

# The Freethinker

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## “BATTLE STATIONS” AS SHOPS DEFY LAW ON PRE-CHRISTMAS SUNDAY OPENING

“The law against Sunday trading is one of the last relics of the way the machinery of State was used to enforce the doctrine of the Church”, commented Nicolas Walter on the question of shops opening on Sunday during the pre-Christmas period.

The Managing Director of the Rationalist Press Association and a Vice-President of the National Secular Society said that over the last two centuries freethinkers have opposed sabbatarianism for a number of reasons.

“No one should do the same thing all the time, and everyone should have a change or a rest from time to time. It is a good thing to have a day or two off every week or so but it is a bad thing to have no choice in the matter.

“People who are observant Muslims, Jews or Christians should be able to have Friday, Saturday, or Sunday off work if they wish so that they can follow their particular beliefs. But people who have other religions, or none, shouldn’t have to conform with such beliefs.

“In our increasingly pluralist and secular society, it is time for shops to follow parks and gardens, trams and buses, museums and galleries, concert halls and cinemas, sports and leisure facilities, and to open or close on Sunday or any other day according to their wishes, without intervention of Church or State.”

The Lord’s Day Observance Society is urging sabbatarians to grass on traders who are sensibly ignoring Sunday trading restrictions during the run-up to Christmas. John Roberts, the LDOS general secretary, said they were “encouraging church people to report shops which were opening illegally in their areas”. If they did not wish to inform on shopkeepers, the Society would do it for them.

Mr Roberts said that the LDOS was “totally opposed” to Sunday opening. Sabbatarians have at one time or another been “totally opposed” to just about every

conceivable form of Sunday activity from cheese-making to funerals. The Lord’s Day Observance Society gallantly resisted enormities like Sunday opening of the British Museum, not to mention excursions to the Isle of Man. But in the current Sunday trading battle, the overwhelmingly Protestant defenders of “Our Lord and His Day” have been up-staged by ecumenical Keep Sunday Special Campaign.

The Rev John Kennedy, representing the Methodist Church’s Division of Social Responsibility, urged church members to “make as much fuss as possible” against Sunday trading and in support of “the traditional British Sunday”.

But Roger Boaden, the Christian director of the Shopping Hours Reform Council, said that of the estimated three million Sunday trading offences committed every year, only a few hundred come to court.

He added: “A few assiduous councils account for the majority of court cases. But most are sick to the teeth of this law.”

A number of opinion polls confirm strong public demand. One of the latest, conducted by MORI, shows that people in the north of England are most in favour of pre-Christmas Sunday opening. Seventy-nine per cent want stores to open. The national average is 74 per cent.

Home Secretary Kenneth Baker is caught in the crossfire between opposing forces. He sought the advice of Sir Patrick Mayhew, the Attorney General, on what the Government could do to appease retailers and the customers without actually breaching the Shops Act 1950. It has been suggested that he could take advantage of a provision in the Act which allows him to suspend restrictions during the Christmas season. But the length of the Christmas season, like that of a piece of string, is hard to define.



# THE FREETHINKER

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# NEWS

## THE GENERATION GAME

Anxious to hold public interest, yet divert attention from the embarrassing disputes between its traditionalist and modernist wings, the Church of England has been setting up working parties which produce reports of increasing fatuity and irrelevance. The latest, entitled *All our Children?*, was prepared for the General Synod of the Established church by a panel which included erstwhile outsiders from the Roman Catholic, Methodist and Baptist churches.

The working party was set up on the initiative of the Rev Gavin Reid, a member of the General Synod, who wrote in the *Church of England Newspaper*: "Since the 1960s, we have been raising generations of British people who haven't much clue as to the Bible, its stories and its pictures of our Lord and his Heavenly Father." So much for classroom religion. Furthermore, Mr Reid does not contradict those who argue that "the old Sunday School was inoculating children against Christianity".

So there is something to be said in favour of those wasted Sunday afternoons in musty church halls.

This latest call to action is directed at all the main Christian churches. Gone are the days when God was probably an Anglican, and C of E and Nonconformist flocks were confined to their respective folds. Get the children hooked on any religious fix.

Concern is expressed over the temptations with which children are confronted in modern society. These include products of a "highly commercialised toy industry". Computer and fantasy games are a "major evil influence". The report is scathing about books which feature "human sacrifices" and "agonised figures" — like a crucified saviour, for instance?

Of course there is no critical mention of Christianity's holy book with its accounts of atrocities and threats of eternal damnation that have terrorised generations of children. This continues to the present day in places like America's "Bible belt" and Northern Ireland where Christianity is still a "major evil influence". In Britain, fortunately, as Gavin Reid admits, "the vast majority of today's children are totally outside the work of any or all of the churches".

It is very likely that members of the working party were influenced by a realisation that the "national custom" of Sunday School attendance has died the death. The English Church Census of 1989 revealed that only 14 per cent of those under the age of 15 were



# AND NOTES

involved in church-related activity on Sunday. A similar survey in 1965 showed that 83 per cent of adults questioned had spent a large amount of their time in Sunday School when they were children.

With a marked decline of religious belief and observance by adults, the churches are anxious to extend their influence over children. The Rev David Gamble, a Methodist representative, said that "for the Church and Christians not to speak out to children about God's love is almost criminal". However, he warned against the "hard sell". So while a veneer of spurious social concern is applied to this report, at the end of the day its purpose is recruitment and indoctrination in the hope that today's children will be pew fodder of the future.

## A DILATORY DEITY

God plays a "heads I win, tails I win" game. He is praised and thanked when survivors of an earthquake are rescued, but not blamed for the deaths and injuries (or the earthquake). He fights on both sides in war, and is thereby assured of the victors' gratitude but not the losers' reproach.

Terry Waite's release after nearly five years of detention by Islamic Jihad is a case in point. Church bells rang out and thanksgiving services were held. The Archbishop of Canterbury declared: "The prayers of so many have been answered." The Church Army was moved to insert the following advertisement in the *Daily Telegraph*: "At last the prayers of all Church Army officers and supporters have been answered. Thanks to God's mercy we can now rejoice in the new-found freedom of our colleague, and share in the joy of his family."

Terry Waite was abducted and imprisoned by a group known as the Party of God (an ironic twist to the affair that seems to have gone unnoticed by the thanksgivers). This raises a number of questions. Why did God in his mercy wait for 1,763 days before coming to the aid of his servant? Does that mean God is on the side of the terrorist party named after himself?

It will be recalled that the God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims was invoked by all sides in the Gulf War a year ago. It should be noted that he was reinvoked by all sides in the Middle East Peace Conference a month ago. The *Independent* newspaper (1 November) published a report by Robert Fisk headed, "They all

agreed about God in Madrid yesterday. . . God, in fact, was about the only personality who received a clean bill of health from everyone." He was called in aid by President Bush and by the rulers of virtually every country and faction in the region, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. It is almost unnecessary to add that he didn't help the conference come to any useful conclusion. Could it be that he rather enjoys making so much trouble in his triple homeland?

## DECADE OF DIVISION

The appointment of Bishop Michael Marshall to lead an evangelical campaigning project known as Spearhead is seen as an attempt by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to breathe life into the Decade of Evangelism. But already misgivings have been expressed regarding the suitability of the former Bishop of Woolwich.

Bishop Marshall is on what could be described as the rock bottom wing of Anglicanism. He has considerable evangelising experience, including a spell in the United States. It is likely that he will embark on his new crusade with "evangelistic zeal" which he says is not conspicuous in the Church of England.

He believes that the Decade of Evangelism "will necessarily involve a decade of confrontation". In his book, *The Gospel Connection*, he writes: "The call to win Islam for Christ is on the agenda." And in a BBC Radio 4 interview Bishop Marshall declared: "Jesus did not say to us 'go and preach everywhere in the world except to the Jews, Muslims and Buddhists'".

Dr Zaki Badawi, principal of the Muslim College, London, is furious about Bishop Marshall's appointment. He said the bishop is on a course that will lead to confrontation between faiths. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, was quick to assure Muslim leaders that the church's aim is not to "convert, or worse, confront Muslims". They aimed to reach "lapsed Christians and those indifferent to any faith".

This is a rather limp statement by the head of a church which, in its Book of Common Prayer, implores divine guidance upon all Jews and Turks so that they "be made one fold under one shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord".

In a further attempt to placate the disciples of Allah, Dr Carey put the boot into author Salman Rushdie. He alleged *The Satanic Verses* "contained an outrageous slur on the Prophet. . . I well understand the devout Muslims' reaction, wounded by what they hold most dear what they would themselves die for." Dr Carey is seemingly on the side of the Islamic book-burners and would-be assassins. It will be interesting to see how his working relationship with Bishop Marshall develops. It should add sparkle to the lack-lustre Decade of Evangelism.

## “THOU SHALT NOT. . .”

Although Christians are no longer able to persecute and massacre their opponents (or each other over dogma and interpretation of holy writ), they still react with witch-hunting fervour to competitors in the superstition market-place. So a psychic fair in a suburban hall or an occult shop in some back street invariably attracts a picket of sappy born-againers who importune and impede the passers-by.

A holy dust-up is presently taking place in Luton where the proposed opening of an occult shop has caused the local dog-collared fraternity to get their cassocks in a twist. Heart-rending pleas to prevent the satanic den of iniquity opening have emanated from church and chapel. A letter-writing campaign, which appears to be orchestrated rather than spontaneous, has caused the *Luton News Gazette* to report “the biggest number of letters that we have received on one subject since the row in 1983 over plans to move Luton Town FC to Milton Keynes”. The occult shop-owner should be eternally — or perhaps infernally — grateful to the witch-hunters for an immense amount of free publicity.

Christian letter writers have expressed sentiments ranging from “sadness and anger” to “extremely alarmed”. *News Gazette* readers are informed by “a mother of four children” that “occultism is not fun”. She may be right — but how does she know? Those who have endured Christian services, whether plain boring or of the fire-end-brimstone variety, know that they are not exactly a barrel of laughs.

Another Christian lady deplures “the repeal of Acts which formerly made the practice of witchcraft and similar a criminal offence”. Under these Acts, and in obedience to a biblical injunction, hundreds were done to death.

The usual warnings that children are endangered by the forces of Satan are proclaimed by the Christian campaigners. They should not be allowed to forget it is often in a Christian environment that physical and sexual abuse of children occurs.

No doubt there are charlatans who exploit and fleece the gullible with their occult merchandise. But in this respect they are no worse than the hucksters of Christian superstition.

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A former Chief Rabbi of Israel has advised the faithful that monkeys may be trained to turn off lights, a job forbidden to Jews on the Sabbath. But Ovidia Josef, writing in the religious weekly, *Yom Hashishi*, warns observant Jews that their own animals should be allowed to rest on the Sabbath. They must borrow another (unorthodox) person's monkey (also unorthodox, presumably) to operate light switches.

## THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF Ms GRUNDY

When Goya's painting, *Naked Maja*, was exhibited at the National Gallery, London, for two months last year, it was seen by over 216,000 viewers. No complaints were received about the subject of the celebrated work, a nude lady, the Duchess of Alba, reclining on a couch. Nevertheless a reproduction of the painting has been removed from the music room of Penn State University, Pennsylvania, where it had hung for the last ten years. The reason? An unnamed woman on the staff complained that displaying the painting was “sexual harassment”.

Miss Bonnie Ortiz, the university Affirmation Action Office's gauleiter, said whether or not Goya's painting was a work of art was irrelevant. It was the image of an unclothed female. And that condemned it in the eyes of the “anti-sexist” thought police.

The president of the Student Government Association said: “What next? This is clearly ludicrous censorship. The problem is that it is a dangerous precedent.” How right he is. And accustomed as we are to hearing office frumps complain about “sexist” calendars and posters, it is nevertheless astonishing to encounter such prudery at a centre of learning.

## Freethinker Fund

It has never been easy to raise money for “the best of causes”, but *Freethinker* readers rally around every month with donation. The latest list of contributors to the Fund is given below.

D. T. Harris, N. Levenson, M. G. McIver, A. Marshall, R. W. Philpot and R. A. Wood, £1 each; T. J. Davies, N. Divall, J. Fawbert, G. Horner, B. Thorpe, S. Waite and W. S. Watson, £2.50; M. Crewe, £2.50 each; B. E. Clark, £3; T. Atkins, C. M. Bondi, J. P. Cleave, S. F. Cox, R. Delaurey, D. R. Leighton, E. J. Little, I. J. MacDonald, J. Mehta, T. A. Millar, A. Negus, C. G. Newton, M. P. T. Palmer, R. T. Savage, O. J. Scott, E. H. Seagroatt, D. Shaw, G. Taylor, F. Vale, V. Wilson and E. Winson, £5 each; E. Wakefield, £6; Anonymous, £9.50; Anonymous, W. D. Brettingham, M. J. Coward, P. Danning, J. Dobson, J. L. Greenalgh, D. Harper, K. Houghton, E. McCann, F. E. Seward, M. Schofield and W. Steinhardt, £10 each; A. Beeson, R. E. Davies and C. Kensit, £15 each; T. G. Millington, £100; Anonymous, £1000. Total for October: £1411

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.



# A Blot of Mustard

NEIL BLEWITT

It is recorded that the god of the Bible appeared in dreams to speak to many of its characters, including Jacob, Abram, Samuel, Daniel and Joseph to name but five. Recently, it seems, he chose this method to communicate with one of the Freethinker's contributors.

Sorry to break into your sleep, Neil, but I've always preferred to work this way and old habits die hard. I heard that you were writing an article on the Christmas story for *The Freethinker*. Now, far be it from me to want to stop you, but I would ask you that you don't blame me for what appears in the gospels.

It came about like this — or on this wise, to coin a phrase: the four men you know as evangelists got together and for some reason best known to themselves decided to write the life story of a chap who never actually existed, but to do it in such a way as to make it appear that he had. Their idea was for him to be a sort of preacher who did miracles on the side. Well, they wanted to portray him as my son and they asked if I objected. I thought it might enliven a millennium or two and perhaps give me a bit of publicity at the same time. As it happens, I was right, but that's not to say I approved of all they wrote. I didn't.

The truth is that these evangelists made what I believe you call nowadays a pig's ear of the whole business, though I'm only concerned with the Christmas story at the moment. I told them at the outset not to have a miraculous origin for their preacher, particularly a virgin birth because that had already been done to death — if you'll pardon the pun. The Egyptians had used it, the Greeks had used it, the Persians had used it; you name them — they'd used it. Two of the four — Mark and John — took my advice; the other two not only ignored it but seemed to forget that they were supposed to be presenting fiction as fact and wrote as if they wanted their readers to *know* that it was fiction.

First of all they devised genealogical tables — and I warned them they would run into trouble if they didn't exercise proper care; anyway, they said they would prove that their preacher was descended from David — as if that was something to boast about. Well, they did, but they forgot to agree on who was to beget whom in between. Not only that, but they each had a different number of generations and then, having opted for a virgin birth, instead of making the line of descent go from David to the boy through his mother, they traced it through her eventual husband. They couldn't have made it look more ridiculous if they'd tried.

Another point I made about the virgin birth was that it would look odd because Paul was already writing interminable letters to anybody who wanted to hear

from him — as well as to lots more who didn't — and nowhere had he mentioned it. But do you know what Matthew said? "Oh, he'll get around to it, and if he doesn't somebody's bound to slip it in at some time or other!" Anyway, later on, when they'd finished with Christmas, I had to point out (a) Matthew's angel appeared to Joseph and Luke's to Mary; (b) Matthew's baby was taken to Egypt and Luke's to Nazareth; (c) Matthew had wise men visiting the baby in a house, Luke had shepherds visiting him in a stable and (d) Matthew had Herod slaughtering children under two years of age then John the Baptist appearing large as life later on in the story — never mind that Luke had him as six months old when the massacre took place. Matthew's answer to all these objections was that people would be too stupid to notice but, even if they did, he and Luke couldn't then be accused of collusion. I didn't pursue that one any farther but, between you and me, if the name Charles had been around then, I would have seen to it that the first gospel was differently ascribed.

I don't want to go on about Matthew, but I had words with him on angels continually appearing in dreams to help his characters out of awkward situations. It didn't make any difference; he wouldn't alter a word. But I ask you: five dreams in twenty-eight verses! He was just as obstinate about keeping in all the old prophecies he'd raked up to fit in with his story. Take an example: the one from Isaiah about a virgin conceiving and bearing a son and calling him Immanuel. Well, only two verses before he quoted that, he'd written that the baby had been called Jesus. In any case, if he'd read the next chapter in Isaiah, he'd have found that the prophecy was fulfilled there. I told him somebody was bound to spot it one day — and, sure enough, somebody did. And it wasn't a bishop as you might have expected. It was Thomas Paine of all people! Mind you, I had a soft spot for him. Deist, you know. My sort of chap.

But it wasn't just Matthew. Luke was fond of the magic too. He would keep on about a holy ghost. He had it getting into everybody — Elisabeth, Mary, Zacharias and Simeon — but he didn't explain what a holy ghost was. I don't think he knew — and I'm damned if I do, although I shouldn't use that expression. It caught on though, and within a few years everybody was using it. But the most ridiculous thing of all was, after everything he'd written about his ghost, the angels, the virgin birth and all the rest of it, he had Mary and Joseph marvelling at what people said about their son. Really! He made them look as if they didn't know how many Articles made Five!

Matthew and Luke should have done what Mark did — ignore the birth story altogether; or take John's line

and use something obscure like his Logos idea. Theologians are still arguing about that one. Nobody really understands it and it's been put into the Christmas service as a seasonal abracadabra. But even John put his foot in it in the Logos chapter. He said that nobody had seen me at any time, but if he'd read Exodus he'd have found that scores of people had seen me. That's the trouble with Christians — they don't know their own Bible.

But the chap I take my biretta off to — or I would if I had one — is Athanasius. He was even better than John at writing nonsense and making it sound significant. And that's saying something when you consider The Revelation. Take Athanasius' creed. Caused any amount of slaughter in its day. Got to be quite like old times for me! The best of it was that nobody knew what the hell it meant — I shouldn't say that — let alone what they were fighting for. I love the verses where he says the father, the son and the holy ghost are all incomprehensible, yet there aren't three incomprehensibles but only one! Well — with that sort of stuff, who needs more than one incomprehensible, I say!

I can't stay any longer, Neil, but I hope I've made my point. If you do write that article, please make sure I don't get the blame for the Christmas story, there's a good fellow. It really was nothing to do with me.

By the way, it's just occurred to me — and I find it rather droll — you can't tell your freethinking friends about my visit tonight because you don't believe in my existence! Mind you — and don't quote me on this — intellectually I don't believe in it either. I've tried terribly hard down the centuries but I can't make out a reasonable case for it.

Perhaps I'm like Marley's ghost: an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese or a fragment of underdone potato. I expect you're surprised I know *A Christmas Carol* but it happens to be a favourite of mine. It's certainly preferable to any of those in the Oxford book. Can't approve of his name, of course, but Dickens was a first-class writer; except for *his* attempt to write a gospel. Turned out worse than anything Matthew or Luke ever wrote.

Oh — one final thing. If I get to hear you're writing a piece on the Easter story for *The Freethinker*, I'll need to have another word with you. That's even more of a pig's ear than the Christmas effort. And, believe me or believe me not, I had nothing to do with that either.

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**“We have a wonderful time to offer”, promises an advertisement for Christmas at a Blackpool hotel. Attractions listed include “Breakfast with Father Christmas. . . Fancy dress competition. . . Free 'n' Easy Night. . . Midnight Mass”.**

## The Great Trek Continues

BRIAN DONAGHEY

Gene Roddenberry, the man behind *Star Trek*, has now himself been beamed up — or if not up, at least somewhere — for he died on 24 October, aged 70. He had been associated with the series since its inception in 1966. *Trek*, a South African word of Dutch origin, has some unfortunate historical connotations of colonisation, and displacement of native peoples in the process, but in the sense of an exploration over vast distances into the unknown it provided a punchy title for the Starship *Enterprise's* interstellar voyages, where colonisation and displacement were not the primary motives. Rather, the emphasis was upon understanding, relating to, and coming to terms with the myriad forms of sentient existence which the universe surely has the potential, or at least the possibility, of presenting us with.

In a country where the “moral majority” was officially Christian, insisting that this be reflected in some aspects of the media; where televangelism was big business and religion was an important issue; where teaching about the scientific findings concerning processes of evolution was prohibited in some States because it contradicted the biblical account of Creation — in such a country it may seem surprising that this series found a home and a dedicated audience. It did so despite the misgivings of the NBC, who decided to cancel it after three seasons because of unsatisfactory ratings. However, massive protests from all over the world (though not so much in the United States itself) persuaded them to continue it.

The subtext, and often the explicit message, of *Star Trek* was of human values and the significance of a system of ethical action, operable with respect towards all forms of life, independently of any sanctions or external rewards or punishments proposed by an organised religion. It provided a safety valve from the pressures of enclosed dogmatic systems, mutually intolerant of one another. It opened up a vision of alternative ways of thought that could be explored beyond the confines of an official ideology.

Science fiction was a convenient medium because viewers had long experience of it. Roddenberry used it as a stalking horse so as to snipe away at rarely spoken and rarely questioned norms of racial, sexual and political prejudice. In effect, it was a modern revival of allegory, far removed from the fatuous fantasies of contemporary series like *Lost in Space*, and more akin to the thought-provoking film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Although in the spin-off films it engendered Roddenberry was forced to compromise his integrity for commercial reasons, the new series promises to address the same issues, and its comparatively cerebral demands are no barrier to its



popularity. It has racial and sexual — perhaps one should say, galactic — equality, and the situations are often posed in terms of moral dilemmas leading to objective search into motives. It seeks to avoid conflict where possible, in favour of peaceful resolution by negotiation without removing the self-respect of the parties, without recourse to expediency, and without the use of repression. Forces ostensibly violent and malevolent are not opposed with brutish destruction before seeking to understand them; often they are shown to be themselves victims of circumstance, from which some action can be taken to release them. It exemplifies the desire to harness an awesome technology towards benevolent ends, and to use it responsibly and with restraint.

Right from the start the principle of the “prime directive” was used to express the need to preserve the harmony and balance of the universal forces of nature. In a sense, this was a statement of an all-embracing ecology, before the concept, as applied to our own petty planet, became fashionable. But it went beyond that, for here too moral dilemmas were posed: there was a duty to refrain from interference that could lead to unforeseen consequences, allowing things to evolve in their own way, even when a situation seemed to be undesirable by our limited criteria. Sometimes the task was to prevent such interference by others; sometimes interference inadvertently occurred through misunderstanding, in which case the crew sought to nullify the effects or limit the damage.

The characters were not superior, but sentient, mortal beings (this includes the non-humans) with their individual quirks and quiddities, so that we could identify with them. There were interpersonal difficulties and special affections, but all subsumed into the corporate enterprise and held together by subscription to a common code of behaviour. This concession to mortal limitations was a strength, not a weakness — it was deliberately enhanced by the use of one member of the crew as a contrast character, the one who worked by relentless logic and eschewed any sense of personal vulnerability (e.g. emotion), and who often viewed others’ disclosure of their innermost selves with incomprehension. In the first series this was encapsulated in Mr Spock; in the new series, perhaps more appropriately, it is the android Mr Data, of human appearance externally, who takes on this role. Like any machine, he has admirable qualities and is an indispensable tool, but these qualities are presented as ultimately imperfect alongside fallible living beings.

The insistence on toleration, the recognition of difference without prejudice, and the other qualities of *Star Trek* already enumerated, are markers of a humanist position. Roddenberry was committed to this position: he became a leading member of the American Humanist

Association and was recently presented with the Humanist Arts Award. Through his work he advanced these ideas and strove to preserve his integrity as much as is possible in a commercial context where he sometimes had to temporise.

Of course we must not be swayed by nostalgia into viewing the series through spectacles tinged with rose. Some of what Roddenberry did was certainly not new — analogues of some ideas, themes and characters can be found in earlier, medieval and classical literature and philosophy. There was, inevitably, some concession to hoary old stereotypes. Pretty, female victims turn up in all sorts of places; the men were often presented as sex-object hunks of beef; and there was Scotty, a terrible carry over from all those old war films where the Scottish engineer could keep the ship going when all seemed hopeless. Despite these defects, we must pay tribute to Roddenberry’s vision in creating and sustaining a fable for our times, with immense power to reach out to multitudes and get them thinking about the human condition. Ironically, by using the right packaging he was able to achieve this by employing a medium that, more than any other, is generally subject to crude commercialism. Let us hope his influence will remain to aid them to boldly go forward in the same spirit.

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The Campfield Press, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Salvation Army, has closed. Nearly a hundred workers, some with over thirty years’ service, have been laid off. They were dismissed with “God’s blessing”. The firm made an operating profit of £200,000 in the last financial year. Chris Harding, national officer of the Graphical, Paper and Media Union, was surprised and angry “at the secretive and antagonistic manner and style in which the Salvation Army sacked almost a hundred loyal employees. This is an organisation purporting to be primarily interested in caring for people, while clearly demonstrating this not their philosophy or attitude towards their own employees.”

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The headmaster of a Birmingham school has been forced to remove “P for Pig” from an alphabet chart and replace it with “P for Panda”. A large proportion of the pupils come from Muslim homes. Devout Muslims tell their children that the word “pig” is filthy. It they utter it, their tongues and mouths will be unclean for forty days.

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Sunday is the most popular day for visits to attractions such as museums, according to a survey carried out for the Employment Department, English Tourist Board and British Tourist Authority.



# Blaming the Victim: Spirituality of the New Age

JANET McCRICKARD

The term "New Age" refers to the belief that we are now living in (or on the threshold of) the new astrological age of Aquarius, characterised by a this-worldly spirituality of love and cooperation between humans, as opposed to religious philosophies of hierarchy and dominance which are passing away.

If we simply take the New Agers' own definition at face value, it might look as if it is a form of humanism — but is not humanism based on this-world values of human cooperation and mutual respect? It is true that, at its inception in the "hippy era", it might have been possible to describe the New Age movement as a "humanistic religion". However, during my twelve years in one of the world's principal New Age centres, at Glastonbury, in Somerset, I had the opportunity to observe the evolution of New Age ideas into something quite different — in fact into something which could accurately be called "anti-humanism".

A great deal of the spiritual directing in the United Kingdom is done by individuals and groups in the United States, chiefly California, via the medium of book and tape imports, and the hundreds of workshops given by visiting spiritual teachers. Almost nothing of the New Age movement is homegrown, in the terms of the belief-system itself. Over the last decade one particular imported doctrine has become extremely fashionable. This is the idea that each individual is responsible for "creating their own reality", in other words, a hundred per cent of everything that happens to you is actually *caused* directly and personally by you, including bad weather, late trains and the price of double glazing.

Thus an evangelising New Ager will assert you have hay fever only because you are "choosing" to be ill. Louis Hay, the American New Age writer, actually gives a list of illnesses which you can consult to find out why you've chosen a particular ailment. Blindness, for example, is caused by individuals "choosing" not to see what is going on around them. This does not refer to hysterical blindness, but to all blindness, including having one's optic nerve severed in a car accident. It is wasting one's time to point out that certain complaints are congenital. A New Ager will tell you that a spastic person "chose" the affliction before birth, in their disembodied pre-incarnational state, or that they brought it upon themselves through karma.

The "choosing" dogma extends into all areas of life and is used to explain every misfortune; the sufferer has indulged in negative thinking and has thus "drawn it to themselves", another phrase regularly used by New-

Agers. One New Age cult, which has a UK outpost in Glastonbury, declares that death itself is not natural, but the result of negative attitudes. Its members refuse to engage in rational discussion about death with non-members. To think about, acknowledge or discuss the possibility that death is a natural biological event is to contaminate one's mind with "death-consciousness", and so put oneself at risk.

Denying the reality of illness and death, identifying them as spiritual complaints having no factual basis in the material world, has important effects on the way New Agers treat other people. A elderly friend who became ill at a New Age event was refused a lift back home (a few miles away) because, as the leader told her, "you have created this illness and this situation for yourself. Now let's see you get out of it." New Agers will often refuse help in this way, on the grounds that, for example, to get some shopping in for someone who has 'flu is "encouraging them to be a victim".

It is not only a patronising "it's in your own best interests" attitude that makes New Agers shun the ill or disadvantaged; it is also the belief that such wilful unfortunates emit an actual contaminating force, "negative vibrations", which can detrimentally affect the health or bank balance of any New Ager foolish enough to stand within range. This appears to be a radius of approximately four yards, to judge from the behaviour of some New Agers who moved their position in a restaurant in order to avoid a woman friend of mine. She didn't have bubonic plague; she had merely "chosen" to be mugged a few days earlier. The New Agers lectured her from a safe distance. "You must have been giving out negative vibrations", they pontificated. "If you have been beaming out light and love he wouldn't have attacked you."

The contradiction between the belief that all misfortune is wholly caused by the individual, and the belief that unfortunate people are magically dangerous, never seems to occur to New Agers. They also claim to have transcended all political questions, divisions and polarities, and to be working on a higher spiritual plane. Yet they contradict themselves by adopting what are clearly extreme Right-wing positions — belief that the poor have only themselves to blame, and thinly veiled hostility to welfare. New Age therapists who are getting rich quick by charging exorbitant fees (sometimes as much as £60 a session in the case of "rebirthing", for example) have recently been rejoicing at the decline in the National Health Service. Some "healers" actually want the NHS to disappear altogether so that sick



people will be "forced to take responsibility for themselves" and resort to alternative therapies. (Many such therapies are nothing more than devices for forcing desperate people to swallow absurd New Age propaganda. The parallels with the recruiting techniques of born-again Christianity are obvious.)

The belief that individuals are solely responsible for actually *creating* everything in their lives, means that New Agers reject any political analysis which identifies oppressors. It is hardly surprising to find that the blame for Hitler's mass murder of the Jews is laid by New Agers not on Hitler but on the Jews themselves. Likewise responsibility for the brutal devastation of tribal societies by the white man in fact belongs to the native Americans and Australians themselves. And I need not say why New Agers think Africans starve to death, women get raped or children fall victim to sexual murderers.

The New Age answer to every instance of human

suffering or wickedness is to place the blame on the victim, thus siding with the oppressor, the exploiter and the status quo. It is an ideal device for bypassing conscience, and for justifying an unflinching attitude of callousness, hostility and indifference to people enduring misery, sickness or injustice. The New Age dogmatist rarely fails to put the principle into action in his personal life, feeling free to treat others badly and then, when they object or feel pain, telling them that they are solely responsible for creating the situation and are "choosing to be hurt". It is quite clear that the New Age pseudo-philosophy is the diametric opposite of humanism.

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## A Most Conservative MP

DENIS COBELL

Sir Cyril Black, who has died at the age of 89, was Conservative MP for Wimbledon from 1950 until 1970. During that time he rivalled his 19th-century fellow-Tory, Colonel Sibthorpe, who represented Lincoln from 1826 until 1855. He was called "the most Conservative Member of Parliament ever known". He set standards for extreme reaction and nationalism, and was in opposition to every change, innovation, or reform. Sir Cyril Black has joined Colonel Sibthorpe in the graveyard of lost causes.

Freethinkers will be familiar with Sir Cyril's attacks. I lost a libel case he brought against me when I dubbed him an opponent of "any humane or social progress". No doubt the editor of this journal was pleased that my criticism of Sir Cyril did not appear in these pages; for however "justified" a libel may appear, legal demonstration is often hard to establish.

The list of Sir Cyril Black's appointments illustrates his interests and views. He was at various times treasurer of the Billy Graham Crusade, president of the Baptist Union, chairman of the Band of Hope, member of the Public Morality Council, Free Church Federal Council, Houses of Parliament Christian Fellowship, Houses of Parliament Temperance Group and, for over forty years, chairman of the Temperance Building Society. In 1971, as president of the Eric Hutchings Hour of Revival Evangelistic Association, he declared that its theme was "to renew faith and restore Christian morality in our lives in this age of permissiveness, devil worship and religious apathy". He had previously said that permissiveness had crept up and struck "while Christianity was in bed asleep. . . the humanists and rationalists had done it through Parliament in a giant confidence trick." Thus he marked us out as the enemy,

despite democratically achieving our aims.

Sir Cyril Black's campaigns included opposition to all the 1960s law reforms on abortion, divorce and homosexuality. He was a sabbatarian in opposition to John Parker, MP, who wrote in *The Freethinker* in support of liberalising the Sunday Observance laws. He opposed a suggestion to limit the use of cars on Sundays as this might reduce churchgoing. He brought a private prosecution against Hubert Selby's novel, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. A non-smoker, he nevertheless believed "smoking was a lesser matter than fornication", a reference to sexual intercourse between young people who intended to marry.

Politically reactionary, he once said "we've lost our Empire, our wealth and world influence". He regarded the religious conflicts in Northern Ireland with equanimity: "The operations of the IRA have proved less devastating than the go-slows, work-to-rules and strikes fomented by trade unions in Britain."

*The Times* obituary stated that he was opposed to immigration but won a libel action he brought against the *Socialist Leader* which called him racist in 1968. Two years later he resigned his seat in the House of Commons to pursue business interests in the then apartheid-bound South Africa.

My file on Sir Cyril Black, as a man who was in his day synonymous with literary censorship and the "protection" of public morality, closes almost poignantly — almost.

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A recent issue of the Norwich Diocesan News carried the following prayer instruction: "Eyes together, hands closed."

**JESUS DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE**, by Skipp Porteous. Prometheus Books, £15.50

"At the age of eleven," writes this American author, "I invited Jesus to live in my heart. . . Now, without a shred of guilt or fear, I can say, 'Jesus doesn't live here anymore'."

For almost half of his life (he is 47) he was an enthusiastic fundamentalist, ten of those years being spent in ministry of a Pentecostal type. He describes himself today as a secular humanist, but not an atheist.

Essentially autobiographical, his book is fascinatingly informative about the extreme Christian right and the sectarian scene in the United States. It is laced with sometimes earthy humour. One or two passages are not for the prim.

He writes in an easy, conversational style. Pedants might squirm at his frequent split infinitives and such colloquialisms as "he blew it", "I kind of doubted", but most readers are likely to warm to his humanity, his plain love of sincerity, abhorrence of hypocrisy and, perhaps above all, his unabashed candour about himself.

His purpose is much more than to tell his personal story. He is convinced that the bigotry endemic among members of the "born again" fraternity constitutes a serious political and social threat. If vigilance is not exercised and acted upon, freedoms now taken for granted could be quietly filched away.

There is a California-based organization called Coalition on Revival whose "members sign a pledge in which they vow to work toward Christianizing America, and ultimately the world. Their covenant with God, and with one another, binds them 'to live in obedience to the Bible until they die'."

It may be thought that Skipp Porteous has drawn an exaggerated picture, giving the near future an almost Orwellian appearance — "a grim, frightening outlook" he calls it. After all, it can be pointed out, solemn pledges made during childhood or when under emotional stress are often quite sensibly broken in later years or when experience widens one's perspective. (Christians conveniently overlook Jesus's injunction, as given in the Bible they profess to obey, to "swear not at all".)

The point being made, however, is that, if fanatics are tolerantly ignored while they organize the support they need in order to obtain positions of influence and political power, we may wake up to the danger too late. "They've taken the emphasis off national politics and they're focusing on the states, counties and cities." Once elected — by God's will, as they would put it — and ruled by archaic, punitive, Biblical (largely Old Testament) ideas of "justice", they would lose no time

in implementing these if they could.

"Divine" commandments and what they regard as contemporary applications of these, which they would seek to impose, make a shocking list. They include, according to their own recorded statements, the corporal punishment of recalcitrant children, strict censorship, suppression of anything deemed pernicious, blasphemous or pornographic, an end to sex education in State schools, a ban on abortion, even the death penalty for homosexuals "caught in the act". The scenario is undoubtedly sinister.

Skipp Porteous resolutely devotes his energies to doing what he can to remedy the situation, on the grounds that "an informed public is a responsible public". Having had considerable experience as a radio evangelist, he continues to broadcast, sometimes along with opponents, on radio and television networks. He is President and National Director of the Institute for First Amendment Studies, Inc. "The Constitution's First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press." He presumably founded this Institute, although I found no admission of that. He also publishes *The Freedom Writer* (a national newsletter defending the Constitutional separation of Church and State) and *Walk Away*, a support newsletter for ex-fundamentalists.

He is no longer a "Christian soldier". Nevertheless, while he confesses that "it's my nature to avoid confrontation", boxing champion and undercover narcotics policeman though he has been, among other things — he is certainly fighting a good fight.

CHARLES WARD

**THE SEX CODE: MORALS FOR MODERNS**, by Francis Bennion. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, £18.95

I'm deeply suspicious of the credentials of anyone who seizes on a neat catchphrase and then flogs it to death. Banging on about "Running Dog Imperial Capitalists" or "Male Chauvinist Pigs" displays a rigidity of mind as well as a poverty of description. So what can you say about a book that has some excellent ideas but keeps harping on about "sex negators" and "sex negativism"?

*The Sex Code* is on the whole provocative and thoughtful and worth reading. I've always found it insulting that "Christian" has been taken widely as a synonym for "ethical". Not because Christians *can't* be ethical — some of them are. And much of the Christian code, such as don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't lie or cheat, is admirable. But so often there is the



# REVIEWS

implication that ethics is the sole possession of those belonging to the Christian faith and that cultures or individuals outside it are devoid of civilised rules of contact. As Francis Bennion shows, however, a Christian code of ethics, especially when applied to sexuality, in fact degrades and trivialises the very areas of life it seeks to elevate and protect.

His book offers an antidote in a set of moral principles that derive from reason and concern rather than religion. It is a sex code for adults rather than children, where people seek to do the right thing, not because Big Daddy In The Sky will punish them if they stray, but because it is the decent way to behave. His code seeks to offer flexible principles rather than dogmatic moral certainty. It also offers a life-affirming view of sexuality rather than a rigid list of "Thou shalt nots".

His twenty chapters examine Ethics and Sex, Sex Acceptance, Fulfilment, Relationships, Propagation, Prostitution, Homosexuality and Pornography and end with 60 moral precepts that form the modern sex code. These range from "The duty of self respect; since sexuality is the source of all human life and is of profound concern to all human beings we should. . . therefore not commit any act that degrades or trivialises them", to sex education, "it is the duty of the persons rearing a child to ensure that it undergoes whatever sex education may be necessary to enable it progressively to learn the facts about human sexuality and eventually to carry out the duties of ethical understanding and ethical action."

So why can't this reviewer be wholeheartedly in favour of this book? Firstly, because the author is in danger of replacing sex-negativism with an equally unsympathetic sex-positivism. Guilt, misery and confusion arise from telling people they *shouldn't* have sex except under strictly controlled circumstances. But it is equally unreasonable, unrealistic and unsound to tell them they *should* have sex. Bennion states that "enduring celibacy and chastity are undesirable in the way that any other failure to fulfil one's human potential is undesirable", and I would disagree.

Similarly, I find his views on incest and child/adult sex decidedly suspect and very worrying. His permissive views on these areas taint for me an otherwise interesting book. He claims that incest is morally neutral and implies the same about child/adult sex — as long as there is no risk of producing genetically defective offspring, disrupting relationships within the family unit or exploiting a younger person. The problem is that exploitation can be so hard to assess at the time. A young person may seem to welcome the attention of their father, uncle or friend and no one else may appear

to object. Many adults fool themselves with the claim that "She/he wanted it, she/he encouraged and no one was hurt." Yet inappropriate sexual activity can have far-reaching and devastating effects. The problem is that when a relative or an older person initiates sex or responds to the sexual approaches of a younger person, it can *never* be a neutral situation. Hidden motives and hidden networks of power are always present.

While many will welcome his views and wish we as a society could follow many of his suggestions, respecting our sexual natures more and repudiating the view that sex is sinful, I wonder how many will share my feeling that the code in its entirety has as many flaws as the one it seeks to replace.

SUZIE HAYMAN

## TELEVISION

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VOLVO CITY, Channel 4

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We have read much of late in these pages of the anti-social attitudes of religious sects, but never before have the facts been so vividly and depressingly brought home to us as in this Channel 4 programme on the Hasidic Jews of Stamford Hill, London. The strange characters have sought to "take over" more than one suburb, imposing on the host community their archaic behaviour.

Admittedly these Hasidic sects show no desire to conform, or live together with, rather than be separated from their neighbours — such are the rights of people in a free society — but to oppress and be oppressive is a two-way ticket. And there is more than one form of persecution in a civilised society.

What the television documentary plainly showed was this sect's adamant refusal to lose its identity, its refusal to assimilate, or turn ghetto-like behaviourism into some kind of ethical or social religion. They adamantly refuse to renounce certain primeval traditions that have been strangling them for centuries.

The Hasidics who bargain second-hand cars (Volvo was the favourite brand name) and their females who decided which special wigs they must for ever after wear if they become married women, fitted into no free community except the most rigid of enclosed enclaves. These cannot be "chosen" people (unless all the men are chosen over women and must necessarily be misogynists in the sight of the "Almighty") and the sooner they become resigned to that fact the sooner might they be accepted as desirable friends and neighbours.

Einstein, Freud, Spinoza and the rest were citizens of the world. (Was it not Einstein who was one of the first

to warn the Zionists and other extreme groups about their over-zealous fervour in Palestine over 40 years ago?) Would it be too much to trust that their modern equivalents might in time become the more ordinary denizens of Stamford Hill?

Fundamentalists are ever a danger in our midst, but some escape detection by the "civvy" clothes they wear whilst not on parade or on duty. Not so the Hasidic sect.

The great H. G. Wells wrote that the future of the Jews is like that of the Irish, Scottish, Welsh, English,

Germans and Russians, and that is common humanity in one large and varied world order, or death. And a Jewish-born editor of this paper, the late Chapman Cohen, enjoined all *civilised* folk to become citizens of the world. Of a world of the free spirit, these Hasidic characters, in appearance and gesture straight out of a Grand Guignol farce, know little.

*Volvo City* was a depressing type of documentary, but then it depicted a retrograde form of life.

PETER COTES

## OBITUARY

### CARL LOFMARK

Carl Lofmark, who died on 31 October at the age of 55, was best known to freethinkers as the author of two very recent books on God and the Bible, but he had been involved in the freethought movement since he attended university, and he had been an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association since 1986.

By profession he was an academic, with a high reputation as both researcher and teacher. He specialised in German literature, and was professor of German at St David's College, Lampeter, from 1974 until his death. He also taught Swedish (his father came from Sweden), and in 1987 he produced a translation of some of the *Short Stories* by the freethinking writer Hjalmar Söderberg. After settling in Wales he developed an interest in the native language and literature, and in 1989 he produced a translation of some old Welsh poems about *Bards and Heroes*.

He began writing a critique of religion and other kinds of nonsense as a result of answering his own children's questions, and then decided to turn his manuscript into a series of books. Two of these were published in 1990 by the RPA as *Does God Exist?* and *What is the Bible?* and they have proved very popular.

He did much of the latter work under the burden of increasing illness, and showed the strength of his convictions through the courage and humour with which he fought his long struggle with cancer and the treatment for it.

A very well-attended secular ceremony was held at St David's College, the principal speaker being his personal friend, Professor G. A. Wells.

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Church leaders in Teddington, Middlesex, are annoyed because a local firm has invited pupils at a girls' school to design a non-religious Christmas card. A spokesman for Thorn Security Ltd explained that the card was intended for their foreign clients. The "non-religious" theme was necessary because not all clients regarded Christmas as a religious event.

## Deliver us from Evil

COLIN McCALL

Judith Williamson, writing in the *Guardian* (10 October 1991), drew attention to a disturbing theological throwback, the concept of evil, which is creeping back into use, especially by politicians. Saddam Hussein, of course, epitomised "evil" in the eyes of the West, but Judith Williamson points out that he, in turn, contributed to the unwelcome revival by declaring that Iraq was "a small nation facing evil and the forces of devastation". The *Guardian* writer also cited an absurd remark by the Home Secretary, Kenneth Baker, during the pit-bull terrier scare. "Many are good dogs", he said, "but there are some evil dogs, and these must be put down." Ms Williamson was so amazed that she noted the words, there and then, during *World at One* on 22 May.

It was almost exactly three years earlier (21 May 1988) that the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who was brought up a Methodist, addressed the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh, "speaking personally as a Christian, as well as a politician, about the way I see things". (The full text appears in Jonathan Raban's *God, Man & Mrs Thatcher*, *CounterBlasts* no 1, Chatto & Windus.)

"Most Christians", Mrs Thatcher told her Edinburgh audience, "would regard it as their personal Christian duty to help their fellow men and women. They would regard the lives of children [as] a precious trust". But, she somewhat grudgingly allowed, "there are a number of people who are not Christians who would also accept these responsibilities".

She therefore identified "three beliefs in particular" which were "distinctive marks of Christianity". And the first was, "that from the beginning man has been endowed with the fundamental right to choose between good and evil".

In which connection it is worth noting that Mrs Thatcher claims an Old Testament story as "distinctive" to Christianity. Indeed, her second "belief" falls into the



same category, "that we were made in God's own image". It is only the third belief — in the self-sacrifice of Christ — that is distinctively Christian.

Whether God gave dogs the same right of choice between good and evil is a question Mr Baker can settle with his former leader. Neither of them, I trust, would argue from dogs to humans and that the "evil" ones must be put down.

Clearly, though, the Home Secretary has a particular penchant for the sinister-sounding word. He used it again, almost as absurdly, when he told the House of Commons recently that "the evil of squatting" was indefensible and should be made a criminal offence, though not, so far as we know, carrying the death penalty.

It must be said that when Mrs Thatcher addressed the Church of Scotland Assembly, she adopted an uncharacteristic attitude of humility. She was, she said, "greatly honoured" and "deeply grateful".

No such deference towards the cloth was detectable after this year's riots when, ironically, the "evil" epithet was used by Government spokesmen in opposition to the man who ought to know more about it than they do, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who sensibly seaches for social causes for social unrest, rather than attributing it to evil people. Indeed, for some time now, Lambeth Palace has seemed rather more "radical" than Downing Street, though that word was appropriated by the late incumbent and her followers.

There was, too, a time when Mrs Thatcher spoke most belliciously about the "evil empire" of Communism, and hardly less so of Arthur Scargill and the National Union of Mineworkers. Never, though, do we hear references to the "evil" police, even if they are throwing their truncheons about or falsifying evidence to send innocent people to jail. "The police have a hard job to do" is the most we can expect in these circumstances.

In fact, "evil" like "sin" need have no place in the freethinker's vocabulary: it is, as I said at the start, a theological concept for which he or she has no use. And the problem of evil exists only for the theist, against whom we substitute the term suffering. Why is there suffering in the world if there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving Creator?

A lion killing its prey causes suffering, but the lion cannot in any meaningful sense be called "evil", any more than Mr Baker's pit-bull terrier. Carnivorous, yes; causing pain, yes; but not evil. Nor should the word be applied to humans. Poetry aside, "The evil that men do" would be better rendered as the harm that men cause to other human beings, animals and the environment.

We are, in other words, dealing with human behaviour that harms others, physically, mentally or socially, not with a person created or imbued with evil or choosing it perversely.

## Health Chief Supports Voluntary Euthanasia

A former president of the Royal College of Physicians has called for the legalisation of euthanasia. Addressing a conference of health care policy-makers, Sir Raymond Hoffenberg said sick old people should be allowed to die with dignity.

"Many old people do not wish to be a burden to their family and to society", he declared. But if the practice were introduced as a means of reducing financial strain on the health service, this would be quite unacceptable.

A resolution passed at the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society welcomed the clause in the Schwartzberg Report to the European Parliament that recommends legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, with proper safeguards, for the terminally ill. It noted that the report has now been referred back for reconsideration, partly because of opposition by the religious lobby in several countries to this clause. All NSS members were asked to write (in an individual capacity) to their Euro-MPs urging support for the voluntary euthanasia clause, both in committee and when the Report comes up for debate again next Spring.

The resolution concludes: "Any emendation of the clause should be in the opposite direction to that demanded by the religious lobby, so as to recognise as legitimate beneficiaries of voluntary euthanasia not only the terminally ill but also the incurably and intolerably (thought not terminally) ill or disabled, including those in an irreversible 'vegetative' condition."

The most vigorous opposition to voluntary euthanasia emanates from religious quarters. A recent *Catholic Herald* editorial stated that legalisation would lead to "the sweeping abandonment of the Judaeo-Christian ethic that underpins our medical ethics and legal system".

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According to a nationwide poll of religious education teachers in the Republic of Ireland, pupils lose interest in the subject after their first year at secondary school. The survey was organised on behalf of the Roman Catholic bishops.

Eric Matthews

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# Letters

## A BLACK RECORD

The brief item on animal abuse (November) was a timely reminder of an issue seldom referred to in *The Freethinker* in spite of its revealing nature of the severe limitations of our intellectual development. The article refers to the situation in Spain where public displays of the grossest cruelty are popular annual events. However, few countries are guiltless of animal exploitation and abuse including the so called advanced nations. Animals are utilised for a wide range of purposes none of which could be justified now as necessary to our survival, including the despicable practice of vivisection which mushroomed from the days of the infamous Claude Bernard to its present level, in the course of which supposedly cultured individuals have cold-bloodedly subjected sentient creatures to unimaginable suffering.

It is in such a field that one would expect the religions to express indignation and outrage. But with few exceptions they are utterly indifferent, remaining silent and unmoved or have even devised barbarous methods of animal slaughter as part of their foolish rituals. Nothing so clearly demonstrates that we have taken only the first faltering steps towards civilisation as our indifference to and often savage treatment of the other animals unfortunate enough to share this planet with us. Technological advancement, however amazing, is no substitute for the development of that state or condition which it is claimed elevates us above all other forms of life. Fallen we are not — struggling to rise we should be.

ROBERT BARR, Enderby, Leicestershire.

## WHAT IS HUMANISM?

It seems that the debate between Nicolas Walter and myself on the legality of the Gulf War is over. He has (Letters, November) left his recent claims and returned to an old one (June) to which I had already replied. (July: the UN Secretary General gives authority to the natural meaning of the words of Resolution 678, as against Walter's.) But he makes two claims about Humanism which should be answered.

As to the first, Walter attributes underserved importance to my views. The statement that Humanism is a life stance is declared by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which represents all the major Humanist organisations in the world.

The second derives from Walter's attack on Eric Stockton's distinction (Letter, July) between: conclusions that follow from Humanism in itself; and those which follow if we add our individual assumptions. In the latter case contradiction is by no means excluded, for however "inevitable" Walter's assumptions may feel to him and mine to me, mine are not inevitable to him, nor his to me! Neither set is inevitable in Stockton's logical sense. Each is our personal addition to "our common humanism". The former case is different, because two conclusions drawn from Humanism alone can be mutually contradictory only if Humanism is self-contradictory, and therefore absurd. All I have been doing is to point to these basic matters of logic.

Finally, may I add a personal point? Walter corrects me for being opinionated, and gives three examples. The first two I have commented on above. For the third, he claims that I "insist" that "what Humanism is for" is "to give people the foundations on which to build their lives." Actually, however, far from "insisting" on this claim, I said "One might say that this is what Humanism is for." (Italics added.) I certainly did not mean to imply that everyone must so use Humanism, nor that Humanism has no other uses.

HARRY STOPES-ROE, Birmingham

## PORN AND POWER

Apropos Nicolas Walter's "Censorship: Always Wrong?" (November), the Official Secrets Act exists for the purpose of safeguarding the wealth (power) of our rulers. The pornography business exists for the purpose of increasing the wealth (power) of those who run it. So long as people desire power over others these phenomena will flourish.

What I find amazing is that so many people accept the validity of Official Secrets insofar as they believe that it can be controlled by having an "accountable Secret Service", which of course is nonsense. Also that people tend to forget that publishing Sade's works can make a few bucks.

ERNIE CROSSWELL, Slough

## NONSENSE NOUNS AS DOGMA

I can concur with E. M. Karbacz (Letters, November) when she states that it is highly probable (I would say almost certain) that many beliefs (I would use the word imaginings) existed long before human beings found (or invented) words to express them (and therefore unable to communicate or metaphorically "cram words down the throats" of their fellow human beings).

I also think that Karl Heath's review of *Creation out of Nothing* (October) did a good service in debunking much of the double-think of Don Cupitt (double-think meaning the power of holding two contradictory beliefs simultaneously and accepting both of them).

The point I was making in my October letter was that following the invention of words and alphabets, some charlatans have taken advantage of this to transmute some silly beliefs to their fellow humans (especially children) by asserting without proof some very preposterous dogmas, often for political purposes.

ERNEST WAKEFIELD, Mansfield

## BIBLE ON THE BEEB

Unlike yourself, I am quite enjoying the BBC readings of the Bible, a book that was fed to me in small, carefully selected doses during my Christian upbringing. The BBC are to be congratulated on preferring the poetry of the Revised Version to the colourless, though doubtless more accurate, version used in churches today.

The ungenerous item in the October *Freethinker* is quite wrong, though, about what it calls child abuse. It is now believed that the practice of sacrificing firstborn sons (and the firstborn of domestic animals) to the god was at one time current among all semitic tribes. Quite why such a practice should have arisen is not known; though it may have had something to do with the wish of the dominant male to rid himself of his principal rival. If this belief is correct, then the stories must be read not as tales of child abuse but as allegorical myths. The story in Genesis 22 (not 27) would depict the abandonment of the practice among the descendants of Abraham (Jews and Arabs). After the way of myths, there are several versions. For instance Arab tradition makes Ishmael (truly the firstborn, though son of a concubine) the intended sacrifice. The Passover story would suggest that the practice was still current among the Egyptians in biblical times, though abandoned by the Israelites. Some credence is given to this view by the ceremony of redemption of the firstborn (*pidion haben*), described in Numbers 3, 40-51, and practiced still by Jews today, in which the father substitutes for the child a symbolic gift of money together with a promise to dedicate the boy to God in a gentler manner by teaching him to obey the law.

Fundamentalist believers take the Bible literally. I hope that most secularists could recognise it for what it really is: a chronicle of Man's first attempts to escape from the superstitions of the Neolithic age.

GLYN EMERY, London N1



## ORIGINS

I would be grateful for Stephen Moreton's "science lesson", were it not pedantic, superfluous and inaccurate.

True, I said 5 billion years for the age of the earth instead of the present of 4.6 billion. In the context of my argument the round figure seemed justified.

As for life in the pre-Cambrian era, the first billion years were lifeless. During the next 2 billion years the earth's atmosphere was mostly carbon dioxide and nitrogen, and there was no life on land until 500 million years ago. Moreton is entitled to refer to bacteria and eocytes in boiling hot springs as "life". He is quite right, but this does not affect my argument against Don Cupitt.

I do not understand why Moreton should have thought that I regarded the Milky Way as a galaxy other than our own. He should read more carefully.

He is entitled to regard the Magellanic Clouds as other galaxies. I am treating them as fragments of our own galaxy.

KARL HEATH, Coventry

## NO TIME FOR RELIGION

So Warren Mitchell has no time for religion (November). He believes the world "would be a better place without religion" and doesn't mind "if his new show offends Catholics, Protestants or Jews". His opinion is that there is too much "bland" comedy about, presumably identifying his new show "So You Think You've Got Troubles" as not bland.

Your article applauds, quite rightly, Warren Mitchell's atheism but, by association and quite wrongly it also applauds the new show.

"So You Think You've Got Troubles" portrays the situation in Ireland as caused by religious bigotry. It mirrors the view that Britain is a secular State which is tolerant of religious belief and has risen above religious bigotry. Ivan Fox voices the idea that the Irish have only themselves to blame for *their* troubles. That, if only they could rise above their narrow religious beliefs as Fox, and by implication Britain, has, if only they would stop killing each other in the name of religion, all would be well.

Now, in attacking religion, as we must all do, it is important to avoid confusion. Religion, of course, is playing a part in the Irish situation, but it is not what the show, and the British establishment, would have us believe it is.

It is not the religious beliefs of individual Catholic or Protestant Irishmen, much as those beliefs are in themselves deplorable, that has caused the present appalling situation to develop. It is British involvement in Ireland, the history of imperialism and exploitation in the interest of Britain that is to blame and is the reason it continues. The part that religion plays in all this is as a body of beliefs that have been amended and modified to serve the interests of Britain. It is as a State religion serving the interests of Britain that religious involvement in the Irish situation should be seen and fought.

It is not surprising that the State religion of an occupying power shapes politics in an occupied country, that adherence to the occupying State's religion would bring benefits to those who espoused it and discrimination to those who did not. It is not surprising that an indigenous religion, especially one that has historically been attacked by the occupying State, would act as the focus for resistance to occupation. It is not surprising in this situation that adherents of the occupying State's religion and those of the indigenous religion would be antagonistic to each other, an antagonism which, being in the interests of the occupying state, is likely to be fostered by it. It is not surprising that the occupying State will portray the adherents of the indigenous religion as terrorists whom it is necessary to have an army of occupation to subdue, or as unknowing children who it is necessary to have an army of occupation to protect, and as the cause of the dissent.

So, we must combat religion wherever we see it but we must also be careful to clarify the different roles it plays in complex situations.

"So You Think You've Got Troubles" rightly attacks religious bigotry at the individual level, but quite wrongly identifies this individual bigotry with the cause of the troubles. The show may offend Catholics, Protestants or Jews, but it does nothing to clarify the real reason for Ireland's long and continuing agony.

It is one thing to have no time for religion at an individual bigoted level. But to have no time for an established State religion is "bland" in the extreme.

CHRIS HONEYWELL, Oxford

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (Near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49a). Sunday, 5 January, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Forum and New Year party.

**Cornwall Humanists.** Information about a new group obtainable from Beryl Mercer, Amber, Short Cross Road, Mount Hawk, Truro TR4 8EA, telephone Porthtowan (0209) 890690.

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

**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.

**Haverling and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road Romford. Tuesday, 7 January, 8 pm. Public Meeting.

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 19 December, 8 pm. Winter Solstice party.

**London Student Skeptics.** Please send stamped addressed envelope for 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, 19 December, 7.30 pm. Public Meeting.

**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, 8 January, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Jessica Saraga: Education and Indoctrination.

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**Please — not a word to Mary Whitehouse about an advertisement in the Situations Vacant section of the Westmorland Gazette: "Temporary teacher of German required from January 1992 to join strong language team".**



## Child Abuse: Church Shields Offenders

Canada has been shaken by child abuse scandals involving Roman Catholic priests and members of religious orders. Newfoundland's Catholic community was particularly affected by the revelation that sexual abuse was rife at a boy's orphanage run by priests and Christian Brothers. A member of the order, Edward English, has been sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment. A further two dozen priests and brothers are already convicted or have been charged with sexually abusing boys in their care.

An investigating commission set up by Archbishop Penney concluded that the offenders were treated with greater consideration by the church hierarchy than were their victims. The Archbishop has since resigned.

But the Canadian cases of sexual abuse are minor by comparison to those rocking the scandal-ridden church in the United States. Mark Chapto, counsel to the public policy department of the National Conference of Bishops, has admitted that since the mid-1980s the church has been unable to obtain liability insurance covering sexual abuse by priests.

Richard Snipe, author of *A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy*, says church policy is "avoid scandal at any cost". Certainly the Catholic Church is paying a heavy price for the activities of pederasts in the priesthood.

One case alone, that of Fr Gilbert Gauthé, a Louisiana priest, has cost the church \$20 million. It is generally accepted that he assaulted a large number of children, mainly altar boys, over a seven-year period. Paul Bencomo, attorney for some of the plaintiffs, says the church knew that Gauthé was a pederast, but "they shuffled him from one parish to another and swept it under the rug to avoid embarrassment". Fr Gauthé will not be involved in parish work for some time. He was sent to prison for 20 years.

Catholic writer Jason Berry also claims that church authorities do everything possible to conceal cases of sexual abuse by priests. "At least two hundred cases have been reported to the Vatican in the last six years alone", he says. As for the offending priests, "they are placed in another parish".

It is not just the RC Church that connives at keeping the criminal activities of its priests out of the public domain. A New Orleans priest, Fr Dino Cinel, had an enormous collection of pornographic films featuring children. They were found at his rectory where, it transpired, some of the videos were made. District Attorney Harry Connick, a strong upholder of the State's anti-pornography legislation, was urged by his staff to investigate. Connick, a devout Catholic, admitted in a television interview that he refused to take action

"that would embarrass Holy Mother Church". Fr Cinel, who was seen on the videos having sex with a number of teenage boys, now faces serious charges. He may derive some consolation from the fact that St Rita, to whom his church is dedicated, may be invoked "in desperate situations".

In some States the church is taking advantage of what is known as the doctrine of charitable immunity. This bars law suits against charitable institutions. It was successfully invoked in the case of Christopher Schultz, a New Jersey boy who was sexually abused from the age of ten by Edmund Coakeley, a Franciscan brother, teacher and scout master. The boy, whose brother was also molested by the Franciscan, became increasingly disturbed and eventually committed suicide.

The Schultz family lawyer said: "The real outrage here is the cover-up. The child probably wouldn't have killed himself if these people had acknowledged that he hadn't done anything wrong and had been taken advantage of. The fact that he had to go to school every day and see this guy shattered the child."

Legal action by the Schultz family was successfully opposed by the Archdiocese of Newark, the Franciscan Brothers and the Boy Scouts of American organisation. They argued that charities are immune from paying damages to beneficiaries of their services. The family of Christopher Schultz, the "beneficiary" of an education at a Franciscan Brothers School, lost their case at the New Jersey Supreme Court.

## Islamic "Family Honour"

A Muslim who beat up his sister for "dishonouring" the family by walking out on her arranged marriage has been jailed for a year. Alid Hussain pleaded guilty at Doncaster Crown Court to causing his 21-year-old sister actual bodily harm.

The court was told that Hussain became head of the household on the death of his father. His sister had been married by arrangement at the age of 17 to a man more than twice her age. She was allegedly ill-treated by her husband and eventually left him, taking their two children. She started divorce proceedings and because of this her brother attacked her in a Rotherham street. She had to undergo an operation to restore the sight in her left eye.

Prosecuting counsel said in court: "According to the defendant's tradition, the marriage split was a matter of disgrace. He later told the police that his reason for attacking his sister was simply to discipline her."