

The

40p

Secular
Humanist
monthly

Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 113 No 12

December 1993

AWAY WITH THE MANGER!

BIRTHDAY felicitations to Mithra, the Persian Sun God who came from Heaven to be born as a man (of a virgin, on December 25) in order to redeem us from sin.

All the best, too, to Horus, the Egyptians' Saviour of Mankind, whose birthday was celebrated on December 25. He was born of the virgin Isis, and in the temple at this season would be found in a crib or manger. And many of 'em to Bacchus, child god, born of a virgin at dawn on December 25 – and to Adonis, whose birthday was marked on...December 25.

Many happy returns to Christmas Day babe, Buddha, who, say some Chinese, was born of the Virgin Maya when she was put in an interesting condition by the Holy Spirit. All in all, it's a great season for virgin-birthday celebrations – and for pagan festivals of merry-making to celebrate the birth of the new Sun at the Winter Solstice.

Pity about the Christians, who should, by right, be excluded from the rejoicing – as, no doubt to their chagrin, they were until, on the "if you can't beat 'em" principle, a feast was established to mark Jesus's birth as late as the 4th Century. It wasn't until the 5th Century that the Western Church ordered that Christmas be "celebrated forever on the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol, as no certain knowledge of the day of Christ's birth existed" (Encyclopædia Britannica, 1946).

And now here comes biologist Ralph Ison (see centre pages) to cast further gloom with unseasonably scientific questions about Christ's mother and her pregnancy which suggest that she may not – surprise, surprise! – have been a virgin after all. It follows that her son is inferior to the "genuine" gods of December 25.

Put away the tinsel!



Happy birthday Horus

(and Bacchus/Buddha/Mithra)

God 'n' chips diet is no substitute for care

THOUGH thousands of children throughout the world are murdered daily in wars, and millions in the Third World die of neglect and starvation, it is difficult not to feel more deeply about the murder of a single child on our own doorstep – and the mass media plays on this emotive reaction.

The horrific details that came out in the James Bulger murder trial made me close my eyes and ears. But the paths of the two diminutive accused was almost equally unbearable.

They were only just old enough to be tried under English criminal law; in Germany they would have had to have been four years older, in Scandinavia five years older, and in Spain six years older. Only in Scotland is the age of criminal responsibility even lower than in

The punishment of two schoolboys – burial alive in the British social dung-heap – began 10 years before they actually murdered baby James Bulger. Fatuously, the judge in the case put some of the blame for the children's behaviour on their exposure to "video nasties." Many Christians insisted that the boys were simply "evil." Here, BARBARA SMOKER suggests other possibilities...

England and Wales.

Throughout the long, inhuman, nine-month delay before the case came to trial, they were deliberately denied psychiatric treatment or post-trauma counselling, lest it prejudice their Not Guilty pleas. Now, before even leaving primary school, these two little boys have begun serving life sentences.

And how appalling it was that, as soon as the verdict was announced, adults gathered outside the court to shout demands for the children to be hanged. But scarcely less sickening has been the bleating of churchmen, politicians, and media pundits, in the aftermath of the trial, about Evil and Original Sin and the need to impart to children so-called spiritual values.

After enduring this claptrap on Radio 4's *Moral Maze* the morning after the verdict, I stopped listening to all such chatter programmes. But Government Ministers joined in the hubbub, and one of them, Criminal Justice Minister David Maclean, was quoted on the news as saying that churchmen should stop talking about social issues like housing and start talking about teaching children the difference between right and wrong. My reaction was that politicians should stop talking about right and wrong and start talking about social issues like housing. (Anyway, was Maclean implying that while Humanists can be trusted to know that children need moral training, Christians need to be told so?)

It was a novel experience for me to find myself disagreeing with a criticism of the Church. However, I do feel that the Church must accept some responsibility for the murder of the Bulger baby, since the school that the two little murderers attended – even though sporadically – is a Church of England school.

And that is a significant fact; for in church schools moral education is generally replaced by religious education, with bible stories about a punitive tribal god and, central to Christianity, the cruel death of an innocent person to appease God's distorted sense of justice. The children are then expected to join in collective worship of this same sadistic god.

The most important school lesson should be moral discussion, with the aim of fostering the children's fellow-feeling for other human beings and animals, using incidents throughout school life to inculcate kind behaviour and

eradicate unkind behaviour. But when children in church schools are unkind to one another, instead of being confronted with the Golden Rule question: "You wouldn't like it yourself, would you?", they are often told that God is angry with them and will punish them – like the cruel adults in many of their young lives.

Unfortunately, the recent education laws and the present Roman Catholic Secretary of State for Education are aiming to subject children at ordinary state schools to this same damaging pattern of Christian teaching. Other countries in the western world rarely allow religious teaching and practice in their state schools, let alone make them compulsory.

Let us take religion out of school, and bring in moral education – based on human empathy.

At the same time, we must look outside school for many of the causes of the murder. Convicts Robbie and Jon were deprived children. True, they were not actually starving, as similarly neglected children would be in the Third World: they had plenty of chips to eat, if nothing else. But they were certainly starved of adult concern, and no doubt felt deep, uncomprehending jealousy of an obviously cared-for toddler.

The Government must take a share of the blame for the care-starvation that they suffered. Just as it is implicit Government policy for people to live in cardboard boxes because it would be costly to house or hospitalise them, so it is implicit Government policy to leave children in appalling home situations since alternative solutions, such as giving more help to problem families, placing more children in care, or even employing more school truancy officers, would be too expensive for the tax-payer.

Killed himself

A SIKH boy killed himself by stepping in front of a train because he was allegedly being bullied for dating a Muslim girl at school. Mandip Singh Sidhu, 15, was beheaded as the 110 mph train ploughed into him at Slough station in Berkshire. Police are investigating claims of bullying at Slough and Eton C of E Secondary School made by an anonymous girl pupil in a phone call. *Daily Star*, September 17.

THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

Views expressed in signed articles are not necessarily those of the publishers.

CONTENTS

Birthday of the gods	Page 177
Murder of the Bulger baby	Page 178
Up Front:	Page 179
Set Sunday free!	Page 180
Barbara blasts Bishop	Page 181
What's On	Page 182
Book review: Ettie Runt	Page 183
Nativity – a biologist's view	Page 184
Blast from the past	Page 186
Down to Earth: Bill McIlroy	Page 187
You're telling us! Letters	Page 188
Last Word	Page 192

Subscriptions, book orders and Fund donations to The Publisher:

G W Foote & Co (Dept F),
702 Holloway Road,
London N19 3NL

Editorial address:

24 Alder Avenue,
Silcoates Park,
Wakefield, WF2 0TZ.

Annual postal subscription rates

UK: 12 months £10 or £7 (unwaged). Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £13. Air-mail £20 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.

Printed by Yorkshire Web, Barnsley S70 2AS.

UP FRONT

with the Editor

Death in the heart of Texas

LOOKING down over the past 12 months from the frosty pinnacle of December, I seek to pinpoint the most noteworthy religion-related event of the Year of Their Lord 1993.

And I am drawn irresistibly away from a main contender – the collective delusion of a number of women that they can now become valid priests of the Church of England (St Paul says they can't, so that's that) – to Waco, Texas.

I have been reading a précis of the Official Report on April's siege of the Branch Davidian sect's ranch: "The medical examiner found the remains of 75 individuals in the debris," it says. "Thirteen adult bodies had fatal gunshot wounds. Most of these were gunshot wounds to the chest and face. Two adults were fatally shot in the back. Three young children were shot to death and one three-year-old boy was fatally stabbed in the chest. Two other minors suffered fatal blows to the head."

Suicide, then, and murder – and the rest of victims were killed by the fire, which the report insists was started deliberately on the orders of the sect's leader, David Koresh, who himself "died of a gunshot to the mid-forehead."

The report found that the fire was not caused by the FBI's gas assault on the building as bulldozers knocked holes in the walls. And, well, yes, it would say that, wouldn't it? We may never be told the full story of official agencies' real contribution to the Waco Gotterdammerung (any more than we shall be allowed to know what part some of their functionaries may have played in the destruction of President Kennedy, which took place, you may not have failed to notice, 30 years ago last month).

Scenario shared by millions

THE question which most interests me here is why Koresh and his followers so steadfastly refused to surrender their ranch, which had been raided by Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms officers (who rightly believed Koresh and his flock to be harbouring deadly weapons) back in February.

And one is led by the facts to the only possible answer: because Koresh and his congregation were very observant Christians.

As the world-eminent Humanist Paul Kurtz says in the Summer issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine: "David Koresh was mad, we are told, but in his teaching he was drawing upon the Book of Revelations, and his end-of-the-

world scenario is shared by millions of fundamentalist and evangelical believers. His reference to the seventh seal and his apocalyptic interpretations of the Bible are reminiscent of the Armageddon belief systems held by Baptist fundamentalists, Seventh Day Adventists, and other so-called traditional religious denominations.

"Unless sustained criticisms of the premises of Biblical faith are carried on, they will continue to go unchallenged – with often disastrous consequences."

Unquestioning acceptance

IT MATTERS not whether you are talking about Catholicism, Methodism, Anglicanism, Salvationism: all varieties of Christian belief worthy of the name require believers to turn their backs on individual reasoning and offer unquestioning acceptance of what priests and prophets and parsons say is the Truth.

In the end, every Christianity holds out threats of some kind of hell to the wicked and hopes of some kind of paradise to the pure.

Given this, it needs but little effort from a leader of unusual mental strength and charisma – and some people, especially those who are already socially alienated or despairing or schizoid, quickly arrive at a point at which they see the devil's hand everywhere at work, except in their own unsullied communion.

To such folk, at Waco, perhaps, and in Jim Jones's Guyana, an early death – and therefore an early admission to the paradise for which you and your chums are uniquely qualified – becomes a consummation devoutly to be wish'd.

The wonder of it is that more zealots don't go that way.

Ancient prophets

WE MUST be careful not to place these potentially deadly unfortunates too far from the mainstream, however.

What hair's breadth separated Koresh from President Reagan? It is just a decade (October 18, 1983) since Ronnie, with one hand on his heart and the other on the button, told the Executive Director of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee: "I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon. Believe me, they describe the times we're going through."

Characters like Reagan and Koresh, the dangerously devout, do take such matters literally – and for around two millennia it has been at the core of Christian dogma that the world will end suddenly as a horde of supernaturals wipe-

out most of humanity at the command of an all-powerful being. Sole survivors will be those who believe in the Messiah, who will appear suddenly and in whom only a few – like those at Waco? – will believe.

This is Christian orthodoxy for millions. And how far removed is Koresh from a Pope who is infallible on matters of faith and morals? From Martin Luther who announced that God had instructed him to destroy the Jews and burn their synagogues?

Turning to other, related religions, how does Koresh differ in any important way from an Ayatollah who, with the enthusiastic support of co-religionists, takes to himself the right to pronounce a death sentence on a foreign scribbler? From the Lubavitcher disciples of Rabbi Schneerson who *know* that he is the Special Messenger of God?

When Koresh let it be known that God had come to the Mount Carmel ranch at Waco and told him to keep all the women and girl children for himself, he was merely making Old Testament "history" repeat itself.

Studying what our US contemporaries have been saying about Waco, I was drawn to a letter from Patsy Barker in *Freethought Today*, June-July issue: "I blame the Bible for the Waco tragedy. If David Koresh hadn't picked up the Bible in the first place, he would still be alive and in his right mind today. And so would all the others."

That may appear simplistic, but, given the facts even as outlined in the Official Report, it is difficult to argue with.

And so is the comment of my hero, Captain Jim Kirk, (creation of American Humanist, the late Gene Roddenberry), who in a recent *Star Trek*, replied to Spock's bewilderment over how humans, with all their violence, had managed to survive for so long.

As *The Enterprise* hit Warp Factor 4, Jim said: "We managed to control it." And that brings us back to Dr Kurtz and his call for "sustained criticism" of the premises of Biblical faith, if others are to be saved from Waco-style disasters.

We must attempt to "control" religion, as we try to control violence – by challenging it and criticising it and exposing its pointlessness at every possible opportunity.

SPREAD IT AROUND!

You can help spread the Secularist message of *The Free-thinker* by supporting the paper's vital development fund. Please send a donation today to: Terry Mullins, G W Foote & Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.
SPREAD IT AROUND!

SET SUNDAY FREE!

AS the House of Commons prepared to vote on the Government's Sunday trading proposals, the Rationalist Press Association sent all MPs a 10-point statement urging support for the complete deregulation of Sunday shopping.

This issue of *The Freethinker* went to press before it was known which of the options before the House – deregulation, restriction or partial deregulation – found favour with MPs. But the RPA statement, issued with the backing of the National Secular Society, was unequivocally for setting Sunday completely free:

"Of course there should be no interference with religious observance and no exploitation of workers. But the basic principle is that people should be able to buy and sell what they want on Sunday, just as they can do anything else on Sunday and buy and sell what they want on any other day. There is nothing new about this – it works in several other countries,

and increasingly in this country. It is time to accept that the observance or non-observance of Sunday should be a matter of personal choice and not of criminal law, and to set Sunday free."

The document noted that all the many recent surveys and studies of public opinion and behaviour have shown that a major relaxation of the law is favoured by a large majority of the population, and that the law is already being defied by increasing numbers of shops and shoppers.

Minority

Other points made to MPs included: Sunday and family life have already changed beyond recognition. Longer holidays and more flexible working hours mean that it is less important as a day off. Greater mobility and more purchasing power mean that Sunday is increasingly used for shopping and travelling.

Traditional Christian observance has now become a minority practice. Less than 10 per cent of the population regularly attend religious services on Sunday.

Of course, Christians (and Jews, and anyone else) should be able to continue their traditional observance of Sunday (or Saturday, or any other day), but not to force other people to do so. The only reason for giving Sunday special protection is the religious tradition. This is no longer a good enough reason to involve the criminal law to do so.

Restrictions have been gradually removed from sports, games, meetings, lectures, museums, galleries, concerts, cinemas, theatres. Shopping is the last major object of sabbatarian restrictions.

The present lists of things which may or may not be sold are notoriously anomalous, and any possible future lists would be equally unsatisfactory. The same is true of proposed limits on the kind or amount of work or the type and size of shops which may or may not be allowed on Sunday.

The present law is enforced by local authorities, but they have become increasingly reluctant to prosecute offending shops and it is increasingly difficult to secure convictions. As a result, there is considerable variation from place to place and from time to time. The general principle that a victimless crime which can't be enforced should be repealed clearly applies here.

Anomalies

Sunday may be the only day when couples can shop together or when young people can go out together.

Many shopkeepers and shopworkers fear deregulation of Sunday trading (as they once feared the abolition of Resale Price Maintenance), because of the increase in competition and the danger of exploitation, but most people now prefer more freedom of trade and work, as of everything else. Most retail organisations and trade unions now accept that relaxation is inevitable and may even be desirable.

Changes in the lists of restricted goods would only change the details of anomalies; restrictions in hours of trading or size of shops would only produce more anomalies. And any reform based on compromise would prove unpopular and unworkable and would soon have to be reformed again.

The simplest course is to abolish all restrictions on Sunday, make it the same as any other day in law, putting shopping on the same basis as all other activities, and deal directly with the genuine problems of planning and employment.

The Freethinker to cost more

FROM January, the UK annual subscription to *The Freethinker* – leading voice of the best of causes – will be £10.

There will be a concession for the unwaged – pensioners, unemployed people, students – for whom the subscription will be £7. They should reveal their status when renewing or taking-out subscriptions.

The over-the-counter cover price will be £1.

The publishers are aware that the increases appear high. But we are confident that readers will consider them in the context not only of what they pay for other publications but also of the fact that the cover price of 40p and annual subscription of £5 have been held at those unrealistically low levels since January 1, 1988.

Increases in postal charges from November 1 and ever-rising printing and production costs can no longer be absorbed at the same rate – although the 'paper continues to be heavily subsidised.

"It is ludicrously cheap," according to one newcomer to the movement.

Even at the new prices, a copy of the oldest Secular Humanist publication in the world will still cost far less than a pint of beer or ten cigarettes.

We appeal to readers to continue to support our never-ending fight against superstition and for a more humane, more rational world.

The Freethinker Fund is as vital as ever, more especially since we are stepping-up the effort to take *The Freethinker*, here and

abroad, to people who may be unaware that there is a practical, principled alternative to religious belief.

Hardest hit will be our overseas subscribers. In a move which many see as part of the process of "fattening-up" the Post Office for eventual privatisation, the cost of sending one airmail copy of *The Freethinker* to, for example, the USA or India rose by an incredible 42p on November 1. The charge for sending one copy airmail to Australia and New Zealand went up from 76p to £1.13! Even surface mail charges rose by around 13p per copy.

We plan to appoint agents in some countries who will be able to receive *The Freethinker* in bulk and send it on to subscribers at local rates.

But in the meantime the (still heavily subsidised) overseas airmail rate must be increased to £20 sterling.

The surface mail rate goes up to £13, anywhere in the world outside the UK (including the Republic of Ireland).

Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling (or USA \$8) to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.

The Freethinker publishing company is G W Foote & Co. Ltd., 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Barbara blasts the Bishop

NATIONAL Secular Society President Barbara Smoker has blasted Northern Ireland's RC Bishop Daley for claiming on the BBC Radio Four *Today* programme that sectarian violence in the province is perpetrated by "godless people," not by Christians.

Bishop Daley made the allegation on November 1 – and Miss Smoker at once despatched a protest to the *Today* producer, accusing the prelate of "a blatantly untrue slur on godless people, whom the National Secular Society has represented since 1866."

She added: "Though the bomb-planters and gunmen may not care much about theology, they are identified by their religious affiliation; they maim and murder in the name of their particular brand of Christianity and its god; and their mutual hostility is fostered in childhood, through the

dual educational system of Northern Ireland, which divides Catholic from Protestant at the age of five.

"When have agnostics ever mounted violent campaigns against atheists?"

"Moreover, we godless people naturally choose to have non-religious funerals, for which there are some 200 trained Secular Humanist officiants in Britain, and several in Ulster.

Claptrap

"Having officiated myself at more than 400 funerals, I have never heard of a single non-religious funeral being requested for a member of the IRA or the UFF. Their funerals, according to the news media, are invariably traditional religious funerals, with all the claptrap about a supposed god and a supposed future life.

"So Daley was obviously talking through his mitre."

● On a lighter note, Nicolas Walter writes: The following news item was broadcast in *Rory Bremner Who Else?* on Channel Four television on October 30 and November 3:

This is a divided city, on one side the Christians, on the other the Christians. Last weekend, Christian fanatics crossed the line which divides the Christian sector from the Christian sector, and planted bombs which killed a number of Christians. In retaliation, the Christians ambushed a group of Christians, killing two and injuring others. The Christians have promised revenge. Some fear that the Christians will not rest until all the Christians have been wiped out, but others fear the reverse. For ordinary people, though, the only comfort is their religion. And now, Thought for the Day.

Broaden EC research, say Euro Humanists

A RESOLUTION on EC research subjects, presented by Richard Benjamin, of the Ethical Society, London, was unanimously approved at the European Humanist Federation's Berlin meeting.

It says: "The European Humanist Federation notes that the 2nd Working Document of the European Commission's 4th Research Framework Programme (for 1994-98) continues to concentrate mainly on support for industrial competitiveness, by the development of technology.

"By comparison, the plans for Targeted Socio-economic Research, although a step in the right direction, are quite inadequate.

"We submit that there is an urgent need for co-ordinated research on the entire social infrastructure, including the health and social services, the education systems at all levels, the judicial systems and, above all, the problems of democratic government, including constitutional and electoral problems, the decision-making process and industrial co-determination.

"Such research should aim at identifying best practice, any *inadequacy* or inefficiency, and any *special problems or controversies* requiring more detailed research."

The motion has been sent, in the first instance, to the relevant committees and study groups of the European Community's Commission, Parliament and Economic and Social Committee.

Richard Benjamin told *The Freethinker*: "It is an example of Humanist methodology – the scientific approach to human and social problems is perhaps the greatest achievement of the Humanist tradition.

"The competent implementation of the parts of the resolution which I have italicised must, in the long term, lead to a Europe free from doctrinaire belief systems (except among the insane).

"Incidentally, the Council of Ministers agreed on October 11 to spend more than £10,000 million on its 4th Research Framework Programme."

The believing world

GUIDES have been banned from an Essex church hall because the vicar thinks they are no longer a Christian organisation. The Rev Christopher Keating, of All Saints, Goodmayes, decided on the ban after the Guides voted to change the wording of their promise from "do my duty to God" to "love my God." Mr Keating, who says the change allows children of non-Christian faiths to think of their own god, told Guide and Scout leaders of his decision last week. *Daily Telegraph*, October 8.

THE Catholic Church is caught up in institutionalised racism, according to a statement released by Aboriginal church representatives yesterday. In the statement, Aboriginal Catholics complained of whites vacating pews so they did not have to sit near them, and of being asked not to participate in church activities. However, the statement's main criticism was "that the church is still trying to assimilate Aborigines into the non-Aboriginal society, rather than in assisting Aborigines to be Catholic in their own culture." Launching the document, *Recognition: The Way Forward*, the Chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, Bishop William Brennan, said: "We are trying to get the average Catholic to listen to the voices of the Aboriginal people and to recognise that they're not just suntanned white people." *The Age*, Melbourne, September 14.

Hell of a need for cash

HULDA PELZL, a reader of our US contemporary *Freethought Today*, writes to that 'paper: "Heard on St Louis radio station WLOX, October 23, 1993: 'If there is no hell, there are a lot of preachers collecting money under false pretences.'"

Nice one, Hulda! Like you, we know that hell is a particularly nasty myth – and the cash collected under false pretences by god-botherers who terrify with tales of eternal damnation amounts to many, many millions.

At *The Freethinker* we live a hand-to-mouth existence, by comparison. We must rely upon the generosity of our readers to keep alive the bright light of rationalism.

We only hope that they don't let the fact that we have had a price rise forced upon us prevent them from maintaining support for our all-important fund.

Please send cheques, postal orders, stamps to G W Foote & Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Many thanks to: K A Barbour, D W Burt, D Eastham and G F Jackman: £1 each; P R Smith, £1.40; R J Beale, M Crighton, L T Harrington and S W Rayment, £2 each; D Harrod, £2.40; M Hakeem, £2.50; J Beaven, N H Divall, L Gledhill, B Piercy and R T Richardson, £3 each; B Bensley, £4.40; A M Aitken, T Atkins, E L Chapman, A M Clifford-Winters, F Coubrough, G Coupland, M

J Coward, E H Crapper, D Brown, R J Delaurey, M and M O Elliott, J C Gale, M Hallett, M Kirby, R W Hamilton, D T Harris, H Hilton, M G Kamal, M G McIver, J Morton-Williams, A Negus, A W Newton, G M Punnett, P J Rogers, M Sargent, R Savage, J R Shewan, D J Sloan, L Wilson, J Spottiswoode, J Swanson, R G Tee, R A Wood, D Whelan and J Priest, £5 each; C M Bondi, £7; A Varlet, £9.40; E R and A N Blewitt, R E Davies, E and M Essex, A I Parr, F E Seward, M Schofield, N E Thompson and H M Wellstead, £10 each; A Beeson, P A Buther, J Dobbin and E McCann, £15 each; U and H Neville and N Ratcliffe £20 each; O D'Arcy £40.

Total for October: £454.10

WHAT'S ON

Birmingham Humanist Group: For information about Birmingham Humanist Group contact 021 353 1189.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, January 9, 5.30pm for 6 pm; Stephen O'Kane: *Politics and Morality*.

Central London Humanists: Meet 7.30pm, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square WC1. Contact: Cherie Holt 071-916 3015 or the BHA office. Thursday, January 20: "Tell Peter Lilley what you think of his views on single mothers." Speaker: Former Director of Gingerbread.

Cornwall Humanists: Contact: B Mercer, "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Telephone: 0209 890690.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road Kenilworth. Monday, December 20, 7.30 pm: Public meeting. Subject: *Humanism and Literature* (with readings of poetry and prose).

Devon Humanists: For details, please contact: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lymington, Exmouth EX8 5HN.

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, 7.30pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday, December 10, 8 pm: Annual Winter Solstice Party. Details from George Broadhead at Kenilworth address above. January 14: Discussion and social.

Glasgow Humanist Society: Information regarding meetings and other activities from Hugh Bowman, 7 Elm Road, Burnside, Glasgow G73 4JR; telephone 041-634 1447.

Hasving & District Humanist Society: Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, December 7, 8pm: Seasonal music and readings.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Details: Robin Wood,

37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, December 14, 7.30pm: Miss J Jackson, Leeds University Department of Philosophy: *Moral Dilemmas in Medical Science*. Tuesday, January 11: John Roberts, Leeds Racial Equality Council: *Race Relations in Leeds – Credit or Shame?*

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Friday, December 17, 8pm: Winter Solstice Party.

Manchester Humanists: St Thomas's Centre, Ardwick Green. Public meetings on the second Friday of the month, 7.30pm. January 14: New Year Social. Information: telephone 061-432 9045.

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, December 16, 7.30pm: John Aldam: *Do Humanists Believe in Anything?*

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: The Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, December 8, 8 pm: Howard Sykes: *Sunday Shopping – the Only Permanent, Practical and Popular Solution*. Wednesday, January 12, 8pm: Frank Abel: *Religion in Schools*.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, January 12, 7.45pm: Public meeting. A speaker from The Samaritans of East Surrey.

Tyneside Humanist Group: Meets on third Thursday of each month (except August), starting 6.45pm in the Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. December 16: Nigel Collins: *Humanist Ceremonies*. January 20: Professor Neil Jenkins introduces the revised version of his book *Modern Humanism*.

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. No meeting in December.

REP
the 1
fam
tries
New
and
hom
Sho
awar
Recon
with

B
O
O
K
S

Alk
Islan
1936,
was n
offici
book:
Even
barel
frien
never
in my
trol, f
pages
Wh
marr
phy, t
was a
Chris
chose
hope
work
thoug
Safe A
Etti
move:
in 188
1892:
Chris
and c
More
trade
"honn
ing E
Thr
Scho
priet
but in
1900.
note
includ
inal e
and N
veget

Resurrection of a Freethought 'saint'

REPUTATIONS are curious things. In the 1920s Ettie Rout Hornibrook was famous – or notorious – in three countries: Australia, where she was born; New Zealand, where she was educated; and England, which she made her home.

She was also well-known in France, which awarded her its highest civil order, the *Reconnaissance Française*, for her work with the ANZACs and other troops in that country during and after World War I, and in the United States, where she wrote and lectured on birth control.

Soldiers called her their “universal mother,” an American doctor named her as “the real guardian angel of the ANZACs,” a NZ shear-er said she was “the greatest woman New Zealand had produced,” an English bishop said she was “the wickedest woman in Britain” and H G Wells called her “that unforgettable heroine.”

Alas, after her suicide in the Cook Islands and simple burial on Rarotonga in 1936, she was forgotten all too soon. She was mentioned in Australia's but not NZ's official history of the war and her sparkling books went out-of-print and circulation. Even in radical Freethought circles she was barely a name. Though I was a personal friend of her husband's in the 1960s, he never mentioned her, and I recently found in my own library her *Morality of Birth Control*, published in 1925 and with most of its pages uncut.

When Jane Tolerton, a distant relative by marriage, began research for her biography, the only NZ trace of her she could find was an Ettie Rout AIDS clinic in Christchurch. (She would, of course, have chosen that rather than a granite statue). I hope that this inspiring, yet hauntingly sad, work will restore her to prominence, though not to the bigotry that banned her *Safe Marriage* in 1922.

Ettie was born in Hobart in 1877 and moved with her family to Wellington, NZ, in 1885. After her father's bankruptcy in 1892 she was the family's breadwinner in Christchurch, chiefly as a shorthand-typist and court reporter, then male preserves. More so were radical politics and militant trade unionism, in which she was made an “honorary shearer” and became the found-
ing Editor of *The Maoriland Worker*.

Through attending the Christchurch School of Physical Culture she met its proprietor Fred Hornibrook, also born in 1877 but in Ireland, whence he emigrated in 1900. They formed a partnership to promote healthy living, which went on to include proper breathing, rhythmic abdominal exercises, native (chiefly Polynesian and North African) dancing, a high-fibre vegetarian diet and other practices that

A Life of Ettie Rout by Jane Tolerton. From Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland, New Zealand. NZ\$29.95.

Review: DAVID TRIBE

have a very modern ring.

In 1915 she set up a Volunteer Sisterhood to provide a canteen and “comforts” for wounded soldiers in Egypt and later in France. Some officials and “moral purity” grand ladies who gave her early support withdrew it when they found the comforts were to include prophylactic kits against venereal disease and the services of a super-vised brothel.

This work, to which she was able to introduce Fred, was undertaken from a utilitarian desire to control disease, not out of any abstract rationalism. But there was nothing mealy-mouthed about the way she promoted it. There was no point, she told a NZ general's wife, “tearfully pleading with the dear boys ‘not to sin against the Holy Ghost.’ (The dear boys are much more interested in the Virgin Mary.)”

Eugenics

From this cause she proceeded to a number of other issues dear to radical feminists: birth control, sexual equality inside marriage, a measure of free love, easier divorce, child care for single mothers, abortion when contraception failed, eugenics. Unfortunately for her and their peace of mind, she refused to adopt the feminist party line, either early in NZ or later in England. Not only would she have nothing to do with what is now called “positive discrimination,” she was in many socio-political matters as “politically incorrect” as any YWCA group leader. She opposed equal pay because men had more responsibilities, both at work and in the home; she favoured the Contagious Diseases Acts, which obliged prostitutes to be medically examined but not their clients, because infection should be curbed at source and soldiers were subject to their own inspections; and, perhaps with tongue in cheek, she even criticised NZ female suffrage as having spread “a blighting mildew of ‘wowsersism’” and promoted a “type of semi-clerical politician.”

As a Socialist, she wanted unjust inequalities removed. But just as her fellow-Socialists were warming to her, she said that she didn't believe in universal equality but in evolution and natural selection through eugenics and avoidance of miscegenation, which she called “race suicide.” These views were similar to those of Wells, a close friend and perhaps lover, who has recently been “exposed” as a fascist. This was one case where she let abstract views, whether scien-

tifically right or wrong, blind her to political and social realities. Another was her romantic notion of the “noble savage” and woman's place in primitive society.

Having decided, like Marie Stopes (whose first marriage, as it happens, was un-summated), to write about birth control from the standpoint of a married woman, she married Fred in 1920. There's poignant comment in the biography from Fred's (and my) close friend, Peter Cotes (whose own important autobiography was recently reviewed here by Bill McIlroy), on the relations between the “terrible” Ettie and the genial Fred, whose second wife, Nina, was as gentle and diplomatic as himself.

Not only did Ettie not suffer fools gladly, she documented her views. George Bernard Shaw was described as “an impotent agnostic Irish Puritan posing as a free-love Socialist” — in a letter to Wells. But she was quite capable of denouncing her victims to their face. She got away with urging Wells: “Do, do, do leave off pot-boiling and get back to your job and stop on it.” But Stopes never forgave her the candid: “You can write well, talk well, and I believe you could work well – if you would empty out the rubbishy emotionalism, the superstition, the vanity and egoism with which you becloud and degrade your work.” Neither did Margaret Sanger, whose pamphlet *Family Limitation* Ettie worked so hard and so thanklessly to defend, appreciate advice on how the American birth-control movement should be run. Unfortunately, Ettie never saw the difference between impersonal invective and personal abuse, or realised that most people were not as honest as she was.

In 1924 Fred published *The Culture of the Abdomen* and became an overnight celebrity as an author and a physiotherapist. Ettie found herself a reluctant Mayfair hostess as Fred numbered among his clients Churchill, Marconi, Wells and Arnold Bennett. Her significant books were already written, her causes more or less won. She turned to the Freethought movement, lectured on many National Secular Society platforms and wrote a series on “Freethought and Sex” for *The Freethinker*. Later Fred became NSS vice-president and member of a *Freethinker* editorial committee.

Life became increasingly irksome for Ettie, and her friends. In 1936 she suddenly decided to return to New Zealand, then go on a Pacific cruise. She had contracted malaria in Egypt and lived on quinine thereafter. In the Cook Islands she took an overdose.

Jane Tolerton admires and yet reproaches her subject as a Humanist who loved all humanity but seemed unable to love, or be loved by, any one human being.

Secularists at AGM condemn religious subsidies

A RESOLUTION welcoming the Government's decision not to provide public funding for the Islamia Muslim School in Brent, North London, was passed at the AGM of the National Secular Society, held at Conway Hall, London, on October 30.

The motion also reiterated the NSS view that "the only way to avoid inequality of treatment of religious groups is to phase-out the subsidies for all denominational schools."

A further successful resolution called on Parliament "to reduce the age of consent for male homosexual acts from 21 to 16 years, the age applicable to heterosexuals, and to remove all other legal discrimination against lesbians and gay men."

The AGM also welcomed "the accord reached between the Israelis and Palestinian Arabs," and deplored "the attempts of religious extremists on both sides to subvert it."

President

The meeting, held under the chairmanship of Jim Herrick, re-elected Barbara Smoker as President (Miss Smoker's Presidential address appeared in last month's issue of *The Freethinker*).

Denis Cobell was elected and Nicolas Walter was re-elected to the Society's Vice-Presidency. R J Condon, who stood down as a Vice-President, was elected to the Council of Management.

David Williams was re-elected Treasurer of the Society.

Peter Brearey, Editor of *The Freethinker*, was elected to the Council of Management and Norman Bacrac was re-elected to the Council.

● Individual membership of the National Secular Society costs £4 a year. Details from the Secretary, Terry Mullins, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL, who will also provide information to organisations seeking affiliation to the NSS.

AND A VERY HAPLOID

AT THIS time of the year, the "Christian" World, whether individuals are Christian or not, engages in those festive activities which are usually conducted to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

The Biblical story of this event is given both in St Matthew's Gospel (Chapter 1 verses 18 - 25) and in St. Luke's Gospel (Chapter 1 verses 26 - 38 and Chapter 2 verses 6 and 7). Neither account gives many details, but we do know from them that Mary appeared to have had the usual nine-month pregnancy natural to human females.

These days, liberal Christians do not believe in the literal truth of every word of the Bible and, therefore, no longer believe in virgin birth. However, fundamentalist still abound in their thousands - which prompts the biologist to ask them a number of interesting questions, of which the following appear to be the most relevant:

1. By what means was one of Mary's eggs stimulated to divide and proceed to develop into a healthy **male** child?

2. Was a **male** sperm produced from somewhere? I understand that, in the eyes of fundamentalists, both God and the Archangel Gabriel are incorporeal (that's the whole Christian explanation of why Jesus had to come to earth - to represent God in the form of a man). Therefore, neither could have produced a physical sperm (and indeed it would be very wrong to assume that Gabriel would have done so even if he could), so who or what produced the male set of chromosomes?

3. If a sperm (or a male set of chromosomes) was produced how did it (or they) get inside Mary? A sperm is easily killed if not given the right physiological conditions for survival; handling "naked" chromosomes is even more tricky.

4. It is a physiological fact that a mere poke with a needle can cause some animal eggs to start to divide, while some have been known to divide spontaneously. If no sperm was used, is this how Mary's egg was stimulated? Was some

The ra Jesus

spirit needle used when Gabriel visited her?

The answer to this question is important.

If God (or his messenger Gabriel) merely commanded, or whatever Mary's egg to give rise to a child **out the intervention of a sperm** very important consequences follow. Jesus could have been haploid (that is, having only one set of chromosomes, instead of 46) or (b) Mary's haploid could have divided by mitosis to produce a diploid set. But (c) in either eventuality, the resultant offspring would have been **female**. In the light of recent debate that has taken place in the Church of England and which has resulted in women being admitted to priesthood, male theologians ought to give this question serious consideration.

5. If God is all-powerful, why did he make Mary endure the pregnancy all the discomfort that that brings women? Surely he was capable of fulfilling the prophecy of "being born of a virgin" without putting Mary through a nine month ordeal?

6. Why not an instant full-term baby? This would have been in keeping with an all-powerful and **loving** God.

7. And, again, if God is omniscient, why did he feel he needed to disturb Joseph's mind at rest? If you recall, Joseph acted as any red-blooded man might act when he discovered his wife was pregnant and believed it wasn't the father (he clearly didn't believe in miracles at first - Matthew 1 v 19).

OLD CHRISTMAS TO YOU, TOO

The miraculous birth of a biologist's view

by Ralph Ison

el vis anyone replies to me that God was being considerate to Joseph by sending him what he had done, I will answer: "Wouldn't it have been nicer to have taken Joseph into his confidence before the event took place, rather than after the deed had been committed." Gabriel hated the deed. After all, if you are omniscient and want to do the decent thing you should do the decent thing and not go behind a fellow's back.

There are human laws, and were laws at the time, covering such goings on: see the tenth commandment, which, we are told, is God-given; to say nothing of the seventh. Fundamentalists should be disturbed by the fact that two God-given commandments could be broken by God himself. They should be concerned to find that they are in the hands of not only an omniscient being but also one who is so inconsistent that he is quite

prepared to break his own rules. The fundamentalist is thus a believer in someone he/she cannot trust. That is a sad state of affairs when only mere mortals are involved. It should be beyond endurance when God, by his actions, places himself among the untrustworthy.

Such myths (including such dubious morality) have been taught to young children down the ages and are strengthened at every anniversary of the alleged birth of Jesus, unless they are taught to question, and then to challenge, nonsense.

The Italian poet Giuseppe Gioachino Belli (1791-1863) wrote about 2000 satirical sonnets which give a vivid picture of Rome's last days of temporal power. The following is appropriate in the context of the above (Anthony Burgess is the translator):

You know the day, the month, even the year.

As Mary ate her noonday plate of soup,

The Angel Gabriel, like a heaven-hurled hoop,

Was bowling towards her through the atmosphere

She watched him crash the window without fear

And enter through the crack in one swift swoop.

A lily in his fist, his wings adroop,

"Ave," he said, and after that, "Maria.

Rejoice, because the Lord's eternal love,

Has made you pregnant – not by orthodox Methods, of course. The Pentecostal Dove

Came while you slept and nested in your box."

"A hen?" she blushed, "for I know nothing of –"

The Angel nodded, knowing she meant cocks.

In the original it is not "cocks" but *uccelli*, meaning plain birds. This is better, because birds rise and point skywards.

A poetic hypothesis about impregnation!



"Merry Xmas. Now, can you help us trace the Father?"

This month's Blast has been selected by **RUTH BLEWITT** from Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary* – a splendid version of which, *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary*, has been published as a Penguin Classic, with many new "definitions" which were unearthed after Bierce's death. Bierce (1842-1913?) began his *Dictionary* in 1896 when short of ideas for his usual newspaper column and went on adding to them during the following years. Among them can be found examples of his satire and flippancy (both with underlying seriousness), parody, acerbity and sardonic wit.

ASTROLOGY: The science of making the dupe see stars. Astrology is by some held in high respect as the precursor of Astronomy. Similarly, the night-howling tomcat has a just claim to reverential consideration as precursor to the hurtling bootjack.

CATECHISM: A form of theological riddles in which universal and eternal doubts are resolved by local and fugitive answers.

CHRISTIAN: One who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbour. One who follows the teachings of Christ in so far as they are not inconsistent with a life of sin.

CONGREGATION: The subjects of an experiment in hypnotism.

DEIST: One who believes in God, but reserves the right to worship the devil.

ELYSIUM: The heaven of the ancients. Nothing could be more ludicrous than this crude conception: instead of golden clouds, harps, crowns and a great white throne, there were fields, groves, streams, flowers and temples. In the ancient Elysium we have a signal example of the inferiority of pagan imagination to Christian knowledge.

EUCCHARIST: Sacred feast of the religious sect of Theophagi.

FAITH: Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge of things without parallel.

FRAUD: The life of commerce, the soul of religion, the bait of courtship and the basis of political power.

HEATHEN: A benighted creature who has the folly to worship something that he can see and feel.

HEAVEN: A place where the wicked cease from troubling you with talk of their personal affairs, and the good listen with attention while you expound your own.

JACOB'S-LADDER: A ladder which Jacob saw in a dream, reaching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. Seeing that angels have wings, the purpose of this ladder is so imperfectly apparent that many learned commentators have contended that it was not a real ladder, but only a ray of glory. One cannot help thinking it rather hard on Jacob that he should be required to dream with logical realism.

KORAN: A book which Mohammedans foolishly believe to have been written by divine inspiration, but which Christians know to be a wicked imposture, contradictory to the Holy Scriptures.

Talk of the Devil

MAMMON: The god of the world's leading religion. His chief temple is in the holy city of New York.

MANNA: A food miraculously given to the Israelites in the wilderness. When it was no longer supplied to them they settled down and tilled the soil, fertilising it, as a rule, with the bodies of the original occupants.

MIRACLE: An act or event out of the order of nature and unaccountable as beating a normal hand of four kings and an ace with four aces and a king.

MYTHOLOGY: The body of a primitive people's beliefs concerning its origin, early history, heroes, deities and so forth, as distinguished from the true accounts which it invents later.

PALACE: A fine and costly residence, particularly that of a great official. The residence of a high dignitary of the Christian Church is called a palace; that of the Founder of his religion was known as a field, or wayside. There is progress.

PRAY: To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.

PRELATE: A church officer having a superior degree of holiness and a fat preferment. One of Heaven's aristocracy. A gentleman of God.

REDEMPTION: Deliverance of sinners from the penalty of their sin, through their murder of the deity against whom they sinned. The doctrine of Redemption is a

fundamental mystery of our holy religion, and whoso believeth in it shall not perish, but have everlasting life in which to try to understand it.

RELIGION: A daughter of Hope and Fear explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable.

RELIQUARY: A receptacle for such sacred objects as pieces of the true cross, short-ribs of the saints, the ears of Balaam's ass, the lung of the cock that called Peter to repentance and so forth. Reliquaries are commonly of metal and provided with a lock to prevent the contents from coming out and performing miracles at unseasonable times.

RITE: A religious or semi-religious ceremony fixed by law, precept or custom with the essential oil of sincerity carefully squeezed out of it.

SACRED: Dedicated to some religious purpose; having a divine character; inspiring solemn thoughts or emotions; as, the Dalai Lama of Tibet; the Moogum of M'bwango; the temple of the Apes in Ceylon; the Cow in India; the Crocodile, the Cat and the Onion of ancient Egypt; the Mufti of Moosh; the hair of the dog that bit Noah, etc.

SAINT: A dead sinner revised and edited.

SCRIPTURES: The sacred books of our holy religion, as distinguished from the false and profane writings on which all other faiths are based.

UBIQUITY: The gift or power of being in all places at one time, but not in all places at all times, which is omnipresence, an attribute of God and the luminiferous ether only. This important distinction between ubiquity and omnipresence was not clear to the mediæval Church and there was much bloodshed about it. Certain Lutherans, who affirmed the presence everywhere of Christ's body, were known as Ubiquitarians. For this error they were doubtless damned, for Christ's body is present only in the eucharist, though that sacrament may be performed in more than one place simultaneously. In recent times ubiquity has not always been understood.

UNCTION: An oiling or greasing. The rite of extreme unction consists in touching with oil consecrated by a bishop several parts of the body of one engaged in dying.

WORSHIP: Homo Creator's testimony to the sound construction and fine finish of Deus Creatus. A popular form of abjection, having an element of pride.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Flagging enthusiasm

JOHN PATTEN, Secretary of State for Education, hit the headlines last year by deploring "the loss of belief in damnation and redemption." Being a faithful son of the Roman Catholic Church, which displays hideous crucifixes in its schools to remind children of this eternal truth, his dismay over rejection or even watering down of fundamental Christian doctrine is understandable.

Mr Patten linked this regrettable state of affairs to "the growth of secularism... since the Second World War" – an unintended but deserved tribute to the freethought movement.

The Education Secretary is in the news again. He has issued yet another circular of 60 pages ordering even more rigorous religious indoctrination and ritual in the classroom. He reminds school heads and others that legislation is designed to ensure that pupils receive a thorough grounding in the country's Christian heritage.

In what appears to be a determined bid for Pillock of the Year Award, Mr Patten has also suggested that the Union Jack be flown from school buildings.

He told a meeting in Aylesbury that the flag is a "potent national symbol representing the Kingdom's unity" which should be defended against the forces of bigotry and extremism. Sadly, he mistimed his appeal by making it after the Conservative Party conference, where such forces were much in evidence.

Historically, the flag has been the cause of confusion and dispute. It is often flown in the wrong position and is known by different names. Although still generally called the Union Jack – strictly speaking, it is only the Jack when it is flown at sea – the term Union Flag is becoming increasingly popular. In parts of the former Empire it is referred to as the Butcher's Apron.

The design, a mish-mash of Christian symbols, evolved over two centuries. King James I (VI of Scotland) "the wisest fool in Christendom," marked the union of the thrones in 1603 by commanding that his warships fly a flag incorporating the crosses of St George and St Andrew. The former was in a dominant position. This annoyed the Scots, so the crosses were joined at the Treaty of Union, 1707. The cross of St Patrick was added in 1801.

The centrepiece is a red cross of St George,

the patron saint England shares with Bavaria, Germany, Greece and Portugal. St George (also called Giorgio and Joris) is a shadowy character – so shadowy, in fact, that in 1969 Rome demoted him to the status of a local cult figure.

St Patrick is patron saint of Ireland, 26 counties of which are an independent republic, the other six (Northern Ireland) being a troublesome and embarrassing partner in a shaky union with the United Kingdom.

St Andrew represents Scotland, where there is a growing movement for self-government.

So much for the symbol of potency and the Kingdom's unity!

Instead of blethering about the country's Christian heritage and flying the flag, Mr Patten should concentrate his mind of why it was necessary to set up a National Commission on Education to investigate why English children are "the worst educated in Europe." A thoroughly demoralised teaching force, shortage of text books, inadequate facilities and run-down classrooms may have something to do with it.

So perhaps, after all, the national flag should be flown from school buildings. But fly it in the upside down position – which is a distress signal and appropriate to the education system after 14 years of John Patten's party in government.

In a rite pickle!

JOHN CLUNAS, secretary of Aberdeen Humanist Group, took me to task in last month's Letters page on the role of Humanist ceremonies. "The traditional Freethinker line is necessary but not enough," he averred. What Britain needs is "a large 'broad church' Humanist organisation."

His words revived memories of that exciting era when there was an influx of 'Sixties swingers into (or passing through) Humanist organisations. Some appeared to think they had invented Humanism – at least their ignorance of the movement's history and structure conveyed that impression.

Grandiose plans for a mass "broad church" movement were seriously discussed. There were predictions of a six-figure membership. Humanist centres were to be established in town and cities throughout the land. Humanist grandees would walk in the corridors.

Those who suggested that all this sounded a mite ambitious were loftily dismissed as

purists and sectarians. Secularism was old hat and atheism a dirty word.

Mr Clunas's forerunners' ambitions and plans were based on the assumption that religion and religious institutions were defunct. The time had come for a positive, "broad church" Humanist movement to which the faithless would flock.

The reality proved otherwise. Religion was not "finished"; the churches held on to their religious privileges; social reforms achieved after many years of patient work came under attack; it was pernicious religious movements like the Moonies and the Children of God that attracted a large following.

"Broad church" Humanists' latest panacea for growth is provision of ceremonies, in the demand for which, according to Mr Clunas, "there is overwhelming interest."

Really? It would be interesting to know how many marriage and naming ceremonies were conducted under Humanist auspices during, say, the past three years.

The situation regarding funerals is somewhat different. Unlike marriages, there are no rigid legal requirements for conducting the final rite of passage. And while celebration of a newcomer to the family is a jolly affair, funerals are usually tense and emotional occasions. Furthermore, the dead person's wish to be spared the ministrations of a dog-collared body-snatcher may well have been expressed verbally or in a will. In such circumstances, a Humanist officiant is meeting a genuine demand.

Like others inclined to ceremonies, John Clunas invites "broad church" Humanists to turn Eastward for inspiration. "Look at Holland and Norway," he writes. By all means; Humanists in those countries may provide a range of counselling, social services and ritual. But they do so not only on the basis of a large, active membership as is often implied – their training, remuneration and administrative costs are substantially funded through Government grants or complex tax arrangements.

That may be an attractive prospect from Aberdeen. Unfortunately, Mr Clunas's aspiration for the movement's growth and influence in Britain are at present enveloped in a Scotch mist. Perhaps he will clarify matters by presenting a specific, realistic programme to the Humanist Liaison Committee and governing bodies of the national organisations.

Finally, Mr Clunas's fear that the shock of "a large and influential organisation" producing "tangible results" would be too much for me is most considerate, but quite unnecessary. Active involvement in the movement for nearly 40 years has left me shockproof.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Church of What?

IN HIS interesting article "Bans Can Backfire" (November), Govind N Deodhekar errs on one count. Half-way through the article, he asks: "Would we in Britain put obstacles in the way of a Republican Party? Obviously not. We have an Established Church, the Church of England."

To Mr Deodhekar and all others who equate England with Britain, please remember that the jurisdiction of the C of E stops at Gretna. While disintegration of that church may be your contributor's aim, disintegration of Britain takes precedence with many in Scotland.

CAMPBELL BURNSIDE
Kirkintilloch

Ireland

IAN NORRIS (November) and myself obviously read different history books.

Ireland was partitioned by Britain, against the wishes of an overwhelming majority of the Irish people, in such a way as to ensure a loyalist majority in that portion of the country Britain could continue to hold.

Historically, Britain has seen Ireland as providing a possible back-door invasion route for the perceived enemy of the day: the Spaniards, the French, the Germans, the Russians. With the Republic of Ireland neutral in its foreign policy – ie, not a member of NATO – Britain has felt it to be strategically necessary to hold the Six Counties as a military and telecommunications watchtower on the Atlantic seaboard, both in its own self-interest and as a part of its NATO commitment.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, that particular reason for remaining in Ireland has gone, and, with a majority of the Irish people wanting Britain out, and a majority of the British people wanting to get out – as indicated by successive polls over the years – Britain has to recognise that its main responsibility to Ireland now is to negotiate the terms of its withdrawal, and to ease the transition to a unified 32-county state. This may require massive inputs of expertise and financial assistance, which Britain clearly has a duty to provide.

In a unified sovereign Ireland, loyalists will command far greater weight electorally than they can in union with Britain. They will have a major contribution to make to all areas of Irish life, if they want to grasp the opportunity and make that contribution. As a component of the UK, their overall impact is minuscule.

Finally, may I say that it is not open to a correspondent who writes "If Britain didn't have to keep Irishmen from one another's throats..." to accuse me of partisan rhetoric. Ian Norris's comment is patronising racist stereotyping of the worst kind, and is then offered as justifica-

tion for the maintenance of a British garrison in Ireland.

D HARROP
Sheffield

THE excellent Northern Ireland article by Ian Norris suggested a policy initiative: the Secular state. If peace is to occur in Northern Ireland, then stage one of the peace process requires an independent, Republican Secular state, with its own currency and its own non-Westminster government. This is quite possible within the framework of EC-European Union.

The Secular part of the constitution should ban religious teaching in schools, religious job discrimination and religious marching.

Since Britain invaded Ireland in the past, then quite rightly the British presence is felt to be part of the problem. This problem can be alleviated if international partners are brought into the peace process via the European Union and the North Americans via the United States. The peace-keeping force should be international.

The second stage of the peace process can only occur if Southern Ireland accepts a Secular constitution. This means any Anglo-Irish agreement should not discuss integration or federation until this principle is accepted.

R AWBERY
Reading

THE belief in an Ireland united by force surely rests on the assumption that Catholic majorities, as in the South of Ireland, have rights of self-determination which Protestant majorities, as in the North of Ireland, do not have. Such an assumption doubtless reflects the traditional teachings of Rome (outside the Church there is no salvation, etc) and I have to say that I was just a little surprised to find it so warmly endorsed in the letters columns of *The Freethinker* in October.

TOM CHALMERS
London NW6

On wrong tract

I CAN understand why Mr A G Stephens is ignorant of the female body, but in a Rationalist publication let's get the facts right.

The vagina is not the urinary tract of the female, which is situated outside the vagina in the vulva and is much the same as the opening of the male urinary tract in the penis.

The vagina into which the male inserts his penis is both the channel for male mammals to place the sperm inside the female and the exit for the resulting baby at childbirth.

It seems a small point, but it seems to me to be important to be clear about facts, opinions, hearsay and myths, and to be very careful in keeping them apart when we debate an issue.

The rectum, by the way, is for the purpose of expelling faeces and is an exit channel.

ROGER NADON
Horsham

I THINK Mr A G Stephens should find out more about the female anatomy before he again writes about "the abhorrence of homosexuals at the insertion of a vital part of the body into the urinary tract of the female"!

R A COBB
Rutland

IF Ernie Crosswell really believes that sex does not have "anything to do with love," I can only commiserate with his partner(s), whoever she, he, it or they may be!

ANTONY GREY
London NW2

VERY briefly: I am "homophobic" only in the sense that I object to the physically dangerous and extremely unhygienic practice of sodomy. I call for nothing more than an educational campaign against it.

My impression that sodomy is (or was?), in the words of Stephen Moreton, a "specially homosexual pastime" has come from Gays themselves, AIDS figures in the Northern Hemisphere, and films on TV showing simulated sodomy.

The authorities I have quoted specifically state that our genetically closest relatives, the apes, do not practice sodomy – which is evidence that it is not natural.

The medical authorities have publicly advised: "Say No to anal sex."

I rest my case.

ERNIE CROSSWELL
Slough

Rag-bag

ISN'T *The Freethinker* a marvellous rag-bag? Ranging from such uplifting, clearly-written articles as Colin McCall's on Diderot to the mind-boggling idea in A G Stephen's letter that "love" can be inserting something vital into a woman's urinary tract – is this some sort of catheter fetish? (I'm glad you've closed this particular correspondence which has been rife with a hell of lot of hang-ups, has it not?).

I like Eric Stockton's "opiate addiction" model to the Sea of Faith thing but, withdrawn symptoms aside, we must remember that the methadone alternative can be more addictive than heroin. Perhaps the followers of Don Cupitt will have to cold turkey it if they are not to replace one addiction with another.

I am not comfortable when it comes to cont-

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 188

missed, that when you talk about rights you need to explain whence those rights derive. Evidently he saw deism as a way of avoiding what would otherwise have been a fatal flaw in his argument.

GLYN EMERY
London N1

Sea of Faith

IT IS good to know that Eric Stockton finds those of us associated with "the Sea of Faith phenomenon" of "great positive interest to



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.

sceptics," not the "two-faced wimps or incorrigible woolly-heads" some Secular Humanists suppose us to be, and not deserving the "incautious derision" too often heaped upon us from that quarter. He even thinks readers of *The Freethinker* should "converse with these people". Thanks, Eric.

Eric's kindly disposition towards us derives from the fact that he has been able, as he says, to "clinch the proposition that [Don] Cupitt, and by extension his followers, are atheists." Our only fault is the language we use: dirty words like god, faith, spiritual (the last of which, as he acknowledges with some distaste, we share with the equally language-challenged BHA). But some SoF members, says Eric approvingly, are "trying to abandon their deceptive metaphors." And Eric wants to help.

Note that word "deceptive." Of course, if the god-metaphor or faith-metaphor is seen as deceptive it has to be abandoned in favour of something better. But some SoF members who

no more believe in a "real God" than Eric Stockton believes in real fairies nevertheless find the man-made language and symbolism of religion speaks to them more profoundly, more poetically, more timelessly and more usefully than the prosaic language of metaphor-cleansed Secularism.

Religious fundamentalists and fundamentalist Humanists both complain that we reinterpret words like god and spirituality. But of course we do! Words have no fixed, single meaning. A good dictionary tells us not what a word means but what it meant when it was coined, and what it has meant at different times and in different conditions to different groups of people. You don't have to be a dead poet, for Christ's sake, to use words creatively, to explore their possible meanings and extend them at will. And, just so that there's no misunderstanding, I use the words "for Christ's sake" as a figure of speech.

The Sea of Faith Network has many strands. Yes, there are the Anglican clergy and laity who get exposed in the Press as "atheists," but there are also Quakers, Unitarians, post-modern post-Christians and, God help them, Humanists like me. Our sole point of agreement is that we think the implications of seeing religion as a human creation are worth exploring and promoting, inside and outside the churches. Christians who bitterly attack Humanists for their godlessness and those Humanist sects which spend most of their energies mocking the easy targets of religion are unlikely to find much in common with us, but the rest of you may find there is a useful dialogue to be had. And if Eric wants to slap the occasional custard-pie in our face, as he promises, we'll do our damndest, with God's help (if you'll excuse the metaphor), to turn the other cheek.

DAVID BOULTON
Editor, Sea of Faith

ERIC STOCKTON writes about the British Humanist Association's deceit ("its deceptive metaphor") in his Sea of Faith article (November). He is presumably referring to a BHA leaflet, *The Human Spirit*. This title was carefully chosen in order to encapsulate its humanistic argument. Since Eric Stockton does not explain his extraordinary accusation, your readers may well be baffled as to what he is on about.

The Human Spirit has been produced to draw attention to a remarkable development in education. The National Curriculum Council (now incorporated in SCAA – Schools Curriculum Assessment Authority) sent its document *Spiritual and Moral Education to every school*. It says of the term "spiritual development" that: "It is not confined to religious

paring the Editor's Up Front unfavourably with, say, Govind N Deodhekar's article *Bans Can Backfire*. You both feel strongly about your respective issues but, whereas he writes in a controlled "reasonable" voice, you (no offence) let your heart turn your logically-researched work into rhetoric. Your writing is truly moving and reports atrocious recent historical facts fairly emotionally. In my opinion, the emotion is unnecessary and is, in fact, counter-productive. You should let the readers feel their own emotions when they read your article. Part of my problem is that, as a Humanist, I am struggling to stay positive about Humanism rather than negative about religion. This is not really a criticism of you – merely a single viewpoint – but I had similar feelings at the Humanist Conference in Dyfed in October. As a newcomer, I am still trying to cope with such open and violent attitudes to religion as seems rife in the Secularist world. Don't get me wrong; I feel as strongly – I just wonder if one has to be so virulent and anti. I feel a need to build something, not pull something down.

I guess I now stand to be corrected.

JOHN E BOSLEY
Huddersfield

Deliver us from..

I WOULD not describe myself as a sensitive soul (October Up Front) – or any other sort of soul, for that matter – but I was disappointed to see contributors to a supposedly Secularist periodical using, apparently without any hint of facetiousness, theological terms like "evil." Religions are products of evolution; and it is no more appropriate to call them evil than to call, say, diseases or wild animals evil.

I see now that Karl Heath's article is to be published as a pamphlet by the National Secular Society, which is a pity, since it can only serve to intensify the negative image that the NSS is projecting.

I still have not had a satisfactory answer to my question: "What does the Humanist say?" Because religions have laid exclusive claim to social morality, religion in decline has had the unfortunate side-effect of dragging our ethical framework with it; and society seems to be losing its cohesion. Karl Heath puts the blame on the concept of private property. This seems to me to suggest that Humanists take a more relaxed attitude to theft, which would merely exacerbate present problems. Besides, if there were any form of communal property holding that really worked, should we not see it in successful societies around us?

Finally, an answer to David Yeulett's (November) question on Thomas Paine. Paine realised, what Humanists today seem to have

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 189

beliefs or conversion to a faith. It is to do with the search for meaning and purpose in life and the values by which to live."

In stressing that the word "spiritual" is not confined to a religious use, it says that to do so would "exclude the majority of pupils who do not come from religious homes" and would alienate "the many teachers who do not profess a faith."

The Human Spirit thus publicises the fact that the body responsible for overseeing education in all our schools has now acknowledged that being an atheist does not debar you from celebrating the achievements and aspirations of the human spirit.

What is "deceptive" about making known that the NCC have at last come round to the view of Sir Julian Huxley, the first President of BHA? He wrote: "I prefer to say that the spiritual elements which are usually styled divine are part and parcel of human nature."

DAVID BOTHWELL
JOHN WHITE
BHA Education Committee

Killer religions

THANK you for "Religion is evil" (October). I couldn't agree more with you and the author of that *Lancet* article on the "killer superstitions" Islam and Catholicism.

But I regret that only their fatal impact on the spot (in the Third World) is denounced, not the influence they exert in the wings, at the levers of command in the West, with worldwide consequences.

Thus it was due to American fundamentalists and the Roman Catholic Church that Reagan withdrew all US financial support from the International Family Planning Federation in 1984, thereby killing off the already very limited help the West offered in the way of birth control. It was due to Islamic fundamentalism and the Roman Catholic Church that the Rio world summit on the environment in June ignored the demographic problem. It is due to RC influence that RU 486 is not getting off the ground and that birth control programmes make up only 1.3 per cent of development aid. (Cf. Brenda Maddox in *The Pope and Contraception* (Chatto & Windus).

Indeed, the telegenically snow-white Pope should appear in a blood-bespattered, blood-besmeared robe, for he is a killer all right.

Thanks for the whiff of fresh air that *The Freethinker* brings every month.

NELLY MOIA
Atheist
teacher
in a
"Catholic"
country

NT dates

I MUST apologise for writing about minor academic details, but like the leopard I have a vicious nature and defend myself when attacked. I will be as brief as possible.

My summary of the evidence about NT dates was intended only to indicate what is basically known about them. Most of the facts can be found in *A New Eusebius*, edited by J Stevenson. I may have been too doubtful about Justin's knowledge of the Synoptics, so will quote W H C Frend: "Justin quotes Memoirs of the Apostles, apparently Synoptists with variations" *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1973, p146). The date of the original Mark is uncertain; in spite of the authority of Eisler and A Robertson I cannot easily believe that this can have been written as early as 75-80. Apart from these points, I don't think there is anything controversial in my summary.

I did not try to give a date for the Fourth Gospel, because I like the reconstruction of its origin given by R Eisler, *The Enigma of the Fourth Gospel*, and this is not generally accepted. This suggests an author with precisely the right qualities to have written such a book. His suggested date is c.115 In my young days palæographers used to suggest about 110-115 for the John Rylands fragment, but dates from palæography are notoriously unreliable.

Mr O'Hara is perhaps over-cautious when he suggests that "the genuine Pauline material was almost certainly all written before about 60-65 AD." Obviously it was all written before 65. The difficulty is that the existing epistles are certainly the work of different writers, and it is difficult to define the parts written by the original Paul. An attempt at unscrambling the mess will be found, in Rylands' *A Critical Review of the Four Chief Pauline Epistles*; a summary will be found in Archibald Robertson, *The Bible and its Background*, p26 f.

I agree with M R James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, that Irenæus picked the four best Gospels, but agree with Mr O'Hara that even the chosen ones are pretty improbable. I may add that I have not special knowledge of NT History, but have been interested in comparative religion for some 80 years and have picked up a certain acquaintance with it.

In the case of Egyptian history I am rather better informed. Although a Professor of Classical Archaeology, I had sufficient knowledge of Egyptian archaeology to have been invited to join the excavation staff at Amarna; I was unable to accept owing to university commitments. The main facts about the origin and distribution of the alphabet are not in dispute; it appears first in Sinai, and every known alphabet can be traced back to this. The two possible exceptions, the cuneiform alphabet of Ugarit and the Korean alphabet introduced in

1446, were both produced by people in contact with alphabet users, and are unlikely to be original inventions. If Mr Kensit knows of any other case of people inventing an alphabetic system perhaps he would publish it. Of course other systems have used letters, but these were not the basis of writing. All the above information is conveniently summarised in *Reading the Past*, edited by T J Hooker (Trustees of the British Museum, 1990).

There is nothing very new in the idea that the alphabet democratised learning, or that it may have been easier for a busy man to learn twenty-odd characters than several thousand. I think the idea was first suggested to me at Cambridge by Charles Seltman. I used it, adding the importance of the invention of iron, when lecturing on Greek history at Edinburgh in 1937, and these ideas were later developed by M O Wason in her Ph D thesis on the Greek tyrants; a brief and rather unsatisfactory summary of this was published, I think, in 1946 under the title *Class Struggles in Ancient Greece*. Reviewers have praised the sections on iron and the alphabet; I have more recently restated the history of early iron working (*Acta Antiqua*, 1977).

It is clear that the Sinai script was written by Semites familiar with Egyptian hieroglyphs. The Nile Delta and the Palestine coasts were inhabited by Semites ruled by Egyptians. Until 1550 they had been ruled by Semitic kings. After the Egyptian conquest of the Delta we hear of iconoclastic riots there. We find literate people working as slaves in the mines. I suggested that they were intellectuals deported for subversive activities. I said that this was the obvious answer; I did not say that it was unavoidable. If Mr. Kensit can think of a more likely scenario I should be interested to hear of it.

Mr Kensit accuses the Editor of error. Possibly the Editor is a better judge than Mr Kensit.

C R WASON
Bridgwater

ALTHOUGH I am not a language expert, I can read English, and in answer to Mr Cornaire Kensit's criticisms of a previous letter about the alphabet from C R Wason I would say that Mr Kensit runs counter to all that I have read on the history language by experts.

He says it is just as easy to learn to read Egyptian hieroglyphics. Any language can be easy if enough time is taken in learning it. Nevertheless, if the Phoenicians had not invented the alphabet, we would not have had any Western history or philosophy and today would have spoken a language similar to Chinese, Egyptian, Arabic etc.

J H MORTEN
London WC1



Turn to Page 191

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 190

Keep cool!

I NOTE your recent admonition that letters be (preferably if not mandatorily) short with some respectful amusement. The first three in the same issue fill up one and two-thirds pages!

But never mind. One (in fact many) is/are privileged to get, for free, the scholarship of C R Wason to cut out as ammunition when debating with the vicar over the lychgate.

Talking about debate, in the recent "For and Against God" one on the admirable Channel 4, we once again had the inevitable "Angels on a pin" debacle. No wonder presenter Sheena Macdonald looked throughout as though she was conducting a discussion for a class of opinionated infants.

For Humanists, there is (in a way) no debate. The debate is among "believers." I was disappointed to see a past Chairman of the Humanist Association losing his cool. While, at all costs, avoiding looking/sounding "superior," the stance of Freethinkers should always be like Good King Wenceslas's snow: cool and crisp and even. Reader/TV viewers will have noticed the contrast with that long-haired lady in Blood-of-the-Lamb red who flopped her hands like a four-bladed propeller.

Such debates (thank you, C4) will make rational folk tend to ask themselves: "Surely, this religion thing can't last another millennium!"

NOEL RATCLIFFE
Buxton

Palestine

AT the National Secular Society AGM a motion was passed welcoming the recent "peace" accord between the PLO and Israel. Since 1948, the Jews, with the massive backing of the USA, have laid claim to Palestine on the unproven and flimsy excuse that "God" gave the land to Abraham and his descendants 5,000 years ago!

Since 1948, every means possible, including force of arms and tyranny, have been used to oust the Arabic inhabitants from their traditional land. Now that the Jews have obtained what they wanted, it is in their interests to sue for peace – in order to enjoy their ill-gotten gains regardless of the misery they have inflicted.

It is so easy to say "Let's forget the past... let's live in peace." But where is the justice in such an "arrangement"? How can the refugees be recompensed?

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

Unceremonious

I MUST congratulate Nigel Collins (October) for adroitly explaining to me that ritual is now out in Humanist circles, and ceremony is in.

I look forward to reading about the suggested wording of a Humanist grace before meals. And what about a few little mantras for the children to recite before they snuggle down in bed?

"Now don't laugh!" as the late Frankie Howerd used to say, "this is serious!"

I share Nigel Collins's admiration for Yeats, but I do wonder if, in this case, the poet got it wrong. Custom and ceremony strike me as being less likely to foster innocence and beauty than to enshrine humbug and hoary old abuses.

NIGEL SINNOTT
Alexandra, Vic.,
Australia.

Thomas Paine

DAVID YEULETT (November) is surprised that Thomas Paine still believed in God.

The reason why he and other deists did so was because it was not until the middle of the 19th Century that the progress of science had made belief in a supreme being or creator clearly unnecessary. While deism had been spreading among thinking people in Paine's day, most infidels – including Voltaire himself – still retained a residual belief in a God, although Voltaire seems to have had some doubts about that proposition in his later years.

Had Paine and other such deists lived a century later, they would very probably have been, instead, atheists or agnostics.

R J M TOLHURST
Great Baddow

Altruism

GENES don't think. Genes don't feel. Human beings, who are more than the sum of their parts, are capable of thinking and feeling and therefore of empathy. So true altruism does exist – although, alas, it is far from widespread. If there were more of it, the world would be a much better place.

Could there be a greater "justification," if such is necessary?

VIVIEN GIBSON
Ealing

Seeing the light

HAVING been an Atheist for a number of years, I recently joined the Humanist organisation – and then wondered why I had waited so long.

I think that the reason why I waited was because, like some Atheists, I had rejected the Church teaching, a teaching that was engraved in me from the day that I was born, through being baptised, going to church every Sunday and having to attend school assembly which always had a religious content, to say nothing of the variety of activities that I had to attend in the name of the church.

Yet despite this heavy bombardment and psychological pressure, I drew my own conclusion based on my own reason that God did not exist – a conclusion that I came to, not from reading Atheist literature or by being approached by an Atheist group. I had done it by myself, simply by questioning what I was being told and rejecting it as it made no sense to what I saw in the world. Therefore, I felt that, having seen the truth, I was on my own and that I did not need to join in with a group of like-minded people as I now possessed the true faith. How wrong can you be!

So how did I "see the light," and what made me change my solitary Atheist existence? The change came for me one day when my daughter of six, in a tender moment, said that she loved Mummy and Daddy, Grandma and Jesus.

Jesus? When did he come into the equation? I was astonished, because we had never taught her anything to do with religion, feeling that she was too young to grasp the concept, but I have always taught her a high moral standard to live by.

I knew that she would come into contact with religion at school, but I was not concerned as I felt that because she did not see this in the home there would be a balance of what she accepted.

Now I find that not only is she receiving a high amount of religious doctoring from the school, but also they are teaching her that this Jesus is on the same level as her family, thereby undermining the family unit which we thought that we had.

How do I fight back? Through my children by telling them to question such teachings? This would only lead to them being rejected by the teachers who obviously have a lot of zeal for their faith, a zeal that I have often found turns very nasty when challenged. And could I expect a six-year-old to be able to debate an opposite view to such teachings?

No, I am powerless on my own, a single voice lost in the sound from organised religions, yet I am sure that there are other parents who feel the same. I want my voice to be heard. I want my opinions taken into account. I want a better world for us all – so I joined the Humanist society and I am pleased that I did.

JOHN WILSON
Warwick

LAST WORD

by Carl Pinel

Getting shirty with the Witnesses

JEHOVAH'S Witnesses do not usually call at my house. It is more than three years since the last Bible-pusher declined my invitation to have further discussion on the inconsistencies in the Bible and the absurdity of belief in the supernatural.

I was surprised, therefore, to be informed by my daughter that two "Bible-bashers" had just knocked at the door, but that they had left when she had told them we were not superstitious.

Ascertaining which way they had gone, I padded down the road after them – in my slippers. Tormenting the neighbourhood must have been going badly because they had travelled some distance before I caught up with them and invited them in for a cup of tea.

Once they were seated in my lounge with cups in their hands, they were a captive audience and could not make the hasty escape which the last representative of this peculiar and persistent cult had deemed prudent.

I assailed them with most of the usual arguments, asking them why, if God is Love, did he kill so many Old Testament people, and why, and when, did he change his mind and decide to send his son to save the world in the New Testament. And if, as they claimed, wickedness was increasing, why had the sado-masochistic sacrifice failed?

The younger men all have the same pattern: they claim that before becoming Witnesses they slept with many women – which sounds considerably more enjoyable than attending Bible classes.

Sexual matters usually get fundamentalist Christians (and many other Christians) in a fluster, and it is always amusing to discuss the subject with them. I asked how, since incest is forbidden in the Book of Leviticus, was the world re-populated after the Flood? And if Jehovah's

Witnesses oppose homosexuality because it is also condemned in Leviticus, why were they both wearing shirts of polyester and cotton, when the wearing of clothing of mixed fibres is also forbidden in the same chapter?

Apparently which laws they choose to obey, and which to ignore, is optional.

The two Witnesses seemed at a loss to explain why the "Virgin Birth" is not recorded by two of the New Testament writers in their Gospels. One would have assumed that it was important enough to merit at least a mention.

I challenged them on the discrepancies concerning Joseph's genealogy, pointing out that it was irrelevant anyway because he was not the natural father of Jesus. They claimed that Mary was descended from David, but when I challenged them to show me which biblical passage stated that, they were unable to do so.

However, they were able to explain away the fact that Jesus was not recognised after the resurrection by claiming that he had a different body!

But why anyone would want to change

his body but keep the holes in his hands and feet (which were later shown to the doubting Thomas) they could not say.

They were also at a loss to explain why, in one of the Gospels, Jesus is inside the tomb, while in others he appears to Mary in the garden, or to disciples on the road to Emmaus. Why would Mary (or the two Marys, depending on which of the Gospels you read) want to anoint a body which had been dead for two days anyway?

Fundamentalists claim that the world was created at 9 am on October 23, 4004 BC. But they are unable to say if this very precise calculation applies to Europe or to the Antipodes. Of course, the time might have applied to the Garden of Eden but, so far, explorers have been unable to discover where the Garden is, or was.

After an hour and a quarter, the two would-be proselytisers declined an offer of more tea, gave me a pamphlet to read and left. I asked them to call again but their response seemed half-hearted.

If Jehovah's Witnesses can knock at my door with their literature, perhaps I could do the same? A telephone call to the Kingdom Hall in Manchester secured the number of a local contact who supplied information about the services. Thus, armed with recent and current issues of *The Freethinker*, I visited the local Kingdom Hall a few minutes before the service was due to start.

The building was a plain but solid structure which, in a less superstitious age, could be put to a better use. The doors were wide open and the lights were welcoming. On the doorstep, three young girls were playing under the watchful eye of their mother.

I approached: "As an alternative to the religious viewpoint, can I interest you in a copy of *The Freethinker*?" I inquired.

"No thank you! Nobody here will want to read that! Come inside, children!"

The doors were closed in my face.

A minute or two later, the youngest girl opened the door a few inches and peeped outside – but was hastily called back in. I waited for a few minutes longer and then one of the Elders came out to speak to me. The doors remained closed.

He declined my offer of *The Freethinker* and asked what religious group I belonged to. When I informed him that I was an atheist, he responded: "Oh, you poor soul."

But at least he was friendly, and he invited me inside. It was my turn to decline as religious services are about as much fun as a visit to the dentist's. I left.

Perhaps I will visit the Mormons next.

The believing world

VICAR Louis Norvelle faces the sack – for mooning at the choir during Sunday morning service. The holy man bared his backside because of a long-standing feud with his choirmaster over hymns at the Signes Memorial Church in France. The cheeky vicar refused to apologise, claiming his actions were "totally justified." *Daily Star*, October 18.

A SPOILT moggie called Minka cost a

German church a £600,000 legacy. The cash was left to the church by the cat's owner, 83-year-old spinster Theresia Asshof. But her will had one condition – the church must feed Minka with beef and boiled ham. The local priest decided that £45 a month in cat-food bills was too much and paid only £8, saying Minka could also catch mice. Now two neighbours are taking the church to court in Dusseldorf. *Daily Star*, October 2.