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The

Freethinker

Secular
Humanist
monthly

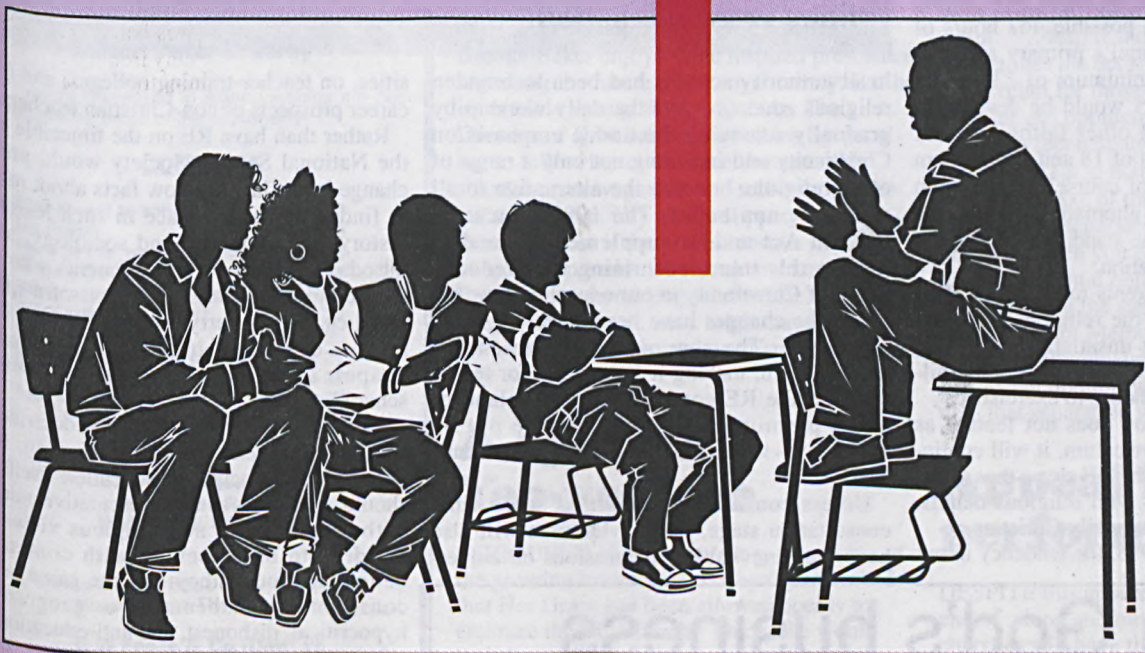
Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Vol 114 No 2

February 1994

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'Arrogant' Christian bias threat in RE

by Barbara Smoker

THE new model syllabuses of religious education for the national curriculum in the local authority schools of England and Wales, published on January 25 by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, are even more unbalanced in favour of Christianity than we had expected.

Reflecting the Department of Education's narrow interpretation of the religious clauses of the Education Acts of the past five years, they pander to the most arrogant Christian demands, almost totally ignoring the views not only of non-Christians (let alone atheists), but also of the great majority of educationists and teachers, who recognise that such "education" is against true educational principles.

The arithmetic effect of these new model syllabuses is that, of a possible 467 hours of RE lessons during a pupil's primary and secondary school life, a minimum of 233 and a maximum of 361 hours would be devoted to Christianity, while all other faiths together would have a minimum of 18 and a maximum of 83 hours. There is, of course, no minimum laid down at all for any alternatives to religion, which now represent the standpoint of about a third of the adult population.

The legal right of parents to withdraw their children from RE and the religious assembly has proved to be most unsatisfactory. It can cause psychiatric disturbances in some children, and few parents choose to exercise it.

Since moral education does not feature as such in the national curriculum, it will continue to be squeezed into the RE slot – thus falsely associating morality with religious beliefs, and these, now, predominantly Christian.

Between 1944 and 1988, the tendency in our

What *The Times* (January 25) reported as 'a rare coalition of Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh representatives' has complained that only 18 hours' teaching a year would be guaranteed to non-Christian faiths under new guidelines proposed for religious teaching in the schools of England and Wales: the United in Faith group will campaign against the teaching of minority faiths being 'squeezed out.' But Evangelical Christians say the guidelines are too vague on Christian content and have a 'multi-faith, mish-mash approach.' Clearly, the battle over the document will be long – and as bloody as only religionists can make it. Secular Humanists believe that the place for religious education is in the church, chapel, mosque or synagogue, as National Secular Society President BARBARA SMOKER was quick to point out in a media release as soon as the suggested guidelines were published.

local authority schools had been to broaden religious education and the daily worship by gradually removing the undue emphasis on Christianity and including not only a range of other religions but also the alternative to all religions: non-belief. The 1988 Education Reform Act and its supplements aimed to reverse this trend, enshrining the predominance of Christianity in our education law; but so far the changes have been largely ignored in practice. The new model syllabuses will enforce them, making it impossible for teachers to make RE comparative and balanced; and a premium will inevitably be put on hypocrisy – which children are quick to identify.

Unless considerably modified at the final consultation stage, these syllabuses will also have their inevitable repercussions on univer-

sities, on teacher-training colleges, and on the career prospects of non-Christian teachers.

Rather than have RE on the timetable at all, the National Secular Society would prefer a change in the law to allow facts about religion to find their natural place in such lessons as history, art, literature, and sociology, and to introduce moral education. Parents who want their children to learn the tenets of a specific creed can surely carry out this teaching themselves, or entrust it to their own church, chapel, synagogue, or mosque – outside school hours.

As long as religious myths and doctrines are taught in our schools, however, then, in the name of the principle of education itself, they should surely cover a representative range of both religious and non-religious views. For children to be presented with contentious beliefs as though they had the same sort of consensus as mathematics or geography is hypocritical, dishonest, and anti-educational.

It is also self-defeating, and we are almost tempted to welcome the new provisions as being certain to increase sceptical inquiry and support for Secular Humanism. But we do not welcome them, as we are committed to honesty and to good educational practice.

Moreover, the increased emphasis on Christianity will, of course, mean increased pressure – and more justifiable pressure – from non-Christian religious leaders for their own separate state-funded schools, in line with Roman Catholic and other denominational schools – and this, if successful, would be disastrously divisive in our plural society.

On God's business

HOSPITAL chaplains are being ordered to draw up "business plans" under the new NHS market economy, which even means sending hospitals bills for ministering to the dying, the *Evening Standard* reported on December 6.

Many of the NHS hospital chaplains – 260 full-time and thousands part-time throughout the country – will be asked by health authorities to price their spiritual

ministrations to the sick and charge the hospital units accordingly.

Health authorities and GP "budget holders" are now demanding facts and figures on the chaplaincy facilities before placing contracts with hospitals.

National Secular Society President Barbara Smoker noted that, even under the former system, chaplains had been paid for out of NHS contributions, and she commented: "Sectarian facilities should be paid for by the churches themselves."

UP FRONT

with the Editor

Something worthwhile

IT WAS a relief while on a trip abroad last month to find a day-old copy of *The Times* (January 14) and to read some news that really mattered: that Cardinal Basil Hume was to receive the Duchess of Kent into the Roman Catholic Church. That story wiped the Governmental Back to Basics pantomime from the foreign front pages, I can tell you.

But even such heart-warming stuff as this has its denigrators. I arrived home to read an article in the Darlington-based *Northern Echo* (by columnist Harry Mead, January 20) which bitched: "If I was contemplating becoming a Roman Catholic, is it likely I would be offered guidance by the Archbishop of Westminster, head of the Church in England and Wales?"

THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: Peter Brearey

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

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24 Alder Avenue,
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Subscriptions, book orders and Fund donations to The Publisher:

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

Annual postal subscription rates

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

Printed by Yorkshire Web, Barnsley S70 2AS.

"And if I chose to adopt the faith would I be received into it at a ceremony in the Archbishop's private chapel, followed by a reception? Do you suppose that while this obviously VIP treatment was being given to the Duchess of Kent either she or the Archbishop, Cardinal Basil Hume, reflected that it didn't quite fit with what is always said to be a cardinal (oops, sorry!) principle of Christianity in any form: we are all equal before God?"

Well, perhaps Harry *does* have a point: since the beginning of this century, there have been around 750,000 converts to the Roman Catholic Church in Britain, and few have qualified for a celebration booze-up funded by the faithful.

Anyhow, there was worse to be read in *The Age* (January 14), when colleague Nigel Sinnott's batch of religion-related clippings arrived from the soon-to-be-Republic of Australia. Quoting the publishing director of *Burke's Peerage*, Harold Brooks-Baker, as saying that the Duchess's switch to Roman Catholicism was the beginning of a slippery slope which would precipitate a constitutional split between Church and State in Britain, and would make it possible for the Prince of Wales to become King as a divorced man, *The Age* opined: "Time alone will tell... whether Mr Brooks-Baker enjoys some inspired prescience regarding the future of the royal family. But he is certainly wrong about one thing. The Duchess of Kent has begun nothing by deciding to follow her conscience. Innumerable scandals, extravagances and self-indulgences put the royal family on the slippery slope years ago. But if the process results in the eventual separation of church and state in Britain, then something worthwhile will have come of it, because what might have been useful for Henry VIII is irrelevant and discriminatory today."

A spot of Yeo-yeo-yeo

SERIOUSLY, though, isn't it symptomatic of the growing irrelevance of Royalty to real life that Her Grace has been allowed openly to embrace the RC Church? Once, she would have been killed or put away; until quite recently, she would have been forced to follow her new faith quietly and well away from the vulgar gaze. Now, who cares? (Certainly not the 73 per cent of the 1,016 adults interviewed in an *Observer*-ICM poll [December 26] who wanted to axe all state funding of the Monarchy).

Unlike most of her relations, however, the Duchess can now claim to belong to that rare phenomenon - a major Christian denomination which maintains an unequivocal belief in the BVM's not having enjoyed a spot of Yeo-yeo-yeo nine months or so before giving birth

to her notable Son.

I see that even the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland has said in support of the Bishop of Durham that the virgin birth need not be viewed as a literal truth and is "perhaps best thought of as a symbol" (*The Guardian*, January 3).

However, I am led by a report in *The Age* (Melbourne, November 19, 1993) to wonder if the entirely unchangeable Roman Catholic Church is changing its ancient stance on divorce, which would certainly increase its attractiveness to the bed-hopping tendency of Royalty, as well as to true believers like the Duchess of Kent.

The Age was in no doubt: "Australia's Catholic bishops yesterday endorsed divorce in marriages that have become harmful or oppressive.

"In a significant shift from the hard line taken in the Pope's last encyclical, which restated his opposition to divorce, the [Australian] bishops' pastoral statement on families said that sometimes the decision to separate was a welcome relief...

"Entitled *Families: Our Hidden Treasures*, the statement said families were 'the foundations of social, cultural and economic life.'"

But: "...despite the sadness of divorce, 'sometimes the decision to separate is a welcome relief for those couples in a particularly harmful and oppressive relationship.'

"When reconciliation was not possible, it was important to help couples separate amicably for the sake of their children. 'If you as a couple have separated, although the legal bonds between you come to an end with divorce, parental obligations continue.'

"Launching the statement in Melbourne, the Archbishop of Melbourne, Sir Frank Little, said...the church always saw marriage as a permanent union. It was only with deep sadness that separation was recommended."

Appeal for performers

DESPITE this apparent chink of light at the end of a long and murky tunnel, the Christian churches still have the power to create emotional misery for millions - although, thankfully, they have lost most of their power to have us locked up.

The mad mullahs, on the other hand, exercise enormous temporal clout, as information received from the International Federation of Actors reminds me: "Artistic freedom appears to have clashed with religious law in the United Arab Emirates. Ten non-Islamic Indian actors were jailed for six years each in Sharjah, one of the United Arab Emirates,

UP FRONT

with the Editor

From Page 19

following the performance of a play entitled *Ants That Feast on Corpses* at the premises of the Indian Association of Sharjah in May 1992."

It seems that a Sharjah court upheld charges that actors (from the Surya Arts Company) staged a play "which insulted Islam and Christianity and violated the law of the land." The judge ordered that all those accused should be deported upon completion of their sentences.

Following an appeal, some of the defendants were released, but four remain in jail for periods of between six and 10 years.

Authorship of the controversial play is the subject of some confusion and it seems quite likely that the version performed by Surya Arts had been considerably amended. In their version, three corpses, representing Jesus, Mohammed and Karl Marx were "made objects of ridicule by repeatedly asking what good they had done mankind, other than to create division" (*India Today*, November, 1992).

Peter Plouviez, Chairman of the International Federation of Actors' newly formed Committee for Artistic Freedom, has condemned the imprisonment. His letter to the Sharjah authorities was met with the response that "any future review will therefore be made within the normal judicial process of the land." Requests for a clarification of this statement have been met by silence.

Plouviez has called upon affiliates and individuals to pressure the Sharjah authorities regarding this case. In particular, unions are asked to raise the matter both with their own Ministries of Foreign Affairs and with the embassy of the UAE in their own country.

Letters of protest should be addressed to: HH Sheik Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Presidential Court, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and to HH Sheik Sultan bin Mohammed Alqassimi, Ruler of Sharjah, Emiri Court, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

Overcoming divisions

CONGRATULATIONS to Sandy Edwards, Press Officer to the Humanist Society of Scotland, who presented a fine and (see Barbara Smoker, Page 18 of this issue) timely *Comment* piece on Radio Scotland.

Sandy said: "The school assembly is the ideal opportunity for a school to foster in children a sense of community and common membership of society. After all, it is usually an assembly of children of different ages, backgrounds, faiths and races. Recognition of these

shared values and the values of friendships goes a long way to overcoming the barriers which cause divisions in our society.

"To introduce, as is required, an element of religious worship into a school assembly is utterly inappropriate for several reasons. The human qualities of kindness, consideration and co-operation do not require supernatural approval or disapproval.

"It is offensive to those families who follow a different religion or have no belief in the supernatural. In some schools, religious worship is basically religious indoctrination.

"This and Religious Education are the only areas of the curriculum subject to a parental withdrawal clause, which defeats the whole purpose of a school assembly.

"For many, praying, praising or asking forgiveness from something that isn't there is undignified as well as escapist. It avoids human responsibilities in life and the world, something that should be at the very heart of a school assembly.

"School is a place where the approach to learning is based on sound evidence and enquiry. Combined with the assembly of children and teachers, it is a realistic basis for education, including moral education.

"Children already have the opportunity to attend a religious assembly once a week at church. Leave worship to the churches and let the schools get on with education."

As H E Bates' Pa Larkin used to say: *Per-fick!*

Challenge to Bishop

THE thoughts of our friend Roy Saich, Secretary of the Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists, have been turning in a broadly similar direction.

"For the sake of young people especially, we should make 1994 the year in which our country starts to adopt sensible Humanist ethical values," he told a recent meeting of the group.

"Many people, including politicians of all parties, confuse morality with religion. This is not surprising when schools confine moral teaching to what amounts to Religious Instruction. On behalf of the Department for Education Sir Ron Dearing is refusing to include Humanism in the model syllabuses for the basic curriculum.

"Humanism would provide the vital framework for the third of the population who are agnostic or atheist, and who need to consider morals in a proper non-religious context."

Noting that the Church of England was "morally bankrupt," Roy continued: "The Ten Commandments can no longer be taught with conviction now that the Archbishop of York has said that adultery by the Supreme Govern-

nor of the Church is perfectly acceptable, and the Bishop of Durham has proclaimed with impunity that the eternal damnation preached by Jesus is a myth.

"Indeed the whole basis of Christianity has now been abandoned as any Second Coming of Jesus to judge the world has also been ruled out."

And Roy issued the following challenge to his local prelate: "The Bishop of Coventry should now publicly state what guidelines he will give in these matters to help teachers and parents who will be in doubt about what is to be taught in the Church of England community schools in his diocese, which covers Coventry and Warwickshire. These schools, although controlled by the Church of England, are paid for by us all out of our taxes, and include pupils of many faiths and none. I hope 1994 will see an end to evasion about proper moral education."

Roy concluded by suggesting that people who agreed with him might contact Simon Barrington Ward, Bishop of Coventry (telephone 0203 672244; fax 0203 713271) and Sir Ron Dearing, Chairman of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (telephone 071-243 9273; fax 071-243 1060).

Too happy for religion

THANK you Peter Cotes for the cutting from the *Sunday Telegraph* (January 11) of an interview with the now lordly former Member for Leeds East.

Denis Winston Healey is entirely open about where he stands in relation to Jehovah, as interviewer Frances Welch made clear: "Avowedly atheist, Healey is not prepared to concede that human conscience points to the existence of God. Nor does he feel that God has anything to do with the spiritual uplift he gains from art.

"I think that the only worthwhile politician has a vocation, as a nun has a vocation. But I don't see that vocation coming from God because I don't believe in a personal God. I can cry over a Beethoven quartet and I'm deeply moved spiritually when I look at a painting by Mantegna or read poetry by Thomas Traherne. But you can't be convinced that it is God's influence if you don't believe in God."

"Had he never felt the need to believe? 'People turn to God in the same way they turn to happy for religion? 'I dare say I am,' he grinned, escorting me to the door."

A hero of the 'glorious army'

WRITING as Chapman Cohen's next-but-three successor to the Presidency of the National Secular Society, I would like to take this opportunity of acknowledging my considerable personal debt to "CC" (as he was generally called), when, 23 years ago, I was suddenly thrown into the deep-end as a public speaker and broadcaster in the atheist cause.

Whenever I was called upon for the first time to tackle a particular aspect of the subject, I found that the relevant Cohen pamphlet would give me a quick grasp of the salient points and pithy phrases in which to express them. Certainly those points were to be found also in other exponents of freethought, but their more verbose writings demanded slow intellectual study, and I was usually in a hurry.

Cohen's concise, lucid style made my homework easy, and his cogent arguments, stark contrasts, and apt analogies, went straight to the point and remained in the memory. Requiring little adaptation for a modern audience, they enabled me to stand on his shoulders and acquire a bubble reputation as an able polemicist, on the platform and on the air, as well as on the printed page.

Over the years, I have added to my rhetorical repertoire other points purloined from other writers, but I think that most of the stolen goods I still use came originally from Cohen. I say "think" because, after all these years in my mind, they have really become my own, and often I cannot remember where they came from.

My justification, however, resides in the words that CC wrote of himself, as the epitaph that he said he would most value: "He took the best from others and gave his best to the world."

Nowadays, when I read or hear my own phrases repeated, without acknowledgement, by younger freethought exponents, I try to be unpossessive about them, as a way of repaying my own debt to the past – and especially to Chapman Cohen.

Born in Leicester in 1868, CC was a self-taught philosopher: "By the time I was 17," he wrote, "I had at my service some of the greatest teachers that have ever lived, ranging from the early days of Greek philosophy down to contemporary writers."

A quick thinker and born master of the spoken and written word, with the rare ability to make profound ideas simple, he chose to devote his considerable talents to the atheist cause, in a bid to set human minds free from the falsehood and folly of religious superstition.

It was in 1889 that he began lecturing for regional branches of the National Secular Society (indoors and out), continuing this activity for the next 60 years. His quick wit,



*Chapman Cohen, pictured above, a great Editor of *The Freethinker* whose contribution to the struggle for human liberty has been likened to the achievements of Paine, Bradlaugh and even Voltaire, died just 40 years ago – on February 4, 1954. BARBARA SMOKER pays a personal tribute*

tempered always by personal charm, ensured him a busy lecturing schedule.

From 1897, he was also a regular contributor to *The Freethinker* (then a weekly of a consistently high standard of journalism), and he became its Editor on the death of G W Foote in 1915. He was to occupy its unrelenting editorial chair for the next 37 years – a remarkable stint by any standard. At the same time, he was President of the National Secular Society, from 1915 to 1949.

His main practical campaigns were in opposition to religion in schools and to the blasphemy law – these two issues, above all, representing the perennial struggle for freedom of thought and speech. He also wrote innumerable scintillating articles, pamphlets and books, which brought him world-wide acclaim – though not so great as the acclaim he would have enjoyed had he been willing to make a fashionable, obscu-

rantist hullabaloo about philosophical problems instead of taking the shortest route to their core.

The decades of overtime sadly took toll of his faculties some years before his death at the age of 85, but his writings live on; and subsequent generations may continue to say of him, as did so many of his contemporaries: "He taught me how to think," which meant becoming "voices, not echoes."

CC never shied away from the straightforward word "atheist," though his atheism was never dogmatic. When told that he ought to call himself an agnostic, he replied: "No; agnosticism implies that there is something to be agnostic about."

Philosophy was as natural to him as breathing, and despite – or, perhaps, because of – his lack of formal education, his intellectual attainments and uncompromising honesty made him more than a match for the clerics and professors who ventured to debate with him.

One of the tributes written on his death commented that he was "a giant in debate...surprising his opponents by a presentation of their case even more comprehensive than their own – and then demolishing it."

It was also said, however, that he was "always courteous and considerate to honest defenders of their opinions, and it was not unusual for them to take a good drubbing at his hands and then thank him for his fairness in the contest."

Another first-hand description of his style of public speaking reads: "His humour was irrepressible and was always bubbling up on the platform. It put a sparkle into his lectures and a punch into his debates."

In the words of another colleague: "The youngsters will never know his platform gifts: at his best he was superb, no hammerblows, but rapier thrusts. He pricked the bubbles of religious cant and solemnity with the needle of irony; they just burst...he will be remembered in gratitude and pride, and his written works, *Pamphlets for the People*, or his books on Materialism, Determinism and Philosophy, will continue to enlighten and emancipate future generations until mankind is free...No, he is not gone: I look up as I write: his books are on my shelves."

Now, four decades later, I would like to echo those words – CC's written works should have a place on the bookshelves of a new generation of readers who want to think freely, and clearly, for themselves – and who seek to hand on the torch to others.

As the officiant declared at CC's funeral: "...the name of Chapman Cohen will be linked in the history of human liberation with those of Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Robert Ingersoll, Charles Bradlaugh, and the whole glorious army of freedom-loving pioneers."

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.

Blackpool and Fylde Humanist Group: For details, please contact Secretary D Baxter. Telephone 0253 726112.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, March 6, 5.30 for 6 pm. Public meeting. Speaker: The Rev Anthony Freeman, author of *God in Us*.

Central London Humanists: For details, please contact Cherie Holt on 071 916 3015 or 071 430 0908. Friday, February 25: Trip to Alternative Comedy Cabaret - sex, politics and religion! Thursday, March 17, at 7.30pm, Conway Hall: *How to End the Monarchy and the Established Church*. Speaker: Prof Stephen Haseler, author of *The End of the House of Windsor*.

Chiltern Humanists: 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.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road Kenilworth. Monday, February 21, 7.30 pm: Public meeting. Subject: 'Near Death' and 'Out of Body' Experiences.

Devon Humanists: For details, please contact: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lymington, Exmouth EX8 5HN; 0395 265529.

Ealing Humanists: Friends House, 17 Woodville Road, Ealing W5. Thursday, February 24, 8pm: Richard Wilkins, Association of Christian Teachers, and David Simmons, writer, debate *Morality Does Not Need Religion*. Details: telephone 081-422 4956.

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.

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, March 1, 8pm: Don Hilton: *Sentencing by a Magistrate*.

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: Scottish Humanist Conference at the Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Stirling, Saturday, April 23, 10am to 5 pm. Details: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; tele-

phone: 0563 26710.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, February 24, 8pm: Peter Heales: *Rhyme and Reason*.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, March 8, 7.30pm: Rabbi D Charing, Jewish Education Bureau: *Pluralism in Contemporary Judaism*. Tuesday, April 12, at 14 Foxholes Crescent, Calverley: AGM and supper, 7.30pm.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Public meetings, Sunday, at 6.30pm. February 13: the Rev David Hart: *Do Christians Need a God?*

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. March 11: the Rev Denise Boyd: *Unitarianism and Humanism*. April 15: Ann Cresswell: *Child Protection - a Positive Approach*.

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, February 17, 7.30pm: John Watts: *Science and Religion*.

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

Raise funds for your group! Sell *The Freethinker* at your meetings. Wholesale rate for latest issue: £6 per dozen, post included. Send cheque (payable to G W Foote & Co) with order to: Peter Brearey, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, March 9, 8pm: Charles Miller: *Humanist Ceremonies*

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, March 9, 7.45pm: Christine Bondi: *The Case for Integrated Schools*.

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.

Ulster Humanist Association: Meets on the second Thursday of the month in the Regency Hotel, Belfast. Contact: The Secretary, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4NE (telephone 0846 677264).

Winter Breaks: Humanist couple would welcome like-minded paying guests at our Dumfries-shire country home (a C of S manse for 260 years!). Three acres of grounds. Delicious food, ch and log fires. Books from our travels around the world, Humanist magazines, rational conversation. Fishing, golf, hill-walking. Very reasonable rates. Main line railway station nearby. Telephone: 0659 66218.

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.

Why read the Old Testament?

by C R Wason

(c. 715-687 BC)*.

Sometimes the opinions of a historian are more interesting than his facts. It is not important whether David was really as black as he is painted. But it is at least interesting that in the 8th Century BC there were writers who wrote for the common people.

The early prophets share the same point of view. The prophets do not foretell events in the distant future; they are preachers, who discuss contemporary problems and warn against imminent dangers. Amos, the earliest complete book in the Old Testament, attacks the upper classes: "What do they care for honesty, who store in their palaces the gains of crime and violence?"⁹. The rich use fraudulent measures to cheat the poor¹⁰, and bribe judges to support them¹¹. And what should the lower classes do about it? "Rebel!"¹²

This does not surprise us. We have spent a thousand years educating our kings by cutting off their heads or driving them into exile until kings have got the message; they do as they are told. But 3,000 years ago kings were

divine gods. They might be murdered, but normally they were venerated and obeyed. Only in Israel did men try to set up a constitutional monarchy.

Compare the Homeric poems of Greece, which are roughly contemporary with the older parts of the Old Testament. In Homer only one man has the impudence to protest against the misgovernment of the divine-born kings, and he is soundly thrashed amid general laughter, and serve him right¹³. Yet most people believe that democracy began in Greece.

And the Israelite part of Samuel-Kings is three centuries older than Herodotus, who is called the Father of History.

Perhaps after all the Old Testament is worth reading.

References: Quotations are from the New English Bible (1970). Except for n.12 the Authorised Version of 1611 gives the same meaning. 1. 1 Kings ii. 1-9. 2. 1 Sam. xxv. 2-9. 3. 1 Sam. xxvii. 4. 2 Sam. xv. 2-6, 18. Pelethites are Philistines, Kerethites are Cretons or Carians. 5. 1 Kings iv-vii. 6. 1 Kings xi. 3. 7. 1 Kings xii. 11. 8. For a recent discussion of this period see R E Friedman, *Who wrote the Bible?* 9. Amos iii. 10. Amos viii. 5. 11. Amos v. 7. 12. Amos iv. 4. 13. Iliad ii. 211 f.

Vicar sees the funny side

IN A recent local newspaper article, the Vicar of Rotherham accused *The Freethinker* of being "geared to poking fun" at religion. While being unable to deny that irony, humour and even sarcasm do occasionally slip into our columns, Bill McIlroy and Peter Brearey in their published replies stressed that the serious side of the journal does predominate.

Bill McIlroy said that *The Freethinker* had raised "serious questions about Christian beliefs which were once held to be eternal truths," helping to create "a climate of tolerance in which an Anglican cleric can publicly question the date of Jesus' birth and other aspects of the Christmas story." (The Vicar had said he didn't think that "anyone in the Church has ever seriously suggested" that December 25 "is the actual date of the birth of Jesus." He had also in the course of his notes about the December front page of *The Freethinker* described the Virgin Birth story as a "symbol").

Peter Brearey's letter to the *Rotherham Advertiser* noted that: "*The Freethinker* promotes freethought, civil liberties and independent rational ethics. It helped to pioneer the birth control movement. It has also campaigned, and still campaigns alongside the closely-associated National Secular Society, on a wide range of issues, including: rights of oppressed minorities and racial equality; sex equality;

safe and legal abortion; voluntary euthanasia; animal welfare; literary and artistic freedom; abolition of the blasphemy and Sunday observance laws; an end to religious education in state schools and to denominational schools...we also seek disestablishment of the Church of England."

Of course, the paper depends on the generosity of its readers to enable it to continue to pursue these positive policies. Please, as a sort of "thank you" to the Vicar of Rotherham for creating so much useful publicity for *The Freethinker*, do send a gift to the fund.

Cheques, POs, stamps to: G W Foote & Company, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Many thanks to: D J Blewitt, K S Clair, J E Dyke, V Gibson, T Graham, L Jordan, C R Keys, S Sheridan and J Yeowell, £2 each; M O'Brien and F Pamphilion, £3 each; N Barnes and B New, £4 each; Anonymous, N Bruce, A Hills, J A Irving, J Little, E Napier, P J Paris, D Parker, A I P Parr, S O Rose, J G Strickland and E Wakefield, £5 each; R A Sage, £7; M E Bush, O D'Arcy, G Emery, M Fox, P D V Hosier, D Lennie, A Liddle, A W Nunn, A Taylor and C Wilshaw, £10 each; P A Smith, £12; M Kirby, £12.50; W A Grey and K Haughton, £13 each; D Harper, £20; W Scott, £50; Anonymous, £80; S K P, £100.

Total for December, 1993: £499.50. Grand total for 1993: £5, 227.90 and \$50.

UNFORTUNATELY, the Old Testament has usually been regarded as primarily a religious book, which prevents readers from trying to understand what the writers say. If we read it without preconceptions it becomes more interesting. Here are some extracts from five books: the four books of Samuel, Kings and the prophet Amos.

First, two short extracts from the account of the death of David: "When the time of David's death grew near, he gave this last charge to his son Solomon: 'I go the way of all the earth. Fulfil your duty to the Lord your God, conform to his ways, observe his statutes and his commandments and his solemn precepts...You know how Joab the son of Zeruiah treated me...do as your wisdom commands you, and do not let his grey hairs go down to the grave in peace. And Shimei...bring down his grey hairs in blood to the grave.'"

The first four verses of this passage are pious exhortations, the last five show a gangster ordering his son to bump off his oldest friend, who had probably been blackmailing him for years, and a man to whom he had promised immunity. It is difficult to believe that these two passages were written by the same author.

Chicago

The same discrepancy occurs throughout David's history. Many passages praise him for serving the Lord. But if we look at what he did, we get a rather different picture.

First he is a member of Saul's bodyguard, but is dismissed for disloyalty; we do not have the evidence to decide if this is true. He then becomes a brigand, working the protection racket with a smoothness that would have won applause in Chicago². Next he joins the Philistines, the national enemy³. He is rewarded by becoming King of Hebron, then captures Jerusalem and conquers Israel. He is hated; two revolts rouse the whole country against him, but the Israelites cannot defeat his foreign mercenaries⁴.

Next came Solomon, whose wisdom is much praised. He spent 20 years on his magnificent building projects, using expensive imported materials and forced labour⁵. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines⁶. Guess who paid for all this.

When he died, his son, Rehoboam, came to be crowned in Israel. The people demanded better government, and Rehoboam replied that he was going to be a worse tyrant than his father⁷. So the Israelites killed the overseer of forced labour and chased Rehoboam back to Judah. After that they chose their kings, but all were bad.

The parts of this history which attack kings were probably written in Israel before 722 BC. The parts which praise kings were written in Judah not earlier than the reign of Hezekiah

Violet Mitchell: for atheism and animal rights

VIOLET Isabel Mitchell, a Hertfordshire woman who was passionately committed to the causes of radical freethought and animal rights, has died at the age of 94. George Mepham, of the BHA and the National Secular Society, officiated at a moving celebration of her life at Golders Green on January 6.

Violet's radicalism developed early, with teachers finding her refusal to be satisfied with what they taught, and her repeated "Why?" a nuisance and, on occasion, a disruptive influence. Her mother belonged to a Baptist sect, and was distressed when she realised that Violet was questioning the foundations of Christianity, but she agreed that Violet need not go to Sunday School provided she read instead.

After leaving school, Violet did secretarial work. Later, she taught shorthand and typing. Some pupils became good friends, including Doris Copps. Violet was living on her own near Finchley Central Station, so, from 1954 until she died in 1975, Doris shared the house with her. Their friendship was close and happy.

When Violet joined the National Secular Society, its then President, Chapman Cohen, invited her to the Society's Annual Dinner, where she enjoyed a "delicious vegetarian meal." She made new friends who, like her, were both atheists and vegetarians. She organised meetings and appealed through the Rationalist Press Association and the NSS for help to start an Ethical Sunday School. In the article published in 1981 she wrote:

"I have been asked why I persist in attacking Christianity. A general answer is that it propagates the idea that animals are lower than humans; they are 'different' but not lower. Like the Government, Christians assure me they are against inflicting 'unnecessary' pain; like some trade unionists, they uphold justice but do not demand justice for all sentient creatures. For me, Justice is indivisible – it is not logical to confine it to *homo sapiens*."

At the funeral service, George Mepham noted that "Violet was an atheist – she insisted that 'Humanist' did not adequately define her non-belief. But she had many friends who, like Doris, were Christians, and she always respected their beliefs.

"She will be remembered as a remarkable woman who devoted her life and energies to causes that can and hopefully will one day make our world a better place for all its sentient life."

AFTER RELIGION

RELIGION is in a state of turmoil all over the world. The Catholic Church denounces birth control and homosexual relations – yet many of its adherents practise them. The Protestants are frightened that ordination of women will split their church, so its misogynist bishops will fly to minister to those of its religionists of like mind. Sunni and Shia Muslims massacre each other. The Orthodox Jews try to ignore the Liberal Jews.

Yet 60 to 70 per cent of all Americans attend worship regularly, as do one to 10 per cent of those in other advanced democratic countries. The large majority of citizens of these countries believe in God, even although they do not celebrate him by attending services. On the other hand, Christianity holds sway over the African and American continents; Islam is the main religion in the central belt of the globe, stretching from Morocco to Indonesia; the Hindus control India, and the Buddhists are powerful in the East.

However, nowadays the world has been taken over by more universal influences than religion, such as money, television, celebrities, popular music, national sports, fashions in clothes, alcoholic beverages, colas, fast food, cars, drugs of addiction and tourism. Each of these world-wide conquerors is irresistible. How many young people dream of taking up Holy Orders? How many more would like to be a Pet Shop Boy or a Madonna? We are now caught up in a deluge of material riches and instant pleasures. Despite these phenomena, various religions continue to exert enormous secular power.

Yet in advanced countries, religion as a philosophy is on the defensive. It only comes alive when the media give its schisms the oxygen of publicity. It has crises of conscience on birth control, equality of women, immigration, pacifism, euthanasia etc. It speaks with so many tongues that any adherent may call him or herself orthodox within a religion with people of diametrically opposing views. Let us not forget, however, that the secularist movement has also always had, and continues to have, its own schisms.

I am making out the case that, despite the political power of the large religions in vast tracts of the world, their messages are equivocal and largely irrelevant to the modern world – even to those who believe in them.

Newton, Faraday and, it can be argued, Darwin were all religious men, but their impact on society came from their secular science.

Until about 10 years ago, Christians were a self-confidently part of the Establishment in Britain, and non-believers were rather reluctant about revealing their views. Nowadays it is the religious people who are apologising. In the *Thought for the Day* radio programme, it is often difficult to guess which religion is being represented. Speakers often do not mention God or the Bible, and they rarely make decisive moral statements. They are kind enough not to want to hurt the feelings of members of other religions, or of non-believers. They often talk about current events, sport or politics, and even make irreverent jokes. Sadly, they are on the defensive.

Humanists should not rejoice about the collapse of religion in advanced countries and its replacement by consumerism. The public has abandoned not only the houses of worship but also the political meetings, the public debates, the trade union rallies and so on.

Religious people have usually managed to persuade the public that morality has its roots in theology, so that the collapse of theology was seen by many as the demise of morality. The vacuum left by the loss of interest in religion by the masses has been filled largely by consumerism, which is equally antithetical to Humanism as religion now alleges it to be. It is also true that, for historic reasons, many people in the community who have been concerned about the same moral issues as Humanists have been religious. Unfortunately, in the past, during the golden ages of Christianity and Islam, organised religion was usually on the side of the exploiters and was not in the forefront of the battles against discrimination, slavery, war and pollution.

Paradoxically, the collapse of traditional religions has made their adherents more sensitive – or perhaps more susceptible to guilt feelings – about their past sins of omission so that, nowadays, they and we are often allies in the moral causes we both support.

Where, then, should Humanists, Freethinkers, Secularists, Rationalists, Atheists and Agnostics stand in this post-religious era?

Firstly, we should continue our historical fight against religion whenever its power is used against human beings – for example, its opposition to birth control, its suppression of free speech, its support for imperialism, its stand against the equality of women, its employment of racialism.

RELIGION – WHAT?

A personal view from David Alexander

Secondly, in our politically-powerful developed countries, we should oppose the influence of religions on international bodies and pursue the latter policies in underdeveloped countries.

Thirdly, we must oppose the tribalism and exclusivity of religions when they are used for partisan purposes.

Fourthly, we must continue to support

humanitarian causes, even co-operating with those whose theology we do not share.

Fifthly, we must continue our fight for complete tolerance of views with which we do not agree, so long as those views are not damaging to people who do not share them. We do not regard it as our business if people wish to believe that the animals went into the Ark two-by-two, that Jonah lived in the belly

of a whale, that Jesus performed the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, or even that he was resurrected from death. However, we reach the limits of our tolerance when these beliefs are used to justify slavery, the Inquisition, stoning allegedly adulterous women, massacring Armenians, the Holocaust of the Jews or the destruction of Bosnia.

Sixthly, perhaps our most important task is to persuade people that morality is possible without religion – and then show them of what that morality consists.

Questions

Probably, most Humanists would agree with the above attitudes, but now we come to the most difficult. How does one behave towards deeply-religious people at a personal level? Does one have a duty to try to persuade them of the inconsistency of their views? Should one patronise them by suggesting that their psychological needs for their beliefs are such that it would be unkind to persuade them that they entertained contradictions? Or should one maintain their personal friendship by not talking about these?

The problem is a real one whenever one questions the beliefs of another person in religion, politics or even in science. However diplomatically one speaks, those with whom one argues usually become disturbed when they understand that you are pointing out anomalies in their deeply-held beliefs. If one argues with them in circumlocutions, so that they can avoid realising the contradictions in their own beliefs, they can brush off the criticism. However, they usually become angry if forced to address the difficulties of their own views, rather like the captain of a cricket team who is out for a duck. One risks losing their friendship.

This leaves Humanists with two final tasks. On the one hand, we must not be disrespectful of those who have beliefs different from our own, as long as they are universal and do not result in immoral actions. On the other hand, we have the enormous task of learning ourselves, and teaching our intellectual adversaries, true tolerance, which will enable us to have profound differences of opinion, and, meanwhile, remain true friends.

If you can do all that – yours is the world and everything that is in it, and, what is more, you will make a true Humanist, my daughter!



**BUY!
BUY!
BUY!**

Blast from the past: Number 14

In his preface to the great Socialist classic novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, Robert Tressell wrote: "It will be evident that no attack is made on sincere religion..." What he did attack was the hypocrisy of many church people. It is also clear that his Socialism and his Humanism were inseparable. This adaptation by **RUTH BLEWITT** has been taken from the first complete edition of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, issued in 1955 by Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., who continue to publish a hardback edition of the book.

OWEN found a small black kitten crying piteously, its fur saturated with rain and every joint of its backbone distinctly perceptible to the touch. This served to turn his thoughts to another channel. If, as so many people tended to believe, there was an infinitely loving God, how was it that this helpless creature that he had made was condemned to suffer? It had never done any harm and was in no sense responsible for the fact that it existed. He felt it was impossible to believe in the existence of an individual, infinite God. In fact, no-one did so believe; and least of all those who pretended for various reasons to be the disciples and followers of Christ, whose lives were passed in deliberate and systematic disregard of his teachings and commandments. It was not necessary to call in the evidence of science, or to refer to the supposed inconsistencies, impossibilities, contradictions and absurdities contained in the Bible in order to prove there was no truth in the Christian religion. All that was necessary was to look at the conduct of the individuals who were its votaries...

Pauperise

All through the winter the wise, practical, philanthropic, fat persons whom the people of Mugsborough had elected to manage their affairs – or whom they permitted to manage them without being elected – continued to grapple, or to pretend to grapple, with the "problem" of unemployment and poverty. They continued to hold meetings, rummage and jumble sales, entertainments and special services. They continued to distribute the rotten cast-off clothing and boots and the nourishment tickets. They were all sorry for the poor, especially for the "dear little children." They did all sorts of things to help the children. In fact, there was nothing that they would not do for them except levy a half-penny rate. It would never do to do that. It might pauperise the parents and destroy parental responsibility. They evidently thought that it would be better to destroy the health or even the lives of the "dear little children" than to pauperise the parents

LOATHSOME HYPOCRITES

or undermine parental responsibility. These people seemed to think that the children were the property of their parents. They did not have the sense to see that children are the property of the community, and it is the business and to the interest of the community to see that their constitutions are not undermined by starvation.

It was common knowledge that the majority of children attending the local elementary school were insufficiently fed. It was admitted that the money that could be raised by a half-penny rate would be more than sufficient to provide them all with one good meal every day. The charity-managers, who professed such extravagant sympathy with the "dear little children," resisted the levying of the rate "because it would press so heavily on the poorer ratepayers" and said that they were willing to give more in voluntary charity than the rate would amount to; but the children continued to go to school hungry.

If these loathsome hypocrites had really meant to do what they pretended, they would not have cared whether they paid the money to a rate-collector or to the secretary of a charity society and they would have preferred to accomplish their object in the most efficient and economical way.

But although they would not allow the children to be fed, they went to church and chapel, glittering with jewellery, their fat carcasses clothed in rich raiment, and sat with smug smiles upon their faces listening to the fat parsons reading out of a book

that none of them seemed able to understand, for this was what they read: "And Jesus called a little child unto him and set him in the midst of them, and said: 'Whosoever shall receive one such little child in my name, receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.'"

They also read: "Then shall he say unto them: 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels; for I was an hungred and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not.' Then shall they answer: 'Lord, when saw we thee an hungred or athirst or a stranger or naked, or sick, and did not minister unto thee?' And he shall answer them: 'Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.'"

These were the sayings that the infidel parsons mouthed in the infidel temples to the richly-dressed infidel congregations, who heard but did not understand, for their hearts were become gross and their ears dull of hearing. And meantime, all around them, in the alley and the slum, and in the streets where lived the respectable class of skilled artisans, the little children became thinner and paler day by day for lack of proper food, and went to bed early because there was no fire.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Illusory hopes of peace?

THE Joint Declaration from Downing Street on the future of Northern Ireland has raised hopes for peace which are likely to prove illusory. The British and Irish Prime Ministers have unwisely pledged that reunification of Ireland will take place only by agreement of the Protestant majority in the Six Counties. This in effect gives right of veto to the likes of Ian Paisley and James Molyneux.

Respecting the wishes of a majority may be normal democratic procedure. But whatever their public pronouncements, politicians know full well that the Protestant majority position in Northern Ireland was rigged and undemocratic from the start.

In practice, British Governments' concern for majority opinion has been inconsistent. Partition was imposed in 1921 against the wishes of a majority in Ireland; it is maintained in 1994 against the wishes of a majority in Britain.

Indeed, the British Government has on a number of occasions ignored the Protestant majority. In 1972, for instance, Westminster abolished the Northern Ireland Parliament. Stormont was the Protestant holy of holies and power base of Unionism. But it was given the chop, majority wishes notwithstanding.

Just as Stormont's abolition was fiercely opposed by the Protestant majority, so was disbandment of the "B" Specials. This state-endorsed terrorist force, whose members were prominent in attacks on civil rights marches, was Unionism's armed wing. But it was sacrificed as a face-saving measure by London, again in defiance of majority wishes.

The Government quite understandably hopes that, by its making placatory gestures, Ulster Unionists will return the favour during critical votes in the House of Commons. But it is deplorable that Labour and the Liberal Democrats have boxed themselves into the "majority consent" corner.

Basically bonkers

"1994 must be a year not just for economic recovery but also for rediscovering the values that made this country what it used to be: safe, tolerant, law abiding. And which we must work to become again." Thus the very pro-

Tory *Daily Mail* editorially greeted the New Year.

The newspaper's nostalgic if muddled recollection echoed John Major's "Back to Basics" rallying cry which so enthused the faithful at the Conservatives' Blackpool conference. Anxious to divert their minithoughts from that Maastricht unpleasantness and the withered shoots of economic recovery, the Prime Minister's advisers in the Policy Unit foolishly saw deliverance in the form of a moral crusade.

Perhaps John Major did not intend that it should develop into a witch hunt against the "socially undesirable." If so, he should have known his party better. His speech, reinforced by Ministerial sneers against single mothers, their children and unmarried couples living together, was manna to the those exalted Right-wingers who no doubt felt, as Oscar Wilde put it, "if the lower orders cannot set us a good example, of what use are they?"

For a time, Essex Man and Suffolk Woman commanded the moral high ground. But the self-righteous fervour was short-lived. Three months on from Blackpool, the Prime Minister found himself up a very murky stream without a paddle.

First it was revealed that one of his respectably married Ministers was a serial bonker. Then another Minister, also with a wife and family, admitted that he had fathered two children outside marriage, a Conservative local councillor being mother of the most recent. This caused much indignation in the twin-set-and-pearls section of his constituency association.

Then it transpired that a Tory politician, this time a humble Member of Parliament whose marriage was "under strain," had shared a French hotel bed with a male companion. Of course, it is accepted that this arrangement was only to save money – a cause dear to Conservative hearts, as education, health and social service chiefs will aver.

After the "Back to Basics" fiasco, it is back to the drawing board for party managers. And the Conservative Christian Fellowship's Prayerline circle of god-botherers will have to work overtime from now until the next General Election.

Municipal mummery

MANY Christians still regard civic buildings as part-time churches. Elected councillors are expected to join in, or to respectfully endure, prayers before getting down to business. A new and unwelcome development is the way in which pushy representatives of non-Christ-

ian religions are getting in on the municipal mummery.

In Sheffield, a Muslim "equality officer" claims in familiar ecumenical jargon that all believers, Christian, Muslim and Jew, "find solace and comfort in prayer." So Mahroof Rashid has suggested in a report to the local council that the town hall should have a staff prayer room. Of course, extra facilities for ritual washing would have to be laid on for the disciples of Mohammed.

Mahroof Rashid asserts that a prayer room "will enhance spiritually the well-being of employees." It is more likely to cause friction between zealots from religious groups in competition for the divine ear-hole. Proselytism involving a Muslim converting to Christianity would result in a messy confrontation.

Councillors have decided to meditate on the prayer room proposal. It is to be hoped they will remember that council workers seeking spiritual enhancement are already well provided for. Within a few minutes' walk from the town hall there are at least six places of worship, including two cathedrals, where they can pray to their hearts' content – outside working hours.

Pie-eyed in the sky?

SOME people behave a bit oddly at funerals. But it was not excessive grieving for the departed that caused David Heron to fall over several times during a service at Durham Crematorium. Even before the service commenced, he was slumped in a pew, rocking backwards and forwards. In fact, Mr Heron was, in words of one mourner, "so drunk he could hardly stand up."

"It was only 9.30 in the morning, but it was obvious that he had had a skinful."

"He kept repeating himself and singing at the top of his voice completely out of tune."

It was at a point in the proceedings when the deceased, Mr Tommy Alderson, a retired miner, was referred to as "our dear departed sister" that mourners realised the spirit which moved the Rev David Heron had come out of a bottle. The Vicar of St Stephen's Church, Willington, has since been relieved of his clerical duties.

The delicate task of apologising to Mr Alderson's family fell to the Bishop of Durham. Poor Dr Jenkins: as if he hasn't troubles enough with sober evangelicals and traditionalists in his flock.

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Clash of symbols?

IT IS currently fashionable for people to claim that biblical events previously promoted as historical facts (until this became unsustainable) are now to be regarded, instead, as primarily symbolic. We are seldom told, however, what they are supposed to be symbolic of.

Dr J G Bourne (January) asserts, without providing any supporting evidence, that the nativity "has great beauty and moral power, which Humanists would do well to concede and respect."

Well, I beg to differ – because the Virgin Birth has historically been closely associated with, and serves to represent, misogynistic and anti-sex attitudes. The Catholic Cult of the Madonna, the most pernicious form taken by the nativity myth, is derived from and reinforces the unhealthy sexual neuroses of the priesthood. Whatever the original literary intentions of its writers were, the Virgin Birth story has come to symbolise the Church's near-pathological hatred of women and of sexual pleasure.

If this is Dr Bourne's idea of "beauty and moral power," who can blame Humanists for getting a little bad-tempered about it?

DAN J BYE
Rotherham

'Evil' children?

I WOULD like to reply to some of the letters in the January *Freethinker* about my December article on the murder of the toddler James Bulger.

Vivien Gibson's and A Mitchell's only quarrel with me is, it seems, for my rejection of the word "evil." I rejected it because it usually has the connotation of some external non-human force – which is often personalised by prefacing the word with the letter "d." And this was clearly the way it was used in most of the media comment on the case.

Laura Meszaros finds fault with my suggesting some social factors that may have contributed to the tragedy, but I did not exclude other factors, and I happen to agree with her that genetic causes probably played a larger part than "political correctness" would allow.

Peter McKenna, on the other hand, seems determined to misunderstand everything I wrote. How can "almost equally unbearable" mean, as he implies, "more unbearable"?

He castigates me for using the name "Robbie" instead of "Robert" for "Child A," but I simply used the name by which, according to the popular Press, the boy was generally known. (Does Mr McKenna himself use the "correct" names Robert Hope and Robert Charlton?)

More importantly, he denounces as "grotesque" my deploring the behaviour of those people outside the court who screamed for the two boys to hanged, and who even

tried to get at them to lynch them. I am not immune from the immediate vindictive feelings that prompted this behaviour, but, as a Humanist, I do try to quell vengeful emotions and to act in accordance with reason and as much understanding as possible.

As for Mr McKenna's accusing me of a "petty attack on the Church of England," I was merely countering Christian statements that the increasing secularism of society was to blame for two 10-year-olds committing a cruel murder, by pointing out that what formal moral education they had received was actually at a C of E school – a fact on which there had been almost total media silence.

BARBARA SMOKER
London SE6

Alternatives

IN THE issue of December, 1993, John E Boseley "...feels a need to build something, not pull something down."

I also am a new Humanist. I was extremely religious when young. With a wider view of the world, I have broadened my own horizons. I do not wish to remove any crutches that help others until I can give them an alternative. We need to develop a paradigm which we can "preach."

I do not think we shall find "one way." We shall find support and information and opportunities within the democratically-produced law of the land/world.

Each person must find their own self. We must try to supply possible, workable models?

At present I feel so comfortably supported just by being among other Humanists. I include my religious friends as humans; they don't feel safe enough to grow further by themselves yet: let us show them a model of a supportive, accepting world.

ALISON ELKINS
Cornwall

Land of Israel

DAVID YEULETT (December) is entitled to take the Arab view in relation to the long-standing claim to one land by Jews and Arabs. I support the Jewish claim. I agree that the yarn about God promising the land to Abraham, Jacob etc., can be set aside, but by the same token so can Mahomet's connection with Jerusalem's Al Aqsa mosque and his ascent to Heaven from El Kuds (Jerusalem) on the back of the horse, Al Buraq.

The Jewish presence in the land of Israel was very long and pronounced and was finally ended (?) with the Arab invasion of the 7th Century. Certainly some Arab families are descended from those invaders. Most current Arabs in the land arrived there only in the past 100 years, when Jews opened this deserted region agriculturally, economically and politically. Jews have been a majority in Jerusalem since 1850.

Undoubtedly the Jews have a stronger claim.

They have put their identity on this land as has no other people. Unlike the defeated and dispersed Red Indians of the Americas or the Aborigine of Australia, but like the resurgent blacks of Southern Africa, Jews are flocking back to their land, and, from all quarters of their Diaspora, and despite the wars against them by vastly superior Arab forces.

The flowering of Israel is one of the grand sagas of this century and deserves the support of every decent person.

WILLIAM E WILKERSON
Johannesburg

Power relationships

THANK you for the interesting letters in *The Freethinker* over the last year. However, there is insufficient discussion about the principles which underlie power relationships in the letters columns.

Usually, senior males – Protestant, Roman Catholic, Muslim or of no religious affiliation – set these power relationships and ensure their validation through ideology, religion, coercion. What is needed in *The Freethinker* is an open discussion of power, its locations and its representations.

This might be "unpicked," at least in part, via a discussion of successful violence to subjected groups. Subjected groups could be those who may not have a right or legally validated capacity for self-defence; some examples for discussion:

Are women who resist oppression silly, Fascist feminists or even members of a "shrieking sisterhood"?

Why are two children per week getting killed within their "family"? (according to the National Children's Bureau statistics).

Do subjected wives have a right to resist oppression?

Do children have a right to resist, eg., a renter or a paedophile, both usually male?

Do Jews, previously conceptualised as women, have a right to self-defence?

Do Jews have a right to their own homeland?

Are the Provos heroic Socialist freedom fighters?

Are the UDA wicked Fascists and not freedom fighters?

Was there an alphabet for a mother-right society as seen in Gimbutas?

The philosophical bases and criteria for judgements need more discussion and less cant about freedom. Whose freedoms are at more risk? What groups can represent and happily twist grand theory to their own purposes? I cannot handle the grand theory which your respondents might care to develop in a Freethought perspective.

BRENDA ABLE
Croydon

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 28

Buddhists

ROGER NADON (January) writes that he knows of two Buddhists who read *The Free-thinker*. There are three. As a convinced and committed Buddhist (by way of experiment, not mere belief) I read the paper with gratitude for the light which it directs into some very dark places.

However, I am not happy at the aggression which I frequently find. Peace campaigners sometimes resort to violence in order to propagate their cause and this serves only to weaken their arguments. Also, I search vainly for articles written by "the opposition." To give a platform to superstitious and neurotic religionists is to expose their fallacies. Like Roger Nadon, I would welcome open debate.

Perhaps an article which I sent to you shortly after your "elevation" to editorship, and which you kindly undertook to publish, could be unearthed as a "starter." It is gentle in tone, but it is also in the nature of a challenge to those who make sweeping and generalised condemnations without having thoroughly researched their subject.

Finally, may I say that the Buddha was no more than a very insightful man and that it doesn't matter two hoots where or when he was born?

Thank you for a great paper.

PETER GALBRAITH
Northampton

● The article referred to by Mr Galbraith is indeed awaiting publication – along with a mass of equally good material. What we must have is a bigger paper, and that will come only if we get more income from sales and more contributions to the Fund. Over to you. – Editor.

Morals

ONE of the many ways in which the theists seem to maintain the moral high ground over us is the claim that they believe in absolute morals and we believe in relative morals. Of course, we must explain to folk theists that we do not *believe* in relative morals but *live* by a set of relative morals, and that what they are told to believe are absolute morals are in fact a set of relative morals that are in most ways even more relative than ours.

The case that most irritates is their morals regarding capital punishment. Now, extremist theists tend to support capital punishment wholeheartedly, while their mainstream on the whole is quite equivocal about the matter. The declining liberal forces in theism do side with us.

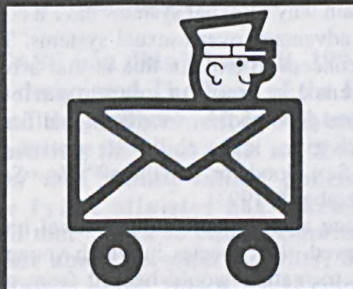
On the whole, mainstream atheists are against capital punishment, I would suggest.

So, why is it that in particular mainstream theists (and also folk theists) do not seem to have any morals when it comes to capital pun-

ishment? Can I suggest that it is the way in which they are psychologically let off the hook when it comes to taking human life? After all, there is this Afterlife, and if a mistake is made in the scientific certainty of a law court, no real harm is done because life goes on after death.

I suspect that, because of this folk theistic psychology of reality, there is this huge, but not surprisingly incoherent, support in our country for capital punishment.

Now, back to the point concerning relative values. We as atheists do not regard morals as absolute, but when it comes to life and death, where things are as absolute as dammit, we say that you cannot commit the sentence of capital punishment because it is as near to an absolute as one can get, and our legal system could never be absolutely correct in its ver-



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dicts. (And I think that is our basic position).

The theistic position seems to be: there is no real thing called death (death is relative), hence the taking of human life is not absolute. Hence the taking of human life can be used as, say, a means of deterrent to others, or a price that the victim's family has a right to exact, or even that the State has a right to exact. In fact, the list of relative moral attitudes towards the taking of human life among folk and mainstream Theists goes on and on.

But then, that is the kind of deep-rooted debasement of human values that the theistic establishment engenders. And it is not the only area of human morals that are debased.

CLARENCE M G WILSON
Harrow

From the USA

I APPROPRIATED your December, 1993,

cover and the article by Ralph Ison for a flyer [leaflet] to be available for the taking at our annual Solstice stand in Palisades Park in the city of Santa Monica. I apologise for this late request for permission to use them, but since it was for a free handout you would not mind but perhaps appreciate that knowledge about *The Free-thinker* being spread.

As an addendum to Ison's article ("The miraculous birth of Jesus – a biologist's view"), I call attention to what apparently was the view of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch. In his letter to the Ephesians, he wrote: "For our God Jesus Christ was according to the dispensation of God conceived in the womb of Mary, of the seed of David, by the Holy Spirit...Now the virginity of Mary, and he who was born of her, was kept in secret from the prince of this world; as also the death of our Lord; three of the mysteries the most spoken of throughout the world, yet done in secret by God." (4:9-10)

That these "mysteries" were not only "done in secret" but were also "kept in secret" indicate that they came to the attention of Ignatius well into his term as Bishop, which ran from about 64 to 105, European Calendar. The obvious source of Ignatius' information must have been the Gospel of Matthew, written after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 EC, before which the original Mark was written.

The phrase "of the seed of David" does not indicate that Mary was a descendant of David (her lineage was of Aaron, the Levite proto-priest) and it is not a remnant of the lineage of Joseph. It does indicate that the actual sperm of King David was used by the Holy Spirit. This was artificial insemination from a heavenly sperm bank. Ignatius, like many Christians, was able to hold two incompatible views at the same time, for he considered Jesus to have been God incarnate. (2:7)

In the Gospels, when Jesus is recognised as the "son of David," it is meant literally.

KENNETH H BONNELL
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Homosexuality

IT WAS a relief to see the letters pointing out the physiological error regarding the female genito-urinary arrangements in A G Stephens' letter (December, On Wrong Tract). However, I think it is also illuminating to notice that it possibly embodies an illustration of the psychological influence on sexual development. Such a basic mistake is typical of a very small boy who is desperately trying to work out exactly what his parents get up (or down) to; he assumes that females must only use one channel for two functions as males do and, importantly, this fantasy is unmodified by any later "knowledge" of the facts. Although it is popular to invoke genetic determinism for

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homosexuality, in my researches I find such psychological fantasy underlying preference for same sex relationships.

JENNIFER JEYNES MSc
Hampstead

SOME points in reply to A G. Stephens (January):

1. I have regarded the anal region as being "particularly unhygienic" as a result of potty-training advice, and the wealth of statements in the medical literature, for example: "Organisms that infect the gut are transmitted through contact with faecal material" (*Immunity Plus* by Melville and Johnson).

2. More serious, perhaps, is the physical damage caused by anal sex: I read that bleeding, lesions and haemorrhoids are common, leading to blood-borne infections.

3. The warning "Say No to anal sex" was certainly put out by the Health Authority in this area – it appeared in the local Press two or three years ago.

4. If only the Gays in the bath-houses and clubs of San Francisco and New York had sought "privacy and peace" for their sex acts (as Mr Stephens claims animals do) there would have been no AIDS epidemic. Their determination to have their peculiar activities officially recognised has damaged them far more than the cruel legal system they reasonably, and successfully, challenged.

On another matter, Glyn Emery asks "if there were any form of communal property-holding that really worked, should we not see it in successful societies around us?" (December). The answer is that we do see it in abundance in the non-human animal world.

That humans are the exception to the golden rule that ensures the continuation of the species is due to our capacity for abstract thought, leading to indoctrination, deceit, romanticism, and ideologies that set people against one another.

It is impossible to imagine any "lower" animal species engaging in a 1914-18 Western Front scenario (including a Christmas Day truce and football match) because they have no Kitcheners or Hindenbergs. The "lower" animals fare much better on instinct. It need not be like that, but Freethinkers have a hell of a fight on their hands.

ERNIE CROSSWELL
Slough

I AGREE with Ernie Crosswell (November, 1993) that sex does not have anything to do with love in the sense that the total biomass of the planet is concerned with maximising biological reproduction for the next generation. A variety of strategies is used to achieve biological success, and heterosexual love is one such strategy.

The lowest reproductive unit is the virus, which is a giant self-replicating biological molecule, or strand of genetic material. The virus is interesting in that it exists at the boundary between living matter and non-liv-

ing matter.

The next level of reproduction is the single cell – and the bulk of single cell systems, animal or plant, are asexual systems or single partner. There are a few asexual lizards, which is the highest level reached by asexual systems. There are no asexual (virgin birth) mammal systems, excluding the Virgin Birth!

The next level of complexity is the multicellular system, and they mainly use bisexual systems. Bisexual systems involve two partners, and there seem to be no systems with higher numbers of partners, excluding orgies!

The high-level systems use a double-strand of DNA genetic information, each strand supplied by one of the partners. The double strand helps to prevent errors. Low-level systems, the virus types, use a single-strand RNA, mainly, and have a high mutation rate, since there is no error correction.

The main problem for the biologist is to explain why bisexual systems have a comparative advantage over asexual systems. The latest concept to explain this is that a bisexual system can draw on genetic variety in a species gene pool by sacrificing half its genes, which gives it the ability to survive disease ("Is Sex Good for Anything?" *New Scientist*, December 4, 1993).

Once a multi-cell animal level has been achieved, then species in which young take a time to mature would benefit from parental care, or parental love. In bisexual systems, such as humans, whose offspring require a long time to develop pair-bonding, that is heterosexual love, developed. Bonding involves chemical external signals, such as pheromones and internal signals (*Chemistry of Love*, Liebovitz, Little Browns). Short-term love is due to amphetamines and long-term love is due to opioids. There are other references, but the most modern and popular view is expressed in *Red Queen* by Matt Ridley, Viking, 1993. Those who have a cosmological view of the problem should read *Cosmic Evolution, Order and Complexity* by Hubert Reeves, W H Freeman, 1991.

Heterosexual love is thus one of the last properties to emerge from a biological reproductive system. I have adopted a reductionist approach to the problem in considering its components; however, a holistic approach should be adopted for a high-level view. Some individuals – for example, those who work in the caring professions – obviously can transcend the minimal requirements of a human biological reproductive system.

BOB AWBERY
Reading

More biology

THERE has been such a mass of technical sexual biology in *The Freethinker* of late that I am tempted to add my little bit, especially as reference was made in the last issue to female circumcision being practised in Australia as well as in other countries.

It is a little known fact at the popular level

that the Aborigine in Western Australia (perhaps elsewhere as well) undergo what is colloquially known as "whistle-cocking" at about the time of puberty. This involves the Aborigine boy having a small hole made under the penis near the scrotum, so as to leave an open aperture when the surgical procedure is healed.

When the boy starts sexual activities with his tribal women, the ejaculate does not penetrate the vagina but falls near the folds of the labia majora. The woman then has the option, should she feel like becoming pregnant, to direct the ejaculate into her vagina with her fingers. Alternatively, and choosing this peculiar form of birth control, she can carefully wipe away the semen from her privates.

For the life of me, I couldn't say whether this is a good idea or not, but I'm sure your readers will have their ideas about it. This letter is not submitted for humorous purposes: the procedure can no doubt be verified with some medical type at Australia House.

CHARLES WILLIAMS MARSHALL
Wimborne

Ill-starred

IN HIS article "Ancient Prophets" (Up Front, December) the Editor once again quotes from *Star Trek* on the grounds that the series' producer, Gene Roddenberry, was a Humanist and Rationalist. However, closer examination of the programme reveals evidence to the contrary.

First, the series is set upon a vessel with a military rank structure based upon the United States Navy. At the time of the series' first showing on TV in the US, millions of young people were demonstrating in the street against both the principle of compulsory military service in general, and the Vietnam War in particular. It was felt by the powers-that-be that the armed force needed a TV show that portrayed military men as heroes. Also, on board this ship superiors give orders to subordinates and expect them to be obeyed, and have to be addressed by their given rank. I would have thought that by the end of this century, let alone by the 23rd, we would have done away with all that heel-clicking, saluting, order-giving and instant unquestioning obedience.

Second, the ship is called *Enterprise*, a quality that Margaret Thatcher highly prized – a combination of greed, opportunism and cowardice. The idea that "entrepreneurs" expose themselves to risks for the chance of reward is a classic Big Lie; businessmen are very securely protected from the consequences of their own recklessness by the principle of Limited Liability: what they win, they keep; what they lose, they don't have to pay out. The only people who lose are the employees who run the risk of losing their jobs, or their lives or limbs to industrial accident or disease.

Third, rarely does an episode pass without some unfriendly alien making an appearance,

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most often "Klingons," who have brown skin and black hair, or "Romulans," who have an advantage in that they look like "Vulcans," who are the "Good Guys" in the programme. As I think Bertrand Russell once said: "The racist hates the black man because he looks different, but he hates the Jew even more for the most heinous crime of looking the same as himself."

Fourth, frequent reference is made to "colonies," other worlds appropriated by Earthmen for their own use. Those who want to know what colonisation really means should consider the fate of the natives of Tasmania, hunted down to the last child, exterminated for sport by their colonisers.

Fifth, anybody who still thinks the show supports liberal ideas, would do well to study the notorious episode "The Way To Eden," which features a group of idealistic young people resembling 20th Century hippies. These people, believers in an actually-existing Utopia, are shown as irresponsible to the point of being homicidal; at one point to escape from the ship they broadcast a lethal ultrasonic noise over the ship's PA system. They steal an expensive space yacht; their leader, based on Timothy Leary, is portrayed as a murderous "Charles Manson" type, carrying a lethal disease that will kill them all, without treatment. Worse, when they eventually find their Utopia, they discover that the whole environment is lethal to humans.

So, *Star Trek*, ostensibly a plea for understanding, reason and tolerance, actually supports militarism, racism, capitalism, imperialism fascism, and attacks the real people who were promoting an alternative to the society that produces these ills. Watch the programme, by all means, but remember that it stands for the opposite values to those it claims to support.

KEITH ACKERMANN
Tilbury

Nice things?

I THINK that Anthony Freeman's book *God in Us* is a "stride" forward for Humanism. Whether he calls himself a "Christian Humanist" or not does not matter; he is a Humanist, full stop. He does not believe in God, nor does he believe that Jesus Christ was the son of God, whether he believes in the existence of Jesus (I don't) or not is immaterial. Christianity has provided us with a lot of things with regard to art and music etc. The Sistine Chapel, St Paul's Cathedral and so on have been given to us by the Christians. No one can mock the beauty and splendour of these places. The sound of Plainchant coming from the cloisters is "something else" – something I have cherished ever since my days as a student in a seminary.

Even though we disagree with the "basics" of Christianity, the absurd beliefs and all the atrocities perpetrated in its name, there are still

a lot of nice things which we should accept as "our" culture.

CHARLES STEWART
Crawley

In a tizzy

THE "Primate" of All England is in a tizzy. He is much alarmed that the nation's children are growing up in profound ignorance of J C and his not-so-merry men!

I would have thought that his main concern would have been as to whether the doctrines of his church were true or false, fact or fancy. Even he, as titular head of the C of E, cannot miraculously transform a few loaves and fish-

es into enough to feed 5,000! Even he cannot work the Oracle, and make the blind see, or raise the dead after four days.

Isn't it about time that open admission was made that the stories about J C in the Bible are just stories and nothing more?

World history shows that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, has exerted a baleful influence and has been a hindrance of scientific progress.

Our thanks to Secularist teachers in schools who refuse to be blackmailed into teaching the myths of religion, at the expense of their prospects of promotion. Well done – and keep at it!

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

Year of the Bigots?

IN CASE you didn't know it, 1994 has been designated The Year of the Family, and the Government is hell-bent on celebrating this fact with its "back to basics" and "family values" policies.

The Prime Minister has vehemently denied that "back to basics" constitutes a crusade about personal morality, but he can hardly claim this when it comes to "family values," a term enthusiastically espoused by the Christian "Moral Majority."

The policies being so enthusiastically pursued by Roman Catholic Education Secretary John Patten are especially bad news for lesbians and gays as they are heavily weighted in favour of "family values," which in his view are clearly synonymous with Christian values.

Mr Patten, who has admitted to being flogged at school by Jesuit priests for not getting his sums right, told last year's Tory Party conference that schools must reinforce the moral framework of the family.

"That is why," he said, "I am determined to see a proper act of worship" [by which he means Christian worship, of course] "in schools. Every day. In every school."

This in spite of the fact that there is now a substantial minority of followers of other faiths in the population – and around one-third with no religious beliefs at all.

Not surprisingly, Mr Patten's latest circular setting out guidelines for sex education bends over backwards to accommodate religionists. For example: "Pupils' questions should be answered with due consideration for any particular religious factors bearing on the discussion of sexual issues." And: "Where schools are founded on specific religious principles, this may have a direct bearing on the manner in which [sex education] is presented."

Parents will be allowed to withdraw their children from sex education lessons without giving a reason, thus providing a clear opt-out for Christian prudes and denying chil-

by George Broadhead
Gay & Lesbian
Humanist Association

dren vital information about HIV and AIDS.

Moreover, although the new circular excludes the virulently homophobic section contained in a previous version, it makes no provision for objective teaching about homosexuality and stresses the importance of "moral considerations and the value of family life."

"Moral framework of the family...family values...the value of family life." Phrases like these are, of course, just a roundabout way of saying "Christian moral values" which dictate that sex is only morally acceptable within a monogamous, married, heterosexual relationship. Anything else – including lesbian and gay sexual relationships – is beyond the pale.

Exclusively

As Mr Patten's fellow Roman Catholic, Cardinal Basil Hume, has so succinctly put it: "The Church has always taught that sexual (genital) expression of love is intended by God's plan of creation to find its place exclusively within marriage between a man and a woman.

"The Church, therefore, cannot in any way equate a homosexual partnership with a heterosexual marriage. The sexual (genital) expression of love must always be open to the possible transmission of new life. Consequently the Church does not approve of homosexual genital acts."

If teaching like this is the order of the day, there is little prospect of young lesbians and gays getting a fair deal in schools in the foreseeable future.

The dreadful secret of Little Bible Stories

LAST summer, our four-year-old said good-bye to his local private day nursery. The nursery had been great for him – gym, painting, dancing, friends etc. When we picked him up for the last time, he skipped out clutching two gift-wrapped leaving presents from the nursery staff – he could hardly wait to get home and open them. When we did open the presents, we found that both were Bible story books: one, *Naaman's Dreadful Secret*, was a story taken from 2 Kings; the other, *Jesus is Alive*, told the story of a Lord called Jesus, who was killed on a cross, but came back to life. We quickly decided to spirit both presents away from our four-year-old, who was enthusiastically bidding us to: "Come on, let's read it!"

Jesus may be alive, but one of the first illustrations in this "Little Bible Story" for little people is a drawing of a man hanging tortured and dead on a cross. The crown of thorns is a detail that many children would pick out from the picture. We later see nails hammered into his feet, and the removal of the body from the cross. Then the murdered man somehow leaves his tomb, and the youthful reader is treated to a close-up of the holes that the nails made in his hands. Again, the nails. Now the isolated image on the title page – one large, sharply pointed nail – makes sense. It may be that these images have become defamiliarised to children indoctrinated by adults, but they are not familiar to our child, and we would have had a hell of a lot of explaining to do.

The "dreadful secret" of the second book's title is that Naaman has a chronic skin disease; his wife, who "tried to look pretty" and pretend that nothing was wrong, "knew that when their friends found out they would send Naaman away...they won't want us as friends." Some friends! Naaman, a captain in the Syrian army, had taken an Israelite child into slavery:

Faithful unto death

NINE pupils and a priest who tried to walk on water like Jesus Christ drowned in Lake Victoria, Tanzanian police said yesterday (*Daily Star*, October 28, 1993).

The members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church were going in a flotilla of canoes to a religious festival when they decided to make the watery walk as a test of faith.

Other pilgrims watched helplessly from the shore as the victims died. Police questioning four priests who arranged the pilgrimage said relatives of the dead had asked not to press charges.

LAST WORD

by Peter McKenna

the removal of "prisoners" from Israel is pleasantly described on the very first page, and the drawing shows a smiling Naaman holding a smiling, orphaned slave-girl, who is clearly making the best of bondage: the King "let him take one little girl home, as a present for his wife." The "little girl" knows the prophet Elisha, who in turn knows God, and fixes it for Naaman with a magic seven washes in the Jordan so that he keeps his friends and lives happily ever after. He decides to worship the God of the Israelites, and "could not wait to get back to Syria to tell his wife, so that she could worship him, too".

This sordid little tale is packed with messages, both subliminal and explicit, for young people: war is a natural thing, and it can be quite fun for a young child to be taken into slavery; a wife should believe and do what her husband believes and tells her to do; and as far as possible, if you do have a disease or disability, it is a socially abhorrent thing that you must keep secret – the "dreadful secret" of the title. This all for the sake of showing that God is powerful.

We did not want our child to encounter these messages at the age of four; and we were shocked that otherwise caring people could see fit to give this as a "present." Presumably it was well-meaning, but what mind-lock was it in people that made them suspend their normal standards of decency, and then present such material to a pre-school child who was temporarily in their care for two days a week? If there is an answer, it is close to the heart of religious belief.

Other stories often told to children can be almost as brutal. There are, however, fundamental differences between these Bible stories and, on the one hand, fairy tales and Classical Mythology, and on the other, history. Firstly, whereas one engages briefly in suspended disbelief when a fantastic character such as Perseus beheads Medusa, the whole point behind the Bible stories is meant to be that they are real and true. Whether true to the letter or to the spirit hardly matters, and of course they are more than true: the Bible stories are didactic tales, ordinances from the child's creator and benefactor/punisher. And the brutality is often so central to these ancient moral tales that it is difficult to tone them down effectively. Unlike all but the most jin-

goistic history narratives, description of brutality necessitates approval where God or his agents are responsible: one cannot feasibly accept, say, the Exodus, and reject the mayhem that Yahweh inflicts on the Egyptian people; accept Jesus' promise of everlasting life, and reject his sentence for those who do not believe. And even where brutality is seemingly against God, as in the crucifixion, one makes a virtue out of a torture and execution that God planned anyway. The path to moral turpitude is laid wide.

At the end of *Naaman's Dreadful Secret*, children are directed to "the Old Testament history book, 2 Kings" to find out more about "God's love and care for everyone." The pleasant sequel to the story in 2 Kings is that one of Elisha's servants takes payment from Naaman, and Elisha instantly inflicts leprosy not only on the servant, but also on his "seed for ever." Kings 2 is not a good one for the kids. If one reads on a little we see Elisha cursing a group of "little children" for saying unto him "go up, thou bald head," whereupon a gang of bears tears 42 of them to pieces. Jehu, in the course of exterminating, at God's command, the house of Ahab, kills Ahab's 70 sons, and sends baskets full of their heads to him – to much congratulation from "the Lord." The Lord specifically demands that Jezebel be eaten by dogs (Jehu treads her underfoot for extra Brownie points, while her blood spatters everywhere). A few pages on, and "the angel of the Lord" slaughters 185,000 Assyrians – this unfortunately is the subject of the next story in the children's series, number 24, *Enemies all Around*. One also dreads to imagine the contents of number 12, *The Battle of Jericho*, or number 13, *Gideon Fights for God*.

These presents reminded me of a row that hit the news four or five years ago over a children's book called *Abigail at the Beach*. One of the characters threatened another child, fairly rhetorically, with violence (hanging her up by her thumbs, I think). More than 50 MPs proposed a motion calling on the publisher, Collins, to withdraw the book. The motion mentioned, indignantly, and to make the matter more forceful, that Collins were the publishers of the Bible. It was barely credible that they were not aware of any irony!

What is the real "dreadful secret" of religion? Presumably as children the MPs too had been let into this secret, had thumbed through the mass killings, had seen the nail-marks in the flesh. As adults perhaps they feel the pathos of self-sacrifice, or the value of suffering. Yet one wonders whether it is the religious setting of the psyche in childhood that encourages people to accept injustice without question, that enables them to ignore the reality of human suffering in modern-day atrocities. We are also left wondering: what on earth are we to do with these horrible little books: and how come our son's state school now has the full set on display in its corridors?