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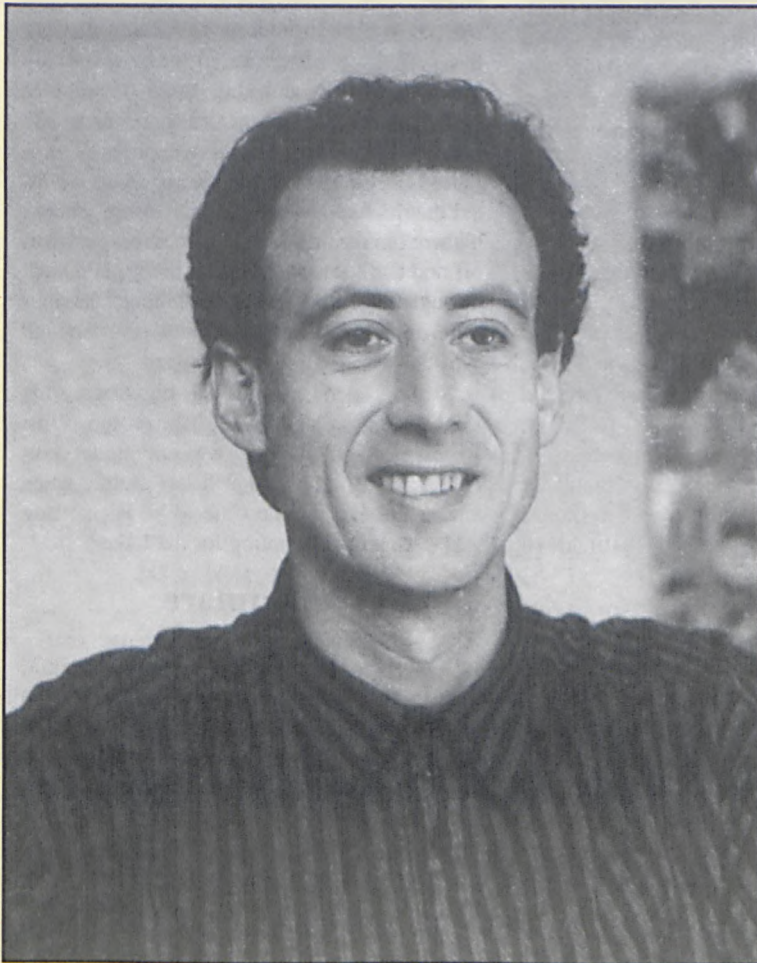
The *Free*thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 118 No 10

October 1998

Tatchell needs your support!



**Archaic law
invoked to
prosecute
him for
interrupting
an Easter
service**

• Turn to centre pages for the full report

Up Front

IT'S WRONG, I know, to laugh at the misfortune of others, but I must confess to having cracked up over two items which crossed my desk in the last few weeks.

The first concerned pastor Melvyn Nurse, of Florida, USA, who accidentally shot himself in front of a packed congregation at Livingway Christian Fellowship Church in Jacksonville.

Nurse was using a revolver loaded with one blank round to illustrate each of the seven deadly sins. "He was trying to convey the point

Who says there isn't a funny side to religion?

that sin leads to death," said associate pastor Michael Cooper.

The idea was that he would spin the chamber in Russian roulette style and hold the gun to his head.

After just one spin, the gun fired and the cardboard wadding in the blank pierced Nurse's temple, inflicting fatal brain injuries.

"He fell out of sight and everyone was waiting," said Michael Cooper. "We thought it was part of the demonstration."

The pastor, whose accident was witnessed by more than 200 parishioners including his wife and four daughters, was rushed to University Medical Centre, but died five days later. Hopefully, the lesson learned by his congregation is that guns are a whole lot more lethal than "sin".

An ill wind

The second item concerns the enormous damage recently inflicted by Hurricane Bonnie on the area around Virginia Beach, in Virginia, USA.

Virginia Beach is where Pat Robertson, founder and head of America's fanatically right-wing Christian Coalition, chose to site his Regent University and Christian Broadcast Network.

What made me chortle was the news that Hurricane Bonnie struck Virginia shortly after the rabidly homophobic Robertson had warned the people of Orlando, Florida, that unless they stopped welcoming gay and lesbian visitors, something awful would happen to them.

"I would warn Orlando," Robertson brayed, "that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don't think I'd be waving those [rainbow gay rights] flags in God's face if I were you."

The fact that Florida escaped the ravages of the hurricane and Virginia did not clearly demonstrates that the egregious Robertson does not know his God half as well as he thinks he does.

The third laugh of the month came from a piece of good fortune – the discovery of an Internet website called *Fearsome Atheist*

Webzine, motto "Kick Theist Ass", established by Daniel Adams, an Englishman living in America who felt the need to do something to counter the sickening religiosity of that country.

Fearsome Atheist makes extensive use of humour to demonstrate the absurdity of religion, and the webzine attracts some top quality writing. Here is an example – a spoof news item entitled *Jesus Resigns*:

Las Vegas – After a fortnight of vacation to "evaluate his life" and "reassess his goals" and career, Jesus Christ today announced his resignation. Sources say that he was probably under pressure to resign after failing to capitalise fully on his success.

Whilst the religion he founded raked in billions each year, a significant number of people refused to buy into it, and earnings had been falling in recent years.

"I mean, my life just wasn't going anywhere," the 2,000-year-old Jerusalem-born saviour said in an interview. "I had a productive period a while back. "You know, walking around on water and shit. But to be honest since then I haven't gotten out much and haven't really gotten anything done."

Jesus, who answers prayer requests, admitted that he had been somewhat leisurely about his work in recent years. "I sometimes just drift off and can't seem to concentrate. I plain slept through the entire 1940s," mankind's Saviour told reporters, explaining how the Second World War was allowed to happen.

"It was also a logistical nightmare that frankly I just don't need," Christ said. "Just yesterday, Carl Schroeder was praying fervently that the Bulls would win last night's game and at the exact same time Mike Richardson was evangelically rooting for the Lakers.

Nightmare

"I mean, what's a discerning saviour to do?"

Jesus said that his resignation was not due in any way to his arrest this February for stalking. Charges are still pending on that matter, after police realised that Jesus' omnipresence left him open to an estimated 50,000 counts of stalking.

A police source, who wished to remain anonymous, stated that they were "still sorting out the paperwork" and estimated it would be at least another two centuries before all the charges were calculated, researched and filed.

In the meantime they have brought a court-order against Jesus ordering him to stay at least

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The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1981

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

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Subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher:

G W Foote & Company

25 Red Lion Square

London WC1R 4RL.

Editorial office 0181 305 9603

E-mail: iduke@compuserve.com

Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

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

Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to The Freethinker at 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son,
Sheffield

Advertisers told: 'Lay off religion'

ASA expresses concern over the growing use of 'religious' advertising to get a laugh

WHILE religious advertising appears to be exempt from practically all the rules laid down by the Advertising Standards Authority – truthfulness and honesty being the ones most flouted – religious organisations and individuals are quick to begin bleating whenever advertisers use religion in a light-hearted manner.

In one of its recent monthly reports the ASA said that advertisers were increasingly using religious themes in a bid to get a laugh and this trend was upsetting religious people. Whereas this sort of advertising was once most noticeable at Christmas, the approach was now being used all year round.

The ASA said that in the last year it had to deal with more complaints about ads causing religious offence than ever before. Earlier this year it upheld 83 complaints against Diesel jeans, which used "nuns" wearing jeans to sell a "superior denim".

An ASA spokesman was quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* as saying the ASA message to advertisers using religion in a mocking manner was that they "are playing a very dangerous game and should not think they can get away with it."

Stationery

This summer the ASA upheld 124 complaints against advertisements for Rey and Co, a stationery manufacturer. These included slogans such as "Praise the Board", and "Behold, the King of paper is born".

The ASA spokesman said: "The Bible is so much part of the common culture that you can understand why people want to use it, but the problem comes with any depiction, particularly of Jesus or other religious figures."

The ad that drew the highest number of complaints was never publicly exposed. Created on behalf of the British Safety Council, the ad – using a picture of the Pope wearing a hard hat to promote safe sex – was withdrawn before it was shown.

The caption was: "The 11th Commandment:

Thou shalt always wear a condom." The ASA will no doubt also have received complaints concerning an advertising campaign launched in August to promote a leading English rugby club – the Northampton Saints.

strongly object to this advertisement which appears to be blasphemous.

"It is a very poor choice probably made by someone who does not have a religious background and who does not realise the significance of the Holy Trinity."

Steve Hands, the club's recently appointed marketing director who masterminded the campaign, said in an interview with *The Times* that the campaign had gone down well with the majority of fans.

"We are trying to create a brand but the last thing we want to do is irritate anyone or appear blasphemous. We were founded by a vicar in 1880 and it seemed a perfect theme."

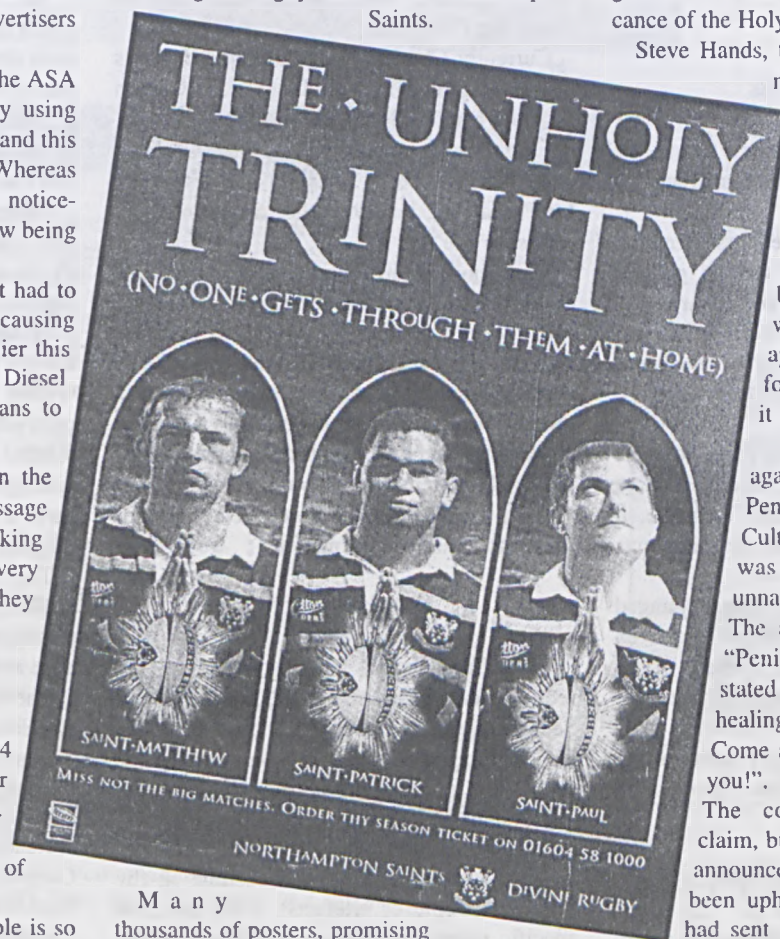
A more surprising complaint against an advertisement by the Peniel Pentecostal Church (see *Cult Watch*, *Freethinker* August) was made to the ASA by an unnamed Methodist minister.

The advertisement was headlined "Peniel Easter Conference" and stated that it was "a church where healing and miracles happen today. Come and see what God can do for you!".

The complainant challenged the claim, but earlier this month the ASA announced that the complaint had not been upheld because "the advertisers had sent testimonials, including seven from doctors, that they believed supported their claim; these included reports of physical healing".

The Authority noted that the advertisements invited readers to "come and see what God can do for you!" and did not refer to physical illnesses.

It considered that readers would interpret the challenged claim as referring to spiritual healing, and therefore it does not object to the advertisement.

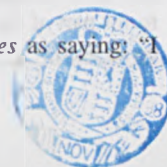


Many thousands of posters, promising "Divine" rugby, showed three of the club's top players, framed in ecclesiastical window frames, in attitudes of prayer.

Above their heads were the words "The Unholy Trinity". Another version depicts two players under the heading "We'll bring the opposition to their knees."

One furious Christian was Basil Ayres, vergar of St James's Church, where the club was founded in 1880.

He was quoted in *The Times* as saying: "I



Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the NSS reflects on

Spirit Zones, Lords, Secular Space and Freethinkers

The Spirits in the Dome's Spirit Zone seem to be having a turbulent time. After hearings much wailing that this zone was the only one not to receive sponsorship, we learned at the beginning of October that it is to be downgraded from a glass and steel pyramid to a tent.

This meant dropping the Zen Buddhist garden, Muslim garden and monastic cloister. Then, a fortnight later, we were told of a new-found injection of cash for the Spirit Zone (see *Terry Sanderson On the Media*, page 7). It is not clear whether this will result in returning to the pyramid; let's hope not.

Congratulations

This will, I think, be the first time that I have congratulated Dr Carey and Cardinal Hume, so here goes.

They have both given their endorsement to a "Millennium Resolution" a sort of godless prayer to be spoken in homes and at parties:

Let there be respect for the Earth, peace for its people, love in our lives, delight in the good, forgiveness for past wrongs, and from now on a new start.

I am not suggesting that more could not have been added, nor that it could have been more elegantly put. But it is at least inclusive, it doesn't mention any deity and the sentiments are generally sound.

Any doubts on this score were expunged when I heard that the Resolution had been described by the Bishop of Fulham as "a betrayal of the very meaning of the Millennium".

The churches will send every home in the country a copy of the Resolution, together with a candle.

Parliamentary Reform

The first stage of Lords' reform will solely deal with hereditary peers and a Royal Commission will be appointed to make recommendations on subsequent stages of Lord's reform. The Society will of course be making full representations to the Commission, but the signs are far from encouraging. Regular readers will remember that the NSS lobbied the Lord Chancellor (as chair of a committee on Lord's reform to abolish the bench of bishops at the same time that the voting rights of hereditary peers are curtailed.

Far from heeding our suggestions, it seems that Lord Irvine has even considered appointing representatives of other faiths. Even if the Bench of Bishops were removed, we may still not be free from their influence in Parliament. An all-party committee of MPs recommended on October 1 that the ban on Anglican bishops in the Commons be maintained *as long as places were reserved for the Anglican hierarchy in the House of Lords*.

The committee was examining the somewhat haphazard laws on the eligibility of clergy for Parliament.

Currently, Church of England and RC priests cannot become MPs, but clergy in the Church in Wales can do so (although they never have). A further Byzantine twist is that Anglican clergymen can resign from the church and run for Parliament, but the other denominations' ban is for life.

Even more bizarre, non-conformist preachers in Scotland are disqualified from becoming MPs, but not those in the rest of the UK. By virtue of this exemption, Ian Paisley is able to stand. Although I have been assured he is a model constituency MP, his brand of Christian compassion and tolerance is one that most people would prefer to do without.

I am indebted to the *Daily Telegraph* for some of the above information.

Secular Spaces

Dr Jeffrey Segall has responded to my request for comments about my piece on Secular Space, in last month's issue (page 5). He has played a major role in fighting the proposed Eruv (notional Jewish religious area) in Barnet, north London. In the piece I cited problems of visual images which might be found disturbing and also of obstruction (by religious people or artefacts). I did not give specific examples of them. Dr Segall would like to emphasise the invasion of secular space by the Eruv, which, at least in Barnet, will have poles, and wires, which will be both visually unattractive and cause some obstruction.

He is also concerned that those who do not support the Eruv have no practical alternative but to pass through the Eruv poles and under the suspended wires, also that permission has not been sought from those whose property forms part of the boundary for their property to be so used.

Dr Segall's letter has arrived as I am about to submit formally to the International Humanist and Ethical Union the National Secular Society's proposals on religious discrimination and secular space, for discussion at their Mumbai conference in January 1999. When doing so, I will specifically relay to them the points he has made.

World Union of Freethinkers

The WUF has just held its Congress in Luxembourg and I represented the NSS. There were about 100 delegates, mostly from Europe, particularly France and Germany.

Speakers spoke in French or German and were simultaneously translated from German and French, respectively.

Papers were presented on such topics as *The role of Churches in Fascism*, *Bioethical Problems in the European Institutions*, *Separation of Church and State*, *Religion and Freethought in the Former Eastern Bloc*, *Europe and Humanism*.

Each country presented a report from the perspective of their own country and the NSS's seemed well received. After describing current issues in the UK and the organisations based here, it drew attention to the high profile of religion in the United States.

The report concluded by underlining the challenge for international organisations presented by the growing tide of religious intolerance around the world.

The Society presented the only motion of the conference, calling on all states with blasphemy, or similar laws, to abolish them. It was of course passed unanimously – bringing it about is the hard part.

Readers will be interested to know that the Congress sixty years earlier (in 1938) it had been held at Conway Hall and was chaired by Chapman Cohen – and every continent was represented.

The proceedings were later printed verbatim in a hard-back book. Motions that Year were in support of the Spanish Republicans, the independence of Czecho-Slovakia and of the struggle for freedom of the Chinese, Abyssinians, the Italians, the Germans and the Austrians. The last motion and the very last sentence in this book read "The Congress expresses its horrified condemnation at the persecution of the Jews."

The Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, led by a fanatical Christian determined to to install a government based on the Biblical Commandments, is this month's Cult Watch subject.

Children abducted to serve in a violent Christian crusade

In 1990, Joseph Kony, founder of the Lord's Resistance Army and a veteran opponent of Ugandan President Museveni, began a campaign to bring Uganda under strict Christian rule.

His army comprises mainly youngsters, some as young as seven, who have been abducted and forced to serve Kony.

It is estimated that around 8,000 children have been pressed into LRA service since 1990.

In a report in the *Daily Telegraph* on October 8 this year, journalist David Blair told the story of Walter Ochala, who was only 11 when the LRA raided his village and forced him to serve as a boy soldier.

Immediately after his abduction, Walter was initiated into a children's fighting unit which raided a village.

"In one house there were two sisters. I had to kill them. I broke their heads with an axe," Walter said.

"For the next three years he was brain-washed and brutalised into taking part in a

violent crusade to rule Uganda according to the Ten Commandments," Blair wrote.

During Walter's three years in the force, he witnessed the way in which Kony inspired a fanatical devotion among his followers with his cult of personality and the imposition of a bizarre set of beliefs.

In that time Kony declared that pigs and any white animals were unclean and had to be ritually slaughtered on sight. Bicycles were forbidden and anyone seen cycling had their feet hacked off. Walter was told to kill any villagers seen farming on a Friday, which Kony had declared a day of rest, like Sunday.

Sudan

Another child kidnapped by Kony's rebels was Janet Achan. She was 13 when she was abducted while walking with her mother to market. Immediately after her capture she was taken north to neighbouring Sudan. *En route*, children were made to kill other youngsters who could not keep up. This formed part of an initiation rite.

Janet described how Kony used primitive rit-

uals to harness his "supernatural" powers to protect his child army. This included making a fire and telling his followers to breathe in the smoke which, he said, contained the Holy Spirit. This, he claimed, would protect them from bullets.

"I believed that Kony could not die and that in battles only Ugandan army soldiers died. I believed we were fighting for Christianity and the Holy Spirit," Janet is told reporter David Blair.

Janet was freed in June by the Ugandan army, and reunited with her mother. She and Walter, whose unit surrendered to the army a month before, are both receiving counselling to help them over the trauma of the abduction and the terrible experiences they suffered afterwards.

Even though he has been freed from Kony's clutches, Walter still believes that the rebel leader has supernatural powers.

"Kony has a blessing from God. He is protected by the Holy Spirit and cannot be killed," he said.

Yet another apology from the Pope

The Pope, who must already have gone down in history as the most apologetic pontiff ever, is, according to a report in *The Guardian*, now "under pressure from his advisers to say sorry for the Crusades".

If he agrees to express his regrets on behalf of Pope Urban II who launched the Crusades in 1095, the apology will be included at an all encompassing 'Sorrowfest' destined to take place on March 8, 2000.

On that date the Pope is expected to ask for pardon on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church for most of its biggest mistakes.

The Polish Pope Paul has already publicly expressed regret for the Inquisition, the recantation of Galileo, the

role of the Roman Catholics in the Holocaust and the burning of any number of heretics.

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 did not receive them is asked to notify the office as soon as possible. Please note that all payments in respect 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.

Regular Freethinker contributor Tony Akkermans is launching his own Internet website with an article entitled

Religion v Humanism

Which system do you prefer? Care to join the debate?

First let us take a brief look at what religion is all about. How did it come to gain such a strong position in human affairs? The answer must be: fear and ignorance.

When humans first took to their feet some 1.5 million years ago they had little understanding of the natural world around them. Full of fear of the unknown, their fragile situation left them wide open to all forms of superstition. Over time this was taken advantage of by self-appointed priests, the second oldest profession and the first deluders of mankind.

Rather than pursue explanations by investigation, trial and error these leaders invented answers and then presented them as god-given fact. Many belief systems were thus created all over the world and because most of them offered considerable advantages to the inventors, non-conformity was suppressed by dire threats of hellfire, and if that didn't work there was always the rack and the stake.

This primitive heritage has proved extremely difficult to shake off. It seems superstition springs eternal in the human breast. It could be argued that superstition has infiltrated the genes and mankind is stuck with it. Richard Dawkins calls it a virus of the mind. It is as if the species Man has a schizoid nature - his feet implanted on the earth but his imaginative head soaring toward a heaven of magical unreality.

Although it is often said that modern man is civilised the facts show otherwise. It is not long since there were witch hunts and people were hanged for blasphemy. More recently there was the genocide of the Jews in WWII and more recently the religious wars in Bosnia, Africa and Northern Ireland. And whilst brutality of action is still commonplace it is no surprise that primitive thought is not far behind.

Religion's most powerful tool is the promise of eternal life. *Homo religiosus* invents religious symbols, which he worships to save him from facing the finality of his death. He devises paradise fictions to provide comfort and support. Man deceives himself about his ultimate destiny so as not to be tormented by the contemplation of it. But because of its improbability this belief can only be skin deep. When ill, people pray but soon run to the best doctors that money can buy; mere humans but more effective, it appears, than the god of their dreams. In their despair they cling to notions that no rational person would entertain for a

second. That in a universe made up of billions of galaxies and trillions of planets and infinite space there is a god who has sent his son to be crucified on this tiny speck earth in order to save the human race. That he has chosen this moment conveniently at the fringes of documented history so that the facts are incapable of verification. That this god controls every little drama that befalls mankind but in such a way that it is impossible to tell it apart from com-

Either God was in agreement with Hitler and he acted at God's behest, in which case God is wicked or God disapproved but could not stop him, in which case Hitler was mightier than God

plete randomness. He is all good but allows thousands to be killed in earthquakes; he is all powerful but allows dictators to kill millions of innocent people in the most barbaric fashion. This the religious call free will but as usual they haven't thought things through. Either God was in agreement with Hitler and he acted at God's behest, in which case God is wicked or God disapproved but could not stop him, in which case Hitler was mightier than God.

The free will claim in defence of God will not do because the millions of free will actions by people combined add up to the conduct of society. It is the collective free will of people that determines the course of events and it leaves no room for an interventionist supreme being. When humans die they are somehow able to carry on just as they were, even though all their atoms have been scattered to the winds. It is all in the soul we are told. This mysterious entity that manages to keep us going just as well without a body; all functions and faculties in tact. One might ask why bother with a body in the first place? Much simpler

to be born, live and die as souls. Easier for women to give birth and easier to explain what is to become of missionaries that have been had for breakfast by the natives. As Albert Einstein said: "An individual who should survive his physical death is beyond my comprehension; such notions are for the fears or absurd egoism of feeble minds".

The question must be asked: is this contorted self-serving scenario a credible, scientific proposition or does it sound like the ultimate exercise in wishful thinking? What is the alternative? Let's take a look at Humanism.

Humanism is not a doctrine but an attitude to life. Because Humanists believe that this is the only life we can expect to have we had better make the best of it, both individually and collectively. Humanists are rationalists because they regard human reason as the best guide we have in facing life's problems. In their social outlook Humanists are secularist because they want to free society from the stranglehold that religious beliefs still have on it, whether it be collective worship in British state schools or depriving women of education in Afghanistan.

Humanists are freethinkers because they refuse to hand over their minds to any church or cult but remain free to think things through for themselves. Humanists hold that every responsible human being should be free to make his or her own choices and live their own life style as long as they do not violate the freedom of others.

This is the Golden Rule: "do as you would be done by". Unlike believers Humanists see no virtue in faith, blind obedience, unworldliness, chastity or pointless self denial. Humanism stands for the open mind in an open society. A believer is a bird in a cage; a Humanist is an eagle, parting the clouds with tireless wing.

In summary:

- Humanism rejects religion in the sense of belief in and worship of a superior being.
- It is not merely agnosticism or atheism but an attempt to develop a positive life stance as a viable alternative to organised religion.
- It believes strongly in individual rights, especially freedom of thought and expression.
- It bases its life stance on the principle of science, reason, understanding, love and compassion.

(Continued on p 13)

Terry Sanderson on the media

VIRGIN MARY HANDS IN HER

NOTICE

When I wrote my satirical novel, *The Potts Papers*, I thought that maybe the plot was a bit over the top and unbelievable. It concerned a family who were extremely short of money and whose daughter claimed to be having visions of the Virgin Mary.

The wily old granny saw this as an excellent opportunity to ease the family's cash flow problem, and within days their home was under siege from true believers wanting to pour cash into their pockets.

Just a bit of exaggerated nonsense, I thought. But now we have the true story of Nancy Fowler, in Georgia, which is about twenty times more unbelievable than my novel ever dared to be.

Ms Fowler, according to *The Independent*, receives messages from the Holy Virgin, which she then relays to the waiting world every October 13. This year, however, Nancy announced that Our Lady had given in her notice, and this was to be the final message. 100,000 people turned up at Ms Fowler's farm in Conyers, east of Atlanta, to hear a lot of bland twaddle about "children modelling their lives on the saints" and building a church on the farm. In the past Mary has condemned abortion and television right there in Nancy's front room.

Ms Fowler's messages from above began in 1991, a year after she claimed to have had a vision of a farm where she was directed to go by Jesus Christ. Ms Fowler's spokesperson, Richard Pfundstein, says: "Jesus appears to Nancy multiple times each day and continues to appear. He gives her messages, some to share and some to keep private."

Bacteria

Of course there are dangers in bringing so many people together like this. A well on the farm, which Ms Fowler claimed had been blessed by Jesus, tested positive for coliform bacteria.

Are we to adduce from this that Jesus not only turns water into wine, but also sometimes into poison? A dozen elderly people broke bones trying to get water from this "holy well". And according to one report, several collapsed with heart attacks before they could fill their plastic jugs. However, as mass hysteria swept the crowd, people claimed that they were smelling roses (a flower associated with the Virgin, apparently), and one man said his rosary had turned to gold.

Others said they saw the sun change colour and yet others heard a heart beat emanating from a statue. There were, of course, mandatory healings of the sick.

Elliott Wisener and his wife Kathy, who had driven all the way from Kentucky to sit all day in the stifling heat, said; "I have smelled the roses. I have seen the colours. I was near God today."

According to the *Independent* report, Nancy Fowler has allowed herself to be subjected to scientific examination, and a neuropsychologist, Ricardo Castanon from La Paz, Bolivia, said that "Ms Fowler's brain produced delta waves similar to those experienced in sleep – even though she was wide awake whenever she claimed to have seen an apparition of Jesus or Mary." Her heart rate drops to three or four beats per minute which Mr Castanon says is impossible, although he has seen it happen. (Actually I saw a similar demonstration in the *Paranormal World of Paul MacKenna* on TV a couple of years ago, when a Russian man slowed his heart and speeded it up at will while under medical observation. This man did not claim any religious intervention, just practice.)

I wonder why Ms Fowler had to go to La Paz to find a scientist willing to examine her? It couldn't have anything to do with waiting for the right scientist, could it? One from a fanatically Catholic country? And why has the Virgin signed off all of a sudden? Could it have anything to do with Nancy's intention to move to Florida?

Needless to say a small industry has grown up around Ms Fowler and her divine visitors.

Huge video and book sales (which she says are endorsed by Jesus) have not been dented by the relentless attacks of sceptics. Local businesses are devastated that she has decided to move on. One restaurant owner had put up his own sign which read: "Eat, drink and see Mary" which eloquently sums up the whole farce.

"We are advised in *The Times* that the Millennium home's "spirit zone" is to be financially rescued by a large donation from two Asian brothers who live Spartan "religious lives" despite phenomenal wealth. They want to see representation of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism etc in the Dome.

The problem is that the Hindus and Moslems are fighting over Kashmir and Indian troops are massing on the Pakistan border. (*Jane's Intelligence* reports that "Within the next decade India is capable of building 455 atomic bombs and Pakistan 105.") The Jews and the Moslems are at war in the Middle East, Islam is persecuting Christians in Pakistan, two dif-

ferent brands of Islam are threatening a major conflict on the Afghan-Iran border, Catholics and Protestants continue to wrangle in Northern Ireland, a civil war is about to break out in Israel between orthodox and secular Jews, the Taliban in Afghanistan have declared war on women, similarly the Church of England on homosexuals.

If it's peace and quiet I'm seeking, I think I'll give the spirit zone a miss and try the Armageddon ride at Alton Towers instead.

Foreign Secretary Robin Cook seems pleased that the Iranian authorities have announced that the "fatwa" on Salman Rushdie no longer applies, and has restored diplomatic relations with the country.

It has given him the opportunity to say that the time has come to make peace with the Islamic world. The trouble is that since the fatwa was pronounced "no longer applicable" by the relatively moderate Iranian government, there has been nothing but threats to Rushdie emanating from Tehran. The Daily Express announced that "A hard-line Iranian student group has offered £200,000 to anyone who kills Salman Rushdie."

The Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Fazal Lankarani is quoted in *The Daily Mail* as saying: "The fatwa is by no means revocable or changeable and it is the duty of all Moslems in the world to carry it out." His statement was echoed by several other leading clerics.

In this country, Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, leader of the "Muslim Parliament of Great Britain" told the *Guardian* that "The government in Iran has no authority to revoke the fatwa. It is Islamic law."

Mr Cook told Muslims in a speech at the Israeli Centre in Kensington that "the Muslim and Western worlds have grown too far apart and cannot afford to let misunderstandings continue."

He insisted that "primitive stereotypes are dangerously misleading, and that all talk of a clash of civilisations or Islam replacing communism as the enemy of the West were "profoundly wrong."

I'm all for peace, understanding and reconciliation, but it has to be a two-way process.

Moderate Muslims must distance themselves more clearly from the maniacs who have created, and who live up to, the worst stereotypes of Islamic barbarism.

Terry Sanderson's satirical novel, *The Potts Papers* is available by post from The Other Way Press, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ for £6.95 post free.

Support grows for campaign who interrupted Archbishop's Easter service in Canterbury

Following a peaceful protest during the Archbishop of Canterbury's Easter sermon at Canterbury Cathedral, gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell is due in court to answer charges of "indecent behaviour in a church" contrary to Section 2 of the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860.

As a result of his arrest and impending trial, the National Secular Society wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury and called on him to "practise what he preaches" and forgive Peter Tatchell for the interruption of his Easter service.

The National Secular Society said that Dr Carey should either call for the trial – scheduled for November 30 – to be halted or at least make clear that he does not want to see Tatchell jailed.

In his reply of October 6 to NSS President Denis Cobell, the Archbishop declined to do so "from the legal perspective," but did point out that "the charges against Mr Tatchell are being brought by the Crown Prosecution Service, and not by himself, nor by the Dean and Chapter at Canterbury".

A custodial sentence is a distinct possibility but, the NSS believes, totally inappropriate.

Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the NSS, said "As a self-proclaimed man of compassion, we are certain that Dr Carey will not want to see Peter Tatchell jailed. He must know that in jail Mr Tatchell may well suffer physical attack and even sexual assault. We are still asking the Archbishop to make clear, as soon as possible, that he does not want to see Tatchell incarcerated

for what was a reasoned non-violent protest supporting human rights for homosexuals. In this secular age, we believe that a short dignified peaceful protest in a church should be treated the same as if it were made elsewhere.

"Beyond our concern for Peter Tatchell's safety, we are also deeply disturbed by the continued existence of such an archaic law (this one was previously part of the Brawling Act 1551) which gives privileged and sinister powers of

suppression to the churches. Far from being moribund, as many assumed, this law has already resulted in incarceration this century and demonstrates that the church still relies on medieval powers to stifle dissent and criticism of itself."

At the behest of the National Secular Society, Amnesty International has agreed to monitor the trial. The NSS has also circulated a public appeal against Peter Tatchell's prosecution and possible imprisonment and is also calling for the

What the relevant section of the Act says

Any person who shall be guilty of riotous, violent, or indecent behaviour in England or Ireland in any cathedral church, parish or district church or chapel of the Church of England ... or in any chapel of any religious denomination, or in England in any places of religious worship duly certified under the provisions of the Places of Worship Registration Act 1855, whether during the celebration of divine service or at any other time, or in any churchyard or burial ground, or who shall molest, let, disturb, vex, or trouble, or by any other unlawful means disquiet or misuse any preacher duly authorized to preach therein, or any clergyman in holy orders administering or celebrating any sacrament, or any divine service, rite or office, in any cathedral, church, or chapel, or in any churchyard or burial ground, shall, on conviction thereof before two justices of the peace, be liable to a penalty of not more than [£20] for every such offence, or may, if the justices before whom he shall be convicted think fit, instead of being subjected to any pecuniary penalty, be committed to prison for any time not exceeding two months.

Campaigner Archbishop's Canterbury



repeal of the 1860 Act. The appeal points out that "there are no lines of defence open to Tatchell under this oppressive Act. It is therefore likely that he will be found guilty and, if so, a jail term would be expected – a former Vice-President of this Society was jailed for two months in similar circumstances in 1967 (the last time the 1860 Act was used in this way)".

The appeal drew a swift response from hundreds to whom it was sent, and, at the time of *The Freethinker* going to press, among prominent people who signed it were:

- The Viscount Falkland
- Lord Jenkins of Putney
- Baroness Flather
- Lord Peston
- Sir Ludovic Kennedy
- Michael Foot
- Polly Toynbee
- Jonathan Meades
- Edward and Elizabeth Bond
- Iain Banks
- Alan Bennett
- Claire Rayner
- Barbara Smoker

The wording to which they appended their names is:

"We oppose religious privilege and support the right to peaceful protest. As well as deploring the prosecution of Peter Tatchell under the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860, we strongly believe that a jail sentence is entirely inappropriate for peaceful protest in defence of human rights.

We furthermore call for the repeal of the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860; it gives the church unique and sweeping powers to suppress dissent. This is unacceptable in a modern democracy."

Court won't allow Tatchell to call Dr Carey as a witness

WHEN Peter Tatchell appeared at Canterbury Magistrates Court earlier this year he was refused permission to witness summons the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey.

Mr Tatchell condemned the decision as "unjust and unfair". "I am being denied the right to call a witness who is crucial to my defence", he said.

"Dr Carey's evidence is necessary to establish the facts of the case. The court's refusal to summon the Archbishop will seriously hamper my defence against the charge of indecency."

Mr Tatchell's request for the disclosure of unused prosecution evidence was rejected by the court, even though it was conceded that this material may undermine the case against him.

Mr Tatchell's application to move the trial from Canterbury to another town was also refused. The court ruled that his case be heard by a stipendiary magistrate from outside the Canterbury area.

Britain's top civil right's lawyer, Michael Mansfield QC has generously agreed to represent Peter Tatchell. His defence will be "the right to free speech".

"Parents wants a church education for their children"

The Church of England's General Synod is to be asked in November to support an official resolution calling for an expansion of its secondary school system, which, at present is greatly outweighed by church primaries.

The church owns one in four of all English primary schools, educating 750,000 children. But only 145,000 of these find a place in a church secondary. Canon John Hall, General Secretary of the Synod's Board of Education, was quoted in *The Times Educational Supplement* as saying: "Parents are clamouring for a church education. They recognise the importance on an education based on Christian belief and values."

Taliban turn their wrath on tailors

The latest group in Afghanistan to attract the attention of the Ministry for Promoting Virtue and Suppressing Vice are the nation's tailors.

They have been warned that they will be punished according to Islamic law if they take women's measurements.

The ban was announced by the official Radio Shariat, which added that barbers had been forbidden to trim men's beards in "non-Islamic fashion".

Clinton is urged 'to turn to Scientology'

American actor John Travolta has reportedly invited American President to join the Church of Scientology. Hollywood gossip columnist Janet Charlton claims that the star – an ardent Scientologist – has been trying to persuade the lifelong Baptist President that the cult can help him overcome his sex addiction.

It is unlikely the President will join. According to the *Daily Telegraph* "a team of three ministers have been asked by Bill Clinton to counsel him and pray with him on a weekly basis to help him overcome the temptations that led to the Lewinsky affair.

De-baptism ceremony held at Conway Hall

ALL THE national organisations in the humanist movement were, as always, invited to send delegates to the Annual Reunion of South Place Ethical Society on September 20.

The "keynote speaker" was NSS President, Denis Cobell, who spoke about his recent appointments as Humanist Chaplain to the Mayor of Lewisham and to Greenwich Hospital – appointments described by the *Evening Standard* as "outrageous".

He concluded by inviting any ex-Roman Catholics present who had been baptised in infancy to "come forward", as at a revivalist meeting, for a corporate signing of copies of a de-baptism certificate which Barbara Smoker drafted some years ago for the NSS. Three did so.

An equivalent Protestant certificate was also created by Barbara Smoker, the wording of which will be included in a future issue of *The Freethinker*.

'Pro-Nazi' Pope to be canonised

The Pope's plan to canonise one of his predecessors – Pius XII – has come under fire from Jewish leaders who claim that Pius was in sympathy with the the Third Reich.

Their claim is supported by telegrams contained in wartime German archives from the German Ambassador to the Vatican which praise Pius XII's positive attitude to Nazi Germany at a time when the allies were begging him to take a tough stand against it.

"To imagine that a man who sat in silence on the throne of St Peter, watched the trains criss-cross Europe to take Jews to death camps and never uttered a word against the Nazis should become a saint would desecrate memories of the Holocaust," said Rabbi Marvin Hier, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Los Angeles.

Christening numbers fall

A NOP survey carried out for *Bella* magazine among almost 1,000 adults found that a third would consider having a secular naming ceremony for their babies, rather than a religious one. Only one infant in four is now christened in the UK.

Christ statue for Trafalgar Square

A planning application is to be made in November to Westminster City Council for the placing of a life-size statue of Jesus Christ on a nine-foot high plinth that has remained unoccupied since the square was created in 1840.

The statue by Mark Wallinger is one three chosen by the Royal Society of Arts to take turns in sharing the plinth over a period of three years.

The other works are a translucent replica of the plinth itself cast by Rachel Whiteread, and a sculpture comprising a head and a book bound together under a tree by Bill Woodrow.

'Dildos' banned

Alabama, USA, State legislators have enacted a new 'dildo law' which makes it a misdemeanour to "distribute any device designed or marketed as useful primarily for the stimulation of human genital organs."

Declaration of De-baptism (Roman Catholic)

I,....., having been baptised in the Roman Catholic Church without my consent, before reaching an age of discretion, hereby revoke that baptism, renounce that church, and reject its creed. I object to the label "lapsed Catholic", since I have not apathetically "lapsed" from the faith – I have, after due deliberation, renounced it. Moreover, I wish to be excluded from future Roman Catholic statistical claims, except for the statistics of apostasy.

Signed

Date

The wording of the Roman Catholic de-baptism certificate

If you would like to submit a story or feature you think might be suitable for *The Freethinker*, please contact the editor, Barry Duke, on 0181 305 9603 (E-mail lduke@compuserve.com)

Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Dirty work at the Vatican

TWO suspicious papal deaths – those of Celestine V and John Paul I, separated by over 700 years – have been receiving attention recently, and deserve notice here.

Pietro del Morrone, a Benedictine monk, was 85 when he reluctantly accepted the papal crown in 1294 to break a stalemate in the conclave. He was, as Joseph McCabe says in his *History of the Popes* (Watts, 1939), “a really religious man of ascetic life” at a time when even the Franciscan and Dominican friars were already corrupt; and, at his own insistence, he was consecrated at Aquila rather than Rome. But he was persuaded to abdicate, and was imprisoned by his successor, Boniface VIII who, says McCabe, was accused by “all the pietists of Italy of usurpation, bribery and murder”.

There seems some evidence for this last charge now, according to Giorgio de Matteis, a leading authority on Celestine, and Father Quirino Salomone, head of the Celestine Study Centre at Aquila. As *The Times* Roman correspondent Richard Owen reported on August 30, an x-ray photograph of the cranium of the “hermit pope” revealed a 5 cm hole, which Father Salomone attributed to a “nail driven through the Pope’s head by an unknown assassin”. And Signor de Matteis said he believed Celestine had been “made to disappear” in case he was used by Boniface’s opponents as a rallying point for schism.

Writing a few days later (August 24) Richard Owen informed us that a Brazilian cardinal had acknowledged the suspicious nature of John Paul I’s death twenty years ago, after only 33 days in office. Not unlike Celestine, John Paul I was described as “an other-worldly type”, who “hated pomp and urged priests to sell church valuables to help the poor, and wanted the West’s wealthy churches to give 1 per cent of their income to the Third World”. He planned to purge the Vatican Bank and demote or dismiss powerful figures in the Curia.

Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider of Brazil, a strong supporter of John Paul I, questioned the official version of the Pope’s death (a heart attack) and noted that Cardinal Jean Villot, the then Secretary of State, had refused to allow a post-mortem examination.

The truth may never be known, said the

Italian magazine *L’Espresso*, “any more than we know the truth about the murder of Colonel Alois Estermann”, the Swiss Guard commander, who was shot dead last May allegedly by one of his disgruntled guardsmen. In that case, too, Owen remarked, “the Vatican gave out contradictory accounts, giving rise to suspicion of a cover-up”. And he quoted David Yallop, author of *In God’s Name* (1984) saying that “when you cross the Tiber to the Vatican, you have to put the clock back to the time of Lucrezia Borgia”.

Or even to Boniface VIII.

Ghosts at the Mail

I HAVE often criticised the *Daily Mail’s* credulous editorial coverage of the occult, as exemplified in its July 10 spread, *Is this the house that will prove ghosts really exist?*

A few weeks later it reprinted an article from the September *She* magazine by Debbie Frank, described as “Astrologer and confidante to Diana, Princess of Wales”.

Diana’s “chart” was said to be “complex and contradictory”. She was a Cancerian, you see, with her moon in Aquarius, “while her Ascendant was Sagittarian”. Now you could not expect that to gel with a Scorpio like Charles, with his moon in Taurus, could you?

But I wonder how many astrologers forecast the marriage break-up before that fairy-tale wedding in St Paul’s.

I now learn that the *Mail’s* late proprietor, Lord Rothermere, believed all the ghostly gabble and received “regular private interpretations” from the paper’s own astrologer. Obviously, proprietors have to be pleased, but it would be nice to think that the *Mail* editorial will now assert its independence by dropping those all-too-frequent phantom forays. Or will it still be haunted by the ghost of Rothermere past?

For better— or worse?

“I WAS a preacher of prosperity”, America’s disgraced TV evangelist Jim Bakker told a meeting of Christian leaders in Sheffield last month, “but when you teach that and you lose your houses and cars and money, then God is gone as well”.

Notice the plural possessions: several

homes, including one in Palm Beach, and three Cadillacs, not to mention the 2,000 acre religious complex in South Carolina called Heritage USA, which became “the third most popular attraction in America” (*The Observer*, September 13). Ten years ago Bakker was convicted on 24 counts of corruption involving more than £100 million, and he doesn’t intend to return to TV preaching, although he is apparently in touch with Jehovah and Son again. But the message is no longer of prosperity. He says he now sees the world much better and the vision is now far worse.

“The four horsemen of the Apocalypse are about to enter the world stage”, accompanied by famines, earthquakes and collapsing economies.

Er, aren’t those always with us?

Spiritual chocolate

Is it “blasphemous” as local church leaders declared, or “living art sculpture”, as committed Christian artist Emrys Morgan insisted? Whatever you like to call it, a large crowd came to see the Chocolate touring exhibition at Rochdale Art Gallery (*The Observer*, Aug 23).

Certainly it was novel. Wearing a crown of chocolate thorns and a loincloth, Morgan hung on a cross for 10 minutes before descending into a bath of chocolate. “He’s not mocking religion, he’s a serious artist”, explained the art gallery press officer, Penny Thompson. “In this day and age many people, especially women, turn to chocolate when they are depressed. There is something spiritual about it”.

Come next Easter, will we see Cadbury’s producing chocolate crucifixes as well as their usual bunnies and eggs?

Jesus up a tree?

Jesus, much to the chagrin of Christian abstainers, turned water into wine. But what sort of wine? Could it have been homely elderberry? A Widnes mother-of-four, who didn’t want to be named, claims she actually saw Jesus in an elderberry tree in her garden where, I suppose, he could have been gathering fruit for his latest vintage.

Mind you, the lady might have had a little tipple herself.

ANYTHING GOES

Is this the Post-Modernist approach?

There is an intriguing story behind this book, but let's leave that till later. For a start, consider the following passage about the Gulf War: "What is most extraordinary is that the two hypotheses, the apocalypse of real time and pure war along with the triumph of the virtual over the real, are realised at the same time, in the same space-time, each in implacable pursuit of the other. It is a sign that the space of the event has become a hyperspace with multiple refractivity, and that *the space of war has become definitively non-Euclidean.*"

The italics are in the original, but I don't think they offer any enlightenment. Yet the highly-regarded French newspaper *Le Monde* has referred to the "extreme precision" of Jean Baudrillard's sociological work. Like you and me, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont dispute *Le Monde's* description and, as professors of physics in New York and Louvain respectively, they criticise Baudrillard's frequent scientific and pseudo-scientific terminology. What does the italicised phrase mean? Indeed, as they ask, what would a Euclidian space of war look like? As for "hyperspace with multiple refractivity", it is an invention, existing neither in mathematics nor physics.

Sokal and Bricmont proceed to expose other Baudrillardian inventions and distortions; his constant use of scientific terms with total disregard for their meaning or relevance; and they wonder "what would be left of Baudrillard's thought if the verbal veneer were stripped away".

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, has also been praised as "a crystal clear author", and for giving "Freud's thought the scientific concepts it requires". His predilection is for mathematics or, at least, for mathematical terms, which he mixes up arbitrarily "without the slightest regard for their meaning". Some of his "calculations" are "pure fantasies" and, as his writings "became, over time, increasingly cryptic—a characteristic common to many sacred texts—by combining play on words with fractured syntax; they served as a basis for the reverent exegesis undertaken by his disciples", and came to resemble a religion.

Some day, perhaps, said Michel Foucault, "the century will be Deleuzian"; and Gilles Deleuze is another French thinker dealt with here, along with his collaborator Felix Guattari. The two are impugned, *inter alia*, for their lack of clarity, use of scientific terms "without rhyme or reason", and "mystifications about mathematical objects that have been well understood for over 150 years". And the two-page quote from Guattari that ends this chap-

***Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*, by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont. Profile Books paperback £9.99**

Review: Colin McCall

ter needs to be seen to be believed.

Then there is the architect and town planner Paul Verilio, praised by *Le Monde* for his "astonishing erudition", who confuses velocity and acceleration, and writes a 193-word sentence which "is the most perfect example of diarrhoea of the pen" that Sokal and Bricmont have ever encountered. And as far as they or I can see, "means precisely nothing".

Definition

Paul Feyerabend provided us with a handy definition of postmodernism when he wrote: "All methodologies have their limitations and the only rule that survives is 'anything goes'". Feyerabend's conclusion is false, as can be shown by practical example. Sokal and Bricmont instance the several ways of swimming, all of which have their limitations, but "it is not true that all bodily movements are equally good (if one prefers not to sink)". But "anything goes" is an apt description of the post-modernist position; That's what makes it pernicious.

It affects culture in general, people's way of thinking. In a book on epistemology written for high-school teachers, Gerard Fourez, a philosopher of science, confuses facts and assertions of fact, and describes the diurnal rotation of the Earth as "another theory". And a British archaeologist, Dr Roger Anyon has been quoted as saying that "science is just one of many ways of knowing the world"; the world view of the tribe he worked with, was, he said, "just as valid as the archaeological viewpoint of what prehistory is about". Feyerabend went further, calling science a "particular superstition". Others place astrology on the same footing as astronomy.

This lackadaisical attitude towards science had undeniable success in France in the 1970s and is still influential there. It spread especially in the English-speaking world during the 1980s and 1990s, but it is not confined to European philosophy and American literature departments. It probably does most harm in the Third World, say the authors of *Intellectual*

Impostures, who tell a story that does credit neither to India nor the USA. Meera Nanda, an Indian biochemist, tried to interest American academics in the case of an Indian politician who demolished a slum so that he could enter his office by an east-facing gate and maximise his "positive energies" in accordance with Vedic superstitions. Nanda's US friends refused to take sides on the issue. Seeing "the two culturally bound descriptions of space [the scientific and the Vedic] at par with each other is progressive in itself", they told him, "for then neither can claim to know the absolute truth, and thus tradition will lose its hold on people's minds". So superstition won the day.

As Sokal and Bricmont remark, "intellectuals easily fall into the hypocrisy of using Western science when it is essential, for example, if they are seriously ill while urging the common people to put their faith in superstitions". In which connection, I might mention the case of the Prince of Wales, who extols the value of alternative medicine, while he and his family make full use of the scientific kind.

The main negative effects of postmodernism are, as given here, "a waste of time in human sciences, a cultural confusion that favours obscurantism, and a weakening of the political left".

Choices have to be made and not all choices are of equal value. "At a time when superstitions, obscurantism and nationalist and religious fanaticisms are spreading in many parts of the world, including the 'developed' West, it is irresponsible, to say the least, to treat with such casualness what has historically been the principal defence against these follies, namely a rational vision of the world." Postmodernists may not intend to favour obscurantism, "but it is an inevitable consequence of their approach".

Sokal and Bricmont demonstrate this by an examination of individual writings and a general chapter from which the last paragraph's quotations are taken.

There follows a reprint of a hoax paper, written in postmodernist style and delightfully entitled *Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*, which Alan Sokal submitted to *Social Text* in 1996, and which the magazine published in all seriousness.

It was, as Nick Cohen of *The Observer* has said "the most delicious and revealing fraud in American academic history", and it induced Sokal to join with Jean Bricmont on an all-out exposure of a highly dangerous intellectual fad.

Bad marks for orthodox Jewish school

A JEWISH school in London that devotes more than half of each day to prayer and religious study has been ordered by Ofsted to rethink its timetable.

Pardes House and Beis Yaakov primary schools in Barnet, North London, merged in 1996 to meet the requirements of the state system. However, an inspection by Ofsted found that the narrow curriculum and high proportion of unsatisfactory teaching had produced unacceptable standards of general education. Adhering to Torah values, the ultra-orthodox school keeps its male and female pupils several miles apart by operating on the original sites.

Standards compromised

Ofsted's inspection report said governors and senior staff had been "slow in coming to terms with the responsibilities and demands associated with voluntary aided status".

The Ofsted team, who carried out their inspection in June, said: "The small proportion of curriculum time allocated to the teaching of subjects in the secular curriculum has had a significant impact on standards."

Jewish schools were the first non-Christian religious foundations to be admitted into the state system. Their success paved the way for the Government's decision earlier this year to approve the first Muslim state schools.

Religion v Humanism

(Continued from page 6)

- It derives its morality from an understanding of our nature as social beings who like to co-operate with one another and show sympathy and compassion for our fellow creatures.
- For Humanists the afterlife is what you leave behind in other people.

One of the most persistent accusations levied against Humanism is its supposed lack of moral guidance. It is overlooked that it is human society that has created systems of morality and it is religious man who, with uncalled for humility, has attributed their authorship to God. The Golden Rule already described is as good as anything religion has to offer and the proof of it can be found in the virtual absence of Humanists from prison whilst most of the country's notorious villains, including Myra Hindley and Peter Sutcliffe were and still are committed Christians. Believers can ask God's forgiveness and wipe the slate clean so that they can start sinning all over again. Humanists do not stand before God but before man and must account for their actions in this world.

However, before concluding it should be emphasised that Humanists have few reservations about people practising religion as individuals. If their faith offers them personal comfort, then all well and good. But organised religion is a different matter. Religion becomes a menace when religious leaders such as Popes and Ayatollahs, given credence by sheer numbers, are able to restrict personal freedoms far beyond the spheres of their own religions such as women's right to determine what happens to their own bodies and to dictate to authors under pain of death what they can or cannot write. The Taliban religious dictatorship in Afghanistan is a recent example of the unacceptable face of religion. Closer to home we have the established position of the Church of England and compulsory worship in state schools.

As we are approaching the end of the 20th century we still seem to be facing the same old conflict within the human psyche: science versus doctrinaire religion; the empirical world of intersubjective verification versus the world of fantasy; knowledge of fact versus romantic superstition. Which do you think is the right attitude for modern man.

An honest admission that many things are as yet unclear but that the human race should be chipping away steadily and enthusiastically at the boundaries of knowledge, using science as the only tool; or should we continue to accept the writings of ancient tribes as the basis on which to build our modern society simply on the assertion that these edicts are God's word and are unchangeable.

Jesus resigns

(continued from p2)

200 yards from women. Christ said that he planned to just travel for a while. Answering queries about his resignation conflicting with the Bible's Deuteronomy 31:6 in which it is stated "the LORD thy God he [it is] that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee" Jesus replied that we "must not take too literal an interpretation" and that he was being quoted out of context.

The retirement, effective immediately means that Christians seeking spiritual aid or guidance will no longer receive an answer to their prayers. "Quite frankly I don't expect it will make much difference," said the saviour. "I haven't been doing much for the last couple of centuries and no one seems to have noticed. There's always going to be fruits who think they hear voices in their head and the fact that Allah doesn't exist doesn't seem to have hurt those Muslims much either."

When asked if he had any final words for his adoring worshippers Jesus replied simply "Always look on the bright side of life."

Jesus explained that, in order to minimise confusion in coming weeks and also to update prayer-answering to match today's technology he will be installing a voicemail system.

"Burning bushes are all very well for talking to my Chosen People" said Jesus, "but they're pretty costly in terms of time resources and I don't want to bother with any of that shit while I'm on vacation."

The answering system incorporates a prayer-tone system for navigation within the prayer voicemail system "People can leave messages for me in the hope that I'll return to read them one day," Jesus said. "I apologise for any inconvenience caused."

Archbishop Jim Carrey of Westminster Cathedral told reporters that "You can expect the same great service from our voicemail system that you've always gotten from Jesus."

The response from Christians were varied although the changes were taken extremely well by the majority. "I just thank God for this," said Southern Baptist Chuck Whitman. "Getting up early on Sunday was just killing me, so I'm pretty glad actually."

"He actually exists?" asked incredulous Peter Barker, 13, of London UK. "Then why the f... didn't I get that mountain bike I wanted for Christmas. No. Hold on. That's Santa isn't? I always get those two mixed up."

You can access the Fearsome Atheist Webzine at <http://fearsome.net/rants.htm>.

You're telling us!



The Freethinker letters pages have always attracted lively debate on a wide variety of subjects. If you want to have your say on any topic in this or past issues please address your letters to: Barry Duke, Editor, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. The E-mail address is lduke@compuserve.com. You can also fax a letter to 0181 305 9603

Atheists 'more tolerant of religion'

KEITH Porteous Wood's article on Denis Cobell's appointment as chaplain to the Mayor of Lewisham (*Freethinker*, August) refers to comments made by me in the *Evening Standard* and on the *Today* programme.

He says that I appear to be "confused about non-believers," and suggests that I took greater exception to humanists than I did to atheists. The suggestion was also made that I believe humanists to be anti-religious.

In case the reader is left in any confusion, I would make it clear that I would indeed take greater exception to humanists than to atheists, because atheists tend generally to be quite tolerant of religion; if someone chooses not to believe in God I respect that person's right, in the same way that I expect him/her to respect my belief.

Is Mr Porteous Wood claiming then that humanists are not anti-religious? I would find that difficult to accept, especially when most of the content of the *Freethinker* is a diatribe against religion, typified by the article on page 10, "The battle against religion has to go on."

FATHER KIERAN CONRY
Catholic Media Office

Wholly fictitious narratives

EVIDENTLY E Goodman (Letters, August) is not paying attention. In my earlier letter (*Freethinker*, June) I made it clear that the Gospel Birth Narratives are wholly fictitious. Consequently the association with a census (enrolment) is spurious. Indeed it is very fanciful: the Roman enrolments did not require people to move about in the manner described by Luke.

In particular, the enrolment in Judaea did not involve subjects living in Galilee, still ruled by Herod Antipas. Luke used the idea of the enrolment as a mechanism to move Jesus' parents

from Nazareth to Bethlehem so as to fulfil what he saw as a prophecy (Mic.5:2) that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. In fact, this is not necessarily what the prophecy means, which may be why it does not appear to have bothered Jesus. Luke had to reconcile the belief that Jesus came from Nazareth with the belief that the Messiah should come from Bethlehem. Only by using the enrolment could he make the reconciliation.

There is no legitimate reason to reject the idea that Jesus was born in IBC. I apologize for having to repeat myself and perhaps boring some readers with this matter.

STEUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

Luke 'made it all up'

E GOODMAN (*Freethinker* letters, August) suggests that Luke's census is not needed to fulfil prophecy – and takes this as evidence that the celebrated birth must have occurred in the year of the census. Its main purpose is probably to lend a much-needed veneer of authenticity to Luke's yarn – the insertion of historic names and events into otherwise unbelievable stories was a technique common to the gospel business.

The author of the childish drivel that is the apocryphal gnostic first Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ, for instance, placed the birth quite specifically in the 309th year of the era of Alexander. Some Christians point to the very mention of names such as Augustus Caesar as proof of the gospels' veracity!

The census, however, is also a transparent device to get Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where the messiah had to be born. As such, it is a totally incompetent fabrication. The cuckold character called Joseph lived and worked in Nazareth. Nazareth is not Bethlehem, nor was it in Judea; indeed, like the rest of Galilee, Nazareth was not even under direct Roman rule. Joseph therefore did not need to register at all, and it is utterly absurd that a Galilean should register for taxation (dragging his heavily pregnant wife along, of course) in Roman Judea, where he had no property or residency, on the basis that he was descended from David [Luke 2:4]. The story is

a nonsense.

In any case, there was no census of all the world as Luke so explicitly describes the event. There is no historical record of any empire-wide census, and it is inconceivable that every historian of the time failed to record such a momentous event. Those who wish to have settled for the next best thing – a minor census in AD 6 that was local to Judea, marking its full incorporation into the Roman Empire.

Luke also places the annunciation of the birth in the reign of Herod the Great. Given that the conception, immaculate or otherwise, is understood to have occurred around about the same time (Matthew too places the birth in the time of Herod), accepting the Judean census date of AD 6 as the divine date of birth creates yet more problems. In the real world, a King of Judea and Roman direct rule cannot be co-simultaneous! Nor is it a trivial matter that Herod was ten years dead by AD 6.

Either he was miraculously resurrected – to reign in some miraculous concurrent mode with Roman direct rule that would be the envy of Ulster...or we have the miracle of the longest pregnancy in history.

Who writes this rubbish?

All the contradictions, however, can readily be explained with a bit of lateral thinking: Luke made it all up. A cursory reading of the apocryphal gospels should convince even believers that gosselling people of the time were in the business of making stuff up – and, like Luke, that they weren't awfully good at it. It makes about as much sense to argue over Batman's date of birth – more, really, as at least nowadays storytellers are more proficient at creating consistent and credible fiction.

PETER MCKENNA
Liverpool

Satire 'an antidote'

DICTATORSHIPS, such as existed under Stalin, Hitler and Franco, make democratic or military opposition difficult. Satire undermines the credibility of such regimes by making them look ridiculous when other forms of dissent are denied. In democracies, satire acts as an antidote to the political propaganda issued by political parties and creates a climate for change. I disagree with Keith Ackermann when he



states that George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four is crude and badly written: badly written books don't survive for half a century. (Where are Jack Hilton's books now?) Nineteen Eighty-Four contains a powerful message of the way that people in power maintain their position by force. In Spain, Orwell had seen that the Communist Party was counter-revolutionary, and the post-war Labour Government, which imprisoned strikers, was just another capitalist party although, somewhat inconsistently, he continued to support it.

Orwell's denunciation of Communists and Fellow Travellers was inexcusable, but does Keith Ackermann really think that we could build a better society by breaking people's knees?

CARL PINEL
Stockport
Cheshire

A bid for 'Pseuds Corner?'

I THINK that Paul Bennett (Letters, August) should come clean - he was making a bid for an entry in Pseuds Corner in *Private Eye*. How else can he explain the pedantry of *Don't confuse Socialism with collectivism*? As Paul apparently thought that "a moneyless, classless society" was "totally practical" I did wonder if he might be serious. But no, as his views ran so counter to experience and common sense they could only be sustained by faith typical of a fundamentalist Christian. No one could argue them seriously in the rational pages of the *Freethinker*. OK Paul, you've had your fun but enough is enough.

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Victims of Christianity

I SUSPECT you are quite right (Up Front, August) about the considerable amount of space needed for any memorial to the victims of Christianity.

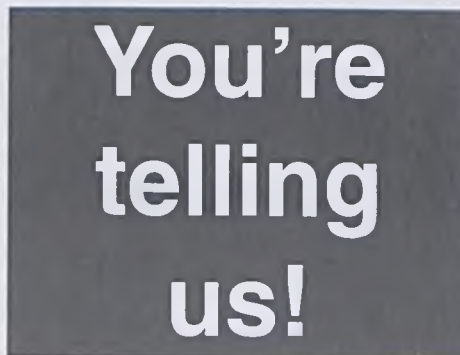
I imagine most Freethinker readers know that Charles Bradlaugh named one of his daughters after Hypatia of Alexandria, mathematician and philosopher who was murdered in CE 415 by a Christian mob led by Peter the Reader, probably acting at the behest of Archbishop Cyril.

A less famous but more recent victim comes to mind. In the nineteenth century Christian evangelists liked to claim from time to time that atheism and disbelief led to suicide. And in 1862 George Jacob Holyoake, founding father of secularism and one of the founders of the co-operative movement, discovered that he was the principal beneficiary in the will of an atheist who had indeed committed suicide.

Two years had elapsed since the man's death,

and before that Holyoake had received disturbing correspondence from him. Holyoake investigated, and discovered that the death of Bombardier Thomas Scott of the Royal Artillery (8th Brigade), Aldershot, had followed a systematic campaign of harassment by his military superiors.

Scott had been found in possession of Volney's Ruins of Empires, and some of Holyoake's writings. As a result, Scott was denied a studentcy he had won at the Chelsea Military Hospital, and was told that, unless he changed his opinions, he would be refused all promotion and appointments in the Royal Artillery. He argued that, if his opinions were wrong, they should be changed by persuasion rather than coercion.



He was charged with insubordination and, when he resisted further intimidation, he was court-martialled. He was denied writing materials for preparing his defence. While in prison his health broke down, so he was transferred to a military hospital, where he committed suicide.

Holyoake established that Scott's tormentors included his colonel, a lieutenant, a military chaplain and an army doctor. I am not aware that disciplinary action was taken against any of them. A more detailed account of this cruel and grubby business is given by Holyoake in chapter 75 of his *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life* (various editions from 1892).

NIGEL SINNOTT
Victoria
Australia

Sceptics tend to be left wing

NIGEL Meek (*Freethinker*, June) once again questions the *Freethinker's* political stance, calling for an unequivocal declaration of allegiance. I don't think he is going to get one, for the simple reason that there isn't one. Of course he is correct in having noticed that whenever political opinion or comment crops up in the magazine it tends to be predominantly of a radical and progressive stripe rather than conservative. It could hardly be otherwise.

With honourable exceptions it is a fact of life that people who are irreligious and sceptical in outlook tend not to be conservative. Thus the political colouring of the journal arises from

the prevailing disposition amongst the contributors rather than a proprietary dictate. No murky Murdoch figure lurking in the background at the *Freethinker*!

If more correspondents of a right-wing hue were to submit material the balance would shift accordingly.

I am confident that the only criterion set by whoever happens to be in the editorial chair is that freethought articles are worth reading and rationally argued, although even that modest requirement does not always seem to be fulfilled.

Any political angle is purely incidental and so it should be. Freethinkers believe in open and free enquiry and should not object to items being published that are not fully to their taste. If that really goes against the grain then people are free to protest as of course Mr Meek has done. He is entitled to take offence but I find it difficult to understand why his political sensibilities are so readily bruised.

I usually find something of merit in well made political arguments that assail my adopted position and frequently I am forced to give some ground. That is what rational debate is all about.

I have much sympathy for the various socialist systems but as a pragmatist I have come to realise that socialism, and particularly communism, fit uncomfortably with human nature, which, sad to say, is as yet unready for the share-and-share-alike requirement that collectivism demands. For all we know it may never be.

That is regrettable for, in theory at least, socialism is a much more humanitarian system than capitalism. That said I have long since taken the easy way out and now describe myself as a golden rule libertarian, trying to keep out of politics as much as possible. It is when politicians (on the right but under Blair increasingly on the left) start interfering with personal freedoms that I am inclined to take exception. However, the menace of political machinations in our semi-democratic society is as nothing compared to the damage done by power in religious hands. Give me Castro in preference to the Taliban at any time and yes, Margaret Thatcher too!

Nigel Meek's criticism comes at an unfortunate time following on so close on Peter Brearey's death. Sadly Peter is not here to rebut the accusation but I can vouch for the fact that although I am far from left wing in my politics Peter never refused a single line of all the items I have submitted over the years.

In his own case he hardly abused his strongly held political persuasion. Indeed, it came as a surprise to learn that he had such deep socialist roots; and that he was buried with the red flag and a copy of the Communist Manifesto.

For me what counts is how sound a person is on a rational approach to the mysteries of life; the politics are secondary.

TONY AKKERMANS
Leeds

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 & Hove Humanist Group: Information: 01273 733215. Cornerstone Community Centre, Church Road, Hove, corner of First Avenue. Sunday, November 1, 4.30 pm. Free for all (prose & poetry readings).

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnley on 0117 9049490.

Bromley Humanists: Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01296 623730

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

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

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Monthly meetings. Information 01926 858450.

Devon Humanists: Information: Christine Lavery, 5 Prospect Garden, off Blackboy Road, Exeter. Tel. 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. Tel 01926 854450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. November 13 - representatives of the Gay Press.

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

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. Meetings at Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch, from 8 pm to 10 pm.

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

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

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

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

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

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee. Tel. 0113 2577009. All meetings at 7.30 pm, Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Tuesday, Nov 10: Jo Fensome: The Woodcraft Folk - the Secular Youth Movement.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116

2622250 Or 0116 241 4060.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: 0181 690 4645. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, October 29, 8 pm. Terry Liddle: Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx of Sydenham.

Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Arthur Chappell. Tel. 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. Tel. 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), 6.45 pm, Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle.

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. Information: Anne Toy on 0181 360 1828.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, November 4, 8 pm Barry Johnson: Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildering - the Church and Witchcraft. Wednesday, December 2, 7.30 pm Annual Dinner. Guest speaker: Tony Robinson, writer and broadcaster. Information and bookings: Gordon Sinclair. Tel. 01226 743070.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information and literature stall at Sheffield Peace Fair, Town Hall, Pinstone Street, Saturday, November 14, 10.30 am till 4.30 pm. Information: Gordon Sinclair. Tel. 01226 743070 or Bill McIlroy on 0114 2509127.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess. Tel. 01458 274456.

Stockport Secular Group: Information: Carl Pinel, 85 Hall Street, Offerton, Stockport SK1 4DE. Tel. 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. Tel. 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. tel. 01892 890485 or Chris Ponsford on 01892 862855.

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