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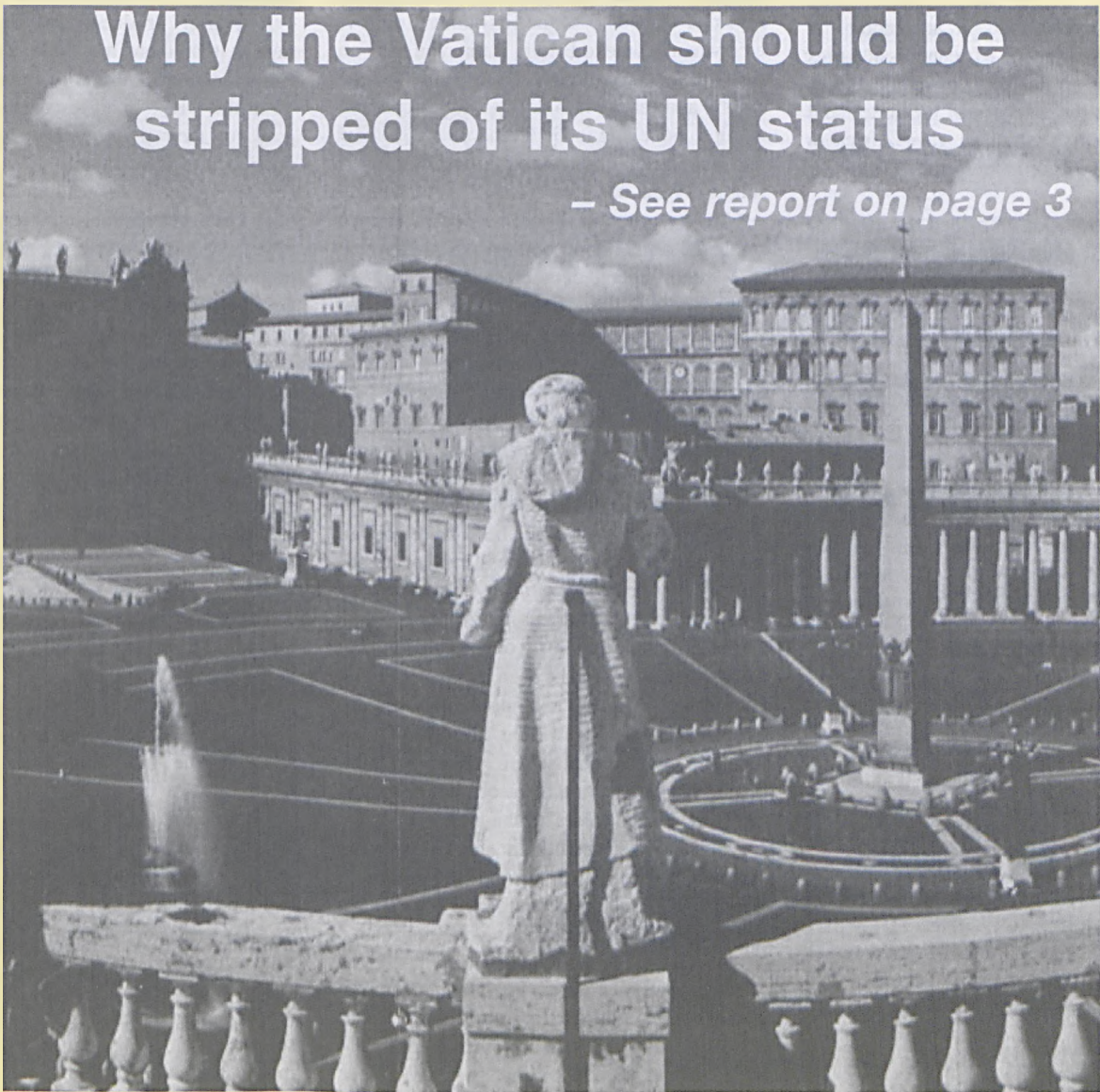
Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Why the Vatican should be
stripped of its UN status

– See report on page 3



The Piazza di San Pietro, Vatican City

Also in this issue: Atheists asked to give evidence to the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords – see p3

FOR THE second time in a month, I have had God's blessing bestowed upon me within the cavernous (and unlikely) precincts of the Lewisham shopping centre.

On neither occasion had I sneezed, so there was no excuse for my being victimised in this manner by a complete stranger.

So why did it happen? I don't have "heretic" tattooed across my forehead, nor was I wearing my "Religion is the problem, not the answer" T-shirt.

No, I was merely chosen at random by one of a growing army of African missionaries who are taking up positions in public places in the UK with the sole aim of trying to hand back to the British what we gave Africa in spades a century ago: namely the "Glory" of God.

On the first occasion I brushed the missionary aside with a terse, "Please don't give me that crap."

On the second I was in a far more frivolous mood, and took time to explain to the man that,

touched as I was by his concern for my soul, his efforts were completely wasted on me.

It just so happened that I had about my person a copy of the *Freethinker*, and said that all would become clear if he took a few moments to read the magazine.

He was clearly perplexed. "Your missionaries came to Africa to convert us to Christianity. You told us that Christianity was a very good thing, and we embraced the religion. White missionaries were almost regarded as gods. But the first thing I discovered when I came to Britain is that you have no time at all for religion. Your churches are empty, and falling into decay, and no-one will admit to believing in God. And now you show me a magazine which says Christianity is rubbish. What has gone wrong?" he lamented.

"Ah, the question should be 'what has gone right?'" I replied, and pointed out to him that in Western liberal democracies many of the things we take for granted – free speech, the absence of food shortages and terrible diseases, water on tap and uninterrupted electricity supplies – are not the result of God favouring white races over those who are black, but because we had learned the hard way that religion is a fatal impediment to social progress.

The problems that bedevil large parts of Africa, I added, will never be solved through superstition. "We in countries like Britain are fortunate to be living in a post-Christian era. Any attempt to return us to the days when Christianity held full sway over large numbers of the population will be seen by most thinking people as an effort to re-impose religious control over all aspects of their life. They know that in every country where religious fundamentalism has been in the ascendancy, human rights have been forced to the wall.

"So I would suggest that instead of trying to spread Christianity in Britain, you return to Africa and begin to reverse the terrible damage the British missionaries did to your continent."

And with that I waved him a cheery goodbye.

Two days later I was to learn that even more godless than the British are the French. "Great," I thought, "superb cuisine combined with rational thinking. What better to please the heretical gastronome?"

My delight, though, is not shared in Christian circles. British evangelists, according to a report in the *Sunday Telegraph* (July 18) are swarming over to France in an attempt to put the French back on religious course.

The report, by Jonathan Petre, revealed that "despite its Roman Catholic traditions, cathedrals, and a plethora of saints and miracles, France is now regarded as one of the world's most secular countries, with church atten-

dances among the lowest in Europe". This has made it "particularly alluring territory for British evangelicals". While there are now 199 UK missionaries in Brazil, 229 in South Africa, and 248 in Kenya, France tops the list with 268 – twice that of 15 years ago.

But the eminently sensible French are proving immune to the likes of France Mission, the fourth largest evangelical outfit operating in that country, which has admitted making little headway.

A leaflet produced by France Mission reveals that there are "just four evangelical Christians per thousand in France. It's almost 40 in the UK ..." and it exhorts the British to pray for their poor godless brethren on the other side of the channel.

I have a better suggestion: that France, and other countries harbouring foreign evangelists, give these nasty, interfering parasites the royal order of the boot, and leave the indigenous God-botherers to take care of their own.

Local newspapers are always scrabbling around for items to fill their pages – their letters columns in particular. This practically guarantees space to those of a religious bent who are allowed to waffle on at interminable length, often quoting great chunks of drivel from the Bible.

Case in question: earlier this year the *Citizen* in Gloucester carried a front page report under the banner headline *A Miracle!*

The story concerned a Pastor Bill Rogers' remission from cancer – the result, according to the paper, of "prayer".

This was the cue for one Douglas Drane of Tewkesbury to pen what was to be the lead letter in the following day's issue of the *Citizen*.

He congratulated the paper on carrying "good news" and added: "Hopefully [the report] also stimulates those who pray to continue doing so, and also challenges those of us who don't, or who have lost the habit, to start again."

To the newspaper's credit, it carried a much more intelligent letter in the same issue from someone who sadly chose to remain anonymous. In challenging the paper's headline the correspondent pointed out that it did "a disservice to the hard work and skill" of those who treated the pastor.

"At the very least the exclamation mark in your headline should have been a question mark, although perhaps the more perceptive course of an investigative journal would have been to question why God did not save the other 154,206 people who died from cancer in Great Britain last year," the letter concluded.

I could not have put it better myself.

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ATHEISTS CALLED TO GIVE EVIDENCE TO ROYAL COMMISSION

THE NATIONAL Secular Society (NSS) has been called to give oral evidence to the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords.

This follows the Society's powerful written Submission earlier this year calling for the Bench of Bishops to be scrapped and for the new Second Chamber to be entirely secular. (The full text of the Submission is available on the NSS website: www.secularism.org.uk).

After giving a summary of its views on

religious representation, the Society will respond to questions from the Commissioners about its written submission.

The Commissioners will also probe the Society's views on religious representation. This evidence will be presented at the last hearing of the Commission, which will be in London on 27 July, shortly after we go to press. Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the NSS, who will present his organisation's case, said: "We are pleased that the

Commission is giving serious consideration to our suggestions. We welcome a further opportunity to articulate the compelling case against continued – and even increased – religious representation in the House of Lords, which the Government is advocating.

"Since our Submission was published, several of the problems we predicted concerning religious representation have already arisen. Bringing these to the Commissioners' attention should further strengthen our case."

Barbara Smoker chosen to live with the enemy

Living with The Enemy, the provocative BBC2 documentary series in which people of diametrically opposed viewpoints and lifestyles are required to live together for periods of up to a week, will shortly include an episode in which an atheist is shown squaring up to a group of evangelical Christians.

In announcing the launch of its second series of *Living with the Enemy*, the BBC enlisted the *Freethinker's* help in finding a suitable atheist.

Subsequently, the BBC revealed that it had chosen Barbara Smoker, former President of the National Secular Society, to live for six days in Waverley Abbey House, in Farnham, Surrey, as guest of Gerald Coates, kingpin of an organisation called Pioneer People.

The stately home is occupied, said Barbara, by a segment of the New Church Movement predominantly made up of the "happy-clappy" tendency. Some of its members, she pointed out, were recently in the news when they claimed that God had transformed the amalgam in their teeth to gold.

Naturally, she wanted to know more about the phenomenon, and asked to interview someone who had experienced the miracle.

"Mr Coates proved very evasive on that score, and I wasn't able to interview anyone about the phenomenon," Barbara said.

Nor was Barbara and the film crew allowed to attend the goings-on at a number of church seminars and other meetings conducted by him.

But what she did see of the organisation led her to conclude that it was made up of "naive, touchy-feely" people who demonstrated a singular reluctance to think for themselves. "Their leaders were forever quoting others, or the Bible, but were rarely willing to express their own opinion. In many ways they were like politicians – long-winded, difficult to pin down, and avoiding anything contentious," said Barbara.

However, she did feel that she was able to "educate" Gerald Coates in a number of areas – especially in regard to the Bible "which he did not know as well as I thought he would.

"For example, he was surprised when I pointed out to him that Ezekiel 16 and 23 were famous pornographic chapters which were once used for masturbatory purposes".

The programme is due to be broadcast on BBC2 in October. Precise details will appear in the September issue of the *Freethinker*.

TV Preacher implicated in man's suicide

A coroner said at an inquest last month that a 25-year-old gay man from Yorkshire, care assistant Lee Guilfoyle, possibly hanged himself as a result of a vitriolic attack on homosexuals by TV preacher Pat Robertson. Robertson's remarks were reported following a decision by the Bank of Scotland (not the Royal Bank of Scotland, as was wrongly stated in last month's *Freethinker*) to sever business dealings with the right-wing head of America's Christian Coalition. Within days of Robertson's outburst, Mr Guilfoyle was found hanging in a loft. "There had been a lot of publicity about an extremely intolerant American who wanted to set up a business deal with a bank. He upset a large number of decent people. Lee Guilfoyle was a thoroughly decent man who would have been upset by those remarks," said Rotherham coroner Stanley Hooper.

FREETHINKER FUND

WE ARE grateful to the following readers who have so generously donated to the *Freethinker* fund over a period of two months: £18 J Edwards; £16.50 Musical Heathens; £15 D Kirkland, J Ross; £13 J Crowhurst, R Richardson; £10 A Ball, J Blackmore, T Clifford-Winters, G Colling, R Condon, D Craddock, J Crowhurst, R Deacon, E Haslam, P Lancaster, S Lee, A McCloy, I Norris, C Rudd, N Sandieson, J Staniforth, J Tarski, A Tiffany, C Wilson; £8 A Briglin, K Gerken, J Hobbs, G Jackman, M Smith; £7 R Sheward; £6 J Jenkins; £5 A Bradley, D Carter, A Chapman, A Dick, W Hall, J Hayward, W Keeton, D Leighton, J Lewis, H McDougall, P Paris, J Radford, L Stapleton, G Taylor, S Thomas, D Thompson, P Thompson, B Thorpe, E Violet, D Walker, D Whelan, B Whiting; £4.50 W Simcock; £3 G Broady, P Brown, W Browne, D Dawson, M Dixon, E Fleury, D Gorringer, E Hetherington, F Hoare, S Holt, T Liddle, D McTavish, J Segall, D Seymour, J Tiplady, C Tonkin, B Van der Sloot, R Watson; £2.50 B Clark; £2 H Ash, P Cass, D Christmas, J Crowley, H Evans, J Ford, J Hutton, T Lock, M Palmer, G Welsh; £1 C Mills.

Total for the period: £525.50. In addition, G W Foote & Co. has received the following legacies: £4,000 from the estate of Dorothy Edwards; £250 from the estate of Peter Cotes.



Anglican attendances

THE MORE Anglican attendances decline, the more publicity they receive. Following an article in the American magazine *Newsweek* for which the National Secular Society provided some research, the *Sunday Times* resolved to see what it could uncover in this increasingly murky area.

The paper questioned individual dioceses about Sunday attendance figures and found some interesting results: Exeter had suffered a 31 per cent drop between 1996 and 1997; Ely (including Cambridge) reported an annual decline of 18 per cent; and Salisbury around 6 per cent.

According to the paper, "many dioceses refused to reveal up-to-date attendance figures because they said they had been ordered by a Church of England press officer not to disclose them".

If these assertions are correct, it seems our established Church wants to retain all the trappings of power associated with their establishment, but – when it suits them – conduct its affairs like a small private club accountable to no one. This is the organisation that runs most of the church schools which we, the public (believers or not), pay for. This subsidy includes all the salaries and the vast majority of the costs of premises.

Church statisticians believe the suppressed figures are "masking an unprecedented collapse in attendance", according to the *Sunday Times* report. Understandably, the C of E is becoming increasingly sensitive to publicity about its decline.

Further evidence of the sensitivity of the nations' "mother church" came in their response to a letter from the NSS published in the *Independent*. The letter, which I was told by a reporter of another paper had angered the bishops, read as follows:

"The Church of England's spin-doctors are at it again. They claim that the 396 new deacons that they plan to ordain is the highest number 'since the eighties'. But given that 141 of the latest batch are women, none of whom would have been eligible for the priesthood in the 1980s, the figures are simply not comparable. Questions have already been raised in Church circles about whether the increased number has been achieved by lowering standards. Perhaps this could be explained by the need to replace the escalating numbers of priests retiring. To whom will these new priests preach? The attendance figures at the Church of England services are declining so steeply that they hardly dare publish them."

The Church's belligerent response was

along the lines that the Society could teach the C of E a thing or two about spin-doctoring. Yet, since the letter was published, the experienced religious columnist Andrew Brown has made similar points in the *Church Times* about both C of E attendance and the real reason for the increased number of new entrants.

An American television company also picked up the same story and told me during the course of an interview that a Church House spokesperson had suggested to them that the "less than a million" church attendance figure was wrong and there were around six million UK worshippers. They added that the same source denied that Dr Carey had stated that that "the nation had an allergy to religion" and the Church was "one generation away from extinction".

This last quote was widely reported and commented upon. Even the very religious former editor of the *Independent*, Andreas Whittam Smith, had his say. I do not recall seeing any Church denials at the time. And, just for the record, my edition of *Christian Research 1998/99* (previously quoted in the *Freethinker*) indicates Anglican attendance in England of 854,000 for 1995, with an even lower figure estimated for year 2000.

As already reported in the *Freethinker*, the Anglicans claim to welcome representatives of other denominations and faiths in the Second Chamber, provided of course the C of E does not have to give up even one of its 26 seats. Could this simply be a ploy to limit the damage inflicted by dwindling attendances? An LSE professor was quoted in the *Sunday Times*: "If the [attendance] figures continue like this ... the establishment of the church could be in the balance". Yet, sadly, with the Government's sycophantic support, the Church probably has little to worry about, even if its worshippers end up being limited to the Cabinet itself.

Roman Catholic bishops' dilemma

THERE cannot have been many issues where the NSS and the *Tablet* have taken the same line. But one such issue has just emerged.

In an editorial under the headline "Bishops into Lords don't go", the *Tablet* has made a strong case against RC bishops being given seats in the Lords. It declared that the bishops "cannot 'represent' the Catholic community" nor "the variety of Catholic moral dialogue". The article maintains (disapprovingly) that any RC bishops in the Lords would represent "the international college of bishops with the Pope at its head"; and if they were answerable to anyone, it would be "to the Holy See". These

assertions are uncannily similar to points made by the NSS two months ago in its Submission to the Royal Commission on the Reform of the Lords.

Significantly, it is only the English and Welsh RC bishops that have taken this line (reported in last month's *Freethinker*).

In contrast, in their Submission to the Royal Commission, the Scottish Bishops do not propose to participate in the new chamber, preferring "the appointment of lay people, of wisdom and experience". Leaving aside the question of appointment or election, the Scottish proposal is sensible enough, provided that their definition of 'lay' does not exclude non-religious people; that none of the 'lay' people are official representatives of their faith; and that seats are not allocated based on religious affiliation. The NSS Council would object to Second Chamber members being selected based on religious criteria, even if organised non-believers were to be fairly represented – an unlikely scenario, I accept.

If their Scottish and Northern Irish colleagues declined to do so, it would be unthinkable for the England and Wales RC bishops to take up seats; one of the major objections to the 26 Anglican bishops (who do not represent dioceses in Scotland or Northern Ireland) is the English bias their presence brings to the Chamber.

The Scottish bishops are not expected to change their position and seek seats in the Chamber, particularly as RC canon law forbids them to share in the exercise of civil power without permission from Rome. Yet, unless all the RC bishops in the UK unite to seek seats in the reformed chamber, the secular case is strengthened. This is because the RCs have the largest attendances, and without them the Government's hope for the second chamber to be representative of religious opinion in this country would ring even more hollow.

More ruffled feathers

ANOTHER irritated response to an NSS letter, on this occasion in *The Times*, was printed under the headline "Friends in high places?" "The General Secretary of the National Secular Society has had yet another letter printed in *The Times*. Surely the gods must smile on him."

Quotable quote

Many people think they have religion when they are troubled with dyspepsia.

– Robert G Ingersoll
(1833 – 1899)

Cock and bull at the Cock and Bottle

BRITAIN'S FIRST "Christian" pub, the Cock and Bottle, has been opened in Bradford by the Bishop of Bradford, Dr David Smith.

Situated in the shadow of his own cathedral, the pub, according to a report in the *Independent*, "is part of the Church's new strategy to increase congregations in the inner city.

When the paper's Northern correspondent Ian Herbert attended the official opening he was to find that the 30 Yorkshiremen in the pub "had a distinctly secular feel. Bewilderment best describes their response as they were told to sup up because a church service was to follow. 'And can I have a drink after that?' one asked".

"A woman from the adjacent flats," reported Ian Herbert, "was more animated when she complained about the loud music – from a band tuning up for *Amazing Grace*."

But the person who had the last word on the

subject – in the form of a letter published in the *Guardian* – was *Freethinker* columnist Terry Sanderson.

"So, evangelical Christians have taken over a pub in Bradford called the Cock and Bottle. What happened to the campaigning against these two great evils?", he mischievously enquired.

O come all ye faithless

YOU DON'T have to believe in God to attend Methodist Church services. This surprising news, under the headline "O come all ye faithless" appeared in a recent issue of the *Daily Mail*, which reported that, in an attempt to boost a decline in membership, the church is no longer insisting that members believe in God. The "logic" behind the new membership drive is that unbelievers who attend services "will come to have faith in three or four years."

"But critics will see the abandonment of the demand that members believe in God as the point at which the Methodists cease to be a church and become a social society," wrote

Social Affairs correspondent Steve Doughty.

Krishna and lesbians don't mix

AS A RESULT of pressure from Hindus, an episode of the cult American TV programme *Xena: Warrior Princess* has been withdrawn from international showing and repeat showing in the United States. The producers of the series caved in to pressure from the World Vaishanana Association, which objected to the appearance of the Hindu deity Krishna in an episode entitled *The Way*. The WVA, an offshoot of the Hare Krishna cult, were particularly put out because the lead characters in the series are reputedly lesbians.

The withdrawal of the episode drew an immediate response from the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) which joined thousands of fans of the series in the growing clamour for the "offending" episode to be re-instated.

PERSONAL VIEW: Better dead than defiled?

RECENTLY, the idea that the law should recognise degrees of rape, surfaced fleetingly, only to be immediately attacked from opposite directions by the disparate forces of feminists of the "Women against Rape" tendency and people who think rape is all in the mind (women's minds of course).

I for one, agree that there are degrees or categories of rape just as there are of murder and assault. In the same way that we do not equate violent killing during a robbery or on the street with killings for which there may be mitigating circumstances, similarly we differentiate assaults, and we should be able to discriminate between rape as part of violent attack and an incident, perhaps sordid or unwanted sex after a party or date during which one or both parties under the influence of alcohol or drugs let the fooling around go too far. The law should recognise this difference.

If all killing regardless of the circumstances attracted the maximum penalty, many killers would go unpunished for fear of injustice. We accept murder, causing death, and manslaughter; the Americans have degrees of murder. As the situation is at present, with no differentiation between "proper" rape and "date" rape many rapists are given the benefit of the doubt and walk free, the women accusers branded as liars. The current conviction rate is about 10 per cent.

What is interesting for secularists is the degree to which the issue of rape in general is coloured by cultural attitudes, engendered and reinforced by religions. That a woman's worth depends on whether she is a virgin, a mother, has sex inside or outside of marriage, is called a 'spinster' a 'slut or a'whore', has ten children or is childless, must be challenged.

Traditional religious ideas of chastity, virginity and the worth of women in relation to fertility and sexuality are still reflected in, and

dictate current attitudes to rape and raped women. (not to say women in general).

Women are expected to feel guilty, sullied, dirty and worthless when they have been raped.

The popular picture painted by the media accentuates this view (to its own ends) and women are encouraged to wallow in trauma and at least some must feel that there is something wrong with them if they feel angry, humiliated for a while, then get on with their lives. Forced sex is not acceptable whatever the situation, but certainly it in no way compares, even as a weapon, with other serious personal attacks. *These extreme attitudes seem to me to be putting the sex act itself out of all proportion to its real importance.* The media obsession is another aspect of the same lack of proportion and feminists who take on this view uncritically, are in my opinion playing along with them notion to the detriment of most women.

The most serious manifestation of this idea is the fact that there are whole cultures in other countries and cultural groups in this country today in which a woman is considered better dead than defiled. Fathers and brothers will pursue and kill daughters or sisters for disobeying or being forced to disobey their cultural rules. Marital or sexual "crimes" can lead to women being beaten, imprisoned, maimed or outcast from their families.

Once again the reluctance to seriously examine the roots of these attitudes in order not to upset the religionists, and the unwillingness to criticise aspects of culture, however harmful for fear of being called racist by upholders of these cultural-religious values is preventing discussion in the wider media. As usual politicians are unwilling or unable to address these issues.

– A W F Mayer

Hume: saviour or failure?

AFTER the fulsome obituaries, one or two writers began to question Basil Hume's leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in Britain. He may, as Hugo Young suggested, have avoided the "constant turmoil in the Church elsewhere and bitter divisions between conservatives and liberals, especially in European countries" and risen "above such arguments"; but at what cost? As fellow *Guardian* columnist Mark Lawson put it, in statistical terms Hume's record in office was "frankly Majoresque" (June 19). Congregations have almost halved, Lawson said. "The church to which the Cardinal gave his life is in a perilous state, short of clergy to minister even to those diminishing parishes which remain".

Writing on the same day, Madeleine Bunting, the *Guardian's* religious correspondent, filled in some details. Every year 50,000 Roman Catholics "fall away from the fold". There may be 5.7 million Catholics in the country, but "fewer than a quarter of them attend mass regularly" and, given the significance of the Eucharist, these figures are "hard to explain away".

What Young saw as a Church rising with Hume above the turmoil on the continent, was a Church in decline; what Bunting calls a "sleepy backwater". The "We Are The Church" movement, which started in Austria and spread through Germany and the Netherlands "fizzled out with a whimper in England, after a brutal reprimand from Cardinal Hume".

One of the movement's recommendations was for married priests, which Mark Lawson thinks, along with women priests, is the "obvious answer" to the problem of diminishing clergy.

It might even bring back some of the not-so-faithful, but it cannot solve the main problem, that of Catholicism itself, an other-worldly religion. When headmaster of Ampleforth School, Hume was asked what he prepared the boys for. His reply: "We prepare them for death".

And in her obituary, Margaret Hebblethwaite recounted how, a few years ago, the Cardinal said "I now have no fear of death. I look forward to this friend leading me to a world where my parents, my brother and other relatives are, and my friends".

It is this primitive belief in a "world" where families and friends will be united after death that is no longer believable for anyone who gives it serious thought.

German defiance

NOW, what about that turmoil on the continent? Well, it continues, particularly in Germany, where liberal Roman Catholics are preparing to defy another attempt by the Pope to ban church counselling on abortion.

After several years of largely ineffective "discreet pressure", the instruction to take no further part in the state counselling system which controls abortion procedures came in a letter to the German bishops' conference (*Guardian*, June 19). The Church runs 270 of the 1,700 national abortion counselling centres and advises 20,000 Catholic women every year, of whom 5,000 are persuaded not to end their pregnancies.

The ban would be "a catastrophe for women in need and for the German church", said Christian Weisner, head of the "We Are The Church" movement, which represents 1.5m liberal German Catholics. And the Social Democrat minister for family affairs, Christine Bergmann said she knew that many bishops wanted to stay in the counselling system. This was confirmed in no uncertain terms by the Bishop of Munster, Reinhard Lettman. "Regardless of the form it takes. We will continue counselling", he said.

Can you imagine the late Basil Hume being so defiant? I can't.

Gingering them up

SO Ginger Spice has annoyed Roman Catholic leaders in the Philippines by advocating birth control to reduce the population explosion. During a visit to the Marie Stopes reproductive health clinic in Manila, Geri Halliwell said "I believe everyone deserves control over their life, and that means control over their fertility and protection against disease and unwanted pregnancies".

She hoped that she could "make a difference" in a country of 74 million, three quarters of them Roman Catholics, with a population growth of 2.3 per cent a year.

Judging by the television pictures, Halliwell certainly attracted the youngsters, and certainly got publicity for the UN Population Fund, but she had less appeal for the Church. Had not the Archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Sin, notoriously denounced condoms as "evil" and "fit only for animals"?

"Family planning amounts to killing our babies", said Church spokesman Monsignor Pedro Quitorio, who urged Filipino teenagers to ignore Geri's "western message". Any effort at safe sex was "utterly immoral".

Similar sentiments were expressed in this country back in March, when Jim Caffery, head of Rosary Roman Catholic School, Saltey, banned Red Nose Day; and Alan Whelan, principal of St Benedict's College, Colchester, wrote to the *Guardian* saying that "Catholic schools have long had grave misgivings...over the use of Comic Relief funds for morally dubious family planning projects".

"Utterly immoral", "morally dubious". How warped these Catholic minds can be.

Still "two cultures"

DR ROBERT Baker of the Centre for Infectious Diseases in London was one of several scientists who wrote to the *Guardian* recently (June 11) deploring popular and journalistic ignorance on scientific matters. Whenever a scientist sees an issue covered in the papers, he said, "it is usually at least partly wrong, or is patronisingly reduced in content to make it digestible but meaningless. Yet, if you explain things properly, most people can grasp scientific ideas without too much trouble".

So, he asked, why don't the press do so here, as they do, for example, in Germany?" The reason, he suggested, might be that the majority of British journalists are trained in the humanities.

Regrettably, this anti-scientific bias is national. Michael Faraday's head is being replaced on the new £20 notes by that of the composer Edward Elgar, ostensibly because his moustache will make forging more difficult. But if facial hair is a crucial factor in thwarting the forgers, why not go for Darwin, who had a lot more than Elgar?

Astrologer divines the light

LAST year, as *Private Eye* reminded us, the *Daily Mail* (in a feature on "loony cults") had rubbished the Divine Light Mission of the guru Maharaji, who owns a 21-room mansion in Malibu, complete with all mod cons like a swimming pool, sauna, massage room and a nine-car garage for his fleet of Rolls. Oh yes, and a \$20m private plane.

Now it transpires that the *Mail's* resident astrologer, Jonathan Cainer, has joined this "loony cult" and, with other devotees, opened a website (www.enjoyinglife.org) "for those who appreciate the teachings of Maharaji".

It took Cainer "two years of careful questioning" before he felt ready to trust that the guru was on the level, but "it made me sweetly, safely, strongly at home". Two years to find out what the stars could surely have foretold.

DEAR GOD, I know you move in mysterious ways but this is ridiculous. Six million Jews praying to be delivered from Hitler; nothing. And here you are on the net. Shame there were no modems at Auschwitz. But better late than never I suppose.

Odd of you, God, that you should have picked on Cambridge as your earthly domain. Surely you know that you have been comprehensively banished from there by the likes of Russell, Wittgenstein, Ayer, Bondi and Hawking? Or was Oxford more threatening still because of Dawkins?

Now you have surfaced, and before you go *incommunicado* again, let me ask you a few searching questions.

People have been asking you questions for thousands of years, of course, but they have found to their cost that prayer is strictly an exercise in one-way communication. Now you are on the net ignoring people will no longer do; it is known as netiquette; you send somebody an e-mail; they send you one back. Can't make exceptions for deities. You choose to come on the Web, you play by the rules!

Quite exciting, don't you think, this prospect of actually getting some sense out of you? By the way, are you using Netscape or Explorer or do you have your own browser? A high-brow browser perhaps. Just hope it isn't one of your inscrutable, ineffable, unfathomable browsers that leave people staring at a blank screen.

You'd better come up with something really impressive. There are already too many people with computers who are beginning to believe that Bill Gates is God.

I wonder which internet service provider you are using. I just hope, for your sake, it is not Demon.uk or you may well be cut off in your prime.

Sorry to be giving you this anthropomorphic treatment but ever since you announced your presence on the net I can't help getting an image of this bearded anorak doing clever things with web design.

Hey, you are not one of those horrible virus writers infecting people's software are you? That would explain where Richard Dawkins got his idea of viruses of the mind.

Now let me ask you this: if you are the cause of all things and everything must have a cause – as your spin-doctors on earth keep pointing out – how come you are exempt from this rule? In other words, can you tell us who created you and if nobody did, how come you are there in the first place? Also: if you are all-powerful, all-knowing and all good, how come evil? And please spare me the nonsense about free will; I am talking earthquakes, bolts of lightning, disease – that sort of thing.

**When Keith Akkermans
discovered that God had
acquired an e-mail address –
set up by Cambridge
University chaplain Bruce
Kinsley – he seized the
chance to quiz the Deity
about some of the more
baffling aspects of His
existence. Keith is still
waiting for a reply ...**

No excuses about fallen angels or devils either, please, or else we would have to conclude that such entities are more powerful than you, and that would not do, would it?

Whilst you are at it, can you explain why you are quietly standing by whilst the most horrific things go on in the world, like the genocide of the Jews, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, tribal wars in Africa and countless other conflicts in the world, the majority conducted in your name, whilst you seem to be much more preoccupied with allowing individuals to win the lottery, sports people to triumph in games and similar banalities.

The other day a young woman drove off the end of a cliff and was rescued not because she called you but, more sensibly, the emergency services on her mobile phone.

A person living nearby said that you must have been watching over her; but why make her drive off the cliff and dislocate her hip in the first place? To test people, your apologists suggest. But what is the purpose of such tests? You can't enjoy life unless you are given a few broken bones?

And here is a good one: it is about your fairness. I am told that only believers will gain entry to the Kingdom of Heaven. That leaves me with rather a problem. You see, try as I might, I can't believe. I am one of those unfortunates who require evidence before they take things on board.

Not even my free will makes any difference. I cannot will myself to believe in you anymore than I can will myself to believe that 2+2 is 5. What's more, you have made me this way and I think it is rather unfair, if you don't mind my saying, that I should be left carrying the can. In any case, why do you have this thing about

being believed in. Are you so insecure that my denial merits an act of vengeance?

Contemptuous indifference would seem a more appropriate response.

Another question I have is to do with a problem of scale. You see, I am mystified about your improbable preoccupation with this humble planet earth. You of all people must be aware that the universe consists of more planets, stars, galaxies even, than there are grains of sands on all the earth's beaches. A concept so mind-boggling that it must give even you a headache from time to time.

Given this multitude of places in the universe, lots of them no doubt full of other forms of life, how have you managed to pick out this tiny speck – and what induced you to send your only beloved son here to be crucified? Even-handed as I know you must be, have you also sent him out to be crucified on billions of other planets, and if so was this done one after the other or, in view of the time required, perhaps simultaneously? But then he would no longer be your only son would he?

All rather perplexing, don't you think? Now I have a burning question about the afterlife. (Any questions about the afterlife from an atheist would involve some burning I suppose). I want to know how you reassemble the bits. Even your devoted followers on earth are rather worried about your ability to perform this trick; that's why they don't want to be cremated. What about your missionaries – garnished with a sprig or two of parsley? – and eaten by the natives. A bit of complicated chemistry there, you will agree. And if souls can manage perfectly well without bodies, why give people bodies in the first place? I know some poor souls whose bodies give them nowt but trouble. Yet others put their bodies to sinful use; enough to make you blush. And whilst you are on line could you beam me down an illustration of how earthly life is regenerated somewhere else? What do all the dead people do all day; they must be bored stiff. What sort of afterlife is reserved for souls of foetuses never born? By the way, why is a human foetus worthier of salvation than an adult chimp? Will I see my mother at age 90 when she died or will she be older still? And will she recognise me if I too will live to 90? And will the soul of a 21-year-old still fancy his geriatric wife or wish to swap her for a younger model?

Another handy trick for which I would not mind an explanation is your ability to be on both sides in the same war. And then there is the little matter of miracles. I have never understood why instead of dodgy miracles like

(Continued on page 11)

HOW THE VATICAN WAY INTO THE U

By Eamonn

It was reported a while back that the Pope wants Vatican diplomats to intervene more decisively in world affairs to ensure that Catholic teaching is given greater weight in decisions to do with human rights, aid programmes and population control.

In the same week, UN officials complained that a Vatican campaign had stymied efforts to fulfil pledges made at Cairo five years ago to reduce the numbers of women dying in childbirth and to improve the reproductive health of young people.



Pope John Paul II who heads a church of "malevolent illusionists"

The coincidence of the two reports prompted me to ponder on how the Catholic Church has diplomats accredited to various countries, and is represented at the United Nations and in a wide range of international bodies. After all, it is a church, not a country; no other religion is involved in global politics in this way.

The common assumption is that the dual remit arises from the status of Vatican City as a State. But it is not as simple as that. Nothing to do with religion ever is.

In fact, it isn't Vatican City which is recognised at the UN and in the chancelleries of the world, but the Holy See, which at first sight is strange. Vatican City may be a State, albeit of the micro variety – less than half a square kilometre in area and with fewer than 500 citizens – but the Holy See is an altogether more nebulous affair.

Vatican City's statehood derives from the Lateran Treaty of 1929, negotiated between

Pius XI and Mussolini. The purpose was to ring-fence Church property and central administration from the secular law of the surrounding society.

The Holy See, on the other hand, defines itself as "the supreme organ of both the Catholic church and the Vatican City State". It might be imagined as the apex of a trinity, the micro-State and the institutional Church being the two other components. It has no temporal or territorial existence of any kind.

Nevertheless, the Holy See is mandated to conduct international relations as the "juridical personification of the Church".

In itself, this isn't to be wondered at. Treating abstract constructs as material realities is the stock-in-trade of all religion. What is wonderful is that this arrangement seems fully accepted by governments and international agencies. The Holy See is represented at the UN and maintains diplomatic relations with 157 countries.

The Holy See has a seat at the UN as a Non-Member State Permanent Observer (NMSPO). There is no provision for any such status in the UN Charter. The designation originated in an *ad hoc* way in the infancy of the organisation in 1946, to make provision for Switzerland – which was affiliated to a number of international bodies being brought within the UN's remit but was prevented by its constitution from taking up full UN membership.

Five years later, in 1951, Pius XII, citing the Vatican City's affiliation to two international bodies, the Universal Postal Union and the International Telecommunication Union (the city-state ran its own postal service and radio station) claimed a comparable right, and appointed an auxiliary bishop from New York to attend the UN on a part-time basis. The bishop's status was uncertain. UN documents from the time refer to him as the representative of "the State of the Vatican City".

By 1964, the presence of the Pope's man at UN Plaza had become accepted as custom and practice. Then, Pope Paul VI wrote to Secretary General U Thant, announcing that the "Holy See" wished to appoint a Permanent Observer on the Swiss model. There was no discussion of the proposal at the General Assembly or in any other UN forum. Within three weeks, U Thant had replied, welcoming the "Holy See" as the organisation's second NMSPO. Ever since, nominees of the Pope have been able to attend and speak, but not

to vote, in the General Assembly, and to participate fully in UN-sponsored international bodies.

Thus, the Holy See operates as a member of the World Health Organisation, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, the International Atomic Energy Agency and so forth. It also attends and has played a prominent role in gatherings such as the Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio in 1992, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and so on.

Given the UN's propensity to seek consensus rather than majority decisions, the Holy See has been able at assemblies of this sort, frequently in alliance with conservative Latin American and Muslim delegations, to block initiatives which it considers out of line with Catholic teaching. When it has failed, it has then mounted world-wide campaigns against the programmes and initiatives it had failed to defeat.

The Cairo conference, for example, in the face of Holy See-led opposition, launched a Programme of Action to address "the critical challenges of interrelationships between population and sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development". The five years since have been marked by a Vatican-inspired effort to prevent the programme being put into practice.

The Holy See was particularly upset by the Programme's stress on the "right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children, and to have the information and means to do so", and by the conference's more explicit call for measures to "ensure that women and men have information and access to the widest possible range of safe and effective family planning methods".

In a recent briefing document, the dissident group, Catholics for a Free Choice, detailed the Church's "campaign of obstruction" against the recommendations of Cairo.

• The campaign was the context for the publication of John Paul's March 1995 encyclical

CAN CONNED ITS UNITED NATIONS

● FEATURE ●

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Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life) which condemned not only contraception but the treatment of infertility. The encyclical claimed that unspecified international institutions were engaged on a "conspiracy against life".

- In June the same year, bishops from Asia and the Middle East forthrightly condemned "safe sex" education, saying, "We insist that the only reliable remedy to the spread of AIDS is fidelity within marriage and chastity outside marriage". They added that "periodic abstinence" was the only acceptable method of family planning.

- Three months later the Brazilian bishops attacked a government health programme involving the use of condoms. "Sickness isn't fought by degrading morals and hurling people to hell."

- In September 1995, the Vatican denounced any focus by UN agencies on the sexual and reproductive health of women and demanded that governments interpret all references in Cairo documents to sexuality to mean sex within marriage.

- In March 1996, the church in Brazil rejected a marriage application on the ground that

the man was paraplegic and therefore impotent.

- In August 1996, Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi responded to pleas from church leaders and cancelled all sex education in primary schools. "Our religions are against this immorality", he explained.

- In the same month, the Nicaraguan bishops declared that the country was suffering from "anti-reproductive colonialism" and that the terms "reproductive rights", "reproductive health" and "safe sex" really meant "abortion, promiscuity and the arbitrary use of sex".

- In July 1977, the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, highlighted and welcomed a report by a consultant in bioethics saying that people with physical or mental disabilities shouldn't have sex. The disabled should "collaborate with God to avoid creating further pain and sorrow".

- In November 1977, the Holy See's UN deputation protested against the distribution of contraceptives in UN refugee camps.

- In April 1998 the New York and Connecticut State Catholic Conferences launched a lobby to dissuade insurance companies from covering health plans which included contraceptive drugs and devices.

- In June 1988, the Vatican condemned proposals to include "enforced pregnancy" in the International Criminal Court's list of war

crimes, lest this provide a basis for women raped in wartime to obtain legal abortions.

The examples, chosen from a catalogue at least 20 times as long, have this in common: that they weren't random outbursts by reactionary clerics responding to this or that development; each was an element in a coordinated effort to combat attempts to put the Cairo recommendations into practice.

The Holy See operates in world forums after the manner of a State. But when it doesn't get its own way it self-transubstantiates into a religion and mobilises its agents and adherents across the globe to set the majority decisions which it disapproves of aside.

All of this activity affects the lives and legal rights not only of Catholics but of many millions of people of all religions and none.

What is at stake here is the health, contentment and life expectancy of an entire generation. Every day, 7,000 people under 24 become infected with AIDS; half of all rapes and sexual assaults in the world are inflicted on 15-year-olds and under; complications from pregnancy and childbirth is the most common cause of death among teenage girls.

These are world problems which the Catholic Church doesn't want confronted, other than with piety and prayer-beads.

The cynicism and dishonesty of the deception shouldn't shock us. But we should be shocked that they have been allowed to get away with it for so long. It is time these malevolent illusionists were kicked out of the world bodies they've conned their way into.

NSS calls for Vatican to lose its UN status

THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY (NSS) has called for the Vatican to lose its privileged status as a permanent observer at the United Nations following the Church's efforts at a UN Conference to halt sex education and the dissemination of contraceptive advice in developing countries.

In a statement issued last month, the Society voiced its support for Clare Short, the Secretary of State for International Development, in her important initiative at the UN to help stabilise population growth throughout the world.

Speaking at the UN General Assembly, Ms Short sharply criticised the Vatican for what she called its "reactionary" interference in the promotion of information that would help women in developing countries to protect their health and limit their families.

Immediately after, Ms Short was attacked over her pronouncement by the Conservative Party spokesman Gary Streeter, who demanded that Ms Short apologise to the Vatican for her critical comments.

His attack was condemned by the NSS as "unthinking support for religion at its worst".

Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary of the NSS said: "The Pope's inhumane refusal to permit artificial birth control increases poverty, misery and overpopulation. Forbidding condoms furthers the spread of diseases – especially AIDS.

"Only last month the Vatican was trying to stop the distribution of morning-after pills to Kosovan Albanian women who had been raped by Serb soldiers.

"There seems to be no end to the cruelty the Roman Catholic Church is prepared to inflict on suffering people in the name of its dogmas.

"Many of the people affected by these decisions are not Roman Catholics, or even Christians, and some are even non-believers. An institution with such policies must no longer be permitted to interfere with the urgent need to curb the massive rise in the world's population. The Vatican should be stripped of its status at the UN immediately before it inflicts further damage on this vitally important work. Roman Catholicism is the only religion to enjoy this status."

Every newspaper and trade union in Britain should be remembering Henry Hetherington (1792-1849), the great pioneer of a free press, who died 150 years ago this month. A radical reformer and follower of Robert Owen, Hetherington signed the original *People's Charter* and took part in most of the progressive movements of the early nineteenth century, including the struggles to set up workers' trade unions.

Most important, though, was his leadership of the "war of the unstamped press", in opposition to the fourpenny stamp on newspapers, more particularly through his publication *The Poor Man's Guardian* (1831-35), described by E P Thompson (in *The Making of the English Working Class*) as "undoubtedly the finest working class weekly which had (until that time) been published in Britain"; and by Dorothy Thompson (in *The Chartists*) as "the best and most influential of the unstamped journals".

The paper carried an emblem of a hand-press, the motto "Knowledge is Power" and the heading "Published contrary to Law" to try the power of "Might" against "Right"; and in his opening address, Hetherington quoted clause by clause the laws he intended to defy. *The Poor Man's Guardian* would, he said, contain "news, intelligence and occurrences", and remarks and observations thereon on matters of Church and State "tending decidedly to excite hatred and contempt of the Government and Constitution of the country BY LAW established"; and also "to vilify the ABUSES of Religion".

His fourth number carried a "WANTED" advertisement: "Some hundreds of POOR MEN out of employ who have NOTHING TO RISK...to sell to the poor and ignorant". Not only were the volunteers found, says E P Thompson, "but a score of other unstamped papers sprang up, notably [Richard] Carlile's *Gauntlet* and Joshua Hobson's *Voice of the West Riding*. By 1836 the struggle was substantially over, and the way had been opened for the Chartist press". Thompson also tells us that, while editing the unstamped *Poor Man's Guardian*, one of Hetherington's stratagems was to pass "under the noses of the constables...in the highly unlikely disguise of a Quaker".

Even so, he was twice sentenced to six months' imprisonment in 1831 and 1832. And he was to be imprisoned again in 1840, this time for blasphemy, for publishing C J Haslam's *Letters to the Clergy of All Denominations*, a penny anti-Christian weekly that exposed scriptural contradictions. At his trial he defended the right to freedom of

speech; the "exercise of the right of free inquiry, and the unrestricted publication of the results of such inquiry". Lord Denman, the judge, confessed to "having listened with feelings of great interest and sentiments of respect, too", but this defence proved unavailing. Hetherington was fined and incarcerated in the Queen's Bench Prison, because he refused to pay the fine.

On his release, says Joel H Wiener (in the *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*), he took up the cause of religious liberty even more vigorously, and was active in the Anti-Persecution Union, a defence organisation for "blasphemers", founded in 1842.

Earlier, as Wiener points out, he had joined a group of freethinking Christians, but soon broke with them because they refused to admit a Jew. He also printed, and possibly edited, the *Freethinking Christian's Quarterly Register* (1823-25), which presented the case for a Christianity devoid of common prayer, ritual and "superstitious" doctrines such as the immortality of the soul. And he worked for the Civil and Religious Association, a reform group that favoured Roman Catholic emancipation, as well as other extensions of religious liberty. But the *Poor Man's Guardian* contained anti-Christian pieces by Voltaire, Shelley, Byron and d'Holbach; and in the late 1830s Hetherington published a number of freethought tracts and pamphlets, among them *A Hunt after the Devil*, which demolished the story of Noah's ark.

In an erudite lecture to South Place Ethical Society on July 11, 1999, which he kindly let me see beforehand, Daniel O'Hara has shown that Hetherington, with a Joseph Taylor of Birmingham, was the first translator of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* into English, although George Eliot's version is generally accorded that honour. South Place Ethical Society has a copy of the Hetherington/Taylor translation bound in two volumes, which it brought to Mr O'Hara's attention. The work was originally issued in four volumes, with Hetherington's name appearing first on volume one, and Taylor's taking precedence on the remaining three. Volume one is undated, says Mr O'Hara, but two, three and four were published between 1842 and 1844. George Eliot's translation of Strauss's work (in three volumes) appeared in 1846.

John M Robertson knew of the Hetherington/Taylor translation (what didn't he know?) which, he learnt from a Unitarian divine J R Beard (1800-1876), was made from the French version by Littré (1839). Beard, who edited and contributed to a "reply" to

Strauss, described the translation as having "not the slightest literary value whatever, being obviously brought out to supply food to the unhappily depraved appetite for sceptical productions". He accused the translator of being "ignorant of the most ordinary facts and circumstances connected with the subject" but, says Daniel O'Hara, he "cites only a single trivial example of a place-name which has suffered by being doubly translated". Robertson found the translation at least adequate, and no more guilty of error or solicism than Beard himself. There is no evidence that George Eliot knew of the Hetherington/Taylor version when she began her own.

After Henry Hetherington's death from cholera on August 24, 1849, his followers published his last will and testament, in which his freethinking ideas are made explicit.

In the first place, he wrote, "I calmly and deliberately declare that I do not believe in the popular notion of an Almighty, All-wise and Benevolent God - possessing intelligence, and conscious of his own operations; because these attributes involve such a mass of absurdities and contradictions, so much cruelty and injustice on His part to the poor and destitute portion of His creatures - that, in my opinion, no rational or reflecting mind can, after disinterested investigation, give credence to the existence of such a Being".

Second, he believed death to be "an eternal sleep". Third, he considered "priestcraft and superstition the greatest obstacle to human improvement and happiness". The only religion useful to man consisted exclusively of the practice of morality. As he had lived, he said, so he died, "a determined opponent to the nefarious and plundering system"; and he wished his friends "to deposit my remains in unconsecrated ground", allowing "no priest, or clergyman of any denomination, to interfere in any way whatsoever at my funeral".

And he paid his final tribute to "that great and good man Robert Owen", whose system, Hetherington was convinced, was "the only true road to human freedom and emancipation".

— Colin McCall

Quotable quote

Why do born-again people so often make you wish they'd never been born the first time?

— Katherine Whitehorn, British journalist, writing in the *Observer*, May 20, 1979

WE SHOULDN'T crow too much about the tangles that opponents get themselves into, because history shows that we in the secular movement are quite capable of messing up our own organisations. However, it is particularly gratifying to see the so-called "pro-life" (more accurately anti-abortion) movement wading into the mire. The Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, one of the most powerful and virulent of the anti-abortion groups, has, according to the *Daily Express*, received a "scathing letter" from its supporters in Parliament, criticising it for seemingly changing tactical direction without consulting anyone. It is, apparently, turning down its pressure in parliament and looking towards the Vatican.

Among signatories to the letter are the ubiquitous and hilarious Ann Widdecombe and a dozen other "senior MPs", as well as members of the House of Lords, including Lord Alton, who failed a decade ago to have the abortion time limit cut. They accuse the organisation's new leader John Smeaton of turning the society away from its original purpose and causing its founder, and half the national council, to resign.

SPUC has since given Mr Smeaton a vote of confidence, so the politicians assume that the organisation shares his policy of scaling down efforts in Westminster.

The letter, which was leaked to the *Express*, says that the MPs and Lords are "appalled at the diversion of the whole society from its original strategic objectives" and that those changes were made without consulting its estimated 50,000 members. It goes on to "question the probity" of raising fighting funds from people who believe it will be channelled into the political fight in parliament.

Usually any religious pressure group in Westminster gets an automatic and respectful hearing from the holy Joes in the Government, but this time Ms Widdecombe and her motley crew of religious fanatics are up against Frank Dobson, the Health Secretary whose humanistic sympathies are well known. He is much more likely to favour a liberal stance on this issue, and is less vulnerable than some of his colleagues to pressure from Widdecombe, SPUC or anyone else of that ilk.

Nevertheless, her holiness Ann Widdecombe is now being touted as possible Tory second-in-command – even though she has blotted her copy book by coming out in favour of a ban on fox hunting. But does she really stand any chance of real success in the world of politics with its pragmatism and compromise? She is, after all, something of a dogmatist in the religious arena and will prove to be so in politics.

Ann Widdecombe in abortion scandal

Ms Widdecombe had to be moved from her job as shadow health secretary because of her unyielding stance on abortion, and the *Daily Telegraph* senses that she might spell big trouble for the party because of her "overbearing righteousness". All the same, Mr Hague is still taking the risk of leaving her in charge of the party while he is away on holiday this month. Let's hope that a religious controversy arises while Willy's away. If it does, Ann will be unable to restrain herself, and that extraordinary voice will be heard screeching from the airwaves night and day.

A lot of people opine that Ann Widdecombe is just the thing that the Tory party needs, a strong woman with principles to match. The problem is that she thinks she's Pope Ann, and she imagines that she can bring us all to Jesus. She has that strange lack of insight that all evangelically inclined people have, and has not yet realised that there is a special humiliation awaiting all politicians who think they are preachers.

However, given that the BBC cannot find the right formula for a sitcom that can make us laugh, it is up to Ms Widdecombe to push herself forward to become leader of the Conservative party. In this way she can genuinely serve her country by keeping it entertained during the dark days of the Blair administration.

Wrong again

THE GREATEST prophet of them all, Nostradamus, got it wrong again. That is unless the world actually did end after all and we are in fact in an afterlife that is exactly like the previous one and we therefore we can't tell the difference (as suggested by Miles Kingston in the *Independent*).

It is unsurprising that lesser prophets also cock it up, and so it was with Vincent Munden, a "psychic medium" featured in the *News of the World*. Apparently Mr Munden has built "a worldwide reputation for the uncanny accuracy of his predictions". The NoW invited the seer to predict the winning horses for that day's racing. After all, Mr Munden claimed he had given the winning lottery numbers to a man in Bournemouth, so picking three winning horses should have been child's play.

After some mystical *fol-de-rol* with a quartz crystal and his magical tarot, he came up with Primo Lara ("No doubt – this will win"); Pairumani Star ("I'm getting a strong mes-

sage") and Raaqi ("This is the one to back").

Primo Lara went down the tubes, as did Raaqi, but Pairumani Star won at 9-4. So taking into account the betting tax, a straight win on these nags would have left you slightly out of pocket.

Mr Munden did not reveal who on the other side had passed this information to him, but I suspect it might have been the late (and not very lamented) bookie William Hill, who wanted to ensure that his old firm on this side of the veil wasn't out of pocket.

Quote of the month

"WHAT A strange view of human nature is held by church leaders. Surely it's obvious that moral values develop naturally through observation and experience. To attempt to 'teach' them would be absurd and in any case, self-defeating, since nothing is more certain to turn a teenager one way than an instruction to turn the other. Moreover, the idea that one generation should try and forcibly pass on its moral values to the next is not only absurd but dangerous. If applied in the past we'd still be tugging our forelocks to the gentry and burning witches."

– Richard Guise, Independent.

God on the net (continued from p7)

having the Blessed Virgin Mother appear to some neurotic peasant girls in backward European countries or curing the odd headache and limp in Lourdes, you have never seen fit to perform a full-blown, conclusive miracle, such as replacing somebody's lost leg or making an appearance in the centre circle at Wembley stadium, just before kick-off.

Now you might say, having an e-mail address on the net is proof enough, but I must confess to this tiny nagging doubt that perhaps it's your mates again, those tiresome sycophants that you seem to attract from everywhere, prepared to do your bidding. (Admittedly for a bob or two.) So, after all you aren't going to answer any of my questions are you? My local vicar would say I will have a long wait; you are far too superior to be wound up by the likes of me; but if you are so aloof and untouchable, why does he, and others like him, bother so much?

Why don't they leave off conjecturing and doing your talking for you until you get your celestial modem into gear? Perhaps I am being too harsh and the complexities of modern electronics are defeating your brain. For the sake of mankind let us hope that someday soon in your confusion you will highlight your folder and double click delete.

THIS is a book that glories in the multitudinous diversity of living organisms and their functions. "What a world to be living in, to marvel at, to enjoy in its multifarious variety", exclaims Steven Rose, Professor of Biology and Director of the Brain and Behaviour Research Group at the Open University.

Like Richard Dawkins in *Unweaving the Rainbow*, published a year later than this book in hardback, Rose reveals beauties beneath the surface: "in the scanning electron microscope's view of the eye of the bluebottle as much as in the flowering of a camellia; in the biochemical mechanisms that generate usable energy in the miniscule sausage-shaped mitochondria that inhabit each of our body cells, as much as in the flowing muscles of the athlete who exploits these mechanisms". How are we to understand these multitudes of organisms? And what about ourselves, "like, yet unlike, any other species on Earth".

We are not, he says, "empty organisms, free spirits constrained only by the limits of our imaginations or, more prosaically, by the social and economic determinants within which we live, think and act. Nor are we reducible to 'nothing but' machines for the replication of our DNA. We are, rather, the products of the constant dialectic between 'the biological' and 'the social' through which humans have evolved..."

Those who are familiar with the current – and continuing – debate among eminent Darwinists will detect an argumentative note here, and it is a theme that runs right through, indeed, is integral to the book. Rose has always been concerned about freedom – of all kinds – and is particularly opposed to any attempt to treat humans as being "programmed" from birth. He recognises the power and role of the genes without subscribing to genetic determinism. He wants to recapture "an understanding of living organisms and their trajectories through time and space as lying at the centre of biology". It is these trajectories that he calls "lifelines".

Steven Rose understands the appeal of reductionism, but considers it inapplicable to biology. Living systems are far from simple, "they evolve many interacting variables"; the living world is "highly non-uniform". Reductionist methodology is helpful in chemistry because (so far as is known) the chemical world is the same everywhere but, in the living world, "the exception is nearly always the rule". Rose aims "to counter the gene's-eye view" of those he calls the ultra-Darwinists, and "put the organism and its lifeline back at the core of biology".

Two of the "ultras", as he sees them, are

**LIFELINES: Biology,
Freedom, Determinism
by Steven Rose.
Penguin £8.99**

Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, at Oxford University, and Daniel C Dennett, Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, Massachusetts, author of *Consciousness Explained* (1993) and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995).

There is nothing wrong with controversy; indeed, it should be encouraged. Sadly, though, personal bitterness has crept into this argument and, regrettably, this book is not free from it. Which is a great pity because Rose's case for the complexity of living organisms at all levels is convincing. He argues too for "the role of chance, of contingency, at all levels of analysis of living systems", from the micro-level of the individual cell and its subcellular components. Biochemists do not deal with individual cells or with individual copies of their molecules, but with aggregates of millions and "on this scale properties become fairly predictable. But what is predictable for the mass does not apply to the individual". Chance at this level, he says, "affects all cellular processes, including, as has long been recognised, the random mutations in DNA structure induced by cosmic radiation or other mutagenic agents". And "Similar considerations apply to the role of chance in development".

Contingency can be found in the fruit fly, *Drosophila*, he says – and in humans... Identical twins, for instance, share identical DNA, "yet from the moment of conception and cell division the relative locations of the two embryos to the placenta and the environment of the uterus affect their development in chance ways. Developmental divergence increases with every cell division..."

I don't see a real clash with determinism here. May we not regard "affect" as a conditioning or determining factor in the twins' development? It is true that we cannot predict how it will affect that development, but that is a separate issue. And Rose is surely right when he regards the "combination of predictability and unpredictability" as distinguishing "living systems and processes from the much simpler events that form the terrain of physics and chemistry". I have long considered the development of scientific disciplines schematically in the form of a spiral with physics at the base.

There is undoubted continuity through the different sciences – chemistry, biochemistry, biology, psychology – but not unity; each level requires new descriptive laws beyond those it shares with the levels beneath it.

Steven Rose is, of course, a Darwinist himself, and a materialist who yields no ground to those who argue that life is "anything other than material forces operating in a material universe, potentially explicable by the methods of a (non-reductive) science". His critique is "in no way directed against the fact of evolution among the organisms that inhabit our planet, nor against the mechanics of natural selection". The problem of adaptation is not an insoluble one. Darwin "surmised that it could be resolved, given enough evolutionary space and time, and he was surely right". There is, needless to say, no place for creationism, fundamentalist religion or New Age mysticism. He aims, he says, to rescue Darwin from "some of his over-solicitous modern friends". And some scepticism is certainly called for when we are constantly hearing of the "discovery" of genes for this and genes for that.

Karl Popper argued for "active Darwinism", which conceived of "the living organism as helping to determine its own fate by itself challenging and modifying its environment to meet its own needs", which may be likened to Rose's "dynamic Darwinism", viewing organisms as "active players in their own fate". But neither cells nor organisms can be considered in isolation from their environments, that of cells being "membranes constructed of complex arrays of lipid and protein molecules, which act as both barrier and interface with the world outside them".

Evolutionary change follows environmental change; evolutionary forces respond only to present circumstances, not to potential future contingencies. And Rose contends, "To isolate from this evolving web a single factor, be it gene or organism, as the unique determinant of change is as problematic as isolating a single enzyme from the metabolic web that constitutes the cell. Any such attempt at isolation is a reductionism that mistakes method for theory". It is, as I have said, a thoroughly materialistic case, and he argues it well, not to say with feeling.

In conclusion I especially welcome Steven Rose's warning about the use of analogy in scientific writing. Analogies are, as he says, "hazardous tools". "Often they are merely metaphor, and the likeness we imagine is poetic rather than exact. And often they are taken to imply homology..." I am not sure that the warning is always heeded.

Dear Parson,

In my last letter I asked you about things, thoughts and words.

Much more must be said about words. Where would we be without words?

The answer is: nowhere!

The human species, as it is now, and as it has been for thousands of years, would never have come into existence. Other animals possess varying modes and degrees of communication. But no other species on this planet can think about places they have never visited, or times they have never lived in.

Our brains are vastly magnified because they are connected, like a telephone exchange, with thousands of other brains, living and dead. Words store information and build up an enormous accumulation of knowledge. They instruct, inform, comfort and delight.

But there is a dark side to language. In the *Freethinker* (November and December 1985) I explored this dark side in two articles entitled *Bad Language* and *The Power and Peril of Words*. We are all familiar with lies, deceit, fraud, jargon and the webs of the spin-doctors.

But there is far worse.

Words can kill!

Words have killed millions!

How many people have been persecuted for words they have uttered, or refused to utter?

How many wars might have been avoided if the protagonists had negotiated using words with mutually agreed meanings?

Your religion, dear parson, is full of words, sacred writings, hymns, prayers, encyclicals, blessings and condemnations of heresy.

Does Christianity have clean hands?

Christian crusaders, barbarians when compared with the more civilised Saracens, launched successive attacks in the name of Jesus. In the 12th century AD, Pope Innocent III initiated crusades against fellow Christians, denounced as heretics – the Albigenses of Provence, more enlightened than the rest of France. When this genocidal campaign continued into the 13th century, one of Innocent III's papal successors, Gregory IX, set up the Inquisition, putting the Dominican Order in charge to torture the survivors.

All about words!

In 1414 the Czech Protestant reformer John Huss was invited to present his "heretical" views to the Council of Constance, and was granted a safe conduct. Notwithstanding, the Council demanded a retraction, and when Huss refused he was burned at the stake. I have seen the spot.

Words!

The slaughter continued. 50,000 Huguenots were massacred on St Bartholomew's Day

Bad language

by Karl Heath

1572. The Thirty Years War in Germany (1618-1648) reduced the population from 15 million to nine million. 25,000 Protestants were killed in one German city alone, Magdeburg.

Christians have executed thousands of innocent women because of eight words in the Bible – "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." (Exodus ch22 v8).

Words!

The *auto-da-fe* (Portuguese for act of faith) was devised by the Spanish Inquisition as a ceremonial procedure against heretics, especially on All Saints Day.

Heretics were than handed over to the civil authorities to be burnt.

Why burnt?

Words again!

The victims were burnt because the Roman Catholic Church claimed that it was forbidden to shed blood. The axiom *Ecclesia non novit sanguinem* meant "the church is untainted with blood".

But death by fire was all right. A 12th-century Pope, Innocent IV, perpetrated a similar tergiversation when he instructed the Inquisition that it was permissible to torture.

The *auto-da-fe* continued until the 19th century.

"True Christians"

I am sure you do not defend this bloody history. But do you, as many other clerics have done, try to evade responsibility by claiming that these horrors were the work of persons who were not "true Christians"?

What is a "true Christian"?

I am sure you will agree that the definition excludes those like the Borgia Popes, Alexander VI and Cesare, with their incest and Vatican orgies.

But what about hypocrisy?

After the massacre of Irish Roman Catholics at Wexford and Drogheda, Oliver Cromwell said: "Would that God had not put upon me the doing of this deed." Was he a hypocrite? The Levellers thought so. One of them wrote: "You shall scarce speak to Cromwell, but he weep, howl and repent, and call God to witness, while all the while he doth smite you under the fifth rib."

Cromwell required his "New Model Army" troopers to carry Bibles in their saddle-bags, to be sustained, especially from the Old

Testament, in their resolve to smite their enemies "as stubble to their swords".

But is hypocrisy the problem?

Would you agree that much of the horror has been directed by zealots who genuinely believed they were obeying God's will?

Underlying all this history there have been words – false words and words without meaning.

I have no quarrel with fiction, fairy tales, fantasy and poetry so long as they are acknowledged to be what they are. They can be wonderful, give immense pleasure and stimulate noble emotion.

But when false and meaningless words are declared as doctrine and dogma they can become killers.

In most societies there are safeguards against the misuse of words. The sale of goods and services is restricted by trades description legislation, the Sale of Goods Act, and other laws relating to contracts and misrepresentation. Those offering professional services are required to prove their professional qualifications. There is protection against defamation and incitement.

But your churches, in the main, appear exempt from these safeguards.

When you use words like "creation", "resurrection", "immortality", etc, are you legally required to demonstrate your veracity, and produce evidence for it?

In my letter No 8 I asked you about one of the words in constant use in your religion.

Forgive me if I tease you about it.

If I were to say that I believe in osuls, you would naturally ask me what an osul was. If I replied vaguely that we each have one, and that they live forever, would you not be inclined to ask what osuls look like, if they are visible. If they are invisible how do they recognise each other? Do they walk, talk, eat and drink? Where are they?

I have transposed only two letters.

Can you demonstrate that the word "soul" has any more meaning than my invented word "osul"?

I have devoted much of my life to the proposition that words should have meaning. They should be related to life, our physical surroundings and our human conduct in those surroundings.

To me, the misuse of words is a crime.

Quotable quote

Man is quite insane. He wouldn't know how to create a maggot, and he creates gods by the dozen.

– Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592).

French essayist

Co-operation, not amalgamation

THE PRESENT debate about the future of humanism and secularism, which has been initiated by the British Humanist Association, seems more indicative of a loss of direction on their part than any coherent case for amalgamation.

I am not a member of the BHA, and that is because I do not know what the organisation is for. Is it some kind of crypto-religion? Or is it just a forum for people without religion to exchange ideas and philosophies? Or, as some of its members seem to think, should it be something like the Salvation Army, doing good works and helping the needy? I'm all for philanthropy, but the BHA will never have the resources to make any meaningful impact on any area of social need nor should it try. After all, we strive hard enough to get religion out of hospitals and schools without wanting to introduce a replacement. If humanists want to do good, let them do so as individuals within the secular structures of social work and the NHS that exist already.

One reason I won't join the BHA is because the idea of "organised humanism" seems to me an oxymoron. Why would a freethinker want to be in an organisation that seeks to create some kind of unified ethical philosophy? The other reason I stay out is because I am anti-religious, and, by and large, the BHA isn't.

On the other hand, the National Secular Society knows precisely what it is for. It is a pressure group, a lobbying and campaigning organisation. Its aims are quite clear, and they are supported by its members and associates. It wants the Church and State separated, the bishops out of the House of Lords, religion out of schools, and for dangerous cults to be vigorously opposed. It doesn't seek to explore issues of personal morality. Navel-gazing is not part of the NSS's purpose.

The idea, therefore, that all the other groups should shut up shop and be absorbed into the BHA just isn't on. I know that the NSS is anathema to many members of the BHA, and they would object at every stage to the NSS's important, and increasingly effective, work if they had a say in it. In the unlikely event of a take-over of the NSS by the BHA, I for one would not be coming along for the ride, nor, I suspect, would many other members. Co-operation in areas of common interest, yes. Amalgamation definitely not.

TERRY SANDERSON
London

Anachronistic role of the bishops

QUOTING Pike's Constitutional History of the House of Lords, Eric Thompson (July

Freethinker) questions the accuracy of recent National Secular Society statements on the Bench of Bishops, on the ground that the "Prelates, though spiritual lords, were Peers only by virtue of their temporal possessions". However, since only five of the 26 "spiritual lords" sit on the Bench by virtue of their particular diocese, with its Crown lands, this assertion can surely refer only to those five. The remainder of the Bench are there on the basis of their individual seniority, irrespective of diocesan land.

The full text of the NSS Submission does in fact mention, in passing, this historical criterion; but it is hardly of great moment today, for no one would suggest that the real-estate function justifies the retention of any bishops (whether five or 26) in a reformed Second Chamber at the start of the third millennium. Indeed, it is common ground among both supporters and opponents of the Bench of Bishops that their main legislative function now is that of alleged experts in "spiritual" and ethical matters rather than defenders of Crown land. In our view, this function too is anachronistic and totally unjustified.

The point at issue, therefore, is how the Church can justify its historical stake in the legislature, representing as it does a small bastion of privilege for a dwindling minority Christian sect.

To augment the Bench of C of E Bishops with appointed leaders of other sects and other religions would only give further weight to unrepresentative religious bias in the House at the expense of genuine democracy. We might as well institute a second legislative chamber composed of freemasons or bookmakers or members of the Magic Circle.

D. Bressan's letter on the same subject (same page) dismisses the NSS campaign as "misguided" since the social and psychological influence of the C of E is "bland" in comparison with that of the RC Church elsewhere in Europe. But it is the job of the NSS to fight ecclesiastical privilege in the UK, and this topical threat is at the very core of secularism. Your letters page would have justly overflowed with accusations of dereliction of duty had the NSS Secretary, Keith Porteous Wood, taken Mr Bressan's advice instead of mounting the energetic campaign he did, for which he should be congratulated.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Overstated

I WRITE as member of both the BHA and the NSS and I take no pleasure in saying that your reporting of the Bank of Scotland's decision to

sever connections with the odious Pat Robertson was rather inaccurate. Your front page heading "Pat Robertson is sent packing by irate Scottish and English humanists" and the press statement issued by GALHA saying "Robertson's worst nightmare has come true - he has been cast out by homosexual humanists", are both exaggerations. Admittedly your text acknowledged the contribution of "a variety of other groups" but the whole slant of your report greatly overstated the importance of the contribution made by both GALHA and the other Humanist organisations. It was the breadth of public opposition which moved the Bank and you do no service to the humanist movement by pretending otherwise.

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

Bradlaugh would have been a Tory

MR MCILROY in his letter entitled "Tories hated Bradlaugh" (*Freethinker*, July) commits the very crime he is accusing me of; namely disingenuousness.

Mr McIlroy knows that Bradlaugh's liberalism included a full-blown defence of private property and a vigorous condemnation of socialism. Bradlaugh's beliefs were therefore radically opposed to pink champagne socialists, whether found in the present day so-called "Liberal" Democrats or "New" Labour. The present day Conservative Party is closer to Bradlaugh's liberalism, and if he were alive today, no doubt he would be a member!

In view of the many crimes and idiocies revealed since the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe, I find it as difficult to understand how a freethinker, such as Mr McIlroy, can still believe in such irrationalities as Charles Bradlaugh found it difficult, for a rational person to believe in God.

PETER WINDLE
Newcastle Upon Tyne

We are all painient beings

P L LANCASTER ("Wrong Statements", *Freethinker*, June 1999) attacks Heather Evans for questioning the morality of exploiting animals for "cheap food" and "profits". Surely Heather is right to do this. To cause great suffering to humans for these ends would be inexcusable. So why should it be right to abuse nonhumans for such purposes? We are all painient beings. To justify abuse on the grounds that some painients are of a different species is a prejudice that I have called speciesism.

Mr Lancaster makes the point that humans have heavier brains and are better at using language than other animals. But are these differ-



ences morally significant? If so, would Mr Lancaster justify the exploitation of humans who have small brains or who are mute? Surely, painience is what matters morally.

DR RICHARD RYDER
Devon

Living without flesh foods

First, in reply to Roger McCaffister (*Freethinker*, June), we humans have reached a stage in our evolution where our behaviour needs to be guided by rational thought, not just our genes, or else this planet will become unfit for habitation.

Happily, there is no evidence that plants are painient, although plenty of evidence that animals are. It is quite possible to live enjoyably and healthily without flesh foods, or even any animal products – so “starvation or cannibalism” will not be our dilemma!

In reply to Peter L Lancaster, I do not claim that any other species uses a language “as we do”, but that some have “a language or complex social structure”. The “genes 98 per cent similar to our own” expression is in common use and not of my invention.

Regarding brain size, psychologist Susan Blackmore’s *New Scientist* article does indeed make claims differing from my library source. In the Nov 7, 1998 issue it is even hypothesised that “a big brain reveals more about our vision than our intelligence”! If Peter rereads my article, however, he will notice that my mention of brain size is a mere digression to outline the absurd justifications human animals give for exploiting other species – and how often these are factually inaccurate as well. It is crucial to realise, however, that in the speciesism argument size of brain is totally irrelevant.

Singer’s claim that “our domination of animals is morally indefensible” seems to me a reasonable one. In order to get cheaper food (and have more cash for luxuries) we buy battery produced eggs – spare just a few more pence and the hens could live comfortable lives. The cost to us would be small, the difference to them immeasurable. Should our trivial interests outweigh their important interests? Is this morally defensible?

Most animal protectionists would consider it justifiable to defend themselves against the threat of mosquitoes.

Peter, in turn, might like to justify for us the daily exploitation, imprisonment and slaughter of species quite harmless to us, usually with the ‘nasty jobs’ taking place behind closed doors (so that we needn’t know too much about it) while we conform with the mindless crowd and ask no questions - taking pains not

to notice the “concentration camp smoke”.

HEATHER EVANS
Warwickshire

God’s funeral

Terry Sanderson, reviewing A N Wilson’s book about sceptical writers in Victorian England (*Freethinker*, July), says that “his erudition in this respect cannot be faulted” and that “he seems to have read every book in the British Library”. On the contrary, his book is marred by several errors and serious omissions.

Take only some examples most relevant to readers of the *Freethinker*. Wilson refers to the “Secularist Society” when he means the National Secular Society, and includes Bradlaugh among sympathisers with the Social Democratic Federation which he strongly opposed; and there are minor mistakes in most of the other references to both the secularist and the socialist movements.

More important, Wilson on the one hand concentrates on a few middle-class and upper-class intellectuals who tended to conceal their agonising doubts, and on the other hand ignores the many mostly lower-class propagandists who tried to proclaim their comfortable doubts. And – as I noticed when working in the same place at the same time on the same subject in the same period – he didn’t bother to consult the many publications of the 19th-century freethought movement which were produced by these people and are available in the British Library.

So he says a little about Besant, less about Bradlaugh, almost nothing about Foote, and nothing at all about Carlile, Watson, Hetherington, Southwell, Holyoake (G J or Austin), Watts (John or Charles), Saladin, Robertson, Gould, McCabe, Cohen, and all the other obscure people who struggled and suffered for “the best of causes”. (Incidentally, he says virtually nothing about Meredith, the freethinking poet and novelist who coined that phrase.)

Finally, the title of Wilson’s book, *God’s Funeral*, comes from a poem not by Thomas Carlyle but by Thomas Hardy.

NICOLAS WALTER
London N1

Library destruction

Your correspondent D Roberts of Surrey (*Freethinker* July) challenges my sources regarding the destruction of the Library at Alexandria by Bishop Theophilus (not Theodophilus). The article was extracted from a section of a lengthy thesis that now forms

chapter five of my book, *Christianity, Astrology and Myth*, currently being published in the USA. The full text is as follows:

The library was burned during the siege of Alexandria by Julius Caesar in 47 BCE. To make amends for this great loss, the library collected by Eumenes, King of Pergamus, was presented by Marcus Antonius to Queen Cleopatra. However, under an edict of Theodosius in 389 CE, the fanatic Christian bishop Theophilus burnt the library to the ground along with the temple of Serapis, and in so doing destroyed the only remaining library of importance in the ancient world. The few books that survived were destroyed by the Muslim general Amr ibn-al-As when he captured the city in 646 CE

The above-mentioned library was added to the remnants of the original stored in the Serapium – temple of Serapis. Theophilus, under an edict of Theodosius, was responsible for the destruction of the Serapium, along with all other pagan temples and Academies in Alexandria. In consequence much of the combined library was destroyed; the final destruction being in or about 646 CE at the hands of the Muslims.

For relevant sources consult:

Draper J W *The Conflict between Religion and Science*, Watts, 1927, pp.18-21& 47-48.

Gibbon E *Rome*, Penguin, Vol. 3. p.146.

Larson M A *The Story of Christian Origins*, Village Press, USA, 1977, p.181 [cites Against Heresies 1. 23. 1-4]

Prof. H.W. Smith, *Man And His Gods*, Little Brown, USA, 1952, p.164

LARRY WRIGHT
Swindon

Vatican priorities

THE VATICAN is considering appointing Isidore, a bishop of Seville who was born around 560, as patron saint of the Internet. I can, of course, see how important this appointment would be to devout Internet users. Even so, I think the issue raises some questions about the sense of priorities in the Vatican. The appointment of a patron saint of children sexually abused by Roman Catholic priests seems much more urgent.

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Please address your letters (preferably typed) to Barry Duké, *Freethinker* editor, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. E-mail: editor@freethinker.co.uk. Fax: 0181 305 9603.

HUMANIST CONTACTS AND EVENTS

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: Information: Ivor Moll, 6 The Brooklands, Wrea Green, Preston PR4 2NQ. 01772 686816.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information: 01273 733215. Cornerstone Community Centre, Church Road (corner of First Avenue), Hove. Sunday, Sept 5, 4 pm. Public Meeting. Summer programme available.

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 Cleevelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel 01242 528743.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450.

Devon Humanists: Information: Margaret Siddall, 9 Smithay Meadows, Christow, Exeter, EX6 7LU. Tel: 01647 252113.

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

East Kent Humanists: Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

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. No meetings in August and September.

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.

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, September 30, 8pm. Don Langdown: *Social Housing*.

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: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Information: Christine Wood on 0191 2763123.

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, Sept 17, 7.30pm for 8pm. Sir Hermann Bondi: *The Human Face of Science*.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, Sept 1, 8pm. Michael Clapham MP: *Parliament and Religion*. Programme from Gordon Sinclair, telephone 01226 743070 or Bill McIlroy, 0114 2509127.

South Place Ethical Society: Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, 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, Sept 8, 8pm. Yvonne and Stephen Bracken-Kemish: *Revolution in Education*.

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.