

Cwl

£1

The

Free thinker

Secular
Humanist
monthly

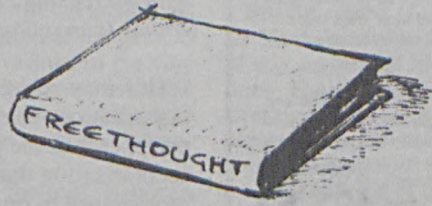
Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 117 No 1

January 1997



Euro boost for blasphemy law



A mind virus tackles Dawkins – see centre pages

Up Front

Keynote for the future

Because it so well encapsulates the policies of The Freethinker – and because we want to see the National Secular Society grow alongside us – this month's editorial is devoted to the acceptance address of Daniel O'Hara on his election as President of the NSS on November 23.

The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

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

Front sketch by Geoff Day

CONTENTS

Up Front	Page 2
Blasphemy meeting	Page 3
Down to Earth: Colin McCall	Page 4
The Trouble with Science	Page 5
Salem witch trials	Page 6
Terry Sanderson on the media	Page 7
Mind virus tackles Dawkins	Page 8
Obituary: Edward Blishen	Page 10
Mediator myth	Page 11
You're Telling Us! Letters	Page 12
Bible studies by Eric Stockton	Page 15
What's On	Page 16

Subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to The Publisher:

G W Foote & Company
Bradlaugh House
47 Theobalds Road
London WC1X 8SP
Telephone: 0171 404 3126

Annual postal subscription rates

UK: 12 months £10 or £7 (unwaged). Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £13. Airmail £20 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.

Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote & Company to The Freethinker at Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son, Sheffield S30 6JE.

MAY I first thank all those who have voted for me as your new President, and express our thanks to Barbara Smoker who held this office for so long. At times of change it is usual for there to be strong feelings and conflicting emotions, but I hope we can all now work together – after what has been a very turbulent year – for the good of the Society.

You will not be surprised to hear that I take on this office with some sense of trepidation. Indeed, I should not have stood for the Presidency had I not been encouraged by a number of senior members of the society, nor without the support of the overwhelming majority of the Council of Management. I hope I shall be able to justify their confidence in me.

I think it behoves us as dedicated Secularists to recognise what vast changes in our direction there have been in our society over the past century, and indeed over the last few decades. The chief engine in the process of secularisation has been the demographic changes which have occurred as a result of modern scientific and technological advances. In his fascinating study *Religion in Modern Britain*, (OUP, 1995) the sociologist Steve Bruce says this:

Certainly one finds committed atheists – the sort of people who join Rationalist and Humanist associations – and some very liberal Christians arguing that religion has lost its mediaeval dominance because modern people are too clever to believe in old superstitions ... But no modern account of secularisation assumes that we (or our culture) are superior to what went before or that religion has declined because it is false. The history of the human ability to believe very strongly in what turns out to be nonsense suggests that whether something is true or false and whether or not it becomes widely accepted are two very different questions ... A cursory glance at countries and social groups within countries which are least religious suggests that [secularisation] has something to do with modernisation. [By this he means] the whole package of economic, political, cultural and social changes which come with increasing reliance on inanimate rather than animate sources of power.

This may suggest that the efforts of organisations like our own are largely peripheral to the process of increasing secularisation that we have seen gaining momentum in our century. But there are still, as I see it, two areas in which we still have an important contribution to make. The first is in the world of ideas,

and the other is in the realm of social action. It is still necessary to combat false and woolly notions about our place in the universe, notions which are not only the stock in trade of the Churches, but are also increasingly promoted by the so-called "New Age" movements. While these may be numerically small, they can nevertheless have a disproportionate influence upon the popular imagination. As an example, I cite a recent spate of television programmes which treat the occult with an unwarranted seriousness and thereby give it a wholly undeserved respectability.

But perhaps the more important sphere of our activity is the social, political and legislative arena. The NSS has always stood for the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of England, for the removal of Bishops sitting as of right in the House of Lords, for the end of privileged treatment for religious organisations under the tax and rating legislation, and for rational and humane social policies on marriage, divorce, contraception and abortion, homosexuality, the age of consent and voluntary euthanasia. Still today, when legislation affecting any of these areas is proposed, the Churches have a disproportionate degree of influence, and can be relied upon to take a reactionary stand. Organisations such as ours are thus still very necessary to fight for progressive and secular social policies.

I hope that I can rely on each and every one of you to continue to give your support to the best of causes which this Society has represented for 130 years. We have an enthusiastic new secretary who is already involved in a number of campaigns, and we have a large reservoir of talent that can be drawn upon as need arises. Whether by speaking at public meetings or on radio phone-ins, or by writing in secularist journals and to the local press, or by conducting secular ceremonies, or by your financial support, or any combination of these, I ask you all to continue to give of your best in the promotion of the cause to which we are all committed. Thank you again for your support, and for making what I know for some has been a considerable effort to attend this AGM.

● As we go press, the Editor of *The Freethinker*, Peter Brearey, is still in hospital. He thanks readers for their expressions of goodwill.

'Blasphemy law now worse than in 1922'

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

BRITAIN'S archaic blasphemy law seems to have been given a new lease of life by a decision handed down on November 25 by the European Court of Human Rights.

The decision concerned an 18-minute video *Visions of Ecstasy* by Nigel Wingrove which depicts the sexual fantasies of St Teresa of Avila and Christ on the Cross.

The video had been refused a certificate by the British Board of Film Classification (and lost an appeal in 1989) on the grounds that it believed it might contravene the blasphemy law. No case had been brought.

The European Court refused the licensing appeal, in broad terms confirming that the BBFC was entitled to refuse certification and that any member country was permitted to have blasphemy law, despite the implications for freedom of expression.

Nigel Wingrove appealed to Europe on the grounds *inter alia* that his freedom of expression had been infringed. Such cases are heard in the first instance by the European Commission of Human Rights whose adjudications are generally followed by the European Court of Human Rights – but not on this occasion.

The Commission had ruled in favour of the plaintiff by 14 votes to 2, whereas this judgment was overturned by the European Court, by 9 to 2. Apparently by coincidence, Lord Mackay of Clashfern was in Strasbourg on the day the judgment was announced to emphasise to the Court the need for national sensibilities to be respected. One mechanism for recognising this is the "margin of appreciation" referred to below.

The NSS immediately called a public meeting to protest at the decision. It was held at Conway Hall on December 11 and was hailed as successful by those who attended.

Barbara Ward, of both SPES and the NSS encapsulated the sober mood of the meeting when she said: "This seems neither the time to challenge the law, nor the case on which to do it."

The speakers were Dr David Starkey, of the LSE and Radio 4's *Moral Maze*, Dr David Nash, of Oxford Brookes University, and Carmel Bedford, representing Article 19 which has fought hard to defend Salman Rushdie.

Dr Nash was worried that the last two invocations of the blasphemy law in relation to Christianity "contain trends which erode further the notion of progressive tolerance".

Dr Starkey left us in no doubt about his stance by asserting that belief in a personal deity is irrational. He enumerated two concerns about the European Declaration of Human Rights (which Nigel Wingrove claimed had been violated). Firstly, Dr Starkey said that its very existence had almost encouraged the UK to avoid considering human rights sufficiently; he said we "look to Europe for them to sort it out". Then he read out a long list of duties and

responsibilities Article 10 of the Convention imposes in relation to freedom of expression (including *inter alia* the protection of public security and public morals). He said he recognised only one possible responsibility which such freedom should impose "to ensure others have the same freedom of expression".

Carmel Bedford said the only campaigns in Europe against Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* were in Britain and in Norway (where a publisher was shot, though not fatally). Article 19's sustained campaign had been unsuccessful in having the Rushdie *fatwa* lifted, and the Islamic world regard this as a victory. Her dealings with political leaders have shown them to put the Middle East peace process and economic issues before human rights.

The blasphemy law is still causing difficulties. A statement was read out concerning the arrest in 1992 of NSS member Michael Newman for selling *Visions of Ecstasy*. Also, an invited guest, Richard Kirker, Secretary of the Lesbian & Gay Christian Movement, told of the intimidation this organisation had suffered in 1996 as a result of complaints of blasphemy by three "members of the public" who he assumed to be clerical opponents of this organisation. The complaints related to discussions on the Internet at two university sites about the poem by James Kirkup which was the subject of the last successful blasphemy prosecution in *Gay News*. Richard Kirker said that he had been cautioned by the police and that software had been seized from the university sites months ago by the Clubs and Vice Squad and had not been returned.

Recent trends clearly concerned all the speakers. Carmel Bedford said that she found the mood of compromise over human rights (of which blasphemy judgment is yet a further example) to be deeply disturbing and is worried where it will end, even within Europe. This clearly struck a chord with the audience.

Dr. Starkey was troubled by the 'creeping' phrase, "the established religions", referring, he said, to the Church of England, United Reformed and Roman Catholic Churches and the Jewish and Islamic faiths.

Dr Nash warned that the rejection of expert evidence and the denial of the need to prove intention were innovations in the *Gay News* and Wingrove cases and were evidence of an escalation of the law which he thought would have considerable adverse consequences, unless challenged.

Dr. Nash's critique of the last hundred years of blasphemy law showed progress towards secularism to have been halted at times. Unsurprisingly, Dr Nash had little praise for the BBFC, which, he said,

appeared to be both judge and jury in an area where to all intents and purposes the law has been usurped by government agency. He attacked the vagueness of the European judgment in which one judge had also mentioned obscene pornographic images and paedophiles (not issues in this case). David Nash was particularly scathing about the apparent need for a 'margin of appreciation', on which the judgment relied. This, he concluded, was "another piece of buck-passing" by the court, whereby legislation is permitted to revert to a member country.

He opined that the principal excuse offered for the blasphemy law being retained was because, being common law adapting itself to what was assumed originally to be progressive secularisation, it would become ever more difficult for a jury, which represented the average adult, to convict. However, the notion of society being ever more secular is increasingly in doubt.

A speaker from the floor drew applause when he said that he thought it was no coincidence that the last two cases involved sexual imagery of Christ.

Speaking from the political Right, Dr Starkey warned the Left that they will have to tackle the danger of Blairism's openness to religious dogmatism. He said that our attack on the blasphemy law should be based on its irrationality. We should also emphasise how uncontrollable and open-ended it was for people to claim protection simply because their feelings were hurt – where was the line to be drawn? He also drew attention to the impossibility of an objective measure of damage for blasphemy, unlike libel and slander; how did you measure hurt feelings?

Dr Starkey warned that we need a rigorous reappraisal of what we are thinking and claiming before we go to another forum. The meeting considered whether an attempt should be made to have the film tried for blasphemy by a British court. Although David Nash wanted the legal clarification that a *Visions of Ecstasy* legal case would bring, most felt that we should select a better case and await a more favourable climate. Before mounting a legal challenge, we must be confident of winning.

But the aspect of these cases which worried Dr Nash most was the complete abandoning of any scriptural or biblical test for convictions. These appear to have been replaced by 'feelings and convictions' which, he said, were so vague they elevate religion to a "tyrannical limbo" which can only be solved by the abolition of the blasphemy law.

On a lighter note, David Starkey drew applause when he defined the purpose of the Church of England: to ensure that religion isn't taken too seriously!



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Jewish women get a tanning

IN MY review of Hyam Maccoby's *A Pariah People* last month, I said that, ironically, the term antisemitism might be used to describe the Israeli government's attitude towards the Palestinian Arabs, who are as much a Semitic-speaking people as the Jews—and semitic is a linguistic, not an ethnic term.

This was confirmed when the *Guardian's* Matthew Engel, re-visited Israel after the election of Benjamin Netanyahu, with the particular support of the Jewish religious parties. "Israel seems to be turning into Iran", he wrote on November 18, 1996. "Extreme orthodoxy is on the march". And he witnessed "the casual contempt with which Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem deal with Palestinians".

Not only are they antisemitic, however; Orthodox Jews are also sexist, as indeed is their religion. When a group of Jewish women tried to worship at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, they were ambushed by Orthodox men who "hurled chairs at them". The police ignored the attackers and threw the women out. Later a government spokesman told the women they were crazy. If they wanted equality, he said, they could go to the beach or the disco. And while I would opt for the beach anytime, that has no relevance in the context of religious relations between the sexes.

But a Jewish woman has to remember God's ruling (Genesis 3:16) that "Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee".

RC feminists use their loaf

PAUL was another biblical character (Jehovah being nothing more) who treated women as second-class citizens; and the present pope, who took the saint's name in his title, holds similar views. Indeed his "infallible" decree that women are unsuitable for ordination "always, everywhere and by all", has understandably landed him in trouble with Catholic feminists in France, Germany and the US, where he has been publicly challenged by pro-ordination nuns, proclaiming that "if women can make bread, they can also break bread", (*The Guardian* October 7, 1996).

There is already an international group known as Women's Ordination Worldwide who, according to Sister Myra Poole, have learnt "not to expect anything from the top. They know they must work themselves for the changes they want".

One who sees these changes coming is Ursula King, professor of theology at Bristol University. It will take more than one traditionalist pontiff to halt "the unstoppable

progress of women through the church", she says.

Were John Selwyn Gummer, Ann Widdicombe and the rest aware of this when they went over to Rome in protest against the ordination of women in the Church of England? They might now reflect that, while John Paul II may consider himself infallible, he is assuredly not immortal.

One step further

"REASON takes on rant..." ran an *Observer* headline for Cal McCrystal's interview with the Rev Dennis Cooke, principal of the Methodist Edgemoor Theological College, Belfast, and author of *Persecution Zeal*, a portrait of the Rev Ian Paisley (November 24, 1996).

Dr Cooke is disturbed by the influence Paisley exerts not only in Northern Ireland but beyond, and particularly by Paisley's assertion that the Roman Catholic Church is not Christian. Cooke acknowledges that there is "certainly no scarcity of anti-Catholic polemic" in John Wesley's writings, but there is "no evidence that Wesley denied Catholicism's position as a Christian church."

While the Catholic church is only one of many churches to have been involved in religious wars and bigotry, continued Dr Cooke, "Paisley highlights only Roman Catholic persecution and violence, ignoring examples of Protestant intolerance and rapacity".

All of this is true and, certainly in contrast to Paisley, Dr Cooke sounds a rational man. It's a pity he doesn't take his rationalism a step further and say "a plague o' both your houses".

Jesus wept!

JESUS has wept, yet again. Many people, we are assured, have seen the tears "coming down and down" (not going up, which would have been a miracle) the face of an icon in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is built over the grotto where he is said to have been born (*The Observer* November 24, 1996).

"I saw it myself", said Father Anastasios, official Bethlehem representative of the Greek Orthodox archbishop, Diodoros. So, too, did a Roman Catholic insurance agent, Anton Gideon.

Not only that. The Muslim woman who cleans the church became "aware of a great light". At first she couldn't believe her eyes but, when she got closer to the icon, she "realised the tears were real". How she knew, we weren't told. Did she taste them for saltiness, I wonder?

That would hardly fit with another priest's assertion that the cotton wool swabs used to wipe away the tears were imbued with "the most fantastic fragrance".

Not all have been carried away by the "miracle", however. Dr Jad Isak, a Palestinian

agronomist described as a loyal member of the Greek Orthodox church, went along, as well, and all he saw was "some vapour condensation coming from the roof".

As the icon is painted on a marble column, condensation would seem a highly probable explanation of the phenomenon, particularly if there are burning candles nearby. Not that I want to increase the flow by adding my drops of cold water.

Baby talk

COMMENTING on the Scottish Cardinal Winning's attack on Tony Blair over abortion, William Rees-Mogg, a Roman Catholic himself of course, exemplifies one of the common tricks of the anti-abortionists (*The Times* October 23, 1996).

"Three out of ten conceptions in the United States end in the destruction of the foetus", he tells us, though he doesn't say whether that includes miscarriages.

Very soon in his piece, however, he accuses the Supreme Court of being responsible for "a veritable genocide of American infants, comparable in number to the deaths for which Stalin, Hitler or Mao were [sic] responsible". And, he continues, "Five times as many American babies have died as a result of Roe v Wade [the court case in question] as Jews were killed in the Holocaust".

So, as you will see from my italics, foetuses have become, first infants and then babies, set in highly emotive contexts.

It is pertinent here, to recall the words of Professor Judith Thomson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that, contrary to the Roman Catholic teaching that the foetus is a person from the moment of conception, "A newly-fertilised ovum, a newly-implanted clutch of cells, is no more a person than an acorn is an oak tree".

Oh brother!

A HOLY alliance of Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times* and BBC Radio 4's Roman Catholic controller James Boyle has ensured that we will not be hearing Michael Redmond's comedy series, *Eamon, Older Brother of Jesus*, which was due to begin in November 1996, and had already been heard in a shorter version on Radio 1.

The programme was attacked in the *Sunday Times* "Culture" section, and the criticism was brought to Boyle's attention. When he listened to the tape, he thought the performance excellent, but considered that "the material would not sit well on the Radio 4 schedule". Three of the five BBC controllers are now Roman Catholics and, with chairman Christopher Bland declaring that the Corporation had "a duty to respect the views of those with more traditional values", I fear there will be few seats for unorthodox broadcasters.

Planet can't afford distractions in the race against time

"WHENEVER one lights upon more exact proofs, then we must be grateful to the discoverer", wrote Aristotle in the fourth century BC, "but for the present we must state what seems plausible". He went further than that: he stated facts which, to his contemporaries – and for several centuries afterwards – seemed implausible: that dolphins are mammals and not fish, for instance; and that certain sharks are viviparous.

Aristotle was essentially an empiricist and, through his insistence on "hands-on" research, he has a host of scientific "firsts" to his name. He also made a lot of mistakes, of course, but if he could see a thing and dissect it, he usually got it right: if he couldn't observe it at first hand, he often resorted to the "conventional wisdom of the day", and got it wrong.

Empiricism is the basis of science. Indeed Robin Dunbar, Professor of Psychology at the University of Liverpool, finds its roots in animal life. "Being able to predict what is going to happen in order to be able to act in an appropriate way at the right moment is", as he says, "fundamental to survival". And he cites a series of studies in which birds and mammals exhibit learned behaviour.

A fascinating example is the honeyguide bird of East Africa, which leads humans and the ratel (or honey badger) to bees' nests. The bird cannot get into the nests to steal the honeycomb and relies upon the other party to remove it. Members of the Boran, the local people, will smoke out the bees and leave a share of the honeycomb for the bird; the ratel doesn't deliberately leave any honeycomb, but it is a messy eater and will unintentionally leave enough for the honeyguide.

Among the more remarkable animal learners are, not surprisingly, the primates. Gelada baboons, studied by Robin Dunbar himself in northern Ethiopia, suffer serious constipation during the dry season from eating dessicated grasses and, when the wild roses come into fruit, the animals consume them in large quantities. Rosehips have a high vitamin C content, which cures their constipation. And there are several well-documented cases of chimpanzees using medicinal plants for intestinal disorders, practices that must have been learned empirically, although they may now have become habitual.

The basic processes that underlie science are not, therefore, unusual: rather they are "characteristic of all advanced life forms", making it "possible for these species of animals to operate much more effectively in the world". And the scientific method of logical deduction and the meticulous testing of hypotheses provides human beings with their most effective way of living and surviving in the "real world".

Science as practised in our high-tech laboratories is, of course, "something more than just everyday knowledge put into practice". In some respects it may be said that science is "unnatural" (cf Lewis Wolpert's *The Unnatural Nature of Science*). Or, as suggested at the start

The Trouble with Science by Robin Dunbar. Faber and Faber £7.99

Review: Colin McCall

– I think preferably – implausible.

But, as Professor Dunbar remarks, the rigour with which the scientist applies his methods is "genuinely unnatural". Our minds seem to be "predisposed to deal with social matters rather than the nature of the physical world". And science has always had its enemies, because it threatened traditional ideas and methods.

So, while Robin Dunbar's splendid little book is essentially a defence of science and a plea for better coverage in the media, it contains many examples of theological hostility. Galileo's imprisonment is the outstanding case in the Christian world. Less well known is the effect of Islamic fundamentalism on the rise of Arab science in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. "Islam's insistence that everything of any consequence had already been written down in the Koran made it impossible for the philosopher-scientists of the Arab world to debate openly any of the newly discovered dimensions to science".

The great twelfth-century Moorish philosopher al-Rashid (Averroës) maintained "a substantial output (including his authoritative commentaries on Aristotle) while under the protection of the politically powerful caliph Yussuf of Cordoba". But when he fell out with Yussuf's successor, mainly because of pressure from fundamentalists, al-Rashid's career came to an

end, and his death in 1197 "marked the beginning of the end for Arabic liberal science in the West".

Needless to say – in these columns at least – religious fanaticism is still with us, three obvious examples being the relentless efforts of American creationists to control the schools, the ferocious Roman Catholic opposition to abortion, and the Muslim *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie.

Professor Dunbar also rightly criticises Holism and Postmodernism. The former, he says, "leads us straight into mysticism and religion" and "we should be deeply suspicious of it". It is a very pessimistic philosophy. If the real world is too complicated for us to understand, then there isn't much hope for the future. "We will never learn how to control the diseases that strike us down, and we will never be able to save the planet from the fate that two dozen centuries of mismanagement have left it heir to ... It is a race against time, and we cannot afford the luxury of allowing mystical nonsense to distract us from reality ..."

Postmodernists in the humanities aver that a reader has "the right to interpret a given author's work anyhow he or she likes". And, by extension, "the world is however we wish to interpret it". This strikes Robin Dunbar as "intellectual laziness", undeserving of the name of scholarship.

Our only real hope for the future, he declares, "lies in the belief that our intellectual abilities are good enough to unravel the complexity of natural processes and allow us to forestall the inevitable fate that awaits us if we don't".

We must be empirical.

Lesson in Islamic values for HRH

THE SECOND most stupid thing ever said by Prince Charles, surely, was that Islam had "retained a more integrated view of the world" than materialistic Western Society (*Daily Telegraph*, December 14).

The most stupid thing was, of course, "I do," but his demand for more Moslem teachers "to allow British children to learn from Islamic values" must run it close.

He wants Islam to provide the West with "inspiration for the next century" – and we are sending him a copy of this month's *Freethinker* to give him an idea (see Terry Sanderson, Page 7) what our children may be expected to learn from Islam. (Read Terry's article; it's all too beastly to bear repetition).

You do see, now, why it is so essential that the *Freethinker* survive to provide an antidote to the great sea of superstitious poison which rises

daily from the likes of HRH?

And the fund is one way in which *you* can ensure that we do thrive to keep up the fight for reason. Making cheques and POs payable to G W Foote & Co, please send a donation to the *Freethinker*, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: B Samuel, £2; R Awbery, J Chadwick, J Lavety, C Shives, R Stubbs, £3 each; F Bacon, A Brown, E Brown, N Bruce, A George, A Hoyle, S Rose, A Thorne, G Broady, £5 each; R Brown, £6; J Bell, J Corcoran, S Geddes, R Lovejoy, E Napier, D Norman, G Reece, G Strang, S Valdar, I Williams, W Donovan, £10 each; E Sinclair, £15; R Melbourne, £20; A Negus (August-December) £45.

Total to December 16: £258.

Boring sermons may have sparked Salem!

"I DESIRE to be humbled before God for that sad and humbling providence that befell my father's family in the year about '92". That was how the 26-year-old Ann Putnam began her confession in 1706, for her and her parents' part in the horrific Salem Witch Trials 14 years before. She now had "just grounds and good reason to believe" that, through "a great delusion of Satan", she had helped to send "innocent persons" to their death. But, she declared, "before God and man, I did it not out of any anger, malice or ill-will". Satan had to take the blame.

She was, it is true, only 12 at the time, and was almost certainly encouraged by her father, Thomas Putnam, but she was able to throw fits at will and accuse without cause. She was not the only one; she was one of a group of girls, the youngest nine and the eldest 19, who convinced the people of Salem Village in Massachusetts in 1692, that many of their friends and neighbours were bewitched.

As a result, 19 men and women they had known from childhood were hanged, well over a hundred languished in cramped, stinking jails, and some were tortured. It was religious fanaticism at its worst.

We can never know, of course, whether any of the girls feigned their fits or how much was hysteria. What we do know is the near hysterical nature of the Puritanism in which they were reared. Evil spirits were all around.

"Go tell mankind that there are devils and witches", wrote the Boston minister Cotton Mather, "... New England has had examples of their existence and operation; and that not only in the wigwams of Indians ... but in the houses of Christians ..." Death, too, was ever present and, Mather warned, children "are not too little to die, they are not too little to go to hell". "Are you willing to go to hell to be burnt with the devil and his angels? ... Oh, hell is a terrible place, that's worse a thousand times than whipping."

"The lives of girls were monotonous past bearing", writes Frances Hill with feeling. They "had nothing to feed the imagination, to expand understanding or heighten sensitivity. There were no fairy tales or stories to help order or make sense of experience. There was no art or theatre or any but

***A Delusion of Satan: The Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials* by Frances Hill. Hamish Hamilton £18.**

Review: Colin McCall

the simplest music to express and give form to chaotic emotion. Boys enjoyed hunting, trapping and fishing, carpentry, and crafts. For girls there were no such outlets for animal high spirits or mental creativity."

They, like everyone else, were expected to attend a long midweek sermon by the pastor Samuel Parris on Thursday afternoons and, of course, the boring church services in the unheated meetinghouse on Sunday.

The witch-hunt started in Parris' house, when his nine-year-old daughter Betty, his niece Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam and Elizabeth Hubbard accused his Caribbean Indian slave Tituba and two other women of witchcraft.

Betty and Abigail dabbled in fortune telling to relieve their boredom and some commentators have seen the West Indian Tituba as their instigator, but Frances Hill thinks not. She points out that the methods the girls employed were "thoroughly English ones", using "sieves and keys, and peas, and nails, and horseshoes". They also broke the white of an egg in a glass of water to see what shape it flowed into. "In fact, everything about the witchcraft accusations was homegrown, that is, transplanted from England and then taking on a New England flavour."

Parris, who was born in England, was a fanatical Puritan who preached constantly on the villainy of sinners and their everlasting punishment. "Sinners see no hell", he declaimed, "and therefore fear none. Oh sinners time enough, time enough, have but a little patience, and you shall see an hell time enough, wrath will overtake you time enough, if you repent it not by true repentance."

It is hardly surprising, Frances Hill says, that the girls' first hallucinations should be of Tituba. "They must have seen her shouted at, called 'evil' and 'devil' ... and probably beaten by the pastor". And this is not just speculation, although there is quite a bit of this in the book. When the girls accused Tituba of witchcraft, Parris tried to make her confess by beating her and "otherways", whatever these may have been.

As each of the accused was brought before the examining magistrates, John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin, the questioning, mostly by the former, assumed guilt from the start. "What evil spirit have you familiarity with?" he would ask. "Why do you hurt these children?" And, repetitively, "Have you made no contract with the devil?" When this met with the accused's denials, the afflicted girls would scream and writhe, twist their limbs "beyond what seemed possible", collapse, choke and faint.

It was only years later that writers suggested this apparent suffering might have been fraudulent, Frances Hill says. "At the time nobody doubted its genuineness". And in the mid-eighteenth century Thomas Hutchinson, governor of Massachusetts, reported that many were still not convinced that the accusers were fraudulent, but were "under bodily disorders which affected their imaginations".

Certainly, according to an eye-witness of later examinations, they presented a disturbing sight: tongues drawn out of their mouths "to a fearful length", arms and legs twisted "as if dislocated", blood gushing out of their mouths, and so on.

Yet they could bring the fits on to order and, in *The Crucible*, his play based upon the trials, Arthur Miller portrays some of them turning on the fits deliberately. He also makes Abigail Williams the ringleader, and adds six years to her age. In Frances Hill's view, the role of leader "probably belonged at least equally to Ann Putnam".

Whatever we think of the genuineness of the girls' fits, there can be little excuse for the role of prosecuting adults. Ann's father, Thomas Putnam, was "utterly cynical and unscrupulous". He and his wife (who also suffered fits for a time) were allies of Samuel Parris and "consciously or unconsciously drove on the witch-hunt as a means of demolishing his enemies and theirs".

Increase and Cotton Mather, father and son, helped to create the climate of fear and suspicion in which the witch-hunt took place and, although his father later doubted the validity of spectral evidence in trying witches, Cotton never repented. Nor did John Hathorne, who assumed the guilt of the accused before they opened their mouths. He earned the contempt of his great great grandson: Nigel Hawthorne added a w to his name, in distinction to that of his ancestor, whom he portrayed as the cruel Judge Pyncheon in *The House of the Green Gables*. But Hathorne had then been dead for 100 years.

Among those who emerged with credit, in addition to many of the victims, were Samuel Saltonstall, one of the judges at the trials which followed the examinations, who resigned; and the mathematician and astronomer, Thomas Brattle, who, in a letter dated October 8, 1692, criticised the whole procedure.

On October 12, the Massachusetts provincial governor, Sir William Phipps forbade further imprisonments for witchcraft.

PS. One of the last people to be accused by the girls was Mrs Margaret Thatcher (yes, there must have been another), but by then the tide had turned and she was never arrested.

God by any other name ...

ACCORDING to the *International Herald Tribune* of Paris, an article in the influential Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica* asserts that "God may have spoken through books as diverse as the Muslim Koran, the Hindu Vedas and Bhagavad-Gita and the sacred texts of China's Taoism and Japan's Shintoism".

The article suggests that these and other religious writings "represent not mere literature or philosophy, but rather 'revelation' - God

speaking through man".

Because the journal's articles are informally checked by Vatican censors, questions have been raised as to whether these views represent the Pope's own mind on the matter.

The *Tribune* observed that in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul II noted that the Church was seeking in other religions that which forms a kind of common root with the teachings of the church.

Source: *Awake!* August 22, 1996.

Terry Sanderson on the media

I HAD thought that the horrible excesses of Afghanistan's Taliban fanatics were bad enough, but they almost pale into insignificance when set against what is happening in Algeria. There, the government is trying desperately to stop the country being taken over by Islamic militants, who want to add another theocracy to Allah's growing collection.

Unfortunately, the Algerian government's ban on religious groups taking part in elections has given the fundamentalists exactly what they wanted – a sense of persecution to play on. Since they were stopped from taking over the country in the democratic elections, the Islamic Salvation Army, and others of the same ilk, have turned the country into the throat-slitting capital of the world. The growing number of reports of the mass murders committed in the name of Allah are appalling, and mostly it is women and children who are taking the brunt. Needless to say, the Algerian government is almost as bloodthirsty in its attempts at repression as the Islamists are in their righteousness. Both accuse the other of being guilty of the killing and torturing.

In *The Observer*, Lara Marlowe asked how Algeria, "a country blessed with riches and beauty", came to be host to daily massacres and blood-letting on this scale. "Yesterday came news of fresh atrocities: a total of 29 men, women and children, massacred on Wednesday and Thursday in two villages 18 miles south-west of Algiers," she wrote. "Ten victims, including seven women, were decapitated... At the home of the Merkhrafi family, the mother was decapitated and twelve year old Mustapha's hands were cut off. Four other women, including a 15 year old girl, and five men were killed in the same house... A 70-year old woman was dragged from her bed and beheaded. Another family of seven were massacred. All the children had their ears and hands cut off. The victims included a child of six, 13-year old twins and a pregnant woman whose baby was cut out of her stomach before her throat was cut..."

It goes on like this for paragraph after paragraph, each horror more extreme than the last. Eventually you begin to ask: can this be true? Can human beings really do this to each other for no purpose other than the belief in something that they can never know for certain? It seems almost like the anti-Hun propaganda of the First World War, but this is dispassionate reporting from the front by some of Fleet Street's finest.

In the world of the Islamic fundamentalists, anyone who criticises such extremes of cruelty, such unforgivable brutality and murder, is told that "Westerners cannot understand Islamic culture. It is a different mind-set and therefore you have no right to comment

Horror upon horror in the throat-slitting capital of the world

on it." Robert Fisk, reporting on the situation for *The Independent*, had a dose of this when he interviewed one of the "freedom fighters" – a 20 year old calling himself Abu Mohammed. Mr Fisk wrote: "When I asked him why the Muslim groups cut the throats of their enemies, [Abu Mohammed] replied: 'It's the best way to become closer to God, the best way to kill a *taghout* [enemy of God]. If you have someone who is capable of killing five-year-old children what do you do with him? Kill him with bullets? Bullets are precious to us – they are very expensive. Take a 9mm Kalashnikov bullet – it's as if you are throwing it away. Anyone who tried to destroy Islam, tried to destroy the Good Lord, who takes the Lord's name in vain, is a devil. You can do anything to wipe out a devil."

A lot more of this drivel emanates from Abu Mohammed during the interview,

steadily becoming more and more fanatical, and more and more deadly.

"Martyrdom" was much on Abu Mohammed's mind. 'The Koran promises victory or martyrdom. It says real martyrs don't bleed very much. When they die they smell of musk perfume. This is true. The security forces have noticed that sometimes our dead smell of musk. When a martyr dies, he is met in paradise by 72 beautiful women'".

Just the rantings of a misguided young man? Of course, but a misguided young man with a Kalashnikov, a special knife for slitting children's throats and an unshakeable belief that it doesn't matter if he dies, because Allah has promised a better life after death. When whole nations believe this kind of thing, and they have access to nuclear weapons, then the end of the world seems a distinct possibility.

Atheists get the tabloid treatment

I'VE NEVER really been able to work out Rupert Murdoch's attitude to religion. Given that he is supposed to be a born-again Christian, he seems not to mind his tabloid newspapers spending half their time dragging vicars, vergers, bishops and deacons through the mud. The *News of the World* particularly seems to have it in for the pious, and some of their headlines are a brilliant. "Chapel organist likes to Handel my missus" was the gem on December 1. While the week before we were regaled with "Bible basher defrocked me in the vicarage."

It could be, of course, that Mr Murdoch is on a personal crusade to clear the unholy and hypocritical out of the Church. The problem is, his reporters are uncovering so much "filth" among the clerical classes that soon there won't be any left that haven't been done over by the *News of the World*. What will happen to their anti-sex crusades then?

Not that we should laugh too loudly. I have seen the first instance I can remember of an atheist being given the shock-horror-scandal

treatment. "Atheist linked to missing money," the *Times* informed us on December 11. "America's most famous atheist, who disappeared more than a year ago, vanished at about the same time as \$625,000 went missing from two groups she controlled, it has emerged."

Madalyn Murray O'Hair brought a famous federal case in 1993, which removed prayers and Bible reading from American schools. The case made her a household name across the United States, but she disappeared in August last year, together with members of her family. Now American Atheists Inc. and United Secularists of America have admitted that the money is missing after earlier denials.

Of course, religion is taken so much more seriously in the United States (did you know, for instance, that a recent poll has shown that 38 per cent of Americans think that Joan of Arc is related to Noah?), and the Christian political groups are so powerful and conniving that no-one should jump to any conclusions. Ms O'Hair won a great victory that annoyed many of the most fanatical religionists in her country. I'm not really into conspiracy theories, but I'll wait for the evidence before deciding who is to blame.

A mind virus to Richard Dawkins

DEAR RICHARD, sometimes a friend makes a cake – and it tastes fine but they leave out the best ingredient. Your linking of religion with viruses is like that: a splendid idea – but it is a pity you do not know more about us viruses.

You innocently treat me and my brethren DNA viruses as mere replicators which hitch a free copying service from a cell's own replicating machinery or its equivalent in the mind. Richard, duplicating yourself upon others is never so easy.

We, whether viruses of DNA or the mind, face the hassle that cells and minds do not like being duped and abused. Naturally, they make life hard – they do not let you in, and once in they do their best to detect and stop you.

Imagine what it is like being a DNA virus. Cells might have replication machinery waiting there to copy you but cells also block access by surrounding themselves with membranes. And entry is only the start of your problems. Cells make existence tough against foreigners. Worse, the bodies they made long ago evolved to spot and destroy any cells viruses had taken over. After all, the reason you, Richard, as a human, have an immune system is to pick up and destroy infections – and that includes viruses. You may be grateful that evolution has given your body this ability, but from the viewpoint of me and my brethren the immune system is an enemy on the lookout to stop us making any more copies of ourselves – it is no friend.

And this is where Professor Richard you mistake us – we are not mere replicators. Like our *modus operandi* we borrow our tools of survival – with the devices of the immune system we outwit the cell. Look inside us and you will find we are packed with kidnapped genes from the immune system (and the normal workings of the cell) for making proteins reversed-engineered to sabotage its baring, detection and destruction of us. Scientists have even taken to looking over our genes to see bits of the immune system we have kidnapped (we were there first) but they have overlooked.

Take entry, cells have a transport system across their membranes in the form of receptors. Packed in our survival gear are kidnapped proteins which link with them and so like forged passports let us in. We have more problems once inside a cell. You may think

your cells are passive but we can see them engaged in a constant dance by which specialised carrying-proteins take protein fragments (including bits of us) from its depths to its surface for display to immune cells such as lymphocytes which give cells a check over as to whether foreigners (detected by our alien protein fragments) have entered. We need to stop them being alerted. How? Long ago, we kidnapped the genes responsible for making such proteins and rewrote them to make fifth columnists which subversively take the place of bona fide ones but refuse to hand over protein fragments and so give us away. Smart aren't we?

But you have not seen anything yet of how we turn the immune system against itself. Sometimes in spite of our best efforts, the immune system is put on alert. But then we deploy more kidnapped and rewritten genes. If certain proteins attach to the cell advertising that we are within, then we create subversive fifth columnist ones which float outside cells, putting the immune system off the trail as to where we hide – rather like the decoys and tinfoil used by aircraft to confuse enemy radar. The immune response becomes thus lost in a fog of false signals. Another trick is to confuse the immune system by using the proteins it uses to co-ordinate its attack. Guess what? We make lots of extra copies and deluge its communication system with spurious messages and so put its workings in a muddle.

So, Professor Dawkins, you have got us wrong and we want a correction. We are not mere replicators: we are super-replicators packed with smart counter-defences like faked passports, decoys, camouflage and communication jamming. We cannot survive without these hijacked tricks – cruel scientists have even made copies of us minus them and the immune system just spots and zaps us out.

Now, Professor Dawkins, if you do not understand my DNA virus brethren, how can you understand us viruses of the mind? Getting them wrong, you are bound to give us the credit we are due for our smartness in the replication business. Like DNA viruses we face a tough world. After all, people do not adopt stupid, false and bigoted ideas like us easily – let alone devote their lives evangelising so that others get infected and evangelise them on further. The human species in spite of some lapses are rather rational and basically

kind creatures. Indeed, if they knew how to let this side of them win out, we mind viruses would have long ago, like bear-baiting and slavery, died out and entered the history books.

The questioning Greeks, I should briefly note, were just about to do this. Euripides after all had the character Talthybius in his play *Hecabe* ask, are “all our beliefs in gods, a myth, a lie foolishly cherished, while blind hazard rules the world?”. His contemporary Diagoras, of Melos, argued that the Gods could not exist since wrong doers were never punished. He was even called *ho Atheos* – Greek for atheist. The Greeks were beginning to think and stop us. It was a risky moment in the history of mind viruses. Fortunately, like our DNA brethren we learnt quickly how to hijack and turn such rationality against itself. The Greeks might have discovered logic but it took us only a century or so to kidnap and rewrite it into theology and so keep us in business. Thus to understand me, you must understand such things as how I put common sense – the ‘immune system of the mind’ – in reverse.

But first, like my DNA brethren, I have to get into people's minds. I am foreigner no one would want taking over their thoughts and behaviour. Thus like my brethren DNA viruses I must get past the boundaries people put in place to keep intolerant and stupid ideas like me out. That is a tough task: people do not take on new beliefs lightly – they demand evidence, logic and morality. Thus, it is not easy to gain access into people's minds – people are no fools. But like my brethren DNA viruses, Richard, I know how to transport myself in – by a kind of fake passport. To understand how, you have to understand some of the biology of the infant mind.

Evolution long ago spotted young primates cannot know what is good and bad for them. After all, they have not been around long enough to learn much about the dangers of the world. Evolution therefore gave them a shortcut – child psychologists call it social or maternal reference. Children look to who they trust, usually mother, and learn direct from them. Mum or any other trusted figure knows what to rely on and what to fear. Thus a young mind can skip learning the hard and potentially dangerous way from experience and use trusted figures.

s writes Dawkins



Professor Dawkins is wrong! A mind virus is not a mere replicator; it's a super-replicator – a real smart cookie. Dr John R Skoyles, pictured left, feels not enough credit is given to these clever fifth columnists.

For us viruses it is literally a Godsend. Indeed, it is such a good entry into the mind we hijack it twice. First, think about it, once I have got into mum's mind, I have her children. They look to her for what to trust and they find all my fake 'knowledge' evolved to replicate myself – and they look at what to fear and they find all my warnings about not using the 'immune system' of their commonsense – 'temptations of the devil' – to reject me. Moreover, I put it in their heads that I am better than real knowledge (which is always open to doubt and challenge) since I am unchangeable, absolute, and of course, unquestionable. Indeed, I am so fundamental to reality that I am more real than life itself. Thus I program people (you call it religious instruction, Bible classes and Confirmation) to ignore (well try to) present concerns and seek instead to do things which copy me out of concerns about the sacred, God and what happens after death. In particular, I teach parents they should raise children to hold me in total respect as the truth and source of all that is right and wrong. Naturally, I ensure if someone marries that whatever their partner's wants, they infect, or to use the polite euphemism 'raise', their children in 'the true faith'.

What chance do children have – hardly any. I still however do not risk things. Parents are not always reliable and can (worries of worries) raise their children with the examining independence that might doubt and reject me. Therefore, I hijack a child's learning from trusted figures in a second way to remove that danger: I delude some people to hear 'a calling' to devote their lives to being better than real-life mums, dads and other kin: in your parlance, Mother Superior this and Father that (even though, of course, the one thing I do not

let them, at least publicly, be is real mothers and real fathers). Children therefore do not only turn to their mums and dads and elder siblings but my bogus Mothers, Fathers, Brothers and Sisters. They are my hottest replicators.

But my problems, like my DNA brethren, are not over once I gain entry. As much as the body has an immune system to rid itself of viruses so does the mind – commonsense. People seek not to be fools and try to free themselves of dotty ideas. They are always unfortunately checking their ideas for errors and mistakes. This makes it a hostile world out there for us – I noted above ever since the Classical Greeks people have been coming to the conclusion that the idea that the Gods exist and have power over us is absurd. (Even Aristotle knew we were a con. For instance, he observed that religious mythology and ritual "was introduced to persuade the multitude and with a view to practical use for the laws and expediency" – *Metaphysics* 1074b 1-8). Thus while atheists seem to think it is hard to convince people that God is a lot of nonsense, for us viruses of the mind, people seem always at the point of realising that religion is just this and junking us. Fortunately, like my DNA brethren, we know how to protect ourselves by turning what should protect people to our advantage.

Our main defence is to turn reasoning against itself – we get people to back-reason. This is like *bona fide* reasoning except it works in reverse. In proper reasoning you start with premises and deduce from them conclusions. In back-reasoning, you start off with the conclusion you need and invent arguments which give them support. Getting people to reverse their reasoning is useful both in

entraping people in religious beliefs, and once caught, creating theological prisons to hold them.

To get people to reverse reason, I put them in what psychologists call 'cognitive dissonance'. This is felt when we find we have done or said things that lack sensible justification. People face a kind of intellectual embarrassment – they look at the absurdity they have done and wonder how they came to waste their time, respect and money. Like nature, minds do not like a vacuum – people look around for justifications. They thus are vulnerable to any arguments (however loony) which fill this gap.

To exploit this weakness I get people to believe and do absurd things. They need to be over-the-top ridiculous so that people cannot explain having believed or done them other than for the story I invent for them – for instance, that they are required by ancient sacred doctrine to keep the Devil away, the Universe together, Sun to rise tomorrow etc etc. Some aid my replication such as giving up 10 per cent of their income or knocking on doors with religious leaflets. But most are pure stupidities: really silly things and beliefs righteously executed believing, that if they were not done, the world would end. One of my most popular is getting people to eat bread and drink wine served by a man in camp drag while believing they are not actually eating bread or drinking wine but first century AD cannibals eating the flesh and blood of their Saviour. Even the Monty Python team could not think of anything with more fruit and nut than that.

Now if people do and believe over-the-top absurdities especially for a number of years they are trapped. What kind of story could they tell themselves? Are they likely to be open that they have been wasting their money, lives and self-respect over crazy and idiotic ideas? Giving a tenth of what you earn to the church and believing that the Lord is a pointless myth do not fit. No, instead, of bravely admitting having held and done nonsense, they cling to me even more strongly. They back-reason from the absurdities they do to the justifications – 'faith' – preached to them. No, you are not stupid. In eating that wafer, you are really sharing in the sacred event of

Obituary: Edward Blishen

'One of the freest thinkers'

EDWARD Blishen, who died at the age of 76 on December 12, was for more than 30 years a prominent figure in educational, literary and broadcasting circles.

Obituaries in the national press gave extensive coverage to Edward Blishen's achievements as an educationist, writer, critic and broadcaster. Predictably, neither *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph* nor *Independent* recorded his long and active involvement with the freethought movement.

Edward Blishen's name on the National Secular Society's list of distinguished members was not just a formal gesture. He spoke at NSS meetings and contributed to the columns of *The Freethinker*. Despite press-

by Bill McIlroy

ing professional commitments, he was ever obliging and reliable.

Looking back to the first issue of *The Freethinker* I edited (August 1, 1970), Edward Blishen's name appears on the front page. He was commenting on David Tribe's *The Cost of Church Schools*, which had just been published by the NSS. Edward Blishen wrote of church schools: "They bear as much relation to the real needs and common convictions of our community as would schools based on our old divisions into Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex and so on. And, indeed, it is a kind of spiritual tribalism that they represent – a primitive organisation in the field of belief that takes no heed of the

scepticism and open-mindedness that have long formed the outlook of the nation. A study of the historical tricks by which the churches have maintained their grip on education is a matter, perhaps, for someone even more Voltairean than Mr Tribe."

Edward Blishen returned to the subject of school religion when, as a guest of honour at the NSS annual dinner in 1976, he declared: "If I want to see the religious load lifted from the shoulders of the school and the children, it's partly because I think it's a perfectly insufferable anachronism, and makes it much more difficult to have a serious discussion of serious things; but also because it casts its shadows, is the enemy of laughter and of vital scepticism and of delight in living, and the ally of docility and conformity."

At the same function, another educationist, Nicholas Tucker, described Edward Blishen as "one of the freest thinkers. We are very fortunate to have him at our own particular time, a writer who is totally independent, individual, honest, and unfailingly skilful in all he ever does."

A mind virus writes to Richard Dawkins

From Page 9

the Lord. A tenth of one's income is not down the drain but an obedience to God's Law. People thus never risk questioning my stranglehold over them. Suppose they did. Full marks for bravely accepting I have wasted their lives and money for superstitious gibberish. Fortunately for my continued existence people have too much pride and self-deception to wise up.

I have another problem. Like my brethren DNA viruses, I need to infect people not only as virologists say vertically – down from their parents (described above) but horizontally – to converts. Worse, some people with good religious upbringing drop me, as I have said, most people if aware would view me as ridiculous, immoral and intolerant. Some wake up that I am and kick me out. Fortunately, I can find other ways to enter adult minds using back-reasoning.

To get in I use lots of tricks. I have the infection with me promoted as being a way to be, if not socially desirable, at least special. It works well on those feeling insecure and uncertain about who they are – an experience common in modern times. I offer them the privilege of being one of 'the chosen ones'. As a member of my closed group, they can feel self-righteous that they are among the elect and 'saved'. Sometimes I have a little trouble here: some groups go a little far and to get more recruits name dates for salvation. Bad idea – the hour always passes like any other. Far better to leave the date vague or better shift the great event into an 'after-life'. Christianity has built into a nice replication business from rather unpromising beginnings upon that nonsense.

You should not think getting people to fall for this is easy. People may be vulnerable for the

self-delusion of being special but they still have wits to see a con – if you do not approach them correctly. The art is to be gradual. Invite people with an air of openness, friendship and 'a need to investigate the other side'. Offer them soft sells talk about caring for others and brotherly love – all the values with which no one would disagree. And ask people to do just a small something. Nothing initially big, share a small prayer, make a small donation, or help in the reading of some Bible passage. You do not even need to ask – people's sense of not offending will be enough. But the foot has been put in the door. They have done something with which they can later be identified and with which you can move them to bigger things. Before long they discover without knowing it that they have done real stupidities. People may think they act out after carefully reasoning. But social psychologists know otherwise – people can readily be induced into doing nearly anything, however absurd, providing the social situation has been made to lead them on without cause to reflect. Thus people easily find themselves getting more committed and snared without spotting the subtle manipulations played upon them. I enter people because most people underestimate the power of this slippery slope of social persuasion using 'back-reasoning' and induced 'cognitive dissonance'.

Now, Professor Dawkins, you should understand why I worry you underestimate my brethren DNA viruses. We, DNA and mind viruses do not just copy ourselves – our survival depends upon undermining determined defences. If you are going to write about us, then note how we viruses hijack and put in reverse these defences. A virus whether of DNA or the mind cannot survive if it is a mere replicator: survival requires that we are also subversive and smart.

NSS SUBS DUE!

A reminder that subscriptions are due on 1 January 1997 for all NSS members (except for new members who paid after 30 September 1996 whose renewal subscriptions will not be due until 1 January 1998.)

The subscription is £5, but – particularly as this only covers a fraction of the Society's running costs – if you are able also to make a donation, this would be particularly welcome.

The oldest profession of all

PRIESTHOOD must be the very oldest profession. Long before it had occurred to anyone to offer sexual services on a business basis, someone was waffling away at the back of a cave, discouraging in the shadows with imaginary beings, whose privileged agent he or she had become to companion troglodytes.

The meal ticket had fallen by chance. An extra sense, maybe. Keen perceptions, anyway, allied with a ready wit. A lucky guess or two, establishing a reputation for the fey. Wild ramblings after chewing on that root. No matter. The bone collar could be worn with pride; folk watched the fearsome gyrations of the seer and listened with respect to every grunt. Here was an authority (or one fast becoming so) on unseen presences, who could be wheedled into granting favours.

Such was the ancestor of all the world's mediators.

Priesthood proved to be a most rewarding business. Just a pity that so much went up in smoke. In due course there were trained successors, well-developed rites or procedures, holy objects which only priests or official personnel could be allowed to handle, places consecrated to the mysteries of their secret art, from which the unauthorised were excluded, and arcane powers. Trickery was sometimes practised, but some weird things actually worked, even when no one knew quite how.

Control

Priests became the guardians of civilisation; their libraries preserved tradition; their hierarchies, congruent with regal authority as often as not, the means of political, economic and social control. Nothing useful could be done without their involvement, which, of course, as the inevitable consequence of not being able to tell the difference between scientific fact and superstition (or even that there was a difference), meant that entirely useless things were done also.

Temples were centres of power. Spiritual, it was said. Military strategists wanted the gods on their side. Farmers and traders likewise. Architects and engineers were among those whose talents you employed.

At the time of Jesus, Temple religion had been long established. Jerusalem was the political and religious centre of Judaism. A ceremonial calendar governed both social and private life. Great buildings, dwarfing worshippers in their courts ... sonorous music and chanting ... clouds of incense, sacrificial smoke... vestments and banners ... such paraphernalia have always had, for many, strong aesthetic and theatrical appeal. Mysteries of infinity, eternity and the supernatural appear to be given dramatic embodiment.

Some early Christians had a fondness for hierophantic imagery. *My priestly service, wrote Paul, is the preaching of the gospel.* Members of the Christian community were described as *built upon the foundation of the*

CHARLES WARD EXAMINES THE MEDIATOR MYTH

apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner-stone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

Hebrews, a non-Pauline writing, gives even more enthusiastic expression to this fancy.

The writer drew a grandiloquent word-picture of divine glory among the rafters of a hierarchic universe, high above the Angels, said to function as couriers, another type of go-between.

Jesus is given top place. By his death (conceived as a sacrifice transcending and replacing all previous "gifts" to the gods), he has, it is claimed, performed his priestly duty, *purgation of sins*. Christians are to think of him as *High Priest*.

Elaborate explanations follow as to how and why the old covenant was replaced by the new; why Jesus was obliged or destined to suffer in order to *make expiation for the sins of the people*; how *the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit, offered himself without blemish to God* can effect everyone's salvation, how Jesus is the *mediator of a new covenant*, and so on.

At the Reformation, Protestants rejected the traditional mediation of priests on the basis of *1 Tim. 2:5 – there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus* – while claiming support from other texts.

Nevertheless, priestcraft has retained its hold, although this fact is glossed over, both by secular-minded politicians who imagine that religion can be socially useful, and by ecumenically-minded nonconformists, anxious not to rock the boat.

The world to come (Heb. 2:5), (that is, the heavenly realm supposedly awaiting the *saved* after death) is linked with the theme of mediation. The sinner cannot approach God, it is maintained, without a go-between. Accordingly, those who hope to be admitted, are bidden to look to Jesus as their High Priest, who may intercede on their behalf.

All this Temple twaddle is a thousand miles from Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels. It is extremely unlikely that a local preacher thought in these terms. If he thought of himself at all as a *mediator between God and men*, it would probably be in the simple sense of being a servant of the God he believed in. His mind would be full of Jewish preconceptions, not Christian ones.

Hebrews is an evangelistic appeal for faith in Christ. Jesus, says the author, is (like God) *the same yesterday and today and for ever*.

Here the wish is certainly father to the thought, since neither God nor Jesus in the Bible, or anywhere else, presents this singu-

lar appearance.

Immutability may be a harmless fantasy. Unhappily, not all fantasies are.

The mediator myth is prejudicial to rational morality because it plays upon the desire to minimise or remove feelings of guilt which actually require acceptance. Also, by investing another person, who bears no responsibility for the wrong done, with a vicarious role as saviour, it undervalues personal moral responsibility. That the characters of some Christians are superior to their convoluted, essentially unethical, theology, is irrelevant.

Many are attracted by the "purple" passage (Heb. 11), glorifying *faith* which in that context merely implies an adventurous disposition. A sinister undercurrent may escape notice. When the writer is plainly thinking of faith in the customary religious sense of "true" belief, it is part of his religion that failure to believe is due to disobedience, or rebellion against God. He means that unbelief is due to *evil intention*.

This sick, irrational attitude to deciding what is acceptable belief or surmise has been at the heart of Christianity from its inception. It has adversely affected the mental (and often, as a result, the physical) health of countless believers, as psychiatrists know.

The underlying cause is fear – fear of losing comfort derived from self-delusion that one knows "the truth", or – even more negatively – fear of divine punishment, which people have been taught to associate with lack of orthodox (correct) belief.

Unsavoury

Luckily (in a way) for them, some, who remain within the ambit of Christianity, have an in-built resistance to such spiritual terrorism. They conveniently forget the Church's history of wickedness. They ignore unsavoury passages in their "holy" scriptures. (This is not hard to do, because, apart from tracts of the Bible whose real meaning has been sanitised out of recognition by the devout through constant doctrinaire interpretation, unsavoury passages are rarely, if ever, read out in church.) Guided by their "hearts" rather than their "heads", they lead lives of modest virtue based on sentiments of love and fellowship with like-minded people.

Cleverness may not be a vital component of a good life, but clarity of thought is certainly helpful.

We are not responsible for the junk with which our minds were cluttered in the course of our early instruction in the traditions we were expected to treasure. But, as we become aware that they are undesirable accumulations from an ignorant and superstitious past, we are culpable if we do not dispose of the lumber.

We owe no thanks to the primordial rascal who committed the genuinely original sin, which has proved to be a disaster for our entire species – acting as self-appointed intermediary between human beings and the mythical.

You're telling us!

Nothing comes of nothing

ERIC Yaffey tells us (Letters, December) that once we have accepted the idea of an expanding universe, we can "run the film backwards, so to speak, and can then calculate when all the galaxies and all space must have occupied a single point". (Since a point has only location and not space, I presume he means an "infinitesimally" small volume). However, I can see no reason why we cannot continue to run our film backwards until we have arrived at the other side of existence – i.e. nothing – and, as Lear informs us, nothing will come of nothing!

From all this I conclude that the Big Bang hypothesis is quite probably a big con trick. Indeed, the likelihood (since 'God' or 'Gods' are no more than a human invention) is that all existence is pure fantasy. Nothing is more probable than that, as Tweedledee informs Alice, existence is no more than the dreams of the sleeping Red King. Nonetheless, as figments of that dream, our business is to get on with the business of living according to our lights and to the best of our ability for as long as we feature in the divine tragi-comedy of life.

ALBERT ADLER
London N4

Resisting Nazism

WITH regard to the December letters and the on-going debate, Peter Gamble (I'll acknowledge his "Reverend" status on being recognised as the Agnostic Messiah) says: "... Better to let Hitler invade than to throw away millions of lives in resisting his invading armies ..." His hope, seemingly, being that Hitler and the "Thousand Year Reich" would prove but a passing evil. Had this hope proved as forlorn as so many others voiced by Christian propagandists, Peter reassures us that "... the time would come when Christian Pacifists must resist his hideous evil – and face the consequences ..." Methinks Peter's gamble would not have paid off.

Might I point out that "... millions of lives ..." were thrown away, routinely and without mercy, in occupied countries and the "Fatherland" itself. Even while Peter was debating whether he could raise the courage to "resist", Jews, Poles, Russians, Gypsies, Pacifists (Christian and otherwise), all manner of dissenters, genetically impure "Untermensch" and other undesirables were facing "... the consequences ..."

Do Mr Gamble's powers of self-delusion really extend to imagining we would have fared any "better"?

STEF GULA
Leicester

Confused

THE REV Peter Gamble (Letters, December) tells us that he knows from the gospels which sayings of Jesus are more characteristic of him from the account of how he met his accusations, tortures and execution.

In the same breath, he tells us he doesn't take

"Matthew and Luke seriously and/or literally". Confusing!

He then refers us to Tacitus, Pliny the Younger and Josephus.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1989) vol. 22, page 360, tells us: "Non-Christian sources are meagre and contribute nothing to the history of Jesus that is not already known from the Christian tradition".

The passage in the annals of Tacitus tells us nothing of Christ's character and as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (same page) says: "only affords proof of the ignominious end of Jesus as the founder of a religious movement".

Regarding Pliny the Younger's letter to the Emperor Trajan we read (same page again): "Nothing is said of his early life, and the factual information in the letter undoubtedly stems from Christians". I am sure Mr Gamble knows that the passage in Josephus referring to Christ is highly contentious and could be the work of a later Christian copyist.

I think Mr Gamble is trying to tell us that only a person of splendid character could meet his end with "utter resignation and non-violence".

He could just as easily be an outright fanatic!

RAY MCDOWELL
Co. Antrim

Open letter to St Paul

PAUL, let's get this clear from the start, I do not blame you directly for all the terrible deeds done in the name of the religion you founded. Yes, Paul, the one you and you alone founded – Christianity as a world religion. We both know the Christian church was not founded by some supernatural deity, but by you. Why you did this we will never know.

Were you just an unbalanced religious fanatic – there have been plenty since you – or were you trying to give the world a moral code to live by? I could forgive the first, but not the second. What right have you to impose a moral code on all humanity for eternity? The only moral code we can expect any other human being to follow is not to undertake any deed that will consciously harm any other human. I'm quite aware that it is not really fair that you cannot refute my arguments, unless you could conjure up some divine help from somewhere, but failing this I will try to put some of your arguments for you.

Can I prove the non-existence of God with a big G? No, you are quite correct, Paul, there is no way I am able to disprove the existence of a supreme being. The difference between us is I admit not knowing what fate awaits us when we leave this mortal coil. Why cannot you and your ilk admit the same? Why did you insist on putting the fear of god into humanity? Good god, do not humans have enough to worry about in this life without worrying about what comes next?

Let me put this to you, Paul: if you are right and some supernatural super-being did mould this world out of nothingness, what is to prove he is a good and kind creator? Looking at the cruelty and misery in the world today, I would think it highly unlikely. What's to say he, she or whatever, is not playing some monstrous practical joke on us, letting all the bad guys into par-

adise and locking the good guys out?

Over two centuries before you were born, Epicurus wrote: "Become accustomed that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation ... Death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us but when death comes we do not exist." What Epicurus is saying is don't worry about things we have no control over. Would it not be better to try and make the world we are aware of a little better?

Yours Agnostically,

ALBERT MITCHELL
Bradford

Shared values

AS A fairly frequent contributor to this magazine I can, perhaps, say something about Mr John Rayner's basic question "What is a freethinker?" and about his implied answer that freethought is little more than negative anti-clericalism.

Recently I have been engaged in correspondence in our local paper, *The Orcadian*, on the subject of the Vatican's belated acceptance that evolution is "more than a theory". In this correspondence a reader wrote: "Even if there was an unbroken chain of evidence pointing to the chance formation of life ... would not Christians still hold to their belief that all life was created as written in the first book of the Bible?"

Such a view, denying as it does that there is any real need to consider evidence, is what society as a whole is up against. We need freethought – thought free from blind adherence to unexamined dogma – if any lasting progress whatever is to be made. This magazine has, as its prime function, to counter blind dogmatism where it is at its most rampant – in religious discourse.

The other aspect of the matter is that we freethinkers do not function only in a world bounded by the remit of our magazine; many of us are active in organisations concerned with the important public matters which Mr Rayner, very reasonably, lists for our attention. Our sceptical freethought may well contribute to these organisations being perhaps a little less inclined to nebulosity than would otherwise be the case.

This brings me to my own ongoing complaint about our magazine. It is precisely in organisations devoted to matters on Mr Rayner's list – world politics, human rights, unemployment and the rest – that we meet liberal religionists who are, in their own ways, just as concerned as we – and with whom we very often agree at a practical level. It does no service to the promotion of 'shared values', that can unite people constructively, to be cantankerously negative about unshared doctrine that does divide people destructively.

To be brutal, it is time some of us, borrowing from an old Christian aphorism, *love the sinner but hate the sin*, began to love the nebulous while hating the nebulosity.

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

You're telling us!

From Page 12

Power to cripple

BOTH Nigel Meek and George Jamieson have to be challenged over their defence of Mrs Atkins (December).

First, George Jamieson parrots the absurd Christian excuse that Christians can hate the sin but not the sinner. I am homosexual. I no more chose to be homosexual than I chose to be English, or born in London or have brown eyes. These are all things that make me who and what I am. But I did not choose any of them.

Would it be all right for an American or a French person to hate my Englishness but not me — it is absurd like all of Christianity and it's born out of the muddled belief that sexuality has some choice in it. I can tell you it does not.

Nigel Meek says that Mrs Atkins has no power to impose discrimination, maybe not. But there is discrimination against homosexuals who do not enjoy the same job protection rights, rights to housing and pension rights, to mention but three, as heterosexuals. These discriminations are encouraged by the Church and are helped every time someone like Mrs Atkins gets air time to push forward her prejudices.

GALHA was right to protest and it is sad that some Humanists still do not appreciate the power of religion to cripple lives even now. Free speech is fine but the BBC does not accord to Humanists, in *Thought for the Day*, the same free speech. By giving Mrs Atkins air time in the middle of the BBC's premier current affairs programme, the BBC was reinforcing a prejudice. Would Mrs Atkins have been allowed to say she hates the acts of Blacks, or the Disabled or those of another religion? I think not. Free speech is all very well and should be defended, but then GALHA must have its right to respond. When a member of GALHA can give *Thought for the Day*, the BBC will have accepted free speech, but not before and maybe by then Mrs Atkins can peddle her prejudices in the certainty that they can be answered and shown for the absurdities they are.

ALAN R BAILEY
Southend on Sea

Ungracious!

REGARDING Jane Marshall's November article, the religious rite of saying grace before meals in the form of merely expressing thanks for what we are about to receive, is not particularly gracious, since what we are about to receive might have come to us at the expense or deprivation of others, or through suffering of animals, and makes no thoughtful mention of those who are not about to receive, or expect to receive anything.

The mystic, however, before partaking of food, blesses and magnetises the food by the vibrations which we all emanate from our hands — that it may greatly supply the needs of the body, and always expresses the wish — either verbally or mentally — that he/she may always share with others that which we are fortunate enough to enjoy, and that they have not.

True grace must consist in sharing and creat-

ing, as well as having.

F BACON
Mansfield

Happiness

CONCERNING happiness (December letters) it has always appeared to me that the happiest people I have met are Humanists. Perhaps it is because we do not carry this problem of sin and guilt with us. Thomas Jefferson got it right in the American Declaration of Independence when he wrote that among men's unalienable rights are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.

Robert Ingersoll summed it up even better when he wrote: "Happiness is the only good. The place to be happy is here: the time to be happy is now and the way to be happy is to make others so."

ROBIN WOOD
Kilmarnock

Nihilism

FRIEDRICH W Nietzsche's famous dictum "God is Dead" is wrong in one essential respect, in that it implies that such an alleged being, at some time was alive, and is now dead.

It can safely be said that all of the world's "sacred" scriptures can be dismissed out-of-hand owing to the contradictions and absurdities contained therein, thus proving that these books are the works of man alone, with no supernatural assistance whatsoever!

To a large extent, I can go along with the philosophy of nihilism which rejects the claims of all established religions, and accepts that life is devoid of meaning, but I think it absurd to assert that "nothing really exists" — that is going too far!

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

Definitions

MY definitions of an atheist are:

- 1 A person with no invisible means of support.
- 2 A person who shouts "Nobody!" during a sexual climax.

A friend once described religion as "superstitious crap". There are better longer definitions but, as a short definition, it takes some beating.

CARL PINEL
Stockport

Checkmate?

IN THE long-standing debate on speciesism in *The Freethinker* letters page, the sudden non-appearance of a reply in his defence from R G Tee (last month) could have exciting implications: have we checkmated him at last?

This brings to mind the story about the eminent American philosopher who had for many years been actively against these new ideas about animals and then dramatically changed his mind, publicly admitting he had been shortsighted.

Incidentally, Daniel O'Hara, in his November article "Coming to terms with definitions", has

introduced me to the term "species chauvinism": an improvement on the clumsy word "speciesism" and, perhaps, more likely to catch on. I wonder if he coined the term himself? If so, it will certainly endear him to me!

HEATHER EVANS
Kenilworth

Listening, Charles?

IT MAY interest you to know that on marriage with a divorced person, one is out of Communion with both Catholic and C of E.

One point of interest is that you are under obligation to take Communion in the first church but not in the second.

R M SIMPSON
London W1

Big deal!

SO THERE are contradictions and inconsistencies in the Bible, and C Dennis McKinsey takes 600 pages and £42 to tell you so (Up Front, December). Big deal! It would be remarkable indeed if there were not any, in a compilation of writings covering many centuries and with many different authors, editors and translators.

And your editorial in the same issue has some words uncomfortably like Papal decrees: "I do not allow Christians to ... select" as does Mr McKinsey's "If inerrancy fails, other doctrines will fail too". Really? In fact, it all seems remarkably like mediaeval churchmen fulminating against heresy in somewhat intemperate language.

Anyway we know now; the voice has come down from the mountain, the tablets have been written. No-one can be a Christian unless he or she believes in slavery, stoning and tribal massacres — and, most importantly, gets his or her botany right on the subject of seeds, shrubs and trees!

ELSIE KARBACZ
Colchester

What about ecology?

HAVING had a letter published (December) asserting that Freethinkers' thoughts appeared to be disappointingly unfree in being largely restricted to the dismemberment of obsolete religions/philosophies, I am vulnerable to the question, what else is there for Freethinkers to apply their intellectual liberty to? Well, what about ecology? (Perhaps ecology should be today's religion.) It certainly seems in need of new, free, thought.

The current situation was brought to my attention when I attended a "rally" organised by The Real World Coalition (RWC) last November. The RWC is the brainchild of such luminaries as Jonathon Porritt and Sarah Parkin. Its formation was prompted by the poor performance of the Green Party in the 1992

Turn to Page 14

You're telling us!

From Page 13

general election. Its membership excludes individuals and consists of nearly 40 NGOs. Only some of them, such as Friends of the Earth, have primarily ecological interests; others, such as Charter 88, have almost exclusively political objectives. Despite the possible conflict between their various objectives, the organisers obviously believe that in coalition these NGOs may achieve more than if acting separately.

What does this tell us about the battle to save the environment? First, the failure of the Greens in the 1992 election tells us that environmental protection, as propounded by the Greens, attracts little support from the general electorate. Understandable, since democratic electorates expect to be promised more, and the green agenda is about consuming less.

Second, that many of those leading the ecologically motivated NGOs have little comprehension of the restraints that are essential if sustainable economies are to be developed, otherwise they would not have joined an organisation such as The RWC, which harbours many NGOs with objectives that are inimical to sustainability. Yes, let us be frank, the Save the Children Fund, Oxfam and Christian Aid all have policies based upon the anthropocentric attitudes that produced our ecological problem in the first place.

With such muddled thinking so evident in several of our most eminent ecological NGOs, and besides Friends of the earth, The RWC includes the New Economics Foundation, Population Concern, and the World Wide Fund for Nature, the field is wide open for freethinkers to make positive contributions to the solution of our ecological problem. Alternatively, freethinkers could continue to reassure one another that they are the sole repositories of truth, while slowly suffocating in the all-pervading smog of an over-crowded society, adhering to religiously sanctioned, short-term, self-interest.

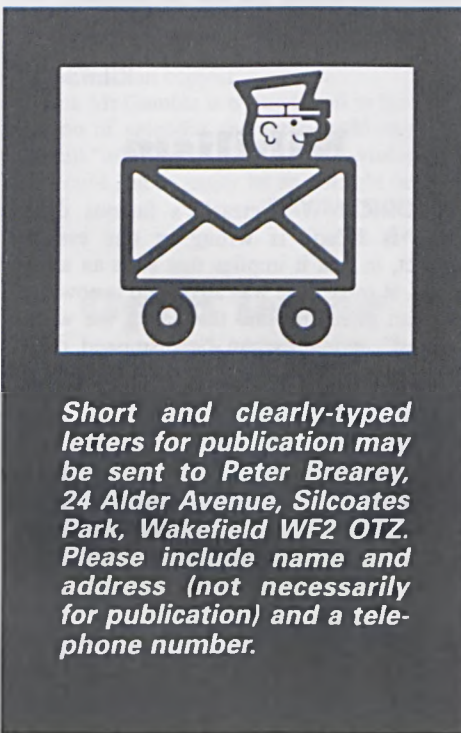
JOHN RAYNER
Middlesex

Metaphorically speaking

I AM going to assume that there is something of value in religion and that it isn't all simply wrong. I am going to assume that it is disguised in a language known only to a priestly caste. My third assumption is that it is not like science. If I succeed and find something of value in religion then I haven't proved anything unless my assumptions are true. If I fail and

don't find anything of value in religion then it may be because there is nothing of value, because my reasoning is faulty or because my assumptions are wrong or incomplete.

Scientific truth differs from religious truth in that, in science, a model, a theory, or a law, is true because it fits the data. If new data come up which do not fit then the model, theory or law, has to be modified or done away with altogether. Since there will always be a possibility of new data arising which could contradict the presently accepted model (theory or law), scientific truth is provisional. Religious truth, on the other hand, is 'absolute and for ever'. Now, as a starting point, what things could be absolute and for ever? It is no use, at this stage, to say 'God' because that begs the question 'What is God?'. So, provisionally, I suggest that



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

it is the 'self'. The objection that we all die is invalid, not because there is an after-life, but because 'die' is less accessible to us than is the 'self'. (I have to start somewhere.)

As self-conscious organisms we are aware of ourselves. We also know that the answer to the question, 'Who is aware of whom?' has the same answer, the 'self'. The trick is somehow to be both at once. There are terrible consequences if you identify only with the 'who' or the 'whom': delusions of grandeur if you identify only with the 'who' and delusions of persecution if you identify only with the 'whom'. We also have an image of ourselves. As social

animals we project this image so that others may know that we are members of society. It is by means of self-image that we are able to differentiate individuals within our group. There is a sort of 'three-in-one' here.

I believe I have found something of value in religion. It does seem to be disguised in religious language. I started by assuming that there was something absolute and for ever, the 'self'. What justification do I have for this assumption?

When a tree falls in a forest, with no-one there to hear it, does it make a sound? The answer is, 'No'. If there was someone there to hear it then it would make a sound and science would explain fully why he heard it. There can be no sound without the perceptual apparatus to hear it. Any experience, past, present, or future, requires the 'self' there to experience it. 'God' is 'That which experiences'. God is a metaphor for the self.

In the Hindu scriptures there is a venerated phrase which translates as, 'Thou art that'. In the Book of Exodus, God states, 'I am that I am'. In Buddhism 'Buddha-nature' is said to reside within us all. I quote from these traditions in support of my claim that far from being heretical, 'God is a metaphor for the self' has a respected pedigree. I claim support from a secular source too: without admitting that he believed in God, George Bernard Shaw once warned: 'Beware the man whose God is in the skies!'

Our evolution millions of years ago into organisms with consciousness-of-self has meant that we are aware of ourselves as a subject, object and social selves. This 'three-in-one' nature of the self may be what Christians mean by 'The Trinity'. The projected self-image, our social-self, experienced by others, is a product of God, our self. This may be the meaning of (in religious language) 'God makes man in His own image'.

Why is religious language so unclear? It could be that it is old and pre-scientific. Instead of seeing language as a metaphor or as poetry designed to express an idea, it was seen as a way of concealing the truth. It was misinterpreted and obscured. The most common misinterpretation is that there is a single, external God. This makes individual life extremely pointless.

One of my initial assumptions was that religion is not like science. This seems a truism in the case of organised religion. Organised religion is based upon misinterpretations and is terribly obscure. I find, though, that I arrive at a conclusion (God is a metaphor for the self) for which there is evidence - my own existence and that of others, and selected quotations from selected texts - which involves reason, and which explains the existence of obscure religion. The scientific status of my conclusion hinges, in the last analysis, on whether the self is an observable phenomenon, but since the self is a three in one object which is both subject and object as well as social self, this is not a question that can be answered without a metaphor. It may be better to call the whole object 'God', God being a metaphor, and assert that 'God exists'! This may be the starting point for a good many religions but that is not to say that all that follows from here is in any sense true.

ERIC YAFFEY
Kieghley

Write on

Recent publications by National Secular Society members include:

- *Jesus the Pagan Sun God* by Larry Wright (£7.50 from 12 Kent Road, Swindon SN1 3NJ).
- *The Potts Papers* ("beguiling satire") by Terry Sanderson (£7.70 from The Other Way Press, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ).
- *Humanist Anthology* by Margaret Knight, ed. Jim Herrick (£8.50 from RPA, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP).
- *Foundations of Modern Humanism* by Bill McIlroy (£1.25 from NSS, Bradlaugh House).

WHY I DO NOT TRUST THE BIBLE

by Eric Stockton

THE above title does not imply that I place no great value upon the Bible which is, I accept, one of the most important literary legacies of the ancient world; parts of it are of still-lasting value and those parts that are not, nonetheless, instruct us usefully in the history of ideas and beliefs.

When people place absolute primary trust in anything or anyone whatever (for example, literalists placing such trust in the Bible, Papists in Papal Infallibility, party hacks in the Party Line and so on) they are thinking carelessly. You cannot, coherently, trust anything or anybody unless first you trust your own ability to recognise trustworthiness when you meet it and, to do this, you have to adopt criteria which may, themselves, be untrustworthy.

Given reasonable criteria of trustworthiness – correspondence with observed fact, consistency, moral acceptability to reasonable people, absence of logical impossibility – my thesis is that the alleged special authority of the Bible is undermined by some of those “flagship” passages that Bible worshippers bring most confidently to our notice. I select five of these. (It would be as easy to select five others and five others again).

First there is the Genesis story. We are asked to believe an account of the origin of the living world that makes no mention of micro-organisms – we might as well believe an account of 20th Century warfare that makes no mention of aeroplanes! Whatever hidden meaning or inspiring merit may be read into the Genesis story, it was evidently written by people ignorant of basic biology – understandably ignorant given that they had no microscopes.

Second there is the Noah story. We are asked to believe that an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful all-just, all-loving, all-merciful god (we might call OMNIGOD) would not know that in a world of general wickedness it would be extremely improbable that people, except members of one family, would all be equally wicked and so equally deserving of the same penalty – drowning. OMNIGOD would surely know about normal distribution – the probability that, in a wicked world, there would be tiny minorities of the extremely good and the extremely bad with most people’s badness ratings being somewhere in between these extremes. OMNIGOD, were He just, would not have drowned the whole lot indiscriminately. Moreover, according to the Bible, Noah’s descendants turned out to be quite as bad as his forebears and his contemporaries and so the whole crazy slaughter was to no avail anyway. We are asked to believe that OMNIGOD would not have known this in advance. We are asked to believe that

OMNIGOD is unjust – and daft with it.

Third there is the Decalogue. This purports to be the ethical centrepiece of Old Testament teaching. We are asked to accept that adultery is a sin (even though in some circumstances it is generally recognised by morally upright people to be a merely technical offence) while we are left free to accept the abuse of minors and of the aged, torture, rape ... as not worth a mention in this celebrated moral code. Hardly worth climbing a mountain, and humping tablets of stone down to the bottom, for such a patchy ethic as that!

Fourth there is the relation, attributed to Jesus, of lustful thoughts to lustful acts. (*Matt 5:28*). The text is a little unclear as to whether a lustful thought is as bad as, or merely akin to, the corresponding lustful act. The moral bankruptcy of this, on any reading, is obvious. Even to begin to compare the wickedness of a thought with the wickedness of the corresponding act is simply wrong. If I, for example, entertain lustful thoughts about my neighbour then, while that may well be wicked of me, she is not hurt if the matter is limited to my thoughts. If however I act lustfully towards her then she is going to be hurt in some way – embarrassed, humiliated, frightened, physically or psychologically wounded according to precisely how I act. To even seem to equate the

thought with the act is to assume that *what happens to her, what she experiences, simply does not matter very much*. A morally more objectionable view is difficult to imagine; it is all of a piece with the Decalogue’s implication that women are things rather than persons.

Fifth there is guidance on prayer. In the Gospel according to St John (14: 13, 14) the word “whatsoever” is about as all-embracing as it can be and it is tempting to deduce from the text that even one’s most trivial requests will be granted via the good offices of JC ... perhaps that Peter Brearey will find a dead mouse in the next pork pie that he bites! But trivia aside, the text suggests that a moral God can be asked to do immoral things – and He will do them. What this does for OMNIGOD’s reputation is devastating; it makes Him into a pagan god, “on tap”, rather than the God of theism, “on top”. Not content with triviality and pagan theology, this text attributes to OMNIGOD the practice of logical impossibility – that, for example, prayers for victory in a war will be answered positively for both sides if offered by both sides. (This has been tried, of course).

These selections from the Bible exemplify varied failures to meet reasonable criteria of trustworthiness – set out in an earlier paragraph. So, unprejudiced people might well deem the Bible to lack what it takes to be trusted as *authoritative*.

ASK THE PARSON (3) by Karl Heath

Facing up to Jesus

MY THIRD question is an easy one. What did Jesus look like? An easy question because you can say “I don’t know”. Can you also say “Nobody knows”?

The Bibles handed around, when I was a nine-year-old in my elementary school, had marginal dates. Against Genesis, Ch. 1 v. 1 the date 4004 BC appeared for the Creation of the World. If I had been asked at nine years old if there were any dates in the Bible I would have replied “yes”. There are, in fact, no dates in the Bible. I did not know, when I was a child, that it was still customary to insert into the Bible text the dates alleged by James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, in his chronology *Annales Veteris et Novi Testamenti*, annals of the Old and New Testaments, published around 1650. Millions of Bible readers must have accepted his dates as Gospel.

I am sure that you would not demand faith in such an assumption.

Millions of Christians think they know what Jesus looked like. How do they know? No representation of Jesus during the first three centuries after His death has ever been found. He was represented symbolically as a Fish and later as a stylised Good Shepherd. The earliest picture, from the 4th Century AD, shows Him as a beardless youth.

The traditional bearded ascetic first appears in Byzantine art, including icons, from the 7th Century AD. Ever since, this traditional image of Jesus has been the convention of Christian art. But do you tell your congregation that this picture is only an invention, the exercise of human imagination? Do you tell them that, whatever else we may know about Jesus, we have no idea of what He looked like?

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, February 4, 5.30 pm for 6 pm: Roger Murray: *Alternative Medicine - Acupuncture*.

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.

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, January 16, 7.30 pm: Sean Neill: *Genetics and Behaviour*.

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). January 10: Derek Lennard: *Thomas Paine*. 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, January 7: *Any Questions on Humanism*.

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, Tuesday, January 14: Paul Mann: *The Law - is it an Ass?*

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. Thursday, January 30, Malcolm Rees: *Secular Organization for Sobriety*.

Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607. Please note, from this month, Greater Manchester Humanist Group will meet at the Friends' Meeting House on Mount Street, Manchester, on the second Wednesday of each month. January 8, 8pm: 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*.

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, January 8, 8 pm: Harry Barnes MP: *Humanists in Parliament*. Wednesday, February 12, 8pm. Carl Pinel: *Three Victorian Thinkers - Bradlaugh, Darwin and Kropotkin*. 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 Hall 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, on 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.

HUMANIST HOLIDAYS EASTER 1997 AT SHREWSBURY 28 MARCH/1 APRIL

A first class hotel at a reasonable price, ideally situated in a quiet central area of historic Shrewsbury. Plenty to see and do, both in Shrewsbury and the beautiful and interesting surrounding countryside. Shared and single rooms £190 per person, Dinner/Bed/Breakfast.

LAST BOOKING DATE WITH FULL PAYMENT 20 FEBRUARY - to Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, Glos. GL52 5AA.