

Secular  
Humanist  
monthly

The

# Free thinker

£1

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 117 No 5



May 1997

**Hollywood's  
'hidden atheist'  
lives again  
in new play**

**If there  
is a  
supreme  
being,  
he's  
crazy**

— Marlene Dietrich

**We're on the Internet!  
e-mail us at:  
[editor@freethinker.co.uk](mailto:editor@freethinker.co.uk)**





# Up Front

## Beliefs of scientists

MUCH has been made in the popular media of a recent survey of the religious beliefs of American scientists, conducted by Professor Edward Larson, of Georgia, and Larry Witham, of Maryland, which is reported in the April 3 issue of the scientific journal *Nature*.

A re-run of a similar poll conducted by the freethinking Professor James Leuba in 1916, the new one suggests that – then as now – roughly 40 per cent of the scientists contacted admit to belief in a personal God. In the *Daily Telegraph*, edited by the enthusiastic Roman

Catholic Charles Moore, the science editor/correspondent, Roger Highfield, could scarcely conceal the paper's delight and relief that things are not (from its point of view) now much worse.

But if the figures are examined a little more closely, there is little to give the churches any real encouragement, and much that should give them pause.

Between 1916 and 1996, the percentage of scientific respondents claiming to believe in God has, indeed, fallen only slightly – from 41.8 to 39.3 per cent – while the percentage of those who actively disbelieve has risen from 41.5 to 45.3 per cent (agnostics and doubters have fallen from 16.7 to 14.5 per cent). But, much more significantly, the number of those believing in personal immortality has slumped from 50.6 to 38 per cent, while the proportion of those actively rejecting immortality has increased from 20 per cent to almost 47 per cent.

Equally interesting, the number of those strongly desiring personal immortality has plummeted from 34 per cent to under 10 per cent, while the proportion of those having not the slightest desire for immortality has increased from 27 per cent to more than 64 per cent. Whereas in the earlier survey 25 per cent more American scientists believed in immortality than believed in God (perhaps under the influence of the then more widely regarded apologists for psychical research, like Sir

Oliver Lodge and the Cambridge-based British Hegelian philosopher John McTaggart [1866-1925], who rejected God but accepted immortality), it now seems that slightly fewer believe in immortality than believe in God – though the difference is small.

What are we to make of all this?

One obvious conclusion is that, of those claiming to believe in God, slightly fewer are persuaded by ancillary beliefs about an afterlife, which must mean a significant decline in the overall influence of traditional religions. Whereas in 1916, roughly 25 per cent more than those who believed in God were prepared to believe in an afterlife, now belief in an afterlife is far less common, and is virtually restricted to those who believe in God.

If the overall proportion of American scientists who are God-believers has declined only marginally, it also seems that, of those who remain believers, more are likely now than of yore to adhere to conservative religions.

My own recent experience in the Cambridge Union debating chamber has further convinced me that conservative religious organisations regard it as extremely worthwhile to invest a great deal of their very considerable resources in keeping the flame of religion alive among the cream of the young intelligentsia, even though the arguments they muster in its support are as tired and threadbare as ever.

Daniel O'Hara

## The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

Cover and Page 8 photographs: Hulton Deutsch Collection.

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

### CONTENTS

Up Front: Beliefs of scientists	Page 2
Marlene: Hidden atheist	Page 3
Down to Earth: Colin McCall	Page 4
Bible critics from SCM	Page 5
McCall on Carl Sagan	Page 6
Banned from church fete	Page 7
Smoker on Heaven's Gate	Page 8
Walter reviews new Bible	Page 10
Charles and the Koran	Page 11
Obituary	Page 12
You're Telling Us! Letters	Page 13
K P Wood at Leicester	Page 15
What's On	Page 16

Subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to The Publisher:

G W Foote & Company  
Bradlaugh House  
47 Theobalds Road  
London WC1X 8SP  
Telephone: 0171 404 3126  
E-mail: editor@freethinker.co.uk

### Annual postal subscription rates

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

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

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

## Humanists get 'foot in the door'

CONGRATULATIONS to Brighton & Hove Humanist Group secretary Joan Wimble, who was invited by Mayor-elect Coun Betty Walshe to address the first meeting of the new Unitary Authority of Brighton and Hove.

It was a tradition of the former Hove authority to choose a Chaplain when the new Mayor was installed and he opened each Council meeting with a prayer. In 1988, the then Mayor, Ray Blackwood, not being religious, asked the group to provide a speaker to present this address at the first Council meeting, and George Vale (who has since died) did so.

"This year, Betty Walshe, who is an unbeliever, and who wanted a woman to address the first Council meeting, asked if I would do it and I was very happy to comply with her request," reports Joan Wimble. "In the end, Hove insisted that tradition should be upheld and she had to appoint a Chaplain (male) but was allowed to appoint a Vice-Chaplain (female) – but she insisted that I should be allowed to address the first meeting at her installation as Mayor of the new Unitary Authority.

"On Tuesday, April 1, I was asked to accompany the Chaplain to the dais and stand beside him while he gave the prayer. Then he stepped down and I took his place and made a short address.

"I attended the reception at Hove Town Hall after the meeting and was approached by several people who found it all very interesting and agreed with what I said. Some had never heard of Humanism and wanted to know more, so it was quite a useful exercise.

Although tradition prevailed, at least we have got a foot in the door."

Joan's address noted that, as a Humanist celebrant, she represented a large number of people in the community, and in the nation, who were not religious but believed in a caring life philosophy: "We believe that men and women are rational beings and capable of making their own decisions without a supernatural influence. We accept, of course, everyone's right to hold differing opinions and beliefs so long as they do not lead to making others suffer.

"Your duty as councillors is to provide an authority where justice prevails, where poverty and disadvantage should be continuously eroded. Success depends on honourable service with goodwill and concern for the dignity and common good of all. May mutual respect in the quest for truth guide you in your deliberations.

"Some of the sentiments I have expressed do, of course, sound familiar to you. Humanists, too, are ethical people, having a regard for what is valuable and true in human endeavour, personal responsibility, tolerance and breadth of sympathy. Indeed these codes tend to be the same in every society or culture and, whether believers in a supernatural being or not, we all strive to make a just and fair way of life.

"Therefore, may I wish you well in your future meetings in Council and may your business be conducted in an atmosphere of tolerance; may it be constructive and successful and to the benefit of the citizens of the new Unitary Authority of Brighton and Hove."

Peter Brearey



# 'Hidden atheist' strides the stage once again

*Marlene - A Tribute to Dietrich* (Lyric Theatre, London W1. Box Office: 0171 494 5045)

Review: TERRY SANDERSON

**M**ARLENE DIETRICH is one of the great hidden atheists of our time. Now her life is being celebrated in London's West End by Siân Phillips in what is virtually a one-woman show written by Pam Gems.

Miss Phillips is a dead ringer for Marlene, particularly in the last third of the show which recreates the legendary concert performance that Dietrich toured around the world in the 'sixties and 'seventies. Having seen the original many times, I can confirm that Siân Phillips has got the physical presence of Dietrich absolutely spot-on, but she lacks something of Marlene's powerful charisma. Nor is Miss Phillips' "vee-haff-vays-of-makink-you-tok" accent quite authentic.

Marlene Dietrich had a tremendously varied life. She was a film star, a singer, a pacifist and a passionate anti-Nazi. During the Second World War she deserted her Hitler-infested homeland and became an American citizen. Despite repeated blandishments from Goebbels to return to Germany to oversee the film industry which he had turned into a propaganda machine, she instead joined the US army as an entertainer.



● *Eerily accurate: Siân Phillips as Marlene*

## Human spirit, human joy

*Delius: A Mass of Life and Requiem* - Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra/Richard Hickox (2-CD set CHAN 9515)

Review: TERRY SANDERSON

THE atheist composer Frederick Delius's great choral masterpiece, set to Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, has been given a stunning new interpretation by Richard Hickox and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

Exultant and expressive, *A Mass of Life* has it all: Mahleresque climaxes that will blow your head off, and passages of almost unbearable beauty. I hope this tremendous recording will bring the *Mass* to the attention of a new generation of music-lovers.

And as an added treat, the same disc also features a rare outing for Delius's pagan *Requiem* - a glorious denouncement of religious delusions. Both pieces sing the praises of the human spirit and human joy.

There will be a live performance of *A Mass of Life* at the Royal Festival Hall in London on May 17.

Throughout the war she toured the battle-fronts singing to the Allied troops. For these efforts she was honoured by France with the Legion d'Honneur and by the US with a Congressional Medal.

It was her battle-front experiences that eventually led her to renounce her Calvinist faith. In her autobiography she wrote: "Back in my early childhood I learned that God doesn't fight on any army's side. So there was little point in praying. Nonetheless, before every battle prayers were read, all kinds of incantations were recited, staged by all sorts of preachers. We attended these ceremonies and I saw how the soldiers stood in place, as though they couldn't believe their ears. I couldn't believe it either, but I counted for nothing ... Since then, I have

given up belief in God, in a 'light' that leads us, or anything of that sort. Goethe said: 'If God created this world, he should review his plan.'"

No-one who saw her singing anti-war songs such as *Where Have all the Flowers Gone?*, *White Grass* or the evocative *Lili Marlene* can doubt her detestation of war.

The depth of her compassion and humanity was evident in her extraordinary voice - not a particularly musical voice, but one of deep feeling.

None of this is covered in Pam Gems' rather shallow script, but the recreation of the concert is worth the admission price alone. Once again, Dietrich strides the stage, and even though this is only an impersonation, it is eerily accurate.

## Humanism with elegance

THIS elegantly written little book will serve as an excellent primer for any newcomer to Humanism, and will provide food for thought for the old hands, too.

Arthur Atkinson is 86 years old and a keen naturalist. This volume is obviously the culmination of his life's thought and observation of the natural world, and a fine achievement it is, too.

Should be on every Freethinker's bookshelf. *The Cosmic Fairy* is available at £7, includ-

*The Cosmic Fairy - the New Challenge of a Darwinian Approach to Humanism* by Arthur Atkinson (Colin Smythe Ltd)

Review: TERRY SANDERSON

ing postage, from the BHA, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP (£1 per copy will be donated to the BHA).





# Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

## Not a lot of care in the community

THE conflicts within Christianity are common knowledge. We hear much less about the schisms within Judaism. It is the practice to treat Jews as a "community" because they follow the same rituals and observe the same festivals. And in the past, persecution has tended to solidify. Lately, however, the splits and antagonisms have been widely publicised and have driven commentators like Michael Freedland close to despair.

A mass meeting called to heal the rifts here in Britain seems to have had the opposite effect. "A series of statements from supposedly religious men", he told us, "is tearing at the souls of decent people as assuredly as if those men wielded newly sharpened blood-stained daggers" (*The Observer*, February 23).

As a result, synagogues all over the country have had letters cancelling contributions. "Young people who were wavering anyway" are moving "not just out of religion but out of Jewish society, taking non-Jewish partners (which in the case of men means their children will not be Jewish)". And, hardly surprisingly, "Intellectuals in particular, say they cannot identify with Judaism".

This, when what was a 300,000 strong "community" has already been halved in the last 50 years.

## Orthodox drive on the right

NOR is Jewish division confined to this side of the Atlantic. Officials of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the US and Canada were about to declare that the two largest branches of Judaism in America are not Jewish! They want "to prod American Jews into withdrawing from Conservative and Reform congregations to which 90 per cent of US Jews belong" (*The Observer*, March 23).

The declaration is in support of the Orthodox drive in Israel to control the right of citizenship (normally open to all Jews) and to ban non-Orthodox rabbis from performing marriages, burials and conversions. Moderate Jews are "threatening to quit Jerusalem if the right wing has its way".

It was refreshing, in the light of this bitter religious strife, to find one American intellectual expressing his freethought when interviewed by Simon Hattenstone in *The Guardian Weekend* (March 29).

"I am a Jew only in the sense that I was born into a Jewish family", said Woody Allen. "I have no interest in the organised religions

beyond a certain cerebral historical curiosity. They are all nonsense to me in their basic premises ... I'm agnostic, but I have one foot in atheism". Which, as I happen to know, is roughly the position of Simon Hattenstone himself and many other "Jews" of my acquaintance, although some of them have immersed both feet.

## Doc's dilemma

THE forthright expressions of atheism by two Oxford professors – Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins – has so disturbed philosopher Dr Jacqueline Stewart, of the University of Leeds, that she plans to set up a centre for the study of science and religion, presumably to defend the latter.

She has the support of some of her colleagues and of Dr John Hapgood, sometime pharmacologist and Archbishop of York, and she wants "to achieve a much more serious consideration of the issues related to science and religion" (*The Guardian*, March 11). More serious, that is, than what she calls Richard Dawkins' "knockabout". What Dr Stewart forgets is that Dawkins and Atkins have already given "serious consideration" to the question of religion, and dismissed it on intellectual grounds. Their atheism is scientific.

## Vatican is by-passed

WAS this Easter the Pope's last? This is what "Vatican observers" like Peter Stanford are asking. Certainly, if John Paul II hasn't yet passed on, the world has passed him by.

Despite the generally favourable TV coverage, when he goes abroad now, Stanford says that "he attracts smaller crowds, less attention and often receives a dusty answer from local Catholics when he returns to his familiar themes of contraception and abortion" (*The Guardian*, March 29). He is far from happy with his native Poland, where the government is no longer as acquiescent as that of his beloved Lech Walesa. Here in Britain, recent polls on abortion have shown that 50 per cent of Catholics favour a woman's right to choose in certain circumstances. Worst of all, no doubt, in Latin America, home to half the world's Roman Catholics, the Church is hopelessly polarised and, in Brazil, on the brink of schism. And Stanford holds John Paul responsible because of his "inquisitorial persecution of popular priests and bishops who support Latin America's homegrown theology of liberation with its 'option for the poor'".

As is the usual practice in the case of an aging pontiff, Stanford goes on to consider some likely contenders for the succession, and we may not have to wait too long to learn which one proves acceptable to the Holy Ghost.

## Who's naive?

A N WILSON who, I believe, is no longer a believer, reviewed the new Oxford World's Classics edition of the Bible for *The Guardian* (March 27), and related how the poet Philip Larkin bought a large Bible and read his way through it in the course of a year. When asked by Wilson what he thought of it, Larkin said he was amazed "that anyone could ever have believed it".

That's why people stopped reading it, Wilson commented, but "like so many pessimistic and 'modern' judgments it seems not merely thin-natured but a little naive".

Was Larkin naive? The Bible is, after all, the official book of the established church of this country; used in churches, chapels and schools; sworn on in law courts; bedside reading in countless hotel rooms; and, if our politicians are to be believed, the basis of their morality, although that isn't saying much.

For Wilson, it's not a matter of faith but of "imagination". When we lost the habit of Bible reading, he thinks "we lost a range of sensibilities to the Text which no number of Comparative Literature courses or paperback Bibles could recapture". It's not clear how the Word changes with the bookbinding but, for Larkin – and for me – it's because it offends our sensibilities that we reject it.

## Easter charade?

ACCORDING to the Rt Rev Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, the Easter message of God's love in Christ brings "not only a sense of personal affirmation, dignity and joy but a discovery of gifts and new courage to work for a different, better world" (*The Guardian*, March 29). I knew Richard before he moved to Oxford, and I know that he has always striven for a better, more equitable world. I suggest, however, that this is for humanistic reasons and has nothing to do with his belief in the resurrection of Christ.

## Poor old Judas

STILL on the Easter story: Karen Armstrong in *The Observer* (March 30) considered some recent attempts to rehabilitate Judas Iscariot.

She noted that St Paul, "the earliest Christian writer", never mentions Judas, and she referred to the various discrepancies in the Gospel accounts, including his two different deaths. Then there was the absurdity of his having to identify a figure who was already well known. And the callousness of Jesus himself in choosing Judas as a disciple, knowing that he would be treacherous. "Better for that man if he had never been born", as Mark has it (14.21).

But when she turns to the recent theorists, Ms Armstrong warns us that "we have entered the realm of fantasy", forgetting that we have never been out of it.



# Bible critics – from the ‘other side of the street’

**F**OR A hundred years the Rationalist Press Association has been publishing books which attack various aspects of Christian theism, biblicism and ethical theory. Nowadays, it publishes very few books: is there a need which it is not fulfilling? One is forced to confront the possibility when in the same month two new books arrive from the SCM Press, formerly the publishing arm of the Student Christian Movement, which continue the tradition of attacking Christian biblicism and ethical theory once the preserve of the other side of Islington High Street!

R A Sharpe is Professor of Philosophy at the University College of Wales, Lampeter, where he presumably knew the late Professor of German, Carl Lofmark (1936-1991), whose last two completed books (*Does God Exist?* and *What is the Bible?*) were published by the Rationalist Press Association in 1990. Lofmark was a dedicated Secular Humanist and an Honorary Associate of the RPA. Sharpe describes himself as a “Post-Christian”, and differentiates himself from his wife, Lynne, whom he describes as “a militant atheist ... who has never been willing to acknowledge that there is more to religion than a collection of fairy-tales.” For all that, Sharpe has no truck with moral theism, though he finds more to admire in the character and teaching of Jesus than Lofmark, George Wells or Margaret Knight would have allowed.

His short essay, running to a hundred pages, “is intended to be read in an evening or even a sitting”, and is notable for its clarity and avoidance of jargon. All the well-known arguments against moral theism are briefly presented, and a few new ones are interestingly added. His chief contention is that religion must inevitably corrupt morality, and has traditionally done so in some disastrous ways which he analyses acutely. The worship of a divinity likewise necessarily corrupts and diminishes the worshipper and detracts from his humanity. It is impossible, he maintains, truly to love the abstraction which “God” must forever remain; furthermore, it is unhealthy even to try. The Church, starting from false premisses, has got it all wrong about love and sex: and the prospect of immortality, if one thinks clearly about it, is simply appalling.

Not only is it refreshing to have such a clear and unanswerable case against moral theism so well and briefly presented: it is amazing that it emanates from the SCM Press.

Gerd Lüdemann is Professor of New Testament and Director of the Institute of Early Christian Studies at the University of Göttingen. A Protestant layman, he is fiercely critical of his Church and of the double standards which have for so long corrupted academic theology. In an earlier work on the “resurrection” of Jesus, he insisted most emphatically that the body of Jesus did not rise from the dead; the tomb was not empty but full, and the corpse eventually rotted away like any other.

*The Moral Case Against Christian Theism* by R A Sharpe. SCM Press, £7.95. *The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible* by Gerd Lüdemann. SCM Press, £9.95.

Review: DANIEL O’HARA

This was not calculated to ingratiate him with the German Church authorities, and he should not be surprised that such remarks and his further strictures have resulted in his being “dismissed from the Board of the Protestant Federation of the Churches of Lower Saxony, responsible for examining theological students, to which traditionally every theological professor there belongs.”

Lüdemann is acutely aware of the schizoid mentality which infects theological education in Germany. Each University has separate confessionally-organised Catholic and Protestant Departments of Theology, which, on any rational grounds, is as untenable as having separate Marxist and Monetarist Departments of Economics. It is a nonsense to pretend that one is engaged in free and scientific enquiry when the acceptability or otherwise of particular results is prescribed in advance by the confessional basis of the Department in which one is working. It is clearly a recipe for either open conflict or covert dissembling. Lüdemann has already been sickened by seeing far too much of the latter: he thus feels he has no alternative but to expose it and risk generating the former.

This particular book is aimed at demonstrating the untenability of the confessional view that the Bible is “The Word of God”. It focuses first on the Old Testament view of Israel’s “election” by Jahweh, and the doctrine of the Holy War by which Israel’s enemies are to be utterly destroyed as a dedicated offering to “the Lord”. Such a doctrine, clearly taught in the

Torah, is totally repugnant on any ethical canon of acceptability, and attempts to “interpret” it in ways which somehow mitigate its awfulness are to be roundly rejected. Indeed, as Lüdemann shows convincingly, such doctrines have a way of turning back on themselves and destroying their adherents. This can be applied not just to the Nazi holocaust but also to more recent events at Waco, Texas.

The New Testament is shown by Lüdemann to be no improvement on the Old. For it is through and through a vicious compendium of gratuitous anti-Jewish polemic. The historical reasons for this are not hard to discover. At the time when the documents which came to make up the New Testament were written, the Christians found that their chief antagonists were Jews, not unnaturally resentful of Christians misappropriating and distorting their scriptures and traditions. The Christians paid them back by transferring blame for the death of Jesus from the Romans (where it properly belonged) onto the Jews, with lasting baleful consequences.

Lüdemann calls upon his fellow-Protestants to abandon the pernicious fiction that the Bible is the “Word of God”. But he also seems to think that if only Christian origins could be stripped of their poisonous accretions of falsehood and hatred, something worthwhile and sufficient might remain on which to base a purified religion. To me that seems no less wishful thinking than the traditional Christian hope of an imminent Second Coming in Glory!

A short appendix by the English translator, John Bowden, who is an Anglican priest and Managing Director of the SCM Press, further underlines how difficult it is for a Christian to be true to both the canons of scientific criticism and the tradition of his Church. My advice is: cleave to the former and ditch the latter; it contains nothing that is truly worthwhile!

● Daniel O’Hara, a former Anglican priest, is President of the National Secular Society.

## Humanist Lunch '97

**THE Humanist Lunch will be held on Saturday, June 21 – International Humanist Day – at the Russell Hotel, Russell Square, London WC1, with the bar opening at noon and the meal beginning at 1 pm.**

Principal speakers will be:

● Paul Kurtz, a leading philosopher of Humanism and campaigner for Humanism and free inquiry. A former co-President of the IHEU and author of many books on Humanism, Kurtz is Director of the Council for Secular Humanism, of Prometheus Books, and of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Paranormal.

● Levi Fragell, a leading Norwegian Humanist and Vice President of the IHEU. He was the Executive Director of the

Norwegian Humanist Ethical Association and then Editor of the leading Norwegian Humanist journal, *The Humanist*. He is currently International Secretary of the Norwegian Humanist Ethical Association.

Tickets for the event are £15 per person (excluding wine) from the British Humanist Association, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald’s Road, London WC1 8SP; cheques should be made payable to BHA. Please indicate any vegetarian or other special food requirements.

Late bookers may need to be seated in an ante-room, but will join the main party for the speeches. Please indicate if this is not acceptable when applying for tickets.

Inquiries: BHA on 0171 430 0908.



# 'Better the hard truth than the comforting fantasy'

**C**ARL SAGAN, who died on December 20 last year, at the age of 62, was a distinguished astronomer, responsible for a number of significant discoveries; he was also a brilliant populariser of science, whose *Cosmos* became one of the most widely read science books in the English language; and he was an atheist, who said "I would lose my integrity if I accepted any belief system that did not stand up to sceptical scrutiny".

Sceptical scrutiny: that was the test he applied to any old or new hypothesis; scepticism had to be "a component of the explorer's tool-kit", he said, "or we lose our way". And he was deeply concerned lest we should lose our way. He was appalled at the scientific illiteracy in his own country, the USA, and the superstition that abounded in consequence.

Among many alarming statistics cited in Sagan's last published book, *The Demon-Haunted World* (Headline £7.99), polls have shown that something like half of American adults do not know that the Earth goes round the Sun and takes a year to do it. A 1993 poll by the China Association of Science and Technology found that a similar state of affairs exists in China. "It may very well be, then, that more than four and a half centuries after Copernicus, most people on Earth still think, in their heart of hearts, that our planet sits immobile at the centre of the Universe, and that we are profoundly 'special'".

Of course, for those Christians who accept the literal truth of the Bible, then the Earth must be flat. The same goes for Muslims regarding the Koran. In 1993, the supreme religious authority of Saudi Arabia, Sheik Abdel-Aziz Ibn Baaz issued an edict that the world was flat. And in Israel, the film *Jurassic Park* was condemned by some Orthodox rabbis because it accepted evolution and taught that dinosaurs lived a hundred million years ago. Moreover, "as is plainly stated at every Rosh Hashanah and every Jewish wedding ceremony, the Universe is less than 6,000 years old".

Since this book was published, *Nature* has revealed the disquieting results of a poll among US scientists, in which just under 40 per cent described themselves as believers; 45 per cent did not believe; and 14.5 per cent were doubters or agnostic. The results show little change from a similar poll in 1916, which predicted that dis-

belief would increase as scientific education increased.

This, while it would have distressed Sagan, might not have surprised him. His whole concern was to give Americans the scientific education they deserve but are not getting. Creationists still fight to prevent evolution (what Sagan called "the most powerful integrating idea in all biology, and essential for other sciences ranging from astronomy to anthropology") from being taught in the schools.

And he contrasts attitudes at the top: those of the first American President with those of a more recent holder of that office. "There is nothing which can better deserve our patronage than the promotion of science and literature", said George Washington, in an address to Congress in 1790. "Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness". But in a campaign speech in 1980, Ronald Reagan asked: "Why should we subsidise intellectual curiosity?" Today, more money is needed for teachers' training and salaries, and for laboratories; but "all across America, school-bond issues are regularly voted down". So much for progress.

**CARL SAGAN  
(1934-1996)**

**An appreciation  
by Colin McCall**

America's third President, Thomas Jefferson, was a scientist, as a visit to his home in Monticello readily testifies; and he abolished the Alien Act which gave his predecessor, President John Adams, the right to deport any foreigner who aroused his suspicions. Jefferson believed the Act had been framed to expel C F Volney, author of *Ruins of Empires*; the British scientist Joseph Priestley; and Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, of the family of chemists. In Jefferson's view, these were just the sort of people America needed.

Nancy and Ronald Reagan consulted astrologers on public as well as private matters. Worse still, Ronald Reagan was unable to distinguish between fact and fiction. "He confused a movie he had seen with a reality he had not". On many occasions in his Presidential campaigns he told an epic story of World War II courage and sacrifice, which was an inspiration to all of us. But it had never happened: it was the plot of the film *A Wing and a Prayer*. It made a big impression on Carl Sagan, too, when he saw it at the age of nine.

No wonder he was worried when he wrote *A Demon-Haunted World*. He dedicated the book to his grandson, Tonio, with the words, "I wish you a world free of demons and full of light"; but he realised there was much work to be done

to achieve that goal. Our world is still haunted by the demons of Christianity, of St Paul, St Augustine, of the infamous Bull of Pope Innocent VIII in 1484, *et al.* As Thomas Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan*, "Fear of things invisible is the natural seed of that which every one in himself calleth religion". And Sagan followed another courageous 17th Century author, Thomas Ady, whose Biblically-based book, *A Candle in the Dark* (1656), attacked the witch-hunts then in progress as a scam "to delude the people".

"Science as a candle in the dark" is the subtitle of the present work, and it conveys the immensity of the problem facing us today. Every branch of science has its own "complementary pseudoscience", and the newspapers, magazines, radio and TV give much more publicity to the fantasy than to the reality.

And Sagan feared that, "especially as the millennium edges nearer, pseudoscience and superstition will seem year by year more tempting, the siren song of unreason more sonorous and attractive".

As an astronomer and a populariser of science, Carl Sagan received mountains of mail on UFOs. In the early 1960s he argued that the UFO stories "were crafted chiefly to satisfy religious longings ... an alternative to the god hypothesis: dressed in scientific jargon ... the gods and demons of old come down from heaven to haunt us, to offer prophetic visions, and to tantalise us with visions of a more hopeful future ..."

People at all times have been subject to hallucinations and - trickery aside - reports of alien visitations have much in common with saintly apparitions. Sagan saw many parallels between Marian apparitions and those of aliens.

Having mourned the deaths of his parents and sometimes dreaming that he talked to them, he could sympathise with the woman who visited her husband's grave and talked to him. And if Sagan had "difficulties with the ontological status of who she's talking to, that's all right. That's not what this is about. This is about humans being human".

It's disturbing, nevertheless, to learn that more than a third of American adults believe that "on some level they've made contact with the dead", the number seeming to have jumped by 15 per cent between 1977 and 1988. A quarter of Americans believe in reincarnation. But, as Sagan said of life after death, "better the hard truth ... than the comforting fantasy".

*The Demon-Haunted World* is, as I hope I have shown, a book that should be in the hands of all freethinkers and all teachers, especially of science. It is a poignant book because of the recent death of its author; a pessimistic book because it exposes the credulity of human beings and their leaders, and the perversity of the media. But it is also a hopeful book.

The hope lies with the young. Carl Sagan found an "enormous zest for science ... in first graders" and "a proclivity for science ... embedded deeply within us, in all times, places and cultures". We must do all in our power to keep the candle alight.

## Orderly retreat

**THE Sunday Telegraph on April 13 contained some distressing news - brace yourself. "More than 2,500 sisters have been lost from Britain's 200 orders since 1985 and of the 8,000 remaining almost half are more than 70 years old. Nuns aged between 30 and 50 account for just 10 per cent of the total." Also, two leading Roman Catholic girls' schools - "already almost run by lay staff" - are now to have lay headmistresses. KPW**



## The Lewisham Three!

# Secularist trio threatened at church fund-raising

**N**ATIONAL Secular Society stalwarts Barbara Smoker, Denis Cobell and Malcolm Rees were threatened and told to leave church grounds – for trying to add “Spice” to a fund-raising event organised to preserve St George’s, Catford, reports PETER BREAREY.

The church has been closed for some time because, it is feared, it might collapse because of subsidence. The congregation holds services in the church hall, but wants to restore the church itself for worship.

Restoration would cost £920,000, and £250,000 must be found before the National Lottery and English Heritage will help. Before the recent event supporters had raised only £15,000. Lewisham Humanist Group members Denis Cobell and Malcolm Rees are “parishioners” and had been invited to contribute to the fund; Barbara Smoker lives nearby – indeed, her grandparents married at St George’s.

The large Victorian edifice drew more than 500 people to Sunday services earlier this century. Before closure, there were only a handful of worshippers.

At the fund-raising event, Barbara, Denis and Malcolm gave out a leaflet (reproduced right) with a heading based on a Spice Girls pop-charts hit.

Denis Cobell told *The Freethinker*: “Although this leaflet is controversial, it is nevertheless mild in its criticism of the Church, and supportive of the idea of preserving it for wider use. Indeed, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in appealing for lottery funding, made a similar statement: ‘Strong community life is an important contribution to health and happiness, particularly for the young, for families and the elderly – using the often spacious church buildings for good purposes in addition to worship.’”

“Just a few weeks ago, Humanists from groups throughout the South East attended a meeting together at a preserved former church in Lewes near Brighton – now the All Saints Centre. It was quite a thrill to see signs posted on the lychgate and vestry door, directing arrivals towards the Humanist gathering: Humanist discussion where the altar used to be.

“So, with all this apparent support, it came as rather a surprise when, distributing the leaflets at St George’s, we were first told to

stop, then Barbara Smoker’s patronage at a stall was not accepted, and finally we were asked to leave. We were threatened with physical removal by some large young men!”

NSS Vice President Denis noted that Freethinkers have “always recognised that religious tolerance rested on thin ice – but one hardly expects such bully-boy tactics in the grounds of an Anglican church in 1997.”

He added: “John Major, Barbara Cartland, and others had donated signed books and

other objects towards a raffle. Barbara gave a signed copy of her book *Good God* – a string of verses to tie up the deity – but maybe these lines upset the parishioners: *If churchmen fear lest things I say against their childish creed should harm their god in any way that’s ‘blasphemy’, indeed!* for they handed back the book to her.”

However, we understand that several copies of Thinkers Library books of 1940s vintage were found among second-hand volumes on sale in the hallowed grounds.

## WHAT WE REALLY REALLY WANT

*Is a break from the assumption that everyone goes to church. In fact less than 10 per cent are regular churchgoers. And there are plenty of folk who don’t believe in God. They know that good behaviour – morals – have a social foundation. You don’t have to go to church to be good. So that’s why St George’s only attracts a small congregation and there is difficulty in raising money to preserve it.*

*But if it was used to more purpose there might be good reason to save it as an example of Victorian architecture, with its beautiful “rose” west window. We have examples such as the Christchurch Forum in Greenwich, St George’s Centre at Chatham, and All Saints Lewes in East Sussex, where either redundant or little used church buildings are put to a use for the local community, and this attracts support, interest and more funds. These church buildings are available for a variety of activities, and may include the worship that formerly excluded others. Now they are there for everyone seven days a week.*

*What about this St George’s? If we, as Humanists – atheists and agnostics – were also allowed to meet here, or to hold non-religious ceremonies to celebrate birth, marriage and death, for all people, then maybe even Lewisham Council would be prepared to help.*

*So spice your appeal up, give us what we really, really want, and open St George’s to all in the local community!*

**LEWISHAM HUMANIST GROUP**

*Hon Secretary: Denis Cobell – 0181 690 4645 Chair: Barbara Smoker – 0181 697 3619*



# Foote's journal on the Internet

WHAT a heart-warming response to our April appeal. £1,458.30: it must be an all-time record for the fund which does so much to keep *The Freethinker* in being. Many, many thanks.

One more effort and the £2,000 target will be reached – exceeded even.

Thanks to your support, 19,000 leaflets have gone out, explaining what our atheist journal stands for.

We have joined the Internet. Our e-mail address is:

[editor@freethinker.co.uk](mailto:editor@freethinker.co.uk)

And we have a web site:

<http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

on which to display pages from and publicity for *The Freethinker* to a world-wide audience.

Please keep up the momentum. Not a penny is wasted – all you send goes for atheism ... freethought ... rationalism ... secular humanism.

Cheques and POs, made payable to G W Foote & Company, should be sent to Freethinker Appeal, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: Anon, £500; A Akkermans, £120; N Moia, £77; Sheffield Humanists, £51.30; D Cranford, S Valdar, £50 each; S Jaiswal, B Mills, £40 each; M Hill, G Lyons, £30 each; K Partington, C Pinel, P Windeatt, D Yeulett, £20 each; R Kempe, J Little, D Redhead, C Wilson, £15 each; N Blewitt, J Boyd, I Chandler, J Claydon, R Condon, A Fintelman, F Fish, J Hazlehurst, S Jacobs, G Jamieson, I Kirkland, S Lee, W McIlroy, N Potter, J Radford, R Sartin, F Saward, V Smith, L Stapleton, S Whitfield, N Wood, £10 each; B Hayes, £8; N Mitchell, £7; E Beeson, D Clamp, C Gill, J Glenister, J Goldsmith, E Hammond, R Ison, E McFadyen, R Maur, A Negus, J Sampson, K Spencer, R Tee, P Windle, £5 each; A McQuail, W Simcock, L Smith, £4 each; A Clunas, S Farrelly, B Judd, L Mayberry, N Ritchie, E Violet, £3 each; B Curry, N Smith, £2 each; A Atkinson, £1.

**Total from March 22 to April 21:  
£1,458.30.**

## Mass ritual suicide in California: BARBARA



“JUST checking you are still alive,” I said, phoning an American friend when the news broke of the 39 ritual suicides in California at the time of the Hale-Bopp comet reaching its closest point to Earth. This old friend of mine had informed me 20 years ago that he was one of 10,000 (or was it 100,000? I forget) enlightened people destined to be collected by a huge extraterrestrial spacecraft, for immortality elsewhere in the cosmos – and he really believed it. I might mention he is a member of Mensa, a university graduate, and a computer engineer.

Yes, he was still alive – apparently his time has not yet come. Again I asked him, as I had done 20 years ago, what evidence he had for the existence of the jumbo spacecraft for which he has a boarding-pass, and his reply was that I myself believed in the force of gravity, though no one had ever been able to explain it. To the inflation of my telephone bill, I countered that, whether or not gravity could be explained in the abstract, it could certainly be demonstrated, while the predicted UFO had to be taken completely on trust – and a scientist should be able to see the difference. But science is no match for wishful thinking.

The 39 suicides – 21 women and 18 men – were likewise intelligent, educated people. Most of us find it difficult to understand how they could swallow the spacecraft story with such utter conviction that they were willing to kill themselves in readiness for it, many of them having submitted to castration first.

**When you come to think of it, however, why should that be any more surprising than the faith of millions of equally intelligent, educated people in the similar (though more traditional) story of Christian salvation, resurrection, and immortality? Yet press commentators have mostly been blind to the parallels, and the religious ones blindest of all.**

If anything, to postulate an inter-galactic

# The space old

spaceship for the journey to “the evolutionary level above humans” is a tad less absurd than believing in the individual flight of disembodied spirits to “the other side”. In both cases, Heaven, of one kind or another, is the final destination – though for the putrefying bodies found in a palatial rented hilltop mansion in the California millionaire suburb of Rancho Santa Fe, the actual destination proved to be the San Diego morgue.

The Heaven's Gate guru was Marshall Herff Applewhite, or “King Do”, who died with 38 of his followers. It was his hypnotic intensity and gentle but passionate way of speaking – the hallmark of orthodox Christian televangelists too – that seduced many in western USA to join his group. Some had been members for more than two decades.

Like traditional Christian monks and nuns, they were supposed to be completely celibate, they dressed all in black, they cropped their hair, and they called each other brother and sister. Their rigorously ascetic life-style, though in a plush setting, would put medieval monks to shame – but these latter-day monks did have the pleasure, at restricted hours, of watching videos of selected old episodes of *Star Trek* and *The X-Files*, with their fictitious apocalyptic scenarios.

Applewhite himself – the 66-year-old son of a Presbyterian minister – had left theological college to take up music and opera-singing, but in his late thirties had been sacked as a music professor because of a homosexual scandal. He then became a voluntary patient in a psychiatric hospital, where, in 1972, he was put in the care of a woman nurse, Bonnie Nettles – an astrology and flying-saucers freak who was clearly even more crazy than her patient. Persuading him to be castrated for the sake of androgynous immortality, she convinced him that he was a new messiah sent to Earth by extraterrestrial beings to fulfil a divine prophecy – leading earthlings to an inter-galactic spacecraft for transit to a distant utopian planet. After Bonnie's death from cancer in the 1980s, King Do lived on under her posthumous influence, pursuing her fantasies



ARA SMOKER finds not much to choose between ...

# Heaven's Gate Spaceship and that Old-time religion

to their grisly conclusion.

Since 1994 he had been using the latest digital technology to recruit more followers – naming his Internet website “Higher Source”, changing the name of the group from HIM (Human Individual Metamorphosis) to Heaven's Gate, and moving his headquarters from New Mexico to a succession of rented houses in California.

Fulfilment of his destiny became urgent when Applewhite learned he had a terminal heart condition – a fact which he did not see fit to share with his keyboarding followers. Had he done so, they might well have cut loose from his timetable of death. But he told them that planet Earth was about to be recycled, and their only hope of survival was to pass through death at the right time to be beamed up by an inter-galactic UFO, piloted by the late Ms Bonnie Nettles, for their journey back “home” – like ET – to their native planet. In the words of a Christian spiritual, the spacecraft was “comin’ for to carry me home”.

The predicted approach of an unusually bright comet, first discovered by American astronomers Alan Hale and Thomas Bopp in 1995, gave rise to the idea that the awaited flying saucer was travelling earthward in the comet's slipstream. And the cultists' expectation of it seemed to materialise in March, 1997, as the comet came close enough to Earth to be seen with binoculars, and then, tail and all, with the naked eye – “the marker we've been waiting for”. So their time had really come.

If only they had seen the last issue of the CSICOP magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*, containing an article by Hale about his comet, it might have given them pause for rational thought, for in it the astronomer recounted similar cases of “comet madness” in relation to other bright comets over the centuries, and predicted even greater madness this time – partly because of the coincidence of the comet's appearing so soon before the end of the second millennium.

Photographs taken in November 1996 of the alleged spacecraft in the wake of the

comet were, Hale discovered, actually of a “red giant” star that had appeared in that part of the sky at the time. To stem the flood of inquiries that he and other astronomers began receiving, he put the real explanation on the Internet – only to receive a large amount of vicious hate mail from UFO buffs, accusing him of being involved in a federal “conspiracy” to hide information about the comet and its attendant spaceship. So perhaps King Do's disciples were too fixated after all on their own mythical theory to be saved from mass suicide by mere scientific explanations.

A comment in *The Times* notes similarities between the spheres of computer fanatics and religious cultists – “both of them requiring a mental rigour to the point, often, of excluding common sense”.

Unlike the many other mass cultist deaths in recent years – in Guyana, Mexico, Waco, Vietnam, and Solar Temple sites in various countries – the one in Rancho Santa Fe apparently entailed no forced suicides or murder. The victims all went voluntarily, even leaving euphoric video messages, two by two, as animated suicide notes. “It's not a big deal”, said one; “We couldn't be happier”, smiled another.

Ironically, a recently added section on their worldwide website was headed “Our Position Against Suicide”. Declaring their collective opposition to suicide, which they did not equate with “the spacecraft to take us home”, it emphasised the importance of looking after our bodies, which they called “containers”. The doctrines of the Heaven's Gate group – who claimed to be “inter-galactic angels” – are akin to those of the Church of Scientology, which teaches that humans were brought to Earth by an inter-galactic warlord, Xenu.

Applewhite is described as having a very gentle personality, a non-violent ethos, and a lovely speaking and singing voice; but he was not too saintly to milk his recruits of their assets while isolating them from their families and friends outside the cult in line with most fanatical sects, whether New Age or Old-time

religion. They were also set to work on designing commercial Internet websites to swell the Heaven's Gate coffers.

King Do's final broadcast, in his musical intonation, was this message to his resident followers: “Light is coming to this planet. An opportunity is offered to humans. Those ready can graduate from this garden. You must leave behind loved ones, security, possessions. This is known as the harvest.” It was also known as “shedding our containers” and “transcending”.

Because the phenobarbital-alcohol-plastic-bag method of “transcending” used in Rancho Santa Fe – in shifts, over a period of three days – is the chief method of “self-deliverance” recommended by the Right-to-Die movement in the USA, many commentators have put the blame for it on that movement: but euthanasia literature sanctions rational suicide only, for those with an intolerable and incurable illness or disability; while cult mass suicides are far from rational.

The Heaven's Gate website was cross-linked to a plethora of others, mostly with extremist religious themes – today's equivalent of the Book of Revelation. In Britain, the Cult Information Network has urged parents to supervise children who may be surfing the Internet.

The number of mind-controlling cults is said to be about 2,500 in the USA, 800 in Canada, and 500 in Britain. But that is a mere fraction of the number of sects of Christianity and Islam, which belong to the same genre – to a greater or lesser extent sacrificing present life, in the world we know, for a nebulous future life.

In the words of a contributor to the *Independent on Sunday*, writing from the USA: *If you consider that 222 million Americans, or 87 per cent of the population, believe they will go to heaven; that 125 million believe in the existence of UFOs; and that 200,000 believe they have been abducted by aliens – then the decision by 39 people to hitch a ride to eternity on a passing spaceship does not seem as strange as all that.*



# 'Best antidote to Christianity'

**D**URING the Second World War, from January 1940 to July 1941, the *Literary Guide* ran a series of articles by RPA members on the books which helped to destroy their faith, later collected in a booklet called *Why I Am a Rationalist* (1942). Several of the contributors mentioned the Bible, and J B S Haldane added that it was important for people to go on reading it because this was the best antidote to Christianity. On the radio programme *Desert Island Discs*, the Bible is still automatically given to the castaways, usually without comment, though not many of them would want it (except perhaps as a handy source of lavatory paper).

Fewer people read the Bible nowadays, and fewer people remain religious (at least in Europe). No one should feel obliged to read it. Yet not only religious people, but also many non-religious people who want to know about religion, will still want to read it in some form. Fortunately there are increasingly faithful versions and honest studies of it, and good cheap copies are easy to find in second-hand bookshops.

This new edition of the Bible has had much favourable publicity, partly because it appears in a popular series and partly because it is produced by a reputable publisher, but it is actually highly unsatisfactory. Whereas the old World's Classics included the Bible in several nice small hardback volumes, the new World's Classics includes it in one nasty big paperback volume. It has smudgy print on grey paper with a limp binding so that its 1800 pages are almost unreadable, in sharp contrast to the old editions

*The Bible: Authorized King James Version (with Apocrypha). Edited by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett. Oxford University Press: World's Classics. Paperback, £9.99.*

Review: NICOLAS WALTER

on india paper in leather bindings. It uses the Authorized Version of 1611, which was of course written in splendid formal English but is deliberately archaic and frequently inaccurate. It keeps the two-column format and the division into verses, which interrupt the flow of the prose and also disguise the appearance of the poetry, although such an arrangement wasn't used in the original languages and hasn't been used in modern versions for more than a century. It gives no cross-references to parallel passages or alternative translations for difficult words.

There is a general introduction at the beginning which makes some absurd claims for the Bible, such as that it is "the basic book of our civilisation", but avoids religious propaganda, and there are detailed notes at the end, which are full and fair, though above the head of most likely readers.

This edition does have two real assets. Unlike most Bibles, it contains all the Old Testament Apocrypha. And the introduction and notes contain many useful references (including some to freethought writers and publishers). It even quotes Philip Larkin's reaction to the Bible: "It's absolute balls. Beautiful, of course. But balls." It might also have quoted Randolph

Churchill's comment when reading the Bible, as reported in Evelyn Waugh's Diaries: "God, isn't God a shit!" (By a curious coincidence, I was myself reading the Bible at exactly the same time, in November 1944, because I was given one as a tenth-birthday present; I felt the same, and still do.)

Suggestions have been made – for instance, by Melvyn Bragg in *The Times* on April 14 – that, although the Authorized Version has almost fallen out of religious use in churches, it should be brought back into educational use in schools, in the form of a compulsory set book to restore part of our literary heritage. Our first reaction might be to reject such suggestions out of hand, but on second thoughts we might remember what was said by Haldane and Larkin and Churchill. While one form of Christianity remains the main religion in our society, it is worth remembering the Bible, and especially relishing some of the gorgeous language of the old translations.

But let us hope that the chosen text is not this inconvenient and inconsistent edition. Before the Second World War, the American *Bible Designed to be Read as Living Literature* (1936) showed how the Judaeo-Christian scriptures could be properly presented, and the American *Bible of the World* (1940) also showed how scriptures of several religions could be presented together. It would be good to have an English-language anthology of the Bible and other Jewish and Christian literature for young people and general readers, provided that it used good texts and that they were carefully edited with a serious critical apparatus. As Rowland Hill said, why should the devil have all the good tunes?

## From sleaze to superstition?

**SUNDAY, April 27:** As *The Freethinker* goes to press, signs and portents continue to point to a Labour General Election victory ... so what may people of our sort expect from a Prime Minister Blair? For him, religion is not a mere theatrical prop, meant – like the Flag and the Queen Mum and *Land of Hope and Glory* songsheets all round – to help divert the peasants as, backstage, the suits get on with the sleaze.

No. The dangerous thing about a Labour Front Bench awash with Christians – Blair himself, Paul Boateng, Gordon Brown, Chris Smith, Jack Straw *et al* – is that they appear really to believe in their superstitions.

And what hope is there in these circumstances of progress in the matter of, say, voluntary euthanasia? Surveys show that there is huge public backing for a change in the law; that 30 per cent of doctors in hospitals have already taken active steps to hasten death; that around half of all doctors think the law should be altered to permit voluntary euthanasia. True, there is strong backbench support for a more humane law – but what of our Christian Socialist leaders?

How does the campaign to enshrine in law a woman's right to safe, free and legal abortion based on her own informed choice sit

with Front Bench Christianity?

There are other worries, too. In *Muslim News* (April 25), Tony Blair is quoted as saying: "Labour believes the right of a school to apply for voluntary status should be available to non-Christian denominations such as those from the Muslim community. Under a Labour Government, any existing independent school would have the right to apply for aided status in the state sector." Is there a hint here that the Blairite state would be prepared to fund Islamic schools, as a gesture towards "equality". Muslims are right to point to inequalities in a law which permits state funding for Jewish and Christian schools but discriminates against Islam. The truly non-sectarian policy would be to phase out *all* state aid for denominational schools, with religion put in its proper place – the home, the church, the mosque, the synagogue. But dare we hope for this from Blair?

And the blasphemy laws? Blair was asked by *Muslim News*: "Would you ... support a law that would protect religion (which would include Islam) against vilification and ridicule?" He waffled, as is his wont, but there may be a whiff of warning for us in his reply: "Labour's priority is combating discrimination, wherever and however it arises, and we will continue to review the operation of our laws in the light of this paramount

objective." Of course, Freethinkers are unequivocally opposed to racism; we go further – we advocate the total abolition of the Common Law offence of blasphemy instead of its continued and divisive existence for the benefit of one Christian sect. There are already laws to deal with racial harassment and racially-motivated violence. Labour must not be allowed to let a *de facto* extension of the blasphemy laws sneak in under cover of protecting people from evils which can be dealt with under existing legislation.

A heavily religionist Labour Government must be kept under constant pressure if problems like the ones outlined here are to be addressed in a rational manner. And, to look at the situation positively, it may be that among the new intake of MPs there will be many who would listen to the voice of reason and use their influence within the Parliamentary parties. There must be a Secular Humanist strategy to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a new Parliament (whoever turns out to have won). An aspect of this could be revival of the Humanist letter writing campaign, which has already proved its worth in demonstrating to our rulers that the great British Christian consensus is no such thing.

Let us have your views.

PETER BREAREY



Terry Sanderson on the media

## HRH and the Koran:

# Has he found the part that orders adulterers to be stoned?

**T**HE Archbishop of Canterbury has ill-advisedly allowed a fly-on-the-wall TV programme to be made about his daily life. It reveals him to be a strange, confused man, totally out of his depth and unable to make up his mind. Much in line with his predecessors, in fact.

During the programme, Dr Carey claimed that people living together out of wedlock are destroying marriage, and that they have lost the sense of shame that is necessary to keep moral order in society. He seems to regret the passing of the authoritarianism that was once the church's prerogative in these matters. Nowadays, if young people feel that the Archbishop is trying to run their lives for them, they are more likely to blow a large raspberry at him than to genuflect. They've got minds of their own, thank you – a development Dr Carey obviously regrets.

But the Archbishop of Cant. signally failed to make any mention of the most notable fornicator of them all, namely Prince Charles, who is at present all but "living with" Mrs Camilla Parker-Bowles.

Nor was there reference to the Prince of Wales's younger brother, Edward, who is also reportedly "living with" his girlfriend, Sophie Rhys-Jones. She has moved into the Prince's Buckingham Palace suite with the full approval of Her Majesty. Are they all sinners? Of course they are, but you won't hear the Archbishop say so. He's too busy licking their orbs and sceptres.

And what are we to make of the would-be "Defender of Faith" singing the praises of Islam? Presumably the heir to the throne is assiduously studying the Koran, and says that we have much to learn from Mohammedanism. I wonder whether he has yet come to the part that orders adulterers to be stoned to death? He was lucky that the Saudis didn't bury him and Mrs Parker-Bowles up to their necks and throw rocks at their heads when the Prince recently visited that country.

Of course, the Saud family that tyrannises Saudi Arabia can do what it likes – it isn't bound by the same rules that apply to everyone else, what with it being royal and everything. It is unlikely that it would execute a fellow Royal in case the habit caught on in the country that they at present rule with a rod of iron (or, more accurately, a sword of gold: the one used for chopping the heads off dissenters).

ANOTHER religionist who had a TV crew following him round last month was Omar Bakri, the self-styled Ayatollah of Tottenham. The resulting Channel 4 documentary was shown on April 8. Mr Bakri is a large man (he's the one who put the fat into *fatwah* according to Victor Lewis-Smith in the London *Evening Standard*),

and he intends to overthrow Western civilisation and instal an Islamic theocracy in its place. A modest ambition, but one Mr Bakri is busily engaged in bringing about.

The director of this film, Jon Ronson, spent a year filming Bakri's frantic activity, with hilarious results. The contrast between Omar Bakri's megalomania and the laughable reality of his everyday life made for great comedy. Mr Bakri was filmed happily having his leaflets photocopied at Office World (because it's cheaper there than anywhere else) while gibbering on about the overthrow of capitalism. He then set about distributing the leaflets in the street, warning the passing shoppers in the Wood Green mall to beware of homosexuality because "it isn't good for your tummy."

Another irony was that Jon Ronson, who made the film, is himself Jewish, one of the people that Bakri would like to see exterminated. But he resisted the temptation to comment on Mr Bakri or his ideas, he just gave the holy fool all the rope he needed – and what a fine job Mr Bakri made of hanging himself. While spouting his apocalyptic vision of a world dominated by Islam, he took fright at a tiny, flapping fish that one of his daft followers had pulled out of a pond.

As Victor Lewis-Smith commented: "Long before the end I was appalled by Omar's views and his intolerant, imbecilic followers, as are most Muslims. In fact, watching him march along with a twat in front of him and a complete arse behind him, I thought the man ought to change his name to Perineum."

FINALLY, *The Times* reported that researchers in America are to "test the power of prayer in an experiment." The paper says that "of 600 patients awaiting heart surgery, two groups will

be told they may be prayed for. One will be prayed for the other will not. A third group will be aware that they are being prayed for, and will be used to determine if the knowledge has psychosomatic effects on their symptoms."

As T P O'Connor, of the Department of Archaeological Sciences at the University of Bradford, pointed out in a letter to *The Independent*, "A positive result will be hailed by the theists as evidence that God exists, whilst a negative result will indicate to them that God did not wish to co-operate. The initial hypothesis is thus not susceptible to refutation." He says that the man conducting the experiment, Professor Russell Stannard, has "seriously compromised his standing as a scientist".

Of course, as another correspondent pointed out, researcher Francis Galton has already had a go at this one. He proposed that of all people in the country, the Royal Family were those whose well-being was most prayed for "this being a regular feature of all church services". Sadly, the experiment found that prayer didn't work for the Royals. "If anything," he says, "they enjoyed worse health and shorter lives than average."

This research was considered so offensive to believers that Galton subsequently suppressed it.

Meanwhile, our present Queen does seem to enjoy rude health, and her mother shows signs of longevity. But then again, so does my father who is at present 85 years of age and still sprinting to the betting shop each day. Whereas the Queen Mother has had the life of Riley, my old dad spent the whole of his 52-year working life down the pit, digging at the coalface.

Nobody ever said a prayer for him, and he wouldn't thank them if they had done.

## Tempest-tost Down South? Don't blame Jehovah!

**GET** ready to rewrite any legal or insurance documents that refer to floods, hurricanes and earthquakes as "Acts of God".

The Governor of Arkansas is seeking to abolish the phrase. Governor Mike Huckabee is refusing to pass a disaster relief bill offering compensation to victims of March's tornadoes because the bill calls the storms "Acts of God".

Huckabee, a Baptist minister, has reopened the old Manichæan heresy by refusing to attribute the disastrous effects of

the storms to God.

"It's a matter of conscience," he says. Other Arkansas laws referring to "Acts of God" include air pollution legislation. To not use "acts of God" in legislation could open loopholes for lawyers and insurers to exploit.

The phrase is likely to be replaced by, or used in tandem with, "natural disasters".

"Acts of an supremely indifferent and meaningless universe" was rejected as being unnecessarily existential.

Source: *Chemistry and Industry*, April 8, 1997.



## Obituary

# 'The way to be happy is to make others so'

## FRED McKAY (1914-1997)

WHEN Fred was an apprentice in Belfast in the 1930s, he used go into a left-wing bookshop. It was there that he started reading *The Freethinker* and buying books on Freethought.

He remembered having to save up for weeks to get the one shilling and threepence needed to buy a book of essays by Robert Ingersoll, whose words, *It is grander and nobler to think and investigate for yourself than to repeat a creed*, inspired Fred to a lifetime of involvement in the Freethought movement.

He was one of the longest-serving members of the National Secular Society when he died, having joined it in 1941.

Other precepts in those essays were also important in his life. One was the need to serve the cause of human progress – and Fred was involved in the political struggle against social injustice all his life. And few human beings have followed Ingersoll's famous words on happiness so well: *The way to be happy is to make others so*. This he did not only by his sunny personality but also by his outstanding talents as an entertainer. He sang folk songs of his native Ireland, and recited his monologues, all over the country. He was part of the Folk Revival and worked with Brendan Behan, Dominic Behan, the McPeake Family, Seamus Ennis, Ewan MacColl and Alan Lomax.

He achieved great popularity in the folk world, and a memorial celebration is being planned. The funeral was a family event. It took place at Golders Green Crematorium on April 1 and was conducted, at Fred's request, by fellow-NSS member John White.

## RODGER ALDER (1947-1997)

THE impressive Great Hall of the Victorian Gothic Guildhall in Northampton, with its wealth of interior colour and decoration, played host to an unusual event on Monday, March 17 – a Humanist funeral ceremony.

The subject was Rodger Alder, a prominent Labour councillor and Deputy Leader of Northampton Borough Council, who died at the early age of 49 following a battle against cancer. He had expressed a wish for a Humanist ceremony, leaving clear directions about who should conduct it and what it should comprise of.

The well-attended funeral ceremony, which included readings and live music, as well as a number of personal tributes from friends and colleagues, was conducted under the auspices of the Gay & Lesbian

Humanist Association by Nigel Collins, of the British Humanist Association Ceremonies Network.

At Mr Alder's request, it concluded with a tea party decidedly not designed for the weight conscious, when the word *enjoyed* – a word not usually employed to describe a funeral ceremony – was being freely used by those who had attended.

Mr Alder, who was a senior lecturer in Industrial Archaeology at Northampton's Nene College, was a well-respected and colourful personality, and on his death John Dickie, Leader of the Borough Council, told the *Northampton Chronicle & Echo* that he had been a passionate, vigorous and enthusiastic advocate of Northampton.

During the ceremony, Nigel Collins referred to Mr Alder's role as Chairman of the Borough's Planning Committee. When land formerly used as a golf course was acquired by the council for a public park, he was largely responsible for getting it named Bradlaugh Fields, after the 19th Century Liberal (and atheist) MP for Northampton, Charles Bradlaugh, who founded the National Secular Society. This was an important historical acknowledgement which reflected favourably on the town.

## DR CON DIETRICH (1918-1997)

CON DIETRICH was a distinguished physicist who was also a committed Humanist and an early member of Ealing Humanist Association.

He took a First in physics in the University of London, and later did doctoral research in nuclear physics at Birkbeck College. After working in private industry for many years, he joined the Scientific Civil Service in 1967 and rose to be head of the Mechanical Section of the British Calibration Service at the National Physical Laboratory.

His book *Uncertainty, Calibration and Probability: the Statistics of Scientific and Industrial Measurement* (Adam Hilger, 1973) went to a second edition in 1991.

A man of great capacity for friendship, he kept in touch with his scientific colleagues after his retirement, and was always ready with explanation and encouragement in matters scientific and humanistic.

He enjoyed tennis, and had a special affection for the music of Schubert, some of which we heard at the Humanist ceremony on February 19 in Guildford, which was conducted by Barbara Bowen, who has been a source of great comfort and support to Con's family in recent days. He leaves a gap in the lives of all of us who knew him, and our thoughts remain particularly with Drusilla at this sad time. – Charles Rudd.

## Praise for Walter's new book

THE Rationalist Press Association's annual general meeting at Conway Hall, London, on April 14, was followed by a party to celebrate publication of Nicolas Walter's new book, *Humanism: What's in the Word*.

David Pollock, Chairman of the RPA, who presided, paid tribute to the author's scholarship and immense knowledge of his subject.

*Humanism: What's in the Word* had its genesis in one of Nicolas Walter's distinctive "letters to the editor". Deemed too long for publication, the same verdict was pronounced on a proposed article and pamphlet.

Undeterred, Nicolas continued writing and has produced a highly significant contribution to Humanist literature.

### Special

Nicolas Walter thanked all who had given assistance when he was writing the book. He was particularly grateful to the RPA Board, the British Humanist Association and the Secular Society (G W Foote & Company) Limited for financially backing its publication.

● *Humanism: What's in the Word* is available at a special price to readers of *The Freethinker*. The book's cover price is £6 but

our readers may obtain it for only £5 – including postage and packing.

Send remittance with name and address (stating that you are a reader of *The Freethinker*) to Rationalist Press Association, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. Cheques and POs should be made payable to RPA Ltd. There are special rates for bulk orders on application.

In last month's issue of *The Freethinker*, former NSS President David Tribe described *Humanism: What's in the Word* as " ... an important new book".



## You're telling us!

### Back to the dictionary!

IN David Tribe's generous review of my book *Humanism: What's in the Word* (April), he reports a Latin professor agreeing that the ending *-ismus* was unknown in ancient Latin, and suggesting that *Humanismus* was probably introduced into Church Latin during the Reformation.

The professor should go back to his dictionaries. The ending *-ismus* came into Latin from Greek by the 1st Century AD, when Quintilian used *barbarismus*. Tertullian used *christianismus* and *judaismus* in about 200, and Augustine used *paganismus* in about 400, and Jerome used *baptismus* in the Vulgate Bible in about 400. There were also various religious heresies and philosophical theories, and grammatical, rhetorical and medical terms. But, so far as I can tell, *anthropismus* wasn't ever used, and *humanismus* wasn't used before it appeared in German in 1808.

NICOLAS WALTER  
Islington

### Testing time for God

A MOST remarkable report appeared in *The Scotsman* on April 11, under the headline "Physics professor to test the power of prayer". Reading the report – which one has to presume is not a hoax – one is led to fault the project which is, no kidding, to conduct trials on the efficacy of prayers offered on behalf of patients about to undergo heart surgery.

It may be assumed that the professor, Russell Stannard, of the Open University, is well versed in the design of experiments aimed at investigating the efficacy of particular medications in the treatment of particular diseases. The tests and controls the professor appears to be contemplating are much like those used in field trials in many areas of inquiry. What then is wrong, methodologically speaking, about the reported project?

A moment's thought, a moment's philosophical "unpacking", reveals a fatal flaw. In "ordinary" field trials of medicines it may be assumed with great confidence that the medicine does not "know" that it is being tested; indeed it seems almost insane even to suggest that perhaps it might be aware of what is going on.

However, on ordinary theistic assumptions, God would know perfectly well what is being attempted; He would know that His willingness to heed prayer is under scrutiny.

There is some scriptural warrant for supposing that God does not take kindly to being tested.

If He is God Mark I (of the OT) then He might well be angry at the implication of human doubt in Himself and He might, in His Infinite Wisdom and Mercy of course, decide to visit vengeance upon the investigators and the subjects alike. (Next time my cardiac pacemaker is due for replacement, atheist that I am, I will wish nobody to use me as an instrument for monitoring g[G]od).

If He is God Mark II (of the NT) then He

would be a lot more believer-friendly than that; He would probably restrict Himself to procuring inconclusive results.

My case is that God's knowledge that He is under test would, of itself, undermine any validity the results of the test might have. I rest that case.

If Professor Stannard's project is the fruit of a marriage of science and religion, then the sooner an amicable divorce is arranged the better for both parties.

ERIC STOCKTON  
Orkney

### Big battalions get results

JOHN CLUNAS (April) is right when he says that the Humanist movement is all we have in the United Kingdom and it is important that we get as many atheists, agnostics, freethinkers to join us because it is only by having a large membership that we will have influence.

Christians and other religions have dogma and therefore it is easy for them to agree a policy. Well that is the theory. However, as we know, there are hundreds of different sects and they all believe they are right. Humanists tend to be individuals and anarchists at heart and therefore getting them to agree and join an organisation is difficult. In England, there appear to be four organisations (British Humanist Association, National Secular Society, Rationalist Press Association and South Place Ethical Society) that you can join and, while you now appear to be under one roof, you still have your differences.

In Scotland we have the HSS (Humanist Society of Scotland). All groups in Scotland are considered part of the HSS and all members of the groups are automatically members of HSS. However, because two of the groups (Edinburgh and Glasgow) existed prior to the setting up of the HSS, they retain some autonomy. Edinburgh, for example, is affiliated to the BHA but the Glasgow group is not. All this confusion does not help us in a membership drive and is one of the things that John Clunas finds so frustrating. Many of us in the movement also find it frustrating that we cannot get better organised, but it is better to work from inside the movement than from outside where you have no influence.

Many of your readers may wonder why we need a separate Scottish organisation when we have the BHA. My own view is that the BHA ought to be called the EHA (*English Humanist Association*) because it does not promote reform in Scotland where we have a separate education and legal system. Ideally, we should move to a federal organisation with one organisation each in England, Scotland, Wales and Ulster and an overall Council to represent the common view.

It is frustrating that there are BHA and, no doubt, NSS members in Scotland who are not members of the HSS. While the HSS membership is around 350, we do not know how many other Humanists reside in Scotland and are members of other Humanist organisations. If we had one national organisation in each country or province, and we liaised together, so that if an enquiry came to one organisation, but was

proper to another because of residence, we would have a better idea of our support, be able to organise better and present a better front to the media.

This should not be impossible. The National Trust for Scotland is a separate organisation from the National Trust for England and Wales and yet they have reciprocal agreements where members can get into each other's property free of charge.

We can work together and we can increase our membership and influence. But this can only be done by being in the movement and trying to reorganise from the inside. We have to move on. The NSS has a great history; but it is time for organisations to get together. In the same way as the United Kingdom has had to give up some of its autonomy to become part of Europe, so will Humanist organisations, whether they be groups in towns and cities, or organisations representing countries and provinces. We can make a difference as individuals but unfortunately it is the big battalions that get results and some of us may have to give up our own pet projects for the greater good. There is a lot of goodwill out there for Humanism and we just need an organisation capable of tapping into it.

ROBIN WOOD  
Kilmarnock

### View from Trinidad

I WISH to continue receiving *The Freethinker*, as in it I find relief from the disgust I feel when I see so many religions exploiting the simple-minded and ignorant to fill the pockets of the ministers and the coffers of their churches.

As a teacher of Social Studies for many years, I followed the official line given to us at independence – that we could be proud of being a tolerant, multi-racial, multi-religious nation. "Here every creed and race find an equal place", went the words of the national anthem. I have often doubted the latter, and now I am wondering how far we should carry tolerance of religion.

In a small nation of 1.2 million (mainly Negro and Indian, with minorities of Europeans, Chinese and Syrians, and a large mixed population) there are so many Christian churches and varieties of Hindu and Muslim religions, that our nation should be a manifestation of all that is good and noble; that the ideals of all the religions would be fulfilled.

Instead there is corruption, murder every day, crime, injustice, poverty, mendicancy and vagrancy, and now the "street children", drug-addiction, drug-barons, money laundering *ad nauseam*.

It is pretty obvious that there is no connection between religion and social morality, nor religious ideology and political parties.

Since I cannot find solace in any of the philosophies of religion – either in their programmes for social reform or in their injunctions about the will of an all-good, all-knowing God – I can join you and your readers in being amused at the ridiculous in religion, while knowing that there is a religion of goodness in



# You're telling us!

From Page 13

most people, which unfortunately is exploited by priests and charlatans.

**NIKOLA MITCHELL**  
Trinidad WI

## Smoker on Dev

MAY I add to your report of the memorial meeting for Dev (April) a few personal comments on the Dev I knew for 30 years? I cannot agree that he was modest: though he had firmly renounced the caste system early in life, he never really shook off the inbred high-handedness of a Brahmin. I told him I understood his favouring the name Dev when I learned it was the word for "god" in Sanskrit and other Indian languages, and he smiled.

Dev's written English was impeccable, and he was very knowledgeable on a wide range of subjects; but he could be pig-headed. We often crossed swords at meetings, to the extent of a slanging match – but would then go off together for a friendly restaurant meal; food being important to both of us. His favourite cuisine, surprisingly, was Greek. And we went to the cinema together.

Another interest we shared was visiting beauty-spots and places of historic and architectural interest, and Dev was able to take me in his car to lovely remote places which he had discovered during his four decades in this country. He also planned my entire visit to India in 1990. He wrote to a large number of friends and acquaintances there to arrange contacts and hospitality for me wherever I went, and accompanied me to the Indian rail ticket office in Wembley to book all my journeys on the sub-continent. He was just as assiduous in ensuring I took in the best tourist attractions as in arranging an extensive lecture tour for me.

Though he was inclined to be very careful with money – not a bad trait in a society's treasurer – he was generous in other ways, especially with his time. I miss him.

**BARBARA SMOKER**  
Bromley

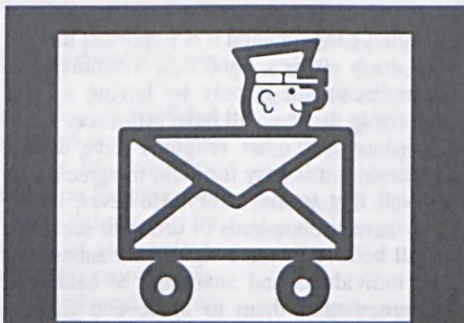
## Who was Chrestus?

STEUART CAMPBELL'S disparagement of Count Volney as an ill-informed author very much out-of-date (March) sadly indicates that his own historical conceptions are formed from a background of religious fundamentalism, and not from the informed understanding that ancient history is sadly intermingled with astrological mythology, and that the proportion of the latter increases the farther back in time the research is prosecuted. It may safely be added that sacred writings are all mythology rather than literal history.

My own search for truth has led me to become an ardent student of the works of the Reverend Robert Taylor. He, in reaching the conclusion that the works of Josephus and Tacitus had indeed been subject to interpolation, writes: "We have investigated the claims

of every document possessing a plausible claim to be investigated, which history has preserved, of the transactions of the first century: and not so much as a single passage purporting to have been written at any time within the first hundred years can be produced from any independent authority to show the existence at or before that time of such a person as Jesus Christ, or of such a set of men as could be accounted to be his disciples."

As for Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (AD 75-160), the Roman historian who wrote the life of Claudius (who reigned from AD 41 to 54) and also wrote the ambiguous tract that says "he drove the Jews who, at the suggestion of Chrestus, were constantly rioting, out of Rome," Orosius, a Christian writer of the 5th Century, who quotes the passage, does not pretend to know whether it was the Christians or Jews who were expelled.



**Short and clearly-typed letters for publication may be sent to Peter Brearey, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. E-mail address: editor@freethinker.co.uk Fax: 01924 368338**

Notwithstanding the absurdity of the supposition of this Chrestus being Christ, and of Christ heading riots in Rome, this passage has served its generation in Christian evidence. However, Dr Lardner, the church authority on the interpretation of holy scriptural text, admits that "learned men are not satisfied that this relates to the Christians". There is no reasonable ground for thinking that by Chrestus, Suetonius meant Christus. Chrestus signifies merely the Good Man. Christ, or Chrest, as a Greek word, derives its mystical sanctity from the circumstances of its being the universal inscription on tombstones and sepulchres of the dead, among all nations that used the Greek language, and among many using it without knowing its Cabalistic significance. Taylor in his work *The Devil's Pulpit*, explains: "The simple epitaph on each good man's tomb was his name and the two expressive words [meaning] 'good fellow – good bye!' These two words represented sometimes by the initial letters, two X-es, or St Andrew's crosses, were a most obvious hieroglyph of the two crosses of the equator by the ecliptic, at the equinoctial points, that of autumn when the Sun dips below, and that of Spring when he crosses it again from below; and so is said to rise again from the dead.

"Hence, also, the word Chrest or Christ, upon all their tombstones, naturally associated itself

with the idea of the Resurrection, and was hieroglyphical to the same purpose as the Latin *resurgam* – I shall rise again. Thus the phrase, 'Jesus which was crucified,' means nothing but the Sun which was crossified."

During the 19th Century, Richard Carlile and Robert Taylor published many articles demonstrating that almost every fact and feature of the fabulous history of Cabalism is to be traced in the Brahminical, Druidical, Greek and Roman superstitions, many ages before they were new-modelled and palmed a second time on human credulity and ignorance, under the much abused name of Christianity; and surely a clearer detection of stolen goods cannot be conceived, than the tracing them back to the identical place from which they were taken.

In reply to Connaire Kensit (March), my reference to the Chinese confounding the name of Jesus with the name of Fot should have been attributed to a M de Guignes, *Hist de Huns*, but it still applies to the relevant passage in Volney's *Ruins of Empires*, Page 120 (37).

A comprehensive biography of Isaac Beausobre, with details about his works, appears in the *Grand Larousse Encyclopedique*. Robert Taylor, in his work *The Diegesis*, adduced 239 authorities with the notable inclusion of Beausobre in Chapter XVI, page 116.

By pure chance, I came upon a photostat copy I made several years ago from one of Richard Carlile's 19th Century publications *The Republican*. It refers to the nature of the birth of Fot or Beddou from a virgin as being in the similar manner to all divine avatars, perhaps explaining why the Jesus story became in vogue at some time.

I would just like to point out, without mentioning any of the numerous sources available, that IES was the name of Bacchus, the personification of that wonderful power of the Sun which "turns water into wine" (St John). The name IES, as applied to Bacchus, was also used in the form YES, whence the English expression of assent or affirmation. Christian prayers end with another form of assent – AMEN. Somebody with an interest in philology could perhaps trace some connection with the Chinese use of YESU.

**DANIEL H BIRD**  
Coventry

## Indoctrination in our schools

IT IS worth noting in *The Freethinker* the position concerning religion in government schools. Firstly, all such schools must have a daily assembly of a broadly Christian nature and, secondly, at Key Stage 4 – Years 10 and 11 – all students must undertake religious studies where one of the key elements is that students must be able to present Christian views on various issues.

Also, it is worth noting that all parents have the right to have their children opt out of the assemblies and out of the Key Stage 4 provision – many schools for all sorts of reasons do not inform parents of this right. Your child at GCSE could gain a supervised double lesson for catching up on homework and study for the cost of losing a double lesson of indoctrination!

**A J GUNN**  
Maldon



National Secular Society General Secretary KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD delivered the 116th Anniversary Lecture of Leicester Secular Society in March. This edited extract is continued from the April issue of *The Freethinker*: a final instalment will be published next month

# Electronic messages of intolerance and hate

**R**ELIGION still holds many countries in an iron grip and fundamentalism is on the rise throughout the world. In the USA, Christian evangelicals have come within a whisker of influencing the outcome of a Presidential election. They have so far failed to impose their agenda on the American people but that does not mean that they have abandoned their efforts.

They are using the new communications technologies quite ruthlessly to spread their message of intolerance and hate. Television, radio, the Internet and all other conceivable means of communication are being employed by Christian fundamentalists to increase their influence and power. So extreme is their philosophy and so apparently open to it are some Americans that they are prepared to commit murder in God's name, as is demonstrated by the shootings of several doctors who carried out abortions.

## Theocracy

Fundamentalist influence in American politics is truly frightening and should not be underestimated. The stated aim of these politicians posing as priests is to turn the USA into a theocracy. Despite the fact that so many televangelists have been unmasked as nothing more than money-grubbing con men, their influence remains undimmed. So far, at election time, the Americans have narrowly rejected such extremism. This does not guarantee that in the future the balance will not tip the other way.

The rise of militant sects of Islam, too, is terrifying. As in Northern Ireland, it is often difficult to distinguish the exact role of religion in sectarian wars. I imagine you may be aware of the 60,000 murdered in Algeria over the past 10 years, mainly by Islamic fundamentalists. Millions have been killed in the Iran-Iraq War. Bitter conflict between secularists and Muslims is now starting in Turkey.

And the dreadful irony is that the people who are being killed are themselves often Muslims – but not the right kind!

In some parts of Afghanistan not only has music been outlawed – hence the order for all song-birds to be shot – but also women doctors have been forbidden from working. And, as women are forbidden from being treated by male doctors, many women are dying from neglect.

Recently, Iran put up the reward for killing Salman Rushdie to \$2.3 million, and yet we still have commentators who claim that the public money spent on protecting Rushdie is “wasted”.

I am told that he helps to pay some of the cost of this security himself. Only Norway thinks it is a good idea to impose sanctions against the régime because of the *fatwa*.

More worryingly, commercial considerations seem more important than free speech to many and over-ride several Western governments' ability to condemn outright the mullahs in Tehran and to take action against them. Free speech, it seems, also has a price on its head.

But we must tread carefully here. There is now a campaign afoot to try to contain criticism of Islam by claiming such criticism is tantamount to racism.

I, and the Society, abhor racism, but those in the West who express horror at the atrocities committed in the name of Allah are now described by some as “Islamophobic”, and those who have coined this word appear to be claiming that Muslims in this country who are not extremists and are law-abiding citizens have to suffer the backlash which follows every new report of such atrocities. Criticism of Islam, according to the Runnymede Trust in a recent consultation paper, can engender racism.

But hating religious extremism is not the same as hating individuals because of their race or religion, and we should not be distracted from criticising the irrationality, cruelty and excesses of some members of some sects of Islam by the arguments put forward by the Runnymede Trust.

I dislike all religions, but I am not anti-Muslim people. My dislike of religions includes Christianity because I feel that it, too, is an insult to reason. But that does not mean that I don't have very close Christian friends. I tolerate their self-delusion in the same way I expect them to tolerate my little eccentricities. I tolerate it so long as they do not try to impose it on me or anyone else. But as soon as they, or adherents to any religion, start to impinge on our liberty, then it is our duty to stand up and be counted among the opposition.

Where this could be leading is indicated by another suggestion from the Runnymede Trust (whose members, incidentally, include the Bishop of London, Rabbi Julia Neuberger, and several Muslim academics), that there should be a campaign for race relations law to be extended to religions, including of course Islam. (Judaism and Sikhism are already protected as races under this Act).

Clearly, if such a law were passed, there would be a possibility (depending on the drafting and interpretation) that this could make criticism of the excesses of all religion difficult, if not impossible. Were this to happen it would be quite outrageous and unacceptable – and could in itself lead to a backlash.

I raised the Runnymede Trust's proposals during a discussion about racism at a meeting of the European Humanist Federation in Strasbourg. The President, while totally opposed to racism, summed up the consensus of the meeting when he said that it was a core objective of the Humanist movement to oppose extensions of the law protecting religion.

Not that it is necessarily easy to criticise Islam even under our current laws, as our former President, Barbara Smoker, found out in May, 1989. Along with two other demonstrators, she was physically assaulted at a Muslim rally held to protest against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and in favour of an extension of the blasphemy law. She told me how she and her co-dissidents were holding banners calling for free speech. Young hotheads rushed towards them shouting “Kill! Kill! Kill!”. Barbara and her colleagues were slightly injured before being rescued by older, more moderate Muslims.

## Resurrect

Christianity, of course, has its own history of murder and blood-letting, but hopefully those days are long past, in this country at least. Indeed, the number of churches in England has dropped by about 800 in the past 25 years, although new ones are being built at the rate of 15 to 20 a year. But that does not mean things cannot change back.

Huge resources are being poured into attempting to resurrect religion in this country. So far this effort is showing little sign of working. Attempts, sometimes exorbitantly funded from the United States, to establish Christian broadcasting in the UK have been manifestly unsuccessful. The disastrous Decade of Evangelism is drawing to a close, with small sign of success.

One of our major problems is countering the oft-repeated charge that secularism is negative. As Robert Ingersoll so succinctly intimated: Before we plant our vegetables, we must tear out the weeds and the rocks. It was secularist campaigners who played a large part in many of the changes that have benefited our society. In the face of religious opposition, the rational campaigners have managed to change the law on contraception, abortion, homosexuality, the treatment of animals, and Sunday trading.

The fight is not ended on any of these issues; the battle also goes on to improve the situation in many areas, including environmental issues, disarmament, women's rights and relief of poverty.



# 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:** Cornerstone Community Centre, Palmeira Square (corner of First Avenue), Hove. Sunday, May 4, 5.30pm: Jane Quincey: *Religious Education and the Act of Worship – How Maintained Schools Meet Their Statutory Obligations.*

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

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01296 623730. Tuesday, May 13, 7.45 pm, Wendover Library, Jane Wynne Wilson: *International Humanism.*

**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, May 15, 7.30 pm: Karl Heath: *The Origin of Religion – How Did it Arise in the Human Race?*

**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 2HB; 01926 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 (Library, 1st floor). May 9: Post-General Election meeting, with Stonewall's Angela Mason on future prospects for Gay and Lesbian rights. June 13: Peter Tatchell: *Pride or Shame? Has the Pride Festival Lost its Way?* July 11: Denis Cobell: *Affirmations – Secular Humanist Ceremonies.*

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

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. Meetings at Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch, 8 pm to 10 pm. June 3: Sir Hermann Bondi: *The Arrogance of Certainty.* June 17: Committee meeting. July 1: Vince Chaney: *Humanist Weddings.* August 5: Daniel O'Hara: *David Hume – a Humanist Pioneer?*

**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.

**Lancashire Humanist Alliance:** Details from Steve Johnson, PO Box 111, Blackburn BB1 8GD.

**Leeds & District Humanist Group:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. All meetings at 7.30 pm, Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. May 13: Senior Probation Officer Rosemary Heal: *Crime and Punishment.* October 14: Julie Douglas and Sue Firth: *The Work of Marie Stopes International.* November 11: Peter Brearey: *The Freethinker – Past, Present and Future.*

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell, 99 Ravensbourne Park, London SE6 4YA; 0181 6904645. Meetings at Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, 8 pm. Thursday, May 29: Don Langdown: *Rights v Responsibilities?*

**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. May 14: *Manchester Ancient Egypt Society.* June 11: *Humanism and Politics.* July 9: *Discussion topic for young people.* September 10: John Taylor: *Age Concern.* October 8 (fifth anniversary meeting): Daniel O'Hara, President of the NSS.

**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. May 15: John Aldan: *Humanist Turning-points in History.* June 19: Brian Snoad: *Science and Ethics.* July 17: *Atheism on a Soapbox* (tape).

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, May 7, 8 pm: Professor R P Davies *The Dead Sea Scrolls.* Wednesday, June 4, 8 pm: Richard Clare: *Religion v Free Thought – an Organic Perspective.* 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). Literature stall at May Day celebration, Chesterfield, Monday, May 5. Arts and Music Festival, Devonshire Green, Sheffield, weekend June 14 and 15. South Yorkshire Festival, Wortley Hall, Wortley, Saturday, July 5. Offers of assistance to Bill McIlroy or Gordon Sinclair (see above).

**South Place Ethical Society:** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Full list of lectures and Sunday concerts: 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. Monday, June 16, 8pm at The Railway, Wellington Road North, Stockport: Bill McIlroy: *The Freethinker, Journal of Unbelief.*

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 0181 642 4577.

**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.

## BOUND TO BE READ!

Bound volumes of *The Freethinker* for 1994, 1995 and 1996 are now available at £25 each or £50 for all three (including post).

Cheques with order please to G W Foote & Company, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

