

Secular
Humanist
monthly

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Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 117 No 7

July 1997

UNICEF TOLD:



RELIGION'S ABUSE OF CHILDREN MUST STOP!

Dr Narisetti
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reports
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Church gays battle:
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Up Front

'Rights' threat to freedom

Discrimination on religious grounds is to be made illegal as part of the Government's human rights legislation to be introduced this Autumn. The new law will extend the protection offered by the 1976 Race Relations Act to religious minorities in England and Wales, including the one million strong Muslim community, which has been pressing for the change for many years.

THUS *The Guardian*, June 12—and isn't it all so comfily liberal ... so New Labourly democratic ... so entirely just?

The Freethinker

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UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

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

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Subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to The Publisher:

G W Foote & Company
Bradlaugh House
47 Theobalds Road
London WC1X 8SP

Telephone: 0171 404 3126

E-mail: editor@freethinker.co.uk

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

Annual postal subscription rates

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

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

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son, Sheffield.

But colleagues at the National Secular Society are less than sanguine about the possibilities raised by the report. In a media release on so-called "Islamophobia" the NSS insisted that the proposed legislation must not make it more difficult for the religious beliefs and practices of any groups—majority or minority—to be open to critical scrutiny and rational discussion:

"While we have always believed that those of all religious persuasions and of none should be free to follow their consciences (within the law), we consider it would be a retrograde step if protection from religious discrimination should itself become a form of religious privilege. This would cease to be a free, open and democratic country if ever religious, political or philosophical beliefs and practices of any kind should become exempt from open discussion or rational criticism."

Labour has not detailed its threatened enactment—but who can doubt that, whatever its precise wording, it will be seized on by some as being meant to protect Islam from "open discussion or rational criticism"?

We saw how sensitive to perceived slights are British Muslims from their reaction to the *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie following publication of *The Satanic Verses*—the smoke from that burning book still catches in my throat—and now we have riots in Leeds and a failed attempt to burn down a cinema in Edgware over the film about the 1971 India-Pakistan war, *Border*.

One scene, said to show the Koran burning, is claimed to be particularly offensive—and although *there is no such scene in the movie*, there have been calls for it to be prosecuted under existing race relations laws.

Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, leader of the *soi-disant* Muslim Parliament said on June 23 that he had not seen *Border*, but had been "reliably informed" that it contained scenes offensive to Muslims: "It should be banned immediately because it could lead to further unrest."

Well, I thought that *The Robe* and *The Ten Commandments* were pretty insulting to the intelligence of anyone not confined to a place of safety under the Mental Health Act, but it never occurred to me to seek their banning.

Why do the doctrines of Muslims need better protection than those of unbelievers? Is Allah unable to stand up for Himself?

UNDER the proposed legislation, would we be allowed a smile at the holy tomato of Huddersfield—the one whose pips were found to form the Arabic words for *There is no God but Allah* and *Mohammed is the Messenger*?

Would we remain at liberty to compare such a prodigy with the celebrated milk-drinking elephant gods which stunned UK Hindus ... the infestations of Earth by blood-weeping Holy Virgins ... the Californian tortillas which have shown Christ's head?

Might we still arrange the words on this page into a pattern reading *What a load of superstitious bunk*—and live without fear of a midnight knock from Blair's Theology Squad?

Would we jeopardise our freedom by drawing conclusions from throat-slitting by Muslim militants in Algeria ... the murderous excesses (including stoning adulterers to death) of the Taliban in Afghanistan ... the enslavement of

women in Bangladesh ... the obscenity of female circumcision, which (see Page 3) is still a feature of Islamic life in certain lands?

Would our condemnation of such foulness be construed as "discrimination" because it was felt to reflect badly on UK Muslims?

The *Times Educational Supplement* reported on June 13 that a private Islamic boarding school had been told "to deal with risks to pupils' health and safety or be struck off the Department for Education and Employment's schools register."

Children spent 18.75 hours a week on Islamic studies, compared with 11.25 hours for secular studies, and "... had little contact with non-religious literature and were not introduced to any British religious or cultural traditions outside Islam ..."

The Head says that health and safety problems have been sorted out, "although raising teaching standards cannot be done overnight." But under the proposed legislation would we be guilty of "religious discrimination" in wondering how this affair ought to affect society's reaction to demands by Muslims for state funding for their own schools?

As it happens, I believe in total equality for the youngsters of all faiths and none: there should be no state funding for *any* religion-based school.

WE CHALLENGE the ideas of Islam but we don't want to ban them. We must have the right to try to argue people out of their notions, just as the Muslims have the freedom to question *our* beliefs. But arson and GBH and threats of a stretch in Strangeways are not in our armoury.

As the NSS put it: "While we abhor racism, and would stand up for the rights of all minorities to live in peace and free from discrimination, we feel that a blanket ban on criticism of activities sponsored by any section of society is dangerous ... Islam is often portrayed in the media as a sinister threat, and law-abiding Muslims *do* regrettably suffer as a result. We still feel, however, that we should be free to criticise the excesses of some sections of Islam without being branded 'Islamophobic'—which implies racism" (it also implies that we are *afraid* of Islam: we are not—we question its dogmas, as we do those of all other religions).

Criticism is not enough, however: we tear up the weeds to facilitate the harvest. In the *International Humanist News*, Ibn Warraq constructively suggests the creation of machinery to enable us to give concrete support to Secular Humanists in the Islamic world (rather as the West encouraged writers and thinkers in the old Eastern Europe), and calls for backing for a *samizdat*-style publishing project aimed at the Islamic communities.

But Mr Warraq adds, perceptively: "It seems to me that even in the West we are reluctant to criticise Islam. Any such criticism is deemed 'demonisation of Islam.' I am pretty sure that there are many humanists who feel decidedly queasy about criticising non-Christian cultures and religions. But if we are really committed to the notion of truth and free inquiry, then we cannot stop the inquiring mind at the gates of any religion—let alone Islam."

Peter Brearey

10.2.97

A hard-hitting resolution against the religious abuse of children—proposed by the Rationalist Association of India—was unanimously accepted at the Board meeting of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, held in London in June. The resolution will be sent on to UNICEF (now the United Nations Children's Fund).

International Humanists spotlight religion's child abuse scandal

HISTORY is replete with examples of children being abused in the name of God and religion.

In India—home to millions of unfortunate children—some parents have traditionally given up their daughters as *Devadasis* (maidens of the deity). Such children ended up as teenage prostitutes because, being married or devoted to God, they belonged to all, and once they reached puberty—or even before that—became vulnerable to sexual abuse and ultimately ended as village prostitutes or were sold to brothels.

While the Indian Government has tried to crack down on such abuse, this has only driven the *Devadasi* practice underground, making it even more difficult to monitor and prevent this practice.

UNICEF co-sponsored the 1996 World Congress against commercial sexual exploitation of children and has worked with diverse groups to combat child prostitution. But if the religious source of such exploitation is not tackled, children will continue to be forced into prostitution in the name of religion.

For centuries, Hindus in India supported and practised child marriage (quite often a girl child was married to a much elder male) and this obnoxious practice naturally resulted in many young women ending up as widows, with no hope for the future, as a widow is socially ostracised and cannot normally remarry. Apart from this, thousands of young widows were burnt to death along with their dead husbands, in the name of religion (the practice of *Sati*). Even though India has passed laws to prevent such marriages, it is not uncommon to find, especially in rural areas of India, children being married at a young age because of religious and social taboos and beliefs.

While the Indian Government has focused its efforts on the Devadasi system—which involves female children—it has simply ignored the practice of male children being handed over by their parents at a very early age to become gurus in matts (hermitages) or even Buddhist monks (lamas in Tibet).

Today, religious indoctrination of children begins at a very young age and at home, thanks to parents who are themselves by-products of a similar upbringing. Parents routinely take their children to temples, churches, mosques and synagogues, where they are exposed to superstitious beliefs that usually go against scientific thinking and a critical evaluation of religion. Children are often brainwashed by priests, ministers and mullas, who put divine obligations ahead of any human rights, creating an environment which allows much abuse.

In its simplest form, religious child abuse manifests itself throughout the world—religion is used to discriminate between male and

female children, the latest extreme example being the Taliban Government in Afghanistan which has banned girls from attending schools.

UNICEF has not spoken against such Islamic child abuse, because religion is involved here.

Consider the example of genital female mutilation. In more than 28 countries, female children undergo genital mutilation in the name of Islamic practice and age-old traditions. In six African countries, UNICEF estimates, more than 80 per cent of female children suffer genital mutilation.

While UNICEF considers such mutilation is a

**by Dr Narisetti Innaiah
Vice President
Rationalist Association
of India**

“fundamental violation” of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it hasn't aggressively countered the false notion that the Koran does not require female circumcision.

Instead of condemning the practice outright, UNICEF is funding a project in Somalia (where nearly 98 per cent of female children suffer genital mutilation) which encourages the token bleeding from the clitoris by pricking the child with a sharp instrument. UNICEF's funding is going towards payment of the medical kits!

UNICEF's approach to the issue is to treat it as a deep-rooted cultural phenomena, rather than try and forcefully tackle the fundamentalist religious leaders who falsely propagate the practice in the name of religion.

There are many other countries where gender discrimination in the name of Islam is far more subtle. But the effect is the same—it undermines equal rights and is damaging to the educational and emotional upbringing of children, particularly girls.

An argument could be made that children should not be exposed to religious preaching in churches, mosques, temples and so on. Religion should be considered as an adult belief-system under which children choose any religion they like when they turn 18 or become eligible to vote. Parents who belong to various political parties in the democratic countries do not worry so much if their children, on becoming eligible to vote, choose to vote for a different party than that for which the parents give support. Because participating in the political arena requires certain maturity that is associated with age,

nobody questions this.

Religion should also be considered such an arena, where children exercise a mature choice.

Just read some of the fear and intolerance that religious books propagate, and it will be easy to understand why young minds could be irrevocably damaged from being blindly indoctrinated in a particular religion. The Bible talks of how all the male children in and around Bethlehem under the age of two were killed by the soldiers sent by Herod. While they were supposed to be the first Christian martyrs, such examples can only shock young minds. Hindu religious epics and Islamic traditions are full of violent deeds in the name of religion, many involving children.

Many parents in India force their children to shave their heads (ritual tonsuring) and make offering of hair to the Hindu god, Lord Venkateswara. We are all aware of the distress this causes the child. Children are forced to memorise Koranic verses (nearly 6,000!) by Muslim parents, even though the child often does not know the meaning or even speak the Arabic language.

It is true that the issue of child labour, which has been a key priority of UNICEF, is an important problem and needs to be addressed. But to ignore religious abuse and persecution of children is to turn away from a problem that is as severe and as harmful as child labour, if not more so.

Teaming

Instead of confronting the issue head-on, UNICEF has been collaborating with religious organisations, by teaming up with the 1995 World Council for Children. By co-opting UNICEF into their ranks, those who abuse children in the name of religion are finding themselves above criticism.

It is time for the International Humanist and Ethical Union to take on this issue seriously. As other organisations persistently ignore the issue, the IHEU must take the lead in discussing it.

The resolution passed by the IHEU Board said:

Whereas children's rights have gained official recognition ever since 1990 when the United Nations hosted the World Summit on Children where 71 countries adopted goals to improve children's lives by 2000;

Whereas the Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by 187 nations, making it the most widely accepted human rights treaty ever;



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Science and superstition don't mix!

"TODAY, we are told, religion and science are no longer in conflict", wrote Terence Kealey, Lecturer in Clinical Biochemistry at Cambridge University, "but ... I believe that the scientific and religious impulses are so different that they must, at some visceral level, conflict." He's right, of course; and he's right, too, to deplore Tony Blair's appointment of a practising Roman Catholic, John Battle MP, as Science Minister.

It is an open secret, Terence Kealey continued (in *The Guardian* "On Line") that Adam Ingram, who was Shadow Science Minister when Labour was in opposition, "has been sent to Northern Ireland precisely because he is a science enthusiast".

Which makes one seriously question Mr Blair's motives. Everyone knows that he's a committed Christian, married to a Roman Catholic whose church services he attends; and that his children are being brought up in that faith. It is thought that Cardinal Hume will preside over Euan Blair's confirmation in Westminster Cathedral next year (*The Express*, June 2); and "a senior source in the Catholic hierarchy" considered that it would be "an ideal time for Mr Blair to be officially received into the faith". There is "considerable expectation", he added.

Regrettably, the Prime Minister's approach to science seems to foster that expectation.

Catholic tastes

ALL POLITICAL leaders should have religious beliefs, according to Lord Alistair McAlpine, former Treasurer of the Conservative Party, who defected to Referendum. Like Tony Blair, McAlpine regularly attends Roman Catholic services—at Brompton Oratory in London and at San Giorgio Maggiore near his home in Venice. Divorce stands in the way of formal conversion, he told Frances Welch of the *Sunday Telegraph* (May 4), but he believes he "will get to Rome in the end". He certainly intends to get there *at the end*. If he was very sick he would have the last rites. "The rules allow for that".

He is obviously impressed with size, contrasting the Pope's massed crowds in Vatican City at Easter with Archbishop Carey's congregation at Canterbury Cathedral comprising "10 people and a policeman". His Lordship is also "sensitive to atmosphere". When he walked through the hall of his former house, he felt "there were a lot of spirits, as though a

party was going on". No doubt there would be plenty of spirits if a party *was* going on, but I take it Lord McAlpine means spirits of the non-liquid variety.

He greatly admires Margaret Thatcher who, as he says, was deeply religious; and one reason he gives for disliking her successor is that John Major is not religious.

Which means that Terry's brother can't be all bad.

Clown Prince

FILM STAR Al Pacino and his Australian TV journalist friend Lyndall Hobbs could reportedly barely stifle their giggles when they visited Prince Charles at Highgrove and found the royal fool dressed in a flowing Islamic "djellaba", one of two traditional Middle Eastern outfits he likes to wear at home (*News of the World*, May 11). And who can blame them?

A day later the *Daily Mail* took up the story and quoted Ms Hobbs as saying she was a bit surprised to see the Heir Apparent in a flowing robe but, "If he has an interest in other religions that's his business. Just because he dressed a little weirdly doesn't make him odd or crazy".

Well, I suppose it's polite to be generous to your host. As for the Prince's penchant for Islam, I suggest he might muse on Omar Bakri Mohammed's demand (on Channel 4's *Witness*, April 8) that adulterers should be stoned to death.

They want to sack Sacks

CHIEF RABBI Jonathan Sacks is in the middle of a widening gulf between the Liberal, Reform and Masorti synagogues on the one hand, and Orthodox Jewry on the other. But he has no cause for complaint—except that a letter of his attacking the late Reform Rabbi Hugo Gryn was leaked to the *Jewish Chronicle* in March.

Dr Sacks was originally criticised by the more progressive synagogues for missing Gryn's funeral last August; then he incurred the wrath of Orthodoxy by attending a Gryn memorial meeting. But in his letter, written in Hebrew to an ultra-Orthodox rabbi, he apparently described Rabbi Gryn as "one of those who destroy the faith" and Reform as a "false grouping".

It's hardly surprising, then, that the three non-Orthodox synagogues no longer want Dr Sacks to represent them on the Council of Christians and Jews, and would prefer one of their own leaders. "This is a response to the issues which underlie the extremely sad episode over the letter", said Rabbi Tony Bayfield, Chief Executive of Reform. "The outcome we seek is an appropriate measure of representation for our section of the communi-

ty". A somewhat war-torn community, if you ask me.

Focus on prophets

AN ESTIMATED five million people in this country read horoscopes every day. So the French "mystic" Maria Duval, who dubs herself modestly as "probably the greatest clairvoyant in the world", knew what she was doing when she took full-page advertisements in women's magazines and newspapers like the *News of the World*, offering "a talisman which I'm convinced could help you change your life".

Notice that she's only convinced that it *could* help you change your life, not that it will. Indeed, apart from one letter (from Mr LS of Prague) who found a job, none of the accompanying testimonials amounts to much. Mrs RN of Lyons has now been given "the focus" to try her luck in the lottery; Mrs R of Nice, likewise "focusing" on the talisman is "off to the casino"; and Mrs EF of Hungary found that the talisman gave her "the will to tackle my financial situation".

But the *Sunday Times'* Kirsty Lang, who interviewed Duval, told us (April 13) that the mystic's "psychic intervention" enabled Brigitte Bardot to be reunited with a lost dog. And Duval claims to have "invented" horoscopes for pets. More importantly, Ms Lang informed us that the organisation behind Maria Duval, AstroForce, is in the business of making money, believing that "you can sell anything by mail from a Rolls Royce to a psychic prediction".

A class act from Heads

CONGRATULATIONS to the National Association of Head Teachers' conference in calling for the abolition of daily prayers in schools.

"My father was an archdeacon, my uncle's a bishop and my brother-in-law is a vicar", said Chris Nye, head of Park Primary School in Gloucester. "None of them goes to an organised act of worship every day" (*The Times*, May 30). Diana Wayne, head of Cardrew Junior School in Cornwall expressed "unease over 'indoctrination'". And Simon Marsh, chairman of the Association of Christian Teachers, was "convinced that to enforce a hypocritical act does more harm to faith than almost anything else".

Liz Paver, President of the NAHT, said she would make abolition her personal aim during her year in office. So let us hope that her Association has more success on this issue than it did in its laudable effort to get rid of Chris Woodhead.

HIGH COURT BLOW FOR ERUV OBJECTORS

But they won't 'walk away' from fight

THE long battle in north west London between those who want an *eruv* and those who object to it has come to an end. Sadly, Mr Justice Laws dismissed the *eruv* objectors' application in the High Court in London on June 16 because he considered that it had been made too late. The objectors believe that planning permission for the *eruv* granted by Barnet Council was in contravention of the Race Relations Act by discriminating in favour of an ethnic group. They therefore sought the court's permission for a judicial review of Barnet's decision.

An *eruv* is a notional area with a physical boundary where, under Judaic law, some Sabbath restrictions do not apply. Such restrictions even include pushing prams and carrying keys. Planning permission is needed for an *eruv* because symbolic "gateways" to the *eruv* take the form of poles and thin nylon wire installations in streets.

The objectors' legal advice had been that the three months judicial review time limit was the relevant one. However, the judge ruled that a six week limit (which applies under planning law) should apply instead. Judges can set aside time limits in exceptional circumstances, but no such concession was made in this case.

Elizabeth Segall, one of the objectors, felt that the judge concentrated on technical issues, rather than the issues of public concern that the case raised. The objectors—and the National Secular Society—deplore the decision to refuse a judicial review.

But immediately a defiant Mrs Segall told *The Freethinker*: "This is not the end of the matter as far as we are concerned—we cannot walk away now". Some of the north west London objectors would consider opposing *eruv* plans elsewhere. They would be prepared to use their considerable knowledge, experience and energies—but, understandably, not further money.

Money is a problem here. The judge has decreed that, in addition to their own costs, the objectors must pay Barnet Council's costs, which are likely to be thousands of pounds. The total will considerably exceed the *Eruv* Challenge Fund which was set up to help pay for this battle.

The objectors—and there were only five who took the court action—will have to find these excess costs out of their own pockets. I am confident that readers would like to join the Editor of *The Freethinker* and me in commending them for their public-spirited actions and for putting their own money behind their principles. The objectors thank those who have already contributed.

However, Peter Brearey and I now invite you to make donations to reduce the deficit. Please make cheques payable to "Eruv Challenge Fund" and send them to me at Bradlaugh

by Keith Porteous Wood
General Secretary
National Secular Society

House. Thank you; the objectors deserve our encouragement.

● This *eruv* has a chequered history. Around five years ago, the original planning application to Barnet Council was upheld on appeal to the then Secretary of State (and Anglican Synod member) John Selwyn Gummer. However, because the area of the *eruv* has had to be changed, the original poles were not erected and a new application has been made, most of which was passed in January, 1997.

It was shortly after this that the objectors, all local residents (and including one subscriber to *The Freethinker*), applied for leave to seek a judicial review of the Council's decision. Barnet Council contested the application for judicial review.

Fortunately, the judge's decision does not preclude an application for judicial review of any other planning decision in connection with an *eruv*—for example, if another *eruv* is proposed.

Ironically, members of this community who are not in favour of the *eruv* include those who consider the *eruv* an evasion of Judaic law (ultra-orthodox Jews) and those who generally think the *eruv* to be divisive (liberal Jews and non-Jews).

One objector wrote to the Court of the Chief Rabbi objecting to the frontage of his (the objector's) house forming part of the boundary of the *eruv* without his consent. The reply—which I have seen—included the following: "You are of course at liberty not to use the *eruv*, if you do not wish to do so. You are also perfectly at liberty to demolish your house, thus causing the frontage of your house to cease to exist."

● The *eruv* controversy is expected to feature in BBC1's Omnibus on Monday, July 7, at 10.40pm.

Now it's *rhythmic* humanism!

THIS is a very pleasant book—pleasant to handle and pleasant to read. Yes, and to re-read. It is also deeply personal. The poems (and one song) reflect the author's own life, family, feeling for the natural world, angry compassion, wry humour, humanistic philosophy, reaction to public events, and sheer love of words. His personality—open, likeable, but rather quirky—shines through.

Some of the anti-theology poems, such as "The Papal Prayer" about AIDS, have a sharp satirical bite. Of the gentler poems, my favourite is "The Visitor", with its fresh, lilting cadence, and assonance that really works, it must surely describe a living, much-loved person

Leslie Scrase has a good sense of rhythm, which in most of the poems is sufficient to mask his lack of formal prosody: betrayed, for instance, in the fourth stanza of "The Convert", which, though

The Sunlight Glances Through: Poems by Leslie Scrase. Own publication (from Copthorne, Quarr Lane, Symondsburry, near Bridport, Dorset, DT6 6AQ), 1996, paperback 93pp, £6.95 post free

Review: BARBARA SMOKER

in perfect alternating tetrameter/trimeter when read aloud, has its lines on the page divided wrongly. I also spotted a couple of spelling mistakes ("rab-bitting", "cossetted").

However, this is a book that is worth owning (particularly by Humanist funeral officiants), and it would also make a suitable gift for almost anybody; especially as it is such excellent value—which is enhanced by Mr Scrase's offering to pay £2 commission per copy to the Freethinker Fund for every order that mentions this journal. So there are several good reasons for buying copies.

'Agnostic' enemy of optimistic dogma

THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY was "the devil's disciple" in the first volume of Adrian Desmond's biography; he has clearly been elevated here. You may share my view that it's a curious title, but the book abounds with religious metaphors and sobriquets. Starting as "the Apostle Paul of the New teaching" (taken from the *Daily News*), Huxley soon becomes the "Agnostic Pope"; he joins the "cardinals of knowledge" of the Metaphysical Society and goes "into conclave"; is one of the "pastors of science" and of "the young guard ... codifying Darwinism, hardening it into a Nicene creed". All by page 11; and the tendency continues throughout.

Rather more fitting military terms are fashionable, too, with Huxley the "General ... angling for a new barracks"; although he likened himself to a shilling "recruiting sergeant" enlisting men into "the army of science". Then, as his army expands, it is joined by "that loose cannon Ray Lankester".

Sacrifice

Desmond has a splendid story to tell. I only wish he could tell it more plainly: without any "*sanctum sanctorum*" or sacrifice on "the professional altar". And I think we might be spared being told, on facing pages, that "The new secretary pushed open old creaky doors" and "The high-pressure boiler whistled its warning again". But let's get to the nitty-gritty.

Huxley hardly knew what rest was. He had, as Desmond says, "a prodigious capacity for work" without seeming to know his limit, and he suffered a great deal from what I suppose would now be called stress-related illnesses: "no positive complaint", just a "deadness that hangs about me" was how he once described it. But he had his family worries, too, notably the mental collapse of his daughter Marion, "Mady", and her death at 28.

It was in the wake of this tragedy that he dispelled any Wordsworthian "Nature" fantasies a Manchester audience might have. "You see a meadow rich in flower and foliage", he said, "and your memory rests upon it as an image of peaceful beauty. It is a delusion ... Not a bird that twitters but is either a slayer or [slain and] ... not a moment passes in that a holocaust, in every hedge and every copse battle murder and sudden death are the order of the day". And,

Huxley: Evolution's High Priest
by Adrian Desmond. Michael Joseph. £20.

Review: COLIN MCCALL

like Voltaire before him, he shattered "the optimistic dogma that this is the best of all possible worlds" which, of course, is what it should be if created by an all-powerful, all-loving God.

He demolished his Christian opponents like Cardinal Newman's advocate W S Lilly and Prime Minister Gladstone, and demonstrated how to make "spirit raps" with his big toe. He coined the term agnostic, scorning "the religious observance of Positivism", while abhorring "Bradlaugh's atheists". And when George Jacob Holyoake went blind, Huxley contributed to a fund to help him, but wouldn't join the fund-raising committee for the man "who has so long & so faithfully served the cause of Free-thought". He knew that a committee seat would "send the wrong signal". He was, in Desmond's words, "tying Darwinian agnosticism to middle-class values" and he "had to manoeuvre adroitly to champion 'philosophical freedom, without giving other people a hold for saying that I have identified with Bradlaugh'". He did, it is true, sign a protest petition and summon an extraordinary council meeting at University College, London, when Annie Besant and Bradlaugh's daughter, Hypatia, were banned from botany classes "without

reason", following the *Fruits of Philosophy* prosecution. But privately, he had "no objection to her [Besant's] exclusion", although he hadn't read the pamphlet.

There was, indeed, some inconsistency in Huxley. He opposed George Eliot's burial in Westminster Abbey, but succeeded in getting Darwin buried there. In argument with Gladstone he cited "the Babylonian myths of a flood and half-mile-long ark to discredit the Biblical plagiarism", yet he sent a Bible to his godson and, although the School Board had the power to exclude theology altogether from the schools, he supported selective readings from it. Children should learn to recognise the "moral beauty" in all religions. In later life, though, he "stiffened with every year of controversy", as Desmond says, "projecting 'a strict secularism in State education'". By the end, the real issue was the critical approach to sacred texts.

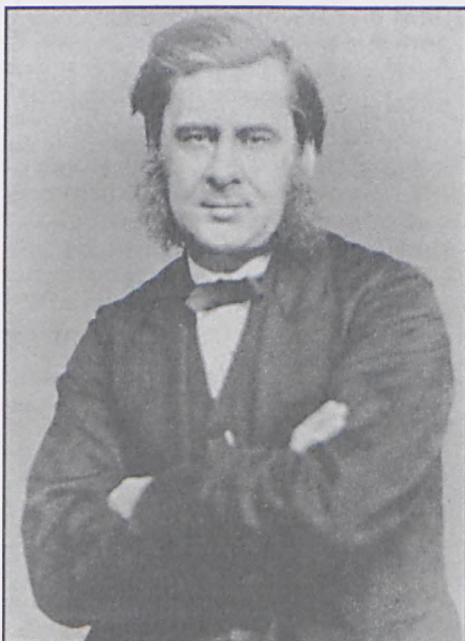
And he disagreed when his old friends Joseph Hooker and John Tyndall chided him with, respectively, having "exhausted the subject" and "hacking a dead horse" in his "Agnosticism and Christianity" articles in the *Nineteenth Century*. "They shut their eyes to the obstacles which clericalism raises", was his comment. Ironically, says Desmond, after a life in science his biggest book, the 625-page *Controverted Questions* was of Biblical criticism, but that relates directly to those "obstacles".

Synthesiser

Freethinkers formed the larger part of the audiences for Huxley's countless lectures, which were regularly reported in the *Reasoner* and the *National Reformer*; and his books were sold in the Halls of Science. He believed that science "would uplift the masses". He was, as Adrian Desmond asserts, "the world's greatest scientific synthesiser".

Finally, let me recount the story of George Sparks, the pound-a-week coffee unloader at Southampton docks. A freethinker and socialist, he sent Huxley some "promising observations of the fission of pond organisms (made with a sixpenny 'toy glass')". Sparks didn't give his address but Huxley went to some lengths to find it and to send some books and a microscope "from a friend", followed by his own telescope so that the docker could see sunspots. Sparks guessed who the friend must be: "the greatest of living scientists".

T H Huxley was also, in H L Mencken's view, "perhaps the greatest virtuoso of plain English who has ever lived". Which makes a remarkable combination, even allowing for exaggeration.



● T H Huxley — "the world's greatest scientific synthesiser".

Dr Spong's wishful-thinking

THIS 360-page paperback by the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, is the latest in a series of works in which he presents a liberal and controversially unorthodox view of some aspect of Christian tradition, practice or belief. The two subtitles give the main drift of the work. Spong believes that Christians have failed to notice quite how "Jewish" the NT is, and he also believes he has discovered the key with which to unlock the secrets of the Gospels, and thereby rescue Jesus from 2000 years of misunderstanding. He has come by this key through his reading of works by Michael Goulder, the Birmingham NT scholar who in 1981 renounced his Anglican ordination and declared himself an atheist.

My first problem with Spong's book is that it cannot quite make up its mind whether it is a work of NT scholarship or a work of Christian apologetics, and steers an unsteady path between the two. Viewed as a work of scholarship, it contains some fairly elementary mistakes which raise doubts as to the author's knowledge of his subject. For example:

1. On page 300, Spong says it was Matthew who added the detail about the Temple veil being rent in twain at the crucifixion, but this detail was already present in Mark 15.38!

2. On page 54, Spong shows that he misunderstands the meaning of the word "Synoptic" as applied to the first three Gospels. He betrays that he thinks it means "eyewitness", whereas it actually means "seen together". The term was actually coined by J J Griesbach, who in 1811 was the first to set out parallel passages of the Greek text in adjacent columns so that they could be "seen at a glance", and compared one with another. It was only in this way that the close literary relationships and dependencies between these three Gospels could be clearly discerned. Spong appears ignorant of Griesbach, and many other key figures in the history of NT criticism.

3. On page 123, Spong says that Luke's account of the nativity of John the Baptist is unique; but had he consulted Hennecke/Schneemelcher: *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol.1, page 365, he would have read that such stories also occurred "in the quite independent tradition of the later Baptist sect."

4. On page 123, Spong speaks of Luke "introducing" elements into Matthew's birth story. But the two accounts are completely independent and incompatible (see G A Wells, *Who was Jesus?*, Chapter 3, and my 1996 SPES lecture *No Babe in Bethlehem*). Spong is misled by his belief that there was no "Q" document, used independently by Matthew and Luke, but that Luke knew Matthew's Gospel. Despite Michael Goulder's support for this view, the weight of scholarly opinion is still (and in my view rightly) against it.

5. Spong is often inconsistent: for example, on page 278 he claims that some sort of experience of "Resurrection" was necessary on the part of the early Christians for them to "create a new holy day, different from the Sabbath". But on page 120 (and see Note 8.1 on page 340), he gives a quite different, and much more rational, suggestion to account for it.

***Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes: Freeing Jesus From 2000 Years of Misunderstanding* by John Shelby Spong. HarperCollins, £8.99.**

Review: DANIEL O'HARA

On a more general level, one is often disturbed by Spong's apparent ignorance of the whole historical development of scientific NT criticism, from Reimarus through D F Strauss, F C Baur and the Tübingen school, French scholars like Renan and Loisy, later German scholars like Wrede and Weiss, Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, even Schweitzer's popular *Quest of the Historical Jesus*. And there are two contemporary NT scholars from whom Spong could learn much: Gerd Lüdemann and Heikki Räisänen. They are both very much sounder than Spong on the Second Century "heretic" Marcion, and also very good on the strong anti-Jewish bias of the Gospels (and indeed the whole NT), which it suits Spong to ignore or play down because he wants to see them as strongly Jewish works.

Spong has a bee in his bonnet about the Gospels being *midrashic* (I don't think he even properly understands this either, as a Rabbi friend has apparently already told him), and their being constructed on a liturgical/lectionary basis. Much of this he has got from Goulder, who I think rather overstates an interesting idea. The notion that the Gospels were formed around a liturgical or lectionary framework is, of course, not new or original, even with Goulder. J M Robertson, for example, examined a somewhat similar view held by Johannes Weiss, and had some sympathy with it, around 90 years ago (see G A Wells: *J M Robertson*, Pemberton, 1987, page 141).

If Goulder overstates the case, Spong goes right over the top. He seems to think he has made a major and startling discovery, but it is far from clear, to this reader at least, how this makes Christianity any more acceptable as a belief-system, as Spong clearly thinks it does.

Goulder, for example, who holds similar views about the New Testament, does not see it as authenticating belief. Spong's remarks about his hopes for Goulder's eventual reconversion to Christianity and return to the priesthood on page xv are truly cringe-making—I suspect Michael Goulder will be embarrassed by this book, though he is too much of a gentleman to say so.

I agree with Spong when he questions the historicity of Judas, of the Last Supper, the empty tomb, etc.: I go even further, and suspect the historicity of Jesus. Spong would benefit from reading G A Wells' several books on the subject. But even allowing that there was an historical Jesus of Nazareth, it has been quite clear to most open-minded NT scholars for most of this century that there are few—if any—genuinely historical traditions about him in the Gospels.

Spong does not believe, any more than I do, that Jesus walked on water, turned water into wine or rose physically from the dead. I welcome his saying so: it is only right and proper that he should try to disabuse his readers of beliefs which have not been seriously entertained in the scholarly community for more than a century. But he should not present these conclusions as though they were a startling new discovery: much of this was made plain by D F Strauss in his 1835 classic *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, and has been developed and refined by his successors over the past century-and-a-half.

Strauss, like Goulder, had the courage to admit that such conclusions are incompatible with any traditional understanding of the Christian faith, and so left the Church. If Spong believes he can have his cake and eat it too, as he clearly wishes, then it seems to me that with his talk of Jesus being "the conduit through which the love of God was loosed into human history" (page 332), he is indulging in a brand of wishful-thinking which is every bit as discreditable as the varieties of Catholic and Protestant fundamentalism that he quite properly rejects.

● This review was written shortly before Daniel O'Hara recorded a *Crossfire* television discussion with Bishop Spong and a Muslim scholar which was transmitted on Sunday, June 22, on Channel 5.

Walter book is selling well

ORDERS have come in from many different parts of the world for Nicolas Walter's new book, *Humanism: What's in the Word*.

It was reviewed for *The Freethinker* by former National Secular Society President David Tribe, who described it as "... an important new book".

Readers of *The Freethinker* may obtain *Humanism: What's in the Word* at the special price of £5, including postage and packing. Send remittance with name and address to Rationalist Press Association, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

There were, incidentally, two misprints in David Tribe's April review: a phrase in the second column, second paragraph, on Page 9 should have read: "Coming back to *Humanism* after an enforced absence"; in

the third column, second paragraph, please read "rejected a term appropriated by a powerful branch of academe".

ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

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'Theatrical folk tend to address me as Dear Boy to be Creeping. I answer to them all

Face-to-face with

IHAD been confined to bed, unwell, but the gravity of my condition was not apparent until I saw a figure walking towards me. Of course, I recognised him straightaway with his seamless robe, neatly-trimmed beard, immaculately-parted hair and the aureole hovering above his head. His portrait had adorned the wall of my old Sunday school room.

He doffed his aureole, smiled and greeted me. "Welcome to Many Mansions plc where we neither slumber nor sleep," he said. "I can see that you know who I am," he added—mischievously I thought. "I'm called by a variety of names here. Theatrical folk tend to address me as Dear Boy, businessmen as JC, but the favourite seems to be Creeping. I don't mind any of them. I answer to them all. Now—do you have anything to say?"

What *could* I say? I, who had refused to accept the existence of any of the thousands of gods on offer, suddenly proved to be so devastatingly wrong on the strongest possible evidence. I thought of "Nice place you have here" and "How's your father?" but both seemed woefully inadequate and I settled eventually for—and it came out rather truculently I thought—"So I was wrong! But, if you don't mind my saying so, you weren't always right yourself. You said you'd lie in that sepulchre for three days and nights and in the end it was only one day and two nights. Then you told your disciples that you'd return to earth before they died but you never did. What kept you?"

"You're quite right," he said. "But what with that stone across the doorway and the linen cloth wound round me, I could hardly breathe, and as for coming back to Earth, I just didn't fancy it. I'd been there, done it all and got the tee-shirt in a manner of speaking."

I felt myself regretting that I had not studied the art of wailing and gnashing

my teeth. I knew I should need the facility when I was cast among the worms in the fire that is not quenched.

He broke into my thoughts. "You looked surprised when you saw me just now," he said. "But I'll tell you something: you weren't half as surprised as the clergy who've come up here. What they called faith was only whistling in the dark. They knew it and so did I. Give me atheists any day. They're all for evidence and that seems to me the only logical position. I don't know how it got about, but John was never my favourite disciple; you've only to read Revelation to know that he was always one verse short of a chapter. Thomas was the pick of the bunch. He wouldn't believe until he'd actually seen me risen from the grave and put his fingers in my wounds. A true rationalist if ever there was one. Incidentally, I told him to get his nails cut if he ever wanted to do that again, but that didn't appear in the Gospels. Perhaps they couldn't understand why I shouted out my own name before I said it. But what I'm getting round to is this—and it'll probably surprise you—*only atheists are canonised up here*. I'll introduce you later on to St Chapman and St Bertrand. Then my father'll fit you out with an aureole of your own and you'll become St Neil."

"Thanks be to god," I said. "By the way, if they're off-the-peg you'd best tell him I take seven-and-a-quarter in hats. But I must confess I was expecting to go to Hell."

"No such place," he replied. "There used to be—it was called Sodom Hall—until St Chapman pointed out the illogicality of it. A god of love, he maintained, couldn't consign somebody to eternal misery. In any case, it wouldn't be fair. LGA created man and gave him a brain. If as a result of using it he couldn't believe in a creator it was hardly his fault, so it would be unjust for him to be punished. I thought that that was unanswerable and so did LGA when I put it to him. He said 'Behold, I have played the fool and erred—1 Samuel 26

verse 21,' and promptly abolished Sodom Hall. But to come back to the clergy, I have a bit of fun with them at times. I remember asking Pius IX if he was fallible when he declared he wasn't. I still haven't had an answer. I defied Innocent III to celebrate Mass and transubstantiate while I was standing beside him. He pleaded another engagement and I haven't seen him since. Then I asked the last Pope to come up here how it was that there had been more than 200 Italians in the job but only one Jew when it was a Jew—that is, *me*—who started it all. He said 'Was it as many as that?' I told him it was—well over 200—and he said 'No, I don't mean Italians, I mean Jews. I can't think of one to be honest.' I had to remind him that Peter was the first of them all and he'd actually passed him at the door coming in. 'You caught me there,' he said.

Argue

"You'd be surprised how many people try to argue with us here—and I don't mean just atheists, although one of your chaps did have a set-to with LGA one day and actually proved to him that he didn't exist. It quite upset the old boy for a while. He was walking about for days shaking his godhead and saying: 'There must be a fallacy somewhere but I'm damned if I can see it.' Eventually your chap told him where it was and they've been the best of friends ever since.

"Jehovah's Witnesses are the worst. LGA told them that they had it all wrong and his name wasn't Jehovah but Fred. Do you know, they wouldn't have it? They said if it wasn't in the Bible it couldn't be true.

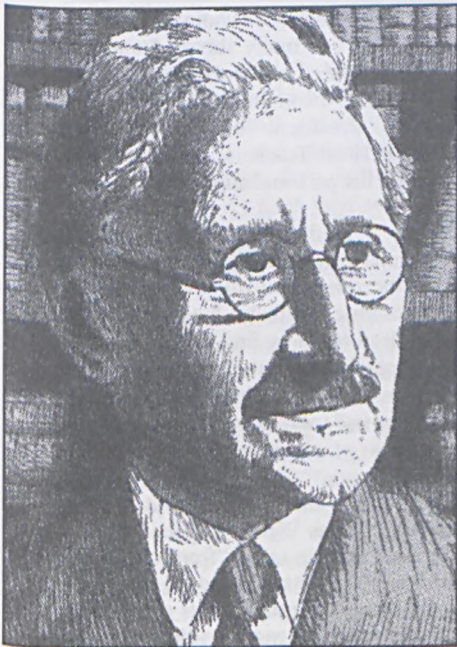
"Then Sabellius and two of his disciples came up and insisted that LGA, HG and I were only one person. Well, we got together and showed them that there were three of us. But they wouldn't accept it. Sabellius said he was dreaming, one of his disciples said he was due an eye-test and the other begged pardon but he'd just had a couple."

oy, businessmen as JC, but the favourite seems all': NEIL BLEWITT finds himself ...

the Son of Fred

There was a pause in the conversation at this point so I took the opportunity to ask Creeping what happened in Many Mansions plc. What did he do? What did everybody else do?

"It's pretty humdrum, really," he said. "I greet newcomers and try to settle them in. I do a bit of visiting, keep an eye on what's going on down there and spend the rest of the time sitting on my golden throne. Fell off a chariot you know." And here he winked and tapped



"I'll introduce you later on to St Chapman..."

his nose with a forefinger. "I change myself into a lamb now and then and sometimes surround the throne with lions and calves and make them sprout wings, or I conjure up a dragon or two with seven heads. But that's largely for John's benefit. He loves it. And he's always getting me to act out that bit of his in Revelation where the lamb gets married. John plays the part of the vicar and says to me 'Wilt thou have this woman?' and I have to say 'Baaa!' Then he asks Mary Magdalene—who's the bride—if she will take me and she has to

say 'Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.' It's all a bit of innocent fun really. Anyway, when I sit on the throne everybody has to prostrate themselves and worship me day and night—except that we don't have any night here. It's not compulsory but it gives us all something to do. Life can be tedious. I see the funny side of it: dead men and women—bored stiff! I don't care much for the worshipping and glorifying myself but it goes with the job unfortunately. I don't like the noise either, especially when John asks me to bring on the trumpets. They're not little Woolworth's kazoos, you know—they're 12-foot alpenhorns. And it's getting awfully crowded here too. LGA blames the RCs and their opposition to birth control. I was talking to him the other day about it and he says if it gets too full he'll have to end the world. I suggested 2000 was a nice, rounded date but he wants to leave it a bit longer. He says there are people on earth predicting it will end then and he's not going to have a lot of Bush-Baptists second-guessing him."

It occurred to me that, although atheism was quite acceptable in Many Mansions plc, I ought to apologise for my misdemeanours while a church member. I started to do so but he interrupted.

"No need to list them," he said. "I know about your putting tadpoles in the font just before baptisms—and about you and the bell-ringer's daughter in the stoke-hole."

"Oh, my god..." I began, then realised that that was a foolish thing to say in the circumstances.

"Verily, verily, I'm sorry about it," he broke in, "but I can't help myself. I see what everybody is doing everywhere all of the time whether I want to or not; and frankly it embarrasses me. I can't help it. It's the way I'm made. And it's not just stoke-holes I see into but bedrooms as well. I don't like it. It's the temptation it presents. I'm continually having to say 'Get thee behind me, Satan—and not too close either!' I've put the case to LGA and asked for my powers to be reduced

but he won't hear of it. Says I've got a position to keep up, though between you and me I think he's forgotten the formula."

"Perhaps," I ventured, "you'll take over from him when he retires and then you can do what you like."

"Fat chance of that," he answered. "He's in the job for life. But, as I always say—take no thought for the morrow. Now, I'm taking harp practice this afternoon so I shall have to go soon. But before I do—and I almost forgot—you're allowed one request when you first arrive here. Anything come to mind?"

"Well, yes," I said. "I'm not normally a vicious person, but is Pony Moore, my old sergeant-major, up here?"

Comrades

"Sorry," he said before I could make my request. "He is, but I know what you are going to say. I admit I said 'Ask and ye shall receive' but I'm going to have to deny you in this case. Several of your old comrades are already here and they all made the same request which I was rash enough to grant; but, frankly, I've become bored with performing the miracle of replacing Pony Moore's parts that they pulled off and chewed up. And he's not a bad fellow—though when he came up here the first thing he said to me was—well, shouted really—'Get your hair cut! You look like somebody out of the bloody Bible!'"

"Do you fancy a cup of tea?" The voice had changed from Creeping's imitation of Pony Moore's to one that sounded like my wife's.

Of course—but you had guessed. Like that other writer of 300 years ago, I awoke, and behold it was a dream; although the length of *his* suggests that he was actually in hibernation. Mine must have unfolded in a matter of minutes.

I was sorry it was nothing more. I rather liked the sound of St Neil.

Church gays battle may eclipse fight over women priests

AS THE General Synod of the Church of England prepares for its first debate on homosexuality for 10 years, the bishops are moving behind the scenes to ensure that there will be no change to Anglican policy. In a letter to all 500 members of the Synod, the bishops have said that they will not accept amendments to the motion—which simply asks for further reflection on the House of Bishops' report *Issues in Human Sexuality*—hoping to limit damage and put off the schism which many see as inevitable over this issue.

At present, the Church of England's policy is that while homosexual acts "fall short of the ideal" they may be permissible in some circumstances for lay people, but not for priests. The liberal wing of the church is calling for a relaxation of this, claiming that there are "practising" homosexuals in all levels of the church. The evangelicals, on the other hand, are fighting to ban church membership to all practising homosexuals.

The Synod debate, which takes place in York on July 14, will fuel the civil war that is raging within the church on this topic—a conflict seen by many as even more divisive than the battle over women priests. The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement is mobilising to oppose the increasingly fanatical activities of fundamentalist groups such as Reform, and has encouraged its members (many of whom are ordained priests) to agitate for change. It is even claimed that 14 bishops find the current position unacceptably hypocritical.

Gay Humanists are watching developments with interest. George Broadhead, Secretary of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, told *The Freethinker*: "Of course we are personally indifferent to the machinations of the church, and are even watching the impending schism with some

Keith Porteous Wood reports

relish. However, we would like to see the Church of England change its policy towards homosexuals because we feel that many institutions take their lead from the church's stance. Until the church drops its sometimes violent opposition to gay people and their relationships there will always be an excuse for other conservative institutions, such as the military, to continue to discriminate."

It seems unlikely that any major change of policy will follow the General Synod debate, but the subject will return next year at the 10-yearly gathering of Anglican Bishops at the Lambeth Conference. It is at this event that the issue is likely to come to a head. Or, as Clifford Longley said in the *Daily Telegraph*: "The crunch is coming next year over gay clergy. It will not be possible to find a solution for the problem of gay clergy in the Anglican church. The Lambeth conference next year will be the moment when the irresistible force meets the immovable object."

Time for big push on school prayer law

THE May 29 annual conference decision of the National Association of Head Teachers to press for revision of the law which forces daily prayers on schoolchildren will be welcomed by all Freethinkers.

The conference debate underlined the fact that an influential body of Christians—acting from many different motives—has now adopted a cause which was initiated, long ago, by Secularists and Rationalists.

Speakers at the conference felt the law requiring a daily act of worship was both hypocritical and impractical: last year, 90 per cent of primary schools and 25 per cent of secondary schools obeyed the law—compared with 100 per cent of primaries and 60 per cent of secondaries in 1993.

Diana Wayne, a junior school head from Cornwall, proposed abolition for a variety of reasons, including unease over "indoctrinating" children, and Simon Marsh, Chairman of the

Association of Christian Teachers, said: "Worship is a voluntary act of homage and love given to the God one freely serves. I am convinced that to enforce a hypocritical act does more harm to faith than almost anything else."

Liz Paver, President of the National Association of Head Teachers, said she would make abolition her personal aim during her year of office.

Ms Paver, a leading Anglican who has chaired sessions of the General Synod, took up the issue in the *Times Educational Supplement* (June 13), pointing out that a law which "vast numbers of head teachers find it impossible to keep" lacks credibility, but stressing the need for a religious education which enables pupils "to develop an understanding of the moral and spiritual values which underpin any civilised society."

In response, the Rationalist Press Association's Nicolas Walter told the *TES* that two comments were in order "from one of the organisations which have opposed this anti-educational practice throughout its existence."

One was that all the many individuals and institutions who now agree about this subject should put forward constructive proposals for secular assemblies which can properly express the collective spirit of schools and the communities they serve.

And: "The other is that the same individuals and institutions should recognise the need to include in such assemblies and in wider religious and moral education a proper treatment of the interests of the large and growing minority of the population—including teachers and pupils—who have no supernatural religion."

A call for action, if ever there was one. Groups and individuals in our movement, locally and nationally, cannot afford to pass up the opportunities for broad-based anti-school prayer alliances presented by the decision of the head teachers.

Even Front Bench Jesus-freaks will find it difficult to ignore the views of our educational system's key people. **PB**

International Humanists spotlight religion's child abuse scandal

From Page 3

Whereas the idea behind the Convention was to turn children, seen as powerless property of their parents, into people with their own rights—civil, economic, cultural, social and political, with countries agreeing that children face unique circumstances and need special protection;

Whereas much progress has been achieved since 1990 in diverse areas such as school enrolment, immunisation, poverty, hunger and child labour (and the UNICEF itself now enters its 51st year), there still exists one form of enduring and pervasive child abuse that has gone on for centuries but has been ignored and

deliberately neglected: child abuse perpetrated in the name of religion;

The IHEU resolves that countries that are tackling issues of child-protection must seriously examine the issue of all abuse of children including in particular in the name of religion and God. World bodies like the UN cannot remain silent on such issues in the name of religious correctness and must take a principled and unambiguous stand against such abuse.

● The International Humanist and Ethical Union may be contacted through its Executive Director, Mr Babu R R Gogineni, 47, Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP; telephone : +44 - 171 - 831 4817; fax : +44 - 171 - 404 8641; E Mail : babu@iheu.org

Terry Sanderson on the media

IF IT'S possible for a newspaper to be mentally ill, then I think it's time the *Daily Mail* was certified. After all, this is the newspaper that gives space to every barmy theory and superstition going.

One week it was "Kirlian photographs" which, according to the paper, reveal "the energy field—or aura—around the hand." This was being peddled by Garion Hutchings, the Chairman of Kirlian Research Ltd., who I'm sure has no vested interest in the issue whatsoever.

He says: "It has been accepted that we all have an electrical energy field. Each of us radiates electromagnetic energy. This aura is thought to be a subtle energy framework that can act as a transmitting and receiving station for thoughts and emotions."

The *Mail* allows him to go on spouting this pseudo-science for half a page, but when he says "it has been accepted" he does not make clear by whom. ("Workshops" were available for those who wanted to explore this further—price unspecified but available on request).

A few days later, the *Mail* gave instructions for "summoning your guardian angel". This was based on "workshops" run by a woman called Diana Cooper (cost of workshops not divulged, but please apply for details).

She says she "knows angels exist" because she saw one. It was April 6, 1982, apparently. She threw herself into a chair and "this angel floated into the room." As a result of this encounter—part of which involved the angel flinging her off a cliff!—Ms Cooper is now an expert on angels and reveals that they are androgynous and that they will come to you if you "send out a cry from your soul".

Stroking

For those of us who don't know how to send out cries from our soul, there is an alternative means of communication—all you need to do is "stroke your aura". This procedure involves sitting in a chair, closing your eyes, stroking your aura for a few minutes and your angel will come running. You then "invite your angel to come close and stroke your aura" for you.

Make sure you've got the curtains drawn at this point or the police might get involved.

After this, the *Mail* treated us to "The Bible Code", which can be deciphered by "entering the 304,805 characters of the Hebrew Scriptures as a single continuous text into a computer", which then searches for letter patterns that spell out hidden words.

Michael Drosnin, the author of the book which was serialised in the *Mail* (and subsequently topped the best-seller lists) did just that ... and claims that he came up with all kinds of predictions that have all come true (naturally). Unfortunately, rather like the Nostradamus predictions, these new forecasts are not exactly straightforward. It's all in the interpretation, and only wishful thinking will make it work.

Publishing this kind of guff obviously does the trick: the *Daily Mail* has the fastest-growing readership of any newspaper in the country. On that basis, perhaps it isn't the newspaper that's crackers, but its readers.

The *Mail* is in a deadly circulation war with the *Daily Express*, so naturally the *Express* has to keep up in the battle for barmiest stories. It, too, has a long list of features to its credit of the

Daily Mail: A suitable case for treatment?

"I was abducted by aliens" variety. It, too, frequently promotes bizarre and unproved "alternative therapies" (drink-your-own-urine-and-live-forever type of thing). It has the mandatory astrologer, of course—one Marjorie Orr. She recently took part in a disgraceful TV programme called *Predictions* (LWT).

This programme purported to test "a panel of leading psychics, clairvoyants and astrologers", but was chiefly distinguished by its highly selective editing.

The psychics were asked to make predictions about four strangers. After six months, the subjects were shown the pre-recorded predictions and asked to say how accurate they had been. It goes without saying that we were shown only the predictions that appeared to have come true; the ones that were wide of the mark presumably ended up on the cutting-room floor.

When I say the predictions that "came true", it shouldn't be taken to mean that there was anything very startling. In relation to one of her subjects, Olwyn Kirkman, Ms Orr said things like: "There may be a little tension, a few upsets, because Uranus tends not to make it easy for you to keep going. The end of February and beginning of March will be slightly awkward." Fabulously specific, isn't it?

Mrs Kirkman's verdict was: "It was very, very accurate." But when asked in detail she wasn't quite so sure: "Marjorie's predictions about my future were also correct. There was nothing specific but the way she forecast my moods, particularly towards April, was very accurate. There was nothing that stood out, just everyday events, but I had a lot of fiddly things going wrong."

Not exactly mind-blowing, is it? And yet on the TV programme, with its spooky music and

lighting, sensational presentation and preordained sympathy for the psychics, it seemed really impressive.

Another astrologer, John Frawley, was asked to predict the result of the Cup Final. This he did by writing it on a piece of paper and putting it in an envelope to be opened after the match was over. And guess what—it was spot on! But haven't I seen Paul Daniels do this one? Why didn't the psychic say what the result was going to be *before* the event?

The one really impressive prediction came from astrologer Bernard Fitzwalter, who said that the Grand National was likely to be cancelled—which, of course, it was.

The only vaguely scientific test in the programme came when a psychic called Tag Powell claimed that he could predict the sex of babies by swinging a piece of metal over the protuberances of pregnant women. He was put up against a midwife, Mary Croft, who said that, after many years' experience, she could tell the sex of babies by listening to them through a device like an ear-trumpet. She said that the heart beats of boys and girls were different.

They both made their predictions on 16 pregnant women. The laws of chance and averages were represented by a chimpanzee which chose the sex of the babies at random.

The midwife scored 13 correct: 76 per cent. The psychic guessed seven correct: 41 per cent. The chimp correctly guessed seven, too.

Which just goes to show that it isn't difficult to make a monkey out of psychics—if you don't load the evidence in their favour.

God? It's all in the mind, says Sir Ludo

SIR Ludovic Kennedy, the veteran liberal campaigner, is, I can disclose, poised to begin what he sees as his most important mission yet: to convert the nation to atheism.

So wrote Peterborough, of the *Daily Telegraph*, on June 20.

The columnist added: "Now 77, Kennedy is near the end of a book entitled *Testament: Reflections of a Born Again Heretic*, in which he seeks definitively to disprove the existence of God. This work is, I learn, something of a final frontier for Sir Ludovic—the end of a journey begun at Eton, and his first compul-

sory chapel service."

"I haven't believed in God since I first went to school. He exists only in the mind and is otherwise completely redundant," Sir Ludovic told the *Telegraph*. "I had to undergo at least 1,300 hours of heavy Christian indoctrination—what a terrible waste of time."

In addition to the book Sir Ludovic has, said Peterborough, been taking his atheist message to the boys of Eton and Harrow, where his message, he feels, went down well: "At Harrow there were at least 20 masters present."

Discussion:

TIME TO RE-STRUCTURE?

THE existence (all in Bradlaugh House, and the adjoining Humanist Centre, in Holborn in London) of the four associations, the British Humanist Association (BHA), National Secular Society, Rationalist Press Association and South Place Ethical Society (with others, such as the Secular Society Limited) seems to be due solely to history and separate finances.

In areas of London there are other Humanist groups too, but most of those do not claim to speak for Humanists nationally. Some kindred organisations, such as the International Humanist and Ethical Union, Humanist Housing Association and the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, have members nationally in Britain but have contemporary reasons for their separate identities. None of the four have any regular activities (such as Board meetings) out of central London (except the BHA annual conference). So much for them being national or British—more like Holborn!

The failures of the various governing

by Roy Saich

committees to resolve the squandering of their separate resources, such as the wasteful duplication of their administration, is not a criticism of the individuals involved but of the structures that have been inherited. The liaison committee in Bradlaugh House could have developed into a *co-ordinating* committee; instead it has become a “forum” (= talking-shop?).

Many individual readers of *The Freethinker* are members of some or all of these organisations at excessive financial personal cost and we get poor value for our money. With such a wide overlap of membership it can hardly be claimed that they stand for incompatible policies or principles. The hard work of the paid and unpaid workers is unco-ordinated, as the recently announced decision by the BHA to leave the Humanist Centre complex proves. To make the best use of joint meagre resources, a single organisation would help. These so-called national organisations have no public or membership relations, or indeed publicity departments, or even a membership recruitment officer

between them! There is no research worker to back up the magazines, writers and spokespeople! Practical people will point to the waste of effort and money in keeping separate accounts and collecting separate subscriptions many times from the same people each year, as well as the work and time spent on separate AGMs etc.

The time may have come now to set up a joint working party of dispassionate people to establish a new national organisation in place of the existing four and some others. None of the four can “take over” all the existing ones. Any such attempt is doomed to disaster and would only happen when dictated by financial necessity. If any of the four insist on remaining independent, this need not stop the sensible ones getting together. As a first step, individual members of the various ruling committees should state their aims, if any, towards the creation of a single national organisation.

Independence

The editorial independence of *The Freethinker* would not be effected in any way as it is produced by a separate company. This is a great advantage as a new organisation would need to be a charity, and difficulties with the Charity Commissioners, not to mention the libel laws, must be avoided. This would not stop close links between it and a new organisation, like those which exist now between G W Foote and Company and the National Secular Society.

We need a two-pronged approach to promoting the secular scientific way of life, both by attacking irrational superstitions in effective ways from a sceptical position, and, at the same time, advocating a sensible, humane, ethical world in positive ways, which may attract people who prefer the constructive work of helping others to the confrontational approach to the same ends.

One organisation would provide a necessary incentive for everyone to get on with each other and work together in the interests of “the best of causes” and not to fall out, or work against each other, and sometimes to justify ourselves by disguising personal differences as differences of principle.

Please send to *The Freethinker* any comments you have about this, and suggestions for making the views of the members of the various organisations throughout the country carry proper weight nationally.

● As well as being a member of the National Secular Society, Roy Saich is active in the Coventry & Warwickshire Humanist Group and in GALHA. The Editor urges readers to comment on his proposals.

An eggcellent way to boost freethought?

WHAT we need is a miracle—a wonder to do for *The Freethinker* what piety has done for tomatoes and eggs.

People in Huddersfield have been buying up tomatoes like fun since the seeds of a particularly succulent example were found to spell out the name of God in Arabic. And eggs? The *Leicester Mercury* (June 26) assures us that pilgrims have been flocking to a house in the town to see an example of hen-fruit which bears the name of Mohammed on its shell!

What we need, to get people buying our atheist paper, to encourage more to support the Fund which helps to keep it going, is for the legend “Bradlaugh Rules OK” suddenly to appear on the forehead of K P ...

But perhaps not. Miracles have a way of backfiring. The same issue of the *Leicester Mercury* reports: “Sportswear giant Nike had to withdraw 38,000 pairs of trainers from its Nike Air summer range stored at distribution centres worldwide yesterday after Muslims complained a flame-shaped logo resembled the Arabic for Allah.”

No. We must continue to rely upon the secularist dedication of our readers to help us pay the bills.

Making cheques and POs payable to GW Foote & Company, please send donations to Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to the following: £100, D Yeulett; £50, T Bowen; £40, C Pinel, SKP; £30, R Lewis, M Morley; £20, D Baker, B Garrington; £15, P Lancaster, J Ross; £12, M Ewing; £10, B Able, G Airey, B Albers, A Ball, A Beeson, R Condon, W Hall, A Mutch, F Sheppard, J Tarski, G Taylor, O Thompson, L Wilkins, G Worrall, A Negus; £8, S Watson; £7, R Deacon, J Kay; £5, A Chappell, B Clark, A Gore, J Grierson, E Haslam, C Hetherington, H Hinchcliffe, J Hobbs, G Huddart, A Jenkinson, H McDougall, R Simmonds, D Thompson, D Whelan, Anon; £3, A Briglin, W Brome, J Brooks, B Clarke, J Clarke, D Gorringer, S Holt, J Hughes, JWLewis, A Marshall, C Mills, K Wootton; £2.50, D Carter; £2, H Ash, F Hoare, W Keeton, P Perry.

Total donations from May 23 to June 26: £665.50.

You're telling us!

'Separate but consonant'

CALLS for all national secular humanist bodies to "get together", which appears to be a euphemism for merge as they are already physically and on many issues operationally side-by-side, surface regularly in *The Freethinker* and elsewhere. Robin Wood (May letters) has added some bells and thistles which add to the sound of his case but not, in my view, its plausibility.

These add-ons amount to perceived analogies with the worlds of politics, industry and public relations and can be considered in that order.

Only history will show whether the United Kingdom was wise to ditch the multicultural British Commonwealth, which effectively combined commercial interdependence with political autonomy, in favour of a potentially unstable Roman-Catholic-dominated European Union which for several centuries—indeed, millennia—has been the scene of internecine strife. Apart from the economic argument of a common market, the theory is that removal of "tribal" and national boundaries brings accord. Wood's other observation, my own experience as a National Council for Civil Liberties envoy to Scotland on some matter of Scottish concern and the recent election results demonstrate the enduring nature of "Celtic fringe" suspicion of England within the "United" Kingdom, while Spain in the 1930s and Africa today prove that civil wars are every bit as nasty as national ones.

The vogue word "reorganise", so beloved of economic rationalists, with its promise of a "big battalion" needs close scrutiny. A necessary consequence, if not a business objective, is downsizing. Since many freethinkers are members of more than one existing body, in any merger the whole would be less than the sum of its parts. And while a merged organisation would have a bigger membership than any of its components, on the national scene, by comparison with trades unions, churches and the like, it would barely rank as a big platoon. Nor would it be more stable than the average industrial or political merger. Not only would displaced executives' noses be out-of-joint, but any tendency for humanists "to be individuals and anarchists at heart" would be magnified by loss of the historical and ideological nuances represented by the existing freethought bodies. Nor would a merger "present a better front to the media". In many respects it's regrettable, but it's also true, that the major UK media are based in London (if not New York and potentially Brussels). While they are partly influenced by size, they're more influenced by the number of independent voices through media releases, meetings, rallies, journals and other publications from separate, though consonant, sources.

Wood does however make an important point that Scotland—and Northern Ireland, but not Wales—has "a separate education and legal system". Every support should therefore be given by London to the Humanist Society of Scotland and the Ulster Humanist Association as they represent their particular situations.

DAVID TRIBE
New South Wales

BS, Dev & McIlroy

THE vitriolic response from Bill McIlroy (June letters) to my letter of the previous month about Dev has surprised some readers, but not me. Bill's practised use of verbal vitriol is what makes his attacks on our opponents so amusing and effective—and now, for some reason, he counts me as an opponent.

Nor is it news to me that Dev, who had supported me as NSS President for a quarter of a century, was opposed to my re-election at the last AGM. In fact, he made that clear to me. The reason was that when, in protest at the Council of Management's mishandling of the secretary's retirement, a technical motion was put at an EGM to remove seven members (including Dev) from the Council, I refused to vote against it—though I did say I hoped most of the seven would be reinstated.

Ironically enough, it was Bill McIlroy who first proposed me as NSS President. Again, ironically enough, while NSS secretary he wrote innumerable resignation threats because Dev (as treasurer) interfered too much.

However, I remember with gratitude a lot of things Bill did for me over the years—for instance, coming to my home to help pack Heretic Cards when I was snowed under with orders. Such memories prevent me from retaliating with comparable vitriol now.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley, Kent

AFTER the President, Barbara Smoker, was illegally excluded from the meetings of the National Secular Society Council during 1995 (on the pretext that she was only the "Honorary President"), Dev's was the first name on the proposal to elect her as proper President at the 1995 AGM. The Council did not propose anyone at all.

TERRY MULLINS
London N7

THE unseemly publication of the carrion-crow-like activities of a former President and Secretary of the National Secular Society, over the remains of a former Treasurer (letters from Barbara Smoker and Bill McIlroy, May and June) are surely symptomatic of the inhumanity being displayed by some Humanists, implicit in the prospective break-up of the Humanist Centre.

To its credit, *The Freethinker* has published the news that the British Humanist Association intends to leave Bradlaugh House; the BHA's own *Humanist News* has not.

However I do question the Editor's judgement in printing these scurrilous personal attacks. *The Freethinker* stands for freedom of speech, not freedom from thought by people who allow their mouths to open without considering the wider consequences for the Humanist movement.

Milton wrote: "Licence they mean when they cry Liberty". How apt. Moreover, it is an Editor's task to edit: "to pick out certain passages for publication, omitting what is undesirable, unsuitable" (OED). As a Secular Humanist paper, *The Freethinker* should reserve its attacks for the proponents and prin-

ciples of all superstitious ideas, not encourage this form of character assassination.

DENIS COBELL
Vice President NSS
Director G W Foote & Co

Alternative moral code

DURING a visit to my parents last week, my mother showed me a list of "the Socialist Commandments" which may interest readers:

1. Love your schoolfellows, who will be your fellow workmen in life.
2. Love learning, which is the food of the mind; be as grateful to your teacher as to your parents.
3. Make every day holy by good and useful deeds and kindly actions.
4. Honour good men, be courteous to all men, bow down to none.
5. Do not hate or speak evil of anyone; do not be revengeful, but stand up for your rights, and resist oppression.
6. Do not be cowardly, be a friend to the weak, and love justice.
7. Remember that all the good things of the earth are produced by labour; whoever enjoys them without working for them is stealing the bread of the workers.
8. Observe and think in order to discover the truth; do not believe what is contrary to reason, and never deceive yourself or others.
9. Do not think that he who loves his own country must hate other nations, or wish for war, which is a remnant of barbarism.
10. Look forward to the day when all men will be free citizens of one fatherland, and live together as brothers in peace and righteousness.

I do not know their precise origin, but they were passed to our family by Ruth Frow, of the Working Class Movement Library, Salford. Presumably they were in use in Socialist Sunday Schools (when exactly?), as some viewed Socialism as an alternative religion.

The Humanist and Rationalist content is obvious. They are not a line-by-line rebuttal of the Christian Commandments, but an independent set of values on their own terms, which is as it should be.

We badly need such an alternative moral code, which also takes account of today's sensibilities.

PETER LATHAM
Sheffield

Scepticism on UFOs

WHEN suggesting that those sceptical about flying saucers are flat-earthers, who also deny the existence of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, Michael Hill (June letters) takes a bigger hop than any of his UFOs have managed so far. I too am exceedingly sceptical about UFOs but not at all about the likelihood of intelligent life on other planets. Indeed, it would require a considerable act of faith to believe that of all the billions of planets in the universe the Earth would be the only one that has spawned forms of life.

You're telling us!

From Page 13

The scepticism about UFOs comes in because of the distances involved in the travel, the nearest star being more than four light-years away. The millions of sightings (more than 12 million in the last 25 years), particularly in the USA, leave me largely unmoved. In a country where most of the population believes in resurrection, faith healing, weeping statues and many other weird and wonderful things, such reports can be taken with the necessary sackfuls of salt.

Anyway, why were there no reported sightings before 1947, and why have alien abductions only started in the sixties?

The problem with all the strange phenomena reported by the gullible tends to be the same. It always involves tinkering in the margins. The Loch Ness monster always happens to be on the other side of the lake. UFOs appear as tiny specks on the horizon. But what is far from A must be close to B so each distant sighting ought to be balanced by one closer by. Astrologers' predictions are so vague that they could apply to anybody; fortune tellers may hint that something unexpected may happen to you next week but their ability to predict the winning horse is no better than anybody else's. Faith healers are adept at "curing" the odd back or headache, but, if miracle cures were really possible, why not a new arm or leg? If ESP really existed why can't it do better than alleged marginal improvements on chance in heads or tails transmitting experiments? Never mind a 50.4 per cent success rate, it either works convincingly or it doesn't.

UFOs are not the highest on my list of scepticisms, but if aliens were trying to make contact would they really fly through space for many light-years just to remain blips on the horizon? No, they would land in Wembley Stadium and tell us whether Jesus has been sent to save *their* planet too. Until I see a UFO, piloted by Elvis, landing on top of Nessie, I am afraid, Mr Hill, I shall have to remain sceptical. If that makes me a flat-earther, then my only other excuse is that I come from Holland!

TONY AKKERMANS
Leeds

Dilemma

THE letter from A J Gunn (May) on the question of indoctrination in government schools does raise a dilemma for Humanist parents with children at state schools.

Do we opt our children out of the indoctrination sessions—or let them stay in but give them the necessary intellectual wherewithal to cope with the arguments of the religionists?

JOHN EVERS
Worcester Park

Humanists in communion?

AS A Catholic I enjoy the awe-inspiring ceremony of the Mass and other religious rites.

Thus if I was a Humanist I would want rites to "celebrate birth, marriage and death" (Page 7, May issue). They fulfil basic human needs.

And I would have thought that Humanists

would assemble on a Sunday to have a godless ceremony in a spirit of communion!

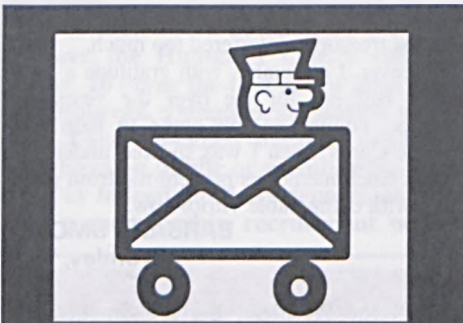
ANDREW HARVEY
Carlisle

Cosmic Fairy

ARTHUR ATKINSON'S new book *The Cosmic Fairy* starts with a notably unconvincing attempt to prove the non-existence of an (alleged) God the Creator. The argument runs thus:

Premises: 1, The emergence of consciousness has been relatively late in evolutionary development; 2, A Creator, initiating it all, must have been conscious of His creative act (conceivably an act that started the evolutionary ball rolling); so the (conscious) Creator-God must have existed before there was such a thing as consciousness; this is incoherent; *ergo* no God.

This is plainly a valid argument but it is equally plainly not a sound one.



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

The theistic claim is precisely that divine consciousness is prior to all other instances of consciousness and that these latter (notably human consciousness) merely mimic divine consciousness (in His image etc.) ... by evolution or otherwise is strictly immaterial.

The argument is valid in its structure but unsound in that it begs the question: *Is there a Creator who started it all—leading in due time to us, in image of Himself?*

What is more, it masks the true objection to theism, namely that the God-idea is, precisely, unfalsifiable; there is no conceivable test or criterion whereby it can be falsified. Whatsoever is discovered about anything at all can always give the theist the chance to say *Yes indeed it is so; God made it so for His sufficient reasons.*

It is potentially falsifiable ideas *only* that can prove illuminating; it is precisely the successful falsification of an idea that kills that idea and, to that extent, helps to point to provisional truth—truth that conceivably can be falsified but which has, so far, defied attempts to falsify it.

Atheism rests not on spurious proof that there

is no God; it rests upon genuine recognition that the God-idea is vacuous precisely because of its essential unfalsifiability.

Any theist can demolish the thesis that evolution proves that there is no God. Hostile reviewers of this book will have a field day doing so.

The trouble with theism is not that it can be disproved, but that it *can't* be disproved.

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

● *The Cosmic Fairy* is available at £7, including postage, from the BHA, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

'Humanist Adviser'

ONCE again, West Glamorgan Humanists have been asked to provide a Humanist Adviser for a civic dignitary. Whereas two years ago, it was a Humanist Adviser to Humanist County Councillor, Frank Evans, upon his becoming Chair of the West Glamorgan County Council, this time it was for the installation of the Humanist Dr Richard Edwards as Mayor of Carmarthen.

The outgoing Mayor's Chaplain read an opening prayer, but the ceremony was brought to a conclusion by the incoming Mayor's Humanist Adviser, Marjorie Vanston. The new Mayor did not want a Chaplain so had contacted the BHA and it fell to Marjorie, the outgoing Chair of the West Glamorgan Humanist Group, to fill the post. The Mayor himself took the opportunity to explain in a most reasoned, sensitive and comprehensive fashion why he had decided not to appoint a Chaplain. At the lavish reception which followed (freely available to townsfolk as well as councillors), a few sentences from Marjorie expressing a Humanist view replaced the customary grace.

On the Sunday following, the conventional Mayoral service was replaced by a Civic Celebration, involving representatives of several local schools. The Mayor himself read a passage from the *Humanist Anthology* and Marjorie, as his Humanist Adviser, acted as MC. As well as the few opening and concluding words, she read two poems—one in English and the other in Welsh, the latter written by Euros Bowen, the late brother of Geraint Bowen, a founder member of the North Wales Humanist Group.

Marjorie took great delight in being called "The Mayor's Humanist Adviser" throughout the occasion as well as in the printed programmes, and she encountered no open hostility. Her delight was even greater due to the fact that she was born in Carmarthen and lived there as a young girl until she was 13.

Marjorie's next turn of duty was on May 28, when she was required to open the first Council Meeting of the new season. We wish her and Dr Robert Edwards well in fulfilling their new duties from a Humanist perspective.

JULIE NORRIS
Swansea

You're telling us!

Superstitious nonsense

I WOULD like to know what other readers of *The Freethinker* think of the relatively recent upsurge of superstitious nonsense called astrology. I suppose it has always been with us, and more or less ignored, but now it cannot be ignored.

I have heard it referred to as "harmless fun", but I don't believe it is harmless any more, now that every cheap magazine and even the BBC and ITV offer advice on how to run your life on astrological grounds.

For instance, I once heard one young woman enquire of a TV astrologer during a phone-in whether the time was right for her to emigrate to Canada. He assured her that it was, without apparently knowing anything of her life and circumstances. I consider this to be totally irresponsible.

I understand, too, that certain Heads of State around the world consult astrologers to assist them in making decisions on affairs of state.

My belief is that all this—the astrology, the Tarot cards, the runes, the numerology phone lines and so on—is taking over where religion is leaving off, and it is just as silly and just as dangerous.

Can anyone tell me where astrologers supposedly get their information to make their predictions? Do they have some sort of "bible"? Where exactly does it say that, for instance, all Taureans will have a lot of visitors next week, or that all Cancerians will meet someone important on Friday? What are we supposed to think about their sources?

GEORGINA COUPLAND
Preston

Making 'em pay!

LAST night on the *Meridian Tonight* TV programme, it came to pass that them there governors of the Canterbury Cathedral have decided to enhance their prophets (sic!) by opening up visitation rights for we who are interested in archaeological, historical, architectural, artistic values—at a price, by charging for Sunday visitations; but ... only to those who actually visit, not to they that utilise the Cathedral for genuine, or divine, reasons!

"Oh!", I hears you say, "is nowt sacred?"

"'old 'ard!" sez I, "for once I feel that they are on our side, Lads (or Lassies even!)"

I shall gloss over the whole of EXOD. chap.

20 and the Decalogue ruling; ignore totally EXOD. 21:14; 31:14-15; 35: 2-3, which do cover the act of working (or not working) on a Sabbath day; I shall shun the Synoptic story of the money-grabbers in the temple, as well as Mothering Sunday (which, totally incidentally, has nothing to do at all with mothers!) and I shall concentrate solely upon modern day issues.

Utilising Cantab. Carey's rationalisation programme, Railtrack, the Misery Line, and South East Railways' problems are solved in an instant. The logicity is beyond belief, is it not? The commuter and the user travel absolutely free... and then we send the bill to the trainspotter clubs! Why has no one thought of this before? Train, car and plane spotters now, and ultimately the butterflies, birds and bees ...

But the problem now is—how do we get at the beermat, label, stamp, matchbox and diverse other criminal collectors who are definitely "under the counter", and but for whom we would all be living in a free society? Personally, for some unaccountable reason, I only ever collect viruses or bacteria!

By the way, as new subscribers, we love your mag.

LANCE MAYBERRY
Deal

News of their World

monitored by
BILL McILROY

THE Government has closed the St Richard of Chichester Roman Catholic school in Camden, north London, for "failing to raise standards through three years of drift". The school roll had fallen and it had one of the worst truancy records in England.

A critical report in 1994 by the Office for Standards in Education resulted in a £500,000 grant by the local authority to improve the school's performance. It received £500 more funding per pupil than any other secondary school in the borough.

Schools Minister Stephen Byers said support for the school from the local Roman Catholic community had slumped. Places would be found in other schools for the St Richard of Chichester pupils.

SIX teenage British Jews were among a hundred worshippers who came under attack as they prayed at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The non-Orthodox were holding a service when they were set upon by several hundred strictly Orthodox Jews.

Police tried to restore order as stones and bags of excrement were hurled by the Orthodox demonstrators. They spat and screamed abuse at the non-Orthodox Jews, who were told to "go back to Germany to be finished off."

Chaim Miller, an Orthodox Jew and Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, refused to condemn the attack.

Joel Levy, leader of the British youth group, described their experience as "shocking". Another member said: "This is the first time I

have been attacked for being Jewish."

The incident brings to mind a comment by a former Editor of *The Freethinker*, Chapman Cohen: "Really religious people never learn toleration from experiencing persecution."



THE headteachers' conference call for the Government to abandon legal insistence that the school day should start with an act of worship has been editorially endorsed by the *Methodist Recorder*.

"The law is neither respected nor observed", the *Methodist* weekly commented.

"In the past, the churches have generally supported the state requirement of daily school worship. In the light of major changes in British society, Christians have to ask themselves whether they are still right to do so. We live in an increasingly secular society, far removed from a Christendom culture."



A NEW survey of young Christians' attitudes

to sexual questions will dismay traditionalists. Conducted by philosopher Peter Vardy, the survey of sixth formers attending RE conferences last year reveals that 85 per cent believe sex before marriage is morally acceptable.

One of the most significant findings is that more than 90 per cent of Roman Catholic interviewees disagreed with the statement that artificial contraception is always wrong.



A DO-IT-YOURSELF questionnaire has been published by the Save the Church of England Foundation. Entitled *Belief Revealed*, it poses 253 questions of mind-boggling fatuity. Fortunately, seekers after faith are assured it is necessary to answer only 16.

The questionnaire was compiled by Malcolm Barker, who describes it as "the result of many years' gestation". Interviewed by the *Church Times*, Mr Barker declared with disarming frankness: "Christianity is not an intellectual religion. You don't arrive at being a Christian by exercising your mind."

Recent publications by National Secular Society members include:

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

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: Summer programme obtainable from Jopan Wimble, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove BN3 2TL. Telephone: 01273 733215.

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. Details of Summer social lunch at Bridgewater Arms, Little Gaddesden, on Sunday, July 27, from Alan Foreman on 01582 667420.

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, July 17, 7.30 pm: Public meeting on Reform of the British Constitution.

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). 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. 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. Thursday, July 31, 8 pm: AGM. Thursday, August 28, 8 pm: Informal meeting. Both meetings at 99 Ravensbourne Park. Saturday, July 12, noon to 6 pm: 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. 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.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): Information: J Cole 01642 559418 or R Wood 01740 650861.

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

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. July 17: *Atheism on a Soapbox* (tape).

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, August 6, 8 pm: AGM. 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 South Yorkshire Festival, Wortley Hall, Wortley, Saturday, July 5., and at Greenpeace Festival, Endcliffe Park, Hunters Bar, Sheffield, July 13, 10 am. Offers of assistance to Bill McIlroy or Gordon Sinclair.

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.

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0181 642 4577.

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.

West Kent Humanist Group: Information: Ian Peters on 01892 890485 or Chris Ponsford on 01892 862855.

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

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