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# The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 110 No. 4

APRIL 1990

40p

## LESS RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE IN THE HOME BLAMED FOR VOCATIONS CRISIS

There will be a distinct air of dejection about this year's World Vocations Day on 6 May. For despite appeals and pleadings by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, vocations are declining in many parts of the world, particularly in Western countries. The response to a papal call for "personal and community commitment to the promotion of vocations" has been described in one quarter as "complacent and pathetic".

Pope John Paul recently declared that the vitality of a parish could be judged by the number of vocations it produces. If he is right, it is evident that many parishes in the British Isles are in a run-down state.

In Scotland things are so bad — or good, according to your viewpoint—that "Closed" signs could appear in parishes in the Glasgow Archdiocese. More than half the priests there are over 50, a third over 60. Yet only one ordination is due to take place this year at the main seminary. In order to foster interest, a series of Vocations Awareness Evenings were organised. Only six people turned up to the meeting held in one of Scotland's largest parishes.

The secretary of a lay organisation promoting vocations blames parents and priests for the desperate situation that has developed. There was less religious observance in the home and parents no longer "control the development of their children". Priestly support for the recruiting drive "leaves a lot to be desired".

Even Irish parents are actively discouraging their sons and daughters from entering the religious life. Last month the director of the Dublin Catholic Press and Information Office confirmed there had been a fall in the number of entrants to seminaries and novitiates. Faced with an acute shortage of recruits to the priesthood, the church is appointing vocations directors to visit schools in an attempt to foster

interest. It has even been suggested that African priests may have to take over some Irish parishes.

The Irish church can no longer export large numbers of its priests.

Young people's reluctance to enter the religious life is not the Catholic Church's only problem in Ireland. There are strong indications that many who emigrate, are lost to the church forever.

This year's *Catholic Directory* shows that the number of diocesan priests in England and Wales has also fallen. There are 234 fewer than the previous year. The Leeds diocese is worst affected, followed by Arundel and Brighton.

Monsignor Vincent Nicholls, general secretary of the Bishops' Conference, put on a brave face, saying that statistics "give a picture of steady church life in England and Wales". There was evidence of modest growth in the number of Catholics. No doubt his optimism is rooted in the "once a Catholic always a Catholic" myth. A more realistic appraisal of parish life is reflected in the *Catholic Directory* survey of church attendance. It shows that on a typical Sunday, only 32 per cent of Catholics attend Mass.

Protestant churches, particularly the established Church of England, have been in a state of decline for several years. The latest three-yearly returns from the Methodist Division of Ministries shows a marked fall in church members, with a decrease of 18,857 since 1986. With the exception of North Wales, no district has registered an increase in membership.

Nearly 28,000 new members were enrolled, but a total of 55,396 have either died or "ceased to be members".

There are 182 fewer Methodist churches than three years ago and overall attendance is down by 21,000. Sunday school attendance has fallen, with a marked decrease in the number of young church members.





# The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

The Freethinker was founded in 1881 by George William Foote and is published mid-monthly. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or Editor. Articles, Reviews, News Reports, Obituaries, Letters and Announcements should be sent by the 18th of the preceding month to the Editor at 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT (telephone 0742-685731). Unsolicited reviews should not be submitted.

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Postal subscriptions, book orders and donations to the Freethinker Fund should be sent to:

**G. W. FOOTE & COMPANY,**  
702 HOLLOWAY ROAD, LONDON N19 3NL  
(Telephone: 01-272 1266)

## ANNUAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

United Kingdom: twelve months £5. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £5.60; USA: twelve months, \$12. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3 total \$15.

Printed by F. Bristow and Co., London

# NEWS

## A MATTER OF MONEY

There was a diverting dust-up in the House of Commons last month when two Conservative MPs, both of the Neanderthal Tendency, clashed over a proposed tax reform that would benefit a large number of working women and their families. Teresa Gorman (Billericay) asked leave to bring in a Bill that would allow tax relief for employers of home helps and child minders "in cases where such employment is essential to the earner's availability for work". She told the House that around 45 per cent of all jobs in the work force are done by women, the great majority of them married. However, a working woman who sends her child to a nursery or registered child minder has to pay a fee which may well be a substantial part of her earnings.

Mrs Gorman's Bill called on the Government "to allow those expenses that are reasonably incurred by a woman who goes out to work to be treated as a business expense and to be offset against her pre-tax pay". Although modest enough in all conscience, it brought Ivor Stanbrook (Orpington) to his feet denouncing the suggested reform as "an affront to mothers who see it as their duty to stay at home with their children". Tax benefits would encourage those mothers "who see fit to evade their responsibilities".

Mr Stanbrook did not offer a shred of evidence to support his statements. True, there are women in fundamentalist religious sects, Christian and otherwise, who believe that their duty lies in being submissive to their husbands, bearing children and keeping the house in order. But they are a minuscule group and unrepresentative of women, including those who misguidedly vote for Ivor Stanbrook. And it is not evasion of responsibility but economic necessity that compels a growing number of women, a large proportion of them mothers, to go to work. Many of them are among the one million Londoners earning poverty-level wages as the Low Pay Unit's latest report reveals.

Of course it is highly unlikely that Ivor Stanbrook's wife has ever been forced to forsake "her duty" in order to balance the household budget. In addition to his parliamentary salary, he is a partner in an international law firm and the recipient of income from other sources.

Ivor Stanbrook said Mrs Gorman's Bill would increase child deprivation and "expose them to the risk of cruelty and abuse". Rather than offering tax relief to working mothers and thus encouraging them to seek employment outside the home, the Govern-



# S AND NOTES

ment should "be dedicated to Christian virtues and even Victorian values", he declared.

It is noticeable how upholders of Christian virtues constantly hark back to a supposed golden age when family life was placidly secure and childhood a time of unalloyed happiness. For a large majority of people the reality was somewhat different. With virtually no access to contraception until secularists (in the teeth of Christian opposition) pioneered the birth control movement, unchecked breeding resulted in excessively large families, overcrowded dwellings and horrifying maternal and infantile mortality rates. In such circumstances, children were not high on the list of Victorians' values. Infanticide, disease and neglect wiped out vast numbers. In the 1870s the national mortality rate among those up to the age of 12 months was 15 per cent; in black spots like Liverpool it was not far short of 25 per cent. These figures do not include stillbirths (omitted from official records until 1926) or babies dying shortly after birth and described as stillborn.

It is highly unlikely that women regarded working long hours in the mills and factories of Victorian Britain as a pleasant method of evading domestic responsibilities. Like a majority of women today, they went to work to make ends meet. They had no choice but to employ unregistered and often neglectful child minders, Sarah Gamps who quietened infants with doses of alcohol-laced "soothers", sometimes with fatal results.

Ivor Stanbrook is greatly concerned for the nation's "moral fibre". He has called for enforcement of religious observance in schools and urged that parents should be allowed to withdraw their children from sex education classes unless a Christian view is given. Demanding the resignation of Cecil Parkinson, he charitably described his fellow-Conservative as "a self-confessed adulterer and damned fool". A consistent supporter of the "Life" (anti-abortion) lobby, it follows that he is also an outspoken defender of capital punishment.

Although he opposes tax relief for working mothers, never let it be said that Ivor Stanbrook is an ungenerous man. He has courageously advocated higher salaries for judges.

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**The Rev Keith Burchell, a Methodist minister in Basingstoke, Hampshire, has called for an end to the practice of swearing on the Bible in Courts. He would prefer all witnesses to affirm before giving evidence, and did so himself at a recent inquest.**

## CHANGE OF MIND

During an interview with the religious affairs correspondent of the *Guardian*, the Archbishop of Canterbury has revealed a change of mind on the question of blasphemy law. Previously he supported demands for its extension to other religions, a fact that Islamic zealots were quick to exploit. The Archbishop now believes that blasphemy law should be abolished.

But Dr Runcie went on to suggest another extension: that of Northern Ireland's law against incitement to religious hatred. Such a law is unnecessary in Britain. It would be used by those now leading the clamour to extend blasphemy law in order to silence unbelievers and critics from other religious groups.

Religious hatred is real enough where adherents to various religious faiths — particularly Christianity, Islam and Judaism — are a power in the land. Fortunately, religion is of scant interest to a large proportion of the British population, with the number of committed believers dwindling every year.

Historically it was not in the interest of the English ruling class to foster serious religious division among the lower orders. But the divide-and-rule tactic was used with considerable effect in Ireland, particularly during the 19th century, to set Protestant against Catholic. Religious hatred in Northern Ireland is a baneful legacy of colonialism. The present law against incitement is ineffective there and its extension to Britain should be strongly resisted.

## EUROPE NEXT?

America's televangelists are looking eastward. Shaking in their squeaky clean shoes after a series of sexual and financial scandals, they hope it will be easier to tell the old, old story in Czechoslovakia, Poland and East Germany.

In God's own country itself, the hoo-ha over Brother Jim Bakker's fall from grace has diverted attention from the virtual collapse of another religious business empire. Oral Roberts has announced that he is closing down his discredited and debt-ridden City of Faith. He is also selling the sumptuous houses in which he and his son, the faith-healing Richard Roberts, live. Holiday homes in California have already gone under the hammer.

One of the televangelist's tallest stories concerns his meeting with the Almighty who commanded him to build a hospital. There was a fund-raising campaign during which Roberts saw a vision: "I felt an overwhelming holy presence all around me. When I opened my eyes, there He stood, some 900 feet tall, looking at me. There I was, face to face with Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God." The faith-



ful responded and money poured in. The hospital was duly built but only a small number of its 777 beds were ever occupied.

After that it was downhill all the way. Slick rivals appeared on the scene. A series of public relations blunders alienated hitherto pliant dupes. Oral Roberts claimed that he had revived dead people. His son stated publicly that there are "dozens and dozens" of documented instances of the dead being restored to life by faith healers.

If the Bakkers and Swaggarts and Roberts do extend their activities, Eastern Europeans would be well advised to heed the warning given by one theologian: "Watch for the difference between love-thy-neighbour and empty-thy-wallet."

## A WINNER

Nicolas Walter's excellent *Blasphemy Ancient & Modern* is selling well. Lord Willis (writer Ted Willis) says it "comes exactly at the right moment."

"It is a spirited yet factual examination of the history of blasphemy up to the present day and will provide valuable reinforcement not only for those who are already convinced of the rightness of his arguments and conclusions, but to those who may come to the subject seeking for answers."

Recalling that just over ten years ago he introduced into the House of Lords a Private Member's Bill which proposed the repeal of blasphemy laws, Lord Willis admits he had no real hope of getting the Bill past the entrenched religious establishment in the Upper House.

"There was the predictable hostility from some quarters, and even those who were sympathetic expressed the view that my Bill was unnecessary because the blasphemy laws were as good as dead."

"The Salman Rushdie affair proves how wrong they were. There is now a demand that the law should be strengthened and extended to cover other religions. Apparently the followers of Islam, like the Christians, are so uncertain as to the strength of their beliefs that they look for the protection of the courts."

Nicolas Walter

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## PROPHET OF DOOM

The recent death of Bagwan Shree Rajneesh removed from the scene one of the world's most successful purveyors of religious gobbledygook. This jolly old humbug was once described in all seriousness by Bernard Levin as "the conduit along which the vital force of the universe flows". (Less reverent observers of the cult scene referred to him as "the Bagwash".)

Incredibly, as we approach the 21st century there are still thousands of men and women following the oldest profession. The only qualification necessary to join the international god squad is ability to attract a group of followers, preferably able-bodied, wealthy and, above all, gullible.

At the present time followers of one such divine being, Elizabeth Prophet, also known as Guru Ma, are making their way from various parts of the world to the headquarters of her Church Universal and Triumphant. Having abandoned careers and disposed of their homes, they plan to take up residence in a network of underground shelters in Montana, USA, to await Armageddon.

The Church Universal and Triumphant was set up by Elizabeth Prophet's first husband, Mark Prophet, now deceased. Its teachings are based on a hotch-potch of beliefs culled from Christianity and Eastern religions. Guru Ma claims that she is under the guidance of "Ascended Masters", who include Jesus Christ and the late Mr Prophet.

The church's journal, *Pearls of Wisdom*, predicted that in October 1989 there would be a first-strike nuclear attack on the United States by the Soviet Union. Undaunted by this failed prophecy, Elizabeth Prophet and her church stepped up preparations for "the end of all things". Her followers were encouraged to invest in a shelter which costs \$100,000 to construct.

The Church Universal and Triumphant claims a worldwide membership of 30,000. Its posters have recently appeared in a number of British universities.

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Fourteen candidates stood in last month's Mid-Staffordshire by-election. David Black (Christian Patriot) came bottom of the poll with 39 votes.

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Kellie Everts is an ordained minister in California's Church of the One World Light. She is also a strip-tease artiste. While delivering hellfire sermons from the pulpit she strips and reveals all (well, nearly all) to the congregation. She says: "Stripping is a way of finding a congregation who has never been exposed to the word of the Lord".

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A new Christian bookshop has been opened in Kent. It is situated at Pratts Bottom.



# Women Against Fundamentalism

BARBARA SMOKER

It is just a year since a group of (mainly Asian) women, in response to the Rushdie affair, set up the pressure group Women Against Fundamentalism. On 23 March this year, in commemoration of International Women's Day, they organised a public (but women-only) meeting in central London on "Women's Struggle Against Religious Fundamentalism Across the World". It was attended by some two hundred women, including the President of the National Secular Society, who writes this report.

The platform, this Friday evening, comprised eight very articulate speakers, all women, representing East and West, Black and White, several farflung parts of the globe, and various social issues.

The first speaker, representing Iran, spoke on Islamic Fundamentalism in that country, from its revival under Khomeini in February 1979. Within a few weeks, all women judges in Iran were dismissed, as Khomeini asserted that women were incapable of making judicial decisions. He made abortion a capital offence, both for the woman and her doctor — the woman to be either stoned to death or thrown from a height — and a law was passed forcing women to cover themselves in public from head to toe. Any woman walking about without such covering runs the risk of being attacked with acid. In Britain, it is important to find ways of enabling women and men of Asian origin to establish their identity other than through organised fundamentalist religion.

A well-known woman from a Hindu background spoke on the Rise of Hindu Fundamentalism in India. Having just returned from a visit to India, she said she found the political situation there depressing, confusing, and frightening. Originally founded as a secular State, India is now ruled by a coalition of the Right-wing Hindu and Muslim Parties, based on religious sentiment and the principle that all religious traditions must be preserved. What sort of secularism is that?

A speaker from Bangladesh said that her country, though 85 per cent Islamic, remained ethnically Hindu, and had seceded from Pakistan in 1971 in the name of secularism, but the present Right-wing Government, supported by Iranian money, was unfortunately espousing the idea of Islam being made the State religion. Progressive women's organisations, realising that this constitutional change would mean the oppression of women, are opposing it and the Mullahs, but the illiterate masses are unaware of the implications.

A member of the Jewish organisation, Women in Black, spoke on Jewish Fundamentalism, Women and Zionism. She said that women are victims of the alliance between religion and the State, and that the

dissolution of that alliance is a prerequisite of liberty. In every country Jews are supposedly united by their religion; in reality, Jewish fundamentalism is basically political and divisive. The Zionist movement claims to be socialist, and in theory upholds the equality of women; but is ready to sacrifice it to political expediency. The feminist movement in Israel has always been the main route for women opposing Zionism. It is a strong movement, though small: many Israeli women, looking for national identity, are attracted to Jewish fundamentalism and like to claim that they keep to the Orthodox rules more than the men.

A West African representative of the organisation Forward spoke about the amalgam in West Africa of two patriarchies, with the worst features of each, where fundamentalist Islam is superimposed on the traditional tribal religions. Christian Pentecostalism and other fundamentalist movements, mainly from the USA, are also gaining ground. Many West African women, suffering hardship in everyday life, rush into the fundamentalist sects for the sake of welfare handouts, but are then controlled by the Church, which, forbidding contraception and abortion, uses the myth of Adam's rib to foster the idea that women were created to serve men.

The next contributor, speaking on Science, Religious Fundamentalism and the New Right, made the point that while the fast-growing cult of quasi-scientific socio-biology makes an ally of anti-feminist fundamentalism and the New Right, this development is opposed by many feminist scientists: true science is the real ally of women's liberation.

A spokeswoman from the Soviet Union said that though the Revolution had promised equality for women, this promise had been betrayed for seven decades. Economic demands were denounced, and the shamefully high infant mortality rates are only now beginning to be seriously discussed. Besides, the attitude of men towards women has never changed in the Soviet Union. When, for instance, women were told they could become tractor drivers, they were given only the oldest rusty tractors to drive. It is impossible for women to liberate themselves in a climate of general political oppression; but with the advent of *perestroika* women are now beginning to take leading social roles in the Soviet Union — though many simply want to rest at the moment, following years of bearing the double burden of work inside and outside the home. The Orthodox Church still insists that women should emulate the Madonna. In the refugee camps in Azerbaijan, young Muslim men are forming fundamentalist gangs which bully women who do not follow the strict Muslim rules of dress — though (contrary to Gorbachev's propa-



ganda) in those regions struggling for their ethnic liberation there is also a freer strand of Islam.

A particularly horrifying instance of Muslim male chauvinism coupled with fundamentalist Islamic injustice is the case of a young Pakistani woman, Rabia Janjua, who was also present at the meeting. She has two children (one aged four years, the other five months), both of whom were born in Britain, but she is now faced with deportation to Pakistan, where she will either face death by stoning or 30 lashes followed by ten years' imprisonment. Her crime, in Muslim eyes, is that seven years ago, aged 20, she was raped. Since this meant she was unable to return to her family, she married the rapist, who, as a British subject, brought her to this country five years ago. But he deliberately obtained only a visitor's visa for her, instead of bringing her in officially as his wife. He often assaulted her, and, while in hospital (for a second time), she admitted that her serious injuries had been caused by him. By way of reprisal, he informed the immigration authorities that she was an illegal immigrant, whereupon the Home Office took her into custody and prepared to deport her. Pressure from MPs, the press, and women's organisations, has now resulted in a stay of deportation, but she is still liable for detention and deportation at any time. By chance, only a few hours before the meeting — not thinking I would see her there — I had written a letter in the name of the National Secular Society to the Home Secretary, asking him to reconsider his decision to deport her.

She bravely agreed to tell the audience her story (in Urdu, which was translated into English) — though she was obviously shy and said she felt ashamed to reveal her sufferings in public. It seems that the British immigration laws can be waived for a political refugee, but not for a refugee from the injustices of fundamentalist religion.

During audience participation in the second half of the meeting, I objected (not for the first time) to men being refused admittance — and was surprised to receive a lot of support, though not from the executive. Although I am in favour of there being women-only pressure groups (as, increasingly, there are on many issues), my view is that public meetings held on public issues should be open to members of both sexes.

A representative of the National Abortion Campaign spoke of attempts to put the legislative clock back in Britain and the United States.

The standard of speeches at this particular meeting was so high that I would have liked them to be heard by sympathetic (and even less sympathetic) men. They need not be allowed to speak, but it would surely do them good to listen — and learn. Anyway, a similar meeting restricted to men would definitely be denounced as sexist, and I maintain that sauce for the gander should be sauce for the goose.

## Freethinker Fund

The question is often asked: "How has *The Freethinker* kept going for so long?" One reason is that it has always enjoyed the loyal and generous support of its readers. For the most part they are not prominent in any organisation but quietly promote "the best of causes" in their own way.

Mr M. D. Jeeps, who died recently, was a *Freethinker* reader for many years. He not only sent donations during his lifetime but in his will bequeathed the sum of £1,500 to the Fund. He also left the same amount to the National Secular Society.

The latest list of contributors includes a number of familiar names as well as new donors. We thank them and all who help to keep the paper on a sound financial footing.

N. C. W. Barr and J. K. Hawkins, £1 each; M. A. Aitchison, £2; P. A. Beaver, £3; U. and H. Hansell, £4; Anonymous, C. Blakeley, A. J. Camplin, M. J. Carr, P. Case, B. M. Chatfield, T. Cornish, F. Docherty, S. and F. S. Eadie, B. Everest, R. Fennell, D. Flint, D. Franklin, A. E. B. George, L. Georgiades, N. Gibbard, W. J. Glennie, M. D. Gough, J. D. Groom, H. C. Harding, E. M. Haye, D. J. Holdstock, C. James, W. Johnston, B. N. Kirby, D. Lloyd Lewis, C. H. Matthews, G. S. Mellor, G. Mephram, D. O'Hara, F. Pidgeon, F. A. M. Stevenson, A. Taylor, R. K. E. Torode, S. Trent and E. I. Willis, £5 each; In memory of William Ingram, £6.40; H. J. Jakeman, M. O. Morley and A. J. Wilson, £7 each; E. Cecil, J. Madden, A. Oldham, P. Ponting-Barber, M. D. Powell, A. Rudling and Sutton Humanist Group, £10 each; B. A. Burfott, H. K. Campbell and D. Harper, £15 each; Anonymous, £20; G. C. L. Lucas, J. E. Rupp and K. Porteous Wood, £25 each; M. D. Jeeps, £1,500 (legacy); S. Dahlby, \$30.

Total for February: £1,928 and \$30.

Speaking at an AIDS conference in Rome, Monsignor Carlo Caffara, Dean of the Vatican's Institute for Marriage and Family Studies, said married couples should risk catching the virus rather than use condoms. He told the conference that the risk of death was preferable to contraception.

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# Another Year of *The Freethinker*

R. J. CONDON

To be confronted with a year of *The Freethinker* in one volume is to appreciate the sheer weight of material in it, and the unenviable task of the writer who, much as he would like to, cannot mention everything. For well over a century the paper has concentrated on its task of exposing the stupidity and wickedness so characteristic of the manifold varieties of Christianity. There is a noticeable difference in the latest bound volume, for the Islamic religion is now seen as a powerful and ugly rival to a faith obviously on its way out as far as the British public are concerned. Not one monthly issue is without an article or news item — sometimes several — about the Salman Rushdie affair. It seems that just when the Christian churches have declined almost to the point where we can live with them, secularists must start all over again fighting a religion whose outlook is that of the Christianity of 400 years ago. Of one thing we can be sure — *The Freethinker* will not be found wanting.

Newspapers get read and thrown away. This volume is a permanent reminder of what Britain would become if Islamic demands were conceded. Here is the leader of Scotland's 35,000 Muslims calling for changes in British laws and customs to suit them, and never mind the native population. To put it simply, Islamic law is to be paramount. It is high time this gentleman and others of his outlook were told that if they don't like the way we live, they have a simple and obvious remedy.

Several reports during the year emphasise the growing numbers of people with no religious belief. To quote Barbara Smoker: "Despite the shame of having an Established Church and compulsory religion in schools, Britain is among the world's most irreligious societies." Some of the figures given are frankly astonishing. Can it be true that at one Essex school where parents were told of their rights, almost 90 per cent of them withdrew their children from the Christian assembly? It could be, for an opinion poll indicates that one-third of our population now openly proclaim their unbelief. However, other kinds of superstition are increasing in influence, especially among the young. Clearly we have to do more than get religion out of schools — we must get reason in.

*The Freethinker* continues to attract new writers of quality. Daniel O'Hara has the ability to turn a neat phrase. I like his definition of faith as "a vice of lazy minds". And who better than an ex-minister for showing up the inanities of the higher clergy? T. F. Evans perhaps?

Phillip Adams, known as "The Unspeakable Adams" in his native Australia, gives us some entertaining details about Jehovah's Witnesses, though he might have told us why Mormons wear funny under-

pants. I must remember to ask them next time they call.

Barbara Smoker keeps us posted with news and comments about the Roman Catholic Church of which she was once an ornament. While agreeing in general that religious feminists are likely to widen the rift between Rome and the Church of England, I doubt if the reported transsexual priest worries the Pope too much.

*Freethinker* Reviews draw attention to books unlikely to be noticed elsewhere. A notable example is *Lost Children of the Empire*, by Philip Bean and Joy Melville, which shows how the inmates of children's homes and orphanages have been systematically exported, without their consent, to British Empire countries as slaves in all but name. Even respected names like Barnardo's had a hand in this profitable traffic, which was still going on as late as 1967. How easy it is to take the benevolence of such bodies for granted.

Turning over a whole year's pages brings home to the reader the many aspects of religious nonsense and nastiness which come under notice, particularly as short items in News and Notes. If the Editor cannot resist the occasional sardonic comment who can blame him? No space is wasted in this volume — even the fillers add their weight to this massive indictment of established and privileged unreason.

Much of value has had to be passed over in this survey for lack of space. My apologies to these writers, and please note that my own contributions have not been mentioned either. *The Freethinker*, Volume 109, provides a huge amount of good reading for less than the price of most hardback books. Long may the paper continue, in the Editor's words, to be consistently fair to all religions, not having a good word for any of them.

## THE FREETHINKER

Volume 109, 1989

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# I Believe

NEIL BLEWITT

Was Jesus Christ a god? That is the question; and, not to beat about the bush, I am prepared to state unequivocally that he was.

Anybody who contrives to be born of a virgin, walks on the sea, raises the dead to life, turns water into wine, transfers devils from men into pigs, comes to life again after having spent a week-end dead, walks through closed doors, floats bodily into the upper atmosphere, is seen sitting on the right hand of a god and then disappears for ever can be nothing but a god himself; and a pretty good one at that.

Attis was born of a virgin — and he was a god; Poseidon walked on water — and he was a god; Aesculapius raised the dead to life — and he was a god; Osiris rose from the dead — and he was a god; and Romulus ascended to heaven and he was worshipped by the Romans as a god — and they knew their gods if anybody did.

As to the miracles — no self-respecting god would be seen without them. Jupiter filled a pitcher belonging to Baucis and Philemon with an inexhaustible supply of wine; Apollo gave King Midas donkey's ears as an alternative to his own; Peneus transformed Daphne into a bay-tree and Thor ate a couple of goats and then brought them back to life with his hammer. And they were all gods as good as you'd find anywhere. No mere man — not even Paul Daniels on a good night — could do any of these things.

Now, it may be represented to me that Jupiter's miracle with the wine was also performed by Elijah and that he wasn't a god — just a common or garden prophet. But I think this is to underestimate him. I believe he was a god. He was well qualified: he raised the dead to life and was propelled by a whirlwind into heaven aboard a fiery chariot. Moreover, he was able to part the waters of the Jordan with his mantle so that he could cross in comfort. And the only other perpetrator of that miracle had been the god of the Israelites, who parted the Red Sea. And he was in a class of his own among the gods.

I would agree with the view, if it were advanced, that the record of Elijah's life fails to mention that he was born of a virgin, thereby automatically disqualifying him. But we do not *know* that he was not born of a virgin. His biographer may have omitted to record it on the perfectly reasonable assumption that, as everybody knew it was the correct way for a god to be born, it was hardly worth mentioning. After all, Mark, John and Paul made no reference to Jesus having been born of a virgin, but we know that it happened. Matthew and Luke declared it to be so and, what's more, cited angels and dreams as supporting evidence. And, in defence of Paul, he wasn't there in the first place and, secondly, he was

a bachelor and may have felt embarrassed at having to write on such a delicate matter. I concede that he did produce such sentences as "Jesus was born of the seed of David according to the flesh" — but this may have been an interpolation. It is well-known that there were lots of interpolators at that time just waiting for an opportunity to interpolate.

But I disagree. Was Jesus Christ a god or was he not? There are many who will say that he was not a god but merely the son of a god; and there are others who will say that he didn't even claim to be *that*. An examination of the gospels seems to indicate that these latter may have a point. He refers to himself as the son of man although, curiously, nobody else does. It can't have been a particularly popular appellation. He is addressed as the lamb of god, a prophet, a lord, a devil (and a mad one to boot), the son of Mary, the son of Joseph, the son of David; and I have no doubt that if he had been born in Bethlehem, USA, instead of Bethlehem, Palestine, he would also have been the son of a gun. The fact that he didn't describe himself as the son of a god may have been prompted by any one of several considerations: an agreeable modesty or a reluctance to pull rank on his disciples; he may have been naturally secretive or it may be that he wanted to give everybody a big surprise at the ascension. Actually, he almost let the cat out of the bag on one famous occasion. He said "Before Abraham was, I am. . ." but didn't finish the sentence.

Nevertheless anybody paying attention to the events of his life would have cottoned on pretty quickly to the fact that he was no mere mortal. At his baptism, for example, a voice called down from heaven: "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." And if that wasn't a god talking, I've never heard one. Then, at the transfiguration, the heavenly voice made a similar announcement; and with more justification on that occasion because of all the miracles Jesus had performed in the interim.

Then one would have noticed that whenever anybody said to him "Thou art the son of god", he never denied it. And it wasn't that these words, or their equivalent, were spoken by just one person. Everybody was falling over one another to say it: unclean spirits, fishermen, even a eunuch. Peter said it; Saul said it; Martha said it; Athanasius said it — and they all ought to have known if anybody did. Doubters were quickly discomfited. Take, for example, those standing around at the crucifixion. Before Jesus's death they were jeering at him and inviting him to prove his divinity by coming down from the cross. He didn't, of course, but he had one or two other tricks up his sleeve which allowed him the last laugh. After his death, one of the onlookers had to eat



humble-pie and admit that he was truly the son of a god. Mind you, I think he was assisted to this conclusion by Jesus having arranged for an eclipse of the sun, a couple of earthquakes and an outing for some long-dead bodies and, with a rare touch of humour, visits by the saintly skeletons to their friends and relations. Surprise, surprise!

But the onlooker who realised Jesus was a god didn't know the half of it. Not in his wildest dreams could he have imagined that his corpse was going to escape from a sealed and guarded tomb, then give a theology lesson to some friends, have supper with them, show off his scars, go fishing, materialise and vanish with such frequency that nobody knew whether he was coming or going, and finally sit on a cloud and disappear into the atmosphere.

The cynic may say that Matthew recorded some doubting even at this point. But, really! What more proof could anybody want? Such a comment does no more than confirm the maxim that you can't please all of the people all of the time. And some people are never satisfied.

The cynic may say, further, that if Jesus were as clever as the Bible represents him to be, why didn't he enunciate the law of gravity, mention that the earth is round, advocate social security legislation to abolish poverty, produce a shot or two of penicillin, explain evolution and natural selection, describe possible political and social systems, point out the advantages of the internal combustion engine and so on. But, again, really! Who needs penicillin when sickness can be cured with a word, a touch or a soupçon of spittle. And if the breath of Daniel's god could blow Habakkuk from Judaea to Babylon with Daniel's dinner, and faith can move mountains — who needs the internal combustion engine? And what is so rotten about being poor on earth when it is the qualification for the life of Reilly in heaven? As for the rest of it — what, for pity's sake, did it matter? Within the lifetime of Jesus's friends paradise was going to be established on earth and no one then would give a hoot about evolution, gravity, dynamism, communism, or even rheumatism.

There is no getting away from it. The actions of Jesus in his lifetime prove that he was not simply a man; nor was he just the son of a god. He was those things, but he was a god in his own right as well, and anybody who denies it displays an appalling inability to face up to facts. Jesus may not have been such a colourful combination of entities as some, like Picus who was not only a god but also a woodpecker, or Pan who was a god, the son of a god, a man and, in an early example of one-upmanship, a goat as well. But although less flamboyant than his peers, Jesus had the three attributes. He ate, slept and spoke like a man; he behaved like the son of a god, talking respectfully to and about his father on

several occasions (his heavenly one that is; he tended not to speak of his earthly parents except to ask who they were), and he acted like a true god in being born and resurrected in the prescribed manner and proving it on a daily basis with miracles. No mere man, or even the son of a god, raises the dead, pays his taxes with a coin brought to him by a fish, stills a tempest with a rebuke, feeds five thousand with next to nothing and then ends up having more than he started with, has a conversation with two men who have been dead for centuries and can wither a fig-tree with a word. It just isn't reasonable.

## TV Banned

Two strictly orthodox rabbis in Israel have forbidden their followers to own or hire "dreadful and demoralising" video recorders. Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Wassner and Rabbi Nissim Karlitz said video recorders were not allowed in their followers' homes "even if used to show weddings or other family events".

In Britain the Hubert Jewish High Schools for Girls has announced that from September girls will not be admitted unless their parents agree to prevent them from watching television. A letter has gone out to parents of existing pupils at the Manchester school concerning the "insidious influence" of television.

Michael Brandeis, chairman of governors, defended their prohibition on the ground that "television glamourises the breaking of the commandments. It runs counter to the ethos of a Jewish religious school which is intended to embody those commandments."

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**The fundamentalist Islamic rulers of Sudan have issued a decree segregating travellers on public transport. In future the front doors of buses can be used only by women and the rear doors only by men. There will also be separate seating for men and women.**

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**The Sacred Roman Rota, which records applications for marriage annulments, is in trouble with its nice new computer. Whilst most computers use Italian or English, the Rota stores its information in Latin.**

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Holiday accommodation to let: a self-catering chalet to sleep a maximum of six, situated eleven minutes from the sea at Mablethorpe. March to May and October to November, £40 per week; June to September, £70 per week. Further details from Secular Properties Company, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB, telephone (0533) 813671.



## BOOKS

**BLAVATSKY AND HER TEACHERS: AN INVESTIGATIVE BIOGRAPHY**, by Jean Overton Fuller. East-West Publications, £14.95

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky has long been my favourite charlatan. This view is confirmed by a recent "investigative" biography.

Named after her first husband, Madame Blavatsky is a notable example of the nineteenth century's capacity to produce extraordinary personalities. Mystery and controversy shadowed much of her life (almost contemporaneous with Bradlaugh's) and have lightened little since her death in 1891. Whatever view one takes of her, long before Women's Lib she was, in every sense, a successful adventuress and — like the Fox sisters, Ellen White and Mary Baker Eddy — the virtual founder of a new religion when women had only a subordinate role in the old religions.

Obese, ugly and mannish, she was an obvious target of many detractors both inside and outside the Theosophical movement. In my view her biographer demolishes the cruder slanders: that she was uncouth and ill-educated, never went to Tibet, knew no Eastern languages, had an illegitimate child and was a Russian spy in India.

Curiously, I've discovered no accusation that she was a butch lesbian. Certainly Jean Overton Fuller makes no reference to this possibility and merely observes that it was "a mystery" that she was married twice — to Nikifor Blavatsky and Michael Betanelly, with neither of whom she appears to have cohabited and whom she soon deserted. Nor is it suggested that "unnatural" proclivities may have had something to do with why Henry Steel Olcott, the president of the Theosophical Society with whom she lived intimately but apparently Platonically for many years, called her "Jack", or with her initially friendly and later embittered relations with Alexis and Emma Coulomb, or with her mesmeric effect on Annie Besant. I say "proclivities", for there's no evidence of physical relations in these or other friendships. Neither is there any mystery about her marriages without this hypothesis. The first was an arranged one within a Russian aristocratic family; the second a desire to have a "respectable" marital status during her association with Olcott and probably to facilitate the gaining of American naturalisation.

The subtitle of this book suggests an *exposé* of fraud by HPB in the production of Spiritualistic "phenomena" or letters ostensibly penned by her occult Masters, notably "Koot Hoomi", a Punjabi Sikh normally resident in Tibet. Fuller does indeed

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track down the likely nationality and antecedents of these supposed teachers, as well as many details of Lamaistic theology and politics. She even undertakes an explication of the "secret doctrine" and speculates on HPB's previous incarnations: Père Joseph and Cagliostro.

In tracking down original manuscripts of *The Mahatma Letters* (purportedly from KH and Morya to Alfred Percival Sinnett) and other epistles and diaries, the author reveals motivations for and, in many cases, vital clues to the *modus operandi* of HPB's phenomena. To the suggestibility of dupes and the collusion of acolytes, which I discovered during my investigation of Spiritualism in Bristol in 1957, can be added the pliability of Indian servants in endorsing the materialisation of flowers, the discovery of missing crockery and brooches, the duplication of pencils, the tinkling of "astral" bells and all the other wretched conjuring tricks common to seances and fairgrounds. On top of this, Fuller concedes that HPB claimed she "could make Olcott believe anything she liked by just looking at him", that at one time or another all her associates had doubts about a phenomenon or a "precipitated" letter from a Master, that the style of KH is similar to M's (from which attention is drawn by having one use blue ink and the other red) and to HPB's own, that as violet writing sometimes occurred the two Masters probably shared one pen (though they lived comfortably in separate houses), and that the "occult room" and shrine at Adyar conveniently adjoined HPB's bedroom.

Yet, despite this weight of damaging evidence and inference, Fuller is convinced not only of the truth of Madame's teaching but of the authenticity of all her phenomena and her Masters' letters. At this stage, if not before, one might note from the jacket that the author is a member of the Theosophical Society and from the title page that her publisher works "in association with The Theosophical Publishing House Ltd, London". Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to see this book as a cynical PR exercise. For some years I was a colleague of the author's in Poets' Workshop, and I noticed then that while she was often brilliant at identifying associational trees she frequently missed the nature and extent of motivational woods.

It should already be clear why I regard HPB as a charlatan. But why favourite? As distinct from modern equivalents, she came from an affluent background but lived comparatively simply. She worked hard at her self-imposed mission, and clearly spent much of the time when she was supposed to be travelling or meditating or convalescing, reading. Her writings may be "simply a medley of well-known



# REVIEWS

though generally misunderstood Brahmanic or Buddhist doctrines", but they're imaginatively compared with other literature and, if taken simply as poetry, not without interest.

At a time of Christian *imperium*, Theosophy was one of the forces that helped to break down the old creed's blinkered and bigoted world-view and to reverse the dominance of the West over the East. As such, it saw itself marching in the broad armies of freethought, taking up many of the issues espoused by nineteenth-century secularists: Indian independence, anti-vivisection, cultural freedom and a host of others. Its magazines advertised secularist publications, even the contraceptive *Fruits of Philosophy*, until Anna Kingsford, an influential London Theosophist, complained, whereupon KH discovered that the *Fruits* was "infamous and highly pernicious in its effects".

Normally I give short shrift to the familiar apology of tricksters that they are only satisfying a need. In HPB's case I'm almost inclined to make an exception. However muddled and unscientific, her basic message wasn't about miracles but about *karma* and mental evolution. Her Masters frequently told her associates and disciples they were giving too much attention to phenomena. As better lighting and investigations were making mediumistic tricks increasingly risky, there was a prudential element in these chidings. But perhaps she was as irritated as *Freethinker* readers by well-educated seekers after truth who wouldn't believe anything unless it was scrawled out in coloured ink on supposedly "precipitated" sheets from adepts in Tibetan mountains. (Their astral stationery, by the way, was the same as HPB's.)

DAVID TRIBE

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**FACING THE WORLD: AN ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY FOR HUMANISTS.** Chosen by Bet Cherrington  
Foreword by Gavin Ewart. Pemberton, £12 and £7

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This diverse collection of verse is carefully subtitled "an anthology of poetry for humanists"; it is not intended to be an anthology of humanist or freethought poets. The book is divided into a novel arrangement of sections or parts, each with a theme such as "The Human Condition", "Doubt and Disbelief", "Time", "Humanity in Nature", and so on.

It seems clear from the choice of writers and subjects that Bet Cherrington, the compiler, has had considerable experience in collecting, reading and analysing poetry, and has acquired a very broad range of tastes.

There was certainly plenty for me to enjoy in

*Facing the World*. For example, in the first part ("The Human Condition") there was Thom Gunn's charming "Baby Song", John Clare's touching "First Love", and Jane Tozer's neat riposte, "Anne Donne Breaks Her Silence" (about the romantic John, of course). I was particularly moved by J. J. Jolobe's "The Making of a Servant" — the "servant" in this case being a young yoke-ox.

The section I found most entertaining was probably the one on "Doubt and Disbelief". There you will find Marvell's "Priests were the first deluders of mankind", Byron's send-up of Bishop Berkeley, one of my favourite sequences from Shelley's *Queen Mab*, Clough's biting lines, "The Latest Decalogue", and Siegfried Sassoon's "They" (about a patriotic bishop). There were two very nice pieces by Phyllis fforde, "How to Start a War" and "State Meeting at Jerusalem", and some excellent parodies: Bet Cherrington's "Facing East" (which begins "Bogus! Bogus! Bogus! Lord God Almighty"), her "Song of the Bishop of Woolwich" (to the tune of "The Vicar of Bray"), and David Oppenheimer's "Psalm 23a" ("The Lord is my shepherd" rewritten for freethinkers and vegetarians). Maureen Duffy's "For *The Freethinker* Centenary" is also included as are extracts from Barbara Smoker's *Good God*.

I do just wonder if the compiler's inclusion of Samuel Butler's "The Saints" is not a gaffe. It seems to me to be saying that all dissent is vice and self-interest camouflaged by humbug; but it is so nimbly and wittily written that it may be tongue in cheek. I could be wrong.

The section entitled "Fantasy" ranges widely from lighthearted nonsense to religious verse. Some *Freethinker* readers may frown at the idea of putting religious writers in an anthology like this, but remember it is *for* humanists, not necessarily by them. Just as music transcends boundaries of language, so can poetry transcend boundaries of ideology: a cantankerous old atheist like me can enjoy the religious poetry of Sir John Betjeman even though I thoroughly dislike the Church of England which Betjeman loved. (I cannot be so charitable about all religious poetry, of course.)

Under "Fantasy" I had a good chuckle over Edwin Morgan's "The First Men on Mercury" and Roy Campbell's "The Theology of Bongwi, the Baboon"; but I did gag at "Hark! the herald-Angels sing" by Charles Wesley. As religious poets *have* been allowed here, it is a pity that Betjeman could not have been included: his "Huxley Hall", for example, is a gentle send-up of the Left-wing, humanist and "progressive" ideas of Hampstead a generation back. (I have given strict instructions for it to be read at my funeral.)

Bet Cherrington has certainly covered a remarkable range of poets and subject matter. I hesitate to mention missing names, because an anthology like



this is very much a matter of personal taste, modified by limitations of space. However, I must say I was surprised to find Swinburne, of all people, absent. Surely the wayward genius who shocked the Victorians with "Glory to Man in the highest!" deserves a place in an anthology for humanists. Other poets not represented here include George Meredith, Gerald Massey, G. L. Mackenzie (of *Brimstone Ballads* fame), Omar Khayyam (the compiler has excluded all translations), James Thomson ("B.V.") and Whittier. However, it is impossible to please everybody in just over two hundred pages.

Poetry is a versatile and useful art-form. It can be read just for amusement, laughter and entertainment; but it can also be written with very serious intent, for putting over a message or a protest. Gavin Ewart's foreword to *Facing the World* mentions poetry as consolation, which I can certainly vouch for. The words of Swinburne, in particular, have often soothed and sustained me through times of grief and despair. And when, in Australia, I get homesick for England I settle down with Betjeman, Rudyard Kipling and a handkerchief. (Yes, I read Australian poetry too: and some of it is very good.)

To quote Gavin Ewart again: "It would be an odd person who didn't enjoy a large number of these poems — assuming that he or she were sensitive to verse and not in a similar category to the tone-deaf and the colourblind." I agree. Bet Cherrington has obviously gone to great lengths to collect, select and arrange the material for *Facing the World*. She deserves to be congratulated and supported, as does the Pemberton Publishing Company for making this book available.

NIGEL SINNOTT

## THEATRE

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**RACING DEMON**, by David Hare. National Theatre (Cottesloe), London

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David Hare is the fifth columnist of contemporary English playwrights, attacking our most sacrosanct institutions from deep within their confines. Public schools, freemasonry, the War Office and Whitehall and merchant banking have all come under his caustic scrutiny. Now Hare turns his attention to the most hallowed of sacred cows after the monarchy in a blistering anatomy of the Church of England in crisis.

Hare's immediate focus is a team ministry in South London beset by internal division and a general questioning of the efficacy of traditional doctrine. The four representative members of the clergy hold views

that cover the breadth of current debate within the Anglican community. There is the Reverend Lionel Espy, upholding what has come to be known as the liberal establishment, concerned mainly with social ills without heavy-handed God-bothering. The word of God means very little, he feels, to a black woman who, after a painful abortion, is scalded with a pan of boiling water by her husband. She needs a court order, not divine rhetoric.

The curate, Tony Ferris, disagrees. God's message must be paramount to such people, and Espy is pursuing a "dangerous" path in not pushing it harder. Ferris is disturbed by falling church attendance anyway. Yet when he attempts to visit his flock as God's emissary, he is mistaken for the police and has to resort to physical violence. Pastoral love has forsaken him. "Christ came not to bring peace, but a sword," he tells his colleagues during a backroom meeting to oust Espy. His is the "Savoy Grill Room School of theology". Ferris is exposed as a careerist eager to make his mark, whose lover leaves him because, she says, he always brings someone else (The One Above) to the party during their lovemaking sessions.

A gay member of the team is forced to leave the ministry when a tabloid journalist threatens him with a double-page expose. And there is Donald "Streaky" Bacon, who does his best to act as honest broker in a situation that seems to be beyond them all.

Finally there is the decisive presence of the Bishop of Southwark, whose "brass balls clang as he walks". Jovial beneficence on the outside, he is as tough as one of his wife's overcooked ducks when pitted against the do-nothing "humanists" like Espy who corrode the iron of belief. "The Church of England," he says, "is about what you can stomach. And I've reached the stage where I can stomach no more."

So Espy and his ilk will have to leave, while there is still time, because the Church is also about bumping up the numbers by whatever means available — a boost for Billy Graham or multi-media plug from a public relations agency. In the end, the inner-city victims of Thatcherism matter less to the traditional middle for whom the Church has always ministered.

It is a marvellously full-bodied examination by Hare, replete with well-turned epigrams, incisive characterisation and stirring intellectual debate. Richard Pasco, who distinguished himself 15 years ago as the demonic Aleister Crowley, is equally electric as the Bishop. Michael Bryant, as the tormented gay priest, is masterly. The rest of the cast acquit themselves splendidly under the direction of Richard Eyre.

*Freethinker* readers are especially fortunate that a play which is bound to excite their interest should come from Britain's foremost contemporary dramatist writing at the height of his powers.

JAMES MacDONALD



# The School as a Caring Community

DAVID HARRIS

State schools are institutions where the teacher still finds his/her definition of the situation is backed by the overwhelming authority of the entire education system. It is still the case as Berger and Luckmann (1962) have dryly observed, that he who has "the larger stick" may fashion reality. The teacher will hold assumptions about students, the quality of their responses, and the effectiveness of his/her teaching. In the day to day routine of teaching, many assumptions and beliefs (and many not stated), will merge into the social structure of the school.

In the light of my recent research into social education at Southampton and Cambridge Universities, I would offer three main objectives for social education in the schools: (1) to help students to become well adjusted in life, socially and morally; and to help establish good personal relationships; (2) to establish a code of behaviour for life in the community which may include the commonly accepted standards of society; (3) to encourage children to develop healthy attitudes — kindness, love, courage, etc.

I would see the entire life of the school community a caring community, as a means of fulfilling this objective. This would be a community in which sincere teachers with acknowledged and respected differences helped to fashion the school into a warm, friendly and purposeful community in which every child would feel a valued member with a personal contribution to make.

Teachers have their certificates, diplomas and degrees, but in social education no one can be qualified to teach morality in the sense of teaching children what to think about moral matters. Moral judgements and principles are subjective concerns. The degree to which the teacher observes this may relate to the extent of his/her conceptual development vis-a-vis some basic model of the universe. This is not a plea for the neutral teacher cosily acting as a detached arbiter in any given situation. One cannot envisage a situation in which even the most "liberal" teacher would accept with equanimity any moral viewpoint which a student may come to hold. At best the teacher will be a willing member of a common ethos which the staff — and possibly the older students also — have worked out and agreed together, and of which the accruing values are manifest in the day-to-day life and relationships of the school.

Ideally the *modus vivendi* of the school will bring home to all children their responsibilities for themselves, their own actions, and for helping one another and participating in solving the problems of the community. In the light of current scholarship and personal experience, one cannot regard morality as an enshrined code to be followed like a route-

map. It is perhaps better represented by humanity's cultural achievement, by the knowledge of ourselves and of the students. It is this understanding that guides what I seek to describe as "social education", and therefore the objective study of morality in the classroom cannot be equated with compulsory acts of worship in the assembly hall.

Traditional authoritarian teaching has surely waned, and whilst some would say that this secularist erosion of "standards" is regrettable, it would appear that the questioning and exploration of social education by the young is axiomatic of a healthy stance of limited certitude:

We often hear talk of "Christian values". Those who use this phrase are confident that everyone knows what the Christian values are. But I do not know what they are. For example, I am puzzled whether thrift is a Christian value in view of the fact that thrift is often praised by people calling themselves Christian, yet is rejected by Jesus in the gospels. We often hear talk of "Western values", as if we know quite well what they are. I find this puzzling too. Do they include capitalism? Do they include promise-keeping? If so, is promise-keeping therefore not an Eastern value?

(Robinson, 1975, p9)

No one seeks churlishly to upbraid any cherished personal philosophical or religious viewpoints, but clarity of thought and definition of terms have to play their part in the ongoing discussion of important topics in social education. The student must surely discover values and attitudes in the real life situation, and the school teacher must intensify comprehension of these situations and promote accompanying insight. Moral choice becomes a matter of autonomy, and the hopes underpinning the state schools are realised. The student's unique self has become an acceptable part of the harmonious and receptive community.

## References

- Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, T. (1962), *The Social Construction of Reality*, Allen, Lane/Penguin.  
Robinson, R. (1975), *An Atheist's Values*, Basil Blackwell.

**A Freethinker reader is anxious to acquire a copy of Phyllis Graham's book, *The Jesus Hoax*, which has been out of print for several years. Anyone who can help should contact Mr James P. Milne, Via XI Febbraio 75, Cremona 26100, Italy.**

Newspaper reports are always required by The Freethinker. The source and date should be clearly marked and the clippings sent without delay to The Editor, The Freethinker, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield, S6 3NT.



# LETTERS

## UNNECESSARY DIVERSION?

I am frankly alarmed at George Broadhead's apparent readiness to jettison secularism, freethought and rationalism, so long as he can cleave to "Humanism with a capital H" (Letters, March). What is this dignified but unqualified beast?

George Broadhead knows as well as any one that "humanism" has had a variety of meanings throughout history. Doubtless people who are attracted to the humanist movement, in one or more of its various manifestations, are drawn to it for a variety of reasons, and seek from it a variety of responses to a range of human needs. That is as it should be. Some will value most the fellowship of local groups of like-minded people, others the range of non-religious ceremonies on offer, still others its vigorous anti-religious propaganda, or its social activism on such matters as education, sexuality, free speech, etc. For myself, I value chiefly the rational approach to social and philosophical issues which I see as characteristic of humanism, and its determination to work for a thoroughly secular society in which all arbitrary assumptions and religious privileges are swept away. Thus my humanism will always be both rational and secular: and I prefer to keep the lower case "h" lest it gets too big for its boots!

DANIEL O'HARA, London W7

## A QUESTION OF FAITH

I am far from being a Christian Scientist, or a Christian "Anything", but had a deeply indoctrinated childhood. I brought my mother lifelong distress by rejecting "Science".

Nevertheless, I found Laura Meredith's dismissal unsatisfactory and over-simplified (February). All states of faith can be called "superstitious", but superstition is not necessarily despicable. Science (the ordinary secular kind) is constantly proving that the threshold of knowledge has not been reached, nor is likely to be. Between our knowledge and that unreachable horizon lies uncharted ground, and who can say what concepts have yet to be found there, some to be initially condemned as superstition, only later to become received wisdom? Superstition is fear or reverence toward the unknown. The unknown may not ultimately be proved false. Some feel that reverence for the alleged infallibility of science is the biggest and most dangerous superstition of all, and perhaps they have a point!

My main reason for rejecting Christian Science — apart from seeing how Christians behaved toward their own and other species — was that my rational mind failed to see the logic in not preventing (or, where possible, curing through orthodox medicine) a physical ill, while accepting the "reality" of matter by daily feeding, washing and in other ways catering to the physical needs of one's body. I take that stance to this day.

That said, we are left with the fact that orthodox medicine has a lamentable success rate in curing major ills, and an even worse track record for prevention. Many more of us have "died of our physician" than of failing to abandon Christian Science for the hospital specialist.

I lack that deep, calm faith in a God whose desire for my well-being is so strong that I have only to submit to His (or Her) will to experience physical and psychological harmony. Frankly, I wish I had! It would save a great deal of money, fear and discomfort if I were blessed by a temperament that made me receptive to "spiritual healing". Instead, "stubbornly", with my

puny human mind, I believe that my best chance of survival in reasonable nick is to eat the right food, avoid chemical pollution as best I can, and go for naturopathy rather than allopathy. I admit of no god (other than a devil taking that name) that could have created this cruel and indifferent universe, nor do I admit to the possibility of any human or group of humans likely to come up with a better scheme of things.

Nonetheless, I have met many Christian Scientists over my 65 years and I cannot deny that some of them have "demonstrated" the power of faith no less than have members of other sects who aim to harmonise life by states of faith. The mind is a powerful tool for more than just the techniques of advanced banana-peeling. Faith, meditation, affirmation, and other disciplines can unquestionably influence and change material conditions. "Stubborn belief" can be a very effective practical faith, and I see no point in being snide about others' methods if they are more effective than my own hit-and-miss answers.

Of the Christian Science organisation, the least said the better: and of the smugness and shut-mindedness of many individual Christian Scientists. But such feelings are as common among those of no faith or superstition as among those so burdened!

JON WYNNE-TYSON, Fontwell, Sussex

## WHAT THE DEVIL DOES HE MEAN?

I confess to being somewhat flummoxed by Tim Lenton's extraordinary reply (March) to my letter on Christian superstition. I was concerned to emphasise that Hippocrates was one of the earliest practitioners of the scientific method in the field of medicine by dismissing such absurd beliefs about the "sacred" disease of epilepsy and asserting that all illnesses had purely natural causes. Some 400 years later we find the Jesus of the gospel narratives perpetuating superstitious nonsense by rebuking and expelling the "devils" which he clearly believed were responsible for various afflictions. This Jesus "devil" syndrome was carried into the Middle Ages and, of course, reinforced scriptural authority for the hideous torturing and eventual burning to death of thousands of so-called witches for allegedly consorting (and cohabiting!) with "devils".

However, for some totally obscure reason, Mr Lenton states that my medical question assumes that man is evolving (which he doesn't believe) and therefore my letter doesn't require an answer. What on earth has Evolution to do with the subject under discussion?

Let me update this frightful Jesus "devil" nonsense and issue a direct challenge to Mr Lenton. Some two years ago in the American state of Florida an evangelical Christian mother starved her four-year-old daughter to death because she believed the child was possessed by a "devil". In another shocking case a couple actually burnt their four-year-old daughter to death because they were convinced she was possessed by a "devil". In the face of such appalling tragedies we are compelled to ask from whence and from whom does this vile superstitious nonsense derive? In the gospel of Mark, ch 16, v 17, Jesus is reported as saying: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name they shall cast out devils".

I ask Mr Lenton to address himself seriously to the question as to who, ultimately, must be held responsible for the tragedies related above. May one hope that he will be good enough to frame his reply in language totally free from the kind of semantic fudging so beloved by many Christian apologists?

MARTIN O'BRIEN, Cardiff



## NOT CONVINCED

Ludovic Kennedy asks me a question, which deserves an answer.

No, of course I do not believe that Timothy Evans killed his wife. Why on earth should I, when Christie in the same house made it a practice to murder women? But there is nothing in Christie's history to suggest that he numbered child killing among his perversions: consequently the evidence against Evans in respect of the child, deserves to be taken seriously.

The point I am making, in this case, as well as that of the Guildford Four, is that unjust condemnation does not necessarily imply total innocence, however much the "black and white" school of jurisprudence may wish it so.

GLYN EMERY, London N1

## SAM BEER, ESPERANTIST

Further to your obituary of Sam Beer (February), I would like to record his lifelong interest in Esperanto, the international language. During the 1930s he was International Secretary of the TUC Esperanto Group. He travelled widely and it was in Esperanto circles that he met his wife Betty.

Esperanto was to Sam Beer an important part of humanism, a means of connecting the human family.

BEATRICE CLARKE, Hove, Sussex

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 6 May, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Beatrice Lewis: Co-dependency.

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.** 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 Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-942 0129.

**Leeds and District Humanist Group.** Swarthmore Institute, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 8 May, 7.30 pm. Public meeting.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 26 April, 8 pm. Terry Liddle: Marxism and Glasnost.

**Norwich Humanist Group.** Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone (0603) 427843.

**Scottish Humanist Council.** Cowane Centre, Stirling. Saturday, 28 April, 10 am until 5 pm. Annual Conference. Guest speaker: Nettie Klein, Secretary of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. Details obtainable from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, telephone (0563) 26710.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 9 May, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Edward Bailey: The Community Relations Council in the London Borough of Sutton.

**South Place Ethical Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sundays: Lecture, 11 am; Forum, 3 pm; Concert, 6.30 pm. Tuesdays and Thursdays, Extramural Studies, 6.30 pm. Please write or telephone 01-831 7723 for details.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Friends House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Meetings on the third Monday of the month, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Information: telephone Kenilworth 58450.

**The Town Plays, performed by local groups in the streets and squares of Brighton, go from strength to strength. This year they will take place throughout Sunday, 27 May. The same evening, at an indoor venue, the New Venture Theatre Club, a new play about the 19th-century secularist and founding father of the co-operative movement, George Jacob Holyoake, will commence a week-long run. It is appropriate that Holyoake is being performed in Brighton where the subject of John Norman's play lived for the last 25 years of his life. Brighton and Hove Humanist Group are arranging a first-night booking. Tickets are £2.50, and arrangements are being made by Beatrice Clarke (Brighton 774048) and Joan Wimble (Brighton 733215).**

**There will be a one-day conference of young humanists in London on Saturday, 5 May. It is hoped that a national network will result. The conference venue will be Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn. It commences at 10.30 am. Limited overnight accommodation can be arranged. Details are obtainable from Adrian Bailey, 1 Bronte Close, Swindon SN3 6JL, telephone 0793 485089 and Michael Newman, British Humanist Association office, telephone 01-937 2341.**

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers include  
MICHAEL FOOT, MP  
MERVYN JONES  
BARBARA SMOKER  
NICOLAS WALTER

The Bonnington Hotel, London  
(Southampton Row,  
near Holborn Underground)

Saturday, 21 April, 6.30 pm for 7 pm

Tickets £16. Vegetarians catered for  
(advance notice essential)

NSS, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL,  
telephone 01-272 1266



# Rushdie Threat: Lords Demand Action

Strong condemnation of death threats to Salman Rushdie was expressed during a House of Lords debate last month. It was initiated by Lord Harris of Greenwich who asked why there had been no prosecutions for incitement to murder.

Lord Harris recalled that after Ayatollah Khomeini issued the *fatwa*, a number of Islamic leaders in Britain declared that Muslims should carry out the death sentence. The vice-chairman of the Islamic Mission in Rochdale went even further by saying that retribution was justified against everyone involved in the publication of *The Satanic Verses*.

"We have witnessed crowds carrying banners in public demonstrations with the words 'Kill Rushdie'.

"In the light of clear, unambiguous evidence, what has been the response of the Director of Public Prosecutions?

"It would be truly remarkable if the Director did not regard incitement to murder as a matter of extreme gravity. What puzzles many of us is why not a single prosecution has been brought against those in this country who have called for the murder of a British subject."

Concluding his statement, Lord Harris said the disinclination of the DPP to bring proceedings is beginning to cause significant public disquiet. This has given rise to the belief, however unjust, that if other British citizens behaved as a minority of Muslims have behaved, they would be prosecuted.

"We are discussing the case of a British citizen who is a hunted man in his own country. He has committed no offence known to our law. All he has done is to exercise his right to free speech in a democracy. I believe that what has happened to Mr Rushdie is a public outrage.

"Just after the Ayatollah Khomeini's sentence of death on Mr Rushdie, the French Prime Minister said, 'Any further calls for violence or murder will lead to immediate criminal prosecution.'

"I believe that it is about time we heard those sentiments expressed in this country."

Lord Houghton of Sowerby said he took the death penalty of Salman Rushdie very seriously.

He added: "I do not know whether people think this is just wild talk, that they do not mean it, and that it will not happen. I think that they do mean it and that it can happen.

"If he emerges and is seen by a faithful member of the Muslim fraternity, he could be shot on sight and the man who did it be glorified among his own people. That is a sombre thought."

Referring to demands that blasphemy law should be extended to protect non-Christian religions, Lord Houghton said: "As a matter of principle some of us would object to the extension of protection given to

religious activities, thought and teaching."

Lord Hutchinson of Lullington said that Salman Rushdie was condemned and sentenced without trial by a judge who has no jurisdiction in this country. "The irony of the situation," he added, "is that it is freedom of speech, of thought and of expression which are the guarantee of freedom of religion.

"The Government acted with alacrity when it was a question of prosecuting pickets during the miners' strike. The Government pursued relentlessly another aspect of the written word, *Spycatcher*, through the courts at huge expense. The case of Salman Rushdie far exceeds *Spycatcher* in importance for the ordinary citizen. Each day he remains a prisoner is an affront to all of us. Each day the evil of racism and of censorship persists and grows as a direct result."

The Bishop of Manchester, the Rt Rev Stanley Booth-Clibborn, related his experience when invited to give greetings on behalf of the Christian churches at a meeting in Manchester City Hall to commemorate the Prophet's birthday. It was the occasion when Dr Kalim Siddiqui made his notorious and widely reported speech.

"When he spoke," the Bishop declared, "I had no doubt whatever what was being said and the response he was trying to elicit. I do not believe that anybody in the United Kingdom should be able to make such threats with impunity to a British citizen or anyone living in this country. That should be clearly understood in the future."

The Bishop of Manchester said there was little support in the churches for the Muslims' campaign to have *The Satanic Verses* banned from bookshops and libraries, or to prevent publication of a paperback edition.

"It is important to appreciate why there is so little support from the churches for these demands," he said.

"Part of the reason is that we are all penitent in the churches, or should be. We have burnt books and their authors. We have been on the side of repression and intolerance again and again. It is well catalogued."

The Bishop informed the House that he supported the Law Commissioners' majority recommendation on blasphemy law. "I hold the view strongly that it ought to be repealed," he said.

Replying for the Government, Lord Belstead said the question of blasphemy was being kept under review, but at present there are no plans to change the law. He condemned the "terrifying tactics" of Salman Rushdie's enemies. Incitement to murder was a serious charge, but there had been insufficient evidence to justify a prosecution.

