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CLASSROOM SEGREGATION: "PARLIAMENT" POSES NEW THREAT

Last month's inaugural meeting of the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain brought together fundamentalist Muslims of various ethnic groups, prepared to sink their differences in opposition to British laws and social practice that they regard as inimical to the Koran and Muslim interests. The establishment of State-funded Muslim schools is one of the Parliament's chief demands, and this was the subject of a statement issued by Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society. The text of the statement is given below.

* * * * *

Dr Kalim Siddiqui, leader of this so-called parliament, reiterated the Muslim demand for public funding for separate Muslim schools — predictably, and unanswerably, making the point that, while Muslims have to pay through taxation for Anglican, Roman Catholic, and a few Jewish, denominational schools with grant-aided or voluntary-aided status, they are denied equal rights for their own schools.

This is something about which the National Secular Society has been warning our politicians and education authorities for decades past. We did so, for instance, in April 1986, when the Education Committee of the London Borough of Brent misguidedly recommended, in the name of racial harmony, that the Brondesbury Park Islamic Primary School should be accorded voluntary-aided status. Had this succeeded, a flood of similar applications would have followed. So far, the Government has been able to turn down all applications and recommendations for such schools on the ground that (largely because of fanatical prohibitions, such as not allowing musical instruments within the school walls), the curriculum fails to meet the national requirements for public funding. But if one of these schools should remove the grounds of this official rationalisation, where would we be?

It is surely bad enough that we already have in this country Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Jewish schools that segregate children according to their religious background. The resulting divisiveness — as seen at its worst in Northern Ireland — would be vastly increased by the proliferation of denominational schools for the more recently immigrant religions, segregating their children from the host population, on the basis, *de facto*, of skin colour as well as sex and creed, and, moreover, dividing one from another and importing to this country the religious strife and bitterness that exists on the Indian sub-continent. Indeed, most Muslim parents, realising that State schooling is in the best interests of their children, do not support the separate education demands of the fanatical, short-sighted minority which the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain exemplifies.

The National Secular Society has, since its inception in 1866, urged the abolition of all church schools, and now points to the added danger that their existence poses today: in the name of equity, it gives Muslims (and Sikhs and others) the same right to State-subsidised segregated schooling as Christians and Jews — with all the social harm that such a policy would be sure to build up for the future.

It is therefore high time that Parliament (that is, the proper Parliament) began to phase out State subsidies to denominational schools of every kind, so as to discourage segregated schooling.

We urge all political parties, teachers' unions, educationists, responsible religious leaders, communicators, and members of the general public, to press for legislation to phase out the public financing of all denominational education and to support the transfer of any redundant church schools to the appropriate LEA.



(continued on back page)

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Vol. 112 No. 2 CONTENTS February 1992

CLASSROOM SEGREGATION:
"PARLIAMENT" POSES NEW THREAT 17

NEWS AND NOTES 18
Papal Humbug; Religion and Justice; BHA Produces a Winner; The Kalim Siddiqui Show

THE MEDIUM IS NOT THE MESSAGE 21
Terry Sanderson

WHOM THE GODS LOVE... 22
R. J. Condon

THE SECULAR PRIEST 23
Colin McCall

ANOTHER LOOK AT MORALITY AND RELIGION 24
Rona Gerber

BOOKS 26

The Unauthorised Version:
Truth and Fiction in the Bible

Reviewer: Daniel O'Hara
Funny Old World

Reviewer: Peter Cotes
A Book of Consolations

Memorials
Reviewer: Nicolas Walter

MISCELLANEOUS

Catholics Defy the Pope, 23; Clerics Protect Nazi, 25;
Crazy Christians, 28; Letters, 29; Roddenberry
Remembered, 31; A Bitter Pill for Granny Gillick, 32;
Islamic Terrorists Silence Author, 32

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NEWS

PAPAL HUMBUG

As usual the international press dutifully reported Pope John Paul II's World Day of Peace Message, with little attempt to analyse what he said. Which is just as well, perhaps, as close examination of his pearls of wisdom would have exposed them as being somewhat flawed.

In his peroration, the Pope called on national and world leaders "always to show the greatest respect for the religious conscience of every man and woman". Of course the Roman Catholic Church, where and when it was in a position of undisputed authority, has always shown such respect, with special concern for the conscience of the non-religious. Admittedly there are embarrassing episodes in the Church's history, like the fate of individuals such as Cranmer and Hus, and communities such as the Albengians and Waldensians. The record is also blotted by inquisitions, massacres of Jews, witch hunts and sword-point conversions.

Any reference to Holy Mother Church's tainted history is regarded as rather tasteless in these ecumenical times. It all happened long ago; we should be looking to the future, we are now all one in Jesus, etc. However, current events in central Europe are a reminder that in the present century the Church has had scant regard for "the religious conscience of every man and woman".

Fifty years ago, a reign of terror was unleashed by the Vatican-backed Ustasha Nazis who established Croatia as a German puppet state which Archbishop Stepinac described as "a work of God that arouses our admiration". Another Catholic leader wrote: "God, who directs the destiny of nations... moved the leader of a friendly and allied people, Adolf Hitler, to enable us to create an independent State of Croatia. Glory be to God, our gratitude to Adolf Hitler".

In the years that followed, the fanatically Catholic Ustasha committed some of the worst wartime atrocities. A systematic programme of forced conversions was put into operation. Catholic priests and monks accompanied soldiers who rounded up inhabitants and told them they must convert to Rome. Those who refused were either executed or sent to concentration camps. Nearly 200 Serbian Orthodox priests and bishops were murdered; no respect was accorded their religious conscience by the Catholic Church or the pontiff's predecessor, Pope Pius XII.

Pope John Paul II has also called on world leaders to show respect for "the special contribution of religion to

S AND NOTES

the progress of civilisation". While he did not specify the "special contribution", we must assume he was implying that Christian enlightenment enabled humanity to emerge from savagery to an advanced state of social development.

What has been religion's contribution to science? For centuries scientific investigation was conducted under supervision of the Church which feared new ideas lest they should undermine beliefs previously held to be immutable. Boldness and innovation could endanger a thinker's life. Hence Copernicus waited for more than forty years before he dared to publish his great discovery that the earth is not stationary. Like Bacon, Galileo and other eminent scientists, he was denounced and censored, as Darwin is today in American schools and colleges.

Medical science was impeded by religious obscurants who taught that demons were the cause of disease and mental disorder; that holy water was more beneficial than clean water; that touching the relic of a saint, even a mythical one, was more curative than medicine. Clerical opposition to the use of anaesthetics prevailed well into the 19th century. Even today, victims of the religious virus still die because when ill they seek a cure through prayer rather than medicine.

What has religion's "special contribution" been to education and social reform? The establishment of Christianity as the official creed of the Roman Empire was followed by the closure of centres of learning. Great libraries were consigned to the flames. Education became the prerogative of monks, enabling them to act in the Church's interest when advising illiterate barons and rulers. In modern times Church of England bishops in the House of Lords delayed introduction of publicly funded schools by over sixty years. Catholic schools, particularly those run by religious orders, have long functioned as centres of indoctrination.

Religion has played a baneful role in the wider field of social reform. The Christian churches condoned slavery, the subjugation of women and children, empire building and the exploitation of subject peoples. They invariably sided with the rich and powerful, admonishing the lower orders to keep their place in society as ordained by Almighty God.

In his message the Pope also urged public authorities "to support development which benefits everyone, and primarily those oppressed by poverty, hunger and suffering". His personal contribution to this end is exercising his authority to sabotage birth control programmes.

For many centuries the Church laid down laws on learning, sociology, ethics and morality. But the overwhelming evidence shows that scientific knowledge, literacy and the humanistic influence in all aspects of human endeavour, have made an infinitely greater contribution to the progress of civilisation than Pope John Paul II's or any other brand of religious superstition.

RELIGION AND JUSTICE

Despite anomalies, the class character of the judiciary, and gross miscarriages of justice, the public is constantly exhorted to respect the law. Yet there is growing suspicion that some of those responsible for conducting trials are not entirely without bias. Last September, for instance, we quoted from a book by a Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate in which he expresses the view that "the police are doing the work of God".

David Vaughan, who pleaded guilty at Knightsbridge Crown Court last month to 18 charges of theft, will have said "Amen" to his wife's comment: "Thank God for a Christian judge." Mr Vaughan stole £455,288 from his employers, Kleinwort Benson, the bankers, between 1983 and 1990. He used the money to finance an extravagant lifestyle.

When he appeared before Judge Christopher Compson, his defence counsel played David Vaughan's "strong Christian beliefs" in spades. And after hearing that the defendant was a long-standing member of the Methodist Church, Judge Compson imposed a two-year prison sentence — suspended for two years.

"It was a right and just sentence", Mr Vaughan's wife declared. But although pleased that a custodial sentence was not passed, many will wonder if a court would show the same leniency to a person without "strong Christian beliefs" who was found guilty of stealing a lot less than £455,288.

While Church of England bishops back the Keep Sunday Special Campaign and criticise supermarkets for opening on Sunday, their own cathedral gift shops are doing very nicely out of Sunday trading. The manageress of one admitted to breaking the law "dozens of times". Roger Boaden, director of the Shopping Hours Reform Council, says it is hypocritical for a bishop to call for the boycott of Sunday traders while allowing his own cathedral gift shop to break the law.

The Vatican may set up an Exorcism Office to train priests how to rescue the perishing from the clutches of Satan. Rome, the Holy City, is said to be "a hothouse of bizarre sects and satanic churches."

BHA PRODUCES A WINNER

The first video produced by the freethought movement in this country has been issued by the British Humanist Association. *Humanism: The Great Human Detective Story* is designed for outsiders, especially young people, and is particularly suitable for use in schools.

The freethought movement has traditionally concentrated on books, periodicals, pamphlets and leaflets. It has taken a long time to develop up-to-date methods for producing our written material, let alone to turn to new kinds of material. A few audiotapes have appeared from time to time, but either they have been recordings of radio broadcasts or live talks or else they have been better forgotten. Now the BHA has broken new ground by moving into the videomarket, deservedly earning the congratulations and support of the whole movement.

The BHA video is a proper professional job. It was mainly the work of the writer, Meredith MacArdle (who has recently been working at the BHA), and of the director, Ian Ilett (whose mother, Jean Woodman, has just joined the staff). They were given a lot of help, both amateur and professional, but these two young people deserve all due praise for their achievement. The script and treatment are both as good as anything you might see on a television programme or in a commercial video, though the cost was much less (and was almost entirely raised by donations). The young presenter, Jaye Griffiths, gives a very polished performance. Altogether the result is remarkably assured and impressive.

The video is 21 minutes long. The "Great Human Detective Story" of the subtitle begins with a question — "Who dunnit?" — and the answer (after some witty film) is "No one dunnit": the world is the way it is without any God or other supernatural agency, and we have to make the best we can of our time in it. After a quick summary of humanist history, there is a clear and straightforward exposition of humanist ideas and values, including interviews with celebrities and film of real ceremonies.

There are a few minor defects. The historical section has some dubious details, though nothing serious enough to matter. It is possibly a pity that the celebrities interviewed are in their sixties, but both Claire Rayner and George Melly are skilful performers and popular personalities. They express their cheerful humanism in characteristic style. It is certainly a pity that the funeral shown includes a reading from the Bible (the famous opening of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes), but this probably won't be noticed by anyone except a few watchful Christians (and Freethinkers). There are so many major virtues that the video may be confidently recommended for humanist groups to show and discuss

at meetings and particularly for schoolteachers to show and discuss in class. If only it could also be seen by the general public on network television — but it is probably too forthright for that. Now it is up to the whole movement to make good use of it.

Humanism: The Great Human Detective Story, £10 post free from the British Humanist Association, 14 Lamb's Conduit Passage, London WC1R 4RH.

THE KALIM SIDDIQUI SHOW

It would take a W. S. Gilbert, assisted by the *Week Ending* team, to adequately portray the Muslim "parliament" set up in London by Dr Kalim Siddiqui and his cohorts. Not content to form yet another Islamic organisation, Siddiqui has decided to ape the Westminster institution, even to the extent of having a "leader of the house" and a "speaker". Participants are referred to as MMPs (Members of the Muslim Parliament).

Dr Siddiqui has been likened to another religious ranter, the Rev Ian Paisley. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two. Paisley has actually been elected Member of Parliament by an overwhelming majority of (admittedly misguided) voters in his constituency. Siddiqui is self-appointed, endorsed by a minority of Islamic zealots.

However, Siddiqui and Paisley are alike in some respects. Both are motivated by a fanatical religious faith. Both preach a message of exclusiveness and social divisiveness. Generations of Ian Paisleys have contributed to the creation of a lamentable situation in Northern Ireland. And for all its parliamentary trappings, Kalim Siddiqui's outfit is a ploy to foster segregation and keep Muslims out of mainstream social and political life.

Many Soviet Jews have come to regret emigrating to Israel. About 200 have sought political asylum in Holland and some are trying to settle in other Western countries, including Germany. Human Rights activist Adam Keller said that many couples were of different faiths. They were harassed in the Soviet Union because one of them was Jewish. They suffered discrimination in Israel because one of them was Christian.

The following interesting news item has appeared in the Hatfield Peverel and Ulting parish magazine: "At the choir concert next Wednesday, Mrs Sharp will sing 'Tuck me in my little wooden bed' accompanied by the vicar."

The Medium is Not the Message

TERRY SANDERSON

A few weeks ago a television mini-series called "The Hillside Stranglers" was screened. It was based on a true story of two men working together as "serial killers" in Los Angeles during the 1970s. Between them they murdered twelve young women for no apparent reason. The very arbitrariness of the crimes made them difficult to solve, and the television film concentrated on the mounting pressure being exerted on the policeman at the head of the investigation. His failure to make any progress in tracking down the murderers was underlined when, in one scene, an old man appeared at the door of his office. "It's the medium who wrote to you from Germany," says the detective's assistant, "you remember, the one who wanted you to pay his fare over here because he had vital information on the case."

"Bring him in," says the cop, ready to try anything. In comes the old man, who is visiting relatives — and has been obliged to pay his own fare. He tells the policeman that he should be looking for two Italian brothers who are driving a red car. The detective loses patience and tells the assistant: "Get this creep outa here."

Needless to say, when the murderers are eventually apprehended they are Italian in origin, but they are cousins, not brothers. The red car is, in fact, a red van. "Isn't this what that old man said?" asks the incredulous detective.

I don't know whether this incident has any truth in it or whether it was added to the dramatisation in order to perk it up a bit, but claims by psychics that they have given invaluable assistance to the police in difficult cases is quite common. Take the dear departed Doris Stokes, who was a seasoned operator of the celestial switchboard ("just one moment, please, I'm putting you through"). She made all kinds of extravagant claims about kidnap victims she had located, and hidden bodies she had led the police to. None of these were ever verified by the authorities and, indeed, the only time I ever saw them checked up on was when a Sunday newspaper asked Scotland Yard for details of Doris's miraculous sleuthing. They denied ever having heard of her.

Now Scotland Yard has issued the findings of a report it undertook in 1990 monitoring London's eight major investigation pools, which deal with the most serious crime. As a result Detective Chief Superintendent Eddie Ellison was able to say: "There were no cases of psychics either offering effective help or being invited to assist investigations."

Are you really surprised? Even Tony Ortzen, editor of *Psychic News*, has to admit: "Anyone can call themselves a medium, and often, if you get a child

murdered in a brutal fashion, one of these people will write to the police or family and say 'I was just washing up last night and this name came to me as that of the murderer.' There are a lot of tea-cup mediums around who will take advantage of any situation."

Mr Ortzen, though, as you'd expect, doesn't hold with the view that all mediums are misguided. He feels that if the police were to find "the right ones" they might discover that spiritualism has a lot to offer.

Of course, if we could only find the "right ones" we wouldn't need the police at all — except perhaps for crowd control and helping old ladies across the street. There only need be a few arresting officers to go around mopping up the miscreants that the mystics had pinpointed. Who needs all this forensic balderdash when a quick trance could save so much time and effort? Strange that this economically appealing idea never seems to get much further. Think what could be saved in public spending (and public unease) if we could reduce the police to the role of traffic wardens.

Not that the spirit-mongers don't continue trying. The *Sun* claimed that they had been in touch with Robert Maxwell through the auspices of a famous medium. This lady reported that Cap'n Bob had only blandest things to say, as the spirits always do. When asked whether he had been murdered, the fat phantom said mysteriously: "I didn't jump and I didn't fall." He then faded away before he could be pumped for particulars of the missing pension fund money.

Given that those on the other side know the answer to every cosmic question that has ever flummoxed a philosopher, it's amazing that they never get round to giving any information. Why don't mediums ever ask the Christian wraiths whether they have met God, and if so whether he accepts Muslims and Hindus at his place. Why don't they ask whether they still have sex in heaven. (I'd particularly like an answer to that one because if they don't, I'm not going.) Wouldn't Bertrand Russell want to give us the answers now that he has them? Wouldn't Dickens want to let us know how *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* worked out? Wouldn't Mahler like to tell us what he thought about other people completing the symphony he left unfinished at his death — and what kind of job they made of it?

The sinister side of all this, of course, is the exploitation of the recently bereaved. Doris Stokes was a devil for that. Those who are in the vulnerable state of having to let go of their loved ones are easy prey for those who promise one last glimpse.

Spiritualism is appealing, of course, but I think we ought to accept that it doesn't pose much of a threat to the criminal fraternity.

Whom the Gods Love...

R.J.CONDON

*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
If God won't have you the Devil must.*

As custodian of Hell, Satan is of course God's obedient servant. God in his turn is the Pope's lackey, accepting without demur as many new saints as His Holiness cares to send him. The Heavenly Company has been considerably augmented lately, for in his thirteen years on the Throne of St Peter the present incumbent has created 234 saints, more than all his 20th-Century predecessors combined.

It is not all that easy to become a saint. One must have the usual religious virtues, of course, but a stumbling block for many is the modern requirement that a saint's life should be an example for Catholics to follow. This means that self-mortification is not likely to get one very far along the road to canonisation.

One proposed saint whose cause is being promoted with some difficulty is Teresa Musco of Caserta, near Naples. This enthusiast crammed more sickness and self-torture into her 33 years than Padre Pio did in 80-odd. Alban Butler, who filled several approving volumes with lives of this kind, would surely have drawn the line at Teresa.

She was born in 1943 to a family always on the brink of destitution. Her mother, a drudge, bore ten children of whom six survived. Teresa's father, a wife-beater, took exception to her precocious godliness and beat her too. At the age of six she had taken to wearing a tightly-knotted rope round her hips as a penance for his habitual swearing. When she later refused to marry he threw her out. It is no surprise to learn that the Virgin Mary made regular appearances, dictating prayers and giving advice on how to win souls.

Her list of complaints reads almost like a medical dictionary. Colic, palpitation, headache, sinusitis, coughing of blood, fevers — you name it, she probably had it. Her first operation, at the age of nine, was followed by no fewer than 116 surgical interventions, for which she had to be held down because no anaesthetic seemed to work.

When Teresa was 26 there came a new affliction, the five wounds of the stigmata. A photograph shows her with both hands transfixed by a knitting needle, the probable cause of the wounds. Kidney disease led to a transplant and an early death.

Teresa's case is a pathological one of a kind often met with in religious history. Masochistic ascetics like her are capable of turning torment into a perverse kind of pleasure. Her motto "Suffer, offer and keep quiet" may be matched with St Margaret Mary Alacoque's "Nothing

but pain makes my life supportable". This lady also died young after a useless existence, fittingly rewarded with an equally useless halo which is said to have appeared on her deathbed in 1690. There is a photograph of Teresa similarly laid out, but alas no halo.

Fr Franco Amico, Teresa's confessor, is leading the campaign for her eventual canonisation. His association with her became a full-time job which he now feels has only just begun — the Vatican saint-makers are notoriously hard to satisfy.

Fr Franco has preserved Teresa's rooms as a museum, whose effect on visitors is startling. Her sitting room is crowded with religious portraits and statues that are alleged to have wept and sweated blood during the last 18 months of her life. None of the blood has been cleaned off. A statue of Christ has a black stain over the heart. Nearby the Virgin Mary weeps blood, her face and chest almost obliterated. In Teresa's bedroom hangs a well-encrusted Christ on the Cross.

The collection reaches its nadir with a ghastly figure of Jesus as a baby, with black bloodstained eyes. Baby Jesus was for ever seeking attention. Often when Teresa and Franco were having a meal the statue would begin to weep and would have to be set at the head of the table. The same thing happened if the pair went out in a car; Baby Jesus had to go too. There is probably truth in a suggestion that the trio of Madonna, Christ and Baby Jesus formed a substitute for Teresa's own awful family.

The priest tells his audience of Teresa's piety and humility, and compares her suffering with that of Christ. She had visions of the Passion from which she woke to find her bedclothes soaked with blood. She even paid a visit to Hell, which left her with a singed nightdress. Her message to us all, says the good Father, is "Love, pure love". A profound observation, but hardly worth a wasted life.

For the present writer the most interesting figure in this affair is Fr Franco. He seems to have stuck closer to Teresa than a Siamese twin, going far beyond his priestly duty. He has had the blood from a portrait of Christ clinically tested and shown to be of a different group from his or Teresa's. The blood, then, was brought in from an outside source.

Fr Franco's entire life is devoted to making Teresa a saint. He has had one serious setback; his local conference of bishops has decided that her phenomena "did not exceed the natural order of things". In other words, they were faked. But he has talked to the Pope and her case has been referred to the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Those reverend sceptics may have some searching questions for Franco Amico.

The Secular Priest

COLIN McCALL

"I am a secular priest. I wonder would that qualify me for membership of your [National] Secular Society?" I was asked that question after I had briefly stated the atheist case in an unscripted discussion in a radio series entitled *What's the Idea?* nearly thirty years ago (31 October, 1962), one of the very rare occasions when atheism got an airing on the BBC in those days.

My questioner, Fr Anthony Kenny, had been described to me by the producer as a brilliant young priest from Liverpool. Alongside him was John Wren-Lewis, who said he had been an atheist at 16, but was now an Anglican.

Since then Dr Kenny has certainly fulfilled his early promise. Three years after our debate he became a Fellow and tutor in philosophy at Oxford and then Master of Balliol; and he is a prolific author on philosophical and theological subjects. But the book that interests me here is his autobiography, *A Path from Rome* (Oxford 1985), in which Dr Kenny reveals his fitness, if he wished, to become a member of the National Secular Society.

More significantly, it reveals that he had already been troubled with doubts about the existence of God when he took part in the radio discussion. While he was at Oxford, 1957-59, he says: "I began to think — as I do to this day — that belief in God can be rationally justified only if the traditional proofs of the existence of God are valid. Faith will not do instead of proof, for faith is believing something on the word of God; and one cannot take God's word for it that he exists."

Influenced by Wittgenstein, he found it "difficult to conceive of the survival of a human disembodied soul"; and he was "unhappy about the doctrine of transubstantiation". Altogether, a sorry plight for a priest.

It was hardly surprising, then, that Dr Kenny should eventually leave the Roman Catholic Church. He did so in 1963, and he was married three years later.

When he was laicised "an ex-priest was a rarity", he says. In 1970, however, Cardinal Heenan, Archbishop of Westminster, acknowledged (in a letter to Dr Kenny's uncle): "The path which Tony took has now become a great high road."

Dr Kenny has continued to attend church, Anglican more often than Catholic, though he now describes himself as an agnostic. But, he explains that he is "not using the word, as some do, merely as a bland synonym for 'atheist'. I mean that I do not know whether there is a God or not".

In an attempt to settle his uncertainty, he turned first to Thomas Aquinas and examined the famous "five ways" in the *Summa Theologiae*, because the Angelic Doctor, if anyone, "was likely to have offered a really convincing proof of the existence of God".

Alas no. "None of the arguments, on close examination, seemed to be successful". And in a book entitled *The God of the Philosophers*, Dr Kenny argued that "If God is to be omniscient. . . than he cannot be immutable. If God is to have infallible knowledge of future human actions, then determinism must be true. If God is to escape responsibility for human wickedness, then determinism must be false. Hence, in the notion of a God who foresees all sins but is the author of none, there lurks a contradiction. Hence, there cannot be a God with all the attributes which theologians and philosophers have traditionally assigned to him."

Which is the atheist, ie non-theistic, position.

Ah, but "That does not mean that there cannot be a God of some other kind. . ." Well no, but we really have to limit the scope of the discussion somewhere, if it is to be meaningful, and exclude such vagaries. We are concerned with theism: belief in a God that can and does influence human affairs, a God with the attributes traditionally assigned to him; the sort of God that Dr Kenny once believed in, however briefly.

We have to consider the evidence presented by theists and decide if it stands up to critical examination. If it does, the reasonable person will accept: if not, he or she will reject it. The latter is the atheist position.

As I read *A Path from Rome* it is Dr Kenny's too. But he can't stop hankering.

Catholics Defy the Pope

Speaking at a meeting of Italian "natural family planning" instructors, Pope John Paul II condemned the use of artificial methods of contraception as "a sign of moral degradation". But this latest papal tirade has drawn criticism from some Roman Catholics.

Dr Frances Cole, a Catholic GP, said that the Pope's statement is "a million miles away from reality."

"Women need to be able to choose whether or not they have children.

"It is immoral and unethical not to allow to women have access to contraception. If they don't have, they will inevitably end up having a lot of children. They will be unable to cope, either economically or emotionally. That is moral degradation."

A priest in the north of England, who has to remain anonymous, says the Pope's views come from "a male, celibate, clerical outlook which is very much removed from reality."

"But many young couples will take no notice. The church's institution is just too incredible for them. Living in a marriage is totally different from a man sitting behind a desk in Rome legislating on the subject."

Another Look at Morality and Religion

RONA GERBER

In what follows I want to argue for a particular view of the source and basic constituents of morality and from there attempt to demonstrate that, if this view is correct, religion cannot possibly provide a proper foundation for morality; on the contrary it is, in an absolutely fundamental sense, totally opposed to it. This is not to say that what a religion prescribes to its adherents is always at odds with morality — indeed many religious people who act humanely and well towards others claim to derive inspiration from their religious beliefs. But what I am arguing is that their approach is basically flawed, since any principle which places “God” first and one’s neighbour second can, under certain circumstances, lead to atrocities. One has only to look at the present and past persecution of religious heretics, the savagery of religious punishments and the methods of terrorisation employed to secure converts to the faith, to recognise the justice of this claim.

To return to the question of the constituents of morality and their underpinnings. Any approach to morality which is independent of religion must be susceptible of rational appraisal; it must be based on a plausible view of what constitutes human good and must, of course, also be concerned with the question of how to promote this good. No logically watertight argument can be presented which finally settles the question of which view of morality is the correct one. However, it would be ludicrous to propose a system of morals which has no connection with promoting human wellbeing; the promotion of wellbeing must surely be one of the major aims of any rationally defensible morality.

Many would argue that the idea of wellbeing is not fixed; it is subjective or relative to the culture. I would urge, however, that there are certain universal elements in wellbeing, that we can indeed knowingly hurt or harm others, and that, in the absence of the distorting mirror provided by doctrinaire beliefs (such as belief in a cruel, hell-creating God) human sympathy is a reasonably reliable guide as to what we should do or refrain from doing to other human beings (or, for that matter, to the higher animals). The philosopher, David Hume, argued strongly for this view. For him, morality springs from compassion (sympathy); indeed its source is entirely “passion” (by which he means all types of feelings — not just violent, intense ones) and not reason, which he believed to be absolutely incapable of prompting action.

His analysis, however, seems unsatisfactory. Moral feeling, as he acknowledges, is identified as such by its independence from one’s own particular benefit — the quality of an action itself, divorced from personal gains

or loss, is what appeals or repels. This, it seems to me, involves a distinctively intellectual process — sympathy becomes a generalised attitude towards those who suffer and is thus transmuted into a humanitarian principle of action. Thus I would agree with Hume in so far as he holds that fellow-feeling is the primary source of morality, but disagree with him in so far as he denies the role played by the intellect in structuring moral responses. Indeed it is difficult to see how he can believe that, in his own description of the moral process, he has purified it of all intellectual elements.

Disinterested responses (and by this I mean impartial and not uninterested) are not simply raw emotion; they necessarily involve insight and understanding. Thus I can recognise the nature of my impulses when I’m tempted to say damaging things about my rival in love, and can stand back and evaluate them. I can see my projected action as spiteful — a type of action of which I generally disapprove — and can thereby refrain from doing it.

The ability to sympathise with another’s situation, then, does not simply involve a gut feeling. It involves working out what it would be like to be him in that situation (as far as possible), not just allowing one’s own feeling about him to well up unscrutinised. This element of dispassion is particularly important when moral prescriptions refer to the wider world.

Sympathy and reason are intrinsic to morality and inextricably bound together, both in moral precept and moral practice. A moral system or set of moral prescriptions which springs from sympathy tempered by, and under the control of, reason is capable of embracing both personal kindness and public justice. Further, the goal of procuring as worthwhile a life as possible for all sentient beings is the natural goal of morality thus generated. Again, if reason is so heavily involved in morality, then morality cannot be “simply subjective”. It can thus be the object of rational debate.

Religious morality is quite a different matter. In its traditional form it assumes that the meaning of good is “that which is commanded by God”. But this has been challenged since the time of Socrates who pointed out, surely correctly, that this would strip “good” of its usual meaning — indeed of any meaning whatsoever, since to say “God commands what is good”, is assumed to mean more than “God commands what God commands”. It surely means that the commands in question possess a certain quality — that of goodness — which we recognise independently of their source, whether that source is an ordinary individual, a powerful monarch, or an Almighty God. Nevertheless, if religious people strongly believe that a particular command proceeds from the Deity,

they have a tendency to rate it as good even if it is palpably evil, such as a command to burn heretics.

Thus religious moral systems — that is, the moralities of doctrine, fundamentalist religions — are based on acceptance of Divine authority and are consequently hostile to reason. Reasoning about morality is considered to be either superfluous or heretical. Such religious moralities rely on divinely inspired scriptures to support the moral stances their adherents adopt and this often creates victims whose suffering is totally unnecessary — like the unhappy young homosexual who appeared in a recent “Rough Guide to the Southern United States”, whose church taught that he would go to hell for his proclivities. There is, of course, a clear disadvantage inherent in religious moralities: there is no way in which conflicting prescriptions, based on contradictory revelations, can be rationally resolved.

Religious morality, then, fails to match up to the rational demands morality. How about the emotional aspects?

The motivations of religious morality are equally suspect. Clearly, if the faithful are kept on the “straight and narrow” simply by the power of threats and bribes, their conformity is motivated by prudence rather than morality. If, on the other hand, they seem to be animated by the good, humanistic motive of compassion, the genuineness of this motive in many cases remains open to question.

For example, the much adulated Mother Teresa, in discussing her work for the poor, denied that she was motivated by compassion. “No, no,” she said, “*it is for religion that I do it.*” This explains her total indifference to the looming menace of over-population and her steadfast opposition to birth control and abortion. Compassion dictates that suffering must be relieved *because it is suffering*, not because alleviating it happens to be the will of God. Mother Teresa looks over her shoulder at God and seeks his approval; thus she takes her eyes off the true human situation and fails lamentably to address herself to the wider problems faced by mankind in the contemporary world. She does not care about famine and suffering brought about by over-population because, according to the religious doctrine she embraces, sex is for procreating and birth control impedes God’s purposes. This is a particular instance of what I mentioned before: compassion passed through the distorting lens of religious dogma — and behold, it is *not* good.

Granted, many religious people and organisations *genuinely* aim to alleviate suffering. Christian Aid is an example. But, in general, the people involved are following a humanistic morality rather than a religious one and this determines which elements of the faith they profess to follow they are prepared to accept. They start out with an idea of what is good and fit their religion to

this ideal. The punitive, harsh and cruel aspects of the traditional Deity are jettisoned and a God is created in the image of good. I happen to think this is cheating, but I do not deplore it.

Morality is opposed to authoritarianism and religion is dedicated to it. Morality is humane and rests on a compassionate appraisal of the human condition. Religion defers to God even where this increases rather than decreases human suffering, despite the fact that religious people are also admonished to be charitable.

The conclusion that morality and religion are fundamentally opposed seems inescapable.

Clerics Protected Nazi

The Roman Catholic Church in France is facing an embarrassing scandal uncovered by its own investigating commission.

For 45 years, Paul Touvier, a leading wartime Nazi collaborator, lived under the protection of cardinals, priests and nuns. Touvier was a senior official of the pro-Nazi militia during the German occupation. It is alleged that he was responsible for several murders and was involved in the deportation of Jews. He was sentenced to death in his absence for crimes against humanity.

Cardinal Decourtray ordered an investigation into the church’s role in the affair after Touvier was arrested two years ago. An eight-man commission was charged with discovering the truth, “no matter what it costs”. The truth turned out to be extremely uncomfortable. The commission confirmed that since 1945 Touvier was shielded by a large number of priests and religious, with the approval of high-ranking clerics.

It is no secret that Catholic right-wingers were prominent among pro-Nazi and anti-Jewish elements in wartime France.

In Britain the *Catholic Herald* commented: “It is not enough for the church to try to distance itself from those whose activities it finds understandably embarrassing.” The Roman Catholic weekly urged the church to “ask itself awkward questions that have long lain dormant about anti-semitism in its ranks. . . and the church’s part in the escape from Europe of other known Nazis in the post-war years.”

A court-martial at Catterick has found Captain Peter Hodgkinson guilty of stealing £44,000 from the parachute Regiment’s TA battalion in West Yorkshire. Captain Hodgkinson, who was responsible for the battalion’s accounts, refused to divulge how he spent the money. Army investigators believe that some of it may have been donated to a church spire appeal fund administered by his wife.

THE UNAUTHORIZED VERSION: TRUTH AND FICTION IN THE BIBLE, by Robin Lane Fox. Viking, £20

Robin Lane Fox is a fellow of New College, Oxford, and a University Reader in Ancient History. He is also gardening correspondent of the *Financial Times*, and has published books on gardening as well as historical studies of *Alexander the Great* (a young man's work which drew high praise from Cyril Connolly in 1973) and, more recently, *Pagans and Christians*, a study of their interaction in the early centuries of our era, which also attracted some good reviews in 1986.

Mr Lane Fox describes himself as "an atheist. . . (who) believe(s) in the Bible but not in God". On one level, this latest book can be seen as an attempt to rescue the Bible from fundamentalism. Writing "as an historian", he accepts the critical view of the Old Testament established by Wellhausen and others in the 19th century, and he is particularly dependant on the scholarship and views of David Daube, Arnaldo Momigliano, Emil Schuerer and his revisers, and E. J. Bickerman, as he readily acknowledges at the outset. Less reasonably, he has also embroiled himself very liberally in the writings of recent theologians determined to salvage something of "spiritual value" out of the wreckage left by earlier generations of critical scholars. It is chiefly in his over-dependence on them that his treatment becomes desultory, repetitive, unconvincing and ultimately unsatisfactory.

Mr Lane Fox is at his least critical in his treatment of the New Testament — over and above its more glaring inconsistencies. He holds, for example, the now thoroughly unfashionable (except, ironically, among fundamentalists) view that the Fourth Gospel is the work of "the beloved disciple" of Jesus. This alleged companion of Jesus might, he thinks, be the same person as the John bar Zebedee who figures in the synoptic gospels as one of Jesus's earliest disciples, but is nowhere mentioned in the Fourth Gospel itself.

The author holds a few other idiosyncratic views. For example, he boldly proclaims (p.34), without giving adequate supporting evidence, that: "Jesus was crucified on Friday, 30 March AD 36. . .". Other scholars, whom he never mentions, have calculated that the crucifixion was probably on 3 April AD 33, since during the years (AD 26-36) when Pontius Pilate was Prefect (the title "Procurator" is anachronistic) of Judea, 14 Nisan (the date of Passover) fell on a Friday only in AD 30 and 33, and on Thursday only in AD 27. (See G. Ogg on "The Chronology of the NT" in the 1962 edition of *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*.)

Lane Fox reveals that he has good reasons-as-motives if only poor reasons-as-grounds for this assertion (and, incidentally, he appears innocent of the distinction, so importantly insisted upon by Antony Flew, between the two). It is because he wants to telescope the events between the death of Jesus and the conversion of Paul into a few months, thereby quite gratuitously lending historical credibility to at least the broad outline of Christian origins presented in the gospels. But this approach begs an awful lot of questions, not least that of the existence of an actual historical Jesus in the first third of the first century. With a complacency that ill-becomes a professional historian, he totally disregards the long tradition of historical criticism, whose most recent and persuasive representative is G. A. Wells, which casts doubt upon that very premise.

Let us look for a moment at how Lane Fox deals, or fails to deal, with the implications of his view that the Fourth Gospel (or at least its first 20 chapters) is (or is based on) the actual reminiscence of an intimate companion of Jesus throughout a three-year ministry. And while we are about it, let us not forget that this gospel, alone of the canonical four, contains the quasi-gnostic logos-christology of its prologue, the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the Cana wedding-feast, and the raising of Lazarus who had been dead for four days, yet managed to walk from his tomb, though still bound head, hand and foot!

Lane Fox may well not believe that such events actually happened, but is too ready to excuse their author of sheer mendacity. In this respect, he is more indulgent of New Testament than Old Testament authors. He urges that the Gospel "is written with hindsight, to present religious Truth" (p.388); that it "must speak to each of us 'that we might believe'; to this end, the author used the historian's great privilege: hindsight" (p.389). "Either we see or (like 'sons of darkness') we do not: these themes have special meaning for the Gospel's individual hearers because they live in a new Christian context. With hindsight, they have deeper insight: it is this gap which the author so strikingly exploits to bring home Truth" (p.390). "By such intertextuality, the author deepened meaning and forestalled doubt. For it is he who fixed the balance of knowledge. Jesus is said to know, and the scriptures know; the author knows and we know too with the promised gift of the Holy Spirit" (p.391). "Hindsight", it seems, can cover a multitude of sins!

The passages I have quoted in the previous paragraph are not only typical of this author, they bear a close resemblance to the sort of sophisticated equivocation which is dished out from the pulpits of University

REVIEWS

FUNNY OLD WORLD, by Steve Bell and Roger Woddis.
Methuen, £9.99

churches and a few fashionable West End cultic centres on most Sunday mornings. When Lane Fox goes on to assert that the Fourth Gospel's " 'hard sayings' on Bread and Wine are not puzzling to Christians who now know the Eucharist. . . (and). . . the paradox of Eternal Life" and claims that its author "could open a gap between appearance and reality to bring out truth" (p.392), it is clear he has abandoned his role as historian and overdosed on theological rhetoric!

When it comes to the staggering disparity between the almost complete ignorance of an *historical* Jesus displayed by both Paul's and other early epistles written in the years *circa* AD 50-65, and the Gospels, which probably date from *circa* AD 75-95 (ie, the other side of the great watershed marked by the Jewish war with Rome, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the virtual end of Palestinian Christianity), Lane Fox seriously underestimates the difficulties of harmonising the two. It is simply not good enough to state, misleadingly, that: "Notoriously, Paul's surviving letters are *not particularly concerned* to quote Jesus's *exact* sayings at every opportunity: their concern is with Jesus as the risen Christ, though Paul's oral teaching, now lost to us, *may have had a different focus*" (p.124, emphasis added).

Though most readers will, I suspect, like me, find this book a disappointing, overwritten and insufficiently judicious treatment of its subject, it may provide a crumb of comfort for those, like the present Bishop of Durham, who want to have their cake and eat it. For though Lane Fox is prepared to launch Exocets against the historical credibility and reliability of at least the more obviously vulnerable parts of both Old and New Testaments, he also wants to retain and even emphasise the view that the Bible can be true *existentially*. Thus he claims that "the authors of (its) stories were pointing in the right direction, even where the stories themselves are untrue" (p.399). If one has to wade through over four hundred pages of turgid text and fifty pages of unsatisfactory and poorly set-out notes to reach such an unremarkable conclusion, is it worth it? I, for one, don't think so. That which was worth saying has been better and more economically said elsewhere by other authors. Too much of the rest is persiflage or obfuscation.

DANIEL O'HARA

David Berman's highly commended *A History of Atheism in Britain* From Hobbes to Russell has been published in paperback by Routledge. Originally a £30 hardback, it is now £9.99 (plus 65p postage) and obtainable from G. W. Foote and Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Gillray and Rowlandson in their prime had no rivals, except each other, but now they walk again in the shape of Woddis and Bell. And what an extraordinary combination they make.

There are things that are stretched, no doubt, but mainly they tell the truth. A fact that serves to make their victims — politicians, captains of industry, leaders of all nations, reactionaries of the deepest hue — wriggle and squirm. But few of the latter can fail to disentangle themselves from the hook, line and sinker of the manipulative artists who blow humbug into the gutter where it belongs, giving us a smirk, a smile and more often than not a guffaw. An experience that is good at any time, especially during a continued "recession" and with a General Election in the offing.

Roger Woddis is a writer of many accomplishments whose wide range of work is here illustrated by Steve Bell. Both work for *New Statesman and Society*, with Woddis being included as a regular feature of *Radio Times* and Bell equally regular in the *Guardian*, where his idiosyncratic cartoons are given wide prominence. These collaborators are complementary to each other, and if Woddis understates the impact they make as "something to make us wince, or possibly even make us laugh" he is modestly ignoring the talent that has gone into the building of each subject in the present volume.

Although the verses and pictures have appeared in the past (same order between 1988-91), now assembled they tell a tale rather better than all the newspaper leader writers put together. Also, by dating their original publication, present readers will benefit by studying chronologically an historical record. Hence a flavour of Mrs Thatcher, then, dated 19 February 1988:

And spurning the multitudes, she went into private session with
her leading prelates:
And she opened her mouth, and taught them, saying
Blessed are the rich in pocket: for theirs is the freedom of choice
Blessed are they that screw the poor: for they shall be rewarded.

Important cartoonists and caricaturists of the recent past — Will Dyson, David Low and even H. M. Bateman, despite his "English scenes" and situations — all had their roots in Australia, while Vicky's political drawings were acutely inspired by his tortuous flight as a refugee from Nazi Germany. In this distinguished international line, from the great Gillray down the years, who have made their craft notable in today's Britain, Steve Bell deserves recognition; by his collaboration with a writer so distinguished as Roger Woddis, *Funny Old World* takes its place as a worthy addition to humorous as well as Freethought literature.

PETER COTES

A BOOK OF CONSOLATIONS, edited by P. J. Kavanagh.
Harper Collins, £16.99
MEMORIALS, edited by June Benn. Ravette, £7.95

Freethinkers don't have holy scriptures or special prayers for guidance or comfort at times of trial or difficulty, but there are plenty of texts which may serve similar purposes, and the freethought movement has produced several useful anthologies of suitable extracts, whether for private or for public reading. In the old days there were separate collections of *Freethought Readings* by Harriet Law and J. M. Wheeler, then *The Wisdom of Life* by J. Frederick Green and *Lift Up Your Heads* by William Kent, or the more specialised *Man Answers Death* by Corliss Lamont. More recently there have been *A Humanist Anthology* by Margaret Knight and *Facing the World* by Bet Cherrington, *Classics of Free Thought* by Paul Blanshard and *The Best of Humanism* by Roger E. Greeley, *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism* and *A Second Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism* by Gordon Stein (these six are all available from the Rationalist Press Association). There are also some relevant recent anthologies from general publishers — such as the *Oxford Book of Death* and the *Faber Book of Fevers and Fetters*, both edited by D. J. Enright.

A Book of Consolations is a new book which fits conveniently if a little uncomfortably into this list. It sets out to provide consolation “for doubt, pain, mortality” in more than 200 pages containing short passages of poetry and prose, arranged in sections called “Love”, “Christianity”, “Human Solidarity”, “Personal Faith”, “Defiance”, “Comedy”, “Pleasure”, “Age”, and “Lament”. P. J. Kavanagh is a well-known poet and novelist who previously helped to edit the *Oxford Book of Short Poems* (itself a very nice collection of 658 pieces), and he brings to the apparently easy but actually very hard task of anthologising the wide reading and deep feeling previously shown by people like Geoffrey Grigson and D. J. Enright. Kavanagh is a Christian, and he gives a definite religious bias to his selection — including some passages which are likely to afford a freethinker irritation rather than consolation, but several others which are very moving. However, he also gives a fair hearing to more secular writers such as Matthew Arnold, Baudelaire, Bellow, Byron, Clough, Emerson, E. M. Forster, Freud, Grigson, Hazlitt, Henley, Keats, Leopardi, Marvell, Montaigne, William Morris, Neruda, Llewelyn Powys, Schopenhauer, Seneca, Shelley, Thoreau, Whitman, and Virginia Woolf. The passages are often refreshingly unfamiliar, but the comments are sometimes rather patronising.

Memorials isn't a new book, but it has been rather neglected by freethinkers despite being a very handy collection of prose and poetry passages concerning

death (it is available from the Rationalist Press Association). It may not be as professionally produced (or as pretentiously edited) as the *Book of Consolations*, but it is bigger and fuller and more straightforward. June Benn is a professional writer too, who has also thought and read much about her subject. Her attitude is non-religious rather than anti-religious, and she is as fair to believers as Kavanagh is to unbelievers. There are short sections on “Life and Death”, “Love and Death”, “Fear of Death”, “Death, the Dead, the Dying”, “Mourning”, passages from classical Greece and Rome, Jewish and Christian scriptures and other works, Buddhist, Hindu and Zen writings, mystics and pantheists, “Characters of the Dead”, “Time”, and “Private Meditation”. But the longest section is 80 pages of “Passages specially chosen for agnostics, atheists, humanists and rationalists”, covering “secular attitudes to death”, and including many favourites but also several strangers who are very welcome.

These two books make a very nice pair, but I must say that I have found *Memorials* particularly helpful, and I am not surprised that it has been sold and used steadily since it was published in 1986. It deserves to be better known and perhaps to have a paperback edition.

NICOLAS WALTER

Crazy Christians

On his return from a visit to the Middle East last month, the Archbishop of Canterbury warned that the Christian population of the Holy Land could vanish within the next two decades. If that happens, Dr Carey fears that Jerusalem will become “a Walt Disney theme park for Christian pilgrims”.

But according to Dr Iair Bar-El, director of the Kfar Shaul mental hospital, Jerusalem already attracts many visitors who live in a religious fantasy world that out-Disneys Disney. Pious prophets and cranks abound, with 20th-century John the Baptists and other biblical characters wandering the streets.

Some of the pilgrims are mentally disturbed and come to Jerusalem to live out their religious fantasies. However, that is not always the case. Ordinary tourists are susceptible to what is known as the Jerusalem Syndrome. They lead normal, uneventful lives, but on arriving in Jerusalem take it into their heads that they are Jesus or the Virgin Mary. Some believe that God has sent them into the world with a message for mankind.

Dr Iair Bar-El says that most of the pilgrims who end up in the mental hospital respond to treatment. This involves some drugs, but the most effective method is confronting patients with reality and persuading them to talk with relatives or friends. They usually return to normal within a few days.

Letters

THE DIVERSITY OF HUMANISM

The London end of secularist Britain seems to be exhibiting examples of sterile disputation. Even at this distance, I find the view unenchanting. Had I moved away from London solely to avoid that particular ill, then I would have moved to Shetland!

I seem to have been drawn into the Nicolas Walter/Harry Stopes-Roe correspondence on account of my wish that we should the better keep to the humanist point when we wear our humanist hats.

I do not mean to convey that there is such as thing as "humanism itself" (Harry Stopes-Roe's phrase) from which this or that does not follow. Such an illusory entity as cut-and-dried humanism would be too contrived a life-stance for me; it would require me to Believe Truth and to identify, and seek single-mindedly to extirpate, Heresy. My life-stance (the term does not embarrass me as it does Nicolas Walter) consists mostly of good intentions in the heart, sceptical enquiry in the head and custard pies in the hand.

I see us as a small under-resourced band of people with a loose bundle of shared ideas — called Humanism — that are easier to recognise piecemeal than to define as a whole.

We should make sure that we concentrate our output in the areas where we have something to say that we can say more readily and more effectively than non-humanists can be expected to do. There is no line dividing humanist opinion and opinion held incidentally by humanists. But there is a spectrum and, as humanists, we should concentrate more on the end of it that is our natural home.

ERIC STOCKTON, Sanday, Orkney

ONE PERSON'S HUMANISM

I have no difficulty at all in seeing Humanism as a life stance. From that position I believe in (1) a "natural" universe (2) trying to bring about a kinder, fairer and healthier world (3) a combination of common sense and sympathy in pursuing this aim; acknowledging that most ethical questions have no easy answers, there being comparatively few black or white issues and a multitude in shades of grey.

Doubtless someone will point out the inadequacy of the foregoing, but its good enough for me, thank you!

VIVIEN GIBSON, London W5

AN ETHICAL SEX CODE

My attention has just been drawn to Suzie Hayman's review of my book, *The Sex Code* (December 1991).

The review mistakenly says the book is "permissive" about child/adult sex relationships. What the ethical code offered by the book actually says is:

"We ought not to touch another person sexually without their consent. . . Apparent consent by a youngster to a sexual act with an older person is morally ineffective, and therefore counts as no consent, where the youngster is too immature to understand the nature and quality of the act, that is its physiological, emotional and ethical significance. . . A test for whether a youngster who apparently consents to a sexual act really understands its nature and quality is whether, when maturity is attained, he or she would be likely to regret having committed the act."

Where the sexual contact is within the family the code suggests *additional* safeguards:

"Incest may be morally objectionable on one or more of three grounds. It may (1) risk producing genetically defective offspring, or (2) grievously disrupt relationships within a family unit, or (3) constitute immoral exploitation of a younger person by an older

relative. Where none of these conditions exists, incest is morally neutral."

Elsewhere the code makes clear that its precepts are *cumulative*. I do not see how any humanist could disagree with the combined effect of the above.

Your reviewer's misunderstanding of what the book says invalidates her accusation that my "permissive" views on child/adult sex "taint" the book. I trust you will publish this correction of a damaging misstatement.

FRANCIS BENNION, Oxford

SEX BY CONSENT

While I agree with Suzie Hayman that in our society — permeated as it still is by Christian notions of "sin" — it is unrealistic to expect that such heavily proscribed activities as incest and sex between adults and children (adolescents too, for that matter) will ever be seen as "morally neutral", I hope she would agree with me that the ethical crux of the matter should be the quality of the consent between the parties concerned while their relationship remains a private matter and has not been dragged into the public domain.

In his book, *The Sex Code*, Francis Bennion discusses the knotty issue of what constitutes "true" consent in such situations, and makes the valid point that this is profoundly affected by the attitudes of parents and others in authority. Yet however horrified such adults may be, anyone who has not totally lost honest touch with the realities of their own growing up knows very well that adolescence can be a time of agonising sexual loneliness, when initiation by an older person is often ardently desired and eagerly embraced without the slightest hesitation.

I agree with Suzie Hayman, too, that the power imbalance in adult/child relationships will always make these highly dangerous and undesirable. And the destructive influence of this power factor can work both ways: it is by no means always the adult who is in the stronger position once such a relationship has begun, and I have known of some pathetic instances in which an adult who rashly agreed to the eager importunities of a youngster below the legal age of consent has afterwards been terrorised by emotional (and sometimes financial) blackmail into unwillingly continuing it, sometimes for years. While complacently condoning such relationships is irresponsible, many of those which do occur call for our caring compassion rather than indignant condemnation. At least, as a humanist, I like to think so.

ANTONY GREY, London NW2

GOYA, THE PORNOGRAPHER

I greatly appreciate *The Freethinker* and don't expect to agree with it on every point — after all, the freedom to argue is essential to the freedom of thought.

I disagree with your stance on the Naked Maja controversy. I realise that support for abortion and pornography are strands in the humanist position, though this distresses me. But your views seem old-fashioned as well as near those of the *Sun*. Have the last 20 years of feminism made no impression at all?

A reproduction of Goya's painting was removed from the music room of Penn State University, you reported. You called those who asked for its removal "gauleiters" and "anti-sexist thought police". "Accustomed as we are to hearing office frumps complain about 'sexist' calendars and posters," you went on, "it is nevertheless astonishing to encounter such prudery at a centre of learning."

I work in an office. I also have a University degree. If anyone put up a nude calendar in my office I would complain (nobody has — but we've had some run-ins with pornographic software and I and others, some of them men, have complained). But how do you know I'm a frump? And should freethinkers be prejudiced

against frumps? And this is before we've even got to the case against pornography, which it's difficult to state in a single sentence.

I find the following points irrelevant: pornography is tacky; you don't have to look at it; the models are not coerced, and are paid; it only caters to a few pathetic inadequates; it leads to crimes against women.

It's said that banning pornography would be an attack on freedom of speech. Where does speech come into it?

People's freedoms must be protected, but only when they don't remove other people's freedoms. Pornographic images of women attack the freedom and autonomy of *all* women. By their existence they imply that women exist for the sake of men, that they are two-dimensional, non-autonomous beings.

The jury is still out on whether pornography leads to crimes against women. I think pornography is a crime against women. LUCY FISHER, London N16

FEMINISTS' PHOBIA

Oh dear, the editor has done it again. He has dared take to task feminists who have a distaste for the display of the human body.

Well, let me defend him; particularly from the gentleman whose splendid £5 donation is intended to keep the evil of atheism alive. (Would that the C of E could survive on this sort of funding!)

It has always been a mystery to me why a man's liking to look at women and pictures of women is interpreted as denigrating to women. I would have thought the feminists' correct response would be to pin up male nudes to restore the equilibrium. As this is not happening I suspect an element of envy or a basic disgust with sex which they share with the religious puritans. Fortunately there are plenty of women with the same healthy enjoyment of sex as men and thank (I nearly said God!) for that. TONY AKKERMANS, Leeds

PORN AND POWER

Ernie Crosswell's notion (letter, December 1991) that the "pornography business exists for the purpose of increasing the wealth (power) of those who run it" is weird.

That it makes money (wealth) for those who run it — albeit drastically restricted by the UK's outrageously repressive censorship laws — is certainly true, and why shouldn't it? That it increases the "power" over others of those who run it is, however, nonsense.

That the "pornography" business "exists" at all is for the purpose of increasing neither the "wealth (power)", nor the "wealth (money)" of those who run it. It exists because of the law of supply and demand. People always have, and no doubt always will, have an enthusiastic interest in "pornography" — or sexually explicit material, as it should more accurately be termed — and a desire to acquire access to it. No surprises there, surely. The "pornography business" "exists" because the people's demand for such material requires to be satisfied. It supplies that demand.

Mr Crosswell's implication that it is the desire for "power over others" that motivates the publishers of "pornography" is absurd. Their natural desire that the "pornography business" "will flourish" is not, of course disputed. But why does Mr Crosswell believe it should not flourish? His contorted equation of the free publication of harmlessly pleasurable sexually explicit material with the free publication of potentially disastrous State security is muddled thinking at its most ludicrous. A world of passive voyeurs is preferable — and safer! — to a world of active saboteurs any day.

DAVID WEBB, Honorary Director, National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Act, London SW3.

POLICY AND PRINCIPLES

In discussing the Sunday opening of shops, News and Notes (January) gives a mere 13 words to the people most affected, shop assistants. Even then it is a side-swipe referring to their union as "the unrepresentative Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers". Only a small minority of shop workers are members, but whatever has that to do with the correctness of policy on Sunday opening or any other matter?

It is a fact that prior to Xmas many shop workers jumped at the chance to obtain extra cash by working on Sunday. As foreseen by the Union, firms are now issuing new contracts making Sunday working compulsory, in many cases without extra pay. One can hope that many will learn the lesson that the fast buck, go-it-alone policy is not necessarily the best and that they will help to make USDAW more representative by joining.

The Freethinker could perhaps learn the lesson that in evaluating future social questions, it does not give so much weight to the religious aspect as to play down the importance of other factors.

The circulation of *The Freethinker* has always been "unrepresentative", but we believe that its principles need and deserve our continued support.

RON SMITH, Guiseley, Yorkshire

THE PURPOSE OF PUNISHMENT

Charles Ward, in his very interesting article entitled *Burns's Piety and Wit* (January) speculates on Burn's personal religion. I believe that Burns was a Deist, a term which covers as wide a range of possibilities as does Christianity.

However, Charles Ward, expressing his own views on heaven and hell, states: "Logically there cannot be one without the other." The "logic" of this completely escapes me. What you cannot have simultaneously is a good god and a hell. The idea of a god who ordains eternal punishment is certainly monstrous, since the only justification for punishment must be its possible reformative effect. Having ruled out hell, one is left with the problem of the destination of the "wicked" who are certainly with us (and I don't mean people with unorthodox sex lives). Purgatory — not a place of torture, which never improved anyone, but of re-education? Re-incarnation?

The Cathars thought this world was purgatory. One sees their reasoning.

RUTH ROSS, London N6

A RITUAL COMPLAINT

Since the publication of Jane Wynne Willson's booklet, *Funerals Without God* in May 1989, it has sold approaching 10,000 copies in Britain and has recently been published (with minor adaptations) in the United States. It has received many complimentary reviews — not only from secular reviewers; has created a great deal of positive media interest; helped innumerable bereaved families to see through the non-religious option satisfactorily; played a significant role in the training of potential officiants; and all in all has been a superb advertisement for Humanism.

For reasons best known to itself, *The Freethinker* has not seen fit to ever review, publicise, or even acknowledge the existence of *Funerals Without God*. (The only, and purely incidental mention of it in your columns, was in a book review of other publications concerning funeral practice, by Nicolas Walter, May 1991.)

However, I see (*A Matter of Choice*, January) that you have — at last — broken you duck. What a pity therefore that your belated acknowledgment of this excellent and acclaimed BHA publication should be marred, by being included in a rather niggardly and, at times, mildly supercilious review of Jane Wynne Willson's follow-up booklet, *New Arrivals: Guide to Non-Religious Naming Ceremonies*.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. 40 Cowper Street, Hove (Near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49a). Sunday, 1 March, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Jim Herrick: Shelley and Humanism.

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.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road Romford. Tuesday, 3 March, 8 pm. Susan Sloane: My Work as a Magistrate.

Humanist Holidays. Easter (17-21 April) in Torquay. Information from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242 239175.

The Humanist Society of Scotland. Cowane Centre, Stirling. Saturday, 25 April, 10 am until 5 pm. Annual Conference. Details obtainable from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, KA3 2JD, telephone (0563) 26710.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 10 March, 7.30 pm. S. Fatheazam: The B'Hai Faith.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 28 February, 8 pm. Tony Milne: The Nature of Reality.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 19 March, 7.30 pm. Ruth and Neil Blewitt: An Evening With Chapman Cohen.

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, 11 March, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Simon Williams: Adults do not Need Marriage but Their Children do.

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers include
A. N. WILSON

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

Saturday, 11 April, 6.30 pm for 7 pm

Tickets £18. Vegetarians catered for
(advance notice essential)

NSS, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL,
telephone 071-272 1266

It should be remembered that Humanist ceremonies are conducted country-wide by individuals who represent all strands of Humanist opinion — and who may belong to one, all . . . or perhaps none of the national organisations. Those who ultimately do become more involved in the wider aspects of Humanism, through their interest in and commitment to secular ceremonies, will presumably draw their own conclusions from both the uncharitable omissions and internecine sniping which, sporadically, *The Freethinker* sees fit to indulge in. NIGEL COLLINS, Ceremonies Co-ordinator, British Humanist Association, Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire

Roddenberry Remembered

The life and work of Gene Roddenberry, creator of *Star Trek*, are commemorated in the Glasgow Film Theatre. Roddenberry, who died last October, was a prominent member of the American Humanist Association and received the Humanist Arts Award shortly before his death.

Members of the Roddenberry fan club in Glasgow — known as the Away Team — raised the money for the seat and plaque. A representative of the club said; "Gene Roddenberry meant a lot to many people all over the world.

"He was a trendsetter in American television. *Star Trek* broke all barriers of racial prejudice.

"For example it was taboo for a white man to kiss a black woman on screen until Captain Kirk kissed Lieutenant Uhura in an early episode. He also upset many prejudiced people by showing blacks and other minority people in senior posts on the USS Enterprise.

"There was such an outcry from certain quarters that *Star Trek* almost didn't survive into a second series.

"But Gene Roddenberry bravely stood his ground and went on to make one of the most popular and lasting successes in television history."

Referring to Merseyside's forthcoming celebration of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in America, Frank Kennedy, a full-time worker of the archdiocese's Justice and Peace Commission, advised the churches to think about Christianity's role in the conquest of the "new world". He said: "Most church leaders of the time failed to condemn the slaughter of millions and forced conversions to Catholicism."

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A Bitter Pill for Granny Gillick

Victoria Gillick, the Roman Catholic anti-contraception campaigner, has reported a family planning doctor to the General Medical Council. She complains that Dr Rosemary Birkhill prescribes the contraceptive pill for girls under 16 without informing their parents or general practitioners.

Mrs Gillick, who has ten children, originally laid a complaint against Brook Advisory Centres. But the GMC does not investigate organisations, so she named Dr Birkhill who chairs a group of BAC doctors in Birmingham.

Darrell Thorpe, Brook administrative officer, says the House of Lords ruled in 1985 that doctors could in certain circumstances prescribe the pill for girls under 16 without informing their parents. But they had to be satisfied that young patients understood the consequences of taking the oral contraception.

Brook guarantees under-16s seeking contraceptives that their parents will not be informed. And the GMC recently revised its rules, emphasising the importance of confidentiality.

(continued from front page)

This would make economic sense, too, since not only is the dual system of education notoriously wasteful of resources but at least 85 per cent of the capital cost and 100 per cent of the running costs of church schools are paid for out of the public purse.

The National Secular Society is also opposed to the other Muslim educational demand: that their traditional faith and practices should be adequately provided for in the State sector. It is not for the school to provide for any religious teaching or practice. The school ought not to be used as a part-time mosque — nor, for that matter, a part-time church, synagogue, or temple. There are enough out-of-school hours for religious instruction and prayers without trespassing on the time required for legitimate school subjects.

If religion is taught at all in the county schools (as required under the present law, which we wish to see repealed), then certainly Islam should take its place alongside other world religions — provided, of course, that the teaching is objective and that alternative world views (disbelief, including secular humanism, as well as a representative range of beliefs) are accorded comparable time and respect.

Thus, in the light of fundamentalist Muslim demands, three things need to be legislated out of existence, as a matter of urgency: the public funding of all denominational schools, the religious clauses of the Education Reform Act, and, in a different sphere but for similar reasons, the blasphemy law.

A representative of the Department of Health says that, while the Department strongly urges that parents should be involved in cases where young people requested contraception, “we accept there are cases where this is not possible”.

Meanwhile, Mrs Gillick has had to swallow what must be a bitter pill for an indefatigable defender of “Christian values”, the family, purity and, of course, sex exclusively within marriage. She has become a grandmother again. Her 18-year-old unmarried daughter Jessie has given birth to a son. He was born in the same King’s Lynn hospital where Hannah, another of Victoria Gillick’s unmarried teenage daughters, also gave birth to a son just over a year ago.

Islamic Terrorists Silence Author

As briefly announced in last month’s *Freethinker*, Egyptian author Alaa Hamid has been sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment for blasphemy. His novel, *A Distance in a Man’s Mind*, allegedly “mocked religion and insulted a heavenly deity”.

The trial was held under emergency legislation introduced in 1981 after the assassination of President Sadat. There is no appeal against the sentence. It has caused outrage and united groups that normally are at loggerheads.

Playwright Karim el-Rawy said: “They are making an example of somebody to make everybody shut up.” Publisher Amin al-Mahdy described the trial as “a sign of intellectual bankruptcy of the regime and of the clergy”.

A Distance in a Man’s Mind was published in 1989 and a year later came the first call for prosecution. This was followed by an attempt to assassinate the novelist. There was also an arson attack on his home.

It is clear that Islamic terrorists are now engaged in an international campaign against writers and literary works which they regard as blasphemous or in contradiction to their superstitious beliefs.

Ramon Almazan, Pastor of the Mount of Olives Pentecostal Temple in El Charquillo, Mexico, died with 29 other worshippers — including 17 children — when butane gas fumes filled the tiny church. The authorities believe the gas was released to induce a feeling of “the presence of God”. Three people who escaped reported that when worshippers started to faint Pastor Almazan told them: “Keep praying, God is drawing near.”