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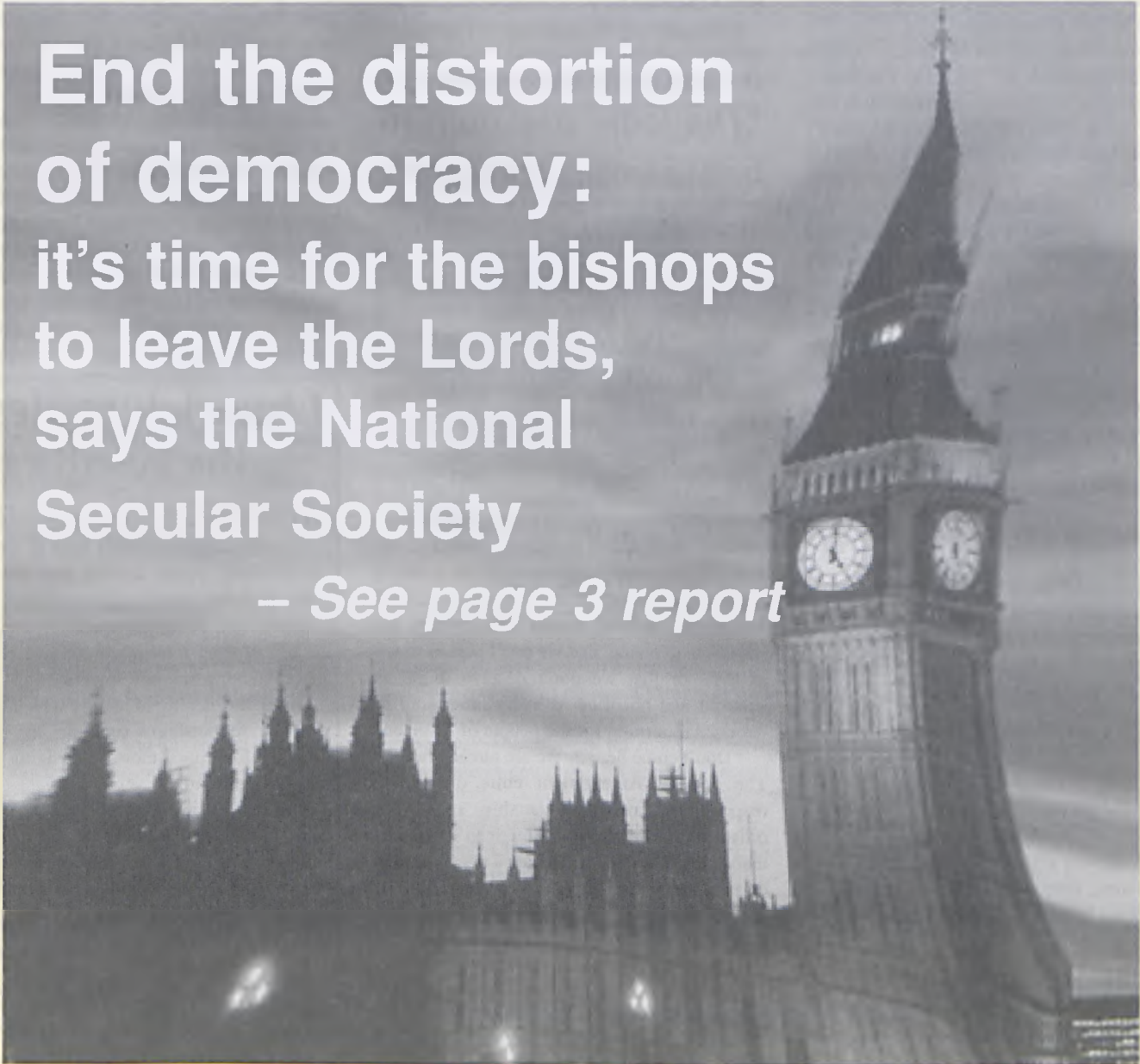
The

Vol 119 No 6
June 1999

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



**End the distortion
of democracy:
it's time for the bishops
to leave the Lords,
says the National
Secular Society**

– See page 3 report

***Religious stranglehold
loosened in Iran, p10***

TO MY mind, the only thing more scary than a Christian fundamentalist is a Christian fundamentalist with a right-wing political agenda – and a gun with which to back it up.

And nowhere is that scariness more palpably embodied than in Charlton Heston, the American actor who played Moses in *The Ten Commandments*.

Today, Mr Heston is better known as the President of the National Rifle Association of America (NRA) – a post to which he was elected in June of last year.

Several months after his election, he was the keynote speaker at the Christian Coalition's *Road to Victory* conference in Washington DC.

This is just a short excerpt from the lengthy tirade he let loose to cheers from a right-wing Christian audience: "Sabres are rattling in America's mild-mannered living rooms. Americans are ready to fight for the true booty of the cultural war – their values. They want them back. They want the America they built. They want an America where you can pray

without feeling naive, love without feeling kinky, sing without profanity, be white without feeling guilty, own a gun without stigma, shout amen without apology, and prosper without being blamed."

A few months on, and America was wringing its hands over its latest tragedy – the fatal-shooting of 15 at a high school in Littleton, Colorado. It happened just before the NRA was to stage its annual meeting of members on May 1 in Denver.

In the wake of the tragedy, Denver's Mayor, Wellington Webb, told Heston and the NRA: "Don't come here. We don't want you here."

"The individual right to bear arms is freedom's insurance policy"

Heston and NRA members came anyway – but, in deference to the dead and bereaved at Littleton, did not indulge in the festivities that normally take place at their annual beanfeasts. A wise move, given that the eyes of America – largely hostile – were firmly focused on Denver that day.

Heston's response to that hostility – summed up in a nationally-published cartoon depicting children's dead bodies sprawled out to spell NRA – was this: "They say, 'Don't come here.' I guess what saddens me most is how it suggests complicity. It implies that you and I and eighty million honest gun owners are somehow to blame, that we don't care as much as they, or that we don't deserve to be as shocked and horrified as every other soul in America mourning for the people of Littleton.

"Don't come here"? We are already here ... The Second Amendment ethic of lawful, responsible firearm ownership spans the broadest cross-section of American life imaginable. Our mission is to remain a steady beacon of strength and support for the Second Amendment, even if it has no other friend on the planet. We cannot let tragedy lay waste to the most rare and hard-won human right in history.

"A nation cannot gain safety by giving up freedom. This truth is older than our country. Those who would give up essential liberty, to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety. Ben Franklin said that.

"The individual right to bear arms is freedom's insurance policy, not just for your children but for infinite generations to come.

"That is its singular, sacred beauty, and why we preserve it so fiercely. As long as there is a Second Amendment, evil can never conquer us. Tyranny, in any form, can never find foot-

ing within a society of law-abiding, armed, ethical people."

Ethical people? When Heston spoke at the Christian Coalition bash – at which students dressed in the uniforms of various branches of the American military marched into the room and fired blanks – he shared a platform with Christian Coalition chairman, the televangelist Pat Robertson, a man whose ethics have frequently been called into question.

In Robertson's sights that day were the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), secular humanism and church-state separation decisions by the US Supreme Court.

ACLU, he claimed, had been founded with the help of at least three communists; teacher educator John Dewey had "sent out crops of teachers who were cultural relativists" to spread the "poison" of secular humanism; and, thanks to the Supreme Court, "it had become illegal to worship God in public places."

To borrow the blurb for the film *Alien*: "Be afraid. Be very afraid."

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Limerick contest: the results

THE TRUE test of talent in our limerick competition launched in April was to produce compositions which did not seek to rhyme Carey with fairy.

Apart from being quite possibly libellous, the use of such a term would have been an affront to our many gay readers.

Given the dearth of words which rhyme with the Archbishop's surname, the contest was therefore much more challenging than it may have appeared.

However, a good number of correspondents proved that it could be done, and the winners of a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker* are Jean Aitken, of Dunbarton, and Edward Royle of York.

This is Jean's entry:

*That blundering Archbishop called Carey
Proclaimed to the weak and the weary
"A war is good news
It fills up my pews
and demolishes one's adver-sary."*

Edward's is:

*That blundering Archbishop called Carey
Held views he would never vary:
You may kill from the air
Just to please Tony Blair.
Prince of peace, bless the bombs, Hail Mary!*

Bishops must go in Lords Reform, says the NSS

THE BENCH of Bishops should be abolished as part of Tony Blair's "modernisation" plans for the House of Lords, says the National Secular Society (NSS), in a submission to the Royal Commission for the Modernisation of the House of Lords. The NSS also says that the Government's suggestion of introducing even more religious representation into a reformed Second Chamber would be an affront to democracy.

The report contains startling research, commissioned by the NSS, showing Britain to be the only country among 27 other leading Western democracies to retain religious appointees in its legislature (see table on page 4).

The 26 Church of England bishops who are entitled to sit in the House of Lords and vote are, according to the NSS, unrepresentative and wield power that is disproportionate to their support in the country. "The Bishops represent English dioceses alone, of a Church which itself does not reflect society," says the report.

Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the NSS said: "Whether Mr Blair likes it or not, we live in a secular society which has, on the whole, rejected religion. The Church of England, and other churches, are losing more supporters each year and this should be reflected in a modernised Second Chamber. If clerics wish to have places in such a Chamber, let them seek election in the same way as everyone else. It is an iniquitous and unjustifiable privilege to give Anglican bishops – or any other religious representatives – places by right. Why should the non-religious be under-represented?"

The NSS also fears that any attempt to increase religious representation would lead to factionalism. Mr Porteous Wood said "The religious profile of this country is changing rapidly. If religious representatives are appointed now, what will be the position in 20 or 30 years when their churches may have all but died and younger churches may have increased in popularity? Will these unrepresentative figures step down and make way for other religions? I think not. Who is to decide which religions deserve places? Are we to see

Prepared over a two-month period by Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the NSS, a comprehensive and hard-hitting submission to the Royal Commission for the Modernisation of the House of Lords was submitted at the end of April. Here are its key points

representatives from the Moonies, the Mormons or Scientologists in Parliament? Will Sunnis or Shiites represent Muslims? Will Orthodox or Liberals represent the Jewish perspective? The pressure for more and more representatives could swamp the new Second Chamber.

The Society recommends a completely secular Second Chamber. This would avoid all these problems."

Executive summary

In its executive summary, the NSS submission states:

We recommend (i) that the Bench of Bishops be removed from the House of Lords, nor should the new Second Chamber have any *ex-officio* religious representation, whether of Christian denominations or any other faiths, and (ii) that, in future, neither prayers nor religious oaths should form any part of the proceedings of the Second Chamber.

The United Kingdom is *unique* among Western democracies in having *ex-officio*

religious representation in the legislature. The vast majority of Western democracies have abandoned all links between Church and State, with no discernible adverse consequences.

To retain the Bench of Bishops or to extend religious representation would be inimical to the Government's stated aim of "modernisation".

Formal research (much of it carried out by religious bodies themselves) shows that nearly 99 per cent of the population does not attend the Established Church in an average week, while 89 per cent of the population in England do not regularly attend any church. These statistics cast doubt on claims that the Bishops – or any other religious representatives – speak for any significant constituency. Since the trend towards rejection of religion is likely to continue, the role in Parliament of religious representation would become increasingly irrelevant.

We reject the implication in the Government White paper that the Bishops provide special moral insights denied to other members of the House. Many temporal peers already identify themselves as being religiously motivated. Furthermore, those who profess no religion are no less capable of making moral and ethical judgements. We instance the Bishops being less than wholehearted in support of Human Rights and of behaving in self-serving ways.

Were representation to be extended to other denominations or faiths, religious factionalism is very likely to lead to large and increasing demands for representation from the many religions and their various sects. Those denied any, or in their view sufficient, representation, could (and probably would) claim discrimination, and possibly racism. The Established Church has already refused to concede voluntarily any of its 26 seats. A "reformed" House of Lords which contained extended religious representation would become unworkable. Not only would it be distracted by sometimes strident sectarian and doctrinal arguments, this unrepresentative (and mostly morally absolutist) group could vote *en bloc* and even hold the balance of power. There is no democ-

(Continued on page 4)



Time has come for the Bishops to go

The UK Compared with other Western democracies

THE TABLE below summarises the research the NSS has commissioned into the constitutional arrangements of the UK and other major democracies. It shows the UK is unique among Western democracies in having *ex officio* religious representation in its legislature. The remaining 27 countries in the table all manage very well without specific religious representation. Countries with totally secular constitutions – as the table shows – include Albania, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United States of America. Of these, Japan's Post-WWII (and thus westernised) constitution is one of the most modern. It specifically prohibits State involvement in religion, and *vice versa*; it also guarantees that the practice of religion will not be mandatory.

The table also reveals how unusual the UK is among Western democracies in having such strong links between Church and State. Practically all states, whether entirely secular or not, recognise the dangers of such arrangements. Italy provides a European example of how religious influence can be separated from the legislature. The Italian Constitution once protected Catholicism as the established religion. Recognising developments in Italian history and society over the last hundred years, Italy has recently enacted reforms based upon a concordat agreement designating spheres of influence. The Italian legislature no longer has *ex officio* religious representatives.

Even in Poland, where the importance of the Roman Catholic Church's influence is acknowledged in the preamble to the Constitution, the rest of the Constitution contains very definite separation of Church and State.

Country	<i>ex officio</i> religious representation in the state	control of religious education by parliament	control of religious institutions by parliament	religion established by law	limitation upon the expression of "blasphemy"	Oaths or preamble contain a religious component
United Kingdom	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Albania	No	No	No	No	No	No
Austria	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Australia	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Belgium	No	No	No	No	No	No
Canada	No	No	No	No	No	No
Czech Republic	No	No	No	No	No	No
Denmark	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Finland	No	No	No	No	No	No
France	No	No	No	No	No	No
Germany	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Greece	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ireland	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Italy	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Japan	No	No	No	No	No	No
Luxembourg	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Macedonia	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Netherlands	No	No	No	No	No	No
New Zealand	No	No	No	No	No	No
Norway	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Poland	No	No	No	No	No	No
Portugal	No	No	No	No	No	No
South Africa	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Spain	No	No	No	No	No	No
Sweden	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Switzerland	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Turkey	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
United States	No	No	No	No	No	No

(Continued from page 3)

rationale justification for extending privileged religious representation and thus further eroding the franchise of the many who are non-religious.

We demonstrate in the Submission why it will be potentially catastrophic if the Government proceeds with its desire for other denominations and faiths to be represented in the "modernised" Chamber – and why such a step would be near-irreversible.

In our view, all oaths should be replaced by non-religious affirmation and public prayers should be abolished from the Chamber.

The Rationalist Press Association, in its Memorandum on the Reform of the House of Lords, says:

"As a matter of urgency, the hereditary peerage should be excluded once and for all ... the Lords Spiritual should not be included *ex officio*, so that the Church of England should lose its formal representation in the Upper House, and no other religious organisation should gain such representation.

"This provision would not prevent the inclusion of bishops or other religious leaders in the Upper House on other grounds; at the same time, the exclusion of priests of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church from the House of Commons should be abolished. The effect would be the separation of Church and State in legislative affairs, and the exclusion of religious interests from the legislature, as in every other known democratic country in the world."

The full text of the NSS submission can be accessed via the Internet (<http://www.secularism.org.uk/lords.htm>), or a photocopy obtained by sending a self-addressed stamped A4 envelope, plus four extra first-class stamps to cover costs, to the General Secretary, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. The NSS hopes at a later date to publish the submission in booklet form.

NSS General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood will give a talk to the Manchester Humanist Group on Religious Representation in the new Second Chamber on Wednesday, July 14. Event details from Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607

Spanish atheists fined for anti-Catholic poster campaign

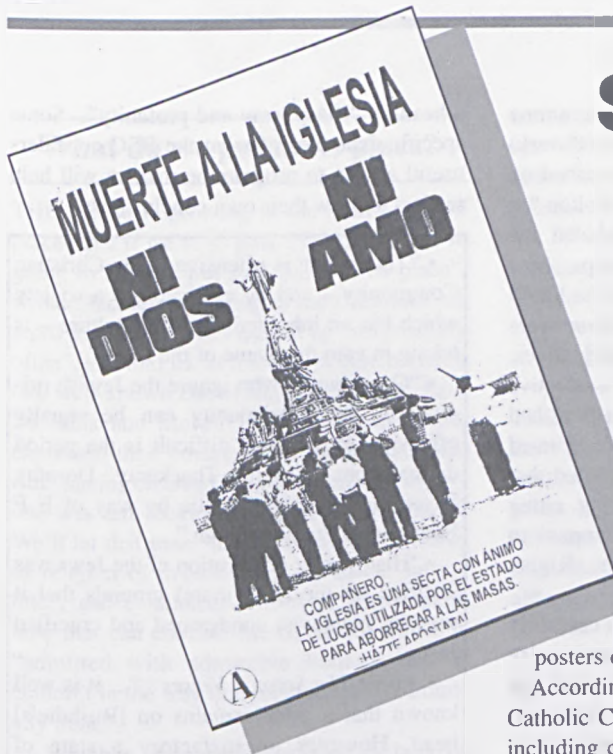
SPANISH atheists are being asked to sign a petition calling on the authorities to quash the recent conviction of four members of the Grupo Apostata Anticlerical (GAA) who were fined a total of 540,000 pesetas (about £3,800) for placing anti-Catholic Church posters on and around a church in Barcelona.

In addition to their fine for "offending religious sentiments," the four – Luis Perez Martin, Eva Romero Ganzalez-Rua, Juan Manuel Sanchez Redondo and Alberto Perez Bernal – were ordered to pay 80,000 pesetas (around £570) to compensate for "damage done to public property" when they plastered "Death to the Church" posters on the buildings.

According to the GAA, the posters were put up to draw attention to the "cruel reality" of the Catholic Church. They sought not only to highlight the crimes it had committed in the past – including collaboration with the Franco regime – but also the injustices it inflicts on the world today.

The group is also campaigning to stop the baptism of children under the age of 16, on the grounds that baptism is invariably carried out without the consent of youngsters, who should be allowed to make an educated choice later in life.

GAA is also calling for the repeal of several articles of the Spanish Penal Code which they say restrict freedom of expression by giving undue protection to the Church.



The GAA poster – showing a figure of Christ standing before a firing squad – that led to four Spaniards being fined for “offending religious sentiments”.

Dr David Moor acquitted of murder

VOLUNTARY euthanasia supporters, and those campaigning for the terminally ill to be allowed a comfortable and pain-free death, are celebrating the acquittal last month of Dr David Moor.

On May 11 a jury at Newcastle Crown Court returned a Not Guilty verdict at the end of Dr Moor's murder trial. After deliberating for just over an hour, the jury cleared Dr Moor of the charge of deliberately administering a lethal overdose of diamorphine to George Liddell, 85, in 1997.

Dr Moor was the first GP in Britain to be charged in such circumstances. The 52-year-old doctor was arrested after his remarks about giving morphine to two elderly men – Mr Liddell being one – were reported in newspapers and on television.

The verdict came as a great relief, not only to Dr Moor who had endured almost two years of stress over this charge, but for doctors and patients nation-wide.

After the trial Dr Moor said: "I am extremely relieved at the jury's decision. The last two years leading up to the trial have been extraordinarily difficult for me and my family, and the last few weeks have been devastating.

"I would like to express my sympathy once again for Tony Ryan and the family of George Liddell, and specifically to thank Mr Ryan – a man whom I respect for being able to come to this court and give evidence in such difficult circumstances.

"In caring for terminally ill patients a doctor is entitled to give pain-relieving medication even though it might have the incidental effect of hastening death.

"All I tried to do in treating Mr Liddell was to relieve his distress and suffering. This has always been my approach in treating my patients with care and compassion.

"Doctors who treat dying patients to relieve their pain and suffering walk a tightrope to achieve this. I would like to take this opportunity standing here to thank my family, my patients, my friends and all those people who supported me throughout this extraordinary ordeal."

The judge had commented earlier that he was sure we would all like a GP like Dr Moor.

Commenting on Dr Moor's acquittal, Dr Michael Irwin of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society said: I am very pleased by this verdict. Many doctors have been concerned in the past

22 months since Dr Moor was first arrested, because they could so easily have been there themselves. Dr Moor was responding to his patient's request – he wanted to relieve his suffering. To me, this not guilty verdict shows that slow euthanasia is alive and well."

Correction

In our January 1999 issue we referred to the death of Mark Correia and his association with the Jesus Army.

Mark Correia's death was found by the coroner to be accidental, with no evidence to suggest he took his own life.

The Jesus Army has asked us to point out that it works to help many with drink and drug problems, such as Mr Correia, and that far from putting people in "mortal danger", hundreds have been helped through this work. The Jesus Army Jesus Fellowship Church has also asked us to point out that it has warm relationships with the Evangelical Alliance and is linked to it through the Multiply Christian Network, of which it is a founder member.

We are happy to put the matter right, and apologise for the inaccuracy in our report

The C of E - Yet another twist in the Disestablishment saga ... and their Submission on the Lords

THE EXCLUSIVE relationship between the Church of England and the State will be loosened, according to a report in the *Independent on Sunday*. "Secret" discussions have been held between senior Anglican clergymen and royal advisers over three days at Windsor Castle. Around 24 clerics and academics took part in the meeting but neither the Archbishop of Canterbury nor the Prime Minister were present, although they were kept informed. The Archbishop of York has been reported to have acknowledged privately that reform is "inevitable". February and March *Freethinkers* contain background information on this topic.

Rather than the Church being disestablished, what these reforms are likely to amount to is the C of E's privileges being extended to an ever-wider number of denominations and faiths. A significant public step towards multi-faith representation was taken in the Church's Submission to the Royal Commission on the Modernisation of the Lords, summarised in the panel below:

"The C of E ... would very much welcome a wider representation of the nation's spiritual life in the Second Chamber. Whilst the C of E remains ready and willing to speak in Parliament as appropriate for its Christian partners and for people of other faiths *and none* [my italics], it does not for one moment pretend any exclusive claim to do so.

"A reformed Second Chamber that truly aspires to serve the nation must be seen to take full account of the nation's growing ethnic and cultural diversity ... The C of E fully recognises that other denominations, and other faiths (the latter representing about 6 per cent of religious adherents), will wish to express their own views about Parliamentary representation."

The Church does not suggest "the numbers of denominations, or faiths" to be represented, except to plead for "as wide a range as possible". But on its own Bench it is quite clear: "Reducing the number of bishops available to the chamber risks compromising the service of the C of E by impoverishing the range of contributions – regional and otherwise – that it can offer."

The only public criticism of their Submission that I am aware of came in a broadcast on May 9. This was a short debate

on BBC Radio 4's Sunday Programme between Tom Butler (Bishop of Southwark) and myself. My criticisms were described on the programme by presenter Roger Bolton "as a fairly long charge list" and included the undemocratic nature of the Bishops, how unrepresentative the Church is, and the likelihood of even more moral absolutism were there to be additional religious representatives.

The Bishop responded by giving a selective summary of the contributions the Bishops had made to debates in the Lords. He seemed somewhat taken aback when I suggested that the Bishops had also been self-serving, citing that, to their shame, they had attempted to exclude religion from Human Rights legislation.

For the record, his reply was **"We certainly talk in terms of religious rights and we're very committed to human rights, but not where that trespasses on religious rights and many people in this country would agree with us for making that point."**

Morning-After Pill for Raped Women

THE International Planned Parenthood Federation has called for the United Nations to review the Vatican's UN status as a state. This follows the Vatican's call for the 'Morning After' emergency contraception pill not to be offered to ethnic Albanian women who have been raped by soldiers in Kosovo. The senior spokesman for the RC Church in England "justified" the Vatican's stance by asserting that the violence suffered by the women made them unable to give informed consent. His so-called justifications met with hostility, no more than on the Jimmy Young Show whose switchboard was jammed with irate callers.

The National Secular Society has sent a message of support to the IPPF and has requested the International Humanist & Ethical Union (which has UN representation) to do anything it can to downgrade the Vatican's UN status.

Blasphemy and Profanity laws by the back door?

Religions, Religious Language and Imagery in a Multi-Cultural Society is the title of a recently-issued paper from the Broadcasting Standards Commission to inform broadcasters in detail about what would offend adherents of the six "top" religions.

The Paper purportedly makes "no special claim that religions should be treated differently from other organisations nor that they be immune from criticism or even satire", but has

a heading "Blasphemy and profanity". Some specific examples of what the BSC considers useful advice to programme makers will help readers to draw their own conclusions:

- "That which is offensive to the Christian Community – and by extension to a society which has an inherited Christian culture – is taking in vain the Name of the Lord."

- "Contributors who ignore the Jewish origins of their Christianity can be equally offensive. Particularly difficult is the period drama from Dickens, Thackeray, Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie by way of E F Benson and Evelyn Waugh."

- "Historically persecution of the Jews was justified on the (inaccurate) grounds that it was the Jews who condemned and crucified Jesus."

- About *The Satanic Verses* "... it is well known that a price remains on [Rushdie's] head. However unsatisfactory a state of affairs ..."

- "In the area of humour and satire, origination should be in and from the communities who are best able to expose the follies and excesses of their own religious culture ... perhaps acceptable religious humour and satire can only come from people who understand the sources and implications of the joke."

I suggested to the Broadcasting Standards press officer Andrew Ketteringham that the Paper will be interpreted as guidelines calling for an unreasonable degree of sensitivity by broadcasters when referring to religion or religious subjects. He maintains, however, that "These are not guidelines, simply a Paper. They were produced for members of the Commission who wanted more information to assist them to understand what offended those making religious complaints, especially those from religions not familiar to Commission members. Having produced the Paper, we thought it would be of interest to broadcasters." The National Secular Society has made a formal complaint to the Chairman of the Media Select Committee about the Paper.

I would be interested to hear from readers whether they see any objection to (our tentative idea of) the introduction of warnings to precede broadcasts of potential offence to the religious, similar to those already broadcast before programmes showing explicit sex or violence. Would they encourage self-censorship, or would they have the opposite effect – tempting producers to shock in the expectation that in so doing audiences would be boosted?

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What do we put in its place?

THE "sense is growing in the least expected places that if we're to junk Christianity, we're going to have to put something in its place", wrote Madeleine Bunting in the *Guardian* on April 2. The concern cropped up "surprisingly often", she told us, at a recent debate between two well-known Darwinian scientists, Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker, both of whom expressed their contempt for theistic religion. But "having cleared God out of the way, everyone was left looking at the hole". Everyone? We'll let that pass. "Dawkins maintains a sort of religion of evolution as a possible substitute", she continued. However, when asked how that can comfort the bereaved, Dawkins "admitted with admirable honesty that it couldn't in the way that religion had traditionally done".

Which is, of course, by offering the hope of eternal salvation and the prospect of reunion in heaven. But does that really offer much comfort? Don't Christians mourn the death of a loved one like everyone else? In truth there is no real comfort after bereavement, except perhaps when it is a "blessed release" from suffering. We know death is inevitable, but that doesn't lessen the loss; it's something we have to "get over" as best we can.

Pinker, it seems, acknowledged that we still need a religion. And he quoted an anthropologist who had concluded after studying dozens of religions, that they are all ultimately survival systems. Religion orders our relations with each other and with our environment for our long-term survival. Scientific humanism would, I suggest, fit that bill better than any superstitious creed.

It is surprising, anyway, that so many people are flummoxed by the question, what do we put in the place of religion? The really important question is why put it there in the first place?

Sympathy for Sam

ONE never knows when to take Roger Scruton seriously. Part of his act is to goad libertarians, and part of his method is hyperbole extending to outrageousness. How much are we to believe, then, when he says his baby son Samuel, born last November, will not enjoy his childhood, deprived as he will be of toys, pop music, Coca Cola and television?

If, as Scruton suggests, Sam's early life is to be like John Stuart Mill's, then the answer pretty certainly is that he won't enjoy it. But it is not so much the deprivation as the indoctrina-

tion that worries me. At least Mill was spared Christianity, and Sam is not to be. His father intends that the boy should study "the sources of religious truth".

We can only hope that Sam outgrows the religion of his dad and meets another Harriet Taylor.

Sinead's new moniker

THEY say pop stars will do anything for publicity but it is, so far as I know, the first time a woman singer has been ordained a Catholic priest, albeit by the rebel divorcee Bishop Michael Cox. And Sinead O'Connor (for it is she) intends to carry on with her stage career, although never without her dog collar.

She now thinks more favourably of the Pope than she did seven years ago, when she ripped up his photograph on American television. "It was more an expression of frustration and nothing personal". But whatever nice things she says about John Paul II won't get her recognition at the Vatican.

Still, she thinks she'll "make a very good priest" (*Guardian*, April 30), and she announced that those seeking sacraments from her should write to Atlantic Records in New York or Eastwest Records in London; but they should mark their envelopes with a cross, to distinguish them from requests for autographs and T-shirts. Those T-shirts will have to be altered anyway, Sinead is now Mother Bernadette Marie. What will her fans think of the new moniker?

Don't Bragg about it, Melvyn

THE "most radical manifesto ever delivered". That's how Melvyn Bragg described the Sermon on the Mount in the hype for his 20-part TV series *2000 Years* (*Observer*, April 18). So we have to ask him has he read it recently or does he just have vague memories from his Cumbrian childhood?

The bulk of it, of course, is waffle; some of it is plain stupid (like taking no thought for your life, not resisting evil, or expecting God to clothe you); some of it monstrous (like plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand). As a whole, you might regard it as a manifesto for avoiding hell and achieving eternal life with the Father in heaven, but as a manifesto for this life it is risible.

Philosopher in the firing line

ED Vulliamy likened it to the row over Bertrand Russell's appointment to the chair of philosophy at the College of the City of New

York in 1940 (*Observer*, April 11). The Australian philosopher Peter Singer, described by one critic as "the most dangerous man in the world today", has been given one of the top chairs in ethics at Princeton University.

Singer is perhaps best known for his advocacy of animal rights. He set up the International Association of Bioethics, which founded the Great Ape Project to protect our nearest relatives in the animal world. But it is his utilitarian *Practical Ethics* (CUP) which has incurred the wrath of American conservatives. The *Wall Street Journal* accused Princeton of "jettisoning the understanding of man's dignity that has defined Western civilisation for two millennia"; and anti-abortionists have vowed to picket all Singer's activities.

Whether Princeton will stand up to the criticism and the anti-abortionists' threats remains to be seen. Bertrand Russell, it will be recalled, was "judicially pronounced unworthy to be Professor of the College of the City of New York".

Sanctified murder

ON November 4, 1995, a far-right student Yigal Amir assassinated the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The aim was to wreck the Oslo Accord and reverse any rapprochement with the Palestinians. It was, as the title of a newly published book by Michael Karpin and Ina Friedman has it, *Murder in the Name of God* (Granta £13.99), and it achieved what it intended. Rabin's Labour successor Shimon Peres was beaten in the subsequent election and Benjamin Netanyahu, an opponent of the Oslo Accord, became Prime Minister of a right-wing government.

In a letter from prison to a hostile rabbi, Amir's brother wrote: "Your eminence attacks my brother and calls him wicked. Does your eminence know why he did what he did? My brother did it for the sake of the Lord, in the purest possible way. He received a halachic [Jewish law] ruling from a rabbi, and he acted according to halacha, and with sanctity, knowing that he was probably going to die for it".

I trust Ehud Barak will be fully protected against such sanctified murder.

Mistaken identity

THE *Guardian* has a commendable policy of correcting errors as soon as it notices them or has them pointed out by readers.

So a heading on its comedy review on April 29 was corrected the following day, as follows: "The person to whom we meant to refer... was Chris (rather than Christ) Barrie. Apologies". To whom?

WHAT'S IN

There is, I suggest, not a single topic more likely to crop up in discussions amongst freethinkers than the question whether one should want to be classified an agnostic or an atheist.

Styling oneself an agnostic holds obvious advantages. It conveys a number of attractive attributes: open-mindedness, tolerance, reasonableness.

Atheism, on the other hand, gets a pretty bad press: itself it is said to be a religion – aggressive, intolerant, arrogant, immoral.

The word agnostic was first coined by Thomas Huxley in 1869. When he joined the Metaphysical Society he found that most of his colleagues were -ists of one sort or another. Needing a label himself he selected the early religious sect known as “Gnostics” as a prime example of men who claim knowledge of the supernatural without justification and he distinguished himself as an “a-Gnostic” by asserting that the supernatural, even if it exists, lies beyond the scope of human knowledge.

Thus an agnostic is defined as “a person who holds the view that nothing can be known of the existence of God or of anything beyond material phenomena” (*New Shorter Oxford*). The main problem with agnosticism is that it does not say what it is agnostic about. Agnostic about God? That immediately calls for a definition of God. That would not have been very difficult 50 years ago when there was a ubiquitous perception of God the father figure, made in man’s image, looking down from on high, controlling all action on earth, rewarding the good, punishing the bad. Are today’s agnostics really saying that they are still agnostic about such a God? I doubt it very much. I believe agnostics have moved on. They are now agnostic about an altogether different definition of God. The God of the Sea of Faith, ethereal, ineffable, unknowable.

Once expressed in such abstruse terms it is perfectly sensible and acceptable to be agnostic about a force, entity, concept, intelligence, call it what you will, beyond our reach and understanding. Even the most hardened sceptics might describe themselves as agnostic when faced with such a nebulous definition. But in the world of the run-of-the-aisle theists there is nothing vague about God. He is very much in charge, very much involved with his creation. And about their anthropomorphic, interventionist, in-your-face god, I, for one, am not at all agnostic but unashamedly atheist.

After all, an atheist merely asserts that he/she is not a theist in the terms defined above. It is a deep-seated and widespread misunderstanding that an atheist tries to prove the non-existence of God. For one thing it is impossible to prove a negative; for another the

onus of proof rests squarely on the theist; he/she, after all, is the one making the assertions.

Unfortunately that has not stopped the religious from accusing the atheist of a religion of non-belief. Dictionary definitions almost invariably describe atheists as “one who denies the existence of God”.

In reality there is no notion of “denial” in the origin of the word and the atheist who denies the existence of God in any form is by far the rarest type. Most atheists would agree with the statement of Charles Bradlaugh who said, in the *Freethinker’s Text Book*: “Atheism is without God. It does not assert no God. The atheist does not say there is no God, but he says ‘I know not what you mean by God. I am without the idea of God. The word God to me is a sound conveying no clear or distinct affirmation. I do not deny God because I cannot deny that of which I have no conception and the conception of which by its affirmer is so imperfect that he is unable to define it for me’”.

And Holbach, author of the *The System of Nature*, the first openly atheistic work ever published, said: “All children are atheists, they have no idea of God. The idea that a child not yet exposed to theism would be an atheist can only be true if atheism means ‘without a belief in God’ as opposed to denial of the existence of God”.

Let I be accused by inveterate atheists of uncalled for even-handedness, let me hasten to state that I do not grant the religious equality of proposition in the God–no God debate. If I and the vicar are sitting opposite each other and he asserts that behind me he can see a purple, three-horned cow and I tell him that behind him I can see an angry man wielding a cricket bat, we both have to take these two statements on trust because without looking round we cannot be sure.

I contend, however, that the vicar would be sorely tempted to take a peek, since men with cricket bats have been known to exist and that they should wish to take a swing at a vicar is a distinct possibility. I, on the other hand, would not take his three-horned purple cow very seriously, for such a creature has never been reported.

Equally his assertion of the existence of a God, for which there has never been any evidence, is a poor match for my scepticism. For whilst the vicar cannot produce God-supporting evidence other than laboured hypothesis, I,

Tony Akkerman Wilkinson et al. personal view and cons of non-believers describe the

taking a more pragmatic approach, can point at evidence, perhaps not for his non-existence but certainly for his non-intervention. Take prayer. God is prayed to on a daily basis by millions of people, requesting good fortune and good health. If even ten per cent of these prayers were answered there would be a very noticeable effect. It would soon be clear that motor-ing in those religious countries praying to the one true God would be much safer than in a country where prayers were rarely said or were addressed to a false God.

Same with health statistics. Statisticians would soon cotton on and insurance companies would offer discounts to people who undertake to say regular prayers as they do to non-smokers and non-drinkers. But alas, the man from the Pru is not going to be impressed.

The religious themselves are not impressed either. To all intents and purposes they behave as if prayer had not the slightest effect. They insure their home, their car, their health, like everybody else. When ill they rub shoulders with the non-believers in the doctor’s waiting rooms. As George Santayana has said “Prayer among sane people has never superseded practical efforts to secure the desired end.”

This non-differentiation in fortunes between believers and non-believers, since the dawn of mankind, would stand up in court as solid proof of no mysterious force at work to the benefit of the believer; the jury would pronounce the rumour false. All there is left to

... A NAME?

● FEATURE ●

**ans and Mike
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God are the metaphysical gymnastics so beloved of theologians and philosophers; in practical terms it is case dismissed.

– Tony Akkermans

Recently, I've been involved in several debates on the Internet, and I am constantly surprised by the hostility towards atheism, and the way that atheists are stereotyped, and accused of proselytising. I always argue from a rational point of view, but respecting the views of the less extreme religious groups, yet I often find myself compared to the Jehovah's Witnesses! This seems unfair, as my primary concern is to argue for a secular society, rather than to convert individuals to atheism.

This set me thinking about how we are perceived, and how we should present ourselves. In particular, I wonder about the labels we use for ourselves and our opinions. It seems that anyone openly stating himself to be an "atheist" is automatically regarded as a bit of an intellectual, concerned with something which "doesn't really matter". "Intellectual", it appears, is a crushingly dismissive insult in our society!

Personally, I don't like the label "atheist", as it defines me by reference to what I am not, and, more importantly, it carries the connotation that belief in God is the norm: it gives respectability to theism. However, it is clear that the word atheism is widely understood,

which saves some of the tedious explanations required if you use a different word.

"Humanist" seems preferable, implying that we are *for* something, rather than against something. Humanism is not seen as rebellion, unlike atheism. One problem is that it was first used to describe a branch of Christianity. Qualifying it as "secular humanism" sounds a bit anorakish and off-putting to the general public. Also, amongst religionists, the word humanist provokes something of a sneer. If the Church of England is the Tory Party at prayer, then humanists are the Liberal Party, conspicuously not at prayer!

I often describe myself as a secularist, but only in the context of talking about my political views. I regard the campaign for a secular society as far more important than changing the religious views of the members of that society. Secularism is a political movement in a way that atheism, Humanism and so on are not.

Unfortunately, the word is not in common use, which can be an obstacle to discussion with people outside the debate.

"Agnostic" has the advantage of being in common currency. Unfortunately, the literal definition does not coincide with normal usage. Agnosticism is the belief that we can never know whether God exists. This leaves the options of theism and atheism equally valid. I choose to apply Occam's Razor, and other arguments, and I plump for atheism; many religionists see faith as a virtue in its own right, and agnosticism as a challenge to be met, strengthening their faith! Colloquially, agnosticism seems to mean no more than being open-minded, which often means, "I've not thought about it very deeply."

I like the word "freethinker", although I am not sure that it is widely understood. It is not an exclusively atheist term: Socrates was a freethinker, but also a believer in gods. None of our thinking is completely free, because we are all products of our society; this may be why the *Freethinker* contains so many specifically anti-Christian items. No doubt my own thinking is influenced by science lessons at school, and books I have read. My moral views are undeniably linked to a Christian background. On the whole, "freethinker" seems a good label, although with the *caveat* that it can sound a little pompous to outsiders.

This leaves "rationalist". I like this word as, like humanism, it is a *for* word, rather than an *against* word. Most people have an idea of

what is meant by rational. Unfortunately, many religionists regard their own views as rational.

In some cases, such as the Book of Mormon, there is evidence of deliberate fraud; in some other cases, we might assume sincerity without necessarily assuming accuracy. It constantly amazes me that intelligent people, who quite sensibly distrust today's newspapers, accept the truth of the gospels.

The case against God has been made more completely elsewhere. My point here is that we approach the question in a rational way, and that is perhaps how we should present ourselves to the world at large.

Rational, in this context, means being able to apply logic where appropriate, but using judgement to decide when it is reasonable to infer a general rule from limited evidence, and, crucially, seeing the significance of the absence of evidence, where evidence would be expected to be available.

This is a position which can be defended without appearing dogmatic, and which can demonstrate that there is a respectable alternative to religion. If we can do that, then we might appeal to the world outside our comfortable philosophical ghetto.

– Mike Wilkinson

Living with the enemy

Are you an atheist? Are you willing to put your convictions to the test and live for a short while in a religious community?

If so, the BBC 2 documentary series *Living with the Enemy* would like to speak to you.

Programmes in the last series included an animal rights activist spending a week working on a dairy farm, and a pair of homophobic rugby players from Wigan living for a week with a gay couple in London.

As part of its latest series, the BBC wants to place an atheist in a Christian home – possibly with a vicar and his family – somewhere outside of London.

If you think you may be the right candidate for the programme, please contact Lucy Waller on 0181 752 4828.

When the last Shah ruled Iran, he held on to power by employing the traditional weaponry of the despot: secret police forces winkled out dissenters and death squads then got rid of them. The media were strictly controlled, and open political opposition was impossible for all but the bravest and most foolhardy. While the Shah whooped it up in extravagant luxury, most of his subjects lived in abject fear and poverty.

Is it any wonder, then, that when Ayatollah Khomeini organised an Islamic opposition from his exile in Paris, the population embraced it with zeal? They were convinced that an Islamic revolution would be the answer to their problems, and so the great uprising came to pass. The Shah was deposed and Khomeini became leader of the new Islamic State, perhaps the strictest and most ideologically pure Muslim country the world had known.

Iran fell under the black cloak of Khomeini, and the West, particularly the USA, was portrayed as "the great Satan". Support for the revolution appeared total, and the abiding image emerging from the country at that time was of huge crowds of veiled women gathered in the streets chanting anti-Western slogans. These aggressive postures were eventually turned on neighbouring Iraq, and a catastrophic five-year war ensued – which resulted in the deaths of more than a million young Iranians. Hardly a single family was left untouched by this conflict, which appears to have achieved nothing, but it did spawn disillusionment with the revolution.

The regime also gained an unenviable reputation for oppressing women. Purdah was strictly enforced, with religious police combing the streets seeking out transgressors. Any woman who was found to be dressed in an "un-Islamic" way (maybe with a few strands of hair showing, or with her wrists exposed) would be swept from the street and taken away to be flogged. As with the Shah, the grip of the mullahs was enforced by cruelty and oppression; anyone they didn't approve of was declared an "enemy of Islam" and murdered. Indeed, the Islamic State made the Shah look like an amateur when it came to repression.

Iran is still very much a religious country. The degree of indoctrination that its inhabitants have been subjected to make it difficult to be anything else. But beyond the official version of what life is like there is another story, a story that Western journalists are gradually beginning to uncover.

Natasha Walter paid a visit to Iran last year to research the "changing position of women". While there she met Ayatollah Mohsen Kadirvar who impressed her with his progress-

Religious stranglehold loosened in Iran

sive thinking. Ms Walter wrote in the *Independent*: "One of the most pressing problems that women in Iran face right now is the problem of child custody. Since religious texts state that men have an automatic right to custody of their children, women who are trapped in unhappy or even violent marriages too often feel forced to stay with their husbands. Debate and reform on that issue are currently pressing ahead, to the horror of religious conservatives. Could Kadirvar see the need for fundamental reform – even if it went against the teachings of his religion? 'If a father is not suitable, custody should be given to the mother,' he said definitely. So he was prepared to add his weight to one of the most vital struggles that women are now undertaking in Iran."

The old guard are alarmed to see Khatami and his supporters gradually pecking away at their power and influence, and Kadirvar has since been arrested and thrown into jail for his "radicalism". His support for the popular and reforming President Mohammad Khatami has been a thorn in the side of the traditionalist mullahs for some time. However, in an unprecedented show of support and defiance, students are demonstrating and demanding his release.

Of course, by Western standards, Khatami and Kadirvar would hardly be considered liberals, but in theocratic circles they are regarded as a dangerous threat.

Khatami is well aware that the time for change is coming; he sees that the population of the country cannot bear the incessant weight of the mullahs' religious demands 24 hours a day. They are human beings, not the ideological robots that Khomeini wanted them to be. As far as they are concerned, God may be great, but surely he wouldn't want to deny them an occasional McDonalds or a record by the Spice Girls.

Many Iranian women are desperate to dump the veil and, indeed, a few brave ones are actually taking the risk of being seen in public in ordinary Western-style clothes. As Natasha Walter reported: "I was struck by the women I

met who nonchalantly wore nail polish and pushed their scarves back on their heads, who listened to Western music and watched satellite television. All of these actions are, in theory and often in practice, punishable, and many non-political women spoke of their arrests and the floggings they have suffered. But there is a new and growing confidence among modern Iranians that means such rebellion is taken for granted."

Many young people ache for a more open and brighter society. In an article in the travel section of the *Sunday Telegraph*, James Robinson extolled the virtues of Iran as a holiday destination (a recommendation I can support. I've visited this fascinating country). Mr Robinson assures us that the country is clean, safe and welcoming, and foreigners are not regarded as infidels or devils, but with fascination and curiosity. He wrote: "On every bus, parents would send small children up the aisle to proffer pistachios or carefully peeled segments of apple. Taxi drivers would pull up at the next rank to introduce me to their friends and make me repeat my few words of Farsi as a party piece. Everybody wanted to talk about Michael Owen, the footballer."

His impression of the country was one of cheerfulness and a desire to learn about the rest of the world. His contact with young people suggested to him that they "abide by the regulations imposed by the theocrats who rule Iran. But none of my conversations suggested they will still do so when they come to power in turn."

Perhaps another revolution is approaching Iran, a quieter, more stealthy, but much more profound one. Human beings are gradually stepping out of the shadow of their cruel and vengeful God, and demanding a little time of their own in the sun.

MY quote of the month comes from Victor Lewis-Smith, TV critic of the London *Evening Standard*: "Kevin Woodford hosts a BBC1 Christian show so dull that it would put anyone off religion for life. Yet, curiously, during the programme, I found myself constantly repeating two words: 'Jesus Christ!'"

Annual Humanist Lunch
 This year's Annual Humanist Lunch will be held at Westhill College (part of Birmingham University) on Sunday, June 27. The lunch forms part of the Rationalist Press Association's conference: *Thinking Ahead – Rationalism in the 21st Century*. Please book on 0171 430 1371.

GOD'S TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

MODERN business practices are reportedly being harnessed to improve the dismal performance of the Church of England, and in some C of E circles worshippers are now being referred to as "customers".

"We have to think in terms of exceeding customer delight," said Canon Raymond Rodger, aide to the Bishop of Lincoln, in a recent London *Evening Standard* interview.

"What we have to offer is the glory of God and we have to give the very best service to our customers in terms of added value and value for money. Our product is quite simply allowing people to come closer to God."

Playing a key role in the C of E's attempt to gain more "customers" is a pressure group called Modem (Managerial and Organisational Disciplines for the Enhancement of Ministry). The group argues that the Church should rethink how it uses its "human resources" – the clergy – and to consider the introduction of "quality standards" in priesting.

A good starting-off point for them might be a questionnaire concerning God put through the public's letterboxes. It just so happens that an appropriate questionnaire was discovered on the Internet by *Freethinker* reader David Haslam, and this could serve as an inspiration to Modem.

GOD'S TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

God would like to thank you for your belief and patronage. In order to better serve your needs, we ask that you take a few moments to answer the following questions. Please keep in mind that your responses will be kept completely confidential, and that you need not disclose your name or address unless you prefer a direct response to comments or suggestions.

1. How did you find out about your deity?

- Newspaper
- Bible
- Torah
- Book of Mormon
- Koran
- Local vicar
- Divine inspiration
- Dead Sea Scrolls
- On daddy's knee (or other low joint)
- Near-death experience
- Radio
- Burning shrubbery
- Other (specify):

2. Which model deity did you acquire?

- Yahweh
- Father, Son & Holy Ghost [Trinity Pack]
- Jehovah
- Jesus
- Krishna

- Zeus and entourage [Olympus Pack]
- Odin and entourage [Valhalla Pack]
- Allah
- Satan
- Gaia/Mother Earth/Mother Nature
- God version 1.0a (hairy thunderer)
- God version 1.0b (cosmic blunderer)
- None of the above; I was taken in by a false god

3. Did your God come to you in good working order and with no obvious breakages or missing parts?

- Yes
- No
- If no, please describe the problems you encountered.

- Not eternal
- Finite in space/does not occupy or inhabit the entire cosmos
- Not omniscient
- Not omnipotent
- Not infinitely plastic (incapable of being all things to all creations)
- Prohibits/permits sex outside of marriage
- Prohibits/permits same-sex relations
- Makes mistakes (eg Margaret Thatcher)
- Makes or permits bad things to happen to good people
- When beseeched, doesn't stay beseeched
- Requires burnt offerings
- Requires virgin sacrifices

4. What factors were relevant in your decision to acquire a deity?

- Indoctrinated by parents
- Needed a reason to live
- Indoctrinated by society
- Needed focus as to whom to despise
- Imaginary friend grew up
- Graduated from the tooth fairy
- Hate to think for myself
- Fear of death
- Desperate need for certainty
- Like organ music
- Need to feel morally superior
- Thought Rev Ian Paisley was cool
- My shrubbery caught fire and told me to do it

5. Have you ever worshipped a deity before? If so, which false god were you fooled by?

- Ganesh
- Baal
- Money
- Margaret Thatcher
- Ra
- Beelzebub
- The sun
- Elvis
- Madonna
- The moon
- Burning shrubbery
- Other:

6. Are you currently using any source of inspiration in addition to, or in place of God?

- Tarot
- Astrology
- Television
- Fortune cookies
- Uri Geller
- Dianetics
- Palmistry
- Sex, drugs, rock and roll
- Biorhythms
- Alcohol
- Tea leaves
- Mantras
- Crystals (not including Crystal Gayle)
- Human sacrifice
- Pyramids
- Wandering in a desert
- Burning shrubbery
- Other:.....

7. God employs a limited degree of divine intervention to preserve the balanced level of felt presence and blind faith. Which would you prefer? (circle one)

- a. More divine intervention
- b. Less divine intervention
- c. Current level of divine intervention is just right
- d. Don't know...what's divine intervention?

8. God also attempts to maintain a balanced level of disasters and miracles.

Please rate on a scale of 1 - 5 his handling of the following (1-3 Unsatisfactory, 5-3 Excellent):

- Disasters:
- Flood 1 2 3 4 5
- Famine 1 2 3 4 5
- Earthquake 1 2 3 4 5
- War 1 2 3 4 5
- Pestilence 1 2 3 4 5
- Plague 1 2 3 4 5
- Miracles:
- Rescues 1 2 3 4 5
- Spontaneous remissions 1 2 3 4 5
- Stars hovering over one-donkey towns 1 2 3 4 5
- Weeping statues 1 2 3 4 5
- Water changing to wine 1 2 3 4 5
- Walking on water 1 2 3 4 5
- VCRs that set their own clocks 1 2 3 4 5
- Mary Whitehouse still alive 1 2 3 4 5

9. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for improving the quality of God's services? (Attach additional sheet if necessary.)

If you are able to complete the questionnaire and return it by October 31 you will be entered in the One Free Miracle of Your Choice draw. (Your chances of winning are approximately one in 6.023 x 10 to the 23rd power, depending on number of beings entered).

It is forty years now since C P Snow delivered his Rede Lecture on "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution" which, as Melvyn Bragg reminded us in the *Observer* recently, received the support of Bertrand Russell, John F Kennedy and, I may add the *Freethinker*, but was abusively attacked by the Cambridge literary critic F R Leavis. Snow knew what he was talking about because he had experienced the "two cultures" — the arts, especially literature, and the sciences. The two groups, "comparable in intelligence, identical in race, not grossly different in social origin, earning about the same incomes", had, he said, "almost ceased to connect at all". In "intellectual, moral and psychological climate [they] had so little in common that instead of going from South Kensington to Chelsea one might have crossed the ocean".

Literary antagonism towards science was not new. Jonathan Swift satirised it in *Gulliver's Travels*; William Blake feared and despised it; and at a dinner in Benjamin Haydon's studio in 1817, John Keats accused Newton of destroying "the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to a prism". Three years later, in his poem *Lamia*, Keats wrote that "Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings, / Conquer all mysteries by rule and line, / Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine — / Unweave a rainbow..."

Keats was wrong, says Richard Dawkins in *Unweaving the Rainbow* (Allen Lane, 1998). Wordsworth, who was also present at Haydon's dinner, had more regard for science and, in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) anticipated a time when "The remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, or mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet's art as any upon which it can be employed". That encapsulates Dawkins' position. "The impulse to awe, reverence and wonder which led Blake to mysticism (and lesser figures to paranormal superstition...) are", he says, "precisely those that lead others of us to science". But he offers a reciprocal process: whereas poets "could better use the inspiration provided by science...scientists must reach out to the constituency that I am identifying with, for want of a better term, poets".

There is considerable danger here. Fine poetry can be literally — and biologically — false, as in Shelley's opening lines to the skylark: "Hail to thee, blithe spirit! / Bird thou never wert". We know what it means, precisely because we know it isn't true, because we know the skylark is a bird; but what if we didn't? We would be misled. Dawkins tries to put our minds at rest. With the rare exceptions of those with the talents for prose poetry, scien-

tists should cultivate "simple, sober clarity", letting the facts and ideas speak for themselves. "The poetry is in the science", he says.

Ruskin was another writer of anti-scientific bent with particular concern lest scientists should "unweave the rainbow". "I much question whether anyone who knows optics, however religious he may be, can feel in equal degree the pleasure or reverence which an unlettered peasant may feel at the sight of the rainbow", he wrote in *Modern Painters III*.

Blissful ignorance might well lead to reverence. Yet I cannot believe it would spoil any reader's pleasure to be told "what is going on inside all those thousands of falling, sparkling, reflecting and refracting populations of raindrops", which is what Dawkins does.

Ruskin also thought that studying a flower detracted from its beauty, and the same suggestion was once made to Nobel prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman (1918-88), who explained the various ways in which the study revealed a "deeper beauty".

It is well known now, of course, that the spectrum we, as humans, see is only a small part of the full spectrum of electromagnetic waves but, although I have always been interested in reptiles, I didn't know that some snakes, like guided missiles, use infrared rays "to home in on their targets"; nor that for insects, visible light is shifted along the spectrum, making ultra-violet visible, but not red.

One might have hoped, as Dawkins says, "that by the end of this most scientifically successful of all centuries science would have been incorporated into our culture and our aesthetic sense risen to meet its poetry". But as Snow revealed in the 1950s, opposition to science didn't end with Ruskin. And now, not only do we have to contend with the "intellectual impostures" of postmodernism (so splendidly exposed by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont in their book of that name); the purveyors of superstition, the paranormal and astrology still flourish at the expense of the public.

Many, if not most of Britain's popular newspapers carry astrological gobbledegook of some sort and the *Daily Mail* notoriously heralded the advent of 1998 as "The Dawn of Aquarius", telling its readers, *inter alia*, that, in addition to the "physical sun", there was "a spiritual, psychic, inner sun" which "didn't have to obey the law of gravity". How can people find this appealing, especially in the face of the real universe as revealed by astronomy? Dawkins asks, and exposes it for the "meaningless pap" that it is.

The fact that a newspaper can publish such bunkum shows the contempt that the editor or proprietor has for the readers. In the *Guardian* on October 6, 1994, Jan Moir related that her first job in journalism was writing a horoscope for a stable of women's magazines. "It was the office task always given to the newest recruit because it was so stupid and so easy that even a wet-eared geek like me could do it". As a young man, conjuror and psychic-debunker James Randi did a similar job for a Montreal newspaper, cutting out "forecasts" from old astrology magazines, shuffling them and pasting them at random under the 12 signs. From the reader response, he concluded that many people "will accept and rationalise almost any pronouncement made by someone they believe to be an authority with mystic powers". So he hung up his scissors, put away the paste pot, and quit.

Recently, as Dawkins notes, there has been "a near epidemic of paranormal propaganda on television". On the internet, too, where a Roman Catholic website describes the "miracle" of Fatima, to which Dawkins applies the David Hume test. And he cites Sir James Frazer on homeopathic or imitative magic, but he eschews condescension towards "primitive" cultures by choosing examples which are equally applicable to "theologies closer to home".

There is "bad poetry", too, in evolutionary science writing, exposed, for example, in Sir Peter Medawar's devastating review of Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959). And, like Medawar, Dawkins draws attention to the mystics' fondness for technical terms like "energy" and "vibrations" to create the "illusion of scientific content where there is no content of any kind".

Dawkins is often called an ultra-Darwinian, generally as a term of abuse. Biologically he is a Darwinian gradualist. He doesn't think that macromutations have played an important role in evolution and he is certainly a gradualist when it comes to explaining the evolution of "complex adaptations like eyes". But, as he emphasises, mass extinctions, as in the case of the dinosaurs, form no part of the Darwinian process, "except in so far as they clear the decks for new Darwinian beginnings". Natural selection is "selection within species, not between species"; and it is non-purposive; it is never aware of the long-term future; indeed, "it is not aware of anything...there is no foresight".

(Continued on page 15)

THE DEVELOPMENT Nicolas Walter calls "New Christianity" (*Freethinker*, Feb 99) was probably first promoted by clerics who had come to realise that the traditional theology was no longer tenable but who, for some reason or other, were reluctant to make a clean break with their confessional past.

Perhaps social status or even livelihoods were at stake; perhaps they still had some of the old "fear of God" left in them or perhaps they found it hard to admit, to themselves and to others, that their old religious stance had been fundamentally wrong. Whatever the grounds and whatever the reasons, the new design was obviously required to meet the following specifications:

1. The New God had to be sufficiently vague or diluted to be impossible to pin down.
2. He had to be located nowhere and everywhere.
3. He must not have any features or characteristics that could give critics anything to get a grip on.
4. Although retaining the title "Almighty", He should never accept responsibility for any misfortune, any mistake or indeed anything wrong, bad or negative.
5. He should, on the other hand, always claim credit for anything and everything good, positive, praiseworthy or beneficial.

Favourable terms, indeed! Very clever.

This remarkable theological dexterity, not least the cunning evasiveness, can perhaps help to explain why and how my "New Christianity" ecclesiastical contact managed to

get out of answering the following three questions:

1. To believe that the universe and all forms of life are manifestations of the same fundamental force, of energy, seems perfectly plausible. But to call this force "God" is a nonsense, a corruption of language; it is as close to dishon-

"You can believe in God or you can believe in the Holocaust; you can not, if your mind is clear and honest, believe in both."

esty as you can get. If you no longer believe in God as a conscious being who can be persuaded by prayer to manipulate the fate of individuals, how can you avoid seeing that your Divine Service with Worship and Prayer is nothing but a futile and pointless charade?

2. If, on the other hand, you still believe in the traditional God, the one presented in the official confessions of all major Christian denominations, the Almighty Ruler of the Universe and individually concerned ultimate "Father" of every one of us, will you not have to admit

that, even from behind a triple theological smokescreen, an Almighty God would never be able to escape responsibility for the monstrous atrocities perpetrated over the centuries in His Name by His believing and faithful followers?

3. Christians tell us that we are all creations of a good and almighty God who sees everything, knows everything and for whom nothing is impossible. This God is also supposed to be the loving and caring ultimate Father of every child on Earth.

If all this had been true, the Dunblane massacre would never have happened. Neither would the Holocaust. Yet, tragically, happen they did. Which makes it clear that the Christian tenets referred to above are as untrue now as they always were.

Recently I came across a statement by a Jewish philosopher making the same point in a sharper and more concentrated form. He said that you can believe in God or you can believe in the Holocaust; you cannot, if your mind is clear and honest, believe in both. How can a different conclusion be logically possible?

The traditional Christian God is supposed to be both "good" and "almighty". It is when these two claims are seen together against a background of real world injustice, cruelty and suffering that God's credibility collapses; especially since much of the suffering is caused by natural disasters for which nobody but God can be held responsible. This is the crucial testing ground, and here the "New Christianity" is bound to fail just as spectacularly as the old one did.

Freethinker Fund

Donations March 13 - May 12, 1999: £400 J Wood; £40 J Pickard, C Pinel; £37 D Bressan, O D'Arcy; £25 M Hart; £20 L Georgiades, I Hyde, R Lewis, H Millard, A Stevens, J Tarski; £18 M Hasan; £15 J Hobbs; £13 A Jagger; £10 N Barnes, H Barrett, D Bramwell, S Dulson, E Fraser, J Glenister, G Jamieson, E Laughran, A Moppett, J Simpson, R Smith, G Taylor, J Witney; £5 G Chapman, J Dyke, M Fletcher, J Gibson, P Goggins, D Granville, R Hopkins, G Huddart, P Langford, J Light, J Little, H McDougall, G Meaden, O Oduleye, G Petruczok, F Thrift, J Wright; £3 L Griffiths, J Groom, R Ison, P Pullen, L Wilkins, K Wootton; £2 A Ludlow, D Lummis.

The total for the period was £945. Many thanks to those of you who have donated so generously to the *Freethinker* Fund.

Overview, by Keith Porteous Wood (Continued from page 6)

I envisage such warnings would make it very much more difficult for the religiously oversensitive to impose their views on the rest of the population.

On a lighter note, the Paper's proposal about religious humour gave me an idea for a letter which was published in *The Times* on May 11, part of which read: "The BSC is to insist that comedians and programme makers mock only their own faith. What is left for those of no faith to mock - the Commission?"

That would not be hard. These restrictions on humour are ludicrous; humour's very essence is the disregard of rules and challenging the *status quo*. Even medieval monarchs recognised this important function, tolerating court jesters in a way the Commission apparently cannot."

Maybe *The Times* had the last laugh, however. Our letter ended "The Commission should reflect the tastes of most of the population; rather than failing in its duty to them by caving

in to intolerant but vociferous pressure groups representing tiny minorities." *The Times* followed our letter with one from just such a minority which claimed that, far from being too strict, the BSC's Paper was not strict enough.

Crazy Cleric

PLACE of honour in my Odd Slot this month goes to a crazy cleric from Virginia, a certain James Ogle who is Pastor to the "Bull Run Bible Fellowship".

When one of Ogle's parishioners told the pastor of his marital difficulties, the Pastor's response was to offer to kill the man's wife - provided the parishioner obliged by killing Mrs Ogle.

The parishioner told the police about the proposal and was wired for sound for several later meetings with the pastor, thereby providing evidence for an indictment.

Part of evolution

HEATHER Evans (*Freethinker* April) suggests that man should not exploit other species.

Surely exploitation of other species for food, clothing, transport, or our own protection, is a natural part of evolution and survival of the fittest.

Without exploiting other animal or plant species we could not eat. The alternatives are starvation or cannibalism!

I would also not be happy to protect malarial mosquitos, or many other species which are keen enough to exploit us.

ROGER MCCALLISTER
Dawlish
Devon

Wrong statements

WITH reference to Heather Evans' article on Speciesism (*Freethinker* April 1999) I am in no doubt that *homo sapiens* has treated other species (as well as members of its own) abominably. An interesting article could be written on how institutionalised religion has had a major part to play, though it would make unpleasant reading. However, I do not think it strengthens Heather's argument to include statements which are wrong. There are good reasons enough for being kind to animals – spurious reasons will not alter the opinions of those who disagree.

1) Our brains are the heaviest: "in proportion to our body mass our brain is three times as large as that of our nearest relatives" (*New Scientist* 13 Mar 99, p42). This astonishing organ uses 20 per cent of the body's energy in a resting human. This means *homo sapiens* is remarkable and is very different to all other species.

2) We are the only species with a language. After decades of intensive work with a few chimps etc, there is no case for saying they use language as we do; to state otherwise is at least to misuse the word language.

3) "A chimpanzee, in fact, has genes 98 per cent similar to our own" is a meaningless statement with a spurious air of precision. Of course we have a common ancestry with all living things, but genes are not the sum total of life: to imply that life is explained completely by DNA is an inexcusable oversimplification.

A lot of what is done to animals is wrong but much of it is because (a) those in agribusiness want to maximise their profits and (b) the general public want cheap food and safe and effective medicines. The extreme statement that our domination of animals is morally indefensible

implies the moral indefensibility of cheap food and safe and effective medicines, as well as profits – does Heather really mean that? There are specific abuses which should be stopped – eg the continued use of animals in product testing when advances in scientific knowledge have made it unnecessary.

Finally, I'd guess that a large proportion of *Freethinker* readers are perfectly well aware of animal exploitation and disapprove to some degree: comments like "we are nearly all deeply involved" and "not wanting to know" annoyed me and probably many others. To return a barb to Heather: does she consider that malaria-bearing mosquitos have a right to life and should not be dominated, or is kindness just for cuddlesome creatures?

P. L. LANCASTER
Maldon
Essex

Don't publicise Blakemore

I RECEIVED a leaflet in my last copy of the *Freethinker* about a conference to be held by the Rationalist Press Association. Nothing wrong with that, except that I see that one of the speakers is Professor Colin Blakemore, speaking on "What hope for rationalism in the 21st century".

Blakemore is well known for his experiments on animals, especially cats. These experiments do not seem either rational or scientific to me – they are so cruel one wonders how anyone could do it.

I hope this man will not get any more publicity from the *Freethinker*. He is held in such contempt by so many people that it can do our cause no good to give him publicity.

MRS JEAN FAWCETT
Ipswich,
Suffolk

History and mythology confused

On the principle that superstition/religion should be opposed wherever it appears, I wrote to the editor of the Ancient & Medieval History Book Club complaining of the increasing tendency for the club to take on books that properly belonged to the Christian Book Club.

To put the matter in its historical perspective, I quoted from the *Christian Dictionary of the Bible* (Brockhampton Press, London 1995) which opens with the statement: "Jesus of Nazareth has been the central figure of the most widespread religion of the past two thousand years, yet almost nothing is known of his Earthly life."

Adding: "For the most part, however, we can

neither make a map of his (Jesus's) journeys nor a time chart of events" and "Thus it is impossible to put together an orderly account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth from the pages of the Bible".

I urged the editor not to confuse a religious version or mythology with history. Religions, of course, are multi-million dollar businesses.

However, two days later, the editor's choice of book for April was *Jesus Christ* (the Jesus of History, the Christ of faith). The author, J. R. Porter, is not an historian but Professor Emeritus of Theology at the University of Exeter, who for 20 years was a member of the Church of England synod.

The work is fully illustrated, not of course with contemporaneous pictures – they don't exist. One, in particular, did bear historical examination, that of Jesus on a tau, the Roman method, rather than a cross. It begs the question: why do Christians worship the much more ancient magic symbol of the cross? I think we should be told.

STEWART VALDAR
London N8

Constructive criticism the intention

I was taken aback by David Michael's comments ("Vicious Attack", letters page, *Freethinker*, May 1999) concerning my letter in the March issue. I have re-read my letter, and cannot recognise in it the "covert and vicious attack" which David Michael describes.

It would not be constructive to argue in detail over individual points raised by David Michael, but I do wish to go clearly on record as supporting the *Freethinker* and its aims as sincerely as any other subscriber. The letter was intended as constructive criticism, and support – no more, no less. Surely the whole point of free-thinking is that we can hold strong opinions without assuming that anyone holding contrary opinions is being "covert", "vicious", "seeking to... oppress", "insulting", "malicious", or even "simply wrong".

MIKE WILKINSON
Nottingham

Tories hated Bradlaugh

Peter Windle's observation (May *Freethinker*) that "many leading freethinkers have been opposed to socialism" is unexceptionable and would have passed without notice but for his reference to Charles Bradlaugh.

Charles Bradlaugh was, by the standards of his time, a radical. The Liberal Member of Parliament for Northampton was also Britain's



best known atheist, republican, advocate of land reform and birth control. Not surprisingly, he was hated by the Conservatives who resorted to every dirty trick and tactic in their armoury to prevent him taking his seat in the House of Commons. Lord Randolph Churchill, leader of the Tory pack, described Bradlaugh's supporters as "the mob, the scum, the dregs". Sir Henry Tyler, member of Parliament for Harwich, was another leader of the Tory clamour against Bradlaugh. He initiated blasphemy prosecutions which were intended to destroy Bradlaugh's parliamentary career, but instead resulted in a year's imprisonment of Freethinker founder G W Foote.

In Parliament and the country, freethinkers were subjected to harassment and discrimination by Conservative-controlled authorities. So was it warped humour or wilful ignorance that caused Peter Windle to call upon the name of Charles Bradlaugh, their prime target, to underpin his own political stance?

BILL MCILROY
Sheffield

Defining socialism

Three letters (Vivien Gibson, John Rayner, Martin Skinner) in the April *Freethinker* deal with socialism. However it be defined, socialism is of the future and unless we properly understand the present we may not have a future.

The present is guns, chemical and biological warfare, bombers and nuclear weapons; it is racism, speciesism and genocide; it is prisons, dictators and torture; it is Catholicism, Islam, Buddha, and faith in unreality; it is poverty, hunger and homelessness; it is Stock Exchanges, money markets, futures and derivatives; it is manipulative media, lies and pornography; it is Free Trade, banana wars, genetically-modified foods, and beef and chicken containing salmonella and hormones; it is pollution, destruction of habitats and global warming; it is in a word, capitalism.

Unless we honestly analyse and understand capitalism it may well lead us to disaster. Capitalism is the control and exploitation of the vast majority by a select minority. The first requirement of capitalism is obviously to conceal its real identity and this it does remarkably well; it owns most of the newspapers and broadcasting stations. It tells us that we live in a democracy and democracy is a great institution initiated by the Ancient Greeks; it does not add that those same Greeks were slave owners. It extols freedom but nothing is free under capitalism, not even the *Freethinker*.

Alone and unaided, the odd individual cannot complete the analysis, draw proper conclusions and undertake whatever is necessary to alter things. But surely that is a task crying out for urgent attention.

R G SARGENT
Looe
Cornwall

Wrong correspondent

A FOOTNOTE in *Points Of View* in the February edition of the *Freethinker* attributed authorship of the letter *Memories Invoked Of Fascist Rallies* (January) to myself. Although I am flattered to be thought the author of this well-written, witty, incisive and thought-provoking letter, I regret that I have to insist that whoever it was who penned it (and whose name was so unfortunately omitted)

it certainly was not me.

I have never been inside Canterbury Cathedral, nor have I ever been present at any meeting attended by Mr Peter Tatchell. I have no interest in the politics of sexual orientation or of homosexuality, and while I support Mr Tatchell's stand on conscientious objection and socialism, I do not share his sexual preferences – and the last place on Earth I would be at any time would be any event where Outrage were likely to be present.

No doubt the real author of *Memories of Fascist Rallies* will be in touch to express his own outrage at the misattribution of his work.

KEITH J ACKERMANN
Tilbury
Essex

Editor's note: The letter was in fact written by Tony Akkermans. Apologies to both correspondents

Please address your letters (preferably typed) to Barry Duke,
Freethinker 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.

BRIDGING THE CULTURE GAP, by Colin McCall (Continued from page 12)

Nor is nature in any objective sense romantic. "Animals are not there to be role models, they are there to survive and reproduce". They may form communities, of course, with each other and with individuals of other species. And in a sense, each individual animal or plant may be regarded as a community, "a community of billions of cells, and each one of those billions of cells is a community of thousands of bacteria". So Dawkins leads us into wonderful worlds beyond our ken—until now.

However, I'm still not sure about that word poetry, and whether it is sufficient to warn about "bad poetry in science". Should we not simply condemn bad (ie inaccurate) scientific writing? Richard Dawkins apparently thinks otherwise. "Science is poetic, ought to be poetic, has much to learn from poets and should press good poetic imagery and metaphor into

its inspirational service", he says. But he admits that his own best known image, "the selfish gene", while potentially a good one, can sadly mislead "if the metaphor of personification is improperly grasped". It is the general reader who is at risk when scientists wax too metaphoric. Dawkins need have no fears where his fellow biologists are concerned. Even his strongest critic, Steven Rose, makes it clear that "Dawkins' genes aren't selfish in the sense in which we might refer to 'gay' or 'aggression' genes" and "they do not necessarily confer selfishness on their possessor..." (*Lifelines*, Allen Lane, 1997).

One thing is sure. Whether you call it poetry or not, *Unweaving the Rainbow* is fascinating, exciting science. It should help to bridge the gap between C P Snow's two cultures.

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, June 6, 4 pm. Public meeting.

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, 55 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Thursday, June 17, 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.

Essex Humanists: Information: Brian Whitelaw, 66 Linnet Drive, Chelmsford CM2 8AF. Tel:01245 265664. Monthly meetings, second Sunday, 7.30 pm.

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, June 11: Alistair McNeill, organiser, London Mardi Gras.

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.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Tuesday, July 13, 4pm – 8pm. Garden party at 15 Victoria Crescent, Horsforth.

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, June 24, 8pm. Bill Alexander: *The Spanish Civil War in Retrospect*.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information and literature stall at Lewisham People's Day, Mountsfield Park, Stainton Road, London SE6, Saturday July 10, 12 noon til 6pm.

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: Information: Jean Woodman on 01865 760520. The Pauling Centre, 58 Banbury Rd, Oxford. Friday, June 18, 7.30pm for 8pm: Barbara Smoker: *Humanism and I*.

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 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*. Wednesday, July 7, 8pm. Royden Harrison: *Was Marx a Humanist?* 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. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, June 10, 7.30pm for 8pm. Denis Cobell: *Non-religious Ceremonies*.

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.