

Secular  
Humanist  
monthly

The

# Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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## Has the message finally filtered through?



● The work of a graffiti artist photographed by Barry Duke. The huge World Cup football poster, near the entrance to the Blackwall Tunnel, London, was seen by thousands of motorists and other passers-by during the summer.

# Up Front

## When will we recognise Christianity's victims?

DID YOU know that the Duke of Edinburgh's great aunt—the Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia—was done in by the Bolsheviks for failing to renounce her Christianity?

I confess I didn't—until I picked up a copy of the *Express*, dated July 10.

Great Aunt Lizzy's cruel fate, according to a report under the heading *Abbey's Modern*

*Martyrs*, has earned her a niche in Westminster Abbey.

At the same time, nine other niches—empty since the Middle Ages—were filled with the stone figures of other 20th century Christians, each of whom had come to a sticky end.

These range from Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in El Salvador in 1980, to Esther John, an evangelist “allegedly” killed by a Muslim fanatic in 1960.

Gosh, I thought as I read the report, secularists would need a hell of a lot more than ten niches if ever we were to mimic Christianity's latest tacky exhibition.

Leaving aside old atrocities ranging from the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition, slavery and the forced Christianisation and subsequent destruction of indigenous people's civilisations, we would still need a space twice the size of the Millennium Dome to identify those who have fallen victim to Christianity in the 20th century alone.

## Transfusions

These would include people drawn into mass suicide cults; the children of Jehovah's Witnesses denied blood transfusions; and others who have died after being given “faith” and “spiritual” healing instead of proper medical care

We would then need additional space to demonstrate Christian cruelty in respect of entire groups: Jews massacred by the Nazis with the connivance of the Roman Catholic Church; black South Africans subjected to apartheid by the Dutch Reformed Church; children mentally and sexually abused by priests; and, of course, members of the gay community.

But if the task fell to me to set up a Christian Chamber of Horrors, I would open the exhibition with a statue of a young deaf mute called Daniel Joseph—a living example of what terrible harm Christians can do, even when they mean well.

This summer Joseph, 19, was ordered to be detained without limit of time at Broadmoor high security hospital by an Old Bailey judge.

His crime: the killing of Carla Thompson, 57, in south London, and the severe beating of her upstairs neighbour, Agnes Erume.

Initially, this looked like just another monstrous Care in the Community cock-up. But at Joseph's trial it was revealed that the teenager, who has a history of disturbed and violent behaviour, was on special medication for his condition.

Carla Thompson, a family friend and devout Christian, persuaded him to give up his medication and to rely instead on “the power of prayer”.

As his condition deteriorated, his worried mother, Claudette, tried to get him committed to hospital.

On learning this, Thompson helped him move to another flat.

In January this year, Joseph burst into Thompson's flat, beat her unconscious, and dragged her body outside. He then attacked Agnes Erume, also a devout Christian, and dragged her onto the pavement as well. He tied the two women together and refused to let

the police approach. Eventually tear gas was used and the 6ft 6in Joseph was arrested after a violent struggle. Both woman were taken to hospital, but Thompson died shortly after being admitted.

Another example of Christian good intentions going horribly wrong was reported in the *Daily Telegraph* in June under the headline: *Neglect by vicar and wife led to the death of 76 cats*.

## Deformities

When RSPCA inspectors called at the vicarage of the Rev Victor Dickenson, of Lowick, near Berwick-on-Tweed, last September, they found 100 cats kept in atrocious conditions. Many had physical deformities and illnesses, including cat flu, diarrhoea and conjunctivitis.

Berwick magistrates at the trial of Dickenson, 50, and his wife Judith, 40, were told that 76 of the cats had to be destroyed. The Dickensons both admitted a charge of causing cruelty to an animal under the Protection of Animals Act 1991. In addition to being banned from keeping animals, they were each ordered to pay £250 costs to the RSPCA.

Defence Counsel Andrew McMurchie told the court that the case had arisen out of the Dickenson's desire to house unwanted cats. They had not appreciated the consequences of taking on so many.

A statement by the Rev Dickenson was read to the court. In it he said: “The deaths were a profound shock. There was no cruelty involved, only a desire to be kind.”

If ever we were to erect a monument to the victims of Christianity, the Rev Dickenson's words would make an eminently suitable epitaph.

## ‘Haunted’ bank rejects clergy

IN SPAIN priests have had to exorcise a revolving door, according to an article in *The Big Issue*. The door in question was at the entrance to a bank in Seville. “It was a perfectly normal electronic revolving door,” explained the bank manager, “except that whenever a member of the clergy used it, it suddenly speeded up and threw them out the other side.”

Over the course of three months the door savaged no fewer than 20 church officials, including two elderly nuns who were spun around 13 times before being rescued by staff.

Experts failed to find any technical reason for the door's behaviour, and, eventually, convinced it was possessed, the manager arranged for an exorcism. Even then, however, the door continued to give trouble, and it was only after an undercover police operation that the real cause was discovered: a Muslim security guard was deliberately speeding up the door from a control desk whenever a member of the church tried to use it.

We thank *Freethinker* reader Barry Johnson, of Chesterfield, for sending us this item.

## The Freethinker

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# Secular civic leaders break from tradition



**H**UMANIST Mark Nottingham, the Mayor of Lewisham, has appointed Denis Cobell, NSS President and Chair of the Lewisham Humanist Group, as his “Mayor’s chaplain—humanist officiant”. Denis officiated on July 26 at a secular public ceremony in the Council chamber to mark the inauguration of the civic year. In previous years there has been a civic service in a church.

Among those at this year’s ceremony were Deputy Lieutenant (Queen’s representative) Conrad Graham and the Borough’s Chief Executive Barry Quirk. Malcolm Rees from the Lewisham Group read the “lesson” which was from Darwin’s *Descent of Man*.

At the ceremony Denis described humanism, and—citing the Golden Rule—pointed out that there can be morals without religion. He reminded everyone in humanistic terms that, in all their diversity, the duty of the Borough was to its citizens. Its motto, *Salus Populi Suprema Lex*, he said, loosely translates to “the welfare of the people above all”. He concluded by quoting Robert G Ingersoll:

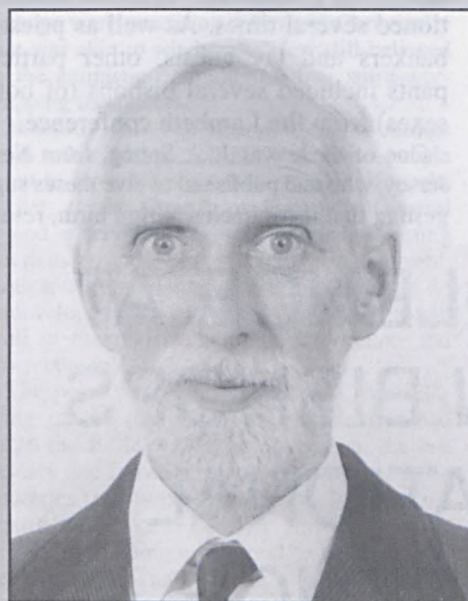
*Justice is the only worship.  
Love is the only priest.  
Ignorance is the only slavery.  
Happiness is the only good.  
The time to be happy is now.  
The place to be happy is here.  
The way to be happy is to make others so.  
(Wisdom is the science of happiness.)*

Not surprisingly, Denis’ appointment became the subject of some controversy at regional and national levels. London’s influential *Evening Standard* ran a prominent story headlined “Outrage as London mayor appoints an atheist as chaplain” together with a picture of Denis over the caption “Unholy row”.

This led to his being interviewed the next morning on Radio 4’s *Today* programme, where he was introduced as the President of the National Secular Society, whose objectives were summarised on air. With Denis in the studio was Father Kieran Conry, a representative of the Catholic Media Office.

The priest maintained that Denis’s appointment “sends out completely the wrong signals to people—especially if they are going to call him chaplain” to which Denis quickly retorted that the title “Father” was hardly less confusing.

The priest claimed that Denis did not represent the community but Denis pointed out that the “rites of passage” ceremonies he conducted were far more inclusive than church ones. He cited commitment cere-



● Denis Cobell

**Denis Cobell, NSS President and Chair of the Lewisham Humanist Group, is “Mayor’s chaplain—humanist officiant” to the Mayor of Lewisham. Keith Porteous Wood, NSS General Secretary, reports on the media’s reaction to his appointment.**

monies for same sex couples for example, something the priest had to admit he could not envisage taking part in.

Denis made the point that *Thought for the Day* was denied to all but religionists, and presenter John Humphrys seemed to sympathise with our position.

The *Evening Standard* article covered much of the same ground as the interview and also included quotes from Father Conry. He was reported as describing Denis’ appointment as “offensive” and a “slur against the established church” but he seemed confused about non-believers, taking greater exception to humanists (believing them to be anti-religious) than he did to atheists.

The article specifically (and incorrectly) stated that atheists contribute to *Thought for the Day*.

This gave me the opportunity to insist on a lengthy right of reply under the heading: “Atheist chaplain truly represents his flock” and this was published together with another supportive letter.

After correcting the error and observing that vigorous attempts to protest at our exclusion from *Thought for the Day* had been fruitless, I objected in my reply to the word “outrage”; there had been no complaints to the Borough, and even the priest conceded he was something less than outraged. I drew attention to how some of the bishops are verging on atheists themselves and quoted statistics to demonstrate just how unrepresentative the C of E is.

I added: “We believe there is no place for enforced (and inevitably divisive) religion in

civic ceremonies in this multi-cultural society.”

Denis Cobell’s appointment follows another heartening break with tradition, reported to the *Freethinker* by Hayward Lynn Millard, a Humanist and NSS officiant from Burnley, Lancashire. Lynn—the name he’s best known by—informs us that earlier this year, the then Mayor-elect of Rossendale Borough, Lancs, announced she was departing from custom by not appointing a chaplain, and would, therefore, not be holding the customary Mayoral service on the Sunday following her inauguration.

“Although it was sensationally reported in the local press, a big majority of commentators were in favour of Councillor Mollie Disley’s actions. She was reluctant to discuss her beliefs, announcing that during her term of office she would be representing people of all beliefs and none, and instead of the Mayoral service would have a procession on the Sunday afternoon, followed by a gathering of citizens from all walks of life. She announced that her chosen theme for her year in office would be ‘Sharing, Caring, Laughing, Loving and Learning’,” Lynn reports.

It was at this gathering that Lynn was invited by Cllr Disley to give an address. He described the event as “historic—a departure from custom and practice in the Borough. Some would say it was a departure from tradition. Other would say from habit, but it is by no means unique in Britain as more and more civic leaders refuse to be hypocrites. They are being honest and forthright in declaring their beliefs and philosophies”.

Keith Porteous Wood, Secretary of the National Secular Society, reports on key events over the past few weeks.

# NSS COUNCIL MEMBERS MEET LAMBETH BISHOPS

Council members Jennifer Jaynes and Mike Howgate and I spoke in two television discussion programmes timed to coincide with the Lambeth Conference and which were broadcast on Channel 5 on Sundays July 26 and August 2. The NSS was men-

tioned several times. As well as priests, bankers and lay guests, other participants included several bishops (of both sexes) from the Lambeth conference.

One of these was Jack Spong, from New Jersey, who had published twelve theses suggesting that the miracles, virgin birth, resur-

rection etc should not be taken literally.

Nine or ten of the theses would not be considered a bar to membership of the NSS.

One of the TV programmes concentrated on the implications of views such as Spong's and asked whether they amounted to a new reformation. On air, former NSS President Daniel O'Hara drew attention to the many biblical contradictions and Mike Howgate ridiculed the biblical creation myth.

I then contrasted Bishop Spong's emphasis on human rights with the recent performance of his colleagues in the House of Lords (where they voted to exclude religions from the Human Rights Bill and against the reduction of the age of homosexual consent, in defiance of the Government's public undertaking to the European Court of Human Rights). I suggested that, unless Bishop Spong could persuade the Church to move their doctrine in his direction, there wouldn't be an Anglican church of any size left in 20 years, at least in the northern hemisphere.

Referring to the Holocaust and other atrocities, Jennifer Jaynes challenged the bishops to explain what Christ had achieved by dying to redeem our sins. "He might as well not have bothered," she added, to the evident amusement of some of the audience.

Anne Toy, from the North London Group, suggested that Bishop Spong should join us, as he seemed to have more in common with us than them. To our surprise, the Bishop of Rochester acknowledged the difficulty of meeting Jennifer's challenge and, with some venom, all-but dared fellow-bishop Spong to accept Anne Toy's "invitation".

The other programme dealt with women in the church, world debt and homosexuality, in which *Freethinker* columnist Terry Sanderson castigated the Archbishop. "If Dr. Carey thinks this new hard-line approach will put bums on pews he should think again, it will drive people away."

In that case, long may he continue.

AS I predicted in the *Freethinker*, Britain's first Christian radio station, Premier Radio, is in crisis. According to the *Express*, far from the 500,000 listeners it promised, it now has only 144,000. The numbers are falling catastrophically; as recently as Christmas they had nearly 200,000 listeners. Premier claims to take a stand on moral issues, refusing adverts for the National Lottery and refusing to employ gay staff. If the number of listeners fall below 100,000, they will not be listed in the publication followed closely by advertisers and this could precipitate their demise.

## NEAR-VIOLENCE AT ANGLICAN BISHOPS INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

THE LAST few days of the Lambeth Conference was dominated by the topic of homosexuality. There was world-wide press coverage for the decision on 5 August (by 526 votes to 70)—that it could not "advise the legitimising of same-sex unions or the ordination of those involved in such unions".

The support for the motion came mainly from biblical literalist bishops from African and Asian dioceses who attended this year's conference in record numbers, some of whom equated homosexuality with bestiality. One even asked whether relationships with cats and dogs would be on the next conference agenda. The result of the main vote and the strength of the conservative majority was far worse than liberals (mainly from North America and Britain) had expected.

The conference earlier rejected a "fudge" option—avoiding debate by the appointment of a commission to review the issue and report back to the next conference in ten years' time.

The whole issue provoked unparalleled ferocity; a cartoon on the front page of the *Church Times* shows a bishop with a black eye being asked "did you get that at the resolution-drafting or the full debate stage?" One broadsheet actually claimed that one word, euphemistically known as the "S word", appeared to be banned. "S" stands for schism.

Any hope for a reversal at the next conference seems scant as the liberals' church memberships are declining and the conservatives' are increasing—which will give them the right to appoint further bishops.

Conference motions are advisory rather

than mandatory, but the Archbishop of Canterbury has personally endorsed the decision, and has been said to be pleased that it reduces the opportunity for criticism of Christians by Muslims.

Relations with Islam was another difficult area. African and Asian bishops, who generally objected to appeasement, did not get their way. One said that there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim. But the *laissez faire* line prevailed. One exponent of this, the Bishop of Rochester, Kent (a former Muslim), wanted Christians to set an example to the Muslim world, and one way to do this would be set up Muslim schools in Britain (presumably he meant more such schools). He made this suggestion in a newspaper article and I wrote to the Editor of the paper suggesting that if we are going to set any examples, a far better one would be to press for the removal of our own blasphemy laws; those in the Bishop of Rochester's native Pakistan had already led to the recent suicide of a RC bishop there.

Another part of the 526-70 motion opined that "in view of the teaching of Scripture, [the Conference] upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a women in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage." Taken literally, this appears to condemn the millions of heterosexual couples "living in sin". When tackled about this on BBC 1, George Carey looked most uncomfortable and said many of these were in a relationship akin to marriage, advising them to tie the knot. He was predictably silent about those who declined to do so, or those whose relationship wasn't akin to marriage, and emphatically ruled out gay marriage.

Terry Sanderson on the media

# WHEN IS A LIAR NOT A LIAR? WHEN IT'S A C of E SPIN DOCTOR

**T**HE CHURCH of England's Decade of Evangelism is drawing to a close. Was it successful? Well, according to *The Sunday Times* on July 26: "The Anglican Communion's active membership has fallen to an all-time low." Apparently, Dr Carey's newly-appointed spin-doctors have been putting it about that there are 70 million Anglicans world-wide, but *The Sunday Times* investigation reveals it to be more like 23 millions. The paper says: "The survey suggests that Anglicans are being disingenuous about their support by including among their followers people who have been baptised but no longer attend church."

*The Sunday Times* points out that the disparity is most pronounced in England where there are 25 million baptised people, but only 1.1 million Sunday attendees at church. Australia has also apparently lost interest in churchgoing. Its 4 million baptised contrasts with only 190,000 attendees.

So, I think we can clock up another dismal failure to the equally dismal Archbishop. And as for the C of E being "disingenuous" about its claims (if anyone else did this kind of thing they'd be called liars), this is not the only area where contradiction and obfuscation reigns.

Last month the Church of England got a big press because of the Lambeth Conference, a ten-yearly gathering of Anglican bishops from all over the world. It was a real humdinger this time round, with western liberals being routed by African and Asian bishops on the topic of homosexuality (see report on page 4).

Dr Carey was anxious that no-one would think that the conference was in any way homophobic, even though some of his colleagues likened homosexuality to bestiality and prostitution. They then passed a resolution more or less saying that no homosexual who ever did anything with his genitalia other than pee through it could be an Anglican. Dr Carey supported the resolution fully, but then had the brass neck to "apologise" to gay Christians for causing them pain.

Actually, I think the bishops were right. The Bible does condemn homosexual acts and it is reasonable for the church hierarchy to demand that those who want to join their club desist from breaking the rules. The answer for gay Christians is to leave the church altogether. Why on earth would they want to be members of an organisation that hates them so deeply and passes resolutions condemning them? They ought to find their way to some other more sensible organisation. The Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, for instance.

If Richard Kirker, the secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, is right in his claim that a quarter of London vicars are gay, then the church would be severely damaged by a mass walk-out. Let the hate-mongers get on with it without the support of those they are persecuting.

Then, Bishop Jack Spong, of Newark, New Jersey, stirred the pot by telling the *Church of England Newspaper* that some of the African bishops were practising a form of Christianity that was akin to witchcraft. They still believed in the animistic traditions of their spirit-worshipping forefathers.

Naturally this suggestion brought outrage from other bishops. But these same people seem to have forgotten that a couple of weeks earlier, at the Church of England's General Synod, a service of exorcism aimed at casting out demons and evil spirits had been approved. Juju and mumbo jumbo are not confined to undeveloped parts of Africa, they are alive and well in the parish churches of Surbiton and Rochdale, too.

The point was made by many of the right-wing papers that Christian missionaries had taken the Bible out to the colonies in the last century and forced it on to the peoples of those countries (or 'introduced them to Jesus' as the spin doctors would have it). Now those same people were coming here and trying to foist it back on to us. The problem is—as Jack Spong pointed out—we've moved on and they haven't. Darwin and Einstein don't seem to have happened for the African bishops yet.

But should we be concerned with all this foolish nonsense? Does it really matter what the pompous, self-important leaders of a dying church think or do?

Unfortunately, yes it does. Because these are not powerless men. They are part of the established church, and they have influence in our legislature. If we need proof of that power, we have to look at what happened in the House of Lords over the lowering of the homosexual age of consent. Whatever one's opinion of the issue, the fact is that it was overturned by the House of Lords with the collusion of some bishops and the outspoken support of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

They are entitled to their opinions, of course, but are they entitled—unelected and unrepresentative as they are—to impose them on the

rest of us?

They have done it before when the Human Rights Bill was passing through Parliament. A coalition of Christians (including most of the bishops and the Archbishop) managed to get themselves—and other religions—more or less excluded from the remit of the Bill. (This was subsequently modified in the Commons, but nonetheless the Christians were reported to be pleased with their "victory".)

Using spin-doctors, misleading statistics and self-serving methods in the Lords is the new face of Anglicanism. Carey has decided that he is going to "toughen up" his Church and take the American route of muscular Christianity. The problem is that, far from increasing his flock, he will be perceived as a bigot and even more people will flee. He may well have found a popular whipping boy in homosexuals, but let him try to extend his strictures to the heterosexual majority (no sex outside of marriage? the man's a nutcase), and he'll soon get short shrift. For instance, I heard no mention of Prince Charles's extra-marital jollies, which are presumably unrepentantly continuing with the delightful Mrs Parker Bowles, and he is potentially the next spiritual leader of the Anglicans! And if marriage is so ideal, how come two of Mr Carey's own children are divorced?

If Carey thinks he's going to successfully import the African brand of Anglicanism, with its childish literalism and fire and brimstone melodramatics, he's going to be preaching to an even further diminished flock.

I FIND those smug poster puns outside churches very irritating, you know the sort of thing: "A Carpenter has Died and Left You a Fortune, apply within", "Heaven: All Gain, No Pain."

But occasionally someone will make an impromptu improvement with a felt tip pen. Outside a Texas Church a poster read: "If you're sick of sin, come on in". Added to that was: "if you're not, ring Rita on..."

## Algerian freethinker murdered

**THE GUARDIAN** (June 29) carried a long and moving obituary by Abdenour Kilou on the Berber singer Lounes Matoub, who was murdered in Algeria "for his freethinking and his defiant mountain music", aged 42. Here is a relevant extract:

"He was a tireless activist in the Berber cultural movement and, in 1976, a co-founder of the Algerian Human Rights

League, with current leaders of the only openly secular Algerian party, the Rally for Culture and Democracy."

Matoub Malika, the singer's sister, accused the Islamists of the murder at a fake roadblock. They had kidnapped him in 1994 and repeatedly threatened his life. But, she added: "They'll never kill him. He has left his songs, which will speak for him."

# ASK THE PARSON (17)

by Karl Heath

## MAKE-BELIEVE OR MADE TO BELIEVE?

**D**ear Parson, You may be offended if I claim that both parts of the title apply to your religion.

Are there not essential elements in your religion which cannot be established by rational or scientific proof? Do you not, then, have to seek other methods of inducing belief? Do you employ emotional pressure? Are any forms of compulsion, legal or otherwise, used to buttress your religion? In short "made to believe".

Let us make two lists. The first contains sun, moon, stars, dogs, cats, seas and mountains and all the other objects observed in the physical universe. You believe in their existence as much as I do. Belief in them does not depend upon faith. Disbelief in them would not be heretical, merely silly.

List No 2 contains God, Jesus, souls, heaven and life after death. These are invisible, inaudible, indescribable and undefinable. How, therefore, do you proceed in order to induce belief in them? I would like you to comment upon the techniques that you appear to use, techniques which I regard as illicit.

What are these techniques?

### ■ Force or legal compulsion?

No longer Recusancy Acts forcing people to go to church. But the 1944 Education Act makes religious instruction the only compulsory subject, and requires schools to conduct daily worship. By the Act of Settlement 1701 the Monarch is compelled to be an Anglican. The Church still crowns the King or Queen.

On the BBC *Prayer for the Day* on March 12, 1998, an archdeacon enjoined us to pray for the Queen and obey her. "Governments," he said, "are appointed by God." Preaching the Divine Right of Kings! Preaching it three centuries after it was laughed out of court by John Locke when he denounced Filmer's *Patriarcha* and when Alexander Pope wrote in the *Dunciad* of "the Right Divine of Kings to govern wrong".

### ■ Salvation, faith and fear?

You may no longer preach Hell-fire. But do you promise eternal reward in return for faith? Do you not attribute to Jesus the words "he that believeth in me hath eternal life". Common sense says that faith is not a virtue, whatever St Paul may have said in I Corinthians. When you say "Only believe" I would reply "Believe in what?" And "Why?"

And is it not weird to suggest that salvation should depend on thoughts? Does it occur to you that this proposition is a device to control people's minds and induce obedience to the ecclesiastical power structure. Paul may not have intended this, but the politician Augustine did.

### ■ Guilt?

Have your colleagues never tried to induce belief through the doctrine of "Original Sin"?

Is this not a hellish doctrine? Has it not

caused untold misery to millions? Why? A specific sin which one is conscious of committing can be acknowledged. Recompense may be possible.

But to be sinful without knowing the sin?

To be burdened by a profound but indefinable sinful flesh from the moment of birth?

"Where every prospect pleases, but only man is vile."

Do you terrify your flock?

Do you persuade them that their only escape from sin is to be "washed in the Blood of the Lamb"?

And only through the Church?

### ■ Broadcasting?

I am sure you will repudiate the hate-ridden, dollar-grabbing American Gospel stations, the "Elmer Gantry" figures like Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Swaggart and Bakker.

But have you considered that something more sinister happens in Britain? The BBC is publicly funded. We are all, if we have TV sets, required to pay a licence fee under penalty of prosecution.

The licence payers include non-believers and the large majority of those who have no particular interest in religion. Yet the BBC devotes 730 hours a year to religious programmes, 14 hours every week.

Furthermore, on the rare occasions when the expression of atheist views is allowed, the strange BBC doctrine of "balance" is employed. There has to be a "dog collar" on the programme.

This doctrine of "balance" does not apply in reverse, during the 730 hours of religious propaganda. A blatant example of this occurred seven years ago. On February 22, 1991, the *Songs of Praise* programme was conducted by Colin Morris, of the BBC Religious Affairs Department. To millions of viewers he declared that "hatred is the ultimate atheism". My protest to the BBC was never aired, yet the *Freethinker* opened its correspondence columns to Colin Morris, who defended himself with sophistry, casuistry and feeble sarcasm.

May I ask you, dear Parson, whether your faith is so feeble that it requires this gross inequality?

### ■ Theatre?

Has not your religion, for centuries, been ornamented by scenery, costume and drama?

Beautiful cathedrals, splendid vestments, painting, sculpture, orations, cantatas, masses and poetry—giving pleasure to believers and non-believers alike.

How sad it is that the aesthetic glory of the past should have degenerated into the vulgarity of *Jesus Christ—Superstar*, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Cliff Richard and Elton John!

I could weep for you. Bad taste and "dumbing down" will serve you ill.

### ■ Hymns, hypnosis and bad taste.

There have been wonderful hymns, stirring music and expressive words. Is not the modern popular trend rather disturbing? In a recent TV play, a young woman, dying of cancer, requested that *How Great Thou Art* should be played at her funeral.

The tune of this hymn, so popular on *Songs of Praise*, bears an uncanny resemblance to the *Horst Wessel Lied*. (Perhaps you are too young to remember it. Horst Wessel was a pimp-gangster killed in a Berlin street brawl. He was also a Nazi. The Nazi Party made him a martyr, and his song became the party anthem.)

May I be nasty in suggesting that the words, also, of *How Great Thou Art* are psychologically similar to *Heil Hitler*?

### ■ The Emperor's New Clothes

Hans Christian Andersen's story *The Emperor's New Clothes* is about conventional pretence for the sake of respectability. The rogue tailors persuade the Emperor and his courtiers that their magic clothes would be "invisible to everyone who was unfit for the office he held, or was extraordinarily simple in character". For the sake of respectability courtiers and subjects would not acknowledge that they saw nothing. I'm afraid that some of my own colleagues behave similarly when they embrace "milk and water" names like "humanist" and "agnostic" instead of "atheist".

When the Emperor paraded in his "new clothes", a little child, "the voice of innocence", called out: "But the Emperor has nothing at all on." Rather like the other child who asked "Who made God?"

Does your religion rely for its acceptance upon convention and respectability?

### ■ Tradition?

You will have heard the argument that the duration of a belief adds weight to its validity. Will it do? Astrology is older than Christianity and yet, today, has even more mentally retarded adherents than in the past. I am reminded of the *Noodle's Oration* by the witty Reverend Sydney Smith (1771-1845): "If the proposal be sound, would the noble Saxon have passed it by? Would the Dane have ignored it? Would it have escaped the wisdom of the Norman?"

Dear Parson, you have, heretofore, appeared reluctant to answer any of my questions. Do you hide behind a rampart of silence? Are you afraid to submit your faith to rational examination? Is your faith so weak that it must be protected by the techniques I have listed in this letter?

Do you deny that some of these techniques are unfair?

That some of them are emotional blackmail?

That, in rational terms, some of your techniques are propaganda, illicit and illegitimate?



# Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

## God moves the goalposts

GOD HAD a pretty busy World Cup, if his various devotees are to be believed. Thousands of Iranians poured out on to the streets to praise Allah, after their team's victory over the United States. He was with us all the way, one woman supporter told the *Daily Express* (June 23). "When we took a shot, he widened the goal posts. When the Americans aimed, he narrowed them". Which wasn't much of a tribute to the players, especially as they only won 2-1, and certainly not fairly.

The Jamaican side also hoped for help from the Deity—and certainly strove very hard to get it. Coached by a born-again Christian and with their own "spiritual adviser", they prayed together in the dressing room before the matches, all of which were "dedicated to God". The coach sported the words "Jesus saves" on his kit, and signed souvenir footballs "Jesus loves you", but he expressed the unusual view, for a coach, that "This is a mission, it is not a football game".

As mentioned last month, Uri Geller warned readers of the *News of the World* that they couldn't expect God to blow the ball into the net for England, but this didn't seem impossible when Glenn Hoddle's psychic, Eileen Drewery, boasted of a "one-to-one" relationship with God. Surely she might have had a word in his ear, unless, like Moses, she only sees his backside.

One further point—and I promise these will be my last words on the World Cup. Hoddle credited Drewery with introducing him to God at the age of 18 (*The Guardian*, June 13), which is strange when you consider he went to a Roman Catholic school.

## More bunkum from the NoW

DEMONIC possession is the *News of the World's* latest occult craze. "EXORCIST HIT SQUAD TO BATTLE WITH EVIL" it announced in huge capitals on June 21, over stories featuring "Britain's longest serving devil-buster", the Rev Tom Willis and the psychic Philip Steff. We read of the "stench of sulphur" and "blood from beyond"; and of the "Struggle for soul of a tot", a boy of four, in fact, who was possessed by "an exceptionally powerful spirit". Powerful enough, anyway, to turn off the lights the moment the boy and a medi-

um entered a room.

No doubt this all helps to sell Rupert Murdoch's rag. As a journalist, however, I am sorry that my fellow hacks have to write such trash (under by-lines, too); but there seems no depths to which their paper won't stoop. "If you know someone you think has been possessed by an evil spirit we'd like to hear from you" it printed at the foot. I could ring them with a suggestion, but it might be libellous.

## Taking the fun out of Sunday

THE POPE has appealed to Roman Catholics to keep Sunday as a day of prayer and worship, in what *The Guardian's* Rome correspondent John Hooper called a 95-page discourse. "When Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a 'weekend', it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they no longer see the heavens", said John-Paul. The Lord's day should be kept holy, and the weekend not just "understood as a time of simple rest and relaxation".

We can appreciate his concern. In Rome only 28 per cent of the people go to church on an average Sunday and, in Latin America, a region often said to be offsetting the drift from organised religion in Europe and North America, now only 6-10 per cent attend Sunday liturgy. Even a 95-page discourse from the pontiff is unlikely to turn the tide. People realise they can see the heavens better from outside rather than inside the churches, where they're often filled with flying angels.

## Bishop's suicide 'a scandal'

MOST of the commentators regarded Bishop John Joseph's suicide as an heroic act of solidarity with Pakistani Christians condemned under that country's blasphemy law; but the Roman Catholic weekly, *The Tablet* was not so sure. The Catechism, it reminded its readers, "describes suicide as contrary to love of self, neighbour, and God and adds that, 'if suicide is committed with the intention of setting an example, especially to the young, it takes on the gravity of a scandal'".

The Christian tradition is firm according

to *The Tablet*, that "martyrdom must not be sought". But isn't that just what Jesus Christ did? And allegedly for the same reason as the Bishop of Faisalabad: to save others.

## More church sex scandals

APPARENTLY the Roman Catholic Church isn't the only one that covers up the sexual misdemeanors of its members. Andrew Bird confessed to leaders of the Enfield Evangelical Free Church in north London, that he had molested a 15-year-old girl of the same congregation (*Daily Telegraph*, June 13).

The girl, who had suffered mentally and physically since the attack and is now 26, was in court to see Bird jailed for a year, and the church's handling of the affair described by the judge as "most unsatisfactory".

A few days earlier, in *The Guardian* (June 4), Nick Davies had mentioned the case of the Rev Phil Aspinall, who was accused of making sexual overtures to three teenage boys in different places at different times. The NSPCC and local Social Services had warned that he might be a risk.

Yet the Anglican Church had left him at his post. Until he was arrested.

## State funding for Muslim schools

SOME well-meaning humanists—and some less well-meaning politicians with an eye on the vote—defend state support for Muslim schools because Church of England, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools already enjoy that privilege. But as Dr Mary Midgeley argued in *The Guardian* (July 10) in reference to the Orange Order marches in Northern Ireland, history offers no justification. "The fact of having done something wrong [ie anti-social] before is never really a reason for doing it again; it only makes it difficult to stop".

That is precisely the case with sectarian schools.

Barbara Smoker looks at the background to the Pope of the Faith), and finds that surprisingly he is something

# THIS SEX-OBSESSIVE

**W**HILE the Anglican churches were openly debating outmoded sexual restrictions at their international convention in Canterbury in July, and its host archbishop was making a fool of himself on the same subject in the pages of the *Times*, the Pope must have preened himself on having been able to get in first, with his recent "apostolic letter", *Ad tuendam fidem* (*In Defence of the Faith*)—without any need for public consultation, agenda papers, or proposals put to the vote.

*The Guardian* front-paged the document on July 3 under the headline "Pope turns on liberal Catholics", and it is certainly designed to gag some of the more progressive theologians on these issues. But whether it will make much practical difference is another matter, since not only does the claim of papal infallibility ring increasingly hollow, but also the Church no longer has the power to burn dissidents at the stake, and there can be few who regard excommunication as a fate worse than death.

Not that the document states anything new—quite the contrary.

It is really no more than a technical device to enshrine in canon law the traditional Vatican stand on such issues as artificial contraception, abortion, voluntary euthanasia, the medical and experimental use of foetal tissue and embryos, priestly celibacy, "family values", and women priests—a stand which the Pope had already reiterated less formally in his encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*), published in 1995.

It is obvious that John Paul II has no insight as to the very principle behind the right to life being consciousness, and it is generally assumed that, as a celibate priest, he has even less insight into sexuality. However—surprising though it may be—it seems he is something of an academic expert on the subject. (Presumably, in theory only.)

More than three decades ago, the then Pope, Paul VI, was wracked with indecision about sanctioning the Pill, and invited leading prelates from different countries to advise him on it, so as to avoid a subsequent conservative backlash. Karol Wojtyła, Archbishop of Cracow—who was destined to become Pope John Paul II—claimed at that time to be a celibate expert on human sexuality, having already established an

institute devoted to sexual ethics and written a book on sexuality—including physiological details of orgasm! So he was ready with copious advice to Paul VI. This was necessarily in writing, since the Polish government of the day restricted foreign travel. For that very reason, however, the text was all the more easily accessible to Pope Paul, word for word, in producing his agonised reactionary encyclical, *Humanae vitae*—of which he always seemed rather ashamed.

The long delay before that encyclical was published had led the Catholic laity to expect a lifting of the ban on (specifically) the non-mechanical method of the Pill, and many of them had jumped the gun—only to be told in 1968 that they now had to give up the Pill to which they had become accustomed.

*Humanae vitae* was therefore widely seen as a counsel of perfection, and it became commonplace for married Church members (at least in developed countries) to disobey the contraception ban, while many progressive priests connived at this. And once you disobey a pope in one matter, you can no longer regard him as infallible. It is then but a small step to pick and choose among his edicts in general. So it has proved quite disastrous for papal authority in the past 30 years.

## Failed

This was the climate in which the present Pope took office ten years later; and though not for want of trying, he has failed conspicuously to regain the lost authority—which is, in a strange way, personal poetic justice if he actually drafted important sections of *Humanae vitae*. In any case, throughout his 20-year reign (so far), he has quoted approvingly from it in his speeches and in several encyclicals, "apostolic exhortations", and other messages to the faithful.

In the papal election of October 1978, Karol's uncompromising stand on sexual matters, the role of women, and "family values", may well have given him the vital votes of die-hard members of the College of Cardinals, while his left-of-centre reputation in the economic sphere would have made him acceptable to the more progressive, mostly younger, cardinals—many of whom, in fact, may not have been fully aware of the extent of his sexual intransigence.

During the 1982 papal visit to London, I wrote him a letter pointing out that in this country more than a third of all abortion operations are, disproportionately, carried out on Catholic women—mostly young, sin-



**How long can the Vatican stand out against the tide of social history?**

gle, Catholic women, who are reluctant to take contraceptive precautions, since that would indicate an unforgivable prior readiness to "sin" rather than mere human frailty. Needless to say, I never received a reply, and have no means of knowing whether he ever read my letter; but in the 1995 encyclical he specifically denied that the prohibition of contraceptive facilities leads to more abortion. Indeed, he saw the two as "fruits of the same tree".

The whole gamut of Catholic bio-ethics, from embryology to euthanasia, turns on the doctrine of an immortal soul. At one time, theologians laid down a particular week in the pregnancy when the soul entered the foetus (a few weeks later for female foetuses than for males!), but modern theologians admit they have no knowledge of the actual timing; so, to be on the safe side, it has been assumed that ensoulment takes place at the moment of fertilisation of the human ovum—and most Catholics, including the Pope, now seem to regard this as fact. It is expressed in the favourite statement of all "pro-lifers", repeated yet again in this encyclical: "Life begins at conception".

That is, of course, a biological nonsense, as there is no beginning for any individual life. The unfertilised egg is a living entity, and was present in the mother when she herself was a foetus. Similarly, the sperma-



Pope's recent edict, *Ad tuendam fidem* (In Defence of something of an expert on human sexuality.

# LIVE CELIBATE POPE

tozoon is a living entity.

When the two come together, that is an important stage in the life cycle, but no more than that.

Another favourite pro-life phrase is "The embryo is human".

Of course it is human—it is not a non-human embryo, such as that of a chicken—but that is not to say that it is a human being, any more than a human finger-nail is a human being. It is impossible to point to a particular moment when a human being develops, since development is a gradual process. Our response to it must therefore be flexible.

Even the dictum "Life begins at conception" fails to explain the Catholic prohibition on artificial means of birth control. That seems to hinge on the anti-sex attitude that sexual pleasure can be justified only if it entails a chance of conception, thus enabling God to bring another soul into being. All other sexual activity is "dirty", presumably because the reproductive organs are so close to the organs of excretion—a puzzling error made by the Creator!

## Laxative

It might be supposed, on basic principles, that the technology of artificial insemination, which has already produced many thousands of "test-tube" babies that would otherwise never have existed, would meet with the Pope's approval; for it is surely "pro-life", if anything is. However, it, too, is "morally wrong" in his eyes, for three reasons: first, because it is "unnatural" (it's a wonder that the Church allows the faithful an unnatural laxative or aspirin); secondly, because the semen is generally obtained by means of masturbation—another dirty, unpaid-for pleasure; and thirdly, because the custom of producing half-a-dozen fertilised ova at one time entails the destruction of those that prove to be surplus, or, worse, their preservation for medical research. IVF is therefore acceptable only when the semen used is that of the husband and has been obtained during coitus with his wife—for which a condom is allowable, provided it has been specially perforated! More important, no extra eggs may be fertilised so as to save the mother from repeated operations, as all fertilised ova must be implanted in her womb, even if known to be defective, and even if resulting in life-threatening multiple births.

In January 1989, a theological crisis was precipitated by the dissident document known as the *Declaration of Cologne*,

signed by 163 North European (German, Austrian, Dutch and Swiss) theologians, and later supported by many more. It demanded, *inter alia*, a modification of the total ban on contraception, and the 1995 encyclical was partly a put-down of that demand.

Then fifty thousand women converged on Beijing for the fourth United Nations Conference on Women. As expected, the greatest controversy was on the worldwide campaign for greater access to contraception and for legal abortion, both predictably opposed by delegates from Catholic countries and from a number of conservative Muslim countries—in temporary alliance, as they had been on the same issue at the Earth Summit in Cairo. On abortion, they were also supported by a few fundamentalist Protestants, including two British delegates from the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children. But they were severely trounced by the liberal camp, spearheaded by Platform for Action and backed by a large majority of the delegates, including those of the European Union, with a more responsible attitude towards the world's population explosion.

The Vatican itself sent a large delegation to Beijing—surprisingly headed by an American woman law professor, Mary Ann Glendon. She loudly proclaimed equal rights for women, while aiming to deny them rights over their own bodies.

Homosexuals in almost every Christian sect are made to feel guilty about their own nature, and homosexual Catholic priests particularly so. The next pope might well be less intransigent on this issue than the present one. In particular, the use of condoms by gays, included in the Vatican's blanket ban on condoms—except for the perforated ones used in obtaining semen from husbands for IVF—is obviously crucial in preventing the spread of HIV; but the Pope will not compromise his insistence on total gay celibacy.

How long can the Vatican stand out against the tide of social history? The present Pope will never change; but he can live for only a few more years. Younger members of the College of Cardinals, though chosen finally by the Pope, are inevitably less reactionary on sexual matters than those too old to have a vote, and are ready for a change of policy; so the next pope is likely to be comparatively permissive.

Early on in the reign of the next pope, the 800-year-old rule of clerical celibacy will almost certainly be made voluntary, if only because Catholic bishops are desperate about the number of priests leaving the

priesthood. In the USA they are said to number 42 per cent, of whom 90 per cent blame the celibacy mandate for their leaving. Besides, all the recent publicity given to the widespread sexual malpractices of priests, both with women and with vulnerable boys, points to the advisability of making celibacy voluntary. During the pontificate of Paul VI (1963-78), the requests of priests for laicisation so as to marry were received sympathetically, but the present Pope put a stop to this laxity, and made it much more difficult for a priest to leave the priesthood without being excommunicated—apparently failing to predict that this would inevitably mean a rise in the incidence of priestly "affairs".

Acceptance of women to the priesthood will not be far behind a relaxation on celibacy for priests, if not for gays. There are several reasons for this—including the shortage of priests, political correctness on sex equality, and the desire for expansion through rapprochement with the Anglican communion.

## Disobeyed

The acceptance of artificial contraception—at least, by certain methods—is also likely to follow closely on the election of the next pope, though the prohibition of abortion, widely disobeyed though it is, will almost certainly persist.

Sexuality has always loomed large in the problems that beset Mother Church—from the neurotic hangups of St Paul, through the sexual scandals of the medieval papal court and of supposedly celibate clergy and monastics, through the Anglican schism triggered by Henry's lust for Anne Boleyn, to the insidious rebellion of millions of Catholic women against the Vatican's continued ban on artificial contraception.

Comparatively flexible as the Anglican communion is, the differences exposed in the Lambeth Conference last month are making it difficult to hold together the Sea of Faith theologians at the one extreme and some of the fundamentalist African bishops at the other. There was a time when WASPS could afford to ignore African opinion, but now it represents their only strong growth area—as, coincidentally, it does also for the Church of Rome—and most of the African Christian converts, of both denominations, are as reactionary as the Pope himself.

*BARRY DUKE peers into the workings of the Peniel Pentecostal Church and its leader 'Bishop' Michael Reid, who reportedly believes God gave women bigger bottoms so that they could be spanked.*



**T**HE PENIEL Pentecostal Church, based in Brentwood, Essex, got a great deal of publicity in July—publicity its leader, a 55-year-old insurance salesman and former policeman, no doubt wishes he never received.

For under the headline: *The sect that preyed on my life*, the *Express* of July 12, reported the case of Caroline Green, a woman who had been a leading member of the Church until she realised that Reid and his organisation had taken complete control of her life and that of her family.

### Key

It had done more than that: at the beginning of the year, almost 200 members of the church suddenly took up membership of the Brentwood and Essex Conservative Association, and voted themselves into the club's key positions.

Far from being a source of concern to the local MP, Eric Pickles, he went on record as saying he welcomed the new members.

Caroline, 30, told the *Express* she believed the move was part of Reid's obsession with power and influence.

"He is power-crazed and lives a luxurious lifestyle on the back of the church members and their contributions," she told reporter Matthew Mervyn Jones. "He wants to control local politics and strengthen his power base."

# CULT TAKES OVER ENTIRE TORY BRANCH

Caroline added: "Peniel and Mike Reid are utterly controlling. They run your whole life, what you wear, where you go, what you say, and, of course, what you think."

She claimed that the church also controls its members' finances—and provides everything from mortgages to life insurance.

"They handle everything. You can't even go away for the weekend without asking the church's permission."

Caroline estimates that she and her ex-husband had given the church more than £40,000 and at one stage had 13 insurance policies with it.

Caroline Green's disenchantment with the sect after 16 years and the subsequent break-up of her marriage occurred after she began questioning the church's methods and the attitudes of its leader, a former policeman who, she says, believes that children are demons who need thrashing and that God gave women bigger bottoms so that they can be spanked. He attacks homosexuality, the Church of England and vegetarianism.

### Anger

Pressure was put on her marriage when Caroline began voicing her anger over the "extreme control" Reid and the church had over her family's life. Her husband told her that he could not break with the sect. "He chose Peniel and Mike Reid ahead of his children, which is ironic that Reid always said the family was the most important thing in life."

'Bishop' Michael Reid says his qualifications are recognised by the Evangelical Alliance, and that the EA does not consider his church a cult. However, Catalyst, an anti-cult counselling service, says it has dealt with a number of people who have left the Peniel Pentecostal Church.

## Interested in working for the National Secular Society?

A part-time Administration Assistant is sought to work on book-keeping and membership records. PC experience (including spreadsheets) is essential.

Hours are variable and salary is to be agreed. Please contact the General Secretary, Keith Porteous Wood, for further details.

The NSS address is 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Tel/fax 0171 404 3126. Email [kpw@secularism.org.uk](mailto:kpw@secularism.org.uk).

## The battle against religion has to go on

ALTHOUGH great progress has been made in diminishing the power of the church, there are still too many areas in which meddling bishops and religious organisations have a disproportionate amount of influence. Our battle will go on until we are finally free of these dangerous influences. Your contributions are invaluable in continuing the fight.

Our thanks to: £270 S Reid; £25 G Lyons, M Phillips, D Towers; £20 T Bowen, E Charlton, L Dubow, A Glaiser, P Housego, M Irwin, K Sotheran; £15 G Colling; £14 I Campbell; £13 A Eden; £10 C Adams, B Albers, M Chase, A Clunas, J Clunas, R Deacon, G

Fraser, J Grierson, R Hale, E Hughes, B Lockyer, W MGhie, P Somers, A Stone & E Whyte, S Tatner, G Taylor, G Taylor, O Thompson; £8 K Gerken, M Smith; £7 P Jordan; £5 B Clark, W Compton Hall, D Craddock, N Ellicott, A Gose, N Green, J Hutton, W Keeton, R Leveridge, D Martin, G Meaden, D Roberts, N Sandieson, R Walton; £4 H Ash; £3 W Carter, D Harding, J Jenkins, R Newman; £2 A Ludlow, M Palmer; £1 J Fortes.

**Total from July 13 to August 16: £821.**

● Donations to the Peter Brearey Memorial Fund, which closed at the end of August, will be announced separately.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union Board has formalised – through the adoption of a new set of by-laws – far-reaching organisational changes that the Board initiated at its meeting in Mexico in November 1996.

# Seven new groups welcomed

**A**T ITS meeting of July 21 and 22, 1998, at Heidelberg, the Board (consisting of representatives of IHEU member organisations) renamed itself the General Assembly, and the Executive Committee has been redesignated the Board of Directors of the IHEU. The new General Assembly (formerly the Board) continues to have a key policy setting and controlling function.

The budget for 1998 as proposed by the Treasurer was approved of, and the Board (now called the General Assembly) expressed its appreciation for the work done in the past year by the Executive Committee (now called the Board). The Executive Committee has been authorised to finalise several outstanding financial matters.

Full details of all the decisions made will be available in the official minutes.

Seven new Member Organisations were also welcomed into the IHEU fold:

- UVV, Belgium (full voting member)
- Afro-Asian Philosophy Association (Egypt; Associate Member)
- Delphi Society (Greece; Associate Member)
- Humanist Association of Nepal, (HUMAN) (Nepal; Associate Member)
- Indian Renaissance Institute (India; Associate Member)
- Russian Humanist Society (Russia, Associate Member)
- Satya Shodhak Sabha (India; Associate Member)

At the end of the meeting in Heidelberg, elections were held to the vacancies announced previously: a new President (Mr Levi Fragell by acclamation) and two new Vice Presidents (Ms Jane Wynne Willson and Mr John Leeson) have been elected.

In addition, as Vice-President Prof Vern Bullough announced his resignation, the Board approved by acclamation the nomination of another Vice-President (Ms Liesbeth Mulder) to complete Prof Vern Bullough's term which comes to an end at the IHEU's January 1999 Bombay Meeting).

Outgoing President of IHEU, Prof Robert A P Tielman, abstained from the Board meeting at Heidelberg.

The NEW team is:

President:

Levi Fragell (by acclamation)

Vice Presidents:

Jane Wynne Willson (re-elected)

John Leeson (elected)

Liesbeth Mulder (by acclamation, to complete Vern Bullough's term)

Fred Cook (continues)

Treasurer:

Ms Robbi Robson (continues)

Executive Director

Babu Gogineni (ex-officio)

Levi Fragell is 59 years old, has been an IHEU Board member since 1976, and has a professional background in journalism and public relations.

The Norwegian Human Etisk Forbund under his leadership saw a phenomenal growth. He is currently the HEF's International Secretary.

Jane Wynne Willson has been a co-president of IHEU since 1993, and a Vice President since 1996. She is the author of the popular manuals for humanist funeral, wedding and baby-naming ceremonies in the UK, and has recently authored a book on humanist parenting.

John Leeson has been a Board Member of IHEU since 1985, and during 1988-92 and 96-98 was involved in the revision of the IHEU by-laws. He was the first President of the European Humanist Federation, and is currently its networking officer. He is also presently the British Humanist Association's Treasurer.

## Quality

Liesbeth Mulder is the acting President of the Dutch Humanist League. She is professionally active in the Dutch Public Education policy initiatives, and is also a music teacher.

In his Presidential statement, entitled IHEU in a Modern World, Levi Fragell said: "When I first time took part in an IHEU board meeting, in 1976, the quality and qualifications of the people I met amazed me. Almost all of them were doctors and professors, and by reading their books and articles I learnt everything I know about humanism. Since my own profession was marketing and public relation, I found it strange, though, that such a prominent group of leaders had not been able to make IHEU a visible alternative in a world of corrupt religions and mistrusted ideologies.

"I soon realised that the main reason for this shortcoming was the fact that the IHEU did not look upon growth as a very urgent matter, and did not at all have a professional strategy for growth. I volunteered as a leader of the IHEU Committee for Development and Growth, and with the American humanist leader Paul Kurtz as the dynamic and creative force, we succeeded to double the number of affiliated groups.

"But we are still very far away from being a well known and internationally respected alternative to the religions. This fact is primarily a challenge to our 100 local and national member organisations.

"A tree grows from its roots. There are many ways to organisational growth, due to local and national conditions, but the starting point will always be to make growth the top priority (for a shorter or longer period). The next step is to make a strategy—for one day or one year. Evaluate continuously, and drop methods that do not work! Here are a few ideas:

1. Dare to challenge power structures when they violate humanist principles, even if the mighty ones are the local bishop or the government. Polite letters do not attract attention. Even small demonstrations outside churches and city halls do, especially when they are well prepared with press releases etc.

2. Never leave your office without a couple of humanist leaflets and application forms in your bag.

3. Use the international humanist symbol to identify yourself and your cause.

4. Make simple logos, with Humanism in eight letters as the identity tag, without confusing additional qualifying expressions.

5. Support our representatives in international bodies like the UN, UNESCO, Council of Europe etc, so that they will wave our banners vigorously when humanist questions are discussed.

6. Do not use more than 1 per cent your valuable time to quarrel with other humanists.

"Of course I realise the necessity of having philosophically competent humanist leaders to represent us in the intellectual and academic world.

"There are too few of them, actually, on the barricades. Which is exactly a part of our problem: The lack of a growth strategy means that we also have failed to use our scholars in an efficient way.

"One hundred eminent humanist speakers in a humanist congress are less useful for our movement than one single eminent humanist speaker in an audience of one hundred college students.

"Have I said this before? Certainly. And this will not be the last time."

## 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.

# NEW TITLES ARE ADDED TO THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS SERIES

**S**IX NEW titles have been added to this admirable series, each one featuring a writer who could justifiably be called a freethinker, ranging from Democritus (c460-370BC) to Popper (1902-1994). Aristotle, Spinoza, Hume and Kant are the other four, although Kenneth McLeish's contribution on the first of these is concerned only with the Poetics

Aristotle, however, is important to our understanding of Democritus, the great atomistic philosopher. Plato was, as Paul Cartledge says, "ringingly silent about Democritus by name" and was, indeed, largely responsible (along with, I would add, the Christian Church) in driving "from the market all earlier philosophers apart from Socrates"—and the Platonic Socrates, at that. We may have nearly 300 fragments attributed to Democritus, but we cannot be sure of their authenticity, and this figure must be contrasted with the huge number of his works that were listed by Diogenes Laertius in the third century of our era.

## Atoms

It is chiefly thanks to Aristotle and his pupils that we know as much as we do about Democritus' physics, his "atoms and the void". How remarkable this theory has been acknowledged by the late Nobel laureate Erwin Schrodinger (1887-1961), who wrote: "Matter is constituted of particles, separated by comparatively large distances; it is embedded in empty space. This notion goes back to Leucippus and Democritus, who lived in Abdera in the fifth century BC. This conception of particles and empty space is retained today...and not only that, there is a complete historical continuity."

That may not be quite right, now the atom has been split. Cartledge points out that the Greek atomon meant an entity that could not be cut or divided; but we can reasonably ask what other comparable concept held the field for so long before being superseded? Democritus was not only a physicist but a cosmologist, geologist, medical writer and an ethical and political philosopher... "Everything happens according to necessity; for the cause of coming-into-being of all things is the whirl (vortex) which he (Democritus) calls necessity", wrote Diogenes Laertius. But necessity wasn't simply identified with the whirl, says Cartledge: for

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Review: COLIN MCCALL

Democritus, "the physical process as a whole happens necessarily, given the nature (size, shape, mutual 'fit') of atoms in their relation to the void". Moreover, the system as a whole functions "independently of any omniscient and omnipotent demiurge".

Democritean fragments, Cartledge continues, "present the clearest ancient statement of the possibility and existence of innumerable worlds", in opposition to "the dominant strand of ancient cosmology represented by Plato and Aristotle". And if Democritus didn't explicitly deny design and purpose, as Epicurus did, his theory "absolutely required him to suspend active religious belief". For him, too, the "soul" was no less material than the body, which contained "soul-atoms" like a "tent".

Known as "the laughing philosopher" because he encouraged cheerfulness, Democritus was really an advocate of moderation. For him, as Cartledge remarks, "Enough was as good as a feast".

Necessity, or determinism, is the link with Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), whose *Ethics* is described by Roger Scruton as "perhaps the most enigmatic book of philosophy that has ever been written". The enigma, as I see it, concerns Spinoza's God, which (and I say "which" rather than "who") can sometimes be identified with nature and yet is not. It is not a God one can worship and certainly not one from whom one can seek favours, because he has already predetermined everything. God is "a being absolutely infinite", that is, "a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, each of which expresses an eternal and infinite essence". There is only one substance in the world and this substance is God. Nothing in nature is contingent. In Spinoza's own words, "all things have been determined

from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way".

We are mistaken in thinking ourselves free; we are conscious of our actions but "ignorant of the causes by which they are determined". We should live by the dictates of reason because, in Spinoza's view, that makes us "free" men. Freedom is not release from necessity but, as Scruton puts it, "the consciousness of necessity that comes when we see the world sub specie aeternitatis and ourselves as bound by immutable laws". And in Spinoza's most famous aphorism, "A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation upon life".

"The greatest of British philosophers; the most profound, penetrating and comprehensive". Anthony Quinton is, of course, speaking about David Hume (1711-1776). And it is a tribute to Hume that he can be presented mostly in his own words.

## Rubble

It was in *The Dialogues on Natural Religion* that Hume targeted the argument from design and, as Quinton comments, "Never has such a large, widely believed and intellectually respectable doctrine been so devastatingly and stylishly reduced to rubble". Then, in the *Essays*, Hume surely says the final word on Christianity: "Upon the whole, we may conclude, that the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one".

Quinton's conclusion is that "Hume was not solemn enough to appeal to John Stuart Mill, whose theory of knowledge is, all the same, a kind of domestication of Hume. Russell, as mischievous and joke-loving as Hume, saw his own philosophy as a combination of Hume with modern logic. Wherever analytical philosophy is alive, as it still is in quite a number of places, Hume, more than any other great philosopher of the past, is still a force to reckon with".

*The Phoenix Great Philosophers* series is edited by Ray Monk and Frederic Raphael. The latter evaluates Karl Popper's opposition to historicism, while Ralph Walker elucidates the moral law of Kant (1724-1804). So there is much to think about in these little books on great thinkers; and they are delightfully produced at a price that anyone can afford.

# BELIEFS AND FICTIONS

**F**ULL MARKS to Le Poidevin for a volume whose clarity and conciseness make it a pleasure to read. The discussion includes, and clarifies, contemporary variants of the traditional arguments for and against the existence of God, and goes on to outline an approach to a 'religion without God'. This interlocking complex of ideas is made eminently comprehensible to the non-specialist.

The author restates, and discusses, several versions of the cosmological argument for the existence of God as a first cause of the universe. He concludes that, because of its relationship to time, such a first cause is so different from the ordinary notion of a cause, that the universe cannot be said to be caused in any ordinary sense of the word.

Le Poidevin also deals with tradition and current versions of the ontological argument, in which analysis of the word 'God' is said to show that God's existence is logically necessary. A traditional version, first expounded by St Anselm, is generally regarded as being invalid. However, a current version, known as the modal ontological argument, makes use of the ideas of possibility and necessity, and has given rise to much controversy.

## Clarity

The involvement of modal logic in these and other contemporary philosophical arguments, has led, for reasons of argumentative clarity, to the concept of possible worlds, but the author's considerable comments lead him to conclude that the concept is an unsatisfactory one for the theist.

Traditional teleological arguments for God's existence, based on a supposed design or purpose in the universe, have, since Darwin, been increasingly considered to be both superfluous and invalid. On the other hand, recent teleological arguments have claimed to see purpose, not in the end results of natural laws, in the traditional way, but in the laws themselves. Some scientists, for example, noting that the occurrence of life in the universe has depended on some supposedly improbable values for fundamental physical constants, have concluded that the intervention, if not of a traditional God, then of some creative intelligence, is required. However, such arguments take the concept of probability outside its normal context, and it can be argued that it is not intelligible to talk of the inherent probability of natural laws in the universe as a whole.

Accepting that we are not the outcome of design, some nevertheless still seek an explanation of some sort for observed values of the fundamental constants, and, for them, the weak anthropic principal is on offer. This is said to explain critical features of the universe by pointing out that if they were absent, we would not be here to observe them. Le Poidevin argues that the weak anthropic principal is not trivial, because the relationship which it seeks is causal and not

*Arguing for Atheism; an introduction to the philosophy of Religion* (1996. Routledge. Hardback: ISBN 0-415-09337-6, £37.50, Softback: ISBN 0-415-09338-4, £11.99).

Review: DOUG BRAMWELL

logical; the point is controversial.

An alternative explanation, the strong anthropic principal, states that the universe must have the properties which allow the development of observers within it. Although not always made clear by its advocates, the 'must' is intended in the strong sense that implies that the universe has a purpose, and this seems, to many, to be merely a restatement of the argument from design. Possible escape routes are provided by science; first, some versions of the inflationary big-bang theory allow for the existence of multiple universes with differing physical constants, and, second, an as-yet-to-be-discovered theory-of-everything may provide an ultimate explanation.

The author discusses a moral version of the strong anthropic principal, in which the universe has to be such to permit the emergence of moral agents. After discussing the selfish gene hypotheses, he concludes that this version leads, once more, in the direction of theism and, it would seem, the argument from design.

In considering the most difficult of all the theist's problems—that of the presence of evil in a world supposedly created by a God both omnipotent and benevolent—Le Poidevin discusses, at length, the traditional theistic defences which centre on human freedom and determinism. Many theists admit that these defences are inadequate, and, in the case of the suffering caused by natural disasters, they are not even relevant. An alternative theistic stance is that the justification of evil is just not accessible to us—surely an admission of defeat.

Unable to solve the difficulties that confront them, some theists argue that we may usefully continue to deploy religious language even if we do not take it to be descriptive of reality—in other words, even if we accept that God does not exist. Le Poidevin argues that religion without God—religious observances, even if make-believe—can benefit the individual and the community.

Many readers will be unable to support the author's advocacy of such pseudo-religious practices, or believe that, in the long term, they could lead to a healthy stability in a society of non-believers. Similar arguments might be put forward in support of behaviour relating to aliens, spiritual healers, channelers, gurus and fortune tellers, even if they are known to be fictional or fraudulent. Looking back over the history of organised religion, few atheists or doubters could feel confidence in the benefits of religious prac-

tice—whether directed towards an object of fiction, or of supposed fact.

This raises the point whether it is feasible, as many sceptics advocate, to exclude religious beliefs from their enquiries. In relation to matters of practical investigation, this is possible—although any contemporary claims of religious miracles must surely be examined. As sceptics, we advocate a rational, scientific basis for behaviour and where, along the path from theist deities to New Age prophets, do we choose to abandon our rationalism? But enough!

Le Poidevin ends his book with a chapter asking whether atheists should fear death. He does not believe that we exist in some disembodied form after death, but challenges our ordinary concept of time 'flowing'. He puts forward the idea that past, present and future are equally real, in time, just as here and there are equally real in space. As a consequence, death need longer be seen as the passage to oblivion but, like birth, one of the temporal limits to our lives.

## Experience

The author does not, unfortunately, tell us whether there is a sense in which, outside these temporal limits, we experience our lives. If so, we need to discuss the nature of the experience; if not, we are back to oblivion. Nor does Le Poidevin add any structural detail to his concept of time—structure which might explain the apparent passage of time during 'life'. Likewise, the special theory of relativity is not considered; its relevance is most obvious in Minkowski's interpretation in terms of four-dimensional space time. Especially relevant for the time structure problem seems to be the proven relativity of simultaneity for different observers.

This review, by its selectivity, compression and comment, no doubt distorts Le Poidevin's arguments—particularly the balance of his overall approach to the atheist/theist complex of problems. That balance can be restored by reading the book.

Also, the last few paragraphs of the review have pointed out some areas needing more attention. The advocacy of belief in 'fictions', for example, needs a more detailed defence, and the author's concept of time requires a great deal of filling out. Subjects for further books? Let us hope so.

● Chapter headings: Must the universe have a cause? Is God necessary? Could the universe have an explanation? Are we the outcome of chance or design? Does the universe have a purpose? Are God and ethics inseparable or incompatible? Is there a problem of evil? Is God a fiction? Is 'Does God exist' a real question? Should the atheist fear death? Also: chapter summaries; suggested reading, bibliography; glossary; index.

# You're telling us!

## Left-wing bias

HOW I agree with Nigel Meek's letter (*Freethinker*, June). Every time I renew my subscription to the *Freethinker*, I do it more reluctantly, simply because of the left-wing bias of so many articles.

The nub of the problem is this: more humanists, atheists and agnostics are on the political left than on the right. In fact, roughly the same proportion of them are not left-wing as the proportion of the general population which is not religious.

Many of these left-wing humanists, atheists and agnostics feel their humanism to be inextricably linked with their political views, and so feel they have a right to inflict their politics on the rest of us. That politics and religion are not linked is borne out simply by statistics and it is bigotry to maintain that they are.

The change of editorship which must result from the sad death of Peter Brearey provides an opportunity for a clear statement of intent by the *Freethinker*, both in the choice of a new editor and in his first editorial. I want to know, as does Nigel Meek, whether the *Freethinker* is a socialist magazine or not. Please come clean!

**FRANCES WATKINS**  
Oxford

## Don't confuse Socialism with collectivism

MY REVIEW of *Socialism and Religion* has drawn a couple of comments. Both are based on misunderstanding, and one cancels out the other.

Nigel Meek confounds Socialism (which I defined briefly as a moneyless, classless society) with collectivism, by which I suppose he means state capitalist societies like the USSR as was, which have nothing to do with Socialism at all. Whatever its historical role may have been, capitalism nowadays artificially restricts production to what is profitable and limits human freedom by forcing people to toil as wage slaves.

Howard Hill regards Socialism as idealistic, whereas I see it as a totally practical alternative to what exists now. I'm sure he will have read Nigel Meek's letter, and seen that atheists can still be apologists for capitalism. Attempts to remove all the obfuscations thrown up by class society will never end, as new ones keep appearing. Let's instead get rid of the underlying cause of people's confusion and misery.

**PAUL BENNETT**  
Chorlton  
Manchester

## Failed philosophy

I COMPLETELY agree with Nigel Meek (Letters, June).

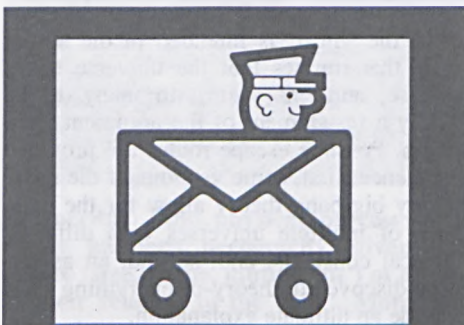
I have complained for a number of years about the socialist slant of the *Freethinker*. It cost the magazine a number of donations from me.

As I pointed out to [former editor] Bill McIlroy; why should I pay to support a philosophy that has been branded a failure around the world, and now even in this country?

So, Peter Brearey was working on data that supported Karl Marx's trash—was he also working on proof that pigs can fly?

By definition, the *Freethinker* is supposed to be politically neutral. How about trying it for a change with the next editor.

**MICHAEL HILL**  
Gillingham  
Kent



*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*

## God's bottom

AS A NEW reader of the *Freethinker*, I hesitate to make any correction. But I was so intrigued by Karl Heath's mention of God's "bottom" (Ask the Parson, June) that I made a rare dip into the Bible.

The reference is to verse 23, not 33, in chapter 33 of Exodus. And, in the twenty-one words of this verse, you can read about God's "hand", "back parts" and "face" (although the last named "shall not be seen")!

I find Ask the Parson a most instructive and entertaining feature—excellent material to offer one's religious acquaintances.

**MICHAEL IRWIN**  
London SW3

## Common sense

HAVING recently subscribed I thought I'd drop you a line to let you know how pleased I was to discover a publication crammed full of common sense (although we can all see that there is, sadly, no such thing in reality) tinged with a dis-

paraging humour for all things religious. I really enjoyed the piece on The Simpsons, Karl Heath's "How big is God?" and the thought-provoking possibilities hinted at in Barry Duke's "Bring on the Clones".

I don't think I could generalise as to recipients of the death penalty to the extent that Raymond Challinor seems to be able to. I couldn't possibly feel as outraged at the execution of someone who had systematically hunted down, tortured and killed innocent people as I would for someone who had, say, stolen a loaf of bread. Is it, I wonder, the fact that it is the State that carries it out as opposed to an individual that provokes the shouts of "injustice"?

If you were attacked in the street by someone intent on stabbing you with a kitchen knife would you not be justified in defending yourself? Even if that meant hitting them over the head with the nearest thing to hand, say a metal bar, that could easily kill them (without trial!) You would have enacted the death penalty. I regard the torture of the prolonged trial and appeal system in the States to be the cruellest aspect of the death penalty.

I would also take issue with Nigel Meek's assertion that "the more fully capitalist a nation's socio-economic settlement the greater the material prosperity and personal liberty of the vast majority of its citizens, not just for the favoured few..." How vast a majority do you require as proof of this Nigel? (51 per cent maybe?)

I hasten to add that I am no card-carrying socialist but capitalism is not the road to the promised land as some people seem to have convinced themselves because they're doing all right, Jack!

**STEPHEN DULSON**  
Fareham  
Hants

## Is satire subversive?

BARRY Duke's article, *Subversive Simpsons Are A Sceptic's Delight* (*Freethinker*, June) makes the common mistake of confusing satire with subversion.

Rather than undermining the institutions it attacks, satire more commonly bolsters them, by providing a safety valve allowing critical pressure to be released before it reaches levels that threatens them.

The Oxford Union once debated the motion *Satire is Subversive* with John Bird, from *That was The Week That Was*, supporting the motion, and Peter Cook, of *Not So Much A Programme, More A way of life, Beyond the Fringe* and *Private Eye* etc, opposing.

Bird insisted that *TW3* had brought down the Tory Government in 1964; Cook pointed out that the far more scurrilous and abrasive *Cabaret* of pre-war Berlin had manifestly failed to bring down Hitler and thereby prevent World War Two. Cook won the debate.

If satire was subversive; surely the proliferation of satirical political comedy in this country in the 1980s (*The Comic Strip, Spitting Image, Ben Elton* etc) would have brought down Thatcher, long before she actually was humbled

# You're telling us!

From Page 14

by Sir Geoffrey Howe changing his vote in favour of Major in the second ballot.

In any case, *The Simpsons* is distributed by 20th Century Fox and broadcast by Sky TV, both subsidiaries of News International Inc, a company which does not permit trade unions at its newspaper printing works, as anyone with memories of the 1985-86 Wapping Strike would know. If Rupert Murdoch thought that *The Simpsons* was in any way, shape or form subversive of the current *status quo* he would certainly never permit it to be broadcast!

On another matter, Nigel Meek (Letters, June) brackets Socialism with "other similar ideologies antipathetic to personal freedom".

As a lifelong socialist myself, I have always believed that the effect of an ideology providing for unrestrained free access to the necessities of life, to be attained through the vehicle of universal common ownership and the abolition of private property, would be to enhance human freedom, not destroy it.

I suspect that when Mr Meek accuses Socialism of destroying "choice" and "freedom", he really means that it destroys the privileges of the rich.

Sooner or later, all anti-socialists resort to quoting from George Orwell's *1984*, a badly written, crude and violently anti-socialist novel intended as a thinly-veiled attack on the 1945 Labour Government, which articulated the fears and hatreds of the middle- and upper-classes and set out in print how they felt about the reforms enacted by that government (full employment; rights for trades unions, a free health service, council housing etc); it is a fact that every government which brought about a shift in the balance of wealth in favour of working people has always been accused by the bourgeoisie of destroying "freedom" and "choice".

It comes as no surprise to me that recent revelations show Orwell to have been an informer who denounced men like Paul Robeson, Charlie Chaplin and George Bernard Shaw to the Secret Service. Orwell, the anti-socialist *par excellence*, stands revealed as a grass; one who betrays his friends to the bosses; one whose usual fate, when discovered, is to have his knees broken, and rightly so.

When *The Road To Wigan Pier* appeared in print, along with its singularly unflattering portrayal of working-class people as pig-like semi-humanoids grubbing in the muck, the socialist author and critic Jack Hilton warned that Orwell's professed socialism (at that time) was only a pose and could not be relied upon, but he was dismissed as jealous.

When *1984* appeared, Hilton could only shake his head sadly and say "I told you so".

**KEITH ACKERMANN**  
Tilbury  
Essex

## Correct date of the Millennium

STUART Campbell's letter published in the June issue of the *Freethinker* raises more ques-

tions than it answers.

He is correct in stating that the census referred to by Luke must have been that of AD 6. Why then does Mr Campbell put the birth of Jesus at 1 BC and not AD 6? He rejects Matthew's version of events, ie Holy Family's Flight into Egypt to avoid Herod the Great's "Massacre of the Innocents" c 5 BC then settlement in Tetrarchy of Galilee in AD4 on partition of the Herodian realm.

Why not instead accept Luke's rival version, ie Census of AD6, during which the Holy Family went to the new Roman province of Judea to register as Roman subjects?

The Gospels were Christian propaganda and dealt with events within living memory. To preserve their credibility, the evangelists therefore had to avoid fabrications unless necessary to fulfil a prophecy relating to the Messiah.

Mr Campbell correctly alludes to some, eg Bethlehem as place of birth to fulfil the prophecy of Micah, the "Massacre of the Innocents" (not mentioned by Luke or Josephus) to fulfil the prophecy of Jeremiah, and Nazareth as home town to fulfil the prophecy in Judges XII 5 & 7. Luke's link between the Census of AD 6 and the birth of Jesus is not, however, needed to fulfil any prophecy and refers to a documented historical event. Why does Mr Campbell reject it?

**E GOODMAN**  
Redhill  
Surrey

## Drosnin's Bible Code

ABOUT A year ago I introduced Drosnin's Bible Code to readers of my weekly sceptical column in a local daily. I have made one or two follow-ups, but had been hoping to see some comment on Drosnin in the *Freethinker*, on which I could base a satisfactory refutation of Drosnin. However I have seen nothing until Colin McCall's paragraph in the July issue saying that three mathematicians had found similar "predictions" in Moby-Dick.

Statistically one would expect this, but it doesn't quite deal with the fact that the original study by Rips and two others used control texts including the Hebrew translation of Tolstoy's War and Peace, and other texts produced by randomising the word sequence of the original text. Only in the original text were the "messages" found to be statistically significant.

I find it hard to believe three eminent mathematicians would deliberately doctor the evidence. Does any reader have an alternative explanation?

**DAVID SIMPSON**  
Lusaka  
Zambia

## Hard-hitting or crudely outspoken?

AS A regular reader may I express appreciation of the successful efforts made to maintain continuity during this recent sad and trying time.

Warmest thanks are due to Barry Duke and to Pamela Brearey. I am especially well placed to see what Pam has been doing these few months; let it be said that we all owe her immense respect and gratitude for serving us well beyond the call of duty when a lesser person might have retreated into a merely personal shell.

With a new editor in the pipeline it might be worthwhile to make a general comment about future direction.

Having a circulation of millions, an editor might, understandably if not defensibly, imagine that (s)he has a free remit to be as crudely outspoken as the mood dictates; such an editor can, but should not, disregard the few remaining potential readers. Our situation is that we, having a circulation of not many thousands, must be aware that our potential readership is (assuming that we believe that what we have to say is worthy of wider notice) far larger and far broader than our current readership.

How to be honestly hard hitting as to content, without being offensive to people whose skins are as thin as ours, is a very difficult problem continuously to solve. It is no disrespect to the living, and none indeed to the dead, that we have not always solved this problem in a sufficiently satisfactory manner.

If a good point is made in a way that is gratuitously hurtful to people who are guilty of not agreeing with us then that point is likely to be lost. It is simply easier for people to lick their wounds than it is for them to revise their ideas. It is revising their ideas that we wish them to do; perhaps we need to revise some of our own.

We cannot afford a tabloid style because we have not a tabloid's circulation. Our potential readers are people who do not share many of our assumptions and are never likely to if we give them too many opportunities to trip up over style when they ought to be evaluating content.

**ERIC STOCKTON**  
Sanday

## Wrong picture

MAY I thank you for publishing the Statement of the Indian Radical Humanist Association concerning nuclear tests in India and Pakistan that IHEU distributed.

It is now reproduced in many valued humanist publications all over the world, as well as posted on the Internet, Teletext in Belgium etc. I am glad for the role this statement is playing in shaping Humanist response among IHEU members everywhere.

However, do allow me to say that the photograph that accompanies the statement in the *Freethinker* is inappropriate, since the tests conducted by both India as well as Pakistan (as were the French and Chinese tests a few years ago) were underground tests.

I think that the photograph published gives your readership the wrong picture.

**BABU GOGINENI**  
Executive Director  
International Humanist  
and Ethical Union



# 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 73215.

**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.

**Haverling & 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:** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6 4YA. Thursday, September 24, 8pm. Barbara Smoker: Humanism—an Update for the New Millennium.

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

**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:** Merlin Theatre, Meadowbank Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield. Saturday, September 5, noon to 5pm. Information and literature stall at the annual Green Fair.

**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.

## 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 your membership application to the National Secular Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

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