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'Vatican saved Nazis with Holocaust gold'



Peter Brearey: Page 9

Shooting down the UFOs: Colin McCall & Terry Sanderson

Up Front

Torture of the innocents

ON THIS occasion, I take no pleasure from saying *We told you so*. But—starkly, horribly—ecclesiastical news from Ireland, the USA and Egypt underlines the demand which we splashed across the front page of last month's issue of *The Freethinker*: RELIGION'S ABUSE OF CHILDREN MUST STOP! Inside was a full-page article by Dr Narisetti Innaiah which made many urgent points about the deleterious effects of religion on young people. It called for UNICEF action to

curtail superstition's baneful influence on infancy.

And now, from America, comes a report that a jury has awarded damages of \$120 million (£73 million) after finding that the Dallas diocese of the Roman Catholic Church had ignored evidence that the Rev Rudolph Kos had sexually abused altar boys as young as nine. The civil case was brought by 10 of Kos's alleged victims and the family of an 11th who committed suicide at the age of 22 after 10 years of abuse.

Criminal proceedings against Kos are likely to follow the civil decision that the Church was responsible for failing to act sooner.

The Church has appealed against the magnitude of this (to me) satisfyingly copious flow of funds from the massively rich to the needy—almost certainly the largest judgment ever made against the Church, according to a Roman Catholic functionary in New York. The previous highest sum awarded was \$3 million. But the figure paid out in secret settlements in the US could exceed \$500 million: Minnesota lawyer Jeffrey Anderson, who has represented more than 350 abuse victims, said he knew certain dioceses had paid out \$50 million-plus.

"We've never been able to get [diocesan officials] to take these matters seriously," said Sylvia Demarest, lawyer for one of the plaintiffs. "They maintained throughout the trial they were not in any way responsible for the activities of this priest."

The Dallas Diocese insisted that it had used reasonable judgment in pursuing complaints but said Kos was a "very convincing man". The words "hoist" and "petard" sprang at once to mind when I read that, for didn't the Church teach Father Kos how to be convincing when he was telling lies?

MEANWHILE, on this side of the Atlantic, Brendan Smyth, 70, was jailed for 12 years on July 25 after a Dublin court heard harrowing details of his victims' suffering over a 36-year period. A member of the Norbertine order, Smyth pleaded guilty to 74 charges of abusing 20 children, male and female, some as young as six.

In 1994, the Irish Coalition government of Albert Reynolds collapsed amid uproar over the revelation that the Attorney General's office had failed to act on extradition applications for Smyth's return to face charges in Northern Ireland.

I found reading the evidence against him a truly lacerating experience. One woman told of being repeatedly abused in a convent parlour. Her school uniform had been stained after Smyth ejaculated on to it. The next day, she had been humiliated and beaten in school—because of the semen stains. When the girl refused to see Smyth again, the Mother Superior told her she was "above her station" and slapped her before making her see him. As in the case of another girl who woke up on one occasion to find Smyth's finger in her vagina, this poor lass went on to attempt suicide.

IN BOTH these cases, we surely have men who suffer from serious psychiatric problems and who have little in common, sexually, with the huge number of "normal" priests who,

almost as a tradition of the Church, bonk housekeepers and married women parishioners and the occasional nun. This is not a moral question and I doubt if it has anything to do with the Church's tottering celibacy rule. We are looking at men who need medical assistance as much as children need protection from their depredations.

What fills me with a heart-scorching anger is the fact that this pair were able to become and remain priests. The Norbertine Order has admitted that it is now "painfully aware" of the inadequacy of its response over the years to reports of Smyth's behaviour. As *The Guardian* said (July 26): "Attempts to treat his deviancy were not only unsuccessful but also indicated that at least some people within the order may have known what he was up to."

And dealing with the Dallas case *The Independent* (July 26) noted that the jury found the Diocese guilty not only of failing to uncover Kos's 11-year reign of abuse "but also of covering up the evidence when victims finally came forward." Kos had been ordained despite his having once served a year's youth detention for having molested a young male neighbour. He had been married for a year before persuading his diocese to grant him an annulment, and his ex-wife was one of many who had complained to the diocese about his behaviour; she drew attention to his interest in young boys.

But God moves in bewildering ways. Not only did He cause Smyth's victim to be further tortured by the nuns, but also, shortly after the first complaints against Kos, the priest was promoted by the Church.

I wonder how many thousands of youngsters are even now suffering, unheeded, from sexual persecution at the hands of the Christian clergy? But the Roman Catholic hierarchy need not lose much sleep over the issue: dioceses all over the world have insured against having to pay out sums similar to that granted in the case of Brother-in-Christ Rudolph Kos. So that's all right.

GOING back to Dr Innaiah's July article, he writes to say that actually there is *no* reference to female genital mutilation in the Koran: "It is only Muslim tradition that is being observed by mullahs ..."

This is supported by an Agence France Press report of June 24: "A Cairo court yesterday overruled a Health Ministry order and authorised public hospitals to perform female circumcisions. The ruling was made at the request of Islamic fundamentalists and doctors."

"Judge Abdelaziz Hamada of the Cairo Administrative Court said the ruling 'cancelled' a directive from the Health Minister, Ismail Sallam, a year ago banning the operation in public hospitals."

Sheikh Yussef Badri, an Islamic clergyman who was among those who filed the Cairo suit, commented: "God be praised, we have won and can apply Islam."

The AFP report concludes: "The operation is widespread in Egypt and supporters say it is necessary to quell sexual desire before marriage. But it has led to several deaths."

Peter Brearey

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More co-operation and sharing, but ...



If it ain't broke, why try to mend it?

Former President of the National Secular Society BARBARA SMOKER joins the debate over the future of the Humanist movement, expressing her own view and that of the Editor of *The Freethinker*

IN HIS article "Time to Re-structure?" (July issue), Roy Saich suggests that the national bodies in the Humanist movement should hold regular activities (such as Board meetings) outside London. That might sound democratic, but in practice it is not. Roy himself, living as he does in Kenilworth, would probably welcome a Coventry venue, but surely he would find London more convenient than, say, Brighton or Great Yarmouth, just as people in those towns find London more convenient than Coventry.

However, Roy rightly deplores the unilateral decision of the Executive Committee of the British Humanist Association to move its headquarters away from the Humanist Centre in Holborn, thus effectively breaking up the Centre altogether—especially as the BHA would like to take the International Humanist and Ethical Union with them, and the RPA would probably follow.

The National Secular Society, though not the wealthiest of the Humanist organisations, bought 47 Theobald's Road (now Bradlaugh House) nearly four years ago, so as to enable a Humanist Centre to be set up for all the main organisations in the movement. For this purpose it made structural alterations to the building, with a communicating door into the adjacent Conway Hall; and additional structural alterations were made to assist the BHA, at considerable expense.

The NSS provided not only separate administrative offices for each organisation

but also a large open-plan office to house electronic equipment, some of which was to be used communally. It was decided to employ a shared receptionist and have a single telephone switchboard for the whole complex, and the Joint Management Committee unanimously agreed that leases should be negotiated between the NSS and its tenants on reasonable terms for a reasonable period.

However, when, after some delay (caused by personnel changes, both of staff and officers), a form of lease was drawn up by the NSS, the BHA refused to accept its terms. Then came the BHA leadership's review of the suitability of the premises—and the decision that they wanted to leave.

The fact that this would leave the NSS high-and-dry, without its main tenants, and would at the same time destroy the whole co-operative concept of the Humanist Centre did not seem to give the BHA executive so much as a twinge of conscience—though, strangely enough, they did not inform their own rank-and-file or affected organisations.

In all this I agree with Roy Saich, as also with his contention that the old Humanist Liaison Committee made a move in the wrong direction when it became the Humanist Forum (meaning "talking shop") instead of becoming a real co-ordinating committee with some executive powers.

But Roy swings too far when he suggests setting up a single national organisation to replace the main bodies that have hitherto comprised the Humanist Centre.

He describes them as "the existing four

and some others", without saying which four he means. Perhaps he has forgotten that the South Place Ethical Society, which owns Conway Hall and is the oldest of all the bodies, is a London organisation, not a national one—though it does have members all over the world. Even when the Ethical Union (which changed its name in 1967 to the BHA) was set up in the last century as a federation of local Ethical societies, SPES refused to join—and they would certainly not want to give up their sovereignty now, after more than two centuries, especially as their property is very valuable and they host more activities than any other organisation in the movement.

The National Secular Society, which dates from 1866, is likewise proud of its history, and continues to promote more radical policies than the BHA, which tends to be scared of jeopardising its charity status. Indeed, one of the reasons given for its wanting to leave Bradlaugh House is that it does not want to cohabit with organisations that are making statements with which they may not agree.

The Rationalist Press Association, which, like the BHA, is comparatively upper-crust, is perhaps the one body that might conceivably be willing eventually to marry the BHA; but when they jointly founded the original BHA in the early 1960s as an umbrella organisation, the RPA soon broke away, thus enabling the Ethical Union to adopt the name as its own.

Though advocating a single national



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Difference of emphasis?

I READ that Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould have been debating Darwinism and related matters in the *New York Review of Books*. Without the texts it isn't possible to comment on their relatively minor disagreements over natural selection, but one of the related matters they discussed was religion, and the two men's attitude to that subject is worth considering here.

According to Andrew Brown, writing in *The Guardian* (June 11), the argument is between "Darwinian atheists". But whereas Dawkins is an avowed atheist with no time for religion, Gould's view, as expressed in his writings, is less clear-cut. Of course, as Brown said, "Neither side believes that history has a purpose". There is, nevertheless, a difference of—let us say—emphasis, as can be seen from Gould's essay "The Late Birth of a Flat Earth" (*Dinosaur in a Haystack*, 1996).

Gould has been criticising John W Draper's *History of the Conflict Between Science and Religion*, first published in 1874, and Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, published in 1896. And he says, "the myth of a war between science and religion remains all too current, and continues to impede a proper bonding and conciliation between these two utterly different and powerfully important institutions of human life. How can a war exist between two vital subjects with such different appropriate turfs—science as an enterprise dedicated to discovering and explaining the factual basis of the empirical world, and religion as an examination of ethics and values?"

If we consider this a difference of emphasis, we might summarise by saying that Gould is kinder to religion than Dawkins. And as religion has been anything but kind to scientists (see the aforementioned Draper and White) there is no reason for scientists to show generosity now.

Sun shines on righteous

WHEN an evolutionist like Stephen Jay Gould can describe religion as "an examination of ethics and values", it's not surprising that a popular newspaper should confuse Christianity with morality.

"Schoolchildren are to be given lessons in morality, Prime Minister Tony Blair has pledged", wrote *Sun* assistant editor Chris Roycroft-Davis (June 18). And, in keeping with his paper's new political stance, he accused three Tory Education Ministers of "betraying the nation".

The betrayal began in March 1991, when Kenneth Clarke sent a letter to Chief Education Officers, saying that the agreed syllabuses for RE "should not be designed to convert pupils, or to urge a particular religion or religious belief on pupils".

Clarke's "illegal diktat" was reinforced in January 1994 by John Patten, said Roycroft-Davis, and continued under Gillian Shephard. Now, alas, "Many children don't know the Lord's Prayer ... They are taught that all religions are equal and learn about Hindu and Muslim festivals at the expense of Christian ones".

We are, he suggested, "in danger of wiping out religion in this country altogether. What hope would we have then of instilling moral values in young people?" More hope, I would say.

Wrong angle on 'rights'

NEWS that discrimination on religious grounds is to be made illegal as part of the Government's human rights legislation in the Autumn raises some puzzling and possibly disturbing questions. Where and in what circumstances are Muslims, for example, discriminated against on religious grounds?

Ahmed Versi, Editor of *Muslim News*, told *The Guardian* (June 12) that almost every month he hears of cases where "women have been dismissed or have problems at their workplace because of their headscarves". But that isn't religious discrimination—it's discrimination against women wearing headscarves in the workplace and, in some cases, there may be a practical reason for it. If there isn't, then headscarves should be allowed.

The proposed new law, which has been welcomed by the Commission for Racial Equality, will extend the protection offered by the 1976 Race Relations Act to religious minorities in England and Wales; and therein lies the danger. I fear that anything offensive to Muslims may be considered discriminatory.

It was the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims which declared that "Islamophobia is a serious and dangerous feature of contemporary affairs and culture". And it suggested there should be legislation to make discrimination on religious grounds unlawful. It's now going to get its wish, with the serious consequences outlined last month in "Up Front".

Runnymede—and the Government—really have got it wrong. It isn't Islam that needs protection, it's society. Muslim activists are influential enough without the power of the law, and not just in Islamic countries. Nike Inc have withdrawn sports shoes because a logo on them, intended to look like flames, resembled the word "Allah" in Arabic script (*Daily Telegraph*, June 25). Under an agreement with the Council on American-Islamic

Relations, the firm has apologised to Muslims, and the Council will urge Muslims not to boycott Nike products.

I shed no tears for Nike, but Runnymede, the Commission for Racial Equality and New Labour should note the words of Nikhad Awad, the Islamic Council's Executive Director: "We wanted to reinstate confidence in our community that whenever they see something offensive, there could be something done about it."

Brick wall syndrome

WELL, what do you know? Jericho didn't fall to Joshua's trumpets! I know you never thought it had, but *you* don't accept the word of God. Plenty of people still do, and for them it should come as a shock to learn that, after a month-long dig this Spring, archaeologists from the University of Rome found no evidence of any collapse (*The Guardian*, June 19). The walls they have excavated are still intact. I say it *should* come as a shock to believers, but nothing seems to shake their faith. It's like the walls of Jericho.

Threats of Paradise ...

THERE'S hope for us all. Father Giovanni Marchesi, resident theologian on the Italian Jesuit magazine *Civiltà Cattolica*, has said that members of the other great religions, such as Buddhists, Muslims and Jews, could hope for "eternal salvation". So, too, could non-believers, "as long as they have earned it by the way they lived their lives" (*The Times*, June 18).

St Augustine was wrong to say that non-believers would burn in Hell for eternity. Father Marchesi prefers to follow Origen, who held that, although souls became either "demons or angels" after death, at the Last Judgment "even the Devil himself will be saved". Which means there will be some interesting company up there.

Who has the best tunes?

THIRTY years ago, John Lennon, famously or infamously, announced that the Beatles were bigger than Jesus. Now, in an interview with *New Musical Express*, Oasis songwriter Noel Gallagher says: "I would hope we mean more to people than putting money in a church basket and saying 10 Hail Marys on a Sunday. Has God played Knebworth recently?"

When Oasis "played Knebworth" last year, they attracted a record-breaking crowd of 250,000, which it would take many church congregations to equal.

New ethic for matters of life and death

THIS book is sub-titled “The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics” and Professor Singer sustains his thesis that such has actually happened.

A refreshing feature of the book is that, in the text and not just hidden in footnotes, there are quotations (some of the legal judgments) relevant to cases. Listing the names of people featuring in these cases demonstrates that the book is valuable for historical reference as well as for discussion of principle.

The list includes: Rudy Linares (who held hospital staff at bay at gunpoint while he disconnected the respirator sustaining the futile survival of his infant son. He held them off for about half an hour—until he was satisfied that the baby was dead and then gave himself up.

Trisha Marshall had attempted to rob a cripple who, himself, succeeded in shooting her instead. Marshall was rendered “brain dead”—but, it was discovered, she was also 17 weeks pregnant. It was decided to keep her remains alive so that the pregnancy could come to term—which it did—and Marshall’s family and her lover quarrelled over custody. Blood tests revealed that the lover was not the father anyway!

Nancy Cruzan’s case, and Anthony Bland’s, are described fully. In these cases the concept, for what it is worth, of “brain dead” did not apply. Both of these cases, Cruzan and Bland, were instances of the persistent vegetative state—eight years in Cruzan’s case.

Another significant case, described at some length as “Dr Shann’s Dilemma”, concerned two babies simultaneously in his care. Baby A was normal except for heart disease—so severe that early death was inevitable unless a new heart could be found in time. Baby B had suffered bleeding into his brain, destroying his whole cerebral cortex but the brainstem was functioning and baby B could be kept breathing—but only with a ventilator and with no hope of anything remotely resembling a normal life. The whole brain was not dead and so, legally, he was not dead. His heart was in order. It happened that the two babies were of the same blood group and so it would have been feasible to attempt to use B as a donor whereby A’s defective heart could be replaced.

Under the prevailing (Australian) law, killing one “brain dead” baby (with no prospect of meaningful life) to give meaningful life to another who could not live meaningfully without a new heart—a project that might seem to be reasonable on both a common sense basis and on a “pro-life” basis—was ruled to be unlawful. No alternative heart was to be had for baby A; both babies soon died. One might have been saved but, perversely, was not—precisely because of “pro-life” simplistics.

It is serious detailed study of the general

Rethinking Life and Death by Peter Singer. OUP paperback, pp 250. £7.99. ISBN 0-19-286184-0

Review: ERIC STOCKTON

ethics of particular situations that gives Singer’s book its force and its value. He devotes many pages to demonstrating that “brain death” is not such a useful concept as it has been taken to be. He shows convincingly, and with telling particularity, that the “absolute sanctity of human life” is an untenable position.

The case of Lilian Bayliss and the work of Dr Jack Kervorkian are both memorable in general; in this book, the significant facts are set out in some detail and with great attention to fairness. The (very wise and humane) judgments of several leading jurists are quoted where relevant and, again, this alone makes the book useful.

Moreover, Singer outlines a convincing basis for a new ethic regarding life and death questions—an ethic that leaves room for honest revision in the light of likely technical developments. In particular, the notion that conception and death are usefully to be described as instant events is demolished; it is made clear that these are not strictly events but are processes—admittedly sometimes rapid but essentially proceeding by stages.

Another particular point of huge general significance is that the human species is not apart from the rest of life but a part of the totality of life. One particular consequence of this general view is that Singer exposes “species-ism”—the notion that any human life is necessarily more valuable than any

non-human life. This exposure is at the root of much thought and concern on the subject of “animal rights”—about which Singer has written extensively and forcefully elsewhere.

Positively, Singer lists two sets of “commandments”—the Old Ones (OC 1-5) and the corresponding revised New Ones (NC 1-5). Both sets are reproduced here:

OC 1: Treat all human life as of equal worth.

NC 1: Recognise that the worth of human life varies.

OC 2: Never intentionally take innocent human life.

NC 2: Take responsibility for the consequences of your actions.

OC 3: Never take your own life and always try to prevent others taking theirs.

NC 3: Respect a person’s desire to live or die.

OC 4: Be fruitful and multiply.

NC 4: Bring children into the world only if they are wanted.

OC 5: Treat all human life as always more precious than any non-human life.

NC 5: Do not discriminate on the basis of species.

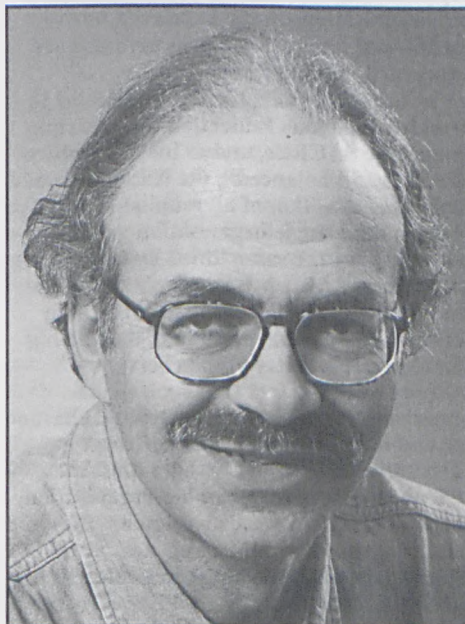
Of course, Singer does not mean by “commandment”, in respect of the new ones, what is often its connotation in the old ones. The old ones have been flagged as absolutes—and indeed are phrased as such; the new ones are meant as guidelines—and are phrased as such. There is a difference of “mindset”, as well as of content, in the one set as compared with the other. The old ones are proclaimed *a priori*; the new ones are to be discussed empirically.

As a reviewer I cannot fault this book on clarity, coherence and comprehensiveness.

Simply as a matter of personal opinion, I think that Singer maybe underrates the importance of birth as a turning point in human life. It is true that he does not fall for the simplistic view that birth is a mere shift in location from the womb to the world (a pro-life notion that seeks sentimentally to equate abortion with infanticide and, hence, with murder—the basis of the silly nonsense that “if the body wall of the woman in late pregnancy were transparent then you would see that, inside her, is a baby just like it will be after delivery”). But I would like to have seen more qualitative significance attached to birth than Singer seems ready to allow.

I also wonder whether Singer is not a little simplistic in his treatment of speciesism.

But, like the “commandments”, these personal reservations are reasons for reading the book and discussing its contents from a Humanist standpoint. Humanist groups might well consider arranging to discuss this important book as well as trying to get copies of it into libraries.



● Peter Singer

Courage in the face of oppression

IT IS a surprise to realise that women writing as early as the 18th Century were as strong in their antagonism to the Bible and as critical of the effects of religious beliefs as writers in this century. The loathsome doctrine of Hell was considered by these independent-minded women to be as outrageous and as undermining of true morality as most *churchmen* now believe it to be. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) writes: "Why is our fancy to be appalled by terrific perspectives of hell beyond the grave? Hell stalks abroad—the lash resounds on the slave's naked sides, and the sick wretch, who can no longer earn the sour bread of unremitting labour, steals to a ditch to bid the world a long goodnight ..."

Many of the women who figure in this compilation were exceptionally brave, unintimidated by the vicious hostility their views aroused. It is no surprise that many were identified with the cause of the abolition of slavery and of course with the fight for women's freedom from oppressive laws and social attitudes which upheld the right of husbands to rule and subdue them.

Frances Wright, born at the end of the 18th Century, poured scorn on the pretensions of religion to promote morality. She wrote: "... so far from entrenching human conduct within the

Women Without Superstition: "No Gods—No Masters". The Collected Writings of Women Freethinkers of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor. \$25 (NB: add \$4 for surface mail; \$17 for air mail). Freedom from Religion Foundation, PO Box 750, Madison WI 53701, USA.

Review: RONA M GERBER

gentle barriers of peace and love, religion has ever been ... the deepest source of contentions, ... persecutions for conscience sake, ... false judgements, evil interpretations ... unjust, injurious, inconsistent actions ..."

The women in this book deplore the general tendency of women towards conformity and submission (although, in the 20th Century, this may not be true of most women living in the more prosperous parts of the world). Elizabeth Cady Stanton, writing in the second half of the 19th Century, impatiently reflected on the the paralysing piety of women which helped to reinforce their own subjection.

She asserts: "The thing which most retards and militates against women's self-development is self-sacrifice;"—but this, of course, according to traditional Christian teaching, is a

mark of virtue in a woman!

Many of the women freethinkers represented here were brilliantly clever. Even Annie Besant, who later turned to theosophy and muddied the waters of her thought, received the only Honours award given in botany in 1881 in Professor Huxley's class, women having been first admitted to London University in 1878. Susan Wixon was "always head of her class"; at four, bright Voltairine de Cleyre taught herself to read; Barbara Smoker, until recently President of the National Secular Society (who, incidentally, shocked even fellow Humanists when she called Mother Teresa a "Sacred Cow" on national television) was markedly clever in school, as was the pro-abortionist Anne Nicol Gaylor whose book *Abortion is a Blessing* would "create shock waves across America", according to the Catholic chat-show host who interviewed her on television.

The last woman featured in this book is Taslima Nasrin, who with great courage opposes the cruelties of fundamentalist Islam and is thus an outcast from her own country and is still in danger of her life.

This book clearly demonstrates the close connection between the institutions of religion and the oppression of the powerless: slaves, women, lower-class workers and children. Read it as a heartening testimony to the courage and influence of dissenting women in the face of this repression.

If it ain't broke, why try to mend it?

← From Page 3

organisation to replace the existing Humanist bodies, Roy says (quite rightly) that "none of the four can 'take over' all the existing ones". What, then, does he envisage? The word "merger" is invariably a euphemism for "take-over". The only question is who takes over whom—and in the eyes of the BHA there is simply no question at all: the BHA would "absorb" all the rest of us.

In 1960, because the thriving Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was careful not to indulge in illegal activities, the Committee

of 100 was set up to do so. It had roughly the same aims as CND but used different methods—which could not possibly have been used simultaneously by the same organisation. The same is true of the different organisations in the Humanist movement—and not only as far as methods are concerned, but even aims.

For instance, while the BHA has tried to broaden Religious Education by participation in the SACREs, and to make it "objective, fair and balanced", the NSS has stood firmly for abolition of all religion in schools. How could a single organisation go along both paths at the same time? Besides, when radio or television producers want a discussion on the subject, it is possible for both sets of views to be represented, thus giving Humanism two bites of the cherry.

Apart from the fact that each of the organisations has its own individual character and its own emphasis on different issues, each has different sorts of activities: the BHA is mainly a membership organisation, the NSS is mainly for campaigning, the RPA is mainly for publishing, and SPES is mainly for public meetings and cultural activities. This diversity could scarcely survive any sort of merger.

I had to smile at Roy's vision of everyone

getting on with everyone else if in a single organisation. It would only magnify differences of taste and opinion—and when push came to shove, there would be nowhere else to go.

Although I myself, in spite of all the disagreements, feel comfortable enough belonging to all the organisations, I know a number of Atheists who abhor the word Humanist almost as much as the word God; and *vice versa*. Without separate organisations, the movement would lose such exclusive members altogether. And, of course, we would also lose their future donations and legacies. Also, the financial and other benefits of one person belonging to a number of different organisations would be lost!

Finally, there is the problem of the accumulated past donations and legacies held or converted by each organisation. It is very difficult in law to change the exact objects for which money has been given in trust in the distant past, without contacting the heirs of every donor—which is, of course, impossible, at least in the case of small donations.

So the organisations must—and will—remain separate. However, it is shameful if they cannot manage to co-operate and at least share premises.

Labouring the point

THE Prime Minister has decided to make his Christian faith a key feature of this year's party conference at Brighton ... Mr Blair has organised a massive religious "super service"—a multi-denominational affair for up to 500 worshippers—on the first day of his party's annual gathering. *The Sunday Telegraph*, July 27.

Undermining 'religion's tottering dome'

ONE HUNDRED and seventy-five ago—on July 8, 1822—Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned in a boating accident off the North West coast of Italy, near Viareggio, shortly before his 30th birthday.

His reputation as an outstanding lyric poet remains undimmed, and Shelley was also a radical with a frequently expressed hostility to organised religion and the political establishment of his time.

He was expelled from Oxford in 1811 for co-writing a pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*, in which he argues that "... no testimony can be admitted which is contrary to reason; reason is found in the evidence of our senses." He also contends that it is irrational for a deity to command belief because religious conviction is not an act of volition.

Shelley rejected Christianity for deism in his early teens but this was succeeded by pantheism, a view to which he adhered for the remainder of his life and which found expression in the epic poem "Queen Mab", written in 1813. In his essay, "There is no God", written as a preface to "Queen Mab", Shelley explains: "This negation must be understood solely to affect a *creative* Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading spirit co-eternal with the universe remains." An example of Shelley's pantheism can be seen in the verse:

*Spirit of Nature! all-sufficing Power,
Necessity! thou mother of the world!
Unlike the God of human error, thou
Requirest no prayers or praises; the caprice
of man's weak will belongs no more to thee
Than do the changeful passions of his breast
To thy unvarying harmony: the slave,
Whose horrible lusts spread misery o'er the
world,
And the good man, who lifts, with virtuous
pride,
His being, in the sight of happiness ...*

Shelley castigates greed and religion:

*Then grave and hoary-headed hypocrites,
Without a hope, a passion, or a love,
Who, through a life of luxury and lies,
have crept by flattery to the seats of power,
Support the system whence their honours
flow—
They have three words:- well tyrants know
their use,
Well pay them for the loan, with usury
Torn from a bleeding world!—God, Hell, and
Heaven.
A vengeful, pitiless and almighty fiend,
Whose mercy is a nickname for the rage
Of tameless tigers hungering for blood.
Hell, a red gulf of everlasting fire,
Where poisonous and undying worms prolong
Eternal misery to those hapless slaves
Whose life has been a penance for its crimes.
And Heaven, a meed for those who dare belie
Their human nature, quake, believe and
cringe*

CARL PINEL pays a freethinker's tribute to Shelley

Before the mockeries of earthly power.

"Queen Mab" was privately printed, but a pirated edition was published by William Clark in 1821. Shelley tried to get the publication suppressed but is thought to have privately approved of its publication (Walter, 1990). There is no copyright on obscene, seditious or blasphemous material, and it is possible that Shelley knew this when applying for an injunction.

However, Clark was prosecuted by the Vice Society and sentenced to four months' imprisonment for refusing to withdraw the poem. George Woodcock (*Anarchism*, 1962), points out that William Godwin's anarchist classic *Political Justice* influenced Shelley's political development: "On one level at least, 'Queen Mab', 'The Revolt of Islam', and 'Prometheus Unbound' are all transmutations into verse of the creed of 'Political Justice'".

Shelley's longer poems are explicitly didactic and this has made him popular with Anarchists and Socialists. "The Masque of Anarchy" was written because of his feelings of outrage at, and compassion for the victims of, the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester on August 16, 1819, when sabre-wielding yeomanry killed 11 peaceful demonstrators for Reform and wounded 400, including more than 100 women. One of the verses says:

*And at length when ye complain,
With a murmur weak and vain,
'Tis to see the tyrant's crew
Ride over your wives and you:-
Blood is on the grass like dew.*

In May, 1812, Daniel Eaton was imprisoned and pilloried for his printing activities (in the pillory, he was cheered instead of being pelted with eggs). This led Shelley to write an eloquent letter to Lord Ellenborough, pleading for toleration for those whose beliefs are different:

Either the Christian religion is true, or it is not. If true, it comes from God, and its authenticity can admit of doubt and dispute no further than its Omnipotent Author is willing to allow; if true, it admits of rational proof and is capable of being placed equally beyond controversy ... If false, surely no enlightened legislature would punish the reasoner.

Eaton's actual "crime" was his publication of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. Shelley's letter was reprinted in 1883 after G W Foote, founder and first Editor of *The Freethinker*, was

imprisoned for a year for blasphemy.

The esteem in which Shelley is held by both Socialists and Rationalists can be seen by the publication in 1888 of *Shelley's Socialism* by Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl Marx, and her partner, Edward Aveling, caretaker-Editor of *The Freethinker* while Foote was in prison.

Shelley's interests were wide-ranging: he extolled the virtues of a vegetarian diet, opposed the barbarity of capital punishment, proposed electoral reform, and was a republican. Shelley believed that the marriage and divorce laws placed artificial constraints on people and that love alone should determine whether couples stayed together. His essay *Even Love is Sold* poses the question: "How long then ought the sexual connection to last? What law ought to specify the extent of the grievances which should limit its duration?" He adds: "The state of society in which we exist is a mixture of feudal savageness and imperfect civilization. The narrow and unenlightened morality of the Christian religion is an aggravation of these evils."

Shelley's views on equality of the sexes anticipate the feminist movement's call for justice in the 20th Century. In "The Revolt of Islam" he writes:

*Can man be free if woman be a slave?
Chain one who lives, and breathes this
boundless air
To the corruption of a closed grave!
Can they whose mates are beasts, condemned
to bear
Scorn, heavier far than toil or anguish, dare
To trample their oppressors? in their home
Among their babes, thou knowest a curse
would wear
The shape of woman—hoary crime would
come
Behind, and fraud rebuild religion's tottering
dome.*

Shelley displayed moral courage in criticising religion, although, as Walter (1990) points out, poets were not prosecuted for blasphemy—vigilante Christian groups preferred to attack easier targets in the Freethought movement.

Many of Shelley's views on morality and politics remain as fresh today as when they were written. We can learn from his views of liberty and equality of the sexes which are contained in his carefully-argued prose and his magnificent poems. As he concludes in *A Defence of Poetry*: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

References: Clark, D L (1954) *Shelley's Prose*, Fourth Estate, London, 1988. *Shelley's Poetical Works* (1892), Frederick Warne and Company, London and New York. Walter, N (1990) *Blasphemy Ancient and Modern*, Rationalist Press Association, London. Woodcock, G (1962) *Anarchism*, The World Publishing Company, USA; Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1963.

GAY CLERGY: THE DAY OF JUDGMENT IS YEARS OFF

THE C of E General Synod agreed on July 14—by 380 votes to 126—to reopen its debate on homosexual clergy by acknowledging that *Issues in Human Sexuality* issued by Bishops in 1991 “was not the last word on the subject”.

Bishops voted unanimously in favour and the clergy did so by a ratio of six-to-one. Proponents are heralding this as a resounding victory, particularly as two conservative amendments to the motion were roundly rejected and the Archbishop of Canterbury (Dr George Carey) agreed to consider setting up an international commission, similar to the one which paved the way for women priests.

Richard Kirker, Secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, told *The Freethinker* that the commission “will lead to what we want, in all probability”.

But, despite losing amendments by 180 and 153 votes respectively, the conservatives are making light of the progressives’ optimism, particularly in letters to *The Times*, where they point out that it will be up to the international conference of bishops next year to decide whether or not to have a commission. Even if there is a commission, they say, its remit is likely to be sexuality in general, and even if it were to consider the issue of homosexual priests, it is not a foregone conclusion that any liberalisation will result. Many of the conservatives are lay members, as the voting figures showed—only 63 per cent of them voted in favour of the

Keith Porteous Wood reports

motion, but some of their number are very highly placed.

Dr Carey declared uncompromisingly that he could not find any justification, from the Bible or the entire Christian tradition, for sexual activity outside marriage, and that same-sex relationships could not be equal to marriage.

He added that he did not think any change was likely in the Church’s position “in the foreseeable future”. Carey’s deputy, the Archbishop of York (who had previously described his sexuality as “a grey area”) was also intransigent, calling somewhat optimistically for gay priests to be celibate, describing celibacy as a “positive, creative and fulfilling lifestyle”.

It is hard to reconcile the Primate’s utterances at the Synod with the proposed commission and (almost as if it were a Party-line) the Bishops’ unanimous vote in favour of further discussion. But both were masterpieces of political “fudge”.

Albeit that it is probably only a recently-held view, Carey’s judgment was correct that the issue could no longer be ducked completely. This is partly because of pressure from liberal Anglican bishops (notably in America and Britain) and rank-and-file clergy.

The mobilisation of sympathetic clergy is largely the result of efficient campaigning by the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement,

which revealed on the eve of the debate that 21 serving bishops have knowingly ordained gay priests. LGCM has also raised public awareness, as has the gay campaigning group OutRage!

Doubtless Dr. Carey is congratulating himself on at least having “put off the evil day” of decision and having prevented open warfare. Although the progressives think they have made a step forward, the conservatives will also be pleased because Carey has publicly sided with them and that the wording of the motion was so vague as to be almost meaningless. The progressives are probably now regretting they had not been more assertive in the wording of their motion.

What is clear is that natural justice and compassion are irrelevant to this debate. The Rev Malcolm Johnson declared: “I find it obscene that happily married heterosexual bishops condemn their gay clergy to celibacy. I think we need an ethic for homosexuals other than ‘stop it’”.

Canon Wigley’s response was: “If ever legislation is passed by this Synod which allows for practising homosexuals to be ordained, I am afraid that the number of clergy and lay people who will leave the Church of England will make the numbers who left over the ordination of women look infinitesimal.”

Carey’s triumph has been to make it highly unlikely that this particular day of judgment will be during his Primacy

LAST WORD ON THE MILLENNIUM?

WHAT ought to be—but certainly will not be—the last words on two topics which dominate the front pages *ad nauseam* came in July from Nicolas Walter, of the Rationalist Press Association and *The Freethinker*.

In a letter to *The Times*, our colleague noted that the House of Lords debate on the Millennium Dome, as sketched by Matthew Parris (July 9), seemed to have got itself into a muddle:

Several peers said that this is a Christian country; but a large and growing proportion of the population follow other religions or none. Lord Elton said that the Millennium is a celebration of the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ; but anniversaries, by definition, recur every year. Lord McIntosh of Haringey said that the Millennium is significant for anyone who uses the Gregorian calendar; but this, based as it is on the pre-Christian Julian calendar, only measures the year and doesn’t actually count years.

The problem is that the post-Christian Dionysian era, which does count years, is based on a mistake. When Dionysius Exiguus invented it, in its sixth century, he placed the incarnation of Jesus in AD 1, though most Christian scholars both before and after him

put it a few years earlier. It was later discovered that Herod the Great had died in the Spring of 4 BC, so the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus, if it really occurred and if it really matters, has already passed.

Lord McIntosh said that the possible chapel in the Millennium Dome will be a place for quiet reflection. A little quiet reflection might suggest that the so-called Millennium, which has nothing in common with the original Millennium of Christian tradition, has no genuine significance at all, being based on a wrongly calculated celebration of an uncertain event which means little to most people in this country, and even then being marked at the beginning rather than the end of the wrong year. What an appropriate symbol of our irrational age!

Then, on July 20, the BBC Radio 4 *Sunday* programme included a discussion of the controversy about the relationship between the Church and the Crown, with special reference to the relationship between Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles (as though there were anything odd about Supreme Governors of the Church of England being adulterers or divorced).

During the discussion, Anthony Howard said that there were now so many Humanists in Britain that the Rationalist Press Association

should take part in the next Coronation.

This prompted a swift rejoinder from Nicolas Walter:

Sorry, no! Most of us are republicans as well as atheists, so all we would like to do is add some unholy vinegar to the holy oil at this pagan ritual.

If you, too, find the notions of myth-based millennia, religions, crowns and churches risible or repugnant or both, then you are reading the right journal at this moment. But *The Freethinker* must have its readers’ financial support if it is to add to its 116 years of atheistic existence. Making cheques and POs payable to G W Foote & Co., please send donations to The Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks for: £100, J Marks; £40, N Everitt; £30, B Aubrey; £25, M Phillips; £20, W Harman; £13, R Richardson; £10, O Adams, A Clifford-Winters, A Forde, A Glaiser, G Jackman, S Lee, A McCloy, E Muggridge, A Negus, A Rankin, M Richardson, G Robbins, D Williams; £8, M Smith, J Sweeney; £5, F Bacon, V Bridge, S Brister, P Browning, D Craddock, N Haemmerle, W Hall, D Leighton, K Macleod, K Papas, S Tatner, D Walker, R Walton; £3, R Burt, R Handley, P Jackson, W Lewis, R Newman, E Rose; £2, J Hart, J Hutton.

Total from June 26 to July 22: £461.

'VATICAN SAVED NAZIS WITH HOLOCAUST GOLD'

by Peter Brearey

If Fascism falls, God's cause goes with it—Cardinal Hinsley of Westminster, 1935.

The priests and Catholic flock must give their unreserved support to the great German State and to the Fuhrer—Cardinal Innitzer of Vienna, 1938.

Adolf Hitler is an envoy of God—RC Archbishop Stepinac of Zagreb, 1941.

AWARE of these long-established Christian principles, I was less than dumbfounded to be told that the Vatican now “stands accused of using gold plundered from Holocaust victims in Yugoslavia during the Second World War to smuggle war criminals into Latin America and the Middle East” (*The Sunday Telegraph*, July 27).

It is a simple fact of history that Pope Pius XI abetted Mussolini by commanding all Catholics and the Catholic Party to support the Duce. And Hitler became Chancellor in 1933 despite having polled 11 million votes to the Left's 13 million in the previous year's general election—at least partly because the Papal Nuncio to Germany, Cardinal Pacelli (soon to become Pius XII), caused the Catholic Party, with its power-balancing five million votes, to back him.

And this highest-level support—sometimes open, sometimes implicit—continued throughout World War II (until 1944, when the Axis cause foundered, along with the Vatican dream of a new Holy Roman Empire arising from the ashes of Bolshevism). For example, as Peter de Rosa, former Dean of Theology at London's Corpus Christi College notes in his *Vicars of Christ*, long before the end of 1942 the mass extermination of Jews was common knowledge, but: “Not one unequivocal word of condemnation issued from the Vatican. This silence, many say, was worse than any heresy.”

Peter de Rosa also tells us that, notwithstanding Pius XII's intimate experience of Nazism during the his service in Germany, “he always feared Communism more.”

So if the latest allegations, made by an international team of Holocaust experts following the publication of a recently declassified US Treasury document, turn out to be true—well, at least the Vatican was being consistent in using plundered gold to save the Nazis: it was rounding-off what it had done so much to start and to succour.

The Sunday Telegraph story relates to a US Treasury memo of October 1946 by Emerson Bigelow, who worked for the Treasury's monetary research unit and who received reliable information from the OSS, precursor of the CIA, on Nazi wealth held in specific Swiss accounts.

Bigelow's memo claims the Ustashe—the Nazi puppet regime of Croatia which was led by the Catholic Ante Pavelic—used the Vatican to look after part of the millions of dollars' worth of gold and jewellery which

they stole from 900,000 Jews, Serbs, Croat moderates and Gypsies they had put to death in a terror which even Goebbels described as being “beyond description” (see *The Freethinker*, November 1993).

Citing “reliable sources in Italy”—understood by *The Sunday Telegraph* to mean US Intelligence—the memo says that one-third of the estimated 350 million Swiss francs which the Ustashe tried to remove from Yugoslavia was impounded by the British at the Austrian-Yugoslav border. The remaining 200 million Swiss francs “were originally held in the Vatican for safe-keeping,” to keep the gold from falling into the hands of the Allies.

While stating this as fact, the document also quotes rumours saying a large portion of the Vatican-held money was sent through its “pipeline” to Spain and Argentina. But it adds that this could also be a “smokescreen to cover the fact that the treasure remains in its original repository”—namely, the Vatican.

A number of Ustashe found refuge in Spain and Argentina after the Nazi defeat. It is well documented that the Ustashe had strong ties with Rome. It is also known that after sending the gold abroad in 48 containers as Tito's army advanced on Zagreb, Pavelic made his way to Salzburg, and that in August 1946 he reached Rome. In 1948, he arrived in Argentina.

It is worth noting that Pavelic's wartime policy was to kill Yugoslavs who refused to convert to Catholicism. Pius XII described him as “a much maligned man”; his death camps were often run by Franciscan monks.

The Bigelow memo is being investigated by the US authorities, who have now promised to comb state archives for evidence, according to *The Sunday Telegraph* report.

I understand that it has also attracted considerable interest at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, which is leading the international inquiry into Nazi gold.

Shimon Samuels, the Centre's Director, said that the memo supports claims that Nazi gold received by the Vatican was later used to pay for war criminals to be smuggled

out of Europe.

According to Mr Samuels, the “gold-line”, or channels that were used to smuggle looted Nazi gold, was linked to the “rat-line”, the mechanism by which war criminals were spirited out of Europe.

A connection between the Catholic Church and Nazi gold was very feasible, Mr Samuels said, since “he is convinced” that the Vatican played a crucial role in smuggling war criminals to South America. Indeed, we know that Vincent la Vista, an agent of the US Counter Intelligence Corps wrote a report on the issue: “The justification of the Vatican for its participation in this illegal traffic is simply the propagation of the Faith. It is the Vatican's desire to assist any person regardless of nationality or political beliefs, as long as that person can prove himself to be a Catholic ... as long as they are anti-Communist and pro-Catholic Church ... ” (*The Freethinker*, *op. cit.*).

“We know that a number of monasteries helped Nazis to escape to South America,” said Mr. Samuels. He said that the monastery south of Rome where Erich Priebke, the former SS captain, is under house arrest for his role in Italy's worst wartime atrocity, had had other war criminals staying there awaiting escape. “I have been told by two sources that Adolf Eichmann was among them”, Mr Samuels said.

He added that the gold-line and the rat-line often coincided and mentioned declassified US documents which talked of how the late Baron Thyssen “and other Nazi industrialists” after the war ploughed huge sums of money into Argentina.

The looted Nazi gold from Yugoslavia could have gone to the Vatican to finance the rat-line, Mr Samuels suggested. Priebke, who was Rome SS commandant Herbert Kappler's deputy, escaped from a British PoW camp near the Adriatic after the war. Shortly afterwards, he and his family sailed from Genoa to South America. So, incidentally, did the Ustashe leader Pavelic—disguised as a priest.

The Vatican has denied the latest allegations—and perhaps, like Pavelic, Their Eminences are much maligned: who could be more aware than they that lying is a sin?

Death of Humanist stalwart

WE ARE very sad indeed to have to report the death on July 21 of Amanda Todd at the age of 43, writes Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the National Secular Society.

The British Humanist Association's Administrator for the past three years, she played a large part in the organisation of the 1997 Humanist Lunch and the BHA's recent AGM.

Born in Skipton, Amanda's honesty, sincerity

and Yorkshire grit meant she had little time for pretence.

Always willing to give a kind word and a helping hand, Amanda set an example by doing more than her fair share, and would turn her hand to almost anything.

She will be sadly missed by her colleagues in Holborn as well as by members throughout the country of our kindred organisations. Amanda was an active NSS member. We all send our sympathy to her family.

'Sagan saw parallels between alien abductions and Marian or angelic apparitions'

Half-a-century of flying saucers

PROBABLY the most exciting astronomical sight most of us will ever see was the Hale-Bopp comet, so clearly visible in March and April this year. Sadly, though, many were not content to view it as a natural phenomenon, and it spelled doom to the followers of the Heaven's Gate cult in San Diego, California, who imagined they saw a flying saucer in its tail. Reports of the number vary, but 38 or 39 of them committed suicide, believing that they would be transported to a better life after death: an old belief updated for the Space Age.

They were not alone in "seeing" the UFO. Two days after April 1, the *Sun* reported that John Devine of Tullyallen, Co Louth in Ireland, and his two teenage sons had seen a "flashing UFO" (they always seem to be flashing) as they watched the comet through a home-made telescope.

"This thing crossed the sky to the tail of the comet", said John. "It zig-zagged from star to star".

"It was a UFO", added his 15-year-old son, Martin. "It couldn't be anything else".

Which is emphatic enough. And although the paper added a note that "expert astronomers ... rubbished the sighting", one wonders why it gave space to the silly story. In truth, the press and—particularly regrettably—TV channels must share a great deal of the blame for perpetuating paranormal beliefs of all kinds.

"This woman was abducted by aliens" screamed *The People* on March 23 in a four-page "exclusive", which was actually adapted from the book *Witnessed* by Budd Hopkins, dubbed America's leading UFO "expert", when "enthusiast" would be a better description.

The story only deserves notice as exemplifying the paper's contempt for the intelligence of its readership. "Against her will, the attractive woman felt the three grey creatures with dead black eyes lift her from her bed", it begins. "Terrified mum Linda Cortile" had been sleeping alongside her husband Steve in their New York apartment when she was abducted. And she switches from past to present tense to describe her italicised experiences: "*I'm standing up on nothing. And they take me out all the way up, way above the building. Ooh, I hope I don't fall. The UFO opens, almost like a clam, and then I'm inside*".

The interior seems relatively normal: benches, corridors, doors, lights and a big long table on which she is placed for examination. Then her memory goes blank and she wakes up in her apartment, where her husband and two young sons are still sleeping. Was it all a dream then? Well, just ask yourself, would *The People* run a story like this if it were just a dream?

Linda told her tale to Budd Hopkins, who hypnotised her to find out how she got back to her apartment and "what had happened in the meantime". She then recalled being on a beach, seeing a dead fish and accusing three people on the sand of "killing our sea creatures".

After the hypnosis session, Hopkins is convinced that Linda's will has been overpowered and controlled by aliens. And what do you know? In due course, two US secret agents tell the "UFO expert" that they were driving an "international diplomat" to the Wall Street heliport at 3 am on the day Linda was abducted and saw her sailing out of the window in a "foetal position" illuminated by a blaze of light from the saucer.

The two agents then began having their own flashbacks in which they saw her on the beach. Proof then? Well there are two problems regarding their story, apart from its absurdity: we know them only as Richard and Dan, which would be something of a hindrance for anyone who thought the matter was worth investigating.

Something of the fanaticism found among the flying saucer brigade was revealed when Dr Alan Hale, joint discoverer of the Hale-Bopp comet, told the *New York Times* that he had received hundreds of "vicious hate letters" because he had scoffed at the idea of a UFO near the comet. Indeed, he went so far as to deter young people from going in for science. There are too few opportunities, and if you try to advance a scientific proposition, all you get is abuse from scientific nutcases.

COLIN McCALL
would like a
more critical
media attitude to
the paranormal

The late Carl Sagan, American Professor of Astronomy and Space Sciences, was also worried about the antagonism towards science and the popularity of pseudoscience. And so should we be. Go into the average bookshop and compare the display of scientific works with the shelves devoted to the paranormal. Contrast the limited space in newspapers and restricted time on television given to science with that given to the effusions of the occultists. Anything Madame Blavatsky could do, the New Agers do better—with considerable help from the media.

Sagan devoted a number of pages in *The Demon-Haunted World* (Headline 1997) to belief in UFOs and alien abduction, as well as to extracts from the many letters he received on the subject. He quoted a standard medical text (Harold I Kaplan, *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, 1989) warning of "a high likelihood that the beliefs of the hypnotist will be communicated to the patient and incorporated into what the patient believes to be memories, often

with strong conviction." And Sagan cited examples.

Think, then, what might happen when a clearly impressionable woman like Linda Cortile is hypnotised by a UFO enthusiast like Budd Hopkins.

Sagan saw parallels between alien abductions and Marian or angelic apparitions. Among the points he made are: both come from the sky; any communication they make is mundane; there is a close connection with sleep and dreams; others present at the time and place see nothing unusual.

In the Linda Cortile case, according to Budd Hopkins, there were witnesses: the two US secret agents and an international diplomat. Secret, the agents assuredly were, revealing only their first names. And consider the scene that "Richard" described: "There was an oval-shaped object hovering over the top of the apartment building two or three blocks up from where we sat ... Its lights turned from a bright reddish orange to a whitish blue coming out of the bottom. Green lights rotated round the edge of the saucer."

Quite a sight in the heart of New York, you will agree. Wouldn't it have made the newspapers? Surely it would have woken Linda's husband Steve and their children? Yet they slept peacefully on, completely unaware of the visitation from Outer Space.

Before his own visitation by the agents, Hopkins himself was "certain that in a city as busy as New York someone must have seen the giant UFO hovering over Linda Cortile's apartment block." But the rest of New York's residents must have slept as soundly as Steve Cortile that night in November 1989.

It is 50 years now since the first flying saucer stories emerged in America, and the anniversary was celebrated by a *Fortean Times* "UnConvention" last April, attended by 1,200 people. Not all were UFO enthusiasts. In fact, Dr Richard Wiseman, of the University of Hertfordshire, exposed the Indian rope trick, showing from photographs, film footage and eye-witness accounts that it employed a climbable bamboo stick and not a rope. In rather different mode, however, Jon Downes, "who runs the Centre for Fortean Zoology" found "a definite correlation" between flashing lights in the sky and attacks upon animals at Newquay Zoo.

Fortean Times publisher Mike Dash told *The Observer* (April 20) that "Fortean do like the paranormal, but we are sceptical about it—and about sceptics". On the same day, his editor, Paul Sieveking, was regaling readers of the *Sunday Telegraph* with an attack on the *American Skeptical Inquirer* for its scepticism, and on Richard Dawkins for "recommending psychiatric help for ghost witnesses in this year's Dimbleby lecture".

A little more *Fortean Times* scepticism would not come amiss, but I'm afraid that's too much to expect. It's not what its 60,000 monthly readers want anyway. More welcome would be a critical attitude towards the paranormal by the national press and television.

Terry Sanderson on the media

THE media's mad fascination with all things paranormal, supernatural and extra-terrestrial continues unabated. As my colleague Colin McCall points out on Page 7, last month was the 50th anniversary of the first "sighting" of a supposed alien space craft (or, as one commentator put it, "it is 50 years since someone saw a UFO and journalists decided it was an alien spaceship").

Whole evenings of TV were devoted to the delusions of frightening conspiracy theorists and paranoid obsessives. The newspapers were filled with blurred pictures that purported to show "incontrovertible evidence" that, not only are alien space craft commonly spotted in the skies (particularly, for some reason, over Falkirk), but also that their occupants are walking among us. I'm making no comment about William Hague in this respect.

Susan Blackmore is a sceptical psychologist who has made a special study of so-called psychic phenomenon. Writing in *The Independent* about her experience, she said: "The paranormal sells because people like mysteries, and leaving them unsolved goes down better than solving them." She maintains that half-a-century after the first UFO sighting we still "have no physical evidence of alien landings, no alien artefacts and no further knowledge about who the aliens are or where they come from."

She has studied people who claim to have been abducted by aliens, and says: "I have seen how therapists {in abductee support groups} encourage them to elaborate their faint memories into fantastic stories, and how easily 'support groups' can distance 'experiencers' from their concerned family and friends. I have seen 'alien implants' and shown one to be a dental filling."

One TV series promoting—among other things—the idea that flying saucers are real is *The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna*. Mr McKenna, the famous hypnotist, gives a platform to every kind of crackpot belief you can think of. In one of these programmes, he told us that flying saucers are so densely packed over Mexico City that you more or less just have to randomly point your camcorder at the sky and you'll film one. To prove his point, he then produced home videos of flashing lights and other frustratingly out-of-focus and indistinct aerial phenomena.

The Sun's TV reviewer, Garry Bushell, dismissed Mr McKenna's paranormal world as "a load of old ghoulies". He criticised TV companies for encouraging belief in bollocks. "Any old nonsense is wheeled out to bamboozle the hard of thinking", he wrote. "This show is about as honest as a teenage boy on a Internet dating line. When Paul says keep an open mind, he really means an empty head." And speaking of the Mexico City UFOs, Bushell asked: "Does this mean a) Aliens are addicted to Tacos? b) Tequila poisoning is widespread? or c) The Mexican Tourist Board is doing a great job?"

A more worrying element of Paul McKenna's programme concerns the unquestioning promotion of "faith healers". David Aaronovitch in *The Independent on Sunday* wrote: "There is an argument that we shouldn't care about this Millennium pap appearing on prime-time TV. No-one who wasn't already a bit doolally will take it seriously, and for most viewers it is just

A KICK IN THE GHOULIES FOR PAUL MCKENNA

an assembly of diverting curios. They watch, and pass on. There is so much stupidity in the world that another bit won't make much difference. When it comes to drama I think this argument holds. But with programmes that claim to be factual, I am not so sure. There is a language of TV journalism and enquiry that most of us have come to trust. To use it in the service of quackery is—at best—to debase the currency. At worst it could lead the vulnerable, the stupid or the desperate into harbouring false hopes, or into the clutches of charlatans."

Indeed, in one show, a group of Irish "healers" claimed that they were achieving astonishing results by waving their hands over desperately ill people. Their representative was allowed to make all kinds of ludicrous claims about his "treatments" (which cost £50 an hour). A young man who had received serious spinal injuries in a road accident was shown rising from a wheelchair and we were expected to take the healer's word for it that he had effected the cure. There was no questioning of these claims, no medical input, nobody checking the veracity of what people were saying. The "healer's" claims were presented with the utmost gravity.

But it was when the "healer" claimed that he had successfully treated "terminal illnesses" that I lost patience. Separate complaints by the National Secular Society and me are now being considered by the Broadcasting Standards Commission and by the Independent Television Commission. I'll keep you posted about the response.

And, finally, another visitation this month

from the peripatetic Virgin Mary. This time, according to *The Sun*, she turned up in a packet of pork scratchings.

The miracle occurred in the Royal Oak public house, Coventry. A young "God-fearing" man, Aaron Dodgson, was "drowning his sorrows after splitting up with his girlfriend" when the pork scratching "shaped like the Madonna and baby Jesus" was found at the bottom of the packet. To prove that it really was a miracle, Aaron looked out of the window at the chip shop across the road and found it to be called GABRIEL'S.

"There was a neon light flashing when I found the scratching. It made it seem like an apparition," he said.

The Sun does not report how long Aaron had been in the pub or what his particular tippie had been. But there does seem to be something rather strange—if not blasphemous—about the Holy Family (Jewish by origin) appearing as a pork scratching.

The hallowed scratching is now housed in a glass case, but there are no reports of the faithful queuing up to venerate it as they did with the Huddersfield tomato that contained a message from Allah.

What this suggests is that there is a limit to the amount of indignity that even the fanatical religious will endure.

● See *You're Telling Us*, Pages 13 and 14, for yet more on UFOs. Our columnist Terry Sanderson has written an extremely funny satire on religion (and other present-day absurdities), based in his native South Yorkshire: *The Potts Papers* is available at £7.70, including post, from The Other Way Press, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ.

£44,000 'collection'

READERS will doubtless be sad to hear that £44,000 destined for the jobless youngsters in Fife was spent by the Provost of St Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Dundee. Michael Bunce clearly thought a better use of the money was on flying lessons for himself, as well as on two horses and a luxury car.

Instead of sending him to prison at the State's expense while leaving him with his ill-gotten gains, the judge fined Bunce £66,000. He has had to sell his marital home and is now unemployed.

Although it is not clear from the account in the *Daily Telegraph* (July 18), from which I learned of this case, I hope that the lads in Fife receive restitution.

Perhaps some community service with

jobless youngsters would also have been in order—but, on second thoughts, the further they keep this man from such youngsters the better. KPW

Ulster 'school'

THE Ulster Humanist Association has organised a Secular Summer School on "European Freethought Since Toland" at which the speakers will include Jim Herrick, Justin Keating and Nicolas Walter.

It will be held at Redcastle Hotel, County Donegal, August 22-24, 1997, with the aim of promoting "the concept of a secular society in Ireland and elsewhere". The fee is £50. For details, call 01846 677264 or write, quickly, to Brian McClinton at 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE.

News of their World

monitored by
BILL McILROY

THE collapse of Jonathan Aitken's libel case against *The Guardian* newspaper and Granada Television was yet another serious embarrassment for the sleaze-sodden party of Victorian values. Still politically Right, but no longer Honourable, the former Cabinet Minister had no option but to resign from the Privy Council.

Prominent Christian Tories have rallied to their disgraced brother in Christ. For Jonathan Aitken is no nominal C of E Christian. Speaking of "sadness and shock" among parishioners, the Rector of his church in Sandwich, Kent, described Aitken as a regular churchgoer who "spoke easily and with conviction about his faith. He is a man I believe who has a deep Christian faith."

Deep Christian faith notwithstanding, Don Witts, Communications Officer in the Diocese of Canterbury, said of Jonathan Aitken's behaviour: "I find the scale of deception staggering ... Aitken is from a class of people who believe they have a divine right to rule."



THE Roman Catholic Church in France is to officially acknowledge its history of intolerance and persecution. An act of repentance will take place at a ceremony in Paris this month, attended by the Pope and leaders of other faiths.

Two episodes will be highlighted at the ecumenical service.

First, the Church's wartime collaboration with the Germans and the pro-Nazi régime headed by Marshal Petain. The bishops gave full support to Petain and police chiefs who organised the deportation of 75,000 Jews to the concentration camps and gas chambers.

Secondly, the massacre of 3,000 Protestants on August 24, 1572, will be repented. That orgy of killing occurred on the feast day of St Bartholomew—patron saint of butchers, as it happens.



CONCERN about world population and other environmental issues is being fostered by a movement "which is essentially hostile to the values of the Judæo-Christian tradition", according to the authors of a new book. *The Cross and the Rain Forest* is the work of Robert Whelan (Institute of Economic Affairs), Joseph Kirwan (Plater College, Oxford) and Paul Haffner (the Pontifical Lateran University).

The writers assert there is no need to worry about population growth. Why not? God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. So, they conclude: "There is no reason to believe that population growth will make the environment worse, or that population shrinkage will make it better."

Prof Ghillelan France, Director of Kew Gardens, described the authors' claims as "absolute rubbish". He commented: "As a biologist I well know that the Earth does not have

an infinite capacity. There are many pressures in the world because the population has got out of control."

The Cross and the Rain Forest is published by an American company specialising in theology and biblical studies. It is distributed in Britain by Family Publications.



TORY Party leader William Hague is to marry his fiancée Ffion Jenkins in December. The ceremony in the Commons crypt will be conducted in both English and Welsh. The Speaker's chaplain and a Methodist minister will officiate.

The happy couple are already living together in Mr Hague's London flat. It is not known if the Conservative Christian Fellowship or the Conservative Family Campaign will be represented at the ceremony.



THE Rev Prof Norman Pittinger, who has died at the age of 91, was an influential and controversial theologian. Born in New Jersey, he lived in Britain from 1966. His defence of homosexual relationships in *New Christian* journal, in 1967, was ahead of its time and caused a furore.

Prof Pittinger wrote some 90 theological works. The content became somewhat thinly spread and repetitious, causing him to be dismissed in some Christian circles as "the Barbara Cartland of theology".

DRAMA AT HUMANISTS' AGM

THERE was a dramatic scene at the AGM of the British Humanist Association at Conway Hall on July 12 when, near its end, the Chairman lost control of the meeting and abruptly left the room.

Richard Paterson was replaced in the Chair by Robbi Robson following the outburst, which came after a series of criticisms of the leadership from the floor.

These included what many have seen as the precipitate abolition of the old Education Committee and, following the tabling of a critical motion for this AGM, the hasty appointment of a new one.

There was wide concern also about the decision of the Executive Committee to move the BHA office away from Bradlaugh House—which was only partially pacified by the announcement of a joint working party with the other organisations to discuss the whole question of premises and relations between the organisations. Several members drew attention to the absence of any reference in *Humanist News* to the withdrawal of the BHA from Bradlaugh House; it was reported in *The Freethinker* in June.

A likely hostile vote on a composited motion deploring the actions of the Executive Committee was avoided only by the personal intervention of the President, Sir Hermann Bondi.

On a more positive note, the AGM was attended by about 80 members, including most of the employees and officers of the

by a *Freethinker*
correspondent

other national Humanist organisations, as well as representatives of many local Humanist groups.

There was satisfaction at the general state of the BHA at the end of the first full year with the new Executive Director, Robert Ashby, supported by a loyal staff and a busy Executive Committee.

In this period, membership increased by six per cent (from 2,983 to 3,073), and the liquid assets of the BHA stand at more than £1 million, having benefited from the receipt of investments from The Humanist Trust and the proceeds of a legacy, jointly totalling more than £200,000.

The level of activity is also rising, and there are plans to expand the staff with an education officer, a ceremonies co-ordinator, and a professional editor of *Humanist News*.

The postal vote in the elections to the Executive Committee involved more members than before, though still less than 15 per cent of the membership. (David Pollock, Chairman of the Rationalist Press Association, and Carole Mountain were appointed, and Ian Dunbar was re-appointed, to the EC).

The Annual Report and Accounts for 1996 were passed with some enthusiasm, and the EC was congratulated on the work which had gone into production of the revised

Memorandum and Articles of Association, which were adopted. Draft By-Laws were approved, with only minor amendments to allow members more knowledge of and voice in the affairs of the Association. One such amendment—to enable an Extraordinary General Meeting to be called by one per cent (rather than 10 per cent) of the membership—was strongly opposed by the EC but was successfully proposed by Dr Christine Bondi.

Lesson

All Humanists will welcome the rising profile of the British Humanist Association, as the largest and most active organisation in the Humanist movement in this country, but many will wish its leadership to learn an important lesson from this meeting—that it should take more account of the views of its own members, should consult with kindred organisations on matters of common concern, and should not resent justified criticism.

It may be feared that the BHA will in fact leave Bradlaugh House in a few months, with all the awkward consequences for the other organisations, but it may be hoped that this move will not cause lasting damage to the cause we all believe in.

● At the meeting of the new Executive Committee the following day, Robbi Robson replaced Richard Paterson as Chairman. Mr Paterson took over the Chair of the new Education Committee.

You're telling us!

Labour's atheists

IT IS obviously necessary, and even something of a priority, that an Atheist Labour Group should be formed at Westminster, given New Labour's frighteningly high nutter-level. Is there a Labour MP reading this who would be willing to lend his/her name, and postal pigeon-hole, to such a cause—or does any reader know of such an MP?

It's hard to get used to the idea, I know, but the fact is we've won the election now. In other words, we don't have to behave ourselves any more. So to hell with Blair, and the pious fools in his entourage.

MAT COWARD
Frome

Roy Saich is right!

ROY SAICH ("Time to restructure?" July) is right. I too have long thought that the duplication of Secularist effort should come to an end. It is clumsy and wasteful to have four separate organisations serving the same Freethought constituency.

Religions require their different denominations because they agonise over petty detail of doctrine and precise interpretation of the scriptures. But the Freethought movement does not suffer these narrow ideological restraints—the only basic requirements to belong are absence of a belief in the supernatural and adherence to the golden rule: treat others as you would be treated.

Although within that broad definition there is plenty of opportunity for disagreement, leading to much discussion and debate, there is no necessity for the continued existence of smaller units of superior doctrinal purity. Unification would bring considerable organisational and administrative benefits and the clout that a single national organisation would carry would be considerable.

David Tribe (Letters, July) argues for leaving things as they are but I am not sure that I agree that many small voices nagging away independently, and sometimes contradictorily, are as effective as one big one. The churches too are aware of the importance of size—hence the attempts at merger between the C of E and the Methodists and the unholy alliance between Muslims and the Vatican to counter the rights of women and population control. What David Tribe calls the "historical and ideological nuances represented by the existing Freethought bodies" seem to me little more than the trivial differences between pedants unable to shake off the habit of a religion-induced desire for doctrinaire exactitude. Such pettifogging attention to detail can be tiresome although it must be acknowledged that it is often the pedants who possess the necessary fiery indignation to bring them rushing to the Secularist barricades.

For the Freethought movement to become a force to be reckoned with, it will be necessary also to shed the divisive nit-picking mentality and the personality clashes that have again erupted in recent weeks. I despair at the attitude

that brings this about and would just say that despite their personal foibles all the people involved should be praised for their unstinting efforts in the cause of Freethought and be asked to recognise this in one another too.

If Roy's proposals are taken up, as I hope they will, there remains the problem of what to call the end result. I fear the three minor organisations with the deeper roots will not readily allow themselves to be subsumed in the BHA. Most of us consider ourselves Rationalists, Atheists, Secularists and Humanists. Perhaps a new acronym is called for: RASH. It ought to spread all over religion.

TONY AKKERMANS
Leeds

I HAVE been involved in the Humanist movement for about 30 years—and during that time I have seen very little progress in the organisation. There have certainly been considerable developments in society that Humanists would support, but these have been achieved, on the whole, without any pressure from the Humanist movement. Even today, when we are called upon in ever greater numbers to officiate at non-religious ceremonies, the vast majority of people who attend these ceremonies have never heard of Humanism.

Roy Saich is right. We need to restructure and that was what I was proposing in my letter in May. The British Humanist Association feels that in order to develop they must move into more suitable premises, and if the smaller organisations feel that they must remain behind in order to maintain their autonomy, so be it. The four London-based organisations have been under one roof long enough to see whether or not they can work closer together. If they cannot, then it is right that the one organisation (BHA) that appears to want to progress should set out on that path and leave the others to their own little world.

David Tribe, writing from New South Wales, appears to be in a different world. The United Kingdom is just that, being made up of different parts and two recognised nations, England and Scotland. It is difficult for organisations based in London to deal with Scottish law and education. That is why I feel that some kind of federal set-up would be a practical answer to progressing Humanism within the UK. Mr Tribe (I find it very rude to refer to someone just by their surname) is wrong about the media. With local radio and television, stations like to make contact with local organisations and only deal with London in many cases because we have not been good at advertising locally.

Scottish Humanists are no different from those elsewhere in the UK. We have established the Humanist Society of Scotland but the two major groups in Scotland, based in Edinburgh and Glasgow and which contain a majority of Society members, like their autonomy. They advertise their existence very often, to the exclusion of the Society so that the media are unaware of the larger organisation even though they are part of that larger Society.

Some of us are hoping to bring changes about in Scotland that will give a higher profile to Humanism, especially at a time when we may get a devolved Assembly in Scotland. It would be progress if the organisations South of the Border could restructure as well so that we

could all face the millennium with new hope and a more noticeable voice.

David Tribe implies in his letter that since many Humanists are members of several organisations, if there was only one, the overall numbers would appear less. This seems a very dishonest approach. One organisation given a proper structure and publicity could soon get new members who would see the value of joining such an organisation.

ROBIN WOOD
Kilmarnock

Grow up, Brearey!

THE Up Front feature in your July issue typifies the reason I find your magazine so counter-productive to those of us who espouse the atheist cause. An otherwise well-argued article about the dangers of making laws to protect religious beliefs was, as usual, destroyed by the offensive language that seems to be becoming more and more prevalent in the pages of *The Freethinker*.

The description of two Hollywood epics (*The Robe* and *The Ten Commandments*) as "insulting to the intelligence of anyone not confined to a place of safety under the Mental Health Act" is simply gratuitously insulting. Worse, this kind of language provides perfect ammunition to the more fanatical believers who would describe us doubters of the teachings of the Old Testament as being without an argument. How much better to have simply described these (actually quite enjoyable) films as portraying a Christianity which has no historical basis?

When will Peter Brearey understand that bigotry is bigotry no matter what point of view is being taken? There are plenty of reasonable arguments, many of which he uses in his article, that support his case extremely well. But which ones will be quoted in any reply to the piece by the Christian community? I fear it will be the ones I mention above.

For goodness sake grow up, Brearey. Your rantings do the Secularist cause no favours whatsoever. As long as we use the same pedantic and insulting language as the religious communities (who have far more opportunity to reply than we do) we might as well write scriptures and require our members to recite catechisms on Secularism for all the good it will do to convert people to our cause.

MIKE WALSH
Kettering

Eruv fight goes on

WE congratulate Keith Porteous Wood on his excellent article on the *eruv* controversy, and would like to thank all readers who have contributed financially to our ongoing opposition to the Barnet *eruv* proposal.

We assure these readers and other sympathisers that despite the High Court setback, the battle to oppose the proposed *eruv* is by no means at an end.

You're telling us!

◀ From Page 13

Not only do further planning permissions have to be given by Barnet Council, but also the poles-and-wire gateways will have to be licensed by the Council's Public Works Committee, and the Highways Agency also has to give permission for gateway structures over trunk roads.

At each of these stages there will be an opportunity to oppose and challenge, and we will continue to play our part to prevent implementation of the *eruv* boundary.

ELIZABETH SEGALL
JEFFREY SEGALL
London NW2

Controversy over UFOs

THE July letter from Tony Akkermans was full of the usual nonsense blathered by UFO sceptics.

Astrology is rubbish—therefore UFOs do not exist! There are some eccentrics in America—so all are condemned as loonies! How can I argue with such logic? Has Mr Akkermans been eating some space-cake from back home in Holland?

Less than a century ago (in 1903), the Wright brothers made the first heavier-than-air flight: 852 feet at a height of 15 feet. In 90 years, we have sent spacecraft to all the planets in our solar system, except Pluto, and have two spacecraft (Voyagers) now several billion miles from Earth.

So, Mr Akkermans, why should progress stop now? Why should we not reach the stars one day, soon? For decades, there have been designs for spaceships that will reach nearby stars but which will take a lifetime to do so, necessitating families being put on board, rather than all-men crews.

In 1900, they believed heavier-than-air travel was possible but couldn't achieve it. Now, many scientists believe that faster-than-light travel is possible, which would mean travelling to nearby stars in months or less.

Why shouldn't aliens (which Mr Akkermans admits may exist) from older planets than Earth have not constructed such craft?

And UFOs? Read some of the many books: UFOs have been seen throughout history, although things didn't hot-up until 1947, two years after the first nuclear bombs were exploded, giving man the potential to destroy his world. A coincidence? I don't think so.

Some millions of people have seen UFOs—like when some flew over Washington DC or the length of New Zealand or around Japan ... all in broad daylight.

While there are undoubtedly cranks and people who have actually seen Venus but thought they were seeing a UFO, even independent investigators are willing to admit that there is no explanation other than UFOs for about 10 per cent of sightings.

Mr Akkermans has probably never seen a mugging—so until Elvis is mugged by the Loch Ness Monster in his plain sight, muggings don't exist!

Lastly, watch some SF films about peaceful alien visitations and you'll have some idea why

they don't make contact. Christians tell us we killed Jesus: would unhuman aliens fare any better?

MICHAEL HILL
Crystal Palace

Huge logical leap

MICHAEL HILL (June issue) criticises Keith Porteous Wood for "crassly dismissing" "flying saucers", before making the mistake of equating UFOs with intelligent life on other planets. Overwhelming evidence points to life evolving naturally in our small corner of the universe, and as such scientists have no objection to the notion of life arising elsewhere.

However, while alien life is necessary, it is far from sufficient to prove that UFOs are visitors from outer space. It is a huge logical leap from alien life to alien visitors.

Mr Hill supports his argument by saying that



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

people in all walks of life have seen UFOs. Readers of *The Freethinker* will be aware that many more people around the world have personally witnessed demons, angels, ghosts, statues that drink, bleed or weep, and even the various gods themselves, but this only shows the fallibility of human perception. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, and personal anecdote, fuzzy films, popular belief and strongly held views are not even ordinary by scientific standards.

"Unthinkingly dismissing" does imply fundamentalism (as does the unthinking acceptance implicit in Mr Hill's rhetoric), but reasoned objection does not. I imagine Keith Porteous Wood, like many, has done the reasoning and is tired of having to spell out the logical fallacies of belief in God, flying saucers and other popular myths every time they crop up.

The "thinker" part of *The Freethinker* is important. Free belief is an essential human right, but is unlikely to advance our understanding of reality. I reject belief in God and flying saucers on the grounds of lack of evi-

dence and the use of Occam's Razor. If Mr Hill has real evidence to support his belief, he should share it with us "flat earth fools".

Pavlov333@aol.com

'Flying shields'

TONY AKKERMANS (July) asks why there were no UFO reports before 1947, apparently implying that such reports are invented.

Although the term "flying saucer" was only coined in that year, similar reports can be found throughout history. The Romans described "flying shields" and in the USA in the late 19th Century there were many reports of mystery "airships" (although no airship flew at that time in that country).

Most UFO reports are the result of seeing a real strange sight in the sky (sometimes thought to be on or near the ground); very few reports are hoaxes, although many UFO pictures are. Of course this does not mean that UFOs are alien craft; it just means that many people are unfamiliar with what can be seen in the sky. People who report UFOs are not particularly "gullible"; mostly they are curious and ignorant.

Nearly every UFO report has a sensible, rational explanation not involving aliens or paranormal activity (as is evident to readers of my book *The UFO Mystery Solved*). As for Nessie—see my book *The Loch Ness Monster: The Evidence*.

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

Oh what a whopper!

IN polite circles it would be called a *whopper*; in other circles it would be regarded as a blatant lie designed by crafty priests to fool the public.

I refer to Article 17 of the 39 Articles of Religion which are in the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*: "Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ, to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour". As for those not predestined and chosen, their lot is "desperation", according to the Article!

Taking all of the above into account, it is obviously all cut-and-dried who is to be saved and who is to be damned. Surely, then, it is a waste of time for the clergy to preach, since they (and their God) already know the outcome!

According to a recent article in *The Times*, the Church of England has assets of £3 billion—yet it has the gall to beg and cadge for yet more in what it calls Christian Aid Week, so that it can perpetuate its propaganda under the guise of social welfare.

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

ASK THE PARSON (7)

by Karl Heath

SIXTY years ago, BBC radio began panel programmes debating listeners' questions. When a question involved morality the question-master would frequently say: "I think we should address this question first to the Reverend So - and so". *Why?*

I intend no personal discourtesy. You and many of your colleagues, by virtue of your training, sense of vocation and even some insights from your theology, may, with some justice, believe that you can advise others about their conduct. I am not sure whether this should go as far as homiletics from the pulpit.

There is a North of England working class tradition of the neighbour to whom many would go with their troubles. But what has God got to do with it? Such a neighbour is not necessarily religious. One of the most obnoxious, condescending and self-congratulatory remarks of some clerics, when meeting a non-believer whom they cannot fault on moral grounds, is to say: "You are really a good Christian". A patronising remark which should be thrown back in the teeth of any self-righteous Pharisee uttering it.

What, indeed, has God to do with morality?

The BBC comper, by his action, raised many other questions. Would you agree that moral codes exist in all human societies? Would you agree that pre-Christian philosophers contributed to Christian theology? Would you agree that primitive communities, and, almost certainly, pre-historic ones, live and lived by unwritten rules which would put some modern societies to shame? Do you, therefore, claim that the Hand of God was touching those ignorant of His existence?

Dinosaurs

This raises other questions. How far has God's hand extended, and for how long has His Will been operative? Reducing Earth's 4,700 million year existence to 24 hours, beginning at the first midnight, human beings did not appear until the last minute before the second midnight. What was God, and His morality, doing before that?

For more than a billion years the Earth was lifeless; where was God and his morality?

The dinosaurs were a successful life-form, lasting more than 200 million years, or an hour on our one-day scale. Presumably God did not communicate with them? The insects were even more successful. Was there any morality? What is the morality of carnivores who cannot survive without killing? If God created them, Mrs Alexander felt it prudent not to include them among all things bright and beautiful.

Can you not acknowledge that morality is quintessentially human?

So much for the *time* element.

What about *space*?

When God's creation was thought to be a huge central Earth, with little bright things revolving around it, one could imagine God, in His Empyrean Paradise, concentrating His attention upon us. But now we know that we inhabit a tiny grain of sand on a beach which stretches beyond our perception. Is there any

HOW DOES GOD KNOW WHAT'S RIGHT?

reason why God should be interested in us?

Assuming that God wishes us to behave in a certain way, how do we know His Will? It would indeed be very convenient if God was like an objective moral thermometer by which we could take our temperature beyond doubt. But, in practice, everything we are told about God is second-hand. May I examine three examples?

First, there is institutional religion, church doctrines. Can you claim that these are of any help at all? For two millennia, Christian churches have persecuted and slaughtered each other's members by the million in the name of Jesus. God's Will? The Pope's will? Ian Paisley's will?

Second, there is a sacred book, the Word of God. God would be convicted of murder, even genocide, in a modern court, for what He gloried in doing in the Old Testament. In addition to the thousands of human beings He massacred, He demands the burnt offerings of bullocks, goats, rams, lambs, pigeons and turtle-doves. In Exodus and Leviticus He tells us He "loves" the "sweet savour" of "burning flesh". And what do we make of Numbers, Ch.31 v. 17-18, where Moses, after defeating the Midianites, tells the children of Israel how to exact God's vengeance: *Kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him But all the women children, that hath not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves?*

Is the New Testament any better? The Gospels play down the role of God the Father. When you praise Him for the Resurrection, whom do you blame for the Crucifixion? In His omniscience and almighty power did He plan to kill His son, or did He merely "let it happen"? Not a morally edifying story. Even worse than

old Jehovah, who, after telling Abraham to kill his Son, Isaac, at least changed His mind and accepted the burnt offering of the wretched ram in the thicket.

Do you really discern a supreme morality in a ritual human sacrifice and the notion that human sins can be washed away in the blood of a sacrificed lamb?

Third, there are those who believe that God talks to them and answers their prayers. One should not be discourteous to those who genuinely believe in their revelations, but you must agree that they put an end to all argument. Does it not seem that if God is anxious for us to abide by His rules, He has been singularly ineffective in communicating with us? And, if the sacrifice of His Son was supposed to redeem us, do you believe that the two millennia since that event have been morally superior to the millennia which preceded it?

Have you ever considered that traditional Christian morality is flawed, defective? Can you really admire a morality based upon promise of reward or threat of punishment? Parents who bring up children in this way are not well thought of. You may have abandoned the threat of Hell, but do you still promise Salvation?

Finally, there is the logical problem with which, I am sure, theology students are familiar. Is God *good*, or is He *goodness*? If He is goodness, He is incapable, by His nature, of being any other. So why praise Him in hymns and prayers for being good? Is it not like praising green grass for being green?

Society

But if He is good, then He is contingent upon another standard. The Greeks subordinated their gods to logos and natural law. Why should I believe that morality is divine, when all the evidence of experience shows, beyond doubt, that it is exclusively human? And by human I mean material, biological and evolutionary. Our species is social and could not have survived without society. Therefore society itself must survive. This requires rules of conduct and mutual cooperative behaviour. The word "good" describes what promotes the security and survival of society, and "bad" that which endangers it. Morality is no less worthy for this, none the worse for being human and natural. It is mean-minded to degrade that which is human, and to demand that we should kneel before an external supernatural force. Human morality is superior because we alone bear the responsibility for our actions. While proud of our achievements, we can be ashamed of our excesses, evils and follies, and seek to rectify them. When we are good it is not through promise of reward or fear of punishment, but because we know from human experience that it is right to be good.

Consider, by contrast, a morality of pardons, indulgences, salvation, "Hail Marys", "only believe and you will be saved"—such a morality is thread-bare and pathetic.

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

What's On...What's On...What's On...

Birmingham Humanist Group: Information: Tova Jones on 0121 4544692.

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: Information: D Baxter on 01253 726112.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: Cornerstone Community Centre, Palmeira Square (corner of First Avenue), Hove. Sunday, September 7, 4.30 pm: Public meeting. Information: 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.

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, August 21, 7.30 pm: Public meeting on *Art and Evolution*.

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. No meeting in August or September. Friday, August 2: Visit to Regents Open Air Theatre; details from Mike Savage on 0181 514 2115. Friday September 12-15: Weekend and AGM, Creffield Hotel, Bournemouth; details from Lee Gledhill on 0171 739 3011.

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. Thursday, August 28, 8 pm: Informal meeting at 99 Ravensbourne Park.

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. 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.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, September 3, 8 pm: Writer and broadcaster Rony Robinson: *What I Don't Believe*. 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 and information stall at The Green Fair, Merlin Theatre, Meadowbank Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield, Saturday, September 6, noon to 5 pm..

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.

Bound to be read! Bound volumes of *The Freethinker* for 1994, 1995 and 1996 are now available at £25 each or £50 for all three (including post). Cheques with order please to G W Foote & Company, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Humanist Holidays: Yule 1997 at Bournemouth. Tuesday, December 23 (dinner) to Saturday, December 27 (breakfast). A return visit to a very comfortable hotel with a high standard of cuisine, not far from the Front. £225 per person to cover half-board (with full board on December 25) and one all-day coach trip. £50 deposit by November 5 to Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham GL52 5AA (01242 239175).

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