

The Open Society

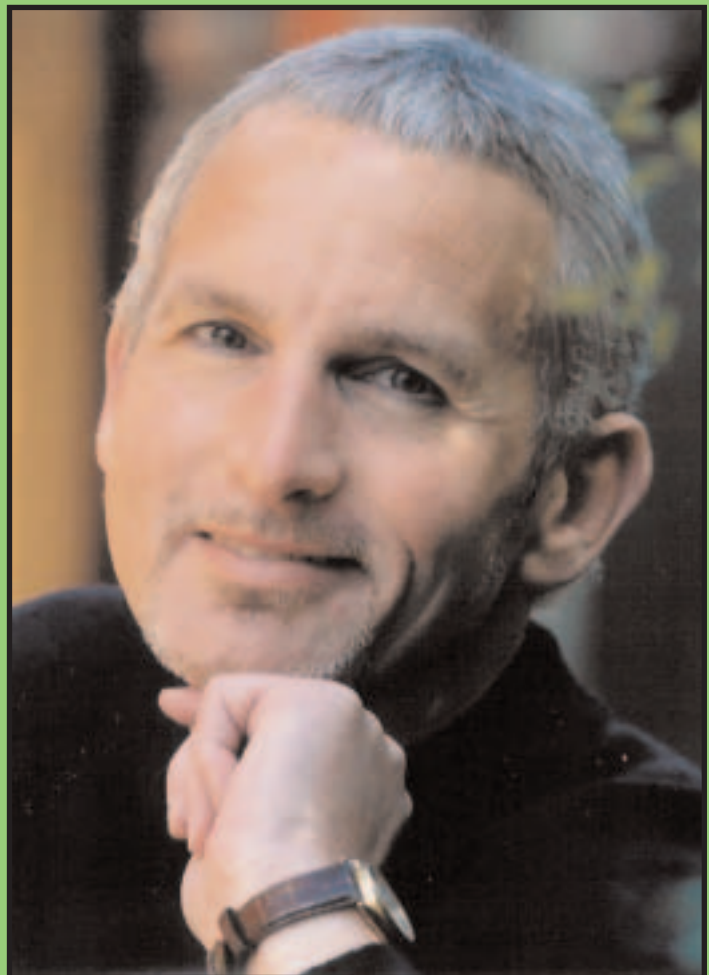
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**God,
Immortality
and
Free Will**

Christian Morality

Faith Healing



Michael Laws, winner of the 2003 Charles Southwell Award

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The principal objects of the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists are:

to advocate a rational, humane and secular view of life without reference to supernatural agencies and which is compatible with scientific method

to promote a tolerant, responsible and open society

to encourage open-minded enquiry into matters relevant to human co-existence and well-being

Right but Wrong versus Wrong but Right

Let's be clear about one thing – the fundamentalists are right. The Bible is quite unambiguous about its disapproval of homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 is a broad condemnation of the practice and two chapters further on (20:13) the death penalty for homosexuality is urged. Just in case this is seen as merely an Old Testament throwback we can safely ignore, Romans 1:26-32 repeats the condemnation and the call for death for homosexuals. And we can't really play the 'yes, but Jesus was different' gambit either, because recall in Matthew 5:17-19 he insists he has come to uphold every jot and tittle of the Jewish law, which, of course includes Leviticus.

Many religious liberals have tried to pussyfoot around the issue. One liberal has tried to enlist Ezekiel (the very thought is preposterous!) on his side. For did not Ezekiel (Chap 22) make a list of all the sins of Israel which requires the judgement of God, a list which does not include homosexuality? And in the New Testament, a list is made in Galatians (5: 19-21) of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God, and homosexuals don't figure on the list. Attempts have been made to show that the moral of the Sodom and Gomorrah story is the price paid for lack of hospitality, rather than for homosexuality. And isn't the Law fulfilled by loving one's neighbour as oneself? (Galatians 5:14)

But there is a sense in which the religious liberals are trying too hard. The condemnations of homosexuality are too strong and too unambiguous to be explained away. This is the price paid for a scriptural religion: at some point the scripture becomes a liability and divides the followers into those who seek to overcome this liability by creative interpretation in the light of new conditions; and those who are determined to follow the scripture, no matter how perverse, uncaring and even ridiculous the result.

This is the dilemma of contemporary Christianity. The conservatives have the advantage of having scripture on

their side, but at the cost of coming across as sanctimonious and lacking in compassion. By contrast, the liberals look good on the compassion front, but at the cost of fudging scriptural authority. This is what Duncan Howlett called the fatal flaw in liberal Christianity.

Once the smoke from the gay bishops dispute had settled, a couple of images remain strong in my mind, the most memorable of which came from Nigeria, where a conservative church-goer joined the chorus of condemnation from the African churches about gay priests. When asked about his two wives, the man noted – correctly – that polygamy is not condemned in the Bible, whereas homosexuality is. Give that man a medal.

And it defeats me to see how God's cause has been nobly served by the

from secular society, refuses to live a lie? What sort of institution is it which prefers its senior members to be hypocrites? Particularly when the religion's founder had some harsh things to say about hypocrites.

Against all this, the Humanist position, as I understand it, is incomparably more straightforward and humane than the religious position. Where Christianity takes scripture as its starting point, humanists look at the natural world, and science, which is the most successful means we have of understanding the natural world. Science has demonstrated that homosexual behaviour is common in the animal world, and not unknown in the plant world. The old accusation of homosexuality being unnatural is therefore nonsense. Most homosexuality is a physical orientation that the individual is born with. And there is no

What sort of institution prefers its senior members to be hypocrites?

Archbishop of Canterbury's comic coercion over a cup of tea of Jeffrey John, the openly gay vicar in Reading. In persuading John to refuse his promotion to Bishop as a sop to evangelical wrath, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop, has succeeded only in driving the issue underground – until the next time. This can't have done his reputation as the bold progressive much good. At least the Americans have taken the issue seriously and elected an openly gay bishop and to hell with the consequences.

One final point. Has anybody noted the hypocrisy that is implied in the term 'openly gay bishop'? There have been gay bishops ever since there have been bishops. Why should the issue now become so critical simply because some of them, taking the lead

necessary link between homosexuality and pederasty, which, because it involves the exploitation of children unable to exercise an adult choice over what is happening to them, is wrong in all cases. Most sexual exploitation of children happens by heterosexuals.

And, thinking ethically, Humanists acknowledge that they would not want to be discriminated against and subjected to various humiliations and physical dangers, and so they are obliged not to extend to others what they would not want done to themselves. But religionists are forced to contort themselves into all sorts of unnatural positions because of the existence of archaic hatreds bound up in something they call scripture. What a farce.

The Meaning of Life

God, Immortality and Free Will

Raymond Bradley

In this brief but ambitious paper I discuss three grand questions about the nature of reality and our status and significance within it:

First: Does reality include a supernatural realm, inhabited by spiritual beings such as gods? Or is the familiar natural world all there is to it?

Second: If there is indeed a supernatural world, how do we relate to it? Are we composite creatures with a foot in both camps, so to speak; creatures with souls as well as bodies? If the latter, is it possible that our souls should live on after our bodies are no more? Or is physical death the end for all of us?

Third: What is the nature of the free will that we commonly suppose ourselves to enjoy during our sojourn here on earth? Do we in fact have free will? Or are our lives little more than pointless scribbles on the fabric of the universe, as devoid of real significance as scratches on a piece of glaciated rock?

Each of these questions is apt to come up in any discussion of the more general one: 'What is the meaning of life, if indeed life does have a meaning?' So I'll say a little about each.

How, for a start, might the existence of a god or gods affect the meaningfulness of our lives here on earth? Among the plausible answers that might be given are these:

* that if there is deity to whose existence - as is often supposed - we owe both our own existence and that of the physical universe, then surely we should live our lives in accordance with any plans that deity might have for us;

* that it is therefore incumbent on us to find out what those intentions are; and

* that our lives will be most meaningful if we fulfil that deity's purposes.

In short, some would say that the real meaning of life is to be found in service

to such a god, and in living according to his or her dictates. But which god are we talking about? And which of his or her commands are we to obey?

Which god?

First: To whom does the term 'god' refer? Obviously not to some New Age god or other construct of man's imagination. Few would suppose that such gods communicate with us at all, let alone about how we should live. And obviously not to the Aztec god, Huitzilopochtli, who - only about 600 years ago - supposedly commanded the sacrifice of 50,000 youths and maidens in a single year. Nor to his brother, Tezcatilpoca, who supposedly consumed 25,000 virgins annually. Nor, presumably, to any of the other 189 gods whose 'death' was celebrated by H L Mencken in his 1922 essay *Memorial Service*.¹ There is no good evidence for their existence. And no enlightened person could countenance the idea that their commands were moral. These gods deserve the oblivion to which thinking men and women have consigned them.

But, by the same token, so does the God of our much vaunted Judeo-Christian tradition. After all, this is the God who, according to the Old Testament, is said to have drowned every member of the human race, not just wicked men and women, but innocent children, suckling infants, and the unborn, with the sole exceptions of the drunkard, Noah, and his incestuous family.² This is the God who himself slaughters hundreds of thousands, if not millions, by means of his angels, serpents, hailstones, wind-storm, earthquake, fire, and plague.³ This is a God who: gives 32,000 Midianite virgins to the soldiers who had killed their families;⁴ who allows his hero, Jephthah, to demonstrate his devotion by sacrificing his daughter 'as a

burnt offering';⁵ who punishes the Babylonians by having 'their little ones . . . dashed to pieces before their eyes . . . and their wives ravished';⁶ who declares 'I will cause them [members of his own chosen people] to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat everyone the flesh of his friend';⁷ and who commands His chosen people to slay 'both man and woman, infant and suckling' in 31 kingdoms while directing the Israelites in their policy of ethnic cleansing of what orthodox Jews now call Greater Israel.⁸ And this is the very same God⁹ who, in the New Testament, repeatedly promises eternal torment in the fires of Hell¹⁰ for all those - the majority of the human race - who haven't believed in Jesus (an obscure figure whose dates of birth and death no one knows and whose historical status may fairly be likened to that of Hercules, Mithra, King Arthur or William Tell).¹¹

The God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - as supposedly revealed in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran - is depicted as a spiritual being who commits, causes, commands or condones violations of almost all the moral precepts that we hold dear. He is a moral monster, infinitely more evil than the moral monsters of human history: the Ghenghis Khan's, Hitler's, Stalin's, Pol Pot's from whom we shrink in horror. And the world he supposedly created for us to live in is one in which we - and his other creatures - are constantly being assailed by his chosen weapons of mass destruction: natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes that kill tens of thousands, not just the 3,000 odd of September 11, 2001; radiological bombardments from outer space; chemical and biological minefields that await our blundering mis-steps because he has not deigned to

reveal them to us; and diseases such as cancer, filariasis, hookworm, malaria, and schistosoma that cripple or kill countless millions each year.¹²

Compared to Him, the Aztec gods were paragons of virtue. So, too, is Satan - the mythical personification of evil - who is portrayed as being guilty of nothing much worse than tempting Eve with a piece of fruit or, with God's permission, giving Job a bad case of boils. Is this the God on whose behaviour we ought to model our own in order to give a meaning to our lives? If so, we have a moral license for mayhem. Or are we to say that what is good enough for God is not good enough for us?

Which God to obey?

Second: If it were the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God in obedience to whom we are to find life's meaning, which of his commands should we obey? All of them? Or just those that now satisfy our moral scruples? One problem is that this God prescribes the death penalty for over thirty offences. These include: being a stubborn and rebellious son; cursing or hitting one's parents; owning an ox that happens to kill a man; blaspheming; committing adultery; committing homosexual acts; picking up sticks or working on the Sabbath; preaching other religions; and so on. If we were to obey this God's dictates, we would have a quick solution to the world's population problem. Are we really obliged to kill all who are guilty of these offences? Or is it up to us to decide which laws to obey?

Clearly, there are grave difficulties with the belief that the meaning of life is to be found in service to the Judeo-Christian God - or, for that matter - in service to the Allah of Islam. There are grave difficulties, for that matter, in the supposition that any sort of god exists. If a god exists who does not reveal himself, then we have no clear evidence for the existence of that god. At best we can produce abstract philosophical arguments for the existence of some sort of vaguely conceived deity, or supreme being.

But such arguments - the arguments of so-called natural theology (as opposed to revealed theology) - are notoriously feeble. The argument from design, when viewed in the light of the disasters and diseases in the universe such a deity supposedly designed, leads to the conclusion that the Great Watchmaker is either incompetent or malevolent. And it raises the further question, 'Who designed God?' Likewise, the argument from the alleged need for a cause of

existence gets us nowhere. If we postulate an existing God as an answer to the question 'Why does anything exist?' we merely add to the list of existing entities. That only adds to the burden of explanation by raising the question 'What caused God?'. We do better to avoid the regress by accepting the existence of the universe as a brute fact.

There are no sound reasons, I would argue, for supposing that there are any gods at all, either revealed or hidden from view. A fortiori, there is no good reason for believing that we should order our lives so as to take account of their alleged existence and purposes for us.

How about the supposition that the meaning of this life lies in one that is to follow? This wide-spread belief is implicit in the view that if all came to an end at the grave, then life itself would be devoid of meaning. Now it is clear that the question whether we are composite creatures having spirits or souls that might survive our bodily deaths is independent of the question whether other spiritual beings, such as gods, angels, or devils, exist. As for the latter, we may well believe - and, for the reasons just given, also hope - that they do not. Nevertheless, we might well embrace the idea of ghosts while rejecting that of gods.

But is survival of our bodily deaths a real possibility? And would having a second life confer meaning on the present one? I'll deal with these questions in turn. Ask yourself, first, what would it be like for you yourself to survive your bodily death? What do you envisage yourself surviving as? I suspect it would give you little comfort to know that the molecules, atoms, or subatomic particles of which your physical body is composed are virtually immortal in so far as they will probably survive as long as does the physical universe. These are not the parts of you that you think of when you think of your self surviving the death and dissolution of your physical body. So - once more - what do you survive as? One hypothesis is that it is your soul that survives. But what is your soul? We commonly invoke the trilogy 'body, mind, and soul'. But are these three things or just two? If three, then it would be nice to have some sort of guarantee that when your soul survives it will at least be accompanied by your mind. Otherwise, the survival of your soul as some sort of mindless, unthinking, unconscious entity, would carry as little significance as would the survival of your appendix in a test-tube of preservative fluid.

The soul is nothing more than a hypothetical entity, invented by theologians

and metaphysicians as the bearer of mental properties in much the same way as the ether was invented to be the bearer of light waves. We have no more warrant for believing in the soul than we do for believing in ectoplasm, the faked emissions of spiritualist mediums. Hence, since it is the thinking, feeling, you - your conscious mind - that you want to survive, let's drop the term 'soul' from our discussion and concentrate instead on the ideas of minds and consciousness.

What exactly do you envisage when you think of your mind surviving the death of your physical body and brain? You think of it, I submit, as some sort of non-physical object that can be detached from the body and its brain and go on existing in the absence of either. But is this really the right way to think of it? Certainly language encourages to think so. After all, the word 'mind' is a noun; and nouns - we have been taught - are naming words, and names stand for things or objects. Hence, we conclude, the noun 'mind' must be the name of an object; and if not the name of a physical object, then surely of a non-physical one.

But this idea raises a host of problematic questions. When, in the embryological story of the development of a human being from the union of sperm and ovum does this object, the mind, get 'injected', as it were, into the growing embryo? When, in the evolutionary story of the development of Homo Sapiens from more primitive primates, does this object, mind, enter the picture? More pertinently, if it is your mind that you identify with the 'you' that is to survive your death, will it be the mind you had as a child, as a teenager, as an adult or the mind you have in your dotage? And what of the minds of paranoid schizophrenics, imbeciles, stillborns or aborted fetuses? Is the meaning of their lives to be found in the continuance of the minds they have at death?

When questions like these are so clearly imponderable - admitting only of arbitrary answers if any at all - we would do well to examine their presuppositions: in this case the presupposition that the mind really is some kind of substance or object. But what might the mind be if it isn't a substance, thing or object?

The answer I would give is that when we talk about the mind we are simply talking of a cluster of mental attributes or properties: various dispositions, abilities and activities; intellectual properties, like being rational; emotional properties, like being loving; artistic ones, like being musical; moral ones, like

being honest.

Now if the mind is not itself an object but rather a set of properties of an object, namely a set of properties of a physical body with a properly functioning brain, then the mind can no more continue to exist after the death of the physical body and brain than can a grin continue to exist after the disappearance of the face that does the grinning. To suppose otherwise is to commit what I call the 'Cheshire Cat fallacy'. You may remember the wonderful passage in which Alice, while in Wonderland, chides the cat who keeps doing disappearing tricks:

“. . . I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy."
"All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.
"Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!"

Curious indeed. In fact, conceptually absurd. If I am right, the idea that we -

our minds, our souls or our consciousnesses - might survive our bodily deaths in any meaningful way is a philosophical fiction as little deserving of rational belief as Lewis Carroll's story of the Cheshire Cat in Chapter VI of *Alice in Wonderland*.

I have a general piece of advice to offer here: In thinking about such allegedly deep and intractable questions as 'What is the mind?', 'What is intelligence?' or 'What is consciousness?' - any question involving the name of some non-physical abstraction - we do well to avoid the noun and concentrate instead on the corresponding verb, adverb or adjective.

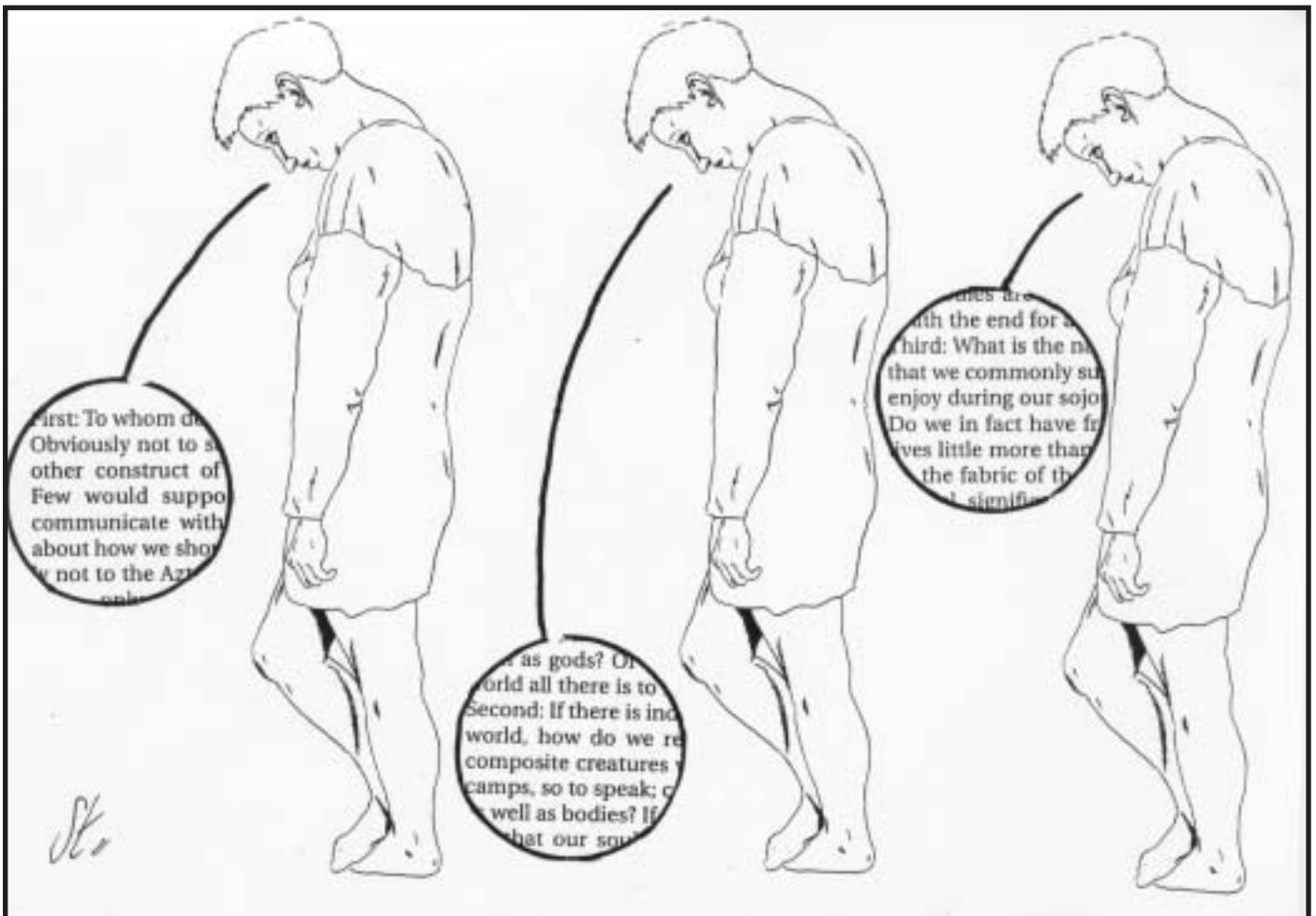
The question 'What is consciousness?', for instance, about which so many neuro-scientists and philosophers currently seem so deeply puzzled, is better replaced by questions like 'What is it to be conscious?' [the verb], 'What is it to do something consciously?' [the adverb] or 'What is it for someone to be in a conscious state?' [the adjective]. It then becomes clear that the abstract noun 'consciousness' isn't the name of some elusive thing; it isn't the name of a thing at all. To be conscious is to be aware; to do something consciously is to do it while being aware of what one is doing; to be in a conscious state is to be in a

general state of awareness of one's self or surroundings.

It is so easy, you see, for us to fall into the trap of reification: the tendency to think of an abstract noun as if it were the name of a real thing, object or substance that is capable of independent existence. The fallacy of reification is epitomised for us in a passage from another of Lewis Carroll's works, this time from *Through the Looking Glass*, chapter VII:

"[The two Messengers have] both gone to the town. Just look along the road, and tell me if you can see either of them."
"I see nobody on the road," said Alice.
"I only wish I had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone. "To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!"

As Peter Heath, in *The Philosopher's Alice*, comments: "Because *nobody* functions grammatically very like *somebody*, there is a temptation to believe that it is the name of a peculiar, diaphanous sort of somebody, who is then unnecessarily added to the world's inhabitants. In such a way does the lan-



guage of abstraction darken counsel, corrupt communications and beget bad philosophy, a theme much insisted on by Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and their many modern successors". 13

Properly conceived, consciousness or awareness is a property of a living organism. It is a property that we human beings share - though to a different degree - with members of various other species such as alligators, bats, cats, dogs, elephants, frogs and gorillas (to list just a few in alphabetical order). Likewise with other mental properties like intellect, will and emotion; like the properties of having temperature and being fluid, all are emergent properties: properties possessed by complex objects though not by their simplest constituents, the molecules, atoms and subatomic particles from which they are constructed. All these mental properties are designed by what Richard Dawkins has called 'the blind watchmaker': they have emerged in the natural course of evolution.

The term 'mind' is just a compendious way of referring to all such properties. None of them can exist in the absence of the organism that has them. It follows that none of them can continue to exist when the organism that had them is dead. When the organism dies, so does the mind and so does consciousness.

The meaning of life?

There is another grave problem facing the hypothesis that our lives here on earth wouldn't have any significance if all came to an end at the grave, that it would be meaningless unless we could look forward to life in a another world. This hypothesis leads to the kind of absurdity that philosophers call an infinite regress. For in what would the meaning of this second life lie? In its sequel? And in what would lie the meaning of that sequel? Still another sequel? And the meaning of that? The answer gets postponed ad infinitum.

Once more, the question admits of no non-arbitrary answer. If any of the unending hypothetical series of 'other' lives can have a meaning, surely this one - the one we have here on earth - can too.

For reasons like these, my answer to the question 'What is the meaning of life?' is akin to the answer I would give to the question 'What is the meaning of such and such a book?' The meaning of a book is to be found in the words, the sentences, the paragraphs, and the chapters it contains. Likewise, the

meaning of life is to be found in the meaningful moments, episodes and achievements that occur within our brief appearance here on earth. A book doesn't lack meaning because it comes to an end on the last page. Nor do our lives lack meaning because they come to an end when all neural activity ceases.

To be sure, some lives are lived in meaningless fashion. Some lives are lived in pursuit of goals which we can only deplore. But the lives of still others, gifted by nature or favoured by circumstance, will have value not just for themselves but for others. And some - by virtue of their physical, intellectual, artistic, moral or social achievements - may even achieve a different kind of 'immortality': they may live on in the memories of those who follow them.

No gods are needed to give our lives meaning. No future life is needed to give meaning to the present life. We ourselves can choose to give our lives meaning, purpose, and value right here and now.

Or can we? Opinions differ on the matter. On the one hand, it is indisputable that we do, at least in many circumstances, believe ourselves able to exercise freedom of choice and freedom of action. The concept of free will is entrenched in our commonsense beliefs and ordinary language. We can and do distinguish between the freedom conferred on some by virtue of economic status, education and good health, for instance, and the relative powerlessness of others who are handicapped by poverty, ignorance or disease. The choices open to one may not be open to another. The freedoms enjoyed by the master are not enjoyed by the slave. The freedoms of the jailer are not enjoyed by the prisoner. The freedoms of oppressors are not enjoyed by those who are their victims. These differences do in fact exist. We recognise them in practice as well as in theory. And we mark them, in language, by talk of various kinds and degrees of freedom, or its absence.

Yet, on the other hand, many philosophical arguments have been advanced to show that commonsense and ordinary language are fallible guides to truth. The truth of the matter, it has been argued, is that free will is an illusion since we are all in fact mere slaves of fate, products of and subject to the constraints of laws that rule our lives.

Two main arguments have been advanced in support of this fatalistic conclusion. One has to do with the laws of logic; the other with laws of nature. The first is an argument from the doc-

trine that all of reality - whether past, present or future - is subject to the laws of logic. These are laws, theologians have usually conceded, that even an almighty God cannot violate.

One of these laws is the Law of Excluded Middle which says that every statement must be either true or, if not true, false (there being no 'middle' possibilities). Another is the Law of Identity which says that if a statement is true then it is true, and if false, then false. Applied to statements about future events, these yield the obvious conclusions:

Either it is true that such and such an event will occur or it is false; if it is true that it is going to occur then - of necessity - it is going to occur; if it is false that it is going to occur then - of necessity - it is not going to occur.

Generalising, we infer: the future will be what it will be; and from this we infer, in turn: you can't change the future from what it is going to be any more than you can change the past from what it was.

Free will or determinism?

At this point, the dark clouds of fatalism seem to threaten our cherished belief in free will. We may well be tempted to start thinking of our lives as mere pawns of fate. Hence the famous stanza from Fitzgerald's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*:

Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights
and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces
plays:
Hither and thither moves, and
mates, and slays,
And one by one back in the closet
lays.

Each of these statements is an expression of the doctrine that I once christened as 'Logical Determinism', a doctrine which - even expressed in these general terms - seems to imply that the future is fated and that we are powerless to do anything about it.

Over forty years ago, I tried to illustrate how easy it is to draw fatalistic conclusions from Logical Determinism by writing an article entitled *Must the Future Be What It Is Going to Be?*,¹⁴ in which I predicted that a fellow doctoral student at the Australian National University - Bob Hawke - would one day be Prime Minister of Australia. Now obviously, if my prediction was true at the time when I made it, then Bob was indeed going to become Prime Minister, and there was nothing that anyone could do to prevent this, since otherwise

my statement would have been false. Equally obviously, if my prediction was false, then Bob would never become Prime Minister and there was nothing that anyone could do to make him Prime Minister, since otherwise my statement would have been true. No matter what final outcome the future held, in neither case could anyone do anything to change it from what it was going to be.

But - I asked - does this imply that Bob's future was fixed or fated in advance, irrespective of his own choices in the matter? My answer, now as then, is 'No.' To conclude that it does is to suppose that what the future is going to be owes nothing to an individual's goals, ambitions or choices. It is to suppose that our wills are causally inefficacious, that none of our efforts or strivings can have any effect.

Bob Hawke did indeed become Prime Minister of Australia. But not because of blind fate or string-pulling deities, let alone because of my predictions. He became what he became with the help of others, no doubt, but at least in part because of his own ambitions, his own efforts and his own political will. No one who knew him - as I did in his capacity as neighbour, friend and occasional baby-sitter - could ever deny him that. True, nature and nurture may have given him those ambitions and political will. And political circumstances may have fostered his plans. But they operated, as it were, through him, not despite him.

It wasn't my prediction's being true that made him Prime Minister. It was his becoming Prime Minister that made my prediction true. Bob Hawke gave his own life meaning by aiming for and achieving, - among other things - his status as political leader of Australia.

The laws of logic don't imply fatalism. The answer to the factual question as to whether someone's choices and actions will make a difference to the future cannot be deduced from the logical truth that the future will be what it will be. True, we can't change the future from what it is going to be. But the fact remains that what it is going to be may - to some extent - be a consequence of what we do in the present.

A second argument for the illusoriness of free will is derived from what we call Causal Determinism: the belief that there are exceptionless causal laws connecting states of affairs and events such that, for any system governed by such laws, the state of the system at any given time determines a unique state of the system for any later time. This doctrine

is implicit in such claims as 'Everything has a cause', 'Things don't just happen' and 'Nature is law-governed'. It holds that the past determines the present, and the present determines the future.

Now, according to the arguments I've advanced so far, reality has no place for a supernatural domain, either one inhabited by gods or one inhabited by ghosts. The only world that exists is the natural one, the material one, the world that we can best learn about by observation and experiment, the methods of scientific inquiry. Man, so conceived, is a wholly natural being: and, like any other natural being, is subject to the laws of nature.

But, once more, there is an apparent problem with this conception. If we, like other natural entities, are products of nature, then what account are we to give of free will? To what extent, if at all, do we have control over our own destinies? What meaning or significance could our lives have if we are designed to be what we are by the 'blind' processes of evolution?

The plausibility of Causal Determinism stems largely from the success of the various sciences in providing causal explanations of why things behave as they do: things like the motions of the heavenly bodies; the rise and fall of the tides; the rising and setting of the sun; the recurrence of the seasons; the workings of machines; the incidence of disease. Thus it used to be said that every scientific inquiry presupposes the truth of the Causal Principle, 'Every event has a cause', (i.e., the existence of causal laws 'governing' the phenomena under investigation) and that every success of science confirms its truth.

With the arguable exception of events in the microphysical world of quantum physics, causal laws seem to apply quite universally throughout the universe, not just to inanimate objects but animate ones as well. Even human beings and their behaviour seem to lend themselves to causal explanations by various life sciences. Consider the biological sciences such as genetics, endocrinology, molecular biology. They abound in causal explanations for why we do what we do. So do the behavioural sciences of psychology, sociology, etc. That much human behaviour is determined by an interplay between nature and nurture - not to be identified with heredity and environment, respectively - seems clear. Couldn't all of it be?

In the minds of some thinkers, the answer must be 'No'. For Causal Determinism, like Logical Determinism, seems to have fatalistic implications

that would render the notions of free will, responsibility and the meaningfulness of life itself totally illusory.

The great physicist Sir Arthur Eddington - an early promoter of Einstein's Relativity Theory - voiced this objection when he asked: "What significance is there in my mental struggle tonight whether I shall or shall not give up smoking, if the laws which govern the physical universe already preordain for the morrow a configuration of matter constituted of pipe, tobacco and smoke connected with my lips?" (*Philosophy, 1933*)

According to Eddington, the concepts of significance and freedom can be rescued only by denying the universality of Causal Determinism and embracing the so-called indeterminacy of quantum physics. Yet this conclusion is fraught with difficulties. The argument is that we can't really have significant freedom if what we do is determined by what we are and what we are is itself determined by factors over which we have no control. But by the same token it is hard to see how our acts can be free if what we do is determined by what we are and what we are is undetermined in the sense of being the outcome of mere chance. We seem to be faced with a dilemma: Either what we are is the outcome of causal factors in the past or it is the outcome of sheer indeterministic chance. Yet in neither case can we really be in control of what we are, or - it is further argued - of what we do.

How might one escape from the horns of this dilemma; the so-called 'Determinism or Chance Dilemma'? One option, countenanced by Eddington and numerous other thinkers, is to take recourse to a dualistic conception of the human being: the supposition that our immaterial minds, or souls, stand outside the material world and interpose themselves in the causal breaks postulated by quantum indeterminacy. As he put it: "... we must attribute to the mind power not only to decide the behaviour of atoms individually but to affect systematically large groups - in fact to tamper with the odds on atomic behaviour".¹⁵

Likewise, Nobel Prize laureate Sir John Eccles speculated that the mind or soul can intervene in the otherwise orderly flow of deterministic laws by virtue of indeterminacy at the microphysical level. He even suggested that free will may be located between the synapses in the brain. But this hypothesis will not do, for two main reasons.

First, it presupposes the kind of dualism

that we have already seen reason to reject: a dualism that sees reality as comprising two sorts of realms, the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the spiritual, the material and the immaterial. It thinks of the mind or soul as a mysterious entity that can violate the laws of nature. In short, it thinks of mind or soul as an entity that transcends the world of nature, one whose acts - designated acts of free will - are nothing short of miracles.

Second, this conception of free will offers only a temporary respite from the difficulties posed by the Determinism or Chance dilemma. For the dilemma arises again with respect to the postulated mind or soul. How did we come to have it? Was it preordained for us, by God perhaps, or by other causal factors in the spiritual domain? Or did we get it just by chance? In either case we seem to have no choice in the matter. After all, it is not up to us to choose the nature of our immaterial minds or souls any more than it is up to us to choose what genes we inherit from our parents or what chance mutations our genes may have undergone. Clearly, there is no escaping this dilemma.

The conclusions we are forced to if we accept the presuppositions of this dilemma are stark ones. No-one ever does, or even can, make genuine choices or act freely. No-one is really free in a deep sense of the word, any beliefs to the contrary being shallowly conceived. No-one is ever truly responsible for his or her actions since there is no possible circumstance - whether in a deterministic world or in an indeterministic one, whether in a natural world or a supernatural one - in which we choose, or have control over, the self that is 'given' to us. Ultimately, we are puppets of the fates of causality or chance, living lives that are meaningless.

According to this line of reasoning, there are no conceivable circumstances, no possible worlds, in which the concepts of freedom, responsibility or meaningfulness have any application. These conclusions, if correct, would have profound consequences, not only for our theoretical conception of our status in the universe, but also for our practical dealings with our fellows: it would mean that our ordinary practices of praising and blaming, of assigning responsibility in private judgements or in courts of law, would be unfounded and without justification.

But we don't have to accept these bleak and counterintuitive conclusions. The reasoning from which they are derived involves an all too common kind of fallacy: the fallacy of persuasive redefini-

tion. Let me illustrate in terms of a different example: the concept of solidity. Just as we ordinarily distinguish between circumstances in which we are free and ones in which we are not, so we also distinguish between objects that are solid and ones that are not. A concrete floor and a thick plank of sound wood are solid; marshy ground and rotten planks are not. As Aristotle pointed out: it is the business of the language of 'properties', as also of definitions, to distinguish.' ¹⁶

Now consider an argument which purports to conjure this distinction away. Arthur Eddington once claimed that if we were able to inspect a block of concrete at the sub-microscopic level we would see that the molecules and atoms of which it is composed are at least as distant from one another as the planets in our solar system. At the 'deep' level of atomic physics, he pointed out, our block of solid concrete and our solid plank are full of empty space. He even went to so far as to suggest that this profound discovery had radical practical consequences: stepping on a concrete floor or a solid plank, he concluded, is as risky as stepping on a swarm of flies. We ordinary folk, he claimed, are shallow folk who don't understand what 'solid' really means. Its real meaning is such that nothing ever has the property of being solid.

But this is preposterous. Eddington seems ignorant of Aristotle's point about the function of language. It is not we but Eddington who doesn't understand the meaning of 'solid'. Eddington has used seemingly subtle and sophisticated reasoning to try to persuade us that our commonsensical beliefs are mistaken. But in fact all he has done is to try to persuade us to forget the ordinary criteria for the use of the word 'solid' and adopt new ones. He is trying to persuade us to redefine the word 'solid'. Yet if we were to accept his redefinition of the term, we'd not have learned a new fact about the world; we'd merely have fallen victim to his word-play. The old distinction between what one can safely rely on to support one's tread would now have to be marked by a new pair of words. Instead of saying that the concrete is solid whereas the marshy ground is not, we'd have to say something like 'The concrete is *dolid* but the marshy ground is not *dolid*'. We'd have changed our language but made no advance in our understanding of how the world works.

Much the same needs to be said, I submit, about the reasoning of those who would try to persuade us - on the grounds given above - that no-one is

ever 'genuinely', 'really', 'truly', or 'ultimately' free in the allegedly 'deep' sense of the word 'free'. The weasel-words ('genuinely', 'really', 'truly', or 'ultimately' and 'deep') are the give-away. They are sure signs that a linguistic conjuring job is taking place. We are being subjected to an attempt to persuade us to abandon what we ordinarily mean by the words 'free' and 'not free', and to adopt new - allegedly 'deeper' - criteria for their application. But we make no advance if we go along with these persuasive arguments. We would still need to find words to distinguish between the master and the slave, the warden and the prisoner, the cases where we make choices and those in which we don't, and so on. All that will have changed is that we will have had to invent new words for the old distinction, new bottles for the old wine.

Those who have tried to persuade us that we are never 'really' free have subjected us to nothing more than semantic sophistry. This should become clear when we step back and take a closer look at one of the presuppositions relied on by both horns of the dilemma with which they try to confront us: the presupposition that if I have no control over what I am, because - in the final analysis - I don't choose what I am ¹⁷, then I have no control over which acts I will perform.

Is this presupposition true? I think not. From the indisputable fact that - ultimately - we don't choose, and hence aren't responsible for, what we are, it does not follow that we don't choose, or aren't responsible for, what we do. In other words, from the fact that nature, nurture - and perhaps even sheer chance - make us what we are, it doesn't follow that we ourselves don't play a role in determining what actions we will perform. Equally, from the fact that neither the master nor the slave chose their parents or the circumstances in which they would be born, it doesn't follow that the master can't make choices and exercise freedoms that are unavailable to the slave. We all know that he can.

The doctrine of Causal Determinism is consistent with the view that Eddington's morrow is determined in part by what he does today. It does not commit us to saying that his tomorrow is determined independently of what he does today. ¹⁸ Causal Determinism says that the future is determined by the present and the present by the past. It certainly does not say that the future is determined irrespective of what happens in the present.

Causal Determinism, in short, no more

implies Fatalism than does Logical Determinism. As I put it earlier with respect to Bob Hawke's political ambitions and machinations, his nature and nurture may well have given him these. But they operated through him, not despite him. Likewise with Arthur Eddington. The laws of nature, both those of nature and those of nurture, may well have determined what decision he would make about whether or not to smoke the next day. But these, once more, operate through him, not despite him. Both were free agents to the extent that they were neither compelled to do what they did nor prevented from doing what they chose to do.

The notions of free will and responsibility, and the sort of significance we attach to both, are in no way compromised by our conception of man as a wholly natural being. Nor are they in any way compromised by the supposition that what we are is a consequence of factors -

deterministic or indeterministic - over which we have no control. The kind of freedom that is required if we are to live our lives in meaningful fashion isn't threatened either by determinism as such or by indeterminism as such. It is threatened only by causes and accidents that prevent us from acting in ways we choose or that compel us to act in ways we do not choose.

Thus if Bob Hawke had chosen to pursue a political career and had been prevented from doing so by ill health or accidental incapacitation, for instance, then to that extent he would not have been free. And if Arthur Eddington had chosen to give up smoking but had been in the grip of an addiction to continue, then to that extent he too would not have been free to act otherwise. But in the absence of such compulsions or impediments to action both were free to act as they chose. And the lives of both men, politician and physicist respec-

tively, had a significance that was in no way impaired by the fact that they were products of evolution, nature's blind designer.

As it was with them, so it can be with us. To repeat what I said earlier: 'No gods are needed to give our lives meaning. No future life is needed to give meaning to the present life. We ourselves can choose to give our lives meaning, purpose and value right here and now.' In short, life can have meaning in the natural, purely material, world - the one with which we are all familiar.

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Notes

1. H L Mencken, 'In Memoriam', Alfred A Knopf, 1922, and renewed in 1950 by H L Mencken
2. Genesis 7:23
3. For instance, he punished King David for carrying out a census that he himself had ordered and then complied with David's request that others be punished instead of him by sending a plague to kill 70,000 people [II Samuel 24:1-15]
4. Numbers 31:17-18
5. Judges 11:34-39
6. Isaiah 13:16
7. Jeremiah 19:9. For other instances in which God causes, commands, or concurs with cannibalism see Leviticus 26:29, Deuteronomy 28:53-58, Ezekiel 5:10
8. I Samuel, 15:3 and Joshua 10. And by way of explanation of why only one of the indigenous peoples made peace with the invaders, we are told 'For it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle that he might utterly destroy them, that they might receive no mercy,' [Joshua 11:20]. The occasion for killing was contrived by God himself.
9. To suppose that the New Testament God is different from the God of the Old Testament is to dissent from Jesus' reported view of the matter: it is to be guilty of the Marcionite heresy.
10. The book of Revelation tells us that 'everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain' [Revelation 13:8] will go to Hell where they 'will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb; and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever: and they have no rest day or night.' [Revelation 14:10-11].
11. As is acknowledged by many liberal biblical scholars including the less conservative members of the Jesus Seminar.
12. Reflecting on his own list of God-generated disasters and diseases, Mark Twain [in Letters from the Earth, posthumously published in 1938] commented:
It is curious - the way the human mind works. The Christian begins with this straight proposition . . . : God is all-knowing and all-powerful. This being the case, nothing can happen without his knowing beforehand that it is going to happen; nothing happens without his permission; nothing can happen that he chooses to prevent. That is definite enough, isn't it? It makes the Creator distinctly responsible for everything that happens, doesn't it? . . . [Man] equips the Creator with every trait that goes to the making of a fiend, and then arrives at the conclusion that a fiend and a father are the same thing! . . . What do you think of the human mind? I mean, in case you think there is a human mind.
13. Peter Heath, *The Philosopher's Alice*, [London, Academy Editions, 1974, p 201]
14. Raymond D Bradley, 'Must the Future Be What It Is Going to Be?', *Mind*, April, 1959.
15. Sir Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, p 313; quoted by L Susan Stebbing, *Philosophy and the Physicists*, p 163.
16. Aristotle, *Topics*, Bk. V, para. 2, 130b.
17. That, in the final analysis, I don't choose what I am is obvious. Let us use the word 'self' as an abbreviation for the expression 'what I am'. Then, unless my self has existed for all eternity along with God (a supposition that nobody would seriously entertain) then it is obvious that there must have been a temporal beginning for my self, to what I am. And this original self cannot - without contradiction - be supposed to have been chosen by an earlier stage of myself. This conclusion holds no matter what metaphysical status we assign to the self; whether we conceive it as a spiritual entity, or a material one, or as a composite of two such entities.
18. Raymond D Bradley, 'Causality, Fatalism, and Morality', *Mind*, October, 1963.

Adam's Rib

Anne Ferguson

Choice, Eh?

A New Zealand dairy: 3.10 pm. Ahead of you in the queue are half-a-dozen children in a dither of indecision about which sweeties to buy. A scene no doubt repeated all over the world where there is affluence enough to allow children a little pocket money and where vendors are willing to take it off them.

Not a day goes by but we have to make a decision of some sort. You could say the littlies in the dairy were receiving their first practical lesson in existentialism. If they choose the fruity chew they will have to live without the chocolate fish. Or they could choose not to buy anything at all – and risk a disdainful sniff from the dairy owner who turns to accept the more lucrative transaction offered by a grown-up clutching a loaf and a tin of cat food.

Existential thought has it that choice is inescapable: even not making a choice is a form of choosing. One chooses to take control of one's life or to go with the flow. Either course of action, unless one is extremely lucky, is eventually going to land you in a sticky situation, uncomfortable enough to render a choice of one sort or another essential. It's debatable whether those who aim to exercise control over their lives are any happier than those who go with the flow. The former may die early of a heart attack from all the stress of keeping control of things, the latter from the stress of coping with all the muddle attendant upon taking no deliberate action at all.

The choices we make, honed by socialisation, culture, world view, even gender, are driven by our

essential being responding to the events and circumstances obtaining right now. If choices only affected the individual, well and good. 'You makes your bed and you lies on it', as the saying goes. But the consequences of the choices made by persons in authority on behalf of others have to be borne by those others. The decisions parents make, even with seeming good intentions after taking 'expert' advice, can have lifelong disastrous consequences for their offspring. I dished out this advice to a young mum once: "Read the books but follow your instincts." In other words, listen to all the arguments. Someone may say something which you haven't thought of but which 'feels right' and may well prove the right course to follow.

These past few years have seen some appalling decisions made at a global level, taken for all the wrong reasons. The fellows who flew those planes into the twin towers had their reasons, as explained to us by their comrades left behind. Daft reasons by many standards but valid from the point of view of the perpetrators. At any time they could have stopped, said: "Heh, these are jokes just like me I'm going to kill." They could have chosen not to go ahead. But the pressures of their individual socialisation and environment were too compelling. Bush and his merry men (and, oh dear, the odd – very odd – woman) could have said: "We strongly disapprove of what you did but we are not going to retaliate. Instead, we are going to sit down with you and try to understand where you are coming from.

Together we might be able to work through our differences to a solution acceptable to all." But did they? No, we all know what they did instead. And for no less daft reasons than those of the pilots on their suicide mission.

If, as the cynics say, the invasion of Iraq was so the US could get its hands on the region's oil, what a short-sighted reason. Surely all those billions spent on the military machine would have been much better spent on researching cheaper, more effective ways of harnessing the world's renewal sources of energy.

It takes a particular brand of courage, a particular brand of wis-

choice is inescapable: even not making a choice is a form of choosing.

dom few, alas, of the human race possess to choose to say: "Your arguments may be rational. You may be expressing sentiments my culture believes to be right but my instincts tell me what you plan to do is all wrong." Why do so few global leaders display this courage and wisdom? Maybe it is because people who possess the capacity to see situations from all angles appear indecisive and thus do not inspire confidence as leaders. Making up one's mind on complex issues can sometimes be so hard that the ability to make decisions readily is a characteristic sought in a leader, irrespective of how the leadership is attained. That the decisions made by such a leader can sometimes be so bad is, perhaps, one of those tragic

The Ultimate Paradox

George Pirie

Why did the Christian church fail to fulfil its titular founder's vaunted ideals? To find some of the answers we must look at its ethical formulae and faulty premises:

- humanity's creation in the image of the gods, superseded by Yahweh or God.
- humanity's fall due to Eve, the first woman, before which all was perfect in Eden.
- Jesus being sent to save humanity from original sin inherited from the fall.
- hearsay accounts of Jesus' birth and life in the Bible resembling pagan god-men.
- the Second Coming, expected during the lives of the original converts.
- St Paul advocating Christ to European Gentiles, without having met Jesus.
- physical and mental sickness, plagues and catastrophes being caused by demons.
- assumption of a supreme ineffable being, or god, as with pagan Greek philosophy.
- dualism; the proposition that humans have souls and minds that survive death.
- the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost.
- the inerrancy of the Holy Bible, claimed to be the word of God.
- the souls of believers ascending to heaven for eternal bliss, those of infidels roasting in hell.
- priests empowered to forgive sinners, their repentance earning heaven.
- a cosmology of heaven, hell and the

spirits controlling them, created by God; angels being needed to keep the planets and stars orbiting the earth, the hub of the universe.

This recipe proved to be an absolute winner for the church by convincing ignorant masses to embrace the new faith. But its sheer success later proved to be the opposite by tempting the church hierarchy to abuse its power, and the members to abuse an ethical structure that was clearly flawed. Since the Bible does not deal with ethics as such, containing much that is obscene or even immoral, the Christian fathers had to consult Plato's and Aristotle's works to formulate the new religion's moral code, intended to exert a benign influence on human morality.

Together with dedicated Christians who are blind to the truth, they would be aghast to find that the reverse is true for criminal behaviour and other measures of its dire effects. For all the facts are against Christianity; the higher the degree of Christianity the higher the crime rate. That is proved by comparing European countries and American states with one another, the USA being the most Christian country, yet having one of the highest crime rates. Ironically the safest city in America is Amherst, the hub of humanism, which is blamed by fundamentalist Christians for all that is evil in the modern world. America suffers six times the homicide rate of Britain, which is far less Christian. In the USA the Bible Belt states are the worst offenders. Sweden's crime rate is low, in line with its low religiosity. Japan has a very low crime rate and is almost devoid of Christianity.

Therein lies the ultimate paradox, since the Christian church is the most powerful and longest lasting human organisation the world has ever known, claiming to be the inspiration and source of morality. If that were so, it would surely be reflected in crime statistics. But since the opposite is true, this effect must be

due to mistakes in the Christian dogma, the methods used to instil it, the truth of its premises, or its ethical practices.

Christianity began with a fatal handicap, as the Bible is full of inconsistencies and ideas that modern knowledge has disproved. Much of its historical data is false, and omits facts known from external sources. The heroic characters and myths of the Old Testament are concocted from other peoples. Neither of the creation stories bears any relationship to the facts of the cosmos or of man, as revealed by modern science. In spite of that, the Bible has never been updated, for to do so would contradict its claim to be the Word of God, and thereby undermine the religion's undoubted mana and mystique.

No mention of Jesus is made by the Roman, Greek or Jewish authors writing at that time. An early Christian sage denied that Josephus' works included any reference to Jesus. The later insertion is therefore a forgery, while the Gospels were written long after his death by men who never met him. Their hearsay stories then suffered translation, alteration and addition at the whim of anonymous editors, to bolster their particular brand of belief.

But the most compelling evidence against the mythical Jesus is that his contemporaries did not flock to revere him in Jerusalem, as they surely would have done if they had known him as the only Son of God. The Christian religion was based instead on the conceptions of Saint Paul, as a sect of Judaism.

The early church suffered disagreements that St Paul tried to overcome with his 'orthodox' version. But he could not prevent the heresies which arose from the start, or the later most important one led by Arius. Arianism held sway in the west of Christendom and threatened the unity of the Roman Empire, so Constantine sought to defuse the problem. He planned the

Council of Nicaea, which voted to adopt the Nicæan creed, with few Arians being able to attend. But its doctrine of the Trinity only caused more dissension, the irony being that Constantine was not baptised till on his death bed, and then by an Arian bishop.

From its inauguration, the Christian Church was wracked by acrimonious dispute. It also became autocratic and obscenely rich by using corrupt tactics. It waged internecine religious warfare, as well as Crusades in which millions of innocent people were slaughtered, whose 'sin' was not to believe the orthodox teachings of the one true faith. To persuade the infidels' conversion, it used vile tortures, contrary to its vaunted ethics.

When the Muslims reached Spain, it became the most modern and enlightened country in Europe, with a culture forging centuries ahead of Christendom's. That led to the Renaissance, whereby the West was reintroduced to the lost wisdom of ancient Greece and the advances made by the Arabs in all fields, leading by fitful stages to modern knowledge.

The Roman church resisted any progress that might question its dogma or stranglehold on learning, so the centre of progress moved to northern Europe. The Orthodox Greek or Eastern Church had split from Rome earlier in the Schism, but an even greater rift then tore the fabric of the church - the Reformation. Spawned by the corruption of Rome, it led to the branching of the church into various Protestant sects, each of them exclusive.

These troubles were the inevitable result of there being no rational or scientific basis for Christian dogma. Indeed modern research has not spared any aspect of it. The cosmos is now known to be millions of times older and larger than inferred from Biblical myths. Mankind is merely a naked branch of the ape family, not a creation in the image of the gods, or God.

The Bible invited the most trenchant criticism. The historicity of the Israelite heroes and even of Jesus are doubtful, as is his miraculous virgin birth. So it is hardly surprising that educated people no longer credit the truth or authenticity of the Bible, the main textbook on which the dogma of Christianity relies.

Religions lose their mana and wither if they fail to claim exclusiveness. So they cannot be a unifying influence. That is proved by the history of internal and external dissension and the religious wars that wracked Europe. These were

at their height when Christianity was at its strongest. The reverse should have been the case, yet the cult of Jesus is still being vaunted as a harbinger of 'peace and goodwill towards all men'.

Based on the Old and New Testaments, the worst sin was held to be disbelief, punishable by everlasting damnation of the soul in a hell created by a loving God! Hence the criminal history of Christians, who were ready to die, kill, or even torture in defence of their faith, so as to earn their ticket to heaven. Persecution of the infidel was justified by the assumption that conversion would save the souls of the infidel from hell, but ignoring their bodies being burnt alive to avoid shedding blood.

All this leads up to the modern incidence of crime being associated with Christianity. The main cause is a psychologically inept formula whereby sinners can confess to a priest, who is qualified to forgive their sins on God's behalf. Wrongdoers then salve their conscience, which frees them to sin again. So the dogma becomes a certain recipe for disaster due to the denial of personal responsibility or altruism.

The dogma also proved a perfect tool for extracting funds from rich and poor alike, so clerics used it to their own profit and became as rich as lords, the church amassing greater fortunes than monarchs. It used its wealth for its own aggrandisement, erecting monumental places of worship, virtually by slave labour, and palatial properties for its bishops.

Apart from the aspect of morality, Christianity was responsible for blocking every advance in science, including medicine. It tried to stop the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, so that it would no longer be the preserve of an elite who knew Latin, particularly the priests.

By the time of the Renaissance, the culture of Spain had benefited from advances in every field of human endeavour by the Muslims, then at their peak and relatively tolerant. But the conquering Christian armies destroyed many of their finest works; that seems to be the norm when religions clash. Meanwhile the wisdom of ancient Greece, as well as splendid advances of the Arabs, triggered the rebirth of European culture. That was fulfilled by the invention of printing leading to education and technology, in spite of the Church.

Thus was Europe modernised, 2000 years later than it might have been, if the science of ancient Greece had been

allowed to continue unabated, whose sages measured the size of a spherical earth, and theorised the existence of atoms. However, philosophers and religionists combined to halt further progress in those fields, turning Europe into a spiritual as well as a civil battleground.

The God of the Old Testament became racist by favouring Israelites over all the other races; Christianity became sexist by denying women their due place in church or civil affairs. It also formed an unnatural view of human sexuality. That started from the times of St Paul and St Augustine, after he had experienced the joys of sex. The recent scandal of paedophilia affects Catholic priests more than those of other sects because they are required to be celibate.

Christians now want more church schools, and to have the state finance religious (meaning Christian) teaching in state schools. That smacks of indoctrination, ignoring 10,000 other brands of religion, and ignoring their own religion's dreadful side effects. But worst of all is the reliance on an inapt system of ethics attached to it, that continues to fail in its mission.

The Middle East is now suffering from the dire effects of another variety of theocracy based on archaic dogma; fundamentalist and militant Islam, the relic of an equally sexist, sadistic and irrational doctrine. Against this grim background, humanism has the awesome task of persuading people to be good for goodness sake, not for God's sake.

George Pirie was president of the NZARH from 1988 to 2000.

Southern Lights

Russell Dear

I Remember It Well

When I was a wee shaver, at primary school, we recited the so-called 'Lord's Prayer' just about every day. This didn't change much at secondary school and even as a teacher myself, in the early years I heard it repeated fairly often. Yet, despite the fact that I've heard it spoken around 30,000 times, I've never been able to remember it. It's not a recent phenomenon, not the onset of Alzheimer's. It's just never pasted itself into my mind. Why? I don't know. Maybe it's all those archaic words or the fact that it never made any sense to me. Maybe I just have a learning difficulty. I can remember the first couple of lines but after that it gets all hazy. Mind you, having said that, when I tried to repeat it to my wife just now she corrected me almost immediately. "It's who art in heaven, dear, not which art." I once heard a vicar say that knowing the Lord's prayer was a requisite for going to heaven. Oh well, that won't be my final destination then.

On my eighth or ninth birthday I asked for a Bible. I wanted one of those with the indentations on the side so that I could find a chapter quickly. On receiving it, I at once began to read but soon became totally bored with the whole thing. It was so dull. I tried different bits; after all, lots of books have slow starts. This one had a slow start, a slow middle and a slow ending. I discovered it wasn't a book at all but a collection of little booklets. Some were written about the same events but were contradictory, others seemed to have no connection to the whole. It was all a mystery.

I can hardly remember any of what I read in the Bible either, just

isolated bits and pieces many of which, I suspect, I didn't read at all but were thrust upon me by various teachers. I do remember that someone called Mary had a baby. I remember that because of the nursery rhyme 'Mary had a little lamb' which in turn reminded me of farms and stables and things. I also recall someone called Moses was blinded by a burning tree on his way to Damascus and wrote about it in a letter to some people who lived in Corinth (but I can't remember their names).

I remember too that 'David was small but oh my', and 'he fought big Goliath, who lay down and dieth', but I think that may be because I saw the musical Porgy and Bess. I also know that Goliath was not the tallest person mentioned in the Bible at just over six cubits, because Og, king of Bashan, slept in a bed nine cubits long. 'Porgy and Bess' may also be where I learnt that Jonah lived in a whale. Mind you, someone's biological, or was it taxonomic knowledge was lacking because they thought 'He made his home in that fish's abdomen' and everyone knows a whale is not a fish.

Being a mathematician in a past life I do remember certain numerical oddities from the Bible. That the numerical value of pi is given as three, for example, and that 666, the so-called number of the beast was also the number of gold talents given to Solomon in one year and the number of Adonikam's children. I remember that Methuselah lived over 900 years (but is that Porgy and Bess again?) and that the Bible's shortest verse is 'Jesus wept' but I'm a bit vague about who Jesus was.

Someone once told me of the Bible's defence of cigarette smoking and it's one of the few things I remember from the book of Genesis - apart from all that begetting. Somewhere in chapter 24 it's written that 'Rebekah lighted off her Camel'. That suggests to me that the Bible was written by an American after all. I wonder if it's the same guy who wrote the book of Mormon?

Incidentally, while I'm giving you all this personal stuff, my naval fluff is invariably blue.

Thought for the Day

The consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop of the New Hampshire Diocese of the Episcopal Church is an affront to Christians everywhere. I am just thankful that the church's founder, Henry VIII and his wife Catherine of Aragon, and his wife Anne Boleyn, and his wife Jane Seymour, and his wife Anne of Cleves, and his wife Katherine Howard, and his wife Catherine Parr, are no longer here to suffer through this assault on traditional Christian marriage.

Sir Ian McKellen, speaking at a Wellington Gay and Lesbian Business Association meeting. Quoted in *The Sunday Star Times*, 7 December 2003.

The Prophet Motive

Jim Peron

The tragedy of incurable illness is heart-breaking. We all realise that such is a very real possibility in our lives. We all know that death is inevitable. But we always assume that such is the fate that awaits the old. Wium Basson, 25, was a handsome, well-built man and one of South Africa's leading rugby players. Just two years ago he was a star on the rugby field. But within weeks he was frail and already showing the emaciation of advanced cancer.

Basson, along with dozens of other South Africans flew to Lagos, Nigeria to seek divine healing. There 'Prophet' Temitope Joshua conducts faith healing meetings that attract people by the thousands every day. Busloads of foreigners seeking healing leave from the airport regularly to the church compound. Each visitor is interviewed and a large card is given to them. On the card is their name and the name of the illness that needs healing.

For two weeks Basson, in a weakened condition, waited to be called for healing. The Prophet wandered through the vast congregation announcing healing for various individuals. He told television interviewers that Basson only had a 'sore' on his liver and that God would heal him. But when he walked among the South Africans, all of whom had been whipped to the heights of emotional hysteria, he ignored Basson. The television crew caught the look of anticipation on the young man's face as the Prophet looked right at him. But instead of reaching out to Basson the Prophet made a quick detour and walked away. Basson broke down crying. He was told that he should come back in a few weeks and then he will be prayed for and that he will be healed. Basson died two days later.

Along with Basson were several other South Africans all seeking healing. One man, John Rindel, announced that God had cured him of HIV and, as a bonus, of his homosexuality. As Rindel put it: "He [Joshua] said to me, 'The virus is gone. You are healed. And you will come back in a month's time and testify.' It's only the mercy of God that I'm here. And for me it's even more rewarding that I'm healed." He bragged: "When I see a woman now I go wow that's what I want." That was only minutes after his supposed healing. But Rindel was confident that the HIV had been removed from his body along with demons that must have resided there as well. But upon his return to South Africa a new blood test revealed that he is still infected.

Aubrey Starke brought his nine-year old son, Muiler, who suffers from a severe heart condition, to be healed as well. Both father and son publicly said that Jesus had healed the condition. Muiler Starke, though a child, believed he was healed. Afterwards he said: "I knew the Lord was going to heal me." Upon their return to South Africa a visit to the hospital confirmed that there was no change in the boy's condition. Linmarie Oliver went to the Prophet to be healed of stuttering. Even while she testified of how she was cured she continued to stutter. But she pointed out that she could tell it wasn't as bad as it used to be. One young man threw away his medicine for cystic fibrosis proclaiming that he was absolutely convinced that he was healed.

Prophet Joshua will not pray for anyone unless they have one of the large cards in front of them proclaiming exactly what it is that needs healing. Perhaps this is so he can avoid potentially embarrassing

cases like that of Wium Basson. Prophet Joshua was fully aware of Basson's condition and he shied away from the desperate man. He did pray for numerous people who supposedly were diagnosed with something called 'leg cancer' and, of course, they were all healed. One woman showed up, supposedly with a medical certificate stating that she had paralysis of the body. And Joshua had no problem healing her though, for some reason, this woman, who had supposed been paralysed her entire life, seemed totally unimpressed by the event. She walked around upon command but did not show the least bit of emotion. It wouldn't be the first time that a faith healer planted a 'cure' in the audience, if that is what happened. Of course she may well have been paralysed her entire life and walked for the very first time but her emotional state didn't back up this interpretation.

One former member of the church has said that Joshua specifically avoids the very ill. She mentioned a friend of hers who worked at the church. When the man became ill Joshua pronounced him dead, though he was still alive, and refused to pray for him. Just as with Basson, the Prophet tried to avoid this case. Yet he circulates a video purporting to show that he brought a new born baby to life hours after it had died.

Prophet Joshua appears to be nothing more than another one of the multitudes of con-men using God and Jesus to build up their own personal empires. Their healings, when investigated turn out to be shams – as happened with the South Africans who went to Joshua for healing.

But none of this is new. I've seen it

all before when I was involved with the Assembly of God church and various charismatic groups. I remember one faith healer who grabbed the cane of an elderly man I knew and threw it across the room proclaiming the man healed of leg problems. I watched with sadness as the man picked up his cane after the service so he could walk to his car. He truly believed in faith healing and he was ashamed that he wasn't cured. He kept his head down and didn't look anyone in the eyes. He could walk without the cane - he always could - but only with difficulty. Yet when the cane was pulled from his hands and he was commanded to walk the congregation broke into an emotional frenzy at what they saw. Yet this was nothing different than what he could do under normal circumstances.

Of course the tactics of the various faith healers differ from one another. One of the most famous was the evangelist Kathryn Kuhlman. I attended one of her crusades and the only legitimate 'miracle' I saw was her turning the word 'God' into a four syllable word. Kuhlman drew audiences in the many thousands. Certainly the crusade I attended was packed out hours before she appeared on stage. And for her it was clearly a stage with every move choreographed for the most effective results. Kuhlman, though quite elderly by this time, still wore long

flowing locks like a school girl. She was adorned in a long, flowing pure white chiffon dress with massive sleeves. When she made her entrance the auditorium was dark. Suddenly the spotlight would hit the middle of the stage where she was already standing absolutely motionless. The light reflecting off the dress, along with the contrast from pitch darkness to the bright spot light, blinded the audience.

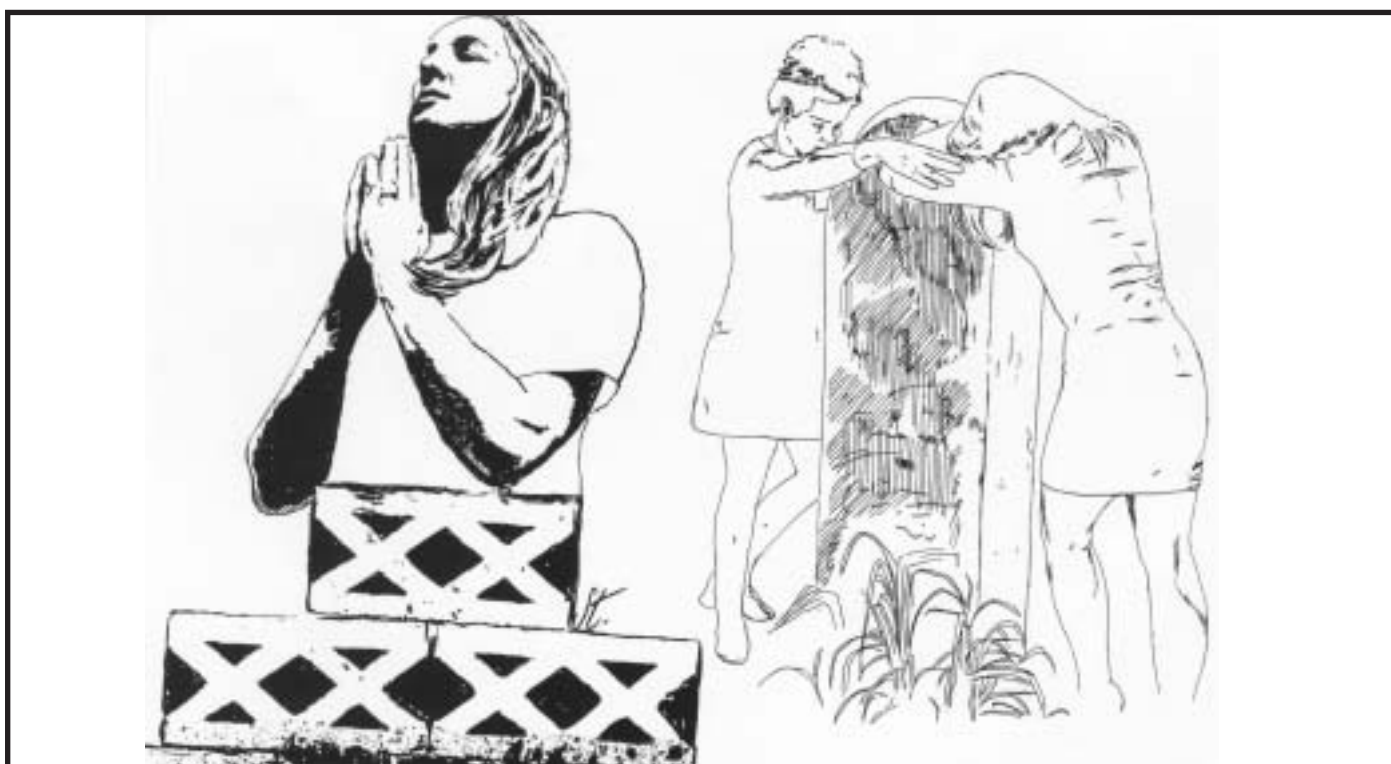
Kuhlman had her arms stretched straight out to each side. The long sleeves hung down. But her dress also flowed mystically, fluttering and moving. A few carefully placed fans made sure of this. But this sudden image in front of an audience that had waited hours was enough to create a emotional pitch that swept up everyone in the auditorium. A combination of prayers and song continued to work up the congregation. And finally Kuhlman would start calling out illnesses. She didn't call out individuals but would announce: "Someone here has stomach cancer. G-o-o-o-d wishes to heal you." If someone stood up with this disease she would call them forward.

Once on stage she would 'heal' them and they would collapse on the stage. They would immediately announce their own healing. The audience didn't need verification to 'know' that the cure was real.

Kuhlman's technique worked because her audiences were large. In any crowd of several thousand it was relatively easy to call out some diseases, including those that are a bit more rare, and still find someone suffering from it. A few times God revealed a disease of which no one wanted to be healed that night. When that happened Kuhlman just ignored the problem and moved on to another disease. If she called the illnesses out quick enough, no one seemed to notice the discrepancies. And if they did notice they didn't seem to care.

In my Assembly of God we were taught that it was always God's will to heal. They argued that just as Jesus died to save everyone so he was tortured to heal everyone. Supposedly when Christ was whipped before his crucifixion this was done to earn healing; as they sang, "by his stripes we are healed." The Foursquare Gospel Church, founded by notorious evangelist Amiee Semple McPherson, said that not only was Christ the saviour but the healer as well.

And even though I attended the Assembly of God several times a week for years, I never saw one legitimate healing. Considering that we had services Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday nights you would think I would have seen something. Add to this count-



less revival meetings and special crusades I sat in on hundreds of faith healing sessions. But the typical 'healing' was rather unimpressive. I remember one elderly woman who announced that she had the flu but that she prayed to the Lord Jesus and was healed completely within a few days – just like almost everyone else with the flu whether they prayed or not. One of the infants of a family from the church was hospitalised severely ill. The entire church prayed for the baby. And eventually the child was sent home well. The fact that the baby had 24 hour a day medical care at a top of the line hospital was dismissed. The church, of course, ignored the medical care and attributed the healing to their prayers. To them this was proof that God healed.

Now and then a few of the women (it was almost always women) would announce that God had healed them of some dire disease. But invariably the disease was one which they had self-diagnosed. There was never any evidence that they actually had the diseases of which they were cured. Over the years I have continued to follow the faith healers even after I had been healed of faith in my own life.

What I have noticed is that there are several clear types of individuals who are 'healed' by the power of faith. The first are those who are healed of diseases which never existed. Since so many of these people would refer to 'Dr Jesus' they often avoid all medical care. Thus they would engage in self-diagnosis, find a dire disease, and announce they own healing. This 'healing' was accepted by believers without question. The second group comprised individuals who had a disease, claimed they were healed, but in fact were not. Such as those South Africans who travelled to Lagos seeking healing. A third group is made up of individuals who are sick and who seek faith healing along with ordinary medical care. Whenever they are healed it is faith which gets the credit and not the medical care they received. A fourth group comprises people who are sick, pray and get better. But these were always individuals with illnesses like flu or a cold. Most dis-

HumanLight: Celebrating Humanism

Joseph Fox

Now there is a holiday you can celebrate and truly be yourself: HumanLight. You are a Humanist, which is worth celebrating. Late December in Western cultures is a time at which everyone expects you to be celebrating 'the holidays.' The first HumanLight celebration took place on December 23, 2001 in the metropolitan New York area. In 2002, HumanLight spread to at least 5 states in the US. This year, 2003, HumanLight is expected to become a global celebration. HumanLight celebrations have been wildly successful, providing a great time for participants and serving a means of getting the word out about Humanism.

As the momentum for HumanLight grows, along with other holidays such as Darwin Day (February 12) and World Humanist Day (June 21), the presence of Humanism in our lives and in our society will also grow. Imagine a world that is as aware of HumanLight as it is of December celebrations based on supernatural beliefs. A world in which all humankind can enjoy the good times, the self-expression, and the opportunity to let others know that there is a realistic, philosophically consistent, and psychologically healthy alternative to ancient mythology and modern day dogma. Also, HumanLight celebrations have been very successful in obtaining tremendous positive press coverage for Humanism, at a time of the year that many media outlets are looking to spotlight alternatives to the holidays.

For more information about HumanLight, as well as to see photos and press coverage of previous HumanLight events, visit us on the Internet at www.HumanLight.org

Joseph Fox is a member of the Center for Inquiry–Metro New York

eases run their course and an individual gets better whether or not he prays.

There is always a justification for the healing that fails. Those who argue that it is always God's will to heal will place the blame on the sick. They lacked faith. It was hidden sin or unbelief on their part which was responsible for the lack of healing. Others just attributed the failures to God's will. A death was excused with the flippant, 'God just wanted to take them home.'

As I followed the sad story of Wium Basson I already knew the final chapter. It was one I had seen over and over. The individuals differed and so did the circumstances but the results always remained the same. No matter how fervent the prayers, no matter how strong the faith, the facts of reality can not be

manipulated either by witch doctors, faith healers or prophets. And yet each day I look around and I see magnificent and marvellous miracles. I see heart transplants giving new life to those who received a death sentence. I see a world where infant mortality rates have plummeted over the years and continue to fall rapidly. I see a world where there are more and more people better fed than anytime in human history. I see life spans so incredible that 100 years is no longer an oddity. Yes, we do live in a world of miracles but all of them are the result of reason and not faith.

Jim Peron is the owner of Aristotle's Books, 167 Symonds Street, Auckland. He has written for dozens of newspapers around the world.

Bill Cooke's Letter from America

From the World's Rooftop

How often do we hear naïve westerners extol the virtues of 'traditional cultures', often contrasting them favourably against shallow western humanism? Traditional cultures, we are told, are more vital, are closer to the earth, understand the rhythms of nature, or some such platitude.

Contrary to popular prejudice humanism is not 'a eurocentric discourse'. Such a claim involves a profound insult to the many humanists, skeptics and rationalists in non-Western countries who are often battling the more debilitating effects of traditional cultures, what used to be called superstition.

I wonder if the apologists of traditional cultures have heard of the Kumari cult in Nepal. The Center for Inquiry had an opportunity to learn about it during the visit in November 2003 of Dr Gopi Upreti, the chairman of the Center for Inquiry–Nepal. CFI-Nepal is affiliated with the Humanist Association of Nepal (HUMAN), which was founded in 1997. Nepal is the world's only state with Hinduism as the state religion. But it is also wracked with rural unrest, as Maoist guerillas control large parts of the country, restricting government control to the cities and main routes. As Nepal moves slowly to democracy, it is coming to terms with some very old and sometimes quite primitive customs.

The Kumari cult is an old form of temple worship common in both Hindu and Buddhist practice that has taken on a life of its own in Nepal. The Kumari cult involves the worship of the female principle, with the supposed qualities of purity it entails. There is a powerful myth that speaks of the Royal family losing their throne if they should cease to worship the Kumari.

The Kumari cult involves girls been taken from their families, often while still a toddler, and established in a temple, where they are worshiped as a holy virgin. Once the girl reaches sexual maturity, she is turned out of the temple and left to fend for herself, which is often very hard. Old superstitions exist that marrying a kumari will bring early death to the man, which means that former kumaris are often unmarried, which can be a dangerous state on the Subcontinent. Not infrequently, kumaris end up as prostitutes.

Not surprisingly, the selection of the kumari to attend the royal temple is especially demanding. Any sort of imperfection, even shedding teeth or crying, immediately disqualifies the Royal Kumari from her position, and a replacement is sought. The ceremony of investiture involves, among other things, being left alone in a darkened room with the bleeding head of a freshly decapitated buffalo. Later on she must sit above the buffalo head while people dressed as demons leap around her, yelling and shrieking. Only the girl who remains calm through this ordeal can become a kumari. This process is not over until 108 buffaloes (and 108 goats) have been sacrificed.

During her time as a kumari, the girl receives no education, and is allowed out only on rare occasions, and only then to perform religious duties. As Nepal modernizes, questions have been asked about the future of the kumari system. But it took the Humanist Association of Nepal to take a leading role in challenging this barbaric reform of exploitation. In December 2001, CFI-Nepal/HUMAN released a Research Report on the Cult of Kumari in Nepal which gave an

excellent, ten page summary of the practice and account of its impact on girls' lives. Not surprisingly, the report denounced the whole cult as dehumanizing and reliant on old superstitions based on fear and unreason. Oddly, despite the flagrant abuse of human rights that this practice entails, no other groups have been prepared to criticize this practice. This is because of the support it has from the Nepalese royal family. Only CFI-Nepal/HUMAN has had the courage to attack this practice.

But the campaign against the Kumari Cult is not all CFI-Nepal/HUMAN have been doing. They were also active in exposing a vicious witchcraft scare in the south of the country, during which more than a hundred women were tortured and humiliated and twice that number ostracized from their communities by so-called witch doctors. An expose of this practice has been published. CFI-Nepal/HUMAN has also been active against the exploitative dowry system, in which brides are traded along with as large a dowry as the family can afford, and over which the woman has no control over once she is married.

CFI-International took the opportunity of Dr Upreti's visit to Amherst to increase funding for CFI-Nepal, although it remains at a level still very much less than we would like to provide. The world is big, the needs are great, but resources are limited.

Bill Cooke is International Director of the Center for Inquiry – International in Amherst, New York and Editor-in-Chief of The Open Society.

The NZARH Conference

The Association held a conference in July 2003 to allow members and visitors the opportunity to hear a number of speakers on one day and to encourage discussion. The conference was held at Auckland University of Technology. Many stalwarts of the Association attended, as well as some newcomers. Our speakers were Michael Laws, Joe Atkinson, Zoë During, Felicity Goodyear-Smith and George Pirie. We are now in the early stages of planning a conference for 2004 and we hope to make this an annual event. The next conference will be in Auckland, but in future conferences might be held in other cities.

Charles Southwell Award

The 2003 Charles Southwell Award was made to Michael Laws, who came to public prominence as Member of Parliament for Hawke's Bay between 1990 and 1996. He is also author of the controversial best selling political memoir *The Demon Profession*, a novel, *Dancing With Beelzebub* and *Gladiator: the Norm Hewitt story*. Before entering the political arena, Michael worked as a tutor in medieval history at Otago University, where he graduated with a First Class Honors degree in History.

In 1985 he entered the National Party parliamentary research unit with responsibility for education, industrial relations and law and order. In 1990 Michael was elected National MP for Hawke's Bay with a majority of 2900 votes. He was re-elected in 1993 with an increased majority at the time of

the massive swing against the National Party. During his time as MP, Michael was an outspoken supporter of electoral reform and a leading critic of right-wing economic policy and theory.

Outside the political arena, Michael is the founding publisher of Darius Press Limited. He is also a TV/radio commentator on politics and social issues, as well as a weekly columnist with *The Sunday Star-Times*, and a monthly columnist with *North & South* and *NZ Rugby World*.

The award was made principally for Michael's trenchant opposition to religious fundamentalism and puritanical attitudes, which is regularly expressed with vigour and wit in his weekly newspaper column. Michael, who is an Anglican, accepted the award at the NZARH conference, where he warned freethinkers of the growing influence and power of religious conservatism in New Zealand

Russell Dear

Russell Dear, best known to readers for his *Southern Lights* column, has resigned his post as co-Editor of *Open Society*. We thank him for his valuable contribution to this publication. Paul Litterick, who is Secretary of the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists and is currently responsible for the design and typesetting of the journal, has agreed to replace Russell, starting with this issue. David Ross remains as the other co-Editor, with Bill Cooke as Editor-in-Chief.

Cornelius Stone

Readers may not know that

Cornelius Stone, our illustrator, is an established comic-book artist with an international reputation. With collaborator Roger Langridge, he has recently published *No More Mrs Nice Nun*, the collected stories of Knuckles the Malevolent Nun; recommended reading for lapsed Catholics.

Library Donation

The Association has received a generous donation of books from our member Jim Dakin. The books cover a broad range of topics that will enhance our library. We have also received sponsorship from our member Graham Hay for making book plates to record donations. We are grateful for both gifts and expect that Mr Dakin's books will be graced with Mr Hay's book plates soon.

The Year Ahead

The Raelian Movement, which claims to be an "Atheist Religion", has decided that 2004 will be the Year of Atheism. To celebrate, they will hold an International Convention of the Atheists in Rome, the highlight of which will be the burning of the Pope in effigy on the same spot where the humanist Giordano Bruno was burned for heresy in 1600. Before any reader starts making travel plans, we should let you know that the Raelians are a bunch of space-cadets who believe the gods were visitors from outer space and who last year claimed to have cloned a human baby. They are what sociologists categorise as a Science Fiction Religion. They are also very fond of genetically modified food: last year the New Zealand branch held a GM picnic in Auckland's Albert Park.

Books

The Blasphemy Depot: A Hundred Years of the Rationalist Press Association

Bill Cooke (London: Rationalist Press Association, 2003). 356 pp. ISBN 0-301-003002-5

This welcome volume, celebrating one of the most innovative, long-lasting and successful of freethought organisations, provides an excellent survey of a hundred years of achievement. That is not to say that failures are not recognised as well as successes, for even rationalists have feet of clay and Bill Cooke is not afraid to expose them. It is unlikely that such a detailed overview of the RPA will ever again be written: this will long remain the definitive work, not least because of the amount of detailed research that Bill Cooke has put into it. Not only are we given a chronological account of the RPA from its beginnings as the Propagandist Press Committee in 1890, forerunner of the RPA which took that name in 1899, to the start of the twenty-first century, with references meticulously footnoted; we are also given in painstakingly-assembled appendices, a list of works published by the RPA since 1890 - over 1500 books, pamphlets and reprints including 140 titles in the *Thinker's Library* series between 1929 and 1951; the names of all 273 Honorary Associates from Sir Leslie Stephen to Hazhir Teimourian; a complete billing of all Presidents, Vice-presidents, Editors and Secretaries; and lists of the books or issues featured as supplements to *The Literary Guide*, 1893-1907, and of the topics and speakers at RPA conferences, 1945-2001. This has indeed been a labour of love and provides an invaluable source of reference for future historians of freethought and the history of the dissemination of ideas in the twentieth century.

Some of the figures loom larger than others - some larger than life, among them that stormy genius, Joseph McCabe, whom Bill Cooke calls 'the joker in the pack', never an office-holder, in and out of the organisation,

fiercely critical and yet one of its most successful authors. Then there are the patient workers who kept the organisation going in good and difficult times alike - of whom Constance Dowman (née Kerr) should be mentioned as secretary for 37 years. Above all was the Watts family: Charles Albert, publisher and editor of the *Literary Guide* for sixty years, followed by his son, Frederick, publisher and editor from 1946 until his premature death in 1953. It was Charles Watts's vision and energy which created and sustained the RPA and blazed the trail in popular book club publishing which Victor Gollancz and others were later to follow.

The difficulties of the post-war and post-Watts years are not minimised. Publishing was becoming an increasingly difficult business, highly competitive and expensive. Even more difficult were the attempts to establish working relationships between the various freethought/humanist organisations, never easy at the best of times. Bill Cooke charts the territory well and with more material and perspective than David Tribe had when he wrote about this period from inside in the mid-1960s. He does not disguise the problems or refrain from comment on them.

The great crisis of 1973 which followed the failure of Christopher Macy's relaunch of *The Humanist* as *The New Humanist* in 1972, is handled sympathetically. The problem for the organisation and its work in the second half of the twentieth century was the understandable failure to 'foresee the emergence of a post-Christian Britain where religious belief would decay but where non-religious organisations such as their own would languish in direct proportion to that decay.' (p. 263). Yet the achievements of the RPA remain considerable, and of those listed on the concluding pages, this reviewer would single out two as the most important: 'consistently encouraging free enquiry, the smiting of humbug and the advocacy

of unpopular causes'; and the achievement of the RPA's primary purpose, 'publishing so many good books', not least, in 2003, this one.

Edward Royle is Professor of History, University of York, England, and is the leading historian of freethought in Britain, being author of *Victorian Infidels* (1974), and *Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans* (1980) among other important works.

*Editor's Note: Prometheus Books will publish an American edition of this book under the title *The Gathering of the Infidels: A Hundred Years of the Rationalist Press Association*. It is due early in 2004.*

Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millennium

Tim La Haye & David Noebel (Nashville: World Publishing, 2000) ISBN 0-8499-1672-0

Twenty-two years ago Tim La Haye wrote a book called *The Battle for the Mind*, which was little more than an extended abuse, caricature and demonisation of secular humanism. Now with David Noebel in tow, La Haye is back, but *Mind Siege* is little more than a sequel. I read about this book originally in *Free Inquiry* and looked around the Christian bookshops in Auckland to find a copy. I was pleasantly surprised when I couldn't find one. It was too American for New Zealand readers, even among fundamentalists, who are used to passively accepting large chunks of American culture.

But once in the United States, *Mind Siege* reared its head once more as something that needed to be read. *Mind Siege* is the non-fiction version of the phenomenally successful *Left Behind* series of novels, which have sold in the millions, staying on the New York Times bestseller lists for weeks on end. Someone called Larry Jenkins actually wrote these novels, but they were based on La Haye's

ideas. The *Left Behind* series presents a fictional account of the second coming of Christ and the final battle at Armageddon between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The Antichrist is Nicolae Carpathia, the Secretary General of the United Nations! Described in *Harper's Magazine* as 'jaw-droppingly substandard', these novels bristle with hatred, with notable levels of anti-Semitism.

So *Mind Siege* has to be seen as part of the marketing phenomenon of the *Left Behind* series. What is different is that the hatred in *Mind Siege* is directed mainly against Secular Humanists. After a paragraph-long list of ideas (some of which Humanists do espouse, others not) we are told '[a]ll of these rotten ideas spew directly from the foul-smelling sewer of Secular Humanism.' (p 38) On the same page Secular Humanism is denounced as satanic and as the 'catastrophic lie', while on the next page it becomes the 'gargantuan error'. And so it goes on, throughout the book. Humanists are routinely denounced as constitutionally dishonest, shallow, deceitful, unreliable and unfit for any position of civic responsibility. When they tire of slagging Humanists, it is the turn of Unitarians, socialists, feminists, homosexuals and anyone in favour of the United Nations. And, true to American fundamentalism, there is a strong undercurrent of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism.

La Haye and Noebel use 'Secular Humanism' as a catch-all phrase use to encompass Humanism, postmodernism, new age, multiculturalism, socialism, liberalism and internationalism. They seem entirely unconcerned that each of these movements disagree very strongly between themselves and have different intellectual histories. This paragraph sums up the spirit of the book:

It is no overstatement to declare that most of today's evils can be traced to Secular Humanism, which has already taken over our government, the United Nations, education, television, and most of the other power centres of life. Secular Humanism—whether it calls itself Marxist Humanism, Cosmic Humanism, Scientific Humanism, Planetary Humanism, Postmodern Humanism, or sports some other label—is driven by a flaming hatred for Jesus Christ that seeks to eradicate the Christian worldview from the media, the government, and especially public education. (p 35)

The hysterical overstatement, sense of conspiracy, and sheer intellectual sloppiness of this paragraph is symptomatic of the entire book.

La Haye and Noebel then go on to misquote, selectively quote, or not quote at all, Humanist sources to build up what they see as the essence of the Humanist conspiracy against all right-thinking Americans. Their bunker mentality can best be illustrated by this following passage. After lamenting that the Panama Canal was returned to Panama and wondering whether it really went to the Chinese Communists (!), La Haye and Noebel ask:

Why do such political travesties occur? Because we are being ruled by a small but very influential cadre of committed Humanists. These politicians are determined to turn America into an amoral, humanist country ripe for merger into a one-world, socialist state. Of course, they do not call it "humanist": they call it "democracy." But they mean humanist in all its atheist, amoral, one-world government sense. (p 176)

It is difficult not to recognise the clumsy conspiracy theory being worked up here. Small but very influential cadre, committed to some hideous agenda, who call things this, but we know they really mean that, and beneath it all a benighted populace of naive, god-fearing folk in need of heroes like La Haye and Noebel to warn them they are being duped. It is reminiscent of Nazi hysteria about sinister Jewish cabals which managed to dominate both Bolshevism and international capitalism at the same time. And the authors don't even consider the option that maybe Panama had a right to expect the return of the canal territory. Erich Maria Remarque, the German novelist, once said that dictatorship begins with simplifying. *Mind Siege* illustrates the truth of that very well.

Throughout the book La Haye and Noebel equate godliness with America. Their militant protestantism is indistinguishable from their xenophobic nationalism.

Although the left is determined to turn America into an amoral, socialist state similar to China or Cuba, it is not inevitable. We still have time to turn back the tide to traditional moral and spiritual values and to restore genuine individual freedom. (p 177)

Change the wording in the first sentence and the Taliban, or the Nazis, could have used the same appeal. And I shudder to think what they have in mind by 'genuine individual freedom'.

The authors can't help but bang the drum that Humanism is a religion. Fundamentalist insistence on this point is only understandable in terms of the American political scene, and the complex struggle for the separation of church and state in that country. They quote lots of sources from the 1930s to about the mid 1960s, when such passages were common in Humanist literature, but neglect to mention the large literature which has built up since then, from inside and outside the Humanist movement, which emphasise the non-religious nature of Humanism. Also, they work on an eccentric idea of what constitutes religion. Any thinking about the universe or god, whether atheist or theist, is religious thinking. And they see only one division between the religions. There are the wisdom-of-god religions (Judaism and Christianity) and the pagan religions (everyone else). No serious scholar of religion would endorse such a simplistic distinction.

The book ends with a rousing call to arms for fundamentalists to involve themselves in politics and reclaim America from the wicked Humanists who control the country. It is symptomatic of conspiracy theorists that the enemy should be both all-powerful (see Chapter 9: 'Humanists Control America') and essentially powerless (see Chapter 13 'Waking the Sleeping Giant'). Their claim about the American political machine being in the hands of Humanists reads as doubly absurd in the light of the George W Bush presidency, not usually thought of as a hotbed of atheism.

Mind Siege is notable for its noxious levels of hatred, excitable conspiracy theories, xenophobic American nationalism, and intellectual poverty. *Mind Siege* should be read by anyone who suspects that Humanists are wasting their time opposing fundamentalist truth claims. Anyone—Humanist or religious—who values diversity (yes, even including fundamentalists), democracy, and civilised debate should be offended and worried by this odious work. I don't think I've ever come across a book with more similarities to *Mein Kampf*.

Bill Cooke is International Director of the Center for Inquiry and Editor-in-Chief of The Open Society.

Current Comments

Doing Time for Eternity

The Corrections Department has opened a "faith-based unit" at Rimutaka Prison to cater for the needs of Christian inmates. The faithful felons will receive two hours of instruction each day from members of Prison Fellowship, an organisation started in the United States by a Watergate offender. A quick look at the Prison Fellowship website suggests that the prisoners will not be discussing the thoughts of John Selby Spong or Lloyd Geering but will get a regular dose of warnings about Hellfire and Damnation. According to *The Dominion Post*, about 10 per cent of the prison's population applied for places in the new unit. Whether the remaining 90 per cent are saddened by the departure of the god-botherers is not recorded.

Meanwhile, the same prison has prevented author John Wareham from presenting seminars based on his book, *How to Break Out of Prison*, which uses the theories of Plato, Sartre, Freud and Jung to help prisoners reform. Mr Wareham has successfully presented seminars in New York's Rikers Island Prison for five years. *The Dominion Post* says the Corrections Department cancelled the seminars because it "did not want to be seen endorsing a book it did not know much about". Obviously, Corrections does not have such qualms about promoting the Bible.

Voted into the Middle Ages

One of the predictions opponents of the war in Iraq made has been shown to be valid. Elections were

held in July among the small percentage able to vote (only men, and only those who can trace their ancestry as Kuwaitis back to 1920; about 137,000 of Kuwait's 2.2 million people) in which the liberal element was wiped out and replaced by conservatives, who are generally more in favour of Sharia law and are more hostile to the West.

Before the election, Saad Bin Tifla al-Ajami, a prominent liberal, criticised Islamists as those who cannot cope with the world and who will be bypassed. The Kuwaiti electorate disagreed and gave the conservatives a landslide victory. One influential Islamist saw the victory in terms of a rejection of globalisation and an endorsement of traditional Muslim values. Thus, the prediction that the war in Iraq would isolate moderate Muslim opinion, making the chance of peace even more remote, has—here at least—been vindicated.

Caged or Unraveled?

Among the highlights of the Council for Secular Humanism's One Nation Without God conference in Washington DC was the plenary session which asked the question, 'Will Islam Come into the Twenty-first Century?' Each speaker had extensive experience of the Muslim world, either teaching there as does Pervez Hoodbhoy, professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University in Pakistan, or having fled persecution, as has Ibn Warraq, Fatemolla, Irfan Khawaja, and Azam Kamguian.

The speakers were divided into those who thought Islam needed to be caged and those who

thought it could be unraveled. The cagers saw little chance of Islam being open to any sort of secular or democratic reform. The unravelers were more of the view that the tensions within Islam may permit some degree of space for limited reforms to take place over time. All were critical to some degree or other of the appeasing attitudes among many Western academics and politicians, who continue to peddle the fiction of Islam as exclusively a religion of peace, while glossing over the huge amount of evidence to the contrary. There are peaceful and noble passages in the Qur'an, but it is foolish to deny that there are also some very primitive and hateful passages as well. It is these passages which give strength and comfort to religious terrorists.

The panel was unanimous that vigorous criticism of the foundations of Islam, such as has taken place within Christendom over the past two hundred years, was essential. This debate only served to underscore the value of Ibn Warraq's work over the past few years. His own book, *Why I am Not a Muslim* (1995), is important, and his edited works, *The Origins of the Koran* (1998), *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* (2000), *What the Koran Really Says* (2002), and *Leaving Islam* (2003) lay the foundations for an era of Koranic criticism which is long overdue. Ibn Warraq received the Distinguished Secular Humanist Award for his contribution toward an Islam that no longer needs to be either caged or unraveled.

Ghosts in the Machines

An Auckland packaging firm has been bedevilled by problems

since moving to new premises, including missing stock, high staff absenteeism and a fire. According to *The New Zealand Herald*, staff suspect the factory is haunted or has been built on top of a Maori burial ground. One worker, who is also a Christian minister, has suggested that a blessing ceremony would make the problems go away. The firm's manager invited ministers from the Maori, Pacific Island, Hindu, Christian and Catholic communities to conduct the blessing.

This catch-all approach might work. Perhaps one of the ministers will possess the magic powers necessary to spiritually cleanse the premises. We think not and offer a rational explanation: some of the staff did not want to move to the new factory and so they are stealing, shirking and sabotaging.

Eating with the Enemy

One thing the Vatican can't be faulted for is its management of the media. Its recent encyclical, *On the Eucharist and Its Relationship to the Church*, came out while the world's media was focused on the war in Iraq. This meant few reporters had the time to go through its arcane proscriptions of exclusive authority.

The Encyclical lamented the "ecumenical initiatives which, albeit well-intentioned, indulge in Eucharistic practices contrary to the discipline by which the Church expresses her faith." It expressed concern that, under the pressure of this misplaced ecumenism, the eucharist was being reduced to "a fraternal banquet."

In the spirit of haughty exclusivism that has become a feature of this pontificate, the Encyclical decreed that the Catholic faithful, "while respecting the religious convictions of these separated brethren, must refrain from receiving the communion distributed in their celebrations, so as not to condone an ambiguity about the nature of the Eucharist and, consequently, to fail in their duty to bear clear witness to the truth."

This encyclical follows on from *Dominus Iesus*, which came out in 2000, and asserted that "Just as there is one Christ, so there exists a single body of Christ: a single Catholic and apostolic Church". Catholics were reminded they were "required to profess" this truth to the unwashed. This can be translated as "we're right, you're wrong, and don't you forget it!"

These arrogant restatements of doctrinal superiority receive little attention in the media. Instead, emphasis is given to reports of the Pope's heartfelt calls for peace in the world, with all the assumption of equality among believers such calls require. But, of course, people can ignore these comments, because any criticism of the Catholic Church automatically reveals the critic as "anti-Catholic".

GG not OK: PM

It was too good to be true for John Howard, Australia's conservative Christian prime minister who was anxious to advance the Christian cause as inconspicuously as possible. Peter Hollingworth, former Anglican Archbishop of Queensland, was an ideal choice as the Governor-General. With a good reputation as intelligent and progressive, Hollingworth was even well regarded in Humanist circles, having written a biting attack on creationism in a Foreword for *Telling Lies for God*, written by Australian geologist Ian Plimer.

But within weeks of Hollingworth's appointment as Governor-General, rumors began to circulate about his protection of pedophile priests in the 1990s. The Church of England in Queensland, where Hollingworth was Archbishop, currently has 119 complaints of child sexual abuse. Australia was already familiar with these sorts of scandals; with some high-level establishment figures, church and secular, being implicated in child sex rings in the mid-1990s. Currently, Australia has 1640 cases of sexual abuse by priests going through the legal

system, of which 1240 are in the Catholic Church, most of them in Melbourne.

Howard staunchly defended Hollingworth's appointment in the weeks after the scandal first broke. The scandal refused to die, however, and raised its head again earlier this year when it was revealed Hollingworth himself was also the subject of a rape allegation. The alleged victim died in April and it is no longer possible to determine whether the case was valid. But this was enough for Hollingworth, who resigned his position at the end of May. So much for John Howard's attempts to give religion a powerful boost in Australia.

Human Rites

Church and State issues seem to be springing up all over New Zealand. On Auckland's North Shore, the City Council opens each session with a prayer. Councillor Andrew Williams has renewed his campaign to have the prayer replaced, which won him the NZARH Charles Southwell Award last year. This time he has made a complaint to the Human Rights Commission. We await the Commissioner's decision with interest.

Speaking of prayer, Progressive MP Matt Robson attempted to have the prayer read in Parliament replaced by something which reflects our secular society and its diversity. The prayer is a cumbersome affair which dates from 1854 and includes a reference to the maintenance of "true religion" which could offend anyone who is not a 19th Century Anglican. Mr Robson's initial attempt to remove the prayer was unsuccessful and the Speaker has said it will not be replaced while he remains in office. Nonetheless, Mr Robson is persisting and is also considering a complaint to the Human Rights Commission. We have offered our support and we have circulated a press release on the subject.

Meanwhile, in Palmerston North, several citizens have objected to a cross that was put on top of the

city's clock tower to celebrate Easter some years ago, but has never been removed. The mayor, Mark Bell-Booth, wants to keep the cross, claiming that the city is overwhelmingly Christian. A local list Member of Parliament, Ashraf Choudhary, is Muslim and wants the cross gone. Inevitably, NZ First leader Winston Peters joined the fray, saying "It shows that some newcomers to New Zealand want us to destroy our culture so that they may impose their own". Alan Millar, a local atheist, is considering a complaint to the Human Rights Commission, which should be getting used to dealing with discontented infidels. For our part, the NZARH issued a press release, stating that crosses belong on churches not public buildings and noting that the 2001 census results show that a substantial proportion of the city's residents have no religion.

Schools for Scandal

For over thirty years, New Zealanders have been paying for "Integrated" schools, a strange hybrid somewhere between the private and public sector. Integrated schools are privately owned but receive state funding

for their operating costs. They are permitted because they offer education of a "special character" which usually entails a religious ethic. In fact, 238 of the 324 integrated schools in New Zealand are Catholic. The idea of integration came about after vigorous lobbying by the Catholic Church, which could no longer afford to subsidise its schools; an article about the history of integration by Jim Dakin will appear in a future edition of Open Society.

The Ministry of Education is now considering how the law governing integration could be consolidated into a single Education Act. Wittingly or not, the Ministry has opened a can of worms. The Quality Public Education Coalition issued a report criticising integration for funding exclusivity: the schools take the state's money and also charge hefty fees. An example is Lindisfarne College in Hawke's Bay, which charges about \$1800 a year for day boys and a special character donation of \$2400 a year. The poor are subsidising the education of the rich and non-believers are paying for Christian education. Another aspect of this sorry mess is that the state cannot close down or merge integrated schools, regard-

less of how many pupils are on their role. So, while state schools suffer funding cutbacks and closures, the churches carry on milking the taxpayer. It is all very mediaeval.

It is time for change. New Zealand's state education is meant to be secular and there should be no place for state subsidy for religious schools. Now would be a good time to stop this nonsense, before it gets really out of hand: in England the Government is paying for Anglican, Catholic, Jewish and now Islamic schools, as well as funding a private school which teaches "Creation Science". Lest anyone think that this won't happen in New Zealand, Jim Dakin recently found that the ludicrous and sinister Satya Sai movement had applied for a school it had founded to be integrated. Satya Sai is a Hindu cult which has many western new-age hippy types among its following. The cult's founder, Sai Baba, looks like something out of the musical Hair and has been accused by former acolytes of indulging a taste for young male members. We are please to report that Education Minister Trevor Mallard declined the application for integration.

It happened in April

- April 1 1960, first weather satellite goes into orbit.
- April 4 1968, assassination of Martin Luther King.
- April 6 1896, revival of Olympic Games, at Athens.
- April 7 1948, World Health Organisation founded.
- April 9 2003, Baghdad 'falls' to American forces.
- April 11 1876, W K Clifford delivers his famous lecture 'The Ethics of Belief'.
- April 11 1955, Albert Einstein signs the Russell-Einstein Declaration condemning nuclear weapons.
- April 11 1968, Civil Rights Act extends rights to African-Americans in the United States.
- April 12 1961, Yuri Gagarin becomes the first man to go into space.
- April 13 1817, birth of George Jacob Holyoake, who introduced the term secularism.
- April 13 1919, birth of Madalyn Evalyn Mays (Madalyn Murray O'Hair).
- April 14 1891, birth of Dr Ambedkar, tireless campaigner for the rights of untouchables in India.
- April 15 1865, Abraham Lincoln dies of wounds from an assassination attempt.
- April 15 1912, Titanic sinks, having been struck by an iceberg.
- April 15 1921, Albert Einstein introduces time as the fourth dimension.
- April 15 1938, first Superman comic makes its appearance.
- April 16 1958, death of Rosalind Franklin, pioneer molecular biologist, aged 37.
- April 17 1790, death of Benjamin Franklin.
- April 18 1775, Paul Revere's ride begins the American revolution.
- April 18 1955, death of Albert Einstein.
- April 19 1929, C E Major became the first rationalist in New Zealand to air his views on radio.
- April 20 1986 Madalyn Murray O'Hair steps down as president of American Atheists.
- April 21 753 BCE, traditional date for the foundation of Rome.
- April 21 1910, death of Samuel Clemens, 'Mark Twain'.
- April 25 1915, ANZAC forces land at Gallipoli, in an attempt to knock Turkey out of the First World War.
- April 25 1933, German Catholic Church supplies Nazis with information on the racial stock of all German Catholics.
- April 25 1953, DNA discovery announced.

Letters

Dear Bill

Here are a few comments on your editorial.

1. When I first read it, I almost choked on the third sentence: "Proponents of the war had two main arguments: they spoke of the value of destroying the iniquitous Saddam regime, and then of providing Iraqis with a chance for peace and democracy". The objections that immediately leapt to mind had to do with your use of the term 'arguments'. My reason: the principal argument used by Bush and his cronies, together with Blair and his, had to do with the allegedly imminent threat posed by Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It was this argument that featured first and foremost - both chronologically and in order of importance - in the case that was presented to the UN.

To be sure, way back in the 90s some future members of the Bush Administration - Wolfowitz, Cheney, Perle, et al. - had stated the aim of regime change (principally to ensure a more compliant Iraq and reduce a potential threat to the US's client state, Israel). But this was an aim, not an argument, and featured only later in the case presented to the US people. As for the aim of instituting democracy, that was enunciated much, much later, as a sort of afterthought.

I suspect that many readers will react as I did. And some may even think you have fallen victim to historical revisionism, albeit not of the perversely misdescribed kind that Bush has recently talked about.

Suggestion: Substitute the word 'aims' for the word 'arguments'.

2. The distinction between aims and the arguments advanced in order to achieve them could then be reinforced by rewriting the first sentence of your fourth paragraph along the following lines: "More disconcerting still in the continued failure to find any weapons of mass destruction, the existence of which was presupposed by the argu-

ments for going to war".

3. I am also a little troubled by the second sentence of the fourth paragraph: 'I still believe that . . .'. To be sure there is nothing wrong with avowals of what one believes or does not believe. But I would have thought it important for a rationalist to back up such avowals with evidence; or, if space does not allow for that, to at least leave the questions open. As you know, I subscribe to Hume's dictum that one should proportion the strength of one's beliefs to the strength of the evidence for them. Maybe you do have evidence for your avowed belief that 'some odds and ends will be found'. But if so, what? And remember, we are talking here about evidence of WMD in 2002-3; not of WMD having been in Iraq at some time in the past. I am inclined to doubt that which you profess still to believe. But it is only an inclination; and for my own part I certainly wouldn't go so far as to say 'I believe that not even odds and ends will be found.' I'd rather say, 'I see no good reason to believe that . . .'; or something to that intent.

Suggestion: Start the sentence with 'It remains to be seen whether . . .' or 'It is still an open question whether . . .'

I hope you don't think these comments are frivolous. I certainly don't think they are. One of my own precepts is: 'The first obligation of a philosopher is to be clear about concepts and about the language in which they are expressed.' Only then, I submit, is one likely to be successful in one's pursuit of truth let alone wisdom.

I do hope everything is working out as well as you hoped. Keep up the good work.

Professor Raymond D Bradley
North Auckland

Editor's comment: this letter began life as a response to the editorial in the previous issue from Professor Bradley in his capacity as member of the Editorial Board, but arrived too late for any action to be taken. The points

raised are important enough to reprint as a letter. It also gives some idea how the Editorial Board works behind the scenes.

Dear Bill

I enjoyed Michael Martin's article 'A Dozen Reasons for Being an Atheist' immensely. Sadly I must remain sitting on the fence as he aptly puts it, and although I don't share all his views I would be among the first to defend his right to have them.

Here is why I sit so amiably on the fence. First I must tell you that in December this year I will be seventy. While this is not important of itself it shows that I have had a long time in which to ponder the subject. I've been all three. From about the age of four 'till early teens I believed what was fed to me by teachers' parents and society, 'God was number one'. From middle teens or thereabout, I could see no reason for such belief. I was to all extents and purposes an atheist. This state of total disbelief lasted into me twenties.

With some see-sawing back and forth but now quite firmly on one tack I appear to be an agnostic. You see, and I cannot prove this, I have since been on two occasions 'out of the body'. I was able to think, see and hear and could move around at will. I was totally invisible both to myself and others present. When, out of surprise, the first time and for reasons I'm not certain of the second time I dashed back into the (my) body and when, oh maybe a foot from it, I was pushed back in as if by a magnetic force. A bit like falling down a well.

Doctors could find nothing wrong and preachers both licensed and lay were extremely annoyed when I told them of my experience. While this of itself does not prove the existence of a 'God' or even a spirit world it puts me to thinking that perhaps there is more to our being than the flesh and mind.

I enjoy reading The Open Society and

was only recently introduced to it by a younger brother who lives in New Zealand.

Robert C Love
Prince Edward Island, Canada

Dear Bill

They were Mormons, this was evident from the crew-cut to the bicycle clips at their ankles; and being of the non-religious but tolerant, curious nature I invited them in, why not? It was a wet Sunday. No chance of a game of golf.

The usual 'chat,' my Aussie flat-mate didn't know much about their belief, I'm well read in it merely in order to 'know thy enemy'; ditto other beliefs. They left us a Book, with a [promise to call] again next Sunday or when appropriate, and now came the 'Second Coming' and the discussion.

"So why was the original Book found in the woods of gold?"

"Because it was valuable."

"But why not construct it of platinum or some exotic metal or material equally indestructible?"

"Platinum hadn't been discovered then."

"So this omnipotent, all-knowing, Great Creator is dependent of man's metallurgical knowledge?"

They took up their Book and walked.

A Love
Avondale

PS. On Feb 14th (St Valentine's Day) with a surname of LOVE, I had a triple bypass; the surgeon operated with scientific knowledge, not blind faith. Thank God!

Dear Bill,

In his article 'Southern Lights' (Open Society, Winter 2003), Russell Dear expressed the typical reaction of most unbelievers to visits by would-be missionary Jehovah's Witnesses. My own reactions were just the same until I learned something about their peculiar teachings from a book which I had by the Editor of New Humanist, at that time the voice of the Rationalist Press Association, been asked to review.

The Jehovah's Witnesses must have been in the twentieth century the most widely persecuted of all human sets (by Cantor's Axiom for Sets the sole essential feature of a set is that its members have at least one common characteristic, any kind of characteris-

tic). They have been persecuted by Communist and by National Socialist regimes as well as by other regimes of no particular ideological character. I, myself, first heard of such persecution in Malawi in 1967 from a Swedish missionary friend of the friends with whom I was staying. She reported that converts were being punished for resolutely refusing for religious reasons to join the official party of President Kamuzu Hastings Banda (it is believed that he wrongly identified them with a very different Watchtower movement which rose in the Nineteen Thirties in West Africa).

Perhaps the most impressive example of the courage and commitment of Jehovah's Witnesses was provided by their reaction to the "particularly ruthless persecution which began within weeks of the Nazis' assumption of power". For, "No other sect displayed anything like the same determination in the face of the full force of Gestapo terrorism".¹ Visitors to Sachsenhausen Concentration camp on the outskirts of Berlin can see the memorial to the more than 850 Witnesses who were martyred there. The next largest group was that of the Polish professors who had been rounded up for future extermination just as soon as the German armies had entered Warsaw in 1939.

The abandonment of traditional Christian teaching about Hell by the Jehovah's Witnesses was not - as with other denominations - a belated, tacit and usually unacknowledged afterthought. Instead it was precisely what set Charles Russell on to the founding of his sect. For "from adolescence on" he "was never to stop asking how an all-loving God could punish sinners with the infinite torments of hellfire... to him God was his father in a pre-eminent sense, and because he had always had such a warm loving relationship with his human father... he could never conceive of the Lord Jehovah as anything but a merciful deity".²

I do not know how chosen spokespersons for the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation would handle the relevant Gospel passages. But the rank and file Jehovah's Witnesses coming to my door are certainly delighted to hear such trophies of Hobbist Biblical criticism as the one which I am about to quote. Thomas Hobbes was the author of *Leviathan*, one of the classics of political theory, and he must have spent a great deal of the forty years between the first publication of the King James Bible and that of his

own *Leviathan* engaged in Biblical criticism:

And it is said besides in many places [that the wicked] shall go into everlasting fire: and that the worm of conscience never dieth; and all this is comprehended in the word everlasting death, which is ordinarily interpreted everlasting life in torments. And yet I can find nowhere that any man shall live in torments everlastingly. Also, it seemeth hard to say that God who is the father of mercies; that doth in heaven and earth all that he will, that hath the hearts of all men in his disposing; that worketh in men both to do, and to will; and without whose free gift a man hath neither inclination to good, nor repentance of evil, should punish men's transgressions without any end of time, and with all the extremity of torture, that men can imagine and more.³

Professor Antony Flew
Reading, England

Notes:

1. J S Conway: *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), p197.

2. This note ought to be providing a title and page reference to the work about the Jehovah's Witnesses mentioned in the text above. But that book, along with most of my other books about philosophy and religion has gone to form a special collection in the Library of the new Central European University in Budapest.

3. Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Chapter XLIV.

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Humanist Noticeboard

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2003: Michael Laws, writer and columnist
2002: Andrew Williams, secular state champion
2001: Dr Philip Nitschke, euthanasia campaigner
2000: Dr Zoë During, women's health campaigner
1999: Brian Rudman, crusading NZ Herald journalist
1998: Dame Cheryl Sotheran, on behalf of Te Papa

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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.

The Humanist Outlook

hosted by Jeff Hunt and Joan McCracken

Wellington Access Radio

783 AM, times vary

-Go to www.naturalism.org for an excellent website covering all aspects of scientific naturalism

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Fifty Years Ago

Sir Edmund Hillary made an interesting remark when addressing the Auckland Optimists' Club recently. He revealed that the ascent of Everest was made in the face of a Buddhist prophecy that the peak would be reached but that they would never return. The head Lama of the Thyangboche Monastery was the prophet. He told the expedition when it set up base camp near the monastery that great Buddhist gods lived on the peak and would overwhelm them. Another religious prophecy "gone west"! And let not Christians scoff, for their own religion is strewn with ridiculous unfulfilled prophecies, from Christ's own prediction that he would return in the lifetime of his contemporaries down to the present day.

NZ Rationalist, October 1953.

A Directory of New Zealand Freethought

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The Auckland University Atheist Club can also be contacted at this address

The Skeptics

Or NZCSICOP - New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal
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New Zealand Humanist Society

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