

The Freethinker

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PRIVILEGED RELIGIOUS BODIES ABOVE THE LAW AND CODES OF PRACTICE

The recent destruction of a London Georgian church interior by Muslims was fiercely criticised by Barbara Smoker in her presidential address to the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society in London last month. "Paradoxically enough", she said, "atheists have always been more concerned about the preservation of old churches, cathedrals and synagogues, than those who continue to have the use of this architectural heritage for obsolete religious purposes".

Miss Smoker was referring to a building in Fournier Street, Spitalfields, which started life in 1743 as a Huguenot chapel. It later became a Wesleyan chapel, and until recently was used as a synagogue.

The building was acquired by Muslims who wanted to transform it into a mosque, with a completely new interior. Barbara Smoker described what happened when the vandals of Allah struck on 13 October.

"One of the most complete surviving 18th-century galleried church interiors in London was legally destroyed with pickaxes and chainsaws while conservationists looked on in helpless horror and frustration. The chairman of Save Britain's Heritage commented: 'Nobody thought that this building could be treated so brutally'. My own comment is that such deliberate destruction of an irreplaceable thing of beauty and history is — to put religious terms to appropriate metaphorical use — a 'sin' and a 'sacrilege' . . .

"Any individual, or any secular organisation, wishing to carry out such an act of architectural vandalism would have to obtain planning permission to do so, and permission would almost certainly have been refused in this case. But places of religious worship are exempt under English law from the general requirements of planning permission.

"Religious bodies are above the planning laws, as

they are above so many other laws and codes of practice which apply to everyone else.

"For instance, all religious bodies, even pernicious religious cults that have been denounced in our courts of law as socially harmful, are automatically accorded charity status. This gives them exemption from corporation tax, capital gains tax, and, apart from VAT, every other form of state tax, as well as the statutory remission of half the local authority general rate — or, in the case of C of E churches, the full general rate.

"Yet the Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission, *Faith in the City*, while rightly pointing to the neglect of inner-city areas, did not suggest that the C of E should voluntarily pay rates like the rest of us, so as to help local authorities restore social services depleted as a result of Government cuts. Nor did it suggest that the C of E should re-deploy its vast invested wealth to meet the needs of the community as a whole; or that its thousands of redundant churches and other under-used buildings — many of which, often on prime sites, were originally paid for by compulsory tithes or by donations from the ancestors of unbelievers as well as believers, and all of which have been heavily subsidised out of the public purse ever since — should morally be given back to the community rather than be sold to the highest bidder for their own funds".

Barbara Smoker gave other examples of religious privilege. Earlier this year a Government Bill to remove the preposterous restrictions on Sunday trading was narrowly defeated. In the forefront of the campaign against reform was the Lord's Day Observance Society.

"For well over a century, that body has been the chief opponent of the National Secular Society on the particular issue of a freer Sunday — and it is

(continued on back page)

The Freethinker

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Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

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NEWS

CHRISTMAS SHOPPING GUIDE

Religious toys are big business in the United States, particularly with Bible Belt fundamentalists, and manufacturers expect to make a killing during the Christmas spending spree. Their latest product is a game, the laudable object of which is to "lay up treasure in heaven".

One popular item is a model of a whale into which one of Jonah fits comfortably. Other models have names like Action Jesus, Action Moses and Strongman Samson. For the younger children there are soft toys named Holy Cow, Sanctified Skunk and Born Again Bunny. Labels giving a biblical reference to the character are stitched to their chests.

The biggest manufacturer of these holy horrors is Wee Win Toys, of Houston, Texas. Company vice-chairman James Flanagan claims that Wee Win's toys are alternatives. He declares that forty per cent of American toys are based on television cartoon characters associated with "violence, sorcery, demons, mysticism, magic and mind control".

So what's the difference between the telly-toys and Wee Win's biblically based playthings?

A confectionery company in West Germany has brought on to the Christmas market a product with a strong religious flavour (sorry). But by doing so it has provoked the wrath of the Roman Catholic bishops' conference. The hierarchy strongly objects to the company's Nativity scene, complete with crib, cow and baby Jesus — all edible. It seems odd that men who are constantly presiding at symbolic acts of cannibalism should take exception to this harmless confection.

Those wishing to obtain seasonal gifts with more profound religious associations than Born Again Bunny or an edible Nativity scene will find it difficult to resist an Essex firm's "most original present for Christmas — concentrating our thoughts on Christ and the Holyland" (*sic*).

Dysopp Limited have informed their customers that they "have just received a large shipment of Holy Water from the Holyland". This precious liquid is being retailed at £4.95 a bottle. With every bottle comes a "certificate of genuity" (*sic*), signed by the Superior of the Benedictine Monastery at Tabgha. The certificate is worded: "This is to certify that this bottle contains water from the sacred Jordan River for all spiritual purposes as consecrated by the Church of Bethlehem".

There is still time to acquire this unique Christmas gift for your friends. And remember that orders of

AND NOTES

24 bottles are delivered *free* in the United Kingdom (details on page 193).

PLAIN SPEAKING ON AIDS

The decision by this Government to spend £20 million on a health issue is in itself an indication of the seriousness of the AIDS threat. For once, all the parties at Westminster are in agreement, despite a charge by the Shadow Social Services Secretary that the money allocated is "too little and too late". And MP Leo Abse's criticism of prissy elements in the Conservative Party who are opposed to the use of explicit language in leaflets and posters is probably endorsed by most members on the Government side.

One of the few outright denunciations of the Government's AIDS programme has come from the Conservative Family Campaign, a Christian pressure group that was formed earlier this year. Its sponsors include MPs Sir Bernard Braine, Peter Bruinvels, Dame Jill Knight and Ann Winterton.

In a letter to Lord Whitelaw, head of the Cabinet committee on AIDS, the CFC chairman, Graham Webster-Gardiner, described the Government advertisements as "a waste of taxpayers' money, offensive and an encouragement to experiment with immoral sex and drugs". Mr Webster-Gardiner's alternative to the anti-AIDS campaign is Government support for organisations upholding family values and offering Christian counselling to help homosexuals to refrain from homosexual acts.

Fortunately, the authorities are more likely to be influenced by the Albany Society's briefing paper, "AIDS and Public Policy", a document which combines realism, rationality and compassion. It declares: "Understandable preoccupation with the demands which the spread of AIDS will make on the medical profession and the health services, and the likely scale of financial, human and technical resources which are going to be required, must not be allowed to deflect attention from the growing impact which the spread of AIDS is bound to make upon the character and structure of our society".

The Albany Society warns against "the scapegoating and prejudicial treatment of high-risk groups. . .

"The time is long overdue for every responsible political, religious and civic leader to condemn the vilification and prejudiced treatment of homosexual and bisexual men and women that is still rife in our society. . .

"Yet already, some voices are being raised calling for yet more discrimination, and even punitive legis-

lation, against homosexuals, on the spurious pretext that this will 'help' to curb the spread of AIDS.

"The precise opposite is the truth: because the more demoralised and fearful the homosexual members of society become, if they are faced with mounting public hostility in addition to the escalating number of personal tragedies which AIDS is bringing them, the less likely they will be to seek screening and treatment voluntarily, or to co-operate with preventative health measures".

The Albany Society argues that "open, frank and honest sex education" is essential in combatting AIDS. It urges that "the nettle of explicitness be firmly grasped; otherwise, the expenditure of large quantities of public money will undoubtedly be wasted. . .

"Those who persist in being mealy-mouthed in this situation place others at risk of unnecessary death. It would be unforgivable if either Parliament or Government adopted such a stance".

It is vital that the Government heeds advice from counselling organisations and concerned individuals about the importance of using plain and, when necessary, forthright terms. There are many people whose vocabulary is so limited that they constantly resort to the use of words and phrases that are frowned upon in "polite society". But as the Albany Society points out, "the debatable concept of 'good taste' has no place in this crucial exercise". The authorities must ignore the pleadings of religious pressure groups who are pestering the media to sterilize the language.

One very unpleasant feature of the AIDS scare is its exploitation by fundamentalist preachers and doorstep evangelists who claim that it is an expression of "God's wrath". Cliff Reed, writing in the Unitarian newspaper, *The Inquirer* (22 November), said the idea that AIDS is divine judgement "enjoys considerable support in the ranks of a certain breed of fundamentalist Christian". Mr Reed adds: "The singling out of homosexuals as the people responsible for bringing AIDS upon us is reminiscent of the accusations made during the Black Death of the 14th century that Jews were spreading the plague by poisoning the wells".

Almost as objectionable is the opportunism of Christian elements who are promoting their religious faith through AIDS counselling groups like the Terrence Higgins Trust. This organisation has achieved much by its endeavours to combat ignorance about AIDS and in caring for victims of the disease. Although not specifically Christian, religious services, prayers and ritual have become a feature of its meetings. Many supporters find this religiosity offensive, and unless it is curbed the Trust's reputation will be tarnished. AIDS is far too serious a problem to be used by Christian zealots as an excuse for prosletysing and performance of ritual.

THE BIBLE SAYS . . .

A lady named Kate Dow published a letter in *Radio Times* (22-28 November) complaining that she was disturbed by constant references to evolution in a *World Safari* programme. She goes on to tell readers how it really was.

There wasn't some creature gradually getting a longer and longer trunk, and bigger and bigger ears: God by his marvellous creative force, with which he created the universe, created an elephant. Nothing evolved into a daffodil; and "survival of the fittest" was not the reason for the peacock. The peacock exists because God has an eye for beauty, and the hippopotamus because God has a sense of humour.

Kate Dow's assertion of the creationist case was headed "Evolution Challenge". Small wonder the evolutionists are now in a state of consternation bordering on panic.

Seventh Day Adventists have come a cropper — not for the first time — by announcing the date of the world's end. Adventists in Kenya named 27 November as the fateful day, and declared "there is no need to struggle for development or go to school". They also advised women to leave their husbands and "join a free world where they can serve all men usefully".

CAUTIOUS CATHOLICS

The Association of Natural Family Planning Teachers is perturbed by the lack of Catholic interest in its work. It claims that interest in natural family planning is increasing among non-Catholics. The Association organises teacher-training courses spread over six months to teach the sympto-method of family planning. The course, for which the fee is £30, includes lectures and a written examination.

Molly McGrath, secretary of the ANFPT, commented: "It is very strange, and also sad, that while interest in natural family planning continues to grow, there are so few Catholics among the enquirers".

Perhaps they remember the recent comment by England's leading layman, the Duke of Norfolk, on the Church-approved method of family planning: "My wife and I did it that way. It didn't bloody work".

An escape organisation known to inmates of a Brussels prison as "the travel agency" provided escapees with hack-saw blades, ropes and keys. The "agency" has ceased to operate following a police investigation. The man who ran it is in custody awaiting trial. He is the prison chaplain.

"The Dictatorship of the Sabbataria"

It was a former *Freethinker* editor, Chapman Cohen, who described the arrogant imposition of Sunday restrictions on everyone as "the dictatorship of the sabbataria". Shortly before the 1929 general election he commented on "that curious body", the Lord's Day Observance Society, which intended to press the new Parliament to pass legislation that would "stop all Sunday games and pleasure rides by motor, omnibuses and motor-coaches; stop all Sunday newspapers; stop all Sunday concerts, dances, cinemas, theatres, and the Sunday opening of the Zoo; close all shops of every description on Sunday; close all public houses all day on Sunday".

Cohen's tongue was, in a manner of speaking, poking through his cheek when he proposed: "Legislation of the kind named must be only preparatory. . .

"We ought to get back to the good old days, when 'seizers' were empowered to walk the streets and arrest all who were found walking about during sermon time, or when constables were ordered 'to restrain all persons from swimming, or unnecessary walking in the fields, or following their secular occasions or recreations in the evening preceding the Lord's Day'. That last point seems very important, because it is well that people should enter on the Lord's Day in a properly reverent state of misery".

Cohen recalled that in the previous century Christian organisations were publishing circumstantial accounts of disasters befalling those who desecrated the Sabbath.

"There were boys who went sliding on the ice, and the Lord caused the ice to crack and they were drowned. There were other children who spent on lollypops the pennies they should have given to the Church, and were promptly choked to death. There were men who went out riding during church hours, and their horses were divinely inspired to throw them and break their necks; and there were others who ended up at Tyburn Green, and who gave sorrowful accounts of how their first steps towards the end were in the shape of neglecting Sunday worship.

"There were many thousands of these tracts distributed, each with its appropriate woodcut, and all 'as true as gospel'. It was the Lord's Day, and the Lord was attending to it. While he did this there was no growth of Sunday amusements.

"But the Lord got careless. He allowed people to get drowned on Monday who went to Church on Sunday, and he omitted to drown the boy who went sliding on the ice from dawn to dusk on the Sabbath. He managed things so that a man was as likely to get his neck broken through his horse bolting when he went to church as when he stayed at home. People

OBITUARY

Miss I. Davis

Isabel Davis, who has died at the age of 93, was for many years a pillar of the humanist movement in Sussex. She was a founder member of two groups — Brighton and Worthing — and although preferring to remain in the background, her immense contribution was recognised and appreciated.

Miss Davis spent most of her long retirement from the teaching profession in Worthing. She had a wide range of interests and supported many good causes. She had been secretary, treasurer, librarian and programmes arranger for Worthing Humanist Group. Only age and infirmity prevented her from playing an active role in the Group's affairs.

There was a secular committal at Worthing Crematorium.

Mrs W. Standfast

Winifred Standfast has died in hospital, aged 80. A Londoner by birth, she was a lifelong freethinker as was her late husband. Both were members of the National Secular Society.

In her younger days Mrs Standfast was active in trade union and political life. She took refugee children into her home at the time of the Spanish civil war. In the post-war years she was active in CND and other peace organisations.

A widow since 1979, Winifred Standfast is survived by her two sons, daughters-in-law and three grandchildren.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Lambeth Crematorium, London.

* * *

Secular committal ceremonies took place at the following cremations: Arthur Cooke (Poole); Edwin John Davis (Torbay); Salvatore Ferrigno (Southgate); Norah Hutt (Coventry); Edith Lawson (Leamington Spa) and William Watts (Southgate).

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began to see the lack of sense in managing affairs in this way. If the Lord will settle down to business again and promptly make it hot or uncomfortable for such as desecrate the Sabbath, things may look up".

The Lord does not now appear to be much concerned how people choose to spend "his day". But there are still sabbatarian throw backs to be found on off-shore islands. For example, soccer fans on the island of Lewes who recently travelled to see their favourite team, Glasgow Rangers, play a Sunday match, have been threatened with outer darkness by the Free Kirk. They could lose "privileges" like the right to be married in church or have their children baptised.

Church elder Murdo Macdonald made a special appeal at a prayer meeting for telephone calls to the local Rangers supporters club protesting against the trip to Hampden Park. He commented: "I felt it was my duty to protect the fourth commandment".

The Rev Angus Smith, Moderator of the Free Kirk, issued a solemn warning: "If we find out that any of our young people were involved, they could well lose their church privileges". Criticising the millions of viewers who watched the match live on BBC television, he said: "We don't use the television on Sundays, unless it is for worship".

Times are changing, even on the island of Lewes. Pious sabbatarians did not have even the consolation of a disaster befalling the Rangers fans who desecrated the Lord's day. And to cap it all — Rangers won.

Freethinker Fund

The latest monthly list includes a generous donation — one of several — from Glasgow Humanist Society. With the end of 1986 approaching, we hope readers will ensure that the amount donated during the year will be a record one. We thank those whose names are given below and all whose generosity over many years have enabled *The Freethinker* to honour the pledge of its founder in 1881 to "wage war against Superstition in general, and against Christian Superstition in particular".

G. Grieg, £1; J. Anderson, D. S. Andrew, M. Carter, P. Danning, J. Dobbin, H. Goodall, J. Hein, G. Horner, T. Liddle, K. Mack, B. Morgan, C. G. Newton, A. Turner and W. S. Watson, £1.40 each; K. Byrom and F. Couborough, £2.40 each; M. Minsball, £3.25; K. Williams, £3.40; N. F. Wray, £3.50; Anonymous, £4.50; J. H. Charles, £5; E. F. Channon, M. Schofield and V. Wilson, £6.40 each; E. C. Hughes, £6.40; P. Moon, £8.75; R. J. Condon, F. Howard, E. J. Little and A. E. Woodford, £10 each; P. L. Lancaster, Mr and Mrs Neville, £16.40 each; R. E. Davies, £26.40; Anonymous, £30; Glasgow Humanist Society, £40.

Total for October: £250.20.

The Road to Damascus

PHILLIP ADAMS

Unbelievers are constantly assured by Christians that they will repent when time is running out and the last heave-ho draws nigh. Phillip Adams rebuffs this "slandrous prophecy familiar to atheists" and asks some pertinent questions about Christians' attitude to death.

About ten years ago in an oration I gave to members of a Church of England College I spoke about that theological thoroughfare, the Road to Damascus, the freeway of faith, along which countless critics like to think I'm unconsciously but inexorably travelling. The gist of their argument is that, like Malcolm Muggeridge and other erstwhile infidels, I'm destined to recant, a slanderous prophecy familiar to atheists. In the terror of your days you'll see the error of your wicked ways. When the Angel of Death roosts on the head of my deathbed like a dirty great vulture, I shall beg God's forgiveness.

I agreed that while I was, indeed, on the Road with Malcolm, we were travelling in opposite directions. And I warned Christians against advocating deathbed conversion, instancing the scandalous case of Rome claiming poor old Voltaire. Moreover, such pathetic pillow talk can go either way, as many Christians are, themselves, deathbed converts: converts to disbelief, to the realisation that their sustaining beliefs had been a deception. "Many of you Christians will die very badly indeed", I said, "because despite your protestations about your faith, you have very little faith. You cling to it like the drowning man to his straw".

I've long found the Christians' attitude to death a profound puzzlement. If death means to see the face of God, to spend an eternity in some blissful state in His proximity, why the muffled drums, the soulful dirges, black crêpe, the grieving? Why don't all funerals follow the Dixieland convention and rejoice with "When the Saints Go Marching In"? Why is the simple, inevitable fact of death surrounded by such heavy-handed theatricality, by such despair?

Faith, I argued, is like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, forever elusive and out of reach. The louder people protest their beliefs, the less convinced I am by their sincerity. They protest too much. If one really did believe, if one had faith as surely as, for example, one has measles, there'd be no need to constantly profess one's profound certainty, let alone to go in for weekly recharging of spiritual batteries in kirk or cathedral.

The subtext of a typical sermon reveals the doubt, lays bare the lack of belief. As circuitous and absurd as Heller's *Catch 22*, the essential argument of a priest or cleric goes something like this . . . "Believe, despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite your

constant doubts, reach out and try to have faith. The gravitational pull of reality is trying to drag you away so you must try harder and harder — you must pray for strength". In short, if you have faith, pray for faith. Not on the grounds that you can't have too much of a good thing, but because we all know that, except for a fortunate, fanatical few, faith is as effervescent and unconvincing as candy floss.

The rhetoric of faith aches with uncertainty. People talk of clinging to their faith, of the leap of faith. The force which is meant to be so powerful and substantial that it anchors your life (not to mention your after-life) remains feeble and unsure — except in the case of the blessed saints and martyrs, when it smacks of the hysterical.

Faith isn't something that people have or achieve: it's something they yearn for, try desperately to attain. And the whole purpose of sermons, hymn-singing and ritualistic attendance on the Sabbath is to reinforce that scintilla of belief, a scintilla surrounded by the echoing darkness of doubt. No wonder that saints are so admired — it's because people of soaring conviction are as rare as hen's teeth. Willing to be put to the torch rather than renounce their faith, they are the VC winners in the army of Christian soldiers, whereas the rest of the congregation are conchies.

Verily I say unto you that faith is like great wealth, something that millions want but few achieve. When truly attained, faith would be ineffable. It would have little need for choirs, cathedrals and public show. For too much of the time faith is like patriotism, which has to be whipped up, drummed in and constantly reinforced. Whereas patriotism is based on something comprehensible, if not entirely sensible, faith is the ultimate fantasy, a vast collective dream. And only fools, or saints, believe in their dreams.

During my life I've met countless people who wanted desperately to believe. They've prayed incessantly, wandered from cult to cult, had sudden passions for this or that guru, have changed convictions with the fashions, as if beliefs were frisbees, hula-hoops and yo-yos.

As well as being given the map references to Damascus, my correspondents are forever telling me that faith is such a wonderful support in times of grief, that without faith people could not endure tragedy. Yet there are times when religion seems to intensify anguish. Take the worst case of all, when parents are coping with the death of a child. Christianity may prop them up for a moment or two during a church service or at the graveside, but you know the question in their minds. "God, why did you

allow this to happen? How could you let my child die?" Better, I think, to accept the fact of death in all its simplicity and inevitability, without an iota of transcendental belief.

My attitude to death is best expressed as a matter of factness. I regret the death of those I like or love, and would prefer to delay my own as long as

possible. But when death comes, as it must, as it will, I'll view it with equanimity. Clearly death is as necessary to life as night is to day, as up is to down. Knowing that, accepting that death is the full-stop in our life sentence, and not a question-mark, I think I'm better equipped to cope with the Last Rites of Passage.

Utterly Utterly Irreverent

BARBARA SMOKER

Censorship is perhaps the clearest indication of a society based on religious principles. The society may be paternalistic or repressive, but as long as an influential section of that society knows what is best for everyone else (and there is nothing like religion to inculcate such certitude), they will try to suppress any publications they dislike. After all, there can be no doubt that their Lord shares their tastes.

The latest attempt at censorship is an attack launched by the Bishop of St Albans, with support from the usual religious killjoys, against the publication (in aid of Oxfam and the Save the Children Fund) of *The Utterly Utterly Merry Comic Relief Christmas Book* — because it is allegedly "obscene" and dares to treat Christianity as no less a butt for irreverent joking than anything else.

The publishers have unfortunately responded with a call for reports on the book and with a preliminary apology for any offence it may give; but this response need not perhaps be taken too seriously, since there does not seem to have been any real attempt on the part of the publishers to call in copies from their sales outlets. Most bookshops still have large displays of the book, including a window display seen in a major legal booksellers in Fleet Street a week after the publishers' apology. And the furor is hardly likely to harm its Christmas sales figures. Indeed, the *London Standard* carried a cartoon in which a character comments: "Clever the way they got the church to do their publicity".

The book itself — a compilation by more than forty writers and artists, most of whom are known as contributors to *Private Eye* and radio and television satire — is certainly not the sort of thing I would be delighted to find among my gift-wrapped talc and stationery; but it would do very nicely as a gift from me to one of my many nephews (or, come to think of it, great-nephews) — the chosen of whom may well be the recipient of my review copy (thanks, Editor) on the 25th. (Nieces and great-nieces would, I think, find some of the items in rather childish bad taste).

There is no harm in the book — far less, certainly, than in putting a Bible in the hands of the young without a health warning. It includes some biblical parodies, while other items share with the Bible a

great deal of blood-thirsty description — but there is this difference: the Bible generally presents blood-thirstiness as something ordained by the deity, and therefore moral. And though some of us have certainly found quite a few laughs in the Bible, its main aim is not to amuse. Nor are the profits from selling Bibles usually devoted to such good causes as are the profits from this book.

Even I, old-fashioned as I regrettably am, have got a number of really good laughs out of the book under review — not least the true-life stories headed "A New Decade of Heroic Failures":

I also like some of the parodies of Christmas songs:

I'm dreaming of a Grey Christmas,
And that's exactly what I'll get.
If you live in Britain, you can bet
That all your Christmases will be wet.

Serious problems given fun treatment include the world population problem:

Luckily, the Angel Gabe noticed what was going on and gave God a nudge on the elbow. "Jesus H. Christ", said God. "Will you be looking at all them people! That Willie's certainly been busy". God hadn't been giving Earth his undivided attention, what with the Universe to run. He'd assumed that earthquakes, floods, junk food and accidents in the home would keep the people level reasonable. "Better nuke 'em", he said. "Dunno about that", said Gabe. "A holocaust is a bit over the top. What about Pestilence?"

A ballooned eight-word dialogue in the same picture story is, apparently, what upset the would-be censors most of all: in order to attract the attention of the cowboy with the nuclear button, God calls from out of a cloud, "Oy you, fuck wit!", to which the cowboy replies, "'Mr President' to you". This brief exchange is, it seems, felt to be lacking in due respect — though for which of the two characters is unclear.

There is also a comic strip showing a nativity play in which the actor playing Baby Jesus stage-whispers "GOT THE PRESSIES MIKEY? . . . OKEY DOKEY HOSANNA IN BLOODY EXCHELSEA MATEY". Yes, it is rather jejune and lacking in wit; but irreverence in itself is always worthwhile.

One of the better written items, with point and

humour, is "Adrian Mole's Christmas", by Sue Townsend.

And I love the primary-school children's letters to Santa, in traditional childish writing and spelling — leading up to one from the bright boy of the class, who knowingly addresses his letter to his Mum and Dad and types it, with perfect spelling, on a word processor. But his postscript shows that he has, after all, the fears of a child.

Most of the rest, with its undergraduate lavatorial humour, is not (to use the appropriate style of language) my scene.

However, I do hope the ephemeral Christmas

sales of this book prove to be astronomical — first, because it will give seasonal pleasure to many people in this country; secondly, because it will help many people, in less fortunate parts of the world, to whom clean drinking water would be a wonderful Christmas present; and thirdly, because it has got up the noses of pious moralists whose noses deserve to be got up.

• **The Utterly Utterly Merry Comic Relief Christmas Book** is edited by Douglas Adams and Peter Fincham, and published by Collins Fontana. It is obtainable at most bookshops, price £3.95.

The Blonde Virgin of the Blue Grotto ERIC WESTMAN

The Irish radio has recently reported yet another spate of visions of the Blessed Virgin. This time they have taken place in a grotto near the village of Inchagiela, up in the hills two miles from Cork. The first sighting was made nearly a year ago by two young girls; since then there have been two hundred more, and thousands of people from all over Ireland—including two busloads from Northern Ireland — have visited the grotto.

A Mrs O'Clare has seen the vision twenty times — twice in one day — and other people have also made multiple sightings. Mrs O'Clare described how she was alone in the grotto, on her knees and reciting the Rosary before the statue of Our Lady. Suddenly, a blue mist appeared in the grotto, the statue vanished, and in its place stood "a beautiful lady". Surprisingly for a Jewess, she had golden hair that hung in two ringlets down over her chest, and big blue eyes. She appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen years old.

This vision of loveliness spoke to Mrs O'Clare — not with her lips but "through my mind". She said: "I am the Queen of Peace. I want people to behave. I love the people of Ireland, and I want people to take the sacrament of my son more often. I enjoy your company". Not surprisingly, Mrs O'Clare then found herself indulging in "palpitations and perspiration", but she enjoyed the experience so much that she came back in the evening for a second session.

Other visionaries, as they call themselves, had similar experiences. The drill for invoking a vision was always the same: kneel before the statue and start reciting the Rosary, whereupon the blue mist forms, "everything turns blue in the grotto", and the teenage blonde beauty swaps places with the statue.

In addition to the statue there is in the grotto a large donation box, installed by the grotto's owner and curator John McCarthy. The money from the box goes "to the upkeep of the grotto". Mr

McCarthy admitted that the donations were generous, but pointed out regretfully that only sixty people could get into the grotto at a time, whilst another two thousand were outside, "and these two thousand people never even knew there was a donation box".

The two young girls who originally saw the visions are not allowed to be questioned about it, and the local bishop has "serious reservations" about the whole affair. But he thinks "manipulation" might be a very strong word.

When the young girls saw the vision of Fatima in Portugal in 1917, they were told by the local priest that it was "the work of the devil", but he was subsequently proved wrong. However, it was denied that an exorcism occurred at the Irish grotto. What happened was that a girl got into great emotional difficulty there, and two priests said some prayers with her.

Well, it made a change from moving statues and weeping ones. Whatever will Our Lady get up to next?

C of E's Earthly Mansions

The Church Commissioners are selling off spacious Victorian vicarages for huge sums. The minimum price, depending on location, is £80,000. But most are in the six figure price range. The Glebe House at Ulcombe, Kent, has been sold for £300,000. And the asking price for a vicarage in Buckinghamshire is £400,000.

Last year the Commissioners disposed of around 250 clerical residences, realising a total of £20.7 million. In 1984 they sold 260 for £21 million, and in 1983, 308 for £23 million.

The houses were built at a time when the clergy had large flocks and large families.

With smaller congregations, merged parishes and planned families, the clergy are making do with more modest accommodation.

Pagan Gods in Judaism

R. J. CONDON

Judaism is said to have been the first of the great religions to teach belief in one god, which of course made it greatly superior to pagan polytheism. In reality it venerates quite a number of pagan deities, who appear in the Old Testament as human heroes and patriarchs. One of the better-known examples is the story of Samson, long recognised by scholars as a version of the mythical adventures of Hercules, whose 12 Labours are the trials the sun is said to undergo in its passage through the constellations of the Zodiac.

Hercules, like Samson, kills a lion (Leo) in his youth. He carries two pillars, called the Gates of Cadiz. Samson likewise carries off the gates of Gaza, including two pillars. Gaza means goat or Capricorn. Hercules is captured by the Egyptians, who want to sacrifice him, but he breaks loose and kills them all. Similarly the bound Samson is delivered to the Philistines, who mean to kill him, but he breaks the cords and slays a thousand of them. Both heroes, being thirsty, call on their fathers in heaven for water, which is miraculously provided. Both have long hair representing the sun's rays, in fact Samson is the sun by one of its names. Hercules, incidentally, is the original Jonah, for both characters spend three days inside a fish, and at the same place, Joppa.

The Graeco-Roman writer Plutarch claimed that the Jews were worshippers of Bacchus, a role they were sometimes forced to assume. About 170 BC the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes compelled the Jews to attend the Dionysia or feast of Bacchus carrying ivy, an emblem of the god. Then came a threat to demolish their temple and erect one to Bacchus in its place (2 Maccabees 6:7 and 14:33). The third book of Maccabees, omitted from our Apocrypha, says the Alexandrian Jews had earlier been branded with the sign of the ivy by order of Ptoletmy Philopator. With Jerusalem under Roman rule, we find Bacchus figuring on the coins of the Jews, showing that they were obliged to recognise the god as a patron of their holy city.

This identification of Judaism with Bacchus-worship is readily understood when we compare the life of Moses, the law-giver of the Old Testament, with the mythical history of Bacchus related in the Orphic hymns sung at the Dionysia. Like Moses, Bacchus was born in Egypt, was found floating in a basket and had real and foster mothers. Like Moses, he drew water from a rock by striking it with his staff. Both had rods which they could turn into snakes, and both crossed the Red Sea dryshod with their armies. Bacchus too was a law-giver, and like Moses he wrote them on two stone tablets. As Moses and his army had a pillar of fire to lead them at night, so Bacchus and his followers marched at night by sunlight. Moses sought a land flowing with milk

and honey. Wine, milk and honey flowed wherever Bacchus passed. Bacchus conquered the giants; Moses destroyed the giant Og. Bacchus covered the Indians with darkness, Moses the Egyptians. Pan gave Bacchus a dog as his faithful companion; Moses had the faithful Caleb, "a dog" (Cruden's Concordance). Bacchus married Venus, called Zopporah by the Arabs, one of seven planets. Moses married Zipporah, one of seven daughters of the priest of Midian. In the Orphic hymns Bacchus is called Mysos, with the same meaning as Moses, "drawn from the waters". After all this we are not surprised to find Moses building an altar to Jehovah-nissi, a term cognate with Dionysus or Bacchus.

Bacchus and Moses are both depicted with horns. Exodus 34:30 reads "the skin of his (Moses') face shone" in our Bibles. The Vulgate, for centuries the only translation in use, has "his face was horned". Michelangelo's statue of Moses has horns, and so incidentally has the Moses in the *Freethinker* cartoon which helped to get G. W. Foote a prison sentence.

There was a tradition, referred to in Acts 7:43, that the Jews were or had been worshippers of Remphan, "which some think to be Saturn" (Cruden). The planet Saturn was called Israel by the Chaldeans and the Phoenicians, and personified by the Jews as Abraham, meaning "father of a people", the "people" being the stars of heaven, called "his seed for ever". The variant Abram means "father on high", for Saturn's course in the sky is the highest of the planets known to the ancients. It was a very old god among the Latin races and called by them Saturnus. The story of Abraham, revered by the Jews as their greatest ancestor, has some points of similarity with the myth of Saturnus.

Saturnus was the son of the goddess Terra, or Earth. Abraham's father was Terah, a moon-god. Saturn married his sister Rhea, Abraham his sister Sarah. Saturnus had many sons but only one, Jeoud, whom he loved as an only son and sacrificed as a burnt offering. Abraham had many sons of whom he loved only Isaac, almost sacrificed as a burnt offering.

Saturn, as the slowest and most remote of the planets, became an emblem of time, hence the biblical references to Abraham connected with time, such as "before Abraham was" or before time was. Saturnus was said to have castrated his father Uranus with a scythe, which implement he still carries as Father Time. In India the names of Brahma and his consort Saraswati appear to stem from the same source as Abraham and Sarah. Brahma too is a time-god, and is said to regulate the

(continued on page 191)

ANNIE BESANT, by Rosemary Dinnage. Penguin, £2.95

This book is published in the Penguin Lives of Modern Women series which consists of "short biographical portraits by distinguished writers, of women whose ideas, struggles and creative talents have made a significant contribution to the way we think and live now".

Rosemary Dinnage has written a fascinating introduction to the life and work of this extraordinary woman who does not fit neatly into the category of "social reformer" or indeed to any other conventional category. In this she greatly resembles Marie Stopes, whose birth control interests she shared. Both were women of intelligence, monumental energy and public spirit, who sacrificed themselves for great causes. But both had a completely dotty side to them which seems to fit ill with the important causes to which they devoted much of their lives.

Annie Besant was of Irish stock. She was a passionate and devout Christian, and at the age of twenty appropriately married Frank Besant, an Evangelical clergyman. Two children were born of this marriage which became increasingly unhappy since Frank Besant had very traditional Victorian views about the place of women in the home. In 1873, when Annie Besant was 26, she dramatically lost her faith and scandalised society by leaving her husband and becoming a crusading atheist. She travelled around the country lecturing for the National Secular Society, having meanwhile met Charles Bradlaugh, who was separated from his alcoholic wife, and entered into a relationship with him, the nature of which remains somewhat obscure. During this period she even had time to compose a song, the "English Marseillaise", which she used to sing "to great applause" at the Hall of Science. The author observes that this song "had a long and successful career in Freethought circles". (Perhaps, if the music is still available, some contemporary showbiz singer could be persuaded to record it anew for the present generation of young freethinkers!)

The year 1877 saw one of the most important events of her life when, together with Bradlaugh, she republished an American booklet on birth control, which was declared obscene. They were both duly sent for trial, with the Solicitor General of the day leading the prosecution against them. In this experience too, her life closely resembles that of Marie Stopes. This trial, like the later one that Marie Stopes was involved in, was a major milestone in the history of the English birth control movement. She said: "I hold that it is more moral to prevent the birth of children than it is after they are born to murder them as you do today by want of

food, and air, and clothing, and sustenance".

The American booklet and the subsequent pamphlet that Annie Besant wrote herself eventually sold more than 100,000 copies and introduced the notion of birth control to a wide public. Her reward was to have the custody of her daughter removed from her by her husband. He already had her son. Rosemary Dinnage does not tell us what ultimately became of these children, which it would have been interesting to know.

Thereafter followed her Socialist period, when she became active in the Fabian Society, took part in "Bloody Sunday" and led the celebrated strike of girls working at the Bryant & May match factory. During this period too she was elected to the London School Board and was active in helping to found the school medical service and in pioneering school meals.

At this point in her life she unfortunately met the appalling Madame Blavatsky and was converted to Theosophy, a creed so bizarre that it defies description in the columns of this august journal. Rosemary Dinnage sums it up with the words: "At forty-two, she was converted for life to a 'religion' hastily patched together by a psychic Russian aristocrat on the basis of occult messages from Tibetan gurus in the Himalayas". She spent some twenty years in India spreading this absurd gospel with the same demoniac energy that she had previously devoted to more rational causes. However, she did not then relapse totally into religious eccentricity. She took up the cause of Indian independence to which she made an important contribution in her old age, and even became, briefly, the President of the Indian National Congress.

Annie Besant is an impossible woman to sum up since she seems to have been completely devoid of judgement and prepared to be taken in by any lunatic notion. Yet she was a woman of almost saintly character who did important work for many vital causes. Her life was both tragic and deeply comic. She adopted a young Indian boy, Krishnamurti, who died at a great age only very recently, and who was brought up to be the substitute God of the Theosophical movement. He was not too bright and kept on failing all his English school exams which rather disappointed her. But in the end he turns out to be something of a hero, for he refused to continue to play at being a God and threw out Theosophy lock stock and barrel. "Heavens", he exclaimed on one occasion, "what have I done to deserve all this"! What indeed!

There is a lot more we shall ultimately want to know about Annie Besant, but meanwhile in the

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space of little over a hundred pages Rosemary Dinnage has written a fascinating account of her life. What the lesson of Annie Besant is for contemporary feminists is quite hard to say. Perhaps it is simply "Look before you Leap" — look very critically at the causes you may be tempted to embrace. But then, having been brought up as a devout Christian, Annie Besant never had the chance to develop a critical faculty.

MADELEINE SIMMS

THE CHURCH IN CRISIS: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT STATE OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, by Charles Moore, A. N. Wilson, Gavin Stamp. Hodder and Stoughton, £6.95

The authors declare that they are practising Anglicans of no party or faction writing for ordinary Anglicans about their Church. They are also practising journalists who can write readably. The crisis they are writing about is not a crisis of faith, for they believe there is a widespread lively interest in religious belief, not least among young people. The crisis is in the health of the Church of England, its ill-service to the faith it exists to propagate and the people to whom it has the mission to minister. Their intention is to put together a portrait of the C of E at work, in terms of its organization, its clergy, its parishes and churches, the three topics into which the book is divided, each author taking one. The information they furnish is useful to anyone whose ideas on the subject are vague or mistaken or out of date. Is it a true description? That of course, like "objectivity", is unattainable, if not meaningless. Is *Yes, Minister* a true description? In some respects, Yes; as in other respects is a text-book on the Constitution. Herbert Morrison wrote a book on Cabinet Government as he found it, which Richard Crossman meant to displace by using the material accumulated in his *Diaries*. A. N. Wilson on the clergy, the best writer of the three in this book, has the ironic touch, and can set up a scene that makes a telling point without telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Anyhow, two-thirds of the book is well-founded description, one-third critical comment from an evident point of view.

Like all institutions, the C of E is corrupt, in the sense that it is a vested interest engaged at least as much in self-preservation and expansion as in serving the purpose for which it was founded. The General Synod has cleverly stolen effective control from Parliament, virtually denying the purpose of Establishment. The three parties represented within

it, here described as Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical, and Radical, manoeuvre for influence on decisions that regulate doctrine and practice. The ordination of women is the subject heard most of at present — with matters arcane beyond belief in the background. The upshot is thus summed up:

One important theme runs through the work of the Synod: centralisation. Its main work has been . . . to alter the way the Church runs itself so that its character is changed. The very idea of Synodical government in essential matters is hostile to the belief that the Church of England is the property of the English people.

The activist infiltrates, and rules. The bed-rock of practice, the "living" and the parson's "freehold", is undermined. This centralisation serves the diverse interests of conservatives and radicals, those who believe the Church is in the world for the sake of the elect, and those who believe the Church is in the world for the sake of the world, say, the Bishop of London and the Bishop of Liverpool.

In matters of worship and doctrine, in the organising of parishes, the training of priests, the spending of money, the Synod has changed the Church dramatically and acted in favour of itself.

That is the conclusion of the first chapter, and makes the framework for what follows in the other two parts.

Centralized administration implies assimilation to the model of an industrial company or the Civil Service, with the clergy as middle management or officials of a hierarchy with a career structure and a retirement age. One of the privileges of the Church is a general freedom from planning controls, so that it can at will close or demolish churches as redundant, merge parishes, appoint "priests in charge". To a central administrative authority pursuing a policy of rationalization the parson's "freehold" sticks out like a sore thumb, something to be put out of sight by suspension and other devices. On the ground, the response of a parish clergyman in his daily activities to the demands and expectations by which he is beset provokes a description which "is not intended as satirical". On the next page: "In England it is very largely a joke profession. . . And few clergymen recognize how ridiculous they seem to the eyes of the laity". The provenance of ordinands today is still middle class, but no longer the gentility. There is a material temptation, since the central administration of funds makes the Anglican clergyman more comfortably provided for than the teacher, whatever his decline in status.

To get as ordinands Christians who are and remain one of the people in serving the Church, A. N. Wilson sketches a radical restructuring of the way the clergy are recruited and trained and organized. His view is that the rural deanery is a

more appropriate unit than the diocese, and that all the rural deans should become bishops; they would be much closer to the parsons and people in their jurisdiction than a present bishop can be. This would make it possible to discern persons apt for training for ordination, and to provide them with in-service training in the skills required. Even if this recruitment and training of part-time or voluntary clergy were regarded as supplementary, it would check the administrative need for closures and amalgamations involving high-handed decisions. Moreover, successful experiment on these lines would influence the old pattern of selection and training so scathingly criticized in this chapter. The whole question of the "validity" of orders, as it has vexed relations between the Anglican and Roman (and Orthodox) Churches, is shown here to be a red-herring in other respects. Priestly magic is no part of the Christian gospel.

The last chapter is the longest, about parishes and buildings. The author, Gavin Stamp, is an architectural historian as well as a practising Anglican, and therefore in his accounts of visits to some forty churches around the country (the bulk of the chapter) he is both a Pevsner and an inspector of Christian worship. Early enthusiasm for the building of churches has given way to defeatism since the Religious Census of 1851 showed that only 21 per cent of the population attended an Anglican church, and half the population no place of worship at all. The C of E can no longer be assumed to be composed of all those who do not belong to another religion or sect; it has become itself a sect, and the ecclesiastical parish a community of the faithful, not a territory.

The parish church in its very distinctiveness and public presence has become an anomaly. What is also an anomaly, and one that outrages the author, is the modern tendency of the central organization to look on churches and vicarages and other ecclesiastical property merely as "plant" to be managed on cost-effective criteria, developed or disposed of on the lines followed by a Macgregor brought in to remodel Steel and Coal for tomorrow. What shocks him is the Philistinism which pays scant regard to architectural qualities and their influence, coupled with equal disregard of the church as in itself a concrete religious presence, a standing witness to religious aspirations and dedication of generations. Its utility is special to itself, unrelated to the values of the market-place.

All over England people see abandoned, mutilated or demolished churches, the legacies of optimism, sacrifice and love, and draw their own conclusions about the real state of the Church.

Whereas in the nineteenth century congregations in Britain found money to build mission churches, remarked one clergyman, today when Pakistanis

move into British cities, the Church of England simply gives up and retreats.

Mr Stamp's random sample of churches, services, and parish activities shows a bewildering variety of conditions and practices, influenced in some places by show-biz or pop art, elsewhere faintly following tradition. One new rite celebrated everywhere is the serving of coffee after the service (or sherry for Anglo-Catholics, perhaps), for which building adaptations have had to be made.

If on this evidence the Anglican Church is squandering its birthright, what is that to unbelievers? We are not well known for wanting effective propagation of the Christian gospel. But that is really a side-issue here, for we are given a particular example where least expected of a general tendency that deeply affects things we do care about, education, the NHS, British industries. The accountant rates higher than accountability, which is not democracy. Ill-considered, inadequately informed decisions and policies are formed by central authorities on paper evidence, so that when interventions are needed an axe is wielded instead of a scalpel. We have seen county boundaries redrawn, the NHS reorganized on an American commercial model, as well as the closure or merger of art colleges with an irreplaceable tradition and record, and village schools that have a case for survival. Rationalization, a theoretical construct, has been shown to be in many deeply painful cases a destroyer of morale and of dedication and team-work on the operational front, which administration exists to serve. Parkinson's Law, like *Yes, Minister*, is a joke. The ruin of lives and communities is not. The story in this book is of use for its information. And more for its moral.

H. J. BLACKHAM

The current issue of *New Humanist* carries a wide range of articles and reviews. Articles include *Jehovah's Witnesses and Biblical Inerrancy: a Study of Fundamentalist Mentality*, by G. A. Wells. Levi Fragell's subject is *Humanism in Norway: Strategies for Growth of the Humanist Movement*. Other contributors include Colin Brewer and Mansel Davies. *New Humanist*, Rationalist Press Association, 88 Islington High Street, London N1 8EW, prize £1.50.

Father Michael Tierney, director of the Catholic Communications Institute, told a meeting of European bishops last month that the Roman Catholic Church may lose access to the Irish airwaves. He said: "There are only three people left in the Religious Affairs Department of RTE, the Irish broadcasting organisation. I just wonder what the situation is going to be next year". He described the bedtime religious programme, *Night Light*, as "the Irish cure for insomnia".

LETTERS

SEXISM AND RACISM IN THE FREETHINKER

I thought that we had finally heard the last of this one; but here we are again, with *The Freethinker* being belaboured once more, this time by Jonathan Sanders (Letters, November), for its "sexist" attitudes. To make matters worse, the paper has, according to Mr Sanders, been racist too! Its sins are compounded by making covert references to such things, hiding behind skilful journalism at one moment, and hackish quoting out of context the next.

As Jonathan Sanders understands *The Freethinker* enough to place these transgressions at the door of its "relentless concern for freedom" — and improvement on previous accusations — I shall address his assumptions rather than the comment he referred to, and put a number of questions to him.

Why do you insist that everyone else who happens to be white and male is a closet racist and sexist like yourself? Why do you insist we all become flagellants and punish ourselves for sins and crimes we have not committed? Is there the slightest chance that your self-denigration and righteous indignation comes from your refusal to do anything positive about this blatant discrimination at your place of work? Why project on to others your guilt feelings at having gained employment through sexual discrimination? Why should *The Freethinker* support groups like separate feminists who maintain strict censorship of views published in their newsletters, persecute women who call themselves "sodomasochists", and who only a year ago demanded that gays who like wearing leather be thrown out of their own centre in London?

Trying to legislate against sexist or racist thoughts is as futile as trying to legislate against morality. Freethinkers are in the business of changing people's minds. Our priority happens to be the mind-fogging influence of religion and superstition. Because of persecution in the past, we are also wary of ideologists who seek to force their views on others, and of political tendencies which exhibit fervent neo-religious attitudes.

What is the difference between your claim that I am racist and heterosexist, and the Christians who believe that I am steeped in original sin? I do not subscribe to their Bible and I will not subscribe to yours; it also demands one hundred per cent endorsement of beliefs or else a Stalinist-type show trial where self-reunciation is obligatory. Regretfully, certain sections of the Left share your holier-than-thou attitude.

Positive discrimination, as long as it does not lead to a subtopia, is one thing; the desperate search of the Labour Party to find "minority" MPs is another. All this sycophantic tokenism and posturing have done nothing to change people's attitudes on race and sex. Such attitudes are in many ways a product of Christendom (Eve's "punishment" and Imperialism's "civilising" mission), and we have been fighting that for well over a century.

Sexism today seems to be anything that cabalistic feminists and their fellow-travellers decide it is, an ever changing definition defying logic and consistency. Racism, we are told, is a genetic handicap of the white race. An example of this approach was seen a couple of years ago in the expulsion of all non-Black and Jewish women from the London Women's Liberation Newsletter collective for their "sexist and racist attitudes". Imagine that — "sexists and racists" in their own ranks! I suspect that a number of London women are no longer pointing accusing fingers at others since they had a taste of their own medicine.

Racism and sexism are social attitudes. They are not innate to pictures, photographs or films; they are no more biologically determined than the "qualities" used to justify racial and sexual discrimination.

May I remind readers that while a certain chairwoman of the GLC Women's Committee was being paid £40,000 a year plus perks, female canteen staff were taking home less than £40 a week. The likes of Margaret Thatcher and Bernie Grant (who deserted his wife and children and has a conviction for beating up an Asian) show that there is nothing innately good in being female or coloured either. Both have proved that freedom is not the concern of political parties.

If I utter the words, "thank God this journal exists", I doubt if I will be expelled from the ranks of freethinkers. That is why I read it. As for ivory towers, Mr Sanders, where else do you think the pious piffle you preach comes from?

JOHN CAMPBELL

EQUALITY AND TOLERANCE

Jonathan Sanders' letter (November) chastising *The Freethinker* for attacking those whom he sees as the champions against sexism and racism is based on a false premise. The "Alternative Moral Majority" of the Left referred to in the October issue is concerned with sexism and racism from only the narrowest, most bigoted and intolerant standpoint.

A society in which women or ethnic minorities — or sexual minorities — are treated unequally and not given equal opportunity is to be deplored and challenged, but a society in which groups are afforded positive preference, and allowed special privileges and considerations denied to the rest, is equally reprehensible and equally unacceptable. A black person is entitled to equality, a "gay" person likewise. As a woman I expect — nay, demand — equality. However, we shall all be doing ourselves, minorities or otherwise, a great disservice if we persist in countenancing some of the absurdly counter-productive and divisively extreme policies of the "Alternative Moral Majority" or, as it has now firmly become known in the popular press, the "Looney Left".

Some of the current strictures being applied in the name of anti-sexism and anti-racism are nothing short of incitements to hatred, as well as dangerous incursions into the freedom of expression. They are as fascist in content and intent as anything the National Front or the "Looney Right" can come up with. It is a perilous road to go down. How much more responsible it is to tread the path of tolerance, rationality and humanity and walk the freethinkers' way. I am sure that is all the Editor was trying to say. And if it was, he is to be praised rather than pilloried.

PAMELA WARDLE

A SERIOUS MATTER

Jonathan Sanders (Letters, November), makes a snide comment about "white liberal academics living in ivory towers". He concludes his letter with the assurance that he has more serious things to worry about than what journalists like (Peter) Simple and (John) Junior write about us.

Unfortunately such journalists write for mass circulation newspapers and their malign influence should be taken seriously. It is therefore regrettable that — as *The Freethinker* pointed out — some feminists and their male supporters make the job easier for them.

Mr Sanders is free to remain aloof and unsullied. But he is about the last person to accuse others of living in ivory towers.

H. S. RYLEY

BODY IN THE TOMB

In the August Freethinker I claimed that no one had ever suggested that Jesus' tomb (it was actually the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea) was not empty (on the Sunday morning). This was in response to Antony Milne who had written of the tomb being "sometimes empty sometimes not".

John L. Broom challenged me (September) and implied that Charles Guignebert had argued that the tomb was not empty. In response (October) I pointed out that Guignebert actually believed that Jesus' body was thrown into a common pit and that the story of the empty tomb was a later invention.

Mr Broom now accepts my correction (November), adding that Guignebert did not rule out the possibility that Jesus had been placed in a tomb (from which his body subsequently disappeared). But now Broom cannot see why the body could not have remained there!

So it is only John L. Broom who suggests that the body remained in the tomb! Since it was not Jesus' tomb and since he had been placed in it only temporarily (according to the gospels) it is perfectly obvious why he could not have remained there. Furthermore Jesus had forecast that he would rise from the dead after three days. How could he do that if he remained in the tomb? If there is a myth of an empty tomb it can only be based on a belief in an empty tomb. There is absolutely no justification for the idea that Jesus' body remained in the tomb (which is why no one, until John L. Broom, suggested it). What he cannot see is perfectly plain to everyone else!

STEUART CAMPBELL

THE JESUS HOAX

I was very sorry to see the excellent, moving, and hard-hitting book, *The Jesus Hoax* (1974), by the late Phyllis Graham, dismissed as "worthless" by Steuart Campbell (Letters, November) — and I would like to put it on record that many people disagree with him. It has been out of print for too many years, and I would like to see it reprinted.

BARBARA SMOKER

Doctor Dodges the Rabbis

An Israeli surgeon has outwitted the Rabbinate and performed the country's first liver transplant operation. Yigal Kam made secret preparations for the operations, knowing that it would be prevented by the rabbis. The patient is recovering in Haifi's Ramban Hospital.

Israel has one of the highest number of doctors per head of the population in the world. Until now they have been prevented from performing heart or liver transplants because of religious opposition. Rabbis contend that such operations differ from others because the organs have to be removed while the heart is still beating. Doctors have a different criterion of brain death to mark the end of life. Some organs can be kept alive after brain death and transplanted.

A former Chief Rabbi has described organ transplant as double murder. But Health Minister Shoshana Arbeli-Almoslino has defended the Haifa operation on the ground that a life was saved.

PUBLICATIONS

(postal charges in brackets)

Hardbacks

The Bible Handbook, G. W. Foote and W. P. Ball, £5 (35p); Did Jesus Exist?, G. A. Wells, £5.80 (85p); The Historical Evidence for Jesus, G. A. Wells, £8 (£1.05); Honest to Man, Margaret Knight, £6 (50p); Humanism, H. J. Blackham, £5.95 (70p); Religion in a Modern Society, H. J. Blackham, £2.50 (60p); Materialism Restated, Chapman Cohen, 50p (45p); President Charles Bradlaugh, D. Tribe, £4 (£1.50); 100 Years of Freethought, D. Tribe, £2 (£1.05); The Trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, Roger Manvell, £5.95 (65p); The Freethinker, 1978, 1981, 1982 and 1983, £7.50 each (90p); The Freethinker, 1984, 1985, £7.95 (90p); Against the Faith: Some Deists, Sceptics and Atheists, J. Herrick, £12.50 (70p). Also in paperback, see below.

Paperbacks

Atheism: the Case Against God, G. H. Smith, £6.50 (£1.10); The Philosophy of Humanism, Corliss Lamont, £6.50 (75p); Varieties of Religious Experience, William James, £3.50 (65p); The Humanist Revolution, Hector Hawton, 95p (45p); Humanist Anthology, Margaret Knight (Editor), £2 (40p); The Humanist Outlook, A. J. Ayer (Editor), 95p (65p); Humanism and Moral Theory, R. Osborn, £2 (40p); Common Sense, T. Paine, £1.50 (25p); Rights of Man, T. Paine, £2.25 (35p); Pioneers of Social Change, R. Pike £2 (40p); Radical Politics 1790-1900: Religion and Unbelief, Edward Royle, £1.85 (35p); Britain's Unknown Genius: The Life and Work of J. M. Robertson, M. Page, £2.25 (35p); The Portable Voltaire, B. R. Redman (Editor), £2.50 (55p); The Dead Sea Scrolls, J. Allegro, £2.25 (30p); The Gods and Myths of Northern Europe, H. R. Ellis Davidson, £1.75 (35p); Origin of Species, C. Darwin, £2.25 (45p); On the Nature of the Universe, Lucretius, £1.75 (35p); Middle East Mythology, S. H. Hooke, £2.25 (35p); Mohammed, M. Rodinson, £2.95 (45p); Sociology of Religion, R. Robertson (Editor), £2.95 (45p); Controversy, Hector Hawton, £2 (45p); Causing Death and Saving Lives, J. Glover, £2.50 (35p); Pope John 23rd and the Cold War, F. A. Ridley, 50p (25p); Rome or Reason?, R. G. Ingersoll, 25p (20p); The Secret History of the Jesuits, E. Paris, £3 (50p); The Vatican versus Mankind, A. Pigott, 60p (35p); Lift up Your Heads, W. Kent (Editor), 60p (35p); The Dark Side of the Moonies, Erica Heftmann, £2.50 (35p); Boys and Sex, W. B. Pomeroy, £1.50 (25p); Girls and Sex, W. B. Pomeroy, £1.50 (25p); The Worm in the Bud: the World of Victorian Sexuality, R. Pearsall, £3.50 (65p); A Message From the Falklands, D. Tinker, £1.95 (30p); Vision and Realism: a Hundred Years of The Freethinker, J. Herrick, £2 (40p); In God's Name, D. Yallop, £2.95 (50p); Against the Faith, Some Deists, Sceptics and Atheists, J. Herrick, £5.95 (60p).

Bertrand Russell

A Free Man's Worship; Bertrand Russell's Best; £1.95 each (35p each); Unpopular Essays; The Conquest of Happiness; The Impact of Science on Society; The ABC of Relativity; On Education; £2.50 each (35p each); Political Ideals; Education and the Social Order; Principles of Social Reconstruction; £1.75 each (35p each); In Praise of Idleness; Why I am Not a Christian and other Essays; £2.95 each (35p each); Autobiography, £4.50 (70p).

Pamphlets

The Case Against Church Schools, P. Knight, 30p (13p); The Cost of Church Schools, D. Tribe, 25p (13p); Religion and Ethics in Schools, D. Tribe, 25p (13p); Objective, Fair and Balanced, BHA, 50p (25p); What About Gods?, C. Brockman, £2.50 (25p); A Definition of Humanism, R. Fletcher, 25p (13p); An Introduction to Secular Humanism, K. Mouat, 60p (13p); Humanism, Barbara Smoker, £1.50 (25p); A Chronology of British Secularism, G. H. Taylor, 20p (13p); An End to Belief? (the 1984 Voltaire Memorial Lecture), L. Kennedy, 50p (13p); Marriage: Sacerdotal or Secular?, G. C. L. Du Cann, 20p (13p); Birth Control, various writers, 15p (13p); The Rights of Old People, various writers, 12p (13p); The Right to Die, C. Wilshaw, 50p (13p); Thomas Paine, C. Cohen, 25p (13p); The Devil's Chaplain, H. Cutner, 25p (13p); William Morris and Hyde Park, L. S. Jones, 30p (13p); The People's Uprising, L. S. Jones, 75p (13p); The Nun Who Lived Again, Phyllis Graham, 10p (13p); The Mask of Anarchy, P. B. Shelley, 90p (18p); Life, Death and Immortality, P. B. Shelley, 20p (13p); The Necessity of Atheism, P. B. Shelley, 10p (13p); An Appeal to the Young, P. Kropotkin, 15p (13p); Our Pagan Christmas, R. J. Condon, 75p (13p); What is the Sabbath Day?, H. Cutner, 15p (13p); The Longford Threat to Freedom, Brigid Brophy, 15p (13p); Buddhism and Blasphemy, Sangharakashita, 60p (13p); The Open Society and Its Friends, D. Tribe, 15p (13p); The Future of the British Monarchy, F. A. Ridley, 40p (13p); Good God (verses), Barbara Smoker, 95p (25p); From Jewish Messianism to the Christian Church, P. Alfarc, 20p (13p); The Rise of the Papacy and Crimes of the Popes, G. W. Foote and J. M. Wheeler, 25p (13p); Frauds, Forgeries and Relics, G. W. Foote and J. M. Wheeler, 25p (13p); Our Celestial Visitor, F. A. Ridley, 30p (13p); Three Lunar Voyages, F. A. Ridley, 50p (13p); The Unpleasant Personality of Jesus Christ, C. Maine, 25p (13p); Why I am Not a Christian and Faith of a Rationalist, B. Russell, 60p (13p).

Pamphlets for the People

Morality Without God; Christianity and Slavery; Christianity and Ethics; Deity and Design; The Devil; Agnosticism; Did Jesus Christ Exist?; Giving 'em Hell; Freethought and the Child; Gods and Their Makers; Must We Have a Religion; Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch to Live; What is Freethought? Chapman Cohen's series of pamphlets, 15p each (13p up to 3 pamphlets).

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Reports from New York indicate that FBI agents know the places where Mafia bosses are regular visitors. According to Time magazine, law enforcement agencies have been bugging confessionals in Roman Catholic churches. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights has written to William Webster, director of the FBI, asking for clarification of the Time report. A League spokesman said that if the report is true, the FBI action is "an outrageous violation of our rights — the sacred and confidential confessor-penitent relationship". District Judge Joseph McLaughlin said he had "never heard of a court-approved wiretap on church facilities".

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 4 January, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Members' Forum.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of Forum meetings from the secretary, 59 Fox Covert Avenue, Edinburgh, EH12 6UH, telephone 031-334 8372.

Gay Humanist Group. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30 pm.

Glasgow Humanist Society. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Norman Macdonald, 15 Queen Square, Glasgow G41 2BG. telephone 041-424 0545.

Harrow Humanist Society. Programme of meetings obtainable from Rosemary Bennett, telephone 01-863 2977.

Norwich Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone Norwich 47843.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 21 December, 11 am. Barbara Smoker: Christmas.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton, Wednesday, 14 January, 7.30 pm for 8 pm Brian Snellgrove: Shelter's Task in the International Year.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 19 January, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, 117 Pennard Drive, Southgate, telephone 044 128 3631.

Pagan Gods in Judaism

motions of Saturn (Moor's Hindu Pantheon).

The many biblical references to the "most high" may mean the most high planet. In Luke 16:19-31 Abraham appears as the heavenly father, indicating that he and Jehovah are interchangeable if not one and the same.

Robert Taylor, in *The Devil's Pulpit*, suggests what at first sight appears a rational explanation of the "Abrahamic rite" of circumcision. Of all the heavenly bodies only Saturn has a part, and that part a ring, detached from it, this being the covenant or common bond uniting the Children of Israel with their Father on High. There is, however, no evidence that this peculiarity of Saturn was known before Galileo found it with his telescope. But at least we know why the sabbath is Saturn's day.

Baptist Union Expels Stanton's Sect

The Jesus Fellowship (Baptist), subject of John Campbell's article, "The Evangelical Problem Family" (*The Freethinker*, November), has been expelled from the Baptist Union. Its membership of the Evangelical Alliance had already been terminated in March.

The Rev Noel Stanton, leader of the sect which is based at Bugbrooke, Northamptonshire, said: "The Jesus Fellowship will continue its vigorous, prophetic ministry as a living and radical expression of the Christian faith. It will continue as an independent Baptist church, bringing the life of Christ to the people in Britain".

Stanton became lay pastor in charge of the small Baptist chapel at Bugbrooke in 1956. Under his direction it distanced itself from other churches. It developed into a network of communal homes where members and their children live under the strict supervision of elders. Alongside the marathon prayer meetings and evangelising activities, the Fellowship has built up a business empire worth millions.

Earlier this year journalist Deborah Sherwood managed to penetrate the sect and published an account of life at New Creation Hall. This is an old rectory which the Fellowship purchased and converted into a communal home. Drinking, smoking and television are banned. Only minimum and supervised contact with the outside world is allowed. Sex is thought to be inspired of the devil and married couples sleep separately. Women are kept in

a state of subservience, and are not allowed to wear make-up.

Deborah Sherwood described a Jesus Fellowship prayer meeting as frightening.

"They wail and go into a trance-like state. Their chants reach a crescendo as 'Svengali' Stanton murmurs Bible passages and whips them into a frenzy. A young man beside me shook and began jumping in the air yelling 'Jesus, Jesus'".

Dr William Sargent, a world authority on brain-washing, has described Stanton's methods as "classic brain-washing techniques. Stanton gets these people into such a state that they become his slaves".

There have been sinister incidents, including the death of a 20-year-old member whose headless body was found on a railway line. He was one of five young people connected with the sect whose deaths occurred in circumstances necessitating inquests.

Despite the Jesus Fellowship's unsavoury history, the Baptist Union appears to have expelled it because of organisational transgressions. The Rev Brian Green, general secretary of the Baptist Union, said: "Our decision does not imply any judgement about their standing before God. The issue before us was membership of the Baptist Union".

Window Witness

The Church of Scotland minister at Colvend, Kirkcudbright, will have to clean his own windows in future. After doing the job for ten years, John Huggins has told the Rev Ian Robertson that he can no longer include the manse in his window cleaning round. His refusal was not prompted by trade union pressure or a competitor's threats. It was something much more serious. "Sorry", he told his clerical customer, "but I've been told that cleaning your windows is a sin".

Mr Huggins explained why he would no longer clean the manse windows: "I do not see eye-to-eye with the Kirk on the interpretation of the Bible", he said.

Colvend's window cleaner has joined the Jehovah's Witnesses, and it is they who imposed the ban. It appears they regard cleaning the Rev Robertson's windows as "working for the Church of Scotland".

Mr Robertson commented: "I have no quarrel with Mr Huggins. This sect decided that they have no time for established churches. They are very zealous". And he wrote in a letter to his local newspaper: "This kind of incident illustrates the kind of love they exhibit, and the kind of doctrine you end up with when you write your own Bible".

Privileged Religious Bodies

blatantly unjust that, simply on grounds of religious belief, one organisation should be able to campaign out of untaxed income while another, campaigning on the opposite side of the same social issue, should have to do so out of fully taxed income.

Another social injustice based on religious discrimination is that, as a perpetuation of Lord Reith's religiosity, every radio and television station (whether BBC or independent) has a special budget and a large proportion of broadcasting time allocated to the output of its Religious Broadcasting Department, while there are no comparable provisions for the alternative viewpoint to be heard.

Barbara Smoker concluded: "Similar kinds of discrimination in the opposite direction occurring behind the Iron Curtain, are rightly denounced on all sides in this country. Yet few people here seem to be even aware of the mass of legal and social discrimination that continues to operate in Britain against non-believers — although we now represent more than 25 per cent of the population".

