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FAMILY PLANNING BECOMING RECOGNISED AS A HUMAN RIGHT, DECLARES UN REPORT

"The experience of the last twenty years shows that strong, well-managed family planning programmes are highly effective", declares the United Nations Population Fund in its 1991 Report.

"By purely voluntary means, they have achieved smaller family size, healthier mothers and children, more balanced rates of population growth in developing countries and in a wide variety of social and economic settings."

The cost of meeting international targets in fertility and family planning will double in the next ten years. But the cost of not reaching them will be far higher says the Report.

The urgency of meeting the targets is further underscored by the extent of urban growth, the extent of environmental damage, the impending food crises in many developing countries and the low status of women.

But there are hopeful signs, according to the Report. It declares: "Compared with any previous generation, women are saying that they want fewer children. . . The voluntary use of contraception in developing countries has grown from ten per cent of couples in the 1960s to 51 per cent today."

Despite the endeavours of Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa and the breeding lobby, family planning is becoming increasingly acceptable in countries with a large Roman Catholic population. The Report gives several examples of this development.

"Mexico, with a largely Catholic population, has an extremely effective Government-run family planning service.

"In Colombia, another predominantly Catholic country, the Government has successfully delegated the provision of comprehensive family planning services to non-governmental organisations.

"Peru's president, Alberto Fujimori, is supporting a major new family planning programme because he

believes that 'natural family planning' is unreliable and leaves people living in fear.

"The percentage of Catholic couples in the United States using modern methods of contraception is about the same as for non-Catholics."

Significant progress is also recorded in areas of the world with a large Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist population. Following a meeting of Islamic religious leaders from 29 countries, it was agreed that "as well as the need to provide accessible family planning services, voluntary sterilisation should be recognised as an acceptable form of contraception."

Cuba is actively promoting the family planning message among young people.

Many religious groups now recognise the benefits of family planning in reducing the number of abortions, legal and illegal. Preventing unwanted pregnancies also prevents tragic deaths which result from unsafe abortions. However, religious opposition to birth control and women's rights is still a major obstacle.

"In some cases", says the Report, "fundamentalist movements have been allowed to undermine women's rights. Laws favourable to women in divorce and custody of children are under attack in some countries.

"Changes which limit choice inevitably reduce the self-confidence of women and threaten many of their human rights, including the right to family planning."

Fortunately family planning has won acceptance in a wide variety of economic and social environments. Its acceptability "is enhanced by promoting other human rights — economic security, adequate housing and community services. . .

"Put simply, family planning is encouraged by a society in which basic needs are met and in which women participate on an equal basis with men. Family planning also increases women's opportunities to participate in life outside the home."

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NEWS

SECTSUAL ABUSE

Freethinker readers will have heard about some recent cases involving the ritual abuse of children, but they may not have heard about one form of such behaviour which has come to our attention.

It seems that there are small sects in various parts of the country which carry out ritual mutilation of the genitals of very young boys (and sometimes young girls too), generally in connection with ancient religious taboos. There are also much larger sects which practise less drastic but equally peculiar rituals of various kinds. They subject newborn babies to initiation ceremonies which involve pouring water on their heads and making impossible promises on their behalf. They tell growing children strange stories about a figure (confusingly described both as a lamb and as a shepherd) who was tortured to death on their behalf a long way away a long time ago. To preserve his sacred memory and to purge their evil nature, they have to recite strange incantations in uncomfortable postures in front of representations of his cruel death and read meaningless texts in old-fashioned language. When they are older they have to take part in ceremonies involving the consumption of his flesh and blood (though there is disagreement about whether this is real or symbolic).

There are also primitive pagan survivals even in families which don't practise these barbaric customs. Before a midwinter festival children have to ask for presents which are supposedly brought by an old man with a white beard and a red costume, but which are actually bought by the children's parents in an attempt to get rid of all their surplus wealth; at the festival itself they have to eat and drink so much that they are ill. There is a spring festival involving symbolic eggs, during which bad days are called good and dead people rise again.

Very large numbers of children are even subjected to ritual abuse at the schools provided by the State. They are forced to take part in regular ceremonies where various forms of occult belief are combined in what is called a "mish-mash" and also in regular lessons where these ideas are somehow presented as "education" and where notions of right and wrong are dangerously associated with someone or something "up there" or "down here".

Our investigations into these alarming manifestations are continuing despite a conspiracy of silence among all the adults involved and the refusal of the authorities to listen to the children's complaints about their treatment.

AND NOTES

CATHEDRAL CASH

Although the suggested donation is £1, visitors to St Paul's Cathedral, in London, put an average of only fifteen pence in the collection box. The cathedral authorities have now decided on a fixed charge of £2 (children and pensioners £1) for a period of three months. The move has been approved by Dr George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Those who want to pray will be admitted free of charge to the Middlesex Chapel. But the tight-fisted who pose as worshippers in order to gain free admission to the main attractions of the cathedral will be thwarted. There will be no access from the Middlesex Chapel to other parts of the building.

An admission charge of £2.40 has been made at Ely Cathedral since 1985.

Meanwhile the Environment Minister, Sir George Young, has announced that £11.5 million of public money will be given to 42 Anglican and 19 Roman Catholic cathedrals over the next three years.

A 22-year-old Canadian has died because religion was pushed down his throat. The Toronto coroner suggested that Franco Blum tried to swallow a miniature Bible in order to purge himself of the devil.

WHO ARE THE CRIMINALS?

The Scottish Office has announced that there will be no criminal proceedings against families in Orkney who were caught up in the recent child abuse controversy.

The decision was announced more than two months after dawn raids by police and social workers on the island of South Ronaldsay. Nine children, aged between eight and fifteen, were removed from their homes and taken to the Scottish mainland. They were not allowed to contact their parents for 36 days.

There were scenes of jubilation when the children returned to Orkney, following Sheriff David Kelbie's stinging denunciation of those responsible for the "ritual abuse" allegations. The gossip about ritualistic ceremonies, he declared, was based on the children's reminiscences of Halloween and wedding parties. As for the music at these ceremonies, it included "satanic" pieces like the folk dance, Strip the Willow, and tunes from Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Phantom of the Opera".

The Scottish Secretary, Ian Lang, has promised a full judicial inquiry into the South Ronaldsay affair.

Evangelical churches and American-inspired "end-timers" are behind the satanic scare which resulted in children being separated from their parents in other parts of Britain. The Christian witch-hunters claim that a large number of children are being ritually abused by Satanists. But Sir John Woodcock, Chief Inspector of Constabulary, says the police have no evidence of ritual or satanic abuse of children.

The National Assembly of Pakistan has passed a bill to make the Sharia code the nation's supreme law. Opponents, including liberal Muslims, say this will strengthen fundamentalism, weaken Parliament and hold back social progress, particularly on women's rights.

AN ENGAGING TALE

"Our faith cost us a home", ran the *Daily Mail* headline. It concerned the case of Wayne Ullyatt, a lay preacher, who was offered a two-bedroom council house on condition that he and his fiancée occupied it for several weeks before their wedding. He turned down the offer, because it was "morally impossible" for them to move in together before marriage.

A local authority spokesman says as there is a waiting list of 60,000 applicants, half of them urgent cases, "it would be wrong for a single person to live in a house designed for a couple or a family. Our policy allows for engaged couples to have a house for up to six weeks before their wedding day."

But this is unacceptable to Mr Ullyatt, who hopes to become a Methodist minister. He says: "We still happen to believe that morals and ethics are important."

That is a commendable sentiment. But it is not only Christian lay preachers who believe that morals and ethics are important. Thousands of couples live happily and responsibly together, although their union is not blessed by the church or legalised by the State.

Furthermore, Mr Ullyatt and his fiancée were offered a two-bedroom house. Surely they could live together under the same roof and, strengthened by their Christian faith, resist the temptations of the flesh for a few weeks.

A Commons Select Committee has urged the Ministry of Defence to reconsider its policy of sending 17-year-old servicemen into combat. Members of the all-party Committee said they "share the disgust that has been voiced in so many quarters that people so young, still children in law, should be sent into active service." At least two 17-year-olds were killed during the Gulf war.



A FURTHER STATEMENT

by Jane Wynne Willson, chairperson of the British Humanist Association, and David Pollock, chairman of the Rationalist Press Association

We do not propose to pursue the Editor's petty unpleasantness in detail (News and Notes, May). But two points must be made.

First, and most important, his repeated charge of "double standards" reflects both on our relations with our staff, and on Sir Hermann Bondi's and our own integrity.

May we make it perfectly clear that we encourage and expect all officers (voluntary and paid) in our Associations to give interviews and publish articles when they wish. We expect them to speak freely, according to their own interpretation of Humanism. And we are very glad that they should express their view as Association policy, when this is clearly the case. But in matters where there is no Humanist consensus we do expect them to distinguish clearly between the general (*not* necessarily unanimous) view of their Association and their own view. Here they could not do better than to follow the example of our President, who is always scrupulous on this.

There is a fundamental difference between an interview or article in which various points of view are identified, and a statement which declares in favour of a particular view. There is no analogy between Sir Hermann's interview and the Humanist Peace Council statement. He did not present his views as those of either Association, whereas the purpose of the Humanist Peace Council statement was to declare "our opposition to the present war", and it was signed by officers of the organisations, identified as such.

Our second point refers to the allegation that Sir Hermann exerted "improper" pressure on our two Associations. It may bring some clarity into the matter if we quote the text of Sir Hermann's proposed resolution, as approved by the BHA Executive Committee. A suitably adapted one was approved by the RPA Board: "The E.C. notes that the first sentence of the Press Statement issued by the Humanist Liaison Committee on 15 January can be read as implying that all Humanists condemn. . . and that therefore anyone not condemning is not a Humanist. The E.C. emphatically rejects this reading and notes that in accordance with para 9 of the General Statement of Policy (which states our abhorrence of war but accepts that force may have to be used in support of International Law) a wide range of opinion on the vexed issue of the Gulf war legitimately exists among Humanists."

Clearly he could not but have resigned if we had not agreed to pass something so obviously right. The whole

matter has been blown up out of all proportion by *The Freethinker*. Its readers may appreciate this better if they know that the two officers concerned regard the treatment of the affair by their EC and Board respectively as fair and reasonable.

Would it be possible for a bit of fairness towards the other Humanist organisation to enter *Freethinker* editorials? It would not do our movement any harm. Francis Wheen's article in the *Independent on Sunday*, which took up these ill-founded allegations, was damaging to us all.

A REPLY

by the Editor of *The Freethinker*

Jane Wynne Willson of the British Humanist Association and David Pollock of the Rationalist Press Association have again issued a Joint Statement without consulting their respective Executive Committee or Board of Directors, though they have this time consulted some of their staff. We reject the charges of "petty unpleasantness" and "ill-founded allegations". Furthermore, we insist that our only aim is to tell the truth about the freethought movement, good or bad. If unfavourable material in *The Freethinker* is reported in the national press, this isn't nearly as damaging as "favourable" material which gives a false view of the facts. (The accusation in this context that *The Freethinker* brought bad publicity on the movement is ironic. One signatory to the Statement bears not a little responsibility for the worst public relations débâcle in the BHA's history.) Anyway, if "the whole matter has been blown up out of all proportion", it is not by *The Freethinker* but by the leading members of the BHA and RPA who made such a fuss in the first place.

We all agree that the members and officials and employees of humanist organisations should be able to speak freely, provided that they distinguish properly between their personal views and those of their organisations. But the test comes when they express views different from those of some leading members of their organisations — which is what happened this time, with revealing results. And the point this time is that this rule was not in fact broken in either of the two statements complained of.

The Humanist Liaison Committee press statement, which was issued at the critical moment of the United Nations deadline on 15 January, just before the Gulf War began, opened by saying that "British Humanists condemn the current drift to war in the Gulf". This was a simple statement of fact, and didn't imply that *all* humanists did so or that anyone who didn't do so was *not* a humanist. The resolution forced on the BHA and

RPA by threat of resignation by their President, far from being "obviously right", therefore seems absurdly disproportionate.

The Humanist Peace Council founding statement, which was issued on 5 February, certainly opposed the Gulf War and identified its signatories by the organisations they work for. Again, this was a simple statement of fact, and didn't imply that the organisations took the same position or that all humanists did so. On the contrary, the first paragraph explicitly made the proper distinction: "Its members include leading figures in national and local humanist organisations and magazines, but they are all acting in their individual capacities, and it makes no claim to represent the views of any other organisations or indeed of the humanist movement as a whole." This is closely analogous with the way Sir Hermann Bondi in the 1987 television interview was identified as the president of the BHA and RPA, giving authority to his account of humanist views about war, although he pointed out that his views were not necessarily those of the organisations or the movement. The complaint about the use of the names

and addresses of the various humanist organisations therefore also seems absurdly disproportionate.

Those members of the BHA and RPA staff who are concerned may now regard the behaviour of the respective Executive Committee and Board of Directors as "fair and reasonable"; others will regard it as clumsy and foolish and still consider that it involves double standards. We also suspect that it derives from attempts by some leading members of both organisations either to impose their views or else to suppress other views.

One point which is in danger of being forgotten is that the Gulf War was opposed by almost all the members of the Humanist Liaison Committee and almost all the employees and officials of the national humanist organisation. Yet when this prevailing view was expressed during a serious world crisis in very moderate terms, all hell broke loose from several individuals, one of whom — not a signatory to the Joint Statements — has never scrupled to express his personal views as if they were the agreed policy of humanist organisations or the whole movement. We are all for "a bit of fairness", but suggest that it should apply to everyone.

Satanic Fantasy

TOBY HOWARD

Satanists have ousted Reds from under fundamentalist Christian beds in God's own country. And a large section of America's born again fraternity believe that Old Nick is lurking in the kitchen and bathroom as well.

Company logos have been in the news recently: from the multi-million pound re-invention of British Telecom, to the sad retirement of Nipper the fox-terrier, who for most of this century has cocked an ear to His Master's Voice. Far stranger, however, is the story of the logo of Proctor and Gamble, parent company to such consumer favourites as Ariel, Fairy, and Vidal Sassoon, to name but a few. Here is a trademark with character: an old man's bearded face in the crescent moon, facing thirteen stars, all set within a circle. What does this odd-looking image mean? Who is the old man, why the moon, and why thirteen stars?

The first time the logo attracted attention was in 1980 when the company began to receive telephone calls and letters asking whether the company had been bought by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Proctor and Gamble denied this outright. Throughout 1981, the number of enquiries escalated to thousands, and the accusations shifted towards satanism: the logo was claimed to be an evil symbol declaring the company's support of a satanic cult, to which it was allegedly contributing ten per cent of its annual turnover. Supposedly, at the top of the logo, the old man's hair forms a devil's horn, and the

curls in his beard are revealed by a mirror to spell out 666, the "mark of the Beast". The thirteen stars, apparently, if joined up by lines in the correct way, also spell out 666. Another claim has it that an executive of the company had admitted the truth of a satanic connection on a nationwide TV talk-show — *Donahue*, *The Tonight Show*, or *David Letterman*, depending on the version of the rumour, in true friend-of-a-friend urban folklore style. It was even claimed that the chairman of the board had sold his soul to the Devil in return for the guaranteed success of the company!

Understandably, Proctor and Gamble worked very hard to counteract the rumours, issuing press releases, instigating legal action and even soliciting the support of leading Christian fundamentalists who announced their faith in the purity of the company. But what is the story behind the strange logo? According to Proctor and Gamble, the Moonies and satanism claims are — to borrow a phrase from Stephen Fry — pure tommy-cock and poppy-twaddle.

In fact the history of the logo is straightforward and easy to document. It has its origins in a simple sketch of a cross in a circle, used to mark shipments of "Star Candles", one of the company's earliest products in 1851. Over time, this developed into a star in a circle, and later the single star was replaced by thirteen stars, in honour of the original thirteen colonies of the United States. The final embellishment was the addition of the

man-in-the-moon figure which according to urban folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand, "was a design as popular around the turn of the century as the 'happy face' drawing became three quarters of a century later." Finally, in 1930 a sculptor was commissioned to create the definitive design we see today.

Still, the rumours periodically resurface. According to a syndicated report of 20 March 1991, Proctor and Gamble has answered more than 150,000 telephone calls and letters relating to the satanism myth in the last ten years. A recent Kansas court case ruled that a couple accused of spreading this satanic stupidity must pay Proctor and Gamble damages of \$75,000. Small fry, perhaps, to a multinational whose UK operation alone had a turnover of £884 million for 1989-90, but a significant victory against modern ignorance and superstition.

Beverly Halstead

MIKE HOWGATE

Dr Beverly Halstead, who died in a car crash, was a distinguished palaeontologist with a gift for communicating science. He was president of the Geologists' Association and the Geology Section of the British Association. A formidable defender of Darwinism, he wrote *The Evolution of the Mammals and Ecology of the Dinosaurs*. His early death is a profound loss to British Science. A professed atheist, Beverly Halstead was a member of the National Secular Society and a contributor to *The Freethinker* over many years.

Beverly Halstead was a man of many parts and passions. He was an ardent Communist when such things were unfashionable in the early 1950s. His disillusion after the crushing of the Hungarian uprising led to a drift to the Right, but a drift tempered by his admiration for the works of Engels and Lenin on the Natural Sciences.

He was an academic with numerous papers in his chosen field of vertebrate palaeontology to his credit. An indefatigable populariser, his books, often illustrated by his wife Jenny, brought dinosaurs to life for a generation of schoolchildren.

But first and foremost Beverly was a fighter for a materialistic atheist truth in the interpretation of nature. He loved nothing better than to get his teeth into trendy "flash-in-the-pan" theories in the field of evolution and shake them to pieces. He was also an implacable foe of academic bureaucracy. At Reading University he put his career on the line to defend the leftist Student Union president and student newspaper editor against pressure from the vice-chancellor. Nationally he was to the forefront in defending scientific integrity in the research work and displays of the Natural History Museum in

London.

However, to cross Beverly when he was on the warpath was not necessarily to make an enemy of him. His passion for truth was fierce but without rancour. His sense of humour was as disarming as it was sometimes irritating. His capacity for sheer hard work was a constant source of amazement. At any one time he might have half-a-dozen, mainly one-man, pots on the boil, another campaign about to be launched, a couple of dozen papers and articles in the planning, writing, and proof-reading stages.

But despite what appeared to be at first glance a host of disparate issues and unconnected disputes — on cladistics, biological structuralism, punctuated equilibrium, creationism and sudden mass extinctions — to Beverly they were all of a piece. The resurrection of pre-Darwinian conceptions of nature — archetypes, revolutions of the globe, intelligent design — in a form he designated "The New Essentialism", were all to be combated from the Darwinian standpoint. For Beverly, this is where he stood; he could do no other.

I first met Beverly almost exactly ten years ago. He had just launched an attack on the new dinosaur gallery in the British Museum (Natural History), now the Natural History Museum. The gallery was being used to proselytize a new method of taxonomy called cladistics. This dispensed with evolutionary trees, replacing them with a formal "unhistorical" branching schema. In Beverly's eyes this was "Marxism", an attempt to displace gradual evolution along ancestor-descendant lineages by sudden "ancestorless" appearances. He burst into print and started the first of a series of Halstead campaigns, this one producing a classic headline in the American weekly, *Science*: "Anti-cladist sees reds under fossil beds in alliance with creationism to subvert the establishment".

I chipped in my two pennyworth defending Engels from having anything to do with cladistics, drawing a characteristic response from Beverly — a bunch of papers to review and criticise and an invitation to address the British Association the following year on "Marxism and Evolution". We continued to meet up and cross swords at fringe-biology meetings, where we discovered that we were attacking the same enemy. He quipped more than once: "You attack them from the Left and I'll attack them from the Right, that will have them really confused."

Out of that struggle grew respect and friendship, and what Beverly considered his greatest victory when Britain's foremost philosopher of science, Sir Karl Popper, was forced to concede that the historical sciences were scientific in that they could propose "testable" scenarios of past events.

Beverly's exploits are legion. A three-month stay in

Japan produced a book written "in a rage" while he was there against the anti-Darwinian theories of Professor Kinji Imanishi. His championing of siesmological verification of nuclear testing at the Reagan-Gorbachev Geneva summit led to a Special Branch-M15-CIA turnover of his house in Reading. After all, it was called The Red House and he had been a writer for the *Daily Worker*. There was a palaeontological expedition to Nigeria where everyone spent Christmas in jail as spies. And a re-run of the Huxley-Wilberforce debate in which Beverly, glorying in the *nom de guerre*, "Darwin's ferrier", trounced a lack-lustre and equivocal Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford.

Beverly will be sadly missed by all those who loved him, those he encouraged by his persuasion and a little kick up the arse, and those who see the job of science as pushing forward knowledge against pseudo science, both mystical and decked out in the garb of science itself.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Bath Crematorium.

Bradlaugh and Marx

KARL HEATH

Strollers on Beachy Head, near Eastbourne, on 27 August 1895, might have noticed a small hired boat being rowed out to sea. They would have observed four persons, but would not have known that the boat also contained the remains of a fifth, the ashes of Frederick Engels, which he had expressed a wish to have scattered at sea. In the boat were Eleanor ("Tussy") Marx, who committed suicide later the same year, Edward Aveling, her unpleasant husband, whose conduct may have contributed to her death, and Edward Bernstein, later, with Karl Kautsky, to become one of the "revisionists" of Marxism so castigated by Lenin.

The fourth person was Friedrich Lessner. He had first met Marx and Engels in 1848 and later served a four-year prison sentence in Germany for his socialist activities. On his release in 1856 he came to London and became a frequent visitor to the Marx family home. He was a tailor by trade and made clothes for both Marx and Engels, although he said that neither of them took much interest in what they wore.

In his book, *Sixty Years in the Social Democratic Movement*, published in 1907, Lessner writes of the early 1860s:

The Freethought movement made itself very conspicuous in London. At the head of it was Charles Bradlaugh, a man of the people, a very able speaker and agitator. He held public lectures, which, at the beginning, were directed not only against religion, but also against

oppression and corruption. Mrs Marx and her children also attended the Sunday afternoon lectures of Bradlaugh, and Marx himself went several times. When I paid a visit to the Marx family about that time, I heard Mrs Marx praising Bradlaugh, and expecting great things from him for the proletarian movement. Marx smiled, and gave his opinion that Bradlaugh would go over to the bourgeois party sooner or later. After his return to Parliament, he only spoke in favour of the middle class and decried Socialism. The bishop of atheism behaved towards the working class as badly as the bishops of the church. He also tried to intrude himself into the International Workingmen's Association, but here met Marx's opposition, who knew how to keep undesirables off. Bradlaugh avenged himself on Marx by spreading to rumour that Marx had sold himself to Bismarck, and was acting in his interests. Men like Bradlaugh are not rare in England. They use the shoulders of working men only as steps to rise higher, and then turn against the working class.

Some corroboration of this is to be found in Max Beer's *Fifty Years of International Socialism*. He recalls a conversation he had with Eleanor Marx in 1891:

Eleanor further told me that her father hardly ever spoke about religion, neither for nor against. Her mother and elder sister attended sometimes Mr Bradlaugh's Sunday services, but father dissuaded them from doing so. He had a dislike of secularism. He told mother that if she wanted edification or satisfaction of her metaphysical needs she would find them in the Jewish prophets rather than in Mr Bradlaugh's shallow reasonings.

My only comment is about Marx, not Bradlaugh. This is an interesting example of the deceit of quoting out of context. Marx is reviled by ignorant people who have never read him for saying that religion is "the opium of the people". If they had known the rather beautiful passage in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (or Law)* they would read:

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

This seems in accord with Eleanor's account. Marx appears to have regarded secularism as a diversion from the major human tasks, as he saw them.

Chanting "Celibacy is bad for you", six hundred German Catholics demonstrated outside the Bishop of Augsburg's palace in protest against his dismissal of their parish priest. Fr Michael Edenhofer was applauded by parishioners when he announced at Sunday Mass that he planned to marry his housekeeper.

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.

Not an Ealing Comedy

TERRY SANDERSON

Five years ago a Labour council was elected in the London Borough of Ealing. It was a council with a radical manifesto, which translates into *Sun*-speak as "loony Left". In common with other such local authorities in London, Ealing introduced an equal opportunities policy promising protection for the rights of women, ethnic minorities and lesbians and gay men. I was invited to sit on a committee to advise the council how to best implement their policy in regard to Ealing's large gay community.

Within weeks, "the Parents Action Group" had come into being, formed solely to oppose the council's commitment to protecting the rights of homosexual employees. The Parents Action Group's spokesman was a Mr Graham Weekes.

Because I was vocal in support of the council's policy, it wasn't long before Mr Weekes tracked me down and arranged a meeting to "discuss our differences". He came to my home and harangued me (and my partner, Keith) about the Godlessness of our relationship, the wrongness of homosexuality and how we were trampling over the teaching of scripture. He was accompanied on this occasion by an American dressed in the kind of sombre business suit usually associated with Mormons. I had foolishly imagined that we might have a civilised discussion, but soon realised that these men were sitting in our own front room, mindlessly chanting chapter and verse, and telling us that we were evil. They were sent away with fleas in their ears.

When the next local election came round, the Labour council was ousted; their pro-gay stance had contributed substantially to their undoing. But amongst the new intake of Tory councillors was one Graham Weekes, the self-same fundamentalist Christian who had spearheaded the campaign against the council's equal opportunities policy.

It wasn't long before the new Tory-controlled council dropped the commitment to protecting its gay staff from discrimination — an action instigated by Mr Weekes.

Soon after that, I noticed a small announcement in the *Ealing Gazette* that Councillor Weekes had given a talk to his fellow-Tories about "religious education in schools".

Within days of that meeting, the Secretary of State for Education said that he had received a complaint about Ealing council's "multi-faith" religious education syllabus, which had been drawn up under the previous Labour council. Local born-again had objected to the "lack of Christian content" in the syllabus and, as a result, the Government issued a letter to every chief

education officer in the country, setting out the requirements for a larger emphasis to be put on Christianity in religious education. Although his name was not attached to the complaint, the hidden hand of Graham Weekes was apparent.

Meanwhile, the Rev Neil Richardson, an Anglican priest who is also a Labour councillor in Ealing, has claimed in the *Church Times* that the borough's ruling Conservative group has been "hijacked by fundamentalist Christians." He said that the previous syllabus had been unanimously endorsed by the former council; but now: "What has changed is the election of a small but influential group of fundamentalists with an American-style Moral Majority package of aims. They have persuaded the ruling group to politicise religion to catch votes." Graham Weekes denies that he is a fundamentalist. "I am a conservative Evangelical," he says. In fact he is an "elder" of a branch of the USA-based International Presbyterian Church.

This little anecdote goes to illustrate the way in which religious extremists are becoming adept at manipulating the political system. They are insinuating themselves into positions of power and using that power to promote their alarmingly restrictive philosophies.

Such religiously-inspired politicians often choose homosexuality as a campaigning issue because they have recognised that the gay community is a ready-made "unpopular minority". It isn't difficult to incite a war of righteousness against a section of society which already carries a heavy stigma of disapproval, and whenever homosexuality is an issue, the born-again brigade are always on the front line.

For instance, the Isle of Man was recently ordered by the European Court of Human Rights to bring its antiquated laws on homosexuality into line with those in the rest of the United Kingdom. At present homosexuality on the island is completely illegal and can be punished by a life sentence.

After the European ruling, a Bill was introduced into the House of Keys aimed at decriminalising homosexuality; almost at once local fundamentalist Christians joined together with the ultra-conservative Methodist establishment to stop the reforms. This holy alliance was supported from the mainland by a host of evangelical groups, including the Conservative Family Campaign, whose chairman, Graham Webster-Gardiner, wrote to the Manx committee considering reform: "The experience of all countries which have permitted this abnormality has been worse than the opponents feared. . . Many of us are campaigning and looking forward to the day when, in fact, homosexual acts are re-criminalised in the UK." The CFC claims

that 27 MPs and two MEPs are members.

The Manx parliament was warned repeatedly that if it didn't put its own house in order, Westminster would do it for them. Despite that, the reforms were rejected and homosexuality remains completely illegal on the Isle of Man. The British Government refuses to say when or if it will impose reforms on the island.

A similar thing has happened in the Irish Republic. Once again the European Court ordered a reform of the law — which the Irish Government agreed to implement. It hasn't happened yet, though, and now another ultra-religious group calling itself Family Solidarity is pressing Charles Haughey to abandon reforms. They have published an opinion poll which they allege shows a majority of the electorate opposed to law reform (49 per cent against, 34 per cent for and 17 per cent unsure).

And now another group, Family and Youth Concern (previously known as The Responsible Society), is calling on the Government to cease funding the AIDS education charity, the Terrence Higgins Trust. Family and Youth Concern wrote a spoof letter (purporting to be from a 17-year-old gay youth) to the Terrence Higgins Trust, asking for "help in spreading awareness of homosexual issues in his youth club". FYC say that in return they received "a (pornographic) package of leaflets and posters, some of them depicting naked men in bondage poses".

Valerie Riches, chairperson of FYC, said: "the Terrence Higgins Trust would do well to remember that homosexual intercourse below the age of 21 is illegal." She went on, in the 12-page FYC newsletter, to distort and misrepresent the work of the Terrence Higgins Trust, suggesting that the education material it supplies to young gay men is "proselytising" them into homosexual activity.

Perhaps Mrs Riches should remember that statistics from Europe indicate 50 per cent of those who have contacted HIV (the virus that can lead to AIDS) are between 25 and 35. Nick Partridge, a spokesman for the Terrence Higgins Trust, says: "This means that people are becoming infected in their late teens and early twenties." This is the age-group to which the religiously-inspired Mrs Riches and her band of self-righteous bigots would deny the information.

"It's easy to take gay material around HIV and AIDS out of context to show it as pornographic, but it requires people to think about why it works as health education," says Nick Partridge.

Indeed, as HIV is largely a sexually transmitted disease it would be difficult to imagine how people could be educated about it without putting it into the context of sexual activity. The only known protection against the disease is safer sex. How would Mrs Riches suggest that this is explained to young people without using sexually explicit language and pictures?

Perhaps the only thing that would quell the anti-sex bee that people such as Family and Youth Concern have buzzing in their bonnets is for them to see the misery and suffering that AIDS causes. How can Christians — so quick to brag about their compassion — live with themselves when they stand in the way of educating young people into the ways of avoiding infection by a deadly virus?

The good news is that these extremist pressure groups seem to be exerting less and less influence at 10 Downing Street. John Major is less inclined than his predecessor to offer open house to sinister and intolerant religious bigots. However, the fact that the members of these groups are so adept and energetic at getting themselves into positions of influence, means that their progress must be taken seriously. It's up to everyone who opposes them to ensure that their covert activities are exposed at every opportunity.

Freethinker Fund

For over a century *The Freethinker* has struggled along on minimal resources. But thanks to its generous readers and unpaid writers it carries on the struggle against superstition and irrationalism. Appreciation is expressed to all who make its continued publication possible, including the latest list of contributors to the Fund.

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HOLY FACES, SACRED PLACES: THE QUEST FOR JESUS' TRUE LIKENESS, by Ian Wilson. Doubleday, £ 16.99.

Ian Wilson, an imaginative historian, is an old sparring partner of mine. Our first bout took place on a recorded BBC Radio 4 programme in 1978, when he claimed that the "overwhelming evidence" for the authenticity of the Turin shroud had forced him to convert from agnosticism to Roman Catholicism. My immediate response — "Rather a materialistic basis for faith, isn't it?" — was carefully edited out of the broadcast version.

The first of his "shroud" books, *The Turin Shroud*, had just been published. In that book the author contrived to demonstrate that the Turin cloth was indeed the actual burial cloth of the gospel hero by identifying that relic, which has an undisputed history from the mid-fourteenth century, with a sixth-century relic (the Edessa "holy face", on a piece of cloth that could have been folded so as to show the face only) which legend had ascribed to New Testament times — most unhistorianally glossing over the 500-years gap in its whereabouts as well as the later 250-years gap from 1204 to 1355.

One of the statements made at that time by Mr Wilson in support of his theory was, "of whatever substance the shroud image is composed it is not of any readily identifiable pigment that would have been used by a medieval artist". A few years later, however, a leading American micro-analyst, Dr Walter McCrone (to whose future findings Mr Wilson had looked forward with confidence in 1978), was able to examine fibres of the cloth's apparent blood-stains, and, expecting (as he later admitted) to find traces of dried blood, found instead iron-oxide pigment — a substance which might well have been used by a medieval artist. Ian Wilson was rather downhearted by this discovery, but I waited in vain for him to retract his Christian faith along with the material evidence on which he had originally based it.

Non-miracles are non-news. Not only are they accorded far fewer press column inches than the spurious claims they disprove; they do not inspire book publishers with plans for best-sellers — unless they can be conveniently turned back into miracles. So, for a couple of years it looked as if Ian Wilson would be unable to exploit the shroud theme again. But with publishers vying to offer Wilson larger advances and glossier production for any future shroud mysteries he might be able to concoct, he obviously had a vested interest in finding new arguments in favour of his theory that the image on the so-called shroud was "made without hands".

Since this could no longer be based on absence of pigment on the cloth, he began to suggest that the pigment found on it had been used later, simply to touch up the image. And he brought out a shroud sequel — bigger, glossier, more spectacular than the first book, while more subtle in its content.

While *The Turin Shroud*, comparatively modest in its production if not in its content, had been published by Gollancz (1978), the second book, *The Evidence of the Shroud* (1986), carried the imprint of a presumably Roman Catholic publisher, O'Mara, who had obviously not spared expense in its production. The large, glossy "coffee table" format, with its superior quality of paper and print as well as its many illustrations (several in colour), either betokened expectation of a huge sale or a heavy subsidy based on true faith. The huge sale presumably materialised, as the volume now under review — shroud book three — brought out by Doubleday is similarly lavish in production and comparatively modest in price.

In *The Evidence of the Shroud*, Wilson explained away the inconvenient iron-oxide pigment, and, largely by innuendo, managed to build up the infrastructure of a great unsolved mystery. It was cleverly done, with one chapter presenting the scientific evidence and the next giving equal weight to mere surmise, unsubstantiated theory, and wishful thinking. Whereas the earlier book had come down firmly on the side of the Jesus connection, the second one left it as an intriguingly open question.

At that time, Wilson remained strongly in favour of fragments of the relic being subjected to carbon-dating — though, on the face of it, the shroud industry had little to gain and everything to lose by having a scientific date put on the relic. Even if it had transpired that the flax from which the linen was made had been alive during the Roman occupation of Palestine, doubters could postulate a medieval forger who was sufficiency perfectionist to use an ancient piece of cloth; while the more likely finding that the flax had grown long after the alleged lifetime of Jesus would seem to put the kybosh on the shroud theory once and for all.

However, the syndonists (shroud believers) had an ingenious excuse ready in advance. I remember, some ten years ago, asking an executive member of the British Society for the Turin Shroud how his organisation would react if Carbon-14 tests were to be carried out on the shroud and were to reveal an impossibly late date. "Oh", was his nonchalant reply, "we don't expect the date to come out right; the Resurrection would entail

REVIEW

a burst of radioactivity, which would, of course, completely nullify the tests."

At that time Ian Wilson did not see any need to take out this insurance. But his faith in the shroud stopped short of his accepting my offer of a £1,000 wager (at evens) on the outcome of the carbon-dating tests — an offer which (not being above the immoral practice in such circumstances of betting on a virtual certainty) I had also made, sadly in vain, to other members of the British Society for the Turin Shroud, to listeners to the Radio 4 programme "Sunday", and to leading bookmakers.

It seemed a little unfortunate for Wilson and his publisher O'Mara that the second shroud book was already in print when at long last the Pope gave his consent for the C-14 tests to be carried out. But in the event, missing that piece of news has given Wilson an excuse for this follow-up, his third book in the shroud series — for, though put into the wider context of a number of "holy faces" on cloth, it is largely taken up with the same strip of painted cloth in Turin. The chief of these other Jesus images on cloth is the Veronica — of which there are several extant specimens, all originally purporting to be the actual veil (or towel) with which the legendary St Veronica is said to have wiped the face of Jesus prior to the crucifixion.

When the three laboratories (in Oxford, Zurich and Arizona) that carbon-tested the small samples of linen from Turin all came out, independently, with a date between 1260 and 1390, Wilson again, as on the discovery of the pigment, expressed his disappointment with the finding. But he soon bounced back once more as an unshakeable syndonist, and started on the present book — economically working in a good deal of the material and illustrations from the previous two.

Some of the Veronica icons can be traced back reliably to the early Middle Ages — that is, centuries before the scientific date for the Turin relic — and Wilson's main thesis this time is that, since these "holy face" relics are all artistically inferior to the Turin image, they must have been copied from it, rather than the other way round!

He also raises the question, why should this tradition of the physical image miraculously imprinted on cloth apply to Jesus alone? But there is an obvious answer to this which seems to have escaped him: while most saints and heroes of old were able to leave behind pieces of bone to be venerated as relics, Jesus was supposed to have ascended to heaven with his whole skeleton. Therefore, his followers, hungry for relics, had to have

recourse to secondary items — such as his baby-linen, his milk teeth (of which there were hundreds in medieval churches), his navel-cord and foreskin (likewise miraculously multiplied), thorns from the crown of thorns, splinters from the true cross (amazingly discovered intact, three centuries later, by Constantine's ex-barmaid mother), and even phials of his mother's milk. It is hardly surprising that such ingenuity in the production and sale and veneration of relics should include the face-imprinted Veronica veil, nor that this should inspire, for the most wealthy customers, the shroud with an imprint of the whole body. And, of course, the specimen in Turin was at one time only one of many authentic shrouds — though probably the best of all, which is why it has survived.

Ian Wilson claims that if the cloth really is medieval, then the artist who made the image could not possibly have done so without using an actual crucified man! That seems to me unnecessarily far-fetched and sensational. Surely a life-size statue would have sufficed?

However, one chapter of the book casts doubt on the scientific reliability of the carbon-dating procedures; and even brings in, for the first time, the stand-by theory of a burst of resurrection radioactivity — "the release of some form of energy at Jesus's resurrection" which "may have altered the shroud's carbon 14 isotope content to make it appear younger than it is." Well, of course, that is only to be expected, isn't it, from a miraculous resurrection?

It seems that the most important reason to Wilson for the failure (from the syndonists' standpoint) of the C-14 tests is the masochistic one that God, being angry that they should want his Son's shroud to be tested in this mundane way, deliberately blocked the true evidence — probably, with his divine foreknowledge, in advance, by means of the aforementioned resurrection burst of energy.

Nevertheless, Wilson risks God's wrath by continuing to seek evidence. *Inter alia*, he brings some numerology into his book: it transpires that whereas the dimensions of the Turin shroud are odd in feet and inches (what about centimetres?), in Jewish cubits they measure a satisfyingly exact 8 by 2. It does not seem to occur to him that, even discounting mere chance, the undoubtedly clever 14th-century craftsman who made the relic, presumably for a wealthy client, might have taken the trouble to look up the biblical cubit table for the purpose. In fact, the professional makers of Christian relics at that time were often so meticulous in the art that it is hardly surprising if the maker of the Turin "shroud" was sufficiently astute to mystify pundits of the 20th century — especially those who want to be mystified.

Any scraps of possible evidence, even the numerical dimensions of the cloth in cubits, are all grist to Wilson's

mill, since his method of persuasion is (like that of Erik van Däniken and other such pseudo-scientific writers on the “paranormal”) the piling up of any scraps he can lay his pen to, until the resulting accumulation looks impressive.

Since there is also a propensity to reproduce facsimile quotes in Latin and Old French, it is a pity that, for all his academic pretensions, Ian Wilson cannot observe the comparatively few grammatical inflections we retain in modern English. The most glaring lapse occurs in his Preface, where, explaining that in this book, “in order to deflect criticisms of undue bias”, he has stopped using the upper-case initial letter for the word “shroud”, he adds: “The distinction is scarcely likely to have bothered *he* whom the shroud may or may not have originally wrapped”. (My italics.) How could Doubleday’s readers have passed it? Or doesn’t it bother they?!

On Easter Sunday this year, Ian Wilson and I appeared together in the Channel 4 open-ended discussion programme, “After Dark”, and (as it goes out live) I took the opportunity to chide him for shifting his ground every time science disproves one his arguments for the authenticity of the so-called shroud, to ask him why he still clung to the faith that he said he came to because of this disproved evidence, and to suggest that it was too lucrative for him to be convinced by mere facts. A Protestant pastor on the programme came to his rescue by saying that it is possible to come to faith *via* a bridge that later blows up behind one, and that does not destroy the value of the insight to which the bridge has led. Wilson clutched at this straw with alacrity, and unfortunately I had no opportunity to point out that if the bridge of the shroud had blown up behind him it was hardly honest to continue writing about it as though it were still intact.

However, perhaps I should be nicer to him. I will suggest a new theme for his next book: the “Holy Coat of Treves” (allegedly “the seamless garment” for which the Roman soldiers cast lots at the crucifixion), of which, amazingly, I can find no mention in any of his writings. Indeed, he has stated that the famous negative image revealed by an 1898 photograph of the Turin relic is unique, whereas the “Holy Coat” entry in *Harmsworth’s Universal Encyclopedia* of 1920-22 (which, incidentally, has no entry on the Turin Shroud at all) declares that an 1891 photograph of the “Coat” revealed a negative image impression of the supposed face of Jesus. It was no doubt a technique developed by at least one medieval relic-manufacturer so as to lend a mysterious aspect to sacred images.

Perhaps Ian Wilson might restore the fame and fortune of Trier (Treves) as a pilgrimage centre, while adding to his own.

BARBARA SMOKER

Semper Fidelis

DANIEL O’HARA

In a recent devotional broadcast on BBC Radio 4, Canon Colin Semper, a former Head of Religious Broadcasting, and now on the staff of Westminster Abbey, made references to Jesus which betrayed a lack of any knowledge of the historical criticism contained in a series of books by Professor G.A. Wells: *The Jesus of the Early Christians* (1971); *Did Jesus Exist?* (1975, 2nd. Edn. 1986); *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (1982) and *Who was Jesus?* (1989). I therefore wrote to Canon Semper to inform him of Professor Wells’ works, and to tell him that I was much happier since I had given up believing in Jesus.

Canon Semper eventually replied as follows.

Dear Mr O’Hara,

Many thanks for yours. I sent your letter to the best scholar (according to the last Archbishop of Canterbury) in the Church of England. He comments: “Professor Wells is the most recent in a line of scholars (sceptical scholars) begun by Archibald Robinson (*sic*) — *Jesus: Myth or History* — about 50 years ago. The ‘line’ has never been found to cope satisfactorily with all the evidence. Even if accepted, it leaves one with an equally difficult question: if Jesus never existed, who was the genius who invented him?” I couldn’t live without the desperate venture of faith. Like Graham Greene, though, I have few beliefs. Glad you are happy.

Colin Semper.

□ □ □

I have now sent Canon Semper the following reply.

Dear Canon Semper,

Thank you for your letter of 6th May.

I am shocked and surprised to learn that Lord Runcie’s nominee as “the best scholar. . . in the C of E” should believe that the “line of. . . sceptical scholars” to cast doubt on the historicity of Jesus “began (with) Archibald Robinson — *Jesus: Myth or History* — about 50 years ago”. Any competent New Testament scholar should know that Archibald *Robertson’s* book, 2nd edition, 1949, far from being a partisan work, gives a useful summary of both positions. He should also be aware that the historical criticism of the New Testament goes back at least as far as D.F. Strauss, whose *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* first appeared in German in 1835. The view that Jesus was a myth was seriously argued by German scholars, like Drews, in works published in 1910 and 1911, and by the great Scottish Liberal scholar and Parliamentarian, J.M. Robertson (1865-

LETTERS

UNA AND THE GULF WAR

Harry Stopes-Roe (Letters, May) refers to your report (News and Notes, April) that the United Nations Association "opposed the Gulf war precisely because it was not conducted according to the UN Charter", says he has examined "a number of such claims" and found "they were all ill-founded quotes out of context, downright distortions, or otherwise misleading", says "humanists should check claims against facts", and asks "Is this claim true?" He could have answered his own question by checking this claim against the easily available facts. I have done so, as follows.

The United Nations Charter establishes the following procedure for military action under UN auspices. The Security Council may take "such action by air, sea or land forces as may be necessary to maintain and restore international peace and security" (Article 42); if it decides to do so, member states shall "make available to the Security Council" their armed forces and other facilities (Article 43), and "plans for the application of armed forces shall be made by the Security Council with the assistance of the Military Staff Committee" (Article 46); "the Military Staff Committee shall be responsible under the Security Council for the strategic direction" of the armed forces (Article 47); member nations have "the right of individual or collective self-defence" against armed attack "until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security", but any measures taken "shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council" (Article 51).

The Gulf war was clearly not conducted according to this procedure. Resolution 660 (2 August 1990) called for Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait; Resolution 678 (29 November 1990) authorised "all necessary means" to enforce this resolution if Iraq did not comply by 15 January 1991. Military action was not mentioned, but the United States and its allies were already preparing for the war which was conducted entirely on their own responsibility. The Security Council wasn't consulted, the Military Staff Committee wasn't called, the Secretary-General wasn't even informed until the attack on Iraq began, and the United Nations was ignored throughout the six weeks of the fighting.

In the circumstances the UNA issued several statements opposing first the drift to and then the conduct of the war. On 2 August it regretted the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, emphasised the role of the United Nations, and opposed "any unilateral military intervention". On 22 August and 24 September it called for greater UN participation in the Gulf. On 27 October it called for the continuation of sanctions and diplomacy, adding that "it is essential that the member states continue to act only in strict accordance with the Charter" and that "any final decision to use military force" should be "through a specific decision of the Security Council" and should involve the Military Staff Committee. On 8 December it repeated the call for the continuation of sanctions and diplomacy and opposed the use of military action except under the correct procedure. On 15 January it continued to warn against military action. On 17 January it regretted the beginning of the attack on Iraq, called for "a strategy which seeks to minimise both the length of the military campaign, human losses and casualties, and environmental and other areas of destruction", demanding an "early end to the fighting" under UN auspices. On 16 February it regretted the refusal of the allies to respond to the Iraqi peace offer. On 28 February it welcomed the ceasefire and emphasised the role of the United Nations following the war. During the war it also held frequent protest vigils.

So the answer is: Yes, the UNA did oppose the Gulf war for the reason given. Anyway, the objection to the Letter in *Humanist*

1933) in a series of works first published early this century. G.A. Wells may thus be only the most recent in a long line of critical scholars to examine the vexed questions of Christian origins, but in terms of both the quantity and quality of his output on the subject, he probably deserves to be considered the most acute and telling critic of the orthodox view. His work gains strength from the fact that he takes into full account the researches of orthodox scholars, and shows from their own arguments and conclusions that the orthodox view is untenable. No single theory can hope to deal convincingly with *all* the evidence: the most that one can hope for is that the theory makes the best possible sense of the available evidence and is not incompatible with our knowledge of the world. On that score, Wells is most convincing, and deserves to be read first hand, not simply dismissed on the basis of prejudices held by those with a vested interest in buttressing orthodoxy.

I am surprised (though I suppose I should not be) that you consider it would have taken a genius to "invent" Jesus. Unlike Dickens, surely a genius, who in *The Pickwick Papers* has given us a believable portrait of someone who might well have existed, but we know in fact did not, the authors of the gospels give us a confusing and disparate mosaic of a strange and bizarre personage who bears all the hallmarks of mythical figures like Hercules, Romulus and Attis. Of these, as with Jesus, legends gradually aggregated over time as imaginative votaries vied to outdo each other in the generation of wondrous tales.

If you now have, "like Graham Greene", few beliefs, I wonder what "the desperate venture of faith" actually amounts to. And is it "desperate" because you know that the beliefs generally assumed to be held by clergy of the Church of England, even if now more tenuous than those enshrined in the XXXIX Articles to which you assented at your installation, are simply untenable? It could be interpreted to mean that you now have a merely sentimental attachment to the faith, were it not for the fact that you seem content to draw the stipend paid on the basis that you actually do believe, and regard it as your duty to promote, what are commonly supposed to be the Christian verities. A good man is compromised by having to pretend in public to hold beliefs which he knows to be false. A scoundrel, on the other hand, lives by dissimulation. How do *you* wish to be known?

Airport officials at Quito, Ecuador, noticed that four nuns who were boarding a flight for Madrid were walking in a peculiar way. They were detained and drugs worth over a million dollars were found concealed on them.

News isn't that it supported the UN, but that it presented a false choice between the UN and the Humanist Peace Council which is actually affiliated to the UNA. Meanwhile our warnings about the likely effects of such a war are being fulfilled every day.
NICOLAS WALTER, Humanist Peace Council, London N1

NOT CONVINCING

Harry Stopes-Roe's letter (May) on opposition to the Gulf War will not sway those he criticises. He avoids describing opponents of the war as liars or rogues, but his claims that assertions on its conduct were out of context, distortions or misleading, are far too sweeping to be convincing. I feel that he is rather too easily satisfied that views of which he disapproves are not supported by the facts.

Jim Herrick in the same issue refers *inter alia* to "sour and misleading comments" and "sectarian quarrels"; Jane Wynne Willson and David Pollock refer to "malicious and grossly inaccurate hearsay". All three contributions will be seen by supporters of the Humanist Peace Council, like myself, as examples of the stirring up of needless ill-will condemned by Jim Herrick himself.

I don't claim never to have used strong terms myself when I thought it was appropriate (I may well have been wrong in that), but it is useless to express outrage when opponents react accordingly. Are those whose contributions I mention really behaving in a pluralistic and tolerant fashion? I feel they need reminding there are always other legitimate viewpoints.

COLIN MILLS, Amersham

AMERICA'S WAY

Harry Stopes-Roe asks for proof that the Gulf war "was not conducted according to the UN Charter". In 1980, in what was called "the Carter Doctrine", the United States let it be known that "Any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf will be regarded as an assault on vital strategic interests of the United States of America and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force". In the event, the US managed to get three out of the four UN veto-wielders to go along with the Sanctions/ War plan, scrapped the sanctions part of it, and left Peres De Cuellar with the feeling that he had been used as a pawn.

Anyway, the term "United Nations" is a contradiction in itself, because it supposes that those nations have relinquished the very essence of their being — their sovereignty.
E. F. CROSSWELL, Slough

UNJUSTIFIED COMPLAINT

The complaint of politicisation of *The Freethinker* made by R. A. Cobb (Letters, April) is not founded on fact. Contributors sometimes make political references; but the scale is infinitesimal and to describe a handful of comments as an onslaught is to employ the shameful distortion of Government newspeak.

The ultra sensitivity of Conservatives to any form of criticism may be attributed to a malfunctioning of what could be described as the evolutionary remnants of social conscience. Such a development is necessary to the followers of a party which has blatantly enriched the wealthy at the expense of the deprived, seriously underfunded health and education services, vastly increased central power, frittered away oil revenue billions and wittingly endeavoured to reduce us to a nation of financial consultants, insurance agents and waiters.

R. A. Cobb should understand that since the grubby tentacles of policies permeate almost every aspect of national life it is inevitable that occasionally political references will appear in *The Freethinker*, but generally it is not considered a subject

worthy of serious consideration except, in the wider field. Neither is criticism of the Government's socially destructive policies an expression of political allegiance to any alternative.
ROBERT BARR, Enderby, Leicestershire

THE CENSUS

Your contention (Counting Heads), May issue, that the purposes of the 1991 Census could more efficiently be met by means of sample surveys is understandable, but completely mistaken. The Census provides the population figures for local and health authority areas, on which distribution of revenue support grant and resource allocation to health authorities are based; these grants and allocations currently come to some £32 billion each year. A full count is essential for this purpose. Moreover, detailed statistics for small areas and sub-groups are needed by local authorities, health authorities and others who plan and run local services. Figures from sample surveys are not reliable enough where small sub-groups of the population are concerned. When all the uses of census statistics are put together, a cost around £135 million over ten years (or 25p per head annum) is good value for money.

You are also mistaken in your view that the Census question on ethnic group is misleading. The question was developed through the 1980s by consultation and thorough testing of successive trial versions, and was found to be a formulation which matches closely people's own perceptions of the cultural communities to which they belong. That is what is required to meet the needs of users. Incidentally, no strong case was made for information about religion or for including a Jewish category in the question.

Your final remark that we do not need more detailed information but more relevant action is surely on shaky ground. The one is a necessary foundation for the other; it is no good basing policies and plans on guesswork.

B. H. MAHON, Head of Census Division, Office of Population Censuses & Surveys, London WC2

THE FREETHINKER AND THE GODS

May I be allowed a few brief lines in reply to Verna Metcalfe (Letters, May) and others?

I wouldn't dream of imputing "bland conformism" to *The Freethinker* — far from it! But only to one minor, but very persistent, trend which continues to point out the errors and inconsistencies in the Bible and Christian doctrine, which I'm sure freethinkers know all about anyway. And since there are many definitions of God, even among Christians, there seems not a great deal of point in setting up one particular construction, interpreting it in rather unfriendly terms, and then shooting it down in flames.

Since atheists do not believe in God or gods, however constructed or defined, cannot his nature and attributes be left to believers to argue about? As a previous writer to your paper, Ray McDowell, put it (Letter, January): "Why should atheists be interested in attributing characteristics to something we don't believe in?" Why indeed. This was what I meant by Aunt Sallies and why I used the word shallow — in the sense of easy to negotiate, offering no challenge, rather like the shallow end of the swimming pool.

I would have thought a far better brand of ammunition against fundamentalists is contained in Neil Blewitt's witty article, "Those Magnificent Men" (May). Why should freethinkers take the trouble to pick apart what is mythology? And incidentally, isn't the word "lies" rather inappropriate to an ancient "disobedience" myth? Who would use that word about Pandora and her Box or Prometheus and his Fire?

E. M. KARBACZ, West Mersea, Essex

THE BBC AND ATHEISTS

Colin Morris will observe that *The Freethinker* has published his letter, while the BBC gave me no right to reply to his offensive remark which was heard by millions.

We atheists have become conditioned by the religious totalitarianism under which we live. If anyone thinks that "totalitarianism" is too strong a word for a country where the law compels a daily act of worship in schools, and makes religious instruction the only compulsory subject, they should compare the annual 720 hours of BBC religious broadcasting with the time they allot to atheists.

Colin Morris says that I left out the half-sentence: "For Christians who believe that God is love". Since he surely includes himself among these Christians, the qualification is fulfilled and he must therefore stand by his five bitter words: "Hatred is the ultimate atheism". It is sophistry to pretend that such a harsh comment on a system of belief does not smear its adherents. Colin Morris knows this. He knows that if "Christianity" or "Methodist" were substituted for his fifth word, "atheism", he would regard it as an attack upon himself and his co-religionists.

I would have thought that Colin Morris was too well-educated to believe that atheism means denial of God. We do not need to "deny" God any more than Colin Morris would trouble to deny Jupiter, Thor, Wotan, goblins or fairies. We simply subscribe to beliefs which exclude the supernatural. "Denial" is an emotive word, especially since Peter denied Jesus thrice before the cock crew. "Denial" implies something wilful or perverse, and this is what Colin Morris meant when he equated atheism with hatred. He cannot dismiss as "a splendid piece of polemic" the bloodthirsty record of Christian hatred which I recounted. Unless he can charge atheism with anything comparable with the crimes committed in the name of Jesus, the only honourable course for him (or Christian charity, if he prefers it) is to withdraw, publicly and without reservation, his hateful words, to admit that he was wrong, unconditionally, and to express sincere regret.

KARL HEATH, Coventry

FACTS

Glyn Emery writes in sneering terms "that once again a letter in your columns from someone too fastidious to permit a daughter to take the Guide oath has invoked the standard response of a plug for the Woodland Folk" (Letter, May).

It would help Emery's case if he were a little more fastidious about facts, otherwise he would not have displayed crass ignorance by making three errors in one sentence. In the first place, there was no letter in *The Freethinker* about the case of Abigail Wright. It was reported in the magazine and in the national press. Secondly, it was Abigail Wright, not her mother, who took the initiative by telling the Guide officer that she could not "promise to do her duty to God." Thirdly, the Co-operative youth organisation is called the Woodcraft, not Woodland, Folk.

COLIN HULSE, Barnsley

POETIC JUSTICE

The poem quoted by Barry Morse at the Annual Dinner of the National Secular Society (*The Freethinker*, May) was not by Hilaire Belloc but by Gerald Bullett, the freethinker.

The correct version is as follows.

To a Certain Archbishop: After hearing his broadcast strictures on a Royal Personage fallen from power

My Lord Archbishop, what a scold you are!

And when your man is down, how bold you are!

Of charity how oddly scant you are!

How Lang O Lord, how full of Cantuar!

It is included among the Hate Poems in the 1955 edition of *The Week-End Book*.

ANNA FREEMAN, Leighton Buzzard

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 7 July, 4.30 pm.. Tea party followed by Annual General Meeting.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists. Waverly Day Centre, 65 Waverly Road, Kenilworth. Monday, 17 June, 7.30 p.m for 7.45 pm. John Rex: Multi-Cultural Societies and the Secular State.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Savile Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD, telephone 031-667 8389.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA). Information from 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB (telephone 0926 58450). Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm.) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

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.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 2 July, 8 pm. Public Meeting.

International Humanist and Ethical Youth Conference. Conway hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1. 22-28 July. Information from Matt Cherry, BHA office, 14 Lamb's Conduit Passage, London WC1R 4RH, telephone 071-430 0908.

National Secular Society. Annual Outing, Arundel, Sussex, Sunday, 8 September. Information from the NSS office, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL, telephone 071-272 1266.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 27 June, 8 pm. Public Meeting.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 18 July, 7.30 pm. Thomas Paine's Rights of Man, 1791.

Preston and District Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, telephone (0772) 796829.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 10 July, 7.45 pm. for 8 pm. Bob Tutton: Reflections of a Humanist Teacher.

Toby Howard, author of Satanic Fantasy (page 85), contributes a column to *The Skeptic*. This excellent journal specialises in debunking of paranormal happenings and consequently is not popular with the mystery-mongers. It is attractively produced, with articles on a wide range of subjects, book reviews and a lively, sometimes abrasive, Letters page. *The Skeptic* is published bi-monthly at £1.85. Address: PO Box 475, Manchester, M60 2TH.

The Higher Cost of Catholic Schools

Figures released by Strathclyde's education authority, the largest in Europe, show that it spends considerably more on pupils attending Roman Catholic schools than on those in the non-denominational sector. The annual cost of a pupil's education is £56.40 more in a Catholic primary school and £131.26 more in a secondary school. This amounts to £3.5 million yearly.

Transport and maintenance costs are also included in the breakdown of figures. Because Roman Catholic schools have a bigger catchment area, it costs more to transport pupils in both the primary and secondary sectors.

During the period 1988-92 the authority will have spent £3072 more on major maintenance in each Catholic school than on non-denominational ones.

Strathclyde is responsible for educating half of Scotland's children. It operates a dual system of denominational and non-denominational schools. This

analysis of the region's £100 million budget is the latest move in a battle involving the education committee and the Roman Catholic Church. It was alleged in a diocesan magazine that a "hidden agenda" had been drawn up with the aim of abolishing Catholic schools. Education chief Ian Davidson denied there was a hidden agenda or that there was discrimination against Catholic schools.

He said: "I believe these statistics show that the regional council has been completely even handed in using its money according to criteria which do not take account of religious dimensions.

"The fact that a disproportionate number of Roman Catholic pupils reside in areas of priority treatment means we spend a disproportionate amount of money on them."

During the debate there has been no reference to the social cost of classroom segregation in Roman Catholic and other denominational schools.

Benn Bill Proposes End to Church Privilege

Tony Benn, MP (Labour, Chesterfield), presented his Commonwealth of Britain Bill to the House of Commons last month.

The Bill proposes that Britain shall be "a democratic, secular, federal Commonwealth, comprising the Nations of England, Scotland and Wales, in association with such islands as have historically been linked to the United Kingdom." The jurisdiction of Britain in Northern Ireland shall cease, troops will be withdrawn and premises and equipment disposed of.

The most radical proposal is that the Constitutional status of the Crown will end and the Monarch "will cease to enjoy or exercise . . . any political or personal power of any kind." Crown property will be transferred to the Commonwealth Government. The Monarch will be compensated and paid a pension. The Church of England will be disestablished.

There will be equal status for all religions and beliefs: "Members of all religious denominations and holders of other beliefs including atheism, agnosticism or humanism, shall have equal status before the law." Legal restrictions on clergy standing for election shall be abolished.

The offence of blasphemy shall be abolished, and "no criminal prosecution shall be instituted against any person for blasphemous libel, heresy, schism or atheism."

There shall be a Commonwealth Oath which does not refer to any deity.

Scout Twins Challenge Religious Ban

A judge's ruling in the first of several anti-discrimination suits against the Boy Scouts of America means that the case of nine-year-old twins, William and Michael Randall, may reach the US Supreme Court.

The boys were barred from the Cub Scout pack after declaring that they did not believe in God and refusing to refer to the deity when reciting the Scout promise. Their father has argued that the Boy Scouts is a public organisation and should not break laws which prohibit discrimination on religious grounds.

Judge Richard Frazee ruled that the Randall twins must not be excluded from Scout meetings until a trial decides whether Scout leaders have the legal right to bar them. Expulsion from the Scouts would violate their constitutional rights.

The Boy Scouts of America have the same rules and rituals as the British organisation.

Harvey Thomas, a born again Christian who was regarded by Margaret Thatcher as her last remaining champion at Conservative Central Offices, has departed. Apparently he got the hump over the appointment of a new Director of Communications. Mr Thomas is a former stage manager for the Billy Graham road show. Commenting on the possibility of working for the Church of England General Synod, the modest Harvey Thomas said: "I could do a lot for them, but the trouble is they don't have the money to pay me."