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Establishment swamped by new pagan cult



Nicolas Walter Page 2

**Barbara Smoker on Mother Teresa
– centre pages**

Up Front

The cult of Diana (Mk II)

THE death of Diana had obvious social and political implications, but most of these will soon fade. It had less obvious religious implications, which may last longer. The most notable feature of the episode was its sheer scale. Much of the public and private interest may have been initiated or inflated by the media, but most of it was spontaneous, and the result was the voluntary involvement in a single event of more people in this country—and indeed in many other countries—than

has happened since the end of the Second World War.

Another notable feature of the episode was its apparent intensity. Again, much of the public and private emotion may have been fabricated or falsified by the media, but genuine grief was felt by a huge number of people for a person who had genuine connection with very few of them. This is a phenomenon which needs to be thought about more carefully than most of us might like.

Diana has been widely described as an "icon", but there is something wrong here. An icon doesn't stand alone; it stands for something. "Icon" is the Greek for "image", and the icons and images of Jesus and Mary and the saints in the Christian tradition are objects of rituals directed at the people they represent (like the idols of gods and goddesses in other religions). Although Diana has appeared in plenty of pictures (though not yet statues), they haven't become objects of veneration (let alone worship), and she doesn't represent any other other than herself.

Diana and other such cult figures are venerated for their own sakes. They aren't gods or goddesses. They aren't Christian saints or even post-Christian parody saints (like Elvis Presley or Madonna). They aren't heroic figures of power or victory (whatever the good works of Evita or Diana). They are ideally young and beautiful and tragic, and they tend to die prematurely and painfully and publicly. Diana should be seen as neither a human nor a super-human but a non-human figure, a character from fairytale or myth, an ancient spirit or nymph, the object of a Pagan cult.

Even her name is strangely resonant. Diana was an Italian deity, worshipped by outsiders (women and slaves), located in groves and honoured with torchlight processions, associated with both virginity and childbirth, and so on. (She was later identified with Artemis, the Greek goddess of the moon and the hunt, of virginity and childbirth, and also an Anatolian goddess of fertility, whose temple at Ephesus was one of the wonders of the ancient world.) Her festival was celebrated on the Ides of August—two days before the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The echoes are endless.

Diana achieved special status through her connection with the Royal Family; but this too is a religious institution. There are all sorts of good practical reasons for the survival of hereditary monarchy in this country, but the bad theoretical justification is that our kings and queens are descended from rulers of Anglo-Saxon invaders of Britain 1500 years ago who claimed descent from the Germanic god Woden. They adopted Christianity, including rituals for anointing monarchs adapted from those described in the Bible (which are still included in the coronation service). They had been deified and they continued to be canonised, and they possessed supernatural power. The English monarch touched sufferers from the "King's Evil" (scrofula) as late as the 18th Century. Diana unconsciously revived the royal gift for the healing touch and the magic look, and projected divine charisma through the camera lens on to the television screen or the tabloid page.

Our monarchs eventually lost almost all their political power, but they retained their reli-

gious position, and the incumbent is still the Supreme Governor of the Churches of England and Scotland. The monarchs used to rule by divine right, as mediators between the people and God, but even in our secular age it seemed that the mandate of heaven had shifted from the old queen and the middle-aged prince to the young princess. One irony was that the Spencers are a more aristocratic family than the Saxe-Coburg Gotha/Windsors, so that Diana actually had a more distinguished ancestry than Charles.

No wonder the Established Church and the Royal Family had such difficulty with her death. The public tributes from both institutions were more than usually ambiguous for a person who had belonged to but turned away from them. The funeral service in Westminster Abbey was nominally Anglican but implicitly ecumenical, though there was no explicit recognition of other religious or indeed non-religious belief. Hardly any of the official liturgy survived. The most notable elements were non-Anglican or even non-Christian. The explicit references to sin and salvation, death and resurrection were irrelevant to Diana herself and to many of those inside or outside the Abbey, and probably most of those watching on television or listening on radio.

The last journey became the climax of the cult which had developed during the previous week. The crowds were casual and the rituals were informal, tears and applause rather than prayers and hymns. The votive offerings were do-it-yourself gestures, flowers and cards, balloons and toys, messages in books and soundbites for the media. The mass showering of the hearse with garlands seemed to come from a Grecian urn, and the final burial on an island in a lake seemed to come from King Arthur.

Children

All this belongs to religion—not post-Christian, but pre-Christian, even pre-Pagan. It is the most basic form of religion, the attempt to make sense of life and death through collective ritual, without any doctrinal or institutional structure.

Is this unreasonable and unhealthy? Yes, and No. Most freethinkers weren't much concerned with the real Diana alive—even if we were intrigued by her changing human character and impressed by her growing humanitarian work—and aren't more concerned with her dead; many freethinkers don't feel the need for ritual to come to terms with emotion; few freethinkers were involved in this particular phenomenon. Yet it was surely more reasonable and healthy than the conventional reactions which would have been preferred by either the State or the Church.

Children understand it all perfectly well. My two-year-old granddaughter (a natural ritualist) observed that Diana had a birthday party, with flowers and presents, cards and balloons; though my four-year-old grandson (a natural rationalist) objected that Diana is still alive because she is on television. The cult of Diana, alive or dead, is essentially infantile. Well, at least children can't do much harm; and anyway they may grow up.

Nicolas Walter

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Female Genital Mutilation:

'They screamed and called for mercy, but we held them down until the cutting was done'

FROM an August 20 despatch to the *Daily Telegraph* from Jocasta Shakespeare in Cairo:

"In a barber's shop on the outskirts of Cairo's City of the Dead ... 10-year-old Aisha is held down on a bench by her father and mother to be circumcised. The cut-throat razor is rinsed with alcohol and then it takes two minutes to perform the operation. No anaesthetic is used. Aisha screams and struggles as the blood spurts, but it is no good: her mother fixes her eyes upon a framed Koranic verse nailed to the wall ... Dazed, Aisha is carried home in the 120F heat to receive presents and congratulations. She is now considered 'clean' and can prepare for marriage."

Ninety-seven per cent of women in Egypt's population of 62 million are circumcised, says the National Population Council. Only the richest and most educated three per cent reject female genital mutilation (FGM), which is championed by Islamists seeking to turn Egypt into a strict Muslim state.

Earlier this summer, a lawyer, Sheikh Yousuf El Badry, won a court case overturning a ban on FGM imposed by the Health Ministry. It was brought in after a girl of 11 bled to death after being circumcised by a village barber. Ismail Sallam, the Health Minister, plans an appeal, but meanwhile girls continue to be circumcised.

Jocasta Shakespeare reports: "The extent of the surgery varies, but all forms of genital mutilation can lead to infection, sterility, sexual dysfunction and even death. Under Egyptian law, anyone who causes permanent damage by performing a circumcision may face three to 10 years hard labour, but this is not enforced. The ruling overturning the ban ... prompted cheers from the predominantly male audience, even though five girls have already died this year following botched circumcisions ..."

But El Badry says the deaths are "just bad luck" and quotes four sayings of the Prophet which, he insists, show approval of the practice. Dr Aziz Khattab, Professor of Gynaecology at Ain Shams University, says there is no specific call for FGM in the Koran.

Dr Muneer Fawzi, a British-trained gynaecologist, supports the practice: "I strongly recommend it to avoid infection, promote cleanliness and help women control their sex drive." He will circumcise his two daughters before puberty but argues for the ending of operations by barbers in favour of hospital treatment.

What is hard to understand, says Ms Shakespeare, is why FGM is supported by women who have suffered it: "Aida, 46, had both her daughters circumcised by a barber. 'They screamed and called for mercy, but we held them down until the cutting was done ... One was infected and the other cannot bear her husband to have sex with her. But I will make sure my grandchildren are circumcised—otherwise they cannot marry or will be sent home in disgrace ...'"

Fallacious arguments for God

by Nicholas Toon

THE monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, involve a cosmogony as well as a system of ethics. The existence of God cannot be proved, since the traditional arguments for his existence are invalid—for example, the "ontological argument" is fallacious because (conceptual) existence is not a predicate.

The "argument from design" was refuted by Hume and others in the 18th Century, and given the final *coup de grâce* by the non-teleological Darwinian theory of organic evolution by means of natural selection. Taken to its logical conclusion, this theory implies that man ultimately evolved from inorganic matter—to which we do not ascribe morality or innate purpose—which existed some four thousand million years ago. At what stage in his evolution from more primitive progenitors did man acquire an immortal soul?

Meaning can be predicated only on propositions, not of life itself or the universe as a whole. Since meaningful statements which do not involve the continuum are either true or false, it follows that either God exists or he does not exist (objectively)—that is, the assertion "God exists" is either true or false. The criterion of the truth of an empirical proposition is its correspondence with observed fact. Our only reliable source of knowledge about the world is natural science, and scientific method is totally opposed to preconceptions and dogma. Miracles, by definition, contravene the laws of Nature, and are therefore physically impossible. We have no reason to suppose that the universe was "created" by a sentient being for some

purpose (and who created God?), or indeed that it necessarily had a finite beginning in time.

Living organisms, including primates such as man are part of Nature, and hence subject to the same laws of physics and chemistry as the inorganic world. Thoughts are correlated with electrochemical events in the brain; when the brain dies, the mind dies with it. Scientific explanation is based on efficient causation, not teleology. Neither causal determinism nor chance lend support to the notion of explanation in terms of (cosmic) purpose. Viruses seem to be intermediate between the living and the non-living, while in the process of photosynthesis green plants in the presence of sunlight utilise inorganic substances (carbon dioxide and water).

Science is concerned with facts, and facts

per se are value-free. However, certain moral values are implicit in the scientific method: respect for truth, for example. Nevertheless, philosophers point out the fact/value distinction. This was stated succinctly by David Hume: "We cannot argue from an 'is' to an 'ought'." Still, that people hold certain moral principles is itself a fact, and hence one that can be explained naturalistically, in terms of an individual person's heredity and the environmental influences that have impinged on him.

Moral and aesthetic value-judgments are emotive expressions which cannot be shown to be objectively true or false. Many religious believers do not behave in a morally good way, and there can be goodness without belief in God, based on kindness, sympathy and the Golden Rule. Freewill is an illusion. There are no absolute standards of right and wrong; we make our own morality.

DEATH WITH DIGNITY

COLOMBIA'S Constitutional Court—the highest in the land—has ruled that it is not a crime to help a terminally-ill person to die if they have given clear and precise consent.

The court ruled on constitutional grounds, finding that Colombia's citizens have a right to die with dignity as well as live with dignity. Ironically, the decision was made in a case brought by an attorney who sought harsher penalties for mercy killing.

Legal regulations for the process must now be made by the Colombian Parliament.

Meanwhile in Australia, John Bailey, a Northern Territory MP, has devised a plan to reinstate the Territory's voluntary euthanasia policy. He has introduced a Bill to amend the Territory's criminal code so that, although VE remains a crime, the penalty will be only \$50 for doctors who follow strict guidelines. His scheme sidelines the Federal Act which barred Territories from passing VE laws. Bailey's Bill is due to be debated this Autumn.

● The UK's Voluntary Euthanasia Society may be contacted at 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG (0171 937 7770).



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Amid the alien corn?

YOU could say that flying saucers are in the air; speaking purely metaphorically, of course. And, if you'll forgive the paradox, there's no limit to the nuttiness of the stories the tabloids are digging up on the topic.

The People unearthed two on July 13, one involving SAS soldiers waiting to ambush IRA gunmen near an army dump in South Armagh four years ago. Instead of the Irishmen they were expecting, the "undercover troops" saw "up to four small grey figures", who disappeared after a minute. Seconds later the eight SAS men saw a flash in the sky. They were so disturbed by the vision, we are informed, that "they took the rare decision to abandon the stake out"—a serious dereliction of duty, I should have thought. But I suppose that's relatively unimportant in the context of a UFO visitation.

The doubt about the number of "aliens" does nothing for the credibility of the tale and, as is often the case, it has an internal flaw. "The 'aliens' and soldiers stared at each other for a minute", it is reported. But the soldiers were in hiding and presumably couldn't be seen.

Another common feature of such accounts is the introduction of an "expert"; in this instance Belfast-based Hugh O'Brien, who is trying to interview the soldiers. Whether he is the source of *The People's* story isn't revealed. I can't believe that it's taken from an official army communiqué and, as Mr O'Brien mentions that some of the men may be "too embarrassed" to come forward and discuss the case, it can't very well be them. I think we should be told. And Joe Brady, who gets the by-line for the story, is the one to tell us.

Pull the udder one!

AT LEAST the SAS's aliens were harmless. Not so those in *The People's* accompanying story, where they are linked with the discovery of mutilated cattle in Texas and New Mexico. Whenever people see a spacecraft, said Sheriff C J Richards, of Cochran County, "two or three days later we hear of mutilated cows". The mutilations vary, it seems: one animal had its sex organs and navel removed; another had "its heart pulled out through a small hole in the neck".

A clue to the reason, according to the paper, was provided by one Judy Doraty, who revealed under hypnosis (so it must be true, mustn't it?) that she had been abducted late one evening in May 1973, when driving home from playing bingo in Houston. She saw a light in the sky and "a calf being drawn up in a

beam". She, too, was taken up into the spacecraft, where aliens told her that they "were working for the betterment of mankind which was destroying itself through pollution". They "were studying the reproductive systems of animals to find the extent of contamination".

So perhaps I should amend my opening remarks. While it's hard lines on the mutilated cows, we have Ms Doraty's word that it's all for the good of humanity. That's all right then.

Don't think, though, that this is in any way an investigative story by *The People*: they merely "adapted" it from a book by another "expert" on the "extraterrestrials" among us.

Worthy of our ire?

STILL on extraterrestrial matters. You will recall that three Court of Appeal judges ruled (on July 11) that a minister of religion serves God and his congregation but does not serve a terrestrial employer. In consequence a number of sacked clergymen lost their appeal against their Church of England bishops.

No doubt the latter serve God, too, but they manage to keep up with the increasing cost of living down here. The costs of bishops' housing, salaries and administration have risen from £4.9 million in 1987 to £10.3 million in 1996, a rise of 110 per cent, when prices generally rose by 50 per cent over the same period. And running costs at Lambeth palace, the official residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, have exceeded £1 million for the first time. Now, what was that about not serving God and Mammon?

When Islam isn't

ZAINUDDIN MOHAMMED and his bride Sharifah, of Singapore, are faced with a problem. They belong to a sect known as Ahmadiyya and, like 500 other Ahmadies in Singapore, they consider themselves to be Muslims. But the highest Muslim authority on the island doesn't recognise the sect as a true form of Islam (*The Guardian*, August 8). So the two were turned away when they tried to solemnise their vows at the registry of Muslim marriages, and until their marriage is registered they are ineligible for government housing.

There is an alternative: they could sign on at Singapore's secular marriage registry. But "that conflicts with my faith", says Mr Zainuddin. "It's not correct". A dilemma indeed.

Apartheid lives!

THERE'S division, too, among the Jews in Tel Aviv. More especially among the children of Remez school in Bnei Brak, which has literal-

ly been divided in two by a high metal fence. By order of the municipality but against the wishes of the headmistress, Ilana Tauber, one half is to be handed over to the suburb's "rapidly expanding ultra-Orthodox Haredim population". The school's present 250 pupils, "mostly of secular parents" are to be confined to the other half and Mrs Tauber's office will be moved into what is now a tool-shed (*The Guardian*, August 22).

"We don't want our children open to outside influences", said 42-year-old Barry Rabinowitz. "The population of religious people is growing all the time". Which is good news for Prime Minister Netanyahu (indeed he is encouraging the expansion) but bad for the Labour opposition—and bad for the Middle East peace process, such as it is.

Snow joke to Julian

THE YETI. Remember him? If you do it's probably as the Abominable Snowman. The translation of a local name should be "filthy snowman", Julian Champkin informed us in the *Daily Mail* (August 16). He's not sure whether the animal exists or not, but thinks it would be wonderful if it did.

Well, his hopes rest on 52-year-old Italian climber Reinhold Messner, who claims to have seen it four times, once close enough to touch it. More importantly, wrote Champkin, Messner "claims to have photographs of the creature, including a mother Yeti tending her child", as well as a Yeti skeleton. And even though he's only had four sightings, Messner estimates that there are a thousand Yetis in the Himalayas. They are shy, he says, and they only come out at night.

He's rather shy himself. Despite all his claims, he doesn't intend to show his evidence. Champkin will have to wait for the book in two years' time to answer his headline: "Is this proof that Yetis really do exist?"

Neighbours foil God

WHEN a thunderbolt hit his vicarage and his and his wife's cars, the Rev Dennis Ackroyd, Vicar of Cleckheaton, West Yorkshire, described it as an Act of God. "He directed the thunderbolt to our house, rather than anyone else's—so that only we were inconvenienced—and he made sure no one was in the house and no one was hurt. And he gave us wonderful neighbours and a first class fire brigade" (*Church Times*, July 25).

Mr Ackroyd should be particularly thankful for those last two. When they saw this Act of God, his neighbours immediately called the fire brigade, who were on the scene within minutes and got the blaze under control.

THE MYSTIQUE OF MONARCHY

'To speak in rude and general terms, the Queen is invisible and the Prince of Wales is not respected ...'

TOWARDS the end of the film *Mrs Brown*, based on Queen Victoria's relations with her Scottish gillie, John Brown, the Queen learns that her son, the Prince of Wales, later to succeed her as Edward VII, is ill with typhoid, the disease that had killed her beloved Albert. And, although the mother-and-son relationship had not always been rosy, she leaves her Balmoral hideaway to be with him. The near-death of the son, and the mother's emergence from self-enforced exile to be with him, helped restore the people's regard for the monarchy, which had previously been low.

"To speak in rude and general terms", Gladstone had written, "the Queen is invisible and the Prince of Wales is not respected." These words could have been applied to the present Royals in the week before the funeral of Princess Diana.

The unpopularity of Queen Victoria's retreat from public life was epitomised by the appearance of posters outside Buckingham Palace in 1864, reading: "These commanding premises to be let or sold in consequence of the late occupant's declining business". But as Ilse Hayden suggested (in *Symbol and Privilege*), in retrospect, it can be seen that Victoria's withdrawal was "a chrysalis of sorts from which emerged a transformed monarchy more mysterious and more popular than ever before."

It was Gladstone who coaxed her out and used the occasion avowedly to defeat republicanism. February 27, 1872, was declared a public holiday and 50 tickets were presented to "selected workmen" to attend the service at St Paul's to do homage to the Sovereign and her son. Afterwards mother and son appeared on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, a public relations exercise we have seen repeated many times since.

We should not now rule out a similar situation-saving act by Tony Blair, who has already defended the Queen against public criticism. On September 7 he had four hours of talks at Balmoral, after predicting that the monarchy will "change and modernise". Appearing on BBC's *Breakfast With Frost*, he stressed that he remains a monarchist.

Which isn't surprising. He is a weekly guest at the Palace, and part of the panoply. And when Parliament passes a law it is prefaced: "Be it enacted by the Queen's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons ..."

We can't, then, expect Blair's New Labour to initiate a republican policy. Indeed, old Labour never did. Tony Benn raised the matter with Harold Wilson, but with no success. And it is almost three-quarters of a century (1923) since a Labour conference debated *That the Royal Family is no longer necessary as part of the British Constitution ...*, a resolution moved by J Vipond of the Stockton and Thornaby Labour Party and seconded by the well-known rationalist Ernest Thurtle, of the Shoreditch Trades Council, two men who deserve mention here. George Lansbury, himself a republican, replying on behalf of the National Executive, described the question as of "no vital importance"; not worth bothering about. Well, it may not be of vital importance. Life will still go on if the monarchy survives its present crisis. But it will be a life restricted by medieval trappings. Instead of being citizens, we will continue to be "subjects" of "Her Most Excellent Majesty". We will still have that obtrusive head on our stamps, no matter what they commemorate; we will still have to listen to a national anthem that isn't national at all, but a preposterous hymn for whoever sits on the throne and tells us what "My Government" has decided to do for us. *God Save the Queen* may be music to her ears, but it's an embarrassment to anyone of sense and sensibility.

The gilded neo-Gothic Parliament building fits into the mystique, with its Black Rod in knee-breeches, its daily mini-processions and

prayers, its loyalty oaths *et al.* Not only are the members' facilities inadequate, but the public provision is minimal. Democratic it is not.

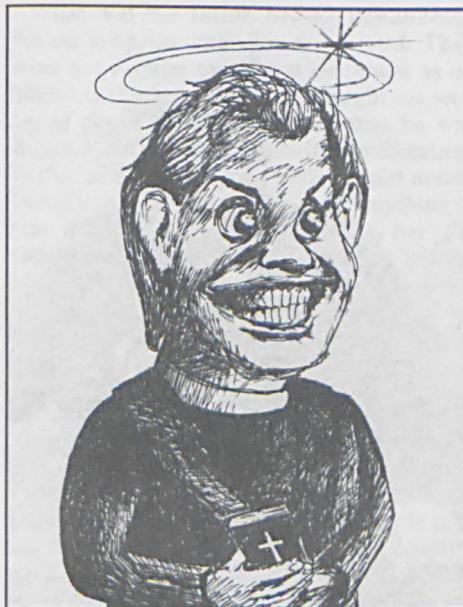
Then there is the mace. "A staff of office signifying authority", as Ambrose Bierce defined the word in his *Devil's Dictionary*, "Its form, that of a heavy club, indicates its original purpose and use in dissuading from dissent." And, as Tom Nairn has said, "People were abruptly reminded of the original purpose of this symbol of transplanted Royal authority in 1977 when, after a particularly exasperating and long-drawn-out debate, the Conservative MP Michael Heseltine suddenly picked it up and mockingly threatened members of Her Majesty's Opposition with instant punishment" (*The Enchanted Glass*).

But, Nairn added, "there is something more than flummery here", and he quoted Professor Richard Rose: "In a political system that lacks a sense of the state and a Constitution, the Mace is the appropriate symbol of political authority". Medieval in origin, it is "a five-foot-long silver gilt representation of prepotent power ... [and] only when it is in position on the table of the House of Commons is it deemed to be in session."

The idea of the state—independent of the members of a society—is, as Rose pointed out, "alien to British political thinking". Our allegiance is to the Crown; and the woman who currently wears it on what are called "state" occasions but are actually royal pageants, is an anachronism. If she should go (which is unlikely without pushing) what would we lose? The somewhat extensive and expensive Royal Household; her similarly extensive and expensive family; the Queen's Flight; the now renewable royal yacht and rarely-used and never-full royal train; those garden parties to which it is such a "privilege" to be invited; and the present invidious honours system.

Would it matter if there were no more Knights of the Garter or the Thistle, Knights or Dames Grand Cross? Would we miss seeing this sportsman or that pop-star proudly displaying his MBE to the TV cameras outside Buckingham Palace and telling us how nice the Queen was? Would Britain be worse for having no dukes, barons or earls; with no one being ennobled and having to shuffle off backwards, without turning his or her back on the royal presence? And all the rest of the medieval mummery? The answer is an unequivocal *no*.

PS: The current cost of the Monarchy is £80 million a year.



● Blair: Remains a Monarchist. Sketch by Geoff Day.

'Burdensome, expensive, useless and dangerous'

THOUGH monarchies and republics have adopted protean forms down the ages, and there have been good kings and bad presidents, there is about the former an odour of sanctity if not a stench of tyranny and about the latter a fresh breath of public interest, commonweal and democratic ideals. Emperors, kings, queens and princes are anointed by popes and archbishops in the sight of God while doges and presidents are elected by and in the sight of the people. Thus religionists and reactionaries have tended to favour monarchies, and freethinkers and libertarians republics.

Republicanism—if not based on universal franchise—is generally said to have originated in Sparta and the Greek city states, where it was supported by leading thinkers—if not freethinkers—like Plato and Aristotle. In ancient Rome its major champion was Cicero, dubbed an “advanced sceptic” by McCabe.

Republican Rome became Imperial Rome, then Christian Rome, and finally sank into the Dark Ages and later Middle Ages. When the ideal of republicanism re-emerged during the Renaissance, Post-Renaissance and Enlightenment, it was freethinkers who held it aloft: people like Hobbes (*Leviathan*), Milton (*Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*), Locke (*Treatise on Civil Government*), Toland, Rousseau (*The Social Contract*), Paine (*Rights of Man*), Lafayette, Montesquieu, Horne Tooke and Bentham.

Of these only the last has been called an atheist, but the others were in enough strife for their political and heterodox religious views (vaguely theistic or deistic) without inviting the ultimate opprobrium. Nor did their (and much of 19th Century) republicanism necessarily demand the demise of kings. But if these were retained they were expected to repudiate “divine right” and acknowledge some form of natural law (which latterly has proved an obstacle to sexual liberalisation) or social contract giving rights to the governed as well as governors.

Centuries of legal, but mostly illegal, championing of republicanism elapsed before it was actually implemented in an enduring form. In certain Italian and German cities it flourished, usually in a perverted form under a religious fanatic, for short periods; but its most significant expression before the 18th Century was in the land of the most enduring monarchy: Britain. During the reign of Charles I freethinkers initially supported Cromwell, the English Octavian, but when he succeeded and developed an Augustan complex many turned to the Levellers and the

Diggers. The last straw was when the Cromwells—like the African “presidents for life”—reintroduced the hereditary principle despite the obvious lack of familial talent, and Charles II was invited to return from his travels.

The 18th Century brought the American and French Revolutions, and the 19th and 20th successful republican revolutions or evolutions in Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia—led almost to a man (and occasionally a woman) by freethinkers too numerous to name. But what of Britain?

Corresponding societies perpetuated the freethought and republican ideals of Paine, while Carlile converted his deism into atheism. During the first half of the 19th Century, journals edited and largely written by freethinkers were the main foci of the movement: Sherwin's *Republican* (1817), Carlile's *Republican* (1819-26), Hetherington's *Republican* (1831), Hollick's *Atheist and Republican* (1841), Harding's *Republican* (1847), Harney's *Red Republican* and Linton's *English Republic* (1850).

Bradlaugh early adopted an editorial policy of atheism, republicanism and neo-Malthusianism for his *National Reformer* (1860-93). Of this trinity, republicanism was the only platform Holyoake, the founder of secularism (1851), accepted in later life. In 1870 Fawcett and Clifford founded a republican club in Cambridge and the following year Cattell one in Birmingham. Also in 1871 a Universal Republican League was formed at the Eleusis Club, Chelsea, and Bradlaugh wrote his best-selling *Impeachment of the*



● Charles Bradlaugh: Atheism, republicanism and neo-Malthusianism.

House of Brunswick. Soon republican clubs sprang up all over Britain and in 1873 a National Republican League was created with Cooper as chairman, Foote (founder of *The Freethinker*) as secretary and Bradlaugh as moving spirit and president-in-waiting of the “coming” British Republic. Royle's description of the National Secular Society (1866-) as “defunct” in 1872-73 may be an exaggeration, but certainly republicanism was absorbing the energies of most secularists then.

By 1874 all the excitement was over. Now with Besant, Bradlaugh and Watts returned to secularism and only Standing kept the banner aloft with his *Republican Chronicle/Republican/Radical* (1875-86). In the 1880s Bradlaugh joined two Royal Commissions and in 1901 Foote declared: “Her Majesty made a good queen because she was a good woman”. In *The Freethinker* republican aspirations have survived. But so too has the monarchy.

What lessons does this history teach? Paine's scathing comment is as good today as ever: “The idea of hereditary legislators is as inconsistent as that of hereditary judges, or hereditary juries; and as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, or an hereditary wise man; and as ridiculous as an hereditary poet-laureate.” While in a constitutional monarchy the sovereign reigns but doesn't rule, Bradlaugh and other republicans formed organisations to lobby against the hereditary principle in arenas where ruling still occurs, notably the House of Lords with its Bench of Bishops. And they pointed to the connection between this principle and the class system, with its hereditary expectations for education, employment and housing.

Yet in phlegmatic Britain it has taken a catalyst—or, rather, two—to produce a reaction. One was the example of foreign revolutions, especially in France: 1789, 1830, 1848 and 1870. The other was a widespread perception that the monarchy was “burdensome, expensive, useless and dangerous” (Milton) and that the incumbent was “vile” or “viler” (Landor) or “physically and morally incapacitated from performing her duties” (Bradlaugh). When the British Monarchy stopped costing 80 times the American Presidency and 1.5 per cent of the National Budget, when people forgot about the “Four Georges” and their “small German breast-battered warrior” relatives on the Continent, and when, under the genial influence of Disraeli and the fading memory of Albert, Victoria became industrious and caring again, the issue of republicanism didn't appear all that important.

Can the House of Windsor project a new image and survive?

- The Wembley crowd at the England-Moldova match sang *God Save the Queen* with greater fervour than has been heard for many a year.
- Prime Minister Blair is the Monarchy's most potent friend.
- Under Charles, who has been traditionally groomed, the three-ring circus will continue.
- There will be further attempts to muzzle the media.

Keep the champagne on hold!

THE British Monarchy is used to being in crisis but its past trials and tribulations are as nothing to what it has had to endure these past few weeks.

An event which might have resolved its most intractable problem is set to haunt it, probably for the remainder of its tenure. It will be very difficult for living members of the family to survive the presence of a sanctified dead relative. Edward Kennedy, his children and his nephews, have all been brought low by their failure to match the frozen, sacred, youthful image of JFK. Even in an age of revisionist biography, the dead can make no mistakes. Their survivors can only pale in comparison with the departed icon. Aware of the mortal danger, the Monarchy has bent over backwards to retain its tenuous grip on the throne. "Speak to us Ma'am", intoned a servile *Daily Mirror*, "your people are suffering" and at last she spoke. Flags that could not fly half-mast were eventually lowered. Heads that could not bow stood bowed, bewildered and forlorn. The planned private funeral became a unique national occasion. A posthumous HRH was soon on offer. But the contrast with Diana's lifestyle could not be masked. Her fresh rebellious approach exposed what Hugo Young has called "the anachronistic, tightarsed poncing about that has been the experience of monarchy for everyone now alive". Her life had been a torment to the Royals, showing up the fustiness and flaws of their archaic institution.

The Establishment too has closed ranks in its attempt to bring Diana home. Archbishops and Deans were at centre stage praising God on our behalf for her life and charity. No-one was allowed to question the supreme irony of a life cut short before her final mission, the banning of landmines, was completed. Ways mysterious as ever! But their trite homilies were upstaged by Elton John singing what the people wanted to hear and a bitter valedictory by Diana's brother, pleading for privacy and relaxation of the Royal bondage for his nephews. But here he was naive. An exalted, privileged position bestowed by birthright cannot hope to escape the close attention of the people. The principal use of the Royal Family now is to keep the masses titillated and tantalised, to give them something new and spicy to discuss in pub and workplace. Their story has become a kind of rich psychological drama

more gripping at times than *EastEnders* or that other *Dynasty*.

At the height of the Diana and Fergie double act, the Royal Family was said to be so dysfunctional that if they had lived on a council estate the neighbours would have had the police out every night. There is little likelihood of things improving. Already we hear it alleged that Charles has told Sir Robert Fellowes, the Queen's Private Secretary, "to impale himself on his flagstaff". Recriminations, attempts to read the public will, experiments with closeness and aloofness will now pre-occupy this hapless clan. They will know no peace. If Earl Spencer really cared for the well-being of his nephews he would buy them a two-bedroom semi, let them attend a local comprehensive and encourage them to train for a proper job.

The advice to the Royals is conflicting. Walk hand-in-hand with the people said Diana in the famed *Panorama* interview. Retain your dignity and distance, say others, lest that special Royal magic is subverted. And, yes, a bicycling Royal Family on the Dutch or Danish model is even more of a contradiction. If they blend in with the people so well, why is the job handed down by inheritance and why do they still live in palaces and wear crowns? Progressive ordinariness can only lead to swift extinction.

What will the future bring? Republicans should keep the champagne on hold. They must not dismiss pro-Royal sentiment as an intellectual aberration; they might as well try to prove to a man in love that he was deluded. No ordinary celebrity, no Elizabeth Taylor or even an Elvis Presley could match Diana's appeal. For more than anything it was her Royal status that made her the object of fascination. She never really left the Monarchy; in the people's eyes she was more Royal than any monarch this century. Even though she became semi-detached, she was the only person in any of the Royal palaces to be attuned to the spirit of the times. Although she was a scourge of the Royals, what mattered was that she was inside the tent spitting out.

Only Royalty reaches the millions and attracts bouquets to railings. Royalty is taking the place of religion in sating the people's need for myths. Ironically, the people furthest removed from privilege, drawn from the lower strata of society and conditioned into unquestioning obedience through cen-

turies of servitude, were most in evidence. Wayne and Tracey—the powers behind the throne. They form a formidable army; the masses empowered by democracy beyond their judgement. In their yearning for hero worship, egged on by Lords Archer and Fawsley, they link arms in a grotesque alliance with the fat cats of the Establishment, who, like drooling corgies, wait around the palace table to be thrown a juicy bone.

Meanwhile, the thinking classes observe the scene in quiet despair, their voices drowned out in a tidal wave of mass hysteria. They know that if the emotions could be held in check, and if common sense prevailed, the whole robber baron-based, outmoded edifice of Royalty could now be swept aside and replaced by a modern secular republic, with elected representatives and a proper constitution. Then as free citizens the people could hold their heads up high, released from their duty to bow and scrape to empty effigies. But sadly the republic is not around the corner. The Wembley crowd at the England-Moldova match sang *God Save the Queen* with greater fervour than has been heard for many a year. Rampant lager louts draped in Union Jacks may yet again disfigure Europe's city centres. Deference and servility are deeply ingrained in the psyche of the "lower" castes. They are not about to exchange the comfy shelter offered by their betters for the unsettling prospect of independent citizenship.

Prime Minister Blair is the Monarchy's most potent friend. He is a traditionalist and will not challenge fundamental preconceptions. His whole record reflects his populist approach. He perceives that what the masses want is not the end of the Monarchy but a Monarchy that comes down from on high without depriving them of residual awe.

Under Charles, who has been traditionally groomed, the three-ring circus will continue. He lacks the imagination to bring the curtain down. There will be further attempts to muzzle the media. The Royals would like nothing better than to be left to wallow in obscure luxury, occasionally to be trotted out before the admiring public to unveil a plaque, mouth their platitudes and beat a hasty retreat. Republicans must hope that when the time comes for Charles to hand over to Diana's sons they will prove to have inherited her rebel spirit and will decline the dubious honour.

Hullabaloo!

WHY have we devoted so much of *The Freethinker* to "royal" issues?

● The hullabaloo surrounding Princess Diana's death shows how unreason still flourishes in Britain—and it is our duty to expose and to fight it.

● Given the polls and feature articles and television head-shaking over the monarchy which followed the *après-Ritz* pile-up, we could not miss the opportunity to restate our journal's historic republicanism.

A monarchy *with* power is an affront to democracy: the subjects (not citizens) have no say in who "rules". If it *lacks* effective authority, it is an expensive pantomime, rooted in the blackest superstition. Either way, we seek an end to it.

But we are not holding our breath. We take some comfort from a MORI poll which, before Diana's death, suggested that 55 per cent of us believe we would be better off, or no worse off, without a monarchy. But most people now seem to favour mere reform: according to *The Sunday Times/NOP* (September 14), 72 per cent of us feel the Queen is remote and out of touch with the people, most are unable to foresee life without a monarch, and 60 per cent want to draw a veil over recent embarrassments by making Prince William the next king.

This latter point highlights the intrinsic silliness of monarchy. Who outside his immediate circle knows anything about this child? He could be a thoroughly nice chap; kind to animals and old people; a virtuoso pianist from the age of three, perhaps, who translated into German all 13 volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu* before he was 11. Or is he stupid and cruel and barely literate and given to kicking corgis and being rude to servants? We just don't know—and yet, simply because he happened to be born at a certain time in a certain place to a certain dysfunctional couple, we are prepared to accept him as our Head of State! Silly.

But whether William is "good" or "bad" is in the end immaterial: it is, as they say, the principle of the thing. *The Freethinker* will continue to campaign for a modern republic. Please give us the resources to do so. Making cheques payable to G W Foote & Company, send donations to Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: £50 E Clark, P Forrest; £45 D Broughton; £40 C Pinel; £30 A Parr; £25 L Dubow, N Ratcliffe; £20 D Bennett, K Partington, S Smith; £18 A Mutch; £15 J Bond; £13 C Ablethorpe; £10 G Blakey, D Harris, M Hill, J Lance, E McCann, H McNaughtan, L Palmer, F Seward, R Schilsky, P Somers; £8 R Giles; £5 E Carson, A Chambre, N Divall, J Dyke, J Haggerty, A Harvey, A Hawkins, S Kennedy, I Lloyd, C Newton, M Schofield, V Smith, C Tott, A Varlet, R McCallister, B Whiting; £4 W Rogers; £3 R Delaurey, F Jones, N Levenson, J Roles, C Tonkin, E Wakefield; £2 A Bolt, D Dow, H Evans, J Ford, C Shrives, P Wood; £1 D Simpson.

Total from August 14 to September 21: £594.

Freethought & Monarchy

HOW TO BE

IT WAS a drama of coincidence—the deaths within the same week of Diana, Princess of Wales (36) and Mother Teresa of Calcutta (87). The one a glamorous privileged English woman in her prime, the other a wrinkled Albanian nun, they nevertheless had a great deal in common.

They both allowed superstition to rule their lives—in the one case a mishmash of ancient and modern folklore, in the other a rigid acceptance of institutionalised dogma. Both were hailed as charismatic; both had an insatiable appetite for worldwide adulation; both manipulated the media. And they were both in the laying-on-of-hands business—the nun pressing heads and praying, instead of providing medical treatment, the Princess touching and hugging alongside the medical treatment provided by others.

While Diana was a sort of pagan goddess, Mother Teresa was a more traditional saint; but both were in the Virgin Mother mould. Diana's attested virginity was the main criterion for the arranged marriage she went through in 1981, and, though subsequently twice a mother, she still looked virginal; while the octogenarian Bride of Christ, though literally ever a virgin, undoubtedly had a strong maternal instinct for all babies—even for foetuses. However, she always asserted that, unlike the Princess, she was motivated not by love and compassion for her fellow humans but by love for Christ—an aloof, omnipotent being who, she believed, "called" her to dedicate her life to the impossible task of relieving suffering that he could presumably have prevented had he so willed.

Even before she died, there were popular demands for MT's canonisation, and she said nothing to discourage them. Indeed, she boasted that St Peter would have no difficulty in recognising her when she reached the Pearly Gates. In the first few days after her death, the Vatican was besieged with demands to curtail the usual lengthy investigatory procedures before beatifying her in readiness for speedy canonisation, and may well do so.

As for the Princess's brand of superstition, she and Dodi Fayed had travelled 250 miles by helicopter only 18 days before their fatal car accident to consult an expensive clairvoyant—the self-styled "priestess" of spiritualism, Rita Rogers—presumably about the future of their relationship. We cannot be sure what Ms Rogers told them, but she certainly seems to have neglected to warn them to shun nocturnal car journeys!

It seems most likely that she assured them of a long and happy life together. That might account for Dodi's inviting Diana to select an



unofficial engagement ring. She chose a magnificent £133,000 diamond ring (diamonds being a girl's best friend), of which Dodi took delivery early that fatal Saturday evening and no doubt tried on Di's manicured finger before they left for their Last Supper at the Paris Ritz. Such a prediction might also have contributed to a feeling of unassailable security, which would make it unnecessary to take such mundane precautions as fastening seat-belts and avoiding excessive speeds in a tunnel—not to mention an apparently drunken driver.

The media and the public rushed to blame the persistent freelance photographers for the tragic accident, then the chauffeur for drinking (though he was supposed to be off-duty), and, in the background, the Royal Family, especially Di's former husband. Even conspiracy to murder was postulated. But Dodi and Diana must bear some personal responsibility for their manifest irresponsibility—in which they were emboldened, perhaps, by their heady courtship, by the clairvoyant's positive predictions, and (who knows?) by the wine at dinner—possibly combined with Di's usual prescribed Prozac.

The paparazzi certainly seem to have behaved intolerably, but it would have been far more intolerable for Diana had they ever ceased wanting to photograph her altogether. Besides, if she and her playboy lover wished to avoid cameras on this particular occasion, why not simply use blinds in the back windows of the car; why not ask for police protection; why not even order a Ritz takeaway in the first place, rather than turn the public highway into a suicidal speed track?

Presumably innocent of the sin of drinking alcohol, Dodi was given a traditional Muslim funeral. Then, on the eve of Diana's funeral, every mosque in this country included her too in its Friday prayers—though in most of the worshippers' homelands she would probably have been stoned to death as a self-confessed

BARBARA SMOKER on the Princess and the nun: twin souls in life and death

A VIRGIN MOTHER

While Diana was a sort of pagan goddess, Mother Teresa was a more traditional saint: but both were in the Virgin Mother mould.



adulteress. It was all part of the mass hypocrisy, hysterical adulation, and excessive public mourning that engulfed the country.

Some of the tributes to the Princess described her, amazingly, as "intelligent". That made me smile, and would have made her smile too, for she was well aware that she was all heart ("Queen of Hearts") and little brain (O-levels: *nil*). At the same time, she had perceptive intuition, genuine concern, and impish wit, as well as the cunning to win people over to her side.

It was Diana's volatile, emotional, irrational nature that made her "this impossible girl" (as the Queen is said to have called her) and that so endeared her to the British and worldwide public. Most little girls learn to get their own way by flirting; and Diana flirted shamelessly and effectively—with the whole world. But her one-to-one relationships were punctuated by bitter quarrels—even with most of her staff.

Had her relationship with Dodi not been so tragically cut short, it might have lasted a year or two—long enough, at least, for her to acquire a new father-in-law able to install the couple in a recently restored villa in the Bois de Boulogne, extravagantly designed half-a-century ago for a British abdicatee-in-exile. In fact, they toured it just a few hours before the car crash. It seems that Diana, like Jackie Onassis, having tasted the aphrodisiac of public grandeur, now craved the aphrodisiac of pampering private wealth and personal worship.

However, in spite of everything, I must admit I rather took to the Princess myself—smitten, as most people were, by her lovely expressive eyes and her undoubted empathy with those who suffered. And she did, after all, succeed in rescuing AIDS and leprosy victims from untouchability and in raising public consciousness of the victims of anti-personnel landmines.

As it happened, I was called upon to defend her in a television programme (*Stand and Deliver*), earlier this year, against an attack by a brittle young media woman who blamed Diana for single-handedly bringing down the monarchy. I pointed out that if the monarchy had indeed been brought down, the Royals must take a share of the blame. Anyway, the Princess was herself a monarchist, and clearly wished her elder son to become king. Yet in death she was seen as a quasi-republican; she almost turned the nation to republicanism within days, and forced the Queen herself to eat humble-pie.

To my mind, Diana's campaign against anti-personnel land-mines expunged all her self-centered silliness, and it is to be hoped that her legacy will include a complete international ban on them.

There is no such extenuating legacy of the life of Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, better known as Mother Teresa.

She actually declared, in one of the poorest and most densely populated cities in the world, "Have all the babies, and I will look after them!" How arrogant can you get? And she admitted, without shame, that saving the lives of severely defective newborn babies was primarily a propaganda exercise against contraception, abortion, and euthanasia.

Hers was a grandiose form of sado-masochism. Putting on an act of humility, she hobnobbed with the world's most powerful and wealthy people, including its most corrupt dictators, and maintained a special hot-line to the Creator himself.

Many Indians saw her as a "disaster" for Calcutta. Social justice was simply not in her vocabulary. Not only did she use her considerable political influence to obstruct the availability of contraception and abortion, but also she wasted huge sums of money from the West that might have gone to those trying to deal honestly with the underlying problem of over-

population and to provide India with modern hospitals.

The obituarist in the *Calcutta Telegraph* forthrightly accused her of using the dying poor as "stepping-stones in a relentless ascent to sainthood".

Her self-righteous submission to poverty and suffering, in accordance with medieval Catholicism, was likewise forced upon her clients, though the majority were not even Christians. One of them, told by her that he was privileged to be caressed by Jesus on the cross, replied "I wish he'd stop caressing me"—and she repeated this as an amusing quip.

A considerable proportion of the donations she attracted came from very dubious sources (Papa and Baby Doc and Robert Maxwell are examples), and were given with very dubious motives. Even when told it was stolen money, she refused to give any up.

Soon after Malcolm Muggeridge had put her on the world stage, casting her as a "living saint" in his sickeningly titled TV film (1969) and book (1971), *Something Beautiful for God*, she chose to spend a large donation, presumably intended to relieve poverty, on a gold ciborium for a new convent chapel, to glorify her cruel god; and St Mugg perversely applauded the choice. At the same time, he castigated me (in a Sunday paper) for having dared to dub her a "sacred cow".

In 1979 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Ten years later she arranged a meeting with the Princess of Wales, shrewdly recognising in her a twin soul.

The funeral journey for each of them was by state gun-carriage, in London and Calcutta. Diana was buried with the rosary given her by Mother Teresa—though she would not have known how to use it. Some assert that the two women are now together in Heaven, beaming their spiritual gifts to Earth. Others see Dodi as Di's more likely soulmate in the after-life.

I too think Diana will live on—but as an undying legendary icon of immaculate womanly beauty, like Helen of Troy. And the little island in the Althorp Park lake will become a place of lasting popular pilgrimage.

Had true precognition been possible, Diana might well have regarded death as not too high a price to pay for the adoration of her that has ensued; especially if the alternative were to be survival with disfigurement. And she has avoided both the trauma of another broken marriage and the physiological ravages of time and of Prozac. Blessed art thou among women!

THE BIBLICAL GUIDE TO ABORTION

THE birth control controversy continues to heat up in the United States. The majority of people are still unaware that "family planning" programmes that utilise contraceptives and abortifacients are morally and ethically justified on religious grounds.

Considering the Judæo-Christian make-up of the US population, it's not altogether clear why Bible-believing citizens would have any difficulties with the issue. After all, the Bible does favourably mention a wide variety of folk abortifacients and contraceptives. In fact, the Bible contains a virtual catalogue of ancient contraceptives and abortifacients. Many of these represented valuable trade goods.

For example, myrrh (a resin made from the African commiphora plant) is mentioned 17 times, mostly in association with sexual intercourse. It was used as a contraceptive among other purposes. Myrrh is sometimes thought of as a narcotic and as a poison.

A novel usage of myrrh occurs in the purification rite whereby "... every maid's turn was come to go-in-to king Ahasuerus ... so were the days of their purification accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours ..." (Esther 2:12).

There are found several mentions of myrrh under highly erotic circumstances throughout the Bible. Examples include: "I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fin-

by US Correspondent
GENE KASMAR

gers with sweet smelling myrrh ..." (Solomon 5:5). And the harlot "... perfumed the bed with myrrh ..." (Proverbs 7:17).

A passing mention is made of Cyrene and Cyrenians in the New Testament Bible. This area of North Africa was famous for its production and trade in silphion (giant fennel), a widely regarded contraceptive and abortifacient of ancient times.

Another abortifacient mentioned in the Bible is "wormwood" (*Artemisia Carduaceae* or *Absinthium*), which can cause violent convulsions and induce menstruation. Oil of wormwood (*Artemisia Absinthium*), is used to make absinthe liquor also. It too, in large quantities, can cause convulsions. Wormwood was also considered an aphrodisiac by some.

Laxatives

Another abortifacient is hyssop (possibly majoram or caper plant). Both of these are better known as cathartics or laxatives. Hyssop is mentioned a dozen times in the Bible, usually as part of a ritual for cleanness, purging the bowels, curing leprosy and so on. It is found in Leviticus Chapter 14 five times alone, and twice in Numbers Chapter 19, for similar purposes.

Blair and the bishops

PRIME Minister Blair has set the Downing Street cat among the clerical pigeons by refusing to accept either of the Church of England's nominees to succeed to the Bishopric of Liverpool, which is regarded as a key position.

For the past 20 years, the Crown Appointments Commission has submitted to the Prime Minister a first and second choice for each new diocesan bishop in England, although the Church previously directly elected bishops in England—and continues to do so for dioceses elsewhere.

Although the Commission's workings, chaired by the relevant Archbishop, are not public, it is thought that Mrs Thatcher (as she then was) opted for the second choice rather than the first on a number of occasions, causing quite a stir. If, however—as is reported—Tony Blair has rejected both candidates and asked to see the complete list, he will have broken significant new ground, effectively taking the selection entirely on himself.

There is general controversy about the suit-

ability of the nominees, particularly as several allegedly outstanding candidates did not make it to the top of the list and one of the nominees is described by two newspapers as a friend of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Blair may have shared these concerns, but whatever his intentions, he appears to have delivered a huge snub to the Church and could unwittingly have given the disestablishment bandwagon a gigantic shove. Any organisation that cannot even appoint its own most senior "managers" can hardly claim to have any authority of its own. This point will not be lost on senior Church figures, some of whom are thought to favour disestablishment, which would remove the Prime Minister's role in such appointments.

According to the Editor of *Church Times*, in the absence of informed debate "the pressure for disestablishment is growing fast."

Apart from disestablishment, the only solution I can see is to appoint Tony Blair as Archbishop of Canterbury. Oh, and having seen His Grace's incursion into politics at the TUC, George Carey for Number 10!

Keith Porteous Wood

Willow, date palm, and pomegranate were also considered useful for birth control. They all stimulate the production of female sex hormones and thereby reduce fertility. This is exactly the way modern birth control or contraceptive pills work. Pomegranate are mentioned 31 times throughout the Bible; most often in conjunction with cultic rituals.

Another abortifacient is "rue" (also known as pennyroyal or fleabane), a toxic member of the mint family. Rue contains a compound similar to pilocarpine, which induces abortion. It is widely used even today throughout Latin America. In the Bible, it is only mentioned once, as trade goods, in "... woe unto you Pharisees, for you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs ..." (Luke 11:42).

Another botanical product mentioned in the Bible is "gall". The Hebrew *rowsh* translated "gall", means "hemlock". A deadly poison, it was also widely used as an abortifacient. Associated with bitterness, its Biblical citations usually revolve around figurative usage such as "... lest there be among you a root that bearest gall and wormwood ..." (Deuteronomy 29:18). It is also referenced as useful for purging "uncleanness" in "... give us water of gall to drink because we have sinned against the Lord." (Jer 8 :1 4).

Miscarry

Induced miscarriages were attributed to other causes as well in "And the men of the city said unto Elisha ... the city is pleasant, as my lord seeth: but the water is naught, and the ground barren." (2 Kings 2:19). The Hebrew *shakol* translated "barren" means "miscarry" and "cause abortion". Here we have a euphemism, with "barren ground" meaning "cause to miscarry". The townsfolk recognised that the drinking water was causing miscarriages. Elisha's solution was to go forth "... into the spring of the waters, and cast salt in there, and thus sayest the Lord, have healed these waters; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land. So the waters were healed unto this day ..." (2 Kings 2:20-22).

Nowhere does the Bible caution against or prohibit the use of the varied abortifacients that were in wide use during Biblical times. The conclusions to be drawn from that fact should be self-evident.

● Gene Kasmar is author of *ALL the Obscenities in the Bible*.

Terry Sanderson on the media

DECENT EXPOSURE ON CHANNEL 4

AFTER the surfeit of paranormal rubbish that television has foisted on us over the past few months, it was absolute bliss to find Channel 4's science programme *Equinox* putting a bomb under the lot of them. In an episode called "Secrets of the Psychics", we were given 90 minutes of sheer, unadulterated scepticism and exposure.

The programme began with a comprehensive hatchet job on Spiritualism, which we discovered began 150 years ago in upstate New York. Two silly girls made knocking noises on the bottom of their bed with their feet and claimed that they were coming from the Spirit World. Their mother—even dafter than they were—believed them, and within two years there were 100 mediums operating in New York. Within 10 years, there was a new religion with millions of adherents.

One after another, the Victorian mediums were exposed as frauds, albeit highly ingenious ones. Some of their favourite tricks were explained and then tested on present-day educated people to see if they still worked. A group of students sat around a table with a man they were told was a medium. To reassure them that there would be no cheating, his hands were tied to the arms of his chair. Then, in traditional fashion, a hat, a bell and a trumpet were placed on the table, and the lights were turned out. Naturally the spirits would only appear in the dark.

We, the TV viewers, were allowed to see what the students couldn't by the use of infrared cameras. First, the chair that the supposed medium was tied to was specially constructed so that he could release himself quite easily. He then produced a telescopic stick (apparently a favourite tool of the mediums), with which he proceeded to move the objects on the table, much to the consternation of the students. After that, an accomplice dressed in black crept unseen into the room and placed the hat on the head of one of the students.

They were utterly perplexed—and convinced that the supernatural had been at work. Until, that is, they were shown an infrared video of what had really happened in the pitch-dark room, and then they felt like absolute idiots.

One after another, experienced conjurers came on to tell how they had presented themselves to "psychic researchers" as possessors of special powers. Using their professional skills, they had repeatedly convinced the supposed scientists that mind-reading, telepathy and telekinesis really exist.

But even when they've been so easily duped, the psychical researchers remain unperturbed and continue business as usual.

Best of all, though, was the *Equinox* exposure of Uri Geller. Using film from hidden cameras, we saw the master supernaturalist doing his spoon-bending magic—only this time he wasn't using psychic energy, but brute force. Then, his mind-reading exhibition included him peeping through his fingers when he had supposedly covered his eyes. The *Equinox* team had even unearthed some film of him failing dramatically to deliver the paranormal goods during a chat show on American TV. It's strange

how such examples of Mr Geller's failures tend to disappear into the deepest recesses of the archives, but it is reassuring that determined researchers can find them if they try hard enough.

Yet another series on this paranormal theme, *Strange but True* with Michael Aspel, has also taken to the airwaves. Once more an unconvincing collection of ghosties and ghoulies and alien abductions is presented for our entertainment. Strange it certainly is—but true?

Unlike the unquestioning Paul McKenna fiasco, at least this programme occasionally admits that fraud and deception might be at the heart of some of its stories.

In the first programme of the series, we were given the tale of a young man who claimed he had been the first person in the world to receive a £1m insurance pay-out after being abducted by a flying saucer. He told a familiar tale of beams of light lifting him into a spaceship and aliens messing about with him. He was so convincing that the insurance company had, apparently, paid out gladly. He was pictured in newspapers around the world displaying the insurance certificate and the cheque for £1million. He became a hero for the UFO buffs, who saw his story as final proof that something really is out there. The trouble is, this youth had made the whole thing up. The insurance certificate had been constructed from Letraset and the man from the insurance company presenting the cheque (a bit of cardboard) was actually a friend of his who was in on the con.

None of the newspapers apologised for pre-

sending him at face value.

On another front, the cult of Princess Diana seems to be growing by the day. If the media go on much longer like this, it too will soon be a full-scale religion. One Scottish Kirk minister was so alarmed by these developments that he declared from his pulpit that God had killed Diana because He did not want her to marry a Muslim. According to a report in *Scotland on Sunday*, the Rev James Munro, of Corpach, near Fort William, found quite a few of his congregation walking out and vowing never to come back because of his suggestion.

He later said that he had no recollection of saying these things, and didn't agree with them. Oo'er—maybe there's more to this than we realise!

And finally, the case of Ernest Digweed, described in *The Daily Telegraph* as "a religious recluse who died 21 years ago surrounded by crucifixes in a tent in his living room." Mr Digweed left a will stipulating that his estate should be invested for 80 years after his death, and that if, during that period, Jesus Christ should return to Earth, then all the property should go to the Saviour.

Over the years, there have been hundreds of claims for the bequest, including one from an American door-to-door salesman. He claimed he was entitled to the money because whenever he knocked on a door, he was greeted with the response: "Jesus Christ, not you again!"

I think he should get the money on the basis of being the sanest person in the whole business.

Humanists slam ITV 'rubbish'

WHILE praising Channel 4 for a recent programme in its *Equinox* series, *The Secrets of the Psychics*, Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists have strongly criticised ITV for screening programmes which lend credibility to allegedly paranormal phenomena.

A resolution carried unanimously at the group's annual general meeting on September 18 congratulated Channel 4 on its balanced *Equinox* programme but called on ITV to stop broadcasting programmes "which give publicity to charlatans claiming to be 'psychics'."

Secretary Roy Saich commented: "Equinox was a breath of fresh air after the so-called 'investigations' of paranormal

phenomena put out by ITV in programmes like *Beyond Belief* and *The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna*. This sort of rubbish misleads the ignorant and credulous.

"The educational foundation set up by American Humanist magician James Randi offers to pay \$1 million to any 'psychic' worldwide who passes scientific tests—but, so far, no money has had to be paid out!"

At the same meeting, Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists also passed a resolution welcoming the British Humanist Association's decision not to proceed as planned with its decision to leave Bradlaugh House. Members expressed the hope that the BHA and the National Secular Society would co-operate under one roof "for many years to come."

Spreading the word

We are satisfied that there can be but little liberty on earth while men worship a tyrant in heaven...

ONE of many splendid quotes from the US freethought writer Robert G Ingersoll, subject of the first of a series of leaflets about the Humanist tradition from the Pink Triangle Trust Humanist educational charity.

A copy of the attractively produced leaflet is available free of charge (large SAE to PTT, 34

Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB). Ten copies for free distribution cost just £1.

Roy Saich, a trustee of the charity, said he hoped associations within the movement would make the leaflets available with their own, and that individuals would give copies to friends and families, mail copies with their letters and cards, provide teachers with copies for use as an aid, and donate copies to be given out at meetings.

As we reported in last month's issue of *The Freethinker*, the Home Office invited the National Secular Society's views on possible new legislation against 'religious discrimination' and related topics. General Secretary KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD went along to Whitehall ...

No timescale for new law ... but we must keep up the pressure

A LENGTHY one-to-one meeting took place on August 27 with Caroline Rowe, a senior official of the Home Office Community Relations Unit. It seems that, if there is to be new legislation around the issue of "religious discrimination", it will not be for many years. However, this was a valuable opportunity to learn in detail about the Home Office's approach—and for the authorities to be appraised of a secularist view.

The official told me that there was "no perfect solution" to legislation in this area and that her department was "acutely aware of the practicalities" of drafting it, for which "there was no timescale". There is also a clear appreciation of the need for consultation.

The meeting arose from reports of a Home Affairs Select Committee at which these issues were discussed, at least partly following representations by the Commission for Racial Equality, which were similar to those mooted by the Runnymede Trust discussion paper on "Islamophobia", which received much attention in *The Freethinker*.

The most alarmist of the newspaper reports forecast an extension of blasphemy law and imminent religious discrimination legislation. However, the official told me that these reports "were not all accurate" and there was no commitment to legislation.

Although the discussion focused on religious discrimination law, it also covered the role that religion should play in society today, and I suggested that its cohesion can often be compromised by the promotion of religious identity, as is already the case in Northern Ireland [where, I have been told on good authority, integrated schools are facing funding difficulties while Roman Catholic schools' funding is being improved to bring them onto the same basis as State (Protestant) schools].

I then described how impractical it would be to extend the blasphemy law; and the difficulty of deciding (and justifying) which religions should be included and which excluded from any extension. I opined that the law's involvement in multiple faiths and sects (whether relating to blasphemy or religious discrimination) would bring the law and courts into disrepute.

Were there to be a successful prosecution under a new law for a book such as *The Satanic Verses*, there would be a danger that any fine or custodial sentence, however severe, would infuriate the plaintiffs by its (perceived) inadequacy—while most of the rest of the population would be incensed that such a prosecution could even have been possible.

On the other hand, were the Church of England to be disestablished (a frequent media demand during August), the current blasphemy law would be unsustainable and would surely have to be abolished.

It is significant that the Community Relations Unit, although not formally responsible for the blasphemy law, is taking a close interest in it. Secularists need to consider carefully the implications of this: does it mean that the race relations groups are expected to set the agenda, and that if they shout loud enough they will be appeased?

The official indicated that Home Secretary Jack Straw "is very concerned about religious discrimination, especially (but not exclusively) against the Muslim community". She told me of her concern that Muslims feel excluded from the mainstream of society in a way that other minorities do not. She cited higher levels of disadvantage in the Muslim community (much of which has more recent origins in many different parts of the world) than other ethnic communities—for example, the Jews, who are better funded and organised, having long-established communities in this country.

Jews and Sikhs, unlike Muslims, are protected by the Race Relations Act 1976 which would be the likely template for any future religious discrimination law. My attention was drawn to a tabloid article criticising Tesco for responding to calls from Muslims to remove a cartoon pig printed on till slips. Staff in the Community Relations Unit had even more concern about the unpleasant tone of the article than the content.

While regretting that discrimination exists, I took the position that new legislation would probably cause more problems than it solved. We discussed the use of existing public order and damage legislation for these purposes and the official was interested to hear of a case of building workers being jailed for interrupting prayers.

But if legislation is forthcoming, it is important that we continue to register our views about how it should be drafted. A major requirement is that belief, rather than religion, is protected. This would cover atheists and humanists, among others. The British Humanist Association has actively promoted this position in governmental and parliamentary circles. The official seemed sympathetic to this view and was interested to hear about the case of a man in the West Country whose firm had been taken over by an American corporation which unilaterally changed all contracts of employment to include as the first item a commitment to honour God "in all we do".

I listed the areas of law which already embody religious privilege, noting that the Northern Ireland Constitutional Act 1973 prohibits religious discrimination in Northern Ireland legislation. The NSS, of course, is adamant that no new legislation should confer further religious privileges, and specifically that any religious discrimination law should not require employers to provide space or working time for religious observance. We would also

press for specific provisions in the law relating to religious broadcasting in public (for example, calls to prayer) and that even in religious schools, teachers (except where religious lessons are concerned) should not be discriminated against on grounds of belief.

I emphasised that any such legislation should specifically require that freedom of speech and expression should not be hindered by law. While agreeing with this in principle, the official felt that such a guarantee would not be embodied in this law. I intend to take further advice as to what demands we should make in this area to best meet our concerns.

There is also the danger of well-funded religious organisations using such legislation to persecute secular groups—for example, cults trying to eradicate awareness groups which expose their methods. The time such groups would have to spend defending themselves—not to mention having to bear unrecoverable legal costs—would annihilate most of them, even if they were found to have no case to answer. The official took note of this justification for making the application of the law in this area more difficult. I suggested requiring the Attorney General's permission for cases to be brought and also for intent to be proved (as is already the case for incitement to racial hatred).

We had a lively debate about the permissible locations for prayer. I suggested that the appropriate places were the home and places of worship, but this was considered to be unacceptable from a civil liberties perspective. We agreed that a pavement was an unacceptable place, and I suggested that this example demonstrated that any legislation would have to define what kind (if any) of religious observance was acceptable in public secular space and, if so, where. This issue has become particularly relevant in some secular universities where a religious group set up an informal but permanent place of worship. In order to explore further the possibilities, I took a railway station as an example and conceded that, personally, I would not object to quiet private prayer of individuals (or small family groups) of those waiting for trains, provided that it did not disturb others. On the other hand, I would object to an area of the station being permanently out of bounds to the public as it had been annexed for prayer.

I explained that the National Secular Society, while opposing religious privilege and promoting the rights of the non-religious, also sought to protect minorities from discrimination. The official was interested to learn more about the Society, about which she asked a number of questions.

We agreed to keep in touch, and I have particularly requested to be kept informed of any relevant developments, particularly in respect of any moves to adopt the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law.

You're telling us!

'Unity' and UFOs

BARBARA SMOKER (and the Editor) have cogently stated the argument for organisational independence within the freethought movement (August), so I'll confine myself to matters in correspondence concerning myself (ditto).

The churches have less reason for separateness than humanists, for they purport to worship the one true God with the benefit of a once-for-all revelation and divinely created intuition and intellect, whereas freethinkers approach all issues from individual perspectives. These entail different conclusions which would be intensified and not diminished by factitious "unity".

I'm sorry Robin Wood was offended by the use of his surname, which is familiar among peers, academics and writers where "Mr" is patronising.

One organisation would provide less choice and hence less attraction for new members, less publicity (whether honest or dishonest) and less scope for what he recognises in Scotland as a natural desire for "autonomy".

I am shocked that Colin McCall and Terry Sanderson appear not to believe in UFOs when I and all my friends have seen them.

It reminds me of the Apostle Paul's derision when he found the Athenians had erected an altar "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD".

I understand "UFO" means "unidentified flying object", but even if it meant "unidentifiable flying object" (such as a meteorite which had already disintegrated), I would still believe such a phenomenon to be possible.

The problem is when the Apostle Paul and the deluded or devious people who tell the banal, derivative accounts of their abductions or other "experiences" claim to *know* the reality behind their illusion or delusion.

DAVID TRIBE
New South Wales

Superficial approach?

COLIN McCALL appears to base his knowledge of UFO phenomena rather more on what melodramatic reports in the press have to say rather than any in-depth reading of the literature on the subject (August issue). Of course, he may prefer it that way as it takes some effort to read and understand the more technical material, and he may, for all I know, lack the expertise to properly evaluate what is being presented. This may readily explain his superficial approach and also why he imagines it was the late Carl Sagan who first decided there were parallels between alien abduction claims and Marian or angelic apparitions.

He sneers at a press description of one individual as being "America's leading UFO 'expert'" (about which many would differ) and expresses the opinion that a better description would have been "enthusiast". Perhaps the person concerned is an enthusiast, but since when has it been impossible to combine expertise and enthusiasm? For example, Aubrey Burl is an acknowledged expert on prehistoric stone circles but he is also enthusiastic about his field of

research, so does this detract from the value of his published works or in any way reduce the importance of his opinions? Taking Mr McCall's point at face value it would. Would Mr McCall call into question the late Dr Gordon Stein's enthusiasm for freethought and rationalism by asserting that this reduced the value of his bibliographical studies on Ingersoll?

Professor Carl Sagan, as Mr McCall *enthusiastically* claims, was certainly highly critical of the use of hypnotic regression, but, then, this is also true of many of those involved in investigating UFOs, as he could easily have found by reading some of the literature, perhaps commencing with the works of the late Professor Hynek, a professional astronomer, thus presumably being expertly qualified to assess "lights in the sky", whether flashing or not (and contrary to what Mr McCall observes, most cases do not involve flashing lights). But Hynek was also an enthusiast, so does this negate his expertise?

Now Mr McCall may feel those interested in the paranormal suffer from some sort of mental disorder which prevents them opting for a critical approach to the subject, for he concludes his polemic by calling for "a little more *Fortean Times* [the reference is to the journal of that name] scepticism". This suggests, at least to me, a lack of familiarity with that publication on his part, for, contrary to what he believes, *Fortean Times* frequently publishes articles highly critical of claims concerning paranormal phenomenon. The same critical approach was to be found among many who attended and participated in the "UnConvention" he refers to. Indeed, at one question-and-answer session on UFOs, most of the panel, and a considerable number who asked questions, were highly critical of claims made concerning UFOs, particularly when they were said to involve alien abductions. This contrasts markedly with the impression Mr McCall seeks to impart to his readers and so prompts the question as to whether he is allowing an ill-informed scepticism to take precedence over facts, simply to dramatise his article?

R W MORRELL
Nottingham

What's the problem?

AN ARTICLE in *New Scientist* (July 19, 1997) from Marcus Chown, of the Space Telescope Institute, calculates that 55 per cent of Sun-like stars have planets, based on the latest information.

It is accepted fact that even if we cannot crack the light barrier (and many believe we will) that we will reach the nearby stars in the foreseeable future. And allowing for time dilation effects, if we can get near enough to the speed of light, we can reach any point in the Universe in a single lifetime, though eons may have passed back on Earth.

So, what is the sceptics' problem? Do they believe that there are no other races anywhere in the incredibly huge Universe, or that despite the existence of star systems billions of years older than ours, none have reached our level of scientific expertise?

The 10 per cent of unexplained UFO sight-

ings were after examination by hardened sceptics, Mr McDowell (September letters). Having read your letter, I would not be surprised if your car wouldn't start because you forgot to put the key into the ignition. Pseudo-motoring, no doubt!

MICHAEL HILL
High Ongar

Modern myths?

GREAT credit is due to Keith Porteous Wood (April) and to Tony Akkermans and Georgina Coupland (July) and to e-mail correspondent Pavlov 333 (August) in their rational debunking of mythology, both ancient and modern.

Not so to Michael Hill (June and August), who seems to have swallowed a few modern myths relating to manufactured flying objects.

He asserts (June): "Some have had close encounters."

He states (August): "Many scientists believe that faster-than-light travel is possible."

Who are his so-called scientists?

In accordance with the Theory of Relativity, a velocity greater than the speed of light (186,000 miles per second) can never be attained in nature.

I know that the late Carl Sagan in his book *Cosmos* speculates that man may one day attempt inter-stellar space travel, approaching the speed of light, but the question of the supply of food, water and oxygen got no mention, and it's too late to ask him about it now.

Two oxygen generators—each resembling a cylinder 4.2 feet in length, 1.4 feet in diameter and weighing 253 pounds—are aboard the space station Mir, but they have to be replaced periodically from Earth by space shuttle.

E WAKEFIELD
Mansfield

Absence of proof

MICHAEL HILL (August) huffs and puffs but it will do him no good. His main stumbling block remains time travel. He says that many scientists believe in the possibility of travel faster than the speed of light. I am not aware of any reputable scientists who hold that opinion. Perhaps Mr Hill could enlighten us with some names?

In any case, such is the vastness of the Universe that it has been calculated that if there were a million civilisations in our galaxy capable of sending out one spaceship annually, we could expect to be visited only once in 10,000 years. Compare that to the millions of sightings in the last 50 years and they will be recognised for the nonsense they are.

UFO investigations generally tend to find explanations for all but two or three per cent of sightings and these, too, no doubt, would be cleared up if all the facts were known. I recently heard a strange noise under my floorboards. I did not think it was an alien. It turned out to be a squirrel. UFOs are not coming from Outer

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You're telling us!

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Space but from the inner space between people's ears.

I fear Mr. Hill and his fellow believers are doomed to go through life increasingly anxious in the face of absence of proof for their pet theory. A never-ending litany of faint, receding lights, fuzzy pictures on the horizon, wild ramblings from deluded witnesses, constant exposures of fakes and misguided sightings are bound to get him down. I earnestly counsel him, before it is too late, to read a good book on the subject such as *UFOs Explained* by Philip Klass. This will help him to put this regrettable episode behind him and to move on to a less frustrating hobby, such as train spotting.

TONY AKKERMANS
Leeds

Mental illness

KEITH ACKERMANN'S letter and Terry Sanderson on "Why Lourdes makes me sick" (both September issue) raise some interesting points:

i. We are all products of our shared human gene pool—home to some pretty defective material.

ii. Our existence from conception to death is a random occurrence. We become what we are as an accident of genes, time, location, parents and surroundings. Nothing else.

iii. Animal instincts such as hate, fear, love, spite, desire for revenge, the sex impulse, being the most powerful, form the background to most human activities and emotions. "Giving way to temptation" occurs when these are allowed to take control in the wrong situation.

iv. The law as it stands on punishment is still tainted by the religious premise that some are outside the category mentioned in ii, have a divine right to rule, make laws and impose punishment on those who break them.

v. There is an underlying flawed concept: Namely that we all have control over our lives and can be held responsible at law for our personal actions. For many this is simply untrue. It becomes evident all too often later. How many potential paedophiles, rapists and murderers we pass in the street every day are really capable of autonomous long-term control, especially with the free availability of alcohol and drugs? Just why are such people released so often—free to rape, molest children or even murder, then face another brutal beating when finally caught and readmitted to prison?

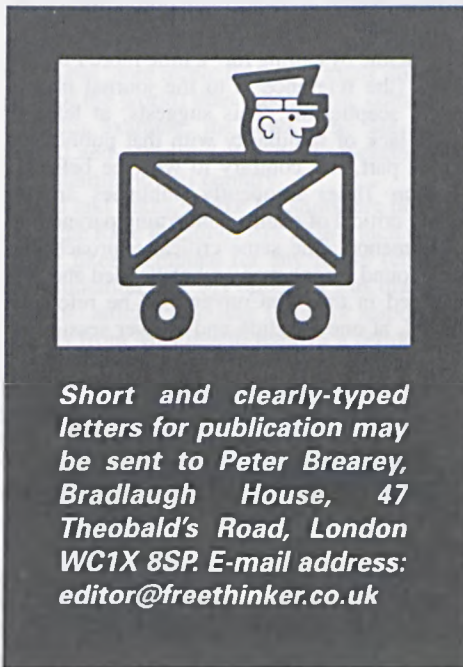
All enjoy freedom—until they offend, and this can be after a rape or murder. The press waxes fat, and a custodial sentence follows and in many cases unofficial punishment of the most brutal kind, against any civilised code of behaviour. Clearly this is a fundamental flaw isn't it? As "RS" of Ashworth Special Hospital put it recently in a letter to *The Freethinker*: "We have defective brains".

As we leave behind this shameful century of cults, fraud and corruption, surely our goal should be a system in which people who either feel or know they are a serious sexual or violent threat—or if they suspect the same of a workmate, friend or relative—can approach profes-

sionals with a view to effecting a treatment, perhaps with inhibiting drugs to control their behaviour, for their own protection and that of everybody else. Wouldn't this prevent their victims' and their families' misery and save lives too? All too often the warning signs are there well before the atrocity is committed. All too often they are ignored—until it's too late.

Just how should we as secular humanists address the problems of all these offenders in our midst—the Sutcliffes, Neilsens, and the Wests of the world? Should we "beetle along in the age of insects" with the uninformed public? Incidentally, many murderers have claimed over the decades that they heard God's voice commanding them to kill! Sounds more a case of mental illness than of "demonic possession"—warranting token punishment to accommodate the public base instinct for revenge and the media's obsession to boost circulation figures—doesn't it? By the way, have any of these people successfully tried Lourdes for a cure?

DAVID STERRETT
Forest Hill



Insulting to many

KEITH ACKERMANN (September letters) is correct in claiming that Tony Blair, or indeed anyone else, "insults" us when they try to tell us, without our seeking help or advice, how to run our own lives.

But then, having thrust his version of history upon us which displays, to say the least, considerable naivete he insults a great many men and women by presuming to tell them that they have lived "intolerable prison" lives of "marriage-for-life."

I had always understood that freethinkers did not pry into what consenting adults do in private or make hurtful comment on how other intelligent humans prefer to live their lives. For it matters not one jot how "marriage was invented"; it is, in fact, an ancient and remains a current institution that many freely enter and should be accepted as such even if it should

become a minority's preference. It, and those who choose to enter it, should not be the subject of abuse from anyone.

R E ISON
Farnham Royal

Good God?

THE Page 2 article "Father, Son, and Single Mum" in the September issue left out one argument for raising the status of the BVM.

At the moment, when Christians defend the existence of evil in a world made by their good and omnipotent god, they tend to be forced back to the argument that free will necessarily means giving human beings the right to be able to choose the evil option.

However, the Catholics' dogma of the Immaculate Conception requires them to believe that, from the very moment of her conception, the BVM was, by the singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, kept free from all stain of Original Sin. In other words, one human being did have free will but was also given the gift of always, and freely, choosing not to do evil.

Now, if their God could do that for one human being, how can they explain why he did not do it for the rest of us? If we all freely chose the good option, there would presumably be a lot less pain and suffering in the world: surely a good God would want that, and an omnipotent one would be able to achieve it?

Could not deifying the BVM strike the Pope as a way out of that dilemma? If she wasn't a human being, they don't need to believe that their God did give something to one human being denied to the rest of us.

ERIC THOMPSON
London

Argument

IT WAS with incredulity that I read that Mr Atkinson (September letters) questions the standard distinction between a valid argument and a sound one. A valid argument is one in which the conclusion follows from the premises quite irrespective of the truth of the premises. A sound argument is one that leads to a reliable conclusion because it is both valid and based upon premises that are true.

To be sound, an argument has to be valid but its validity in no way guarantees its soundness.

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

Dismay over Sir Ludovic

I READ with some dismay in your September issue that Sir Ludovic Kennedy had been invited to become an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society.

Kennedy's support for voluntary euthanasia is highly commendable and in line with the official Freethought/Humanist stance on this—but the same cannot be said for his staunch support for the hunting fraternity ("the unspeakable in

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You're telling us!

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full pursuit of the uneatable", as Oscar Wilde so aptly described them).

Also, I seem to remember that Kennedy raised a few secularist eyebrows by announcing in a television programme about death that he wanted to be buried at sea *with the last rites being administered by a priest*, and that he judged (alongside the Roman Catholic convert John Selwyn Gummer) a "Best Sermon" competition organised by *The Times* and the College of Preachers.

Is this interest in blood sports and religion in keeping with the aims of the National Secular Society?

GEORGE BROADHEAD
Kenilworth

Royalty & religion

THE national reaction to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, prompts the observation that part of the obsession with royalty lies in its affinity with religion. The connection is with the belief in a being, one who effectively acts as a repository for the panoply of unresolved infantile conflicts—in this case, primarily of the idealised and wished-for variety.

There is the unquestioning belief in, adulation of, and subjugation of self, to something above, something extraordinary. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that, no matter how seemingly small or inconsequential many of Diana's actions were, they became inflated with significance. As with religion, to question this supposed significance is to risk public censure and opprobrium. Thus all thought on the matter is stifled since we are dealing with an emotional investment rather than something that might be open to reasoned thought.

There is also the idea that such an authority can somehow affect our lives. Thus the headline of one newspaper article reads: "She could reach out and touch ordinary people just like us". Diana was perceived as an "ideal parent" watching over us; an angel of transmogrification. Witness the media construction of her persona as a force for good, as someone who, like Jesus, administered to the unfortunate in society. The idea being that no matter how brief the encounter, she had the power to "touch" people's lives and somehow transform them.

These observations are not intended to be exhaustive. In fact, once this line of thought is opened up, the parallels with religion appear legion. Doubtless, other readers will be able to furnish insights of their own.

It remains now to be seen what becomes of her. It may be that we are confronted with a potential future saint, canonised in the public mind.

One conclusion I draw from this is that one should not underestimate the potential for change of religious ideas and emotions. While a professed belief in God may be declining in this country, it is being replaced by its secular representation in the form of the fixation with Royalty. With the story of Diana, religious sentiments have found their transformation.

ANTHONY MURPHY
Uxbridge

Paths of glory

AFTER all the fulsome flattery of the past weeks, a note of sober realism from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" will perhaps redress the balance:

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour,
The paths of glory lead but to the grave ...*

*Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or flattery soothe the dull cold ear of death?*

Nothing in these lines about "Mansions in the Sky" for the redeemed or "fiery Hell" for the damned—just the common-sense attitude that if some of us refuse to "bow the knee at the name of Jesus", we all, regardless of belief, certainly eventually bow to death!

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

A load of cojones

WITH the growth of quasi-religious suicide cults such as the Solar Temple and the Heaven's Gate Church, you just can't help wondering what is said at the initial induction meeting between cultists and applicants for membership. Perhaps a typical interview might go something like this:

Applicant: So run that past me again to see if I've got this right. You want me to sign over all my worldly wealth to your organisation, have my testicles surgically removed and then commit suicide?

Cultist: Yep!

Applicant: Can't I just put 50p on the collection plate?

Cultist: Nope!

Applicant: Look, I'll bring in a jar of jam for the Harvest Festival—and that's my final offer!

Cultist: Sorry, no deal! It's yer testicles or nothing!

JOHN EVERS
Worcester Park

Fine read from cover-to-cover

I AM a new member of the National Secular Society and subscriber to *The Freethinker*. I want to say how much I thoroughly applaud your objectives and what a fine read your magazine is. I read every issue from cover-to-cover. No other magazine that comes through my door gets that kind of treatment.

Your magazine is so refreshing for the intellect after a life surrounded by religious propaganda and coercion from every quarter of the media and public life. I particularly like the column "Ask The Parson" by Karl Heath and I may well get round to doing just that. Your magazine is a comfort in my old age!

DAVID BROUGHTON
Isle of Wight

Shame on you, Scotsman!

THE *SCOTSMAN* newspaper runs a weekly caption competition in which readers are asked to supply humorous captions for a photograph. Recently the photograph featured the Pope, and this led to letters from several people who claimed to be deeply offended by the very idea. Not surprising, you may think—but the letters were followed by an abject apology from the Editor, effectively rapping his staff over the knuckles for running the photograph, and cancelling that particular competition. This prompted me to write the following letter:

I wish to express my profound regret and dismay that the Editor of The Scotsman should feel it necessary to express his profound regret and dismay at the Mind Games photo and caption featuring the Pope. If I ardently believe that Santa really comes down the chimney on Christmas Eve or that fairies live at the bottom of my garden or that the earth is flat, a great many people would have a bit of fun at my expense, but I doubt that the Editor of The Scotsman would print an apology for my hurt feelings. Why should religious beliefs on a par with my examples be given special treatment? At a time when, rather than its repeal, there is a possibility of an extension of the blasphemy law, it ill behoves a newspaper editor to encourage those who would stifle free speech on matters religious.

The letter was not printed, and in fact another apology was printed in place of the cancelled competition. I feel this is an indication of the sort of attitude that would increasingly come to the fore if religious individuals and groups were to be encouraged by any extension of the blasphemy law. I shall be writing to my MP urging repeal rather than extension, and I would encourage all readers of *The Freethinker* to do likewise.

DAVID C KIRKLAND
Edinburgh

Labour's record

I CANNOT understand Mat Coward's August issue comment that "we've won the election." Previous Labour Governments have imprisoned strikers and used troops to break strikes. They have enacted racist immigration laws, caused a winter of discontent with a pay freeze, and now want to charge for higher education.

The once-hated Conservative Government under Edward Heath now seems quite liberal compared with Tony Blair's anti-working class ideas.

The cynical comment that having won the election "we don't have to behave ourselves any more" is merely dishonest.

CARL PINEL
Stockport

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, November 2, 4.30 pm: Shelley Frank: *Citizens' Advocacy—a Voice for People with Learning Disabilities*. 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. October 14 at The Friends Meeting House, 289 High Street Berkhamstead: Les Edwards: *The Total Eclipse of the Sun in India, 1995*. November 6 at Wendover Library, High Street: Nicolas Walter on aspects of his life and work as a Humanist.

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

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

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, October 16, 7.30 pm: Public Meeting.

Devon Humanists: Information: Christine Lavery, 5 Prospect Garden, off Blackboy Road, Exeter (01392 56600).

Ealing Humanists: Information: Derek Hill 0181 422 4956 or Charles Rudd 0181 904 6599.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB; 01926 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Street, London WC1 (Library, 1st floor). October 10: Terry Sanderson: *Coming Out*.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: NI 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*. December meeting changed to Paul Mann: *The Family Today—Robust or Rotten?*

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622250 or 0116 241 4060.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell, 99 Ravensbourne Park, London SE6 4YA (0181 690 4645). Meetings at Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6, 8pm. October 30: Mr Babu (International Humanist and Ethical Union): *International Humanism*.

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. October 8 (fifth anniversary meeting): Daniel O'Hara. November 12: *Humanist Ceremonies*. December 10: Derek Chatteron: *A Secular View of the Bible*.

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 Chaaney, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN; 01362 820982. Meets at Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich, 7.30 pm. October 16: Robert Ashby: *Humanism*. November 20: Chris Hull: *OXFAM*. January 15: John Hemsley: *Counselling*. February 19: Vince Chaaney: *Humanist Weddings*. Winter Solstice Party at 21 Hellesdon Road, Norwich, on December 18.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, November 5, 8 pm: Lecture and demonstration by Tony Youens: *Psychic Fraud and Deception*. Saturday, November 15, 10 am to 5 pm: Literature and information stall at Sheffield Peace Fair, Town Hall, Barker's Pool. Wednesday, December 3, 7.30 pm for 8 pm: Annual Dinner, Three Cranes Hotel; guest speaker: Peter Brearey, Editor of *The Freethinker*. 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).

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Full list of lectures and Sunday concerts: 0171 831 7723. Sunday, October 12, 11 am, in Library (1st floor): NSS General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood: *A Law Against Religious Discrimination?*

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

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

National Secular Society

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

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

A presentation to past-President Barbara Smoker will take place at the AGM.

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