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Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

July 1996

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Divorce – children matter, gods don't

Family Law Bill: MPs reject religion trap

Up Front

God takes a back seat

THE headline in the *Independent on Sunday* for June 8 said MAJORITY OF BRITONS 'NO LONGER BELIEVE IN GOD' and our hearts leapt a little.

The results of the British Humanist Association's MORI poll on the subject had found their way to the *IoS* – and the BHA's Robert Ashby was suddenly on wireless and television all over the country, discussing the survey. And Keith Porteous Wood, the new General Secretary of the National Secular

Society, as well as being quoted in the press, was called to no fewer than seven radio interviews after he had issued a media release welcoming the results of the poll.

Conducted in April as part of the MORI Omnibus interviews in respondents' homes, the poll indicated that 10 per cent of the adult population (4.5 million people) shared Humanist beliefs. At least, that is how, with justice, the current issue of *Humanist News* reads the figures: "Up till now, most BHA spokespeople have simplified Humanism when it comes to statistics, by equating the number of humanists with the number of atheists and agnostics. Clearly, this ignores some positive elements of Humanism – the belief that one can shape one's own life rather than be powerless in the face of 'destiny,' and the belief that one should try to enable others to live happy and fulfilled lives. Therefore the BHA chose a more thorough survey, with expert advice from MORI's experienced researchers."

Although the results confirmed the churches' estimates that 33 per cent of the population "do not consider themselves to be religious," only one third of *this* group also believed that people have any real control over their lives and value universal human rights, the open society, and other factors. Hence the 10 per cent figure for Humanists.

The BHA regards the figure as "both realistic and encouraging, adding weight to our argument that the basis of morality in Britain is no longer the prerogative of the Christian churches."

But...

"Anecdotally, most of us are aware of the shifting sands of theology and religious belief in Britain and other developed nations. However, this MORI poll clearly shows the present confusion: while only 43 per cent believe that 'God exists,' 67 per cent believe themselves 'to be religious,' and 79 per cent believe there is an afterlife.

"There is a known trend towards the reincarnation-based religions and groups, such as Buddhism. Television programmes have recently given overly credulous accounts of 'near death experiences.' These, coupled with the age-old fear of death and non-being, might account for the stubborn refusal of so many people to realise that there is no verified evidence for any afterlife.

"As with the Ethical Union early in this century, there is a growing sense of religiosity without gods noticeable both in the Christian denominations and among younger members of Hindu, Sikh and other religions. The combination of the spiritual elements of private worship, and the valued traditions of community and ceremony, sustain religion far more than the god-fearing of yesteryear."

Well, that is *some* relief for which we may be thankful. Congratulations to the BHA on its initiative in commissioning MORI.

The National Secular Society gave an unequivocal welcome to the showing that the majority of Britons no longer believe in God.

Keith Porteous Wood's press release, issued before the ink on the *Independent on Sunday* story was barely dry, said: "This is excellent news, and confirmation of something which we have been observing informally for some years.

"The calls on our services for non-religious funerals, weddings and naming ceremonies have seen an enormous increase over the last few years. There is little wonder that religious organisations and spokespeople are rushing to rubbish the findings – this is bad news for them in that the privileges which they enjoy are increasingly being seen as inappropriate.

"It is the Humanist movement's hope that the exodus from traditional religion will not mean a rush to join other, equally irrational systems that are springing up to fill the need. Some people have for external moral guidance.

"Abandoning religion does not mean losing morality or having no ethics; on the contrary, it stresses the need for human beings to work out a rational code appropriate for the modern world which is not dependent on the myths of religion.

"Humanists put the needs of human beings before those of any supposed deity, and work to improve the lot of humanity by rational, pragmatic means."

Hell fire, it's the Cardinal!

ON PAGE 11 of this issue, Tony Akkermans notes how the religious doubts of H G Wells gained a firmer foundation after he had heard with disgust a Roman Catholic priest threaten the citizens of Portsmouth with Hell and damnation.

So...what would Herbert George make of the broad U-turn on Hell now executed not only by the fatuous C of E but also, it seems, by Cardinal Cahal Daly, the Irish Primate? No intellectual shrinking violet, would he claim some of the credit, perhaps?

In *The Universe* for June 2, the Cardinal is said to have denounced rank-and-file papist claims that messages are coming from Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary warning of Hell fire and doom. It was a "worrying feature," he said, that many of the alleged visions and messages emphasised divine wrath and punishment.

"The phenomena seemed to be associated with the end of a century, and particularly the last years of the millennium, and he warned more of these messages to come," reported *The Universe*. "It was well, he said, to have criteria for evaluating them in the light of Christian faith."

A faith which His Eminence must believe based upon the teaching of Our Lord aforementioned – who warned repeatedly and obscenely (see especially Mark's Gospel) of the "unquenchable fire" in a Hell where those of us unfortunate enough to be afflicted by worms would find that the wriggly creatures dieth not.

Far be it from us to try to foment discord in the Church, but the words "heresy" and "stake" do spring to mind as we compare the words of the Cardinal with those of his supposed Master.

The

Freethinker

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Divorce: Commons rejects 'fundamentalist claptrap'

by Peter Brearey

THE bedroom door was slammed on God-botherers' fingers on June 17 when the Commons decisively rejected an attempt to add religious belief to the existing grounds on which a court can block a divorce.

As this issue of *The Freethinker* goes to press, the Family Law Bill must still complete its journey through the Lords. But it is highly unlikely that the superstitionist kicked out by 260 votes to 138 at the Third Reading in the Commons – will be readmitted.

Described by its mover, Edward Leigh (Conservative, Gainsborough and Northampton), as "my modest amendment," its success would have forced the courts to consider hardship "attributable to the fact that the person concerned has a deeply held religious belief that marriage is indissoluble" when dealing with the other partner's application for divorce.

This consideration would have been based on a deed drawn up and officially registered at the time of marriage or afterwards stating the couple's "conscientious belief in the Christian concept of marriage."

Invoked

The effect would have been at least to delay the 18-month "no fault" divorces provided for in the Bill, at the behest of a partner who invoked the religion clause. But it could even have stopped a divorce being granted altogether – one section said: "No court may make a divorce order in respect of the marriage to which the deed applies other than in any circumstances provided within the deed."

In other words, if the deed said "No divorce, please, we're Christians," then in theory the marriage would be indissoluble, even if one of the partners had become an atheist or a Muslim.

Mr Leigh admitted: "If the House accepts my amendment, it will be much easier for people to go to court and to say, 'I am being divorced against my will. I have deeply held religious views. Please listen to me and give me a bit more time,' or, in extreme cases, 'Prevent the divorce,' which, I suspect, the courts will never accept."

He said: "Such a deed would be drawn up according to the teachings of the various Christian churches. I am not familiar with the teachings of other religions but no doubt they could do the same."

Labour's Harry Cohen (Leyton) led a spirited and successful attack on the proposal: "It is a dog's dinner of a new clause, and its consequences will be viciously reactionary. This country would end up with as

many multiple versions of divorce law as multiple versions of the deeds...I support the notion and the idea that national law should take precedence over private deeds, even if they have religious backing. In many sectors, the acceptance of decent standards should be the norm. A person should not be trapped for ever in a spiteful, violent or desperately unhappy marriage. That should be a nationwide standard. No deed should be able to wipe that out."

Mr Cohen insisted that the new clause was "fundamentalist claptrap" and: "It will be used by fundamentalists of all religions, and it could inflict great pain on partners. If passed, it could cause enormous heartbreak and misery, so I oppose it."

Conservative Peter Bottomley also spoke out strongly against the clause, while David Alton, who was elected as a Liberal Democrat but is now at odds with his party, vigorously defended it: "...in the circumstances that we are debating one or other partner will be divorced against his or her will. How will that leave them if they conscientiously believe that marriage is for life and that marital breakdown excludes the possibility of remarriage?"

In the free vote which followed the debate, the Rev Ian Paisley ecumenically supported Roman Catholic Alton, and they were joined by Tim Yeo, Ann Widdecombe, Hartley Booth, Jonathan Aitken, Dame Jill Knight, Dame Angela Rumbold, John Redwood, Hugh Dykes, to name but a few luminaries of the Right and proper.

● On June 12, when it became clear that "fundamentalist claptrap" would be on the Commons agenda, Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the National Secular Society, not only issued a media release giving a Secularist view of the threat but also wrote personally to the Lord Chancellor, to Tony Blair and to Paddy Ashdown.

He called on them "not to submit to pressure from MPs to give some power to those with strong religious convictions to delay or stop a divorce."

His letter to the Lord Chancellor (with a similar text to Messrs Ashdown and Blair and the Parliamentary Humanist Group) said:

"I understand that you have been approached to table an amendment to the Family Law Bill to give some power to those with strong religious convictions to delay or stop a divorce.

"The National Secular Society believes that it is totally inequitable for those professing religious belief to receive privileged treatment in law. If enacted, this legislation

will set a precedent of the worst kind where those not claiming to be believers would in effect be second-class citizens – legislation worthy of the Middle Ages.

"The Society believes that any such legislation will disadvantage those – of whatever beliefs (or none) – who are married to those who, at the time of the divorce, profess to be strongly religious. Any such law would prove to be unworkable as beliefs are so difficult to define and the confusion would increase lawyers' fees dramatically. The unscrupulous could also benefit if they pretend to beliefs which they do not hold, potentially to the detriment of those who are more honest."

Copies of the statement were available around the Commons on the day of the vote, and it is pleasant to hope that the NSS might have had some influence with MPs.

● As I say, there is still time for the Bill to be changed yet again as *The Freethinker* goes to press, but it does seem that its provisions, notably the one abolishing the concept of fault in divorce, would be likely to bring about a reduction in the acrimony that all-too-often accompanies marital breakdown.

Distinction

Certainly it cannot be all bad if *The Daily Telegraph* fears that it effectively destroys "the distinction between marriage and cohabitation" and complains that "ceasing to be married will simply be a matter of no longer wanting to be" (June 19).

● A rational comment sparked by the debate – one which might be read as expressing the Editorial view of *The Freethinker* – came from our own Nicolas Walter in a letter to *The Times*: "Is it time for the social institution of marriage – the permanent union of two people on the basis of an exclusive sexual relationship – to be separated from legal regulation altogether?"

"More and more couples, heterosexual as well as homosexual, are already making and breaking relationships which are equivalent to marriage without any formal recognition by either church or state.

"Sharing of property and caring for children may need more or less elaborate regulation, but these are quite separate issues from the institution of marriage, and they concern unmarried just as much as married couples.

"Rather than constantly amending the increasingly absurd laws about religious or secular ceremonies for weddings or about harder or easier procedures for divorce, wouldn't it be better to make a clean break and accept that the state has no place in personal relationships?"



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Rationalism Down Under

CONGRATULATIONS to *The Rationalist News*, journal of the Rationalist Association of New South Wales, which celebrates its 30th anniversary with its summer issue. It contains pieces by David Tribe and Nigel Sinnott, both well-known to readers of *The Freethinker*, and carries quotes from Robert Green Ingersoll and Salman Rushdie.

"Give me the storm and tempest of thought and action," said Ingersoll, "rather than the ignorance and bliss of religious faith; cast me out of Eden when you will – but first let me eat of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge."

And Salman Rushdie exclaimed: "If only Ayatollah Khomeini had read *The Rationalist News*!"

Rushdie made his irreligion clear in a lecture to Bard College, NY, which had offered him a faculty position at the time of the *fatwa*.

He told graduates that they would encounter big and little gods, corporeal and incorporeal gods, all of them demanding to be worshipped and obeyed (*The Guardian*, May 31). "Defy them," he said, "that's my advice to you."

Toothless terrier

"I THINK I can honestly say I've never run away from a question. I'm the sort of person who, with a question, well I'm like a terrier with a bone." So said Patrick Kelly, the new Roman Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool, in an interview with Joanna Coles of *The Guardian* (May 25).

Did he think the Pope's stand on contraception puts people, especially young people, off Catholicism? Ms Coles asked him. "That's not an issue that's been raised with me," he replied. "It seems to be an important objection to Catholicism," Ms Coles continued. "Sure, sure," said the Archbishop. "But no one's raised it." *Never*? "No. no. Not in those terms."

What was that about the terrier?

Scouse religion's a load of balls

CHURCH attendances are down throughout the city of Liverpool, reported David Harrison (*The Observer*, May 26). "Anglicans are struggling to fill their pews and only one in five of the archdiocese's half a million Catholics attends Mass." Earlier in the week 150 children and adults had been confirmed in the huge Anglican cathedral but, as Bishop David Sheppard conceded, many of them would not become church members.

Harrison found "a widespread view" that the success of the city's two football clubs had

helped to create "a new religion: football." He noticed, in fact, that the Anglican cathedral shop was selling Liverpool FC pennants, along with the Bibles and religious posters.

Out of practise

ROMAN Catholicism is also in decline in Italy. A recent survey by the Catholic University of Milan (reported in the *Methodist Recorder*, May 2), revealed that, although 88 per cent of respondents called themselves Catholics, only 31 per cent were practising, and "as many as 50 per cent never went to confession." Moreover, "for many Italians, the Pope was no longer the supreme moral and spiritual authority." The numbers of priests being ordained were also "sharply down."

Italian Protestants, according to the survey, number 400,000, half of whom are Pentecostals, mainly in the south where, we are told, scarcely a village is without its Pentecostal congregation. Naples alone has no less than 350 Pentecostal churches.

Many of these groups have little formal education, but they are described as being "steeped in the Bible." Sippy, you might say.

Casting the first stone

IF YOU go to Majorca, as I did recently, make a point of visiting the secularised monastery at Valdemossa, where George Sand and Frederic Chopin lived together in 1838-39. The villagers were openly hostile to the unmarried pair, selling them food at such inflated prices that George Sand had to take the coach south to Palma to do the shopping.

"We could have lived on good terms with the local people had we gone to church," she said. "That would not have stopped them taking every opportunity to cheat us, but at least it would have stopped them from throwing stones at our heads from behind bushes whenever we walked by."

Now, thanks to Sand and Chopin, Valdemossa enjoys a lucrative tourist trade.

That old devil moonshine...

THAT old mystic Colin Wilson has been dispensing his moonshine again. Mind you, he's been at it all the time, but never so noticeably since he conned the cognoscenti with *The Outsider*, 40 years ago. Now, a hundred dispensable books later, he's hit the headlines again with *From Atlantis to the Sphinx*, which is already in its third reprint, such is the demand for the esoteric.

Martin Wroe tells us that it describes the life

of an ancient civilisation 10,000 years BC, whose members sailed the seas from China to the South Pole – before it iced up – and passed their brilliance in science, mathematics and astronomy to descendants in Egypt and South America (*The Observer*, May 26). They used their "intuitive" powers of communication – like birds in flocks or fish in shoals, moving together without any apparent leader. How Wilson knows this is anybody's guess, and it's more than my *guess* that he doesn't.

But he certainly fancies his animal comparisons. He told his audience at the book launch that the religion of the Ancient Egyptians "turned them into a single organism – like an intelligent anthill."

Let us take up the theme. When Wilson declares "I've been swimming against the tide for 40 years. Eventually the scientific orthodoxy will crack," shall we say we detect "a very ancient and fish-like smell"?

Missionaries up the pole

SINCE the collapse of Communism, 30,000 Christian missionaries have poured into eastern Europe, and Channel 4's *Witness* (May 23) followed a number of American evangelists as they busied around Russia hymn singing, praying, preaching (not to mention bribing with free medical treatment); often antagonising fellow Christians of the Russian Orthodox Church.

"We find it offensive that the Americans have the utter gall to come and preach to us," said a Russian Orthodox nun. "We don't go to America to convert them to Orthodoxy," said another protester.

"Life with God can be much better than without the Communists," one US evangelist told a Russian woman, who had a picture of Lenin on the wall. "Life was much better before," she replied. "I'd do better praying to a telegraph pole."

Mind blowing

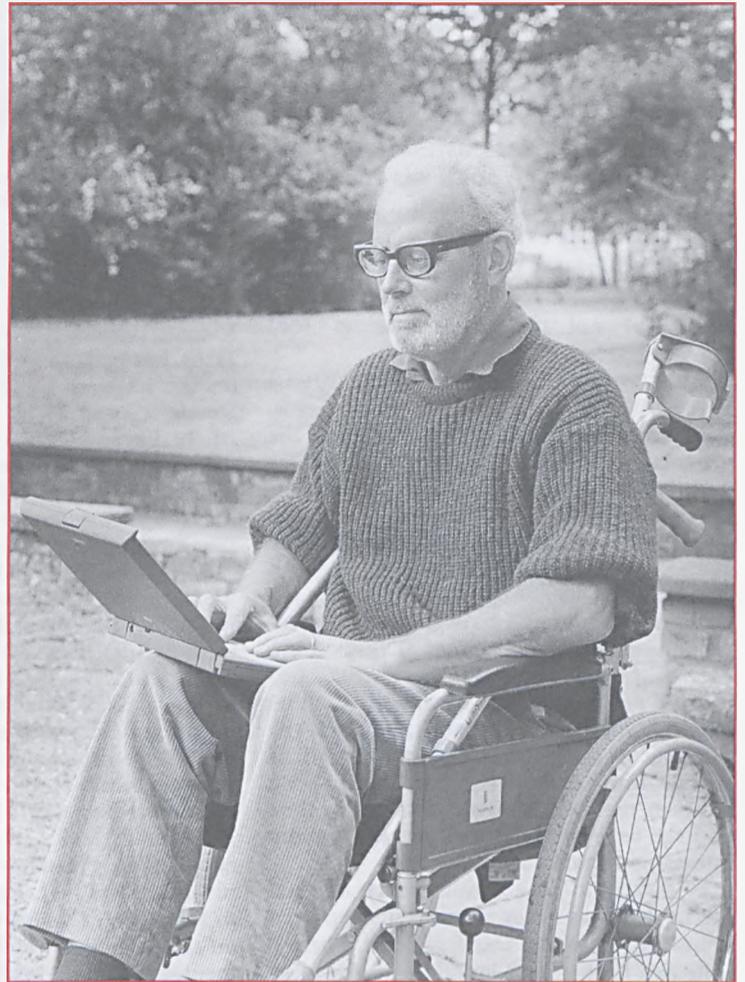
DID you know that for every £1 it spends promoting the arts, the British government spends 130 times as much buying supplies for war: that fighting the Gulf War cost more than £10 billion a day; and that the aerial bombardment in that war was greater than the RAF delivered on Nazi Germany?

These and 600 odd other "mind-blowing number crunchings from the cutting edge of eco-paranoia" by Rowland Morgan, which appeared in *The Guardian*, are collected in *Digitations* (Michael O'Mara Books, £4.99).

Oh yes, and the resignation of each priest as a result of women's ordination is expected to cost the Church of England £140,000.

The following talk by NICOLAS WALTER, pictured below, was broadcast several times in the World Service series "Words of Faith" on May 23. Eloquent and movingly, it encapsulates *The Freethinker's* attitude towards life – and death.

'The time to be happy is now'



(Photograph: Joe Bulaitis)

ONE of the great strengths of people who have a religion is that they look forward to something beyond – perhaps a continuation of life, in some kind of world above or below or beyond this one; or perhaps a renewal of life, through some kind of resurrection or reincarnation after this one; or at least some kind of significant change, an absorption into a universal spirit or will.

One of the most common questions asked of people who don't have any religion is: "How do we face death?" One answer is not to think about it, and this is probably more common than you might think among non-religious people, and indeed among religious people, too. Another answer is to think there is something after death, and this too is probably more common than you might think among non-religious people, as well as religious people.

But the answer of most Humanists who have thought seriously about the subject is this: we think death really is the end of life; there really is nothing afterwards; the only kind of existence we shall have after we die is to be followed by our children and remembered by other people, for a time; and all we can do about it is make the best of our time before we die.

This sounds good in theory, but what does it mean in practice? Oddly enough, it doesn't make all that much difference. Religious and non-religious people live in pretty much the same way for most of their lives, and they die in

pretty much the same way for most of their deaths. If there is a difference, it's that Humanists who have no belief in life after death realise we must put everything we have into life before death.

If we aren't going to meet our friends and relations at another time, we must make sure we enjoy our meetings this time. If we aren't going to be rewarded or punished in another place, we must make sure we do the right things for the right reasons in this place. If there'll be no future chance to say *sorry* or *thank-you*, we must say it here and now. As the English poet Matthew Arnold put it:

*Hath man no second life?
– Pitch this one high!*

But what about the actual business of being ill and getting old and dying? The French thinker Blaise Pascal said more than three centuries ago: "The last act is bloody, however fine the rest of the play." And this is true of most of us, whatever we believe. But if there's no future consolation, it's all the more important to reduce present suffering – to cure illness, relieve old age, make death as easy as possible. As for those of us who are ill and old and dying, we can learn to face our predicament at least with dignity, if possible with humour, even at times with joy.

I've been very ill with cancer, I've been crippled by the treatment for it, I shall die fairly

soon. But this makes my life more precious, not less. Every day is a new gift, to be relished. Every time I look at my wife is a new look, to be cherished. Every time I meet a friend is a new occasion, to be celebrated. Every time I see my children, and now my grandchildren, I observe new life and love carried on down the generations. Every time I'm helped, I appreciate the human fellowship. Even travelling in a wheelchair can be fun, because there's more chance to slow down and look around as I go. Not to be able to enjoy live plays and concerts any more is a blow, but I can read books and listen to music at home, remember how much I've enjoyed, and realise how much I've missed. For the first time, I have the chance to stop and think.

Alive

I shall end by quoting two things said about this subject more than a century ago. The American orator Robert Ingersoll gave this as his creed: "Happiness is the only good; the time to be happy is now; the place to be happy is here; the way to be happy is to make others so." And the English scientist William Kingdon Clifford, giving a lecture on life and death, taking the same line as mine, ended as follows: "Do I seem to say, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'? Far from it; on the contrary, I say, 'Let us take hands and help, for this day we are alive together!'"

Christian riddles remain unsolved

THIS book demonstrates the fact that where an author is convinced that he has the solution to a mystery, he will see evidence everywhere for that solution and will be blind to obstacles. I know – I too hold such a conviction, but not the same one as Joel Carmichael.

It is a book of two halves. Part one ("Jesus Before Christ") examines the life of Jesus. Part two ("Christ after Jesus") studies the articulation of the Christian message after Jesus' death, focussing on the role of Saul of Tarsus (St Paul) and the impact of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem on both the Jewish and the fledgling Christian communities. Carmichael puts special emphasis on the concept of the "Kingdom of God", which was fundamental to the teachings of Jesus, John the Baptist and Paul. He describes the ferment of political unrest and apocalyptic theological speculations that influenced the thinking of the earliest Christians, and he delves into the intriguing relationship between the many Jewish sects of the time and the believers in Christ Jesus. My main interest is in part one.

As the biblio-page admits, much of what Carmichael has to say about Jesus appeared in his 1963 book *The Death of Jesus*. There is little new here – Jesus is still the leader of an armed band who held the Temple in an insurrection.

Carmichael sees evidence for his "insurrection" throughout the Gospels. The Sermon on the Mount predicts social turmoil (which Jesus would bring about). John the Baptist was the organiser of a seditious group, executed for his activities, which involved his followers in a massive secession from the state. The disciples were Jesus' "lieutenants". Jesus went to Jerusalem because his campaign in Galilee failed. Judas betrayed the hiding place of the leader of an armed revolt. The Galileans of Luke 13:1 "may very well have been the group who took and held the Temple". The fall of the

tower of Siloam (Luke 13:4) is evidence of a siege operation by the Romans to recover control of the city after it had been taken by Jesus and his insurgents.

He can see that much of the Gospels is invented, but he has difficulty sorting fact from fiction. He can see that it was the Romans who arrested, tried and executed Jesus, but he is not sure why: "it is difficult, on the basis of the Gospels, to grasp the Roman role in Jesus' execution". Yet elsewhere he emphasises the Roman involvement in Jesus' death and that he was executed for sedition. In particular he believes that the story of Jewish trial was invented to throw blame on the Jews.

He believes that Jesus "held the Temple" by force, but he has very little evidence for this idea. He speculates that "Jesus must have had an armed force powerful enough for him to seize this vast edifice and hold it for some time". All this based on the story of the money-changers and the fact that at least one of his disciples had a sword (which he was told to put away). Carmichael's hypothesis hinges on a single incident, almost a single verse – Mark 15:7, where there is reference to an "insurrection" (*stasis*), which involved Barabbas. Luke (23:19) also refers to this event. Carmichael puts great weight on this account, which he thinks "no commentator has yet ventured to explain". Yet most are content to accept Luke's statement (23:25) that Barabbas was imprisoned for "insurrection and murder". To Carmichael, the "insurrection" was one led by Jesus, and Barabbas was a Temple dignitary, or his son, accidentally arrested and later released!

To bolster his thesis, Carmichael even makes the outrageous claim that "ancient authorities refer to the armed character of Jesus' enterprise" and he quotes Tacitus, who did no such thing. Carmichael sees an abundance of hints to the real nature of Jesus' enterprise. This is true, but the hints Carmichael sees are not those I see. We all see what we want to see. He wants to see hints of an armed rebellion led by Jesus, and

The Unriddling of Christian Origins – A Secular Account by Joel Carmichael. Prometheus Books, 425 pages, including collected notes, a bibliography and a name index. Cloth £30. ISBN 0-87975-952-6

Review: STEUART CAMPBELL

this is what he sees. I see no such hints.

His idea seems to take no account of Jesus' own philosophy or of his evident pacifist nature. It takes no account of the forecasts of resurrection, the coming Son of Man or the mystery of the empty tomb. Although he discusses some accounts of post-Crucifixion appearances of Jesus, Carmichael shows no interest in explaining them, especially that in the last chapter of John's Gospel, which he admits is "curious". Nor does it take account of influence of Zoroastrianism or Pharisaism. It is a simplistic reading of the Gospel as if it were merely the record of a failed military leader. Moreover a leader unknown to Josephus, a former general himself, who mentioned every other Jewish military leader. Josephus' record of Jesus bears little relation to Carmichael's Jesus.

All I can say in Carmichael's favour is that he understands the concept of the Kingdom of God and that it is true, as he claims, that the genesis of Christianity cannot be understood without its historical background. Also, he recognises that Jesus was "Jewish schismatic"; Jesus observed Jewish customs and practice and the basic Jewish laws. However this is not surprising. What matters is how Jesus interpreted the Jewish scriptures and what he planned. Carmichael is weak in this area.

In addition to criticism of content, I have some criticism of form. The absence of both a subject index and a Scripture index is annoying. There are too many quotations from the Gospels, some far too long. The strange title is misleading. The book does not solve any riddles about Christian origins, at least none that have not already been solved by others. On the other hand, Carmichael's idea that Jesus led a revolt is itself a riddle that even he cannot solve.

● Stuart Campbell's *The Rise and Fall of Jesus* has just been published by Explicit Books.

Antidote to superstition

THE tenth anniversary of the Pope's historic gathering with world spiritual leaders in Assisi to pray for peace will be commemorated by the Westminster Interfaith annual pilgrimage on Saturday, June 8...

How heartening it was to read that item in *The Universe* for June 2. How it brought the memories flooding back.

Ten years! And so much achieved in that time for the peoples of Afghanistan, Ireland, Bosnia, Ruanda, Iraq, Iran, Burma, and all those places with unpronounceable, unspellable names in the former Soviet Union.

to which His Holiness's personal intervention with The Lord has brought peace and love.

How grateful to the Pope must be the folk of Liberia and the Sudan and, indeed, Manchester, who, but for his personal influence on God over the decade, might have suffered the effects of bloody conflict...

Come on – what do they take us for? Credulous idiots? Well, yes, actually, they do, probably.

But we have *The Freethinker* as an antidote to their mind-numbing poison – and those who suggest that we have nothing positive to offer in place of superstition should study Nicolas

Walter's inspiring essay on Page 5 of this issue.

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Bertrand Russell – an audacious iconoclast

WHEN Bertrand Russell was born, his mother wrote to Helen Taylor, wondering if she and John Stuart Mill would be the boy's secular godmother and godfather, "for there is no one in whose steps I would rather see a boy of mine following in ever such a humble way, than in Mr Mill's." Helen Taylor agreed to the Countess of Amberley's request, providing Russell, as Ray Monk says, "with the most appropriate godparents imaginable." This biography takes us to the birth of Russell's son, John Conrad Russell, whose secular godfather was the novelist.

But after the deaths of Bertrand Russell's mother and father (when he was two and three respectively), it was his grandparents, not his godparents, who had most influence over his childhood, in a household, described by Bertrand's brother Frank, as "full of high principle and religious feeling of the same kind that surrounded Queen Victoria."

Fortunately for Russell, he had a series of private tutors up to the age of 16, who pushed him, especially in languages, history and mathematics; and he was given a copy of W K Clifford's *Common Sense of the Exact Sciences*, which he read "with passionate interest and with an intoxicating delight in intellectual clarification."

"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one to believe anything upon insufficient evidence," wrote Clifford, a view which Russell found much more amenable than the religion of his grandmother.

And just before he went up to Cambridge, he recorded in his diary that "the only shred of faith I had left in me is, for the time at least, gone...the reasoning which always convinced me before...has lost its cogency." This time the responsibility was his "godfather's." Russell's previous conception of God as a lawgiver had been demolished by his reading of Mill's *Autobiography*.

At first, though, he deeply felt his loss of faith. And later, in his own *Autobiography*, he regretted that, whereas "What Spinoza calls the 'intellectual love of God' has seemed to me the best thing to live by...I have not had even the somewhat abstract God that Spinoza allowed himself to whom to attach my intellectual love. I have loved a ghost, and in loving a ghost my inmost self has itself become spectral."

Russell was a great admirer of Spinoza, "the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers." "Much of what I feel is in Spinoza," he declared.

Ray Monk, who lectures in philosophy at the University of Southampton, is excellent in charting and commenting on Russell's philosophical development: his flirtation with Hegelianism under the influence of McTaggart; his work with G E Moore and Alfred North Whitehead; the sometimes turbulent discussions with Wittgenstein; elucidation of Leibniz; and so on.

Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude by Ray Monk. Jonathan Cape, £25.

Review: COLIN McCALL

Hegel's philosophy "had seemed both charming and demonstrable," as presented by McTaggart and others, but when Russell "turned from the disciples to the Master," he found in Hegel himself "a farrago of confusions and what seemed to me little better than puns. I therefore abandoned his philosophy."

Russell and Moore met frequently and arrived, as Monk says, "at the conception of logic and philosophy that gave rise to the entire 'analytical' tradition." Not, though, of the linguistic variety. For both men, analysis was an ontological activity.

And Monk describes Russell's work during the six-year period 1904-1910 as "one of the wonders of the history of modern philosophy. If he had done nothing but his share of *Principia Mathematica* [with Whitehead], that alone would have been a prodigious achievement, but in fact he did far more: many of the philosophical articles that are now considered his greatest contribution to the subject...were written during this period..."

He would take long walks for refreshment, preferably by the sea; and in Brittany, he wondered how anyone could believe in God (as the Breton fishermen did) "in the presence of something so much greater and more powerful as the sea."

Solitary

"The spirit of solitude" is the book's sub-title, and Russell's solitariness is constantly in evidence. "My most profound feelings have remained always solitary," he wrote in his *Autobiography*, "and I have found in human beings no companionship. The sea, the stars, the night wind in waste places, mean more to me than even the human beings I love best, and I am conscious that human affection is to me at bottom an attempt to escape from the vain search for God."

Intellectually, said Beatrice Webb, Russell was "audacious – an iconoclast, detesting religious or social convention, suspecting sentiment, believing only in the 'order of thought' and the order of things, in logic and in science." What he lacked, she suggested, was "sympathy and tolerance for other people's emotions."

It seems a fair assessment. Certainly Russell could be cruel, especially to the women he married or fell in love with. And Monk misses no chance to draw our attention to any failings.

Perhaps Russell was a little too honest in describing his feelings, however base; but he argued that "There is a comfort in saying what one feels, without stopping to ask oneself if this feeling is foolish; and if one only mentions

one's very sage and dignified thoughts, the effect is a person quite unlike the real one."

Monk, alas, is not always content with the facts. "Perhaps his 'German lady' had made it clear that she wanted to spend Christmas alone with her children. Or perhaps Russell had decided that, after all, she could be no replacement for Ottoline [Morrell]," we read on one page; and on the next, "perhaps it had not gone the way Russell had expected and hoped."

On one occasion we even have a footnote speculating whether Russell "failed to maintain an erection" or if "Ottoline was having her period at the time." A "fertile imagination could no doubt add to these possibilities indefinitely," Monk adds promptly. Perhaps he should have titled his book *The Life and Loves of Bertrand Russell*.

Rather more pertinently, Russell followed the examples of his mother and "godfather" in supporting women's suffrage. It was important, he wrote, "not so much on account of the direct political effect, as because I detest the general assumption of women's inferiority, which seems to me degrading to both men and women."

And in May 1907, he contested a by-election in Wimbledon as a National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies candidate.

At his first meeting, rats were let loose to frighten the women; at another, eggs were thrown at the platform. He lost to a Tory squire, but he polled 3,000 votes and, above all, had publicised the cause.

Russell, of course, opposed the First World War. Though never a pacifist, he saw no justification for a war between civilised nations like Britain and Germany; it was "a mad horror" that would "cause the deaths of thousands of men like ourselves." Something of civilisation would be "lost for good, as something was lost when Greece perished in this way."

He became estranged from the Whiteheads; lost his lectureship at Trinity College, Cambridge; was refused a passport to visit America; and banned from lecturing for the No-Conscription Fellowship in "coastal" regions, including Newcastle, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

So, the day after Russell gave his first lecture in Manchester, Robert Smillie, President of the Miners' Federation, delivered the same lecture in Glasgow.

Finally, Russell was imprisoned in Brixton, though he was spared the intolerable conditions that other conscientious objectors had undergone. He had a large furnished cell, had plenty of books and was able to order his meals from outside. Altogether, as Monk says, it was rather like being in a monastery, and the man who rather fancied a career as a free-lance philosopher like Abelard (with one important difference, of course!) was able to keep on writing.

"My bias remains," he said, "I still wish to rescue the physical world from the idealist." Even better, "if I could rescue the so called 'mental' world from him too!"

When people refer to 'seeing things as they really are' one may reasonably

THE NEVER-ENDING QUEST FOR REALITY

FOR most of us, most of the time, the real world is "out there." "Post-modernist" philosophers, however, insist that our world is only what goes on in our thoughts, that all we are actually aware of is a mental domain in which we play about with language. If that is taken to be so, the world most people think of as real is wrapped up in this world of thought, and not the other way round, as the majority suppose.

Religious people posit an extra world awaiting their arrival – one that can't be reached until they've died. But among religions there are all sorts of variations.

Lead me from the unreal to the real. So runs an ancient Hindu prayer. Here the underlying concept of the universe is also dualistic. There is the world of *maya* (illusion), in which we live, and our consciousness reflects, and the "real" world, to awareness of which we may attain by spiritual effort.

People make confident assertions, yet the fact is that no one can be certain as to what reality is. Humanity has been teased by the question for thousands of years and has come up with different answers. Modern scientific knowledge has enlarged, rather than solved, the problem. Plainly, what is perceived as reality by any living creature depends on the sense equipment it possesses and on that equipment's operative range.

A dog hears a whistle that I can't; delights in odours to which, I am glad to say, my nose remains insensitive. Bats have built-in radar. To us, their squeaks are mostly super-sonic.

A dragonfly sees, with its compound eyes, about twenty-five thousand views of its environment. A moth will respond to scents exuded at a distance of two miles. A butterfly can taste sugar in a mixture of one part to three hundred thousand.

Their worlds appear different from ours. Yet they do not live on another planet. We and they exist in the same reality, don't we?

Extensions of our own waveband appear to occur. Self-styled occultists and believers in psychic phenomena seek to persuade us that visionary experiences represent other levels of reality, or reality itself. Experimenters with mystic techniques and with mind-affecting drugs often convince themselves that they have opened doors of perception.

Doors of *deception* may have come ajar instead. To produce, preserve and develop intelligent life, evolution has not merely had to contend with the second law of thermodynamics, but also with expanding universal information. To protect creatures from the enormous, if not infinite, mass of influences ceaselessly impinging from all quarters, filters were of necessity provided. A complex brain ensures that human beings are adequately filter-topped.

Defects in the machinery of perception, or the suppression of mechanisms whose function is to exclude superfluous information, may produce hallucinations, confused or distorted images, or – on the other hand – lead to development of greater sensitivity in use of machinery remaining intact, as in the case of blind people who can distinguish colours by touch. (All five familiar senses involve cerebral interpretations of some kind of contact). Our senses, however, do not reveal what underlies the mental structures (which we describe as our perceptions) to which they are attuned. They cannot reach the molecular constituents of living tissue without the aid of extremely powerful instruments of magnification.

Biology is merely one route by which we enter the world of chemistry – the hundred or so elementary substances and the compounds they may form. There is further to go before we touch bottom, or consider that we have done so.

Nothing seems more real to us than our own existence, yet, as we must, however reluctantly, concede, life is an ephemeral phenomenon, organised, it appears, from non-living matter. Matter itself could be described as organised chaos. Is energy ultimate reality? Whence energy?

At all levels, wrote Milton A Rothman, *what happens is nothing but the motion of electrons and photons; an observer sitting on*

by Charles Ward

an electron would be aware of nothing but the electron moving along electric field lines (*The Science Gap*, p.231, Prometheus, 1992). Note the reiterated phrase *nothing but*.

Indulging a fleeting fancy that I am riding this cosmic dodgem, Richard Dawkins' notion comes to mind: *If we could shrink ourselves to the atomic scale, we would see almost endless rows of atoms, stretching to the horizon in straight lines – galleries of geometric repetition* (*The Blind Watchmaker*, p.150, Penguin, 1988).

But I erase this unattractive picture, reminiscent of a modern megalopolis, smog-ridden...ugly walls, rendered no less monotonous by being decorated with graffiti, streets choked with screeching vehicles, Kafka creatures dimly seen through grimy windows.

Yet cities stand for civilisation. They embrace the powers sustaining the entire fabric of our technological world. The microcosmic "city," too, contains the factories and centres of control through whose functions the commerce of the world of our experience is maintained.

Reality is obviously multi-levelled, from the macrocosmic to the subatomic. Experts in their various fields are prone to see reality in those terms to which their specialist knowledge has accustomed them, devaluing other viewpoints.

No admittance signs bar the entry of the uninformed, who may ignorantly suppose that arcane transmutations of the power to comprehend reality have been secretly conferred on members of these scientific priesthoods, who, with such consummate ease, converse in their language of mathematical equations. Like academic theologians and, for that matter, gurus and other putative adepts, a reputation as custodians of occult knowledge is found advantageous.

When you think about it, their personal experience of the world is much the same as mine or yours. In fact, in all principal respects, it is the same. There are likely to be minor differences of sense-perception, such as being colour-blind. All major differences, however, can be taken as belonging to peo-

ay reasonably suspect that they are talking nonsense...

RENDERING REALITY

rd
e's private mental worlds, in which so
any delusions may be indulged.
When people refer to "seeing things as
they really are" one may reasonably suspect
that they are talking nonsense.
What is seen, imagined or conceived
depends on who is doing the seeing, imagin-
ing or conceiving and on the particular way
in which it is being done. Why, then, should
we suppose that one world – or "level" – in a
scientific account is necessarily less accurate
than any other? It is reality, if you like, as
observed (or conceived) at that level. The
perception may include mistakes, but – true
science being self-correcting – should error
be found, this has to be publicly admitted.
Courageous individuals do display this
morally required integrity. It is not found as
a rule in institutions bound to credal state-
ments. There the instinct for self-preserva-
tion is strong. Rather than confess to error,
industry is employed to fudge the issue.
Reinterpretation over a long period, assist-
ed by amnesia, may be preferable to total
obscuration. But such tardy liberalisation,
the past half-century has shown, encour-
ages reactionaries. They retreat into fictional
conceptions of reality which provide a super-
ficial sense of security. They reinforce their
inevitably doubt-ridden faith by constant
mantra-like repetition of its doctrines, both
in worship and evangelism (or auto-sugges-
tion and propaganda).
A striking feature of evolution is the com-
bination of the basic building blocks of the
universe so that living organisms resulted,
and in increasing complexification, stage by
stage. At intervals of varying length, a
change of conditions brought about some-
thing new – not by introducing something
that was not there before, but through the
combination of what was already there in a
different arrangement, resulting in different
effects.
Reductionism, or "nothing but-tery" (as it
is often labelled), states that cosmic con-
stituents remain unchanged despite their
 manifold manifestations. Because the fact
that newness springs from rearrangement is
ignored, discussion of the nature of reality
frequently produces more heat than light.
To introduce supernatural elements into

any description of reality is impermissible,
since these have no basis in physics. From
primæval æons, when there was nothing but
a cloud of cosmic gas, through the formation
of galaxies, stellar systems and planets, the
first amino-acids in the atmospheric soup, to
our era of compact discs, guided missiles
and canned beer, there has been nothing
added to the universe in the way of extra
ingredients.

But one would have to be peculiarly
myopic not to have noticed that *newness* is
actually what goes on happening throughout
the course of time. The new items are not
fresh cosmic constituents; they are fresh
arrangements of some of the original (and
continuing) constituents. Moreover, despite
their ephemeral nature – for, at a nod and a
wink, so to speak, they are ready to rush
back to the disorder from which they sprang,
victims of entropy – once a toe-hold has
been obtained, or a route established, the
way is open for repetitions, or copies.

The process is not top-down hierarchic,
but, from an evolutionary point of view, the
converse – each level depending on what has
been previously achieved. We may think it
logical to regard reality as the ultimate
Whole, a discrete entity, the totality of time
and space, or perhaps of hyperspace. If this
is our opinion, we should realise that we are
in a semantic minefield. Totality, like "God,"
or perfection, is after all only a mental con-
struct. We have to remember that we do
"play about with language." Post-modernists
are right about that.

Is reality Becoming, rather than Being?

If so, and if reality had a voice (as the reli-
gious have imagined) and revealed itself to
the human race, then the mythological
Yahweh's unenlightening exposition of his
name: *I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE*, would
be an apt enough, if a tautological, way of
expressing the fact. Nothing is gained, how-
ever, by dressing up this speculation as a
theophany, although it is intriguing that
someone among the many contributors to the
Old Testament (whose interest in philosphi-
cal reasoning, since they were basically reli-
gious storytellers and poets, was negligible)
actually did ventilate the idea.

The fatuity of supposing that total compre-



(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

**Plainly, what is
perceived as reality
by any living creature
depends on the
sense equipment it
possesses and on
that equipment's
operative range. A
dog hears a whistle
that I can't; delights in
odours to which, I am
glad to say, my nose
remains insensitive.**

hension of reality can be presented, let alone
absorbed, as a package, whether of "divine
revelation" or as a product of brilliant human
intelligence, should be obvious. We have no
alternative to taking one step of understand-
ing at a time and should cease to delude our-
selves that there can be any conclusion to the
quest.

Henotheism: Intermediate stage between polytheism and monotheism; worship of one god by an individual, clan, or nation to the exclusion of others; term applies when worshiper has achieved this measure of unity but is not sufficiently philosophically advanced to deny the existence of other gods; stage of Israelite belief from Moses to the exile. An Encyclopedia of Religion (Peter Owen, 1964).

AARONJUDAH SUGGESTS HOW...

A super-Jewish disdain for converts might save religion!

PEOPLE in general have mutely accepted that monotheism is the basis of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. But the claim that the ancient Hebrews had devised a monotheistic scripture would dissolve before our eyes were we to make an imaginative leap into the congregation at the foot of Mount Sinai at the moment when Moses is exhibiting the Tablets of Stone on high: "I am the Lord God of Israel...thou shalt have no other Gods before me...I am a jealous God."

The meaning is unambiguous in any language: "I am the greatest of the whole pantheon of gods. Abhor them, adore me."

This is henotheism from the horse's mouth, *par excellence*. Had the as yet unheard-of concept of monotheism been broached to Moses, he would have seen its perils. A revelation of the One and Only God carries the commandment for any religious leader: Proselytise! Adoption of such a policy would have stifled the Israelite's nascent mission in its crib. His central tenet was exclusivity, and he (or his scribes) hammered it home. Compulsory circumcision, dietary laws, imposition of the Sabbath, female hygiene, proscriptions against homosexuality, onanism and bestiality are sacred edicts quite unique to their time. No other religion then had them, and they assured the Jew of his *differentness* – of his special place in the human faunæ – in which he believes to this day.

We are now left with the main question. *How* did the Jews come to be generally regarded as monotheistic? The answer lies rather in another question: *when* did it happen? It occurred upon the rise of Christianity. St Paul did it. St Paul should be in *The Guinness Book of Records* as the biggest cuckoo in the transcendental element for having laid his monotheistic egg in our henotheistic nest. Friedrich Nietzsche had expressed his disapproval of the brazen arrogation of an old religion by a new one with strong language, but did not remark on the change forced upon the identity of the old. This needs to be followed through to correct public misconceptions.

In the April issue of *The Freethinker*, the actor Tom Conti is quoted as saying he

would like to get on the time-machine to Nazareth 35 AD "to find Jesus the carpenter and tell him of the trouble he caused." This is the kind of sincere yet ill-informed judgement, fomented by public inertia, that prompted me to pick up the pen. Jesus was *not* responsible for the founding of Christianity. He was as henotheistic as Moses – in the forms the two protagonists have been translated and are translated to disgorge their characters upon us. In Matthew 10 v5, Jesus instructs his 12 disciples: "Do not go among the Gentiles, nor enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel." In the same Gospel (15 v24), he reproves a Canaanite woman for persistently soliciting his aid: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." In the same vein, he conjures up a metaphor equating Gentiles with dogs. The other two Synoptic Gospels (Mark and Luke) offer a similar list of instructions but discreetly omit reference to "the lost sheep of Israel." The unsynoptic John is not worthy of consideration unless the screed can be correctly dated. Its shameless, back-biting anti-semitism makes it sound post-Pauline; and as the author also of Revelation, John was plainly subject to fits of hallucinogenic incontinence.

Cypher

Looking down on the panorama occupied by religious movements from as high and as remote in time as historically annotated, the existence of "God" appears as convincingly validated as, say, "Rumpelstiltskin." It is really a cypher for something which it affects; primarily it is a rallying call. Belief here is make-believe, and that coupled with latent human aggression is the alchemy which transforms mere charade into calamity. A view like this offers an explanation as to why individuals of the best intelligence keep up regular attendance at places of worship. Self-delusion appears (quite falsely) to be a small price to pay for congregational warmth and togetherness.

Concerning the organising of peoples, Moses and Plato had the same idea about the numerical limits of society. The Greek noted that the city-state would prove inde-

fensible were it too small, and would lose coherence if it was too large. Moses, at a time when the itinerant Israelites had no land to build a city on, came to the same conclusion in the religious realm.

But whereas Plato's persuasions were never put into practice, that of Israelite exclusivity maintained itself through the rise and fall of their vexatious kingdoms. The greatest test, their cathartic period, occurred after the Babylonian exile when the resurgence of racial purity and so on was initiated by Ezra and Nehemiah, resulting in a wholesale expulsion of "foreign wives."

To date, all the many conquerors of the Jews have left mere relics of their former grandeur; some disappeared altogether. The small pockets of Jews on the other hand show no sign of declension; yet to give the credit for their survival to their God ignores the facts – which point to their policy of exclusion, and simultaneously demonstrate the failure of the proselytising creeds.

The more that Christianity and Islam succeed in their efforts to enlarge, the more the intimate spirit of community shrinks. Schisms as rapidly proliferate, and it is no surprise to see how easily a charismatic figure can cut into an over-swollen congregation and establish a cult following. A small country like Holland alone has to bear with 30 different protestant sects, each keeping watch on the others for fear of poachers. Proselytising fosters disaffection through envy. There is not a single country where factions of the same religion (Christian or Muslim) are completely spared the fear of some denominational outrage erupting out of thin air. If the Jewish experience is worth a trial, a halcyon vision presents itself: thousands upon thousand of gods each worshipped by a tribe of adherents with a super-Jewish disdain for converts.

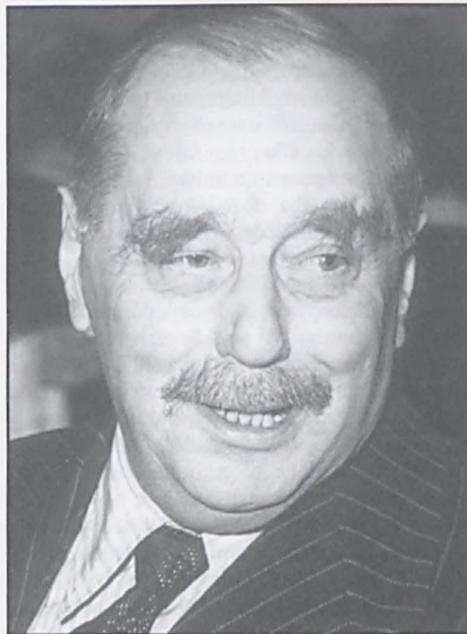
The present state of affairs surely could not be exacerbated by the woolliest scheme, but on looking around for someone to blame, please spare Jesus. I have no objection to anyone travelling on the time-machine back to Nazareth AD 35, but would rather St Paul did the trip to visit the aforesaid carpenter. They never met, and *that* would be a reckoning to interest more persons than Mr Conti.

H G Wells and the 'incredible and ugly lie' of Catholicism

by Tony Akkermans

done his earlier imitative approach and became almost immediately a successful journalist and short story writer, the possessor of a lively and humorous style and an exponent in fiction in the relatively new literary subject of science.

Like so many rationalists, who expect this life to be the only one they are ever likely to have, Wells had a desperate urge to find the perfect companion in body and mind. This restless search (expressed in his novel *The Sea Lady*) after two marriages and numerous liaisons eventually led him to the love affair which, by his own admission, had the greatest effect on his work and life. In the young author Rebecca West, he found the ideal for which he had been searching. But the two intellects had both positive and negative effects on each other, and, although their turbulent relationship lasted intermittently for the rest of his life, Wells never left his second wife, Jane, and on her death in 1927 he did not remarry.



● H G Wells – one of the *Freethinker's* earliest regular readers.

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

In 1882, when Wells was a desperately unhappy 16-year-old drapery apprentice, on his cloth-matching expeditions he used to pass "an obscure but spirited newspaper shop which displayed a copy of a weekly called *The Freethinker*. Each week it had a cheerful blasphemous caricature, which fell in very agreeably with my derisive disposition. I looked for this very eagerly and when I could afford it bought a copy."

Unlike Bertrand Russell, who was very outspoken on the matter, H G Wells is not widely known for his atheism, but there is no question that he had a hearty dislike of religion, and we have his very revealing anecdotes from his autobiography to prove it.

One of these, of great interest to readers of *The Freethinker*, relates how in 1882, when Wells was a desperately unhappy 16-year-old drapery apprentice, on his cloth-matching expeditions he used to pass "an obscure but spirited newspaper shop which displayed a copy of a weekly called *The Freethinker*. Each week it had a cheerful blasphemous caricature, which fell in very agreeably with my derisive disposition. I looked for this very eagerly and when I could afford it bought a copy."

We all know that *The Freethinker* was founded by G W Foote in 1881, so H G Wells must have been one of its earliest regular readers! As it must have done for many since, *The Freethinker* helped him to crystallise his hitherto vague reservations about belief in general and Christianity in particular, and in his autobiography Wells gives us a vivid description of how the seeds of doubt, thus having been sown, took firm root when, one Sunday evening, he heard a sermon in the Portsmouth Roman Catholic Cathedral:

*The theme was the extra-ordinary merit of Our Saviour's sacrifice and the horror and torment of hell from which he had saved the elect. The preacher had a fluting voice and a faintly foreign accent, a fine impassionate white face, burning eyes and self-conscious hands. He was enjoying himself thoroughly. He spared us nothing of hell's dreadfulness. All the pain and anguish of life as we knew it, every suffering we had ever experienced or imagined, or read about, was nothing to one moment in the unending black despair of hell. And so on. For a little while his accomplished volubility carried me with him and then my mind broke into amazement and contempt. This was my old childish nightmare of God and the flaming wheel; this was the sort of thing to scare ten year olds. I looked at the intert faces about me and again at this gesticulating voluble figure in the pulpit, earnest, intensely earnest – for his effect. Did this actor believe a word of the preposterous monstrosities he was pouring out? Could anyone believe it? And if not, why did he do it? What was the clue to the manifest deep satisfaction of the believers about me? And from that my eyes and thoughts went, with all the amazement of new discovery, about the crowded building in which I was sitting, its multitudinous gas and candle flames, its aspiring columns, its glowing altar, the dim arched roof, which had been made to house this spouting fount of horrible nonsense. A real fear of Christianity assailed me. It was not a joke; it was not funny as *The Freethinker* pretended. It was something immensely formidable. It was a tremendous human fact. We, the still congregation, were spread over the floor, not one of us*

You're telling us!

Anal-retentive ... and rich!

IAN FORBES (April) asks why it is that so many atheists feel that they have to support the political left. For myself, it is because I found that Christianity was no more than a justification for the actions of capitalists, and incompatible with the aim of Socialism; there can be no such thing as a Christian Socialist, in spite of the pronouncements of Tony Blair, Jack Straw, *et al.*

To see why this is, we must look at the origins of organised Christianity. The popular image of Christianity during the Roman Empire is of slaves and plebians holding secret services in catacombs and sewers, in constant fear of the knock on the door at midnight that was the prelude to being thrown to the lions the next day.

In fact, this picture is erroneous; the idea of Christians skulking in catacombs was a piece of propaganda constructed by those notoriously anti-Christian commentators Pliny and Tacitus. The first Christians were traders and entrepreneurs; they may have been born to plebeian parents, but they soon grew into "self-made" businessmen, growing rich by buying up all the available supplies of such necessities as wheat, oil, and so on and turning a tidy profit by selling them to the public at a highly inflated price – the classic behaviour of "middle-men" to this day.

This would cause resentment on the part of the Roman population at large. Sometimes the resentment at the price rises and shortages this behaviour would cause would threaten serious public disorder. To placate the mob, the nearest Roman official would assuage public demands to *do something* by finding the biggest profiteer, arresting him on some trumped-up charge of treason, and throwing him to the lions. The fact that the man was a Christian was entirely coincidental.

These "self-made" businessmen needed a moral justification for the wealth that they acquired, so they invented the religion of Christianity to make themselves appear morally superior to the Roman populace who did not practise it; their compulsive asceticism was made to appear a laudable mode of behaviour, instead of evidence of an anal-retentive personality.

The entirely mythical character of "Jesus" was cobbled together from bits of stories about other pre-existing gods to provide the figure of ultimate good which that stance of moral superiority required.

Eventually, the middle-men acquired enough power to appoint, virtually, the Emperor himself: this is a more plausible reason for Constantine's conversion – the need to acquire the support of the Roman business community is much more realistic than some alleged vision of a crucifix in the sky!

We cannot say with any certainty what the behaviour of these Christians in private was like, but if it was anything like their counterparts in the 19th Century, the Victorian entrepreneurs so admired by Margaret Thatcher, then there could not have been a single vice or perversion in which they did not indulge. Evidence for this assertion can be found in the Private Case in the British Museum; those who have no access to the collection of expensively-pro-

duced Victorian pornography therein can find all they need to confirm this in Mr Stephen Marcus's excellent work, *The Other Victorians*.

Judging by the comments of certain "New Labour" politicians, Blair's assurance of the rich that it is no sin to acquire wealth by taking the products of someone else's labour and selling it for 20 to 30 times what you paid him for it, and Straw's pledge to sweep the streets clean of the poor, homeless and ill, Christians have learned nothing since Roman times. Those who need a realistic moral framework for our times could do a lot worse than read Shelley's *The Necessity of Atheism*.

KEITH ACKERMAN
Tilbury

I SEE from the June issue that some readers of *The Freethinker* criticise what they call "blatant Left-wing propaganda" in its columns.

I can't understand what the objection is about. I always thought Leftism meant progress, while Rightism was reactionary.

A progressive magazine like *The Freethinker* in supporting the Left is taking a stand for progress. In my opinion, were it to adopt a neutral attitude, it would be "sitting on the fence."

J H MORTEN
London WC

● FT reader JOHN DOWDING, of Essex, has written the following letter to the Editor of *Fabian Review*: The article in the current *Fabian Review* from the Co-ordinator of the Christian Socialist Movement refers to "the astonishing furore" caused by Tony Blair's comments on his Christian faith.

How can we present a united front if religion is brought into the discussion? Each religion thinks it (and possibly it alone) has the ideal ethic, whereas in fact most have some good, each in their own way. It is pointless to concentrate on differences real or otherwise. In a Socialist society, we are Socialists first and foremost. Our religion or lack of it is our affair. There are enough problems with having a multi-racial society. Religion should affect only our personal lives and possibly bring us into Socialism, but, once there, the route in is immaterial.

There is currently correspondence running in *The Freethinker*, the journal associated with the National Secular Society. This is from Conservative atheists, complaining about the Socialist bias in the magazine. Here the opposite applies; if we are in a non-religious organisation, who should worry about our politics?

Horses for courses please!

Knife in the back

I TOTALLY disagree with Paul Thompson's April letter, which implies that religion should be treated with some seriousness. Any religion is a wimpish irrationality that promotes stupidity.

Religious mystical stupidities profane all honesty, and pious frauds camouflage evil with illusions of virtue.

Religion projects and induces false, unearned guilt into everyone. Priests fake compassion by using super-hypocritical demagoguery.

Organised religion has always been the knife in the back of mankind. Irrationality is the only disease of human consciousness. Irrationality trades everything for nothing.

When the last stone of the last church falls off the head of the last priest, humanity will be free.

MICHAEL J TARSIS
Dursley

Letting God off the hook

IN THE aftermath of Dunblane, Christians have been wrestling once more with the age-old conundrum of how to reconcile such dreadful events with the presence of their almighty, benevolent, interventionist God.

At times like these, Christian leaders, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury (Leslie James June), invariably trot out the proven device of describing the tragedy as the outcome of God's will and the fact that God has allowed free will. God is off the hook; not his fault after all. Such an expedient may be sufficient to mollify the unthinking flock but it is unlikely to satisfy Freethinkers, who are in the habit of thinking things through.

Let us therefore examine free will, this handy excuse handed to God by his helpful apologists here on earth, a little more closely. This is what it boils down to: God is in charge of the boardroom decisions while we, the minions on the shop floor, may decide about the petty details. If we get it wrong we must carry the can because God is too busy dealing with the real estate.

But this convenient division of labour must have its limits. There must be a point where certain misdemeanours by the workers are of such a magnitude that they can no longer be overlooked by the MD. Sixteen innocent children and their teacher dead because some loon man had free will. If he had walked into a stadium strapped in Semtex he might have killed hundreds; still OK to let people have free will? What if OK for Hitler to have his free will to kill six million Jews?

To force the issue, I have devised the ultimate free will test. Suppose that a revengeful nut like Saddam Hussein, or an Armageddon-crazed American fundamentalist, managed to get hold of a large arsenal of nuclear weapons and used his secret service to have devices planted in the population centres all over the world and that all the bombs were wired up to a red button on his coffee table. An unlikely scenario, admittedly, but possible in theory. Here he is (and no doubt it would be a hell!) with his index finger poised over the button ready to blow God's beautiful creation to smithereens. The ultimate moment of truth. Would God strike him dead? Would He have to say: "Well, I have given the people free will – do your worst; nothing I can do about it"? At this point the theologians must stop waffling and make up their mind. Either they must say that God will act to stop the destruction or they must allow that a mortal human being has become more powerful than the creator.

If, as I suspect, they would argue that God would act, they would have to face the immediate follow up question: If he can act now, why

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in Dunblane; why not in Auschwitz? And if God can not or will not act, where is the justification for all the centuries of worship and prayer?

TONY AKKERMANS
Leeds

I THINK that you were mistaken in publishing the letter on the Dunblane tragedy by Leslie James (June). However, I realise that – if James's reasoning is sound – you are not responsible for your actions.

GORDON EASTON
Oban

Wasted space?

I AM surprised you wasted space publishing Prof Gula's collection of sarcastic gibes and misrepresentations (June).

None of Gula's distortions address anything I actually wrote in my letter on juries. As I have said in the past, often the only way my critics attack my arguments is to misrepresent them first. Gula even goes so far as to put words in my mouth (or my typewriter). I said nothing about "innocence" nor did I comment on "naive" (a contentious term I try to avoid).

Gula even has the cheek to call me "naive" for thinking something I don't think and did not say – that "expert" jurors would be better than other professionals. I merely stated the obvious: that well-qualified and trained jurors would be better at handling complex evidence than the ignorant and unintelligent.

It is deeply dismayed to see that the readership of *The Freethinker* includes people whose inability to use rational argument manifests itself in the form of dishonest distortions and personal insults.

STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

Oppression of women

WHAT'S the difference between freethought, humanism and atheism?

I don't understand the Christian world's obsession with religion. I'm a feminist person and I don't believe in patriarchy in any form. Certainly there's religion – you can't escape it. All I can say is – I don't respect it because of its consequences...the oppression of women worldwide.

Ms C HARRISON
Ontario

The species boundary

JESSIE BOYD'S letter (June) does nothing to remove the fundamental flaw in the concept of human rights being extended across the species boundary to justify animal rights. Those who at one time have the power to

grant rights may well at some other time be "inarticulate and/or powerless"; they were children and could become "mentally infirm or enslaved."

We choose to protect hedgehogs but we do our best to eliminate other animals, such as rats, that we classify as "vermin" (although we may argue as to whether our methods are sufficiently "humane").

If the hedgehog has a "right" to our protection, then so has the rat. Yet even a vegetarian society would have to protect its population from disease, as well as its grain stocks from despoliation.

Heather Evans (May) says that I have not answered Singer's argument as it is based on "specism." I made it quite clear that I see nothing wrong in being "specist" so there is no force in that argument.

R G TEE
Leeds

'Truth comes in blows'

AS Len Bergin's letter (May) so well expresses it, the universal law is that objects move along the line of least resistance or of greatest attraction. (As to how those objects, and indeed how energy/matter, space and time, on which that universal law operates, came to be, we must, at present at least, admit to the most profound ignorance – an ignorance for which we can, if it makes us feel better, substitute the title of "God" – let $x = \text{the unknown}$ – even as ancient map-makers might have supplied the large blanks in their knowledge with such legends as "Here be monsters!").

Applying then this universal law to sentient beings, one can say that they act either to secure their greatest perceived good (which includes their sense of how their actions affect others, and their evaluation of those effects), or to minimise their perceived likelihood of harm or injury.

However, as with objects so with sentient beings, we occasionally find our progress blocked and that, for one reason or another, we are unable to continue in what were our established paths of thought or conduct. I would contend that it is at such point – when one is compelled to "review the situation" and to come to a conscious decision as to how one's behaviour is to be, or might be, modified – that the element of free will enters the equation, as we subject our behaviour to the (perhaps uncertain) light of experience and are likely to entertain and act upon hypotheses about possible causes of remedial action that lie or appear to lie open to us. The point I am making is that under these conditions we find that our habitual mode of behaviour is no longer valid and that new modes of behaviour have to be devised and experimented with.

It is conceivable that, if one becomes conscious of this operation, one may develop one's faculty for arriving at such reassessments, and that it can be said that by such experience one learns to establish and enhance the area of one's personal free will.

I suppose all this is another way of stating the ancient Greek adage, "Man learns by suffering" (or, as Bellow puts it in his *Henderson the Rain*

King, "The truth comes in blows").

Necessity, it appears, is not only the mother of invention but also of free will!

ALBERT ADLER
London N4

Dealing with Christians

I FELT that I had to reply to Mr Wakefield's brilliant attack on my May letter in the June issue.

The Christians who come around to your door are usually a few little old ladies who probably left school at 14 and still wonder what a VCR is, so I try to pitch my argument at their level. Simply saying "God doesn't exist – goodbye!" isn't good enough.

As I said in my second paragraph, it's "something along the following lines." If it was someone who believed in an abstract mental concept, I'd say "ideas don't create universes – only actual gods can." And if the little old lady had the brain-power of a Mr Wakefield, I would go into a detailed explanation of why I believe an all-powerful God cannot exist.

As to Jesus's existence, no one knows and probably no one will ever know if an actual person (without the miracles nonsense) ever existed, though many books will continue to be written on the subject (two more, I see!). And Mr Wakefield is undoubtedly aware of the then (Jewish) meaning of the word *virgin*.

As many have claimed since, Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, yet when the chips were down, as with many others, his belief (if he actually existed, I think he actually believed it as many mortals have done) let him down.

Infinite does not mean "embracing everything": it means literally "everything." Were God infinite, the end of the Earth and all its people would mean nothing to "him" since it would merely be an infinitesimal part of "him" decaying to other products, and since this universe is probably "closed," there will always be the same mass, regardless of its form.

Our Sun may end up as a red dwarf one day, barring cosmic accidents, but never a super nova; it's far too small (no doubt a slip of Mr Wakefield's pen).

Finally, I have come across Left-wingers who firmly believe that today's Labour is the same as it always has been. They do not recognise that it has done U-turns on almost every policy it held dear at one time. Right, Mr Wakefield?

A number of MPs who have upset the applecart have been kicked out. Others have been silenced. The once fiery Labour Party is now a toothless old dog which will do anything, embrace any policy to get into power, and if they do all will be changed overnight, with softie Blair's days numbered and the unions back in power (a general opinion, this, among many independents as well as Right-wingers).

But *The Freethinker* is not the place for politics, and I doubt that Mr Wakefield would send donations if *The Freethinker* continually published Right-wing articles. The paper should be neutral.

With reference to the June article on Lord Houghton: while Neil Kinnock didn't claim to

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be a Freethinker, he did dare to say that he was an atheist, and it possibly cost him a lot of votes.

MICHAEL HILL
Crystal Palace

Reply to a critic

THERE are a few points I'd like to make about Daniel O'Hara's interesting review of my little book *Jesus Christ Uncluttered* (June). First, I deliberately kept the book brief and low-priced, and I confined myself strictly to the four Gospels. This I explain initially in the book, so it is surprising to find Mr O'Hara commenting on its "extreme brevity" as a limitation.

O'Hara also sees as an apparent limitation my training by "these 'Modernist' mentors" Dr Henry Major and Bishop Barnes. I have the impression he sees them and their views as outmoded and superseded. But that is not a critical judgement; it is merely a point of view. The contemporary critics he cites so approvingly may also be outmoded at some future date.

He presents as my own views what I carefully describe as opinions of the general and unacademic majority (for example, ideas on Reimarus and Strauss and the Essenes and the Turin Shroud and Leonardo da Vinci). And I am frankly astonished to find Mr O'Hara writing of my "too ready acceptance" of the Gospels as "genuine eyewitness testimony of Jesus." I hope I have made it very clear that I don't accept uncritically one word of the Gospels. I assumed it was pretty obvious to the reader that I am a pacifist and that the main aim of my little book is to extol the sublime pacifism of the life and teaching of Jesus...and if some people find that "sentimental" – well, so be it.

There is much more that is factual and important (even sometimes original) in my book than Mr O'Hara's review would suggest. I am sure he wants to be just and fair but I am also sure that he finds it very difficult because he has such an intense dislike for the Church.

I hope the readers of *The Freethinker* will want to get hold of my book and judge it for themselves!

[The Rev] **PETER GAMBLE**
Guildford

Cause of crime?

MAY I suggest that it is the Rev David Walker who is off the rails when he says that the demise of religious belief has contributed to the present acceleration of crime that is filling our prisons?

It is the teaching of good moral behaviour alongside religious beliefs that is at fault. When a child grows up and begins to doubt, as many of them surely will, the existence of a Christian God and all the primitive superstitions that go with it, then they will surely have doubts about the whole package.

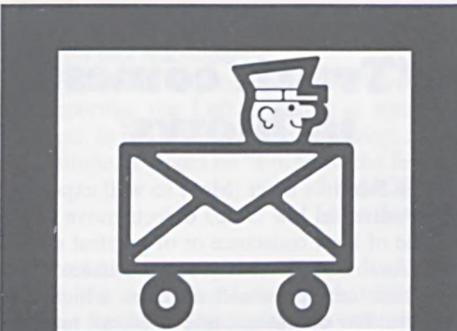
Speaking as a sportsman, is it not possible to have a sports cap with *The Freethinker* written in the appropriate position on the front and

another one with the Humanist logo? I for one would be happy to purchase both and wear them with pride.

Full marks to Neil Blewitt on his humorous review of the Book of Joshua (April). I hope it made Mr Atkins from Hornchurch (April letters) smile as much as I did.

Leslie James's article on the future of the monarchy (also April) is not the first one I have read in *The Freethinker* expressing similar sentiments – which makes me, as a member of the Republic Association, wonder why the two organisations should not merge. There may be a few people of either membership who do not want this and therefore drop out, but I do feel that such a merger would provide a much larger membership and therefore a greater voice with more impact.

A JONES
Crewe



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.

Sound and fury

THERE is *one* question I would ask of your readers, be they members of MENSA, egg-heads, whizz-kids, philosophers, academics, or just plain duffers like me: "Why is Nature so divided against itself?" It most assuredly is!

Why, further, does the law of the jungle operate on land, in the sea, in the air? Why does "Nature" go to infinite lengths to produce human beings and members of numerous other species – only to destroy them before they have had the time to develop any possible potential?

To me, the whole set-up here on what the "Spiritualists" call the "Earth Plane" appears to be nothing more than that of a vast mad-house. The religious assure me that behind the scenes lurks an infinite "God of Love" and that later on we will have the answers to these perplexing questions.

That's not good enough for me. Like Freddie Mercury, I want the answers *now!* Until I get them, I have to accept the verdict of Shakespeare: "'Tis a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

Psychics a 'blessed nuisance'

SPIRITUALIST medium Shaun Joynson, of Prestbury, Cheshire, has spent six months on "an intensive investigation...into the claims made by psychics and mediums to have helped solve crimes or find missing persons. He has looked at the most "high-profile" cases of this century, including Great Train Robbery, the Moors Murders and the John-Wayne Gacy murders in the USA.

Noting that the case of the missing estate agent Suzy Lamplugh was said by a member of her family to have attracted the interest of "no less than 473 psychics, mediums and just plain nut cases," Mr Joynson says in *Psychic News* (June 1) that he spoke privately and publicly to psychics and police officers at all ranks and to the National Missing Persons Bureau.

And the result of his probe?

"Despite all this research, I did not find one shred of evidence of a psychic being successful in any crime or missing person case. If anything, I found that both police and relatives involved in these cases regarded psychics as at best a pest and at worst as distressing." He states "categorically" that official police psychics do not exist, and that the police officers, from PC to Commanders with whom he communicated "were resolute in their opinion – expressed both on and off the record – that psychics were nothing more than a 'blessed nuisance.'"

It's a snip – at £80!

BRADFORD Hospitals NHS Trust has agreed to provide religious circumcision – but at a cost of £80.

Khadim Hussain, President of Bradford Council for Mosques, told *The Muslim News*: "It is far too much. The private GPs charge a lot less, £40 to £50. It should be free."

The Bradford Trust said it responded to the Muslim community needs of more than 1,000 male births annually. As to the high charges the spokesman said: "Charges are based on what it costs us to provide the service, and also the initial costs are very high."

Bradford had, in the past (some 20 years ago) provided free circumcision as a routine procedure for all babies. However, after reassessment by the Bradford Health Authority, in terms of clinical effectiveness was found that there was no medical reason for providing circumcision.

A spokesman for the Authority justified its stand by pointing out that it was meant to meet the health needs of the community and "not religious need", and therefore, "we cannot purchase it," which means that the charge by the NHS Trust has to be met by the patient and not by the Authority.

Muslim ultimatum to Government

THE newly-elected leader of the "Muslim Parliament" in Britain, Dr Muhammad Ghayasuddin, has pledged to continue the organisation's commitment to improve the plight of Muslims in Britain by any means necessary, reports *The Muslim News* for May 31. In a message to mark the beginning of the Islamic New Year 1417, Dr Ghayasuddin issued an ultimatum to the British government "unless we are given legal protection against religious discrimination, unless our schools are granted voluntary aided status and our children are allowed to receive Islamic education in state schools, we are prepared to break the law to bring justice to our community."

Dr Ghayasuddin, 57, of Chesham, Buckinghamshire, was elected by members of "Parliament" to replace Dr Kalim Siddiqui on Sunday, May 5.

He outlined the plight of Muslims across the world and in the UK in particular: "Today, the poor, the sick and the dispossessed of the world are Muslims. Despite this, we are portrayed in the media as barbaric and terrorist to distract us from doing anything to change our condition. Had Muslims accepted *The Satanic Verses*, a floodgate of novels, plays and films denigrating the values of Islam, the Prophet of Islam and the heroes of Islam would have opened. The stand taken by Muslims over *The Satanic Verses* has made them the moral conscience of British society."

He accused the Government of "undisguised hostility towards Islam and Muslims," claiming it was "now determined, more than ever before, to keep us at the bottom of all piles - educational, economic and social. It would be naive to think that we can leave our future in this country to their goodwill. History is proof enough of the futility of such pious hopes." He criticised the approach of going to the Home Office "cap in hand" for help: "Now is the time

to help ourselves, not to ask others for help."

Dr Ghayasuddin has threatened a campaign of civil disobedience unless legislation is introduced that protected Muslims and Islam, similar to that granted to Sikhs and Jews, said *The Muslim News*.

"So far our commitment to remain the most law-abiding community has been taken as our weakness. Our essentially peaceful and co-operative nature has been taken advantage of to ensure that we remain downtrodden and disadvantaged. We have paid a high price for this attitude. But we can no longer accept injustice and discrimination lying down. We are full members of British society. Our young people deserve to be treated equally. This is our right

and we will not accept anything less."

The Muslim community's campaign of civil disobedience could include refusal to pay fines for not sending children to state schools or refusal to pay the portion of tax that goes towards education, he said.

"We are sick and tired of being told that we shall get equal citizenship when we open our culture and homes to western standards of morality. We intend to do none of these things."

He added: "We are the recipients and transmitters of the last Divine message. We have a duty to establish an example for the rest of mankind, beginning with our fellow citizens in our own country."

Religious violence threat to Speakers' Corner

NINETY-THREE year-old Lord Soper has spoken to the *Methodist Recorder* (May 30) about his concern that Speakers' Corner is being hijacked by those who promote violence to intimidate opponents on the soap box.

The Hyde Park spot, where Lord Soper has spoken from the West London Mission platform since 1925, and where orators once spoke of justice and democracy, has become a battleground between Islamic extremists and Christian evangelists, with fights increasingly common, the report says.

The Royal Parks Constabulary has increased the number of officers on patrol and mounted police now join the crowds that gather round the Sunday soap-boxes. Fighting erupted between rival religious sects a few weeks ago when an Iraqi Muslim

speaker was arrested for allegedly stabbing a Lebanese Christian. Four police officers were injured when they tried to clear hundreds of people from the area. The gates to Speakers' Corner were then locked - an event unheard of in its 124 years as a symbol of free speech.

"The root problem is that there is a dependency, a cynicism, that has the inevitable result of despising the method of argument, agreement and consultation," said Lord Soper. "There is a widespread concept and culture of violence promoted to a large degree by the press and all sorts of other people and I see that as a great and real danger."

Lord Soper said: "It is a confession of an attitude of despair with what one would think of as the means of social change - it is a culture of violence which in my judgment is the absolute peril of the human race. It sounds despairing - and I can see the reason for that despair. It is a cry for help."

Of the Islamic extremists, Lord Soper said that was a violence which was inherent in a great deal of religious activity which was incorporated not only in the resurgence of Islam but also in some aspects of Christianity. "I would be prepared to say that it was the supreme problem today - unless we can abate the violence then we shall go the way of the dinosaur."

Wells and the 'ugly lie'

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had decided me in my recalcitrance. Through him the Church and its authority were laid bare to me. The thing he believed was so impossible to me that I could not imagine it being believed in good faith. Could anyone who had even tried for truth believe it? I found my doubt of his essential integrity, and the shadow of contempt it cast, spreading out from him to the whole Church and religion of which he with his wild spoutings about the agonies of hell, had become the symbol. I felt ashamed to be sitting there in such a bath of credulity.

In this highly evocative piece, many freethinkers will recognise the early stirrings of their own teenage minds beginning to disperse the religious smokescreen which clouded their ascent to the glorious hills of open enquiry, broad horizons and personal freedom.

Thus, remarkably, it was our very own *Freethinker* which gave the first impetus to the great Wells's unbelief and subsequent atheism. Today, more than a century later, it is still there to provide the same inspirational service to budding world figures and humbler thinkers alike.

Tax rip-off

SPAIN'S bishops have defended the Church's "historic dependence" on government subsidies as the deadline loomed for taxpayer contributions. Such contributions are on the decline as Spain's increasingly secular society has begun to question why state revenues should be channelled toward the Church, reports *The Universe*, June 2.

Since 1979, Spanish citizens have been able to elect to contribute 0.5 per cent of their tax payment to the Church; in 1988, they were given the additional option of donating it to non-governmental charities. Taxpayer contributions to the Church came to 13.63 billion pesetas (£73 million) in the 1994 tax year, compared with 13.89 billion pesetas in 1993.

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: Summer programme obtainable from Joan Wimble, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove BN3 2TL, telephone (01273) 737669.

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 Lighter on 01895 632096.

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01296 623730. Friends Meeting House Berkhamstead.

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

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

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, July 18, 7.30pm: Public meeting: *Can Humanists Believe in Anything Supernatural?*

Crawley: Information: Charles Stewart 01293 511270.

Devon Humanists: Information: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lymstone, 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).

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

Harving & 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*. Tuesday, August 6: Dr Michael Kehr: *Alternative Medicine - an "Orthodox" View*. Tuesday, September 3: Lesley Brown (Eastbrookend Country Park): *Wild Barking and Dagenham*. NB: Tuesday, July 16, at 8 pm: Question and answer session with Claire Rayner at The Friends' Meeting House, Cedar Avenue, Chelmsford (Essex Humanist Group).

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 Taylor 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 262225. Sunday meetings at 6.30pm.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Summer programme obtainable from Denis Cobell, 99 Ravensbourne Park, London SE64 4YA, telephone (0181) 6904645.

Manchester Humanist Group: Information: 0161 681 7600. Meetings at St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North, near Apollo Theatre, 7.30 pm. July 12: Robert Ashby, Executive Director, British Humanist Association.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP24 7PN; telephone 01362 820982. Martineau Hall, 2 Colegate, Norwich. July 18, 7.30 pm: CRUSE Bereavement Care.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Literature and information stall at the South Yorkshire Festival, Wortley Hall, Wortley, Saturday, July 6, noon until 6 pm. Annual General Meeting at The Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield, Wednesday, August 7, 8pm. Literature and information stall at the Green Fair, Merlin Theatre, Meadow Bank Road, Nether Edge, Saturday, September 1, noon until 5 pm. Information: Gordon Sinclair, 9 South View Road, Barnsley S74 9EB; 01226 743070.

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 0171 831 7723). Full list of lectures and Sunday concerts (6.30pm) from the above address. Telephone: 0171 831 7723.

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

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0181 642 4570. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, July 1, 7.30pm for 8pm: Roger Thatcher: *Evolution and Ethics*.

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

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

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: 01223 842343 or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Upland, Swansea SA2 0JY. July 28: Group Outing to Middleton Hall Botanical Gardens, Dyfed.

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

Recent publications by National Secular Society members include:

● *Jesus the Pagan Sun God* by Larry Wright (£7.50 from 12 Kent Road, Swindon SN1 3NJ).

● *The Potts Papers* ("beguiling satire") by Terry Sanderson (£7.70 from The Other Way Press, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ).

● *Humanist Anthology* by Margaret Knight, ed. Jim Herrick (£8.50 from RPA, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP).

● *Foundations of Modern Humanism* by Bill McIlroy (£1.25 from NSS, Bradlaugh House).