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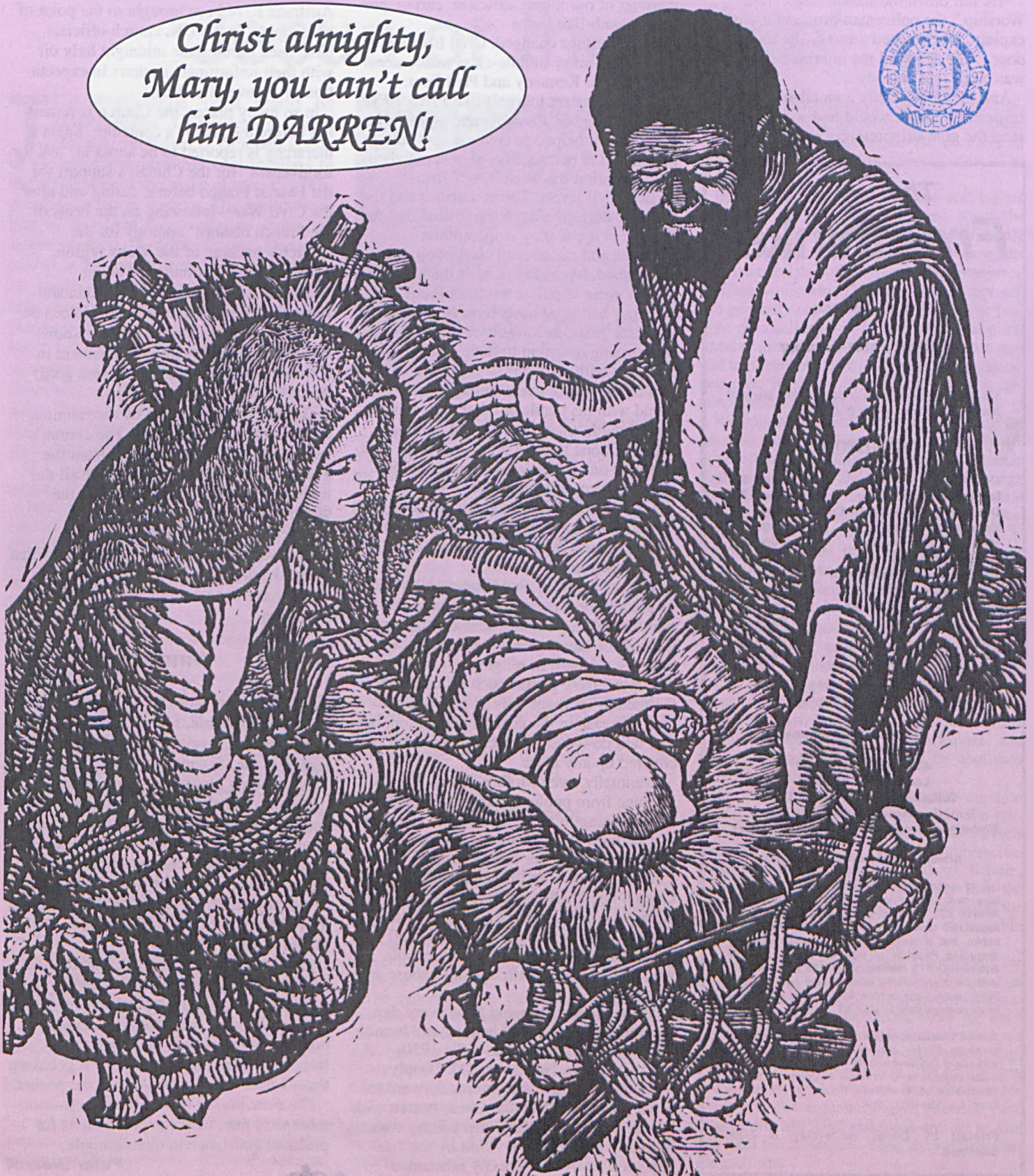
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Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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*Christ almighty,  
Mary, you can't call  
him DARREN!*



# Up Front

## Rotten to the core

AS young reporters working hard at becoming cynical, we would wink at each other knowingly whenever a bruised and bloodied defendant *sagged* before the small-town Bench.

"He fell down the station steps, Your Worship," the policeman-prosecutor would explain. "He resisted arrest ... he ran into a door ... he acquired the injuries before he was taken into custody ..."

And the JP, probably a member of the Inspector's lodge, would nod wisely and send the gore-dripping miscreant to be

reformed. Occasionally, however, the defendant would upset the pantomime—by being so poorly that hospitals and doctors became involved, and then an officer might receive a public slap on the wrist for assaulting a prisoner.

Enter a Police Spokesman with the traditional mantra: "There's always *one rotten apple in the barrel*: Sergeant X's conduct fell well below the standards expected of a member of our highly-efficient, caring, positively lamb-like Force ..."

Slowly, things changed. Civil liberties groups and noisy middle-class malcontents like Ludovic Kennedy and Paul Foot, backed by irritant journals like *Private Eye*, *Socialist Worker*, *Freedom* and—yes—*The Freethinker*, helped to create a new culture in which it is permissible, almost mandatory, to question the workings of British Justice at all levels. The authorities and the mainstream media have recognised that the *one rotten apple* ploy is incredible.

Violence and racism and corruption, it is established, have always been the *norm* in certain areas of police work: millions in damages and legal costs have been paid out in recent years, as a result of officers' over-enterprising devotion to their duties.

So it is with religion.

In the old days, when a clergyman was found with his hands or other parts where they shouldn't have been—and nothing could be done to hush it up—we were treated to the *one rotten apple* excuse and the offender went into retreat for a while.

And only ill-natured infidels like ourselves discussed the outrages which were, are, inevitably associated with the True Faith at any given period.

Now, as the truth about superstition and its practitioners comes out, ordinary folk find that killing, torture, sexual abuse, gross intolerance have never been anything but industry standard in religion.

Sceptics have gained such influence in the media—perhaps only in proportion to their increase in the general population, but that will do—that this fact simply can't be covered up any more.

Eventually, even Mother Teresa was not immune from public criticism, although the news coming in as we go to press suggests that perhaps she was almost saintly compared to some of her fellow nuns.

Here in Britain and Ireland, a Catholic Church already demoralised by a series of scandals could be forced to pay out millions of pounds to settle more than 250 demands for compensation from people who claim to have suffered child abuse at its hands.

"New claims are being filed every day, including allegations of beating and humiliation by nuns going back to the 1950s ..." (*The Guardian*, November 11). Deeply traumatised people are coming forward to insist that as children they were beaten with broom handles, plunged into boiling water, forced to eat their own vomit by the "sisters" at a number of grossly misnamed

homes. Those infants who were simply compelled by nuns to parade with urine-soaked sheets wrapped around their heads seem to have been the fortunate ones.

The latest estimate from the USA is that the Catholic Church has paid out \$650 million (£420 million) in settling child abuse compensation claims, and may have to pay out another \$500 million. Dioceses and religious orders in the US, Canada and Australia have been brought to the point of bankruptcy. In the UK, church officials have been burning the midnight holy oil with their unfortunate insurers in expectation of a wave of claims.

In so many places, the Church is retreating before the people's contempt. Spain's hierarchy is reported to be about to "ask for forgiveness" for the Church's support for the Fascist Franco before, during and after the Civil War—following on the heels of the French bishops' apology for the Church's backing of the Vichy regime. Even the Pope has muttered about "remorse" for centuries of Christian anti-Judaism, whose climax was the Holocaust. We have already reported on revelations about the Church's close involvement in spiriting Nazis (and their ill-gotten gold) from the clutches of the Allies.

The horrors perpetrated by the religious are not a new phenomenon. The church's sadism did not recently spring from the ground, fully-formed. It was there all the time. But today people throughout the world—people influenced down the decades by rationalists, freethinkers, humanists and secularists—feel empowered to speak out, to hit back in a way which would have been unthinkable 20, even 10, years ago.

## Winning

Don't take my word for it: pay attention to Mrs Whitehouse, Lady Thatcher, Lord Tebbit as they inveigh against the terrible legacy of the 'Sixties.

On our own ground, *we are winning*.

The mega-challenge comes from Islam, of course. The Muslim fanatics' murder of 58 tourists at Luxor, though horrible, is entirely explicable in the context of the Islamic world's being still at the medieval stage of development, as are the many similar atrocities which have been, and are being, committed in Allah's name.

I believe, however, that the Middle East's own capitalists and traders, backed by the region's ever-growing cohort of educated men and women, will resolve the problem now that fanaticism is interfering with *their* freedoms—and, most importantly, is hitting them where it really hurts ... in the pocket.

*The Freethinker* wishes them well—but, more than that, they can count on us for practical assistance in their struggle.

Peter Brearey

## The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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# 'We don't believe in Allah or Muhammad or the Quran any more than in God or Jesus or the Bible'

**T**HE Runnymede Trust report on *Islamophobia: A Challenge to Us All* (£9.50), published in October, is one of the most irresponsible contributions to the discussion of the place of minority religions in a plural society. The tendentious line of the trust's consultation paper on *Islamophobia: Its features and Dangers*, issued in March, prompted many responses, most of them favourable (though a refreshing exception came from the National Secular Society). This line has been followed in the final report, which was also widely welcomed (though again a refreshing exception was the joint statement issued by the National Secular Society and the Rationalist Press Association).

The trouble begins with the word *Islamophobia*, which is said to have been "coined in the late 1980s" and first traced in print in 1991, and to be "a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam—and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all of most Muslims". This may be true, but the corollary is not:

*Such dread and dislike have existed in western countries and cultures for several centuries. In the last twenty years, however, the dislike has become more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous. It is an ingredient of all sections of our media, and is prevalent in all sections of our society.*

This paranoid tone sets the low level of intellectual discourse and the high level of emotional temperature in the rest of the report. Let us be quite clear about the position of freethinkers. We are not Islamophobes. We have no dread or hatred of Islam as distinct from any other religion, and we have no fear or dislike of Muslims as Muslims.

We have a rational and realistic opposition to Islam on the general ground that it is as incredible as all theistic beliefs, and on the particular ground that (like the other Semitic religions) it is based on incredible doctrines about divine participation in sacred writings. We don't believe in Allah or Muhammad or the Quran any more than in God or Jesus or the Bible, and we insist that unbelief is just as valid as belief.

We have a rational and realistic opposition to Muslims and their Islamophile allies who demand special indulgence for practices justified by religious arguments but condemned by humane principles. We reject discrimination against women, deprivation of proper education

## Nicolas Walter on an 'irresponsible' report from the Runnymede Trust

for girls, genital mutilation of infants, cruelty to animals, unjust trials and inhuman punishments, prudery about sex, art and clothing, terror and torture, and so on.

We judge Islam exactly as we judge Christianity or Judaism or any other religion, and we hold that Muslims should have exactly the same treatment as the followers of any religious or other belief. We condemn this report for arguing otherwise, and for the many factual and logical errors in its argument.

Thus the report inflates the size of the Muslim presence in Britain. It counts as Muslims not only people who call themselves Muslims but also people who have been Muslims or who come from Muslim families or from Muslim countries. It concludes that there are now between 1.2 and 1.4 million Muslims in Britain, which is lower than the commonly quoted two million but is still far too high.

### Calculations

No reference is made to the most obvious source of information—public opinion surveys, in which samples of the population are asked to describe their own religious affiliation—which would drastically reduce this figure. Of course the same objections apply to calculations of numbers of other religious denominations—and indeed of humanists!

The report distorts the history of relations between the West and Islam, by beginning with the Christian attack on the Muslims in Crusades and ignoring the earlier Muslim attack on Christendom, and it distorts the history of Christian fundamentalism, by relying on secondary rather than primary sources. It confuses prejudice and discrimination on religious and racial grounds, and conflates Muslims and Asians. It mentions attacks on Muslims but

ignores attacks by Muslims. It condemns criticism of Islam and Muslims in the media, and evades genuine objections to the doctrines of the religion and to the behaviour of some of its followers.

But, whatever its many factual and logical defects, the most important thing about the report is its many recommendations. Virtually all are objectionable, since they propose the extension to Islam of privileges always enjoyed by Christianity which we have always opposed. We generally oppose affirmative action or positive discrimination in favour of any religious or other group, and we particularly oppose special treatment of Islam in politics, immigration, censuses, social services, armed forces, hospitals, prisons, and so on.

We oppose the demand for state funding for Muslim schools, just as we have always opposed state funding for Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Jewish schools, though we recognise that so long as the present system survives Muslims should have the same treatment as other denominations. The solution is the abolition rather than the extension of the system. We oppose the identification of ethnic origins and religious affiliation of schoolchildren, because we favour the integration rather than the disintegration of our society.

We oppose the suggestion that the criminal law should be amended to cover incitement to hatred or violence or discrimination on religious grounds, including an extension of the blasphemy law, because we consider that the existing public order laws are adequate, and that the blasphemy law should be abolished rather than extended.

We accept the call for Muslims to organise themselves, just as other religious and non-religious and anti-religious groups do, though their attempts so far have not been very impressive. However, the Muslim Council of Britain, formed in November, may do better than the Muslim Parliament, and we would welcome the presence of a responsible and respectable Muslim voice in this country.

Finally, we reject the report's arguments for restrictions in public comment on Islam and on Muslims. We can tell them a thing or two about unfair treatment by the media, since we have suffered from it for several centuries, and we can tell them that there is no point complaining, let alone calling for protection. The only way is to do as you would be done by, fight fair, get your facts and arguments right, produce your own media, and think and speak and act so that you earn fair treatment. Then let the best man (or god) win.



# Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

## Know your aura from your elbow?

WHEN my wife and I went to the Hampstead Theatre last month to see David Haig's moving play about Rudyard Kipling, *My Boy Jack*, the foyer seemed to have suffered a psychic visitation. Esoteric leaflets outnumbered the usual notices of other theatres' productions, advertising, for instance, "The Travel Agent for Inner Journeys", "The School of Insight and Intuition" and "Bodymind Massage".

In September 1996, we read, a certain Leo Sofer began "receiving" entire spiritual teaching stories, which "speak of a new way of living". Now, we are asked to believe, when he performs them in front of an audience "he has no idea of what is coming next but is led unfalteringly from scene to scene by a source of higher wisdom".

Mr Sofer—or his source of higher wisdom—will be performing at two spots in London during December, but if you can't get along you can always book a one-to-one session, when he will tell you a story on "a theme that relates to your personal life". Cost: £50 (£40 concessions).

Or, why not go one better and get a water-colour drawing depicting the unique character of your soul from Mouse Katz, who is "assisted on the spirit level" by Feather Cloud, a Native American of the Apache and Navaho tribes? The latter, also rather curiously known as RR, "explains" that a soul portrait excites "the molecules of your physical being" and "continues to imbue your auric field".

And don't tell me you're not aware of your auric field!

## Dark Age 'honour'

ALTHOUGH the Runnymede Trust's report on "Islamophobia" concedes that it is "legitimate to criticise the treatment of women in some Muslim countries", it takes the matter no further. Yet it surely is of vital interest—and I mean *vital* literally.

So-called "honour killings" are increasing in Jordan, reported Julian Borger in *The Guardian* (November 4), the latest being the family murder of Rania Arafat for refusing an arranged marriage and eloping with her Iraqi boyfriend. Two aunts took

her to a patch of open land, then stood aside while her 17-year-old brother shot her five times in the head. Rania's body was taken to Amman's Al-Bashir hospital, where it was examined to see if she was still a virgin.

Dr Mu'men Hadidi, Director of the National Institute of Forensic Medicine, told Borger that "half the women who end up on this mortuary slab have already been sent to the Institute for their hymen to be examined". And, according to Rana Husseini, the only Jordanian journalist who reports "honour killings" regularly, 40 of the 153 inmates at Amman's women's prison are in "protective custody"—from their families.

Ah, that's the Middle East, you may say. But "honour killings" are not unknown here, where more and more Muslim teenage girls want the same freedom as their friends and classmates to continue their education, hold jobs and marry people of their own choosing. These "simple wishes", as the *International Herald Tribune* calls them (October 20) are "in direct conflict with their father's notions of women's roles, filial discipline and clan honour". In extreme cases, the families have punished their daughters by beating them, throwing acid in their faces and burning them to death.

Philip Balmouth, Bradford area Community Officer of the West Yorkshire Constabulary, told the paper that until a few years ago, when coroners began getting suspicious, there were a number of "suicides", where Asian girls who had left home were said to have set fire to themselves. "The families would all tell the same story. She had been sad, she was so depressed, we should have taken her to see a doctor".

I hope the Runnymede Trust will forgive me if I'm feeling rather Islamophobic at the moment.

## Not-so-holy matrimony

WHEN the Archbishop of Wales called for the ending of Bible readings and prayers in school assemblies, Christian campaigners "reacted with fury", according to the *Daily Mail* (October 7). And Peter Bruinvels, the new Inspector of Church of England schools, protested that: "For the vast majority it is often the only message of right and wrong they receive".

Two days earlier, Mr Bruinvels might have read how a number of Church of England clergymen apparently saw nothing "wrong" in violently and sexually abusing their wives (*Sunday Times*, October 5).

One wife, from a Yorkshire diocese, said

that it took four years before her bishop did anything—despite his knowing that she had twice been admitted to hospital with serious injuries. Even now, her husband had not been disciplined by the Church. Similar complaints by a vicar's wife from the south-east had been dismissed by an archdeacon.

The two women decided to speak out after the Church of Scotland announced the opening of a care centre in response to a University of Edinburgh report suggesting that as many as one-in-10 such women in Britain may suffer abuse at the hands of their husbands.

Lesley Macdonald, author of the report, which involved 25 women, has since been contacted by more than 40 abused clerical wives in other parts of Britain. How does that reflect on Mr Bruinvels's "message"?

## Christian dog's life

IF A Christian woman evangelist breaks a leg and prefers to pray to God to heal it, I suppose we can treat it as her own affair, dotty though it is. When her dog's leg is broken and the animal is in agony, the law has to step in.

Unfortunately, the five-month-old puppy belonging to the Rev Alison Brown, pastor in charge of the River of Life Ministry in Devon, suffered for three hours while its mistress chanted religious sayings and called on Satan to "get out of the animal". Peter Williams, a neighbour who went to the dog's aid, was ordered away because he wasn't a Christian.

When RSPCA Inspector Stephen Roach told Brown of the laws protecting animals, she replied: "God comes first" (*Daily Mail*, October 14). And when she appeared before Exeter Magistrates she sang hymns and read from her Bible. Working on the principle that the welfare of the animal comes first, however, the magistrates found Brown guilty, disqualified her from keeping a dog for two years, fined her £250 and ordered her to pay £270 costs.

## Joy over Jonathan?

THERE is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, Luke tells us. And *Daily Mail* gossip columnist Nigel Dempster reported (October 9) that the disgraced Cabinet Minister Jonathan Aitken had enrolled for a spiritual enlightenment course at Holy Trinity, Brompton, and Knightsbridge Church, London.

But has Aitken repented? A church spokesman said the course offered the chance to discuss and investigate the principles of Christianity, which is not by any means the same thing.

## Bicentenary of Heine

# Perpetual outsider, brave soldier

by Nicolas Walter

**H**ENRICH HEINE, the bicentenary of whose birth falls this month, was one of the greatest of all German writers.

He was born on December 13, 1797, in Dusseldorf into a liberal Jewish family, failed in business, studied law, and became a journalist. In 1825 he was baptised as a Lutheran—not from conviction, but as what he called an “entrance-ticket to European culture”.

He was first known for wandering humorous prose, but then also for exquisite lyrical poetry which veered between sweet romanticism and bitter cynicism. He left Germany in 1831 and spent the rest of his life in France, explaining the two nations to one another in brilliant articles and books, and producing more poetry and drama and memoirs.

In 1848 he was crippled with paralysis, which may or may not have been syphilitic, and he spent eight years in agony on what he

called his “mattress-grave”. During this time he adopted an emotional belief in what he had described in 1834 as “a dying God”, but he continued to despise actually existing religion, and preferred opium. He remained a sceptic to the end, answering a religious inquirer: “God will pardon me, that’s his job.” He died on February 17, 1856, in Paris.

Heine was a perpetual outsider—a poor man among the rich, an intellectual among philistines, an internationalist among nationalists, a liberal among conservatives, an individualist among liberals, a German among the French, a Jew among Germans, a Christian among Jews, an infidel among Christians, a theist among infidels, always a free thinker in the widest sense. He wrote his own best epitaph: “I don’t know whether I deserve a laurel-wreath to be laid one day on my coffin ... But lay on my coffin a sword; for I was a brave soldier in the liberation war of humanity.”



● Heinrich Heine

## Questions

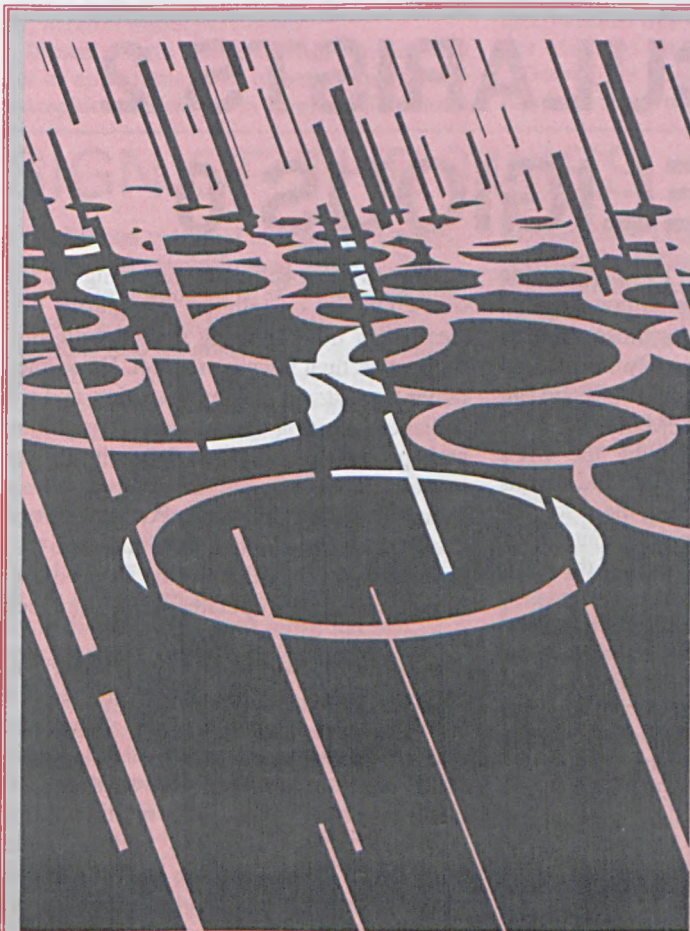
by HEINRICH HEINE

*By the sea, by the empty, night-time sea  
Stands a youthful man,  
His breast full of longing, his head full of doubt,  
And with gloomy lips he asks the waves:*

*“Oh, solve for me the riddle of life,  
The painful ancient riddle,  
Over which so many heads have brooded,  
Heads in magicians’ caps,  
Heads in turbans and black birettas,  
Bewigged heads, and a thousand other  
Poor, perspiring human heads—  
Tell me, what is the meaning of Man?  
Where does he come from?  
Where is he going?  
Who lives up there on the golden stars?”*

*There murmur the waves their eternal murmur,  
There blows the wind, there fly the clouds,  
There twinkle the stars, indifferent and cold,  
And a fool waits for an answer.*

“Fragen”, from the *Buch der Lieder* (1827)  
Translated by Nicolas Walter



# Joe Ashton in Commons bid for death with dignity law

**A**TEN Minute Rule Bill to allow incurably ill adults to seek help from a doctor to die with dignity was presented in the House of Commons on November 20 by Joe Ashton MP (Labour, Bassetlaw).

Mr Ashton's Doctor Assisted Dying Bill will be debated in the Commons on December 10—Human Rights Day—under the 10 Minute Rule. This gives MPs on both sides of the issue 10 minutes each to argue their cases. A free vote will then follow.

Mr Ashton said: "We in this country have to face the unwelcome fact that dying is not always easy. I believe that everyone has the right to a peaceful, dignified death when their quality of life has become unacceptable. Many people would like a doctor's help to achieve this, and my Bill will allow compassionate doctors who agree to give this last act of care to provide lethal drugs within the law."

To qualify under the Bill, patients must be adults who are terminally or incurably ill or suffering permanent physical impairment.

Safeguards include:

- Two separate written requests to a doctor and a consultant for help, with independent witnesses.

- These two doctors must be convinced that the request is the definite wish of the patient, that the patient's suffering is

unbearable, and that they are fully informed of all options.

- Doctors who are related to, or in any way financially linked to, the patient, or his or her family, would not be eligible to give help to die.

- The Coroner's Office will oversee all the forms relating to assisted deaths.

- The Department of Health will draw up a Code of Practice and other safeguards.

Patients will have to make the final act themselves. Doctors will be permitted to supply a lethal dose of drugs or to connect equipment containing a lethal substance. There will be an opt-out clause for doctors.

The Bill has the backing of motor neurone disease patient Annie Lindsell, who in October won the right to escape mental and physical suffering by using the double effect of morphine at an earlier stage than normally administered.

She said: "I and many other terminally-ill patients would gain great comfort now if we only knew we could rely on a doctor's help to a swift and peaceful end.

"Death by the administration of morphine can take days (during which time you simply starve and dehydrate until you die). Surely we who are dying deserve a swifter end if we want? I beg MPs of all parties to support Joe Ashton in this."

On October 28, Ms Lindsell, 47, stopped her High Court application for morphine when the

independent medical expert dropped opposition to the plan. She can now be given morphine to relieve her distress as soon as she begins to have difficulty swallowing. The drug has the secondary effect of hastening death.

Sir Ludovic Kennedy, long-time campaigner for the right to die with dignity and Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society, welcomed the Bill.

He said: "A 10 Minute Rule Bill has no chance of becoming law, but I am delighted that Mr Ashton is helping keep this issue at the forefront of politics and the public mind. Some 82 per cent of British people support the legalisation of medical help to die, so this Bill represents the views of the majority."

John Oliver, General Secretary of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, urges that we:

Make an appointment to see our own MP at his/her next public surgery: "A personal visit is the most effective form of lobbying."

Write to our MP at the House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA.

Telephone our MP's office on Tuesday, December 9 (call 0171 219 3000 and ask for the Member by name) and leave a message requesting his/her support for Joe Ashton.

Further information from: **Meredith MacArdle, Voluntary Euthanasia Society 0171 937 7770; 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG.**

## Vatican told to come clean

LEADING British Jews have appealed to the Vatican to open its wartime files on the Nazis' relations with the Catholic Church. Eldred Tabachnik, President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, said: "So long as the archives remain closed, people's understanding of those relationships will be based upon rumour and speculation. It would be a matter of lasting regret if the Vatican were unable to assure the world as to the truth of its relationships during the Nazi era."

## Dario Fo lives!

APOLOGIES to the Nobel Literature laureate Dario Fo for having killed him off in the last issue of *The Freethinker* (Page 2). Happily, our report of his death was greatly exaggerated—and he will be in Stockholm to collect his prize on December 10. The Vatican, which regards Fo as a blasphemer, is said to be "stunned" by the award: *Osservatore Romano* said that giving the prize to Dario Fo was "beyond all imagination". Rejoice!

## SECULARISTS 2 RELIGIOUS 0

THE 12 million-viewer TV programme *Here and Now* on October 6 concerned a so-called "marriage test" for those about to be married in church, recently introduced into several parishes in the UK by an American pastor, Mike McManus.

Mr McManus is appalled by the UK's near-world record divorce rate, and claims that the 100-plus question test, the results of which are fed into a personal computer, dramatically reduces the likelihood of the ensuing marriage ending in divorce.

On air, questions were asked of several couples who had taken the test and Pastor McManus was on hand, thanks to a satellite video link. National Secular Society General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood travelled to Manchester to lead the sceptics.

He drubbed the test as being excessively religious, sexist and simplistic, also attacking the paltry amount of training given to testers. Interestingly, of the couples there who had taken the test, almost all thought it a waste of time, with practically all of the

grooms-to-be specifically objecting to the over-emphasis on religion. The pastor was clearly not used to being treated with anything other than fawning respect. He seemed rather bewildered at the opposition and the audience, scenting blood, even accused him, perhaps unfairly, of just doing it for the money.

And it isn't that Keith Porteous Wood doesn't care about the divorce rate—he told the pastor that a secular pre-marriage course, like the one Relate operates, would be much better.

● Former Editor of *The Freethinker* Bill McIlroy faced a Christian pastor and a Muslim local councillor in a 40-minute discussion programme on BBC Radio Sheffield on Sunday, November 23, adroitly refuting his opponents' claims that the Rushdie *fatwa* had "nothing to do with Islam" and that the conflict in the north of Ireland had "nothing to do with Christianity".

# Schism plan is Carey's Christmas-box

**E**XACTLY five years after the General Synod vote on the ordination of women priests, traditionalists are threatening to break away *en masse* from the Church of England.

According to the *Sunday Times*, it is thought that more than 1,000 out of 13,000 parishes could leave. The Forward in Faith movement, which claims that 550 clergy have left the C of E in the past five years, is reportedly consulting widely as to how (not just *whether*) the split could be achieved and will produce proposals by Christmas.

Edward Barnes, one of the three Provincial Episcopal Visitors ("flying bishops"), evidently a leading light in the breakaway movement, is quoted as saying that many worshippers no longer recognise the church as their own. John Broadhurst, Bishop of Fulham is reported as describing the present situation as a nightmare and: "We have already got a schism".

Open comparisons are being made with the schism when the Methodist Church was formed at the end of the 18th Century, after the death of John Wesley. (Coincidentally, the General Synod is about to debate whether—and, if so, how—the Methodists should be reunited with the C of E.)

The new "breakaway" church could be called the Orthodox Province, the Third Province, or the Church *in* England (my italics), and supporters hope it would have a similar status to the Scottish Episcopal Church.

Dissenters are concerned about what they see as appointments of liberal bishops, "catastrophic reductions in church attendance

by Keith Porteous Wood  
General Secretary  
National Secular Society

since 1992", changes to liturgy and "defections" to the RC church—high profile examples of which include Anne Widdecombe, John Selwyn Gummer and the Duchess of Kent. Above all, the cause of the rift is concern over women priests.

However, others believe the pace of change is much too slow. Supporters of women priests, for example, point to its taking 20 years for their campaign to come to fruition. Noting that their victory resulted from due process, the women priests' supporters ask how the dissenters can claim to be the "authentic C of E" as they do not accept the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the House of Bishops and the Synod.

Were the threatened split to occur, and were it to involve a significant proportion of C of E members, the likelihood of Disestablishment, long campaigned for by the NSS and *The Freethinker*, would be increased. On November 10, the very day after the publication of a prominent article on the threatened schism, it was announced that Archbishops Carey and Hope would form a new council to strengthen the Established status of the C of E. It is not clear whether this was a coincidence or a damage-limitation exercise.

Despite the bluster from the traditionalists, however, many doubt that the breakaway will

occur. They remember that five years ago traditionalists forecast that 3,000 clergy would leave over the issue of women priests—but in the event the number was nearer 300.

Even more relevant is the issue of finance: the dissenters are hopeful that they would be able to share in the Church's assets, although they acknowledge they have no legal right to do so. I cannot imagine the C of E giving up much, if anything—and without buildings and finance it is difficult to see the dissenters making any impact.

Apparently the last straw for some of the current C of E dissenters was the recent much-publicised comment about homosexuality from Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, liaison officer between the Bench of Bishops and the organised homosexual clergy. He announced that, after studying considerable research, he had changed his mind and decided to back the reduction of the age of homosexual consent to 16 (as is likely to be proposed in Parliament).

This is definitely not the Archbishop of Canterbury's opinion. Lambeth Palace was quick to issue a statement slapping-down Bishop Harries: "The Archbishop has made it clear that he would not support lowering the age of consent for homosexual practice and would be worried by the signal it would send out that homosexual practice is on a par with and equal to heterosexual relationships."

We can only speculate as to whether Dr Carey (whose demeanour has just been memorably described in the *Sunday Telegraph* as "truculent bewilderment") will be sending Bishop Harries a Christmas card this year!

## SIGN OF THE TIMES

by Carl Pinel

I HAD been sceptical of weeping statues, visions, and revelations of "Allah", in Arabic, being found in sliced melons and tomatoes. Strangely, when an airline's cushions had an abstract pattern which resembled "Allah", there were protests that they were blasphemous and they were withdrawn to avoid offending Muslim customers. But for some reason a similar approximation of "Allah" appearing in fruit is regarded as miraculous. Perhaps it is just as well; Muslim fanatics have pronounced a number of death threats on those who have incurred their displeasure—and *fatwa* against greengrocers could ruin Sunday lunches. Vegetarians might starve!

My scoffing at such gullibility underwent a re-appraisal recently. As a night nurse (not a proprietary medicine for colds, but paid employment) I checked some resuscitation equipment. Instead of the usual flat-line tracing on the ECG, the print-out showed a pattern similar to that obtained when the machine is wired up to a patient's chest. I had been given a sign!

I was in the hallowed company of

Bernadette of Lourdes and Joan of Arc. Admittedly, Milligan in "Puckoon" had been hit on the head by a bottle when he asked for a sign, but as he was a fictional character I didn't feel in physical danger. I could not claim to be in the same class as St Joan, who heard the voices of St Michael, St Catherine and St Margaret, but the Maid of Orleans was only 13 and lying and/or schizophrenic and/or a confidence trickster.

Still, it was reassuring to find that being middle-aged, with wrinkles and badly-fitting dentures, did not preclude me from being the recipient of a miracle. I would probably be canonised; the Sage of Stockport—St Scepticus, patron saint of superstitions, with a Feast Day on April 1. Unfortunately, the Vatican takes centuries before it canonises its saints, so my mother would not be able to swank to the neighbours. And as pride is a Deadly Sin I couldn't boast about it—which seemed unfair.

The first task was to interpret the sign. For three days, I carried the graph paper in my pocket, looking at it from time-to-time with a feeling of frustration. There had to be a message on the paper, but I couldn't make head or tail of it. Of course, a divine

message would not be easy to interpret. God had confounded the evolutionists by planting fossils that were millions of years old when he created the world at 9 am on October 23, 4004 BC, so he obviously enjoyed riddles and didn't intend them to be solved too easily. How was I, a mere mortal, who couldn't even complete *The Guardian* crossword, going to solve the riddle of the universe hidden in my message?

I scanned the tracing again. Some of the P-waves were long, others were short; the same applied to the T-waves: there was no discernible pattern. And then the answer struck me: if I thought of the short waves as dots and the long waves as dashes, then I was looking at a form of Morse Code. Unfortunately, I couldn't read Morse, but I had a diary which was a mine of obscure information. I thumbed through it until I found the section on Morse Code.

The excitement and my sensitive bowels were incompatible. But after obtaining fresh air and composure, I was able to decode the sign. With trembling fingers, I spelled out the letters and worked out the message for the world to marvel at: C-O-B-B-L-E-R-S!

## On the offensive

YOU want weird? *The Skeptic* has weird. Crop circles, regressive hypnotism, UFOs—and now, in the current issue, “The Alternative to Religion? A brief brush with Humanism” by Mike Walsh, “author of more than a dozen erotic novels”.

Forget the Cottingley Fairies—this chap actually believes that *The Freethinker* is an official organ of British Humanism! Given this, the British Humanist Association will wonder if he also insists that his granny has been painted purple by aliens.

But we’ll let that pass—as we will his attack (the CIA couldn’t have done better) on the *FT* Editor’s report of a holiday in Cuba and his strange notion that: “The concept of a ‘Gay and Lesbian’ movement is ... ridiculous, but is constantly espoused by *The Freethinker*.”

He seems not to understand that our letters column really is open to all ideas—it’s called freethought, Mike, *freethought*—and that while we don’t agree with everything our readers write, we don’t hold with censorship, either. And he is wrong about our attitude to abortion (we do not make it “mandatory” on Humanists to be pro-abortion; try making *anything* mandatory on our readers!).

What really irks us is to be criticised for our “sneering and unnecessarily offensive remarks” about religion, for our “streams of vitriol and invective against those simply trying to keep the faith in which they had been brought up.” Mike, *that is the whole point of the journal*—that and presenting rational alternatives to superstition.

G W Foote, our first Editor, wrote: “*The Freethinker* is an anti-Christian organ, and must therefore be chiefly aggressive. It will wage relentless war against Superstition in general, and against Christian Superstition in particular. It will do its best to employ the resources of Science, Scholarship, Philosophy and Ethics against the claims of the Bible as a Divine Revelation; and it will not scruple to employ for the same purpose any weapons of ridicule or sarcasm that may be borrowed from the armoury of Common Sense.”

We find it impossible *not* to be vitriolic against those who are “simply trying to keep” faiths which lead to children having their genitals razored in the name of God ... nuns torturing their charges ... Jewish women being forced to ride at the back of Israeli buses, old Mississippi style ... priests throughout the world abusing their flocks almost as a rite of the church ... mayhem in the name of God from Ireland to Bosnia, from Luxor to the USA.

Mike, do you expect us to be *respectful* about all this? Stick to writing your erotic novels; we will get on with the job of defending your right to do so.

We need cash to help us keep our offensive suitably offensive. Please send donations to Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald’s Road, London WC1X 8SP. Many thanks to: £100 each, J Manley, W Scott; £75, Humanist Society of Scotland; £50, Anon; £25, E Crapper; £15, T Green; £13 each, I Kirkland and G Powell; £10 each, K Clair, G Emery, G Francis, J McDonald, T Mason, M Sloan; £8, R Woodward; £5 each, Anon, J Archard, W & E Brown, A George, B Hall, A Henness, S Kurti, V Mart, M Powell; £3 each, C Brabbins, E Stockton; £2.50, T Bell. **Total from Oct 24 to Nov 21: £512.50.**

## ASK THE PARSON (10)

by Karl Heath

### DOES GOD HAVE A PLAN? WELL

# A weird and concocted in the

**D**OES God have a plan? What does the very question mean? How do you define *God*? Is He something whose independent existence can be demonstrated through sense-experience? Or is He a subjective idea? *Your* subjective idea? When you say “God”, are you like Humpty-Dumpty, who said: “When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean”?

But “plan” can be defined—a scheme to achieve a particular result which, otherwise, might not happen. “Plan” requires conscious intent and effort. But Almighty God would need no plan. He could achieve any result effortlessly without even a magic wand. That is, if, at all times, He controls every atom in the Universe. But this would be pantheism. He would *be* the Universe and we would be part of Him. There would be no point in worshipping ourselves. Alternatively, if He is incapable of controlling the Universe, there is no point in postulating His existence. He is nothing.

So, we are left with what appears to be your position—namely, that He intervenes, arbitrarily, from time-to-time, influencing events according to a plan. If so, what force or forces are at work in the Universe when He is *not* determining natural events? I am not talking about human behaviour, “Original Sin” and “Free Will”. I am talking about natural events, including those which we humans call disasters. I am talking about what happened before human beings existed. If there are forces which operate independently of God’s will, what is His relationship with those forces? Did He create the Universe, and then “let it rip”?

The Bible is your sacred book. What does it tell us about God’s plan? The Old Testament God is vicious, spiteful and criminal—a mass murderer on a genocidal scale. He slaughters the innocent with the guilty, and the children with the adults. He even slaughters 50,000 of his own chosen people because *some* of them peeped into the Ark of the Covenant to see if it was all right after it had been rescued from the Philistines (Samuel I Ch. 6). He certainly has plans, but they appear clumsy and ineffective. Although the Sons of God found the Daughters of Earth fair, and married them

(Genesis Ch. 6), he decided to drown everybody, except eight people, and all the innocent animals, except two of each. We are not told how the drowned the fishes. After the Flood, God, pleased with the “sweet savour” of burnt offerings—burning flesh—promises that He will not “smite any more every thing living” (Genesis Ch. 8). But by Chapter 11 He has become cross again, and frightened. His people are living in harmony and all speak the same language. They start to build a city and a tower in the plain of Shinar. When He sees what they are doing, He is alarmed, saying “nothing will be restrained from them that they have imagined to do.” So He perpetrates the “Babel” sabotage.

Where do you stand on the Old Testament? If it is just metaphors and allegories, what do they stand for? Surely not for anything acceptable in our morality? Would it not be more honest to admit that the Old Testament stories are silly, nasty fairy tales?

In the New Testament, God’s plan is to save us all, or at least those who believe the story, by creating a Son in human form, and then having Him executed. Some might call it a weird and deranged scheme, concocted in the mind of a madman. Furthermore, what has the plan achieved? The historical evidence does not suggest that the world has become a better place since the Incarnation than it was before.

Now, look for God’s plan in your congregation. Among them sits a typical member—female, grey-haired, wearing spectacles. She enjoys the services, meets her friends and derives emotional comfort. She is God-fearing, praises the Lord in hymns and believes that God knows all about her and cares for her.

Let us call her Miss Witherspoon. But how does she come to be there? Why does she exist? Did God intend her, specifically, to exist? Is she part of His plan? As a child, she was told about “the Lord who made thee.” But how *did* He make her? She had a father and a mother who conceived her, and they, too, had ancestors. How far back shall we go? Even if we stop in 4004 BC, when, Archbishop Ussher claimed, everything began with Adam and Eve, we still need thousands of copulations and conceptions to account for Miss Witherspoon. Not all of these copulations took place in the sanctity of holy matrimony.



ELL, THERE'S SALVATION:

# deranged scheme, the mind of a madman



**'Or perhaps God is an idiot child, and we are living playthings in His toybox—to be thrown out, broken, squeezed, trampled on, tortured or killed for His sadistic delight?'**

Chance encounters, one-off sexual intercourse, incest, rapes, orgies and paedophilic abuse all figured in the biological process which produced Miss Witherspoon, as with all of us—including yourself and the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope.

You cannot say that this biological sequence only accounts for her body. You do not believe in the pre-existence of souls, nor in their independence from the body in earthly life. You believe that souls are sexually-generated, formed at conception, or, at least, before birth. So each link in Miss Witherspoon's ancestral chain, however horrific, has culminated in the immortal soul which you believe her to possess. Was this all God's plan? Did He devise the whole sequence, or did He just let it happen?

Let us expand the notion of human existence as part of God's plan. I lived for many years in the Caribbean area. Most of the population there are of African origin, like 30 million citizens of the USA. They are more religious and God-fearing than the British. Yet none of them would exist today but for the ghastly horror of the slave trade. Were the slave ships wafted across the Atlantic by the Holy Spirit? If God exists, and has the power, He either *made* it happen or *let* it happen.

Let us re-enter your church and take another look at Miss Witherspoon. What's this? She has disappeared. In her place sits the grim-faced Mrs Harrison, clutching her handbag and looking cross. Miss Witherspoon was never born. The house in which she was conceived in her universe does not exist in this one because the builder went bankrupt. In Miss Witherspoon's universe, a certain model

of car was never built. But in Mrs Harrison's universe, Mr Witherspoon was too worried about the defects in his car to make love to his wife.

Can you bring yourself to admit that the existence of each one of us is a winning lottery ticket or football-pool coupon? The hypothetical Miss Witherspoon is one of billions of tickets that never won. Do you gamble? Would you take part in a lottery which was rigged? If everything which has happened was intended to happen, then God is rigging the lottery.

If God is rigging the lottery and decides who is to be born, and who not, then we must accept that—just as He created Jesus in human form—so He ...

- created Judas
- created Pilate
- created Lazarus to die and be revived
- created the donkey which Jesus rode into Jerusalem
- created the cockerel which crowed for Peter
- created the Gadarene swine to receive the evil spirits.

If not, we must conclude that other forces are at work in the Universe, independently of God's will. In which case, either He is powerless to control these forces, or He refrains from exercising His power. But, if the latter, His negative responsibility is as culpable as positive acts.

But if He is not rigging the lottery, then you must accept the dreaded word "chance". So God is sharing control with "chance"? Or is

He sharing control with other forces, even other Gods? Why not other Gods? Your claim that God exists is an assertion. How can you do demonstrate that your assertion is correct? You say that there is one nice God. Suppose someone else says that there are two nasty Gods, or three Goddesses, or four It Gods, or a green-eyed monster God? Or just a Universe without God in which the events are chance events unless we humans arrange otherwise.

Ever since Aristotle made the mistake of calling purpose "Final Cause", there has been confusion between cause and purpose. Aristotle seems to have believed that things are what they are because of cause (the past) and purpose (the future). An acorn is what it is because of what has produced it, but also because it is designed to become a tree. But whereas cause is objective and can be investigated by the senses and science, purpose is subjective. Purposes are human purposes. Why should we wish to be part of the purpose of some superior being?

Are we God's pets?

Are we livestock in God's farmyard—Autumn turkeys wondering why we are so well-fed and cared for?

Are we animals in God's zoo?

Are we experiments in God's vivisection laboratory?

Or perhaps God is an idiot child, and we are living playthings in His toybox—to be thrown out, broken, squeezed, trampled on, tortured or killed for His sadistic delight?

Horrible nonsense? Yes. But can you demonstrate that your benevolent God, "old Greybeard in the sky", who loves us, cares for us, and has wonderful plans for those of us lucky enough to have been born, is not equal nonsense? The real Universe shows no evidence of benevolence. The real world is not like Mrs Alexander's silly hymn. It is neither bright and beautiful nor nasty—but neutral. The adjectives are subjective human reactions.

So also are purposes. The only purposes are human. If we think otherwise, then we have the mentality of slaves.

**● KARL HEATH suggests that readers might put the questions posed in this series to their local clergy—and send any replies to *The Freethinker*.**

# Isaiah Berlin, incomparable hedgehog of philosophy

"PEOPLE don't want their assumptions examined overmuch", Sir Isaiah Berlin told Brian Magee (in *Men of Ideas*, 1978), "they begin to feel uncomfortable when they are made to look into what their beliefs really rest on ... They don't like their roots laid bare and closely inspected." Then he posed a dilemma: "If everybody constantly examined the presuppositions of their beliefs, nobody would be able to act at all. Yet if presuppositions are not examined and left to lie fallow, societies may become ossified ..."

Readers of Berlin's essays, as in this anthology, must be prepared to follow his consideration of virtually all the possibilities raised by the question at issue, and perhaps being made to feel uncomfortable. "History of Ideas", the title of one series of essays, might well be an alternative title for this 650-page book, which is enlightened throughout by the author's incomparable knowledge of European thought and thinkers.

If one had to state the fundamentals of Berlin's own thought, they would have to be pluralism and relativism. Principles, he says, "are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past". And he quotes, with approval, Joseph A Schumpeter: "To realise the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian."

Berlin was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1909. When he was six, he and his family moved to Petrograd, later Leningrad and now St Petersburg, and there are several essays here on

**The philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin died on November 5 at the age of 88. Having obtained a scholarship to Corpus Christi College in 1928, he was to remain at Oxford University for most of his life. The *Daily Telegraph* obituary recalled that "aged eight he had impressed a five-year old friend with some informal lectures on Schopenhauer." Here, COLIN McCALL assesses somewhat later examples of his genius contained in the recently published *The Proper Study of Mankind, an Anthology of Essays* by Isaiah Berlin, edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer. Chatto & Windus. £25.**

Russian writers. He has conversations with Boris Pasternak who thought, like Tolstoy, that Dostoevsky's novels were a dreadful mess, a mixture of chauvinism and hysterical religion; and with the poet Anna Akhmatov, who worshipped Dostoevsky and disliked Tolstoy's sermons. And there is a tribute to the socialist, Alexander Herzen, whose memoirs I read years ago on Berlin's recommendation.

## Muslims 'know who to vote for'

**HUNDREDS** of Islamic leaders from across Britain converged on north London on November 23 to create a new organisation "to win more rights more Muslims" (*Daily Telegraph*). Claiming to represent the UK's 1.5 million Muslims, the Muslim Council of Britain will press for Government funding for Muslim schools and a ban on "anti-Muslim discrimination".

Aqbal Bakranie, who chaired the meeting at Brent town hall, said: "Muslims know who to vote for or who not to vote for. We'll be telling them what actions have been taken by the Government to help Muslims make

the right decision."

At present, Muslims have just one representative in the Commons—described by the *Telegraph* as "the discredited Glasgow MP, Mohammed Sarwar."

Representatives from 300 Islamic organisations attended the launch of the Council. Immigration Minister Mike O'Brien said he welcomed its aims and would be pleased to meet the organisers.

But it is not without its opponents. Outside the meeting, young Muslims circulated leaflets accusing the Council of "playing into the hands of the Jewish lobby and media by encouraging Muslims to be British first and religious second."

Perhaps the best known piece, "The Hedgehog and the Fox", on Tolstoy, takes its title from a line in the fragments of the Greek poet, Archilochus, which says "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing". And I learn from Stuart Jeffries, of *The Guardian*, that Michael Ignatieff (whose biography of Berlin is expected soon) thinks that Berlin was worried that he might be thought a fox, when he was, in fact, a hedgehog.

I'm not really sure how or, indeed, whether one can tell the difference and, even if one can, why the "hedgehog" is to be preferred. Certainly Berlin knew many things. The most impressive feature of the essays collected in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, as of his other works, is their intellectual scope.

He tells us that the growing bibliography on Machiavelli in 1972 contained more than three thousand items and, while he might not claim to have read them all, it is clear from the text and footnotes that a goodly number have come under his purview. (And it is fitting, here, to welcome the often long and informative notes on the same page as the text—a rarity in books these days.)

"If morals relate to human conduct", he writes, "and men are by nature social, Christian morality cannot be a guide for normal social existence. It remained for someone to state this. Machiavelli did so." That, in the title of the piece, was his "originality".

Berlin champions the Neapolitan Giambattista Vico (1688-1744), "the very exemplar of a lonely thinker", and the German Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), "the most formidable of the adversaries of the French *philosophes* and their German disciples". Of the *philosophes* themselves, he has much to say on Voltaire, whose ridicule "probably did more for the triumph of civilised values than any writer who ever lived", Diderot and the other *Encyclopedists*.

Readers, as I have said, may feel uncomfortable when their beliefs come under critical review, but I detect a little discomfort in the author himself in his discussions of determinism. He doesn't "wish to say" that it is "necessarily false", only that "we neither speak nor think as if it could be true"; and in a typically long sentence he argues that to "accept the determinist hypothesis, and yet continue to think and speak much as we do at present is to breed intellectual confusion".

Yet he has already acknowledged that "the growth of science and historical knowledge does in fact tend to show—make probable—that much of what was hitherto attributed to the acts of the unfettered wills of individuals can be satisfactorily explained only by the working of other, 'natural', impersonal factors". And he goes on to speak of "the narrowness of the field within which we can begin to claim to be free ..."

So we have had to adapt our speech and thought in a deterministic direction and can, no doubt, do so again without the "intellectual confusion" that Isaiah Berlin predicts.

Terry Sanderson on the media

# Meaningless research into a meaningless activity

**H**ERE we go again. Yet more "proof" that our destinies are written in the stars. Astrology, says "Euro-millionaire" Gunther Sachs, "plays a significant part in shaping our lives."

Mr Sachs, described as "one of the world's richest playboys" and "ex-husband of Brigitte Bardot" has produced a book, *The Astrology File*, which he claims shows that "there is a definite link between the stars and human behaviour".

He is reported to have "gathered a team of scientists and statisticians who, over two years, analysed the lives of nearly two million men and women."

This news was, of course, jumped on with great glee by the *Daily Mail*, official organ of the superstitious and credulous. It reported that Mr Sachs had used "established statistical techniques" and had gathered data from the official statistics office in Switzerland where, apparently, the authorities have "recorded the hour of every citizen's birth since 1875"

## How many believers in astrology are Leos?

Our intrepid investigator is alleged to have laid down "very rigid rules for his study". He stipulated that the team was not to start with any assumptions: the study must be based exclusively on empirical data; astrologists were not to be consulted; and the results were to be independently controlled. After the data was compiled, he "brought in a German research expert and two statisticians from Munich University who checked the figures".

So what did he find? Well, the *Daily Mail* tells us that there is a "clear pattern of a particular star sign marrying someone of another particular sign." The paper quotes no hard figures, but we are told that the "likelihood of it happening accidentally is a one-in-50,000 chance".

The same applied to divorce: "The following combinations of star signs are most likely to find their marriage on the rocks: Gemini husband and Taurus wife; Taurus male and Cancer female; Pisces male and Scorpio female; Aries husband and wife."

Other findings were that Scorpios and Geminis steal less than other star signs, Capricorns are more likely to be convicted of drug-dealing, Sagittarians steal cars, and Taureans embezzle. Arians die mostly from heart attacks, Librans from lung cancer and Leos from brain disease.

This was all music to the ears of the *Daily Express* astrologer, Marjorie Orr. She says that "cynics and sceptics" will be silenced by this new evidence. "Even scientific super-guru Richard Dawkins," she rather cheekily says, "who once launched a blistering attack on astrology as an exercise in 'meta-twaddle', distinguishes birth chart astrology from the simple astrology on which newspaper and magazine horoscopes are based."

I'm not sure that Professor Dawkins will be pleased to read that he has been recruited by the astrology apologists as a believer in "real" astrology (as opposed to pretend newspaper astrology). But whatever Richard Dawkins might think, I'm afraid Marjorie Orr's arguments still fail to move this sceptic.

If our futures really are pre-ordained by some unknown influence from the heavens (which presumably is not God), then why is it only partly pre-ordained? After all, *kismet* is *kismet*. Surely there is no such thing as semi-*kismet*. If there is, it isn't *kismet*. How can your future be written in the stars and then not be fixed? If you can then go and change it—which is what the astrologers claim—how can you know that it was your destiny in the first place?

Most astrologers say—and Marjorie Orr is no exception—that astrology provides merely a guide to the future. She writes: "There are dangers in obsessive reliance on its information, but handled lightly, astrology helps enormously."

Helps what, exactly?

If events are really pre-ordained, how come we were so shocked by the sudden death of Princess Diana? If anyone could have been warned of danger by astrology, surely it was her? She's had more birth charts made than Soft Mick. The point that has been made several times in *The Freethinker* is: *if the power of astrology is so strong, how was it that nobody managed to warn Di not to get in that car that night?* After all, if everything has truly been decided in advance by the celestial powers—that-

be, then there can be no accidents. Accidents are a contradiction in terms.

The simple explanation is that nobody had any idea what was going to happen that night in Paris. Events in the universe are random, created by a reaction with an infinite number of other random events. Not even Gunther Sachs or Marjorie Orr were able to keep Diana out of that car (although, of course, there were plenty of self-proclaimed seers who came forward after the event to say they'd foretold it).

Astrology is illogical nonsense. If all is pre-ordained, then what is the use of morality? After all, every Sagittarian car thief could say that it wasn't his fault—the stars had already made the decision for him to nick that Jaguar. Why is Myra Hindley in jail? After all, she could not possibly have stopped herself doing what she did—it was already determined by the position of the planets at her birth. It wasn't her fault at all!

If millionaire playboys want to waste their money on meaningless research into a meaningless activity, that's up to them. But my stars tell me that the money could have been put to much better use.

*THE TIMES* reports that "a powerful movement of 'godly disobedience'" has arisen in the state of Alabama following a court case that "struck out a state law allowing prayer in public schools."

Naturally the religious fanatics were straight on the case; there is nothing that Christians thrive on better than a spot of supposed persecution.

As an atheist—and a proselytising atheist at that—I would like to see people pooh-pooh prayer, but I want them to renounce it of their own free will. Persuasion and education is the only way to undermine religion; coercion and legal restrictions only make the faith grow stronger.

## New Labour—old horrors

**THE spin-doctors made a great to-do over the Government's ban on the use of animals in cosmetic testing. They failed to mention that the number of animals used and destroyed in military testing has doubled since 1992 and is set to grow further.**

Last year, 11,221 procedures were carried out on animals, including marmosets, pigs, rabbits, Rhesus monkeys, sheep, goats, guinea pigs, rats and mice by the Defence and Evaluation and Research Agency at the infamous Porton Down. This compares with 4,500 procedures in 1992 (*The Independent*, November 22).

Experiments have included anaesthetised pigs being strapped to trolleys and subjected to blasts at close range to test body-armour. Monkeys were shot above the eye to investigate the effects of high-velocity missiles on brain tissue. There are plans to use rodents and monkeys to test the vaccines and tablets which were given to Gulf War soldiers.

Readers of *The Freethinker* might like to test Tony Blair's Christian conscience on such matters by writing to him at Downing Street. Paul Flynn (Labour, Newport West) and Norman Baker (Liberal Democrat, Lewes) are among the MPs intent on continuing to expose these outrages; no doubt they would be encouraged by letters of support.

# News of their World

monitored by  
**BILL McILROY**

CHRISTIANS are turning up on Maui, one of the Hawaiian islands, to pray at a rock formation which they claim is shaped like the late John F Kennedy's face.

"It's a miracle" says pilgrim Judith Lalby. "I come here every morning to pray. So do countless others. We ask God to allow the great man's strength and wisdom to guide our wonderful country.

"I know our prayers are answered. God is sending the spirit of JFK to guide and protect the United States from beyond the grave."

Meanwhile, back at the White House, the current President and Mrs Clinton have been visited on several occasions by a well-wisher who warns them that the end is nigh.

Several staff members—all of whom refuse to be identified—report that a strange light has appeared in parts of the building. One claimed that it became brighter and brighter until the whole room was glowing: "Then in the midst of the light, the figure of Jesus appeared. There was no mistaking who he was. He held out his hands and there were nail marks on the palms.

"He told Mrs Clinton we were in the final days and Americans should turn their lives over to God."

A kitchen worker claims he saw an apparition of Jesus confront President Clinton in a corridor: "He spoke to the President for a few minutes and told him to use his power in the cause of religion. And that Mrs Clinton should teach America's women to love their husbands and children, not their careers."

The Clintons are reported to be "very, very concerned". With religious nutters on the White

House staff, they have cause to be.

CLARK'S, the chain of footwear shops, is the latest company to offend religionists. By inadvertently putting the names of deities on two of their products, the firm has "outraged" the Hindu faithful.

A representative of Clark's explained: "Names are randomly selected from a computer and would never have been used if we knew the Hindu community would be offended or upset."

But that did not placate Kishor Ruparelia, secretary of the UK Vishwa Hindu Parishad. He has threatened to take out a court injunction.

"Shoes and feet are viewed as the dirtiest part of the body by Hindus", he declared. "It is absolutely disgraceful that Clark's have named their footwear after aspects of our supreme being. By their action they have insulted our community and our religion."

The shoe firm's apology was immediate and suitably grovelling. Their customer service manager said the company was extremely upset.

"We are completely embarrassed and realise we have made a terrible mistake. We sincerely apologise that the religious significance of these names was overlooked."

A directive has been sent to the company's 600 shops. The Hindu deities' names must be removed from their stock of shoe boxes.

DAME Barbara Cartland has taken a rest from churning out bodice-rippers. The novelist-turned-essayist has contributed *Back to Basics* [!] and *the Search for Love* to a policy paper

published by the Institute of Community Studies.

The very religious and very wealthy Dame Barbara has no time for working mothers and couples "living in sin". She denounces ill-disposed miscreants who campaign for equal rights. All that movement achieved, she claims, "was to make the woman throw away the Bible."

Like the prolific romantic novelist she is, Dame Barbara the social historian is a purveyor of fiction. For example: "Where we had morality in the home, the village, the town ... we now have wife-swapping in small towns and many other unpleasant sexual pastimes."

The celebrated novelist's thesis appears to be that before women were made to throw away the Bible, social stability and domestic bliss were the norm. Infanticide, incest, child prostitution, botched abortion and certainly wife-swapping in small towns were unknown.

Dame Barbara's previous forays into social affairs include a campaign to increase Christian indoctrination in the nation's schools.

FATHER Mario Frittitta, a Carmelite monk, has been detained by the Palermo police and charged with aiding and abetting the Mafia. He was alleged to have been closely associated with Pietro Aglieri, the Cosa Nostra's second-in-command.

When the police caught up with Aglieri earlier this year, they discovered a chapel and hundreds of religious texts at his hideout. It was there that Father Frittitta celebrated Mass at Christmas and Easter for the Mafia boss.

## Five-point bid for abortion law reform

BACK in the 1960s when the Abortion Law Reform Association helped David Steel to steer his Abortion Bill through Parliament, it was the only organisation campaigning for safe, legal abortion in this country. Thirty years on, ALRA is part of a much larger pro-choice movement campaigning for the reform of that law to give women the right to choose on abortion—in law and in practice.

But there is still a long way to go. ALRA is marking the 30th anniversary of the Act by campaigning for improved NHS abortion services in the areas of the country where abortion is still difficult to obtain.

ALRA is working with many other bodies, some as part of the Pro-Choice Alliance and others with broader interests, to fight for five changes to the 1967 Abortion Act:

● To allow abortion on request up to and including 14 weeks of pregnancy.

● To make abortion available with only one doctor's approval from 15 to 24 weeks under the current criteria.

● To place a duty on doctors to declare their conscientious objection to abortion and refer a woman immediately to another doctor who does not share that view.

● To extend this amended Act to the North of Ireland.

● To place a duty on the NHS to provide adequate abortion services for local need.

Abortion on request in the first three months of pregnancy is available in 24 European countries, the USA and Canada. In the western world, only the Republic of Ireland and Malta have a more restrictive law than Britain.

ALRA believes that a woman is the best judge of how a pregnancy will affect her—it is her mind, her life and her future and only she knows how she will feel: "Why should two doctors decide for her? Or MPs, priests, judges? Why are some abortions morally acceptable and others not? How can it be morally right to force a woman to have an unwanted child when she has already made a responsible decision not to continue with an unplanned pregnancy?"

Only two out of three women get NHS abortions—28 per cent of women in England and Wales have to find a clinic and pay for private health care, causing delay and further emotional distress. In some areas, NHS abortion services are severely limited because health authorities choose not to fund them on moral grounds. Some GPs are judgmental and unsympathetic to women asking for abortion.

ALRA believes the NHS should fund at least 90 per cent of all abortions. Health authorities should ensure abortion services are easily accessible to all local women: "Why should women be classed as undeserving or irresponsible by being refused NHS care? Why should women have to pay for abortion when maternity services would be offered free, regardless of

the circumstances?"

Doctors can opt out of abortion treatment because they conscientiously object—but they do not have to give reasons to their patients. Women therefore do not know if their family doctor or consultant is fundamentally opposed to abortion, even after a consultation. Such doctors are often obstructive or even hostile.

ALRA believes doctors should have to register their conscientious objection and make their views publicly known, particularly to their patients: "Why should women be made to feel guilty by doctors with religious or ethical views opposed to abortion? Surely women should be offered help as quickly and as early in pregnancy as possible?"

The Channel Isles and Isle of Man have brought in their own laws legalising abortion so the north of Ireland alone is still covered by 60-year-old English case law on abortion.

Among the many organisations supporting ALRA's five points are the Birth Control Trust, Marie Stopes International, Doctors for a Woman's Choice on Abortion, the Family Planning Association and the Scottish Abortion Campaign. The TUC has called "for the right of all women to adequate services for contraception and abortion on request, available free of charge on the NHS."

For further information on the campaign, contact Jane Roe at ALRA, 11-13 Charlotte Street, London W1P 1HD (telephone 0171 637 7264).

# You're telling us!

## The sham of Christmas

SINCE long before the dawn of History, Europeans have been celebrating the Winter Solstice, in happy anticipation of longer, brighter and warmer days, of new growth and eventually new harvest. The motivation for this celebration was no doubt reinforced by a need for something that could cheer people up in the darkest and most barren of seasons. And the extra calories the festivities brought along were probably needed too.

The name of the game would have differed from region to region. So would customs and observances. But the basic motivation, the essence, would have been the same.

During the course of the 4th Century, however, the Christian churches within the Roman Empire eventually gained promotion from scapegoats to bully-boys and decided to crack down on and put an end to this popular celebration, which they considered pagan, sinful and wholly unacceptable. But the tradition was too deep-rooted, too strongly motivated and too dearly loved. To eradicate it turned out to be impossible.

It was at this point that a smart-alec among the church strategists had a bright idea: what if they could make people believe the ever-so-innocent porkie that Jesus was born on the day of the Solstice? Then people could gradually be brought around to believing that what they were celebrating at mid-winter was the birth of Christ! Then the insuppressible mid-winter celebrations would be a winning card in the hands of the Church!

The idea was accepted, the card was played and, as we very well know, in the fullness of time the venture turned out to be a tremendous success. But a fraud it was, and a fraud it remains; a disgraceful deception based on a shameless lie.

I suppose most people who have been serving up this Christmas porkie through the centuries have done so in ignorance and can be excused. But for people who are committed to truth and honesty and who are not that ignorant, the sham of Christmas cannot be acceptable.

The good old pre-Christian Yule, however, is the honest and genuine thing: when taken in its pure and basic form that is, untainted by the inessential clutter of old superstitions. Celebrations and festivities on that basis can be accepted and enjoyed by anybody and everybody without compromising truth and honesty.

I have the pleasure, therefore, to extend to all honest people of good will and decency my very best wishes for an enjoyable Yule and a very happy New Year!

**YNGVE BAUTZ**  
Newcastle on Tyne

## Convert to ufology?

I'M SORRY my old friend Bob Morrell has fallen for ufology, and with all the fervency of a convert to the faith.

He objects (October) to my substituting "enthusiast" for "authority" on the subject of UFOs, and refers me to Dr J Allen Hyneck, who

is Professor of Astronomy at Northwestern University, USA and, incidentally, technical consultant to Steven Spielberg's film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. My distinction, I would argue, still applies. Hyneck may be an authority in his astronomical field; he is merely a UFO *enthusiast*. Martin Gardner, in his review of the film, aptly described Hyneck as the Conan Doyle of ufology, and cited an interview the professor gave to the occult magazine *Fate* in June 1976.

"There are other planes of existence—the astral plane, the etheric plane and so forth", Hyneck said. "I believe the world is in a psychic revolution that most of us are not aware of ... The new puzzle pieces are being given to us by the whole parapsychological scene—ESP, telepathy, the Uri Geller phenomena, psychic healing and particularly psychic surgery." And UFOs? "Maybe they're an example of the Uri Geller-type phenomena in which physical effects occur apparently without physical causes ..."

Does Bob Morrell, one-time secretary of the Nottingham Branch of the National Secular Society, accept this twaddle because it comes from a professor of astronomy? A little less enthusiasm and a little more Morrellian scepticism is surely called for.

**COLIN MCCALL**  
Herts

MICHAEL HILL is wrong about 10 per cent of UFO sightings (reports) being unexplained "after examination by hardened sceptics" (October). This is usually the stance of experienced ufologists—that is, people who investigate reports from a position of belief that a real UFO phenomenon exists. Hardened sceptics (I am perhaps one of the most hardened) claim that all UFO reports can be explained.

Regarding the "sceptics' problem", it is that despite the probability that ILE (Intelligent Life Elsewhere) exists, there is no evidence that it does or that it has reached Earth. Nor are UFO reports any evidence for ILE; they are merely evidence for the persistence of the UFO Myth.

R W Morrell suggests that Colin McCall read some of the works (on UFOs) by the late Professor Hynek, a professional astronomer who was presumably qualified to assess "lights in the sky", unless his enthusiasm negated his experience. Unfortunately Hynek's enthusiasm *did* negate his experience; believing that a real phenomenon existed, he failed to see that there were mundane explanations, even astronomical ones, for many of the reports he exhibited as evidence for the existence of that phenomenon.

Tony Akkermans recommends sceptic Philip Klass's *UFOs Explained* (1974). Unfortunately, Klass's sceptical enthusiasm negates his experience; believing that all who report UFOs are either deluded or jokers, he mocks them and misses clues that could actually explain their reports. Many US sceptics jump to the first prosaic explanation that comes to mind, especially hoax, when no evidence exists to support that explanation. Advocating the wrong prosaic explanation is nearly as bad as advocating an erroneous and unjustified exotic one. Readers would be better off reading my book, *The UFO Mystery Solved* (1994), where experience is not impaired by enthusiasm.

**STEUART CAMPBELL**  
Edinburgh

## For maximum effectiveness

LOOKING at some of this year's correspondence in *The Freethinker*, I am disturbed at the idea that there is not room in this country for more than one secularist organisation and that in order to maximise office efficiency the organisations should amalgamate.

I think that this is a very dangerous trend and am worried that the narrow ideas of a few people could effectively squeeze the range of secularist opinion into one centralist organisation.

There was, is and always will be differing ideas of the definitions of humanism, secularism, rationalism, atheism, agnosticism, as well as views on tactics, ways of working towards our aims, countering the effects of religions—adversarial, entryist or ecumenical!

While many people are quite happy to work within an organisation with people with very different views, others find it intolerable—from those who abhor any overt criticism of religion or the churches to those who insist on calling a spade a bloody shovel. Some emphasise the "respectable approach", working with the great and good, policy-makers; others take their atheism to mean a narrow unbelief in God without any need to reject anti-humanitarian political attitudes or policies.

Every contribution has its place—"moderates" and "extremists" are only moderate or extreme in relation to each other; to ignore this is to narrow the movement and limit its range of activity and appeal. Those who sit down with the policy-makers, bishops and so on cannot reasonably be expected to level vigorous criticism, let alone harsh attack, however justified. Yet both are necessary for maximum effectiveness.

Which organisation people join is often a matter of chance, and many belong to more than one. Each organisation has its own history and tradition, strengths and weaknesses, and differences of emphasis and tactics.

This breadth is, or should be, a strength, provided that those in the central offices co-operate wherever possible in office equipment, management, administration, and in policy and campaigns where this is agreed. There is, after all, in these days of information technology, no need for all administrative work to be done in a central location. (A small joint sub-committee could be set up to co-ordinate and facilitate communication and co-operation between the organisations).

In terms of public image, however, I think it is of great importance that there is a national movement operating from a national headquarters through which it can present a unity of purpose and refer inquirers to the most appropriate sources of information. It would be against the interests of the movement if any of the strong and talented people entrusted with the administration of the movement considered themselves and their views more important than the tolerance of the wide range of members now catered for.

**S E LORD**  
Westerham

# You're telling us!

From Page 13

## Under one banner

I STRONGLY support the view of Roy Saich that there should be one national organisation to replace the current confusion. Most friends I tell about BHA and NSS are only half-interested: as time goes by, religion becomes more and more untenable and churches less attended, without our help, they say. Others attend the group, then drift away. The fact remains, though, that there is work to do. Established bigots continue to maintain religious privilege at the expense of freedom. They encroach on our equality in public life, interfere in the schools, the media, and so on. Other religions proclaim *fatwah*, set up single-religion-single-sex schools—a threat to social cohesion, to education and to girls' education in particular. And more.

In short, freedom from dogma needs defending. That is our responsibility and it needs one strong organisation under one banner; one clear, unequivocal voice. There will still be room for people to promote their own enthusiasms within such an organisation, but that it stands against religious interference should be clear to everybody. Then people will stop leaving in boredom, and others will come in with a new sense of commitment. And that's a good, clear name for it: Freedom from Dogma.

ALFRED DOWSON  
Shropshire

## Knock, Knock!

I SEEM to recall that many years ago I read some secular account of the supposed apparition at Knock, and it was suggested that some magic lantern kind of stunt had been pulled.

Through *The Freethinker* office, can any reader supply me with any book, account, pamphlet or what-have-you on that matter?

I have indeed been to Knock and, while being impressed with some of the local architecture, had a very strong gut-feeling that it was all a "con".

CHARLES MARSHALL  
Dorset

## Menace of Islam

KEITH BELL (November) correctly highlights the growing menace of Islam and the tendency of politicians and the media to keep their heads below the parapet.

However, for him to imply that this politically correct cop-out is also muzzling the Editor of *The Freethinker* would suggest that he hasn't done his homework. I have therefore done it for him.

In the past 12 month period there have been a total of 14 items, not counting the letter pages, critical of various aspects of Islam, including two extensive editorials (April and July), strongly condemning a whole range of unacceptable consequences of that religion. There were of course many more when the Nasreen and Rushdie outrages were more topical.

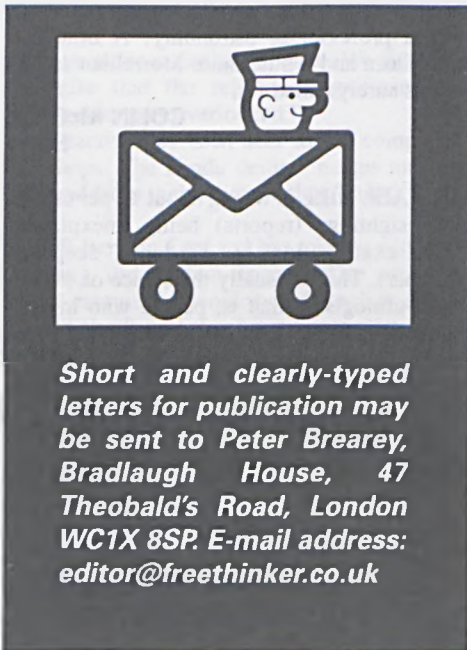
In the current climate it takes considerable courage to voice criticism of belligerent fundamentalism and we should be proud that *The Freethinker*, at least, refuses to be cowed.

TONY AKKERMANS  
Leeds

## Humanist Abraham?

WHILE contemplating the Islamic celebration of *Eid-ul-Adha*, that is of pious Abraham's message from God not to kill his son, I actually had a revelation. Due to recent reading, I now accept that it was prevalent among most cultures in the area to sacrifice their first-born son, for a variety of reasons.

The revelation is that: (a) Culture via religion ordered Abraham to kill his son, and not a god; (b) Abraham committed apostasy in not killing his son; (c) Abraham's reluctance was due to human reason and fatherly love—genetically programmed into us to ensure survival of the



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

species; (d) Abraham could not admit his reasons as ostracism would follow, so said God told him to abstain, to cover-up; (e) Abraham's action was celebrated and accepted by all (up to this day) as fathers could now keep their first-born son (and maybe only son); (f) Abraham was the first humanist.

Can anyone think of anything better?

PETER HANNA  
Lidcombe NSW

## Nightmare operation

PERHAPS it's only possible to appreciate the full horror of female genital mutilation (FGM) if we imagine a headline: PARENTS IGNORE SCREAMS, STAND BY AS DAUGHTER SEXUALLY MUTILATED! Surely the public would demand retribution for such a dreadful crime.

But wait! This headline may never appear if the parents are Muslims: FGM is illegal in this

country but Muslim parents do this horrendous thing to their eight-year-old daughters with impunity. It's "a religious ritual", so it must be okay!

It is shameful that our health and social workers give tacit approval to this nightmare "operation", which Muslims claim is "helpful" to a girl because it curbs her sexual drive. Doubtless it does—after such an experience she might never want to have sexual relations. This is not considered a problem. Perhaps Muslims prefer unwilling wives.

Barbara Smoker (November) finds it strange that it is often the mothers and grandmothers of these eight-year-old girls who are most vociferous in their approval of this cruel practice. It is incredible. But one must remember that the only variable that correlates with abuse is that the abusers themselves have been abused. One would assume an abused person would be the last to abuse another, but the opposite is the case; human nature is indeed strange.

Muslims literally believe that cleanliness is next to godliness. I have a booklet entitled *Personal Hygiene in Islam* (published by "Islamic Medical Association"). Quoting from the Qur'an, it says "... Allah loves those ... who keep themselves clean"; it gives detailed instructions on how to obey the injunctions of the Qur'an, including what to do "if you have had contact with women" (notice the plural).

The booklet is almost entirely devoted to instructing males. In mentioning the medical advantages of circumcision, the booklet mentions "woman" for the first and last time, stating that there is no evidence relating female circumcision to carcinoma of the cervix.

Unsurprisingly, although FGM may not lead to carcinoma of the cervix, it does often lead to other unpleasant side-effects. The chief one is incontinence, particularly after childbirth. The mother is then considered "unclean" and often thrown out of the house by her god-fearing husband.

HELEN WATSON  
Bath

## The Scotsman

WITH reference to the recent correspondence on Princess Di and David Kirkland's condemnation of *The Scotsman* apology over its recent caption competition, I would like to quote from the editorial of *The Scotsman* which may help to redeem its reputation (but only slightly!).

After the incident with the helicopter and the fortune-teller (not clairvoyant—I hate that word), the paper posed the question: "And what are we supposed to think when the mother of the heir to the throne displays the intellectual reach of a particularly gullible medieval peasant?" That says it all.

I sent in a letter to the same newspaper recently which asked: "I wonder if now is an appropriate time to question whether the fortune-teller that Diana and Dodi consulted a few months ago had any premonition of the recent tragedy, and, if so, did she forewarn them?" They chose not to publish—even I could have predicted that!

ALAN HENNESS  
Grangemouth

Turn to Page 15

# You're telling us!

From Page 14

I WAS most interested in Barbara Smoker's recent contributions concerning the involvement of Diana and Dodi with clairvoyants and psychics. But I could not grasp what Barbara meant in the last sentence of her November letter: "I wonder if any infallible prediction could logically (rationally does not come into it, of course) have the effect of nullifying itself!" Can someone explain the difference between logic and reason?

JOHN WATSON  
Sunderland

## Ghosts & 'spooks'

THIS article entitled "Don't believe in ghosts? Tune in ..." was in last Tuesday's [November 4] new technology section of the *Telegraph*: "Halloween weekend saw an unbelievable crop of supernatural films on TV—the sort of programming that, according to one expert, could encourage belief in ghosts, witches, aliens and other paranormal beings.

"Prof Glenn Sparks of Purdue University found that the more 'paranormal' programmes people watch the more likely they are to believe in paranormal phenomena. 'Television may explain 10 per cent of belief in the paranormal' he wrote in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*."

Did you see last night's (November 9) BBC1 programme on the how the Vatican co-operated with the CIA to defeat the Soviet Union?

I had to smile at the comment from one CIA spokesperson along the lines of "The Soviet Union promised its people heaven in their real life and failed, while the Vatican promised heaven in the after-life and has not failed!"

There was a nice twist at the end though when the programme said that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, US capitalism benefited massively as the Russians embraced rampant materialism, while the free rein of the Catholic church has failed to make any inroads to improving the spiritual life of the Russian people!

LEWIS ROGER  
By e-mail

## Romans & Christians

KARL HEATH (November) accuses the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a US Protestant mission to South American Indians, of "vicious depravity" and "linguistic lying": "Translated into native languages 'Romans' Ch.13, v.1, which in the Authorised Version reads 'Let every soul be subject to the higher powers—the powers that are ordained of 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!"

And, no doubt, music in the ears of the present democratic governments in Latin America. But Karl Heath's claim that the SIL has distorted the Bible in the interests of "foreign

exploiters" and local dictators is (at least in this instance) completely false.

First, he misquotes the AV. It actually reads: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God."

Second, modern English translations give the verse in the same sense as the SIL does, or even more forcefully:

"Everyone must obey the state authorities, because no authority exists without God's permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God." (Today's English Version/Good News Bible).

"Every person must submit to the supreme authorities. There is no authority but by act of God, and the existing authorities are instituted by him;" (New English Bible).

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." (New International Version).

Fortunately for the oppressed, any self-respecting cleric who puts his mind to it can turn Romans 13 into a vindication of the right of revolution. A Dominican friar whom I met on a Gulf War demonstration could accomplish this in five minutes flat. I have no doubt that Protestant pastors are capable of the same agility, should the need arise.

KEN MacLEOD  
West Lothian

## Jack London, Freethinker

COLIN McCALL's November review of the Alex Kershaw biography of Jack London was excellent.

Others might be interested in London's *Before Adam*, a 1907 work that was not mentioned but includes his freethinking.

When 18, London was arrested (June 29, 1894) in Niagara Falls, New York, on a charge of vagrancy. *The Buffalo Courier* headlined the story, describing how "John London" was one of 13 vagrants caught in a crackdown: London was handcuffed to a tall black prisoner, shackled to the remainder of the troop of convicted vagrants, and unceremoniously led through the streets of Niagara Falls.

After a 30-day sentence, he and a fellow prisoner panhandled some change in Buffalo, went to a German saloon which his new friend wanted to rob, and London made a quick exit, jumping from the men's room window in the back of the saloon. He then hopped a freight train and returned to California.

The jailing likely inspired his description of Buck, the canine hero of *Call of the Wild*: "Then the rope was removed and he was flung into a cage-like crate. There he lay for the remainder of the weary night, nursing his wrath and wounded pride. He could not understand what it all meant. What did they want with him, these strange men? Why were they keeping him pent up in this narrow crate? He did not know why, but he felt oppressed by the vague sense of impending calamity. Several times during the night he sprang to his feet when the shed door rattled ..."

Of interest to us Secular Humanists is what the police docket recorded: that London was

single, had a mother and father who were living, that he listed his occupation as "sailor," and informed the officers that his religion was "atheist."

WARREN ALLEN SMITH  
Free Inquiry

## Wonderful?

IN such former Communist countries as Bulgaria and Romania, children are dying of cold and hunger. Thousands of Gypsies are leaving former-Czechoslovakia. There is a flourishing mafia in the former Soviet Union.

How is it that none of the above happenings occurred when all these countries were in the grip of the wicked Stalinists, but only now, following the establishment of wonderful democracy?

JHMORTEN  
London WC1

## Immoral religion

THE bishops here in Ireland have been meeting to discuss the vocations crisis, among other things.

As an atheist, I am certain that for anybody to encourage vocations to the priesthood is a terrible mistake—for it is asking young men to become slaves to a religion that is neither believable nor truly good.

The Catholic Church demands huge sacrifices and even martyrdom for her sake. She has no right to do this, for she has no honest evidence for her doctrines. Her using of miracles as evidence is clearly fallacious. When she says we cannot understand why evil exists, it is clear that she is only guessing; she says that miracles are done to support her teaching, but it may be that we cannot understand their purpose either.

When God's ways are so mystifying, why shouldn't Satan's be the same? Why can't Satan do good miracles for an evil purpose that we will never be able to discover?

An all-good God would not ask you to suffer for a religion that has no evidence.

Catholicism, following Christ, condemns doubt as sinful. You cannot help what you sincerely think, so, though doubt can be evil, it can never be sinful.

The Catholic Church praises the good works of venial sinners, though they are simply informing God that they will do good when it suits them. The good is just a pretence. The prayers of sinners are insults. Catholicism is an immoral religion.

Anyone who supports the Catholic Church by giving her money or going to Mass is to blame for the suffering of those who have been abused by her priests. The Church must hold that the priests should not be exposed and be punished, for it does grave spiritual damage to her and she believes the soul comes before the body. By assisting her, you are assisting a cult that would have abuse covered up for her sake, which is detestable for she has no evidence that she is the right religion.

Now you will see that the fall in vocations is a cause for celebration.

PATRICK GORMLEY  
Co Donegal

# 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, January 4, 4.30 pm: Public Meeting. Information: 01273 733215.

**Bristol Humanists:** Information: Margaret Dearnaley on 0117 9502960 or Hugh Thomas on 0117 9871751.

**Bromley Humanists:** Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680.

**Central London Humanists:** Information: Cherie Holt on 0171 916 3015 or Hilary Leighter on 01895 632096.

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01296 623730.

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

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

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, December 18, 7.30 pm: Winter Solstice Party.

**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). January 9: Joint meeting with Amnesty International's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Network.

**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.

**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. 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. December 18: Winter Solstice Party.

**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. 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. 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, January 7, 8 pm: Public Meeting. Wednesday, December 3, 7.30 pm for 8 pm: Annual Dinner; 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. Meetings at Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton, at 7.30 pm. December 10: John Chitty, UNA: *Longevity and World Population*. January 14: Frank Evans: *Charles Darwin—the man, his theory and its impact today*. March 11: AGM.

**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.

## The British Humanist Association & The Voltaire Lectures Fund

### The 1997 Voltaire Lecture

Professor Robert Hinde FRS  
University of Cambridge

## RELIGION AND DARWINISM

6.30 pm Tuesday December 9  
The Library Conway Hall  
Red Lion Square London WC1

To book free tickets call 0171 430 0908