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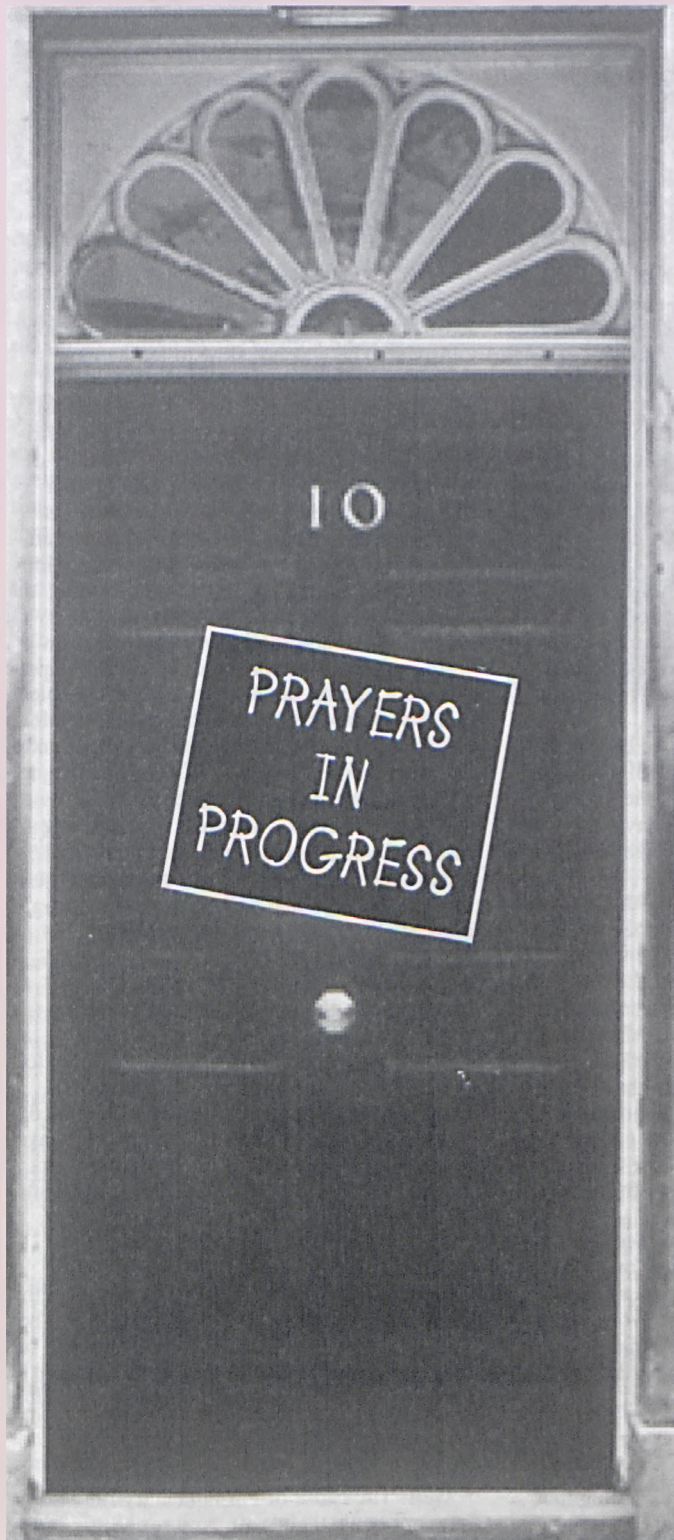
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Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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TEST OF REASON FOR BLAIR'S NO 10

Who are the
atheists behind
closed doors?

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Up Front

House of Straw?

HOME Secretary Jack Straw, an Anglican of Congregationalist origin, is to reintroduce the curfew as a means of controlling young offenders.

So — will a mere tolling of the day's knell take us far enough along the road to a crime-free Britain? Indeed, as a policy, is it sufficiently *Christian*? Mr Straw's fellow worshippers of Jehovah, the Theonomists — the word is based on the Greek for "God's law" — would probably say not.

And they have studied these matters: their modest proposal for dealing with recalcitrant

youngsters could not fail to solve the problem of delinquency, were it to be applied with zeal.

According to a report in *The Scotsman* (May 12), quoting a leading Theonomist: "Theonomy applies to drunkards and gluttons and children who are violent towards their parents. This wouldn't apply to younger children. The parents would give testimony to civil magistrates and the child would be put to death on the basis of that. I would stress that it would be an absolute last resort applied to children who ignored repeated attempts at discipline."

(Last resort? Obviously, this chap is one of those wishy-washy liberal Theonomists).

The Theonomists are in the news because, says *The Scotsman*, the group, "which teaches that murderers, homosexuals, people who have had premarital sex and even teenagers who are abusive to their parents should all be stoned to death, has infiltrated Scotland ..."

It seems that the Free Church of Scotland General Assembly Committee on Public Questions, Religion and Morals has warned that the Church could be fertile soil for Theonomy because of the common strict theological stance of the two sects.

Theonomy has many followers in both Scotland and England, but, readers will be astounded to learn, it "originated in the United States, where its followers span the religious spectrum, from the Conservative Roman Catholics to charismatics."

The Scotsman's tame Theonomist is quoted as saying of his belief in capital punishment: "The main purpose of the judgment is judgment of the criminal. At the same time it would have a deterrent effect. It would deter people from certain crimes."

According to *The Scotsman*, he believed that the schoolboy killers of James Bulger should have been executed — and that the Bridgewater Four would never have been convicted in a society embracing Theonomy.

Well that's all right then.

Personally, I don't see what all the fuss is about. As our US correspondent, Gene Kasmar, points out on Page 7, the whole Theonomy thing is utterly biblical. And the Bible is the Word of God for the entire Christian Church, not excluding Mr Straw and his Front Bench colleagues, with the Jews and the Moslems also subscribing to the Old Testament. The Book has an importance for the State, too, as the basis for the oaths of allegiance and the promises to tell the truth of those who lack the inclination or the courage to affirm.

Or — perish the thought — is Mr Straw one of those pick 'n' mix Christians, one of those theological joy-riders, who take it upon themselves to fiddle around with the Word, ignoring the barbaric bits while grabbing at what are often perceived as the nice parts, like the Sermon on the Mount?

God forbid that Mr Straw should subscribe to the Bishop Jack Spong heresy! Dr Spong, Anglican Bishop of Newark (New Jersey), ruined many a Whit Sunday by arguing that "neither Judas Iscariot nor Joseph existed, that there was no Temptation in the Wilderness or Sermon on the Mount, and that Jesus did not preach many of the parables ... that many of the details of the crucifixion were embellishments and the Resurrection was not a literal reality" (*Sunday Telegraph*, May 25).

The Freethinker will be returning to Dr Spong (who makes the former Bishop of Durham sound rather like, well, rather like a Theonomist) when his new bomb — sorry, *book* — is published in the UK.

The question for now is — do Mr Straw and his Cabinet colleagues accept the Word of God in its entirety? Or are they carefully selective? The only other possibility (and I do not think they are smart enough for it) is that they secretly regard the whole thing as a load of cobbles but in those long years in Opposition have been learning how to rule by swotting-up on Napoleon: "How can you have order in a state without religion? For, when one man is dying of hunger, near another who is ill of surfeit, he cannot resign himself to this difference unless there is an authority which declares 'God wills it thus'. Religion is excellent stuff for keeping common people quiet."

I WOULD imagine that Cardinal Hume accepts the Bible as the Word of God — at least I hope he does, else why is he in the job?

Anyhow, he was not slow to let the new Government know what he and the Lord expected of it. Through *The Independent* (May 6) he issued "A manifesto for moral and spiritual problems" to Mr Blair: "The first duty of any society is to respect and protect human life itself. While this may seem obvious, its full consequences are not always appreciated, for human life begins at conception. Abortion virtually on demand is one of the greatest scandals of our time ... We need also to beware of the arguments now being put forward in favour of euthanasia. What is trumpeted as the right to die for terminally ill people could very quickly become the duty to die for elderly people who felt themselves a burden to others."

This celibate expert on the bedroom also addresses Mr Blair's attention to the "rising levels of cohabitation", but unaccountably holds back from demanding a ban on contraception. Perhaps that will come — and perhaps Mr Blair will listen, for the *Daily Telegraph* of May 9 carried a piece by the right-wing Roman Catholic journalist Paul Johnson with the straightforward headline: "Why Mr Blair will become a Catholic".

Mind you, Mr Johnson's actual copy, while pointing out that Mr Blair regularly attends Sunday Mass with his Catholic family, failed to live up to the headline's promise: "We have no reason to suppose that Mr Blair's conversion is probable, let alone imminent. But I suspect it will occur, in God's good time. That, indeed, would be a remarkable event in our modern history ..."

Remarkable? I'll bet Mr Blair's new Health Secretary, Frank Dobson, would think so. The *Health Service Journal* recalled in a profile of the man (May 15) that Dobbo is "out of step with Labour's new moralist streak. On hearing talk of a Blairite 'Christians for Labour' group in 1994, he suggested setting up a rival 'Atheists for Labour'."

Well! The cause of Parliamentary rationality may not be lost, after all. And for a little project which *The Freethinker* is planning in conjunction with National Secular Society members, readers are asked to let me know of other MPs who are unequivocal and unashamed unbelievers.

Peter Brearey

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'Pro-lifers' imply that we must always give the Almighty a sporting chance of a miracle cure: BARBARA SMOKER, in the real world, demands ...

The patient's right to choose

COMPUTER-assisted euthanasia, devised by compassionate doctors of medicine with the requisite technological skills, has been the subject of recent simultaneous news reports from opposite sides of the globe — the USA and Australia — and in both countries the religious lobby, spearheaded by hard-line Catholics, has rushed in to stamp it out.

In both countries, as in Britain and most parts of the western world, suicide is legal but assisted suicide is not — which means that incurable patients are often forced to kill themselves prematurely, before losing the physical strength to do so unaided. Moreover, deprived of monitoring by a doctor or anyone else to see that they manage it successfully, many of them regain consciousness — sometimes with added complications caused by the suicide attempt.

Most religious believers contrive to make a moral distinction between active and passive euthanasia; that is, between killing and letting die. However, though completely discredited in secular moral philosophy, this spurious distinction — assuming the same intent and same motive — is by no means confined to religious teaching: in almost every country, it underpins the present secular law on expediting death, for laws tend to be based on theological criteria rather than common sense.

A number of compassionate doctors — wishing to do their best for their patient and, ultimately, seeing their best as helping him/her to cut short the process of dying when it is prolonged and painful — have jeopardised their careers, and even risked murder prosecutions, for the sake of a patient.

Most doctors, however, contrive to keep on the right side of the law by making use of the blurred area between passive and active euthanasia — particularly by administering increasing doses of pain-killers as required, even though they know they have reached a lethal dose. This procedure, which is now almost universally followed, was developed by the hospice movement which, founded on a combination of care and religion, has made use of religious casuistry to insist that it is morally and legally defensible to give a patient a lethal dose provided the motive is palliative care, not euthanasia. Though hospices generally oppose the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia as such, at least they seem to be carrying it out in practice.

However, theirs is not an ideal solution, for it does not address any distressing incurable symptoms other than pain. Besides, there are some types of pain (for example, thalamic pain) which cannot be controlled except by rendering the patient comatose; and if one is permanently comatose, one might as well be dead. Anyway, such patients are generally subjected to the horror of regaining consciousness between doses of anaesthetic.

Although the churches have traditionally regarded suffering as a valuable means of acquiring grace, even religious opponents of euthanasia and suicide often talk about a "merciful release" when a distressing illness ends in

death. Supporters of voluntary euthanasia simply want the merciful release to occur before the suffering has been uselessly prolonged. But, except in the case of infants, there is only one person who has the moral right to decide on euthanasia: in each case the decision must rest with the person most concerned — the euthanasia candidate — provided he or she is adult and rational. It is thus akin to suicide.

On April 22, Channel 4 screened a documentary, sensationally titled *Witness: Appointment with Doctor Death*, about a retired pathologist from Michigan, Dr Jack Kevorkian. Targeted by pro-life demonstrators and hounded by police, he claims to have got round the law by creating the "mercitron" or "self-execution machine" — a computer-driven intravenous

Barbara Smoker, former President of the National Secular Society, was also Chair of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society from 1981 to 1985, and compiled *Voluntary Euthanasia: Experts Debate the Right to Die* (Peter Owen, 1986).

syringe operated by the euthanasia candidate himself. Though 46 of his patients had already used it, several juries have refused to convict him.

The relatives of one of the 46 were distressed because, they said, she had taken several minutes to die instead of the few seconds promised; but that is surely a direct result of the doctor's having to leave the whole operation to the patient herself instead of being allowed to intervene when required. And a coroner who conducted post-mortem examinations on 39 of Dr Kevorkian's 46 computer suicides claimed that three of them showed no anatomical evidence of terminal disease — but that, too, is hardly surprising in the enforced climate of secrecy, which means that no second medical opinion can be sought.

The legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, which Kevorkian advocates and most members of the public (even Catholics) want, is to be considered by the US Supreme Court this summer.

Australia's Northern Territory was in the news last year when it passed the world's first "right-to-die" law — which was to last only eight months. In that period, several terminally-ill patients who satisfied its strict guidelines were legally allowed the induced death they had requested. But a coalition of "pro-lifers", led by (literally) die-hard Catholics, had already called a high-powered meeting (co-chaired by representatives of Australia's three major parties), at which the campaign Euthanasia No was formed.

In March, Euthanasia No managed to force a

Private Member's Bill through the Australian Federal Senate (by 38 votes to 35), preventing the Territories from passing their own laws on Voluntary Euthanasia.

Last year, Dr Philip Nitschke, a physician in Darwin (capital of the Northern Territory), developed, and used for a number of patients, a DIY euthanasia machine similar to Kevorkian's in the USA. On May 14 this year he disclosed that he had now, in view of the change in the Australian law, invented a "coma machine", designed to keep the dying unconscious. Its computer-programmed sensor detects emerging consciousness and controls the flow of drugs through an intravenous drip.

Dr Nitschke is quoted in *The Guardian* of May 15 as commenting: "It is considered to be good medical practice to allow a person to die over two days, and yet if you increase the infusion rate and they die over two hours it is considered to be murder." This sums up the absurdity of the law, based on the split hairs of religious superstition.

A more common example of the same split hairs is the accepted practice of leaving pneumonia untreated if a dying patient happens to contract it — though there is no discernible ethical distinction between withholding antibiotics (so as not to cure the pneumonia) and actually administering a lethal dose or injection (in the absence of pneumonia) — except, perhaps, the implicit principle that you must always give the Almighty a sporting chance of a miraculous cure! Ironically enough, it is usually expressed in the words of the humanist poet Arthur Hugh Clough — "Thou shalt not kill; but needst not strive / Officiously to keep alive" — though, of course, Clough intended this satirically, as the context makes clear.

Religious opponents of euthanasia often insist that God alone is to determine our time of death; humans are not allowed to tamper with God's will. If that were so, would it not be wrong to intervene to save life, as well as to hasten death? But human lives, they tell us, are a "gift from God". Even if we were to accept that as true, is there no right to decline a gift when it is nothing but a burden?

Besides, the case for legalising voluntary euthanasia is that the required change in the law would be merely permissive. We uphold the right of our opponents to decide against active (or even passive) euthanasia for themselves, but not for us: they have no moral right to make laws that impose their views on others, who may not even share the religious beliefs on which those views are based.

Believers who uphold the principle of complete freedom of religion often fail to see that, in all logic, this must include freedom from religion.

● Since writing my article on the "Heaven's Gate" mass ritual suicide in California (May issue of *The Freethinker*), I have learned that another American, Charles Spiegel, who is leader of the Unarius Academy of Science, has announced that sadly the Heaven's Gate group got it all wrong. A number of inter-galactic spaceships will indeed be landing on Earth — to be precise, on the estate he himself has purchased for them near San Diego — but their arrival is not due until the year 2001.



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Supremely good — at doing bad

BELIEF in God — of the Christian or Islamic variety — has to endure some terrible setbacks; and I'm not thinking of the advance of science: that makes no impression on fundamentalists of either persuasion. But you might expect Muslims to hesitate before taking part in the *Hajj*, considering the disasters that have attended the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca in recent years.

Consider: in August 1980, a Pakistani airliner caught fire after taking off from Jeddah, and crash-landed killing 301; in July, 1987, 402 people were killed and 649 wounded in Mecca, when security forces clashed with Iranians demonstrating against the United States; three years later 1,426 pilgrims were killed in a stampede. There was another air crash in March, 1991, which killed 98; and 270 pilgrims died in another stampede in May, 1994, as worshippers surged forward for the ritual "stoning the devil".

Then, this year on April 15, more than 200 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured as fire engulfed an encampment outside the holy city. (*The Guardian*, April 16).

Whenever a tragedy like this occurs, my thoughts go back to Voltaire's poem on the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, in which 30,000 people perished, many of them in their churches.

After an initial outburst: "Unhappy mortals! Dark and mourning earth!/Afrighted gathering of human kind!/Eternal lingering of useless pain!" Voltaire furiously attacks what the translator Joseph McCabe (in *Selected Works of Voltaire*, 1935) calls "the more complacent deism of the time". And, I might add, completely demolishes theism.

"God holds the chain: is not himself enchained", says Voltaire: and taking issue with St Augustine's declaration that "Under a just God, no one is miserable who has not deserved misery", the poet poses the unanswerable question, "Why suffer we, then, under one so just?" Indeed, the whole poem is a questioning of "how conceive a God supremely good/Who heaps his favours on the sons he loves,./Yet scatters evil with so large a hand?"

I could, and should like to, go on, but extracts can be the enemy of poetry and argument. So I will leave it at that.

Positively sadistic

"PEOPLE have had negative experiences with the Christian Brothers and schools in the past", said their current leader, Edmund Garvey, when he was made a Freeman of his home town of Drogheda, County Louth, Ireland. And what, you may ask, are "negative experiences"? In fact, they weren't very negative at all. The Brothers were notorious for their sadistic punishments; and Brother Garvey later changed his adjective, asking forgiveness from those who had suffered "hurtful experiences".

The Guardian's Peter Lennon, who attended one of the Brothers' schools in Dublin in the 1940s, described "the routine instrument of punishment" as comprising four or five layers of tightly stitched leather. The sensation as it hit the boy's hand was "of being stung by a dozen bees". Even worse was the pointer, a long wooden stick which "would be brought down on your fingers with a crack that shot agony from skull to heel".

On RTE radio, Brother Garvey finally explained what he meant by negative/hurtful experiences. He was referring to those occasions "in which we are clearly exposed in the media for having excessively physically abused, and sometimes even sexually abused children in our care".

His apology and plea for forgiveness symbolise a remarkable change that has taken place in Irish society. Previously, as Peter Lennon pointed out, sympathy had been reserved for the "poor men" and not their victims.

Flaming nonsense!

FIREMAN Mario Trematore had to break through four layers of bullet-proof glass to rescue the Turin shroud when the Guarini chapel in which it was housed was gutted by fire. "God gave me the strength to break that glass" he said afterwards (*The Observer*, April 13).

And after examining the shroud, the Archbishop of Turin, Cardinal Giovanni Saldarini declared "It is intact. It is a miracle". Curious, isn't it, how Christians reason? Chapel destroyed; shroud saved: a miracle.

Courting contempt

SOMETHING of the continuous struggle to preserve the US constitutional separation of church and state may be gleaned from Ian Katz's report on the "Ten Commandments row" in Alabama (*The Guardian*, April 14), which carried a picture of a demonstrator

dressed as Moses carrying tablets marked I-X.

He was one of several thousand people who gathered in the state capital, Montgomery, in support of Judge Ray Moore, who had defied a court order to remove the plaque bearing the Decalogue which he displays in his courtroom. The judge, a Baptist who reads prayers before jury selection, was also supported by the Republican Governor, Bob James Jr, who threatened to call out the National Guard if any attempt was made to remove the plaque. And the Republican-dominated House of Representatives passed a resolution praising Judge Moore and calling for display of the Commandments to be allowed in government offices and courtrooms.

No wonder American astronomer Carl Sagan feared for the future. In *The Demon-Haunted World* (Headline) he found a place for Voltaire, from the sci-fi satire *Micromegas*, where one alien, approaching the Earth, remarks "Truly, that which makes me believe there is no inhabitant on this sphere, is that it seems to me that no sensible being would be willing to live here." "Well then", said *Micromegas*, "perhaps the beings that inhabit it do not possess good sense."

Hammurabi rules — OK?

ASKED in the *New Statesman* (April 4) which political figure, living or dead, he most admires, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks chose Moses, "the greatest nation-builder in history, and the figure who first taught that politics is subordinate to moral principles". And the time in history at which he would most like to be present was "The giving of the Ten Commandments — the revolutionary moment".

We'll leave aside the contradictions and absurdities that surround the Biblical story and express surprise that Sacks isn't aware that the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi predates the Decalogue by nearly a thousand years. Rather a late revolution, then, wouldn't you say?

Delayed reaction

I FIND it singularly surprising that Lord Rees-Mogg should be regarded as an "intellectual", even a Roman Catholic intellectual. I haven't space to list his gaffes, but I learn (from a Decca Aitkenhead interview in *The Guardian*, April 5) that "a spiritual experience" has convinced him that he lived briefly 150 years ago.

Perhaps that explains his antiquated views.

Accomplished fraud who pioneered 'New Age'

MADAME Blavatsky's rooms in New York were furnished in typical Victorian style, though with something of an "oriental" flavour. There was also a collection of stuffed animals: a lioness' head, birds, reptiles and monkeys, including a large bespectacled baboon, dressed in morning suit, with wing collar and tie, carrying under its arm the manuscript of a lecture on *The Origin of Species*.

Like the monkey cartoons of Darwin in the press, it symbolised Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's opposition to Darwin and what she (rightly) called "materialist science". Yet, in Peter Washington's words, "whereas the century since his death has seen the canonisation of Darwin as a secular saint, the same period has relegated Blavatsky to virtual oblivion". The baboon has had the last laugh.

Yet hers was a remarkable story and, owing to the seemingly limitless gullibility of humans, one that is still being aped today.

It really would be too ridiculous for words, were it not so revealing. Blavatsky was a liar and a fraud, but what counted, as Peter Washington says, was her ability to persuade people to accept her stories, "even when reason was telling them not to".

Reason was noticeably absent in the conversion of Annie Besant, Charles Bradlaugh's companion on the secular platform and co-defendant in *The Fruits of Philosophy* prosecution. Given Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* to review by the spiritualist W T Stead, Besant described it in glowing terms, and was later taken to see the author.

Although Blavatsky talked with energy and brilliance, she mentioned "no word of Occultism, nothing mysterious", Annie wrote in her *Autobiography*. But when she and a friend were leaving, Blavatsky looked into Annie's eyes and said, with a "yearning throb" in her voice, "Oh my dear Mrs Besant if you would only come among us".

"It was a psychological masterpiece", Peter Washington comments.

At the time, G W Foote, the founder of *The Freethinker*, remarked that Annie Besant needed someone to lead her, to attach herself to; and this view is echoed by Washington. She "always needed something and someone to believe in", he says. She "drifted away from Bradlaugh towards Shaw and Edward Aveling ... and it is impossible to separate her changing convictions from her changing affections".

Richard Hodgson, who had investigated Theosophy for the Society for Psychical Research, found HPB "one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors of history". Accomplished she certainly was; during that first visit in 1889, she even offered Besant the Hodgson report to read, but Annie rejected it out of hand, so convinced was she of her hostess' honesty.

And although it meant giving up the cause of contraception over which she had risked imprisonment, Annie Besant joined the

Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru by Peter Washington. Secker & Warburg. £12.99.

Review: COLIN MCCALL

Theosophical Society, of which she would later become President.

It was she and Charles Webster Leadbeater who hailed the Indian boy Krishnamurti as the world Teacher; and she founded the Yellow Shawl Group, who actually wore the garb, and the Purple Order, with its purple ribbons, to support the boy in his mission.

It distressed her enormously when, in 1927, Krishnamurti branched out on his own, declaring "I am the Teacher. I have entered into the flame— I am the flame, I have united the source and the goal". Or again, "I am that full flame which is the glory of Life". During the Second World War, he and the mystical Aldous Huxley found they had much in common in their search for spiritual truth; and Gerald Heard was another who was impressed.



● Madame Blavatsky

The Austrian Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was another admirer of *The Secret Doctrine*; and after going through a mental crisis (a common feature among gurus, notes Anthony Storr in *Feet of Clay*), then meeting Annie Besant at a congress in 1902, Steiner took over the leadership of the Theosophical Society in Germany, Switzerland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But he left in 1913 to form the Anthroposophical Society.

For him, the main enemies of humanity were Lucifer and Ahriman, personifications of the spirits of pride and of materialism, the latter as represented by science and technology. Materialism was in fashion at the Technical University of Vienna when Steiner was studying there, the dominant influence being the evo-

lutionist Ernst Haeckel, not "Australian" as the book mysteriously has it, or even Austrian, but German.

Steiner not only rejected "materialist theories of evolution", but also "mechanical theories of heat and light in physics for the same reason: that none of these theories took into account spiritual realities". He regarded the Earth as an organism which breathes in and out, inhaling in the Winter and exhaling in the Summer; and he believed human beings changed psychically and physically at the equinoxes. In the modern era, humanity "had lost the spiritual, aesthetic and cognitive unity for which it now pined".

When he visited Wales and the West Country, Steiner "relived" Druid ceremonies by means of clairvoyance, and an astral light provided him with a vision of Merlin and the Knights of the Round Table. And, like Mary Baker Eddy, he insisted that the root of serious illness was spiritual, not organic. He refused medical treatment and, in Anthroposophical terms, "Crossed the Threshold" on March 30 1925. The Prince of Wales, you will not be surprised to hear, has expressed an interest in Steiner's methods.

Nor will a little story that Elizabeth Mayall told about George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff surprise regular readers of *The Freethinker*. When she took a friend with a problem to see the guru, they sat through a long lunch during which Gurdjieff never spoke a word to Mayall's friend. Until the end, that is, when he fixed her with a stare, as Blavatsky did with Besant, and then mumbled some words in an incomprehensible language. As they walked away, Mayall apologised to her friend, but there was no need. Even though she hadn't understood anything he had said, Gurdjieff had solved her problem.

What is there to add? Just to say that Peter Washington has researched his subject in detail and has taken us on an esoteric trip that would be incredible were it not true. He has given us a refreshingly wry guide to the precursors of the New Age.

Bradlaugh House

AS A result of its planned expansion, the British Humanist Association — currently a tenant of the National Secular Society at Bradlaugh House — has decided to seek "more appropriate" premises in the Greater London area.

BHA Executive Director Robert Ashby has written to local groups: "BHA has not yet worked out the desired timescale for any relocation. I am preparing detailed specifications, and working with John Leeson (Treasurer) on the financial implications. We aim to keep affiliated groups closely informed, and hope you will respect our openness and that we are putting the interests of your Association before all other considerations."

Suffering good for the soul? Tell it to the marines!

IT IS arguable that any work of fiction is, at least implicitly, "message-laden", but it does not follow that the conscious aim of sending a message in fictional form is easy to achieve without damage to the message or to the fictional genre selected — or even to both. So, when we read in the blurb: "Combine the extraordinary skills of a professional philosopher with the talent of a storyteller and the result is (this book) ... " we have to be wary of either the message or of the quality of the story-telling.

Sometimes message fiction succeeds admirably both as story and as comment: *Gulliver's Travels* and *Animal Farm* are good examples among many — but sometimes both the story and the message are disappointing. To exemplify this double failure we do not need to resort to the bottom of the sci-fi barrel; relig-fi includes the tale of the widow's mite, attributed to Jesus, which shows plainly how not to do it. This is not only a flimsy little story but also it does no justice to the ethical issues it supposedly alludes to; it does not address the difficult

The Big Domino in the Sky and Other Atheistic Tales by Michael Martin. Prometheus Books. ISBN 1-57392-111-4. £14.50.

Review: ERIC STOCKTON

problem of motives *vis a vis* consequences and it does not draw a proper contrast between doing good and merely feeling virtuous.

In this book, Michael Martin does not score full marks but he does not fail either. As stories, the contents of the book are not satisfying; the characters are as of cardboard and the story-lines are simplistic and climax-free. As lucid expositions of some of the main arguments that atheists level against believers, the book can be praised without reservation.

A necessary feature (which no professional philosopher would omit) is a proper definition of terms. Professor Martin not only pleases your reviewer by sidelining, in one of the stories, the use of the term agnosticism, but also he makes clear distinctions between

atheism in general and positive and negative atheism in particular.

Atheism is the godless view of things; positive atheists claim that the non-existence of God can, for all practical purpose at least, be proved while negative atheists contend merely that the grounds for belief that a god does exist are insufficient and so the belief can be disregarded. We negative atheists place the onus of proof upon theists who, in our view, fail to make their point; positive atheists take the onus of proof upon themselves — in the negative atheists' view, quite gratuitously.

The several stories are interrelated but any can be read separately and each deals with a specific point of contention between theists and atheists.

There is skilful use of different fictional forms for different areas of controversy — for example, there is an ongoing correspondence between a sceptical mother and her student son about the latter's entrapment in, and emergence from, cult religion of the most insidious kind.

There is an excellent unpacking of the Vatican's position on miracles in the form of a report by a very sharp Jesuit examining the whole notion with a view to saving the Church from making claims that can be refuted.

A very smart cookie, called Mary, drives a coach and horses, in dialogue form, through William Paley on the design theory; this lady points out that a watch is actually made by many people co-operating so Paley's analogy — if it has any value at all — points to polytheism. Your reviewer, labouring under significantly defective eyesight and being able to survive only by having a cardiac pacemaker, always likes to see Paley undermined — considering the mileage that is generated by the alleged perfection of the eye and other organs being cited as evidence for divine design rather than for the make-do-and-mend of the real evolving world. It is perhaps unjust to write of cardboard characters — perhaps one might actually fancy that young lady?

A particularly good chapter takes the form of alternating analyses of the theory that suffering is good for the soul (advocated by the real Professor John Hick) and the practice of making people better by harsh treatment (advocated by a fictional but particularly sadistic drill instructor in the US Corps of Marines). The quality and lucidity of argument presented by Michael Martin in this chapter is simply superb. In it are exposed the elaborate excuses made for undeserved suffering in a world presided over by the received Omnigod. Had the phrase not been coined long ago, one might suppose that Martin is saying to Hick "tell that to the Marines".

If you want a story book then you can find plenty of better ones; if you want the atheist position spelled out and defended very tellingly, then this book will be of very great value to you.

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Total from April 22 to May 22: £1,025.

'All scripture is given by inspiration of God': GENE KASMAR reports on what the not-so-Good Book lays down for our daily lives

BARBARISM IS BIBLICAL!

ABOUT 35 of the 50 American states have mandated the death penalty to date. The remaining 15 states are attempting to catch up and also pass into law "death penalty" legislation.

And why not? State legislators of the Judæo-Christian persuasion would be remiss *not* to make every attempt to enforce God's divine decrees regarding capital punishment as demanded throughout the holy Bible for the countless "crimes" specified therein.

What the Bible does provide is an almost unending litany of those "crimes" punishable by death. Although some might wish for moderation of both the "crimes" and the penalties, such is not the case. God has not seen fit to invalidate, update, or void any of the provisions regarding capital crimes.

The following listing of "crimes" punishable by death generally are framed in a manner whereby the transgressor will be "... cut off ...". The Hebrew word translated "cut off" is *karath*, which actually means "destroy", "perish" and "kill". And the "killing" is to be performed by members of the "faith community" and not by God in almost all instances!

And so, with that in mind, these are some of the Biblical offences that demand the death penalty:

Eating animal fat (Leviticus 7:25); adultery (Leviticus 20:10); sexual intercourse during a woman's menstrual period (Leviticus 20:18); homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13); cursing or striking one's mother or father (Leviticus 20:9, Exodus 21:15-17, and Matthew 15:4); remaining uncircumcised (Genesis 17:14); bestiality (Exodus 22:19, Leviticus 18:23, Leviticus 20:15-16, and Deuteronomy 27:21); making holy ointment (Exodus 30:22-33); putting holy ointment on a non-Israelite (Exodus 30:22-33); making a proprietary perfume (Exodus 30:34-38); sacrificing to other Gods (Exodus 22:20); worshipping other Gods (Deuteronomy 13:6-11); priest's daughter playing the whore (Leviticus 21:9); incest (Leviticus 18:6-18 and 20:11-21, Deuteronomy 22:30 and 27:20-23; excepted is father-daughter incest which is not specified as an offence).

Rape (Deuteronomy 22:25; only if in the countryside); being a stubborn son (Deuteronomy 21:18-21); witchcraft (Exodus 22:18); turning to wizards and familiar spirits (Leviticus 20:6); being a wizard or having a familiar spirit (Lev 20:27); blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10-16); killing a man (Leviticus 24:17); murdering a man (Exodus 21:14); work on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14-15); kindle a fire on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2-3); gather sticks on the Sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36); not celebrating Passover (Numbers 9:13); eating

leavened bread during Passover (Exodus 12:15); ingesting animal blood (Leviticus 3:17 and 7:26-27 and 17:10-14); eating sacrificial meat on the third day (Leviticus 7:18 and 19:5-8); eating sacrificial meat while in a state of uncleanness (Leviticus 7:20); persons with leprosy or gonorrhoea eating holy things (Leviticus 22:4); eating beasts that die of themselves (Leviticus 22:8).

Acting presumptuously (Numbers 15:30 and Deuteronomy 17:12); kidnapping (Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 24:7); selling an Israelite into slavery (Deuteronomy 24:7); allowing your ox to gore someone (Exodus 21:29); touching Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:12-13); possessing an idol (Joshua:7:10-26); worshipping the Sun, Moon, or stars (Deuteronomy 17:3-5); being a glutton or a drunkard (Deuteronomy 21:20-21); not

virgins (Deuteronomy 22:20-21); unsanctioned and uninspired prophets (Deuteronomy 18:20); disregarding court or temple judgments (Deuteronomy 17:12); touching unclean animals (Leviticus 7:21; unclean animals include swine, rabbits; finless and scaleless water creatures like lobster, trout, and shrimp; various birds; most four footed insects [!]; and bats); touching any unclean thing (Lev 7:21 and 22:4-9); unclean things include menstruous women, urine and excretion, semen, leprosy, diseased genital emissions, dogs, mice, corpses, and so on).

The Old Testament stands today just as applicable as it was 2,000 years ago. The later Messiah, Jesus Christ, established that with his "Think not that I am come to destroy the law ... For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments ..."(Matthew 5:17-19 and Luke 16:17).

Guilty

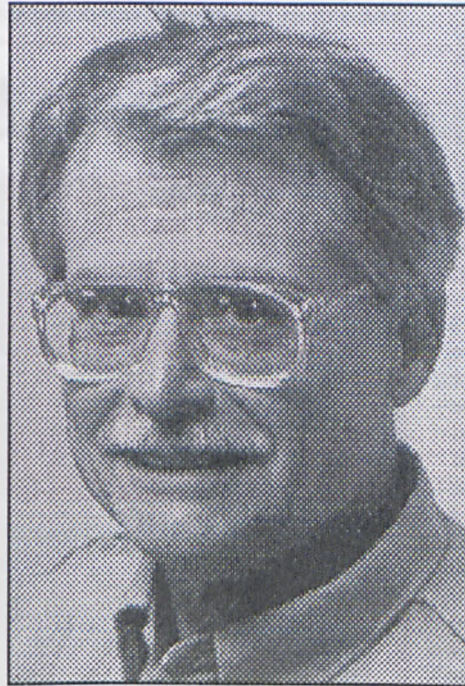
St Paul also agrees with applying the whole Old Testament when he specifies "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:"(2 Timothy 3:16). And further reinforcement is found in "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." (James 2:10).

And so, will all 50 states impose death penalty legislation throughout the United States?

Folks ... it's only a matter of time!

STOP PRESS: The Minnesota State Legislature has just seen the introduction of a "death penalty" amendment (the "Sviggum Amendment") to a House Judiciary Financing bill, HF-1880. The amendment as written is anti-Biblical and opposed to the Judæo-Christian Biblical God's divine decrees on several points. For instance, the amendment singles out for capital punishment only the murderers of either police officers or children under 12 years old.

Nowhere does the holy Bible make any kind of similar distinction. In fact, the *opposite* holds true. According to Leviticus 27:1-6 (and also Numbers 3:15-50 & 26:62), children less than a month old have exactly *zero* Biblical value; from one month to five years old, a child has one-tenth the value of an adult; and a person from five to 20 years old has about one-third the value of a full adult.



● Gene Kasmar

offering sacrifices at only the central sanctuary (Leviticus 17:8-9); withholding meat from the sacrifice (Lev 17:2-5); touching boxes containing Gods (Numbers 4:15); looking at holy objects (Numbers 4:20); approaching the altar (Numbers 18:3); not to tinkle little personal bells in the temple (Exodus 28:33-35); not wearing pants in the temple (Exodus 28:42-43).

Touching a corpse (Numbers 19:13); entering the sanctuary in a unclean state (Numbers 19:19-20); working on the day of atonement (Numbers 23:29-30); drinking wine or strong drink in the tabernacle (Lev 10:9); straying too near the tabernacle (Numbers 1:51, 17:13, and 18:22); approaching too near to priests (Numbers 3:10, 3:38, and 18:7); brides found to be not

● Gene Kasmar, author of *ALL the Obscenities in the Bible*, may be contacted at 5559 N. Lyndale Brooklyn Center MN 55430 USA. E-mail: kerry@mtn.org

The Freethinker will apply the 'test of reason' as the new government's

Deeper questions be

THERE was curiously little discussion of religion during the General Election, considering how much there was before it. The Christianity of John Smith and still more of Tony Blair had been repeatedly emphasised. The undoubtedly important tradition of Christian Socialism was played up, while the equally important tradition of Secular Socialism was played down. Most of the Labour leaders were identified as Christians, and when politicians of other parties were questioned about religion John Major and Paddy Ashdown joined Blair in stating publicly that they prayed regularly.

It was perhaps a relief that little of this came out during the campaign. The Chief Rabbi and the Archbishop of Canterbury issued calls for the remoralisation of society, but took care to keep the political implications implicit. The churches issued a report about unemployment and homelessness, but still shrank from making the obvious conclusion explicit. Even the Pro-Life Alliance and the Natural Law Party were reluctant to make overt references to religion in their campaigns against legal abortion or for transcendental meditation. Were religious people just lying low, like Old Labour, until the election was over? We shall see.

But what about non-religious people? Where do they stand in politics? How do Humanists vote? In the old days it used to be said that the Church of England was the Conservative Party at prayer; it could also have been said that the Liberal Party was the Nonconformists in the polling booth. Most members of the old Secularist and Rationalist movements were Liberals too, then most members of the later Ethical and Humanist movements were Labour; indeed it was once said that the modern Humanist movement was the Labour Party at non-prayer. But all this is no longer true. Denominations have lost their political affiliations, among Humanists as among Anglicans or Nonconformists or Catholics or Jews or Muslims. Humanists may vote Labour, if they can work out what New Labour is; but they may vote Liberal Democrat or Liberal, Referendum or Independence, Green or even Conservative (though hardly Natural Law or neo-Fascist). As in other areas, the Humanist approach to politics is not to give the right answers but to ask the right questions.

What are our questions about politics? They are not party slogans of the kind we were deafened by during the past few months. They are deeper questions, to be answered not by the repetition of dogma or the appeal to sectional interest, but by the test of reason and for the sake of all human beings.

In constitutional politics, what about the hereditary principle, in the Monarchy as well

as the House of Lords? What about some form of proportional representation, so that all votes count? What about allowing votes against as well as for candidates, and what about insisting that any representative in any assembly, from the smallest council to the High Court of Parliament, must receive the votes of at least half of the electorate? In national politics, what about Britain and Europe? If it is right for Scotland and Wales to be part of the United Kingdom, why is it wrong for Britain to be part of a federal Europe? What is so good about being ruled from London, rather than Brussels or Edinburgh, or anywhere else?

In so-called defence, why is this country still a nuclear power? During the Cold War, there may have been an argument for hydrogen bombs, but whom are we threatened by and whom are we threatening now, what are they for and what do they cost? And in the same area, why is this country one of the leading

makers and sellers of weapons of war? We wonder how our ancestors could tolerate the slave trade, but won't our descendants wonder how we can tolerate the arms trade?

In energy, why are we so dependent on nuclear power? What about solar power, and wind power, and wave power? In transport, why are we so dependent on motor transport? What about rail, returned to public control, and canals, restored to working use, and bicycles, allowed their own tracks? Why don't we take proper care of our environment in which we live, or will die out if we ruin it?

In human rights, why do we allow so many of the freedoms which our predecessors fought for us to have to be taken away? And why are we so weak in defending the freedoms of our fellows in other countries? Why do we make enemies with a few bad weak regimes, but make friends with many other equally bad but strong ones? Why are there

Election blow for Church

**Shrill voices
of an
insignificant
minority**



**by Keith Porteous Wood
General Secretary
National Secular Society**

BEFORE the General Election, anti-abortion campaigners were threatening a US-style abortion war if MPs didn't heed their message. The electorate had other ideas, however. Not only did they fail to land even one seat, but also those candidates who stood on a specifically anti-abortion ticket received a total of only 17,600 votes throughout the 51 seats in which they stood. That's an average of 345 votes per seat — less than three-quarters of one per cent of the votes cast in the 51 constituencies.

Anti-abortionists came last in the poll 19 times; they succeeded in culling more than one per cent of the votes in only 12 constituencies; they failed, spectacularly, to win even 100 votes in Southampton (Itchen). They lost all their deposits, totalling more than £25,000, and even if all their supporters throughout Britain had miraculously been in one constituency they still wouldn't have secured a seat.

Their unpopularity nationwide must be even greater than in the constituencies they fought, assuming that they targeted the seats where they thought they would do best. They cannot even claim that, recognising that the anti-abortion candidates would not win, their supporters voted tactically for other candidates — none of the main parties undertook to tighten the abortion law. Judging by their showing at Southampton (Itchen) they were scraping the barrel for candidates; I

as policies unfold: NICOLAS WALTER makes some preliminary points

Behind political slogans

more people out of work and more people in prison than ever before?

In education, why do we subject children to large classes and repeated examinations, and schools to national curricula and league tables? In health, why do we subject patients to waiting lists and premature discharge, and hospitals to performance targets and league tables? Why is there such intolerance of some harmful drugs, and such tolerance of other much more harmful ones?

In welfare, why are so many poor in such a rich country? Why are the young and old, the ill and disabled neglected? Why are we told that we can't continue to afford publicly what we can begin to afford privately?

In the areas of particular Humanist interest, what about the imposition of "mainly Christian" worship and education on state schools, and state support of religious schools? What about the religious domination

of philosophical and moral discussion on radio and television, from Thought for the Day onwards? What about the state provision of religious chaplains in hospitals and prisons, in local councils and the armed services? What about the disestablishment of a church which is now only a minority sect, and the complete separation of church and state?

Above all, in all levels of society, why are we told so much about democracy but allowed so little of it? Why, in a so-called free country, do we seem to be less free than before? Why do we have so little real choice about what we can do, at school and at work, in our neighbourhoods and communities, locally and nationally? Why do we have to choose between rapacious capitalism and repressive bureaucracy? Why is there so much emphasis on casting a vote in elections, and so little on having a voice between elections? Why is the General Election like the National Lottery,

with very few winners and very many losers? And why is so much necessary expenditure dependent on the National Lottery, which is a hidden tax on the poor?

In general, why do we have so little proper discussion of these questions? It has been said that every country gets the government it deserves; could it be said that every government gets the country it deserves? And the last questions are whether it makes any serious difference which party forms the government, and whether it will make any significant difference that another party has now done so?

Humanists all answer these questions in their own ways. They vote according to their answers and according to the circumstances. But are you surprised to hear that at least one Humanist interprets the precious right to vote by exercising the equally precious right *not* to vote?

as voters reject anti-choice candidates

also notice that two candidates named Quintavalle managed to poll fewer than 400 votes between them.

Faced with such an unmitigated disaster, most organisations would have had the grace to say nothing and crawl back into the woodwork. But a representative of the misleadingly named "ProLife" — or should that be AntiChoice? — Party told *The Independent* on May 14: "We stood on the most difficult election platform of all time — abolishing the 1967 Abortion Act ... That around 20,000 people voted for us we find very reassuring."

I am reassured, too. I am reassured that despite the mighty Roman Catholic Church trumpeting abortion as the single most important electoral issue, the voters almost completely ignored it. I am also reassured that we have not followed the United States like lemmings into allowing politics to be poisoned by an obsession with one "righteous" issue. I am not without sympathy, but my sympathy is for those election candidates who had pressure brought upon them by anti-abortionists to endorse their line or risk opposition from a specifically anti-abortion candidate.

The most important lesson to be learned from these figures is for all prospective Parliamentary candidates to recognise any threats by the anti-abortionists for what they are — shrill voices of an insignificant minority which is obsessed with a simplistic stance on a complex issue.

Ignoring the scale of their defeat, there

are some interesting details about the spread of seats and regional results. The party's choosing 51 seats to contest was presumably in order to secure them air time for their party political broadcast (but only a censored version of their film was screened).

Cardinal Winning of Glasgow — not noted for his aversion to self-publicity — recently announced that he would offer cash to women (regardless of their faith) to dissuade them from proceeding with abortion. He will take scant comfort from the Glasgow anti-abortionists' results being the least unsuccessful in Britain and that in nearby East Kilbride their candidate polled 2.4 per cent of the votes cast, the only one to exceed — slightly — 1,000 votes.

The conurbations with a high percentage of Roman Catholics — around Glasgow and Liverpool/Manchester — fielded a quarter of the anti-abortion candidates but secured nearly half of the anti-abortion votes country-wide. The percentage of anti-abortion candidates' votes of the total cast was 1.3 per cent in these two conurbations, compared with 0.6 per cent in the remaining constituencies they fought. By percentage of votes cast, the predominantly RC constituencies took nine out of the top 10 contested. The only constituency in a non-predominantly RC area to appear in the top 10 by percentage was Doncaster Central; there was a small cluster of seats contested in the Doncaster/Sheffield area.

I feel that we can now justly challenge

the prominence given to the anti-abortion point-of-view, given that the electorate has so comprehensively rejected it. We have also learned once more that single-issue politics — be the issue abortion or Europe — are an irrelevance in this country. Even if the UK were to adopt proportional representation, on this showing the anti-abortionists have no hope of a seat at Westminster.

But, before you reach for your pen, I do accept that abortion should be avoided whenever possible, and I realise that many of those who have abortions find them traumatic experiences which they never forget. We need to work instead on finding ways of reducing the number of abortions through improved sex education and a greater awareness and availability of contraception which, at least publicly, the Roman Catholic Church continues to oppose. Could this be because it impedes the production of pew fodder?

I almost forgot to mention that when the party contested seats with the Monster Raving Loony Party, the Loonies prevailed each time.

● Editor's note: Under the headline "Pro-Lifers outstripped by loonies in unpopularity test", *The Independent* reported Keith Porteous Wood's conclusions on May 14. The National Secular Society was credited with the research and KPW was extensively quoted. *The Guardian* included the story in its pick of items from other papers — and there was even a reference in *The Tablet*, the RC "quality" weekly.

TONY AKKERMANS reports

An Irish plea for fairness and common-sense

THE progress of rational thought in Ireland, even more than in Britain, has been slow and tortuous.

The first Irishman on record as a sceptic was the philosopher John Toland (1670-1722), who was described by Jonathan Swift as "the great Oracle of the anti-Christians". In his footsteps came William Lecky, the politician and historian, and John Bagnell Bury, a classical scholar who held professorships at Dublin and Cambridge.

In 1913 Bury published *A History of Freedom of Thought* which contained a lengthy treatise on "The Growth of Rationalism", to which the following passage is central " ... If the history of civilisation has any lesson to teach it is this: there is one supreme condition of mental and moral progress which it is completely within the power of man himself to secure, and that is perfect liberty of thought and discussion. The establishment of this liberty may be considered the most valuable achievement of modern civilisation and as a condition of social progress it should be deemed fundamental ... "

But in the early 20th Century Bury was very much a voice in the wilderness. The Roman Catholic church, partly due to its close identification with nationalism, had developed a stranglehold on Irish society. National schools which were almost totally funded by the State had been handed over to the Catholic and (in some instances) Protestant churches, and the precepts of the church were imposed by law on all citizens, whatever their philosophical persuasion.

Contemporary

As a rationalist reaction to this blatant imposition of religious control, the Secular Society of Ireland was established in 1933. The society sprang from the Contemporary Club, which had been founded in 1885 and contained people of all strands of liberal persuasion. Copies of *The Freethinker* were distributed at their meetings and contact was established with the Rationalist Press Association in London. Eventually the widely circulated *Irish Catholic* and the *Catholic Standard* began to warn of "the enemy in our midst" and called for measures "to expose its iniquity and to repress its activities". The Contemporary Society was forced to cease allowing the Secular Society to meet on its premises and the Society disbanded in 1936, donating its funds to the anti-Fascist cause in Spain.

It was not until some 30 years later that another Humanist group was formed in the Republic. More recently, in 1993, the group was reconstituted as the Association of Irish Humanists. It is from this fledgling beginning that now has come another Humanist handbook. Numbering more than 100 pages, it is similar in its approach to the admirable guide recently published by the Ulster Humanists, except that as well as explaining the theory of Humanism to



● Tony Akkermans

newcomers it also discusses the practical functions that Humanism now has to offer.

Written by Dick Spicer and Ellen Sides, *The Humanist Philosophy – with an Irish Guide to Non-religious Ceremonies*, to give you its full title, is a gem of lucid and pleasing treatment of a topic that elsewhere is often prone to tedium. Pity, therefore, that its forbidding title and uninspiring cover mask what is a splendid tale of Humanism through the ages told with brilliant clarity.

The book starts with a model introduction to the Humanist outlook, its philosophy and ethics. Complex ideas are so cleverly disarmed that the usual brain-ache is readily avoided, and in no time at all even people unused to rational thought will get the message. Here is a sample paragraph on morality:

"The much discussed 'moral crisis' is only a crisis for a morality which is not based on a Humanist outlook. Humanist values on the contrary, are centred on the basic human decencies of altruism, integrity and personal responsibility. These stem also from a commitment to the application of reason and science, to an understanding of the universe and the solving of human problems. Taken together, these values lead to a commitment to transcend any divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, class, nationality, gender or sexual orientation; to work for the common good of humanity and to protect the earth and its environment."

There is the usual look back over the ages, summarising the development of thought towards Humanism, starting with the great philosophers and poets of ancient Greece, China and Rome and progressing via the Renaissance, the Utilitarians and Darwin to the

emergence of specific freethought movements in the late 19th Century.

In the discussion on Charles Bradlaugh, founder of our own National Secular Society, it is disturbing to learn that affirmation in Ireland is still not an option for the swearing-in of Presidents and Supreme Court judges.

Worth quoting from the same piece is Bradlaugh's rapier reply to an accusation that criticism of religion was a destructive task:

Tell the backwoodsman, who, with axe in hand, hews at the trunks of sturdy trees, that his is destructive work and he will answer: I clear the ground, that plough and reaping-hook may be used by and by.

There is naturally a substantial section on the Irish Humanist dimension, both its history and present. Statistics are given to show an encouraging growth of secularism. Progress is also being made in non-sectarian education. There are now 14 multi-denominational primary schools. Even some of the clergy see the disadvantages of herding children into strictly denominational camps. As long ago as 1826, Dr Doyle, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Kildare, is on record as saying: "I do not see how any man ... can think that peace can ever be permanently established ... if the children are separated at the commencement of life, on account of their religious opinion".

Poems

The manual concludes with an extensive section on all aspects of Humanist rites-of-passage ceremonies, with sample "services" and ideas for prose, poems and music.

The writers, living as they do in a country so brutalised by religion that not long ago a 14-year-old schoolgirl, pregnant through rape, was denied an abortion and was initially prevented from travelling abroad, are remarkably restrained and fair-minded in their attitude towards religion. The strength of the book lies in its understated plea for fairness and common-sense. Only the most hardened dogmatist could ignore its eminently reasonable and well-argued case.

To cram all things Humanist into a single cover has obvious advantages, but the object of a handbook must be as wide a distribution as possible. The format and price of this book may make that difficult. Do not be put off by its title – it is an easy and informative read, particularly for the young and the new students of Humanism.

Humanist thought is not the monopoly of Humanists. Many people today think along Humanist lines, often without realising that Humanist organisations exist. This book will greatly help in spreading the message. Buy it. Available from Humanist Publishers, 25 Wolfe Tone Square West, Bray, Co Wicklow, Republic of Ireland. Price £8.50.

Terry Sanderson on the media

THE *Sunday Times* reported on May 4 that France was “flabbergasted” at the news that the late President François Mitterrand (“a cynical agnostic”) had been consulting an astrologer before making important decisions. The seer’s name is Elizabeth Teissier, and she just happens to have a book out about the alleged relationship. Ms Teissier says Mitterrand wanted charts on his allies and his enemies — he needed to know which of his Cabinet he could trust.

The *Sunday Times* was rightly sceptical about the veracity of these tales, indicating that a number of French journalists had asked her directly if she had made the whole thing up. The *Daily Express*, on the other hand, was completely unquestioning when it took up the story a couple of weeks later. In an interview with the paper, Ms Teissier claimed that she had “foretold a world-shattering event” at her very first meeting with Mitterrand. She claims to have told him that there would be “people on the street like the storming of the Bastille around 10th November, 1989”. On November 9, the Berlin wall fell.

Well, how remarkable. There’s nothing more to be said, is there? This woman obviously has the gift of foresight — certainly as far as the *Daily Express* is concerned. The fact that the only other person who was present when she made the supposed prediction is now dead is irrelevant. If Ms Teissier says she said it, then it must be true. She also claims that “during crisis periods such as the Gulf war, Mitterrand would call me several times a day.” Once again, we have to take her word for it.

Ms Teissier says that “she never tried to profit” from her connection with Mitterrand, so will she be giving the profits from her book to charity? I predict not.

Mitterrand is not the only politician to have been addicted to astrologers. Ronald Reagan was also similarly influenced. And we are told that Boris Yeltsin is in the thrall of a glamorous TV seer in the mould of our own Mystic Meg.

The trouble with astrologers and psychics is that we only ever hear about their successes (and even then we usually only have their word for it). In his excellent book *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal* (Prometheus Books), Terence Hines writes: “Until recently, no-one has been ‘keeping score’ on psychics’ predictions. The tabloids certainly don’t run a column at the end of the year detailing the fact that the psychic predictions they ballyhooed so vigorously earlier have all turned out to be wrong. In short, failed predictions are not news and are forgotten. On the other hand, when a psychic does manage to be correct, either by being trivial (‘I foresee continued trouble in Lebanon’) or by claiming that the prediction was much more specific than it really was, that prediction gets plenty of media attention. Thus, the public is selectively exposed to the ‘correct’ predictions and almost never hears about the thousands of failures.”

Well, let’s do our bit towards putting that right. Let’s turn back the clock to March 23 this year, when the *Sunday Mirror* published “The Crystal Poll” in which it invited “Britain’s top psychics” to give predictions about the outcome of the General Election on May 1.

Craig Hamilton-Parker who is “resident psychic on *The Big Breakfast*” predicted: “The

Psychics – 0 Skeptics – 5

Tories will win by a small margin, but will stay in power for less than a year. It will be one of the most exciting elections ever with both parties neck and neck all the way. The biggest surprise will be that Birmingham turns Tory. Labour will also lose seats in Scotland ... Norman Tebbit will resign from the Tory party days before the election. Ted Heath will be taken ill. A Labour politician is caught drink-driving ...”

Mr Hamilton-Parker made several other predictions which were equally wide of the mark. Just for the record, there is now not a single Tory MP in the Birmingham area nor in Scotland.

Next up is Betty Palko “a clairvoyant and medium whose most famous client is Princess Diana”. Ms Palko opined that: “Labour will win with a slim majority. The Tories will gain more votes than expected. John Major will lose his seat ... Tony Blair will not be leader for long. Within a year there will be riots over unpopular legislation — possibly tax — and he will be replaced.” As we all know, Labour won by a landslide, and John Major was re-elected in Huntingdon.

Next the *Sunday Mirror* treated us to the musings of Daphne — dubbed “Britain’s leading seer and America’s leading psychic”. Her seance revealed: “The Labour party will win but it will be a close-run contest. The Tories will poll a high number of votes and everyone will be on the edge of their seats as the results come in.” Once again came the prediction that “Tony Blair will face riots over unpopular tax legislation” and “After a year there will be a new Government, probably a coalition.” I’m not holding my breath over that one.

Russell Grant, the *Sunday Mirror*’s own

astrologer, said that John Major would lose because “he didn’t call an April poll. As an Aries he should have gone for 10th April.” Needless to say that the real opinion polls at that time were predicting a Labour win, so you didn’t have to be celestially gifted to get the result right.

That didn’t stop Jim Chivers, a “psychometrist who tunes into people by looking at their photos” from predicting: “The Tories will get in by a slim majority. Tony Blair will take defeat in his stride.” Mr Chivers needs to refocus his camera.

Helena Clarke tried “numerology” to come up with this answer: “The Conservatives will win with quite a large majority,” she said with every confidence. “There will be a big upset in North London with a huge swing to the Right in traditional Labour strongholds.” As it happens, the Tories were virtually wiped-out in North London. I demand a recount of Ms Clarke’s numerological calculations.

And finally Jane Hamilton-Parker, a crystal reader, consulted her ball for the result. “The Conservatives will win by a large majority,” she said. “Labour’s downfall will be a drugs and sex scandal involving a major figure, and will cost them the election. Michael Portillo will be promoted. Mrs Thatcher will return to the Government in a powerful role.” I think Ms Hamilton-Parker had better get the Windolene out. Her window into the future is in need of a bit of a buffing.

Given that all these supposed psychics got it so wrong, can we now expect the *Sunday Mirror* to warn their readers to steer clear?

Not a bit of it. There’s a free astrology supplement in next week’s issue.

Rabbi urges schools integration

THE Chancellor of the University of Ulster, Rabbi Julia Neuberger, was at the centre of a row over the Six Counties’ religiously divided education system after she criticised the Catholic maintained sector as “sectarian” and praised integrated education.

Interviewed afterwards, Rabbi Neuberger accepted her remarks would cause offence but said she believed integrated schools were the best way forward for Northern Ireland.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools demanded an apology for the speech. And UU vice-chancellor Trevor Smith said: “The university has taken immediate steps to reassure our many partners throughout Catholic education, at all levels,

that the views reported were unequivocally not the views of the university ...”

In her speech at the opening of a new integrated school near Belfast, Rabbi Neuberger said all single religion schools were sectarian and should not be fully funded by the Government, which should instead provide 100 per cent cash support for the integrated schools.

She added later: “Educating your children in a school which reflects your religion is an argument that has been used by Jews and Muslims as well as Catholics.” This week Rabbi Neuberger said she was deeply concerned at the response to her reported remarks and was planning a clarifying statement. Source: *Times Higher Education Supplement*, April 25.

NSS President in Iceland

DURING a recent visit to Reykjavik, I met up with members of the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, known as Sidmennt, writes Daniel O'Hara. Before travelling, I had made contact by letter, phone and fax with the President of the Association, Hope Knuttson. She is an American from New York, married to an Icelander, who has lived in the country for 23 years.

At their invitation, I gave a version of my recent lecture on *Schubert's Religion* (first given to South Place Ethical Society, and printed in the *Ethical Record* for March 1997) to the group. We also had friendly discussions about modern Humanism and the activities of our respective societies. Hope has provided the following summary for inclusion in *The Freethinker*.

Sidmennt, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, was founded in 1990 by a small committee of people who had organised the first civil confirmation in Iceland, which took place in 1989 after a year of preparation. Civil confirmation is still our main activity, although we assist people in organising secular funerals and name-givings as well.

We have published and distributed booklets about these three secular ceremonies. We publish a newsletter for members several times a year and also send it to the media, libraries and various public institutions. We hold occasional lectures and meetings about life-stance issues and have initiated a movement for separation of Church and State in Iceland.

An elderly Sidmennt member living in a small village in the North of Iceland has almost single-handedly established a nationwide organisation for the sole purpose of achieving separation of Church and State. His group is an offshoot of Sidmennt in which people from many different religious and political affiliations have joined forces.

Sidmennt members are a very varied group, and not all of them would define themselves as Humanists. In the short time of its existence, even some of the Board members have had problems in this area. Most of the membership consists of families who have participated in the civil confirmation programme and who want to see this alternative [to religious confirmation] continue.

Last Summer and Autumn, the Sidmennt Board worked intensively to expand the civil confirmation programme by hiring several philosophers and teachers as group leaders for the programme [in which young people are given a secular and non-religious understanding of the responsibilities of adulthood and citizenship]. After getting help from HEF (the Ethical Humanist Foundation) in Norway, in the form of a Summer seminar about civil confirmation, we doubled enrolment in the programme, which is now in its ninth year. For the first time we have sent information about our programme into the homes of 2,500 families who have children of confirmation age. This Winter we had four courses running, and there were three ceremonies, including one in Akureyri, the largest town in the North of Iceland. The other two were in the Reykjavik

area.

Considering the fact that there are only around 160 members in Sidmennt, including children, and sometimes only three or four active board members, this expansion has been a major achievement. The State Church in Iceland (the Icelandic Lutheran Church, to which more than 95 per cent of the population at least nominally belonged) has been beset by many major scandals in recent years (of both sexual and financial kinds). It has thus been losing members in droves: the figures are now regularly reported in the media. Sidmennt has managed to open national discussion on the issues of separation of Church and State, and has been involved in several key TV, radio and newspaper debates on the subject.

We have always maintained close contact with the Norwegian Humanist Association, and there have been visits by members of our organisation and theirs to each other. Hopefully, the movement towards separation of Church and State in other Nordic countries will also benefit us.

It was a pleasure to meet with the brave few who have achieved such a significant impact in such a short time that they found themselves blamed by the local Bishop for the recent fall-off in religious confirmations! So far as I know, I was the first British Humanist ever to meet officially with the Icelandic association, whose address I obtained through IHEU.

Sidmennt can be contacted by e-mail: hopeful@islandia.is

Religious 'cloth heads' under fire

ONE OF the greatest allies of Secularism is science. Science has done more to discredit the irrationalism of religion than any other influence. Indeed, the Church seems never to have quite recovered from having to concede that Charles Darwin was right about evolution.

Whenever science advances, religionists' knees start jerking. They are always ready to jump in and explore what they like to call "the moral dimension". A recent example of this occurred when it was announced that Scottish scientists had succeeded in cloning a sheep.

Immediately, the religious Jeremiahs were on the bandwagon, wailing about the "ethical implications" of this dreadful new development. But Professor Lewis Wolpert — a well-known atheist and leading biologist — has said that he knows of no new ethical issues involved with cloning; indeed, he has been offering a bottle of champagne to anyone who could think of one new moral implication.

But the wailing and gnashing of teeth continues from the self-appointed moralists. "It's against nature" they say, "flying in the face of God's intentions". But this has been the story of religion throughout the ages. It has tried desperately to retard knowledge because all along the line knowledge under-

From the 116th Anniversary Lecture of the Leicester Secular Society, delivered by KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD, General Secretary of the National Secular Society, in March.

mines the fairy tales on which religion is based. In her laughable contribution to the debate, the Catholic journalist Mary Kenny even quoted the infamous verse from Ecclesiastes: "In greater knowledge is greater sorrow." What she really means is that with greater knowledge, there are fewer believers in religion.

Professor Dawkins — who I'm proud to say is an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society — is another scientist who will have no truck with the nonsense spouted by those of a religious persuasion. His relentless logic and intolerance of irrationality often gets him into trouble, but he seems to thrive on the controversy. Each time he puts his head above the parapet, the supposed moralists jump up and down with fury. Richard Dawkins gives no respect where none is due — and he believes that little respect is due to religion.

His services were much in demand by the media after the reports about the sheep-cloning experiment in Scotland. He said that whenever he was invited to some radio or TV studio there would invariably be what he

called "the religious lobby" waiting.

Writing in *The Independent*, he said: "This week I have experienced public discussion of cloning with several prominent religious leaders, and it has not been edifying. One of the most eminent of these spokesmen, recently elevated to the House of Lords, got off to a flying start by refusing to shake hands with the women in the studio, apparently for fear that they might be menstruating or otherwise 'unclean'. They took the insult graciously and with the 'respect' always bestowed on religious prejudice (but no other prejudice)."

He asserted that religious lobbies have an inside track to influence and power, but — as their contribution to the cloning debate shows — their views are a waste of time. "Cloth-heads" is what he called his religious adversaries: ignoramuses who didn't know what they were talking about, but were always invited to contribute to scientific debates simply because they were representatives of religion.

Professor Dawkins does not mince his words and neither do those who regularly take pot-shots back at him. His writings invariably lead to much furious correspondence in the letters pages, and almost always from the Reverend this or Father that. The fact that he shakes them so profoundly is an indication of his great value to the Secularist cause.

You're telling us!

Applying pressure by post

I ENDORSE your call for a Humanist letter-writing campaign made at the end of "From Sleaze to Superstition?" (Page 10, May issue of *The Freethinker*).

Five years ago the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) launched a Postal Action Scheme in which about a hundred members now take part. When issues of gay or Humanist concern arise, they are mailed with a briefing and urged to write.

Gay issues have included the ban on gays in the armed forces, a Sainsbury charity's funding of a Christian "gay cure ministry", and helping persuade Amnesty International to accept as "prisoners of conscience" those imprisoned because of their sexual orientation.

Humanist issues have included the exclusion of Humanists from Radio 4's "Thought for the Day", the plight of Salman Rushdie, and compulsory worship in schools.

It is worth noting that not all have involved a complaint. One, for instance, involved congratulating Channel 4 on its ground-breaking *Beyond Belief: Religion on Trial* series.

While a member of the BHA's Executive Committee a couple of years ago, I instigated a similar scheme to GALHA's, but although this proved very successful at the time, it now seems to have been abandoned.

The main purpose of the scheme is, of course, to inundate MPs, Ministers, the media, institutions and so on with letters, since much more notice is taken of a quantity from individuals than one from an organisation. But there is a further (and equally important) benefit in that it involves members of organisations themselves in campaigning initiatives and helps to boost morale.

With a new Government now in power and a large influx of new MPs, it seems a good time to get such a scheme under way.

GEORGE BROADHEAD
Secretary, GALHA
Kenilworth

Freethought's duty to truth

"MOST people accept that there should be some limits on freedom of speech", wrote Anthony Julius, in a review of John Vidal's book on the McDonald libel case (*The Guardian*, May 8, 1997). He instanced "to inhibit incitements to violence, to protect religious susceptibilities, to safeguard reputation". And, as you can imagine, it is that middle one which worries me.

First, I suppose, we should ask what is meant by "religious susceptibilities". Obviously I would not advocate or condone intrusion into a religious gathering, destroying a person's religious icon or desecrating a religious building. But if humanity is to progress; if we are to come to a better understanding of ourselves and the world we live in, we must be free to criticise ideas that we believe stand in the way of that understanding, in particular the delusions of

religious belief.

We cannot help it if our criticism and our advocacy of atheism upsets a Christian's, a Jew's or a Muslim's religious susceptibilities. We have a duty to truth, and to show them that, as Charles Bradlaugh had it, humanity gains from unbelief.

Freedom of speech in religious matters is especially important in face of a new threat in this country, that of Islamic fanaticism, as evidenced by the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*. The book undoubtedly offended Muslim susceptibilities, although it is doubtful whether many of them read it: they preferred to burn it.

Which side would Mr Julius take in this case? Would he defend religious susceptibilities? Would he bow to the Muslim plea that the blasphemy law should be extended to cover Islam? This is a serious topical issue. A number of Labour MPs (particularly those with large Muslim communities in their constituencies) have expressed their support for such a measure, and with their party's huge majority, it could quite well be passed.

And it could have the support of the Runnymede Trust's Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia. The road to hell being paved with good intentions might well be the slogan here.

The Commission was set up in 1996 under the chairmanship of Professor Gordon Conway, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sussex, with Christian, Jewish and Islamic members. It defined "Islamophobia" as "dread or hatred of Islam or Muslims" which "has existed in western countries and cultures for several centuries but in the last 20 years has become more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous."

The report, which has been issued for consultation, lists seven main aspects of islamophobic talk and writing; discusses how it affects Muslims in public life, the education system, discrimination in employment, harassment, poverty and deprivation; it then suggests some general principles for further consideration and discussion.

It agrees at the start that it is "not intrinsically phobic to criticise or oppose Muslim beliefs, laws or practices", and it draws attention to the diversity and differences within Muslim cultures. But, under the heading "Stereotypical views of Muslim and non-Muslim communities", it makes no criticism of, for example, the Islamic attitude towards women or the fundamentalist interpretation of scripture, merely suggesting that they are not peculiar in these respects.

Yet it argues that Muslim criticisms of "Western liberalism, modernity and secularism" should be taken seriously; that Muslims have "important perspectives and insights to contribute". Single-sex schools, arranged marriages, for instance?

Leaving aside the question of discrimination (an important one, I agree, and one which, needless to say, I deplore), why should Muslim criticisms of our society be taken seriously? For the most part, they are retrogressive, and they are based on the outdated teachings of one "holy" book. It is dangerous to base one's ideas on one book, however inspired you may think it is. Fundamentalist Christians are seriously damaging the educational system in the USA with their creationist views based upon the

Bible; and Islamic reliance on the Koran is equally harmful. We may laugh at Omar Bakri Mohammed who, in Trafalgar Square in 1995 and on Channel 4's *Witness* (April 8, 1997), preached that homosexuals and adulterers should be stoned to death, and that men and women should not mix freely in public.

Absurd isn't it? But it's no joke in Afghanistan where, according to an Associated Press report in December, 1996, a man and a woman taken in adultery were stoned to death near a Kandahar mosque in front of thousands of onlookers.

Consider some other recent reports: in Bangladesh, Rehana Begum and her husband were jailed for marrying against the wishes of the bride's father (*The Observer*, March 16, 1997); in Pakistan, thousands of Christians were driven from their homes by Muslims (*The Times*, February 13, 1997); in Algeria, Muslim militants slit the throats and cut off the heads of villagers, and murdered five young women who refused to cover their heads (*Daily Telegraph*, January 14, 1997).

Fanatics all, you will say; and you would be right; but it is fanatics who pose the threat. And not just in their own countries. In France, Algerian Islamic fundamentalists warned President Chirac that they intended to continue their campaign of terror "to destroy your country" (*The Times*, December 26, 1996).

Is it Islamophobic to fear Islamic fundamentalism? Tell that to Salman Rushdie.

COLIN McCALL
Herts

'Despicable' slur on Dev

BARBARA SMOKER (May letters) expresses disagreement with the (unnamed) person who, she claims, described the late G N Deodhekar (Dev) as modest.

Of course Dev may not have aspired to Miss Smoker's level of modesty (who could?). However, her assertion that Dev was "pigheaded" and given to "inbred high-handedness" is a despicable slur on the memory of a decent man who did not kowtow to She Who Must Be Obeyed.

Miss Smoker's heart-warming account of her and Dev's social relationship is not quite the whole picture. I spent an afternoon in Dev's company shortly before he left for India. His chief — indeed, *obsessive* — concern was that Barbara Smoker should not be re-elected President at the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society. His anxiety was such that he even arranged for the result to be telephoned to him in India.

Dev wrote to me on November 27 last: "I have had news of the defeat of Barbara Smoker, much to my great relief." And, in a letter to another colleague, he described her defeat as "the end of the Barbaric period".

Dev had a way with words. He also had a passionate concern for truth and accuracy that is not evident in some of his critics.

BILL McILROY
Sheffield

You're telling us!

From Page 13

We're moral animals!

THE narrow-minded and pitiless attitude of "species chauvinist" Chris Condon (March letters) is pretty distasteful. Not once does the word or notion of *suffering* crop up in his letter. The enormous suffering inflicted on non-human species by men does not enter CC's picture of the world and man's actions in it. It is grotesque (and misleading) to speak of the bacteria sacrificed by vegans to produce their tofu, while ignoring the millions of sensitive, more or less intelligent animals, which men keep (breed, raise) under abominably painful conditions to kill them off equally cruelly.

Of course each and every living being is a species chauvinist insofar as each and all of us/them are impelled by the instinct of survival to destroy in order to live, be the victim a beast or a plant. No Gaia fan demands that humans starve to death to allow other organisms to live. It is ludicrous and dishonest to allege such opinions (implicitly). But human species chauvinism has led to quite horrendous suffering on the part of non-humans, incompatible with pretensions to civilisation at the end of the 20th Century.

Civilisation means morals, and morals mean the protection of the weaker, the fight against unnecessary suffering — our own (as a person and a species) as well as *other* living beings'. We hurt far too much in the name of speciesism. Why is CC blind to that fact? I repeat: we cannot live on air, but no animal liberationist ever said we could. But we can and should make sacrifices (giving up pleasures, amusements, be they circus games with beasts, or pâté de foie gras or many other foods) because we are not mere egoists, but "moral animals".

As for the statement that "good for the earth" must mean "good for man", one must agree, if this means cutting down men's numbers and stabilising them around one to two billions; stopping the poisoning, polluting and destroying of air, water and soil, vegetation and animal life; trying to co-exist with other species because they have a right to exist and thrive unhindered. But in the name of "what is good for man" such horrendous suffering and destruction are being inflicted on the world that one begins to long for a planet rid of the human curse — *without* "the sick animal" that destroys and auto-destroys relentlessly.

NELLY MOIA
Luxembourg

'Ga-ga' PM?

I AM one of the 29 per cent that did not vote at the General Election. In my case it was not indolence or indifference, but, with no Green Party candidate in my constituency, there was no political agenda that I could support.

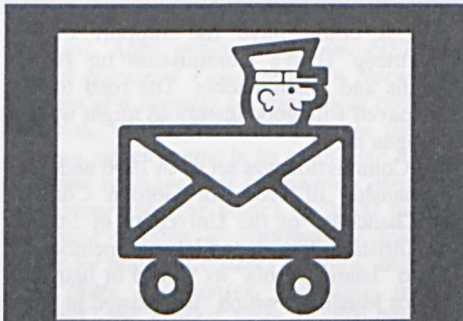
Why is it that the nation that gave the world most of such enlightenment as it possesses

(through Harvey, Newton, Darwin, Crick and Watson etc) should be governed by a Prime Minister who is so ga-ga that he believes that our world was made in six days and nights by some sort of magician?

Furthermore, a Prime Minister who so regularly attends a Roman Catholic church that he gives the impression that he would like to join that body, and become an acolyte of that prince of darkness who so hates the world that he would destroy it through overpopulation. Our Prime Minister's indifference to our ecological plight is indicated by his having personally supported his party's proposed reduction of VAT on fuels.

A century after Bradlaugh, should not the Freethought movement be taking positive actions to exclude the religious from positions of power, and should we not be taking positive actions to see that people with rational minds are in position to identify and deal with the real problems of our time?

JOHN RAYNER
North Wembley



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

I AM saddened by today's broadcast (May 11) in which much was made of the increasing religious belief/influence in New Labour. Yes, hearts were uplifted across the nation at the election result and the promises for the future. Mine was — until today.

All this talk of greater religious input into our daily, our political, life is, at the least, depressing. I am tempted to ask about all those millions who *choose* to live their lives without religion. All the talk is about giving some representation to the nominal Jew, Muslim, Hindu — including in the House of Lords. No mention of the majority of people who are thus left out of this equation.

So-called radical New Labour should be looking to make greater separation between Church and State. Matthew Parris (whose original political stance is certainly not mine) said it right — this trend is very disturbing. It is not just non-believers who hold that it is time to look at Disestablishment as well as reform of hereditary Lords and the democratisation of our country.

I am sad and worried.

In today's world we must have religion separated from politics and education by law — as it is in some countries such as USA and Australia (I think).

We all need our problems to be faced up to in this world. There are no panaceas, there is no one to turn to. No one to blame except ourselves, no one to get our lives improved except by our own efforts.

JOHN BOSLEY
Huddersfield

Those Flat Earth fools

I HATE it when Flat Earth fools show their ignorance by crassly dismissing "flying saucers" (a generic term for the existence of intelligent life elsewhere in the Universe which has developed beyond our present knowledge).

I expect better from the General Secretary of the National Secular Society (Page 12, April issue), but, then, as the survey on scientists who believe in God showed, expertise in one field can mean total ignorance in another.

On Earth, life exists in boiling, acidic/alkaline pools in lava fields, in the crushing depths of the ocean, miles below Earth's surface — and can even survive a vacuum.

In our Solar System, Mars may have evolved life, may even still have very primitive life, as may the moon Europa. Organic molecules have been detected in Deep Space.

Even former hardened sceptics now believe that life may be abundant throughout the Universe, now that a number of nearby stars are believed to have planets revolving around them.

In old SF stories, Earthlings were always top dog; they "ruled the stars". Reality may be frighteningly different. There may be races millions of years in advance of us. Look at civilisation 200 years ago — they didn't have the slightest inkling of today's inventions, things we take for granted. And it is also accepted that we cannot comprehend what will be "normal" 200 years on from now, making beings *millions* of years beyond us beyond our wildest imaginings.

As a man of 1797 could not conceive of our present rocket technology, but if open-minded would be willing to allow it possible, so we are in the same position regarding newer methods of travel which will bring other stars within reach.

While life may abound, intelligent life is probably relatively rare, and "nearby" alien races may keep an eye on their neighbours as their technology advances — but not, thankfully, normally interfere (look at what happened to the Australian Aborigines, American Indians, Eskimos and so on when "civilisation" was suddenly thrust upon them).

People in all walks of life have seen UFOs, from ignorant savage to President. Some have even had close encounters. Anyone who unthinkingly dismisses them is no better than a religious fundamentalist.

MICHAEL HILL
Crystal Palace

ASK THE PARSON (6)

by Karl Heath

A matter of life and death

Dear Parson,

I AM in some difficulty. Since you have not replied to any of my questions, I do not know what kind of parson you are. So I now invite your thoughts on "Life after death". Several members of your flock, especially the elderly, must surely envisage some kind of revival in familiar surroundings.

Do you?

Or do you privately conceal scepticism about the promises, repeated over and over again, in hymns and prayers, about personal and recognisable survival? What are your thoughts about immortality and eternal life? Not all religions make this promise, but Christianity certainly does; otherwise Salvation would have little meaning.

May I assume that you are not crude? Try four crude examples. Many American fundamentalists, including Ronald Reagan, believe in the "Rapture". When the time comes, "born-again" true believers will ascend bodily, leaving heaps of clothing behind them. US airlines should advertise assurances that all their pilots are guaranteed atheists.

There is a hymn which describes Heaven's "streams of crystal water flowing down the golden streets", suggesting that Heaven's drainage system could be improved. The same hymn contains the appalling line

"harpers harping with their harps", which I was astonished to find comes from Ch.14, v. 2 of "Revelation", quite the most awful phrase in the beautiful Authorised Version.

Then there was the old lady who thought of Heaven as a spotless public lavatory, gleaming white tiles, strong disinfectant and not a germ in sight. Finally, there was the dreadful Doris Stokes, demonstrating Spiritualism before a TV audience, claiming to speak to a dead little boy, and telling his parents that he was going to school in Heaven.

I am sure you reject all these images, but what is left? Do you accept that we should not play with words? What does "life" mean? Does it not mean sunshine, rain, trees, flowers and other living things? Does it not mean eyes, ears, mouth, noses, digestive organs, excretory organs and sexual organs? Is it not disingenuous to speak of "spiritual bodies" unless you can define and describe them?

Does life not mean change and growth? Can we understand "perfection"? Does the word not mean "finished", a horrific state with nothing to expect, nothing to anticipate, no surprises, just eternal torture?

If "life" means what we are accustomed to understand by it, would not "after-life" require that not only we, ourselves, should survive, but that we should take all our familiar environment with us — a sun to shine on us, and an atmosphere without

which there could be neither speech nor music, no trembling of the air.?

But if you say that it will not be like that at all, are you entitled to use the word "life"?

Something completely different, indeed unrecognisable and indescribable, would not be "life". How can our memories and personalities be transferred?

Unless they are transferred we would not know that we had survived; for all practical purposes, we would have disappeared forever.

Are you prepared to admit that you don't know?

We know full well what happens to our dead bodies. The brain processes and memories which constitute our personalities and sense of self are so intimately involved in our physical bodies that they must cease forever on death. You profess to believe in a soul. If such were to exist, it is either dependent upon the body, or it is a completely different entity, uninfluenced by bodily experiences. Please explain.

Can you, dear Parson, answer me without resorting to the age-old retreat behind the shield labelled FAITH?

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

News of their World

monitored by
BILL McILROY

LAST month's General Election attracted the usual assortment of nutters with more money than sense. Once again, the Natural Law Party put up the largest number of candidates in this category.

The ProLife Alliance was the largest specifically Christian bloc of hopefuls. They made little impact, all losing their deposits. ProLifers in Cheltenham and Chipping Barnet polled fewer votes than did the Monster Raving Loony Party candidates (see Keith Porteous Wood, centre pages).

James Pollitt, Christian Democrat (Dartford), attracted 59 fewer votes than did Peter Homden, who stood for the Fancy Dress Party. Andrew Lightfoot, Christian Nationalist (City of York), came bottom of the poll, as did Daniel Hart, Christian Unity (Inverness East, Nairn & Lochaber).

Peter Bruinvels, a pillar of the Christian Right, failed in his attempt to get back to the House of Commons as Conservative MP for The Wrekin. Ten years ago, Leicester East electors made him redundant. Like so many ProLife supporters, Bruinvels is a keen advocate of capital punishment ... so keen that he once said he was prepared to do the job himself.

Two distinguished Christian ladies elevated the political debate with their views.

The dippy Dame, novelist Barbara Cartland, warned voters: "Labour are going to bring in a law that means people will be able to walk into your garden and pick your flowers."

Mrs Mary Whitehouse announced that she doubted if Labour could be trusted with the social and moral welfare of the country. Better, presumably, entrusting such matters to the party of Victorian values and cash for questions in the Commons.



CARDINAL Thomas Winning, head of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, is a worried man. Addressing a symposium in Paisley arranged by Churches in Action Together, he warned of secular trends that were widening differences between the churches on moral issues.

Cardinal Winning said: "Under the onslaught of secularisation, the self-understanding of some churches has suffered ... The growing tide of secularism seems to be driving a wedge between us."

MANY practising Christians are perpetrators of sexual abuse of children, according to a new survey (*Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches*, Hodder & Stoughton, £8.99).

Patrick Parkinson, Associate Professor of Law at Sydney University, writes: "Child abuse is a deeply hidden aspect of the lives of many church members ... It is quite clear now from all the evidence that sexual abuse does occur even in devout Christian families. It is also quite common in situations such as church youth groups and other church activities."

The Bishop of Bath & Wells, in a foreword, describes the incidence of so much abuse in Christian families and institutions as "a shock".



RELIGIOUS houses in Ireland are closing because of a decrease in vocations. As a result, second-hand furniture shops are crammed with redundant chapel furniture. Tabernacles, pews and even altars are on offer at bargain prices. Such items are much sought after by owners of trendy pubs and clubs. Stations of the Cross are a particularly popular acquisition. The frames are very suitable for converting into mirrors.

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, July 6, 4.30pm: Tea-party followed by AGM.

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

Bromley Humanists: Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680.

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01296 623730.

Cornwall Humanists: Information: B Mercer, "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Telephone: 01209 890690.

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ: 01242 528743.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, June 19, 7.30 pm: Public meeting on Recent Scientific Advances.

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). 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 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. 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.

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, June 26: Ashley Hills (Unitarian minister): *What God Means to Me!* Saturday, July 12, noon to 6pm: LHG stall at Lewisham People's Day, Mountsfield Park, Stainton Road, Catford SE6.

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. 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. 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, June 4, 8 pm: Richard Clare: *Religion v Free Thought - an Organic Perspective.* Wednesday, July 2, 8pm: Barry Johnson: *The Denial of Knowledge.* 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 Arts and Music Festival, Devonshire Green, Sheffield, week-end 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.

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