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Secular Humanist Monthly

Freethinker

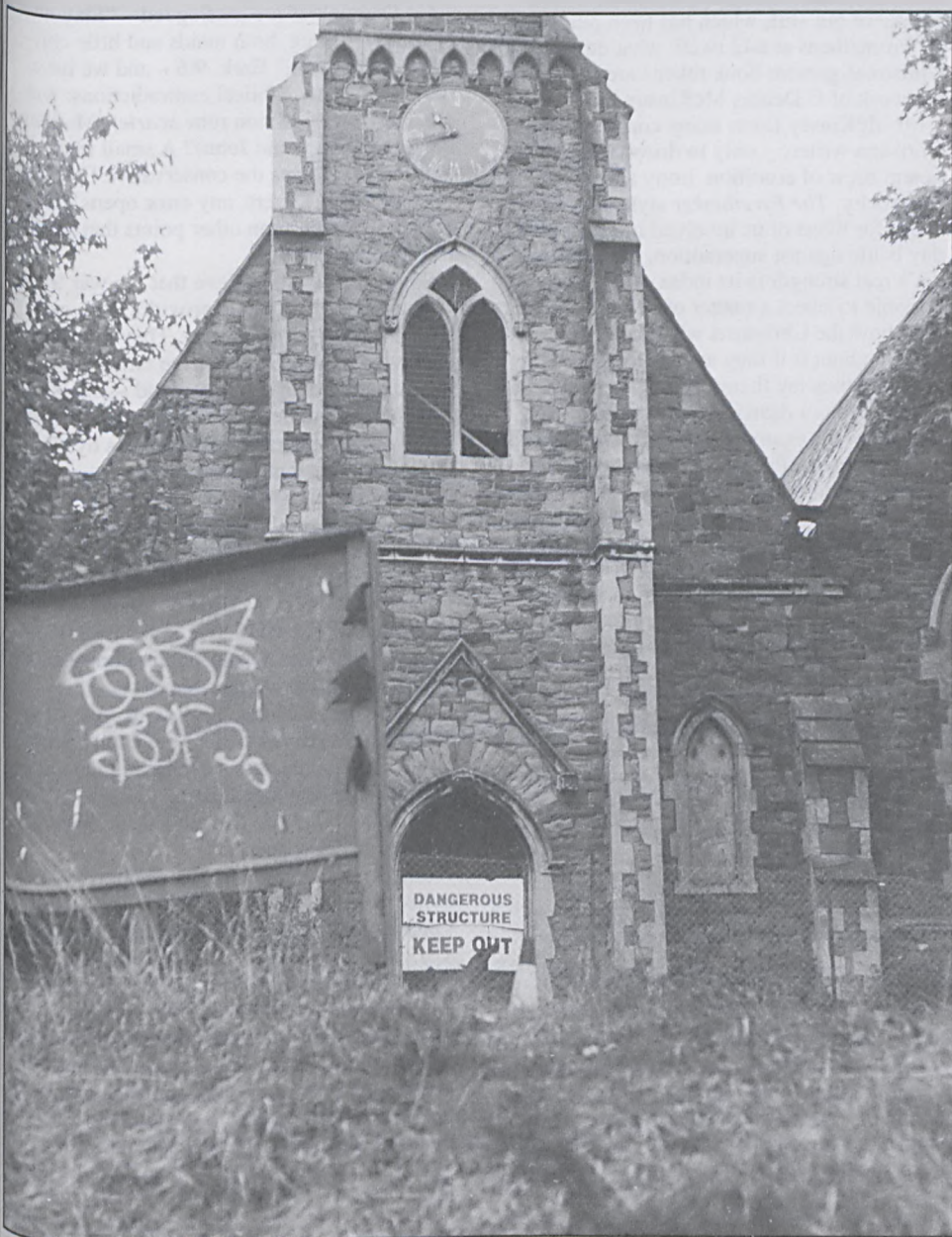
Founded by G W Foote in 1881



Vol 116 No 12

December 1996

Secularist Health Warning



**RELIGION
CAN
DAMAGE
YOUR
HEAD!**

SOME person of possibly Humanist sympathies has added a sign to each of the entrances of a church in Bishopstone, Bristol, reports HUGH THOMAS.

What a good idea! I suggest that it would be most appropriate for such signs to be put over the doors of all our country's churches - derelict or not - in similar style to the health warnings on cigarette packets.

**LATEST: NOW IT'S PRESIDENT O'HARA
Leadership change at NSS: Page 10**

Up Front

Stand by Holy Writ!

I DO not allow the Christians to treat their Bible like an elderly sack of potatoes from which they may select the more edible spuds while disregarding the rotten ones.

They must be made to stand by each fetid jot, not to mention every absurd tittle, of the Scriptures – otherwise it is too easy for all those *nice* religionists as well as the horrid fundamentalists to perpetuate their ghastly myths.

Fortunately, I have Professor Charles Ryrie,

of the Dallas Theological Seminary, on my team: “Can one be a biblicist and deny inerrancy? Not if the Bible teaches its own inerrancy ... If the Bible contains some errors, no matter how few or many, how can one be sure that his understanding of Christ is correct? ... Even if the errors are in supposedly ‘minor’ matters, any error opens the Bible to suspicion on other points that may not be so ‘minor.’ If inerrancy falls, other doctrines will fall, too”

In other words, if Adam and the sin of man are denied by the liberals, then the matter of why Jesus died on the cross – the cornerstone of Christian belief – is brought into question, if not actually proven to be useless.

Ryrie is quoted in *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy*, almost 600 pages of information, comment and live ammunition for people of our sort, which has been published by Prometheus at £42 (well, what do you think Christmas-present book tokens are *for?*); it is the work of C Dennis McKinsey.

Mr McKinsey floats many contemporary Christian writers – only to drown them in a potent brew of erudition, irony and (just a hint of) cruelty: *The Freethinker* style, exactly.

But for those of us involved in the day-to-day battle against superstition, the encyclopedia’s real strength is its index: at a glance it is possible to select a matter of current moment and show the Christians what they *must* believe about it if they are not to reject Holy Writ and thus lay themselves open to the threat of their Jesus’s dearly beloved Hell.

Slavery, for example, is still a live issue (it is a way of life in Pakistan and many other Islamic lands, as well as in areas of India), and in seconds we can prove New Testament support for that venerable institution. There are many references, but Titus 2:9-10 is a goodie: “Bid slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to be refractory, nor to pilfer, but to show entire and true fidelity, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God.”

We might also use Mr McKinsey’s work to help those homosexuals who imagine – who pathetically *insist* – that there is a place for them in the Church.

Again, there are several references, but the unequivocal Leviticus 20:13 is probably the most effective, for it specifically states that any male who lies with another male as with a woman has committed an abomination and should be killed. So – how can gays who give natural expression to their feelings be valid priests ... “marry” in church ... legitimately take Communion?

And what of those sad women who labour under the illusion that they are valid priests (even bishops!) of the Church? Paul is, of course, notorious for his order that “women keep silent in the churches, for it is not permitted them to speak”, and Peter insisted: “Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your

own husbands.”

Most non-RC Christians are sniffy about the Vatican ban on divorce, but Rome’s is an entirely biblical stand. Protestants – not excluding our at-it-like-knives Royals – should note what Jesus says in Luke 16:18:

“Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, commiteth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband commiteth adultery.”

Think of a subject, and it’s there: long hair (men can’t have it: 1 Cor. 11:14); planning for the future (don’t do it: Matt. 6:25-34), and the pious Mr Blair’s family values: “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

God’s cruelties are catalogued – “Slay utterly old and young, both maids and little children, and women” Ezek. 9:6 – and we have the many, many Biblical contradictions: was Our Lord’s crucifixion robe *scarlet* (Matthew) or *purple* (Mark and John)? A small matter? Not really – for, as the conservative Christian Professor Ryrie avers, any error opens the Bible to suspicion on other points that may not be so minor ...

Some Humanists believe that the war for which this encyclopedia provides such excellent ordnance has been won. They must be deceiving themselves over the number of believing Christians in the world – and, sadly, some are so intellectually dishonest as to collude with the liberal superstitionists by allowing them to snatch the less corrupt vegetables from the bag of nastiness.

Do, please, get this encyclopedia. It is obtainable on order from all bookshops: ISBN 0-87975-926-7. In case of difficulty, contact Prometheus UK at 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex IG10 4PZ (telephone 0181 5082989). Certainly your public library should be asked to order a copy.

All the big issues are dealt with – the false science of the Scriptures ... the empty prophecies ... the foolishness surrounding the alleged life, death and resurrection of Jesus ... all are taken apart, with the Bible itself as the principal tool of destruction.

Equally fascinating are the smaller, sharper barbs: Matthew 13:31-32 (RSV) says: “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which ... is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree.” In fact, as Mr McKinsey gleefully points out: “The mustard seed is not only not the smallest of all seeds, because the orchid seed, for example, is much smaller, but young trees are not shrubs, as the mustard plant is, and shrubs do not grow into trees.”

You would have expected the Creator of all things to have known that.

Peter Brearey

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Visions of Ecstasy. Dr David Starkey, Carmel Bedford (Article XIX) and Dr David Nash (Oxford Brookes University) will speak at an NSS public protest meeting in The Library at Conway Hall at 7.30pm on Wednesday, December 11, following the European Court of Human Rights’ decision to uphold the archaic blasphemy law in the UK.

As (yet another) 'moral panic' rages among MPs and media folk, Brian McClinton insists that

Moral education must be freed from its religious straitjacket

MORAL panic is all the rage – and so are moral posturings. Current “remedies” tend to place great emphasis on social authoritarianism: crackdowns on law and order, tougher discipline in schools and renewed emphasis on “family values”. Ironically, many of these current solutions are being proposed by a Conservative Party whose Leader in the 1980s – Margaret Thatcher – had declared that “there is no such thing as society”. In less than a decade, Conservatives have discovered that society does exist, after all. A climate of populist political hypocrisy is therefore not an ideal context in which to consider the question of moral education, but this public “debate” does nevertheless provide Humanists with an opportunity to promote our own approach to the question.

First, it has to be said that some of us, at least in the English-speaking world, do not have a good track record. Humanists like Ayer and Russell, following Hume, insisted on making philosophy the handmaiden of science and dismissed ethical propositions as meaningless. Their radical empiricism thus led them to renounce the traditional vocation of Western philosophy since Plato, who had suggested, through the mouth of Socrates: “We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live”.

The moral vacuum created by this intellectual betrayal has, of course, been filled by the clerics. They have been allowed to make ethics their preserve. Naturally, they have wrapped-up morality in a religious package. Those of us who know that morality has nothing to do with religion have been unable to get our message properly across, in no small part because we have received so little help from a tradition of Western intellectual thought which has largely abandoned ethical concerns.

The dilemma was highlighted recently by Peter Beaumont in an article in *The Observer* (October 27, 1996). An atheist from the age of 15, he has nevertheless agreed that his two children should be raised in the church because he sees no feasible alternative in furnishing a “moral education”: “The new secular society has not found a way of expressing ideas of duty and conscience. Instead the dominant idea is of individual ‘happiness’ as an end in itself. It is this that bothers me, not violence on television, sex or drugs. Religion, I conclude, offers an education in the anti-egotistic. Its business is something other than the self. It provides a measure for behaviour. Even in rejecting a belief in a God, one is still left with the accretion of values from a system that permeates our civilisation: its laws, its art, its social organisation”.

So clearly Humanists have some ground to

make up. We have to show that the Dostoevsky proposition in *The Brothers Karamazov* – “without a god everything would be permissible” – is wrong. We have to demonstrate clearly that supernatural religions have never provided an adequate basis for morality. As a principle, might is never right and morality is not a matter of obedience to divine commands or of surrender to the will of a deity. This truth was also recognised by Plato more than 2,000 years ago. If the gods approve of certain actions, he has Socrates say, it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods’ approval that makes them good. In other words, morality is quite independent of religion and springs instead from human needs and human interests.

As Humanists, we should also reject the notion that morality cannot be taught. To some, the very idea is absurd because morality is not a set of rules to be imposed. No one, it is argued – not politicians, not teachers – can dictate morality to the individual, and they should not try. A leader in *The Independent* (October 28, 1996) put it as follows: “Moral education as a syllabus component is very largely a nonsense. In the same way as religious education in secular schools disappears quickly into a desiccated run round the major world belief systems, moral education would instantly become a vacuous recital of platitudes”. The substance of the leader was that morality is unteachable; it is “caught, not taught”, and we learn to be good by example.

Morality

This reasoning is entirely false, and the rest of the leader proves it. It mocks the idea of an A-level in morality by asking: whose morality? John Knox’s or Kant’s? The implication is that in other subjects there are “correct” answers, whereas any A-level student struggling to determine whether Germany was primarily responsible for World War I or whether Hamlet was wrong to kill Polonius knows that patently there are not objective responses to be learned by rote. In fact, the whole leader confuses education with indoctrination and then implies that morality has nothing to do with education because it is something you have to work out for yourself!

This leader article highlights the moral confusions which are the product of 18 years of reducing the process of education to a matter of rote learning to pass examinations. Even as he attacks the government, the writer has swallowed its propaganda. The government, for its part, is totally hypocritical in lamenting the lack of moral teaching in schools in view of its policy of treating education as a product whose quality is judged by exam league tables.

Of course, “teaching morality” may mean different things to different people. Of course,

there are those who will interpret it as meaning a programme to get children to obey certain authoritarian rules. But the fact that their conception is wrong – we might even say “immoral” – does not negate the validity of the exercise. For Moral Education is an essential component of any advanced educational system.

It is only recently that a prevailing attitude has developed which sees education as an investment in a narrow economic sense. But as well as developing talents and skills, it should also be concerned with fostering independence of thought and the improvement in moral and social behaviour. In all these ways, the community assumes its responsibility for making the future better than the present.

Morals in a broad sense enter every subject of the school curriculum. Take Chemistry or Physics, which might superficially appear devoid of ethical content. The concepts and laws by which they operate depend crucially on respect for truth, reason, evidence and a sceptical yet open-minded approach. And these are nothing if not ethical principles. Indeed, the adoption of a proper scientific “method” is a great antidote to dogmatism because scientific theories are always subject to revision. The “truths” of science are held “until further notice”. By implication, a crucial aspect of a truly scientific approach to any matter is the critical attitude, which works with the judgments confirmed by experience thus far but holds even the best confirmed views in principle ready for modification or even complete replacement. Is this not a desirable – that is, a *moral* – way to proceed?

Rationality is itself a highly “moral” principle, and not just on matters of fact or logic. Reason pervades ethical problems. It is by our reason that we acquire the ability to empathise with another’s situation because we have to think out what it would be like to be that person in that situation. Reason in ethics also means taking into consideration all our relevant desires and not just the desire which happens to be strongest at the moment. As Bertrand Russell put it, “A man is rational in proportion as his intelligence informs and controls his desires” (*Can Men Be Rational?*).

Morality also enters the Social Sciences, despite attempts until recently by many social scientists to eliminate values from their disciplines. Take Economics, for so long dominated by “positivist” theorising about “the Market”, as if it were some kind of impersonal *deus ex machina* which magically solved all the world’s economic problems. Quite wrong, of course. The decision to allocate a particular commodity or service within a “free” market is itself a moral decision. Should health care be run according to “market forces”, for example? Moreover, like any system of free organisation,



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Ridiculous spectacle

"WE KNOW of no spectacle so ridiculous", said Macaulay, "as the British public in one of its periodical fits of morality". And what a ridiculous spectacle we are witnessing now, with religious and political and religio-political outbursts on all sides, and not a few pleas for a return to Macaulay's own day.

I can only notice one example here, so let it be Gillian Shephard writing in the *Sun* (October 29); as fine a pair of moralists as you're likely to find. And don't you know what to expect?

"Children must be taught morals and culture", wrote our Secretary of State for Education. "But they must be developed spiritually as well". And that means "daily assemblies where children take part in religious worship led by teachers they respect. For that reason this Government will continue to support strongly Church schools".

We might note the ambiguity caused by fear of the split infinitive, but it will apply either way to Northern Ireland, where religion has been taught dutifully by Protestants and Roman Catholics, and is still the most divisive factor in the Province.

"Schools should provide that framework of spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development", Mrs Shephard babbles on. "They have a legal duty to provide religious education and a daily act of collective worship for all pupils". And she promised that teachers "will be given practical advice to help them", though whether that will include warnings against grossly immoral sections of the Bible and immoral actions of the Churches, she didn't say.

She was clear, however, that "We must take a stand for the kind of society we all want to live in", blissfully unaware, it seems, that at least half the population of Britain deplores the type of society she and her party have foisted upon us.

The Independent – as Brian McClinton notes on Page 3 – set a poser for Mrs Shephard and her ilk. "Whose morality?" it asked, "John Knox's or Kant's?"

Crusades old and new

I DON'T know how the Crusades are presented in the New Curriculum for schools, especially in those "strongly" church schools. In my schooldays they were grossly misrepresented, though fortunately I had a copy of *Crimes of Christianity* by G W Foote and J M Wheeler, which helped to counter the "official" history. Later came the marvellous three-

volume history by Sir Stephen Runciman, as near definitive as I should think you can get in English.

But I can't imagine a better introduction than *Crusades* by Terry Jones and Alan Ereira, who collaborated on the BBC television series of the same name, for which Runciman was a consultant. The book is now available in paperback (Penguin/BBC Books £6.99).

It won me over from the start with this quote from the eleventh-century Syrian poet Abu'l-'Ala al-Maarri:

*The world is divided into two sects:
Those with religion but no brains
And those with brains but no religion.*

Now the Pope has called for another crusade – though this time, thankfully, a bloodless one; and in Rome itself where, the Vatican says, citizens outside the Holy See are prey to "superstition, magic and occultism" (other than the Papal variety, that is) and are "religiously indifferent".

Ten thousand "missionaries" are being recruited to convey the "Good Word" from door-to-door, Jehovah's Witness fashion, and distribute a million Bibles (*Sunday Telegraph*, October 6). Unbelievably and certainly unnecessarily, 50 new churches are also to be built in time for "Holy Year 2000".

Unnecessarily because "The scant numbers to be seen in churches of a Sunday morning make official estimates that one-in-three Romans attends mass seem like wishful thinking".

Pope evolves – but not much

"POPE places some faith in Darwin's theory of evolution" read a headline in *The Times* (October 25): "Vatican's slow evolution as it discovers Darwin" declared *The Independent* on the same day.

It isn't clear from either paper's quotes from John Paul II's letter to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences whether those headlines are strictly correct; whether Darwin or Natural Selection was specifically mentioned – and we should certainly guess not the latter. What we know the Pope said is that "New knowledge leads us to recognise in the theory of evolution more than a hypothesis." But that's a step forward, anyway.

No place for Daisy

"THIS is a time of vehement intolerance in Iran", Neil Farquhar reported from Tehran (*International Herald Tribune*, September 21-22) "a backlash against incremental loosening

of clerical control over the last few years".

The atmosphere was inescapable, he said. A new television programme accuses specific writers and professors of being "Israeli spies or social misfits". Dissenting professors have been beaten and publications closed down.

A vociferous debate is also in progress on whether women should ride bicycles. Bicycle seats resemble saddles, say conservative religious scholars; Muslim women should not ride horseback, so cycling should be prohibited. To which I suppose we might add, QED.

A week later, incidentally, staff at the *International Herald Tribune* made known their opposition to an advertising campaign for the Church for Scientology appearing in its pages. They bought space in their own newspaper "to emphasise their moral disagreement with the cult. Good for them!

God squad

THE England football coach Glenn Hoddle is generally referred to as a born-again Christian, although religious nut would seem more applicable, in the light of Mark Lawson's piece in *The Guardian* (November 6).

Consider the following: from the age of 18, Hoddle has been consulting faith healers and continues to recommend them to other players; he says he was guided by God to take the England job (presumably God rather than the FA will tell him when to give it up!); he believes in reincarnation.

"If we all lived very close to God", he said to Lawson, "if we all had a spiritual life, every single person on this planet, I am pretty well sure that there'd be no such thing as earthquakes, there would be no such thing as people blowing people out of the sky, would there? There wouldn't be any war."

He's "pretty well" wrong about earthquakes, of course: they happened before humanity came on the scene and will likely continue after we've gone. The remainder is one of the "if" questions to which there's no logical answer. But from what I've read, logic plays little part in Hoddle's thinking.

Notre Amis

LAST month's "God-hater" was A E Houseman, whose memorial window had been unveiled in Westminster Abbey on September 17. This month it is Kingsley Amis, for whom a non-religious service was held in St Martin-in-the-Fields church, Trafalgar Square, London.

Martin Amis told the guests that his father had not been a very religious man. Kingsley put it rather more strongly in his memoirs. "I'm an atheist, yes", he said. "But it's more than that I hate Him".

Voluntary euthanasia:

'Whose life is it, anyway?'

by Keith Porteous Wood

General Secretary
National Secular Society

THE Voluntary Euthanasia Society has become the latest human rights organisation to launch itself on to the Internet. VES now has a "site" which prospective members or students can "visit" and once there they will be told the basic facts about the Right to Die and be encouraged to join the political fight to make voluntary euthanasia legal in Britain. No DIY suicide advice is given on the web site because, in England, this would be unlawful.

At the launch of the new site, actress Annie Lindsell, who is terminally-ill with degenerative motor neurone disease, gave a moving testament for VE. She says she doesn't have a "death wish" but operates on the principle of "Whose life is it, anyway?"

Annie is determined that her condition will not be allowed to run its full, terrible course. If, when she feels the time has come, voluntary euthanasia is not available, she has decided to commit suicide at the last moment that she is confident she is physically able to do so, unaided. That moment will be very much earlier than the point where life becomes intolerable for herself and her loved ones.

In practical terms, some relaxation in the law has already occurred. "Passive euthanasia" – where treatment is withheld – is a form of physician-assisted euthanasia already sanctioned in the UK in some tightly-defined circumstances.

In October an edition of the TV programme *Nothing but the Truth* asked a representative "jury" of the UK public to decide whether a woman in a very similar situation to Annie's should have the right to ask for assistance to die at her considered request.

The jury seemed unconvinced by the arguments suggesting that the medical profession should give more weight to prolonging life than relief of suffering on the grounds that modern drugs can almost eliminate pain. Most jurors seemed more swayed by the arguments that the side effects of such drugs – including near-unconsciousness and almost chronic incontinence – reduce the quality of life to the point that some at least would think it unacceptable.

The anti-VE lobby claimed that some residents of old-people's homes in the Netherlands (with their liberalised laws on voluntary euthanasia) were fleeing to Germany to escape the possibility of non-voluntary euthanasia. My own experience of Dutch/German relations leads me to treat these unsubstantiated claims with some scepticism.

I was, however, concerned about claims of the anti-VE lobby on the programme which quoted a Dutch survey that alleged widespread flouting of their already-liberalised law, with doctors failing to follow the strict new procedures. I am told that doctors who are found not to have followed the guidelines are prosecuted. The process is so thorough that some of the those requesting voluntary euthanasia die before permission is granted. It was reassuring to hear that two out of every three requests for voluntary euthanasia there are denied.

It is essential that the claims about the flouting of the law in the Netherlands be thoroughly investigated. The conclusions should be borne in mind when we are deciding whether it is possible – and, if so, how – to frame satisfactory legislative changes and "policing" procedures for the UK.

Most people recognise that the UK law has been circumvented for years and see the moral objection to requiring compassionate doctors to risk murder charges if they agree to ease the passing of patients in terminal agony.

There is evidence that doctors are becoming more favourably disposed to further liberalisation of the legal position. I am told that doctors are already able legally to administer drugs in quantities which relieve pain even though the quantities administered may hasten death – as long as the stated intention is to relieve pain.

One of the keys to change is defining what constitutes true consent free from pressure – and then devising an effective policing mechanism. Examples of pressure which might be applied could be from those with financial interests or those wishing to relieve themselves of a practical burden (including relatives and the State/medical establishment).

The pressure can even come from the dying person themselves. Recently, a senior nursing administrator told me that she had come across a terminally-ill woman who said that, under the new financial rules, her own capital would be used to pay for her care – but she wanted to leave her money to her children. Should she

have the right to demand euthanasia if she had an incurable disease and was suffering unbearably and, at the same time, not see her life savings swallowed up in the process?

But it is *voluntary* euthanasia that is advocated – the adjective is often omitted by VES's opponents. Many consider it heartless to condemn their loved ones or patients to an agonising death and there are heart-rending stories of those who have suffered terribly by refusing to do so.

Since opinion polls were first taken on the topic in the 1950s, there has been a majority in favour of VE. That majority has grown steadily to around 80 per cent in 1993, the last nationwide poll which, significantly, also recorded a majority in favour of VE by every religious group.

I have been a Life Member of VES for the past 25 years, but even with such enthusiasm for the cause, I counsel proceeding – with extreme caution. I hope that those who want to die and are incurably suffering will be able to say "I am dying as and when I wanted".

● **Note for PC buffs: The email address for the VES site is:**

<http://dialspace.dial.pipex.com/ves.london/>
Also, the NSS and *The Freethinker* are investigating joining the Internet. I am working with Amanda Todd in Bradlaugh House and we have completed the first stage – selecting a potential service provider.

Atheism in the dustbin

DONATING £20 to the Fund a while ago, a long-time reader told us of his first encounter with *The Freethinker*.

He said: "I was walking along Princes Street in Edinburgh when I saw a copy sticking from a litter-bin. I pulled it out, intrigued by the title – and have been buying it ever since."

Now we are not suggesting that you dump copies of the paper in bins – but the story does illustrate that our policy of distributing large numbers in public places, or targeting them at individuals, can work (and well done the London reader who is working his way through everybody in the *Church of England Yearbook*!).

A contribution to the Freethinker Fund not only helps to keep the journal going but also it underwrites this nationwide initiative.

Who knows – your fiver could be the one which buys *The Freethinker* which, found in some library by a doubting Muslim girl, prompts her to escape from an oppressive family and a gun-to-the-head wedding!

Please make cheques and postal orders payable to G W Foote & Company and send them to Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47

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Total from October 19 to November 22: £665.

Sunday opening blow for the Holy Willies

FAR BE it from me not to kick a Sabbatarian when he is down. So it was most gratifying to learn that Lord's Day observers suffered a resounding defeat in Dwyfor, their last Welsh outpost, where residents have voted in favour of public houses opening on Sunday. Last month's referendum was the final of a series (held at seven-year intervals) which have liberated Wales from a Sunday drinking prohibition dating back to 1881.

The Early Closing (Wales) Act, passed at a time of evangelical fervour following an upsurge of religious revivalism, ensured that

by Bill McIlroy

the villages and valleys were enveloped in Sabbath gloom. Wales was a hundred per cent "dry" on Sunday when the first referendum was held in 1961. The 1989 referendum left only one district "dry".

It was announced that, whatever the outcome, this year's referendum would be the last. As it approached, the *Methodist Recorder* (August 8) reported that once again "churches and temperance societies will campaign against Sunday opening." But as usual on such occasions, appeals to the

populace and The One Above went unheeded. The pussyfooting Holy Willies were trounced at the ballot box.

From the foundation of Societies for the Reformation of Manners to the present day, Lord's Day observing zealots have been characterised by arrogance and barminess. During the 19th Century, particularly following the young Queen Victoria's Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue, considerable political clout was wielded by a plethora of Sabbatarian organisations. These included the Society for the Promotion of the Christian Sabbath, the Imperial Sunday Alliance, the Central Association for Stopping the Sale of Intoxicating Liquors on Sunday, the Anti-Sunday Travelling Union, the Lord's Day Alliance of Scotland and the Lord's Day Observance Society. All but the latter have gone down the plug-hole of history.

ASK THE PARSON (2)

by Karl Heath

What kind of God *is* He?

MY FIRST question to you, the parson, was to ask you how you could reconcile the promise of immortality with the chance happening of birth. I would now like to hear your explanation of God the Father's role in the Incarnation and the events which followed it.

Without discussing the Virgin Birth, or all the early Christian disputes about the relationship between Father and Son, can we assume your assertion that God manifested Himself in human form, and that His purpose was to save us from sin, through the death by execution of His human form and subsequent resurrection?

Perhaps this is a diversion, but there is a problem of size. When the story of the Incarnation was first proposed, the Earth was thought to be the largest thing in the Universe, at the centre, with a lot of small objects encircling it. God was the god of the Earth. But – is He now the God of the Universe? A Universe in which our own Galaxy is a mere speck, our Sun an even more minute speck, the Earth sub-microscopic and the beings crawling on it almost imaginably tiny. If I were to comment on the Incarnation and Manifestation by saying "Jesus the Microbe" I would be accused of blasphemy, but there does seem to be a discrepancy of size between God the Father and God the Son.

I agree that size does not matter, but the life of Jesus is also small-scale, parochial. He appeared in a somewhat backward region of what had just become the Roman Empire, but did He know this? He knew about Pharisees and Sadducees; He knew

about Samaritans; but, when shown a Roman coin, He asked whose head was on it. In China, at the time, the Han Dynasty had established a civilisation superior to that of Rome, but Jesus appeared to know nothing about it.

My question, however, is whether God the Father knew what He was doing. Did He know in advance about the subsequent Crucifixion of Jesus? Did He plan it? Are the Disciples, including Judas the Betrayer, Peter the Denier and Thomas the Doubter, all acting out roles according to a script already written? Are Annas and Caiaphas "bit parts" like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Is Pilate an indecisive Hamlet? Are the two Marys written-in to compensate for the overwhelming male cast? Was the Resurrection a Hollywood-style happy ending? And the horrible death by torture? Did God know beforehand? Did He intend it? If He wished to save us, was this the only way? If so, what kind of God is He?

The alternative is that God did not know what was going to happen. If so, the Passover Crowd might have cried "Give us Jesus" instead of "Give us Barabbas", and Jesus might have died of old age. Similarly, if Pilate had summoned up his courage, and risked trouble with his superiors in Rome by releasing Jesus, what would have followed? It is not helpful to say that these are "might-have-beens", and that what happened happened. This would imply a Fate or Destiny greater than God Himself. If God the Father did not know in advance what was going to happen to Jesus, again we must ask – what kind of God is He?

Rigid

Wales does not appear to have had a Sunday observance movement as such. It was hardly necessary: chapel elders and Nonconformist clergy exercised rigid control over their flocks and the community at large. Church and chapel enforced strict observance of the Fourth Commandment.

CH Dodd, who became an eminent Bible scholar, recalled the Welsh Sunday of his youth: "Work and play alike were taboo. You might walk in the garden and admire the flowers, but to pull up a casual weed was reprehensible. To take a bath on Sunday was not thought of. To shave was a misdemeanour. No books might be opened but 'Sunday books', and that category was rigidly defined.

Depressing

"No toys of any kind were permitted. One year Christmas fell on a Sunday. This was a depressing conjunction, for we might only look at our presents and then put them aside until tomorrow."

Over the past 50 years, hundreds of Welsh chapels have been either converted to a useful purpose or demolished. The disappearance of these power-houses of religious indoctrination and social control, together with referendum results since 1961, meant that by 1989 most Welsh people enjoyed the same Sunday drinking rights as the rest of us in mainland Britain.

The Dwyfor referendum result has extended freedom to enter a public house on Sunday to the whole of Wales.

How Christianity spawned the Holocaust

ANTISEMITISM is a dangerously ambiguous term. It might be levelled against me because I condemn Israel's expansionism or criticise the Jewish religion. It is also inaccurate. Jews are not the only Semitic people. Ironically, indeed, it might be used to describe the present Israeli government's attitude towards the Palestinian Arabs. But it is here to stay, and we have to do our best with it. Hyam Maccoby, Emeritus Fellow of Leo Baeck College, London, spells it without the usual capital S, to show that it is not to be taken literally as "hatred of Semites". What it means in this book is what it means in popular parlance, "hatred of Jews".

Maccoby finds some evidence of anti-semitism in the Greek and Greco-Roman Empires from the 3rd Century BC, based on the cultural rivalry between Hellenism and Judaism, as well as in Gnosticism and Islam. But in none of these cases were the Jews treated as pariahs. That was left to Christianity.

In some ways the position of the Jews in medieval Europe resembled that of the Untouchables in Indian society; but the latter generally accepted their lowly status, believing that they would be reborn in their next life in a higher caste.

The Jews, in contrast, never accepted their pariah state. Moreover, they were essential to Christianity, as St Augustine made clear. One of their services was to prove the truth of Christianity by their sufferings. They were being punished for their rejection of Jesus and the crime of deicide. Heretics like the Albigenses were exterminated, but the Jews "were spared this fate because they were considered to have an important contribution to make to Christian society".

The Jews were also transmitters of the Old Testament, "slave librarians", as Augustine phrased it. "By the evidence of their own Scriptures, they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ", he wrote in *City of God*.

And with the Second Coming, Paul's prophecy in the Epistle to the Romans would be fulfilled: the Jews would be converted to Christ.

St Thomas Aquinas declared that the Jews, "in consequence of their sin, are or were destined to perpetual slavery; so that sovereigns of states may treat their goods as their own property; with the sole proviso that they do not deprive them of all that is necessary to preserve life".

Interestingly, the Jews were never treated as pariahs in "the home of pariahdom", India. In Cochin, on the Malabar coast of south-western India, they formed a large pious community; were respected and given positions of honour. The first time they experienced antisemitism was when the Portuguese Christians arrived in the 16th Century. Synagogues and sacred books were burnt, and the Jews were then oppressed

***A Pariah People: The Anthropology of Antisemitism* by Hyam Maccoby. Constable £20.**

Review: COLIN McCALL

until the Portuguese were replaced by the Dutch.

There is no evidence of Jews in England before the Norman Conquest, says Maccoby. And even for some time after it, they benefited from "the imperfect Christianisation of society". William II (Rufus) was actually "accused by Christian writers of impiety and 'insolence to God'". He arranged a debate between Christians and Jews, "saying (perhaps jestingly) that if the Jews won he would become converted to Judaism".

Through the 12th and 13th Centuries, the position of the Jews "deteriorated as society became more and more under the control of the Church". And it was the papacy of Innocent III (1198-1216) that introduced the yellow badge.

In England "the 12th century saw the first blood-libel accusations" of the murder of Christian children at Easter in repetition of the crucifixion of Jesus, "and then the even more terrible and brutal accusation that Jews used the child victims' blood for their own Passover rituals".

Tragic events accompanied the Coronation of Richard I in 1189. Thirty Jews were killed as they came to pay homage; there were riots in other centres and, in York in 1190, "the whole Jewish community died".

Maccoby follows their fortunes and misfortunes through the ensuing reigns, when they



● ***"The most terrible irony, however, which isn't noticed in this book, is Hitler's indebtedness to Judaism for his Chosen People myth."***

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

were not outside society in a functional sense. "Yet in every cultural and religious sense, they were complete outsiders". The last traces of pagan tolerance were being obliterated, he says, "as the Christian masses were inducted into fanatical Christian belief".

The Jews' unforgivable crime was the killing of Christ, for which their punishment would be "weeping and gnashing of teeth". And Maccoby reminds us that the disciple who betrayed Jesus bore the name of the Jewish people. The Roman Catholic Church has now cleared the Jews of deicide (at the Vatican II Council) but "without accepting responsibility" for past oppression. That was attributed to a "popular misunderstanding".

By the charge of deicide, says Maccoby, the Jews were "mythologised into instruments of the cosmic power of evil". They were demonised.

Demonisation began in the Middle Ages and was furthered in Church art and the Passion Plays, where the Jews, "spearheaded by Judas Iscariot, were portrayed torturing Jesus in prolonged and ingenious ways, until the spectators of these mass entertainments were roused to antisemitic frenzy..." And the Middle Ages continued until the 19th Century for the Jews in Tsarist Russia.

Worse was to come in Germany. And, while to blame the Germans exclusively for the Holocaust is, in Maccoby's words, "a way of avoiding responsibility by other Christians", there is a relevant history dating back to the first massacre of Jews in the Crusades. In Germany, too, the Passion Plays had "a particular sadistic edge, and the portrayal of Jews in art and caricature had a brutal obscene relish".

Protestantism also played its part. Luther's diatribes against the Jews, for instance, rivalled those of the Nazis.

There is, then, no mystery about the Holocaust for Hyam Maccoby. "If a people has been subjected to constant vilification and demonisation over a period of centuries, so that a popular loathing has been instilled so deeply as to operate like an instinct, it is no surprise that eventually a movement will arise that has as its aim the extermination of this alleged pest and enemy of humanity".

Add to that defeat in war and economic hardship, and you have the conditions for Hitler's "Final Solution". And even that concept was present in Christianity in the millenarian movements that have arisen from time to time and, indeed, emerging again now.

The most terrible irony, however, which isn't noticed in this book, is Hitler's indebtedness to Judaism for his Chosen People myth.

It remains only to repeat my original warning concerning the term "antisemitism". Even Maccoby refers to "the excellent record of Hinduism in relation to the Jews" being marred in recent years by "an unfriendly attitude by Indian governments to Israel". That India might, as I do, deplore certain actions of the Israeli government should not be confused with Hinduism's tolerance of Judaism.



MIRACLES TO HAPPEN

SOMEONE once declared of the Authorized Version of the New Testament that if English was good enough for St Paul it was good enough for him. I have often wondered if it was the same person who observed that the date of Jesus' birth had been determined by the conjunction of BC and AD.

However that may be, it is clear from another conjunction – that of Mary and Joseph, given their antecedents – that his birth was a miracle waiting to happen and that Jesus was going to be if not unique then somebody of considerable consequence. It is not every child who is born of a virgin mother; nor is it a common occurrence for the impregnating agent to be a ghost; rarer still, if the assertion in the medieval hymn is correct, that the ghost used one of Mary's ears for the act of impregnation. I have not seen the hymn myself – merely a reference to it, but it would not surprise me. As Gabriel said, when informing Mary of her impending motherhood, "With God nothing shall be impossible." Or, as the Lord himself declared, perhaps less felicitously, on a similar, earlier occasion: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Unusual – one might almost say bizarre – methods of impregnation were regularly employed by those seeking to bring gods into the world. Maya was impregnated in a dream, Isis by a corpse, Coatlicue through her breast and Danae through a keyhole. Whatever switches you on, I say.

But, to return to my theme that the birth was a miracle waiting to happen, let us consider the histories of the persons chiefly involved.

First, Mary. Her own birth was no less miraculous than her son's. Anna, her mother, had been childless for 20 years

after her marriage to Joachim. Then, one day, when she was bemoaning her lot to some sparrows, she was overheard by an angel who revealed that God had arranged for her to conceive and that she would bear a daughter – and one, moreover, who would be spoken of throughout the world. It is an indication of the nature of the conception that Joachim had been absent from home for five months and, as there was no suggestion of an illicit human liaison, it must be regarded as a miracle. The only unusual contact that Anna had at the critical time was with a dove which descended unannounced and reposed in her bosom, and it is not insignificant that doves were often used as divine agents for procreational purposes. Another one, incidentally, had alighted on Joachim's head but without a similar miraculous consequence – for which, no doubt, he was heartily grateful. Obviously his dove was less potent than his wife's or it simply did not fancy him. In due time Mary was born and, at the age of three, she was dedicated to a life of service in the temple. And if further proof were needed of the divine interest in her body, it is recorded that an angel provided her with food during her 12 years there.

Vision

But this is not all. Joachim himself had been born in no ordinary circumstances. David, his father, had been told by a vision that the Redeemer would come from his family and, shortly afterwards, his wife Sara gave birth to Joachim. Now it may be objected that this is not of importance since he took no part in the production of Mary any more than Joseph did with Jesus. But that both men were taken into God's confidence, the one in a vision, the other in a series of dreams, must have some significance. Not all of us are visited in this way prior to our wives producing offspring, although if any read-

er of *The Freethinker* has had such an experience, I should be glad to hear from him.

If we turn now to Joseph and examine the pedigrees thoughtfully provided by Matthew and Luke – and, for this purpose, it does not matter which of the two is correct – we find the names of many who were born as a consequence of divine intervention. The Lord gave Ruth conception of Obed, the grandfather of King David; he arranged for Abraham at 100 to impregnate his 90-year-old wife Sarah; and he assisted to motherhood Rebekah, the wife of Isaac, after years of barrenness, although his participation in this instance seems to have been somewhat over-enthusiastic since she subsequently bore twins. One could go back farther – to the progenetrix of them all, but the miraculous birth, or fabrication perhaps, of Eve is too familiar to be repeated here.

It is plain that, with the conjunction of Mary and Joseph, the constituents were in place for an explosive miracle. It needed only a third party to light the touch paper and that third party was on hand in the form of – or lack of form of – a holy ghost. Sadly, very little is known about him. The impregnation of Mary was his first manifestation – at least with that designation – in the Bible, although he was mentioned in passing by the angel who foretold the birth of John the Baptist to Mary's cousin, Elisabeth. He reappears several times later in the New Testament but he seems to have been chiefly occupied with what his chroniclers describe as "descending on" or "filling" a number of people; and these contacts must have been of considerable importance in view of the status of those selected for attention – Peter, Paul, Stephen, Barnabas, Zacharias, Simeon, even Jesus, to name but a few.

There are two interesting features about this ghost. The first is that, so far as we know, he did not make a habit of impregnating virgins, through an ear or any other

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LE WAITING

HAPPEN

Seasonal thoughts from
NEIL BLEWITT

orifice. There is no record of him being involved in a second sexual act and one assumes, therefore, that he either intended to father only the one child or he did not rate the experience sufficiently enjoyable to want to repeat it. The second is that Mary, despite having had no introduction to the Holy Ghost nor, apparently, having ever been informed of his existence, did not seem at all surprised when an angel announced that she would be overshadowed by the Highest, that the Holy Ghost would come upon her and that she would bear the son of God. She did not say, for example, as she would have been perfectly entitled to, "The Holy *What?*" or "Pull the other one!" She simply said "Be it unto me according to thy word." Such imperceptibility, almost uninterested acquiescence, in these extraordinary circumstances would be remarkable in any woman. How much more so in a child of 15.

But there it was. She had found favour with God and he, in special disguise, would impregnate her so that she could give birth to himself in the form of his son. One can only suggest that her training in the temple and a knowledge of the facts of her own conception had prepared her for the moment when she would become the instrument for the completion of the Christian Trinity. She must have been aware of the importance of trinities and would probably have known the more popular ones – perhaps Isis, Osiris and Horus or Ahuramazda, Sraosha and Mithra. They were an indispensable feature of all the best religions and as familiar in early days as Freeman, Hardy and Willis in ours. No doubt, too, she would have learned that gods tend to overshadow those with whom they desire to have sexual contact, as Zeus did with Io, and she would have known that, on these occasions, gods prefer to attend in disguise. There are records of them assuming the forms of a sunbeam, a swan, a feather and

a pomegranate, so a ghost would have come as no surprise at all. She may have learnt, finally, that gods often father themselves and perhaps the case of Ptah would have leapt to her mind. He it was who inseminated a virgin heifer and was born of her himself in the form of a black bull. The Phoenix, too, though not of course a god, was similarly inclined and his habit was recorded in Mary's day by Ovid and in our own, more succinctly, by Ogden Nash:

*Deep in the study
Of eugenics
We find that fabled fowl
The Phoenix;
The wisest bird that ever was,
Rejecting other Mas and Pas,
It lays one egg,
Not ten or twelve
And when it's hatched
Out pops itselve.*

Once the miracle waiting to happen had done so, there was the customary display of celestial wonders – albeit modest by the standards for these occasions – including the positioning of a bright star immediately above the birth-place for the convenience of visitors, an angelic choir and birds frozen in mid-flight.

Adoration

There followed, still conforming to best practice, visits from Wise Men, adoration by animals and, eventually, a flight from peril. It was like floodwater cracking a dam. Once the breach had been made, a mighty accumulation of miracles poured through it.

One of Jesus' biographers recorded that a midwife who attended his birth was healed of a withered hand by the hours-old infant and that one of the Wise Men who took some of the swaddling-clothes back to his own country discovered that they

were proof against fire. A woman who had been dumb spoke, another was relieved of a demon's unwelcome attentions, a third was cured of leprosy by the water in which Jesus had washed and a fourth, who had been changed into a mule, was restored to her original form when Jesus was placed on her back.

The miracles continued on the flight into Egypt. When Joseph, for example, complained of the long distance between Bethlehem and their destination, Jesus announced that he would shorten it and immediately the hills and cities of Egypt became visible. Before that, dragons had appeared out of a cave blocking the family's path, but when Jesus stood before them, they extinguished their fires and praised him. Later, unsolicited, lions, leopards and wolves were to add their voices to his worship.

No wonder, then, that when the party eventually arrived at the city of Sotinen in Egypt and entered the temple, the 365 idols there all crashed to the floor. Obviously, they knew a god when they saw one.

Finally, to return to the miracle that started it all, it has been suggested that God should have departed from the prevailing custom of employing a virgin mother for his purposes, and initiated a more advanced tradition by impregnating Joseph instead. But although, superficially, that would seem the greater miracle, unfortunately it would not have been original. Minerva had already sprung fully-armed and uttering a war-cry from the brain of Jupiter while Atum had performed an even greater wonder when he drew from within himself gods, men, women and all living creatures. One can only hope that he felt better or, at least, no worse for the experience.

The Preacher was right. There is no new thing under the sun.

Books we can use – with care

FINNGEIR HIORTH was for 30 years a lecturer in philosophy at Oslo University, and is now a prolific contributor to Humanist papers all over the world. He has also produced several books, and these two, which have been published by the Indian Secular Society, are the most relevant to English-speaking Freethinkers.

They are both small paperbacks, quite well produced though not well sub-edited or proof-read. Neither of them is really what the titles suggest – they are not so much clear and coherent introductions to their subjects as disjointed and unbalanced surveys of some of the relevant writers and writings in their respective areas.

Introduction to Atheism covers general aspects and various forms of disbelief in God, concentrating on such writers as Ludwig Büchner, Bertrand Russell, A J Ayer, Richard Robinson, Gora, Walter Kaufmann, Ayn Rand, John L Mackie, Antony Flew, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, George H Smith, Michael Martin. It also has whole chapters on Carl Vogt and Kai Nielsen and on ethics, as well as less relevant chapters on materialism and secularisation (the latter wasting much space on unreliable and obsolete statistics in an old edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*).

Introduction to Humanism similarly covers general aspects and various forms of what has been called Humanism, concentrating on Ancient and Medieval, Renaissance and Enlightenment, Christian and Secular, Marxist and Existentialist, and other versions of the term, and on some national movements and the international movement. It also has whole chapters on Julian Huxley and F C S Schiller, M N Roy and A B Shah, as well as less relevant chapters on Kant and rationalism.

Introduction to Atheism (1995), \$US18 and *Introduction to Humanism* (1996) \$US15 by Finngeir Hiorth. Indian Secular Society.

Review: NICOLAS WALTER

There is little clear pattern in either book, whether logical or chronological. In fact they both read less like finished books than as notes for books or as collections of encyclopedia entries, summarising particular writers or writings or ideas in a rather laborious and tedious way. The coverage is inconsistent and repetitive – some important figures are barely mentioned while some unimportant ones are discussed at length, and several points are made over and over again. The actual treatment of Atheism suffers from the attempt to bully readers into accepting the author's view of Atheism without giving a fair hearing to other views of it, and without considering other views of God or gods. The actual treatment of Humanism suffers from the failure to begin with clear accounts of the many different meanings of the term and firm distinctions between the conflicting and contradictory ways it has been used. In both cases the result of the treatment is frequent confusion, as references and quotations and comments follow in no particular order, and the subject disappears under the weight of verbiage.

This doesn't matter so much with *Introduction to Atheism*, whose subject is relatively straightforward, but it does matter a lot with *Introduction to Humanism*, whose subject is much more complex, and in which the errors and omissions are more serious. One obvious example of the latter is the process of initial

resistance to and gradual acceptance of the term *Humanism* by Freethinkers until it eventually became the normal title of the Freethought movement.

Despite all their drawbacks, however, these two books have considerable value. Together they provide a great deal of information, simply presented, contained in a total of 450 pages, costing relatively little. The most interesting such information concerns figures or episodes unfamiliar even to most specialists – such as Gabriel Sibbern, a Danish philosopher who wrote an isolated book *On Humanism* in something like our sense in 1858, or a *Humanist Manifesto* with a strong socialist flavour published in Sweden in 1919 – and there are other valuable bits and pieces along the way.

So these books are worth reading, but should be used with care. Readers who know little about the subjects will find them muddling on their own; readers who know more will find them more useful, not so much for themselves but as guides to or summaries of other books. Indeed they should really be used alongside other studies of atheism and humanism; the trouble is that there are so few books on either subject which do provide helpful information either for outsiders or for insiders. The lesson for Freethinkers is the old one – if you think something should be done, do it yourself. Meanwhile, Finngeir Hiorth has done a lot of work and dug up a lot of facts which readers and other writers will be working on for a long time, and the Indian Secular Society has taken the initiative in publishing the results.

● *Introduction to Atheism* and *Introduction to Humanism* may be obtained post free on payment in American dollars to the Indian Secular Society, Aboli, 850/8A Shivajinagar, Pune 411 004, India.

O'Hara is Secularists' new President



● New President Daniel O'Hara

DANIEL O'HARA – a former Anglican curate – is the new President of the National Secular Society.

He was elected at the Annual General Meeting of the Society, held at Conway Hall on November 23, when he received 68 "Yes" votes and 11 "No" votes to the 21 "Yes" votes and 54 "No" votes cast for Barbara Smoker.

Aged 56, Mr O'Hara has been active in the Humanist movement since 1986. He is a member of the South Place Ethical Society, the British Humanist Association and the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. He is on the Board of the Rationalist Press Association.

A regular contributor of articles and reviews to *New Humanist* and *The Freethinker*, he has taken part in three two-hour broadcast debates and contributed to other radio and TV programmes. He has spoken at the Cambridge Union and is due to do so again in January. He has given numerous talks on Humanism and on related issues to various local groups and has lectured and given courses at SPES on D F Strauss, David Hume, the Bible, Marriage and Divorce.

A theology graduate, Daniel O'Hara was briefly an Anglican curate (1968-70), then qualified as a social worker. After 25 years in

social work and the probation service, he took early retirement in December, 1995.

In his Presidential address, Mr O'Hara paid tribute to the work of Barbara Smoker.

Miss Smoker turned down the Chairmanship of the British Humanist Association in favour of the NSS Presidency in 1971. Her booklet for teenagers, *Humanism*, has sold about 35,000 copies.

She conducted lengthy speaking tours of the United States (1984) and India (1989). In this country, she still has a full speaking and broadcasting programme. She has officiated at almost 1,000 non-religious ceremonies, four of which have been televised.

Elected Vice Presidents of the NSS at the meeting were Denis Cobell and Jim Herrick, while the new Treasurer is Barry Duke, one of the seven original subscribers to the NSS Limited's Articles of Association (1978).

Peter Brearey and Surendra Lal were re-elected to the Council of Management and co-optees Colin McCall and John Metcalf had their membership confirmed. Jennifer Jeynes – perhaps best known for her work with SPES – was elected as a new member of the Council.

Richard Noon, Barbara Smoker and Terry Mullins were unsuccessful candidates for membership of the Council of Management.

Terry Sanderson on the media

WE START out on a minor note. The bigwigs at the BBC bowed to pressure from the God-botherers and aborted a Radio Four comedy – *Emmon, Older Brother of Jesus* – because it dared poke fun at religion. This is a salutary reminder of just how “liberal” this country really is, and how much power religionists can still wield within our institutions. Let’s not forget that three of the BBC’s Radio controllers are avowed Roman Catholics.

Having said that, it’s got to be better than living in Afghanistan. In an horrific article about the rule there of the Taliban militia, the *Daily Mail* described the barbaric punishments that the religiously pure Taliban mete out to adulterers and others who dare to defy Allah. Their reporter had witnessed a man and woman being stoned to death for having sex outside of their marriages. In gruesome detail, the article described the dreadful self-righteousness of the priest who cast the first stone at the woman who was buried up to her waist. The man was dead within a few minutes, but the woman took nearly 20 minutes, with a crowd of godly men throwing rocks at her. When the priest thought it was all over, he ordered her son to raise the veil to confirm that she was dead. When he said she wasn’t, another holy man finished her off with a large boulder.

The whole thing was witnessed by her family – including her younger children. The article also described how thieves in the new improved Afghanistan have their hands surgically removed (the Taliban idea of mercy is to give the victim an anaesthetic before the mutilation).

Meanwhile, over in the *Daily Express*, Denise Robertson reports that Kabul, Afghanistan’s capital, is known as the City of Widows because of the number of husbands killed in the Holy War: “These widows, some with children, scrape a meagre existence by taking on menial work. Now the Taliban have forbidden them to leave their homes. They can’t earn and, even if they had money, they can’t go shopping. To be seen in the street, even veiled, is to risk a beating or death. A whole gender has been virtually walled up alive, some of them to starve to death.” Men who don’t grow beards in honour of the prophet are thrown into the back of a bare freight container for 10 days until they conform.

In the *Daily Telegraph*, Alex Spillius was reporting how the Mullahs in Kabul were deciding what the appropriate punishment should be for homosexuality. “There are two kinds of strong punishment,” says Mullah Mohammed Hassan. “There are those who say that homosexuals should be thrown to their deaths from a high fort, and those who favour putting them in a pit and pushing a wall on top of them. On the other hand, they can be paraded before the public with their face blackened.” This more liberal approach is the one favoured by the Taliban – perhaps because homosexuality is rife among the Kandaharis, as they readily admit. But there’s always somebody ready to make excuses for the inexcusable. An English convert to Islam, Hassan Morrison, wrote to the *Daily Mail*’s letters page: “The 20th century West is destroying the human family and replacing it with single parents and unnatural homosexual couplings, in opposition to everything good and pure: Murder, abortion, rape,

Walled-up alive in Allah’s name

paedophilia, violence, robbery, greed, selfishness and utter disrespect for the elderly are prevalent. Atheism, humanism, nihilism are on the increase ... Islam should not be portrayed as a medieval order simply because it unflinchingly upholds divine law ...”

Self-deluding tommy-rot, or what? If Mr Morrison is so fond of medievalism, why doesn’t he hie himself off to Afghanistan. I’ve a feeling he’d soon change his tune about the goodness of “divine law” if he saw it being administered at first hand. He shouldn’t forget that the people the Taliban are killing regard themselves as good Muslims. But in the ultra-fanatical world of the Taliban, they just aren’t good enough.

Carolyn Sellers, another correspondent to the *Mail* put the other side of the case: “How timely that during the debate on morality we should be offered, by the bloodthirsty Afghan Taliban movement, an example of what happens when an undiluted religious creed takes over. Hundreds of years of history, and the sometimes desperate fight for religious tolerance, have proved to us how oppressive people can be when they claim for themselves the privilege of acting in the name of God. Christians have proved sadistic and anti-social enough in the past – and their hero was a self-denying ascetic who was put to death by the civil and religious authorities. Utter it not in the halls of the politically correct (and intellectually supine) but the

conquering prophet Mohammed has been an even less comfortable companion to neighbours who fail to agree with his followers’ point of view. Let us have a ‘moral’ society by all means, but beware of finding that morality in one particular creed, or set of rules. That way lies stoning.”

Other atheists were also anxious to get their points across, and the British press seems more amenable these days to allowing it. Take this, from the novelist Iain Banks – writer of the recently televised *Crow Road* – who was interviewed in the *Daily Telegraph*: “I want to proselytise about the badness of religion, and to say that faith is wrong, belief without reason and question is just evil. Within the next two or three generations everything will be explicable in scientific terms. What’s left for mysticism or superstition?”

Another writer, Edward Bond, made this point in the *Financial Times*: “Of course I’m not religious. The idea is an obscenity. Children get shot at Dunblane and the next day someone in a cathedral is telling us that God loved them. That’s almost worse than shooting them. God is a fiction we should have discarded ages ago. We keep the Church not for God’s sake, but the Devil’s. The Devil gives us a way of explaining evil. But I believe that no-one acts out of a bad motive, unless you count fear. I believe it’s biologically impossible.”

Can happiness be bottled?

IN THE 1950s, President de Gaulle and his wife were invited to Downing Street for a formal dinner. Making polite conversation, the Prime Minister said to Madame de Gaulle: “And if you were granted a wish to have anything at all in the world, Madame, what would you wish for?” Without hesitation she replied: “A penis.” There was a communal gasp of horror, until General de Gaulle came to the rescue saying: “In this country, my dear, it is pronounced *happiness*.”

Well, of course, we’d all wish for happiness and, indeed, many Humanists think that the pursuit of happiness is the purpose of life. There was some support for this philosophy in a recent issue of *The Independent* which carried a report on the findings of Prof David Lykken, of the University of Minnesota.

Prof Lykken says that “humans evolved to be increasingly content with their lot in life because the survival of the happiest made our ancestors more upbeat with the passing of each generation.”

Prof Lykken’s theory goes like this: back in the Pleistocene, when our ancestors were developing by natural selection, the grouches and the doleful were less successful in the mating game, and less likely to pass on the “happy genes”. Lykken says: “Happy people have certain advantages. People like them. They are attractive. Happiness seems to be an antidote to illness – happy people get sick less often, or get well more quickly. So happiness offers a selective advantage.”

Another prominent geneticist, Dean Hamer, agrees that there probably is a happiness gene, but he says if you don’t have it, you should still strive to be happy. But how? And what exactly is happiness, anyway?

This was the question exercising the mind of Julia Myerson, in a recent *Independent* article about “moments of bliss”. Ms Myerson considers that she has had “more than her fair share” of those moments of rapture and joy that come only rarely for most of us. She describes them as “a pinnacle, a heightened moment, yet it’s ongoing – it pinpoints a perpetual, momentary state of lusciousness. Bliss is a peak of creative concentration, an intense feeling of love, a true moment of oneness, an emotional orgasm – or just an orgasm. I have bliss instead of God. My own sense of bliss helps me understand other people’s sense of God.”

You're telling us!

Beginning of time

THE question about the beginning of time is a good one (Karl Heath, November letters).

In fact, the idea that time had a beginning is not a new one. The idea occurred to a Christian theologian some 1500 years ago. His name was St Augustine. He argued that because time is a characteristic of the world and God created the world, God created time as well. So time came into being with the world when God created it and did not exist before the world.

Modern cosmology differs from St Augustine's religious philosophy in that it has evidence for its conclusions. The Big Bang theory which states (among other things) that time began some 15 thousand million years ago also differs from St Augustine's philosophy in that it does not rest on the premiss that there is a God. In short, modern cosmology is scientific whereas St Augustine's was religious.

The main piece of evidence that time (and space) had a beginning comes from the light from galaxies. When this light is analysed into a spectrum it is seen to show a "red-shift" indicating that the galaxies are receding away from us. This was first observed by Edwin Hubble in the late 1920s. He also noticed that the further away a galaxy is, the greater its red-shift and the faster it is moving away. This is explained by an expanding Universe. If we "run the film backwards", so to speak, we can calculate when all the galaxies and all space must have occupied a single point. Obviously, this point would have been hot and dense - this is an understatement! The explosive event which caused space itself to expand and carry away the galaxies with it (when they were formed a million years later) is known as the Big Bang.

Modern astronomers use light rather a lot. As well as analysing it into spectra it is an important idea in itself. A beam of light can be thought of as representing an interval in "space-time". Space-time is an amalgam of space and time with qualities of both. A beam of light has qualities of space in that its two ends occupy different locations. If the beam is moving relative to some frame of reference then its two ends may occupy the same location but at different times. In this sense it is like time. It is more strictly true to say that space-time was generated in the Big Bang, rather than time, or space and time.

There is other evidence to support the Big Bang theory. The afterglow from the Big Bang, the Cosmic Microwave Background Radiation, was detected by Penzias and Wilson in 1965. The predicted temperature characteristics of this afterglow fit perfectly the characteristics of the measured radiation. Also, the Big Bang theory predicts that the abundance of Helium in the inter-stellar medium should be 25 per cent (by mass). This is exactly what it is observed to be.

The Big Bang is simply the first event. "Before the first event" does not make sense. If your major doubt about the Big Bang is that it smacks of "creation out of nothing", then you might like to ponder on this: gravitational energy is negative because objects lose gravitational energy when they fall; all the positive energy in the Universe (heat, electromagnetic radiation, kinetic energy) is balanced out by all the negative energy; all the positive charges in the

Universe would cancel out all the negative charges; and for every clockwise motion there is an anti-clockwise motion. So all these important physical quantities, energy; charge and angular momentum (and momentum), balance out and leave a Universe which totals zero. There has been nothing all along!

ERIC YAFFEY
Keighley

I WRITE again only because Karl Heath asks me to. Professor Stephen Hawking has dealt with this matter in his *A Brief History of Time* (1988). However, I will summarise.

In 1781, Immanuel Kant believed that both the idea that the universe *did* have a beginning and the idea that it *did not* involve contradictions; in the former case the absurd idea that there would be an infinite period of time before any event and in the latter case the equally absurd idea that there would be an infinite period of time "before" the beginning. It seems that St Augustine was the first to point out that the concept of time has no meaning before the beginning of the universe. When asked what God did before he created the universe (*sic*), he replied that time was a property of the universe that God created. In effect (but without God), this is what modern cosmologists believe.

The "hot big bang model" of the universe involves the spontaneous emergence of the universe as a quantum fluctuation "out of nothing". This is hard enough to understand, but even harder is Hawking's idea that the quantum theory of gravity suggests the possibility that the universe is not only finite but unbounded in space, but finite but unbounded *in time* (imaginary time!). He writes: "There would be no singularity at which the laws of science broke down and no edge of space-time at which one would have to appeal to God or some new law to set the boundary conditions for space-time. One could say: 'The boundary condition of the universe is that it has no boundary.' The universe would be completely self-contained and not affected by anything outside itself. It would neither be created nor destroyed. It would just BE." He also suggested that "so called imaginary time is really the real time, and that what we call real time is just a figment of our imaginations ... an idea that we invent to help us describe what we think the universe is like". Freethinking indeed!

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

The christ of the Scrolls

THE difficulty experienced by Charles Adams in finding *christ* in the Dead Sea Scrolls arises because he is thinking of Christ as a name (November letters). It is in fact a common noun, used to describe a certain individual. The word is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word *messiah*, meaning anointed, and describes a divinely appointed ruler who will lead the Jews to military victory. The earliest certain occurrence is in 539 BC, when it is used to describe the Persian king Cyrus.

The New Testament is written in Greek, and therefore uses the Greek word. The Scrolls are in Hebrew or Aramaic, and use the original

word *Messiah*. If Mr Adams read a French history book looking for the word "king" he would be wrong to conclude that kings were unknown in France. He would have reached a different conclusion if he had tried to find the word *roi*. There is a very good introduction to the Scrolls in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh (Jonathan Cape), which gives the whole background to the controversy about them. The only point which might be disputed is the interpretation of "Damascus" as Qumran. I believe this, but it is not quite proved. The suppressed documents of the Scrolls have been published by Eisenman and Wise in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (Element 1992), which has a useful introduction giving additional information. Mr Adams will find several *messiahs* (*christs*) in it.

C R WASON
Bridgwater

Ireland - and other things

IT IS usually forgotten - especially by the Roman Catholic church - that Ireland was "given" to King Henry II in 1155 by Pope Hadrian IV. The fact that he was English is, of course, immaterial, as the Roman Catholic hierarchy have always insisted that its god guides the decisions of those prelates electing the Pope and the nationality of the pope is therefore irrelevant.

Furthermore, in 1172 the assembled bishops of Ireland accepted Henry's overlordship, and the RC church has never queried those 12th Century decisions. Inquiries of modern archbishops have elicited replies amounting to "it all happened a long time ago and there's no point in raking it all up now." So the English conquered Ireland with the approval of the church, and the church has never announced a change of mind.

Although I am as concerned as Messrs Bacon and Moreton over the issues they have raised in recent letters, I do wonder whether *The Freethinker* is a suitable publication in which to discuss them. I cannot find any connection between experiments on animals, the ritual mutilation of young girls, and the advocacy of denunciation of god-bothering. I am deeply interested in road safety and the dishonest assertions that the wearing of cycle helmets will increase the safety of all cyclists; but I see no reason why I should try to take space in your columns to combat the propaganda of the manufacturers and motoring lobby.

DEREK ROBERT
Mitchard

... but on the other hand

WHAT is a freethinker? I have just read my 14th issue of *The Freethinker*, the November 1996 issue, and judging by its contents *Freethinker's* freethinker is a person who largely confines his/her thinking to the detection of

You're telling us!

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flaws in religions and the religious. Are freethinkers just religious parasites? If religions disappear, would freethinkers die also?

We live in a world that is suffused in problems, strife, unemployment, poverty, pollution, etc., etc. Have freethinkers nothing to say on these matters? The present world order is derived from the teachings of anthropocentric religions. Its problems can only be dealt with by the adoption of rationalist, ecocentric policies. Have freethinkers nothing to contribute? The contents of *The Freethinker* would suggest not.

What do freethinkers advocate regarding Zaire, Bosnia, Ulster, regarding unemployment, regarding crime, regarding European integration? Religions restrict the permissible. Are these problems not the areas in which freethought could justify its rejection of religion? If freethinkers do not make positive and constructive use of their freedom, is the world any better for their existence?

JOHN RAYNER
North Wembley

Rise and fall of Jesus

I AM a little surprised that you have not yet carried a review of Stuart Campbell's book *The Rise and Fall of Jesus*; I think that, whatever people with more scholarship than I may allege, the book is of potential value to the general reader.

The semi-received view of Jesus – his being God Incarnate sent to offer us redemption by crucifixion and resurrection – sits uneasily in most modern minds. This unease is evidenced alike by the strident propaganda of the traditionalists, the revision by allegorisation beloved of modernists and the sheer disenchantment of the indifferent majority.

We need a better model of the Jesus story and the one that Campbell expounds has, at least, the merit of coherence with what we know of Pious oddballs in general. In the book Jesus is presented as a deluded believer in the notion that he, himself, is the long-awaited Messiah (they have them twice weekly in California, I think) and that it is both his duty, and the inexorable consequence of inner compulsion, that he acts out the prophesy so far as he can – but he cannot see it through to the (literally) crucial bit because real ordinary death overtakes him. He could fix things at the mundane level but he, just like you and me, could not procure a miraculous resurrection. ("My God why hast thou forsaken me?")

Without being instantly committed to the Campbell version, one has to say that, empirically, it is more plausible than the semi-received one.

If the latter were the true version then the history of the 2000 years interval from BCE 1000 to CE 1000 would have been hugely different; there would have been an unambiguous life-transforming event in the middle of it.

In fact all that appears to have happened during those millennia is historical "business as usual", sundry empires rose and fell; sundry religions began each with a bonanza followed by lapse into bureaucracy; technology made

only quantitative advance.

I make this, some would say, dismissive comment about that slice of history not because I cannot accept that anything much ever happens; big things do happen. Several thousand years before Jesus, our species made the huge advance from hunting and nomadic pastoral life to stable agriculture-based civilisation. In the years well after the Christian religion began to wane – and perhaps somewhat because of that waning – we experienced huge developments in the Renaissance, and the scientific and technological revolutions. Huge life-transforming things do happen but the brief tragic career of Jesus was not, I claim, one of them.

The merit of Campbell's book is that, in it, the relative unimportance of Jesus at last gets an informed airing. Do we not wish to celebrate that?

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

● Stuart Campbell's book (which will be reviewed in *The Freethinker* – eventually) is obtainable on order from booksellers (ISBN 0 9521512 1 9) at £9.95, or from Lavis Marketing, 73 Lime Walk, Headington, Oxford OX3 7AD, if you add £1.50 for postage and packing.

Sufferers

RE "Martyrs to Truth" (Mark Doran, October letters). I generally find that the absolute believers and the convinced atheists are the ones without stress – it is those who are not quite sure who seem to suffer the most.

RICHARD SAGE
London WC2

Without a prayer

HAS there been any deterioration in Princess Diana's condition since her name was removed from parliamentary prayers? Or has the disaster which one might have expected to attend its exclusion been averted by Mr Blair, Mr Ashdown and Mr Major including a plea for her continued well-being in their private supplications?

NEIL BLEWITT
Norfolk

Genuine distress?

I HAVE considerable sympathy for Mrs Ann Atkins, the vicar's wife who caused such a stir on Radio 4's *Today* programme by denouncing sexual relations outside of a heterosexual marriage. It was rather refreshing to learn of a Christian in this country who actually believes in it!

More seriously though, I was surprised by GALHA's rather excessive reaction to all this (*The Freethinker*, November). Even if she wanted to, Mrs Atkins has no power to impose discrimination upon homosexuals in this world, and since we believe her to be wrong about the

existence of the next the problem necessarily falls.

I am also reluctant to believe that many homosexuals listening to the programme were so lacking in robustness that they were caused genuine distress. As for Mrs Atkins encouraging discrimination and prejudice, how exactly? At worst she allowed a few like-minds "to take a warm bath in their own prejudices"; at best she showed up just how dotty even "mainstream" religion in this country can be.

NIGEL G MEEK
Bromley

IT IS disturbing that GALHA attacks freedom of expression on the ground that certain views are distasteful to others. This is the ground upon which religious believers justify blasphemy laws. It appears now to be an act of blasphemy to query the righteousness of certain types of sexual behaviour.

It is true that Christianity hates the sin but not the sinner. Christians should be free to express that view.

GEORGE JAMIESON
Paisley

Bitter Orange

THE Editor's article "Bitter Orange" (Page 2, August issue) skipped superficially around the question via truths, half-truths and misconceptions. To suggest that the RUC is the Paramilitary Wing of the Orange Order is way off-the-mark. True, it has historically supported the *status quo*, but it is now under direction from government (certainly in need of reform), not local Unionist politicians – however much some officers favour the latter's outlook.

The churches in Ireland have been part of the problem although (except for Paisley's Free Presbyterians) they have sometimes tried to cooperate to reduce violence.

It is the intertwining of religion, politics and ethnicity which has produced such an obnoxious view. To think it is solely a religious conflict is to misunderstand this residue of British – or rather *English* – history, dating back to Henry II's commanders' decision to land by hook or by crook (1169) to take control of Ireland.

There is a distinct cleavage between the two groups – one believing they are British, the other that they are Irish – but careful examination shows that they are a similar mix to that which exists throughout both islands.

It is a mistake to assume that there are no people in Northern Ireland who understand the need for change. The Opsahl Report (June 9, 1993) dealt with nearly 600 submissions (including mine), suggesting how progress might be made. A main barrier is the preoccupation of the two governments with using the present Northern Ireland political leaders to try to reach a settlement: they are too deeply entrenched in their views to be capable of change. With apologies to Brian (now Lord) Rix, the Forum is a Whitehall farce.

The idea that British governments armed the Protestants after Partition is a red herring, for

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all states which consider their existence threatened arm their police and use the military. That the RUC is mainly composed of Protestants is true, but if *they* had constituted the threat then, *vice versa*, the police force might well have been mainly Catholic.

To overcome the difficulties – a legacy of British adventurism – will require serious suggestions; the disparaging tones of "Bitter Orange" do not qualify.

A 32 County Secular state requires a change of culture and Constitution in the Republic of Ireland, as well as an altered mind-set among the majority and the minority in Northern Ireland. Recently, there have been signs in the Republic heralding progressive developments towards secularism. As someone born and raised in the Northern majority community, and for well over 60 years a non-religious secular socialist, I couldn't honestly recommend unification until a much freer society was established in both jurisdictions.

My view is that this question should be put to referendum, on specific proposals, every 10 years, separately assessed, North and South, requiring more than a simple majority in both simultaneously (say, 60/40) before implementation.

Convergence would need to take place on the secularisation of education and removing church interference in health and hospitals, and social legislation in respect of women's choice, which would require considerable time to effect.

A comprehensive Bill of Rights and a devolved Assembly in the North (on a single constituency and full proportional representation) pending any agreement on unification would also be required – so that perhaps eventually in time there might evolve a secular 32 County state, with the gun and bomb, no longer agents for change, superseded by agreed democratic structures.

SAMUEL H BOYD
Cwmbran

Bad news on the Messiah

I HAVE some bad news for the Rev Peter Gamble (letters, October). No Jewish messiah, whether his name was Jesus or not, reversed the "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" law. To have done so would have broken The Law of centralised Temple worship in Judea.

The beautiful 28 ft long scroll designated "The Temple Scroll" (11QT/11Q19) deals with the Jewish Covenant between God and the people of Israel, purity regulations, idols, the conduct of war etc.

This scroll has come down to us after an incredible 2,000-year drift through time. It is untouched by tamperers and is therefore reliable as Messianic (Christ) law. If there were a Jesus Messiah (and there are good reasons to think there was) a copy of this and other works would have been given to him, because The Law stated that the Messiah of Aaron and Israel *must* have copies of The Law.

The Temple Scroll was in use through the reigns of Herod the Great, the Emperors

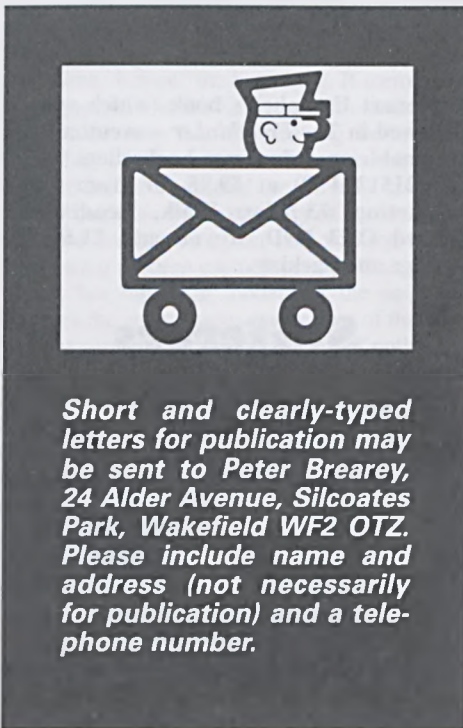
Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius. It was concealed near the Dead Sea in about AD70 or 74, the falls of Jerusalem and Masada respectively.

It states: "The rest shall hear of it and shall be awe-stricken and never again shall such a thing be done in your midst. You shall have no mercy on him: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot".

Christians are very fond of the "turn the other cheek" saying – but, on the showing of the Temple Scroll, it is a worthless forgery.

ROBERT SINCLAIR
Coventry

THE Rev Peter Gamble's remark (November letters) is self-contradictory: "I think most non-believers see God as rather an inefficient stage



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manager, an old bungler ..." Non-believers don't see this God as *anything*, Mr Gamble, simply because they don't believe it exists.

Non-believers can certainly take seriously what Christians believe about their imagined deity: not because of those beliefs *per se*, but because of the often devastating influence those beliefs have had (and still have) on behaviour, with consequences for us all.

Sadly, throughout history, Christians have taken seriously the cruel, vindictive God and his Hell-fire preaching son, as depicted in the Bible. The loving God and his pacifist son are also depicted in the Bible. But if you believe the Bible to be the word of God, then surely you have to accept both sides of it – contradictory as they are!

RAY McDOWELL
Co Antrim

YOUR readers are making me repetitive, which is boring for them and for me. Mr McDowell in your November issue asks how I know from the Gospels which sayings of Jesus are more characteristic of him. I "know" it from the Gospel account of how Jesus met his accusations and tortures and execution, which are not events the Gospel writers are likely to have invented about the leader they had thought heroic and blessed by God.

Moreover, Tacitus and Pliny the Younger and (above all) the Jewish historian Josephus refer with pity or contempt (or mere indifference) to the utter resignation and non-violence with which he met his end.

Mr Stuart Campbell's letter is sensible in places, but he takes Matthew and Luke seriously and/or literally – which I do not. He also says Jesus refers to a time "after his resurrection" when he would become a mighty ruler. He should have said that the Gospel writers said that Jesus said that.

Of course, Jesus may, if he had lived on, have become a tyrant (but I think it unlikely, and in any case I am concerned with what he was and what he did, not with what he might have become).

Mr Tom Montgomery asks in his letter "Should we have let Hitler invade Britain?" This takes me back to the sort of questions was asked by CO Tribunals in 1940. I said then (and I say now): "Better to let Hitler invade than to throw away millions of lives in resisting his invading army."

Hitler *may* have proved like so many dictators to be a bubble that would inevitably grow so big that it burst. If not, the time would come when Christian Pacifists must resist his hideous evil – and take the consequences. Whether I would ever have had the courage for that ... who knows?

(The Rev) **PETER GAMBLE**
Guildford

Family matters in focus

IF IN order to remain the Perpetual Virgin, Mary *didn't* provide brothers and sisters for Jesus, one imagines that Joseph must have been more than a trifle miffed. After all, he hadn't been provided with the whole script from the beginning.

As to current families, I wonder what is meant by "family values"? I'd have thought a value to be a value, whether inside or outside the family. If what is being advocated is a return to the "traditional family", this isn't the same thing, is it? The "values" of some "traditional families" don't bear thinking about.

VIVIEN GIBSON
London W5

Cards for heretics

FOR the 24th successive year, Barbara Smoker has produced Heretic Cards (a range of irreverent greeting cards, mostly knocking Christmas), some with new topical cartoons.

In an inexpensive monochrome format they cost only 15p each, including envelope. For £5, Barbara will send you a good selection, post free. Her new address is: 51 Farmfield Road, Downham, Bromley, Kent BR1 4NF.

Can happiness be bottled?

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Given that happiness is such a personal experience, dictated by our own individual histories, trying to define it is a difficult task, but a brave few have tried.

Bertrand Russell, for instance, says the secret of happiness is to "let your interests be as wide as possible, and let your reactions to the things and persons that interest you be as far as possible friendly rather than hostile."

So what happens if happiness eludes you? Can it be created? According to the BBC series QED, yes. The producers of a recent edition of this programme put three individuals who considered themselves to be miserable on a course that was aimed at making them happy.

Firstly, the psychologist in charge of their treatment introduced them to "laughter therapy" (laughter being an important indicator of happiness). Now laughter is a funny thing, a uniquely human thing. As the American writer William Miller puts it: "Man is the only laughing animal" and laughter has been clinically proven to be good for the health. It releases endorphins – naturally-produced brain chemicals – which enhance healing and ease pain. So we should seek laughter at every opportunity. People know this instinctively, of course, and many of us will travel a long way to find a good laugh. We pay serious money at the theatre or cinema if we think a comedy is going to amuse us and, indeed, the sky's the limit for any comedian who is truly funny.

After the laughter therapy, the psychologist told his subjects to think positively about themselves and the situations they found themselves in. Living for, and fully appreciating, the present moment is a difficult skill to acquire, but one worth having. Worrying about what has happened in the past, or is going to happen in the future, are generally fruitless exercises, and the assassins of a happy frame of mind.

And finally the therapist recommended dancing – Scottish dancing in this case, but any dancing would do. Dancing to music is also a uniquely human activity and one which mysteriously provokes delight in dancer and spectator alike. There are thousands of poems extolling the joys of dancing (which is often accompanied by singing and carousing) and there is something exhilarating and purely sensual about moving one's body in time to rhythms. There is no experience quite like it, and it is always associated with leisure and abundance ("A very merry, dancing, drinking, /Laughing, quaffing and unthinking time" as Dryden expressed it in his *Secular Masque*.)

We know that we dance when we are happy; the question is: can dancing make us happy when we aren't? The answer seems to be yes, because after they'd danced their

reel, the happiness quotient of the subjects was measured again. It had increased considerably since the treatment had begun, and they all expressed an enhanced feeling of well-being.

This all seemed to give lie to the assertion of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, who said: "Perfect happiness is the absence of striving for happiness."

Of course, religionists will tell you that God is the only way to true happiness, but as John Pepper points out in his book *How to be Happy* the only really enduring happiness is the kind that is an end in itself. "It is not something to be tied with a cord or teat, for sustenance, to something outside itself. If we prove to ourselves that happiness is possible and sustainable without 'belief', the happiness is secured in a knowledge gained from direct experience. We deal in fact, not faith. And what we know to be true from experience is something that can never be taken away from us. Such truths are our only safe possessions in a shifting world. A happiness based on 'nothing' – no political ideology, religious doctrine, material possession, or relationship – is in the end the only kind that is shockproof."

I'll say amen to that – and look forward to the next barn dance at Conway Hall.

Moral education must be freed from its religious straitjacket

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some will use the market to their own advantage, while others will be disadvantaged.

This fact has become increasingly evident as a catalogue of scandals – from Maxwell, BCCI and Barings to Black Wednesday and BSE – has revealed that many will use unregulated markets for highly immoral purposes. Nor are unethical practices confined to private individuals or organisations. Governments justify, for example, selling arms to dictatorships with reference to "market forces".

Obsessive allegiance to "the market" is indeed all ideology like any other – in this case the application of extreme liberalism to economic affairs. It is perhaps telling that a government wedded to this economic liberalism should at the same time so enthusiastically champion extreme social authoritarianism. Such inconsistencies are becoming increasingly apparent as 18 years of Conservative rule unravel and the ideology behind it implodes. In making students of Economics or Politics or Sociology aware of these hidden values and paradoxes of public policy, teachers are contributing to Moral Education in the best, critical, sense. Syllabuses in these subjects have been revised to take account of such normative questions, and this is to be welcomed by all who believe that ethics is inherent in all aspects of the school curriculum – as it is also, of course, in the general ethos of the school.

But what of Moral Education as a subject in its own right? Clearly, it has been wrong to filter it through RE. There is always the danger

that the young who come to "see through" religious mythology may also reject the accompanying moral values. Some of these are certainly worth preserving. The Golden Rule is an example, though it is older than Christianity and is found in, among others, Confucius: "Do not do to others what you would not like for yourself". On the other hand, some "Christian" values are highly dubious. Leviticus, for example, advocates the death penalty for all adulterers and homosexuals.

Humanists want to see Moral Education freed from this religious straitjacket and treated as a subject in its own right. But this aim also presents us with an important challenge which so far we have largely evaded. It is not enough for us to produce material on the history of Freethought and Humanism or potted biographies of famous Humanists. It is not enough for us to highlight the deficiencies of religious faiths. If Humanism is a positive lifestance, then we need to show it in detail. We need to demonstrate clearly that life without religion is better. No small part of this task is the need to develop a detailed Syllabus or Course in Secular Moral Education. It would not dictate morals as such – indeed its first "commandment" might be to "think for yourself" – but it would serve as a guide.

This, I believe, is one of the greatest challenges which Humanism faces as we approach the millennium. Can we rise to it, or will we remain content to avoid the issues?

● Brian McClinton is Secretary of the Ulster Humanist Association.

Brighton Bill ...

FORMER Editor of *The Freethinker* and veteran NSS member Bill McIlroy drew an appreciative audience for his illustrated talk "Brighton for Freethinkers" at the British Humanist Association annual conference in Brighton last month. He traced the history of organised unbelief in the town from the mid-19th Century to the present day. Eminent freethinkers who lived in Brighton included Grant Allen, Herbert Spencer, G J Holyoake, Peter Kropotkin and Ernestine Rose.

Incidentally, the booklet *Foundations of Modern Humanism*, the text of a talk Bill gave to Sheffield Humanist Society, has attracted favourable comment in an unlikely quarter. A reviewer in the Autumn issue of *Touchwood*, the pagan quarterly, writes: "*Foundations of Modern Humanism* provides the focus upon which Humanists in today's society can measure their success and keep people's minds ever open to free thought everywhere."

The booklet is available at £1.25, including post, from Sheffield Humanist Society, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT.

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

Birmingham Humanist Group: Information: Tova Jones on 0121 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, January 5, 5.30 pm for 6 pm: Members' Forum and Welcome to 1997.

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

Bromley Humanists: Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680.

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01296 623730. Wednesday, 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, December 19, 7.30 pm: Public meeting: *Humanism and Personal Life*. January 16: Sean Neill: *Genetics and Behaviour*. February 20: *The Bible as Evidence*. March 20: Daniel O'Hara: *David Hume*.

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). 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: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. Meetings held at Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch, from 8 pm to 10 pm. Tuesday, 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, December 10, 7.30 pm: Peter Brearey, Editor: *The Freethinker - Past, Present, Future*. Tuesday, January 14: Paul Mann: *The Law - is it an Ass?* Tuesday, February 11: Dr A Radford, Leeds University: *Your Genes and You - A Perfect Fit?* Tuesday, March 11: John Bradfield: *Green Funerals*.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622250 or 0116 241 4060. Meetings on Sundays at 6.30 pm.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell, 99 Ravensbourne Park, London SE6 4YA; 0181 6904645. Meetings at Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, 8 pm. Wednesday, December 19: Winter Solstice Party.

Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607. St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North (near Apollo), 7.30 pm, December 13: Carl Pinel: *Darwin, Bradlaugh and Kropotkin*. From January, Greater Manchester Humanist Group will meet at the Friends' Meeting House on Mount Street, Manchester, on the second Wednesday of each month. January: Social evening; February: AGM; March: John Passmore on *The Freemasons*; April: Can Humanists be Spiritual?

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN; 01362 820982. Meetings at Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich, 7.30 pm. January 16: John Lear: *Greenpeace*. February 20: Jean Kent Field: *Religious Education for Young Children*. March 20: Robert Ashby: *Something Humanistic*. NB: 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, December 4, 8 pm: Barry Johnson: *Rules, Rulers and Republicans*. January 8: Public meeting: Harry Barnes MP. 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.

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

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

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0181 642 4577. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, January 8: Malcolm Rees: *Secular Organisation for Sobriety*. February 12: Jim Herrick: *Humanism in Europe*. Meetings at 8 pm.

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

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

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

West Glamorgan Humanist Group: Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY. Saturday, December 14: Yuletide Dinner at Nicholaston House Hotel, Penmaen, £11.50 per head. Book now with Kay John on 01792 234495. January 31: Visit from Robert Ashby, Executive Director of the British Humanist Association.

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

Group Secretaries: Please make a contribution to The Freethinker Fund if you feel that inclusion in this feature is helpful to your group. Cheques and postal orders (made payable to G W Foote & Company) should be addressed to Nicolas Walter, "FT Fund", Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.