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Making Contact with Jodie

Star rejects God-belief

Alison Rowland and Peter Brearey
– Pages 2 and 3

★ Film star Jodie Foster – who is perhaps best known for her Oscar-winning role in *The Silence of the Lambs* – in a scene from 20th Century Fox's recent release, *Contact*, based on Carl Sagan's novel of the same name.

★ *Contact* is about a radio astronomer (Foster), who has dedicated her life to searching for clues to life beyond Earth.

★ In a recent interview, Jodie said she thought there was a possibility that extra-terrestrials existed, but added: "There was absolutely never a time that I believed in God or practised a religion."

Up Front

Jodie's one of our own

OSCAR-winning film star Jodie Foster—*The Accused*, *The Silence of the Lambs*—is one of us. She is a freethinker. And unlike those spin-doctored celebrities who remain coy about their atheism, she makes no bones about it.

I suspect that most readers of *The Freethinker* are not given to hero-worship, but consider: when a person of such immense popularity comes out as a non-believer, the message received by the fans is: *It's all right to be an atheist—Jodie says so*. It might make some question the superstitious nonsense

imposed by their parents and teachers and the general media. Those who are already harbouring doubts could be pushed off the fence—over to our side.

Whether we like it or not, this sort of thing does happen—think of how young people ape the dress fashions, the food and drink fads, the vocabularies, of their idols.

At a press conference to launch *Contact*—reviewed for us by Alison Rowland on Page 3—Jodie Foster declared her unbelief and also paid tribute to fellow-rationalist Carl Sagan, upon whose 1985 novel the film is based: “He was such an extraordinary man ... He was so romantic and so passionate and so enthusiastic and so in love with what he did and the questions that he had. To me, that was the greatest inspiration—watching somebody glow about intellectual discovery. People say, ‘What do you base your character on?’ and I’ve tried to figure out who she resembles in some ways, and I just keep coming back to Carl ...”

Foster’s *Contact* character, Ellie, is a radio astronomer who has dedicated her life to searching for clues to life beyond Earth. Over the years, she remains obsessed, despite ridicule from peers, and she is rewarded when she discovers a message coming from a planet far, far away ...

Foster prepared for Ellie by immersing herself in science: “I really had to spend six months reading all the baby science books and really getting to understand the science of the movie.”

Though Foster is sceptical about the authenticity of UFOs, she does believe in the existence of extraterrestrial life: “We would all be foolish to believe that this small speck that we inhabit is the only possible life out there. I mean, the numbers just aren’t with that idea at all. But I certainly have no idea what that means. I don’t think I could even imagine what that means.”

In her report of the press conference, Betsy Pickle, *Knoxville News-Sentinel* film critic, stated unequivocally: “Like Ellie in the movie, Foster doesn’t believe in a supreme spiritual being.”

“You get into these really good questions with this, don’t you?” the star responded when asked if she believed in God. “I think that’s the thing that I love the most about this movie is that you go home or you go to a coffee shop with your friends and suddenly it sparks big

questions about the meaning of life and things that you don’t usually dwell on in normal, everyday life. So, of course, we had these conversations on the set.”

While she respects religious belief, and has spent a lot of time studying it, Jodie Foster says: “As far as in my own life, I only have questions. Just as the character says in the movie, as a scientist, I’d have to say that there is no evidence ...”

She says there was “absolutely never” a time that she believed in God or practised a religion: “It’s only as I got older that I really got interested in it. I didn’t have any religious background. My mother had a lot of religious background; my brothers and sisters did. But for some reason, I was the last in the family, and it was the ‘60s, and it just didn’t trickle down.

“The only church I’d ever been into, I think, the only service that I’ve ever attended was the cathedral of the Vatican—because you went to Rome, and you want to go in. And I think I’ve been to Notre Dame a few times because it’s really pretty.”

HAPPILY, Jodie Foster is still with us, and will doubtless go on to act in and direct many more excellent movies. Sadly, another of our allies from the world of drama has died: Nobel Literature laureate Dario Fo.

Fo’s best-known work is *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), a farce based on the case of railway worker Giuseppe Pinelli, who “fell” from a Milan police station window while being interrogated with that zeal which bobbies throughout the world adopt when dealing with enemies of the ruling-class. He also wrote *Can’t Pay, Won’t Pay!* (1974), which uses laughter as a weapon in support of civil disobedience.

His one-man show *Mistero Buffo* had much to say about religion—one part of it recording the mob’s attitude to the Lazarus miracle, with wagers being laid on whether Our Lord would or would not succeed in raising the dead.

I imagine that of all the comment made about the piece, Dario Fo would be most proud of the Vatican’s observation: “It is the most blasphemous show in the history of television”. *Mistero Buffo* was seen in London in 1983; isn’t it time we had a showing on Channel 4?

Peter Brearey

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David Starkey for GALHA dinner

ATHEIST academic and media pundit Dr David Starkey will be guest-of-honour and after-dinner speaker at the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association’s Winter Solstice Dinner, which is to be held on December 14 at London Lighthouse.

Dr Starkey lectures in international history at the London School of Economics and Science, and is perhaps best known for his acerbic wit and trenchant criticism of religion on BBC Radio 4’s *Moral Maze*. He has his own weekly programme on Talk Radio. A frequent TV commentator on constitutional issues—he was much in demand during the controversy surrounding the death of

Princess Diana—Dr Starkey is a former Chairman of the Gay Tory group, Torche.

He has been described as “the rudest man in Britain” and “the thinking man’s Alf Garnett”. A flavour of his attitude towards religion was given in a recent issue of *The Sunday Telegraph*: “My first boyfriend called himself a High Church atheist. I remember going with him to a church with altars crammed with statues and crosses; four Knights of Malta with purple socks. I’d like to have taken a sledgehammer to it all.”

The dinner is open to non-members of GALHA. Details from Mr George Broadhead, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2HB; telephone 01926 858450.



MISSING THE POINT OF CONTACT

A major new film reviewed by Alison Rowland

EACH week, the broadsheet film reviewers cry out for new high-brow films with excellent content, scripts and acting. They set impossibly high standards, yet sometimes fall foul of their own narrow tastes, championing movies that last a week at most cinemas and then are relegated to the mists of time. In view of this, it's perhaps not such a tragedy that they have universally misunderstood the nature of a thought-provoking and well-crafted big-budget American film, whose heroine is a devout rationalist and atheist and whose subject touches on the "great" questions in the relationship between religion and science and the boundaries between the two.

Granted, the film *Contact* has no great sex scenes and only about 20 minutes of "action", but it does have Jodie Foster, who recently broke another great taboo by "coming out" as a lesbian. Perhaps this put her in an ideal position to be cast as a side-lined scientist who spends years listening for sounds of intelligent life on other planets, refusing to have her head turned by even the most blue-eyed of supporting men, who is one day rewarded by a message from Vega, the initial "contact" of the title. Based on the novel by the late Carl Sagan, the film charts her efforts to have the messages taken seriously and to be the first one to make contact with the force which sent them.

Well, I hear you seasoned film-goers cry, who needs another alien movie? Haven't *Independence Day*, *Mars Attacks*, *Men in Black* and the like really said it all? Not really, because this is that rare commodity—a film that insists you take your brain to the cinema with you and use it. It treats the issue of intelligent life on other planets in its true context: as a possibility, but one which is still regarded as being on the margins of accepted scientific fact. The final message of the film is in fact that the boundaries of science share a kinship with religious faith: experiences which cannot be independently verified are questionable.

They should not be dismissed, but further attempts to prove them should be made. The challenge to "prove it" is one that science tries to meet where religion cannot, but only

after painstaking and meticulous repetition and with the scorn of the scientific "establishment" facing many researchers into borderline issues.

We get an early inkling that Ellie (Foster) will not be comforted by the traditional fatalism of religion when, after the death of her father, the nine-year-old is told by the priest that death is often an inexplicable act of God. "I should have kept some medicine in the downstairs bathroom", says Ellie, "then I could have gotten to it sooner." Later, she asks the priest who is to become the closest spiritual advisor to the President of the US (an unwitting cameo role for Bill Clinton) if his conversion experience was not something he had because his mind "needed to experience it". An unusual snippet of pillow-talk this, but one which resonates when later, at the selection of candidates for the ultimate mission to visit intelligent life on other planets, Ellie's chances are scuppered by the same priest asking directly if she believes in God, a clear case of religious discrimination. The selection committee admits that it cannot face sending someone whose views are not in line with the "95 per cent of the population who believe in some kind of supreme being." One thinks straight away—this could only be America, but of course, one is wrong. Bigotry knows no international borders.

She gets to go though, largely due to the efforts of a God-like benefactor, played by John Hurt, whose extreme wealth enables him to overcome the usual laws of nature—getting him, for instance, a place aboard the MIR space-station in an attempt to cheat the cancer he suffers from devouring his tissue. His place in the plot is made ambiguous: is he cruel or kind, a symbolic God of the Old or New Testament? He's only a minor character, but the issues he raises are complex: it's that meaty a film!

The film abounds, amid these serious issues, with some lovely touches of irony. The top-level security advisor, for instance, who spouts the old humbug of "if they're so intelligent why don't they speak English?" whose command of the universal language of maths turns out not to extend to knowing what a prime number is. And the charismatic religious leader who presents the message to his followers as a sign that they need to turn to God, while quietly undertaking a plot to sab-

otage the mission itself.

Strange how the critics missed all this. One could almost start to think like a conspiracy-theorist. Matthew Sweet in the *Independent on Sunday*, for instance, describes it as "as compromising as a collaboration between Richard Dawkins and Dana", which at least suggests that the connection between religion, politics and science made some impression upon him. I have to suspect that he was visiting the toilets when Ellie meets what looks like her dead father after her spectacular journey through a few wormholes. Sweet comments that her quest is portrayed as "a search for Dad, God or as it turns out, the Mekon posing as both." Actually "Dad" is quite open about the fact that he is a facsimile culled from Ellie's subconscious, created so that her encounter with alien life would not prove too heart-stoppingly alarming (and incidentally, the same theory is often used to explain near-death experiences, with which Ellie's trip forms an interesting parallel). A nice touch, I thought, from the only sci-fi film which convincingly portrayed its inter-galactic traveller as as desperate to go as she was ultimately terrified. Time-travelling, one feels, should appear a bit less everyday than a trip to the supermarket.

The only way to really experience anything is to go yourself, whether it's journeying to the ends of the universe or visiting the local multiplex, so humanist, atheist, rationalist, or whatever you choose to call yourself, you ought to be going to make your own mind up. A TV reviewer today said it would be much more preferable to go and see *Close Encounters*, which ironically was re-released the same weekend. I say—go to both: *Close Encounters* first, to see the first real movie that launched the debate about how individuals would feel about a scientific issue which would affect us all, then *Contact*, to see what a largely unbiased and rational mind has to say about the issue 20 years on. You'll see real progress which represents a healthy leap in scientific and moral understanding, culminating in a film which is not afraid to raise the problem areas in the conflict between two understandings of the word "truth". A word of advice: make sure you are not alone, because you'll need someone to argue with afterwards.



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Now they're all 'playing silly b***ers'

IT WAS good to see two London *Evening Standard* journalists—Victor Lewis-Smith on July 30 and John Diamond on August 2—deploring the publicity given to paranormal stories in the press and on television. Lewis-Smith pointed out that, in the Paul McKenna programmes, “anything any contributor said was credulously accepted, with no attempt to ascertain whether any of them might be fools or frauds”. And at a time when there is a great need for scientific information, anti-science is flooding our media, said John Diamond: “Papers across the intellectual gamut routinely write about ghosts and poltergeists, spiritualists and mediums, flying saucers and spoon-benders as if there is no question but that these are genuine, if not fully understood, phenomena.”

The *Daily Mail* is one of the front runners in the general rush for the occult. The day before Diamond's criticism, it had interviewed a 78-year-old retired Anglican vicar who has seen “countless spirits” and believes that “almost every home has at least one ghostly resident”.

Naturally—or should I say supernaturally?—there were spooky stories following the death of Princess Diana and the *Mail* (September 12) was not one to miss them. Mourners who queued to sign books of condolence at St James's Palace saw “a mysterious apparition”—Diana's face in the background of a portrait of Charles I. New-born baby Max Boneham “seemed to sense something was happening when he came into the world” on Saturday, September 6, at 12.05 pm. “Accordingly, he waited one whole minute before uttering his first cry”. His own silent tribute, you might say. Mum and child therefore got their pictures in the paper.

And there had to be a psychic who had foreseen the fatal accident though, unfortunately for Diana and Dodi, it was not Rita Rogers, whom they had flown 160 miles to see in August, specifically to “know” their future. They should have chosen Betty Palko, especially as her link with the beyond is none other than the late Earl Spencer who, we learn now, asked Betty to tell his daughter to stop playing “silly b***ers”. By her own account, however, even this clairvoyant didn't get it quite right. When she heard that the car accident had killed Dodi, she exclaimed: “Thank

God Diana's all right!”.

Now for the good news. Carlton Television has no plans to renew Paul McKenna's contract because his ratings are poor. Which almost restores one's faith in the common sense of the British public.

An 'ology' too far?

THE University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology must have changed a great deal since I was there. As far as I recall, it had no lecturer in market research like Dr Vince Mitchell in those far-off days. And, judging by a report in the *Daily Mail* (September 17), it was none the worse for it.

He and his team have been studying the latest General Housekeeping Survey on smoking, drinking and leisure, compiled by the Office of National Statistics, and have found “significant differences in behaviour across the zodiac signs”. Now it's likely they'd find differences of behaviour across any human spectrum, but Dr Mitchell claimed that his analyses “show that astrology does have a significant and sometimes predictable effect on behaviour in the leisure, tobacco and drinks market.” And he “hoped that this study will act as a springboard for future research using more accurate and detailed astrology frameworks”.

His view was echoed by the *Daily Mail* astrologer, Jonathan Cainer, but the latter turned out to be rather less impressed by the findings than the lecturer. “Ariens would run a mile rather than fill in forms”, Cainer commented. And Gemini's “just tell a few lies and half-truths almost deliberately to confuse people”. Hm, better think again, then, Dr Mitchell.

Rambling on about Jehovah

ANOTHER academic—no less a one than the Professor of Philosophy at the University of St Andrews, John Haldane—believes that God is the best companion on a country walk. This may not be much of a compliment to his friends, but let's not quibble over that. “The contemporary desire for walking in the landscape ... often expresses a spiritual sensibility”, he wrote in *The Times* (August 30), but “it generally lacks focus”.

“The passing countryside seems as if we and it were made for one another,” he continued, “yet that thought is idle without a

belief in creation”. But “seems” is the operative word here. To Professor Haldane, as to St Thomas Aquinas, St Francis and Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom he cites, it may indeed *seem* as though humans and the countryside were made for one another, but this is a pre-evolutionary concept, excusable perhaps to the first two but certainly not to a professor of philosophy today. It is also a “fair-weather” view. I can't think that John Haldane could declare that humans and nature were “made for one another” in an earthquake, a hurricane or an avalanche.

Arson about in Zion ...

THE last thing you would expect one Israeli Jew to shout at another is “It's too bad they didn't burn you at Auschwitz”. Such, however, is the hatred that Orthodox Jews feel towards Reform Jews like Chana Sorek, who lives in the town of Mevasseret Zion, to the west of Jerusalem. Another told her: “You sell pork in the shopping mall. We'll burn the shopping mall and we'll burn you, too” (*The Independent*, September 13).

Not an idle threat; although the immediate target proved to be a kindergarten run by a fellow Reform Jew, Aliza Landau. Mrs Landau was loath to believe that the burning was deliberate until the police showed her the evidence of arson. And no one doubts that Orthodox Jews were behind it.

Nor is the hatred confined to the rank-and-file. Yisrael Lau, Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazi (Jews of European origin) has compared Reform Jews to the suicide bombers of Islamic Jihad. You'll note that anti-Semitism is rife in Israel.

Out of the mouths ...

FINALLY, I must come to the defence of the ghost that Vicki and James Kewley say “took over” their three-year-old daughter Kimberley. It just won't do to blame Kimberley's bad language on a man who, the child said, “walked through her closed bedroom door and sat on her bed at nights”. If Kimberley shouts “F*** off”, she's heard some human being say it.

And, Mrs Kewley, you can tell that to Gordon Stott, who recounted your “exclusive” story in *The People* on September 14.



RIGHT UP OUR STREET!

■ On Secularist business in Bradford, Gordon Sinclair, Secretary of Sheffield Humanist Society, Peter Brearey, Editor of *The Freethinker*, and former Editor Bill McIlroy, made an interesting discovery – a terrace in Wibsey named after Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891), founder of the National Secular Society and Liberal MP for Northampton.

■ Any reader with information on how the notorious atheist and birth control pioneer came to be so honoured is asked to enlighten us.

(Photograph Pam Brearey)

News of their World

monitored by
BILL McILROY

THERE was a time when nuns were regarded as quasi-divine beings. Not any longer—not even in the church-ridden Republic of Ireland.

Louis Lentin's television documentary about the Sisters of Mercy opened many eyes to the reality of the caring, self-sacrificing image of the Brides of Christ. It attracted a worldwide response from men and women who, as children, suffered at the hands of bewimpled terrorists in the order's orphanages.

Last month the High Court in Dublin delivered a hammer blow to the order. It awarded £20,000 and costs to Myles and Christina Howe whose baby daughter, Marion, died more than 40 years ago.

It was in 1955 that Marion, then 11 months old, was temporarily placed with the Sisters of Mercy at their Goldenbridge orphanage. Mrs Howe, who had four other children, was recovering from an illness and her husband was working in England. A hospital almoner said she could arrange for Marion's admission to Goldenbridge where "she would be well cared for by the nuns."

Four days after her arrival at Goldenbridge, Marion Howe was taken to a hospital where she died. Mrs Howe was not informed by the nuns that her child was seriously ill or that she had died. She was told of Marion's death by neighbours.

The cause of Marion Howe's death was given as "acute dysentery infection". But there was no reference to the burns on her legs. The parents' pleas to the authorities for an inquiry were ignored.

Mrs Howe recalled that her husband went to the mortuary where the body lay. He unwrapped the bandages and saw that both legs were, as a hospital sister had said, badly burned.

The Howes went to the Goldenbridge orphanage, seeking an explanation of Marion's death.

Mrs Howe said: "We knocked on the door. Sister Xaviera opened the door and looked at us. I said, 'What did you do to my baby?' She turned around and said 'It was only a baby'.

"She had no sympathy, no compassion. She just closed the door and we walked off."

The Sisters of Mercy made a statement to the High Court expressing sorrow over Marion's death and regretting "if there was any lack of courtesy or compassion at that time."

An *Irish Times* editorial declared it "quite breathtaking" that what happened to baby Howe should be equated with a "lack of courtesy and compassion", adding: "It is breathtaking that the acts of cruelty and bullying recounted by many former inmates of Sisters of Mercy orphanages, here and abroad, could be explained away by a phrase—which has about it the ring of a public relations agency."

The Roman Catholic weekly *Universe* ("Britain's best-selling religious newspaper"), every issue of which is stuffed with "pro-life" propaganda, devoted six column inches to the Howe case.

AS LEADER of the Tory pack, William Hague is in an unenviable position.

Holding together a party of squabbling xenophobes and sleazebags—described by Ken Clarke, former Tory Cabinet minister, as "clinically and legally insane"—is a daunting enough task. To make matters worse, an aspect of Mr Hague's private life has caught the attention of bishops and assorted evangelicals. He and his fiancée are "living in sin."

The Bishop of Chester is one who does not approve. "If marriage is the ideal", he declares, "then anything short of it must in one degree or another be regarded as sinful."

Describing the Tory Party as "an absolute shambles", the very conservative and very low

Anglican, the Rev Tony Higton, of Action for Biblical Witness to our Nation, added: "As for being the party of the family, I think we would take Mr Hague more seriously if he wasn't cohabiting with his fiancée. I find that rather hypocritical."

Baroness Thatcher's opinion of the current Tory leader's sleeping arrangements may be gauged by her recent speech to the International Conservative Congress in Washington.

"Democratic government can only work with a God-fearing nation", she proclaimed. "We have a duty to fight the attack on the family that threatens the West at its foundations."

Watch out for that handbag, William!

LONDON solicitor Lewis Ruskin pleaded guilty at Southwark Crown Court to nine charges of false accounting, plundering his clients' accounts of £218,000.

His victims included a young girl who suffered brain damage at birth. Another was a construction worker who had been seriously injured in a building-site accident.

Judge Bathurst-Norman told Ruskin: "Words fail me to describe your conduct towards those who have already suffered injury, who are among the more vulnerable members of society."

Sentence of 18 months' imprisonment was brought forward a day to avoid clashing with the Jewish New Year. The court was told that Ruskin was "a deeply religious man who is highly regarded by his local rabbi."

Sceptical voice at Sheffield

PRETENDING to have special gifts and supernatural powers, psychics exploit irrationality and gullibility. Their fraudulent claims are promoted in the press and on radio and television. The paranormal industry is an extremely lucrative one, which will no doubt expand as the Millennium approaches.

But sceptical voices are raised from time-to-time. Tony Youens, an experienced debunker of psychic fraudsters, is giving a lecture and

demonstration arranged by Sheffield Humanist Society. He says: "I explain why we should all be highly sceptical of those claiming supernatural powers. All my effects are achieved by trickery. I have no paranormal or psychic abilities whatsoever. But, then, I don't know anybody who has."

Northern readers of *The Freethinker* might note that the Youens meeting will be held at The Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield, on Wednesday, November 5, at 8 pm. All are invited.

'With all his faults, I can't help liking Jack London'

JACK LONDON was a commercial writer. From the beginning he wrote for money, at first to escape from poverty, subsequently to keep up a luxurious lifestyle, while meeting family obligations. He habitually produced 1,000 words a day and published 40 books in 16 years. But he preferred living to writing, and he lived an exciting, adventurous life, which is very well documented by Alex Kershaw, with illustrations and maps of two remarkable travels: to the Klondike during the Gold Rush and to the South Seas in the Snark with his second wife Charmian.

London was born—unwanted—in San Francisco on January 12, 1876, to William Chaney and Flora Wellman, who ran an “astrology parlour”. Chaney left Flora and, a few months later, she married John London, a Civil War veteran and widower with two young daughters, Eliza and Ida. Although he was her only child, Flora showed little or no affection for Jack and he was looked after by Eliza who, as Kershaw says, continued to act as a surrogate mother for the rest of his life, and superintended his ranch until she died in 1939.

As a boy, Jack was frightened by the seances held by his spiritualist mother but, after a lifetime condemning spiritualism, this atheist and “material monist” embraced it in his closing years, following a series of tragedies and disasters.

Leaving school at 14, Jack worked in a “hell hole” of a canning factory in Oakland, California, while educating himself at the local library. Within the year he quit the factory to become an oyster pirate; then switched sides to the Fish Patrol and, after a spell riding the rails, signed on a sealer heading for the Bering Sea, an experience he later drew on for *The Sea*

Jack London: A Life by Alex Kershaw. HarperCollins, £20.

Review: COLIN McCALL

Wolf: “When I come to think it over”, he said in later life, “I realise ... that I have never had a boyhood”.

After further labours in a jute mill and shovelling coal at a power plant, he declared himself finished with wage slavery. He joined a march of unemployed men; went hungry, was jailed as a vagrant and (as he tells us in *John Barleycorn*) “discovered that I was a socialist”. So he remained all his life, although he was to leave the Socialist Party in 1916 “because of its lack of fire and fight, and its loss of emphasis upon the class struggle.” As “the whole trend of Socialism in the United States during recent years has been one of peaceableness and compromise, I find that my mind refuses further sanction of my remaining a party member. Hence my resignation.”

Jack London was 21 when he read about the discovery of gold in the Klondike, and he borrowed money to join hundreds of others on a ship to Alaska. Alex Kershaw describes the hardships Jack and his fellows endured in the hopeless quest for fortune—back-breaking climbs, river rapids and whirlpools, freezing cold, scurvy. Boredom, too, but Jack had books—Darwin, Spencer, Haeckel, Marx and Milton among them. And many of his own books arose out of the experience. “It was in the Klondike that I found myself”, he wrote later. “There nobody talks. Everybody thinks. You get your perspective. I got mine.”

Six months after his return, a local magazine had printed his first Alaskan tale, followed by “The White Silence”, with its typical Jack London theme of “survival of the fittest”, in this

case at the expense of the mercy killing of an injured companion. There was a great demand for adventure stories at the time, and he was helping to satisfy it. He was giving readers what he called realism, fused with “the fancies and beauties of imagination”.

His assertion of the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon “race” was entirely fanciful. Indeed, it should have been shattered by his experience in Alaska, where the Inuit were far better fitted to survive the elements. His socialism was “not an ideal system devised for the happiness of all men; it is devised for the happiness of certain kindred races ... so as to give more strength to these certain kindred favoured races so that they may survive and inherit the earth to the extinction of the lesser, weaker races”, he admitted to a friend.

Of course he used “race” widely and wildly. When he visited the East End of London in 1902, he found the streets “filled with a new and different race of people, short of stature, and of wretched or beer-sodden appearance”. But he was, as Kershaw says, “genuinely outraged by what he saw in the backstreets of the centre of the greatest empire the world had ever known”. “I am made sick by this human hell-hole called the East End”, he wrote to a friend. And in the resulting book, *The People of the Abyss*, he declared: “If this is the best that civilisation can do for the human, then give us howling and naked savagery. Far better to be a people of the wilderness and desert, of the cave and the squatting place, than to be a people of the machine and the Abyss.”

The People of the Abyss was the book he loved most, he wrote later: “No other book of mine took so much of my young heart and tears as that study of the economic degradation of the poor”.

Both London’s young and older heart (he died at 40) were in the right place. His “generosity to strangers knew no bounds”, Kershaw tells us. “He sent cash to unknowns trying to finish books. He contributed to strike funds. An Australian woman who had lost both her sons received \$50 a month from him until he died.” And after returning from his voyage to the South Seas, he wanted his ranch (where he pioneered organic farming) to become a utopian community with first-class facilities for his workers and a school for their children. By then, though, it was too late. Smoking and drinking had taken their toll. He died of uraemia in 1916.

With all his faults, I can’t help liking Jack London. My affection goes back to childhood and early youth, when I first read *White Fang*, *The Call of the Wild* and the Klondike tales, though they abound in violence and Wolf, as he liked to be called, was grossly unfair to wolves. Later it was *Martin Eden*, his own favourite *The People of the Abyss*, and *The Iron Heel*, reprinted in paperback during the war years, that most impressed me. But, as he preferred living to writing, read this life by Alex Kershaw which, I learn from the dustcover, has been bought for filming in Hollywood by the director Michael Mann.

Sectarian schools opposed

THE Runnymede Trust demand for state funding for Muslim schools is rejected by freethinkers represented by such organisations as the National Secular Society and the Rationalist Press Association, a Press statement issued by Nicolas Walter (RPA) and Peter Brearey (NSS) said on October 22, the day the Trust published its report on the issue.

The statement went on: “We have opposed the use of public money to finance any kind of denominational education for more than a century. We accept that, with the present system of religious schools, the privileges long enjoyed by Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Jewish schools should in all justice be available to Muslim schools as well. But we have always objected to the system, ever since it was established in 1902, and always argued that it should be phased out as soon as possible.

“Moreover, we are particularly concerned about state support for schools which concentrate on religious education at the expense of secular subjects, which discriminate against girls, which offer little artistic or physical education, and which serve to marginalise a community which is already so seriously marginalised, as is emphasised by the Runnymede Trust itself.

“Schools which separate children according to religion tend to divide society into isolated communities, as seen all too clearly in Northern Ireland, and we deplore any development which not only preserves but also strengthens such a system.

“We insist that if any groups, religious or otherwise, want separate schools for their children, they should pay for them, and we add that the proper solution to the problems raised by demands for sectarian schools is for the authorities to offer the best education in secular schools to all the children in our society.”

'We have to wonder whether any even remotely credible god actually wills that we presume to act against our fellows on his supposed behalf merely because of what is said or written'

HOLY LITIGATION COULD LEAD TO HOLY WAR

warns Eric Stockton

IT IS perfectly coherent for believers to recognise the possibility of blasphemy and to raise objections when they think it has been uttered; there is no point in believing in a god whom you do not revere; blasphemy is the sin of thinking or saying things that effectively negate such reverence—attributing evil, ignorance, perversity or stupidity to the god in question.

Sincere believers will feel hurt if their god is thus blasphemed against—it is surely not asking too much of the tolerance, claimed explicitly by sceptics who see themselves as being above bigotry, that they should try to avoid giving such hurt.

But three things must be said:

- That there is no good ground for making an act of blasphemy the basis for persecution of, or legal action against, the alleged blasphemer—we have to wonder whether any even remotely credible god actually wills that we presume to act against our fellows on his supposed behalf merely because of what is said or written.

- That it is not blasphemous to criticise, even quite harshly or satirically, a particular view of god that someone professes to hold—such criticism is not of any god *per se* but criticism of perceived human error about god—we have to wonder whether any god would object to our thinking that some human person has false ideas about "Him".

- Many of the principal religions are, essentially, mutually blasphemous and so it has to be the case that an over-zealous over-reaction to blasphemy, real or imaginary, can only make divided humanity even more dangerously divided—we have to wonder whether any credible god would will that.

These first and third of these three things need further consideration.

To persecute or penalise alleged blasphemers rests upon two assumptions which mature believers do not now normally make: one is that their god is vindictive and will punish all of us for the sins of some of us and the other is that we are entitled to "play god" in total disregard of the obvious thought that if their god wishes to punish me (for example) then there is no divine reason why I should not be singled out. The notion of a vindictive god is itself blasphemous—a vindictive god is not a just and forgiving god. As to "playing god"—that seems to come close to committing the sin of presumption; perhaps God actually approves of *The Satanic Verses*. God is famously mysterious in His ways, is He not?

The mutually blasphemous content of the three main theistic religions is apparent in their

differing assessments of Jesus.

The essential tenet of Christianity is that Jesus is God Incarnate—that He is uniquely both divine and human and that His saving role depends upon this double nature.

The Jews believe that, one day, the Messiah will come but that this has not yet happened. Jesus, according to the Jews, is a false messiah—better no doubt than the ones that pop up every second week in California—a false messiah who was either deluded or fraudulent or both.

Islam is different again. The followers of The Prophet hold him to be the finally and fully authentic messenger bringing God's Will to our notice and that Jesus is simply one of a series of Old Testament prophets to be revered but not in any way deified.

Logically, Christians have to claim that the other two parties are blasphemous—because they belittle, to the point of rejecting, the divine nature of Jesus.

Logically, the Jews have to claim that both Jesus and The Prophet are far, far less than what is, respectively, claimed to be the truth about them. The Jews, by implication, claim that Jesus was simply human and that The Prophet

was just another famous teacher—at best, one among many; at worst simply bogus.

Logically, Muslims have to believe that the Jews and the Christians are both mistaken to the extent of denying the truth of the central idea of God's Messenger being none other than The Prophet.

It is absolutely no cause for surprise that adherents to these several faiths have been at each other's throats for almost the whole of their shared histories. If, in some countries, things are more peaceful... then that is largely because of liberalism and secularisation. It would be a pity if that very liberal secularist tolerance were to lead to the attempted protection of all religions by Blasphemy Laws. That would simply mean Holy Litigation perhaps leading to Holy War if the litigants think, as they likely would come to think, that the courts have done them wrong.

An open secular society is the only environment in which it safe to be religious—but only if religious people can temper their perceived certainties in the interest of social peace.

● ERIC STOCKTON may be e-mailed at: stockton.sanday.orkney@zetnet.co.uk His *Atheist Thought* site is at: <http://www.orknet.co.uk/godiva/at/index.htm> (through which the National Secular Society and *The Freethinker* Internet sites may also be accessed).

World's Humanists to meet in India

HUMANISM for Human Development and Happiness will be the theme of the 14th World Congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which is to be held Sunday, January 10, to Thursday, January 14, 1999, at the M N Roy Human Development Campus in Bombay.

Humanism is an ancient tradition in India, and Humanist groups are flourishing in the Indian sub-continent, involved in a variety of practical and intellectual work.

Congress registrants will have ample opportunities to see Humanism at work; to exchange ideas with leading thinkers and activists from many countries, and to take part in cultural and social programmes.

Concessions to previous IHEU Congress participants and special registration rates for participants from the Third World are available.

Congress dates make it possible to take advantage of good weather and off-peak air-

line fares. Advance registration is highly recommended. For registration, accommodation possibilities and other travel arrangements in connection with the congress, write to: Dr Indumati Parikh, President, Indian Radical Humanist Association, 276, Telang Road, Bombay 400 019, India. Telephone: +91 2241 41 702; fax: +91 22 41 35 248.

E-mail: mrcssc@bom2.vsnl.net.in

Hands off!

AUSTRALIA'S Roman Catholic bishops are seeking to ban their priests from having any private contact with children, in an attempt to check damaging sex abuse scandals. A draft code of conduct, which is thought to have the Vatican's backing, would mean that confessionals would have to be fitted with glass viewing panels. *Daily Telegraph*, September 25.

On the offensive

NEWS from the Middle Ages is hard to come by. There is still confusion around the case of Deborah Parry, sentenced to be beheaded, and Lucille McLaughlan, awarded eight years in prison and 500 lashes, following a "trial" for murder in Saudi Arabia.

Even if the women *are* guilty (and they are appealing), there is no doubt that the mere threat of such punishments is "inhuman and degrading" in terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But there is a suggestion that Yvonne Gilford was actually killed by locals because she upset a money-lending scam which targeted Third World nurses. Evidence of this did not come out at the trial because the nurses were not *given* a trial which would be recognised as such in a civilised state: Saudi judges simply interpret laws rigidly from 8th Century Koranic and prophetic texts.

The Saudi Ambassador says that words like "primitive" and "barbaric" used in connection with this case are deeply offensive to Muslims; we believe them to be clinically accurate. The question is—if the Runnymede Trust's proposals for laws against "Islamophobia" were accepted by the Government, could *The Freethinker* be prosecuted for saying so? What of Polly Toynbee's breathtakingly courageous article "In defence of Islamophobia" (*The Independent*, October 23)? We shudder to think.

Please help *The Freethinker* to keep up the pressure against the threat of such legislation. Happily, the Home Secretary is not inclined towards Runnymede, at present, but who doubts that Muslim fanatics and their do-gooding allies will maintain the demand for it? Please send a donation to *The Freethinker* Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP (cheques payable to GWFoote & Company).

Many thanks to: Anon, £290; T Healey, £100; M Essex, R Sage, J Vallance, £40; A Liddle, T Morrison, A Taylor, K Wingham, £20; D Pritchard, £15; E Charlton, M Fox, £13; C Burnside, M Chisman, M Crewe, R Deacon, E Durbridge, M Hill, R McCullough, H Madoc-Jones, R Parfitt, S Penlington, L Thompson, T Tyson, S Williams, R Woodward, £10; J T Caldwell, P Danning, V Wilson, £8; Anon, S Barrett, J Bassett, D Brown, S Burton, K Byrom, T Case, E Clayton, A Hall, L James, V Martin, A Ringer, L Smith, R Wood, £5; H P Brooks, F Evans, C Govind, R Harrison, M McIver, W Millard, J Smithson, J Wimble, £3; G Edwards, C Keys, J Marsham, A Murphy, J Spottiswoode, £2; P Betambeau, £1.

Total from September 22 to October 23: £900.

There is a strong demand within the Roman Catholic Blessed Virgin Mary's equal status within the Holy Trinity according to NEIL BLEWITT ...

GOD AND

EVERY religion worthy of the designation has a Trinity, vindicating Pythagoras' view that three is the perfect number. The Egyptians had Isis, Osiris and Horus, the Babylonians An, Bel and Ea, and the Romans Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. Christians, always punctilious in matters of religious convention, selected a tribal god, an itinerant preacher and a rushing, mighty wind for their Trinity and styled them Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Its most important feature is that although it comprises three individuals, they are of but one substance. This may be expressed mathematically as $1 \times 3 = 1$ or, if one takes away the god one first thought of, thus destroying the Trinity, $1 - 1 = 2$.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* comments on the Trinity: "It is a mystery in the strict sense, in that it can neither be known by reason apart from revelation, nor demonstrated by reason after it has been revealed, but it is not incompatible with the principles of rational thought." And how glad one is to have that final assurance.

It is incumbent upon all religions to have mysteries, and a Trinity is as good a one as any. The nature of the Christian variety is explained very fully in Athanasius' creed which states, *inter alia*, that although the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are each almighty, eternal, uncreate and a god, yet there are not three almighties, eternals, uncreates and gods as simple-minded folk might expect, but one only. Similarly that, although each of the three is incomprehensible, there are not three incomprehensibles but one only. And this may come as something of a relief to most people who would probably be able to cope with one incomprehensible but find three rather too many.

Below are some of the other salient points of this creed. The punctuation of the *Book of Common Prayer* and its generous use of upper-case letters have been retained since they are certain to assist an appreciation of the depth of the doctrine's mystery.

In this Trinity none is afore, or after other: none is greater, or less than another; But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together: and co-equal. So that in all things, as is afore-said: the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped ... Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds: and Man, of the Substance of his

Mother, born in the world; Perfect God and perfect Man: of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting; Equal to the Father, as touching the Godhead: and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood. Who although he be God and Man: yet he is not two, but one Christ; One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking of the Manhood into God; One altogether; not by confusion of Substance: but by unity of Person

Mysteries like that do not come every day of the week.

The word Trinity does not appear in the Bible, but it is not difficult to discover its provenance. The first person of the Trinity made his position quite clear in the Old Testament. "I am the Lord thy God," he said and, even more to the point, "I am that I am." And when one considers that he made that declaration from the middle of a burning bush and conducted a conversation with Moses while remaining there without uttering a word of complaint for nearly two chapters of Exodus, it will be agreed that, unless he was wearing a pair of asbestos trousers (and there is no reliable record that he was), he is unquestionably a god to be reckoned with.

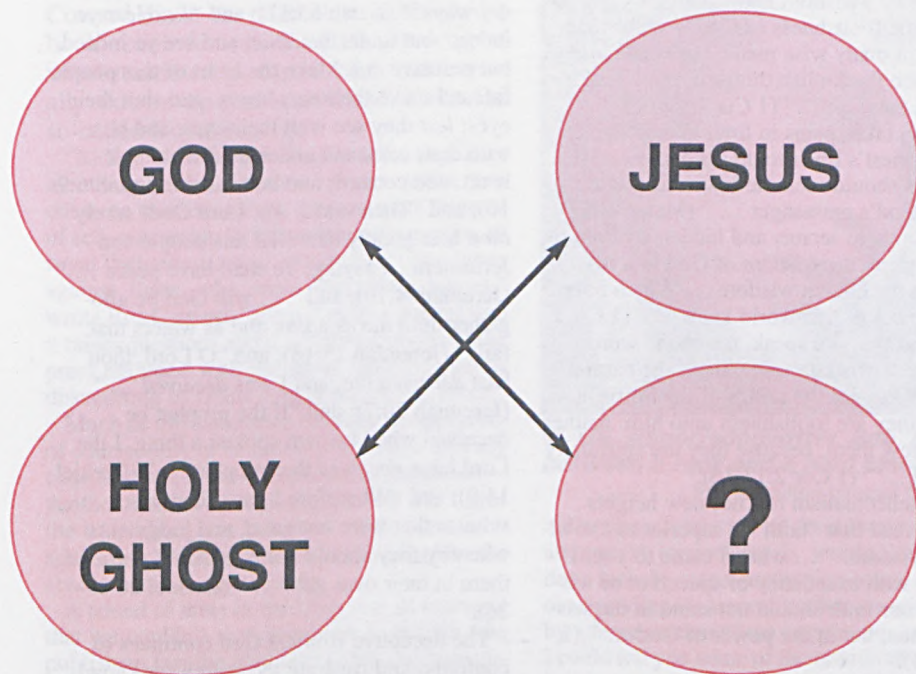
That Jesus was his son is demonstrated equally clearly in the New Testament. He was identified by an angel, an assortment of devils and, conclusively, by his father calling out—in a fairly strong voice one imagines—from behind a cloud. His coming, furthermore, was predicted with uncanny accuracy by Isaiah, although the prophet was at something of a loss regarding his name. He said it would be Emmanuel, but the angel at the Annunciation instructed that it should be Jesus. One thing is certain; his name was not inspired by one of the Wise Men. A report, which has no Scriptural authority, has long been circulating that as Balthazar entered the stable where the baby was born, he struck his head on a low beam and cried out "Jesus Christ!" whereupon Mary clapped her hands and said "Oh, that sounds a good name. We were going to call him Fred."

As for the Holy Ghost, he appears in the New Testament in a number of guises: as a dove, for example, and as a rushing, mighty wind; but there are references to him in the Old Testament as well, where he materialised in the most diverse locations—from the waters at the Creation to Job's nostrils. He was obviously a most resourceful spectre.

It is, perhaps, of interest, in passing, that the Holy Ghost had little to say in his Biblical manifestations. Strange for one who gave the

public Church that the Pope should create a Holy Quartet by infallibly declaring the Trinity, *The Freethinker* reported in September. So what else is new? Not a lot,

HIS RELATIONS



gift of tongues to the Apostles. And when he *did* speak it was not to utter anything of great moment. On the other hand, one is surprised at the occasions on which he said nothing at all. When he appeared as a dove at the baptism of Jesus, for instance, one might have expected him to say at least "Coo!" to indicate that he was entering into the spirit of the occasion, but he said not a word; nor, when he had impregnated Mary, did he as much as ask "How was it for you, my dear?"

The Father and the Son were always sure of their places in the Trinity, but there was some disagreement as to whether Mary or the Holy Ghost should occupy the third and vacant spot. There was not room for both of them and eventually Mary's nomination was withdrawn but, by way of compensation, she was allowed bodily to ascend to Heaven, Pius XII confirming in 1950 that this had, in fact, occurred. Four members of the Trinity, of course, would have been a clear case of overcrowding and, if Nestorius' view had prevailed—that Jesus was two separate persons, one human, the other divine—the position would have been more serious still for there would then have been five—or four and two halves—in the Trinity and the whole business in danger of getting completely out of hand.

All was not lost, however, for it was discovered that Jesus, according to the Gospel of the Hebrews, had spoken of "My mother the Holy Spirit". Now if Mary was doubling as the Holy

Ghost the membership would have been reduced to four again—and three if Nestorius were ignored. And it could have been reduced even further if necessary for Jesus, in John's gospel, is reported as having said "I and my Father are one," which would mean that there were only two in the Trinity—but this would have been as unacceptable as five. No Trinity worth the name can consist of two persons, one doubling up, the other trebling. It would make the whole arrangement a nonsense. Imagine, say, *Two Men in a Boat (Including Harris, George, Jerome, Montmorency and Mrs Poppets)*.

The number of candidates available to Christians for their Trinity was large enough for them to be able to match any other Trinity then in existence. They could provide Creator, Holy One and Logos, as in Mithraism for example; Father, Mother and Son to rival Isis, Osiris and Horus; and they could even have enrolled Satan as their Loki if the Scandinavian model were chosen. I suspect, too, that they could have included a Lord of the Underworld, as did the Babylonians, if they had wanted to. There must have been somebody in charge of the Christian Hell; it couldn't run itself. (One will disregard the anonymous and frivolous observation that the hot money was on Bram Stoker or, at least, take it with a pillar of salt.)

The importance of the Trinity can hardly be exaggerated. There are more Sundays named

after it than any other Feast-day; it is featured in the first of the Articles of Religion; knowledge of its composition is required of those being examined in the Catechism; glory is ascribed to it at the end of the psalms and canticles; and in its name congregations are blessed, the sick are absolved of their sins, children are baptised and couples are married. The dead, strangely, have to be buried without the benefit of its invocation, and this may seem, at first, unjust. But it may be that as Mary was welcomed into Heaven by the Voice of the Trinity—presumably in unison—so others will be welcomed, and there is no need, therefore, to call on it in the Order for the Burial of the Dead. This title, by the way, has always troubled me. It suggests that there is a service for the Burial of the Living, but I have to say that at the time of writing, despite a diligent search of Christian records, I have not been able to unearth one.

Before the 4th Century councils decided on the membership of the Trinity and, presumably, informed the successful candidates, it must have provided a stimulating topic of conversation. Nobody was quite sure who would form it nor what their natures and duties might be. Consider some of the views discussed: one was that the elements of the Trinity were not persons but merely aspects of one of them; a second that the Son was but a man and not a god at all; a third that he was divine; a fourth that he was both; a fifth that Father and Son were distinct; a sixth that they were not; a seventh that the Logos was merely the Father's wisdom which descended to the Son but did not unite with him; an eighth that Mary ought to be included, and a ninth denying the godhead of the Holy Ghost. The subject must have enlivened many a party and lengthened many a lover's goodnight.

Once the composition of the Trinity had been settled, those who took a view different from the official doctrine were severely dealt with. As for the bishop who first deduced that there must be a Trinity, he was canonised which, as an earthly reward, was no more than his perspicacity had merited. One hopes that on his admission to Heaven the Voice of the Trinity greeted him with something a little more gracious than "We've got a right clever dick here!"

Bibliography: *Two's Company, Three's One; The Feast of Pentecost and the Mighty Wind; John Biddle's Lonely Road to Unitarianism* (by himself); *A Word in Your Ear (The Logos Speaks); Introduction to The Trinity* (three volumes); *My Wife Doesn't Understand Me* (by Athanasius); *If God Is I Am, Is The Trinity They Are? To Be Discussed.*

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise'

A NUMBER of Bills in various US State Legislatures and the National Congress seek to help increase and facilitate the knowledge of our young students through education funding increases and teaching improvements.

These lawmakers, like the public in general, aren't always aware that the pursuit of knowledge is *contrary* to Biblical teachings.

The "holy" Bible cautions *against* knowledge throughout.

Some typical warnings include: "For what hath the wise more than the fool? ..." (Eccl 6:8); and "... If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God ..." (1 Cor 3:18-19 and Job 5:12-13); and "... Knowledge puffeth up ... And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know ..." (1 Cor 8:1-2); and "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy ... after the tradition of men and the rudiments of the world ..." (Col 2:8).

The Bible says that increased knowledge just brings grief and anguish as in "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow ..." (Eccl 1:17-18); and ... how dieth the wise man? as the fool ..." (Eccl 2:16); "... thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee ..." (Isaiah 47:10).

It adds that fear of the Lord is the proper path to knowledge: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom ..." (Psalms 111:10 and Job 28:28); and "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge ..." (Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10).

The Biblical God frustrates the gathering of knowledge in: "I shall destroy the wise men out of Edom, and understanding out of the mount of Esau..." (Obadiah 1:8); "He disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot perform their enterprise. He taketh the wise in their own craftiness ..." (Job 5:12-13); "God leadeth counsellors away spoiled, and maketh the judges fools ... He removeth away the speech of the trusty, and taketh away the understanding of the aged ... He taketh away the heart of the chief of the people of the earth, and causeth them to wander in a wilderness where there is no way... They grope in the dark without light, and he maketh them to stagger like a drunken man ..." (Job 12:17-25).

Knowledge is hindered in: "... the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid..." (Isaiah 29:14); "I will make drunk her princes, and her wise men, her captains, and her rulers, and her mighty men: and they shall sleep a perpetual sleep, and not wake..." (Jeremiah 51:57).

Knowledge is punished in: "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the pru-

The Bible and humanity's search for knowledge by US correspondent GENE KASMAR

dent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe ... hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ... wisdom knew not God ... Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men ... not many wise men ... are called: God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise ..." (1 Cor 1:19-27).

God also takes pains to limit knowledge in: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and others should seek the law at his mouth: for he is God's messenger ..." (Malachi 2:7).

Paul admits to secrets and hidden wisdom in: "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom ... Which none of the princes of this world knew ..." (1 Cor 2:6-8); and "... we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth ... the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned ..." (1 Cor 2:13-16).

Anti-intellectualism reaches new heights when we read that "faith" is superior to knowledge or wisdom: "... when I came to you, I came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom ... your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God ..." (1 Cor 2:1-5).

"Faith" is the very antithesis of knowledge [see Karl Heath, Page 15], yet the Bible elevates it *above* knowledge in "For I know nothing by myself ... the Lord ... will bring to light the hidden things of darkness ... We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ ..." (1 Cor 4:4-10); and "... in simplicity and godly sincerity, *not* with fleshly wisdom, but by the whim of God ..." (2 Cor 1:12); and "Now faith is the substance of things *hoped* for, the evidence of things *not* seen." (Hebrews 11:1).

Interestingly, although the word "faith" occurs several hundred times in the New Testament, it only occurs twice in the whole Old Testament. The reader might also wonder concerning the efficacy of "faith" over knowledge after reading "... though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?... faith without works is *dead* ... Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and *not* by faith ... so faith without works is *dead* also." (James 2:14-26).

According to the creation accounts in the Book of Genesis, the desire for knowledge proved to be Adam and Eve's downfall. That little tale begins when God tells Adam (Eve had *not* been created yet!) "... of the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil, thou shalt *not* eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17). After eating of the fruit "... the eyes of them both were opened ..." (Genesis 3:7).

They did *not* die as God threatened, but they frightened God into realising "... Behold, the man is become as one of us, to *know* good and

evil: and now, *lest* he put forth his hand, and take *also* of the tree of life, and *eat*, and live for ever ..." (Genesis 3:22-23).

Besides restricting knowledge from people, Jehovah also constantly deceives people as in "O Lord, why hast thou *made* us to *err* from thy ways?" (Isaiah 63:17); and "... Hear ye indeed, but understand *not*; and see ye indeed, but perceive *not*. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; *lest* they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed." (Isaiah 6:9-10); and "Then said I, Ah, Lord God! surely *thou* hast greatly *deceived* this people and Jerusalem ... saying, Ye shall have peace ..." (Jeremiah 4:10); and "... wilt God be altogether unto me as a *liar*, and as waters that fail?" (Jeremiah 15:18); and "O Lord, thou hast *deceived* me, and I was *deceived* ..." (Jeremiah 20:7); and "If the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have *deceived* that prophet ..." (Ezekiel 14:9); and "Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were *not* good, and judgments whereby they should *not* live; And I *polluted* them in their own gifts ..." (Ezekiel 20:25-26).

The deceptive Biblical God continues to confound and frustrate the search for knowledge in the New Testament also. Examples include "... Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast *hid* these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." (Matt 11:25-26 and Luke 10:21); and "... unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and *not* perceive; and hearing they may hear, and *not* understand ..." (Mark 4:11-12); and "... Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were *holden* that they should *not* know him." (Luke 24:15-16, and the similar John 20:14 and 21:4); and "He hath *blinded* their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should *not* see with their eyes, *nor* understand with their heart ..." (John 12:40, Matt 13:14-15, and Acts 28:25-27); and "For this cause God shall send them strong *delusion*, that they should believe a *lie* ..." (2 Thess 2:11-12).

Should *any* "Bible Believing" USA (or, for that matter, UK) citizen or lawmaker even think about countermanding the mandate and decrees found throughout the "holy" Bible on this issue?

Or should they instead take a common sense and rational stance on the otherwise grave risks associated with *not* facilitating and increasing our young people's knowledge and wisdom?

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

Terry Sanderson on the media

The Queen gets her comeuppance – and the Pope gets his rocks off

UNDER the headline “No wonder they don’t want you to read this book”, Ros Coward was writing in *The Guardian* about *The Royals*, Kitty Kelley’s notorious (and all-but banned) biography of the House of Windsor. Ms Coward made the point that, although the book relies for much of its effect upon unsubstantiated gossip, it also “occasionally throws up real questions” about the so-called Royal Family.

“Kelley exposes the British press regularly mouthing palace denials of things which turn out to be true, exercising extraordinary degrees of self-censorship to hide unpleasant aspects of royal behaviour, and conducting vendettas against those who raise dissenting voices,” wrote Ros Coward. “Even if only a quarter true it raises questions about whether sections of the press colluded with the royal family’s vicious discrediting of Diana simply out of deference.”

Much of this deference has now disappeared, of course, only to be replaced by a new privacy code from the Press Complaints Commission—another method of ensuring that we don’t hear the truth about this bunch of no-accounts who spend our money like water and give the absolute minimum in return.

A friend of mine in the USA was so outraged that we couldn’t read this book in Britain (the publishers fear the libel laws), that she immediately sent me a copy. “Why should Britons, who after all have to foot the bill, be the only people in the world not to know how their money is being used?” she asked.

Regrettably, I cannot relay to you some of the juicier anecdotes from the book, for *The Freethinker*, too, stands at risk of the libel laws. But one example of the way the press has, over the years, kow-towed to the Palace’s demands not to disturb the “mystique” of the monarchy can be related with impunity.

Anthony Holden, another royal biographer, told Kitty Kelley how he had mentioned in his own book that the Queen had breast-fed Prince Charles for the first six months of his life. The Press Secretary for Buckingham Palace, John Dauth, rang him “almost hysterically”.

“The sentence about breast feeding must be deleted. Absolutely and at once.”

“But why?” asked Holden.

“One never mentions the royal breasts.”

“Perhaps I should paraphrase and say, ‘The Princess fed the baby herself?’”

“That still implies the royal breasts, and the royal breasts must never be exposed.”

In the end, Holden deleted the phrase.

This may seem like a small example of royal censorship, but the book reveals others, much more serious. The way this family has manipulated the media over the years is outrageous, but even more scandalous is the fact that the media has conspired to allow it. It almost makes you grateful for arch-republican Rupert Murdoch, because he was the one who finally broke the unwritten law about unquestioning respect for royalty.



● **US singer/songwriter Bob Dylan – between a rock and a hard place?**

(Photo: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

The Royals may not be great literature, but its attempt at iconoclasm is worthy, and Kelley does include some pretty ripe jokes about the over-privileged, amoral lot that are still revered by a large section of the population. I only wish I could tell you some of them without ending up in court.

GIVEN that we are not allowed to laugh at the royals, let us have a few giggles at the expense of that other con trick, religion. *The Guardian* reported that “Theologians in Cornwall prepare to call in the frogmen after a disturbing run of posters appeared in a village post office by the river Tamar. The first advertised that the vicar would give us a talk titled *Jesus Walks on Water*. The following week’s lecture, meanwhile, was billed as *The Search for Jesus*.”

Over in the *London Evening Standard*, we were informed that after it “swept America”, spiritual healing for pets is a growing phenomenon in London. The reported cases at the Pets’ Healing Clinic in Croydon are, needless to say, all successful. A cat’s ear abscesses miraculously disappeared, a renegade rabbit suddenly becomes well-behaved and an Alsatian with a pancreatic problem appears to be “slightly improved.” Hallelujah to that, not to mention *miaow* and *woof*.

Unfortunately, on the same day, the *Daily*

Mail carried a report about a born-again Christian whose dog was run over and dreadfully injured. She refused to take it to a vet but decided that if she prayed hard enough, the animal would recover with God’s help. As the dog lay howling with pain in the road, the Rev Alison Brown of the River of Life Ministry, spoke in tongues and chanted “Satan get out of this animal.” She then took the dog home and prayed for another two hours. When a neighbour came to help she asked him if he was a believer; when he said he wasn’t, she ordered him out of the house.

The *Mail* reported: “Her attempts at divine healing ended only when the RSPCA and a vet were called, and even then, Brown told an inspector that his fingers were the instruments of the devil.”

When Inspector Stephen Roach reminded her about the laws concerning the protection of animals, she replied “God comes first”. She was, quite rightly, prosecuted.

While the magistrates considered their verdict, Ms Brown sang hymns and read from the Bible. Despite this somewhat excessive show of piety, Brown was convicted of failing to provide adequate care and attention to her pet. She was disqualified from keeping a dog for two years and fined £250.

Be assured that with proper treatment at the hands of a trained vet, Sheba made a full recovery and is, hopefully, now happily ensconced in the home of an atheist.

MEANWHILE, naughty Peter Bradshaw of the *London Evening Standard* was “entranced” by Bob Dylan’s recent performance before the Pope of his song *Blowin’ in the Wind*. His Holiness interpreted the words thuswise: “You say the answer is blowin’ in the wind, my friend. So it is: but it is not the wind that blows things away; it is the wind that is the breath and life of the Holy Spirit”.

Mr Bradshaw then asks how the Pope might interpret lyrics from other Dylan songs, particularly this stanza from *Get Your Rocks Off*:

You know, there’s two ol’ maids layin’ in bed / One picked herself up an’ the other one said / Get your rocks off! (Get ‘em off!) / Get your rocks off-a me! (Get ‘em off!).

Given that such lyrics now have Vatican approval, I assume they will be translated into Latin and heard in Catholic churches up and down the country next Sunday morning.

Bank falls to barbarians

THE Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, which gave tiny loans to Afghan women for the purchase of a sewing-machine or a goat, or to finance some other modest means of livelihood, has been thrown out of Afghanistan by the Taliban Islamic Militia for promoting “shamelessness” among females.

The bank survived opposition from fanatics at home, who are also intent on keeping women in subjection, but the Taliban has closed it down. There are around 11,000 war widows in Afghanistan, each with an average of four children. They spend most of their time begging for food in the streets. Source: *Daily Telegraph*, September 26.

TV exposé of Female Genital Mutilation: Barbara Smoker reports

POLITICALLY CORRECT TORTURE

THE subjection of small girls to female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM), is a common practice, especially in Africa, affecting two million girl children each year.

There are various degrees of FGM, ranging from "Sunna"—excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris—to "infibulation", which additionally involves narrowing of the vaginal opening. Carried out without anaesthetic, it is extremely painful; it has dire consequences with regard to the girls' future health and happiness; and sometimes it causes death.

The underlying motive for it is to ensure that girls remain virgins until marriage, and then, supposedly, to enhance their husbands' enjoyment of the sex act while curtailing their own. It is therefore patriarchal in its origins, but the people most adamant in advocating it are, strangely enough, often the women, especially the girls' grandmothers—who were victims of the practice themselves. One is reminded, in our own culture, of the decades of campaigning against corporal punishment in schools, when its abolition was most vehemently opposed by old men who had been schoolboy sufferers. ("It never did me any harm.") Perhaps there is a natural urge for former child victims of torture

to revenge themselves on future generations.

Female circumcision is frequently claimed to be a religious requirement for Muslim families, though some exegetes maintain that the Koran actually stipulates the circumcision of boys only, not girls.

Although banned in Britain by the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act, 1985, FGM is still widely practised in Muslim communities in this country. Some of the girls are taken on "holiday" (often by their grandmothers) to their ancestral homes for the operation; others are illegally circumcised in Britain by traditional male practitioners—including doctors—for whom it is a substantial money-spinner.

Despite the law, those who carry out FGM here are rarely brought to trial—partly because our health and social workers are reluctant to appear "politically incorrect" by intervening in the traditions of any immigrant culture. Some British health workers even promote "medicalisation" of the procedures, under clinical conditions, so as to reduce the attendant pain and health risks—but this only legitimises the superstition that underlies this child mutilation.

It was the subject of an exposé on October 7 by the excellent television documentary series on Channel 4, *Black Bag*, which concerns itself with topical issues in Britain's black communities. Though it did not pull its

punches, the programme did soften the harrowing details by use of the euphemism "cutting the rose", not only verbally but also in its visual substitution of roses for human flesh. But the message came across clearly enough. Some of the young women who spoke out against the practice were sufficiently courageous to allow their faces to be shown on the screen; others, understandably enough, hid behind camera angles and blurring techniques. But some of their dossiers are now to go to the police and, in the case of medical practitioners, to the General Medical Council.

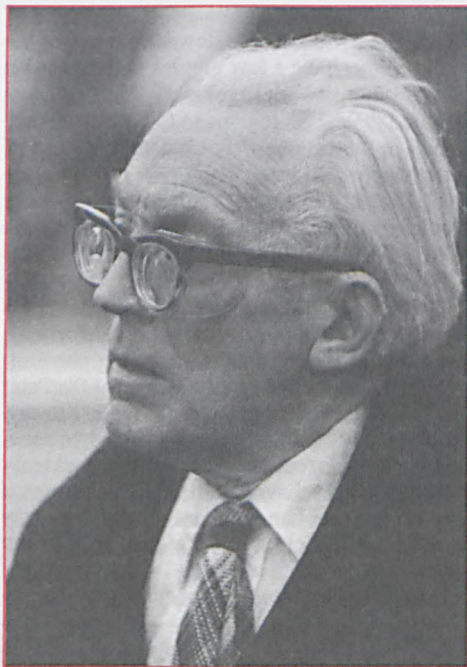
At the end of the TV programme, the address was shown of the campaigning organisation FORWARD (Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development) International, which, "promoting awareness to counter traditional practices prejudicial to the health of women and children", is also active in the alleviation of suffering from vesico-vaginal fistula resulting from FGM. Its large informative folder is available on request from 40 Eastbourne Terrace, London W2 3QR, while the book *Cutting the Rose* (by its Director, Efua Dorkenoo) is obtainable for £9.95 (inc. p&p) from the Minority Rights Group, 379 Brixton Road, London, SW9 7DE.

A monumental occasion

IT IS 112 years since Joseph Corfield erected the two reformers' memorials in north-west London's Kensal Green Cemetery: one (a classical marble obelisk), to the memory of Robert Owen, pioneer socialist and founder of the Co-operative movement; the other, alongside it, of stone, engraved with the names of 74 other radical reformers—including a fair number of women—from the 17th to the 19th centuries.

Seeing that these monuments had become sadly dilapidated, Stan Newens (Labour Euro-MP) made an approach to the Co-operative funeral departments, which beneficently undertook and funded the renovation of both memorials, to match the recent renovation of the nearby Dissenters' Chapel. As the work neared completion, Stan organised, and sent out invitations to, a re-dedication ceremony, which took place in the autumnal afternoon sunshine of October 13, with about 100 people gathered around, including a number of celebrities and representatives of relevant organisations, of which the National Secular Society was one.

The main speaker was the Rt Hon Michael Foot—at 84, looking more frail than when I last saw him a couple of years ago, but speaking as strongly and fluently as ever in tribute to the men and women to whom we all owe so much. There is space on one side of the stone memorial for more names, and it would surely be appropriate if the name of Michael Foot (an



● **The name of Michael Foot, former Leader of the Labour Party and campaigner for social justice, should be on the reformers' memorial, says Barbara Smoker.**

(Photograph: Richard Carter)

Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society) were eventually added to those of Thomas Paine, John Stuart Mill, Harriet Martineau, Josephine Butler, and the rest of the

campaigners for democracy and social justice, on whose shoulders we stand.

Other speakers, apart from Stan Newens himself (who presided), were Lord Graham of Edmonton—one of Michael Foot's left-wing "creations"—and the Deputy Mayor of Kensington and Chelsea: who is not only a woman, but also, despite her cut-glass Kensington accent, Labour.

For me, the ceremony evoked a similar one, eight years ago, which was likewise organised by Stan Newens, to re-dedicate the statue of Fenner Brockway in Red Lion Square. Having been badly damaged in the hurricane of October, 1987, the statue was repaired and given a new plinth, thanks to a generous donation which I happened to be instrumental in eliciting. Stan reminded me of this on the present occasion, at the entrance to the Dissenters' Chapel—to which we all made our way at the conclusion of the ceremony, for excellent refreshments and the opportunity to renew old acquaintances and make a few new ones. We then went our separate ways—some of us reflecting on the gulf between Robert Owen's New Lanark and today's New Labour, with government fast becoming a branch of Management.

The maintenance of anti-establishment monuments helps to keep alive for future generations the historical memory of pioneers of radical social reform, whom we should not allow to fade away while memorials proliferate to royals, statesmen, and war-lords.

Barbara Smoker

You're telling us!

UFOism is 'like belief in God'

I HAVE been following the recent UFO correspondence with interest and some amusement. Do the UFO believers not see the similarity between their belief and that of believers in God? There is no actual proof but that little matter does not stop their belief.

Apart from that, what has always puzzled me about UFOs is why would anybody/thing bother to come goodness knows how many light years' journey to visit Earth, at no doubt very great expense, and then not make proper contact with us?

Why don't they land in the middle of London or New York and show themselves properly and openly? Why is it always in the dark? Surely having navigated billions of miles to reach here they would know and be able to land somewhere suitable which would make it easily accessible for them and for us.

G F JACKMAN
Leeds

A blow to Christians

WITH reference to my critics in the October letters, tunnelling particles have been measured at 1.4 times the speed of light. Unless scientists have made a mistake, atomic particles have travelled through material faster than light (FTL).

Also, *New Scientist* (October 11, 1997), reports that an "entangled" photon was teleported in a lab. Hardly *Star Trek*, but it's a beginning.

As to Tony Akkermans, if FTL travel is possible (doubters should read up on tachyons) and FTC communication also, it is likely that such a rarity as intelligent life on the edge of space travel, with the capacity for total self-destruction, would be watched very closely by higher civilisations in our galaxy.

As to fuzzy pictures, show me a photograph of a mugging before CCTV cameras came along a few years back. Sceptics then could have said that those people imagined being mugged and so on. I tried *UFOs Explained*. What rubbish!

And E Wakefield: even if we do not invent time-stasis fields or develop beyond present research into hibernation and suspended animation, I think our technology will still go beyond Mir to closed systems with minimal wastage, making 50 years in Space possible.

Lastly, the Galileo probe has found organic compounds on Europa, the last necessary ingredient for life there—and yet another blow to Christians (and others) who believe that the Earth is unique in the Universe.

MICHAEL HILL
High Ongar

Islam and State

I AM unnerved by the tone of the article dealing with Mr Keith Porteous Wood's conversation with Ms Rowe, of the Home Office

Community Relations Unit (October issue, Page 12).

The Freethinker pulls no punches over female circumcision, our absurd monarchy and Teresa, "the sacred cow", the odour of incense about the Prime Minister and religion in general. Yet, when the matter is Islam, the official line recalls Richard Dawkins' sarcastic statement that "religious sensitivities" deserve a "consideration not accorded to ordinary prejudice".

The government has many things to be frightened of. We haven't. Without having to use a gadget, as the imprisoned Brian Keenan had to lest he defile God's word, we can read the Koran and the hadiths for ourselves, sympathetic accounts of the emergence of Islam, such as Watt's *Mohamed, Prophet and Statesman*, or wonderful A J P Taylor-ish hatchet jobs such as Crone and Cook's *Hagarism*.

But one thing no reasoning person can do is pretend that Islam allows a separation of State and religion. As in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, they are identical. This is the central pillar of Islam which tosh about a "multiculture" or Blairist decency twaddle may not conceal.

Between the murder of Thomas à Becket and the statutes Henry VIII 1535 and 1536 against appeals to Rome, this country decided that the separation of State from a universal religion is in its best interests. By now, everybody who can read *The Independent* or see TV documentaries knows that the idea of a hotline to instant goodness is subversive of the idea of critical discourse in its political and—witness the murderous attacks on Farag Fodah, Nequib Mafouz and a host of journalists and lesser writers—non-political forms.

After hearing, some time ago, no less than John Humphreys on Radio 4 *Today* expressing genuine astonishment that a Kuwaiti citizen might die because he had converted to Christianity, it would not surprise me at all that the mass of our MPs and the officials of the Home Office were also ignorant of the politics of Islam. In which case, they had better be sharpened up a bit quick. Even New Labour won't like the idea of a new Byzantium in Bradford. Or is it the case, as Ibn Warraq makes out in *Why I Am Not A Muslim*, that the UK liberal intelligentsia, including the Editor of *The Freethinker*, is scared?

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Blasphemy

REGARDING the suggested extension of the blasphemy law to include Islam as well as (at present) Christianity, this is completely illogical because, basically, Christianity and Islam are surely *mutually* blasphemous.

Islam is blasphemous to Christianity because it denies divine status to Jesus Christ: Christianity is equally blasphemous to Islam because it denies divine inspiration to the Koran and the prophet Mohammed's "special relationship" to God.

The English blasphemy laws are cast strictly from the viewpoint of the Christian establishment. In fact, I think a Muslim could be successfully prosecuted under English law simply for being a Muslim. (So why aren't they?)

ARCHIE MERCER
Cornwall

Psychics and the princess

IN MY article last month, "How to be a Virgin Mother", I mentioned that, less than three weeks before their fatal car crash, Diana and Dodi had visited a clairvoyant spiritualist, Rita Rogers, to consult her, it seems, about the future of their relationship. Only after writing this did I learn that she was one of several "psychics"—astrologers, and so on—they visited over a short period; and none of them apparently warned the star-crossed lovers about imminent road dangers.

It has also been brought to my notice that when their visit to Ms Rogers came to light (through some children spotting the landing of the helicopter), the *Daily Mail* cashed in on the story by commissioning two professional psychics to report on the future of the great romance. One of them, Jim Chivers, asserted: "The wedding will take place in about a year's time, and I think they'll be very happy". The other, Craig Hamilton-Parker, disagreed: "The relationship will fizzle out soon after Christmas" was his prediction, and he continued in some detail, as follows. "It will be Diana who walks away from it, but Dodi won't give a damn when she does. The feeling will be mutual. In the meantime, though, they'll have some fun. I can see them going on a skiing holiday together." Well, perhaps there are ski slopes on "the Other Side".

Two weeks after the tragic event, *Psychic News* revealed that the accident had actually been predicted by a number of psychics, who had since informed the paper of the fact. It seems unfortunate that none of them bothered to publicise their predictions in time to alert the people most concerned. In any case, however, I wonder if any infallible prediction could logically (*rationality* does not come into it, of course) have the effect of nullifying itself!

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley, Kent

President Maggie?

IF *The Freethinker* gets its wish and Britain becomes a republic, who will be on the list of candidates for President?

The list is likely to consist of: Jim Callaghan, Ted Heath, John Major, Margaret Thatcher. I only have to read the names for my heart to sink.

Unless we revert to the old system of electing the monarch, it is unlikely that the choice would fall to such a first-class actress as the late Diana Windsor.

ROY SAICH
Kenilworth

Up the Republic!

I WAS hoping that *The Freethinker* would be the one place free of any mention of the late Ms

You're telling us!

From Page 13

D Spencer. Evidently I was wrong. By what right did she assume the title of "The People's Princess"? Nobody asked me if I wanted one; and ever since I can remember I have been a staunch republican.

She has been unjustifiably lionised for her verbal support for "underprivileged groups". When did she ever say one word in support of all those who have been cruelly robbed of their livelihood by the Tories? Where are her statements in support of the dockers, miners, steelworkers, print workers, local government workers, dustmen, roadsweepers and so on—all thrown on the scrapheap by "downsizing", "rationalisation", "gutsourcing" (contracting out), privatisation, and straightforward redundancy?

What experience did she have of trying to raise three children in a damp and fungus-riddled room in a bed-and-breakfast?

When did they ever stop her payments from the state for "failing to make sufficient effort to secure employment"? The "crime" for which they stopped mine was not buying a suit! How many suits from Next could you buy when trying to exist on a £45-per-week giro? When did she ever have to try to survive on £45 per week?

There is a campaign called "Groundswell", made up of all the groups (claimants' unions, unemployed activists, and so on) agitating against the provisions of the Job Seekers' Allowance and Workfare. Their favourite tactic for dealing with "Dole Bullies" (over-officious DSS and Project Work officials who cut off benefit for the slightest excuse, no matter how specious) is to take their photo at their desk, and distribute it around the community.

The one constructive fact to emerge from this whole sorry spectacle is that the Groundswell campaign's "Paparazzi Man" now has a new use for his cheap camera. Simply wait for the Dole Bully to climb into his chrome-plated, gas-guzzling, penis-substitute and threaten to take his picture; he'll be filled with an irresistible compulsion to see how far he can drive it through solid concrete!

Up the Republic!

PETER V B REECE
Essex

The Queen and the unbelievers

MANY of us found the public reaction to the death of Princess Diana very moving, as human feeling for a kind, loving and vulnerable young woman.

The Queen, however, in her speech to the nation, said: "May we each and everyone of us thank God ..."

Although I appreciate that this was a personal tribute prepared at very short notice, I feel that the statement did clearly show that our monarch was either assuming an absence of non-believers in the nation or was asking such citizens to turn to the "Lord".

While the monarchy remains, it is surely reasonable to expect it to acknowledge that it represents a multi-faith nation, with at least a third of its citizens being non-believers.

(Removal of reference to God from the word-

ing of the National Anthem—deeply embarrassing for non-believers to stand for—could be one appropriate action).

And wasn't it absurd, anyway, to ask everyone to thank a supposedly good and all-powerful God after the slaughter of young lives in a Paris underpass!

ROGER McCALLISTER
Dawlish

A setback for reason

I AGREE with the rational comments made in the October issue of *The Freethinker* regarding the recent mass cult-like hysteria which surrounded the deaths of three people in Paris, one of whom was raised to goddess status—namely, Princess Diana.

I feel that a counter-appraisal of the woman may calm things down and help bring about a return to normality. She was extolled for her



Short and clearly-typed letters for publication may be sent to Peter Brearey, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. E-mail address: editor@freethinker.co.uk

charity work, but turned her back on 100 charities which had come to rely upon her. She was praised as a mother but probably never had to change a nappy or be concerned about anything regarding the children's well-being or education—that was all done by nannies and governesses.

Tony Blair was going to make her an unofficial ambassador for Britain even though, just a week before she died, she stated that she would not even visit Britain if her sons were not here.

She manipulated the media and the public—with that doe-eyed, hurt look—to keep herself in the limelight.

The public piled flowers outside the royal palaces, while the residents of these establishments who had ostracised her were up in Balmoral, wondering what all the fuss was about.

Her legacy was supposed to be a more compassionate nation, but the news of 400 people being drowned when a ferry sank off Malaysia the same week received a 10-second mention on the news ... while the "problem" of dispos-

ing of the floral tributes, and the overnight queues to sign books of condolence, were on the news for 10 minutes!

Rationality and reason completely left the British nation at that time, mostly thanks to manipulation by the media. It was all reminiscent of the funeral of the Ayatollah and of the mass suicides of cult religion members, not to mention the Hitler rallies.

Even the Nobel Prize committee was affected by it all, awarding the Peace Prize to the landmine abolition group which has been working hard for years towards that end, unappreciated and ignored by the nations which use landmines.

I feel that the Enlightenment project claiming that rationality and reason will eventually prevail in human thinking has suffered a major setback.

ALISTER RANKIN
Leven, Fife

Nazis and the Vatican

PETER BANNING (September letters) has fallen too easily for the propaganda of the Vatican and the Nazis.

When I first visited Moscow and Leningrad, the Soviet Union had many successes. In Russia at least there was no inflation, no unemployment, and no real poverty. In addition, it was the most democratic country I had ever been in. I may say there are quite simple objective tests for the amount of democracy in a country. There is no gain without a price. Russian men could not buy imported motor-cycles, and Russian girls could not buy French dresses and cosmetics.

I might add that the British government clearly shared my opinion, since it deliberately created a major European war in order to destroy the Soviet system.

C R WASON
Bridgwater

Sir Ludo

I WAS greatly surprised to read George Broadhead's October letter in which he informs us that Sir Ludovic Kennedy announced in a television programme that he wanted to be buried at sea with the last rites administered by a priest! I find this very difficult to believe as I remember reading Sir Ludovic's autobiography some years ago in which he recounts his adolescent doubts and uncertainties in regard to the claims of orthodox religion. He goes on to say that it was finally a reading of Tom Paine's classic *Age of Reason* which weaned him away completely from his rather tepid Christianity. I was also surprised to read that along with John Gummer he judged a "Best Sermon" competition organised by *The Times* and the College of Preachers.

While I was delighted to read in the September issue of *The Freethinker* that Sir Ludovic had become an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society, I am now beginning to think that he and the NSS must make rather strange bed-fellows.

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Gwent

ASK THE PARSON (9)

by Karl Heath

DEAR PARSON: Why faith? Surely the most ambiguous of Paul's Corinthian trio? Love is a self-sustaining word, needing no further qualification. An emotion of living things, and also a virtue, if one notes its antonym—hatred. Hope, although you theologians seem to neglect it, is also self-sustaining. It, too, is a virtue, a quality desirable among us, compared with its antonyms, despair and hopelessness.

But faith? Faith, *full-stop*? Surely this is meaningless? Therefore, faith in something, but faith in what? The word can mean belief or trust, or a blend of both. "Hebrews", Ch. 11 v. 1, says that "faith is the substance of things hoped for", implying that faith also means anticipation. Yet "faith *full-stop*" is not a substance, but a word left hanging in the air. Nor is it a virtue. It can mean a belief in something false or harmful. It can mean trust, but a trust misplaced.

The "Hebrews" verse goes on to describe faith as "the evidence of things not seen". Oddly, this seems to suggest the same as the sceptic, Voltaire, who wrote: "Faith consists in believing that which reason does not believe". I realise that you use the word faith in a restricted theological sense, just as you call religion a faith. You mean faith in the Lord Jesus, Resurrection and Salvation. Nor is there salvation without faith.

The Athanasian creed which, no doubt, you recite, begins: "Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick faith ... without which he will perish everlastingly".

I wonder how many of your congregation realise what a burden of faith is demanded of them. The same creed, continuing to explain the Trinity, says: "There are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible".

Do you understand this?

Or is it, indeed, incomprehensible?

Would you admit that this kind of faith cannot be acquired spontaneously, within an individual's own understanding? Is faith God's will, or a human being's intimation of divinity?

Or is it derived from tortuous theological disputation in the early centuries of Christianity?

Why do you wish to instruct others in this faith? Is it God's desire that His existence should be believed, together with the story of His Son? Does God want churches, doctrines, creeds, evangelists and missionaries?

Are you sure that your church, whatever it is, presents its views for others to judge with open minds? Do you say "This is our opinion", or do you declare "This is so"? The medieval monks at least tried to debate rationally with their ontological and cosmological arguments, and the equally fallacious physico-theological argument, which Archdeacon Paley popularised as the "Argument from Design". Jesus himself seems to have considered that faith requires evidence. Instead of demanding blind faith from doubting Thomas (Didymus), He shows him the nail holes in His hands, and asks him to touch His spear-pierced side.

Would you agree that, today, the appeal to faith is emotional rather than rational, not only

There is no evidence — only faith!

among the fundamentalists? And, in the history of Christianity, it seems to have been assumed that faith could be imposed by force. The Inquisition tortured bodies to save souls, and in the *Auto-da-fe* (Act of faith) non-believers were burnt, usually on All Saints Day, a practice which continued in Mexico until 1815. Archdeacon Paley, already mentioned, believed that capital punishment should embrace children; hanging would save their souls. In England the Recusancy Laws, compelling people to attend church, were in force from 1552 until the last conviction in 1782.

Are we much better today? The 1944 Education Act makes Religious Instruction the only compulsory subject in the curriculum. The BBC broadcasts 700 hours of hours of religious programmes, virtually unchallenged, every year. Where is the "level playing-field" of modern jargon? Against 700 hours the non-religious are grudgingly granted maybe half-a-dozen hours. In response to 250 "Thoughts for the Day", nothing at all. Can pressure of this kind create true faith?

Jesus, Himself, knew the difference between faith and the profession of faith. When the Pharisees demonstrated their sanctity by shuffling their feet, standing still in the marketplace and putting bags over their heads, He denounced them as "whited sepulchres". What about the missionaries spreading the faith, the Good News? Many devoted their lives, risked their lives and lost their lives, deserving the pocket money of the Victorian schoolchildren who sang:

*Hear the pennies dropping.
See them as they fall,
Every one for Jesus.
He shall have them all.*

But there was also the arrogance of Bishop Heber in "Greenland's Icy Mountains":

*The heathen in his blindness
Bows down to wood and stone.*

He ignored, surely wilfully, the Christians who regularly kneel to wood, stone and metal in

the form of an instrument of execution like a gallows, namely the Cross. Some Africans thought that they paid a heavy price for faith: *You had the Bible; we had the land. Now we have the Bible; you have the land.*

In the last century the London Missionary Society arrived in Tahiti and were appalled to find healthy, happy people living carefree and not too laborious lives because of the abundance of natural products. The missionaries therefore ordered the destruction of the breadfruit trees "to incite the people to industry by reducing the spontaneous production of the earth". Saved from Satan by becoming the wage-slaves of the whites?

In South America today the forest Indians are being driven from their immemorial hunting grounds by foreign exploiters. A crucial element in this process has been the American Protestant missions such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics and The New Tribes Mission. Their vicious depravity is illustrated by the linguistic lying of the former (the SIL). Translated into native languages "Romans" Ch.13, v. 1, which in the Authorised Version reads "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers—the powers that are ordained by God" becomes in the SIL version, "Obey your legal superiors because God has given them command—there is no government on earth that God has not permitted to come to power". Music in the ears of Latin American dictators!

As noted before, "Hebrews" says that faith is "the evidence of things not seen". There is no such evidence. You ask us to believe that behind this vast universe there is one invisible creator. There is no evidence—only faith. You ask us to believe that there are no other gods or goddesses. I accept that you do not need, nor could find, evidence to prove a negative. Yet you ask us to believe that your God is three-in-one. There is no evidence—only faith.

A man called Jesus may well have been crucified, but there is no evidence that He was the Son of God, and resurrected. No evidence—only faith. You suggest that there is a Lord Creator of the Universe, who while controlling whole galaxies, quasars, pulsars, Black Holes and possibly billions of planets, yet still contrives to know and concern Himself with the lives and thoughts of each of us microscopic humans. Is not this notion totally devoid of plausibility, but also breath-taking in its arrogance and wildly unrestrained in its absurdity?

Finally, is it not ironical, but perhaps revealing, that the movement led by your modern "Didymus", Don Cupitt, should be called "The Sea of Faith"? Did the good Dean take the title from Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach"? If so, did he remember that the "Sea of Faith", once a "bright girdle" is later recalled in the words "but now I only hear its melancholy long withdrawing roar, retreating".

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

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

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

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

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: Cornerstone Community Centre, Palmeira Square (corner of First Avenue), Hove. Sunday, December 7, 4.30 pm: Members' Forum. 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. 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 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ: 01242 528743.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, November 20, 7.30 pm: Derek Lennard: *Thomas Paine*.

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). November 14: Question Time with Chris Morris, Anya Palmer, Nettie Pollard, Peter Tatchell.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. Meetings at Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch, 8 pm to 10 pm. Tuesday, 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. November 11: Peter Brearey: *The Freethinker—Past, Present and Future*. December 9: Paul Mann: *The Family Today—Robust or Rotten?* January 13: *The Politics of Religion*. February 10: Martin Schweiger: *World Development*. March 10: Dr J K Elliott: *Myth and Legend in Christianity*. May 12: David Taylor: *United Nations—Fifty Glorious Years?*

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. November 27: The Rev Charles Pickstone: *Has Sex Usurped Religion?*

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. November 12: *Humanist Ceremonies*. December 10: Derek Chatterton: *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 Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN; 01362 820982. Meets at Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich, 7.30 pm. November 20: Chris Hull: *OXFAM*. January 15: John Hemsley: *Counselling*. February 19: Vince Chainey: *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*; bookings to Gordon Sinclair. 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

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. Registration starts at 1.15 pm.

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.