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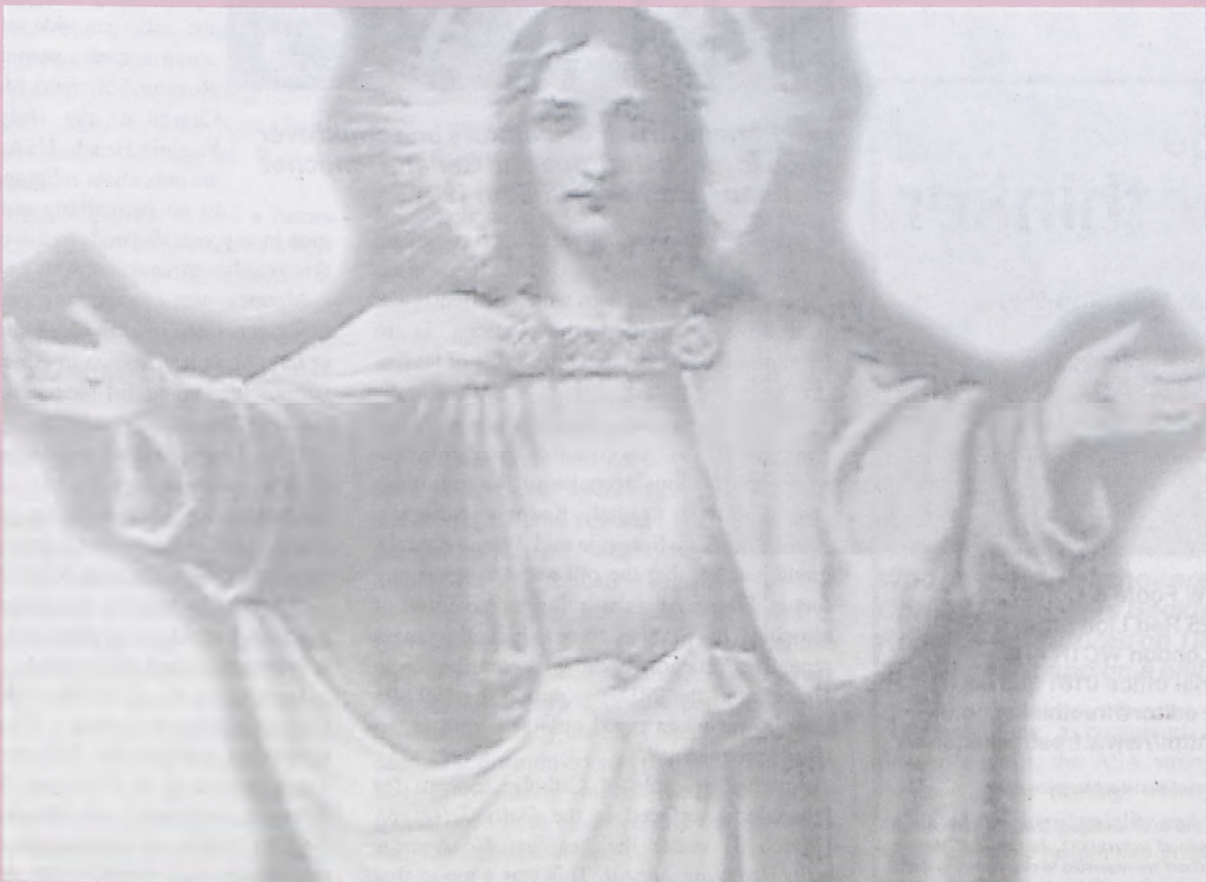
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Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

**Nine out of ten saviours prefer Dazzle[®],
with added Radiance[®], to any other
washing powder**



*Is this what adverts
might one day
come to?*

– See page 3

“Saving souls can often be a grubby business – but I cannot afford to have my robes looking anything other than whiter than white at all times. When I took the Dazzle[®] challenge I was Godsmacked – ‘Jesus Christ,’ I exclaimed, ‘that’s what I call white!’” – JC, Nazareth.

FORMER Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Lamont, appears to have completely lost his understanding of the meaning of certain English words. Either that, or, along with many a fellow inmate in the House of Lords, he's totally lost the plot.

This observation is based on his utterance in the Lords concerning the 83-year-old Chilean dictator General Pinochet, currently under house arrest in Britain, and reportedly spending most of his waking hours praying and surfing the Internet.

Following representations made to the British Government by the Vatican, which wants Pinochet's extradition to Spain halted, Lamont told the House that he thought His Holiness himself wanted to see Pinochet let off the hook: "I suspect that the representations have been made at the highest level, *recognising the general's great contribution to protecting freedom in the cold war.* The Government

should listen to the voice of the Pope as a Christian leader. *He understands the value of human life.*" (the italics are mine).

It gets worse: "As someone who lived under a communist dictatorship the Pope has a clearer understanding of the background in which General Pinochet lived and acted."



As charming a pair of dictators one could ever hope to meet: the Pope and General Pinochet pictured together in Chile in 1987

In the pile of press cuttings which contained a report of Lamont's words (*Guardian*, February 19) was an item which demonstrated just how committed the Vatican is to humanitarian matters and "the value of human life".

"The Vatican," according to a report in *The Times* (April 14) "has criticised the distribution by United Nations agencies of the 'morning-after' pill to raped Kosovo refugees. Archbishop Elio Sgreghia told *Avvenire*, a religious journal, that the pill acted to abort any foetus. Ethnic Albanian refugees have told of atrocities by Serbian forces, including mass rape. The Vatican withdrew its contribution to Unicef after the Pill's use during the 1992-95 Bosnia war when raped girls as young as ten risked pregnancy."

Another example of Catholic concern for humankind surfaced in the *Daily Telegraph* (March 3) under the headline *Headmaster halts Red Nose Appeal*. This was a report that Jim Caffrey, headmaster at Rosary RC school in Saltley, Birmingham, had barred his pupils from taking part in the Comic Relief Appeal because it supports pro-abortion and family planning charities.

Caffrey, along with other anti-abortionists, were upset that "Red Nose" cash had been given in past years to the Marie Stopes Foundation, Brook Street Advisory Services, the International Planned Parenthood

Foundation and Population Concern.

He said: "The very fact that Comic Relief has contact with such groups means I wouldn't want a penny of whatever charity money we raise in this school to go to that cause."

"I commend Red Nose Day for all its good and fun but you have to look at the bigger picture. As a committed Catholic I believe these organisations are about people control, not life and love."

Perhaps he had in mind the brand of "life and love" the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta demonstrated when she once declared that it was better for an unwanted child to be born, then tossed in a dustbin, than never to be born at all.

JUST when I'd given up hope of ever hearing a sensible word from the religious side of the divide, along comes a comment from the Reverend Richard Mooney of the Church of the Holy Family in Virginia Beach, USA: "Americans are nuts about religion, and we tend to go particularly nuts about religion in any year that ends in a double zero, and this year has three zeros, so it's even worse."

Mooney was commenting on the hysteria being generated over the Millennium computer bug, or as it is known in America Y2K, by various fundamentalist preachers – televangelist Jerry Falwell in particular.

Falwell has produced a videotape devoted to Y2K in which he says the bug "may be God's instrument to shake this nation, to humble this nation ... (Y2K could) start a revival that spreads (over) the face of the earth before the Rapture of the Church," he bumbles, and goes on to warn his followers to stock up on provisions, and weapons to protect their food and family.

Jumping on the doomsday bandwagon – he too has a video to peddle – TV preacher and right-wing politico Pat Robertson told delegates attending a Christian Broadcasting Network conference on the computer bug: "We are looking at a man-made crisis of such magnitude that nobody can assess it. We should think now of how to store up supplies ... so that at this time of crisis, we can help people. It can be the church's finest hour."

Mooney is not impressed with these predictions of technological and social meltdown. "I find this Year 2000 nonsense perfectly predictable and utterly non-interesting," he told the *Virginian-Pilot*. My advice to those worried about the Year 2000 problem is to buy new computers."

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ASA issues another warning over flippant religious imagery

THE Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) appears to be fighting a losing battle in its attempt to get advertisers to stop using religious imagery in a light-hearted or frivolous manner.

Last month the ASA repeated an earlier warning to advertisers (see *Freethinker*, October 1998), but in the same week, the London entertainment guide, in its Easter issue, published a cover depicting a leading English footballer in a Christlike pose, along with the words "The resurrection of David Beckham", and Pirelli tyres is using another international soccer star, Inter Milan centre forward, Ronaldo, mimicking the huge Christ the Redeemer statue overlooking Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.

One of the Pirelli posters caused a furore when it appeared during Easter week on a billboard opposite St Mary's RC Church in Paisley, Scotland. Parish priest Father Charles Cavanagh immediately organised a protest petition, saying "Any Christian would take exception to that poster. It is insulting to Christians and says a lot about the extent to which firms will go to promote their goods."

The two posters are likely to bring a fresh crop of complaints to the ASA, which only recently had to deal with a flurry of moans generated by an advertisement for Diesel Jeans. This featured a photograph of four young women dressed as nuns from the waist up, wearing jeans and holding rosaries.

Behind them was a statue of the Virgin Mary, also wearing jeans. The ad, in *Sky* magazine and on posters, had the wording "Pure virginal 100% cotton. Soft yet miraculously strong. Our jeans are cut from superior denim, then carefully assembled by devoted Diesel followers. The finest denim clothing. This is our mission."

Another version of the poster appeared on London Underground sites, and claimed "superior denim".

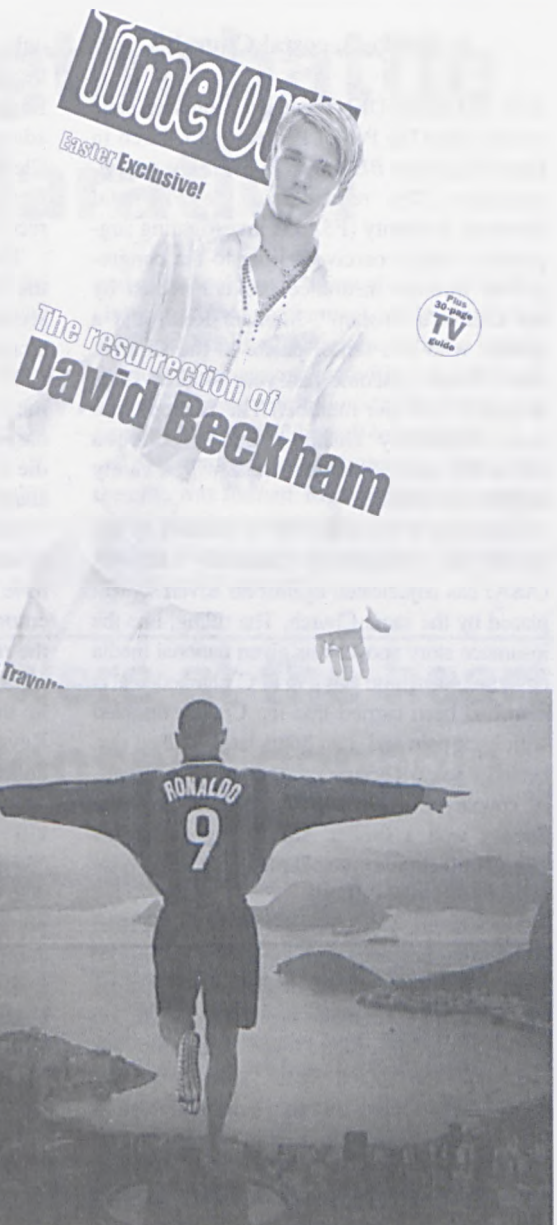
In upholding the complaints, the ASA said that "to depict nuns as sexual beings was unacceptable" and was "concerned by the way the advertisers had used the Virgin Mary on posters, a medium that would be seen by a wide, untargeted audience".

The ASA concluded that the advertisements were "likely to cause serious or widespread offence" and asked the advertiser not to repeat them or use the approach again.

Whereas the Diesel ads were, in the words of the advertiser, "fun, tongue-in-cheek visual puns to emphasise the features of their jeans and were not intended to be taken seriously", a mailshot distributed by Don Stewart Ministries Ltd was deadly serious in its intent to separate recipients from their cash – something the ASA found "unacceptable" in one of its recent adjudications.

The mailshot included a special sealed envelope containing "the seven blessings of Abraham". Recipients of the mailshot were told not to open the envelope "under any circumstances until you and I are face to face on Saturday night at Brixton Recreation Centre".

There, recipients were told, "the Spirit of God is going to challenge you to sow a definite seed of £43 to unlock Isaiah 43:19 ... he may instruct you to sow a double portion seed of £86. Just be led by the Holy Spirit. There is no charge for my ministry and prayers ... When the Holy Spirit directs you to sow, place it in the special seed faith envelope and bring it along with the sealed envelope".



Who do they think they are? Jesus Christ? Footballers Beckham and Ronaldo as featured on TimeOut's Easter cover, and on a billboard

In upholding a complaint against Don Stewart's outfit, the ASA strongly criticised the tone of the mailing, which, it believed, exploited religious credulity and "could intimidate vulnerable people into giving money".

Religious broadcasts on CB radio declared illegal

CHURCH services may not be broadcast on Citizen's Band (CB) radio, according to a report in *IEE Review*, journal of the Institution of Electrical Engineers.

The Radiocommunications Agency's ban comes after the discovery that a number of churches were using CB radio to broadcast services to parishioners unable to attend in person.

The agency said that CB radio is not an appropriate band for broadcasting. It is designed for short-term, social or business conversation, and lengthy services can jam the channels.

Peniel Pentecostal Church

THE INDEPENDENT carried a quarter page article about the Peniel Pentecostal Church in Essex headlined *Bishop sells insurance to congregation*. The report said the Financial Services Authority (FSA) is investigating suggestions about coercive selling to the congregation, through insurance brokers owned by the Church's "bishop", Michael Reid, and a partner who is a senior pastor at the Church. The Church's income last year totalled £2m, around £2,500 per member. The Bishop, who is also apparently "Bishop of Europe", drives a top-of-the-range Mercedes Benz with a vanity registration number.

Following a complaint by a member of the public, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has adjudicated against an advertisement placed by the same Church. The ruling, like the insurance story above, was given national media coverage, this time on TV. PPC claimed that a man had been carried into the Church disabled with back pain and, two hours later, walked out, healed – solely because of "the power of Jesus". A couple of years ago the National Secular Society won a similar ASA ruling against an evangelical church who claimed they could raise the dead and cure AIDS.

The Church, which has its own school – Peniel Academy – has links with the Peniel College of Higher Education whose degrees and diplomas are, according to an ex-husband of a student, "no better than GCSE courses". The Church also has links with the United States, where religious-political connections are more common. Regular readers may remember a recent piece in the *Freethinker* reporting that Peniel Church members have virtually taken over the local Conservative Party, causing a new independent Conservative group to be set up in the area in response.

Voluntary Euthanasia

DR JACK KEVORKIAN, perhaps the US's best known campaigner for assisted dying, has been convicted by a Michigan court of second degree murder. Kevorkian – also known as "Dr Death" – had administered a lethal injection in 1998 to Thomas Youk, at his request. Youk was in the last stages of Motor Neurone Disease.

Prior to the Youk case, Dr. Kevorkian – a former pathologist – had declared that he would go no further than assisting suicides, 130 of which he has been involved in. Four of these have resulted in manslaughter charges, but not convictions. The State of Michigan responded last year to Kevorkian's activities by outlawing assisted suicide; Oregon is the

only American State to allow doctors to issue lethal prescriptions for the terminally ill. Kevorkian exceeded his self-imposed limit by administering the fatal dose to Youk himself. Clearly trying to provoke the legal authorities, Kevorkian personally handed a video tape recording of Youk's death to CBS.

The resultant programme (which attracted the highest ratings of the season) included scenes of Dr Kevorkian saying "Now there's a straight line. The cardiogram will be turned off." On air he demanded that the authorities must charge him. A friend, Geoffrey Fieger, has said he is convinced the doctor wants to die a martyr to his cause. He he has already started a hunger strike.

Kevorkian, 71, conducted his own defence in an unconventional way and he appears to have made a number of mistakes. The prosecutor told the court that the case was not about the right to die, it was about Jack Kevorkian's right to kill, likening him to a "medical hitman in the night with his bag of poison". But Kevorkian insisted the law which banned voluntary euthanasia was wrong, saying "Tom Youk didn't come to me saying 'I want to die, kill me.' He said 'Please help me.'" Maintaining he was no more guilty of murder than was an executioner, because he was simply doing his job as a physician, Kevorkian compared himself to civil rights leader Martin Luther King. The jury's deliberations took almost as long as the trial itself and, despite the video evidence, decided Kevorkian was guilty of second-degree (un-premeditated) murder. He was sentenced to 10-25 years in jail.

Thomas Youk's family have supported Kevorkian throughout the trial. They were particularly concerned that the jury were not allowed to hear more personal details about the deceased, especially his suffering.

Although Kevorkian had dismissed his own counsel, they are expected to be reappointed to act in an appeal against the conviction, calling for a retrial as the judge's summing up allegedly violated the accused's constitutional right to silence.

The latest details of this case are being posted regularly on the Voluntary Euthanasia Society's excellent website www.ves.org.uk, on which (as well as the *Sunday Telegraph*) some of this article is based.

Catholic Archbishop cleared

John Ward, Archbishop of Cardiff, will not now be charged with repeatedly raping a seven-year-old girl (See March *Freethinker*).

He was accused by a woman, now 45, who alleges to have been the victim. Ward has always denied the accusations.

C of E Finances

THE PUBLICATION of the Church Commissioners' 1998 annual accounts provoked conflicting headlines. *The Times* said "Church cash crisis hits poor parishes. Cost of pensions leaves too little for stipends". In contrast, the *Sunday Times* informed us that "High-living bishops anger their flocks", noting that one bishop's expense claim for the year totals £160,000 and that bishops' expenses had increased by more than inflation.

The Church seems to be practically the only major organisation where the management structure has not been pruned. This might not be so remarkable were it not for the fact that there are now significantly fewer worshippers than ever before for the bishops to minister to.

Despite disastrous losses on property investments in the 1980s, now apparently recovered, the Church has £3.5 billion in assets (to which some of our ancestors, believers or not, were forced to contribute). With such a sum behind them, and only the good Lord to be accountable to, why should the bishops care about their own expenditure? Why should we be surprised that many bishops – who so love to pontificate about Jesus's example – appear to live the life of Reilly in their splendid palaces, callously indifferent to the plight of clergy, many of whom are paid so badly they draw state benefits?

Churches lobbying for exemption from VAT on repairs

HEADLINED *Treasures in Heaven*, a *Times* editorial demanded VAT concessions on repairs to church buildings. The main justification seemed to be that religion was a marvellous thing; that the Churches needed more support because their attendances are dwindling; and that some of the buildings are of architectural merit.

The Church seems to have a somewhat exaggerated sense of its own importance. Having just castigated the Government for daring to hold a debate on the future of House of Lords during "Holy Week", it seems the Church is now expecting to dictate VAT policy.

The NSS protested to the *Times*, pointing out that the N Ireland conflict disproves their claim that religion is a binding force – and there were far more deserving uses of taxes than further filling the Churches' already ample coffers (*see above item*).

We suggested that if the Churches cannot or will not pay for the repair of any church buildings worthy of preservation, they could (as in the Netherlands) be converted for suitable secular uses, eg civic centres, libraries or museums. The State would pay for the repairs, and the wider public would benefit.

NSS man wins lengthy battle over Loyal Declaration

NIGEL SINNOTT, an NSS member living in Australia, has won a protracted battle to scrap the Loyal Declaration at Alexandra Primary School, Victoria, attended by his 10-year-old daughter Miriam.

The Declaration's wording is: "I love God and my country. I will honour the flag, I will serve the Queen, and cheerfully obey my parents, teachers and the laws."

Nigel first registered a protest in 1992 when he moved to Alexandra.

"I protested about it on a number of grounds," he told the *Freethinker*. "I do not want my daughters to 'love God' or 'serve the Queen', and I do not want them to show *cheerful* obedience to me or anyone else. I associate cheerful obedience with fascist and communist rallies! Obedience should be thoughtful and critical – or else withheld.

"In addition, I object to the whole idea of requiring oaths or declarations of loyalty – to anything or anybody – from youngsters who have not reached an age of discretion and informed consent."

At first Nigel arranged for Miriam to go into assembly late, immediately after the Loyal Declaration was over. This proved difficult, so it was agreed that she could be present during the Declaration, but not take part in it. After a few months Miriam found the arrangement embarrassing – people kept questioning her – and she chose not to attend assembly at all.

Then, earlier this year, the school's new acting principal, Chris Varker, put the matter to a vote among parents. He asked them to choose between the Declaration and an alternative pledge, based on the one used at Australian citizenship ceremonies.

This reads: "As a young Australian, I promise to obey the laws of my country, and respect the rights of people through my words and actions. I will try to make my home, school and community a better place for all."

The results of the poll, announced at the beginning of March were: 64 for the Loyal Declaration and 131 for the new pledge, which was immediately introduced.

"Ideally I would have preferred no pledge at all," said Nigel, but the new pledge is a great improvement on the old Declaration.

Meanwhile, another school battle has been won in Michigan, USA. Micah White, a junior at Michigan High School, has won the right to

form an atheist club. He wanted to form the club to counter several Christian groups who were meeting on campus.

The school authorities were less than helpful, so Micah enlisted the help of Americans United, which campaigns for the separation of church and state.

AU sent a letter to Micah's school, pointing out that the Equal Access Act, passed by Congress in 1984 and upheld by the Supreme Court six years later, states that public sec-

ondary schools must allow all sorts of student clubs to meet on campus. Only those that might "substantially interfere with the orderly conduct of educational activities" can be disallowed. AU said that failure to allow Micah to launch his club could result in a lawsuit.

The school immediately backed down, and the club was formed. Micah expected around a dozen people to attend the inaugural meeting, but was pleasantly surprised when 40 students turned out to support him.

Religionists were at the heart of Age of Consent debacle

THE Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) has blamed religionists for the scuppering of the age of consent legislation for gay men by the House of Lords.

This debacle, says GALHA, demonstrates the power and influence which religionists of one sort or another still exercise over the lives of lesbian and gay people.

GALHA spokesperson, George Broadhead, said:

"When proposing her amendment hostile to this legislation during the first debate on the issue, Baroness Young made her Christian motivation clear by declaring at the outset that she was speaking as an Anglican and boasting of the support she had from the Archbishop of

Canterbury, former Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits, Roman Catholics, and the Moslem Council of Great Britain. She also had strong support from the intensely homophobic Christian Institute of which she is a patron.

"Nobody reading the speeches in both the House of Commons and House of Lords debates on the issue can fail to notice the regularity with which religious credentials are cited by those speakers who either opposed the reform outright or only tepidly supported it in this particular case, while speaking out against lesbian and gay rights in general.

"This is in sharp contrast to the speeches in favour of reform made by Humanist peers like Earl Russell."

Have you considered joining the NSS?

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

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

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

You can be part of these and other important campaigns by joining the NSS today. The subscription is £10 per annum for single membership (£15 for partners living at the same address). Unwaged membership is £6.

Please write to the National Secular Society, at 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL, or telephone 0171 404 3126 for an information pack. (E-mail kpw@secularism.org.uk).

Their website (www.secularism.org.uk) includes an application form.

WHILE officiating at the secular funeral in February, 1976, of one Joseph Brett, who had been a conscientious objector in the First World War, Bill McIlroy – then Secretary of the National Secular Society - commented that there were public memorial monuments everywhere to honour those killed in action, but none to honour those with the special courage to refuse to kill.

Among the mourners was the deceased's niece, Edna Mathieson; and the idea of erecting a memorial for conscientious objectors took root in her mind, refusing to go away.

The Greater London Council supported her suggestion of a COs' plaque on the South Bank, but dissolution of the GLC and lack of funding put an end to that project. Enlisting the Peace Pledge Union as a focus for a new approach, Edna finally got permission from Camden Council to site the memorial in Tavistock Square – which, with its Gandhi statue, was already known as a "peace park".

This allowed for something more substantial than a plaque, and on May 15, 1993 – International Conscientious Objectors Day – the *Guardian* published an appeal on its letters page, which brought in many donations.

Why May 15? The date furthest removed from November 11 is May 14, but it seems that, when a continental peace group was organising a COs' ceremony one year, they happened to find a day later more convenient; and the date stuck. Somehow, a slight mathematical deviation seems fitting.

During the ensuing few months, the concept developed from a plaque to a large Cumbrian rock, symbolising quiet and steadfastness in resisting the tumult of war. A 450-million-year-old rock from Kirkstone Quarry was selected; was sculpted under the direction of Hugh Court; and was transported to Tavistock Square. The inscription reads: *To all those who have established and are maintaining the right to refuse to kill.*

The stone was in place within one year of the opening of the *Guardian* appeal – in time to be unveiled on May 15, 1994, by the late composer Michael Tippett, himself imprisoned as a "conchie" during the Second World War.

Among those present at the unveiling were Edna Mathieson, Bill McIlroy, Trefor Davies and Bill Hetherington of the Peace Pledge Union, as well as other members of the peace and the secular humanist movements (including myself).

On May 15, 1998, another public ceremony was held at the stone; and the tradition continues this year on Saturday, May 15, at midday, to be followed by a gathering in a near-by crypt.

As part of the ceremony, I have been asked to read a poem of mine about the memorial.



*Barbara Smoker
reports on the
monument erected to
honour conscientious
objectors*

Here it is – written, appropriately, in "heroic couplets."

*In this one century, one country, we
Have made so many heroes, by decree.*

*To kill, to die? They had but little choice:
Earl Haig's directives, Winston Churchill's
voice
Demanded deaths, in national defence.*

*As retrospective peacetime recompense,
Remembrance Day was instituted, and,
On plaques and monuments throughout the
land,
Young lives cut short are named – so honoured
still.*

But shame on rebels who refused to kill!

*Such cowards, they, to disobey the call
Of patriotic duty! Weaklings, all
Who would not drop a bomb or fire a gun –
To maim or kill another mother's son?*

*In thousands were they thrown in gaol to rot;
In hundreds by their own close comrades shot.*

*They stood alone Let's dedicate a stone
Belatedly their bravery to own:
No cenotaph, no obelisk – but just
A sloping rock, saluting epic dust.*

*Belatedly their bravery proclaim!
Let Peace, not War, set human hearts aflame.*

I must confess to a little poetic licence: none

of the British soldiers executed at the front in 1914-1918 were registered conscientious objectors; death sentences passed on COs were all commuted to penal servitude, in compliance with the law. The three-hundred-plus British executions that were actually carried out by the firing squads were invariably for "cowardice" and "desertion in the face of the enemy". Most of those executed were probably suffering from what was later called "shell-shock"; but motivation is always complex, and many of the victims may well have rebelled against having to kill other human beings in close combat. So I felt they should be included in my poem. As for the genuine COs, thousands whose justification was non-religious were sent to prison, 73 of them dying as a result of prison maltreatment.

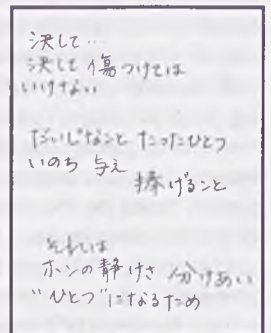
The poem has been criticised for its "nationalism", since it deals only with Britain. But I do not apologise for that: though it is right to remember the war dead on both sides, in honouring those who refused to kill we should concentrate on our own. It is too easy to honour those on the other side who refused to kill us – though of course we do.

The memorial, however, is indeed international, and the annual ceremony is increasingly inclusive. This year it will include a one-minute silence, which is to be observed also at a pacifist conference being held at the Hague that weekend, and by groups in other countries. In Japan, an artist-poet, Tsutomu Yoshida, who has a daughter living in London, has written three haikus for the ceremony. They read as follows, in the original Japanese as well as an English translation.

*Never,
never to damage
others*

*Only to give
and offer
own life*

*To share
a minute's silence
to become "one".*



By way of a footnote, I cannot resist a little dig at the Quakers. As the foremost religious body connected with conscientious objection, they were approached by Edna for financial support in the early days of her quest, but refused on principle – saying that living people's needs should be met before money was spent on monuments for the dead. However, when the stone was finally in place, paid for by others, the Quakers happily used it as a focus for a ceremony of their own. How human!

Spin doctors came to prominence during the Labour party's rise to power, when shadowy individuals such as Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell were employed to put the best possible shine on the party's activities, and to rescue it from its inevitable pratfalls and banana-skins. Their job is to manipulate the media, either through dishonest hype or straightforward intimidation.

A few years ago, the Church of England announced that it, too, had employed spin doctors to try to improve its image. Their Mandelson equivalents remain shadowy figures, but the influence is very plain to see. Occasionally this all backfires – journalists sometimes get shirty when they feel they're being set up, and they retaliate viciously.

Take the article in the *Daily Telegraph* (April 3) about the Archbishop of Canterbury. *Archbishop, for how long?* asked the headline over two pages of withering criticisms of the shortcomings of Dr Carey. Damian Thompson questioned in forensic detail the wisdom of keeping Dr Carey in office when he is so patently not up to the job.

By the time I'd reached the end of this rather cruel recitation of the prelate's inadequacies, even I felt sorry for him.

But the spin doctors continued to spin, and no more so than over the Easter period this year. Andrew Brown in the *Church Times* put it this way: "I'm normally sceptical of claims that Christianity is making a comeback in this country, but it is certainly true that it has made a comeback among the broadsheet newspapers. I don't think I have ever seen so many religious cuttings in one week, and all of them pegged to Easter one way or another."

Yes, indeed, as religion loses power with the population at large, it seems to be increasing it with editors. It seems editors have fallen for the argument that if we dispense with religion we will also dispense with morality, and have therefore taken it upon themselves to "morally re-arm" the nation through the promotion of religion as "a good thing".

Consequently, Holy Joes galore were given acres of space to peddle a message that has been roundly rejected. In a country that has demonstrably embraced secularism, it would be interesting to know what motivates the media to force-feed us religion.

For example, Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, wrote in the *Independent* about what he alleges is a world-wide revival in religious faith, and claimed rather pathetically: "Occasionally attempts are made to suggest that religious leaders speak for a dwindling constituency."

He doesn't seem to have latched on to the

The World May Turn, but the Church Spins

fact that these are not mere "suggestions" – reliable statistics show them to be fact.

Even the *Church Times* had to admit that "by a rough calculation, the Church of England has, in nine years of the Decade of Evangelism, lost a quarter of its membership, whether that is measured in attendance figures (now concealed because they are too awful to publish) or by electoral roll."

The *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* were the worst offenders in the old-time religion stakes, filling their opinion pages and editorials with sanctimonious droning.

"Real Christianity is 70 per cent proof" wrote Digby Anderson in the *Telegraph*, arguing that Christianity is all about the supernatural, and that we should all force ourselves to believe the incredible.

He ignores the fact that it is this very supernatural element that most people find untenable, and walk away from.

Then Peter Osborne in the *Daily Express* exhorted us to "Reclaim Christ for His Millennium".

"Even atheists," he wrote, "must acknowledge that Christ was an extraordinary figure whose teachings during the 30 years or so that he was on this earth are achingly relevant today."

Well, this atheist doesn't accept anything of the sort. The teachings of Christ are not original. Most of them had already appeared in the writings of older religions and philosophies by the time he got round to them. The reason they independently occurred to so many people is simply that they are common sense, not divine inspiration.

However, the religionists didn't get it all their own way. The *Independent* (April 2) led its Review section with a thoughtful article by self-identified agnostic Will Self under the heading *Why I hate Easter*. At least it put both sides of the case.

Then in the *Guardian*, Madeleine Bunting, its former religious affairs correspondent, was also accepting that Christianity is a dead duck.

"The decline of religion in the West – plentifully in evidence on Good Friday with those empty pews – has left some gaps. Many of the purposes which Christianity served are clearly redundant. We don't need its cosmological explanations about the origins of the universe,

for example. Neither do we want its policing of personal morality with its punitive attitudes to sexuality.

"But the sense is growing in the least expected places that if we junk Christianity, we're going to have to put something in its place." She suggested that the replacement might be the old philosophy of the Stoics. "First, stoicism stresses reverence for the harmonious interconnectedness of every part of the cosmos – from which one can clearly deduce a comprehensive environmental awareness. But where it becomes radically counter-cultural is in its emphasis on acceptance of your lot in life (usually pejoratively dismissed as fatalism) and the subjection of emotion to the judgment of wisdom. "You will give yourself relief if you do every act of your life as if it were the last, laying aside all carelessness and passionate aversion from the commands of reason, and all hypocrisy and self-love, and discontent with the portion that has been given to you."

This philosophy is being promoted on the Internet under the title *Cyberstoia*, and Ms Bunting thinks it has a great future.

The best insights, though, were, as usual, reserved for the correspondence columns. In reply to the Bishop of London's pious maunderings, Christopher Walker of London W14 wrote to the *Independent*: "Is faith – any faith – true? It's not good enough to say people want faith. They also want chocolate bars the size of Mont Blanc. Why have people of differing faiths hated one another with more viciousness than any other form of hatred across the centuries? The Bishop mocks 'Consumer Unbeliever International', but Voltaire sensibly saw commerce as a way of finding common purpose between Jews, Christians and Muslims 'where the only infidel was the bankrupt.' Why are the epiphenomena of religion so startlingly similar to the epiphenomena of mental illness? Anyone who has knowledge of someone afflicted by either will know that the delusions (magic, control, irrational thinking) are often echoed in each other. If religion is such a good thing, why is the fundamentalist form today – whether Judaism, Christianity, Islam or Hinduism – so intolerant, repellent, bigoted and politically intransigent? Surely something which seeks to define goodness should be good in its most extreme form. Yet the manifestation of extreme religion, from the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque westwards, has been events of peculiar horror and badness. How can the Bishop explain that?"

He can't of course. But no doubt he'll be given acres of newspaper space to try.

How Came They to T

Ambrose Bierce defined a saint as a dead sinner who has been edited. If that appears too cynical a view, the question remains - what exactly must candidates for sainthood do to achieve that status? Or, as Isaac Watts asked rather more poetically, "How came they to the blissful seats of everlasting day?"

It seems to me that there are seven possible qualifications and nobody is considered without possessing a minimum of two.

The first and not the least of these is, as Ambrose Bierce suggested, that candidates must be dead. It is not necessary for them to wait for the natural termination of their earthly lives; it has always been open to them deliberately to court death in order to qualify earlier than they normally would and, although this may smack of sharp practice, it is quite acceptable.

If they can arrange to expire with a sense of theatre then so much the better for their chances. Paul and Catherine of Alexandria may never have become saints had not milk rather than blood flowed from their severed heads; nor Alban if his executioner's eyes had not fallen out as the axe descended. It was more common, however, though no less spectacular, for candidates to cause a stream, a well or a fountain to appear where they died and the sick to be healed by their tombs.

It may be held that because those selected for canonisation are dead, they will not have an opportunity to object if they prefer that their slumbers are not disturbed. But this is not so.



Aspiring to sainthood, or just taking the mick? The late Brian Parry, atheist, Freethinker contributor and a founder member of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, demonstrating how easy it is to appear saintly.

Saints are perfectly capable of making their feelings known from beyond the grave. Swithun caused it to rain for 40 days after an attempt was made to remove his body against his earlier expressed wishes, and Odulf struck a queen with blindness when she sought to appropriate his relics for her private collection.

Second, it is of great advantage if candidates have been engaged in one of a number of approved occupations in their lifetime. At the top of this list are popes (who have about a one in four chance of sainthood), bishops, monks, kings, queens and virgins. At the bottom, with precious little chance at all, are plumbers and their mates. But if it is of any consolation to them, Jude is the patron saint of hopeless cases and he would no doubt plead a plumber's cause if it were referred to him by his priest or trades union representative.

However, some persons in unlikely occupations have been canonised. One, Machalus, was a pirate, although it must be admitted that he took the precaution of becoming a bishop before he died; another, Dismas, was a thief who seems to have been canonised because Jesus responded positively to his prayer from the cross "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." (It has been generally assumed that these words were spoken penitentially, but there is an alternative view which is gaining some currency that they were spoken mockingly, and a subsequent aside "Nutty as a fruitcake!" never found its way into the gospel record.)

Catherine Labouré was a waitress who, while still a virgin, became a nun - an approved occupation and an excellent attribute. She was rewarded not only with sainthood but also by becoming a confidante of the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, who had died some 1800 years earlier. Labouré deduced her identity from the large letter M on the reverse of an inscription she was carrying. In their subsequent conversations matters of a common and intimate nature were discussed.

Third, a virtuous life is required to be led by candidates. Severe chastity is recommended for its own sake and, as also, as Augustine discovered, because the sexual act is the conduit for original sin. Abolish one and you abolish the other, if I may express it thus. Chastity in men is not sufficient to guarantee canonisation, although it does give the stronger willed an advantage over their weaker brethren. In women, virginity is considered an adequate qualification in itself and some have gone to extraordinary lengths to preserve it. One gave her eyes to a suitor who desired her because of their beauty; another, a Portuguese princess, prayed that she would be rendered unattractive to her pursuers and in time was observed sport-

Fancy becoming Neil Blewitt way to can

ing a moustache and a prodigious beard. Who, after this, could deny that prayers are answered?

Fourth, in pursuit of the virtuous life, aspirants must be able to endure privation and discomfort, like Eusebius who lived in a well or Simeon who preferred the top of a 60-foot pole, often standing on one leg for a year at a time. These are good starting points.

One can, in addition, like Thomas Becket, wear a hair shirt, taking care on the rare occasions on which it is removed not to disturb the resident vermin. On this particular saint's garment they reportedly "bubbled like a cauldron". Alternatively one may, like Antony, never wash the feet or, like Besarion, refuse to lie down to sleep.

The watchword must be discipline, a quality exemplified by Kevin who, when a blackbird laid an egg in his hand while it was outstretched at prayer, remained in that posture until the chick had hatched and fledged. That, it will be agreed, is discipline of a very high order.

Fifth, one's body must remain incorrupt at least for a while. It is often a test of sanctity for the body to be disinterred to discover if there has been any deterioration in its condition since death. If there has, on the first disinterment, one's candidacy would probably be at an end. If there has not, the candidate immediately becomes eligible for canonisation. Often a second and third disinterment will be conducted and, although it is not essential for the incorruption to remain for these later examinations, it would obviously be viewed very favourably if it did. One saint continued bleeding for over 50 years after his death, and his friends (and presumably their descendants) were required to change his clothing twice a week. The necessity for this ended when eventually he was buried under concrete. Another saint's body remained incorrupt for over 500 years.

Not all candidates would be expected to emulate these exceptional men, but perhaps a sneeze or two *post mortem* would be helpful, or one could contrive, like Waldef, to be halfway through reciting the

Their Blissful Seats

● FEATURE ●

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Lord's Prayer at the moment of death but continue in a strong voice to the Amen. Of course, not all candidates' bodies are disinterred, but if one is aiming at sainthood it is better not to take any chances and arrange for the body to remain incorrupt.

Sixth, the acquisition of one or more of the stigmata will materially assist a candidate's prospects. The most popular seems to be the mark of the crown of thorns which was possessed by several women, the blood from one of whom would flow frequently but would always cease at her word of command. Some less common are the marks of the scourge, the lance and the nails, but a few particularly favoured individuals had them all. One such was Francis of Assisi who, it will be recalled, preached to the birds, an activity by no means unusual. Anthony of Padua, a contemporary of Francis, preached to the fishes.

The seventh and final qualification is the ability to perform miracles, and although some persons have been canonised without having been able or willing to suspend the natural order of things, those who include a miracle or two in their CV are always assured of sympathetic consideration.

To indicate the ingenuity of candidates in this field, I have selected a variety of illustrations from a number so substantial as to fill a good-sized volume. Eloi used to remove a horse's leg when he came to shoe the animal – it was more convenient for him if not the horse – and restore it when he had finished. Osith was beheaded by pirates three miles from the church where she desired to be interred so, for the convenience of those appointed to conduct her obsequies, she thoughtfully carried her severed head thither before succumbing.

Birstan's speciality was to pray aloud for the dead in various cemeteries and elicit a hearty Amen from the inhabitants.

Restoring the dead to life is not uncommon in religious circles but one example ought to be included in any selection, and Nicholas' feat is as good as any. He raised from the dead three boys who had been cut up and pickled ready to serve as bacon. One wonders if the

miracle could have been accomplished if the meat had actually been eaten and what the effect this might have had on the diners.

Another standard miracle is the intervention of a saint on the battlefield in order to give the victory to a favoured side. Mennas is a modern example. He it was who won the Battle of El Alamein in 1943 despite having been dead for 1600 years. He is obviously an incredibly robust old soldier.

The miracles of some saints have inspired whole generations of theatrical illusionists. Barnabas contrived to be interred with a copy of Matthew's gospel in Greek long before it was composed and, even later, perhaps as an *encore*, wrote and published his autobiography. Teilo must have been similarly gifted for when three churches laid claim to his body he thoughtfully provided a further two so that none of the claimants should be disappointed.

One cannot conclude a list of examples without mentioning Brigid. She used to transform her bath water into beer for the convenience of her visitors. I have been unable to ascertain if she took a bath as soon as they arrived or left the plug in at her earlier ablutions so that the raw material of her miracle was always at hand. Nor have I discovered if being Irish she included the provision of Guinness in her repertoire.

I have deliberately omitted from these examples Columba, whose death was foretold by his horse, since I have always felt that an error was made here in that the horse rather than Columba should have been canonised. Not many horses are capable of divining the future; fewer of articulating it.

Once a candidate has fulfilled a sufficient number of the conditions, he will be awarded a sainthood by the pope of the day which will allow him to occupy a privileged position in heaven. The god in charge of that establishment obviously has the opportunity to object to any nomination but, although the number of persons canonised currently fills twelve weighty volumes, there is no record that he has ever done so.

Some candidates learn of their elevation in a matter of weeks, but many may have to wait considerably longer before a decision is reached. They must possess themselves in patience as Joan of Arc had to. A decision on her case was not reached for 500 years and even a pope, Leo III, was left in suspense as to his status for over 800 years. Neither, I understand, lodged a complaint.

Saints, who are entitled to wear robes of white and crowns of gold and carry triumphal palms, are awarded shrines, emblems and cults, unless these are already in existence, in which case they are made official. They are

then given various duties to perform which elevate them to a level occupied by the gods of antiquity. Just as, for example, Athene, whose emblem is an owl, was allocated a shrine at Delphi and given a duty to protect horses and architects, so Dunstan, whose emblem is a pair of pincers, was allocated a shrine at Canterbury and given a duty to protect blacksmiths and jewellers.

His emblem recalls his seizing the Devil by the nose with a pair of red-hot tongs, refusing to release that organ until he promised never to tempt him again. Brigid's emblem, by the bye, is not, as might be supposed, a foaming tankard but a cow, a reminder that she served only milk to visiting bishops rather than reconstituted bath water.

Most sections of society are offered special protection by saints from pawnbrokers to archers. Sebastian, patron of the latter group, displays a rare magnanimity in that before being clubbed to death his body was used by archers for target practice.

Some classes of persons are doubly protected. For example, pregnant women enjoy the patronage of the goddess Diana as well as Margaret of Antioch, while Apollo and Cecilia work in close harmony for the benefit of musicians.

Saints are always willing to cure certain ailments if they are invoked (Armel is a specialist in gout, Beuno in veterinary practice and so on) and they are also assigned to protect churches, towns and, indeed, entire countries. They will act on behalf of supplicants with their god on any matter that falls within their competence. Each will have a feast day (the more privileged two) when their life and work are celebrated on earth.

Some saints on their feast day will offer services which are not always available at other times of the year. For example, on 25 April a young lady who is curious to discover the identity of her future spouse will be assisted to that end by Mark whose feast day it is.

She has but to pluck twelve leaves of sage as the clock strikes noon on that day and he will provide her with either a vision of her husband-to-be or, in exceptional cases, his actual person.

Other saints will sometimes give an indication of their activities on their feast day. If, for example, it rains on Mary Magdalene's day (22 July) one can be sure it is because she is washing her handkerchiefs prior to weeping copiously on James's day 72 hours later.

All in all, saints must be fully occupied and doubtless find their activities on behalf of humans absorbing and rewarding. As Frank Capra didn't say but Andrew Mackman Beagles did, "It's a wonderful death!"

Spare the embarrassment

BY THE time you read this, Britain will have undergone yet another transatlantic invasion by Christian missionaries, with all the usual razzamatazz – or perhaps in this case, slightly unusual razzamatazz. Spotlights, ritual music and clapping, shrieking girls and so on, we take these for granted, but now they're bringing us strong men who blow up hot-water bottles, tear telephone directories, snap baseball bats and bend horseshoes. Appropriate enough, I suppose, if you lead the Power Team, as John Jacobs does, in a "war on the devil".

Dan Michalski caught up with the Jacobs ensemble in Tulsa, Oklahoma for the *Observer Magazine* (March 28), where public relations director Rick Krout acknowledged that the feats of strength were "just bait". Jesus told us to be "fishers of men" (Geddit?).

"Have you ever thought about your salvation?" Jacobs asked Michalski. "When you surrender your heart to Jesus, all things are possible. It's not about religion, it's about knowing God ... glory be ... come to Jesus ... Jesus Christ". But after he had addressed the congregation for an hour and the "born-again" had swarmed onto the stage, Jacobs expected his listeners to give more than their hearts and souls for Jesus; he wanted what he euphemistically called a "love offering". Fortunately the crowd knew what he meant, and the buckets were soon overflowing with donations towards the next crusade.

Questioned about the collection, Jacobs said he didn't even see the money, he was only "interested in souls"; but he admitted that "God has blessed me and my family very well. It's almost embarrassing how much I have been blessed". Well now, if it embarrasses him, there is a remedy to hand. Did not Jesus enjoin: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell all thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven"? What could be better than that, Mr Jacobs?

Drewery drivell

DO YOU remember when Channel 4 produced good television? Nowadays the news is about the only programme worth watching. One of its documentaries in March 1996, *Guns on the Street*, has been accused of fakery and is under investigation as I write; but my complaint here relates to *Hoddle and the Healer*, a devious defence of the former England football coach, shown on March 23 this year.

Devious because it touched only briefly on the real reason for Hoddle's dismissal – his shameful remark that disabled people must

have sinned in a previous life – and presented him as a victim of media pressure. And Eileen Drewery was given time to utter the usual psychic drivel about an "aura around the head ... protecting the spirit". "I feel the energies coming through me", she blathered. "I feel the extra love".

Typically, too, for those in her line of business, she showed her vanity by disowning any special powers: she had merely been chosen by God.

No guarantee

STEPHEN Turoff not only talks about auras, he claims to have one, and to have had it photographed by doctors in Israel. It turned out to be "all white with blushes of pink", which sounds rather pretty, as far as these things go. Alas, there was no sign of it in the *Guardian* close-up colour photograph on February 17, when he was treating Elsie, who has travelled from Hackney to see him in Chelmsford, every six weeks for about 18 months.

Elsie, whose husband has been a spiritualist for over 50 years, has "numerous health problems"; is on oxygen for 16 hours a day; and was back in hospital over the Christmas period. When asked by the *Guardian's* Madeleine Bunting if Turoff's treatment had done her any good, she was doubtful. She doesn't come out feeling any different, but consoles herself with the thought that she "could be even worse" if she didn't come. "I was only in hospital for four days last time", she says bravely.

"I know I can't give you a new body but I'm looking after you", Turoff tells Elsie, and if she will sit quietly every evening at 8pm, he will send her his energy; and he will pray for her. Does he, I wonder, have a timetable for energy dispensation in the evening for his various clients: 8.00, 8.15, 8.30, and so on? Mind you, Elsie must have seen the disclaimer on the treatment room wall, warning that "Mr Turoff is not a doctor. He is an instrument of God's love and as such he cannot guarantee a cure". Regrettably, then, Elsie must realise that God's love isn't infinite, after all.

In the bar of the adjoining Miami Hotel, Ms Bunting met a party of Germans who "complained bitterly" that, although Turoff has patients abroad, he can't work in Germany. Good for Germany, I say.

Supplementing faith

GOOD for Brazil, too, where police are investigating another faith healer, Rubens Faria, who claims that his body is inhabited by a German field doctor, Dr Adolf Fritz, who died in the trenches in 1918. Hundreds of thousands

of people have visited Faria since 1990, but not all came away cured, if the testimony of his arrested security guard is to be believed. Three people are alleged to have died and been taken to a nearby hospital (*Guardian*, February 13).

It seems, moreover, that Faria found it necessary to supplement his "faith healing" with a little conventional doctoring. When the police searched his premises they came across 1,000 boxes of conventional medicines and, in fact, he has already admitted illegally practising medicine.

Now he has been taken to a private hospital suffering from stress. Which prompts the injunction, false physician heal thyself.

Young men forget

HINDUS in Britain celebrated the start of the 52nd century. Or more accurately, some did. An awareness campaign failed to impress a fifth of our island's estimated 1.1 million Hindus, said Manoj Ladwa, spokesman for Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, a group which promotes the principles of Hare Krishna.

"We are very concerned. Some young Hindus are forgetting that they have their own belief system. We will happily celebrate with our Christian brothers for their millennium but we must keep our own ceremonies", he told Rory Carroll of the *Guardian* (March 18).

No lottery money had been set aside for the year 5100; indeed, this once-in-a-lifetime event had been ignored, said Bimal Krishna Das, secretary of the National Council of Hindu Temples. "We're all taxpayers, but we're not being given equal rights. This is a big deal for us. Lord Krishna appeared some 5,000 years ago, and when he left the plane, time began. Our calendar is not based on an event but a mathematical calculation."

Not all Hindus use the same maths, though. As Mr Das acknowledged, some follow the Vikrama Samvat calendar, which starts from 57BC. All a bit confusing if you ask me.

The outraged Cardinal

A PLEA for glass-fronted confessionals put forward by Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse has been condemned by Cardinal Basil Hume (*Express*, January 17), and the leaflet proposing them has been banned from Westminster Cathedral.

"To suggest that children should never be alone in a confessional is outrageous," said the Cardinal. "I believe this sort of statement only compounds the media image of priests as paedophiles awaiting their prey."

What CSSA members know from experience is that some priests *do* come into that category. That's where Hume ought to direct his wrath.

DEAR Parson,

“Things, thoughts and words”: Do you accept this order of things?

Common sense suggests that there would be no words unless there were ideas already in existence for words to describe.

Common sense suggests there would be no thoughts without something to think about – and something to think with.

Common sense (or our scientific knowledge) suggests that all but a fraction of our physical universe consists of things or substances that do not think, still less talk.

Stones, water and the chemical elements all exist without thinking. Parts of our own bodies do not think – the hair we cut off or the nails we trim.

In my understanding this unthinking matter precedes consciousness, ideas, thoughts and words. Thoughts and words are the products of physical brains and could not exist without those brains.

The physical brains could not exist without the non-thinking material of which they consist.

While we still do not know the nature of matter, “matter” is a convenient way to describe our world, our universe. It is the basis – the starting point.

Anything else – God, Creator, *Logos*, Karma, etc, are phantasms of misguided thinking in the brains of a species called *homo sapiens*.

Do you deny the existence of material things? Do you follow Pythagoras and Plato in claiming that the only true reality consists of perfect ideas - material things being merely feeble transitory copies of those eternal ideas?

“Five cows in a field.” Each cow is imperfect and will die, but the number five will go on for ever.

Plato likened us to prisoners in a cave, our backs turned to the entrance, with an unseen fire burning behind us. All we see are flickering shadows on a wall inside the cave – which we assume to be part of the real world, knowing nothing of the dazzling light of perfect ideas outside the cave.

Ironically, all idealist philosophers appear to have enjoyed the feeble, transitory physical copies, or “shadows” when it came to eating, drinking, and other physical comforts.

Your religion, dear parson, seeks to rearrange the order of things, thoughts and words.

St John writes: “In the beginning was the Word. We are told that he wrote *Logos*, expressing the Greek feeling that the universe was an orderly place – not chaos but cosmos, reflecting some anterior rationality behind it, and accounting for it. This was understandable in a world of limited scientific knowledge, a

Things, thoughts and words

by Karl Heath

world of geocentric parochialism. But there is no evidence for *Logos* in modern science.

Two millennia later the Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, the Reverend Don Cupitt, wrote *Creation out of Nothing*, published by the SCM Press.

In it he says: “Language creates reality” and goes on to assert: “Language is bigger than you and me, more powerful than us, and prior to us.”

Reviewing this book at the time of publication I called it “a preposterous farrago of pretentious nonsense,” and since then have found no reason to alter my judgment. If language is so important to Cupitt, why does he play with words? Suffice it for me to say that

Is it not arrogant to assert something for which there is no evidence, then strive to make others believe you?

Cupitt’s thought processes seem swamped in a Sea of Faith.

You may not agree that thoughts and words are contingent, dependent for their existence upon the prior existence of “things”.

Yet we are left with “things”. I hope to write another letter to you about the nature of “things”, but, in the meantime, I assume that if you believe in Creation, then “things” are just as contingent as thoughts and words.

But have you considered that all you are doing is trying to explain one mystery by postulating a greater mystery to account for it? But there is more to it. The humble process known as science can nibble away at the first mystery, our universe. But your mystery defies investigation. You can call it First Cause, Unmoved Mover, *Primum Mobile* or God, but you still tell us nothing. Is it not arrogant to assert something for which there is no evidence, then strive to make others believe you? You demand faith and promise salvation in return.

Is this not impertinence?

Your religion preaches humility. To me this includes the humble words: “I do not know.”

Can you bring yourself to utter these words? Most of our huge universe is surely still unknown and much of it will forever be unknown to limited human understanding.

Science is a continual acknowledgment of “not knowing”. Science is humble.

It is permissible to speculate about the unknown, to suggest possible explanations, to advance hypotheses (which must then be subjected to rigorous, and sometimes destructive, testing).

But it is not intellectually honest to make untested assertions about the unknown, peopling it with gods, souls, spirits or angels.

Do you ever subject your beliefs to rigorous testing? If not, your status is not humility but arrogance. Not just arrogance but ignorant arrogance. If you are familiar with science, then you are choosing deliberately to ignore it, despising centuries of patient scientific investigation.

Do you reject science because you cannot square it with your theology?

Perhaps some of your colleagues, especially the fundamentalist ones, can be excused on the grounds of ignorance. How, otherwise, can they ask adult congregations to sing Mrs Alexander’s silly hymn in which the Lord God makes all the beautiful things, but perhaps not the nasty bits.

You may tell me that some well-known scientists are religious. Sir James Jeans, impressed by the mathematical

aspects of the universe, concluded it was the work of a Supreme Mathematician. Did it not occur to him that he may have been looking at the universe through mathematically-tinted spectacles?

Other scientists appear to have compartmentalised minds. Some compartments contain their science; others their childhood or traditional beliefs. The barriers between these compartments prevent the rigour of science to be applied to their other beliefs.

There may be ideas and words elsewhere in the universe. We know nothing of them and must, therefore, confine ourselves to our microscopic earth. For billions of years the earth was lifeless. Where were ideas, words and God? Then there were millions of years with only micro-organisms. Where were ideas, words and God? Then there were some hundreds of millions of years of reptiles. Where were ideas, words and God?

Bishop Berkeley claimed that “things” only existed as long as God was thinking about them. I will turn the bishop’s words around. God did not exist until we humans thought about *Him*.

Spinoza would not have liked this biography. Margaret Gullan-Whur tells us he would consider it a distraction from his principles, which he believed to be, like Euclid's, deducible from self-evident maxims. "We need make no researches concerning the life, the pursuits, or the habits of the author; nor need we inquire in what language, nor when he wrote..." That was how Spinoza regarded Euclid, and it was to a Euclidean perfection that he himself aspired. Witness his mathematical style and use of QED. But philosophy cannot achieve mathematical accuracy, even in the hands of its greatest exponents, of whom Spinoza is unquestionably one.

He knew his own worth and could be contemptuous of others. After reading a few pages of a treatise by a professor in a bookshop, he "judged it not worth reading through and far less answering". So he left it lying there. Not even Descartes (1596-1649) escaped censure. Yet Spinoza's own reasoning let him down on two essential questions. Although he made lenses for microscopes and telescopes, he had no time for science, and he regarded women as intellectually inferior to men.

Those blind spots aside, Baruch or Benedict Spinoza stands out – in Charles Bradlaugh's words – as "a mighty thinker", a "fearless utterer of free and noble thoughts", who "crushed with relentless force, the theological shell, in which the priests hide the kernel 'truth'". Or, as Dr Gullan-Whur has it, his firm resolve was "to substitute the natural light of reason for the irrational light of faith, superstition and divine revelation".

He was born on November 24, 1632 to Hana Debora, the second wife of the Jewish merchant Michael de Espinosa, whose father had fled the Lisbon Inquisition first to southern Portugal and then to Nantes. Michael moved on to Amsterdam, where he could practise his religion openly; but, as we all know, his son found that religion unacceptable. According to an early biographer, "He was not yet fifteen years old when he raised difficulties which the most learned among the Jews found it hard to solve". As his contemporary Bayle (of *Dictionnaire* fame) observed, Spinoza had "a geometrical mind, and as he wanted to find a reason for everything, he soon perceived that the teaching of the rabbis was not for him". Certainly, says Dr Gullan-Whur, somewhere between boyhood and banishment from the synagogue his conformity with Jewish law became strained, although she thinks it unlikely that he declared his doubts. It would have been foolish to do so in the 17th-century climate, and it would have

Within Reason: A Life of Spinoza

by Margaret Gullan-Whur.

Jonathan Cape, £20.



Baruch Spinoza (1632 - 1677)

humiliated his father.

Spinoza's father was dead when the Jewish governing body, the *Mahamad*, after endeavouring "by various means and promises to turn him from his evil ways", and "daily receiving more information about the abominable heresies which he practised and taught", decided that he "should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel..." And so, "By decree of the angels [!] and by command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God" (no less). They cursed him by day and by night, "when he lies down ... and when he rises up ... when he goes out, and when he comes in". The Lord, they said, would not spare him and would "blot out his name under heaven." And they ordered that nobody should communicate with him on this earth or stay "within four cubits in his vicinity"

Benedict moved first into the ancient centre of Amsterdam and then to Rijnsburg, near Leiden – where he may have attended the university without enrolling – doing a little teaching, lens-making and, above all, developing his philosophy in which, Dr Gullan Whur rightly insists, God and nature are interchangeable. "Wherever God is mentioned in his works and letters the word nature may be substituted." "I do not differentiate between God and Nature in the way all those known to me have done", he explained in a letter. And he confirmed this in the *Theologico-Political*

Treatise (TTP): "Nature herself is God under another name, and our ignorance of the power of God is co-extensive with our ignorance of nature ... Nothing happens in nature which does not follow from her laws". And, of course, man is a part of nature.

While he was not a distinguished natural scientist, says Dr Gullan-Whur, "he interestingly anticipated much later ways of looking at nature. First, he debunked the supernatural in a manner uniquely open and forceful for his day, leaving no doubt, despite calling Nature God, that the God of the Bible and the Koran had gone the way of spirits and demons, and that everything that happened was natural, and naturally caused. Miracles, for example, were logically and practically impossible".

No doubt he was intellectually arrogant, but he had cause to be. A philosopher, he said, "is supposed to know what is the difference between fiction and a clear and distinct conception", and few could live up to his expectations. Certainly he had no time for religionists. "Whenever people say that God is everywhere they introduce him as a spectator at a play", he remarked. And he suggested that a triangle, if it could speak, would say that "God is eminently triangular, and a circle that God's nature is eminently circular."

Faith had become "a mere compound of credulity and prejudices", he wrote in the TTP (1670), prejudices "which degrade man from rational being to beast, which completely stifle the power of judgment between the true and the false, which seem, in fact, carefully fostered for the purpose of extinguishing the last spark of reason." And that was unforgivable.

For Spinoza, who has aptly been called the supreme rationalist philosopher, everything was, in principle, knowable through reason, because nature was rationally (logically or mathematically) ordered. Reason and revelation were incompatible. The sole aim of philosophy was truth: the aim of faith, obedience and piety. By the "guidance of God", Spinoza meant "the fixed and immutable order of Nature or the coherent system of natural things". In his biblical criticism he described the story of Adam as just that, "a story or parable". And Moses, he said, treated the Israelites as parents treat irrational children, not seeking to convince them by reason, "but to bind them to covenant by oaths", threatening them with penalties for disobedience, "inculcating obedience only, and not knowledge".

No wonder the *Theologico-Political*

(Continued on page 15)

LIVING in a flat with a little-used spare bedroom, I have from time to time been induced to take in the odd lodger to help balance my ever precarious finances.

Recently, I took in one of my oddest lodgers yet: a Christian.

Matt was introduced to me by a mutual friend who assured me that, although he was a bit religious, he was an ordinary chap who was "one of the lads" and would be no trouble.

Taking the bait, I welcomed Matt into my home, waiving the usual deposit and other preliminaries on the strength of his being a friend of a friend. First mistake. His first rent cheque bounced so he lived rent free for the first month.

"You'll have to wait till pay day," he said, although he seemed to be dining on steak most nights when I saw him in the kitchen.

He also told me that he preferred to be called Matthew, and that as he was a born-again Christian this made him a Saint.

This seemed rather peculiar, and possible grounds for calling in the men with the white coats and the big net without delay, but scientific curiosity got the better of me. For here, I saw, was a possibly never-to-be-repeated chance to devote myself to a case study of a real live dyed-in-the-wool Christian.

"So let's get this straight," I prompted the next morning as I watched him pour the contents of my rare sugar sachet collection onto his porridge, "You are in fact Saint Matthew."

"That's right," he replied, later conceding that he was of course just a Saint Matthew rather than the one I might have heard of.

His particular branch of Christianity – which seemed to have no more than about two dozen members, although he implied that they were in fact the only true Christians around – was based on three tenets: foretelling the future, healing by laying on of hands, and talking in tongues.

This was not a religion I had heard of before – he denied it was a cult, even though it met in a hotel rather than a church – so I was keen to find out more by means of careful observation.

He wasn't able to tip me the winner of the Grand National that year, his precognitive powers seeming to take the form mainly of his saying "I predicted that" after things had happened.

As a Christian, he told me, Matthew had the right to be illness-free, although I noted that he seemed to have a hacking cough the day he told me that.

"It was wonderful to see a woman so perfectly subservient to her husband," he told me one Sunday after attending a service where an Evangelical version of Paul Daniels and

Debbie McGee had put on a show of tongues-talking, he gabbling while she translated.

"No, I never smoke," I heard him tell a mutual friend. I had seen the butts and smelled the aroma of the solitary vice he conducted in his room.

"God knows when you're lying Matthew," I told him.

"I'm not lying," he lied.

As we continued to live together, a number of taboos in his religion came to my attention. There was one against buying his round in the pub, and against washing up. The one time I saw him near the sink he was dumping a soiled

His precognitive powers seemed to take the form mainly of his saying "I predicted that" after things had happened.

cats' bowl in the water with the human crockery.

"Ah, but you've never been really hungry," he replied when I accused him of trying to give us dysentery. "If you were really hungry I bet you'd eat cat food." I remained unconvinced.

Perhaps most interesting of all his taboos was one forbidding him from flushing the toilet more than once a day.

When confronted on the latter point, St Matthew claimed that he was saving water. I said it was a pity he didn't feel the same way about my electricity or gas bills, as he was forever turning on the central heating even if he was going out in five minutes.

"I get cold," he said.

"You've never been really cold," I replied.

Being a born-again Christian/Saint also meant, it later transpired, that Matthew was immortal. Resisting the temptation to dangle him over the banisters by his ankles to test his strength of belief, I probed further.

Born-again Christians, at least of his ilk, believe that Christ is coming back to Earth in their lifetime, and will take them all straight back up to heaven with him.

This is by virtue mainly, or possibly even purely (he varied on this point), of their being born again, and is therefore largely or wholly irrespective of what they have got up to here on Earth. As for the rest of us, we will be left to the tender mercies of the Antichrist, who they think is already stalking the Earth, probably, for some reason, in Israel.

"So we atheists are all going to hell are we?"

"That's right."

"No matter what we do?"

"Yes."

Matthew eventually left when he found somewhere else to live among other Christians and at half the rent. My study was over.

So, there you have it. Christians: even nuttier than Barrow-in-Furness Bus Depot. Come up peanuts slice after slice.

Christians: they're special, because they're in the club, the privileged few, regardless of what they do. They're special because they're special.

They think like a football chant: "We're going to heaven, we're going to heaven – you're not, you're not!"

And as for the rest of us, it's "Going down, going down, going down".

Oh well, at least we won't have to share a kitchen and bathroom with them.

"Praying" peer caught communing on the phone

THE SIGN outside the door declared: Lord Ahmed at prayer. But when an elderly peeress walked into the room, having failed to see the sign, she found Nazir Ahmed, a new peer and founder of the British Moslem Councillors Forum, in deep conversation on the telephone.

Lord Ahmed had informed Black Rod, who deals with these matters in the House of Lords, that he needed a private room for his five-times-a-day devotions. A parlour normally used by peeresses above the Lords' chamber, was commandeered for him.

According to a report in *The Times*, the incident surfaced at a weekly meeting of Labour peers, where the peeress insisted on voicing her indignation, and she would not let the matter rest.

Lord Ahmed, who said he prays five times a day, either in the House of Lords or his hotel room, confessed to having interrupted his prayers to make a phone call, but claimed he did not use the room as an office. *The Times* reported that a new prayer area was being found for Lord Ahmed – one without a telephone point. It quoted one senior Labour insider as saying: "It's all very embarrassing. When someone puts out a sign saying 'at prayer' you expect them to be at prayer. Not on the telephone."

Sacking the Devil

FURTHER to Nicolas Walter's article, "The Devil gets a make-over too" (*Freethinker* April) I should point out that the C of E upstaged the "Whore of Babylon" by sacking the Dark One last year. But what the C of E says doesn't seem to matter much in comparison to the might of pontifical decrees.

This is an hilarious spectacle for free-thinkers but must be a cause of consternation and bewilderment to the orthodox believers who make up the majority of the laity.

I have no doubt that the latter will hide their discomfort and dutifully go on as before – that is, if they even get to know about it at all.

But there is a serious side to this breath-taking U-turn.

What about the millions of innocent victims of Christian persecution down the ages, and up to the present day, who have been tortured and cruelly put to death for either denying the existence of the Devil, or for having allegedly had dealings with him?

I'm pretty sure we will not be treated to another papal apology on this one. The implications of denying that the Devil ever existed are immense and, in line with the dictum uttered by no less an authority than John Wesley, must imply the complete negation of the Christian faith.

The theologians are deftly substituting the language of science by identifying the Devil as a force as opposed to a personality. This is the well-known tactic of taking your opponents' ground – in this case that of freethought. We should not let them get away with it.

I note also the attitude of some non-believers who deem that highlighting the discrepancies and shortcomings of religion is old hat and not at all necessary nowadays. This attitude was regrettably exhibited in the review of Ludovic Kennedy's new book (*Freethinker*, March 99).

My concept of the *Freethinker* is just what its name implies, and I have found that the kind of information that is the currency of freethought is of great value when the religionist is brought to consider his creed. To borrow a religious platitude: the truth does not tarnish with time!

Whilst I can see the point of offering the Humanist perspective of a society free from destructive partisanship, I would maintain that we are not there yet, and that we must get rid of the "Devil" of religion first.

D REDHEAD
Haughton-le-Spring
Tyne & Wear.

The best PR

THE DEVIL may have the best tunes, but the Christians have had the best PR people. The faith has enjoyed excellent publicity over the centuries while atheism has generally been associated with the wilfully evil.

It is good, therefore, to be able to welcome a book by a popular media figure which redresses the balance, and Ludovic Kennedy's *All in the Mind: A Farewell to God* deserves more than the luke-warm review it received from Terry Sanderson (*Freethinker* March 99).

The book is important. It is easily readable, and although popular in appeal rather than academic, has a significant bibliography and an index, and deserves to be taken seriously by scholars. Because it is written by a celebrity it will attract considerable attention and has already achieved best-seller status.

Its significance is that it dispels the notion that Christianity, whether true or not, somehow occupies the moral high ground and that it is unfair of atheists to expose its weaknesses.

After Kennedy's catalogue of Christian cruelty and obscurantism, the moral high ground has now been recovered by the atheists for the first time since the days of the Stoics.

The book deserves to become the latest chapter in the history of the advance of secularism which it itself chronicles.

Of course, in any work of such a wide scope there are bound to be inaccuracies; those I found were trivial; eg it was Voltaire not Marx who first said "Religion is the opium of the people." And there are a few omissions in what is an extremely comprehensive work. Perhaps Gibbon, the first historian to ascribe the rise of Christianity to natural causes, was worth a mention, and his near contemporary Laplace the astronomer who, when asked where God fitted into his scheme of the universe, replied, "I have no need of that hypothesis."

Kennedy also underestimates the irrationality of Protestantism. He is inclined to associate the Reformation with rationalism and freedom of thought. When it is remembered that Luther and Calvin believed in justification by faith alone (and not works), the predestination of the elect, the trinity, and infant baptism, this becomes a dubious proposition.

Protestant fundamentalism is not dead. Research in the USA in 1990 showed that 49 per cent believed "that people on earth are sometimes possessed by the Devil" and in 1993 47 per cent were convinced that God "created man in his present form within the last 10,000 years."

Since 1980 a number of attempts have been made at state legislature level to have "creation

science" taught in schools along with evolution.

Kennedy confines himself to Christianity, and here I agree with Sanderson that it might have been appropriate to mention Jewish and Islamic fundamentalism: after all, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie was widely publicised in Britain and books were burned in Bradford.

JACK HASTIE
Kilbarchan
Renfrewshire

Humanist Triumphalism?

MY UNEASE – to which Roger McCallister refers (*Points of View*, March) – resulted not so much from the Mayor of Lewisham appointing a humanist chaplain as from the President of the National Secular Society accepting such a position.

The rest of Mr McCallister's argument strikes me as self-defeating. He seems to be saying that because Christians in top positions in local authorities have a habit of promoting displays of Christian triumphalism (chaplains, prayers, and so on), humanists in a similar situation should "provide much-needed public awareness of a humanist presence in public affairs". I think this is a euphemism for promoting humanist triumphalism instead.

I rather doubt that we will overcome religious privileges and practices by imitating them!

I joined the NSS – 36 years ago – to help promote freethought and secularism, and to oppose the arrogance and privileges of organised religion in education and public life. I did not join to promote a confessional state with perks for Christians and humanists alike.

NIGEL SINNOTT
Alexandra,
Vic, Australia.

Restricted pub hours

Some sad loser gets himself crucified, and 2000 years later I am turfed out of my local pub at 10.30 pm instead of the customary 11 pm. The landlord's explanation: "It's Good Friday, and we have to observe restricted hours". What the hell is going on here? There are far more people in pubs over Easter, and on Sundays, than in all the churches combined. It's about time the authorities got wise to the fact, and stopped trying to impose restricted hours of opening on the so-called Sabbath and other religious occasions which have no meaning whatsoever to the majority of people in this country.

MARCUS ROBINSON
Greenwich



Vicious attack

I REFER to Mike Wilkinson's covert and vicious attack on the *Freethinker* (March 1999) and his insults to many individual humanists and secularists. He is seeking to harm in the name of help, and oppress in the guise of advice.

His assertion that most people are *de facto* atheists is factually incorrect: in Western societies some 70 per cent of people believe in a deity in some way or other. He confuses belief in God with religion – he may as well confuse lack of belief in God with religion. Both are opinions arrived at by individuals after consulting their knowledge, experience and reason.

He states that "the existence of deities has never been proved to the standards required by ... common sense". Whose common sense? Who sets the standards – Mr Wilkinson? If by common sense he means the sense of the majority, he is simply wrong.

He elevates scientists to the position of priests by implying that their beliefs and proofs should be taken on faith. Many scientists whose intelligence and knowledge would put mine, and, I presume Mr Wilkinson's, in

the shade, do believe in God, whilst recognising that this opinion is outside the area of proof.

Mr Wilkinson's proposed test as to the worth and value of the *Freethinker* – besides implying that it is not informative and thought-provoking – is utterly invalid. The magazine is produced for a special interest group, and at least one of the major purposes of such a magazine is to maintain and encourage the enthusiasm and interest of this group. Diversion and dilution would simply destroy the *raison d'être* of the *Freethinker*, and thus eventually the magazine itself. Encouragement and repetition is not "preaching to the converted" – a malicious phrase if ever there was one.

DAVID MICHAEL
Weymouth
Dorset

Agreeing with Cobb

I ENTIRELY agree with Roy A Cobb ("Same old political crap", Feb 99 issue.)

There is no correlation between holding secular beliefs and holding socialistic views. Historically, many leading freethinkers have

been opposed to socialism. Charles Bradlaugh, after many struggles, was elected as a Liberal MP. John Stuart Mill, an independent MP, said of socialists "their notions of property look ugly" – hardly a recommendation.

Contemporaneously I would suspect that in the North East, at least, there are far more "unbelievers" in the Conservative Party than in the Labour Party, which is controlled by the "Paddy Nostra" – Roman Catholics of south-eastern Irish extraction.

Incidentally, why does your journal link freethought with homosexuality?

PETER WINDLE
Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Editor's reply: The *Freethinker* has never sought to "link" homosexuality with freethought. However, successive editors over the last few decades have, quite rightly, seen gay rights as inseparable from human rights, which have always enjoyed the full support of this journal. Therefore, whenever homosexuality comes under attack, invariably from religious and/or right-wing bigots, the *Freethinker* has a duty to vigorously counter such irrational prejudice.

Please address your letters (preferably typed) to Barry Duke, Editor, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R

4RL. The E-mail address is editor@freethinker.co.uk. You can also fax a letter to 0181 305 9603

BOOK REVIEW: By Colin McCall

(continued from page 12)

Treatise was condemned by the faithful. To the Jews it was "a poisonous distillation". "The Lord confound thee, Satan, and stop thy mouth" exclaimed Pastor Colerus, Spinoza's biographer. Two more liberal critics saw the book as teaching atheism: "cleverly and in disguised words", according to one; "by stealth", said the other. Although it didn't carry Spinoza's name, its reception prevented him from publishing anything more in his lifetime.

It should be remembered that these were dangerous times for freethinkers. Several of Spinoza's contemporaries suffered persecution with tragic results but, as Dr Gullan-Whur notes, "he rose above these particular outrages"; and she quotes two general principles from the book's final chapter, rather differently translated from the 1862 edition I proudly own from Charles Bradlaugh's library.

Here I can only give the first of the two: "Men whose consciences are clear do not fear

death or beg for mercy like criminals, since their minds are not tormented by remorse for deeds of shame; they think it is a merit, not a punishment, to die for a good cause, and an honour to die for freedom." The importance Spinoza set upon freedom of speech was demonstrated when he declined a regular professorship of philosophy because that freedom would be at risk.

I have, you will have noticed, concentrated on the *Theological-Political Treatise*, rather than the *Ethics*, because it is less known and less easily available; but Part 5 of the more famous work deserves attention and is discussed at some length in *Within Reason*. It is interesting because Spinoza suddenly elevates intuition – the "third kind of knowledge" which led to God – above reason. He could have been influenced by "poignant reminders" of his Jewish background, and he was certainly at work on a *Hebrew Grammar* in his closing

years, when he was chronically sick with phthisis. He died on February 21, 1677.

Dr Gullan-Whur emphasises that he had set out, in Part 5, "to reinstate the 'active' intellect as the means to loving and knowing God or Nature", in contrast to the passive faith of mystics. He was, she says, seeking "satisfaction of mind, or Love, or Blessedness, or Joy in a state of vacillation, his own dreams and cravings battling with an assumption he had unconsciously assigned the status of metaphysical truth."

This is the first biography for 28 years and it illuminates all aspects of Spinoza's life and works. It decisively proves that the philosopher was wrong when, as quoted in the first paragraph, he thought none was necessary. Dr Gullan-Whur deserves the thanks of all lovers of Benedict Spinoza who was, in Bertrand Russell's words, "the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers".

HUMANIST CONTACTS AND EVENTS

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: Information: D Baxter: 01253 726112

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information: 01273 733215. Cornerstone Community Centre, Church Road (corner of First Avenue), Hove. Sunday, May 2, 4 pm. Harry Haddoway: *Genetic Modification*

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnley on 0117 9049490.

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 0181 777 1680.

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01296 623730

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

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

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Thursday, May 20, 8pm. Public meeting.

Devon Humanists: Information: Christine Lavery, 5 Prospect Gardens, off Blackboy Road, Exeter. Tel: 01392 56600.

Ealing Humanists: Information: Derek Hill 0181 422 4956 or Charles Rudd 0181 904 6599.

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

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. Friday, May 14: *Labour's second anniversary - The Gay Agenda.*

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.

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

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

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

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, May 11, 7.30 pm. Hazel Hobbs: *Uses and Abuses of Counselling.*

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell:

0181 690 4645. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, May 27, 8pm. Sebastian Hayes: *Is Rationalism a Humanism?*

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 Christine Wood 0191 2763123.

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.

Oxford Humanists: Monthly meetings, third Friday. Information: Jean Woodman on 01865 760520.

Rationalist Press Association: Centenary Conference at Westhill Conference Centre, Selly Park, Birmingham, June 25-27. Information: John Metcalfe, RPA, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. Tel: 0171 430 1371.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information and literature stall at May Day Festival, Chesterfield, Monday May 3, 10.30am till 4pm, and South Yorkshire Festival, Saturday, July 3, at Wortley Hall, Wortley, 10.30am till 4pm.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, June 2, 8 pm. Professor R P Davies: *Millennium Fever.* Programme from Gordon Sinclair, telephone 01226 743070 or Bill McIlroy, 0114 2509127.

South Place Ethical Society: Weekly talks/meetings/concerts, Sundays 11am & 3pm at Conway Hall Library, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0171 242 8037/4. Monthly programme on request.

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.

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.

