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The

Secular  
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# Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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March 1994



**Sex education**  
**Gay age of consent**  
**Voluntary euthanasia**  
**Sunday trading**

## THE DEAD HAND OF RELIGION



**It's time for a register of MPs' sex interests!**  
- see P34

**Rome-bound Anglicans could be in for a rude awakening - P37**

**Star Trek and its sequel zapped as racist - boldly go to P45**

# UP FRONT

with the Editor

## Back to bonking

YEO, Norris, Caithness, Ashby, Waller, Milligan and "General" Booth – the names are etched in voters' minds like the letters through a pinkly succulent stick of Blackpool rock – like "Calais" in the heart of Mary Tudor.

First there was Cecil and then there was David Mellor and the toes business (he quit as Heritage Secretary, you will recall) and now there are:

- Tim Yeo: fathered a child by somebody who wasn't his missus – and another when he was a student. He handed in his junior Environment Minister's badge.
- Transport Minister Steve Norris, accused in the tabloids of having had five mistresses. He still has his job.
- Upper House Transport Minister Lord Caithness: he had a liaison with a woman. His wife shot herself. He resigned.
- Tory MP David Ashby: shared a French hotel bed with a male friend, but denied that anything sexual occurred.
- Tory backbencher Gary Waller: admitted he had an illegitimate child by a Commons researcher without telling his girlfriend.
- Stephen Milligan: an up-and-coming Tory MP, he died while indulging in a bizarre sex act.

And now – Hartley Booth, descendent of the Salvation Army's General Booth; former Chairman of the National Organisation for Helping the Family; ornament of the Order of Christian Unity; Methodist lay preacher; a Patron of the Conservative Christian Fellowship.

Hartley, a married man, resigned as Parliamentary Private Secretary after admitting "kissing and cuddling" with, and writing romantic love poems to, a Commons research assistant.

Even those electors who don't much care about the alleged gerrymandering of votes, or arms sales to tyrants, or aid to Third World countries being conditional on their buying British killing-machines, do perk up at a sex scandal when they smell one; their noses are sensitive, too, to the odour of hypocrisy.

As polls and letters to the Press have shown, they resent the implied "do as I say, not as I do" strictures of Parliamentarians.

## Personal morality

AN EXAMPLE of this sort of lecture came from the unfortunate Mr Milligan during a BBC TV debate in January, when he insisted that John Major's Back to Basics policy meant clean living and untarnished morals (report in

the *Daily Mirror*, February 8).

And he said: "You ask the question – is Back to Basics linked to personal morality? The answer is – in part, yes it is."

So much for the fatuous business of Back to Basics not really applying to individual personal acts, now that very individual and amazingly personal acts of top politicians have come to light.

Of course, it would be too obvious a climb-down if Mr Major were suddenly to drop the phrase. But I know that his PR men will have worked out a strategy which involves his using the phrase on fewer and fewer occasions until it disappears from the public consciousness and may safely be not mentioned at all.

But as the *Sunday Times* commented (January 16): "Major's repeated denial of the discrepancy between his call for greater personal and family responsibility and the exposing of indiscretions among his colleagues has put his leadership firmly on the line."

There is further confirmation of Back to Basics having started out as a campaign for "romance, love and morality," as suggested to Mr Major by none other than Dame Barbara Cartland, 92, who got the idea from – Her Supreme Magnificence Baroness Thatcher of Belgrano, who "had confided to her that she was worried about the nation's morality" (*The Times*, January 25).

## A second religion

AGAINST the background of sleaze, we have had stories of the Department of Education's intent to propel yet more Christianity down young throats in an effort to inculcate "moral values," despite that religion's patent failure in this area over a couple of millennia (as is evidenced, now you come to mention it, by the aforementioned behaviour of some of the Education Secretary's own Hon Friends).

But seriously: I must stress that, really and truly, I do not care what these people get up to between the sheets: that's their business and let him that is without sin cast the first pair of frilly knickers.

What we are entitled to be cynical about is the fact that all this illicit sweating and squelching has been happening among the very people who seek to force single-mums to sleep in shop-doorways before they can be considered homeless, and who make a second religion out of stigmatising the unacceptable behaviour of council estate dwellers and Social Security scroungers. And all, as I say, against a background of Establishment demands for a "return" to Christian "morality."

## An immodest proposal

MOST readers of, shall we say, *The Sun* would at least pay lip-service to such foolishness – and would therefore be agin sin, in the ory – and those that wouldn't are cross with the Tories for having such a good time when they're not.

So – how may Mr Major deliver himself from this unpromising situation before the local government and Euro elections?

What's done is done. But there is still time to rescue something from the wreckage, and I suggest that he should create – a Register of MPs' Sexual Interests, to be kept alongside the Register of MPs' Financial Interests.

This would defuse electorally dangerous tabloid prurience like that in the *Sunday Mirror* (February 13), which states (on the alleged authority of the alleged Security Services) that six MPs are capable of sex only when wearing women's clothing...that five employ rent boys...that four indulge in the sort of auto-erotic fun which went so sensationally wrong for Mr Milligan.

A sexual interests register might not curb the activities of the chronically unzipped, but it would release Mr Major from the agony of having to wait for the piecemeal disclosure of these legislators' names and the concomitant headlines. It would be all over in one go.

There just wouldn't be a story any more when an MP was discovered with his pants down or with the bin-bag in place.

After all, now that MPs are supposed to state their business interests, the electorate doesn't make a fuss when a Member delivers a tear-jerking Parliamentary plea on behalf of this or that board of directors: a quick check of the register shows that he is simply doing it for the money, so all is well.

The Register of MPs' Sexual Interests need not be an elaborate affair. Simple headings like "Adultery," "Fornication," "Three-in-a-bed sex romps" would do nicely. "Bestiality," rather than itemised preferences for "sheep," "gerbils" or "stick insects," would suffice. Likewise, paedophile Parliamentarians need not specify "boys" or "girls" or "leverets." Fetishists, on the other hand, might do themselves a bit of good with their constituents by being more specific: a predilection for wool would go down well in Yorkshire...for cotton in Lancashire...for leather in Northamptonshire, and so on.

Speed, though, is of the essence: the rate at which skeletons are being noisily uncloused (reminder: don't forget a category in the register for the Backbench necrophiliacs) leaves no margin for procrastination if the scheme is to succeed.

# Dead hand of religion still holds up progress

by Peter Brearey

REPORTEDLY vicious Cabinet-level infighting is going on between the Department of Health (in the left corner, Mrs Virginia Bottomley) and the Department of Education (in the right corner, Mr John Patten) over new guidelines on sex education in schools, which are due to be published in the Spring.

Health Secretary Mrs Bottomley insists that sex education is too important to be undermined by the "crusading moralist" wing of the Tory Party: she has set the target of halving teenage pregnancies by the end of the decade.

Mrs Bottomley wants every child to be taught about contraception and AIDS in school – but according to *The Observer* (February 20): "It is an open secret in Whitehall that the Health Ministry believes Mr Patten

has been 'nobbled' by religious fundamentalists. Senior officials were upset at his decision to remove teaching about abortion, contraception, HIV and AIDS from the compulsory science curriculum."

Education Secretary Patten is touting the idea that for teachers to give advice to girls under 16 on contraception without the full knowledge and consent of their parents could amount to a criminal offence. Of course, this will not stop many teachers doing their duty by their pupils – but the consequences could be personally and professionally disastrous.

Both Ministers are now lobbying Cabinet colleagues for support – and, given top politicians' "Back to Basics" sensitivity over the string of sex scandals which has beset the Tory Party, it is by no means certain that they will risk church and tabloid wrath by permitting Mrs Bottomley's common-sense to prevail.

A victory for Patten's view, which is inevitably informed by his Roman Catholic beliefs, will mean that sex is kept behind the bike sheds, with wrong and potentially dangerous information continuing to be exchanged between youngsters, and unprotected sexual activity still creating huge social, personal and health problems: around 8,000 girls under 16 get pregnant each year in the UK – seven times the rate in the Netherlands, where sex education is central to the school curriculum.

Patten-style blinkers were obviously donned by many – including Labour members – in the February 21 Commons vote against lowering the homosexual age of consent to 16 (Edwina Currie's brave effort was defeated by just 27 votes).

Again, this will not stop sexual activity by "under-age" gays: it merely perpetuates their criminalisation and sense of being treated as second-class citizens in comparison with girls of the same age. And as George Broadhead, secretary of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, said after the vote: "They will still have to live in fear of punishment and still be afraid to seek counselling and medical advice about a life-threatening disease like AIDS."

A back-to-the-past chord was also struck by the House of Lords Select Committee ruling against voluntary euthanasia (see Page 37): *The Freethinker* understands that 19 Church-related organisations presented evidence against euthanasia, and patently their view prevailed.

But whatever the House of Lords finally

decides on this issue, voluntary euthanasia will not end – it will continue to be the result of collusion by desperate and courageous "criminals": the terminally-ill, their families and their doctors.

Sunday trading is another issue over which the religionists are allowed to maintain an unacceptable measure of control.

While welcoming the Commons decision (by a majority of 93 on February 23) that small shops will be allowed to open on Sunday for as long as they like, we have to record our disappointment that large outlets will be restricted to six hours of opening, with no trading on Easter Sunday and on any Christmas Day which falls on a Sunday.

These restrictions, however minor they may seem to a number of those who have campaigned on this issue for decades, permit strictures associated with a mythical Hebrew tribal god *some* influence in late 20th Century Britain – and any amount of that is too much.

The only reason for giving Sunday special protection is religious tradition and – with less than 10 per cent of the population regularly attending Sunday services – this is no longer a good enough reason to involve the law.

Of course, traders and shoppers will soon vote with their feet and create a Sunday which is, *de facto*, free of all restrictions. But in doing so they will be forced to become law-breakers – like others in the areas of sex education, euthanasia and under-age gay activity. And all because members of the Establishment have been afraid or unwilling to go all the way against the superstitionists.

## More incitement

IN A move designed to mark the fifth anniversary of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, an Iranian foundation on February 22 increased its \$2 million (£1.4 million) reward for the author's head.

The size of the increase was not disclosed. Besides the reward, the 15 Khordad (5 June) Foundation also offered to foot the bill for any expenses incurred in executing Ayatollah Khomeini's decree, *Agence France Press* reported from Tehran.

*The Freethinker* extends its good wishes to Rushdie at this time and congratulates him on his continuing stand against censorship of all kinds.

## THE FREETHINKER

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Barbara Smoker monitors British Islam's views on education

# 'DISASTROUS SOCIAL SEGREGATION' IF MUSLIMS GO IT ALONE

WHEN a *Freethinker* reader sent me details of a one-day conference to be held on February 5 at a London mosque under the auspices of the Association of Muslim schools of UK and Eire on *Education Opportunities, Principles and Policies for British Muslims*, I thought I should go along to monitor it.

On this occasion, unlike those events held under the auspices of university unions which I have described before in these pages, I was willing to defer, if necessary, to such requirements as audience sex-segregation and removal of shoes. I even put a large headscarf in my handbag in case that should be *de rigueur*. But I need not have bothered. The conference was held in the hall adjoining the mosque, so everyone wore shoes, women were scattered around the hall, and the heads of several of them were uncovered.

The chair was taken by a non-Muslim, Dr John Marks, and the platform speakers included Lord Skidelsky, of the Social Market Foundation, and Stuart Sexton, of the Independent Primary and Secondary Education Trust, as well as two leading Muslim educationists, both of whom put forward moderate views, moderately expressed.

The main themes of the conference were, first, the Christian bias of the new education laws for local authority schools, and, second, the new opportunities for grant-aided, as opposed to voluntary-aided, Muslim schools.

I enjoyed hearing such names as Lady Olga Maitland cited by Muslims in the same derogatory terms I would use myself in connection with the new statutory emphasis on Christianity in schools, and I concurred with the statement that few teachers are qualified to introduce children between seven and 11 to

five different religions. One Muslim speaker asked, rhetorically: "When have the British ever allowed their own children to be taught religion by Muslim, Sikh, or Jewish believers?"

A particular Muslim problem with regard to the education of their children in non-Muslim schools is that not only religious teaching but also the whole curriculum should conform to the Koranic ethos, and classes in sex education present even greater difficulties than RE. The orthodox Muslim prohibition on dance and musical instruments also raises difficulties with regard to the national curriculum.

There was plenty of opportunity during the day for participation from the floor, and I was able to make two contributions: the first in the morning, on RE and collective school worship in local authority schools, and the second in the afternoon on publicly-funded denominational schools and consideration for the rights of children alongside parental choice.

I was heard courteously, and the Muslim audience seemed pleasantly surprised that a non-Muslim agreed with them on the unfairness of the present laws regarding religion in schools. We were also in agreement that "broadly Christian" worship is impossible, and worship on the basis of local population percentages even more ludicrous.

It is anathema for Muslims that children be imbued with "the moral relativism of Humanists" and be encouraged to reach their own ethical conclusions as they grow up, instead of following sacred revelation. One speaker from the floor actually said that this "moral relativism" could lead to a teenager's saying "It is my life, so I can choose to take a loaded gun to school and shoot someone dead if I want to," and then go home and say to his parents "It is my life, so I will not accept an arranged

marriage, but will choose a wife for myself." He really seemed to think that the two free choices were on a par!

Many of the Muslims present saw secularism not only as a denial of moral values but also as aiming at totalitarian atheism (as achieved by the Albanian régime) and, somewhat inconsistently, as rank consumerism.

Dr Ghulam Saqeb, of London University, attacked the secularist tendencies in British society, but Lord Skidelsky pointed out that secularism allows everything to flourish within the law and can therefore be helpful to religious and ethnic minorities.

While the existing voluntary-aided sector of education comprises a large number of Anglican and Roman Catholic schools and a few Jewish and other denominational schools, totalling about 4,000, all applications made for the public funding of Muslim schools have so far been turned down, mainly on grounds of there being surplus places in other schools in the locality. But an alternative solution is offered from next January in the new statutory provisions for grant-maintained status, which will redefine surplus places with deference to reasoned parental choice while retaining the same generous level of public funding. I argued that this could lead to disastrous social segregation.

However, even the 15 per cent of the capital that must be found by those setting up a new denominational school, whether voluntary-aided or grant-maintained, could, it was said, be difficult to raise, especially as the Koran does not permit the paying or charging of interest.

At another point in the conference, one of the Muslim speakers boasted that many of the Muslims who had settled in this country in the past three decades had made good, some of them having become successful businessmen and bankers - which seemed rather inconsistent with Muslims castigating consumerism and being forbidden to pay or to charge interest. Raising the point personally at the end of the meeting, I was told that not all Muslims live in complete obedience to Islam, but when I pointed out that successful Muslim businessmen and bankers had actually been commended, without dissent in the meeting, my respondent had to admit that this should not have been so.

## Humanists seek world growth

THE International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is increasing its efforts to promote its non-religious views around the world. As the first step in a drive for worldwide growth, the IHEU has appointed a Secretary for Development and Public Relations: Matt Cherry, formerly of the British Humanist Association.

There has been a rapid growth in Humanism in recent years and the IHEU now has more than 80 member organisations in 32 countries, representing more than three million members.

It aims to use this powerful base as a launching pad for a campaign to increase Humanist influence.

# Bruce Kent's warning for Romeward-bound clerics

CND's Monsignor-as-was, Bruce Kent, offers cold comfort to superstitionists who plan to leap from the Anglican frying-pan into the Roman Catholic fire because they can't accept women priests.

A legal barrier to the ordination of women was swept away at the High Court on February 21, when the Rev Paul Williamson failed to secure leave to seek a judicial review and, pending the sought-after hearing, prevent the Church of England's General Synod voting on the issue.

The Synod did vote on February 22 – overwhelmingly in favour of women becoming priests. The first ordination is expected to take place on March 12; around 1,200 women are said to be waiting in the wings. And as *The Freethinker* went to press traditionalists were rushing to the media with their threats to head for Rome.

However, in advance of all this, Bruce Kent advised caution. Writing in the *Roman Catholic Universe* (January 9) he said: "Can I

be the only one with some nagging doubts about the influx of Anglican priests who, it is said, will be Romeward-bound when the Church of England ordains women?

"Our Church has, let me say at once, been wonderfully served by convert Anglican clergymen in the past. Many suffered isolation and insecurity as they made up their minds. Some I will never forget.

"Richard Johnson, for instance, who once served as curate in London's Kensington. He was humble, honest and prayerful, and typical of many. So also was my friend Philip Carpenter, who died 18 months ago – in every way a civilised, conscientious priest.

"But the Richard Johnsons and Philip Carpenters came over not because they didn't like one item of their own church menu, but because they really believed that Rome was the universal Church. In conscience they could not stay where they were.

"Is it not curious to move because of the woman priest issue to a Church which still holds in official documents that Anglican

orders are null and void? Is it not also unusual to wait until issues like pensions and severance pay are satisfactorily sorted out?

"The assumption seems to be that there will be dogmatic security in the new home. Religion is not about security but rather insecurity. It is a journey in trust.

"Anyone who thinks that, in Rome, nothing ever changes has not read a line of Church history. Only just over 130 years ago, priests were being removed from their posts because they refused to teach that the continuing existence of the papal states was essential to the preaching of the gospel. A little earlier, official Church documents were even supporting slavery.

"I wonder, too, what the message is for those of us who have married – hundreds in this country, and thousands worldwide?

"To put it at its mildest, the pastoral concern for incoming Anglicans looks rather warmer than it does for off-side members of the home team..."

## Voluntary euthanasia: 'Fundamentalist attitudes will not always prevail'

**PERSONAL** choice in dying, and the suffering of many incurably ill people, have both been ignored by the House of Lords Select Committee on Medical Ethics, the Voluntary Euthanasia Society said on February 17, following the 14-strong Committee's ruling against euthanasia.

General Secretary John Oliver told *The Freethinker*: "We are bitterly disappointed in what seems to be a very blinkered report. The committee is refusing to accept that dying can be difficult.

"It is ignoring the fact that many people can suffer unbearably before they die, and it is denying people personal choice in the manner of their dying."

The VES welcomes the committee's call for improved palliative care, but stresses that a tragic minority of people will still suffer.

Also, not everyone wishes to die the slow, hospice way, the Society says.

Mr Oliver added: "The only sop in the direction of patient choice is the Committee's commendation of Advance Directives for the refusal of life-sustaining treatment. These forms at least allow people to protect themselves against being kept alive arti-

cially. But acknowledging their usefulness is not enough: we need a law for Advance Directives to ensure that patients and doctors are fully protected."

The VES will continue its campaign to get the British establishment to recognise that the law must change, Mr Oliver pledged.

He said: "Fundamentalist religious attitudes will not always prevail. But, until

then, it is a sad fact that more people will be driven to take their own lives instead."

The report of the Select Committee is far from being the last word on the matter, even at this stage of the campaign. The document will be debated by the House – and members might well reject it.

Further information from: John Oliver, VES, 071 937 7770.

## Christian tradition maintained

TRADITIONAL levels of Christian tolerance for those holding different views are being maintained by Calvinist students at the Faculty of Divinity at Edinburgh University, where "bigotry is alive and well," according to *The Observer* (February 13).

The newspaper unearthed allegations that non-believers, Catholics and Jews had been booed out of tutorials, sent to Coventry and spat at. One Catholic said she felt as if she was living in the 18th Century.

At the university newspaper *Student*, a file of letters reported bizarre goings-on – including a revealing contribution from a Presbyterian student: "Not all of us are intolerant. Some of us are very tired of having to endure intense

peer pressure to either bully non-Presbyterian students or to keep silent."

Examples of the bullying included:

- A group of Calvinists who "set up" Catholics by putting a rosary on the statue of John Knox which stands on campus.

- A PhD student interested in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia was labelled a "demon" and "under the influence of the devil."

- A Catholic was called a homosexual, another a "slag," a third a "Catholic whore."

A student wrote: "I feel like a Jew in Nazi Germany." She was told by a Church of Scotland student: "You're damn lucky it's 1993. Otherwise, I'd be happy to lead the crowd at your hanging in Parliament Square."

# WHAT'S ON...WHAT'S ON...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 & 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*. Sunday, April 10, 5.30pm for 6 pm: Public meeting.

**Crawley, West Sussex:** Charles Stewart is working to establish a Humanist group for the area. Interested readers should contact him at 50 Boswell Road, Tilgate, Crawley RH10 5AZ. Telephone: 0293 511270.

**Central London Humanists:** For details, please contact Cherie Holt on 071 916 3015. Thursday, March 17, 7.30 pm: Stephen Haseler: *How to End Monarchy and the Established Church*.

**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, March 21, 7.30 pm: Public meeting. Subject: *Humanism in Politics*.

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

**Ealing Humanists:** 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, April 5, 8pm: Public meeting.

**Humanisma kaj Etika Unuigo:** Faldfolio pri gajj celoj estas senpage havebla de IHEU, Oudkerhof 11, NL-3512 GH Utrecht, Nederlando.

**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; telephone: 0563 26710.

**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. Tuesday, May 10: Professor David Cove: *Genetic Engineering - Boon or Bane?* Tuesday, July 12: Summer Garden Party.

**Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Public meetings, Sunday, at 6.30pm. March 13: Morris Beckman, author and anti-Fascist: *The 43 Group*. March 20: 113th Anniversary Lecture. Caroline Moles: Nicaraguan Clean Water Project. March 27: 1/2 AGM.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, March 31, 8pm: Tony Milne: *Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence*.

**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*. May 13: Dr Andrew Read: *Genetic Engineering - Threat or Promise?* June 10: Dorothy Greaves: *The Rochdale Pioneers*.

**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, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SP.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, March 17, 7.30pm: Public meeting.

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

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, 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. Neil Kinnock MP will be holding a question-and-answer session on Thursday, March 24, at 7 pm in the Library. All welcome. Admission free (collection).

**Stockport Secular Group:** Newly-formed. Details of activities from the Secretary, Carl Pinel, 85 Hall Street, Offerton, Stockport SK1 4DE. Telephone: 061 480 0732.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, April 13, 7.45pm: Diana Sampson: *Crime Prevention and Safety*.

**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. April 21: *Charter 88 and Human Rights*. May 19: *Samaritans*.

**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: Mike Sargent, 0903 239823. March 27: Eric Paine: *Thomas Paine - the Man They Could Not Contain*. April 24: Toby Crowe (SPGB): *Is Marxism Dead?* May 29: Annual General Meeting.

# Ibsenmonger at the court of Reason

**William Archer by Peter Whitebrook. Methuen. £25.  
Review: COLIN McCALL**

I DIDN'T know that William Archer was buried in All Souls churchyard, King's Langley, only a few miles from where I live. There were many other things I didn't know about him, but Peter Whitebrook's biography is so thorough in its coverage of the life of the outstanding drama critic of his age, that I couldn't ask for more.

My interest in Archer was basically two-fold: as the critic who transformed the Victorian theatre from the home of burlesque and melodrama to the serious, social theatre we know today; and as a freethinker.

It is impossible to think of modern theatre without thinking of Henrik Ibsen, and it was Archer who introduced the Norwegian dramatist to the British stage, a stage subject to official censorship and, in Archer's words, "incredibly puerile," bearing no relationship to real life. He translated most of Ibsen's plays and edited a 12-volume edition of his works.

After a three-month trial WA, as he signed himself, became theatre critic of *The World* in 1884 and stayed for 21 years, for ten of those, Whitebrook tells us, "at a salary of three guineas a week, because he could never find the right moment to ask for more."

A year later, in the *Dramatic Review*, he called for an end to the convention of wearing formal evening dress in the stalls, boxes and "dress" circles of theatres. And he countered the objection that gentlemen always dressed for dinner and the theatre, by asking: "Is it not nearer the truth that most men have no dinner to dress for?"

He was, of course, completely opposed to the theatrical censor, who could forbid the production of any play "whenever he shall be of the opinion that it is fitting for the preservation of good manners, decorum, or of the public peace to do so."

Shelley's *The Cenci* was banned in 1886 and, although Archer didn't think much of it, he insisted that "the English nation should be allowed to judge for itself as to whether the works of its great poets are fit or unfit for the stage." And writing about the Examiner of Plays, who had recommended the banning to the Lord Chamberlain, Archer made the important point that "to say that he errs, frequently and ludicrously, is to say that he is mortal, and if he has erred ludicrously in the past, may he not err destructively in the future?"

The National Theatre was another cause for which Archer worked incessantly and, with

Harley Granville Barker, he produced what later commentators have called "quite simply, the best blueprint for a National Theatre ever written."

Born in Perth in 1856, Archer began speaking Norwegian in infancy. His family had a house in Norway and he was a frequent visitor. He first met Ibsen in 1881, having previously translated *The Pillars of Society*, and, within a few days, he began translating *Ghosts*. Ten years later, Ibsen allowed a London production of the latter play, providing Archer was there to supervise. It seems, if the *Licensed Victuallers' Mirror* is to be believed, that the other "Ibsenmongers" who attended comprised "long-haired, soft-hatted, villainous or sickly-looking socialists, well-known propagandists of atheism, iconoclasts and anarchists." *The Daily Telegraph* critic, not exactly an "Ibsenmonger," considered the play "an open drain, a loathsome sore unbandaged," a "dungheap."

As for *A Doll's House*, which Archer translated and co-directed, the critics found it variously "morbid and unwholesome," "unnatural, immoral," "dreary and sterilising"; Nora was "so unnatural a creature", part of "an unlovable, unlovely and detestable crew"; Ibsen "a Zola with a wooden leg stumping the north in the interests of quasi-scientific realism." But the play was a success: it played to full houses.

Archer likewise translated and co-directed *Hedda Gabler*, with his mistress, Elizabeth Robins, in the title role, but he rarely allowed his directorial contributions to be credited in the programme. In consequence, as Peter Whitebrook notes, Archer's importance as a pioneer director was largely unrecognised in his lifetime and has been "eradicated in the years since."

Contrast this with the fame of the man he first met in the British Museum and encouraged in journalism and play-writing: Bernard Shaw. But then, the men were contrasts: the one principled and serious, the other a quite unprincipled joker. Shaw "wanted to make Archer laugh at the world," Whitebrook suggests, "but Archer was pessimistic...and his vision of the world was sometimes too dark for laughter."

Still, they were friends for more than 40 years and, when Archer died, Shaw felt that "he took a piece of me with him."

Both Archer's parents were "unshakably religious" and William revolted early, "developing a fierce hostility towards religion which he never lost. It became a vital component of a view of the world in which everything was subject to the law of Reason."

In January, 1883, soon after passing his law examination, he started writing for *Progress*, edited by G W Foote, rightly described by Whitebrook as an atheist and combative speaker, but wrongly as a socialist. Archer also contributed to the *Literary Guide*, the monthly organ of the Rationalist Press Association and to the *Rationalist Annual*; and wrote *The Life, Trial and Death of Francisco Ferrer*, who was executed for advocating freethought at the Esuala Moderna in Barcelona; and *God and Mr Wells*, in reply to Wells' *God the Invisible King*. He sometimes used the pseudonym E V Ward.

In the *Rationalist Encyclopedia*, Joseph McCabe says that in his last years Archer "seems to have been lenient to Spiritualist claims." Peter Whitebrook puts this in context. It was after the 1914-18 war and his son Tom had been reported missing that Archer, unbeknown to his wife, consulted a number of mediums in the hope of learning something definite. He did believe, according to Whitebrook, that he was in "communication" with his dead son, but the communications were patchy and "so mixed" that he never passed them on to his wife or his daughter-in-law.

Whatever the reason, his visits to mediums "abruptly ceased" in 1920.

In most matters, it can be said that William Archer remained true to his rationalist principles. On one other subject, race, he didn't. In his numerous travels, he visited the American South where, he argued, the "sheer unlikeness" of the white and Afro-American pointed to a separate state for the black population, but one with the constitutional rights of the union. In short he fell victim to the "fallacy of race."

But his battleground was the theatre, and this biography of the man who introduced Ibsen to Britain and edited his works; guided the early career of Shaw; encouraged Pinero, Wilde, Galsworthy and Granville Barker; is virtually a history of our theatre from Victorian times to the 1920s.

It will now go on my shelf alongside a little red, gilt-edged volume of Hazlitt's dramatic essays, dated 1895, edited by William Archer and his friend Robert W Lowe, and bearing a delightful Don Quixote bookplate: *Ex libris William Archer*.

# Bradlaugh House is Secularists' new 'home'

THE National Secular Society has a new national headquarters, which is being shared with other branches of the Humanist movement in the hope of enhancing co-operation and information exchange on matters of mutual interest.

- The address, to which all correspondence for the NSS should now be addressed, is: Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.
- The telephone number for the NSS and *The Freethinker* publisher is 071 404 3126.

In an exercise led by NSS Treasurer David Williams, the freehold of the four-storey building next to Conway Hall has been bought by the NSS.

Its name commemorates the founder of the NSS, Charles Bradlaugh (1833-91), atheist, MP and social reformer.

The NSS office, formerly at 702 Holloway Road, is now operating from its new premises. Secretary Terry Mullins may be contacted at the new address, which is now also the office of G W Foote & Co. Ltd., publishers of *The Freethinker*.

The NSS is leasing space to the other Humanist organisations: the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Press Association will move in from Lamb's Conduit Passage, where they have been for the past three years. South Place Ethical Society has also decided to take space: Secretary Nina Khare will have her own office in 47 Theobald's Road.

Besides its original rooms, Bradlaugh House has had what was its back yard built over - there is a long basement store-room with kitchen, a large ground floor area that can be used as a conference room, and a mezzanine floor above which can be used as extra office space by all four societies.

For the first time, the four major British Humanist organisations are together in one building.

This will ease information exchange and co-operation between them, and it is planned that the new building will be a focus for media interest in Humanism.

A fuller article about Bradlaugh House will appear in *The Freethinker* after its "official opening," which is being planned for later this year, when alterations, improvements and decoration are completed.

## Instead of a religion?

# CARING, CO-OPERATION

**F**EW naturists, I fancy, are likely to be found asking: "What shall I wear instead of clothes?" One might suppose that those who have discarded a religion as being a great deal of unnecessary wrapping-up of one's feelings and thoughts about life (and all the healthier for making this decision) should not be disposed to ask: "What shall I put in its place?" However, a number of Humanists brood on this question.

Minus attire once thought comfortable and protective, they now feel vulnerable and exposed. How - they feel - can they endure life's harsher weather without some warm, emotional garments? All right, so we are as sensitive as well as a rational species and we do have to be practical. But we are born and die naked creatures - the religious apparel with which we may have clothed ourselves is no real part of us.

It is foolish, surely, to think of a Humanist as a mere escapee from one system of belief, now in search of another. She or he is approaching a philosophy which takes account of humanity as part of a universal process but places no value on speculations concerning the supernatural. Such a philosophy, in view of the recognition that knowledge is never complete, is an ideal aim rather than a potential achievement.

The world is full of ready-made religious and ideological systems which purport to be already complete, or sufficiently so for unquestioning acceptance as the truth we cannot do without. A Humanist, having discovered the falsity of such claims, should have no wish to acquire anything else off the peg, but neither should toy with the notion of producing a new system. The idea is philosophically unsound.

Humanists are individuals with different points of view because they have reached such a consensus, as is suggested above, by different routes. Their lives have been enriched by different experiences. They are plainly also at different stages of intellectual clarity with respect to the cogency of belief-statements.

Not all Humanist societies have relin-

quished the old-fashioned custom, favoured by religious bodies, of listing aims, beliefs and modes of behaviour in rigid phraseology with which they expect all recruits to agree. There is an evident wish to protect the distinctive character of the chosen line but often failure to appreciate that this laudable purpose is achieved by such a Procrustean method: it results in is psychological mutilation. Bigoted are given a drum to beat and the sincerely earnest suffer untold anguish in their efforts to accommodate. Of course, freedom of expression is desirable, but language is a device whose fluidity deserves no greater respect than it gets.

In all efforts to define credal positions (and that word "credal" should act as a danger-signal to all who wish to present themselves as free-thinking, rational, Humanist and so forth) three factors need to be taken into consideration - first in a general sense so that the framework, in which the proposed principles are to be set, is acknowledged as acceptable or convincing and secondly, in the particular sense in which these principles are taken to apply.

**1** *The basic human urge.* Nothing has flowed here. It is a matter of common experience that human beings have a persistent, conscious urge to seek a personal fulfilment in life.

They do not pursue this aim according to a single instinctive pattern, although it has been said and written concerning the underlying sexual drive. Among the variety of forms are many intentions, the hopes not only distinct from each other but also mutually contradictory. We may generalise about the pursuit of happiness and fulfilment, but human beings can be driven for entirely different reasons.

Moreover, the happiness of some may entail the misery of others, while the people whose objectives, or methods of attaining these, do not appear to be anything that resembles what is commonly meant by happiness.

Cynics would say that even the noblest aims - that is, those that excite feelings of admiration for their self-effacing nature - are none the less selfish because they represent the means by which these particular people find



# OPERATION, CLARITY

Charles Ward discusses principles which have sliced through the binding knot created by religious belief

are considered by many to have an essence worth preserving, even when their religious significance has vanished. Some Humanists believe that they provide a useful bridge over which converts to Humanism may pass. Meaningful ceremonies are unquestionably preferable to mumbo-jumbo but, as already noted, human beings find satisfaction in different ways. A liking for ritual is not a universal disposition.

Political control, deemed vital (except by anarchists), since nations depend on efficient deployment of their material and human resources, has inevitably been linked with religious authorities, which grew from the respect in which "holy" leaders were held in ancient times. Power struggles resulted in the creation both of secular and of religious States or, as in our own case, of a State riddled with complex compromises.

**3** *Attempts to justify control.* Failing such life-support as may be given for political purposes, religions do not die out so long as people may be persuaded to accept their doctrines (teachings) by faith (indistinguishable to unbelievers from credulity). Supernatural assumptions being insupportable on rational grounds, this has to be done by exploiting emotion. Dogmas are teachings exalted – if that is the right word – to the status of required belief.

Before the flowering of the human intellect and the recognition (by a minority) of the supremacy of reason as a tool for assessing the validity of opinions and chosen values, mankind had got into the habit of expressing its fears, hopes and gropings-after-significance in myths.

By endless repetition, enshrinement in sacred books and liturgy, the desired effect of this blind feeling-about was achieved – a conviction of divine revelation. Myths are, of course, no more than poetic imaginings. Although this is well recognised by an increasing number of the religious intelligentsia, efforts to justify retention of faith in their supposed revelatory or spiritually uplifting nature continue. Arguments do

tend to become more subtle and involved.

Religions have had a long run and the conceptions – or, rather, misconceptions – which are inseparable from them are frequently found difficult to shake off. Discredited ideas appear in new disguises. Sometimes revolutionary changes in outlook are offered, but the underlying revivalism means that these cannot be delivered.

The Humanist faces the facts directly associated with the condition of being human – the self-centredness of the individual members of the species, which, in tension with the unstable types of order they have felt pressured by their gregarious nature to impose on each other, promotes an ever more tangled web of self-deception.

The simplicity of Humanist principles slices through the binding knot religions have created. Three words represent their sum – caring, co-operation and clarity – and I have not selected them solely on account of their alliteration.

We do not learn them from religions. That is not to deny that the first two, in particular, have found expression, sometimes admirably, among the devout. Credit is loyally given by them to their particular "faith," ignoring the manifest lack among fellow-religionists of notable consideration for, and co-operation with, those who are not accredited believers, no matter how commendable the intentions of such non-believers might be.

We find our principles of behaviour in our own mammalian nature and the self-consciousness with which we are endowed. Not religion in any form, but the evolutionary thrust of life itself, has produced the intensely human motivation to care in an ever-expanding compassion; to co-operate, not only with our fellow-creatures but also with the life-process; and to develop the intelligence which gives clear direction to the natural moral development of our extraordinary species.



# A farewell to faith

## THE SEEKER'S LAMENT

*I don't know if we were created with a purpose  
or have come about by chance  
nor whether a God or Gods amuse themselves at our expense,  
laughing at the tribulations of our lot.  
If that were true it would be reprehensible!  
Whose fault then that the weak are weak,  
the sick are sick and the dull are dull?*

*If we were made for a specific goal  
and fail to meet it through our imperfection  
then the blame for all the wrongs does not rest on us  
not on the created but on the creator!  
Be He called Zeus or Jupiter, Jehovah or Baal.  
Either He is not there or He must be kind  
and forgive us our failure to understand Him.  
It was up to Him to reveal Himself and He failed!  
If he had done so He would have done it  
in a manner to leave no doubt.  
That all would say: I know Him, feel Him and understand Him.  
What others claim to know of Him does not comfort me.  
I don't understand Him.*

*I ask why He reveals Himself to others and not to me!  
Is the one child closer to the father than the other?  
As long as a single human being doesn't know this God  
it is blasphemy to believe in such a God!  
A child vainly calling its father does not commit a sin  
but the father who pays no heed is cruel  
and it would be better to believe there is no father  
than that he would turn a deaf ear to his child!*

*Maybe the time will come that His presence will be manifest,  
that the reason for his silence will be clear.  
Once we know, the time for worship may have come  
but not before...not now!  
It would trouble God to discover he was worshipped without cause  
and it is folly to attempt to illuminate the darkness  
by a light that not yet shines.  
Serve Him? Nonsense! If that is what He wanted  
He would have indicated how.  
It is irrational to expect worship and prostration  
whilst withholding guidance as to how.  
If the way we serve Him is not to His liking  
it is His fault and we are blameless!  
Meanwhile until we are wiser – are good and evil one?  
I can't see a role for God in separating right from wrong  
On the contrary: he who does good to earn God's favours  
debases good to lowly barter  
And he who shrinks from wrong for fear of God's wrath is  
cowardly!*

*I do not know you God; I entreated you, I searched,  
I pleaded for your answer and you stayed silent.*

THE Netherlands has a distinguished history of Humanism and Freethought, with Spinoza and Erasmus being the two names most widely known internationally, writes TONY AKKERMANS.

However, the person with whom the Dutch Freethinkers most closely identify is the Bradlaugh contemporary Eduard Douwes Dekker, better known by his pen name Multatuli.

Multatuli was born in 1820 in Amsterdam and went to the Dutch East Indies in 1838. He subsequently wrote his famous *Max Havelaar*, partly autobiographical, a satirical account of the vain efforts of an enlightened official to counter exploitation of the native population under colonial rule.

Apart from his social concerns, Multatuli, on his return to the Netherlands, became a tireless crusader against the injustices in society and religious oppression. In 1861 he wrote his *Gebed van de onwetende*, to which I have tried to do justice in translation.

In a letter to a friend, Multatuli himself describes his "prayer of the bewildered" as a cry of farewell to faith, where agony has not yet been replaced by the new peace afforded by a higher truth. But for anyone seriously seeking this truth, prepared to come to terms with reality, this peace will come.

*I yearned to carry out your will,  
not from fear of punishment or hope of reward,  
but like a child doing its father's will...out of love!  
You are silent...ever silent!  
And I search and long for the moment when I shall know that you  
are real...  
Then I will ask you: "Father, why so late this signal to your  
child that it had a father,  
that it was not alone in the fierce struggle for humanity and  
right?  
Or were You sure that I would do Your will, without knowing how?  
That I, unaware of Your existence, would serve You to Your  
liking?  
Could that be true?  
Answer father, if you are there, answer!  
Don't leave your child in peril, father do not stay aloof!  
Why hast thou forsaken me?  
Thus laments the seeker on his self inflicted cross,  
wincing in pain and crying out with thirst...*

*The righteous, who have seen the light and know their God,  
mock the fool, offer him gall and cry: "behold he calleth for his  
father!"  
and murmur: "thank you Lord for not being like him!" and sing the  
psalm: "blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the  
ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners"...*

*The righteous...sneak off to market and practise insider  
dealing.*

*The father stays silent...oh God, there is no God!*



# DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



## One hell of a Bishop

BACK in 1984, some batty traditionalists asserted that a bolt of lightning which struck York Minster was an expression of divine wrath because Dr David Jenkins had been consecrated Bishop of Durham. His impending retirement from the Anglican Church's fourth senior bishopric will therefore be regarded with thankfulness and relief by the orthodox, who will be praying that his successor, the Rt Rev Michael Turnbull, Bishop of Rochester, will be a less provocative character.

The Bishop of Durham's critics have consistently portrayed him as a cussed old party who is out of step with his church and the Christian faithful. In fact he is not the isolated figure we are led to believe.

A new survey of churchgoers, conducted on behalf of BBC Television's conventional and untrendy *Songs of Praise* programme, has produced results which prompted a Sunday newspaper headline: "Christians Stay Faithful to the Bible." It reported that of those interviewed, 64 per cent believed in Hell, 75 per cent in the Virgin Birth, 85 per cent in life after death and 91 per cent in the Resurrection.

Put another way, churchgoing Christians did not accept those basic tenets of the faith by 36 per cent, 25 per cent, 15 per cent and nine per cent respectively.

It is not unusual for Dr Jenkins to be in the firing line for expressing views that once would have led him to the dungeon and the stake. He has now aroused the ire of evangelicals, fundamentalists and *Sun* hacks by rejecting another Christian doctrine – that is, the existence of Hell where, as recounted in the Book of Revelation, "the unbelieving, and the abominable... shall have their part in the lake which burneth fire and brimstone."

Dr Jenkins dismissed the notion of "eternal punishment" when he addressed a gathering of Anglican lay workers. He told them: "There can be no Hell for eternity. Our God could not be that cruel." And he declared in a broadcast interview, "if there is such a God, he is so bad-tempered that the sooner we forget him, the better."

This was not at all to the liking of some leaders of Christian opinion, including the Rt Rev Noel Jones, Bishop of Sodor and Man, who resents Dr Jenkins's reservations about the Second Coming of Christ. Such scepticism is "undermining one of the central tenets of the Christian faith."

On the question of eternal punishment, the

less elevated but arguably more influential Clive Calver, director of the Evangelical Alliance, put it bluntly: "Evangelicals have continually maintained that there is torment in Hell." He added, quite correctly, "that is the biblical line."

Even that fount of wisdom and megamoralinity, *The Sun* newspaper, added its two pennyworth to the debate. "Dr Jenkins says Hell doesn't exist," it fumed. But "*The Sun* says" such softness is typical of the Church of England's "wishy-washy weakness."

The Bishop of Durham's humane sentiments are most creditable, but the evangelicals and fundamentalists have him over a biblical barrel. The Book of Revelation ravings – "obviously pathological," in the Bishop's own words – have been reinforced by centuries of Christian preaching and writings. The eternal punishment doctrine has not been rejected by the churches. Indeed, it is upheld with considerable fervour by thousands of Christian sects. Like so much of Christian doctrine, it brutalises and warps the human mind. Thus a believer who would normally not hurt a fly will strive to justify everlasting punishment of "the unsaved," who will often include family and friends.

Belief in Hell as an actual location is an integral part of historical Christianity. So intelligent and squeamish apologists are forced to indulge in weasel-wording and mental gymnastics in order to convince sceptics (and themselves) that the Bible does not mean what it says about "the lake which burneth fire and brimstone."

Conceptions of Hell are as manifold and varied as are those of the Christian deity. The Bishop of Durham's successor describes it as "the other side of freedom." Dr Hugh Montefiore, a former Bishop of Birmingham, says it is "an eternal inability to respond to the love of God." The Rt Rev David Lunn, Bishop of Sheffield, comes up with a somewhat Gilbertian explanation: "The church may not require us to believe in the physical torments associated with Hell, but that is not the same as saying it does not exist."

An awful thought comes to mind of Hell being a Temperance Hotel where there is nothing to read but *The Sun*.

## Screen – but not Hird!

FOR hundreds of hours every week, the substitution slot hogs airwaves at national, regional and local level. Yet the Independent Television Commission is complaining about reli-

gious programmes on the small screen being "confined to the outer margin of the schedule."

It is compulsory to transmit religious programmes, but of course the commercial companies prefer to show non-religious items during prime time. Fortunately, the ITC hasn't authority to dictate schedules.

Last year *Highway* was withdrawn in favour of feature films in order to maximise Sunday evening audiences. Clare Mulholland, ITC's Director of Programmes, said that 1,400 complaints were received following the *Highway* decision. It is surprising that the number of protests was not much higher. Evangelical publications and organisations are constantly urging their supporters to complain.

However, there is also encouraging news from the ITC. During a survey, its researchers questioned 1,000 members of the public and discovered that less than a third regarded Britain as a Christian country. Furthermore, only one-in-five of those interviewed attended a place of worship at least once a month.

And another piece of good news, this time from the BBC. There will be no resurrection of Dame Thora Hird and the spine-shuddering *Praise Be!* Praise be, indeed.

## Easter charade

SEVERAL years ago an Anglican dignitary published an article entitled "The Lasting Message of Easter" in our local newspaper. He asserted that an event "on a Friday in the Spring of 27 AD has been solemnly observed by Christians wherever they are every year ever since." Unfortunately, the writer did not specify which Friday in the Spring of 27 AD he was referring to; my enquiry in the newspaper's letters page failed to elicit a reply.

Imprecision over this most important date in the Christian calendar is understandable. Easter is a moveable feast and like other Christian festivals – Christmas, for example – its origins are rooted in paganism.

Time and again, Parliament has been urged to set a fixed date for the Easter holiday. Failure to do so is likely prompted by apprehension that such a move would cause unseemly squabbling among competing Christian churches and sects.

By the way, I *almost* resisted the temptation not to mention that this year Good Friday falls on April Fool Day.

## YOU'RE TELLING US!

## Remembering a great Editor

THE timely and admirably written tribute to the memory of Chapman Cohen on the 40th anniversary of his death makes happy and informative reading for those of us who have benefited down the years by the writings of a great man, as well doubtless for the army of present-day readers of your journal who will continue to be rewarded by beautiful simple writing if his past works can be returned to by present and future generations of Freethinkers in the years to come. [Barbara Smoker: February issue].

An American writer has collected data for a biography, but Barbara Smoker must write, when she ever has the time, the definitive biography of a rare human being.

I was fortunate in meeting many wise and illustrious folk during a lengthy life spent in the world of entertainment, but there were few so entertaining I heard on the lecture platform and in his home as dear, fearless old Chapman, who talked down to nobody and looked up to few.

At my first meeting, when as a boy actor I was introduced to him by letter from my late mother – some sort of distant relative, but I never got to know exactly what kind of kinship there may have been and to this day have never been enlightened! – I trundled up the stairs at his, then, office in the 30s, situated at the corner of Ludgate Circus – and was from an outside small room ushered into the presence of The Great in a further untidy and bigger room which was marked on the outside door: *Editor*. Papers and books were everywhere, the floor was carpetless, an ancient Oliver green manual machine was on the Editor's desk and, as I recall, there was a kitchen armchair pushed back against the empty fireplace. It was all "Dickensian" then, and ever since I've recalled it so – right down to the splendid office manager-cum-receptionist, Mr Skidmore, who became for many years – with Mr Rosetti and Mr Bedborough (all were "misters" in those days) characters of fiction to my boyish way of thinking.

Later I was whisked across the road to an Express Dairy Co., where we ate simply and my host was well known to the staff, to judge by the friendly manner in which we were waited on, with more "misters" from the staff: "How are you today Mr Cohen?" and "Well, bye for the time being" etc. Much amiability for and from a favoured "regular."

There was no question of ice being broken – we became (the middle-aged man and the boy) chums instantly; and later, when the office of *The Freethinker* moved to Furnival Street, Holborn, I visited him there, too, and both he and Mrs Cohen (Auntie Ciss) frequently entertained me on a Sunday for luncheon at their very much "lived-in" home, a modest dwelling at Leytonstone on the edge of Epping Forest, where Chapman would take us after the Sunday meal: "My back garden – the biggest and

best forest of them all," he would childishly boast as he sat at the wheel of an old Humber car as we sailed along on Spring and Summer days. Later he would visit my parents and brothers where they lived in the country and the families became great friends, with my late brother John naming his eldest son after one who became his, as well as my, mentor.

The years marched on and his wonderful library which set me on the road to reading properly for serious study and amusement, spilt over and quite a few Ingersoll, Paine, Mark Twain, Robertson, Bradlaugh, Spencer and Geo. Henry Lewes, found their way onto my own shelves and are treasured possessions to this day, each inscribed with the bold signature "from Chapman Cohen." He had a special reverence for G W Foote, who Chapman considered to be the greatest living (at that day) authority on Shakespeare. And much of Shakespeare (which he loved) had been inherited from his old friend and former Editor of *The Freethinker*, GWF.

Barbara Smoker's piece set my mind rolling and my memory ablaze and there is still so much to be said about CC that a whole book will one day be written about one who never sought the limelight, but was as writer and speaker without any pærs when he was in his prime. I have heard Churchill at the Albert Hall, Lloyd George at the Earls Court Stadium and Aneurin Bevan (for whom I took the chair at the Chelsea and Marylebone town halls in the 1945 election campaigns). They were fine public speakers, to be sure, but none of them in my view were superior to Chapman.

**PETER COTES**  
Chipping Norton

I FIRST heard Chapman Cohen speak in 1933 and I started to read *The Freethinker* at about the same time. If my memory serves me well, the paper was then priced at threepence.

For many years Cohen kept the name of G W Foote on the front page as well as his own. I read and possessed many of Cohen's writings, but unfortunately most were lost in the bombing during WW2.

I need hardly mention that I can confirm all that Barbara Smoker has said. I, too, often quote him (not verbatim) and one little saying often comes to mind – his advice to anyone about to write a book: *He should read everything that has been written on the subject... This will not prevent his writing nonsense, but it will prevent him from thinking the nonsense is his own.*

My library now contains only a few of Cohen's writings: *Determinism or Freewill*; *Theism or Atheism*; *Essays in Freethinking* (Third series); *Essays in Freethinking* (Fifth series); *Humanity and War*.

There are a number of others I would like to possess. Is there anywhere I could obtain them? Would G W Foote & Co. care to do some reprints?

Barbara Smoker's mention of "voices, not echoes" reminds me of the gramophone record *The Meaning and Value of Freethought*. Could

not the text of that record be printed in *The Freethinker*?

**PAUL PAYNE**  
Leigh-on-Sea

I MUCH enjoyed reading Barbara Smoker's tribute to Chapman Cohen in *The Freethinker* (February); and it was so fitting that she should have written it. I am glad his anniversary was not overlooked.

Like Miss Smoker, I am a great admirer of the man and his work and, also like her, I have so steeped myself in his writings that I am never quite sure how much of what I say and write is me – and how much him!

But, as an old freethinking mentor of mine used to say, the influence a great man has on succeeding generations is the only real proof of life after death! Whether that would have satisfied CC, I don't really know. I recall reading in one of his pamphlets that if he found he was wrong in his beliefs and awoke after death in Heaven, there would be some plain speaking there! I can imagine it. And I should love to have been a fly on the celestial wall.

My old friend, by the way, used to tell me with pride of how he had been in several of CC's audiences at public meetings. He always maintained that he was the finest public speaker he had ever heard. I wish I had had the privilege.

A thousand pities it is that, alone of those mentioned in the final paragraph of Barbara Smoker's article, Chapman Cohen has yet to find a biographer.

**NEIL BLEWITT**  
Norwich

## On morals

CLARENCE Wilson (February) suggests that the tendency for Theists to support the death penalty is related to the belief in an after-life. While this may be a factor, it is difficult to apply his rationale to other related moral positions which are characteristic of the religious. Moral values tend to be "packaged" (like party political platforms) so that if a person is known to hold one value, others can be guessed far better than by chance. For example, people who endorse the death penalty also tend to advocate the "right to life," prayer in schools, nationalism, and "manliness."

My analysis would suggest an explanation involving *how* such persons think (process), rather than *what* they think (content); a common structure underlies these and other "packages" of associated values. This structure is notable for two factors: (1) a demand for simplicity; (2) a readiness to jump from probability to subjective certainty. The Thatcher dictum "there is no such thing as society" asserts simplicity by rejecting the relevance of all structural considerations. Paraphrased, "the system is OK; if there's anything wrong, it's with individuals or families"; a concept associated with the idea of individual sin. It affords

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a very convenient simplification for PR, but is lacking in "commensurate complexity" and hence is totally unsuited as a logical construct for moral analysis.

The death penalty is only one feature of our criminal justice system. Because of its high drama it is not a particularly useful measure of punitiveness. I recently studied the use of prison in different jurisdictions for which comparable data were available. Only low correlations were found with any index derived from crime records. There were far higher correlations with economic indicators. Indeed, the use of prison is greatest where the very rich (top five per cent) are the richest. The significant point to note is that extremes of reward go with extremes of punitiveness. I look, therefore, to "extremism" as the pivotal associated factor. As any middle ground is eroded, extremism develops. When only the extremes are left we have a dichotomy; a simplification into "right" v "wrong," "true" v "false," "them" v "us" and, of course, "guilty" v "innocent": a two-value logic. This is the simple structure of extremes providing the basis for fundamentalist values, whether Christian or other.

Of course, simple dichotomies are sometimes desirable. It depends upon purpose. A two-dimensional map would be adequate for finding your way around Cambridge, but more complexity becomes necessary if you wish to walk safely in the Scottish Highlands, and still more for space travel. Accommodation of uncertainty in moral precepts is certainly not a simple matter. It tends to be dealt with by deference to authority such as Holy texts, or judicial process and a two-value logic. Perhaps simple models were adequate in the simpler world of 2000 years ago? The Good Samaritan saw the victim. His capacity to act was commensurate with his information. Perhaps for some the two-value logic is a form of regression adopted as a convenience, whereas, with others, styles of thought have not evolved to accommodate the complexity required.

LESLIE T WILKINS  
Cambridge

## Cruelty

WHEN I read in Barbara Smoker's "'Arrogant' Christian bias threat in RE" (February) that the legal right of parents to withdraw their children from RE and religious assembly is unsatisfactory and that withdrawal can disturb children, painful memories were evoked.

As a 12-year-old in the 1950s, one of my best school-chums was a boy from an orthodox Jewish family. He was the only Jewish boy in the school. When we were marched to morning assembly in the adjacent parish church, he was made to march with us but stand outside in all weathers because his parents disapproved of his entering a church. During religious education he was made to sit on his own in a rear corner of the classroom.

Because of this he was taunted by other children, and became severely asthmatic. But worse than the children's behaviour was that of the school's Anglican chaplain, who would send my Jewish friend out to fetch items of personal shopping and treated him like a little servant.

It was this same priest (who flounced about in a cassock and was prone to utterances like: "Little boys, like incense, don't they?") who asked the class if anyone had not been baptised. A handful, including me, put their hands up. Would we like to be?, he asked. Of course we all said: "Yes, please, Sir." A minority of children does not like to be different from the majority, and my mother allowed me to be "done" so that I didn't feel an outcast.

Because she (a lapsed Roman Catholic) wanted me to make up my own mind about



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

personal faith when old enough, the attempt to brainwash me failed and I soon left the so-called "fold" and became a Secularist. Indeed, it was the chaplain's and the Jewish boy's parents' cruelty that set me on the anti-religion road. My little friend's misery had tugged at my heart-strings.

The Anglican chaplain had replaced a lay teacher of religion who was a member of the Plymouth Brethren. There had been complaints from parents about him because his rantings about hell and damnation had struck terror into some children who came from religious Christian homes and who had already been parentally indoctrinated not to question this frightening nonsense.

Nearly 40 years on from my experiences, it seems that the Department of Education is intent that young minds should continue to be warped and young psyches cruelly damaged at the public's expense.

Incidentally, the Plymouth Brother left the

school to become a missionary in Sierra Leone. When I told my mother, she said: "Pity the poor little Sierra Leonians!" I had a lucky escape from religion. Many children are not so lucky.

CLIVE SIMMONDS  
London SW9

PS: A subsequent chaplain at the same school once reduced an RE class to sniggers and giggles when he exhorted: "Make sure you've all got nothing on this evening because I want to see you all at my confirmation class."

## Still Trekkin'

I WISH to add to the criticism of *Star Trek* by your correspondent Keith Ackermann (February).

The ship *USS Enterprise* is an armed vessel, equipped with "phasers" (heavy naval guns?) and "photon torpedoes" (atomic missiles?). The crew members carry powerful side arms or "phaser pistols," capable of vapourising their target. These weapons can also be set for non-lethal "stun" levels.

What the programme-makers are in effect saying is:

- What ever other progress humanity makes it will never get beyond the need to have weapons, the means of killing, available. (This was a direct refutation of the pacifist feelings shown by young people in the campaign against the war in Vietnam at the time of the programme's production).

- Weapons can be used for "calming down" people when they get rowdy and need a little "discipline," in which case they can be used against people without causing any lasting harm, and in their "stun" mode can even be used against women and children. This was the rationale behind the American "riot guns" used against Civil Rights protesters, and the rubber and plastic bullets and CS gas used in Northern Ireland (see the pamphlet *They Shoot Children*, produced by Information on Ireland: "riot guns" are better known in this country as "sawn-off shotguns"). Anti-riot weapons have caused many deaths, maimings,crippings and mutilations in Northern Ireland, most notably of children.

The racism apparent in *Star Trek* continues into the new series, *The Next Generation*, with the appearance of a new alien enemy the "Ferengi." In the episode "The Last Outpost," the supposedly rational and dispassionate Lt-Cdr DATA describes them as "the most nauseating race we have yet encountered; they embody all the most negative aspects of predatory capitalism. Their entire morality is encompassed by the phrase *caveat emptor* - 'let the buyer beware.'" Word for word, this could be a description of the Jews in either Hitler's *Mein Kampf* or Table Talk, or from Goebbels' *Der Ewige Jude*. The ascribing of a monopoly of a particular type of unethical business practice

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to a specific minority is called "anti-Semitism," and was responsible for the horrors of the "Final Solution."

CIARAN O'RIORDAN  
Stanford-le-Hope

## Women's rights

THE list of questions put by Brenda Able (February) raises many matters which certainly need discussion, but her first one "Are women who resist oppression silly...?" implies a criticism of Freethinking that is not very fair or just.

Freethinkers have surely been in the vanguard in fighting for the rights of women, and they still are, as we can gather from your pages. As I remember, the term "shrieking sisterhood" was used of those women who, under the guise of opposing pornography, wanted to censor "girlie" magazines and other such frivolous nonsenses, which I would have thought are better just ignored by feminists – and censorship is a dangerous trend.

I heard Brigid Brophy, many years ago, underline the basics of power, which modern feminists so often bypass. She pointed out that subjection consists of not being economically independent, and since so many women, even in the West, are still in that dependent situation, they were and still continue to be, denied their rights. I point to the large numbers of women dependent on their husbands, welfare benefits, and casual part-time low-waged employment. The present situation is not propitious, when so many men as well as women are denied the right – the basic right – to earn their own living, but I feel we should never be deflected from our goal. A woman who is economically independent – to answer some of Brenda's other questions – does not have to suffer cruelty or respond with violence; she can simply remove herself and her children from the abuser; she is no longer a "subjected wife."

While the present unsatisfactory situation exists, it does seem a shame to accuse the male sex in general of being the oppressors. It isn't so. Men can only benefit from women's independence, as the more intelligent of them realise. And if some feminist groups have received criticism from other women, it may well be because they have been sidetracked away from mainstream women's concerns into trivialities like whether men should call you "dear" and "love."

Just one small criticism of *The Freethinker* on the score of women's rights: you are inclined to concentrate on Christianity to the exclusion of those religions and customs which practice institutionalised discrimination against women, and which cry aloud for some of your irony and satire.

ELSIE KARBACZ  
West Mersea

## 'Bishop Eric'

RATHER in the manner of a bishop catechising a confirmation candidate, Eric Stockton (January) presses me to say whether I accept his particular formulation defining the difference between "the ordinary atheist" and "the Sea of Faith people."

I don't know what an "ordinary atheist" is – unless it means someone who sees things pretty much the way Eric sees them. I would have thought there were many different kinds of atheist, and which are ordinary and which extraordinary will depend on where you are coming from.

Similarly, as I tried to explain at some length in the letter (December) to which Eric was responding, there are many different kinds of "Sea of Faith people," some of whom would accept the atheist label and some of whom wouldn't. Eric wants to pigeon-hole us as a group which sees man-made gods and man-made religion as "natural and necessary... if life is to be truly meaningful." I imagine that may be true of some members of the Sea of Faith Network, but most would go no further than acknowledging that religion, like art and science, is just one imaginative framework for creating meaning, and one not to be automatically despised.

I suppose that in not necessarily holding all forms of religious expression in total contempt we *do* differ from those whose humanism is defined exclusively (and wearisomely) in negative anti-religious terms. But our concern is to connect with those whose humanism is more positive, expressed in human rights, human values, the human spirit. That's why there is a growing overlap between membership of the Sea of Faith Network and the British Humanist Association, and why so many of us warmly support the work of the BHA on "religious" education as defined in their admirable briefing, *The Human Spirit*. Eric's criticism of the briefing only demonstrates that, when it comes to literalism, the evangelicals have no monopoly on fundamentalism.

But Eric should know all this. He is, after all, a member of the Sea of Faith Network and a welcome contributor to our magazine.

DAVID BOULTON  
Sea of Faith magazine  
Hobsons, Dent LA10 5RF

## Your grace?

HAVING been out of the country for the past three months, I am just enjoying catching up on my *Freethinker* reading. As always, the letters pages have provided me with particular interest, and I feel the need to comment on a couple of them.

Firstly, Nigel Sinnott's request for a Humanist grace (December). Some 30 or so years ago, when I was teaching in Northamptonshire, I took my turn at helping to supervise school dinners. This involved the saying of grace before the meal, and I simply said: "For

what we are about to receive may we be truly thankful." A sentiment which I felt no one, not even considering the awfulness of some meals, could really disagree with.

I was at that particular school for some five years and no one ever queried the lack of an appeal to a deity. Granted, when I had made my pronouncement, the pupils made mutterings which could have been interpreted as being "Amen," but I personally made no response.

My second comment is in connection with the "wistle-cocking" method of birth control adopted by certain Australian Aborigines, described in Charles Williams Marshall's letter (February). Like him, I feel uncertain as to its efficacy as a means of preventing unwanted pregnancies; however, I am left pondering what happens when the youth wishes to have a pee, since the urethra is a common duct for both semen and urine!

CHARLIE ABLETHORPE  
Leigh-on-Sea

## Three points

IN response to Terry Little's question "Just who are the Jews...?" (*The Freethinker*, January, 1994): the Jews are a people who have laid undue emphasis upon one aspect of their culture – the written word. A Jew defines himself as one who lives in accord with the "Torah" (the first five books of the Old Testament). Why he does so is simply because it says so in the Torah. The Torah does contain some historical facts and it is in places beautifully written but the emphasis placed upon its prescriptive power is extreme. There are many aspects of Jewish culture which could equally well be used as criteria for determining Jewish identity: geography, history, politics, bagels.

● May I suggest Joan Bakewell as a role-model when considering issues of moral importance? She can identify issues with great insight and she considers them from all viewpoints with no ulterior motive. She is passionate, an excellent communicator and she cares. Please see Joan Bakewell's *Heart of the Matter*, 10.30pm on Sundays. May I suggest also that she be sent a free copy of *The Freethinker*?

● I would like to kick-off a lively debate with Western rational Buddhists (cf. "Debate Urged" by Roger Nadon, *The Freethinker*, January).

According to history, Buddha's farewell address included the words "Be lamps unto thyself"; in other words, think for yourself, do not accept authority blindly, be a Freethinker.

What more is there to Buddhism?

ERIC YAFFEY  
Bradford

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## Violence

HRH Prince Charles, presumably on our money in the last instance, takes his children to view hares being killed by hounds. The children I teach, out of school, go to pit fights and badger-baiting; they also view videos showing scenes of cruelty.

I was wondering whether what they are taught and see with the hares may develop HRH's children into the same patterns that my students evince: that is, really cathected into violence without limits. Some of them even express their civil liberties on other humans, never mind animals.

(Ms) B L ABLE  
Croydon

## Last word

I THINK you ought to allow me to correct a serious factual error made by A G Stephens in his letter (January issue), in which he confused the anus with the rectum.

According to a medical book, the anal canal is about one-and-a-half inches in length, and is connected to the rectum via an involuntary sphincter. If my understanding is correct, the rectum does store faeces, which are expelled when the rectum becomes full. The implications for anal sex are, therefore, not to be contemplated with equanimity.

ERNIE CROSSWELL  
Slough

● This correspondence is now closed: Editor.

## Circumcision

I FULLY support the sentiments expressed in the article (January) against female circumcision. But what about male circumcision? This practice may be surgically less radical, but the principle is the same: children have the right to protection against genital mutilation.

Some child psychologists now recognise circumcision as a form of child abuse, which not only scars the body, but can also scar the mind.

After many years when circumcision was regularly performed on baby boys in this country as a kind of fad, for peculiar notions about hygiene or for crank moral reasons, the British medical establishment has fortunately realised that the necessity for circumcision for medical reasons is relatively rare. Even many American parents are less keen to inflict it on their baby boys, since Dr Benjamin Spock has changed his mind and now opposes routine circumcision where he once recommended it.

That still leaves the continuation of male circumcision on a huge scale as a religious ritual, carried out by Jews, Muslims and some other cults. It is a primitive practice which has had respectability in our culture because of its bib-

lical provenance. Its continued practice is a result of attitudes to which *The Freethinker* is rightly opposed: superstitions, credulity, cultural tyranny, and the mindless following of tradition.

D S LEE  
Rochester

## Israel

UNDER the heading "Land of Israel" (February), W E Wilkerson is gracious enough to concede that "God promised Palestine to Abraham and his descendants 5,000 years ago" (Genesis 17.7-8) is nothing but a yarn – a myth. The tragedy is that many settlers in the

Occupied Territories under Jewish control take the above chapter and verses quite literally, and from their fanatical religious standpoint oppose any other viewpoint.

I repeat: the Occupied Territory of Palestine by the Jews was only possible with the massive aid given by the USA, and the territory is only held under by a reign of tyranny. Whether Mr Wilkerson or T Liddle like it or not, these are the facts of the matter.

To say that the "flowering of Israel" deserves the support of every decent person is too ridiculous for words: for a "God" to depend upon brutality in order to fulfill prophecy is beneath contempt.

DAVID YEULETT  
Greenwich

## A lot on our plate

THE Church Commissioners are to halve their £62.7 million annual contribution to the cost of Anglican clergy stipends in "a drastic response to the fall of £800 million in the value of their assets," it says here in the *Yorkshire Post*, February 16.

"To meet the shortfall in their grant, the income from the collection plate will have to double over the next three years..."

At *The Freethinker*, talk of all these millions makes our heads reel. We have a far more life-enhancing message than the "impoverished" Church of England, with its warring sects and their theological Bosnias, but we dare to expect only hundreds of pounds to find their way on to our "collection plate."

We must also dare to ask our readers

to do what is being asked of the unfortunates in the CofE and dig deeper in their pockets – but in the interests of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Rationalism, rather than superstition and credulity.

Noting the new address, please send cheques, POs, stamps for *The Freethinker* fund to: G W Foote & Co, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: C L Howard, £2.50; D Earle, I S Ivinson, R V Samuels and L Young, £3 each; D C Brockman, J Hazlehurst, J Lippitt, C Price, A Ruddle, S J Sanders, E W Sinclair, E Stockton and E K R Wingham, £5 each; J Bendall, £6; J Boyd, £7; J Bourne, V Gibson, J Madden, R Melbourne, A Negus, V S Petherham, N Rankin and J C Rapley, £10 each; J Vallance, £50; N Moia, £77.

Total for January: £279.50

## Grace Heath

GRACE Heath, a founder-member of Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists, has died.

Grace and her husband Karl, a valued contributor to *The Freethinker* and veteran National Secular Society member, organised regular musical evenings at their home, benefiting the funds of the Humanists and providing a great deal of pleasure for members and friends.

A Humanist funeral ceremony for Grace was held on February 7 at Canley Crematorium and was well-attended by members of her family, former colleagues from the teaching profession and fellow Humanists.

On behalf of its readers, *The Freethinker* extends sympathy to Karl and his family on their loss.

South Place Ethical Society*A Wicked and Seditious Person*

*A dramatisation of the life and times of Thomas Paine, in his own words, written by Martin Green and performed by Alan Penn*

Following its February, 1993, success, there will be another performance of the piece on Thursday, April 14, 1994, at 7 pm at Conway Hall, Red Lion Street, London WC1 (telephone: 071 831 7723).

Tickets £3 obtainable from the South Place Ethical Society Secretary

# Violence, sex and a 'retired' campaigner

**T**HE illogical linkage of sex and violence has always irritated me and when, in the aftermath of the James Bulger tragedy, pornography was being discussed as a complete red herring, I fired off the following letter to *The Guardian*:

"The sad James Bulger case and Mary Whitehouse's 'retirement' are giving rise to a plethora of moral introspection. But I am afraid much of it is ill thought out as usual. For example, a phone-in programme on my local radio started off promisingly by questioning the wisdom of so much violence on TV but soon got sidetracked into the 'evils' of pornography. After that it never looked back.

"It is an enduring mystery to me how these two topics ever got mixed up together. I can only think that to get the prudish anywhere near the bedstead violence was unavoidable. The awful truth is that although there are the occasional perfunctory disapproving noises the censors aren't really worried about violence. When most of the sex scenes were cut from the TV version of the film *Fatal Attraction*, the ghastly rabbit-boiling incident, desperately upsetting to young children (and animal-loving adults for that matter) was left in. Similarly, in a recent documentary about undesirable computer games everything of a sexual nature was excised but there were no reservations about showing horrible scenes of people being decapitated and having their limbs cut off.

"I could go on but it is making me go queasy already. The Government, despite the James Bulger tragedy, has no plans for placing restrictions in the way of such films as *Child's Play 3*, but acted swiftly enough when it came to suppressing *Red Hot Dutch*, a late night show strictly for adults and containing no violence whatever.

"Mary Whitehouse, grand protectress of the nation's morals, would have earned some respect from me if she had raged against gratuitous violence, but her priorities too were wrong. I am not for censorship of any kind,

## LAST WORD

by Tony Akkermans

because where films and books are burned people soon follow, but if we got to have it let's apply it to mindless violence and leave sex alone."

This was duly printed. I got quite a few letters of support and that I thought was that. Then a couple of weeks later the not-so-retired Mary Whitehouse came out of her corner, fists flying:

"For sex, against violence," ran the headline, and then: "I would have expected any reader of *The Guardian* to be better informed than Tony Akkermans shows himself to be. Perhaps his thinking has been conditioned by the utterings of the 'trendy left'.

"His statement that I would have earned some respect from him if I 'had raged against gratuitous violence,' leaving sex alone, demonstrates how ignorant he is. We have always been against the gratuitous violence which so disfigures our TV screens and some films and an increasing number of videos. As far as sex is concerned, we are *for* it [her italics] and that is why we have campaigned against its exploitation!"

Of course, I could not let this pass and sent off a rejoinder to *The Guardian*, with a copy to the Conscience of the Nation herself: "It is official! Mary Whitehouse is for sex! How so many of us could have misunderstood her for so long is a mystery. Joy shall be over one non-sinner that repenteth! I did not say that Mary Whitehouse and her organisation were

not against violence; merely that it seemed to have a very low priority compared to her tireless crusade against what she now calls the exploitation of sex.

"Since she has called me ignorant, I must ask for enlightenment. Let actions speak louder than words. For my benefit, and that of your readers, I challenge her to provide a list of all law suits brought by her against the showing of gratuitous violence as compared with suits brought against other matters she has objected to. If violence wins I will happily concede the argument. I am waiting with baited breath."

This time *The Guardian* didn't publish. It seems that we Freethinkers are allowed occasionally to throw pebbles at the pillars of society – but if we start cornering them without prospect of escape, even a liberal paper like *The Guardian* rapidly develops cold feet.

I could have said much more. I could have exposed Mary Whitehouse's new wheeze for the semantics that it is. Her organisation has now declared itself *for* sex but *against* its exploitation. What exactly does that mean? It is a bit like saying we are for soccer but we prefer not to have it shown and we certainly don't want any celebrations once a goal has been scored. No sponsorships, no football pools, just keep it all under the pitch.

Her letter itself inadvertently concedes my point. She mentions "being against gratuitous violence" but uses the word "campaigning" when tackling the "exploitation" of sex.

I should mention that I had so much confidence in the correctness of my analysis that I didn't even bother to check my facts, something I am normally quite careful about. I stopped watching *Fatal Attraction* before the rabbit scene was shown. I have never watched *Red Hot Dutch* and I do not have a record of all the items MW has complained about over the years. But we all know what bothers them don't we? People become moral busybodies because their bodies aren't busy. About violence they care not tuppence. Needless to say there has been a deafening silence from the National Viewers and Listeners Association.

National Secular Society

## ANNUAL DINNER

Saturday, April 16,  
6.30 for 7 pm  
Bonnington Hotel,  
Southampton Row,  
London WC1.

Speakers:

- Dr Peter Atkins (Channel 4 series *God, For and Against* and author of *The Creation and The Creation Revisited*).
- Dr Michael Rodgers (Spectrum Publishing).
- Mike Howgate (founder of "APE" and London Student Skeptics).
- NSS Vice President Denis Cobell

Chair: Barbara Smoker,  
President of the  
National Secular Society

Price: £20. Dress informal.

Tickets from:  
National Secular Society,  
Bradlaugh House,  
47 Theobald's Road,  
London WC1X 8SP.  
Telephone: 071 404 3126.