

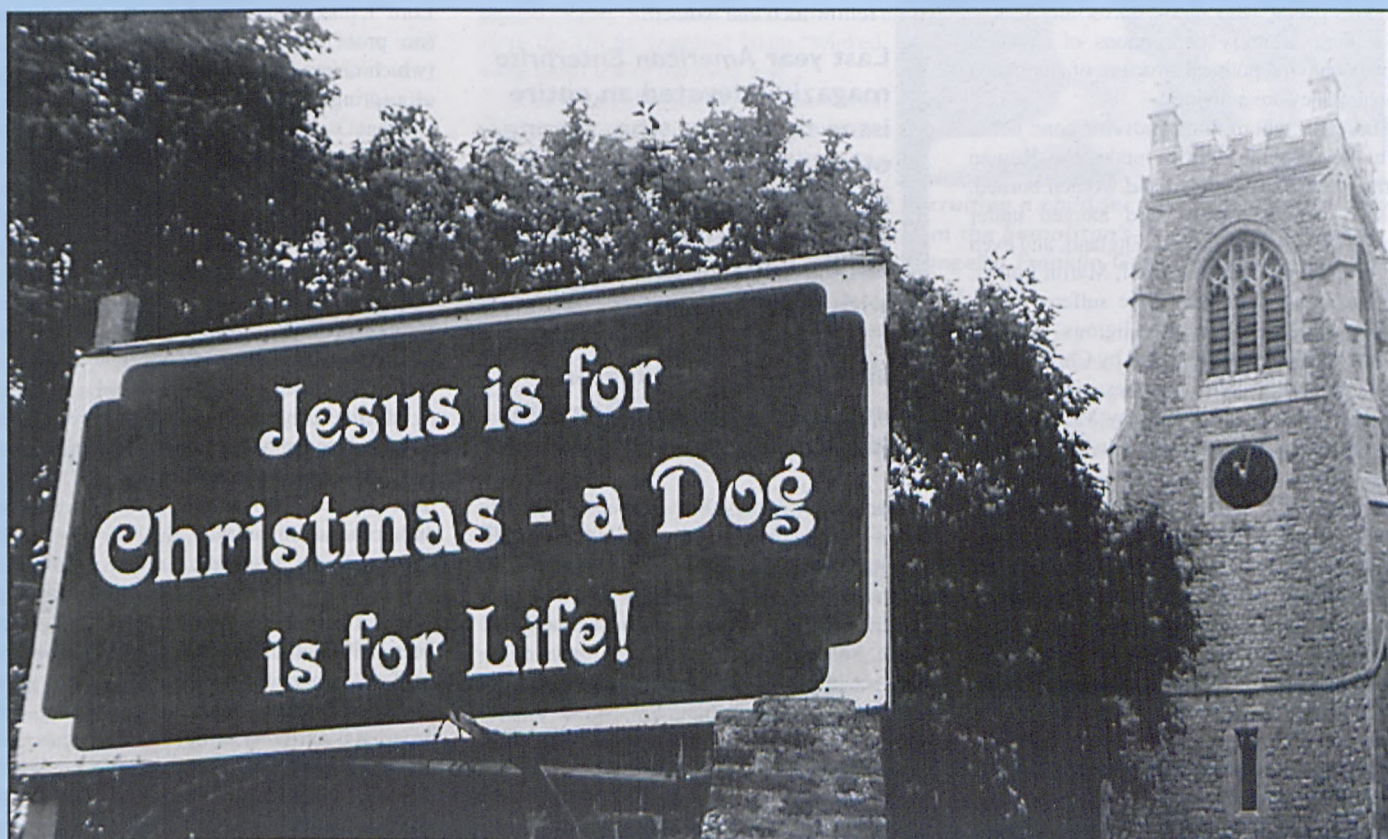
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Freethinker

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Last October we asked what words an atheist might put on a church billboard – and we received an impressive number of very amusing and clever entries to our billboard competition. The winning entry, submitted by Graham Livingstone, of Surrey, is pictured above

– the runners-up and their entries are on page 10

Also in this issue:

- A country ruled by religious fanatics with a huge arsenal of weapons of mass destruction at their disposal poses a very real threat to the rest of the world – p2
 - The United Church of the Kingdom of God loses its battle to transform an historic London cinema into a place of worship – p5
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A PSYCHIATRIST who spoke at last year's Freedom From Religion Conference in the US maintained that most studies substantiate the claim that people who live constantly in reality are not as content as those who are willing to step outside reality and entertain beliefs in hypothetical super-beings.

But there are many others, also, for whom things do *not* go better with God. They are those who live under the domination of "happy" religious people who almost universally seek to force their arbitrary conceptions of mythical entities onto the political structure of any nation in which they are a majority.

Those for whom things *haven't* gone better with God include Galileo under the Roman Catholic Church, the men and women burned, pressed beneath stones and hanged under Puritan Governance in New England, and even that original protestant himself, Martin Luther.

What about those who have suffered under Taliban rulers in hyper-religious Muslim nations; the doctor assassinated by Christian terrorist Paul Hill; those families sundered by Christian terror bomber Timothy McVeigh; the many Hindus and Muslims slain in India's history, and the American slaves enchained with the support of Bible authority, chapter and verse, and the support of the Christian Ku Klux Klan?

The list of the oppressed by those "happy" in the thought of their God is endless. Why? Could it be that the opportunity for oppression under the godly is limitless, since their supreme model for happy governance, under which things go better for them (but not for those who disagree with them), is usually the ever arbitrary and unchallengeable authority of a perfect and tyrannous king or prince?

Further, faith encourages tyranny because belief is always unsupported by fact. Scoundrels must always seek power to build up their worthless selves, and, no surprise, there are as many Christian scoundrels as not.

This atheist insists that people who believe

ABC TV apologises for 'offensive' email sent to Christian Bible-basher

AN ARKANSAS, US, man who emailed a complaint to the ABC TV network concerning homosexual content in an episode of a programme called *The Practice* was horrified to receive the following reply: "How about getting your nose out of the Bible (which is *only* a book of stories compiled by *many* different writers hundreds of years ago) ... Try thinking for yourself and stop using an archaic book of stories as a crutch for your existence." Jim Neugent, who used the Bible as justification for his gripe, later received an apology from ABC, saying that the emailed response "was the act of an individual employee and did not in any way reflect the views of ABC Television."

in some perfect fairy tale outside of time and space might be happier, but history also teaches him that these godly happy ones will always be a threat to the freedoms of the rest of us. Wherever belief in God dominates, there oppression is sure to rise, but wherever secularism is maintained by democratic government, tolerance and fairness will thrive, since the model for democratic governance is the law as made by our obviously flawed and fallible fellow men and women.

Last year *American Enterprise* magazine devoted an entire issue to writers who, among other things, argued that religion made for a better nation. The theme of the issue was 'Things Go Better with God.' GEORGE THOMAS, a freethinker living in Spokane, Washington, insists that 'Things Don't go Better with God'

Democracy fosters disagreement and debate by its very nature because its leaders are fallible humans like ourselves. There should be no appeal to perfect super-beings in democratic governance. We're stuck with the laws we make. So let's admit it: for some, things *do* go better with God, but for everyone things go much better under democracy. Notice that no democracies appear in the old books of out-worn religions.

Thus are Democracy, the Constitution and, specially, the First Amendment, an American atheist's religion, if you will.

A devout born-again will tell you he (or she) is a Christian first and an American second. I can assure you that I am an American first and an atheist second. All my values and hopes for things "going better for me" stem from living in a nation which is to be governed by laws and humble citizens and not by men who imagine they are being directed by mythical beings.

The most ironic thing about this brief essay is that I learned these lessons from many fine conservative as well as liberal essayists in my lifelong readings in literature and history. It's disappointing to see a supposedly conservative publication join in this divisive battle between America's ultra-religious and the Constitution – the Constitution which ought to protect us, once and for all, from this debate and from the strivings of the monotheistic religions among us to dominate the culture of secular America.

FOOTNOTE: "Things go Better with God" was the theme and subtitle of the entire October/November 2003 issue of *American Enterprise* magazine. Various essayists cov-

ered a variety of topics, claiming that the religious impulse to explain God's universe was the sole impulse for modern scientific enquiry; that marriages go better for believers (I recently heard that only 3 in 7 Christian marriages succeed – lower than our 5 in 10 national average); that drug use is lower among believers (unless you count God addiction and alcohol addiction – most alcoholics are serious believers and Christians speak of "being drunk in the Lord"); that medical healing is faster with God (no proof), and that believers are happier (which claim, of course, was the theme I used as a springboard for my essay).

What is important about the *American Enterprise* issue under discussion is that it's a publication of the American Enterprise Institute, which is one of the chief "intellectual" think-tanks for the conservative movement in America. The fact that supposedly conservative thinkers, who used to shy from religious fanaticism, are now jumping on that bandwagon in America demonstrates how seriously askew American culture has become as literacy declines, ignorance abounds, scepticism dies and superstition flourishes. America is becoming a very backward nation. America under the Evangelical movement is as ripe for authoritarianism as was Nazi Germany. All one has to do is spend a Sunday morning in one of America's many small churches and, after the sermon, attempt to challenge the minister and watch the murderous hatred leap into his face. American Christians must be right at all costs, and a battle for modernity and progress is currently being waged in America's press. Unfortunately, few average conservatives or fundamentalists are very literate, and they get their views from the millionaires who run talk radio, and those who cater to the worst impulses of the mob in order to get the work of the rich done. If American culture has become as uncivil as many claim, we have but to look at the resurgence of religious fanaticism within the country to find the source of hatred, conflict and intolerance.

The current ultra-conservative movement is not the responsible, highly intellectual movement it might have been in the past under the Bill Buckley's of the right. These people are Neanderthals, and pose a very real danger to the rest of the world. For example, do you know that Trent Lott, Republican legislator, a loud-mouthed friend of the administration, said [I paraphrase] about Iraq, "We ought to just level it and see what grows back?"

• George Thomas is a member of the Inland Northwest Free Thought Association, affiliated to the national Freedom From Religion Foundation. He has published poetry in various literary magazines around the country, and also founded and edited three literary publications in the Spokane area over the years.

Fire Service Dumps Operation Christmas Child after Learning of its True Nature

THE South Wales Fire Service pulled the plug on its 2003 Christmas project supporting Operation Christmas Child after it learned of the deceptive nature of the appeal from a National Secular Society member.

Andy Armitage, editor of the *Gay and Lesbian Humanist*, together with several other concerned people, contacted the Fire Service alerting them to the fact that Operation Christmas Child, operated by Samaritan's Purse – an organisation headed by evangelist Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, was much more concerned with proselytising than giving material aid to disadvantaged children.

Said Mr Armitage: "After learning that Operation Christmas Child had been adopted by the Fire Service, as well as the Co-Op, as its annual appeal, I emailed South Wales Fire service and the Co-operative Retail Society. I heard nothing from the latter, but got an email from the fire service saying they would look into the matter.

"Rather out of the blue – because I didn't expect to hear any more – a letter arrived from the Fire Service's director of Corporate Services, Norman Hillier, in which he wrote: 'I am sure that you will appreciate the brigade's intention has always been to support wherever possible worthwhile causes that relieve suffering and poverty wherever it occurs. Our involvement in Operation Christmas Child has been on the basis that the project was no more than a charitable event. We do not lend support to any political or religious organisation in their own right, neither do we wish to be associated with anybody whose activities would bring the brigade into dispute.

"I have instructed that the brigade's normal involvement with this project be halted and any future involvement will be subject to an investigation of the allegations made by yourself and others about the organisation Samaritan's Purse and its associated bodies."

In 2002, the *Guardian* ran an article about Samaritan's Purse, exposing the fact that "many of the scheme's supporters, who include thousands of schools, are unaware that the organisation behind it is a US-based, evangelical and missionary Christian charity led by a controversial fundamentalist. Parents and teachers are not told that the boxes of gifts they have been filling are in many cases sent overseas with religious literature."

Operation Christmas Child is run in Britain by Samaritan's Purse International (SPI), a charitable company linked to the US charity Samaritan's Purse. The latter's chief executive is a right-wing fundamentalist, Franklin

Graham, son of the celebrated evangelist Billy Graham and a close friend of President Bush. Franklin Graham, who is also the international president of the British charity SPI, has caused controversy in the US by branding Islam "wicked, violent and not of the same god".

"Many staff of established humanitarian charities are increasingly concerned at the activities of evangelical relief agencies in the developing world," according to the *Guardian* report. "Brendan Paddy, of Save the Children, says it is dangerous when charities mix humanitarian work with the promotion of a particular religious or political agenda. 'The risk is that it creates conflict and that the agency is regarded as partisan,' he says. 'Given the current state of the world, I would have thought it particularly important for agencies to preserve neutrality.'"

Each year, SPI sends appeal literature to 24,000 British schools. Of these, more than 10,000 are believed to take part in fund-raising – many as part of their citizenship curriculum. Besides the shoebox items, valued by SPI at an average of £14, the charity asks for a £2 donation for each box towards transport and other costs.

The glossy appeal leaflets, which instruct children and parents what to put in boxes and how to pack them, do not make any mention of a missionary role.

However, SPI's website features links to a Samaritan's Purse newsletter from Graham, in which he states that God has blessed Operation Christmas Child "because it is about more than Christmas presents". He says: "It is about



Recruiting a child for Jesus: this picture, taken from the Samaritan's Purse website, shows evangelist Franklin Graham handing a gift to a needy child

introducing children and their families to God's greatest gift – His Son, Jesus Christ. As long as evangelism is the focus, God will continue to bless it."

The newsletter says the boxes are distributed along with evangelical literature and that the boxes "have led to salvation for tens of thousands of children and their families". It cites examples such as Zambia, where "one shoebox prepared the way for nearly two dozen people to come to faith in Jesus Christ".

Follow-up materials "give children further opportunities to accept Christ and grow in their faith". Hundreds of thousands of children in developing countries are said to have participated in a 10-lesson Bible-study course run by the charity.

Boxes from Britain were sent on 2002 to 14 countries in eastern Europe and south-west Asia, including some with large Muslim populations, such as Bosnia and Azerbaijan.

In 2001, boxes were also sent from Britain to Afghanistan.

Voluntary Euthanasia Society head resigns

THE Chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, Dr Michael Irwin, resigned last month after he had been arrested and flown to the Isle of Man for questioning about a plan to help a terminally ill man commit suicide.

According to a report in the *Guardian*, Dr Irwin, a former medical director to the United Nations in New York, admitted taking steps to help fellow voluntary euthanasia campaigner, Patrick Kneen to end his suffering from prostate cancer.

The 72-year-old retired GP said he went to Mr Kneen's home on the island late last year with a large quantity of sleeping pills, but found his friend was too ill to take them. Mr Kneen, 74, a retired farmer, could no longer see or raise his hand to his mouth, and could hardly swallow. He died naturally within days.

Dr Irwin, who could face up to 14 years in jail for conspiracy, said that neither he nor Mr Kneen's widow, Patricia, had been prepared to "force-feed" Mr Kneen the pills, because that could have left them open to a charge of murder.

Police contacted Dr Irwin soon after Patricia Kneen wrote a letter to her local paper, which was not published, but instead was passed onto the police.

Dr Irwin said that some fellow members of VES had urged him not to resign, but he was anxious not to harm the group's law-abiding reputation.



Police find guns, gay porn Nazi paraphernalia and pilfered cash in Catholic Priest's Closet

NEW YORK police who called at the home of a Catholic priest to investigate an allegation that he had been making "offensive and nasty" phone calls to the Bishop Laughlin High School in Fort Greene, New York, were shocked to discover a stash of Nazi memorabilia, gay porn, guns and thousands of dollars in cash stolen from church collection plates.

The police probe began when Brother Dennis Cronin, the school principal, began receiving numerous nasty phone calls late last year.

According to a report in the *New York Daily News*, Cronin told police that the caller spewed curses about the school, which is run by the LaSalle Christian Brothers. The police then traced the calls to the home of Reverend John Johnston, 64.

Johnston answered the door in a kimono – but what grabbed the police's attention was a huge wad of cash and a revolver sitting on a dresser. Within minutes, he led the police to a bag stuffed with more than \$80,000 cash that he admitted having stolen from the collection at St Martin of Tours Church in Bethpage, where he officiated as a part-time priest.

"He was hitting the plate for between \$60 and \$100 a week," said a police source, adding that

Johnston has been a teacher of religion for 23 years at Oratory Prep School, an all-boys Catholic school in New Jersey. "There is a possibility that he may have taken up to \$100,000."

The police said Johnston was upset he didn't get a pension after recently retiring from the school.

As the police continued their search, they were astounded to find a closet full of Nazi paraphernalia.

"He had a whole shrine of Nazi memorabilia in his closet – Nazi flags, helmets, daggers, swastikas, and German military medals," the police spokesman said. Before they left, the police also found two other handguns, .38-calibre and .32-calibre, as well as gay pornographic videos and magazines.

Rev Johnston, who offered no explanation as to why he made threatening calls to the high school, was promptly arrested on charges of possessing stolen property, criminal possession of a weapon and aggravated harassment. He faces at least seven years in prison, if convicted.



Evangelical Christians demand right 'to hound people out of their jobs'

THE Evangelical Alliance, the Christian pressure group which claims a million members, has been given permission to argue its case for "religious autonomy" by intervening in a High Court row between the Government and the unions over new regulations on the rights of gay and lesbian workers.

The new Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations, which came into effect last December 1, contain exemptions that permit religious organisations to continue discriminating against gay people. These exemptions are being challenged as unlawful by a coalition of unions in the High Court in a case to be heard in February.

At a preliminary hearing in London on Monday, Mr Justice Elias gave the go-ahead for the evangelicals to put their case, even though they are not parties to the action.

The Alliance – described in court as representing "a multiplicity of Christian organisations" including the Christian Schools Trust – says they have the right to formulate and apply their own policies regarding the employment of gays as clerics and as teachers in faith schools.

Paul Diamond, counsel for the Alliance, said the court's ruling would also affect other religions, including the Jewish and Islamic faiths.

Terry Sanderson, spokesman for the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) said: "This is a desperate bid by these Christian churches to hold on to a wide-ranging opt-out from the regulations, allowing them the right to sack and refuse to employ gay people in certain jobs, particularly in religious schools (which represent a third of all schools in the country).

"The exemptions have already been criticised as being beyond the scope of the original directive by a parliamentary scrutiny committee.

"There is no doubt that the Government went too far in permitting religious groups such large-scale exemptions."

Mr Sanderson said that the Evangelical Alliance were arguing that the exemptions were needed to protect "religious freedom", but that seemed to mean the freedom to hound people out of their jobs and have special rights that are denied to everybody else.

"Freedom to practise religion seems to translate into freedom to persecute other people as far as the Evangelical Alliance is concerned," he said.

London father jailed for cruelty to son 'possessed by the devil'

A LONDON father who cruelly mistreated his nine-year-old son because he was told by a priest that the boy was possessed by the devil has been sentenced to five years' imprisonment.

The boy suffered months of "callous brutality" at the hands of both his mother, 42, and father, 44, who branded his son with an iron, Snaresbrook Crown Court heard at the trial of the couple late last year.

The mother received a 12-month suspended sentence for cruelty.

The boy was eventually rescued by a concerned neighbour in October last year. Worried Jennifer Watson took him into her own home and spotted burns on his buttocks and hips after giving him a bath. She alerted police and social services, and his parents were arrested and charged.

The boy's parents began their campaign of cruelty after being told by the pastor at an evangelical church that their child was possessed by the devil and "flew around during

the night eating people".

At a police interview, the boy, who cannot be identified, said: "My mum said I was the devil. When I moved, my dad was on my back, but he fell off my back and then he put the iron on my back. I was screaming and screaming and screaming and no-one heard me."

The boy's father, originally from the Congo, was jailed for five years for causing grievous bodily harm, 18 months for cruelty and 12 months for a further cruelty charge, to run concurrently.

Sentencing the father, Judge Alan Simmons said: "Placing a hot iron to the skin of a young child is an appalling offence which would have been unthinkable to ordinary members of the public. You did it more than once and the child must have been writhing in agony. This was a nasty campaign of assault on the child until he was mercifully rescued by the concerned attentions of a neighbour."

THE United Church of the Kingdom of God's plan to convert Waltham Forest's historic EMD Cinema in east London into a place of worship has been thwarted by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. Mr Prescott dismissed the UCKG's planning applications for both change of use of the venue and the variation of Listed Building status.

The government concluded the art deco venue should remain a cinema, declaring it was unsuitable for the proposed church development. Mr Prescott's decision was based on the evidence collected at the Public Inquiry held last summer where arguments were heard from all sides regarding the future of the cinema and its potential role in the regeneration of Walthamstow town centre.

Among the many objections lodged against the UCKG was a submission from the editor of the *Freethinker*, who pointed out that the church, with its tendency to carry out exorcisms on disturbed youngsters, posed a very real threat to them in the Waltham Forest area (the UCKG was implicated in the Victoria Climbié case).

The EMD Cinema was originally purchased at the end of 2002 by the UCKG which planned to convert the venue into a church and conference centre. The local McGuffin Film Society immediately launched an initiative to save the cinema and organised a campaign of letter writing, petitioning and demonstrations to persuade Waltham Forest Council's Planning Committee to dismiss UCKG's proposals. On November 12, 2002, Waltham Forest Council voted unanimously to reject the planning applications tendered by UCKG. An impressive turnout of McGuffin members and supporters attended a lively demonstration on the Town Hall steps to lobby councillors as they entered the building. The crowd then packed into the public area of the council chamber to hear the wide-ranging debate which followed. Many hundreds of members had written letters, sent emails and signed petitions in support of the cinema and this no doubt had a significant impact on the Planning Committee decision.

But the UCKG then appealed against this decision to the Government's Planning Inspectorate in the hope that they would overturn the council's decision. In the closing weeks of 2002, the McGuffins redoubled its efforts to demonstrate the strength of local feeling in support of the cinema and against the church plan. More than 2500 people signed petitions and several hundred also wrote individual letters of objection. The campaign received both national press and television coverage and messages of support were sent by people from across the country.

In January 2003, ownership of the cinema then transferred to the UCKG and the building immediately closed to the public. On the weekend of January 26-27, 2003, an illegal

Waltham Forest says 'Good Riddance' to the United Church of the Kingdom of God



London Mayor Ken Livingstone (centre) pictured demonstrating his support for Waltham Forest's Save the Cinema campaign

rave party was held at the cinema and sound equipment, original furniture and fittings were looted from the building. Many areas of the cinema were covered in graffiti and the unique Christie organ was also damaged. UCKG claimed to have no prior knowledge of this event – although the McGuffins immediately received eyewitness accounts of alleged



The front page of the Walthamstow Guardian jubilantly announcing that the UCKG had lost its battle

church members visiting the premises shortly beforehand. Members of the McGuffin Committee visited the cinema at various points during the weekend and can testify to the chaos and destruction which took place. The local police refused to intervene due to lack of manpower and the threat from firearms in the building. Several arrests were made for drug-related offences. Throughout the spring and summer of 2003 the McGuffin campaign to save the cinema continued to receive widespread national press, TV and radio coverage while attracting many high-profile supporters. London Mayor Ken Livingstone declared his support for the campaign in a personal letter to the McGuffins. He wrote: "I would like to offer my support to the

campaign to preserve and upgrade Waltham Forest's EMD cinema as a venue for film shows and live entertainment. As the only venue in Waltham Forest capable of staging large-scale cinema, theatre and music events, the EMD has a vital role to play in the planned regeneration of Walthamstow town centre, the sustainability of the area's evening economy and the cultural life of local people. Central London has a wealth of entertainment venues but it is often those based outside the centre that are more accessible to London residents and are best able to meet the needs of London's diverse population.

"The EMD has had a fascinating history, having provided entertainment to local people for more than 70 years, and I support the efforts of Waltham Forest residents to preserve and revive the EMD as a venue for cinema, live music and theatre. I would like to place on record my support for the decision by Waltham Forest Council to refuse planning permission for the venue to be used for any purpose other than public entertainment."

Support was also received from Alfred Hitchcock's daughter Patricia Hitchcock. Writing from her home in California, Ms Hitchcock, who appeared in a number of her father's films including *Psycho*, sent a personal letter of support after hearing that Waltham Forest was in danger of losing its only surviving cinema – the last in the area where her father was born.

During the past 40 years the cinema has been used as a venue for live performances by many of the world's greatest names in jazz and pop from Duke Ellington to the Beatles.

QUITE recently the *Guardian* chose to accompany a little snippet on Tony Blair's religious belief with an illustration created by Mary Evans (a Victorian lithographer, one assumes). Her drawing depicts "God" as a giant (one might say an inflated) figure, blessed with an abundance of hair and beard, togged out in a garment resembling a dressing-gown, apparently floating among the clouds as though filled with a light gas, while a huge glowing sun-disc apparently emanates from his head!

To anyone but a true believer the idea of such a grotesque figure having *any* sort of existence, outside of a comic-book, let alone being the originator of the actual existing universe, must appear laughable in the extreme – but, whatever sophistications and qualifications they might offer, I would contend that this ridiculous Phantom-of-the-World-Opera figure (as we might call "Him"!)) is in fact a construct that is entertained by most believers some of the time, and by some believers all of the time, and constitutes the heart of a true believer's religious fantasies.

For in their imagination there truly exists this "God"; this great magician, this all-benevolent, all-compassionate, father-figure who, should He so wish, and if properly appealed to, is going to protect us from all harm, grant us all our wishes, and ensure us health, wealth, and life (of some sort) without end. As Shakespeare almost said, "It is the eye of childhood that delights in such a naive image!"

In point of fact the word "God" is no more than a word, a blank label, relating to the emp-

Teacher warned to keep religion out of the classroom

AN elementary-school teacher in the Fife School District of Washington, US, has been reprimanded for allegedly bringing religion into his classes. Steve Brown, a teacher at Hedden Elementary School, made references to God's healing powers, sang gospel songs in class and promoted his own CD of religious songs to students.

"Your actions and activities were not, and are not, appropriate behaviour for an elementary teacher in a public school setting," Hedden Principal Julia Grubiak wrote in the letter of reprimand, according to a *News Tribune* report.

She told Brown to refer students' religious questions to their parents or guardians. And she warned him that further inappropriate activity would lead to more serious action, up to and including termination.

"As an employee of the Fife School District, you are prohibited by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution from soliciting or encouraging religious activity, participating in such activity with students, or coercing students in any fashion to participate unwittingly in religious activity," Grubiak wrote.

tiest of abstractions. Ask an intelligent believer (and, apart from their alleged belief, there are such people) what they understand by the word "God", and if they are honest they will tell you that this "God" is indeed beyond all human understanding but can best be conceived as the Governing Intelligence that gave rise to this world and everything within it, and (hopefully) maintains a benevolent eye on its development – if you will pardon the anthropomorphism involved in the word "eye". (But of course with the concept "God", anthropomorphism is constantly raising its head!).

The word 'God' is no more than a word, a blank label, relating to the emptiest of abstractions says ALBERT ADLER

But then why, if "His" concern is primarily with this Earth and its (human) habitants is our planet – in cosmological terms – of less significance than a microscopic speck of dust in a very large and mostly empty room? A speck of dust which, like all other bodies in the universe – as indeed the universe itself – must ultimately come to an end.

Why did many billions of years have to pass before the emergence of planet Earth (an emergence for which there is a perfectly credible scientific explanation)?

Or again, why did at least another billion years have to pass before the emergence of life on Earth?

What need did a Divine Intelligence have for time and experiment in order to encompass "His" ineffable and surely instantaneously realisable plans? (Although why and how such a perfect Being should wish to add to "His" perfection is itself a conundrum wrapped in a mystery wrapped in an enigma!).

Why did a number of large-scale (and in one case at least almost complete) destructions of earthly life have to take place before the eventual appearance of humankind at the top of the finally (thus far anyway) triumphant mammals – and what sort of advertisement for a Creator anyway is Man, the great exterminator of his own and every other kind?

And over and above all these questions – how indeed did this alleged great Creator pull off the wonderful trick, as logically "He" must have done, of in the first place creating "Himself" out of nothing?

To all these questions, and the many more of a similar nature that might be put, there is one blindingly obvious answer. This is that we do not know, and may never know how or why our universe came into existence – nor of what preceded that event, if anything. Nor, apart from its purely scientific interest, is there any valid reason why we should know. But one thing at least *is* certain and that is that the

empty hypothesis "God" is a complete nonsense, a form of verbal Polo Mint with a very large hole – O – at its centre!

Does all this mean that I think that, at a practical or emotional level, "God" has no meaning? Of course not. To the disturbed and unhappy faithful, "God" is their nostrum, their panacea, their answer to all the ills which life besets them. Equally of course to the successful believer "God" is their guarantee that their success will be sustained. Nor, as is all too often the case with believers in the fantastic, whether it be Loch Ness monsters or Little Green Men from Outer Space, is their faith likely to be disturbed by the argument that "He" is no more than the invention of the human mind; that their "God" is truly the Ghost in the Machine! A phantom production that serves the believer much as a comforterdummy serves the insecure child.

Dummyless (and godless) rationalists, however, will at least have reason to rejoice in their ability to accept that the point and purpose of life is, not to bow themselves down before the empty creation of deluded minds, but rather to learn to know as much as possible of that which is worth knowing and to attempt to do as much as possible of that which is worth doing.

FOOTNOTE: (a) My reason for placing the word "God" inside quotation marks is to draw attention to the fact *that it is only a word*, only an hypothesis, and a most improbable, unconvincing, and unnecessary one – especially in an age when science is revealing more and more of the answers to man's questions about the nature, origin, and likely future of the universe.

b) How can one possibly feel anything but contempt for the intellectual integrity of those who profess to believe in the all-knowing, all-prescient, and all-powerful "God" – one who knows all that has happened, is happening, and will happen – and yet feel able, indeed impelled, to offer up daily instructions to "Him" in the form of prayers and exhortations? (Prayers and exhortations, incidentally, which "He" will already have foreseen and allowed for!). Would not any "God" who was truly worth his salt respond to such impertinence with very similar words to those used by Lewis Carroll's long-suffering Father William to his over-inquisitive son:

"You have worn out my patience: enough is enough!

I am tired of you and your prayers.

Do you think that I pay the least heed to such stuff?

Cease to meddle in Holy Affairs!

But of course such a "God" would be of little use to us in our desire to order and re-order the universe to our own liking – and it is this unavailing desire to which those futile addresses are testimony.

LAST year, the *Times* reported that in the USA, "Hundreds of victims abused by priests in the Boston area have won compensation of up to £200,000 each in a hard-fought settlement with the Roman Catholic Church."

It went on to say that "An estimated 1,000 children were abused in the archdiocese over the past 60 years, according to a report by the state attorney-general that blamed Church leaders for covering up allegations of abuse against nearly 250 priests."

Personnel files, held by the Church, contained details of boys being bugged by priests in confessional boxes. Child rape is a sickening enough crime but it is made all the more despicable when you know that those who committed it were members of a Church which claims to give moral guidance to its followers.

A review of history reveals that this lapse of moral behaviour is nothing new within the profession of the clergy and that of the Roman Catholic Church in particular.

In his book *All in the Mind*, Ludovic Kennedy noted that: "Any criticism of the Papacy was regarded as heresy and therefore worthy of punishment. In 710, for instance, the Archbishop of Ravenna disobeyed a command of Pope Constantine for which the Pope ordered his eyes to be gouged out. This seems to have been a standard punishment at the time."

Bearing in mind this was hundreds of years before the Reformation, when none of the Protestant churches that we know of today existed, here we have Christianity's top man, otherwise known as the Vicar of Christ, commanding that people's eyes be plucked out for disagreeing with him.

The second millennium was no better than the first as Bertrand Russell pointed out in *Marriage and Morals*: "The immorality of the Middle Ages was widespread and disgusting; bishops lived in open sin with their daughters, and archbishops promoted their male favourites to neighbouring sees."

He continues: "The writers of the Middle Ages are full of accounts of nunneries that were like brothels, of the vast multitude of infanticides within their walls, and of that inveterate prevalence of incest among the clergy, which rendered it necessary again and again to issue the most stringent enactments that priests should not be permitted to live with their mothers or sisters."

In addition to sexual misdemeanours, infanticide and incest, the clergy of this period were also guilty of barbarity.

The cruelties of the Papal Inquisition are widely documented. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* describes how this most feared institution; set up to combat heresy, obtained its powers.

"The Pope gave the inquisitors the most unlimited powers, as judges representing his person: they were permitted to excommunicate, or sentence to death, whom they thought

proper, upon the slightest information of heresy; were allowed to publish crusades against all whom they deemed heretics, and enter into leagues with sovereign princes, to join those crusades with their forces. About the year 1244 their power was further increased by the Emperor Frederic the Second, who declared himself protector of all inquisitors, and published two cruel edicts – viz, that all heretics who continue obstinate should be burnt; and that all who repented should be imprisoned for life."

The Spanish Inquisition came later, beginning in the 15th century, when Tomas Torquemada was appointed Grand Inquisitor of Spain with the Pope's blessing. This inquisition became synonymous with terror and cruelty because of the thousands of people who were tortured and executed by its authority.

PETER RICHARDS says immoral behaviour is nothing new among the clergy – particularly those in the Roman Catholic Church

Corruption, dishonesty and fraud should also be included in this catalogue of the sins of the Catholic clergy. Christian relics were good for the Church's tourist trade, otherwise known as pilgrimages. Amongst the relics on show in European churches were the Holy Lance, the True Cross, the bones of saints, Christ's tears, Christ's blood, the Crown of Thorns, Christ's swaddling clothes, the rod of Moses, and the heads of St Peter and St Paul. The fact that many (if not all) were fakes is made obvious by the number of duplications. As many as 15 churches claimed to have Christ's foreskin!

Repentant sinners could buy indulgences for large sums of money, after which the Pope would grant absolution for the remission of sins. Selling indulgences in this way was undoubtedly a lucrative trade for the Catholic Church but also an immoral one. Martin Luther, a German monk, certainly thought so. He demonstrated this by nailing a list of his objections, known as the ninety-five theses on indulgences, to the church door in Wittenberg, Saxony. It was this event, according to the conventional view, that triggered the Protestant Reformation.

The Catholic Church has always been obsessed by sex. The celibacy of priests became

Queen 'trashes marriage'

"UNDER the Civil Partnership Bill [included last year in the Queen's Speech] homosexual couples are to be given all the legal rights and privileges which currently only apply to married couples. It is 'gay marriage' in all but name and it is enshrining a lie in law ... The proposals result in trashing marriage by equating it with gay liaisons"

- extract from a Christian Institute press release

compulsory in 1139. All sexual acts indulged in for pleasure rather than for procreation were regarded as disgusting. Deviation from the missionary position (ie the face-to-face position with the man on top of the woman) was thought to be unnatural, and contraception was forbidden, as it was believed to be a form of murder. This makes the chosen entertainment of the Borgias all the more surprising.

In his fascinating book *Sex in History*, Gordon Rattray Taylor describes how Pope Alexander VI (born Rodrigo Borgia) amused himself.

"The court of this Pope was the scene of licence which could scarcely be credited, if it were not recorded in the annals of the papal historian Burchard, whose evidence is unimpeachable. He tells how, one evening in October 1501, the Pope ordered fifty prostitutes to be sent to his chambers. After supper, and in the presence of his 25-year old son, Cesare, and his 21-year old daughter, Lucrezia, they danced with the servants and others who were present, at first clothed but before long naked. Then lighted candles in candlesticks were placed on the floor and chestnuts were thrown among them, and the women were ordered to crawl between the candlesticks on their hands and knees and to try to pick up the chestnuts. Finally a number of prizes were produced, and it was announced that they would be given to those men who, in the opinion of the spectators, 'should have carnal knowledge of the greatest number of the said prostitutes' – *qui pluries dictos meretrices carnaliter agnoscerent*".

Franciscan monks got their name from St Francis of Assisi (1181 – 1226), the founder of the order of mendicant friars in the Roman Catholic Church to which they belonged. In the year 1776 some Capuchins (friars of a branch of the Franciscan order, so called because of the hoods they wore) were taking part in a street procession. Ludovic Kennedy takes up the story: "In that year in northern France the young Chevalier de la Barre was walking along a street in Abbeville. A Capuchin religious procession passed by. Because it was raining the chevalier did not doff his hat as was then the custom. This was observed and reported on, and the chevalier was arrested. The charge against him was blasphemy. He was found guilty. The sentence of the court was amputation of the hands, the tongue to be torn out with pincers and then for him to be burned alive."

Whatever happened to the Christian virtues of compassion and forgiveness?

This brief survey reveals some of the shocking sins of the men of the cloth, indicating that the clergy cannot be trusted to always behave in a morally acceptable way. In fact, if the last 2000 years are anything to go by, then they can be relied upon, periodically, to display behaviour that any normal civilised person would regard as positively evil.

With a dynamic and dedicated leadership, and a steadily increasing number of members and supporters, the National Secular Society looks to be in a strong position to take up the challenges that face it in 2004. And these challenges are formidable. As NSS President Denis Cobell points out in the Society's latest annual report, "Survey after survey shows that Britain's attachment to organised religion continues to dwindle at a very fast rate. Yet, religious organisations grow ever more demanding and politicised and, as a result, are increasingly finding the ear of those in Whitehall and Downing Street.

"The NSS has discovered that the Government – with the specific support of Tony Blair – has quietly convened a working party of 'religious representatives' to decide how best religious communities could influence policy-making across a wide area of government. Such moves are becoming the cause of alarm and dismay by a growing proportion of the population.

"The working party comprised a whole raft of supposed 'faith representatives', but there were no representatives of non-believers. But how representative are these 'faith representatives'? The reality is that they speak for only a tiny proportion of the population. In many instances they do not even represent the views of the communities they purport to lead. For example, many in the liberal Jewish community have actively distanced themselves from the Chief Rabbi. And doubt is spreading whether for many in the Anglican Church the Archbishop of Canterbury is their 'spiritual leader'. The Muslim Council of Great Britain represents only a small section of the Muslim community – which in itself makes up less than three percent of the total population yet this body is increasingly represented in official committees and consultations. Also on the committee is a member of the Baha'i faith, which has only 6,000 members in the UK.

"Even before the working party was established, these groups already had ready access to Whitehall and Downing Street. Their words, however contentious or incomprehensible, are also reported and broadcast by a strangely pious media – despite the fact that readers and viewers generally have little interest. The BBC is promising ever more religious programmes, and every broadsheet in the country has a 'religious affairs' correspondent and regular sections devoted to religious propaganda.

"The Government's addiction to religion is alarming not just to the NSS but to the many people in this country who find the idea of reactionary and unelected bishops, rabbis and imams making law and being accorded a highly privileged input into public policy-making to be abhorrent. Church of England bishops in

the House of Lords already boast that they always receive replies from ministers, and promptly, to any questions written on House of Lords notepaper.

"Religious authoritarianism is engaged in a bitter struggle with secular liberalism, and seems to be prevailing. Largely because of Mr Blair and his Christian Socialist colleagues in Downing Street, the religionists are becoming even more in the ascendant in public life. The NSS will continue, during the coming year, to do as much as it can to redress that imbalance.

'The Government's addiction to religion is alarming not just to the NSS but to the many people in this country who find the idea of reactionary and unelected bishops, rabbis and imams making law and being accorded a highly privileged input into public policy-making to be abhorrent'

"The Catholic Church, too, has become aggressively ambitious in spreading its influence in the past year. It has pushed hard for more influence in the newly-expanded European Union and also seeks to upgrade its already anomalous status at the United Nations. It uses this status to promote policies on sexual matters that lead directly to overpopulation, greatly increased mortality from AIDS and 'back street' abortions. The NSS has joined with other groups to resist these anti-democratic developments.

"While this generally unwanted incursion of religion into our public life continues, much damage is being done to our society that will be hard if not impossible to reverse. This applies to the insinuation of religious organisations into our welfare services and the placement of religious representatives into institutions and committees. The opening of numerous religious schools poses an even greater danger and we abhor the inevitable indoctrination of impressionable young minds. Such new schools will also lead to the splintering of education down religious lines. In areas with a significant minority ethnic presence, this will also be along racial lines, and we fear it could lead to a deterioration in community cohesion.

"The struggle in which the NSS is engaged is at the moment one-sided. We are up against

NSS For Challenges New

extremely rich and powerful opponents, who are becoming increasingly slick and ruthless in their push for power. Earlier this year, the conservative Christian organisation CARE sent out application forms to join one of the major political parties to all of its 30,000 members. Millions of people in Britain hold secular views. We need all of our many supporters to contribute to the battle against privileged or covert religious influence in public life.

"That is why we need more commitment from you, our supporters, to make your own voices heard. We need more secularists on official committees, on councils, school boards and Standing Advisory Committees on Religious Education (SACREs). There are thousands of secularists in parliament and the media; we need many more of them to actively support us. Similarly, there are many more all around the country who have the capacity to be skilled and determined activists – now is the time to bring that energy to the cause.

"As it continues to grow, we hope the NSS will gain the resources and manpower to make progress in all these areas. Although we have achieved considerable media exposure, we cannot rest on our laurels. But the NSS is, in the end, only its members and its many supporters. We also look to you to grasp every opportunity to promote the ideals to which we are all committed."

The NSS's latest Annual Report, issued at the end of last year, highlights another busy – at times frenetic – 12 months campaigning to protect and promote secularism in Britain, and, where relevant, Europe. Areas that it has been active in include:

- Protesting about the privileges being offered to religion through the faith liaison working party set up by the government
- Challenging religious exemptions in the new employment regulations that aim to outlaw discrimination at work
- Resisting the inclusion of a reference to Christianity in the new European Constitution
- Pressing the BBC to devote more time to issues of relevance to non-believers
- Continuing opposition to the establishment of more religious schools in this country
- Seeking to end discrimination in the provision of school transport on religious grounds.

aces a nging Year

When it uncovered the existence of the working group set up by the Home Office to examine the "Government's interface with the faith communities", the NSS found itself at the centre of controversy. After the NSS protest was covered by the *Observer*, the Society was invited to meet Fiona Mactaggart, the Home Office minister chairing the group, who assured the Executive Director that the "faith committee" was being consulted on a limited range of issues, but that no secular or humanist groups would be consulted or invited to participate. Nevertheless, a number of positive action points came from the meeting and will be followed up by the Minister and the NSS.

It later emerged that the Home Office had established a Faith Communities Unit specifically to create "effective dialogue with faith communities and to ensure that the views of faith communities are considered in emerging policy". The Home Office signified formally, however, that it had taken some of the NSS's concerns on board when it said: "The Faith Communities Unit will be giving some consideration over the coming months to what the Government can do to safeguard the interests of those with no faith in areas where the faith communities have an input."

Employment Regulations

The NSS has also been at the forefront of the resistance to wide-ranging religious exemptions in the new employment regulations combating discrimination on grounds of religion and sexuality that came into effect last December. The Executive Director discussed them in detail last year at the cabinet office with the Minister for Equality as part of the consultation process. After the consultation period ended, however, massive religious exemptions were inserted, it is claimed on the Prime Minister's direct instructions, following threats from the Church of England's Archbishops' Council. The wording of the exemptions was almost verbatim as dictated by the Church. A cabal of evangelical organisations had also lobbied the Government in similar terms.

Despite warnings from an independent parliamentary scrutiny committee that the exemptions for religious groups were too wide and were likely to be *ultra vires*, the regulations were approved by Parliament. Through our

Honorary Associate, Dr Evan Harris MP (LibDem), we managed to raise a raft of objections in the House of Commons, but to no avail. Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC put up a similarly valiant fight in the Lords, but with the same result.

The NSS is petitioning the European Commission to take out infraction proceedings against the UK for faulty transposition of the Employment Directive into UK law. This catalogue of complaints has been drawn up by council member Anna Behan and the Executive Director, with help from member Sue England, who specialises in European law. It will be reviewed by leading human rights lawyers before being finalised.

Since the regulations were approved, the Evangelical Alliance and other Christian groups have launched employment handbooks to advise Christian employers how best to ensure that all jobs in their organisations can be reserved for believers. The NSS has protested most strongly about this, and it was taken up in a major story in *The Times*.

The NSS has also had significant input into the preparation of non-statutory guidelines to the regulations aimed at both employers and employees. These are being drawn up by the arbitration service ACAS in co-operation with the Department of Trade and Industry. Our interventions have resulted in worthwhile improvements.

On a wider front, the NSS joined with its French equivalent, *Libre Pensée*, to issue a joint declaration calling for Europe to defend its secular heritage and to ensure that the planned European Union constitution does not become a religious document.

The Vatican and some Orthodox Churches have been pressing to have a specific mention of Europe's "Judeo-Christian heritage" included in the preamble.

Thought for the Day

AFTER a series of meetings with the head of religion and ethics at the BBC over its policy of excluding non-believers from participating in the *Thought for the Day* slot, the NSS made an official complaint to the Board of Governors. When this failed to produce a positive outcome, the Society resorted to legal action alleging discrimination and that the BBC had failed to deal adequately with our complaint.

In response to this, the BBC commissioned a report from the very department responsible for the programme, which concluded, predictably, that "*Thought for the Day* has always been a faith based programme" and the ban was "reasonable" and no discrimination was involved in the policy.

The NSS later withdrew from the legal case on the grounds that taking it further would have been disproportionately expensive. We

did not want to risk the Society's funds on such an action, when the BBC would be using public money to fight its own case with the most expensive lawyers in the country. Had we not been successful, their costs would have been awarded against us.

The campaign generated considerable positive publicity, and the majority of public take our side. It has also made the BBC more conscious of the non-religious voice. The NSS intends to continue pressing the BBC to provide more and better programmes of interest to secular humanists.

The Government is determined to press on with an expansion of church schools despite the number of pupils in education declining for demographic reasons, and the seventy years of continuous decline in religious belief and observance showing no sign of abating. Now only seven percent of the population is in church on an average Sunday.

The Church of England is taking full advantage of the Government's enthusiasm for the creation of more "faith schools". It is doing so at a rapid rate by converting community schools into Voluntary Aided establishments, and opening new schools. Although the C of E gives the impression that it is contributing to the capital costs of these schools, the truth emerged in the *Church Times*, which revealed that the Church is paying little or nothing towards them. Much of their paltry ten percent contribution (whittled down from the 50 percent required under the 1944 Education Act) is being met by other sponsors. In return for this pittance they are in some instances able to restrict admissions almost entirely to Christians, even though the running costs are entirely met from public funds. It was revealed this year that the Canon Slade C of E School in Bolton required parents to attend church at least 48 times a year before they could be considered for a place. It is widely accepted that parents pretend to believe in order to gain entry to such schools. The growth in C of E schools is an encouragement to other faiths to establish their own schools, as is starting to happen in Leicester, which is likely to be the first city where education is splintered along religious and hence racial lines.

All but one of Catholic schools are Voluntary Aided, so all places are reserved first of all for Catholics. It is only when they cannot find enough Catholic children to fill them that they are opened to other Christians or, as a last resort, to non-believers – even though this may be their nearest school.

The NSS also sparked debate about the continued existence of Catholic schools in Scotland. The NNSS featured in several

(Continued on page 14)

Scottish newspapers, after it pointed out in the *Sunday Times* that a large-scale survey had shown that a majority of Scots opposed denominational schools. The NSS called for a referendum on the continued existence of these schools in a country afflicted by increasing sectarianism. Honorary Associate Professor Richard Dawkins weighed in on its side.

The leading RC archbishop in Scotland was incandescent and declared a "war on secularism". This was reported on the front page of the Scottish *Herald* with a sizeable quote from the NSS President Denis Cobell. The Catholic Church has now appointed a "school czar" to make a case for the continuance of denominational schools.

The NSS also submitted evidence to a consultation on religious observance in schools in Scotland, which resulted in a long interview on Radio Scotland with the Executive Director.

The Society also took up the issue of religious discrimination in the provision of school transport. It has a legal team prepared to take legal action against the wide-spread policy that permits local authorities to subsidise transport for children attending denominational schools, while denying it to non-Christian children attending the same school. This resulted in a major feature in the *Guardian* Education supplement and also made waves in the *Times Educational Supplement* and several regional papers.

The NSS also:

- **CAMPAIGNED** to outlaw the ritual slaughter of animals without prior stunning. It made

Billboard contest winners

THE first prize in our competition, a set of Heroes of Atheism quality mugs specially commissioned by the National Secular Society, has been won by Graham Livingstone, of East Molesey, Surrey.

The mug collection, worth £29.95, features six individuals chosen by NSS members in a poll. They are Charles Darwin, Richard Dawkins, Carl Sagan, Bertrand Russell, David Hume and Charles Bradlaugh. The full set of mugs, and other Heroes of Atheism products, can be viewed on the web at www.secularism.org.uk/merchant.htm, where the mugs can be bought on-line as a set, or individually.

Three runners-up receive prizes of a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker*, plus a copy of Barbara Smoker's collection of *Freethinker* articles, entitled *Freethoughts*.

They are Peter McKenna of Liverpool, whose entry was **Special Offer: Buy One Eternal Life, get Middle-Class School Place Free**; John Archer of Canterbury with **Keep the Sabbath! We Want None of it Here!** and William H Simcock, of Staffordshire, with **Abandon All Hope, You Who Enter**.

a submission to the Department of the Environment and Rural Affairs pointing to evidence of the greater cruelty of *halal* and *schechita* (Jewish) slaughter methods. The NSS joined other animal welfare groups in calling for the introduction of pre-stunning, so that animals are unconscious when their throats are cut and they are bled to death in the manner prescribed by Jewish and Islamic law.

- **CONSULTED** with the Independent Television Commission regarding the regulation of programmes featuring purported "psychics", "clairvoyants" and "mediums".

- **OBJECTED** to the appointment of athlete Jonathan Edwards, a born-again Christian, to the Content Board of the new TV regulator Ofcom. We protested that Mr Edwards' much-proclaimed evangelical Christianity would not allow him to adjudicate fairly on complaints about "taste and decency". Our complaint was taken up by the media and caused much debate. The NSS was quoted in *Radio Times*, *BBC Online* and the *Guardian* as well as regional papers where Mr Edwards lives.

- **PROVIDED** evidence in 1992 to the House of Lords Religious Offences Select Committee, which issued its report last summer. Although it was highly critical of blasphemy law and repeated many of our objections, the Committee was not able to reach a consensus on its abolition. The committee had intended to recommend the introduction of a new offence of "incitement to religious hatred". The NSS had argued that introducing such a new offence would be impossible without seriously compromising freedom of expression. After considering the various options, the committee was unable to find a safe way to bring this law into effect. The Crown Prosecution Service has, however, made clear that it intends to prosecute more cases that have a "religiously aggravated" motive. If an offence can be shown to be "religiously aggravated" the prison sentence can be increased to up to seven years.

The NSS has raised the alarm about this development, seeing the potential for it to become a new and much more powerful form of blasphemy law. There is an increasing and worrying tendency by government agencies to seek to treat religious "offences" similarly to race offences. It is worried that religiously aggravated offences such as insulting behaviour will gradually expand from covering insults of the person to insults of the religion. Such concerns have been raised by the Executive Director at a meeting with a minister at the Home Office.

- **SUBMITTED** a response to the Government's consultation on the establishment of a single equality body that is proposed to take over the duties of the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality and also

to include religion and belief and sexual orientation. The Society also submitted a response to the Government's consultation on a legally recognised partnership register for same-sex couples.

- **PARTICIPATED** in several high-profile debates this year and Council members gave talks at local groups around the country. The President is particularly active in this field, having spoken, for example, at the Oxford Union, Cambridge University Humanist Group, the Inns of Court Christian Society (supported by Jennifer Jaynes). She and the Bishop of Woolwich (who also supports disestablishment) were the movers of a debate at the Oxford Union on this subject. Ian Andrews debated at the University of Durham. Dan Bye spoke on Education at a Lib Dem conference.

Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood was the principal speaker at the 2003 Annual Conference of the Humanist Society of Scotland. Terry Sanderson was the keynote speaker at Sheffield Humanist Society's tenth Anniversary Conference on Religious Fundamentalism. Council members Ian Andrews and Malcolm Trahearn attended the National SACRE meeting in Birmingham. This led to representations to Education Secretary Charles Clarke about a more positive representation for non-religious standpoints in any new national syllabus.

THE NSS's profile in the media continues to grow. As well as stories in all the serious newspapers, the NSS has contributed to dozens of radio programmes and many TV programmes over the past year. One of the highlights included Vice President Terry Sanderson being featured on the *One o' Clock News* on BBC1 in an item about superstition, when he was filmed walking under ladders and breaking mirrors (not to mention stepping on cracks in the pavement). Another was Barbara Smoker's appearance on BBC1's *Heaven and Earth Show*, when she memorably described the NSS as "the trade union for atheists".

The Executive Director has kept up his relentless round of media appearances, dashing from the World Service to Radio Scotland to the *Today* programme and BBC1. Terry Sanderson also took part in many broadcasts, some of which were on Radio 2, Radio 5 Live, BBC World Service and Radio Scotland. The NSS ISDN broadcasting equipment has assisted the Executive Director and Vice President in their frequent interviews with radio stations around the country. The President has also taken part in broadcasts, as have other members of Council, and also some members. Most notably, Andy Armitage represented the Society on the *Sunday Programme* calling to account an international charity called Samaritan's Purse, which is closely associated with fundamentalist preacher Franklin

Graham. The charity collects gifts in this country for disadvantaged children abroad. What the donors do not appreciate is that Bible tracts are inserted in the gifts or made available when they are distributed. As a result of these protests, some organisations have now ceased to support this charity.

The Executive Director has briefed dozens of journalists with the facts they need for their stories, and have provided sound-bites galore. He has featured in the *Observer*, the *Guardian*, the *Times* and the *Times Educational Supplement*, as well as many smaller, but nevertheless influential journals. The NSS was also been quoted in many regional newspapers.

EDWARD P Tolley Jr is an American lawyer, and his book *Beach Blanket Atheism* is subtitled *The Beginner's Guide for the Non-Believer*. It is funny, wise and clever, and has some amusing cartoons in it by Jeff Swenson, whose simple, direct style serves very well to point up the kinds of ludicrous religious contradictions and imbecilities we all know and love so well.

Genuinely funny books presenting the case for atheism and for a rational approach to living are rarer than hen's teeth and should therefore be warmly welcomed. This is just such a book.

So why did I end up wanting to throw it across the room in sheer frustration? Not for any wrongdoing on the part of Mr Tolley, for sure. How could I, when he writes so well? And how could I possibly complain about the wide range of quotations he has included, or about the extensive range of authors he has selected to quote from? And how could I complain about the clarity of his expositions of sometimes difficult notions? I can't.

But I can complain about the kind of outrageously slack editing that allows a book that could have been really excellent to be merely OK.

What are the problems with it? The first is repetition. Identical quotes appear again and again throughout the text – often so closely together that they end up on consecutive pages.

The second problem concerns referencing. Some of the quotes are so good, so sharp, that I would have loved to have known where they came from. All we are given, however, (with a few rare exceptions) is the author's name. It is true that this is not an academic work – but if Mr Tolley is seriously intent (and I think that he is) upon challenging and changing minds, then to deny readers the chance of further exploration is rather cruel. It is certainly unnecessary. Good editing could have wiped out this problem at source. A few pages of notes could easily have been combined with the useful bibliography that the book does contain. The effect would have been transformative.

The third problem is that the book has been carelessly proffered in respect of small details. There is a world of difference between "William Black" and "William Blake", for example. "Sloan Gary" may or may not be "Gary Sloan". The

The NSS also appeared in the *EU Observer*, *Psychic News*, the *Church Times*, *The Tablet*, the *National Catholic Register* as well as on German radio and several US stations. Our fame is growing and, as a result, so is our membership.

Four more Honorary Associates have joined the NSS distinguished panel during year. They are:

- GRAHAM ALLEN, Labour MP for Nottingham North. He was named "Backbencher of the Year" in the Channel 4 Political Awards Ceremony.
- MICHAEL CASHMAN, the campaigning MEP for the West Midlands. He is also a member of the Labour Party's National

Executive and is working hard to ensure that the EU Employment Directive is fairly applied.

- PAUL HOLMES, MP for Chesterfield. He is the Lib Dem front-bench spokesperson on disability, and sits on the Commons Education and Skills Committee. He has been very helpful with technical information on the NSS's schools campaign.
- MARTIN ROWSON, the famous political cartoonist. His work appears regularly in the *Guardian*, *Mirror*, *Scotsman*, *Independent on Sunday* and *Tribune*. He was voted Political Cartoonist of the Year in 2000 and is cartoonist laureate for London.

Book Reviews

names Marlon Brando and Sean Penn both appear twice in a list of "unbelievers" in the entertainment field. I picked up all this, and much more, on my first reading of the book. If I could do it so easily, why did no-one at Sterling House? After all, they're the publishers. Shame on them.

NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews

***Beach Blanket Atheism*, by Edward P Tolley Jr. Published by Sterling House 2003 ISBN 1 58501 043 X, paperback 188 pages; and *Keeping His Promise* by Enver Carim. Published by Funky Narratives 2003. ISBN 0 9545667 0 X Paperback 348 pages, £7.99**

Despite all this, *Beach Blanket Atheism* is a good book that deserves an audience. Mr Tolley's writing has bite, and his thinking lies squarely within the tradition of really tough minded, combative rationalism. It's an astringent read and manages to steer that difficult path between hectoring preachiness and rationalist "superiority" very well indeed. Those who incline towards or share Mr Tolley's views will be amused and uplifted by it. Readers with religious beliefs will be very cross with it. Much of it made me smile, and a number of times I laughed out loud. It is for this reason that I suggest that those without a sense of humour avoid it entirely. If jokes like "Why don't Baptists make love standing up? Because they are afraid it will lead to dancing" tickle you, then give Tolley a try. You will not be disappointed.

READERS of fiction should seek out *Keeping His Promise* by Enver Carim. It is a thoughtful, intelligent, interesting and informative novel set

in post-apartheid South Africa. It manages to raise a host of important issues within the framework of a gripping story, and to keep a balance between narrative tension and emotional exploration. Its subtitle *Exploring Mandela's Emotional Legacy* is entirely apt.

Enver Carim is new to fiction, but is not only a novelist. He has co-written a book on the Aids epidemic, has a PhD in cognitive psychology, was for fifteen years the publications manager of the highly respected National Foundation for Educational Research, and was commissioning editor for a number of business intelligence yearbooks (to list just a selection of his activities). A South African himself, he lives in England.

The plot is essentially simple. Jerry D'Arcy, just on the point of turning eighteen, has his whole world turned upside down when his father, a jazz musician, bandleader and composer, is murdered by white supremacists on his own doorstep. Rennie D'Arcy answers a knock, calls out the names of the visitors, whom he recognises, and dies in a hail of bullets. The two assassins speed off into the night.

Rennie's action in calling out the names give Jerry the information he needs and he resolves upon vengeance. He will kill the murderers just as they killed his father – coldly, clinically, and ruthlessly.

In some ways Jerry is a symbol. One of the central questions for South Africa since the ending of apartheid has been that of what to do about and with those who supported (and presently continue to support) the old regime, those who committed acts of repression, torture and murder on its behalf and in furtherance of its aims. The Truth And Reconciliation Commission, internationally much lauded as a solution to the problem, is not universally supported, and in this book Enver Carim explores some of the ambiguities surrounding attitudes to the work of the Commission – mainly the central one of how it can be said to offer the kind of justice many of those who have suffered truly deserve and desire. To his credit he offers no easy solutions.

What prevents Jerry from being merely a symbol is the richness and complexity of Carim's

(Continued on page 12)

portrayal of him. He is awakening sexually, politically, and intellectually, and is just beginning to grasp precisely how multilayered and interconnected the world and his relationship with it actually is. Enver Carim is particularly adept at describing the young man's growing awareness of his body and of girls (who fascinate and scare him). His reflections will chime with anyone of either sex who can still recall the mysteries of late adolescence.

Jerry, however, is not just a likeable and sensitive boy. He is also a boy who has made a promise – one that will turn him into a killer. Enver Carim handles this split well and manages

to connect it (without being heavy-handed) with the dilemma of the country as a whole, raising as he does so many questions about how decent human beings ought to deal with apparently insoluble moral problems. It really is the case that, for Jerry, the personal is the political.

It should be obvious by now that Jerry is not white. Yet he has white friends as well as black, and no problem with the idea that whites, even Afrikaner whites, can be Africans. One of the strengths of the novel is that it does not deal in simplified, cartoon portrayals but is able to explore the richness of individual responses.

One of the strongest sections (for me at least)

was that within which Jerry meditates upon the simple strangeness of being in the world – and it's here perhaps most strongly that the secular-rationalist basis of the book is most obvious. Being in the world is odd, and one is oneself very odd indeed – an animal, at bottom (though an exceedingly complicated one), caught in a complex web of ultimately untraceable causes. Enver Carim's handling of Jerry's internal monologue at this point is vivid and thought-provoking and feels both accurate and very real.

In order to achieve his murderous objective Jerry learns how to shoot. Carim is good with his description of the process, and cleverly interweaves into these sections much historical and sociological information given from the mouth of his teacher. In fact, readers will imbibe quite a good deal of information about South Africa and its history from the book. I got the feeling that he wanted to use the story in order to educate the uninformed. At times this interferes with the pace, and the transitions are sometimes a little awkward between action and the moments of pedagogy – but since more is gained than is lost the book as a whole does not suffer in consequence.

The first vengeance killing is done quickly, but the second is more problematic and much of the novel and its plot development hinges upon how Jerry is to locate his target and kill him without risk to himself. Here Enver Carim brings together the young man's increasingly urgent need to find sexual experience and fulfillment and to find some way by which he can waylay and dispose of his target. He achieves this by means of a relationship with a young white blind girl, to whom he is introduced (and here Carim brings off some wonderfully tense description) by a journalist friend who was also a friend of his father. My first thoughts were that this was an implausible twist – but the author, against expectation, succeeds very well in making what could have been a very sentimental solution seem strangely right. He describes their relationship, including the sexual one, with great sensitivity and delicacy.

The only scene that seemed superfluous and gratuitous was one towards the end of the book in which Jerry was involved in the rescue of some children from a drowning accident. This reader, at least, had difficulty in relating it to the rest of the plot and in seeing how it illuminated anything more than what we had already learned about Jerry and his character. It's a small point, however, and other readers may well disagree.

The book succeeds on a number of levels. The plot is good, the writing clear and clean, and the secondary characters are well drawn and complicated enough to be interesting in their own right. Adult readers will enjoy it – but it will appeal perhaps especially to readers in their teens, who will find in Jerry someone who is able to articulate many of their concerns, perplexities and confusions. I hope that Enver Carim is writing another novel. I hope too that if and when it appears it will be as well-produced as this one. My mole-like eyes gave thanks on every page for the excellent typeface and bright paper.

Enver Carim, we myopics salute you.

This month sees the return of the *Freethinker* Toshpot, a mish-mash of ridiculous, irrational and downright stupid quotes from the mouths of the religious. Here we offer a selection of daft words, ancient and modern, about women.

"EQUALITY does not take precedence over justice. Justice does not mean that all laws must be the same for men and women. One of the mistakes Westerners make is to forget this. The differences in the stature, vitality, voice, development, muscular quality and physical strength of men and women show that men are stronger and more capable in all fields. Men's brains are bigger, so men are more inclined to fight and women are more excitable. Men are inclined to reasoning and rationalism, while women have a fundamental tendency to be emotional. The tendency to protect is stronger in men, whereas most women like to be protected. Such differences affect the delegation of responsibilities, duties, and rights."

– Hashemi Rafsanjani, former President Of The Islamic Republic Of Iran

"ANY woman who does not give birth to as many children as she is capable is guilty of murder."

– St Augustine

"RAIL as they will about 'discrimination,' women are simply not endowed by nature with the same measures of single-minded ambition and the will to succeed in the fiercely competitive world of Western capitalism."

– Pat Buchanan, right-wing Christian American politician and commentator

"WOMEN should not be enlightened or educated in any way. They should, in fact, be segregated, as they are the cause of hideous and involuntary erections in holy men."

– St Augustine

"I LISTEN to feminists and all these radical gals – most of them are failures. They've blown it. Some of them have been married, but they married some Casper Milquetoast who asked permission to go to the bathroom. These women just need a man in the house. That's all they need. Most of the feminists need a man to tell them what time of day it is and to lead them home. And they blew it and they're mad at all men. Feminists hate men. They're sexist. They hate men – that's their problem."

– American televangelist Jerry Falwell

"TO find a virtuous woman is like finding the one eel in a bag with 500 venomous snakes. And if you grope in the bag and find the eel you have but a wet and slimy eel by the tail."

– St Alban of Alexandria

"AS regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex, while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence."

– Thomas Aquinas

If you come across a quote you think appropriate for the Toshpot, please send it to The Toshpot, the *Freethinker*, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD.



Art and religion

COME on now Mr Editor, you are not trying to pretend that Clive Greedus (*Freethinker*, November 2003) is real. His article "Why Art is the Greedy Twin of Religion" must be a leg-pull. It is so packed with bloody-minded ignorance it can't be true. For instance, when rich people or organisations spend huge amounts of money on art for their own selfish ends, or because they enjoy it, why blame the artist? That's just stupid.

Blame the wealthy, and religious organisations too perhaps, for wasting money others have earned by effort and skill. Blame the religious for being irrational, but don't blame me for enjoying Bach's music just because some of it was paid for by a stingy Lutheran church or by stinkingly rich aristocrats. If they had spent their money on drink instead of on Bach's music I, and a few million others, would never have been able to enjoy it. When his religious music is sung in German I don't get put off by the words. Any words will do. It is the music that matters to most of us. The same goes for the crazily expensive cathedrals and temples. Thank goodness they spent their ill-gotten gains on temples instead of doing what many top people do, wasting it on attempting to kill the wrong enemy.

Go on *Freethinker*, tell us you were mocking your readers.

PETER ARNOLD
Alderney

Brights

I WAS disappointed to see that the only response to Dr Massimo Pigliucci's article about "brights" (*Freethinker*, October 2003) was a pejorative one by K Moore (*Points of View* November). I think "bright" is an excellent idea.

I had missed Richard Dawkins' article in the *Guardian* so I looked it up on the internet in the public library to see what he had to say. His definition of a bright "is a person whose world view is free of supernatural and mystical elements. The ethics and actions of a bright are based on a naturalistic world view." I also discovered a list of "Enthusiastic Brights" which included himself, Daniel C Dennett and James Randi, amongst others.

I have spoken with people in the past who, while admitting to having no religious beliefs nor believing that the universe is a haunted house, when I've said that I was an atheist they have insisted that they were not and intimated that it was time to change the subject.

Taking on board K Moore's point that to call oneself an atheist is to define oneself according to some one else's superstitious beliefs, I shall now call myself a bright.

Unfortunately I have also spoken with quite a few humanists and freethinkers who wouldn't qualify as brights. They are the types who say with an air of certainty that "we can't be certain of anything" which includes the possibility of the supernatural. The same type assume a wise expression as they quote Shakespeare's "There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio than

are dreamt of in your philosophy." Once again with the implication that supernatural mystical forces might exist.

The "bright" idea has inspired me to think seriously about getting my own computer so that I can contact and communicate with other brights.

JIM CASS
Co Durham

K MOORE'S letter complaining about the use of the word bright to describe freethinkers is interesting (*Points of View*, November 2003). He finds it "Disneysque". I think "bright" is wonderful. It's open and friendly. It's catchy. And when all is said and done, to think carefully for yourself without letting yourself go along with the unjust bias that religion connives to implant in us from childhood is being bright. To me, the word bright is about being an independent thinker and recognising that any religious group or God has no right to order us what to think. After all, why let another think for you when you can do it yourself and when somebody had to think up the dogmas religion tells you to believe in the first place?

Deep down we want to decide all things for ourselves; it is just that some of us are too scared to do it and end up exploited by religious people. It is bright to recognise that universal need.

K Moore says he'd prefer a word that described his beliefs and not his disbeliefs. But to believe x is to deny whatever contradicts it. To disbelieve x is to affirm what is against it. Disbeliefs are more important than beliefs because if I believe, say, that there is no God, I will have more disbeliefs than beliefs. I mean I will disbelieve in pantheism, theism, deism, agnosticism and all those other countless isms. The belief in theism then is less important because it is only one belief while the disbelief is more important for it is disbelieving far more propositions. So there is nothing shameful about any term that emphasises disbelief. A disbelief is a belief itself. It is believing that something is untrue. It is positive in the only way that matters – you reject what you see as false in order to serve the truth. It is easier to unite people in what they do not believe than in what they do believe. If people want to use a term that emphasises their disbeliefs then good luck to them. But there is no doubt that bright does not do this. It emphasises belief in yourself, that you can be free from religious conditioning and think for yourself.

PATRICK GORMLEY
Eire

I AM completely convinced of the truth of our basic humanist principles (no God, no afterlife), and if I feel any twinges of doubt I find these can be settled very quickly either by the enjoyable process of re-reading people like Dawkins and Russell or by the depressing process of listening for a few minutes to any of the BBC's nonsensical religious programmes.

However, I am becoming increasingly worried about our claims that, as Norman Pridmore put it

when applauding Fergus Stokes' Radio Four remarks (*Freethinker*, July 2003), humanism offers "an intelligent and coherent case for a rational and purely secular ethic". If Fergus can, in fact, make such a case I hope he will write an article for the *Freethinker* spelling it out, as I have not yet found anything which does so convincingly. I fear that our claims on this subject may be exactly the kind of woolly views based on hope rather than fact or logic which we rightly criticise when expressed by believers.

My worries are exemplified by Norman's quotation from Roy Saich later in the same article, which suggests that humanists can easily solve all ethical questions by simply equating moral rightness with maximising pleasure. I feel our problems are a great deal harder than that, as the following example shows. Imagine a 45-year-old man, married to a wife of his own age and with their children about to leave home, whose 30-year-old secretary would like to have an affair with him. If he is a religious believer, his morally correct action in this situation is of course obvious; he should re-read his marriage vows and remain faithful to his wife. But if he is a "god-forsaken humanist", he can argue that his wife won't know about the affair so her happiness will not be reduced by it, while his own and his secretary's happiness will be greatly increased. On the Epicurus/Mill/Saich view, therefore, his morally correct action is to have the affair. A further ethical question may then arise a few months later, when if the affair is going well he will find that he must choose between giving up either his wife or his mistress. Applying the greatest happiness principle again, he can argue that the result of making either choice will be about equal as far as the two women's total happiness is concerned, since whichever he abandons will be made miserable while the other will be made happier. But his genes and instincts are telling him forcibly that he will himself be much happier if he leaves his wife and starts a new family with his young mistress, so on humanist principles that is the morally correct action to take.

A humanist ethical code based on maximising pleasure thus appears to be saying that it is morally right for a married man to have an affair, to lie to his wife about it, to break his marital promises and to leave his wife for the younger woman. Is this really the message we want to give to potential recruits to secularism? It hardly seems to support Norman's view that "...most people [including humanists] behave with a degree of decency and seem to agree on some basic ideas of what constitutes moral behaviour".

Another problem with the humanist argument that a purely secular system of ethics will support conventional "decent" morality is the large number of well-publicised examples of the actual behaviour of highly intelligent humanists, past and present. To take just one, consider Bertrand Russell. Apparently a genius-level mathematician, certainly a brilliant popular anti-religious writer, but his personal moral code seems to have involved repeatedly making whatever public promises of

life-long faithfulness were necessary to persuade a girl to marry him, then ditching her as soon as a younger more attractive one became available.

I am sure there is a very real and difficult problem for us as humanists in finding a moral code with a purely rational basis which when observed will maximise both the happiness of individual people and of society in general. However Fergus Stokes must be right that "absolutes founded on myth are clearly the wrong absolutes to have", so I look forward to reading his alternative suggestions, and of course those of other people. These might be particularly interesting if expressed as "advice to our children", aimed at say 12-15 year olds, facing the ethical problems of how to behave in modern British society.

SLADE PENOYRE
Surrey

Was Jesus a Buddhist?

IN HIS penetrating article (*Freethinker*, November 2003) on the antipathy of the Christian church to scientific advance through the centuries, Reg Le Sueur "suggests" that Jesus may have been a Buddhist.

Jesus of Nazareth appears to have developed his own distinctive theology throughout his preaching life, but that his ideas were most strongly influenced by an 18-year sojourn in Buddhist and Hindu India between the ages of 12 and 30 is, to my mind, an acceptable historical fact that it is difficult to refute after reading the powerfully researched *A Search for the Historical Jesus* (ISBN 0 94655199 5) by the late Professor Fida Hassnain, Director of the Kashmir State Archives and Museums 1954-84 and formerly Professor of Historical Research, SP College, Srinagar.

Drawing on Sanskrit and Urdu texts familiar to Buddhist and Moslem historians but generally unknown or rejected in the Christian west, Professor Hassnain relates how Jesus of Nazareth, a precocious Bible pupil, was so attracted to the novel ideas of a group of Buddhist savants who visited the Jewish temple in Jerusalem that he accompanied them on their return to India and eventually settled for years at a time at two Buddhist centres, the temple at Jaganath on the east coast, and the Buddha's birthplace in Nepal. Jesus also visited the Hindu holy city of Benares before returning to Judea after an 18-year absence that had lasted more than half his 33-year lifetime. This is the period of Jesus' life, from age 12 to age 30 about which the New Testament is entirely silent.

I am not a theologian but I am prepared to accept Professor Hassnain's claim that the Sermon on the Mount shows clear Buddhist influence. And further evidence indicates that Jesus' connection with India was so close that, after being rescued from the gallows by friends while still alive, like a number of other convicted criminals, before the three days had expired that it normally took a victim to die, he found his way to the existing Jewish community in Kashmir where he lived and preached for many years and where hereditary custodians still main-

tain the tomb of Jesus (locally known as Yuzu Asaph) under authority of decree of 1766 of the High Court of the Kingdom of Kashmir.

As I understand Dr Le Sueur, the rise of Christian teaching took advantage from a climate of scepticism in the Graeco-Roman world that produced an other-worldliness that had little time for scientific enquiry and in time pooh-poohed the discoveries of Galileo and his successors. Historical research was another victim. The forgotten books of the Apocrypha and Professor Hassnain's book all deserve to be better known.

NICK JENNER
Sussex

F A Ridley

IN THE December 2003 issue of the *Freethinker* appears an article by Bill McIlroy critical of my pamphlet, *The Gentle Revolutionary*; a short biographical study of F A Ridley, one-time president of the NSS and editor of the *Freethinker*, which has been published by the recently-founded Freethought History Research Group. Although the article appears in the reviews section of paper, it can hardly be described as constituting one, as its author directs his attention almost exclusively to four paragraphs on a single page out of a total of 27.

The intemperate tone of the article should be self-evident to anyone reading it, and the reason for this would seem to be that Mr McIlroy is currently mesmerised by a belief that in 1962 there was a sinister conspiracy involving Ridley's supporters on the NSS Executive Committee to get rid of the then secretary, and so take control of the Society. This belief emerges clearly when he writes, "It is hardly surprising that Robert Morrell makes no reference to the unscrupulous campaign that a faction conducted to drive Colin McCall, the general secretary, from office". However, there is nothing surprising about my failure to refer to such a campaign for the very simple reason that there is no evidence in the EC minutes indicative of there being one. Perhaps this is why Mr McIlroy refers to what he imagines to be my selectivity with them. Nor is there evidence from other sources, which include Mr McIlroy himself, for he appears to have overlooked the fact that following the Eric Paine Memorial Lecture in London last March, which we both attended, I discussed my research and asked him, as one who had known and worked with Ridley, for his opinion of him. At that time, nor in subsequent telephone conversations, did he refer to the plot he now pontificates about.

For the most part, Mr McIlroy's comments on my pamphlet may be said to be characterised by sweeping generalisations devoid of facts, vitriolic personal innuendos levelled against individuals he lacks the courage to identify, factual inaccuracies and invective directed towards me personally for being sympathetic in respect of Ridley, an accusation I do not deny. But sympathy is not "flattery", a fact I would have thought even Mr McIlroy was capable of realising.

Apart from these comments, I see no point in making a detailed, point-by-point response to my

critic's bad-tempered polemic. Anyone interested can readily discover for themselves whether what I wrote about Ridley, specifically in this instance his connection with the NSS, is accurate and reasonable, particularly as I support my statements with references to sources as well as identifying those who passed on their recollections of him to me when necessary. If Mr McIlroy has reason to detest Ridley, as is suggested by his final paragraph, so be it, but if he must express this publicly, I, for one, sincerely hope he will abandon fantasy and stick to facts.

ROBERT MORRELL
Nottingham

WHEN Bill McIlroy set out to write a review of *The Gentle Revolutionary*, Robert Morrell's short biography of FA Ridley, he seems to have dipped his pen into a large vat of vitriol (*Freethinker*, December 2003). Indeed, it reads more like an explosion of angry spleen than a review.

The Freethought History Research Group did not publish this pamphlet to reactivate old disputes or open old wounds. We published it because we felt that Ridley had made a significant contribution to the causes of both secularism and socialism which deserves to be better known than it is at present. That is also why we have republished Ridley's pamphlet *Socialism and Religion*.

The FHRG has a number of members who are also members of the National Secular Society. None of them has complained about the content of the pamphlet. The only complaint we have had is Mr McIlroy's.

If Mr McIlroy cares to write his own history of the NSS in the period in question, I feel sure it would be carefully considered for publication in the FHRG's journal. All that is asked of him is that he is objective and refrains from rancour and personal insults. Such do not make for good history or good reading.

I was not party to the events Mr McIlroy describes and therefore feel unqualified to comment. However, for the record I worked with Ridley in the late 1960s when we both wrote for the Independent Labour Party's weekly *Socialist Leader*, and Robert Morrell worked with him when Ridley was a Vice-President of the Thomas Paine Society.

I suggest that readers judge the pamphlet for themselves. It can be had for £2 plus postage from FHRG, 83, Sowerby Close, London, SE9 6EZ. Make cheques payable to T Liddle.

TERRY LIDDLE
Secretary, Freethought
History Research Group
London

Progressive education

BRIAN King (*Points of View*, December 2003) writes of the needs of "ordinary children" in his letter deprecating Summerhill school and "progressive education". Who are these "ordinary children"? All the children I've ever known have been anything but ordinary.

He's quite right about the baleful influence of Rousseau, of course – but when I did my



teacher-training in the middle of those decades of "child-centred education" he refers to (the sixties, seventies and eighties) the main theoretical influence was Piaget. We read Rousseau mainly to criticise his ideas (and criticise we certainly did, especially when teaching practice placements loomed and we were all stricken with terror at the thought of how we would maintain classroom discipline).

I'm all for literacy and numeracy, and if a particular child is happy in his or her school then fine. But there should (indeed must) be alternatives for those children who for whatever reason cannot cope with or flourish in "normal" schools. And there should also perhaps be a long hard look taken at "normal" schools and at "normal" education in general. There may well be a causal link between the increasing demands placed upon children and the apparent rise in levels of depression and anxiety, self-harm, eating disorders and suicide among them.

The main point I would wish to make is that if we are to be strictly rational in our approach to education we need to recognise that the way in which children are presently educated may be deeply flawed. We should be prepared to question and challenge whatever the conventional wisdom of the day happens to be. And not for merely contrarian reasons, either, but with a view to improving matters. Children are not fodder to feed the economy, so why hot-house and battery-raise them as though they were?

As for anarchism and utopianism – well, I can see no fundamental contradiction between these and true (critically-minded) rationalism. For myself I'm neither (entirely) an anarchist nor a utopian despite my youthful flings with both of these noble traditions – but I would call myself a libertarian. Perhaps in Mr Blair's yearned-for technocratic meritocracy, with its "bread and circuses" mentality, people like me will just be irritating anachronisms. But in the long run (and I mean centuries), I suspect we won't.

NORMAN PRIDMORE
Sleaford

Circumcision

AS A fellow circumcised gay man, but one done by choice as an adult. I hope you will not be misled by the moaning Mr Veauce of Manchester. Being in a position to compare before and after states I can assure you that you are not missing much. I am, however, intrigued as to why Mr Veauce should imagine that gay men, cut or otherwise, might have an interest in promoting circumcision. Perhaps it is a quiet admission that those in the best position to know (ie those who have intimately examined and tested more of the relevant items than most ever even get to see) have discovered something – that the trimmed variety are cleaner and perform better. Whilst these observations are certainly true, the majority of gay men I have asked for an opinion have expressed indifference.

Before rushing to condemn the practice it may be prudent to consider the facts first. I agree that to snip a baby purely for reasons of superstition,

tradition, or just personal preference, is unacceptable, but if that snip confers benefits that outweigh the risks then everything changes. It has long been known that the circumcised are almost immune to penile cancer, have lower incidences of various infections and STDs and, of course, never get phimosis (the most common reason for adult circumcisions in the UK). Nevertheless, medical authorities could not agree on whether these were enough to justify the procedure. Then AIDS entered the equation.

There are now dozens of studies showing that circumcision hinders female to male transmission of HIV. The principal way the virus passes from a woman to a man is through the inside lining of the foreskin. If only your black countrymen had received, as babies, the same consideration you did they would not now be dropping like flies. That is not to say circumcision is foolproof. It works only for female to male transmission (a fat lot of use to us queers) and even then is only partially effective (even so, a 50-percent reduction translates into millions of lives saved; some studies indicate much greater efficacy). Nevertheless it is effective enough to have, so far, contained the worst of the African epidemic to those countries where most men are uncircumcised.

In the light of this I would advise against jumping on the anti-circumcision bandwagon. As a vaccine is a distant dream, or even impossible (as some scientists are beginning to suspect), we must consider other options. A simple established procedure, which has already saved millions of Africans, should not be condemned for what are essentially ideological objections. Do we really want to condemn circumcision because it offends our principles, just as the Pope condemns condoms because they offend his, when the result is the loss of a potent weapon against AIDS? Unlike condoms, foreskins really do let the virus through.

Properly done, by which I mean done by a medically trained person taking appropriate hygienic and pain-killing precautions, circumcision is at worst harmless, at best life-saving. What we should be condemning are back-street clowns with razor blades attacking infants. This is exactly what happened to little Callis, the Irish-Nigerian baby whose death could so easily have been avoided if the proper facilities for a safe circumcision had been more readily available.

STEPHEN MORETON
Cheshire

Resurrection and Cannibalism

WITH regards to "No Resurrection, No Christianity" (*Freethinker*, November 2003), I should point out that in the fourth book of *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas addresses several putative difficulties attendant on resurrection of the body.

At first glance, one objection appears weighty. Imagine an inveterate cannibal, himself the offspring of cannibals, who has never eaten anything but human flesh. His body, it seems, comprises sundry bits and pieces of his victims. But

what about his victims? Must they spend eternity mangled and piecemeal?

The resourceful saint banishes the specious objection. He assures the uneasy reader that digestive processes reconstitute the matter that composes the individual body. Hence, cannibals don't retain custody of ingested parts. Their victims will be resurrected in plenary majesty.

GARY SLOAN
USA

Homophobia

ONCE more Michael Hill rides his homo-hounding hobby horse.

Methinks he protests too much. Calm down Michael and let me explain something: human sexuality is on a continuum, ranging from full heterosexuality to full homosexuality with many gradations in between. Good luck to them all; I don't care a toss what anybody does provided nobody gets hurt.

Rationalists should know better than to get hung up about sex. We can leave that to the Christians and their batty Bible.

TONY AKKERMANS
Shropshire

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Events & Contacts

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, January 4, 4.30pm. Public Meeting. Sunday, February 1, 4.30pm. Robert Stovold: *Life: How Did it Get Here - Evolution or Creation?*

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

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 01959 574691. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851.

Cornwall Humanists: Information: Patricia Adams, Sappho, Church Road, Lelant, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 3LA. Tel: 01736 754895.

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleevelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel 01242 528743.

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

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. Email: info@devonhumanists.org.uk. Website: www.devonhumanists.org.uk.

Ealing Humanists: Information: Secretary Alex Hill 0208 741 7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group: Information: Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

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

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel 01926 858450. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday, January 9, 7.30pm. *Gays in the Catholic Church – a Personal Account*.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: June Kamel 01925 824844. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

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: Jean Condon 01708 473597.

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428502. Moordown Community Centre, Bournemouth. Saturday, February 7, 2pm. Ros Cole: *Freedom and Determinism*.

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. Website: www.humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Humanist Society of Scotland – Dundee Group: Contact secretary Ron McLaren, Spierhill, St Andrews, Fife KY16 8NB. Tel: 01334 474551. Email: humanist@spierhill.fsworld.co.uk.

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, January 13, 7.30pm. D S Bell: *What Price a Republic?*

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Henness. Tel. 07010

704776. Email: alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

Perth Group: Information: Terry Martin, Tel: 01250 874742. Email: perth@humanism.scotland.org.uk

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Website: <http://homepages.stayfree.co.uk/Iss>. Public Meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Programme from above address.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Thursday, January 29, 8pm. Barbara Smoker: *Down With Political Correctness*.

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: the Secretary on 01434 632936.

North Stafford & South Cheshire Humanists: Information: Sue Willson on 01782 662693. Newsletter and details of programme available.

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.

Plymouth Secular Society: Information: Jenny Hynes on 01752 516272 (evenings only). Website: www.plymouth-secularists.org.uk. Monthly meetings and other events.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, January 7, 8pm: Frank Abel: *Review of 2003*.

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: 0208 773 0631. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282.

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

West Kent Secular Humanist Group: Information: Ken Allen . Tel: 01892 863002.. E-mail: ken@kallen14.fsnet.com.

Ulster Humanist Association. Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264.

E-mail: brianmclinton@aol.com
website: www.ulsterhumanist.freesevers.com

Please send your listings and events notices to:

Bill McIlroy, Flat 3, Somerhill Lodge, Somerhill Road,
Hove, Sussex BN3 1RU.

Notices must be received by the 15th of the month
preceding publication