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# Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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## New Labour — old myths

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What freethought means to me  
by Daniel O'Hara: Page 3



# Up Front

## Substitute for action

DOES IT *really* matter if the Heir Presumptive to Number 10 takes Communion from a Roman Catholic priest (see Carl Pinel: Page 8) and believes the wafer to have become truly the body and blood of Jesus?

Well, yes, it does. Tony Blair's acceptance of such foolishness would put him at the philosophical level of ... I don't know ... the Bushmen of South West Africa who revere Omumbo-Rombonga, the tree of life; of poor old Armageddon-happy Ronnie Reagan.

### The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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Editor: Peter Brearey

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

Front and centre sketch by Geoff Day

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There is no qualitative difference between the beliefs of such folk and those of Mr Blair – if he does accept the magic of transubstantiation, which he must for the sacrament to be valid.

If, on the other hand, he takes Communion in an RC Church with his fingers crossed behind his back, holding the rite to be a mere symbol of Christ's love or an expression of family togetherness or some such, then he is just another humbug.

He fails to improve his situation in my eyes at his Anglican church, for in reciting the Apostles' Creed he will aver that he truly – not symbolically – believes in Jesus Christ "Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Was crucified, dead, and buried ... the third day he rose again from the dead ..." and so, fatuously, on.

Would you buy a worn-out superstition from this man?

NOT THAT you will be offered much choice in this area at the General Election – as is illustrated in Roy McCloughry's *Belief in Politics* (Hodder & Stoughton, £7.99).

It is made up of interviews with leading politicians, and, of course, Mr Blair is there: "... I was not in any real sense a practising Christian until I went to Oxford. There was an Australian priest at the same college as me who got me interested in religion again, and, unusually, I became confirmed at university".

The book also has an unequivocal statement from John Major that he not only believes in God ("I don't pretend to understand all of the complex parts of Christian theology, but I simply accept it") but also that he prays "in all circumstances". For years, there has been a rumour that Mr Major is an unbeliever; the book scotches it.

And Paddy Ashdown? If you have tears of disappointment, prepare to shed them now. He tells Roy McCloughry: "I count myself a Christian ... I pray every night, I believe in a Christian God, but it's an encompassing God that recognises and understands."

Have these characters never read the Bible – I mean, *really* read it?

AS WE were going to press, politicians of many hues were flinging themselves on to the God 'n' Morality bandwagon – some hoping to restore our faith in Parliament following yet more allegations of sleaze, most seeking to upstage Tony Blair, who in his speech in South Africa grabbed headlines by addressing himself to the issue of Sin.

Blair argued that the inability of parents to transmit the values of decency to their children is at the heart of much that is wrong with modern society. He said that his Government would be free from the bind of pressure group politics, broad-based, in touch, and motivated not by narrow ideology but by certain key enduring values. Community ... *blah* ... duty ... *blah* ... responsibility ... *blah* ...

We've heard it all before – in the 50s, the 60s, the 70s and, most recently, from Mr Major, for what the Labour leader said in Cape Town was surely little more than Back to Basics with its face scrubbed, its hair nicely brushed, a Fettes College shine on its shoes. There was little concrete about what Labour plans actually to do about unemployment and poverty and the crumbling Welfare State and the resulting anomie which blights so many lives.

Perhaps he and Messrs Major and Ashdown

could get together and pray?

FORGIVE ME if I sound cynical. Thirty-five years in journalism have left me with scant regard for politicians – any politicians – but I am especially suspicious of those who go on about Christian morality and isn't the Family wonderful (give or take a spot of incestuous rape, a touch of battery and murder, and much get-out-of-here-you-bum-we-can't-afford-to-keep-you!)

By and large, politicians' moralising tends to be a substitute for action.

Last month I read *A Stomach for Dissent*, an entertaining life of Raymond Postgate by John and Mary Postgate. It seems that when, in 1944 and with a General Election looming, things were looking from bad to catastrophic for the Attlee government, Raymond Postgate, with an early and quite brilliant grasp of the spin-doctor's art, told his friend Herbert Morrison that while the Labour Party *could not offer the electorate anything that would cost money* (my italics) it could present, say, reform of the libel laws, an Act forbidding racial, religious or colour discrimination in public places, legislation to oblige magistrates to seek expert evidence in blasphemy and obscenity cases ...

Morrison did nothing, of course, but today's politicians seem to have adapted the tactic to far less laudable ends: their current talk of Morality is, I suspect, a variant of the Postgate technique: "We can't – or won't – actually do anything to improve the material quality of your lives, but, by God, we're agin sin, and we know you are, too, so vote for us".

THERE IS no doubt that religion and politics are being mixed to a disturbing extent – especially now that the RC Church is (or perhaps is not) encouraging its pew-fodder to vote Labour.

It is a trend which rightly alarms the National Secular Society, which on October 21 issued a media statement condemning the Leaders of both the Tory and Labour Parties for proclaiming their personal religious beliefs in the political arena.

And the Rationalist Press Association's Nicolas Walter wrote to *The Guardian*, pointing out that idealism and realism, ethics and morality, decency and fairness, welfare and justice, law and order are central to the Secular Humanist tradition, which has "inspired many of the best thinkers and doers in our history", and insisting: "If the current debates about politics, society, education and the media are going to discuss morality, they should take note of the belief and behaviour of non-religious as well as religious people. We may only be a minority, but we are an important and increasing section of the community".

I particularly enjoyed Nicolas's biting response to a leader in *The Times*: "You call for a debate about rather than a crusade for morality, free of sneering cynicism or point-scoring partisanship, inspired by reason and passion. But leadership comes from the top, and what do we get from the top in politics and business: the churches and the media, culture and sport? Sorry; but when such people start talking about morality, especially during an election campaign and a press war, my reason reflects on what they actually do, and my passion repeats what Emerson wrote in *The Conduct of Life* (1860): 'The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons.'"

Peter Brearey

Letters to the Editor (see *You're Telling Us*, October and this month) show that there is still a need – from time to time – to clarify some of the terms we use frequently. The *Freethinker* asked DANIEL O'HARA, Chairman of the National Secular Society's Council of Management and a former Anglican priest, to provide some thoughts on the subject.



# Coming to terms with definitions

LET US start with *ATHEISM*. This much misunderstood word is sometimes given a tendentious persuasive definition, for example by Catholic apologists, who argue – quite falsely – that it involves a claim to *prove the non-existence of God*.

It is, of course generally accepted that one can never prove a negative. Can one, for example, conclusively prove that the dodo is extinct? Might there not be a few breeding pairs left on some isolated islet off the coast of Mauritius? It seems unlikely, to say the least, since no living dodo has been seen since the end of the 17th century, when the last known specimen died, though it is not impossible. But at least we know that this flightless pigeon, the size of a turkey, did once inhabit the island of Mauritius. There are well known contemporary drawings and even a few surviving bones which give us a good idea of what it looked like. It certainly existed once, just as it almost certainly exists no longer. But as for a god or gods of the sort posited by the religions of the world: there is not the slightest reason to believe that anything of the sort, any more than leprechauns, ever existed outside human imagining.

All the evidence suggests that God and the gods are cultural artefacts, mythical beings dreamed up by human beings to serve a variety of explanatory, social and existential needs. With the growth of scientific understanding, however, theism (God-belief) largely lost the explanatory power it was once presumed to have. Indeed, as David Hume demonstrated, it really explains nothing because it is based on a question-begging premiss.

So *ATHEISM*, far from being a belief that God's existence can be disproved, is a simple rejection of God-belief on the grounds that there is no evidence for the existence of such an entity. It can be further defended on the grounds that the very concept of God is incoherent.

An *atheist* is thus someone who lives without belief in a God or gods, who does not look for divine rewards and sanctions in this life or in any supposed hereafter. His standpoint is therefore a *Secularist* one. He considers everything from a this-worldly perspective. He does not believe in the claims of the religions to embody their institutions and sacred writings a "revelation" from "beyond" the sensible world. Such claims he regards as not merely mendacious, but as imposing a wholly spurious – and socially damaging – authority over human life. The *atheist*, though a *secularist*, is not necessarily an *anarchist*: but he believes that all laws and authority are temporal and should be devised and deployed for the benefit of society and without reference to any supposed 'will of God'. Civil power should thus not be entrusted to religious institutions.

What of *RATIONALISM*? Here we need some historical perspective and must recognise that up to the 17th or 18th century, Rationalism and Empiricism were seen as opposites. The rationalist believed that human thought and "reasoning" were the surest routes to "the truth", inde-

pendently of any examination of how things actually are. With the growth of the new inductive scientific method (in which Francis Bacon had been particularly influential), however, the importance of experiment and observation of how things actually are and behave in nature began to be properly recognised.

For a time Rationalism and Empiricism were competitors. The empiricist believed that all knowledge comes from experience, while the rationalist (Leibniz being an extreme example) believed that at least some knowledge was innate and represented, as it were, the hallmark of an omniscient creator-God. But before long it was recognised that neither Rationalism nor Empiricism can stand alone, and that all true science must combine: on the one hand the rational construction of testable theories (or hypotheses), and on the other a careful collection and evaluation of physical evidence. Only when the two are held in harness are we likely to get a self-correcting system leading to reliable and useful knowledge.

Furthermore, it is futile to ask: "Which comes first, reason/theory or evidence/facts?" because there is never a time, in the life of any sentient being, when the two are not inexorably combined. We cannot formulate a useful theory without some empirical experience of the world; and we cannot begin to collect evidence (indeed, we would not even know what might constitute evidence) without some prior theory/hypothesis, however tentative, that we are seeking to test.

What we discover will always depend in large measure on what we are looking for: and what we look for will likewise depend in large measure on what we are hoping or expecting to find. So "Rationalism" (at least in the sense advocated for more than a century by the Rationalist Press Association) does not mean what it meant in the 17C or 18C. Rather it signals a determination to use rationally defensible means of enquiry rather than simply relying on supposed authority and ancient wisdom.

And this brings us to the term *FREE-THINKER*. Religionists frequently ridicule the idea that human thought can be free of all presuppositions. And, of course, they are right up

to a point! No one really supposes that human thought can be usefully engaged if it rejects all that we have discovered by long experience to be true and valid (such as the inverse square law, the organic basis of life, the second law of thermodynamics). What *Freethought*, properly understood, implies, is a rejection of arbitrary limits to our thinking, such as those that might be imposed, for example, by religious or political authorities.

For the mediaeval Catholic, the truth of the Christian Gospel and the divine authority of the Church were axioms, the questioning of which might lead to a trial for heresy and even the death penalty. It was thus a proper demand of the Enlightenment thinkers that all such arbitrary restrictions to human thought should be rejected. It nevertheless remains the case that if our thinking is to be fruitful, we cannot lightly set aside what long experience has repeatedly confirmed, even though further discoveries may yet make necessary a revision or setting-aside of some long-cherished theory or notion.

What then is *HUMANISM*? At the very least, Humanism requires an acknowledgement that human reason and human needs are normative for the policies that an enlightened society will pursue. This does not necessarily entail a "species chauvinism", which relegates the needs of other species to a secondary place in all circumstances. Nor is it implied that human life is in any sense "sacred". But it does mean that legitimate human needs for a decent quality of life (and there must here be a balancing of individual and societal needs) will take precedence over other considerations, particularly those that have no demonstrable validity.

And finally, *AGNOSTICISM*. Catholic apologists again get it wrong. They claim that the agnostic (unlike the atheist) has simply not yet made up his mind whether there is a god or not. But agnosticism does not necessarily, or even usually, imply a suspense of judgement, still less a laziness of thought.

The agnostic rather claims not to know (or even that it is not possible to know) what the religionist so confidently claims to know about



# Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

## Dispirited response to Dawkins

THE Ghost Club Society. Now there's an intriguing if tautological title. Does it conjure up a gathering of spooks, several no doubt decapitated, assembled to report on recent hauntings – and the extent of press coverage – and to decide on allocations for the future? Nothing so esoteric, I'm afraid. Mere mortals; one of whom, President Peter Underwood, wrote to the *Sunday Times* (September 1) expressing surprise that Richard Dawkins should dismiss "the whole realm of the paranormal" in his comments, in the previous week's paper, on Carlton TV's *Beyond Belief* and BBC's *Secrets of the Paranormal*.

Underwood claimed to have "collected a wealth of unbiased evidence for unexplained paranormal activity" during half-a-century of investigation; but he admitted he had also "encountered a vast amount of fraud, conscious and unconscious" (sic). Moreover, "Years ago" he offered a £25,000 award for "anyone who could produce paranormal activity under test conditions". There had been no winner because, he said, such activity "cannot be produced to order". So the "wealth" of paranormal activity he has collected is simply activity that has not been explained, has certainly not been produced under test conditions and could well be fraud.

## Haunting refrain is off-key

IN FACT, the main indictment of Dawkins' original piece was of the television companies, whose "recent splurge of paranormalism debauches true science and undermines the efforts of their own excellent science departments".

Another letter writer, Giles Oakley, Head of Community and Disability Programmes at the BBC, sought to justify *Secrets of the Paranormal* as "an inevitable and legitimate response to an important shift in popular culture".

Whether there has been such a cultural shift is open to doubt. Spiritualism is far from new. But instead of pandering to it or paying someone like Carol Vorderman to sit alone in a "haunted hotel" hoping(?) to see a ghost (in *Out of this World*), the BBC ought to treat it with the contempt it deserves.

I find it irritating, incidentally, that any journalistic nonentity should adopt a superior attitude towards Richard Dawkins. And there seem to be quite a number of them. On September 1, for example, a *Mail on Sunday*

television previewer declared that "Dawkins' problem is that he is as much a fundamentalist as any born-again Christian: he thinks that science can explain everything".

I console myself with the thought that Dawkins' anti-religious message must be getting home, to arouse such antagonism.

## What's in a title?

THE latest story of sex abuse by a Roman Catholic priest comes from Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne, where Father Kevin Bolger has been suspended and is receiving therapy. But the family of the boy involved did not want any action to be taken, and a Northumbria police spokesman said that Father Bolger had been cautioned and the matter was "now closed" (*Daily Telegraph*, September 18).

I don't regard imprisonment as an effective measure against sex-offenders, but I wonder if Northumbria police would have been as ready to close the case had Kevin Bolger been just plain *Mister*.

## Far-EastEnders?

"OBEDIENCE is our transcendent rule", Father Luis Sequeira, Superior of Macao's "small but influential Jesuit community" told *The Guardian's* Andrew Higgins (August 29). But Sequeira can't get obedience from 79-year-old Benjamin Pires, founder and headmaster of the Jesuit-run Instituto Melchior Camerio.

The Superior wants Father Pires to retire and make way for a younger man, but Pires refuses to do so, and thinks that the Society's intention is to close the school and sell the valuable land on which it stands.

"I hope and pray he will reconsider his position", said Father Sequeira; but, as usual, prayer doesn't seem to have worked.

Perhaps the most fitting comment on this apparently "noisy fracas" came from the Editor-in-Chief of Macao television, Victor Chan, who called it the "longest running soap opera in town".

## Wellcome news

I WELL remember my first visit to Charles Darwin's Down House, some 35 years ago, and the excitement that didn't diminish on subsequent occasions. I was appalled, therefore, to read of its dilapidated state (*The Observer*, September 8). This is where, as David Attenborough has said, "one of the world's greatest thinkers did his thinking – and changed the way we all think today".

Thanks to the Wellcome Foundation, the Natural History Museum and English Heritage, it will be saved for others to pay

their tribute to the man who put the final nail in the coffin of special creation.

His own coffin, by the way, lies in Westminster Abbey and, on the occasion of his burial in 1882, a New York Unitarian, John Chadwick, eloquently declared that "The nation's grandest temple of religion opened its gates and lifted up its doors and bade the king of science to come in".

As the "king" was carried in, the choristers sang "I am the resurrection". More appropriately, they sang "Happy the man that findeth wisdom and getteth understanding", although, as Adrian Desmond and James Moore remark in their biography, the closing refrain "left a sacreligiously unDarwinian image of nature: 'Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace'".

## Averse to God

ON SEPTEMBER 17 this year, a memorial window to A E Houseman was unveiled in the Abbey by his pupil Enoch Powell. Alan Bennett gave the address, and the tenor Ian Bostridge sang lyrics from *A Shropshire Lad*. But the Abbey chaplain, the Rev Jonathan Goodall, "had problems in finding anything suitably Christian to say about the author", wrote John Ezard (*The Guardian*, September 18). Not surprising when, as Ezard said, Houseman was "one of the bitterest God haters to wield a pen".

## Mexico way ...

THERE is no more painful and pitiful sight than that of Mexican Roman Catholics crawling on their knees to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

Now the Abbot of the shrine, Monsignor Guillermo Schulenberg, has retired, forced out by most observers believe, because he regarded the story of the 1531 visitation of the Virgin Mary as "legend rather than historical fact" (*The Guardian* September 9).

In an interview with the Italian magazine *Giorni*, last year, Monsignor Schulenberg said that Juan Diego, the Indian to whom the Virgin allegedly appeared, was "a symbol, not a reality".

## All Greek to me

CONTRARY to all the "evidence" of the Gospels (and there is no other source), the Pope insists that Jesus had no brothers or sisters. The words "brother and sister" were used loosely in the Gospels, the Pope said, because there was no word for "cousin" in Hebrew or Aramaic (*The Times*, August 30). There is one crucial flaw in this old argument: the Gospels were written in Greek.



**‘In the name of the true faith’**

(Freidenker, Switzerland)

# There's Salvation in store

by Keith Porteous Wood,  
General Secretary of the National Secular Society

The National Secular Society will be suggesting to Tesco's Chairman that it is made clearer to the parents and potential participants in the club that this is a religious venture and that it is being run by the Salvation Army. We will be asking him what plans there are for more religious ventures. We will also enquire what provision he is proposing for the vast majority of customers' kids – the non-religious – and suggesting that a non-religious club open to all

would help to create a more rational and cohesive society.

Sir Ian is Chairman and Chief Executive of Tesco Stores PLC, Delamare Road, Cheshunt, Hertfordshire EN8 9SL (Fax: 01992 627033)...

Do readers of *The Freethinker* (never short of helpful suggestions) think I should recommend that Tesco stock barbecue-flavour communion wafers, Chardonnay-style communion wine – and baby-wipes impregnated with holy water?

## Trapped in Islam's cage

IT WAS announced that thieves would have their hands amputated, and there were the traditional public executions, when the Taliban brought their Islamic "culture" to Afghanistan. TV, music and alcohol were forbidden. Men were told to grow beards and to pray at the mosque five times a day. But, after the initial blood-letting, the Taliban transferred their deep brutality to women, who were banned from all work and all education. They could go out only if covered from head to foot, with mesh over their eyes, and accompanied by a male relative.

Now, happily, the Taliban seem to be getting a bloody nose from those who also want to control the considerable mineral wealth and potential oil routes of northern Afghanistan, but they'll be back – somewhere.

Closer to home, and equally grotesque, we have the deaths of Christian children through want of unbiblical blood-transfusions, millennialist New Age fakers plundering their credulous followers ... Muslims in the UK bringing violence or even death to female relatives who spurn marriages forced according to Islamic custom ... Christian priests by the dozen abus-

ing the bodies of infants ...

Who dares to suggest that the battle against superstition has been won?

Help us to keep up the struggle against religion and for rational alternatives with a donation to *The Freethinker* fund. Send cheques and POs (made payable to G W Foote & Co) to: Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

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**Total from September 17 to October 18: £607.75**

THE Salvation Army has just started to offer hour-long Sunday School services at a superstore in Maidstone, Kent, in an attempt, it says, to "limit the damage" of Sunday trading. While their parents are shopping, children will attend the indoctrination sessions at their local Tesco.

If they are successful, the Sally Army has already admitted it plans to expand these "schools" to the whole of Kent and, disturbingly, to contact Tesco's national Chairman, Sir Ian MacLaurin, presumably with a view to their even wider distribution.

It seems the new supermarket litany may become *A pound of black pudding, two cans of deodorant and three Hail Marys*. Where might it all end? Will the nation soon be choosing its shopping venues on ecclesiastical grounds, rather than on price or quality? Will *Which?* include a Sunday School "Best Buy" in its next shopping survey? Which store in Golders Green will be the first to offer Talmud classes on Saturdays?

No doubt our supermarket bosses will soon turn to market research to help them maximise profits from this venture – weighing up the number and the socio-economic groups of different religious adherents around each store before deciding which "brand" to offer. Perhaps they will even demand longer sermons to increase parents' spending-time?

Such manipulative techniques are not, however, the monopoly of commerce. Weasel words – worthy of the best advertising agency – are being used to entice the children in. Rather than "Salvation Army Bible Class", say, we have "Kids Alive Tesco Club". It sounds (almost) appealing. Not to mention the unmistakable implication that kids who don't want to go in are in some way "dead". Organiser Major Bill Heeney offers little reassurance. He says to the Young Soldiers he's recruiting: "Jesus Christ is our Saviour and we want you to get to know him".

# Whatever happened to the Second Coming?

**C**HRISTIANS have been waiting for nearly 2,000 years for Jesus's Second Coming, and some of them are now becoming sceptical – beginning to wonder, even, if he is a fraud and will never return.

But Jesus is a decent sort of a chap, with good intentions. Admittedly his critics have pointed out that he said *I come not to bring peace upon earth, but a sword*. And it has to be conceded that he turned the money-changers out of the temple, caused the fig tree to wither, drowned the Gadarene swine, and threatened non-believers with Hell-fire. But nobody's perfect.

Besides, who really believes in Hell? His remarks were probably just a figurative way of describing Bootle or Bradford. Most of the time, Jesus was nice to people: feeding the Five Thousand, curing some people of nasty diseases, raising others from the dead (although Lazarus was a bit peeved because his mother had taken a lodger for his room, his job hadn't been kept open, and he had got his rheumatism back. There's just no pleasing some folk.)

In fact, the delayed Second Coming is not Jesus's fault – it's his Dad's.

Jesus's Dad is a Creator, and quite a clever one, who can make whole worlds from nothing. According to the Bible (so it must be true) he has always existed. Obviously, he had to do something to occupy eternity, so he began to create planets.

But the first worlds that Dad created were failures. They were too hot or too cold to support life. Some had poisonous atmospheres and were doomed to remain barren. But then he created Earth. It was believed that this was his first successful attempt because it was a bit crude. There were earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, hurricanes, tidal waves, spiders, cockroaches and fleas. Still, it worked tolerably well.

The people were a disappointment, though, and kept behaving wickedly. Dad sent a Flood which killed off the bad ones, but the effect was only temporary. To keep massacring people in such large numbers was impractical as a long-term solution, so he sent his son as a human

## Carl Pinel has a theory

sacrifice to save the world. No one is quite sure why this was necessary, or why it could not have been done earlier instead of sending the Flood, but, presumably, he knew what he was doing.

Carried away by his cleverness, Dad created lots of worlds with intelligent beings inhabiting them. But, unfortunately, free-will always caused a problem: the perverse creatures would insist on *using* it, and Jesus was called upon to be sacrificed all over the place.

Sometimes the plans went awry. On Asdin, for example, the people were invisible and he couldn't prove that he had been resurrected. Dad approved of his being burned at the stake on Pyros because it maintained a Christian tradition, but his body was too charred to be recognised after the Resurrection. On Plonka, he died of measles before he could begin his ministry, while on Donos he was killed in a pub brawl over Mary Magdalene when a client wanted her services and wouldn't take "no" for an answer when she said she was busy washing Jesus's feet.

Everyone on Dupla had two heads; when Jesus was decapitated he complained to Dad that he had been sacrificed twice in one day. The curious inhabitants of Thermosiaon worshipped packed lunches. Jesus knew it was a mistake to trot out the standard speech: "Take my body and my blood ..." and offered a silent prayer that they were vegetarian. He was out of luck. Later, he was to recall that hanging upside-down from a butcher's hook was the most humiliating experience of his lives. (*Confessions of an Inter-Galactic Human Sacrifice*, Heaven Sent Publications, Paradise Row, Nirvana. £14.95 + £21,800 postage to any universe.)

Jesus protested at being thrown into a snake pit on Zubon because he was terrified of reptiles, suggesting that perhaps the inhabitants could be saved by a wave of the hand, for once. But Dad was adamant that things had to be done

by the Book.

The planet Rubecula was inhabited entirely by birds. Jesus didn't want to go because he suffered from vertigo when flying. He also pointed out to his Dad that animals don't have souls. But, as Dad explained, he could do anything he wished. Reluctantly, Jesus became a bird, but he found living on a diet of worms distasteful and, as birds don't have teeth, he lisped his way through the Sermon on the Nest. It was almost a relief to be plucked to death.

On the matriarchal planet Sharon, Jesus had to become Julia and preach of the Mother, the Daughter and the Holy Ghostess. Capital punishment had been abolished by the matriarchs: a five-year jail term was an insufficient sacrifice upon which to found a world religion. To make matters worse, Dad had created three more new worlds while Jesus/Julia was sewing mailbags.

After undergoing his first 50 executions, Jesus asked for a holiday, which Dad granted. But a week in Cleethorpes during the coldest February in 250 years wasn't much of a break. In desperation, Jesus enrolled Dad in a Book Club to stop him Creating. Letting him read Kafka was a mistake, because Jesus suddenly found himself metamorphosed as a caterpillar on Gwagga and was killed with a DDT spray. He was resurrected as a rather attractive butterfly, but, again, his vertigo stopped him from flying.

Jesus complained to Dad that if he was part of a Trinity, why did he get all the tough jobs? Dad explained that someone had to do the administrative work and Spooky (as the Holy Ghost was affectionately called) was busy impregnating the Virgin Mary. When Jesus asked if he could have a turn at doing that, his Dad got angry and called him a pervert. The next three executions were particularly unpleasant, so Jesus thought it wise not to mention the subject again.

To catch up with the backlog of work, the Virgin Birth was dispensed with, and Jesus visited each planet as an adult. The Holy Ghost is still sulking at his loss of employment and status (the report that he has started poring over girlie magazines is unconfirmed.)

Fortunately, Dad has stopped Creating new worlds and spends most of his time making full-scale models of Blackpool Tower out of matchsticks – although, in true creative spirit, he makes the matches out of nothing. Unfortunately, the towers collapse when they are more than 10 ft high; Dad is thinking of amending the laws of physics to solve the problem.

Jesus has another 823 worlds to be sacrificed on before he can begin his round of Second Comings. Providing he can get through Immigration Control, we should see him in about 2,500 years' time. Hopefully, the Christians will remove the symbols of execution from their buildings before then. It would be tactless and unkind to remind him of his unpleasant exit from this world the last time.

## Religion low on students' priorities list

**THE** typical Australian adolescent has no real interest in either religion or politics, according to a survey of students aged between 13 and 16 years, which was produced by University of Sydney lecturer Dr Jennifer Bowes.

The young people's priorities went in this descending order of importance: "Having close friends, getting a good education, having a secure job, developing my talents, being close to my family, preserving the

Earth for future generations, protecting animals, having a nice home, travelling to other countries, earning a lot of money, doing something to stop pollution, getting married, helping those who are less fortunate, helping my country, doing something worthwhile for society, having some influence on other people".

The two least important of the 18 values listed were "following the principles of my religion" and "being active in politics".

Terry Sanderson on the media

# God and the Lottery: Whose balls are in His hands?

**G**OD, we are told, moves in mysterious ways – and surely the most mystifying of his modern-day interventions was recently reported on the front page of *The Sun*: “A boss who was facing ruin has scooped £2.6 million on the Lottery – after going to church and praying: ‘Please God, let me win.’” The paper charmingly described Harry Thomas’s scoop as “A Wad from God”.

Apparently, the businessman had “turned to the Almighty” because his haulage firm was hundreds of thousands of pounds in debt, and on the brink of collapse.

The *Daily Express* told us that Mr Thomas does not consider himself to be “a religious fanatic” and that he only goes to church for weddings and christenings, but is now convinced that “there is somebody up there with me”.

Well, God is merciful, isn’t he? I’ve always said so. But one little point troubles me – what about the fifty-five million other people who bought tickets? How many of them turned their eyes to Heaven as the button was pressed and whispered: “Please God, let it be me – put your merciful hand on my balls!” What happened in their cases?

Perhaps God considers the one-parent family or the destitute old age pensioner less deserving than Mr Thomas?

Not to worry, *The Sun*’s new “lottery psychic” – Claire Voyant – was on hand with the answers. In the light of Mr Thomas’s win, Miss Voyant suggested to her readers that certain “divine numbers” might do the same trick for them.

She suggested that they back 1 – because there is only one God; 3 for the Holy Trinity; 10 – for the Commandments; 12 – the disciples; 23 – for the 23rd Psalm, and 30 for the 30 pieces of silver used to betray Jesus. Unfortunately for the psychic’s followers, not one of these numbers came out that week.

God’s capriciousness is dizzying, but it spurred *Daily Mail* columnist Richard Littlejohn to pen this little prayer, for use in churches where funds may be required to shore up the roof:

*Our Father, who art in Camelot,  
Jackpot be they name.  
Give us each day our daily scratchcard  
And deliver us our bonus number  
As we deliver profits to you  
In newsagents and supermarkets.  
Forgive us our fecklessness  
Our avarice and recklessness  
And lead us into temptation.  
Give us our roll-over  
And we’ll hand our dole over*

*For ever and ever  
Until Labour takes your licence away.  
Amen.*

Even more incredible than God coming to the rescue of troubled businessmen is the news reported in *The Sunday Telegraph* that 300 British women have taken out insurance against having “A Virgin Birth by Act of God” – in expectation of the Second Coming in the year 2000.

Apparently these barmpots have shelled out £100 each, and will be paid £1 million if an independent panel of gynaecologists confirms that they are pregnant virgins.

The policies are offered by insurance brokers Goodfellow Rebecca Ingrams Pearson, and the firm’s managing director Simon Burgess says: “You must never underestimate the stupidity of the British public. We’re getting more interest from virgins, prostitutes and people who believe in aliens than people who will take out a policy that is likely to pay off”.

And talking about not underestimating people’s stupidity, we move on to those churchgoers who will sit in the pews and allow themselves to be harangued about their lack of piety and their sinfulness by some dog-collared berk while he himself is going forth and multiplying.

## God-send

Such was the case with Roddy Wright, Roman Catholic ex-Bishop of Argyll and the Isles. His exploits were a God-send to the newspaper wags, and it was only a matter of hours after his defection with his girlfriend that the papers had dubbed him Randy Roddy.

One tabloid hack even went so far as to report that Mr Wright had been offered a job in Uruguay. It was totally untrue of course: the paper just wanted an excuse to run the headline “Bishop to try missionary position”.

In the Scottish editions of *The Sun*, a cheeky chappy recalled the tale of the priest who confessed to his bishop about his Roddy-esque exploits.

“Forgive me father,” says the priest, “I’ve been sleeping with prostitutes.”

“What?” splutters the prelate.

“I said I’ve been sleeping with prostitutes, father.”

The bishop sighs with relief: “Thank God for that – I thought you said you’d been sleeping with Protestants!”

*The Independent*’s resident humorist, Miles Kington, was speculating whether the Catholic church would now employ a public relations expert to try and rebuild its image

in the media.

After doing his research by reading the Bible, this imaginary PR person then presents his report to the high-ups at the Vatican. He says: “Gentlemen, you must prepare yourselves for a shock. I think celibacy is about to be blown out of the window. Jesus may well have been a celibate, yes, but it didn’t run in the family ... Jesus may have been a goody goody, but it’s more than you can say for his Father. You never told me that God the Father did exactly the same as the Bishop of Argyll. God had a secret love child and his name was Jesus. Think about it. Mary was never consulted by God about becoming pregnant. He just got her with child. Nor did God have the courage to come and tell her himself that she was in the heavenly family way, but sent an angel instead to spill the beans. God the Father didn’t provide much in the way of maintenance while Jesus was growing up, and didn’t show up in the family home much. Nor was he around much in Jesus’s last days. Believe me, gents, there’s little to choose between the Bishop of Argyll and dear old God the Father! The Bishop is following a very strong biblical tradition indeed.”

**The 1996 Annual  
General Meeting  
and EGM of the  
National Secular Society  
will be held  
at Conway Hall  
London WC1  
on Saturday  
November 23  
at 2.00 pm**

A brief Extraordinary General Meeting, which will take place first, will 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

# NEW LABOUR PEDDLES

**I**N AN Easter interview with *The Sunday Telegraph*, Tony Blair declared: "My view of Christian values led me to oppose what I perceived to be the narrow view of self-interest that Conservatism – particularly its more modern Right-wing form – represents".

Although Blair took care to emphasise that he did not expect all Christians to vote Labour, *The Sunday Telegraph* presented his comments as an attempt to depict Conservatism and Christian belief as incompatible.

In fact, Blair was equally critical of the Left-wing, claiming that his rejection of Marxism was inspired by Christianity and that the Left got into difficulties when it became separated from the ethical values of Socialism, which he found in the Bible.

This is a curious statement to make: the Labour Party, whatever its ethical values may have been, has *never* been inspired by Socialism. It was formed to represent and protect trade union interests in Parliament – a role which has caused it difficulty in government and embarrassment in opposition. And it is not surprising that New Labour is gradually loosening its ties with the trade union movement.

Blair is not the first politician to claim to be a Socialist and a Christian: the Christian Socialist movement was formed by John Ludlow, F D Maurice and the novelists Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes (who later became a Liberal MP). Christian Socialism was a response to the Chartist agitation of 1848 and was intended to avert revolution by improving social conditions. Its leaders called for an extension of Liberal social policy and offered paternalistic "solutions" to the poverty and insanitary conditions so graphically described by Kingsley in his novel *Alton Locke* (1850).

In the late Victorian age there were a number of groups which claimed to be Christian and Socialist: the Socialist Quaker Society, the New Church Socialist Society, Christian Socialist Society; John Clifford's Christian Socialist League and the Free Church Socialist League. Most of these groups were sectarian, and collapsed after a few years.

Few of the members had an understanding of economics or of Socialist ideas – indeed, the Rev Samuel Keeble was exceptional in being widely read in economics; he tried to introduce Methodists to Socialist ideas with *Industrial Daydreams* in 1896. The book, although well-reviewed in radical circles, did not sell among Christians.

Predictably, the Blair interview, as reported in *The Sunday Telegraph*, provoked a number of angry responses from Conservatives.

Elizabeth Noel, prospective Conservative parliamentary candidate for Tony Blair's Sedgefield constituency, and a Roman Catholic, said in *The Times*: "The Christian message is too complex and challenging to be reduced to political propaganda. Jesus, I suspect, would have made an appalling guest speaker at a New Labour rally. He would have made the same rather short speech at all political meetings: 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's'".

## Qualified

Harry Greenway, Conservative MP for Ealing North, went much further in his regular column in the *Ealing Gazette* in May, stating that his religious convictions were only compatible with the Conservative Party, although he qualified this with a further article the following week by writing in the *Church of England Newspaper* that: "Britain needs Christianity a hundred times more than it needs Conservatism." Greenway suggested that the Conservative Party shared the same core beliefs as Christianity in emphasising the freedom of the individual.

This brought an angry response from the Bishop of Willesden, Dr Graham Dow, who told the *Ealing Gazette*: "It is because each individual is sacred that God is so angry when society operates as to widen the gap between rich and poor. Yet I have seen for myself that single parent families cannot manage on the present state provision. This is poles apart from God's kind of society and from the work of Jesus, which was always lifting people up rather than putting them down."

The Liberal Democrats have sensibly avoided the contentious issue of claiming a party affiliation for Christianity, although in

the West Country the Methodist Church is sometimes nicknamed "the Liberal Party at prayer".

In claiming a Christian justification for his political ideas, Blair is emulating Margaret Thatcher. In a speech in 1978, the year before she came to power, Thatcher declared: "The Tory Party in its origin was the Church of England in politics, for the old concept of a partnership between Church and State lies very near the heart of traditional Tory thinking."

Interestingly, the association of Anglicanism and Conservatism spoken of by Margaret Thatcher did not receive the same attention from the media as Blair's statement. But *The Sunday Telegraph* tends to be supportive of the Conservative Party and hostile to the Labour Party. Perhaps, with hindsight, Tony Blair would have been wiser not to have spoken of such a contentious subject as religion to a newspaper which has not been favourably disposed towards the Labour Party in the past.

Clearly, practising Christians are deeply divided in their opinions of what the message of the Bible is supposed to convey. None of this should surprise Rationalists because there are contradictory messages running through the whole of the New Testament. And with its emphasis on a loving God, the New Testament runs counter to the Old Testament, with its vengeful, war-like deity – although the elements of human sacrifice, power worship and the threat of eternal punishment remain.

It is possible, by selectively quoting from the Bible (ignoring the parts which do not fit one's ideas) to claim almost any political position as a temporal extension of Christian belief. Militarism, pacifism, anarchism, slavery have all been claimed by individuals at different times by selective and idiosyncratic interpretations of the scriptures.

The Labour Party leaders have distanced themselves from using the word "Socialism" for some years. Even that erstwhile hero of the Left, Neil Kinnock, omitted it from the 13,000-word election manifesto in 1992, and it is said that Ramsay MacDonald, campaigning in 1931, never let the word "soil his lips".

Recently, Kim Howells, Shadow industry spokesman, has called for the Labour Party to

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# OUR LEADER OLD MYTHS



**CARL PINEL with a personal view of the religious beliefs of Tony Blair, the man most likely to be Britain's next Prime Minister**

Get rid of the "outdated label". This is logical enough; a party which is not Socialist does not need such a label. But, surprisingly, the Labour leadership has rallied in defence of retaining the word. Blair himself said in an article in *The Guardian*: "My kind of Socialism is a set of values based around notions of social justice ..." which is vague enough to sound good but is actually meaningless.

John Prescott, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, defended the "Socialist concept" behind the National Health Service – without pointing out that the White Paper for a unified National Health Service was presented by Henry Willink, Conservative Minister of Health, in 1944. The Labour Party has more in common with the Liberalism of William Beveridge and John Maynard Keynes than with Socialism, which, given its reformist origins, history and record in office, is hardly surprising.

If Blair's politics seem to be all things to all people, then his religious views seem almost as pragmatic. He regularly attends Communion with his family at St Joan of Arc Roman Catholic church in Highbury, North London, despite his being an Anglican, and when he is in his Sedgefield constituency he

attends the St John Fisher RC church even though the Anglican church of St Edmund is situated just opposite. However, unlike at Highbury, he is not offered Communion at St John Fisher. It is forbidden by Church rules: a non-Catholic is not allowed to receive Communion in a Catholic church except in extreme or unusual circumstances.

Labour spokesmen deny that Blair is on the verge of conversion to Catholicism, but Father Caden, the priest at St John Fisher and a friend and spiritual adviser of the Labour leader, has spoken of his commitment to Catholicism. There has also been political pressure from some Catholic MPs for Blair to make a decision about his religious beliefs.

Perhaps Blair is being as cautious over taking a positive step in declaring his religious allegiance as he is in clarifying his political programme. He may wish to remain an Anglican and merely attend a Catholic church with his wife and children for the sake of family togetherness. But that does not explain why his spiritual adviser is a Catholic priest, nor why he appears rarely to attend an Anglican church.

It is possible that the lack of clarity over Blair's position is because he has not, or cannot, make up his mind. After all, how does

one choose between two similar superstitious legends? There are also suggestions that he is waiting until after the General Election before converting to Catholicism. This has prompted an "anonymous church official" to complain in the Catholic weekly *The Universe*: "Receiving Communion without becoming a Catholic is a cowardly thing to do. Why should a politician feel that he cannot bear witness to his creed?" If Blair is waiting until after an election before changing his religion, then presumably the answer to that question is *votes*.

Until about 150 years ago, Catholics were not allowed to become MPs, and Britain has never had a Catholic Prime Minister. But fewer people take religion seriously and it is probably a matter of indifference (rather than greater tolerance among Christians) to the majority of electors whether Blair has a religion or not, so long as he does not try to inflict his views on to the non-worshipping majority.

Church attendance has been in decline for a number of years. Regular church-goers are regarded as slightly eccentric – continuing an outdated ritual which their neighbours have long since abandoned. It is, therefore, slightly puzzling why Blair's religious views – or the confusion over them – should be of interest to anyone.

If Blair wishes to convert to Catholicism and revive the label "Socialist", then he may wish to heed the declaration of Pope Pius XII: "No-one can be at the same time a sincere Catholic and a Socialist properly so-called". Fortunately for Blair, the Labour Party does not have a Socialist programme and has never been "... Socialist properly so-called". And if he does convert, at least his politics will not be an obstacle to being received into the Catholic Church. No doubt if Blair were to become a Catholic Prime Minister he would quietly drop even the word "Socialism" from his vocabulary.

For the moment, it looks as if the Labour leader intends to keep all his options open. To the consummate politician, votes will always take priority over any agenda. To appear to be all things to all electors is the supreme art of the politician. This is an art at which Blair is showing himself as quite skilful.

# FALL FROM GRACE

**H**AVE good Christian friends who always say grace before meals. They expect me to take part, even though they know I am not a believer. I usually shrug and acquiesce – after all, I am in their house.

However, it happens that this little ritual is more than just a quaint cultural tradition or cosy family habit; to my friends, it is a deeply meaningful religious act. Maybe that is why it makes me feel uneasy, and why, on a recent visit, I found myself rebelling. I suggested mildly that they might go ahead and say grace while I went off to “wash my hands”. I assumed that when they nodded in agreement, they were excusing me from their religious observance, so was astonished on my return to find them still standing, waiting for me. They were quietly insistent I too must be present during the prayer. I asked half jocularly if they would not be distracted by the waves of scepticism which would emanate from me, but they were not deterred. We duly sat down and grace was said.

I am not aware of any rules of etiquette regarding the saying of grace on private social occasions. However, some books do give advice on other contentious matters like smoking. It is suggested that guests should be prepared to withdraw to another part of the house if they want to smoke at the end of the meal, and in this way considerate hosts can accommodate guests' conflicting preferences about smoking. So why can they not accommodate their preferences about religious observance in the same way? Or do the

by Jane Marshall

deeply-held convictions of believers always take precedence over those of non-believers?

My friends must at the very least realise that non-believers may feel embarrassed at having to commune with a being they do not believe exists. Or that they might resent being forced to choose between two alternatives: being polite but dishonest (by assuming an attitude of false reverence), or impolite but honest (by appearing tactlessly irreverent). By choosing the second alternative on this occasion, at least I felt less of a hypocrite.

Anyway, why are my friends so keen that I join in their prayer of thanksgiving? Why insist I go through the motions? As the Bard said, “Words without thoughts never to heaven go.” Do they hope the sincerity of their own devotion will affect my disbelief?

On the other hand, maybe my non-attendance is seen as an insult to God or disrespectful to themselves. Not at all. When I skip off, I am not insulting God: how can I insult someone whose existence I do not accept? Nor am I being disrespectful to them or hostile to their beliefs: on the contrary, it is my dissenting presence which is surely more likely to devalue their ritual and turn it into a charade.

If I were teetotal, my friends would not deliberately ply me with alcohol; if I were a vegetarian, they would not insist I tuck into an *entrecote saignant*. Yet though I am an unbeliever, they oblige me to partake of their religious fare. An insignificant little inci-

dent? Perhaps. But the notion of the primacy of religious belief over alternative life stances prevails at many communal gatherings where there is still a traditional religious input. I have nothing against religious observance, as long as it is optional. When friends visit me, they are welcome to say grace if they wish - but only when I have retired to the kitchen to see to the meal.

## GALHA SLAMS BBC

THE Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) has attacked the BBC for broadcasting what it describes as a “virulently homophobic God slot” during Radio 4's *Today* programme.

Following a “Thought for the Day” delivered by vicar's wife Ann Atkins on October 10, a motion at the GALHA annual general meeting at Conway Hall on the following day strongly criticised the BBC in a motion which claimed that Ann Atkins' words “directly affect the freedom, happiness and security of gay and lesbian people. Pronouncements like *love the sinner, hate the sin* are an attempt to retard growing tolerance of homosexuality by many years.”

Ann Atkins had said that homophobia – which she defined as discriminating against people on the grounds of their, often involuntary, sexual orientation – was reprehensible. But she also said that sex outside heterosexual marriage was not an option for Christians – and she cast doubt on the wisdom of allowing Southwark Cathedral to host a service of thanksgiving for 20 years of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, “since this movement advocates sex outside marriage.”

### Opportunity

And she was quoted in *The Sun* (October 12): “It is clear from the Bible that God made sex to be enjoyed in a monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong relationship.”

The GALHA motion called on the BBC to provide an opportunity for gay Humanists to put a contrary point of view.

GALHA spokesman George Broadhead said: “‘Thought for the Day’ is the product of the BBC's Religious Programmes Department, which commissions scripts for it. The Department must have known that this broadcast would cause distress to lesbian and gay listeners and encourage discrimination and prejudice.

● Founded in 1979, GALHA is one of the longest established gay campaigning groups, numbering Tony Banks MP, jazz singer George Melly and journalist and writer Claire Rayner among its supporters.

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# Now Claire is 'one of us'



● Claire Rayner

THE National Secular Society is very pleased to announce that Claire Rayner has accepted its invitation to become an Honorary Associate, writes KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD, General Secretary.

She said that she was "flattered" to be asked and that it gave her "great pride to be counted as one of you".

Claire also observed that she would be in "extremely notable company". Regular readers of *The Freethinker* will remember that we were delighted recently to welcome Dr Richard Dawkins and Polly Toynbee as Honorary Associates, both of whom continue to give a large amount of welcome media exposure to the Secularist position.

Claire Rayner is so well-known that any detailed biography would be unnecessary – except for the benefit of those readers who are recently returned from Mars.

She used her experience in nursing and talent in

writing and communicating as the basis for her career as an "agony aunt", prolific contributor to magazines, author (both fiction and non-fiction) and broadcaster.

Her main concern has been to educate people (particularly women) about their bodies, relationships and assertiveness. She has opened up discussions on previously taboo subjects, such as sex. Her contribution to the relief of unnecessary suffering in the UK in recent years is extremely impressive. Whenever it is possible and relevant, she supports Humanism.

Claire's response to our enquiry as to whether she would like to receive copies of this august journal was typically warm. She said: "I'm looking forward hugely to reading it ... I must keep up with all that's going on – if I don't, I have no right to call myself an interested person, have I? ... I will be spreading the word and proselytising like fury!"

**ASK THE PARSON:** In a new series of articles, KARL HEATH seeks theological answers to what he calls "questions too rarely asked and still less answered". He suggests that readers might like to approach their own local clergy with the questions – and let *The Freethinker* have the replies. Number one: Birth.

## Winners and losers in the cosmic lottery

WE ARE told that Jesus died to save us all, that His Sacrifice on the Cross was our Salvation, the guarantee of eternal life. "Only believe, and you will be saved". What follows is, to some extent, under our control. We can make an effort to believe; we can strive to obey the Church; we can earnestly follow Jesus.

But there is a missing factor in the equation. There is one thing we cannot control, over which we have no control, the most arbitrary thing to happen to each and all of us – birth. Would the theologians agree that, unless you are born, you cannot inherit life everlasting?

We non-believers accept our chance existence with equanimity. We have won a "millions-to-one" ticket in a cosmic lottery. Our prize is a brief glimpse at a vast universe, after which we exist no more – and in another twinkling of an eye no-one will know that we ever existed.

But is it not a sinister and grotesque notion that immortality depends upon birth? Are not the "might-have-beens", the millions of hypothetical human beings who don't get born, are they not real possibilities whose non-existence has been caused by chance?

Before the First World War, my mother's current boy-friend, Harry Wells, introduced her to another young man, George Heath. Had he not done so, there might have been some little Wellses, but no Karl Heath.

Some 60 years ago, Mrs Carey might have asked her husband whether he had remembered to lock the back door. If he had gone downstairs

to check, the time delay could have been crucial. Conception a few minutes later might have involved a successful X-chromosome sperm – and, consequently, a baby girl who might have been called Mary. But the Archbishop would never have come into existence, nor would Heaven ever enjoy his presence!

Do theologians acknowledge that each birth is the culmination of generations of converging chances, myriads of variations where the slightest alteration in a single strand can alter all the subsequent consequences? Or do they see conscious Direction, the "Hand of God", Kismet, Destiny, Predestination or "Sheep and Goats"?

In the 3rd Century AD, Origen, one of the early Christian Fathers of the Church, avoided the problem through his doctrine of the pre-existence of souls, claiming that souls had existed from Creation, occasionally entering bodies – although, like the Pythagoreans' "Wheel of Birth", he seems to have regarded this as a punishment.

This doctrine was condemned as heresy. Others might have had reason to doubt his judgment because of his drastic interpretation of Matthew, Ch 19, v. 12: *there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs, for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake*. After reading this, Origen castrated himself.

Perhaps he perceived the paradox that, in orthodox theology, the creation of immortal souls inevitably involves an activity which Christianity has always singled out to be especially sinful – namely, sex.

How can it be that rapes, orgies and "one night stands" may create immortal souls, while

well-behaved holy men, priests, monks and nuns are not supposed to?

And many devout couples, longing for children, are denied them through infertility.

When was the first immortal soul created? Fundamentalists may say "Adam", but what does your parson say? In the pre-Christian era? Among Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Sumerians or Chinese? Before civilisation? Among the Neolithics? The Cro-Magnons? The cave painters of Altamira and Lascaux? The Neanderthals who practised ritual burial? Or earlier still? Sinanthropus, Pithecanthropus, Homo Habilis, Sinjanthropus, Australopithecus? Or back even to ring-tailed lemurs and tree-shrews?

Was there some magic moment, some crucial birth where conception also created an immortal soul?

### Bad noose!

THE attitude of the Roman Catholic Church to the case of the Bishop of Argyll has been a great disappointment to me, because I am myself descended from the Roman Catholic Archbishop John Hamilton (hanged in 1571). I have always claimed that this meant that I was the result of a miracle. Now it appears that the Church does not acknowledge such miraculous claims. C R WASON, Bridgwater, Somerset.

# You're telling us!

## Holistic healing

WITH reference to Mike Howgate's October article on superstition ... Faith or, more accurately, Holistic healing is usually offered entirely free by healers who seek no other reward than helping those in pain or distress. They are, surely, following the good Humanist principle of caring for others. There is nothing, except in the minds of the participants, to link this with any god and many are non-believers.

Healers don't dissuade anyone from following prescribed treatment – though they may suggest that a doctor's pessimistic diagnosis is not necessarily correct and that a positive outlook can have a dramatic physical effect.

Having received help myself, I took my elderly rescued dog along on a regular basis – an unwilling participant, heavily bribed, who clearly didn't believe in it! It didn't clear up her many physical problems (the vet had already had his expensive way with her; there is no easy answer) but they no longer seemed to bother her. Her shaky old legs still give way regularly but she just gets up again and carries on with no sign of pain or distress, if necessary waiting cheerfully until her strength returns.

After some weeks people who knew nothing of the healing commented that she looked much brighter and more alert. Nowadays she even manages to run and scamper when she feels in the mood. While I can think of several reasons why this caring and gentle healing of the whole being should work for humans, I cannot understand why it is so helpful to the dog. But then I don't understand how electricity works either and I'm certainly not going to go without its many benefits on that account.

DIANA ELVIN  
West Wickham

## Own a Bible? Go thank an atheist!

THE Millennium! No doubt, in the true Humanist spirit, freethinkers will wish to share their Millennium celebrations of victories won against malevolent forces of great evil – at great cost and against all odds – for the whole of mankind.

There is no reason not to. They have nothing to be ashamed of. Theirs is not a long history of degradation, damnation and death; of theft, rape, plunder. Of slavery. Of deceiving, misappropriation of land, exploitation of the people. Forgery. Falsification of Act of Parliament. Murder of freethinkers, dissenters, Jews, and even brother Christians who were either known to be or suspected to be "freethinkers" or "heretics".

Freethinkers are free from the taint of spreading malicious and false rumours of "witchcraft", and have never sent hundreds of thousands of woman to the stake, to be tortured to death slowly by fire. Neither religious nor atheist freethinkers could find it easy to call this a "charitable act" intended to save these wretched woman from the fires of Hell.

Freethinkers have never seen black people as apes in a more human form, provided by the wish of God to serve their Christian masters.

Freethinkers have never torn black children from their mothers' breasts, to be sold separately to the highest bidder, to be packed into shipping fleets that resembled ocean-going sardine tins.

Freethinkers own no monumental edifices built on the proceeds of the slave trade, in the hope that they will "buy a ticket into heaven". However, freethinkers may wish to discourage black people from such places of public worship, and, along with the population in general, from taking part in such acts – the intent being to "deliver them from evil".

Freethinkers would find it difficult to justify the ideals of preventing the people, black or white, from being able to read; the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures thus being confined to priesthoods, on account of profit, and subordination to a decadent authority. They have never engaged in evil, deceit and fraudulent acts to prevent the people from access to, or ownership of such sacred texts and books, like the Bible.

Freethinkers knowingly own no land, buildings or estate appropriated by attachment and seizure of assets belonging to people declared to be nonconformists, freethinkers, Jew, Catholic, or Protestant. Such land, buildings and estate being used to aggrandise religious "Holy Orders" – the forerunners of more recent acts of "Forfeiture to the Crown".

However ...

I find it easy to see another reason for the leaders of the world's major religions' attempts to block, for near on two millennia, the spread of knowledge and education to their uneducated peasants: it seems that if you give the typical small-minded, bigoted, religious peasant access to knowledge, what you get is murder, death and destruction; bombing, fraud and terrorism ... all in the cause of converting the world to their "peaceful" religion and sharing their idea of ethics!

A BISHOPSON  
Forest Hill

## Roman scandals (cont.)

IT IS no accident that the more recent occupants of Peter's Chair have been chosen when they were well stricken in years and rather doddering. This is so that naughty "Peter" is likely to be pointed only at the porcelain. Thus, when age has (hopefully) put the Pontiff beyond the reach of the Sins of the Flesh, he will not follow the examples set by his notorious predecessors – many of whom threw their morals (and their knickers) to the four winds.

Many Popes behaved exactly like the Roman Emperors. Tiberius, Gaius (Caligula), Nero put up the balloons – and the Popes kept the debauched party in full swing. Rape, murder, incest, bribery – name a crime and one or other of Christ's Vicars was guilty of it.

Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503) actually bought his votes with mule-loads of silver, castles, land and money. Giovanni de' Medici (who would become Pope Leo X) said of Alexander: "We are now in the clutches of perhaps the most savage wolf the world has ever seen. Either we flee, or he will, without doubt, devour us."

This Pope, Alexander VI, better known as Rodrigo de Borja, had a charming son called Cesare (who became Archbishop of Valencia at the ripe old age of 17) and an equally lovely daughter, Lucrezia. While Lucrezia handed round the hemlock sandwiches, Cesare stabbed to death his father's Spanish Chamberlain (and lover) Perotto Calderoni, spattering the Papal apartments – and the face of the Pope – with blood.

Pope Alexander does not seem to have been excessively choosy in his bed-shaking activities. The Ferrarese envoy reported: "It has been vouchsafed from Rome that the daughter of the Pope gave birth to a child." Two Vatican announcements were published – one naming Alexander VI as the father, the other naming her brother, Cesare!

There is no doubt that Pope Alexander and his daughter carried on with gay – oops! – incestuous abandon; the gay abandon was with the handsome Chamberlain, Calderoni.

The historian Thomas Tomasi wrote of Alexander's papacy: "It would be impossible to enumerate all the murders, the rapes and the incests which were every day committed at the court of the Pope. Scarcely the life of a man could be long enough to register the names of the victims murdered, poisoned, or thrown alive into the Tiber."

Pope Leo X (1513-21) was in some ways at least an honest charlatan. On being elected to the Chair of Peter, he said to a Cardinal called Giuliano: "God has given us the Papacy. Let us enjoy it."

Joseph McCabe said Leo was "a coarse, frivolous, cynical voluptuary, probably addicted to homosexual vice in the Vatican."

When Leo heard Cardinal Bembo speaking the joyful message of the Lord Jesus, he said that it was well known to the world through the ages how greatly the fable of Christ had profited us and our associates." Honest – what?

It seems that all sorts of Christians, high and low, could join in the fun. In medieval Christendom flagellation became all the rage. A good birch-branch thrashing in the nunnery, monastery or church was simply the done thing. One priest, "punishing" nine naked nuns for their "sins", became so inflamed with passion that he had sex with them all!

There were also frightful and very foolish superstitions put about by Christians. It was said, for example, that witches stole the member while men slept. This seeming Christian obsession with the one-eyed trouser-snake did not end with its alleged theft. Witches were said to keep them in birds' nests, where they stayed alive, with a need for food. When one unfortunate whose penis had been stolen was sent up a tree to a nest to select another, he chose a big one – only to be told that he couldn't have that – because it belonged to the parish priest!

ROBERT SINCLAIR  
Coventry

## Simulated shock

THE apparently shocked response of the Catholic Church to the certainly shocking

# You're telling us!

From Page 12

ry of continental drift was not accepted for 40 years after its publication, and therefore would not have counted as rational explanation at the time. To take another example, Newtonian mechanics has been superseded by Einsteinian relativity, and thus no longer counts as a rational explanation.

Robert Awbery distinguishes between true atheism and pseudo-atheism, which irresistibly reminded me of Christian polemic, which often seeks to distinguish between true and false Christianity. There is no need to make this distinction, and it does the freethought movement no favours to advance it.

Humanism and Rationalism have a variety of meanings, which can be gleaned from any good dictionary, but I give below some definitions arrived at after examining my copies of the various Oxford Dictionaries and Webster's Dictionary.

An atheist is one who disbelieves in, or denies the existence of, a god or gods, usually rejecting all religious faith and practice.

An agnostic is one who holds that nothing is known, or can be known, of the existence of a god or gods, or of anything beyond material phenomena.

A freethinker or rationalist is one who forms opinions on the basis of reason independently of authority.

Humanism, as distinct from humanitarianism, is a theory of the life of man in the world as a responsible being behaving independently of any revelation or of preternatural powers.

Materialism is the theory that the material universe is the only one of which we have any sure knowledge. Alternatively, the opinion that nothing exists but matter and its movements and modifications, and that consciousness and will are due to material agency.

A rational explanation is an explanation advanced for valid reasons or supported by valid argument.

Secularism is indifference to, rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations.

COLIN MILLS  
Amersham

ROBERT Awbery gives definitions of "Humanist", "Freethinker" and "Atheist" which, together, encompass my own outlook and, I imagine, that of the majority of your subscribers. This can be summed-up by the word "Rationalist". But surely an atheist can be a person who, while rejecting belief in a God, still retains minor superstitions, such as astrology? I have met such persons. "Rationalist", however, gives the heave-ho to all beliefs of an irrational nature.

Turning to John Lauritson's letter in the same issue, I was chilled by his apparent contempt for compassion, and among other things his austere view of education as an accumulation of facts and grammatical principles. His description of marble-cold "classical Humanism" seems to me to be a lesser concept than what most of us understand as the broad, humane philosophy of today's Humanists. But then, I'm one of the "soppy, soft-headed leftists" he so despises.

JESSIE BOYD  
Cwmbran

## Animals for our needs?

R G TEE (October letters) takes it quite for granted that "We judge their worth [animals'] by the needs of our species and in the ultimate our needs over-ride those of other species". This, of course, is precisely the problem and why the word "speciesism" has had to be coined. This assumption that other animals are here especially for our use is common, especially in Bible-reading circles! (Would R G Tee judge my worth by my ultimate usefulness to him? What about a chimpanzee?)

Animals are of value to themselves. Often their deaths are grieved by their companions, be it mother, offspring or mate. It is human animals, however, who have assumed total charge of all other species and make the decisions about them.

Considering it necessary to kill off rats which attack grain and spread disease is considerably easier to justify than deciding to (a) breed, (b) factory farm and (c) slaughter animals (incidentally herbivorous) which do not threaten us, all merely to eat meat that is not necessary (and may even be harmful) to our health. One is at least a self-protective measure, the other sheer exploitation.

HEATHER EVANS  
Kenilworth

NELLY MOIA asks (September letters) how Jains manage to coexist with man-eating tigers and rivals for food.

According to Paul Dundas' *The Jains*, destruction of life causing distress to humans and animals is forbidden. Therefore occupations which involve digging the earth, keeping livestock for milk, meat and eggs, making things which could be used as weapons or for producing weapons, are banned. Although vegetarians, they should not eat onions and fruits containing seeds, nor drink alcohol, because these are seen to involve a Life force.

But it is only a few ascetics who conform to these rules.

Ordinary lay-people must *try to avoid any pointless destruction*. In practice, they emphasise the *purity of their intentions*, and can be engaged in agriculture and manufacture which *could* lead to the production of things which *could* be used as weapons. They conform with religious rites and manifest their pious intentions and ethical principles – for example, by endowing hospitals and contributing to other worthy causes, while upholding their economic and social status as best they can.

Not very different from Christians. But Dundas does not give any information about whether or not Jains enrol in the army or kill tigers – of course, there are *other* people to take on these activities.

In my opinion, competition for life is a reality: we cannot even grow a food crop without, at the very least, depriving some other animals of their habitat. But our greed should be strictly limited so that we do not inflict cruelty on other creatures for whatever reason, and our fecundity should be limited so that we do not despoil the whole Earth.

LUELA PALMER  
Colchester

Turn to Page 14

## Defining beliefs

ROBERT Awbery (October) makes a good start on definitions. Here is my attempt at an improved list.

**Atheist (1):** Any person who believes that deities do not exist.

**Atheist (2):** Person who is opposed to deities, distinct from simply disbelieving in their existence (for example, "The best justification for a tyrant on earth is a tyrant in heaven" – Bakunin).

**Rationalist:** Atheist (1) who claims to arrive at atheism through rational argument.

**Agnostic:** Atheist (1) who makes the reservation that non-existence cannot be proved.

**Humanist (1):** Person who does not believe in a supernatural deity, but regards humanity and the human mind as sacred ("They take the figure of Christ from the altar and put the figure of Man in its place" – Stirner).

**Humanist (2):** Atheist (1). (The object of referring to atheists as "humanists" is to condemn them with humanists (1) in the minds of religious people, who might take unkindly to atheists under their proper title.)

**Freethinker:** Atheist (1). (Usage similar to Humanist (2), but of an earlier date; now little used except as the name of a long-established periodical and associated groups.)

DONALD ROOUM  
London SW2

NOTED the definitions offered by Mike Howgate (Page 3, October) and Robert Awbery (Page 14). I differ from Mike Howgate in that I believe rational explanation need not be compatible with current scientific views: it might be based, for instance, on sound mathematics or sound philosophy (neither of which are empirical sciences), or compatible with scientific views which were accepted in the past, or are not yet accepted. For instance, Wegener's theo-

# You're telling us!

From Page 13

I HAVE written in the following terms to the Rt Hon Michael Howard QC, Secretary Of State, Home Office, 50 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AT; I hope many more readers of *The Freethinker* will do likewise:

"I am writing to ask you to call for a Royal Commission Inquiry to investigate the alarming number of animals that are used in experiments each year.

"You are no doubt aware of the great public concern regarding animal experiments and yet more than 11.5 million animal experiments have been authorised by the Home Office during the past four years. These are tragic and distressing figures.

"I wish to bring to your attention that the European Community Environment Action Programme calls for a 50 per cent reduction in such experiments by Member States by the year 2000. The Community has also committed itself to the phasing out of animal tests for cosmetics by January 1998. Yet between 1991 and 1994 the number of animals used for cosmetic testing in the United Kingdom increased by more than 12 per cent – hardly an encouraging picture! A similar increase over the same period is shown for primates, which were used in almost 20,000 experiments. In the case of Old World monkeys, the increase was 37 per cent.

"More than half of all experiments are carried out by commercial companies which have no practical incentive to fund research into non-animal alternatives. Further, much of the data concerning both animal and non-animal tests is held by these commercial companies, which do not publish or make accessible their findings – resulting in duplication and a major barrier to achieving progress.

"Even where a variety of 'in vitro' alternatives are available, such as in eye irritation tests, the latest figures show an increase of 200 more rabbits used for this particular test and, deplorably, 32 Old World primates endured experiments involving the application of substances to the eye. Yet the 1986 Animal Act (Scientific Procedures) specifies that animals should not be used where alternatives are available.

"I ask that the Government face up to the reality of the tragic extent of animal experiments. The enormous number of animals used, and the lack of progress and commitment to reduce these numbers, is simply unacceptable and must be stopped.

"I request that you take immediate action and plan the formation of a Royal Commission of Inquiry to make a full investigation of animal experiments being carried out in the United Kingdom."

**F BACON**  
Mansfield Woodhouse

## AIDS in Africa

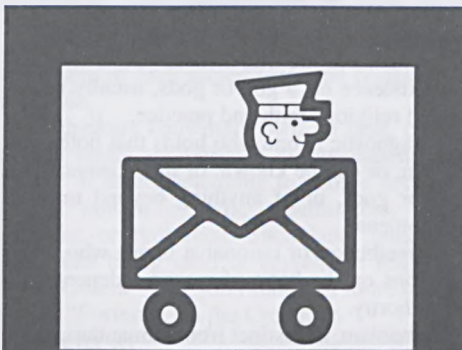
STEF GULA (September letters) may not believe it but my critics really do misrepresent me – and my latest critic, Nelly Moia (October letters), has come close.

My September letter said nothing at all about female genital mutilation (FGM) but Moia

accuses me of dismissing "all relationship" between this and AIDS in Africa.

I suppose it could be argued that FGM may be included in the "other excuses" I alluded to but I did not claim there was no relationship between these "excuses" and AIDS. What I said is that they do not account for the *distribution* of AIDS in Africa. In the article I referred to (*Scientific American*, March 1996, p.40-6) factors such as age at marriage were examined and found simply not to correlate with AIDS distribution. Likewise for FGM, as the authors pointed out in the July issue of the same journal.

AIDS in Africa is due to a combination of circumstances: promiscuity, prostitution, other sexually-transmitted diseases and probably also the factors Moia mentions. However, while lack of male circumcision is not the only factor



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involved, it is the one which distinguishes African countries in which AIDS is an epidemic from those in which it is not.

**STEPHEN MORETON**  
Warrington

## Conflict in the Six Counties

FOLLOWING the review in *The Freethinker* of the *Humanist Handbook* published by the Ulster Humanist Association (September), I obtained a copy. It should be required reading for people like your correspondent Derek Harrop (September letters) who doubts whether the conflict in Northern Ireland is mainly caused by religion.

I come from Northern Ireland and can testify to the almost total segregation of Catholic and Protestant children in the education system which is the foundation of the religious divide. But it is a pity that the article in the *Handbook* on this subject tends to confirm the erroneous impression given by the media to English peo-

ple that Protestant children in NI attend schools that are the exact counterpart of Catholic schools. In fact most Protestant children attend non-denominational schools, much like schools in the rest of the UK. The fact that in NI only Protestant children attend them is because the Catholic church insists on Catholic children attending church grant-aided schools in which the clergy can give instruction in the Catholic religion. I appreciate that Humanists do not like seeming to say that one religion is better than another, especially in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, but that should not lead to disguising the truth that the Catholic church is the prime cause of segregated schools in Northern Ireland. (Incidentally what would happen in a "united" Ireland?)

It should be known to people in Britain that their taxes are helping to keep the two communities divided in NI and perhaps they would then call for the ending of all grant-aided church schools throughout the UK as a first step to a secular education system as in France or the USA.

**SAM KEENE**  
Warrington

IN REPLY to Derek Harrop, perhaps it is possible to bypass the British/Irish claim arguments over Northern Ireland.

Just after William the Conqueror invaded England, Wales was invaded; then, by a slow process, Ireland and finally Scotland were added as "English Colonies". (Just as in North America's Westward Empire expansion, a high death rate occurred in the local population, particularly in Ireland and Scotland.)

English law is based upon the principle that a contract is only valid if it is based upon consent. What consent is the Act of Union based upon? Monarchy is based upon the principle that the King is Right, but modern law, Humanism and science are based on reason and evidence, and these three systems, directly or indirectly, support people's choice and the democratic principle.

The three regions – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – should be given a status similar to that of Canada and Australia, with their own currency, Parliaments and Governor – but Northern Ireland's Governor should be controlled by the English and Southern Irish Parliaments. The three regions have their own independent religious and cultural systems. (With the return of Scotland's Stone of Scone, political events are moving in this direction.)

All this would follow the subsidiarity principle: decentralisation, with the regions for some time experiencing the lack of their own political centre of gravity. If the EU adopts a common currency, then it would be easy to set up small "states".

Over time, historic events tend to fade in significance, unless they are as basically significant as Darwinism or Newtonism. It is not true, as Michael Heseltine MP is reported as having said, that "History cannot be rewritten". At various periods, the ruling élites put a gloss on the immediate history, post-imperialism and post-modernism not excepted. We are bound by the mental maps of our ancestors.

**ROBERT AWBERN**  
Reading

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# You're telling us!

From Page 14

## Lighten our darkness...

MAY I, as a scientific illiterate, seek enlightenment from Steuart Campbell? He writes (October letters): "... 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*)". The statement that "time" began with the "Big Bang" is often repeated, but never explained.

What does it mean?

We are presumably precluded from using the words "before" and "after" because they are in the context of "time".

But, in the condition where the universe does not exist, what does exist? Nothing? If so, why should a "Big Bang" have happened at all?

I can understand that time is a dimension, having no existence separate from events, any more than length, breadth and height can exist independently of the objects measured.

The Christians say "In the Beginning" and "World Without End", a logical fallacy because, if there is an infinite future, the Beginning will recede into infinity and disappear. If it is possible to contemplate an infinite future, why not an infinite past? Objectively, the only beginnings we understand are the beginnings of new phases, not beginnings from nothing.

In the words of Third Collect, "Lighten our Darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord".

KARL HEATH  
Coventry

## Circular reasoning

HOW does the Rev Peter Gamble (October letters) know from the Gospels which sayings of Christ are "more characteristic" of him? The self-same Gospels are the only source from which he can make a judgement about Jesus's character, so his judgement is based upon circular reasoning.

Surely any objective reading of the Gospels would lead one to conclude that Christ was both a loving, affectionate pacifist – and a violent, vindictive bigot? Mr Gamble prefers the former and so feels the need, as do many Christians, to water down or explain away the nasty side of Christ's character. Such an exercise tells us more about Mr Gamble's character than Christ's.

Several time I've read Mr Gamble's attempt to water down Christ's vicious condemnation of the Pharisees (Matt. 23). Frankly, I find his attempt pathetic!

RAY McDOWELL  
Co Antrim

IT IS not clear what David Yeulett (October) means by claiming that D F Strauss pronounced the Gospels "untenable". Perhaps he reflects the idea that Strauss concluded that Jesus did not exist – but this is not true. Nor are some of Frank Ridley's claims.

Modern scholarship is not unable to give a

definite answer to the question of whether or not Jesus existed. Wells could claim to have made a clear case against; I can claim to have made a clear case for.

However, even if Jesus existed, there is no evidence that he was associated with the Qumran sect, as Robert Sinclair (also October) claims.

Because the Rev Peter Gamble cannot understand the Parable of Nobleman (Lk. 19:12-27), he concludes that it is a "muddle" due to Luke's lack of understanding. But the conclusion (Lk. 19:26) occurs also in Matthew (Matt. 13:12). Both evangelists made it clear that this is one of the "mysteries of the kingdom". Clearly Jesus refers to a time *after* his resurrection when he would become the ruler, and *he* is the Nobleman. Jesus was only pacifist when he lived the life of Messiah ben Joseph. But he made it clear that he would be tough as Messiah ben David, the coming world ruler. Fortunately, he never got the chance.

STEUART CAMPBELL  
Edinburgh

WHEN the Rev Peter Gamble quotes the text "do not resist one who is evil", what does this mean? Should we have let Hitler invade Britain? If Mr Gamble or his loved ones were attacked by a mugger, would he let the mugger get away with it? Non-metaphorical answers, please.

TOM MONTGOMERY  
Edinburgh

TO RETURN to the attack! The Rev Peter Gamble (October letters), in order to sustain his contention that "Jesus of the Gospels" was a "sublime pacifist", misquotes scripture – by oversight or design, I know not.

I quote: "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'".

If Mr Gamble was referring to the "scriptures" at Zechariah 9.9 and Matthew 21.4, he should have quoted in full the texts, both of which picture a lop-sided Jesus riding into Jerusalem straddling an ass and a colt! Luke 19.35 says that he was seated upon a colt only ... nothing about Jesus having a pronounced list to starboard.

DAVID YEULETT  
Greenwich

## Coming to terms with definitions

From Page 3

the being, nature and will of God. The agnostic thus simply issues a rebuke to the "gnostic" who claims to know what it is not reasonable for anyone to claim to know (on the basis of the evidence and a testable theory) to be the case. Agnostic and atheist are therefore not alternatives: one can quite properly claim to be both.

For myself, I do not believe in any God or gods, because I do not consider that there is any reliable evidence or any testable theory to justify such a belief. To that extent, I am an a-theist (god-less). But I also reject the claims of those who profess to know God by means of some occult and untestable "knowledge" or "gnosis". I maintain that their claims are unwarranted,

IN YOUR October issue, Mr Tony Akkermans accuses me of using words like "metaphorically" and "symbolically" to describe Jesus' utterances when I find them too abrasive for my sensitive ears. Well, I can only say (again) that any such words of Jesus must be set beside all that he said and did in the last days of his life; he spoke and acted as "a sublime pacifist" indeed.

This deals with Mr Ray McDowell's letter, too, except that he says "I am astounded at the suggestion that you can love someone to order", especially if that someone is your enemy. Is Mr McDowell really so naive as to think that one's enemy is necessarily a miscreant? That's like those of his own people that Jesus condemned for assuming that their enemies were also God's enemies!

Mr Neil Blewitt's one-sentence letter ("If Jesus was a pacifist, he didn't take after his dad") was not only amusing but also deserves to be taken seriously. If by "his dad" Mr Blewitt means God, he seems to be taking seriously the primitive Biblical picture of God as a cruel and vindictive tyrant.

Actually, I think most non-believers see God as rather an inefficient stage-manager, an old bungler who has had to shoulder his terrific job for far too long – and entirely unaided ... I have never believed in "conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of a virgin", but you know (come to think of it) perhaps the idea of giving God an efficient and courageous young son as his help-mate wasn't so silly after all ...?

(The Rev) PETER GAMBLE  
Guildford

## The Scrolls

ROBERT Sinclair (October) states that the Dead Sea Scrolls name Christ on many occasions. I have read many of the Scrolls books. While it does appear that Christ may have been an Essene, I cannot remember ever seeing Christ named. Will Mr Sinclair please state which book names Christ?

On the subject of the Scrolls, they are so fascinating that I appeal to the Editor of *The Freethinker* for more information. For instance, Barbara Theiring's *Christ the Man* makes the most astounding claims.

Lots more on the subject, please.

CHARLES ADAMS  
Southgate

### FURTHER READING

- RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM: A G N Flew, *An Introduction to Western Philosophy* (1989, Thames & Hudson).  
 ATHEISM: G A Smith, *Atheism; the Case Against God* (1979, Prometheus) A G N Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (1984, Prometheus).  
 SECULARISM Jim Herrick, *Against the Faith* (1985, Glover & Blair); G W Foote, *Secularism, the True Philosophy of Life* (1879, G W Foote, to be reissued shortly)  
 HUMANISM: Carliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism* (1982, Ungar); Barbara Smoker, *Humanism* (1984, NSS).  
 AGNOSTICISM: T H Huxley, *Science and Christian Tradition* (1894, Macmillan).  
 FREETHOUGHT: Jim Herrick, *Vision and Realism* (1982, G.W. Foote); David Tribe, *100 Years of Freethought* (1967, Paul Elek).

# 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, December 1, 5.30 pm for 6 pm: Jenneth Parker: *Environmental Ethics*.

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

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01296 623730. Monday, November 11, at Wendover Library, High Street: Ivor Russell: *Humanism and Architecture*. Wednesday, December 11 at the Friends' Meeting House, Berkhamstead: Sir Hermann and Lady Bondi: *Humanism in India*. Meetings start at 7.30 pm.

**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: 01242 528743.

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, November 21, 7.30 pm: Paul Baptie: *Moving People Forward*.

**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, 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). November 8: *Any Questions?* December 13: Winter Solstice Party (food, drink, entertainment). Admission: £8. Advance booking. New *Gay & Lesbian Humanist* now out: A4 stamped, addressed envelope to George Broadhead, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HD for trial copy.

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

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. 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, November 12, 7.30 pm: Granville Williams, Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom: *Digital Television - Trick or Treat?* Tuesday, December 10, 7.30 pm: Peter Brearey, Editor: *The Freethinker - Past, Present, Future*.

**Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622250 or 0116 241 4060.

Sundays at 6.30 pm. November 10: Gynaecologist Christina Oppenheimer: *Reduced Births and Fertility Drugs - the Facts*. November 17: Dr Ali Mohammadi, Reader in International Communications at Nottingham University: *The Future Relationship of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Europe*. November 24: John Moore: *Anarchist Storyteller*.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell, Ravensbourne Park, London SE6 4YA; 0181 6904645. Meetings at Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, 8 pm. November 28: Terry Liddle: *William Morris - Atheist Saint*.

**Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607. Meetings St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North (near Apollo), 7.30 pm on second Friday of month. November 8: *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 IP24 7PN; 01362 820982. Meetings at Martineau Hall, 21 Colegate, Norwich, 7.30 pm. November 21, Peter Kentfield: *Humanism & Socialism*. December 19: Musical evening for Winter Solstice at 21 Hellesdon Road, Norwich.

**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, November 6, 8 pm: Dan Bye: *Drugs Prohibition or Control?* Wednesday, December 4, 8 pm: Barry Johnson: *Rules, Rulers and Republicans*. Saturday, November 16, 11 am to 5 pm: Literature stall at Peace Fair, Sheffield Town Hall. 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. Thursday, November 14, 7 pm: 71st Conway Memorial Lecture: *The Secularisation Question - Is Religion Losing its Social Significance?* Dr Bryan Wilson, Emeritus Fellow of A.S. Souls, Oxford. Admission free, all welcome.

**Somerset:** Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess on 01458-274456.

**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, November 13, 8 pm: Gordon Steel: *The Society of Friends (Quakers)*.

**Teesside Humanist Group:** Information: J Cole 01645 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.

**Humanist Holidays:** Yule 1996 at Eastbourne. Tuesday, December 24 (dinner) to Saturday, December 28 (breakfast). Half-board but with full-board on December 25. £200 sharing; £210 single. Last date for booking (with £25 non-refundable deposit): November 20. Details: Gillian Bailey, 19 Priors Road, Cheltenham GL52 5AA. Telephone: 01242 239175.