

The Open Society

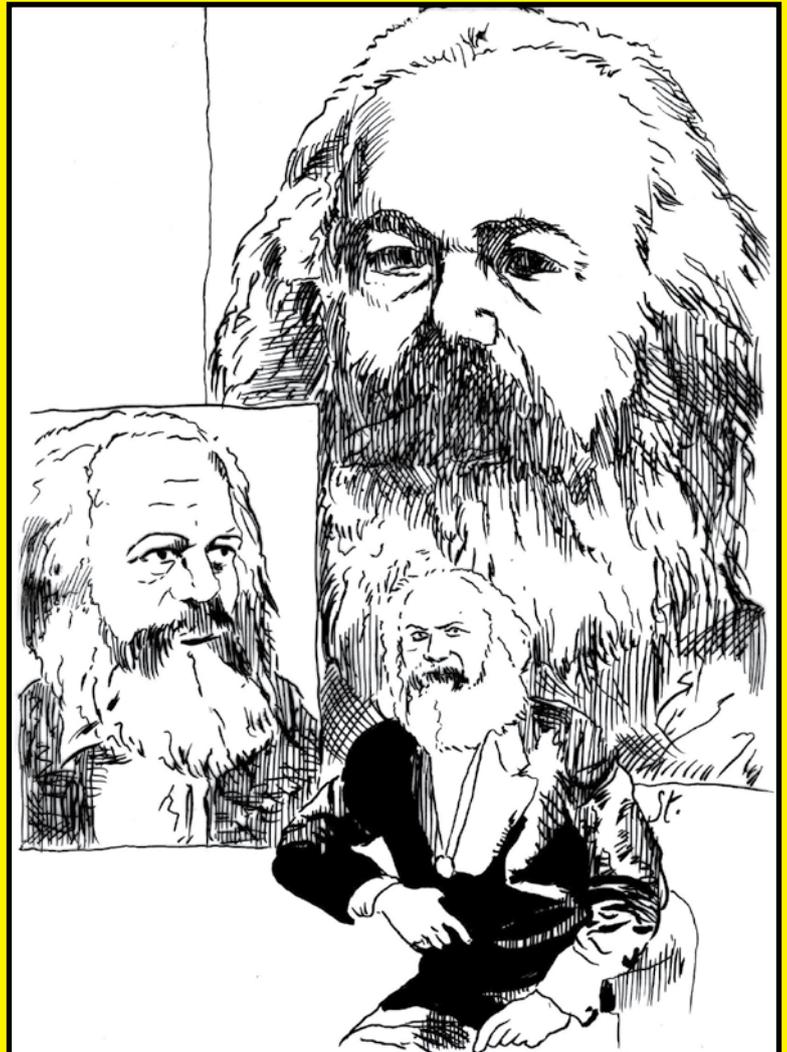
Journal of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists

Volume 79, Number 1, Autumn 2006

A Born Humanist

Creation and
Evolution

A Humanist
Creed



The Open Society, Autumn 2006, Volume 79, Number 1

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Principal objects of the NZARH:

To advocate a rational, humane and secular view of life without reference to supernatural agencies and which is compatible with the 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.

Miracle Man

Imagine the scene: a God-fearing man, prostrate with fever on the dank floor of a prison, being looked after by his three cellmates. The man is in prison for his beliefs. The cell door is open for a while, a concession granted by the guards to permit some breeze to find the sick, God-fearing man. A guard shuffles down the long row of cells, scrawling a number in chalk on each cell door, as his list tells him to. These figures indicate the number of people in the cell who are to be taken out and executed, for they are all prisoners of a brutal regime in the middle of a frenzy of arrests and executions. The guard comes up along the open door, which opens out into the corridor, dutifully scrawls '4' and shuffles on to the next door.

The time soon comes for the God-fearing man's cell door to be shut once more, and for him to be incarcerated for the last time. That night the next guard detail makes its way along the cells taking out the required number of people from each cell. The cell door of the God-fearing man is now closed and so the '4' scrawled on it faces the inmates and not the guard detail. Seeing no number, the guards move on to the next cell. The lives of the God-fearing man, and those of his three companions have been spared. They hear the screams and groans of the others, who have not been so fortunate.

Before the authorities realised their mistake, the regime had toppled, and the dictator was sucked into the same spiral of brutal executions that he had initiated against the innocent. The God-fearing man is released. He recovers from his fever, leaves the country, and

continues his career of defending his idea of God. In fact, he went on to write a work which was critical of atheism, one which is remembered to this day. The God-fearing man is in no doubts about what has happened. Almighty Providence intervened and saved him. A miracle had occurred.

So how can rationalists explain this sequence of events? These events actually happened: they were the experience of a famous historical person. This is not something lost in the mists of history. For once, the alleged miracle took place within recorded history; 1794 to be exact. A sequence of events took place that was so unlikely that talking of it as a miracle is at least understandable. As the faithful like to say, what are the chances of such an unlikely sequence of events actually happening?

But of course, the problem comes when we reveal who this God-fearing man was. Many readers will already have twigged that I am referring to Thomas Paine. Few people have been so reviled by Christians, in his own day and since his death. And yet this man, who Theodore Roosevelt denounced as a 'dirty little atheist', believed he had been saved by a miracle. But presumably most Christians would deny this. So we are left with the unsettling question: do miracles only occur when they happen to people we agree with?

The reason Thomas Paine has been vilified for centuries is that he wrote *Age of Reason*. This courageous polemic sought to make a sharp distinction between uncritical belief

in the Bible and a belief in God. By showing all the falsehoods, errors, immoralities and absurdities of the Bible, Paine made it obvious that this was not a source we could turn to in order to understand God. And Paine was clear in his understanding of God. 'The only idea that man can affix to the name of God,' he wrote, 'is that of a first cause, the cause of all things.' (*Age of Reason*, p 22)

In *Age of Reason* Paine also turned the notion of infidelity on its head. Traditionally an infidel was someone who questioned or did not ascribe to the commonly-held beliefs. But Paine reworked the notion of infidelity in a brilliant way: 'Infidelity does not consist in believing or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.' (*Age of Reason*, p 2) Infidelity now became infidelity to one's own standards of truth, rather than to a socially enforced dogma. In Paine's view the real infidels are the very conformists who persecute and condemn while knowing in their heart the dogmas they profess to champion are not true.

Two hundred years on, many people are still a long way from dissociating notions of God from belief in the Bible. For humanists this is not a problem, as we have dispensed with them both. But for millions of people around the world, this remains an important step still needing to be taken. The day they succeed will truly be a day of miracles.

A Born Humanist

George Pirie

“What is sin?” I asked ‘Sone’, headmaster of Ardvreck.

I was eight, and had just returned from my first church service. As a new boy I sat in the front pew just by the pulpit, so I’d got the full force of the Scottish preacher’s message about sin. But I did not understand most of it, for he had ranted on about matters that were above my head, such as chastity, fornication and adultery. Sone answered that sin was disobeying the word of God as revealed in the Bible. The worst sin was not to believe in Him. The everlasting penalty for that was the soul’s burning in the fires of Hell.

Sone was ever so pious. He read the lesson at morning service in church. He conducted the school’s chapel services on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday evenings; he taught scripture once a week. Starting on the Old Testament at Genesis 1, Chapter 1, I learnt the Genesis myths of God’s creating the world, its plants and animals, the sun and the stars. I learnt about the fall of man in the Garden of Eden and God’s punishment - Noah’s Flood.

I didn’t believe a word of it, any more than the fairy tales Granny used to read us. However, Sone must have assumed I’d taken it all in, as he believed Genesis literally as the ‘Word of God’, and assumed all his pupils would follow suit. I realised it would be useless to ask him how Noah could have caught animals from America or Australia and taken them into the Ark, or how such a small crew could have tended so many diverse animals.

In the school library there was a series of ‘Wonder Books’, including one on the world and another on its animals. That was my fount of knowledge of

the real world, and I was intrigued by pictures of bison, kangaroos, polar bears and penguins; by the skeletons of huge extinct beasts like dinosaurs and woolly mammoths.

When it came to reading the New Testament I did not know the meaning of virgin, so I had to ask Sone again. His reply inferred that I was too young to understand it, and should leave such questions till I was older. I also treated the nativity, miracles and resurrection as fairy tales, but dared not admit it to Sone, let alone my doubts about the existence of God, hell or heaven. I talked to my father about it instead, a wise Dad who never talked down to his four sons and two daughters.

It was clear that Dad looked on Genesis and much else in the Bible as mythical, rather than factual, and that satisfied me for many years. By choosing to believe what he told me, and preferring the Wonder Books to the Bible, I had unwittingly become a humanist.

My younger brother Roger and I were excited enough by the train journey to Crieff from our home in Kent, with Lindsay’s help. But our greatest surprise was at bedtime before lights out in our dormitory. A bell announced ‘Quiet Time’, the sign for us to pray, something we’d never done before. So we mimed those who knew the ropes, and knelt down beside our beds, with our hands in front of our noses. I could see through my fingers and hear several of the boys saying their prayers out loud “God bless Mummy; God bless Daddy” and so on, then asking God to forgive them, or make them good boys.

In spite of years of indoctrination and peer pressure I never understood this prayer affair, in the dorms, in church or

in chapel. To me it just seemed nonsense then, and nonsense it remains, as was the ‘Grace’ before meals; “For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful”. Thank the Father, not the farmer!

After five years of this regime I could recite the whole of the book of Morning Prayer, for what that’s worth. But I did enjoy one aspect of ‘religion’ at Ardvreck, the voluntary hymn singing in Sone’s living room. Mrs English accompanied us on her grand piano, but not as well as my Mum. Perhaps the main attraction was the wood fire in winter, with hot buttered toast and tea.

So religion escaped me at Ardvreck, except that I have to admit perjury when I joined the Boy Scouts that involved a promise to do my duty to God.

Having been Head Boy for my last term at Ardvreck, the adjustment to being a mere new boy again was traumatic for the first few days at Stowe, the ‘public’ school I attended for the next five years. The religious side at Stowe brought no surprises, except that we had a magnificent new chapel, with a superb pipe organ and organists. The ‘Cantata Stoica’ contained many semi-sacred songs that were a pleasant change from the dreary hymns A & M.

Dr Huggins, musical director, auditioned the new boys, and separated us into good singers, so-so singers, and growlers. As a good singer and able to read music, I joined the Choral Society, who sat in the middle of the chapel. Services were held on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday evenings as well as the main one on Sunday mornings. I also attended chapel on Monday evening, when the choral society practiced, and we listened to organ voluntaries.

Grace was said in Latin before lunch and dinner, and prayers preceded lights out, as at Ardreck. The school had three masters ordained C of E, who stuck to the *Book of Common Prayer* I knew so well. I did not know the depth of religious affiliation of my school friends, and we never discussed religion as such, except with a freethinking teacher, T H White.

In my school certificate year my form master, Rev Earle, was due to leave after 15 years, so the whole form was persuaded to take the catechism and be confirmed at the end of term. Thus it was that the Bishop of Ripon confirmed me, although I had expressed doubts to 'Pop' Earle, who countered that I would regret it later if I failed to take the opportunity then. After confirmation I never took communion, as I considered the drinking of blood and the eating of flesh to be barbaric, even if only symbolic.

When I became a house prefect, the headmaster had me practise reading the lesson, being careful to say a few words at a time to avoid the echoes drowning the next phrase. I passed with flying colours, and he commended me.

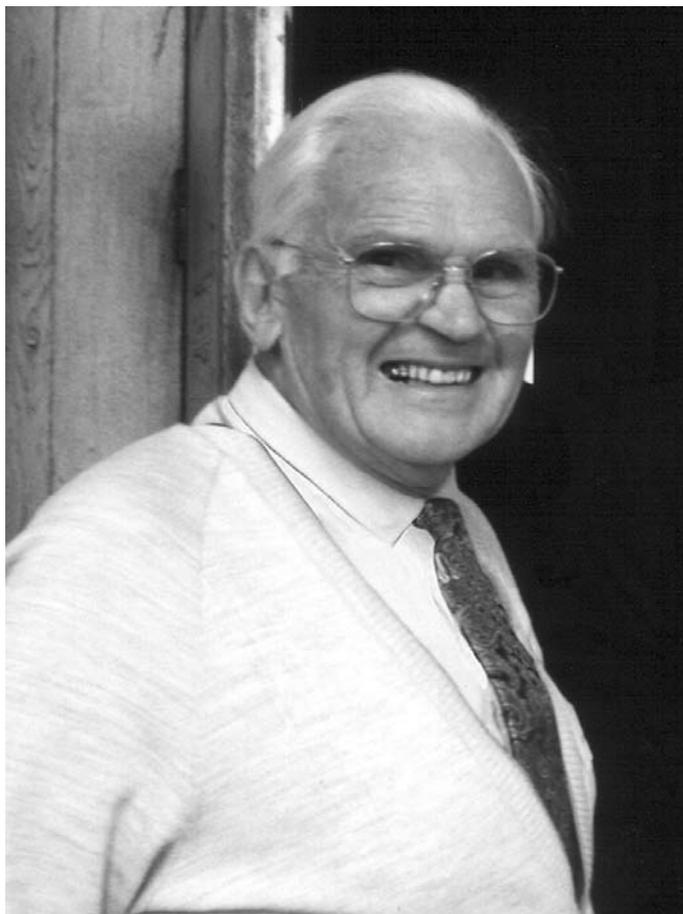
And that was the end of my formal religious education that had not only failed to convert me, but had put me off religion for the rest of my life. Being an engineer, and interested in science I reinforced my views of the archaic biblical myths by learning the natural causes of 'creation' and the evolution of species.

Between leaving Stowe and going up to university, I spent a beautiful three months in Germany, at Bonn am Rhein, where I learnt to speak German. It was 1937, Hitler's heyday. I saw and heard him mesmerise the crowd, ranting on about Aryanism. It was the most awe-inspiring and frightening experience in my life. One could feel the feedback from the crowd. It made me realise how

a dedicated orator could manipulate a gullible and willing crowd.

We trekked to a hunting lodge at an isolated village, passing a tiny wayside shrine with an embroidered altar cloth 'Schmerzhaftes Mutter Bitte Für Uns', and clay figurines of the local saints. It made me realise how these simple country folk were wedded to their religion.

At Cambridge University my Stoic roommate proved to be an atheist, like me, and so was the undergraduate next door. We didn't attend the Clare College chapel although it was just opposite the dining hall and at the foot of our



George Pirie

staircase in my second year. Visiting Clare many years later, the chapel was closed, so I had to wait ten more years before looking in. What a dismal contrast it was to the magnificent King's College Chapel next door.

Gliding was my sport. After less than a year I came thirteenth out of 30 competitors in the National Gliding Competitions. But at Easter 1939 I crashed an H17 suffering multiple fractures to my legs and skull. Matron asked if I would

see the local vicar although she knew I was irreligious. When he came to visit me I was struck dumb at his proposal to consecrate my bedside table so I could take communion!

My heart was racing, but luckily my 25 year old brother Donald arrived while I was wondering how to refuse the vicar's offer. Don saw some flies stuck in his tweed hat and turned the subject to fly-fishing. The vicar left. Matron took my pulse. "No more vicars" she said.

World War Two started. One of my friends joined the ambulance service at once, although we were supposed to finish our engineering degree. He was sent to Poland, and returned as a conscientious objector, like all good Quakers. I admired his stand. He prayed; I didn't.

My younger brother Roger's ship Royal Oak was sunk, ten of the 13 of the midshipmen being lost. My roommates were aghast at my not bothering to see if his name was on the list of survivors. I knew it would be, and found it in the Stop Press News. He was a light sleeper, so I guessed the first torpedo would wake him up. It did, and that saved his life.

A German submarine fired at Don's HMS Spearfish four minutes after war was declared. That time it missed, but Spearfish was badly damaged during a later attack. After a refit she was sent on her last patrol that started successfully, but ended in her

being sunk, according to the German claim. Dad was on his monthly visit to the factory where I worked, and joined us at the local pub. The tenor sang Good Bye, and the tears were streaming down Dad's cheeks.

The following month my boss asked the tenor not to sing "Goodbye", but Dad had already requested it. That was as close to a funeral service as we got. No rite of passage. No good.

When I joined the RNVR in a chairborne capacity, I attended one church parade during my training, being labelled C of E – what else?

After the war I became a trainee at a Paper Mill, whose manager had been a trainee at the parent mill where I was born. He was courting Mollie's stepmother, and I followed by courting Mollie, her stepdaughter. On the first Sunday of our honeymoon I learnt she was a staunch Christian, and she learnt I wasn't! That hasn't prevented us from being together for the next 57 years, although both of us might have been even happier if we'd shared the same religion.

I hadn't even heard of humanism till we'd witnessed a daughter at a faith healing service during which the 'sick' fell back, and had to be caught. I was warned by an Anglican priest not to stand between them and the window, or the devils being cast out would knock me down! He had left a book by my bedside that was utter rubbish to me, about a man who claimed that God had saved him from the horrendous crash of two jumbo jets colliding and catching fire.

I was so horrified by this experience that I rang the writer of a letter to the *Herald*. She introduced me to Ray Carr, who lived nearby. And that was how I came to be a member of the Auckland branch of the Humanist Society of New Zealand. Till then I hadn't heard of humanism, only rationalism, and that rather vaguely.

The main stumbling block with the Auckland branch was in not having a headquarters where we could meet. So we made do with some pretty dingy rooms compared with the Rationalists who had a fine building, if somewhat Edwardian. From Ray and his colleagues I heard about their breaking away from the Rationalist Association, who had become dogmatic and anti-church, with little interest in the more positive aspects of humanism.

The new society HSNZ had no capital and little income to support its very existence, yet started with great

enthusiasm, drawing large crowds to their meetings with famous speakers. By the time I joined, other social diversions made inroads into all such affairs. The Lyric Choir filled the Town Hall before I joined it, but TV killed it too, so my days as a chorister ended, and I gave my well-worn copy of the Handel's Messiah to another choir.

The Auckland Branch made two improvements that helped it along before its originators died off. It instituted meetings at members' houses, and it started to hold Solstice Parties in mid-winter. In that way we broadened our outlook, and got to know each other much better.

Civil celebrants started to conduct marriages as well as funerals and Naming Ceremonies. Ray asked me to take the load off his shoulders when he was overseas. I started by naming the younger son of a family whose previous children had been named by him. I had no idea what form to follow, till I had a brainwave. The parents had vowed to love and support each other through thick and thin, so all they had to do was to reaffirm their vows so as to include the new child! This formula proved a great success.

Marian Barnes was a great help to me in performing funerals, and I ended up with about 400 during my career. It was a very rewarding procedure socially, but not financially. I was also responsible for writing the monthly Newsletter for several years, as well as being chairman of the Auckland branch. My efforts to hand them over failed and we found increasing difficulty in finding committee members and speakers, like most voluntary societies. We had tried several meeting places too, eventually being invited to use Rationalist House.

In collusion with Bill Cooke, the Auckland Branch decided to wind up and join the reformed Rationalists. Many of our stalwarts had died or left, so the merger lost the social advantages of the Auckland Branch in return for a permanent home and organisation. The aims of the new Association were in keeping with humanism, and the NZARH had a number of younger

members from the University Atheists that augured well for the future.

Reverting to my eight year-old experience, we Pirie boys enjoyed the fun and education for life that go with crewing and maintaining a sailing yacht, and the housework involved. We never prayed for better weather, but learnt how to cope with our fate. We gained our sea legs; we learnt the ropes. But most importantly, we absorbed the invaluable lessons of cooperation, courtesy and loyalty. For sailors rely on each other for their lives as well as their amusement.

I believe faiths suffer from a basic flaw as they have driven so many adherents to torture, kill or die in defence of the religion they chose. Furthermore there are so many brands that I believe they can only flourish by the indoctrination of gullible minds. As I never had a spiritual experience I can't understand spirituality, or duality. I believe that the mind or soul surviving death is wishful thinking, as are the supernatural man-made concepts of gods or saviours, devils or angels, heaven or hell.

I believe that provisional truth is only to be found through reason and scientific enquiry. That is why I have been a humanist since birth.

George Pirie is a Life Member of the NZARH, and served as president from 1997 to 1998.

Southern Lights

Russell Dear

Introducing Barry and Ross

This story is not true, nor are the characters real. Barry and Ross, though, are based on people I've met and the conversation is similar to ones I've heard or in which I've taken part. You will hear more from Barry and Ross.

Barry and Ross are the best of mates. Although they argue incessantly it's just a game. It seems to be a male bonding ploy, one they particularly indulge in at the pub when they're enjoying a cool beer after a hot game of squash. I think they feel it's what real men do. For example, when it comes to beer Barry likes DB while Ross prefers Speights. They never tire of arguing about the relative merits of the two beers. Their wives, who can't tell one beer from another, think it's a huge joke.

When it comes to watching sport, Barry prefers rugby while Ross is more inclined towards soccer. Barry's comment that "only poofthahs play soccer" is likely to rile Ross and elicit the response "well, everyone knows Ruggerheads are brain-dead." Don't get me wrong, the guys are not completely unsophisticated, Barry manages a hardware store while Ross owns a small car repair business, it's just that disagreement is part of the ethos of their relationship.

On occasions Barry and Ross discuss more significant matters like the current political situation or international events. They even occasionally discuss religion, although they have their differences there too. Recently Ross was describing some letters to the editor he'd come across in the local newspaper on the evolution debate.

"You notice," he said to Barry, "now that the expression Creation Theory has come into disrepute, that the weirdos have decided to give it another name. They call it Intelligent Design now. They're trying to hustle the old philosophy under the guise of a new title. Beats me how they can think none of us can see through it." "What's bloody intelligent about it anyway, I want to know?" rejoined Barry, interrupting Ross before he could say more. "I mean, take my back. I've had trouble with it for years like heaps other people I know. It's always causing me grief. Incidentally it's why you beat me at squash today, I couldn't bend for the low shots. Anyway, if the design had been more intelligent the problem of back pain would have been solved before it began." "Intelligent doesn't mean perfect, I suppose," added Ross quietly, realising that Barry was getting into his stride.

"You're not wrong about that," Barry continued, "and what about women's inner bits?"

Ross quickly queried, "Inner bits?" "Yeah, you know, the reproductive organs and things. I mean, they don't work too well do they? All that trouble women have with their monthlies and the hassles of having a baby when it comes..." Barry paused.

"Yes, I suppose you're right, other animals do seem to find having offspring a lot easier than us humans." Ross replied.

Barry finished up with, "What a system. I reckon I could design a better one."

The men sat silently for a bit, sipping their beer. Happy to relax and consider wider issues after their bout of exercise.

Finally, Ross spoke again, "As I said, maybe God is intelligent enough, just not perfect. Maybe he..."

Barry quickly interrupted, "Or she, or it. Who says God has to be a bloke?"

"Yeah," Ross continued, "Maybe he or she or it is not perfect, just reasonably intelligent and..."

Barry interrupted again, "Like me and you."

"Yeah. And this universe is just God's first attempt at creating one." Ross paused for a few seconds. "Maybe there's even a second attempt...and a third, and a fourth, and a fifth..."

Barry took up the idea, "Maybe there's lots of parallel universes, with each one a bit better designed than the one before." Warming to his subject he added, "A whole line of millions and millions of parallel universes all leading towards a perfect one." He stopped and asked, "Do you think you and I are sitting enjoying a beer in all these universes, Ross?"

"Yeah, why not?" Ross replied.

"Bet we're both drinking DB, then." Barry quipped.

"No chance," Ross replied, "It'll be Speights."

Creationism vs. Evolution

Simon Gemmill

A Dialogue

Shaun, a 28 year-old man, goes back in time twelve years and meets his 16 year-old self. The two temporal parts of this man are rather different: the sixteen year-old is a creationist, and a Christian fundamentalist; the 28 year-old man has searched for more answers; spent a lot of time studying and researching the subject, and found evolution to be true after all. Soon enough, they get into a heated debate over their differing opinions. For a distinction between Shaun's temporal parts, and to identify them according to their views, we shall call the young Shaun, CreaShaun, and the older Shaun, EvoluShaun.

EVOLUSHAUN: What's true - creationism or evolution? Only about a third of Americans believe that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is a scientific theory that has been well supported by the evidence, while just as many say that it is just one of many theories and has not been supported by the evidence. The rest say they don't know enough to say. Forty-five percent of Americans also believe that God created human beings pretty much in their present form about 10,000 years ago. A third of Americans are biblical literalists who believe that the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word." (Newport, 19 November 2004) More New Zealanders believe in evolution, but there is still a significant community of believers here who believe the Bible to be literally true, and accordingly, evolution false. Only

10% of New Zealanders believe every word of the Bible is literally true (Laugesen, 31 July 2005). As you are in the latter group, define your beliefs about the origins of life on Earth.

CREASHAUN: Creationism is not simply the belief the universe has a Creator, but a belief that the world was created by God 6,000 (some say 10,000) years ago, as verified by the Bible; man did not evolve from apes, and eyes simply could not have evolved. It is primarily based on the truthfulness and accuracy of the book of Genesis and its account of creation. Science confirms these beliefs, with the researchers based in California constantly finding proof of the Bible's validity. How can you believe in evolution now? It's just fairy tales for grown-ups.

EVOLUSHAUN: You creationists do not even specify which creation story you believe; there are two different accounts of creation in Genesis - chapter one and two. I fail to see how both could be true.

Your rejection of evolution is based on the fear that it leaves no room for God. However, many scientists are able to reconcile their faith with science; seeing no need to rely on poor science to defend their beliefs. If Christianity (or any religion) is true, true science will bring us closer to proving it. The only thing religions have to fear from science is proving them false; this could well be the creationists' fear.

Whether we believe in a Creator or not, if science has proven evolution, we should accept that fact; if we believe in God, we should give him or her due credit for the wonders of evolution. Creationists should reject their false beliefs and try and fit their God into their science, rather than water down their science out of fear they'll lose their God. Many scientists are religious, implying that science is not the threat to faith that creationists claim it is.

CREASHAUN: Evolutionary biologists, astronomers and physicists have been brainwashed by Darwinian dogma. Our evidence for the Bible's factuality is stronger than the evidence for evolution. Have you heard of the proof that man and dinosaur walked the Earth together? It's in the book of Job, and there's a dinosaur footprint with a human one inside it.

EVOLUSHAUN: There are many reasons creationism is at best a dodgy science, at worst, not science at all. For example, in 1993 those creation 'scientists' were teaching you that man had walked with the dinosaurs. This claim was proven wrong in the 80s: the footprint 'evidence' was challenged when an undergraduate student suggested that the small footprint was actually that of a smaller dinosaur, not a human. Upon examination, that turned out to be the case. So if creationists willingly present evidence - even after it has been discarded by the rest of the scientific community - as being valid, their science is far less than honest.

These people would probably be arguing for a flat Earth, if they had been alive 500 years ago. The basic premise of proving the Bible right tends to twist logic in ways it doesn't want to go. Creationism rejects out of hand some scientific data that has strong evidence, such as the big bang, the old age of the Earth, and evolution. With no evidence to support creationism, we will then examine how we really got here: evolution.

CREASHAUN: Why trust science in the first place? If it challenges the Word of God, it must be erroneous.

EVOLUSHAUN: Because science is our most dependable source of knowledge about ourselves, our world, and our universe. There is no better system of information gathering known to mankind. Chet Raymo writes:

If anyone doubts that scientific knowledge is reliable, I will take the DNA of the Red Knot, adjust the four letter code, and send the bird winging on a new course. (Molecular biologists perform similar feats every day.) If anyone doubts that our telescopes reliably reveal the galaxies in their august places, let them follow the journeys of the Voyager spacecrafts out beyond the farthest planets on trajectories precisely calculated in advance. The reliability of scientific knowledge is confirmed every day, all around us, in the accoutrements of technological civilisation. (Raymo 1998, p 135)

In other words, people who question science's validity, and who also use technology developed as a result of scientific understanding, such as television, cars, aeroplanes, etc, are being dualistic. While enjoying the comforts and conveniences brought about by science, many are unprepared to accept the implications of other scientific discoveries. People are happy to use cellphones and cars, but are not prepared to accept the impact of scientific knowledge and thinking into their daily lives.

The evidence for evolution is compelling, as a matter of fact. Since Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace put the theory forward, the evidence has mounted up. It could have been discredited, but it has not. Some modifications have been made, as is the nature of science, however, the theory of evolution has stood strong for the past 200 years. The only weakness lies not in the amount of supporting evidence, but people's lack of awareness or acceptance of scientific discoveries.

Evolution is a historical science, confirmed by the historical evidence, primarily the fossil record [as well as DNA]... Evolution is happening all around us, day by day - most dramatically and dangerously in the case of pathogenic bacteria evolving resistance to antibiotics. For example, the bacterial agent of malaria has evolved resistance to many of the drugs that formerly held that disease in check. This is compounded by the evolution of DDT resistance by the mosquito that carries the malaria pathogen during part of its life cycle. After a period during which malaria worldwide was on the decline, the disease is now making a roaring comeback as the world's biggest killer of children. Creationists who deny evolution not only contribute nothing to the resolution of the malaria problem but also undermine the scientific education that will help the next generation solve the problem. (Raymo 1998, p 154)

Science is reliable, and holds the answers to our questions and problems. It is not antithetical to religion, although the theory of evolution does pose problems for fundamentalists. Not all scientists are atheists. Ultimately, the God question is not influenced by science, which means the creationist claim that evolution was invented to get rid of God cannot be justified.

Science is a dynamic social activity, made up of millions of men and women of all religious faiths,

racism, nationalities, and political persuasions. It is preposterous to suggest, as do creationists, that this vast and diverse assemblage of scientists, many of them devoutly religious, is guided by blind commitment to Darwinian dogma... the evolution of life over hundreds of millions of years has virtually 100 percent support of the organised scientific community, whereas biblical creationism has essentially zero support. To suggest that creationism should get equal billing in our public schools not only is unconstitutional (violating separation of Church and State) but is simply silly. One might as well give equal billing to those who believe the Earth is flat. (Raymo 1998, p 156)

There is far more valid, scientific data in support of evolution than there is of creationism - that's why the former gets taught in schools and not the latter; because, although there is no absolute truth, just as scientists have made light-bulbs and also rockets and satellites that can go into space, so also they agree in general terms about how the world came into being, based on the evidence they have seen. Theories are replaced and changed over time, as new evidence arises, and, as time goes by, paradigms are overturned. New theories are embraced.

CREASHAUN: But what about the theory of creationism? It's perfectly fair to argue that there must be a creator, even engineers agree with this fact, it's only scientists that are dumb enough not to see the case for it. If it weren't for their dogmatic holding onto Darwinism, they could accept creationism as a scientific theory. In fact, the recent work on Intelligent Design theory has phrased the argument for a designer in scientific terms, acceptable even to the most ardent sceptic.

EVOLUSHAUN: However, creationism - more recently repackaged as 'Intelligent Design', is not a scientific theory to begin with; it cannot be tested, let alone

accepted. The argument that there may - or must - be a designer has some good points, philosophically, but is as quantifiable as the 'theory' that there must be a tooth fairy (after all, the tooth has gone and money has been left in its place, what more evidence could we ask for?). A scientific theory with evidence is fairly reliable, if not extremely reliable, enough so that we can count on our knowledge enough to send rockets deep into space, whereas you cannot say your belief in a designer is reliable, much less your belief in biblical events that contradict science! Just one example of many - Genesis says Earth existed before the Sun, that is far off the mark. A theory subject to change is far more reliable than an unscientific theory, or an item of religious dogma.

CREASHAUN: All the uncertainty and changing theories in science is too much. My God is unchanging, the Bible's truth is enduring, and your science changes with the wind. Some knowledge! How can you be so certain then, if you know all your theories are always changing?

EVOLUSHAUN: I can see you dislike this uncertainty; this lack of absolute knowledge. But let's live with it. We have no better means of finding things out than the scientific method; faith comes way down the line when it comes to alternative ways of knowing. Don't tell me the Bible is unchanging - interpretations have adapted to the values and knowledge of the times. It used to 'say' the world was flat and that we should have slaves, and now it doesn't. Why is that? Interpretations change to keep it relevant and worthy of following. Considering this, if you value it so much: why can you not accept an interpretation of Genesis that allows for evolution? Call it an allegory, poetry, whatever you like. It doesn't have to be false, just for evolution to be true.

Darwin himself was not out to discredit the Bible; he resisted the idea of evolution, aware of the political, social and religious implications of his new idea. But the evidence of nature forced the "mutability of species" upon him. (Raymo 1998, p 139)

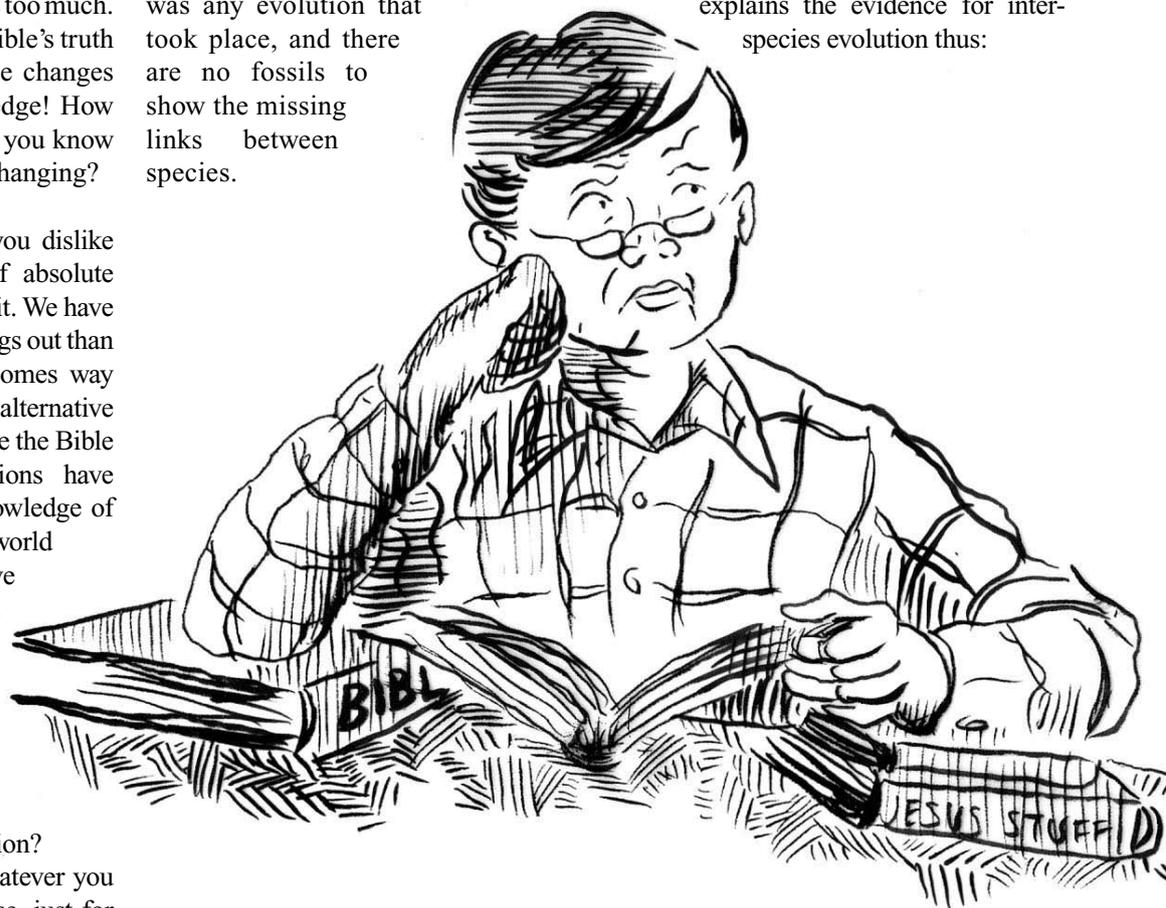
CREASHAUN: But no-one has shown any examples of evolution occurring. Animals stay the same, they do not turn into other species.

EVOLUSHAUN: Scientists Peter and Rosemary Grant spent 20 years in the Galapagos Islands. They watched populations evolve in times of stress and of plenty. 'Ongoing evolution [is] observed by scientists in other places: guppies in the Caribbean, soapberry bugs in the American South, stickleback fish in ponds of the Canadian West, and, of course, bacteria worldwide.' (Raymo 1998 pp 154-155) Evolution happens; it has been observed.

CREASHAUN: What about the missing links? Scientists cannot find any - because there never was any evolution that took place, and there are no fossils to show the missing links between species.

There are thousands of 'missing link' fossils, and every year more are found. Examples are the stages between reptiles and mammals, between reptiles and birds, between land mammals and whales, between horses and their progenitors, and between humans and their extinct apelike ancestors. The so called fossil 'gaps' are partly due to the rarity of conditions for fossilisation and to the relatively rapid series of mutations... (Gardner 2002, p 18)

So your saying that there are missing links indicates your misunderstanding of evolution, and perhaps even that you have not looked into it yourself. In fact, Martin Gardner, author of *Did Adam and Eve Have Navels?* is another person who believes in God and evolution. He explains the evidence for inter-species evolution thus:

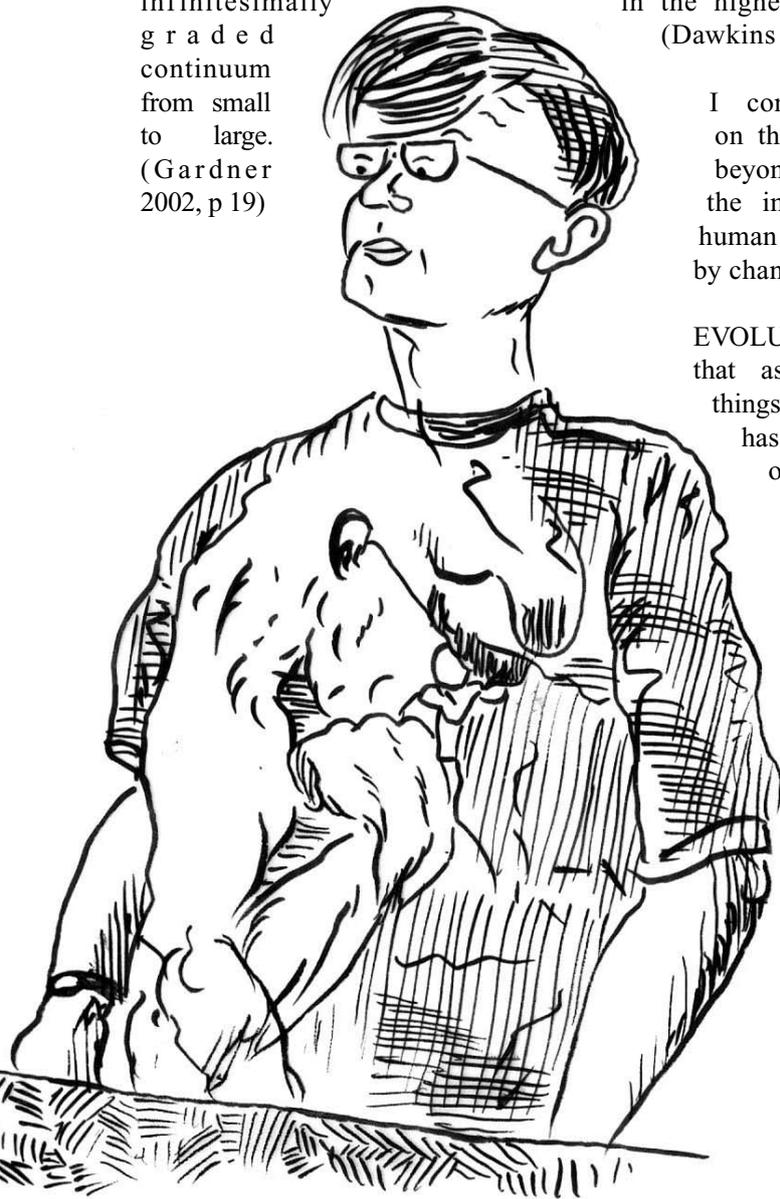


EVOLUSHAUN: The gaps which creationists refer to are not gaps at all. No-one finds a species and says, "Oh, this is a gap species." All species we have found have been named and classified. Leaving names aside, and just looking at the physical continuity, it is easy to see species which are related, and have evolved from others. Furthermore:

There are animals alive today that beautifully illustrate every stage in the continuum. There are frogs that glide with big webs between their toes, tree-snakes with flattened bodies that catch the air, lizards with flaps along their bodies; and several different kinds of mammals that glide with membranes stretched between their

limbs, showing us the kind of way bats must have got their start. Contrary to the creationist literature, not only are animals with 'half a wing' common, so are animals with a quarter of a wing, three quarters of a wing, and so on. The idea of a flying continuum becomes even more persuasive when we remember that very small animals tend to float gently in air, whatever their shape. The reason this is persuasive is that there is an infinitesimally

g r a d e d
continuum
from small
to large.
(Gardner
2002, p 19)



CREASHAUN: This continuum may or may not imply evolution. I personally believe God created each species as it is. Let's move on to my favourite objection to your crazy evolution story: how could the eye have evolved by chance? It has irreducible complexity. It is useless if you simplify or change it. It has

to be perfect to be any good. Did not Darwin himself write:

To suppose that the eye, with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest possible degree. (Dawkins 1997, p 127)

I concur with Darwin on this. It is impossible, beyond any stretch of the imagination that the human eye could just evolve by chance.

EVOLUSHAUN: Your saying that assumes two flawed things: 1) That the eye has to work perfectly in order to be of any use. And 2) That it must evolve quickly. Presumably you are still thinking within the 6,000 year framework, not to mention you are ignoring that there are 40 or so different types of eye, many of them far from perfect, across the different species on Earth.

There are many kinds of eye. Once again, there is a continuum, a gradation between the complexities of eyes in different species'.... arguments, detailed by Darwin himself, give ... plausible conjectures about how eyes could slowly evolve independently, in many different species, from light sensitive spots on the skin.' (Gardner 2002, p 19)

Furthermore, you failed to finish your quotation of Darwin. Right after the words you quoted in favour of your case for the 'necessary' design of the eye, Darwin went on to write:

When it was first said that the Sun stood still and the world turned round, the common sense of mankind declared the doctrine false; but the old saying of Vox populi, vox Dei, as every philosopher knows, cannot be trusted in science. Reason tells me, that if numerous gradations from an imperfect and simple eye to one perfect and complex, each grade being useful to its possessor, can be shown to exist, as is certainly the case; if further, the eye ever slightly varies, and the variations be inherited, as is likewise certainly the case; and if such variations should ever be useful to any animal under changing conditions of life, then the difficulty of believing that a perfect and complex eye could be formed by natural selection, though insuperable by our imagination, cannot be considered real. (Dawkins 197, p 179)

As I mentioned before, you creationists insist that the eye has to be perfect to be any good, and deny that it could evolve randomly. Yet the scallop's eyespots serve it well. The Euglena has an eyespot, which helps it find the light. It may be a crude eye, but it is crucial to the organism's survival. The variety of eyes, and the varying quality - yet absolute usefulness for survival - in nature is overwhelming.

Raymo writes that 'Virtually every image-forming method devised by human technology has been anticipated by nature: lenses, mirrors, pinhole cameras, and fibre-optic bundles. Eyes of one sort or another have independently evolved at least forty times during the history of life.' (Raymo 1998 pp 149, 150)

The evolution of the eye has been modelled on a computer. The experiment revealed much about how eyes could have evolved. Dan Nilsson and Susanne Pelger modelled the evolution of the eye computationally:

They started with something akin to an eyespot... they allowed the eyespot to deform itself at random, with the requirement that any change be only 1 percent bigger or smaller than what went before. They also provided for random changes in refractive index of the transparent layer... The image quality at each step was calculated using elementary optics. The two researchers made assumptions about heritability and intensity of natural selection based on research with living species in the field, choosing the most conservative numbers in each case. They then set the computer program running and observed the results... an eye socket, a curved retina, and a lens appeared on the screen of the computer. Using the most conservative assumptions about how changes are propagated through offspring, the researchers found that the time taken to evolve a vertebrate eye from a flat patch of light-sensitive skin was 400,000 generations. That's half a million years or so for typical small animals, a mere blink of the eye in geological time. (Raymo 1998, pp 151, 152)

Considering the geologically ancient Earth, being 4.5 billion years old, rather than a puny 6,000, such things and greater could develop over such a vast period of time.

CREASHAUN: The world is not that old. The Bible is literally true, thus the world is 6,000 years old, allowing no time for this evolution to have happened. There are many books that show creationism to be true; whereas your scientists have claimed the Earth is so old just to allow time for evolution to occur.

EVOLUSHAUN: Many books that claim creationism is true seem less credible if you check up their claims in scientific publications. Many of their theories have been discredited - such as the man walking with dinosaurs claim; their quotes are often only partial, as with Darwin's words about whether an eye could evolve

independently. No creation science research has been peer-reviewed or made it into a scientific journal; not due to discrimination, rather, due to a lack of credibility.

The age of the Earth has been established at around 4.55 billion years old. Scientists have not merely chosen the age for evolution to have time, as you claim; it is based on sound dating methods.

The oldest rocks which have been found so far (on the Earth) date to about 3.8 to 3.9 billion years ago (by several radiometric dating methods). Some of these rocks are sedimentary, and include minerals which are themselves as old as 4.1 to 4.2 billion years. Rocks of this age are relatively rare, however rocks that are at least 3.5 billion years in age have been found on North America, Greenland, Australia, Africa, and Asia.

While these values do not compute an age for the Earth, they do establish a lower limit (the Earth must be at least as old as any formation on it). This lower limit is at least concordant with the independently derived figure of 4.55 billion years for the Earth's actual age. (Stassen, 22 April 1997)

Regarding your disbelief in the age of the Earth, refer to what I said before about science being reliable. Your bottom line is the Bible, not science. And at that, it's your interpretation of it that gets you into trouble. Maybe it is a true book - however, if so, you are not reading it correctly. It's okay, the flat Earthers did the same.

CREASHAUN: I still believe fully in the Bible, and do not appreciate scientists' efforts do discredit it. If I were to reject Genesis, I would surely have to reject the gospel too. Evolution is a story to get us away from believing in God. I do not believe we came from apes, God gave us a special place of authority on the Earth, to rule over it.

EVOLUSHAUN: Although you're wrong, you're not alone. Evolution has not convinced everyone, in spite of the availability of evidence; thus it is worth delving into the possible reasons why

this is. Muller attributed the failure of Darwin's revolution to penetrate at two 'opposite ends of a spectrum - creationism's continuing hold over much of American pop culture, and limited understanding of natural selection among well-educated people content with the factuality of evolution.' (Gould 1997, p 29) As I said, the evidence is here, you just need to look. Your fear of finding something that will unravel your beliefs, I suspect, is what stops you from even reading about evolution.

Stephen Jay Gould writes:

We might... continue to espouse biblical literalism and insist that the earth is but a few thousand years old, with humans created by God just a few days after the inception of planetary time. But such mythology is not an option for thinking people, who must respect the basic factuality of both time's immensity and evolution's veracity. (Gould 1997, p 19)

In trying to explain why many scientists have told the story of evolution in terms of progress - a progression that leads up to humans being some kind of pinnacle or 'goal' of evolution - Gould puts it down to human arrogance; surely the same attitude that led us to believe that God made the Universe for the human race.

Freud was right in identifying suppression of human arrogance as the common achievement of great scientific revolutions. Darwin's revolution - the acceptance of evolution with all major implications, the second blow in Freud's own series - has never been completed... Darwin's revolution will be completed when we smash the pedestal of arrogance and own the plain implications of evolution for life's nonpredictable nondirectionality - and when we take Darwinian topology seriously, recognising that *Homo sapiens*... is a tiny twig, born just yesterday on an enormously arborescent tree of life that would never produce the same set of branches if regrown from seed ... (Gould 1997, p 29)

Gould has a good point about human arrogance. Even while people have come to terms with evolution, we have preferred to tell the story with a human twist; there have been analogies of ladders, among other things, to show the steps of evolutionary progress. While arrogance has even made some scientists put a spin on evolutionary theory to suit our frail egos, some have not even been able to accept this scientific theory, simply because they feel that life is meaningless unless God created each one of us for a reason (but not the animals, who cares about them?...) Scientific people are able to believe in God: since God's existence is not a falsifiable belief - it cannot be proven true or false - while it may be true or false, science will never be able to say. Science is not a direct path to atheism (as creationists fear), but it is, as Gould writes, the path to fully understanding who and what we are, where we've come from, and our place in the scheme of things. Our place in the universe required us to eat humble pie, and perhaps you creationists fear the most. With 'decent God fearin' Christian folk' in the USA going on Safaris in Africa to hunt endangered species, it is clear that fundamentalism does not lead to a regard for nature. And that's just ironic. If you believe in God, you should respect his creations and creatures. The snag is that you think he made it all for you. I was taught that the original sin was pride; if so, it is sin that keeps you from accepting your modest status.

I am convinced, from all I've read and heard that creationists (now called the Intelligent Design Proponents, to

make them sound more authentic), that creationism's goal is to reassure people that they have a purpose for living. They are afraid of science taking God away, so they grasp at straws to retain their beliefs. Ironically, since God's existence cannot ever be disproven, they should just keep believing if it makes them happy - but stop making ridiculous claims and calling them science. I trust science more than the Bible: it may never have all the answers, but that is not a flaw of science; it is part of the beauty of it. Chet Raymo remarks that, 'Scientists look at the overwhelming success of evolutionary science and assume that the gaps will be filled as our knowledge becomes more complete. Creationists point gleefully to the gaps: "See," they shout, "evolution is a shambles." They assume that because we don't know everything, we know nothing.' (Raymo 1998, p 156) Scientific knowledge is incomplete, yet it is the most reliable information we have. There are always more answers to look for. That's what makes life interesting: satisfying our curiosity. If you could only see the amazing world as it really is, with its incredibly long and fascinating history, your sense of awe and wonder would grow, perhaps causing you to appreciate your Creator even more. I don't think you are gaining anything by rejecting evolution; it's intellectually dishonest, and that cannot lead you to God or Truth.

Simon Gemmill lives in Christchurch, where he works as a primary school teacher. His previous article for *The Open Society* was a survey of current thinking on the Big Bang.

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The Vicar, Darwinism, and Intelligent Design

Warwick Don

In November 2005, the Christchurch Press published a pro-intelligent design article by a Christchurch cleric, Vicar Ron Hay. In response, I submitted a brief opinion piece, but it was rejected on the grounds that the paper had been 'deluged with letters and opinion pieces about intelligent design' and that they had run all they wanted to for the time being. Their prerogative, of course, but the decision not to publish any counter to the good Vicar's article was regrettable, given its blatant misconceptions.

In early January, I re-submitted the opinion piece, hoping that the recent judgement against intelligent design as science in the Dover (Pennsylvania) court case, and the current promotion in this country of intelligent design creationism as an alternative to evolution in science education, might induce a positive response. After all, the intelligent design movement continues to be topical, both here and abroad. I am therefore grateful to Bill Cooke and *The Open Society* for enabling the critique to see the light of day.

The article ('Darwinism: A Faith System') by Vicar Ron Hay (Nov 23) contains several misconceptions. Let me clear up one from the start – intelligent design 'theory' is not science. Its core idea is that of a divine designer, a concept that harks back to Paley and the Argument from Design. The nature of such an entity is beyond the purview of science. Therefore, it is not 'a debate about science' at all. Intelligent design creationism poses no legitimate threat to Darwinism whatsoever.

And it is not 'a clash of two faith systems'. Darwinism is not a faith

system (it is a set of scientific propositions), whereas intelligent design does fit this description, given the primacy accorded to a transcendent agent. Words like 'faith' and 'belief' really do not belong in a scientific context. Their inclusion only engenders confused thinking. Scientific propositions are held or accepted (not 'believed in') on the strength of the empirical evidence for them, and are provisional (they are always open to modification or rejection).

A contention being vigorously promoted by intelligent design proponents is that many scientists (particularly evolutionists) are deliberately rejecting the supernatural because they 'believe' it has played no role in nature. The reality of the situation is very different. Darwinism is not a materialistic philosophy, as Mr Hay maintains. Science is conducted on the basis of a necessary methodological materialism (not to be conflated with philosophical materialism), because the supernatural realm, even if it exists, lies beyond its scope. In practice, science is pursued without appeal to the supernatural. And it has been extremely successful in this approach. To condemn Darwinism for not showing 'any openness to the transcendent' is to misunderstand the very nature of science.

I am afraid your contributor has been paying far too much attention to erroneous arguments against evolution. He states that 'the fossil record, far from supporting Darwin's tree of life, in fact points in the opposite direction with the Cambrian explosion showing the sudden emergence of diverse life forms.' However, the Cambrian

'explosion' is not really the sudden or instantaneous event the name suggests – many millions of years were still involved. The preservation of apparently new organisms during this period may well coincide with the first appearance of easily fossilized hard parts (shells and bones). In any case, there are numerous fossils older than the Cambrian, and many organisms have appeared since, including the majority of vertebrates. Incidentally, the 'tree of life' is now depicted as a 'bush', with living species, including our own, as terminal 'twigs'. And the Argument from Irreducible Complexity, with its ultimate appeal to a designer (natural selection could not possibly have produced such complexity!), can have no place in science.

Finally, to contend that 'what is sadly lacking in the Darwinian perspective is any sense of awe and wonder before the natural world...' reeks of arrogance. Richard Dawkins, for one, would vehemently disagree with the Vicar's view. And the final sentence of Darwin's most famous work certainly does not bear it out. After all, the sentence begins with: 'There is grandeur in this view of life...' and concludes with: '...from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.'

Warwick Don is an Honorary Associate of the NZARH. He is one of New Zealand's most distinguished and indefatigable defenders of evolutionary science from the various faith-based critics. He lives in Dunedin.

Sixth World Atheist Conference

January 5, 6 & 7, 2007

At Atheist Centre

Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India

Theme: "The Necessity of Atheism"

The Sixth World Atheist Conference scheduled to be held at Atheist Centre, Vijayawada, on January 5-7, 2007 (Friday, Saturday & Sunday). It will be yet another milestone in the onward march of atheism, humanism and rationalism. Atheists, freethinkers, humanists, rationalists and social change workers from different continents will be participating in the Conference. The earlier World Atheist Conferences were held in 1972, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1996 and 2005.

The distinguished participants include:

- Mrs Saraswathi Gora, Co-founder, Atheist Centre;
- Dr PM Bhargava, Vice-Chairman, National Knowledge Commission, Govt. of India and Founder Director, Center for Cellular & Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad;
- Dr Veeramani, President, Dravidar Kazhagam (India);
- Mr Roy Brown, President, IHEU, (Switzerland);
- Mr Levi Fragell, Former President, IHEU, (Norway);
- Dr Volker Mueller, President, Freethinker Association, (Germany);
- Dr Bill Cooke Editor, *Open Society*, (New Zealand),
- Mr Pekka Elo, Editor, *Humanisti*, (Finland);
- Mr Premanand, Indian COICOP, leader, Miracle Exposure Campaign;
- Mr Jim Herrick, Humanist, (U.K.);
- Dr Selnes Kjartan (Norwegian Humanist);
- Mr. Babu Gogineni, Executive Director, IHEU;
- Prof. Dhaneswar Sahoo,
- Mr Ramchandra CST Voltaire,
- Dr Umesh Patri (Orissa);

- Dr. Narendra Naik, Convener, FIRA;
- Prof. Sunanda Shet, Coimbatore;
- Dr Innaiah, Convener, FARA, Hyderabad;
- Mrs Vidya, Ex-MP;
- Mr Kalanand Mani, Executive Director, Peaceful Society, Goa,
- Mr Shariff Gora;
- Mrs Hemalata Lavanam and Mr Lavanam, Atheist Centre;
- Mrs Mythri, Editor,
- Nasthika Margam;
- and others from America, Europe, Asia and Australia will participate.

Please plan from now on to participate in this important international event and extend your valuable cooperation and support to make the World Atheist Conference a great success.

Registration fee: US \$ 150 (including simple accommodation and food at Atheist Centre). A good number of hotels are also available.

Registration of Non-Participating Delegates to show solidarity with the cause: Those who cannot attend the Conference personally can become Non-Participating Delegate by contributing US \$ 75 and Conference material and Souvenir will be sent to them. Kindly contribute donations for the success of the Conference. Atheist Centre is dependent on public donations and support. Please send your check/Bank draft in the name of: "ATHEIST CENTRE," payable at Vijayawada, India.

Vijayawada city with a population of one million, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, is an important railway

junction in South India. It also has an airport. Nearest International airports are Hyderabad and Chennai. Please check: www.vijayawada.com

Atheist Centre was founded by Gora (1902-1975) and Mrs. Saraswathi Gora (b. 1912) in 1940 and since then it has been in the forefront of secular social work and social change and promotes atheism as a positive way of life. The Government of India released a postage stamp of Gora in 2002 recognising him as an outstanding social reformer and an atheist. Atheist Centre publishes *Atheist*, an English language monthly, since 1969.

Marx and Philosophy

Adam Buick

In July 2005 BBC Radio 4 announced the result of its poll of listeners to find 'the greatest philosopher of our time'. And the winner was – Karl Marx, as the first past the post with 28 percent of the 34,000 or so votes cast, way ahead of the second, the eighteenth-century sceptic and agnostic, David Hume, with 13 percent, and the early twentieth century logical positivist, Ludwig Wittgenstein, with seven percent.

There must be some sort of significance to Marx being selected by some 9,500 people. It would be nice to think that it was a vote for Marx's aim of a society without private property in the means of production, without money, the wages system or the state. More likely it represented a recognition of his contribution to the analysis of history and capitalism.

What did Marx have to say about philosophy? In fact, was he really a philosopher? He was certainly a doctor of philosophy in the literal sense, having obtained his doctorate – the trade unionists who associated with him in the 1860s in the First International knew him as 'Dr Marx' – for a thesis on two ancient Greek philosophers, Democritus and Epicurus. And in his early and mid twenties he thought and wrote extensively about philosophical problems, but then he reached the conclusion that abstract philosophising about 'God', 'the nature of Man' and 'the meaning of life', which nearly all philosophers had speculated about till then, was a pretty useless exercise and he abandoned it, at the age of 27, never to return to it. This was in fact more or less the same conclusion as reached by the two runners-up in the BBC poll, Hume and Wittgenstein.

What such philosophy was replaced by, for Marx, was the empirical, ie scientific, study and analysis of history

and society, what has become known as the materialist conception of history. Strictly speaking, this is not really a philosophy but a theory and methodology of a particular science. Engels has had to take some stick for introducing the term 'scientific socialism' but it is an accurate description of the outcome of Marx's (and his own) encounter with the German philosophy of his day.

Marx had come to socialism via German philosophy. Like many other radical-minded Germans in the 1840s he had been a 'Young Hegelian', the name given to those who interpreted Hegel's philosophy in a radical way to justify the establishment of a democratic and secular state in Germany. Hegel himself (who had died in 1831) was no radical democrat, even though he had initially welcomed the French Revolution. Quite the opposite. By the 1820s he was a conservative defender of the Prussian State, almost its State philosopher. And he believed that Christianity was true, with all that implies in terms of the existence of a god with a plan for humanity and which intervenes in human affairs.

What appealed to German radicals in Hegel's philosophy was the concept of alienation (of something from its nature, or essence) and the view that (until the end of history) all human institutions were transitory and developed through intellectual criticism bringing out and then transcending the contradictions in the idea behind them. For Hegel this was all in a religious context (alienation was the alienation of Man from God and the end of history was the reconciliation of Man with God). The Young Hegelians completely rejected this and were highly critical of religion; in fact they made a specialty of this, presenting a secularised version of Hegel's system in which alienation was still the alienation of Man (with a capital M) but from

Man's true nature, and the end of history was the reconciliation of Man with this nature, or human emancipation as they called it.

Most of them identified this with the establishment of a democratic republic. So did Marx, to begin with, but he came to the conclusion that political democracy, though desirable as a step forward for Germany, did not amount to full emancipation, but only to a partial 'political' emancipation; 'human' emancipation could only be achieved by a society without private property, money or the state. Looking for an agent to achieve this, Marx identified the 'proletariat' but conceived of in very philosophical terms as a social group that was 'the object of no particular injustice but of injustice in general', 'the complete loss of humanity and thus can only recover itself by a complete redemption of humanity'. As he wrote at the end of his article 'Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' published in February 1844: 'The head of this emancipation [of Man] is philosophy, its heart is the proletariat.' This is the same article in which occurs perhaps his most well-known saying 'religion is the opium of the people', ie an illusory escape from real suffering. This was in fact aimed at his fellow Young Hegelians who seemed to imagine that religion could be made to disappear merely by criticising its irrationality. Marx's analysis of religion and of what was required to make it disappear went deeper:

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion. The criticism of religion is therefore the germ of the criticism of the valley of tears whose halo of religion.

And:

The criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that man is the highest being for man, that is, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned and despised. (translated by David McLellan in Karl Marx: Early Texts)

This is still a philosophical approach and it makes Marx, at this time, a humanist philosopher. Some find this enough, and eminently commendable (and Marx may even have got some votes in the BBC poll on this basis), and of course being a socialist has to rest in the end on wanting to 'overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned and despised.'

Marx himself, however, was not satisfied to let the case for socialism rest on a mere philosophical theory that it provided the only social basis on which the 'essence of Man' could be fully and finally realised. After continuing to initial with the previous philosophical position, he ended by rejecting the view that humans had any abstract 'essence' from which they were alienated. As he put it in some notes jotted in 1845: 'The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.' (Theses on Feuerbach)

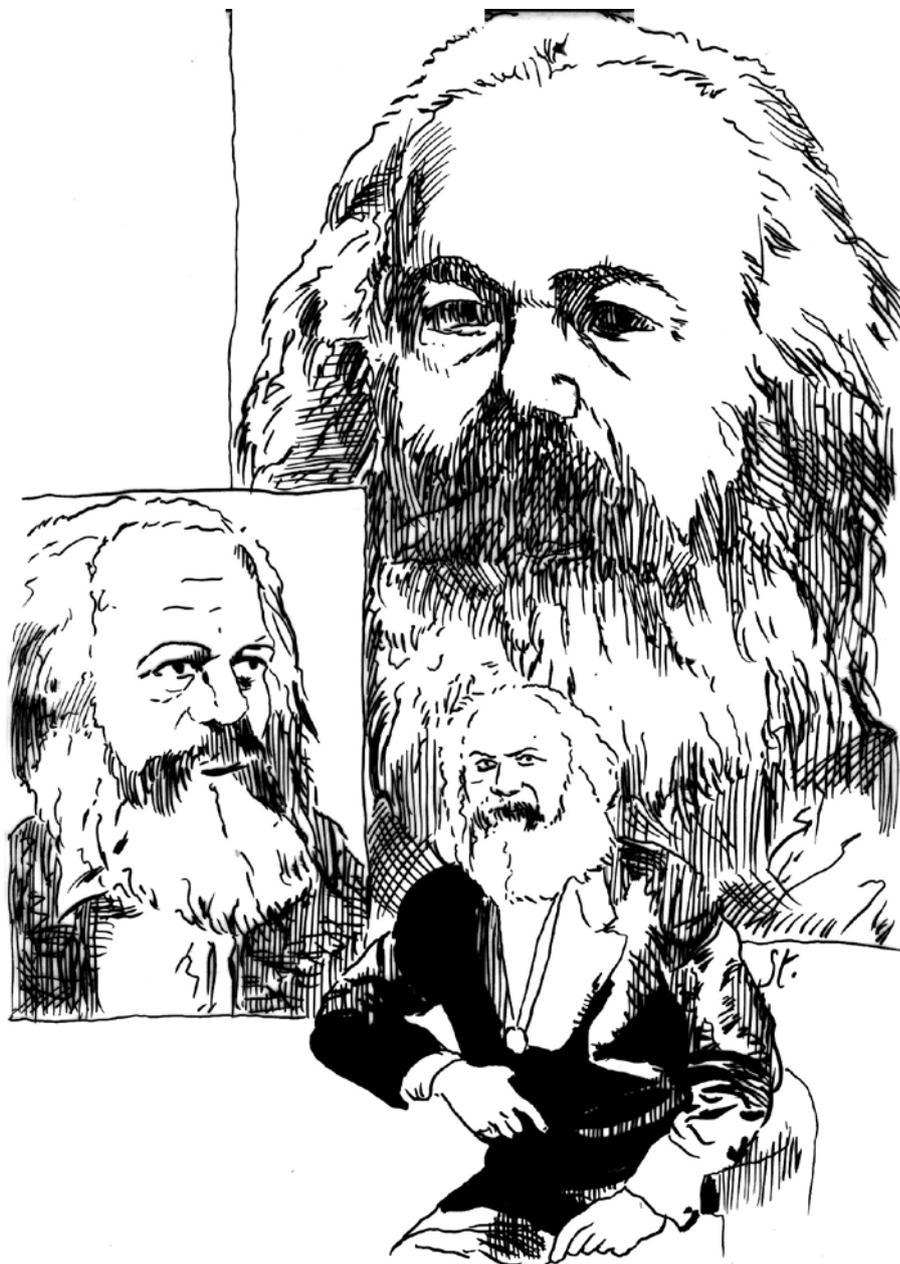
This led him away from philosophical speculations about 'human essence', what it was and how to realise it, to the study of the different 'ensembles of social relations' within which humans had lived and to see history not as the development of any idea but as the development from one 'ensemble of social relations' to another in line with the development of the material forces of production. This gave socialism a much firmer basis than a simple 'categorical imperative to overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned and despised.' It made it the next stage which was both being prepared by the development of the current state (capitalism) and the solution to the problems caused by capitalism's inherent internal contradictions. It kept

the agent of its establishment as the class of wage workers, no longer considered as a class embodying all the sufferings of humanity, but as the class whose material interest would lead it to oppose and eventually abolish capitalism.

Marx still retained some of the language and concepts of his Young Hegelian past, but he gave them a new, materialist content. Thus, for instance, the alienation of the 'proletariat' was no longer alienation from their human essence but alienation from the products of their own labour which came to dominate them in the form of capital as personified by a capitalist class and 'the emancipation of Man' became the emancipation of all humans through the abolition of classes and class rule by the

world-wide working class pursuing its material interest; and he still referred to end of capitalism as the close of 'the pre-history of human society'. The imperative to change the world too remained, but addressed to the working class rather than to philosophers. As he put it in 1845 in his parting shot at German philosophy: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.' (Theses on Feuerbach)

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Living Like a Humanist

Bill Cooke

The Good Life

For centuries thinkers have mused on what makes up the good life. Many people have succumbed to the temptation to simply list do's and don'ts, thinking that the good life is made up of obedience to lists. But it's not that easy. To start with, the good life is not the same as the moral life. Many people have led moral lives, according to the conventional moralities of the day and yet been desperately unhappy. The good life involves being moral, but is not subsumed or defined by it.

One of the best conceptions of what constitutes the good life is from the Buddha. In the *Anguttara-nikaya*, the fourth of a collection of dialogues (this

one with the banker Anathapindika), the Buddha outlined four characteristics of the good life:

- well-being relating to resources, or sufficient means, honestly acquired
- economic well-being, happiness resulting from enjoyment of lawfully-acquired wealth
- happiness consequent upon being free from debt
- happiness of being free from blame.

For the Stoic thinker Epictetus (c. 55-135 CE), the good life had three main features:

- the ability to master one's desires
- performing one's duty to the best of

one's ability

- being able to think clearly about oneself, one's loved ones, and the wider community

Epictetus had been brought up a slave but was released by a kindly master, who recognised his talents. His idea of performing one's duty to the best of one's ability has much in common with the notion of dharma or Nietzsche's idea of amor fati, or love of necessity. And the third feature has lots in common with the idea of taking a cosmic perspective, which we outlined in the Spring 2005 issue.

A Humanist Creed

George Pirie

I believe the universe to be too old and too large for the human mind to find out for certain how it came to be.

I believe that science and reason are best able to provide us with reliable knowledge about the universe, being open to disproof and willing to change in the light of new discoveries.

I believe evolution by natural causes has shaped us and the other forms

of life with which we share the world's habitat.

I believe that ethics and morals are personal responsibilities, subject to development alongside new knowledge.

I believe that our development of tools and weapons has outpaced our ability to control them for the sake of amity and the future.

I believe that death is final, but our achievements and our influence on others survive us, as do our genes.

Editor in Chief: we would like to hear from you if you have a humanist creed to share with us.

Adam's Rib

Anne Ferguson

For He's a Jolly Good Fellow

As always happens when some international celebrity visits these shores, they are interviewed extensively for radio, TV and the print media. One would have to be very uninterested in current affairs to fail to notice the celebrity in question was in our midst. Robert Fisk's visit to New Zealand for the Arts Festival was no exception. When he was being interviewed on radio I heard him say that, unlike the Middle East, the West 'had lost its faith.' He went on to say that the West now puts its faith in Human Rights and Secularism, with which he was in agreement, and so say all of us.

When one considers that 90% of Americans and 75% of New Zealanders claim to have a religious belief, including the small, if very vocal, band of Christian fundamentalists, one has to question Robert Fisk's contention that 'the West has lost its faith.' I once knew someone who was a member of the Skeptics and was a teacher of physics but, a seeming paradox, was an active church member. I have colleagues at the Citizens' Advice Bureau, sensible, educated, rational people who, nevertheless, are active church members. How can it be that otherwise sensible, educated members of western society still take all the God nonsense seriously? If the lights in the house suddenly go out, do they fall on their knees and pray that there should be light? No, they fumble for a torch and go and have a look at the fuse box. Alternatively, look out the window to see whether all the lights in the neighbourhood are all off too. If so, out come the candles and there's a patient wait for the power company

to get on the case. How is it possible for ancient superstitions to link arms so closely with modern technology?

The answer, I think, is infant brainwashing. Three-year-olds want to please. Fact. Ask any child psychologist if you don't know from your own observation. They are also very trusting. The Trusting Threes. If three-year-olds are told the world is round, they will believe it. If they are told that milk comes from cows, they will believe it. If they are told that babies grow in their mummies' tummies, they will believe it. Tell them there is a God who, though you can't see him, is everywhere, they will believe it. Tell our Trusting Threes often enough that this God is watching them all the time, will be cross if they don't behave, be pleased if they do, reinforce this message for the next decade or so, and the hard wiring is in place. If, during their childhood, their parents' behaviour towards them mirrors this message, if it is delivered in a benign and caring climate, no amount of subsequent rational argument will eradicate the feeling that there is a God. Describing this God as someone always looking after you and into whose arms you will go when you die is, for lonely, unloved, unfulfilled adults, a very seductive concept. Add to this the social cohesion of a religious congregation from which one is unlikely to be blackballed and the person is hooked for life.

Superstitious explanation for the material world, handed down for eons from generation to generation, carrying firmly embedded beliefs, was

where mankind was at until a handful of people started to have doubts. Within the Christian Church, if they dared to express such doubts, they were burned at the stake – an effective way to 'encourage les autres'.

Believers are unable to rationalise their beliefs, they just feel it but the educated ones try to rationalise them - because believing in things that don't exist is what silly, uneducated people do! It wasn't until the last couple of hundred years that scientific knowledge encouraged doubters to speak out with courage and, really, only within our lifetime has a liberalisation of attitude towards non-believers developed – hence Robert Fisk's contention that the West has lost its faith.

The problem here is a definition of 'East and 'West'. The last century with its rapid movement of peoples around the world has rendered any clear definition impossible. Perhaps 'Enlightenment' - The Enlightenment of European tradition - and 'Darkness' would be better. History tells us that persecution never changes hearts and minds. If we want the forces of Darkness to be overcome by the forces of Enlightenment then sweet reason ought to be the more effective weapon. But that sweet reason must be based on fact not on myth.

“Read any good novels recently?”

Bill Cooke

One good thing about a Christmas break is that you can catch up on the novels you wanted to read through the year but didn't have time to get round to. And most of them are good enough to share, hence this article. It strikes me that fiction is enjoying a surge of quality at the moment. What follows is an entirely unscientific survey of some novels I've read recently, in no particular order.

I've just finished reading *Blindsight*, Maurice Gee's latest novel. There are many features of this novel that readers of Gee's earlier books will recognise: a childhood in Loomis, murky origins in Whakatane, and life now spent in Wellington. Close-knit families suffused with gritty closeness serving as cover for loneliness, missed opportunities and wasted potential. But it's not the cloying despair of existentialists, it's more reminiscent of the warm melancholy John Steinbeck was so good at. Not light holiday reading by any means, but neither is *Blindsight* cold or grim. What Maurice Gee does is tell us about love and commitment with an awareness of how porous these feelings are. He also writes this novel in the first person, through the eyes of the principal – female – character. It's always been tricky for men to write through a woman's eyes. I think he succeeds, though others might not be as convinced. Maurice Gee's novels are a standing objection to the oft-repeated jibe that humanism is unable to appreciate the tragic dimension of life. I enjoyed *Blindsight* a great deal, though will be keen for a different sort of novel to follow that.

A different sort of book is *Archangel*, by Robert Harris, as good an action thriller as you could reasonably expect. It is, in fact, so much more than an action-thriller. To begin with, it's well-researched, and the tale of Stalin's last days accords closely with non-fiction accounts. *Archangel* gives an authentic account of Russia as it is now. The sense of corruption and wild-west style lawlessness, with small admixtures of promise for the few or the lucky, rings true. Harris has also written *Enigma*, a novel about the enigma code that played a decisive part in changing the fortunes of the Second World War. More recently, he's written *Pompeii*, a fictionalized account of living in Pompeii at the time the town was destroyed in 79 CE in a volcanic eruption.

After hearing that John Banville won the Booker Prize for 2005 for his book *The Sea*, I was motivated to try some of his works. Rather than simply read *The Sea*, I visited my local secondhand bookshop, and there was *The Untouchable* waiting for me. *The Untouchable* appeared in 1997 and is the very thinly disguised story of the life of Anthony Blunt, the so-called fourth man in the British spy network. After Philby, Burgess and Maclean, there was Blunt, a key establishment figure – the Keeper of the Queen's Pictures no less. *The Untouchable* tells the story of the life of a surprisingly apolitical, though patriotic, traitor. On the strength of *The Untouchable*, it is clear that John Banville is worth reading more of.

Another writer not afraid to tackle the big themes is Simon Mawer. People who enjoy credible science in their fiction need to read *Mendel's Dwarf*. The reader gets some insights into the life of Gregor Mendel, discoverer of genetics, and of the genetic strain in evolutionary thought. Intertwined through all this is a sad tale of a love that could never happen, and about the cruel facts of sexual selection. Mawer has also written *The Gospel of Judas*, which poses the question of what a former priest does when a scroll turns up that threatens to discredit Christianity's historical claims. Opinions about what happens will differ according to one's religious beliefs. Not as good a novel as *Mendel's Dwarf*, but a good story nonetheless.

Rather in the tradition of Iris Murdoch is James Wood's 2003 novel *The Book Against God*. Wood had made a name for himself as a reviewer who took no prisoners, so there was a great deal of expectation about this, his first novel. To many people's surprise, and doubtless disappointment, the novel has generally been held a success. It's the story of Thomas Bunting, a rather shiftless man, supposedly studying for a PhD, but more intent on writing the definitive book disproving the existence of God. The novel is actually about the breakdown of his marriage and the awkward relations between Bunting and his father, a minister of religion. It's a sad book, and nobody really wins in the end. Unlike the main character is *Blindsight*, there are few redeeming features in the main characters to make up for their obvious failings.

If black humour is your thing, it's difficult to go past Max Barry's *Jennifer Government*. In the tradition of *Brave New World* or *1984*, *Jennifer Government* tells the story of a nightmare world of the near future. Here is a world where unfettered globalisation and privatisation have triumphed, and our surnames become that of the corporation we work for. The villain of this book is John Nike. But don't be put off by the theme; this is a witty, even funny book. Max Barry is a young Australian writer, and New Zealand gets a role in the book. Not an altogether flattering role, but a role nonetheless.

And among all these excellent novels, were there any duds? Yes, one. *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown is the most overrated, poorly-written, formulaic drivel I have read in a long time. There are too many set-piece nail-biting scenes where some awful danger is averted in the nick of time. In one scene, the police dutifully turn up only seconds after the hero has foiled the machinations of the villain and saved the girl, all in a suitably exotic setting. And the dissolute American scholar-hero is becoming a tiresome staple of novels. It worked in *Archangel* but didn't in *The*

Da Vinci Code. Brown's book also had a lame ending. One gets the feeling he was writing for the subsequent film than for his readers. He's made a poultice out of it, and good luck to him. But it's depressing that such a bad novel should do so well when there are so many incomparably superior books around.

Changing tack slightly, who would I need to have with me for the proverbial exile on a desert island? Well, if my internment was going to be a long one, I would need to take stacks of novels from these ten writers, listed in alphabetical order:

- **Margaret Atwood**, one needs to be feeling strong to tackle an Atwood, but *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, in particular, reward the effort.
- **Arnold Bennett**, for his lightness of touch, and for his humanity. *Riceyman Steps* on its own qualifies him as a genius.
- **George Eliot**, for the grace and beauty of her writing. *Middlemarch* and *Silas Marner* are timeless classics.
- **Maurice Gee**, is, as far as I'm concerned, the novelist of New Zealand. Hard to pick favourites, but

The Big Season, *Plumb*, and *Going West* are probably the ones for me.

- **Thomas Mann**, who could plumb the psychological depths with German profundity, without too much of the Teutonic heaviness. *The Magic Mountain* stands out here.
- **Rohinton Mistry**, in particular *A Fine Balance*, one of those books one regards as a significant experience in one's life.
- **Iris Murdoch**, complex, multi-layered novels. Quite against the normal trend of opinion, my favourite is a later work, *Message to the Planet*.
- **Mary Renault**, for historical fiction of unsurpassed quality.
- **John Steinbeck**, *The Grapes of Wrath* was an important book for me, but so were *The Wayward Bus* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*.
- **H G Wells**, and not just his science fiction; some of his characters are incredibly funny, and he was bold and experimental.

What are yours? Send in your top ten novelists – the people you'd need to have stacks of for your exile on a desert island.

Bill Cooke is Editor in Chief of *The Open Society*.

Thoughts and Comments

Bill Cooke

March for Free Expression

At the end of March a group of progressive and humanist organisations held a rally in Trafalgar Square in London to protest the intimidation of free expression by militant Muslims in the wake of the furore over the Muhammad cartoons affair. Participating organisations included the Rationalist International, National Secular Society, British Humanist Association, Rationalist Association and the Libertarian Alliance. About six hundred people heard speakers such as Dr Evan Harris, Liberal Democrat human rights spokesman, defend freedom of expression as a foundation stone of the open society.

One speaker, Maryam Namazie, declared that “Offensive or not, sacred or not – religion and superstition – Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Scientology and so on – must be open to all forms of criticism and ridicule.” If that sounds too much, just try and think what the alternative would be like.

Open Society articles around the world

Articles in the *Open Society* continue to be taken up by organisations around the world. The series by Dr Sheikh on women and Islam has been taken up by the Humanist Society of Ottawa in Canada and placed on their listserve. And a music student in Brighton has taken up some aspects of Simon Gemmill’s article relating his odyssey from fundamentalism to humanism.

Meanwhile the editorial on Albert Einstein which appeared in the Spring 2005 issue has been reprinted in *Human Interest*, the journal of the San Francisco Humanists, and my article outlining the core principles of Planetary Humanism has been reprinted in *Fig Leaves*, the journal of the Free Inquiry Group in Cincinnati, Ohio as well as by the online version of the Indian magazine *The Modern Rationalist*.

Promise and danger in Palestine

By and large the election of Hamas as government of the Palestine Authority is a good thing. Fatah had been in office for four decades and had become arrogant and corrupt with power. By its own reckoning, about seven hundred million dollars has been misused or stolen, a figure which could easily rise into the billions. The rejection of Fatah was a plea for the humanist values of openness and transparency in government as much as the election of Hamas was a vote for sectarianism and terrorism. The irony, of course, is that this election, where a Muslim people has its say against an entrenched and undemocratic leadership, is precisely what George W Bush and Tony Blair have been calling for.

But against this is the question of whether Hamas understands democracy. Their official policy is still that Israel has no right to exist and that violence against it is legitimate. However, the realities of international politics may soon intervene. The Palestinian Authority is very deeply beholden to European and American money in order to stay afloat. The EU and US withdrawal of assistance to the PA government may well be a sharp

lesson in the realities of politics.

And in the middle of all this, it is clearly a serious setback for Middle East peace that Mahmoud Abbas got caught up in the ousting of Fatah. Abbas has not—so far—been implicated in the corruption and had been a voice of reason during his term in office. He will be sorely missed.

Terrorists gaining the upper hand in Iraq

Iraq is slowly collapsing into, if not civil war, then certainly a prolonged period of heightened tension and violence. So far the Shia majority has remained generally calm in the face of terrorist provocations. But the destruction of the Askariya shrine in Samarra with the loss of the more than 1300 dead has clearly ratcheted up sectarian tension by a few points. Just as serious, the escalating violence is helping harden attitudes among Shia politicians as they manoeuvre to form a government in the wake of their election victory. No government has been able to form since the December elections, with the interim prime minister Ibrahim Jaafari, able to attract ever-diminishing levels of support. This vacuum can only strengthen the hands of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who so far has acted responsibly, and Moqtada al-Sadr, who has not.

The growing control terrorists have over events in Iraq is being mirrored by the increasingly obvious loss of focus by the United States. As the war becomes less popular at home, and Congressional elections later this year, President Bush

may be regretting his earlier rhetoric about seeing things through in Iraq. The badly overstretched Coalition forces seem increasingly unable to maintain the rule of law outside of small, select areas. And ongoing reports of abuse by coalition soldiers suggest a decline in morale.

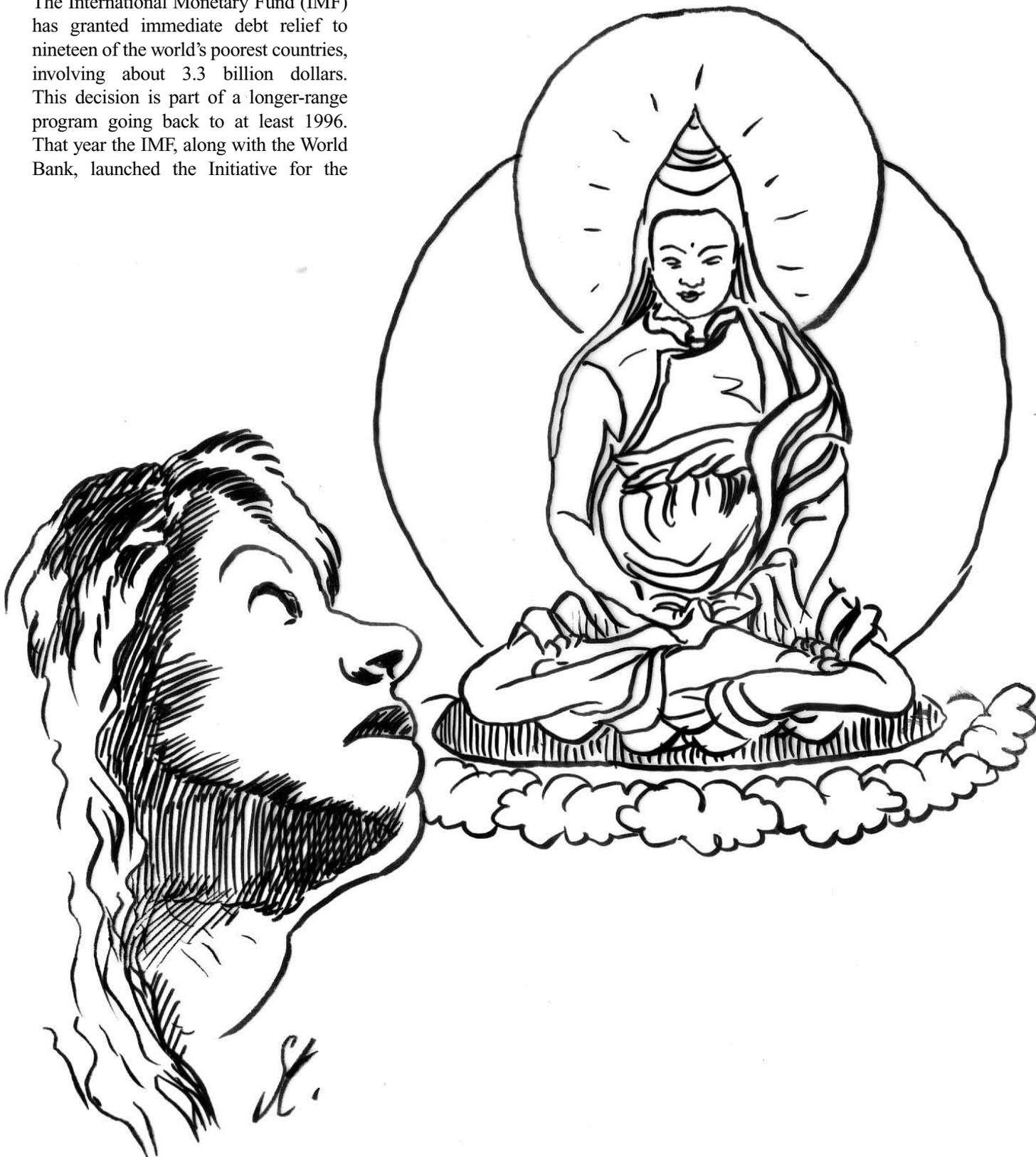
International Monetary Fund absolves debt

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has granted immediate debt relief to nineteen of the world's poorest countries, involving about 3.3 billion dollars. This decision is part of a longer-range program going back to at least 1996. That year the IMF, along with the World Bank, launched the Initiative for the

Heavily Indebted Countries. The main aim of the Initiative was to help heavily indebted countries achieve a sustainable level of debt and established criteria for the achievement of that goal.

The Initiative was stepped up in 1999 after it became apparent that the problem was more intractable than first realised. The Initiative has also sought to manage debt relief in a context of

overall poverty reduction. Contrary to some opponents' fears, the IMF has been reasonably flexible in its criteria, judging things on a case-by-case basis. The first country to come within the Initiative's range was Uganda, which in April 1998 began receiving assistance amounting to 650 million dollars, or 20 percent of the country's debt. The IMF's move is a positive sign of increasingly enlightened global governance.



Books

The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason

by Sam Harris

New York, WW Norton, 2004

A book announcing the end of faith should be of immediate interest to humanist readers. Faith has for so long been cast in a positive light either as a commitment beyond reason or as a non-doctrinally uplifting human urge. But in 1992 the British philosopher Anthony Kenny came to very different conclusions about faith. In *What is Faith?* Kenny, a lapsed Catholic, concluded that faith was not a virtue at all, but a vice. Faith, Kenny argued, only has meaning insofar as it is faith in something for a particular reason, namely that God has revealed it. But unless the existence of this God can be demonstrated by means other than faith, then that faith becomes insubstantial and prone to manipulation in the service of unreason. As Goya warned years previously, 'the sleep of reason brings forth monsters.' Well, a new century has opened, and events have done little to dispel the fears of Goya and Kenny. In fact, *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris carries on in their footsteps.

Sam Harris has nothing positive whatsoever to say about faith. Early in the book Harris notes that while all faiths have dabbled to some extent in ecumenism, 'the central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others

are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete.' Later on the same page Harris states that '[c]ertainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.' (p. 13) Another example: Faith 'is the search for knowledge on the instalment plan: believe now, live an untestable hypothesis until your dying day, and you will discover that you were right.' (p. 66) The first few chapters lay out his argument to justify these claims. None of the arguments are particularly new but Harris's turn of phrase and confident generalisations add bite to familiar territory.

At times his enthusiasm runs away a bit. He declares that we 'are at war with Islam. It may not serve our immediate foreign policy objectives for our political leaders to openly acknowledge this fact, but it is unambiguously so.' (p. 109) This is getting back into the more hysterical clash of civilisations rhetoric that I thought we'd finished with.

What is valuable about Harris's book is that his militant attack on faith will hopefully open up much needed discussion about the role faith really should have in people's lives. His scorched earth approach has created

room for more measured criticisms to survey what has for too long been a no-go area. This book should help expose the long-standing unwillingness to expose religious beliefs to any sort of rational criticism.

A more trivial gripe is that titles like *The End of Faith* may help to sell books, but it probably doesn't help much to generate understanding. Whether we like it or not, we will never see the end of faith. The focus for people's faith may change, but as a human foible, we are unlikely ever to see the end of it. Faith is not going to go away, any more than atheism is going to go away. But the British apologist Alister McGrath had his book entitled *The Twilight of Atheism*, presumably in the same vein of wishful thinking that motivated Harris (see *Open Society*, Vol 77, No. 3, Spring 2004, pp 20 - 22). It would be wiser, rather than wishing the end of something, to suggest ways we can live together in harmony.

Bill Cooke is Editor in Chief of the *Open Society*. This review first appeared in the *Sea of Faith Newsletter*, No. 65, March 2006, p 8.

Skepticism

by Finngeir Hiorth

Oslo: Human-Etisk Forbund, 2005

Readers of this journal will be familiar with the writing of Finngeir Hiorth, the distinguished Norwegian philosopher and atheist and NZARH Honorary Associate. Over the past ten years, Professor Hiorth has written a series of short works that, when taken as a whole, comprise a veritable encyclopedia of atheism, rationalism and humanism. *Skepticism* is the latest in a series of works, which include *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (2005); *Marxism* (2004); *Positivism* (2004); *Bertrand Russell* (2004); *Atheism in the World* (2003); *Studying Religion* (2000); *Values* (1999); *Atheism in India* (1998); *Ethics for Atheists* (1998); *Introduction to Humanism* (1996); and *Introduction to Atheism* (1995, reprinted 2003)

Skepticism follows on the path set by the earlier works. It presents clear summaries of the main sceptical thinkers, gives their dates, tells you what relation they have to other thinkers and offers a simple analysis of their contribution. The name of the person being discussed is put in bold, making it possible to use

the book for reference purposes. Hiorth also gives what is in effect a descriptive bibliography of all the relevant writing in the field being considered, scepticism in this case. Then there are six pages of bibliography. All this in 102 pages!

A strength of most of Hiorth's work is that he is aware of the atheist and humanist traditions outside Europe. He was born and raised in the Dutch East Indies, Indonesia as it is now, and is well travelled in Asia. Indeed, the earlier titles mentioned above were published by the Indian Secular Society. Of interest to New Zealand readers is that he has written a history of Timor. Ironically, Hiorth's internationalism is not on display in *Skepticism* as much as in his other titles. That is partially because scepticism is predominantly a European tradition, but not entirely. Wang Chong (27-97 CE), for instance, deserved a mention. He did a really valuable job shedding Confucian thinking of accretions of supernaturalism and superstition that had slowly built up over the previous few centuries.

But pretty much everyone else who has worked in sceptical philosophy gets a mention here. He ranges from the very beginnings of philosophy in Ancient Greece to what is happening right now. It's this ability to synthesise and cut to the chase that makes Finngeir Hiorth's book so worthwhile.

It has long been my view that these works are so valuable as resources that they deserve a wider distribution. They could be put together as a stand-alone reference work, put on the web or on a CD, preferably cross-referenced. This really would be worth doing. A CD with all this burned on could be an extraordinary resource to a humanist anywhere in the world.

Bill Cooke is Editor in Chief of the *Open Society*.

Book Notice

Philosophy and Freethought in French, by Finngeir Hiorth, Oslo: Human-Etisk, 2006. ISBN 82-92529-09-8

This book gives a survey of philosophy and freethought in France. It does not only provide information about developments in France but also about some other countries in which French is an important language. Still, most of the book is devoted to developments on France.

The book gives a general introduction in which concepts such as freethought and philosophy as experienced in France are briefly discussed and explained.

It then gives an historical survey of philosophy in France, mentioning the Middle Ages, scepticism in the sixteenth century (Sanches, Montaigne and Charron), Descartes and some critics (Gassendi, Pascal and Huet), the Enlightenment period (Montesquieu, Diderot, d'Alembert, Condillac, Helvétius, Holbach, Rousseau, Turgot, Voltaire), 'Spiritualism' (Maine de Biran, Ravisson-Mollien, Henri Bergson), positivism (Auguste Comte, Émile Littré, Pierre Lafitte, Hippolyte Taine, Ernest Renan, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl), philosophy of science (Cournot, Boutroux, Claude Bernard, Émile Zola, Henri Poincaré, Gaston Milhaud, Emile Meyerson, Léon Brunschvig),

modern philosophical movements (phenomenology, existentialism, Marxism, structuralism, and post-structuralism), Jacqueline Lalouette on freethought, individual thinkers and rationalists, secularisation, and secularism in Belgium. The book concludes with an alphabetically arranged dictionary of French speaking philosophers and freethinkers.

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Letters

Dear Bill

Recently I noticed copies of *The Open Society* in our local public library and needing mental stimulation in my retirement bliss, I borrowed them. They certainly stimulated me – to the point anyway of writing this letter!

The first one I read left me wondering what humanists and rationalists were actually on about. Every article, except one, was close to being a tirade against religions of all varieties. Even on the penultimate page there was the statement: ‘Unlike the churches, the NZARH has to pay its own way...’ Well, academic debate is fine, but it needs to be balanced.

Blessed relief! There was an article entitled ‘Living like a Humanist’. But really it made no progress in saying what humanists were on about, as in it the writer said, ‘The anchor of humanism is science’. He seemed to be saying that humanism takes a position on science that others, (and I guess he was thinking of religions) do not take. But as someone who makes the assumption (has the ‘belief’) that the Christian God created the universe; I also agree that science ‘offers the soundest method by which we can gather reliable information about the world.’

You see, I am fascinated by the complexity and patterns of the radio-active decay of fundamental particles, that tells so much about the development of the world. I delight in the complexity and patterns of DNA that also tell so much. And further I note the complexity and patterns of the development of plants and animals that also fill in details of the history of the world.

But I do not forget that physicists have calculated that they will never be able to build accelerators capable enough to unlock the inner-most secrets of the forces of the universe.

Then I also do not forget that for all the huge number of stars and galaxies, man has been unable to find, and will never be able to travel to, another world that is so precisely located with respect to its sun, that life on it has developed to the point that it has on our world. Also it seems to me that man will probably use up the world’s entire energy resources before being able to reproduce the development of man from his earlier species. Almost as an afterthought I should add that I also think about the scientific method, where researchers must do tests of significance to show that their data did not occur by chance.

I have no problem with the picture language of the book of Genesis which was, in the state of knowledge at the time, unable to explain radio-activity, DNA and ‘evolution’.

But I digress. Why would the writer base his article on the value of science when many others, not being humanists, or rationalists, or Christian, would also agree? It doesn’t seem to make a case for humanism or rationalism.

Blow me down, lo and behold, the editor is aware of the problem!! In another issue he writes in the editorial of the need to ‘balance our message between the criticism of religion and the voicing of a positive alternative.’ He admits that ‘we know what we are against, but are less clear what we are for.’ So he then attempted to try to reset the balance by writing about nine things that he sees humanism is for. But I agreed with almost the whole lot!! (I was not so sure about ‘cosmic modesty’ – it reminded me of the picture story of the nakedness of Adam and Eve.)

But my point is that I am sure many people who do not see themselves as humanists, could agree with most of what was written. So what really are humanists on about? I wait with bated breath as the Editor seeks to get

contributions from a wide range of people who can set out their unique message and furthermore, explain how the message has changed the world for the better.

Ian G Turner
Whangaparaoa

Editor in Chief’s response: *I’d like to thank Mr Turner for his letter. In my reply to him I confessed to being at a loss to see where all the tirades against religion are. In the first issue he mentioned, Vol 77, No. 4, Summer 2004, there is nothing that would be a ‘close to being a tirade’ against religion. Is it not reasonable to criticise the religious hypocrite and child molester Graham Capill? Ray Bradley spoke of his religious upbringing. Are we not to speak of what has actually happened? Then there was the article on the Atheist Centre, a relief operation for poor and sick Indians far bigger than anything Mother Teresa runs and yet which receives little or no mention, except from people like us. To his credit, Mr Turner conceded that his charge of producing only a series of tirades may have been an overstatement.*

But whether Mr Turner’s point is valid or not, it serves as a reminder to rationalists and humanists how we are perceived by the wider community. Even when criticism of religion is valid, we are often seen as unduly negative and carping. This makes it all the more serious when the criticism is intemperate and obsessive, something this journal does not do.

Mr Turner is confused about the level of agreement he finds in the statement of humanism I outlined. Why should we disagree as fundamentally as he thinks we should? In many respects humanists share similar values and preferences as their religious neighbours. The main difference is that humanists endeavour to be good citizens without reference to a supernatural element, which we see no evidence for.

Honorary Associates of the NZARH

Gianni Bartocci	Levi Fragell	Taslina Nasrin
H James Bix	Ida Gaskin CNZM	Jean-Claude Pecker
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Brian Edwards CNZM	Tim Madigan	Lewis Wolpert
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Focus on... Richard Dawkins, who has written and fronted a two part television programme called *Root of all Evil?* which examines the weaknesses of religion.

Humanist Noticeboard

NZARH Charles Southwell Awards

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 Cheryll Sotheran, on behalf on Te Papa

Remember the NZARH in your will

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

The Open Society

The Open Society calls for articles and reviews, especially with a New Zealand focus. Contact the Editor in Chief on bill@nzarh.org.nz.

Humanist Services

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Barbara Carr, Auckland	(09) 436 1126
Wayne Facer, Auckland	(09) 528 4465
Dame Barbara Goodman, Auckland	(09) 520 1233
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Dame Barbara Goodman, Auckland	(09) 520 1233
Peter Hansen, Manukau City	(09) 622 1400
Barbara Shaw, Auckland	(09) 528 6293
Sheena Hudson, Wellington	(04) 389 2270
Charles Manhire, Christchurch	(03) 355 8315

Thought

Too much religion is apt to encourage evil.

Lucretius (c. 100-55 BCE)

Fifty Years Ago

The series of Open Forum meetings held by the NZ Rationalist Association in the Fabian Club Rooms, 3 Queen Street, Auckland, came to an end for the year on Sunday 4th.. Due to the energetic efforts of the Lectures and Social Committee, and in spite of the transport difficulties, there was an excellent attendance of members and friends who thoroughly enjoyed the varied programme provided. A panel discussion on 'Should Women Serve on Juries?' took place, the principal speakers being Mrs Holt, Miss W Mansfield, Mr J O Hanlon and Mr P Campbell. The question was thoroughly canvassed, not without some lively humour, and members of the audience also contributed their viewpoints. Mrs M Wilson was the chairman and capably kept the ball of discussion rolling.

NZ Rationalist, February 1956.

A Directory of New Zealand Freethought

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heathen@nzarh.org.nz
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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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The Wellington branch of the Humanists can also be contacted at this address.

New Zealand Humanist Charitable Trust
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Hawke's Bay Freethinkers
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Waikato Freethinkers
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Christchurch Humanist Fellowship
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