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**THERE'S
NO
PLACE
LIKE
HELL!**

— see Page 2

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UP FRONT



with the Editor

No Hell, No Hell!

WHEN, as a pre-Christmas present to Secular Humanists everywhere, the Bishop of Durham rejected "the concept of eternal damnation in a tortuous hell" (*The Times*, December 15), he found himself enjoying the sort of media attention usually reserved for princesses who sick-up their breakfasts over the Queen Mum's slippers.

Why did the 'papers, broadsheet and tabloid alike, devote so many column inches – column feet – to Dr David Jenkins' remarks? Controversy is, after all, no stranger to the Right Reverend gentlemen: he doubted the virgin birth a long time ago, and, even more heinous, he expressed support for the miners during the Thatcher coal strike.

My guess is that somehow it penetrated Wapping's miasma of brandy fumes that to abolish Hell is to abolish Christianity in any meaningful sense.

Without Hell, from what were we Saved by Jesus's pivotal if painful stay among us? The whole thing is rendered pointless.

More practically, how can priests and parsons control the thoughts and deeds of their flocks if the ultimate sanction of eternal damnation is removed from their clammy grasp?

Hell is a fundamental requirement of religion. Christianity *sans* Hell is an Anglo-Iraqi Supergun *sans* shells; it is a theological chocolate teapot.

Rape and pillage?

NOW that it has dawned on them that Hell is an obscene myth, will Dr Jenkins and his followers embark on a rampage of rape, pillage and pigeon-rustling around the Northern shires?

Or will their on-going reasonable behaviour simply prove what Humanists have always known: that the overwhelming majority of people will act decently simply because it is socially advantageous to do so.

"To the Christian, acting rightly means obeying divine commands; to the Humanist, it means acting so as to promote human well-being. To put it another way, the Christian regards morality as something that has been imposed on man from above by a supernatural lawgiver, whereas the Humanist regards it as something that has been worked out – and is still being worked out – by men themselves, in the process of learning to live happily together in communities." (Margaret Knight, *Morals*

Without Religion, 1964).

Or as Einstein remarked in *The World As I See It*: "A man's ethical behaviour should be based effectively on sympathy, education and social ties; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death."

The awesome consequences

IT IS important to note that Dr Jenkins' comments failed to receive the *imprimatur* of many other Christian men, men who have a better understanding of the importance of Hell to Christianity.

Mr Clive Calver, Director of the Evangelical Alliance, said Dr Jenkins's views had "more to do with sanctified Humanism than traditional Christian belief... Evangelicals have continually maintained that there is torment in Hell. That is the biblical line."

And the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, insisted that "Heaven, Hell and the return of Christ are central themes in biblical Christianity... The Church has always proclaimed both the love of God as being supreme in Jesus and the awesome consequences of rejecting that love."

The Rev Tony Higton, Rector of Hawkwell, Essex, leader of an evangelical pressure group, said Dr Jenkins's position was "arrogant, setting himself against the clear teaching of Jesus and St Paul."

Jesus can't be wrong

AND Mr Higton's point about Jesus is the crucial one. Christians *must* believe in Hell – or they must admit that their Lord (who is also God) was wrong on this matter, and how can that be?

There are many proofs in the New Testament that their Jesus believed in Hell. My favourite is the meek and mild one's advice:

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched.

Pretty unequivocal, concrete stuff that, from Mark ix. 43-48; little that's symbolic, there; it is singularly unallegorical. Jesus believed in Hell, and we Atheists must protect him from his backsliding followers: we cannot allow the Christians to treat his teachings as though they were a box of Cadbury's Milk Tray, rejecting the hard centres but grabbing the orange creams of, say, the Sermon on the Mount.

Similarly with the Church Fathers, still revered by millions. We cannot allow the Christians to pluck the relatively sane bits from their teachings and reject the hellish:

St Augustine: *That fire is more deadly than any which man can suffer in this life.*

St Thomas Aquinas: *The same fires torment the damned in hell and the just in purgatory.*

John Calvin: *The damned are forever harassed by a dreadful tempest; they shall feel themselves torn asunder by an angry God and broken by the weight of his hand.*

St Ignatius Loyola: *Let us fancy we see hell – a horrible cavern full of black flames, sulphur, devils, dragons... Imagine the worst ye can, and then say, "all this is nothing compared to hell."*

John Wesley: *Is it not common to say to a child, "Put your finger in that candle; can you bear it even for one minute? How then will you bear hell-fire?... what will it be to have the whole body plunged into a lake of fire, burning with brimstone?"*

Confused Superstitionist

YOU reject Hell – and you reject these cerebrally-challenged characters and, whether you want to or no, you reject Jesus. I repeat: unre-servedly, he believed in Hell and he cannot be wrong in any jot (not to mention any tittle).

But Dr Jenkins wants to cling to a liberal, lamb-loving, politically correct Jesus, and that is why I find myself unable to agree with those Humanists who believe that the Bishop might be persuaded in some way to associate himself with our movement when he hangs up his cope and mitre in July.

He was quoted thus in *The Guardian* (December 15): "My clue to God is love in Jesus and I'm absolutely sure he simply wouldn't do it."

He is, I suggest, just another confused superstitionist: a nice man, a moral man, who yearns to worship not a God of blood and ire but a God of love and peace who doesn't fall behind with his Labour Party subs – but still a God of some kind. To quote his old adversary (who still walketh about, seeking whom she may devour), Dr Jenkins is Not One Of Us.

● The illustration on the front page of this issue is from *The Inferno* by Lorenzo Mantani and his school, West façade, Orvieto Cathedral.

FEMALE CIRCUMCISION: THE UNKINDEST CUT

by Peter Brearey

WHAT Professor Sir Herbert Duthie, Chairman of the General Medical Council's professional conduct committee, has called the "abhorrent, illegal and mutilating" practice of female circumcision threatens many thousands of Muslim girls in the UK, Australia and other "Western" nations.

Sir Herbert's comment was reported in *The Guardian* on November 26, as he announced the striking-off for serious professional misconduct of a London-based surgeon who had denied agreeing to perform the operation on a Nigerian-born journalist.

The operation is of "no possible medical benefit to a patient," Sir Herbert added.

The Guardian has also revealed that health workers estimate that around 10,000 girls in

Britain, mainly from African families, are at risk of female circumcision, carried out to ensure virginity and marriageability.

The practice is widespread among Muslims from Somalia, Nigeria and the Sudan — although it has no basis in the Koran and is thought to pre-date Islam. But Freethinkers are likely to see the procedure as a clear reflection of the major religions' view of women as inferior beings and as the property of their men.

Put bluntly, women who have been circumcised experience no sexual pleasure — and are therefore unlikely to "humiliate" their husbands by associating with other men. Male power over women is hugely reinforced by the practice.

Most operations are carried out on girls aged eight or younger, many of them toddlers who are patently unable to give informed consent to the operation.

The Department of Health has long been concerned about the practice, which was outlawed by the 1985 Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act. No prosecutions are thought to have been brought in Britain, but a similar law in France has led to jail sentences for mothers subjecting their daughters to the operation — and in one case, a five-year sentence for the person carrying it out.

The ban on the procedure in Britain has led families to send their daughters back to their home countries for "holidays" to have it done. In home villages, it is often performed by old women who habitually use unsterilised implements.

In a 1991 survey by the women's health organisation Forward International, which campaigns against the practice, 10 out of 65 UK social services departments reported intervening because cases were suspected.

The families concerned came from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Malaysia and Somalia. In one case, two sisters were made wards of court to prevent their being taken out of the country.

Some social workers have been reluctant to intervene for fear of being branded racist. Health officials regard the issue as something of a "time bomb," but there is concern about how best to deal with it without creating a racist backlash. The problem they regard themselves as facing is: how can you publicise an issue like this without arousing anger and disgust? How do you convince women who have been circumcised that their daughters should not be deformed in this way without making the mothers feel like freaks?

Controversy does surface from time-to-time, however — as when a London councillor called for the procedure to be legalised and provided

on the National Health Service. The call drew letters of protest from the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Children's Fund, who are campaigning to end the custom.

The operation involves complete removal of the clitoris, the labia minora and parts of the labia majora — which is stitched together, leaving only a tiny opening for urination and menstruation.

There is much anecdotal evidence that the practice is widespread among Muslim groups in Australia, and this was given substance by legal proceedings (*The Age*, Melbourne, December 2) around a protection application hearing involving two young girls who had already been infibulated (circumcised).

The magistrate described the practice as a "surgical intrusion" and a "type of assault" on the sisters, who are aged 18 months and three years.

Despite objections from the family, the lobby group Women Lawyers Against Female Genital Mutilation was granted leave to be present as a "friend of the court" at the hearing, which will be in February.

The group's Ms Rose Weinberg said her members wanted the court to be aware of the "ramifications for these children from genital mutilation," and said they could face lifetime problems with their reproductive organs and bladders.

A remark from the family's legal representative gave an indication of just how widespread the practice is in Australia. She said the Department of Health and Community Services was formulating policy on the matter, which was "a very big issue which could have cultural ramifications for all states."

The magistrate said infibulation was "clearly" taking place in Melbourne. She granted a three-month interim protection order over the girls.

Members of the lobby group distributed material after the hearing. This noted that the health risks of the surgery "depend on the gravity of the mutilation, hygienic conditions, the skill of the operator and the struggles of the child." Possible complications included infections, cysts and severe scarring which may eventually obstruct walking.

The Forward organisation is based at the Africa Centre, 38 King Street, London WC2E 8JT. Its literature says: "Female genital mutilation is performed on defenceless young girls solely to suppress their natural sexuality, but is mystified with culture, religion and superstition. This cannot be tolerated in modern society. The practice is deeply entrenched in communities which practise it and in the UK many

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Victory for Sunday shoppers

CONSUMERS and shop workers were the "real winners" on December 8 when the House of Commons voted by a majority of 75 for a change of law to allow big stores to trade for six hours, and others to open all day, on Sundays.

So said Baroness Jay, Chairman of the Shopping Hours Reform Council, after the successful Second Reading and Options Vote on the proposals, which will now go into Committee for detailed discussion before the Third Reading is followed by the Lords debate and return to the Commons.

There is no doubt that the largely reli-

gion-motivated "Keep Sunday Special" campaigners will mount a last-ditch effort to derail the legislation, but if all goes well the proposed regulations could become law in the Summer of this year..

Baroness Jay said: "For years, the Shopping Hours Reform Council has promoted the wishes of the consumers and campaigned to protect the rights of those shop-workers who want to work on Sunday as well as those who do not.

"This decision has reflected the wishes of the majority of people. It provides for good, sound and popular law. It has given the freedom of choice to millions of people to spend Sunday as they choose. Consumers

have been given the freedom to shop at a time and in a manner of their choosing."

● On the first Sunday (December 12) after the Archbishop of Canterbury condemned Sunday trading, Anglican cathedrals across England were busy selling goods it is illegal to sell on the Sabbath!

Dr George Carey said on December 9 that the reform for which Parliament had voted the previous night would cause long-term damage to the nation's "spiritual and physical health."

Yet the goods being sold in cathedral shops three days after his pronouncement were breaking the present law AND were in breach of the highly-restrictive Keep Sunday Special proposals he supported.

Canterbury Cathedral adhered to the letter of the law and was selling only items marked as souvenirs. But they included T-shirts and tea towels.

York Minster had many goods it is illegal to sell covered over but broke the law by selling a toy, a fluffy dinosaur, and a book about dinosaurs.

St Paul's was law-breaking, but only on a few items. Its neighbour, Southwark Cathedral, was offering a whole range of illegal goods.

St Alban's Cathedral, Christ Church, Oxford, and Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral, where the Bishops have been critical of Sunday trading, were all selling illegal goods.

Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral - like Guildford Cathedral - was selling a wide range of goods it is illegal to sell. And Liverpool's Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral was offering a number of goods it is illegal to sell.

Commenting on the reports, David Thompson, of the Shopping Hours Reform Council, said: "There is no reason under Heaven or on earth why cathedral and church shops should be barred from selling any goods they think fit on a Sunday.

"The money is needed to help to upkeep the fabric of the church and for church causes. Would anyone deny them that money? But how can the Church castigate others for doing what it is itself doing?"

Lourdes' prayer

THE town of Lourdes is praying for a miracle - to get pilgrims coming back to its famous shrine.

In the last 35 years, the Vatican has selected only nine wonder cures in St Bernadette's Cave as official miracles. It means fewer and fewer pilgrims visiting the French town - and an economic crisis. Now leading Roman Catholics are trying to get the church to relax its tough rules.

A churchman said: "Only a miracle can save Lourdes and the Vatican is making it harder each year to find one." *Daily Star*, November 3, 1993.

FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

From Page 3

adults use the cultural and race arguments to blur the issue and to prevent interference."

Freethinkers will be bound to ask how far the principle of non-interference in others' culture should be extended. Should colonial administrators have held back from trying to stamp out the Indian tradition of *suttee*, in which Hindu widows were cremated on their husbands' funeral pyres? Should they have ignored foot-binding in China...cannibalism...the practice of leaving girl babies - and, in some areas, unproductive old people - out to die?

In the fight against female circumcision, however, people in and from the former colonies are themselves taking the lead. Forward says: "A movement led by informed and committed Africans, human rights campaigners and health activists is gradually growing against this practice internationally."

But the organisation warns: "Female genital mutilation is happening to children living here and now in the UK...However, local authorities and professionals are not taking action to educate people who practise the mutilation of girls; neither are they intervening to protect children at risk of mutilation as their professionals are afraid of being accused of racism."

Forward calls on people living in the UK to write to MPs, council leaders, social services departments and health authorities, national and local, asking whether there is a policy for prevention of female circumcision in their areas and demanding to know what is being done in practical terms.

Pressure should also be put on Amnesty International to recognise and take up the issue, Forward says, since Article 5 of the UN Human Rights Declaration states that "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

In Australia, Karen Kissane has investigated the abuse on behalf of *The Age*. She wrote (December 3): "It has been known for some time that people in some ethnic communities,

particularly those from Africa and the Middle East, are circumcising their daughters.

"Some girls are done on kitchen tables here, some are sent back to the old country and others, police alleged several years ago, are done by Australian doctors.

"It effectively castrates women, leaving them with sexual pain instead of pleasure and ensuring their chastity as maidens and their fidelity as wives. It is a 5,000-year-old tradition that parents still inflict on their daughters in order to make them marriageable and acceptable to their own communities."

Australian political leaders have long condemned it and threatened legal consequences for anyone involved, but its legal status is still unclear. The Australian Law Reform Commission has argued against special legislation to criminalise it, insisting that offenders could be charged under existing criminal law, and that, in any case, education would be a better tool for change than prosecution.

Karen Kissane commented: "We do not allow Muslims to cut off the hand of a thief or stone an adulteress. People from polygamous cultures must respect our bigamy laws and men from more patriarchal societies must learn that in this country, children of a broken marriage do not automatically belong to the father. Jehovah's Witnesses are not permitted to refuse a sick child a necessary blood transfusion. The right of a child to protection outweighs the right of the parent to follow tradition.

"Genital mutilation should be criminalised if migrants are to get a clear message about how serious a practice it is...

"Education programmes should be set up to ask parents to examine their beliefs and to ask mothers to remember their own shock and pain and grief."

Our own Health Secretary, Virginia Bottomley, might do well to consider the latter point. In the meantime, *The Freethinker* unreservedly endorses Forward's appeal for individual pressure to be applied to those who run the UK's health and social welfare services.

So that's why they called him Superstar!

PERHAPS the most perplexing problem of Biblical research is what is known as the quest for the historical Jesus. The difficulty is that with the death of Jesus his followers began to tell stories about what he did while on Earth and it wasn't until at least 30 years later that anyone got around to writing anything down.

Modern-day scholars have only the written New Testament to work with, and they are eager to pass through it back to the Oral Tradition and then through that in an attempt to discover the nature of the Jesus who actually lived. The difficulty lies in trying to separate the fact from the fiction.

But I was never much concerned with the historical Jesus, mainly because I've always felt that it's more important to get to the Jesus who is alive and who can do something for me today. Consequently, I examined the Bible carefully, applied what little I know about modern astronomy, pushed a few numbers through my pocket calculator, and have discovered the location (well, almost) of the living Christ!

Many people might argue that my positioning of the deity is somewhat imprecise, but I would like them to consider the proposition that a little knowledge is better than no knowledge at all.

Galactic Guru

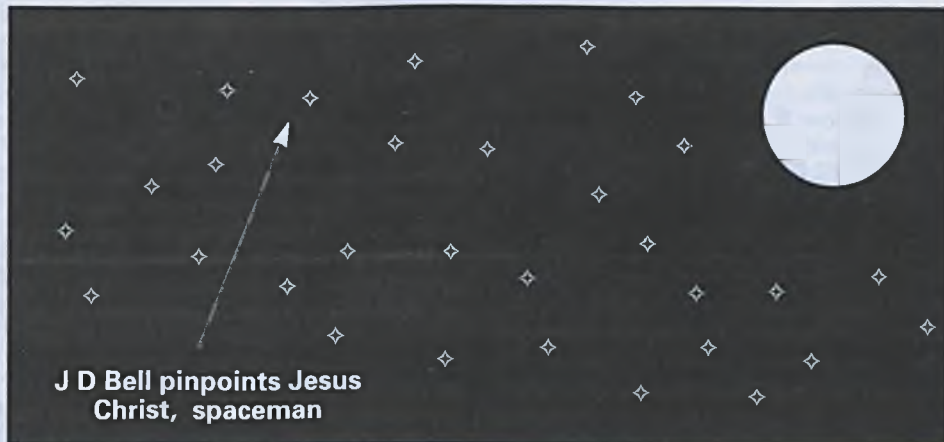
The problem lies in the account of the Ascension found in Luke 24:51. He tells us that Jesus was "carried up into Heaven," and that's exactly what we might expect Luke to tell us: he was living at a time when people believed in a sort of "sandwich" universe, with a flat Earth, a Heaven above and a Hell below, and he described the Ascension based on those assumptions.

But modern astronomers know that it's not that way at all: the Earth is spherical and there is no such direction as "up" when our planet is thought of as an object floating in space. This means that if the Apostles actually did witness an "Ascension," what they saw was Jesus moving not "up," but "away" from the Earth.

Now if we assume a moderate rate of movement, perhaps 10 feet a minute (which works out to about 1,000 miles a year) Jesus is currently in outer space about two million miles from Earth.

Inasmuch as astronomers tell us that the universe is infinite, we are forced to conclude that the Galactic Guru is doomed to an eternity of endless "ascension," which seems rather silly, but who am I to question the Bible, which we all know is the inerrant word of God?

If he is moving in the plane of the planets and going towards the Sun, the Interplanetary Interceder will be within hailing distance of Venus in about 31,000 years.



J D Bell pinpoints Jesus Christ, spaceman

If he is moving away from the Sun, he will be able to stop for a beer on Mars in about 49,000 years, but he'd better get two (or perhaps a six-pack) because he won't be able to stop again until he hits the orbit of Jupiter, which will take another 342,000 years.

Again, I would be the first to admit that the location I've given for the Cosmic Christ is a bit inexact, but it's certainly

much better than having no idea at all as to the planetary position of the Heavenly Healer.

Those true believers seriously seeking the living Jesus should look in the skies within two million miles of Earth. But they'd better hurry up about it: Christ so loved the world that he is getting farther away from it at the rate of almost three miles a day. I know: I read it in the Bible.

Fanatic fatwa on brave Nasreen

FREETHINKERS throughout the world will be following with close attention the welfare of the Mullah-abused Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen – and will no doubt be making appropriate representations to their local Bangladesh diplomatic missions.

Some fundamentalist mullahs want to hang her for her outspokenness – others believe that marriage might be a better way of keeping her quiet.

In any event, the 31-year-old poet and feminist has been described accurately as the Salman Rushdie of Bangladesh, because of a *fatwa* (death sentence) imposed on her for alleged blasphemy.

"But her battle is not only with Islamic fundamentalists," Tim McGirk reported for the *Independent on Sunday* on December 5. "She also denounces Bangladeshi men for keeping women 'veiled, illiterate and in the kitchen.'"

Most of the quality Press has reported that Nasreen's outspokenness has earned her many enemies, but she has refused to go into hiding – even when 5,000 Muslim fanatics blocked traffic in Dhaka by praying in the streets and demanding the writer's execution.

Her only protection is two police guards outside the apartment in Dhaka where she lives with her mother and sisters.

"I will be the last to seek asylum in foreign countries," she told the *Independent on Sunday*. "I will die here, and out of my ashes hundreds of Taslimas will be reborn."

Her latest troubles began in October when a group of clerics known as Followers of the Prophet issued the *fatwa* and a reward of £850 for her death.

"So far, perhaps because of the paltry purse (Salman Rushdie's head is worth more than £1m), no one has yet tried to kill her," writes Tim McGirk.

Bangladeshi novelist Imdadul Haq Milan said: "Taslima's writing has two traits: religion and sex. The Mullahs read her books to find out what she is saying against them. The teenagers read her books because there is a lot of sex."

Banned

The death decree came after the publication in January, 1993, of her novel *Lajja*, or "shame" in Bengali. She describes the persecution of Hindu families in Bangladesh, a vengeful backlash which followed the razing of a Muslim shrine at Ayodhya in India. It sold 60,000 copies before it was banned by the Bangladeshi government in July as "inflammatory."

In a gesture which seems perfectly to sum-up the orthodox Islamic attitude to women, a Muslim clergyman, who already has several wives and more than a dozen children, offered to reform her through marriage.

The three-times married Nasreen – who likens husband and wife to a master and slave relationship – declined to reply.

WHAT'S ON

Announcements are inserted in this increasingly popular column free-of-charge. However, voluntary contributions towards the cost of typesetting would be much appreciated. Cheques and postal orders, made payable to G W Foote & Co., should be sent with copy to: The Editor, *The Freethinker*, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ.

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, February 6, 5.30pm for 6 pm: Marguerite Laporte: *Alice in Wonderland: Concepts of the Beginning of the Universe.*

Central London Humanists: For details, please contact Cherie Holt on 071 916 3015. Meets at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 at 7.30pm. Thursday, January 20: *Single Parents – Worthy of Support or Blame?* With Robbi Robson, ex-Director of Gingerbread. Friday, February 25: Trip to Alternative Comedy Cabaret – sex, politics and religion!

Chiltern Humanist: Friends Meeting House, Berkhamstead. Tuesday, February 8, 7.30pm for 8 pm: Diana Rookledge speaks on the work of the Humanist Housing Association.

Cornwall Humanists: Contact: B Mercer, "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Telephone: 0209 890690. Truro Quaker Meeting House, 7.30pm. Monday, January 17: Seminar on religious education in Cornwall's schools, with Mr John Keast, County Adviser for RE.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road Kenilworth. Monday, January 17, 7.30 pm: Public meeting. Subject: *Is there a Lowest Common Denominator in the Various Religions?*

Devon Humanists: For details, please contact: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lymington, Exmouth EX8 5HN; 0395 265529. Swarthmore Centre, Plymouth, January 20, 7.30pm: *Animal Rights – a Human Responsibility.* With speakers from Animal Concern Today and Disabled Against Animal Research and Exploitation. Music Room, Exeter Central Library, Friday, January 28, 7.30pm: Panel on *A Positive, Non-Religious Approach to Life.*

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, January 14, 7.30pm: 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.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, February 1, 8pm: Vince Chainey: *Astronomy.*

Humanist Holidays: Easter, 1994. A Tudor hotel, well-appointed to modern standards, situated in the centre of historic Colchester. April 1-5, half-board £142; singles and doubles. Plenty to see and do in the area. Details from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, Glos. GL52 5AA. Telephone: 0242 239175.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Details: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, January 27, 8pm: Denis Cobell: *Living as a Humanist.*

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, January 11: John Roberts, Leeds Racial Equality Council: *Race Relations in Leeds – Credit or Shame?*

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Events start at 6.30pm. January 16: Gerard Bane: *Animal Rights and the State.* January 23: Dr Ted Hankin: *Is Freedom an Illusion?* February 6: David Missell: *The Advantages of a Republican Britain.*

London Student Skeptics: University of London Union, Malet Street, London. Monday, January 17, 7.30pm: Jon Atack: *The Total Freedom Trap – Scientology, Dianetics and L Ron Hubbard.*

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

National Secular Society: Individual membership costs £4 per annum. Special rates for organisations wishing to affiliate. Details from the Secretary, Terry Mullins, National Secular Society, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, January 20, 7.30pm: Chad Goodwin: *Thomas Paine – Man of Reason.*

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, January 12, 8pm: Frank Abel: *Religion in School.* Wednesday, February 9, 8pm: Peter Brearey (Editor of *The Freethinker*): *How Free is our Press?*

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 071-831 7723). List of events obtainable from above address.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, January 12, 7.45pm: Public meeting, with speaker from The Samaritans of East Surrey. Wednesday, February 9, 7.45pm: AGM.

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. 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.

ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

Books, pamphlets and back issues of *The Freethinker*.

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

'Uncaring' NHS slammed by abortion charity

EVIDENCE of long delays and uncaring attitudes in the NHS emerged from a survey of patients at a London abortion charity clinic.

"Long waiting lists for abortion are ludicrous and the NHS should face up to the need to treat unwanted pregnancy as an emergency," the Pro-Choice Alliance told *The Freethinker*.

Three quarters of the women who replied to the PCA survey, although not dissatisfied with the private care they received, would have preferred NHS treatment if it had been available.

The survey showed that the lack of prompt, sympathetic help in the NHS for women with unwanted pregnancies causes distress and anxiety which most women find intolerable. They are therefore forced to find private health care at one of the most traumatic moments in their lives.

"Although techniques have improved since legal abortion was first available in 1968, the problems in NHS abortion services have hardly changed at all. Numbers have slowly increased but half of all abortions are still done by the private sector because the NHS in some areas has not attempted to cope with even a reasonable proportion of the demand."

In most areas, abortion patients are treated in general gynaecology sessions and are rarely given the emergency priority they need. Apart from the emotional distress and anxiety women suffer while waiting for an abortion, the risk of physical complications increases with the length of pregnancy.

PCA therefore recommends that abortion services which are separate from other gynaecological procedures should be set up or paid for by every District Health Authority or NHS Trust to cope compassionately with local women's needs. Special day-care units, clinics or theatre sessions could see women within a few days of their request for an abortion.

Responses to the survey:
Although the number of women surveyed at the Pregnancy Advisory Service clinic was small (250) and the response rate was only 40 per cent (101), the responses and comments are sufficient to provide clear evidence of considerable problems faced by women trying to obtain an NHS abortion.

A significant number of the women in the survey had gone first to their GP but been refused an abortion or unreasonably delayed.

Several were simply referred directly to the PAS. A large proportion decided to seek private treatment when warned of the long waiting list in their area (from three weeks to "months").

Some went straight to PAS because they expected to be insensitively dealt with by

their own GP or other NHS doctors.

A 22-year-old woman from Sutton said: "My GP said I would have to wait 4-6 weeks by the time I had been scanned and treated. If it wasn't for this I would definitely have gone to an NHS hospital."

One 27-year-old from Brent had to wait three weeks for an appointment for just a pregnancy test.

A 24-year-old from Harrow was told by her GP that she should have used free contracep-

tion and that she was killing a life.

Several women were informed by their doctor that they did not qualify for an NHS abortion although no reason was given. They all had legal grounds for an abortion.

A 24 year old from Reading was told by her doctor that "places should be prioritised for 15-year-olds and mothers with seven kids."

For further information, contact Pro-Choice Alliance, 27-35, Mortimer Street, London W1N 7RJ.

TRIVIA FOR POSEURS?

MAURICE RAVEL spent the last years of his life, at least until his brain tumour, lamenting the moment of aberration in which he had composed the frightful *Bolero*.

Bertrand Russell is more fortunate; he did not live to see this book, which trivialises one of the most powerful intellects of this century.

The Quotable Bertrand Russell purports to assemble Russell's answers to important questions. The questions themselves have been devised by the Editor, Lee Eisler.

These examples are revealing: "Should small children be left with each other without adult supervision?" "Has there always been antagonism between city and country?" "Why is culture worth studying?" "How is a drive for business success antagonistic to love?" "Why do most people want to have more money?" "What makes people tick?"

Index

The preface asks why people should read this book, instead of reading Russell himself. The answer given is: "Few people have time to read the large Russell record, or have access to it. Besides, how would one know where to look to locate Russell's views on a particular question?" (!!!!).

Is this book intended for those who have never read a book with an index, or know how to use it?

The preface continues, helpfully, Russell's books, the readers are informed, "can be found in libraries and bookstores."

Who would have thought it?

The Editor also selected the answers. These are taken, mostly, not from Russell's major works, but from slight publications and radio interviews. The selections appear to reflect the Editor's predilections. On Plato and Aristotle, he does at least quote

The Quotable Bertrand Russell.
Editor: Lee Eisler. Prometheus Books, £14.50.

Review: KARL HEATH

from the *History of Western Philosophy*, but his selections are neither appropriate nor enlightening. The reader who knows nothing about them will learn nothing. The reader who knows his Plato and Aristotle will merely be irritated. Similarly, Russell's interesting chapter on Marx in the *History of Western Philosophy* would appear not to be by the same author as the selected trivia in this book.

The title of the book is revealing. Is it intended for poseurs seeking to impress on social occasions by remarks beginning: "As Bertrand Russell said..."? Tony Hancock exposed the Russell poseur in a TV sketch in which, sadly alone in his flat, he announces that he is going to spend the evening with "Good old Bertie," a pose which he abandons after a few pages. This book seems to reflect the belief, originally transatlantic, but, sadly, spreading here, that there is something called "Instant Knowledge," like "Instant Coffee."

To me, Bertrand Russell epitomises the older belief that acquiring knowledge is hard work. There are no short cuts, no "Pelmanism" (older readers may remember that), no "Power of Positive Thinking," no "Lateral Thinking." Education needs more than gimmicks and role-playing, more than "multiple-answer questions" and "Yes" or "No" answers.

This book costs £14.50. For a quarter of this price one can buy the 800-page *History of Western Philosophy*. It is even being offered for 50p, by a book club, with no obligation to buy more.

Memorial to David Hume

EDINBURGH Humanist Group's Nigel Bruce is convening a committee of the Saltire Society which has an ambitious plan to raise the profile of the great Scottish Humanist David Hume.

He would particularly like to hear from readers of *The Freethinker* who are able to help with a "launch fund" whose object would be to finance publicity in the USA, "where David Hume is better known and loved in colleges and universities than he is here."

Nigel Bruce may be contacted at 21 The Causeway, Edinburgh EH15 3QA (telephone: 031 661 0937).

The David Hume Commemoration Committee has explored a number of proposals and has decided to give priority to three:

- A statue in bronze or stone, one-and-a-half life size to be situated either on a prominent site near the top of The Mound, overlooking Princes Street, or in the High Street near the present Sheriff Court House. Estimated cost: £100,000.

- A David Hume Heritage Trail commemorating the buildings in Edinburgh where he lived, worked and died, with an information leaflet for visitors. Estimated cost: £20,000.

- Refurbishment of David Hume's mausoleum and the addition of an explanatory plaque. Estimated cost: £10,000.

Nigel Bruce, from whom an explanatory leaflet may be obtained, told *The Freethinker*: "If the international appeal to be launched in due course yields the full sum of £130,000, the Saltire Society will undertake all these three projects. Decisions will be taken in the light of the response to the international appeal.

"In the meantime, the Saltire Society hopes to raise a launch fund of £25,000 to enable them to proceed with plans for a limited competition for the design of the proposed statue."

David Hume (1711-1776), philosopher, historian, economist and diplomat, was perhaps the central figure of the Scottish Enlightenment. His *Treatise of Human Nature*, written in France between 1734 and 1737, had a profound influence among European philosophers, including Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Diderot, D'Alembert and Immanuel Kant; his theories about the nature of causation and the principles of morality were strikingly novel. In our own times, both Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell have acknowledged a profound debt to David Hume.

God, the asl

Does God Exist? Debate between theists and atheists. J P Moreland and Kai Nielsen, with contributions from others. Second edition, Prometheus Books, 1993. £14.50 (paper).

Review: Colin McCall

DOES God Exist? is an impossible book to review impartially. I have taken sides already. And how, anyway, can one treat seriously the arguments of someone who says he "met Jesus Christ personally and he changed my life"? This is the language of the Baptist chapel, not a philosophical discussion. Kai Nielsen, the main atheist contributor to this 1988 debate at the University of Mississippi, thinks that he and the conservative Christian Professor J P Moreland stand too far apart for fruitful discussion: "we are like ships passing in the dark." True, no doubt, but Nielsen and his supporters make stimulating reading.

His essential stand is on the incoherence of the concept of God, and he would like to get beyond the deity of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, with a general argument for and against the existence of God; to consider the positions of Kierkegaard, for example, and Alasdair MacIntyre (during his fideistic period, a period, incidentally, when I knew him and had many discussions with him), as well as Aquinas and Luther.

If a concept is really incoherent, Nielsen argues, "it is plainly illegitimate." Moreover, if the concept of God is incoherent, we cannot take God "humbly on faith," as many theists would have us do. You need to have some "understanding" of God to take his words "humbly on faith."

In mainline Judeo-Christianity, God is conceived as an infinite individual, transcendent to the world, thought to act in the world, yet be transcendent to it. This concept of God is incoherent.

It is incoherent to regard God as an individual (a person) and infinite, says Nielsen. "An *infinite* individual is a contradiction in terms" (his italics).

Another use of "God" is as a referent. But unless God is viewed anthropomorphically, we don't know what the term refers to. We have no means of ostension.

We do no better with alleged descriptions: "creator of the universe out of nothing,"

"maker of heaven and earth" and so forth. Nielsen says, "trying to teach the meaning of the word 'God' intralinguistically, we do ourselves around the web of equally obscurely mutually defining words and phrases in a series of very problematic concepts indeed." And he gives a warning which has wider application than in this debate: "of metaphors, try to be literal."

Professor Moreland, as I have said, believes he met Jesus Christ personally in 1968 to be precise – since when they continued the association. Thomas Hobbes cited here by Antony Flew, dealt effectively with claims like that (*Leviathan*, Chapter "For if a man pretend to me that God spoken to him supernaturally and immediately, and I make doubt of it, I cannot perceive what arguments he can produce to oblige me to believe it... To say he hath spoken to him in a dream, is no more than he dreamed that God spake to him."

Neither Flew nor Nielsen doubts Moreland's "religious" experience. What they rightly insist is that it differs from what I met Lenin personally and he changed my life" (Flew) and "I have experienced harsh winters of Alberta and this has changed my life" or "I saw Trudeau yesterday" (Nielsen). All that Moreland is entitled to claim, as Flew says, is "overwhelmingly vivid experiences," so that it seemed to him (Moreland) "met Jesus Christ personally." We are dealing, in Nielsen's words, with purely subjective psychological phenomena. The only thing it is evidence of is something about the state of Moreland's mind or perhaps (indirectly) of how he is in that state."

The theist has always argued from what we don't know, rather than from what we do know, and Moreland is no exception. What the "know" are phenomena that we can know without reference to the supernatural. However, ever, is the "asylum of ignorance."

What about the origin of the universe? In any instance? Nielsen is excellent here. The temptation to ask such a question is something quite prior to science – from the beginning of the universe as a thing or entity – and to ask naturally enough about its cause. "the universe" is an umbrella term, a word speaking compendiously of "all the processes, things that are." It is "not a mystery for some mysterious additional thing that might have had an origin or cause to have an origin..."

"Something coming from nothing," adds, "is Big Bang mysticism," and should always be on our guard against

glum of ignorance

orthodox philosophy sneaking unwittingly into certain scientific accounts."

"What we have to do, Nielsen continues, is carefully sort out genuine experimental results in the science in question from the metaphysics or ideology that has gotten its head in it."

These words fall on deaf theistic ears. "Don't biologists talk about DNA carrying information"? Doesn't that indicate a divine plan? Not, perhaps, quite like the the-

ists of the Judeo-Christian persuasion have believed and taught down the ages, but let's cling to whatever linguistic straw we can. That is Moreland's method.

And don't scientists deal in theoretical entities, such as the electron? Moreland makes what Nielsen calls an "illicit analogy" between "God" and "electron." Whereas it is true that "we have no independent access to the unseen entity," the electron, "though a very, very small entity, is in the same physi-

cal causal network as the macrocosmic entities it causally explains (the explaining here comes to showing one to have caused the other) as the hot water caused the ice to melt. We have plain causal changes here in the same causal order". In the case of God, we are dealing with a being "outside the world" linked in some mysterious way with the world.

Incoherent indeed.

Breath of fresh air on sex

Speaking of Sex by Antony Grey.
Cassell. Paperback, £10.99.

Review: Daniel O'Hara.

ANTONY GREY has had a long and honourable career as a prominent campaigner, educator and counsellor in the field of human sexuality. In 1992 he published *Test for Justice* (Sinclair-Stevenson), an account of his life and work as Secretary of the Homosexual Law Reform Society and of the Albany Trust. The latter was a pioneering venture in the days following the 1967 Sexual Offences Act for counselling members of erotic minorities and founding supportive social groups for newly-decriminalised gays. It was perhaps the first significant organisation of its type in this country to move away from the medical model, and to regard its clientele not as sick people requiring treatment, but rather as individuals needing understanding, self-acceptance and greater social

Not surprisingly, this approach brought Antony Grey into confrontation with moral monopolists," who, quite gratuitously, accused him of being "soft" on pedophilia. They were, nevertheless, successful in generating sufficient moral panic for funding to be withdrawn from the Albany Trust, which proved a mortal blow to its valuable work. Thereafter,

Antony Grey moved into private practice as a therapist, counsellor and trainer.

In his new book, Antony Grey looks forward to the sort of world he would like to see in the 21st Century, a world in which sex-hate, sex-shame and sex-negativity are swept away, to be replaced by a widespread public acceptance of sexual diversity, decreasing interference by the state in the private lives of consenting adults and a more mature and rational appreciation of the sexuality of children and adolescents.

The book is both a personal statement and, in the best sense, a tract for our times, which urges "the need for fresh ideas and new attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behaviour in our society." A prime concern of the author is "to advocate redrawing the proper and wholesome boundaries of the traditional and legal languages employed about sex so that they become supportive, rather than destructive, of personal sexual fulfilment and happiness."


Antony Grey goes about his task by first analysing the power of words and then examining the role of metaphor, myth and rhetoric in our traditional ways of speaking about sex. The unhelpful and negative contributions of the Church, the Law, "Sexperts," politics and the market place to a proper and positive understanding of sex are deftly and often memorably dissected, and there are moving discussions of the place of love, and of the sexuality of children. The most substantial chapter in the book is an examination of the baleful effects of "sexhate and sexshame" in which strong words are reserved for prurient journalists, "moral monopolists" and members of the "Sex-abuse industry."

Though he finds much in our society to

criticise, Antony Grey is essentially positive and hopeful in his outlook, and his book will provide much encouragement for those seeking a more rational and enlightened approach to the important issues he considers. On almost every page there is some nugget of wisdom that cries out for quotation, but I will limit myself to just two: "Sexual health does not consist of conformity to supposed norms; it involves acceptance of the fact that everyone's sexual personality is as uniquely different as everyone's genetic or intellectual personality." Trenchant in his criticism of religious attitudes, the following shrewd observation also demands repetition: "In a pronouncement grotesque by even his bizarre standards of morality, Pope John Paul II in March 1993 admonished Bosnian women who had been the victims of ethnic rape not to abort their resulting offspring, but to 'accept the enemy into themselves and make him the flesh of their own flesh' - a Christlike gesture which His Holiness is presumably in no danger of having to emulate himself."

Antony Grey's passions and insights are likely to be self-recommending to most readers of *The Freethinker* and it is to be hoped that they will gain a hearing within the wider community.

It is perhaps a pity that the book lacks an index, and that his editors were not a little more observant, since we have on page 98 what appear to be two different drafts of the same paragraph. These small quibbles should not, however, put off prospective readers of this important little book. It is a welcome breath of fresh air.



Debauchery of the mind

NOTHING is more natural than that the belief in God, the creator, regulator, judge, master, curser, saviour, and benefactor of the world, should still prevail among the people, especially in the rural districts, where it is more widespread than among the proletariat of the cities.

The people, unfortunately, are still very ignorant, and are kept in ignorance by the systematic efforts of all the governments, who consider this ignorance, not without good reason, as one of the essential conditions of their own power.

Weighted down by their daily labour, deprived of leisure, of intellectual intercourse, of reading, in short of all the means and a good portion of the stimulants that develop thought in men, the people generally accept religious traditions without criticism and in a lump.

These traditions surround them from infancy in all the situations of life, and artificially sustained in their minds by a multitude of official poisoners of all sorts, priests and laymen, are transformed therein into a sort of mental and moral habit, too often more powerful even than their natural good sense.

There is another reason which explains and in some sort justifies the absurd beliefs of the people – namely, the wretched situation to which they find themselves fatally condemned by the economic organisation of society in the most civilised countries of Europe.

Prisoner

Reduced, intellectually and morally as well as materially, to the minimum of human existence, confined in their life like a prisoner in his prison, without horizon, without outlet, without even a future if we believe the economists, the people would have the singularly narrow souls and blunted instincts of the bourgeois if they did not feel a desire to escape; but of escape there are but three methods – two chimerical and a third real.

The first two are the dram-shop and the church, debauchery of the body or debauchery of the mind; the third is social revolution. Hence I conclude this last will be much more potent than all the theological propagandism of the freethinkers to destroy to their last vestige the religious

This month's *Blast* is edited from *God and the State* by Michael Bakunin. Among the 19th Century founders of modern philosophical anarchism, none is more important than Bakunin (1814-1876). *God and the State*, unfinished and not published until six years after the author's death, holds that religion by its nature is an impoverishment, enslavement, and annihilation of humanity. It is the weapon of the state. It must be smashed before the right of self-determination can be possible. These arguments could perhaps be applied to many present-day Christian and (especially?) Islamic nations. In lighter vein, its prescient reference to "honest but timid souls," must be of particular *current* interest to British readers – given a Bishop of Durham who rejects miracles, Hell and the virgin birth but remains within the Church, and the flourishing Sea of Faith, some of whose members have abandoned the old-style blood-and-guts God in favour of one who is not a being but a "moral focus." The book is available in a Dover edition: ISBN 0-486-22483-X.

beliefs and dissolute habits of the people, beliefs and habits much more intimately connected than is generally supposed.

In substituting for the at once illusory and brutal enjoyments of bodily and spiritual licentiousness the enjoyments, as refined as they are real, of humanity developed in each and all, the social revolution alone will have the power to close at the same time all the dram-shops and all the churches...

There is a class of people who, if they do not believe, must at least make a semblance of believing. This class, comprising all the tormentors, all the oppressors, and all the exploiters of humanity; priests, monarchs, statesmen, soldiers, public and private financiers, officials of all sorts, policemen, gendarmes, jailers and executioners, monopolists, capitalists, tax-leeches, contractors and landlords, lawyers, economists, politicians of all shades, down to the smallest vendor of sweetmeats, all will repeat in unison those words of Voltaire: "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." For, you understand, "the people must have a religion." That is the safety-valve.

There exists, finally, a somewhat numerous class of honest but timid souls who, too intelligent to take the Christian dogmas

seriously, reject them in detail, but have neither the courage nor the strength nor the necessary resolution to summarily renounce them altogether.

They abandon to your criticism all the special absurdities of religion, they turn up their noses at all the miracles, but they cling desperately to the principal absurdity; the source of all the others, to the miracle that explains and justifies all the other miracles, the existence of God.

Their God is not the vigorous and powerful being, the brutally positive God of theology. It is a nebulous, diaphanous, illusory being that vanishes into nothing at the first attempt to grasp it; it is a mirage, an *ignis fatuus* that neither warms nor illuminates.

And yet they hold fast to it, and believe that, were it to disappear, all would disappear with it.

They are uncertain, sickly souls, who have lost their reckoning in the present civilisation, belonging to neither the present nor the future, pale phantoms eternally suspended between heaven and earth...

They have neither the power nor the wish nor the determination to follow out their thought, and they waste their time and pains in constantly endeavouring to reconcile the irreconcilable.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Bargain abasement?

RELIGION not only makes people servile; it also induces them fervently to embrace mental bondage. Thus women have kept the Christian show on the road, not least as breeding machines at the behest of a celibate clergy; Christian homosexuals persuade themselves that they are not "really" condemned by biblical edict; the only sphere of sustained Christian growth in Britain is among those of West Indian origin whose forebears were the property of Christians able to quote the Bible in justification of slavery.

Now a survey published by *The Times* newspaper has revealed that up to 15,000 British women have become Muslims. Some have done so on marriage; the majority have converted to Islam after shopping around the superstition supermarket.

It is understandable that many are rejecting the ethos and values of Western society. But serious thought should be given to what they will get in exchange. For whatever the shortcomings, here at least people are free to follow any religious faith they fancy or to reject all of them – a legacy of the Reformation, the Enlightenment and secularisation. In contrast with that degree of personal freedom, some Islamic states have scarcely moved forward from mediaeval times.

Converts are said to be profoundly impressed by the constancy of Islamic teachings and the discipline of its social and family life. Starry-eyed enthusiasm is common among religious converts. Many were attracted to the absolutism of Roman Catholicism. But the gradual abandonment of many comforting certainties following the Second Vatican Council caused widespread disillusionment.

It is asserted that Muslim women enjoy security and protection from the temptations of modern society. Certainly there is an inherent urge in males to protect their property. Middle and upper-class Victorian men were very protective of their wives. But they vigorously opposed measures like the Married Women's Property Act.

And what of Muslim women who prefer personal freedom to "protection"? British women would do well seriously to consider the implications of becoming followers of Mohammed. They may get a hint of their future role by reading the matrimonial columns of the Muslim press. An advertisement in a recent issue

of *The Muslim News*, published in north London, was placed by a 23-year-old Muslim male seeking a marriage partner. One of his stipulations was that she should be "polite and obedient."

Stone me, it's Doddy!

EVENING services which once attracted huge gatherings of the faithful have declined to such a level that many churches have abandoned them altogether.

That cheering thought brightened a gloomy Sunday evening of late. Walking through Sheffield city centre, I passed by a large, glass-fronted Methodist church. The temptation to take a peep was irresistible. There was a congregation which, at a generous estimate, numbered about 50. It is doubtful if the collection met overhead costs.

Across the street, the 900-seat Crucible Theatre was sold out, packed to capacity with benighted citizens who were keeping their Sunday special by seeing the Ken Dodd show. Doddy's manic humour may not be everyone's cup of tea. But in Sheffield at any rate, the Squire of Knotty Ash and Baron of the Broken Biscuit Repair Works can attract a larger Sunday following than does the Lord of the Sabbath.

And that reminds me: the Lord of the Sabbath took a back pew during the House of Commons debate on the Sunday Trading Bill. Reformers who in past times campaigned for Sunday opening of art galleries, theatres, cinemas, municipal parks and sports arenas had to contend with the "keep Sunday gloomy" lobby, officially known as the Lord's Day Observance Society. Its opposition to Sunday freedom was uncompromisingly based on "what the Bible says" – or rather *some* of what the Bible says.

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," the Rev Martin Smyth, Ulster Unionist, reminded MPs during the Second Reading debate. But even the head of the Orange Order dared not demand imposition by the State of every biblical law on sabbath observance.

For in Exodus chapter 31 verse 15 we are warned, "whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death." The Lord of the Sabbath was not bluffing. In Numbers chapter 15 verses 35 and 36 we read of the man who was discovered gathering sticks on the sabbath: "And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall surely be put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congrega-

tion brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the Lord commanded Moses."

Although just as ardently Christian as the LDOS, the Keep Sunday Special Campaign was far more astute during the Sunday trading debate. It carefully avoided the biblical quagmire, depending instead on spurious social concern and matchstick economics for support.

There was much huffing and puffing about traders who jumped the gun and opened illegally on Sunday. Politicians have only themselves to blame. For more than 40 years they capitulated to the religious lobby at every attempt to reform the law. Nor should they be surprised if many conclude that the most effective way to deal with silly laws is for enough people to break them.

Basics of barbarity

BARBARA SMOKER wrote in last month's *Freethinker* about the "novel experience" of finding herself in disagreement with a criticism of the Church. I, too, experienced the same emotion, but am now quite recovered. It came over me when Government Minister David MacLean criticised the Church for being concerned about social problems while remaining "strangely silent" on moral issues. He was referring to the tragedy of the child James Bulger and his two 10-year-old killers.

Although registered at a Church school, they were mostly absent and had no connection any religious institution. More to the point, all their lives have been spent in a Britain where Mr MacLean's "back to basics" Conservative Party of family values and moral rectitude has been in government.

Barbara Smoker was rightly appalled by the lynch mob of adults who gathered outside the court calling for the children to be hanged. In the golden age of not so long ago, the death sentence was passed on children for lesser crimes than murder.

In 1831, John Bell, aged 13, was hanged at Maidstone. In 1833, Nicholas White aged nine, was sentenced to death for stealing two pennyworth of paint. He was reprieved, but the same year a 14-year-old boy was hanged for stealing, the last juvenile execution.

No doubt Mr MacLean's political predecessors heartily approved the Church's strange silence on such barbarity.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Broad Church

IN HIS *Down to Earth* column in issue 12, Bill McLroy dismisses the notion of a "broad church" Humanist organisation in Britain, but the space which he devoted to this topic is an indication of its importance.

Bill McLroy invited me to "present a specific, realistic programme to the Humanist Liaison Committee and governing bodies of the national organisations." I shall not be doing this in the near future, but at a more modest level, as a member of the Council of the Humanist Society of Scotland, I hope to have a motion supported by the Council and placed before our Annual Conference in April, 1994.

If the idea of a broad church movement wins support in the Scottish organisation, then I have no doubt that the Council of the HSS will make the approach that Bill McLroy suggests.

Space prevents me from refuting all of Bill McLroy's arguments, but I can assure him that whatever 1960s arrivistes might have believed, I do not subscribe to the notion that "religion and religious institutions are defunct." I do believe that they are in serious decline and that this decline leaves a gap which is not being properly exploited by the British Humanist movement.

For a more detailed and analytical treatment of this subject, I would refer Bill McLroy to Levi Fragell's *Strategies for Growth for the Humanist Movement*, first published in *Free Enquiry* about 10 years ago and, as far as I can see, largely ignored in British Humanist literature.

I am fully aware of Bill McLroy's 40 years' involvement in the Humanist movement, and I believe that his honoured place in British Humanist history is both assured and deserved. I just happen to think that he is wrong on this issue.

● I should be grateful if you would point out an unfortunate error/omission in Ms Smoker's article "God 'n' chips diet is no substitute for care" (issue 12).

After her sentence "Only in Scotland is the age of criminal responsibility even lower than in England and Wales," I suggest the addition of "but of course because of their internationally admired children's hearing system, the young accused would have been spared the trauma of a full-blown public trial had they happened to be Scots."

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

Virgin birth

WRITING on the miraculous birth of Jesus, Ralph Ison's biological argument (December issue) is correct: the spontaneous development of an egg in the absence of a male chromosome could only result in a female offspring. Furthermore, parthenogenesis, the reproduction by virgin females through the development of eggs that have not been fertilised, is known to biologists only in low forms of life,

such as some insects, crustaceans and worms.

I would like to have had Ison's argument in mind when I was told recently by a young university student that he believed in the virgin birth. I could only say to him: *it's very rare.*

Thomas Hardy, no less, had something to say on the subject. Here is part of his poem *An Evening in Galilee*:

*She looks far west towards Carmel, shading her eyes with her hand,
And she then looks east to the Jordan, and the smooth Tiberias' strand.*

*"Is my son mad?" she asks; and never an answer has she,
Save from herself, aghast at the possibility.*

*"He professes as his firm faiths things far too grotesque to be true,
And his vesture is odd – too careless for one of his young hue!...*

"He lays down doctrines as if he were old – aye, fifty at least:

In the Temple he terrified me, opposing the very High-Priest!

Why did he say to me, 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?'

O it cuts to the heart that a child of mine thus spoke to me!

And he said, too, 'Who is my mother?' – when he knows so very well.

He might have said, 'Who is my father?' – and I'd found it hard to tell!

That no one knows but Joseph and – one other, nor ever will;

One who'll not see me again... How it chanced! – I dreaming no ill!...

Hardy here depicts Mary, like his heroine Tess, as being seduced, not raped – a young, innocent, warm-blooded country girl responding to her natural, God-given procreative instinct.

Nevertheless, the Bible's fictional (or likely *factional*) nativity story, like much else in the New and Old Testaments, and other great works of fiction outside religion, has great beauty and moral power, which Humanists would do well to concede and respect.

Militant Humanism, like its religious counterpart, looks bigoted and bad-tempered; it is demeaning, and there is no need for it. We should content ourselves simply with purveying rational thought.

(DR) J G BOURNE
Salisbury

Homosexuality

AWARE as I am of your desire to lay to rest the correspondence on homosexuality, I still hope to be allowed to reply to the various points raised by Roger Nadon, R A Cobb and the redoubtable Mr Crosswell himself, originator of the controversy.

As my Gayness did not make itself apparent until I gained the age of 18, I had many sexual experiences with a total of three girls, with

one of whom I had a steady relationship, so the gentlemen in question should not presume that I am unaware of the anatomy of females. And since to carry out my work as a Colliery Deputy I had to hold a Current First Aid certificate, renewed every four years, initially, and every three latterly, that I know nothing of anatomy in general.

I find it slightly amusing, in an ironic sense, that two of these correspondents, while very prepared to take up the cudgels over my very minor point regarding female anatomy, comment not at all upon the main points – that gay men are continually subjected to "sniping" by others who purport to have attained an unprejudiced mind. And I would like to remind Mr Crosswell that he, too, may very well find himself catching HIV or AIDS should he not use a condom during the sex act. The health warnings do not specify "Say no to anal sex" rather do they advise people to avoid sex unprotected by the condom, whether gay or straight. I suspect Mr Crosswell believes that HIV and AIDS are problems which only affect gay men, and that, despite all warnings to the contrary (most of which originated with the gay lobby; only belatedly with the Government's health authorities) the only thing heterosexuals need guard against is starting a child within a female, when it is either unwanted or socially unacceptable (the female being another man's wife or perhaps his own daughter).

One other small point. Although I agree that the rectum is designed for the expulsion of waste, the waste does not reside within it, but in the intestine, until the moment of expulsion. Can Mr Crosswell therefore tell us how the anus is particularly unhygienic? My slight reference to the female urinary tract still holds good, since the main portal to both serves to expel urine and for the same reason the urethra within the male penis discharges both sperm and urine, to flush out any remaining sexual detritus.

I should also love to know how these authorities on the sexual behaviour of monkeys and apes reached their conclusions, since both reside high among the slenderest of tree tops..well out of the reach of heavy humans and, being wary of humans, are prepared to flee at the slightest hint of encroachment, particularly at night, when a strong light would scatter them to the four winds, as would any one attempting to approach during the day or night. For any animal who wishes to perform a sex act, privacy and peace are essential..

Finally, I repeat: we are all products of nature. Therefore, I do not subscribe to the belief in anything being unnatural, apart from man-made fibres and using a condom to prevent conception.

A G STEPHENS
Bradford

YOU'RE TELLING US!

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* * * * !

MOST interesting: those letterettes (December) under the clever headline "On wrong tract"

As to the subject which fascinates millions – including a Humanist or two – of the populace to the extent that women columnists, of both tabloid and "quality" papers, make fortunes discussing (sic) the multi-aspects of it, an important statement:

Mr Gray on Mr Crosswell (see *You're telling us*, December) cannot be allowed to see himself as smarter than he proves to be with his implication that sex and love are much the same thing. Honestly now, when whoever sings the song "Love me tonight," she incontrovertibly means "Fuck me tonight." What else? Holding hands?

And, please, Mr Editor: no asterisks. Shame on that hypocritical nonsense! Surely Humanists can call a spade a spade?

NOEL RATCLIFFE
Buxton

Divine deaths?

ON December 9, it was reported in the news that 12 people had been killed by a gale which swept the country on the previous night. If there is a Being up there who created the world in seven days and controls everything, how do the elements get out of control? Were the 12 deaths part of a divine order?

FRED WESTWOOD
Oldham

Misogynist

I CANNOT agree with your December *Up Front* comment that, since St Paul said that women should not speak in church, aspiring women priests in the Church of England are collectively deluded in supposing that their priesthood can be considered valid. Though they certainly share the doctrinal delusions of all Christians, there is no reason why they should accept the misogynous sex discrimination of St Paul, who was never regarded as infallible, even in the pre-Reformation Church. Indeed, the one figure of his time who might have been credited with infallibility was Peter – who did not always see eye-to-eye with Paul.

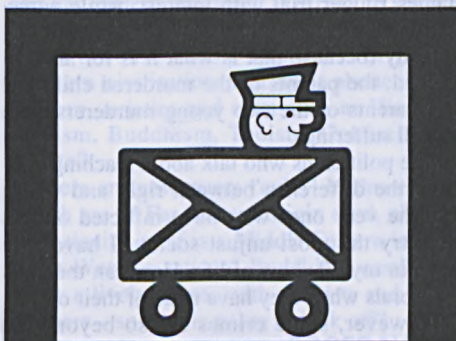
BARBARA SMOKER
London SE6

On writing

J H MORTEN and C R Wason (December) make me challenges which I hope you will allow me to take up. Firstly, I said you erred in printing an essay from Wason which was actually two separate essays: he should have been

asked to re-write them as separate pieces, one on each of his topics. One (with which I cannot disagree, the matter being outside my competence) was on New Testament dates; the second (on a matter I, for professional reasons, happen to know more about than he does) put forward the old, ignorant idea that "the alphabet democratised learning." The latter idea, for which there is zero evidence, is widespread among intellectuals and so a thundering nuisance to me in my work as a linguistics teacher much concerned with Chinese and Japanese. (Japan is the most literate nation on earth: illiteracy in China is now rare among under-60s. Both use non alphabetic writing). Hence my refutation.

The dogma "Alphabet good, other scripts bad" derives from "Alphabet users, white Christians; other scripts, yellow heathen" – it



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does not derive from experience. Here is the relevant experiment: create a morphemic script for English by adapting an existing morphemic script, say Chinese, and create a new alphabetic script for English (or simply take the conventional way English names are spelled in Thai newspapers) related to sounds but not to existing English spelling: then teach both systems to volunteer subjects. I guarantee they will find the morphemic script easier. Hence the use of Bliss symbols (an imitation of Chinese writing) in some schools for the handicapped.

Morten says that I "run counter to all that I have read on the history of language by experts." Well, readers of *The Freethinker* uninterested in this technical subject (by which I earn my bread) may not all want the magazine used up for it, and those that are interested should read F Coulmas *The Writing Systems of the World*, 1989, (Blackwell).

Sum peepul think alfabets must bee eezy

bikkoz they immajin ewe reed buy sounding out wurdz and eye-den-tiff-eyeing them from the sound. But we don't, because that is too hard to do. And when you've learned your 20-30 letters you still have thousands of spellings to learn. Try learning 100 coats-of-arms and 100 phone numbers: sure, the phone numbers are "simpler" but are not the easiest to learn.

Wason asks me for an alternative scenario to explain his literate slave miners, his "intellectuals deported for subversive activities." Well, they may have been prisoners of war, or convicts guilty of embezzlement (that intellectual crime), but I suggest they did not invent the script of their sad graffiti, but learned it in school – they would have written their language the way it was already conventionally written. Now ancient Egyptian like all written language had a way to write foreign names: it had a set of symbols for spelling them out by sound, as in the Greek names on the Rosetta Stone. For any hitherto unwritten nearby language, such as West Semitic had once been, the available script would be the existing way (some) Egyptians wrote foreign name in. In 3,000 years graffiti on prison walls may be all that is left of our writing: archaeologists of the future will not conclude, I hope, that prisoners invented it!

Wason correctly points out the Ugaritic and Korean alphabets (also the Old Persian, which he doesn't mention) arose among people who already knew of, and were doubtless inspired by, alphabets already existing elsewhere. As the West Semitic alphabet began 3,500 years ago and few records survive from an earlier date, his challenge to me to cite "any other case of people inventing an alphabetic system" without prior knowledge of an existing one, all by themselves, is a tough one! But I can meet it, with the Elamite syllabic script (SW Iran, 2nd Millennium BC) and the adaptation of Chinese script to write Jurchid (a version of the language later called Manchu), 11th-12th Centuries AD. And please don't try to blind readers with science by claiming that syllabic scripts like Cretan Linear B are "not fully alphabetic" because nor is the *U* in *use*: it sounds like the *YOU* in *youth*. The point is when and where we get a script based on the sounds of the words.

"If the Phoenicians had not invented the alphabet" (Morten) either someone else would have, or we would have mass literacy in a perfectly good non-alphabetic script. Like a third of the literate people on the planet today.

I'm sure Wason knows his stuff, as I know mine. It is his speculative extrapolations, not his facts, that needed correction.

CONNAIRE KENSIT
Portsmouth

Fundamentalism

MANY congratulations on a truly excellent first year's editorship. I believe the new colourful format is a splendid innovation and

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must surely be very eye-catching wherever it is displayed.

I believe we are living through a period of history when *The Freethinker* is required more than ever, for the hard fact remains that religious superstition and fanatic fundamentalism are on the increase throughout the world and one has only to think of the unrevoked *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie to realise the influence and power of that fundamentalism.

As far as the tragic events in Northern Ireland are concerned, I often find myself wondering whether perhaps the media could help to decrease sectarian strife in that area of conflict by announcing that "...a 40-year-old father-of-two was gunned-down in Belfast last night," instead of "a 40-year-old *Roman Catholic* father-of-two..." Surely the point to be emphasised is that human beings are being senselessly killed and maimed and that their religious convictions have nothing to do with the stark fact that men are perpetrating crimes against their fellow-men which are morally repugnant whether the victims be Protestants or Catholics? Or am I being incredibly naive?

Let me close with the fervent hope that *The Freethinker* will go from strength-to-strength and that the New Year will see a vastly greater readership than ever before in its history.

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Malvern Wells

Baby Bulger

BARBARA Smoker compares the "pathos" of James Bulger's murderers with the murder itself (December), as being "almost equally unbearable." She goes on to refer tenderly to those who slowly tortured and killed the little boy, as "Robbie and Jon," while little James is by contrast referred to coldly and impersonally as "the Bulger baby." Does Ms Smoker know "Robbie" personally? I don't know that he has ever been publicly referred to by this affectionate nickname before.

We descend into malicious fiction when we are told that the two killers were "deprived," and therefore felt "deep jealousy" of the toddler. The truth is that while the child they tortured to death lived in a council property in economically-devastated Kirkby, one of the murderers lived in private property in still-surviving Walton. Ms Smoker would do well to visit Walton and Kirby before tailoring the facts.

In the wake of the court case, we had to listen to our local bishops, eager to grant Christian "forgiveness" and "turn the other cheek" on others' behalf. While this Christian abdication of individual responsibility and justice is traditional, it seems that prominent Humanists will go the extra mile and not only forgo remorse before absolution, but deliberately deny responsibility in the first place. And while some Christians fail to identify with real human suffering because they have objectified and packaged it away into the crucifixion

myth, Ms Smoker's failure to empathise with this little broken boy makes me cry.

Ms Smoker actually admits that she closed her eyes and ears to the detail of baby James's monstrous ordeal – and it is all too obvious that she did. James's uncle – like the rest of the family – could not close off his senses, and he wants to kill the killers. It is grotesque then that Barbara Smoker disdainfully depicts vengeful adults as "appalling" and "sickening."

And it is downright cruel that she uses James's ordeal as a vehicle for a petty attack on the Church of England. Is it really too much to expect Humanists to be "human"?

PETER McKENNA
Liverpool

I READ Barbara Smoker's article on the James Bulger trial with interest, while agreeing with almost all she has to say about this tragedy (because that is what it is for all concerned; the parents of the murdered child and the parents of the two young murderers alike are all suffering).

The politicians who talk about teaching children the difference between right and wrong are the very ones who have inflicted on this country the most unjust society I have ever seen in my 50 years of life. How can they talk of morals when they have none of their own?

However, some crimes are so beyond the pale they are unforgivable, even in the most enlightened society; torturing and murdering a small child is one of them. Where I disagree with Barbara is – I think the two boys knew what they were doing and what they did was evil.

Thousands of children are suffering from the callous policies of our government, but they are not all going out murdering toddlers.

There is evil in this world: religion, nationalism, economic systems that favour the rich at the expense of the poor. The world, not just this country, needs a new moral code. The churches and politicians are not going to give us any sort of morals. We Humanists and Freethinkers have got to stand up and be counted. We seem to be the only source of sanity in an insane world.

A MITCHELL
Bradford

BARBARA Smoker may miss certain important points when she blames "appalling home situations" and "care starvation" for the horrific Bulger murder.

In the case of the Venables family, who appear to have been at least as caring and concerned with discipline as many middle-class families, this is probably a distortion of the truth, as well as an appalling and doubtless undeserved guilt-trap to lay on the unfortunate Venables parents.

Given that none of us truly knows the reasons for this terrible tragedy, I feel that it would be wrong to exclude any possibilities from the arena of consideration, including the simplistic invocation of "evil" that is now so anathemous to the chattering classes.

We are always understandably reluctant to attribute mediocrity and aberration of any kind to human nature, and while it is now fashionable to accept that such factors as intelligence, artistic ability, propensity to schizophrenia or homosexuality etc. are partly or significantly under biological control, it is still very politically incorrect to dare to look in this direction whenever we find ourselves baffled by man's inhumanity to man.

A recent letter to *The Guardian* by a former public schoolboy revealed how sadism and torture have always been as much the preserve of the children of the privileged classes as of those of the inner-city deprived; it is clearly facile, therefore to scapegoat truancy or bad housing in the Bulger case, much as these may have been factors in the children's delinquency.

Barbara Smoker suggests that the killers were fired by "uncomprehending jealousy" of Jamie Bulger's being obviously loved and cared for, but neighbours of Robert Thompson reported seeing him enjoy tearing the heads off live baby pigeons – behaviour that is difficult to reconcile with a "jealousy theory" as such; far more likely that these children enjoyed a heightened sense of power obtained both by inflicting suffering and defying convention.

Research reveals that more than 50 per cent of men would commit rape if they were guaranteed immunity from prosecution, and that nearly 60 per cent of British people would not be prepared to pay any extra taxes to feed people starving in the Third World.

The daily catalogue of horrors from Bosnia and elsewhere reminds us of how seemingly "ordinary" people revert with frightening ease to butchering and raping their neighbours; inspiring tales about Resistance movements during World War II obscure the fact that almost everywhere collaborators far outnumbered Partisans.

In the context of such depressing statistics, we have no problem in inferring a Dark Side to human nature, contained, often with difficulty, by education and civilisation, co-existing in uncomfortable tension with yet another natural impulse – that of empathy.

But to suggest that social controls, *a la* Pandora's Box, can often only contain rather than expunge human mediocrity is by implication to admit that they can do so with only partial success, and most good socialists and liberals shrink instinctively from such a scenario, perhaps believing it to be too horrible to contemplate.

I do not believe we have anything to gain, however, from failing to look the ugly truth in the face, particularly at this juncture in human history, with our fingers virtually on the "self-destruct" button. If we cannot come up with more effective safeguards for the containment of our less attractive passions than we have hitherto devised, perhaps we may have to look to the manipulation of the genetic trigger – another scenario which at present seems too

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horrible to contemplate – in order to ensure that mankind has any destiny at all in the future, let alone a noble one.

Laura Meszaros
Norfolk

Sea of Faith

IN brief response to David Boulton (December), would he accept the following statement? *People who do not credit "god" with real existence can properly be termed atheists; they see "god" solely as a human construction, nothing but a conceptual model. The "ordinary" atheist sees this construction as confused and divisive and thinks that we would all be the better off without it. The Sea of Faith people see this construction (whatever it may be called) as a natural and necessary one for people to make if life is to be truly meaningful.*

With regard to the points made by David Bothwell and John White, the statements they quote from the BHA Briefing, *The Human Spirit*, are perfectly defensible on dictionary definitions. But, if we are not content merely to speak to ourselves and our kind, we have to have regard not merely to *meaning* but to *connotation* – what words are taken to mean in ordinary usage. Experience tells us that words like spirit are associated with a dualist model of human life – and, in the popular mind, with such things as the Holy Spirit, such things as communicationally-challenged Red Indian children of yesteryear purporting to give us the latest on Uncle Charlie who died a long time ago, such things as Mr Coward portrayed in *Biithe Spirit*. We should avoid any usage which can be taken, mistakenly or otherwise, to hide our proper scepticism towards such things.

Humanism has to be expounded to the public not just bounced about in our hall of mirrors. That is why the BHA Briefing should be reworded; in its present form it is likely to be, objectively, deceptive – although, of course, I impute no intention by anyone to deceive anyone.

Eric Stockton
Orkney

Debate urged

THANK you for another excellent issue. Well, I never knew that Horus, Bacchus, Mithra and Buddha were all linked with the Winter Solstice "birth, death and resurrection" myth of Northern climes. The more I read *The Freethinker*, the more my appetite increases, but I would be grateful for footnotes and bibliography. It's not always possible for a layman to disentangle irony from historical "facts."

So Buddha was born on "Christmas" Day, or rather the Winter Solstice, of a virgin! Well, that's news to me – I thought it was April. His "historical" existence cannot be proved, and

dates vary from around 1000 BC to 600 or 500 BC. A lot of the mythology grew up around this "Enlightened human being" due to the human imagination and "faith" which could not accept that human teachers such as Christs or Buddhas could be born in the normal way. The purity of the ideal is contaminated by natural copulation and childbirth, which can be a sweaty, bloody and painful experience.

I am sure that the Buddha (if he ever existed historically) would be an avid reader of *The Freethinker*, as an atheist and a non-believer in the supernatural! There are at least two Buddhists who read *The Freethinker*, and at least one is grateful and joyful for the light it throws into dark corners. Why defend beliefs when you can honestly open up to truth?

Why, oh why, do we not get more Humanist, Atheist, Agnostic, Rationalist debate on the Far Eastern religions? It is easy to see why the Semitic "Big Three" are always in the news because of the Humanist origins in Western civilisation. But what about the Far Eastern varieties and cults such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto?

There are now many "cults" in this country which are of Far Eastern origin (and, after all, Christianity itself is a Middle Eastern import). Most Western rational Buddhists would welcome a lively debate with Atheists and Sea of Faithers – so who is going to kick off?

Roger Nadon
West Sussex

Israel

JUST who are "the Jews" complained about by David Yeulett in his December letter to *The Freethinker*? If he means any of the religious sects, the religious political parties, the Israeli government, Zionism or any of the factions within it, why doesn't he say so?

His use of the phrase "the Jews" is disturbingly reminiscent of its use by far-Right conspiracy theorists and holocaust revisionists.

And among "the Jews" would he include the Bund and its policy of *dorkeit*, fighting where you are rather than emigrating?

The continual conflict between Israel and its neighbours has strengthened the hand of fundamentalists on both sides. Now that peace is a possibility shouldn't Humanists welcome it, rather than fulminate against "the Jews"?

Any solutions to the problems of the Middle

East which are secular, democratic and peaceful rather than theocratic, totalitarian and war-like should be supported. Right now the most important words in this part of the world are neither Jew nor Arab nor Israeli nor Muslim – but *Shalom* and *Salaam*.

Terry Liddle
Eltham

Ireland

IN THE December issue of *The Freethinker*, Barbara Smoker – referring to the North of Ireland – is quoted as saying "...bomb-planters and gunmen...maim and murder in the name of their particular brand of Christianity and its god..."

Would Ms Smoker be so good as to refer us to the evidence to substantiate this claim?

I do, of course, acknowledge that Cardinal Cahal Daly is a reactionary cleric, well practised in slandering both the godless and Irish Republicans – and these are not mutually exclusive categories.

D Harrop
Sheffield

Evil

THE first definition of "evil" in my dictionary, Glyn Emery (December), is "bad; harmful." I suggest that some actions are so abhorrent that those words are inadequate and therefore see no reason why the stronger term "evil" should not be used.

Vivien Gibson
Ealing

Appeal

I HEREBY make an appeal that all newspapers and magazines published in the UK should regularly publish as an advertisement, free of charge, the following slogan as their contribution to saving the human species from self-destruction: "Survival of the human being is dependant on the survival of plant life and animal life. Survival of the First World is dependant on the survival of the Third and Fourth Worlds."

K P Shah
London NW3

Catching up with Norway?

THE newly-formed Kent Humanists have issued a publicity leaflet which says: "50,000 Norwegians can't be wrong! Yes, in highly civilised Norway (population just over four million) the national Humanist organisation is now chalking up its fifty-thousandth member! We are a long way behind, but with your help we intend to catch up."

At their first general meeting on October 24, the Kent Humanists adopted their constitution and affiliated to the BHA. Subscription is £5 a year. The next meetings of Kent Humanists will take place at the University of Kent on Sundays February 13 and April 10 at 2.30 pm. The venue is: Seminar Room 11, Front Extension, Rutherford College, Giles Lane, Canterbury.

Thought Police still have it their way

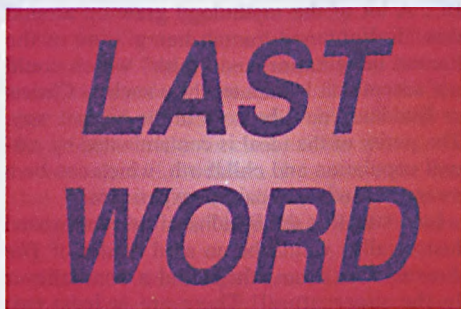
IN A famous passage Neil Kinnock once warned the electorate, should they be unwise enough to elect another Tory government, not to be young, not to be old, not to be sick.

I have often thought that to this list he might have added: not to be areligious. In recent times Neil Kinnock and Michael Foot have been the only political leaders of whom it was suspected that they were "not one of us" in the religious department. We all know what happened to them.

Before the last election, the very Establishment-correct Dame Barbara Cartland, wrote to more than 100 newspapers to expose Neil Kinnock's dreadful secret that dare not speak its name. How much damage it did is not clear; what is clear is that Kinnock was not elected.

Almost a century after the comprehensive intellectual demolition job done on religion by the great 19th Century philosophers and scientists, we are, incredibly, still in a situation where Humanism and Freethought, as far as mainstream society is concerned, are very much under lock-and-key.

Sex escaped the bedrooms in the Sixties, homosexuality came out of the closet in the Seventies, child abuse was discovered in the



by Tony Akkermans

Eighties – but in the Nineties Freethought is wearing its shackles still.

Apart from a brief experiment on Channel 4, the conspiracy of silence against Freethought on the airways has continued. It is fascinating to watch the invidious process by which this is carried out. Blatant ramming of religious fodder down unreceptive gullets is no longer expedient, so the medicine is administered in much subtler form.

Religious programmes now come under the guise of neutral-sounding titles. But don't be taken in: for *Thought for the Day* read *Religious Thought for the Day*. Highway turns out to be *The Road to Damascus* and *This is the*

Day very much becomes *This is the Day of the Lord*.

In discussion-type programmes, scientists, who might be suspected of harbouring subversive infidel views, are carefully kept within the boundaries of their special field, whereas pop-stars such as Cliff Richard and Helen Shapiro are encouraged at every verse end to regale their audiences with tales of how they came to embrace Jesus.

As a boy in the Fifties, having been brought up a Roman Catholic, I vividly remember walking home after the services in desperate isolation, thinking that somewhere there must be people like me, refusing to swallow the daily dose of mumbo-jumbo. But it took me years before I tracked down my kindred spirits in the Freethought movement. Little did I think then that, 40 years on, budding young Freethinkers would still have to evolve in a void, believing that all around them the world has gone mad.

Deference

So powerful still is the influence of the religious Thought Police that, although the intellectual battle has long since been won, this fact has been very successfully kept from penetrating the educational system and the media. As if indoctrination of the young in the churches and denominational schools is not bad enough, religious forces have had the brass neck to worm their way into state schools as well.

The Girl Guides, stung into action by a recent case involving a young Humanist, are now talking about "My God" instead of "The God" but other than as a sop to multi-culturalism this is not much of a concession as far as non-believers are concerned.

Although it is common knowledge that only a small proportion of the population are regular church attenders, the establishment has successfully managed to maintain the impression that this is a God-fearing nation with no place for dissent.

To reinforce this notion, God-botherers are sent into hospitals and prisons at taxpayers' expense. Popes, Chief Rabbis and Ayatollahs are paid due deference by our political leaders. At the great occasions of State, coronations, royal weddings, victory celebrations and funerals of the great and good, church services are paraded on our screens, upholding the pretense of national unity. When terrorists strike, more services are held for victims without opportunity for a voice to point out that there is little logic in praising the Lord on such occasions.

So under the Conservatives, in 1994, don't be an Atheist. Unless you are strong. Unless you are able to walk alone, to develop and live your convictions in a vacuum, unacknowledged and unsupported by the media, Parliament or the educational system.

Bishop upsets the pawns

HERE'S the Bishop of Durham, agitating little old ladies of every age and of all the sexes with his doubts about the Second Coming. And here's *The Freethinker* crew, determined to make 1994 a year when thousands of people are shown, perhaps for the first time, that the story of salvation through even a First Coming is a cruel confidence trick – and that the only hope of a better life is rationally and radically to change the here-and-now.

We can do it – with your help. Postal charges and newsprint prices have just gone up; we must boost the Fund to well over its 1993 level, just to stand still. But a pound or two extra will enable us to expand on our plan to reach ever more young people – especially in the ethnic minorities – with the Good News...of the best of causes.

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

Many thanks to: A D Burton, R H Barr, A J Elkins, E Gwinnell, J R T Jones, R M Kachare, T Liddle, G Moss, D Pickett and A E West, £1 each; A Dawn, A R Hall, O M Hasan, C J Hetherington, R Kuhnel and S R Norton £2 each; D C Calderwood, L D Hall, R C Harrison, G McGee and W G Stirling, £3 each; H G Shapiro, £3.40; C D Heryet, C Minary and A Varlet, £4.40 each; F L Abel, R A Awbery, S P Beharrell, F Campbell, A C F Chambre, E L Chapman, P L Cohen, S Dane, P George, W R Grant, R W Gray, T Green, G F Hammond, J Holland, G R Hopcyn, M Konrad-Kosicky, J Lance, R A Lee, J Lippitt, A McQuaid, N Magennis, T Morrison, E Neville-Jones, W S Spencer, W Steinhardt, R Tee, F Thompson, P K Underhill, D M Watkins and M Yaffey, £5 each; E Haslam, £7; R N Bridge, J R Knight, A W Negus, A J Ringer, S Smith and J Watson, £10 each; N L Child, £15; K Brown, £20; S J Mace, £45; Anonymous, £300.

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