

The

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Secular
Humanist
monthly

Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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The
greatest
story
ever
sold

- On the outskirts of Las Vegas there is a new biblical theme park, with daily partings of the Red Sea and Lazarus rising from the dead at hourly intervals. (We kid you not.)
- Inside: Miracle in the making?



Cartoons by Donald Room

Up Front

Death of an editor

PETER Brearey, editor of *The Freethinker* since January 1993, died on May 7. He was 58.

His death came after a major cancer operation followed by several months of painful illness. Throughout that time, he continued working on *The Freethinker*. His prime concern was that the paper should maintain unbroken publication.

Peter Brearey was born in Dewsbury, Yorkshire, on December 23, 1939. His family lived in Providence Buildings, Lees Hall Road, Thornhill Lees. This was a one-up-one-



● Peter Brearey

down, outside lavatory settlement, typical of the accommodation in which working-class families were housed.

His first formal education was at Thornhill Lees Church of England Infants' School. He later won a scholarship to Wheelwright Grammar School.

Like so many of his generation and social background, Peter Brearey was largely self-educated. His discovery of Dewsbury Public Library reading room was for him the beginning of higher education. Among the radical publications on display was *The Freethinker*. Small wonder he deplored the savage cuts in public library services over the last 20 years.

At a time when most boys of his age aspired to become train drivers or professional football players, Peter determined to one day become editor of *The Freethinker*. He achieved that ambition in his early fifties.

He was a voracious reader of radical journals and at the age of 16 started a Socialist newspaper, the *Dewsbury Sentinel*. It was a short-lived enterprise, but gave its youthful founder a taste for journalism and publishing.

He went on to work for the commercial press. As a reporter, reviewer and editor, he was one of Yorkshire's best known and respected journalists. Altogether he contributed to more than 300 publications.

In collaboration with his wife, Pam, he helped to establish National Health Service internal journals in Bradford, York, Wakefield, Pontefract and Huddersfield. He was founding editor of *Healthview*, newspaper of the Yorkshire Regional Health Authority. He was an active member of the National Union of Journalists and a former chairman of its Wakefield branch.

When Peter Brearey was appointed editor of *The Freethinker*, he declared: "I want to turn my knowledge of journalism to the service of atheism and secularism, and to extend the influence of *The Freethinker*." It soon became clear that his knowledge was not confined to journalism.

He had been a reader of *The Freethinker* since the age of 13 and had accumulated a

huge and comprehensive library. His knowledge of the secularist movement's history and its personalities was extensive. Above all, he had a sure grip of principles and policies.

While the paper's appearance changed during his editorship, its basic message was never camouflaged or tailored to appease. The letters page continued to be a forum through which assorted readers' ideas were hammered out. But while he gave correspondents a free hand (and sometimes enough rope to hang themselves), Peter Brearey valued *The Freethinker* too much to endanger it by becoming involved in expensive litigation.

He was a resolute defender of reforms achieved since the 1960s. He also had vision that enabled him to see the need for further reforming measures. His strength of character enabled him to face setback and disappointment. He was deeply affected by the sudden death of another freethought stalwart, G N Deodhekar (Dev).

Peter had his fair share of Yorkshire grittiness. But this was more than matched by gentleness and compassion. There was always the sense of fun and good humour. And no lost or hungry animal was turned from his door.

Peter and Pam Brearey had been married for 28 years. Pam is also a journalist who has given unstinting support to Peter, particularly in his work for *The Freethinker*. It has taken all her indomitable strength and courage to face the reality of his illness and death.

On Sunday, May 10, relatives, friends and representatives of the secularist movement met at the Breareys' home on the north Orkney island of Sanday. After tributes, readings and music, they carried Peter a short distance to the adjoining plot of ground where he was buried.

Bill McIlroy

● A memorial meeting in remembrance of Peter—to which all are invited—will be held in Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1, at 11am on Saturday, June 20, preceded by refreshments at 10-45am. There will be sufficient time for those wishing to attend to also go on to the International Humanist Day Lunch at the Russell Hotel.

COACH TRIP TO DOWN HOUSE (DARWIN'S HOME) NEAR BIGGIN HILL Sunday 19 July 1998*

Leave London mid-morning, calling at dinosaur exhibition at Crystal Palace (additional pick-up point). Led by Council member Mike Howgate. Cost £10 to include admission. (*Revised date)

Please call Keith Wood at the National Secular Society on 0171-404 3126 for further details.

The Freethinker

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The second of a series of articles based on statistics in *Religious Trends 1998-99*, published by Christian Research at £25. In the interest of brevity, some figures are estimated.

Church's 'secret weapon'

PRESUMABLY distressed by the article on church statistics in last month's *Freethinker*, the Rev Steve Chalke, the Blairite Baptist minister and media 'personality', together with Sir Cliff Richard, has undertaken to double church attendance by the year 2000 (*Daily Telegraph*, April 7). Their secret weapon is a set of new 10 commandments, one of which is "We will make sure you can hear clearly." The rest are equally uninspiring. See centre panel.

Where does Britain stand in the European league of church attendance (1990 figures)? The lowest percentage of church attendance in Europe is in Scandinavia with 3 per cent to 5 per cent and it is hereby awarded the *Freethinker* European gold medal for rationality. Great Britain shares the 11 per cent to 15 per cent band with France and Germany. Between 21 per cent and 30 per cent are Austria, Belgium, Northern Ireland and—perhaps surprisingly—the Netherlands. Italy and Spain share the 35 per cent to 41 per cent slot. The Republic of Ireland alone occupies the "over 80 per cent" classification, despite Mary Kenny's conclusion that it is now "post Catholic". Just for the record, no figures were available for Greece, Portugal and Switzerland and—astonishingly—there were no countries in the percentage ranges 6-10, 16-20, 31-34 and 42-80.

There are large European variations in the percentage of Christians attending church, as revealed by the very different ranking of countries by percentage of the population attending church (above) compared with the ranking of countries by percentage of population which are Christian (below).

In terms of the proportion of the population which are Christian, Britain shares the lowest European band (60 per cent to 69 per cent) with Spain and the Netherlands. In the 70 per cent to 90 per cent band comes Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden. Despite Scandinavia's low church attendance, Denmark, Norway and Finland are in the highest European band of "over 90 per cent", but I do have some concerns as to whether these figures are compiled on the same basis as the others—there are unusual tithing laws in Scandinavia which may cause distortions. Other countries sharing the highest band are Belgium, Greece, Ireland (Republic and Northern), Portugal and Switzerland.

Messrs Chalke and Richard will certainly have their work cut out doubling attendances with the RC church in England, particularly as adult attendance has been predicted to decline to less than a million in 2000 compared with over 1.6 million in 1980. This equates to a drop of almost 50 per cent in 25 years. The priests' productivity has fallen too; in 1980 there was a priest for each 236 attending mass, but in 2000 this figure will

by Keith Porteous Wood
General Secretary
National Secular Society

have fallen to 190.

The rate of decline in RC attendance appears even more dramatic when compared with the other churches. In the 20 years from 1980 to 2000 the number of adults attending English churches will reduce by 20 per cent. But within this figure, RC attendance dropped by nearly 40 per cent, Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed churches jointly fell by 23 per cent and Anglican by 14 per cent—but Independent, Pentecostal and New Churches and Orthodox all rose, by 57 per cent in total. By 2000 this latter group

THE NEW COMMANDMENTS

We will:

- Make you welcome
- Be family friendly
- Make sure you can hear clearly
- Be practical and relevant
- Help you to explore answers to your deepest questions
- Offer you time to stop and think in a busy life
- Help you make sense of the Bible and who Jesus is
- Make sure your visit will be helpful but challenging
- Help you discover for yourself God's love, acceptance and forgiveness
- Offer you the chance to make a new start.

is predicted to represent 19 per cent of church attendance, compared with less than 10 per cent two decades earlier.

Of those claiming to belong to a church, on average only around a third attend four or more times annually and about 46 per cent fail even to attend annually. Interestingly, these percentages are almost unchanged in the last 15 years, suggesting that the decline in church attendance closely matches the reduction in those regarding themselves as 'belonging' to a church.

Many more women believe in God than men, as 27 per cent of women but only 18 per cent of men agree with the categorical statement "I know that God really exists and I have no doubts about it." There are very

significant variation by age too; only 13 per cent of the under 35s agreed with this statement, but 35 per cent of the over 55s did. This suggests that perhaps the majority of elderly women but very few young men indeed agree with the statement.

It seems that the most popular age for believers first "knowing" they are Christian is around 10 years old. Statistical evidence supports the perception that there is a mass exodus from church in the late teens, with a smaller peak of people re-starting church around the late twenties, often with their young family. There is strong evidence to support our expectation that an individual's tolerance/permissiveness is in inverse proportion to their frequency of attending church—over such issues as swearing, euthanasia and references in the media to sex.

Around 20 per cent of Catholics did not vote, but almost all Presbyterians did so. The analysis of voting affiliation showed marked differences by denomination. Pentecostals and 'New Churches' had a high proportion of Conservative voters, but the Catholics had very few. Conservative support among Church of England Synod members has generally declined over the three elections shown; 1983, 1987 and 1992. In 1992 the House of Laity was the most Conservative house with 44 per cent support; the bishops were 29 per cent and the clergy 23 per cent.

We must also look closely at the non-Christian statistics. By the year 2000, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus described in the book as "active members" are anticipated to total (in millions) 0.7, 0.4 and 0.2 with percentage increases in the preceding 20 years of 120 per cent, 267 per cent and 38 per cent respectively. The city with most mosques is Birmingham with 139 and the city with the most Sikh/Hindu places of worship is Leicester with 89. The picture is very different for Jews however; there are expected to be only 89,000 "active members" in 2000, a drop of 20 per cent in the last two decades; such members are about a third of the Jewish community. In contrast, there will be around 144,000 members of the Church of Scientology in 2000, nearly five times as many as there were in 1980.

Religious Trends also contains more general statistics, perhaps the saddest of which is that the *Sun* is the most popular newspaper in Britain, accounting for 22 per cent of all newspapers printed in the country. *The Times* is the favourite newspaper of ministers of religion (read by 30 per cent of them). No surprises there. But alcohol? 52 per cent of ministers drink alcohol at least once a week—compared with 34 per cent of the population!



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Rip-off on a cosmic scale

I CAN remember being surprised, many years ago, when a Sri Lankan freethinker told me that politicians in his country regularly sought the aid of astrologers before making important decisions. Much later, I was not surprised, but considerably alarmed when I learnt that an American president, who held the world's destiny in his hands, combined apocalyptic Christianity with a belief in astrology. Whatever Bill Clinton's faults, he doesn't, as far as I know, consult his horoscope before acting.

Writing at the end of last year and advising his readers to ignore horoscopes, Sir Martin Rees described how he was asked his views on the financial markets and international politics by a leading Indian industrialist. But his questioner lost interest when he realised that Sir Martin was Astronomer Royal, not the Queen's astrologer (*Daily Telegraph*, December 28, 1997). Alas, in India, Pandit Nehru's great secular republic, not only industrialists, but Cabinet ministers, like those in Sri Lanka, are "routinely guided by horoscopes". Even here in Britain, as Rees said, astrologers "outnumber, and massively outearn astronomers".

Just consider the situation 450 years after Copernicus. In Rees' words, "Our Solar System can now be set in a grand evolutionary scheme" stretching back billions of years, and "our whole Milky Way is a vast ecosystem, where material is being re-cycled through successive generations of stars". Yet, otherwise intelligent people forsake the wondrous conception of science and turn, pathetically, to a set of fraudsters who they believe can tell them "what the stars foretell" by reference to a completely imaginary Zodiac. And fraudsters is the right word. Richard Dawkins has urged that they should be sued on the grounds that their pretensions are manifestly bogus.

Power with a purpose

PROFESSOR Michael Barber, head of the standards unit at the Department for Education and Employment, set the cat among the pigeons—or at least among the school heads—with his suggestion that religious instruction in schools should be replaced by the ethics of "global citizenship".

Others may wish to comment in detail on the proposal; my dispute is with the chair-

man of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, Patrick Tobin, who said that the professor's approach would produce "a mishmash philosophy like 19th century utilitarianism that was all things to all men" and meant nothing to anybody (*The Guardian*, March 23).

What this means is by no means clear, but it is clearly bunkum. I refer Mr Tobin to Peter Singer's *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press) where he will learn the relevance of utilitarianism today. And I append what John Stuart Mill called the "one very simple principle" of his *On Liberty*: "That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others...He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise or even right".

Arrogance

LET ME quote Dr Zaki Badawi, "one of Britain's leading Islamic experts and an adviser to Prince Charles on Islam". The intention to broadcast a 15-minute cartoon depicting the life of the prophet Muhammad was, Badawi said, "a great tragedy and has come about because of Channel 4's ignorance and arrogance. Muslims will be very upset and will not accept it" (*The Observer*, March 8).

Then ask yourself who is arrogant?

Caute in the act?

KNOWING the fate of Salman Rushdie, I wonder what lies in store for David Caute, whose new novel, *Fatima's Scarf*, was described by the *Daily Telegraph* (January 24) as "an account of the publication of a controversial anti-Islamic book and subsequent events which have similarities to the painful birth...of...*The Satanic Verses*"?

Mr Caute, former literary editor of *The New Statesman* and Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, said he didn't fear death threats from Muslims because, unlike Salman Rushdie, he could not be considered an Islamic apostate.

I hope he's right.

Ted and the ju-ju men

THE ROMAN Catholic Church got into the

final act, though understandably shamefaced. Dermot Morgan, better known here as Father Ted in Channel 4's sit-com, who died aged 45, was an atheist who, as Rory Carroll reported in *The Guardian* (March 7), "savaged the Church throughout his career". Communion was held at St Theresa's church, Mount Merrion, Dublin, at the request of the family, before Morgan's body was taken for cremation.

Father Michael Paul Gallagher, who had tutored Morgan at University College, Dublin, told the congregation (including the Irish President and government ministers) it was part of Morgan's vocation "to be hard to take at times".

It must have been hard to take Dermot Morgan's last interview, a few days before his death, when he called the clergy "ju-ju men".

All for the best

AT LINCOLN crown court on March 18, Italian-born Bruno Benito Aggiano of Scunthorpe, admitted killing his wife, whom he stabbed repeatedly "with great force", because she wanted to go out to work against his wishes. But he denied murder. He told detectives that he killed her to save her from going to hell. He, as the husband, was God's representative and should be obeyed. He acted in her best interests because at the Resurrection she would be spared eternal damnation.

Mrs Elva Aggiano had left her husband six weeks earlier because of the work dispute, and was visiting him with their nine-year-old son on the day of her death a year ago.

Women have suffered at the hands of religious nutters throughout the ages—and still do.

Spaced out?

ACCORDING to the *Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Substances*, written by Richard Rudgley and published by Little Brown, a number of senior figures in the Vatican at the turn of the last century were keen consumers of a wine laced with cocaine. Both Pope Pius X and Leo XIII enjoyed the elixir, invented in 1863 and known as Vin Mariani. So much so that Leo awarded a gold medal to the manufacturer, a Corsican called Angelo Mariani.

Can the present pope be in on the secret?

Colin McCall on

BYRON: ENEMY OF ENGLISH CANT

"THE truth is that in these days the grand *primum mobile* of England is *cant*: cant political, cant poetical, cant religious, cant moral: but always cant, multiplied throughout all the varieties of life" wrote Byron, in a long letter to his publisher John Murray in 1821. He was defending Alexander Pope against allegations of "The grossest licentiousness", made by the Rev W L Bowles in his edition of Pope's works. But Byron had plenty of English cant to contend with at first hand. *Blackwoods*, while admitting the genius of "the vile" *Don Juan*, attacked the poet ferociously for "Impiously railing against his God", being disloyal to his Sovereign and his country, "outraging all the best feelings of family honour" and being "a cool unconcerned fiend".

Even his closest friend, John Cam Hobhouse, considered the great poem "impossible to publish" because of its "blasphemies & facetiae", as well as "the domestica facta", so that "it will be impossible for any lady to allow *Don Juan* to be seen on her table". Fortunately Byron refused to suppress what Wordsworth preposterously called an "infamous publication", which "will do more harm to the English character than anything in our time".

And although Hobhouse told Byron's half-sister Augusta Leigh, after publication of the first two cantos, that it had been a failure, in fact, as Phyllis Grosskurth has pointed out in *Byron: The Flawed Angel* (now available in Sphere paperback £8.99), Murray had sold all but 150 copies of a 1,500 expensive quarto; and the attacks notwithstanding, *Don Juan* continued to sell in cheaper, pirated editions.

Murray found further cantos "outrageously shocking" and urged Byron to revise them but, again, he refused. The publisher also cut lines from *Cain*, which the poet dedicated to Sir Walter Scott, who declared that it "certainly matched Milton on his own ground". "Some part of the language is bold, and may shock one class of readers", Scott added, "... But then they must condemn *Paradise Lost*, if they have a mind to be consistent". What a hope! The only consistency among the cantos was in their vilification of Byron.

In his defence of Byron, *The Politics of Paradise* (Collins 1988), Michael Foot noted that *Cain* was also acclaimed by Richard Carlile—then in Dorchester gaol—as giving "a never-fading respectability to the school of Paine, or the Satanic School as Robert Southey calls it". To the Tory press, however, *Cain* was wicked and blasphemous.

The sequel, *Heaven and Earth*, set in the time of the Flood, was too much for Murray. He dropped it after the first printing, and it was his last co-operation with Byron. When the waters come, a mother offers her child to Japhet with the moving words:

Oh, let this child embark!



● Byron: Defiantly unorthodox.

I brought him forth in woe
But thought it joy
To see him to my bosom clinging so.
Why was he born?
What hath he done—
My unweaned son—
To move Jehovah's wrath or scorn?
What is there in this milk of mine, that death
Should stir all Heaven and Earth up to destroy
My boy ... ?
And a chorus of mortals about to die, turn
their anger on "the implacable Omnipotent":
If he hath made earth, let it be his shame,
To make a world for torture ...
"Why was I born?" a woman asks. "To die! in
youth to die!", says Japhet. "And happier in that
doom, /Than to behold the universal tomb,
/Which I am thus condemn'd to weep above in
vain."

The *Quarterly Review's* reaction to *Heaven and Earth* was predictable, says Phyllis Grosskurth. Byron was described as "the professed and systematic poet of seduction, adultery, and incest; the contemner of patriotism, the insulter of piety, the raker into every sink of vice and wretchedness to disgust and degrade and harden the hearts of his fellow-creatures".

There was an outcry, too, against *The Vision of Judgment*. Byron's splendid satire on Southey's encomium on the passing of George III first appeared in Leigh and John Hunt's *Liberal*; and after Byron's death, John Hunt was fined £100 for the poem's defamation of George III and George IV. No one who has read it can forget those opening lines: "Saint Peter sat by the celestial gate;/His keys were rusty, and the lock was dull,/So little trouble had been given of late;/Not that the place by any means was full./But since the Gallic era 'eighty-eight'/The devils had ta'en a longer, stronger pull;/And 'a pull altogether', as they say/At sea—which drew most souls another way".

And the second stanza, where "The angels all were singing out of tune,/And hoarse with having little else to do,/ Excepting to wind up the sun and moon,/Or curb a runaway young star or two ... " At the end, King George has "slipp'd into heaven", where he is "practising the hundredth psalm". Not surprisingly, the *Literary Gazette* fulminated against the poem's "impiety", not to mention its "vulgarity, inhumanity and heartlessness". However, a modern poet, Louis Macneice, rightly called it "magnificent".

Byron was never an atheist like Shelley, but he was defiantly unorthodox, as Phyllis Grosskurth emphasises. "I am no Platonist, I am nothing at all; but I would sooner be a Paulician, Manichean, Spinozist, Gentile, Pyrrhonian, Zoroastrian, than one of the seventy-two villainous sects who are tearing each other to pieces for the love of the Lord and the hatred of each other", he told a Christian friend, Francis Hodgson, in 1811. That was, Grosskurth says, a position from which "he was never to deviate throughout his life". When Hodgson raised the question of immortality, Byron replied "we are miserable enough in this life, without the absurdity of speculating upon another".

Hodgson was not the only one who tried to convert Byron. There was his wife, Annabella, who longed to save his soul—in vain—and Dr James Kennedy, physician to the British garrison in Cephalonia, Greece, who was surprised to find a man who knew the Bible as well, if not better, than himself. Augusta Leigh had given her half-brother a Bible as a parting gift, and Byron read a chapter a day so that he would "be able to beat the canters with their own weapons" (my italics).

"I believe doubtless in God", he said once, but not in "revelation of any human creed"; and, he told his wife, religion was "a source from which I never did—& I believe never can receive comfort". But, although he would "respond sarcastically" to Annabella's religious arguments, Phyllis Grosskurth "cannot help feeling that he fully wanted to be converted". If so, it was a wish that was never fulfilled.

When he lay dying in Missolonghi in 1824, his only reference to religion was a ruminative "Shall I sue for mercy?" and his own answer, "Come, come, no weakness! Let's be a man to the last". As everybody knows, Byron had gone to Greece to help the country in its fight for liberation from the Turks. And the famous lines on "Marathon" from *Don Juan* were written to stir the Greek spirit of resistance. He had first learnt of Greek hatred for their Turkish masters during his great journey with Hobhouse when, on Christmas Day 1809, they saw the Acropolis. "It was the most glorious prospect of Byron's life", says Phyllis Grosskurth, "... All life that succeeded it was an anti-climax, a constant struggle to mitigate boredom". But there is nothing boring about his life, which she has told extremely thoroughly and well. And, as she reminds us, Shelley considered Byron to be the greatest English poet since Milton.

ASK THE PARSON (15)

by Karl Heath

DEAR PARSON: One difference between us is that you believe in two worlds, while I believe in only one. The world we both believe in is what I would call the Universe, whereas you, I suspect, concentrate upon this tiny little planet we call Earth

This world manifests itself to our senses. It can be investigated, measured and described. The description can be objectively tested. Mount Everest does not depend upon what someone thinks about it. It was there millions of years before there was anyone to think about it. It is what I would call "real", although there is one quality about it which seems to have escaped your attention, a quality involving time which will be the subject of a later letter to you.

But your other world is totally meaningless to me. You use words like God, Heaven, Life Everlasting and Souls, none of which can be defined objectively. Would it be unfair to suggest that, when you are asked to define or describe these terms, you make up the answers, or repeat answers which others have made up?

In my world, as the Everest example shows, the mountain itself decides whose opinion of it is right "because it's there".

But, in your world, no such test exists. Some of your colleagues, for example, say that

TWO WORLDS

Heaven is a place, perhaps with familiar earthly furniture. Others disagree, but become embarrassingly vague about their alternatives.

I have repeatedly asked what a soul is. No reply.

I have asked whether we retain our personalities and earthly memories in the next world. No agreed reply.

I have asked whether we meet our loved ones again after death. No agreed reply.

Do we have bodies in the next world? No agreed reply.

Will there be sex and babies? No agreed reply.

Will anything happen in Heaven? Will there be events? Will anything change? No agreed reply.

All his vaguery is on the level of the "man in the street" who muses that "there must be something there".

Are you not merely substituting an apparent-

ly sophisticated version of his simple thoughts?

Are you not constructing a vain edifice of grandiose conceit?

And to attain this bliss? A system of rewards and punishments which should be rejected by any moral human being. True morality requires total individual responsibility for wrong-doing, and a genuine effort to redress. "Original Sin" shuffles away this responsibility. Atonement, redemption and salvation are cowardice. The medieval Roman Catholic Church was condemned for selling "indulgences". Are you still not at the same game? What are parsons for? You require faith in the scapegoat, "who dies to save us all", but it turns out to be a conjuring trick, like the girl, apparently sawn in half, miraculously resurrected.

I have said that your vision is narrowly restricted to this tiny planet, Earth. This is geocentric parochialism. Your God is not the Creator of the Universe, but a little tribal earth God.

The arrogant ("Greenland's icy mountains") Bishop Heber said: "The Heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone".

SO DO YOU!

Is your cross not a Totem Pole?

Fight goes on

THE FIGHT against superstition goes on.

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Total from March 17 to April 28: £490.

Muted whinge against Sunday freedom

by Bill McIlroy

THE latest *News Update* from the Keep Sunday Special Campaign is a rather dreary affair. Gone are the glossy screeds that emanated from Jubilee House during the parliamentary debates that preceded the Sunday Trading Act 1994. Christian soldiers of the KSSC are limping rather than marching onward as to war against defilers of "the Lord's day". Their battle cries of yore are now a muted whinge.

There is much huffing and puffing about "the 24-hour society". Several dog-in-the-manger objectives are listed. These include restricting Sunday opening of night clubs and other places of entertainment.

However, there is no mention of the Fourth Commandment, God, or Jesus. The KSSC's true purpose—promotion of religious belief and privilege—is camouflaged by "social concern".

While their predecessors preached that violation of the sabbath was many a wretch's first step on the downward path that led to jail, transportation, or even the gallows, today's Sunday observance campaigners are banging on about the supposed destructive effect on family life of Sunday shopping and entertainment. They claim that Sunday is "a special day"

for children. It is indeed—now that church and Sunday school have lost out to playing-fields and swimming-baths.

Sunday observers (particularly the Lord's Day Observance Society and its satellites) have long been haunted by a dreaded bugaboo known as the Continental Sunday. Contrariwise, the KSSC looks to Europe for inspiration and guidance. One of its long-term aims is "to bring England and Wales into line with other European countries by naming Sunday as a common day of rest."

Crowded

In fact, a Sunday visitor to Paris (day return on Eurostar from London Waterloo) will find shops, cafes, cinemas, theatres and exhibitions crowded, with family groups much in evidence.

The power of prayer has always been strongly proclaimed by the Sunday observance movement. But the KSSC appears to have twigged that addresses to the heavenly throne availeth naught. For if his response to Keep Sunday Special supplications is anything to go by, The One Above is a supporter of Sunday freedom.

The inconsistency of theism

by Andrew Moroz

A GLANCE at the 1998 *World Almanac* reveals that over 1.1 billion people (19 percent of the world) are either atheists or non-believers; a stark difference with North America, where only 7 percent are atheists or non-believers. The atheist position is perhaps founded on a principle of truth—a wish to only believe on evidence rather than on faith. As Bertrand Russell satirically exclaimed: “I wish to propose for the reader's favourable consideration a doctrine which may, I fear, appear wildly paradoxical and subversive. The doctrine in question is this: that it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true.”

While the notions of God are countless, in this essay the focus will be on the Christian God, described in the following way by John Hick: “God is the unique infinite personal Spirit who has created out of nothing everything other than himself; he is eternal and uncreated; omnipotent and omniscient; and his attitude towards his human creatures, whom he has made for eventual fellowship with himself, is one of grace and love.” There has probably been more written on the subject of religion than on any other, hence not even a representative portion can be addressed here. However, several important incongruities within the concept of God will be revealed.

God-talk in general has been long in question by philosophers. David Hume, for instance, maintained that the only legitimate propositions are those of matters of fact and those of the relations of ideas; that is, what we would today call synthetic *a posteriori* and analytic *a priori* propositions. In a well-known passage in the *Enquiry* he declares: “If we take in our hands any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”

Since when one talks about God one neither uses logic (as in mathematics) nor utilises the usual senses (as in science), Hume felt that those volumes ought to be cast to the fire.

There is a more specific problem regarding God-talk—it seems that words mean different things when applied to God than when applied to anything else. When we claim that a mother loves her children, it is because she takes care of them, feeds them, plays with them, educates them, talks to them in a pleasant voice, and so on. If the same mother were to plot her children's death, poison their food, abandon them, and burn their house down, we would no longer say that she loves her children. A person who maintained that she still loves her children would be properly advised to read the dictionary more often. And yet, theists claim that God loves his creatures no matter how many people are hurt and die due to floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, and the like. Perhaps the theist ought to change the attributes of God.

Many theists claim that argumentation to either prove or disprove God's existence is reproachable. The concern is formulated as follows by Paul Tillich: “[T]he question of the

existence of God can be neither asked nor answered. If asked, it is a question about that which by its very nature is above existence, and therefore the answer—whether negative or affirmative—implicitly denies the nature of God. It is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it. God is being-itself, not a being.”

So what is left for one to base faith on? Many people claim religious experience as such a light to truth. Let us test this proposition. On our world, does the use of LSD provide a window into an additional part of reality otherwise undetectable? If it did, we would immediately know because all LSD users' accounts would corroborate one another. That is, all “trips” would depict the same place. On our world, LSD is clearly not a gateway into an additional part of reality because (1) most accounts of LSD experience are incoherent, and (2) those that are tell of no remotely similar places. Religious experience could hypothetically be a gateway into a super-reality. In that case, all religious experiences would be of the same thing—the same god or gods, the same angels or lack thereof, and so on. Specifically, people of different cultures would report the same gods. After all, if a god exists in a part of reality accessible by prayer, then all people that pray will be shown him, no matter where they are located on the planet. On our world, as was mentioned before, differing concepts of god number as many as the stars, hence the reasonable conclusion denies the possibility of prayer revealing anything besides one's own ideas. Religious experience, to the rational person, is nothing more than an inward look at one's conscience.

Paradox

One paradox inherent in the concept of God is brought forth by the juxtaposition of God being all good and the presence of evil. It was perhaps first stated by Epicurus (341-271 BC): “God either wishes to take away evil, and is unable, or He is able, and unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious [malicious], which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them?”

The common answer is that God is both willing and able, but free will was deemed more important, and, because of it, we humans freely choose to do evil. Let us examine this concept of free will. In order for a being to have free will, he must be able to choose among several choices, and act on any of those choices. If a person could not possibly do other than a certain action, we say he did the action without will—without free will. Now God, He certainly knows the future for he knows all—He is omniscient. The question can now be posed—Are not humans constrained to the specific set of actions that God knows they will perform? Do humans have *any* possibility of acting other-

wise? The answer to both questions, according to the Christian definition of God, is no. It seems that the entire concept of free will is incompatible with an omniscient God. And if one holds that one acts freely, he is thereby denouncing the Christian concept of God.

For the sake of the next argument, we can assume that free will and God are not incompatible. As they are defined, good and evil are diametrical opposites; good is construed as necessarily opposing evil. Why didn't God, since He is all-good and loving of his creatures, make the world such that all people freely chose to do good? The reply is that a free action cannot be brought about. That statement does have some sense to it. But let's look at creation. When God created the world, He did so fully consciously. That is, He did not just throw the pieces of the universe together randomly; rather He deliberately assembled it. Before the world was created, God was aware of how it would turn out; He knew that today there would be so many good and bad people inhabiting the planet, for He knows all, and today there are as many good and bad people as God knew there would be. Because God actually brought about the universe which contains certain exact free actions done by certain people as anticipated by Him, He, *in some sense*, brought about certain free actions.

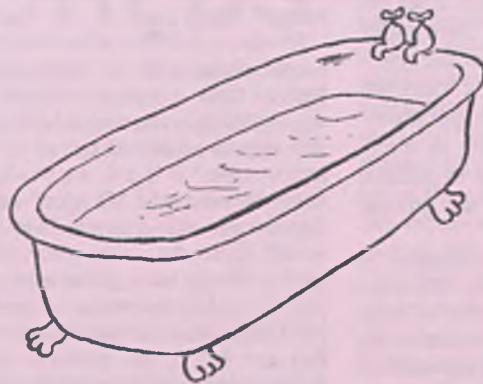
God could have created the world such that today there would be one less bad person and one more good person, could He not? All He would need to do is (1) consider a creation plan, as He did before, but one slightly altered to the point where He would (2) anticipate, as He did before, that the altered creation plan would result in one more good person and one less bad person, and (3) create the universe. Steps one and two could be repeated until all people were made good, and if the original creation plan left us with free will, so would this one, because the steps are identical.

What are the theist's options? As the denial of free will is unthinkable since the whole of morality would subsequently crumble (after all, if a human had no control over his actions, he certainly can't be held responsible for them), the only possibility is to acknowledge that God is not all-good, or He is not omniscient, or He is not omnipotent. In any case, the Christian God is shown to not exist. A theist can, of course, pose objections. Let's consider two of them. Evil is necessary for good to exist, he may say. So what happens if one evil person is plucked off the face of the earth without a trace, and nothing else changes? Does the concept of good no longer exist? Of course not. And after another evil person is plucked, and then another, and another? Goodness still remains. This can continue until there are no evil persons left. It seems that the label, or lack thereof, of an action does not change its worth. After all, say someone rescues another from drowning. If there are no evil persons around, the action is not good? Such a notion is most absurd. The second objection, which is much more reasonable than the first, is that God does not know the future. The future, they say, has not happened yet, so God not knowing it is not only logical but also is not a threat to His omniscience, since it is only possible to know what

A B Lever discourses on faith to NEIL BLEWITT

OF MULBERRY-T

Miracle in the making?



SEE

HELLO, Neil. I expect you're wondering what I'm doing standing here in the garden wagging my finger at the rhubarb. To tell the truth, I'm conducting an experiment. I read that article of yours about faith in *The Freethinker* and I thought I'd study the subject in the Bible for myself, and—do you know?—you can do almost anything with it once you've got it. Jesus had enough to wither a fig-tree with a curse. He had to use a special formula when he did it, but he told his disciples they could all do the same. The Bible doesn't say if they ran off there and then to curse and wither all the fig-trees they could find but it wouldn't surprise me if they did. I would've done if I'd been there, if only to get the hang of it. You never know when it might come in handy. I asked our vicar if what Jesus said to his disciples applied to us as well and he said that it did—so here I am, practising. I don't have a fig-tree so I thought I'd try it out on my rhubarb. Being smaller I thought it might not need quite so much faith, but I haven't had any luck yet. Perhaps the formula's not the same as it is for a fig-tree. I know that Jesus didn't speak in English and I wondered if that might make a difference so I've used several foreign what they call implications—like *abracadabra*, *hocus-pocus* and *pons asinorum*, but none of them has worked so far and I was just trying wagging my finger when you came along.

I was hoping I'd got enough faith to go on to bigger things. In that same bit about the fig-tree, Jesus said you could move mountains into the sea as well, but if I can't wither a stick of rhubarb I doubt if I'm ready for that. I would've practised on something

smaller first—like a sand-dune. That would've been big enough to start with and it wouldn't have been far to the sea so I wouldn't have needed too much in the way of faith—and it wouldn't have upset anybody either. That's the trouble with moving a mountain. It could be risky. I mean, say I got to the point where I could do it and commanded Mount Everest to move over into the English Channel where I could see it arrive—off Bexhill for example. Imagine what it would be like if people were mountaineering at the time and six sherpas came down and found themselves in the De La Warr Pavilion. And there's another thing: say dozens of people had the faith and they were all at it at the same time. You'd have mountains flying all over the place and nobody would know where they were. It'd play havoc with map-making.

In any case, you'd probably get into trouble with the council. You can't just put a mountain down where there wasn't one before. That's dumping and you could be persecuted for not getting planning permission. And I haven't heard that practising faith is a good enough reason for it. And what would happen if you moved a mountain before you got permission, applied for it and got turned down, then found you hadn't enough faith left to move it back where it came from? You'd be in dead trouble. Not only with the council but with the police too. I reckon they'd have you for theft, obstruction and kidnapping sherpas. I suppose you could advertise in the *Church Times* for somebody with the right amount of faith to come forward and do the job for you—but you'd look pretty stupid. Come to think of it, though, why should any one want to move a mountain? But there it is. Jesus said it could be done and Paul backed him up (though in his version you had to have bags of hope and charity as well).

Of course, the Bible says you can do other things with faith apart from withering fig-trees and moving mountains. Practical things like walking on the water. Jesus told

Peter he could do it if he had faith. He only sank when he tried because he didn't have enough. Mind you—I think it was a bit unfair on Jesus' part. After all, he was the son of God and he'd been born into the business of cursing, performing miracles and the like. Having faith was second nature to him, but Peter was only a fisherman. Jesus ought to have encouraged him and told him what the trick was instead of ticking him off. But in view of what our vicar said, I tried walking on the water myself. Not on the sea. I can't swim. I had a go in the bath, but I couldn't get both feet off the bottom at once.

I'll be sorry if I can't work up enough faith because of all the other things you can do with it. You read Paul's letter to the Hebrews. He told them that a lot of famous people in the Old Testament did miracles—just because they had faith. The funny thing is, though, when I looked them up, it didn't mention faith at all. I couldn't understand that but I suppose Paul knew what he was talking about. He was pretty good on ladies' hats and circumcision. And while I'm on the subject, he wrote about circumcision being done with faith too. But I don't want to get involved in that. I'd look a fool if I suddenly got too much faith and overdid things. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.

But to come back to those Old Testament stories ... Paul said it was because of faith that the walls of Jericho came down and the Israelites passed through the Red Sea. But I always thought the walls came down because of the shouting and the trumpets and that the Red Sea opened up because Moses waved his wand over it. Perhaps he and Joshua didn't know they had all that faith and the miracles came automatically or perhaps they did know and wouldn't boast about it.

Paul said Gideon was another one who did everything through faith. I've thought about that for a long time and I'm still wondering if it included fathering all those chil-

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TREES, MUSTARD SEEDS, MOUNTAINS AND RHUBARB

dren. He had more than 70 sons alone, you know, and lots of wives and concubines and he still managed to die of old age. That's a real miracle if ever there was one. It's a wonder he had any time left for slaying the Midianites. Anyway—the long and short of all that was that I wondered if I had enough faith to father some children. I asked two ladies if they'd be interested to try the experiment with me, but they weren't very helpful. One asked if I was some kind of a nutter and the other called me a dirty old man and threatened to fetch the police so I gave up. But I went back to the Book of Judges and checked and it doesn't say there that Gideon had those sorts of problems.

Paul then said that the dead could be raised to life through faith. Mind you, it didn't stop him dying and he didn't resurrect himself afterwards. Well, not that I know of. I suppose he could still be walking about somewhere dashing off the odd letter or banging on about circumcision, but it would be bound to leak out and I doubt that he'd have been able to keep quiet about it. He never needed a publicity agent when he was alive. Perhaps he didn't have enough faith—or perhaps he was wrong. After all, how can you have faith when you've been chewed up by lions or put six feet under? But then maybe none of us has enough faith. Or else we'll never use it to stay alive because we want to get to heaven as quickly as possible, but I haven't seen much evidence for that. I'm in no rush myself, to be honest, and I know for a fact our vicar isn't. As soon as he's got anything wrong with him he's off to the doctor's before you can say *Nunc Dimittis*.

But I'm not too bothered with Paul. It's Jesus I'm interested in. He actually did things with faith—besides withering fig-trees and walking on the water. Like when he cured the centurion's servant of palsy. Jesus and the centurion had to have faith for that job. In fact, Jesus said he hadn't found anybody with as much faith as that centurion had. I've often wondered if he made

good use of it once Jesus told him about it. Did he win battles with it like David and Samson?, I asked myself. Did he keep curing himself of terminal illnesses until one finally crept up on him unawares? Or did he move a mountain? Unfortunately, there's nothing more about him in the Bible. He just disappears.

Incidentally, just after Jesus healed the centurion's servant with his faith, he went into Peter's house and found his mother-in-law laid up with a fever. Well, he did no more than touch her and the Bible says she got up straightaway and ministered to them. That was faith as well, I should think. I shouldn't have such thoughts I know, but I've often wondered if, when Jesus walked in and saw her lying there, he said (not out loud of course): "Damn it, there's nobody here to make the tea. I'd better use up some faith and get her on her feet."

Uproot

There's a bit in Luke's gospel where Jesus tells his disciples that if they had proper faith they could order a mulberry-tree to uproot itself and walk into the sea. Nobody tried it, though, unless they did while Luke wasn't looking. But you'd have thought somebody would have told him if they'd seen a mulberry-tree out walking, wouldn't you? I mean, it's not the sort of thing you see every day. The odd thing was that Jesus said you didn't have to have too much faith for that job—just the same amount as a mustard-seed. Now I didn't know that mustard-seeds had to have faith at all. I suppose Jesus meant that they just had to have enough to be able to go up instead of down. But in the end, the disciples got the faith they needed, because it says so in the Acts of the Apostles. It doesn't say that Peter was able to walk on the water. Paul certainly didn't; he always went by boat on his journeys. But it does say they were able to cast out a lot of evil spirits, strike one or two

people dead just by looking at them and do a lot of very interesting things in Solomon's porch.

Stephen's the chap that puzzles me. He was stoned to death, you know. But in the chapter in Acts just before that happens it says that he was so full of faith he was doing miracles left, right and centre and his face turned into an angel's. Then just before they stoned him he was filled with the Holy Ghost as well so I don't see why he died. He must have had faith coming out of his ears. You think what an advertisement it would have made for faith if he'd turned it on while he was being stoned and just stood there letting the missiles bounce off him, blowing raspberries and telling them all to go away and practise before they took on somebody with his faith; then walking off to do a few more miracles when they'd exhausted themselves with throwing. I can't help wondering what happened to all his faith. Perhaps it was the wrong sort for stonings. But it says he had enough of the Holy Ghost in him to see Heaven when he looked up and Jesus sitting there with God, so I suppose that was some compensation for being stoned to death.

Sometimes I think it's just as well if we can't have enough faith to do all the things they did in the Bible. It'd only be commercialised. I can just hear Paul Daniels saying "For my first encore, I'm going to dump the Mount of Olives in John Gummer's back garden!" Then there'd be synchronised walking-on-the-water at the Olympics and mulberry-tree races and all. It doesn't bear thinking about.

Still, I think I'll get back to my experiment and see if I can't just conjure up the right amount of faith to do something or other. But having failed with the rhubarb and walking on my bath-water I don't feel too hopeful. I expect there's something lacking in me.

Your mother-in-law's not got a cold by any chance has she?

God the Slaughterer of Innocence?

PETER Hanna's letter entitled "First Humanist" (*Freethinker*, April) raised a number of questions in my mind which I should like to share with fellow humanists.

My first question concerns knowledge. Did Abraham know that there was a God as opposed to merely believing there was a God?

A lot of what follows does depend on whether God exists or not. For just as much confused thinking can be caused by insisting one knows God does not exist as by assuming that He does. Humanists generally should be, as Eric Stockton puts it, "default atheists", meaning that it is up to those who say God exists to give irrefutable proof of that hypothesis and not for those who do not believe to be forced into proving He doesn't. In the meantime it behoves us all to be a little modest about what we believe we know.

But back to Abraham. If by some means—and we are told by the Bible that God spoke to him (Gen 22 v 1)—Abraham knew that God existed he can hardly be accused of apostasy (ie abandonment of religious faith) for faith is what one must have only in the face of uncertainty. Abraham was, according to the account in Genesis 22, in touch directly with the Boss Himself; there was, therefore, no need for, or question of, faith. In such circumstances of knowledge faith is redundant unless, of course, Abraham had no trust (faith?) in God Himself. But of course, as Peter Hanna implies, Abraham was probably not in possession of certain knowledge but was merely a deeply religious man who at the last minute commits apostasy and substitutes a conveniently situated

by Ralph Ison

ram for his son.

One must now ask, was Abraham lying to himself (never mind the reasons) when he said God ordered him to sacrifice his son or did he quite deliberately commit apostasy by disobeying God? The question may seem trivial but is important because in Genesis 22 (that same chapter) verse 14 we can read "And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, in the mount of the Lord it shall be seen." Now if we go a little further on in the Bible to Exodus 6 vs 2 and 3 we can also read "And God spake unto Moses and said unto him, I am the Lord. And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them." Now here is a pretty kettle of fish (enough to feed the five-thousand). God is a liar. For how, otherwise than Abraham being given that name by God, would he have known it? The statistical probability of his hitting upon that name coincidentally is too remote to be taken seriously particularly as he was in direct contact with God. Now, where does all this leave Abraham? He might be lying to himself, but equally God might be lying to him for the Bible itself records He is capable of telling untruths and emphasises the fact by the use of upper-case letters!

My second and third question are these: Why is it that it is the "angel of the Lord" who "called unto him from heaven" and said "Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know

thou fearest God seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me?" (Gen 22 vs 11 and 12). Why did not God, Himself, say this to Abraham?

The reason I ask is because the statements in the above verses in a book of which every word, according to religious fundamentalists, must be believed leads to some confusion.

Here then are my questions four, five and six. Is God in charge in Heaven or is some more or less liberal angel in charge? Is God deliberately setting a trap for humanity? After all He is all-knowing. Is God making sure that He has got room to manoeuvre behind His minister's statement (not unknown in human political dealings)?

Unquestioning

If Abraham is a deluded man and as certainly appears, an unquestioning one, by NOT obeying GOD and slaying his son at the instigation of an angel he set a disastrous precedent which has cost the world dear. For if Joseph had been able to follow such a precedent (a practice once generally followed, apparently, in the Jewish religion) he might have pre-empted God's fatal desertion of his own son by 33 years and saved the world the misery of the Christian religion and all its many off-shoots and, who knows, it might even have saved us from the Muslim religion as well. It was not God who told Abraham "to abstain to cover up" as Peter Hanna writes, it was a minion of the Lord, an angel who gave the life-saving instruction and Abraham never questioned him as far as the Bible reports.

There are many lessons that can be learned from this story but I believe the major one for anyone calling themselves 'rational humanist' is this. Beware how you treat innocence. Isaac was an innocent, young boy, trustful of his father. The ram in the bush was an innocent animal. If it had been required for food one can perhaps justify its slaughter (unless you are a vegetarian) but it was used as a sacrifice to a belief. Can that be justified? We should ask ourselves whether any belief justifies the slaughter of innocence. From this same story we may also be led to the idea that both Abraham and certainly God were prepared to slaughter innocence but for the intervention of an angel. I wonder what became of that angel, was he/she summarily executed for usurping God's role or rewarded for saving God's all-loving status? We perhaps may never know but if there is a God and a Heaven then those who go there might like to ask. One thing we do know. God did not learn anything from either Abraham or his angel for, many years later, according to infallible Biblical script, he "gave (euphemism for slaughtered) his own son" on a cross, thus setting an example to fathers which, happily for sons, many have never followed.

The inconsistency of theism

From Page 7

is. While the reasoning is clear, there are many instances of God revealing the future in the Bible, so according to the Bible itself, God knowing the future is not illogical. The gnostic who still maintained that God is unaware of the future should be pressed to explain his entire disregard of, for instance, the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

Two final pleas of the religious apologetic must be considered. First, he may claim that I have been too forward in my assertions; that I cannot claim that God does not exist—only that some aspects of some definition are inconsistent. This reasoning is fallacious, however. For example, if I were to insist the presence of a triangle with four sides on the dark side of the moon, the moment I show that a triangle cannot possibly have four sides by definition (that is, the idea is shown to be self-contradictory), I will have demonstrated the impossibility of the existence of any entities that fit said description anywhere, including the dark side of the moon. Likewise, the contradictions entailed in God's description rule out the possibility of the existence of a God that fits the Christian definition. Second, he will assert that I do not know God only because I do not seek Him, and His glory would be revealed to me should I only open my heart. To these remarks I only say that it is a

truly horrendous doing, a case only of devious sophistry and mischief, to try to convince someone of the presence of a truly illogical being such as Christians make God out to be. Furthermore, if at one point I did succumb to their art, and the belief brought me comfort, I shall ask myself—If I were to live in constant belief of the square triangle, and such a belief brought comfort to my life, of what value should my life be once I die? Would it truly not be a disgrace to the abilities that nature has so generously afforded humans? The ability to reason distinguishes us from other animals; we have a chance to explore the universe, to learn the wonders of nature through science and yet, some surrender willfully to the callings of their animal self to be emotive and not think.

There are those among us who turn away from philosophy, who declare the art tedious and without return. However, it seems to me that one is puerile to base final knowledge on anything except philosophy—the only human endeavour to entail no assumptions. And if through logical argument and rational debate the impossibility of a god is revealed, however much our sentiment of nostalgia calls for a divine caretaker to walk our world, the falsehood must be cast off so we may enjoy the ultimate freedom that only truth can bring. Remember, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Terry Sanderson on the media

MYSTIC MEG FALLS AT THE FIRST FENCE

I complained in a recent column about the dearth of fortune tellers, and other prediction merchants, on the racing pages of our newspapers—the only place where they could possibly be of any use. Well, the *News of the World* seems to have risen to the challenge, because the week before the Grand National this year, Mystic Meg was wheeled out to tell us what was going to win the big race.

First, she said, she had consulted the horoscopes of the leading horses. “Mars and Jupiter hold the key to this year’s Grand National,” she announced. “The horoscopes show that Mars, the planet of victory, is with Samlee, Stormtracker and Time for a Run.”

But how can Mars, the planet of victory, be with *three* horses, I wondered, unless there was going to be a triple dead heat? But there was more to come. Apparently, Jupiter, “the planet of good fortune”, was shining on Him of Praise, Rough Quest, Challenger du Lac, Stormtracker and Time for a Run. So, she had narrowed down her selections to only six.

But just to be on the safe side, she “asked the runes” what they thought would win and they spelled out the names of Samlee, Suny Bay and Mudahim. So, now there were eight to choose from! Except that the runes hadn’t forecast that Mudahim would be withdrawn before the race was even run.

Logical

The eventual winner was Earth Summit, a brave horse unmentioned by Meg, whose stars obviously weren’t shining bright enough to be discerned by the great seer. His name seemed to have eluded her runes as well.

Your faithful columnist, however (who nominated only one horse in the race) managed to pinpoint the winner, not by supernatural means, but by logical consultation of the form book, and study of the race’s previous statistics. (Evidence of this claim has been provided to the editor in the form of a William Hill statement).

The following week, the *News of the World* had somehow managed to forget Mystic Meg’s predictions, and she was back to her usual job of failing to forecast the lottery winner.

And meanwhile, our own Barbara Smoker had a near miss, too. She won a TV competition which allowed her to place £500 on any horse, and she chose Him of Praise. But

don’t worry, she did not settle on this selection because Mystic Meg had chosen him—she had taken the advice of the TV pundits on the show that provided the betting money. Regrettably, Him of Praise fell at the second last, but Barbara was sanguine about the result, even though she had rejected her own selection (Earth Summit) in favour of the experts’ tip! That’s racing for you.

AND TALKING of shameless psychics, we have Rita Rogers, Princess Diana’s favourite, claiming that she warned Diana and Dodi about the crash that killed them days before it happened. *The Sun* (April 2) said: “The warning came during a session at Rita’s home last August 12—19 days before the limo crashed in the Paris tunnel.” She is quoted as saying: “I saw Dodi on his own and warned him what was going to happen. I asked if he’d had an accident before and he said no. I warned him about the tunnel, water, a Mercedes and about the accident. I described it.”

So where is the evidence for this mighty prediction (which was, for some reason, totally ignored by the tragic princess and her suitor)? There is none, of course. Not a shred. The only people who could confirm what she says are dead (although I’m sure Mrs Rogers could summon their spirit forms back if she was so minded.)

Mrs Rogers just happened to be promoting her new biography when she made her surely outrageous (but utterly predictable) claim.

And the newspapers are no better for unquestioningly retailing such fables to an apparently endlessly gullible readership.

THE TIMES reported that “a cult once branded ‘corrupt, sinister and dangerous’ by a High Court judge is gaining a foothold in the Lords. Baron McNair, a Liberal Democrat, is eagerly promoting the words of L Ron Hubbard, founder of the Church of Scientology... ‘There are lots of Scientologists eat babies stories,’ he says. ‘All absolute nonsense.’”

Oh really? I suggest that Baron McNair read *Religion Inc.* by Stewart Lamont (Harrap Books, 1986). This is a scathing exposure of what Scientology is really about. It describes in detail, from first-hand sources, the vast amounts of money that potential adherents have to pay in order to be “cleared” through a process of “auditing”. At the end of it, they become Operating Thetans, and have to believe that L Ron Hubbard visited Venus on their behalf.

Scientology’s history has been well documented through many court cases, one involving the suicide of a follower who tried

to leave before he was completely bankrupted. But still its apologists continue to insist that there is nothing wrong.

In Germany the cult is strictly controlled after allegations that its followers were trying to infiltrate themselves into powerful positions. And *The Independent* (April 2) reported that alarm bells are ringing in Russia, too, after the prime-minister designate, Sergei Kiriyenko, was accused of being a Scientologist (an accusation that he did not deny).

The Russian Orthodox church has already branded Scientology “a totalitarian sect” (although this seems a case of pot and kettle) and now we have at least one Scientologist in our own legislature. Am I being paranoid, or is there serious cause for concern?

LETTERS to the editor are often very telling. Take these two. The first in *The Daily Mail*, from a G Browne, of Glamorgan, who wrote about The Christian Brothers and their cynical “apology” for the decades of abuse, both sexual and psychological, that they have heaped on young boys. Mr Browne was evacuated to Ireland as a child during the war and found himself in a home run by The Brothers. It obviously scarred him because he eventually returned to his native Liverpool and slept on the streets rather than remain at the school. “If the sick individuals themselves apologised I would not accept it from them,” he says, “and certainly will not from others apologising on their behalf. Anything was preferable to being a boy in a Christian Brothers’ school with people who made a mockery of the term Christian.”

In *The Daily Telegraph*, which has recently been conducting an anti-euthanasia campaign, was this letter from Claude Pearce, of Balcombe: “Can any of your readers please fully explain the meanings of the words Religion and Christianity to give me strength to watch my darling wife of 57 years sit here beside me, not more than a corpse, who can do nothing whatsoever for herself, neither feeding, wiping her face or nose, who excretes and urinates in pads all the time and has a brain that understands, yet cannot say a word or ask for a drink, suffering from Parkinson’s disease?”

The letter appeared among a whole sheath of others from Holy Joes of various kinds telling us how wrong voluntary euthanasia is.

You're telling us!

Ground rules on funerals

THE IDEA of allowing religious content in a secular funeral ceremony can only be regarded as a joke – and a sick one at that!

As a celebrant of quite a few years' standing, I offer my own ground rules.

When arranging to visit survivors, I always ensure that they want a non-religious ceremony as opposed to a non-denominational one. There is often confusion. At a crematorium I first remove all movable religious symbolism, although staff often do it without asking. In welcoming guests (not mourners) to "this non-religious Humanist funeral ceremony, at which we are to celebrate the life of Joe Bloggs", I give them my name and tell them I am a celebrant for both the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association, and have been asked to officiate by the family as Joe had no religious belief or no religious affiliation, as the case may be.

Music can often be both religious and secular, according to origin and the addition of words. If the family insist on a hymn tune, I can see no objection so long as there is no vocal content. After all, you don't have to go along with words to appreciate a good hymn tune, in just the same way that opera plots and words, even in a foreign language, don't necessarily prevent one from enjoying the music.

If anyone wants to speak at a ceremony, I welcome it, but insist that the address is relevant to the deceased and does not contain any religious matter or prayers. If survivors agree, and only if they do, I will, prior to the committal when suggesting they recall some happy occasion they shared in life with the deceased, add: "Whilst this is a non-religious funeral ceremony, I realise that there may be family and friends with religious belief and conviction, and who might want to say a silent prayer.

"I have no doubt that Joe would have appreciated your wishes providing it is done with sincerity and conviction and not just as a matter of social convention."

HAYWARD LYNN MILLARD
Burnley

MY LATE father was a C of S Orange Loyalist, my mother is C of E, and my first wife and children of that marriage are RC! In catering for mourner welfare at my funeral, which of these factions are the BHA inclined to offend in an effort to appease those others who will in any event be acting against my express wishes and beliefs? My present wife and I are Humanists of 30 years, specifically in order to avoid such family religious superstitious nonsensical feuding of the past. We joined BHA and NSS because we have no religion, not to create new ones or support others in theirs!

In trying to be objective and not too pedantic or emotional, surely in the ultimate event it is up to the officiant to control the situation and carry out the wishes of the *deceased*, and to bear in mind those wishes which are paramount inasmuch as the deceased has probably *paid* through whatever means; funds which the appropriate officiant will be dipping into for his pay and expenses?

I would also like to ask: in creating such a religious "Born Again Fervour" will the BHA

undertake the necessary visit costs to my solicitor to arrange the codicil which is now essential to ensure my funeral is carried out expressly as I wish it?

A few minutes of silence to cater for mourner private thoughts are all as is necessary; hymns and prayers can only create more problems than can be solved!

L J MAYBERRY
Deal

I HAVE been officiating at non-religious funerals for more than 10 years and that is what they are. I make it quite clear to the family that as a non-religious funeral is what they asked for, that is what they will get. If the family have reservations or require some religious input then I recommend that they approach a sympathetic minister.

Like George Broadhead, I always have a brief period of silence during the ceremony where I ask people to remember the deceased with gratitude and affection. It is at this point that any religious people at the funeral can say a silent prayer.

I would certainly not expect to have a hymn sung at any funeral where I was the officiant. I make the occasional exception for a religious tune to be played either at the beginning or end if it has some particular significance to the family. Such a tune as *Amazing Grace* has been used but there have been no words. This was an exceptional case and I would always advise the family to choose something secular to go with the ceremony they have requested.

I must say I am horrified by the BHA officiant who stated that one-third of their ceremonies had hymns. What sort of message does that give about non-religious ceremonies?

ROBIN WOOD
Kilmarnock

NIGEL Collins' letter (April, p18) suggests that it is difficult for an officiant to refuse to help a bereaved family when they ask for some religious flavour in a funeral. He says that this requirement is usually discovered only during the face-to-face meeting with the family and that to refuse at this stage will create problems for them and for the Funeral Director.

In January I learnt the folly of waiting until this stage in the process, when I had a wasted trip from Sheffield to York (round trip 136 miles). I had made the mistake of not speaking to the bereaved family in a little more detail over the telephone, when I arranged the appointment.

A clearer statement of what we do, and a few well-placed questions, would have resolved the matter there and then, leaving ample time for alternative arrangements. Instead, two further days elapsed before the meeting, when we realised that we had a difference that could not be resolved. Fortunately they were able to make alternative arrangements and understood my reasons for being unable to proceed.

It would be very easy to fudge this issue. Who would know? The family is happy. The Funeral Director is happy. I have the fee. What is the harm?

The harm is that while we tell ourselves that we are working to what will always be a blurred line, what we are really doing is shifting the line to a new position. We all have to make up our own minds about that.

Whether he agrees with this or not, Nigel should not argue that those who disagree with him are not officiants. That is not a matter of opinion. It is untrue.

MIKE GRANVILLE
Officiant
Sheffield

NO DOUBT I lack subtlety and tend to attract like-minded people, but I have never been asked to conduct a humanist funeral service with religious trappings. The simple souls I've met face-to-face may not have known the difference between eupraxophy and eudaemonism but had a clear perception that humanism is non-(meaning not)-religious, if not anti-religious. Only in certain humanist circles have I discovered, to my naive astonishment, that humanism, like cleanliness, is next to Godliness.

Perhaps I haven't asked clients the right questions. Should I have learned from the psephologists or opinion pollsters engaged by particular political parties or commercial organisations and enquired, for example, "Was the deceased a dogmatic tub-thumping atheist or a genial broad-minded person who believed that religion is a sensitive exploration of the spiritual side of our natures?" or "What sort of music would you like for the introit—an uplifting hymn or something from the Sex Pistols?"

Similarly, I have known many liberal Muslims, none of whom has expressed a desire for segregated Islamic day schools. Those making such demands seem to me to believe in rigorous indoctrination, male domination, female mutilation, homophobia, ferocious censorship, *jihads* and *fatwas*. Faced with the issue of equality before the law we may well ask, "Do we make the page of educational history look whiter by dropping ever darker blots upon it?"

DAVID TRIBE
NSW
Australia

BILL McIlroy (April) speaks of the "Secular Humanist movement's current obsession with death and funerals". I don't see any evidence of an obsession, but I do think that the conduct of non-religious funerals is a legitimate subject for debate among humanists. Bill also voices his "strong suspicion...that most requests for hymns and prayers are *prompted* by a minority of humanist officiants". Bill puts this down to "a faction which regards the movement as a surrogate church". There may indeed be such a faction, but to suggest that they are responsible for *most* requests for hymns and prayers is simply not true. In the vast majority of cases, these requests come spontaneously from the people who have asked for a humanist officiant to conduct a funeral. That the people who make the requests see no contradiction in asking a humanist officiant to conduct prayers or hymns is evidence of the effects of their own confused thinking. People drift away from religion rather than taking a single positive step into humanism, and during the transition, they are still influenced by vestigial Christianity which results in all sorts of illogicalities. Your letters page offers clear evidence that the attitude of most officiants does not support Bill McIlroy's analysis. Those who accept some religious element

You're telling us!

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in ceremonies usually do so very unwillingly and often take steps to show that they are not personally involved or responsible for this element of the ceremony. There is absolutely no reason why this issue should be yet another cause for division among humanists. Although I do not always agree with Barbara Smoker, I believe she has done the humanist movement a service by providing a very lucid case for opposing any extension of public funding for sectarian education. I believe that these two debates illustrate the simple truth that there are two ways to run the broad humanist movement. We can all spend our time scoring debating points and exaggerating every difference, while promoting our own constituent organisation or faction as the fountain of all truth, or we can seek a consensus for policies on which we can agree. It is not difficult to see which policy will make for a more effective movement.

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

RELIGION in Humanist ceremonies: You request views on this subject..

I concur entirely with the stand of the Coventry & Warwickshire folk, namely that a period of silence, during which those who wish may offer up a silent prayer to whomsoever they wish, is the ideal situation.

JOHN DOWDING
Essex

Words wanted

I AM just completing a book on secular civic ceremonies and I wish to include a section on suitable music for communal singing. Could anyone please send me copies of words and, if possible, music which might be suitable for any Humanist ceremony. I will refund the cost of any expenses incurred for copying and postage.

CAROLE MOUNTAIN
1 Higher Kings Avenue
Pennsylvania
Exeter
EX4 6JW

An end of St Patrick

I HAVE long doubted the existence of St Patrick. It is certain from reliable sources that no-one ever knew where he died, or where he was born. There is as good evidence of the existence of St Denis as of St Patrick.

"In the Roman Martyrology, bishop Patrick, of Auvergne, is placed at the 16th of March, and on the same day the office of the Lateran canons, approved by Pius V, celebrates the festival of a Patrick, the apostle of Ireland. The 17th of March is dedicated to Patrick, bishop of Nola. Have we not, then, sound reasons for supposing that Patricius Auvemensis sunk a day lower in the calendar, and made for the Irish a Patricius Hibernensis? This seems to be exactly the case. It is very extraordinary the 16th and 17th March should have three Patricks, of

Auvergne, another of Ireland, and a third of Nola! The antiquities of Glastonbury record three Patricks, one of Auvergne, another Archbishop of Ireland, and a third an abbot. The last, according to a martyrology cited by Usher, went on the mission to Ireland, AD850, but was unsuccessful; he returned and died at Glastonbury. We submit, if all that is now advanced be not a fardel of monkish fictions, which it certainly is, the last Patrick was the man who was beatified by the bigoted Anglo-Saxons, for his endeavours to bring the Irish to a conformity with the Romish church.

"It is an undoubted fact that this Saint Patrick is not mentioned in any author, or in any work of veracity, in the 5th, 6th, 7th or 8th centuries. His name is in Bede's Martyrology, but it is more than probable that that martyrology is not Bede's; nor can it be conceived that Bede, in his other works, should never notice the signal service rendered by Patrick to the Roman church, and the signal miracles wrought by him in its behalf, if he had ever heard of them, for the old venerabilis was zealously devoted to that church and its mythology."

Thus there seems to be an end of St Patrick.
DANIEL BIRD
Coventry

Political allegiance

TONY Blair is reported as sneaking into a Roman Catholic church for the Sunday rituals whereas William Hague asserts that he would rather walk the Yorkshire Dales than go to church on a Sunday, for which, he is being criticised by no-less a person than the Rt Rev Michael Marshall, the assistant Bishop of London

Maybe *the Freethinker* should re-consider its political allegiance!

ROY A COBB
Rutland

Judaism never was 'catholic'

WHILST the general message of the cartoon on the March 1998 issue cover is, of course, completely valid, the cartoon is misleading in one particular. Christianity (in its various forms) and Islam are "catholic" faiths—they claim to be for everybody, and would seek to convert the world's entire population if they could. But Judaism is not, and never was "catholic"—it's strictly for Jews only.

I understand that a non-Jew can, if he really wants to, be accepted into the Jewish faith, but they make it as difficult as they can. They don't want converts. They are their Lord's Chosen People. So you won't find Jewish evangelists proselytising to the unconverted on the street-corners of the world.

Re your own article "Back from the Brink", you are arguing that an ignominious climb-down is preferable to another all-out war. Perhaps it is—many would agree with you. *But*—is that the actual choice we are facing? It looks increasingly as though the real choice may well be between an all-out war soon, on

western initiative, or else an all-out war later on Saddam's initiative—when (this time) he's really ready for it. In the meantime, of course, our various leaders should be doing their damndest to find out precisely what the real choices really are—and then acting according to their findings. Simply throwing up an ocean of hands in collective horror at the prospect of another all-out war might even hasten it, or increase its likelihood.

ARCHIE MERCER
Cornwall

Confusion over the millennium

THE correspondence you have published about this is confused.

Dionysius Exiguus must have been wrong about the year in which Jesus was born, which he fixed as 1BC. Saint Matthew states that it was during the reign of King Herod (the Great), who died in 4 BC. Saint Luke, however, records it as being in Augustus' "Great Census" of AD6, the same year that Judea was annexed to the Roman Empire. In fact, it must have been Herod's earlier census of 6BC, accompanied by an oath to the King and his ally, Augustus, which 6,000 Pharisees refused to take and were fined. (Herod's devout sister-in-law paid the money for them.)

The question, therefore, is not whether Dionysius was wrong, but how Luke's Gospel can be reconciled with Matthew's, as neither apostle could have had any motive for intentionally falsifying the year and thereby discredit his narrative. Luke obviously confused two censuses, an understandable error as he wrote his gospel over 60 years after the event. Anyway, the earlier Herodian census must be preferred because the later "Great Census" of Augustus would make Jesus too young to be recognised as a rabbi (minimum age 35) when he commenced his ministry in AD 29 (or even, at the very latest, in AD 32).

The correct Christian millennium was therefore in 1994!

E GOODMAN
Surrey

Trough worship

IN HIS Voltaire lecture some years ago, Dr Dawkins told us how he perceives religion to be a 'mind virus'. With so much evidence of religion being used to corrupt and deceitful ends for the amassment of wealth, prestige and power, are there two not unconnected mind viruses or bugs at work—the religions of superstition (for the masses), aggressively supported by the religion of greed or 'trough worship' for the few?

Barbara Smoker's Indian trip and her visit of the tomb of Periyar, celebrated Indian atheist, and Terry Sanderson's article, 'American import we could do without', highlight an interesting vista. The extraordinary way the greed

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You're telling us!

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and corruption of a few contrast with the motives of the handfuls of individuals in movements such as ours, which are often organised as charities.

Our organisations have to be ever vigilant and mediate for the public's continued freedom and civil liberties against groups with dubious motives, who continually attempt to win influence in a most deceitful and undemocratic manner.

For this service, no public recognition or honour is ever formally forthcoming for these hard-working people in our movements.

If Dr Dawkins' theory is true, is the 'life blood' of a free society dependant on these—a sort of special breed of 'virus resistant human'—analogous to the special blood corpuscles in our blood responsible for the control and removal of poisons and bacteria etc? Would this explain why our organisers seem especially immune to both the greed and superstitious viruses!

It seems strange when one looks at today's huge, well fed, middle class Britain to realise that its ancestry is largely in the industrial classes (despite what many would have you believe) and that it owes its health, education and high standards of living to a few handfuls of individuals who, martyrs to the cause of their higher principles, fought for everything taken for granted today. Their reward was often persecution.

David Sterrett
Forest Hill

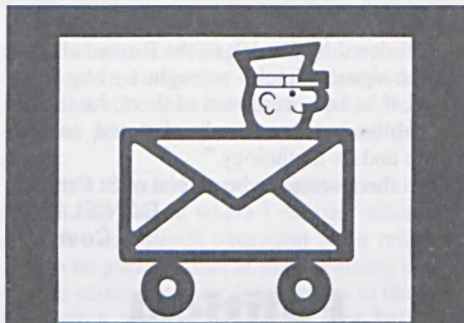
Fraud not witchcraft

HELEN Duncan was not "the last woman in Britain to be convicted of witchcraft", contrary to the story on p12 of the March issue of *The Freethinker*. She was indeed convicted by the jury of conspiracy to contravene the Witchcraft Act (1753), but the very purpose of that Act was to deny the existence of witchcraft. As the Act states: "After the day of June 24th 1736, No Prosecution, Suit or Proceeding shall be commenced...against any Person or Persons for Witchcraft, Sorcery, Enchantment or Conjuraction, or for charging another with any such Offence in any Court whatsoever in Great Britain." The Act continued by establishing that it was designed to prevent, punishable by one year in Prison, "any Person Pretending to have the powers of Witchcraft, Sorcery, Enchantment, Conjuraction...to undertake to tell Fortunes or pretend from his Skill or Knowledge in any occult or crafty Science to discover where or in what manner any Goods or Chattels may be found." Thus her conviction was precisely for not being a witch, merely a fraudster.

It would almost seem that this kind of Act, one denying superstition, supporting skepticism and prosecuting fraud, would be just the kind to receive the support of the National Secular Society rather than its opposition. When Keith Porteous Wood writes that "her so-called 'powers' of necromancy should never have been given legal recognition" — they weren't, that was the point of the trial.

It is true that there are a number of grounds on which the NSS should sympathise with the pardon campaign—the trial proceedings were a travesty of justice; the Act was discriminatory and obsolete. However to join such a campaign is to side with the promoters of superstitious nonsense. Helen Duncan's strongest line of defence in the trial (one which her lawyers were denied the chance to demonstrate) was that she was not guilty because she was a genuine spiritualist medium and would happily prove her powers in the courtroom. It should thus be no surprise that the campaign to pardon her is largely orchestrated by the Anglo American Spiritualist Ministries, and the NSS would be wise to keep away from this "tomfoolery".

RICHARD LEVERIDGE
Oxford



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

Women contributors

MAY I draw attention to a notable imbalance in the generally broad and comprehensive debate on humanist topics argued by contributors to *The Freethinker's* pages?

Analysing the contents of the last 12 issues, I find that 101 features were written by men and only 11 by women (of which 10 were by Barbara Smoker!). As to readers' letters, 112 were from men and only 15 from women (again, mostly from you know who!). As I am sure that your editorial policy is not to exclude worthy contributions from women, I can only conclude that they are just not interested in humanist matters at least to the extent of submitting articles or correspondence in any quantity to you. And the same goes for female attendance at local Humanist Society meetings—usually a small minority, judging from my own observations.

No doubt there are plausible sociological or historical reasons why humanism should seem to be largely a men-only activity, but as a relative newcomer to the movement I would be interested to hear from some 'old-timers' what

some of those reasons might be, and whether anything could, or should, be done, to correct this imbalance.

JOHN HUGHES
Sheffield

Kindred spirits

I AM pleased to read in the April *Freethinker* that at least there are kindred spirits in the Humanist movement. David Murray accepts the idea that our Church schools are 'British' products, and their funding is quite different from that of Muslim schools. His letter implies, and suggests in stating secularists regard Muslims as 'extra-terrestrials', that the increase of ethnic religions in Britain has not been criticised by Humanists because of their left-leaning internationalist bias.

In common with David Murray's statement that Judaism and Christianity have been major components in European thought, I believe Humanists should attempt to put secularism within the context of European philosophy and the rise of European Christianity. We hear from Richard Dawkins that our religion is not a matter of choice—it is inherited at birth!

Humanists are traitors to their own cause, as David Murray recognises, and often argue for a multi-cultural and multi-faith society; I am pleased he supports 'discrimination' against what are alien religions and cultures, and is trying to urge the Humanist and secular movement to look at their own 'facts of history'. Too much 'liberal' thought is clearly standing at what David Murray notes is the 'slippery slope' looking forwards to egalitarian ideologies, at the expense of backwards to our own heritage.

DAVID ENLIM
London

Religion and the brain

TERRY Sanderson's report (*Freethinker*, March) is unduly charitable to *New Scientist's* account of Ramachandran's experiment. Evolutionary psychology would suggest that falling in love is the normal psychological function of the temporal lobe that when disordered by pathology (such as epilepsy) results in psychosis. Such abnormalities may range from mild obsessions to severe delusions and have often been accommodated by Society as "religions", that is religious organisation is the institutional form that allows those with deranged temporal lobe 'love-mechanisms' to remain in the community. To say that a specific part of the brain handles religious experience is to mistake pathology for physiology: all the evidence suggests that religious experience is the result of malfunction of a specific part of the brain.

JOHN MARKS MB ChB, FRCPsych
Consultant Psychiatrist
Wellington

Review of a pamphlet – unavailable for many years – which ‘bears witness to an important stage in the propagation of arguments against religion and for Socialism’

‘Socialism implies atheism and materialism’

THIS short pamphlet was first published in 1910 and, despite later reprintings, has been unavailable for many years. It is significant both for its historical interest and for the intrinsic interest of the arguments it presents. Its reprinting now is therefore doubly welcome.

The Socialist Party of Great Britain or SPGB, nowadays known usually as the Socialist Party, was founded in 1904, with an uncompromising hostility to other political parties and a dogged insistence that nothing short of the establishment of a moneyless, classless society could lead to the liberation of the working-class. The importance of *Socialism and Religion* is summed up by Robert Barltrop in his history of the SPGB, *The Monument* (Pluto Press, 1975): “Here for the first time, a socialist organisation declared itself an atheist one.” No longer was religion to be seen as a purely private matter, on which, as in some parties, members were free to take different views. Instead the pamphlet declared boldly at its outset that “Socialism implies atheism and materialism”. The pamphlet and its arguments were surely known to Frank Ridley, whose 1948 Engels Society pamphlet of the same title has also recently been republished.

Witness

The struggle against religious ideas was probably even more vital for early Socialists than it is today. As Adam Buick points out in his Introduction to this reprint, Socialism was originally spread at street corners and on soap boxes, in the very same places where religious speakers were peddling their nonsense. Combating drivel about a paradise in the next world was therefore essential for every outdoor speaker. Historically, then, this pamphlet bears witness to an important stage in the propagation of arguments against religion and for Socialism.

As for its content, this remains relevant and provocative, as a summary of its arguments will show. *Socialism and Religion* begins with a materialist account of the origins of religion, though whether the details of this explanation are tenable nowadays is less important than the method adopted. Ignorance about the world led to belief in ghosts and sorcery, and the idea of gods arose as people worshipped a dead chief and turned his grave into a temple. Christianity grew gradually out of various other faiths: in a nice phrase, it is described as “a cemetery of dead religions”. The Christian Church became an ally of kings and princes, for which, “with its cardinal ethic of submission, it was eminently suitable”. The Reformation was not a purely religious movement, as it reflected the aspira-

The Socialist Party of Great Britain: *Socialism and Religion*. Republished by Common Ownership (New Zealand), 1997. Available from The Socialist Party, 52 Clapham High Street, London SW4 7UN. Price £2 + postage.

Review by Paul Bennett

tions of the rising merchant class.

Whereas science, by being developed, becomes more complete and systematic, religion tends to evaporate into nothing as it is confronted with experience of the real world. So many once-essential Christian tenets are now viewed by adherents as merely allegorical—a point even truer today than in 1910.

Socialist society will mean the end of religion, as people’s relations with each other and to nature become completely intelligible, leaving no place for confusion and mysticism. Socialists explain the development of ideas (including the rise, transformation and decline of religion) in materialist terms, as people must eat before being able to have ideas. Religion serves the interests of the ruling class by helping to make workers meek and submissive. Even Christian ethics depend on the existence of class society. The idea that Jesus was a Socialist is just nonsense. Politicians like Ramsay MacDonald and Keir Hardie are quoted as finding inspiration in the Bible, which is one of many reasons why they are not Socialists.

We have referred above to the role of

Socialism and Religion in contesting the view that religion is a private matter unconnected with a person’s political beliefs. But there are a number of other views possible on the relation between religion and politics. This pamphlet also argues against one of these, that Socialists should ignore religion entirely: it is important to fight all aspects of capitalist obfuscation. Another view is advanced by Adam Buick in his Introduction, namely that religion will not disappear because it is refuted but because the social conditions that create it disappear themselves. On this view, humanists are wasting their time arguing against religion, as only the establishment of Socialism will remove its breeding ground and thereby ensure the end of religion. It is not clear (to me, at least) whether *Socialism and Religion* adopts this view, but it certainly argues the crucial point that a purely anti-religious struggle is of no avail:

“To abolish religion is not to abolish exploitation, because only one of the enemy’s guns will have been silenced. The workers have, above all, to dislodge the capitalist class from power, and the religious question, and indeed all else, is secondary to this. To say this is not to belittle the specifically anti-religious fight, but to indicate its rightful place in the greater struggle—the battle for emancipation requiring the intelligent co-operation of the great mass of the working class.”

I agree: capitalism without religion (assuming it’s possible) would still be a society of poverty, oppression and insecurity. It is because of this that I see no value in fighting religion on its own (or just racism, nationalism and sexism on their own). And it’s because of this that I am a member of the Socialist Party and not of any humanist or secular organisation.

FREETHINKER BOUND VOLUMES

THE bound volumes of *The Freethinker* for 1997 are now available, and may be ordered from the office at £25, post free. Anyone who previously ordered the set of three bound volumes of *The Freethinker* for 1994-1996 at £50, post free, and didn’t receive them is asked to tell the office as soon as possible.

Please note that all payments on account of *Freethinker* subscriptions, purchases or donations should be made to G W Foote & Co and sent to Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald’s Road, London, WC1X 8SP.

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, June 7, 4.30 pm: Philip Carr-Gomm: *Druidism*. Information: 01273 733215.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Hugh Thomas on 0117 9871751.

Bromley Humanists: Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680.

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01296 623730.

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

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

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, May 21, 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 (7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 (Library, 1st floor).

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. June 2: David Sames: *Home to the World—London's East End*.

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. Sunday, May 10, 2.30 pm, at 20 Trinity Place, Deal: *Religious Involvement in Humanist Ceremonies!* Sunday, May 31, 2.30 pm at Seminar Room 11, Front Extension, Rutherford College, University of Kent, Canterbury: Ray Gard: *Crime and Punishment—Is There a Humanist Perspective?*

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. 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, May 28: David Porter: *Humanity and the Stars—a Critique of Astronomy and Astrology*.

Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607. Meetings at Friends' Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester, on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30 pm. May 13: Peter Thompson: *Friends of the Earth*.

National Secular Society: Sunday, July 19. Visit to Down House, Kent (Charles Darwin's home). Coach leaves Red Lion Square, London WC1. Cost: £10. Details from Keith Porteous Wood on 0171 404 3126.

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.

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. Information: Anne Toy on 0181 3601828.

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, May 6, 8 pm: David Granville: *Ireland 1798—its Relevance in 1998*. Wednesday, June 3, 8 pm: Carolyn Wilson: *How Can We Best Promote Peace?*

Sheffield Humanist Society: Monday, May 4, 10.30 am to 3.30 pm, Literature and Information Stall at May Day Festival, Chesterfield Town Centre, and at the South Yorkshire Festival, Wortley Hall, Wortley, Saturday, July 4, 11 am to 5pm. 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. 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.

NOTICEBOARD

THIS year's Humanist Lunch will take place at the Hotel Russell, Russell Square, London WC1 (Russell Square tube station) on Saturday, June 20.

Baroness Muriel Turner, of the Parliamentary Humanist Group, will be the main speaker. Telephone 0171 430 0908 to book as soon as possible.

All bookings must be made before June 8.

COVENTRY and Leamington Spa. "The Musical Heathens" meet monthly for music and discussion.

For details, telephone Karl Heath on Coventry (01203) 673306