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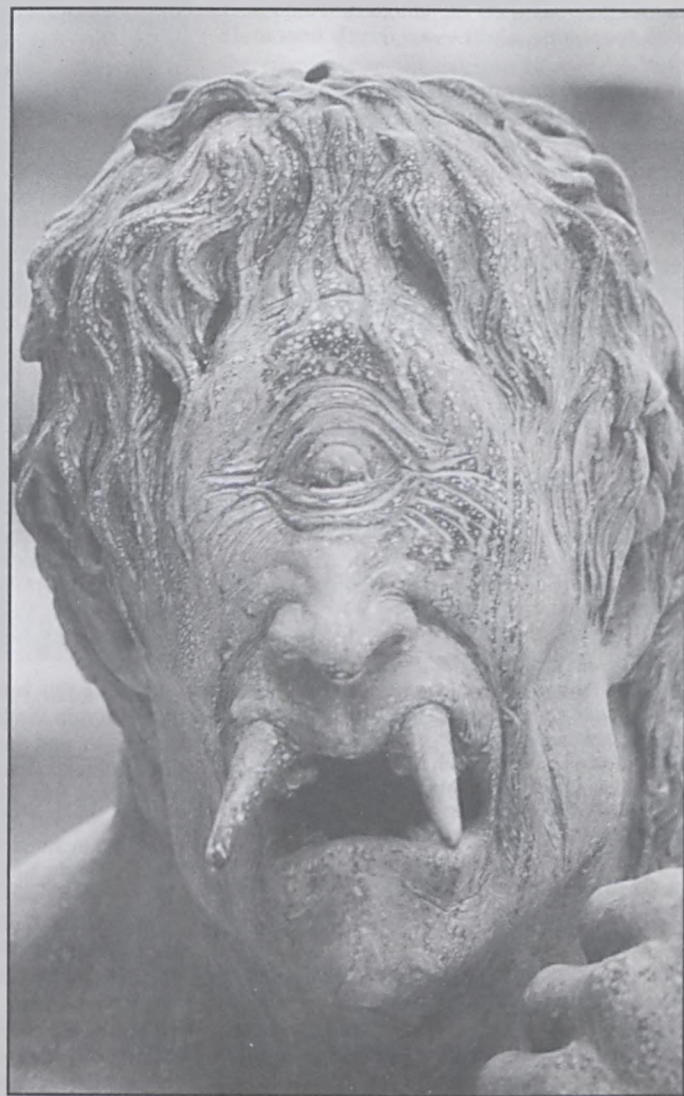
# Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 116 No 10

October 1996

# The face of myth?



● Kernel of truth behind the myth? This gigantic "Cyclops" is part of the display in Visions of Earth at London's Natural History Museum. (Photograph: The Natural History Museum)

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## Up Front

## Roman scandals

THAT noise which carried on the early-Autumn air like the Pentecostal mighty wind was in fact a collective, Catholic sigh of relief.

*Bishop Roddy Wright had surfaced and, thanks be to God, his shenanigans had been with consenting adults – and female ones at that!*

At least he had not plundered the Assisted Mixed Infants for sexual partners – unlike those priests whose lust for young flesh had forced Western Catholicism to negotiate legal

and financial settlements with hundreds of children who had been sexually abused by the clergy.

No, the episcopal bonking had been as straight as it comes – Read All Abaht It in the *News of the Screws* – in the tradition of the fun-loving Eamon Casey, erstwhile Bishop of Galway.

DESPITE all the talk of Roddy's "betrayal" of a people who, after all, *volunteer* to be conned with wine and wafer every Sunday, in all this to-do I felt compassion only for the principal victim, the lad who was exposed to a slobbering world as the son of a celibate if unchaste bishop. But the exposure of Bishop Roddy's over-friendly ways was said by some to have been beneficial in that it brought to the fore the long-vexed question of priestly celibacy.

Well, yes and no. It brought the matter to the fore all right – only for it to be firmly quashed by the Pope, or whoever is playing Peter Brough to his Archie Andrews now that, medicated to the holy eyeballs, he is barely with us. *The Times* quoted a Vatican spokesman on September 18: "The Pope insists on mandatory celibacy in the Latin Church".

My guess is that even if it is true that 50 per cent of RC priests "in the developed world have fairly regular sexual relationships" (Dr Richard Sipe, a married former monk who has made a study of celibacy, *The Independent*, September 17), and that over the past 20 years 10,000 Italian priests and up to 20,000 in the USA have left the Church to get married, we shall not live to see the end of the celibacy rule.

I believe this because the real reason for its imposition in the 11th Century still applies. As the wealth, and therefore the power, of the Church burgeoned, the Vatican decided that it would be a Bad Thing indeed if the loot were to be dissipated by bishops and priests who might be inclined to bequeath God's property to wives and children. It had little to do with chastity and such – although it probably gained the incidental and influential support of some Church leaders because of their deep detestation of women.

REALLY, we need waste no more time on chasing this latest scandal: there'll be another one along in a minute. The truly important ecclesiastical news of September came from France, from where the TV pictures revealed the 76-year-old Pope to be well down the road to his Reward. But he still mouthed the same obscenities on divorce, abortion, birth control and the other below-the-tummy-button matters with which Christians are so obsessed.

I hope, however, that he was able to take in the fact that his presence to mark the 1,500th anniversary of the pragmatic Clovis being baptised was not universally welcomed in a once Roman Catholic country in which only one-in-10 of the population attends Mass. "Clovis has been adopted as a figurehead by the extreme Right in France, but many secular-minded critics have also questioned why the Government is supporting the celebration of a strictly religious event in a nation where Church and State have been separated since 1905", reported *The Times*, September 19.

And as *Time* noted on September 16: "Although 80 per cent of France's 58 million citizens are Roman Catholics, many have

become alienated by the Pope's opposition to abortion and contraception and by his dismissal last year of the popular liberal Bishop of Evreux, Jacques Gaillot".

Not only were our fellow freethinkers of the Voltaire Network very much up front in huge protests against the secular state's betrayal of the republican inheritance in inviting the Pope to preside at the celebration, but also socialists, feminists and freemasons "blocked the use of taxpayers' money for red carpets and grandstands [and] invented a new rite of unbaptism for disaffected Catholics" (*Daily Telegraph*, September 12).

Unbaptism? *The Observer*, September 1: "Hundreds of French Roman Catholics have asked for their names to be removed from church baptism registers in protest at the Pope's visit... A Montpellier-based group, *Vivre au Présent* (Living in the present) has produced pre-printed cards for supporters to give parish priests. The cards state: 'I would be grateful if you would amend the baptism register as follows: *Renounced his/her baptism in writing on [date]*. My philosophical beliefs no longer correspond with those of the people who, in good faith, considered that I should be baptised.'"

According to a spokesman for the Church in France, Mgr Bernard Lagoutte, such requests are not ignored. He told *The Observer*: "...anyone asking to be baptised – formally an impossibility since baptism is a sacrament – would have a rider written into the margin of the register at the church where the ceremony took place". What a splendid idea! Perhaps we could try it here (and not only with the Roman Catholic authorities; we could annoy the C of E with it, too).

NOW that we know (via the staunchly RC former CIA Director William Casey; *Daily Telegraph*, September 14) that Pope John Paul II plotted with the CIA to overthrow the Soviet bloc, with particular reference to Poland, it is to be hoped that another little item of news managed to penetrate His Holiness' dreamworld.

*The Sunday Telegraph*, September 8: "In Poland, homeland of the Pope, the leftist-dominated Parliament voted on Friday to relax its strict anti-abortion law, despite loud protests from the Roman Catholic Church and the Right. Polish women will now be allowed to terminate their pregnancies on the grounds of 'difficult living conditions' or their 'severe personal situation'.

"Under the terms of the old law, adopted in the first flush of post-Communist freedom, abortion had been almost banned..."

Even God's Vicar on Earth can't win 'em all!

QUITE a month for Roman Catholicism, then what a pity to have no means of computing how many of the faithful waded into the ever-broadening sea of disillusion with the Church as a result of the turmoil.

Still, we do have a comment from Joanna Whibley, a woman allegedly Wronged by Roddy Wright, which might indicate how many literate Catholics feel. On September 21 she urged those asked for money at Mass: "Please, please, please don't put it in the collection. Spend it on yourselves. Enjoy it."

Peter Brearey

## The Freethinker

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# There's more to superstition than meets the eye

**On Friday the 13th – when else? – at the British Humanist Association's Anti-superstition Fork Supper**  
**MIKE HOWGATE**  
**had both orbs firmly fixed on an ancient myth**

AS WE all came into the room we walked *under* a ladder – because, being Rationalists, we do not believe in superstitious nonsense. But generally I avoid walking under ladders...not because I think it is unlucky, but because every teacher who appeared in the *Beano* and *Dandy* – my intellectual fare before I was introduced to *The Freethinker* – inevitably ended up with a pot of paint over his head if he ever dared to walk under a ladder. My fear of paint-pots, of course, irrational. However, there is a bit of rationality lurking there – unsecured ladders are a major cause of industrial accidents and accidents in the home.

When we think of rationality as a concept it is almost invariably associated with science. The rather quaint phrase “scientific temper” used by Indian Atheists and Rationalists puts it quite nicely. But when asked to talk on the subject of “Rationality and Bizarre Superstitions” by the Executive Director of the British Humanist Association, I decided on my own definition. A *rational explanation* is: “An explanation of the natural world including society which is concordant with current scientific beliefs, at least does not unreasonably run counter to them”. Having come up with my definition, I then tried to refine it. What is “unreasonable”? And can the unreasonable ever be “rational”? I tried ordering a few medical beliefs – from the rational to the bizarrely irrational.

1. Scientific medicine. Generally subjected to double-blind testing and decades of practice and scrutiny. No one would claim it was based on irrational or superstitious beliefs, but it is by no means perfect for all that.

2. Herbalism. Based on millennia of trial and error. The basis of our modern pharmacopoeia. But dosages can be erratic and diagnosis is generally suspect for all but the wildest ailments.

3. Homeopathy. Is distinctly cranky but claims to be rational. Based on an outdated theory of correspondences, plus a little bit of what is bad for you can do you good homeopathic philosophy. Supposed proofs even got published in *Nature* when one of our distinguished supporters was that journal's Editor.

4. Aromatherapy. A modern “fad” used to sell nice-smelling oils that you can get your partner to rub all over your body. Unfortunately, it cannot cure a thing – but, when again, who cares?

5. Crystal healing. Used to sell pretty rocks

at inflated prices. Has its origin in the discovery that quartz has a piezo-electric property. This keeps time in your quartz watch so practitioners claim it is scientific. It can also do your “aura” a power of good...so long as you buy the right sort of expensive crystal.

6. Faith healing. An outright scam perpetrated on the most vulnerable members of society. This probably helps to kill quite a number of people every year – by dissuading them from following their prescribed treatment. It is actually *proud* of its irrationality: you can be cured only if you truly believe.

Most guests at the BHA evening drew the line below (1) or (2), a few below (3) and some hedonists went for (4). Where do you draw the line?

What I want to prove is that even the most “rational” of us has some residual superstition or “irrationality”. What I, to be polite to my audience, would call “rational superstition”.

Let me explain. It's all to do with that word “unreasonable” in my definition. In the main, all pre-scientific societies were superstitious. They invented explanations that in a way accounted for the various phenomena they encountered. A lot of these explanations often had a kernel of truth within a confusion of misinterpretations.

One of the best examples of a superstitious belief with a rational explanation is on display in the new Earth Gallery of the Natural History Museum. It is one of six sculptures

depicting stages in our understanding of the Earth and it portrays a gigantic Cyclops.

What, one might wonder, has a mythical monster, which supposedly inhabited a Mediterranean island during the time of the Ancient Greeks, to do with the science of Geology? The answer is that it is probably the first-ever reconstruction of a prehistoric animal!

Back in about 444 BCE, Empedocles of Agrigento reported the remains of giants from the island of Sicily as those of the Cyclops Polyphemus of Homer's *Odyssey*. In the 14th Century Giovanni Boccaccio (of *Decameron* fame) identified bones still being found in Sicily as those of the Cyclops race. He gave Empedocles as his authority for this identification. He also suggested a somewhat exaggerated height of 300 feet for the creature – but he was sure that the bones exhibited the central “orbit” of the true Cyclops.

## Elephants

Three hundred years later, in 1678, the world's first speleologist, the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, in his book *Mundus subterraneus* (Underground World) described the bones of four species of giant, including a “Cyclops”, from the same locality. He gave a more reasonable height estimate of 30 feet.

And there it rested for about 250 years. The “mythical” explanations of Empedocles, Boccaccio and Kircher being more and more regarded as flights of fancy by superstitious minds taken in by the antique stories of Homer.

In 1914 the Austrian palaeontologist Othenio Able identified fossil remains of miniature elephants found on several Mediterranean islands, including Sicily, as the rational explanation of the “Cyclops myth”. There, along with the massive limb bones and vertebrae of these extinct animals, were their skulls – about five times larger than our own. It was the misinterpretation of the skulls of these elephants that proved to be the rational basis of this 5,000-year-old myth.

So...the next time you visit a museum with a natural history collection, look for an elephant skull. You will find a giant skull with a high-domed cranium, just like ours, and a lower jaw with a distinctive chin (humans and elephants are the only animals with this protuberance). *But instead of a pair of orbital openings, there is just one gigantic opening in the centre of the face – the cyclopean opening which housed the elephant's trunk!*

● Mike Howgate, a member of the National Secular Society's Council of Management, is a regular lecturer at the Natural History Museum.



# Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

## Much ado about ...very little!

WE ALL see things that, like Macbeth's dagger, aren't "there". We hear things that we can't identify: the air, like Prospero's isle, "is full of noises". But we don't seek paranormal explanations of these phenomena. Unless, that is, we are occult-minded, like Bill and Liz Rich.

The couple may have "endured seven years of terror from apparitions and evil spirits" in their rented farmhouse in the Brecon Beacons (*Daily Telegraph*, July 5); they look harassed enough in their picture; but they cannot expect others to treat the slapstick seriously.

It all began, they say, when Mr Rich "heard hobnailed boots thumping across the landing", while he was in the downstairs loo. But how did he know they were hobnailed? Was a spirit walking in them, or were the boots themselves spiritual?

In line with all hackneyed hauntings, doors slammed, objects moved and there were icy blasts. This obviously animal-loving family also lost their pet pig and guinea pig; their dog and cat both went mad; and their goat crushed one of her kids.

One of the ghosts seen by Mrs Rich resembled their landlord's late mother, while Mr Rich saw a beautiful girl "called Spirit of Seduction" (presumably by him), as well as a seven-foot beast, half-man, half-bird, which he took to be a manifestation of the devil.

Worst of all – and most novel – the spook(s) "fed off electricity", landing the Riches with a huge bill which, despite their name, they haven't been able to pay.

Experienced critics of such cases might find a possible candidate for poltergeist in Mr Rich's 15-year-old son from a previous marriage, who "was so abusive when not watching horror films in his blood-red bedroom that they had to send him to a nearby boarding house 'to save his soul'".

But Mr and Mrs Rich, who have written about their experiences and been featured on TV, are said to be "now devout Christians". So, to end in Shakespearean vein, as I began, I suppose all's well that ends well.

## Nessie's alienated

WHATEVER happened to the Loch Ness monster? In past years the newspapers could never let the silly season pass without a new sighting, underwater sounding or whatever. Now, Nessie has seemingly retreated in face of the alien invasion; and I'm not just referring to the film *Independence Day*.

According to the *Daily Express* (July 20), British TV producer Bruce Burgess spied upon a US military base known as Area 51 in the

Nevada desert, and is sure that "the US government is recreating extraordinary spacecraft based on "flying saucers which have crashed on this planet". And he confirms, "I believe in aliens".

Mind you, he hasn't seen either the saucers or the aliens. His "key" evidence is from one Bob Lazer, a former Area 51 engineer who, with "a chilling clarity" (or another icy blast?), described how the extraterrestrial craft "lifted off silently, drifted around a bit and sat back down" in a hangar. It was, Lazer said, "like seeing a house lift off the ground quietly. You can't imagine the energy involved to do that and not make any noise at all".

Frankly, no I can't; but I do find a certain significance in the alternative name for Area 51 base: Dreamland.

## More RCs are out of practice

"IT CANNOT be denied", writes former Roman Catholic priest Peter de Rosa (in the *Irish Independent*, July 6) "that the Church is in crisis". Indeed, he thinks it is the worst crisis since the Reformation, so it must be bad.

He holds the Vatican largely responsible. Whereas lay people know that "if they follow Paul VI and John Paul II on contraception it will ruin their marriage", on a recent African tour, the Pope "spoke 40 times in one day against contraception".

Many Catholics will leave the Church for good, de Rosa says, but "most of us, I suspect, have too much tribal loyalty for that. We are prepared to wait for a more catholic pope".

But although he regards the crisis as one of authority rather than faith, the facts indicate otherwise. An inset on Church affairs informs us (*inter alia*) that each year 15,000 Roman Catholics cease practising in Germany; and in America, where 20,000 priests have resigned, only 26 per cent of Catholics go to church on Sunday.

In the US, too, "more than 500 priests have been convicted of child sex-abuse, at a cost", the paper says, "of more than half-a-billion dollars".

And, at a cost to the children, I may add, that is incalculable.

## Out of the depths...

AT ACHILL, County Mayo, Christina Gallagher is doing her best to keep the faith alive in Erin, and raising a great deal of money from the pilgrims who flock to receive her blessing. When, in 1993, it was learnt that the Bishop of Galway had fathered a child, the Archbishop of Tuam acted with unusual haste, giving the stigmatic visionary Mrs Gallagher a

former convent for conversion into a House of Prayer, where the Virgin Mary "urged her especially to pray for priests".

Unusual haste, because the Church is only now looking critically at the House of Prayer, which features "garish but expensive holy water containers...life-sized Madonna with a halo of pinprick bulbs...Coquettish white cherubs" on the window ledges and on the altar; "even an image of God the Father, an old man with a grey beard sitting on a cloud". In short, all the vulgarity of Roman Catholic idolatry. (Why, one always wonders, with all the great Renaissance masters to draw upon, does the Church artistically stoop to the lowest depths?)

No wonder that Christina's husband Paddy "just a bit afraid of it all". What normal husband wouldn't be?

## You did say Mormons...?

RAY KEARNEY, on the other hand, thinks that Ireland – and Christianity – would benefit from Mormon teachings. But, as Mandy Rice-Davies observed, in a rather different context, he would, wouldn't he? He is public affairs director of the Church of Latter Day Saints.

The family is the most important unit in society, he tells readers of the *Irish Times* (August 2), and every Monday Mormon families spend the evening together. His church advocates refraining from sexual relationships before marriage and remaining faithful within marriage, which "strengthens the individual, the family and society". Divorce is " frowned upon, but is recognised as a last resort in some cases".

Founder Joseph Smith had no need of that resort: he simply took more wives; an option Mr Kearney neglects to mention.

## Bullock in a china shop?

"WHY IS this man a priest?" asked a lay Roman Catholic, who has complained to Cardinal Hume about Father Jude Bullock, St John the Evangelist church in Islington, north London. And it's a valid question.

Father Jude doesn't believe in God, Heaven or Hell, Lesley Thomas reports in the *Sunday Express* (June 16). He likens his prayers to meditation; has "dumped" the idea of the soul and questions the Virgin Birth. And he defends his views as "just a reinterpretation of the tenets of God in non-supernatural terms".

Geddit? Good for you!

NICOLAS WALTER examines our hopes and fears for the year 2000 and diagnoses a new affliction:

## PMT – PRE-MILLENNIAL TENSION

IS MAN a rational animal? He says he is; he even calls himself *Homo sapiens* – thinking man. But when you think about the silly things he thinks, you have to wonder. *The Freethinker* has for more than a century attacked silly things concerning religion and other superstitious and supernatural beliefs, and there is a great big one in front of us now – the Millennium (Latin for a thousand years). We are entering the silliest of silly seasons, the approaching end of the twentieth century and second millennium of our era, in the year 2000, and we are witnessing increasing symptoms of what may be called millennium madness, or pre-millennial tension. Religious and political authorities, egged on by the media, are running a race to make something important of what is in fact an unimportant and indeed imaginary event, and few people are getting in their way.

The end of the millennium really has meaning only in a Christian context, since the era is a Christian invention, though it has of course been extended by Western civilisation to the rest of the world. The date itself actually has no significance in Christian doctrine, for there is nothing in the Bible or other writings of the early Church about the year 1000 or 2000. What there is, is the single prophecy in the New Testament, in the twentieth chapter of the book called the Apocalypse or Revelation of someone called John (written in about AD 100), that Jesus will return at some early but uncertain time and reign on earth for a thousand years between two episodes of cosmic wars and last judgements. Millennialism – or Chiliasm (from the Greek for a thousand) – became one of the characteristic elements of Christianity, generally interpreted metaphorically, but occasionally taken literally. It is necessary to distinguish between belief in the Millennium, the thousand-year reign of Jesus, and concern about the end of the millennium, the thousand-year or two-thousand year period following the birth of Jesus; the reign of Jesus happens for a thousand years, not after a thousand (or two thousand) years, and anyway the early Christians didn't count years from the birth of Jesus. But the two phenomena are increasingly confused today.

The idea of the Millennium, like those of the Devil and Hell, seems to derive from the Zoroastrians of ancient Persia, who conceived of the history of the world in thousand-year periods, culminating in the final defeat of evil and triumph of good. It doesn't appear in the Jewish Bible, but one version of the apocalyptic book of Enoch (written in the first century AD) conceives of the history of the world as a reflection of the Creation of the world as told in the first book of Genesis, each day represented by a thousand years – following Psalm 90 ("A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday"), echoed in the second Epistle of Peter ("One day is with the Lord as

a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day") – so that the world will last for six thousand years, followed by a thousand years of rest. This is the doctrine of the Great Week and the Great Sabbath. The Epistle of Barnabas (written in the second century AD) assimilated it with the apocalyptic version of the Millennium, which would then begin 6,000 years after the Creation.

According to early Jewish calculation that the Creation occurred in about 5500 BC, this Millennium would occur in AD 500, and there was indeed some fear that it would, but of course it didn't. According to later Jewish calculation that the Creation occurred in 3761 BC, it would begin in 2239, which still gives us plenty of time. But according to later Christian calculation that the Creation occurred in 4004 BC, it would begin in 1997, which gives us no time at all! However, Millennialists have usually ignored such calculations, following emotional rather than intellectual motivation, and have normally chosen a date a few years hence, so that they can personally prepare for and participate in the exciting but elusive event. Incidentally, the story that there was widespread panic among Christians about the year 1000 is quite false; historians have established that there was virtually none, certainly less than on many other dates chosen by various Christian groups for the Second Coming (or by various Jewish groups for the first coming).

One interesting development of the doctrine of the Millennium is its assimilation with the Pagan idea of the Golden Age, shifted from the past to the future, its adoption by political as well as religious radicals, especially during the late Middle Ages and the Reformation, and

its transformation into an element of secular revolutionism of both left and right, culminating in the ghastly parody of the Thousand-Year Empire of Nazi Germany. This development can clearly be traced in some of the current manifestations of millennium madness.

The end of the millennium is of course counted from the birth of Jesus, but one insuperable problem is that it is impossible to decide when this occurred (if indeed it occurred). When the Roman monk Dionysius Exiguus invented the Christian era, in its sixth century, he fixed the Annunciation of Mary on March 25 and the Nativity of Jesus on December 25 in the year 754 after the foundation of Rome (fixed in 753 BC), which he renamed the first Year of the Lord (*Anno Domini*): that is, AD 1. Earlier Christian scholars had put it a few years earlier, and it was later agreed that Herod the Great died in the Spring of 4 BC; so if Jesus was born just before that, following Matthew's Gospel, it will be 2,000 years since his birth any time now. However, it was also later agreed that the Census of Judaea couldn't have been held until AD 6, so if Jesus was born then, following Luke's Gospel, it won't be for another ten years. But what do Christians care about such awkward facts?

Human belief takes little account of facts, anyway, and most people, including most Christians, will celebrate the end of the millennium at the end of 1999 – not at the end of 2000, as logic might suggest and the Government has suggested, or on Lady Day or Christmas Day 2001, as Dionysius Exiguus would have supposed, let alone in 1997 or 2006. Incidentally, Stephen Jay Gould's latest popular science collection, *Dinosaurs in a Haystack* (Jonathan Cape, £18.99), includes an amusing but misleading essay on this subject. Most of the celebrations, whenever they are held, will have little significance beyond themselves, but there are plenty of silly ideas about the coming end of the second millennium, however ambiguous it may be. Some are described in Damian Thompson's new book, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* (Sinclair-Stevenson, £16.99).

The author is a former religious affairs correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, and it shows; the first half is a superficial view of some scholarship on the Millennium, but the second half is an entertaining account of some approaches to the end of the present millennium. It is not surprising that many Evangelical Protestants, based in the United States, are taking an apocalyptic view of the year 2000 – after all, some have taken similar views of almost every year since the Reformation – but it is amusing that at least in public they see it as the date for the evangelisation of the world rather than for the Second Coming. It is more surprising that many Roman Catholics are looking forward to what they call the Great Jubilee, led by Pope John Paul, whose

**'...not so much a celebration as a sell-out, a party for Parties, a Jubilee without anything worth jubilation, a jamboree without jam – an embarrassing mixture of New Year's Eve and Christmas and Easter and Guy Fawkes and Hallowe'en – everything that makes rationalists hate rituals...'**

# GALHA DAYS AT THE SEASIDE

THE 1996 weekend gathering of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) was held in the historic market town of Wymondham (pronounced "Windham"!), Norfolk, from September 13-16, reports **George Broadhead**.

Ironically, the venue for the event was the

Abbey Hotel, just a stone's throw from the impressive medieval abbey which is the town's main claim to fame. This did not, however, detract from the group's varied programme, which included a talk from founder-member Jim Herrick on "Homosexuality and Religion", workshops on campaigning and personal devel-

opment, and an excursion to the Suffolk coast. Members also took the opportunity to visit nearby Thetford to see the fine gilded statue of the radical freethinker Thomas Paine, who was born in the town, and the exhibition devoted to him in the local museum.

The workshops included one on "Gay Marriage", a topic which has been featured prominently in the media recently, with legislation hostile to it impending in the USA. It was also apposite considering the increasing demand for the Secular Humanist affirmation ceremony which the Pink Triangle Trust (GALHA's associated charity) arranges for lesbian and gay couples.

With excellent accommodation and a warm welcome at the hotel, superb sunny weather and lively discussions, the event was pronounced a great success by all who attended.

## Recovery without religion with SOS

SECULAR Organisations for Sobriety UK has celebrated its first birthday, reports **Malcolm Rees**.

From an article in *The Guardian* last September, SOS has taken off and now boasts 13 groups nationally. SOS is a secular alternative for people with addictions who are uncomfortable with the religious content of the "anonymous" organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous and the like.

Until SOS came to the UK, the religious "anonymous" groups had cornered the market

in self-help support for people with addictions. SOS has been seen as a breath of fresh air – at last there is another way, a freethinking way. Not only has it grown rapidly at a local level but also some health trusts and social services Directorates have begun to use the SOS method.

As an offshoot, TRIUMPH! has been set up and offers skills training in relapse prevention to individuals and groups of addicts and professionals in addiction.

Details of SOS London and TRIUMPH! can be obtained from me on 0181-291 5572 (voice and fax), or write to SOS at Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. Outside London, enquiries please to the SOS national phone line 0 7000 78 1230 (standard national call rates apply).

Three books about SOS are available, published by Prometheus and written by James Christopher. They are *How to Stay Sober – Recovery without Religion*, *Unhooked: Staying Sober and Drug Free*, and *SOS Sobriety*.

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## Dig deep for atheism

COMMENTING on recent Fund totals the other day, former Editor Bill McIlroy said: "There can't be many radical journals whose readers are as generous as ours."

Company Secretary Nicolas Walter, who actually opens your envelopes and banks the contents, noted happily: "So many of the gifts are from pensioners and others who take advantage of the reduced 'unwaged' subscription rate – but who make up the £7 to £10 or even £20."

And the present Editor, Peter Brearey, was particularly pleased to observe that the Scottish Humanist Society had sent £20 to pay for its monthly "plug" in the What's On column.

All of which prompts the questions:

1. If OAPs and the jobless can give so generously, shouldn't those of our readers who are in work dig a little deeper to keep our atheist journal in the black?

2. If Scottish Humanists are so appreciative of their What's On advertisement as to send £20, shouldn't all the groups mentioned in the feature do likewise, at least once a year?

Please make cheques and POs payable to GW Foote & Company and rush them to: The Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: I Andrews, H Evans, Parker, £2 each; R Delaurey, £2.50; Browning, R Deacon, F Evans, P Jackson, Levenson, M McIver, M Mason, S Rose, £3 each; B Burt, J Charles, C Freeberne, MacLeod, C Stewart, G Tuck, R Vickers, Wright, £5 each; J Ainsworth, P Atkins, Blakey, A Forde, T Harrington, F Jones, Kamal, S Kennedy, J Lance, J Madden, Parr, F Seward, M Schofield, £10 each; Ablethorpe, R Davies, £13 each; L Dubow, Housego, £15 each; D Bennett, Humanist Society of Scotland £20 each; C Pinel, Ratcliffe, £25 each; A Lea, £30; A Akkerman, £50; M Richardson, £90.

**Total from August 19 to September 16 £518.50.**

## PMT – PRE-MILLENNIAL TENSION

From Page 5

obsession with the Virgin Mary and the fall of Communism serves to link the end of the millennium with the coming of the Millennium. And it is not at all surprising that various devotees of so-called New Age beliefs (that is, the Old Age beliefs of esoteric occultism) are interpreting the end of the millennium as the coming of the so-called Age of Aquarius, though many are hedging their numerological bets by choosing all sorts of other years than 2000 itself. But it is surely very surprising that the world centre of millennium madness appears to be South Korea, where apparently millions of people seriously expect the world to end in 2000.

Perhaps it would be better if it did. Is man, after all, an irrational animal? Back in sober old Britain, it was reported in September that insurance companies are receiving inquiries from and offering policies to virgins against the risk of divine impregnation in 2000 (wouldn't the proper reaction be to repeat the *Magnificat*?). Is it true, as G K Chesterton said in the well-known remark (misquoted by Damian Thompson), that when people stop believing in God they believe not in nothing but in anything? (By the way, did Chesterton

actually say that? If so, where?)

Perhaps we should think of the end of the millennium as a chance to do something ourselves, take the opportunity to explain the truth about it and argue for a sensible attitude to it. The British Humanist Association is trying to do something through its five-year plan for *Making Humanism Happen*, which ends in 2000, and by contributing to various Millennium projects, and unbelievers should surely do as much as believers to make the best of the silly business. The religious and political authorities, and most of the media, will try to turn the event into an irrational, spiritual, emotional, vague, vacuous anti-climax – not so much a celebration as a sell-out, a party for Parties, a Jubilee without anything worth jubilation, a jamboree without jam – an embarrassing mixture of New Year's Eve and Christmas and Easter and Guy Fawkes and Hallowe'en – everything that makes rationalists hate rituals. If only we could all look forwards rather than backwards, face facts rather than hide in fantasies, have a good time together and then do our best to make sure that the next millennium will be better than the last one for all men and women, rational or irrational, with natural rather than supernatural happiness, on earth rather than in heaven, for a thousand years, and more.

Terry Sanderson on the media

# Religion – it really is all in the mind!

**A**RE believers more healthy and happy than non-believers? According to an extensive report in a recent issue of *Time* magazine, the answer is yes. Research conducted over many years, and by allegedly objective institutions, shows that those with strong religious convictions are “three times more likely to survive heart surgery, have lower blood pressure, be less prone to heart disease, be less depressed and to recover better from injury”. Another study showed that non-churchgoers had a suicide rate four times higher than church regulars.

The immediate explanation that springs to mind for all this is that the devout are much more likely to lead “healthy” lifestyles by eschewing cigarettes, immoderate drinking, sexual dilettantism and other “excesses”, and that church-going provides a social support network which is undoubtedly beneficial to personal well-being. When looked at in those pragmatic terms the state of one’s health would seem to have nothing to do with whether you believe or not.

But a study at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Centre claims to prove otherwise. It found that “one of the best predictors of survival among 232 heart-surgery patients was the degree to which the patients said they drew comfort and strength from religious faith.” The researchers tried to separate the effects of social support from religious conviction. Patients were asked separate sets of questions about their participation in social groups and then about the comfort they drew from faith. *Time* reported: “The two factors seemed to have distinct benefits that made for a powerful combination. Those who were both religious and socially involved had a 14-fold advantage over those who were isolated or lacked faith.”

One American author who believes that “humans are actually engineered for religious faith” is Herbert Benson. In his book *Timeless Healing*, he says: “Our genetic blueprint has made believing in an Infinite Absolute part of our nature.” He thinks that evolution has “wired us up to God” in order to off-set the “fundamental angst” created by “our uniquely human ability to ponder our own mortality”.

Evidence for this undeniable craving for religious experience was demonstrated in a recent *Daily Telegraph* article by Damian Thomas. Mr Thomas, who just happens to have written a book about PMT – or Pre-Millennium Tension – says: “As the year 2000 draws nearer, something strange and yet not totally unexpected is happening. Thousands of people around the world are experiencing bizarre and even terrifying visions of the future. The visionaries come from every culture and religion. They include Japanese nuns, Hindu peasants, American

housewives, couturier Paco Rabanne and even, according to some sources, Pope John Paul II. Many of their prophecies foresee grotesque disasters. Others announce the imminent arrival of heaven on earth.”

It does seem from all this that human beings may indeed be genetically programmed to delude themselves (a view shared by leading British atheist Professor Lewis Wolpert). Other evidence in the *Time* article says that the same neuronal and hormonal pathways that affect the level of people’s religious feelings appear also to be associated with the well-documented placebo effect in medicine. If a patient truly believes a therapy is working – even though the treatment consists of nothing but sugar tablets – that belief can positively influence his recovery.

So there we have it – religion is the equivalent of a sugar lump. All you need is the leap of faith into the abyss of self-delusion and you’ll be happy and healthy.

## Ruthless

We should not forget, of course, that *Time* is an American magazine, and that the religious establishment in the that country is skilled, slick and completely ruthless in the promotion of its own influence. If I were an adherent of conspiracy theories, I could easily imagine a committee of American evangelists getting together in secret conclave and saying: *Look, you guys, we’re losing the punters to all this New Age guff. They’ve started redirecting their cash out of our pockets and into those of the alternate practitioners and health gurus. What are we going to do about keeping the mugs in the pews?*

They would then brainstorm, and someone would say: *Everybody seems to be determined to live forever these days – so it’s no good telling them that the best part comes after they’re dead. They all want heaven now, not later – just in case it turns out not to be true. Why don’t we put it about that religion is good for your health? Appeal to their hypochondria? That’ll make them feel good. They’ll be jogging to church in their millions. I’ll plant a feature in Time and see if we can get Oprah Winfrey interested.*

Another study cited by *Time* seems to support the idea that religious belief is the result of biology. It concerns a small structure in the brain called the amygdala, which is part of the limbic system. The limbic system controls such sensations as sexual pleasure, deep-felt memories and, it seems, spirituality. When the amygdala is electrically stimulated during surgery, patients often have visions of angels or devils. Patients whose limbic systems are chronically stimulated by drugs or tumours can become religious fanatics.

This would tie in with my own experiences working in psychiatric hospitals. The most

acute cases were often people who thought they were Jesus or God or, more recently, the recipients of messages from flying saucers – the “angels” of the new age. The speedy administration of medication would often relieve these delusions and return the person to reality, where they sometimes expressed no interest in religion at all.

So, is the amygdala of non-believers different to that of believers? Is Mother Teresa a product of nature or nurture?

Imagine the possibilities if a benign way could be found to dilute the religious fervour of the devout by calming their amygdalas. We might be able to eliminate religious warfare and liberate Iran. Ian Paisley would become rational and the Ayatollahs humane! The Pope would talk sense! Catholics and Protestants would wonder what the hell they were fighting about – ditto Hindus and Muslims.

By the same token, I suppose those who would like to see religion enforced could take it the other way and make us all into God’s zombies by stimulating our amygdalas. What a thought – Barbara Smoker preaching hell-fire sermons at St Paul’s; Peter Brearey editing *The Damnation & Eternal Punishment Times*; the BHA becoming The British Happy-clappers Association; Richard Dawkins as chair of Creationist Certainty...

On second thoughts, perhaps it’s better to leave well alone.

**The 1996 Annual  
General Meeting  
of the  
National Secular Society  
will be held  
at Conway Hall  
London WC1  
on Saturday  
November 23  
at 2.30 pm**

A brief Extradordinary General Meeting will be held at 2 pm to discuss a proposed change in the size of the Council of Management

A large attendance is expected – members are urged to register for both meetings at 1.15 pm

In a recent letter to *The Times*, two readers complained that a proposal to add the name of William Morris to the Church of England Calendar of those considered 'worthy of remembrance' had been dropped by the General Synod on grounds of lack of evidence of Morris's Christian devotions. They hoped the exclusion would be temporary. In an unpublished reply, Nicolas Walter, of the Rationalist Press Association, wrote: 'William Morris, the greatest British socialist, was indeed intended for the Church, but he quietly lost his faith at university, and for the rest of his life he publicly ignored and privately opposed religion. It is insulting to his memory, still so vivid a century after his death, to include this exemplary humanist in the Church of England Calendar...'

**A**T A TIME when children are regularly exploited in the sensational headlines of the gutter press, it is instructive to pose again William Morris's question of a century back: "How is it possible to protect the immature citizen from the whims of his parents?" Why, he asked, should children be made to suffer "under the tyranny of two accidental persons?" Children, he argued, "...are persons not property, and so have a right to claim all the advantages which the community provides for every citizen." The community of which he wrote existed neither then nor now, but was his vision of a society from which all forms of exploitation – economic, political, social, religious – had been abolished.

Since his death on October 3, 1896, much of the reality of Morris has been at best ignored or, worse, distorted. Because he was a medievalist he is accused of being backward-looking. Born into a wealthy family, his concern for the dispossessed is portrayed as patronising condescension.

Parental Christian evangelism and his own early intention to become a priest has led religionists to lay claim on him, and his Christian Socialist friend Bruce Glasier totally distorted Morris's true attitude to religion – which, as quoted by R Page Arnot in his *William Morris: The Man and the Myth* – is summed-up in the headline to this article.

Opening the 1934 Centenary exhibition celebrating Morris's birth, Tory Prime Minister and iron-master Stanley Baldwin described him as a great poet, a great craftsman, a great artist, a great influence – and totally ignored Morris's detestation of the spoliation and pollution of the country arising from the greed of iron-masters, coal-masters and masters generally. Unsurprisingly, the hypocrite Baldwin failed

to mention that Morris was a revolutionary Socialist, or, as Morris preferred to describe himself, a Communist.

#### Craftsman extraordinary

Sent to Marlborough and then Oxford's Exeter College, Morris was less than happy at the quality of teaching and to a large extent pursued his own interests. With the advantage of excellent libraries which he relentlessly mined, with his friends he read and discussed Tennyson, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Kingsley and, of course, Dickens – but also Ruskin's *Modern Paintings*, a lasting influence.

Shaking off his priestly intentions, he articulated himself to the diocesan architect, G E Street, and shortly afterwards, under the influence of Rossetti, turned to painting while at the same time writing a body of dramatic poetry which was published in 1858 as *The Defence of Guenevere*. On the death of Tennyson, this devout anti-monarchist turned down an approach, by a Cabinet Minister, to become Poet Laureate; he couldn't see himself "sitting down in crimson plush breeches and white stockings to write birthday odes in honour of all the blooming little Guelfings and Battenbergs that happen to come along."

Defying convention, he married the daughter of an Oxford livery groom and built the Red House near Bexley as the family home, which was decorated and furnished with the help of his friends, an experience which was followed by the establishment, in 1861, of "a sort of shop where they would jointly produce and sell painted furniture." In fact, The Firm, as it became known among its partners, made all manner of decorative products, including stained glass, embroidery, tiles and jewellery in addition to furniture.

Fourteen years on and Morris bought out his partners, changing the thrust of the firm away from individual commissions to production of commodities, wallpapers, chintzes and fabrics. There was little to which he could not turn his hand – he learned from his craftsmen and he taught

# 'I am v blunt

## Barry Johnson

crafts, having a great faith in the abilities of people to develop their skills.

#### Anti-Scrape

Morris had a highly developed sense, and value, of history, which has often been distorted to his being a backward-looking romantic. For him, history and the past were elements of the present and tools for building the future. "As for romance," he wrote, "what does romance mean? I have heard people being miscalled for being romantic, but what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present." For Morris, ancient buildings – ecclesiastic or secular – were part of that history and patrimony; they were organic elements of the successive communities which they had served; they accreted, were changed, had their functions modified.

During the 1870s there had developed a movement which considered that such buildings should be "restored" to their original condition. Sir Gilbert Scott, perpetrator of the Albert Memorial and architect of St Pancras station, was one of its leading exponents. The proposed "destruction" of Tewksbury Minster prompted Morris to blast those "acts of barbarism which the modern architect, parson and squire call 'restoration.'" His letter to *The Athenaeum* was typically vigorous: "the architects are, with a very few exceptions, helpless, because interest, habit and ignorance bind them, and...the clergy are hopeless because their order, habit and an ignorance yet grosser bind them."

This letter, written in 1876, was shortly followed by the formation of the influential Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, initially with Morris as secretary and continuing to receive his active support to his death. "Anti-scrape" was the somewhat irreverent name he gave to the society and its objectives.

#### The fight for free speech

Morris wrote extensively for the Socialist

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# ... what is called ...ntly an atheist'

## ...nson on William Morris – a man for our time

...press, edited *The Commonweal*, organised within the Socialist movement and frequently spoke at street corner and other open air meetings – even though, as Edouard Bernstein put it, “rhetoric was...not natural to him; his whole nature was...anti-rhetorical.”

A police campaign of harassment in the Spring of 1885 led to a series of arrests of orators for obstruction and a Defence Committee was established which quickly transformed itself into a powerful Vigilance Committee. That September a mass meeting in Dod Street, Limehouse, was attacked by the police as it was breaking up and eight people were arrested to be arraigned the following day. When sentence was passed of two months hard labour for one defendant, a tailoring worker named Lewis Lyons, and 40 shillings or one month on the rest, the public gallery erupted with cries of “Shame”, whereupon “a rush of police was made at those in court”, including Morris. Within two hours, Morris was hauled up before the same beak on a charge of disorderly conduct, being accused of striking a policeman and damaging his helmet by breaking the strap. Asked by the magistrate “What are you?”, Morris responded “I am an artist and a literary man, pretty well known, I think, throughout Europe”. More than 30,000 turned up at the subsequent protest meeting addressed by, among others, Hyndman, George Bernard Shaw and Edward Aveling. The police kept well away from that one!

Nonetheless the persecutions continued and Morris was prominent in the struggle as bailsmen, witness, speaker and propagandist. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant were two fellow campaigners at this period. He made a point of speaking at particular danger-spots. Following the arrest and commitment for trial at Middlesex Sessions of two speakers, Sam Mainwaring and Jack Williams, Morris offered to speak at the same venue prior to their trial. Reminded that he would surely be arrested and imprisoned, his response was: “Well, it will be another experience, and we must never allow the fear of consequences to interfere



● **William Morris**

(Photograph: National Portrait Gallery, London)

with our duty”. He was duly charged with obstruction and the following day the magistrate told him “...as a gentleman would at once see, when it was pointed out to him, that such meetings were a nuisance and...would desist from taking part in them”, a fine of one shilling would meet the case! Williams and Mainwaring, on the other hand, were each fined £20 plus a surety of £50 for good behaviour. Refusing to pay, Williams did two months.

The repressive activity by the police continued, particularly against unemployed workers who had taken to holding mass meetings in Trafalgar Square. A cocktail of virulent newspaper distortions, agent-provocateurs and arrests culminated in what has gone down in history as Bloody Sunday. November 13, 1887, saw a ruthless military-style attack on peaceful demonstrators. Morris was present and having made his way to the head of the demonstration was an eye-witness to the brutality in which three men were killed. At the funeral of one of those killed, tens of thousands sang Morris's *Death Song*:

*We asked them for a life of toilsome earning,*

*They bade us bide their leisure for our bread;*

*We craved to speak to tell our woeful learning:*

*We come back speechless, bearing back our dead.*

*Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,*

*But one and all if they would dusk the day...*

### Humanity

Morris was a moralist and morality was primarily a social issue. For him, capitalist “civilisation” was the barrier to human development. “I demand”, he wrote, “a free and unfettered animal life for man first of all: I demand the utter extinction of all asceticism. If we feel the least degradation in being amorous, or merry, or hungry, or sleepy, we are so far bad animals, and therefore miserable men. And you know civilisation does bid us to be ashamed of all these moods and deeds, and so far as she can begs us to conceal them, and where possible get other people to do them for us”.

Society had to be just before individual relationships could fully develop, though that did not preclude the necessity of striving for mutuality in defiance of “civilisation”. His view of marriage, for instance, is characteristic: “The couple would be free” and “being free, if unfortunately distaste arose between them they should make no pretence of its not having arisen. But I should hope that in most cases friendship should go along with desire, and would outlive it, and the couple would still remain together, but always as free people. In short artificial bolstering up of natural human relations is what I object to.”

Two doctors made their own diagnoses of his death. The first that, “he died a victim of his enthusiasm for spreading the principles of Socialism”, the second that, “the disease is simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men”.

## Reviewing a widely-publicised new book, COLIN McCALL entertains...

*The Tomb of God* by Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger. Little Brown £20.

**T**HIS is a real-life mystery story, the search for "perhaps the greatest secret ever". The fact that I couldn't care what happened to the body of Jesus, presuming that he ever had one, means that my interest waned towards the end of the book. But the conclusion comes as no surprise anyway: it is revealed in the title and particularly the sub-title: "The body of Jesus and the solution to a 2,000 year-old mystery".

Andrews and Schellenberger believe that the body was brought from Jerusalem, possibly by the Knights Templar, and concealed in the side of Mount Cardou, in Languedoc, southern France, near the Pyrenees. They regard it as a shrine of Gnosticism and, as such, frowned upon and unacknowledged by the Roman Catholic Church. They can think of "no other scenario which would engender such secrecy, generate such finance and be associated with so many unexplained deaths".

At the end of the book, alas, there is no explanation of the considerable amounts of money received by three neighbouring priests – Abbé Bérenger Saunière (1852-1917), Abbé Antoine Gélis (1827-1897) and Abbé Henri Boudet (1837-1915). Nor of the murder of Gélis. But more of them later.

The authors first learned of the "mystery" of Rennes-le-Chateau through three television documentaries in the 1970s, and were especially interested in a number of parchments bearing inscriptions that had never been understood. Two of these, referred to in the book as Parchments 1 and 2, were composed by Abbé Antoine Bigou in the 1780s and hidden, probably in Revolutionary times; later to be discovered by Saunière.

Where they are now isn't known, but photographs exist, and it is these that are subjected to a complicated geometrical analysis that is seemingly paralleled in two paintings by Nicolas Poussin, *Les Bergeres d'Arcadie I* and *II*. And if you want to recap on your geometry there is bewildering opportunity in *The Tomb of God*.

Triangles, squares and circles are superimposed on *Les Bergeres II*, which the authors consider of occult origin and connected with the secret of Rennes-le-Chateau. Quite different from its predecessor, this painting, which is in the Louvre, depicts three shepherds, accompanied by a slightly aloof woman who may be Wisdom, examining the puzzling inscription on a tomb, *ET IN ARCADIE EGO*. Puzzling

# Grave doubts about God's tomb

because it doesn't contain a verb. The same inscription occurs in a painting by Il Guercini (c 1618), but here a continuation of the sentence is possible because the phrase is cut off by the right-hand margin of the picture. The Poussin allows no such easy solution.

Andrews and Schellenberger consider various options. *Arcadie*, they suggest, could be identified with *Arca Dei*, ark of God or Ark of the Covenant, but they finally go for "the tomb of God", although this requires the addition of the word *SUM* to the original phrase, and then an anagram.

"The solution is quite clear now", they announce with perhaps more assurance than is justified.

Poussin's beliefs were unorthodox. All references to religion in his letters "display a surprising tone of flippancy", says Anthony Blunt; and the "most appropriate tag", according to the present authors, is Stoicism. In their hands, however, Stoicism becomes Gnosticism and possibly Rosicrucianism to fit their thesis. And, with what justification I don't know, they assert that Poussin, who painted many ancient mythological subjects, "means us to see Christ" when he paints Bacchus.

Moreover, they "discover a connection" between Poussin and Van Dyck, for which they admit they can find no record on one page (351), then talk of "evidence for some secret link" two pages later.

There is, indeed, no doubting the perseverance and ingenuity of Andrews and Schellenberger in pursuit of their goal. Whoever was responsible for the puzzle they have tackled "employed codes, geometry, maps, obscure Latinisms and an intimate knowledge of the area" around Rennes. The odds are against a definitive solution in such circumstances, and it is a pity the book lays claim to one.

But back now to the priests. The story goes that, in 1886 or 1887, Saunière found the parchments sealed in wooden tubes and, after consulting with his bishop, took them to St Sulpice in Paris, where he handed them over to church scholars. In his "reputed Parisian activities", he is "alleged to have gone to the Louvre", having "apparently been instructed" to obtain copies of *Les Bergeres* and two other paintings, which are also scrutinised in this book.

Saunière was the youngest of the three priests, all of whom were "recipients of an unexplained windfall". In 1897 Gélis was murdered, and a rift occurred between Saunière and Boudet. And "rumour has it" that the two "were visited by mysterious strangers in the days immediately preceding their own deaths". Why Andrews and Schellenberger mention rumours of this kind, I can't say. It only serves to cast doubt on other sections of their essentially speculative book.

Another irrelevance is the discovery in 1956 of the bodies of three soldiers by workmen "digging within a stone's throw of Saunière's garden". The three men, we are told "may have known Saunière, or they may not have. Either way, their proximity to the house added more strands to the mystery".

Saunière used some of his "unexplained wealth" to renovate and decorate his little church of St Mary Magdalene; but his Stations of the Cross apparently "differ from the standard version in ways that suggest cryptic intention", and in our authors' words, "the meanings to be derived from them *undoubtedly* refer to the Secret, but so far have eluded a comprehensive analysis" (my italics).

One feature which they justly consider incongruous is a gaudy figure of the Devil, which supports the font and, they believe, their thesis.

Saunière, it should be added, was extremely generous to his housekeeper and confidante, Marie Denarnaud. His newly-completed, costly residence was in her name, and in the seven years 1898-1905, he bought her "no fewer than seven parcels of land adjoining the church and presbytery".

The source of his wealth remains unknown. His "explanations" of a win on the lottery, tips from tourists and so on, were risible, but he was eventually acquitted by the Vatican. "This victory can but leave us wondering what his trump card might have been". Marie Denarnaud, who lived until 1953, must have known, but she never told.

## Eliza Doolittle among the Reds

**WALLPAPER** – "a Shavian melodrama portraying the adventures of Mr William Morris, Miss Eleanor Marx and Miss Eliza Doolittle" – written by Sophia Kingshill and directed by Joe Cushley, in association with London Actors Theatre Company, will be presented at the Bridewell Theatre, Bride Lane, Fleet Street, London EC4, October 8 to November 2 (except Mondays).

A new play with music, it has Shaw's

upwardly mobile flower-seller, Eliza Doolittle, entering the lives of Morris and his fellow activists. On a rainy evening in Covent Garden, 1884, she meets Morris and Shaw: can they transform the colourful Cockney into committed revolutionary?

Box Office: 0171-936 3456. Tickets £8.50 (£5.00 concessions/groups of eight and over). First week: Three for the price of two. Tuesdays: pay what you can!

# DIPPING A TOE IN THE SEA OF FAITH

with Daniel O'Hara



● Daniel O'Hara

the sphere and influence of the Church. Likewise G W Foote, the founder and first Editor of this journal, in his 1879 pamphlet *Secularism, the True Philosophy of Life: An Exposition and a Defence* (shortly to be reissued in an edition by Nicolas Walter), while attacking supernaturalism and superstition, was not indiscriminately hostile to all forms of religion. But he quite rightly insisted that "Morality and theology are essentially distinct. The ground and guarantee of morality are independent of any theological belief. When we are in earnest about the right we need no incitement from above. Morality has its natural ground in experience and reason, in the common nature and common wants of mankind."

As David Boulton points out, rather similar ideas were expressed in a Quaker pamphlet of 1884, also entitled *A Reasonable Faith*. There is no doubt that scientific advances, and in particular the huge impact of Darwinism, had a

profound influence on the development of such revolutionary ideas in the late Victorian era. What is perhaps novel in the modern SoF movement is the desire apparently shared by most of its protagonists to achieve an avowedly Secularist understanding of religion within the traditional institutions of religion. This is where I become doubtful about the wisdom and integrity of the enterprise.

I prefer the stance of D F Strauss, who declared: "We have left the church after an honest fashion, and we do not lack anything out here: why should we regret, therefore, that we are no longer within its pale? [We should be] clearly conscious of all we possess without a church [and]...call to mind the contradictions and impossibilities which we have left behind us with the church, as well as the tortures inflicted on our reason and sense of truth which we have escaped by taking that step." Indeed, as I predicted within these columns, the Church of England found itself unable to continue to employ Anthony Freeman as a parochial clergyman after he "outed" himself as an unbeliever.

If other priests who identify with the Sea of Faith can only retain their benefices by means of an equivocation which I would find wholly unacceptable, that does not seem to me to bode well for the intellectual integrity or long-term survival of the movement. Of course we can agree that there is more to life than cold reason, though I see no reliable alternative way of making sensible decisions. But an appreciation of the proper importance of human relationships, the life of emotion and imagination do not need a religious foundation – whether religion be conceived in traditional supernaturalistic or revisionary naturalistic terms. While Secular Humanists can engage in fruitful dialogue with the SoF movement, and may be surprised by how much they have in common, it seems to me at least that there are fundamental differences which cannot be dissolved or denied. Nevertheless, we should salute and encourage those who are trying honestly to address these issues.

● Postal enquiries about the Sea of Faith and its publications may be addressed to Ronald Pearse at 15 Burton Street, Loughborough LE11 2DT.

## Greetings from Scotland

HUMANISTS in Scotland have produced an attractive range of greetings cards in two packs: seasonal greetings (for Yuletide) and general occasions (blank inside, suitable for birthdays, congratulations, birth/naming day announcements, get well wishes).

Each pack contains eight cards, two each of four designs, and costs £2.50, exclusive of postage and packing. The designs are simple and recognisably Humanist, while being

acceptable to non-Humanists.

Postage costs are: 1-2 packs: £1 (UK), £1.50 (Europe), £2.50 (USA); 3-4 packs: £1.50 (UK), £2 (Europe), £4 (USA); 5 packs or more: £2 (UK), £2.50 (Europe), £5 (USA).

Postal orders or cheques, made payable to Humanist Society of Scotland, should be sent to E C K Brown, Croft Cottage, Croft Road, Markinch, Fife, KY7 6EQ.

**A** LONGSIDE Issue 26 of their quarterly *SoF Magazine*, the Sea of Faith Network has produced a handsome 20-page A4 brochure entitled *A Reasonable Faith* written by David Boulton, who is shortly to take back from Anthony Freeman the editorship of their magazine. Both publications will be of interest to Secular Humanists, as they provide remarkable testimony of a growing convergence – or at least overlap – between the ideas of two groups which might have been thought less compatible.

Issue 26 of the magazine, indeed, contains contributions from several writers who will be familiar to readers of this and other Humanist journals – Charles Ward and Gerd Sommerhoff among them. Their articles could well grace the pages of *The Freethinker* or *New Humanist* without either modification or the likelihood of causing offence to a more determinedly Secularist readership. On the other hand, SoF contributors such as John Hodgkinson, whose defence of prayer is altogether too deferential to the questionable nostrums of James Lovelock and Carl Jung – not to mention his idealised estimate of Jesus – might be expected to provoke a not altogether unwarranted raspberry from the typically robust reader of this journal. But the *SoF Magazine* is well produced, and if Issue 26 is typical, well worth investigating.

Now to David Boulton's *A Reasonable Faith* which, though a personal statement of the author, is also a useful introduction to the activities and ideas of the movement. Boulton describes himself as "a Quaker attender and a humanist". He begins by noting that, while most of us may think of ourselves as seekers after truth and purpose in our lives, the SoF offers no absolute truths or moral certainties: rather "we must make our own meaning, create our own purpose, find ways of working out our own salvation." This, he insists, is a corporate rather than an individual challenge (though I really do not see why it should not be both).

Boulton fully accepts the Enlightenment premiss that religion is entirely a human creation (a premiss fudged by Paul Tillich with his talk of "the God above God", and by Karl Barth, who saw God as existing independently of all religions, which he accepted were man-made). Boulton seems to accept the corollary that God is therefore a human artefact, though he sees value in maintaining a positive view of religious faith, not in spite of, but rather because it is a human invention. Of course, this is neither something new nor entirely foreign to the Secular Humanist tradition.

In his last book, *The Old Faith and the New* (first published in 1872 and to be re-issued in an edition being prepared by G A Wells), David Strauss, while declaring that we should in all honesty cease to call ourselves "Christians", nevertheless saw a place for a secular form of religion, though he placed this firmly outside

*William Blake wondered if the feet of Jesus walked upon England's mountains green. NEIL BLEWITT has a fantasy in which Peter preaches where St Mary-le-Bow was to be built.*

# AND DID THOSE PLATES OF MEAT...?

**M**Y one and others and skin and blisters: I have come here today to bring you the mocking-birds of my lath and plaster, Jesus. And if you ask how I am able to rabbit and pork in your own pint of stingo, the Holy Pillar and Post came upon me and gave me the gift of brewer's bungs. And he came not as a gentle George Raft but as a rushing, mighty Jenny Lind.

Some of those in the crowd that load of hay said I was elephant's trunk, but it was only gipsy's warning and I hadn't been near the rub-a-dub-dub. In any case, I'm not a pint pot. I agree with Solomon who said that the rise and shine makes a two-foot rule of the heavenly plan who tiddley-winks it and that you shouldn't cast a butcher's hook upon the rise and shine while it is red, for at the last it bites like a Joe Blake. And that goes for gay and frisky, bung it in, pig's ear and salmon and trout as well.

## Tooting

I'm sorry my finger and thumb, Paul, who Russian Turks with me can't be here today because he has an amazing Binnie Hale to tell. The risen lath and plaster met him on the frog and toad to Damascus and dazzled him with a bright fly my kite which closed his mince pies; and he took no Tooting Bec nor drank any fisherman's daughter until three load of hays later when he too was filled with the Holy Pillar and Post and could cup of tea again.

Now, if you will give me your King Lear's for a few cock linnets, I will tell you some of the things the Bed and Board said.

He is the Edna May, the long in the tooth and the fork and knife. Whoever would be his disciple must Adam and Eve in him and take up the cross and follow him. And he who would save his fork and knife shall lose it, and he who would lose it shall save it. For what shall it Robertson and Moffatt a heavenly plan if he nose and chin the whole world and lose his own sack of coal?

Give not your bees and honey before

men as hypocrites do, but in the Noah's Ark where one brass band knows not what the other brass band is doing.

If a heavenly plan has no bucket afloat or dicky dirt or round the houses, then give him yours and great shall be your reward in fifteen and seven.

What heavenly plan among you if his bath bun ask for some strike me dead will give him a stone, or if he ask for some Andy McNish will give him a Joe Blake?

Are not two bows and arrows sold for a Covent Garden? They shall not fall to the penny a pound without your heavenly soap and lather knowing it. But every bit of the Barnet Fair on your lump of lead is numbered, and you are of more value than bows and arrows.

Jesus is the strike me dead of fork and knife and he that eats his Tom Noddy shall never crack and cry. For his Tom Noddy is meat and his blood is tumble down the sink.

He came down from fifteen and seven to bring not peace but an oh my Gawd and to set a bushel of coke against his old pot and pan and the bricks and mortar against his cows and kisses.

The lath and plaster loves all dustbin lids. He said that whosoever should cause one any Kennington Lane would be better off with a Salford Dock hung round his bushel and peck and cast into the shake and shiver. Woe to the world for its offences! If your Brighton sands or plates of meat give you any nap and double – cut them off; and if your steak and kidney pies give you any nap and double – pluck them out. It is better to live your fork and knife maimed or blind than have your Brighton sands, your plates of meat and your steak and kidney pies and go to ding-dong-bell where the squiggle and squirm dies not and the Anna Maria is not quenched.

No heavenly plan puts a Harry Randall under a bushel but sets it on the Cain and Abel so that all those in the cat and mouse can cup of tea. The widow's mite of the Tom Noddy is the mince pie and if your mince pie is Wee Georgie Wood your Tom Noddy is full of widow's mite. But if it is sorry and sad – you are in the Noah's ark.

A heavenly plan does not put new cloth into old these and those, or the rent in

them is made worse; nor does he put new rise and shine into old Aristotles lest they duck and drake.

When you make a Lilley and Skinner or a Tommy Tucker, call not your one and others or your China plates lest they invite you back and repay you. But when you want to blow out your Derby Kelly, call in the on the floor and the Brighton pier from the ain't it a treat.

He that enters not by the Rory O'Moore into the sheepfold is a tea leaf. But he that enters by the Rory is the shepherd, and the sheep know his Hobson's Choice and they hammer and nail him. But a Glasgow Ranger will they not hammer and nail for they know not the Hobson's of the Glasgow Ranger.

## Moody

From the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a heavenly plan leave his old pot and pan and his crust and crumb and take and give with his trouble and strife and the two shall be one Tom Noddy. But whosoever shall put away his trouble and strife and have a bit of Moody and Sankey with another or get dot and carried to her, he commits adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her old pot and pan and take someone else to Uncle Ned, then she commits adultery too.

All sins shall be forgiven, but he that shall speak a mocking-bird against the Holy Pillar and Post or cow and calf at him shall not be forgiven. Not on his Nelly Duff. He shall be cast into the outer Noah's Ark and there he shall pipe his eye and gnash his Hampstead Heath for evermore.

Now, one and others and skin and blisters, I must Scapa Flow, but before I do, I give you the blessing of God the soap and lather, God the currant bun and God the Holy Pillar and Post. May he lift up the widow's mite of his Jem Mace and one and nine upon you and keep you in his holy Edna May.

By the way – did anybody here happen to cup of tea the plates of meat of the Bed and Board taking a ball of chalk upon your clouded Jack and Jills?

# You're telling us!

## Ferocious opponents of Jesus

I DO wish these ferocious opponents of poor Jesus didn't take the Gospels so literally. Now Mr Martin O'Brien in your September issue grinds his teeth because in my book *Jesus Christ Uncluttered* I maintain Jesus is "a sublime pacifist".

Mr O'Brien quotes from Luke 19:27: "But these mine enemies which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me."

These are not, of course, words actually spoken by Jesus in a real-life situation: they are words spoken by a character in a parable that Jesus is relating. Moreover this parable, as Luke sets it down, is an incomprehensible muddle. Luke was not a Jew and possibly did not understand properly certain Jewish ideas of a Messiah who was to be hailed as a great King – ideas that Jesus seems to be playing with in parts of this parable. We know that Jesus favoured to the extent of re-enacting the old pacifist idea of a Messiah who would enter Jerusalem "humble, and mounted on an ass." I don't think that anyone could establish that Jesus was or was not a pacifist from Luke 19:11-27.

Mr O'Brien also cites Matthew Chapter 23. Now Matthew's Gospel is the most Jewish of the Gospels, the one most agonisingly aware of Jesus' frequent criticism of the revered Law and the Prophets, and Jesus' repeated condemnation of those Pharisees who as the official instructors so led astray the children entrusted to them. Scholars agree that Matthew's method as a narrator is to concentrate into one convenient place and time large portions of the teaching of Jesus. Chapter 23 is an example of this. Everything Matthew could remember or amass on the subject of purblind Pharisees he slams down in "Chapter 23". Bitter comments that Jesus made on many separate occasions are presented as the angry outpourings of one occasion, with the result that they seem much savager than they really were.

Not that one would wish for a moment to deny that Jesus had a rapier mind and an acid tongue for use on occasions. But such words must always be read in the light of those far more characteristic, words like: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

(The Rev) **PETER GAMBLE**  
Guildford

IF JESUS was a pacifist, he didn't take after his dad.

**NEIL BLEWITT**  
Norfolk

THE September issue produced its usual crop of stimulating letters. The Rev Peter Gamble's I found very stimulating indeed. We are now indebted to him for introducing to *The Freethinker* the religious buzz word "metaphorical". Along with "symbolic", this word is now the mightiest weapon in the religious arsenal of obfuscation. The ultimate "get out of jail free"

card. Increasingly trotted out by religious spin-doctors to extricate themselves from situations where their inconsistencies and flawed logic are being exposed. Designed to prop up their ramshackle edifice for a few more decades.

But for people with even an ounce of active grey matter, this shallow expedient fails to work. Why was Jesus only speaking metaphorically when he said things that have become an embarrassment to the acceptable face of religion that the C of E now wishes to present? Who is to say it wasn't the other way about! Perhaps he meant it literally when he issued the "Ye vipers..." rant and he spoke metaphorically when he advised us to turn the other cheek. The religious, even more so than politicians, excel at woolly language. This could explain why of all the hundreds of sermons I once had to sit through I cannot now recall a single word.

The Rev Peter Gamble offers to send David Yeulett a copy of his book, but I fear that if his letter is a foretaste of the standard of argument he employs then Mr Yeulett would be better off with a present of a toilet roll, metaphorically speaking of course.

**TONY AKKERMANS**  
Leeds

LIKE the Rev Peter Gamble, I am astounded at Christ's ethic of loving your enemy, doing good to those that hate you and turning the other cheek (assuming that he actually said those things). I am astounded at the suggestion that you can love someone to order or as an act of will. I am astounded at the naivete and irresponsibility of an ethic that would leave us, both as individuals and as a society, exploited and controlled by miscreants.

Mr Gamble says that Christ often spoke metaphorically. I am sure that Mr Gamble would accept that there is no consensus among Christians as to which texts (if any) should be regarded as such. It seems to me that "metaphorical" usually refers to those sayings which are vicious and cruel or which would alter the Christians' life-style.

The latter point is well illustrated by a well-heeled evangelist, heard on the radio. Asked about the text "Sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor", his reply – as near verbatim as I can remember – was: "This means the Christian should sacrifice his time to give hope and encouragement to the poor in spirit".

When Mr Gamble writes of an "intelligent reading of the Gospels", this can mean no more than a reading "which my (naturally, very intelligent) conclusions accord with".

**RAY McDOWELL**  
Co Antrim

BEFORE we get bogged down in what "Jesus of the Gospels" is supposed to have said, I think the first requirement is to ascertain if such a man *ever lived*. Until this is resolved, we are wasting time.

Modern scholarship is unable to give a definitive answer, but David Strauss, the German theologian, after three years of intensive study of the Gospels pronounced them untenable!

The late Frank Ridley (an authority on the Roman Catholic Church) had this to say in the Foreword to the 11th edition of *The Bible Handbook* by GWFoote and WPBall: "What actually is the Bible, except a miscellaneous assortment of documents, mostly compiled at

unknown dates and by unknown persons, and haphazardly strung together for religious edification and without any scientific exegesis by Jewish rabbis and Christian clerics? Even the four Gospels, for Christians the most important of all, are now generally admitted to be, at best, second-hand documents which reflect current beliefs, and have no authority as evidence for the alleged events which they purport to describe."

Can the Rev Peter Gamble succeed in furnishing irrefutable proof that JC ever lived (outside of the Gospels), when so many others have failed to do so?

**DAVID YEULETT**  
Greenwich

## Cutting remarks

THE arguments for male circumcision apply equally to male castration.

If the removal of the foreskin is advisable because it is unhygienic and pathogenic, the removal of the whole penis is even more advisable because it is even more dangerous. This operation would also do wonders for social stability, criminal statistics, population problems and world peace. Artificial insemination could provide a controlled birth-rate, and a few unutilised men could be preserved for scientific research and public entertainment. Compare our rational treatment of domestic animals with our irrational tolerance of wild human males.

Similarly, the arguments for male circumcision apply equally to female circumcision (so-called).

But aren't all such arguments utter \*\*\*\*?

**ANNA FREEMAN**  
Leighton Buzzard

## Martyrs to truth?

AS Colin McCall reported in the June issue of *The Freethinker*, an article in the *British Medical Journal* suggests at one point that, as an atheist, one is likely to be "less happy than the average believer – especially if [one] is no longer a spring chicken". Our columnist is rightly unimpressed by the article as a whole; the fact remains, however, that the jibe touches upon an interesting and important Humanist issue.

For the suggestion may well be correct. Various pieces of research have, I gather, indicated that people emotionally buttressed by some form of religious faith are indeed happier than we godless scoffers, other things being equal. What is more, believers will also tend to exhibit lower levels of stress, be less prone to anxiety and depression, and recover from illness more quickly.

To be sure, this is hardly surprising. To renounce religious superstition is to site oneself in a meaningless, uncaring universe as an accidental creature with no expectation of any life after this one; who *wouldn't* be tense, anxious and depressed?

# You're telling us!

◀ From Page 13

Yet such findings raise a deadly serious question about the amount of truth that the human animal is capable of withstanding. If the religious view of the world is indeed objectively false, then we are a species that in definable respects functions best given an optimal degree of expedient untruth, animals for whom a dose of the most monstrous unrealism can yet have "reality value".

Of course, it can be argued that in a fully secular society which had come to terms with the consequences of its atheist Humanism, the psychological causes of this "impaired functioning" would no longer exist. Personally, however, I doubt it: the fewer comforting certainties one has to cling to, the greater the handicap under which one operates. Ironically, then, it would seem to be the atheists, to whom there is no god to die for, who are the real martyrs to truth.

MARK DORAN  
Cambridge

## Anglicans protect us!

IN HIS article "A Step Closer to the 20th Century?" (September), Peter Brearey states that disestablishment has been a major policy demand of *The Freethinker* and the NSS for more than a century. Such a policy would seem to me to be rather short-sighted.

Like too much Humanist thought, bald disestablishment is negative; it is directed at what we do *not* want, but does not embrace what we *do* want. As the spokespersons for the essence of the British nation, for its rationalist pre-eminence, should our objective not be the condition in which only rationalists can hold the highest positions in our nation?

Recognising that such a condition is unlikely to be achievable in the near future, should we not currently be endeavouring to ensure that religious bigotry does not gain a stronger hold on the high positions in our society than it already has?

The present situation would appear to be that the Church of England is nominally subject to the monarch, and that the monarch and consort must appear to be members of the C of E. In practice, the monarch exercises little control over the C of E, his/her authority having been transferred to our secular government.

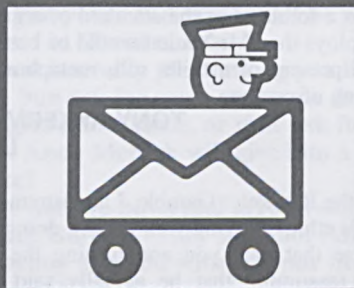
This interlocking would seem to amount to a highly satisfactory (from a rationalist viewpoint), mutual strangulation of religious bigotry, for under these arrangements neither the C of E nor the monarch nor the government can attempt to enforce religiously extreme policies. I suggest that the religious tolerance that we currently enjoy is not unattributable to this interlocking of church, state and monarchy.

Do rationalists really want to dismantle these arrangements and create a situation in which an adherent of any religion could become monarch, consort, or even president? If so, it would appear that our many years of religious tranquillity have rendered us heedless of the harm that bigotry in high places can achieve, and of how difficult it is to restrain determined bigots if the prevailing constitution

has authorised their holding of high offices. Even a scant knowledge of history, or a cursory glance at the religious strife currently raging in other countries, should make us cautious about removing the barriers to religious extremism that we have inherited. Twenty-six clerics in the House of Lords would seem a small price to pay in return for civil peace, and I cannot recall when their presence last had any significant effect upon national life.

Until rationalists can ensure that high places will be occupied by rationalists, their interest surely lies in retaining the Establishment of the Church of England as a barrier against the acquisition of power by adherents of far more barbaric religions.

JOHN RAYNER  
North Wembley



*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.*

## Boldly going...

NICOLAS WALTER (Page 2, September) considered the prospect of life existing elsewhere than on Earth in "almost infinite space" and "almost infinite time". I am puzzled. Why introduce "almost"? In such a consideration are space and time not infinite?

I write this with some trepidation following his question: "In view of all the unintelligent things said by human beings about life, the universe and everything, is there in fact intelligent life on Earth?"

JIM DRUMMOND  
Falkirk

WHILE the class of degenerate stars is usually described as "white dwarfs", Michael Hill (September letters) is correct to point out that, as they cool, they will go through a red phase. Such stars are called "red dwarfs". However, the fate of all white dwarfs is to become *black* dwarfs.

In the same issue, Nicolas Walter refers to "almost infinite space" and "almost infinite time". Apart from the fact that "almost infinite"

is almost meaningless, the universe is known to be of finite size and to have begun at a definite point in time (in fact that is when time began). For this reason, and because time was required for the accumulation of the complex elements on which life is based, there *may* be no intelligent life much older than ourselves. The idea that there must be very many older civilisations is flawed.

Then Nicolas is at pains to tell us how unsurprising the discovery of life from Mars is (this conclusion has since been challenged). Life may exist elsewhere in the universe, even at a primitive level elsewhere in the solar system, but confirmation of its existence, even in the past, is surely very significant.

STUART CAMPBELL  
Edinburgh

## Animal rights

TO ANSWER Nelly Moia (September letters), of course the concept of human rights does not mean that we allow immoral behaviour. We use sanctions to deter anti-social behaviour and to re-educate the miscreant, who still retains his human right to fair treatment.

However, the rat and the hedgehog both live in the manner programmed by their genes; there is no morality involved. Unfortunately for the rat, that means eating our grain and transmitting dangerous (to us) bacteria; whereas the hedgehog does nothing to earn our displeasure. So there is no blame attached to the rat and if mammals have rights we would treat them both the same – but, in fact, we do not. We protect the one and do our best to kill the other (Ms Moia's ideas of persuading rats to eat other food supplies are not yet a practical alternative).

We do this because we judge their worth by the needs of our species and in the ultimate our needs over-ride those of other species. That is what I understand by "speciesism", not the justification of horrific for trivial purposes, as Heather Evans (August letters) tries to portray it.

I can assure Jessie Boyd (August) that I would not wish to rescind all legislation that gives protection to non-humans. However, I would suggest that pressure for further legislation based on the specious "animal rights" argument should be regarded by Humanists with some scepticism.

I assume that Jains solve the problem of animal pests in the same way that most religionists do when their religious principles come up against their essential human needs – they cheat! (The *Eruv* demanded by ultra-Orthodox Jews in North-West London is a perfect example of this).

R G TEE  
Pudsey

## Definitions provided

Ms C HARRISON, of Ontario, requests definitions of a number of terms (July letters). Here goes:

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# You're telling us!

From Page 14

**Humanist:** A person who tries to live life without resorting to religious concepts or behaviour. Also, such a person puts stress on independent thinking to arrive at a life stance.

**Freethinker:** One who dislikes arbitrary authority or ideologies or hierarchies. A freethinker is historically opposed to religion as it is the oldest of superstitious nonsense.

**Atheist:** A true atheist believes in logical reasoning and/or evidence-based reasoning. He or she does not believe in religion – either because it contains too many contradictions or because no evidence for God's existence can be found. A true atheist's primary belief is thus reason, with a secondary belief, or conclusion, of atheism ("not god").

False atheists stress atheism as their primary belief. They tend at times to say they believe nothing, and thus identify with nihilism. False atheists have produced a difficult public relations environment in which to sell the benefits of a rational but humane view of human existence.

All scientific and mathematical knowledge is based on stating those things you hold to be true, and deriving from this basic set of truths those things you conclude to be false or true. In heat science, for example, experiments established basic rules or axioms, and one conclusion was that perpetual motion machines could not exist – and, indeed, such machines have not been observed.

**ROBERT AWBERY**  
Reading

## Apple of God's eye

JESUS, the Jewish bandit (August letters)? Well yes – in Roman eyes. But that does not mean that all those involved in the 1st Century Judean revolt against Rome considered Jesus a "bandit". To the Jews, Jesus was the apple of God's eye.

We have first-hand proof that a Christ led the armies of the "Sons of Light" (Jews faithful to God) against the "Sons of Darkness" (the "kittim", the armies of Rome).

The document designated "The War Rule" from Cave 1, Khirbet Qumran "Dead Sea Scrolls" (IQM) states: "By the hand of Christ, who discerned Thy testimonies, Thou hast revealed to us...of the battles of Thy hands...by levelling the hordes of Satan [Rome]...by the hand of Thy poor [the dispossessed, slum-dwelling Judeans]...Thou will do to them as Thou didst to Pharaoh, and to the captains of his chariots in the Red Sea". (Where text is broken, the gaps may well have named the 1st Century Christ – or even have been "spirited" away in modern times!)

And "The Christ Rule", Cave 1 (IQ28a): "When God will have engendered [yolid = by anointment 'mesiach' – God's, Thine anointed] Christ he shall...the head of the whole congregation of Israel...and they shall sit...in order of his dignity. And then the Christ of Israel shall...and the chiefs of the [tribes of Judea?] shall sit before him [Christ]..." "And...they shall gather for the common [meal?] to eat and...new wine...Thereafter, the Christ of

Israel shall extend his hand over the bread..."

Who, from the evidence of these documents would doubt that a Christ was a flesh-and-blood individual or that "Christianity" and the New Testament Gospels are but fraudulent copies of these manuscripts?

If Jesus did indeed "bring a sword" and stoutly defend "The Law", then he would have exactly fitted the precepts of the sectarian "Essene" community at Qumran by the Dead Sea. They explicitly state that the Christ of Israel shall come at (take his place at) "...their camps and marches". Christ the leader of their armies!

The historicity of our much-tampered-with Gospels is open to much dispute. But the texts from the caves allow for no such disputation. They are first-hand eye-witness testimonies that tell us of an, as yet, unnamed Christ who led the armies of Judea (Israel) against their Roman foe. If, as Christians still pretend, Christ had led a pacifist, pro-Roman, non-violent movement in Judea, he would have received a Zealot knife in his back, not Roman crucifixion!

**ROBERT SINCLAIR**  
Coventry

## Mutilation and AIDS

ALLOW me to disagree with Stephen Moreton (September letters) when he dismisses all relationship between GM (genital mutilation), age of marriage and AIDS in Africa – that is, between the practice of female GM and the spread of AIDS among African women.

To quote one of the most important pioneers in the fight against female genital mutilation – namely, Fran P Hosken, a temporary advisor to the WHO on FGM and member of the seminar thereon at Khartoum in 1979, who has done extensive research and fieldwork all over Africa – "it is clear that AIDS has many opportunities to reach women as a result of these operations (genital mutilations). Indeed, due to GM, especially infibulation, sexual intercourse must be preceded by cutting the introitus of the artificially closed bride. Excision of the clitoris also often involves formation of hard scar tissue, frequently resulting in lacerations during intercourse."

Also: "In many areas of Africa girls are married at a very young age to much older men, who can afford to pay the steep bride price. The genitalia of the often very small girl brides are torn by the much larger males during intercourse. This is confirmed by hospital records in maternities and by midwives and nurses working there. Many young rape victims can also be found in hospital maternities. But male physicians from abroad seldom talk to midwives or visit the segregated maternities as I did. In Moslem Africa and many traditional regions, men (especially foreigners) have no access..." [to places that have to do with childbirth and reproduction, judged to be a strictly female concern.]

In a nutshell: "The strikingly different patterns of AIDS in Africa, namely the heterosexual transmission, is clearly explained by FGM; child marriage; widespread sexual violence/rape; the Moslem requirement that blood must flow on the wedding night (to con-

firm the bride's virginity)."

For more information, please apply to Fran P Hosken, Editor of WIN News (Women International Network News), 187 Grant Street, Lexington, MA 02173 USA. Ms Hosken is also the author of *The Childbirth Picture Book*, with additions to prevent FGM, which is being used (in various translations) by more and more African health services.

**NELLY MOIA**  
Luxembourg

## Schools values

I AM appalled to learn from Keith Porteous Wood's report, "Defend schools 'values' code from religionists" (September), that leaders of the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association have collaborated in, and speak approvingly of, a report prepared by the National Forum for Values in Education and the Community.

That report would appear to mandate the indoctrination of schoolchildren into politically correct "values", eight of which are termed "non-negotiable": *compassion, equality, freedom, justice, respect, responsibility, truth and fairness*. As a freethinker – someone committed to the freedom of the human mind and intrinsically opposed to all forms of censorship – I am horrified by the phrase "non-negotiable". What would this mean in actual practice? The imposition of speech codes? The purging from libraries of books which did not espouse egalitarianism? The firing of teachers who fail to display sufficient "compassion"?

The mish-mash of "non-negotiable" values reflects a quasi-religious outlook – a soppy, soft-headed leftist outlook – which is in direct contradiction to the core values of classical Humanism: "Man is the measure of all things", a striving for physical and intellectual excellence, a high regard for objectivity.

No one who has grasped Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality can regard "compassion" as a categorically desirable "value". Unless "equality" be very narrowly defined, it is in opposition to the values of "truth" and "fairness". Is a slobbering idiot the equal of an athlete and a scholar, and equally deserving of "respect"?

What about values not endorsed by the report? Offhand, in no particular order, I can think of these: courage, ambition, competition, discipline, moderation, scholarship, logic, pride, honesty, industriousness, independence, self-control, cleanliness, courtesy, objectivity, rationality, nobility, health, loyalty.

Keith Porteous Wood cites one teacher, Bill Herron, who opposes the "Values" report as a demand for "moral or social engineering". Says Herron: "Most kids will regard it as some form of conscription." If so, the kids are absolutely right. They are not in school to be brainwashed with "values". They are there to learn such things as the facts of geography, the multiplication tables, and the principles of grammar (for example, subject-verb agreement, which was violated more than once in the September 1996 issue of *The Freethinker*).

**JOHN LAURITSEN**  
Provincetown, MA

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

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

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

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group:** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, October 6, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. G N Deodhekar: *The Islamic World the Rest of Us*. Sunday, November 3, 5.30 pm for 6 pm: Public meeting – speaker and subject to be announced.

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

**Bromley Humanists:** Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680.

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01296 623730. Wednesday, October 9, at Friends Meeting House, High Street, Berkhamsted (near The Lamb pub): Charles Ward: *Who Reads the Bible Now?*

**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, October 17, 7.30 pm: Juliet Gellatley, Director of VIVA: *Is There Any Ethical Justification for Eating Meat?*

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

**Derbyshire:** Kevin W Stone, of 22A Church Street, Ashbourne, would like to hear from readers of *The Freethinker* in his area, possibly with a view to forming a group.

**Devon Humanists:** Information: Christine Lavery, 5 Prospect Garden, off Blackboy Road, Exeter (01392 56600).

**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, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 (Library, 1st floor). Friday, October 11: Annual General Meeting and Social Evening. November 8: *Any Questions?*

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

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. Meetings held at Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch, from 8 pm to 10 pm. Tuesday, November 5: A discussion of Professor Wolpert's ideas by Eugene Leviné: *The Unnatural Nature of Science*. Tuesday, November 19: Committee meeting. Tuesday, December 3: Ron Latchford: *My Work As A Councillor And Former Mayor*.

**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: Alan Henness, 138 Lumley Street, Grangemouth FK3 8BL. Telephone: 01324 485152.

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

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

**Leeds & District Humanist Group:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Tuesday, October 8, 7.30pm: Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies, Bradford University: *The Causes of Conflict*. Tuesday, November 12: Granville Williams, Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom: *Digital Television – Trick or Treat?*

**Leicester Secular Society:** Information: Secular Hall, 75

Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622250. Sunday meetings at 6.30pm.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell, 99 Ravensbourne Park, London SE6 4YA, telephone (0181) 6904645. Meetings at Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, 8 pm. October 31: Lou Betts: *The Criminal Justice Act*. November 28: Terry Liddle: *William Morris – Atheist Saint*.

**Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607. Meetings held at St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North (near Apollo Theatre), 7.30 pm on second Friday of the month. October 11: Granville Williams: *Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom*. November 8: STEER: *Patients as Medical Victims*. December 13: Carl Pinel: *Darwin, Bradlaugh and Kropotkin*.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Information: Vincent Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN; telephone 01362 820982. Meetings at Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich, 7.30 pm. October 17: Douglas Harding: *Wherries of Norfolk*.

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

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** The Three Cranes Hotel Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, October 2, 8 pm: Roydon Harrison: *Is a Religion of Humanity Possible?* Wednesday, November 6, 8 pm: Dan Bye: *Drugs – Prohibition or Control?* Information: Gordon Sinclair, 9 South View Road, Hoyland, Barnsley S74 9EB (01226 743070) or Bill McIlroy, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT (0114 2685731).

**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 Hall Street, Offerton, Stockport SK1 4DE; 0161 480 0732.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 0181 642 4577. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday October 9: David Rainger: *William Morris*. Wednesday, November 13: Gordon Steel: *The Society of Friends (Quakers)*.

**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. Meetings second Thursday of the month, Regency Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast BT7.

**West Glamorgan Humanist Group:** Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY. Saturday, December 14: Yuletide Dinner at Nicholaston House Hotel, Penmaen £11.50 per head. Book now with Kay John on 01792 234495.

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

**Humanist Holidays:** Yule 1996 at Eastbourne. Tuesday December 24 (dinner) to Saturday, December 28 (breakfast). Half-board but with full-board on December 25. £20 sharing; £210 single. All rooms *en suite* with TV and tea-making facilities. Cosy hotel in quiet central area not far from sea. Last date for booking (with £25 non-refundable deposit): November 20. Details: Gillian Bailey, 18 Prior Road, Cheltenham GL52 5AA. Telephone: 01242 239175.