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Father, Son and Single Mum?

Ultimate
promotion
for Mary
could be
on the
cards



Anna Freeman celebrates the bicentenaries of
two other Marys, Wollstonecraft and Shelley

Father, Son & Single Mum

THE Pope is considering a petition from four million Catholics, asking him to have Mary declared Co-Redemptrix. "Such a move would place her alongside the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost and regroup them as a Holy Quartet", comments the *Independent on Sunday*, August 24.

The Internet buzzes with references to the possibility of the BVM's becoming equal with her Son in the matter of Man's deliverance from Sin and Damnation.

For example, the Magnificat Meal

Movement International, "which is sweeping across the world to renew and bring balance to the besieged Church of our times", claims knowledge of God's opinion, referring categorically to a BVM "*whom the Lord wants honoured as Mary, Co-Redemptrix ...*" My italics.

And the International Marian Research Institute (USA) reports: "We have recently been asked: Will there be a new Marian dogma, and how soon? Is it true that the Pope will soon announce that next year he will solemnly and infallibly declare Mary's role as Co-Redemptrix? Recently published articles seem to point in that direction, and some of our correspondents refer to Mother Theresa as authoritative source for this information."

The Institute recalls that at the 1996 International Mariological Congress in Poland, representatives from the Marian theological faculties and the Mariological societies met at the request of the Holy See to consider the advisability of petitioning the Vatican for the dogmatic definition of the Virgin Mary as Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix, and Advocate. There was unanimous agreement that the Holy See should not make such a declaration at *this time*. There were two reasons for this decision: "the theological clarifications *which must first be made*, and the second dealt with the ecumenical dialogue." My emphases.

An American RC theologian assures me that even if she did become Co-Redemptrix, Mary would still be "a creature". But wasn't Jesus a "creature", too, during his time on Earth? Perhaps the theologians are trying to have their cake and eat it: she *would* be a goddess, but, really, she *wouldn't* ... They've had little difficulty with similar intellectual gymnastics in the past.

The *Independent on Sunday* suggests that for women everywhere the ultimate promotion for Mary would be bad news: "Turning a lowly, naive Jewish girl into Co-redemptor [*sic*] would strengthen the church's demands that women be as passive and self-sacrificing as its presentation of Mary. John Paul II runs a clerical patriarchy which offers women little recognition of the right to control their fertility and none at all of equality."

And that, maybe, is the point. Have the Vatican's backroom bishops orchestrated this "demand"? Is the idea to show that the Church *does* care about women (so much so that it has turned one of them into a goddess) without its having actually to *do* anything to meet the growing movement for female ordination and for the freedom of women to choose abortion, family planning and divorce?

Perhaps we should hope that the Pope accedes to the petition, for that would nicely stir up Christendom's traditional disorder. Thoughtful Catholics would see the move as an affront to Christ's unique standing through his redemptive death, while for Protestants, always suspicious and often contemptuous of Marian devotion, it would be the terminal blow to ecumenical progress.

WHAT staggers me is that grown-ups are able to discuss the BVM as if she were, or had ever been, a real person. She is simply an act of theological plagiarism—a creation of man, based upon the many goddesses with similar

qualifications to Mary's, all of whom have much more experience in the job. Ashtoreth, for example, was the Supreme Goddess of Canaan—not only ever-virginal but also a fruitful mother and creatress of life. Ring any bells?

Then there are the mums of Mithra (born of a virgin on December 25), Horus (born of a virgin on ... er ... December 25), Bacchus (born of a virgin on ... yes, Christmas Day). Why not take on board the Virgin Maya, who produced Buddha after the Holy Spirit had done to her whatever it is Holy Spirits do to virgins?

Let's have 'em all in—and why stop at a Quartet? We could form a Holy Octet.

The Romans, hard-pressed by Hannibal around 200 BC, officially introduced the worship of Cybele. She was known as the Mother of Gods and is perhaps the true prototype of the Christians' Mary, the Mother of God.

The Christian claim of a virgin birth ruins the Gospels' genealogical argument that Jesus has status as Messiah by descent from David through Joseph. But it had to be invented and emphasised largely for the pragmatic reason that it was difficult to make and hold converts from worship of the Mother Goddess who would keep drifting back to the old ways, away from this new religion which, disappointingly, insisted that there could be no sexual pleasure without sin.

The BVM gets scant attention in the Bible. Only Matthew and Luke note the (one would have thought) intriguing fact that Our Lord was born of a virgin, and then only in the more recent versions of the text. Mary herself matter-of-factly refers to Joseph as Jesus's father (Luke 2:48); John notes that Joseph and Mary were the father and mother of Jesus.

The Christian version of the virgin Mother of God *had* to be manufactured—and not only to bear out a badly, or dishonestly, translated Old Testament prophecy which spoke (or, rather, didn't speak) of a virgin giving birth to Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14). Even after Constantine recognised Christianity as the state religion in 313 AD, there was a great struggle against the prevalence of the old religion among the *pagani* (country people). But while needing to accommodate as much of the old religion as was sufficient to attract and hold recruits, the Church had to combat the idea of a Mother Goddess as representing the deification of the female principle in the life of nature and mankind, for it was a neurotically man-centred body.

Indeed, the Church was, and remains, a woman-despising organisation. St Paul couldn't have been more explicit: *Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak. They are commanded to be under obedience ... And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.*

The religious "uncleanness" of woman is shown when Jesus forbids Mary to touch him, while encouraging Thomas to do so. In the 6th Century, a Church Council (Macon) actually spent two days debating whether woman was a human being or not.

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RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION:

Threat to free speech – and a legal minefield in the making?

SPARKED by a report by the Commission for Racial Equality, the Government is considering outlawing discrimination on the grounds of religion in the same way that it protects people against sexual or racial discrimination.

The Commission also recommended a law against “incitement to religious hatred”, and called for a public debate about extending the blasphemy law.

Home Secretary Jack Straw told the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee: “It is a very very difficult area. We have at one and the same time to protect people’s right to practise religion and we have to protect the ability in a democratic society to voice dissent.”

There is some evidence that the Government is realistic about at least some of the difficulties of drafting such law. A Government spokesman reportedly said: “We do not want to have a situation that means you could set up any barmy sect and claim discrimination.”

If it is possible at all, framing workable legislation will be far more complex than the Government envisages. Which religions are to be protected and how will the Government defend the exclusion of other religions?

The difficulty of defining what constitutes a religion was demonstrated recently in France, when an appeal court declared that it was justifiable for Scientology to call itself a religion—even though the French Advocate General had described the cult as nothing more than “organised fraud on a massive scale”.

How does one legislate for discrimination between adherents of religions which consider each other’s doctrines to be blasphemous, never mind sects of major religions which consider other sects to be heretical?

How about vegans or animal rights activists who discriminate against those who engage in (or even eat the products of) ritual slaughter?

And are these areas in which the already-overloaded courts should become involved? Without appropriate safeguards to stop abuse, any new law would undoubtedly provide a happy hunting ground for zealots and extremists to clog the courts with ludicrous actions that would bring the judicial process into further disrepute. If these laws are introduced, careful attention should be paid to maximising safeguards, such as requiring intention to be proved and requiring that cases only be pursued with the permission of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Many of the foregoing arguments also apply against any extension of the blasphemy law. Muslim activists have already stated that they would want Salman Rushdie prosecuted as soon as any new law permitted it.

by Keith Porteous Wood

And what sentence would they expect the State to exact before they felt satisfied? Could it be that any new law which enabled Rushdie to be prosecuted for *The Satanic Verses* would succeed in infuriating zealots by imposing what seemed to them too lenient a sentence—while also incensing a large proportion of the population who saw it as violation of free expression?

There is no doubt that, badly drafted, such laws could be highly destructive to the Secularist cause, and we must fight to defend freedom of expression and the liberty to criticise religion.

On the other hand, the National Secular Society has always tried to combat prejudice—and there is little doubt that many from minority religions suffer discrimination. Were we to go along, on the grounds of pragmatism, with the introduction of some protection (provided, of course, non-believers were included) how far should it go? For instance, should employers be required to allow workers on continuous assembly lines to absent themselves for purposes of religious observances?

Gesture

It is clear that the agenda is being set by the religious lobbies. Dr Hamad Al Majed, of the Islamic Cultural Centre in London, was quoted in the *Daily Mail* (July 30) as saying: “This is very good news indeed. It is the kind of gesture which we hoped for from a Labour government.” The Bishop of Oxford is reported to have spoken in similar vein.

The CRE’s report comes on the heels of one from the Runnymede Trust covering very similar ground and to which the National Secular Society has already responded (see *The Freethinker* from April, 1997, on).

Even if such optimism by the religious spokesmen is misplaced, it could cause a climate of expectation which the Government will find it difficult—or even impossible—to placate. Many Labour MPs in constituencies with large religious communities will feel vulnerable to religious opinion. The Government appears to be testing opinion on this topic, but it is not yet clear what its real intentions are. We hope that it has an open mind.

On a slightly more optimistic note, a source present at the Select Committee’s deliberations—and who had talked to officials afterwards—told *The Freethinker* that this issue was not high on the Government’s agenda. While it favoured enacting anti-religious discrimination legislation, it might be prepared

to concede the abolition of the blasphemy law as a *quid pro quo*.

In a climate such as this, it is important that Secularists and Humanists make their opinions known by writing to their MPs and asking them to pass their letter to Jack Straw. And do, please, send me copies of your letters—and, even more important, the replies.

As General Secretary of the National Secular Society, I have been invited by a Home Office Constitutional specialist to put our point of view. We will keep you informed of developments.

● NICOLAS WALTER, of the Rationalist Press Association and *The Freethinker*, wrote to *The Times* on August 2: “The official statement that the Home Office is considering increasing the legal protection of religion along lines proposed by the Commission for Racial Equality is received with moderate scepticism by Paul Barker (August 2), but there are grounds for more militant opposition.

“Discrimination against or incitement to hatred of anyone on grounds of religion is obviously undesirable, but these are not obviously suitable subjects for further legislation, and any such legislation should also cover discrimination against and incitement to hatred of anyone on grounds of difference or lack of religion. Moreover, some religious doctrines and practices are clearly hateful by higher standards, and should be open to the same criticism as any other objectionable doctrines or practices.

“Offensive expression about religion may also be undesirable, but the history of heresy and blasphemy teaches hard lessons about attempts to suppress it. The English common law of blasphemy discriminates in favour of Anglican Christianity, but any proposed extension of it to cover other religions would discriminate in favour of religion. Paul Barker’s suggestion that blasphemy ‘is best left to fade into a dead cinder’ is an English solution of an English problem, but cinders tend to flare up. A better solution would be to put religion on the same level as other controversial matters, and regulate offensive expression through general laws against public disorder and private damage.

“Meanwhile, the Home Office might be well advised to consider decreasing rather than increasing the legal protection of religion. The privileged position of religious institutions in many areas—charity law, planning law, chaplaincies, oaths, genital mutilation, ritual slaughter, marriage, education, politics, monarchy, and church establishment itself—is obviously anomalous and surely objectionable. Belief in supernatural beings should not justify special treatment in a free and open society.”



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Following in grandfather's footsteps?

"SCRATCH out Charles Darwin, pencil in Erasmus", wrote Stephen McGinty in the *Sunday Times* (July 13). "The I man credited with the theory of evolution owed far more to his grandfather than has hitherto been thought." Thought by whom? I ask. Not by anyone who has read the definitive biographies of Charles by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (Michael Joseph 1991) and Janet Browne (Vol 1, Jonathan Cape 1995).

Take just one example from each. Desmond and Moore tell us that in mid-July 1837 Darwin opened his "B" notebook and "on the title page he inscribed in bold letters the word *Zoonomia*, to signal that he was treading the same path as his grandfather" (page 229). From Janet Browne we learn that Charles "studied his grandfather's volumes closely—closely enough to continue the interest by reading Anna Seward's biography of him ... and following up crucial questions about the nature of life and organisation as raised in the *Zoonomia* ..." (page 83).

Even so, we should welcome the biography of Erasmus Darwin by Desmond King-Hele, which is to be published next year, and which prompted Stephen McGinty's article. Erasmus is certainly a fascinating figure in his own right.

UF Oncologist?

THOSE who don't read *The People*—and you can count me among them—have no idea of the trash it prints. On July 27, for instance, there was the story of "Mum Lynne Plaskett" of California, who "claims her cancer was cured by ALIENS" (caps in original). Then we read the familiar formula for miracle cancer cures, that she was "given only three months to live". For some reason, three months seems to be the habitual time limit in these cases; but, however hopeless her condition, Lynne did receive chemotherapy.

She went home, the story goes, intending to make plans for the care of her three-year-old son, and threw herself on the bed. Suddenly, there was a buzzing noise, the room was filled with white smoke and (yes!) she levitated. Then, through the window, came a "gyrating" disc with "multi-coloured lights", which went three times across Lynne's body "as if examining me" and left. She fell asleep and woke "to feel she was cured". Within four months she was given the all-clear.

All this allegedly happened 23 years ago, when Mrs Plaskett was 25, but she has never spoken of it before because she "didn't want to

be ridiculed". I don't know why she should regard it as any less ridiculous now. Why, anyway, does she invoke ALIENS when, judging by *The People* report, she didn't see any? And, as she describes the gyrating disc as only eight inches across, any occupants couldn't have been very tall. Unlike the story she tells.

Jinnah porkies

ADDRESSING the first meeting of Pakistan's Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the "father of the nation", said "You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosque or to any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan ... We are starting in the days when there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another."

It didn't quite work out that way. "Ideology was used to transform Pakistan into a theocracy", says I A Rehman of the Human Rights Association of Pakistan. "There is a problem with the Pakistani Muslim psyche that their concept of a hero is that he can't do any wrong. That is why they must prove that Jinnah offered prayers."

But the real Jinnah, writes *The Observer's* Karachi correspondent, Suzanne Goldenberg, was "not given to religious contemplation" (July 20). He was "a secular, tolerant and forward-looking leader."

They say he even ate pork sausages!

Priestly passion

I CAN'T really believe it: that the BBC intends to kill Assumpta—and by electrocution! But I'd better explain, in case you're not one of the 14 million people who watch it, that I'm referring to the Sunday-evening series *Ballykissangel*, in which the handsome Father Clifford, played by Stephen Tompkinson, has been in love with the luscious local publican, Assumpta, played by Dervia Kirwan, since he first set eyes on her.

Until now the young priest has always remembered his vow of celibacy at the last minute, and backed away from the expected embrace; and I suppose there was a limit to the number of times he and Assumpta could carry on like that. But to kill her off, just as she has persuaded Father Clifford to leave the priesthood and elope with her, is surely going too far, credibly and aesthetically. We won't have confirmation (!) for another six months, when the final episodes are screened, but the rumours persist that she is to be sacrificed.

Greg Murphy, Editor of the *Catholic Times*, is outraged, though not so much at Assumpta's fate. He accuses the BBC of trying to "undermine the priesthood" and "making a meal out of the ills of the Catholic Church" (*The Guardian*, August 1). At least he acknowledges the sickness.

A £50m pinch of Salt (Lake)

AS AN old Lancastrian, I feel sorry for Chorley. What has the town done to warrant the intrusion of a £50 million Mormon temple, second only in size to that in Salt Lake City itself?

The first Mormon missionaries to Britain landed at Liverpool in 1837, and their first converts were baptised in the River Ribble at Preston, a few miles from Chorley. There's already a Mormon church at Preston, but a temple was needed for their proxy baptism and binding — or "sealing" — believers to their relations. Chorley was chosen and the great edifice is topped with a 13ft glass-fibre statue of Joseph Smith's angel Moroni, encrusted in 23 carat gold-leaf, "sounding the gospel message to the world" — or at any rate to the residents of Chorley.

British Mormons are reported to have grown in number from around 6,500 to 170,000 in 50 years (*The Guardian*, July 28). But are all these still living? You can never be sure with the Church of Latter Day Saints, knowing its particular penchant for recruiting dead souls.

Your convent needs YOU!

DRASTIC measures were called for and Sister Mary Bernadette of the Redemptoristine Convent in Liverpool has taken them. Thousands of posters have been sent to Roman Catholic churches, schools and colleges in an effort to recruit nuns for the contemplative convents.

"We are doing this because we want to remind people that we are still here", she told *Guardian* reporter Vivek Chaudhary (July 10), "and because we are not getting that many young females who want to join us." Rather an understatement, as it turns out. Sister Bernadette, aged 68, is one of only nine nuns at her convent, where they have not had a "new vocation" for more than 20 years. As she rightly says, "We could do with some fresh blood".

Whether they will get it is another matter. The poster is attractively designed in its way, but how can the "Contemplative Life" that it advertises appeal to the modern woman? The day begins at 5.30 am, followed by prayers and Mass; after breakfast there is a period of work, then more prayers, lunch and prayers again. Just a moment, though. "We get an hour's break in the evening, when we like to sit down to watch the news or videos of *Dad's Army* or detective movies".

Perhaps she should have put that on the poster.

STRANGENESS IN PARADISE

AT A time when half the serious reported crimes are described by the police as “drugs related”, it is well to be reminded by Peter Raby that the British in India pioneered the large-scale manufacture of opium. Plant-collector Joseph Hooker, who was later to succeed his father as Director of Kew Gardens, was impressed by the Victorian efficiency of the producers, recounting how the workers were hosed down at the end of the 10-hour day and the “inspissated” water was used as liquor to mould the next-day’s output of opium balls. More than 10,000 balls were produced per day.

Hooker (1817-1911), a superb plant-collector “with an eye for everything from the smallest lichen to the forest trees”, searched in the Himalayas at a higher level than any European mountain, without any specialised equipment or experienced guides. On his return to England he worked closely with Darwin.

The latter’s voyage on the *Beagle* and T H Huxley’s on the *Rattlesnake* have recently received more coverage—in biographies and, in the former case, on television—than the no-less-remarkable travels of Alfred Russel Wallace, so it is good to see fair tribute paid here to the joint discoverer of the origin of species.

Wallace had to leave Hertford Grammar School in 1836 at the age of 14, when funds ran out. He was sent off to work with an older brother, John, a carpenter’s apprentice, in London, where he attended lectures at the Working Men’s Institute, and “came across the ideas of Malthus and Owen, each crucial to him in different ways”. Years later, when suffering from fever in the Malay archipelago, he recalled his reading of the *Essay on Population* and “there suddenly flashed upon me the idea of the survival of the fittest”.

“The more I thought it over”, he continued, “the more I became convinced that I had at length found the long-sought-for law of nature that solved the problem of the origin of species ...” When his fever was over, he wrote his notes out carefully and sent them to Darwin.

When Wallace was 21, he took a teaching job in Leicester and, at the public library, he met Henry Bates, with whom, in 1848, he sailed from Liverpool in the *Mischief* to the Amazon, the site—in Peter Raby’s words—“of the greatest concentration of British naturalists in the middle of the century”.

Another British naturalist, Richard Spruce, who sailed from Liverpool a year later, made the first leg of his trip up the Amazon on the brig of “a sturdy, rosy Scotsman”, Captain Hislop, who read only two books, Volney’s *Ruins of Empires* and the Bible. After a few extra glasses of port, we are told, Hislop “would expand on the character of Moses, whom he described as ‘a great general and a great law-giver, but a great impostor’”.

Spruce’s travels took him to the Peruvian Andes by wood-fuelled steamer and canoe, where he spent 18 months or so of solid collecting and three months being ill, by which time he had catalogued “over 1,000 flowering plants and ferns, besides several hundred of his beloved mosses and hepaticæ”.

Spruce seriously questioned the value of mis-

Bright Paradise: Victorian Scientific Travellers by Peter Raby. Chatto & Windus, £20.

Review: COLIN McCALL

sionary work among the Indians. Hueleca, the headman of a group that had renounced Christianity, was “a person of gentlemanly manners and with none of the craving selfishness of those people” who were Christian. But Hueleca’s people were suffering from illness, the children from catarrhal fever; and when his wife and one of the children died, he burned down the house and the dilapidated convent and moved to another part of the forest “where the whites never pass, for to their contamination he believes that he owes his bereavement”.

During his long stay in Malaysia, Wallace studied—and alas shot many—orang utans. “It is very remarkable”, he wrote, “that an animal so large, so peculiar, and of such a high type of form ... should be confined to so limited a district ... When we consider, further, that all other animals have in earlier ages been represented by allied yet distinct forms ... we have every reason to believe that the orang-utan, the chimpanzee and the gorilla have also had their fore-runners”. And he looked forward to the time when “the past history and earliest appearance of the great manlike apes be at length made known”.

Then, when writing about birds of paradise, he foresaw that the incursions of “civilised man” into the “virgin forests” would “so disturb the nicely-balanced relations of organic and inorganic nature as to cause the disappearance, and finally the extinction, of these very beings whose wonderful structure and beauty he alone is fitted to appreciate and enjoy.” Even a “warlike and energetic people, who will not submit to national slavery or to domestic servitude, must disappear before the white man as surely as do the wolf and tiger”.

When it was a crime to be a non-Christian

DO FREETHINKERS and other godless citizens read novels? It is certain that we do not spend the whole of our time in refutations of religion: some of us like novels that pass the time well enough. And occasionally one comes along that is something special, that has a deep pull on the imagination and connects with life as it is lived.

Threshold of Fire deserves every recommendation. It is a story of 5th Century Rome at a critical time of a great change in the life of the Roman citizens. This is the introduction by the Christians from the Hebrews of a totalitarian religion which outlaws dissent—now called heresy—with ominous portents for the future.

The weak Emperor Honorius rules ineffectively in AD 414, subservient to a powerful pressure group. The eastern religion of a

Although he accepted a “spiritual dimension”, Wallace believed, not in Christianity, but in progress towards an ideal state. He had lived among egalitarian communities in South America and the East, who had no laws except “the public opinion of the village freely expressed”. “The more I see of uncivilised people”, he said, “the better I think of human nature, and the essential differences between civilised and savage men seem to disappear”.

Wallace’s influence was acknowledged by the redoubtable woman explorer Mary Kingsley, who characterised late Victorian conventions and prejudices as “humbug” and, as Peter Raby says, went to Africa “not as an extension of empire ... nor even as a missionary ... but in the guise of a trader, because that was something the African people could understand, and not feel threatened by”.

She was no hunter, either, although her father had been, and she deliberately dressed as a woman, sloshing “through mangrove swamps in full Victorian skirts, with a hat and umbrella”. Confronted by a leopard, she threw an earthenware pot at its head and it “went for bush”.

Peter Raby describes another woman, the plant painter Marianne North, as having “acquired a scientific frame of mind” and being “at least an agnostic”, who provided “an alternative approach to the ruthless, large-scale despoliation of the mid-century plant hunters”. And in 1882, Sir Joseph Hooker, as he now was, opened the North Gallery at Kew to house her 882 paintings and 246 different kinds of wood.

“The scientific travellers changed the British, and European, view of the world”, as Peter Raby remarks; and he, as a lecturer in drama and English, looks at their influence on the literature of the time: on Mary Kingsley’s uncle Charles and his *Water Babies* among others. Contemporary maps, photographs and engravings add to the appeal of *Bright Paradise*, with which I have only one complaint: the constant use of “animals” for “mammals”.

***Threshold of Fire* by Hella S Haase. Paperback Original published by Allison & Busby Ltd. £8.99.**

Review: V S PETHERAM

Christ has been declared the official religion of all Romans and the old paganism is to be obliterated and its temples destroyed. Spies are set upon those whose loyalty to the new order is doubtful.

The story is of a trial and its background. The powerful Prefect Hadrian, a fanatical convert, is president of the court. Before him on trial for his life is the aristocrat Marcus Arnicius, who refuses to leave the old culture behind. Eliezer, a Jew in Egypt who holds to his beliefs, has a bastard son, Claudianus, a well-known poet, who is also on trial.

This is a short novel with a powerful story. An enjoyable read awaits you.

Has God come tripping back?

NOW he sees you. Now he don't. Is God playing games with the human race? Or is the author playing games with his reader?

The subtitle is the giveaway. I thought that *The Disappearance of God* might present an account of how humanity has steadily moved away from the concept of God, becoming mature enough to exist happily without such fantasies. Alas, "A Divine Mystery" tells all. It is alleged by Richard Friedman that the gradual disappearance of God from human activity and human consciousness is a divine ploy to enable the race to mature up to point where reunion with God may be the triumphant next step.

Richard Elliott Friedman is a biblical scholar, who wrote a respectable, if unoriginal, book about the Old Testament, *Who Wrote the Bible?*. Probably the most sensible, again unoriginal, section of his book covers the Old Testament. He demonstrates that the visibly active God of the creation, who spoke to Eve and Adam, who communicated quite directly with Moses, slowly moved away. From divine presence to miracles to the intermediacy of priests is all a process in which God is hidden. There is a tradition in Jewish thought which develops this idea, the *deus abscondus*.

God seems to be represented as Tantalus. "You know I could be there, but you shall not know me, not until ..." The author has picked up this tendency and tantalises his readers with ideas which he is just about to explain round the corner, but never quite does. I do not feel his second and third sections on Nietzsche and on modern science explain anything, let alone that reunion with God is imminent. He is constantly declaring that he is the first to find an explanation, which he endeavours with great ingenuity to persuade us of. But it is ingenuity *abscondus*.

Perhaps one should not criticise a book for not doing what it did not set out to do. But this book cries out for the sense of liberation and

***The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* by Richard Elliot Friedman. Little, Brown and Company UK. £18.99 ISBN 031-629-4349.**

Review: JIM HERRICK

excitement that can come from the annihilation of god from human thought. It is not he who has absconded — it is we who have banished him.

The first section on the Bible is too long for its purpose. It moves from divine contact with Moses to Jacob wrestling with God (a key image for Friedman — it is among the wrestlers with God that he wants to be). In the Book of Joshua we are told that God listens to mankind, which Friedman sees as a step forward from man listening to God; but given the babble that the human race is constantly at, it is hard to understand why God could be bothered to listen. If he has a hearing-aid, I expect he has thrown it away by now.

In Esther (from the Judaic Bible) we are given a book without reference to God. There is also a reference to a near holocaust, although we are later told that it is the 20th Century, without God, that is particularly prone to genocide. Somehow, the arrival of Jesus is seen as part of the flight of God — a human in his place, perhaps, if you can ignore that he is the "son of". God could presumably have made humans in any image he liked, but Friedman quotes Mark Twain: "If the Lord didn't want humans to be rebellious, why did He create them in His image?"

The second section is devoted to Nietzsche. Apart from the obvious "death of God" pronouncement, Friedman lays special attention upon the similarity of ideas between Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, and on his encounter with a mistreated horse before he went mad. In the

first case, the similarity between some of the ideas of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche is not as unexpected as the author claims and can also be seen as part of the *zeitgeist*. The obsessive idea that "all is permitted" once God has gone preoccupies Friedman in common with many 20th Century pontificators.

Secondly, the whipped horse, which is said to have triggered Nietzsche's madness. Friedman writes: "Throwing his arms about the neck of the suffering horse was a synthesis and culmination of so many compartments of his life. Dreams, experiences, and ideas all merged in a symbol, and he stepped in and embraced it." I would prefer to look at medical evidence, than to embrace this kind of metaphorical meaninglessness.

The last section compares the Jewish mystic tradition inscribed in the Kabbalah and modern cosmic science. Friedman is one of those who believe that "Science, particularly cosmology, is coming to be widely regarded as intersecting with religion." I would contest that "widely". He quotes the oft-quoted Paul Davies, and makes much of Hawking's comment that scientific discovery may eventually bring us face-to-face with God — a sentence that has been much discussed with more heat than light.

His central thesis emerges towards the end. Humans are becoming mature enough for reunion with God. Has God, like some teacher who walks out of the class for a while, come tripping back to see what's going on and whether his pupils are worthy of him?

After the usual nonsense about the collapse of morality in the 20th Century, he argues for a morality based on species loyalty. He accepts that such morality can be important for unbelievers as well as believers. He thinks that we are all seeking, and all coming close to, Yahweh. Yahweh is "that which causes to be". If Yahweh in any way caused this book "to be", I cannot think why.

Catholic paper spotlights Nazi-Vatican links

MORE revelations about Vatican-Nazi financial relations—from a surprising source: the *Catholic Herald* of August 8.

The report says that "Jewish agencies have released details of wartime documents pointing to contacts between the Vatican, and blacklisted Fascist banks and Germany's Nazi-controlled Reichsbank. The documents were found in US archives as a result of stepped-up research efforts by the agencies after the Vatican's recent denial of claims contained in a declassified US Treasury document which says the Vatican held assets for the Nazi puppet régime of Croatia which had been confiscated from extermination victims." [see *The Freethinker*, August, 1997, Page 9].

It adds: "One of the new documents released this week is dated 27 Jan 1945, and refers to a transaction of 12 Nov 1944. In it, Credit Suisse informs the Vatican's Istituto per le Opere Religiose (Institute of Religious Works or IOR) that: 'We deposit 6,407.5 (Swiss) francs on behalf of the Reichsbank in Berlin.'

"A second document, marked 'secret', refers to two IOR deposits, for 100,000 and 200,000 Swiss Francs, in the Banque Suisse Italienne of

Lugano. That bank was blacklisted by the Allies because of its links with Italian Fascist régime. The transaction is understood to have taken place via two other Swiss banks. A third document, also dated 1945, claims that the IOR asked a Portuguese bank to send \$2,500 in large notes to the Vatican 'in a sealed packet' via the Apostolic Nuncio in Lisbon. The original Treasury document which the Vatican said had 'no foundation whatever' cited what are understood to be US Intelligence sources. According to these, the Vatican took \$130 million of gold and jewellery confiscated from 900,000 Jews, gypsies and other extermination victims of the Ustashe Nazi puppet régime of Croatia.

"It was claimed that the money was kept by the Vatican for safekeeping after other consignments sent out of Croatia were seized by the Allies. Jewish groups then suggested that the gold may have been used to help Nazi war criminals escape from Europe."

Such huge sums as are written of here leave our heads reeling at the office of *The Freethinker*. But stories like these underline the importance of keeping alive—and kicking—an atheist journal which from its earliest issues in

the 1880s to the present day has stressed the unbroken connection between totalitarianism and the Church.

Please help us to keep up the pressure by helping us to pay the bills. Send a donation today to: Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: £50, Will of Vera Brierley, S Clark; £30, D Towers; £25, D Plumb, J Staniforth; £15, L Harrington, J Mehta; £10, D Earle, P George, R Hale, R Harris, M Hickey, M Hill, P Housego, K Woods; £7, D Rogers; £5, F Bacon, R Davies, Ealing Humanists, N Green, M Kamal, P Langford, A Martin, D Martin, C Matthews, W Stirling, B Thorpe, R Vickers; £3, R Cannon, A Clay, G Darroch, J Davis, J Fawbert; £2, E Fleury, P Gormley, M Palmer.

Donations from July 22 to August 14: £378 (note: due to staff holidays, not all donations received in August are included above; they will be acknowledged in the September issue).

Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley:

Lesser writers, freer thinkers!

WE ARE commemorating two closely connected bicentenaries. On August 30, 1797, a girl was born in London after a hard labour; on September 10, 1797, her mother died from complications following the birth. They were both called Mary Godwin; but the mother is better known by her earlier name, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the daughter is better known by her later name, Mary Shelley. The former is best known for the feminist classic *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); the latter is best known for the science fiction classic *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818).

For nearly two centuries they were overshadowed by their respective husbands, William Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley, but in the changed climate of our age they have both received proper recognition at last. There are not only various cheap paperbacks and facsimile hardbacks of their main books, but also expensive academic editions of their collected writings in many volumes, as well as biographical and critical studies of all kinds. It is now easy enough to find and read their work. All that is necessary and possible here is a sketch of the lives and careers of this remarkable mother and daughter.

Mary Wollstonecraft was born in 1759 into an Anglo-Irish middle-class family. After an unhappy childhood and youth with a harsh father and weak mother, she made a precarious living as a lady's companion and seamstress, schoolteacher and governess, before becoming a journalist and translator, a writer of children's stories and romantic novels. She suffered as a woman, nursing dying friends and relations, being rejected and betrayed in love, having an illegitimate child and being abandoned by its father, and she twice tried to kill herself. (The child did kill herself 20 years later.) But she succeeded as a writer, with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (the first reply to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, overshadowed by Thomas Paine's later and greater *Rights of Man*), an early account of the French Revolution, a charming travel book, and her pioneering feminist tract. And she succeeded as a woman too, with her final love for Godwin, her happy pregnancy and their brief marriage, before her tragic death.

Mary Shelley was brought up by her unworldly father and an unpleasant stepmother, until at the age of 16 she eloped with the aristocratic Shelley, although he already had a young wife and child and another child on the way. For eight years she travelled around Europe with the philandering poet, marrying him when his wife killed herself, until he was drowned in 1822. They had four children, but three died; she was left with an only son, and lived on until 1851. She inherited many of her parents' gifts, and became a successful writer. She not only composed *Frankenstein* at the age of 18, but also produced plays and other novels, as well as much journalism. She preserved and published her husband's writings (and preserved but did not publish her father's). She had suffered more

by Anna Freeman

than she deserved, and sought stability and respectability. Her son, who inherited the family baronetcy, inherited none of his parents' gifts, but lived a life of unrelieved mediocrity, carefully falsifying the reputations of his extraordinary ancestors, and appropriately died without issue in 1889.

Godwin and Shelley were of course two of the best-known freethinkers of their time, dogmatically proclaiming varying revolutionary

Wollstonecraft on religion

"What unheard-of misery have thousands suffered to purchase a cardinal's hat for an intriguing obscure adventurer who longed to be ranked with princes, or lord it over them by seizing the triple crown!"—*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792

"[Clergy are] idle vermin who two or three times a day perform in the most slovenly manner a service which they think useless, but call their duty."—*ibid.*

"We must get entirely clear of all the notions drawn from the wild traditions of original sin, the eating of the apple ... and the other fables, too tedious to enumerate on which priests have erected their tremendous structures of imposition."—*An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, 1794.

doctrines of politics and religion, and like so many freethinkers expected everyone else to think as they did. But their wives, while they may have been lesser writers, were actually freer thinkers, and refused to think as they were

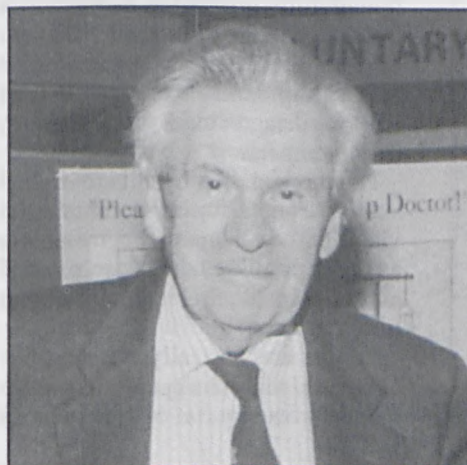
told. The two Marys have been claimed by the freethought movement, but they were religious as well as rationalist, and although both of them may be called humanists neither of them was an atheist.

Mary Wollstonecraft, who was brought up in the Church of England, abandoned it in her twenties, but continued to believe in God and immortality. In her two *Vindications* she appealed to religion as well as reason, to divinity as well as humanity; she saw God as a personal friend rather than a supreme being and death as a change rather than an end, and she saw her belief as a matter of private conviction rather than of public profession. Godwin included in his scandalously candid *Memoirs of the Author of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* (1798) a pleasant if patronising account of her do-it-yourself deism; and his detailed account of her death smugly recorded that "her religion ... was not calculated to be the torment of a sick bed" and that, "during her whole illness, not one word of a religious cast fell from her lips".

Mary Shelley, who was brought up virtually without religion, nevertheless developed a simple informal faith like her mother's, and later played down the unorthodox views of her family and circle. Matthew Arnold repeated an unlikely anecdote about the time when the worried widow was concerned with the education of her son. A friend suggested that he should be taught to think for himself. "Teach him to think for himself?" she replied, only half-jokingly. "Oh, my God, teach him rather to think like other people!" (He was sent to Harrow and Cambridge, rather than his father's Eton and Oxford.) Considering what she had endured from the daring but disruptive thoughts of her parents and husband and so many of their friends, she can hardly be blamed.

We should always remember how complex the story of freethought really is. Meanwhile let us pay tribute to these two remarkable characters who played such different and difficult parts in it — Mary Wollstonecraft, who struck the first effective blow for women's liberation in English, and Mary Shelley, who contributed the immortal image of the Frankenstein monster to modern culture.

Now Sir Ludo backs NSS



WRITER and tireless campaigner for the right to voluntary euthanasia Sir Ludovic Kennedy has become an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society.

In a letter to General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood, he says he is "very pleased to accept" the invitation, and: "I am entirely in support of what you stand for and the work you do."

Sir Ludovic joins a distinguished panel of Honorary Associates which includes Edward Bond, Benny Green, Claire Rayner, Lord Raglan, Polly Toynbee, Dr Francis Crick, Professor Richard Dawkins, Rt Hon Michael Foot, Professor Ted Honderich, Jonathan Meades, George Melly, Jonathan Miller.

ULSTER'S TOLAND 'SCHOOL' SUCCESS

AROUND 40 people from the North of Ireland, the Irish Republic, England, Wales and Scotland attended the Secular Summer School organised by the Ulster Humanist Association at Redcastle Hotel, County Donegal, August 22-24. The event was judged so enjoyable and inspiring that plans are already taking shape for a similar school next year.

The theme of the school was "European Freethought Since Toland", and Sean Kearney, Editor of the *Ulster Humanist*, and Philip McGuinness, Queen's University, Belfast, presented views of John Toland (1670-1722).

Toland, abandoning Roman Catholicism at the age of 15, moved from latitudinarianism to deism, and finally to a materialistic form of pantheism. His deism is most evident in his *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), a seminal work in freethought, and his pantheism is developed in *Letters to Serena* (1704), which contains an attack on Spinoza's theory of matter, and in *Pantheisticon* (1720).

Jim Herrick, Editor of the *New Humanist* and of *International Humanist News*, spoke on European Freethinkers, while Nicolas Walter, of the Rationalist Press Association and *The Freethinker*, author of the recently-published *Humanism: What's in the Word*, took "The Meaning of Humanism" as his subject.

Ulster Humanist Association Secretary Brian McClinton spoke on "The Rise of Fundamentalism", and the new President of the Dublin-based Association of Irish Humanists, Justin Keating, spoke on "Myths That We Live By" (Mr Keating is a former member of the Irish Cabinet, and of the Senate and the European Parliament).

There was much social activity—including a tour of the historic walls of Derry—and especially pleasing was the involvement of young families.

Lilliput, Dublin, publish a volume which includes Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* at £12. The book was burned by the public hangman in 1697—and the publishers plan a centenary "book-burning" in Dublin on September 11. The Ulster Humanist Association has available a pamphlet by Sean Kearney, *John Toland: Father of Irish Philosophy*, at £2.50.

The UHA may be contacted at 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE (telephone: 01846 677264).

● Nicolas Walter's *Humanism: What's in the Word* is available to readers of *The Freethinker* at the special price of £5 (including postage) from Rationalist Press Association, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP. Enclose remittance with name and address.

*'Praying to an imaginary god app
you are well aware, y*

It's good to

TO A HUMANIST, who does not believe in any kind of deity, one of the oddest things that people do is pray. Addressing a being whom they have never seen, of whose existence many remain in doubt, since there is no incontrovertible evidence for it, and whose character and powers are equally matters of debate, does not—in the opinion of unbelievers—seem rational conduct.

That, however, is denied by those who pray, who claim that this exercise of faith (as they put it) is a reasonable response to the complexity and mystery of life. By mockery, argument and sometimes less reputable means, both sides seek to show that their opponents are mistaken. In dealing with this subject, I want to try a different approach. Its success is to be measured in the reaching of balanced judgments, by any of those concerned, which take sympathetic account of opponents' approaches even when they are found unacceptable.

My purpose is not to pretend to those who not share my convictions, as the Gilbert and Sullivan libretto puts it, that *You are right, and I am right, and everything is quite correct*. Readers should know that I am a humanist who does not believe in any kind of deity. It is true that I once did so believe but, while that means I am familiar with all the justifications offered for such belief, now thoughtfully rejected as lacking cogency, I realise that the *I am right; you are wrong* attitude, into which it is all too easy to slip, is liable to result in contentious disagreement rather than enlightenment.

The method employed is to explore the subject from a starting-point of whose viability there is mutual agreement and as far as possible not to lose sight of the aim of being equitable in one's treatment of the topic.

Prayers are, basically, wishes. Certainly, religious people formulate them as requests for, or anticipations of,

action on the part of a supernatural agency. The non-religious may be sure that they have no wishes of that kind. Wishes, therefore, are not necessarily prayers and, it can be added, usually are not. Prayers, however, stripped of their terminology, are, fundamentally, wishes.

Wishes cover an infinitely wide range, from the fanciful, in which young children so much enjoy indulging, to the pragmatic, which marks some level of maturity. The point to be considered here is that, although the totality of possible wishes is beyond listing, the basic human urges (or instincts, as they used to be called), from which all our expressed wishes ultimately derive, are a mere handful, the essence of which can be easily described.

Inherited

These natural urges, which we have in common—religious and non-religious alike—and are inherited from our mammalian ancestry, come into play in human life from birth onwards. We know what they are and how they operate. It is important to recognise that a religious propensity, giving rise, for example, to the practice of prayer, is not one of them.

It is important because religious people, eager to find "scientific" support for their theological surmises, sometimes make false claims to the contrary. Separately, or in partnership, basic urges underlie pious and secular wishes with total lack of discrimination.

Religions are not passed on through genes. They have cultural, not evolutionary, origins. Human beings are not born religious. Under particular prevailing conditions, they become so. The notion that it is natural to pray (whether in a crisis or not is irrelevant) has no biological basis.

We should not imagine that religions were thrust upon our ancestors by deities or other supernatural beings with an interest in public relations. So-called divine revelations, upon which numberless systems of belief have been built, all have manifestly mundane antecedents.

appears absurd enough; praying to a god whom, as you have invented, suggests insanity'

talk – to yourself

by CHARLES WARD

They are human creations. Educated religious people do not deny this. Among them, in consequence, defence of the religious position has moved away from the jejune arguments presented by their forebears and has become more sophisticated, academic—even, one might say, casuistic.

What they assert is that, despite the anthropomorphism (making gods after their image of Man), superstition, bibliolatry and so forth of less well-informed devotees of the past, and diehards still propounding their traditions today, modern folk should be aware that a true insight is encapsulated in the myth.

Although the ancient intuition admittedly requires extensive refinement (not to mention purging of a number of no-longer-respected elements) in order to make it more or less acceptable to present-day believers and, furthermore, this process of refinement is also an observable human activity, the strong suggestion is made that spiritual devotion lends to the exercise a life of its own, and thus the reality of religious experience can supplant what has been demythologised.

This somewhat tongue-in-cheek comment does not, I trust, unfairly describe the situation.

To non-believers, especially those with no liking for subtleties or split hairs, there is no substance in religious views of any kind, hence no alternative to prayer, except (if you have been so foolish as to form the habit) to stop practising it. Praying to an imaginary god appears absurd enough; praying to a god whom, as you are well aware, you have invented, suggests insanity.

Some people try to get over that difficulty by opting for affirmations or meditation instead of prayer. Their faith centres less around dogma and becomes more of a tentative philosophy.

A less exotic, if hard to practise, alternative to prayer, I was once electrified to hear stated by Michael Goulder. As you may recall, he was one of the contributors to *The Myth of God Incarnate* symposium, published by SCM in 1964. Later, he left the Church. As Professor of

Biblical Studies at Birmingham University, he was being interviewed on the BBC *Heart of the Matter* programme, and was asked about prayer. His reply was, *Prayer doesn't help; what you have to do is think*.

I may have been wrong, but the kind of thinking I took him at the time to be alluding to was a no-holds-barred wrestling with one's own thoughts, which from time-to-time I personally have found extremely effective.

It has to be said that it calls for a certain astuteness in organising it (or plain cunning, in my case)—especially if you have family or other commitments; sheer determination to persist; and a generous allotment of time. The first point will be better appreciated if I confess to thinking aloud, of great help in the marshalling of arguments, but likely to be injurious to one's reputation if one is observed in the act, or the walls are too thin.

Liberating

Absolute sincerity is an obvious precondition. With no one else to contradict, seek to impress, or merely be courteous or diplomatic towards, you can give yourself hell, but you can find yourself coming to all sorts of practical decisions you never thought possible. The demolition of all self-deception can be a protracted matter, but there is no doubt that it is a liberating experience.

And an illuminating one—which I suspect is more rarely the case with prayer, despite the hype with which its promoters surround it.

Churchill, when asked whether, on a war-time problem, he would consult a certain peer, wryly remarked: "You know what will happen if I ask Edward. He will go away and pray and come back extremely ill-advised." Only opinions already held emerge from prayer.

On the other hand, I believe it's good to talk in the way I have described but, even if you found the experiment unproductive (which I find hard to credit), it won't increase your telephone bill. It has to be admitted, though, that intimate talk of this sort can lead to bursts of maniacal

laughter, which may startle neighbours.

Perhaps the professor was alluding to thinking of a less strenuous and patently lunatic kind. Be that as it may, it is perhaps too much to expect the sober-minded religious to engage on such a drastic venture.

Unquestionably, it can seem a lot easier to continue to indulge in a charade of seeking advice, confirmation, guidance or co-operation from a source which, being imaginary, is able to supply none of these. Of course, that remark will not prevent some people from believing that prayers are "answered"—sometimes—or (with that ghastly and, I should deem, unspiritual concession to mechanistic ideas) that "prayer works". Books proclaiming the necessity or advantages of prayer are replete with inspirational anecdotes which apparently confirm their theme. That is a topic demanding proper treatment on its own, for here the experient and the sceptical unbeliever are, again, on a different wavelength.

All that can be said here is that trying to make the best possible use of one's own powers of thought, to deal with life's problems and uncertainties, is a positive action.

It means that we are acknowledging our dignity as human beings, responsible for much, if not all, of our own behaviour—responsible, even, for the misjudgments that, with the proverbial "best will in the world", we shall inevitably make from time-to-time.

There is no angry blaming of a God for events he has allowed to happen; no angst about his incomprehensible purposes; no hypocrisy or humbug about his love.

We learn to live with our own mistakes and wrong choices, unless means to correct them can be found, and hope to find the strength and courage we need to bear our undeserved misfortunes, or gain release from them. The great advantage which the kind of thinking describable as "talking to yourself" has over prayer is that you really can have an intelligent conversation.

JEKYLL AND HYDE: A CUNNINGLY DISGUISED MESSAGE?

AS A schoolboy I had heard of, but never read, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The story had appeared in 1886, and in 1996 I found this 80-odd page thriller in a 1992 re-issue of a book. It is an exciting story, splendidly crafted, very popular as a publication and later also presented in film form.

The tale is told by a London lawyer, a Mr Utterson. He introduces an East End physician, Henry Jekyll, who has deposited a will with Mr Utterson — a will leaving his wealth, in the event of his death, to a Mr Edward Hyde. Utterson once chanced upon Hyde, a dwarfed, ugly, repulsive creature living in the same building, or an extension thereof, of Jekyll's residence. It turns out that Hyde, who often mysteriously disappears for lengthy periods, is a violent man who once injured and trampled over a young girl and some time thereafter, and for no reason, clubbed a man to death.

It finally turns out that Dr Jekyll has formulated a mysterious chemical oral potion with which he can transform his dull, scholarly, though pleasing, body into the exciting rogue Hyde, and then back again. Eventually Hyde fails to reassemble himself into Jekyll

by Schneir Levin
Johannesburg

and kills himself.

What possessed me to decide to read the story? I had long been interested in religious *persona* who were constituted of two or more figures. The biblical Isaiah consists of two or possibly three prophets, one living just before the exile of the 10 Northern tribes of Israel to Assyria, and the other featuring 200 years later and exulting over the return of the Judaite tribe from exile in Babylon. The prophet Zechariah is fused from two sources.

Hybrids are common in the New Testament, notably in the case of Paul who is supposedly one with Saul, but if so it is mighty curious that Paul, in stressing his Jewish credentials, never calls himself Saul. Was the Greek-named Peter one with the Hebrew-Aramaic named Simon Kepha? I doubt it. Jesus is two people — a typically young (and failed) leader of a revolt against the Roman régime and who has absorbed a typically older (John 8 : 57) relation, a guru, sermoniser, miracle-maker, crowd drawer, John the Baptising Essene: guerrilla plus guru, and both enveloped in a third identity,

Paul's dying and rising and saving Christ.

With such composite hybrids in my thoughts, I simply had to read *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and with the confident supposition that there was a religious element to the tale. I wasn't mistaken and the clues are too many to overlook, and too obvious, to assume that the author didn't leak them on purpose.

Theological details are dotted throughout the text. Jekyll calls himself "the chief of sinners". In his *persona* of Edward Hyde he leaves "a pious work ... annotated in his own hand, with startling blasphemies." There is a passing comment on "the unbelief of Satan" and "the captives of Philippi", though it is unclear what he means by this. None of this, by itself, is significant; they could be part of any mysterious tale.

But the three chief people in the story have very significant names, and surely not accidentally. The surname Utterson is very strange; there are only two Uttersons listed in the 1997 London telephone directory. Clearly it is a meaningful invention; does it hide (Hyde!) something? In its suffix ... son, Utterson may have been impelled by Stevenson, but the prefix to ... son is part of a special agenda.

Is it an uttering, a proclamation, of the Son, a disguised Jesus? We are not initially given Utterson's first name. Half way through the tale he receives a letter addressed to G J Utterson and several pages later the significant Christian names appear: Gabriel John. Gabriel was the angel who foretold the extraordinary births, first of John (Luke 1 : 19), later a Baptising Essene, and then of Jesus (Luke 1 : 26). Gabriel John uttering the Son is a significant name.

Jekyll is also an unusual name; there is only one Jekyll in the current London telephone directory. This rarity was also seemingly chosen with care, as was its incarnation, used to hide (Hyde!) the real identity of *Jew-kill* who transformed himself from time-to-time to a satanic creature, and centuries of Christian preaching had identified Jews as secretly satanic. But did *Jew-kill* (Jekyll) mean the ostensibly pleasant Jew-physician who incarnated as a satanic killer, or did it mean the satanic killer Hyde who finally obliterated the kindly Jekyll? Or did the author have some other intention in mind?

It seems to me that the author had no anti-semitic intentions in mind. More likely he was poking fun at the whole Gospel yarn featuring a pure Son and the cultured kindly Jews whom Christians saw as a hidden Hyde, a satanic influence in the world.

Literary messages may be cunningly disguised. A Johannesburg writer, Niel Hirschson, with convincing insight, has presented evidence in several papers in the cultural journal *Midstream* (New York; from 1985 on) that Shakespeare was a Marrano, of secret Jewish origin. Likewise, Stevenson hid some kind of New Testament message in his story of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Heaven's above — and so's the boss!

by Stewart R Valdar

OLIVER GOLDSMITH once wrote: "As I take my shoes from the shoemaker, and my coat from the tailor, I take my religion from the priest". But unlike the shoemaker and the tailor, although a labourer is worthy of his hire (Luke), the priest has no protection against an unfair employer.

Who said so? Three employment-protected Court of Appeal judges in July.

They had been appealed to by the Rev Alex Coker, 48, who had been removed from his post as curate at St Philip's Church in Cheam, south-west London, in May 1994, without being given any reason.

The bewigged founts of wisdom decided: "A minister of religion serves God and his congregation but does not serve a terrestrial employ-

er". Why was he sacked? The answer would appear to be: God knows!

If this inscrutable judgment disappointed the Sierra Leone-born Dr Coker, who lost his £12,000 a year job with car and house, it thrilled his bishop, who said: "I am delighted but not surprised at the judgment, confirming what we had always understood: a curate is not an employee."

What Dr Coker's invisible, unobtainable, ghostly employer thought we can only surmise.

Right-minded folk can only sympathise with the unfortunate Dr Coker. But I wonder if would-be priests are warned when they begin that they haven't a hope in hell's chance of ever meeting their employer, let alone of asking him/her/it for a raise?

Remembering Thomas Paine

ADMIRERS of the life and work of Thomas Paine might like to know more of the Thomas Paine Society, whose President is the Rt Hon Michael Foot, former Leader of the Labour Party and an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society.

Details are available from the Society's secre-

tary, Eric Paine, 43 Wellington Gardens, Selsey, West Sussex PO20 0RF (telephone: 01243 605730).

A group of Society members—including octogenarian Hugh McNaughton—recently attended the unveiling of a \$50,000 statue of Paine at Bordertown, New Jersey, where he lived for some time. Eric Paine spoke at the ceremony.

Terry Sanderson on the media

WHY LOURDES MAKES ME SICK

A FEW years ago, while holidaying in the French Pyrenees, I decided to visit Lourdes. The visit was partly curiosity and partly a desire to have my prejudices confirmed. And they certainly were—by the bucketful.

Street after street of shops were packed with plastic icons, glowing Virgin Marys—some with fairy-light halos flashing round their heads—bottles of supposedly curative water, gruesome postcards and endless reams of cheap and tacky Catholic propaganda.

The grotto itself, where Bernadette Soubirous is supposed to have had her visions, was hung with walking sticks and callipers, wheelchairs and crutches, all abandoned after God supposedly effected cures.

According to the Lourdes Medical Directorate, there have been “thousands of medically inexplicable cures” in the town, although only 64 have been formally recognised by the Church as miracles.

After 140 years there have been only 64 official cures out of hundreds of millions of pilgrims? How does God decide who is worthy? Why this child and not that one?

This question about God’s capriciousness does not seem to trouble the people who are running this exercise. God moves in mysterious ways: that’s all they need to know.

So what is the appeal of this place, which attracts more visitors than anywhere else in France except Paris? There was a partial answer in an article by Sue Corrigan in *The Times*. Together with her severely disabled seven-year-old son, Shane, Ms Corrigan had gone to Lourdes as part of a group of 760 people from the Catholic Church in Arundel, Sussex. Like me, Sue Corrigan had imagined that Lourdes represented “religiosity at its worst—deeply irrational, grossly commercialised and, ultimately, exploitative.” But she came away from the experience with a different impression.

What seems to have affected her most was the kindness of the people who looked after the sick and suffering—young volunteers mainly. Father Tony Barry, one of the organisers of the tour said: “The volunteers work round the clock, they pay to go, and come back overjoyed. It helps young people express the idealism for a better world that so many of them feel, but which they rarely get chance to put into practice. We find each year that volunteers, particularly the young, are flocking in ever greater numbers.”

This is something that non-believers can relate to. Lourdes provides a focal point for the expression of several different human needs.

The people who are suffering find that at last their pain is acknowledged. Someone is empathising; someone is caring.

At the same time, the able-bodied volunteers are given permission to pour out their compassion on those for whom they are entreated to care. No need for embarrassment or the risk of rejection—all of the vol-

unteers’ considerable energy can be focused on the needs and feelings of the frail, handicapped and sick. They are astonished and delighted by the depths of kindness and caring that they find within themselves. For the two weeks that they are on this pilgrimage, the volunteers must immerse themselves entirely in the—often exhausting—needs of other people.

Devoting yourself to the welfare of others who would otherwise find it difficult to do the things that the rest of us take for granted, can raise the spirits. You begin to see the world through different eyes. And it can feel like a religious experience.

Cynics would say, of course, that they are doing it just to stash away a few brownie points in the heavenly register of vice and virtue. But whatever the Church says, helping those in need is an entirely human response. The fact that we feel so good afterwards is nothing to do with the promises of a heavenly hereafter, it is to do with the basically altruistic nature of human beings.

Imperative

Enough has been written about the importance of altruism as a survival mechanism in the evolutionary process of human beings; we need not rehearse those theories again here. So the impulse to be kind and protective towards the weak and helpless is not divine inspiration—it’s a biological imperative.

Having worked for the best part of 25 years in institutions for people with profound mental and physical handicaps, I have seen young people—paid and unpaid—reach into themselves and pull out reserves of benevolence and generosity of spirit that they never knew they had.

This has proved to me that the same joy that people report on visiting Lourdes is available in other places: Lourdes just gives them permission. Regrettably it also burdens them with a lot of codswallop about God’s mercy. Religion has always been expert at claiming the credit for everything that is good in human beings

and blithely damning or disowning everything that is bad.

Nowhere is that more evident than in Lourdes. It never ceases to amaze me that religious people never ask: *If God really cared for these people, why are they suffering in the first place?*

LEAVING Lourdes, we return to the trashy TV programme *The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna*. The good news is that Carlton Television, who commissioned it, have told Mr McKenna that the programme has been—as they say in the tabloids—“axed”. Ratings were so low, and critical reaction so bad, that it simply had to go.

As Victor Lewis-Smith, in the London *Evening Standard*, commented: “Aren’t we already filling our kids’ heads with enough Sky-God nonsense, without churning out more telepathetic garbage at prime time?”

MEANWHILE, over in *The Independent*, a fully-fledged “God-basher”, Lynne Wallis, was given space to chide her friends—who she had previously regarded as normal—for taking up church-going.

“What does churchiness say about our lives?” she asked. “Perhaps it has little to do with God. It is more likely that our social networks have broken down so that for many people church is a way to be part of the community.”

She went on to say: “A close member of my family, a heroin addict, found God when he was about 22, two years before he died. He had been in and out of rehabs, and for him church was the last resort. The family supported him and went to praise-be type services. It lasted a few months until he went back on drugs. When life gets really grim God is invited in, often through desperation. But, like any unsound relationship, it rarely lasts.”

She ended her lament by saying: “Whether Jesus wants me for a sunbeam or not, I have other plans for my Sundays. I’m lying in bed until 11, hopefully with the man of my dreams, going for a swim, then a sumptuous lunch, followed by a doze and a stroll in the park. Beat that, God.”

Political ecology

THE Campaign for Political Ecology is sponsoring a conference on *Ecology and Ethics* (speaker: John Gray, Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford) and *Ethics and Population: Seeking Common Ground* (introduced by David Willey, Optimum Population Trust) at Conway Hall, Holborn, on Saturday, October 11, 10.30 am to 5 pm.

Tickets cost £10 (cheques payable to ECO) from: The Campaign for Political Ecology, 42 Rose Terrace, Horsforth, Leeds LS18 4QA.

News of their World

monitored by
BILL McILROY

CHRISTIANS have been complaining to the BBC over changes to the timing of programmes like the Sunday morning service and the daily service. Stuart McPherson, vice-chairman of the Movement for Christian Democracy, accuses the Corporation of "putting an end to Sunday morning as a spiritual breathing space for the listener." Catholic journalist Mary Kenny asserts that "some people in religious broadcasting are not actually believers."

Believers or not, producers of BBC Television's *Songs of Praise*, the Sunday evening hymnalong, are certainly enterprising. In a bid to attract new viewers, they have appealed to owners of parrots who can sing hymns. If there is a favourable response, Pretty Pollys will squawk with non-feathered hymn-singers in a programme to be televised later this month.

How many viewers will notice the difference?

THREE religious independent schools are at risk of being struck off the Government's school register.

Inspectors found standards well below acceptable levels at the Jewish Talmud Torah School (London) and the Islamic Aljamiyah Al Islamiyyah Darul Uloom (Bolton). The Office for Standards in Education was scathing in its criticism of the Islamic Institute in Nottingham.

The three schools emphasised religious teaching at the expense of secular subjects. Pupils are underachieving, creative development is

neglected and there is a scarcity of non-religious books and teaching materials.

At the Aljamiyah School, morning and evenings are taken up with study of the Koran. The only non-Islamic books in the school library are one set of encyclopædia and one set of English classics.

At the Orthodox Jewish school, standards were good in Hebrew studies. But in English "few pupils are achieving satisfactory standards in reading, writing, understanding or speaking." The nursery-aged children were "listless" and "inactive".

A DEVASTATING report by Parliamentary Commissioner Sir Gordon Downey on the "cash for questions" scandal has been endorsed by one of the most senior committees in the House of Commons. The Select Committee on Standards and Privileges accepted Sir Gordon's findings regarding payments made by lobbyist Ian Greer.

Sir Andrew Bowden is one of those whose conduct is criticised. He was Conservative MP for Brighton, Kemp Town, until electors gave him the push at the General Election.

Sir Andrew was an early Patron of the Conservative Christian Fellowship. The CCF's aims include encouraging "greater Christian input to the Conservative Party" and, where appropriate, "defending the ethical aspirations of Conservative policies."

Despite evidence to the contrary, the Conservative Christian Fellowship constantly proclaims the power and efficacy of prayer. At its 1984 pre-Conference prayer session, those specifically mentioned in supplications to the

Almighty included John Major and Michael Portillo.

THE Sandwell Health Authority, West Midlands, is now providing free religious circumcision for male Muslim children.

Zia Choudhury, Muslim Development Officer, thanked the Health Authority for the free service. He said: "We have been striving hard since 1994 to get circumcision for Muslim boys." Abdul Monim Khan, Health Commissioning Officer, said "there was a need to provide a religious circumcision service for the Muslim community."

Sheffield is the only other Health Authority which provided free religious mutilation of children.

TO VAST numbers who commemorated the 20th anniversary of Elvis Presley's death, the singer has acquired divine status.

Many of his devotees believe Elvis is still alive or that he will return. Some claim that a strange light shone over his impoverished parents' Mississippi home when he was born in January 1935. A former girlfriend says she saw him shrouded in a bright light "like the Transfiguration of Christ."

It all sounds rather familiar. But admittedly there is some connection between the King of Heaven and the King of Rock 'n' Roll. Elvis Presley died sitting on the loo reading a work entitled *The Scientific Search for the Face of Jesus*.

Father, Son and Single Mum

From Page 2

But this balancing act *has* been successfully accomplished: teaching folk to hold contradictory opinions at the same time seems to have been child's play to the Vatican. Down the ages the BVM has flourished—and has proved her worth.

In December, 1531, as the Christian Spanish conquest of Mexico was being consolidated, she appeared to a group of native converts at Guadalupe—thus usefully underlining the holy nature of the Conquest. A white god had once ruled Mexico, indigenous tradition said ... and now here was a white goddess to legitimise the whole thing.

At Lourdes in 1858 the BVM fortuitously appeared to Bernadette Soubirous, telling the girl: "I am the Immaculate Conception". Again, the vision confirmed the current policy of the Vatican.

Pope Pius IX was intent on enlarging the powers of the Papacy in the face of the wave of scepticism which flowed from the French Revolution. In 1854, he had proclaimed the Immaculate Conception of Mary as a canonical doctrine—an implicit assertion of infallibility—so it was not disagreeable to the Vatican when the apparition said: "I am the Immaculate Conception". Could there now be any doubt that the Pope was indeed infallible when, so soon after his decree proclaiming the Immaculate Conception, it was authenticated

by the Lady herself?

And yes—when the Pope, in 1869-70, convened the First Vatican Council, a huge majority endorsed Papal infallibility!

Then at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917, the Virgin appeared to three children, two of whom died shortly afterwards. The third, Lucia dos Santos, retired to a convent.

Portugal had just dismissed its Catholic monarch and was regarded by the Vatican as a secular Masonic republic. But a few years later Dr Salazar, pupil of the Jesuits, turned Portugal into a clerical fascist state in which the Church recovered its lost privileges. No doubt the joy and wonder surrounding the Virgin's appearance at Fatima did not hinder this development.

There was more. In 1929, the diocesan Bishop of Fatima instructed Lucia to reveal that the Mother of God had warned against the horrid effects of the Bolshevik Revolution in the year that she appeared, 1917! The purpose of Fatima was to deliver a heavenly broadside against the Russian Revolution and its possible ruination of Christianity. By 1929, Russian Communism was the New Satan, and its survival seemed to threaten the power, the very existence, of the Church.

After such sterling service down the centuries, to make Mary a goddess seems a simple matter of *quid pro quo*.

SO ... what are they expecting from her this time? The Church is indeed besieged. Women

are hammering at the doors of the Vatican demanding the right to become priests. More and more clergy are noisily seeking the right to marry. People all over the world are actually and unprecedentedly standing up to the priests and daring to reject and expose their sexual assaults on themselves and their infants. As we have reported month after month, fewer and fewer people worldwide become nuns, priests and monks (one Australian bishop recently described the shortage of priests as "critical").

The statistics are appalling—for the hierarchy. Here in the UK, adult membership of the RC Church fell by 23 per cent between 1975 and 1990, with Mass attendance dropping by 13 per cent, among those who stayed in, in the five years to 1995. Even in Holy Ireland only 60 per cent of people attend Mass: condoms, and now divorce, are available. Despite papal threats, 66 per cent of UK Catholics use contraception and 84 per cent of US Catholics reject the ban on artificial birth control. Only one-fifth of Italian Catholics flatly condemn abortion (which has been legal in France for 22 years). Voluntary euthanasia is widely practised in many lands, including the UK.

THE Church is desperate for a major miracle. And what better than a few well-planned appearances, augmented by appropriate messages—as at Guadalupe, Lourdes and Fatima—by the Mother of God? Well, just one thing, really: a manifestation or two by the Mother of God *who has become God Herself!*

You're telling us!

Support for Roy Saich

I AGREE completely with the views of Roy Saich (July), that the Humanist groups at Bradlaugh House (at least the BHA and NSS) should co-operate to form a single Humanist organisation.

This need not affect essential variety of individual views within the organisation. It would, however, clearly economise on scarce resources, and should strengthen our work in battling against religious prejudice, and also in constructive projects.

The biggest weaknesses in the past of atheist/agnostic opinion have been negativism and lack of organisation.

ROGER McCALLISTER
(Member of BHA)
Dawlish

Asking too much ... ?

I MUST make clear my support for Roy Saich, Tony Akkermans and Robin Wood with regard to the state of the British Humanist movement. It follows that I also oppose the stance taken by Ms Smoker and yourself. I believe that settling for the *status quo* means accepting fragmentation and marginalisation of organised humanism in Britain as a fact of life.

Ms Smoker produced a gem when she wrote: "It would only magnify differences of taste and opinion—and when push came to shove, there would be nowhere else to go". Of course, she should know, but I wonder if any organisation could be more prone to splits and personal vendettas than the present set-up.

As an obscure rank-and-file humanist, I would offer a useful maxim for some of the luminaries in the various constituent organisations: "Let us sink our differences for the good of organised humanism in Britain".

On second thoughts, perhaps I am asking too much.

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

Free Love's the answer

TONY BLAIR'S latest brainwave: compulsory marriage classes, in an attempt to "cut the rising divorce rate". His conversion to Thatcherite "Victorian Values" complete, he insults our intelligence by claiming that we do not know how to run our own lives!

If the divorce rate is rising, it is because more and more people are coming to realise that life-long marriage is an unworkable bourgeois institution, about as sensible as wearing the same suit every day of your life; no matter how often you make alterations or try to patch it up, it ultimately becomes too tattered to wear, and falls apart and should be replaced.

Marriage was invented by the first robber barons to call themselves kings, after the inven-

tion of private property. By establishing exclusive sexual rights in "his" woman, a king could claim that his personality lived on after his death in "his" children, who therefore "owned" the property, formerly the common property available to everybody, that he had stolen from the people through fraud, trickery or outright force.

As everyone who has studied the history and sociology of the Victorian period knows (I recommend the books *The Other Victorians* by Stephen Marcus and *The Worm in the Bud* by Ronald Pearsall), the Victorian bourgeoisie never practiced the strict moral rectitude and marital fidelity that they preached; they routinely maintained mistresses, patronised common prostitutes and raped their female domestic servants. During the Victorian era there were never less than 80,000 prostitutes on the streets of London—most of them former housemaids who had been raped, impregnated and thrown out by their employers.

When the rotten system of capitalism and private property is finally thrown out, the next thing to go should be the intolerable prison of "marriage-for-life", to be replaced by the open and uninhibited expression of our common sexuality; in other words, Free Love.

KEITH ACKERMANN
Tilbury

The Cosmic Fairy

I HOPE Eric Stockton's July letter about my book, *The Cosmic Fairy*, will receive the attention it deserves. One of the aims of my book is to encourage people to think for themselves and not thoughtlessly submit to the belief-system of the culture into which they happen to have been born.

The second paragraph of the letter sets out the theme of Chapter I, "God and the Dinosaurs", very clearly, and goes on to say that it is plainly a valid argument, but equally plainly not a sound one. (How can an argument be valid, if it is unsound?)

However, Eric Stockton has overlooked the simple implication of the evolutionary development of consciousness, *stage by stage*, which gives the word its meaning and has enabled it to reach its present summit in human beings. The point is that only in this context does the concept of consciousness *make any sense*. Far from begging the question of the existence of a Creator, the "Darwinian Enlightenment", as I have termed it, demonstrates that intelligence came on stage late in the evolutionary drama. It did not raise the curtain. Theism *can* thus be disproved or shown to be nonsense, which is surely the same thing.

What emerges from the fertile imagination of theists is none other than the *Cosmic Fairy*, equipped by magic with consciousness and all other "human" attributes necessary for a busy celestial life. The problem rarely considered by theists, but a very fundamental one, is how a spiritual entity (or however "God" is described) can behave, as it were, in our own image—anthropomorphism, in fact.

Incidentally, the book attempts to do far more than attack "God". The expectation is that readers will find in humanism a recipe for happi-

ness. It enables us to dispose of religious make-believe, think freely, overcome the fear of our mortality, and feel at home in the world.

ARTHUR ATKINSON
Hayes

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

The Vatican & the Nazis

BEYOND doubt, the role of leaders in The Vatican—and to some extent in Dublin—in supporting Fascism and Nazism was atrocious beyond belief (Peter Brearey, Page 9, August issue). However, one should understand that there were good reasons for opposing Communism, as it was practised under Stalin.

Many Catholic priests, especially in Poland, did not follow the Vatican-Nazi line, and consequently suffered at the hands of the Gestapo. A number of Jews survived by being concealed in monasteries and convents, despite the threat of the death penalty for giving shelter.

Our allies and we co-operated with the brutal Soviet régime—supporting the lesser of two evils—while The Vatican chose the greater of evils. We supported the Iraqi régime in its war with Iran, and now support the Saudi kingdom. And worse—in 1945 we allowed Central and Eastern Europe to be under Communist dictatorship for almost half-a-century. Will I see a headline in *The Freethinker*: "For half-a-century, half of Europe suffered from brutal Atheist régimes"?

PETER DANNING
Richmond

Perverted pastime

IN 1950, Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Humani Generis* accepted Darwin's theory of evolution of the species, with the qualification that the human soul was immediately created at conception by God.

This commits God to supervising every act of copulation taking place among six billion people for the exact moment the sperm fertilises the ovum, so as to insert the soul.

It seems an odd, perverted pastime for God to assign himself. As well, the notion of Original Sin displays an awesome, dark, unjust hatred of innocent, non-conscious foetus.

Another thought: It certainly would be hell for theologians these days attempting to calculate how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. They would no sooner get their figures right for the Bus-Stop dance when the Lambada craze comes along and they can squeeze (weightless) tons more on—they recalculate and, heaven forbid, the Macarena comes along. I could not imagine angels doing Dirty-Dancing so we will leave that one out.

PETER HANNA
Lidcombe, NSW

You're telling us!

➤ From Page 13

Not my wedding!

IN THE absence of an explanatory caption, the photograph that illustrated my article about proposals to restructure the Humanist movement (Page 3, August) has resulted in my being asked whether it shows my getting married. No—it is an action picture, taken several years ago at a Lesbian affirmation ceremony. I am the celebrant, and am smiling at the young woman who is placing a ring on her partner's finger.

I was also embarrassed at the statement in the review of the book *Women Without Superstition* (same issue) that I was "markedly clever in school". This reveals more about the reviewer, who is a former teacher, than about me. For the record—though it was a very long time ago—I was good at some subjects (including religious study!), but quite a duffer at others.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley, Kent

Those UFOs

MICHAEL HILL (August issue) writes: "There is no explanation other than UFOs for about 10 per cent of sightings".

Pseudo-science thrives on this kind of thinking: something cannot be accounted for, therefore there can only be one fantastic explanation. Of course there could be any number of mundane explanations which current lack of information or knowledge prevents us from seeing.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find out why my car wouldn't start recently. It must have been gremlins—there is no other explanation!

Right Mr Hill?

RAY McDOWELL
Co Antrim

Historical Jesus?

I READ Daniel O'Hara's review of John Shelby Spong's *Liberating the Gospels* in the July issue of *The Freethinker*. Mr O'Hara is doubtful about the historicity of Jesus and thus recommends G A Well's books.

As a Religious Studies graduate, I esteem Professor Wells for his scholarship and integrity and believe his books should be required reading for all students of the historical Jesus. I still, though, view Jesus as historical as there are passages in the Gospels relating to him which would be an embarrassment to the early Church. In Mark 6v5 limitations to Jesus's healing power are shown: "And he could do no mighty works there"; Matthew has altered it to "And he did not do any mighty works there" (Matthew 13v38). In the story of the Rich Young Man, Jesus declines to be called good in reply to his question, stating that God alone is good (Mark 10v13). Matthew alters it to: "Why do you ask me about what is good?"

The Gospels, apart from John, all record Jesus's agony in Gethsemane, with Jesus begging God to be spared the ordeal. These, and other passages in the Gospels which the early Church would not create as they would be a problem to her, show Jesus existed.

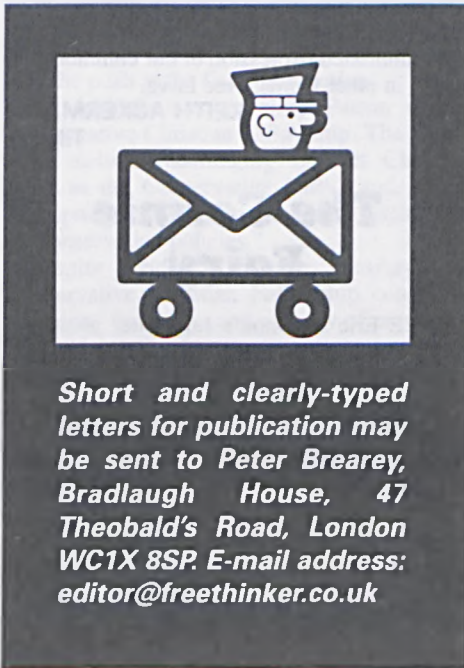
ANDREW HARVEY
Carlisle

Where the money goes

A TELEVISION announcement on June 26 reported that public cash donations to charities had fallen by 12.5 per cent, and the National Lottery is blamed.

Actually, one other important reason may well be that more and more of the once-duped public are discovering that many of the so-called "research" charities are funding the evils of animal experiment-vivisection.

The *New Abolitionist*, newsletter of the



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

British Anti-Vivisection Association, suggests that those "who enjoy their weekly flutter on the National Lottery in the belief that they are helping to fund 'good causes'" would be interested to learn that in the year running up to December 10, 1996, grants were made to many "medical research" charities to a sum of nearly £2 million—and the charities named in the *New Abolitionist* are known to fund vivisection!

Incidentally, a report drawn up by the Economist Intelligence Unit has revealed that the UK is the least healthy country in Western Europe. Taiwan was shown to come out better than the UK, with Mexico above the US. The report also found no correlation between the number of doctors and the quality of medical care.

Meanwhile, according to the World Health Organisation, cancer cases are expected to double globally during the next 25 years. Circulatory diseases, including heart attacks, will also continue to rise. This is surely all good news to the laboratory psychopaths, medical research charities, animal breeders, petro-

chemical drug salesmen, and the medical establishment as a whole, with their "research projects" largely based on pseudo-scientific animal experimentation.

F BACON
Mansfield

A great Christian tradition?

WE OFTEN hear from the cheeky, the brass-necked or the more ignorant Christian that although no longer a Christian country we are, nevertheless, the inheritors of "A Great Christian Tradition".

Let us test that claim.

What was it actually like in Europe when Christianity was at the height of its powers during the Middle Ages? When almost nothing could be done unless it was blessed by Holy Mother Church?

What happened? There was an endless series of wars which ravaged and drenched European soil in blood. Christian bishops and Popes appeared clad in armour as generals leading their troops in battle—with the blood-stained cross of Jesus going on before.

Millions of ignorant peasants, who often owned no more than the clothes they stood in, were forced to spend their whole lives, backs bent in dreary serfdom, cultivating the vast estates of their spiritual masters.

Intellectual life was virtually non-existent. The overwhelming majority of the population could not read, nor could they write. They were compelled by the church to live lives well sunk in the sewers of Christian superstition, and the followers of Jesus actively encouraged the belief that witches actually existed, deliberately infesting uncultured minds with plagues of demons and devils.

There was no end of relics, amulets, holy water and so on—in other words, the church went out of its way to promote and defend the superstitious ignorance on which it thrived. So much for the claim that the Church of Christ was an early educationalist!

Large sections of the population suffered from very poor physical and psychological health. Illness was regarded as the consequence of sin, so the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 forbade doctors (such as they were) under pain of excommunication to treat a sick person who had not confessed his sins. The laying on of hands, exorcism, prayer and all sorts of silly nonsense were approved methods of Christian doctors.

Sexuality, repressed and outlawed as sinful, resulted in outbreaks of mass psychosis, sadism and neuroses of violence (even today, Christian sexual neurosis lays its heavy burden on us all).

All this, and much more, was enveloped by the smoke and flames rising from the countless fires on which human victims were burnt to ashes to the accompaniment of ... more Christian hymns and prayers.

The message is clear: we must turn away from religious illusion and the whole morass of superstition; the way ahead is not through a clutter of theological lies but through the application of rational thought.

ROBERT SINCLAIR
Coventry

ASK THE PARSON (8)

by Karl Heath

DEAR PARSON: I would like to ask you about the meaning of a word. Just one word, but one you use frequently. But first I would like to discuss language generally. Your "Sea of Faith" colleague, Don Cupitt, in his book *Creation out of Nothing*, said "Language creates reality" and "Language is bigger than you and me, more powerful than us, and *prior* to us" (my emphasis).

I do not know what this means. Language is *prior* to *present* human beings because we have inherited it from *previous* human beings. It is not prior to the human beings who developed it as sounds, vibrations in the atmosphere produced by our physical organs. Later it became visual marks on a surface. These sounds and signs refer to "things", events, qualities and feelings, together with a lot of connecting words. I have written the word "things" in quotation marks for a reason which should subsequently become clear.

The basis of language is material and human. It governs our thinking, much of which is linguistic. Does God think? If so, what is His thinking like? What does He think about? If all Creation is His, and He is all-powerful and all-wise, knowing everything past, present and future, He will have nothing to think about.

Language has been a major element in our emergence as the dominant species. It has provided access to the accumulation of past knowledge. It has connected each human brain to thousands of others, past and present. But language has its pitfalls. Words can be dangerous, not merely lies and deceit, but slogans and doctrines. How many thousands have suffered persecution and death for proclaiming or denying catch-words? How many wars have been fought for words?

But here I am thinking more of misunderstanding derived from syntax and sentence structure. We have words for "things", words for action and processes, and words for qualities. But we now know that "things" are not permanent entities, but "events in space-time", fluid eddies in a river of Time, momentary ripples which never existed before, and will never exist again. Nouns become verbs and adjectives. We can no longer believe that there is a "thing" corresponding to every noun. If we refer to a particular "cat" or "tree" there are corresponding objects apprehended by our senses. But what do we mean when we say "God"? Here we need *faith* to establish a connection between the word and what it is supposed to mean. Belief in cats and trees does not require *faith*.

It is true that we have words for "things" we know to be imaginary, but these things are generally unusual arrangements of parts which are themselves real. "Fairies" and "dragons" do not exist, but their parts, wands, stars, insect wings, little girls, pretty dresses, lizards, fire and smoke do exist. There are more subtle, insubstantial noun "things"—abstract nouns. Try these sentences:

"Faith can move mountains".

"Hope springs eternal".

"Love makes the world go round".

And then try:

Well, bless my soul!

"Cycling is a healthy exercise".

We know that there is no such thing as "cycling" in itself, only bicycles and riders. But how many realise that what is true of cycling is equally true for Faith, Hope and Love. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians, Ch. 13, remain beautiful and powerful, but should they not be understood in a different way?

"Faith" is not an entity, but a mental attitude of human beings involving unquestioning belief.

"Hope" is not an entity, but the aspirations and expectations of human beings. There is neither "hope" nor "despair" in inanimate nature.

"Love" is not an entity. It has no meaning if separated from human beings, and perhaps those other animals which demonstrate affection. Love is warm-blooded, the love of lovers, of parents and children. Love is in the flesh, not some frigid, philosophical proposition in outer space.

These abstractions are meaningful only in relation to the material and physical circumstances from which they are derived. Do you, like Plato, turn our world upside-down? Do you claim that the abstractions, or *ideas*, are the true reality, and that our familiar material world is but a dream?

So now we come to the word about which I wished to ask: *Soul*.

What is a "soul"? Your theology, I believe, distinguishes it from the body. Do you also distinguish it from "mind" and "personality"? Do "soul", "self", "personality", "mind" and "body" overlap? Can they influence each other? The body is clearly a changing event, ageing and dying. Does this influence the soul? What is the relationship between a mortal body and an immortal soul? Christian theology has maintained that certain bodily activities may imperil the immortal soul. Do not supplicants confess mortal sins, seeking pardon to save their immortal souls? Anguish about the flesh and

the Spirit surely requires a relationship between the two.

Do you have any problem about the means by which a soul is generated? I understand that there is some argument about whether the soul is created at the moment of conception, or later, but certainly before birth. Paradoxically, the Roman Catholic Church should prefer abortion to contraception, since the latter inhibits a soul, whereas, with abortion, the soul has already been created.

Nevertheless, the creation of souls necessarily involves sexual activity, which is traditionally associated with Original Sin.

Do you not find this surprising?

Do you believe that rape, incest, AID and IVF can create souls, while a devout Christian couple may be denied the privilege through infertility? I suppose that you do not agree with the early Christian, Origen (AD 185-254), who tried to avoid this problem by asserting the pre-existence of souls, waiting in limbo for bodies to inhabit? This doctrine did not explain where these souls came from, although they were supposed to have existed from Creation. Origen's views were declared heresy, and his own conduct may have caused many to question his judgement. Believing that the floating souls could be contaminated by the fleshy vessels they chose to board, Origen, rashly interpreting Matthew Ch.19 v. 12, decided to protect his own soul by removing his testicles.

If the foetus, or the new-born baby dying in the labour ward, has a soul, what is that soul like? Its owner has never seen the Earth, has no memories and has never known another human being.

Tactile

What personality would such a soul carry with it into the next world? Is a soul visible, audible or tactile? If not, how can souls recognise each other and communicate? If you strip off all the familiar earthly qualities, what is left? Nothing to describe? Nothing left? Indeed ... nothing!

Between, on the one hand, this insubstantial soul, and, on the other hand, nothing at all! What is the difference? No difference!

How can you speak of survival?

I do not know how you can answer the questions. I would say that they are unanswerable because the questions themselves are meaningless. But you cannot say that. Nor can you admit that you don't know, because someone might say "Why do you keep talking about souls if you don't know anything about them?".

I must credit you with honesty, and not dissembling, and I hope that your answers will not depend upon faith.

Please tell me, without contrivance or convention: *What is a soul?*

● **KARL HEATH is disappointed that none of his "Ask the Parson" articles have yet elicited any clerical replies. He writes: "Please try this one on a parson of your acquaintance and send their replies to the 'You'reTelling Us' column."**

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, October 5, 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, September 18, 7.30 pm: AGM.

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. Thursday, September 25, at 8 pm, Friends' Meeting House, Woodville Road, near Ealing Broadway Station, W5: Nigel Barnes: *The Necessity of Dogma*.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB; 01926 858450. 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. Tuesday, October 7: Norman Dannatt, former Schools Music Advisor: *Music in Antiquity—What Religion Has Done to Music*. Tuesday, November 4: Roy Mills, former Editor of the *Romford Recorder*. *The Local Press*. Tuesday, December 2: Robert Ashby, Executive Director of the British Humanist Association.

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, September 25, 8 pm, at 41 Bromley Road, SE6: Jeanne Rathbone: *Is to Humanise to Feminise?*

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, October 1, 8 pm: Dan J Bye: *Blasphemy Law*. Information: Gordon Sinclair, 9 South View Road, Hoyland, Barnsley S74 9EB (01226 743070) or Bill McIlroy, 115, South View Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield S7 1DE (0114 2509127). Please note Bill McIlroy's change of address and telephone number.

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 (telephone: 01846 677264). Meetings second Thursday evening of the month at Ulster Arts Club, Elmwood Avenue, Belfast.

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: Methold House, North Street (Gordon Road entrance), Worthing. Sunday, September 28, 5 pm for 5.30 pm. Bill McIlroy: *The Freethinker, Journal of Unbelief*. 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).

National Secular Society ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (Preliminary Notice)

Afternoon of Saturday, November 29, at Conway Hall,
Red Lion Square, London WC1.

A presentation to past-President Barbara Smoker will
take place at the AGM, rather than at the SPES Reunion.

Formal notices will shortly be issued to members.

Those who have not paid their annual subscription
should send £5 with name and address to Keith
Porteous Wood, General Secretary, Bradlaugh House,
47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.