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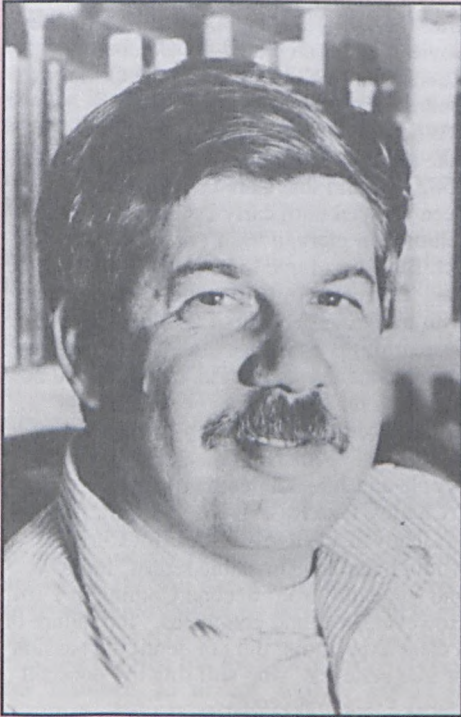
# Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

CO1  
£1

Vol 118 No 1

January 1998



# 1998: A New Year nearer the non-Millennium

Colin McCall on Stephen Jay Gould, Page 2

Meredith and the best of causes:  
Nicolas Walter, Page 8





# Up Front

## A precisely arbitrary countdown

ALTHOUGH many people don't want it, and would prefer the money to be used for other, more important social purposes, Peter Mandelson, the Minister without Portfolio, has decided that we are to have a hugely expensive Millennium Dome at Greenwich.

He doesn't know yet what to put in it—apart from a 40-minute show by impresario Sir Cameron MacKintosh, who produced *Cats*, *Miss Saigon*, and *Les Miserables*

(there's culture for you!)—but he will consider ideas from 11 designers on themes such as “body, soul and mind”. Among the chosen designers' briefs, *The Guardian* (November 4, 1997) listed “are we what we eat, how many races make a nation, how does language influence behaviour, is Britain green and pleasant, what is the meaning of life, and is god dead?” One gasps at Mr Mandelson's imagination.

You may recall, however, the Prince of Wales' plea that the millennial celebrations should have a spiritual content, and it looks as though his wish is to be granted. Rightly so, you may say: is it not the Christian churches' second millennium? Well no, not exactly, for several reasons which the American zoologist Stephen Jay Gould itemises in his latest book *Questioning the Millennium: A Rationalists Guide to a Precisely Arbitrary Countdown* (Jonathan Cape, £12.99).

First, there is the absence of the year 0 AD from the Gregorian calendar, for which a 6th century monk, Dionysius Exiguus, must bear the blame. He it was who, at the Pope's behest, introduced the system of dating backwards and forwards from the supposed birth of Christ. Western mathematicians had no concept of zero at the time, says Gould, so Dionysius jumped from 1 BC to 1 AD. He also got the birthdate wrong: it couldn't have been later than 4 BC, the year when Herod died.

Gould also summarises the calculations of Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656), Primate of All Ireland, that the world began at noon on October 23, 4004 BC, and would end 6,000 years later. Why 6,000? Because God made the world in six days and, as the Archbishop knew from the Second Epistle of Peter and Psalm 90, a thousand years are as a day in the eyes of the Lord.

Ostensibly, then, the reign of Christ should have begun at noon on October 23, 1996—or 1997, allowing for Dionysius' error. But there are further complications. Ussher was using the Julian, not the Gregorian calendar. And to appreciate this aspect of the problem, we must go back to basics.

Sir James Jeans (1877-1946) notoriously told us that “From the intrinsic evidence of his creation, the Great Architect of the Universe now begins to appear as a pure mathematician”, a view which, as Gould says, “has also seeped into common thought and artistic proclamation” (by James Joyce, for example). Unfortunately, Jeans' mathematical god didn't stoop to whole numbers when he created the world. Instead of the Moon circling the Earth in a convenient 30 days, it does so in 29.53059. Nor does the Earth go round the Sun in 365 days, but 365.242199 (365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 45.96768 seconds). Which rather complicates calendric calculations.

Julius Caesar introduced the leap year once every four years to take care of the excess 0.25 of a day, but it was clearly too much, and the calendar kept slowly accumulating extra days—seven in every thousand, making 10 by the 16th century. Gregory XIII therefore proclaimed in a Papal Bull that the day following October 4, 1582, should be

October 15, and that the calendar should lose a day once every 100 years, but he restored every fourth century: 1700, 1800 and 1900 would not be leap years, but 2000, divisible by 400, would.

England would have nothing to do with this “Popish plot” and stuck to the Julian calendar until 1752, by which time we had another “extra” day, so Parliament had to drop 11 days (September 3-13). The Russians didn't accept the Gregorian until after the fall of the Tsars, which is why the Soviet Union celebrated the October Revolution in November and the Orthodox Church still refuses to adopt it.

When we amend Ussher's predictions to take account of Gregory's missing days in 1582, we find that Christ's reign would have been delayed until early last month. If he returned in glory, it hasn't made the news yet. But, from farce to tragedy, Gould shows that “the fusion of Christian millennialism with traditional beliefs of conquered (and despairing) peoples has often led to particularly incendiary and tragic, results”. And he instances the movements of Anabaptists Thomas Muntzer and Jakob Hutter, Native American Wovoka and the African Xhosa people and John Chilembwe.

Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916), founder of Jehovah's Witnesses, thought Christ would begin his “invisible return” in 1874 and stage his “true” Second Coming in 1914. However, as Gould comments, “the failure of a clear expectation did not derail the passion of true believers, who still ring my doorbell nearly every weekend”.

Now scientists, he tells us, recognising nothing special about the BC-AD transition, tend to use BP, or “before the present” for “the oldest radiocarbon dated Palaeolithic cave painting from Chauvet in France—a good way to acknowledge the anachronistic irrelevance of Jesus' birth for an earlier cave artist”. But this dating has the obvious disadvantage that the present increases by one each year.

Nature's astronomical cycles (days, lunations and years) recognise no division by thousands, but the millennium as apocalyptic leads to the millennium as calendrics. It is desirable, after all—even essential—that human beings should systematise what Gould calls the messy realities of nature, to make it “orderly”. The trouble arises when we give a spurious significance to that artificially neat order.

If, recognising its artificiality, we choose to celebrate a new millennium, neither he nor I sees any harm in it. And we can, like Stephen Jay Gould's remarkable autistic son, Jesse, treat the first 10 years of our era as comprising only nine years. We'll opt for 2000, then, not 2001. But Mandelson won't tempt me to the dome with anything he seems to be offering at the moment. His own prediction is that it will attract 12 million visitors and that “All of them will go home with an exciting and enticing story to tell about the new Britain”.

Will they go home knowing if God is dead?

Colin McCall

## The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

Views expressed in signed articles are not necessarily those of the publishers.

### CONTENTS

Up Front: The Millennium	Page 2
Human rights and the Church	Page 3
Down to Earth: Colin McCall	Page 4
News of their World: Bill McIlroy	Page 5
Ask the Parson: Karl Heath	Page 6
Honesty About Ireland	Page 7
Nicolas Walter on Meredith	Page 8
Astrology leaflet published	Page 10
Sanderson on the media	Page 11
Concepts of Time: Charles Ward	Page 12
Letters	Page 13
What's On	Page 15
Daniel O'Hara	Page 16

Subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to The Publisher:

**G W Foote & Company**  
Bradlaugh House  
47 Theobalds Road  
London WC1X 8SP  
Telephone: 0171 404 3126  
E-mail: [editor@freethinker.co.uk](mailto:editor@freethinker.co.uk)  
Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

### Annual postal subscription rates

UK: 12 months £10 or £7 (unwaged). Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £13. Airmail £20 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.

Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote & Company to The Freethinker at Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son, Sheffield.



# Human rights: 'Include us out' is Church demand

**B**RITISH churches have launched a major offensive to have themselves exempted from the Human Rights Bill, which is currently passing through the House of Lords.

The Bill will incorporate into domestic law the European Convention of Human Rights. So urgent and pressing is the Churches' campaign, that the Bishops are planning to use their position in the Lords to try to force exemption and, just a day or two before Christmas, representatives of all the churches sent a delegation to the Home Office, clamouring for exemption.

At the end of November, Lady Young tried, unsuccessfully, in the House of Lords to have the C of E excluded from the definition of "public authorities", which are required in the Bill to uphold the Human Rights Convention. In the draft Bill, the only body exempted from its provisions is Parliament itself, presumably to maintain its sovereignty. Even the House of Lords, when acting in its judicial capacity, is not exempt.

**The Convention specifically protects the right to religious freedom. But this has not prevented churches claiming that their being subject to the Bill would infringe their right to freedom of religion, by forcing them to act against their religious principles. They have claimed that the Bill may force the churches, for instance, to accept women priests in parishes where there are none, or to appoint atheist teachers in church schools.**

Baroness Young, who is a sponsor of the right-wing religious group Family and Youth Concern, claimed in the House of Lords that unless the churches were exempted from the Bill they could find themselves being forced into carrying out church marriages for homosexuals and accepting homosexuals as parents in their adoption agencies. There is a strong suspicion that this is panic-mongering to achieve maximum support.

The National Secular Society identified the problem as soon as the amendments were moved, and we discussed it with the Home Office. We then sent them a formal objection, well before the churches' deputation was even mooted. After discussing tactics with an NSS Honorary Associate in the Lords, and with the Honorary Secretary of the Parliamentary Humanist Group, we are sending letters to targeted members of the House of Lords to enlist their support. We are also researching whether there are lessons to be learned from elsewhere in Europe.

Readers can help here. Please write to your MP—and to any members of the House of Lords you know—asking them to oppose any attempt by the churches to exempt themselves from the Human Rights Bill. The Lords Committee stage will be on January 19.

Arguments you could use include:

*The European Convention of Human Rights is a basic minimum standard to apply to everyone. It is totally unacceptable for churches to be exempted.*

**by Keith Porteous Wood  
General Secretary,  
National Secular Society**

*Once any body other than Parliament is exempted, where does it end? Churches other than the Established church are on the bandwagon. Cardinal Hume and the Chief Rabbi have also expressed their support for "the move to preserve religious freedom". Who next—the Church of Scientology? The Moonies? The only answer is not to exempt any church.*

*The only reason the churches can be seeking exemption is that they anticipate breaking the Convention. It is unacceptable that anyone, far less those who purport to be our moral leaders, be permitted to do this.*

*All round the world, religious bodies are responsible for human rights abuses. These are the last organisations that should be exempted from Human Rights legislation.*

Readers may consult me on 0171-404 3126.

● The threat of opposition by the bishops in the Lords should not be taken lightly. In 1997 they succeeded in forcing the Government to withdraw a provision concerning church schools' governing bodies. It had been intended

that the proportion of church representatives on these bodies would be reduced, although they would have still remained in the majority.

And after the Lords? Edward Leigh MP has signified his willingness to take "exemption" amendments to this Bill through the Commons. The last NSS campaign involving him directly was in 1996 when he tried, unsuccessfully, to introduce an amendment to the Family Law Bill to make the divorce procedure more difficult for the partners of those who claimed to have strong religious beliefs.

Legal experts differ widely on the practical effect of the Bill.

A Home Office official told me that the effect would be minimal because the UK is already subject to the Convention and the Bill simply enables actions to enforce the Convention to be brought in UK courts rather than solely at Strasbourg.

But the Human Rights Bill has been described by senior judge Peter Duffy QC as "the single most significant legal development on fundamental human rights in this country for at least a quarter of a century". The Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine of Lairg, believes the Bill will encourage judges to make moral judgements, based on the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

This looks like being a long fight. Please help all you can.

## Commons 'no' to death-with-dignity

**THE 10-Minute Rule Bill to allow incurably-ill adults to seek help from a doctor to die with dignity (see last month's issue of *The Freethinker*) was introduced to the House of Commons on December 10 by MP Joe Ashton, who spoke movingly about his mother's lingering death from Parkinson's disease. It was defeated by 234 to 89 votes.**

But Graham Nickson, of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, told *The Freethinker* that 89 votes in favour was rather more than VES had anticipated. Some MPs may have been persuaded in favour of the Bill by the publicity surrounding the terminally-ill Annie Linsdell, who made a High Court application to ensure her doctor would not be prosecuted for prescribing a large dose of morphine which would have the effect of ending her life. Shortly before the vote, Annie died.

Joe Ashton said that the overwhelming majority of people who had contacted him were in favour of the Bill, as might be expected from the 82 per cent of the public who supported the right to a merciful and dignified death, according to the survey of British Social Attitudes in 1996.

He singled out Cardinal Hume as being the

Bill's most vociferous opponent.

Coincidentally, Lord Irvine, the Lord Chancellor, published a consultation paper on December 10, *Who Decides? Making Decisions on Behalf of Mentally Incapacitated Adults*. It seeks opinions on whether medical decisions could be made for such adults by relatives or friends they had appointed before becoming incapacitated. Another question raised was whether living wills (also known as advance directives) should be recognised by statute, rather than, as at present, case law. However, Ministers emphasised the distinction between living wills and euthanasia, which they oppose. The consultation period ends on March 31 and those wishing to know more about it may contact me at Bradlaugh House.

Meanwhile, in Oregon state, USA, a law allowing physicians to prescribe a lethal dose to a patient who is terminally-ill, with less than six months to live and who wants to kill him/herself has cleared a legal hurdle. Voters endorsed the law by 3:2 in a state-wide plebiscite. Originally passed in 1994, the law had since been blocked by legal challenges, some of which remain. Until these too are cleared, the law will not be implemented.

KPW





# Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

## Time for fasting ...

WE CAN always expect a Christian outcry against the secularisation of Christmas, exemplified this time by Gillian Crow, Diocesan Secretary of the Russian Orthodox Church in Britain, writing in *The Guardian's* "Face to Faith" slot on November 29. A "sad irony", she called it, which affords less time for thought, prayer and contemplation of the Nativity, than for "shopping, partying, tacky decorations and cloying songs about reindeers". Advent ought to be "a solemn season of fasting, of quiet, of waiting in the darkness of the year for the light of the Christ-child".

But, as should be common knowledge, even in Ms Crow's Orthodox Church, celebration of the Winter Solstice goes back way before Christianity. As the old pun has it, in the darkness of the year, it was the light—and warmth—of the Sun, not the Son, that was eagerly awaited and hailed.

## ... or for feasting?

IN FACT, Gillian Crow only needed to consult the previous day's *Guardian* to learn of an older "Christmas"—or "midwinter festival", as folklore scholar John Kirkpatrick prefers to call it.

"When you strip off the heavy layers of varnish that have been slapped all over Christmas", he says, it is a time of real struggle for life in the depth of winter; when our ancestors nurtured the spark of life while nature was at its feeblest, until the sun came back to warm the land and feed them. And, "despite many centuries of Christian teaching, we still feel the need at this darkest time of year to express some pretty powerful and primitive, even pagan urges".

Kirkpatrick condemns the Victorians for hijacking and then neutering a rich musical and cultural heritage by eradicating the nature worship that was once so much part of the season's ritual. "Their reinvention of Christmas crushed the robust heartiness of the midwinter festival and the impact on its music was particularly devastating"; the old "earthy songs" that contained "something far more vital than mere superstition" were deliberately suppressed. That they have survived at all is thanks to the dedicated collecting of folk historians like Cecil Sharp and A L Lloyd.

John Kirkpatrick spent much of last month touring Britain with *Wassail!*, his alternative Christmas musical celebration of sturdy carols and feasting songs, which were also released

by Fellside Records on December 1, and are much to be preferred to Ms Crow's solemn season. To feast, not to fast, is the message.

## People's puerility

IF STUART Bell MP is to be believed, and I see no reason not to believe him, especially as he addressed his words to the General Synod, Tony Blair is not interested in disestablishment of the Church of England. What he wants is the church modernised: a "people's church" alongside the "people's monarchy" and the "people's government".

A nice piece of rhetoric from a Prime Minister who regularly attends a Roman Catholic church. Is that his example of a modernised church? Whatever he has in mind, he is asking the impossible. Even he can't modernise either the Church or the monarchy. To coin a phrase, both are well past their sell-by-date.

## Tooling-up —for what?

I HARDLY think the Prime Minister would contemplate Don Cupitt's "modernised" religion, as expressed in *The Guardian's* "On Line" (October 2, 1997), involving the abandonment of "the myth of ready-made immutable truths out there", and recognition that "we ourselves tell all the stories".

If it is to survive in the contemporary world, religion must be viewed not as truth, but as a set of "spiritual tools", said Cupitt. It needs to be recast "not as a supernatural doctrine but as an experiment in selfhood", which he equated with "visions of the good life and of the good society that we need". But which, alas, we are not likely to get under Tony Blair's "people's government".

## A Hell of a future

"THE existence of purgatory is confirmation of God's mercy, not evidence of his desire to inflict punishment", wrote John Haldane, Professor of Philosophy—not, as you would think, of Theology—at the University of St Andrews (*The Times*, September 20, 1997).

Purgatory, note, is taken as existing. And in a piece more suited to a Roman Catholic periodical, he spoke of two "beliefs": first, that the ordering of events lies ultimately with God and second, that there is a future life, "our place in which will depend upon the quality of our present existence. We will die and we will be judged". But in the next line, these

"beliefs" become "facts".

Later, we are likened to "wayward children refusing to be guided by loving parents". We "damage ourselves by ignoring the word of God"; and purgatory will be our residence while our "self-inflicted wounds of sin" are assessed. Unless, that is, they are "mortal". In that case Professor Haldane's merciful God will inflict his punishment—everlastingly.

## All Greek to Cherie

ANGELIC "identikits" you might call them, and they are no more revealing. The *Daily Mail* provided photos of seven "celebrities" for Elsa Ayling, and she produced portraits of their guardian angels (November 7, 1997).

The *Mail's* Natalie Clark informed us that Elsa is one of a "growing band" of psychic artists, and that she talks to the angels to discover their name, occupation (while on earth) and personality, although the last is notably absent from the pictorial results of her extra-terrestrial dialogues.

The guardians of Liam Gallagher and Prince Charles are both Indians (so beloved of psychics), a Sioux called Long Bow and a Shoshone called Long Knife respectively; Peter Mandelson's is a 14th century Chinese Buddhist monk, who "was kind to all God's creatures", and William Hague's a hard-working Tibetan farmer, while Elizabeth Hurley's and Caprice's are both nuns. Cherie Blair's is a 14th century Greek doctor, who had "high moral values". Naturally.

I should mention that Elsa observes the proprieties. She always seeks permission of the angels before she draws them. And whose guardian angel could refuse such a request?

## Logic goes to the dogs

"NOW I see you" said the ghost of George Walker's dead sister when she appeared to him in the betting shop. George promptly backed a horse of that name, which came home at 33-1. No wonder *The People* devoted half-a-page to the story (November 16, 1997).

Well, not just to that story. This wasn't the first time that George had felt a "presence". Once, risibly, it took the form of a greyhound "racing around his bedroom before bounding right through him". The greyhound didn't give him the winning tip on that occasion: it came through the loudspeaker at the dog track, although no-one else heard the announcement.

Not only does George see things that others don't, he hears things that others don't. A specially chosen person, obviously, not only by the spooks but by *The People*.



# News of their World

monitored by  
BILL McILROY

THE head of a ferociously Protestant family business has died at the age of 88 in Greenville, South Carolina. The Rev Dr Bob Jones presided over a "university" which bears his name. He inherited it from his father (also named Bob Jones) who founded the institution in 1927. Bob Jones II has bequeathed it to his son and grandson, both of the same name and religious mould.

The Rev Doctor took over the business in 1932. Like his father, he preached "without apology, the old-time religion and absolute authority of the Bible." That included the Genesis account of creation around 6,000 years ago.

Doctorates were conferred on born-again luminaries. Recipients included Ian Paisley, whose detestation of Catholics Dr Jones shared.

Like so many churches and religious institutions in America's Bible Belt, the Bob Jones University provided theological underpinning for racial segregation. Its ban on inter-racial courtship and marriage caused the Internal Revenue Service to withdraw tax exemption.

When the Supreme Court rejected the University's appeal against the IRS ruling, Dr Jones said the decision was made by "eight evil old men and one vain and foolish woman."

He later explained: "We do not believe, as biblicists, in inter-racial marriage. God wants the nations segregated. The current agitation to bring the races together is a Satanic effort."

For more than 60 years the Rev Dr Bob Jones was a highly influential figure in

American religious and political life. The world is a worse place for his having lived in it.

ANOTHER religious business enterprise, the Marian shrine at Medjugorje, has been in the news.

It was in 1981 that six young villagers announced a sighting of "Our Lady". Although the Roman Catholic Church has never endorsed the visionaries' claims—a local bishop has described the most vociferous of them as "sick in the head"—millions of pilgrims have flocked to the shrine.

The international Catholic press has promoted Medjugorje to first division on the shrine circuit. But recently it has attracted publicity of a different kind. The odour of incense is tinged by a strong whiff of gunpowder.

A charity known as the Medjugorje Appeal was set up in Britain, and received vast sums for the relief of Bosnian war victims. But supporters were astonished to learn that the "humanitarian aid" they paid for included troop carriers, military uniforms and camouflage netting. It appears that the Croatian forces, not war victims, were the chief beneficiaries.

One large donation was supposedly for building a day-care centre for war orphans. It turned out to be for the children of employees at the Medjugorje shrine.

Bernard Ellis, a convert to Roman Catholicism and shrine devotee, is executive trustee of the Medjugorje Appeal. He was photographed posing with a Kalashnikov under a Croatian flag. He admits arranging for the Medjugorje Appeal to send military equipment to "his friend" Dragan Kosina.

As it happens, Dragan Kosina is a brigade commander in charge of supplies for the Croatia militia.

There is no suggestion that Mr Ellis has personally benefited, but the Charity Commission has frozen the Medjugorje Appeal's bank accounts.

THE author of a book entitled *Baruch, the Hero* has been sentenced to eight months' imprisonment by a Jerusalem court for supporting a terrorist organisation. The book praised Baruch Goldstein, an American-born gunman who, in 1994, opened fire on Muslim worshippers in a Hebron mosque, killing 29.

Passing sentence, Judge Yackov said the book "turns an act of terror into an act of bravery and the perpetrator into a hero." There was no difference between its author and Muslims who praised suicide bombers.

After the shooting, Baruch Goldstein was beaten to death by the crowd. His grave is now a site of pilgrimage for Jewish settlers.

JUDGE Arif Iqbal Bhatti, a senior member of the Lahore High Court, has been assassinated. He had been threatened on a number of occasions by Islamic militants following the acquittal two years ago of a 12-year-old boy accused of blasphemy against Islam. The boy, although proven to be illiterate, was nonetheless alleged to have written blasphemous words on the wall of a village mosque.

The judge was shot by an unidentified assailant in his Lahore law office.

## Walter nails that Bradlaugh myth

THE *TIMES* published a letter on December 4 from Keith Kyle, the journalist and visiting professor of history at the University of Ulster, about the refusal of the Sinn Fein MPs, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, to take the oath of allegiance in Parliament. It ended:

*May I remind the Honourable Members of the experience of their predecessors with Charles Bradlaugh, MP for Northampton, who was excluded repeatedly between 1880 and 1886 because, being a rationalist, he would not swear on the bible? He was allowed to take his seat in 1886 and thereby established a precedent that can surely be built on with a little imagination.*

A letter from Max Beloff, the historian, on December 6 agreed that Bradlaugh objected to the oath. Nicolas Walter, of the Rationalist Press Association and *The Freethinker*, sent the following letter in reply:

*Some historical myths seem indestructible. Keith Kyle ... repeats the story that Charles Bradlaugh, the Liberal MP for Northampton, was excluded from the House*

*of Commons "repeatedly between 1880 and 1886 because, being a rationalist, he would not swear on the Bible". Some historical facts are necessary. Bradlaugh was elected at the general election in April 1880. He tried to affirm rather than swear the religious oath on the Bible in May 1880. When this was refused, he announced that he would take the oath instead, but this was also refused. He tried to take the oath in May 1880 and June 1880, and on the latter occasion he refused to withdraw and was imprisoned overnight in the Clock-Tower. He affirmed in July 1880, and took his seat, but this was declared illegal and the seat was declared vacant in March 1881. He was re-elected at a by-election in April 1881. He tried to take the oath three times in April 1881 and he was forcibly prevented from entering Parliament to do so in August 1881. He tried to take the oath twice in February 1882. He administered the oath to himself in February 1882, but was forced to resign his seat. He was re-elected at a by-election in March 1882. He tried to take the oath in May 1883 and July 1883. He administered the oath to himself in February 1884, but his seat was declared vacant. He was re-elected*

*at a by-election in February 1884. He tried to take the oath in July 1885. He was re-elected at the general election in November 1885. He was finally allowed to take the oath and able to take his seat in January 1886. He introduced an Affirmation Bill in March 1888 which was passed in December 1888, but he died in January 1891 before being able to take advantage of it.*

*So, although Bradlaugh objected to an oath sworn in the name of a god and on a book he didn't believe in, as Lord Beloff says ... , he never refused to take it, but tried to do so eleven times, and did so three times. It is time this old myth was destroyed.*

This letter wasn't published. A letter from Ludovic Kennedy on December 13 pointed out that Bradlaugh, far from refusing to take the oath, had taken it several times: a letter from Keith Kyle on December 19 claimed that he knew this all the time but "was not able in the course of a short letter ... to go into the detail of the many stages of the Bradlaugh case", though of course the most important detail he did give was the reverse of the truth. So it goes.



# ASK THE PARSON (11)

by Karl Heath

## Arrogance preaching to ignorance

**D**EAR PARSON: Does my headline seem offensive? It might be more so—arrogance *plus* ignorance preaching to ignorance. Let me explain. Matthew and Luke both exhort us not to exalt ourselves. Your religion enjoins humility. But do you ever say *I don't know?* Or *perhaps?* *Maybe?* *It is only my opinion?* Are you not in the business of preaching certainty and dogma? Since our earliest ancestors found themselves in this strange universe, there have been two ways of finding answers to the mysteries. One method has been magic, spells, incantations, belief in spirits and ghosts, and invocation of supernatural forces. The other way is the way of science, patiently nibbling away at the fringes of the mystery, carving a little bit of the known out of the great unknown, collecting the evidence of the senses, devising instruments to extend the senses, observing, co-relating, performing experiments, pursuing research, evaluating the evidence, using mathematics to understand relationships, proposing hypotheses (not dogma), and then testing these hypotheses to destruction, if found faulty.

Accordingly, chemists and physicists have examined matter. Astronomers have probed the cosmos. Geologists and geographers have probed and mapped the Earth. Anthropologists, archaeologists and historians have researched the human past. Biologists and medical doctors have investigated the bodies of humans and other animals. There are still unsolved mysteries; some will never be solved. We will, almost certainly, remain like Professor Hoyle's fish swimming off Yarmouth which will never know that Yarmouth is there!

But do *you* proceed like the scientists? Do you conduct research, albeit of a theological

kind? Do you perform experiments? Do you seek for evidence? Do you ever admit doubt or ignorance? Is it not impertinent of your colleagues to accuse science of arrogance, when you and they proclaim absolute dogma? Are you not claiming to have fundamental answers to everything? Do you not recite *In the beginning ...* without knowing anything about the beginning, if there ever was one? Do you not recite *World without end ...* which is meaningless? You say there is a God, only one God, but divided into three bits. You go on to describe Him, humanlike and masculine. You say He knows all about us, cares for us and has plans for us. How do you know?

Is this not arrogant dogmatism? Furthermore, is not your logic faulty? Can you explain one mystery by postulating a greater mystery to account for it? Not only does this create two mysteries but also, whereas the first mystery, the Universe, can be investigated, even if only by limited nibbling, the second mystery, God, defies analysis, perhaps because He does not exist, except as a product of your imagination.

Are you and your congregation familiar with elementary science? While you are pontificating about the Creator and Controller of the Universe, how much does your flock know, even about our little corner of the Universe? I do not expect them to know about galaxies, even our own Milky Way, or how many millions of suns like ours. I imagine they know little about our little Solar System, far from the galactic centre. Perhaps they can name all the planets, but do they realise it is impossible to construct a visible scale-model of the Solar System? The planets would either be too small to see, or too far away to see. If, in the model, the Earth is the size of a marble, the Sun would be a globe about five feet in diameter, but it would be 100 yards away. Jupiter, the size of a grapefruit, would be half-a-mile away. Pluto, another marble, would be miles away.

Is it not arrogant for we microscopic beings on a speck of dust to claim definitive knowl-

edge about the whole Universe? The early Christians, who believed that the Earth was a huge thing at the centre of the Universe, with little lights going round it, might be forgiven. Can *you* be forgiven? One of your colleagues last year (1997) displayed an astounding ignorance. Speaking on the BBC's "Prayer for the Day" about summertime, he said that summer was due to the Earth being nearer to the Sun. He had presumably never been taught about the inclination of the Earth's axis, as the cause of the seasons. When I wrote to the BBC about this, I received the following reply from Alastair McGhee, Producer of Religious Programmes, dated August 8, 1997: "As I am no expert in astronomy, I'm grateful for your expert advice which I shall, of course, pass on to Professor Weitzmann". The professor was the "Prayer for the Day" speaker. I have received no reply from him. I wonder what discipline entitled him to his honorific.

I accept that ignorance is widespread. In a very different context, a recent poll in the USA revealed that 40 per cent of adult Americans believed that their country was at war with the Soviet Union in World War II. Bookshops and libraries are full of fantasy books masquerading as science. Millions of people, like mentally-retarded children, believe in astrology—like a small child in a train who thinks that the scenery outside is rushing past the window. Millions of people believe in flying-saucers. Some of them behave like religious zealots. Just as some Pharisaical fundamentalists appear to believe that they will appear more holy if they call God "Gard", so the Ufologists roll the word "craft" around their tongues.

Are you completely honest in distinguishing those parts of the Bible which you claim to be literal truth from those other parts which your common-sense compels you to dismiss as allegory or metaphor? *Did* the animals walk into the Ark two-by-two? *Did* God smite Egypt with plagues and part the Red Sea? *Did* He appear to Moses in a burning bush? *Did* Saul demand 100 Philistine foreskins from David, and get 200, as I Samuel, Ch. 18 tells us?

Should we believe Ezekiel in Ch. 4—that God told the Israelites to eat bread baked with human excrement, making a special dispensation that Ezekiel himself could use cow-dung? Voltaire was moved to remark that anyone who admired Ezekiel should be compelled to dine with him!

Do you believe that some of these stories are true and others myths? If so, what is your method of selection? If you are making the distinction out of your own head, are you not being arrogant? Why should Noah's Ark be rejected if you ask your congregation to accept the equally implausible story of the Incarnation and the Resurrection?

Finally, can you bring yourself to reply "I don't know" to any of my questions?

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

## Holy Andrex! Now it's the Church of ASDA!

ASDA, the superstore chain, broadcast a Christmas service to all its stores on the Sunday before Christmas. It included a message from the Archbishop of Canterbury and a Bible reading by the stores' Chief Executive, Allan Leighton.

The idea grew from an approach by a local church to the ASDA branch at Gravesend, from which the broadcast was made.

The venture was reported in *The Times*—and the National Secular Society immediately wrote to Mr Leighton to complain. He disagreed with the NSS's assertion that, in a multi-cultural society where the majority are not practising Christians, a large minority—including some Christians—will find

this service offensive. There was no response to our enquiries as to whether staff, particularly non-Christians, had been given the opportunity to "opt out", or whether they were planning RC, Jewish or Muslim services for 1998.

Mr Leighton didn't believe that customers would feel obligated to participate. But this is not necessarily the same thing as being forced, out of good manners, to stand quietly when the Archbishop is delivering his homily.

Our approach to the story brought massive press, TV and radio coverage, at local, national and even European level.

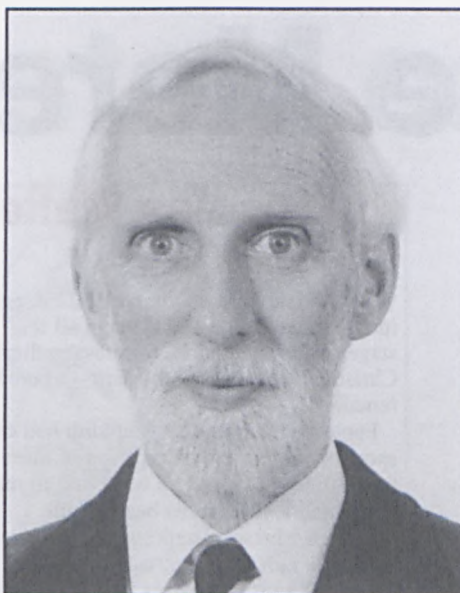
KPW



# DENIS COBELL IS ELECTED SECULARISTS' PRESIDENT

**D**ENIS COBELL was elected President by an overwhelming majority at the National Secular Society's Annual General Meeting on November 29, 1997. He told members that the NSS had its own important role to play in secular humanism, and wished the Society to maintain good relations with its sister organisation, the British Humanist Association, to whose ceremonies sub-committee he belongs.

After the AGM, Denis told *The Freethinker* that a priority during his Presidency would be to raise the profile of the Society, and that he was considering an advertising campaign aimed at attracting more members. He wants to build on the successful reactive work of 1997—for example, exposing the appalling electoral performance of the so-called pro-lifers and protesting about the churches' attempt to exempt themselves from human rights legislation. Lamenting the rising popularity of "new age" religion, he also wants the Society to focus on dis-



● Denis Cobell

establishment of the Church of England and on the problems associated with the Muslim demand for separate state educa-

tional facilities.

Peter Brearey was elected and Jim Herrick re-elected vice presidents, also by overwhelming majorities.

Subscription rates were raised to £10 pa, now with concessionary rates for the unwaged and for two members sharing one mailing. Life membership was introduced (£200, or £100 for those over 65).

## Presentations

The meeting closed with presentations to Barbara Smoker by G W Foote's Chairman, Jim Herrick, of bound volumes of *The Freethinker* and by newly-elected President Denis Cobell of a £500 cheque on behalf of members and the Council in recognition of Barbara's 25-year presidency. Barbara was clearly delighted with the gifts. She responded that she had thoroughly enjoyed her time as President, which, except for that of Chapman Cohen, was the longest in the Society's history.

## Trying to be honest about Ireland

IT IS notorious that the problems (to recall that notable Irishman, GBS) of "John Bull's Other Island" are bedevilled by religious "certainties" if not actually caused by their baneful influence.

If that is indeed the case, then there is scope for a wee bit of freethought on the subject; we can hardly make matters worse by having a go...

There is remarkably little intellectual honesty in the talks about the future of the Six Counties of north-east Ireland. Even the use of the word "Ulster" is false—the traditional province of Ulster comprised nine counties but three of them were left on the south-west side of the border for fear of there being too many Catholics to the north-east of it. Again, the word "loyalist" is misleading; these people are not loyal to the UK, they are loyal only to their own tight-little, right-little communalism.

Even the phrase "Northern Ireland" is a little misleading; the most northerly part of Ireland, Co Donegal, is part of the Republic. But these are perhaps purely semantic observations. What is more substantial is the *de facto* denial of where the true interests of the protagonists actually lie.

The UK has no laudable interest in retaining the Six Counties—they are a bundle of trouble and expense and the best that can be said, from a strictly realistic British perspective, is that UK occupation of those counties has given the British Army on-going training in some branches of armed combat.

The Republic has no interest in acquiring the Six Counties. If the Six are a bundle of trouble

by Eric Stockton

for the (larger and more powerful) UK, then how much more trouble would Pro-Separatist terrorists be to the (smaller and weaker) Republic. Dublin politicians would be wise to let London politicians live with the consequences of their forebears' disastrous policies of the Terrible Twenties.

As for the "men of violence"—these horrible people have an interest in the continuation of the established sorrows of the past. To terminate and forget their pasts would rob these people of their self-contrived importance; it is not always widely appreciated that there are whole generations of "Ulstermen" who have been professional terrorists, of various sorts, all their lives—living by extortion and, of course, by Social Security. Nobody blows up a Post Office in the Six Counties; that's where the handouts are handed out!

The ultimate dishonesty is to speak about "creating trust". The only trust we can have is that the Unionists will stop at nothing to sustain the Union and that the Republicans will stop at nothing to achieve United Ireland. We can, in short, trust that "Incompatibility rules, OK!" In the circumstances, to try to "create trust" is merely to attempt to deceive us all. Why do politicians so love to down the contents of poisoned chalices at one gulp?

The only solution is one that is enforceable and we have heard of no better idea than the forlorn one first floated some time ago in my journal *Lady Godiva*—that the Six Counties should be ceded to the Republic at once but in exchange for a lease-back to the UK for an

exact term of, say, 50 years. During that time the various factions might turn their minds to either putting up with it or going some place else.

Any better ideas will be received with great interest.

● Eric Stockton may be contacted through *The Freethinker* office or by e-mail at: [stockton.sanday.orkney@zetnet.co.uk](mailto:stockton.sanday.orkney@zetnet.co.uk) His *Lady Godiva* magazine is on the Internet at: <http://www.orknet.co.uk/godiva/>

## Mutilation ban stays

EGYPT'S Supreme Court on December 28 upheld the Health Minister's ban on government-certified doctors and health workers from performing female circumcision—or female genital mutilation (FGM), as it is more accurately known.

Muslim fanatics had opposed the ban but human rights and women's groups had supported it. The court said it upheld the ban because Islam does not demand the operation, thus making its performance subject to Egyptian law: "With this ruling it has become prohibited for all to perform the operation of female circumcision, even with the consent of the girl or her guardians."

Doctors and health workers who perform such surgery now face losing their licences, and hospitals risk closure. Anyone performing the operation could face three years in gaol. Source: *Glasgow Herald*, December 29.



*'The man or the country that fights priestcraft and p  
than can be struck anywhere at present'*

# George Meredith and

**G**EORGE MEREDITH (1828-1909) is probably little read today and was certainly little read for most of his life. His early poetry and fiction were appreciated by a few but ignored by the many, and he achieved commercial as well as critical success only in his sixties. However, he was eventually accepted as the leading English writer, and he became the President of the Society of Authors and even a member of the Order of Merit.

After he died there was much belated praise of his writing, and recognition of his political radicalism, but little open acknowledgement of his religious unbelief. His positive philosophy was an optimistic cultivation of Nature and his negative philosophy was a contemptuous rejection of Christianity. Like so many freethinking writers concerned to appear respectable, he made the former public but kept the latter private; but he both admired and assisted those braver than himself.

## THE TRUTH

Edward Clodd, a moderate freethinker (second chairman of the Rationalist Press Association), told some of the truth in an article on "George Meredith: Some Recollections" in the *Fortnightly Review* (July 1909), repeated in his *Memories* (1916). He reported conversations covering Meredith's whole life. He told him:

*When I was quite a boy I had a spasm of religion which lasted about six weeks ... But never since have I followed the Christian fable ... Was there ever a more clumsy set of thaumaturgic fables made into fundamentals of a revealed religion?*

And he told him just before he died: "Burn me and scatter the ashes where they will, and let there be no Abracadabra of ritual, is my wish about myself." Nevertheless his distinguished colleagues requested a funeral in Westminster Abbey, and although this was reasonably refused a memorial service was still held for him there.

When his son William Maxse Meredith produced an unsatisfactory collection of *Letters of George Meredith* (1912), G W Foote, an aggressive freethinker (first Editor of *The Freethinker* and second President of the National Secular Society), replied with an article on "George Meredith: Freethinker" in the *English Review* (March 1913). Foote protested that this aspect of the

by **Nicolas Walter**

writer should be properly recognised, and insisted that "he passed through all the stages of emancipation, from evangelical Christianity to pure Humanism—where he remained".

Foote pointed out that Meredith had corresponded with him over a period of more than 30 years. Indeed he was close to many freethinkers. One of his best friends, Frederick Maxse, a senior naval officer who became a radical writer, was as much a sceptic as he was. He was friendly with the journalists John Morley and Leslie Stephen, the novelists Hardy and Gissing, the poets Swinburne and Rossetti, and also James Thomson, better known as "BV". And as well as Foote, he admired his predecessors as leaders of the Freethought movement, G J Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh, though he seems to have had no direct contact with them. A brief view of his relations with the Freethought movement may be seen through his letters, which were eventually collected in C L Cline's scholarly collection of *Letters of George Meredith* (1970).

## BRADLAUGH & BESANT

Meredith was impressed by Charles Bradlaugh, President of the National Secular Society and Editor of the *National Reformer*, and angered by his treatment in the courts. He wrote to Maxse on December 19 1869 about meeting Frederick Greenwood, Editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*: "I spoke strongly to Greenwood of Bradlaugh; impressed him, I trust." He and Maxse went to hear Bradlaugh speak at the Hall of Science that month, and he wrote to John Morley, editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, on January 2 1870:

*The man is neither to be laughed nor sneered down, nor trampled. He will be a powerful speaker. I did my best to make Greenwood understand this. It was really pleasant to hear those things spoken which the parsonry provoke.*

And he wrote to Morley again on January 27 1870:

*You see they have dealt with Bradlaugh. I spoke to Greenwood about him, insisting that he was a man of power, and was not to be sneered down; & that on the whole he said certain things comforting to hear by one suffering from Simon Peter.*

By "Simon Peter" he meant the Christian church.

When the scientist John Tyndall caused a sensation as President of the British Association meeting at Belfast in August 1874 by proclaiming that science would "wrest from theology the entire domain of cosmological theory", Meredith wrote to Maxse on September 3 1874:

*Tyndall's Belfast address you have seen, no doubt. It has roused the Clergy ... They affirm that Tyndall is an atheist, and would dare to say he is already damned if the age were in a mood to hear that language ... The man or the country that fights priestcraft and priest is to my mind striking deeper for freedom than can be struck anywhere at present. I foresee a perilous struggle with them.*

A similar battle arose over birth control, and when Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh risked imprisonment for the republication of Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*, Meredith wrote to Maxse on March 31 1877:

*I can't but admire Mrs Besant for her courage. On the whole I approve the publication, though to me the book is repulsive. I have a senseless shrinking from it.*

When Bradlaugh was finally elected to Parliament, Meredith wrote to Maxse on April 6 1880:

*The House of Commons has now got its Bradlaugh: & when his power and courage begin to be felt, it will be curious to see the change of manner in the English newspaper press.*

This prophecy was not fulfilled. But he opposed Bradlaugh's aggressive methods, often saying that he disliked what he called "bawlings in the street", and he wrote to Maxse on July 21 1881: "By the way, Bradlaugh threatens to be foolish ... The folly is to take strong measures upon no popular sentiment to back him." But he admired him to the end.

## FOOTE & THOMSON

Meredith made contact with Foote and Thomson when they publicly praised his poetry. He wrote to Foote on August 19 1878:

*I will not offer you my thanks, for such*



d priest is to my mind striking deeper for freedom

# d 'the best of causes'

things are past the sense of obligation. To feel that men like you and BV read & have a taste for what I produce, is full of encouragement to me to write with a good heart ... Let me add what is of more importance to my mind in communicating with you: that I admire the fight you are making, & class you among the true soldiers, as Heinrich Heine called himself for doing battle with the pen. I have in your example to suppose that ours is a public neglectful of brave men ... I trust that I show you that you give me great pleasure in writing to me.

The reference to Heine relates to a passage in his book *Italy*, part of his series of *Reisebilder* (Travel Pictures), in which he described himself as "a brave soldier in the war of liberation of mankind".

He wrote to Foote on December 31 1878, subscribing and offering to contribute to his new magazine *The Liberal*, and giving comfort in case of failure:

*I trust you will succeed with it. I am naturally doubtful, considering the public we have, but of many failures comes the final victory, and to fail is neither shameful nor disheartening if our hearts are firmly set upon the cause we support.*

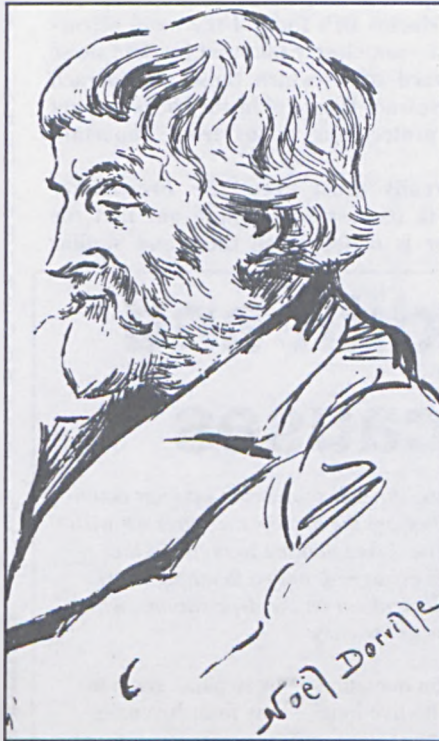
He wrote to Thomson on July 4 1879, thanking him for praising his poems and praising his poems in return:

*The pleasant things you have written of me could not be other than agreeable to a writer ... But when a friend unmasked your initials, I was flattered. The reviewers are not likely to give you satisfaction. My inclination is to believe that you will find freethoughted men enough to support you.*

This prophecy was not fulfilled either.

He wrote to Thomson on November 27 1879, saying that he and Maxse had read the *National Reformer* and were impressed by Bradlaugh: "We both admire the man for his courage, both of us thinking that the country cannot boast much of it." He wrote to Thomson on March 16 1880, when *The Liberal* had ceased publication:

*I regret it, but it was surely anticipated by all—? No paper of free-thought can live in a country where the activity of the mind is regarded with distrust & men live happier when mated with compromises than with realities:— & the very sense of unsoundness resulting from their consequent position makes them all the more dread a breath of*



● **"The Last Sketch of Meredith" by Noël Dorville appeared in the Daily Chronicle in 1908, by which time—shortly before his death—Meredith was accepted as a major artist. His general popularity began with *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), following *Richard Feverel* (1859), the autobiographical *Evan Harrington* (1860), *Harry Richmond* (1871) and *Beauchamp's Career* (1876), which deals with questions of class and party. *The Egoist* (1879), a study of refined selfishness, and *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883) are still read with pleasure by a small but enthusiastic band of Meredithians.**

change.

He continued to praise Thomson's poems, and met him a few times in Summer 1880. He mourned his death and subscribed to his memorial in 1882, and later supported his biography by Henry Salt. He wrote to Foote on July 6 1887, after he had been prosecuted three times and imprisoned for 12 months for blasphemous libel in *The Freethinker*:

*You carry on a brave battle, for the best of causes, personally profitless as you must know it to be, & my good wishes are with*

you.

He wrote to Foote on February 25 1889, thanking him for comments on his latest books of poetry, and attacked Christianity as "the smoking of such priest's opium. Those who do it stop their growth." He wrote to M G Ward twice in June 1894, enclosing a contribution to a testimonial appeal for Foote, and agreeing that his name should be made public: "In the case of testimony to a man's high & constant courage, the name is rightly an accompaniment."

He wrote to Foote on February 24 1908, sending a donation to the new Secular Education League:

*It is for the Funds of the Secular Education movement—no more than a movement at present, but insuring us with one of the certainties of the proximate future. In which latter point it does not resemble the object of your valiant fight, though that is destined for victory. But it demands a combination of ardour & patience rarely to be found. You will have the credit for it when the day ripens for biography.*

Foote has never had a proper biography.

## HOLYOAKE

When the Rationalist Press Association was formed in 1899, Meredith declined to become an Honorary Associate or to attend its dinners. But in May 1904 the *Literary Guide* published his message saying, "Let it be known ... that I wish I were one of the guests," and paying tribute to Holyoake (founder of the Secularist movement and first Chairman of the RPA) and Foote, "who suffered grievously in the time of my younger days for seeking to establish freedom of the mind, a much greater than political freedom". And on April 24 1906 he sent a tribute to Holyoake, who had just died:

*The privilege proposed to me of being among you at your annual gathering this year, would have been hailed in acceptance the more readily for the opportunity I should have had to offer my tribute to the memory of George Jacob Holyoake—one of the truly great Englishmen of our time. From his earliest days as a worker he spoke for the poor, who could not speak for themselves; and for the instructed, too timid to think for themselves. Much is owing to him that England is no longer regarded on the*



# The Emperor's not wearing a stitch!

MINISTER without Portfolio Peter Mandelson flew to Disneyland at the turn of the year—to pick up tips about organising the Millennium Dome project.

How entirely appropriate that the man with the Mickey Mouse job should consult Goofey and Donald about the Mickey Mouse enterprise at Greenwich.

For how may we take the Dome seriously when the Millennium itself is a sham? Read Page 2 of this issue of *The Freethinker*: Jesus was certainly *not* born at the time His birth is celebrated by His father's botherers, and

many believe that He was not born at all. Sounding brass and tinkling cymbals spring at once to mind when we consider the Millennium.

Perhaps it is all part of the non-stop circus—Princess Di's funeral the main attraction last year, closely followed by the Louise Woodward trial—which those who preach the conspiracy theory of history believe is got up to protect our minds from important things.

We really must keep *The Freethinker* strong in its task of pointing out that the emperor is naked when these and similar

matters crop up—otherwise, those in authority will believe that *everyone* accepts their nonsense.

Making cheques payable to G W Foote and Company, please send donations to: Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: £50 each, M Hart and Anon; £40 each, N Dunlop, R Melbourne, K Patterson; £30, W Donovan; £20 each, Leeds Humanists, C Pinel; £15 each, J Drummond, I Williams; £13 each, B Edgecombe, R Stirrup; £10 each, B Able, J Ainsworth, P Barbour, D Baxter, N Bruce, J Corcoran, D Dean, S Eadie, E Gwinnett, M Harris, R Howells, J Joseph, M Littler, A McGee, J Madden, D Norman, P Ponting-Barbour, S Rayment, E Sinclair, J Spence, G Strang, I Wilcock; £8 each, P Gatenby, K Haughton, M Skinner, R Torode; £7, V Smith; £5 each, A Adler, J Beaven, G Broady, A Brown, J Cass, R Fennell, D Holdstock, Hoyle, J Lavety, S Rose, F Shayler, B Thompson, A Thorne, C Williams, A Wood; £3 each, Anon, T Allan, D Blewitt, J Chadwick, T Cornish, B Downs, H Easton, M Fletcher, J Hayward, H Merrill, M O'Brien, B Smith; £2 each, C Jacot, R Eagle, R Shayler.

Total from November 22 to December 19: £722

## George Meredith and 'the best of causes'

From Page 9

*Continent as the backward country in relation to Free Thought, and that the term "Free Thinker" ceased to imply a holy reproach, a warning to infants and the craven. Even Churchmen have been known to allude to him with consideration. By sober persistency, the result of a profound conviction as to the truth of his cause, he succeeded at last in conquering hostile opinion; and this being England, it will be owned that he did nothing less than disintegrate a granite block. Such men as he are the backbone of our land. They are not eulogised in monuments, they have a stouter memorial in the hearts of all who venerate a simple devotion to the oppressed, the labours of a clear intelligence, contempt of material rewards, & unflinching courage.*

This appeared in *The Times* on May 3 1906 and in the *Literary Guide* in June 1906.

### THE END

Meredith wrote to Leslie Stephen, former Editor of the *Cornhill Magazine* and the *Dictionary of National Biography*, when they were both mourning the deaths of loved ones and facing their own deaths, on May 11 1902:

*We two have looked at the world & through men, & to us the word "consolation" is but a common scribble, for there is none under a deep affliction that can come from without, not from the dearest of friends. What I most wish for you I know you to have, fortitude to meet a crisis, & its greater task, to endure. We have come to the time of life, when the landscape surrounding "haec data poena diu viventibus", the tombstones of our beloved, & the narrowing of our powers, throws a not unpleasant beam on the black gateway, as we take it to be in the earlier days. And those younger ones, whom Nature smites with the*

*loss of us, she will soon bring into her activities, if they are the healthy creatures we wish them to be. I find nothing to regret in the going, at my age, & only a laughing snarl when I look about on the deprivations, which make the going easy.*

The Latin quotation—"these pains given to those who live long"—was from Juvenal's tenth *Satire*.

He wrote to Wilfrid Meynell, the liberal journalist and editor, on February 3 1909:

*I drag on counting more years & not knowing why ... But my religion of life is always to be cheerful.*

He wrote to Foote on April 23 1909, sending a donation to *The Freethinker* and agreeing that his name should be made public: "As a question of supporting your paper, my name is at your disposal." Foote believed that this was his last letter: "The last document from George Meredith's pen was a letter of encouragement to the editor of *The Freethinker*. And the fact tells its own tale. There is really no more to be said." In fact there were a few later items, including a reply to an unknown inquirer dictated a few days before his death on May 16 1909, in which something more was said:

*He is not an Atheist, believing in a Spirit of Good unto which we tend out of the state of brute which causes our wretchedness. But according to him there is no intervention in human affairs. Without sharing all the opinions of the Freethinkers he thinks them brave men daring to be free in opinion under the frown of Society and the animadversion of a known compact body.*

So almost Meredith's last words were indeed an endorsement of what he himself had called "the best of causes".

## Taking astrology apart

THE Pink Triangle Trust, a Humanist educational charity, has produced its first two leaflets for 1998, in the series "Introducing the Humanist Tradition". One leaflet asks *Do Your Stars Foretell?* and proceeds to take astrology apart. The other is called *The Adventures of Thomas Paine*, "the most remarkable political writer and radical thinker of the late 18th century" whose influence on the Humanist tradition has been enormous.

A single copy of each leaflet is available free, if a stamped addressed envelope, at least 22cm x 11cm in size, is sent to PTT, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB. Eight copies cost just £1 and payment may be made by sending a book of postage stamps. Eighty-five copies cost only £10.

Roy Saich, a trustee of the PTT charity, said he hoped organisations (and readers of *The Freethinker*) would make the leaflets available along with their own, and that individuals would give copies to their friends and families, mail copies with letters and cards, provide teachers with copies for use as a teaching aid, and donate copies to be given out at meetings.

Commenting on the astrology leaflet Roy Saich said: "Rich and influential people consult astrologers, so sensible people need to be able to challenge the basis of astrology. The new leaflet gives information which can help in that challenge."



Terry Sanderson on the media

# Kidology and the modern witch-doctors

**T**HE march of alternative "therapy" (or complementary medicine, as its apologists call it) continues apace. Prince Charles, that bastion of rationalism, recently called for its wider acceptance. Much of it is now available on the National Health.

The appeal is obvious. Everyone wants a cheap and easy cure for their health problems—one that doesn't involve surgery or nasty drugs with even nastier side-effects. We'd all like a witch doctor to wave a magic wand that would take the pain away and cure our ills. Alternative medicine promises to fulfil all these fantasies, with knobs on.

And yet, surely the time is approaching when the medical authorities should stop the bandwagon for a moment and ask the long-overdue question: is the alternative emperor wearing clothes?

How did we reach the stage where our medical researchers apparently suspend their usual strict criteria of proof, and start accepting that, for example, there are invisible and undetectable "meridian lines" connecting parts of the body? How did they come to accept that pressing the bottom of people's feet can cure them of kidney disease or headaches? How did homeopaths and acupuncturists, aromatherapists and reflexologists ever come to be taken seriously?

Perhaps these are naïve questions when you consider the number of people who are so easily duped by transparent scams like astrology. In a world where the gullible are even willing to kill themselves at the behest of holy madmen—as happened with Waco, Heaven's Gate and Jamestown—alternative medicine can seem like a rather benign variation on the theme. But make no mistake, it is the same theme.

The problem is that alternative medicine is gaining so many unquestioning admirers that it is taking on the form of a cult. To criticise it inevitably brings down a chorus of abuse from believers. To doubt the efficacy of some of these "therapies", or to question the veracity of their inventors, is akin to blasphemy to some adherents. The last time I questioned "alternative medicine" in *The Freethinker* I was assailed as a bigot who should not be allowed to write such things.

Fortunately, despite the fact that the press seems mostly to report these strange treatments unquestioningly, there are still small pockets of resistance. One of these is John Diamond, who is currently writing a series of debunking articles in the *Sunday Telegraph* magazine, *Rx*.

Mr Diamond is a well-known journalist who is, regrettably, suffering from cancer of the throat. He has chronicled the progress of his illness, and the distressing nature of its treatment, over many months in another newspaper. If alternative medicine should appeal to anyone, it is to him. Legitimate medicine has so far resorted to drastic surgery to remove half his tongue,

and he has undergone many sessions of radiotherapy and chemotherapy, all of which have been agonising. Surely, if there was an alternative that was not so painful and destructive, he would have found it. And yet despite his terrible experiences, he has reached the sensible conclusion that he would be dead if it were not for the hard-researched and well-tested methods of his conventional doctors. He has nothing but contempt for the ludicrous claims of alternative therapies, all of which have disappointed him.

"One of the paradoxes of alternative medicine", he wrote, "is that it demands so much more of its rival orthodoxies than it does of itself. A thousand careful studies may demonstrate the efficacy of any particular surgical or pharmaceutical procedure—but if just one post-grad student at the University of Bucharest publishes a paper suggesting that it might be iffy, just watch those antimederalists queue up to denounce the sorry sham that is modern medicine. Conversely, though a hundred equally careful studies show that any given alternative therapy is based on little but blind faith and a mediaeval understanding of biology, just one piece of research showing that there may be possibly be something to the therapy is proof enough to the adherents that they were right all along."

He then attacks homeopathy, perhaps the most venerated of the "therapies", maybe because of its royal seal of approval. Mr Diamond says that even to those who are cynical about most alternative approaches, homeopathy seems more credible. There is a feeling that it has been "proved" to be effective. But, as he points out, there has been no unequivocal proof of homeopathy's efficacy at all. "But then," he says, "there is no reason why homeopathic treatment should work." Its simple-minded principle, invented 200 years ago by Samuel Hahnemann, is that a substance which causes a particular symptom in a well person will, in tiny quantities, cure the same symptoms in an ill one. "It is that 'tiny quantities' qualification with which most rationalists have a problem," he explains. "At its most potent—which is to say weakest—you'd have to drink half a million gallons of homeopathic remedy to be certain of getting one molecule of the substance inside you."

Mr Diamond makes the legitimate point that it may have been all well and good to accept such tosh 200 years ago, when we didn't know any better, but now, when we *do* know better, why should we continue to believe it? He says it's the equivalent of "running our rail system at 29 mph because early Victorians, seeing the first trains, believed that moving any faster than that was more than the human frame could endure."

Similarly, those who imagine that acupuncture really works are living in a world that was current 2,000 years ago in ancient China. The idea that parts of the body are connected by

some kind of invisible network that can be affected by sticking pins into the skin is, to a rational mind, nothing less than barmy. Why would anyone believe it, particularly when the system can't be made to work consistently? It's successful for some people on some occasions, sometimes. What good is that when you're poorly?

I am not going to try to defend conventional medicine; we all know it's not perfect. The multinational drugs companies are just as likely as the alternative "therapists" to be money-grubbing exploiters. Legitimate medicine makes mistakes, it has accidents; only a blind fool wouldn't accept that. At the same time, it has provable, repeatable triumphs. We know for a fact that antibiotics kill dangerous bacteria, and beta-blockers lower blood pressure. These effects are observable and consistent. And yes, there can be side-effects and dangers, but there is no doubt that there are millions of people walking around today who would be dead if these medicines did not exist. Alternative medicine can make no such claims.

The best complementary treatment can offer is the placebo effect. Aromatherapy, and all the other bamboozling quackery, can give you the feeling that you've taken positive charge of some minor but distressing ailments, like eczema or migraine, which have defeated your GP. Often such conditions are induced by stress, and alternative therapies are certainly good at reducing that. If the alternative practitioners would be honest and say "yes, it's kidology, but sometimes it has a psychological effect" I might be less hostile to them. Instead, they introduce ridiculous pseudo-scientific explanations for their "treatments" that defy all known laws of physics.

It's when lives are in danger that alternative practitioners begin their sideways dance. "Our therapy can only help in conjunction with your regular treatment", they will say. "Always consult your doctor before changing your medication."

In other words, we'll let regular doctors make you better, and then we'll take the credit.

## Conway lecture

**THE 72nd Conway Memorial Lecture will be delivered by Reith Lecturer Professor Colin Blakemore, Wayneflele Professor of Physiology, University of Oxford, at 7 pm on Thursday, January 15, at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Professor Blakemore's subject will be *Minds, Brains and Consciousness*.**

**Apply to the Librarian at Conway Hall for free tickets or to order the text as a booklet, price £2.**



# 'MIND-BLOWING' CONCEPTS OF TIME

by Charles Ward

**G**EOLOGICAL time is what we are in. Or, more precisely, stellar time, where extent of duration is equally inconceivable. Most of us, however, block out these mind-blowing concepts except when interested in some relevant aspect of evolution or astronomy. Even then we generally ignore their application to ourselves.

Our mundane awareness of the flux of events is of a vastly different order of magnitude (or we might say *minutude*, if there were such a word.) You may suppose this to be a topic of no pressing concern. You have to agree, nevertheless, that our earthly time-scale has the effect of making human history appear to be of considerable length, whereas, in reality, our story so far is extremely short; in fact, from a cosmic point of view, it has hardly begun.

Unless we render our planet uninhabitable, which to pessimists among us does not seem improbable, or some other global disaster overtakes us, hundreds of thousands of millennia (to say the least) could stretch out before us as a species. This possibility demands a radical revision of perspective. From that, a new understanding of human life would undoubtedly ensue.

At present there is a tendency to regard the principal features of history as indicating the kind of creatures we are—greedy, ruled by mistaken ideas of self-interest, intolerant of those who do not believe or behave the same as we do, addicted to force-of-arms, and religious.

## Wars

The assumption is made that, irrespective of future developments in science and technology, our requirements and purposes are likely to remain much the same as they have been until now. You can't change human nature, it is said; there will always be wars. We are an aggressive species. According to some, we are also religious animals. If that be the case, it would seem that we are stuck with God. We are certainly governed more by emotion than by reason, and unarguably affected by a passion for mythopeia.

Wars, rapacity and delusions regarding our place in the scheme of things do not comprise the whole story to date, but they do occupy a notable part of it. Viewed narrowly from our current position, these therefore permit the impression of being major constituents.

Our morality is no more than a thin veneer on social cohesion. For the sense of right and wrong we boast to possess, much credit is given to the Judaic/Christian Mosaic tradition—more than is deserved, as it happens. In this country, said to benefit from its influence on our laws, and in this century, a spiritualist medium, charged with fraud, was tried under an unrepealed Witchcraft Act! To speak of the infancy or childhood of *homo sapiens* may be tempting, but it is misleading, because the truth of the matter is—we have not been "brought up" or trained in any way by beings more knowledgeable than ourselves. G E Lessing, the 18th Century German dramatist, wrote an essay called *The Education of the Human Race*. There has never been any such phenomenon. It is a pious fiction. Progress was achieved entirely by our own efforts, and it should not surprise us to discover that, in the process, some appalling

blunders were made.

Notwithstanding, the fact that human beings made errors of judgement in the early stage of their existence and that these were perpetuated, on account of ignorance, superstition and prejudice, for the first few thousand years of civilisation, is a horrifyingly inadequate excuse for assuming that they must persist. Should we recoil, as we ought, from the prospect of dooming humanity to a geological age of mindless materialism and mayhem fuelled by confusing superstitious fantasies, we are impelled to opt for the longer view.

It would be useful, at this point, to set out in broad compass, what religions have promulgated at various times and in differing ways:

### 1 spirits ... gods... souls ... heavens...hells

This group belongs to the category of the *mythological*.

### 2 revelations ... theophanies ... miracles ... providence ... mystical experiences

Reference here is to experiences which the persons, who have them, may regard as objective and, even if they do not, interpret as being related to group 1. The second group can be labelled *experiential*.

### 3 prayer ... offerings ... sacrifices ... ritual dances ... other rites

Note that we are not following a chronological order. The third group embraces acts of respect for, worship of, or communion with, the deity and may be named *ritual*.

### 4 priestcraft ... sacred places ... cultic practices ... indoctrination of children ... seminaries

The fourth reflects *social* arrangements whereby the authority and influence of a religion are maintained.

### 5 the idea of ultimate Truth ... sacred scripture ... a plan of salvation ... the importance of faith ... the sinfulness of doubt and unbelief

Systems of belief vary from religion to religion. Listed in this *doctrinal* group are some of the principal ideas found in several.

### 6 "conscience" ... penance ... codes ... confession ... evangelism

Rules for behaviour, a notion that we have an innate moral sense, and methods of dealing with moral failure, are features of religions. Concerning the last-mentioned, it should be noted that not all religions have missionary ambitions, but several do, Christianity among them, and "witnessing" (with proselytising at least partly in mind) is regarded as a duty incumbent on converts.

(Professor Ninian Smart was, I believe, the originator of the "six religious dimensions". The order and notes given above are my own.)

Readers will form their own estimates as to how far any of the features named, or others that I have not listed, are likely to survive into

the 21st or 22nd Centuries of this Common Era.

CE is the recognised substitute for AD (Latin *Anno Domini*)—"the year of Our Lord"—which appellation, if for no other reason than that we live in a multi-cultural society, should be given a shove on its way out.

One idea (significantly associated with religious ones, yielding salutary comparisons), which, though lingering in Britain and a few other countries, has long been headed towards the door marked *exit*, is that of royalty. Kings, queens and their ilk, were once to be had by the dozen. Attitudes have changed, even among idolaters of the past. Although there are those who, for sentimental and other reasons, find it hard to let go of this anachronism, most men and women no longer look upon themselves as subjects or as pawns of those with political power, by whatever name they are known.

Observe how religions cling to the regal vocabulary of a vanished age. In Christianity, for example, God is praised incessantly as King, his fatherhood being less a question of paternal care than his being regarded as the "father of his people", who are to respect his government, of which there will be no end. The "kingdom of God" is the central message.

## Cop-out

The application of one's own intelligence to solving problems, improving conditions, making decisions, is not the issue. It is a matter of *Thy will be done ... thy kingdom come ...* Submission to the monarch's will must be entire. Should you have thought that prayer was a way of circumventing misfortunes, or of gaining the ear of someone in high place, bear in mind the cop-out clause with which the devout conclude their petitions—if *it be thy holy will, O Lord*. If you beg his favour, do not depend on getting what you want.

He is just and compassionate, you will be told, and you had better believe it, although that is not how his actions, or their absence, may appear. You have really no say in the matter, anyway. Perhaps you should have taken the trouble to read the small print.

Private interpretation is abominated where orthodoxy of belief is concerned. Acceptance of the given creed is crucial. Democracy is unknown among religions.

Now of course this is not how "private interpreters" see "true religion"—their own, that is—which in many instances, we may agree, is kindly and tolerant in intent, relatively broad-minded and superficially reasonable. It would be ungenerous to overlook the fact that some people's "religion"—that is, the congeries of beliefs and attitudes which comprise their general outlook and may not dovetail too well with a nominal religion to which they express loyalty—shows marked improvement on religions of the past.

Nevertheless much more radical change is called for, and it might begin with a consideration of the manner in which we measure humanity's projected habitation of this planet—not that we can endure, for more than a few moments, any bogging of our minds, or escape the mental effects of our metabolism, which keeps our sense of time at a span we can accommodate.



## You're telling us!

### Faster-than-light

RELUCTANTLY I enter the fray. As a professional mathematician and fairly knowledgeable theoretical physicist, I must clarify some points raised by Mr Hill *et al* in recent correspondence on UFOs and faster-than-light travel.

Unlike the sound barrier, the velocity of light (186,200 miles per second—usually written as  $c$ ) is a limiting velocity (explanation later). In calculating the relative velocity of two bodies, the position of the observer plays a rôle; this may be insignificant but sometimes is vital. Consider two bodies *A* and *B* in inertial frames moving with uniform (unaccelerated) relative motion. An observer *C* may see *A* rushing towards *B* at 150,000 miles per second and *B* rushing in the opposite direction at 150,000 miles per second. Using Newtonian physics he will record a relative velocity of 300,000 miles per second. Both *A* and *B* may probably find a relative velocity of 160,000 miles per second—a vast difference! In such cases the position of the observer must be borne in mind. Failure to do this is *always* the root mistake made in observations of bodies with FTL velocity. I also saw the article on atoms tunnelling at 1.4 times  $c$ . The author makes this mistake. Admittedly he (or she) should have known better, but even Homer nods. Mr Hill should re-study his Relativity Theory, Inertial Frames and Quantum Theory.

If *A* is an observer on Earth and *B* an observer in a spacecraft, *A* will find that the observed mass of the spacecraft (and therefore the force required to accelerate it) will depend on the relative velocity. If the relative velocity reaches  $c$  the mass becomes infinite, the force required becomes infinite and clocks stop, hence  $c$  as a limiting velocity. These effects result from sound Relativity Theory and the use of elementary mathematics (Lorentz-Fitzgerald Transformations).

Yes I have "read up on" tachyons.

No doubt muggings could not be photographed before CCTV cameras but their results and effects could and certainly were photographed. Where are the results and effects of UFO sightings?

Mr Hill does not seem to realise that the vast majority of scientists and, probably, intelligent people generally as well as (to be fair) some devout Christians, *do* believe it very probable that there is life (possibly highly intelligent life) in other parts of the Universe. His attempt to drag in the discovery of organic particles on Europa is a *non-sequitur*; it has absolutely nothing to do with UFO sightings.

My own opinions on the subject of UFO sightings and alien abductions are very much in line with those of the late Carl Sagan and of Stuart Campbell, but I am too old and tired to argue about it.

MALCOLM G CLARKE  
Benidorm

### What choice?

I FIND little with which to disagree in Mr Gormley's letter (Page 15, December) but most of his comments could apply equally to all cults and religions and not just the Catholic.

The paragraph concerning doubt interests me; why is doubt evil? Basically, how much delib-

erate choice do we have when it comes to what we believe? Could Mr Gormley *choose* to believe in a supernatural being? From an early age, I was never able to believe in a God no matter how hard I tried. I rejected one religion because it told me it was as sinful to think something as to do it. I was only 10 years old but that seemed too illogical to be taken seriously.

I do wonder, however, why he attributes the Catholic Church with feminine gender. There are few more patriarchal churches. Mr Gormley—examine your psyche.

BARBARA ALBERS  
Yorkshire

### Free will

I AM confused. Is it determinism or free will? Most writers in *The Freethinker* suggest that free will is an illusion since everything must have a cause, but it keeps popping up again like a rubber duck in the bath.

Terry Sanderson's piece on astrology (Page 11, December) states "... if all is pre-ordained, then what is the use of morality ... every Sagittarian car thief could say that it wasn't his fault ..." etc. But if there's no free will, it *still* isn't his fault. Some other, non-astrological deterministic force is at work, isn't it?

Please help me out of the very "intellectual confusion" that is described on Page 10.

A J MIZEN  
Tunbridge Wells

### Abortion

I WAS pleased to see the article 'Five-point bid for abortion law reform' (Page 12, December), but I was surprised not to see the National Abortion Campaign in the list of organisations supporting ALRA's campaign, especially as you included the Scottish Abortion Campaign, one of our local groups.

The National Abortion Campaign is a single issue campaign campaigning for equal access to safe, free abortion on request. We have a large membership of individuals and organisations.

This year, the 30th anniversary of the 1967 Abortion Act, NAC has been particularly active. Among our activities has been a Speak Out when women spoke about their experiences of abortion, reminding everyone that it is nothing to be ashamed of. At the time of the election we ran a postcard campaign reassuring would-be MPs that there are votes in being pro-choice. We marked the date of the anniversary with a large advertisement in *The Guardian*, which attracted hundreds of sponsors, and jointly with Marie Stopes International we have published *Voices for Choice*, 30 women's experience of abortion, 1936-97.

Your readers can get further information from NAC, The Print House, 18 Ashwin Street, London E8 3DL; 0171 923 4976.

JANET MEARNS  
Secretary, NAC

### Unholy alliance

SOME may have noted the alliance against legal abortion on the part of Cardinal Hume and

the British Muslims. Photo-opportunities were also provided to the Press; Muslim girls—presumably not circumcised as they looked quite calm—were seen with the Cardinal holding placards. Perhaps this is an alliance for cash as well as ideology, but it does seem a trifle odd.

The Cardinal thinks abortion is murder, yet the Muslims have been killing Christians in the Sudan for some time: they are not averse to killing tourists of unknown religion, while those Muslims in Afghanistan, Algeria and elsewhere who are not of the correct Islamic denomination are also liable to be exterminated, often with the utmost cruelty.

So if Cardinal Hume is very keen on the preservation of all life, even of souls unborn, how come he does not have much to say about the Muslim murderers? He is also silent on the matter of those Christians who in the USA have shot dead several abortion clinic workers. Or maybe it's a matter of funding; if the Christian faithful don't fear Hell like they used to do, they may not contribute so much cash as previously; funds must be found somewhere, after all.

B L ABLE  
Croydon

### 'Unfair' critic

C R WASON'S criticism of Peter Danning for having fallen for the propaganda of the Vatican and the Nazis (Page 14, November) was most unfair when the latter described the Vatican leaders' support of the Fascists as "atrocious beyond belief".

It seems to me that it is C R Wason who has fallen for Communist propaganda. He may well have seen some successes in Soviet Russia (he mentioned abolishing inflation and unemployment), but the same observations were reported by Fascist sympathisers when they visited Nazi Germany. In both countries some economic achievements were made, though some through slave labour.

If the Soviet Union was the most democratic country he had ever been in, then I wonder what other countries he had visited. I don't consider the banning of all opposition parties and censorship of the press as democratic. Communist and Fascist régimes alike have executed or imprisoned numerous people (including Freethinkers and Humanists) just for their beliefs.

This attitude of defending a particular system under all circumstances, to see only its benefits while turning a blind eye to its faults, and especially to ignore its inhumane and cruel treatment of many innocent citizens is no better than the dogmatic thinking of religious fanatics.

ALEX HILL  
London W6

### Blair's choice

FOR more than a thousand years, the Catholic Church has been the most consistently reactionary force in European history. By persecution and suppression of free and rational thought, the peoples of the continent were for centuries denied the development of culture and civilisation that lay in their genes and their classical inheritance.

➔ Turn to Page 14



# You're telling us!

From Page 13

By the same means, the Church managed to make people believe that a *post mortem* transfer of property to the Church instead of to their natural heirs would give testators eternal life in Paradise, whereas failing to do so would forever land them in the most gruesome torment and suffering in Hell. And the swindle worked. By lies, fraud and deception; by shamelessly exploiting human gullibility, fear and egoism, the Church managed to grab and accumulate incredible wealth, while people in general were left in poverty.

It is against this background that we ought to ask ourselves what to make of supposedly progressive political leaders who choose Catholic schools for their offspring. For, surely, there can be little doubt that two of the most fundamental aims of Catholic education will still be (1) indoctrination of the most reactionary ideology our part of the world has ever known and (2) development of loyalty to Papal authority and to the most reactionary of doctrinal systems.

What is of public interest and concern in this connection is not the education chosen for certain young individuals; it is what this choice reveals about the progressive credentials of the present Prime Minister. Are they genuine or have they just been donned to further personal ambition?

In all the hullabaloo around Labour ministers' choice of school for their children, I never saw this point raised. To me it seems far more important than questions concerning the school's administrative status.

YNGVE BAUTZ  
Newcastle upon Tyne

## Thomas Paine

I HAVE been informed by the writer Ronald Blumer of a major television series being shown this month in the USA, which includes highlights of the great contribution made by Thomas Paine towards their independence and a rejection of Monarchy. It is getting rave reviews there from critics and historians.

The BBC has, however, contemptuously refused to buy this series, entitled *Liberty*, without even viewing it, and Channel 4 likewise has so far rejected it.

They have given all sorts of excuses, but one suspects that the real reason for the rejection is that they consider ideas started by Paine and others during the American Revolution are still a bit too radical to be seen by the British public.

So instead, mostly, we will continue to get shown from America on our television just mindless talk shows and old films.

Incidentally, the Thomas Paine Society (43 Wellington Gardens, Selsey PO20 0RF) is holding an exhibition on the life of Thomas Paine at the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, January 28 to February 14.

ERIC PAINE  
Selsey

## Same rights

IN the December 1997 issue of *The Freethinker* (Page 10) it is stated: "At present, Muslims have just one representative in the Commons—

described by the *Telegraph* as 'the discredited Glasgow MP, Mohammed Sarwar'".

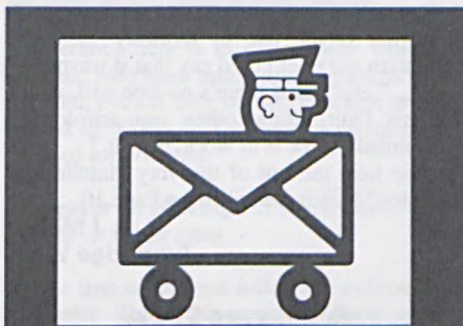
I take the point being made; nevertheless as presented it misleads, in that Muslims are represented by their constituency Members of Parliament. Thus, taken as a group, they can be said to have multi-representation in Parliament, via the approaches individual members of this social group can make to their separate Members of Parliament.

In this respect, they very properly have the same rights as all other constituents.

D HARROP  
Sheffield

## President Tony?

IN the November issue (Page 13), Mr Saich asks who would head the list of possible Presidents, if we became a republic, and goes on to name a number of former Prime Ministers with whom he is not happy for this position.



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

May I suggest that by the time this long overdue situation arrives, the present Prime Minister could be a candidate? I personally have no problem with his selection for this post, which to my mind would be more suited to him.

Some Labour voters might prefer this opportunity to arrive sooner rather than later, so he could be kicked upstairs and be replaced by a true Labour leader.

A JONES  
Crewe

## Tell us, Ludo!

GEORGE BROADHEAD (October letters) refers to Sir Ludovic Kennedy's becoming an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society. I was very pleased to read of his acceptance as I have always had a high regard for Kennedy's outspoken utterances against theism. It matters not to me that he may support hunting. This has no connection with superstitious religious beliefs. What does puzzle me,

however, is his apparent co-operation with John Selwyn Gummer in a Best Sermon Competition, as pointed out by your correspondent. I cannot possibly see how Sir Ludovic can reconcile such an act with his experience.

About three years ago, Kennedy conducted a series of interviews on Radio 4 with well-known Christians; John Gummer was one of these. I recorded it and have just had the opportunity of listening to it again. At one point, Kennedy asked Gummer how he saw his present-day thinking compared to the days when Christians believed in angels. John Gummer immediately retorted: "But I do believe in angels—I pray to one every day!" Sir Ludovic tried to be courteous, but had difficulty in suppressing a slight laugh. This offended John Gummer somewhat, but the interview continued. It also transpired that Gummer accepted Kennedy's observation that many pagan groups had virgin births as part of their culture long before the Christians came on the scene. According to Gummer, however, none of those were true. It was only when the Christians pinched the legend for their own cult that it suddenly became true. Once again, Kennedy had to suppress his mirth.

I hope very much that Sir Ludovic continues to be actively associated with both the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association. I wonder whether he might like to clarify his position on this apparent inconsistency by letting us read his true views in *The Freethinker*? I do hope that he can be persuaded to do so.

ALAN STUART  
Berkshire

## Shackle and Hide 'em!

FRANK McLYNN, biographer (Pimlico Books) of R L Stevenson writes of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*: "This book has become one of those universal texts into which every conceivable meaning can be read". Schneir Levin (September, Page 10) thinks there is some kind of New Testament message in the story. Mr Levin treats names as though they were some kind of literary Plasticine: "Jekyll" is remodelled into "Jew-kill"; "Utterson" is transformed into an "uttering of the Son".

I could shackle and hide those who do this kind of thing!

Mr Levin's article reminds me of fundamentalist interpretations of the Book of Revelation, where texts are manipulated to accord with what Mr Levin calls a "confident supposition".

Treat a work of literature like the Rorschach Test and I suppose you see what you want to see.

On another matter, Michael Hill (October letters) suggests that perhaps the reason my car wouldn't start was because I forgot to put the key into the ignition. Not so. But Mr Hill's response shows that, where dodgy car engines are concerned, he sees that a simple, mundane explanation is far more likely than a fantastic one ("gremlins" in this case). Perhaps he will apply the same rationality to UFOs?

RAY McDOWELL  
Co Antrim



# 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, February 1, 4.30 pm: Beatrice Clarke: *Gurus and Sects*. 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. Wednesday, February 11, 7.45 pm, at The Friends' Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamsted: Joanna Cole: *Humanist Groups and National Policies*. Monday, March 9: AGM at Wendover Library, High Street.

**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, January 15, 7.30 pm: Public Meeting.

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

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

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):** Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB; 01926 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Street, London WC1 (Library, 1st floor). January 9: Joint meeting with Amnesty International's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Network. February 13: Preview of Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.

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

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. Meetings at Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch, from 8 pm to 10 pm. Tuesday, February 3: Robin Squire reminisces about his many years in the House of Commons. March 3: Dr Michael Kehr: *Doctors in Literature*. April 7: AGM and reports on last year's BHA conference.

**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. 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. January 29: Barbara Smoker: *To Hell With Blasphemy!*

**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. January 14: Social.

**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*.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. January 7, 8 pm: Dan Bye: *How Much Freedom Do We Want?* Wednesday, February 4, 8 pm: Jim Herrick: *International Humanism*. 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. 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.

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With Owen Dumbleton, of the North East Humanists, the former President of the National Secular Society, Daniel O'Hara, once an Anglican priest, spoke at the Durham University Union Society Debate on November 28 in favour of the proposition that 'This House believes that Jesus Christ has caused more problems than he has solved'. Their opponents were Dom Raphael Appleby, of the Benedictine order, and the Rev Paul Clark, of the United Reformed Church. As always on such occasions, the audience was heavily packed with Christians (Daniel was particularly disappointed to find Evangelical Christianity represented so strongly among the professional and business leaders of tomorrow) and the 'Noes' had it. But also as always, the freethinkers, while losing the vote, did not lose the argument, as we see from this extract from Daniel's speech ...

# The 'dangerous cult' of Christianity

**T**ONIGHT'S motion begs several questions. Even the phrase "Jesus Christ" is question-begging. "Christ" is not a name, as some imagine, but a Greek word meaning "Anointed". It is equivalent to the Hebrew word "Messiah", a term applied to the anointed Kings of Israel. By the 1st Century, it had come to signify an idealised future King who would restore peace, unity, prosperity and sovereignty to Israel, such as it had supposedly enjoyed in the Golden Age of David and Solomon.

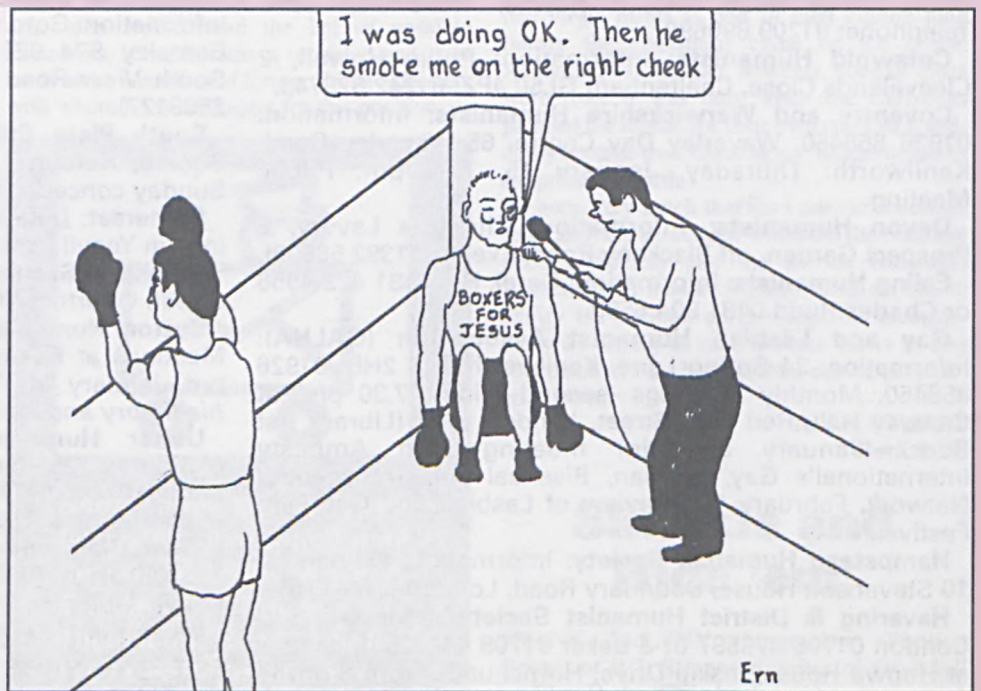
Orthodox Jews still await the coming Messiah. Orthodox Christians believe that Jesus was and is the Messiah, and they await his coming again "with glory to judge both the quick and the dead" (as the Creed has it).

What distinguished the first Christians from their fellow-Jews was their belief that Jesus, their executed prophet, had been raised from the dead and enthroned in Heaven as the promised Messiah or Christ. Carried away by religious zeal and intemperate enthusiasm, they fervently expected his imminent return. Some 50 years later, writings known as "Gospels" were produced by the successors of those followers. These provide a partisan, garbled and heavily mythologised account of his life and teachings. In no sense are they eye-witness documents, as was once widely believed.

Since we have no independent access to the Jesus of history, we can judge him only on the basis of these tendentious documents, and by the actions of those who claim, as Christians, to be his followers. Either way, I submit, the picture is bleak.

I shall deal briefly with a few examples from the early documents.

Jesus is popularly portrayed as "The Prince of Peace": but this is not the whole story. He is actually reported in the Gospels as claiming to have come to "cast fire on the earth", to bring "not peace but a sword", to divide households, to set father against son, mother against daughter: indeed to wreak havoc within families. You can find the whole unedifying catalogue in Matthew 10 and Luke 12. In Luke 14 he declares that no one can be his follower unless they "hate ... father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters." How exquisitely we still find such intentions fulfilled, not only at Waco, Jamestown, and in the nemesis of count-



less cults who take their inspiration from Jesus Christ! The denial of self, the embracing of what Hume called "the Monkish virtues" of poverty, celibacy and obedience to religious superiors, is still enjoined in the name of Jesus by even respectable parts of the Church in the fostering of religious vocations.

Jesus is also often portrayed as preaching forgiveness, love of one's enemies and turning the other cheek. Once again, this is not the whole story. For in the 23rd Chapter of Matthew's Gospel we find him denouncing the orthodox Jews of his day as "hypocrites", "blind guides", "iniquitous", "fools", who are "whited sepulchres, ... full of all uncleanness", "a generation of vipers". They are, in his reported words, destined for Hell: a place where (I quote) "the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched." Need we look any further for a religious blueprint for the Nazi death camps?

And let us for a moment consider that claim of Jesus so beloved of Christian believers: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life: no one cometh to the Father but by me." It is difficult to think of any claim more characteristic of the deluded fanatic, nor any saying which has caused more mischief, more self-righteous posturing, sectarian strife and bloodshed.

In the 4th Chapter of Mark, the earliest Gospel, we find Jesus justifying his method of teaching in obscure sayings. It is so that those outside the charmed circle of his disciples shall forever remain uncomprehending, lest they "turn again and be forgiven".

From the start, then, Christianity can be seen as a dangerous cult: an elitist religion, reserved for those who "know" with the certainty of the true believer! It was, as it remains, credible only for those who surrender to the demand of Jesus Christ for absolute obedience and unquestioning faith.

But what do we see if we remove the rose-tinted spectacles of this wholly unwarranted faith? We see that Jesus Christ, as represented in the Gospels, has more in common with modern religious fanatics such as the Branch Davidian leader, David Koresh, or the Rev Jim Jones or the odious Do Appleyard of the "Heaven's Gate" sect, than with the historic teachers of genuine ethical principles, such as Confucius, Socrates, Aristotle, Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius.

In my submission, he has indeed caused more problems than he has solved.

Daniel O'Hara