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They're *all* talking pernicious nonsense!

At best, only one of you can be telling it how it is.



● The heading was chosen for *The Freethinker* by artist DONALD ROOM. The cartoon itself is also to be used in the new edition of Barbara Smoker's best-selling book, *Humanism*, soon to be issued by the British Humanist Association.

'He who invented God is a fool. He who propagates God is a scoundrel. He who worships God is a barbarian ... ' That's the message which BARBARA SMOKER (pictured by Malcolm Rees with atheist leader Mr K Veeramani) brought back from India: Page 8.



Up Front

Myth of Christian virtue

LET there be no doubt: capital punishment is a barbaric ritual, unworthy of civilised humanity. It drags down society collectively to the lowly agenda set by the criminal. It has little deterrent effect; at best it is the ultimate act of getting even. Nor does it leave room for error.

Its being such a sordid, uncharitable business, one would have thought that it would have been the sole preserve of the godless—those lacking the benefit of an education in

Christian charity and forgiveness. The sort of people who have not elevated humans to the special position of God's chosen species, created in His own image. Such people, in their ignorance and selfishness, could be forgiven for wishing to rid the earth of misfits, sociopaths and other undesirables who make no positive contribution to society but cause endless misery to those unfortunate enough to encounter them.

Surprisingly, this is not the case: most Humanists are against the death penalty and most ardent Christians are for it. In general, the rule is: the more fanatical the belief the more strident the call for vengeance. To understand this vindictive attitude it is necessary to expose a deep-seated misapprehension. The point is that religious people, despite the evidence, still have not learned that their religion does not make them better people.

Of all the oft-repeated lies on which religion has grown fat, the myth of Christian virtue and godless criminals has been among the most successful. The ceaseless mantra *religion good; atheism bad* has been deeply planted. Hence the unshakeable conviction that evil acts are associated exclusively with unbelief. We have all heard churchmen in Northern Ireland denounce the godless gunmen. A call for the death penalty in the eyes of the righteous thus becomes a call for the elimination of one more atheist sinner.

But now they are faced with a troubling development. The powerful and widespread notion of *religion equals virtue, equals speeded-up release* has been put to good use by the smarter criminal over time—to such an extent that the newly-born Christian in prison has become a cliché. Hardened prison staff and court officials have heard it all too many times and the ploy is wearing thin.

As Sergeant Rankin of a Texas penitentiary put it: "Everyone sees Jesus at the jailhouse". Even in the US where a dose of godliness used to do more good than the most expensive lawyer, the game is up. In Texas, Karla Tucker, with her belt-and-braces job of newly-found Christianity grotesquely reinforced by marriage to the prison chaplain, has found this to her cost.

The Christian Right is more confused than ever. How can they demonise the criminal and call for vengeance when the felons turn out to

be from their own ranks? They are now forced to demonstrate against capital punishment—a novel experience. If only they would do what the religious are not wont to do and take a look at the facts. Then they would soon learn that religion is no bar to criminality; if anything, it seems to be an encouragement.

The statistics leave one in no doubt. Extensive research carried out by Barnes and Teeters in the United States and subsequently published in their report *New Horizons in Criminology* shows that there are surprisingly few non-believers in prison. Of 85,000 prison inmates, 60,000 or 80 per cent decisively expressed their preference as Christians. The proportion of avowed atheists was microscopic—some 150.

The study revealed crucially that the proportion of religious affiliates among prisoners is significantly higher than among the general population. This is corroborated by similar findings among the UK prison population. New prisoners are asked if they wish to register their religion. Of a total of 53,000, no fewer than 9,457 said they were Roman Catholic, a percentage of 18, whereas the percentage of Catholics in the wider population is barely eight. A similar situation obtains for Muslims who made up seven per cent of inmates. And, yes, there were some atheists; they brought up the rear, well behind the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. At 0.16 per cent to be precise!

Could it be that we have just stumbled on the origin of the expression "the Devil takes the hindmost"? Conclusive proof, if any were needed, that religion is no deterrent to crime. No huge surprise, bearing in mind that all religions have built-in convenient let-offs for the fallen to be given a second chance. No matter if you live like a brute all your life, just make sure to repent in time and all will be forgiven.

There is no such easy let-off for the Humanist. All actions must be measured against the "Golden Rule" and any trespassing must be made good with the person trespassed against or else the conscience won't rest. No handy helper in the sky for any wrongs not righted.

We shall know when Atheism has finally triumphed when prisoners are let out early on becoming newly-born unbelievers.

Tony Akkermans

The Freethinker

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CONTENTS

Up Front:	Page 2
Disestablishment	Page 3
Down to Earth: Colin McCall	Page 4
War clouds threaten	Page 5
Luxor and after	Page 6
Ask the Parson	Page 7
Barbara Smoker in India	Page 8
Non-religious funerals	Page 10
Sanderson on the media	Page 11
Secularists and witchcraft	Page 12
Letters	Page 13
What's On	Page 15
Muslim women speak out	Page 16

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**Saturday, March 7, 11 am to 4.30 pm:
Russian Ethical and Social Philosophy,
A V Razin, Professor of Ethics, Moscow State University.**

**Sunday, March 8, 11 am:
How Religion Undermines Ethics
A C Grayling, Birbeck College.**

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Disestablishment: 'unholy alliance' the answer?

A CONTROVERSIAL Church of England bishop has added his voice to the renewed and growing call for disestablishment.

The Bishop of Woolwich, Dr Colin Buchanan, confirmed that he favoured disestablishment "provided it was initiated by the Church itself". He made this point during a Conway Hall discussion on February 3, organised jointly by the National Secular Society and the South Place Ethical Society.

Citing weekly Church of England attendances of around only a million, he urged greater realism over the C of E's influence in our multi-faith country. He said: "Parliament hasn't quite noticed the anomaly, and many in the Church would prefer disestablishment not to be discussed." He described the former Archbishop John Habgood's "don't rock the boat" attitude as "typical".

Dr. Buchanan asked: "What contribution can a secular sovereign Parliament make to a minority Church culture?" He added: "It is abominable that Church law has to be ratified

by Keith Porteous Wood

by Parliament and that ecclesiastical appointments are now effectively being decided in Downing Street."

Leading the discussion for the secularists, Dr David Nash, of Oxford Brookes University, said it was "totally inappropriate" for Bishops to sit in the House of Lords—not only did it create an English bias, but also the Bishops weren't even representative of the opinions of the Church they served. (This was a reference to the method by which bishops are selected.)

When Dr Nash suggested that "the death of the monarch would open the door for disestablishment", Dr Buchanan said that although this was true in theory, he believed that in practice disestablishment would only take place if the sitting Archbishop of Canterbury and the Privy Council were in favour and took steps well in advance of the next coronation.

Jim Herrick, a Vice President of the National Secular Society, suggested that disestablishment was only feasible with an "unholy

alliance" of secularists and Church liberals.

Dr Buchanan thought that disestablishment would only occur if the state were to obstruct the Church—presumably, for example, in making some doctrinal pronouncement.

Another call for disestablishment was made shortly before the meeting—by the Christian Socialist Movement, which has published a pamphlet called *Established Certainties?* The CSM said: "So long as the Anglican Church remains established, God will remain white, middle class and English in too many people's minds, failing to do justice to both God and Christianity."

Dr Buchanan certainly gave the CSM plenty to ponder. For example, he described the Episcopal oath—that all authority, both spiritual and temporal, flows from the Queen—as "near to blasphemy"!

● At the suggestion of the General Secretary, Honorary Associate Sir Ludovic Kennedy wrote an article on disestablishment from a secular perspective which appeared in *The Guardian* on February 14.

Explosive truth about Dome

LETTER to Martyn Percy, Director of the Lincoln Theological Institute at the University of Sheffield, from Nicolas Walter, of *The Freethinker*.

I have received a letter dated February 4 from you, in your capacity as "Academic Curator" of "an exhibition area" in the "Millennium Dome" which "is concerned with the subject of *Soul*", inviting me to join "a small team of advisors who might be willing to comment on ideas or design proposals, and perhaps participate in a seminar at a later date to offer some reflection on the likely or eventual contents" of this area.

You explain that "the team of advisors is to be comprised of [sic] theologians, church leaders, representatives from most of the major faiths in Britain", experts in old and new religions, people working in education at all levels, and some working in religious broadcasting" (an asterisked footnote adds "including humanism here—or people representing these [sic] and no faith"), and that all this is part of the plan

to emphasise the "religious content" of the project.

You ask me to reply in writing before the end of the month. I do so as follows.

I do not wish to join anyone in discussing this subject. I am not concerned with the "Millennium Dome", let alone its "religious content", except to say that any coverage of any religion at any time or place should include the bad as well as the good sides of that religion—as proposed by the National Secular Society (see *The Freethinker*, February 1998).

However, I do have two practical proposals for the *Soul* area of the Dome.

One is that it should be absolutely empty, in order to represent the truth about the "Soul".

The other is that it should contain a bomb (no doubt technical help could be obtained from representatives of the major faiths in Northern Ireland) timed to explode at midnight on December 31 in the chosen year, in order to demolish the Dome and everything it stands for.

Discworld writer's a 'Victorian atheist'!

THE writer Terry Pratchett, author of the very successful *Discworld* series of science fiction fantasies, was the token unbeliever in *The Big Question*, a series of religious programmes currently broadcast on BBC1 television, writes NICOLAS WALTER.

Interviewed by Mark Lawson on February 1, he accepted the description of "humanist", though he preferred to call himself "a Victorian atheist". He added that he had never believed in any kind of god who played snakes-and-ladders with the world, and that he found the scientific story of the spontaneous evolution of life and consciousness more awesome than the religious story of divine creation.

He accepted the Christian input into our morality during the past 2,000 years, but argued that morality is nevertheless a purely human phenomenon and that we have to decide for ourselves about right and wrong.

He concluded by saying that there is survival after death—in the sense of what he called the "outer soul", our works and memories which continue for a time after our lives, but that we do not survive as persons.

Asked what he would say if he met God when he died, he replied, "Sorry!"

Altogether this was an interesting quarter-of-an-hour, though it was a pity that the programme appeared under the usual cover of a religious series, that it concentrated on what the celebrity didn't believe rather than on what he did believe, and that it was broadcast early on a Sunday morning.

Book sought

CAN you help? Researcher and NSS member trying to locate a copy of *The Origin of all Religious Belief* by C F Dupuis (abridged). Published 1872 and 1984 USA. Purchase or loan perhaps? Contact: Larry Wright, telephone: 01793-695979 or e-mail lmw6@student.open.ac.uk



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Intolerance über Alles

CATHOLICS “defy Pope on abortion” ran a *Guardian* headline over a report by its Bonn correspondent Ian Traynor (January 26). And undoubtedly many German Catholics do. Indeed, 264 of the 1,685 counselling centres that issue certificates to women seeking to terminate their pregnancy are run by Catholic charities. But the Pope has “urgently requested” the German Church to stop “implementing a law which leads to the killing of innocent human beings”. A couple of days later, Traynor reported that the hierarchy had bowed to Vatican pressure.

“We will obey the Pope. We will no longer issue these certificates”, said Archbishop Karl Lehmann of Mainz. So he joined the “hardliners” like Archbishop Johannes Dyba of Fulda, who has banned the issuing of certificates in his archdiocese as being “licences to kill”, and Cardinal Friedrich Wetter of Munich who, in his New Year’s Eve sermon, outrageously likened abortion to the sexual assault and murder of a seven-year-old Bavarian girl, Natalie Astner.

Germany’s Catholic political parties—Helmut Kohl’s Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria—are worried that the Pope’s interference might lose them votes in this election year.

Alois Gluck, a CSU leader, thought it would be “the bitterest conflict and toughest test the Catholic Church has faced this century in Germany” if the bishops abandoned abortion counselling. And a colleague said that Catholic women seeking abortion would simply go elsewhere for advice and certificates.

There is a historical irony in this for the detached observer. German Catholics were under-represented at the Vatican Council of 1870, when the Pope was declared infallible in faith and morals. Had they had more cardinals then, the controversial measure might well have met more opposition than it did. Significantly, when the present Pope named 22 new cardinals in January 1998, there was no German among them.

When God’s law means gun law

ROMAN Catholic detestation of abortion is matched by that of the other fundamentalist churches in the United States, where bomb

and gun attacks to intimidate abortion doctors “have become increasingly common” (*The Guardian*, January 30) since Dr David Gunn was shot dead outside his clinic in Pensacola, Florida, during an anti-abortion rally in 1993.

In the latest attack, on January 29, a bomb outside a health centre in Birmingham, Alabama, killed an off-duty policeman and critically injured a nurse.

For many religious opponents of abortion, God’s law takes precedence over man’s and, as laws allowing abortion defy Biblical instructions, they must be disobeyed with physical force.

Where human law is seen as permitting “murder of the unborn child”, it is scarcely surprising that fanatical followers should take extreme measures to prevent it.

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, as it were.

Which brings me to another explosion, this time at the Temple of the Tooth in Sri Lanka, and equally unforgivable. How absurd, though, to preserve a tooth, allegedly of the Buddha.

Even the “more enlightened” religions have their silly sides.

Memories are made of this

AN INQUIRY commissioned by the Royal College of Psychiatrists concludes that memories recovered through hypnosis, dream interpretation or regression therapy are almost certainly false; and it blames these “dangerous and powerful tools for persuasion” for spawning hundreds of false accusations against parents, destroying families and undermining the credibility of genuine abuse victims (*The Guardian*, January 12).

The Royal College’s warning can also be applied in the realm of UFOs, where the “dangerous and powerful” tool of hypnosis is widely used to “recall” abduction by little green men and other imaginary nocturnal adventures.

Hath not an authority eyes?

THE Royal Shakespeare Company has been performing the medieval *Mysteries* “with the religion taken out”, as the *Daily Telegraph* put it (December 31, 1997). The 700-year-old original texts describe Jews as evil people who glory in the crucifixion of Jesus. When Caiaphas, a Jewish priest, confronts

Jesus, for instance, he says “I am a Jew and I want to kill you”. This has now been softened—with a certain loss of dramatic effect—to “I am a member of the religious authorities and, frankly, I wish you would go away”.

I can sympathise with Edward Kemp, son of the Bishop of Chichester, who has rewritten the plays for a modern audience and given them a contemporary setting. The *Mysteries’* attitude to Jews is, as he explained, “pretty unsavoury”. But that describes the Christian Churches’ attitude towards the Jews throughout history.

Disunited over gay ordination

THE United Reformed Church is divided. Not on the question of women priests—it led the way with that in 1917—but over another pioneering decision: the ordination of lesbians and gays.

“It doesn’t fill you with hope when you look at all the other churches in the West which have tried to resolve the issue of ordaining lesbians and gays”, URC general secretary Tony Burnham told *The Guardian’s* Madeleine Bunting (January 26). “I do not know how to resolve it”.

He already faces the problem of falling membership: from 250,000 to 100,000 in the last 25 years, and now another 25 per cent threaten to secede on the gay-lesbian issue.

Bell’s not so clear on pain

INDEPENDENT MP Martin Bell, hero to us all when he defeated Neil Hamilton—and his wife—at the last election, told an audience in the Unitarian Chapel in Knutsford, Cheshire, that he had “always been troubled by the issues of pain and suffering and how a beneficent and omnipotent deity could allow to happen the things that I have seen happen”.

He thought he now understood it better. “It’s partly a matter of things defining themselves by their opposites; that without darkness there can be no light, and without wrong perhaps no right, and without sorrow no happiness”.

Unfortunately, Mr Bell, “defining” is not “resolving”. Tony Burnham could tell you that.

Back from the brink

BRITISH warriors will not, it seems, be helping to mince Iraqis and their remaining civic facilities (28 hospitals and 676 schools were “taken out” in the last Gulf War to end all Gulf Wars)—not this week, at any rate. Our squaddies will not be going down to the traditional “friendly fire” of their US allies—nor to some new, improved desert syndrome. They are spared the attentions of Saddam’s SS-style Republican Guard.

Peace appears to have broken out—for now. It will be a long time, however, before we forget the sight and sound of Christian gentlemen—Bonkin’ Baptist Bill Clinton

with Tony Blair, RC-edged Anglican, yapping at the presidential heels—as they limbered-up to deliver Iraq from tyranny ... by bombing bits of it.

We have escaped, for the time being, that inevitable next stage of war fever: the hypocrisy which is the stock-in-trade of religious folk down the ages: *God bless our bombs ... Allah bless our missiles ... tough about the little children!*

The crisis sprang from the ancient US fear of a well-armed Saddam (former client of the CIA) ruling the roost over the Middle Eastern oil producers—and it will be re-run. But the US-UK *excuse* for sabre-rattling

centred on Saddam’s coyness over his biological and chemical means of mass destruction (1990s versions of those deployed by the US in long-ago Korea and Vietnam). But if they really want to know how many such weapons he holds, or is capable of making, all they need do is to scan the copy-invoices held by the entrepreneurs of Christendom who have been his suppliers.

Just how terrifying the tyrant’s arsenal is, we do not know, for statespersons lie to us as a matter of course. For example, we were told during the last Gulf War that Iraq was about to become a nuclear power; in fact this was black propaganda: Iraq was at least 10 years away from making its first atomic bomb.

It is nonsense to claim that the centres where these weapons are held could be eliminated by smart bombs, with no effect on the civilian population. Iraqis of all ages and conditions would die in any such blitz. How many dead babies are worth what measure of US-acceptable political change?

As George Galloway MP said: “If one bomb lands on one stockpile of one kind of biological or chemical weapons, it will send them up into the atmosphere to choke the very Iraqi people we are told we have no quarrel with, to choke them with poison gas. And if the wind changes, all the kings and sheikhs of Araby had better be on the next plane to London or Paris, because they will be choked too.”

The kings and sheikhs knew this: in their gung-ho short-sightedness, Clinton and his New Labour poodle even sticking-plastered the breach between Iraq and Iran and united most Islamic nations against the bombing.

They also set many Muslims in the UK murmuring against war (Islamophobia? Peanuts! If the balloon had gone up, the racists and the advocates of pro-Saddam *jihad* alike would have enjoyed a field day).

We go to press thankful that UN diplomacy seems to have been more successful in Baghdad than it tends to be on those occasions when the USA and Israel ignore international decisions. But still we suspect—and dread—that before long the prayers being offered by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in their respective centres of superstition will be for Victory rather than for Peace.

Peter Brearey

Straw to discuss special ‘rights’ for religion

NO sooner had Home Secretary Jack Straw announced that he was to “put arrangements in hand” to discuss with religious leaders their objections to aspects of the Human Rights Bill, currently before Parliament, than the National Secular Society also sought “to meet you and ensure balance in the representations you receive.”

NSS General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood despatched the request after Mr Straw, speaking in the debate on the second reading in the Commons on February 16, noted: “The churches have expressed concerns about the Bill’s impact on them if they are held to be public authorities in carrying out some of their activities—for example, in conducting marriage ceremonies or running religious schools.

“They fear that the convention rights will be used against them, so that they will have to carry out those activities in contravention of their religious beliefs.”

He would be discussing amendments introduced in the Lords (see below) with representatives of the churches.

Former Tory Minister Ann Widdecombe led the attack on the religion-related aspects of the Bill, claiming that, under such a law, the churches would be powerless to expel clergy who publicly declared they no longer believed in God, and she declared: “Individuals and churches will lose their rights of religious freedom and will be suppressed by state law.”

But Mr Straw insisted: “It could not be used to require the churches to conduct marriages between homosexual couples or divorcees and it could not be used to require churches to appoint atheists as head-teachers of church schools.”

The Opposition’s amendment opposing a second reading to the Bill was defeated by 335 votes to 144.

● In a defeat for the Government, the Lords passed an amendment by 168 votes to 131 on its third reading of the Bill which

would drastically reduce the human rights obligations of the “big six” religions in this country.

The Lords agreed that the Bill should permit as a legal defence non-criminal abuses of human rights that they were “in pursuance of a manifestation of religious belief in accordance with the historic teaching” of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism and Buddhism.

Attempts completely to exempt religions from the Human Rights Bill at the second reading had failed by 93 votes to 82, as reported in last month’s issue of *The Freethinker*, but the practical effect of this new amendment would be similar to exemption.

Little was said in the third reading that had not been covered in previous debates. The principal case made by the Church was that the European Convention, or its jurisprudence, might develop in the future in a way contrary to the churches’ interests.

The National Secular Society has been in frequent contact with the Home Office about the Bill and has made a detailed case to the Home Secretary for this amendment to be reversed in the House of Commons, and for other successful pro-religious Lords amendments to be reconsidered.

These include the freedom for churches not to “marry” homosexuals (even though this is not possible under existing law) and to hire and fire senior staff in church or religious schools, colleges or charities based on “beliefs and manner of life”.

Unless this amendment is reversed, staff of the “wrong” faith (or none), homosexuals or “adulterers”, and perhaps divorcees, had better watch out, even if—perhaps particularly if—they had been open about their position when they were appointed.

Before the second reading in the Commons, the NSS organised a protest letter which was published in *The Guardian*, signed by several of its honorary associates and other prominent secularists.

George Miller

A STALWART of Freethought, George Miller, has died at the age of 92. A long-standing member of the National Secular Society and supporter of *The Freethinker*, in his younger days George frequently took to the outdoor soapbox for the “best of causes” and sold our journal on the streets of London.

The President of the National Secular Society, Denis Cobell, conducted a Humanist funeral ceremony for George at Golders Green on February 8.

HOLY TERROR: LUXOR AND APPEASEMENT

by Peter McKenna

IMAGINE, for a moment, the unthinkable. Irish republicans, using heavy automatic fire, indiscriminately kill 70 tourists outside Buckingham Palace. Some of the tourists, who include British children, are finished off by hand, by blade. The immediate purpose of the renegade terrorists is to inflict economic damage on the British state by disrupting its highly profitable tourist industry.

The next day, there is a strange but conspicuous absence of outrage in the British media. It is full of "angry questions asked of London", unexplained doubt cast on the identity and declared allegiance of the perpetrators, and pragmatic speculation on the future of the British tourist industry. The terrorists are referred to in the liberal press as "supposedly Irish", and a feature appears within three days which decries an unfavourable comparison between the perpetrators and one of their child victims, as anti-Irish racism.

Sounds absurd? Yet this is exactly what happened in November 1997, only the terrorists were "supposedly Islamic" and the location was Luxor, Egypt. The British press—and the liberal press in particular—stooped to new depths in its abject appeasement of Islamic terrorism. What on earth, the naive might ask, is going on? Surely we care when even our own children become military targets?

Julian Borger was *The Guardian's* man in Luxor. On November 18, when the slaughter is breaking news, and amid a description of the mayhem, he is already casting a cold eye on meta-issues and realpolitik. With more journalistic concern for the Egyptian tourist industry than for the people killed, he reports that the atrocity "has critically wounded Egypt's vital tourist industry and shattered government claims to have dealt with the threat of terrorism". Further inside the paper, a headline proclaims "Egypt rejoiced too soon in terror war", and the editorial works out that the "extremists" have "made good" their warning to tourists. Egypt and her tourists have all been taught a lesson. The Egyptian government, we are told finally, must negotiate with these "extremists".

Next day in *The Guardian* there is a piece on the British victims (along with, bizarrely, a humorous cartoon of a Pharaoh). "Angry questions", we learn from the main sub-heading, "are being asked of Cairo". Julian Borger describes the indolence of the Egyptian police now at the site and mysteriously refers to the gunmen as "supposedly Islamic militants" (by this time the killings have been unequivocally claimed, and the gunmen identified). The Letters page, meanwhile, is rehearsing for the umpteenth time the gendering of housework. No letters concerning Luxor are to appear at any time in *The Guardian*, so far as I am aware. By the following day it is as if none of it ever happened. No human stories, no list of the dead, no information even concerning their nationalities. The British media, well capable of emo-



● *The Valley of the Kings at Luxor where the massacre took place.*

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

tionally exploiting human tragedy where it is politically serviceable, showed little interest in the relatives of the dead.

And then the crowning piece. Three days was sufficient distance for *The Guardian's* Religious Affairs correspondent, Madeleine Bunting, to offer an ugly piece of "analysis", a *fatwa* on the "Islamophobia" of reports on Luxor. The media, she says, "did not mince their words": they described the perpetrators as "fanatics" who were "brutal". What a contrast, she points out, to the sympathetic portrayal of "the enchanting five-year-old Briton" whom they killed alongside her mother and grandmother. This coverage, far from being muted in describing the outrage, was not, she suggests, even-handed. The bizarre protection that is afforded to powerful supernatural belief-systems has been extended to the vicious ideology that drives the slaughter.

The implication that somehow, and in spite of all the evidence, such atrocities were not perpetrated by Islamists, is not new. The appallingly brutal mass butchering of women and children by the GIA in Algeria has only recently received the attention of the British media because they have contrived a conspiracy theory to lay the blame—however vaguely—at the door of the Algerian government. Amnesty International is regularly wheeled out to indicate that the Islamists are, despite their own admissions, and the evidence of survivors, not really responsible. At worst, according to Amnesty's latest advertisements, these methodically butchered civilians are somehow "caught in the crossfire" between the government and unknown "groups of armed men".

Although the thousands of civilian victims in Algeria are Muslims—many are now being slaughtered while at prayer in mosques—it is only their assailants who the British press is capable of identifying as "Muslim". To criticise the murderous Islamists, they imagine, is to criticise what they see as "these people" at

home. This inability to perceive "foreigners" as diverse rather than homogeneous—and that is the real "Islamophobia"—is born of centuries of British imperialism and cultural prejudice.

Even many elements of the Left, and of the women's movement, excuse the genital mutilation of girls and women when it is carried out under the auspices of Islam. Perish the thought, they think, that it should happen to one of us (we're different), but we know that "these people" have their own ways. Why interfere when some of them cry for help to people who have power through their global position of influence and access to Western media? Again, they affirm everything that is insidiously wicked about the patronising imperialist mentality.

Adding to this dishonest confusion of religion with race is the white middle-class male convert—so hugely over-represented in British Muslim public bodies and vocal in calling for the murder of the "coffee-coloured freak" Rushdie, absurdly protesting his entitlement to protection against racial prejudice.

The Luxor massacre popped up later only because the mix-up over victims' bodies made an interesting story. *The Guardian* covered the burial of two British tourists on November 29 just to report that their bodies had not been mixed up. And because those real villains, the Egyptian authorities, were suspected of removing rings from the corpses.

The Luxor massacre was only initially described as an "atrocious", or an "outrage"—on the television news and in the liberal press, we repeatedly settle for an anonymous and neutral "tragedy" at Luxor.

The real tragedy is that a country which values the stability of repressive Islamist states is secretly anxious to recognise the Taliban in Afghanistan, and continues to give shelter to Islamist terrorists from both Egypt and Algeria, will continue to soft-pedal, dissimulate and lie about militant Islam. We have the shame of living in that country.

ASK THE PARSON (13)

by Karl Heath

Why praise the grass for being green?

Dear Parson: The most over-worked word in all your liturgical practice is *praise*.

In prayers and countless hymns.

On the most popular BBC religious programme, *Songs of Praise*.

Venite, exultemus Domino.

Te Deum laudamus.

Do you still recite the canticle *Benedicete, omnia opera* in Morning Prayer? If so, do you not feel rather silly when intoning the words: "Oh ye Whales ... bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him for ever"?

Does not excessive repetition devalue and diminish the meaning of words?

So what, or whom, are you praising, and why?

Praise is not the same as admiration. One may admire qualities and attributes of a passive kind, a sunset or beautiful scenery.

But you would not praise the grass for being green.

Praise is for something purposely done, efforts made and something achieved.

What are you praising?

Can you escape from your anthropomorphism?

Do you not, inevitably, regard God as human?

Do you not imagine your God as thinking, behaving and acting like a human being?

Would you address human words of praise to an invisible cloud of energy, existing outside space and time?

Would you praise an arid metaphysical abstraction lacking all material properties, having no shape or size, invisible and intangible?

No!

In honesty, you must admit that you see your God as human. You must think that, in common with human beings, He likes praise. If not, why praise him?

But, in human terms, do we really regard "enjoying praise" as commendable?

Do we really approve of lavishing praise on a human being?

Before we ask what God has done to deserve praise, there is another question. A human being is praised for some achievement which requires effort. But Almighty God is effortless, achieving anything He wishes without effort.

Why praise the grass for being green?

If it is impossible for God to be anything other than good, if God's immutable nature (endowed by some other, mightier God?) is to be loving, caring and merciful, why praise

Him, if He can do no other?

Why praise the grass for being green?

Is God responsible for, and accountable for, all that happens in nature? Your colleagues often thank God for saving the survivors of natural disasters. But why did He not save those who perished? Neglect? Deliberate?

Is God's responsibility selective? Does He stretch out His Immortal Hand, or withhold it? Is this His will, or is it His whim?

So—when you praise Him incessantly and excessively, do you ever blame Him? Was Feuerbach right, in his *Essence of Christianity*, when he said that we attribute all our best human qualities to God, as His gift, while, ourselves, taking responsibility for all our human failings, and exonerating Him. To Him all the credit; to us all the blame.

During the two millennia of Christianity, what has God done to deserve praise?

Can you present any evidence of God's beneficence, since the alleged sacrifice of His Son to save us all, which, itself, could be condemned as a vicious and cowardly scheme, if it was planned and intended beforehand?

Of the good things which have happened in the last 2,000 years, can you name one which can clearly be attributed to God, and to no one else?

What, in fact, has God done to deserve praise?

Has anything happened which could not have happened in Nature without any gods?

The beautiful cathedrals, the wonderful sacred music, the language of the Authorised Version which has enriched our speech ... *all the work of human beings!*

And, for the achievements, good deeds and sacrifices of those who felt inspired by God, there has always been the reverse side.

Oliver Cromwell, defending, before Parliament, his massacres in Ireland at Drogheda and Wexford, lamented: "Would that God had not put upon me the doing of this deed."

Christianity is stained with the blood of millions slaughtered in the name of Jesus.

In fact, you do not try to escape from anthropomorphism. Have not the clergy, and past priesthood, attributed to God any human quality which happened to suit them?

I am a jealous God ... A God of vengeance ... A God of mercy ... A God to be feared ... Gentle Jesus, meek and mild ... I came, not to send peace, but a sword ...

The God who says in Isaiah Ch. 45 v. 7: "I make peace and create evil; I, the Lord, do all these things".

Or Cromwell again, after the Parliamentary victory at Marston Moor: "God made them as stubble to our swords".

Verily, all things to all men!

One of the most popular hymns on the BBC *Songs of Praise* proclaims "How great Thou art!" Equally, if, indeed He existed, one might proclaim—"How cruel!", "How capricious!", "How impotent!", "How irrelevant!"

Is there not a reverse side to this incessant praise? Do those who praise God not degrade and demean themselves?

Is kneeling and prostration a fitting posture for us? Should we not stand up proudly, erect? Do we want to grovel as that old "ten-of-diamonds" gambler, the Rev Toplady, wailed in *Rock of Ages*, "naked", "foul" and hiding in a cleft?

Do we want to share Cowper's paranoia in his Olney hymn, our sinners' guilty stains washed away in a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins?

Is there not something obscene about praising a perfect being, while calling ourselves filthy, guilty and cursed with original sin?

If we must praise, why not turn to the Apocrypha, "Ecclesiasticus"—"Let us now praise famous men" (and women) ... but only when they deserve it.

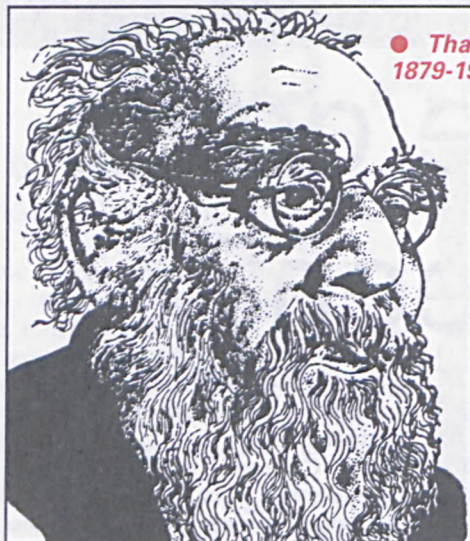
Or perhaps my young school contemporaries in the 1920s had the right idea. In the tradition of "While shepherds washed their socks by night", they would sing "Praise Him for His grease and fever".

I have another, and much more sinister, recollection of mindless praise, and its mind-numbing and paralysing effect upon those who chanted it. In the 1930s I remember German radio broadcasts of Nazi rallies. Before Hitler appeared, there would be an hour of sickening emotional warm-up:

*Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil!
Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer!
Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer!
Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer!
Wir danken unseren Führer!
Wir danken unseren Führer!
Wir danken unseren Führer!*

PRAISE THE LORD.

BARBARA SMOKER IN INDIA FOR A LONG WEEKEND WITH A DI



● Thanthai Periyar:
1879-1973

Atheists' attracts

IT ALL began on January 9, with a message from Delhi left on my telephone answer service, simply asking me to fly out to Madras (now renamed Chennai)—at less than three weeks' notice—to inaugurate a convention being held by the mass atheist organisation, Dravidar Kazhagam, in Thanjavur (Tamilnadu state) at the southern tip of India.

It was an impossible request, and I replied accordingly. My passport had expired; I had no visa for India; I was booked to give talks in London; I would need all the inoculations; the tropical climate disagrees with me; flights would have to be booked ...

Next, I received a fax from the convention organisers in Madras, saying they were so pleased I had agreed to go.

They had apparently been told by a colleague in Delhi, Sanal Edamaruku, of the Indian Rationalist Association, that I was the most important secularist in Britain, if not Europe! Telephone calls and faxes intercrossed between Bromley and Madras, but there is one English word Indians never seem to understand: it is "No".

Flattered by their persistence and monetary commitment, I decided to see what could be done—and, in the event, the London Passport Office issued my passport in three days; India House, the visa in one day. I found deputies for my London engagements; and at two days' notice my local health centre punctured my arms with prophylactic tetanus, typhoid, and hepatitis A, squirted polio into my mouth, and gave me a prescription for anti-malaria pills.

Fellow secularist Malcolm Rees said he would be willing to accompany me, so I faxed Madras asking for two sets of flight bookings, the second to be paid for by us on arrival. I was able to collect the Air Lanka tickets with two days to spare.

Meanwhile, I contacted a man from Tamilnadu living in Surrey, who gave me background information on Dravidar Kazhagam, its founder Periyar, and its current leader K Veeramani.

Periyar is a title of honour, like Mahatma, and just as the latter title, bestowed on

Mohandas Gandhi by Annie Besant, became personal to him, so the title Periyar became personally exclusive to E V Ramasami, and associated with radical humanism.

Born in 1879 into a wealthy, devout, high-caste (but non-Brahmin) family, he learned little at school, preferring to think things out for himself. He wrote of his boyhood: "In our house, sanyasis, pundits, hermits and priests commanded great respect. Because I did not like them, I made it a point to oppose whatever they said and ridicule them. In course of time, this became a kind of hobby ... In answering my questions, the religious men contradicted one another and sometimes contradicted themselves. It gave me extraordinary pleasure to fling at the pundits their own contradictions and thus perplex them. It also gave me the reputation, among our neighbours, of being a clever speaker."

Imprisonment

His reputation grew, and he soon held many important public offices, contriving to stamp out injustice and corruption in his locality. Thinking his family had too much money, he set up a public trust in his father's name to run charitable institutions. In 1920 he joined the Congress Party and Gandhi's Non-Co-operation Movement, serving several terms of imprisonment as an agitator, though committed to non-violence. He always wore black, as many of his followers still do, as a symbol of dark-skinned revolution.

He chose to live in comparative poverty, and was a lifelong teetotaler—but not a fussy eater like Gandhi, who half-starved himself. Periyar enjoyed his food, and was a fat, avuncular figure, as can be seen from the many granite statues erected to his memory in Tamilnadu—always with his spectacles perched on his nose, like the statue of Fenner Brockway in Red Lion Square. He had a great sense of humour, which enlivened his speeches.

Though Gandhi opposed untouchability, he would not oppose the caste system as a

whole, nor the Brahminic domination of society; so Periyar broke with him and the Congress Party in 1925, preferring to support the more radical Justice Party, which stood for the rights of the depressed classes and of women. In 1929 he formed the Self-Respect Movement, to counter religious superstition and the imposition on Tamils of the Hindi language and to promote social equality and integration, encouraging secular inter-caste marriages, widows' remarriage, and free choice in marriage. In 1944 it widened its political scope and became Dravidar Kazhagam—socialist, rationalist, atheist, and feminist.

I was surprised to learn that Periyar opposed independence for India in 1947, preferring the British Raj to remain until the domination of Brahminism and the conflict between Hindus and Muslims had been eradicated. But the secular constitution adopted by Nehru for India had first been put forward by Periyar.

On his death in 1973, he was succeeded as leader of Dravidar Kazhagam by his second wife, who was also his secretary and nurse. When she died, five years later, the leadership passed to K Veeramani, who had been given that secular name by Periyar, having come to his notice as a budding orator 30 years earlier, at the age of only 10.

In spite of having a heart condition, Mr Veeramani still works indefatigably for the cause. A slight, un-Periyar-like figure, with a ready smile and a mellifluous voice, he has vastly extended the organisation's educational institutions in recent years, with their special emphasis on women's courses to postgraduate level in science, medicine, engineering, and modern communication technology.

It was Mr Veeramani who had invited me to Tamilnadu as guest-of-honour of the 1998 Dravidar Kazhagam convention.

Leaving Heathrow on Thursday, January 29, Malcolm Rees and I arrived in the early hours of Friday in Colombo, where we were to change planes. (The last time I had come to Colombo from Britain was as a Wren in 1943 when the bomb-strewn journey took two months.) In the airport we saw a row of seats marked "Reserved for Clergy"; but

parade in India half-a-million!

none for any other profession. (Perhaps no one else would sit with them!)

In Madras, we were met by Mr Veeramani and other secularists, and emerged on to the road bordering the airport. Several honour shawls were draped around my shoulders, one on top of another, and a barrage of press and television photographers pointed their cameras at me, while a large Tamil crowd started shouting slogans. I asked what they were shouting, and was told, to my amazement, it was "Hail to Barbara Smoker! Long life to Barbara Smoker! The living legend, Barbara Smoker!"

Friday afternoon we visited the Dravidar Kazhagam HQ, where Periyar is all but deified, with personal relics, portraits, and other artefacts on display. Within the precinct is his grave, surrounded by many of his sayings carved on polished granite slabs round the perimeter walls. The mere fact of having a grave is, of course, a break with Hindu tradition, in which cremation is the rule. The carved sayings are almost childish in their directness, but members of the movement learn them by heart and chant them on every conceivable occasion. Here is one of the most famous: *There is no god. There is no god. There is no god at all. He who invented god is a fool. He who propagates god is a scoundrel. He who worships god is a barbarian.*

Periyar used to tell his followers not to accept his words blindly, but to think for themselves. Needless to say, few of them do. He has been likened to Buddha, who likewise preached non-theism yet is regarded by most of his followers as a god. But that is hardly the fault of Buddha, nor of Periyar.

Malcolm and I felt uneasy about this adulatory cult of Periyar, but one can hardly expect a developing nation to leap several centuries all at once. Anyway, are the tabloid readers in Britain so very different? What about the mass hysteria here on the death of Diana?

Visiting the Periyar Computer Research Academy, which is part of the headquarters, we were shown CD Roms that some of the young women studying there had made themselves. It made a startling contrast to

the rather primitive surroundings.

We travelled on an all-night train to Thanjavur, where the whole town centre was decorated with bunting printed with the Dravidar Kazhagam black-and-red logo.

Saturday afternoon we went by road to Tiruchirapalli, which is the site of most of Dravidar Kazhagam's social institutions—including a most impressive women's educational complex, with 5,000 students ranging from four-year-olds to postgraduates. They were all there in force to greet us—each year's intake wearing its own distinctive colour and design of sari—and all were anxious to show us their work, ranging from pharmaceuticals to engineering. We were also roped-in to present the prizes at the secondary school's annual speech day, with 1,000 pupils crammed into the school hall.

Back in Thanjavur, Sunday was the day of the convention, which was preceded by a huge, exhilarating parade, attracting a crowd that numbered more than half-a-million. The parade, which took two hours to pass our dais, included a caparisoned elephant which handed (or, more accurately, trunked) garlands up to us. There were also acrobats, tricks with fire (to show that, contrary to claims made by the godmen, they do not require supernatural powers) and a float on which sat a Periyar lookalike.

The convention itself, at which I was the chief guest speaker, took place in a sort of primitive Albert Hall, with an audience of 12,000. It mostly comprised interminable speeches in Tamil plus a few in English translated into Tamil—and it went on till 1am. It was enlivened, however, by the weighing of Mr Veeramani on tinselly scales against money, to determine how much should be given him for his charitable projects. He should traditionally be weighed against gold bars—but this year, because of the fluctuation in the value of gold, he had said the donations should be kept mainly in banknotes, plus the donated gold jewellery and talismans, with just a few gold bars to make up the weight at the end. As he weighs less than eight stone, I offered to stand in for him, but he said he would rather choose the huge German delegate! It was

later announced that Veeramani's weight in gold was equivalent to 21 million rupees (about £300,000), and the next day there was a photograph in Tamil newspapers of his being weighed, with me standing alongside.

Of course, his approximate weight was already known, and the whole exercise was utterly unscientific, especially with paper replacing the gold; but there is little doubt that, without the actual weighing, nothing like so much money would be donated. The gimmick exploits exactly the same psychology as the annual "Children in Need" spectacular on BBC television.

Another ceremony was a quadruple secular "Self-Respect" wedding, in which each partner of the four couples simply placed a garland round their partner's neck and made the same pledges—nothing subservient for the woman and nothing religious.

A young man named Bradlaugh was introduced to me, and there are also Darwins and Russells in the movement.

In my speech I compared and contrasted our two cultures, with particular reference to religion, and complimented the organisation on its social projects. I also complied with a request to "release" a newly-published English compilation by Mr Veeramani, *Why I Do Not Believe in God*, containing essays by Robert G Ingersoll, Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, Bertrand Russell, and, of course, Periyar E V Ramasami. Malcolm also made a speech.

Early the following morning we set out by road for Madras. Electioneering was going on everywhere, in preparation for the general election on February 18, and we were told that the Hindu Party was gaining ground, especially in the North. It has announced that if it gets into power it will change the secular constitution of India to that of a theocracy ...

Our Colombo flight was subject to extra security—because we were arriving close to the same time as Prince Charles. We got back to Heathrow early Tuesday, utterly exhausted, and feeling it had all been a dream.

Practical and poetic help with bereavement

THIS excellent booklet by Leslie Scrase now sees its second edition, such was the success of the first. It is for "the bereaved and those who try to help them". It is in two parts: the first 24 pages are devoted to practical measures for those who have recently lost a relative or a friend, and are confronted with the task of what to do, and what form the funeral should take. The second part, of 60 pages, contains what Leslie describes as "Comforting Words".

These numerous passages are suitable for either private reading or as part of a funeral. Written by many and varied authors, some of Leslie's own compositions are included. The range is wide: from the well-known piece by Henry Scott-Holland, lately a Canon at St

Coping with Death by Leslie Scrase (£6.95 including post from the author at Copthorne, Quarr Lane, Bridport, Dorset DT6 6AQ).

Review: DENIS COBELL

Paul's Cathedral, and happily omitting the final lines which imply a conscious after-life, through Churchill, who I think must count as one of us, and on to these stark lines from an East German State Funeral: *In life as in nature, there is an eternal coming into being and an eternal going. None of us can escape the going.*

The overall emphasis is on the approach to death from the point of view of Humanists—or of non-believers generally, if they don't like the *H* word!

Apart from dealing with the funeral itself,

Leslie provides many insights into the non-religious attitude to death. This includes untimely death in the young, life after death, and life after bereavement. Anger and guilt can often be felt by those left when someone close dies, and their relationship to grief is discussed. An emphasis is placed on saying "thank-you" now, rather than waiting for a final memorial ceremony. An addition in this edition is a section entitled "Return to Joy".

Inevitably, this booklet calls for comparison with the British Humanist Association's *Funerals Without God* by Jane Wynne Willson, which Leslie acknowledges. *Funerals Without God* does provide a broader scope of practical advice, with examples, on funerals. But I find Leslie's questioning approach very engaging.

As a Humanist officiant at funerals, I am well aware that what we are asked to participate in with families is not what we would necessarily design for ourselves. Firstly, many people who neither practise any religion nor attend church worship are often less clear about their beliefs than those of us who are "card-carrying" members of Humanist organisations. Secondly, at most funerals, there are mourners from a variety of beliefs. All these points need to be considered when a funeral to celebrate the life of the dead person is arranged. Leslie makes much allowance, and provision, for these situations. Thus, hymns, Bible readings and even prayers, if offered by one who believes, may all play a part in non-religious funerals.

This may come as a surprise to some readers. But an officiant must never lose sight of his/her role as a facilitator. The funeral is on behalf of a family or friends, and provided one's own principles are not totally compromised, we must be tolerant. It surely goes without saying that this is of utmost importance at a time of bereavement and loss.

It came as a surprise to me, reading his Rationalist Notes in the November *New Humanist*, that Nicolas Walter's father and father-in-law were non-believers (lucky chap) but were not given appropriate funerals.

My view is enhanced by comparison with funerals I have been asked to conduct for persons whose beliefs were not truly akin to the Humanist approach. So—who decides? While a request can be made about the format at one's own funeral, we have to rely on the probity of our family or friends in executing our wishes. At least we will not know!

Leslie reminds readers that the National Secular Society (0171 404 3126) and other Humanist organisations can provide officiants. Often a funeral director will know a local contact, and there is always the BHA's own nationwide helpline for ceremonies—weddings, baby namings, as well as for funerals—0990 168 122.

● Denis Cobell is President of the National Secular Society and the BHA's Co-ordinator for Ceremonies, SE England.

Religion in Humanist ceremonies

THE editorial of the January 1998 issue of *Rite Lines*, newsletter of the British Humanist Association Ceremonies Network, asks "how far we should go to accede to the wishes of the mourners who request hymns and prayers".

According to a report in the same issue, the BHA Ceremonies Sub-Committee has concluded that "officiants should be guided by their own convictions with a recommendation that religious material is read by a family member or friend". A letter from a former BHA-accredited officiant reveals "one-third of the ceremonies at which I officiate have hymns".

This has prompted George Broadhead, who co-ordinates ceremonies on behalf of Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists, to question the inclusion of any religious material at all in Humanist funeral ceremonies [see Denis Cobell's comments, above; Denis adds that the use of such material is "the exception rather than the rule"].

George told *The Freethinker*: "Surely the most important aspect of a Humanist funeral ceremony, and its attraction for non-believers, is that it is the distinctive alternative to a religious one—not religious or even semi-religious—and isn't the inclusion of hymns and prayers the thin end of the wedge?"

"Where does one draw the line? Would one countenance 'Onward Christian Soldiers' or The Lord's Prayer, for instance? Moreover, won't mourners who expect a Humanist ceremony to be non-religious be confused and uncomfortable? I know if I had to listen to songs and readings in praise of the deity at such a ceremony, I would feel as alienated as

I would at a wholly religious one".

George went on to stress that officiants conducting these ceremonies in the Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist catchment area make a point of pausing briefly during the ceremony to invite mourners to reflect on the life of the deceased and for the religious among them to say a silent prayer.

"I think this is far as we should go", said George, pointing out that the BHA's own leaflet *To Celebrate a Life* describes the ceremony as "non-religious" and the Coventry and Warwickshire leaflet issued to local funeral directors states quite clearly: "The ceremony is secular so it does not include hymns or prayers".

GORDON SINCLAIR, Secretary of the Sheffield Humanist Society, adds: Having succeeded in persuading my religious colleagues on the Sheffield World Aids Day Committee that it is not appropriate to have religious content in the World Aids Day Vigil, I am now furious that the BHA Ceremonies Sub-Committee are allowing religious material to be part of so-called Humanist ceremonies.

I also feel let down by the BHA when my frequent defending of other BHA positions within the Sheffield Humanist Society committee can be compromised by such slipshod thinking and action.

And what do I say to the Methodist minister who agreed, as Chairman of Sheffield World Aids Day, that, to be inclusive, the ceremony should be secular?

● Readers' comments (250 words maximum) are invited by The Editor, *The Freethinker*, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Terry Sanderson on the media

American import we could do without

HERE'S a name to conjure with: The Rutherford Institute. It's an organisation described by Nick Cohen in *The Observer* (February 2) as the "legal arm of far-right American evangelists and backer of Paula Jones's claim of sexual harassment against Bill Clinton" and it has recently opened a branch in this country (in Abbey Orchard Street, Westminster). Its purpose is to provide legal support to people going to court on religious issues and it claims to have the services of 50 lawyers at its disposal.

Nick Cohen wrote: "At first glance, the institute does not appear too sinister. Most of the time is spent defending shop workers who were assured that they would not be forced to work on the Sabbath when the supermarkets launched their unlawful campaign to force through Sunday trading. Predictably, the promises are being broken and staff who object are being dismissed."

So far so good. But then Mr Cohen introduces us to John Wayne Whitehead "an attorney and 'concerned Christian'" who runs the institute's head office in Charlottesville, Virginia. You may have seen him on television recently, refuting allegations from Hilary Clinton that he was part of a right-wing conspiracy against her husband. He says his organisation is there to promote religious freedom, but Nick Cohen has unearthed something written by Mr Whitehead in 1982 which reads: "We must influence all areas of life including law and politics. The courts must place themselves under the authority of God's law. We can leave nothing untouched by the Bible. Like it or not, the church is at war."

Mr Cohen says: "I'm all for religious freedom, as long as no-one exercises it within a hundred miles of me ... But the law the Rutherford Institute wants to uphold is God's not man's—a preference it shares with the late Ayatollah Khomeini."

One of the barristers retained by the Rutherford Institute is a man called Paul Diamond. He has been very busy recently. In Oxfordshire he is threatening local probation officers with prosecution under the much-criticised Section 28 of the Local Government Act (which forbids the "promotion" of homosexuality). The probation service sent some of its gay members on a course aimed at helping them cope with homophobic attacks from criminals—and with "sneers from colleagues". The local Christian Fellowship responded by saying that its members wanted equal time off for prayer meetings. If this comes to court, it will be the first time Section 28 has been used since it was made law at the behest of right-wing Tory Christians in 1991. (Mr Blair has promised to repeal it. Mr Blair has promised a lot of things.)

After that, the hyperactive Mr Diamond donated his services to Baroness Young to

assist in her recently successful campaign to have the Human Rights Bill amended in the House of Lords. He must be crowing with pride at his triumph. He was later to be heard on the Radio 4 *Sunday* programme—introduced as Lady Young's "legal adviser" justifying the amendment. He was up against the General Secretary of the National Secular Society.

Mr Diamond is quoted in the *Observer* article as saying: "The only people who deserve respect are the Muslims. Insult them and they say: 'We'll burn your book and fight back.' I know it's extreme but the Christians and the Jews get pushed around because people know they are not going to fight back."

The ultimate aim of the Rutherford Institute, according to Nick Cohen, is to start an abortion war here similar to the one that is raging in the USA. They haven't brought any cases aimed at restricting choice yet, but when Cohen asked the British voice of the Institute, Cynthia Hancock, why she needed 50 lawyers, she replied "to help with abortion".

Nick Cohen does not think that this is some tin-pot fringe organisation that can be safely ignored. "These people are worth watching," he says. "Closely."

QUOTE of the month: Surely one of the best ways to embrace multi-culturalism is to decide that it's time to get all religions off people's backs. People can believe what they like, but why should the fact that their ideas are mystical give them more rights to impose them on others? The teaching of religion as truth has no place in any school, and if there is to be a dominant religion advertised among the trade stands at the Dome, it's only fair it should be Shinto, given pride of place

alongside Toyota.—Jeremy Hardy, *The Guardian* (January 17).

THE *Daily Mail* commissioned a survey to find out what people "really" believe. It turns out that only 64 per cent of them believe in God. But unfortunately of the 36 per cent who don't, the vast majority are not rationalists but believe in some other supernatural phenomenon—ghosts, guardian angels, astrology, reincarnation, that sort of thing.

The *Mail* then used this survey as justification for publishing even more outrageous junk, and its bollocks quotient has increased substantially. It now has more astrologers, faith healers, fortune tellers and telepathists than you can shake a stick at.

But the one place the *Mystic Mail's* psychic talents seem to fail—and the place it is needed most—is the racing page. Its winner prediction rate is on a par with that of aunt Gladys's pin-sticking.

One person who must be glad that his contract with the *Mail* is ending is columnist Richard Littlejohn (he's moving to *The Sun*). He wrote about his first job in journalism which was "making up horoscopes". He says: "As I sat at my typewriter I would chuckle to myself at the prospect of otherwise intelligent people staying indoors all week or splitting up with their boyfriends on the strength of my predictions."

Littlejohn says that eventually he ran out of things to say, and so would swap old predictions round and recycle them. No-one ever noticed, but he says he did receive many letters of congratulation about the accuracy of his predictive gift.

We told you it was all in the mind!

A SPECIFIC part of the brain handles religious experience, claim scientists in California.

People with temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) often become obsessively religious. It could be because seizures strengthen neural connections between the inferior temporal cortex and the amygdala, the emotional arbiter of the brain, so that everything takes on special meaning. Alternatively, seizures might alter neural circuits that deal with religious experience.

To test these ideas, Vilayanur Ramachandran and his colleagues from the University of California at San Diego studied people with TLE, highly religious volunteers and people whose religious status was unknown. They showed them 40 words

including neutral ones, such as "wheel", sexual and violent words, and religious words. As they read, the team measured the conductance of skin on their left hands—a gauge for arousal and an indirect measure of the amount of communication between the inferior temporal lobe and the amygdala.

Only sexual words gave the apparently non-religious subjects sweaty palms. Sexual and religious words excited religious controls. But the TLE patients were disproportionately aroused by religious words, says Ramachandran. "The surprise was that there's selective enhancement to some categories and not others." He speculates that the seat of religious experience is in the temporal lobe. *New Scientist*, November 8, 1997.

Ancient and modern: Secularists act on witches and VAT

THE National Secular Society—Britain's leading organisation for freethinkers—has written to Home Secretary Jack Straw adding its name to the campaign to obtain a posthumous pardon for Helen Duncan, the last woman in Britain to be convicted of witchcraft.

The campaign is also supported by Michael Ancram, MP for Devizes, and the Society of Paranormal Studies.

In his letter to the Home Office, NSS General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood says: "This society ... asks that you give favourable consideration to this petition. It may seem strange that an organisation such as ours, which has vigorously opposed the rise of superstition for the past 130 years, should be lining-up with 'psychics' and believers in the supernatural to campaign for a pardon for Helen Duncan.

"Unlike the supernaturalists, however, we do not believe that Mrs Duncan was possessed of any 'paranormal' abilities. We,



We, instead, take Winston Churchill's view that witchcraft is 'obsolete tomfoolery'.

(Photograph: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

instead, take Winston Churchill's view that witchcraft is 'obsolete tomfoolery'. We also regard 'spiritualism' as nonsensical.

"The continued upholding of this woman's conviction for practising 'black magic' and 'pretending to raise the spirits of the dead' simply supports the idea that such baloney is worthy of attention.

"In order to rescue the law from this humiliation, we ask you to pardon Helen Duncan, and make clear that she was a convicted fraud and that her so-called 'powers' of necromancy should never have been given legal recognition."

Prime Minister Winston Churchill was reportedly enraged when he read reports of the original trial at the Old Bailey in 1944. The events surrounding the trial led eventually to the repeal of the Witchcraft Act of 1735.

● Still on the subject of gross superstition, the NSS has called on the Chancellor of the Exchequer not to give in to the Church of England's demands that it should be granted enormous VAT privileges.

In a letter to Chancellor Gordon Brown, Keith Porteous Wood describes as "scandalous" that the C of E should be agitating for a material reduction in the £20 million a year VAT which it pays on the repair of churches. The Church of England is one of the richest organisations in the country, despite losing countless millions of pounds in property speculation in the 1980s.

KPW told the Chancellor: "The money which the Church hopes to obtain from the taxman is money that could well be used to improve society as a whole. It could be used to create more jobs for teachers and nurses and more hospital beds. We feel that it is time for Lambeth Palace to dig into its own considerable reserves and pay its way in the same manner as everyone else has to."

The NSS has been opposing religious privilege for the whole of its 130-year existence. Readers of *The Freethinker* are urged to become members (subscriptions vary according to circumstances); details from National Secular Society, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Time for the gods to die

THE pamphlet *Socialism and Religion* by the late F A Ridley, a distinguished former Editor of *The Freethinker*, has been republished by the Rational Socialist League, 70 Chestnut Lane, Amersham, Buckinghamshire HP6 6EH. It costs £1.80 (including postage); cheques and postal orders should be made payable to C D J Mills.

Dealing in the first part with the origins and nature of religion, the essay goes on to examine religion and the class war, the churches and society and religion and Socialism.

Although Ridley's work was first published 50 years ago, its closing comments are as apposite today—given the rise of Muslim fanaticism, Christian fundamentalism and the cults—as they were in 1948: "Religion in its present form becomes ever more obviously a parasite on the exploiting civilisation and society of which it is the ideological expression. As the machine age develops and the planets are explored, it becomes more and more an absurdity, and its specific dogmas approximate ever more closely to self-evident mumbo-jumbo.

"More and more, as their historic role becomes more retrogressive, the priest becomes a mere witch-doctor, battenning on ignorance and fear, and droning his meaningless incantations with an ever more wearisome monotony. Men of intellect, like Calvin or Newman, are no longer found in institutions, the evidences of which become continually feebler. The gods are old, they have become senile; it is time for them to die."

It is hoped that readers of *The Freethinker* will ensure the widest possible distribution for *Socialism and Religion*.

Seven thousand for atheism

SEVEN thousand, five hundred and eighty-eight pounds and eighty pence!

That's the splendid sum which our readers contributed in 1997 to the fund which helps to keep *The Freethinker* going.

It must be some kind of record, and all who work to produce our atheist journal on a shoestring are grateful.

However ...

Even such a welcome amount does not go anywhere near to paying all the bills—the printing, the postage, the stationery, the never-silent telephone.

We must ask you to give a similar amount in 1998—and to add a little for inflation.

Making cheques and POs payable to GW Foote and Company, please send donations to:

Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Contributions for February and March will be acknowledged in the April issue.

One of the ways in which we make up the shortfall between income and expenditure is through the investment of legacies from our readers.

We don't believe in life after death—but you can help to keep the freethought standard flying after your demise by leaving money to the journal.

Requests should be made to G W Foote and Company Limited; please write to Nicolas Walter, Company Secretary, at Bradlaugh House for information on the most efficient way of doing this.

You're telling us!

Billion-dollar business on defensive

THESE are worrying days for believers. "No room at the Dome for Jesus, says Conran" but "Jesus may find room in Dome as a puppet" are recent *Daily Telegraph* page one headlines.

After 200 years the Methodists are talking about church unity (they can no longer afford, in the face of rationalism, to enjoy the luxury of sectarian differences with fellow believers in the Christian myth).

"Church-going is going, going ... but not quite gone", reported Martin Wroe in *The Observer*, on UK Religious Trends, pointing out that in the last two decades the number of adults regularly attending church has fallen from 10.9 per cent to 8.2 per cent in Britain. The churches argue that 70 per cent of the adult population still believe in a mystical all-powerful being but they are moving away from "the Christian norm".

The decline has been detailed in the official handbook, *Britain 1998*. Although the CoE sustains 10,000 stipendiary clergy, in 1995, only 24 per cent of children were baptised into the church, confirmations fell to 29,500 and only 32 per cent of weddings were in church. By 1994 the total of 201,000 first marriages was only half that of 1970.

Rival religions were moving in with 600 mosques and Muslim temples, 50 Buddhist monasteries and temples, 150 Hindu temples and 360 Jewish congregations.

Even the Catholics are on the defensive about their role in fostering anti-semitism and the Vatican's role in Nazis war crimes. Certainly, Hitler, as a Catholic, was never excommunicated. And the role of Vatican officials in the escape of Nazi war criminals is being probed. Indifference and disenchantment of people to the reason-defying claims of religion is stimulating Christians to move nearer to the Jews from whom they split so many centuries ago.

There is, of course, a fight-back by organised religion, for we are talking about a billion-dollar business on the defensive.

Four-letter words and especially the three-lettered word "God" used in a recent Channel Four production, *The Granton Star Cause*, by the author of *Trainspotting*, has drawn outrage from the Church of England Ltd. It seems that one of the characters depicted as God is as foul-mouthed as the others. Said a CoE spokesman: "To ascribe these failings to God will upset and offend people." For a start, Mary Whitehouse had asked for the drama to be banned!

And, warned the spokesman, displaying a rare intimacy with the Creator: "It will be a blasphemy and a gross offence both to God himself and to everybody else if this is shown". However, ITV and the Broadcasting Standards, conscious of who they worked for, said they could only act after the programme was shown and viewers had complained.

Like any other big business corporation, in need of a new image, the Christian Churches have asked Martin Lambie-Naim, who for £5.1 million conceived the BBC's tangerine and banana balloon, to give them a unified Church of England and Catholic Church image for the Millennium. After the success of "New Labour,

New Britain" they've come up with, wait for it, "New Start". Well, Second Coming has fallen flat. The logo type resembles the masthead of *The Guardian*. It will lead a £2m advertising campaign and the churches have set up a company to distribute millennium products such as candles and prayer-sheets. And here we are wondering what we should put in the Dome.

Christmas brought a demolition job on the Holy Crib legend from A N Wilson and now the most publicised Jew in Britain, Rabbi Blue, has declared not only that he'd sampled Christianity and found it wanting but that he's decided that prayer cannot alter the material world. Doubts began to creep in when he prayed in his youth, without any effect, for the sudden death of Hitler and Mosley. What next?

STEWART VALDAR
London N8

Illogical?

THE capacity for disagreement within the humanist movement knows no bounds. When the government announced the extension of financial support to some Muslim schools, I thought that I had finally found an issue which would create a consensus among all the factions within organised humanism. In my innocence I believed that this issue would override all the schisms and personality clashes, the "militant secularists" and the timid pragmatists like myself had at last found something in common.

Of course, I should have known better. Jim Herrick (February letters) writes that he would support "a serious campaign to phase out all financial support for religious schools" but "for the meanwhile [he] must accept the justice of offering financial support to Muslim schools".

If Mr Herrick supports the case for financial aid for Muslim schools, should he not also support the idea of extending the same support to other religions and denominations? Does he not realise that the government's shortsighted and illogical action makes the case for phasing out all such financial help even stronger and offers the real possibility of winning broad-based support for a campaign to find a workable and fair solution?

The fact is that any government wishing to take an even-handed approach to all belief systems must provide support for all of them or none of them. By its recent action in disturbing the *status quo*, the government has opened the issue for public debate. If the humanist movement cannot unite sufficiently to mount an effective campaign over this issue, then I cannot see that it can unite over anything. Being rather cynical about the humanist movement's ability to achieve unity, I am not holding my breath.

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

No mistake!

I WRITE to defend the scholarly reputation of the sixth-century monk Dionysius Exiguus against Colin McCall ("A precisely arbitrary countdown" Page 2, January), who alleges that Dionysius "got the birthdate wrong".

Dionysius's task was to ascertain Jesus's birth year by checking datable events in the Gospels

against Roman records. It is clear from Matthew that Jesus was born some time during the reign of Herod, who died in 750 AUC by the Julian calendar.

Luke puts the birth at the time of the census organised by Quirinius as governor of Damascus. Quirinius Publius Sulpicius was appointed governor of Damascus in 757 AUC, and organised the census of Judea (for tax purposes) in 759 AUC.

When Dionysius put the Year of Our Lord at 754 AUC, this was evidently not an error but a compromise.

DONALD ROOOM
Stepney

COLIN McCALL's idea of what Dionysius Exiguus was up to is rather confused. He was not asked to introduce a system of dating "backwards and forwards from the supposed birth of Christ". Nor did he get the birthdate wrong.

Dionysius invented a year-dating system based on what he took to be the age of Christ ("The year of our Lord"). It was not generally adopted until Bede did so in the eighth century (which challenges Mr McCall's idea that a Pope initiated this system). The BC system was added by historians much later.

There was no year-zero for the obvious reason that this is not a number line; it is an age identifier. In year one, Jesus was zero years old. In year two, he was one-year-old, and so on. In 2000, Jesus would be 1999-years-old and he would not reach his millennium (and our Millennium) until 2001 (so your article's option is mistaken). Now in my 61st year, I am 60-years-old.

As for the BC system, the year before Jesus was born can only be called 1 BC. There's no room for a year-zero, and it is too late to change now anyway.

Nor is there any justification for accusing Dionysius of making a mistake. He may not have known that Herod the Great died in 4 BC, but nor would he have known (as Mr McCall should) that the Birth Narratives are wholly fictitious. The association with King Herod was invented for Christological reasons. It is most likely that Jesus was born in Galilee (not in Nazareth) about 1 BC.

Speculation about the exact date of Jesus' birth is futile.

STEUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

I SEE that Stephen Jay Gould has fallen for the fallacy that there ought logically to be a "year zero" to separate "AD" from "BC". I recall that Isaac Asimov fell for the same fallacy in a magazine article some decades ago. The fallacy, of course, is in trying to treat the numbers allocated to calendar years as cardinal numbers, pure numbers, mathematical numbers. They are not. You can't add, subtract, multiply or divide with them. (Well, you can, of course, but the answers you get will mostly be meaningless.)

No, year-designation numbers are simply reference-numbers, ordinal numbers. The Year One of an era should really be called the First Year of that era. It's only a label. If you wish to designate the 13th year as Year 12A, that's entirely allowable—or you can if you wish adopt the Chinese system and label them the Year of the

You're telling us!

From Page 13

Aardvark, the Year of the Wombat, the Year of the Armadillo, and so on. (Yes, I know these animals are not Chinese—but the system is.)

So Year One of an era is simply the First Year of that era. Similarly, the year immediately preceding that year is the First Year Before the era. Trying to interpolate a Year Zero would be entirely illogical. In calendrical terms, Zero is not a year—nor any other unit of temporal duration. Zero is simply a fixed point—the point when the First Year begins and the First Year Before ends.

A Gould or an Asimov, once he had acknowledged the fallacy, could doubtless express this far more clearly than I can. But in the circumstances, you'll have to put up with me.

ARCHIE MERCER
Cornwall

Nit-picking

NICOLAS WALTER's February letter epitomises his tireless research in pursuit of nit-picking accuracy. I admit that, contrary to my previous calculation, the term of my NSS presidency appears to have been slightly exceeded by that of G W Foote—even had NW properly counted mine from the date the executive appointed me as President, rather than from the ratification of that appointment at the following AGM, 11 months later. By analogy, would he maintain that the Queen has reigned only since her coronation in June 1953 and not from the proclamation on the death of her father in February 1952?

In any case, however, it seems a sad waste of NW's undoubted intellect that he devotes so much of his time to investigating such trivia. Less trivial, at least from my standpoint, is the monstrous statement in his middle paragraph that I was "removed from office (the only person to be so)"—which would surely be generally construed as meaning I was ousted from the presidency between elections, on account of some Nixon-style scandal. The less titillating fact is that the 1996 election was contested, and I was out-voted. By a second analogy, would he say that the Conservative MPs who democratically lost their seats to Labour candidates in May last year were "removed from office"?

The actual circumstances of the 1996 NSS presidential election were as follows. I had informed the Council of Management some months earlier that I intended to retire at the 1996 AGM, and suggested the name of Daniel O'Hara as my successor. During the next few months, however, I had reason to think he was not a good choice after all, and I proposed Denis Cobell instead—but this proposal was not accepted, and Denis refused to stand against Daniel. I therefore decided to postpone my retirement by one year, and a ballot ensued between Daniel and myself. A smear campaign secured my defeat, but I accepted it gracefully as one of the failings of democracy.

I then awaited Daniel's resignation—which came, predictably, a few months later. Denis is now, of course, the new President.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley, Kent

Questions for parson

MAY I congratulate the Rev Ronald Young on his being the first and only clergyman to reply (February letters) after a year of my "Ask the Parson" articles?

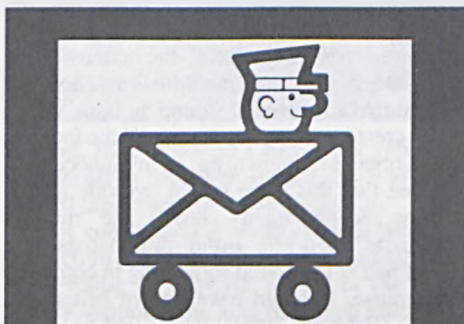
I think, however, that he misses the point. My questions, a hundred not yet answered, were aimed not at what the clergy do not believe, but at what they do believe.

When the Rev Young has finished with his blue pencil, erasing the incredible, what is he left with?

John Robinson rejected "Old Nobodaddy in the Sky". David Jenkins and Don Cupitt reject traditional dogma.

But what remains?

I picture these "modern" clergy in a balloon, throwing overboard accumulated baggage. But



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

the balloon then ascends to heights where the air is too rarefied for intelligent communication.

Some years ago, in this journal, I reviewed Don Cupitt's *Creation Out Of Nothing*. I found it incoherent.

Would the Rev Young answer "I don't know" to the fundamental questions:

Is there a God?

Is there only one God?

What is God like?

Let me test him with questions I have already asked in an earlier article.

We are told that God sent his only-begotten Son to save us all by dying on the Cross.

The questions:

Did God know beforehand what was going to happen to Jesus?

Were Judas, Pilate and the Pharisees puppet actors reciting lines already in the divine script?

Or did God not know the fate of Jesus? Was the Passover crowd not ordained to cry "Give us Barabbas!"?

Without Crucifixion, Resurrection, Redemption and Atonement, there would be no

Christianity.

If God knew beforehand, He would be a pornographer, directing a "snuff" movie.

If He did not know, He would be an incompetent bungler.

Again, may I thank the Rev Young for his contribution?

KARL HEATH
Coventry

Unbelievable!

IT SEEMS to me that all the Rev Ronald Young's letter boils down to is—choose that from the Bible which is palatable to himself and ignore that which is not.

Yet Christians state quite categorically that their God is omnipotent and that the Bible is his book of the Gospel truth. So is the Rev Young saying that his God does not always speak the truth?

However, I do agree with him that the Bible is complex—too complex, in my opinion, to be believable.

F R EVANS
Chichester

Death throes of Islam?

WATCHING the film *Gandhi* recently, I was struck by how tolerant Islam seemed then. Hindus and Muslims worked together with Christians and Sikhs in a peaceful protest against British rule. It reminded me of the history of the Crusades when the Muslims of the Middle East were usually more broad-minded than the Christians, allowing their prisoners to continue their own religions as long as they did not interfere with theirs. How sad that this tolerance seems to have been lost.

Of course, it is not wise to tar all with the same brush and assume that the fanaticism and bigotry that one reads about in *The Freethinker* and other parts of the media is representative of all Islam. Many Muslims are educated and liberal, and respect the views of other people. Maybe it is because the fanatics force themselves into the media headlines whereas the tolerant Muslims live in peace and go unnoticed.

If Islam truly has become more intolerant, I suspect (and hope) that it is because they fear the decline of their power. Authoritarian regimes (for example, apartheid and Communism) seem to become more extreme when they fear the outside world. As people become more educated, as high standards of living permeate the Islamic states, as satellites and the Internet bring knowledge of liberal societies to their people, the control of the mullahs will weaken. People do not need freedom until they taste it; then they cannot live without it.

The extremes of Afghanistan and Algeria are, hopefully, the death throes of one of the most fascist religions of the present day.

PAUL THOMPSON
Reading

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, April 5, 4.30 pm: Public meeting. Information: 01273 733215.

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

Bromley Humanists: Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680.

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01296 623730. 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, March 19, 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). March 13: Chris Morris: *Youthspeak*.

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. April 7: AGM and reports on 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. March 8, 2.30 pm, at 20 Trinity Place, Deal: *Humanists—who or what are we?* March 29, 2.30 pm, at Seminar Room 11, Front Extension, Rutherford College, University of Kent, Canterbury: Eileen Webb: *The Humanism of Amnesty International*. April 26, 2.30 pm at Canterbury: Forum: *What is Lacking in Humanism?*, introduced by Margaret Rogers.

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. 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. Thursday, March 26: Denis Cobell, Malcolm Rees, Barbara Smoker: *Humanist Ceremonies*.

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.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): Information: J Cole 01642 559418 or R Wood 01740 650861.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Third Thursday of each month (except August), 6.45pm, Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN; 01362 820982.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, March 4, 8 pm: Carl Pinel: *Radical and Sceptical Ideas in 19th Century Poetry*. April 1, 8 pm: Public meeting. Information: Gordon Sinclair: 01226 743070 or Bill McIlroy 0114 2509127.

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. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton, at 7.30 pm. March 11: AGM. April 8: Evening of poetry and music in celebration of Spring: John and Lucie White. May 13: former MP David Watkins: *Humanism in Politics*.

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.

Nicolas Walter's latest book
HUMANISM: WHAT'S IN THE WORD
is available to readers of *The Freethinker* at
the special price of £5 from Rationalist Press
Association, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds
Road, London WC1X 8SP. Enclose
remittance with name and address.

HUMANIST ANTHOLOGY
by Margaret Knight (ed. Jim Herrick) is
available from the same address at £8.50.

FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN HUMANISM
by Wm McIlroy costs £1.25 from Sheffield
Humanist Society, 115 South View Road,
Nether Edge, Sheffield S7 1DE.

Dr Larry Wright's highly-praised
JESUS THE PAGAN SUN GOD
costs £7.50 from 12 Kent Road,
Swindon SN1 3NJ.

Women fight the 'mind-numbing religious certainties of Islamic fundamentalism'

THE *FREETHINKER* records the excesses of Islam (as we do those of Christianity, Hinduism and all other brands of superstition). But always we do so in the knowledge that not *all* Muslims accept, for example, that a court sentence of stoning to death for a man who kissed an unmarried woman (Iran: *The Times*, February 12) is the act of a civilised state. We know also that many Muslims refuse to believe that the mutilation of infant genitals is anything but barbaric. And, coming down the scale of horror a good few notches, not all think that the isolation of Muslim youngsters in state-supported sectarian schools is conducive to inter-racial understanding here in the UK.

We have hoped that the "moderate" Muslims would speak out against the more rabid mullahs at home and abroad, and we have insisted that, ultimately, it will be the Muslims themselves who will deal with the fanatics.

And now, under the title of "A Declaration of the Rights of Women in Islamic Societies", a group of born-Muslims, mainly from Iran and South Asia, has, with great courage, gone on the record for rationality—in language which is far stronger than even we would have dared hope for.

The declaration emerged following discussions "on the necessity of publicly submitting an alternative to the mind-numbing religious certainties of Islamic fundamentalism, and the ineffectual vacillation and tinkering of Reformist Islam," according to Mustafa Hussain, Bangladesh, who has reported on the document for Western journals.

Mustafa Hussain adds: "The alternative is secularism: the secular voice is seldom, if ever, heard in debates on reforming Islamic society. Since the failure of political Islam in Iran, the Sudan, and Pakistan is the failure of Islam itself, we now need to move Islamic society and culture a little closer to the ideals of secularism, rationalism, democracy and human rights. An institute, tentatively titled the *Ar Razi Circle*, that would promote secularism in the Islamic world is proposed."

The declaration states:

We, the undersigned, believe that the oppression of women is a grave offence against all of humanity and that such an offence is an impediment to social and moral progress throughout the world.

We therefore cannot ignore the oppression of women by orthodox and fundamentalist religions. We cannot deny history, which shows that these religions were devised and enforced by men who claimed divine justification for

the subordination of women to men. We cannot forget that the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran as their respective holy texts, consider women inferior to men: physically, morally, and intellectually.

We note also that whereas women in the Christian West and Israel have ameliorated their lot considerably through their own heroic efforts, their sisters in the Islamic world, and even within Islamic communities in the West, have been thwarted in their valiant attempts to rise above the inferior position imposed upon them by centuries of Islamic custom and law.

We have watched as official Islamisation programmes in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, the Sudan, and Afghanistan, among others, have led to serious violations of the human rights of women. Muslim conservatives in all Muslim countries, and even in nominally secular India, have refused to recognise women as full, equal human beings who deserve the same rights and freedoms as men.

Women in many Islamic societies are expected to marry, obey their husbands, bring up children, stay at home, and avoid participation in public life. At every stage of their lives they are denied free choice and the fundamental right of autonomy. They are forbidden to acquire an education, prevented from getting a job, and thwarted from exploring their full potential as members of the human community. We therefore declare that:

- *The subordinate place of women in Islamic societies should give way to equality. A woman should have freedom of action, should be able to travel alone, should be permitted to uncover her face, and should be allowed the same inheritance rights as a man.*

- *She should not be subject to gruesome ritual mutilations of her person.*

- *On reaching the legal age, she should be free to marry a man of her own choice without permission from a putative guardian or parent. She should be free to marry a non-Muslim. She should be free to divorce and be entitled to maintenance in the case of divorce.*

- *She should have equal access to education, equal opportunities for higher education, and be free to choose her subject of study. She should be free to choose her own job and be allowed to fully participate in public life—from politics and sports to the arts and sciences.*

- *In Islamic societies, she should enjoy the same human rights as those guaranteed under International Human Rights legislation.*

The group concedes that Islam may not be the sole factor in the repression of women. Local, social, economic,

political, and educational forces as well as the prevalence of pre-Islamic customs must also be taken into consideration. But Islam and the application of the *sharia*, Islamic law, remain a major obstacle to the evolution of the position of women.

To achieve these basic human rights for women, the group advocates that the question of women's status be removed from the religious sphere altogether, that governments institute a separation of religion and state, and that authorities enact a uniform civil code under which all are equal: "In the name of justice, for the sake of human progress, and for the benefit of all the wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers of the world, we call for all societies to respect the human rights of women."

The declaration is signed by Reza Afshari, Iran, Political Scientist; Sadik al Azm, Syria, Philosopher; Mahshid Amir-Shahy, Iran, Author, Social Critic, and Founder of the Defence League for Rushdie, France; Masud Ansari, Iran, Physician, Author, United States; Bahram Azad, Iran, Scholar, Physician, United States; Parvin Darabi, Scholar, Homa Darabi Foundation, United States; Khalid Duran, Professor of Political Science, Editor and Founder of *TransState Islam*, Founder of the Ibn Khaldun Society, United States; Ranjana Hossain, Executive Director of the Assembly of Free Thinkers, Bangladesh; Mustafa Hussain, Sudan, Advisory Board, Ibn Khaldun Society, United States; Ramine Kamrane, Iran, Political Scientist, France; Ioanna Kucuradi, Philosopher, Turkish Human Rights Commission and Secretary General, International Federation of Philosophical Societies, Turkey; Luma Musa, Palestine, Communications Researcher, United Kingdom; Taslima Nasrin, Bangladesh, Author, Physician, Social Critic; Hossainur Rahman, India, Social Historian, Columnist, Asiatic Society of Calcutta; Siddiqur Rahman, Bangladesh, Former Research Fellow, Islamic Research Institute; Armen Saginian, Iran, Editor, Publisher, United States; Anwar Shaikh, Pakistan, Author, Social Critic, United Kingdom; Ibn Warraq, India, Author, Why I Am Not a Muslim, United States. (Identifications include countries of origin and current residence. Affiliations listed for identification only).

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Readers—particularly born-Muslims—who wish to make contact with the group may do so, in writing only, through The Editor, *The Freethinker*, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.