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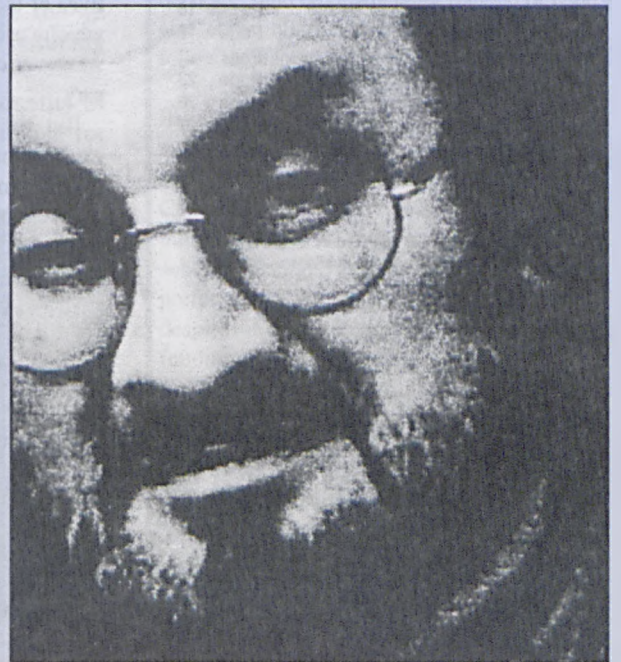
November/December 1998

Victims of Islamic Fundamentalism



Taslima Nasreen

Salman Rushdie



See full report on page 9

Freethinking Out Loud

FROM time to time I encounter people who say that I am "making a religion" out of my atheism.

The Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1981

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Editor Barry Duke

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

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Patiently, I explain that – to my mind – atheism can never be regarded as a religion, because:

- Atheism does not lay down arbitrary and often ludicrous rules and proscriptions
- Atheism does not demand blind faith from its followers
- Atheism does not offer up meaningless prayers and mantras to non-existent, supernatural beings
- Atheism does not seek scapegoats
- Whatever 'schisms' or differences that may arise within the freethought movement are dealt with by logical argument, not violence
- The ceremonies it holds are simple,

Welcome to the world of 'Faitheism'

secular, mumbo-jumbo-free alternatives to religious services, covering such social occasions as births, marriages and deaths

• Finally, and most important, atheism does not seek converts, and is tolerant of other people's religious beliefs – no matter how bizarre – providing those beliefs do not belittle, attack, or otherwise seek to impinge on the lives of those who have no religious belief, in which case atheists reserve the right to mount whatever counter-offensives they deem necessary

But no sooner had I delivered my latest explanation than along came the discovery of "Faitheism" which claims to be a religion.

The Faith Atheism movement, discovered as a result of a bout of Internet surfing, makes claim to being a religion in the question and answer section of its website.

Q: Is Faith Atheism an anti-Christ cult?

A: No, Faith Atheism is a religion. We are not anti-Christ, and nor are we in any competition with theistic religions, because we do not have any interest in convincing theists that they are wrong. Only people whose beliefs fit with those of Faith Atheism should join.

Right. So just what are the "Faitheists"' beliefs?

"We realise that we cannot prove that no god exists, just as theists cannot prove that a god does exist. We, however, have faith that no god exists," they say.

The three basic tenets of Faith Atheism, which they take on faith, are:

1. No God or gods exist.
2. Neither humans nor the universe was created by a "higher" power.
3. There is no immortal soul and nor is there

an afterlife.

They continue: "Many religions offer spiritual support to people by promising immortality and try to force their members into doing good by divine threats and bribes. Faith Atheism does not. If you are willing to accept these three tenets without proof and live without the spiritual crutch offered by many theistic religions, you should join Faith Atheism.

"We believe that theism is useless and false and that the belief in one or more gods has caused great harm and little good, and will continue to do so.

"Theists tend to spend an unreasonable amount of time in prayer and worship, time which could otherwise have been used to benefit themselves and their society.

"Sometimes, on the basis of religion, these theists will break their own moral codes and injure and kill others.

"Furthermore, theism is a deterrent to science and reason. People stubbornly cling to their foolish religious beliefs, and refuse to believe science when it contradicts them.

"Only after a long time do people finally give up their superstitions, and accept things closer to the truth. We need not site specific examples of the bloodshed of 'holy' wars and the impediment of religion to science. You should be able to come up with plenty yourself.

"Regarding morality, Faith Atheism does not dictate any specific moral code.

"It is not possible to create a moral code entirely by logic and reason. We acknowledge that axioms are necessary, and individual Faith Atheists take the axioms of their own moral codes by faith, just as they do the basic tenets of Faith Atheism.

"We believe that individuals are able to create these axioms on the basis of observation of humanity and of their society, and on the basis of compassion and other emotions.

"We do not believe that any divine revelation is necessary for the creation of moral codes. Moral codes can have great use to humanity, even though they do not necessarily have any 'truth' or 'higher purpose'."

I doubt if there are any *Freethinker* readers who would disagree with any of the above – except for the movement's insistence on being recognised as a religion.

Apart from that little niggly, I believe that any new organisation set up to counter religious privilege and foil the attempts of religionists to influence the lives of non-believers should be warmly welcomed.

– Barry Duke

Archdeacon wants 'large bundles of dosh' for images of churches

A SUGGESTION that payment should be made to the Church of England whenever photographs of churches are published within a secular context – for example, St Paul's Cathedral on postcards and in tourist brochures – has been made to the Church's General Synod.

The Venerable David Gerrard, Archdeacon of Wandsworth, said that churches and cathedrals ought to establish themselves as "protected" brands. If the children of Princess Diana and the creators of Dolly the sheep can do it, why not the Church?, he asked.

"In view of the recent attempt to protect by trademark the images of the late Princess of Wales, the city skyline of New York and Dolly the sheep, has the council sought any legal advice about the possibility of protecting by trademarks the images of cathedrals and churches of national importance in order to prevent inappropriate use of these images (and to provide a possible lucrative income)?" he asked in a written question.

Originally, the last sentence read: "and

to provide large bundles of dosh," but this was changed by synod officials.

Explaining the change in an interview with the *Guardian*, he said: "I try to write slightly amusing questions occasionally to keep people interested."

The archdeacon said his question was prompted by the use of the Grade I listed St Mary's in Battersea to promote an expensive block of apartments.

"Whenever I see adverts for it there's this picture of the floodlit church. It probably adds five grand, 10 grand to each flat to have it next to this church.

"But the church doesn't have a right to a penny of of it, and the church is having to spend a fortune on doing itself up."

The Dean of Rochester Cathedral, the Very Rev Edward Shotter, has doubts about the proposal. He voiced his concern that trademarking would damage the 42 cathedrals he represented by reducing their impact on the community.

However, he could see the benefits of preventing the use of a church image for "scurrilous" ends.

A move in the right direction

THE NATIONAL Secular Society and the *Freethinker* have consistently campaigned for an immediate stop to the creation of new denominational schools and for the public funding of all existing denominational schools to be phased out over ten years or so.

At long last the Government has taken a small step in this direction with legislation abolishing the grant-maintained sector – though, unfortunately, with no promise of further steps to come.

By November 20, the governors of all grant-maintained schools had to choose between becoming voluntary-aided schools or foundation schools.

Accepting the first option would mean their having to find 15 per cent of their maintenance costs from local sources; while under the second option only a quarter of the governors would be denominationally appointed, head teachers and deputies could be of any other religion or none, and, above all, the school would be forced to follow the standard RE syllabus.

For these reasons, the chairman of the RC Bishops' Conference Committee for Schools warned the governors of Catholic schools that their schools would lose their distinctive Catholic ethos, and possibly the school buildings too, if they became foundation schools. He urged them to accept the Church's preferred option of voluntary-aided status, despite the 15 per cent shortfall in government funding. The vast majority have done so.



St. Paul's Cathedral
London

Will the Church of England levy charges for the use of pictures like this?



Big Issue

This double-size edition of the *Freethinker* has been published to give readers full value for their 1998 subscriptions. Publication dates slipped earlier in the year as a result of the death of editor Peter Brearey. From January, 1999, the *Freethinker* will be distributed in the first week of every month.

Reaching the rationalists other chaplains can't

As reported in the *Freethinker* (August) I was invited by the Mayor of Lewisham to be his Chaplain for the current civic year. Some folk have questioned the propriety of an atheist and a secular humanist occupying such a post (see letters, page 31).

Would it be better if such positions were abolished altogether? Maybe that is so. But in the absence of abolition I preferred to occupy the post. Becoming a "chaplain" has provided more publicity for our humanist cause than if I simply agreed to be an advisor.

During my tenure as humanist chaplain, I have met many members of the Church. Among these, the newly-enthroned Bishop of Southwark, Tom Butler – "Bishop Tom". On the occasion we met he read a secular 'prayer' for the millennium. He looked towards me after reading it, and asked whether I approved. I did, and I still do.

Reportedly, this "prayer" – reproduced in the October issue of the *Freethinker* – was written by a United Reformed Church minister, Rev Peter Trow, with assistance from Anglican clerics. Every household in the country may expect to receive a copy, accompanied by a candle. The idea is that, on New Year's Eve, 1999, the candle should be lit and placed in a window, while party guests, instead of singing "Auld Lang Syne", should recite the "prayer" in unison.

Whether a lighted candle in a window near curtains amidst jolly revellers is a fire hazard I leave readers to decide: maybe a tragic outcome would be the first 'act of God' for the new millennium!

But apart from aesthetic infelicities, and the prospect that that it qualifies for an entry in Francis Gay's "Friendship Book 1999", I see no reason for complaint at the sentiments expressed in the content of the "prayer" and I said as much in a letter to *The Times*, published on October 16:

"Sir, a secular prayer for the millennium: marvellous! As an atheist and humanist chaplain to the Mayor of Lewisham, I am delighted that such a prayer is an entreaty to those who have ears – our fellow humans".

The letter appeared above one from a Mr Graham J Weeks, whose objection to the "prayer" was stated thus: "Sir, a prayer that does not invoke the name of Christ is not Christian. One that does not invoke the name of God is not even a prayer, merely a wish. The

**Denis Cobell,
NSS President,
discusses his
acceptance of the
post of chaplain to
the Mayor of
Lewisham**

millennium deserves better from the churches." My appointment as chaplain led to other interest locally. In Lewisham's adjacent borough south of the Thames, Southwark, I participated with their Mayor in an evening which preceded the United Nation's One World Week. Along with various faith groups, I gave a reading, choosing an excerpt from Robert Ingersoll.

Furthermore, another neighbouring borough invited me to become a humanist chaplain for their hospital – the Greenwich Healthcare Trust. Their chaplaincy publicised my appointment in its house journal, but at the time of writing I have yet to receive a call from a patient or client.

Apart from briefly outlining the secular-humanist approach for the benefit of Greenwich patients, I pointed out that many folk use the blank space marked "religion" on their admission forms in a variety of ways. If they opt out of the easy choice – "C of E" – what do they put? Some may write "humanist", but other preferences are "none", "atheist", "agnostic", "freethinker", even "Manchester United", or, I am told "MYOB"! It is up to staff to let patients and clients know about the humanist alternative.

What can I offer? A service for the dying; counselling of the bereaved after a death, and comfort for those who lose a baby at birth. Such parents often find the religious approach particularly inappropriate. Also, with evident approval of the hospital chaplain herself, the chance to sign a 'de-baptism' certificate, renouncing a faith imposed at birth (See October *Freethinker*, page 10).

Apart from a few opponents, my post as humanist chaplain was widely applauded. But

at the same time, the new Mayor of Hastings, an atheist, Cllr Godfrey Daniel, was getting a very different reaction.

Prayers before council meetings were discontinued long ago in Lewisham; Mr Daniel found they remained in Hastings. However, as another councillor, Trevor Webb, pointed out: "At a Hastings Borough Council meeting in July it was agreed by a democratic vote to stop having formal prayers and set aside a room for a period of prayer or reflection."

Imagine the surprise of the new mayor when his predecessor Graeme White interrupted a council meeting by reciting the Lord's Prayer and reading from the Old Testament book of Zachariah!

Ten critical letters in the *Hastings and St Leonard Observer* generally deplored Mr White's behaviour. In these letters correspondents pointed out that religion was no solution, rather the cause of many problems, and suggested the row demonstrated the need to disestablish the Church of England.

I wrote to Mr Daniel offering him support from the secular perspective. He replied: "I am an atheist ... I am seeking to ensure that there is separation between church and state in terms of the political meetings and council."

A little local difficulty has also occurred in Lewisham. It had been hoped to make a humanist contribution on Remembrance Sunday, with the Mayor, local MPs and other councillors in attendance.

Despite the fact that this event is held at the war memorial and not in his church, St Mary's, the Rural Dean of Lewisham, Canon David Garlick overruled any possibility of such a contribution and unilaterally decided that this was to remain an exclusively Church of England service.

Apart from ignoring the part played in wars by unbelievers, this also served to exclude the Borough's Sikhs, Jews, Hindus and Muslims. Rev Garlick is a traditionalist who does not support the ordination of women as priests.

This clearly demonstrates that the struggle against church interference is far from over.

I believe that using the appellation "atheist chaplain" – following on from the "devil's chaplain" (Robert Taylor 1784 - 1844) – gives me the opportunity to bring the NSS to the attention of many rational people who may not otherwise be familiar with the organisation.

The alternative is simply to preach to the converted.

Dutch Reformed Church still clings to segregation

SOUTH Africa's Dutch Reformed Church (DRK) has recently been lamenting the principal role it played in institutionalising racism in the country through the apartheid system, but its regrets do not extend as far as sanctioning a merger with its black counterparts.

Last year it issued a pamphlet admitting that apartheid-era legislation, which, among other things, prohibited mixed-race marriages, "was instituted mainly as a result of persistent pressure by the NGK".

It said the church "had not always heard the word of God correctly," adding that it was "concerned about Afrikaners' survival and has not always shown the same regard for the miserable daily existence of other people."

However, when the DRK held its four-yearly conference in Pretoria in October, a bid to amalgamate with a sister church made up of

black and mixed-race members – the United Reformed Church – was blocked.

There was also resistance from members to accept the Belhar Confession, which, as well as condemning apartheid and racism, holds that God is on the side of the under-privileged.

But the assembly of 400 delegates at the conference did adopt a resolution rejecting apartheid as "sinful, not only in its effects and operations, but in its fundamental nature".

The DRK, which always held that white superiority was sanctioned by the Bible, was suspended as a member of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982 as a result of its racist stance.

Later in the 1980s the church set up separate branches for black and mixed-race members, and in 1994 allowed these churches to merge to form the United Reformed Church of South Africa.

'Arrest me', challenges euthanasia campaigner

Millions of American TV viewers last month watched controversial American voluntary euthanasia campaigner, Dr Jack Kervorkian, help a man commit suicide.

Dr Kervorkian administered a lethal injection to Thomas Youk, 52, who was suffering a terminal degenerative muscle disease.

Facing ABC TV cameras at his home, Mr Youk told Dr Kervorkian that he was certain he wished to die. The dose was then delivered.

Afterwards, Dr Kervorkian – who has admitted assisting 120 suicides – challenged the authorities to charge him. He said that millions had witnessed what he had done, and there can be no doubt that the law had been broken. "The issue of euthanasia has to be raised," he said, adding that he could think of no more effective way of doing so than by assisting a suicide in front of TV cameras.

On three previous occasions Dr Kervorkian has been cleared of charges, while a fourth case ended in a mis-trial.

Whatever happened to Father Benz?

Was the plugged pulled on a critically ill parish priest who embezzled close on £1 million from his Pittsburgh, USA, church collections?

Father Walter Benz, 72, died recently in a nursing home after an oxygen tube and intravenous drip were wrenched from his body.

When an alarm sounded, a nurse rushed to the priest's bedside, where, he told police, he saw a middle-aged couple standing over the bed. One was holding his hand. In the frenzy that followed the couple vanished.

Detectives have been looking for them ever since. "I would be willing to bet \$100 dollars they weren't hitmen from the mob," said Dr Cyril Wecht, the Allegheny County Coroner. "Either they said 'you son of a bitch, we're not going to let you die peacefully' or they did it to end his suffering and embarrassment. I lean towards the latter explanation."

Before falling into a coma, Father Benz,

who was suffering from leukaemia, confessed to a church official that he had been systematically plundering money from the parish of St Mary Assumption's collections plates – around \$1,000 a week over a period of 26 years.

Much of this money he lost gambling in Atlantic City casinos, but he also used the money he stole to buy properties in Pennsylvania and Florida, and had a weakness for rare coins and guns.

For three years he lived with a woman parishioner who became his accomplice after catching him red-handed.

Before he died, Father Benz told police that Mary Albaugh, 51, became his partner in crime. She now stands accused of theft, forgery and conspiracy. She reportedly urged doctors to withdraw the priest's life support, but deferred to her lawyer, who advised her to "wait and see next week", adding "God works in mysterious ways."

Scientists face death charge

The death of a woman who had apparently been trying to break free from the Church of Scientology has resulted in charges being brought against the Scientologists.

The cult is facing its first criminal charges in the United States as a result of the death of 36-year-old Lisa McPherson, a woman member who is alleged to have been denied water for up to 10 days.

The Florida State Attorney in Clearwater has charged the Scientologists' main operating arm, the Flag Service Organisation, with abuse or neglect of a disabled adult, and with the unauthorised practice of medicine.

The Church, which claims eight million members worldwide, including actors such as Tom Cruise and John Travolta, has long been criticised for its alleged coercive nature, says it will fight the charges.

Too rosy a picture

THERE has been quite a hoo-ha over *The Pocket Canon*, Canongate's series of 12 books of the King James Bible (six Old Testament; six New) with introductions by contemporary commentators. Christian bookshops have been urged to boycott the set, and a Christian solicitor has threatened a blasphemy prosecution, thus guaranteeing increased sales.

Even *Private Eye* joined in the attack, telling Louis de Bernières that "The point about Christian justice is that it comes from God, you twit", when it was precisely God's justice that the novelist was questioning in relation to the Book of Job.

Will Self likewise got under the satirical magazine's skin for becoming "all bug-eyed about Revelations [sic] being 'the very stuff of modern psychotic nightmare'". He "should know" was the irrelevant, as well as impertinent comment. Self, it was good to see, was unequivocal. "I have no truck with personal immortality – it is the dross of the opium of the people", he wrote; and he has no time either for the concept of humans being born in sin, screaming for redemption.

Here, though, I must mention the contribution of another atheist, not criticised in *Private Eye*. On his first reading of the book in the King James version, Steven Rose somehow found themes in Genesis "which still have resonance today". In the "creation from nothingness", for example, he saw "a nothingness not perhaps so conceptually different from that offered by modern cosmology's Big Bang". Nor, for that matter, he continued, "is the sequence of creation, culminating in that of humans, so different from that proposed by modern cosmology, if we ignore the timescales".

"Perhaps"; "if"; and then the unwarranted conjunction again. "If", said Rose, "we have better grounds for believing cosmologists rather than the Bible, we should not forget that the basis for scientific knowledge remains doubt, not certainty". Then he did, it is true, state his preference for "We don't know" rather than "God did it", when asked what came before the Big Bang.

Professor Rose recently criticised Richard Dawkins for his "fundamentalist Darwinian orthodoxy" (*The Guardian*, October 17); and *Private Eye* expressed its thanks that Dawkins hadn't contributed to *The Pocket Canon*. Had he done so, however, there would have been less "if-ing" than we regrettably get from Steven Rose.

There is no "doubt" about it: we do have better grounds for believing cosmologists rather than the Bible, and have done at least since Copernicus.

Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

Flying off the map

UNDER the heading *Religious impulses are scientific responses too* (*The Independent*, September 5), Andrew Brown defended the theory of the late Eugene D'Aquili, an American psychologist who argued that "we are genetically programmed to develop religious beliefs in a similar way to that in which we are genetically programmed to develop the capacity to speak a language".

According to D'Aquili, the religious impulse can be "mapped in human brains" – in which case I must be one or more genes short, never having had such an impulse. More than that, though, this alleged impulse, we are told, "responds to realities outside our minds and brains" which, you might say, carries us way off the map. But Andrew Brown took the theory even further beyond the language analogy, and ended up responding to "something or someone real out there".

It will be seen, then, that his piece, under the general heading of *Faith & Reason* owed decidedly more to the former than the latter.

Not here Mr Blair!

FAITH and Reason (see etcis also the title of Pope John Paul II's latest encyclical, where he likened them to "two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth". The *Guardian* leader (October 16)

called it "an optimistic, generous document which, while unapologetically holding to Christian truth, believes that truth will be enriched by dialogue with other faiths".

But, the paper pointed out, *Fides et Ratio* "is strikingly at odds with a papacy which has succeeded in stifling the very debate by theologians which the Pope appears to be urging".

And Cardinal Hume, who praised the Pope as a philosopher when launching the encyclical here, did nothing for ecumenism when he recently refused to relax rules for taking Communion in each other's churches, even in cases of mixed marriages like the Prime Minister's. Indeed, the Cardinal had already written to Tony Blair explaining the Roman Catholic position, since when Mr Blair had stopped taking the wafer with his wife and children. Now, therefore, he must be content with the symbolic cannibalism of the Church of England, except when on holiday in Tuscany. Then he can partake of the "real presence" with Cardinal Hume's permission, because there is no Anglican church in the vicinity.

Charitable limits

JAMES Randi was charitable to the "psychics" who strive to win the \$1 million that he has offered to anyone who can demonstrate supernatural or paranormal powers under controlled conditions.

The 13 British people who have approached him include a man who claims he has discovered new laws of physics that rewrite Isaac Newton and another who thinks he has a magnetic body. Several others feel they have psychic powers but "are unable to define exactly what they can do"; and one applicant, a woman from Glasgow, has already been tested and found to be fraudulent by John Beloff of the Arthur Koestler Institute (*The Daily Telegraph*, September 9).

But Randi said there were very few instances of dishonest claims. "All those who fail still believe fervently that they are psychic and that the powers have deserted them for just 24 hours or that they ate a bad pork chop".

Not like the fortune tellers who claim to have predicted an event after it has occurred or those being investigated by a special French fraud squad for promising lottery wins, supplying "magic stones from the Himalayas or computer-generated horoscopes" (*The Sunday Times*, September 6).

In the past 18 months half-a-dozen clairvoyants have been charged with fraud or producing misleading advertising material, and more prosecutions may follow.

There's no reason for being charitable to these.

THE FAILINGS OF GOD, JACK STRAW AND ATTLA THE NUN

The next census will take place in 2001, and for the first time since 1851, it is planned to ask people about their religious affiliations. The Government will shortly issue a White Paper detailing the question it has been road-testing in a trial census in different parts of the country. The Home Secretary, Jack Straw thinks that the question will be "useful" in planning for the needs of ethnic minorities. He made his views clear in an interview with *Muslim News* magazine. "If there is general agreement that it will require legislation changes in the 1922 Census Act, we will change the legislation to incorporate the changes."

But what does Mr Straw mean by "general agreement"? Does he mean agreement among religious groups, or will he take into account the objections of non-believers, too? In its present form, the question asks: "Do you have a religious faith?" and respondents have the option of ticking boxes saying "No, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Islam/Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist" or "other" with a space to fill in the name of that religion.

At present the only people worried about the change are the Secular Humanist groups and some Jewish groups and individuals. Professor Graham Zellick, the vice-chancellor of the University of London, was quoted in the *Sunday Telegraph* as saying that he, and other leading members of the Jewish community, believe the proposal is "dangerous".

"It is wholly inconsistent with our traditions of freedom and personal privacy to ask a question about a person's religious beliefs, presumably on pain of criminal prosecution for a refusal to answer. Although I am not paranoid, and I do not expect the government to misuse the statistics in the near future, if history has taught us anything, it is that such information can be abused. It is only two generations ago that religious affiliations were used against people in a terrible manner. We must guard against such a thing ever happening again."

This is a reasonable point. If a similar question had been included in the 1880

census in Germany, it would have made the Nazis' job of rounding up its victims much easier.

Professor Zellick, however, is in a minority here. Most of the other religions are very enthusiastic about it. A spokesman for the Muslim Education Trust says: "We are constantly being asked how many Muslims there are in this country, and at the moment no-one knows." We are told that the Department of Health, Social Security and Education need the information so that they can ensure that racial minorities are properly catered for. I have no objection to this, but such information could be collected in other, more efficient, ways.

The Church of England is another body anxious for the question to be put, because they know from experience that when people are asked a question on an official form they feel they have to answer. Surveys show repeatedly that the overwhelming number of people in this country are indifferent to the church, to religion and to any system of belief. Yet if they go into hospital and are given a consent form to sign, which enquires about their religion, most will put "C of E" or "Catholic" or whatever, simply because that's what they were brought up as. If they did the same thing on the census form, the Church of England's spin doctors would have a field day with the resultant statistics.

If only half of the apostates in this country ticked one of the boxes other than "no", then the entirely erroneous impression would emerge of a deeply religious country. The Church of England's spin doctors would be straight on the case claiming it had huge support, and then start demanding even more privileges for itself. As it stands, the Church has to publish utterly misleading figures in order to justify the 26 bishops in the House of Lords, its tax privileges, its grasping of public money to keep its buildings and property in repair.

For instance, at the recent Lambeth Conference, the Church of England claimed that there were 25 million Anglicans in Britain. On closer inspection

it turned out that this was based on those who had been baptised (mostly while they were babes in arms). This number is 23 times the active membership of the church, which is a paltry 1.1 million (from a survey conducted by the *Sunday Times*, published on 26 July.)

The obvious and proven truth is that the Church has very little influence on the lives of the citizens of this country, but it is trying its damndest to convince us that it does. This census is a gift to the increasingly sophisticated religious propagandists.

Talking of the Bishops in the House of Lords, it is now reported (*Independent on Sunday*, 15th November) that as part of the reform of the Second Chamber, the Government is planning to bring in even more religious representation. Baroness Jay says that she wants an increase in holy Lords and Ladies so that the chamber will be "more representative" of Britain. But how representative of Britain can religious people be, when only about 15 per cent of the population is actively involved in religion? Let's face it, would you like your local vicar or rabbi or Imam speaking for you? Would he or she truly represent your opinions? Or those of your neighbours or friends? And when you read Hansard transcriptions of debates it is astonishing how often My Lords and My Ladies preface their speeches with the assurance that they speak as Christians. The trouble is that they are usually the kind of Christians whose face you'd slam your door in if they came calling.

It's democracy the House of Lords needs, not theocracy.

The Austrian newspaper the *Kurier* recently carried a list of reasons why God could never be a professor, and why the Omnipotent One would never make it into the upper echelons of academe. It went like this:

(Continued on next page)

Terry Sanderson on the media

(Continued from page 7)

- He issued only one extensive publication.
- It was in Hebrew
- It included no references (reading lists, sources)
- It was not published in any journal of repute
- Some even doubt that He wrote it himself
- Though He may have created the world, what has He done since then?
- His attempts at collaboration were rather limited
- The scientific community found it difficult to reproduce His results afterwards
- He never applied to the Commission of Ethics for permission to experiment on human beings.
- When an experiment failed, He tried to keep the failure secret by drowning the subjects under scrutiny
- When the subjects under scrutiny did not behave as

- forecast, they were removed from the random sample
- He hardly ever came to lectures, and asked His students to read only His book
- Some say he allowed His son to give the lectures
- He expelled his first two students from the class
- Although there are only 10 commandments, most of His students didn't pass the test
- His meetings were at irregular hours and usually took place on a mountain top.

We are advised in the *Independent on Sunday* that women no longer wish to devote themselves to God for life. The number of women in religious communities in Britain has dropped from more than 11,000 a decade ago to just over 9,000 today. Only 20 women took up the convent life in Ireland last year, compared with 100 a decade ago.

These modern women just won't swallow it. They see the stupidity of locking themselves up until they die, denying their

natural urges, chanting meaningless drivel at grotesque hours of the night and generally subjecting themselves to a living death. Only the sexually maladjusted who are running away from reality could find such a life satisfying.

When you see what happened at St Paul's Anglican cathedral in Dundee (reported in the *Sunday Times*), you can understand the drop-off rate even better. At St Paul's, the congregation has been reduced from 200 to about 30 in the space of a few months by their female priest, Miriam Byrne. Sister Byrne has been described as "authoritarian" and "dictatorial". She was so bossy and unpleasant that the deserters nicknamed her "Attila the Nun". Her bishop has asked her to resign. This is a golden opportunity for us anti-religionists. We mustn't let a talent like that go to waste.

I think she should immediately be offered a job by the National Secular Society, who could send her round as a roving priest, going from church to church, decimating the congregations wherever she went. That would be money well spent. Here's ten bob towards her first week's wages.

'And they all lived happily after'

Dear Parson,

I have a Fairy Godmother.

She watches over me, knows all my thoughts, is concerned about my behaviour and wants me to obey her.

It's not just me. She cares for all the billions – living, dead and yet to come.

How she knows each one individually is a mystery. It makes her sound like a colossal computer, but I think of her as a pretty woman. I suppose she can be both computer and woman.

Ours is not to reason why! In fact, reason doesn't come into it. As Pascal said: "The heart has its reasons which reason itself knows nothing of." And, in the words of the hymn writer: "Godmother moves in a mysterious way her magic to perform."

It seems that anything, however fantastic, can be made real by believing in it. This is called faith. Some people don't believe in fairies.

A famous playwright wrote a play called

Ask the Parson

Peter Pan in which the fairy Tinker Bell is dying because no one believes in her. As her little light fades at the back of a darkened stage, a voice calls upon all the children in the theatre to shout if they believe in fairies.

By Karl Heath

When a chorus rings out, Tinker Bell's light brightens and she is saved.

Faith is a wonderful thing.

The Fairy Godmother has a daughter she sent to earth in human form 2,000 years ago. Fairy Daughter stayed here a bit until her mother arranged a magic trick in which daughter appeared to be killed, like a conjuror pretending to saw a woman in half. Daughter was not really dead. She appeared again for a few days until she returned to Fairyland to sit next to her mother.

The purpose of this magic trick, called Resurrection, was to save us all from our

naughtiness and make us live forever.

Godmother also has a servant called the Magic Ghost or Magic Spirit. He or she (it's not clear which) seemed to play a part in daughter's birth on earth.

The Magic Spirit also appeared again after daughter had gone back to Fairyland, and told daughter's disciples to talk in a funny way, called Glossalia.

It seemed that mother, daughter and servant are sometimes merged into one. This is called the Magic Triplet, but it is a very difficult idea which most of us don't understand.

The daughter taught us to say a prayer which begins: "Our Mother, who art in Fairyland, magic be thy name."

We all have things inside us called Magic Sprites. After we die, the sprites leave our bodies and go somewhere. We hope they go to Fairyland.

Once upon a time Godmother was very cross and drowned everyone, except for eight people. I sometimes wonder what happened to the sprites of those who were drowned.

This drowning story is written in *The Big Bumper Magic Fairy Book*. Some people believe that every word in the book is true. Others pick and choose, not saying much about the silly and the nasty bits.

Dear Parson, what do you think of my story?

Does it sound like nonsense?

'Blasphemy' warrant issued against Taslima Nasreen

ON SEPTEMBER 24 this year – under an archaic colonial British law dating back to 1860 – the Dhaka General Magistrates' Court in Bangladesh issued a warrant for the arrest of the feminist writer Taslima Nasreen. The offence: "Outraging religious feelings."

But because Ms Nasreen is in hiding – and has been since her return to Bangladesh on September 14 – the warrant, the second against her – had not, at the time of writing, been served.

This second warrant was the latest turn in a tale of religious intimidation of the writer that began after the publication of the novel *Lajja* (Shame) in February 1993.

It was written in response to the orgy of communal violence which erupted across the sub-continent following the demolition of the



Taslima Nasreen

Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, India, by Hindu nationalists on December 6, 1992, and it chronicles the destruction of a family of Bangladeshi Hindus by Muslim thugs.

Lajja became an instant bestseller, but within a matter of months it was banned by the government. This was followed by the proclamation of a *fatwa* by an obscure Islamic group demanding her death. A reward was offered for her execution.

Taslima Nasreen was forced into hiding, but in 1994, after her arrest on a charge of blasphemy, she jumped bail and fled the country.

She returned to Bangladesh with her parents earlier this year from New York. Her mother, who was stricken with cancer of the colon, had gone to the United States for treatment, and – despite warnings by the Bangladeshi govern-

ment that she should never return to the country – Taslima decided to risk going home.

The news that she was back in the country spread fast and almost at once the fundamentalists were back on the streets, baying for her blood.

This prompted the International Alliance Against Fundamentalism to launch a campaign in her support. Together with the Indian Rationalist Association, the Alliance wrote to Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, calling upon her to personally ensure the safety of Taslima's life; to guarantee that her government would restrain from persecuting her, and arrest those offering rewards for her execution.

The Indian and international press took up the story, and, in the face of world-wide attention, Sheikh Hasina made her first official statement since Taslima's return.

Trying to strike a "balanced position", the Prime Minister criticised both Taslima and the Islamic extremists for "crossing the line". She said the Islamic groups were "over-reacting", but on the other hand freedom of speech did not mean the right to hurt people's religious feelings. However, she clearly stated that the government would not allow anyone to violate the law.

In a telephone conversation with the Alliance, Taslima said: "These are my mother's last days. But I cannot see her. I cannot go anywhere or see anyone. I love this country, but my life here is something no one would want."

Despite death threats, she is determined not to cave in to the extremists. A few days before, a false news agency report said she had agreed to apologise for what she had written. Denying the report, she declared: "I will never be silenced. Not shall I compromise my ideas and thoughts."

Neither have threats prevented Taslima from launching a \$10,000 trust for girls' education in the name of her mother, Eid ul-Ara. At a ceremony in her home town, Mymensingh, ten selected school girls too poor to afford schooling have been awarded stipends of \$105 each per year. The payments will continue until the girls finish their tenth grade. The funds for the trust have come from royalties from Taslima Nasreen's books.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, trouble could be brewing for the author of a book entitled *Blasphemy*.

Tehmina Durrani's novel is a fierce attack

on the hereditary pirs, the keepers of the shrines of Sufi saints. Pirs are venerated in Pakistan for their holiness and their reported ability to heal the sick and perform other miracles. Tehmina Durrani's pir, however, is a sadistic monster who beats people to death, turns small girls into sex slaves, and forces his wife into sexual encounters with a series of men.

"I called my book *Blasphemy* because I think it's important to use the word seriously. I don't think Islam is under threat from anything anyone says. But when Islam is used by important and influential religious leaders who distort the works of the Prophet Mohammed and use God's name to oppress the people, I think those people are blaspheming."



Salman Rushdie – although Iran has officially revoked the fatwa imposed by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, three senior Iranian clerics insist that it remains the duty of Moslems to carry out the death sentence

She has very little sympathy for writers accused of blasphemy. She refused to read Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* because she thought it was anti-Muslim, and has not read works by Taslima Nasreen.

Ms Durrani's book appeared just as Pakistan's lower House of Parliament introduced sharia (Islamic) law as the new legal system. However, this still has to be ratified by the Senate.

If it is ratified, neither religious minorities nor human rights can depend any longer on the protection of the constitution, which sharia law overrides.

The Philosopher Pope Prostitutes Philosophy

POPE JOHN PAUL II has not only clocked up many more air-miles and created many more saints than any previous pontiff, he has also written many more encyclicals – thirteen, to be exact.

Having dutifully read most of them, I do not recall finding any as boring as the latest one, *Fides et Ratio*, published to mark the twentieth anniversary of his election. Building extensively on his very first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis*, he has become excruciatingly long-winded, garrulous, and repetitive – sins all too often associated with old age.

The English translator must be congratulated, however, on his game-show English vocabulary, which includes such arcane words as *kenosis*, *connaturality*, and *salvific*. As for *diakonic*, which occurs more than once, it is not even known to compilers of the OED. It looks rather like the name of a medical condition, akin to diarrhoea – appropriately enough, since the verbal variety is such a feature of this document.

Though he opens the 36,000-word encyclical with the Delphic admonition “Know Thyself”, John Paul exhibits little self-knowledge.

He quotes smugly from several of his own former encyclicals, as well as from those of a select few of his predecessors and from the Old and New Testaments, and even, less predictably, from the Hindu scriptures and other oriental sources. He also cites the famous dictum of the 13th-century scholastic Thomas Aquinas: “Both the light of reason and the light of faith come from God; hence there can be no contradiction between them.... Faith therefore has no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it. “This assertion, which I well remember being taught by the good nuns charged with my formal education, has had a profound effect on my own life, for it encouraged me a decade later to read freethinking philosophers, confident that they could never undermine my Catholic faith. But they did – for, misguidedly, I read them with an open mind and followed each argument where it led. *I think, therefore I am an atheist.*

Not so the Pope (luckily for his job!), whose

reason is no match for his blinkered faith. Though reading some of the same philosophers as I did, he was able to resist their arguments and come out unscathed. And the message of this encyclical is that if he can do it so can anyone else.

He speaks approvingly of “the thirst for truth” – but what he means by truth is divine revelation; for the Thomist dictum does not signify that faith and reason set out on an equal

The Pope's latest encyclical, *Faith and Reason*, published in October to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of his getting the top job, is reviewed here by Barbara Smoker, herself a former Catholic

footing while inevitably reaching the same conclusion, as I had imagined in my Catholic youth. Reason is necessarily subservient to faith; thus, philosophy is prostituted and can never depose revelation. For John Paul, therefore, there is no real contest between faith and reason: the conclusion is known from the outset.

Himself a qualified teacher of philosophy in his early days, he castigates theologians who ignore philosophy no less than philosophers who ignore theology, for he sees philosophy as a useful tool for the rationalisation of revelation – “an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it”. He states, therefore, that it is “theology’s duty to recover its true relationship with philosophy”, and “the magisterium’s duty to discern and promote philosophical thinking which is not at odds with faith.”

In 1990, he issued a theologian-muzzling

Instruction, stating that the role of the Catholic theologian is to “pursue a particular way of ever deeper understanding of the Word of God ... in communion with the magisterium which has been charged with the responsibility of preserving the deposit of faith”, and that “freedom of inquiry is the hallmark of a rational discipline whose object is given by Revelation, handed on and interpreted in the Church under the authority of the magisterium, and received by faith.” In other words, freedom of inquiry was to be encouraged, so long as it did not lead to undesirable conclusions – and this is again the message of the encyclical under review, but at far greater length.

Freedom of inquiry becomes freedom to conform to the “truth” – an unexceptionable proposition were truth not identified with divine revelation as interpreted in the teachings of the magisterium handed down to the faithful by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on behalf of the papacy. So the meaning of the word “freedom” has been stood upon its head, as in all totalitarian regimes.

Nonetheless, launching the English edition at a press conference in London, Cardinal Basil Hume, with a straight face, extolled the Pope as a “fine philosopher”. The British press proceeded to take that as their cue, generally praising the encyclical for (to quote *The Times*) “its intellectual and spiritual breadth”. One wonders whether journalists are actually forbidden to exercise any critical judgment when the Pope pontificates, or whether (understandably enough) they simply could not be bothered to read the thing.

Quotable quote

History does not record anywhere at any time a religion that has any rational basis. Religion is a crutch for people not strong enough to stand up to the unknown without help. But, like dandruff, most people do have a religion and spend time and money on it, and seem to derive considerable pleasure from fiddling with it.

– Robert A Heinlein, science fiction writer in *Time Enough for Love*

Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of The NSS, reports on, among other things,

ANOTHER CAREY COCK-UP

George and the Mormons

GEORGE Carey agreed to film seven TV programmes of religious propaganda to be broadcast around Easter, only to withdraw from the project after he discovered that the shows would be broadcast in the "graveyard slot" after 11.30 p.m. The Primate of all England felt to appear at such an hour was beneath his dignity. He was roundly admonished for his withdrawal in a half-page article in the *Church Times* which pointed out that it was likely that more people would have seen him even at that hour than if he had spoken at every Anglican service in the UK for a whole week.

George is going to need all the media help he can get if the wealthy Mormon Church - described as the "country's fastest-growing religious organisation" by the *Sunday Telegraph* - launches its planned multi-million pound advertising campaign. This is expected to be in prime time at, or just after, Christmas and the adverts are to focus on family values. The Church of England - clearly worried the Mormons will be seen as a mainstream Christian church and an attractive alternative - see the adverts as "a bad thing" and want the authorities to ensure they are not misleading. *Freethinker* readers will share my view that the only way to prevent religious adverts being misleading is to ban them.

It may be that the Church of England is worrying too much. If these adverts are regarded as moralising, they will suffer a similar fate to the recent loss of face of the Republican Party in the United States. They were so hell-bent on exposing Clinton's sexual antics and fulminating about them, they failed to notice the American public just wanted to forget about them. What the public perceived was that most of the religious right-wing Republican candidates were unattractive bigots unfit for office - and voted accordingly.

Eruv

The barriers at local level to the proposed Barnet Eruv (a notional Jewish religious area, the first in Britain) have now been all but cleared, despite the sterling efforts of the Eruv Boundary Opponents Group. They commissioned a Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents report which warned that the poles and wires to be erected in connection with the Eruv would be a safety hazard. The Council was presented with the report, but, like much of the Opponents' previous representations, it was ignored.

Barnet Council have claimed nearly £20,000 from the Opponents towards the Council's legal costs in connection with last year's application for a judicial review (initiated by the Eruv opponents). Fortunately, on appeal, these costs have been reduced to around £13,000.

The entire balance (just under £3,000) of the Eruv Challenge Fund, which was launched by the National Secular Society & *Freethinker*, has been applied towards these costs. This still leaves a substantial shortfall to be borne by members of the Opponents, who - as well as funds - have made a significant personal commitment in time and effort to this project. They have our thanks. We are also grateful to members and *Freethinker* readers who responded to the appeal for funds.

I am now working with the Eruv opponents on a strategy to adopt against the physical implementation of this Eruv, and any proposals for Eruvs elsewhere.

Muslims and Race Legislation

MERTON (south London) Council has failed in its bid to have the High Court declare that Muslims should join Jews and Sikhs in being regarded as a racial group for the purposes of the Public Order Act and the Race Relations Act. Jews and Sikhs had already been so included as a result of case law where it had been successfully argued that, as well as a reli-

gious minority, they were also a racial minority. Merton Council have indicated that it will apply again to the High Court. The case has arisen out of difficulties in prosecuting an organiser of the British National Party over stickers asserting "Rights for Whites" and leaflets against the conversion of an old dairy into a mosque.

Muslims are claiming that they do not have any of the protection enjoyed by the Sikhs and Jews. According to a letter in *The Times* about this case from the Chief Crown Prosecutor, Muslims are now protected by a range of measures including Section 28 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 which criminalises assaults aggravated by race or religion.

We abhor racism and understand why this change in the law has been made in respect of assault; the law should be there to protect people, not religions. Our grave concerns remain in respect of more wide-ranging legislation which could be misused to hinder criticism of religion.

Roman Catholic publicity

THE Pope's 20th anniversary has brought acres of publicity, but not all of it favourable. I was pleased to see eminent theologian Hans Küng telling the faithful that the Pope was simply a puppet of the sinister Curia. He suggested the more doddery the Pope became, the more he claimed that his actions were infallible. This was too much for a Father McCaferty who immediately wrote to the *Independent on Sunday* broadly suggesting that the Pope was faultless and wonderful in every way.

You will, I hope, be pleased to hear that the next edition carried a letter from the National Secular Society suggesting that a better indication of the Pope's performance was that during his Papacy 700,000 people in the UK had abandoned going to Mass. The majority of the remaining congregation - 1,750,000 - ignore his teaching on birth control. I then catalogued the disease and misery throughout the world resulting from this evil policy.

And some of the publicity for the RC church was on the radio. If not for his courtesy in debate, we are indebted to the Editor of the *Catholic Herald*, William Oddie, for describing with such candour his encounter on air with NSS Council member Jennifer Jeynes. He described the programme as "probably my most depressing experience...for some years".

Jennifer had given him a hard time on a *Radio Five* programme about Catholics and, by his own admission, his performance had been abysmal, but this was not the root of his depression. He confided the cause to *Catholic Herald* readers - that the "virtually unanimous attitude of those who phoned in was...of incomprehension of Catholicism as a system of belief...[and]...a venomous hatred for the Church and all her works".

Much of this hatred, he lamented, came from lapsed Catholics, "threatened with hell-fire as children, or terrorised by nuns, or otherwise brutalised. And the question of all those paedophile priests came up more than once." And, worse, he felt betrayed as practically no one had stood up for him in the whole ninety minutes.

This salutary experience led Oddie to conclude in the 16 October 1998 *Catholic Herald* "We [Catholics] are going to have to clean up our act and fast; we have to stop keeping our heads down and learn to explain why the Catholic faith truly is a glorious gift of God and not a contrivance of the devil."

Irreverent thought for the day
If Jesus Christ had been burned at the stake, instead of crucified, would Christians nowadays be wearing ashtrays around their necks?

Row over 'Bible Week' proclamation

A ROW has broken out in the small town of Gilbert, Arizona, over a "Bible Week" proclamation.

Despite concerns voiced by the Arizona chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union that the proclamation subverts the separation of church and state, Mayor Cynthia Dunham did so again this year, and issued her fifth proclamation since 1994 at a town council meeting designating the week of November 23 as "Bible Week."

"The community is very supportive of Bible Week, which is why we do it," Ms Dunham said. "It recognises the important role churches play in our community."

Ms Dunham says she was prompted to issue the proclamations by the New York-based, non-profit group, the National Bible Association. Since 1941, the Bible Association has encouraged Governors and Mayors to observe National Bible Week during Thanksgiving week. The Association's mission statement says the group is dedicated to "encouraging everyone to read the Bible."

Foundational document

Last year, Ms Dunham issued a "Bible Week" proclamation that encouraged citizens to read the Bible and stated that "the Bible is the foundational document of the Judeo-Christian principles upon which our nation is conceived."

Ms Dunham issued the proclamation despite criticism from the Arizona ACLU.

Eleanor Eisenberg, the group's Executive Director, says the proclamation is an unconstitutional government entanglement with religion.

"The proclamation clearly violates the Arizona and US Constitutions," Ms Eisenberg said "It is divisive, and it excludes people."

"It is true that the Bible was a foundational document, but, despite that fact, our founding fathers knew that government should not become entangled with religion."

Thomas May, president of the National Bible Association, said that government officials can issue the proclamations without running foul of the establishment clause of the First Amendment.

"The proclamation has nothing to do with pushing on anyone a particular faith," Mr May said. "Also, the establishment clause means freedom of religion, not freedom from religion."

"What we have asked the Mayors across the country to do is to encourage people to read, if they want to, the Bible," he said. "I'm distressed that anyone would take any kind of umbrage against a public official encouraging a constituency to read a book that is held in the high esteem of the great majority of the public."

May added that it was "rare" for Bible Week proclamations to spark objections.

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.

Loving Jesus Made Me Complete

Many women do not have the opportunity to experience an orgasm (poor dears) and this gave Natalie Lynn the idea to replace orgasm with epiphany (spiritual awakening) in an article she posted on Daniel Adams's *Fearsome Atheist* Internet website.

MARGARET Wiebe, 41, dressmaker of the small town of Abbotsford, British Columbia, reported Tuesday – with flushed face and zealous glee – her first ever epiphany.

All through her adolescence (when this sort of thing was not really discussed in mixed company), early adulthood and marriage, Margaret Wiebe had a certain yearning for an epiphany. Margaret had first heard of epiphanies when she was permitted by her parents, Menno and Hazel to attend the Young Women's Bible Study Group at her local Mennonite Brethren Church.

She later on had also spent many hours in her church's Ladies Bible Study Group listening covetously to other members of her congregation share of their own epiphanies, and on the occasion when one of the ladies would tell of her own multiple epiphanies (unanimously agreed as most sought after of all spiritual events), she would simply sit back, listen and sigh.

By the time she had reached 40, she was feeling left out, inadequate as a woman of the Lord, feeling forsaken by the Father. "Beautiful Lord when it would be (my) time to have an epiphany, or – blessed be! – a multiple epiphany" she would pray. She went on yearning, and continued begrudgingly to live vicariously through those lucky ladies in her Bible Study Group who had experienced it.

Last Monday, whilst clearing the dishes from the supper table and singing *Michael Row Your Boat Ashore* with her husband of 25 years, John, an odd sensation came over her. Margaret describes the experience thusly:

"I had just finished scraping the leftover scalloped potatoes off of my husband John's plate, when this feeling came over me, all of a sudden I felt flushed, my mind was racing at a mile a minute, shivers ran up and down my spine, I grew tense, my knees started shaking, I started to breath heavily – it was incredible. I ran over to my husband and accepted the loving hand of the Good Lord Jesus – Praise Be! – and miraculously we experienced a simultaneous epiphany."

John Wiebe responded to the blessed event as follows: "I am so glad that Margaret acknowledged me enough to share her first epiphany with her."

"Receiving the Holy Ghost is indeed a blessed event. I am so glad after 25 years of marriage that I had a part in this."

It is of good note that Margaret Wiebe, having experienced one epiphany and now feeling complete as a woman of Good God, is eager to receive the Lord once more.

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A YEAR OF GREAT ACHIEVEMENT

The National Secular Society profile has been at its highest for some time over the past year; indeed, some would say the Society has enjoyed better exposure and accomplished more over the last 12 months than in any preceding year.

Many letters and press releases published in a variety of newspapers, coupled with frequent television appearances and radio broadcasts by NSS representatives have brought the Society to the attention of people throughout the UK.

The Society has also engaged in a number of high profile campaigns.

NSS President Denis Cobell, writing in the Society's latest – and to date its most substantial Annual Report – emphasised that “this organisation has been pressing hard for a more secular society. In recent years, religion has, if anything, been growing in influence; there is so much to do and we always want to do more.

“But I believe we have made considerable progress during the last twelve months in some important areas, such as raising awareness of the Society in the media and also in the corridors of power”.

In a comprehensive review of the year, encompassing both global and domestic areas of concern, the report said that “a list of all the world conflicts in which religion plays a major part - or is a direct cause - would be too long to include here.

“Mention must however be made of Jews and Muslims at war in the Middle East, civil war about to break out in Israel between orthodox and secular Jews, Islam persecuting Christians in Pakistan, two different brands of Islam threatening a major conflict on the Afghan-Iran border, Hindus and Muslims still fighting over Kashmir and Indian troops massing on the Pakistan border.

“After great bloodshed, the Taliban may have achieved a peace of sorts in most areas of Afghanistan. However, women there can neither be examined by a male doctor nor go out to work, which means that they can neither practise as doctors nor receive medical treatment. Girls over eight are not permitted to go to school.

“Less media publicity is given to conflict in Africa where huge numbers of people perish in religious/tribal fighting and in Burma where forced labour in the name of Buddha is common practice.

“The malevolent face of religion in the

United States is becoming more prominent. Clients outside abortion clinics are frequently intimidated; their medical staff are routinely threatened and sometimes murdered. It is widely believed that attempts by the religious right-wing to weaken President Clinton or even have him removed from office are, in reality, retaliation for his refusal to restrict abortion.

“President Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky provides ample ammunition for his opponents. However, there are hopeful

Highlights from the National Secular Society's latest Annual Report

signs that the religious right may be frustrated in its attempts to become a dominant force intent on making the United States a near-theocracy as they find it impossible to curb - or conceal - their zealotry”.

Turning its attention to John Paul II's 20th anniversary, the report notes “he is now the century's longest serving pope ... his extreme frailty can no longer be disguised. Leading RC theologian Hans Küng has called for his resignation, challenging the Pope's growing claims to infallibility. The “infallible” ban on women priests is expected to be followed by ones on artificial contraception and abortion. The cardinals that he has appointed have been as backward-looking as he is. If the next Pope is as reactionary and authoritarian as the current incumbent, open warfare in the Catholic church will surely ensue.

“However, we are told the Pope accepts the Darwinian theory of evolution; and after having at last apologised for imprisoning Galileo for stating, correctly, that the Earth revolves around the Sun, the Catholic Church is now considering whether to apologise for the Inquisition. The apologists are already getting their oars in: ‘the Inquisition wasn't as bad as it

is sometimes made out’ said one, and another “by the standards of the time, it was a good system of justice”.

Focusing on the UK, the report points out that “despite the inexorable reduction in UK church attendance, some malignant aspects of religion are only too evident. Catholics and Protestants continue to wrangle over the peace settlement in Northern Ireland. It is of course no coincidence that Northern Ireland's church membership, as a proportion of the population, is eight times that of England.

“While there has been some welcome progress in the peace talks, extremists on both sides seem intent on wrecking the process – recent examples are the devastating bombing at Omagh and the provocation of the Orange Order in insisting their march from Drumcree passed through a RC area. Most politicians seem committed to the peace process (we exclude the intransigent Reverend Ian Paisley, MP) and the churches are now distancing themselves more from the violence. The hard part is yet to come - the decommissioning of terrorist weapons.

“An investment that the Province should be making in long term peace is to increase materially the number of integrated schools. This will require far more clout - and finance - than is currently expended. At the moment, such schools are only established when they are wanted by the community. The places where such schools are really needed is where they are *not* wanted. Will the Government please take heed.”

Switching to Scotland, the report says that “with a church membership ratio three times that of England, Scotland needs to take great care to avoid future religious strife of the kind suffered by its near neighbours in Northern Ireland in recent times.

“Sectarian religious graffiti are commonplace in Glasgow and other urban areas; and religion sometimes raises its head in an ugly way in local politics and football. In the less populated areas of the north of Scotland there are many communities with a high proportion of Roman Catholics, but where the non-RCs often appear to have a disproportionately large share of the senior jobs. The parallels with Northern Ireland are too close for comfort.

While it still can, we hope that politicians in the new Scottish Parliament will treat the

(Continued on next page)

Highlights from the NSS

defusing of such potential conflict with the priority it deserves. Albeit a long-term solution, the most effective first step for Scotland, too, would be to insist on far more integrated schools."

Detailing the public exposure the NSS has received over the year, the report says "we have had an excellent year for publicity. However, for every success there have inevitably been several attempts at promulgating other topics which have borne little or no fruit, perhaps because of a surfeit of other news."

"Just how sensationalist the media is was demonstrated by their enthusiasm for the somewhat trivial ASDA story rather than the other major issue we were then trying to ventilate, the churches trying to exempt themselves from the Human Rights Bill."

The ASDA publicity was the result of the NSS criticising ASDA's in-store "Christmas service" in which carols and a recorded message from the Archbishop of Canterbury were broadcast from their Gravesend store to all other stores. This publicity followed the dispatch of a large number of press releases by the Secretary on the Saturday before Christmas. He talked on several national radio programmes and appeared on Sky TV in Britain and across Europe.

The Society was quoted, or the Secretary's comments were re-broadcast, on numerous stations' news programmes (including several BBC national stations) and on Teletext. A letter from the Society on this subject also appeared in *The Times*.

Probably the highest-profile exposure for the Society was the appearance of General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood on the BBC main evening news on 9 January (both TV and radio) where he was the only person to speak against the first state-aided Muslim school and point out we have opposed religious schools for 130 years. Members of Council have also been active on TV, particularly on Channel 5 where Jennifer Jeynes and Norman Bacrac have contributed frequently and Mike Howgate is now a seasoned performer, particularly on Darwinism or against superstition.

There have been several other radio programmes in which the President, Denis Cobell, has taken part: on BBC Radio 5 Live, BBC Radio North, Radio Scotland and local stations.

Together with Jennifer Jeynes and Keith Porteous Wood, Mike Howgate also spoke in a one-hour programme on the Lambeth Conference for Channel 5, examining whether the liberal bishops' stance amounted to a new

reformation. Member Anne Toy and Daniel O'Hara, our former President (who was so described) also spoke. "Our combined input gave the bishops present a 'run for their money'," says the report.

In another Channel 5 programme, Jennifer, Mike and Anne spoke on the Millennium.

Keith Porteous Wood has appeared on BBC2's *Midnight Hour* on the subject Can or should the Government be Christian?, been interrogated about the Millennium by an audience in the Scottish TV programme *Inquisition* and recorded a piece for LWT's children's programme *Holy Smoke!* in addition to a number of shorter appearances on the BBC and independent television.

The Society's national radio performances have included two peak-hour phone-ins taken by the Secretary on the hour-long *Nicky Campbell Show* on Radio 5. One of these, the programme "Does religion do more harm than good?" was so successful that it was extended by fifteen minutes; this was almost without precedent. Member Terry

Jennifer Jeynes, Alan Lord and Jim Herrick have appeared on radio. Jim Herrick's performances included being a witness on the *Moral Maze*. The Secretary has also taken part in numerous local and regional radio programmes.

Even so far in advance, the Millennium (and particularly the Dome) has been a welcome source of publicity. The Secretary issued press releases suggesting that the Spirit Zone should tell the whole Christian story, including the bloody Crusades, witch burnings, and the Spanish Inquisition as well as Galileo's persecution by the Pope. The suggestions were referred to in the *Independent* and other papers for several days.

The Society has also been mentioned in most of the serious newspapers, most frequently in the *Times*, *Guardian* and *Independent* (in some of which we have started protracted debates), also the *Express*, *Mail*, *Evening Standard* and even the *Financial Times*.

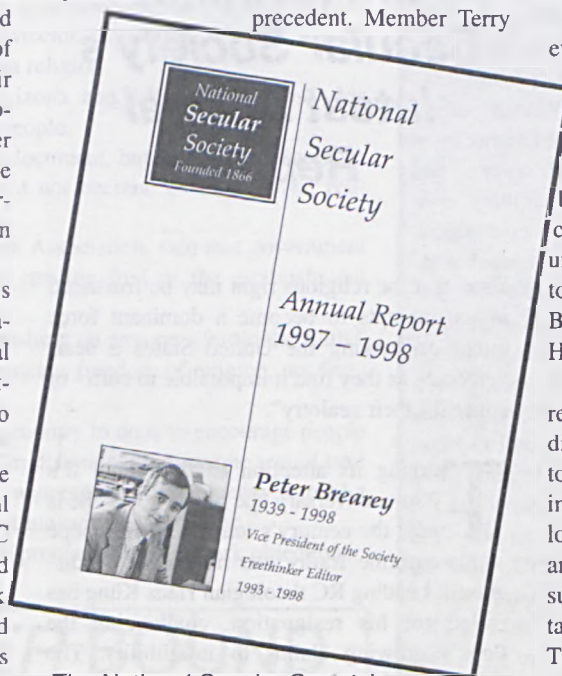
"However," says the report, "we no longer even try to provide material for the *Daily Telegraph* which has an editor who takes religion so seriously he appears to wish to protect his readers from the views of infidels."

The most active campaign fought this year by the Society was in connection with the churches' concerted – but ultimately largely unsuccessful – attempts in the House of Lords to exempt religions from the Human Rights Bill. The Bill incorporates the European Human Rights Convention into domestic law.

After bids for outright exemption failed, the religious lobby tried to make prosecutions difficult to secure under the Bill if they related to an act "in accordance with the historic teachings of the [top 6] religions". The religious lobby was led by the Archbishop of Canterbury and ardent Christian, Baroness Young, with the support of the American Christian fundamentalist organisation, the Rutherford Institute. The Government, to its credit, fought valiantly against the pro-religious amendments as did our secular supporters. Earl Russell and Lord Hughes of Woodside made particularly powerful speeches.

It is sobering to reflect that the religious lobby won their battle in the Lords against this formidable opposition. However, the Government later struck down these pro-religious Lords' amendments in the Commons and replaced them with largely symbolic concessions.

The Society (and, we suspect, many of its opponents) accept that the practical effects of its opponents' pro-religious amendments were minimal, as the *Convention now stands*, but



The National Secular Society's latest Annual Report, which also features a tribute to Peter Brearey, Editor of The Freethinker, who died earlier this year

Sanderson took a third *Nicky Campbell* programme in his capacity as a *Freethinker* columnist because the NSS's quota on this show had been exceeded. In all of the phone-ins in which we have been involved the audience has been heavily in favour of the secular position.

The Secretary also took part in a Radio 4 programme on the decline of religion "A New Jerusalem?"

Apart from the President, council members

Annual Report

this would probably not be the case, were it to be extended. Extensions are expected to include employment, and discrimination on grounds of sex or sexual orientation.

This has been a long and complicated campaign, but it has also been fruitful in raising the Society's profile in the Government and Palace of Westminster, where the Secretary has spent considerable time over the last year making contacts, including some with the Parliamentary Humanist Group.

The increase in the NSS's profile resulting from the work on the Human Rights Bill has been even greater than might have been expected because the Society *alone* took the initiative to lobby against all these revealing examples of religious hypocrisy. On the one hand, the religious fraternity claims to support human rights, but on the other, it seeks to be exempted from the Bill, despite the fact that freedom to practise religion is already enshrined in the Convention.

At the suggestion of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, the Society - together with a number of Honorary Associates - formally supported calls for an equal age of homosexual consent. This was passed by the Commons with a large majority, and was supported by the leaders of the three major parties. However, the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke out against equalisation and, as she had done in the Human Rights Bill, Baroness Young rallied the pious in the Lords and succeeded in reversing the Commons vote. As the Government had given an undertaking to the European Court of Human Rights to pass this legislation to avoid an adverse judgment in a case of discrimination, it will now have to reintroduce the legislation in such a way that the Parliament Act can be invoked if the Lords again try to block it. Nevertheless it is a further example of the power that the religious lobby can muster. Even discounting the votes of the hereditary peers, the religious victory would have remained intact.

Before it became known that only the abolition of hereditary peers' voting rights would be dealt with in the *first* stage of Lords reform, the Society made representations to the Lord Chancellor (who chairs a committee on Lords' reform) requesting that the bench of bishops be removed.

"Rather than follow our suggestions, the Lord Chancellor seems more inclined to prefer that 'other faiths' be represented in the Lords as well," says the report. "The C of E welcomed this, but have declined suggestions to reduce their own representation. The Secretary has been in contact with, and sent briefings on

this issue to, a 'friendly' constitutional expert and an Honorary Associate with a special interest in this area. It is now clear that the *second* stage is some years away. It will probably be preceded by a Royal Commission to which the Society would, of course, submit evidence.

Turning to the issue of blasphemy at home and abroad, the report refers to the case of Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen, against whom Muslim demonstrators want to bring charges of blasphemy (see full report on page 9). It points out that "confusion reigns over the Salman Rushdie fatwa; it seemed in October 1998 that the fatwa had been lifted as part of an arrangement in which diplomatic relations were restored between Iran and the UK. Later reports suggest that although the Iranian state is not supporting the fatwa, others still are; indeed the latest developments seem, at least temporarily, to have strengthened the resolve of Rushdie's opponents."

The Law Commission has twice recommended the abolition of the blasphemy law, although these calls were some years ago. The Secretary has been in contact with the Law Commission and a leading QC to assist us in establishing a strategy for having this issue brought onto the agenda once more, perhaps by seeking a further Law Commission recommendation.

President given the right of reply

Following publication in the *Independent* of the views of a Muslim in respect of "Islamophobia", NSS President Denis Cobell was given the right to reply. Here is what he said in the November 2 issue of the newspaper: I welcome the *Independent* giving an 'ordinary' Muslim the opportunity to let the rest of us see her community through her eyes.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown says that it would be unthinkable for people to say about Jews, blacks or gays the kind of slanderous things they say in the media about Muslims. The virtual immunity from criticism which Jews enjoyed in this country and the United States, for example, no longer applies to the actions of the right wing in Israel.

Neither does her statement hold water for gays who, like Muslims, are not protected by law from defamation and also, as a group, are the target of violence. But most gays have learned to live with the stereotyping and to

counter it, wherever possible, with personal courage and "coming out". The more that the general populace see ordinary Muslim people sharing the same kinds of daily joys and frustrations as the rest of us, the more that each "side's" mutual feelings of persecution will subside.

Freedom of speech is an important element of our society. We should all feel able to criticise those who behave badly whoever they are, including those who belong to our own group. If we do not criticise those acting excessively in our own group, whatever that may be, there is a real danger that our silence will be taken as condoning this behaviour - to the ultimate disadvantage of the group as a whole. Ms Alibhai-Brown has courageously taken this on, and others in her community need to follow her good example.

We should also oppose any laws that seek to give any religious groups special protection from criticism. Sometimes that criticism is justified, and must not be stifled by automatically being branded "anti-Christian", "Islamophobic", "anti-Semitic", etc.

Shock, horror over *The Pocket Canons*

AN OUTFIT calling itself Jesus is Alive! Ministries is all in a lather over the *Pocket Canons*, published by Canongate Books Ltd.

In a letter dated October 9, and addressed to sundry church leaders, Paul J Slennett writes that his organisation is "spearheading a campaign against *The Pocket Canons* [which] consist of the Authorised King James Version of the Bible, each with an introduction written by a well-known writer.

"We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, divinely revealed; therefore every word is true. What we don't want is any fundamental questioning of that text, but rather an introduction which which enables people to understand it more fully.

"However, some of the authors, rather than pursuing this objective, have seen it as an opportunity to describe God, Jesus Christ, or the Bible in terms that will seriously shock and outrage the feelings of Christians.

"Many would no doubt consider the use of scurrilous and irreverent language when describing God in the introduction to Job as blasphemous". Jesus is Alive! Ministries want their supporters to "pray for this campaign"; lean on Canongate Books to withdraw *The Pocket Canons* from circulation, and ask the Scottish Bible Board to revoke the licence granted to use the Authorised King James text alongside these introductions.

Jack Hastie tries to make sense of the term

THE LANGUAGE

Nearly all prayer contains metaphysical statements referring to phenomena which can never be confronted by observable facts and therefore either verified or falsified.

For example, in the invocation "Oh most holy God whom cherubim and seraphim adore," it is impossible ever to acquire any direct evidence as to whether cherubim and seraphim really do adore God, or even if such beings exist. It is, therefore, simply pointless to make the statement.

A prime example of this use of metaphysical language in prayer occurs in connection with the Christian myth of man's fall in Eden and redemption through the death of Christ. This myth pervades so much of Christian prayer that it is impossible to discuss the meaning of prayer without a preliminary look at.

Briefly stated it says that mankind fell from a state of grace because of a primordial act of disobedience, that the consequences of this fall are hereditary and that mankind can only be saved from death by God himself having died in the form of his son Christ.

As none of this can possibly be either supported or falsified by any kind of empirical evidence it is simply pointless to make the assertions.

Moreover, the myth employs concepts which defy logic – God is three distinct persons and yet is at the same time one; Christ was wholly man and at the same time wholly God; sin is inherited although each spirit is a special creation of God; an omnipotent God is unable to waive a penalty he had foreseen and had imposed himself except by subjecting himself to it. It may be that there is an aspect of reality which corresponds to these concepts; it may even be claimed that this reality has been detected subjectively through the experiences of the faithful. But when the normal laws of logic and the normal conventions of semantics are applied, statements about such matters are, literally, non-sense.

It follows that all references in prayer to the fall-redemption myth must also be

nonsense. For example, "Spare us Good Lord, spare thy people whom thou hast redeemed with thy most precious blood."¹

"Thank you that you sent your son Jesus to die on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free."²

"Oh Jesus, my saviour and my God, how can I ever sufficiently thank you for paying the price for my sin on Calvary's tree?"³

'In the absence of any way of defining what "bless", "sin", "Satan", "merciful" and "holy" may mean in terms of what kind of experience would support or falsify the proposition, these are meaningless assertions and requests'.

Besides the fall-redemption myth there are many other statements to be found in prayer which equally belong to the world of metaphysics, ie whose meaning it is impossible to define with reference to the empirically observable environment.

"God bless Daddy and Mummy."

"Bowed down beneath a load of sin by Satan sorely pressed..."⁴

"Almighty and most merciful Father we

have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep... we have offended against thy holy laws."⁵

In the absence of any way of defining what "bless", "sin", "Satan", "merciful" and "holy" may mean in terms of what kind of experience would support or falsify the proposition, these are meaningless assertions and requests.

Christianity of course has no monopoly of statements of this kind. The Jewish Shema begins, "Hear Oh Israel the Lord is thy God; the Lord is one."

And the Muslim call to prayer reminds the faithful, "God is the greatest. I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship but God.

I bear witness that Mohammed is the messenger of God."

Both make statements about God – his one-ness, his greatness, his unique right to worship, his special relationship with, in one case Israel, in the other Mohammed – which are no more subject to empirical investigation than Christian statements about the Trinity, the Fall or the Redemption.

Prayers for the dead offer special examples of this kind of meaninglessness. These petition for an outcome – forgiveness, salvation, rest – which it is impossible to define, for an entity, the deceased, whose continued existence is a matter of supposition, in a manner such that the success or failure of the petition cannot be detected.

Contempt for logic is also not uncommon: "Lord Jesus, draw very near to them" ...of an omnipresent being,⁶ or Milton's famous "Forget not..." of one who is omniscient.

Then there are statements about subjective mental conditions which are not directly accessible to others.

In modern prayer requests are frequently made which relate to such states of mind. It is often asserted that prayer produces an effect on character which is uplifting and ennobling; that inner voices prompt us after we pray and that this is the Holy Spirit guiding us to do God's will.

It is in principle impossible to determine

terminology used in

OF PRAYER

whether these inner promptings have an exterior origin such as the Holy Spirit, or arise from within the unconscious.

Petitions of the form, "Envelop her (a woman recently widowed) with your love" are even further removed from reality since not even a personal hunch may give us a clue as to whether the petition has been granted.

A quite different source of verbal confusion exists in cases in which thanks are offered to God "for everything."

Paul writes, "In everything give thanks."⁷

Protestant ministers officiating at funerals invariably give thanks for the life of the deceased whatever the nature of his character or the circumstances of his death.

Selwyn Hughes, author of the pamphlet series, *Every Day with Jesus*, says, "Oh God my Father so often have I neglected to praise you in all circumstances. I want to remedy this right away, so make me aware that you provide a way out of all my troubles, giving me endless cause for praise."⁸

Expressions of gratitude become meaningless if there is no circumstance – even theoretically – in which thanks would not be appropriate. It is difficult to see, in such a case, what element of meaning would be lost if the term were simply omitted.

This universal application of thanksgiving also raises what may be called the problem of the excluded Ahriman. Ahriman is the Zoroastrian god of evil, co-equal to and co-creator with Ormuzd, the good god.

Christianity, Judaism and Islam deny the existence of such a being. The Christian Satan may be held partly responsible for the evil men do, but not for any evil that may arise directly out of the non-human creation, for which the responsibility rests solely with Jehovah.

This being the case, the statement "Thank you for the birds that sing" cannot possibly be made without the corollary, "you are also responsible for the wasps that sting."

This in turn inexorably leads to one or

other of two conclusions:

1. There exists something for which God is not to be thanked, ie for which he is to be blamed.

2. God is to be thanked for the wasps that sting.

The first alternative implies that, since God is omnipotent, if he has created things which are not good he is not wholly good himself.

Christianity, following Paul, traditionally rejects such a conclusion and usually tries to escape the dilemma by arguing EITHER, firstly, that stinging nasties are really good because they perform some useful function like recycling decaying matter OR, secondly, that man is himself somehow responsible for all the evils in nature. For example, you won't get lung cancer if you don't smoke; or, less plausibly, volcanoes would be harmless if man's greed didn't lead him to build and farm on their slopes.

The second argument can hardly be acceptable to Jews or Christians: mankind would certainly not suffer from typhoons, earthquakes, droughts, poisonous snakes and spiders, and tropical diseases if he avoided two thirds of the habitable world, but that is tantamount to saying that most of the planet has not been created good. This raises theological problems relating to the all-beneficence of the deity and specifically conflicts with Gen. 1, 25 and 31.

The first argument was classically demolished by Darwin's contemplation of the ichneumon fly. This parasitic insect deposits its eggs within the bodies of the larvae of other insects which it paralyses with a sting so that the creature cannot move but does not die. When the eggs hatch the ichneumon fly's larvae eat their way through the body of a living, but paralysed host. Ichneumon flies perform good service, as Christians might expect, in controlling various kinds of caterpillars which damage crops, but the manner of their predation, so unlike the quick kill of a tiger, convinced Darwin that a benefi-

(Continued on page 24)

What the celebrities say to their God

ONE of the silliest little books to be published in recent months is *Oh God ... 120 Celebrity Prayers* (Lion Publishing, £4.99).

Its only redeeming feature is the fact that the proceeds of the publication, compiled by TV vicar Steve Chalke, are destined for Great Ormond Street Hospital.

The entire book is made up of the vacuous words offered up in prayer by well-known personalities.

Thus we have Pauline Quirke (Sharon in the TV sitcom *Birds of a Feather*) beseeching God to "let my children love me as much when they are teenagers as when they were toddlers".

Fight

Boxing promoter Frank Warren came up with this gem: "Dear God, your Bible tells us to 'fight the good fight of faith' and 'finish the race'. 'Perhaps promoting boxing events is not a bad business to be in after all! Please keep my family and business in your care and safety, thank you.' He might have added: "And please, let's have no one else shoot me."

Another from the world of sport, this from Ian Botham: "Dear God, please let the salmon bite, the hole-in-one be not too far off and England be top of the sporting nations. Not too much to ask, is it?"

The *Sun's* agony aunt Deidre Sanders' offering was this: "Dear Lord who knows all the answers but knows I don't, please give me the humility to realise that all I can do for someone is sympathise."

If proof were needed that prayer falls on deaf ears, it comes in the words uttered by so-called comic Bobby Ball: "I don't ask for material things, lots of clothes or even money. It's just that when I have to go on stage, please God make me funny."

– Barry Duke



The Virgin and the Sun-God

DEVOTION to the Virgin Mary is, in all relevant details, the same as the worship of all the other goddesses that were prevalent in the ancient world. Mary is Isis, or Venus, or Aphrodite, or Semiramis, *et al.* She is the 'Queen of Heaven' or the 'Mother of God', or the 'Star of the Sea', or the 'Immaculate Virgin'. The Mother and Child were worshipped in Babylon, as were Isis and Horus in Egypt. In Greece there was Ceres as the Great Mother with a babe at her breast, or Irene with Plutus, and even in China there was Shing Moo, also with a babe.

The ancient Etruscans and Italians worshipped the goddess Nutria, who also had a son in her arms, and the Virgin mother Devaki suckled the divine Krishna. Minerva was honoured by the title Virgin Queen, as was Juno who was called the Virgin Queen of Heaven.

Virgo

The Virgin Mary, the Grecian Venus, and the Egyptian Isis *et al* are all Queens of the starry heavens, for they are all personifications of Virgo, the eternal virgin of the zodiac. The constellation Virgo is a Y shaped group, the star at the foot being the well known Spica – a star of the first magnitude. The whole resembles more a cup than the human figure; but when we consider the symbolic meaning of the cup, this seems to be an obvious explanation of the name Virgo, which the constellation has borne since the earliest times. Virgo lies very nearly on the ecliptic, that is the imagined path of the sun, based on a geocentric model of the universe.

The reason why among her many epithets she was called Stella Maris or Star of the Sea, was because she was the Egyptian prototype of the Marine Venus – the Venus rising from or born of the sea, of which so many paintings have been made. A good example of this genre is *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli.

Frazer certainly recognised that in Mary the Mother of God was the old story of the Queen

of Heaven recast: We need not wonder then, that the serene figure of Isis should have roused in their breasts a rapture of devotion not unlike that which was paid in the Middle Ages to the Virgin Mary. Indeed her stately ritual, with its shaven and tonsured priests, its matins and vespers, its tinkling music, its baptisms

The Virgin Mary was one of a long line of virgin goddesses, says Larry Wright in this comprehensive article

and aspersions of holy water, its solemn processions, its jewelled images of the mother of god, presented many points of similarity to the pomp and ceremony of Catholicism. The resemblance need not be purely accidental. Ancient Egypt may have contributed its share to the gorgeous symbolism of the Catholic Church as well as to the pale abstractions of her theology. Certainly in art the figure of Isis suckling the infant Horus is so like that of the Madonna and child that it has sometimes received the adoration of ignorant Christians. And to Isis in her later character of patroness of mariners the Virgin Mary perhaps owes her beautiful epithet of Stella Maris Star of the Sea, under which she was adored by tempest-tossed sailors. The attributes of a marine deity may have been bestowed on Isis by the sea-faring Greeks of Alexandria.

In Egypt 3000 years ago, the birthday of the Sun-God was celebrated on the 25th of December – the first day to noticeably lengthen after the day of the winter solstice, the 21st of December. At the midnight hour and the first minutes of the 25th of December the birthday of the sun was celebrated. The sun was then in the zodiacal sign of Capricorn, known as the Stable of Auegus, so the infant

Sun-God was said to have been born in a stable. Brightly shining on the meridian was Sirius - the star from the east, while rising in the east was Virgo the Virgin of the zodiac, with the horizon passing through the centre of the constellation. It is this astronomical fact that is the basis of the many legends of virgin-born world saviours.

To the right of Sirius was the constellation Orion, the Great Hunter with three stars in his belt. These stars, in a straight line, point at Sirius and were anciently known as The Three Kings. Depicted in the Zodiac of the temple Denderah, the constellation Virgo was pictured as a woman with a spike of corn in one hand, and on the adjacent margin the Virgin was denoted by a figure of Isis with Horus in her arms.

Succession

Carpenter remarks: But it is well known as a matter of history that the worship of Isis and Horus descended in the early Christian centuries to Alexandria, where it took the form of the worship of the Virgin Mary and the infant saviour, and so passed into the European ceremonial. We have therefore the Virgin Mary connected by linear succession and descent with that remote Zodiacal cluster in the sky! A curious confirmation of the same astrological connection is afforded by the Roman Catholic Calendar.

For if this be consulted, it will be found that the festival of the Assumption of the Virgin is placed on the 15th August, while the festival of the birth of the Virgin is dated the 8th September. At the present day, the Zodiacal signs – owing to the precession of the Equinoxes – have shifted some distance from the constellations of the same name. But at the time when the Zodiac was constituted and these names were given, the first date obviously would signalise the actual disappearance of the cluster Virgo in the suns rays, ie the Assumption of the Virgin into the glory of the

god, while the second date would signalise the reappearance of the constellation – or the birth of the Virgin.

The Gnostic adherents to the ancient solar worship, knowing that the drama of the incarnation was written in the stars, recognised the woman mentioned in Revelations (12:1) as the Virgo of the Zodiac: clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.

They also knew she was the true Queen of Heaven and Mother of God, and that the infant anciently represented in her arms, who rose on the eastern horizon at midnight on the 24th of December, was the same babe of whom the people were taught to sing at Christmas "Unto us a child is born".

In addition, they understood the key to the symbolism of the Biblical verse (Gen.3:15):

I will put enmity between thee and the women, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

Devil

The above refers to the head of the Serpent of Darkness (Devil), responsible for the primal fall in the Garden of Eden, and to the heel of the Redeemer. These are the constellations of the Redeemer (the Sun-God), and Draco (the Serpent), the women referred to is of course Virgo. Christians have never understood why the Serpent is said to bruise the heel of the promised Redeemer. The key is in the heavens, the Serpent and the Sun-God are for ever pursuing each other, and the Sun-God (summer, light, life and hope) leads the way, the Serpent (the Prince of Darkness, winter, and death) follows at his heels. In the symbolism of the Zodiac, Scorpio stands as the sign, who in conjunction with the constellation of the Serpent (Prince of Darkness) is responsible for the death of the Sun-God at the Autumn Equinox.

However, it is the serpent who has become the established synonym for winter, darkness, and death and therefore evil in general and the Devil in particular. All the Sun-Gods bruise the head of the serpent, this symbolism is clearly present in the myths of Horus, Hercules and Krishna. For example, Hercules slew two serpents sent for his destruction. The Serpent/Scorpion as autumnal symbols are always depicted as enemies of the Sun-God; to which may be compared the power Jesus the Solar Saviour gave to his disciples to tread on serpents and scorpions (see Luke, 10:19).

The Jews held that the time of the Messiah's advent was to be astrologically indicated by the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, in the constellation of the Fishes. The prophecy related to the entrance of the vernal equinox into the Zodiacal sign of Pisces the Fishes – due to the precession of the equinoxes – in approximately 255 BCE. Bethlehem means the house of the bread corn. In the mansions of the Zodiac, Virgo is the place of the

seed for sowing, and the opposite sign Pisces is the mansion of the Bringer-forth in fruitfulness, first set in heaven in accordance with the seasons of Egypt. The Hebrew Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, because the birthplace above was localised in the city of Judea, the land of the solar birthplace in the sign of the Fishes.

The ancient starry drama was played out yet again. At midnight on the 24th of December Virgo rose in the east and a new infant saviour was stable born. All the sins committed on earth gradually drifted down to Capricorn, hence the filthy condition of the stable, whose cleansing was one of the twelve zodiacal labours of Hercules, himself a Sun-God.

The second-century church father Justin Martyr remarked that Christ was born when the sun had its birth in the Augean stable, Jesus coming as a second Hercules to cleanse the



foul world. There is another stable in the constellation Auriga on either side of which are Taurus the bull and Ursa Major, known in Egypt as the Ass of Typhon. Here we have the ox and ass of the traditional nativity scene. It is also worth noting that the stars of the Great Bear were known to the Arabians as Martha and Mary, and also the Coffin of Lazarus.

The constellation in conjunction with Virgo, which is now known as Bootes, was anciently called Arcturus, and was the foster father. He is represented as holding in leash two hunting dogs and driving Ursa Major, or the Great Bear, around the north pole. This suggests that the original occupation of the celestial foster father of the Sun-God was that of a bear driver, and that his sons, referred to in (Job.38:32), are the dogs Asterion and Chara.

The Three Kings – the stars of Orion – the Magi from the east mentioned in the Gospels (Matt.2:11), at the birth of the Sun-God, came to pay homage, and bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The reason for presenting these particular gifts is explained by the fact that of the seven metals dedicated to the genie of the planets, gold was the one consecrated to the Sun-God; and frankincense and myrrh

were the gums burnt in censers, at his worship. Despite their astral origins, Christians later discovered the bodies of Melchior, Gaspar and Balthassar; and placed them in their new cathedral in Constantinople. From Constantinople the bones of the three kings were, as a special favour to Milan, allowed to be moved to that city. When Milan was captured by Frederick Barbarossa in 1162 CE, the Archbishop of Cologne persuaded the Emperor to transfer these relics to his cathedral; and there for the last eight centuries the bones have rested. The shrine of the Three Kings thereafter became one of the greatest treasures of Cologne cathedral.

The Egyptian astrological elements in the stable myth are provided by Massey: The manger is the celestial, zodiacal and the actual birthplace of the messiah in Egyptian mythology. The typical birthplace was designated Apt or Aptu, whence came the name of Abydos. Ap means to manifest and expose to view, also to guide; Apt is the place or person. Apt, as person, was the most ancient genitrix who first brought forth from the waters as the fish, dragon or hippopotamus, hence Aptu is the mythical fish. Apt as place was also the pool of two truths, the piscina of the beginning, which was made zodiacal at last in the sign of Pisces. The pool, fish, uterus and crib, are all types of the birthplace named apt, and the apt is also a manger. The manger, apt, is a sign of the birthplace in Thebes, as in Aptu (Abydos). Thus the hieroglyphics will explain why the divine child, as Ichthyus, was born in a manger. One position of the manger can be identified by the asterism called Proesepe, in the sign of Cancer, which was at one time the place of birth of the god at summer solstice. The manger at Bethlehem had been the birthplace of the divine babe in a far earlier cult. Hieronymus describes the Syrian Adonis, extant in his time 331-420 CE and says that in the place where the redeemer cried in the manger, the lament of the women mourning for Adonis had been heard even in later times, as it assuredly had been in the pre-Christian period.

Egyptians

According to the chronicle of Alexandria, the Egyptians not only consecrated the nativity of the new-born babe and the virgin mother, they had the symbolic custom of exposing a child in a crib to the adoration of the people. When King Ptolemy asked why this was done, he was informed that it was an ancient mystery – the crib or Apt being identical to the manger, thus being the same babe in the manger who was born in the Apt above.

It is clear that the worship of the Virgin Mother was a common practice in the ancient world. In the sixth or seventh century the Roman pagan festival of Diana celebrated by torch light on August 13th, was adopted by the Christian cult as the Dormition or falling

(Continued on next page)

The Virgin and the Sun-God

asleep of the Mother of God. This later became known as the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, and was celebrated two days later than the pagan festival – on August 15th.

That the worship of the celestial Virgin Mother had been familiar to the ancient world for thousands of years before the beginning of the Christian cult seems clear. Hawton takes up this point: The Christian Church has taken over the plot of a very ancient story and treated fiction as historical fact. In the case of the Catholic Church, it is difficult to see how anyone can fail to notice the identity of the Virgin Mary with the great female divinities worshipped from the dawn of civilisation.

Theotokos

The worship of the Virgin, the Queen of Heaven, became one of the grand features of the Christian religion. Mary the mother of Jesus, was pronounced Theotokos - Mother of God – by the Council of Ephesus 431 CE, and a church on the site was made sacred to her. Twenty years later in 451 CE at the council of Chalcedon, Mary was further likened to the many virgin mothers that had preceded her by being pronounced a Virgin. Ephesus was chosen, because here had stood the great temple of Artemis, the great Virgin mother of Asia minor – of whom Isis was the prototype. Artemis was to the Greeks what Diana was to the Romans (Acts.19:27). Her temple had been rebuilt for the fourth time under the patronage of the fabulously rich Croesus. It took 140 years to complete and was dedicated in 430 BCE. It was destroyed by fire, but was rebuilt to even greater magnificence by about 356 BCE, and became known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was finally destroyed by an edict of the Christian Emperor Theodosius in 381 CE.

Her Assumption was decreed in 813 CE, her Immaculate Conception became dogma during the pontificate of Pope Pius IX in 1854, although the former was not made official papal dogma until the pontificate of Pius XII in 1950 CE.

Regarding the elevation of Mary, Smith remarks: Mary soon began to compete in popular affection with Isis, Cybele and Demeter. It required but slight and easy changes to transfer to her the stately ritual of the goddess Isis, with its shaven and tonsured priests, its matins and vespers, its tinkling music, its jewelled images of the Mother of God; the ancient portrait of Isis and the child Horus was ultimately accepted not only in popular opinion, but by formal Episcopal sanction, as the portrait of the virgin and her child.

There can be little doubt that the Virgin Mary has been modelled directly upon the

Egyptian Isis, for the two are virtually indistinguishable. The qualities which so endear Mary to the Catholics are the ones which made Isis so popular in Egypt. Both goddesses, gentle mothers that they were, could intercede with the all-powerful creator and stern judge far more effectively than their sons, and accordingly both have been styled Intercessor. Other titles of Isis include Saviour of Souls and Immaculate Virgin, all appropriated by her Christian counterpart. Like Isis before her, Mary is portrayed standing on a crescent moon with an arch of stars above her head. Certain images of Isis were celebrated for their miraculous movements, or the shedding of tears, and she was even said to have appeared to her worshippers on rare but special occasions. This miraculous work of Our Lady was naturally continued by the Christian church which gradually took over the cult of Isis. In fourth-century Alexandria, the Temple of Isis and the Church of Saint Mary stood side by side, the devotees of the mother goddesses indifferently frequenting either. The end came in the sixth century, when the last remaining Temple of Isis, on the Nile island of Philae, became a Christian church at the point of a sword under an edict of Justinian.

Symbolism

In the foregoing it has been argued that Mary the virgin mother of Jesus, like her counterparts in the many saviour cults of antiquity, had their origin in the starry heavens, patterned on Virgo the celestial world virgin of the zodiac. This symbolism of the birth of a new Sun-God, with its attendant message of hope and redemption at the winter solstice, originated in Egypt with the infant Horus and his mother Isis, the Egyptian Madonna. The doctrine of the Mother of God was brought in along with the worship of the Madonna by Bishop Cyril and the monks of Alexandria, in the 5th century CE. Figures of Isis nursing the infant Horus were taken from the temples to serve as the Madonna and Child. The name Madonna is no more than a contraction of Mater Domina or Great Mother – in Roman times a title of mother goddesses in general. As we have noted, Isis was also represented like Mary standing on the crescent moon with twelve stars surrounding her head, and with the infant saviour in her arms enclosed in a framework of the flowers of the Egyptian bean or lotus. The Virgin Mary was often depicted in this manner in medieval art; and she was represented in statuary as being black or dark skinned; black Madonnas exist today in many of the cathedrals of Europe. The most ancient pictures and statues in Italy and other parts of Europe, of what are supposed to be representations of the

Christian Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus are black. The infant god is depicted in the arms of his black mother, his eyes and drapery white, but he himself is perfectly black. The reason why these early representations of the Virgin Mary and Jesus are black, crowned, and covered with jewels, is that they are of pre-Christian origin; as Isis the Egyptian Queen of Heaven was worshipped in Europe for centuries before the Christian Era. Temples and statues were erected to her at Bologna in Italy, and the church of Notre Dame in Paris is built on the original site of a Temple of Isis.

On the entrance to the north cloister is figured the signs of the Zodiac, except that the sign Virgo is replaced by the figure of the Madonna and Child. Finally, in many parts of Italy can be seen pictures of the Virgin with her infant in her arms, inscribed with the words, Deo Soli (Sun-God). This betrays their pagan origin.

Freethinker fund

The *Freethinker* works constantly to boost readership, particularly among young people, in order to promote a more rational view of the world. Such promotion is expensive, and, because we do not have the financial resources of the commercial and religious press, we rely heavily on voluntary workers and supporters' donations. You can help by making a contribution, small or large, to the *Freethinker* Fund.

Our thanks to the following who sent us donations over the past few weeks:

J Manley (£100), **C Pinel** (£40), **N Ratcliffe** (£25), **C Condon**, **A Martin**, **S Smith** (£20), **Musical Heathens** (£19), **J Bond**, **M Hill**, **L Spickett** (£15), **J Charles**, **W Crosby**, **J Morton-Williams** (£10), **I Chandler** (£8), **I Bailey**, **R Ison**, **S Levin**, **P Smith** (£7), **C Ablethorpe**, **M Allison**, **P Forrest**, **J Hagerty**, **H McNaughtan** (£5), **P Howell**, **C Tonkin** (£3).

The Peter Brearey Memorial Fund closed at the end of August 1998, but donations have continued to arrive and further donations are still acceptable.

Many thanks to the following who have recently added to the fund: **T Akkermans** (£50), **K P Wood** (£25), **B Aubrey** (£20), **B Smoker** (£10), **D Goldstick** (£10), **B Hughes** (£10), **R C J Fennell** (£5), **M Dearnaley** (£2).

The final total will be announced at a later date.

Who has the last laugh when it comes to religion?

THE GIFT of laughter is surely one of the basic traits that sets humans apart from all other animal species (including hyenas). Yet although the holy texts of the major world religions are full of stories and parables illustrating every variety of human experience, there are almost no comic situations or jokes to be found in these scriptures. Why is this?

God in his various guises firmly lays down the divine law in his scriptures; yet although he never actually says "Thou shalt not enjoy yourself from time to time, or crack a few jokes", nowhere do I find anyone actually doing this, or even chuckling or smiling (the word smile does not occur anywhere in the Bible).

Is it that the whole question of a God is far too serious for believers to be taken with even a small leavening of humour? Or does the Devil have all the best jokes as well as the best tunes? Let's look at a few cases in point.

Revenge

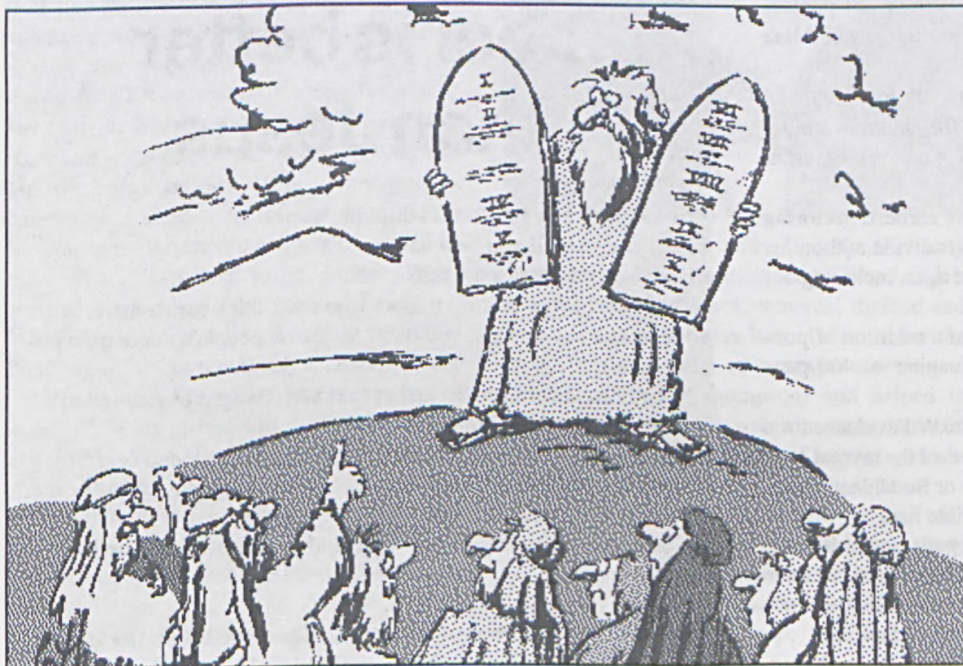
Looking first into the Bible, we search for references in the Concordance to such words as *laugh*, *laughter*, *joke*, *fun*; and we find that references to the first two only are to be found in the 'good book'. In fact, instances of laughter in the Old Testament are based more on the idea of revenge than innocent humour. Remember, the Israelites were a much-persecuted people living in the eternal hope of getting their own back one day on their enemies, with the help of Jehovah of course. Thus:-

"The righteous. . . shall laugh at him" [a rich sinner] (Ps. 52.6)

"At destruction and famine, you [the righteous] shall laugh" (Job 5.22)

"The Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming" (Ps. 37.13).

While in the Gospels, Jesus pursues the theme of vengeance:



Just a minute, I happen to be a lawyer

John Hughes, of Sheffield Humanists, poses the question

"Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh" (i.e. have the last laugh) (Luke 6.21) or, looking at it from the other viewpoint:

"Woe unto you that laugh now, for you shall . . . weep (Luke 6.25).

As for laughter, we hear again a note of bitterness or scorn rather than merriment:

"Let your laughter be turned to mourning, your joy to dejection" (James 4.9)

"As the crackling of thorns under the pot is the laughter of fools" (Eccl. 7.6) and "Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad" (Eccl. 7.3).

Not many chuckles there; we must conclude that the Bible is a humour-free zone, as most people would define humour. Of course, something may have been lost in translation; the many scholars and theologians who have shaped and edited the biblical texts over the centuries into its present form have had a pretty solemn purpose, the creation and propagation of a universal religious system, leaving no room for a few laughs along the way. Think of St Paul, the Early Fathers, the vernacular translators such as Luther and Tyndale, or the creators of the Authorised Version; a pretty stern bunch, quite prepared to cut out any unseemly humour from the original Greek or Hebrew texts if necessary, as part of the deadly serious business of recording God's word in all its solemnity.

The Pentateuch

As with a humourless Christian God, so with Jehovah and Allah. The core of Jewish scripture of course is the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, containing absolutely no laughs, just a lengthy collection of prescriptions and proscriptions to guide the Chosen People in every aspect of life and worship, following on the stories of Genesis and Moses, the supposed author of the Pentateuch. However, there are also two compendia of analysis and commentary on Jewish scripture, the

Torah and the Talmud, which generations of Jews have pored over and studied the meanings of in synagogue and school, and which happen to be full of humorous comments and wry witticisms, as well as theology, reflecting on the turbulent course of the Jewish experience over the centuries. As the compiler of a 460-page *Encyclopaedia of Jewish Humour* writes in its preface, "the true Jewish joke mirrors the history of the Jewish people".

Perhaps one example might sum up the ironic, fatalistic humour of the Jewish story of oppression and persecution through the ages: a poor Polish victim of the latest pogrom pours out his sorrows to a rabbi: the Cossacks have plundered his crops, there is nothing left in the larder, his family faces starvation. The rabbi sympathises but appeals, as clerics usually do, to the peasant's faith: "There, there, my son, things will get better – remember, God will provide!" "Oh, sure, rabbi", sighs the peasant,

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Religion and laughter

Continued from previous page

“but if only He would provide *until* he provides!” I could go on till next Yom Kippur about the richness of Jewish popular humour, but the central question is: we may appreciate all those jokes about rabbis and Jewish mothers, but does Jehovah? From the evidence of the Pentateuch, where he actually intervenes, one has to conclude that there is little sign of his possessing a sense of humour – unless it be a very perverted one, considering the long history of persecution and exile lying in store for his Chosen People. Certainly orthodox Judaism is still a very strictly regimented and humourless affair, as we see from the unsavoury activities of the extreme religious right-wingers in today’s Israel.

In the case of Islam we have the holy Koran, the equivalent of the Judaeo-Christian Bible, largely based on it and – as Muslims claim – superseding it, just as Christians see the New Testament as largely superseding the Old. The Koran is claimed to be Allah’s divine word, as conveyed to (and through) Mohammed, his Prophet; so what sort of a picture do we see of the Muslim God in its pages?

Punitive

Not surprisingly, we find a stern God, vengeful and punitive to those who have heard his commandments but refuse to follow them. Even to the faithful, the believers, he pronounces that he will “test your steadfastness with fear and famine, with loss of property, and life, and crops” (2:156). Some testing! And there will be nowhere to hide from his wrath – not even on the high seas: “among his signs are the ships which sail like mountains upon the ocean. If he will, he calms the wind. . . or causes them to founder as punishment for their misdeeds” (42:34). For those who have stepped out of line but repent (perhaps at the point of a sword) and mend their ways, however, he will be “the Relenting One, the Merciful”; indeed, each chapter of the Koran begins with an invocation to “the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful”.

Of course, there are some redeeming, even attractive, features to be found in the Quran’s teaching, such as the emphasis on giving alms; but all too often the general tone of the text reverts to warnings of punishment and damnation for those who would dare to reject the law of Allah as revealed through his faithful Prophet.

As a vivid example of Allah’s “heads I win, tails you lose” style of divine justice, consider the unconscious irony of this blunt warning: “Whatever good befalls you, it is from God; and whatever ill, from yourself” (4:78).

The whole tone of the Quran is like this: uniformly earnest, hectoring and of course completely humourless, like it seems its divine author, his Prophet Mohammed, and Muslim clerics through the ages, including our jolly Taliban friends in Afghanistan.

At least their historic foes, the Jews, have fostered a tradition of popular humour, as we have seen; can anyone imagine a 460-page *Encyclopaedia of Muslim Humour*?

To round off this very sketchy survey of the scant textual evidence for a divine sense of humour, we ought also to consider some of the myriad gods of historic Eastern religious systems such as Hinduism or Buddhism; unfortunately, this is too large and complex a subject to go into here.

In the case of Hinduism, there is a multiplicity of gods, rather like the old Roman deities or the saints of Catholicism, and they seem to have some rather endearing human attributes (or even animal, like the monkey-god Hanuman), which might even include a sense of humour.

As for Buddhism, its followers claim that rather than a true religion, it is more a spiritual way of life, a path to *nirvana*. The Lord Buddha

himself seemed to possess a sense of humour; according to Bertrand Russell, “he was amiable and enlightened; on his deathbed he laughed at his disciples for supposing that he was immortal”. Unfortunately, he wasn’t God either.

A few concluding thoughts on humour and religion: even if we cannot all agree on what exactly a sense of humour consists of, we would surely agree that laughter is good for you. Indeed, research shows that the process of laughing releases endorphins into the bloodstream which ease pain and actually help physical healing. However, I wouldn’t recommend taking the laughter cure quite so far as a particularly loony group of charismatic Christians who practise something called the Toronto Blessing, a form of prayer meeting – or collective hysteria – where the faithful go into trances and come out laughing helplessly, falling down and rolling around on the floor.

Laughter also has a vital function in exposing the ridiculous or pretentious – and God knows there’s enough of that in the practice of organised religion. So, naturally, organised religion tries to preserve its essential solemnity, for example by campaigning against the iconoclastic but essentially good-natured film *The Life of Brian*, but above all by eliminating any traces of redeeming humour or irony from its various versions of Holy Scripture.

Finally, one arrives at the sane, alternative humanist viewpoint: the fact that there is (probably) no God out there at all is the biggest cosmic joke of all. And yet no matter how sane and rational an outlook on human existence we think we may have arrived at, we cannot ignore the many aspects of life and society today that are disturbing, sad, even desperate at an individual level; so that we are led to conclude that if indeed an all-powerful, loving puppet-master of a God was really pulling all our strings, his sense of humour would have to be extremely sick and twisted, to say the least.

Let the great freethinker Robert Ingersoll have the last couple of thoughts on the matter: first, “No man with any sense of humour ever founded a religion”; second, “Reason, observation and experience . . . have taught us that happiness is the only good; that the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so”.

And one way to make others so, I suggest, is to share an occasional joke with them.

And stay away from holy scripture – it’s no laughing matter.

Ten reasons why beer is better than Jesus

- No one will kill you for not drinking beer
- Beer doesn’t tell you how to have sex
- Beer has never caused a major war
- They don’t force beer on minors who can’t think for themselves
- When you have a beer, you don’t knock on people’s doors trying to give it away
- Nobody has ever been burned at the stake, hanged or tortured to death over the brand of his/her beer
- You don’t have to wait around 2,000 years for a second beer
- There are laws saying that beer labels can’t lie to you
- You can prove the existence of beer
- If you have devoted your life to beer, there are groups to help you stop.

Submitted by Graham Lyons, who discovered it on the Internet where it was posted by the Agnostic & Atheist Student Group (aasg@atheist.tamu.edu)

DEATH OF A FREETHOUGHT STALWART

*David Tribe
reflects on the
life of Peter
Cotes – actor,
producer and
writer who died
earlier this year*

All too often in showbiz a stage is all the world. Manner overwhelms matter; careers overcome wider concerns; promises are instantly forgotten, but bad reviews never. Fortunately the boards have been trodden and directors' chairs filled by more substantial figures – and none more respected than Peter Cotes.

The eldest of four brothers (one of whom died in childhood), Peter was born in 1912 to parents who had an intense love of the theatre as actor-manager and dancer-pianist. He himself first appeared on stage at the age of four presenting a bouquet to the great male impersonator, Vesta Tilley. His real debut was only a couple of years later singing a Tilley song.

After attending the Italia Conti Stage School with Jack Hawkins, he graduated to the West End stage as a boy actor and ultimately appeared in 59 plays and films. It isn't clear why early in his acting career he adopted the stage name of Peter Cotes, after a house called 'Northcote' in which he once lived. His real name was Sydney Arthur Rembrandt Boulting and his brothers John and Roy became the celebrated Boulting Brothers film producers.

It also isn't clear why he turned from acting to stage managing, and later became famous as a stage, television and film director and producer. As such he was responsible for a number of memorable productions in Britain, New York and Australia: 35 film and TV, 65 theatre. He was also influential in launching the careers of a number of stars who ultimately became more famous than himself internationally. These included Janet Munro, Tony Britton, Roger Moore and Julie Andrews.

During the reign of the Lord Chamberlain, challenging contemporary issues and 'obscene' language were taboo on the public stage. To circumvent this censorship Peter acquired a little theatre in Manchester (the Library) and two in London (New Boltons and New Lindsey), turning them into theatre-clubs beyond the Lord Chamberlain's reach.

This step might not have been taken but for a visit he made to the theatre himself. In 1945 he was advised to see an ex-Canadian actress, Joan Miller, playing the part of Rebecca West in Ibsen's *Rosmerholm*. Like all good judges

before and since, he was struck by her extraordinary talent and vitality, beautiful voice and great presence on and off the stage. He married her in 1948 and there began what Arnold (Lord) Goodman called a "legendary" marriage.

In a milieu noted for its separations and divorces they were virtually inseparable, even to the detriment of their – and particularly Joan's – careers. When she died in 1988 he was inconsolable, but her memory stayed vibrant till his own recent death.



Together in 1946 with *Pick-Up Girl* they extended the then frontiers: corralling four letter words, juvenile sex, venereal disease and child abuse. Five years later *A Pin to See the Peepshow* saw Joan as a poignant executed murderess (Edith Thompson) and helped to influence public and government opinion in favour of virtual abolition of capital punishment in 1965.

Unfortunately, Peter's life was dogged with controversies of an inartistic kind, and many disappointments. In 1953 his connection (other than an ongoing royalty) with Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, which he had brought to the stage, was severed. In 1970, despite every expectation, he failed to obtain

production rights to *Peter Pan*, and in 1972 he just missed becoming first general manager and artistic director of the visionary Sydney Opera House. And there were ill-advised partnerships, 'angels' whose wings fell off, and the loss of his beloved theatre-clubs.

Instead of Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen and challenging contemporary dramas, less satisfying work came his way; but everything was produced with true professionalism.

In his autobiographical first book, *No Star Nonsense* (1949), and in his latest, *Thinking Aloud: Fragments of Autobiography* (1993), he powerfully expressed his conviction that "the play's the thing" and censured ego-tripping performers and directors.

Though he appears to have written no plays himself, he was a discerning dramaturge and distinguished prose writer.

Apart from his autobiographies, biographies (George Robey, Charles Chaplin and Sir John Barbirolli), reviews, obituary notices of contemporaries, insightful articles on a diversity of subjects and sparkling correspondence flowed from him, despite years of ill health, and latterly constant pain.

To the wider public he was known as a showbiz personality whose connection with freethought involved launching three plays by secularist dramatist Ted (Lord) Willis: *Look in Any Window*, *The Young and the Guilty*, and *Woman in a Dressing Gown*. He was a protégé of Chapman Cohen in the National Secular Society and, as readers will recall, a regular contributor to the *Freethinker* over several decades, even when forced to dictate his copy.

I met Peter in the late 1950s through his famous physiotherapist, the then NSS vice-President Fred Hornibrook; house-sat for him and Joan when they went to Australia in 1961 to inaugurate commercial TV drama; collaborated with Joan in *Freethought and Humanism in Shakespeare* (1964); sent Peter my plays, which he strove unsuccessfully to get staged, and corresponded with him to a staunchly free-thinking end.

I miss them both enormously.

Meaning in the language

(Continued from p16)

cent deity could not have been responsible for their creation. Besides, why create a surplus of injurious caterpillars just to have them horribly eliminated by ichneumon flies?

In the absence of Ahriman, if God is to be thanked for the birds that sing he must equally be thanked for the ichneumon fly and for a whole range of biological nasties and physical disasters.

It is clear that "thanked" in such a context must have a meaning very different from that with which it is normally associated. Until this meaning is defined, all "thank you" references in prayer, except those associated with specific pieces of demonstrable good fortune, will be meaningless.

If God is to be held deserving of "thanks" for every phenomenon from Mother Teresa to the tsetse fly, what meaning would be lost if the term were simply dropped?

A possible answer is suggested by a consideration of the festival of harvest thanksgiving. As this is held irrespective of the actual quality of the harvest, and presumably would still be held even in the event of a disastrous crop failure, it might be seen simply as another meaningless universal offering of thanks.

In fact, however, the ceremony should probably be interpreted, not as gratitude for any particular harvest, but for the circumstance that harvests exist at all.

The harvest becomes a metaphor for sustenance, and thanks would therefore be appropriate in all circumstances except the total extinction of the species through starvation. Even more widely it may be regarded as a metaphor for all the geographical and astronomical factors which make life possible on Earth. Thank you, God, for continuing to make human life possible.

"Dear God we thank you for all of creation."⁹ seems to carry a similar connotation, as do commonly used phrases like: "We praise you for the gifts of life and love," which suggest that life itself is a gift for which thanks is due.

If thanks in this sense is to have any meaning there must be an alternative open to God of not maintaining a universe capable of sustaining human life. Since He is defined as unchanging, He cannot,

without logical contradiction, having created such a sustaining universe, now withdraw it completely and to do so would in any case, be in breach of His promise in Genesis, 8,22. In the absence of such an alternative the only possible meaning of the harvest thanksgiving is gratitude for God's having created a habitable universe in the first place.

But even here there is a difficulty – is the non-creation of such a universe conceivable? The early chapters of Genesis certainly give the impression that Yahweh is an arbitrary being who might have acted otherwise than He has actually done, but from the theological point of view if God is omniscient, unchanging and all-beneficent, His decision to create the conditions in which man could exist (harvests and all) must have been inevitable, and so no alternative is logically possible.

There is no more point in thanking Him for being good than there would be in thanking a hedgehog for having prickles.

From this it follows that any thanks for the mere existence of mankind and the conditions which make his existence possible are inappropriate since things could not conceivably have been otherwise.

Religious language, like poetry, employs metaphor. This is usually justified on the grounds that religious experience is said to be incommunicable in normal linguistic terms, a position which reaches its logical conclusion in praying in tongues.

This may be true. The Hindu sages may have been correct when they said, "He (Brahman) can only be described by 'no, no'", and the Chinese when they wrote, "If the Tao could be comprised in words it would not be the unchangeable Tao."

However, if there is to be any attempt at all at communication, it is important to consider the role of metaphor in it; metaphor conveys emotion where a literal statement would not, and it may help understanding through the use of explanatory analogy.

But it cannot define. Metaphor can only convey meaning if it can be translated back into literal terms. If it cannot, the metaphor is empty of meaning and is no more than a verbal con-trick.

"Thou art the bread of heaven, on thee we feed"¹⁰

For this to have meaning "bread" and "feed" must be translatable. Bread of heaven might be translated as spiritual sustenance, but sustenance is still a metaphor; what is the spiritual analogy of food and how is it absorbed? Begging the question of the meaning of spirit, the metaphor seems to be empty, an excuse for the devotee not knowing what he means.

So what does this mean?

"At your feet Oh Lord we wait for you, Yearning Lord, hungry Lord, for more of You.

Bowed before you Lord we desire only you.

Fill us Lord, revive us Lord with more of You."¹¹

or

"Lord Jesus, may my roots go down deep in you."¹²

John Robinson, in his controversial book, *Honest to God* devotes a whole chapter¹³ to God as "The ground of our being." What he seems to be trying to say is that the attributes traditionally associated with God, such as love and goodness, are of supreme importance for man's life and personal relationships. But, since it is clear that Robinson does not believe in the existence of God as a distinct supernatural being, it is hard to see how "God is the ground of our being" can mean anything, even as metaphor.

And what would McLaren's "God is the world's horizon"¹⁴ mean?

Robinson and McLaren are not very far from the Hindu and Taoist position of refusing to make meaningful statements at all.

Apparently more reasonable are pseudo-empirical propositions and requests where the vocabulary appears to refer to phenomena which are in principle observable but which in practice are either truisms or, because of the vagueness of the statements, cannot be verified or falsified.

"We have done things we should not have done."

"Grant, Oh Lord that their (our political leaders') influence may be used always to bring peace to the world"¹⁵

Such confessions and petitions are not

age of prayer

meaningless, but, except where they are truisms, the practical impossibility of applying empirical tests to them dilutes their significance to a point at which they become little more meaningful than the waffle considered below.

This is our next source of meaninglessness – plain waffle.

“Gracious Father, how grateful I am that I am not left alone in my weakness – I can be linked to your everlasting strength. Flow into my life in a new way to-day so that I am lifted out of myself into your boundless and infinite resources.”*(16)

“Lord, I see so clearly that one of the reasons why the Devil is so disruptive is because I have not resisted him and his forces through prayer. Give me the power I need to launch an offensive against Satan through powerful, persevering prayer.”¹⁷

“Visit them all in the silent depths of their own hearts because we lift them up to Thee.”¹⁸

Metaphor is still present in these passages: “flow into my life ...so that I am lifted out of myself” is a classic mixed metaphor; “launch an offensive against Satan” is in the good old tradition of “Onward Christian soldiers”. But these metaphors are so empty of translatable meaning that it is to do them more than justice to spend time on a precise analysis of what they might mean. Language like this is simply an excuse for not knowing what you are talking about; the passages are simply waffle and illustrate an ancient fallacy – if you can string a number of words together in a way that is not grammatically absurd, they must mean something.

Finally we come to praying in tongues.

The ultimate stage in the use of meaningless words in prayer is reached here.

Paul¹⁹ accepts the validity of the practice: “For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men but God”, and Gumbel²⁰ regards it as useful because it permits direct communication with God, short circuiting the formality of language (rather in the manner of body language – a girl blushes; a dog bristles).

That God should understand such communication may be admissible, provided it means anything. But does it? As no-one,

not even the supplicant, can understand it, what entitles us to say that it is not just gibberish?

Granted that the demented and delirious rave, how is it possible to distinguish prayer in tongues from their utterances?

FOOTNOTES:

1. *Book of Common Prayer*, The Litany.
2. N Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, Eastbourne 1993 p55
3. S Hughes, *Every Day with Jesus*, Nov/Dec 1998, 4th Nov.
4. Fanny Freer, in *Revised Church Hymnary*, Oxford 1927, Hymn 451
5. *Book of Common Prayer*, Morning Prayer, A general confession.
6. L D Weatherhead, *A Private House of Prayer*, London 1958, p209
7. I Thess. 5, 18.
8. Hughes, op. cit. July/Aug. 1998.
9. S D Bryant ed., *The Upper Room, Daily Devotional Guide*, Jan 7th, 1992.
10. T R Birks in *Revised Church Hymnary*, Hymn 453.
11. Janis Miller in *Mission Praise*, London 1990, Hymn 44.
12. Bryant op. cit., Jan. 8th, 1992.
13. J Robinson, *Honest to God*, London 1963, pp 45-63.
14. E McLaren, *The Nature of Belief*, London 1976, p25.
15. Weatherhead op. cit., p41.
16. Hughes op. cit., July/Aug 1998.
17. Ibid.
18. Weatherhead op. cit., p202.
19. I Corinth. 14,2.
20. Gumbel, op. cit. pp 139,ff.

If you would like to submit a news story or feature you think might be suitable for the *Freethinker*, please contact the editor, Barry Duke, on 0181 3905 9603 (E-mail iduke@compuserve.com)

Queen's health – not wealth – is now being prayed for

BRITISH members of Parliament are no longer praying to God to increase the Queen's wealth.

When MPs returned from their summer recess in October, they broke from 300 years of tradition by not asking the Almighty to endow her “plenteously with heavenly gifts”.

The MPs have also stopped praying for other members of the Royal Family.

The changes to the prayer were made on the advice of a small group of MPs, representing the three leading parties, and were approved by the Speaker, Betty Boothroyd.

According to a report in *The Times*, the Queen had been told of the changes before their introduction and raised no objections.

She was said to agree that her position as sovereign places her in a unique relationship with Parliament, to which other members of the Royal Family are not entitled.

The new prayer asks simply that the Queen be given “long to live”.

Contentious

One of the reformers is quoted as saying: “We don't wish her poverty, but wishing her wealth is contentious and doesn't appeal to everyone.”

The Lord's Prayer has also been amended to make it more ecumenical. It will begin “Our Father, who art in Heaven” – the form used by Roman Catholics, Methodists and the United Reformed Churches – instead of the old Anglican “Our Father, which art in Heaven.”

According to *The Times*, “attending Commons prayers has one practical as well as spiritual advantage. It gives MPs the right to place a prayer card on their seat, reserving it for the rest of the day”.

Another broadside against Islam by Anwar Shaikh

Anwar Shaikh is a remarkable man. Born a Muslim in the Indian city of Gujarat (now Pakistan) in 1928, he has lived in Britain since 1956, where he has published several books at his own expense attacking Islam in an uncompromising fashion. This activity has earned him the hatred of the Muslim clergy in Pakistan, who demand his extradition so that he may be publicly hanged. Shaikh's loathing for Islam grew from harrowing personal experiences at the time of independence and partition in 1947. (See *Anwar Shaikh: a staunch critic of Islam, New Humanist*, Vol. 113, no.2.)

In his latest book *Islam: The Arab Imperialism*, Shaikh attacks head on the Muslim claim that Islam is a universal religion addressed by God to the whole of mankind, constituting the final revelation delivered by the final prophet. Far from this being the case, Shaikh sees Islam as the product of the genius of Mohammed, who masterfully exploited the ancient Middle Eastern notion of prophethood in pursuit of his own and his people's 'dominance urge', which sounds very like Nietzsche's Will to Power.

Shaikh begins by pointing out the inherent absurdities in the concept of prophethood. How it in effect puts belief in prophets above belief in God, since the prophet is supposedly God's messenger and mouthpiece, implying that he is incapable of communicating with humans in any other way. The Muslim idea that Mohammed is the final prophet, confirming and fulfilling all previous prophets, is seen as Mohammed's master stroke, putting the kibosh on any change or innovation.

On the basis of the text of the Quran, underwritten by the traditional biography of the Prophet, Shaikh discerns a progress in Mohammed's expression of his prophetic role. In the beginning, when he was politically weak, he claimed to be a mortal and humble servant of Allah, but when he became strong, after his supposed move from Mecca to Medina: "he began changing his tone, until he was able to claim himself to be Allah's Superior" (75). The proof of this is Q.33:56: "Lo: Allah and his angels shower praises on the Prophet (Mohammed). O ye who believe also shower praises on him and salute him with a worthy salutation." Shaikh claims that the words translated "shower praises on him", really means worship and is usually applied to

God.

According to Shaikh the arrogance of Mohammed is fully expressed in the arrogance of the religion he invented toward all non-Arabs, especially the Jews. The notorious episode of the Jewish tribe of the Banu Quraiza, in which Mohammed is supposed to

Ibn al Rawindi reviews *Islam: The Arab Imperialism* by Anwar Shaikh. Free copies from The Principality Publishers, PO Box 918, Cardiff CP5 2NL

have overseen the slaughter of 800 Jewish men, is seen by Shaikh as: "a pathetic model of ethnic cleansing. The Jews suffered this fate when they refused to become Arabs. We cannot find an example of such extreme nationalism so early in history. Yet the Muslims believe that Islam does not recognise nationalism. They insist that it is a message of international brotherhood" (103-4). As regards history this is not quite true of course. It was routine in the ancient world that when a city was conquered the men were killed and the women and children sold into slavery.

However that may be, Shaikh was undoubtedly right to emphasise the essentially Arab nature of Islam, and how that ethnic identity was imposed on those they conquered.

The crucial question is how long did this process take and who was responsible for originating it and carrying it out. To attribute it all to the genius of Mohammed is to take for granted the picture of the origin of Islam that the Muslims invented it for themselves. This pays an unnecessary compliment to the integrity of the Quran and the hadith and the veracity of Muslim historiography.

Pointing out the contradictions and unpleasantnesses in the Quran and extracting an unattractive portrait of Mohammed from the hadith

is an easy game to play and good for annoying Muslims, but it is nowhere near radical enough if the rug is really to be pulled from under Islam.

The interpretation of the origin of Islam in which Mohammed is seen as a wily and lascivious politician and military leader, rather than as a religious figure, was popular in the West in the good old pre-political correctness days of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The intention then was to show the inferiority of Islam to Christianity and of Mohammed to Jesus Christ, but with the spread of unbelief and the advent of ecumenism this approach was toned down and is now only popular amongst evangelicals. In more recent times, since about 1975, any approach to the life of Mohammed and the origin of Islam based on the Arabic sources has been seen as problematic, since it is now widely recognised by scholars how unreliable those sources are.

If the earliest biography (sira) of Mohammed, compiled by Ibn Ishaq over one hundred years after the Prophet's death, is taken at face value, it provides a life situation for the revelation of the Quran and the hadith. Taking this life story in combination with the texts of the Quran and hadith it is possible to construct various scenarios in explanation of the origin of Islam alternative to that favoured by Muslim tradition. The problem is that if the sources are tendentious and unreliable no reconstruction based upon them is more likely to be true than any other. Abstracting a Mohammed who is an unscrupulous politician is no more likely to represent true history than that of a saintly prophet chosen by God as an example for humanity. The lust for positive results in historical investigations is usually the handmaid of some ideological agenda, whether acknowledged or not.

Admitting that we simply do not know what Mohammed was like, if he existed, that the writers and compilers of the Quran will remain forever unknown, and that none of the so-called prophetic traditions represent authentic sayings or doings of the Prophet, is not much fun and provides no grist for anyone's mills; rather, it calls for an intellectual asceticism without appeal, but at the same time it shows the traditional account of the origin of Islam to be a baseless fiction.

(Continued on page 29)

Purves' 'silly' book claims that LIFE WITHOUT RELIGION IS A 'SORDID' AFFAIR

"ONCE a Catholic, always a Catholic", was the old slogan, comically mocked twenty years ago in Mary O'Malley's play *Once a Catholic*. Of course, like most slogans it wasn't true, as the world has known for several centuries through examples from Voltaire to James Joyce, and as the British freethought movement has known over a century through figures from Joseph McCabe to Barbara Smoker. But it does seem to be true of some people, such as Libby Purves.

She is a broadcaster and journalist who for a long time has filled much space on the radio and in the press without ever saying anything interesting or important, or even original. She has now written a book with the silly title, *Holy Smoke*, and the pompous subtitle, *Religion and Roots: A Personal Memoir* (Hodder & Stoughton, £14.99), which is a nice instance of up-to-date amateur apologetics.

Atheist tendencies

As the child of a diplomatic family, she grew up in the various places where they were posted. Her father was a lapsed Scottish Presbyterian with anticlerical and atheist tendencies, and her mother was a half-Irish Catholic with a vaguely tribal view of religion. As a result she was educated mainly in convent schools in several countries where she absorbed traditional Catholic ideology, though she managed to acquire what has become a fashionable love of the Authorised Version of the Bible and the hymns of the Church of England, and she later added ideas from such



Libby Purvis

authors as Plato and Milton, Aldous Huxley and Jean Anouilh, C. S. Lewis and J. D. Salinger. She was also prone to depressive episodes and mystical experiences.

After a tediously self-satisfied account of

**Nicolas Walter
reviews *Holy
Smoke: Religion
and Roots: A
Personal Memoir*
by Libby Purves.
(Hodder & Stoughton, £14.99)**

what seems to have been a tediously self-satisfied life, the narrative halts when she began to have a successful career and a family, which is a comfort in this age of embarrassingly frank memoirs, but which does leave her readers up in the air. What is the point of it all? She includes herself among the "half-believers". She remains clearly religious and vaguely Christian in her attitudes to good and evil, love and hate, life and death, and so on. She is "always a Catholic" only in an elementary, even sentimental sense, since her attitude to her native sect seems to be one of emotional loyalty rather than genuine commitment. She long ago gave up visible observance, and she says little either about the bizarre doctrines of Catholicism, apart from a furious rejection of the ban on artificial contraception, or about the nastier aspects of the actually existing Catholic Church, apart from a bitter attack on "the clique of Posh English Catholics".

Well-known

One can't help wondering why the book was written or published, apart from the fact that the author is well known. In general it isn't very interesting, except to people who have come from a similar background or travelled a similar journey or reached a similar conclusion. But in one particular it is important to freethinkers, since it contains a revealing

glimpse of the way believers and even half-believers fear and hate real unbelievers. Just as she frequently shows grudging admiration of people who have retained some of the beliefs she has rejected, she occasionally shows gloating contempt for people who have rejected the beliefs she has retained.

She repeats several old clichés about religion – that belief and worship are universal human characteristics, that Christianity has the best story about the world and is the best guide to morality, and that only religion can make sense of everything or anything. She also echoes an old cliché about irreligion. She proudly confesses that she was "charmed" when a vicar wrote in his parish magazine three years ago that 95 per cent of his parishioners "live their sordid little lives without any reference to God":

I looked up "sordid" and its definitions were very satisfying in this context – "base, mean, ignoble, coarse, inferior, squalid, selfish and influenced only by mercenary considerations". Well, what else is modern life, without worship, eh? . . . By and large, life without any religion comes, pretty quickly, to meet all the conditions of that dictionary definition. Sordid.

Charming, indeed! When this passage appeared in the serialisation of the book in *The Times* (on 28 September) there were several protests from correspondents. My own response was to say that almost all the members of my family over four generations, and almost all my friends and colleagues over six decades, have led lives without any kind of religion which have not been sordid, in any sense of the word; that what she believes in private is her own business, but what she says about it in public is everyone's business; and that her ignorant ideas and insulting language about those who happen to believe differently are impressive arguments against what she herself calls her irrational faith. (It wasn't published.)

The bad thing about *Holy Smoke* is that it is such a silly book. The good thing about it is that it is indeed so silly that it shows how even a relatively intelligent, fortunate, educated, cultured, sophisticated, experienced, professional, intellectual person who tries to expound a rational and humane religion in the modern world so easily comes to grief when faced with people who manage to live without religion.

A thought-provoking book from a 'very wise' woman

Even before publication, we are told in the blurb, Mary Warnock's book "caused uproar among thinkers and campaigners such as Mary Whitehouse, Ann Widdecombe and Dominic Lawson, editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*". If that means that those three people were offended by the views expressed, it is a pretty good recommendation, which I heartily endorse.

Lady Warnock is, needless to say, a most appropriate author, as a philosopher with a clear and readable style, a humanitarian outlook, and particular experience in dealing with difficult ethical problems peculiar to our time. She chaired the 1982 Government Committee of Enquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology, set up to consider the ethics and control of the new technologies involved in assisted reproduction by *in vitro* fertilisation, following the birth of the first "test-tube" baby.

But the ethical problems surrounding birth are preceded in the book by those relating to death, and we are confronted with two tragic stories that entail moral decisions: (1) a woman who is terminally ill and in great distress, who longs to die; (2) a teenage girl who has suffered horrendous head injuries and is in a Permanent Vegetative State. Different though they are, both cases raise the question of euthanasia, which their respective relatives favour.

In the first of the cases, the doctor made a value judgment that it was more important that the woman should be relieved of her distress than that she should live a few extra weeks or months. So, in accordance with her wishes and with the agreement of her husband, the doctor ended her life and her suffering. The second case called for a legal judgment. Although everyone who had been fond of the girl wanted her to die, the hospital delayed her death until the Law Lords ruled that she should be allowed to die "naturally" by the withdrawal of sustenance.

Lady Warnock considers it confusing to invoke nature here and in general, but she has "no doubt whatever that the death of the patient in the two stories was morally right". In the particular circumstances, "the value of

their death was greater than the value of their continued life".

From endings to beginnings. One of the recommendations of the committee she chaired, now enshrined in legislation, was that a human embryo could be used for research for up to 14 days from fertilisation in the laboratory and, so far as she knows, that law works

**Colin McCall
reviews *An
Intelligent Person's
Guide to Ethics*, by
Mary Warnock.**

Duckworth, £12.95

satisfactorily; there has been no descent down the "slippery slope." But because she cannot think of an equally simple block on the slippery slope of euthanasia, she opposes "any attempt to change the law, to render some kinds of euthanasia legitimate". A shame, I think.

No doubt it was her support for embryo research that dismayed the Christian trio, Whitehouse, Widdecombe and Lawson, "When does life begin? may look like a rather carelessly phrased Aristotelian question, to be answered empirically, as Aristotle tried to answer it" Lady Warnock says, "yet in the context of Christianity it becomes a question charged with religious significance". It is the soul "which alone has value", and it is "this half-remembered, seldom articulated baggage that the question When does life begin? carries with it". It would be much clearer and less misleading, she suggests, if the question were changed, and we asked "at what stage an embryo becomes morally significant; or at what stage we treat a human embryo as we treat other human beings". It was a new question with no analogies, and it was "of no use to scan Holy Writ

for an answer". However, that didn't stop someone declaring in the parliamentary debate that no Christian could countenance embryo research and, when it was pointed out that the then Archbishop of York, John Habgood, had supported it, adding that it was well known that the Archbishop was not a Christian.

Bentham is cited with approval on the subject of laws and rights, that, unless there is a law conferring it, there can be no right. To speak of rights otherwise was "nonsense on stilts". So his motto was "Obey immediately; criticise ceaselessly". You may think you have a particular right but, if the law does not allow it, what you should say "in the interests of clarity" is that you ought to have that right.

Rather than appealing to natural law or natural justice, Lady Warnock would have us claim a moral right, which would be less confusing and "would firmly establish the priority of the moral over the legal". For her, too, humans must take precedence over other animals, it being "humans and humans alone who can form a civil society within which the concept of rights and duties arise".

Aristotle derived morality from human rationality, but Christianity brought with it the complications of an immortal soul, a God who must be obeyed, and Jesus Christ whose example should be followed. Kant also derived ethics from reason but, says Lady Warnock, he made the mistake of separating reason from all other human faculties. She sees altruism as "central to private morality". And "without the private motive to behave ethically well, the public ethics, devoted to the public good, would founder".

The fundamental virtues are, as she says, those which lead to co-operation; and for the sake of co-operation, our own wishes "may have to go by the board". Following Strawson, she rejects biological determinism as "irrelevant to the facts of human freedom and responsibility".

Possessed, as they are, of imagination, human beings are aware that life is difficult,

Continued on next page

An Intelligent Person's Guide to Ethics

precarious and far from perfect. "They are conscious of the *peccata mundi*, not sins, so much as intrinsic flaws in the world, including flaws in themselves".

The temptation is "to pursue the narrow goals of selfishness", but, "as soon as we recognise the fact of temptation, even sporadically, we have adopted the ethical point of view". What am *I* to do? "can always be more or less translated into What is *one* to do?" (her italics).

This book pulls no punches over postmodernism, the theory that what we say or write "is not meant to have any reference to a world outside itself". It is difficult "to avoid the conclusion" that those who assume a postmodernist attitude "are motivated by a desire, not only to confuse, but to shock with the boldness of their paradoxes". And there is particular contempt for the theologian, Don Cupitt's, contention that "Truth is

no longer something out there; it is a way with words".

Lady Warnock doubts the value of lessons in "citizenship" at school. She believes, instead, that we should help children discover that there is such a thing as private morality, and she makes practical suggestions on how this might be done. But equal priority should be given to developing a child's imagination. Reading and telling of stories have "enormous merit...as a way of conveying values". School, in her view, "is a place where a child, like Aristotle's young man, can practise doing what is good, and can thus come to prefer it to doing what is bad".

If I see no reason for the introduction of "spiritual" alongside moral on the penultimate page, albeit extended beyond religion to knowledge as a whole, it is only a minor criticism of a thought-provoking book from a very wise woman.

In addition to his writings on Islam, Anwar Shaikh is also the editor of the humanist journal *Liberty*, available from the same address as his books. Volume six issue nineteen is a special edition containing an excellent article on Islam and human rights.

Shaikh rightly points out the absurdity of the Muslim notion of "God's rights", since "rights are required to protect one's entity, interest and future, threatened by aggression and fear of usurpation. Allah, who is projected as the Almighty, the Absolute, the creator, the All-wise and Free of desires, does not need the shield of rights to shelter, secure and screen Himself from man, whom he is supposed to have created and whose every movement he is said to control"(3).

Shaikh also considers the rights of Muslim

Anwar Shaikh

(Continued from page 26)

men, infidels, and Muslim women under Islam. It follows that if God has rights man has no substantive rights at all, since any rights he has are derived rights and only accrue to him from his abject submission to the primary rights of God. Infidels, because they do not acknowledge God's rights, have no rights at all and are only fit for extermination. As for the rights of women under Islam they are practically non-existent. Even the much trumpeted rights to inherit property and to divorce men are nullified by the overriding law of purdah, forbidding their participation in social life. Whereas men can divorce their wives quite

independently and at will, a woman is forced to go through a long legal process, almost impossible in a male-dominated society used to treating women as second-class citizens. In effect women's rights are limited to her maintenance provided she obeys her husband. The article closes with a devastating point-by-point analysis of the derogatory Muslim attitude to women derived from the Quran and the hadith.

Shaikh's work deserves more attention than it has so far received. It is an act of courage and carries more weight coming from someone born a Muslim. It should be especially effective amongst those coming from Muslim families and living in the West.

Those wishing to read and distribute his books should write to him at the above address.

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Bad for our health

I deplore your action of placing Tatchell's photograph and appeal on the front cover of the *Freethinker* (October 1998).

Tatchell and his friends were not protesting about the Judaic-Christianity hoax when they interrupted the Archbishop of Canterbury in his pulpit but were there to give publicity to the unnatural, promiscuous, insanitary, AIDS riddled lifestyle they have chosen. Both the Archbishop and Tatchell are bad for our health and our nation needs protection from them.

E W CARR
Worcester

Time and place for protest

THOUGH I am no longer a member of the NSS nor a regular reader of the *Freethinker* – having come, with regret, to the conclusion that neither is truly serving the cause of secularism in which I still believe – I was particularly alarmed by your highly counter-productive campaign in relation to Peter Tatchell. The *Guardian* journalist, Decca Aitkenhead, seems to share my misgivings.

It is urged – quite preposterously – by Keith Porteous Wood that Tatchell's noisy and aggressive demonstration in Canterbury Cathedral on Easter Sunday "was a reasoned non-violent protest". Those who witnessed the incident on television will, however, be aware that Tatchell – supported by banner-waving chanting acolytes – leapt into the pulpit just as Dr Carey was about to start his sermon and shouted him down. In the circumstances, I think the Archbishop behaved with commendable restraint. Only with some difficulties were the shouting demonstrators removed from the building.

Mr Tatchell now faces prosecution in the criminal courts under an Act of 1860 which the NSS secretary considers "gives privileged and sinister powers to the churches", though it is also grudgingly acknowledged that "the

charges against Mr Tatchell are being brought by the Crown Prosecution Service and not by [the Archbishop], nor by the Dean and Chapter at Canterbury". While it is easy to criticise as quaint and old-fashioned legislation from a bygone age which would no doubt be framed differently today, it should not be overlooked that the Act complained of guarantees not just the Established Church but all duly certified places of public worship protection from the sort of outrageous interference in their peaceful and consensual public acts that we witnessed in Canterbury at Easter. Those who clamour for the repeal of such legislation would be well advised to consider how they would like it if their secular weddings and funerals were invaded by screaming Christians or Muslims protesting against the "godlessness" of the occasion.

Peter Tatchell must have known that his action was likely to attract a custodial sentence, and it would send quite the wrong kind of signal to all sorts of fanatics just aching to disrupt other such lawful assemblies if he were not to receive one. I understand Tatchell's health is poor, so there may be grounds for suspending the custodial sentence which I have no doubt his outrageous behaviour richly deserves. There is a time and a place for lawful protest: disrupting public worship is something else.

DANIEL O'HARA
London

Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the National Secular Society, replies:

In my opinion, the cause of secularism is not served (as Daniel O'Hara seems to think) by applauding statutes privileging only religion and claiming their oppressive penalties are richly deserved. I am not advocating unfettered freedom to interrupt worship; our Honorary Associates are in the process of signing a letter I drafted which envisages that the much less harsh Public Order Act would be extended to include places of worship if the 1860 Act were repealed.

Until reading Daniel's letter, I had not intended suggesting that the extension should include secular ceremonies, but perhaps this would be a good idea. The fact that the 1860 Act does not solely apply to the established

church (I never suggested it did), if anything, makes the religious privilege all the greater. However broad, the 1860 Act does not apply to secular ceremonies so I fail to see Daniel's point – clearly I would not like interruptions to these ceremonies, but the repeal of the Act would have no bearing on such ceremonies.

When I described the protest as non-violent, this was not strictly true – but the only violence that was employed was by the security staff removing Tatchell and the other protesters.

An indirect benefit of such campaigns is raising the Society's profile. The campaign has been positively mentioned in the *Observer* diary. David Aaronovitch, the *Independent's* leading columnist has written a highly supportive feature on our campaign. In contrast to Daniel, Aaronovitch describes Tatchell's statement from the pulpit as being delivered "in a voice only slightly less monotonous than that of the archbishop himself". I am also helping another leading columnist to assemble another supportive article, and a TV company has expressed interest.

I am astonished Daniel cites Decca Aitkenhead's article. Unlike him, she agrees with our campaign to have the oppressive 1860 Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act scrapped, adding (in her column) that this "odd arcane law privileging the church should no doubt be demolished". Her qualm seems to be that Peter Tatchell is unpopular and says her friends may not support him for this reason.

We did not "choose" Tatchell as a personality; he alone is charged under this law and faces imprisonment. Sadly, Decca Aitkenhead's friends seem to care about justice only if the victim is a cuddly, likable figure. Wasn't Bradlaugh himself unpopular in the extreme with those obsessed with maintaining the *status quo*? Only by breaking this unpopularity was he able to make the positive changes from which we all benefit today.

To the list of prominent people supporting the campaign (including several peers, as published in the last issue), several more have been added, including Sir Hermann Bondi and Bishop Rawcliffe.

They have all managed to see beyond the personality issue and, because of the principle involved, have signed our appeal. Indeed, Michael Mansfield QC – one of most respected human rights lawyers in the country feels so



strongly about the injustice that he is prepared to act for Tatchell gratis.

Daniel thinks the campaign will be counter-productive. It is inarguable that the best – almost the only – way to raise awareness about an issue is when it is current. Given that it was 35 years since the Act was last so used, it seemed negligent not to strike while the iron is hot. Even if Tatchell is found guilty and jailed (and the law is so oppressive this is almost inevitable), this stage of the campaign will have served its purpose by drawing attention to this law.

If Daniel's "counterproductive" charge relates to Tatchell and his campaigning, Bishop Rawcliffe has assured me that it is almost entirely as a result of Tatchell's activities that the Church has belatedly started to debate its indefensible position on homosexuality, which debate the Archbishop has tried so hard and so long to avoid, and to which Tatchell's intervention drew the public's attention.

Daniel seems keen to defend the Primate. I am happy – not grudging – to exonerate him from personally bringing the charges, but I suspect that most *Freethinker* readers will think that his "Curia" could have quashed this local prosecution before it became public, had they wanted to.

If not to Daniel, it seems to me the height of hypocrisy for a self-proclaimed man of compassion and forgiveness (Carey did, after all, call for compassion for human rights abuser Pinochet) to refuse to say "Tatchell should not go to prison".

Had Daniel simply made some constructive suggestions, such as adding secular ceremonies to the jurisdiction of the 1860 Act, limiting its maximum penalty to a reasonable fine, and renaming it, this reply would have been two words – "I agree". But I stress that such potential amendments are not inconsistent with our campaign. Such (hypothetical) changes to the Act as it now stands would amount to almost totally rewriting it; effectively repealing the Act and replacing it with something new.

The fact remains that this Act is harsh and discriminatory and we must try to remedy this.

As a result of this campaign, hundreds of thousands – possibly millions – of people have become or will become aware of the existence of the Act – and hopefully also of the Society.

KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD
General Secretary, NSS

Uneasy about chaplaincy

I FOUND the article *Secular Civic Leaders Break From Tradition* (*Freethinker* August) interesting and, at times, amusing, but I have to say that I am left with feelings of unease about some aspects of it.

I can understand a self-declared religious humanist accepting an offer of being made a "Mayor's chaplain – humanist officiant"; a president of the British Humanist Association might even do so; but – with all due respect – I have doubts about the propriety of a president of the NSS doing so.

It is probably not my place to say what the humanist Mayor of Lewisham should or should not do, but I much prefer the decision of the Mayor-elect of Rossendale not to appoint a chaplain at all.

This brings me back to the position of Denis Cobell. As I understand it, the NSS has traditionally stood for (among others) two things: rebutting the claims of supernaturalism, and opposing the privileges given to or sought by organised religion.

Because I am a secularist, I try to work for the secularisation of society. I hope to see mechanisms of government dealing even-handedly with people, irrespective of their views about religion, and neither suppressing particular religions nor giving them special status. I do not favour the establishment of a confessional society or state, with separate facilities (and government funding) for Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Unitarians and Humanists.

The establishment of a humanist chaplain (apart from sounding a bit like a vegetarian tiger) could, I think, leave us open to the charge of being interested not so much in whittling down religious privileges as in trying to grab social privileges for humanists, rationalists and secularists.

From the description of the ceremony conducted on July 26, I get the impression that it was pitched in a way that would have been as unacceptable to Christians present as a Christian ceremony would be to freethinkers like me. Surely a public ceremony should be as universal as possible: neither overtly religious nor overtly humanist or irreligious. Denis himself refers to "enforced (and inevitably divisive – religion in civic ceremonies)", but is he not laying himself open to the charge of enforced humanism?

I am sorry if I appear picky, petty, or even humourless, but although your appointment at Lewisham was a great media success – and probably great fun as well – I can see some awkward long-term implications if this is a precedent for the establishment of similar public positions.

Denis may, of course, have considered these implications already and decided that they are not a long-term problem; but I felt I should make my doubts known.

I do not mind the NSS president acquiring a certain notoriety in (some) Christian eyes, but I would not like him to be open to plausible accusations of compromising secularism.

NIGEL SINNOTT
Victoria
Australia

More humour, more women

The September issue of the *Freethinker* gave me three good laughs – *Hello,hello,hello, Is hell endothermic?* and *Scientologists apology*. More humour of this quality gets my vote. (It also makes the magazine quotable, and gives us a good opportunity to show it to others). But I didn't like the red print – it is not easy to read.

I do like a balance of longer more detailed articles (when this is appropriate) and shorter pithier articles. People do not always have the time or inclination to read more serious articles, and more medium to short ones keep the magazine at the top of the reading pile for longer.

I always enjoy Colin McCall's *Down to Earth*.

In the past I have felt the *Freethinker* to be too male orientated. This side of the organisation seems rather like a gentlemen's club, and good as she is I do not think it is good enough to have Barbara Smoker as almost the only woman contributor.

I do think that in this respect the BHA has the edge in bringing in some good competent women.

SUE LORD
Westerham
Kent

Don't mock the afflicted

KARL Heath (letters, September) should not be so hard on Michael Hill. It is unkind to mock the afflicted.

The Tories must be truly desperate, for I have just received an official invitation to join the Conservative Christian Fellowship and support their "expanding range of activities".

Christian Tories are not alone in drumming up support for their party.

In Kent, Michael Hill's county, Conservatives in Tunbridge Wells have formed a unit of activists to spearhead a membership drive.

They are the Tunbridge Wells Action Team (TWATs for short). No doubt they would welcome Mr Hill to their ranks.

BILL McILROY
Sheffield

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 and programme from Joan Wimble, flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove BN3 2TL: Tel: 01273 733215.

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 Cleevelands 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 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. January 8: Joint meeting with Amnesty International. Speakers include Jimmy Somerville.

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

Harrow Humanist Society: Information: 0181 863 2977. Monthly meetings, December – June (except January).

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 Hennes, 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 on 0113 2577009. The Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Tuesday, December 8: Karen Wade – *A Psychological Approach to Religion*. January 12: Martin Schweiger – *World Development*. February 9: Bob Smith – *The Uses and Abuses of Counselling*. All meetings commence at 7.30pm.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone

Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 2622250 Or 0116 241 4060.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell on 0181 690 4645. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, December 17, 8 pm. Winter Solstice party. Thursday, January 28, 8pm. Derek Lennard – *The Wit and Wisdom of Robert G Ingersoll*.

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, January 6, 8 pm Frank Abel: *1998 – That Was The Year*. Wednesday, February 3, 8pm. Hilary Cave: *Humanist Ethics*.

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. Tuesday, December 9, 7.30 pm for 8 pm: Robert Ashby – *The Strength of the Humanist Movement Lies in its Local Groups*. Wednesday, January 13, 7.30pm for 8pm: Roger Eden – *The Humanist Tradition*.

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.

Tel: 0114 2509127.