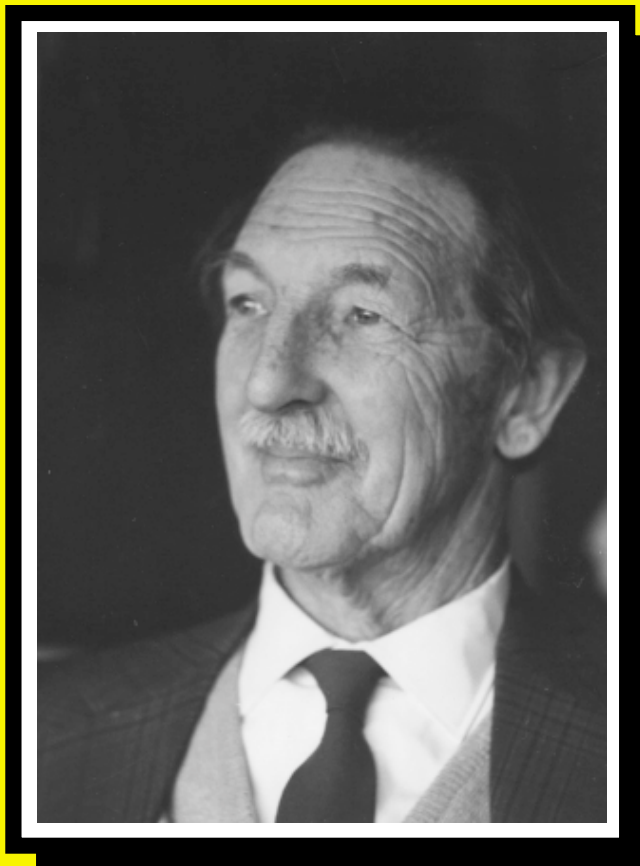


THE



Open Society

Serving New Zealand's non-religious community since 1927



Raymond Firth, 1901-2002
New Zealander, anthropologist, humanist

In this issue . . .

**The Legacy of Raymond Firth
Atheist or agnostic?**

\$5.00

Official journal of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.)

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The principal objects of the N Z Association of Rationalists and Humanists are:

- a) to advocate a rational, humane, and secular view of life without reference to supernatural agencies and which is compatible with scientific method
- b) to promote a tolerant, responsible, and open society
- c) to encourage open-minded enquiry into matters relevant to human co-existence and well-being

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When the Doubting Begins

I have no doubt that Saddam Hussein is a vicious dictator and that his regime in Iraq is brutal and oppressive, a closed society if ever there was one. Neither do I doubt that his regime has pursued a policy of acquiring weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological weapons. I do not doubt that he gave the UN weapons inspectors the run around. I do not doubt that Iraq poses a threat to peace in the Middle East. I have no doubts whatever that significant numbers of Iraqis would be delighted to see Saddam's regime fall and for Iraq to have at least the chance of becoming an open society.

But at this point my doubts begin. I doubt the link between Iraq and Al Qaeda, the Bush administration's claims notwithstanding. I doubt that the Bush administration's fixation with Iraq is solely related to the so-called war on terrorism. I doubt that Iraq poses a serious threat to the security of the United States. I doubt the sincerity of Bush's support for the United Nations. I doubt the sincerity of George Bush's protestations of reluctance to go to war. I doubt that military action against Iraq, particularly if not under the auspices of the UN, will strengthen moderate Muslim opinion against fundamentalism. And I doubt very much indeed the wisdom of the United States acting against Iraq without the sanction of the United Nations, should Bush be foolish enough to do that.

Now, there is, in my opinion, such a thing as a just war. The Second World War, for all the betrayal of its aims in the aftermath, was a just war. Adolf Hitler was not a man who would listen to reason. Reason for him simply meant being weak-kneed and able to be bullied. War against Nazism was a just cause. But most wars are not just wars in the pure sense. Most are avoidable, and can be attributed to greed for power, or to religious or ideological fanaticism. The war that is coming (I write this in the beginning of March) will not be a just war.

It is hardly saying anything new to observe that the United States has been happy to install, support, defend, and arm regimes every bit as brutal and oppressive as Saddam Hussein's. In fact Saddam Hussein himself received generous assistance from the United States when that country was more obsessed with Iran. And many people have observed that, almost certainly, North Korea today poses a more serious threat to the United States than Iraq does. This is because North Korea does possess a nuclear capacity and Iraq does not. And yet this threat is being swept under the carpet while the wardrums beat unceasingly over Iraq.

Why so many people feel uneasy about this war, despite the near unanimity of opinion about the iniquity of the Iraqi regime, is that people are hardly less fearful of America's real motives. I think it is simplistic to see this as simply a bid for Iraqi oil. Planting a dependent regime and securing favourable oil supply deals would certainly be a bonus for the Bush administration. But that is a side issue.

What frightens me about the United States at the present time is that its administration has a whiff of fanaticism about it. The Bush administration is spending itself into a deficit situation that will dwarf all previous deficits in history. At a

time when it is increasing government spending for homeland security (a term which resonates disconcertingly) and defence, the Bush administration makes further cuts to already underfunded education and health services. As if this isn't worrying enough, at the same time it provides tax cuts which work overwhelmingly in favour of the very rich. The Bush administration favours small government when it comes to the poor and big government when it comes to the military. Underlying these measures is a political agenda supplied mainly by the religious right. America is God's own country, with a special mission to the world. America was built on Christian principles of hard work, small government, and everyone armed to the teeth. Welfare, the United Nations, government initiatives in education, the environment—anywhere except defence or homeland security—is somehow unamerican.

**The
war
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What worries so many opponents of the war around the world is that the stories the Bush administration tell itself and its people are just as open to an extremist, fundamentalist reading as is the Muslim extremism they claim to stand against. And let us recall that the Bush administration has the least convincing mandate in American political history.

The risks this war entail seem to me so great as to make the war an unacceptable danger to world peace.

The hardening of anti-American feeling in the Muslim world; the retreat of the United States into even more of a bunker mentality that it is already in; the drastic weakening of the United Nations – all these are scenarios that are growing in likelihood with each passing week. The United Nations, flawed institution though it may be, remains far and away the best hope humanity has to be able to solve international problems in a civilised way.

And by the time you read this, the war will have begun. I will be happy if it transpires I am wrong on this point, but I doubt it.

Bill Cooke

Anthropology and the falsity of religions

Kenneth Maddock

Few anthropologists rack their brains over the truth of religious beliefs in the societies they study. Told that a goddess visits her displeasure upon men behaving badly, most of them would not ask for proof that she exists. But in some ways anthropologists do try to establish what is the case. Thus, in the example given, they might ask whether (it is true that) this set of beliefs is held. If it is, they would expect some victims of misfortune to be treated as sinners and methods to exist for discovering whether the goddess had punished an offender. To investigate such matters is very much what anthropologists do. It means dealing with social facts, rather than delving into metaphysics.

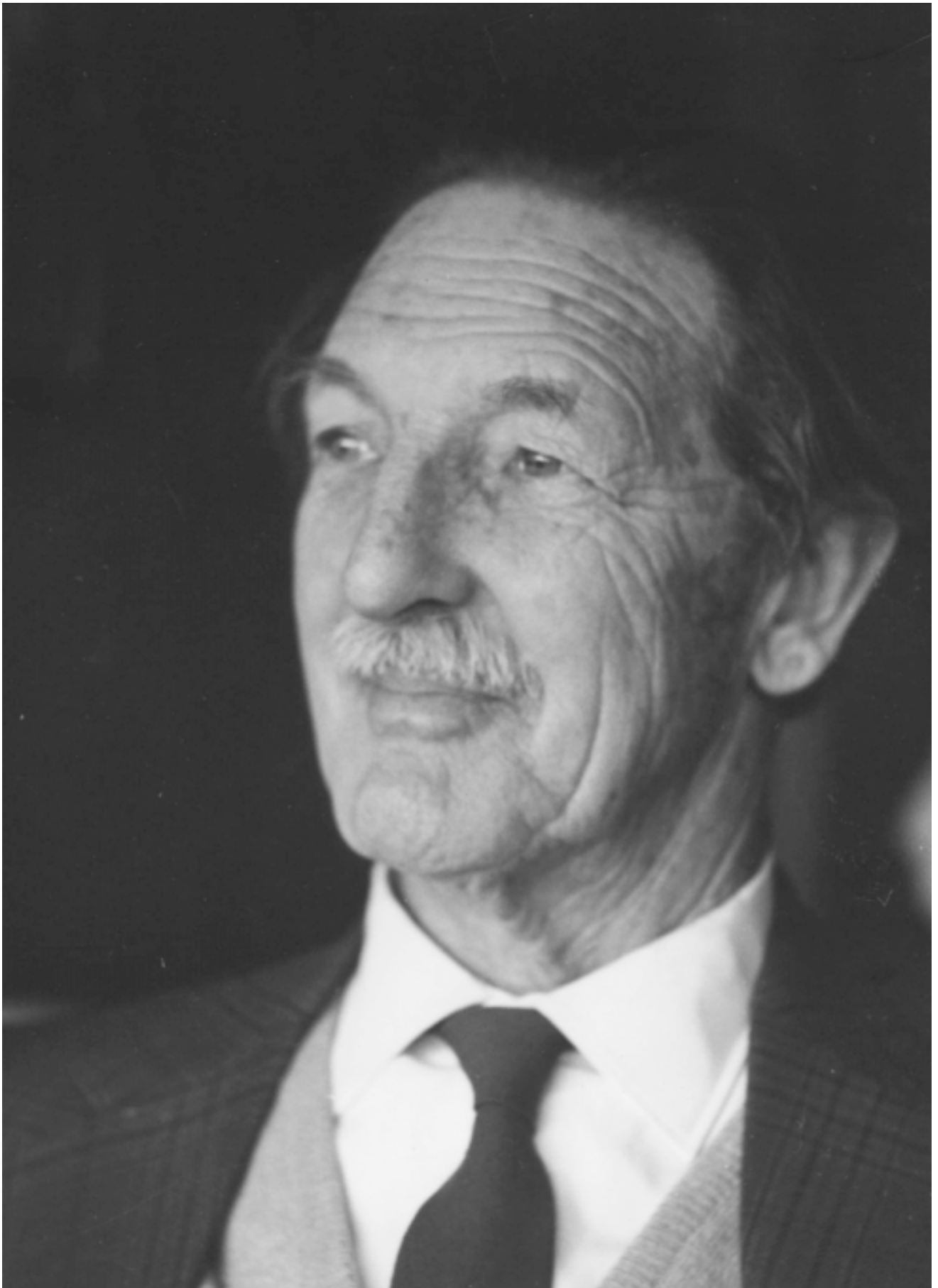
Does this mean that the truth of religious beliefs falls outside the scope of anthropology? The question interested the New Zealand-born anthropologist Raymond Firth who died in England on 22 February 2002, a month before his 101st birthday, and discussion of it is a good way of commemorating his life's work. Firth wrote on many subjects besides religion, becoming a legend in his own lifetime for productivity as well as longevity. The first of many books appeared in 1929 (*Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori*), the most recent in 1996 (*Religion: A Humanist Interpretation*). Brought up as a Christian, Firth was a rationalist most of his life and was always ready to tackle the metaphysical as well as the social side of religion. I do not know why he gave up Christianity or whether doing so was painful or whether he moved in rationalist circles before leaving New Zealand in the 1920s to pursue a career abroad, first in Australia and then in England. At Sydney University, where he lectured in anthropology and knew the controversial freethinking philosopher John Anderson, he was elected vice-president of the Freethought Society in 1932 and agreed to speak to it on the soul. In England, where he lived from 1933, Firth was made an honorary associate of the Rationalist Press Association in 1943 and expounded a rationalistic view of religion in several books and articles.

Though committed to rationalism (or humanism, as he preferred later in life to call it), Firth could not be described as an anti-religious writer. He never hid his scepticism, but unlike the philosopher David Hume who

hoped to excite 'a murmur among the zealots', he seemed devoid of the wish to annoy. Breaking with Protestant Christianity left no lasting quarrel with the faithful and their God. Perhaps Firth's temperament inclined him to look benignly on the endless variety of Human Types, as he entitled one of his books (1938). It is difficult to see him joining Hume in proclaiming that 'errors in religion are dangerous' and that 'the morality of every religion was bad.'

In this Firth may seem to conform to professional type. Whatever their private views, anthropologists tend not to take issue with beliefs and values held in the societies they study. An interesting case is that of A R Radcliffe-Brown, who held the chair at Sydney when Firth went there and who also became an honorary associate of the RPA. His daughter Cynthia spoke to me of her father's atheism and one of his Oxford students, the Indian anthropologist M N Srinivas, remembered him as a professed rationalist who 'tended to be somewhat assertive in his arguments against religion.' This side of the man does not come out in his published writings, however, where we find him maintaining that the anthropologist should investigate beliefs as 'phenomenal reality', not try to determine whether they are true or ethical or logical. Radcliffe-Brown may have meant no more than that a fieldworker's job is to ascertain what are the local beliefs and how, if at all, they hang together and find expression in local practices. But even if their truth, their ethical value and their logical consistency are not suitable problems for investigation in the field, they could interest anthropologists (and others) theorising about the development of institutions or thinking about the justifiability of beliefs.

Occasionally anthropologists have spoken bluntly about the religion of the societies they study. Phyllis Kaberry, who moved in the Anderson circle in Sydney and appears also to have been influenced by Bertrand Russell, wrote in her *Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane* (1939, based on a London thesis supervised by Firth), that 'Man dons the armour of religion because it offers him a protection against fate and misfortune, however much it may hamper his movements, limit his activities, and obscure his vision.' It is redeemed only



The humanist's job 'is to try and extract the human values of religion, to separate them out from the theological languages in which they disguise themselves.'

Raymond Firth

by its social function, without which Australian Aboriginal 'myths, dogmas, and rituals ... become grotesque figments of the primitive mind: the meaningless and perhaps barbarous activities of primitive man.' This is worthy of Hume, who once likened the principles of religion to a sick man's dreams and, more amiably, to the playful whimsies of monkeys in human shape. But Kaberry did not build on her iconoclastic insights. 'A kind of mystical humanist' is how Firth described her after she died.

Firth's Anthropological Approach

In a chapter for *The Humanist Outlook* (1968), edited by the philosopher A J Ayer, Firth stated that anthropologists approach religion as they do other social institutions, without regard to their own beliefs: 'the prime aim is not to try and demonstrate the falsity of religious belief and the superfluousness of religious ritual', but 'to try and understand their complexity, their rationale within their own basic assumptions, their correspondence with or divergence from their own internal structure of control and the social conditions of their time.' It is a view shared by many anthropologists. To be consistent they should apply it to ideologies and practices, religious or not, which they might abhor, such as fascism, communism and Islamic fundamentalism, to name a few examples from history's chamber of horrors.

It is easy to see how the anthropological approach could be used for apologetic purposes. That is not, of course, what Firth does with it. He insists that religion can be fully understood without postulating the existence of gods and other extra-human spirits or powers. Real conditions called it into existence and gave it shape. Like Freud and the Christians, Firth accepts that human nature and experience have a dark side: ignorance, irrationality, inadequacy, aggression, evil and suffering. But our nature and experience also include love, creative imagination and aesthetic inspiration. And, at the end of the day, the miseries and glories for which religion offers an explanation and a solution are explicable in purely human terms. Probably the best statement of Firth's position is to be found in *Elements of Social Organisation* (1951), based on his Josiah Mason Lectures at the University of Birmingham endowed by the RPA. In a chapter on 'Religion in social life', Firth goes beyond social concerns. Religion, he points out, is among the most important topics of anthropological inquiry, but it is also one of the most debatable. The latter point is an allusion to certain opinions strongly felt outside the discipline. The holders of these views (unfortunately he does not name them) welcome anthropology insofar as it appears to demonstrate the universality of religion, but are hostile when anthropologists 'pronounce on the nature of religious reality.'

What might such an anthropological pronouncement look like? Firth suggests that imaginative and aesthetic

concepts are expressed through religion:

One type of imaginative extension is found in the search for expression of the infinite.

In the monotheistic religious systems the idea of God explores this. God is a projection of a number of themes ... the power theme ... the human desire to know ... promise of compensation ... projections of morality and authority ...

Granting that religion is a powerful social force, what is its basis? If there really are spiritual entities or powers existing apart from humans in a dimension of their own, then it could be argued that they are beyond the reach of scientific inquiry by anthropologists or anyone else. But on a 'humanistic' view, these entities or powers exist only because people think they do. It is man who created God, not the other way around. To this view 'all the evidence if rationally considered would seem inevitably to lead.'

The point is delightfully illustrated by an example from New Zealand (given in the Ayer book and again in *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation*). When a god was named in a Lands Court case to support a claim to ownership, it led to this exchange:

Maori witness, "That god is dead."

Judge, "Gods do not die."

Witness, "Gods die when people cease to believe in them."

Firth concludes *Elements of Social Organisation* by contending that:

A religious system is defended by a range of formidable weapons ... Yet, as Susan Stebbing has said, the claim to truth is not self-validating. Exploration of religion by the ordinary process of rational analysis can lead to other views. A comprehensive hypothesis here is that religion is a form of human art. The understanding of religion is most fully obtained not by embracing its symbolic system, but by scrutinising it. It is then seen as a symbolic product of human desires in a social milieu ... It is not possible for human society to exist without some forms of symbolic solutions which rest on non-empirical foundations. But it is the role of the anthropologist above all to make clear their human character and functions.

An Opposing Perspective

We can put Firth's position in perspective by contrasting it with that of his contemporary Edward Evans-Pritchard, also an outstanding figure in British anthropology, who converted to Catholicism. In the last chapter of his *Nuer Religion* (1956), Evans-Pritchard allows that the Nuer idea of God (whom they say is father to all, but whom they also treat as manifesting himself under diverse forms in relation to particular groups and persons) may be co-ordinated with the social

order. Contrary to Emile Durkheim, however, who implied that God = Society, he insists that the one variable cannot be reduced to or explained by the other. After the social and cultural side of Nuer religion has been dealt with there remains a residue which is difficult to define but can best be described as:

... a relationship between man and God which transcends all forms. It is not surprising therefore that we cannot give any clear account of what for Nuer is the nature of this spiritual relationship ... There is nothing Nuer can say of the nature of God other than that he is like wind or air. They can speak of their experience of Spirit but can tell us nothing of Spirit itself.

Evans-Pritchard completes his argument by referring back to the sacrificial rituals described in detail in an earlier chapter:

... when we reflect on their meaning we perceive that they are a dramatic representation of a spiritual experience. What this experience is the anthropologist cannot for certain say ... Nuer religion is ultimately an interior state. This state is externalised in rites which we can observe, but their meaning depends finally on an awareness of God and that men are dependent on him and must be resigned to his will. At this point the theologian takes over from the anthropologist.

Firth would flatly reject this conclusion. He would agree with Kathleen Nott, another contributor to *The Humanist Outlook*, who stated that the humanist's job 'is to try and extract the human values of religion, to separate them out from the theological languages in which they disguise themselves.' For Firth, then, there is no mysterious residue for theology to explain. A religion can be accounted for by showing that it meets social needs and expresses human desires and capacities. The hypothesis that gods and spirits exist is superfluous. Therefore it is gratuitous to suppose that theologians have some special competence to which others should defer. Indeed, Firth targeted a position analogous to Evans-Pritchard's fully six years before *Nuer Religion* appeared. 'Some anthropologists,' he wrote in the *Rationalist Annual* for 1950, 'are content to abandon reason as their guide after a certain point, and to concede the validity of the mystic's claims.'

Yet it could be objected to Firth that he himself appeals to a premise as intangible and undemonstrable as 'Spirit'. In *Elements of Social Organisation*, he sees religion under one of its aspects as a body of symbols having no empirical foundation, which can only mean that the symbols, like hot air balloons which have broken their moorings, are free of ties to earth. This is an eminently arguable thesis. To it, however, he adds the more dubious proposition that without some such apparatus humans would be incapable of living together in society. If Firth's

contention is true, the human condition itself would necessitate the creation of a body of symbols to fill the gap should religions die out for want of believers. It would not need to be a religion in the usual sense. It could be an ideology or philosophy like fascism, communism or humanism. But Firth does not show that social life is possible only when supported by free-floating symbols. Why could not the religion-substitutes make do with an empirically grounded symbolism of their own creation?

Why Truth Is Hard to Ignore

Anthropologists may feel that becoming too interested in truth would win them a reputation as crashing bores at home or cause offence in the societies they study. But it does not follow that questions of truth are alien to their discipline. Even the briefest reflection on how it is practised shows that anthropologists do more than receive information from members of one society and pass it on to members of another. Any articulate person with the patience to listen to others could do as much. There must, then, be more to the anthropologist's craft than acting like a ventriloquist's dummy. The 'more' includes assessing the accuracy, coherence, and credibility of what one is told. Even so questions of truth can be ducked, for example by conflating knowledge and belief despite the difference between them being embedded in common usage. It would be odd to speak of knowledge as false (though one could speak of mistaken or ill-founded claims to knowledge). It is perfectly proper, on the other hand, to describe beliefs as true or false, authenticated or mistaken. Yet conferences are held and books and articles published about 'knowledge' when 'belief' would be a better word.

Another form of obfuscation consists in denying that a truth test can be applied to beliefs. It can be illustrated from a recent Australian case about a 'sacred site' in which I took part. An anthropologist called as an expert witness by one of the parties asked, apparently seriously, what 'truth' and 'falsity' mean with reference to beliefs'. She answered her own question by saying that 'a belief cannot, by its very nature, be verified by an external test as true or false.' She gave no reason for thinking so, and her position can be defended only for assertions of belief which are meaningless. If a proposition has a meaning, it is in principle open to being verified or falsified. A belief that the moon is a sacred site made of green cheese, is the abode of a man and was jumped over by an ancestral cow is in the same boat as beliefs about less holy things, such as the causes and consequences of an outbreak of mass hysteria. At an earlier stage of the same case another anthropologist put her finger on the difficulty with ignoring the truth question by admitting that 'people can put things over you' and confessing to being 'very concerned that there had been a recent fabrication.' Once the possibility of

deceit — or, more innocently, of mistake — is accepted, it follows that assertions need to be tested.

It is not surprising, then, that even those who shy away from explicit questions about truth will tacitly accept that certain beliefs are false, important though they may be to believers, and will act accordingly. As Ernest Gellner says in *Anthropology and Politics* (1995), an anthropologist who explains witchcraft in a society by assuring his professional colleagues that ‘in their country, witchcraft works, just as they say’ would fail to pass muster. But why? His colleagues’ rejection of his opinion implies disbelief in witchcraft. It may accordingly be asked whether their scepticism is reasonable. After all, if witchcraft works (as does gravity), will it not be sufficient to point this out in order to explain the practice? Given the real efficacy of witchcraft, why bother with other explanations? Well, there is a reason, though it does not detract from Gellner’s point. Assume for the sake of argument that occult (or gravitational) forces exist. It does not follow that their nature and the manner of manipulating them are self-evident. They had to be discovered. It makes sense to ask what social conditions and mental prerequisites favoured the emergence of an Isaac Newton (or his occult counterpart), led others to accept his theory and resulted in the discovery being put to use. Now such a line of inquiry could be pursued while abstaining from judgments about the reality of the phenomena, but it is hard to see why abstention should be thought to improve our understanding, let alone to be regarded as necessary.

When the focus of study is on many religions (as distinct from the field study of one) it becomes even less satisfactory to ignore truth and falsity. Awareness of differences among religions can scarcely be avoided, and this in turn is apt to encourage a suspicion that they cannot all be true, at least as they stand, and to trigger a desire to explain not only why they differ but why they exist. In Hume’s terms, why all the monkeying about and why all the sick dreams? And what makes these antics and fantasies so contagious? Or, as Kai Nielsen puts it in *Philosophy & Atheism* (1985):

... there are many faiths, many religious traditions, many alleged revelations. If we look on the matter as social anthropologists would — that is if we are genuinely empirical about religions — we need to count them in the thousands. Why then opt for any particular one? ... we must recognise that these different faiths, different religions do not, in various ways, symbolise the same Transcendent reality. They are sometimes radically different.

Nielsen maintains that religion supports a social order based on miracle, mystery and authority, an authority which is neither rational nor morally justified, and that it thereby obscures the real foundations of society and

falsely makes our condition in this world seem fixed. This is pushing an argument further and using stronger language than we ever find with Firth. His cast of mind was moderate, he stated his opinions with restraint and I am certain that he would have thought Nielsen exaggerated the case against religion. Not for Firth the ‘brutal realism’ of Marx and Freud. Like his old Sydney friend John Anderson, whom he regarded as an extremist, they ‘specialised in the theoretics of confrontation — one might say affrontation.’ Firth, by contrast, followed Radcliffe-Brown in being sceptical rather than iconoclastic, as appears clearly from his *The Sceptical Anthropologist? Social Anthropology and Marxist Views on Society* (1972). Yet, averse as he may have been to shocking people or engaging in lusty controversies, he unequivocally rejected religious claims. It was not his habit to fudge issues in the manner of some ‘advanced’ thinkers who, for example, break with traditional teachings on God, but disguise it by using traditional language, thus preserving a factitious continuity.

Conclusion

Firth’s explanation of religion may seem to leave no room for the dogmas and hypotheses of believers. But final solutions to problems are hard to come by, and a plausible though less convincing case can be made by believers: God exists; his existence can be grasped through natural reason; and, in the absence of revelation, human understanding of him and his creation is unavoidably coloured, even crippled, by the history and traditions of each society. It is this line of thinking which underlies Evans-Pritchard’s treatment of Nuer religion. Believers who adopt it are able to account both for the existence of religion and for the diversity among religions, and to feel at ease in accepting a particular revelation.

Can this conflict over ultimate questions be resolved within anthropology? If it cannot, is there an arbiter somewhere else? Handing over to theologians, as Evans-Pritchard would do, is a sham solution, since there is no compelling reason to accept that they have a real as distinct from an imaginary subject of study (theirs is a skyscraper built on a supposition, as Arnold Bennett remarked of Sir James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*). Where better to look than philosophy with its arguments for and against the existence of God and other disembodied spirits? The fact that the weight of argument favours the No case is all the justification anthropology needs for endeavouring to explain the existence and diversity of religions.

Kenneth Maddock is a consultant on anthropological matters in Australia. For many years he lectured on anthropology at Macquarie University in Sydney. He is past editor of *Polemic*, a predecessor to *The Open Society*. He is an Honorary Associate of the NZARH.

Adam's Rib

Anne Ferguson

Make of it what you will

A few weeks ago there was a TV news item concerning controversy in Virginia about the burning of crosses. Civil rights lawyers were claiming that people had the right to burn crosses as a free expression of their ideas. Those against the notion claimed it conveyed no message other than to cause fear. It struck me while watching that it is only because a cross symbolizes certain values to some people that burning one has any significance. Otherwise all that is happening is that a few bits of wood are being burned. Given that the fire is under control there is no threat to anyone.

When road fatalities are reported on TV, a map of New Zealand is displayed with the site of the fatality being marked with a cross. In a country in which a bare 10% of the population regularly go to church and 26% claim no religion it hardly even seems PC.

The cross in various configurations well pre-dates the Christian Cross, the Latin version of which only began to be recognised as such around 300 CE. This was for ecclesiastical/political reasons. I'll leave an explanation of the whys and wherefores to those more esoterically informed than I! The tau version, shaped like our capital T, is thought to be the more likely shape of the equipment on which Jesus was executed. The tau dates back to ancient Egypt and symbolizes life. I'm tempted to get a friendly jeweller to fashion for me a gibbet to wear as a pendant round my neck and see what reaction it invokes. Alternatively I'm tempted to ask those people who wear a crucifix round their necks why they choose to adorn themselves with a scaffold. When the Christian message is supposed to be one of love and forgiveness it's bizarre that the symbol of their faith depicts an instrument of torture and punishment.

The message conveyed, the ideas represented by the symbols of other faiths and philosophies by contrast are positive and inspirational. There is the Hexagram

and OM, the symbol of the oldest and most important mantra of Tibetan Buddhism. Like the Star of David it is basically two intersecting triangles, the upper symbolizing liberation, the spiritually inspiring, the lower symbolizing universally immanent compassion. In the centre is the OM symbol – a little incomplete circle representing the concept that finite thinking cannot reach the point in any meaningful way. The infinity concept is echoed in the Enso (Japanese circle) which often has a gap in it - the gateway to space - while the circling movement symbolizes the contradictions and opposites of existence. This theme of continual interaction is taken up in the yin/yang symbol (my favourite) - two black/white, head to tail tadpoles, embryos, call them what you will. The Star of David itself symbolizes the interaction of the mortal and the divine. The Tree of Life - the symbol at the heart of Kabbalah - is all interaction: a complex of ten circles, all joined by lines. The Jewish menorah echoes this theme, the seven candle holders and three central joints each representing the ten sefirot of the Tree of Life. These sefirot are not to be interpreted as values but rather as those aspects of existence which make up life and are governed by their relationship to adjoining sefirot: thus wisdom, mercy, judgment, beauty are not absolute concepts.

The crescent moon and star which most of us associate with Islam, like the Christian cross, also predates by several thousand years the birth of the religion it purports to represent. In fact many Muslims reject the crescent as a symbol of their faith, regarding it as essentially a pagan symbol. As for the swastika, no one of my generation can see it without a shiver running down the spine. It was not always so. For many millennia it was honoured as a symbol of good luck and prosperity by many races and creeds across the world. It is even to be found alongside the Star of David in ancient Jewish synagogues, repeating again the idea of the interconnection of the material and spiritual world.

A Dozen Reasons for being an Atheist

(And not an Agnostic)

Michael Martin

Are you as a reader of this publication inclined to embrace atheism but don't have the nerve? Are you sitting on the fence as an agnostic smug in your skepticism about both theism and atheism? Do you crave good reasons for disbelief but disbelieve there are any? Those of you who do not have the nerve brace up! Those of you who are fence sitters be prepared to lose your balance. And those of you who crave good reasons be of good cheer! There are excellent reasons for being an atheist! Fence sitting agnostics your days are numbered!

In what follows I outline a dozen arguments for atheism. (1) I stop at a dozen only because it is a round and familiar number. Naturally, I do not have the time or space to defend these arguments here. But I cite scholarly references and urge readers to pursue them. Moreover, even if readers reject some of these arguments, they should remember that if only one of the dozen is sound the case for atheism is secure.

1. The traditional Argument from Evil argues that the large amount of evil in the world refutes the existence of the theistic God. (2)
2. The Argument from Non-Belief utilises the large amount of nonbelief in the world to show that the existence of a theistic God is doubtful. (3)
3. The Argument from Reasonable Non-Belief makes the case that the existence of reasonable nonbelief for God's existence shows that a theistic God's existence is unlikely. (4)
4. The Argument from Fairness maintains that God's postmortem treatment of humans who die without reaching moral accountability is not fair. But since God by definition is fair God does not exist. (5)
5. The Moral Argument for Atheism argues that there is a conflict between the belief that God would not cause or condone immoral acts and Biblical statements in which God does precisely this. (6)
6. The Argument from Miracles reverses the traditional view that miracles provide evidence of God's existence and maintains that the existence of miracles is incompatible with belief in God. But since theists believe in both God cannot exist. (7)

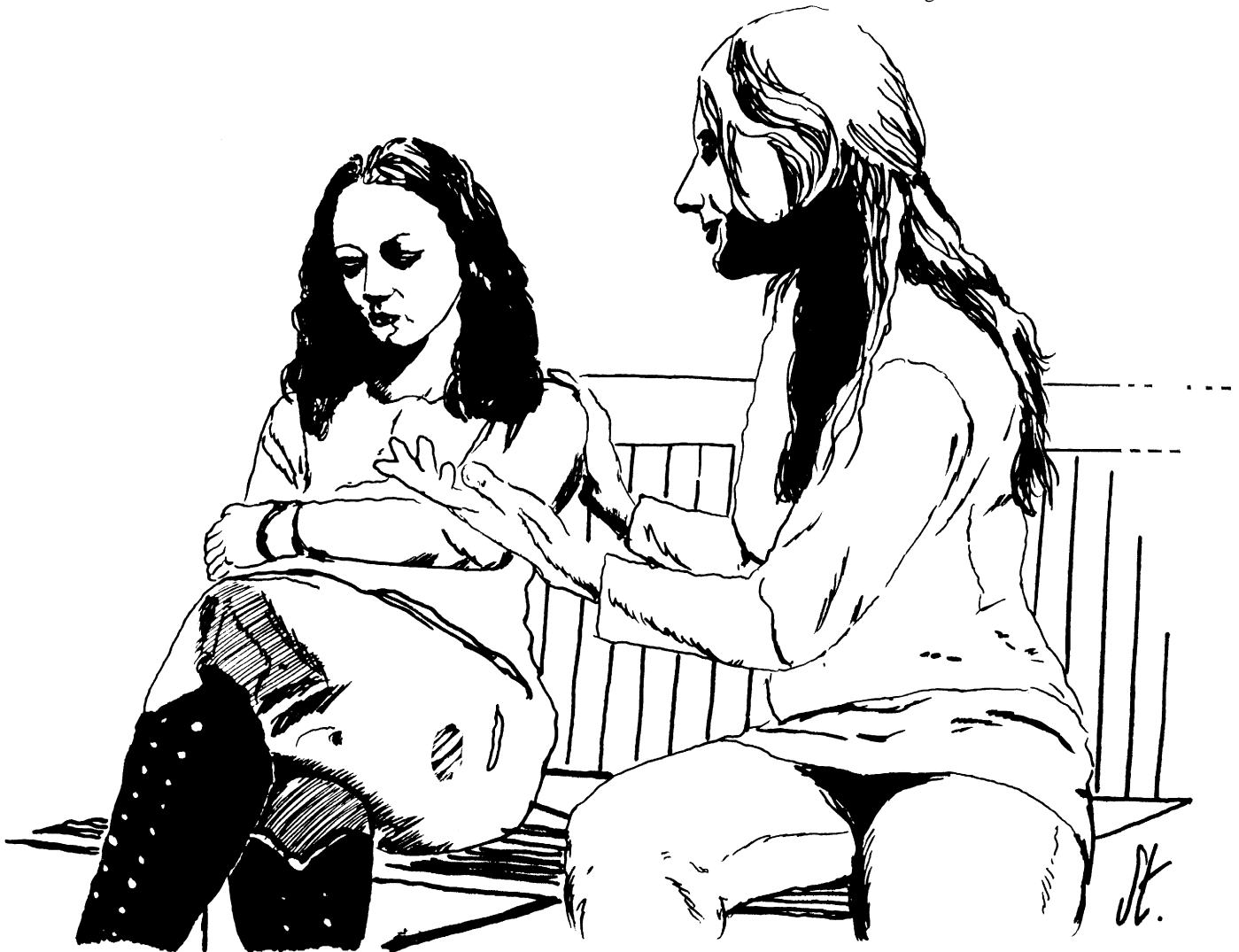
7. The Argument from the Incompatibility Between Omniscience and Immutability holds that since by definition God must be omniscience and immutable, He cannot exist. (8)
8. The Argument from the Incompatibility Between Disembodiedness, Moral Perfection, and Omniscience in turn maintains that since God is both disembodied, morally perfect and omniscience, He cannot exist. (9)
9. The Argument from the Incompatibility Between Having a Mind and Omnipresence asserts that God either has no mind or is not omnipresent. But since by definition He must both have a mind and be omnipresent, God cannot exist. (10)
10. The Argument from the Incoherence of Omniscience argues that the concept of omniscience is impossible. But since omniscience is a necessary property of God, God is impossible. (11)
11. The Argument from the Incoherence of Omnipotency argues that the concept of omnipotence is impossible. But since God by definition must be omnipotent, God cannot exist. (12)
12. Finally, the Incoherence of the Concept of Being Worthy of Worship Argument holds that by necessity God is worthy of worship and yet God cannot be worthy of worship. Since the supposition that God is worthy of worship leads to an inconsistency, God is impossible. (13)

Do the fence-sitting agnostics have arguments of their own? They surely do but, as I have recently shown, these arguments are unsound. (14) So not only are there at least a dozen arguments for atheism, the arguments for agnosticism fail. So what is keeping **you** from being an atheist?

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Notes

1. Many of the arguments cited here will be reprinted in the forthcoming anthology entitled *The Impossibility of God* edited by Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier and published by Prometheus Books.
2. Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990) Chapters 14-18; Theodore M Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), chapters 4,6,7,8,9,10. See also Quentin Smith, 'A Sound Logical Argument from Evil,' *Ethics and Religious Thought in Analytic Philosophy of Language* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp 148-57, and Richard R La Croix, 'Unjustified Evil and God's Choice,' *Sophia*, 13, 1974, pp 20-8.
3. Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil*, chapters 5,6,7,8,9,11.
4. J L Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993). Cf Martin, *Atheism*, chapter 11.
5. Richard Schoeing, 'The Argument from Unfairness,' *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, 45, 1999, pp 115-28.
6. Raymond Bradley, 'A Moral Argument for Atheism,' *NZ Rationalist & Humanist*, Spring 1000, pp 2-12.
7. Christine Overall, 'Miracles as Evidence Against the Existence of God,' *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 23, 1985, 347-53. See also Christine Overall, 'Miracles and God: A Reply to A H Larmer,' *Dialogue*, 36, 1997, pp 741-52.
8. Norman Kreitzman, 'Omniscience and Immutability,' *Journal of Philosophy*, 63, 1966, pp 409-21. See also Anthony Kenny, 'Omniscience, Eternity, and Time,' *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), Chapter 4, pp 38-48.
9. Martin, *Atheism*, pp 287-92.
10. Matt McCormick, 'Why God Cannot Think: Kant, Omniscience, and Consciousness,' *Philo*, 3, 2000, pp 5-19.
11. Roland Puccetti, 'Is Omniscience Possible?' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 41, 1963, pp 92-3; Patrick Grim, 'Against Omniscience: The Case for Essential Indexicals,' *Nous*, 19, 1985, pp 1951-80; Patrick Grim, 'Logic and the Limits of Knowledge and Truth,' *Nous*, 22, 1988, pp 341-67; Patrick Grim, 'The Being That Knew Too Much,' *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 47, 2000, pp 141-54.
12. J L Cowan, 'The Paradox of Omnipotence,' *Analysis*, 25 (1965 Supplement) pp 102-8; J L Cowan, 'The Paradox of Omnipotence Revisited,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 47, 1974, pp 435-45.
13. James Rachels, 'God and Moral Autonomy,' *Can Ethics Provide Answers?* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), pp 109-123.
14. Michael Martin, 'Atheism v. Agnosticism,' *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 19, Summer 2002, pp 17-19; see also Michael Martin, 'On an Argument for Agnosticism' Aug 27, 2001, www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin.martinag.html



Letter from America

The Center for Inquiry

Bill Cooke

The first impression the overseas visitor to the Center for Inquiry gets is the scale of the operation. To all those rationalists and humanists used to small budgets, cramped quarters and voluntary labour, the Center for Inquiry works on a pharaonic scale. More than 30 paid staff, all housed in a complex running through three buildings. At the back is a square, brick two-storey converted house, then a large brick, single storey building, which in turn is connected by a walkway to the front building. This front building, completed in 1995, houses the main offices, conference and seminar rooms, and a freethought library to die for. Tracts by Bradlaugh, *signed by Bradlaugh* – that kind of thing. The Center for Inquiry works as the umbrella organisation. The Center can operate under its own banner, but usually does so via one of its two principal wings; the Skeptics (CSICOP) and the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH). The main journal of each body, the *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Free Inquiry* respectively, come out of the Center.

But alongside these flagship publications there are also several other concerns. It's best to itemise them by way of detailing the people whose jobs are to deal with them. The Council for Secular Humanism employs several people with specific tasks. Ed Buckner is Executive Director of the Council and under him a variety of people are devoted to specialist tasks. D J Grothe is the Field Director. His job is to be out in the field, speaking at meetings, setting groups up, co-ordinating them and so on. This is a gruelling position, as he is on the road for a lot of the time. He works closely with Austin Dacey, who co-ordinates all the campus freethought groups around the country, as well as looking after our office in New York. Austin also edits *Philo*, an academic periodical dealing with the philosophy of atheism, naturalism and humanism. Norm Allen is in charge of directing efforts directed toward African Americans. He was deeply involved in the humanist conference in Nigeria that was covered in the Spring 2002 issue of *The Open Society*. Then there is the Robert Ingersoll museum which the Center runs, and SOS, a secular programme for people recovering from alcohol and substance abuse. Two people are solely responsible for developing and maintaining links with the media and to ensure some positive hits. Joe Beck is in charge of

the cable television network and other people have other jobs I haven't even got to yet.

My position, as International Director, is to co-ordinate and encourage humanist activities around the world. The Center for Inquiry supports offices in Russia, Peru, Nigeria and Nepal, and is looking to expand this network further as and when circumstances permit. There are also other Centers for Inquiry in the United States. A large property, costing millions of dollars, has been purchased on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. This is going to house a comprehensive multi-media editing suite. Other Centers have been established in New York and St Petersburg in Florida.

The Skeptics wing of the Center is just as comprehensive, with several people employed specifically on aspects of their programme. Both wings of the Center, the Skeptic wing and the Humanist wing, are then served by a team of fund-raisers and administrative staff, about ten people in all. *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Free Inquiry* both have computer technicians and design staff working to improve the quality of those journals. And a couple of miles down the road is Paul Kurtz's other creation, Prometheus Books. It's incredible when you think about it.

How do they do it? Unlike the American churches, which enjoy outrageous and undeserved tax-exemptions and can now also wallow in the faith-based initiatives trough, the Center has to raise its own money. Every cent comes from private donations. The paid fund-raisers do an excellent job, but a lot of the money comes in because of the personal confidence people have in Paul Kurtz, the man who set this whole thing up and who keeps it going. It's a drop in the ocean compared with the funding religions attracted in the United States. In 2001 alone, religious organisations attracted \$74 billion dollars. And in the face of that sort of figure, the sense of battling a leviathan alone seems to return, even in the midst of the Center's impressive resources. That's truly scary.

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The Islam I believe in

Syed Anwar Owais

Does Islam allow heresy? Most people's answer to this question would be an emphatic 'no'. To some extent this response is justified because many examples come to mind about people who have dissented from Islam and have been persecuted and worse. One only has to think of Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen. From examples like these it would seem that Islam is a completely totalitarian system that does not brook opposition or dissent in any form. And there can be no doubt that this is responsible for the fanatical image of Islam and Muslims. This lack of dissent within Islam is a favourite stick with which people from other communities beat Muslims. And, to my mind, liberal Muslims are hard put to find replies to these accusations. Indeed, it is difficult for liberal Muslims to explain why writers who write what is not liked by the orthodoxy are ex-communicated and even threatened with death.

It cannot be denied that a religion like Hinduism is more catholic and accepts dissent with much more grace. You can be a theist, an atheist or an agnostic and in any case call yourself a Hindu. You can be a polytheist or a monotheist; worship idols or scorn them- you can still declare yourself a Hindu. For someone like me, this is commendable in many ways, but does not make Hindu culture perfect of without fault. One only has to look at the massively ugly thing called untouchability to appreciate this. Only a few years ago, a Dalit had the temerity to enter a temple somewhere in Karnataka. The 'upper caste' Hindus, shocked by this eccentric breach of tradition, decided to teach him a lesson that would ensure that no Dalit tried to worship in an 'upper caste' temple again. He was tied to a pole and was forced to eat human excreta smeared on a slipper. The purpose here is not to denigrate Hindu society or even to pretend I am doing an exercise in comparative religion. I only want to underscore the fact that different cultures and religions have different problems that urgently need to be addressed and, if they cannot be completely removed, they should be at least ameliorated.

To come back to the question of dissent within Islam, there can be no doubt that the lack of permission to

dissent within any religion is a major problem and by retarding the progress of thought is a great disadvantage to the religion itself. It is a well-known fact that when Europe, controlled by a totalitarian Catholic Church, was immersed in the Dark Ages, Islamic cultures were thriving and were ahead in the arts as well as the sciences. This was precisely because Islam then allowed greater freedom of thought and the Christian world was denied this by the church. What the head of NASA said about the successful Mars landing will underscore this. He said: 'This is a victory for a free-thinking society.'

The example of Ghalib

It is my contention that Islam *does* allow dissent, but does it with some qualifications. The life of Ghalib is a prime example of this. He never fasted and never read namaz. There is a story (one doesn't know if it is apocryphal or not) about how, when Bahadur Shah Zaffar asked him how many fasts he had kept during a particular Ramazan, he replied: "*Huzoor, ek na rakha.*" (Sir, I didn't keep one.) Had he declared his agnosticism (if he was an agnostic) in a belligerent manner, he would not have endeared himself to the king or orthodox Muslims. Even if we assume this story is apocryphal, it shows that there is a tradition within Islam that allows people unorthodox behaviour without their being persecuted. Even though everyone knows Ghalib didn't pray or fast, he is a Muslim icon and is respected by all Muslims, bar a few ultra-orthodox ones. There are many couplets by him that point to his own Catholicism of thought and also within the Sufi tradition. Here is an example:

I shall offer namaz at Kashi
And blow the conch-shell at Kaaba

But the most wonderful example I know of Ghalib's genius and the nature of dissent within Islam is by way of a Persian couplet by him. For the benefit of those not familiar with Islamic traditions, I will give a few facts that will help in understanding the couplet. Mansur al Hallaj was a great Sufi Mystic who raised

the slogan *An-al Haq* (I am the Truth). This was considered blasphemous and he was put to death for this. Today every Sufi says this. Also, though he was born a Sunni, Ghalib lived more like a Shia (Shia's hold Hazrat Ali in special reverence). Hazrat Ali's sobriquet is Assadullah, which means Lion of God. Lastly, Ghalib's first name was Assadullah. Now here is the couplet:

I am the Mansur
Of the followers of Ali.
Hence my slogan:
"I am Assadullah!"

Had Ghafib declared "I am Hazrat Ali!" he would have been declared a blasphemer and would have met the fate of those who blaspheme Islam do. He merely wrote a truism- that his name is Assadullah. Yet the meaning is perfectly clear. However, it merely brings a smile to the lips of even the most orthodox. What genius! Bertrand Russell wrote that a lot can be achieved by wit and eloquence and this couplet by Ghalib is a prime example of this.

This is not to suggest that Ghalib did not get into trouble with the orthodoxy. He was subjected to all sorts of slander and many disliked his views. But then, a Sufi master has said that a Sufi seeker will not find enlightenment unless he is condemned by at least three hundred devout Muslims. This shows that the conflict between the bishop and the mystic very much exists in Islam but the game is played according to certain rules. Sometimes the bishop and the mystic get combined in one, as happened in the case of the much-reviled Ayatollah Khomeini.

Khomeini as a Sufi

I have not read *The Satanic Verses* and therefore cannot comment on the book. However, I have read the poetry of Ayatollah Khomeini (he wrote eight ghazals in Persian) and am a fan of his verse. Strange as it may sound to many, he makes fun of the mullahs in his poetry, writes about how it is pointless to study the scriptures and longs for the intoxication of wine. His poetry consists of the archetypal Sufi quest – the longing for the feminine beloved. When I read Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* I certainly did not find these sensibilities there and was disgusted by his treatment of the character Padma. Someone has said that even fictional characters have human rights and, to my mind, Rushdie violates those of Padma in his well-known book. I would stick out my neck and say that Khomeini was more a protective male than the pre-fatwa Rushdie. While this puts the Rushdie-Khomeini confrontation in a different light for me, I am not for a moment defending the fatwa or justifying

Rushdie's persecution. I should add here that the noted feminist Oriana Fallaci once interviewed Khomeini and came back mighty impressed by him. Another little emphasised fact is that Khomeini's daughter teaches logic at the University of Teheran.

The point I want to make here is that different cultures have different values and it is wrong to impose one's own values on any culture. I am most certainly not an apologist for the dress code imposed on women in Iran or the other restrictions they have, but I think every culture evolves in its own way and the best way to help a culture along is by first empathising with it. Einstein said that a scientist should approach the study of nature with 'a sympathetic, intuitive understanding'. If such an attitude is required in something as impersonal as science, it is obvious that the same attitude should be held when understanding human cultures. And one should always allow the possibility that one might learn something from the culture one is trying to emancipate. I for one have learnt a lot from Ayatollah Khomeini.

Carl Sagan, a champion of agnosticism, held public debates with believers in America. He never got around to accepting religious dogmas like the Immaculate Conception, but conceded that religious devotion is akin to being in deep personal love. At its core, Islam consists of such love for Prophet Mohammed and his family. Anyone who abuses such figures (like Salman Rushdie did in *The Satanic Verses*) is clearly breaking the rules of the game of dissent from Islam and will only evoke a fanatical reaction. And that is exactly what happened in the case of Salman Rushdie. It is my belief that dissenting Muslims should not completely renounce their Muslim identities or take to abuse, but should argue for an Islam based on ethical values and certain cultural values. Albert Einstein is an example of this sort of thing. He wrote that that the phrase 'religious truth' does not convey anything meaningful to him and declared himself as belonging to the 'Mosaic creed' only once in his life (otherwise the application form would have been rejected). Yet he called himself a Jew and was proud of being one when others around him were ashamed of calling themselves Jews.

Love and unorthodoxy in Kashmiri poetry

I have already stated that dissent is allowed from Islam if it is done in a spirit of love. Many examples of this abound in the poetic traditions of Islamic cultures all over the world. The Pakistani Nobel Laureate Abdus Salaam makes an incognito appearance in Carl Sagan's *Contact*. The character based on him says in the book: 'Sufism is to Islam what Zen is to Buddhism.' Sufism, on other words, is the dynamic aspect of Islam that

takes it forward. Consider this example from the renowned Kashmiri poet Shams Faqir:

And there I saw;
No dawn, no dusk
No *Kalima*, no *Ram-Ram*
Shams Faqir speaks of beyond the skies.

Of course, this is an articulation of the mystic's experience of the oneness of all reality, but it is pertinent to note here that Shams Faqir denies the *Kalima*, which is the basic affirmation of faith in Islam. While there are people who say he has gone too far here, no one issued a fatwa against him for this. In my opinion, the reason for this is that the mystic's dissent is born out of universal love and is not meant to insult or denigrate Islam. Also, by transcending both Islam and Hinduism, this great mystic brings about a synthesis of the two much in the manner of Kabir.

In one of his poems, Sheikh Noor-ud-din, who is called the standard bearer of Kashmir, says that one should blend with Shiva for that is namaz. I have heard orthodox Muslims say that 'Shiva' here in fact Means the 'Muslim God' and the Sheikh only used the name for Allah that was prevalent then, but I think Nund Rishi's (another name for Sheikh Noor-ud-din) spirit is unmistakable. He also wrote poems in praise of the Buddha and called him *shehjar* (a tree's shade).

However, my favourite example from Kashmiri poetry of dissent from Islam and it's being accepted is a couplet by Rasul Mir. Rasul Mir lived at the start of this century and was a great poet. His muse was his beloved Kungi, a Hindu woman. He died at the age of 32 and the people of his village (most of them Muslims) choose the following couplet as the epitaph for his grave:

Rasul knows well faith and religion:
Your face and the curl of your hair.
Why should he know heresy and Islam, beloved?

Not only was Rasul Mir's renunciation of Islam accepted, it was actually chosen as the epitaph for his grave- probably because it typified his life. Does this not show that dissent forms a part of dissent within Islam? It should be noted that Rasul Mir dissented out of love. When I brought this couplet to the notice of a fundamentalist I know, he insisted that Rasul Mir wrote this couplet for Prophet Mohammed! This gave me an idea. Is it possible that Islam will allow a relaxation of who the beloved should be? If this happens, Islam becomes synonymous with an attitude of creative love; it retains its spirituality and becomes free of dogmatic assertions. Now this is something really worth thinking about!

Syed Anwar Owais lives in Kashmir and is a philosopher. This article appeared originally in the Indian journal *Manushi*.

Wrong Turnings

Russell Dear

1. The ancients thought the Earth was flat
Like a disc, think of that,
Around the land they thought was water
To go that far they didn't oughter.
Wrong turnings, wrong turnings, the gods got in the way
When priests rule minds then you'll find, progress fades away.
2. Eclipses come, eclipses go
When and where they didn't know,
Then came Thales with his science
Picked the time with some reliance.
Wrong turnings, wrong turnings, gods had the power
But when science is applied, reason will flower.
3. Planets round the earth they spun
Sun and moon as well had done
But some of them backwards flew
Eudoxus was sure he knew.
Wrong turnings, wrong turnings, oh what a strain
Spheres round spheres just weren't right, have to try again.
4. Hipparchus thought Eudoxus wrong
Epicycles were the thing
Ptolemy said it best
In his book the *Almagest*.
Wrong turnings, wrong turnings, will we ever get it right
Throw out prejudice and then maybe we might.
5. Nothing new for two thousand years
Scientists repressed by fears
Copernicus was the one
Who made the Earth go round the sun.
Wrong turnings, wrong turnings, but there's hope in sight
Think again, then again and we'll get it right.
6. Tycho Brahe's observations
And Johann Kaepler's machinations
Gave us laws which hold today
And helped newton on his way.
Wrong turnings, wrong turnings, prejudice gone for good
Science rules the cosmos now - as of course it should.

Russell Dear

U3A

Invercargill has recently joined the many cities in the world in which a University of the Third Age (U3A) has been founded. Beginning in France in the 1970s, the U3A movement has spread to most countries and has many thousands of members. It is based on the idea that retirement, when the responsibilities of child-rearing and work have passed, provides a great opportunity for learning.

Somehow I found myself on the organising committee! By popular agreement the first course was on local history. It was well supported with up to 100 people enjoying presentations by a number of well-informed locals. I agreed to organise the second course, on astronomy. Funding this early in our venture is necessarily limited but I found four local enthusiasts willing to talk on a variety of appropriate topics. I also thought it would be a good idea if the first session was on the history of astronomy to add some context to the subject. I looked around for someone with the requisite knowledge willing to share it. I had little success until I caught sight of myself in the mirror while shaving one morning. Being a mathematician interested in the history of the subject, I know a bit about astronomy, the development of which went hand-in-hand with that of mathematics. Many of the problems astronomers were trying to solve were, of course, mathematical. I put myself down to conduct session one.

As I put together my talk I became aware of how dogmatic attitudes had held back astronomical advancement. In the very early days interpreting the heavens was down to priests and their ilk - they conjured up gods to explain what they saw and used the 'knowledge' to control the populace. The sun was a god, for example, which entered the world each morning by a door in the east and left each evening by another in the west. Comets were portents of important, often calamitous events and eclipses signs that the gods were angry. Thales, perhaps the first scientist, began to look a little further. In 600 BCE he knew what caused both types of eclipse and had some success in predicting them. The age of reason over superstition had begun.

Unfortunately, to the egocentric earth-centred model of the solar system believed by the early Greek philosophers, the Pythagoreans added the dogma of circular motion. The Pythagoreans formed an influential philosophical school for hundreds of years. They were more a religious order than a forum for open discussion. Members had to sign an oath of allegiance and hold to a series of rigid rules such as not eating meat or beans except at religious festivals, not touching a white cockerel and not using iron to stir a fire. They also believed, among other things, that the earth was fixed in space and that all heavenly objects moved in circles. They considered the circle as the perfect two-dimensional shape with mystical significance. These twin beliefs stayed with astronomy and held up its advancement for almost two-thousand years. What is astounding though, is that at least two early Greek philosophers dared to suggest otherwise. Herakleides thought it made much more sense to suppose the earth was not fixed but rotated on its own axis once every 24 hours and Aristarchus suggested that perhaps the solar system was sun-centred, not earth-centred. However, dogma prevailed and neither hypothesis was taken up. It may be true, though, that one or both of these inspired Copernicus towards his sun-centred model in the sixteenth century from which modern astronomy developed.

I covered all this in my talk, as well as describing the various solutions offered to so-called Plato's problem - that of explaining the apparent random movements of the planets across the sky. Since our solar system is sun-centred the motion of the planets relative to earth varies according to where they are in their orbits. Plato wanted this explained in terms of the earth-centred model. Various ideas were suggested, culminating in Ptolemy's book on astronomy, the *Almagest* written around 150 AD, which became the subject's handbook for the next 1400 years.

I ended the presentation by introducing my guitar as an astronomical instrument (hinting at an astronomical fee) and then rendering a song I'd written (see page 13) to summarise the main points, sung in the style of Tom Lehrer.

Ossuary inscription a fake

Readers will remember the rather breathless news item last year about a first century ossuary which carried the inscription 'Jacob, son of Josef, brother of Joshua'. A very interesting report on the Jewish website *Jewsweek* by Rochelle Altman, who is an expert on ancient inscriptions (though not on ossuaries) insists that the second half of the inscription is a fake. Several interesting points arise. Firstly there is doubt as to whether it was actually in Hebrew or Aramaic, such is the lack of clarity in some of the inscriptions. Secondly, the words up to 'Joseph' were written by a different hand than the 'brother of Joshua' section. The first section is composed formally and by a literate person, unlike the second section, which was inscribed by someone of doubtful literacy and possibly fluent in neither Hebrew or Aramaic. Altman finishes her article:

The ossuary itself is undoubtedly genuine; the well executed and formal first part of the inscription is a holographic original by a literate (and wealthy) survivor of Jacob ben Josef in the first century CE. The second part of the inscription bears the hallmarks of a fraudulent later addition and is questionable to say the least.

Another authority, Terry Miosi, said it was quite unknown for ossuary inscriptions to make reference to one's brother, which also leads one to suppose the inscription is highly unlikely to be genuine. And, of course, none of this sort of information attracts media attention. All most people are left with are fragments of misinformation generated when the story first blew.

Christian Heritage Party in disarray - again

After the general election the Christian Heritage Party once more showed how people who presume for themselves the moral superiority of being 'saved' actually behave. It became public at the end of November 2002 that Merepeka Raukawa-Tait, the high profile former head of the woman's refuge stormed out of the party after a torrid conflict with party leader Graham Capill.

Raukawa-Tait's accusations included inadequate scrutiny of party finances, inappropriate use of election funds, and attempts by Capill to intimidate, using threats of legal action and expulsion from the party. These accusations were put in terms of 'blaspheming the name of Christ' and general 'unchristian' behaviour. The entire

Wairarapa branch committee, which had overseen the highest polling for any CHP candidate, resigned in support of Raukawa-Tait. Capill, who has announced his retirement from the party leadership later this year, displayed precisely the intransigence and unwillingness to share power that his erstwhile Christian Democrat allies had complained of. Although, in Capill's defence, Raukawa-Tait hardly comes across as a consensus democrat herself.

Popular protest spooks the Vatican

The ongoing crisis in the American Catholic church reached a crescendo in December with the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law from his position as Archbishop of Boston, widely thought to be the heartland of American Catholicism.

In the generous press attention given to the issue, Paul Lakeland, a religious studies scholar at Fairfield University in Connecticut, got to the heart of the problem. He told the *New York Times* that the Vatican has been deeply concerned about the developing crisis and the growing untenability of Cardinal Law's position. But the Vatican's worry is not so much due to its anguish at the abuse of power by pederast priests, as in the implications of allowing Law to resign. What is concerning the Vatican is that Law's resignation will be the result of overwhelming popular condemnation of his persistent refusal to admonish pederast priests. The Vatican's concern is that by agreeing to Law's resignation, it will have responded to popular pressure, and this runs contrary to all the top-down proclivities of the Holy See. When the pope is Christ's vicar on earth who, on moral issues, can make statements that are infallible, what possible room is there for recognising that an appointment one has made has proved to be an error?

It is testimony to how damaging this whole crisis is for the Catholic Church that it was prepared to respond to popular protest even at the risk of creating a dangerously democratic precedent. The Vatican's response, then, shows that it hasn't really learned any major lessons from this ongoing tragedy. Its first loyalty remains to its own structures of deceit (in the words of the Catholic journalist Gary Wills) rather than openly and honestly recognising that their system is rotten and corrupt.

Religion: The root Cause of Terrorism

N Kunju

‘Religion is good, but people are bad.’ This is the contention of the religious liberals who call themselves secularists. And they have taken the task of redeeming religion by proving that religious fundamentalists and fanatics are wrong. They say that the harm caused in the name of religion is the handiwork of those who misinterpret and misuse religion.

Of course the intentions of these religious liberals are good. They want to foster religious amity and promote tolerance. If they could actually realise their aim, the world would have been a better place with lesser chance for violence and war. If religion could make people good (and *only* good), no one would have any objection. Even rationalists would not have minded the irrationality and preferred not to hurt the sentiments of the faithful

However, reality is different. Religion is like the proverbial curate’s egg, - only partially good. Devotion, prayers, meditation, morning bath and tasting, are all good for the mind and the body. In fact, this is religion in normal times as far as the pious common people are concerned.

But piety is not the whole of religion. If it were so, religion would have remained purely a personal matter, a way of life of the individual. The trouble starts when one’s religion stands in the way of the life of another. Here comes the rot, the bad part of the curate’s egg. The Hindu insists his way of life alone is right. The Christians and the Muslims go a step further. They say their respective gods and prophets are only the true ones, others are false.

The basis of all religious strife is this intolerance. It doesn’t limit to saying that others are wrong, but demands that others need to be brought to the true faith. And the faithful are required to wage a crusade or jihad to bring the infidels to the true faith. History is marked by mass murders and marauding missions of the faithful, in which millions died and millions more innocents were killed to establish the supremacy of one religion over the other.

Coming to the contention of the religious liberals, if religion is good, how do the religious become bad? They are unable to give a proper answer to the question

except saying that religion is misinterpreted by the unscrupulous for own gains. But then, how is such a large chunk of humanity moved by the misinterpretation of religion? And why is it that the religious liberals who claim to truly interpret religion are unable to disabuse the minds of the millions who are being misled? Therefore, the problem is with religion, and not with the people. Gods, prophets, popes, imams and saints, have all set precedents for common people to resort to violence to defend the ‘true’ faith. Scriptures of all faiths could be quoted to justify any crime that is committed in the name of religion.

Veteran journalist V Halasuhramanian once wrote, ‘There is no crime or offence or misdemeanour listed in the Indian Penal Code which the Hindu gods have not committed or at least attempted in the course of their eternal existence.’ However, the religious liberals wilfully refuse to call a spade a spade. They find justification by distorting truth and resorting to verbal acrobatics to prove that to err is human and not divine. In fact, even Gandhiji (to criticise him is considered sacrilege) resorted to the tactic of using religion to spread his ideology of Ahimsa [ie, non-violence]. He quoted the *Bhagavad Gita* to reinforce his theory of non-violence. It is beyond one’s imagination how the *Gita*, which is an exhortation by Lord Krishna to Arjuna to fight his own close relatives on the battlefield is interpreted as the gospel of non-violence. The justification for this contradiction is that the soul of man does not die; you can only kill the body. Try killing someone and defending yourself in a court of law by arguing that the victim’s soul is not dead, so you haven’t committed any murder!

Christianity is portrayed as a religion of love and peace. But the history of the religion is marked by milestones drenched with the blood of the innocents and truth-seekers. The stories of medieval inquisitions are horrific with burning of dissenters on the stakes. A French patriot, Joan of Arc, was burnt in public and it took centuries for the church to realise that she was innocent and made her a saint. Modernism has blunted much of Christian brutality. However, the pope in the bastion of Christianity, the Vatican, by no stretch of

imagination can claim to imitate Jesus Christ who said that for a rich man to go to heaven was as difficult for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle

Islam is described as a religion of brotherhood. One can quote the *Qur'an* for all righteous actions and for peaceful existence with people of other faiths. But then, fanatics too have the facility to quote the Scripture for all sorts of misdeeds - for discriminating against people of other religions, for mistreating their women, and for indiscriminate killing of people in the name of *jihad*. No doubt, there is a method in the Muslim fundamentalist madness. They are exploited by their own sheikhs and kings. Their rightful land has been encroached by the Jews and the Western powers have always patronised the Muslim despots and Israel. But terrorism is no remedy for exploitation. The September 11 attacks by Islamic suicide squads on the USA have brought into focus the destructive power of religious fanaticism. However, religious terrorism cannot be destroyed by military might. America may bomb Afghanistan back to stone age but the seeds of Muslim religious hatred cannot be eradicated from the soil. The cancer lies dormant and could erupt anytime anywhere. Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, Lashker-e-Toiba, Jaishe Mohammed, Irish Republican Army, Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena, all get sustenance from religion. And unless religion is exposed, the cancer of fundamentalism and violence cannot be contained.

However, what the religious liberals, posing as secularists, do, is to use religion to fight religious terrorism. They quote selectively from religious texts to prove that all gods and all religions are against violence. Politicians, of course, repeat *ad nauseam* that all religions teach love and amity. They have a vested interest in saying so, they can't offend their vote bank by saying the truth. President Bush and Prime Minister Vaipayee say their fight is not against Islam but against Islamic terrorists. Vaipayee and Advani throw *Iftar* parties and embrace Muslim politicians to prove they are 'more Muslim' than the Muslims themselves. All this is to establish that religion is good and the fault lies with the people who misuse it.

Nowadays, the Press too has joined the campaign to sugar-coat religion and present it as palatable daily diet for readers. Columns like 'Meditations' (*Hindustan Times*), 'Speaking Tree' (*The Times of India*) etc. are meant to show religion in good light, written by the religious liberals who claim to be fighting terrorism and intolerance by quoting and explaining religious texts. Many may not note their daily (written) discourse, at least the barrage of words deters no suicide bomber. But the trend of using God and religion to lead people to spirituality in the belief

that crime could be curbed in the process, is catching up. The end result of all this may be nil, though the pious columnists live in a world of delusion in divinity.

The fact is, religion based on blind faith is the cause rather the cure to the pestilence of violence and terror. Religion, as the partially rotten egg, could not be imbibed without getting poisoned. Therefore, separating the good from the bad and marketing it as an antidote to violence, is a futile exercise.

The real liberation for fundamentalist violence (call it religious or communal) can be attained only by containing religion. The false claim that religion can bring peace has to be exposed. History shows that more blood has been spilt by religious conflicts than by any other factor. It is also possible for man to live a virtuous life without the crutch of religion. May be some of the great men (Gandhiji included) were believers but there were equally great men among non-believers too. Albert Einstein, Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell, Bernard Shaw - their list is perhaps longer than that of the great among believers.

Exposing religion as a mass addiction that could lead to mass mania, to violence and war, is no easy task. One has to swim against the populist current of blind belief and face much resistance. Politicians who depend on vote-banks to come to power cannot be expected to fight religion. They are busy splitting society into factions of religion, caste, minorities, so as to consolidate their leadership. Those who have a vested interest in religion cannot fight religion.

Man's mind is more potent than the most powerful missile. This is proved by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the USA. Blind faith is the primer that actuates and accentuates that destructive mind. Unquestioning obedience, full faith in the mission, certainty of a reserved place in an eternal heaven and above all, the belief that one is fulfilling God's command, turn men into the most destructive suicide bombs.

Military intelligence, anti-ballistic missiles, strategic missile initiative, not to speak of the nuclear arsenal that could kill every one on earth, cannot combat the fanaticism-fuelled mind. It can be defused only by another passionate mind with the aid of reasoning and compassion. This needs sincerity, commitment and above all, selflessness.

However, the picture is not that bleak. There is a silent majority who believes in 'live, and let live'. They could be won over to play a more active role of fighting blind faith. Fostering rational thinking is the way to get rid of religious bigotry that turns into terrorism.

N Kunju is a journalist based in New Delhi, India. This article was presented as a paper at the Creative Rationalism conference, held by the Indian Rationalist Association, in January 2002.

What Humanism Is

The IHEU Amsterdam declaration on Humanism

IHEU

Humanism is offered as a way out of the present crisis of civilisation. Modern humanism is the outcome of a long tradition that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself.

Humanism unites all those who can no longer believe in the various creeds and are willing to base their conviction on respect for humankind as moral beings. The fundamentals of modern humanism are as follows:

1. **Humanism is ethical.** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.

2. **Humanism is democratic.** Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that human development is a matter of right. The democratic principle can be applied to all human relationships and is not restricted to methods of government.

3. **Humanism is rational.** It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. It advocates a world-wide application of scientific method to problems of human welfare. Humanists believe that the tremendous problems with which humanity is faced can be solved. Science gives us the means but human values propose the ends.

4. **Humanism supports democracy and human rights.** Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right.

5. **Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.** The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-view on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.

6. **Humanism is a life-stance** aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times.

Myths of Modern Religion

Steve Cooper

Steve Cooper, Auckland, 2002

ISBN 0-473-08497-X

This New Zealand writer, author of *Origins of the Christian Faith*, discounts another area of religious belief. He shows how so much of the early history of Judaism, as claimed in the first two books of the Bible, Genesis and Exodus, is not their history but relates to much earlier folk lore. For example, there are parallels to Noah's Ark and the great flood written by Sumerians on their cuneiform tablets about 2,400 BCE. Another myth is the Jewish flight from Egypt - their Exodus: there is no archaeological evidence that the Jewish nation ever was held in slavery or lived in Egypt nor Egyptian records of any pharaoh drowning in the Red Sea. It is apparent that much of such myths were absorbed by the Jews when enslaved in Babylon 586 - 538 BCE and transposed to become their mythical history.

Cooper points out the many myths in the other books of the Old Testament - Joshua ordering the sun to stand still until he had finished killing his enemies, Jonah living for three days in the belly of a fish and be vomited alive and well on a beach, Daniel's three friends being cast into a fiery furnace and come out alive without any hair being singed, are examples.

Then there are the myths of the New Testament. The four writers of the gospels had no contact with Jesus, their accounts being decades after his death. Mark, the first gospel to be written, does not claim divinity for Jesus. Jesus himself is probably a myth there being no written record of his existence, notwithstanding the Romans kept very good records. Christian Bishop Eusebius in the fourth century CE, to overcome this lack, produced a spurious version of Roman Josephus' history which included a paragraph about Jesus. Cooper quotes Professor Ian Plimer as a summation: 'There is such an overwhelming volume of verifiable information ... to show that Christianity is another superstition clinging onto myths stolen from other cultures.'

I recommend this handy reference to back up any discussion on the place of myths in religious belief.

James Gerrand. This review originally appeared in the *Australian Humanist*. Copies of *Myths of Modern Religion* are available from Rationalist House.

Christianity without God, by Lloyd Geering

Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2002

ISBN 0944344925

Christianity without God is much like most of Lloyd Geering's other books, although this one has the feel of a summing-up. Geering writes: 'In humankind's coming of age we have begun to move beyond the limited boundaries of Christian culture into a broader human culture.' (p 14) This is classic Geering. He then sets himself two tasks; one negative and one positive. The negative task is to demonstrate that traditional, theistic Christianity has had its day and is part of the problem rather than part of the solution to the contemporary world's problems. The positive part of the book is devoted to arguing that contemporary secular society is not so much a rejection of traditional, theistic Christianity, but the logical continuation of it, and that Geering's Christian humanism is the appropriate response to this new environment.

Little in the negative part of *Christianity without God* would be news to the rationalist. Geering observes that a morality based on expectation of heavenly reward or fear of hellish punishment is inferior to humanist ethics, which asks that good deeds be done simply because they are good deeds, and without thought to eternal punishment or reward. Geering also draws our attention to some of the classic absurdities and iniquities of the Old Testament. And he acknowledges that evolution posed a fundamental challenge to traditional Christian beliefs and assumptions. Rationalists were scorned for making these observations a century ago, but churchmen are now hailed as brave pioneers for saying the same things long after they have become common knowledge. This irritation aside, it's just as well these things are still being said. They are still valid, after all.

It is in the positive side of *Christianity without God* that the problems arise. For instance, Geering laments: 'It is too little appreciated that [science] arose out of the Christian culture of Western Europe; it was initiated by Christian thinkers and, initially, for Christian purposes.' (p 14) This is simply not true. Most intellectual historians recognise that science arose out of the naturalistic curiosity about the world of the ancient Greeks. This appetite for science was attacked by Plato, whose hostility was taken over by Christianity, via the Neoplatonists. The revival of interest in science took place in the Renaissance, partly as a response to the rediscovery of the classic texts of the ancient Greeks, so

long suppressed or ignored by Christianity. Certainly, many very significant scientists were active believers; Newton, Copernicus, Faraday and so on. But equally, as the body of scientific knowledge grew, the majority of scientists came to be atheists, agnostics or deists of various stripe. And Christianity's role in opposing most significant scientific developments of the past four centuries is too well known to repeat here. Geering's account of the origins of 'Christian humanism' also completely ignores ancient Greece and focuses exclusively on the Wisdom tradition of Judaism. Quite apart from the notion of Christian humanism being highly problematic, this historical account is selective, at best.

Geering also returns to a major theme of his thinking over the past thirty years, the assumption that we are all intrinsically religious creatures and that faith is a human phenomenon divorced from belief. This harks back to two of Geering's most significant mentors, Paul Tillich and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, both liberal theists. But more recent work by people like Anthony Kenny has rejected this all-embracing notion of faith. In *What is Faith* (1992), Kenny concludes that 'faith is by definition a belief in something for a particular reason, namely, that God revealed it.' (p 54) This specific understanding of faith has the advantages of being closer to the general understanding of the term (including the biblical understanding), and allowing the term to actually mean something. When faith becomes a universal human condition, it ceases to mean anything at all.

Geering can't resist the time-worn sideswipe that 'the modern atheist who rejects the notion of God in the interests of truth may be manifesting more faith than the traditional theist.' (p 26) This argument rests on a thorough misreading of contemporary atheism. Atheism is not about proving a negative, or any of the other favourites of street-corner apologetics. Atheism is, in its weaker form, the state of not seeing any evidence for god or gods to be convincing; and, in its stronger form, the conviction that the evidence no god or gods exist is convincing. Neither option requires faith.

Whether Geering's main argument will convince people is hard to say. I suspect that few people will find the prospect of a Christian humanism appealing. Many people who retain a religious belief do so for the reassurance that, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, they matter to the universe. This is why fundamentalism is popular; it provides just that reassurance, but at the expense of scientific and historic reality. Geering's Christian humanism recognises the folly of fundamentalism and seeks to reconcile believers to the facts of science and history, but at the cost of a creating little more than a bland pastiche.

These criticisms aside, *Christianity without God* is a noble and bold attempt to rescue Christianity from itself and retain some of its more positive features. It is also, as all of Lloyd Geering's books are, readable and accessible to the non-specialist.

Bill Cooke

Reincarnation: A Critical Examination,

by Paul Edwards. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2002. ISBN 1-57392-921-2.

Paul Edwards is an American philosopher who admires Bertrand Russell and writes with some of the same style and wit. In this his latest book he exposes reincarnation to the kind of philosophical scrutiny more usually reserved for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. That humans are reincarnated is, of course, an ancient doctrine, but Edwards is concerned mainly with the form it takes in modern times, especially in America and Britain, and with the arguments and evidence (if one may call them that) put forward by believers. His scepticism of the multifarious proofs they offer (birth marks, recollection of past lives, astral visits, spirit guides and so on and so on) is almost total. Even where a case can be made out for certain of these phenomena (out-of-body experiences being an example) there is no good reason to accept them as supporting reincarnation.

As Edwards unkindly remarks of one such proof: 'To meet a spirit two conditions have to be satisfied. The first is to engage in a systematic suppression of one's critical faculties in order to achieve a state of maximum credulity. The second is to attach oneself to a brazen and totally unprincipled exploiter of human credulity. The first of these conditions is already met by many people all over the world. The second is more commonly satisfied in Southern California than elsewhere' (p. 185).

The individuals put on parade in this book are an entertaining lot. Some are delightfully dotty if not barking mad, others are consummately dishonest and manipulative. Many mean well or are on the simple side, while a handful have real achievements to their credit in other parts of their lives. Annie Besant and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross belong to the last category. Besant was an avowed freethinker in England, where she collaborated with Charles Bradlaugh, and a political radical amongst the early Fabians before taking up theosophy. The American Kübler-Ross did admirable work with the dying before going off the rails. She came to believe that she could travel at the speed of light, that she had lived in Palestine at the same time as Jesus who learned a lot from her and that Hitler would return to earth as a great leader. In Europe in earlier times people professing to have had the experiences reported by many of the modern reincarnationists would probably have perished as witches or heretics, though a few might have been acclaimed as saints or mystics.

Most of the chapters are studies of particular reincarnationists or of types of evidence for reincarnation. Edwards finds the former unpersuasive, even when they have some claim to intellectual respectability, and the latter woefully inadequate. The first few chapters and the last investigate more general themes such as the moral argument for reincarnation, the doctrine of Karma (which

presupposes reincarnation, but is not presupposed by it) and the need to have a brain if one is to be conscious of anything. Finally a postscript considers 'the *modus operandi* Problem', namely the difficulty of comprehending how non-physical beings like the disembodied spirits of dead people could interact with the material world.

When I began reading this book I was not long out of a Sydney hospital where I had spent time in intensive care, including several days hovering between life and death, though never clinically dead. During this critical period I experienced vivid dreams or hallucinations. The subject matter of some (train journeys, being in the vicinity of an Aboriginal initiation) can plausibly be explained by my condition. I regret to say, however, that none of the images passing before my enfeebled mind suggested scenes of a previous life, pointed to the likelihood of a new life in the Beyond or persuaded me that I might soon be reinventing myself by invading some woman's womb. Therefore, for what little it is worth, I am unable to testify to the truth of reincarnation beliefs. To the contrary, I agree with Edwards that these beliefs are empirically false and conceptually incoherent. In addition, when they take the form of asserting that life is governed by the law of Karma, they can be vicious in their implications.

Because Edwards focusses on the modern American and British experience he largely ignores the material piled up by anthropologists. Some readers will be disappointed by this, but I think he made the right decision. Tribal material on reincarnation has usually been collected unsystematically and reported uncritically. It does not lend itself to the close scrutiny which makes this book so valuable. Moreover, when allowance is made for differences in cultural setting, tribal tales are remarkably like those of more advanced societies and raise no special empirical or conceptual issues. Their interest is mainly to show the widespread distribution, if not perhaps the universality, of reincarnation and associated beliefs. Why should these beliefs occur in so many times and places? I have no answer, except to suggest that the explanation is bound up with the origins of religion and superstition generally.

Kenneth Maddock

Tom Paine, A Political Life, by John Keane
Grove Publishing
ISBN 0-316484199

This thrilling biography brings Tom Paine to life again, illustrating how he became the most infamous political thinker and author of the 18th century. His best selling books were *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason*. He wrote many letters and pamphlets, arguing with the American and French leaders responsible for

the War of Independence, and the French Revolution.

Tom was a deist, and staunch advocate for the open society that is in our interest. His published objections to the hereditary monarchy and privileged classes in Britain made him so feared that he dare not return there. He was made a citizen of America, and France, where he was elected a deputy in the revolutionary government that started off well. But when it ran awry, he criticised it and was imprisoned for a year, only being saved from the guillotine by chance.

This is a weighty tome, describing the harrowing experiences that led a self educated commoner to blossom into a heroic figure with a great influence on the constitution of democratic republics that have since become the norm. Tom may have degenerated in his old age to become a tragic figure, out of date with reality, but the influence of his works has outlived his death nearly 200 years ago.

Keane has researched his subject and corrected former biographers who were not so sympathetic to Paine's philosophy. There is a complete index of subject matter and sources. There is also a suggestion of a compendium of Paine's writings to follow.

A paperback version of the biography, originally published in 1995, is now in print, while public libraries still have copies of Paine's work, as do our own at Rationalist House.

George Pirie

The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism,
Ayn Rand (Signet, New York, 1964).

No matter how passé your attitude towards ethics, you would find it hard coming away from this book without having at least formed some opinion. Basically, everything you presume to know about ethics at the moment is wrong. And within this collection of 19 essays by Rand and psychologist Nathaniel Branden you are supposed to find out why.

Rand's thesis is that your life is your standard of value. Before you can do anything else you have to be alive, and to keep being alive you have to act to further your own survival. What we ought to do stems from this. Sperm whales ought to swim around with their mouths open filtering plankton, because that is their means of survival which they instinctively do. Sheep ought to stand around eating grass, because that is their means of survival, which they instinctively do. Humans, on the other hand, don't have any automatic means of survival. Our lives depend on the use of our brains, which we must choose to use, or not. It follows from this that any action by another person by force to hamper myself furthering my existence (i.e. physical force or fraud) is immoral, because it is negating my means of survival.

Selfishness, which Rand defines as ‘acting to further your own interests’, is virtuous because you need to further your own interests to survive. Altruism – that you exist for the sake of furthering the lives of others or the ‘greater good’, is immoral because it views any action of which you are the sole beneficiary as immoral.

That’s my quick version. How she and Branden extend it is another story. Unfortunately, although I agree wholeheartedly with her conclusions I found this book almost impossible to enjoy. There is no bibliography or footnotes of any kind. Not in itself a fatal flaw by impossibly annoying. The same goes with the general lack of evidence for points raised in the text. For example Nathaniel Branden writes this passage: ‘...one of the characteristics of mental illness is a distorted value structure; the neurotic does not value things according to their objective merit, in relation to his nature and needs...’ (p 45). For which he offers no supporting evidence whatsoever. I have no way of telling whether it is true or not. Have any studies been done on the value judgments of neurotics? What is a ‘neurotic’? Is it a definite term in psychology? What does the DSM have to say on the subject? This tactic of unsupported assertion goes on and on in the book.

Then there are times when she is simply wrong. For example:

Man is born with an emotional mechanism, just as he is born with a cognitive mechanism; but, at birth, *both* are ‘tabula rasa’. It is man’s cognitive faculty, his mind, that determines the *content* of both. Man’s emotional mechanism is like an electronic computer, which his mind has to program – and the programming consists of the values his mind chooses. (p 30)

This is simply not how it is in the real world. As Steven Pinker has pointed out, language is instinctual, as is all sorts of things like recognising and looking at faces, forming mental images, and other mental modules and strategies for coping with and surviving in the world. Of course there are debates about the amount that is instinctual, but to state that we are *tabula rasa* is just not true.

Then there is her style. There is no doubt that she feels passionately about what she writes but her table-thumping prose makes it a difficult read. Everything is sweetness and Rational light or death, destruction, subhuman, evil. Gives me a headache – when I want forceful passionate writing I’ll still look to Nietzsche even if he is wrong. So, I don’t know whether I can recommend this book, it’s stuck in the middle. She is right, but she’s gone about it horribly.

Hayden Wood

New Book

Islam and Politics in Indonesia

Finngeir Hiorth

Human-Etisk Forbund, 2002

Oslo, Norway

112 pp.

It has been estimated that Indonesia in 1999 had a population of 2118 million. Of these it was thought that 83% were Muslim, 9% Protestant, 4% Roman Catholic, 2% Hindu, 1% Buddhist, and ‘other’ 1%. Globally, Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims of any country. They are mostly Sunnis and followers of the Shafi’i school of Sharia law.

Islam and Politics in Indonesia gives a concise account of the history of Islam in Indonesia. The main emphasis is on political aspects of Islam and on developments during the last two centuries. The story becomes more detailed as we approach the twenty-first century, and ends at October 2002 when Megawati Sukarnoputri was president.

Islam reached the westernmost parts of Indonesia and Malaysia around 1250. From there it spread to most of the rest of Malaysia, Indonesia and the southernmost parts of the Philippines in the course of some centuries.

The author of *Islam and Politics in Indonesia* is a retired lecturer in philosophy. He was born and grew up in Indonesia and has retained an interest in the religion and politics of Indonesia. He has also for many years taught elementary courses of Indonesian at the University of Oslo.

Hiorth has published books dealing with the German philosopher Leibniz, the Scottish philosopher David Hume, the linguist Noam Chomsky, and with topics like atheism, ethics, humanism, materialism, metaphysics, and values. Some recent titles, also published by Human-Etisk Forbund, include *Studying Religion, Big Bang or No Bang?*, *Science, Religion and Philosophy*, *Secularism in Norway*, and *Introduction to Atheism*, published in 2000 and again in 2002. His book *Introduction to Humanism* was published by the Indian Secular Society, Mumbai, in 1996.

The faith of Mr Bush

Mr Bush, who has made faith a defining characteristic of his presidency, can’t easily ignore such opposition [from some churchmen]. Religiously observant voters are a cornerstone of his political base and his strategist Karl Rove has sought to expand that base by courting Catholics. While emphasising faith-based solutions to domestic social problems, he has cited religious imperatives on other issues such as Iraq.

“We’re being challenged” at home and abroad, Mr Bush told religious broadcasters in Nashville this week, “We’re meeting those challenges because of our faith.”

Wall Street Journal, February 13 2002.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Bill

The Summer issue of The Open Society has just reached me, and I hasten to thank you for publishing my letter about Stephen Jay Gould, and for reinforcing it with the references to Dennett and Dawkins.

Gould never fully outgrew his Marxist upbringing. I got to know J Philippe Rushton after he wrote to me for support against the attempt of the then 'Liberal' Premier of Ontario to have him sacked for his 'racist' beliefs. What he had so unfortunately done was to publish evidence of the substantially lower average IQ of blacks as compared to whites; which - as a moment's thought would have revealed even to that 'Liberal' Premier - would not warrant discrimination either for or against any individual of any particular race.

Yours

Antony Flew

Reading, England

The NZARH sent each new United Future MP a copy of Heathen in Godzone, to serve as a reminder to them that we live in an open society, which does not discriminate on the basis of religion, or any other way.

Dear Ms de Leeuwe

Thank you for your letter dated 4 December 2002 and the complimentary copy of Heathen in Godzone. I shall add it to my pile of holiday reading. I agree that today's New Zealand is both multicultural and multi-faith.

However your statement that the largest single grouping in New Zealand are people who describe themselves as having no religion is obviously incorrect. In the 2001 census more than 2.3 million New Zealanders stated that they belonged to a religion and within that group by far and away the largest block were those adhere [sic] to the Christian religion. Accordingly I find your statement completely irrational.

Having said that I hasten to add that United Future is a secular party and warmly welcomes all New Zealanders of any faith or none.

I am personally a Christian and many years ago

concluded that I simply have insufficient faith to believe that the existence of the universe can be explained by chance. Reason alone convinces me that both we and the universe are the product of design and that the whole wonderful creation set before us flows from God. For me faith and reason balance and integrate perfectly.

Faith without reason leads to superstition whilst reason without faith results in ultimate despair.

Is it OK to wish rationalists a Happy Christmas!

Yours sincerely,

Gordon Copeland MP

United Future

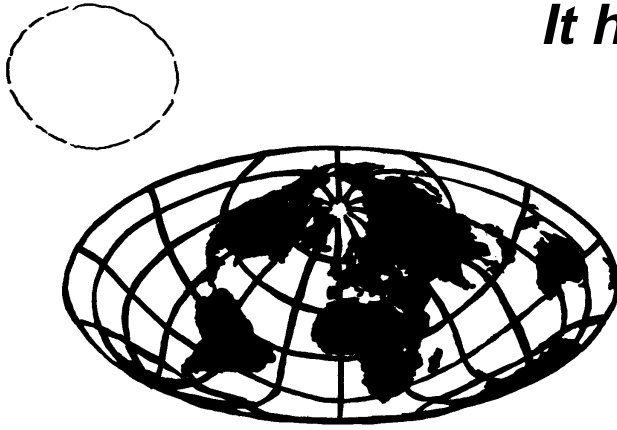
Editor in Chief's response: Life is so much easier when one is content to refute caricatures. Mr Copeland employs the reductionist trick of seeing the only cosmological alternatives as being design or chance. In the event of further reading around the subject, he will discover that rationalists, in line with contemporary science, believe that the universe is the sum total of many highly intricate principles and equations, which we on earth call laws of nature. Chance has nothing to do with it. What we don't believe is that these highly intricate and interdependent laws across the entire universe are the handiwork of a tribal volcano god from one little planet.

Faith without reason leads to superstition. Mr Copeland is right there; but reason without faith leads to life affirming humanism and taking responsibility for oneself. It does not lead to despair. Mr Copeland also begs the question whether faith and reason can work together. Faith has always been more at home with dogma than with reason.

Mr Copeland is correct that if you add all the Christian denominations together, the number is by far the largest. We never denied that. Our point was the simpler one that those who opted to describe themselves as having no religion constitute the largest single category. This remains a simple fact. It is hard to imagine how Mr Copeland thinks humanists would feel welcome in United Future in the face of the ill-informed hostility his letter displays.

And finally, Mr Copeland is quite at liberty to wish us merry Christmas. And in return I would like to wish him a merry Mithras, Krishna, Herakles and Horus.

It happened in February



- February 1 1865, thirteenth amendment prohibits slavery in the United States.
- February 2 1943, German VI Army surrenders in Stalingrad.
- February 2 1970, death of Bertrand Russell.
- February 3 1919, League of Nations first meets.
- February 6 1840, Treaty of Waitangi.
- February 6 1843, Charles Southwell released from prison, serving for blasphemy.
- February 7 1947, Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran.
- February 11 1482, Tomas Torquemada appointed Chief Inquisitor of all Spain.
- February 11 1929, Lateran Treaty between Mussolini's Fascist government and the Papacy.
- February 11 1990, Nelson Mandela released after 27 years in South African gaols.
- February 12 1809, birth of Abraham Lincoln
- February 12 1809, birth of Charles Darwin
- February 13 1633, Galileo detained by the Inquisition in Rome.
- February 14 1779, Captain Cook murdered in Hawaii.
- February 14 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini issues a fatwa against Salman Rushdie.
- February 15 1564, birth of Galileo Galilei.
- February 16 1890, Charles Bradlaugh resigns as president of the NSS for health reasons.
- February 17 1600, Giordano Bruno burned at the stake.
- February 17 1958, CND formed in London. Bertrand Russell becomes its president.
- February 18 1930, Pluto discovered.
- February 19 1859, *Origin of Species* published.
- February 22 2002, death of Raymond Firth, New Zealand born anthropologist, aged 100.
- February 23 1997, NZRA becomes NZARH.
- February 25 1960, NZRA meeting votes unanimously to purchase Rationalist House.
- February 25 1988, televangelist Jimmy Swaggart banned from preaching after being discovered consorting with a prostitute.
- February 27 380, Emperor Theodosius I declares Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire.
- February 27 1975, Jim Woolnough arrested on the charge of illegally procuring miscarriages, which becomes a testcase, leading to the legalisation of abortion.

Honorary Associates of the N Z Association of Rationalists and Humanists (Inc)

Gianni Bartocci
H James Birx
Sir Hermann Bondi, KCB, FRS,
Ray Bradley
Steve Cooper
Richard Dawkins
Warwick Don
Zoë During, MBE
Denis Dutton
Sanal Edamaruku
Brian Edwards, CNZM
Antony Flew
Levi Fragell
Ida Gaskin, CNZM
Maurice Gee
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Lavanam
Richard Leakey
Kenneth Maddock
Tim Madigan
Michael Martin
Taslina Nasrin
Jean-Claude Pecker
Ian Plimer
Anwar Shaikh
Barbara Smoker
Dame Catherine Tizard
David Tribe
Ibn Warraq
Lewis Wolpert

Focus on . . .

Michael Martin, whose new book, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (Prometheus, 2002) is a powerful restatement of the coherence of atheism.

HUMANIST NOTICEBOARD

Support the **Heretic's Happy Half Hour**
hosted by
Bruce Robertson
Wednesday evenings, 8.50pm
on Auckland's **Planet FM 104.6**.

Remember the NZ Association of Rationalists & Humanists in your Will.
Unlike the churches, the NZARH has to pay its own way in the world. No matter how small, a contribution to the NZARH in your Will helps ensure the continued survival of humanism in New Zealand. Just specify the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists in your Will.

NZARH Charles Southwell Awards
2002, Andrew Williams, secular state champion
2001, Dr Philip Nitschke, euthanasia campaigner
2000, Dr Zoë During, women's health campaigner
1999, Brian Rudman, crusading journalist on the *NZ Herald*.
1998, Dame Cheryl Sotheran, on behalf of Te Papa.

Support the
Humanist Outlook
hosted by Jeff Hunt and Joan McCracken
Wellington Access Radio
783 AM, times vary

Follow the debate on the existence of God between Bill Cooke and Imran Aijaz
on www.infidels.org/library/modern/bill_cooke/cooke-aijaz/cooke1.html

Humanist Services

Justices of the Peace

Barbara Carr, Auckland (09) 436-1126
Wayne Facer, Auckland (09) 528-4465
Dame Barbara Goodman, Auckland (09) 520-1233
Ngairé McCarthy, Auckland (09) 372-3322

Humanist and Secular Celebrants

Marriages, Funerals, Rites of Passage

Auckland

Dame Barbara Goodman, Auckland (09) 520-1233
Peter Hansen, Manukau City (09) 622-1400
George Pirie, Manukau City (09) 536-5033
Barbara Shaw, Auckland (09) 528-6293

Taranaki

Jeanne van Gorkom, New Plymouth, (06) 753-2311

Wellington

Sheena Hudson (04) 389-2270

South Island

Charles Manhire, Christchurch (03) 355-8315

Fifty Years Ago

So flying saucers now have a religious aspect! Wonders will never cease. We have in the last two or three years been treated to endless theories about them: they are secret war-weapons of the USA; ditto Russia; they are space-ships from Mars; they are eye-strain spots; they are meteorological balloons or kites; they do not exist at all. Now a New Zealand organisation, Civilian Saucer Investigation (NZ) has been set up to study the matter, and it has been besieged with reports of objects seen. It is needless to go into the pros and cons of the matter here, except to remark that Rationalists should keep an open mind on this as on all other problematical phenomena; but one letter to the investigation committee is worth repeating. An extract goes as follows: "They are certainly not flying saucers, but flying rolls, for the Bible says, 'In the last days there will be signs and wonders in the skies.' This flying roll is the curse that goeth forth over the space of the whole earth - why? Because man has ignored the Law of God."

So now you know all about it.
NZ Rationalist, March 1953

The Last word

Letter to the *Listener*: 'I am writing, though, about the comments on the controversial taniwha v. the general run of talkback people. Your writer makes his atheism and contempt for Christians plain, in contrasting their 'superstition' with the Maori belief in the taniwha! As a Christian, and person of left-wing, feminist persuasion, I resent the writer's arch, superior tone and spiteful remarks about Christians. Sadly, it seems that the *Listener* is coming to resemble more *Open Society* (the Rationalist and Humanist Society magazine) than a magazine for general readership.'

Debbie L Kean
Mt Albert, Auckland

A Directory of New Zealand Freethought

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Celebrant service: (09) 622-1400
Internet: <http://www.nzarh.org.nz>
e-mail: heathen@nzarh.org.nz

The Skeptics

Or NZCSICOP – New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal
c/- The Secretary
P O Box 29 492
Christchurch
e-mail: claire.lecouteur@xtra.co.nz
Internet: <http://www.skeptics.org.nz>

NZ Humanist Society

Box 3372
Wellington
Internet: <http://www.humanist.org.nz>
The Wellington branch of the Humanists can be contacted at the same address.

NZ Humanist Charitable Trust

Public Trust
PO Box 5024
Wellington

Hawke's Bay Freethinkers

c/- Robyn Church, Secretary
2 Millar Street, Napier

Northland Freethinkers

c/- Ian Score
6 Edge Street, Onerahi, Whangarei

Waikato Freethinkers

c/- Peter Murphy
Box 5453, Hamilton
email: heathen316@hotmail.com

Taranaki Humanists

c/- Jeanne van Gorkom
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Auckland University Atheist Club

c/- Rationalist House
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Christchurch Humanist Fellowship

c/- 158 Panorama Road
Christchurch

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