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Up Front

Abortion: the 'ingrained prejudice'

ARBITRARY restrictions are set by some Health Authorities to limit the number of abortions funded by the NHS – and a combination of moral judgement and informal means-testing is being used by GPs and Authorities to restrict the number of such operations.

This warning comes in a report from the Abortion Law Reform Association, which shows how decisions on budgets and availability of abortion services can be based on the ethical beliefs of Authority members and staff,

hospital doctors and GPs, rather than on clinical need.

Access to NHS abortion services has always varied around the country. The level of NHS provision ranges from more than 90 per cent of local demand to less than 50 per cent in some areas.

Although abortion is an inexpensive and effective treatment for unwanted pregnancy, with considerable health benefits to women, many Health Authorities are reluctant to fund all operations. Low targets are set and insufficient funds allocated deliberately to limit the service offered. Research carried out by ALRA shows that:

- Several Authorities write their own list of reasons for approval for NHS abortion, regardless of the broad health grounds covered by the law. Criteria vary widely between Authorities, covering different age groups, numbers of existing children and, most commonly, financial status.
- Informal means-testing is commonly carried out by GPs and pregnancy counsellors, often unknown by the woman, so that those who seem able to pay are steered towards the private sector or openly refused NHS treatment. Some Authorities actively encourage this practice while others condone it.

Jane Roe, ALRA campaign manager and author of the report, said: "It has been obvious for many years that doctors with a conscientious objection to abortion have blocked women's access to NHS treatment, but we had not realised how ingrained the prejudice was throughout the health service in some parts of the country, running right through from GPs and pregnancy counsellors to Health Authority staff and Board members. The numbers are small but the effect they have is highly significant.

"Some Health Authorities have always provided an excellent service, but others just do not accept that ending an unwanted pregnancy is a valid health need. Because they believe abortion for other than strictly medical reasons is ethically wrong, they refuse to fund them but don't publicise the criteria on which they restrict their services. Women have no idea on what grounds they are being judged or even that they are being judged at all.

"On another level we were shocked by the widespread use of means-testing, although all Health Authorities denied that they were actually doing that. But they were quite happy to admit that they sorted out the 'needy' to make sure they were offered free treatment while those who could afford to pay were steered towards a fee-paying clinic. GPs or pregnancy counsellors were expected to assess who was able to pay.

"If any woman decided to go ahead with an unplanned pregnancy, regardless of her circumstances there is no question that she might be refused free NHS maternity care, but if she makes the equally valid choice to have an abortion she is judged as undeserving and forced to pay."

Official statistics show that only 70.5 per cent of abortions in England and Wales were funded by the NHS in 1995. Some Authorities fund more than 90 per cent of abortions for local women but others fund fewer than half. In Scotland almost all abortions are NHS

funded.

The Association carried out its survey in England and Wales. For further information or a copy of the full report contact Jane Roe on 0171 637 7264 or write to ALRA, 11-13 Charlotte Street, London W1P 1HD. Its main findings were:

- Informal "means testing" is applied by many Authorities and GPs to women requesting termination of pregnancy.
- Some Authorities limit approval for NHS abortion to their own list of specific criteria although the 1967 Abortion Act does not include specific criteria for requesting an abortion.
- Some Authorities deliberately ration their abortion service by setting a target considerably below the known local need.
- Decisions on Authority funding for abortions are sometimes based on moral judgements rather than health need.
- Availability of termination of pregnancy in NHS hospitals is directly related to the willingness of key consultant gynaecologists to carry it out.

The Freethinker unequivocally supports the recommendations arising from the ALRA survey:

1 Health Authorities and GPs should recognise the important health benefits of termination of pregnancy and accept responsibility for providing a prompt abortion service.

2 Authorities should allocate sufficient funds as a specific budget or as a specified part of the gynaecology or family planning budget, to provide for at least 90 per cent of the local need for abortions.

3 Authorities unable or unwilling to fund a high level of provision should publish the criteria under which women are judged eligible for NHS abortion.

4 GPs should be discouraged by Authorities from steering women towards the fee-paying sector.

However ... the report notes, as I have said, that some gynaecologists have traditionally held conscientious objections to abortion or have been reluctant to carry them out as part of their normal workload. Some Authority members may also have ethical objections or ambivalence to funding termination of pregnancy from the NHS.

In other words (although the ALRA report doesn't put it like this) the religious tail sometimes wags the secular dog. *We should be on the look-out for this state of affairs – and where there is evidence of its existence, then we should (perhaps paradoxically in view of the point 4 above) insist that our local Health Authority make adequate financial provision for abortions to be performed privately as needed.*

Individuals and organisations can apply pressure through the purchasing Health Authorities and the Community Health Councils. And it might be useful for MPs to be reminded of the law, and of the majority, secular approach to abortion, since something called "The Movement for Christian Democracy aims to force sitting MPs and General Election candidates to declare their views on abortion ... so that voters can decide whether they are sufficiently 'Christian'" (*The Observer*, January 19). **PB**

The

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VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA UPDATE

How 'peace at last' came to Janet Mills

"PEACE at last," breathed Janet Mills as she pressed the computer key. Fifteen seconds later a lethal dose of barbiturates and a muscle relaxant were delivered into her arm by a syringe driver connected to the computer. As a result, Janet Mills died peacefully within a few minutes, having made a competent and conscious decision to end the relentless suffering caused by her cancer, mycosis fungoides, the disease which killed the actor Paul Eddington recently. Palliative care had helped with the emotional aspects of Janet Mills' illness but could no longer relieve the physical symptoms and she wanted a dignified end to her pain. Her family were with her and supported her decision to the full as the compassionate end to her suffering which she truly wanted.

Under current British law, Philip Nitschke, the doctor who had set up the computer, syringe driver and provided the drugs, could have been charged with assisting a suicide and face a possible prison term of 14 years. Janet Mills was able to die a peaceful and dignified death, however, by making use of the rights granted by Northern Territory of Australia's Rights of the Terminally Ill Act – the first anywhere in the world to legalise voluntary euthanasia. (In Holland euthanasia is illegal, although doctors who grant it are not prosecuted provided they follow strict guidelines).

To use the right granted by the Northern Territory's law, Janet had to obtain the signature of Phillip Nitschke, her GP (who had also assisted Bob Dent, the first person to die using the law), a psychiatrist who stated that Janet was not suffering from a treatable clinical depression, and a cancer specialist resident in the Northern Territory who confirmed the diagnosis and prognosis. Due to the opposition of the majority of the small band of resident specialist cancer physicians, Janet Mills was forced to hold a press conference and beg for a cancer specialist to help. One cancer specialist did step forward to provide his signature, but on the strict understanding that his identity would not be revealed because he was afraid of being ostracised. Once Janet Mills had obtained the necessary signatures, a process which took three weeks, there was a further cooling-off period of another nine days before Philip Nitschke could act. This delay, with its strict requirement for signatures of professional medical people, will, I hope, reassure readers of *The Freethinker* that a voluntary euthanasia law would not be used as a quick fix process to "kill off" older people.

Although the Northern Territory is not noted for its progressive social legislation, the courage and persistence of Marshall Perron, the

by **Graham Nickson**
Parliamentary Campaign Officer
Voluntary Euthanasia Society

former Chief Minister of the Northern Territory who the pushed Act through, has ignited an Australia-wide debate on the rights of the terminally ill. The passing of the law has also had another beneficial affect – the budget for palliative care in the Northern Territory has increased ten-fold so that the health care services can comply with one of the strict provisions of the law, that the patient is offered the best palliative care available.

Opposition to the Northern Territory voluntary euthanasia law has come primarily from the political and medical establishment. Their first challenge to the law was through the Australian High Court but this failed when the judge ruled that the Parliament in the Northern Territory had the power to pass the voluntary euthanasia law. The opposition strategy is now to support a private member's bill in the Australian Federal Parliament which will remove the right of the Northern Territory's Parliament to pass laws relating to euthanasia.

In contrast to the medical and political leaders, the Australian public overwhelmingly support the Northern Territory's voluntary euthanasia law. A country-wide opinion poll specifically asked whether the Federal Parliament should overturn the law and found that 71 per cent of the public were against overturning it.

Across the Pacific Ocean in the United States, the debate to legalise voluntary euthanasia has been stimulated by the actions of Jack Kevorkian and the plebiscites in the states of Washington, California and Oregon to legalise the right of physicians to prescribe lethal-doses

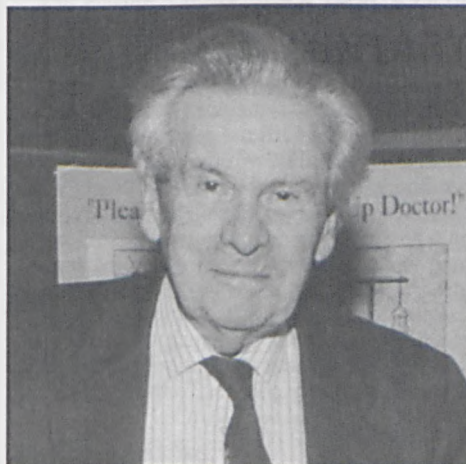
which the Americans refer to as physician-aided-dying. The campaign for change was only successful in Oregon, although the law has not yet been enacted due to a legal challenge from a coalition of anti-euthanasia choice, medical and religious groups. The US Supreme Court has just started hearing the opening arguments in a case which will decide whether or not States have the right to sanction physician-aided-dying. The judgement is expected in the early part of the summer (1997).

In Britain, the voluntary euthanasia debate has not reached the intensity of Australia or the United States. But even in Britain that is changing as opinion changes, notably in the medical profession. Last August 76 per cent of health therapists were found to be in favour of legalisation, while a recent survey by the British Medical Association (BMA) showed that doctors' attitudes were also changing. For the first time ever, more GPs and hospital doctors (46 per cent) said they would support a change in the law to allow doctors to comply with a terminally ill patient's requests for euthanasia than those in favour of the *status quo* (44 per cent). Other surveys have also shown doctors split on the issue, proving once and for all that the opponents of voluntary euthanasia are wrong when they say that doctors would never give voluntary euthanasia.

In a press release accompanying the announcement of the result of the opinion poll, the BMA stressed that it remained opposed to the legalisation of euthanasia but with his most compassionate statement yet on the subject Dr Stuart Horner, Chairman of the BMA Medical Ethics Committee, said: "... if we genuinely believe that all the efforts of medicine have been exhausted it may well be that in a particular case euthanasia has to be considered. That is a matter for the doctor concerned and I would be the last person to say that they had done the wrong thing."

This statement is a recognition of the wider trend in society for a greater acceptance of the right to ask for medical help to die. Despite the noise and smoke from a few religious figures, who generally also oppose abortion choice for women, the latest report on British Social Attitudes shows an overwhelming majority of 82 per cent of the British population support euthanasia for someone with a "painful incurable disease", up from 75 per cent 10 years ago.

The report found that church-going is the factor most likely to influence views on euthanasia,



● **Author, journalist and campaigner Sir Ludovic Kennedy is President of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society.**



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Crooked vote, but Papa still knows best

A SHORT item in the *Independent on Sunday* (January 3) informed us that a Sri Lankan Catholic theologian, the Rev Tissa Balasuriya, a member of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, no less, had been excommunicated. It was hardly surprising that the Pope, who believes himself to be infallible in matters of faith and morals, should refuse the final appeal of a priest who refused to accept papal infallibility.

We might recall, however, that the dogma of infallibility was far from unanimously acceptable to the bishops of the Church when it was declared at the Vatican Council in 1870 under Pius IX. Quite simply, the vote was rigged.

The Council was packed with Italian bishops, who outnumbered those from the rest of Europe (the little kingdom of Naples alone had 65 representatives and Sardinia 25, while Germany had only 14). Nevertheless, in a verbal vote on July 13, 1870, 88 of the bishops voted against the dogma, a further 62 voted for it with reservations, while, according to Cardinal Newman, more than 76 abstained.

Archbishop Darboy of Paris led a deputation to the Pope and Bishop Ketteler of Mainz pleaded with him in vain. The day before the vote, 56 bishops wrote to Pius confirming their opposition, stating that they would stay away from the final session; and "60 additional members of the opposition departed from Rome" (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*).

Finally, however, Pius IX got his way. In a "cynical" atmosphere of "open heat and quiet bribery" as bishops who were present described it to Joseph McCabe (*A History of the Popes*), the dogma was passed with only two dissentients inside, but with widespread opposition outside.

It would be interesting to know whether the Rev Tissa Balasuriya cited these facts in his appeal to John Paul II and, if so, what was the infallible reply.

Minority 'morality'

IN A much longer piece in the same issue of the *Independent on Sunday*, Joanna Moorhead asked if Cardinal Basil Hume was becoming "the moral leader of the nation", by which she really meant could he swell the anti-abortion vote.

Apparently Hume wrote to the Pope in November regretting "the profound failure of society in England and Wales to uphold the sanctity of life", and expressing "our determi-

nation ... to work to create those conditions in which the repeal of abortion legislation will be increasingly recognised as a moral obligation".

It should be increasingly recognised by candidates at the coming election that they have a moral obligation to resist the pressure of the predominantly Roman Catholic anti-abortionists with their "pro-life" slogan. We must not allow the success or failure of "society" to be judged on Cardinal Hume's terms, or to regard a minority religious leader, whose church has been responsible for some of the most heinous crimes in history, as "the moral leader of the nation".

A mass exodus

THE latest edition of the *Catholic Directory* shows that Cardinal Hume's minority religion is in crisis: 55,000 Roman Catholics left between 1994 and 1995, a decline which is set to halve attendance at mass in the next decade.

And, as *The Guardian* pointed out in its first leader on December 16, 1996, the most dramatic drop in mass attendance has been in "those traditional bastions of Irish immigration in Liverpool and lowland Scotland". Barely a fifth of baptised Roman Catholics attend Sunday service in Liverpool, and attendance in Scotland declined by 13 per cent between 1990 and 1994. There is also a continuing shortage of priests.

Yet the man whose religion is in such dire straits purports to be the nation's moral leader and, in the words of his biographer, Peter Stanford, sees government ministers privately "to talk a matter through quietly and reasonably and he does get listened to". But "politicians know that making a public fuss is his ultimate threat".

Behind the scenes diplomacy you might call it but, for me, it's downright immoral of the "moral leader" Basil Hume.

Forgotten victims

IT IS important to remember that many non-Jewish Germans suffered persecution and death during the Hitler regime and, under the heading "Forgotten victims of the Nazis" (*The Guardian*, January 2) Denis Staunton reported on a recent Berlin symposium to consider a monument to those who wore the pink triangle.

At present there is only a little triangular plaque outside the Nollendorfplatz railway station with the moving inscription "Killed with violence, killed by silence. To the homosexual victims of national socialism".

Unlike Jews and Gypsies, gays who survived were not compensated by the government after 1945. Nor will those who died be noticed on a proposed new Holocaust memorial next to the Brandenburg Gate. That will be dedicated

solely to Jewish victims.

But Tsafir Cohen, who is both Jewish and gay, and is organising an international conference on how the Holocaust is perceived today, is sceptical about the value of another monument. Remembering the Holocaust "does not prevent xenophobia, religious intolerance or social injustice", he says, "and monuments don't help either". Which just about sums it up.

Freedom is frozen out

IMAGINE a university where a professor has to begin his lectures with the affirmation "In the name of God" and a student no longer speaks in class because he fears he might say something that offends the Islamic clerical leadership, and you have some idea of the conservative backlash in Iran (*The Guardian*, December 19, 1996).

The "Islamisation" campaign is directed at what it sees as "liberal tendencies" among professors and students and against all advocates of greater political and social freedom, including President Rafsanjani.

Magazines and newspapers have been closed and "a virtual freeze placed on the publication of new books, save for the most orthodox of religious texts". And in November, a left-wing journalist, Faraj Sarkouhi, disappeared while trying to leave Iran and join his wife and children in Germany.

All "in the name of God".

How religion divides young

"WHO IS your God?" shouted Israr Khan, a Muslim maths teacher at a Birmingham school, when the predominantly white senior choir was singing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas". Younger Asian pupils then booed and called out "Allah", according to *The Guardian* religious affairs editor Madeleine Bunting (December 19).

A religious teacher at the mosque where Mr Khan worships told Ms Bunting that the school, which is 60 per cent Asian, should not force Muslim children to sing about Christianity, although he disagreed with the form of Mr Khan's protest.

From what I remember of it, the song in question sounds innocuous enough ("Yuletide bright" and "troubles out of sight") but this little episode indicates again the divisiveness of insisting on a Christian dimension in education.

In a multi-cultural society where only a small minority attends church with any regularity, our schools should be strictly secular. Mr Khan's Allah and the Christian Jehovah should be *extra muros*.

NICOLAS WALTER SUGGESTS ...

Zero tolerance for the New Samaritan

IT SEEMS more and more likely that within the next few months the Labour Party will win a General Election for the first time for nearly 23 years, and will form a Government for the first time for 18 years. The resulting problem will be the one expressed in the question which Dorothy Parker asked when she heard that Calvin Coolidge had died: *How can they tell?* Since Tony Blair became Party Leader in 1994, he has done as much as possible to ensure that his appointment as Prime Minister makes as little difference as possible.

Blair has done what he can to make clear his religious as well as his political affiliation. He is not only New Labour, but New Christian. The addition of the adjective in both cases seems to deprive the noun of meaning. Just as his political position has little to do with the past history of his party, his religious position has little to do with the past history of his denomination. He is a member of the Church of England, but he is married to a Roman Catholic and attends Roman Catholic services. In theory he opposes such sinful activities as abortion and divorce, but in practice he doesn't go so far as to vote against them.

Votes

New Christianity doesn't seem to have much to do with Christ. Blair usually echoes the apostle Paul – "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9) – though he wants to save their votes rather than their souls. In the *Sunday Telegraph* last Easter he expressed sympathy with Pontius Pilate. In the *Big Issue* last month he offered a revised version of the Good Samaritan.

Readers of *The Freethinker* are of course familiar with this parable, in which the "neighbour" of the victim of a robbery is not the Priest or the Levite who pass by on the other side, but the member of a hated minority who has compassion on him and helps him (Luke 10).

The *Big Issue* is a weekly paper which is sold on the streets by the victims of the revived phenomenon of homelessness, who have no proper homes or jobs and often no benefits, and who otherwise have to beg for money. It is worth buying, not only because it is better to give than to receive, but also because it is a good paper. In the approach to the General Election it is publishing interviews with the leaders of the main political parties. The big issue in these interviews is naturally homelessness.

The first such interview, by Simon Rogers with Tony Blair (January 6-12), included the following points. Will Blair guarantee the right of homeless people to vote? No – "Look,

there's plainly got to be some rules." Will Blair guarantee the right of unemployed young people to get benefit? No – "The days when government shovelled out more money are just not going to happen any more." Does Blair agree with American-style "Zero-Tolerance" of petty crime? Yes – "It's important to say we don't tolerate the small crimes." Does Blair want to drive beggars off the streets? "Well it depends what's happening to them." Does Blair support arresting beggars? No – "unless they're doing something that is problematic for other people ... we do have to make our streets safe for people." Does Blair give money to beggars? "I don't, no." Does Blair want to do something about people living on the streets? "Yes it is right to be intolerant of people homeless on the streets. But the way to deal with that is you make sure that when these people come off the streets that you're doing the other part of the equation. You're providing them with somewhere to go." Will Blair do anything about doing that? Nothing is mentioned: education, employment, health, transport, local government, community, Europe – yes; housing – no.

There was a rare personal remark: "I often drop my kids off in the morning at King's Cross for them to take the Tube and it's actually quite a frightening place for people." Is it? Although King's Cross has some attractions for those who live or work in the area (as I have done for near-

ly 30 years), it certainly isn't a very nice place, because it's rather ugly and noisy and dirty, and it's often disturbed by the activities of sex and drug dealers; on the other hand, although it must be pretty frightening for homeless people at any time, it certainly isn't a frightening place for most people, especially during the morning rush hour. The most frightening thing there for an ambitious politician with his young children on their way to school must be the spectacle of a social problem which he hasn't the faintest idea how to talk about, let alone do something about.

New Labour: New Christianity; New Britain; New Samaritan. In this parable, the Priest and the Levite will still go by on the other side, perhaps buying a *Big Issue* or giving some change to salve their consciences; the Samaritan won't even do the despised and rejected the favour of ignoring them, but will actually take the trouble to stop and insult them before passing on. Who is their "neighbour"? Who deserves "zero tolerance"? Blair should remember what a rather subversive Secularist once said about the treatment of the poor and hungry and sick. "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me" (Matthew 25). If this is what our coming Prime Minister says about one of the great evils of our time, what should we say to him? "Depart from me, ye cursed!"

5,344 for freethought!

FIVE thousand, three hundred and forty-four pounds (and 25p)!

That was the magnificent sum contributed by readers of *The Freethinker* during 1996 to help keep their atheist journal alive – and kicking.

And *kicking* is the operative word.

We are equally likely to put the boot in when we encounter the NT-and-water Christianity of a Tony Blair or the off-with-their-heads Islam of true believers in Algeria, Afghanistan, Iran, or the sheer daftness of creating notional fences to ease Sabbath restrictions for Orthodox Jews.

Oh yes – there *are* major qualitative differences (to say the least) in the way these sets of beliefs affect people in their vicinity. But all insist upon the fatuous notion of a god of some kind – and that's a notion which *The Freethinker* has for well over a century shown to imply "the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind both in theory and practice" (Bakunin).

We shall go on doing so – and in our positive way continue to offer rational alternatives to the superstitions of the Blairs, the Ayatollahs,

the rabbis ... so long as our readers continue to help us pay the bills. Please send a contribution to: Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP (make cheques and postal orders payable to G W Foote & Company).

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Total from December 17 to January 21: £765.50.

Reason and ridicule in Atheists' Alley

WE LOOK upon it as an age of enlightenment but to many Christians of the time it was a godless age. "Newton was to such as these a mixed blessing, Toland a renegade, Tindal an outrage, even Samuel Clarke an errant and foolish man", wrote John Redwood when he was a historian at All Souls, in this erudite book, now in paperback 20 years after its first publication.

It was a pioneering work at the time, unearthing a "hitherto little examined flood of literature" for and against the Christian faith; and it remains a valuable guide to the religious disputes of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century. And what a flood there was: witness 48 pages of notes.

The Church saw atheism everywhere, but especially in the coffee houses and taverns, one of which, the King's Head, was in the colloquially-named Atheists' Alley, near the Royal Exchange in London. And although "atheist" covered a multitude of sins, especially in the case of John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, Christianity was "under siege" from "the combined forces of reason and ridicule".

The greatest threat came from the philosophers ancient and modern. The atomism of Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius strongly influenced the atomism of seventeenth century science; Spinoza's pantheism and "logical vigour" were particularly dangerous and, by the 1730s, the scepticism of Bayle *et al* "had been successfully diffused in English literate society".

Hobbes stood out among the enemies at home, eliciting an enormous volume of criticism from clerical quarters; and Locke was condemned for *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, which has been described (by his

Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England 1660-1750 by John Redwood. Thames and Hudson. £14.95.

Review: Colin McCall

biographer Maurice Cranston) as Unitarian or Socinian in everything but name. And it has been argued that the "evidence" taken from revelation and miracle in Locke's religious writings was merely a device to gain clerical approval for what was essentially an empirical theory. Basically, Locke believed that religion was a matter for individuals to decide for themselves, which was not exactly the position of the Church.

Newton's scientific eminence saved him from major criticism. In fact, he originally accused Locke of Hobbism, attacking "the root of morality" in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Although Newton later apologised for this view in a letter to Locke, it was not unjustified. Nor were Locke's moral views the only cause for concern. His "strictures against insignificant language" and his contention that ideas should be grounded in "the firm reality of observed nature, were similarly Hobbist in their implications".

"There is nothing in this whole discourse", Thomas Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan* "... contrary to the word of God, or to good manners: or to the disturbance of the public tranquillity. Therefore I think it may be profitably printed and more profitably taught in the universities ... " But he was far too optimistic, of course.

Leviathan was printed, but was soon suppressed; and some idea of its reception in the universities may be gleaned from the experi-

ence of Daniel Scargill, Fellow of Corpus Christi, Cambridge, and Cardonnel, Fellow of Merton College, Oxford. The former was forced to recant for his "contamination" by Hobbes and relinquish his tenure; Cardonnel committed suicide in "despair" at his "guilt".

Incidentally, Ralph Cudworth, the Cambridge neo-Platonist who is generally regarded as Hobbes' most serious opponent, was among those who signed Scargill's expulsion order.

Among the countless denunciations of Hobbes not noted by Redwood are two from 1677: Bishop Vesey's description of the materialist as a "pandor to bestiality" and Samuel Strimesius', as "Diabolus Incarnatus". Even as late as 1954 the Roman Catholic Giovanni Papini considered *Leviathan* to be "diabolically inspired" (see *The Hunting of Leviathan*, Samuel I Mintz, CUP 1962). Mintz also cites George Catlin as calling Hobbes a "moral defective". Thomas Paine was another who incurred Catlin's fanatical hatred, as I know from my editorial days.

Among the many dissenters whose theories John Redwood presents are the Epicurean Thomas Burnet, the Spinozan pantheist John Toland and the deist Matthew Tindal. Another deist, Anthony Collins, the father of English freethought, as J M Wheeler called him, argued the need to counter superstition and revelation. "Things are said to be above reason", he wrote, "when we are ignorant of the manner, or of the physical cause of their existence". Collins also told the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel that it would only succeed in its foreign missions if it exported freethought.

And there was a precursor of our own magazine (1711-1721) which, in Redwood's words, "combined the flippant with the occasionally serious and could range from discussing revelation and miracle to defending or attacking the latest fashions ... airing the merits of hooped petticoats".

The Freethinker's fashion pages may be dated, but its scepticism is as topical as ever. It regarded presages and omens as "phantoms of a distempered imagination", and regretted the human mind's strong inclination "towards everything that is mysterious, dark, and incomprehensible".

"Where superstition prevails to any great degree", it declared, "we generally see arts and sciences, and everything that depends upon judgement and understanding, languish and die away. The reason is plain: the habit of submitting the understanding to nonsense and contradiction in one sort of subjects, must in time bring it to base compliance in others."

Even John Redwood doesn't find this flippant. It was, he says, "the cry of the man of reason against popery, tyranny, priestcraft, superstition and the uncultured clerical society". Uncultured is the only word I would quibble about here.

How 'peace at last' came to Janet Mills

From Page 3

with declared creed or age having less effect. It was concluded that older people were less supportive than younger people because they were more likely to attend religious services regularly. Overall, therefore, support for euthanasia was likely to increase with time as church going continues to decline and the nation becomes more secular.

With a General Election due before the end of May, now is the time to put pressure on to MPs, and those candidates aspiring to be elected, so that they realise that voluntary euthanasia is an issue which has wide public support and should be legislated for. I would therefore ask all readers of *The Freethinker* who are supporters of

the right to choose at the end of life, to contact the candidates of the main political parties in their area and ask them what their views are. If you would like a free booklet to help argue the case for voluntary euthanasia please write to me at the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, 13, Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W8 5PG, enclosing a stamped addressed envelope. Joining the Voluntary Euthanasia Society will mean that you stay up-to-date with the debate to legalise voluntary euthanasia and become part of the world wide movement for change. In the end, change will only come when people with progressive ideals unite and demand it - I hope you will be part of that movement for change.

Terry Sanderson on the media

THE REV Peter Hancock, of Cowplain, Hants., has, according to the *Daily Mail*, taken a three month sabbatical in order to study “jokes and humour” in the Bible.

Mr Hancock is probably less cynical (but more gullible) than us atheists for whom the Bible is a joke in its entirety, but the following are samples of the “humour” he has extracted from the supposed good book:

“Q. Which American state is mentioned in the Bible? A. Arkansas – ‘And Noah looked from the Ark and saw ... Q. What was the longest day in the Bible? A. The day Adam was created – there was no Eve. Q. Which brand of ice cream features in the Old Testament? A. Walls of Jericho.”

If that’s a sample of God’s stand-up routine, all I can say is “Don’t call us”. Not ever.

But I think the Vicar of Cowplain does the old guy in the sky a disservice. He can be much funnier than the cringe-making Christmas cracker rubbish that Mr Hancock ascribes to him. And so can his family. Take the Virgin Mary – she’s always good for a laugh. Just before Christmas, according to *The Times*, “hundreds of people gathered outside a glass fronted office building in Clearwater, Florida, to stare at what they say is a vision of the Virgin Mary.”

The so-called vision was explained quite rationally as light refracted by water in a garden sprinkler, but Mary Stewart, of the Tampa Jesus Christian Centre, said: “I stepped out of my car and the presence of God almost drew me to my knees.” A N Wilson – who used to be a Bible-thumper but has now seen the light and become an atheist – commented in the London *Evening Standard*: “If we lived in Clearwater it is questionable whether we should welcome Mary’s apparition. When she came to Yugoslavia some years ago, and was witnessed by hundreds of people hovering in the sky, her visit was followed by one of the most horrible wars in recent history. Her apparitions in Cairo about 10 years ago were followed by riots and fisticuffs between Copts and Muslims. Her appearances at Knock in Ireland were followed by renewals of The Troubles. If I see her in Camden High Street, I shall consider emigrating.”

Auberon Waugh in the *Daily Telegraph* was similarly unimpressed by the Florida sightings. “I am more receptive to the suggestion that a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe is to be seen shedding tears of blood in Lewis, Kansas,” he wrote. “That is exactly how I would behave if I were Our Lady of Guadalupe and found myself in Lewis, Kansas.”

He was also exercised by the news that a Catholic Church in Tottenham, north London, had purchased an adjoining pub, the Silver Lady, in order to stop striptease being performed in it. The parish priest apparently plans to turn the former den of iniquity into a community centre and church hall. However, Auberon Waugh thinks that the church should keep the tradition of striptease alive “possibly as an adjunct to Sunday school”. He says: “If the church takes its educational mission seriously, it must be ready to prepare Catholic children for the shock of what grown-ups look like without their clothes. Since the closure of *Health and Efficiency*, there is no other respectable way for the curious child to find

Knock, knock! Why did the Levite cross the road?

out. I suppose it all depends on whether the Catholic hierarchy wishes to fill its churches or not.”

MEANWHILE, if you’ve ever wondered, as I have, why so many gay men are attracted to the priesthood when the Church (any church, every church) hates them so much and abuses them terribly, then perhaps *The Fortean Times* has come up with the answer. The magazine of the bizarre and unexplained revealed that two men in the Romanian town of Botosani have been barred from the Orthodox priesthood because “their penises don’t reach the minimum length set down in the rules.” What I want to know is who does the measuring? And what is the purpose of priests having big ’uns when they are strictly forbidden from using them for the intended purpose? These are important theological questions that demand answers from the highest authorities.

From Romania, we fly to Venus to find out about Scientology, which has now been approved by the Home Office as a *bona fide* religion. An article in the London *Evening Standard* told us what Scientologists actually believe: “According to L Ron Hubbard [the founder], human beings are receptacles for immortal forces called Thetans who were first brought to Earth by an evil lord called Xenn. Scientologists who succeed in ‘clearing’ themselves through ‘auditing’ are known as ‘Operating Thetans’. (They also believe that

Hubbard once visited Venus and that psychotherapy is the creation of the evil Marcab Empire).” Absolutely barmy – but is it any barmier than the six-armed goddess of the Hindus, the man-swallowing whale of Christianity, or the sky God of Islam?

SPEAKING of which, the *Sunday Telegraph* brought us up-to-date with the doings of the revoltingly misogynist Taliban militia in Afghanistan. They have now, apparently, “ordered the closure of all girls’ schools and banned women from the workplace – including female doctors. Whereupon the mullahs decided it was against the teaching of the Koran for a woman to be treated by a male doctor. Inevitably, dozens of women fell seriously ill from – and sometimes died of – neglect ... And so, too, it was that music was banned and the Taliban decided that all the songbirds in Kabul should be rounded up and slaughtered.”

And from that other haven of holiness, Algeria, the *Standard* reported: “A group of Muslim militants slit the throats of 14 people in a village south of Algiers then decapitated some of them and stuck the heads on stakes, witnesses said yesterday. And in a nearby village, five young women were murdered for refusing to cover their heads to conform to strict Islamic doctrine.”

Hey ho. God certainly knows how to make ’em roll in the aisles. (Innocent people’s heads, that is).

Brian Parry (1949-1996)

BRIAN Parry died on December 29, 1996, at the age of 47, after a long illness. Brian was born in Salford, near Manchester. After a period in the Royal Signals he went to work in the City, proving himself very adept at computer technology. In all his jobs his ability to “fix-it” with computers was invaluable.

He met his partner, Barry Duke, in 1975 and a deep relationship developed between them. Their shared interests included politics and Secular Humanism and they both served on the Council of Management of the National Secular Society. They both played a

part in founding and working for the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.

Behind his quiet personality he was a man of determination and strong feelings – as is seen in the various campaigning work he undertook. In relaxation he much enjoyed music – blues and jazz in particular – and travel in the sun and mountains of Spain.

Brian was very much liked, much loved by his friends at work, in the Humanist movement and in his personal life.

A Secular Humanist funeral took place, conducted by Denis Cobell and including a tribute from Jim Herrick (both Vice-Presidents of the NSS).

Can you see the join? NEIL BLEWITT leaves us wonder



● On the crest of the waves – one way of seeking a cure for tuberculosis, according to an old superstition.

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

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I HAVE rarely been so captivated by a book as I was by David Pickering's *A Dictionary of Superstitions*. It is a veritable Aladdin's cave containing information on a wide variety of topics ranging from demonology through crime to gardening, wise advice on such matters as health, love and marriage and domestic economy, and directions for one's general conduct.

I do not doubt that some of the facts packed into this book's 300 pages will surprise many readers of *The Freethinker*. They certainly surprised me.

Apiarists will discover, if they were not already aware of it, that bees sprang from the tears of Christ on the cross, and that to sing psalms in front of a hive will improve the health of its occupants. Nor is this all. If the apiarist will listen carefully outside the hive at midnight on Christmas Eve, he will hear his bees humming Psalm 100 – *Make a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord*.

Not all that is connected with Christmas Eve is so felicitous. Men born out of wedlock on that day who have hairy hands are likely to become werewolves. Unfortunately it is a fact; but if it is of any consolation to sufferers from this condition, their miserable lives may be ended by a silver bullet. It should be borne in mind, however, that the bullet must be blessed by a priest before it is used. Failure to comply with this requirement will create a mess to no purpose at all.

For most ailments there are remedies described in this book. A sufferer from goitre, for example, will find that his condition improves markedly on biting into the

bark of a peach tree on Ascension Day. The affliction then passes into the tree. The author does not give any assistance to the peach tree which may wish to dispose of an unwanted goitre, nor does he state what the erstwhile human sufferer should do if he swallows either a strip of bark or his dentures in the process. But these complications may be avoided by using a second method to remove the goitre. This requires that the sign of the cross be made over the protuberance by the hand of somebody who has recently died. The advantage of this method is that it may be performed not just on Ascension Day but at any time of the year – depending, of course, on the availability of a corpse.

The wearing of red garters is recommended for rheumatism, and baldness may be cured by spreading a generous mixture of honey and mouse-droppings on the unpopulated area. Mice, by the way, are revealed to be the souls of murder victims. Similarly, sea-gulls prove to be the reincarnation of drowned fishermen and I must say that I had no idea fishermen had such unpleasant habits on washing-days.

One remedy was of particular interest to me. To cure tuberculosis, water has to be taken from the crests of nine waves and poured over the head of the sufferer who must then pass through a hole in a rock in a sunwise direction. My interest stems from the fact that many years ago I contracted this disease – regrettably before Mr Pickering's book was published. I, therefore, could rely only on my bed, injections of streptomycin and an operation.

There is much to be learned from this book about love and marriage. Gentlemen will be delighted to know that if a sock slips down to the ankle it means that their lady-love is thinking about them at that particular moment. Similarly, if a lady's night-dress

rides up, it means that her lover is thinking of her, although the precise nature of his thoughts can only be guessed at.

If a groom wishes to test his bride for virginity, he must see if she has an overpowering desire to urinate after being fed a portion of powdered coal. If she is merely sick immediately afterwards it does not signify nor does it if, on blowing her nose, she has a fall of soot. Sadly there is no test recommended to ascertain a groom's virginity.

If one wishes to see the features of a future lover it is necessary only for the blade-bone of a sheep to be placed under the pillow for nine nights in succession and he or she will appear in a dream – always assuming that sleep is possible in these circumstances.

The bride's first purchase for the married home must be a chamber-pot. This should be filled with salt which must then be scattered on the floor – presumably before the pot is used, although this is not made clear – and the bride and groom must conserve sufficient energy to jump over it three times. Good fortune is sure to follow. Further felicity may be won if the bride attends the wedding ceremony wearing no undergarments beneath her wedding-dress. There are, it will be obvious, several drawbacks to this, not the least of which will become apparent in a cold church on a winter's afternoon. As the late Mr Arthur Askey once said, she may not be aware where the draught is coming from, but she is certain to discover exactly where it is going to. The bride may also, as a result of this exposure, develop chilblains in hitherto unlikely places. But these may be expelled, as this book describes, by wearing horses' teeth or pricking the affected area with holly leaves.

If the bride experiences difficulty later on in conceiving, she needs only to walk naked into the garden on Midsummer's Eve and

...ering where superstition ends and religion begins

F CHILBLAINS, URCHYARDS AND HAMBER-POTS

pick a piece of St John's wort. There is a bonus from this action in that St John's wort is useful for warding off evil spirits and as an ingredient of aphrodisiacs.

The subject of evil spirits is covered fully in this book. All may be kept at bay by the taking of some simple precautions. Scissors placed under the doormat will frustrate witches; white lilies planted outside the house will act similarly against ghosts, while a knife under the window-sill will keep out the Devil himself.

The consequences of Judas Iscariot's suicide still reverberate across the centuries. It seems that he hanged himself on an elder tree. Consequently, its wood should not be burned indoors for it will incite the Devil to come down the chimney – no matter how many knives are placed under the window-sill. Boats should not be constructed from elder wood. They are sure to sink. Nor should a prospective murderer fashion his murder weapon from it as his victim's hand will emerge from the grave to point him out to the authorities.

Readers who may be interested to discover how tall Jesus was have only to plant some rosemary and let it grow unhindered for 33 years. It will then match his height exactly. An additional benefit accrues from this experiment in that a sprig plucked from the bush is a guaranteed cure for madness.

One should never wake a sleep-walker. The reason is that the soul leaves the body during sleep and a sudden awakening may not give it sufficient time to re-enter the body. The consequences of this will be obvious to all.

The person to be buried most recently in a churchyard will not enter into eternal rest until the next person is interred. The corpse becomes the Churchyard Watcher in the interim and it must maintain a vigil until it is relieved by its successor. A prospective

corpse, therefore, should ensure that it is never the last to be interred in a churchyard immediately before its ultimate closure for then it can never gain eternal rest.

On the subject of churchyards, it will surely have been remarked that many contain monkey-puzzle trees. The reason is that they act as a deterrent to the Devil when he wishes to indulge his penchant for watching funerals from a place of concealment. There is no such security in a monkey-puzzle tree. I must say that I always thought it was because he would find it so uncomfortable to adopt a sitting posture therein. As Mr Ken Dodd would say: "By Jove, missus, that'd bring the water to his eyes!"

It may be thought that one avoids walking under a ladder because the head would be vulnerable to a dropped paint-pot or similar article. Nothing of the sort. The ladder, this book reveals, forms a triangle with the wall and the ground and this is a symbol of the Holy Trinity, to walk through which shows disrespect to the Almighty. Those who ignore this are therefore likely to receive more than a pot of paint on their heads.

Readers may often have wondered how the man in the moon came to be there. The answer is that he gathered sticks on earth on the Sabbath and was sent into space as a punishment. This may come as a timely warning to those of similar habits. Despite his degradation one should not point at him on nine occasions as this leads to permanent exclusion from Heaven.

Gardeners will find much useful information in this book. For example, parsley must be sown nine times before success can be achieved. This is because the Devil claims the first eight sowings for himself. There may be some delay in the ninth appearing above the surface but this is because it must go to Hell before it germinates. I had often puzzled

as to why my own parsley was slow to grow. It is a herb of which I am very fond despite Mr Ogden Nash's dictum that

*Parsley
Is gharsley.*

Weeds, by the way, were sent by God as a punishment for Adam's sin. The problems they cause, however, may be addressed to some extent by burying three puppies in the affected area. This is excellent for removing the weeds though it does little for the puppies.

If one is concerned that flies are such persistent creatures particularly in the hot weather, it is because St Bernard excommunicated them in the eleventh century and they have been seeking vengeance ever since.

Holy water will always drive away rats. It also has other powers depending on the day on which it is sanctified. Holy water from Easter Day will repel witches and that retained from Palm Sunday will prevent storms.

I could write more. There are thousands of entries in the 300 pages of this absorbing volume but I hope I may have extracted sufficient to whet the appetite. My best advice is to purchase a copy and follow my own voyage of discovery. As I say, it is called *A Dictionary of Superstitions* and is published in paperback by Cassell at £9.99.

One last word. For the benefit of readers who may not choose to consult this book, I can do no better than end my article by reproducing two injunctions from its pages. To ignore either is certain to court the direst retribution. The first is that finger-nails must on no account be trimmed on Candlemas Day. The other is that mackerel should not be eaten until Balaam's ass has spoken in church. You have been warned.

Appreciation: Edward Blishen

Simply awash with life

by Jim Herrick

IN Edward Blishen's *The Penny World* (1990), he comments on an advert for a "clearance event" and wonders whether his death will be described as a "disappearance event". Now the "disappearance event" has happened and Blishen has died at the age of 76 (see *The Freethinker*, January 1997); however the disappearance is not complete, for we have his many books in which he is – in his full, vital relationship with the world – magnificently alive.

He first gained recognition as a writer by writing about school-teaching in *Roaring Boys* (1955), an honest and enlivening account of the struggle and delight found in bringing words, writing, literature to rough teenagers. The book has been required reading for a generation of teachers and it is a crying shame that it is now out of print, alas, along with most of his books.

After leaving school he worked as a journalist on a local paper, worked on the land as a conscientious objector during the war, taught at a prep school in Hampstead, then, after the government's Emergency Teacher Training, in a secondary modern school in North London. Autobiographical works, which cover the greater part of his writing, cover these aspects of his career: *A Cack-handed War* (1972) on wartime land work, *A Nest of Teachers* (1980) on teacher training, *This Right Soft Lot* (1969) on the North London School. His success as an autobiographer lies not just in his ability to bring Dickensian vitality to the people he has known, not just the humour he can bring to the most serious occasion and the serious attention he can give to the most slight moment, but to the way in which he has been so engaged with life – not by great events, or great thoughts, but by great and selfless attention to the multifariousness of life around him.

This Right Soft Lot sees him becoming a vetran after seven years at his North London Sec

Mod. He feels almost guilty about the extent to which he is enjoying himself confronting his pupils with the pleasure and power of the use of words. As an ex-teacher I appreciate his untiring enthusiasm for what could be seen as the most important job any individual could take on. His sympathies extend even to Perksie:

And sometimes I was filled with delight by his slow, pained attempts – from which at the first feelings of inward strain, he would desist – to find words for the folly that made a schoolboy of him. Because he could never do it, could never find the words, and when that happened his grin would become almost a full one.

His description of the emergence of a school play from 2B which embraced ancient Rome, and a large volcano, or of a day-trip with 30 boys to the Tate Gallery, where they clambered around astonished, scornful, astounded by what they saw, cannot be forgotten. On a fine spring morning a religious member of staff decreed that the 450 boys should walk to the nearest park and sniff the flowers and thank God for nature. There was probably little pantheism but much amazement at the very idea of the whole school crocodyling across the streets to the park on such an aesthetic and "spiritual" mission.

At a time when Tony Blair suggests that what schools need is more homework and headmasters better briefed in management, it has to be said that this nonsense should be countered by the quest for more teachers like Blishen.

Blishen's instinct for communicating with children was put to a purpose when working together with Leon Garfield in producing a retelling of the Greek myths in *The God Beneath the Sea* (1970) He also edited anthologies for children.

A dominant strand in his autobiographical works is the depiction of his father, a narrow-

minded, cantankerous man – from whom it seems surprising that such as Blishen had sprung. (His mother, however, was a much more attractive figure.) Blishen *père* deplored the development of young Blishen especially his tendency to endlessly cover paper with words, to surround himself with books.

When asked by a furious father, bent on pushing Blishen into a remunerative career, what he wanted to do with his life, he replied: "All I want to do is to help to make the world a better place". His father retorted: "Oh, my God, Oh, bugger the world ...". Such a wish becomes chastened and battered by life's experience, but it is the retention of such an intention that is crucial to the freethinker.

He was perhaps one of nature's natural freethinkers. At a tender age, when playing libraries at home he classified the *Holy Bible* under fiction. As a Crusader he began asking awkward questions having adopted the position of atheist. It was a shame because one of the religious teachers had a superb repertoire of railway metaphors: "anyone who [like Blishen] had become temporarily unfit for the main line of faith went into the sheds for a spiritual oiling and greasing". Well, no oiling and greasing could save Blishen from a lifetime's freethinking. In his introduction to the revised version of Margaret Knight's *Humanist Anthology* (1995), he wrote that he would have valued the anthology as a source for the arguments of his youth.

Blishen was a very successful broadcaster for the same reason as his success as a writer: his enthusiasm for people and words. He wondered if he was "hopelessly easy-minded, liking the world so much and more inclined to like people than not" (*The Penny World*). No, it was his liking of people and books which made him such an engaging broadcaster. For many years he worked for the World Service, interviewing writers and at one stage working for the BBC's African service where he encouraged a whole generation of African writers. He headed the BBC's *A Good Read* until a few weeks before his death. And then came the "disappearance event".

At his secular funeral Alec McCowen read from *The Outside Commentator* (1986), where he quoted a commentator who said that Blishen's life had been uneventful:

One reviewer of a book I'd written indicated the level of eventfulness below which I had fallen ...

Well, of course, I did see that some lives by their involvement with events of a plainly desperate kind, were more thrilling than others. But I had to say I did not know what was meant by an uneventful life. Simply being alive seemed to me an event on a very large scale.

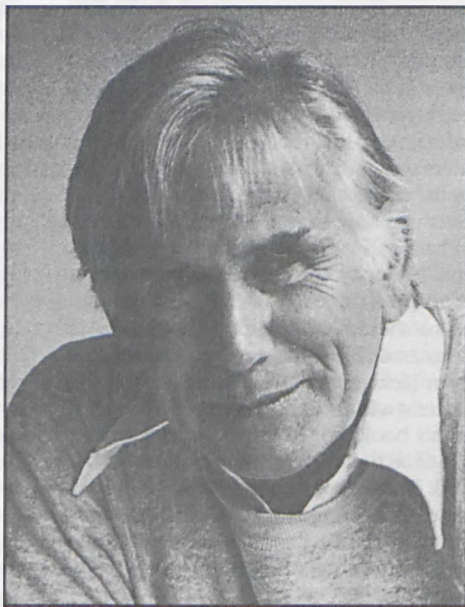
I myself, as long as I could remember, had been quite sensationally up to my neck in life: indeed, awash with it!

So simply awash with life was he that it was impossible not to believe that this inveterate diarist and note-taker was not somewhere at the back of the funeral taking notes for his next volume.

Widdecombe
fair
upset

"ENCOURAGE people to vote Conservative if [you] are really concerned about personal responsibility".

This was Ann Widdecombe's response to several Anglican bishops' New Year addresses in *The Guardian*, one of which accused the Conservative Party of emphasising personal over public morality because "it wishes to resist the fundamental economic and political changes that threaten the privileged position of its supporters" (*The Guardian*, January 2).



● Edward Blishen

HAPLESS CHARLES AND THE ANGLICANS

ONE striking outcome of the otherwise appalling "debate" on the future of the monarchy staged by Carlton Television on January 8 was the deep unpopularity of the Prince of Wales. Buckingham Palace is reported to have been relieved and gratified that two-thirds of the votes cast in the telephone poll favoured the retention of the monarchy, and it has also taken steps to institute a "five year plan" for boosting the image of the hapless Charles.

Even before those hideous excesses in the Birmingham Conference Centre gave mass debating a bad name, the press was full of stories suggesting that the heir to the throne is not as semi-detached about the Established Church as Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Lord Runcie revealed the former Primate considers him to be. Or, if there was any justice in that view, steps are to be taken to remedy the situation. The Prince is known to take an unusually intense interest in religion. He has visited a Hindu temple, said very positive things about Islam, and has long been enthusiastic about the "green-pantheism" of his recently-deceased guru, Laurens van der Post. It should thus have occasioned little surprise when he declared that he would like to become "Defender of Faith" rather than "Defender of the Faith" (and it is surely ironic that the title originally bestowed by a grateful Pope on Henry VIII for writing against Martin Luther's denial of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation should still be so proudly used by a Protestant monarchy).

Many commentators were quick to observe that the title "Defender of Faith" is utterly vacuous. They should have been as ready to admit that "Defender of the Faith" has been in disingenuous use for more than four centuries. Public relations advisors and spin-doctors were nevertheless clearly concerned to present the Prince as a loyal Anglican rather than a desultory browser at the smorgasboard of faith, as if this was likely to improve his image! Perhaps it was the Church – and in particular Archbishop Carey – who, concerned at the prospect of a Supreme Governor who was a self-confessed adulterer as well as a semi-detached Anglican, insisted that it was time to repair the undoubted damage that recent events have done to both the Church and the Monarchy. Both institutions seem to have been forced to recognise that their futures are inextricably intertwined, and when the chill winds of criticism assail them both, they have a better chance of survival if they huddle together for warmth.

With Christmas barely out of the way, the *Daily Telegraph* duly announced on December 28 that "The Prince of Wales is planning to devote more time and attention

by Daniel O'Hara
President, National Secular Society

to the Church of England and less to other religious interests." There had, of course, to be a *quid pro quo*. In return for a promise "to incorporate the Church of England more closely into his public work", the Prince had to be allowed to get off his chest some of the things that have alienated him from the institution. "The Church I love has been swept away by pathetic politically correct progressives" he said in a "private" Palace document coincidentally leaked to the *Telegraph*. He claims not to be offended by the "rise of evangelism" (!) believing "that it may have beneficial consequences for the Church". Though he is reported to be unlikely to say as much in public (sic), the *Telegraph* has ensured by its well-orchestrated leak that there should be no doubt as to his "true" views. In spite of this muted trumpeting of his renewed commitment to the C of E, he reserves his right to continue in the spirit of "Defender of Faith", while being styled "Defender of the Faith" (though there was no acknowledgement that he will not be entitled to this handle before his mother dies or abdicates). Much is made of Prince William's preparation for his confirmation as a member of the C of E later this year, and of the fact that Charles will stand in for his mother at forthcoming ceremonies in Canterbury to mark the arrival there of St Augustine 1,400 years ago. Dr. Carey has responded by praising the Prince for "taking faith seriously" (many atheists do as much, but no one thanks them!).

It is, of course, possible to overestimate the extent of the Prince's apparent conservatism. Like many others of moderate religious convictions or none, he favours the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* over modern would-be vernacular liturgies. But perhaps this has more to do with the fact that the mellifluous archaisms of the former have acquired a life of their own which veils its actual doctrines, whereas the latter's banality can no longer conceal the shocking, trivial or patently false beliefs therein enshrined. Though the Prince is said to have spoken in favour of "evangelism", he doesn't seem like the sort of person who would applaud such typically evangeli-

cal beliefs as eternal damnation for those who do not regard faith in Jesus Christ as the only road to salvation.

In short, the Prince of Wales' apparent desire to be seen as closer to the distinctive beliefs of the Church of England than he actually is bears all the hallmarks of a half-baked publicity stunt jointly hatched by Church and Palace officials, each worried for their own future unless they can paper over the all-too-obvious rift between an heir to the throne currently at the nadir of his popularity, and a church daily losing what little public respect and confidence it once had.

The most interesting and encouraging item touching religion in the same issue of the *Daily Telegraph* was a report of a Christmas Day sermon by the Episcopalian Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway. This diminutive figure of monkish appearance is in fact one of the more honest and progressive Bishops in the Anglican Communion. His past public pronouncements on homosexuality and divorce – and his disinclination to consider adultery a sin – would not have disgraced a spokesperson for the National Secular Society. He is reported to have told his Christmas congregation that he often has "feelings of absolute atheism", when he is convinced that there is no God and no after-life. "Real atheism" he confided "has some good arguments to support it". He was preaching against the "hypercertainty" of Anne Atkins, the vicar's wife and media pundit who, besides denouncing the Church's "liberal" attitude towards homosexuality, had described atheism as "the worst sin there is". Bishop Holloway disagrees. He told the *Church Times* that "faith and doubt coexist: you can't have one without the other." One hopes he is unperturbed at being denounced as "the Antichrist" during a conference at the Roman Catholic Downside Abbey. If he ever comes to recognise that his atheist convictions are more surely grounded than his Christian beliefs, he will receive a warm welcome from his fellow Humanists!

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).

Eruv gains 'partial' approval but Secularist fight goes on

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

THE first British *eruv* (an enclosure within which Orthodox Jews' Sabbath restrictions are relaxed) has been granted partial planning permission; but despite this the *eruv* cannot yet be erected. A previous application to Barnet Council had been refused but this was reversed on appeal to John Gummer, then Environment Secretary – and Church of England Synod member.

This latest application, concerning broadly the same area in north west London, has been necessary because the previously proposed boundary of the *eruv* has had to be changed, partly because of opposition on legal grounds by NSS supporters Elizabeth and Jeffrey Segall. They told *The Freethinker*: "We are disappoint-

ed at the Council's recent decision, particularly as the permission was granted virtually without opposition from the councillors. We are also curious as to why some councillors have withdrawn their total opposition." The appeal over the previous application had been very expensive for the council.

The *eruv* boundary is delineated by existing physical features such as railway embankments and people's houses without consent. Where there are gaps, 39 sets of poles suspending thin nylon wire are to be erected to make symbolic 'gateways' in the boundary. Barnet's Public Works Committee will also need to give permission before the poles can be erected. It is not known how lengthy a process this will

be, but the United Synagogue *Eruv* Committee is happy with the progress so far.

The Segalls, who take a national perspective of this issue, added: "We fear that other Jewish fundamentalists may be tempted to use Barnet's *eruv* as a precedent, despite the opposition of most Jews and non-Jews who believe the *eruv* damages the maintenance of multicultural communities."

The NSS is holding a trust fund, to which some readers contributed. It was set up to fight the first planning application. The NSS General Secretary is in touch with the Segalls to decide on the next move.

● The NSS's overworked helpful suggestions department has come up with an innovative idea for a world-wide *eruv*. Somebody simply holds an elastic band up high and declares that the *eruv* is the area outside the band!

Muslim prayer room in secular university is 'discriminatory'

A MUSLIM prayer room at Middlesex University, in north London, is the subject of a complaint by a National Secular Society member.

He objects to any dedicated religious space in this secular academic institution, where he is a mature student; he has asked that his name not be publicised.

The NSS member confirms that whenever any other special interest group, including Christians, uses any space in the university it is only permitted temporary occupancy and is required to return the space to its original state after use. But the prayer room has continuously displayed quotations from the Koran for a long time. The member has complained to the Vice-Chancellor and the Student Union and suggested that a non-exclusive quiet room on this campus would be an ideal solution.

The complainant felt he had been unjustly accused of discrimination "against one particular group" by the university. Its Vice-Chancellor contends that the partitioned-off area is not "permanent", (despite confirming in the same letter that the room has been used for this purpose for many years). He pointed out that other universities offer similar facilities.

NSS Vice-President Jim Herrick said that each case needed to be judged on its own merits. Many universities (including the majority of the Oxford colleges) have religious origins and dedicated space for religious activities. This is a quite different situation from a secular university like Middlesex. He strongly opposes discrimina-

tion of any kind and feels that in a multi-faith context it is discriminatory for any one religion to have a dedicated space. He suggests that the ideal solution in a secular university is for there to be no space devoted to religious observance. If, however, there are to be any such spaces they should be open to those of all religions and none, for quiet contemplation.

So far, there is no evidence of any change in the university's policy. Daniel O'Hara, NSS President, has written to the university pointing out the discrimination and suggesting the "quiet room" alternative for this campus. It is hoped that the university will consider more carefully a viewpoint propounded by a national organisation.

The university, which also attracts a number of students from the Far East, was established earlier this decade from a number of polytechnics and an – originally Christian – teacher training college. It does have chaplains – who happen to be Anglican – but it is accepted that they are there to assist students of all religions and none.

What had been the chapel at the teacher training college, on another campus, has been officially redesignated as a quiet room and is open to students of all religions (and none) for silent contemplation. The Muslim prayer room is the only space dedicated solely to religious devotion in the whole University. This room is on the Bounds Green campus, where there is no quiet room. KPW

New World Order?

TURKEY'S first Islamist Prime Minister has established a new international grouping – "D8" – of eight developing countries which also happen to be among the largest Muslim countries. Its avowed aim is "refashioning the world order".

Since coming to power, Turkey's PM has assiduously courted the Muslim world, but conspicuously failed to set foot inside the EU, with which Turkey has signed a Customs agreement. (*Independent*, January 6).

A 'trusty' now?

A VICAR stole £81,000, much of it donations from Comic Relief. When sentencing him on January 6 to a year in prison, the judge in Northampton said: "If you can't trust a vicar, who can you trust?" (*Express*, January 6).

Left-footer Rupert?

MEDIA mogul Rupert Murdoch has become a disillusioned Presbyterian and is considering converting to Roman Catholicism, his wife's faith, according to a recent newspaper report.

You're telling us!

Blasphemy

I WOULD like to correct the impression given by the report in the January issue of *The Freethinker* on the public protest meeting of December 11 against the perpetuation of the criminal offence of blasphemy. It had been called in response to the failure of the European Court of Human Rights to overturn the British decision, on grounds of blasphemy, to refuse a video licence to a short film, *Visions of Ecstasy*.

The author of your report, Keith Porteous Wood, quotes a comment from a member of the audience, Barbara Ward, that: "This seems neither the time to challenge the law, nor the case on which to do it." But he does not mention my reply to her, which was well received by the meeting – though he states that her comment "encapsulated the sober mood of the meeting". What does "sober" mean in this context? Pusillanimous? Give me the ardent secularism of the old time NSS and *The Freethinker*! Unfortunately, no motion as to positive action was put to the meeting.

What I said in reply to Barbara Ward was that every conceivable publicity opportunity was the right time to challenge the archaic blasphemy law and that this particular case was as good a case as any on which to base our challenge. If she found the film unaesthetic (as many of us did), that makes it all the more appropriate for us to defend. To oppose censorship on behalf only of material of which we approve would put us on the same footing as every tyrant in history.

Freedom of expression must be universal, or it is nothing.

Besides, if we were to win such an anti-censorship case on grounds of artistic merit, that would not amount to a victory at all: we need a victory based on total eradication of blasphemy from the criminal law. Unless it is eradicated very soon, British Muslims and other religious groups will (especially under a Labour government) achieve the extension of blasphemy protection they are demanding, on grounds of parity with Christianity – and this will mean an end to any mockery of religion in this country, including an end to *The Freethinker*.

I wrote an article on the subject for *Tribune*, which published it in their issue of December 6, and will post a free photocopy of it to anyone who sends to my address (51 Farmfield Road, Downham, Bromley, Kent, BR1 4NF) a stamped addressed envelope for it.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Delighted

I WAS delighted to receive the latest issue of *The Freethinker* after the the usual Christmas charade.

As an ongoing seeker after "Truth", previously involved in utopian socialism and later in a religious cult, I would like to thank all the contributors to your journal for helping me to loosen some of the dogmatic encrustations. Having been an 11-plus failure full of questions, and surrounded by a brutal and boring school environment 30 or so years ago, I can honestly say that when I discovered *The Freethinker* it became my first introduction to thinking for myself; in fact my first real school.

It amazes me that the ideas expressed are not more widespread in the media but perhaps that is due to our dislike of discussing ideas in this country.

I do not see the journal as a battlefield to win arguments but as a forum in which to approach the "Truth" and I believe that religion in the past has been part of this search. We must be honest about truth in all fields of human enquiry. These subjects split from the main trunk of philosophy which means "the love of truth" but all truth seekers share the same human roots.

I do not think that there can be any certain "ultimate truth" because all events are constantly changing, even the events we call our selves, but as human beings we will constantly explore and add to our knowledge of what is true by shedding light upon ignorance. However mythology and legend, which stem from our emotional needs for "security" and "certainty" are also part of the inheritance from our thinking, feeling human ancestors. These are not so open to reason and are not "true" in the same way unless it could be argued that truth should be stripped of its emotional content.

I feel that in an imperfect world a democratic secular government ensuring the freedom of thought in science and religion (as far as this does not harm others, and opinions on that will vary) is the best that can be aimed at. It is a constantly changing world, always involving suffering and the challenge to confront suffering and I do not have any personal experience of a "soul" or a "God" or "meaning" in the rational or observational sense, but there are certainly periods of wonder and joy which some would attribute to a "spiritual dimension" which is not necessarily of "supernatural" origin. Perhaps the "meaning" is to grow and to continue to grow as human beings within evolution.

If we take "God" as a projected personification of "Ultimate Truth" then perhaps atheists, agnostics and those with "faith" can come together in the central dogma of the three semitic religions: that "God was, is and always will be beyond the knowledge of mankind. Just as the created can never fathom the creator, so humans, although striving to understand more and more of creation, can never comprehend God".

I don't know if something is creating me or causing me to evolve, but I do know that, regardless of speculation I am not "Ultimate Truth" and that in the end the universe will have its way with me whether I desire it or not.

ROGER NADON
Horsham

Disappointed

I HAVE taken delivery of my first copy of *The Freethinker*. Having recently joined the British Humanist Association, I believed your publication would help me develop my thinking in many directions. I am so far sorely disappointed not only in the one direction you seem to go, that of anti-religion, but also that you can be so nit-picking.

The religions of the world have very little to support them, and surely we have better ammunition than for example the petty mindedness of the *Encyclopaedia of Biblical Errancy* and the review you carried (December, Page 2).

What made me really alert to the problems this article posed was the apparent contradiction of the colour Jesus's crucifixion robe. Was it scarlet, or was it purple? For a book I am writing, I have made some study of the production of dyes from the murex shell-fish. The word "phoenician" is based on a word meaning both red or purple. And if you consider that the dyes were extracted from the murex by many different people with many skills and without the benefit of a modern quality control system, it is easy to understand that colours could range from a pale red through scarlet to purple. Add to this, that more murex were required to produce a deeper colour, thus increasing the price of the cloth.

If we accept for the moment that Jesus really lived, and I have no problem with this, the Bible tells us he was poor. It follows his robe will be redder rather than purple. However, possibly for the propaganda reasons that Jesus was a "King", Mark's and John's words can easily have been (mis)translated as "purple".

As for many of the so-called inconsistencies, it is worth remembering the Bible was written by many hands and rarely at the time of the event, often not a few years later, but some hundreds. Consider setting an Anglican, a Roman Catholic and a Baptist clergyman the task of writing the trial and execution of Charles I, we would be sure to have three very different essays – and they have a mass of research material to use unlike the Jewish priests of old.

The Bible was written mostly by those priests whose job included promoting Judaism against all the "heathen" gods around them, many of whom were extremely depraved. It is no wonder expressions of genocide like "Slay utterly old and young, both maids and little children, and women", are found so often. Were they actually carried out, one wonders? If we are to believe the words, it is no small achievement of the population that any nation at all in Canaan survived.

The Bible should be looked upon by we humanists as a history and propaganda book of a time that is very unlike our own, do you not think?

EDWIN J DAVEY
Hereford

Non-joiners

AS REPORTED in your January issue, Daniel O'Hara's acceptance address on his election as President of the National Secular Society, carried a long quotation from Professor Steve Bruce's, *Religion in Modern Britain*.

Daniel O'Hara's comment on the extract was "This may suggest that organisations like our own are largely peripheral in the process of increasing secularisation that we have seen gaining momentum in our century". Mr O'Hara then went on to outline a role for the NSS and kindred organisations in the areas of ideas and of social action. I am sure that few readers of *The Freethinker* would find anything to criticise in Mr O'Hara's perception of the role of organised humanism, but it is not readers of *The Freethinker* who have to be won over. It happens that I once wrote to Professor Bruce seeking some advice on ways of promoting organised

You're telling us!

From Page 13

humanism. His reply was "We do not need a humanist movement". The classic response within humanist circles when one cites the very low proportion of freethinking intellectuals who are prepared to be identified with organised humanism is "They mistakenly believe that all the battles have been won". I do not believe that the opinions of freethinkers of the calibre of Professor Bruce should be so lightly dismissed.

It is entirely possible that most of the specific objectives for organised humanism which Mr O'Hara outlined would be endorsed by many prominent people outside the ranks of organised humanism, but they do not believe that the present organisations have the capacity to achieve these stated objectives. As a member of the BHA, the Humanist Society of Scotland and a subscriber to *The Freethinker*, I am inclined to think that the non-joiners are right.

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

Positively

THE term "positive atheism" is more and more used as an alternative to "freethought", "rationalism", "secularism", "humanism" or "secular humanism". Positive atheism may, in fact, be identified with atheistic humanism.

Two new contributions on positive atheism come from the hand of the Indian philosopher S P Kanal: *The Three Atheists of Dev Samaj* and *Positive Atheism of Dev Dharma*, both published in November 1996 by Dev Samaj Prakashan, 570 Double Storey, New Rajendranagar, New Delhi 110 060, India.

The first of these two pamphlets is mostly biographical in content, dealing with the life, work and writings of Har Narayan Agnihotri (1871-1926), who is claimed to be "the first atheist in Punjab who took atheism to the public", P V Kanal (1883-1954), and Professor S P Kanal (b. 1911), the son of P V Kanal and one of India's most outstanding atheistic philosophers.

S P Kanal has been extremely prolific, and many of his writings can be obtained from Dev Samaj Prakashan. As these two pamphlets show, S P Kanal remains active in spite of his advanced age. He is a prominent member of the Dev Samaj, India's oldest atheistic organisation.

The Dev Samaj was established in 1887 for the purpose of moral regeneration. To begin with, it had a theistic ideology. But its founder, Har Narayan Agnihotri, became an atheist in 1895, and ever since the Dev Samaj has been clearly atheistic.

The philosophy of Dev Samaj is often called "Dev Dharma". According to S P Kanal "Dev Dharma is atheistic in its religion, denying and rejecting all forms of supernaturalism". He puts forward his "brand of positive atheism as a contribution to world atheism" (*Positive Atheism of Dev Dharma*). In this pamphlet S P Kanal refers to writers like Auguste Comte, Periyar, Gora, and Jim Herrick, and he gives a summary of the philosophy of Dev Samaj and its activities.

The Dev Samaj now runs 27 educational institutions in northern India, 26 of these being open to women, whereas one of the schools is exclusively for boys. The Dev Samaj has from its beginning emphasised the importance of

education for girls and women.

For more on the Dev Samaj, I refer readers to S P Kanal's two pamphlets and to his other writings, and to Chapter 3 of my forthcoming book *Atheism in India*, to be published by the Indian Secular Society, 850/8A Shivajinagar, Pune 411 004, India.

FINNGEIR HIORTH
Kirkehaugsveien 3
N-0283 Oslo

Quintessence?

WHENEVER I read definitions of Humanism in your correspondence columns, I am always surprised that the writers fail to mention what I consider to be the quintessence of Humanism; namely, that we human beings are each responsible for one another.

As we do not believe in a loving, caring and



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).

omnipotent father-figure who guides our footsteps in life and who responds to our cries for help in times of crises and illness, it automatically follows that we have a duty to help each other in times of distress and pain because, ultimately, only *people* can help *other people*. I do not believe this as some kind of abstract intellectual proposition but as something that the heart spontaneously believes and acts upon.

In the past 12 months we have had a pretty shocking experience when my wife became seriously and dangerously ill and all our so-called "friends" in the area let us down abysmally. Indeed, some of them made me feel ashamed of being a member of the human race and our shock and hurt was so great that we felt compelled to move away from the area. I had never before in my life encountered such mind-boggling hypocrisy. I do not intend to make a blanket condemnation of all Christians when I say that the most long-standing of these so-called "friends" was a regular Sunday churchgoer who only missed a Sunday service in times of illness. Nevertheless, we had a rude awakening as to the nature of true friendship and it makes one wonder what Christians really do believe in their innermost hearts.

May I therefore enter a plea to all Humanists to remember that at the end of the day it is *people* who are more important than academic definitions and that we have an overriding duty to

help and give succour to each other in times of great pain and distress. Humanism must mean *caring* for our fellow men and women or it is totally meaningless.

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Caldicot

Desperate?

THE Rev Peter Gamble (December) is indeed desperate, when he flies to the discredited evidences of quotations of Tacitus, Pliny the Younger and the Jewish historian Josephus in order to justify his evangelical fictions.

Volney, in his scholarly work *The Ruins*, tells us: "There are absolutely no other monuments of the existence of Jesus Christ as a human being than a passage in Josephus (Antiq. Jud. lib.18.c.3.) a single phrase in Tacitus (Annalib.15.c.44) and the Gospels. But the passage in Josephus is unanimously acknowledged to be apocryphal, and to have been interpolated towards the close of the third century, and that of Tacitus is so vague and so evidently taken from the deposition of the Christians before the tribunals, that it may be ranked in the class of evangelical records. It remains to inquire of what authority are these records. "All the world knows," says Faustus, who though a Manichean was one of the most learned men of the third century, "that the gospels were neither written by Jesus Christ nor his apostles, but by certain unknown persons, who, rightly judging that they should not obtain belief respecting things which they had not seen, placed at the head of their recitals the names of contemporary apostles."

Bausobre, a sagacious writer, has demonstrated the absolute uncertainty of those foundations of the Christian religion; so that the existence of Jesus is no better proved than that of Osiris and Hercules, or that of Fot or Bedou, with whom the Chinese continually confuse him, for they never call Jesus by any other name than Fot.

I do wonder whether the Rev Peter Gamble would have been able to maintain his objection to militant service before the CO Tribunals if they had quoted to him, Math 10.34: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword."

DANIEL H BIRD
Coventry

Last word!

NO, Heather Evans, I have neither been checkmated nor converted to the animal rights argument (January letters). I see nothing wrong in speciseism; it applies to all species and is why life is as it is – without it, life would be just a multitude of amoeba. So my reply to your last letter would just have repeated what I have already said in earlier letters. I decided to spare readers of *The Freethinker* repetition of a correspondence that was getting nowhere, as is obvious from your last letter – also a correspondence probably becoming tedious!

You, apparently, could not resist the urge to get the last word twice. I leave it to readers to judge the arguments for themselves: they do not need you to make up their minds for them by crying "checkmate!"

R G TEE
Pudsey

ASK THE PARSON (4)

by Karl Heath

Well, is the Bible the Word of God?

Dear Parson,

Do you like answering questions? When you answer questions about religion are your answers your own opinions, or are they prescribed or God-given? Do you strive to give plausible answers to difficult questions? Or do you practise a dignified silence? Do you ever say I don't know?

To the sciences and many other fields of human thought, questions are essential. Without them human mental activity would be stultified, crushed under the dead weight of dogma.

On Tuesday, February 15, 1972, on the BBC "Prayer for the Day", a Rev Gordon Albion said: "Dearest God ... I don't ask to see ... I don't ask to know ... I seek only to be used by you". Do you agree with this self-abasement?

When your congregation sings "Rock of Ages", which, legend has it, the Reverend Toplady composed on the Ten of Diamonds in a Bath gambling house, do you feel that you are "foul", needing a fountain to cleanse you?

Do you agree with Cowper's "Olney" hymn:

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins,
and sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains?*

Do you feel these sentiments are embarrassing, even nauseating? If so, will you repudiate them?

But does your God wish us to humble ourselves before Him? Does He wish us to prostrate ourselves or kneel? A human being who required others to do so would be condemned. Why, therefore, should the same conduct be admired in God?

Does God love praise and admiration? Is this why so many hymns are full of it?

Some clergy have said that God is indescribable. If so, how can they say anything about Him? Why "Him"? Why not "Her" or "It"? And why singular? Why not "Hims" and "Hers" and "Its"?

What do you mean when you say "God made

man in His own image"? If God made the universe, seemingly limitless volumes of space, light years of cosmic dust, billions of vast conflagrations of incandescent gas, billions of light years apart, vast clouds of radiation, quasars, pulsars and black holes, how can He possibly resemble a human being?

How can He focus on our little planet, a speck of sand in a limitless beach, and focus even more minutely on Mrs Smith hanging out her washing, or Mr Jones sneaking upstairs with Mrs Brown in the next house while Mr Brown is at work?

How can He listen to our prayers? For centuries, every minute of the day, thousands of people are beginning the "Lord's Prayer". Other thousands are ending it, and other thousands are in the middle. Poor God! He must know by now that He lives in Heaven, if He has not been driven insane by this prayer-torture. Or perhaps He has escaped. Is that why He has never spoken to us for 2000 years, unlike His previous Old Testament lectures or his Son's New Testament preaching? Is the "Lord's Prayer" like a mantra or "Om Mani Padme Hom" or perhaps "Eeny, meany, Miney, Mo"?

Is the reverse not more likely?

That man makes God in his own image?

Xenophanes, in the 6th Century BC, enunciated anthropomorphism: "The Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed; the Thracians say they have blue eyes and red hair. And, if horses could paint, they would paint their gods in the form of horses".

Are not all the qualities we attribute to God human qualities? And are not these qualities those that we most value?

Do you agree with Feuerbach who, in his *Essence of Christianity*, maintained that we give God credit for our goodness, while retaining personal responsibility for our failings, including, worst of all, that "Original Sin" for which we cannot be blamed?

Is God incapable of evil?

If so, is the Bible wrong? In Isaiah, ch. 45 v. 7 God says: "I make peace and create evil. I, the Lord, do all these things". Similar sentiments can be found expressed in Job, Amos, Jeremiah

and Ecclesiastes.

Do you pick and choose in the Bible?

Do you invent sophisticated interpretations of plain statements?

Is the Bible the Word of God?

Can you reply with a plain "yes" like the fundamentalists? If not, are you acknowledging that the Bible is a human product?

Furthermore, in addition to being the work of many humans, is it not an anthology? If so, do not anthologies have editors? Is it not the editor's function to decide what goes in and what should stay out? Did God decide what should go into His Holy Book and what should be left out? Who decided which books should be excluded as apocryphal or pseudepigrapha?

The 39 Articles of the Church of England declare (Article VI) which books should be in the Bible. Were the human clergy inspired by God in reaching their decisions?

I would like to return to the Bible in a later article. Is it a sacred book? Do you pick and choose? Do you repudiate any of it? Do you maintain a dignified silence about its more embarrassing texts?

In the meantime, I would like to ask you about faith. Does your religious faith come from indoctrination? If *doctrine* is not a bad word, should *indoctrination* so be? Have you ever encountered anyone who acquired a religious faith without first being indoctrinated? Can you demonstrate, in common-sense terms, that anyone of your acquaintance has ever had a direct conversation with God?

Is revelation demonstrably more convincing than an emotional experience?

A final question for the next article: Does God intervene and control all the time? Or does He not control at all? Or does He arbitrarily act at some times and retire at other times in favour of other forces?

● Karl Heath urges readers of *The Freethinker* actually to put the questions posed in his articles to local clergy – and to send their replies to The Editor.

DEATH OF EVA EBURY

THE freethought movement has had no more faithful servant than Eva Ebury, who died last month, a few days short of her 91st birthday.

Every Sunday for many years, and in all weathers, she and her husband Len, with their loyal followers, would hold morning and afternoon outdoor meetings in Hampstead for the North London Branch of the National Secular Society, he doing the speaking, she selling *The Freethinker*.

When I lived in Manchester, I liked nothing more, on my trips to London, than to join them and do

my bit on the platform. And when I came to London to become Secretary of the Society in 1957, it was Eva and Len who "put me up" at their house in Watford where, of course, we spent many happy evenings together. They were also long-standing members of the Executive Committee.

Eva was a chiroprapist by profession.

Her funeral took place at St Marylebone Crematorium on January 28, when a secular service was conducted by Terry Mullins. CMcC

Atheism and Humanism

Finngeir Hiorth: *Introduction to Atheism*, 1995. 178 pp, index and bibliography, \$18, and *Introduction to Humanism*, 1996, 248 pp, bibliography, \$15, post free.

Books packed with information! Order from your bookseller or directly from the Indian Secular Society, Aboli, 850/8A Shivajinagar, Pune 411 004, India.

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, March 2, 5.30 pm for 6 pm: Bill McIlroy: *Brighton for Freethinkers*.

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 6303 or Hilary Leighter on 01895 632096.

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01296 623730. Friends Meeting House, Berkhamsted (near The Lamb pub), Wednesday, February 12, 7.45 pm: Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary, National Secular Society: *Secularism Today*.

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, February 20, 7.30 pm: *The Bible as Evidence*. March 20: Daniel O'Hara: *David Hume*.

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). February 14: Mike Howgate: *Tackling Creationism*. 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.

Hasving & 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, March 4: Dr James Hemming: *The Origin of Moral Values*.

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. All meetings at 7.30 pm, Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Tuesday, February 11: Dr A Radford, Leeds University: *Your Genes and You – a Perfect Fit?* Tuesday, March 11: John Bradfield: *Green Funerals*.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622250 or 0116 241 4060. Meetings on Sundays at 6.30 pm. February 16: Jill Fisher: *Education Otherwise*. February 23: Paul Harding: *Organic Meat*. March 2: John and Ruth Daultry: *Organic Vegetables*. March 9: Pauline Munroe: *What is Domestic Violence?*

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, February 27: Bill Hughes: *What are the Limits of the Market? A Green Approach*.

Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607. Meetings at Friends' Meeting House on Mount Street, Manchester, on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30 pm. February 12: AGM; March 12: John Passmore: *The Freemasons*; April 9: *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. 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, February 12, 8pm. Carl Pinel: *Three Victorian Thinkers – Bradlaugh, Darwin and Kropotkin*. Wednesday, March 5, 8pm: Dan Bye: *Pagan Origins of Christian Festivals*. 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, 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.

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

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

LEICESTER SECULAR SOCIETY Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate Leicester LE1 1WB

The 116th Anniversary Lecture will be delivered at 6.30 pm on Sunday March 16 by KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD (General Secretary of the National Secular Society) on the theme of

SECULARISM TODAY