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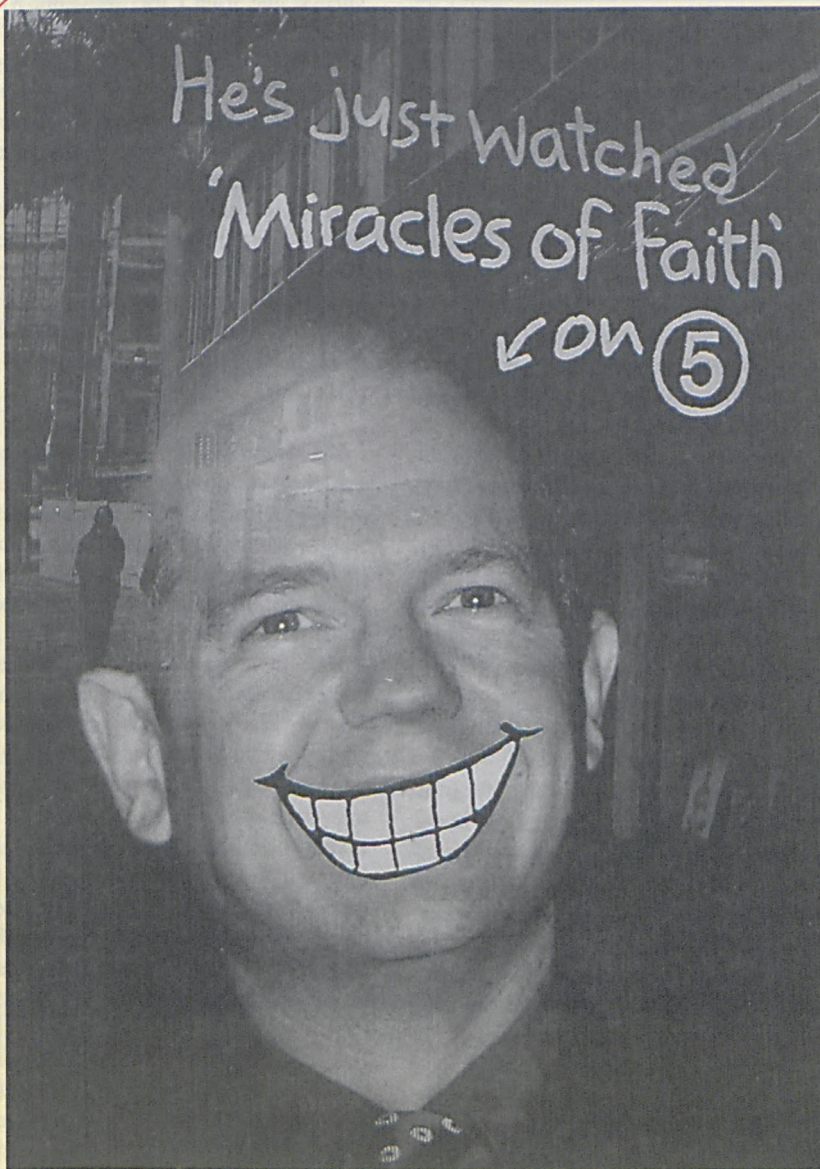
The

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Freethinker

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Founded by G W Foote in 1881



Channel 5 TV got the full measure of Tory leader William Hague's 'Holy Joe' tendencies when they launched a poster campaign last autumn. Can images like this boost Hague's chances of becoming Prime Minister? Terry Sanderson says no, and warns politicians that, when trying to manipulate the Christian vote, you often end up with the Christians manipulating you.

– See his report on p6

Also in this issue:

The National Secular Society ends the millennium on a high note – see p4

freethinking out loud: barry duke

IS THE Conservative Party operating a Daft Old Bat quota system?

If a DOB policy *does* exist I would say it was Margaret Thatcher who pioneered the trend when she began her premiership with a lengthy prayer. And although she did more to promote greed than faith during her long and odious reign, she did have us Brits screaming "Jesus Christ!" more loudly and with greater frequency than we had ever done before. And when she was finally dumped, even the most committed of atheists cried out "Thank God."

The old tyrant is no longer much of a bother these days but the lunacy lingers on – most notably in the form of shadow Home Secretary Ann (the Maniacal Voice of Catholicism) Widdecombe and Baroness (Anal Sex) Young, who appears to be aiming for an entry in the Guinness Book of Records for the repeated use of the word "buggery" in the House of Lords.

It was Baroness Young, you will recall,



who led the Lords to defeat the Government's efforts to repeal Thatcher's disgraceful Section 28, the crazy law which forbids the "promotion" of homosexuality. But her bid to block the legalisation of gay sex at 16 was defeated when the Government forced legislation through Parliament in November to equalise the age of consent.

Those who thought that this move would, at last, silence the bigoted Baroness were in for a surprise, for no sooner had the gay age of consent been lowered than she was up and at it again – this time with a call to the nation to participate in a national buggery poll.

The zany crusader launched a website (www.ageofconsent.org.uk) which asks British citizens: "Do you want to keep the age of consent for anal intercourse for both girls and boys at 18?"

Worse than the patronising use of the words "girls" and "boys" to describe people of 18 was the poll's declaration that "anal intercourse ... is regarded as a sin by major religious groups – Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim".

What it failed to point out was that, far from being a homosexual phenomenon, anal sex is routinely practised by millions of *heterosexuals* as a form of birth control – particularly in societies where condoms are hard to come by, or are forbidden for religious reasons.

To the Baroness's enormous chagrin, the poll completely backfired. Instead of demonstrating that she, and her main ally, the Christian Institute, had the great British public on their side, the very opposite was shown. In the first week of the web poll, 70 per cent of voters said NO, they did not want to make consensual anal sex illegal for those under 18 – and in so doing indicated that it was not buggery they were concerned with, but the Baroness's tedious brand of humbuggery.

AND NOW to another rancid old relic. In November the History Channel devoted close on an hour to an investigation of the Shroud of Turin. I did not see the programme, but, if the *Evening Standard's* TV critic, Victor Lewis-Smith, is to be believed, I was spared an

excruciating piece of dross.

The programme began with the narrator asking: "Could the answers lie beyond the comprehension of even science?"

"He then led us on a chase that even a wild goose would have considered pointless as he strove to convince us that this dubious piece of cloth really might bear the image of the recently-deceased Christ," wrote Lewis-Smith. "And long before this disingenuous piece of raving pseudo-science was over, I'd come to the conclusion that what I was watching was not the History Channel but the Hysterical Channel."

He added: "With no attempt at impartiality, the programme devoted 95 per cent of its length to the crackpot theories of the shroud's defenders, but no matter, because the remaining five per cent was ample time for the prosecution to comprehensively demolish the myths ... In the year 2000 it is beyond me why people should still be indulging in the sort of sky-gods talk with which our ancient primitive ancestors assuaged their fears of a natural world that they didn't understand."

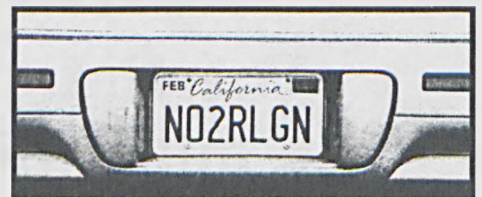
I AM always very wary of people who believe that they are driving their vehicles under the protection of God. Whenever I see a car with a silly religious slogan stuck on a bumper or in the rear window I give it a wide berth, for it's a sign that the driver is likely to do something breathtakingly stupid or dangerous.

Unfortunately, taking such evasive action did not occur to a woman motorist in Michigan, USA. When, earlier this year, she saw a car bearing a bumper sticker which said: "Honk if you love Jesus," the woman – presumably being a lover of Jesus – obligingly did so.

Bad move! The driver of the stickered car, incensed at having a woman driver honk her horn at him, leapt out of his vehicle and set about bashing her car with a sawn-off baseball bat, according to a report in the *Detroit News*.

Which supports my theory that you don't have to be crazy to be a Christian, but it helps.

I am pleased to see that more and more atheists are responding to religious stickers with anti-religious or satirical ones, and in the US some freethinkers have even devised personalised atheist registration numbers, as the picture below indicates. Incidentally, I have just put a sticker on my Mini. It declares: "Jesus paid for our sins, now let's get our money's worth."



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Evangelical 'bishop' puts MP Pickles in a pickle

MARTIN Bell, the independent MP for Tatton, last month announced his intention of fighting the Tory-held Essex seat of Brentwood and Ongar following allegations that a charismatic Christian Church had infiltrated the local Conservative Association.

Mr Bell's decision to contest the Tories' sixth safest seat at the General Election came after he received 200 letters from voters of all parties who expressed concern that the Conservative Association – and its MP, Eric Pickles – could be in danger of being manipulated by a wealthy evangelical sect, the Peniel Pentecostal Church, 119 of whose members had joined the party after the local council turned down their planning application.

The church is run by a former insurance salesman turned evangelical "bishop", Michael Reid, who has been reported as saying that the unemployed should starve, and describing Muslims as "vile people". The church has described these allegations as "foul lies".

Bell, who beat disgraced former Tory minister Neil Hamilton in 1997 on an anti-sleaze ticket, stressed in a *Guardian* report that he was not accusing Mr Pickles of sleaze. But he accused Conservative Central Office of negligence when an inquiry concluded that the local party was not guilty of malpractice despite all the church members joining one branch on one day. "I do believe there was a problem of democratic process in the links between the Peniel Pentecostal Church and the Conservative Association. Alarm bells should have been ringing."

Mr Pickles, who has a 9,600 majority, has denied that his association was being unduly influenced by the Church, but Tony Donnelly,

chairman of the breakaway Independent Conservative Association which first begged Mr Bell to stand, said: "The bishop has got Eric Pickles in a checkmate position – but we have got a white knight. We're calling Mr Bell our Ethics Man."

Meanwhile, a former member of the church, Caroline Green, has revealed on the BBC's *Private Investigations* website that the church was exercising undue control over the lives of its members.

"During all the years I spent at Peniel I didn't question anything, I did everything that was expected of me ... in the end I found that my whole life and the lives of my children were dominated by Peniel."

Caroline Green was a member of the Peniel Pentecostal Church for 16 years. She says the church dominated her life. Last year she and her children, who attended the Peniel school, left the church and moved away. Her husband would not leave, and they subsequently divorced.

During her time at the church, Caroline helped produce promotional videos that depicted "miracle healings". She says her family also gave a proportion of their annual income to the church; this was expected of all Peniel members.

In her investigation Caroline questions whether these "miracle healings" were true and examines the financial accounts of the church and the private companies owned by Peniel's leaders, especially its bishop, Michael Reid.

She also meets another ex-member of the Church to discuss how difficult it was for them to leave.

'We don't want your Bibles', says hotel chain

A CHRISTIAN campaigner has blasted a hotel chain for asking The Gideons to remove their Bibles from guest rooms.

Angry Ron Entwistle has accused the management of the Ibis Hotel in Broughton, near Preston, of being "un-Christian" and "lacking compassion" by ditching copies of the Bible.

According to a report in the *Lancashire Evening Post*, Mr Entwistle accuses the hotel of being the first in Britain to remove spiritual reading matter from the premises, adding: "We are a Christian-loving nation. Why should we be denied the choice of reading the Bible? I don't know who the hotel managers think they are."

A duty manager at the hotel, Guy Kempston, said that the Ibis policy has always been to have no Bibles in guest rooms. "It's the same at all our hotels across the UK and Europe."

"When we take over a hotel, we also remove Yellow Pages and phone directories."

Commented the newspaper: "The Ibis chain is perfectly in its rights to remove Gideon Society Bibles from its hotel rooms. The question is why it should want to. The provision of Bibles in hotel rooms is an admirable long-standing tradition. Depriving those travellers who may find comfort in the Christian message seems particularly pointless."

Snippets

Silly huggers

MORE than 5,000 people made a pilgrimage to London late last year to be hugged by a mystical Indian "saint". Followers of Amma Sri Amrittanandamayi began queuing at the recreational sports centre at Crystal Palace from 4am in freezing weather for a mammoth two-day hugging session. Amma is regarded as a living saint in her homeland of Kerala, southern India. Said one woman who experienced a hug from Amma: "It was the most incredible feeling of my life."

Buddhist bitten

A MAN was seriously injured when he jumped naked into a den of lions at a zoo in Sri Lanka in front of dozens of onlookers. Officials at the zoo said the man had written a letter saying he wanted to offer "alms" to the lions. Sri Lanka majority Buddhist population believes that giving alms can earn merit for future incarnations. The man suffered serious bites on his arms, legs, chest and groin.

Christian hacks horse to death

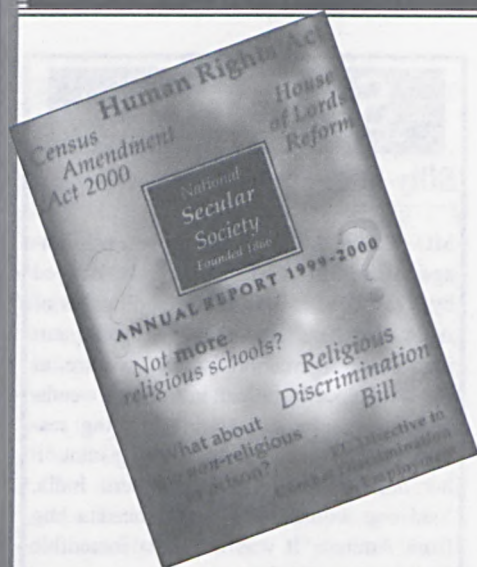
AN AMERICAN Christian living in the west of Ireland hacked his horse to death with an axe because "the Bible says man has dominion over animals".

Greg Martin was given a three-month jail sentence and fined £500 late last year after being convicted of cruelty. He killed the mare after a neighbour complained that it had been eating too much grass.

Martin claimed that he was entitled to kill the horse because it belonged to him, and that he, as a human being, had control over animals. In what was described by Judge Mary Devins in a Co Mayo court as "absolute wanton cruelty", Martin slashed the horse's neck with an axe, then cut the animal into pieces.

Chest for Jesus

"I KNOW it will hurt. But it will be so cool," said singer A J McLean when he revealed his intention to have a tattoo of Jesus inked on his chest. A member of the Backstreet Boys group, McLean's decision to have the tattoo follows a breakdown he suffered as a result of the pressures of superstardom.



NSS completes

The National Secular Society's latest 1999/2000 Annual Report kicks off with good news: "Opinion polls and statistics published this year show that interest in religion is continuing to evaporate", and it quotes Dr Peter Brierley, the man who edits the authoritative Religious Trends survey (himself a Christian) as saying that "all claims that Britain is a Christian nation will finally have to be given up."

Does that mean that the NSS has finally won its battles, and might as well wind up its activities?

The answer is a resounding No! Although in its death throes, Christianity in Britain continues to exert a disproportionate amount of influence on the lives of the people of this country, and, as the report emphasises, "the pressure for increased religious privilege is relentless".

The Government has also been under sustained pressure from religious bodies – particularly from the Muslim community – to introduce legislation that would outlaw discrimination against religion.

In response to these calls, the Home Office has commissioned research from Derby University to establish whether religious discrimination exists on a wide scale in this country, and, if it does, to make some suggestions about tackling it.

NSS General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood and council member Dan Bye visited the report's research team at Derby University, presenting the Society's case to the head of the team and pointing out examples of what the NSS considers to be pro-religious bias in the university's interim report.

The NSS emphasised that protection from discrimination could easily lead to special privileges being granted to religion that would then be misused. Muslim activists, in

particular, want the blasphemy laws to be extended to cover all religions.

The NSS has argued strongly that any extension of blasphemy law would represent a significant threat to freedom of speech and expression. While the NSS accepts that many people in the Muslim community are disadvantaged (for complex reasons), it believes that any discrimination they suffer is mainly racist in origin, rather than being due to "Islamophobia".

"We have argued, therefore, that existing race relations legislation should be adequate to challenge injustice against ethnic and religious minorities, especially when bolstered by new legislation required by the EU Directive on discrimination in employment. The new Charter of Fundamental Rights is also anticipated to strengthen the protection for religion and belief, although the Charter is not expected to be legally binding – at least initially," the report says.

It continues: "There are few areas where the Government better demonstrates its subservience to religion, and its conviction that it is automatically a force for good in society, than in its attitude to church schools. Members of the NSS will wonder why, at the dawn of the 21st century, religion is allowed to control such a large proportion of our educational system.

"A third of schools in this country are of a religious character and are permitted to practise discrimination of the most outrageous kind against non-believers and others of whom they disapprove.

"We especially object to religious doctrine being taught as fact in any schools. The General Secretary receives constant complaints about this practice, even in ordinary state schools. Throughout the year, the NSS has also been receiving complaints from non-believing parents who feel disadvantaged by religious schools. Some are even forced to attend church in order to get a certificate from the local priest to "certify" that they are "practising" Christians, and therefore their children are entitled to a place in the school. This kind of institutionalised bigotry is enshrined in law and, if the C of E has its way, there will be a lot more of it ...

"Since its foundation in 1866, the Society has opposed the public funding of religious schools. There are around 7,000 C of E and RC state-funded schools as well as five Jewish and two

Sikh schools, not to mention one Seventh Day Adventist and one Greek Orthodox school.

"Apart from our concerns about indoctrination in such schools, we have also repeatedly made the point that such establishments can do nothing but create even more divisions in our society. Such schools hinder the eradication of racism and sectarianism by separating children on religious lines at this crucial time in their lives.

"Understanding and respect for each other's cultures is not developed by cordoning off children by religion. And, as more and more religious schools cream off the best pupils – helping their schools up the league tables – so the lot of the non-religious schools spirals downwards."

The report points out that "another excessive manifestation of religion in state institutions is in our prisons – and we have campaigned to draw attention to the discrimination suffered by non-believers in prison.

"Evangelical organisations – such as Alpha and Kairos – are infiltrating the prison system and using their privileged access to draw prisoners into their organisations. Many in prison are lonely and vulnerable, making them especially prone to such approaches. The authorities claim that such programmes are justified because they have a beneficial effect on prisoners, the ethos of the prison and re-offending rates. However, there is no objective evidence for this; the Society has urged that independent long-term research be undertaken into the effects of these programmes, and that secular alternatives be made available."

During the year under review, the BBC came under heavy pressure from the C of E to increase the amount of religious broadcasting, and to improve its quality. The NSS opposed this in a press statement, saying that the BBC should not be bullied into spending licence-payers' money on making even more religious programmes when there was obviously no general desire for them.

The Society noted: "There are still 700 hours of national radio and TV religious broadcasting each year, a huge amount. During last Advent and Christmas there were 50 hours of religious broadcasting, which included a Christmas Day radio service and a televised Christmas Eve service (surely more than ade-

another successful year

quate for those unable to visit a church themselves). The vast majority of the population is not interested in traditional forms of religion, and they don't want any more of it on TV and radio."

The Government is also under pressure to lift the ban on religious stations holding national broadcasting licences. A charity calling itself United Christian Broadcasters has been pressing Chris Smith, the Government minister in charge of broadcasting, to allow it to have a national station. The NSS has raised fears of US-style televangelism (or simply syndication of such programmes) being broadcast in the UK, with the same kind of exploitation and extremism that is everyday fare on American television and radio. "The Government is considering issuing a white paper on this matter, and the NSS will, of course, be making representations when it is published," says the report.

Other areas in which the National Secular Society has made its voice heard during the year include:

- **The EU Directive on Discrimination in Employment:** This was the subject of attack from the Christian Institute, whose patron is Baroness Young. The CI argued that the Directive – which would provide protection from discrimination in jobs on the grounds of age, disability, sexual orientation and religion – would "override religious freedom" and would force religious organisations to employ people of whom they did not approve – such as atheists, homosexuals, and others whose lifestyles they found objectionable. The NSS campaign – the most successful during the period – resulted in the European Parliament reducing the large scale of permitted exemptions from the provisions of the Directive (see *Freethinker*, December 2000, for a full report.)

- **The Section 28 Debate:** In the wake of the row over Section 28, the Government tried to placate its religious opponents by promising new sex education guidelines that would purportedly provide "safeguards" against any kind of proselytising in schools – gay or otherwise. A delegation from the C of E and the Catholic Church submitted a first draft to the Department for Education. It contained the phrase: "Traditional (Christian) marriage should be promoted as the fundamental build-

ing block of society and of family life and as a proper context for the nurture of children. Lifelong celibacy can be fulfilling. In this way of life an individual's sexual instincts may be channelled into generous love and service of others."

The NSS general Secretary wrote to the Education Secretary, David Blunkett, opposing the churches' suggestions, saying: "The proposed guidelines from the C of E and the Catholic Church are authoritarian, dangerous and unworkable ... they are sadly confused and unrealistic. Any attempt to impose them on schools will lead to widespread ridicule and unease among teachers required to teach children 'rules' that are completely out of step with the life they are experiencing ...

"The guidelines only endorse marriage and celibacy. They advocate respecting differences, yet inconsistently stigmatise the huge proportion of people who sustain loving relationships (whether heterosexual or homosexual) outside marriage. This is unhelpful to pupils and will undermine the self-esteem of

those whose parents' relationships are being devalued."

- **The Vatican and the United Nations:** The NSS has continued its opposition to the Vatican's privileged status at the United Nations, and a motion proposed by the General Secretary at the AGM of the International Humanist and Ethical Union that called for the Vatican's status to be downgraded was enthusiastically accepted.

- **God in the Armed Forces:** The NSS lodged a complaint about the proposed appointment of 24 new army chaplains at a cost of £2-million a year. As soldiers are no more pious than the rest of the population, the NSS argued, the battalions of priests employed to tend their supposed "spiritual needs" seem a ludicrous waste. If there must be such personnel, most of them should be non-religious counsellors.

.....
This report replaces Keith Porteous Wood's regular Freethinker column. It will be resumed in February.

Isn't it time you joined the National Secular Society?

FOR MORE than 130 years the National Secular Society has been fighting religious privilege and opposing the extremes of religious intolerance.

Today, with the proliferation of sinister cults, the increase in superstition and the dangers posed by religious conflicts, the rational voice of the NSS needs to be heard more than ever.

We are at the forefront of the renewed debate on disestablishment, and are vigorously arguing for the removal of the Bishops from the House of Lords.

In the past year the NSS has kept a high media profile, with journalists consulting the society on a wide range of topics, and NSS representatives have been invited to comment on national and local TV and radio stations on such topics as the decline of organised religion, religious discrimination, the Human Rights Act, church schools and religious broadcasting.

Shouldn't *you* support these important activities by joining the NSS today?

The subscription is £10 a year for single membership (£15 for partners living at the same address). Unwaged membership is £6.

Please write to the NSS at **25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL** (telephone 020 7404 3126) or e-mail kpw@secularism.org.uk for an information pack, including the NSS's latest comprehensive Annual Report. The NSS website (www.secularism.org.uk) includes an application form.

politics & religion - a sure-fire vote loser

NOW THAT a spring election seems certain, we have to consider just how big a part religion will play in it.

We've been given a few strong signals from both of the main parties. Mr Blair has been touring the evangelical gatherings and communing with theologians, while Mr Hague is scratching around for votes from the "faith communities", promising more or less to hand the welfare state over to them. He also made a deeply embarrassing appearance on BBC's Songs of Praise last month.

As we've often observed in these pages, as interest in organised religion declines, religious groups seem to be increasing their influence in the corridors of power. We have a Government that is led by enthusiastic Christian Socialists, men who sincerely believe that their religious beliefs should inform their political actions. These are men who are convinced that religion is a good thing.

I believe – and a lot of other people along with me – that religion is far from being a good thing, and far from being a benefit to society. A poll on the BBC religious affairs programme Heaven and Earth asked: "Does religion do more harm than good?" Of the 5,201 respondents, 78 per cent answered "yes". This is quite astonishing, given that the programme is aimed at a religious audience.

Religious MPs would argue that they entered Parliament because they are men of conscience and wanted to apply that conscience in the service of their country. This is fair enough, but a religious conscience is not necessarily one of tolerance, inclusiveness or humanity. Often it is the opposite of those things.

Writing about this in *The Times*, Matthew Parris, the paper's political sketch writer (and an atheist former Tory MP) questioned MPs who made political judgments from a religious perspective without declaring what was motivating them. His thoughts were triggered by a debate in the Commons about stem-cell research, where several interventions from MPs left Mr Parris uneasy. These interventions, he said "came from all sides of the House, but all were MPs with strong Christian convictions. None said so."

MPs must declare other interests; financial interests, for instance, must be registered, and sponsorship by a trade union must be declared before debates. Why then didn't our Parliamentary representatives have to declare obedience to faith?"

"Is it really inappropriate," Mr Parris asked, "(as an unspoken press and parliamentary convention suggests it is) to make free mention of the faith to which an MP is obedient, whenever this may bear on her or his judgment? That judgment has conse-



Politicians play a dangerous game when they try to woo the religious vote, warns Terry Sanderson

quences for millions who may not share the MP's faith."

We assume from his lifestyle that Mr Blair prays for guidance before making decisions that affect us all. At the same time, he and his party are aware that, in this country, overtly mixing religion and politics makes the electorate uneasy. Last year, Blair went to speak at a conference in Germany with the theologian Hans Kung. Chief Government spin-meister Alistair Campbell was quick to squash any speculation that the Prime Minister's speech would be of a religious nature. The Prime Minister would talk about values, globalisation and his own political philosophy, but not, repeat not, about religion, we were told.

But the whole nature of Mr Kung's philosophy is that politics and religion are intertwined. He regards Jesus as an outsider who challenged the religio-political social establishment of his time. If Mr Blair was not at the conference because of religion (after all, it was a religious conference) what was he there for?

Alice Miles in *The Times* speculated that there is a conflict in Mr Blair's nature. He wants to preach, to live up to the *Private Eye* image of The Rev Tony, but political pragmatism has reined him in. "Rightly or wrongly, we don't want our politicians to moralise or preach," wrote Ms Miles, "a fact that Downing Street recognises. More, we don't want to know about their religious beliefs at all."

The opposite is true of William Hague. Here is a man who has shown little previous interest in religion, who suddenly presents himself as a protector of religious values, a champion of faith and a friend to all who love Jesus (and Jehovah and Allah and Vishnu, and probably Santa Claus if it could get him the kiddy vote).

Last Easter, the Tory leader attended Spring Harvest, an annual gathering of evangelical Christians. Estimates of the numbers of evangelicals in Britain vary between the 1.6 million, claimed by the umbrella group the Evangelical Alliance, to three million. This would make them about half of Britain's churchgoers, or 5 per cent of the population – a not insignificant number of potential voters when you are so far behind in the opinion polls that desperation has set in. And evangelical Christians are a naturally conservative constituency, so surely, goes the logic, the Tories and the new brand of charismatic Christians are made for each other: united in their nastiness.

So suddenly William Hague becomes Holy Joe. Vote for me, he says, and I'll see that your voice is heard in our country. The Tory high command is obviously convinced that, as the economy is strong at present and not a cause for anxiety, the next election will be won on a platform of "values" rather than finance.

Shortly afterwards, Mr Hague held meetings with Marvin Olasky, a right-wing religious "thinker" whose ideas have already influenced George Bush. Olasky thinks that social welfare is better placed outside Government. He favours faith-based approaches to social welfare – a philosophy dubbed (somewhat oxymoronically) "compassionate conservatism".

Hague has also courted the Jewish, Muslim and Hindu vote.

But the cynicism of this approach – which has been so successful in the USA – may yet scupper Mr Hague's plans. The religious lobby is not quite the monolith that he believes. There are liberal Christians who are sickened by that what they perceive (rightly in my view) as blatant hypocrisy. And there are conservative Christians who don't like the idea that their votes are available to anyone who courts them – particularly someone as patently insincere as William Hague.

Tony Blair knows instinctively that wearing his religious beliefs on his sleeve is OK outside of Parliament, but if he comes the holier-than-thou in the chamber or the cabinet office or a party political broadcast, he will live to regret it. This country is not the USA, and what works there will not necessarily work here.

Mr Hague, on the other hand, thinks that he can get away with it. That he can create his very own Bible Belt with its attendant moral majority, like the one Mr Bush has.

It is almost certain, however, that he will live to regret his flirtations with the intolerant elements of the religious community. As several Republican candidates have found to their cost, when trying to manipulate the Christian vote, you often end up with the Christians manipulating you.

Baptism: telling the Church to stuff it

By Barbara Smoker

FOLLOWING MY interview on BBC's "Woman's Hour" about the National Secular Society's promotion of "de-baptism" ceremonies, I received a request from a listener for practical advice for such a ceremony and a suitable form of wording. She felt strongly about having been inducted into the Church of England while a helpless infant, and said she "would like this to be undone".

I replied as follows: "Obviously, it is only a gesture, but one might as well make it a public gesture, which serves as a way of 'coming out' as an atheist. You could hold a party (to which no religious friends or relatives should be invited), and solemnly burn your baptismal certificate. You could also prepare a de-baptismal certificate, for signing and witnessing at the party. If you make it decorative, you could frame it later for permanent display – but not before photo-copying it, so as to send copies to the local clergy, if that seems appropriate, and to anyone else you would like to annoy."

Demons under the bed are 'real', says evangelist

MENTAL health experts have condemned a US radio evangelist for telling listeners to his recent shortwave broadcast that "satanic monsters from the sewers of hell are flooding the world, and they aren't coming here to visit Disney World to ride the rides – they are coming to get you!"

Dr Raymond Joneston went on to say that "imagined monsters under the bed" were all too real, and that if children wanted to avoid falling into their clutches they must sleep on their backs facing heaven, and store biblical action figures (as opposed to Star Wars-style "light swords", teen magazines and "stick on tattoos promoting aggressive behaviour". According to unconfirmed reports, thousands of parents were forced to seek psychiatric treatment for their children following the broadcast.

Meanwhile, from Germany comes an offer of a \$1-million dollar reward to anyone who can deliver a demon – dead or alive – to Ernst Grueber, a billionaire industrialist from Andernach. Herr Grueber claims that "demons have been directly or indirectly involved in millions of tragedies all over the world" and he wants to put a stop to their devilish activities by putting a price on their head.

I enclosed a photocopy of my own de-baptismal certificate, which, though specifically RC, might be adapted for other denominations. It concluded: "I wish to be excluded from future Roman Catholic statistical claims, except for the statistics of apostasy".

My correspondent then sent that on to the Archbishop of Canterbury, informing him of her intention. She received a long reply from his secretary, who assured her that the C of E uses current church attendances, not past baptisms, as a basis for its membership statistics. However, I was able to let her know that this is not strictly true, as past baptisms are certainly dragged in when to do so might secure political advantage. By way of evidence, I enclosed two pages from chapter 15 of the recently published Wakeham Commission Report, *A House for the Future*, in which past baptismal statistics are cited to boost claims of church membership, so as to justify retaining religious representation (the Bench of Bishops) in the proposed "reformed" Second Chamber.

The next letter I received was so exuberant, I really must quote most of it verbatim (but without names). "The deed has been done: I have been de-baptised. It happened last Saturday, though it hadn't been planned for then at all. My daughter, who has just completed an MA in art and performance art, had prepared, as part of her work for the MA final assessment, a group of about thirty ceramic angels, some eight inches high, in varying poses – haughty, angry, pregnant, and so on – and was asked to exhibit them at a local arts

festival. She was given a part of the parish church to show them in – an interesting choice!

"Over lunch beforehand I showed her my de-baptism certificate, as she had been following my correspondence on it with interest and enthusiasm.

"Somehow it was decided to do it that day, in the church, as the 'performance' part of her exhibit. She and her father disappeared for a bit, and we all met up in the church. She read out the short introduction she had written, then the wording of the certificate, and presented me with some flowers and a white mask. Then we went outside for the signing and witnessing.

"Though that part of the church had been empty when we started, part-way through the ceremony we realised that there were quite a few people watching. Unfortunately, one of the onlookers was the vicar – in plain clothes.

"He followed us out, and wasn't too happy. His main objection was that de-baptism is 'impossible'. Altogether, it was a lovely day, and the ceremony was exactly right. I am sending copies of the certificate to one or two people I want to annoy, as well as to some who will approve of what I have done. And I will reply to the Archbishop's secretary with some of your points. None of this would have happened without your support and ideas."

The sample certificate, using the wording which has been posted on the NSS website – www.secularism.org.uk – would be suitable for de-baptism from any Christian denomination that practises infant baptism.

Declaration Of De-Baptism

After due deliberation, I,, having been subjected to the rite of Christian baptism in infancy (before reaching an age of consent), hereby publicly revoke all implications of that rite and any pledges made on my behalf. I renounce the Church that carried it out, and, in the name of human reason, reject its creeds and all similar superstition - in particular, the perfidious belief that a baby needs to be cleansed by baptism from alleged "original sin" and the evil powers of supposed demons. I therefore wish to be excluded henceforth from enhanced claims of church membership.

Signed:

Date:

Witnessed by:

The two concepts expressed in the title are usually regarded as synonymous, but the theme of this article is their essential difference – one that is vitally important if we are to be true to ourselves as responsible human beings.

The phrase “the still small voice” is from the bible story of the prophet Elijah, who was concerned with the conditions in Israel under the rule of Ahab and Jezebel. He openly condemns both of them and they threaten him with death. He feels deserted and isolated and in panic takes flight to hide in a cave on mount Horeb. While he cowers there, a violent storm breaks over the mountain and there are earth tremors. The account has it that in the utter quiet that follows the storm and the earthquake, he hears “a still small voice”, the voice of Yahweh, “the Lord God”. Its effect is to restore his confidence and send him back to face his responsibilities.

The Judaeo-Christian scriptures are full of accounts of God speaking to man, and usually it is in similar circumstances to those of Elijah. The man is at a crisis, and God, quietly and privately, reassures and puts new spirit into him. An outstanding instance is the burning bush incident in the Midian desert when Moses is recalled from self-imposed exile to face the Pharaoh and obtain freedom for the Israelite slaves. Moses is again the subject when he retreats onto mount Sinai before facing his unruly rabble with the Ten Commandments. Joshua, Moses’ successor, receives his orders directly from God, so does Gideon and the other so-called judges. Samuel’s first experience occurs when, separated from his mother for the first time, and serving as an acolyte to the priest Eli, he is alone in the temple at night. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Micah, and all the other prophets enjoy (if that is the right word) direct instructions from God.

The concept is not limited to the bible. In the middle of the first millennium a man named Mohammed appears in Arabia. He revolts against the idolatrous polytheism which is typical of those around him, spends long periods isolated in caves where he fasts and meditates, and eventually produces the Koran. The Islamic religion is based on the Koran, which Mohammed claims was dictated to him by God (Allah) through the voice of the archangel Gabriel.

In Christianity there is the same phenomenon of a God who speaks to men and women directly (until recently mostly to men). It is interesting that the Yahweh who spoke to Elijah is the Jehovah whose name is appropriated by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a sect which claims that the Bible is to be taken lit-

erally as the printed word of God (although they themselves pick and choose the particular words to be accepted as eternal truths).

That example leads to the question why after 2000 years of Christianity there is no unanimity in the religion about what God has to say to the world. Is it the same eternal “still small voice” that guides the Jehovah’s Witnesses in selecting their proof texts? Is it the same small voice that whispers to the Pope “You are my vicar – my representative”, while telling the Orthodox Patriarch that he has a prior claim, and also allowing the Archbishop of Canterbury to believe that he has as much right as either to claim leadership in the Christian church? And how do we face up to the notion of the Christian God in Ireland saying one thing to Calial Daly on one side of the Falls Road, and something else to Ian Paisley on the other side? Looking world-wide, what can we make of eight major religions, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism, internally split into hundreds of sects with differing views of God, but all claiming to be in direct communication with him? (Three major religions, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism do not acknowledge the existence of God.)

Despite its divisions, Christianity insists that there is only one God, who is the *real* one, with whom people can communicate and from whom they should receive guidance. But so do those with different geographical backgrounds and different gods. Would it not be more realistic to accept that Yahweh, Elohim, Allah, and all the other 2,500 deities of the world are but concepts, not realities, and that these concepts are but human attempts to provide answers to questions about life and living, and death and dying, that have seemed unanswerable in purely human terms.

At this point I want to turn from the idea of a divine voice and come to what George Fox experienced as divine revelation, and called the “inner light”. The idea arose from his personal experience. He was brought up to regard the English church and its clergy as the essential media for any approach to or revelation from God, but his association with the church foundered very early on. First it was due to the contrast he saw between the pious attitudes of the elders of the church and their dissolute behaviour outside it. The second was on his experience of local clergy, one of whom he discovered had betrayed his confi-

The Still, Small Voice (or The Inner Light)

By Basil Clarke

dences in idle gossip, another who poked fun at his youthful problems, and yet another who displayed ill-temper over trivialities.

Fox was unable to accept such divergence between profession and practice for it cut right across the personal integrity he had been brought up to accept as the basic principle of right living. The experience turned him away from the steeple houses, with their formalised rituals, and from their clerics who saw themselves as necessary intermediaries between God and people. Nevertheless he was not turned from religion *per se* but began to travel the country challenging the views and attitudes of the clergy, preaching to those who would listen, and holding discussions with those seeking enlightenment. Wherever he went he left behind men and women inspired by his words and his behaviour, but he rejected any idea of accepting personal authority over them. He insisted that those who listened to him and accepted what he had to say as truth had to accept responsibility for their own lives under the direct guidance of God.

Today, in the Quaker movement, the guiding principle is still that God can and does provide an individual with an “inner light” by which he or she can ascertain the truth about life without the need for any intermediary. This means that there are no Quaker clergy, and that in their meetings Quakers do not follow a form of worship with hymn singing, set prayers, and prepared sermons, but share a fellowship of silence in which they wait for inspiration as to what they shall subsequently say and do. They regard their meeting houses as resorts from the world’s busyness where they can find peace and quiet in which they may become, in the words of Ralph Waldo Trine: “In tune with the infinite”.

Of course the Quaker experience is regarded as a religious one. It is claimed that the thoughts that are stirred in the minds of those who wait in stillness are divine inspirations or revelations from God, that it is he who provides the “inner light” which shines when the mind is quiet and contemplative. That is what Fox claimed for himself and his followers. If that were the last word, there would be no dif-

Small Voice (Inner Light)

sil Cozens

ference between the “still small voice” of Elijah’s experience, and the “inner light” of George Fox’s experience. However, modern Quakerism is not unanimous in that view and there are those in the movement who question the validity of interpreting the “inner light” as the revelation of God. They suggest that humanity might be better served if men and women see what occurs in their solitariness as their own reaction to life, and bear whatever responsibilities arise from such experience. The implication of such a view is that the “inner light” has no source outside the mind but is a natural emanation from the gamut of a person’s experience when it is given the opportunity of developing within the individual’s mind.

The experience of recognising significant truths and of making critical decisions when thrown back on one’s own resources can be seen in the lives of people in all ages. There is nothing extraordinary in the fact that striking examples are to be found in religious writings, but because they are interpreted as examples of God-man and man-God relationships does not mean that they must be accepted as such. The fact that the gods of religious traditions have many names, and the actions attributed to them are by no means consistent with teachings about them, gives cause for serious doubt about any such interpretation.

To illustrate this view I return to the Bible and its account of Moses receiving the ten commandments. He has brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and for three months has led them from place to place until they camp near Sinai. He has obviously found them difficult to handle, for their slave mentality is a major obstacle when he is striving to weld them into a self-reliant and cooperative people. So, leaving them to their own devices, he withdraws to the solitude of the mountain. Here in the solitude, he produces the set of laws that not only suffice to keep the Israelites in check, but have come down through the centuries as models for human conduct.

It puzzles me that if the commandments were as the Bible has it, that “God spake all these words”, why should the first four com-

mandments be concerned solely with establishing his own position, and only six of them be concerned with social behaviour? But there is no puzzle if we see that the purpose of Moses in establishing the laws was to ensure that the people would be in no position to question his personal authority. If he had announced that he was drawing them up

there would have been plenty of scope for such questioning. If, however, they were presented as the word of God, who could question them?

I think that such an interpretation of one biblical incident could be repeated throughout the scriptures. I am not suggesting that Moses, Elijah, and the others (if they actually existed) were charlatans, but that the redactors responsible for producing what we call the Bible were men of their time and tradition and wrote what they saw as the truth, and when we speak of the scriptures as the word of God, we are attributing an absolute value which cannot be justified.

But this is not just a matter of biblical interpretation. Do we not have similar situations existing today? The Pope doesn’t lay down the law as John Paul II, but as the Vicar of Christ, that is as the guarantor of God’s purpose for mankind because he is accepted (by Roman Catholics anyway) as the final authority on what God has to say. Protestants reject the claim that the Pope has a direct and exclusive line to God, but many of their clergy claim exclusive responsibility for special rituals that God has laid on them as ordained men, and that no unordained man, and certainly no woman, could possibly perform.

Non-conformists, in theory, reject the idea of special communicators who stand as intermediaries between God and the laity, and profess to believe in the “priesthood of all believers”, but in practice their ordained ministers come very close to assuming the same attitudes as other clergy, and are encouraged to do so by their own people who are unwilling to accept the responsibility that the priesthood of all believers would lay on them.

The history of religion is littered with differences of opinion about what God has revealed, what he now declares, and who has the right to decide. The Christian churches are far from exempt, and within it the differences have led to division, bitterness, strife, torture, and murder, and are still doing so.

Quakers do allow the privilege and the responsibility of listening to God to all who want to do so, but not all Quakers believe that it is the voice of God that they hear. Some would not even claim that there is a voice to be

heard. The Quaker Universalists hold that the Inward Light is not confined to those who use a particular religious imagery or to those who have adopted a particular theology. They incline to the view that the inner light has no supernatural source but shines when occasions and exigencies of the moment are set over against one’s personal store of experience. Enlightenment is a function of the mind that is prepared to stop “getting and spending”, as Wordsworth puts it, and gives itself time to expand and cope with the task of living.

This leads to the most important aspect of the whole question, giving the mind time and opportunity for enlightenment to occur. Experience informs us that silence and solitude are the essentials. Elijah is alone in the cave on Horeb and it is in the silence following the storm that he finds enlightenment. Moses is alone on mount Sinai. Jesus seeks solitude for 40 days in the desert before he is sure of his ministry, and again withdraws alone in the garden of Gethsemane before he is sure of his destiny.

Most striking example of withdrawal from society into solitude and its consequences is that of Siddhartha Gautama, the Indian prince who became the Buddha. Born into a noble family, he is protected from any experience that could be regarded as unpleasant. By chance he discovers that there are such things as old age, sickness, death, and poverty, which he sees as the realities of human existence. He saw only the last, poverty, as providing anything to be desired, and that was because it was portrayed in the person of a beggar monk who displayed complete calmness and serenity. Gautama chooses to become one such as he, and leaves home, family, and position to seek answers to the problems raised by his experiences. After spending years of withdrawal in which solitude and meditation played the major part, we are told that as he sat under a bodhi tree he reached the highest degree of consciousness, known as *nirvana*. For seven days he remained there in deep meditation until he realised the four great truths of life which are the fact of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the eightfold path which reaches the end

Of course, as with all great personages, including Jesus and Mohammed, his story is full of myth, but the Buddhist faith sprang from him and has continued ever since. One great significance is that it arose from Gautama’s excursion into solitude. But even

(Continued on p13)

down to earth: colin mccall

Remembrance Day

I AM old enough to remember the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and to have met some of the International Brigade volunteers who returned, sometimes wounded and, in one case, limbless. I was therefore delighted to see that the *Guardian's* G2 on November 10, 2000 marked Remembrance Day by interviewing and photographing all the volunteers who could be traced and were well enough to talk – 23 in all.

One of them, Jack Shaw, now 83, was only 18 when he joined the Brigade, and had just served three months' hard labour, accused of hitting a police inspector with a brick during the Battle of Cable Street against the British fascists. He arrived in Spain for the battle of Jarama, the fight to prevent Franco's troops from cutting off the road from Madrid to Valencia in February 1937. Then it was on to the ferocious battle of Brunete which, he said, "We were winning until the German planes began to bomb us". And he recounted how "There was a priest in the church steeple firing at us and when he came down he pushed the villagers to shield him while he kept shooting. One of the men from the American battalion shot him dead".

Not all the Spanish priests supported the Falangists, but the Spanish bishops certainly did. In a collective letter dated July 1, 1937, they declared: "The war is an armed plebiscite ... between a people divided: on the one side, the spiritual is revealed by the insurgents who rose to defend law and order, social peace, traditional civilisation, the fatherland and, very ostensibly in a large sector of the population, religion. On the other side there is materialism – call it marxist, communist or anarchist – which wants to replace the old civilisation of Spain by the new "civilisation of the Russian soviets" (see *Blood of Spain* by Ronald Fraser, Penguin 1981, page 413).

On principle I never went to Spain in the Franco days, but I have been many times since, and have learned with satisfaction that the Church is losing its stranglehold as, indeed, it is in most so-called Catholic countries.

No-go areas

ITALY for one – which I also know quite well, and where, for aesthetic reasons, I always go into the churches. Fortunately I am unlikely to travel to the northern town of Rovato, which isn't in the Michelin, but where the mayor, Roberto Manenti recently banned non-Christians from going within 5 metres (50 ft) of the local churches. On second thoughts, I might not be recognised as a

non-Christian. I'm white, you see, and Signor Manenti's ban is mostly aimed at immigrant workers.

For various well-known reasons I never frequent any of the many McDonalds, and I resent the Italian newspaper *Avvenire's* assertion that fast food is only "for atheists or perhaps Lutherans". In fact, I share the Italian protesters' view, "Better a day of tortellini than 100 days of hamburgers".

Ring Lardner Jr

RING LARDNER Jr, who died on October 31, 2000, aged 85, was not so well known as his father, a writer Ernest Hemingway acknowledged as a mentor. That was because the son was mainly a screenwriter in Hollywood. After wartime army service he wrote three anti-Nazi plays and, in 1947 signed a lucrative contract with 20th Century Fox. But in that same year he was investigated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He was one of the ten "unfriendly witnesses" who refused to answer the question "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?"

"I could answer the question exactly the way you want, but if I did, I would hate myself in the morning," Lardner replied, and he spent nine months in prison for contempt of Congress.

He was, as may be guessed, a strong supporter of liberal and radical causes, and he never regretted his "association with communism". He thought that "some form of socialism is a more rational way to organise a society" but he recognised it hadn't worked anywhere yet. Lardner wrote what Ronald Bergan aptly called the "iconoclastic anti-war satire *M*A*S*H* (1970)". His *Ecstasy of Owen Muir*, now probably out of print, was a brilliant exposure of American evangelism in the *Elmer Gantry* tradition. His memoir, *I'd Hate Myself in the Morning* is to be published posthumously.

Irrelevant

SO FAR as the Church of England is concerned, "The statistics are all downward", said Jack Spong, who retired as Anglican Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, a year ago. The Church in Britain is way behind the United States, he told the *Guardian* (November 7, 2000) after a month-long visit. "It seems to spend its time keeping the one million people who attend its services happy without reaching out to the 50 million who do not." In fact, only two things kept it together: "its pension fund and Wippell's, the clerical outfitters".

He was particularly critical of the church's attitude to women. "I don't see how you can treat women as second-class citizens in the 21st century.

If you have biblical reservations you should do what the Mormons do and get yourself another divine revelation to get things changed." Which, you would rightly think, suggested that Bishop Spong has little time for Bible literalists, "the ecclesiastical version of the Flat Earth Society". If he had to choose between believing in the Virgin Mary and Wonderwoman, he would, he said, "plump for the latter".

Such views have so incensed American fundamentalists that, when the bishop's first wife died in 1988, one woman invaded the funeral service and struck him as he prayed by the coffin. "I have wanted to do that for years" she shouted as she was led away.

Bishop Spong's criticisms are valid. The Church of England is a declining force in British society, because of its "backward attitudes". He wants it to be able to speak to his children and grandchildren in 30 years' time. No doubt it will, but it's not likely to say anything of moment.

The last resort

ARE we getting nuttier? I sometimes wonder. Major, a lion at Newquay Zoo in Cornwall was put down last August suffering, as a post-mortem revealed, from feline spongiform encephalopathy, the cat equivalent of BSE. But we were told in a *Guardian* report (November 15, 2000) that when conventional treatment failed to work, the zoo staff called in a local faith healer to try to cure the lion's spinal problems. Major's health continued to deteriorate and he was finally put out of his misery.

Perhaps the faith healer couldn't lay hands on him.

Our astrologer poet laureate

POETRY can be notoriously difficult to understand. Lacing it with astrology doesn't help the reader, as may be seen from Ted Hughes' poem on his introduction to his first wife and fellow poet, Sylvia Plath. Here's a sample: "The conjunction combust my natal Sun/Venus pinned exact on my midheaven", and there's much more of the same before Hughes concludes that he and Plath had that night been "married by the solar system". No wonder Seamus Healey referred to both of them as "mythopoetic" writers.

But that's not all. Neil Spencer (*Observer*, November 12, 2000) learned from Hughes' publishers, Faber and Faber, that the poet always stipulated the exact publication dates of his books. *Birthday Letters*, from which the above lines are taken, was published on the day of a new moon, January 29, 1998 and its US edition on the next new moon. Moonstruck, you might call him.

MY ATHEISM is based on what I term the "Darwinian Enlightenment". The "enlightened" ideas which prevailed in the 17th and 18th centuries on the whole allowed philosophers and scientists to retain a deistic attitude to life. Descartes doubted everything, including his own existence, but he did not doubt the existence of God, and Newton thought that his discoveries revealed the wonders of the works of God. God was the Creator and the natural world was there for the benefit of human beings. In the middle of the 18th century it was possible for Thomas Gray to write in his *Elegy*:

*Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.*

But evolution has shown that any concept of a Creator does not make sense. The human attributes which are ascribed to God, chief among them being consciousness, have developed over the course of millions of years. Consciousness has come about in stages and is a function of animal nervous systems. It is the result of the operation of animal sense organs and cannot possibly be applied to an entity which lacks them. It must be considered in the light of its biological history. The idea of a "divine consciousness" is meaningless. Of course such a notion involved no problems for our ancestors who were pre-Darwinians. The Old Testament God had created humans in his own image and had physical assets himself. Did he not expose his back parts to Moses (rather reluctantly), but declined to reveal his face? (Exod. 33. 20-23.)

Many a modern scientist suffers from the hangover of biblical beliefs which are embedded in our culture and difficult to shed. As Margaret Wertheim points out, the notion of a "beginning" is biblical: "In the beginning God ..." and (St John's Gospel) "In the beginning was the word ..." Philosophers should now be asking how we can conceive of a "beginning". If there was nothing, how could it "go bang" and produce something? If there was something, it was not the beginning. As that wise naturalist, Miriam Rothschild, has remarked on TV, existence is a mystery, and no one really understands it. Indeed, in the context of infinity in all directions, how can we expect complete understanding?

So I do not go along with those religious people who confidently assert that we cannot prove the non-existence of God. Of course we can. We do so by demonstrating that the notion of God is ridiculous. Scientists should accept the mystery of existence and be content to pursue the fascinating quest for as much enlightenment as possible.

When young, I attended a school where physics and chemistry were well taught, but there was no biology at all. It was the English master who took us for nature walks, named all

Arthur Atkinson, a retired school-master, now in his 90th year, is the 13th contributor to our *My Atheism* series. He is President of the Ealing Humanist Association, and author of *The Cosmic Fairy: The New Challenge of a Darwinian Approach to Humanism*



the wild flowers on the Chiltern Hills and stimulated our interest in natural history. This led on to my discovery of Darwin, but it was a long struggle to escape from the religious ideas which my devoted Methodist parents instilled into me. At University I joined the Student Christian Movement and became President of the college branch. The SCM was a power in the land at that time, and young theological students, when they had qualified, mostly as Doctors of Theology, were encouraged to do a spell as its secretaries, before going on into the Church, where many of them then attained high office. One I knew well. He was Warden of Student Movement House for a time, and he and I arranged pre-terminal weekend retreats to fortify the spiritual resources of the students. He later became Dean of Westminster.

I also knew the Bishop of Hong Kong, the Bishop of South India and others in their early days, so I had every incentive to remain a faithful Christian. But the absence of any "spiritual" experience at last led me, via Darwin, into the haven of humanism.

For me, atheism is an obvious, sensible and vital concept, and I think humanists should show more enthusiasm for promoting it. I agree with Shelley that our knowledge of the existence of God is a subject of such importance that it cannot be too minutely investigated, and I recommend his pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*, recently re-published by GW Foote & Co. Fortunately we are unlikely to suffer the consequences that befell him.

He was 18 years old when he wrote it, and was expelled from University College, Oxford, as a result.

But some humanists hesitate and prefer to

leave God alone because of the comfort which religion provides for those who have been conditioned to it all their lives. They are unable to understand the benefits which humanism provides by disposing of the fear of death, the problem of evil and the emotional and mental stress of irrational beliefs.

It is, of course, sad that the heavenly expectations of simple believers should be disturbed, and I am far from suggesting that we direct our fire specifically at them; but in view of the damage that religion does world-wide by instigating holy wars, providing an excuse for territorial and economic aggression, and disseminating an illusion (ie the existence of God) - in view of all this, we should do what we can to attack its assumptions. We need not accept the blame if vulnerable people get caught in the cross-fire. Articles in the press and programmes on TV are just as likely to upset them.

Finally, I think we need to realise that it is not religion that inspires people to be friendly towards each other and do "good works". It is the social instincts that are part of our nature.

We have inherited conflicting instincts from our animal ancestors. The "Darwinian Enlightenment" makes this very clear. Generally speaking, we possess two contradictory urges: aggressive and social. The former was necessary to protect us from the attacks of other animals. But as the latter evolved, we have been able to co-operate and live together, albeit precariously, in civilised communities. Being more recently acquired, these social instincts can give way to aggressive ones if nurture goes astray. Again, generally speaking, it will be found that most members of humanist organisations are comfortable middle-class people, who do not have to struggle to make ends meet. Their social instincts are not repressed. Deprivation can easily lead to anti-social behaviour.

Human babies, if their needs are not supplied, react like young animals, which is what they are. Religious people would like us to believe that children are young angels, which they are not. They need to be nurtured with care and affection. Good behaviour has to be taught. No God, at some unspecified time and in some inexplicable way, has arranged to have a "soul" implanted in us. But unlike other animals, we have achieved self-consciousness and natural assets more effective for our needs than any provided by some cosmic fairy.

Sadly, belief in God is not a harmless illusion. It can have disastrous emotional, intellectual, social, political and economic consequences.

THIS is not a book for admirers of Bertrand Russell. Ray Monk has hardly a good word to say for him. As an academic philosopher, the author regrets that Russell gave up his philosophical work and turned to more popular writing with the enormous success that Monk can't appreciate or understand. It is an exhaustively researched volume of 574 pages, and I suppose it had to be undertaken after the success of the first volume, *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude*, but it can hardly have been a pleasant task if reading it is anything to go by. Russell's every lecture, every article, every book over half a century is combed for changes of mind or attitude. How this man could ever have become a world-respected figure is inconceivable from Monk's narrative. But then, Monk never concedes that Russell was so respected; it was his "colossal vanity" that made him think he was. For one who lived through the Cold War and the ever-present threat of nuclear catastrophe, as I did, things seemed very different. Bertrand Russell was, with rare exceptions, the voice of reason in a world on the brink.

Perhaps I should have paid more attention to Ray Monk's opening remarks. Two thoughts, he says, have dominated his reactions to his subject; and he is aware that they may have "distorted" his account. The first thought is "just how *bad*" Russell's writings on political, social and moral questions were (his italics); the second is "how emotionally maimed" Russell was in the second half of his life. Monk is no longer able to judge how distorted his picture is, but he is "conscious that other pictures could be drawn in which Russell is presented in a very different light". That, I suppose, can be accepted as an excuse; it is surely an acknowledgment of bias.

Russell himself said that the First World War had "changed everything for him"; that his life before 1910 and his life after 1914 were as sharply separated as Faust's before and after he met Mephistopheles. Russell became much more politicised; but he did not, says Monk (following Beatrice Webb) "bring to politics the qualities that made him a great philosopher and logician ... The gulf in quality between Russell's writings on logic and his writings on politics is cavernous".

An important difference, of course, was the readership: Russell's political and social writings were not directed at academic philosophers, but at the general public and its political leaders; they were popular with the public and were more likely to be noticed by the politicians than a socio-philosophical treatise. Moreover, he needed the money to provide for his second wife, Dora, their son

Colin McCall reviews

Bertrand Russell 1921-70: The Ghost of Madness by Ray Monk.

Jonathan Cape, £25.00; and

Denis Cobell, NSS President

reviews *Seasons of Life,*

compiled by Nigel Collins (£9.99)

& *The Thinkers' Guide to Life*

edited by Marilyn Mason (£4.50)

both published by the RPA

John, and the school that he and Dora had set up to educate children without religion, patriotism or conventional morality.

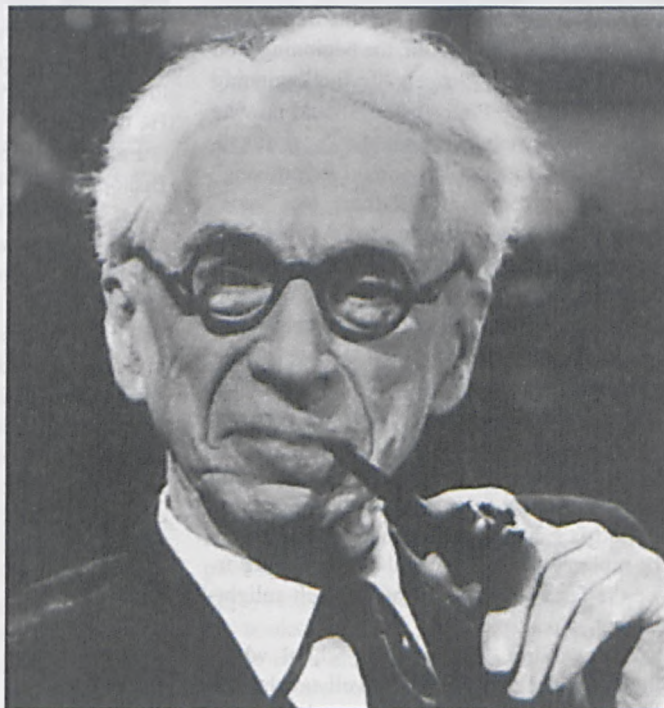
Before his two volumes on Russell, Ray Monk had written a well-received biography of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and Russell seems always to take second place in Monk's estimation, even in an account of the meeting of the two at Innsbruck in 1922, which is worth quoting here. "Wittgenstein rebuked Russell fiercely for his concern with 'peace and freedom'. 'Well I suppose you would rather establish a World Organisation for War and Slavery', Russell is said to have retorted. 'Yes, rather that, rather that!' came the uncompromising reply". "Uncompromising"! Monk makes no comment on what was a stupid remark. Whether Russell was right to call Wittgenstein an irrationalist, he was certainly irrational on this occasion. D H Lawrence provided a parallel case, denouncing Russell as an "angel of peace" and then going on "no, I prefer Tirpitz a thousand times in that role", Tirpitz being a German admiral and an advocate of unrestricted submarine warfare.

The quality of Russell's political writing over a period of the 50 years covered by the book was inevitably varied and uneven, but he was far-sighted enough to note, as long ago as 1922, that Britain's perennial problem

was its subservience to the United States. We cannot, he said, "...adopt any economic policy, even in home affairs, which is displeasing to our American masters". Therefore, "The future of mankind depends upon the action of America during the next half-century". A few years later, in a lecture to the Fabian Society, he said "I do not think that the socialistic outlook is likely to become common in America at any time in the next hundred years, and unless America is socialistic in opinion, no nation within its economic orbit will be allowed to practise even a modicum of socialism" (or even refuse its GM foods).

And although Monk thinks that too much can be made of Russell's "apparent anticipation" of nuclear weapons, it is, as he admits, still remarkably prescient. In his little book, *The ABC of Atoms* (1923), he wrote: "It is probable that it [the recent work on the structure of the atom] will ultimately be used for making more deadly explosives and projectiles than any yet invented".

Russell had no time for futile attempts in popular science writing to bring religion and science together. The scientific outlook which he favoured and propagated was the very antithesis of religion. This brought him into conflict, not only with Sir Arthur Eddington, but his former collaborator (on *Principia Mathematica*), Alfred Whitehead, who, in *Science and the Modern World*, argued that God was "the ground of rationality". Whitehead's God was "metaphysically old-fashioned", Russell wrote in his review, which



Bertrand Russell

Picture credit: The Bettmann Archive

dismissed Whitehead's attempt to use modern science to "restore the consolations of religion to a world desolated by mechanism".

"Why I Am Not a Christian", a lecture delivered to the South London branch of the National Secular Society in 1927, was published as a pamphlet by the Rationalist Press Association and, as Monk says, has probably never been out of print since. It gave its title to a collection of Russell's essays on religion and related subjects edited by Professor Paul Edwards of New York University (1957), who said in his introduction that, "Although he is most honoured for his contributions to such purely abstract subjects as logic and the theory of knowledge, it is a fair guess that Russell will be equally remembered in years to come as one of the great heretics in morals and religion". And Russell, in a preface, confirmed his belief that all the great religions of the world are "both untrue and harmful".

The lecture established Russell as "the hero of secularists throughout the world and one of the principal targets for defenders of religion", says Monk, and he cites T S Eliot among the latter for his "withering review" in the *Criterion*. I have no access to Eliot's full text, but there is nothing "withering" in Monk's quoted extracts. The best Eliot seems to manage is that Russell's "Non-Christianity is merely a variety of Low Church sentiment". Make of that what you will.

Monk disparages virtually all Russell's writing during the last half century including, not

surprisingly, his *History of Western Philosophy*, which has proved extremely popular with students and others for its combination of reasonableness and readability, which few of his contemporary philosophers could equal. The disparagement extends to the equally popular tours of the United States, where Russell would, typically, explain the concept of space in modern physics at the university in the morning, give an interview to the local paper in the afternoon, and address an audience of 2,000 on the non-existence of God in the evening. There was no doubting the public's appreciation.

There is much more in the book, of course: the shameful rejection by the College of the City of New York (which, by the way, is also featured in the *Why I Am Not a Christian* volume), about Beacon Hill School, on Russell's marriages, divorces and parenthood, and on his efforts in the cause of nuclear disarmament. Ray Monk is nothing if not thorough. And he is unique, in my experience, in preferring "earn't" to "earned".

— Colin McCall

THE Rationalist Press Association, in publishing *Seasons of Life* and *The Thinkers' Guide to Life*, has recognised the truth expressed in Ecclesiastes (NEB): "there is nothing new under the sun".

Both these collections contain extracts from a wide variety of authors, expressing a broadly secular viewpoint. Marilyn Mason is the

Education Officer for the British Humanist Association, and has gathered together short quotations from as far back as Confucius right up to Ludovic Kennedy in 1999. Her "little blue book", for such is the hue of the cover, should be sold as such. I recall the "little red book" of sayings from Chairman Mao, which was often on sale at Speakers' Corner and elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s. This volume is a welcome alternative! One criticism – it lacks an index. Another – it refers to Sartre's slim work of 1946 as *Existentialism and Humanism*. The actual title was *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

Seasons of Life is described as "prose and poetry for secular ceremonies and private reflection". It provides a collection of readings for "humanist" or "non-religious" funerals, weddings and baby-namings and has a preface by Tony Harrison. In his introduction Nigel Collins writes: "there is nothing inherently religious about ritual." He adds: "the theological trenches dug to defend sometimes dogmatic reinterpretations of these events are now in the process of being breached".

Anyone searching for an appropriate reading at a ceremony to mark a rite of passage will find in this book a useful cross-section of material. The format makes for ease of access: size of print makes for ease of reading. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that some quotes appear in both works.

— Denis Cobell

The Still, Small Voice

(continued from centre pages)

more important to me is that he made no claim to supernatural revelation. He neither believed nor taught that his experience was god-centred.

This is where lies the distinction between the "still small voice" and the "inner light". A "voice" implies a speaker, a personality, a being who is in charge, to whom the listener is responsible and who is responsible for the listener and his actions. The "inner light" does not necessarily imply this. As the Universalist Quaker admits, the silent waiting for inspiration does not depend on a recipient being a theist. Its function depends upon a mind which is prepared to give itself time and place to form ideas and be stimulated by them. Is this not the mark of true humanity? Would the world not become a better place if every man and woman

took responsibility for his and her own life – thoughts, convictions, and actions? It is much easier for people to claim that there is a God who determines their actions and can be loaded with the responsibility when things do not turn out as expected. I cannot accept that there is a "still small voice" emanating from the supernatural, nor that the Quakers' "inner light" is other than the term claims it to be – that by which we learn to see life when we take the time and seek the place to let our minds perform their most important function. Humanising the experience of inspiration is not to belittle what has been seen as religious experience, it is simply to suggest that we should see ourselves and our lives differently, recognising that the "inner light" is an experience dependent on our own approach to living.

Boy caned for refusing to recite the Ten Commandments

AN 11-YEAR-OLD Boston, US, boy was repeatedly struck across the knuckles with a 3ft-long rattan stick last year when he refused to recite the King James Bible version of the Ten Commandments.

Tom Wall, a Catholic boy, had been instructed by his father and parish priest not to read or recite from the King James Bible as it differed from the Catholic one.

When the boy refused to recite the Ten Commandments, his teacher – after consulting with the principal at the Boston public school – continued striking the boy until, after half-an-hour, Tom relented.

His outraged father filed assault charges against the teacher, but lost.



Did Jesus exist?

THE *Freethinker* cover for November 2000 featured the title "Did Jesus exist? ... and does it matter?" Well, I think a historical Jesus did exist and it has mattered very much in history. Both Robert W Morrell and Gary Sloan contribute valuable insights on the subject but both take the view that Jesus was entirely mythical. And yet Morrell makes the significant comment "If there was a historic Jesus (Joshua), evidence for him is likely to be derived from Judaic messianic agitation ..." Messianic political agitation? Of course! If in a country ruled by colonialists and imperialists (Rome) the indigenous leader of a group of men is apprehended and executed by the ruling authority then we may be pretty sure that the crucifixion was a historical event and that this leader, then about 30 years of age (Luke 3:23) led a failed rebellion against Rome. And that is all. His 12 so-called disciples were lieutenants and six of them even had suggestive nicknames like, for example, Iscariot (Ish-sicara, daggerman, Aramaic).

That is the whole story: Jesus was the failed leader of a revolt against Rome. But then who was the charismatic apocalyptic miracle-making argumentative sermonising preacher who constitutes 90% of the Jesus figure? Here Gary Sloan has a relevant comment: "By the time the Evangelists took up their quills, vague reports about sundry Messiahs had been conflated as episodes in the life of a crucified saviour called Jesus ..." Which sundry Messiah? John the Baptising Essene, that's who! He was conflated, confused and fused with Jesus the rebel into an incompatible Jesus mixture, and there is plenty of gospel evidence that the near-50-year old (John 8:57) John was fused with his ex-pupil Jesus. The biblical prophet Isaiah is also a fusion of at least two figures.

There is more, of course: the initial invocation of a divine soteriological Jesus by St Paul plus the numerous theological insertions into the gospel text, but in purely historical terms Jesus was the failed leader of an insurrection against the rule of Pilate and no more.

SCHNEIR LEVIN
South Africa

I REALIZE that the notion that Jesus did not exist is attractive to freethinkers; it is a handy put-down to believers and avoids the necessity to debate the intricacies of the Gospels (feature by Gary Sloan, November).

However the question of the existence of historical characters should be left to historians to answer. In this case they are over-

whelmingly sure that he did exist. Moreover, the matter was well and truly aired just about 100 years ago (*pace* recent revival by G A Wells, who is not a historian). I dealt with the matter in a whole chapter of my book, *The Rise and Fall of Jesus*.

Sloan has followed Wells into several mistaken conclusions. For example, the idea that the Early Christians (EC) "would naturally suppose" that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate (because that was the time of Israel's greatest suffering) is flawed. There was much more suffering during the war with Rome (66-70). More likely, the EC would have chosen the rule of Herod the Great, during which suffering was so great that many false Messiahs appeared. Why select Pilate's rule and then make every effort to exonerate him? A historian would conclude that the evangelists had no choice – they were stuck with events.

Sloan is also misled by Wells over Josephus' disputed testimony. Because there is no connection between the preceding and succeeding paragraphs, or indeed between them and the passage on Jesus, it cannot be argued that the *Testimonium* "interrupts the narrative flow", which appears to deal with several events in chronological order. Most historians accept that the passage may have been tampered with by Christians but that its origin is Josephan. There is also another Josephan reference to Jesus, which hardly anyone challenges, not even Wells.

Certainly much of the Gospels is mythical, but to claim that it is *all* mythical is to "throw the baby out with the bathwater" and to fly in the face of the historical evidence. It matters that serious freethinkers should fall for special pleading and not face facts.

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

More on homoeopathy

JEAN Fawcett's attack on science reveals exactly the type of miscomprehension that props up mysticism in all its gruesome guises. In fact the history of science starts from the earliest knowledge required to maintain fire. From this to the human genome project there is an unbroken incremental chain of learning. Most of it is so certain that it is no longer referred to as science. At what precise point would Jean Fawcett like us to have stopped?

The ordinary understanding of electricians and plumbers was once on the cutting edge of science.

She also confuses science with technology and so blames science for how people choose to use it. The scientific principles at work in

my toaster might be identical to those in a very nasty instrument of torture. Are we to castigate the inventors of every component right down to the switch? There are many things, good and bad, that are only possible because of science.

Even the bad things reveal the sort of working knowledge absent from homoeopathic theory or practice.

ANDREW MACKENZIE
Newcastle upon Tyne

IF JEAN Fawcett had read my article carefully she would have noticed that it was not in praise of science. I was trying to make the point that homoeopathy has more in common with religion than with medicine. Religion survives by repeated affirmations and indoctrinated faith in mysterious undetectable forces. It's catchy and those who've caught it feel compelled to convert others. It has a central guru figure whose methods were revealed to him by God. Eventually he claimed he could "revive" people who had been "dead for some time".

Homoeopathy – like religion – is utterly at odds with reason and science; it uses no medicine but it does use words. Like religion it is a word game that pollutes the culture. That it has been played brilliantly in these opinion pages by J Fawcett and others only illustrates my point.

STEPHEN PARK
Devon

Twisted view

THE AIMS of Secular Humanism include:

1. Gaining control of key positions in radio, television and cinema.
2. Breaking down cultural standards of morality by promoting pornography and obscenity in books, magazines, films, radio, television and theatre.
3. Presenting homosexuality, degeneracy and promiscuity as "normal, natural and healthy".
4. Eliminating prayer or any form of religious expression in schools.
5. Discrediting the family as an institution.

Do these ring true to *Freethinker* readers? They don't to me, yet for the second time in as many years this distortion of the truth has appeared in my local newspaper's letter column.

The more I think about it, however, the more convinced I am that these people get their jaundiced views by half-reading articles and letters in the *Freethinker*. It is all very well to state that the views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers, but shouldn't each issue contain a more positive statement of Humanist beliefs and objectives

so that such twaddle can't be used to smear our name?

I have attempted to set the matter straight by replying: "Secular Humanists DO NOT seek to eliminate all laws relating to obscenity or discredit the concept of the family, neither do we PROMOTE pornography, homosexuality, degeneracy or promiscuity. Nor do we want to control radio and television, although we would like to see an end to compulsory religious indoctrination in schools (under the disguise of education)! Humanism is all about seeking to make the world a better place for the maximum number of people through tolerance, fairness and personal responsibility. It also means living a life free from superstition of all kinds, and this of course includes what to us are the myths of god(s), heaven, hell and satan along with fairies, goblins, ghosts, horoscopes and the like".

I'm sure that other contributors can come up with an improved version to this, and probably one that is much fuller. However, I feel sure that with the detail will come the disagreements.

JOHN EDWARDS
Solihull

Voltaire quote

WHILE indexing the *Freethinker* at year's end, I came across yet another use of the quote attributed to Voltaire, "Those who believe in absurdities commit atrocities". This is frequently bandied about in humanist and secular circles, but I cannot find it attributed to anyone, let alone Voltaire, in the quotation books I have. The Voltaire website does not, unfortunately, have a search engine. Can someone out there give a reference, please?

BARRY THORPE
Stockport

Raised a smile

I HAD to smile at Jim Cass's remark (*Freethinker*, November 2000) "A little less rational, a little less logical, a little less sensible". No, some of us women are merely a little less intolerant, a little less dogmatic, a little less arrogant - a little more feminine maybe.

Is Jim Cass always 100 per cent rational, logical, sensible? Is there never any room for doubt, or for the other person's point of view?

GEORGINA COUPLAND
Preston

Paine conference

WE ARE interested to hear from *Freethinker* readers who would like to attend a weekend

conference in the Lake District this autumn on the life and works of Thomas Paine. The conference is open to non-members of the Thomas Paine Society.

I would remind readers that this year is the 225th anniversary of the publication of his famous *Common Sense* in America which did so much to start the toppling of the corrupt old world order, and further advance the cause of universal human rights.

ERIC PAINE
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Tolerance admired

I ADMIRE Eric Stockton's *My Atheism* (*Freethinker*, November 2000) and the tolerance of his affirmative answer to *Cosmology - Room for a Creator*. It may not offend logic to believe in a creator of some kind, but he goes on to say that "there is nothing logically impossible in the notion of a benevolent cosmic authority." That seems at odds with the rest of his article and, surely, with the views of most atheists.

Many turn to atheism because they reject assertions that the savagery of nature and the misery of innocents, such as children infected with HIV in the womb, were created and are presided over by a loving God. By what logic can belief in a loving God be reached? Is it not based entirely on faith?

I am always irritated when the faithful dodge or fudge the issue; but perhaps I lack Mr. Stockton's tolerance. It would be most interesting if he could elucidate his thoughts on the point.

PAUL ALBRECHT
W Sussex

Christian song, Nazi tune

THOSE who believe in life after death may wonder whether Hitler, wherever he is, may rejoice that his party anthem has become the religious "Top of the Pops".

"How Great Thou Art" is sung to the tune of the "Horst Wessel Lied".

Horst Wessel, a Berlin pimp and gangster, was killed in January, 1930, in a street brawl over a prostitute, Lucie of Anderplatz. The Nazis made him a martyr, and his song became the favourite when storm-troopers marched through German cities.

Although the tune was stolen from a Hamburg waterfront ballad, and may, originally, have come from Norway, may not modern Christians be embarrassed to be singing to the tune of a song which contains the words: "When Jewish blood drops off your trusted knife, we march ahead with twice as steady step."

Heil Hitler, how great thou art!

KARL HEATH
Coventry

Offended

I CAN only express my disgust over Terry Sanderson's article ("On Catholics and Big Macs", December 2000). How can one expect any decent-minded person to go along with such sentiments? It is absurd to talk of "tens of thousands of starving children ... who would love the opportunity to eat a Big Mac."

The *Freethinker* claims to support animal welfare, but obviously it does not. In the rain forests cleared to make way for beef farms the indigenous people have been shot at and even blasted out of existence. Grain has been imported from the Sudan to Europe to feed farm animals when people in the Sudan were starving.

The *Freethinker* has shown no concern for human welfare in publishing this article.

Furthermore, for Sanderson to state that "the gastronomic delights of France and Italy are the envy of the rest of the world" is nothing short of a lie, as well as showing total bias. Do you really think such envy exists in India, Israel and among all the religious (and non-religious) groups who are vegetarian?

CLIVE ROGERS
Bradford

Please address your letters (preferably typed) to Barry Duke, *Freethinker* editor, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH. E-mail: editor@freethinker.co.uk Phone/Fax: 020 8305 9603.

atheist & humanist contacts & events

Bath & Beyond Humanists: Meets at 7.30 pm on the first Monday of every month at the lounge bar of The New Inn, Monmouth Place, Bath. Information: Louise Anderson on 01225 462 053.

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information: 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove (buses 5 & 5a). Sunday, January 7, 4pm: Public Meeting (Members' Forum).

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnley on 0117 904 9490.

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 020 8777 1680.

Cornwall Humanists: Information: B Mercer, "Amber", Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Tel. 01209 890690.

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel 01242 528743. Worcester House, Pittville Circus Road, Cheltenham. Friday, January 12, 7.30pm. New Year Party. Friday, January 26, 7.30pm. Joy Thacker: *The Whiteway Colony*.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, 21 Southdowns Road, Dawlish, EX7 0LB. Tel: 01626 864046.

Ealing Humanists: Information: Derek Hill 0181 422 4956 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group: Information: Carl Pinel, 41 Horsefair Avenue, Chapel-en-le-Frith, SK23 9SQ. Tel: 01298 815575.

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

Essex Humanists: Information: Brian Whitelaw, 66 Linnet Drive, Chelmsford CM2 8AF. Tel: 01245 265664. Monthly meetings, second Sunday, 7.30 pm.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel 01926 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. January 12: *Gay and Human Rights in the United States*.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

Harrow Humanist Society: Information: 020 8863 2977. Monthly meetings, December – June (except January).

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Secretary: Ivan Middleton, 26 Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5QH. Tel. 0131 552 9046. Press and Information Officer: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire. Tel. 01563 526710

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Henness, 138 Lumley Street, Grangemouth FK3 8BL. Tel. 01324 485152.

Edinburgh Group: Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD. Tel 0131 667 8389.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Niall Power on 0161 2865349. Public meetings second Wednesday of the Month, 7.30pm. Friends' Meeting House, Mount Street, opposite Manchester Town Hall.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. The Swarthmore Institute, Leeds. Tuesday, January 9, 7.30pm. Mike Stewart: *Modern Art – Abstraction or*

Aberration?

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 2622250/0116 241 4060. Public Meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Programme from above address.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, January 25, 8pm. Tony Milne: *Why I am a Eurosceptic*.

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

Musical Heathens: Monthly meetings for music and discussion (Coventry and Leamington Spa). Information: Karl Heath. Tel. 02476 673306.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Information: Christine Wood on 0191 2763123. Literary and Philosophical Society, 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle. Thursday, January 18, 7.30pm. Alan Martin: *What We Are Made Of: From Atoms to Quarks*

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. Information: Anne Toy on 020 8360 1828.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

Oxford Humanists: Information: Jean Woodman on 01865 760520.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. January 10, 8pm Frank Abel: *That was the Year*. Information: Michael Granville 0114 230 9754 or Bill McIlroy 0114 250 9127.

South Hampshire Humanists: Information: 11 Glenwood Avenue, Southampton, SO16 3PY. Tel: 02380 769120

South Place Ethical Society: Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 020 7242 8037/4. Monthly programme on request.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess. Tel. 01458 274456.

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 020 8642 4577. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, January 10, 7.30pm. Public Meeting. Speaker and subject to be announced.

Ulster Humanist Association: Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 01846 677264. Meetings second Thursday evening of the month at Ulster Arts Club, Elmwood Ave, Belfast.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Alice Munn's House (WRVS), 4 Gravel Hill, Ludlow. Tuesday, February 13, 7.30pm. Public Meeting. Speaker and subject to be announced.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group: Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.

West Kent Secular Humanist Group: Meets on 3rd Wednesday each month (except in the summer) at Age Concern, Wood Street, Tunbridge Wells. Information: Ian Peters on 01892 890485 or Chris Ponsford on 01892 862855. E-mail address: C862855@hotmail.com.

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