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There's something nasty on the WWW

See centre pages

Up Front

Baroness Young leads last-ditch crusade against common sense

EARLY ON the morning of June 22, 1998, the nation learned that the Catholic and Protestant churches, in alliance with right-wing traditionalists and various 'family values' organisations, had embarked on a last-ditch offensive to persuade MPs to vote against equalising the homosexual age of consent.

Mr and Ms Great Britain yawned, turned

over and grabbed a few more minutes of shut-eye.

The same night, MPs voted overwhelmingly in favouring of lowering the homosexual age of consent from 18 to 16.

The message to Britain's unsavoury coalition of sex-obsessed, religious prodnoses was quite clear: 'Go away and find something else to bray about'.

Among a hutchful of very unhappy bunnies as a result of the vote was Baroness Young, a former Tory leader of the House of Lords who appeared in BBC2's *Newsnight* studio to piffle on about a 'paedophiles' charter'.

Bristling with Christian outrage she warned that the vote was yet another step 'along a slippery slope'.

If slippery slopes have the ability to eliminate discrimination—and remove humankind as far as possible away from Christianity's baleful influence—then let us have a lot more of them, please.

Of course, what Baroness Young's 'slippery slope' suggested was a slide into immorality—this being a natural consequence of government failing to heed the dead words of the Bible and the bleatings of bishops.

Well, I hate to break it to the good Lady, but most sensible people have long since given up associating Christianity with morality, and would be pretty much in agreement with George Bernard Shaw's sentiment voiced way back in 1911. "The word morality, if we met it in the Bible, would surprise us as much as the word telephone or motor car," he wrote in his preface to *Fanny's First Play*.

The German philosopher Nietzsche went a lot further, calling Christianity "the one great curse, the one enormous and innermost perversion, the one great instinct of revenge for which no means are too venomous, too underhand, too underground and too petty—I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind".

Before the Commons vote was taken, Cardinal Basil Hume, the Catholic Church's head shaman in England, said: "I would urge MPs to reflect on the signal they wish to send to the nation."

Given that Hume represents an organisation notorious for both its physical and mental abuse of children here and abroad, he is the last person on earth to lecture MPs on morality—or anything else for that matter.

But top prize for the most stupid comment in the Commons debate must go to the man who asked: "Am I not correct in saying that a homosexual act is unnatural. If the Lord Almighty had meant men to commit sodomy with other men their bodies would have been built differently?"

Who else could have made such a foolish contribution to the debate but the egregious Tory MP and Defender of the Faith, Nicholas Wintererton?

The foolishness didn't end there, of course. On July 11, Baroness Young, who

has tabled an amendment to overturn the Commons vote in the Lords, wrote to almost 200 peers asking them to support her when the Bill returned to the Lords on July 22.

By the time this issue of the *Freethinker* is published, we shall know whether the clammy fingers of Christianity are at last being prised loose from Britain's levers of state, or if Christianity has once again succeeded in impeding social progress and human rights.

This brings me round to the question of why so many in the Judeo-Christian and Muslim faiths are so obsessed with the Bible's sex bits—and homosexuality in particular.

The answer, I believe, is twofold: The first is their religions' need for scapegoats. All the major religions are only effective when they are able to whip their adherents into states of moral frenzy against some or other 'enemy'.

The second is its need to establish in people's minds feelings of guilt and utter worthlessness—and nothing does the job quite as well as the constant reiteration of Biblical strictures against sexual 'wrongdoing'.

Combine Christianity's innate cruelty with its irrational hatred of sex, and you start to understand why homosexuals have, over the years, provided the religious with such an ideal scapegoat.

But not for much longer.

I believe that the late Brian Parry, my partner and an avowed atheist, was absolutely right when, shortly before his death, he wrote to the BBC *Today* programme to challenge some or other rubbish on its vacuous god slot.

"Homosexuals," he declared, "were around long before Christianity was inflicted on humankind; we have survived many church-inspired attempts to exterminate us; we will still be around long after Christianity has been reduced to nothing more than a cult for eccentrics."

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IS GOD ARITHMETICAL, LOGICAL – OR JUST PLAIN NON-EXISTENT?

WHEN THE *Independent* carried a piece about exorcism, Keith Porteous Wood, of the National Secular Society, wrote to the editor chiding him for giving credence to such mediaeval nonsense. Far from being an “honourable profession”, as the author of the piece had asserted, exorcism was dangerous and could lead to the exploitation of the mentally ill. Society needs to give such people real help, and not leave them to the clutches of “deluded men with crosses and holy water”.

Little could Keith have known what a philosophical can of worms he was opening.

A couple of days later, Maurice Hill, from Javea, in Spain, wrote to the Indy correspondence column saying that he had found Keith’s letter “a breath of fresh air”. He was annoyed that on another page of the same edition he had found a piece by Margaret Atkins which said: “The Bible begins with the creation of the heavens and the earth, and God sees that each thing is good.”

“It is surprising,” wrote Mr Hill, “that there are people who still believe that nonsense. There are no heavens or hells, demons, angels, ghosts, eternal torture, gods, fairies or Father Christmas. There is no evidence for the existence of any of these fantasies, and it is time the human race grew out of its infantile gullibility and came to terms with reality.”

The religionists were not going to let that pass, and Canon Roger Clifton was quick to tell us: “Apart from Maurice Hill’s elementary error of confusing religious beliefs with fairies and Father Christmas, he seems unaware that while there is still no irrefutable proof of the existence of God, neither is there any final proof of his absence. Unfortunately for Mr Hill, the vast majority of the human race has chosen to accept the divine dimension is indeed part of reality—and no rationalist or atheistic regime has ever been able to change that.”

Dr Laurie Buxton, of Swaffham, Norfolk, was quickly on the case. “Canon Clifton asserts that an atheist cannot deny the possibility of a god. Indeed, no sensible atheist will reject the possibility that an intelligence directs the Universe. Every religion, however, describes its god in detail and with every attribute it gives him (mostly ‘him!’) reduces the chances of its being right until it becomes vanishingly small.

“Christians have an even more serious problem. It is now apparent that life must be manifest throughout the Universe. Does God’s ‘only begotten son’ have to go to every planet with life to ‘save’ the inhabitants and get killed in whatever unpleasant manner there is in force at the time?”

Dr Buxton continued: “All religions are

Readers of the *Independent* exchange views

predicated on the assumption that we on earth matter especially. Before Copernicus, when scientists accepted a geocentric universe, that might have been tenable. The whole notion is now manifestly absurd. Take humans as they are, value them, and live on the principle that there is no supernatural force looking after us. Do not seek an emotional crutch.”

Naturally such opinions couldn’t go unchallenged, and Duncan Reeve, of High Wycombe, came along to do the job: “If Dr Buxton really believes his extraordinary claim ‘it is now apparent that life must be manifest throughout the Universe’, then he either knows something that no-one else does, or else he has been taking the *X-Files* too seriously!”

Our own Nicolas Walter also refuted Dr. Buxton’s assertion that “no sensible atheist would reject the possibility that an intelligence directs the Universe.”

“On the contrary,” wrote Nicolas, “a sensible atheist may well reject the possibilities either that an intelligence on its own can direct anything, or that anything can direct everything.”

Noel Thomas, of Bridgend, thought that Dr Buxton “has a narrow European view of religion” and was wrong to “suggest that all religions describe their gods in detail. Buddhists, for instance, consider a universal god to be beyond the comprehension of the enlightened, ‘an unborn, an unoriginated, an unmade, an uncomprehended’. Buddhists have always sought to generate compassion for all sentient beings, in our universe and beyond.”

Then came Owen Gwynne, of Runcorn, Cheshire, who added his two-penn’orth by saying that discussion about the provability of the existence of God “depends on the belief that only things exist that can be proven to exist. Thus, in mathematics, a theorem is subject to logical stepwise analysis leading to an objective, undeniable proof. However, Gödel showed that in any complete mathematical system there are going to be theorems which although true cannot be proved to be true. Therefore it is not reasonable to challenge anyone to prove God’s existence or else deny it, since the existence of unprovable truths is inherent in logic; rather we must expect belief to be based on the non-rational, which probably makes up about 90 per cent of our experience, perception and personality. It is these non-rational bits that make me believe in God, not any particular bits of objective evidence.”

But Michael Broido, a mathematician, of London NW8, soon advised us that Godel didn’t say quite what Mr Gwynne had attributed to him. “What he did show (very roughly)” according to Mr Broido, was “that in logic, every true statement is provable, but that in arithmetic there are true statements that cannot be formally proved. (Thus logic is complete, while arithmetic is incomplete). So, Owen Gwynne’s letter really means that the existence of God is a fact of arithmetic, rather than a fact of logic. Flattering though this is to mathematicians, it does no seem to be quite what he meant.”

Max Beran, of East Hagbourne, Oxfordshire, began his contribution by telling us that he is a (very) lapsed Jew. His explanation for the decline of religious observance by Jews is that “an increasing number of people simply cannot believe either that Bronze Age mythology is true or any longer of much relevance. This same slow realisation and reluctance to suspend belief is playing a part in eroding membership of all religions in the West.”

But PJ Stewart, also of Oxford, thinks there is nothing wrong with Bronze Age myths. In fact, he thinks many of them are ‘magnificent’. “The trouble starts,” he says, “when people start taking them literally. One of the most dangerous situations in the world exists because too many people believe that God gave Palestine to the descendants of Abraham by Isaac, to the exclusion of his heirs through Ishmael.”

Coming from a Sea of Faith position, Fr Dominic Kirkham, of Manchester, responded to the Owen Gwynne letter by saying that Mr Gwynne was “quite free to believe in a ‘God’ of his own choosing”. He said this was no more than Blake’s view that ‘all deities reside inside the human breast.’ Fr Kirkham went on to say: “The veracity of theism must link two poles: cosmology (what is out there) and evolutionary psychology (how we have come to know what is out there). On the basis of modern knowledge in both these areas we are in a position to understand that religious belief in some ultimate being is a fiction of human design—perhaps a necessary fiction, explanatory of the kind of beings we are, but a fiction nonetheless.”

And finally, after two weeks of intense discussion, Richard Friend, from London, summed up: “As the existence of God is in principle undecidable, it is mistaken to ‘look at the balance of evidence and make your own choice’. Even though the signs suggest a Supreme Being who is pretty nasty and keen on random acts of violence, the rationalist and agnostic reply to ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ is not to waste resources agonising over it, but to shelve it and get a life.”

Barbara Smoker reflects on the life of Benny Green (1927-1998)

JAZZMAN'S DEATH ROBBS NSS OF A KEEN AND TALENTED ASSOCIATE

SEVERAL of his obituarists have stated that Benny Green was born in London—some actually specifying east London, apparently on the assumption that only an East Ender could have such a Cockney accent.

But he was actually born into a Jewish family in Leeds, in December 1927, and when the family moved to London it was not to the East End but to the slummy western Euston Road area, where his father, David Green, could ply his trade as a tailor and play jazz on a saxophone in his spare time.

Benny enjoyed his primary education at Clipstone Junior Mixed School, but the social and academic pretensions of the St Marylebone Grammar School, to which he won a scholarship, were not to his liking. So he dropped out of school and educated himself, mainly from the public library—beginning with the works of H G Wells. A polymath in an age of specialism, he was still educating himself to the end of his life.

His father having taught him to play the sax, he first played in public at the age of 15. He enrolled in the London College of Music in 1946, but left there in mid-course to join a big band as a full-time saxophonist, and in 1953 a *Melody Maker* poll voted him “the most promising new jazz musician”.

Long bus journeys from gig to gig were spent in reading Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Hardy, Shaw, and other greats, and he also continued his education at the City Literary Institute. As well as innumerable shorter essays, Benny wrote a shelf of books—among them, literary biographies of P G Wodehouse and Bernard Shaw—and wrote the lyrics for several musicals, including *Boots with Strawberry Jam* (based on Shaw's early life), *Bashville* and *Valentine's Day* (based on two of Shaw's plays), and *Oh Mr*



● Benny Green

Porter (about Cole Porter). Cricket being one of his passions, he also edited the four-volume *Wisden Anthology*. And he was jazz critic of *The Observer* from 1958 to 1977, a regular book reviewer for *The Spectator* from 1970 to 1980, and film critic for *Punch* from 1972.

On top of all that, he was a cabaret host and radio presenter.

His two regular radio programmes were a three-hour slot every Saturday evening for the London Broadcasting Company and, for the past two years, *The Art of the Songwriter* on Radio 2 on Sunday afternoons.

But above all, Benny was a family man, devoted to his lovely actress wife Toni Kanal and their four children.

After his marriage in 1962, he gave up the nomadic life of a jazz musician, saying he would rather live at home than on buses; and one reason he gave for swapping film for television criticism later on was that he could do the latter in his own family home.

I myself was associated with him mainly as a Shavian, a Wodehouse enthusiast, and a secularist, and I recruited him as both a Vice-president of the Shaw Society and an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society. These were not just sinecures to Benny—he actively participated in both organisations.

And he gave a Conway Memorial Lecture for South Place Ethical Society on the writers who had influenced him. Though professional in everything he did, Benny was essentially an amateur, in the sense of doing it all for love. And he was a pastmaster at communicating his varied enthusiasms, both in speech and writing. He was obviously a workaholic, but he told me how lucky he thought he was that he had never had to work at all! He just got paid for pursuing his hobbies.

Once, when a television researcher asked me to suggest someone to join me in opposing religion on a discussion programme, I said the best person would be Benny Green. Puzzled, she said “You don't mean the jazz critic?” I assured her I did, and Benny accepted the assignment, making some very hard-hitting points in his unfailingly good-humoured and humorous way. Later he used to refer laughingly to a member of the studio audience on that occasion who asked him why, if he was an atheist, he did not go around murdering people.

Seated next to him at an annual dinner of the NSS, I asked him if he would like some wine, but he said he preferred not to take alcohol, nor did he smoke, as he wanted to live to be 100—for the Shavian reasons of *Back to Methuselah*.

One day last year he phoned me to ask if I would be the guest on his Saturday LBC radio programme, and I naturally accepted—thinking it would entail an interview of, say, ten minutes. But it went on for an hour! Since Benny assumed I would have read all the books he had, I confess I resorted to a bit of bluffing.

When I happened to mention a book that was new to him, he said: “Oh, I must make a note of

THE EARL RUSSELL FOR HONORARY ASSOCIATE

THE NATIONAL Secular Society recently welcomed The Earl Russell as the latest addition to its panel of Honorary Associates, writes TERRY SANDERSON.

He is Bertrand Russell's son and a distinguished historian of the 17th Century, particularly interested in the Civil War. He said he “would be absolutely delighted” to be associated with the NSS when he was asked, in the gallery of the House of Commons, by General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood. It is unusual for peers to visit the Commons, but Earl Russell was there to listen to the debate about lowering the age of homosexual consent. It's a civil liberties issue which Lord Russell typically supports—he is well

known for his efforts to promote social reform.

Writing in the *Independent* recently about the House of Lords, and Mr Blair's proposed reforms, Lord Russell said he supported the idea of clearing hereditary peers out of the second chamber (“as an institution we are indefensible....it has had its day and must go”) but hoped that whatever was put in their place would be equally free spirited and independent. “Will our successors be able to vote down the next absurd government policy as freely as we have? It is not self-evident than an assembly entirely nominated by the person whose misjudgements we were supposed to check would be able to do this as effectively as we have done.”

IN THE first of a new series, BARRY DUKE looks at the Nation of Islam – a group which leapt into prominence in June during the inquiry into the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence.

Cult Watch

THE NATION OF ISLAM

ESTABLISHED in the United States in 1930 by one Wallace D Fard, who assigned to himself the title Prophet Fard, the group's original name was the Lost-Found Nation of Islam.

According to the [largely incomprehensible] history of its origins published in 1996 by the Nation of Islam, his mission was "to restore and to resurrect his lost and found people, who were identified as the original members of the Tribe of Shabazz from the Lost Nation of Asia".

Tyrants

In 1931 "the One Who Had come in the Early Morning Dawn of the New Millennium to lay the base for a New World Order of Peace and Righteousness on the Foundation of Truth and Justice and to put down tyrants and to change the world into Heaven on Earth" met a man named Elijah Poole in Detroit Michigan.

"The Master" chose Poole to be his "divine representative" in bringing "truth and light" to his lost and found people.

Elijah Poole was then transformed into the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who, for 44 years "suffered persecution and rejection from the very people among whom he was appointed as a Servant of God".

Hardly surprising since Poole, who died

in 1975, renounced whites and preached a form of apartheid.

The group's growth from 1946 as a black separatist organisation was promoted by Malcolm X, who, in 1964, broke away and founded his own Organisation for Afro-American Unity, preaching 'active self-defence'.

Malcolm X persuaded teacher and singer Louis Farrakhan to join the organi-

Farrakhan's admiration of Hitler became well publicised, and in one speech he referred to Judaism as "a gutter religion". He is also on record as saying the whites were the result of a mad scientist's experiments.

sation. When the group was dissolved in 1985, Farrakhan formed a splinter organisation, the Nation of Islam, which is said to have a membership of around 15,000 in the US.

In 1995 he organised the 'Million Men

March' of around 400,000 black men in Washington.

Farrakhan was virtually unknown in the UK until 1986, when he was denied entry into the country because of his inflammatory speeches concerning, among others, Jews and homosexuals.

His admiration of Hitler became well publicised, and in one speech he referred to Judaism as "a gutter religion". He is also on record as saying the whites were the result of a mad scientist's experiments.

Barriers

Farrakhan's hate-mongering is impossible to square with the Nation of Islam's description of him as an "exemplary spiritual leader who is showing the way in the breaking down of communication barriers throughout society, regardless of one's religious, racial or ideological beliefs and views".

Farrakhan's followers in Britain attracted attention when 20 of them disrupted an inquiry into the racially-motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence. Two were arrested.

The disruption came at about the same time that Farrakhan was attempting to get his exclusion order from the UK reversed.

A spokesperson for the Home Office said Farrakhan had recently signed an agreement promising not to make derogatory remarks about whites, Jews or homosexuals in Britain.

He had also pledged that he recognised the UK as a multicultural society, and that it was a criminal offence under the Race Relations Act to stir up racial antagonism.

Exclusion

In a statement issued on July 1, the Home Office said that Louis Farrakhan had been informed by Home Secretary Jack Straw that "he is minded to maintain Mr Farrakhan exclusion from the United Kingdom".

This follows Mr Straw's review of the exclusion and recent events at the Stephen Lawrence inquiry.

"Mr Farrakhan now has the opportunity to make further representations before the Home Secretary takes a final decision on the exclusion based on the totality of evidence available," the statement said.

Meanwhile, the Board of Deputies of British Jews is lobbying the Government to sustain the ban.

JAZZMAN'S DEATH

From Page 4

that!", and promptly did so.

Invited by a newspaper to write an obituary notice on himself, he wrote: "Benny Green, who died yesterday in his 99th year, was always adamant that he would live to be 100. However, arithmetic was never his strong suit. In the course of a life devoted to self-indulgence broken by idleness, he published more than 50 books. He practised no religion, which may explain why he finally died laughing."

Sadly, cancer thwarted his ambition for a long life, but Benny fought the disease courageously, continuing many of his public engagements even when in considerable pain. He finally died on 22 June, at the Royal Marsden Hospital, with all his family at his bedside and Toni singing to him the Gershwin songs he loved.

At his funeral at Golders Green Crematorium on 24 June, representatives of his many interests, including a number of household names,

filled the place to capacity. A jazz band played, and heartfelt tributes made it a moving, though celebratory, occasion.

The following day, as he had wished, Benny's beloved family scattered his ashes in Regents Park—which had not only virtually been his boyhood backyard, but is the site of the open-air theatre where he had often watched his wife in Shakespearean roles, and where his own musical *Bashville* was performed.

Tributes

On the Saturday evening, a sort of memorial meeting took place on radio in Benny's regular LBC slot, with all his family on air for three hours, receiving phone-in tributes to him and playing jazz discs in his memory.

As his hero GBS said on the death of William Morris: "You can lose a man like that by your own death, not by his: until then, let us rejoice in him."

The third and last in a series by Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the National Secular Society. His articles are based on the UK Christian Handbook—Religious Trends 1998/99 No.1 by Christian Research. In the interests of brevity, some figures are approximated.

THE MISSIONARY POSITION – AND MORE

BRITISH missionary societies are now showing increasing signs of life, after stagnating throughout the 1980s. The number of their missionaries in 1997 was 8,964, an increase of 11 per cent on 1991. Two organisations are responsible for this growth; the interdenominational Youth with a Mission has nearly tripled in size in the last six years, with 500 missionaries, and the Church Army with 670 has nearly twice the number of Anglican missionaries that it had six years ago.

In contrast, the number of British missionaries abroad has dropped by 7 per cent in the last six years to 6,032, only 13 per cent of which are now Catholic. In 1995 there were

1,318 of such Catholics, but by 1997 this had dropped to 761.

Although the country with most British missionaries is France (with 268), the continent with the most is Africa (with 2,170). These missionaries in Africa work almost exclusively in the central and southern regions; two thirds of British RC missionaries work there. Outside Africa, significant numbers of other denominations and interdenominational UK missionaries work in Nepal (219), Brazil (145), Spain (115) and USA (110).

Ditch superstition and lose weight

SOME more statistics, this time from the

Daily Telegraph about an Indiana study claiming that the common image of the fat friar and obese bishop may have some basis in fact.

They apparently found that people's degree of slimness had significant differences dependent on their creed. Southern Baptists were least slim, followed by fundamental Protestants and Catholics. With the exception of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, non-believers were the most slim. The seriously unslim who are religious perceive they are happier and healthier than their non-religious counterparts. The author of the study, Professor Ferraro, offered an interesting explanation—the overweight find more acceptance in religious settings. But sceptical readers of the *Freethinker* may put these perceptions down to the religious having greater practice at self-delusion.

Large turnout for Brearey ceremony

FAMILY and friends of the late Peter Brearey came from all parts of the country to attend a moving memorial ceremony held last month at the Conway Hall library.

"This was a favourite room of his," Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the National Secular Society, told the large gathering. "Let us celebrate the life of a good and exceptional man."

Speakers who also paid tribute to Peter with words, poetry and music were his son Michael; Nigel Metcalfe, a journalist and long-standing friend from Yorkshire; niece Sarah Reid; past President of the National Secular Society Barbara Smoker; former *Freethinker* editor Bill McIlroy; and Jim Herrick, Chairman of G W Foote & Co, which publishes the *Freethinker*.

The ceremony was organised and presided over by Keith, whose tribute appeared in the June issue of the *Freethinker*.

A fund set up in memory of Peter has far exceeded the £1,000 mark. Our thanks to all those who have given so generously. The money will be used towards commissioning a portrait of Peter; for a bench next to his grave on the island of Sanday, and a small wild flower garden. Any balance will be added to The *Freethinker* fund. Please let us have your donations before August 31, 1998. Cheques to be made payable to G W Foote & Co (PB) and sent to GWF, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Eruv – our resistance will continue

DESPITE objections from the Eruv Boundary Opponents Group and others, Barnet Council has granted planning permission for the poles and wires to be erected as part of the boundary of the Barnet Eruv, the first one in the UK.

An Eruv is an area within which Jewish Sabbath restrictions are deemed to be relaxed. The boundary is formed by physical features such as railway lines and walls of contiguous houses. Gaps in the boundary, including those caused by public roads, are bridged by 'gateways' consisting of poles and wires.

After the Council had made its decision, Elizabeth Segall, a spokesperson for the protest group, told the *Freethinker* "This is not, as the Council claims, a notional boundary, but a physical one. It is an unprecedented invasion of space." The protesters believe that as only individuals of one ethnicity could benefit from the Eruv, the Council's action contravenes the Race Relations Act. They also contend that it is incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights in two respects. Firstly, 'Eruv non-believers' would have no alternative but to pass through the 'gateways' which are a manifestation of another's religion, and secondly, people's homes are not being respected as

permission has not been sought of those whose house walls would form part of the boundary.

In a debate on Spectrum FM with a Mill Hill rabbi, I spoke of the absurdity and divisiveness of the Eruv and its physical manifestation. As well as many non-Jewish people, many secular and liberal Jews oppose it on one or both of these grounds, and ultra-Orthodox Jews believe the whole concept is like cheating, as it eases the Sabbath requirements. The Rabbi was unable to explain why an Eruv in Strasbourg had been instituted without the need for poles and wires, nor why the Eruv in Amsterdam was operational even though the erection of poles and wires had not been permitted in the streets there.

As well as the Leader of the Council, the opponents Group are asking Secretary of State John Prescott to explain how it can be lawful for the Council to authorise the siting of the poles deliberately to cause impassable gaps at the back of pavements. (The impassable gaps complete the boundary between the poles-and-wires installations and the house walls or other existing structures.)

Despite the set-back, the Opponents Group intends to fight on, and are grateful to those, including readers of the *Freethinker*, who have contributed to the significant legal costs so far.



Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

God and Geller fail to deliver the World Cup

EILEEN Drewery wasn't the only psychic "helping" Glenn Hoddle's team win the World Cup. The day before England's first match the *News of the World* carried a large mugshot of Uri Geller—and his hand, embellished by a St George's cross. And the paper's millions of readers were asked to "Put your hand on Uri Geller's palm and help England win the World Cup".

"Use me as the starter", said the modest mystic, "the man to ignite everyone's psychic energy, and we can send our power surge to France faster than the speed of light". A little prayer might help, too, he suggested, although "We cannot expect God to blow the ball into the net". He might save the Queen and send her victorious, but neither God, nor Uri Geller, nor the *News of the World* millions was able to bring the World Cup back to England.

But there's some consolation for the man blamed for dashing England's hopes —David Beckham, the Manchester United ace who was given the red card during the England-Argentina match.

According to the *Sun*, "a soccer-mad church congregation said prayers asking God to forgive Beckham. Worshipers at St Peter's, in Shipley, West Yorkshire, also wore soccer kit and sang the Three Lions Anthem".

Abuse of Catholic boys costs the church millions

THE ROMAN Catholic Church has agreed to pay £18 million to four altar boys abused 1,350 times between 1982 and 1992 by a Dallas priest, Father Rudolph Kos, who has been jailed for life (according to the *Times*). The jury had ordered nearly £72 million compensation, but the prosecution accepted the lower amount after it was pointed out that to pay it would have bankrupted the diocese. Pity.

Voting against Christ

THE *DAILY Telegraph* carried some "exclusive extracts" from Barbara Cartland's "memoirs of the men she has known" to celebrate

her 97th birthday. But, as Francis Wheen noted in the *Guardian* (July 1), one name was surprisingly missing, that of John Major.

In her 1994 autobiography, *I Reach for the Stars*, she describes how she became friends with the former Prime Minister and helped him win the 1992 general election. He was understandably worried at the time because Labour was ahead in the polls. But "We have not lost yet", the indomitable Dame told one of the PM's advisers, and proceeded to write to 967 newspapers and magazines informing them that the Labour leader Neil Kinnock was an atheist. "If you vote for Kinnock, you are voting against Christ who said 'Suffer little children to come unto me'".

The relevance of the Jesus quote escapes me, but Barbara is "convinced that it is due to my letters that the Conservative vote soared up and up and we had a bigger majority than was expected..." She couldn't use the same tactic against the pious Tony Blair, so that's perhaps why Major didn't make it in 1997.

God's presence at Auschwitz

ISAIAH Berlin could never understand how Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, having studied philosophy at Cambridge—and taken a double first—could be a believer. "When it comes to God I'm tone deaf" was Berlin's own position.

Deborah Ross expressed the same puzzlement when she interviewed the Chief Rabbi for the *Independent* on May 4. Primo Levi, the distinguished Italian chemist and writer who was handed over to the SS in 1943 and spent 10 months in Auschwitz had, she said, expressed the problem as follows: "You can have God. And you can have Auschwitz. But you can't have both". The religious dilemma in a nutshell.

Sacks dodged the issue. "The real question", he suggested, "isn't where was God in Auschwitz, but where was man at Auschwitz? God was there in the command 'Thou shalt not murder'. God was there in the command 'Thou shalt not oppress a stranger' God was at Auschwitz in the words 'Thy brothers' blood cries to me from the ground'..."

God may have been "there" at Auschwitz but it's a pity he didn't do anything.

The Bible or Moby-Dick

YOU PAYS your money and you takes your choice: the Bible or Moby-Dick. Not for literary value but for hidden messages by Equal Letter Skip, ie by taking a letter of any word and jumping forward a fixed number of letters to a second, then a third, fourth, fifth and so on.

When an Israeli expert in quantum physics applied ELS to the Hebrew version of the Bible, "recognisable names and dates seemed to emerge". An American journalist, Michael Drosnin, took up the ideas and claimed in his book, *The Bible Code*, to have found references in the Old Testament to the assassination of John F Kennedy and of the Israeli Prime Minister Yitshak Rabin, and the resignation of Richard Nixon. And he told his critics that when they could find similar messages in *Moby Dick*, he would accept their criticism.

Now, three mathematicians, Maya Bar-Hillel, Dror Bar-Natan and Brendan McKay, have done just that. They argue in *Chance*, published by the American Statistical Association, that you are bound to find words or partial words using ELS, with a text as long as the books of the Old Testament. Professor McKay, who lectures at the Australian National University, applied the system to *Moby Dick* and found that it "predicted" the assassination of Mr Rabin, Martin Luther King and Trotsky.

I wonder if Mr Drosnin has conceded his case.

Boy Scouts 1 atheism 0

IF YOU are atheistic, agnostic or homosexual, your chances of gaining entry to the Boy Scouts of America are zero—thanks to the Supreme Court of California.

The court, according to a report in the *New Internationalist*, recently ruled that the Boy Scouts are not a business, but a club, and can therefore exclude atheists or gays.

The decision follows the barring of two Orange County boys who admitted they had 'not quite worked out yet whether they believed in God or not'.

The California ruling, however, is not the last word on the matter.

The Boy Scouts' admissions policies have also been challenged in Chicago, Washington DC and New Jersey, where, it is hoped, the courts will force the organisation to abandon its discriminatory stance.

Carey echoes Karl Marx

KARL Marx famously described religion as the opium of the people. Confirmation of the maxim has come from an unexpected source. In an interview with the *Guardian's* Madeleine Bunting, the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, said "Christianity was like a drug".

Peter Brearey would have loved that.

If one could wave a wand and conjure Christianity back into oblivion would the Phelps of Topeka, Kansas, USA? Would we have to open a church to test their wits – assuming they had any to begin with? BARRY DUKE poses

SPREADING GOD'S HATE ACROSS THE WORLD-WIDE WEB

THE PHELPS clan, not to put too fine a point on it, are as Godly as two short planks. Or, more accurately, one long plank and a shorter one joined to form their precious (and pernicious) cross.

So? The world is brimful of cerebrally challenged religious sociopaths, cranks, imbeciles and sickos. What, then, makes the Phelps more demonstrably ga-ga than other god-bothering gangs?

In short, the Internet.

A while back, the then 60-something Fred W Phelps, pastor at Westboro Baptist Church, Topeka, tottered into the world of electronic communication—and immediately recognised the World Wide Web's potential as a conduit for a very important global message.

The message was this: God Hates Fags. Not cigarettes, mind, but homosexuals (ho hum).

Fortunately, we can take comfort from the fact that God, being an equal opportunities tyrant and 24-carat psychopath, does not hate homosexuals exclusively. The cranky old bugger loathes all of humanity!

And Phelps is convinced he was put on this planet to plaster his Maker's hatred—like excrement—over its entire surface.

Phelps' astonishing website (www.godhatesfags.com) has a FAQ (frequently asked questions) section that poses the question "why do you preach hate?" It then offers the following

answer: "Because the Bible preaches hate. For every one verse of God's mercy, love compassion etc, there are two verses about His vengeance, hatred, wrath etc."

It adds: "The maudlin, kissy-poo, feel-good, touchy-feely preachers of today's society are damning this nation and the world to hell.

"They are telling you what you want to hear rather than what you need to hear. What you need to hear is that God

Fortunately, we can take comfort from the fact that God, being an equal opportunities tyrant and 24-carat psychopath, does not hate homosexuals exclusively. The cranky old bugger loathes all of humanity!

hates people, and that your chances of going to heaven are nonexistent, unless you repent. What you need to hear is a little fire and brimstone preaching, like Jesus preached. What you don't need to hear is that you're OK just the way you are, and God accepts everyone without exception. Wake up and smell the brim-

stone from the fire lapping at your feet..."

So, using the hateful Bible as the justification for his cult's psychotic views, Pastor Phelps creates an Internet site which will tell you, assuming you ever wanted to know, why former Senator Nancy Kasselbaum is "a whore", Princess Diana "a royal whore in hell", and Elizabeth Taylor "a Jew whore".

The Phelps, by the way, have a rather quaint, if somewhat incomprehensible view of the Jews: "The only true Jews are Christians," Phelps asserts.

Pardon me?

The reverend helps out: "The rest of the people who claim to be Jews aren't, and they are nothing more than typical impenitent sinners who have no Lamb." (And there was silly me, thinking all this time that the Jews have no pork).

Furthermore "as evidence of their apostasy, the vast majority of Jews support fags".

OK. So that's Jews disposed of.

What about black people? Here the Phelps' clan betrays the fact that they are out and out liars—and cowards to boot... "The Scripture doesn't support racism. God never says 'thou shalt not be black'".

Well excuse me, but try telling that to the millions of black South Africans who were forced to live under the system of apartheid created by a Christian nationalist theocracy which time and again used the bible as justification for its monstrous system of segregation.

n where it belongs, what on earth would happen to Jesus junkies like a chain of Betty Ford-type clinics all over the planet to help them regain sobriety poses the question.



● **Making a grave point – the god-obsessed Phelps' lobby target funerals "to warn people who are still living that unless they repent they will likewise perish".**

The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, the principal architect of apartheid, advocated the separation of blacks and whites because the Bible asserted that non-whites were the offspring of Ham, and were therefore to be condemned forever as "hewers of wood, drawers of water." In short, lackeys to the 'superior' whites. The church also made much of the Bible's support of slavery in Leviticus and Deuteronomy to justify its racist attitudes.

By claiming they aren't racist, and denying any association with organisations like Aryan Nation, the Ku Klux Klan and Nazis, the pusillanimous Phelps', are of course, being very careful indeed.

Targeting

Annoying a very large, mainstream section of the population is very different from targeting a minority group, and might conceivably produce something a great deal more dramatic than the piddling little bang that occurred outside the home of Shirley Phelps-Roper, mother of eight and a daughter of Fred Phelps in 1995. Some property was damaged, but no one hurt in this minor bomb blast.

Moving on hastily from suggestions of fascist links, Phelps then insists that the "only true Nazis in this country" are—yes, you've guessed it—those damn fags again. "They want to force you by law to support their filth, and they want to

shut you up by law when they hate what you say."

There's a great deal more of this sort of sewerage sloshing about on the Phelps' website. But, for the best part it remains unseen. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the public protests organised by the Phelps' in which placards bearing inflammatory slogans like the following are displayed: God hates fags, AIDS cures fags, fags burn in hell, no tears for queers...

A particularly despicable practice of theirs is to picket funerals. The scum do so "to warn people who are still living that unless they repent they will likewise perish". Now I don't wish to be pedantic, but I'm pretty certain that mourners at funerals have a pretty shrewd idea that one day it'll be their turn to fall off their perch, whether they repent or not. They do not need the presence of a bunch of scruffily-dressed, god-obsessed, grinning nincompoops waving obnoxious placards to remind them.

Lawsuits

"Are the cult's funeral pickets mean, hateful and uncompassionate?" asks Phelps in his FAQ. Here's the answer, folks: "I'm sure it is, according to your standards. However, according to mine it would be infinitely more mean, hateful and uncompassionate to keep my mouth shut and not warn you that you too, will soon have to face God."

Most of the good folk of Topeka

would dearly love to zip Phelps' lips, whatever the consequences—here or in the Hereafter. They have had about as much of his ranting as they can stomach.

However, the Westboro Baptist Church's practice of filing lawsuits against anyone speaking out against its members has, in the past, discouraged people from using the law in an attempt to stifle their hate-mongering. (Most adults in the cult, curiously, are lawyers.)

For example, after Phelps and members of his church were acquitted in a misdemeanors trial, they immediately filed civil lawsuits against their alleged victims, claiming they were owed damages for malicious prosecutions brought to squelch their constitutionally-protected rights to preach against homosexuality.

This led to the formation of an organisation called Concerned Citizens for Topeka, through which a sizeable number of local lawyers have pledged to give their services free to people filing criminal complaints against Phelps and his followers.

The Stars & Stripes appears inverted on the Westboro Baptist Church's website. This, explains Phelps, is because an upside down flag is the international sign for distress. "This country, as well as the rest of the world, is in distress".

Hardly surprising, with slaving crazies like the Phelps' clan on the loose.

The world according to Feynman

RICHARD Feynman (1918-1988) was a Nobel prize-winning physicist whose knowledge and interests extended far beyond his chosen field. One of his notable achievements was to discover and demonstrate the main cause of the *Challenger* explosion of 1986, as described in *Surely You're Joking Mr Feynman!* (Vintage, 1992). During a nationally televised hearing of the presidential commission on the disaster, he squeezed a section of the gasket from the shuttle's booster rockets in a clamp, and dropped it into a glass of iced water to show that the material lost its resiliency at freezing temperature.

The first of the books reviewed here is a set of three "popular" lectures on the social significance of science, given in 1963 at the University of Washington; the second volume, on the elliptical motion of the planets round the sun, delivered a year later at the California Institute of Technology, is much more demanding, but is preceded by a historical account of cosmology from Copernicus to Newton, a reminiscence of Feynman and an 80-page exposition of the 26-page lecture, as well as the story of its loss and discovery.

Excitement

Science was, for Feynman, "the tremendous adventure...wild and exciting", and *The Meaning of It All* was his attempt to convey that excitement to others; to encourage them to join in the adventure. Primeval myths may be imaginative, poetic, but are far surpassed by the scientific conception of the universe. The "imagination" of nature greatly exceeds the imagination of man.

"First there was the earth without anything alive on it. For billions of years this ball was spinning with its sunsets and its waves and the sea and the noises, and there was no thing alive to appreciate it...And in most places in the universe today there probably is nothing alive." And we that are alive are made of the same "stuff", the same atoms as the stars.

The internal machinery, the chemistry of life, is "something beautiful". All life is interconnected, and Feynman illustrated a "beautiful" connection between the square pattern in chlorophyll called a benzene ring, and "the same interesting and peculiar square rings" in haemoglobin.

He paid tribute to Michael Faraday and recounted "one of the most dramatic moments in the history of science, one of

***The Meaning of It All* by Richard P Feynman. Allen Lane hardback, £9.99**

***Feynman's Lost Lecture* by David L Goodstein and Judith R Goodstein. Vintage paperback, £6.99**

Reviews: COLIN MCCALL

those rare moments when two great fields [electricity and chemistry] come together and are unified" as different aspects of the same thing—"chemical changes with the results of electrical forces". Exciting indeed.

But the first of three lectures in *The Meaning of It All* was entitled "The Uncertainty of Science" and Feynman stressed the importance of the freedom to doubt, not only in science, but in general. Doubt was not to be feared but prized.

In his second lecture, "The Uncertainty of Values", freedom to doubt was extended to religion. The conflict between religion and science could well arise when a young man with a religious family background studies science and begins to doubt, and eventually disbelieve in, his father's God.

He will usually start by doubting, say, the belief in an after-life or "some of the details of Christ's life". He learns about the immensity of the universe "with us on a tiny particle that whirls around the sun", and the close biological relationship of humans to the animals and of one form of life to another. "The stars are made of the same stuff, the animals are made of the same stuff"; and "the theory that it is all arranged as a stage for God to watch man's struggle for good and evil seems inadequate" to say the least.

Conflict

Feynman didn't see how it was possible to avoid a conflict with science "if you require an absolute faith in metaphysical aspects" of religion; or to maintain its inspirational value once one doubts its truth. He did regard Christian ethics as a great heritage of Western Civilisation, but he didn't know how science and Christianity could "stand together in full vigour, mutually unafraid". If people are going back to religion, he asked, "what are they going back to? Is the modern church a place to give comfort to a man who doubts God. More, one who disbelieves in

God?"

We live in a scientific age, but it is also an age of flying saucers. Why, Feynman asked, didn't flying saucers come earlier? Why did they have to wait for the space age, when we are getting used to travelling in space? He had argued with many people about flying saucers, who all said they were possible, but didn't appreciate that it wasn't their possibility that was in question, but their probability: whether they are "occurring or not".

Mind-reading and faith-healing also came under his scrutiny, and he told a salutary story about his previous wife who had died of tuberculosis. She died at 9.22 in the evening and a clock he had given her stopped at exactly that hour. But the clock had stopped before and he had had to fix it, and the wheels were loose. Moreover, the nurse who had to record the time of death had picked up the clock to see it clearly and then put it down. One must be very careful in such cases, he warned, to consider all the circumstances. As for astrology: "It's pure nonsense", based on astronomical ignorance.

The lecture ended with praise for the encyclical of Pope John XXIII on moral issues—duties and responsibilities of human beings, although Feynman obviously didn't agree that the ideas spring from God or that some were "the natural consequences of ideas of earlier popes".

Appreciate

From this set of three lectures, the reader comes to appreciate Richard Feynman's ability to convey scientific ideas in simple language. My only regret is that the influence of the Cold War occasionally intrudes and, in one case, he unworthily criticises Mr Khrushchev for his inability to appreciate modern art.

The "lost" lecture is, as I have said, a much more difficult proposition for the layman and would have been beyond me without the Goodsteins' longer "proof of the law of ellipses". "Simple things have simple demonstrations" Feynman wrote in his lecture notes. Then he crossed out "simple" and replaced it with "elementary". But the demonstration he was about to present to freshmen was elementary only in the sense that it used no mathematics more advanced than high school geometry. It was far from simple. David and Judith Goodstein take us slowly, step-by-explanatory-step with geometrical illustrations, and it is a fascinating trip. Or perhaps I should invoke Feynman's favourite adjective for science...exciting.

Terry Sanderson on the media

A NEW RELIGION WITH ALL THE OLD TRICKS

THE MORMONS have recently opened a huge new temple in Chorley, Lancashire. They did it with their usual flair for PR, inviting newspapers and television to look round their impressive new building. And it worked. Many of the papers carried uncritical reports of the temple's opening, and quoted statistics about "The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints" which had obviously come straight from the Mormon press office.

You've got to give the Mormons credit: in the space of less than 170 years, they have managed to invent "traditions" and doctrines that are accepted by many people as a religion with a long and honourable history.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Mormonism was created by a man called Joseph Smith in the middle of the last century.

Smith, who had been raised a Presbyterian in Vermont, claimed that an angel had appeared to him and told him where to find new "scriptures" about the history of the ancient inhabitants of America, written on plates of gold. He went to the appointed place, a hill called Cumorah, and eventually disinterred the gold plates, together with a breastplate and a pair of silver spectacles, which would allow him to translate the words on the plates. He carried these items home and put them behind a curtain. No one ever saw them but himself. Two months later, he extracted 50 dollars from his first disciple, a farmer called Martin Harris, and set about translating the plates with the help of his magic silver spectacles.

And so *The Book of Mormon* came into existence. It told how America had originally been settled by people from the Tower of Babel in the fifth century AD. It went into great detail about how settlers arrived from Chile, and how Jesus Christ appeared after his crucifixion to preach the gospel in America.

Martin Harris mortgaged his farm to finance publication of *The Book of Mormon* which eventually appeared in 1830 (all except the first 117 pages, which had been thrown on the fire by Martin Harris's wife, furious that he had mortgaged the farm). By this time, the gold plates had been returned to the angel (without anyone but Joseph Smith ever actually seeing them).

Original reviews of *The Book of Mormon* were contemptuous. It was plain to everyone that it was the work of a confidence trickster. But as in so many other instances, the gullible were quick to accept every word as true, and embrace Smith as a prophet. With his growing band of followers (dubbed the Latter Day Saints) Smith moved to Ohio, where the Saints established their own bank and printed their own money (after deeding over all their world-

ly goods to the Church). Needless to say, the bank collapsed, causing five of Smith's 12 "apostles" to denounce him as a false prophet.

In 1834, E D Howe, an investigative journalist, published a series of affidavits from friends and neighbours of Smith, describing him as "a lazy and mendacious religious con man."

But the Saints were establishing themselves in other parts of the USA, including Missouri. Smith joined his flock there but was held in such suspicion by the population that he was imprisoned for several months before moving on to Illinois. The people of that state were equally hostile to Smith's obvious manipulations—especially after he declared that God had ordained polygamy or "plural marriage". Eventually the hostility became so intense that Smith decided that his merry band should move on again and find somewhere to establish the City of the Saints. But before he could go, the citizens of Illinois were arming themselves and talking of massacring the Saints. Fearing for his life, Smith gave himself up and was jailed in Carthage.

On 27 June 1844, a hundred men rushed the jail and Smith was shot dead in the ensuing gun battle.

It was left to Smith's deputy, Brigham Young, to lead the Saints on their great trek westwards to the place where, in 1847, they founded Salt Lake City.

In the mid-1920s, Brigham H Roberts, the official historian of the Mormon Church, said that *The Book of Mormon* contained so many similarities to a book called *A View of the Hebrews*, published in 1823 by the Reverend Ethan Smith, that he needed the help of Church leaders to "solve the problem". He also pointed out that *The Book of Mormon* refers to the ancient Hebrews use of steel, and to domestic animals that were unknown in ancient times. Referring to many other discrepancies, Roberts concluded: "The evidence I sorrowfully submit, points to Joseph Smith as their creator."

Despite the obvious fantasies on which the Mormon Church is based, it is the fastest growing religious group in the world. This is partly due to the Mormons vigorous evangelising and endless search for converts.

But as with other religions, corruption is never very far away. *The Independent* carried an interview with Roweena Erickson, a Mormon who lived in Box Elder County in remote north west Utah. She was married to Leon Kingston, who was also happened to be married to Ms Erickson's elder sister. Even though polygamy was outlawed by the official church in 1904, there are still 50,000 to 60,000 fundamentalists who practise it. Ms Erickson asserts that polygamy is nothing but the organised abuse of women. "I'll tell you what polygamy is in a nutshell," she is quoted as saying. "It is one big eternal fuck in the name of God."

The Independent says: "The picture painted by Ms Erickson confirms our deepest suspicions. Child molestation, kinky sex, pornography and incest all feature. So do genetic disorders. The clans [who practise polygamy], have high rates of dwarfism and macrocephalous (enlarged) heads." To this list of horrors she adds organised crime, violence, extortion and even murder.

Ms Erickson says: "It's a bad, sick cult and they're sexually deviant."

Meanwhile, in the *Church Times*, the Bishop of Blackburn, the Rt Reverend Alan Chesters, also criticised the Mormons, although in less forthright terms. "It does not matter how much they claim to be Christians," he said, "they are not part of the Christian church."

He did, however, declare that "This is a free country where ideas can be shared, and I do not think we do ourselves any good, or act in a Christian way, if we simply seek to denigrate Mormon beliefs."

I would have thought it was in Bishop Chesters' interests to take every opportunity to denigrate Mormonism as, quite simply, a load of old tosh. But then, we all know why religions are loathe to call each other untrue. When it is shown that one is a crazy, man-made invention, it begs too many questions about the others.

Questions religionists would prefer not to be asked.

(Source: *World Famous Cults and Fanatics* by Colin & Damon Wilson (Siena Books, 1992)

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 GWF at 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

SECULARISM, RELIGION AND ATHEISM

GEORGE William Foote, the second president of the National Secular Society and founder of this paper, was one of the finest writers and fighters in the British freethought movement. He won the particular admiration of the novelist George Meredith, who classed him “among the true soldiers, as Heinrich Heine called himself for doing battle with the pen” in “the best of causes”. Meredith looked forward to a Foote biography, but none was ever published. My old colleague Herbert Cutner wrote one, but it never appeared and is probably lost.

Secularism originally appeared in 1879 as a pair of articles in *The Liberal* and then as a pamphlet, at a time when Foote had quarrelled with Charles Bradlaugh and left the NSS. Echoes of their disagreement may be detected in the text and notes, and I will take sides in due course. First I must commend it and commend it highly, both for content and style.

Foote’s “approximate” definition of secularism is “naturalism in morals as distinguished from supernaturalism; meaning by this that the criterion of morality is derivable from reason and experience, and that its ground and guarantee exist in human nature independently of any theological belief”.

“Natural Theology”, that “half paradoxical phrase”, as Foote calls it, can never be more than speculative, and metaphysical treatises on the subject are “not so much proofs as excuses of faith”. He demonstrates that they are “discredited every way”. Special providence and the efficacy of prayer fare no better, as they are aspects of the miraculous. Foote places them in a universal context, where “every present phenomenon, whether trivial or important, occurs here and now, rather than elsewhere and at

COLIN MCCALL reviews two booklets reprinted this summer by G W Foote & Co. They are Freethinker’s Classics no 1 and 2 —*Secularism: The True Philosophy of Life*, by G W Foote, and *The Necessity of Atheism*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Price £1.50 or £2.00 for both copies (post free to readers of Humanist publications).

some other time...All the forces of nature have conspired to place where it is the smallest grain of sand on the sea-shore, just as much as their interplay has strewn the aether-floated constellations of illimitable space”.

Prayers were offered up in 1871 for the life of the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) when he was taken ill with typhoid and, as those who have seen the film *Mrs Brown* will know, Queen Victoria hastened south from Scotland to be with her son. He recovered but, as Foote says, “the doctors were not forgotten; the chief of them was made a knight, and the nation demanded a rectification of the drainage in the Prince’s palace, probably thinking that although prayer had been found efficacious there might be danger in tempting Providence a second time”.

Then Foote switches from satire to sensibility in a passage that deserves quoting in some detail...“The voice of human supplication has ascended heavenwards in all ages from all parts of the earth, but when has a hand been extended from behind the veil? The thoughtful poor have besought appeasement of their terrible hunger for some nobler life than is possible while poverty deadens every fine impulse and frustrates every unselfish thought, but whenever did prayer bring them aid? The miserable have cried for comfort, sufferers for some mitigation of their pain, captives for deliverance, the oppressed for freedom, and those who have fought the great fight of good against ill for some ray of hope to lighten despair; but what answer has been vouchsafed?”

Secularism, as such, neither affirms nor denies a future life but professes no knowledge of such a state. “Mere conjectures will not suffice; they may be true, but more probably false, and we cannot sacrifice the certain to the uncertain, or forgo the smallest present happiness for the sake of some imagined future compensation”. In morals, secularism is utilitarian, and Foote defends the position at some length. He ends the pamphlet by citing secularist social aims.

Before this, however, he has taken an unnecessary and unjustified snipe at Bradlaugh. “Many secularists of the old school boast of

being iconoclastic”, he writes, “and can see no good in any other policy...” As readers probably know, Bradlaugh’s early nom de plume was Iconoclast, but the second half of the sentence certainly couldn’t be applied to him; nor, I suspect to many of his followers.

There was, though, a difference of opinion between the two freethought leaders on one point. Foote describes secularism as a religion; Bradlaugh did not; and here I am with Bradlaugh. Foote quotes Shelley, Comte, Mill and Matthew Arnold in support of his view but seems to think he has delivered the coup de grâce by instancing Buddhism, as a religion without God and with no personal immortality. All this does, it seems to me, is show that religion is an ambiguous term and that secularism is better off without it. I notice anyway that Foote himself subtitles his pamphlet “*The True Philosophy of Life*”.

The Necessity of Atheism was the cause of Shelley’s expulsion from Oxford at the age of 18. It is a brief three pages setting out “impartially to examine the proofs which have been adduced” for the existence of God.

The arguments, it is suggested, should be subjected to three tests: the evidence of the senses, reason and testimony. The first, of course, can only convince the witnesses, whose testimony can only be accepted by us “if our mind considers it less probable that these men [the testifiers] should have been deceived, than that the Deity should have appeared to them”. Our reason could never accept such testimony. All proofs for a deity are deficient; and Shelley concludes: “Every reflecting mind must allow that there is no proof of the existence of a Deity”. He adds his “QED”.

The pamphlet includes the introduction to the first reprint of *The Necessity of Atheism* (1906) and a note on the present one by Nicolas Walter, who edits both this and *Secularism*.



● G W Foote



● Percy Bysshe Shelley

SMOKER UPDATES HUMANISM FOR THE MILLENNIUM

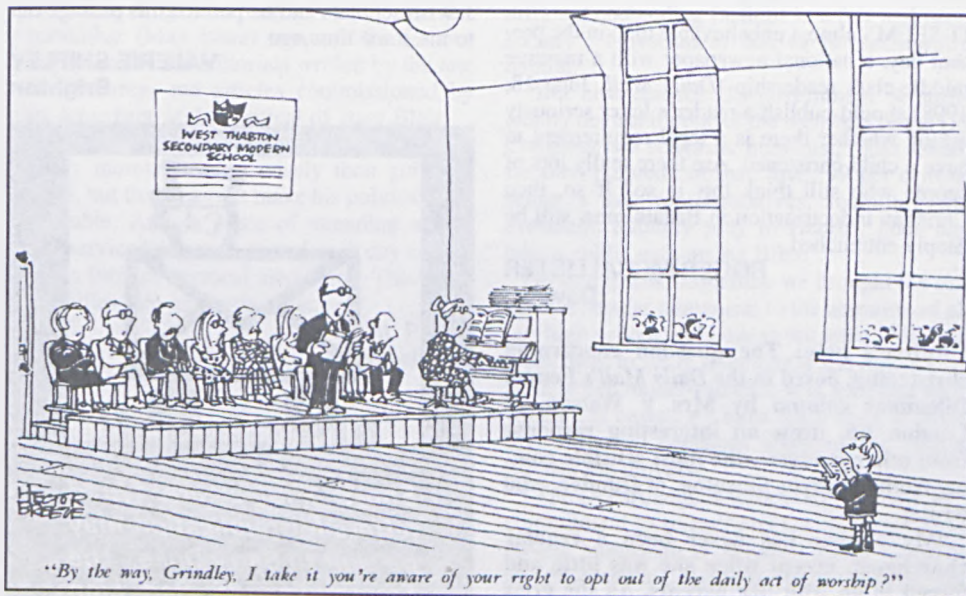
BARBARA Smoker's little book, *Humanism* (published by the British Humanist Association, £3) has been "updated for the millennium". It first appeared 25 years ago in Ward Lock's *Living Religions* series although, *pace* Julian Huxley, in her—and my—view, humanism is not a religion but an alternative to all religions.

After considering the various meanings of the term, Barbara comes down firmly for a "secular scientific humanism", and follows its historical development from Greek philosophers like Protagoras and Democritus, through Moorish Spain, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Deism and Utilitarianism.

And in this new edition, evolution is taken from Darwin to Dawkins, with a welcome acknowledgment of Jacques Monod, who has been somewhat undervalued in this country

Barbara presents and answers the arguments for God, explains the humanist opposition to religion in schools and broadcasting, then turns to other superstitions, and to conjuring and confidence tricks like spoon-bending and clairvoyance, respectively. "Not one of them is true", she writes, and "reality is far more amazing than all of them put together".

Successive chapters deal with "Values—good and bad" and "Morals—right and wrong" in common-sense fashion, in contrast to some philosophers who, Barbara feels, "tend to make heavy weather of quite



● A cartoon from *Punch* showing "an unlikely school assembly situation".

simple matters". To most of us, she says, "it is self-evident that it is better for sentient beings to experience pleasure and happiness than pain and misery".

Morality, for the humanist, is utilitarian, involving practical codes of human conduct devised by human beings for human beings. Sexual morality, marriage and divorce, and euthanasia are approached from the same rational standpoint, and the book ends with a review of humanist organisations and ceremonies.

Altogether, then, a pretty comprehensive three score pages and ten, adorned with some suitable little illustrations. There is occasional inelegance ("Another thing that people wonder about is death") and I submit one minor correction: Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian* was first delivered as a lecture to the South London branch of the National Secular Society and then published as a pamphlet.

Colin McCall

Help us weed out the menace of religion

RELIGION has to be weeded out of our schools, out of our government and out of public broadcasting. The *Freethinker* is practically the only journal in the UK dedicated to the task. You can help by contributing generously towards the *Freethinker's* production costs.

Please make cheques and postal orders payable to G W Foote & Co, and send them to the *Freethinker* Fund, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

In the last month, readers have been particularly generous.

Our thanks to: £100 D Broughton; £50 J Fortes; £40 S K P, J Pickard, A Stephens; £20 E Haslam; £30 A Morley; £20 C Pinel; £15 J Chubb, S Dulson, J Hobbs, P Lancaster, K Mason, J Ross; £13 A Briglin, L Segrove, C

Wootton; £11 M Ewing; £10 L Coddington, R Condon, J Edwards, E Fraser, A Gill, S Kapur, H McDougall, H Millard; £7 B Clarke, E Hammond, J Kay; £5 W Browne, B Cattermole, D Faerber, J Fawcett, N Gibbard, H Hinchcliffe, G Huddart, R Lovesy, J Radford, L Smith, D Thompson, P Thompson, C Tott, G Tuck, G Welsh, D Whelan; £4 J Ayers; £3 Anon, K Bell, D Gorringer, R Handley, F Hoare, S Holt, T Lock, D McTavish, J Mooney, P Perry, F Pamphilon, K Spencer, R Watson. L Wilkins, R Wood; £2 K Ferguson, T Liddle.

Total from June 17 to July 12: £714.

Donations to the Peter Brearey Memorial Fund, which already well exceed £1,000, will be announced separately.

You're telling us!

'Obscene' cover

I WRITE to object to the cartoon on the cover of your May number: since torture was and still is a reality, that sort of stuff is obscene.

GORDON EASTON
Oban

Christian indoctrination

IT SEEMS almost unbelievable that, in the present day, a national newspaper with a massive middle-class readership (*Daily Mail*, June 18, 1998) should publish a reader's letter seriously asking whether there is a legal requirement to have a child christened. Are there really lots of people who still think this is so? If so, then Christian indoctrination in Britain must still be deeply entrenched.

ROGER MCCALLISTER
Dawlish

Editor's note: The question concerning christening, posed in the *Daily Mail's* Femail Dilemmas column by Mrs V Watson, of London E5, drew an interesting response from other readers—the most sensible coming from Carolyne Smeaton, of Dundee, who wrote:

"My mother has never been a regular churchgoer, except when she was little and forced to go with her parents. As she grew older, she made up her own mind that organised Christianity was not for her.

"When I was born she didn't see why I should be christened, as it would be hypocritical of her, because part of the ceremony requires a promise to be brought up believing in God and attending church.

"She also knew that I would receive some form of religious education at school, and that once I was old enough to make up my own mind I could be baptised or join whatever religion I wanted.

"As it happens, I am now agnostic and believe that my mother made the right decision—the decision I will make too when I have a child of my own."

Jews do seek converts

I DON'T want to be pedantic but Archie Mercer's statement that Judaism has never sought converts (*Freethinker* letters, May) should not stand uncorrected.

Paul Goodman in his book *History of the Jews* (pages 39-46) states quite clearly that: "It is an old, and still current misconception that Judaism is adverse to the incorporation of strangers within its midst. It is an entirely erroneous idea that Jews were opposed to proselytism out of sheer tribal exclusiveness. Apart from the assimilation of the aboriginal population of Palestine and the forced conversion of the Edomites, Judaism acquired numerous adherents among the various nations with which it came into contact, until the rise of the

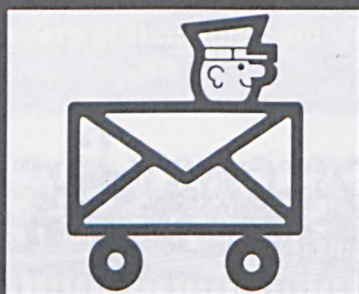
Christian Empire of Rome, when conversion to Judaism came to be treated as a capital crime!"

He goes on to say that "towards the end of the Second temple we find Jewish proselytism all over the Roman Empire and a vast spread of Judaism among the masses.

"In the widely scattered synagogues where Paul sought his Gentile as well as Jewish converts, and for a considerable time afterwards, Judaism was a rival of Christianity in the missionary field. The medieval legislative rigours and attendant dangers in connection with conversions to Judaism made them unpopular among the Jews themselves."

I have a friend who comes from a long line of Jewish scholars and he pointed this passage out to me some time ago.

VALERIE SHIPLEY
Brighton



Short and clearly-typed letters for publication may be sent to Barry Duke, The Freethinker, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. E-mail address: iduke@compuserve.com

Editor's note: Under the headline Rabbi Calls on Judaism to seek converts, the *Times* (April 20, 1998) reported that "a prominent rabbi has embarked upon a drive to convert people to Judaism in an attempt to stem declining numbers. Jonathan Romain, of Maidenhead Reform Synagogue, says it is time to end what he describes as the traditional Jewish prejudice against converts".

Dr Romain is quoted as saying: "British Jewry needs converts more than converts need Judaism."

According to the *Times* religious correspondent Ruth Gledhill, "his call for change comes out of concern, reflected throughout the Jewish community, that intermarriage is causing irrecoverable losses to Judaism".

Vitriolic Succession

CONGRATULATIONS on maintaining the Brearey-style *Freethinker*, as evidenced by the June issue.

As the one journal in this country that has consistently pulled no punches in its opposition to religious privilege and tyranny, not only must

it continue publication into the new millennium, it must do so with no diminution (as urged by some pussy-footing sections of the humanist movement) of its robust and fearless character.

At the same time, I will always find things to criticise in each issue. For instance, your editorial reference to the alleged blood stains on the so-called Turin shroud suggests that you share the Pope's apparent belief that a Jesus-clone could be produced from DNA. But cloning surely requires a living cell, whether fresh or deep-frozen. Moreover, your reference to the effect on the Virgin Birth doctrine of a discovery of paternal DNA is superfluous, since the provenance of the saviour's human male chromosome already presents the Vatican with an insurmountable, if unacknowledged, problem.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Bringing superstition into the new millennium

AS WE near the Third Millennium, by Christian calculations, the Church is struggling to adapt to the Second Millennium.

The Mormans, conceived in the benighted southern states of the USA, with all its prejudices, (for gods are created in the image of man), are critically debating whether to repudiate their church's historic doctrine that blacks bear the curse of God.

Twenty years ago Mormans dropped the ban on blacks serving in the priesthood. It had been hampering missionaries' work in Brazil, in particular. But moves to reject the belief that Africans were descended from Cain and were cursed by God and therefore inferior are recent.

A pedant might have other reservations about Cain. We are told that having slain his brother he went into the Land of Nod (where is that?) and took unto himself a wife. Who was that? Eve, his mother?

The ten-million strong Mormon Church which is immensely rich, claims unprecedented growth in Africa. Gold has been good to the followers of Joseph Smith who reportedly transcribed tablets of gold he found hidden on the night of 23 September 1823 in a hilly field in the USA.

In our House of Lords things are stirring among the unelected bishops. Lord Irvine, the Lord Chancellor, has asked the Church of England to agree to reduce their number to make way—wait for it!—for representatives of other religions. Perhaps he is mindful of the recently-installed Bishop of Coventry's advice to the Church not to 'lord' it over society.

The Rt Rev Colin Bennetts told his flock: "A church that expects to form a moral majority, to lord it over society in a judgmental manner, has clearly misjudged the divine call to servanthood". There was an urgent need to get back to the basics of worshipping God, he told them.

You're telling us!

• From Page 14

Having signally failed to get bums on pews, the Church of England is to launch a 'virtual chapel' on the Internet where people can pray within a computer-generated church complete with pews, stained glass windows and an altar. Cyber worshippers will have a CoE web site a page called "How to pray". Dr Beaver, an American in commercial marketing, said the Internet could be an effective tool for the church. So look out.

Meanwhile Sir Cliff Richard, tireless worker for dragging 2,000 year-old superstitions into the Third Millennium, is backing a new guide on how to welcome worshippers into Christianity's disunited temples. This new version of 'ten commandments' includes advice sound systems in churches; help to explore worshippers 'deepest questions'; help to make sense of the Bible; and a chance to make 'a new start'.

Partly funded by the Cliff Richard Organisation, the 'Fanfare for a New Generation' welcome to church drive seeks to face the question: "Why in a culture where 70 per cent have Christian beliefs (!), only 10 per cent (!) come to church".

Beginning with such an inflated belief in their support doesn't bode well for the success of the campaign.

Meanwhile back at the Roman Catholic ranch, their bishops conference, shrugging off various rearguard actions on wartime antisemitic crimes and priestly paedophiles, have set up a policy think tank on politically-sensitive issues such as marriage, co-habitation and welfare reform "to ensure that the Church's view is heard and understood".

A precedent was set when the World Wide Web was used to beam live to 44 universities across North America, in April, a timely debate between Professor Peter Atkins, a Lincoln College, Oxford, chemist, putting a scientific view of belief in God against Dr William Craig, an American theologian. Holding the ring was the American right-wing commentator William F Buckley.

As a mark of how far Christian scholars have retreated in face of science and commonsense, Dr Craig accepted the 'big bang' theory of creation but said "we don't know how or why it happened". Professor Atkins countered with "We're on the track of it".

Dr Craig's claim that objective moral values couldn't exist without God, Professor Atkins said that such values were simply a social contract produced by intellect and evolution to protect communities.

To Dr Craig's proposition that people could discover God by listening to an inner voice, Professor Atkins countered with "although people could get a warm and cosy feeling by believing in God's existence", religion was, in reality, a form of intellectual laziness.

He concluded: "The reasons for believing in God are vacuous. I ask you to disregard your prejudices. It is time to respect the nobility of the human spirit. It is time to stand four-square in front of this glorious world and accept we are alone.

"Use your brains—the most wonderful instrument in the Universe—and through your brains you will find you do not need God. There is no necessity for God because science

can explain everything".

God and Science will continue to slug it out on the World Wide Web, no doubt in the Third Millennium but who can doubt that religion—organised superstition—is on the defensive and rational thought is, rightfully, coming into its own.

STEWART R VALDAR
London N8

Highly critical

ROY Cobb is quite wrong in stating that the *Freethinker* (May issue) supports the Labour Party. Many of the editorials written by the late Peter Brearey, and articles commissioned by him, have been highly critical of Tony Blair.

William Hague may choose to spend his Sunday mornings more wisely than going to church, but that does not make his politics more acceptable. And in place of attending a religious service he spends part of each day engaging in a form of mystical meditation. This hardly qualifies him as a rationalist.

CARL PINEL
Stockport

Religion in our schools

YOUR REPORT of the National Association of Head Teachers' clash with the Church of England over religious assemblies in schools (*Freethinker*, June) reminded me of a controversy that erupted in United States about two years ago when America's first ever course in secular humanism was introduced at the Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute, New Mexico.

The honours course—*The Humanist Tradition of American Democracy*—was devised by Kaz Dziemka PhD, editor of the *American Rationalist* magazine, who insisted at the time that secular humanism should be on the curricula of all public educational institutions, particularly high schools and junior colleges.

Bishop caught with his figures up!

A STRAW POLL conducted in the Diocese of Ripon purported to show Anglican church attendance at 5.2 per cent of the population, according to the *Guardian* on July 2. The Bishop of Wakefield said this statistic indicated "the widespread support that there is for the Church of England".

Armed with his *UK Christian Handbook*, Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the National Secular Society, wasn't going to let them get away with that, so he wrote to the Editor to tell him "Anglican church membership has declined by around 30 per cent in just 20 years and now represents less than 3 per cent of the English population. This was calculated from every church in the country, not just a selected few [like the survey in the *Guardian*].

In an article in the *American Rationalist*, he predicted this requirement would "spark an endless controversy because secular or scientific humanism (the two are synonymous) teaches that nobody has the monopoly of truth; that if human beings don't solve their problems, then nobody—no God or gods—will.

"Christian theologian and educators talk eloquently about America's Christian heritage and about a personal and caring god; but if we have to be honest to our students, we must tell them that there is not an iota of scientific evidence that such a being exists".

He went on to argue that "the role of the government is to be an impartial arbiter between different contending factions in a free and open society". Government has to be sufficiently neutral.

"But how can the US government be sufficiently neutral if none of the members of the US Congress is a scientific humanist," Kaz asked. He then pointed out that "over 99 per cent of senators and representatives, including the President, publicly pray to Hebrew gods and take a public oath on the Bible".

He said it was "high time we brought the science of secular humanism to the attention of all our high school and college students. We must teach them to study freethought and rationalism from which modern science was born and upon which it is based. We must teach them to make very informed decisions about nature, human life and the universe.

"The Department of Education must show its commitment to science and reason by allowing secular humanism to be part of every scientific and educational programme in the country. The Department can no longer afford to avoid this responsibility".

He added: "Dogmas of whatever nature—religious, political, moral—confuse and can permanently cripple the young mind. Public educators have no business supporting prayer or promoting Christian metaphysics. Religious indoctrination, if at all necessary, must be left at home and in the churches, not in the public school."

In the light of the current debate in Britain concerning religious education and assemblies, Kaz's words are particularly relevant.

GRAHAM LIVINGSTONE
East Molesey

"Perhaps the Bishop of Wakefield should be grateful that neither the claimed new statistic, nor his remark, are subject to the Trades Descriptions Act. It is quite obvious that the figures are being 'recalculated' in a forlorn hope that it will somehow justify the disproportionate power the C of E wields in our society.

"With over 97 per cent non-membership, we would like to know how it is that Anglican bishops have such a significant say in the framing of UK legislation, through their unwarranted 26 seats in the House of Lords? Why are they given another £10 million for their church schools, for whom the Government already pays the salaries? And why is the out-of-touch pontificating of the Archbishop of Canterbury given such prominence?"

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: Monthly meetings except August. Information: Joan Wimble on 01273 733215.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnley on 0117 9049490.

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: Monthly meetings. Information: 01926 858450.

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 (except August) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday 4 - Monday 7 September: GALHA Annual Weekend Gathering, Pennant Hall Hotel, Penmaenmawr, North Wales.

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.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Secretary: George Rodger, 17 Howburn Place, Aberdeen AB1 2XT (telephone: 01224 573034). Convener: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; telephone: 01563 526710.

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Henness, 138 Lumley Street, Grangemouth FK3 8BL. Telephone: 01324 485152.

Edinburgh Group: Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD; 0131 667 8389.

Kent Humanists: Information: M Rogers, 2 Lyndhurst Road, Broadstairs CT10 1DD; 01843 864506.

Lancashire Humanist Alliance: Details from Steve Johnson, PO Box 111, Blackburn BB1 8GD.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. All meetings at 7.30 pm, Swarthmore Centre, Leeds.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622250 or 0116 241 4060.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information and summer programme: Denis Cobell, 99 Ravensbourne Park, London SE6 4YA (0181 690 4645).

Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607. Monthly meetings at Friends' Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

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.

Musical Heathens: Monthly meetings for music and discussion (Coventry and Leamington Spa). Information: Karl Heath on 01203 673306.

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, August 5, 8pm. Annual General Meeting. Wednesday, September 2, 8pm. Speaker: Keith Wood, General Secretary, National Secular Society.

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.

Ulster Humanist Association: Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE (telephone: 01846 677264). Meetings second Thursday evening of the month at Ulster Arts Club, Elmwood Avenue, Belfast.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group: Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.

West Kent Secular Humanist Group: Information: Ian Peters on 01892 890485 or Chris Ponsford on 01892 862855.

Worthing Humanist Group: Information: Mike Sargent, on 01903 239823 or Frank Pidgeon on 01903 263867.

The best of causes needs your support

For more than 130 years, the National Secular Society has been fighting religious privilege, and opposing the extremes of religious intolerance.

Today, with the proliferation of sinister cults, the increase in superstition and the dangers posed by religious conflicts, the rational voice of the NSS needs to be heard more than ever.

We are at the forefront of the renewed debate on disestablishment, and we intend to oppose vigorously any further encroachment into the House of Lords by religious representatives.

You can be part of these and other important campaigns by joining the NSS today. Subscription is £10 per annum for single membership (£15 for partners living at the same address). Unwaged membership is £6. Please send you membership application to the National Secular Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

● Please send your events notices to Bill McIlroy, 115 South View Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield, S7 1DE.

