

Having to deal with a Christian, my argument is something along the following lines:

The Jews were God's chosen people. Despite first-hand evidence of Jesus's miracles, they condemned him to death. Yet despite his resurrection from the dead and performing more miracles, they don't believe that he was the son of God.

Jesus's disciples were with Jesus when he performed many of his miracles and gave them teachings. They knew Jesus as no one else would. Yet when Jesus was to be crucified, they left him to it. Nor were they at the tomb when it rose again. Obviously, they never believed in his resurrection.

Jesus was the son of God. Yet when the disciples came for him, he "sweated blood" in fear. And on the cross he asked God why he had forsaken him (Jesus). Even he didn't believe in his resurrection.

So, why do you believe?

With reference to Stewart Valdar's article on the cross, I always considered the "fishermen" bit in the Bible as someone's private joke. Fish are caught and killed. Their only use as most are concerned is to be consumed. Further, the most stupid things ever. They will blindly follow their leader over a cliff or into a fire.

And on evil: God, we are told, is infinite. Most Christians don't understand what "infinite" means. It means *God is all, everything*. God is me, you, Thomas Hamilton (the Dunblane killer), every dog and its dog-poo, the Sun, Mars, every single thing, even Satan. One single atom anywhere is not God, then God is not infinite. So God is all the evil, everything.

While I haven't gone so far as to let my Conservative stance have cost it a number of donations from me. I wouldn't mind some (if *The Freethinker* is going to indulge in politics), pointing out some of Labour's lies and sins. Anyone who believes Labour's promises is as gullible as a Christian.

MICHAEL
Crystal Palace

Daniel O'Hara (pictured below) insists that non-believers have honourably and significantly contributed to the relief of ignorance, poverty, disease.

Humanism in action



mary objective of *preaching the Gospel to the heathen!* Thus, even today, Mother Teresa of Calcutta is able to declare that her work with the poor is undertaken not for their own sake, but for love of Jesus.

As recent critical studies of her work have indicated, she may well be adding to the sum total of human misery by her enthusiastic endorsement of her Church's prohibition of contraception, which entails that many more babies are born to hunger, poverty, disease and an early death than might otherwise have been the case if sensible policies of family planning had been implemented. And many more criticisms of her methods and basic philosophy have been made by Christopher Hitchens in his recent book *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (Verso, £7.95).

It is also important to recognise that much of the best work in the alleviation of ignorance, poverty and disease in the present century have,

indeed, been instigated and implemented by avowedly secular and Humanist organisations. The National Health Service owes little or nothing to organised religion; modern universities and institutions of higher education are generally speaking wholly secular in organisation and outlook. Two of the most prominent famine relief organisation – Oxfam and War on Want – have been entirely secular foundations, as have the tremendously important educational, health and welfare agencies of the United Nations.

Given their relatively small numbers, Humanists have made an honourable and significant contribution to the relief of ignorance, poverty and disease in the present century. And that contribution has furthermore been untainted by the internecine and sectarian strife, and ulterior propagandist motives, which have disfigured much of the otherwise usefully humanitarian provision of the Christian churches.

What the Christians didn't mean to say!

Monitored by RS

THESE are *actual* announcements from *actual* church bulletins.

1. Don't let worry kill you – let the church help.
2. Thursday night – Potluck supper. Prayer and medication to follow.
3. Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.
4. For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.
5. The rosebud on the alter this morning is to announce the birth of David Alan Belzer, the son of Rev and Mrs Julius Belzer.
6. This afternoon there will be a meeting in the South and North ends of the church. Children will be baptised at both ends.
7. Tuesday at 4pm there will be an ice cream social. All ladies giving milk will please come early.
8. Wednesday the ladies' liturgy will meet. Mrs Johnson will sing "Put me in my little bed" accompanied by the pastor.

9. Thursday at 5pm there will be a meeting of the Little Mothers Club. All ladies wishing to be "Little Mothers" will meet with the Pastor in his study.
10. This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs Lewis to come forward and lay an egg on the altar.
11. The service will close with "Little Drops of Water." One of the ladies will start quietly and the rest of the congregation will join in.
12. Next Sunday a special collection will be taken to defray the cost of the new carpet. All those wishing to do something on the new carpet will come forward and do so.
13. The ladies of the church have cast off clothing of every kind. They can be seen in the church basement Saturday.
14. A bean supper will be held on Tuesday evening in the church hall. Music will follow.
15. At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be "What is Hell?" Come early and listen to our choir practice.

Dominant

To start with, one must introduce a degree of historical and numerical perspective. Humanism as we know it today is a fairly recent phenomenon, with a history of not much more than 100 years, whereas Christianity has been around for almost 2,000.

Furthermore, the numbers of people worldwide today who identify themselves as humanists in the modern sense would probably be far short of one million, whereas those who identify themselves as Christians well exceed one billion. More than half of the past two millennia, the Christian Church has held a dominant position throughout Europe, and has exercised a virtual monopoly in the provision and control of such social services as education, health-care and welfare, as it still does in Ireland. It should therefore be no surprise that most of our ancient schools, hospitals and charitable organisations owe their origin to a Christian foundation.

Even in modern times, the churches have commanded an incomparably larger reservoir of organisation, so it should occasion no surprise that some of these have been prepared to go to Africa, Asia, South America and other underdeveloped parts of the world to set up schools and basic health-care facilities. It needs to be remembered, however, that such enterprises have usually been seen as ancillary to their pri-

OVER the past five years, I have conducted a desultory correspondence with the Roman Catholic convert and enthusiastic apologist for Christianity, Roderick Tyler MA (Oxon.), editor and publisher of the now defunct psychostyled magazine *Clarion*.

This correspondence arose out of my being invited in December 1990 to take part in a debate on the reliability of the Gospels, organised by the local Newman Society at the Womersley Roman Catholic Seminary near Bradford. My edited contribution to that debate was published in *Clarion*, and it proved to be Mr Tyler's introduction to the writings of Professor George Wells, to whose critical work on the historical Jesus and Christian origins I referred briefly in my summing-up.

Since then, Mr Tyler has embarked on a massive rearguard action – seeking to demolish the conclusions of Wells and other critics of orthodox Christian positions. A series of articles in *Clarion* has now been followed up by a book, *Is There a Real Jesus? Twenty Questions* (Dafnia Press, £6.99; ISBN: 1 85863 810 0), in which Tyler uses a combination of conservative theology, question-begging, irrelevancies and sarcasm in an attempt to deflect attention from the real difficulties that face the unbiased student of Christianity.

I will grant that perhaps too much of our correspondence has been concerned with pointing out, and when I have posed questions which he has been unable to answer or unwilling to address, Tyler has often taken refuge in some variation of the challenge: "Where are the humanist hospitals, schools, projects for the relief of suffering and associated good works?" I would like to devote the remainder of this article to addressing such challenges.

To start with, one must introduce a degree of historical and numerical perspective. Humanism as we know it today is a fairly recent phenomenon, with a history of not much more than 100 years, whereas Christianity has been around for almost 2,000. Furthermore, the numbers of people worldwide today who identify themselves as humanists in the modern sense would probably be far short of one million, whereas those who identify themselves as Christians well exceed one billion. More than half of the past two millennia, the Christian Church has held a dominant position throughout Europe, and has exercised a virtual monopoly in the provision and control of such social services as education, health-care and welfare, as it still does in Ireland. It should therefore be no surprise that most of our ancient schools, hospitals and charitable organisations owe their origin to a Christian foundation. Even in modern times, the churches have commanded an incomparably larger reservoir of organisation, so it should occasion no surprise that some of these have been prepared to go to Africa, Asia, South America and other underdeveloped parts of the world to set up schools and basic health-care facilities. It needs to be remembered, however, that such enterprises have usually been seen as ancillary to their pri-

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, June 2, 5.30 for 6pm: Public meeting.

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. Waverley Library, High Street: Tuesday, May 14, 7.45pm: Dr Elizabeth Harris: *Buddhism*. Friends Meeting House Berkhamstead: Tuesday, June 11, 7.45pm: Informal discussion led by Antony Chapman: *Humanism and its Values*.

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, May 16, 7.30pm: Peter Tatchell: *Public Morality, Private Hypocrisy*.

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). June 14: Terry Sanderson presents extracts from his new novel, *The Potts Papers*.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: NI 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: Bring Press cuttings or other "talking-points" to help create wide-ranging discussion.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Secretary: George Rodger, 17 Howburn Place, Aberdeen AB1 2XT (telephone: 01224 573034). Convener: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; telephone: 01563 526710.

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

Leicester Secular Society: Information: Secular Hall, Hummerstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 262222. Sunday meetings at 6.30pm.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, May 14, 8pm: Public meeting: *Caring for our World*. Speaker: Friends of the Earth.

Manchester Humanist Group: Information: 0161 681 760. Meetings at St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North, near Apollo Theatre. May 10: The Sea of Faith Movement. June 14: Kate Brown, of Manchester Met. University: *Religion and Social Work*. July 12: Robert Ashby, Executive Director, British Humanist Association.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Brian Snodgrass 01603 455101. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, May 16: AGM. June 20: Trevor Claxton, Minister, Norwich Spiritualist Church: *Spiritualism*. July 18: Chris Jones: *Bereavement Care*.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: Gordon Sinclair 0114 274999. 9 South View Road, Barnsley S74 9EB; 01226 743070. The Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, June 5, 8pm: Robert Ashby: *Humanism and Religion: The Next Millennium*. Humanist Week: Monday, June 17, to Saturday, June 22, (including 11am until 4pm: Literature and information stall outside Cole Bros., Barker's Pool. Display at Central Library, 1st Floor, Surrey Street.

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 0171 831 7722). Full list of lectures and Sunday concerts (6.30pm) from above address.

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

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0181 642 451. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, June 17, 7.30pm for 8pm. Peter Heales: *David Hume - a Key Figure in the Development of Humanism*.

Teesside Humanist Group: Information: J Cole 01642 559418 or R Wood 01740 650861. Friends' Meeting House, Norton Green, 7.15pm: May 8 and June 12: Discussions.

Tyneside Humanist Group: Third Thursday of each month (except August), 6.45pm, Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle. May 16: *My Hopes for Humanism* by members of the group. June 20: Probation Officer Joanna Cole: *Crime and Punishment*.

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

West Glamorgan Humanist Group: Information: 01423 842343 or write Wyn Lewis, Tan y Bryn, Oldwales, Llanrhidian, North Gower SA3 1HA. May 17: AGM. June 14: Ralph Ison: *Darwin - The Man Who Changed a Tree into a Bush*. July 28: Group Outing to Middleton Hall Botanic Gardens, Dyfed.

Worthing Humanist Group: Information: Mike Sargent, 01903 239823 or Frank Pidgeon on 01903 263867. Methodist House, North Street, Worthing.

Conway Hall Red Lion Square London

(nearest Tube: Holborn)

Thursday May 9 at 7pm

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