

The

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# Freethinker

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## Commentary

**C**REATION of a republic in which the Church of England would be disestablished and the blasphemy laws at last discarded is the aim of a Bill presented to Parliament by Tony Benn, Labour MP for Chesterfield.

This is the second time that Mr Benn has presented the Bill, which seeks to establish "a democratic, federal and secular Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Wales dedicated to the welfare of all its citizens."

British jurisdiction in the North of Ireland would end under the provisions of the *Commonwealth of Britain Bill* (HMSO £4 – and well worth detailed study).

Describing himself as a "Christian Humanist," Mr Benn told *The Freethinker* that he believed the climate was right for further discussion and campaigning around his Bill. Many of its ideas had appeared in *The Rights of Man* some 200 years ago: "It is

just that we have never caught up."

The Bill would "establish fundamental human rights," lower the voting age to 16 and give equal Parliamentary representation to women in a Commonwealth Parliament consisting of the House of Commons and the House of the People.

There would be a President, elected by Parliament for a maximum of two three-year periods.

National Parliaments for England, Scotland and Wales would be in – while decidedly out would be the constitutional status of the Crown, the House of Lords, the Privy Council and the recognition in law of personal titles.

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# Citizen Benn or Queen Di?



# Citizen Benn or Queen Di?

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Of particular interest to freethinkers, the Bill says: "The Church of England is hereby disestablished, and all the powers over faith, doctrine, liturgy, property, discipline and appointments now exercised over that Church by the Crown, Parliament or private patrons, shall forthwith be transferred, in their entirety, to the General Synod of the Church of England to be exercised in accordance with any rules determined by that body.

"No criminal prosecution shall be instituted against any person for the offences of blasphemy, blasphemous libel, heresy, schism or atheism.

"Members of all religious denominations and holders of other beliefs including atheism, agnosticism or humanism, shall have equal status before the law and the legal ban on the election of priests in the Anglican and Roman Catholic faiths to the House of Commons is hereby repealed.

"The House of Commons (Clergy Disqualification) Act 1801 is hereby repealed, and it is declared that a priest, deacon or minister of the Church of England or any other Christian denomination may stand for election to the House of Commons or the House of the People."

On the monarchy, the Bill says: "The legal status of the Crown is hereby ended and the Monarch for the time being and his or her heirs and successors, shall cease to enjoy, or exercise as Monarch, any political or personal power of any kind, either directly through the

person of the Monarch, or by prerogative, or through Ministers."

Ownership and control of all Crown lands, buildings and property would be transferred to the Commonwealth Government.

But compensation and a pension for the monarch and full citizenship and appropriate accommodation for other members of the Royal Family would be made available, and: "All members of the Royal Family shall be liable for the payment or taxes and charges paid by a citizen of the Commonwealth..."

The Honours system would disappear but the Commonwealth Parliament and the National Parliaments "may express gratitude to those citizens who have distinguished themselves through service to the community by Resolutions of Thanks."

There would be a Constitutional Oath to take the place of the Oath of Allegiance:

**"I do solemnly declare and affirm that I will be faithful to the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Britain, and will respect its laws, as enacted by Parliament; will preserve inviolably the civil rights and liberties of the people, including the right to self-government, through their elected representatives, and will faithfully and truly declare my mind and opinion on all matters that come before me without fear or favour."**

Presentation of a Bill is no guarantee of its being debated, and Mr Benn is too experienced a politician to expect to see his brainchild become law overnight.

But he did tell *The Freethinker* that he would use every opportunity to initiate Parliamentary debate around its principles – as, for example, when the Civil List, the ordination of women and Ireland were being discussed.

He pointed out that changes in the spirit of the Bill were already being achieved, with the Queen having accepted the principle of taxation and Australia having dropped the Oath of Allegiance. And: "We will be out of Ireland. It is going to happen. And Scotland will be out of the UK."

Interestingly, the Roman Catholic newspaper *The Universe* printed a generally sympathetic article on the Bill, quoting John Battle, Labour MP for Leeds West, on disestablishment: "It's got to happen. I think the time has come.

"There are some real anachronisms around. It seems illogical that I, a Catholic, will now have a vote on whether or not the Church of England has women priests."

Mr Benn hopes that radicals of many different hues will be able to unite in a campaign around his Bill.

With what he called "the hanky panky" surrounding the Royal Family, it had become possible to question the institution, and even in the Conservative Party there were those Euro-federalists who saw it as an obstacle to the British being accepted as full Europeans:

"They feel they have got to get rid of the monarchy."

He said he had had a "patchwork of support" for the Bill, and there had been a great deal of overseas interest. People in Taiwan, Libya, the US, Rumania, Canada and Japan and other countries had asked for details of its principles.

Perhaps Citizen Benn's hour has indeed arrived. If, in Euro-terms, the British monarchy is seen as an anachronistic obstacle to the profitability of trade and commerce, then support for his Bill's aims among the seriously rich and powerful will grow.

At home, the tangled matrimonial affairs of several Royals and the recent toe-sucking unconventional behaviour surrounding the Queen's family has certainly put republicanism convincingly on the agenda for the first time in generations – although freethinkers may regard as trivial and even hypocritical many of the reasons for this.

John Major's vision of the future seems to imply King Charles and Queen Di commuting from separate palaces to reign over us, nine to five. Even to Royalists, this is plainly not on. Mr Fortnum and Mr Mason, or Mr Eyre and Mr Spottiswoode, travelling from opposite ends of the Home Counties jointly to run their businesses, are not suitable models for the seat of majesty.

This state of things is inextricably tied-in with Prince Charles's future position as head of the Church of England, which would be seriously undermined were he to divorce and remarry. The Wales's break-up has led many traditionalists to question the wisdom of having the sovereign as Supreme Governor of the CoFE.

The coming Parliamentary vote on the question of women's ordination in the CoFE will also put relations between Church and State on the front pages.

All this puts a glint in the eyes of Mr Benn and his cross-party sympathisers. I imagine that most readers of *The Freethinker* will wish success to his Bill, even if its aims are achieved in separate constitutional morsels – as with the Queen's undertaking on income tax.

For, as David Tribe says in his *100 Years of Freethought*: "In their dislike of hereditary privileges of every kind, freethinkers have traditionally been republicans, opponents of the House of Lords and disestablishmentarians. During the 19th Century there were periods of intense activity by, and interest in, the respective reform organisations: Republican League (1873), People's League Against the Hereditary Principle in Legislature (1885), Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control (1844)."

The organisations may have died. Their ideas, patently, have not.

by Peter Brearey

## THE FREETHINKER

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# UP FRONT

with the Editor

## New look for a new year

REGULAR customers will note a number of presentational changes to *The Freethinker*.

Others, not having seen the 'paper before, will be agog to know what we stand for.

And still others, floundering in the ocean of sinfully former-readers, may pick up a copy to question our role in a modern world in which the ancient battles against fanaticism have been won, haven't they?

The general answer is that our *raison d'être* has not changed since G W Foote, *The Freethinker's* first Editor, pledged that it would "wage relentless war against superstition."

We carry this on, still with particular reference to the 20,800-denomination Christian version of credulity because that's the one which we encounter most often, and of course because people have not shrugged off superstition's numbing embrace.

The pews of the more traditional churches are satisfyingly empty. But the evangelicals, who by and large propagate a tiresomely literal view of the Bible, are growing at the rate of five per cent a year: one estimate puts their number at one-third of all Protestants in the UK.

But the irrationalities and cruelties of all creeds and cults – Judaism, Hinduism and the rest – remain grist to our infidel mill.

And certainly we cannot ignore the stench of burning books which wafts in on the breeze from Bradford, nor the fact that many Moslems, including those recently cast adrift in the no-man's land between Israel and Lebanon, believe that Islam should organise the lives of all people, whether they are Moslem, Christian or Jews (Taher Shriteh, *The Observer*, December 27, 1992).

We are, then, concerned only with negatives? We are agin' religion and that is enough?

Nonsense. What could be more positive than our affirmation that, since this life is the only one we know, human thought and effort should be wholly aimed at its improvement?

Of course we insist that religion is based upon ignorance. Of course we repeatedly show it to be the historic enemy of progress. But we, before anyone, are concerned with this life – with the environment, with sexual and racial equality, with the belief that liberty belongs as of right to all.

*The Freethinker* works from the standpoint that morality is social in origin and application: the rules have not been handed down from Above. Abortion, marriage and divorce, birth control, euthanasia, sexual activity which does not harm others...these are matters for the

individual.

Indeed, it could be argued that the "do unto others..." Golden Rule, which predates Christianity by ages, is a cornerstone of *The Freethinker* philosophy.

The old battles do continue. We must go on seeking the complete separation of the Church from the State and the abolition of all privileges enjoyed by religious organisations.

We fight for an education system unencumbered by Jehovah and Jesus, except as beings of academic interest, like Odin and Fagin and Aphrodite and Sir John Falstaff.

We promote the fraternity of all peoples in the cause of universal peace. We seek to further common cultural interests, and to demand the freedom and dignity of mankind.

Does that sound a trifle prim? Perhaps. But such things must be restated from time-to-time, as must our view that such principles are rarely compatible with religious belief.

There is little obvious fraternity among the Hindus and Moslems of India, Catholics and Protestants in the North of Ireland, Christians and Moslems in the Balkans.

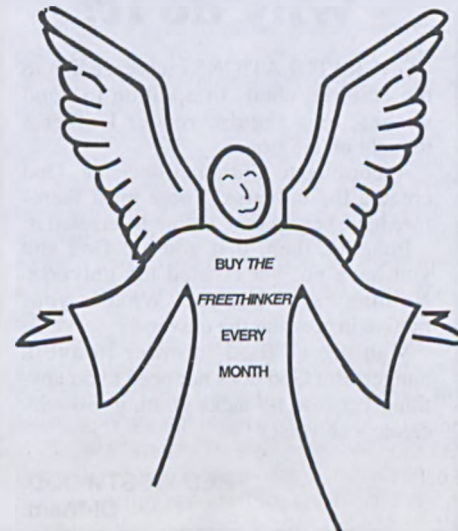
And how can you believe in fraternity, freedom, dignity – while consigning to eternal damnation the untold millions who do not accept – who may never even have heard of – the Virgin birth of Christ, the physical resurrection, the inerrancy of the Christian scriptures in every detail, the fatuity of God atoning to Himself for our sins, the imminent, physical second coming of Christ?

Never mind the compromising liberals who try to rewrite their creed: that is what Christianity is all about.

## We need an angel...

SO...that's where we stand.

The question is – how best to get across our



distinctly positive approach to life to the believing two-thirds of a population which is still bludgeoned into some form of superstitious belief all the way from the maternity unit to the crematorium?

Perhaps what *The Freethinker* needs is a vision.

Not vision – we have oodles of that – but a vision, like the one they've got "...on Tinos, where an icon of the Lord's Mother appeared from the earth..." according to a (one hopes) tongue-in-cheek *Guardian*.

At a time when recession-hit tour operators were dropping from the twig in distressingly large numbers, that newspaper's Helena Smith reported: "As news of the miracle spread, Greeks from all over the world began sending money for the erection of a church, which today – with a \$2 million annual turnover – is the richest in the land."

Such events, which gladden the hearts of travel agents everywhere, are, however, unlikely to add to the meagre coffers of *The Freethinker* – though our colleagues at 702, Holloway Road are ever vigilant.

It is unlikely also that the McDonalds fast-food outfit would join with *The Freethinker* in a similar sort of fund-raising partnership to the one it enjoys with Salisbury Cathedral.

Much to the reported chagrin of the animal-loving Bishop of Salisbury, cathedral managers agreed to allow the hamburger chain to supply 20,000 souvenir scrolls to visitors.

Recipients of the scroll, which contains a brief history of the cathedral, are directed to the local branch of McDonalds. God gets a share of the profits.

Again, however, we cannot see 702, Holloway Road appealing to Burger King or Wimpy as a likely centre for such an initiative.

It seems that we shall have to fall back on the historic generosity of our readers, if we are to extend the influence of *The Freethinker*.

## ...but what we've got is you

WILL you, please:

- Give generously and at once to *The Freethinker* development fund. Even a devalued pound enables us to reach two more potential readers with complimentary copies of the 'paper. And we need money for a *Freethinker* advertising campaign in appropriate publications.

- Sell *The Freethinker* at meetings and to colleagues and friends. You can even make money for your organisation (or, indeed, for yourself) because one-third discount is allowed on SAE orders for 12 copies or more.

# UP FRONT

with the Editor

← From Page 3

● Approach your favourite bookshop and use your muscle as a customer to convince the proprietor that s/he should stock the 'paper. You can arrange supplies through Holloway Road.

● Order a copy of *The Freethinker* at your newsagent: to be displayed in the shop alongside *Playboy*, the *Church of England Newspaper* and *Our Dogs*. You indemnify the newsagent against loss by promising to pay for the 'paper if it is unsold by the end of the month.

● Ensure that your library reading-room takes *The Freethinker*. If it doesn't, but if it takes the opposition journals, create a fuss with the council!

● Increase the flow of articles, news items from your local Secularist Humanist organisations, Press-cuttings, drawings, photographs, letters, so that *The Freethinker* may widen its appeal.

● However you decide to help, contact *The Freethinker* at 702, Holloway Road, London N19 3NL and let us know what you are doing.

Remember that money flows in abundance on the other side: even the principal sect of the Anglicans is backed by the £2,000,000,000 assets of the Church Commissioners.

The gods still have the upper hand in our schools, in the media, in local and national organs of government. There is, as Nicolas Walter noted in these columns a few months ago, a "rising world-wide wave of religious fanaticism." Your money, your dedication, can help to stem the tide.

## Women and the Church

IN THE coming months, we plan to pay particular attention to events in India and the Balkans, in the Roman Catholic Church (watch out for a piece on the new, improved Inquisition, which is now whiter than all other religious institutions put together) and in the strange world of the orthodox Jews.

The Church of England will be much in our thoughts – and not only for the laughs.

It is disturbing to find oneself in bed with John Selwyn Gummer, but I have to say that, in taking his bat home from General Synod after it had voted in favour of ordination of women, the fellow was sticking to the rules.

Synods and such may vote until they grow azure around the gills, but there can never be a legitimate woman priest of the Church of England.

Not, that is, until the Bible is formally rejected as the Word of God and St Paul is drummed from the Communion of Saints.

Of course, there would then be no Christian CofE for women to be priests of, for that book and that man are its mainstays.

There would be some other organisation trading in ignorance and superstition, but the jolly old CofE it would no longer be.

St Paul couldn't have been more explicit: *Let the woman learn in silence with all subjec-*

*tion. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. (1 Tim ii 11-12).*

And just in case the early Christians hadn't got the point: *Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak. They are commanded to be under obedience...And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. (1 Cor xiv 34-35).*

Throughout the Bible, woman is a non-starter. At Creation, she appeared because Adam couldn't find a helpmeet among the animals...and then she went on to bring about the downfall of man.

The tenth Commandment lumps a wife in with her husband's cattle and other property.

And the New Testament? The religious "uncleanness" of woman is shown when Jesus forbids Mary to touch him, while encouraging Thomas to do so. This is a throwback to the belief that during menstruation the touch of woman might have dangerous supernatural consequences.

With female priestesses and prophets all around him, Jesus took no woman for a disciple. The action of one or two of the early Christian sects in giving women the power to baptise and preach was denounced as "heathen."

The prevalence of women in the Pagan religions was at first strong enough to secure for some Christian women the position of deaconess, but this was cancelled, and she was reduced to the post of doorkeeper and messenger.

Later, women couldn't touch the eucharist with their bare hands. It would have made the eucharist – the flesh and blood of Jesus – unclean.

In the 6th Century, a Church Council (Macon) actually spent two days debating whether woman was a human being or not.

An Act of the time of Henry VIII prohibited women reading the New Testament.

Need one go on?

We shouldn't be soft on the CofE, just because we support sexual equality: historically, the Church has opposed it and is today largely irrelevant to the movement.

The Christians should be made to stick to their book in its entirety – or reject it all. We can't allow them to pick out currently acceptable passages and say that they're God's word while the nasty bits are not.

And if, after all this, I am told that although prohibiting women priests, the Bible insists that "there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all are one in Christ Jesus," I say: Fine. That's just another of the Bible's many contradictions and is a problem for the Christian to sort out, not for me.

## Sabbath obsession?

I AM sure that the new Editor will maintain the high standards of his predecessor, and that *The Freethinker* will continue to be indispensable reading.

There is just one area, however, in which I hope an actual improvement might be made: the magazine's recent obsession with anti-Sabbatarianism, through its campaign in favour of Sunday opening.

In particular, I find it irritating to read references to "the unrepresentative Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers." It is clearly misleading, dishonest and reactionary to damn a union for being unrepresentative — when it is trying to organise in an industry largely staffed by low-paid women, part-time workers and immigrants.

No doubt trades unions in totalitarian countries could also be called "unrepresentative;" but they wouldn't be, by you,

would they?  
With best wishes for 1993.

MATT COWARD  
Pinner

## Why do it?

CONGRATULATIONS on succeeding to the editorial chair. In addition to good wishes, as a regular reader I offer a thought on religion.

According to Christian doctrine, God created the universe. There must therefore have been a time before he created it.

Imagine, then, that you are God and you have not yet created the universe. Nothing exists but you. What is your motive in creating the universe?

Man grows food in order to avoid hunger. But God does not need to do anything because he lacks nothing. So why create a universe?

FRED WESTWOOD,  
Oldham.



# Astrological moonshine

CAN a belief be so foolish that it merits no repudiation? If so, astrology would qualify since it exists at the mental level of *Twinkle, twinkle, little star*. How I wonder what you are.

Half-an-hour with a child's guide to astronomy is enough to demolish astrology. And yet, quite apart from Hitler and Reagan, large numbers of apparently normal, seemingly educated, not noticeably deranged adults are attracted by it.

In his *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Science and Technology*, American Humanist Isaac Asimov describes how ancient Greek astronomers, with a few exceptions like Eudoxus (c300BC), accepted astrology "so that its pernicious influence over true astronomy was to endure 17 centuries, into the time of Kepler."

The Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group, for a meeting to be held in January, 1993, approached the Faculty of Astrological Studies, inviting a representative to take part in our discussion.

Our title, *Astrology — is it nonsense?*, understandably offended them and their Registrar suggested that we were not approaching the subject with an open mind. They would not provide a speaker because "no other professionals are asked to defend their chosen fields of expertise." We replied that open-minded people are prepared to ask questions and answer them, and that, if they considered astrology to be a science, we would like to ask questions about astronomy, physics, mechanics, biology and statistics. We heard no more.

## 'Cuddly Cancer'

The Faculty publishes a list of approved astrologers, with the information that a fee for a horoscope is not likely to be less than £40. This type of astrologer usually professes to despise the newspaper horoscopes. I was recently invited by our local BBC radio to an interview with Meg Markova, "Mystic Meg," of the *News of the World*. She was visiting Coventry to autograph her book *Astrolife*, an 800-page astrological guide to love and marriage. Her style is coy and folksy: "Cuddly Cancer mum adores her little Taurus."

In the interview, her tone was more serious. When I suggested that, unlike electricity, magnetism, light, radiation and gravity, the astrological forces alleged to emanate from the stars could neither be detected nor measured by the senses or instruments, she replied vaguely about "electro-magnetism." When asked if astrology was a science, she replied that it was "a teaching," but there was "cosmos biology" which, she said, ingeniously or



**The Letters Editor of the Radio Times defended its recently included horoscope as "harmless fun." It is neither funny nor harmless, declares KARL HEATH (pictured left).**

disingenuously, "sounds like a science."

She described her childhood at the seaside when her grandmother had explained about the Moon and tides and told her that she was made largely of water. Information, needless to say, in no way dependent upon astrology.

Astrology makes the enormous claim that the configuration of certain stars at the moment of birth influences the character and future prospects of every human baby (what about other animals?). Let us examine this step-by-step.

**CONFIGURATION: APPEARANCE OR REALITY?** Let us imagine a bandstand in a public park. It represents the Sun. Around it, at some distance, is a circular path. This represents the Earth's orbit, and should, therefore, be slightly elliptical. A woman, the Earth, accompanied by a small dog, the Moon, is walking around this path while the puppy excitedly describes circles around her.

The woman looks towards the bandstand and sees a tall building in the far background behind it — the constellation Aries. As she continues to walk around, the background to the bandstand continually changes. Halfway round it has become a distant church — the constellation Libra.

During the woman's journey, the bandstand and the background objects have not moved in relation to each other. All that has changed is the appearance to the woman as her viewpoint changes. To talk about the Sun moving through the Houses or Signs of the Zodiac is childish nonsense.

One other thing — the scale of my example is all wrong: the background constellations are vastly further away. The Sun is eight light-minutes away from us, while the constellation stars can be hundreds of light-years away. There is no connection between them and our Sun, other than being part of the same galaxy.

Of course, the Sun does move, circling the galactic centre every 200 million years and carrying all its planets with it. But the astrologers are not interested in this.

The planets move independently, hence their Greek name for "wanderers." Significantly, the astrologers refer only to Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, the

planets visible to the naked eye from ancient times. The telescopic planets, Uranus (discovered 1781), Neptune (discovered 1846) and Pluto (discovered 1930) do not figure in their calculations.

Here again, the movements significant to astrology are "appearances." For instance, the outer planets undergo an apparent retrograde motion every time the Earth "catches up" with them. For a time, they appear to change course and move backwards through the star pattern. But this is only an appearance because we are looking out from a moving Earth, like a rail passenger appearing to see a tree sweep past the carriage window.

The ancients thought that the star patterns resembled earthly objects and so named the constellations. I understand that my sign is Virgo, but I have never understood how one could depict a virgin. But, as Patrick Moore has often pointed out, the constellations are only "appearances" determined from our Earth standpoint by "line of sight." The stars they contain are, in many cases, further from each other than the nearer ones are to us.

**TIME ELEMENT:** Only a handful of stars are less than 20 light-years from Earth. Even when we see the Sun, we see it as it was eight minutes previously. During historical times, many stars have been seen to go "nova," the events not being seen until hundreds of years after they have happened. How can the light from the Zodiac stars, all originating at times varying by hundreds of years, combine to impinge upon a baby?

**BIOLOGY:** Why should the moment of birth be significant? Biology and genetics have already determined some of the child's characteristics, and environment will influence its future. "Mystic Meg" said in the interview that birth meant "separate existence," but admitted that some astrologers take account of the moment of conception. But how could they ever know this?

**STATISTICS:** Astrologers claim empirical evidence by quoting the life experience of a few selected people. Yet 15 million living people have the same birthday, and 450 million living people have the same Zodiac sign.

# Tribute to an enemy of cant

**HISTORY** is said not to repeat itself, but I recall undertaking the sad task of farewelling William McIlroy from *The Freethinker* editorial chair on an earlier occasion: July 1977.

Bill first became Editor on August 1, 1970, when the paper was a weekly.

Like myself in 1966, he undertook the responsibility with some misgivings because of an onerous existing workload — in his case, general secretaryship of the National Secular Society at a dynamic stage in its evolution. But when David Reynolds returned to Academe, no other replacement was forthcoming.

Perhaps strangely in the light of his pub-

by David Tribe

lic persona, his reluctance was partly dictated by modesty. He needed great persuasion from his wife, Margaret, and myself to accept the role, as he felt he lacked credentials.

Indeed, as with Charles Bradlaugh, G.W. Foote, Chapman Cohen and a dozen other secularist editors of the past, in a formal sense he had no qualifications...other than an ability to do the job.

How different from some graduates of the schools of journalism and colleges of creative writing that today are springing up on every campus and in every high street who have every qualification but an ability to do the job!

The rest, as they say, is history.

Through his work as general secretary, Bill had already shown his commitment to the movement, knowledge of its nuances and its essential history, and organisational talents.

As Editor, he soon demonstrated a ready grasp of complex issues and a flair for presenting them in an arresting way. This could be logically persuasive but was more likely to be pungent and provocative.

In my former tribute (following his retirement as Editor in December, 1976, and as general secretary in June, 1977) I referred to his pioneering work in exposing the sects — now a happy hunting-ground for mainstream journalists — and to his “fine line in waspish invective — which remains an essential part of journalism, however the fainthearted may decry it as ‘coarse,’ ‘crude’ or ‘violent.’”

And he drew on his contacts, growing reputation and PR follow-up to attract a widening circle of contributors and corre-

spondents.

All of these ingredients made the ‘paper not just a caller received weekly, then monthly, out of a sense of freethought duty, but a friend — albeit sometimes an ornery one — whose regular visits were eagerly anticipated.

In 1977, Bill was living in Brighton with a sick wife, and when his able assistant, Jim Herrick, expressed willingness to succeed, Bill gladly retired.

After serving with distinction for over four years, Jim moved on to New Humanist, and, as in 1970, there was no obvious successor. So, in September, 1981, Bill again stepped into the breach, and from Brighton, Coventry and Sheffield displayed all his old editorial talents in exposing cant.

Unfortunately, Margaret’s health wasn’t improving — and it takes enormous effort for her to pen the graceful and insightful articles and reviews that appear all too rarely — and distance from a printer is an editor’s bane, so Bill frequently expressed the desire to stand down

Those who knew of this wish — including myself — strongly urged him to carry on, as he has done for over eleven years — longer than anyone should have expected.

Peter Brearey has come forward as successor, and we all wish him well. He has the same obstacle of a country base, but, as Wakefield is close to Sheffield, has the advantage of being able to call on Bill for help and advice where needed.

Hopefully, Peter will have a long and successful tenure. When he eventually retires, however, one just has the feeling that Bill may emerge again for another stint. If that should happen, I hope I’m not too old to pay him another tribute.

● Bill McIlroy writes: Page 11.

## ★ Astrological moonshine ●

← From Page 5

It would require 100,000 investigators, working non-stop for 20 years, to compile even a superficial record of these lives.

Plainly, there is no scientific evidence for astrology. It is no more than a hangover from geocentric parochialism. When the Earth was thought to be by far the largest object in the Universe, encircled by hundreds of smaller ones, all close to it, it was not unreasonable to suppose that the circling objects influenced the Earth, especially since the Sun and the Moon clearly did so. But all this is centuries out of date, a relic of past ignorance.

**SADIST OR BUNGLER?** However, absurd as astrology may be, it is no more absurd than established religion, where tradition and institutional power have cloaked the nonsense in respectability.

Why, for instance, believe in an invisible god who decides to produce a son in human form, and then have him tortured to death on a pole to save us all? If God is all-wise and all-powerful, then He knew the outcome before He started the enterprise — in short, He planned it all. If that is so, He is a sadist.

Alternatively, if He did not know the outcome, the Passover crowd might have shouted for Jesus instead of for Barabbas, or Pilate might have plucked up a little courage.

If Jesus had gone on to die of old age (He had already grown from a baby to a man), what would have happened to Resurrection, Atonement, Redemption and the Blood of the Lamb? There would have been no Christianity, which must have its human sacrifice: no Christianity without the Cross. I have yet to find a parson who knows the answer. God remains either a sadist or a bungler.

## Tributes to Bill McIlroy

I HAVE always believed that *The Freethinker* has a valuable role to play in the latter half of the 20th Century as fundamentalism in general continues to rear its ugly head in all countries, and religious superstition is still rampant even in the more sophisticated countries of the modern world, as well as in the Third World.

I do hope you will keep up the good work of exposing and debunking religious inanities and superstition in the same pungent way as your predecessor in the post.

**M O'BRIEN**  
Malvern Wells.

I WOULD like to be included among the many whose appreciation of Bill McIlroy’s editorship has been expressed and among the

few for whom space can be found to thank him in the letters column.

Few of us can fully imagine how difficult it can be to maintain and steer this most important journal (as all of us previous Editors will recognise) and Bill has done so tirelessly and magnificently for more years than almost every other editor, never permitting its quality to decline. He deserves the great praise I am sure he will currently be receiving. I wish him a happy release and a restful retirement.

To follow him in editing *The Freethinker* is an unenviable position and I earnestly hope the new Editor will be as well supported by readers and contributors as he must have been. Good luck to you.

**KARL HYDE**  
Penzance

# Subservient and powerless?

THIS book is a collection of essays on the oppression of women in fundamentalist forms of religion. The title, *Refusing Holy Orders*, is open to at least two possible interpretations. First, it could be alluding to the fact that women are denied access to Holy Orders – that is, the priesthood, within many traditional religions; or it could be referring to women's rebellion against the restrictive rules imposed on them by the male-dominated religions of the groups to which they belong.

The book is edited by two professional women, Gita Sahgal, an independent filmmaker, and Nira Yuval-Davis, a Reader in Ethnic and Gender Studies at Thames Polytechnic.

Apart from the editors' introduction, which contains a subtle analysis of the interconnections between colonialism, racism, ethnicity and multi-culturalism, *Refusing Holy Orders* comprises essays by six different writers covering various fundamentalist strands in Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant), Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism and Judaism.

The interweaving of multi-culturalism, colonialism and racism, and its effect on the contemporary situation, is a theme that frequently recurs throughout this volume. What is repeatedly stressed is that the much vaunted multi-culturalist policies – that is, policies which are designed to give as much autonomy as possible to the different ethnic groups in respect of their religions and traditions (as defined, of course, by the patriarchal leaders of the groups) – lock women from ethnic minorities into positions of subservience and powerlessness.

In the chapter "Secular Spaces," Gita Sahgal points to the necessity for secular space within which women from different groups and religious backgrounds can come together, even if they are still to some extent attached to the faiths in which they were raised.

Abused women, particularly Hindus and Muslims, are aware that they will lose the support of their families if they flee from their violent husbands. This traps them in intolerable situations from which their only escape is suicide or murder of the husband (as happened in one recently highlighted case). Thus only some form of non-religious refuge can give these women room for reappraisal and reordering of their lives.

Again, as several contributors to this volume make clear, the extraordinary value attached to virginity in women which characterises much fundamentalist religion leads to the policing and confinement of women by their relatives. Brothers and fathers become watchdogs, attempting to exercise a total surveillance over

***Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain.***  
**Edited by Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis. Virago: £8.99.**  
**Review: Rona Gerber.**

the girls of the family. In addition, women are usually considered to be of inferior value to men. Their bodily functions are denigrated and in many religions women are considered impure both after giving birth and during menstruation. The control of women's sexuality is a major aim of most fundamentalist religious groups.

What also emerges in some of these essays, however, (and this slightly muddies the picture), is the fact that the constrictive nature of religion can produce secondary gains even for women. Not least of these is the sense of belonging – the opposite side of the coin from the stifling sense of confinement.

The contributors use a historical as well as a contemporary perspective on the issues they discuss, and this, although at times making for relatively dull reading, strengthens their argument and helps the reader to develop a better understanding of the current situation by showing how it is connected with the past.

Thus it was part of the policy of British colonial rulers, in the cause of stable government, to allow the religious communities to rule their own people according to traditional law – which was often grossly unjust to women. The community structures were thereby fixed in patterns which allowed little scope for evolution and change.

In Britain today, multi-culturalism is the natural successor to this policy. It assumes homogeneity among the members of ethnic groups and takes the views presented by the patriar-

chal male leaders as reflecting the consensus of opinion within the communities.

Although it claims to be anti-racist, multi-culturalism works against the freedom and autonomy of women, as the chapters in this book amply demonstrate. Multi-culturalism is thus shown to be inimical to the proper democratisation of communities. To quote from the introductory chapter: "Fundamentalist *leaderships* have been the main beneficiaries of the adoption of multi-cultural norms." There is always a tension between individual and group rights within a secular democratic model. Groups can tyrannise over individual members while claiming equality of rights in relation to other groups.

## Glimpses

No essay in this book is concerned primarily with outlining or analysing the doctrines of the various religions (except in so far as these are invoked by men to control the lives of women). A short chapter of critical comment on the actual content of holy scriptures and traditions would perhaps have been helpful. True, scriptures and traditional doctrines often obscure and can be modified and redrawn. But it would have been illuminating to have been told in some detail what the followers of the fundamentalist religions actually believe about their god(s). Glimpses come through in the various chapters – broken images of a punitive and unreasonable deity – but the full picture is lacking.

Overall, the message of this book is a salutary one, particularly for those in local and central government who advocate multi-cultural policies under the illusion that they are making a stand against racism. Let us hope its arguments will be heard and understood.

## Keeping us afloat

**READERS' generosity is reflected in the list of donations to *The Freethinker* Fund which is published every month.**

**Despite the recession and general financial climate, the total received during 1992 was only slightly less than in the previous year.**

**Our warm appreciation is expressed to all contributors, including those listed below.**

D Harrod, B Morgan and R W Philpot, £1 each; R H Barr, £1.50; R J Beale, P Deffley, A Hall, C R Keys, G McGhee and G M Punnett, £2 each; G Michel, £2.40; N Barnes, D R Barrett, A Dawn, R Hall, K A Harris and J Wood, £3 each; C Witty, £4.30; J Marsh and P Stiehl, £4.40 each; T Atkins, M E Bush, C Bondi, M F Campbell, A C F Chabre, J H Charles, N L Child, G Coupland, M J Coward, G Edwards, J Fawbert, T Green, M D Hallett, G F Hammond, L A Harling, B J Harrison, R C Harrison, J Holland, G R Hopcyn, R M Kachere, M Kirby, J Lippitt, A R Lister, H Madoc-Jones, J T Morrison, R Meredew, J S Murray, A I P Parr, R I Raven, E H Robbins, J Ryan, J Schwieing, B A Smith, A Stern, R W Vickers and K R Wingham, £5 each; R A Awbery and G A Wain, £7 each; F. Bennion, R J Condon, J A Knight, A McGee, A Negus, A J Ringer, S Smith and J Watson, £10 each; F G Evans, D Lennie and C M G Wilson, £15 each; S J Mace, £20; J Dalby, \$50.

Total for November and December, 1992: £389 and \$50. Grand total for 1992: £4,447.47 and \$175.

# Dead Sea Scrolls de

**T**HE first Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947 when, the story goes, a Bedouin shepherd boy, Muhammad adh-Dhib, crawled into a narrow cave in the cliffs at Qumran, East of Jerusalem, while looking for a goat. He found instead a number of earthenware jars, some of which contained the now famous rolls of leather wrapped in linen.

Further scrolls came to light during excavations in the region in the early 1950s, and an international team was set up by the Jordanian government to study, translate and publish the results.

That team, however, as Robert Eisenman says, "was hardly international...did not work well as a team...and dragged out the editing process interminably." As late as 1986, Eisenman, Professor of Middle East Religions and Chair of the Religious Studies Department at California State University, was refused access to the scrolls, which had passed into Israeli hands at the end of the Six Day War.

Not until five years later was such access obtained. Now, he and Michael Wise, Assistant Professor of Aramaic at the University of Chicago, have provided the first complete translation of 50 key documents which have been withheld from scholars for over 35 years: *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*.

What lay behind the extreme secrecy on a subject of great historical and religious significance? Why were scholars like Robert Eisenman treated shamelessly and, in his own words, "given the run-around"?

A clue can be found on illustration number 16 in Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh's excellent exposé, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*, now available in paperback. It shows Father Jean Starcky, of the so-called international team, celebrating Mass at the ruins of Qumran, prior to the day's archaeological excavations. The hold-up was nothing less than a Roman Catholic conspiracy.

Back in 1955, the American writer and critic Edmund Wilson had



*Why were 50 key documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls withheld from scholars for more than 35 years? What lay behind the extreme secrecy on a subject of such great historical and religious significance?*

*McCALL (pictured left) goes on the trail of the 20th Century's greatest cover-up. Pictured right, Cave 3 at Qumran where the copper scroll was found.*

detected a desire on the part of the "experts" to distance the Qumran scrolls from both Judaism and Christianity, though the connections were clear.

"One would like to see these problems discussed," he wrote in his book on the subject, "and in the meantime, one cannot but ask oneself whether the scholars who have been working on the scrolls — so many of whom have taken Christian orders or have been trained in the rabbinical tradition — may not have been somewhat inhibited in dealing with such questions as these by their various religious commitments." There was "a certain nervousness, a reluctance, to take hold of the subject and place it in historical perspective."

In his view — and I recall that he had taught himself Hebrew in order to investigate the scrolls — Qumran was "perhaps more than Bethlehem or Nazareth, the cradle of Christianity."

Because Wilson was an outsider, the international team could treat him with what Baigent and Leigh call "patronising condescension." They had more of a problem with John M Allegro, of Manchester University, who was originally one of them, and had drawn comparisons between the "Teacher of

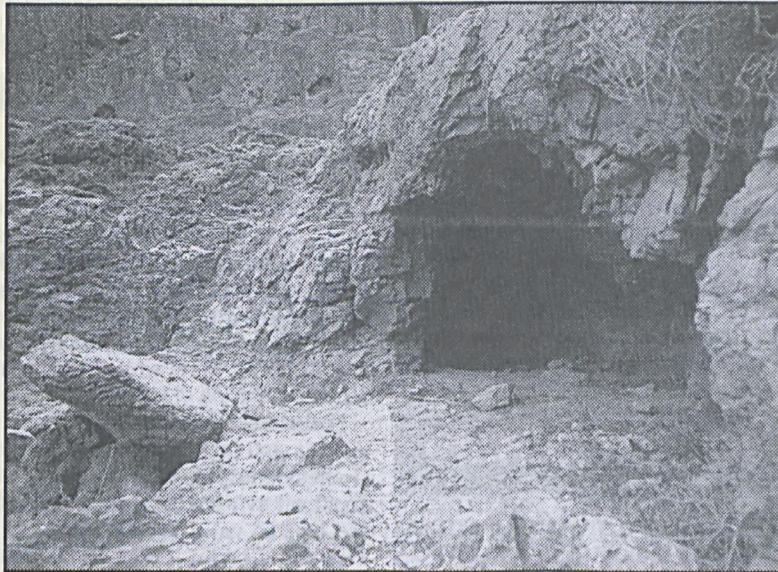
Righteousness" in the scrolls and Jesus. So they impugned his scholarship and integrity, declaring a letter to *The Times*: "...we were unable to find in the texts the 'sayings' of Mr Allegro. We find no confirmation of the 'teacher,' no deposit from the cross, and no 'broken pieces of their Master' to be stood up until Judgment Day...It is our conviction that either he has misread the texts or he has built up a structure of conjectures which the material do not support."

"We," the signatories to this public letter, were Father Roland Vaux, the team leader, a Dominican priest, Director of the Ecole Biblique in Paris; American Monsignor Patrick Skehan; Father Starcky; John Strugnell, a Protestant who converted to Rome.

It would be difficult to think of anyone less suited to preside over the investigation of the scrolls than de Vaux, a bigoted Roman Catholic former member of the ultra-right Action Française and a hateful Jew and Judaism. Yet he and his close friend and disciple" Father Milik laid first claim to all important Qumran texts. No wonder John Allegro got fed-up with what he called the Ecole Biblique gang, especially as he was the only one



# Deceptions uncovered



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published all the material entrusted to him, which the others were signally loath to do. As Baigent and Leigh point out: "Of those residing in Jerusalem during the crucial period of excavation, possession of texts and collation of fragments, only the young John Strugnell (who would hardly have challenged de Vaux anyway) was

not Catholic — and he subsequently converted. All the others were, in fact, Roman Catholic priests, attached to, and residing at, the Ecole Biblique."

Moreover, through its journals *Revue Biblique* and *Revue de Qumran*, the Ecole controlled "the two most prominent and prestigious forums for discussion of Qumran material." And when de Vaux died in 1971, he bequeathed what he regarded as his "rights" to the scrolls to another Dominican, Father Benoit: a quite irregular, not to say illegal, act.

Allegro was convinced that the team's influence extended to England, where the typically timid BBC repeatedly put off showing his relatively innocuous film on the scrolls, completed by the end of 1957, and finally transmitted it in a late-night slot in the Summer of 1959.

"I am convinced that if something does turn up which affects the Roman Catholic dogma, the world will never see it," he wrote in a letter, and implied that he knew instances where information had been concealed.

*The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* traces the close connections between the Ecole Biblique and the Pontifical Biblical Commission set

up by Pope Leo XIII in 1903 to combat the "infection" of Modernism. The Ecole's founder, Father Albert Lagrange, was a member of the Commission; de Vaux and Benoit were consultants to it, as is the present director, Jean-Luc Vesco.

What would the Ecole do, then, if the Qumran material did reveal anything inimical to Church doctrine? The answer, as we know, is suppress it.

No-one can doubt the parallels between certain Qumran texts and those of Christianity. Baptism, for instance, a "Council" of 12 and Messianism. And there is similarity of imagery and phraseology.

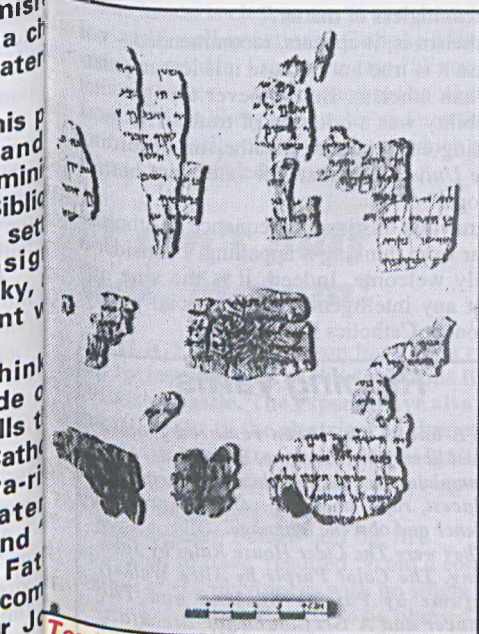
Thanks to the perseverance of Robert Eisenman in what he calls a "long, arduous, sometimes even bitter struggle," we can now read 50 of the documents in translation, alongside transliterations into modern Hebrew, with commentary, index and photographs of 25 originals.

And from them, Eisenman and Wise believe we get: "Probably nothing less than a picture of the movement from which Christianity sprang in Palestine." Furthermore, "if we take into consideration the Messianic nature of the texts...and allied concepts such as 'Righteousness,' 'Piety,' 'justification,' 'works,' 'the Poor,' 'Mysteries,' what we have is a picture of what Christianity actually was in Palestine."

But they describe it as Jamesian, rather than Paulinised Christianity, "zealot, nationalistic, engagé, xenophobic and apocalyptic," like the letter ascribed to the brother of Jesus in the New Testament. In a word, militant.

We might recall, in this connection, that the biblical Jesus was not always meek and mild, coming not to bring peace but a sword.

*The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* by Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, Element Books, Shaftesbury, Dorset, hardback £14.95. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, Corgi £4.99.



Text referring to the Messianic leader (Nasi) which is contained in the Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered.

# A dilemma for the atheist?

AN unsigned article bearing the above title, only without the final question-mark, recently appeared in the Roman Catholic weekly *The Universe*. Its author begins by stating that: "The Christian and the atheist part company over the question of whether there is eternal life." Now that is a very significant statement, because it might be thought that a more fundamental difference is that over whether the claim that God exists is true or even meaningful.

It is, however, easy to understand why believers place such emphasis on the question of eternal life, and that God is of importance to them primarily as the supplier of that supposed commodity. Who, after all, would be more than mildly interested in a God who was not at least supposed to have the power to give or withhold such a desirable prize? It was an early humanist, Epicurus (341-270 BC), who considered that "the Gods" (if such there be) are not concerned about us humans, and that we should return the compliment.

The atheist, we are further told, "holds that there is nothing beyond the grave...(and) no overall purpose to the universe or to our lives as part of the universe." If the first part of this is simply a picturesque way of expressing the view that the individual does not survive death, it is fair comment. But Catholics believe that we have (indeed that we essentially are) immaterial and immortal "souls" temporarily imprisoned in flesh, and that the death of the body is little more than the splitting of a

chrysalis to allow the beautiful butterfly inside to emerge into another, ampler world. Such a belief is sheer fantasy and make-believe – far from giving "meaning" to our lives it robs them of real significance.

The common apologetic device of exploiting semantic ambiguity is evident in the use of the word "purpose" in the *Universe* article. The word can be a noun, a transitive verb or (now uncommonly) an intransitive verb. Only sentient beings can be purposive agents: as such they have purposes in the sense of aims or intentions. But we also commonly speak of the "purpose" of an artefact, be it a transistor or a tampon, not in the sense that it is a purposive agent, but that it has been designed, or perhaps simply employed, by a sentient agent to serve a particular aim or objective. The two are not, of course, the same: one often finds an old flat-iron in use as a door-stop, or a shell-case as an umbrella-stand.

by Daniel O'Hara

Is there any sense in which we can properly speak of the universe, or of life, as having a purpose? Since the universe is not considered, either by Christians or by atheists, to be a purposive agent, it cannot have purpose in the sense of aim or intention. But Christians believe that the universe is the artefact of a purposive creator who has brought it into being to serve his own ends. It is in this question-begging sense which they actually consider it to have a purpose. Not content with that, however, the religious apologist goes on to assume that unless a transcendent being has an aim for the universe as a whole, there can be

no purpose in life. But this is just sleight-of-hand. For we can quite consistently recognise human purpose(s) within the life-process without assuming that there is any overall, extrinsic purpose to the life-process.

The article grudgingly concedes that the "best" atheists "dedicate their lives to doing good...to bring about a better world," but the author goes on to say "it is not realistic to believe that human beings with the same human nature will ever bring about a world of peace and justice rather than one mixed with sin and misery."

What are we to make of this? Are we being asked to accept that it is never worth doing anything unless ultimate perfection can be guaranteed? Surely that is a counsel of despair! But it fits in with the religious view that without "God" all is worthless and hopeless. It is this view which humanists rightly resist.

The author underlines his baleful philosophy, insisting that "if the world really is Godless and pointless there is no ultimate good and evil (and) ...the values of the Nazis are just as valid as the values of Mother Teresa."

This is nonsense. Using similar logic, one might as well claim that if there is no ultimate large and small everything is the same size. But there are important differences between questions of fact and questions of value, and the size of an object is a question of fact, while the goodness of something is a question of value and is always relative to the interests of a purposive agent.

Atheism is to be resisted, according to the article, because it entails that "in the end, humanity, with all its dreams of goodness and beauty, will be swallowed up in the vast night and meaningless of matter."

So theism is, it appears, recommended – not because it is true but because it is less unpalatable than atheism. But whoever thought that palatability was a criterion of truth? The most appalling consequence of atheism, according to *The Universe*, is that "all values are human creations."

I agree that this is a consequence of atheism, but, far from thinking it appalling, I consider it entirely welcome. Indeed, it is the sine qua non of any intelligent, rational social policy. No wonder Catholics hate it so!

## 200 years of SPES

**TO celebrate their organisation's bicentenary, 1793—1993, members of the South Place Ethical Society have organised lectures, meetings, exhibitions and conferences to take place at Conway Hall throughout 1993.**

**There is a special social emphasis on the weekend of February 13-14, the date the Society was founded. Members of all the national and local humanist organisations are invited to all these events.**

**Saturday, February 13, 4pm to 9pm: This event will be mainly social with food, drink and music, "interrupted" by a selection of eminent Humanist speakers.**

**Sunday, February 14: The Sunday events include a talk by Nicolas Walter on the history of the Society (11 am), followed by a buffet lunch (tickets available at £5 each), and the afternoon session (3pm) will be focused on Humanism within the community (an outreach session) and future plans.**

**The weekend is therefore covered by the themes: *Present* (Saturday evening celebrations); *Past* (SPES history); the *Future* (Sunday afternoon).**

**Further details from Nina Khare, Secretary, SPES, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Telephone: 071-831 7723.**

### Ripping yarns

*FIVE books have been removed from a school library in Johnstone, Strathclyde, after a complaint that they contained descriptions of incest, rape, abortion, sexual depravity, violence and obscene language.*

*They were The Cider House Rules by John Irving, The Color Purple by Alice Walker, Perfume by Patrick Süskind and The Chancer and A Greyhound for Breakfast, both by James Kelman.*

*Strangely, the one book which encompasses all these subjects – and in nauseating detail – was not on the list.*



# DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



## No water with mine, thanks

THAT a teenager fell from a tenth-floor window and survived will be regarded as miraculous by those of a credulous turn of mind.

Of course, the skill and dedication of surgeons at Birmingham Accident Hospital had something to do with it. The patient was put on a life-support machine and after six weeks of intensive treatment was on the way to recovery.

However, things started to go seriously wrong, with blood-poisoning causing a rapid deterioration in the patient's condition. It seemed that, after surviving multiple skull, spine, pelvic and leg fractures, he would die after all.

Fortunately, two members of staff noticed that the young man was being visited every day by his Irish aunt, who showered him with holy water. Analysis of the blessed liquid — some of it from Lourdes, no less — revealed that it contained the bacterium that was killing the patient.

A surgeon said of the pious aunt: "She was continually re-infecting him, either through his wounds or, more likely, through spray getting into his nose or mouth."

The holy water treatment ceased, the patient's condition improved and he is now out of hospital.

The lesson is clear to me. If ever I am laid low and a well-intentioned Catholic friend offers a sprinkle, I shall just say: "Never mind the holy water — kindly hand me another Scotch." It is likely to be safer and certainly more stimulating than water over which a priest has mumbled a few words.

## It ain't half hot, Ma'am!

NEGLIGENCE and arson have been ruled out by investigators of the disastrous fire at Windsor Castle. The experts have also dismissed faults in the electrical equipment, a discarded cigarette, or accidental ignition of picture restorers' liquid as being responsible for the conflagration.

Buckingham Palace said the fire appeared to have resulted "from a combination of circumstances with no single factor or individual directly to be blamed."

Fortunately, no-one was seriously injured and many works of art were moved to safety. But a fine 19th Century organ was destroyed.

What can be said with certainty is that the fire started in the Queen's private chapel. Many would expect this sacred corner of the Windsor pile to be under divine protection. However, there are numerous examples of places of worship being destroyed by "acts of God." So others will incline to the view of an irreverent wag who said that during a thunderstorm it is safer to be in a brothel with a lightning conductor than in a church without one.

## Harold's Day is done

HAROLD LEGERTON, indefatigable upholder of "Our Lord and His Day" and a former general secretary of the Lord's Day Observance Society, has died. Aged 80, he was living in retirement in Sussex.

The outlook for the LDOS was much rosier when Harold Legerton succeeded Henry "Misery" Martin as its secretary in 1951. It could celebrate "victories" like preventing the Sunday opening of theatres and the Festival of Britain Pleasure Gardens.

Within a few weeks, it collected half-a-million signatures to a petition against a Parliamentary Bill proposing an end to prohibition of Sunday entertainments and sporting events.

Long before it was acceptable publicly to criticise the Royal Family, the LDOS attacked the Duke of Edinburgh for playing polo on Sunday.

"We will not cease to rebuke him for his regrettable example," it declared. It went on to assert that "Britain disgraced herself" when the Queen met two visiting Russian statesmen on a Sunday.

Harold Legerton belonged to the old school of "every word in the Bible is true" Protestantism. Tenacious and uncompromising, he was something of an embarrassment to modernists who regarded his organisation with a mixture of indifference and disdain. He lived to see the LDOS pushed off stage by the glitzy Keep Sunday Special Campaign and the imposition of Sunday observance become a lost cause.

## Shrining examples

EVERY year, when hundreds of High-minded Anglicans process to the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, their more robustly Protestant brethren raise placards

and voices to proclaim: "No Popery!" Now, the Guardians of the shrine have raised their voices to proclaim: "No women priests at Walsingham!"

Guardians of the shrine include the very conservative Dr Graham Leonard, former Bishop of London, and John Selwyn Gummer, the beefburger-munching Minister of Agriculture. Mr Gummer recently resigned from the Church of England General Synod when it voted in favour of ordaining women. He is a likely recruit to the Romanist ranks.

Meanwhile, there is trouble brewing in Coventry, where plans are afoot to establish another shrine.

Local councillors have approved in principle a plan to resite a statue of the Virgin Mary in the ruins of a Benedictine priory. This has led to accusations of "idolatry" and "Romish superstition."

The pro-shrine faction in Coventry is led by Mr Patrick Flanagan. He believes that it could become a major attraction, with an influx of pilgrims boosting the city's economy.

"The shrine is not just for Catholics," he says encouragingly. "People of all faiths go to shrines such as Lourdes."

Mr Flanagan is a pilgrimage tour operator.

## Happy Mithramas to you, too, folks!

"SOME of the everyday rituals we associate with Christmas are of pagan origin and much older than the birth of Christ.

"One such celebration took place in Rome on or about December 25, engendered by the pagan emperors.

"They celebrated the birth of the unconquered sun which, after the shortest day and the longest night, begins again to give more light to the world.

"Early Christians in the Western hemisphere believed that Christ was born around this time and decided to make December 25 his official birthday."

These quotations are not taken from a back issue of *The Freethinker* or a pamphlet published by the National Secular Society. They are extracted from an article published in the Roman Catholic weekly *The Universe*, just before Christmas.

Such forthrightness is a welcome change — from the annual Christian whinge about "leaving Christ out of Christmas."

# Blast from the past: Number 1

## Silence of the Lamb

by Colonel R G Ingersoll

IF Christ rose from the dead, why did he not appear to his enemies? Why did he not call on Caiaphas, the High Priest? Why did he not make another triumphal entry into Jerusalem? If he really ascended, why did he not do so in public in the presence of his persecutors?

Why should this, the greatest of miracles, be done in secret in a corner? It was a miracle that could have been seen by a vast multitude – a miracle that could not be simulated – one that would have convinced hundreds of thousands.

Does any intelligent man believe in the existence of devils? The writers of three of the gospels certainly did. John says nothing about Christ having cast-out devils, but Matthew, Mark and Luke give many instances.

At that time, it was believed that palsy, epilepsy, deafness, insanity and many other diseases were caused by devils; that devils took possession of and lived in the bodies of men and women. Christ believed this, taught this belief to others, and pretended to cure diseases by casting devils out of the sick and insane. We know now, if we know anything, that diseases are not caused by the presence of devils. We know, if we know anything, that devils do not reside in the bodies of men.

If Christ said and did what the writers of the three gospel say he did, then Christ was mistaken. If he was mistaken, certainly he was not God. And if he was mistaken, certainly he was not inspired.

Is there anything in the literature of the world more perfectly idiotic? Intelligent people no longer believe in witches, wizards, spooks, and devils, and they are perfectly satisfied that every word in the New Testament about casting out devils is utterly false.

### HUMANIST HOLIDAYS - EASTER 1993

Hotel in Chester – all rooms with en suite facilities, TV, etc. Car parking and a few ground-floor rooms available. £120 per person for dinner/bed & breakfast, commencing dinner Friday, April 9, ending breakfast Tuesday, April 13. Booking by February 28.

Further information/bookings: Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, Glos. GL52 5AA. Telephone 0242 239 175.

Excerpt from Colonel R G Ingersoll's writings, reprinted from *The Truth Seeker* of December 12, 1896, and chosen by David Yeulett. Ingersoll (1833-99) was the son of a Congregational minister. A cavalry officer on the Federal side in the American Civil War, he was a successful lawyer and Republican orator whose anti-religious lectures, books and pamphlets gained him a wide following. Our own Herbert Cutner wrote of him: "Without doubt, his devotion to Freethought cost him the highest post his country could offer him – that of President. But Ingersoll never hesitated, he never lowered his flag, he never compromised, and never ceased till his death to attack religion and to fight for freedom of thought." The Editor will welcome further suggestions for this series.

Can we believe that Christ raised the dead? A widow living in Naim is following the body of her son to the tomb. Christ halts the funeral procession and raises the young man from the dead and gives him back to the arms of his mother. This young man disappears. He is never heard of again. No one takes the slightest interest in the man who returned from the realm of death.

Luke is the only one who tells the story. Maybe Matthew, Mark and John never heard of it, or did not believe it, and so failed to record it. John says that Lazarus was raised from the dead; Matthew, Mark and Luke say nothing about it.

Lazarus did not excite the least interest. No one asked him about the other world. No one inquired of him about their dead friends.

We do not believe in the miracles of Mohammed, and yet they are as well attested as this. We have no confidence in the miracles performed by Joseph Smith, and yet the evidence is far greater, far better.

Is it not strange that at the trial of Christ no one was found to say a word in his favour? No man stood forth and said: "I was a leper, and this man cured me with a touch." No woman said: "I am the widow of Naim, and this is my son whom this man

raised from the dead." No man said: "I was blind and this man gave me sight." All silent.

Millions assert that the philosophy of Christ is perfect – that he was the wisest that ever uttered speech. Let us see: "Resist not evil. If smitten on one cheek, turn the other." Is there any philosophy, any wisdom in this? Christ takes from goodness, from virtue, from the truth, the right of self-defence. Vice becomes the master of the world, and the good become the victims of the infamous.

No man has the right to protect himself, his property, his wife and children. Government becomes impossible, and the world is at the mercy of criminals. Is there any absurdity beyond this?

"Love your enemies." Is this possible? Did Christ love his when he denounced them as whited sepulchres, hypocrites and vipers? We cannot love those who hate us. Hatred in the hearts of others does not breed love in ours. Not to resist evil is absurd; to love your enemies is impossible.

If Christ was in fact God, he knew all the future.

He knew how his words would be interpreted. He knew what crimes, what horrors, what infamies, would be committed in his name. He knew that the hungry flames of persecution would climb around the limbs of countless martyrs. He knew that thousands and thousands of brave men and women would languish in dungeons in darkness, filled with pain.

He knew that his church would invent and use instruments of torture; that his followers would appeal to whip and faggot, to chain and rack. He saw all wars that would be waged and he knew that above these fields of death, these dungeons, these rackings, these burnings, these executions, for a thousand years, would float the dripping banner of the cross.

He knew that hypocrisy would be robbed and crowned, that cruelty and credulity would rule the world; knew that his church would extinguish reason's holy light and leave the world without a star.

He saw his disciples extinguishing the eyes of men, flaying them alive, cutting out their tongues, searching for all the nerves of pain. And yet he died with voiceless lips. Why did he fail to speak? Why did he not tell his disciples and through them the world: "You shall not burn, imprison, and torture in my name. You shall not persecute your fellow men."

## OBITUARY

## Paine 'settled the issue' for Willis

WHILE saddened by the death of Ted Willis on December 22, readers of *The Freethinker* will be glad to remember him as an entertaining screenwriter and playwright with an accurately popular touch.

*Dixon of Dock Green* and *Woman in a Dressing Gown* spring to everyone's mind, of course, but there was a phenomenal amount of creative activity – novels, plays, films, journalism – culminating in two volumes of autobiography, *Whatever Happened to Tom Mix?*, and, in 1991, another autobiographical sketch whose title, *Evenin' All*, recalled his best-known character, Sergeant Dixon.

Having acknowledged Willis's popularity as a writer, however, freethinkers have a range of other reasons (barely noticed in the Fleet Street obituaries) to be grateful for having

known him.

He was an Honorary Associate of both the National Secular Society (at two of whose annual dinners he was a guest speaker) and of the Rationalist Press Association.

Many a left-eyebrow was raised 30 years ago when the 1940s drama critic of the old *Daily Worker* and one-time stalwart of the heavily CP-inspired Unity Theatre emerged in the House of Lords as Baron Willis. (God's waiting-room, he called the place, where yesterday's men and women can sit comfortably and talk until the old gentleman with the scythe taps them on the shoulder and tells

them it is time).

But he believed that, since the Lords is a fact of life, progressive folk might as well make use of it...

As a leading member of the Writers' Guild, he fought in the Lords for legislation on author's public lending rights and on copyright protection, animal experiments and fishing-limits.

Significantly from our point of view, he was one of the Lords sponsors of the 1985 Shops Bill, which is being brought in again (by the Government!) on January 22.

And as a labourer's son who, like so many in the older generation of radicals, acquired much of his true education in public libraries, he attacked the cuts which have reduced those institutions to "a state of persistent decline."

Above all, in the eyes of many readers of *The Freethinker*, he introduced a Bill to abolish what he called "our outrageous blasphemy laws," forcing the subject on to the nation's front pages and television screens, trenchantly reopening an old path which other legislators will surely follow.

Born in Tottenham in 1918, Edward Henry Willis was sent to the Primitive Methodist Chapel by "not particularly religious" parents but became a Socialist and an atheist at 16 – after "a cruise around various churches in search of a faith."

Then, as he disclosed recently in *New Humanist*, "like Ludovic Kennedy, I read *The Age of Reason* and that settled the issue for me once and for all."

## Jesus – just an ordinary guy

WITH their recurring visions of "green shoots" and claims that three million are jobless when everyone knows that the true figure is nearer four, our rulers' arithmetic seems to be as creative as that of Archbishop Ussher, who cleverly computed that God made the world in 4004BC.

For the economy remains in a parlous, even perilous state.

There are bright spots, however. In an encouragingly thriving condition is the Yes, but did the HISTORICAL Jesus exist? industry.

Was he a revolutionary anti-Roman? A Jew-Arab-Egyptian-Martian-Indian with Cornish connections? A gay-married-celibate itinerant god-botherer? One of those Essenes? The central character in a mystery play? Was his real name Joshua and was he an hallucinogenic mushroom, after all?

It all adds to the gaiety of nations, as they say, and last year much feverish conjecture along these lines provided a lot of work for idle hands in publishing and media circles.

But, really, does it matter if Jesus was "historical" or no?

In an uncertain world, we dare to feel certain that he was not born of a virgin.

He was not led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.

He did not turn the water in six pots of stone into wine.

He did not send a devil out of a man and into 2,000 pigs which proceeded violently down a steep place and were choked in the sea.

He did not make a bedevilled dumb man speak nor make a blind man see.

He did not, in the fourth or any other

watch of the night, go out to meet his chums, walking on the sea.

He did not rebuke the winds into great calm.

And he most certainly did not revive the dead, bound hand and foot with grave-cloths.

Most important of all, he did not die himself, only to appear three times to his friends before ascending into Heaven observed by 500 people.

Never mind your medicos and your historians and your scientists – almost any Anglican bishop, and I guess most modern theologians, will agree that such claims are irrational, grossly at odds with what we know of meteorology and death and mental illness and pigs and the qualities of water.

This is the stuff of poor fiction, much of it plagiarised from the biographies of gods who were around before Jesus was even a twinkle in the Holy Ghost's eye.

If the "historical" Jesus was a mere man (or a fix of mescaline), who but a person with a poorly head or someone who appreciates the money-making potential of Faith can worship him?

The Jesus who counts, the Jesus of the Gospels in which these impossible feats are recorded and upon whom the Christian faith is based – the Jesus who is absolutely essential to the existence of every warring fragment of the Christian church – did not live. It simply doesn't matter if the "other" one did or did not, except to those who find fascination in the depths of human credulity.

Christianity rests on fibberly on a cosmic scale. *The Freethinker* has said as much for more than 100 years. It will go on saying it until the last grinning fundamentalist has succumbed to the revisionist obfuscation of the last bishop.

THE TYKE

South Place Ethical Society  
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LECTURE

JULIET MITCHELL:  
RECONSIDERING  
HYSTERIA

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Conway Hall, Red Lion  
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WCI.

National Secular Society  
ANNUAL DINNER

Saturday, April 3, 1993  
The Bonnington Hotel,  
London

Tickets: £20  
NSS, 702 Holloway Road,  
London, N19 3NL  
Telephone: 071-272 1266

# YOU'RE TELLING US!

## Ayatollah Walter revealed?

IN HIS article about the Channel Four series *Beyond Belief: Religion on Trial*, Nicolas Walter claims that: "The people who commission and produce television programmes will not let anyone challenge religion or champion Humanism on screen without the other side being given a hearing at the same time."

He also claims that these same people "will not let anyone explain any serious idea for more than a few minutes on screen without being interrupted."

These two statements, coming from a Humanist, beggar belief — if one may use such an expression in this context. By them, Mr Walter stands revealed as the Norman Tebbit of British Humanism — or perhaps the Ayatollah of Rationalism! Both statements, particularly the latter, are untrue and they reveal an attitude towards debate which is surely incompatible with his position as a leading advocate of free thought. By such utterances, he provides ammunition to those who seek to equate humanism with the excesses of totalitarian atheism.

Mr Walter is also being rather less than totally open about his early association with the series. While planning the series, Sir Denis Forman and I, as the producers, invited Mr Walter to be the Humanist consultant on the series. However, he appeared to want programmes that did for Humanism what *Songs of Praise* does for religion or party political broadcasts do for politicians.

Given a rare opportunity to make a series devoted to Humanism, Sir Denis and I were disinclined to throw the opportunity away. Mr Walter may decry what he caricatures as "good television"; however, Sir Denis and I believed that the Humanists have a good case and could survive a confrontation with religious believers. To judge from the general reaction to the series, they did so triumphantly.

Finally, I would like to thank the British Humanist Association and the many Humanists who did help us in such a generous, spirited way. And Mr Walter is wrong about another thing — there will be other programmes on Humanism and the series will not be the "excuse to avoid any further programmes for years to come."

**MICHAEL DARLOW**  
London WIP 7EA.

## 'Irrational trend'

IN HIS article on the 1991 Gulf War and the western media, Chris Templeton states that: "Few humanists would argue against 'truth'

being defined as having some relation to 'fact' and must be vigilant in recognising this media habit of 'normalisation'." (*The Freethinker*, December, 1992).

With this in mind, humanists should also exercise vigilance against the irrational intellectual trend which calls itself "postmodernism" and whose exponents deny the very existence of such categories as "truth" and "fact." This irrational "mental virus" (to

very like the medieval Heaven, but it is less moralistic, pernicky and disapproving than religion used to be...When you shop, pure self-indulgence and the performance of your social duty are one and the same. What religion used to call faith is now rechristened consumer confidence. And the system is matchlessly thorough in the way it uses advertising to arouse and direct our desires, market research to measure them and design and technology to gratify them."

Perhaps Don Cupitt is of the opinion that *The Global Depression Has Not Taken Place?*

**JUSTIN O'HAGAN**  
County Down.

## Social virus

AS A relative newcomer to the Secular movement, I feel in happy accord with the general consensus of views expressed in its Press — with one exception. That is, the tolerance of pornography.

Pornography today, with the powerful tool of the audio-visual, is a social virus, with dire effect in the areas of rape and child abuse. To argue that this is not so seems to defy basic common-sense, which I define as the ability to relate cause to probable effect.

Sex and sadism are powerful instincts in *homo sapiens*, with our capacity for imagination and invention. Impressionable minds and emotions are easily inflamed by material aimed at exploiting these susceptibilities and usually for gain.

The sufferers are those whose humanity is debased by the ingestion of this material, and the victims upon whom their baseness is inflicted. These targets range in age from a month or so to centenarians, and they are either murdered or survive as irrecoverably traumatised, damaged and psychologically spoiled.

Therefore, I am grieved that fine minds in the Rationalist ranks can uphold the "right" to the dissemination of such dangerous material on the grounds of intellectual freedom.

No such tolerance is advocated for the publication of racist propaganda, and rightly so. Yet, basically, the objection is valid on the same premise. Pornography has, in common with the expression of ethnic hatred, an appeal to the basest of human passions, and an evocation of the urge to express them in cruel, power-asserting aggression.

I suggest that Rationalists forsake the ivory tower of academic abstraction and cease to support that which is abhorrent in itself and appalling in its consequence.

**JESSIE BOYD**  
Gwent.



**Preferably short and clearly-typed letters for publication should be sent to The Editor, The Freethinker, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ. Please include name and address (not necessarily for publication) and a telephone number.**

appropriate Richard Dawkins' expression) is currently popular.

For example, an article by postmodern guru Jean Baudrillard entitled *The Gulf War Has Not Taken Place* was published in *The Guardian* shortly after the ending of official hostilities (March 29, 1991). (See Christopher Norris' *Uncritical Theory* for a critique). Baudrillard wrote that: "The true belligerents are those who thrive on the ideology of the truth of this war...If we have no practical knowledge of this war — and such knowledge is out of the question — then let us have the sceptical intelligence to reject the probability of all information, of all images whatever their source."

This kind of non-sense is the norm in post-modern writing. Britain boasts its own post-modern "theologian" in the person of Don Cupitt who, on page 78 of his dreadful book *The Time Being* (1992), argues that: "the late-capitalist economy promises the most perfect synthesis of total social organisation and total personal fulfilment yet achieved on earth. It is

# Yoof for Christ

**DOWN with wimps! Down with plain Janes! Down with oldies! Up with macho men and good-looking chicks! Above all, up with yoof!**

No, not the cry of some roving band of teenagers, but the coded message of the ebullient evangelists of the Oasis Trust as they strutted their stuff before orderly rows of schoolchildren in the TV series *Present Imperfect*.

Make no mistake about it. What they were intent on selling was not boring old religion, but a whole exciting new experience. Out came the high-tech gear and up flashed the sexy pop videos, all in aid of the cause.

Did they not have to communicate in a language the youngsters would understand? Did they not have to project a youthful image to enlist their sympathy?

Sometimes they succeeded. One shining-eyed young woman told of her first visit to one of their religious meetings. Everyone was "dancing up and down and having a good time." Her verdict? "Wow!"

These fervent young preachers did not stop at the use of gizmos. They were also keen to prove that they were tuned-in to the adolescent psyche.

As they zapped from one certainty to the next, they embellished their nuggets of truth with value judgements about their

neighbours, which to some Christians must have seemed anything but neighbourly.

One enthusiast proclaimed triumphantly: "Jesus was a man! He wasn't a wimp."

*Message: You don't like wimps. We don't like wimps either...Poor old wimps. Quite undeserving of respect.* So what of the New Man? Is he a species of wimp? Should we frown on him too?

Our sensitive communicator declared he was going to walk round the room and pick out the best-looking girl in the class — simpler, simpler. *Message: Plain girls are second-best. Good-looking girls are girls with long blonde hair — who else?*

Harmless little sexual clichés? What of the elderly then? Should our attitude towards the aged be more benevolent?

The PR man for the God of Love told of how he had once taken a friend along to a church to see the living faith, but had found the pews full of old women warbling hymns — one of the women so frail she had even fainted!

To underline the horror of this scene, he proceeded to mimic an old woman singing a hymn in a high, quavery voice. An act of contempt? No matter. He got the laughter he wanted.

At the end of the hard-sell came the dramatic appeal. This was aimed at the children's better nature. Do not be moral cowards! Do not be afraid to commit your-



selves!

"Who has the courage to come forward?" The challenge rang round the school hall. You could have heard a pin drop. After several exhortations, children gradually began to leave their seats.

Yet many remained unimpressed. Maybe today's teenagers are more sophisticated than these slick operators suppose. They are quick to suss-out when they are being patronised. They are well aware that long-haired blondes and macho men are not the only, or even the most valid icons around.

And even if a handful of old people singing hymns is not their scene, they may still feel uncomfortable at being expected to connive in ridiculing the elderly and frail.

Schools are apparently happy to allow religious reps onto their premises to set up their sales pitch and flog their particular brand of faith to the next generation.

Never mind that the implications of their message is sometimes suspect, or that the "trendy" attitudes they affect may not be quite so trendy after all.

At least these proselytisers can be trusted to put on a really lively show.

## WHAT'S ON

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group:** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, February 7, 5.30pm for 6pm. Public meeting.

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group:** Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Monday, January 18, 7.30 pm. Public meeting: Astrology: Is it nonsense?

**Edinburgh Humanist Group:** Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the secretary, 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD. Telephone 031-667 8389.

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

**Glasgow Humanist Society:** Information regarding meetings and other activities 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, February 2, 8 pm. John White: Onward broadly Christian sol-

diers — the long campaign against compulsory religious education in state schools.

**Leeds and District Humanist Group:** Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, February 9, 7.30 pm. Public meeting: Neo-Darwinism: Does it explain all? (Speaker from the Department of Genetics, Leeds University).

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, January 28, 8pm. Don Langdown: Sir William Courtenay, the story of a Kentish fanatic.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, January 21, 7.30 pm. John Aldam: Humanism — a personal view.

**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, February 10, 7.45pm. AGM followed by George Mephram: The Arms Trade.

**Worthing Humanist Group:** Heene Community Centre, Heene Road, Worthing. Public meetings, last Sunday of the month at 5.30pm. Information from Mike Sargent, group secretary, telephone 0903 239823.

# LAST WORD

by Barbara Smoker

Every month,  
a contributor  
is given the  
freedom of  
the back page  
to express a personal view  
on a current topic.



**F**OR decades there was bitter debate about women being admitted to the coterie of magic power.

Gradually, with the advance of feminism and women's liberation in society at large, the pro-woman faction gained ground — until it became feasible that, when it came to the vote, the required two-thirds majority for so momentous a change might be attained. And at last, by a slender margin, in the face of last-ditch opposition from the die-hard traditionalists, it happened.

I refer to the decision, in September, 1991, to admit women at last to the Magic Circle in this country — a decision that has many parallels with that of a year later to allow women to be ordained as priests in the Church of England.

Just as the International Brotherhood of Magicians (despite its name) had begun admitting women members many years earlier, so the Anglican Church in most other countries had been ordaining women priests for years — and in both cases the English club was less important, with a smaller membership, than its kindred multi-national organisations. But as long as the admission of women to the status of magician was kept outside this scepter'd isle, most of the sexist little-Englanders were able somehow to accept it without actual apoplexy, if not with equanimity.

It was a matter of choice whether an English parish gave hospitality to a woman priest from overseas. Indeed, on a parochial level, even home-bred contamination of the kind may still be avoided; but it is now too close for comfort.

Besides, the day will come when there are English woman bishops with the magical power of the laying-on of hands (I almost wrote sleight of hand) to ordain new priests — and then it will not be enough to ensure (as far as is seemly) that the minister in drag is biologically male: it will be necessary to ascertain that the bishop who ordained him was male. And with succeeding generations of ordinands, it will entail a sort of genealogical research to be sure that the new vicar has valid apostolic orders through the laying-on of consistently male hands.

The Roman Church, having cast doubt on the apostolic validity of Anglican orders ever since the Reformation, has, in the past three decades, moved towards accepting it for the sake of an ecumenical takeover (a return to the "universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome"). But it is one thing for the Vatican to consider changing its infallible mind on the validity of four centuries of schismatic ordination in the Anglican Church — and quite another to

## Monstrous regiment gets its holy orders

expect it to recognise the validity of a female priesthood or that of a male priest ordained by a female bishop.

The introduction of females into the apostolic succession must nullify the chain of male priestly powers conferred by JC himself — for, the argument goes, he chose only male apostles. Since it would have been unthinkable at that time for women to traipse around the desert with a band of male hippies, this is not surprising.

But why must their successors have to continue to be of the same sex, and yet, for instance, not be required to be circumcised or to be of Mediterranean stock or to speak Aramaic?

For the real reason behind the ruling, we must probe deeper — into inherent sexism. The silent question is: How could a mere women possibly inherit the true magical powers received by the all-male band of apostles from the male Christ, let alone pass them on into the future?

Similarly with the Magic Circle — whose ostensible reason for its obstinate sex discrimination was that women cannot keep secrets! This was shown to be merely an excuse when, a decade or so ago, one of their members changed sex, and was drummed out of the brotherhood — though any relevant secrets she had already learned were not, presumably, excised by transsexual surgery.

Strangely enough, the same problem faced the RC Church at about the same time — but the same solution was not open to them, for *Once a priest, always a priest* is an immutable

principle, necessary to safeguard a gullible laity against the fear of non-transubstantiation, ineffective absolution and other void sacraments.

It is a disadvantage of belief in magic that once the power has been supernaturally conferred, it has to work — no matter for whom. (Hence, for instance, the Black Mass). But a woman has (so far) never been a Catholic priest: a classical case of the irresistible force and the immovable object.

Transsexual priests therefore have the makings of papal nightmares — but the Pope has the consolation that, so far, sex-changes among the clergy remain rare.

It was simple enough for him to forbid the one highly-publicised transsexual priest to carry out any priestly functions, under pain of excommunication — but supposing she had disobeyed? Unfortunately the former Father Paol, now known as Sister Paola, seems to have obeyed.

Freethinkers may well ask why any woman, born or altered, should want to be a priest in a church that regards women (with one exception, impossible to emulate) as inferior beings. But since some women do have this ambition, it is obviously wrong that they should be thwarted in it.

It is predicted that it will be at least another two decades before the Roman Church accepts sex equality for the priesthood. Meanwhile, the CofE is to be congratulated on its belated conversion to that doctrine — and also, surely, on the defection of some of its most chauvinist-pigheaded members.

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