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The

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# Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

## *NSS gains entry to the Synod Chamber of the Church of England*



Photo: Barry Duke

*The National Secular Society's General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood (right) and NSS Press Officer Terry Sanderson pictured in the Church of England Synod Chamber prior to Mr Wood's giving oral evidence to the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords – full report on page 3*

**Also in this issue: Creationists turn back the clock in Kansas, USA – see p13**

A MAN winked at me last week. This in itself was not especially unusual. For some reason or other I have received a lot of winks and smiles lately – something to do with the recent spell of warm weather, I guess.

But this wink *really* took me by surprise, given the fact that the geezer who did it was Jesus Christ.

Not *the* Jesus Christ – he, as we all know, is done and dusted, and there just ain't enough dope on the planet ever to induce in me visions of his Second Coming. No, this wink merely came from a badly-drawn portrait alleged to be our Man from Nazareth.

It happened during one of my rare nothing-to-do spells. I know I should have been vacuuming the cat or attacking the teetering tower of crockery in the sink, but instead I went in search of Jesus.

I was prompted to so by something the Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, said on Radio 4's dreary *Thought for the Day* about the less-than-imposing statue of Christ which had materialised this summer on the empty

plinth at Trafalgar Square in London. Nothing in the Scriptures, he declared, had given any indication as to what the Messiah *actually* looked like. This was done deliberately, he insisted, so that people of all ethnic backgrounds (and presumably of all shapes and sizes) could imagine him in whatever way they wished.

In short, they could conjure up their very own Jesus, in much the same way as they might create their favourite pizza.

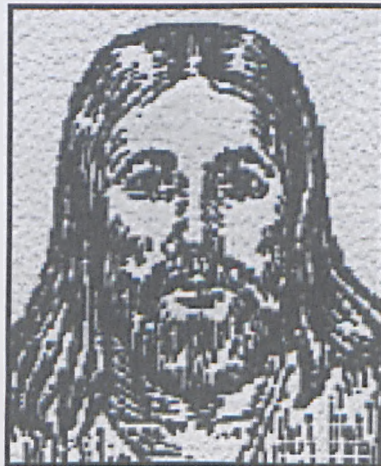
"Hang about, pal," I thought, "virtually all the conventional depictions of Christ I have ever seen portray him as the sort of slim, blond, handsome, blue-eyed Aryan Hitler visualised goose-stepping all over Europe."

The first deviation from this formula I ever encountered was a picture of a black Jesus painted by a mischievous white South African artist during apartheid's heyday. It was put on display as part of an art exhibition in a restaurant in Johannesburg, then hastily removed after an outraged diner hurled a plate of *penne arrabiata* at it.

"Maybe," I thought, "things have changed, and artists are now portraying the Saviour in a manner better suited to the multi-ethnic society in which we now live."

So I decided to consult the World Brain, otherwise known as the Internet.

The first site I stumbled upon was [www.winkingjesus.com](http://www.winkingjesus.com). Intrigued, I entered it, and found myself gazing at this picture:



"Get outta here!" I exclaimed when the bloody thing winked its right eye. It was, of course, an optical illusion or a clever computer trick, and hardly the "miracle" the Rev Jonathan C Chance insists it is.

The Rev Chance, the brain behind [www.winkingjesus.com](http://www.winkingjesus.com), says he set up his website after the picture "miraculously" winked at him on April 23, 1996 and that the experience had "changed my life". In what way the Reverend is not forthcoming.

So far, he says, more than 200,000 people have come to witness the "miracle", and many

have posted messages on his website telling how *their* lives had changed after the sly son-of-a-god gave them a wink.

Not all were serious, as demonstrated by this testimonial: "I was immediately healed of my dyslexia and my chronic drooling. I also stopped wacking off nightly. I had my genitalia cut off, had a breast implant and became a nun so that I could serve Jesus better."

Others trumpeted their outrage, accusing Rev Chance of blasphemy, and expressing the hope that he roasts in hell for all eternity.



Another stab at finding Jesus produced a much more likely image, but this didn't count as it was simply a photograph of some hairy clown pretending to be the Saviour.

Under the heading *Jesus Craves*, the Messiah – clearly seized by an attack of the munchies – is shown "giving into temptation" by greedily helping himself to handfuls of high-calorie home-made cookies containing nuts, grated Hershey bars, chocolate chips and brown sugar.

(Any Weightwatcher drop-outs wanting a copy of the recipe can obtain it by sending a stamped self-addressed envelope to the *Freethinker's* editorial address.)

As it turned out, I was not the only one having trouble finding a convincing image of Jesus. An evangelical outfit in south London, Operation Mobilisation, last month began littering Lewisham with more than 11,000 non-biodegradable copies of a video entitled *Jesus the Video: the Man behind the Millennium*.

The object of the exercise: to counter "the dwindling interest in Christianity among some communities" in Lewisham, and to remind people of Jesus' role in the millennium celebrations. The video has been produced in several languages, including Turkish, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Arabic.

"It's a very accurate portrayal of the life of Jesus, apart from him being white, which he wasn't," a spokesperson for Operation Mobilisation told the *Lewisham Local*.

I can see a very busy time ahead for the borough's refuse collectors.

## The Freethinker

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Keith Porteous Wood facing three members of the Commission

Photos: Barry Duke

**NSS tells the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords:**

**“Religious belief and practice in Britain is at its lowest ebb, and in accelerating decline”**

FOLLOWING THE report in last month’s issue that the National Secular Society had been called upon to give oral evidence to the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords, we reproduce the full address given to the Commission by Keith Porteous Wood, NSS General Secretary, on July 27, 1999:

“The National Secular Society has been opposing religious privilege for 130 years. Arguably the most glaring example of this privilege today is the 26 Church of England bishops who sit in the House of Lords, as of right.

“Our research confirms that Britain is the only Western democracy to have religious representatives in their Parliament, as of right. Yet, not only does the Government want to retain these 26 bishops, it wants to compound the inequity by introducing religious representatives of other denominations and faiths. It is undemocratic for these representatives to make laws binding on a population that largely considers religion to be irrelevant. The number of non-religious people in our country is growing. Their franchise would be further eroded with every additional religious appointee.

“Religious belief and practice in Britain is at its lowest ebb, and in accelerating decline. Given that an increasing majority of young people do not believe in God, this trend will continue. Around 90 percent of the English population does not attend any church and only around 1 percent of the population takes Church of England communion. The Church even refuses to publish the latest attendance figures, presumably because the levels are so low and are declining so rapidly. An LSE pro-

fessor told the *Sunday Times* last week ‘If the [attendance] figures continue like this the establishment of the church could be in the balance’. Roman Catholic attendances in England are dropping still more rapidly - ‘haemorrhaging’, according to an official source.

“Yet even if many more attended church, there would still be no justification for either Anglican or Catholic bishops in the Chamber. They are remote and unrepresentative of their flock; they are middle-class, middle-aged and nearly all of them are white. And they are all male, unlike their congregations who are predominantly female. Yet it is these very women who would be most affected by the bishops’ often-dogmatic stances. This particularly applies to Catholic bishops on such issues as contraception and abortion.

**Opponent**

“A surprising opponent of Catholic bishops taking up seats in the Second Chamber is the Roman Catholic magazine *The Tablet*. It warns that any Catholic bishops in the Chamber would not represent the opinions of British Catholics, but would represent instead the interests of the ‘Holy See’. Does the Commission really want the Vatican to nominate members to our Parliament?

“Religious leaders continually demonstrate their inability to provide moral leadership to the nation. Religious representatives do not possess any special moral insights that would be denied to other members of the new chamber. On the contrary, most of these religious

representatives would represent morally absolutist views out of line with the country as a whole, and sometimes even their own members. What could we expect from the Vatican, for example, given it has just attempted to stop women raped in Kosovo from being given ‘morning-after’ pills? These women are not even Catholics.

“We are particularly concerned about religious representatives’ attitudes to Human Rights, when even Anglican bishops voted last year for religions to be exempted from the Human Rights Act. This was self-serving. But, far worse, the bishops seem unable to grasp the very concept of universal human rights. An Anglican bishop told me on Radio 4 in May that ‘We’re very committed to human rights, but not where that trespasses on religious rights’.

“If religious representatives were banished from the Second Chamber, religion would continue to be represented there. The new chamber would comprise those of all faiths and none, in approximate proportion to the population.

“Existing temporal peers identify themselves as acting from religious motives, and those who profess no religion should not be regarded as any less capable of making good moral and ethical judgments – the Bishop of Oxford, one of the Commissioners, has acknowledged that.

“A major practical problem is numbers. We believe that the new chamber will be overwhelmed by religious appointees if other denominations and faiths are admitted.

(Continued on page 4)



**A rare understanding**

THE REV John MacDonald Smith, contributor to the *Guardian* "Face to Faith" feature on July 10, is a theologian – and it shows. Don't muddle science and religion, he tells A N Wilson, in reference to the latter's recent book, *God's Funeral*. Is it naïve to ask why, when the scientific world has no place for him, God is apparently alive and well in the minds of contemporary believers? "It is the God of the Middle Ages who has died, or rather never existed".

For Mr Smith, who is "aware that religion is a human invention and that no knowledge is absolute", God is "a concept, like love", which he considers "helpful in managing life's experience and furthering spirituality". He doesn't explain in what way(s) the concept was helpful to him, say, in his former capacity as a nuclear weapons scientist, although it does enable him to take in "the ideas of Nietzsche—and for that matter Freud and Marx". Or at least find them "helpful" (that word again) to "the religious understanding". But it's not really relevant to Mr Smith's title "God lives", to cite Freud's analysis of the human psyche as being of value in Christian pastoral counselling, or to tell us that Marxist elements abound in Christian social justice. Even less so, to dismiss Darwin's devastating affect on religion because he was not the first evolutionist.

It seems, too, that Christian teaching has "absorbed" Freud's and Marxist "comments" on religious belief, and that these "have helped to purify our understanding". But then, Mr Smith's "understanding" of religion is very different from that of the Archbishop of Canterbury or the various bishops of the Church of England, now that Dr David Jenkins has retired. And we are given no hint of how Mr Smith's understanding has been purified. What is clear is that it has been considerably diluted, so there is no longer a "God out there". Many critics think of religion as a formal doctrinal system, "a list of things you have to believe". Nothing of the sort, he says. And "a sophisticated exposure to the foundation documents of a religious faith will show that whatever their inconsistencies as to fact, they contain a narrative which captures the self-understanding of a community. That is what religion is".

You can't get much more sophisticated than that – or more vague.

**A Nicean distinction**

HOW was Jesus Christ conceived? This question split the Church of England Synod on July

11, when rebels objected to the version of the Nicene Creed put forward by the General Synod last year.

The dissenters, who were beaten by 308 votes to 104 in their bid to get the bishops' wording thrown out, want the Creed to say of Christ made flesh: "by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary". The bishops' version, which won the day, reads: "incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary" which, the rebels reckon, lifts the Virgin into partnership with God, and reeks of Roman Catholicism.

When grown men can get hot under their clerical collars on a question like this we might as well be in the Middle Ages.

**US health threat**

ROMAN Catholic hospital mergers in the USA endanger reproductive rights, according to one of the 25 most censored stories uncovered by the *Project Censored* website of Sonoma State University, California, and printed in the bi-monthly magazine *Nexus* (June/July).

In 1996 over 600 hospitals merged with Catholic institutions in 19 states, threatening women's access to abortion, sterilisation, birth control and *in-vitro* fertilisation. Kingston Hospital, Rheinbeck, New York once performed about 100 abortions a year, but a planned merger with the Roman Catholic Benedictine Hospital would mean they would be offered for medical reasons only.

Such collaborations have made the Roman Catholic Church the largest private health-care provider in America. Some agreements have resulted in separately-run clinics but this, too, has its dangers. It is feared that it makes them easier targets for anti-abortionist extremists. And we know how extreme these can be.

**No support for Isidore**

SORRY web-surfers, you can't have your own patron saint yet awhile. Indeed, if the *Universe* (July 4) is right, the appointment is still a long way off. So far, the Vatican has seen no sign of the necessary support from Roman Catholic bishops or laity for St Isidore of Seville, despite a campaign started – unsurprisingly – in Spain.

St Isidore, a doctor of the Church, was an archbishop and theologian who lived from c560 to 636; and supporters of his candidacy as Internet patron "clicked onto his name" because he was the chief author of the *Etimologiae*, "an encyclopedia of all the secular and religious knowledge available in

the seventh century [which] has been described as having a structure similar to a primitive database".

Isidore drew heavily on the learning of the Ancients, especially Pliny, and was very influential in early medieval times. So popular that a thousand manuscripts of his book are said still to survive. He believed in astrology and the mystic significance of numbers. And, although "he kept alive a sense of wonder", his work, according to Isaac Asimov (*Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*) "tended to darken the intellectual world rather than enlighten it".

**Putting it in context**

MANY history dons at British universities are worried that new students, fresh out of school, don't seem to know much other than Hitler and the Holocaust, wrote David Cesarani, Professor of Modern Jewish History at the University of Southampton (*Observer*, July 25), citing a survey in *History Today*. A respondent for Northumbria University reported that students come with little knowledge of anything other than Hitler, and Reading University complained that "most seem to have studied the Third Reich several times over".

Cesarani sees this as a recent phenomenon, following a sustained campaign by the Holocaust Education Trust to get the Holocaust included in the national curriculum in 1990. And he approves. We need to know more Holocaust history, not less, he says, but in a broader framework. "We need to understand anti-semitism in the context of Christianity's intolerance of other faiths". Indeed we do.

**Rivers of hate**

"JEWS for Jesus": this puzzling sign caught my eye as I was travelling along Finchley Road in London the other week. It brought to mind a report in the *Editor* (July 23) that an advert for the same organisation had done more than puzzle the comedienne and radio presenter Joan Rivers on her own station WOR in New York. She found it no less than "disgusting", and repeated the word several times over on the air.

"I am a Jew", Ms Rivers said. "I was born a Jew. I intend to die a Jew ... Jews for Jesus, how dare you? How dare you advertise on my show?" She then suggested these disgusting people should take a haemorrhoid cream and put it in their mouths, and she called them "assholes".

Were we speaking of intolerance?

# Charities Commission rapped over fascist “charity” shops

A CHAIN of London charity shops run by the Trust of St Michael the Archangel has been exposed as a front for a neo-fascist group, the International Third Position (ITP), but the Charities Commission is said to be powerless to take action against it.

The exposé, by the London *Evening Standard*, revealed that people were being duped into donating goods and money to the trust in the belief that it was linked with the Roman Catholic Church.

“In fact, the trust has no connection whatsoever with the Church. Profits from the ‘charity’ shops are financing neo-fascist propaganda and a sinister indoctrination programme specifically targeting children both in Britain and the Continent,” the paper revealed.

The ITP advocates the destruction of Israel, the repatriation of ethnic minorities and the persecution of homosexuals. Its founder members, the paper disclosed, are Roberto Fiore, a convicted Italian fascist living in London, and Nick Griffin, the leader of the British National Party. In an editorial, the paper commented: “The most worrying aspect of this ugly story is

## Death of a respected freethinker

DICK CONDON, a former Vice President of the National Secular Society, has died at the age of 80.

A life-long atheist, Dick was a prolific contributor to the *Freethinker*, and author of *Our Pagan Christmas*, a booklet which has enjoyed steady sales since it was first published in 1974.

A secular funeral service, well-attended by friends and representatives from the NSS and other humanist organisations, took place at South Essex Crematorium, Upminster, on August 18.

Bill McLroy, a long-standing friend and colleague, officiated at the funeral.

A full tribute to Dick will appear in the October issue of the *Freethinker*.

that the Charities Commission, whose responsibility it is to blow the whistle on such frauds, is allowing the St Michael the Archangel shops

### Now Scientologists want charity status

The Charities Commission is currently being lobbied to grant charity status to the Church of Scientology, according to a report in the *Independent on Sunday*.

The present status in Britain of this controversial movement, founded in 1954 by the late Ron L Hubbard, a science-fiction writer – and once described by a High Court Judge as “corrupt, sinister and dangerous” – is as a charity registered in South Australia.

But, according to Graeme Smith, its Public Affairs Director in the UK, the Church “would like to be recognised by the Charities Commission as a proper religion. In the past their definitions have been based on Judaeo-Christian religions which have a personal god. In Scientology we have recognition of a supreme being, but it is left to the individual to decide what the supreme being is.”



Dick Condon pictured at his retirement party in 1985

to continue trading without any change in their status.

“It is extraordinary that the organisation and its sister group, the St George Educational Trust, were ever recognised as charities – which are meant to have no political objectives whatsoever, let alone such vicious aims as these.

“More remarkably, the Commission conducted a year-long inquiry of its own into their activities – and has seen the results of the *Evening Standard* investigation – but still claims to remain powerless to intervene ...

“If the Commission cannot mount a proper inquiry into dubious groups to which its attention has been drawn, there seems little point in maintaining such a toothless watchdog.”

### NSS evidence to Commission

(continued from page 3)

“The C of E’s refusal to concede any of its 26 seats creates an expectation for an unreasonable number of additional seats for other denominations and faiths. The English Catholic bishops want more than a token presence and could (on the basis of their higher church attendance) claim more seats than the C of E. So, already, we are up to over 50 seats without the remaining denominations and faiths. How many representatives will the three largest Jewish sects demand, or the larger Muslim community with its Shiite and Sunni sects? No matter how many seats are offered, they will never be enough.

“Those left out, or those who feel they have insufficient seats, will claim discrimination – and perhaps racism.

“If such a plethora of religious seats ensues, the extension would be well-nigh irreversible, however much a failure it is.

“There is just one solution that overcomes all the concerns I have catalogued: the solution we invite the Commission to propose is an entirely secular chamber. Establishing such a chamber would remove a disturbing undemocratic anomaly and demonstrate that Britain really is prepared to let go of its feudal past and to modernise its Parliament.”

• See Terry Sanderson on Bishops in the Lords, p12.

WHAT IS it with these New Agers? Why are they so anxious for the world to end? Many of them can't even wait for the Millennium for Armageddon to arrive; they want obliteration and they want it now! And so we had Nostradamus declaring the end of life as we know it on two dates in August. Neither of them provided the anticipated conflagration, so then the onus of obliteration was placed on the eclipse. That, too, passed without any incident of an earth-shattering nature and so, it seems we're going to have to wait for New Year's Eve after all.

The eclipse was surrounded by so much "supernatural" mumbo-jumbo that its magnificence as a spectacle of the natural world was itself in danger of being put in the shade.

Writing in *The Times*, Simon Jenkins delivered a rebuke to the astrologers and the mystics who had tried to attach all kinds of ludicrous significance to this coincidental conjunction: "That humans should grant eclipses supernatural status simply because they are infrequent is plain stupid. The ancients could be forgiven for seeing the Sun and the Moon in heavenly copulation, with the corona as a celestial orgasm. They did not know better. We cannot plead ignorance of the laws of physics. Scientific advance is not just the route to wisdom and prosperity. It is a vital defence against superstition – Voltaire's 'detestable infamy that must be crushed'."

It's been a bad month for the supernatural brigade generally, though. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that a "huge" investigation into telepathy by Dr Richard Wiseman and Dr Julie Milton had concluded that extra-sensory perception does not exist. The journal *Psychological Bulletin* published an analysis of all experiments into ESP conducted between 1987 and 1997 – more than 1,000 individual trials. All the experiments used the so-called Ganzfeld procedure, which many "parapsychologists" think is most likely to show ESP effects. The scientists found that they proved nothing beyond what could be expected by chance alone. Who needs telepathy anyway, now that we've got mobile phones?

Then the mystery of crop circles was demolished. Ironically it was the *Daily Mail*, usually the unquestioning purveyor of all things superstitious, that did the hatchet job on this annual exploitation of the gullible. The paper employed a team of experienced crop circle creators – who have made hundreds of patterns in corn fields over the years – to go out at the dead of night in July and produce an elaborate pattern in a field of wheat. This they duly did, employing "a plank with a stretch of rope

## ESP = Endlessly Stupid People

attached, a ball of string for measuring and a baseball cap with a sight line made out of picture wire." The finished product was an impressive sight indeed – a huge circle containing a triangle made up of "sacred symbols from ancient civilisations".

The reporter and the artists left the scene of the circle before sunrise and then waited for the response. It was not long in coming. A Japanese TV crew were first on the scene, relaying pictures of the scene back to their viewers. They were rapidly followed by the farmer who owned the field. He charged the TV people fifty quid, and then installed himself in a deckchair by the field gate, charging an entrance fee for anyone wishing to experience the circle at close quarters. By mid-morning 50 people an hour were happily paying £1 each to enter the circle.

One of them, Sandhurst-trained British Army Officer Rodney Carr Smith, said: "No human could have conceived of such a magnificent piece of artistry." Even when the people who had created the circle owned up to it, he declined to believe them.

Another chap was collecting samples to send to a laboratory in the USA. "I am looking for silvery deposits that will give us a clue to what energy force caused it," he said.

A large family of crop circle followers had arrived. The head of the household, a Mr Sewell, said: "I have a positive feeling about this circle. There is no way it is man-made and my sister-in-law Annie has been very affected by it."

Indeed, Annie was lying on her back in the circle, claiming that her kidney pains had miraculously disappeared. "I feel I can pick up the earth's energy," she said.

As the *Daily Mail* reported: "The belief that the circle was too complicated to have been made by man was echoed time and again. Some, like clairvoyant Ian Matthews were adamant that the people who claimed to have made it were just lying. 'I can see the psychic energy in this field,' he said. 'It's coloured red all over. The creator of this circle is a very powerful force of energy. I'd like to see a team of 50 men attempt to get this done and they still wouldn't be able to do it. I feel it is a message being sent to us about the way we treat the planet. A message being pushed up from below to tell us to stop messing about with the Earth'."

There were many others who didn't want to

hear the true explanation, and however much the perpetrators of the hoax tried to convince the faithful that they had been duped, they just wouldn't have it.

And given that this was the *Daily Mail*, with its own financial stake in encouraging gullibility, the "mystery" of the crop circles couldn't be allowed such a prosaic ending. In the pub after the experiment, one of the artists who had created the circle told the journalist that while working on their crop circles they had seen "unfathomable flashes of light and unexplained shapes in the night sky. 'We were working fast to complete a circle,' explained John Lundberg, 'when suddenly a huge lozenge-shaped beam of light appeared above us. Its force was so bright that it literally lit up the field as though it were daylight... We lay on the ground, shaking, waiting for it to pass. Eventually it moved off. It was very frightening... God only knows what is really out there'."

Given that these gents have now blown their cover after providing us with one of the biggest and most successful scams of the century, could it be that they are now looking for the next great hoax? Tongues, I think, might be in cheek.

But what about the idiots who, in the face of all the evidence, refuse to let go of their barmy theories and beliefs?

You'll have to ask the Pope that one yourself.

.....  
**Quote of the Month:** "God has no place in public schools, just as facts have no place in organised religion," – **School Principal Skinner, *The Simpsons*.**

**Joke of the Month:** "This week I phoned the Pope, hoping he could ask St Michael (Patron Saint of Marks and Spencer) to do something about the design of their underpants. 'When I put them on, your Holiness, it looks like a wholesale delivery of root vegetables,' I protested. Sadly the Pontiff told me that the Vatican can't intervene in such matters, but he confessed that he wears them, too, even in the bath. 'You see,' he said, 'I hate to look down on the unemployed'." – **Victor Lewis-Smith, *Mirror*.**

**SOUTH PLACE Ethical Society holds its Annual Reunion of Kindred Societies Sunday, September 19 at 2.30 at Conway Hall.**

**Keynote address: Nicolas Walter on *A Century of Reunion* – the first one was in 1899. Members and friends of all Humanist/Secular societies are welcome.**

Where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise. Maybe Gray was right; but we have no choice once we start thinking for ourselves. It is the human lot to ponder our beginnings and our endings, and once we do so we are on the way to doubt, to doubt especially the fairy-tale of a life beyond the grave.

These musings are prompted by a letter from a woman reader who takes friendly issue with me over my remarks on bereavement in my June *Down to Earth* column. My original piece was written as a comment on the reported responses of Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker to the question how can evolutionary atheism comfort the bereaved? I do emphasise that they were reported responses. I was not present at the meeting; but Dawkins apparently admitted that "it couldn't in the way that religion had traditionally done".

I then asked if the hope of eternal salvation afforded much in the way of comfort, and suggested that, from my experience, Christians mourn the death of a loved one – and shed tears – like everybody else. In truth, I continued, there is no real comfort after bereavement, except perhaps when it is a "blessed relief" from suffering. We know that death is inevitable, but that doesn't lessen the loss; it is something we have to "get over" as best we can.

I should have liked to see her letter published in the *Freethinker*, but my correspondent expressly asks that it should not appear. She would, however, like to see a discussion on atheists and death, and I have her permission to summarise the points she makes. I do so with a certain sense of *deja vu*, as the first article I ever had printed in the *Freethinker* was on this same subject.

It was written when I was very much under the influence of Anatole France, and I referred particularly to *The Garden of Epicurus*, where France expounds the Athenian atomist's teachings. All I remember now about my youthful article was the famous aphorism "I am, death is not; death is, I am not". I later found that William Hazlitt had taken this a stage further back in his essay *On the Fear of Death*. Perhaps the best cure for such a fear, he wrote, "is to reflect that life has a beginning as well as an end. There was a time when we were not: this gives us no concern – why then should it trouble us that a time will come when we shall cease to be?" That sums up my – and indeed, the atheist – view.

And it is my correspondent's own position. Very different from a number of Roman Catholics she tells me about, all men incidentally, who are "frightened out of their wits on what's to come on the other side". They have nightmares, indulge in endless monologues to

patient listeners, and are "poisoning their last years with idiotic fears". So we must presume that the threat of hell is still real for them.

On the other hand, the letter-writer knows some Catholics, including a few old people, "who face death serenely and accept with Christian humility whatever is God's will". One of these told my correspondent "I know I shall live on after death. I believe in resurrection. I have no cause to get upset over dying". In contrast, an elderly atheist "simply panics" at the idea of his death, and envies the true believer just quoted.

So, as the letter-writer says, facing death is very much a question of courage or lack of it, and a lot depends on one's personality, irrespective of religion. A lot, I may add, depends on circumstances: what kind of life one has had; what kind of death beckons. No one wants to die a lonely lingering death; and more and

***"Life has a beginning as well as an end. There was a time when we were not: this gives us no concern – why then should it trouble us that a time will come when we shall cease to be?"***

more people in this country are stating a preference for euthanasia rather than prolonged pain or a vegetable-like existence.

But the Christian lies about unbelievers finally turning to God were exposed years ago in *Infidel Death-beds* by G W Foote and A D McLaren, published by G W Foote & Co Ltd. However, it was the death of others, not one's own, that was the subject of my *Down to Earth* item, where my critic felt that I minimised the pain of bereavement. That was certainly not my intention, and I don't think it can be read into my remarks about there being no real comfort after the death of a loved one, whether or not one believes that person has gone to "heaven". She or he is no longer here, with us, and that is where we want them to be, in the flesh.

The letter-writer thinks it is different for the believer in a future life and says she does envy terribly those who are "simple souls enough to believe that they will some day meet their beloved dead again". She has heard a couple speak of this "confidently and cheerfully", although she acknowledges that "they were certainly mad with grief at first" when their daughter died of cancer.

That was my point: for Christian, as for atheist, such a death is a tragic loss, and we have to get over that loss as best we can. The mother and father mentioned believe that they will be reunited with their daughter in heaven; but I wonder if they ask themselves in what

circumstances? As at the time when she died, or now that they have grown older while she presumably hasn't? Will it be an everlasting parents and daughter situation? If so, what about their relationship to their own parents? They may well try to overcome these problems by positing some sort of "spiritual" state beyond, but it is actual bodily relationships that have been severed by death and, for me at least, nothing "spiritual" can replace the physical presence that has gone for ever.

Nevertheless, I can sympathise with my correspondent when she tells me she often feels the "irrational urge" to be with the mother she lost a few years ago; "to join her, to speak to her, to make her a witness to my life". A widowed friend shares similar sentiments, with a difference: this woman, who is religious, does "speak" to her dead husband.

We all understand the sorrow that the letter-writer expresses, knowing that she will not see her mother again, and never be able to tell her a few important things, for example, "of the feelings of guilt that burden so many bereaved people".

It is different for religious believers, who can find solace in the certainty that some day they will be able "to sort things out". There may be a decreasing number of people as naïve as that, but the point made is that "a future meeting with deceased beloved people can give a hell of a lot of comfort; and atheism has nothing to put in its place. We are brave and more intellectual, but boy, it's tough".

I agree. Life is tough, even cruel, and is by no means "fair" – at birth or subsequently – but we have to face up to it. A few years ago, the late Cardinal Hume exemplified the naivety referred to when he 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". Again we must pose a question: did he ask himself where this "world" was, where his parents would still be his parents and his other relatives would still occupy their relative positions? Where everything in the garden is lovely?

Neither my correspondent nor I can entertain such simplistic beliefs, so where do we stand? Realistically, I would say; and we gain some courage, some stature from that. We do not debase ourselves before crosses or icons, or facing Mecca, while numbling meaningless prayers to an imaginary deity. And I return to the conclusion of my *Down to Earth* piece. I still think it would be better for humanity if such stupid ideas were not put into children's heads in the first place.

Over to you, now, readers.

# ELVIS AND JESUS AND

By Barry T

Television's *The New Adventures of Superman* is an update of the twentieth-century comic-book myth with a strong feminist slant and commentary on modern social phenomena. The *Daily Planet's* editor, Perry White, has been re-invented as a rabid fan of Elvis Presley. In one episode, he gives instructions that his funeral is to be held in the First Church of Elvis the King.

The Internet is bulging with websites acknowledging Elvis as King and possibly more; some fans seek parallels between the King and JC himself:

"Both Jesus and Elvis are Capricorns."

"Jesus had 12 disciples, Elvis had 12 members of the Memphis Mafia."

"Jesus is part of a trinity; Elvis' first band was a trio."

"Jesus lived in a state of grace in a Near Eastern Land, while Elvis lived in Graceland in a nearby eastern state."

"Jesus is the Lord's shepherd; Elvis dated Cybill Shepherd."



**Elvis Presley: now living on Venus?**

Well, yes, these are parodies, but you can't have a parody without something of substance to send up.

To (some) modern eyes, it is more than strange that so many people should believe – sincerely – that Elvis Presley is still alive, or has been resurrected, or taken up into an alien heaven via UFO. (The Aetherian Society has long believed that Jesus is on Venus, and is due to revisit us in a spacecraft.)

Visions of Diana Spencer were reported within days, if not hours, of her death. No doubt further reports will appear of healings and visions for several years or more. In both

cases the fact of death is incontrovertible.

In the first century CE another charismatic figure died in more debatable circumstances, and for a long time after his death there were reports from his zealous supporters of his re-appearance. Indeed, the Roman authorities had to go to considerable trouble to put down the associated disturbances.

I refer, of course, to Nero Claudius Domitius Ahenobarbus, fifth Emperor of Rome, who assumed the purple in 54 CE at the age of seventeen, and died an inglorious suicide in 68. To understand how the monster celebrated in Revelation as the Beast 666 came to be revered in much the same way as Elvis and Diana were to be, a diversion into the history of Imperial Rome is necessary.

Although the Emperors all bore the name, really a title, of Caesar (from which are derived the German Kaiser and the Russian Czar), and they all tried to ensure the succession to their sons, they were rarely successful. In Nero's case, he succeeded to the principate as a result of his mother's murderous intervention.

Agrippina the Younger (fifth wife of the Emperor Claudius, 42 - 54 CE) had been married to one Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus (Bronzebeard), with whom she gave birth to L. Domitius Ahenobarbus, later Nero. She had been banished for political scheming, and during his most formative years the young Nero was brought up by an aunt in relative poverty away from Rome.

After her return, Agrippina made it her aim to engineer her son's accession to the throne. She wheedled her way into the affections of the near-senile Claudius, her uncle, who already had a daughter Octavia and a son called Britannicus, expected to succeed Claudius. The Emperor got a special dispensation from the Senate to marry his niece, and after a suitable interval Agrippina arranged the marriage of Nero to Octavia (against his will), and then persuaded Claudius to adopt Nero as his son over the claims of Britannicus. Finally she saw to the poisoning of Claudius himself.

Perhaps the most domineering woman in history (*pace* the Great Cow herself),



**Visions of Diana Spencer were seen within hours of her death**

Agrippina clearly hoped to run the empire from the back room of the palace. However, for the first five years, Nero's reign was exemplary, thanks to the influence of his tutor Seneca and the Praetorian Prefect Burrus. It was during these years, the *quinquennium aureum* or golden five-year period, that Nero endeared himself to the people of Rome and the provinces.

When Seneca and Burrus fell out of favour, Nero fell into all kinds of debauchery, reported in fervid detail by the historians Suetonius and Tacitus. Later he allegedly committed incest with his mother, who used her body in a last attempt to maintain her influence over him. Nero eventually lost patience with her, and sent a Praetorian centurion to kill her. At one point he tired of Octavia and married the delectable Poppaea. Later he was to evoke great anger among the people when he kicked her to death while she was pregnant with his child.

The Great Fire of Rome, July 64, which destroyed most of the city, was laid at the door



# ID DIANA; ND NERO

ry Thorpe

of Nero, who was then building an enormous palace. He hastily blamed the Christians, a rather suspect bunch who in Roman eyes seemed to be a lot like those cantankerous Jews that were causing so much trouble at the time. Nero ordered a massive programme of rebuilding, much of it at his own expense, and on one occasion opened his gardens at night for public entertainment. The lack of flood-lighting at the time was remedied by the simple expedient of stringing up Christians smeared with tar and setting light to them. The banquet proceeded to the accompaniment of screams from the victims.

**N**ero had grown up in a family in which murder was an accepted, if not routine, instrument of policy, and while the provinces were well-governed and the people of Italy were not badly treated, the governing classes often felt the imperial anger. By 68, the ruling classes had had enough, and an elderly provincial governor called Galba was the first to rebel and march on Rome. On hearing of the approach of the Spanish legions, Nero stabbed himself, helped by a freedman. Galba was soon overthrown by Otho, who was careful to call himself Otho Nero; then came the gourmandising Vitellius, to be replaced in 69 by Vespasian, a capable general who had taken part in the conquest of Britain, and who had left his son Titus to finish the Jewish War in order to claim the throne. The years 68-9 were therefore peculiarly horrible for the empire.

Soon after Nero's suicide, there were already reports that Nero had not really died, and that he would return to save the people – from what was not properly explained. The legend grew, so that Suetonius in later years could report that people would decorate his supposed tomb with flowers. During the brief reign of Otho, one Terentius Maximus claimed publicly to be Nero Redivivus, the reborn emperor. According to Tacitus he was a singer and harpist who attracted a number of army deserters and ne'er-do-wells to his side. After attempting a *coup d'état* in the Aegean, he took refuge with the Parthians on the eastern borders of the empire, where his hosts, who



**Jesus Christ: allegedly rose from the dead**

had reason to be grateful to Nero, were very reluctant to extradite him.

This was only one of several examples, so we have to explain how it was that several impostors felt able to proclaim themselves as the Emperor Nero when they could expect to be lynched immediately if the traditional picture of him represents the whole truth. One of the principal sources, Tacitus, harboured republican sentiments, and for him all the emperors were to be described in black-and-white terms, while Suetonius, who like Tacitus had access to the imperial archives, approached his work with all the concern for accuracy of a tabloid hack.

It seems clear that the people in Rome itself did not see the monster depicted by Tacitus, or chose to ignore those excesses which did not affect them. The common people saw a benefactor who gave them bread and circuses, while the provincials had had no experience of the palace intrigues and murders.

In Nero's day Diana (Artemis in Greek) was the goddess of hunting. As Lempiere tells us (and the parallels are obvious), "she is represented as taller than her attendant nymphs; her face has something manly, a crescent appears

glittering on her forehead [associations with the moon]." While she originally foreswore men and preferred to be thought ever virgin, she was not averse to the company of Pan, Orion and Endymion, males not known for their chastity. She resented both intrusion into her privacy and neglect of her fame, as the fates of Acteon and Oeneus indicate: the former was torn to pieces by his hounds for seeing her bathing, the latter's kingdom was devastated when he forgot Diana in a public ritual. When identified with the threefold goddess (virgin, mother and hag), she was worshipped at altars where three roads met – *Diana Trivia* ...

So here we have three human beings who projected beneficence and hypnotic charm, whose semi-private vices were ignored by the masses who preferred the less attractive aspects of their characters to be hidden in the dazzle of personality, a personality, moreover, that the worshippers themselves were complicit in constructing.

No doubt somebody, somewhere, has studied the social phenomenon of the persistent collective self-delusion; the phrase "mass hysteria" seems more appropriate in the case of single events such as revivalist meetings. Are delusions of this sort necessary for the comfort of most people's thinking?

Recent research has discovered a "spiritual centre", ironically enough in the temporal lobes of the brain, which shows increased activity when the subject is thinking spiritual thoughts. Furthermore, Russian surgeons have claimed a high success rate in curing drug addiction by excising tiny portions of the brain in the same general area.

The mind boggles ...



**Nero: said to have survived his suicide**

Early freethought in England owed a heavy debt to James Watson, said Joseph McCabe. And, as Dorothy Thompson noted, Watson's importance to Chartism, like that of his fellow publishers Henry Hetherington, John Cleave and Abel Heywood, "can hardly be overestimated" in a movement which depended so much on communications.

Watson was born in Malton, Yorkshire on September 21, two hundred years ago. His mother was a domestic servant in a clergyman's house and a Sunday school teacher, who read Cobbett; and James attended charity school from the age of six to twelve, when he did agricultural work to support the family.

In 1818 he moved to Leeds to work as a warehouseman and "had the charge of a saddlehorse at a dry salter's". There he joined a group of artisans who studied and debated the works of radical reformers and freethinkers, including Thomas Paine, Count Volney and Richard Carlile. When Carlile was sent to prison, Watson went to assist Jane Carlile at her shop in London, and was himself arrested in 1823 for "maliciously" selling a copy of Elihu Palmer's *Principles of Nature* to a police sergeant.

Lord Brougham, no advocate of radicalism, had been induced to petition on behalf of Carlile and his men in Newgate jail, pointing out the inconsistency of prosecuting for the selling of Palmer to the poor, while the rich were allowed Gibbon in their libraries with impunity. But the rich did not, of course, present much danger to the status quo.

Twelve months in Coldbath Fields was the first of several terms which, as Arthur Calder-Marshall remarked (in *Lewd, Blasphemous & Obscene*) "served...for a university" for Watson. While in prison he read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, Hume's *History of England* and Mosheim's *Ecclesiastical History* with, as he said, "deep interest and much profit".

After his release in April 1824, confirmed in his anti-Christian and republican views, Watson again worked briefly with Carlile as a compositor and printer of the *Republican*. He then became a printer for the wealthy freethinker Julian Hibbert (1801-34) who, as J M Wheeler recounted in his *Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers*, gave Carlile a cheque for £1,000 when he heard that a distinguished political prisoner had received that amount. A freethinking prisoner should not want equal friends, declared Hibbert, who spent nearly the same sum setting up Carlile's shop in Fleet Street.

Hibbert, it is fitting to mention here, contributed "Theological Dialogues" to the

## Colin McCall reflects on the life of the influential freethought printer and publisher

*Republican* and also wrote for Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian*. He then set up a press in his own house, and was compiling a *Dictionary of Anti-Superstitionists* and *Chronological Tables of British Freethinkers*, but died before completing them. He did write a short life of d'Holbach, published by Watson, to whom, and to Henry Hetherington, Hibbert left substantial legacies.

In 1833, as described by Joseph McCabe, Hibbert had been subpoenaed to appear before a London court, but refused to take the oath on the ground that "he was an atheist". The magistrate drove him from the court and the people hissed him.

Although an outspoken "infidel", Watson doesn't seem to have gone as far as Hibbert in his unbelief, and is described by Joel H Wiener (in the *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*) as "more a militant deist than an atheist". But he used Hibbert's legacy to publish d'Holbach's *System of Nature*, Volney's *Ruins of Empires*, Frances Wright's *Lectures*, Robert Dale Owen's pamphlets, and other freethought works.

Watson took part in the Owenite co-operative movement, in the agitation for universal suffrage, in trade union activities, and in the struggle for an unstamped press. He was imprisoned twice during the 1830s for selling illegal penny newspapers, and his own penny paper, the *Working Man's Friend* was, in Wiener's words, "one of the best illegal papers of the decade".

Like many other printers he supported the Charter on which, indeed, his had been an original signature; and he worked closely with William Lovett with whom, in November 1831, he drew up a declaration for the National Union of the Working Classes.

In short, like Henry Hetherington, to whom he gave considerable support, James Watson was an active worker in various radical movements, but his "forte", as Wiener put it, was as a publisher, particularly of freethought literature. In the early 1830s, he began to issue many anti-Christian works by writers such as Paine, Palmer, Byron and Shelley, in addition to those mentioned above. Large quantities of tracts and books poured forth from his shop in Finsbury, London.

It was Watson, too, who persuaded George Jacob Holyoake to start a new freethought journal, the *Reasoner and Herald of Progress*, which Watson published from 1846 to 1854, and which was summarised by Jim Herrick (in *Vision and Realism*) as "a heavy mixture of atheism and Owenite moralism".

Holyoake, who coined the word secularism, described it as "the province of the real, the known, the useful and the affirmative". It was, he said, "the practical side of scepticism". And Watson helped to found the London Secularist Society in 1853.

Arthur Calder-Marshall thought it possible that Watson was responsible for publishing the full text of a handbill giving contraceptive advice in the *Republican*, for which Carlile received most of the blame, even though he was then in prison. Carlile did, however, follow up the article with the manual *Every Woman's Book*. "It was said at the time that Robert Owen made a journey to Paris to study contraceptive methods", wrote Calder-Marshall, "and that some of the handbills were circulated by Owenites. Francis Place, another advocate of birth control, may have had something to do with it."

Watson certainly published *The Fruits of Philosophy* by Charles Knowlton in 1833, the pamphlet for which Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant were later to be prosecuted.

Holyoake's purchase of Watson's business in 1854 may in effect have ended the latter's career as a reformer, as Joel H Wiener has said, but he had made courageous and outstanding contributions to freethought and radical causes for which we do indeed owe him a heavy debt. In 1865 the Watson family moved to Norwood in south London, where James died in 1874 and was buried in West Norwood Cemetery. But I take mild issue with Wiener's assessment of Watson as a self-effacing reformer of modest abilities. Self-effacing maybe, but his abilities were far from modest. He was widely read and a skilled compositor and printer, as well as publisher. He didn't write much, but that is not the only criterion from which to judge. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, E P Thompson included him among the National Union's "most impressive leaders".

Let me finish with another, personal picture of Watson by the radical reformer and wood-engraver W J Linton: "He seemed always, and in private as well as public to have before him the ideal of what an English workman ought to be. I think of him always as a workman, because, though he had a shop, he was in no sense a tradesman—a buyer and seller for gain."

## Tragedy repeats itself as farce

BEMUSED ARABS and Jews in Jerusalem found themselves being apologised to by around 2,000 Christians who came to the city this summer seeking forgiveness for the atrocities committed 900 years ago by the crusaders.

The "Pilgrimage of Apology" drew participants mainly from the United States, Britain, and Germany. The object of the exercise was to meet and apologise to as many local people as possible. The walkers also presented dignitaries with plaques bearing the words: "Nine hundred years ago our forefathers carried the name of Jesus Christ in battle across the Middle East. Fuelled by fear, greed and hatred, they betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to His wishes and character. We deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors ... forgive us for allowing his name to be associated with death."

Jerusalem was "liberated" from Islamic control on the instructions of Pope Urban II. For this reason the Vatican could not officially support the "Pilgrimage of Apology", according to Mike Neibur, the Israel co-ordinator of the event. "However, the Vatican has privately expressed its support. In general I think they realise it wasn't the best chapter in their history," he added.

Pouring scorn on the "Pilgrimage of Apology", *The Times* commented in a leading article that the tragedy of Jerusalem being seized by the first crusaders – who burnt alive 6,000 Jews in a synagogue and killed thousands of Muslims hiding in a mosque – was "repeating itself as farce". It added that "among the absurdities of this mission is the fact that the guilt-ridden English, German and American "apologisers" are mainly Protestant. Their form of Christian belief did not even exist in 1099. Another is that many of the bewildered people to whom they are apologising are recent settlers, with no family ties they know of to the inhabitants 900 years ago".

## Reformist paper shut down in Iran

Hardline clerics in Iran – determined to reassert their authority after recent student demonstrations demanding reform – have shut down the left-wing reforming newspaper, *Salam*, run by reforming clerics close to the

Iranian President, Mohammed Khatami.

Action was taken against the daily in July after it carried a letter from a high-ranking intelligence official who claimed that hardliners were secretly planning to restrict newspapers supporting reform.

The paper was shut down within hours of a bill to restrict press freedom was rushed through the national parliament.



## A round-up of news from around the globe

### Defying the Vatican

The German drug authorities have defied a last-ditch appeal from the Roman Catholic Church and authorised the use of the abortion pill Mifegyne, or RU 468, within the first seven weeks of pregnancy.

Cardinal Meisner of Cologne said the National Institute for Drugs and Medical Products in Berlin was "trivialising the killing of unborn human beings".

### Canadian atheists spark controversy

Controversial Canadian MP Svend Robinson found himself in hot water in July after he tabled a petition in Parliament on behalf of 1,000 atheists requesting the removal of the

word God from Canada's constitution.

The New Democratic Party MP was banished to the party's back bench for the final two weeks of the parliamentary session by NDP leader Alexa McDonough who was infuriated by the petition.

His banishment, however, led to a wave of reaction against McDonough for punishing one of her most popular MPs for doing his job – that of passing along the concerns of 1,000 of his constituents to Parliament.

The preamble to the Canadian constitution says: "Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law."

When the constitution was originally being forged, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau said: "I don't think God gives a damn whether He's in the constitution or not."

## Fruitless search for New Zealand anthem

New Zealand's national anthem, *God Defend New Zealand*, seems to have gone missing.

When the Waikato Badminton Association went in search of a recording of the anthem, which it wanted to play before the start of a recent test match against China in Hamilton, it could not find a half-way decent recording anywhere.

Finally, a recording was uncovered at local radio station, Radioworks. But the quality was so poor it could not inspire anyone – let alone the Kiwi team which lost 8-0.

"I never realised how hard it would be to get a copy of the New Zealand anthem," said badminton stalwart Doreen Wood. "It's obvious we're not proud of our national anthem. No wonder kids don't know it," she lamented.

## Off to meet the alien spacecraft

Around 100 members of a Colombian doom-say cult disappeared into the mountains of North Colombia at the beginning of July, where, according to relatives, they had an assignation with a spacecraft that would save them from destruction.

Followers of the Stella Maris Gnostic church were informed by their leader, Rogelio Perea, that civilisation would end in August.

They promptly headed for the Sierra Nevada mountains after deserting their half-finished temple in the Caribbean coastal city of Cartagena.

THE ROYAL COMMISSION for the Reform of the House of Lords is a very important body. Well, certainly its members think so – their self-importance seems to know no bounds.

The last of the Commission's public hearings was held on 27th July in the strange circular room that is the Synod Chamber of Church House, Westminster. The Commissioners were up on the stage, arranged as if for an episode of *Celebrity Squares*.

Chairing the proceedings was Lord Wakeham, a leading beneficiary in Tony Blair's culture of the quango. Wakeham has sat on more commissions, committees and adjudicating bodies than you can shake a stick at. At present he is also Chairman of the Press Complaints Commission, a disreputable organisation which is supposed to protect the public from excesses of the press. Regrettably, unless you happen to be Prince Charles, it does no such thing. Given that Fleet Street itself funds it, the PCC exists to protect the press from the public rather than the other way round. Lord Wakeham is its chief public apologist, and for that alone he should be ashamed of himself.

Alongside Lord Wakeham sat the familiar white-haired figure of Douglas Hurd. He always gives the impression of being solid and statesman-like, but we should not forget that he was once big in Mrs Thatcher's government and during his tenure did absolutely nothing to undermine the witch of Westminster. Throughout the evidence from the NSS, Lord Hurd's lips were pursed, as though he was sucking a lemon, or perhaps had forgotten to apply his haemorrhoid cream that morning. Gerald Kaufman seemed at first to be fighting off sleep, but perked up when our hero – Keith Porteous Wood – took the stand to challenge the complacent might of the Carey brigade.

Then came Baroness Dean. You will remember that she used to be plain Brenda when she was General Secretary of SOGAT. Now she's much grander, and has a Mrs Thatcher-style hair-do to prove it. Our Brenda has come a long way since she was a trades union militant. Now she's a pillar of the establishment, and talks lovely these days, having largely expunged from her diction those give-away hard vowels that betray her modest northern origins. Above and behind that lot sat Sir Michael Wheeler-Booth, Commissioner for the Welsh Assembly. Then came the Bishop of Oxford, who seemed to be deep in contemplation most of the time (either that or he was fast asleep), and Bill Morris of the TUC. There was also a woman called Ann Benyon, who played no part in the present proceedings.

## The Royal Commission Sucks Lemons

The Commission had been touring the country, taking oral evidence from those among the 1,400 who had submitted particularly impressive written submissions. Naturally the National Secular Society fell within that definition, having submitted a comprehensive and convincing case for the abolition of the bench of bishops. Keith Porteous Wood, general secretary of the NSS, had five minutes to summarise his submission and then fifteen minutes of questioning from the Commissioners.

As Keith took the stand, Lord Wakeham peered over his pompous half-moon glasses, like some kind of officious general practitioner, and bade him hurry, hurry. But Keith was determined to make his point cogently, and you can read his introductory remarks on page 3 of this issue of the *Freethinker*. When he finished he drew from the audience the first of two ripples of applause – something almost unheard of in these earnest proceedings.

### Practised

Lady Dean (still Our Brenda to her friends), kicked off the proceedings by admitting to Keith that "you have left no doubt for equivocation or misunderstanding from where you are coming from. Of course you have had 130 years' practice at it and we are coming at it new." (Surely Keith isn't that old?)

Our Brenda seems never to have heard of atheism before, proving that life in the print unions must be particularly sheltered. Anyway, she wanted to question the NSS's contention that the bishops – particularly Catholic bishops if they got in – would be out of step with the general public when discussing issues such as abortion and contraception in Parliament. "I may not agree with the views on abortion as expressed by the Roman Catholic Church," she said. "But nevertheless I want to hear those views. I think those views have a right to be heard, especially when one's talking about legislation."

Keith replied: "I am not suggesting that we shouldn't talk about abortion or any of these other issues like homosexuality, even euthanasia. What I am suggesting is that for religion to have a superior franchise in the Chamber is not representative of the country as a whole, something that I think is offensive and inappropriate."

Sir Michael Wheeler-Booth asked: "When you think of the important part religion has played in the development of moral views in

this country, isn't it a little odd not to have the views of people who hold religious positions on such questions as abortion, euthanasia, homosexual reform and so on?"

Keith wasn't going to let him get away with that. "My point is that they should not have any special representation and I am sure you have noticed, as I have, by listening to the House of Lords, that the religious constituency there is absolutely enormous. Lady Young, Lord Longford, the former Chief Rabbi and many people like that are really coming from a totally religious perspective. If anything, religion is already over-represented."

The Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, looking complacent and self-satisfied in the way that only Anglican bishops can, said: "I put to you that there is a growing consensus among sociologists that the more modern the world gets the more religious it becomes. America is the most modern country in the world and the most religious. What sociologists can't account for now is European Exceptionalism. I think it was Lord Melbourne who said: 'We must have a religion that is cool and indifferent and such a one we have got.' From your standpoint wouldn't it be good to make sure that there is some official religious representation of all religions in the Upper House, in order that we may continue with our cultural heritage of ensuring the kind of religion that we have is a balanced and moderate one?"

Keith replied: "The situation you describe is not the same all over the United Kingdom. Sadly we have only to look across the water to Northern Ireland, where there is the highest level of church going in the whole of the UK, and I don't think I need say more. I don't think, either, that I'm particularly sanguine about some of the religious extremism in the United States and in India."

It was obvious that the spectators were far more sympathetic to the NSS's views than the po-faced Commissioners, for once again a smattering of applause could be heard.

The Bishop of Oxford was obviously pleased with his fatuous remark about America's modernism and its religiosity because he repeated it on Radio Four's *Straw Poll* programme a few weeks later. He clearly hasn't been following the debate currently taking place in the US Senate about the unenviable moral vacuum in which America resides. If I might quote Senator Sam Brownback: "How did we get a culture the way it is today that has got so much violence and so much hatred, destruction and mayhem?"

(Continued on p13)

## Born of Mary

By George Broadhead

This year, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) celebrates its 20th anniversary. Though an infant in the Humanist/Freethought movement, it is one of the longest established national gay campaigning groups in the country.

GALHA was founded in 1979 as the Gay Humanist Group (GHG) in the aftermath of the notorious *Gay News* blasphemy prosecution. The instigator of this prosecution, Mrs Mary Whitehouse, frequently referred to "a humanist homosexual lobby" although none existed at the time, and this gave a few gay people in the Humanist movement the idea of setting up such a lobby.

As Nicolas Walter says in his book *Blasphemy Ancient & Modern*, Whitehouse's action led to the formation of "one of the liveliest sections of the Freethought movement".

In August 1979, an *ad hoc* committee of six gay men – Barry Duke, Chris Findlay, Jim Herrick, Brian Parry, Roy Saich and myself – arranged the formal launch of GHG at a meeting in Brighton during the conference of the Campaign for Homosexuality. This conference was attended by 600 people and the GHG meeting was addressed by Bill McLroy, then General Secretary of the National Secular Society, who had already done his first stint as editor of the *Freethinker*. It is fitting that 20 years on Bill is to be the guest speaker at GALHA's 20th anniversary weekend gathering in York from 10-13 September.

Since the Brighton meeting, GALHA has built up a core of loyal members in many parts of the UK and abroad and continues to fulfil its principal aims of bringing the Humanist outlook to the attention of the lesbian and gay community and gay rights issues to the attention of the Humanist/Freethought movement. It can fairly claim to be the only national Humanist organisation to arrange regular monthly public meetings, and is one of only two Humanist organisations (the other being the BHA) to hold a regular annual residential weekend event. It has played a major part in the campaigns to promote gay and Humanist rights over the past twenty years – both in terms of lobbying and direct action. It is affiliated to Amnesty International and the International Humanist & Ethical Union.

In 1992 GALHA was instrumental in setting up the gay Humanist charity, the Pink Triangle Trust, which arranges Humanist affirmation ceremonies for lesbian and gay couples and publishes the quarterly magazine *Gay & Lesbian Humanist*.

GALHA is grateful for the help and co-operation it has received since its inception from other Humanist organisations and their personnel – the BHA, NSS, RPA, SPES and IHEU – from local Humanist groups, two of which (Birmingham and Cardiff) are affiliated to it, and from the many individual Humanists who have lent it their moral and financial support.

## Creationists turn back the clock

CREATIONISTS in the United States notched up a significant victory last month when the Kansas Board of Education voted to remove evolution theory from the state curriculum.

The creationist movement insists that the world and all of its creatures was made by God in six days some 4,000 years ago.

The six to four Kansas vote means that the book of Genesis has now been placed on the same scientific level as the discovery of DNA. This is totally unacceptable to many teachers who say the vote represents a humiliating step backwards in the pursuit of producing a scientifically literate next generation of Americans.

While the Education Board vote does not explicitly prohibit the teaching of evolution, it does wipe out all mention of natural selection, common ancestors and the origin of the universe from the curriculum of all children up to the age of 18.

A blitz on other state education authorities by anti-Darwin activists is certain to follow the Kansas decree.

A new study published last month in the United States by Professor George Bishop of the University of Cincinnati revealed that Americans have a significantly stronger belief in the idea of divine creation than Europeans or citizens of other advanced countries.

"Nearly a third of college graduates in recent Gallup polls still believe in the biblical account of creation", and that about 45 per cent believe that God created human beings "pretty much in (their) present form at one time or another in the that 10,000 years," said Professor Bishop.

His study also revealed that

- 39 per cent believe in a form of so-called "theistic evolution" where evolutionary processes developed over millions of years but were "guided" by God.
- Only about 10 per cent subscribe to evolution without any form of divine guidance or intervention as an explanation of how life began.
- Scientists are far more likely to reject the notion that a deity was involved in any scenario for explaining how human life originated.

**A comprehensive examination of the activities of the creationist movement and the efforts being made to counter their offensive will appear in the October *Freethinker***

## Sucking lemons (continued from p12)

So what chance is there of this Royal Commission accepting the NSS's sensible recommendations? And what chance of Mr Blair accepting their findings? I wouldn't like to put a bet on it. Royal Commissions are rarely heeded, and if this one does not give Mr Blair the answer he so obviously wants – more religion, and yet more – then he'll simply ignore it. But whatever the outcome (and the Commission is to report at the end of the year) no one can say that the NSS hasn't done its bit to provoke an important debate – one that politicians would obviously rather avoid.

You can read about the Royal Commission's activities (and see a transcript of the proceedings) on their website <http://www.lords-reform.org.uk>

The episode of BBC's *Living with the Enemy* (see *Freethinker* August) which features Barbara Smoker as the atheist living for a week in a Christian environment, will be screened on BBC2 on October 13 at 9pm.

**Promoting humane behaviour**

IT IS ALWAYS worrying when someone rejects ethical philosophy as a basis for the values on which people should make choices and judge behaviour. It is especially so when a freethinker does it, like Terry Sanderson (*Freethinker*, August).

Without moral philosophy we are at the mercy of those who say that "might is right", or that we must accept decisions based on "the survival of the fittest", or on "the will of the majority".

Life is only made tolerable by the work of those willing to promote humane behaviour judged according to reasonable guidelines. This is what Humanist societies are there to do.

It is not sufficient to campaign for good causes on an *ad hoc* basis. Religionists can do that.

For us to campaign successfully we need to promote sensible moral values and to mobilise our resources as best we can to oppose the forces of superstition, exploitation and authoritarianism. This can best be done when our structures promote co-ordination, co-operation and working together – not with each pulling in its own direction for its own interests. Separate structures help individuals indulge their own ego trips, often disguised as matters of principle.

As the good book says "no man can serve two masters".

**ROY SAICH**  
Kenilworth

**HSS – not NSS**

IN MY LETTER in the August issue, the opening sentence contained the phrase, "I write as a member of both the BHA and the HSS. Unfortunately you printed "NSS" in place of "HSS". The latter initials stand for the Humanist Society of Scotland, and I am NOT a member of the National Secular Society.

Indeed, since my opinion of the NSS is comparable to Mr. Terry Sanderson's view of the BHA, I found your typographical error particularly irritating.

**JOHN CLUNAS**  
Aberdeen

**Petty objection**

JOHN CLUNAS' objection (*Freethinker*, August) to the report about Pat Robertson's downfall in the July *Freethinker* is, I think, rather petty. It should be recognised that it was the gay rights movement, of which GALHA is a part, which first drew attention to Robertson's connection with the Bank of

Scotland and played a major part in the protest which led to the bank ditching him. It is also worth pointing out to your readers (because the July *Freethinker* report did not) that the Humanist Society of Scotland played its part in the protest by withdrawing its accounts from the Bank of Scotland. Also, a motion proposed by the HSS Council at its AGM on April 7 urging individual members to withdraw their accounts was accepted almost unanimously.

**GEORGE BROADHEAD**  
Kenilworth

**Defending free speech**

THE FRONT cover of your July issue delights in the downfall of Pat Robertson's evangelical exploits.

However disagreeable his remarks, I would nevertheless defend his right to free speech and denounce attacks on his business (withdrawal of bank accounts etc) in order to gag him. The rantings of a fool should be replied with reasoned argument.

Censorship shames only those who use it.

**PAUL GOGGINS**  
Glasgow

**Outrageous and racist**

IN THE July edition of the *Freethinker* you published an article by Hugh Thomas concerning an Australian missionary couple. Whilst I fully understand the horror felt by Hugh Thomas at the prospect of missionaries spreading their version of civilisation and endorse his rejection of their ideal, I cannot help but feel uneasy at some of the other attitudes expressed in the article.

I found the way that the Wodaabe tribe was described totally outrageous.

References to their delicacy of goats' intestines were used to show us how primitive they are, despite the fact that we in the "enlightened west" eat all manner of things which would be considered by people of other cultures, including the Wodaabe, to be far more revolting.

Mr Thomas then proceeds to paint a grim picture of how the Wodaabe will look in ten years time, obviously assuming that their own culture is so weak as to be easily and quickly obliterated by the Christian influence. Whilst this is a real fear shared, I am sure, by all free-thinkers, it is not necessarily borne out by experience. In many instances, Christianity has had to adapt and change in order to incorporate the popular beliefs of the people it has sought to convert. Anyone doubting this should pay a

visit to some of Brazil's Catholic churches and observe the range of non-Christian icons tolerated for the sake of the congregation. Indeed, this a strong and frequently used argument for the fact that religion is merely a form of social control and that man makes God in his own image.

In terms of preserving and protecting indigenous cultures, I would wholeheartedly support the lack of interference in people's lives. However, this does not mean that indigenous people should be forced to always live in their traditional lifestyle, like some ecological theme park. Who are we to deny them the right to a different, perhaps more comfortable, way of life?

It should not be thrust upon them, but similarly they should not be denied the same options that we take for granted. We often have an ill-conceived and over-romanticised vision of "the simple life" which we would never choose to live ourselves.

Finally, I find it frankly shocking that the article concluded with a blatantly racist image of the Wodaabe popping the missionaries into the cooking pot. I'm not sure this type of imagery, portraying indigenous people as cannibals, would be accepted in the *Sun* these days, and there should certainly be no place for it on the pages of the *Freethinker*. We do not need to use crass stereotyping, particularly of a racist nature, in order to argue against missionaries and the superstitious nonsense they peddle.

**CARL BLACKBURN**  
London N16

**Not necessarily a Tory**

WHILST MR Windle is correct in stating that Bradlaugh was a staunch defender of private property and an opponent of socialism (*Points of View*, August), it does not follow that he would necessarily be a member of the Conservative Party if he were alive today. The Tories hated him, as Bill McIlroy rightly states, but many nonconformist Liberals were also horrified by his atheism.

Bradlaugh, like everyone, was influenced by his time and the society he lived in and, although his ideas were considered radical in late Victorian society, they seem less so today, but his ideas would have changed if he had lived in the late twentieth century. He was, like many other politicians, inconsistent in some of his views. Thus, he condemned the use of violence in spreading religion but supported the Liberal Government in passing the Coercion Bill for Ireland.

The Conservative and Liberal Parties are



also very different today, and the Labour Party has changed from being a reformist party, having never been formed as a socialist party in spite of the claims made by some of its left-wing supporters, and, with the exception of his militant atheism, could probably accommodate someone of Bradlaugh's views as easily as the other parties. Indeed, the Conservative Government under Edward Heath's leadership in the 1970s and the Liberal Democrats today seem much more radical than the Labour Party under Blair.

As the countries in Eastern Europe had none of the features defining them as socialist, but operated a capitalist economy controlled by the State, and the expression "pink champagne socialism" has no meaning, the remarks about them are irrelevant.

CARL PINEL  
Stockport

### Courageous old boot

TERRY SANDERSON'S onslaught against Holy Joes in the Government (*Freethinker*, August) was a pleasurable read. So was his criticism of Shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdecombe and "her motley crew of religious fanatics".

Miss Widdecombe is a right-wing Tory and a convert to Roman Catholicism. Yet I must confess a sneaking regard for the courageous old boot. She will not tolerate any liberalisation or watering-down of the faith, charging like an angry bull at the compromisers and fainthearts. And her Commons career was not enhanced when she weighed in against blood "sports" cretins, most of whom are of her party.

When fox-hunting and hare-coursing are outlawed, I will raise a glass to Ann Widdecombe. Of course it will contain Socialist champagne, which is far superior to Tory lager and Lib Dem shandy.

BILL MCILROY  
Sheffield

### Church Tax "entirely voluntary"

D.BRESSAN in his letter "Barking up the wrong tree" (*Points of View*, July) claims to "... know something about Germany, whose citizens are compelled by law to devolve a proportion of their taxes towards the upkeep of mainstream churches". The payment of the so-called Church Tax in Germany, one of only three countries in the world, I understand, where a Church Tax is paid, is entirely voluntary. The invidiousness of the system, however, lies in the fact that an individual has to opt

out of it. Otherwise the tax will automatically be deducted from salary by an employer, just like Income Tax. In recent years, many hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of citizens have opted out, much to the dismay of the churches which have enjoyed many years of extraordinary wealth derived from this tax and are now having to adapt to their "strained" circumstances with a tax income down to a paltry £5 billion per annum at present.

I cannot but agree with Nelly Moia in her letter "Why not just specism" also in the July issue, about "... the revolting lack of pity for animals expressed in the teachings of the Christian Churches especially the Catholic one". It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the most appalling indifference to animal suffering appears to be most pronounced in the more religious countries. I suppose Spain is the best example in Europe where examples of cruelty to animals are legion, but I have witnessed dreadful acts of barbarism to animals in many other, non-Christian, but extremely devout countries.

I must however correct Nelly Moia's translation of *leidensfähig*. It doesn't mean capable of feeling pain but the much different capable of suffering. Suffering can be experienced without pain.

IAIN CAMPBELL  
Schwalmtal  
Germany

### More on Church Taxes

D. BRESSAN (*Points of View*, July) claims that in Germany "citizens are compelled by law to devolve a portion of their taxes towards the upkeep of mainstream churches". This is correct in principle, but two very important facts should not have gone unstated:

1. People are allowed to opt out of payment of *Kirchensteuer* (Church Tax) by making a declaration at their local *Amtsgericht* (a court combining some of the functions of County Courts, some of those of Magistrates Courts and some of those of the Registrar of Companies). I once made such a declaration myself and I even knew somebody who managed to get the local parson to give her a lift to the courthouse, where she then renounced her church membership! There is no court fee charged for making such a declaration.

2. Although the term *Kirche* (church) is used, non-Christian mainstream religious organisations can be given official recognition as *Kirchen* (plural of *Kirche*) and I know of no legal obstacles to the registration of well-established Humanist organisations as *Kirchen*. They would then be allowed to

supplement their income by charging their members *Kirchensteuer* through the Income Tax system. If registration were refused on the grounds that Humanism is non-religious the organisation would probably be successful in contesting that decision in an action under Article 4, Sections 1 and 2 of the Constitution.

The situation remains unsatisfactory but it can hardly be compared with the automatic involvement of bishops in the legislative process.

PETER JANSEN  
North Shields

### Secular chaplains? Not a good idea

NICE TO READ, in the July *Freethinker*, of Denis Cobell's experience as Chaplain to the Mayor of Lewisham. I am a BHA ceremonies officiant in Huddersfield and last year told a Kirklees Councillor that secular chaplains were now being appointed and what did he think. He did not think it was a good idea at all. He said that at present they do not have a chaplain at all – which suited him. He felt that if they began having a humanist equivalent to a prayer before Council meetings, it would not be long before someone recruited a religious chaplain and they would end up going backwards.

By the way, on the subject of doctoring cats (July issue) I know of someone whose neighbour had a tomcat that kept attacking her female cat. A vet lent her a cage. She caught the tom that very day and took him to the vet, who did the business. She paid of course, and then took it home and let it out. It's now as calm and charming as anything and the neighbour is none the wiser. All perfectly legal because cats aren't property – or something like that. So the neutering of cats is not so much the problem – it's who catches them and who pays.

JOHN BOSLEY,  
Huddersfield

Please address your letters (preferably typed) to Barry Duke, *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, October 3, 4pm. Public meeting. 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 Cleavelands 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 Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday 10 - Monday 13 September: 20th Anniversary Weekend Gathering, Holbrook Hill Hotel, York.

**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. Press and Information Officer: 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, September 17, 7.30pm for 8pm: Sir Hermann Bondi: *The Human Face of Science*.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, October 6, 8pm. Terry Sanderson: *Religion and the Press*. 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, October 13, 7.30pm for 8pm. Robbi Robson: *Humanism - Achievements and the Way Ahead*.

**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.

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Please send your listings and events notices to Bill McIlroy, 115 South View Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield S7 1DE.  
Tel: 0114 2509127.