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FIRST STEP TO RID EDUCATION COUNCILS OF HUMANIST REPRESENTATIVES?

The Department of Education and Science has sent a letter to all Chief Education Officers warning that it could be a breach of law if committees responsible for religious education in schools include humanist representatives.

The letter refers to advice received by the Secretary of State on a possible court interpretation of the law on this matter.

This move follows complaints by Christian pressure groups and campaigners in Parliament such as Baroness Cox. She recently asserted that Christianity in RE lessons had been replaced by a "multi-faith mishmash". Baroness Cox claimed that some schools put important aspects of the Christian faith on the same level as human sacrifice and cannibalism. (She raised no objection to human sacrifice as related in the biblical account of the crucifixion, or the symbolic cannibalism of the Holy Communion ritual.)

The new ruling has caused concern among humanists who set great store by participation in Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs). Humanist representation on committee A (which represents Roman Catholics, Free Churches and "other faiths"), may now be in jeopardy.

According to the DES letter: "It seems likely that a court would take the view that the inclusion of humanist representatives on committee A of an agreed syllabus conference would be contrary to the legal provisions, as humanism is not a religious denomination. It follows that humanists should not be appointed to this committee. However, where a humanist has been included on committee A of an agreed syllabus conference, this would not necessarily invalidate the recommendations of the conference, or any agreed syllabus adopted following its recommendations."

The DES points out that SACREs may co-opt

additional members and there is no reason why these should not include humanists.

It adds: "There is also no reason why humanists should not be appointed to secular committees of the conference of SACRE in the capacity of representatives of teachers or the local education authority."

In a Briefing to SACRE members of the British Humanist Association, John White, secretary of the Association's education committee, says of this "unexpected and highly unwelcome" development: "For most of us, it will mean accepting a change from appointed status to co-opted status. This should not affect your position or limit the contribution you make."

But recognising that a Right-wing fundamentalist lobby is behind this latest move to entrench traditional Christianity even more firmly in the classroom, John White warns: "This means it might be the signal for attempts to deprive us of any form of membership. . .

"The BHA will be considering the situation carefully. We shall certainly be considering legal moves to challenge the ruling with a view to eventually taking it to the European Court of Human Rights."

It is rather surprising that this attempt to restrict humanist membership of SACREs was "unexpected" by the BHA. Reports in the educational and religious press have indicated that considerable pressure was being exerted on the authorities to rigidly observe the legal requirements of the Education Reform Act 1988.

No doubt humanists can influence the deliberations and bring to the work of the new SACREs a non-religious perspective. However, there has been a tendency to regard involvement in SACREs as the be-all and end-all of humanist activity in the educational sphere. But the greatest danger is failing to recognise that at the moment the religious indoctrinators have the law even more on their side than was the case prior to 1988.

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NEWS

THE MILLIONS OF LIES TOLD ABOUT ATHEISM

Lord Rees-Mogg is an eminent Roman Catholic who writes a lot. Most of the time he writes well. Not, however, on religious matters. For instance, his article, "The Millions of Lives Claimed by Atheism" (*The Independent*, 9 September), is a rare concoction of muddle, shallowness and half-baked philosophising.

Starting from the premise, "widespread belief in the non-existence of God can lead to the dehumanising of society", it is but a short step to blaming atheism and atheists for every heinous crime in the book. Lord Rees-Mogg refers to "a number of elderly life peers of progressive views who can be regarded as confirmed atheists", part of "a consistent majority in favour of killing the innocent. . . This has been shown in every vote on the subject of abortion for almost a quarter of a century."

As a loyal son of the church, not a "confused moderate uncertain whether God exists or nor", as he implies, Lord Rees-Mogg churns out the Vatican line on abortion and much else. But he is too single-minded to notice, or too obstinate to accept, that his church's teachings have made an enormous contribution to abortion statistics. A large number of unwanted pregnancies result from ignorance and fear. Sex education, as imparted by celibate priests and nuns, leaves young people in a state of ignorance. And papal fulminations against contraception influences many couples to "take a chance", fearful they should endanger their "immortal souls" by deliberately preventing conception.

Lord Rees-Mogg asserts that Christians believe that life is sacred, whereas to atheists "it does not matter to kill something which is not sacred". He does not attempt to square Christian belief in the sacredness of life with historical realities like the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch-burning, mass killing of Jews and religious dissenters. Or that today it is Christians, particularly those of the "pro-life" (anti-abortion) lobby who lead the clamour for the hangman's reinstatement.

The *Independent* article provoked an interesting correspondence, including rejoinders by Ludovic Kennedy and Richard Dawkins. And there was a tart comment by a reader who acknowledged that Lord Rees-Mogg correctly identified the dangers inherent in religious fanaticism: "How interesting it was to note that he was quite unable to avoid them."

AND NOTES

BIBLE ON THE BEEB

A Bible-reading marathon — Genesis to Revelation in 248 chunks — commenced on Radio 4 last month. But why did the press make such a meal of the BBC's engagement of professional actors to read the scriptures? After all, there is nothing novel about this. It occurs every Sunday, but the actors perform in a pulpit rather than a broadcasting studio.

Sir John Gielgud was an appropriate choice to read Genesis. Who more suitable than a theatrical deity like Gielgud to relate the "creation" yarn? The voice that for decades has declaimed the works of Shakespeare could command listeners' attention by reciting the telephone directory — not an infallible volume, but a more useful one than the Bible.

Other readers will include David Kossoff, Leo McKern and Paul Scofield. All are masters of their craft, but spare a sympathetic thought for the unfortunate who is allocated the first 27 (mercifully short) verses of Nehemiah, chapter ten.

Curiously, not a squeak of protest has been heard from that industrious protector of the nation's moral standards, Mrs Mary Whitehouse, over the Beeb's decision to broadcast a hotchpotch of absurdity, violence, terrorism, indecency and child abuse. Christian pressure groups like Family and Youth Concern, CARE and the Jubilee Trust, constantly proclaim their concern for the welfare of the family and young people. Yet they are faithful worshippers of the Judaeo-Christian God whose actions, as recorded in the Bible, show him to be the greatest child abuser of all time.

Take the story of Abraham and Isaac, recounted in Genesis, chapter 27. God instructs Abraham to bind his only son Isaac, "whom thou lovest", lay him on an altar and "offer him for a burnt offering". True, God changes his perverse mind, but only at the last minute as "Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son". Who but a sadist would expose parent and child to such an ordeal?

The killing of Egypt's first-born (Exodus records "there was not a house where there was not one dead") was a divine holocaust. Unless the Bible readings have been laundered, Radio 4 listeners will hear other examples of God ordering the slaughter of children (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, etc).

As for the family: on many occasions God decreed their separation, enslavement and destruction. And in the New Testament, Jesus stipulated hatred of "father

and mother, and wife, and children", as a condition of discipleship (St Luke, chapter 14).

The Bible is an anti-social compilation, sanctioning animal and human sacrifice, slavery, "inferiority" of women, witch-hunting and injustice. For centuries it has been the warmonger's handbook, a manual for armies and crusaders. Historically, biblical endorsement of violence and aggression has been cited to justify the actions of either conflicting side, often both at the same time. Significantly, Northern Ireland is one of the few corners of these islands where the Bible still exercises a strong influence. Protestants and Catholics alike are ardent followers of the "prince of peace" who declared: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword."

While not advocating suppression or censorship, we nevertheless put the question: Is the Bible suitable for family listening?

UNITED IN IGNORANCE

Ulster Christians hate each others' guts, so it is rather a novelty when an issue unites disparate groups like Roman Catholics and the Rev Ian Paisley's Free Presbyterians. However, they have joined forces to combat the powers of darkness, namely a counselling agency which gives advice and information on sexual matters to young people.

Dr Gabriel Scally, director of public health for the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, invited Brook Advisory Centres to open a centre in Belfast. He referred to the "alarming rise" in the number of illegitimate births and teenage mothers. A Brook representative said: "Whether we like it or not, young people are sexually active and need counselling."

Plans to open the Brook Centre aroused the ire of the godly. A Roman Catholic opponent accuses the Brook philosophy of being "totally opposed to the whole Christian ethos". The Rev Ian Paisley says it shows "a complete disregard for the word of God".

Pious prudes, never happier than when poking their disapproving noses in other people's affairs, profess fear that the Centre will encourage sexual activity among the young. Whether this concern is motivated by anything other than envy is a moot point. Certainly it is rooted in ignorance. The sex drive is strongest during early years and teenagers do not need encouragement to be sexually active. But they often need counselling and information which a Brook Centre will provide. It is better for all concerned to accept this fact of life than to produce a generation of sexual ignoramuses.

It is rarely that Ulster Protestants and Catholics make compact. When they do, as on this occasion, it is in defence of ignorance and against the dissemination of knowledge.

ABUSE OF TRUST

The nine-year prison sentence for rape imposed on a Pentecostal bishop (report back page) raises questions about the perception of some Hackney Council officials. For Samuel Douglas's appearance at the Old Bailey stirred memories of his involvement in less serious but nevertheless dubious activities.

Douglas worked as a co-ordinator at the Christian Community Centre. Four years ago he was forced to resign from its management committee after admitting that he forged a colleague's name on a cheque for £1,000. The money was spent on double-glazing at his home. He received a suspended jail sentence.

Two staff members complained of financial irregularities. They were suspended, but Douglas continued to receive an annual salary of £9,000.

In 1983, Hackney Council made a grant of £36,000 a year to the Christian Community Centre. This was halved in 1986 after an investigation into the Centre's affairs. But a report on the bishop's activities was hushed up.

Throughout the Eighties, Government policies forced local authorities to drastically reduce expenditure on social, educational and cultural projects. But in Hackney, and very likely other places as well, religious outfits are regarded as sacrosanct. This is due to misplaced respect for religion and the fact that anyone who criticises or resists demands by religious groups composed of West Indians, Asians or those on the far reaches of Judaism, will attract the "racist" slur.

Will the Bishop Douglas affair bring Hackney Town Hall bosses to their senses? Perhaps, but not just yet. They are now planning to recruit 520 Orthodox Jews because they are "unrepresented" on the council work force.

RESISTING CENSORSHIP

"Probably the worst censorship of all is that which no-one ever hears of, which stops creative endeavour or simple truth-telling before it starts", declares the Campaign Against Censorship in its latest annual report.

The report says in the period under review it would be tempting to think that the world was becoming an easier place for free expression. But the reality is somewhat different.

"While Europe liberalised, the United States appeared to be in the throes of a spreading outbreak of puritanical intolerance. . .

"In Britain there was an apparently endless flow of restrictions, small and large, new and old, as well as the crawling chill of pre-censorship.

"The Broadcasting Act made the Broadcasting Standards Council a statutory body. It increased

Government control through control of appointments to senior posts."

Referring to the ban on statements supporting or appearing to support certain political views on Northern Ireland, the report says "broadcasters actions make the ban look at once ridiculous and sinister.

"It is ridiculous to have a living politician (Gerry Adams, MP) interviewed on television with his own voice suppressed and the words spoken by an actor. It is more so to have dead ones (Eamonn de Valera and Sean McBride) treated in the same way on a schools history programme.

"It is sinister because the concept of a banned organisation, totalitarian in itself, has been extended to the rewriting of history."

The Campaign Against Censorship. Honorary Secretary: Mary Hayward, 25 Middleton Close, Fareham, Hants, PO14 1QN, telephone 0329 284471.

FROM CHAPEL TO THEATRE

After many years of Cliff Richard wittering on about the joy of being "born again in Jesus", it makes a refreshing change to encounter a popular singer who underwent a different kind of conversion.

Brian Hibbard, a former member of The Flying Pickets group, once thrilled Welsh chapel audiences with his preaching. In a recent *Western Mail* interview he said: "I was preacher from the age of 12 to 18, and a delegate for the interdenominational fellowship.

"But I became a born-again atheist after I watched someone preaching in the chapel. I saw his manipulation of the audience. He was an evangelical holy roller and I became very cynical. I'm not religious at all now."

Another conversion has taken place in Brian Hibbard's life. He went to a teacher training college and specialised in drama. No longer a singer, he is much in demand as a television and stage actor. He was in *Songs for World War III* at the National Theatre and is currently playing Chunky in the BBC 1 drama, *Making Out*.

Damian Thompson, a London journalist, was fined £950 by Marylebone magistrates who were told he was nearly three times over the limit and so drunk that he collapsed while driving a friend's car. Mr Thompson is religious affairs correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*.

The Almighty Vandal strikes again! The Gloucester-based Ecclesiastical Insurance Company, which insures much of the Church of England's property, has announced a loss of £2 million, due to an increase in claims. These include claims in respect of criminal damage, including "acts of God".

Anglican Anxieties

DANIEL O'HARA

A former Church of England priest throws out a secular humanist life-line to Anglicans who are becoming engulfed in the stormy waters of controversy.

Outside observers might be forgiven for thinking that the Church of England is suffering from a death-wish. It seems, at least, intent on periodical blood-letting, as clerics clamour to denounce their co-religionists for being either too liberal, too conservative, too permissive, or too blinkered.

The sermon preached by the Archdeacon of York, the Venerable George Austin, in York Minister on 8 September, was clearly calculated to set the cat among the pigeons. The press had been warned that a gauntlet was about to be thrown down, so there was thus a good deal of advance publicity for the slightly hysterical views that the Venerable George put forward.

Before proceeding to consider the substance of his message and the rather predictable responses to his outburst, let us spend a moment looking at the Archdeacon himself. Though he is alleged to be 60, I swear he doesn't look a day over 45. His plump cheeks are quite without wrinkle, and his brown wavy hair, parted almost in the middle, betrays no hint of grey. Archbishop Habgood compared him to the fat boy in *Pickwick Papers* who wanted nothing more than to make the flesh of an old woman creep, and Archbishop Carey has likened him to Humpty-Dumpty (*The Times*, 19 September). To me, though, as I suspect to many of my generation, he conjures up another image: that of Gerald Campion's television portrayal of the Fat Owl of the Remove, Billy Bunter.

A regular broadcaster, and a favourite presenter of Radio 4's "Thought for the Day" (many of his contributions to which have recently appeared in print with a Foreword by Brian Redhead), George Austin has long been known to the general public, as he was previously to fellow-members of the General Synod, as a "conservative" in the mould of the late Dr Gareth Bennett. He, you will remember, committed suicide in 1987 just as he was about to be unmasked as the author of the preface to the newly-published Crockford's *Directory*, attacking the "liberal ascendancy" in the Church of England. Unlike Dr Bennett, George Austin is married; and unlike William Oddie, another cleric of similar ilk, who has since joined the Church of Rome, he seems intent in remaining an Anglican. But he regards the Church of England as not big enough to contain both people who think like him and those who want women priests, gay vicars, and regard God as "She". Thus he has called for a split, with a cosy oasis reserved for "traditionalists" like himself and a raft for

those who would be happier sailing away in currents which he considers heretical.

As wiser voices have pointed out, the Church does not split as neatly down the middle as Archdeacon Austin would wish. There are gay clergy who oppose the ordination of women just as there are supporters of women's ordination who are extremely conservative in matters of sexual morality. And there are supporters of gay clergy who dislike modern liturgical practice. Most Anglicans do not seem to vote for a "liberal" or a "conservative" slate; they choose the bits they like.

There is no doubt, however, that the Archdeacon is right in predicting that forthcoming Synod debates on moral and political issues will create "a period of discord far more bitter and divisive than that experienced with the debate on women priests". He is right, because the real issue at stake here is one of authority. So long as the church was able to sail in calmer waters, no one was forced to think about the source of its beliefs and the basis of its claim to supernatural authority. But the stream in which it sails has become increasingly turbulent in recent decades, and it is much less easy than it used to be to ignore demands to adapt to new knowledge and new social situations. If the church can ordain women, come to terms with homosexuality, regard God as "She", why should it still cling to beliefs formulated in the fourth century which are generally regarded as defining orthodoxy?

Rapid change is likely to seem the thin end of a wedge calculated to separate faith and reason. The Archdeacon's fear is soundly based, because there is no rational basis for religious belief. When these questions are raised in acute form, the authority which the church claims cannot be disguised as anything other than what it truly is: entirely arbitrary. No wonder, then, that the bulk of the population pays no attention to the church's teaching. It is ever more palpably irrelevant and divorced from everyday realities.

The voices of moderation from within the Church, while correctly diagnosing the hysteria and paranoia inherent in the Archdeacon's position, can do nothing to reassure the faithful that their faith is soundly based. There thus seems to be no real alternative on offer from churchmen to the steady erosion of belief and the declining influence of traditional, institutional Christianity.

There are two other possibilities: one, surely a counsel of despair, is the glorification of unreason seen in the increasingly influential cults; the other is secular humanism. Can there be any doubt that we should be presenting this option as the only sane approach to living with uncertainty?

Hot Air, Hoaxes and Crop Circles

ROBIN ALLEN

"Supernatural", "paranormal", are some of the claims advanced by excited mystery mongers to explain crop circles. Dr Allen, a theoretical physicist and President of the Wessex Skeptics, an organisation devoted to evaluating critically paranormal and pseudoscientific claims, takes a different view.

It is now eight years since crop circles graduated from a space filler for a few newspapers to a major player in the National Media Summertime Circus. These attractive patterns, flattened into crop fields in designs from simple circles to complex combinations of circles, rings, trenches and triangles, have become a part of our culture and there can hardly be anyone unfamiliar with them or with their allegedly mysterious nature.

Predictably, there has been no shortage of (typically self-appointed) "experts" willing to pontificate on the nature and importance of the phenomenon. In the best tradition of pseudoacademia, circles research has been grandiosely baptised *cerealogy*, and this discipline is dominated by two schools of thought: that of the "mystics", who ruminate on agricultural folklore and the paranormal, and that of meteorologist Dr Terence Meaden and his supporters, who believe the circles to be caused by a "plasma vortex", a novel atmospheric phenomenon akin to ball lightning. Whereas, a year ago, I was sympathetic to the latter option, I now incline towards a third, minority, position within cerealogy (but not outside it): that crop circles are probably hoaxes. In this brief article, I intend to say why.

The paranormal theories are parasitic on the perceived lack of a satisfactory conventional solution and are supported purely by evidentially bankrupt stories of "strange occurrences" à la Rlipey. The situation with the supposedly "scientific" alternative — the plasma vortex — is remarkably similar. When one cuts through the impressive-sounding verbiage, the evidence for atmospheric causation rests on a handful of eyewitnesses and several dubious analogies, accompanied by astonishingly creative interpretations of the rules of evidence. The vortex camp — predominantly comprising Meaden and a vocal coterie of ufologists, students and amateur meteorologists — exhibits a reluctance to engage in data analysis and hypothesis testing which borders on the medieval. Most of the anecdotal evidence for the existence of vortices — strange lights in the sky sometimes accompanied by strange marks on the ground — is trawled from the UFO literature and shoehorned into Meaden's theory. Minimal effort has been expended on investigating these anecdotes, and superficial examination frequently suffices to reveal manifest inaccuracies — even the

suppression of details inimical to a vortex interpretation.

No data concerning circles has been made available to critical scientists, whose attention appears to be quite unwelcome, and no quantitative analyses of merit exist to elevate the theory beyond its qualitative level; as a result the theory is non-falsifiable, with even the most ridiculous patterns capable of being "explained" by it. Together with its numerous physical difficulties (such as the lack of hard evidence for the historical and international pedigree of circles, the absence of imperfect, "aborted" formations, the outrageous nature of some patterns, and so forth), it is clear that, whilst it might be premature to write Meaden off, his case is considerably weaker than the vorticists' categorical pronouncements would have us believe.

Although the mystics and meteorologists are ordinarily poles apart, they unite in believing the *all* crop circles are most definitely *not* man-made; but the *hoaxing* hypothesis has been rejected largely on the basis of sweeping generalisations concerning human nature. Who would bother making so many circles? Why aren't they caught? The fact that almost half of the 1991 circles were pronounced fakes, that some of these were highly complex and that in the majority of cases the hoaxers were not discovered, renders these pseudo-anthropological arguments unconvincing. However, the linchpin of the anti-hoax argument is the supposed physical impossibility of manufacturing a "genuine" circle; cerealogists contend that features such as unbroken crop and complex stem-layering, as well as the subsequent production within circles of (allegedly) mysterious phenomena such as dowsing responses and psychic experiences, cannot reasonably be attributed to human artifice. Besides cerealogists confidently proclaim near-papal infallibility in identifying those hoaxes that do appear.

The frequent disagreements amongst cerealogists over the status of certain circles, and the mounting evidence that some researchers *have* "authenticated" hoaxes, indicates that the differentiation techniques employed are subjective and unreliable. Concerned by the *ex cathedra* nature of claims to the contrary, we decided to try a hoax ourselves. In August of this year, five members of the Wessex Skeptics manufactured a complex formation (a central circle approximately thirty feet across, together with a ring and several "satellites") near Marlborough, laying the crop partly with a garden roller and partly by hand. The ninety minute exercise was filmed for the programme *Equinox*.

The result of our frenetic exertions was, by our present standards, crude and unsatisfying. Nevertheless, the formation was unequivocally and enthusiastically

endorsed as genuine by every cerealologist who visited it, including Terence Meaden (who described it as “a textbook example” and “absolutely 100 per cent genuine”). Furthermore, several experienced cerealological dowsers were overwhelmed by the responses they obtained, and a medium who sat in the central circle was overcome by ambient spiritual energies.

Crop circles *can* be hoaxed, and it does not necessarily

require excessive skill and planning. If cerealologists had spent less time being pompously authoritarian and more time testing their claims — Meaden, for example, has never even *attempted* to empirically assess the feasibility of hoaxing — they would have discovered this for themselves years ago. Our experiment does not establish that *all* circles are hoaxes, but it does prompt us to ask: if not, how can the “experts” tell which ones are “genuine”?

We Want Our Teachers Back

RUTH BLEWITT

Last month over two thousand people attended a commemorative rally in the Norfolk village of Burston. They were honouring the memory of two teachers, the pupils and their parents who defied the Norfolk Education Committee and the school managers for a quarter of a century.

On 31 March 1914, Kitty and Tom Higdon, headmistress and assistant teacher at Burston Council School, were dismissed from their posts. The following day most of the children went on strike in their support and so began “the longest strike in history”.

The seeds of the dispute at Burston were, in fact, sown earlier when Kitty and Tom Higdon were similarly employed at Wood Dalling, another Norfolk village. They were appointed jointly in 1902 and friction soon developed between them and the school managers, most of whom were local farmers.

At Wood Dalling, the Higdons found a sharp division between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. As in much of rural England, society was organized largely for the benefit of the squirearchy while the welfare of the labourers counted for little. In many industrial areas, workers had formed unions for their mutual benefit and support, and the movement towards union organization was spreading into the countryside. Labourers were beginning to realise their industrial and political strength and the need for concerted action.

The conservative view was that, although the masses had to be educated, they also had “to respect their betters and know their place”, while the status quo had to be maintained. Teachers were expected to support this view and not hold unorthodox opinions or show too much personal initiative. Tom and Kitty were Christian Socialists and they did not conform to that pattern. In many ways they were before their time, taking account of their pupils’ interests and abilities while stimulating their curiosity and sense of wonder at the world around them. They held strong opinions and spoke fearlessly, although perhaps they were at times tactless and impatient with people who did not agree with them or

who seemed petty-minded. They were concerned to help the children develop their skills and think for themselves; not simply, and almost inevitably, to become farm-labourers or go into domestic service.

At Wood Dalling, the Higdons found living and working conditions for the labourers generally poor. The school building itself was cold, damp and insanitary. The older children were often taken out of school, without reference to Kitty or Tom, to work on the farms as required by the school-managing farmers — a common practice in villages at the time.

As headmistress, Kitty agitated for the school premises to be improved and, although the managers resented her pressure, some money was eventually spent on repairs. Meanwhile, Tom used much of his spare time to cycle round the area, talking to farm-labourers and encouraging them to join a union in the hope of improving conditions. This and the resultant demands for increased wages did little to endear him to the landowners! Then, in 1910, Tom and a number of the labourers were elected to the Parish Council, to the annoyance of the sitting councillors who were mostly school-managers in different hats. The Parish Council Act of 1894 intended that such councils should be fully representative but, of course, they were usually cornered by the squirearchy.

These and other actions led to a breakdown in the relationship between the Higdons and the managers. An inquiry was held and the Norfolk Education Committee (NEC) offered them the choice of dismissal or transfer to another school. They agreed to the latter and moved to Burston, near Diss, in February 1911.

Conditions at Burston were similar to those at Wood Dalling. Much of the land was owned by a brewing magnate and farmed by tenants, but these tenant-farmers were powerful. They could hire and fire; they owned many of the dilapidated cottages and some of them were school managers, parish councillors and church wardens.

Soon after the Higdons’ arrival in Burston, a new rector, the Rev C. T. Eland, was assigned to the living. His wife and the rector of the neighbouring parish of

Shimpling were appointed as two of the six school managers, while Eland himself was made chairman. He appears to have been an autocratic man, out of tune with village life and unable to come to terms with the fact that the clergy were losing their influence and power to the civil authorities. In his book, *The Burston Rebellion*, Tom Higdon wrote of him: "His object from first to last appears to have been to turn by compulsion the whole Parish into a sort of Church Colony of grovelling imbeciles in perfect servility to his own despotic and idiotic will." (His capitals have been retained throughout.)

Kitty soon found cause to complain about the state of the school building which was poorly lit, poorly ventilated and inadequately heated. Tom did no political work for two years for fear of provoking a second dismissal for them both. At length, however, he was asked to stand for the parish council by one of the villagers who, along with many others, objected to his concerns being largely ignored. Again, Tom and several labourers were elected, with only one farmer retaining his seat. Tom came top of the poll while the rector, humiliatingly, came bottom.

By then the rector and his friends were resolved to be rid of "that Socialist" and, as they could find no fault with his school work, they decided to attack him through Kitty.

Meanwhile, the Higdons had earned the affection and respect of the villagers, who often turned to them for help and advice. They had proved themselves to be caring and stimulating teachers, generous with time and money.

But faults can always be found if one is determined to do so and Eland and the other managers *were* so determined. For example, without seeking the permission of the school managers, Kitty had lit fires to dry the children's clothes after they had walked two or three miles to school through the rain. It was alleged too that she was discourteous to the managers, the rector and his family. One such discourtesy was said to have occurred when she was standing in the road talking and the rector passed *behind* her on a parallel path, screened by trees. Not surprisingly, as she did not see him, she did not greet him.

But the most serious accusation was that she had caned two Barnado girls, who were fostered in the village, because they had falsely accused a boy of rudeness. The whole school knew that the girls were lying and that Kitty had not touched them physically although she had sharply reprimanded them for telling the untruth. The suspicion was that the rector, the local Barnado representative and paymaster, had concocted the story behind the accusation and primed the foster-mother and the children to repeat it. Tom wrote: "Even Mrs P. (the foster mother) herself says that the Rector

came to her house every day and drilled the children in what they had to say."

The results of the inquiry which followed in late February 1914 seem to have been a foregone conclusion. The NEC representatives, all "establishment" figures, listened closely to the rector's account and did not call witnesses for the Higdons, of whom there were many. They seem simply to have wanted a trouble-free life. Tom said that they found Kitty "an Impossible Woman and a Hopeless Case". The National Union of Teachers representative sadly failed to fight for his members' interests and yet, at the end of it, all the allegations were dismissed with only the charge of discourtesy left unresolved. Nevertheless, the Higdons were given almost instant dismissal, with three months' salary in lieu of notice. Their real "crime" of course was that they were prepared to work and fight for what they held to be the best interests of their pupils and to encourage them and their parents to think and to question. Perhaps reformers are never popular with authority.

The dismissal took effect from 1 April 1914. Of course, most of Burston knew what was happening and the reasons behind it. Many villagers were incensed and, at a large meeting held on the green in the evening of 31 March, their sense of shock and outrage was expressed forcibly and they decided to support the Higdons in whatever ways seemed possible. Tom wrote: "Short determined speeches were made by men and women who had never spoken publicly before; and fists were shaken by noble revengeful women and beards by angry men."

Most of the children, meanwhile, led by 13-year-old Violet Potter, had decided to go on strike in protest at what was happening. On the morning of 1 April, instead of going to school they assembled near the church, watched by many of the parents, and then marched around the village carrying banners bearing the words JUSTICE and WE WANT OUR TEACHERS BACK. The march ended outside the handsome rectory with the children singing and jeering. It was repeated during the afternoon and for several days following. Although the strike was ridiculed by the rector as "an April Fool's joke" and "a nine-days' wonder" it became, in fact, the longest in history, lasting for 25 years.

At the request of the parents, Kitty and Tom started teaching the 66 striking children on the village green, only six children remaining at the council school. Kitty made sure that the school on the green was properly organized, with strict routine, registration, orderly timetable and so on; the parents lent moral support as well as tables and chairs. Fortunately the weather that spring was fine!

However, the authorities decided that they could not ignore such proceedings and, within a few days, 18 parents were summoned before the local magistrate and

fined for the non-attendance of their children at the council school. A fortnight later, 32 parents were similarly treated, in each case the money for the fines being donated by well-wishers. Summoning was then dropped. After all, the children were attending the school of their choice and being taught by properly qualified teachers in a structured way. A subsequent appeal by the aggrieved parents for a full and unbiased inquiry into the Burston affair was ignored by the Norfolk Education Committee.

In an act of spite, the rector evicted from his glebe land some parents who were Higdons supporters, though not without the parties resorting to legal action. Such land, on which villagers grew vegetables and kept chickens, was valuable to families struggling to manage on low wages. Of course, the rector could lease his land to whom he chose, but as the tenants concerned worked the land well and paid the rent regularly, the evictions were seen for what they were. Other petty acts were taken against the "striking" parents and there was much bitterness in the village as a result. One family feud lasted for 15 years.

But in spite of the fines, the tension, the victimisation and the disruption to village life caused by the Great War, the parents did not waver in their support; indeed, they may have been strengthened by it. There is, anyway, a long history of dissent in Norfolk, to which the number of non-conformist chapels (particularly Methodist) bears witness. Also, in 1906, one of the only 29 Labour members to be elected to Parliament came from Norwich. As a local saying goes:

Yew may push me, yew may shuv,

But Oi'm hanged if Oi'll be druv!

The main Norwich-London railway runs through Burston and several villagers were railwaymen. News of the events soon spread throughout the country, by word of mouth and through newspapers. Before long, large numbers of well-wishers, especially trades unionists, gathered in Burston every Sunday, holding huge meetings on the village green. They must have been thrilling occasions, with the crowds, the banners and the marching bands. Often the meetings were addressed by leading unionists and politicians — George Lansbury, Philip Snowden and Tom Mann among others. A local Methodist lay-preacher, John Sutton, lent his support by conducting services, and even baptisms, on the green, which led to diminishing congregations in both the church and the chapel. At all of these meetings, money to support the strike school was collected.

With winter approaching, the strike school was offered accommodation near the green in a redundant carpenter's shop owned by blind Ambrose Sandy, one of the evicted glebe tenants. Other parents helped to make it habitable by cleaning, painting and repairing the fabric.

By 1915, with the tenure of the carpenter's shop coming to an end, it was decided to try and raise enough money to erect a permanent building. A nation-wide appeal was made through the trades union movement, which found a ready response from individuals, union branches (especially the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Union of Mineworkers) and collections at public meetings. A committee was formed to handle the appeal and largely due to the generosity of ordinary working people enough money was eventually raised to purchase a piece of land beside the green and build the school. The foundation stone was laid in 1917 by George Lansbury and the little building finished in early 1918. The opening ceremony was performed, appropriately, by Violet Potter before a huge gathering of supporters, including Sylvia Pankhurst among other well-known sympathisers. The school backs on to the churchyard and the Rev Eland must have found it a continually irritating sight. The school was well-equipped and furnished and its opening was a triumph for all involved. It became a symbol of local democracy and free speech and a place where enlightened, child-centred learning could flourish.

And flourish it did, with money continuing to come in for upkeep and salaries from members of the Independent Labour Party, Co-operative societies and trades unions who so generously adopted the cause in a remarkable example of sustained support and friendship. 66s older pupils left, so younger children took their place and the school prospered until 1939 when Tom Higdons died. Throughout the years he had continued with his parish council and union activities, helping to set up many agricultural union branches in neighbouring villages. Tom and Kitty had been a devoted couple and Kitty, by then in her seventies, was deeply affected by his death. She felt unable to continue alone and so the Strike School was closed and the pupils transferred to the council school. Kitty died in 1946, having spent her last days in a home. She was buried beside Tom in the churchyard just a few yards from the Strike School.

The building, now cared for Trustees, is pervaded by a strong sense of history. A visit to it is a moving experience. The Rev Eland left Burston in 1920 and was succeeded by a more sympathetic man. The council school in Burston is still in use, little changed externally from the Higdons' time. The school at Wood Dalling was closed some years ago and the buildings years ago and the buildings sold to a pig-farmer. The school-rooms are now full of machinery and the playground full of silos.

The issues involved were summed up by Tom on the last page of his book. He wrote: "There is not a principle or practice of Truth or True Religion, of Common or Individual Justice, of Personal or Political Liberty, of Trade Unionism or Socialism, which is not involved in

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CREATION OUT OF NOTHING, by Don Cupitt. SCM Press, £8.95

the issues of the fight; while the whole Rural Problem of the Land and the Labourer, and consequently of Education, Social and Industrial Progress generally, will be largely and vitally affected by the results of the Burston School Strike and Glebe Evictions' Fight.

At a rally in 1984 to commemorate the strike, the then rector, the Rev J. H. Lister, said: "I want to state here and now that I believe he (the Rev C. T. Eland) was wrong; wrong in the views that he took and wrong in the ways he conducted his business in this parish. . . I believe it is my duty to say I am sorry for the way the church failed the people of this parish and caused actual hardship and distress. I want to apologise and seek reconciliation."

It took a big man to make such an apology for one of his predecessors whose behaviour did so much to precipitate the strike.

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Freethinker Fund

It is necessary to keep the *Freethinker* subscriptions at a realistic rather than an economic level. Legacies and donations to the Fund have so far enabled us to do so. But rising costs are always a problem and the increase in postal charges introduced last month is a blow.

Advertising is prohibitively expensive, yet it is important that the *Freethinker* circulation is increased. A larger readership means more income and a wide dissemination of the Freethought message.

The latest list of contributors to the Fund is given below. Their support is much appreciated.

C. Benison, A. D. Gore and E. J. Kemble, £1 each; G. Michel, £1.40; D. Redhead and E. Wakefield, £2 each; D. R. Barret, W. H. Brown and P. J. Kerr, £2.50 each; Anonymous, M. D. Carter, J. M. Crowley, W. R. Grant and R. D. McCoy, £3 each; M. D. Munniksma, £4.40; J. B. Humphreys, £4.75; Ablethorpe, G. A. Airey, J. L. Broom, R. A. Coupe, W. P. Curry, N. Everitt, D. Godin, R. Gray, E. Haslam, J. R. Hutton, D. C. Kilpatrick, T. Liddle, A. J. McQuaid, A. Negus, J. Patterson, W. H. Simock, M. W. Smith, J. A. B. Spence, C. Thomas, D. Whelan and D. Wright, £5 each; A. Varlet, £6.40; A. Williams, £10; P. L. Lancaster, £15; A. G. Bennett and C. G. Roberts, £20 each; Anonymous, £30.

Total for August: £271.25

If book titles were subject to the Trade Descriptions Act the Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, would face prosecution. His book contains nothing about science and the universe, very little theology and only superficial philosophy. Instead there is only a sustained word-play on the word "create", a thicket of verbiage which may be designed to conceal a loss of faith. Rarely have I encountered such a preposterous farrago of pretentious nonsense.

Cupitt establishes his theme at the outset. He says "Language creates reality". If so, nothing real can exist before there is a language-using entity to give it a name. How can anything be named before it exists? And would not any language-using entity also be part of reality? Cupitt says: "Language is bigger (*sic*) than you and me, more powerful than us and PRIOR to us." Yet if language names things and processes how can this be possible unless the things and processes already exist prior to language?

A child knows that the word "create" can mean many things, including "creating a good impression" and "creating a disturbance". As a theologian, Cupitt knows perfectly well that Creation as a religious notion means far more than those examples. So why should he play with his readers? All that language creates is our image of the universe. But Cupitt presumably follows Bishop Berkeley — "*esse est percipi*" — in denying the existence of anything except when it is being perceived. So the universe did not exist until we were around and, even then, not until we started to think about it linguistically.

Dr Johnson thought to dispose of Berkeley by kicking a stone and declaring "I refute him thus". He was not far wrong if we substitute science for the stone. I am sure that Don Cupitt is not ignorant of physics, chemistry, geology, biology, astronomy and mathematics. Why, therefore, should he ignore all of them in a book about creation? Let us take Time and Space. First, Earth Time. If the Earth's 5,000 million years are compressed into 24 hours from a midnight beginning, the Earth was lifeless until the following evening, that is, throughout almost all of the pre-Cambrian era. What language was then creating reality, or does Cupitt deny that the Earth existed in a lifeless form? Around 10.30 pm begins more than a hundred million years of reptilian life. What language did the dinosaurs use to create reality? Human beings did not appear until a few seconds before the second midnight. Now take Earth Space. Nine

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specks, called planets, together with a multitude of specklets, revolve around a ten-a-penny G-type sun, one of billions, in a spiral arm of a galaxy 30,000 light years from the heart of the Milky Way, our own galaxy being one of billions, even the nearest, Andromeda, being two million light years away. Religious people sometimes call scientists arrogant. What could be more arrogant than thin-skinned bipeds, occupying a speck in space for a speck in time, pontificating about creation while ignoring what their senses and their physical brains tell them? This is childish, parochial geocentrism, as if Copernicus and Galileo had never existed. This is tribal belief in an anthropomorphic god made in man's image.

Which came first, matter or consciousness? We have ample evidence of unconscious matter. But consciousness without matter would have nothing to be conscious of, and nothing to be conscious with. Cupitt rejects Plato's eternal ideas, Kant's "noumena" and "pure thought". But, whether he likes it or not, he is left with physical brains which existed before language.

Things have changed since the 17th Century Archbishop Ussher said that the world was created on the 23rd of October, 4004 BC. We have grown up and should abandon neat little dogmatism and, like St Paul in I Corinthians, "put away childish things". Above all, we should have the humility to say "I don't know". The old Milesian Greek philosopher, Anaximander, in the sixth century BC, spoke of a substratum which our senses would never penetrate. In our time Hoyle has likened us to the fish off Yarmouth who will never know that Yarmouth is there. J. B. S. Haldane said that not only will we never know the universe — we are physically incapable of imagining it. All that we learn are the bits significant to us.

One thing we do know is incessant change, as another old Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, insisted. All is flux and change. Things are events: they cannot exist in space without being events in time. We are swept along in the river of Heraclitus.

Into this Universe and Why not knowing
Nor Whence, like Water willy-nilly flowing;
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
I know not Whither, willy-nilly blowing.

Permanent objects and eternal spirits are a childish delusion, together with Creation, God, Heaven and Hell.

Our universe, of which we are a part, not merely dwellers but part of the structure, is neither Cosmos nor Chaos, but existing. It is "bleak" only in minds like Cupitt's. It is neither beautiful nor ugly, except in our heads.

Creation is meaningless; creation out of nothing is meaningless; creation through language is meaningless word-play. With our brains, our language and our cultural history, we try to turn Chaos into Cosmos, but only in our understanding. The universe will still be there, as it has always been, for ever changing, in no way dependent upon what we think of it or what language names we give to it.

KARL HEATH

Letters

THE LEGALITY OF THE GULF WAR

Nicolas Walter (Letters, August) persists in looking in the wrong Articles of the United Nations Charter. Article 49 is a rather precise description of what happened last January-February.

49 The Members of the United Nations shall join in affording mutual assistance in carrying out the measures decided upon by the Security Council.

Articles 43-47 set up a different basis for response, which depends on the Members of the UN making armed forces available to the Security Council. The Members have not made forces available, so these Articles are inoperative. But this does not leave the Security Council impotent: other Articles, in particular 49, enable its decisions to be implemented.

In his June letter Walter quoted some words from Article 47 "the Military Staff Committee shall be responsible under the Security Council for the strategic direction"; but he cuts them off and continues in his own words: "of the armed forces". This might seem to make it obligatory for all military action implementing UN decisions to be under the control of the Security Council Staff Committee. But this is not the case. The passage in fact continues: "of any armed forces placed at the disposal of the Security Council". In other words it applies only to forces made available under Articles 43-46.

It seems that Walter has not been in touch with the United Nations Association very recently. If he lays his recent letter before them he will find that he is playing with words. His claim (Letters, June) that the Association considers that the action in the Gulf did not comply with the UN Charter is quite untrue.

I am glad that Walter now gets right the letter from myself and others in the March *Humanist News*; last time he omitted the essential word "now", repeated. But he still does not seem to see its significance. If last February Walter and I both supported both peace and the UN, then what was the difference between us? Walter does not come to terms with this question. The answer is that I supported war then, in the belief that thereby I was defending long-term prospects of peace; he undermines the power of the Security Council then, by condemning, and denying the legitimacy of, the action then proceeding to implement its decisions, in the belief that thereby he was defending its long-term prospects. We each acted for long term ideals in ways which the other considered misconceived. Our positions are symmetrical.

Walter's reply (Letters, August) to Eric Stockton (Letters, July) does not work. Stockton's basic point was to distinguish between the inevitable implications of Humanism, and the conclusion drawn by Humanists. These are not the same, because individual Humanists introduce their own personal values and factual beliefs. One might say this is what Humanism is for: to give people the foundation on which to build their lives. But the diversity of individual beliefs leads to a diversity of conclusions, which often conflict. Stockton assumed that it is

obvious that Humanism does not have inevitable implications which conflict. In this he is correct; and Walter makes Humanism absurd by claiming that it yields contradictory inevitable implications!

Finally, though I endorse Stockton's main points, I would criticise two subsidiary claims. First, surely it is unreasonable to allow the BHA or other Humanist organisations only to make statements which other people are not saying with equal emphasis. There are many matters where we should join with others who have commitment equal to our own, but on different foundations.

Secondly, he misconstrues the function of a life stance. As I said above of Humanism, a life stance is only the foundation on which each individual builds his or her own life. But it is important that the foundations be sound.

HARRY STOPES-ROE, Birmingham

THE SCOTTISH DILEMMA

Your grasp of Scottish politics is a little uncertain and so you may, inadvertently and gratuitously, mislead readers about our real situation.

The notion of a Scottish parliament within a British context, as advocated by Tony Benn, is precisely what "the small minority of voters in Scotland... who vote for nationalist parties" do not wish to see. The nationalists are for independence, not for a somewhat decentralised UK which they regard as a snare and a delusion. The Scottish Nationalists' pollrating varies over the years; it is rarely under ten per cent and rarely over 25 per cent. They form a significant minority most of the time. "Small number" is a less than just assessment of their strength.

The idea of Scottish (and Welsh) parliaments within a UK may or may not be "dangerous and unnecessary" (as Ted Goodman and the Conservatives believe). Secularism has nothing special to contribute on this issue; the Humanist Society of Scotland has no collective view on the subject, but to have such a parliament is the objective of most opposition politicians in Scotland. This political preference is expressed by Labour, Liberal and (with reservations) Green support for the Scottish Constitutional Convention. Elements of the Kirk, the Scottish TUC and various other bodies also support the Convention and, even among the Tories, support for the status quo is by no means uniformly strong and unreserved.

Secularists have secularist work to do and political assessments that owe nothing to secular principles, even if well-informed and factually accurate, have, I think, no proper place in our magazines. ERIC STOCKTON, Editor, *The Scottish Humanist*, Sanday, Orkney

TIME FOR CHANGE

I read with interest Ted Goodman's article on Tony Benn's Commonwealth of Britain Bill (*The Freethinker*, August), but was dismayed by the terms of the final paragraph, which (so far as it concerns Scotland) contains blatant factual errors.

So far as support in Scotland for a Parliament is concerned, opinion polls regularly show between 70 per cent and 80 per cent support for either outright independence or an autonomous Parliament, the latter being Tony Benn's preferred option. All major political parties support either independence (the SNP and the Greens) or devolution (Labour, Liberal Democrat and Communists). The Scottish Trade Union Conference and the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland also favour devolution. The fact is that a major cross-section of Scottish society wants some form of change in the present constitutional arrangements: only the Conservative Party supports the status

quo.

Mr Goodman confuses support for a Scottish Parliament, which need not mean an independent Parliament.

Moreover, the SNP has, on average, an electoral support of some 20 per cent — hardly a "small minority".

GEORGE JAMIESON, Paisley, Renfrewshire

THE X FACTOR

Further to the Scottish letters published in the September issue of *The Freethinker*: if the majority of Scots want a Scottish Parliament, why does the Scottish Nationalist Party get so few votes?

TED GOODMAN, Redhill, Surrey

NONSENSE NOUNS

The down-to-earth exposé of the "Heaven" and "Hell" myths by Daniel O'Hara, David Yeulett and Margaret McIlroy (*Letters*, September) prompts me to stress that all words and alphabets were invented by evolving man (Egyptian picture writing was followed by Sumerian cuneiform and the Phoenician alphabet). But unfortunately in the past some charlatans or simpletons have fooled about with the language to make up abstract nouns which might properly be referred to as Nonsense Nouns.

The very framing of such questions as "Do you believe in Heaven and Hell?"; "Do you believe in Fairies?" etc., implies to the properly educated, that the nouns relate to something in concrete existence which can be believed "in" or conversely not be believed "in" (a noun being the name of a person, place or thing).

I would pose the following question: "Do you think the man-invented three-letter noun God relates to something in proved concrete existence (presumably with vocal chords) outside a person's brain, or only to be an abstract mental concept within the brain?"

ERNEST WAKEFIELD, Mansfield

RELIGIOUS BELIEF VERSUS SCIENTIFIC FACT

The Rt Rev Richard Harris, Bishop of Oxford, is by all accounts in the business of myth-making, not only by vilifying T. H. Huxley as a liar, but by trying to enlist the memory of Beverly Halstead on the side of his own "equivocal" belief in the Christian God (*Letters*, August). As the bishop knows, Dr Halstead's remit in their re-run of the famous Huxley-Wilberforce debate was precisely to disprove the contention, reiterated in his letter, that "there is no conflict between a scientific account of evolution and a belief in God".

Despite legions of "ordinands" with "doctorates", revealed religion has over the years retreated before the facts of science, particularly those of geology (which was Beverly Halstead's discipline).

The mishmash resulting from attempts to fit religious conceptions around the facts of science is what I castigated as "equivocal". Typically there is, on the one hand, an attempt to re-interpret biblical words or phrases to fit the new knowledge. Thus "a day" in Genesis can be expanded to fit any geological span of time and a universal deluge becomes a local Mesopotamian downpour.

On the other hand, "God" is inserted behind every natural law — Occam's Razor notwithstanding. Bishop Harris may eschew the classical "argument from design" of his Victorian forebears. For him the eye is not the product of divine design directly but, by a more circuitous route, is the working out of God's given laws (see my review of the debate, *The Freethinker*, December

1988).

If this is the best that the Bishop of Oxford can do to reconcile religion and science, then maybe he should follow his own advice and concern himself with the "real problems of religious belief without dragging science in".

MIKE HOWGATE, London N21

ANTI-ABORTION SPLIT

Your Editorial item, "From Church to Clinic" (September *Freethinker*), describes the organisation SPUC as a "Catholic-dominated pressure group", but its activists are in fact fundamentalist Protestants, who are almost as anti-Catholic as they are anti-abortion. The mainly breakaway Catholic anti-abortion pressure group is called LIFE.

BARBARA SMOKER, London SE6

Mouthpiece of the Devil

JANE MARSHALL

A good friend once told me I was the Devil speaking to her. Since my friend is no blind follower of superstition and her opinions have commanded my respect over the years, I asked if she was joking. She was not.

We were talking about certain passages in the Bible which some Christian theologians now regard as myths rather than the literal truth. She did not accept this view. My attempt to explain why I did accept it triggered her remark regarding the Devil. This bombshell not only interrupted our discussion, but killed it stone dead; she did not want to pursue the matter. Some time later I was speaking to another Christian, a lady with an open-minded, liberal outlook. I took the chance to mention my surprise at my friend's reluctance to discuss religious matters with me. She smiled and said, "I would never discuss my religious beliefs with anyone either." End of conversation.

These are not the only occasions when friends who willingly discuss other personal matters, have been unwilling to discuss religion. It is not as if I am out to mock them or to undermine their faith. I ask questions to find out why they hold their beliefs, and to discover if their answer will inform or illuminate my own agnosticism.

Maybe Christians today are generally more reticent about their faith because they are tired of being on the defensive in our secular society. Or perhaps they feel that easy answers are no longer sufficient for awkward questions in the present theological climate. Or is it simply that the non-reverential tone of unbelievers jars, or that our arguments are sometimes too plausible for comfort?

A preacher on radio recently said he admired the open, honest doubt of humble agnostics. My doubt may be open and honest, but perhaps I am not humble

enough. For since my doubt is a positive philosophy rather than a staging-post on some journey towards Christian belief, it may be seen as more challenging and therefore less acceptable.

Even so, I find it difficult to take on board my role as mouthpiece of the Devil. For however the Devil is defined, he is indisputably a very nasty piece of goods. I am bound to wonder why he has recruited me in particular. Are my habits especially debauched, my thoughts especially malignant, or my intentions especially evil? Surely this is not the image my friend has of me? Am I not owed some sort of explanation? Alternatively, maybe the sole qualification required of an agent of the Prince of Darkness is unbelief. As Paul says: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Babel? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?" (2 Corinthians, ch 6 v 14). Believers are righteous, unbelievers are unrighteous, and I suspect apostates like myself are quite beyond the pale.

But who exactly are believers and who are unbelievers? Who are the infidels and false prophets of today? Which of the different interpretations of scripture are the damnable heresies of the hour? Are all biblical demythologizers agents of the Devil? What of the Bishop of Durham? What of Don Cupitt?

No matter, I suppose I should be grateful that my friends do not take Paul's words too much to heart and shun my company altogether. For my part, I am now wary of discussing religion with them lest I am suspected of being full of subtlety and mischief. If the topic does arise spontaneously, and especially if I sense my words are striking a sympathetic cord, I immediately impose self-censorship? After all, who wants to be a mouthpiece of the Devil?

Caroline Mwicigi told a court in Nairobi that she gave an American missionary £10,750 to save mankind when he predicted that the world would end in 1990. He has refused to refund the money and she is seeking an injunction to prevent him from withdrawing it from a bank account.

A high court Judge has ruled that two Bangladeshi girls, one Muslim and the other Hindu, were victims of religious discrimination when they were refused admission at a Roman Catholic school in Tower Hamlets, east London.

Fr Augustin Rieder, a 78-year-old Benedictine monk of Pettinbeck, Austria, has confessed in a radio interview that he is the father of four children. Their ages range from 15 to 40.

Fatherly Abuse

COLIN McCALL

It was most divertingly evoked, I think, in Gabriel Chevallier's Thirties novel, *Clochemerle*. When the young new priest arrives at the presbytery, Sister asks him if he would like her to continue the role she performed for his predecessor. To relieve his celibacy.

Good for a laugh and socially innocuous, I suppose. Less so are some of the accounts of the sexual behaviour of Roman Catholic priests coming out of the United States which, in the words of *Time* (24 September 1990), "would rattle even the sturdiest confessional". The magazine goes on to itemise: seven priests charged in the mid-Eighties with sexually abusing young boys in Louisiana; the finding that Fr Bruce Ritter, founder of a "renowned shelter for runaways", had a "pattern of improper conduct with youths going back to 1970"; then the resignation of the Archbishop of Atlanta and some of his priests because they had been intimate with the same 27-year-old female parishioner.

And these are only the "sensational" cases that come to the notice of the press. On the basis of interviews carried out over the past 25 years with 1000 priests and 500 other men and women, A. W. Richard Sipe, former Benedictine monk, now a psychotherapist in Baltimore, estimates that 53,000 priests in America are breaking their vow of celibacy. Some 28 per cent have relationships with women (many of them enduring), 10-13 per cent have intimacy with adult men, and six per cent pursue adolescents or children, mostly boys.

The scale of paedophilia among the priesthood received further mention in *Time* (19 August 1991), when Richard N. Ostling referred to a federal lawsuit against Honolulu bishop Joseph A. Ferrario, accused of sex abuse. According to Ostling: "Dozens upon dozens of priests have been accused of sexually abusing teenage boys. Cases have erupted in most US states and two Canadian provinces since the 1985 conviction of Louisiana's Fr Gilbert Gauthé, who had molested 35 youths."

Church authorities are reported to have paid out \$300 million in US court settlements. And, says Notre Dame University philosophy professor Ralph McInerny, "we could be sued out of existence".

Ostling also lists three Canadian scandals: two separate ones in Newfoundland, where Edward English of the Christian Brothers received a jail sentence of 12 years, and one from Alfred, Ontario, involving 19 other Christian Brothers.

One attorney in the case against Bishop Ferrario is said to have become "a specialist in civil damage suits involving alleged sexual abuse and is pursuing more than 100 cases at present". Last December he won a case against Fr Thomas Adamson, whose offences

allegedly went back 22 years.

The church does its best to "cover up" the sexual offences of the priesthood. Two dioceses, for example, kept shuttling Fr Adamson into "new assignments". And there are half a dozen clinics where American priests can go for therapy. But Professor Eugene Kennedy of Loyola University, Chicago, told Ostling that the large number of priests suffering from sexual conflicts constituted "a pastoral problem of the first magnitude", which most bishops have refused to investigate seriously.

Clearly the root of the problem is celibacy, as New Mexico psychiatry professor, Jay R. Feierman, acknowledges — after treating 500 sexually abusive priests over 15 years. Priests, he suggests, should be required to live in religious communities "where there are personal warmth and mutual support". Not all is necessarily lovely in religious communal life, however, and it certainly isn't sufficient to stifle — or sublimate — sexual urges.

It never has been, as another American, Henry C. Lea, showed in his *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church*. Though writing in the last century (and revising in 1907) he stated that, in the United States, "troubles of the kind only occasionally come to public view". And not at all if the church can help it!

The latest condemnation of celibacy comes from a German Roman Catholic theologian, Fr Eugen Drewermann, in his 1989 best seller, *Kleriker*. The church, he says, must end its depersonalisation of the clergy, which makes them into "sick people on the verge of madness".

But let us end, as we began, on a lighter note, again from France, though this time not a novelist, but the medieval historian Georges Duby in *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, where he describes the difficulties the church encountered in instituting celibacy: "The battle was already raging in 1031 in northern France when the Council of Bourges excluded the sons of priests from religious orders, forbade young women to be given in marriage to priests or deacons or the sons of either, and barred anyone from marrying the daughter of a priest's or deacon's wife. Thirty years later the bishops meeting at Lisieux were still telling canons that they must dismiss their female companions; but they were so discouraged that they let country priests keep theirs."

Not so different from *Clochemerle*, it seems.

"Do not sample the water", pilgrims to the shrine at St Antonia, Spain, are advised. It has been declared unfit for human consumption.

Basic Church Teaching Rejected by the Young

EVENTS

The results of two major surveys are bad news for the Roman Catholic Church.

The European Values Group, an organisation of Catholic academics, has concluded that the church is losing its hold in Continental countries and is no longer able to dominate people's lives. Professor Jan Kerkhofs, a Jesuit at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, who helped to write the report, says that even in Catholic countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal, the church's influence will diminish further under the influence of the European Community.

Italy's weekly church attendance figure is down to 40 per cent. In Scandinavian countries less than one person in 20 is a regular attender. At 65 per cent, Ireland has the highest proportion of weekly church attenders.

Britain comes far down the religious commitment list. Less than 13 per cent attend church regularly. A minority (44 per cent) believe in life after death, the Resurrection (32 per cent) and hell (25 per cent).

The European Values Group carried out their first survey in 1981. Many of the trends that were becoming evident then have been confirmed over the last ten years.

A survey of young Roman Catholics carried out by the Catholic Women's League in seven English diocese has revealed that 87 per cent of them disagreed with the church's opposition to contraception within marriage. Seventy-two per cent said that church teaching on pre-marital sex is wrong. Only 25 per cent supported the church line on divorce and 42 per cent on euthanasia. Twenty-five per cent opposed the church's stance on abortion.

Children of CWL members all over the country were interviewed, so those taking part had at least one Catholic committed parent. But one in four did not believe in the Divinity or the Resurrection of Christ.

Addressing a conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, Dr Elizabeth Maxwell, international vice-president of the Council of Christians and Jews, said Christianity was being reduced to the status of nostalgia and folk heritage.

Fr Rino Fisichella, of Rome's Gregorian University, told the conference: "If you ask young people what Genesis is, they are more likely to reply a rock group than the first book of the Bible."

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. 40 Cowper Street, Hove (Near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49a). Sunday, 3 November, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. John Hart: Charter '88.

Chiltern Humanists. Public Library, High Street, Wendover. Tuesday, 15 October, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Nicolas Walter: Religious Education.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists. Waverly Day Centre, 65 Waverly Road, Kenilworth. Monday, 21 October, 7.30 pm for 7.45 pm. James Beckford: Religion and Modernity.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Thursday, 7 November, 7.30 pm for 7.45 pm.

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 Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road Romford. Tuesday, 5 November, 8 pm. James Hemming: Education for Humanity.

Humanist Holidays. Cambridge, Tuesday, 24 December until Saturday 28 December. Information from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242 239175.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 12 November, 7.30 pm. Brian Blackwell: The New Leeds RE Syllabus.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 31 October, 8 pm. Terry Little: Rights of Man — Thomas Paine 200 Years on.

London Student Skeptics. Please send stamped addressed envelope for autumn programme to Mike Howgate, 71 Hoppers Road, London N21 3LP. Meetings at University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 17 October, 7.30 pm. Andrew Jay: Human Sexuality.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 13 November, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Keith Gimson: Should Britain be a Democracy?

National Secular Society

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Saturday, 26 October, 2.15 pm
Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Members only. Current membership card to be presented.

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.

Setting Sunday Free: Shops Defy Trading Ban

The Government appears determined to end confusion over Sunday trading in England and Wales. It is now likely that a pledge to end uncertainty on the issue will be in the Conservative general election manifesto.

In a letter to a retail trade magazine, Prime Minister John Major said any proposals for reform should enjoy "widespread acceptance both in Parliament and in the country at large".

Mrs Angela Rumbold, the Home Office Minister, is planning to complete draft legislation after the party conferences. In the meantime, she is considering submissions and holding talks with interested parties.

On the two Sundays before last Christmas vast numbers of shoppers turned up at stores which opened in London and elsewhere. Although risking prosecution, the popularity of Sunday shopping persuaded retailers it was a risk worth taking.

Already there are strong indications that restrictions imposed by the Shops Act 1950 will be flouted on a massive scale this Christmas. Last month over 11,000 people went to the Meadowhall shopping complex between Sheffield and Rotherham when it opened on

Sunday for its first anniversary celebration. There was a carnival atmosphere with jazz band, games and entertainment for children.

Meadowhall may open on a number of Sundays leading up to Christmas. Managing director James Lindsay said: "Our decision is based on how well Sunday was received by the public and the fact that customers are likely to increase as Christmas approaches."

"I would not be surprised if more shops take up the opportunity to open on Sundays".

A building society in Bristol has announced that its new Financial Centre will open every Sunday. The Bristol and West Building Society is providing a wide range of facilities at the Whiteladies Road Centre. It is expected that families will take advantage of the opportunity to "shop around" between 9am and 1pm on Sundays.

Opposition to Sunday opening comes mainly from church groups. It is also opposed by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers which represents a minority of those employed in the retail industry.

Waiting for God

Each year up to 200 visitors to Israel get the "Jerusalem Syndrome", according to a new study by Israeli psychiatrists. The symptoms usually appear towards the end of their stay in the Holy City.

Dr Carlos Bar El, director of the Kfar Shaul psychiatric hospital, says: "For Christians, the Second Coming of Christ to establish the kingdom of God on earth, and for Jews, the arrival of the Messiah followed by reconstruction of the Temple, play a central role in the Jerusalem Syndrome."

Another psychiatrist, Dr Eli Vistum, says: "It's Jerusalem, the magnetic centre of three great monotheistic religions, that can make people mad. In Jerusalem, if people hear voices, it must be the voice of God."

Here in Britain, a group of Orthodox Jews in north London have been affected by the Stamford Hill Syndrome. Last month members of the Lubavitch sect made frantic preparations for the Messiah's appearance at the beginning of the Jewish New Year. Among other things, they distributed thousands of leaflets telling people how to recognise him.

Rabbi Gershon, leader of the sect, said things were very hectic in the community as "he" could arrive at any time. They have been waiting for 2,000 years for the Messiah to show up. They are still waiting.

Bishops's Confession

Samuel Douglas, the 56-year-old bishop at Hackney Pentecostal Church in east London, has been jailed for nine years for raping a 14-year-old schoolgirl.

An Old Bailey jury heard that Douglas confessed to a church elder, claiming that he mistakenly thought the girl was his wife who had crept into his bed. He took her to an abortion clinic when she became pregnant.

The girl, who is now 16, broke down in the witness box. She told the court that she remained silent about the assault because of threats by Douglas. He said she would be sent back to the West Indies and "it cost only £100 to have someone killed."

Judge Nina Lowry said the case had no mitigating features. She told Douglas that his victim "regarded you not only as a father but as a bishop of the church which her family attended."

"Instead of giving her care, you raped her. She had no experience in sexual matters until she fell into your hands."

As he left the dock Douglas called out to the church members in the public gallery: "Carry on the good work and praise the Lord."

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir has paid a 51st anniversary tribute to the terrorist Stern Gang which he led. Shamir said in a broadcast that he was proud of its record of bombings and assassinations.