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Freethinker

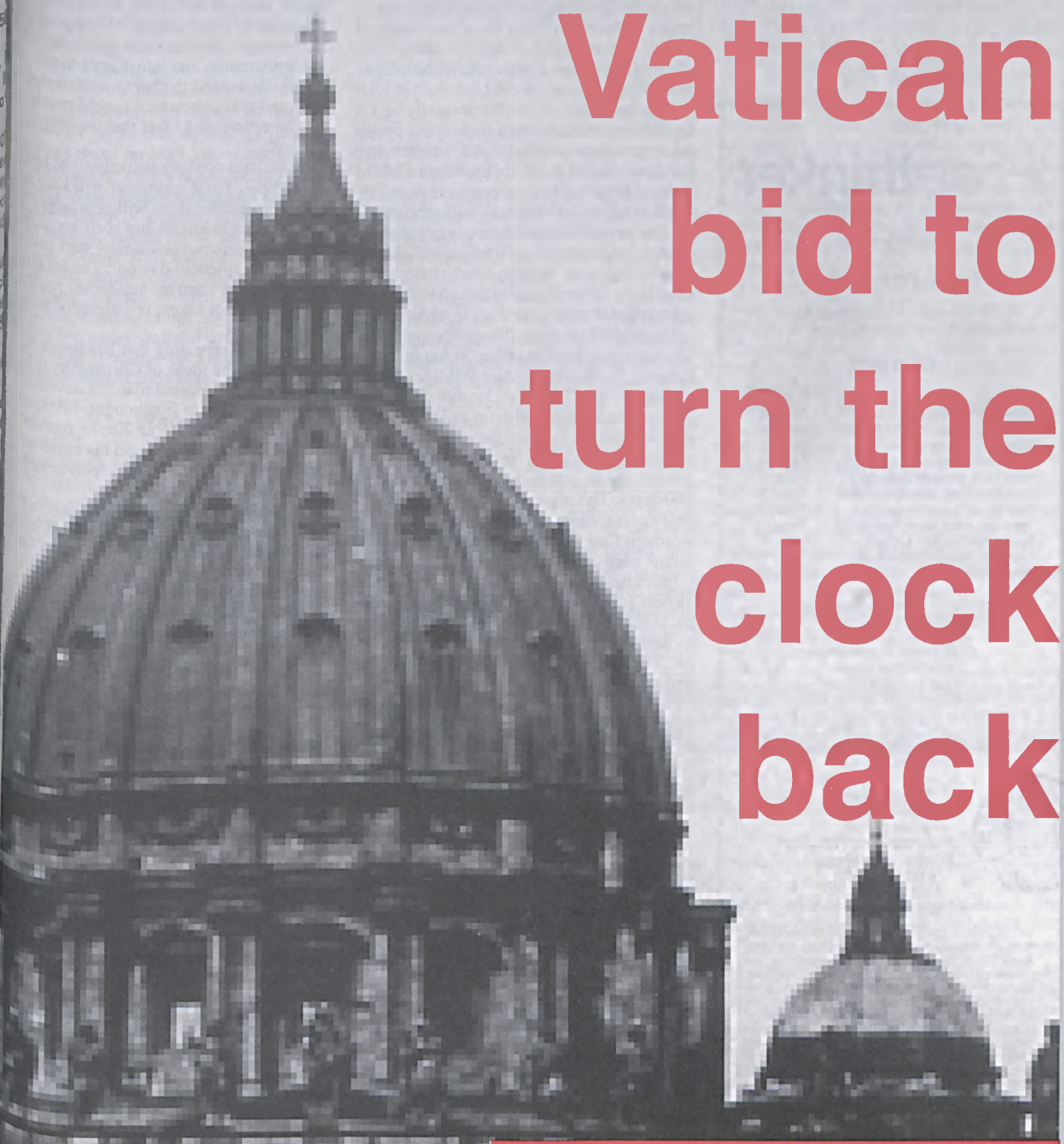
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Secular Humanist Monthly

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Vatican bid to turn the clock back



Eamonn McCann reports on reaction in the Roman Catholic Church – see centre pages

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Up Front

A Green call to arms at Northampton

THE Bradlaugh Volunteers! It sounds like a military detachment – a Secularist response to the Salvation Army, perhaps. But it is a strictly peaceable and exceedingly Green organisation which was launched by Northampton Borough Council to mark Environment Week 1996, which began on May 16.

The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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Editor: Peter Brearey

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

CONTENTS

Up Front	Page 2
Islam in Anglican pulpit	Page 3
Down to Earth: Colin McCall	Page 4
Women philosophers	Page 5
Cool look at global warming	Page 6
New NSS general secretary	Page 7
Church's arrogant certainties	Page 8
Setting up a house group	Page 10
Remembering Lord Houghton	Page 11
You're Telling Us! Letters	Page 12
New books by freethinkers	Page 15
What's On	Page 16

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Peter Brearey
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Since Bradlaugh Fields (named after Charles Bradlaugh, Northampton's atheist MP and founder of the National Secular Society) was formally designated as public open space, local people, particularly schoolchildren and conservation volunteers, have been involved in a number of projects to do with the clearing and tidying of the park, including litter-picking and hedge-laying.

The overall local aim of the Week was to set up the Bradlaugh Volunteers, the first major initiative to foster the involvement of the local community in direct work to develop the nature conservation and educational opportunities at the park.

Volunteer days are aimed primarily at developing relations with those local people who have already volunteered their services for conservation work at Bradlaugh Fields, while guided walks are open to anyone.

All Bradlaugh Volunteers will receive regular invitations to future conservation events and activities at Bradlaugh Fields, and the aim is to develop a newsletter to keep them in touch and involved in the ongoing conservation work at the park.

The project involves three principal organisations: Northampton Borough Council, Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, together with up to 150 local people from the surrounding community.

Bradlaugh Fields is Northampton's newest and largest park, covering more than 100 acres. The main area, a former private golf course, came into the ownership of the Borough Council and was designated as a public park at the end of 1994.

From the outset, local people have been closely involved in the development of the park. Early in 1995, residents voted on those features and facilities they would most like to see incorporated into the park, and the actual name was selected from a list of suggestions submitted by local people (see *The Freethinker*, October 1995).

Bradlaugh Fields is a new style of park for Northampton. Unlike the traditional parks and open spaces that already exist in the town, the emphasis here is firmly on protecting the natural, "wild" landscape and features of the park.

Parks and open spaces are always important areas for plant and animal life, particularly in a dense urban environment such as Northampton's. But Bradlaugh Fields is particularly important. As well as ancient hedgerows and ponds, badger setts and natural grassland areas, the park now contains two formal Local Nature Reserves which are managed on behalf of the Borough Council by Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust.

It is hoped that during 1996 play equipment, seating and other park furniture will be installed, and a feasibility study is being carried out on the adaptation of a central barn as a visitor centre and community facility with surrounding wildlife garden.

It is good to know that the memory of

Charles Bradlaugh is still important to the people of Northampton. As we reported in October, Councillor Roger Alder, Chairman of the Borough Council's Planning Committee, said: "Together with the statue in Abington Square, there is now a fitting memorial for him – a park for all people. And as this will not be a formal park, we chose to use the word 'Fields' as this has been a popular choice with local residents."

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

An official opening is likely to be held in June, 1997. *The Freethinker* will keep readers informed, for there will be a large contingent keen to attend any such event: perhaps local groups should now start making plans for a splendid day out. The legacy of Bradlaugh, as younger and newer readers possibly do not know, is extremely important to us.

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

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

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

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

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

Paine paperback

JOHN Keane's *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, which Colin McCall recently reviewed for *The Freethinker*, is now published in paperback by Bloomsbury at £8.99.

New chapter for 'people of the Book' as Anglicans court the Muslims



by Nicolas Walter

MUSLIMS are slowly but surely edging their way into the religious establishment of this country. In the latest example of this process, Professor Akbar Ahmed, a Muslim anthropologist at Selwyn College, Cambridge, preached a sermon in his college's Anglican chapel on May 19; extracts were published in *The Independent* the next day. The occasion should come as no surprise, since the Church of England is desperate to attract anyone, regardless of belief, though both the Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic wings must surely object to an "infidel" being given a place in such a pulpit. Nor should the content come as any surprise, since no one tries to tell the whole truth in a sermon. But it would be a pity to let the event pass without comment.

War

Professor Ahmed began by saying that "Islam is a religion of peace and compassion." But for much of its history it has been a religion of passion and war. He said that there is a close ideological and theological relationship for Muslims between Judaism, Christianity and Islam," and that "the Koran repeatedly points out that both Jews and Christians are 'people of the Book.'" But this relationship hasn't prevented all three religions from persecuting one another; the Koran also repeatedly attacks both Jews and Christians for their false doctrines, and like both the Old and the New Testaments it condemns unbelievers to death and damnation. He said that the Muslim concept of *jihad* means not "an aggressive act of religious war" but "the attempt to control our own base instincts and work towards a better, more harmonious world." But, as with the Christian Crusades, the popular concept seems to be closer to the truth. He said that on several current issues "Islam takes a strong, enlightened position." But on many more issues Islam takes a strong, unenlightened position. He said that "a basic knowledge of Islam could be taught in Western schools so that children do not grow up in ignorance of it." But such education should include not just favourable material, like his Penguin book, *Living Islam*, but also unfavourable material, like Ibn Warraq's *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (such an approach should, of course, also be applied to Christianity and other religions). Professor Ahmed presents the nice, civilised face of Islam. But, to adapt Virgil's remarks about Greek, we should beware of

Muslims bearing gifts.

Peter Brearey adds: Interestingly, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his Los Angeles speech denouncing all religious extremists, claimed (with stunning inaccuracy, be it said) that tolerance and acceptance of differences were written into the codes of all religions, but: "Sadly, the injunctions to respect, honour and tolerate those of other faiths are not always heeded."

However, Dr Carey called for a "total commitment to building bridges between different religions" (*The Daily Telegraph*, May 25). This may have been what theologians call *bullshitus episcopalis*, and nothing more, but we are told by Margaret Holness, Education Correspondent of the *Church Times*, that moves are afoot to establish a top-level forum of Christians and Muslims to discuss "critical educational issues." The group, which may be known as the Council of Christians and Muslims in Education, is likely to be in place within weeks (*CT* report, May 3).

The strategy is said to have been developed at a private meeting of senior Anglican and Muslim educationalists at Church House - held on the initiative of the Bishop of Ripon, the Rt Rev David Young. The meeting took place against a background of

growing Muslim dissatisfaction with the religious education and collective worship in the schools attended by their children (see *The Freethinker*, March 1996).

Dr Young, who is Chairman of the Anglicans' Board of Education, said he hoped the forum might help to resolve important issues without resorting to legislation: "We need to understand how Muslim parents are feeling, and listen to what Muslim educationalists are saying. The forum will be an opportunity to exchange ideas, and, as far as possible, to move towards a common view."

The Board's general secretary, Geoffrey Duncan also attended the meeting. The Muslim delegation, led by Dr Zaki Badawi, Principal of the Muslim College, included Ibrahim Hewitt, of the Association of Muslim Schools.

Members of other Christian Churches and of a wide spectrum of Muslim organisations will be invited to join the group, according to the *Church Times* report.

But there is a long way to go: one must wonder if this "wide spectrum" will include the so-called Muslim Parliament of Great Britain. According to *The Independent* (May 25), a spokesman for the "Parliament" denounced Professor Ahmed for preaching in a Christian church - an act abhorred as "a preliminary to asking Christian priests to preach in mosques."

Scouts not prepared to budge

by Keith Porteous Wood

General Secretary, National Secular Society

A BRANCH of the American Boy Scout Association has been challenged by Freethinkers for requiring belief in God as a condition of membership.

The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) has been investigating the case for the past four years. PHRC's recent efforts at mediation between the parties have met with intransigence by the Scouts, who categorically refuse to add an extra "o" to "God" in their oath. They claim that they are a private religious organisation and are therefore not subject to the anti-discrimination legislation.

The PHRC will now decide whether this case will go to a public hearing.

Margaret Downey, who visited South Place last year, has brought the case on behalf of her son. Her tenacity is to be admired in pursuing this case - an excellent example of pos-

itive Secularist action. Readers of *The Freethinker* will join me in sending her - and the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (whose magazine was the source of this article) - our best wishes.

Turning to this side of the pond, there was the dreadful case in 1994 of Roy Hartle, an Assistant District Commissioner, and his wife, Sheila, who, after exemplary service, were expelled from the Scouts for being unwilling to make a new religious oath.

I would be interested to learn from readers of the experiences of anyone who has tried to join the Scouts, Guides or similar organisations but refused to take the oath. It would also be helpful to hear about any other cases or disputes, complaints on this topic in the past, at local or national level. Of course, any requests for confidentiality will be respected.



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Monkeying around with Darwin

DARWINIAN theory is compatible with belief in God, according to my old friend Bishop Richard Harries, who used to contribute a Godspot to a paper I worked on when he was plain Reverend. He finds that "it enriches and deepens" his "understanding of how the Lord creates" – that is, "by process as opposed to 'ready made'" (*The Guardian*, April 11).

Whether it deepens his understanding of how the Lord destroys, he doesn't say.

One of the Bishop's predecessors at Oxford was the notorious "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce who, at the British Association meeting in Oxford in 1860, asked Thomas Henry Huxley if the apes were on his grandfather's or his grandmother's side. Wilberforce was, Harries says, a keen amateur scientist, who didn't reject Darwinism "out of hand."

But Huxley's reply put Wilberforce's "science" into perspective. If the question is put to me, TH said, "would I rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather or a man highly endowed by nature and possessed of great influence and yet who employs these faculties and that influence for the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion, I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape."

Richard Harries himself rightly considers "scrabbling around for evidence disproving evolutionary theory...as a waste of time." Religious people should be doing "better things." Like what, Richard?

When is a robe...?

FRIDAY April 19 was a momentous day in Trier, Germany. The holy robe, which Jesus wore on his way to Calvary, went on show for only the third time this century. But *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* was not impressed. It doesn't look like a robe, and "certainly not one from Christ's time and wardrobe. It is more like a liturgical garment from relatively recent times" and the fabric "appears a bit like felt or velvet."

Not to worry, it will still attract the devout, who will also be able to buy a bottle of "Time of Christ" for only £4 in the tourist office.

The paper also tells us that the clergy who led the mass which opened the four-week exhibition invoked the unity of the seamless

robe to call for the healing of divisions in the Christian church.

Protestants might hesitate, though, when they recall Martin Luther's denunciation of the robe as "a new swindle," "a particularly masterly rip-off."

For Trier's greatest son it would, no doubt, be just another opiate of the people.

An apt tribute

IN his *Guardian* tribute to Brian Abel-Smith, defender of the National Health Service and campaigner against poverty, who died on April 4, aged 69, Professor Julian Le Grand, of the London School of Economics, quoted Thomas Paine's "my country is the world and my religion is to do good."

Paine could have been writing about Abel-Smith, the professor said.

Simply barking

LAST month it was Muslims seeing things – in aubergines, as it happens. Now it's the Christians' turn and, naturally, they turn their eyes heavenwards.

We are in America, of course, where viewers of CNN phoned in to say what they saw when pictures of stars emerging in the Eagle nebula, taken by the Hubble telescope, were screened.

Several people said they saw Jesus Christ, reported *Harper's*; a caller from New Jersey saw the Statue of Liberty; from Toronto in Canada it wasn't Jesus, but it did look "a bit like Gene Shalit" (film reviewer on NBC). Most perceptive, however, was a viewer from Nevada, who saw a cow, a cat and "a dog barking up a tree like he's treeing a coon."

When priests' victims speak

IT DOES seem that the Roman Catholic Church's stratagem of merely moving priestly sexual offenders elsewhere is coming to an end. Not through any change in the church's own attitude (there's no evidence of that) but because victims are belatedly beginning to speak out.

The latest example to hand is from Australia, where the New South Wales Police Commission heard that three young men, former students at a Wollongong Brothers' College, said they had been sexually molested by Brother Michael Evans, the headmaster, and Father Peter Comensoli. The Commission

also heard that the Bishop of Wollongong had been informed of the allegations against one of the clergymen 10 years before the charges were laid (*The Age*, Melbourne, April 18).

One witness told how he and several other victims were asked by the church's Director of Public Affairs not to go to the police, and that the matter would be dealt with. The victims agreed to the request, but later went to the police when no action seemed to have been taken, except the transfer of suspected abusers to other schools.

Father Comensoli was jailed in 1994 for indecently assaulting two altar boys, and Brother Evans committed suicide on the day a warrant was issued for his arrest.

Second-class thinking at PO

SO William Morris is "not of sufficient stature" to be commemorated by a Post Office stamp. That is the view of "the committee that makes the decision" (*The Guardian*, April 21) whoever that may consist of. Instead we are going to have Muffin the Mule and Sooty. The only argument that I can think of for refusing Morris is that a revolutionary Socialist would fit uncomfortably with the little golden Queen's profile that is the price we have to pay for leaving out the name of the country.

BMJ diatribe beggars belief

ARE you an atheist? asks Ian Robertson, a neuropsychologist of Cambridge, in the *British Medical Journal*, March 23. "If so, the chances are that you are less happy than the average believer – especially if you are no longer a spring chicken." So "research by Michael Argyle of Wolfson College, Cambridge indicates." When, and where, Robertson doesn't bother to say. His purpose is to attack materialism and particularly Richard Dawkins as "the chief ayatollah of scientific materialism."

From that abusive start, Robertson rambles somewhat incoherently and certainly stupidly. "The Dawkinses of this world," he says, "believe that anything that can't be answered by the scientific method isn't worth talking about"; which, of course, is absurd. Worse follows – when drug-taking is referred to as one of the "logical outgrowths" of "a materialist ideology."

How the *BMJ* came to publish such an irrational diatribe – headed "The new ayatollahs – beggars belief. Dr John Marks, of Liverpool whom I have to thank for these details, wrote reply to Robertson that, to date, hasn't been printed.

Precious beyond estimate

Women Philosophers Edited by Mary Warnock. J M Dent. £20.

Review: COLIN McCALL

ety till the virtues of both sexes are founded on reason."

Mary Wollstonecraft called for boys and girls of all classes to be educated together from the ages of five to nine in a schoolroom "surrounded by a large piece of ground, in which the children might be usefully exercised" once an hour. Not only the three Rs, but also botany, mechanics, astronomy, natural history, "and some simple experiments in natural philosophy might fill up the day." "The elements of religion, history, the history of man, and politics, might also be taught by conversations in the Socratic form."

After the age of nine, there should be "instruction in some measure appropriated to the destination of each individual" in different schools, with the brighter ones studying languages, elements of science, history and politics on a more extensive scale, "which would not exclude polite literature."

That was Mary Wollstonecraft's basic "national curriculum" 254 years ago; but she would also inculcate humanity to animals; and dancing, music and drawing "might be admitted as relaxations."

No testing is mentioned but, then, her aim was "to render mankind more virtuous and happier" and "the social contract more equitable" - very different from the educational aims of Gillian Shephard and her cohorts.

Another outstanding freethinker, Harriet Martineau (1802-76), regretted that there were no philosophers applying Francis Bacon's "experimental method of inquiry into the science of mind." Science, she wrote in a letter to Henry George Atkinson, "has disabused us of our blinding and perplexing notions of spiritual anti-types of material things, and of spiritual interference in material operations; and we have arrived at the notion of chance-excluding Law in the physical operations of the universe. I want to know why it is not possible for us to pursue the same process in regard to Mental Philosophy."

Past ignorance, Martineau declared, "has mournfully impaired the conditions of human life; but the emancipation which may

be obtained, is already precious beyond estimate."

Mary Warnock introduces Victoria Lady Welby (1837-1912) as "a thoroughly independent thinker" whose long correspondence with C S Peirce "contributed to the development of pragmatism as a kind of systematic epistemology."

It is undeniable, Lady Welby wrote, "that obscurity or confusion in language, if it does not betray the same defect in thought, at least tends to create it." And Mary Whiton Calkins (1863-1930), who follows in this book, distinguished between Socrates' philosopher "as a lover of the vision of truth" and philosophy as a "reasoning discipline." Socrates was describing "the seer," she noted.

Hannah Arendt (1906-75) writes on violence; and from Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) we have some pages from *Old Age*. "My mother was as religious as my grandmother," de Beauvoir remarks, "for whom leaving the world was restful; yet she had an animal fear of death." While I am not at all sure that other animals have a fear of death, I think I know what is meant.

I certainly cannot go along with Iris Murdoch (1919-) in her belief in transcendent "beauty." "The statue is broken, the flower fades, the experience ceases," she says, "but something has not suffered from decay and mortality."

Of the remaining contemporary contributions, I particularly responded to Judith Jarvis Thomson's defence of abortion. Opponents argue that the fetus is a human being from the moment of conception. The same argument "might be said about the development of an acorn into an oak tree."

Finally, though, I must return to my first love among women philosophers, Susan Stebbing (1885-1943), whose criticism of Eddington is a model of clarity and demolition. Reading some of the physicist's "picturesque" pronouncements might bring a smile to our lips now, but they were eagerly devoured by the religiously inclined, and they could no doubt be matched today. Certainly Stebbing's logical and linguistic analysis sets a fine example for freethinkers.

Thanks to Mary Warnock's reminder, I shall go back to Susan Stebbing's works, which stimulated me half a century ago and which are, fortunately, still on my shelves.

1996 ANNUAL HUMANIST DINNER

Arranged by British Humanist Association, Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association, National Secular Society, Rationalist Press Association & South Place Ethical Society.

Guest Speakers: Dr Dorothy Rowe, well-known Author and Psychologist; Professor Sir Raymond Firth, distinguished Humanist Anthropologist; Professor Lewis Wolpert, Developmental Biologist & Popular Scientific Writer.

Saturday, June 22, 1996, 6.30 pm for 7.00 pm,
Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Tickets £20 from BHA, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. Telephone: 0171 430-0908 by Monday, June 17, 1996, latest. Please specify dietary requirements (vegetarian etc). Cash Bar or Bring Your Own (corkage charge £1.18).

MENTION of the name Eddington, today, would conjure up recollections of *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*. In the 1930s, however, it would be the Cambridge physicist Sir Arthur Eddington, author of *Science and the Unseen World* which, like Sir James Jeans' *The Mysterious Universe*, was a "scientific" best-seller, because of what Mary Warnock calls "the excitable mysticism" of its style.

A former Editor of *The Freethinker*, Chapman Cohen, wrote critical essays on both books. So, too, did L Susan Stebbing, who was then Professor of Philosophy at Bedford College, London, the first woman to hold such a post in Britain. I delighted in her *Philosophy and the Physicists* (Pelican edition) at the time, and am pleased to find an extract from it in *Women Philosophers*.

Mary Warnock chooses 17 women in all, from Anne Conway (1631-79) to the present day; provides an introduction; a 20-page chronology, which aligns the writers with the cultural and historical events of their times; and sets each extract in context.

Most philosophers these days are attached to university teaching or research departments. Not so in the past; and before the end of the nineteenth century there were no women academic philosophers, because there were no women academics. The later women, here, are academics; the others merit inclusion as being "concerned with matters of a high degree of generality, and...at home among abstract ideas." And it is the "generalising, explanatory and argumentative aspects of their works" that are presented.

Anne Conway's work was "known to Leibniz and admired by him," says Mary Warnock, and the Cambridge Platonist philosopher Henry More, who taught Conway's brother, seems to have been the first to use the term "monad" which was a feature of Leibniz's system.

Both Anne Conway and More opposed Hobbesian materialism with philosophical, if unconvincing arguments.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) is known to the modern reader through Claire Tomalin's biography and reprints of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, from which we can date the feminist movement, "a determination among free-thinking women to unite to claim their rights."

Mary Warnock reminds us that Horace Walpole called its author "a philosophising serpent" and "a hyena in petticoats" but who cares about him nowadays?

"If marriage be the cement of society," we read in the extract from *A Vindication*, "mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, nor will women ever fulfil the peculiar duties of their sex till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free...marriage will never be held sacred till women, by being brought up with men, are prepared to be their companions rather than their mistresses..." And "virtue will never prevail in soci-

Cool look at global warming

RELIGION and politics are declared unsuitable for conversation in some circles – those too polite to mention the subjects or, the less mannered ones, where they are likely to raise arguments which may progress to bellicosity. So what's left to talk about? Well, the weather has always been a favourite subject in Britain. The author of this book quotes Bob Hope on its variability: "Where else in the world can you get four climates in one day?" But now, it seems, even many an Englishman's favoured topic is not free from political, or even religious, considerations.

Antony Milne is a Freethinker who has contributed to these columns. Now he takes his freethinking into opposition to the environmentalists – the greenhouse-mongers as he calls them – and what he sees as "a new kind of pastoral religion."

Milne quotes a variety of sources which claim there is no evidence in the US that there has been a significant warming or chilling over the past century; no evidence for rising sea levels; no need for action to curb greenhouse gas emis-

***Beyond the Warming* by Antony Milne. Prism Press (UK). £8.99. ISBN 1-85327-098-9.**

Review: DENIS COBELL

sions. Apparently, solar effects may be as much to blame for any overall climatic changes.

Milne rejects the idea, touted by the greenhouse-mongers, that there is evidence of an anthropogenic factor. Man is *not* changing the environment more than is nature. What he does has far less effect than those who support arguments about the dangers from increased carbon dioxide emission would have us believe.

This book confronts the common view accepted by many science writers. Paul Simon, author of the recent *Weird Weather*, takes a quite opposite view: "Waste carbon dioxide from power stations and traffic is building up a blanket over the atmosphere which is trapping heat and consequently making the earth hotter."

This seems to concur with the view Milne put forward in an earlier book, *Our Drowning World* (1989) in which he stated: "Man is creat-

ing a hothouse earth...a threat ...when fossil fuels are burned, living trees are hacked down, massive amounts of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere."

So what has brought about Milne's change of mind? He has to admit that, in contrast to astronomy, meteorology is mathematically the most imprecise and unreliable. Vegetation, he avers, has moved backwards and forwards throughout history. Ozone has nothing to do with warming – skin cancer is the scare. Carbon dioxide is not accumulating, for the net absorbers are greater than the net emitters, according to some scientists. Thus he finds forecasts often cancel each other out. Milne also finds little support for the warming hypothesis in John Gribbin's work. The role of the oceans in cooling is generally underestimated. Paradoxically, if there is a global warming, Britain may get colder winters: the melting of the Polar ice cap will push the Gulf Stream coming across the Atlantic to keep our shores warm, southwards, leaving us surrounded by colder seas.

Milne opposes the anthropogenic idea of man being above nature, quotes, *inter alia*, Nigel Calder against those who believe in the greenhouse effect, and finds it a weak argument which there is no sense. The "effect" comes from minor perturbations, where there has been an overstatement by some purveyors of doom in order to get funding. Milne sees some conspiracy, with all the liberal establishments including the Church of England, jumping on this popular bandwagon. He argues that there is just not sufficient evidence, over a prolonged period, to support the theory of a build-up of carbon dioxide, and with it the greenhouse effect: there is little certainty in the prediction – chaos theory takes over, where laws cannot be applied nor forecasts made.

Our pagan past is invoked. Before the deity regularly opposed in these pages was invented there was more sense. Our dependence on solar deity, and Sun worship, at least put man in his place – dependent on nature. All religious festivals rely on dates marking the changing natural seasons; but how far has man controlled or interfered with natural processes? How far is this to our benefit, or disadvantage? We must ask with Richard Lindzen, "look back on past (greenhouse) proclamations as hopelessly naive," or, as Milne concludes, "we may, of course, not think that at all."

Reading Milne's critique of the anthropogenic principle reminded me of a powerful passage in Bertrand Russell's *A Free Man's Worship*: "Brief and powerless is man's life. He has him and all his race the slow, sure doom fall pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way."

Much as I empathise with Milne's view, I find that nearer to home, and our own environment, I am wary of the risks we may be taking. London was shrouded by smogs earlier in the century, resulting in many deaths from bronchitis. Clean Air Acts have seen this sort of thing drastically decline. One other aspect of the book worries me: it is based on extensive references from the "quality" newspapers, and from *New Scientist* – rarely on original research. I guess we all know how journalists variously interpret research!

Sentimental journey

PETER GAMBLE is a retired Anglican clergyman and former educationalist whose charming autobiography, *The More We Are Together*, I reviewed in these pages in April 1994.

Trained at Ripon Hall under H D A Major, and ordained by Bishop Barnes, he bears all the hallmarks of these "Modernist" mentors. Their programme, which is still Gamble's own, was to give, where possible, "a rational explanation of what is presented in the Gospels as miraculous." Gamble otherwise "leaves the reader free either to accept...as true, or dismiss as superstition" what he finds there. He claims also to seek a middle course between the hyper-rationalism of Reimarus, the mythicism of Strauss and the dogmatic literalism of the Fundamentalists. Sadly, his approach already seems rather old-fashioned in the light of critical studies of the New Testament which have appeared in the past two or three decades. His portrait of Jesus tends to be a sentimental one: and he is sympathetic to gnosticism.

Limitation

Perhaps the most serious limitation of Peter Gamble's pamphlet (apart from its extreme brevity at 36 pages) is the author's too-ready acceptance of the traditional view that the Gospels represent genuine eyewitness testimony of Jesus. He thus makes little attempt to consider the implications of even the Synoptic Gospels being the products of third and fourth generation Christians whose developed beliefs already dictated what they imagined must have happened,

***Jesus Christ Uncluttered* by Peter Gamble. £2.75 from Adrian Room, 12 High St, Stamford PE9 2LF.**

Review: DANIEL O'HARA

rather than being based on actual events. He is, however, not only fully aware of the difficulties of harmonising the conflicting traditions within the Gospels, but also draws attention to at least some of them in ways which properly challenge conservative theology.

On the other hand, his speculations that John the Baptist may have been educated by "Essenes" at Qumran who "produced the Dead Sea Scrolls" betrays a touching reliance on a romantic notion which has been exploded by modern research into those documents. (See, for example, Norman Golb's recent book: *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?* which I have reviewed in the latest issue of *New Humanist*).

A brief end note on the Turin Shroud refers in passing to its recent, but untenable, association with Leonardo da Vinci, a subject the author considers "too controversial for this little book." He might at least have referred his readers to Joe Nickell's excellent book *Inquest on the Turin Shroud* (published by Prometheus Books), which not only fully confirms the view that it is indeed a mediaeval artifact, but also demonstrates that it existed a hundred years before Leonardo was born, thus ruling out any possibility that he painted the image on the cloth!

Editor Peter Brearey profiles the man whose new job is to help guide the National Secular Society into a new century

Radical campaigner in a business suit

SMALL clouds of white smoke have floated over Bradlaugh House – and the National Secular Society has a new General Secretary in place of Terry Mullins, who has retired after holding the post from July, 1979.

He is Keith Porteous Wood, 48, who combines an impressive business background with wide campaigning experience and knowledge of new technology as it relates to media and publishing work.

The movement is fortunate in having secured the services of a Fellow of the Chartered Association of Certified Accountants who has spent 25 years in senior managerial and professional roles covering administration, accounting, legal and company secretarial issues.

Keith is active in the Humanist Forum (the movement's "umbrella" organisation) and is auditor of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. A Life Member of both the British Humanist Association and the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, he also belongs to the Rationalist Press Association. He enjoys close links with IHEU and US Freethinkers and with Liberty, Charter 88 and Stonewall. He is a member of the Howard League for Penal Reform and of Greenpeace.

Campaigns

The list of campaigns in which he has participated is formidable, and includes:

Pensions equality: He was instrumental in setting up a working party addressing the significant financial discrimination suffered by unmarried partners over pension issues, compared with those who are married. It has already persuaded the Inland Revenue to propose a suitable policy revision. Next stages include voluntary, then – hopefully – statutory, equality for occupational, private and "state" superannuation schemes.

West Highland Line: This campaign to save the Euston to Fort William sleeper service was successful, despite being thought at the start – by proponents and opponents alike – as being practically hopeless. Keith was genuinely concerned about the economic well-being of the area (he was born in Scotland and his parents live in the North-West of Scotland). He was involved with policy formation and lobbying, which, significantly for his future NSS work, included organising a public meeting in the House of Commons and drafting news releases.

Sex education in schools: He produced separate submissions to the Department of Education on behalf of BHA, GALHA and Stonewall to:

- Remove parents' right of withdrawal of children from sex education classes.
- Increase awareness of the significantly higher teenage suicide rate for lesbians and gays.
- Replace with constructive ones the pejorative references in sex education guidelines to homosexuality.

This campaign was only partially successful because the offer of consultation over new guidelines drafted by the Roman Catholic John Patten was purely cosmetic.

Age of Homosexual Consent: Keith has worked closely with Stonewall, lobbying ministers and MPs in this campaign, which was



● Keith Porteous Wood

instrumental in reducing the age of homosexual consent from 21 to 18. He edited the submission to the European Court of Human Rights for the reduction of the age of consent to 16. On May 21, this case passed its first hurdle towards judgement in that Court.

SACRE: He was involved with the campaign to have the Humanist SACRE member at Ealing reinstated – and offered to take her place when she declined to stand again.

Voluntary Euthanasia: He continues to campaign for legislation.

Civil Liberties: Keith has worked to improve the Press Complaints procedure and in support of people subjected to Press harassment, and has spoken against leaks to the Press of confidential information obtained by police. He has

also criticised the denial of jury trial and legal aid for serious cases through use of obscure bye-laws.

Housing: Partners' rights on the death of the tenant is one of the issues about which he feels strongly and where progress has recently been made.

The Armed Forces: He has backed campaigns for the removal of criminal sanction on homosexual activity in the Merchant Navy and the Armed Forces and for an end to the policy of automatic dismissal of service personnel found to be homosexual.

Transport: Keith has campaigned in favour of better public transport and the Channel Tunnel Rail-link – and against Heathrow Terminal 5.

Happily, in this day and age, Keith is computer-literate, with extensive and practical knowledge of word-processing, desk-top publishing (including attractive design of leaflets and booklets) and spreadsheets.

He has been responsible for the publishing of nine books from first proof stage, including design and distribution. Low costs per copy have been achieved through in-house origination, the innovative use of modern technology and also by robust negotiation with printers. His latest effort in this area concerns publication of his partner Terry Sanderson's new book, *The Potts Papers* (see Page 15).

Priorities

His media and publishing involvement has included some radio work and assistance with preparation for appearances in radio and TV programmes, in both studio and outside broadcasts.

An impressive CV by any standard. But we must give him a chance to get his feet under the table, to become established. I expect he thinks that he came at a bad time, as there is a full year's accounts to be prepared for audit. He has other time-consuming tasks on his list of priorities, including improving systems and formalising the NSS's role as landlord at Bradlaugh House. This will involve a great deal of research and negotiation with our sister-organisations, lawyers and surveyors.

However, the campaigning is already under way from Keith's office up there in the "Gods" at Bradlaugh House. He is engaged in battle with the Advertising Standards Authority over certain ludicrous claims by religions; *The Freethinker* will keep you informed of progress. And you will see his piece on Page 3 in which he lays the groundwork for a possible future campaign concerning the Scouts and Guides and their religious oath.

Keith may be contacted on 0171 404 3126.

'The Vatican now literally won't touch ideas which were

A Church still with arrogant

from EAMONN McCANN in Derry

A TELLING indication of the way the Catholic Church in Ireland is reacting to the crises now surrounding it came with a gathering under the chairmanship of Cathal Daly at a country house in Dundrum, Co. Tipperary, during the week-ending February 17.

At a series of workshops and plenary sessions, "facilitated" by the newly-appointed Bishop of Limerick, Donal Murray, and the leading Jesuit Joe Dargan, the Irish bishops spent four days discussing a "crisis of dissent" in the Church and planning the restoration of the Church's authority.

Despite much recent talk about openness, transparency, dialogue and so on, the Dundrum meeting took place in strict secrecy. The gathering had obviously been scheduled some time in advance. It will have required considerable, detailed preparation and exchange of information – finalising a date, setting an agenda, making catering arrangements for their lordships' needs. But there was no advance announcement. Only Andy Pollock of the *Irish Times* caught wind that something was up, and referred briefly and in general terms to the upcoming meeting.

It wasn't until the following week that there was even a whisper of what had transpired. *The Irish Catholic* (February 22) told on its front page: "Bishops prepare for year 2000 in secret session...Exclusive." The story was scarcely enlightening. What was provided was a summary of the "mood and tone of the gathering" in the form of a quote from the Auxiliary Bishop of Cork, John Buckley:

"It was a joyful period of relaxation and reflection. We emphasised the essence of our mission which is to present the person of Jesus Christ to the people of our time who are searching for a meaning and purpose in life. The search and the message of Jesus are made for each other. It is through Jesus that we realise the greatness of our humanity."

There was also a reference to the desirability of peace in the North. And that, for what it's worth, is as much as the people in the pews have been permitted to know.

It may come as a surprise to some that "we rule, you need know nothing" is still the approach in 1996. But it shouldn't really surprise us. In Ireland, as elsewhere, the main

priority of Catholic Church bosses at the moment is to re-impose order on an unruly flock. In this context, the bishops will have seen the Cleary, Casey and Comiskey affairs, the various money and sex-abuse scandals and the revelations of savagery by religious to children as unwelcome, complicating factors. But it will not have deflected them from their objective of re-establishing Church authority over the people. On the contrary, it is more likely to have hardened their determination to get back to the basics of order, discipline and obedience.

This is not speculative analysis. It's to put succinctly and in a certain context what the Church leaders themselves say they are at. The vague hopes often expressed by Catholic liberals of "repentance followed by renewal" and of the Church transforming itself, by "listening," into a "church of the people," are the product of light minds, and lacking in real substance.

The authentic voice of the contemporary Catholic Church comes through in an interview in the current issue of the Redemptorist magazine *Reality* with Southern Irish Church chief Desmond Connell, Archbishop of Dublin. The problem of Catholics refusing to take Church leadership on trust is "very serious" he admits. There has been "a kind of politicisation of the Church," he complains, with some of its members coming to believe in the possibility of a "loyal opposition" to the Pope and the bishops.

This, he argues, is to misunderstand the fundamental nature of the Church as a "mystery of life," embodying unquestionable truths to be defined only by "the successor of Peter."

What this means in practice is evident in developments in the "universal Church" which might at first sight seem unconnected to experience in Ireland. During his recent visit to Latin America, for example, John Paul told journalists travelling with him of his satisfaction that "Liberation theology was no longer seen as a problem...Following the fall of Communism, liberation theology has fallen a little, too. The bishops confirm that ideologies are no longer a force or a problem."

When the Brazilian Franciscan Leonardo Boff, one of the talismanic leaders of the "Church of the Poor" in the region, protested that the ideas of liberation theology could be contained within Catholic orthodoxy, the Vatican's chief doctrinal spokesman, Joaquín Navarro-Valls, slapped him down. Whatever Boff might mean by "liberation theology," "Priests in politics and a marxist basis for analysis, these two things are over."

John Paul was welcomed on arrival in San Salvador by the successor to Archbishop Oscar Romero, the outspoken prelate assassinated by a military death-squad on the altar of the city's cathedral in 1980. The new Archbishop of San Salvador is Fernando Saenz Lacalle, appointed by John Paul last year. He is a member of the far-Right group *Opus Dei*. His previous posting but one was as head chaplain to the Salvadorean military.

Five days before the Pope arrived, Saenz had sacked the Rector of the San Salvador diocesan seminary, Luis Coto, known as a rather mild, academic supporter of liberation theology. Thus, John Paul did not have to endure the embarrassment of being greeted by Fr Coto when he called at the seminary. The Vatican now literally won't touch ideas which were regarded as debatable, at least, just a decade or so ago.

There are other straws in the unsettling wind. Robert Nugent and Jeannine Gramick have just been ordered by the Vatican to submit written accounts of the beliefs underlying their long-time ministry to gays in the US. Nugent is a priest in the Salvatorian order, Gramick a nun with the Notre Dame sisters. They have been conducting a "Catholic ministry to homosexuals" for 24 years, giving workshops and seminars on the problems encountered by both gay and straight Catholics in handling issues of sexual orientation within the Church. Their ministry has mainly been carried out at the invitation and under the supervision of individual dioceses.

But not for much longer by the sound of it. Two years ago, the Vatican established a commission under Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida to look into Nugent and Gramick's activities. The commission held three lengthy meetings with the two religious and their

ere regarded as debatable, at least, just a decade or so ago...'

bristling certainty



● St Peter's in Rome – the heart of the Roman Catholic Church.

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

vincial superiors and, in February last
submitted a report to Rome. Now
has been in touch with Nugent and
again to relay an instruction from
the Congregation for Institutes of
Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic
Life (the body which controls religious
orders), telling them to set out in writing their
views on two questions to do with homosex-
ual activity and one to do with homosexual
orientation.

In the instruction, the congregation tells the
two that the views attributed to them "may
have created an ambiguity which has caused
confusion in the minds of some people."
Connoisseurs of Vatican-speak will be in lit-
tle doubt from this what's to happen next:
Nugent and Gramick will be required to
re-examine their views and desist from their min-
istry, or be silenced.

These are not isolated occurrences. A trawl
through the Catholic Press any week now
reveals an enormous concentration on the
necessity of authority and the impermissibil-
ity of dissent. The letters page of the *Catholic*
Times has recently featured regular dire
warnings that hellfire awaits Catholics who
challenge papal authority. The once-
respected *Universe* can now (February 18),
without any appearance of irony, splash a
headline on the front page urging, "BAN
ALL TALK OF WOMEN PRIESTS"; (the
story underneath begins: "Primary school
teachers who publicly promote the ordination
of women could face official sanction from
the Church.")

The *Irish Catholic* (February 22) pours a
torrent of contemptuous abuse on a book of
essays, *Authority in the Church*, edited by the
Irish Catholic commentator Sean Mac
Beatha. A contribution by Professor Mary
McAleese – Pro-Chancellor of Queen's
University, Belfast, a mainstream Catholic
and an adviser to the hierarchy at the Forum
for a New Ireland – is splattered with scorn.
Professor McAleese's contention that a
Catholic can raise questions about Church
teaching and still remain in good standing,
The *Irish Catholic* responds with New
Testament texts: "Anyone who preaches to
you a gospel other than you were first given
is to be under God's curse... Hand such a
man over to Satan to be destroyed as far as
his natural life is concerned."

(Again, it's perhaps worth saying that
there's no hint this stuff is intended to be

taken with a pinch of irony).

In his own column, the Editor of *The Irish Catholic*, David Quinn, provides weekly evi-
dence of the Catholic Church retreating
behind a circle of certainty from which it
proposes to issue forth and re-establish its
unique right to control the ideological des-
tinies of the land. A certain mild persecution
mania emerges as Quinn crouches down
behind defensive dogma for protection from
the slings and arrows of the erroneous ele-
ments whooping anti-Catholicism all around.

"What adds up to anti-Catholicism?" he
asks. And answers: "I would have to say that
if you don't believe in objective right and
wrong then you're well on your way. If you
don't believe in hierarchies, then you're gone
a considerable step further. If you don't
believe in the priesthood further still..."

(This is so lacking in logic that it's tempt-
ing to dismiss Quinn as of no account. But he
was appointed Editor of *The Irish Catholic*
late last year specifically because the most
influential of the hierarchy, particularly
Desmond Connell, wanted somebody to steer
the paper steadily in the direction the "offi-
cial" Church wanted).

Given his distinctive definition of the term,
it's not surprising that Quinn sees "anti-
Catholicism" everywhere. The only newspa-

per in Britain or Ireland which he seems able
to identify as definitely not anti-Catholic is
The Daily Telegraph. As for Ireland... "The
newspaper etc in question could be sensation-
ally anti-Catholic, e.g. *The Sunday*
Independent, or sophisticatedly so, e.g. *The*
Irish Times... *The Irish Times* is more anti-
Catholic than *The Sunday Indo*. Its ideology
is set four-square against it. Failure to recog-
nise our media as in the main anti-Catholic
stems from the fact that its anti-Catholicism
is so all-pervading, we are injured against it."

This is the mindset of the Catholic Church
at the moment, and not just in Ireland. Far
from being humbled by its recent experi-
ences, it bristles with arrogant certainty as it
rises above the material world to escape the
sins it is besieged by, retreating deeper into
its own councils away from the sight of scan-
dal, all the while toughening up its ideas and
renovating its machinery for the requirements
of the future.

The aspiration of Irish liberals has never
been to extirpate the Catholic Church and
end its influence. What they've always want-
ed is a new accommodation with the Church.
But all the indications are that this is no go.
The furtive cabal which descended on
Dundrum is not talking terms. Sooner or later
we'll have to have it out with them.

Bromley's Diana Elvin with some useful ideas on the setting-up of house groups

Where two or three are gathered together in Humanism's name...

YOU don't need many people for a house group – get any two or three Humanists together and they'll start a discussion.

At a large meeting with outside speakers it is possible to attend for some time without actually hearing Humanism mentioned at all. Where there are less than a dozen and everyone only talks about Humanism then one learns quickly what it means to others and how they make it part of their daily life.

But there are snags. I learned the hard way that you need to be absolutely ready a whole hour before take off since anything that can go wrong will do so.

One day the first arrival was a man whose glasses promptly fell apart. This necessitated much crawling around on hands and knees searching the multi-coloured floor for the missing teeny-weeny screw. My hands and knees, obviously.

Credit where it's due, he did get down and grope, discovering many anonymous bits of filth. I had not, alas, Hoovered. I'm a busy woman – that's why I have patterned carpets. He was worried about his notes, so carefully prepared, so impossible to read. I worried about how he was going to drive home. But it was OK. He sent me off to get thread — *matching* thread — and tied the specs neatly together. I never did find time to put on make-up or shoes.

We used to watch and then discuss videos (including the Humanist one; a TV programme that visited Sutton group), Dawkins, Darwin and Dutch euthanasia.

Numbers fluctuated wildly as people came, said how delighted they were to find us...and then went away for ever.

But after about six months we had a hard core of pleasant and helpful regulars including three lured by our stall at an Alternative Fair.

We now took turns to introduce discussion about aspects of Humanistic living. Some found this easy, but there were others not used to expressing and defending their ideas. I was sure that, with encouragement, even the most reluctant would do well and so gain confidence and this proved to be the case.

Addressing a small, friendly group is good practice for putting our ideas to a wider world. Few people out there even know what Humanism means; others are strongly against it. I feel we must speak out whenever we can.

We covered many topics. An officiant offered the controversial "Gay weddings – for better or for worse." One newcomer who did not approve of homosexuality said he enjoyed the "intelligent debate."

We asked "Should Humanists celebrate Christmas?" (deciding we could do so with a clear conscience due to the festival's pagan origins).

After we had been meeting monthly for a year, I thought it might be useful and pleasant to gather informally some weekends. There was general agreement, so the Chair tried to find the most convenient time.

"Saturday morning?" No response.

"Saturday afternoon?" Mumbles of shopping, visiting.

"Sunday morning?" Vague, uncommitted, mutterings.

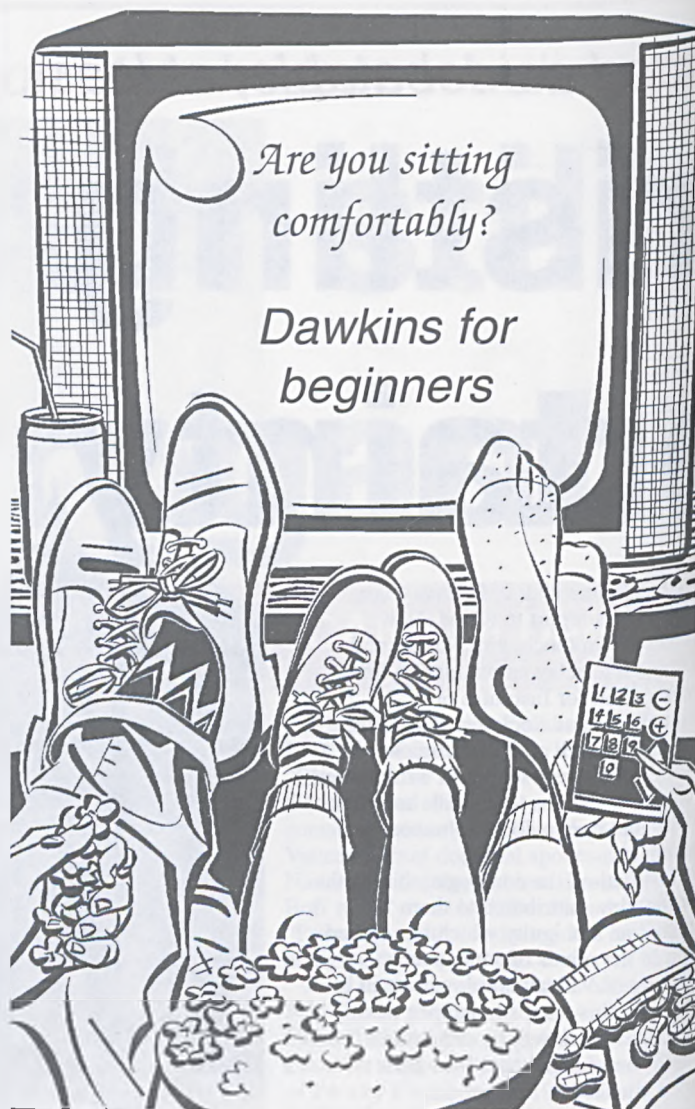
"Well, that settles it," said the Chair, who didn't like to be late home. "Sunday afternoon, carried unanimously."

There was a good turnout the first Sunday and still we flourish, arrival being any time after 2pm. We follow the need of the moment, perhaps discussing what our attitude should be to a news item.

We have social events here. The first time everyone brought food to share which only involved me in dusting the dining room.

Then a fellow vegan offered "Humanist but not vegetarian – what a contradiction," which gave an opportunity to provide ample evidence that vegan food can be varied, tasty, and attractive...a lot more work but a revelation to many.

Recently we celebrated the arrival of Spring with food, flowers and party games, enjoying a



relaxing time together.

We have gradually acquired a committee, but there is no formal proposing and seconding. Members just agree to tackle what must be done, with the proviso that they can easily opt out. I can't claim eager volunteers but most people can do, and do well, much more than they realise and just need a gentle nudge – and perhaps a light touch on the thumbscrews.

I have to do everything I can't unload but I'm working on that.

Having two members move away for some months was quickly followed by two more putting their homes up for sale. This was a serious blow, but we decided to produce a newsletter to keep in touch. This may well prove a good way of imparting information internally, too, since no one ever reads the notices I spread out so carefully (they cover them with coffee cups).

Such was the support for it, and the skill of the (reluctant) editor, that the first issue was out by the next monthly meeting.

We now have headed notepaper for contacting the outside world – the logo and telephone numbers (main BHA and local) put on at headquarters and photocopied here.

The benefits to the group of a home meeting are many. The benefit to you, the householder? Hard to put into words. The best I can come up with is that, despite the worry and hard work, it has, without doubt, proved the most interesting, satisfying, and immensely rewarding project.

If you have nerves of steel, time to spare and a real commitment to making it work – what's stopping you?

FREETHINKERS ON THE NET!

WE can't thank you enough, Freethinkers, for your splendid response to last month's appeal. Please keep it up; not only are postal charges increasing this month but also – and this is good if costly news – arrangements are being made for *The Freethinker* to join the Internet, and we are to have an e-mail address.

This historic move will mean that our atheist message will be available on-screen to people throughout the world – and that they will have a speedy means of making contact with us. But it costs money, lots of money by our standards, to join the 21st Century.

Please, if you believe in the message we're spreading, send cheques and POs (made payable to G W Foote & Company) to: The Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP

Many thanks to: A Atkinson, £1; J Davies and K P Shah, £2 each; L Smith, £3; G Meaden, £4; A Negus, N Davidge, C Fletcher, H Pugh, D Lennie, D Roberts, R Tutton, H Bowman, C Bondi, A Zakrzewski, A Adler, J Ancliffe, P Pullen, R J Hale, S Rowe, J Simpson, H McDougall, G Lyons, F Edgerton, W Simcock, R J M Tolhurst, D Redhead, C Begg, R Tee, R Evans, C R Wason, B Mercer, R Walker, J Glenister, R Ison, E Hammond, G Dunphy, E Beeson, B Hayes, T MacDonald, W Sefton, F Pidgeon, J Gibson, R Mann, £5 each; K Haughton, £8; J Millichamp, W Curry, H Barrett, J Bell, H Madoc-Jones, C Cotton, N Thompson, A Clarke, R Peirce, P Parris, J Blackmore, D Yeulett, S Jaiswal, C Richardson, N Potter, A Martin, F Evans, F Fish, I Chandler, R Kempe, H Walkey, J Little, D Levett, £10 each; A Wright, P Windeatt, J Radford, £15 each; A Stevens, J Lippitt, M Hill, R Gerber, £20; D Crawford, £40; C Bayliss, £50.

Total to May 22: £658

Lord Houghton: 'free as a bird' and feminist

LONG ago, there were Labour politicians who did not live in mortal terror of what the *Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Sport* and the *Daily Express* and papers of that sort might do to their minds. They didn't rush to open the Leader's spin-doctor before Lord Houghton of Sowerby – Douglas Houghton – who died on May 2.

He "dared" to be an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society and he and his wife, Vera, were guests-of-honour at the Society's April, 1977, annual dinner, when a toast to the couple was proposed by another outspoken politician, Lena Jeger MP.

It was appropriate that Vera should have equal "billing" with her husband, for she was very much an equal partner in the campaigns which arose from their deep convictions.

As Madeleine Simms wrote in her appreciation (*The Guardian*, May 6): "The greatest of Douglas Houghton's many achievements was his minds of many of us will be the impetus he gave to the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act, the most important measure affecting the health and welfare of women since the passing of the National Health Service legislation. He was actively associated with this cause from the time he entered Parliament in 1949, and in 1962 he was one of only 29 parliamentary supporters of Joseph Reves, who unsuccessfully introduced the first Bill on this subject to much abuse from the religious fundamentalist lobby."

In 1960 he gave active support to Kenneth Robinson, who tried to introduce a similar Bill which was also talked out by a group of Roman Catholic MPs. During this time, his wife Vera was Chairman of the Abortion Law Reform Association and together they made a remarkable and tireless team which earned the admiration of Lord Silkin and Sir

David Steel and all who were subsequently associated with this then unfashionable cause. *Lord Houghton's life and work on behalf of women over half a century shows how very much more important it is to have feminists in Parliament, rather than just women.*" My emphasis.

Douglas Houghton was born in Derbyshire on August 11, 1898. He was secretary of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation 1922-60, an Alderman of the late, lamented London County Council 1947-49, and Member of Parliament for Sowerby, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, 1949-74. He was on the General Council of the TUC, 1952-60; Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, 1963-64; Privy Councillor 1964; Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 1964-66; Minister Without Portfolio 1966-67; Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party 1967-70 and 1970-74.

He was created Baron Houghton of Sowerby in 1974, and, as Tam Dalyell wrote in *The Independent* for May 3, then began an "Indian Summer" which lasted for 20 years.

Houghton announced: "I am free as a bird to pursue the issues that I care about." And those issues included reform of the constitution, population and development, the House of Lords Industry Study Group, and teachers' pay, on which he chaired the 1974 inquiry.

But two issues, in particular, dominated the evening of Houghton's life, recalled Dalyell – animal welfare and abortion law reform: "No vice-president of the RSPCA was more active, and no abortion law reformer more vigilant."

He was also concerned about the imposition of religion on children in schools. On June 23, 1977, he wrote to the National Secular Society's G N Deodhekar: "When I was a boy it was the Sunday school that taught religion and not the day schools and now the whole responsibility of religious education is thrust upon the State system."

Houghton was writing to Deodhekar in a

period when Lord Longford had been campaigning in the House for more qualified teachers of religion and Lord Blake had been complaining to his fellow peers about the lack of adequate Christian content in the curriculum.

Houghton said of the latter occasion: "I may say that having put up with a good deal that I listened to in the debate, I deeply regretted afterwards that I had not cancelled everything else I had on for that day and put my name down for a speech on this subject. One does have to be prepared however for a bitter experience. Those are the days upon which I feel the House of Lords should be abolished."

It appeared that only Lords Brockway and Ritchie Calder "had anything to say on secular lines," and: "I used to think the House of Lords had a strong progressive element in it but it no longer seems to be there. Whether the progressives have lost heart, I don't know..."

On religious education in schools, he told Deodhekar: "There is obviously a great deal of work to be done before we can shake off the traditional attitudes of the establishment on this subject. It does not, of course, help that we have a Roman Catholic Minister for Education. The 1944 Act in relation to religious instruction in schools was of course the product of the emotion and fear of wartime."

"From the beginning of the compulsory education system in 1870 to 1944 there was no requirement for religious instruction in state schools except those of a denominational character, which did not begin to get State aid until 1903. I think this whole subject is in a real tangle in everybody's minds and I think the attitudes of a great many parents is absolutely contemptible. Many of them have no religion themselves and have a vague idea that children should be taught about religion but they want the schools to do it and not themselves."

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose, as our Euro-partners often remark. PB

You're telling us!

Rushdie, the fatwah and other matters

IN 1988 Salman Rushdie – pictured on the cover of last month's issue of *The Freethinker* – published *The Satanic Verses*, a work of fiction that quoted from the Koran, the holy book of Muslims – but he also quoted from Lionel Bart's verses from *Living Doll* and Kenneth Tynan's novel *Tynan Right and Left*.

Rushdie's novel was published in Britain and America, which have miniscule Muslim populations, yet Iran's religious dictatorship issued a *fatwah* calling upon the faithful to murder Rusdie for "blasphemy" – a death threat that is in itself an international crime, not the act of a civilised state, worthy of UN membership. It is doubtful if one-in-a-million Muslims has even now read *The Satanic Verses*.

Let's consider "blasphemy," impiousness or gross irreverence towards God. To offend anyone, it is necessary to show that such a person exists. Has anyone proved that any god "exists," except in the imagination of the faithful? If I were in the dock for "blasphemy" – still an indictable offence in 20th Century Britain – I would demand evidence of the person that I had offended. I'd have a damn long wait for his/her/its appearance!

And, surely, for mere mortals to punish others for disrespect towards their all-powerful god is in itself "blasphemy" and human presumption. It is asserting that the almighty one is incapable of dealing with his enemies! "Blasphemy" is a victimless crime.

Of course, there is no place in a democratic world for a theocratic state. It is a denial of human freedom. It oppresses the mind as well as the body. Religion – organised superstition – within the framework of a state is clearly a denial of human rights. To impose religious tenets is an admission that they are not universally acceptable. It has been said that religion is man's attempt to communicate with the weather: it is certainly not a philosophy for a thinking person. The mind of Man is bounded only by the Universe.

Tradition becomes religion, religion becomes law. In that way, human advance is held back. Medieval practices are enshrined in today's laws. In Arab countries amputation is still a punishment, as is stoning to death, and even in India wife-burning is not unheard of. The worst crimes in history have been perpetrated in the name of religion, and today it is still the source of the grossest atrocities and injustices.

All religions begin with a simple thesis but with the arrival of "teachers," priests and officials it becomes overlaid with the trappings of ritual and ceremony, devices invented to increase the power and justify the existence of men, usually, who interpolate themselves between the god and the worshippers so that today religion is a multi-billion dollar business, run by a hierarchy in gold-threaded garments, living in palaces and exercising unrepresentative power in government. I have often thought that if, as so many Christians believe, there is a Second Coming, the simple carpenter's son, probably in modern terms a Communist, would be denounced and driven out by these inflated functionaries, so far are they removed from

what was the religion of the poor ("sooner a camel could pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man enter the kingdom of heaven").

In all religions there are those who recognise the gross corruption of the original tenets of their faith and strive to return to simple observances, shunning the trapping of religious empires. Such were the Protestants, then the Non-Conformists and the Free Church, and in South America the brave priests of liberation theology. After all, Christianity arrived on that continent at the point of a Spanish or Portuguese sword and was established after the carnage of the simple animistic people who once occupied that part of the planet.

Dissatisfaction with organised religion is widespread. People in millions are turning hither and thither looking for a creed to live by, a belief that has some meaning for them. They should get enlightenment from the educational system but that is dominated by organised religion. They should find it in publications but the mass media is wedded to the established religions. So any guru or charlatan can set up camp and attract followers from among these millions as they mill around in search of fulfilment.

So let this be said: put not your faith in princes. Look to yourself, not the church, Parliament or any government; they are our servants not our masters. We all have a right from birth on this planet to be free. Let our minds soar to the Universe and beyond. Nothing of itself cannot be understood by the mind of Man. The inborn intelligence of the Globe's billions can and will unravel the last mysteries of the Universe. Religion – ossified tradition – can only hinder this process and put off the day when the world will be truly free.

STEWART VALDAR
London

The 'evil' at Dunblane

THE Dunblane tragedy inevitably prompted the question: what should society's moral attitude be to Thomas Hamilton, the Dunblane killer who, after his dreadful and senseless deed, committed suicide. From comments in the Press, it was clear that many Christians who still believe in hell fire and eternal punishment relished his biblical fate. The Prime Minister, the headmaster of the Dunblane school and others stigmatised the tragedy as evil, and, if evil comprehends an act which is manifestly harmful to society, then Hamilton's act was certainly evil. But if evil comprehends some moral defect attributed to Hamilton's mind or intent for which he can be held morally responsible, Humanists will demur.

Whether or not Hamilton was in fact a paedophile or a homosexual who had been justifiably excluded from the Scout movement or other youth-club activities, Humanists must accept that he was no more than the inevitable vehicle of his own outrageous thought processes. And those thought processes were as much a part of the causal chain of his behaviour as the administrative arrangements currently in force which allowed him to be in possession of four handguns or rifles. Religious people will insist, notwithstanding his disturbed state of mind, that he had a free will and was therefore respon-

sible. But if he was absolutely free to behave as he did, what is the point of having a post-mortem enquiry to determine whether laxity of licensing procedures facilitated his action? Hamilton was evil and his evil sprang from an uncaused element in his make-up independent of his thought processes, what point is there in seeking to prevent a repetition of his behaviour? Why look for causal explanations if you can hold an uncaused evil responsible?

The Times of March 23, 1996, published the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Carey, when preaching in St Paul's Cathedral and addressing a United Guilds Service attended by members of 107 Companies. It was for him, he said, or anyone else to dispense forgiveness on behalf of God to Thomas Hamilton "who commit great crimes against God's will, ones, who are precious to Him and infinitely valuable. We cannot know – nor should we speculate – what the relationship now exists between Thomas Hamilton and his maker. It is not for you or me to dispense forgiveness on God's behalf or on behalf of Hamilton's innocent victims."

The Archbishop clearly saw Hamilton's act as an act for which Hamilton alone was ultimately morally responsible. His God-given freedom could have deterred him from his deed. Society does ill, does not trouble the Archbishop, if he cleverly avoided responsibility for His creation and can justifiably impose punishment on those who succumb to temptation. I suspect that Humanists would not accord a creator such an easy escape from responsibility.

Interestingly enough, two letters in the issue of *The Times* (one indeed from a clergyman) denied that mental disorder could be equated with evil!

By contrast, the Archbishop had no doubts about Hamilton's guilt. "What we can recognise is the heinousness of his crime," he said, "the seriousness with which God treats it." If he had some personal access to the Judge of All the World, he would have said: "You are damned, Hamilton."

Finally, he sought to bind moral values to religious faith. There could be no future for society with "no sense of right or wrong, no concept of eternal truths and no awareness of God." So poor Humanists are doomed to a life of endless iniquity. Not for us a logical, intellectual analysis of moral precepts. Believe in these eternal truths, whatever they are, or your most virtuous, kindly, self-sacrificial endeavours will be in vain!

LESLIE JAMES
Peterborough

Sceptical eclecticism

IT IS not often in Press correspondence that one is offered an explicit challenge when this happens, common courtesy requires an explicit reply.

➤ Turn to Page 13

You're telling us!

From Page 12

Terry Little (May) writes: "Would Eric kill humans who are in terminal pain – and if he would, where does he draw the line between humans and other animals?"

Perhaps Terry thinks of this question as being of the order of "draw the line"; I would regard it as my moral duty to extend the practice of putting other animals in terminal pain to human beings too; I am not in the business of special pleading on behalf of my species although, if things being equal, I would defend a human life rather than a non-human one. So, I would Terry.

There are problems both for Terry and for me. Absolutism must, at least sometimes, lead to official absurdity; my sceptical eclecticism, and acceptance that absolutes can lead one to act counter-intuitively, raises all sorts of absolutely answerable questions such as *how terminal is terminal?* and *how equal do "other things" be and how do you assess the extent of equality?* The answer lies, if anywhere, in the nature of the real world – the fact that risk-averse decisions are elusive if not actually inoperative.

I can only say that I am persuaded that there is such a thing as a life not worth living (in other words, that the notion of the absolute quality of life is not acceptable). So I would attempt to prevent what I might see as a considered act of human suicide; I would be prepared to assist in such an attempt – if assistance were needed and asked for – and would, yes in extreme cases, act to kill a human if I considered that only my intervention and my act (or my purposeful inaction) would suffice to end a hopeless and tormented life. In short, I believe that "mercy killing" is a general imperative in some cases – human and otherwise.

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

Left & Right

In answer Richard Sage (May), both Left and right-wing organisations restrict economic and individual freedom because they represent the different wings of capitalism and are, therefore, subject to its economic laws when they gain power. After all, there was little individual freedom in Russia under Lenin or Stalin or much economic freedom for the homeless in Britain these days.

Only the Socialist Party of Great Britain and Anarchist groups believe in the abolition of capitalism and an end to the exploitation of the working class by governments of both the Left and Right.

I would suggest that you don't vote for these parties as it only tends to encourage them.

CARL PINEL
Stockport

I would most certainly join Mr Ian Forbes in the Tory Atheist Group (TAG?). I too deplore the blatant political bias shown in *The Thinker*, usually without any secular connotation whatsoever.

At 72 and as a life-long atheist, I often wonder what has happened to the old maxim of

most Secular Societies: *All welcome whatever colour, creed, or calling.*

ROY A COBB
Rutland

IAN FORBES raises an interesting point: why is it that so many atheists think they have to support the political Left? Is it because they have an idea that organised religion represents the forces of reaction? Because, if so, I have news for them. It doesn't. You only have to listen to the oddly-titled *Thought for the Day* to see that. A short while ago, the contributions from members of the Church were sounding for all the world like party political broadcasts on behalf of the Labour Party. Presumably someone had a word about this – because I see that the BBC is dropping some of the earlier contributors. Or you could try reading the pronouncements of Church leaders. The Archbishop of Canterbury was recently sounding-off on the subject of crime and punishment, and saying much the same things as Barbara Smoker had written earlier in these columns. We now have priestesses (jolly good – when do the fertility rites start?) and I see that the Church is ordaining "gays" too. Hardly diehard reactionary.

All this is quite understandable, of course, since the make-believe politics of the Left fit very well with all the make-believe that underlies religion. Besides, Jesus Christ was pretty Left-wing himself – "loony" Left, one might almost say, to judge from his almost neurotic attitude to wealth. As a pragmatic atheist, I happen to think Jesus was dead wrong on a number of issues, mostly issues on which Left-wing Humanists probably think he was right.

GLYN EMERY
London N1

Causation, choice, chance

K BUCKMASTER raises an interesting logical conundrum (April 1996), but for all that he is wrong.

Firstly there's no doubt that we do "experience causation, choice and chance" in the same way that we experience a more or less flat Earth. Our experience may be misleading but we do have it.

Secondly the laws of physics do deal with causation and chance, though not with choice. The most fundamental laws of physics, those of quantum theory for instance, are symmetrical in time. That is, they allow a water molecule to dissociate into hydrogen and oxygen as readily as hydrogen and oxygen combine to form water. But they do presuppose change.

More significantly the laws that deal with large collections include the notion of entropy, sometimes called "time's arrow." Entropy tells us that hot things cool and that ashes do not of themselves combine with gases in the air to form wood. Entropy can be calculated from measurements.

On the static interpretation of time, he says, present and future exist alongside one another. If so, why do things continue and develop in time? Why, if yesterday included me, should today include anything remotely similar or, indeed, anything at all?

Like solipsism, the static interpretation of

time is irrefutable in the strict sense. But, like solipsism, it raises problems it cannot solve and no sane person can act as if it were true. K Buckmaster is, of course, sane. He posted his letter confident that the Post Office would deliver it. Why, if there were no causation, should he even expect the Post Office to continue to exist?

DAVID C FLINT
Enfield

Of Heaven and Hell

THE Church of England took its time to discover that the Christian Heaven-Hell implies contradiction, in that Devil and God must cooperate to *allocate* people.

The second contradiction is that the existence of the Devil/demons (faulty angels) implies that God is not all-knowing or all-powerful, since he was not able to prevent this situation arising, or to correct it.

The third problem is that Heaven-Hell exhibit a cultural elaboration, over time. The Xinjiang Mahayana Buddhism Heaven/Hell have 32 levels – 16 Heavens and 16 Hells for the dead waiting to be born again, for another go at enlightenment, for Heaven. Ancient Iraq had a shadow world of the dead, which was later imitated by Judaism, with its Sheol, the Ancient Greek Hades and the early Vedic Indian Nether World. Also, in Ancient Iran, Zoroastrianism (1200 BC) provided a strong personification of Good and Evil. The Ancient Egyptians had Pharaoh's resurrection to the Sky Heaven.

The final problem is that Henry VIII and other European leaders saw the political advantages of the Reformation in gaining political independence from the Roman Catholic Church – a past EU equivalent! Catholic Church lands were sold off, people were killed and murdered, buildings and works of art were destroyed. Therefore, since the initial Karma of the Church of England is bad, all its followers, past and present, can, if their assumptions are correct, be toasted in Hell or annihilated. Unless, of course, they seek absolution – by disestablishing themselves from the State.

ROBERT AWBERY
Reading

Intellectual snobbery?

AM I alone in detecting the merest whiff of intellectual snobbery in Dr Stephen Moreton's May missive?

"...Half the population are of below average intelligence, some are downright thick..."

Quite so. Might I humbly enquire which grouping the good doctor purports to represent?

I always thought "innocence" a Christian virtue. To find such simplistic rustic notions expressed by a sceptic seems somewhat perverse.

Trial by intellectual. How quaint. Since when

Turn to Page 14

You're telling us!

From Page 13

has high IQ been objectively linked to sound judgement?

Is Dr Moreton really so naive as to think "expert" jurors – or intellectuals – will be any less fallible, corruptible, or prejudiced than, say, politicians, clergy, accountants or any other "professional" already at large in society?

Drag 'em out and hang the buggers, eh, Dr Moreton?

STEF GULA
Leicester

Spelling it out

COLIN McCALL reported in the last issue that Muslims were in awe of an aubergine whose seeds spelled "Allah." Perhaps they should have sliced an avocado, which has one big seed. This looks like a nought when cut in half, and this surely spells out what Allah and God do for humans. Nought...nowt...nothing...sod all!

I sympathise with Ian Forbes (April letters), despite my feeling of contempt for the present Government. If Ian Forbes can argue rationally for his beliefs, he has as much right to express himself as any of us without being called names before we have even heard him.

I have promoted Freethought and the National Secular Society on Talk Radio. David Starkey's show on Sunday at 10 am to 1 pm may be of interest to readers since he often debates religion and politics and he is as atheistic and anti-religion as any Freethinker. He did once say he is not a Humanist as such because he feels too many Humanists have rigid moral codes just like believers. Reading *The Freethinker*, one can sometimes see what he means.

DAVID LEVETT
York

Back to basics

ACCORDING to the Oxford Dictionary, the word "fundamentalist" has its root in the "fundament," "foundation," "of the buttocks," "backside" etc. Aubergines have an interesting application in the Middle East – as an anti-flatulent. Is this a message from on high?

Talking of words. Many everyday words have religious associations or origins. You've heard of Delta Airlines, Delta Switchcard, Delta Enfield Cables? Pity these outfits don't employ someone with a bit of education before they choose a name! Delta as a noun is from the Greek letter D; "the dark triangle" – the pudendum. The reason for the River Nile exit point to the sea being called the Nile Delta should be obvious, especially as in the Spring it is richly red and the Spring inundation is responsible for the abundant fertility and revival of the land. Thus one can see the logic behind the fertility rites of the Egyptian Religious System.

The terms Old and New Testament have an interesting root, too. The words "testify," "testimony," "intestate" etc., have a common origin in Testis: Witness. In the old days of the Roman

Empire, a man at court covered himself by folding his hands thus and literally swore to tell the truth...on his testicles, his most prized possession.

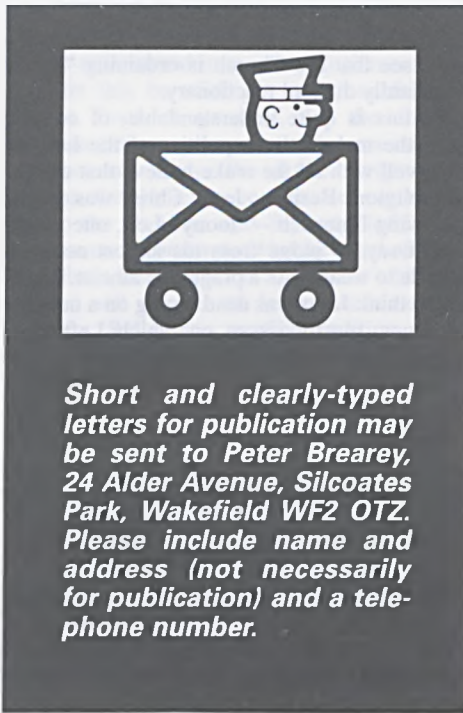
Funny how so many lies are told by religious devils professing the Old and New Testament!

DAVID STERRETT
London SE23

Human nature

WHY do we have jails? To keep the criminals away from our so-called decent society? To punish the criminals? To discourage someone from committing a crime?

In my opinion, you do not achieve any of these aims by placing a person in jail, because there are many more criminals roaming freely in society than the number of criminals in the jails. Indeed, can there be a single person in our



Short and clearly-typed letters for publication may be sent to Peter Brearey, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ. Please include name and address (not necessarily for publication) and a telephone number.

society who has never done a criminal act?

The answer lies in the research of human nature. I am merely a student of human nature and the law of nature. The subject is vast and complex, but this does not mean that some people – those who can – in society should not try to acquire as much knowledge as possible. As a matter of fact "religious studies" in the schools should be replaced by "studies of human nature."

When adults of all ages have failed to grasp the true meaning of the word "religion" for thousands of years, how can you expect children to learn anything about religion in the school?

If the yardstick of human nature is applied to find out the root cause of criminal acts committed by human beings, one would realise the basic weaknesses of human nature, which apply to all human beings, without any exception, are selfishness, survival instinct, hunger, sex, fantasy, mob violence, possession, power, ego, fighting, winning, etc.

Besides these common qualities, each human

being has his own separate nature. That human nature very complex, and that is why seems no one has been able to acquire complete knowledge of human nature. So, each one is born with these weaknesses, and at the same time with some good qualities as well.

Each human being has a mixture of good and evil qualities and each one of us has to win the continuous fight between good and evil within ourselves – sometimes with evil getting the upper hand and sometimes with good getting the upper hand.

Though each one of us is a criminal in one way or another, only those caught and convicted are regarded as criminals by so-called civilised society. Instead of trying to find the root cause of his criminal act, we take the easy way out and put him in jail. That is definitely not the remedy for the root cause. Instead it should be the duty of the leaders of society to find out the good qualities in him, and then create an atmosphere in which those good qualities can overcome the evil qualities.

K P SHARMA
London N1

Relegation threat to JC

LOOKING back through history, one can only wonder what has become of the ancient "gods" of Egypt, Greece and Rome which, in their day, were as real to their worshippers as Jesus Christ is to modern-day Christians.

Whatever happened that these deities should lose grace and be abandoned? Could it be that they didn't measure-up by failing to answer our prayers, in the expected manner, of their devotees – or is it that they were rumbled as being more than mere chimera of the human imagination, fostered by crafty priesthoods?

One thing is for sure – the present-day "gods" will, in time, be relegated and take their place alongside the other has-been "gods" of history and be forgotten!

In their place, other "gods" will arise and the whole sorry cycle will continue ad infinitum, seeing that history repeats itself. Despite the advances in medical science, no cure has yet been found for the religious mania which afflicts 50 per cent of the world's population – a condition which, in my opinion, is just as dangerous as schizophrenia.

DAVID YEUNG
Greenwich

Animal rights

R G TEE (March) says that the idea of animal rights is based on a fundamental flaw in logic because, he maintains, rights must be based on reciprocity.

Of course rights only exist if people demand them, whether on a one-to-one, group (for example, family), social, national or international basis. But to contend that rights exist except on the basis of reciprocity is

Turn to Page 15

You're telling us!

From Page 14

include the inarticulate and/or powerless, such as young children, the mentally-infirm and the disabled. Logically, therefore, this can include non-human beings. Any legislation which seeks to protect non-humans from abuse is granting rights to animals. Currently the Wild Mammals Protection Bill, which may be on the statute book by the time this letter is published, will give hedgehogs the right not to be kicked to death by jobs. The fact that non-humans cannot be taken to their own kind is irrelevant in this context. As to whether or not altruism is a philosophical and psychological subject.

JESSIE BOYD
Cwmbran

Questions

MICHAEL HILL gives us his technique for dealing with Christians (May). But would his technique stand up to someone who may say that he is equally gullible in believing that the three-letter, man-invented "god" relates to something in concrete existence, apparently able to communicate, opposed to an abstract mental concept in the mind of the person who coined or uses the word?

Michael Hill apparently believes it to be an historical fact that a certain man named Jesus actually existed, but he fails to tell us whether or not he believes the virgin birth story to be factual. He then goes on to say that this Jesus didn't believe. Believe what? Michael Hill does-

n't tell us. Perhaps he will be more revealing in further correspondence?

His use of the word "infinite" to mean "embracing all" is somewhat ambiguous. Most people, I would suggest, take it to mean "without end," although life on this planet Earth will most likely come to an end once our Sun turns into a Red Dwarf or a Supernova or whatever!

Perhaps Mr Hill will also tell us just what he means by the word "sins," which he uses in a vitriolic attack on a certain political party?

ERNEST WAKEFIELD
Mansfield

TECK ONG (May) is not the only one who would like to see the source of information for nailed crucifixion being of Buddhist origin.

Crucifixion, by nailing or binding to timber, was not symbolic of anything: like the hangman's noose or the headsman's axe, it was a fact of life - when it became symbolic for Christians is another matter.

A First Century ossuary, a limestone box used for the burial of bones, has been discovered in Israel, with an ankle bone with a nail driven through it and wood fibres still present - reasonable enough proof, one would have thought, of nailed crucifixion.

To those who see Jesus as mythological, there seems to be a persistent and stubborn confusion between "Christianity" and "Jewish Messianism." A Christ, whether or not he was called Jesus, was not of mythological origin. To a First Century Jew, Messiah was the King, chosen and anointed, they claimed, by God himself.

When Jews (not Christians, be it noted) pressed the Messianic claim in Rome, Emperor Claudius threw them out - because they were

making such a fuss at the insistence of their Christ!

I shall send *The Freethinker* details of the historicity of Messiah, based not only on our unreliable Gospels but also on original documents we know "The Dead Sea Scrolls."

On another matter, T W M Darlington (April) is inventing some modern and very elastic boundaries for the ancient Mosaic Laws of Judea.

There was no "Bible" at that time - the Laws were contained in scrolls which would be unrolled in The Temple or a temple and read out as God's (Yahwah's) absolute truth. Priests would use them to forbid, to sanction punishment, and to condemn to death. The world was created in the prescribed time and God did it - because God said so.

When James, the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, broke those Laws, the High Priest Ananias had him thrown from the parapet of the Temple, but despite his fall he was not dead so he was then stoned - and, to finish him off, a fuller beat his head in with a club. End of story.

Those who wish to reinterpret the Judean Law Scrolls, handed down by Moses, should think on. Who would they rather debate God's Law with - the High Priesthood at the Temple in Judea, witch-burning medieval Christians, or some of the nasty blasphemous atheists who contribute to *The Freethinker*?

ROBERT SINCLAIR
Coventry

● Stewart Valdar writes: Correspondents ask for my source of information for the statement that nailed crucifixion was "of Buddhist origin." I was quoting directly from *The Story of the Bible* by Macleod Yearsley (Watts & Co, London, 1936) on the Origin and Rise of Christianity, page 88. Unfortunately, the author does not elaborate.

Freethinking scribes publish new books

TWO well-known Freethinkers - journalist Terry Sanderson and Dr L M Wright - have published books which, while poles apart in style and subject matter, are

equally and delightfully "subversive." Larry Wright's 170-page illustrated paperback is *Jesus the Pagan Sun God* (ISBN 0-9518796-5-0), a restatement of the theory - that the Jesus of the Christian Church is not an historical character, being based upon ancient solar

mythology. It shows how the developing Christian church adapted and adopted numerous "pagan" customs, rituals and traditions for its own ends - in particular the ancient legend of the dying and resurrected saviour

of the Christian church is shown to have been established by fraud and sustained by bribery, fear and persecution. "Jesus the Pagan Sun God" is seen to have been invented at the Council at Nicaea AD 325, in the interests of political stability and the temporary advancement of corrupt bishops, and its thrust at sword-point upon the Empire of Rome by the murderous Constantine as a universal religion. The author is a lecturer in further educa-

tion, teaching Sociology, Philosophy and Comparative Religion. Copies of this essential work are available from: Fairview Books, 12 Kent Road, Old Town, Swindon SN1 3NJ (cheques and POs payable to L M Wright; £7.50 including post).

Terry Sanderson's latest contribution to world literature (remember *The Potts Correspondence*?) is *The Potts Papers* which, allegedly written in the Potts family's own words, is an account of the extraordinary year that propelled them to international infamy.

How could Doreen Potts - until then regarded as a model resident of Rotherham, a doting mother and a diligent upholder of family life - find herself in prison charged with murder? How did her daughter Sylvia come to be at the centre of a religious controversy that shook the world? And will her

son Gary ever make it up with his boyfriend?

It is a story packed with "perverted" sex, gambling, random violence and a great deal of hoovering! Doreen Potts experiences one of the most momentous years of her life - and she tells the truth about it in her own inimitable style, making it one of the funniest tragedies you're ever likely to encounter.

Between the chuckles, however, there lurks a beguiling satire on religion, class and "family values."

The Potts Papers (256 pages, paperback; ISBN 0-948982-09-8) costs £6.95 from book-sellers, or add 75p postage and order it from The Other Way Press, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ.

Request both volumes from your local library - and you'll advance the Freethought cause.

Calling Swindon

Secularists, Humanists, Freethinkers in the Swindon area who would like to help establish a local group are urged to contact Larry Wright at 12 Kent Road, Old Town, Swindon SN1 3NJ.

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, July 7: Tea party at 4.30pm and AGM at 5.30pm.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnaley on 0117 9502960 or Hugh Thomas on 0117 9871751.

Bromley Humanists: Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680.

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01296 623730. Friends Meeting House Berkhamstead: 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, June 20, 7.30pm: Mike Howgate, founder-member Association for the Protection of Evolution (APE): *Fundamentalism*.

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, July 2, 8pm: Trevor Burns (Single Homeless Accommodation Project): *Homeless in Essex*.

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

Glasgow Group: Information: Hugh H Bowman, 25 Riverside Park, Glasgow G44 3PG; 0141 633 3748.

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

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

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information: Robert on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Tuesday, October 8: Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies, Bradford University: *The Causes of Conflict*. Tuesday, November 12: Granville Williams, Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom: *Digital Television - Trick or Treat*.

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, June 8pm: Public meeting on The Criminal Justice Bill.

Manchester Humanist Group: Information: 0161 681 78. Meetings at St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North, near Apollo Theatre. June 14: Kate Brown, of Manchester Metropolitan University: *Religion and Social Work*. July: Robert Ashby, Executive Director, British Humanist Association.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP17 7PN; telephone 01362 820982. Martineau Hall, 2 Colegate, Norwich. June 20: Trevor Claxton, Minister, Norwich Spiritualist Church: *Spiritualism*. July 18: CRU Bereavement Care.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: Gordon Sinclair, 9 South View Road, Barnsley S74 9EB; 01226 743070. 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, Floor, Surrey Street. July 3, 8pm: Author Clare Jenkins: *Priestly Passions*.

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. Telephone: 0171 831 7723.

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

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0181 642 42. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, June 7.30pm for 8pm. Debbie Chay, Lecturer in Constitutional and European Law: *European Citizenship*. Wednesday, June 10: Roger Thatcher: *Evolution and Ethics*.

Teesside Humanist Group: Information: J Cole 0165 559418 or R Wood 01740 650861. Friends' Meeting House Norton Green, 7.15pm: June 12: Discussion.

Tyneside Humanist Group: Third Thursday of each month (except August), 6.45pm, Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle. 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: 01292 842343 or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Upland, Swansea SA2 0JY. June 28: Ralph Ison: *Darwin - The Apple Who Changed a Tree Into a Bush*. July 28: Group Outing to Middleton Hall Botanical Gardens, Dyfed.

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

BHA Centenary Lecture

by Professor

RICHARD DAWKINS

at the London School of Economics

Houghton Street London WC2

Thursday June 20 at 6.30pm

For details call 0171 430 0908