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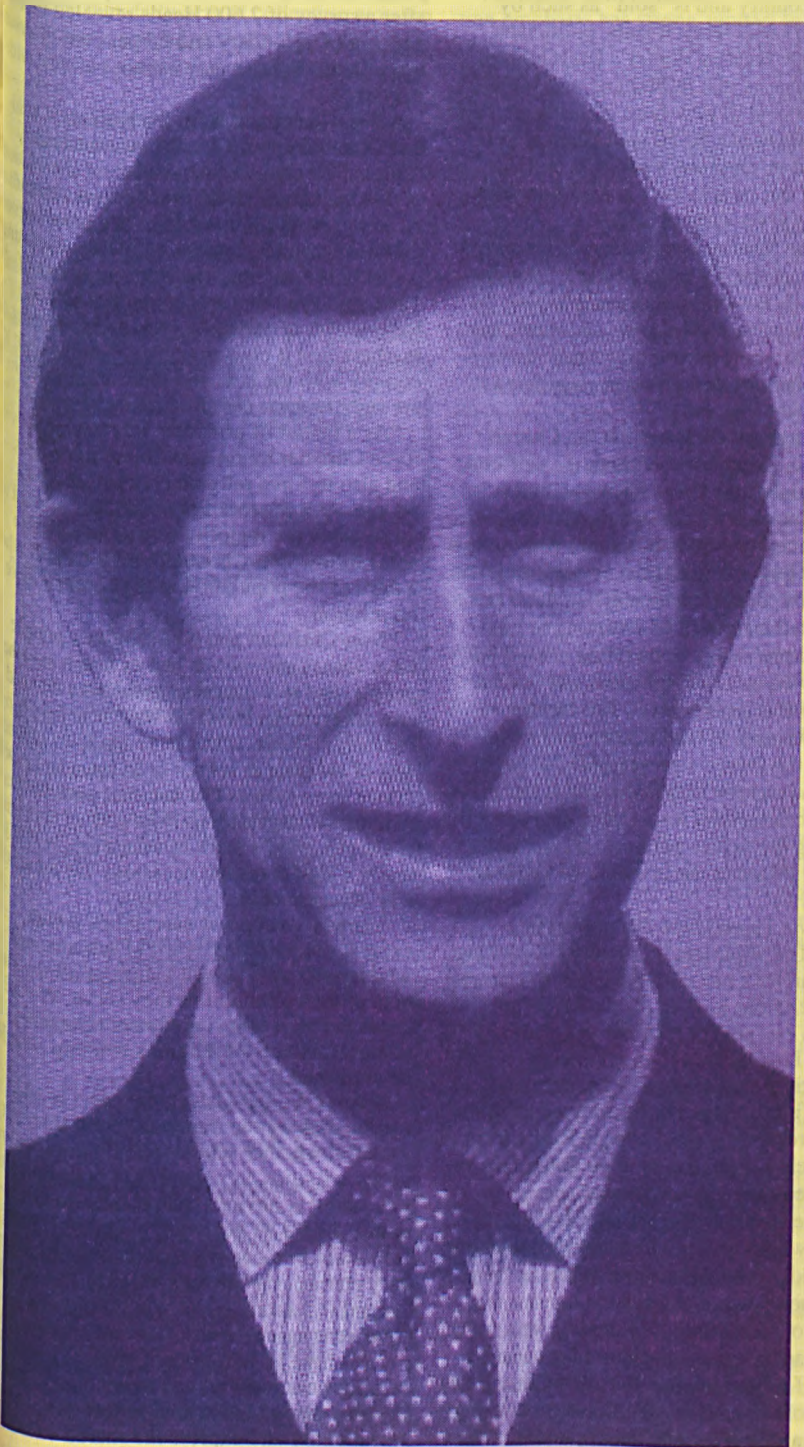
Secular
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Freethinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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*Charles:
Defender
of the
Incompatible*



**Who are the
Jews and is
Palestine
theirs?**

UP FRONT



with the Editor

Defender of lost causes?

IT WOULD not be appropriate for us to adopt that vacuously optimistic grin which born-again Christians have made their own, but Secular Humanists may permit themselves a cautious smile of satisfaction over the way matters are progressing in the seminal areas of Disestablishment of the Church of England and Christian assembly in schools.

In the June 29 two-and-a-half hour ITV programme, *Charles: the Private Man, the Public Role*, the Prince of Wales made clear that, on becoming King: "I would rather see myself as a 'Defender of Faith' and not 'the Faith.'"

He insisted: "Catholic subjects of the Sovereign are equally as important as the Anglican or the Protestant ones. I think the Islamic or Hindu or Zoroastrian subjects are all equally and vitally important."

As NSS President Barbara Smoker said to me on the telephone this week, such an ecumenical attitude certainly qualifies him for the title of "Defender of the Mutually Incompatible," if nothing else.

Charles does seem, however, to have a special enthusiasm for Islam (he is Patron of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies) and this probably has little to do with his important role as a salesman to Arabs of British killing-machines (we saw him hard at this work: "If we didn't do it, somebody else would"), or with the fact that women hardly featured in the film.

The esteem is warmly reciprocated. "I take my hat off to him," Hesham El-Essawy, Chairman of the Islamic Society for Religious Tolerance, told the *Sunday Times* (June 26). "It shows the vision of a man who recognises that there are only two religions: belief and non-belief. The Church of England is strong enough to survive on its own. It doesn't need to be Established."

Privileged position

MR EL-ESSAWY'S comment – neatly and, I believe, accurately linking the Prince's position with Disestablishment – underlines why we should be grateful to Prince Charles. He has brought the issue to the attention of millions who otherwise might never have given a thought to the unjustifiably privileged position of the Anglican Church in our society – and others have been prompted to read into his remarks a call for a break between Church and State.

A French *restaurateur* of my acquaintance

almost choked on his cassis in disbelief this week when I assured him that the Church had the right to inject Bishops into the legislature – "then they should privatise the Church!" remarked his listening waiter – and there is, of course, the vital point that our having an Established Church gives credence to the myth that this land, pulsating with the unbelieving, the indifferent and the differently-faithed, is a Christian country and is "sold" as such by proselytisers and, when it suits, politicians.

(Colleague Nicolas Walter's latest bout of digging suggests that in England and Wales only 27 per cent of new-born children are baptised, that there is a 50-50 split between religious and non-religious weddings, and that 36 per cent of our people have actually declared themselves to be without faith.)

But as the *Sunday Times* (June 26) reported in advance of the TV programme: "Though Charles does not mention disestablishing the church... In private the prince... admires Australia's multi-cultural and religiously diverse society, where no one group is considered to have the state's support."

Some Anglicans believe that the Church may remain Established without the self-confessedly adulterous Prince (King) Charles at its head, but surely the Sovereign is the link which connects Church and State: without that link, what possible historical or constitutional justification for Establishment can there be?

The Freethinker will be returning to this topic in future issues – and to the related but perhaps even more complicated and crucial one of CofE disendowment. But for the moment we dare to read into the furore surrounding the Prince's programme the beginning of the end for Establishment. It has given the faint-hearted and respectable an excuse for discussing the matter publicly and has put a predatory gleam in the eye of non-Anglican believers.

Even *The Times* (June 30) opined in a leader: "The argument in favour of loosening the Monarchy's ties with the Church is powerful: the religious aura of the Crown is no longer an essential part of its appeal and arguably hinders it from modernising its role as an institutional symbol of nationhood."

Ann Widdecombe, the Employment Minister, who recently moved over to Rome from the Church of England, is in no doubt that an end to the Sovereign's 450-year role as "Supreme Head of the English Church and Clergy" would lead to Disestablishment, and she has advanced our argument for us: "An Established Church is a bastion against the advance of secularism. It would be very hard to make advances in religious education in schools if the association between Church and State is lost. As a Catholic, I feel very strongly we need an Established Church, and it is the Church of England, for better or worse."

Jesus assembly on the skids?

HUMANISTS, Jews and some Christians were quick to respond in support of the National Association of Head Teachers' demand that the Government withdraw proposals for daily Christian worship in schools after a survey of 2,600 Heads revealed that 90 per cent of secondary and 65 per cent of primary Heads believe they cannot comply with the law.

A Press statement from the Humanist Liaison Committee put the case in a nutshell: "Humanists support the position of the National Association of Head Teachers on compulsory acts of worship in schools. We have argued that it is wrong to impose religious observance on schools ever since the Education Act of 1944, and even more since the Education Reform Act of 1988. An increasing number of teachers find it objectionable or impossible to comply with the law, and their organisations are right to draw attention to the situation."

"As a matter of principle, it is wrong to force Christianity on non-Christian people, and also to force religion on non-religious people. As a matter of practice, it is absurd to do so when the majority of people in some areas follow non-Christian religions and where a third of the population in the country have no religion."

"Non-Christian and non-religious people have values and morals just as much as other people, and it is insulting to them to be told any different. In the same way, it is insulting for their children either to be made to attend acts of worship at school or to have to be withdrawn from them. (The fact that parents may withdraw their children from acts of worship is alleged to be a mark of toleration, but it is really a sign that such occasions are educationally objectionable.)"

"Humanists support assemblies which express the corporate spirit of schools and which reflect the shared values of all the members of the communities they serve. We welcome the increasing agreement of teachers that compulsory acts of religious worship should be abolished."

Nicolas Walter dashed off letters to the media, making the important point that: "It is doubtful whether schools should organise religious activities, any more than political activities, and it is obvious that, if they do, attendance should be genuinely voluntary. It is important to recognise that there is no necessary connection between religion and morality, and that moral education should not involve religious worship or indoctrination."

"It is time to stop forcing schools into a religious conformity, and to encourage them to develop assemblies which reflect their corporate identity and express the shared values of all members of the communities they serve."

UP FRONT

with the Editor

Jews are angry, too

NOT only infidels like Walter but also many religious folk adopted a similar stand to that of the Heads. *The Times Educational Supplement* (June 17) reported: "Non-Christian groups have been infuriated by an instruction issued in January that daily acts of collective worship must accord a special status to the person of Jesus Christ – something not mentioned in the law itself."

"Now [barrister] Philip Engelman, who specialises in education cases, has told the Jewish Board of Deputies that this instruction, contained in the Department for Education circular on Religious Education and Collective Worship, is illegal because it urges a narrow Christianity on all children."

The eminent lawyer says: "I do not think it was Parliament's intention that a school in, for

example, a predominantly Jewish or Muslim area, should require that the collective worship should be divisive by drawing attention to or emphasising the particular status of Jesus Christ.

"This," he adds, "contradicts the 1988 Act which allows schools to hold assemblies which are 'appropriate' to their pupils' backgrounds."

The Times Ed comments: "The heavy Christian emphasis has strong support from Conservative back-benchers, but causes great bitterness among the other faiths. With the Church of England and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) also known to be against daily Christian worship, Education Secretary Mr Patten has little room for manoeuvre."

Laurie Rosenberg, Director of Education at the Board of Deputies, said: "The individual's right to hold a faith other than Christianity is endangered by this circular. It's unhelpful, it's misleading and is potentially damaging to interfaith relationships."

He said he would be writing to the DFE and the Inspectorate.

The Times Ed said this view was shared by OFSTED, as it had made clear in a private response to the circular: "The concept of collective worship with a Christian emphasis for a group which may contain active members of different faiths, and those who profess no religious belief, causes difficulty," it had said.

OFSTED believes that daily acts of worship are invariably worse than worship conducted once or twice a week, while the Christian element threatens to exclude children and alienate schools. It has also found that the law is widely ignored.

The first legal threat against a school for not holding daily acts of Christian worship has just come to light. Ilkley GM Grammar School has been told by the DFE that it has 12 months to implement the law. The school says it has nowhere for pupils to gather.

The Ilkley case is the first example of the DFE attempting to force the issue. It has already threatened an official "direction" under Section 99 of the Act. And, failing that, there is the outside chance that it could go to court.

Mr Patten warned the NAHT conference: "It is every citizen's responsibility to obey just laws. It is as simple as that."

But even the Chairman of the Church's Board of Education, the Bishop of Ripon, has said that daily acts of Christian worship are inappropriate and that schools should be free to choose what sort of assemblies they hold. Compulsory worship could put young people off, he told *The Times Ed*.

And the Inspectorate has discreetly told the Government in its response to the circular on Religious Education and Collective Worship that the law is probably unworkable and potentially damaging.

The Times Ed notes: "...the law seems to leave Mr Patten with few methods of enforcing it and, if he continues to talk tough, he risks losing face in grand style. Faced with a refusal to obey, ministers would normally seek a judicial review of the school's actions and a writ of mandamus, compelling it to hold acts of worship. But if the school can show that it really cannot comply, then no writ will be forthcoming. Lord Justice Woolf ruled in 1990 that the Inner London Education Authority had no absolute duty to provide something as basic as school places – because it was beyond its ability to do so."

National Association of Head Teachers general secretary David Hart said the courts would be unlikely to issue a writ because policing compliance would prove impractical. Then, he said, there is the question of whether it is wise for a minister to take a school to court. He could lose, after all. And even if he wins, would he then take every school to court?

Barrister and school governor Peter Bibby has argued that the courts should refuse to issue a writ because, while the law requires governors to "have regard" to securing collective worship, it does not say they are obliged to produce it.

Michael Round, a Croydon Head and national council member of the NAHT, said: "Only six per cent of people go to church and many headteachers do not believe. They are very vulnerable because they are required to do this by law, and at the moment many are living a lie."

Stuart Haves, a practising Anglican and Shropshire Head, added: "We don't live in a society where God is at the forefront, and this daily act of collective worship is trying to make schools do something that is rapidly becoming alien."

Let's take comfort

FREETHINKERS may take comfort from all this. In the first place, Roman Catholic John Patten may not be Secretary of State by the time these notes appear – he is tipped for the chop in a Cabinet reshuffle, and his successor may not be so unnervingly zealous for Jesus.

But more importantly, his attempt to force compliance on schools has – as in the case of Prince Charles and Disestablishment – provoked much mainstream discussion, even outrage, around the question.

There is a now a real prospect of the whole matter coming to a conclusion which would be acceptable to Secular Humanists – the abolition of superstition-based school assemblies, a move which would be fair to all children. And if compulsory religious assembly goes, can RE itself be far behind?

THE FREETHINKER

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

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Festive launch for Bradlaugh House

A DOUBLE ceremony was held on June 21 – the Summer Solstice and International Humanist Day – when the new Humanist Centre was officially opened in London.

As reported in last month's issue of *The Freethinker*, the four national Humanist organisations – the British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society, the Rationalist Press Association, and the South Place Ethical Society – have all moved their offices into Bradlaugh House, next door to Conway Hall in Bloomsbury.

At midday, Michael Foot, an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society, cut a ribbon and officially opened the premises with a characteristic speech, having been introduced by NSS President Barbara Smoker as “a man of letters who used to have some connection, I believe, with politics.”

He lived up to the description by producing Charles Bradlaugh's personal, annotated copy of J S Mill's autobiography, which contains a reference to Mill's support for Bradlaugh's campaign for acceptance into the House of Commons.

Michael Foot noted: “Everything Bradlaugh did contributed to the health of the politics of his time.”

Mr Foot was supported by Professor Sir Hermann Bondi, the eminent scientist, who said the move was “a miracle which, like most miracles, had involved a lot of hard work.”

Together

Sir Hermann described Bradlaugh House as looking “so wonderful” and stressed the importance of all Humanists working together: “The need for our work is greater than it has ever been.”

Lord Dormand, the Labour peer, who is one of the very small number of members of either House to “come out” as an atheist, described his current efforts to revive a Parliamentary Humanist Group. About 35 parliamentarians had expressed interest – but there was a great need for Conservative members to make it truly cross-party.

In the evening, 200 people attended an informal social event in Bradlaugh House and Conway Hall, at which a toast to the new venture was proposed by Harold Blackham, the veteran founder of the modern Humanist movement. He spoke of “equal and independent organisations working in co-operation

and cohabitation – a thriving partnership in the attempt to promote Freethought.”

Among those present at one or both of the



events were: Raymond Firth, the anthropologist; Antony Flew, the philosopher; Alan Brownjohn, the poet; Naomi Lewis, the critic; Lord McIntosh; Lord Raglan; Ellis Harman, the Labour Mayor of Barnet; Nigel Collins, of the Humanist Funeral Network; George Broadhead, Editor of the *Gay Lesbian Humanist*; John White, of the Humanist Education Committee; Anne Chapman, of the Humanist Media Committee; Peter Brearey, Editor of *The Freethinker*; Jim Herrick, Editor of the *New Humanist*; Walter, Chair of the Humanist Liaison Committee; Colin McCall, a former General Secretary of the NSS and one-time Editor of *The Freethinker*; Norman Bacrac, Editor of the *Ethical Record*; and members and employees of the various Humanist organisations.

The formal proceedings throughout a day were led by an indefatigable Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, which owns the building.

The Centre has, of course, been named after Charles Bradlaugh, the founder of the NSS, whose great-grandson, Basil Bradlaugh Bonner, sent a message of greeting: “The sharing of one headquarters by the several bodies in our movement appears to make a lot of sense, and I feel both humble and proud that the memory of my great-grandfather is kept alive in the name of the building.”

Messages

Other messages were received from Edward Blisshen (who was “furious” at being able to make it to the opening), Benjamin Green, Professor Ted Honderich, Jonathan Miller, and Claire Rayner.

The Humanist Society of Scotland wished the four organisations “good luck in your new home” and Ivor Russell, President of West Glamorgan Humanists, sent “best wishes for the opening of the Humanist Centre.”

And Nettie Klein, Secretary General of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, wrote: “I would like to congratulate you heartily on the establishment of your new headquarters in Bradlaugh House. Since one of the main purposes of IHEU is stimulating Humanist organisations to co-operate for common cause, we very much applaud your initiative.”

'Challenging' book for teachers and parents

***Beyond Authoritarian School Management – the Challenge for Transparency* by Lynn Davies. Education Now Books, Ticknall. ISBN 1-871526-16-7. £10 pbk.
Review: PROFESSOR LESLIE T WILKINS**

dealt with, perhaps because these are assumed to be covered in other documents published by the same body; thus the reader who might look for any analysis of educational processes will be disappointed.

For example, it seems to be assumed that natural curiosity is an adequate guarantee that the right (powerful, sensible) questions will be asked. This is surely not a valid position. Indeed, well-formulated questions require a foundation. Stating such questions may be an art, but it is an art which has to be learned. Learning how to ask questions is certainly more important than learning conventional answers. Natural curiosity should not be snuffed out in early childhood, but natural curiosity can lead the inexperienced into unnecessary danger. Boundaries must be set, and unfortunately knowledge of the settings may not come with parenthood.

The author's interest in the feminist perspective on language is understandable, but at times she presses the case too far. "Gendered language," she writes, instancing the term "headmaster," "is the classic instance of how males become automatically the

first to be thought of, and females become invisible." She quotes Morgan (1986): "...the idea that the organisation is a machine sets the basis for the idea that it ought to be run like a machine." She goes on to state: "Not only does our language of description start to point to certain ways of action, it excludes others." Even the most religious would not take the view that because it was said – on good authority – "The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a cornfield" suggests that it is managed like one – or that it ought to be. Analogies, paradigms and models are tools of communication and analysis, and when used rationally they facilitate rather than constrain thought. The problem here is not language but logic.

Powerful legal minds also seem to bring some odd reasoning to educational issues. As the author notes, "the 1993 teachers' boycott of government tests... was legal only if it was said to be about the time the tests took and therefore about teachers' conditions of service; if it was on the ground that the tests themselves were unsound, this would be a direct attack on government policy and thus unlawful."

Teachers and parents would find this book both "challenging" and useful. Many education theorists (aware of research findings not noted in this work) would give general support to the objectives set out but probably express some disappointment as to the inadequacy of the treatment of the philosophical and scientific background.

Authors should exploit more fully the facilities of their word-processors — even a pamphlet should have an index.

Sir Ludo sticks to his guns

WRITER and broadcaster Ludovic Kennedy – knighted in June – remains an unmitigated atheist, as he made clear in an interview with Frances Welch, of the *Sunday Telegraph*, May 8.

"We're in an age where it's not possible to accept supernatural beliefs. In 500 years God will simply be seen as myth and allegory...there have been millions of gods in human history. This is just another one. We do not believe today in the gods the Greeks and Romans worshipped, but they did. I mean, why do people believe now there's just one? There could be hundreds up there watching us."

Welch records that Kennedy condemns the notion that spiritual enrichment can be gained only from religion. He is adamant that he gains such enrichment from poetry, art and music.

The tempestuous nature of Kennedy's relationship with religion began in his teenage years: "I'd say f... the Virgin Mary and b... the Holy Ghost and wait to be

struck down by lightning."

Years later, with furious dedication, he worked out that he had wasted 1,300 hours on religious observances at school, notes the interviewer.

Kennedy's parents were both Anglican. His father prayed every night: "I'm sure he prayed as usual the night before he and his ship were blown up at the beginning of the war...He probably prayed for his fleet. The Germans were doing the same. It didn't do any of them any good."

Kennedy does not believe that his preoccupation with euthanasia and "dying well" is connected with his atheism. He maintains there are as many believers as non-believers interested in the movement: "It's only the Catholics who are implacable enemies of euthanasia. That wicked old man the Pope..."

He quotes the Pope's words with feeling: "Suffering, especially during the last moments of life, has a special place in God's saving plan... unmitigated tosh!"

BY COINCIDENCE, the above noted book was received for review in the same post as the official Department for Education *The Updated Parent's Charter*. (A correspondent to *The Independent* pointed out they did not consider themselves to be updated parents!) When assessing works of pedagogy, perhaps one may be somewhat pedantic, and remark that both of these pamphlets might have been more appropriately titled. Slightly better might have been *Parents' Updated Charter*, and while I can accept "Challenge for..." or "Challenge to...", "Challenge for..." does not get an "A" for English from this scientist!

Education Now is an advocacy group with an interesting platform from which few readers of *The Freethinker* would wish to dissent. Among other perspectives they state that their vision (sic) includes:

"a focus on the uniqueness of individuals, of their learning experiences and of their many and varied learning styles

"recognition that learners themselves have the ability to make rational and intuitive choices about education

advocacy of co-operative and democratic organisation of places of learning

belief in the need to share national resources so that everyone has a real voice in education"

and they maintain:

that people learn best when they are motivated: when they take responsibility for their own lives and learning: when they feel comfortable in their surroundings:

when teachers and learners value, respect and listen to each other: when education is seen as a life-long process."

The pamphlet contains many practical suggestions on school management and, in particular, provides draft forms of checklists and questionnaires to assist assessment of educational quality. The value of which cannot be denied, although the reader need not assent to all the opinions expressed by the author, some of which go beyond (add to and differ from) those listed above.

Though not explicitly stated, it seems unlikely that the work is intended neither to enter nursery schooling nor university education.

There is no mention of religious education or Patten's ideas of "acts of worship."

It would have been preferable if this work had been limited to practical ways of interpreting the desiderata of school organisation. Theoretical issues are not well

WHAT'S ON...WHAT'S ON...WHAT'S ON

Announcements are inserted in this column free-of-charge. Voluntary contributions towards the cost of typesetting would be 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 activities contact Adrian Bailey on 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, July 3, 4.30: Tea party followed by annual general meeting

Central London Humanists: For details, please contact Cherie Holt on 071 916 3015 or Hilary Leighter on 0895 632096.

Chiltern Humanists: Friends' Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamstead. Tuesday, July 12, 7.45pm: Professor George Wells: *The Origins of Magic*.

Cornwall Humanists: Contact: B Mercer, "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Telephone: 0209 890690. Sunday, July 17, 5pm to 8pm (if wet, July 24): Bring food and a bottle to the Summer Garden Party at 21 Treworder Road, Truro. £1 (children 50p).

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Monday, July 18, 7.30 pm: Public meeting. Subject: *A Humanist Belief System*.

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.

Devon Humanists: For details, please contact: C Mountain, "Little Gables," Burgmanns Hill, Lypstone, Exmouth EX8 5HN; 0395 265529. Sunday, July 31 (August 7, if wet): Plymouth Picnic - visit to Mount Edgcumbe Gardens, followed by picnic (bring food and drink). Cremyll Ferry departure point 1.45pm; 4pm at Orangery for picnic.

Ealing Humanists: Details: telephone 081-422 4956.

Edinburgh Humanist Group: Programme from secretary, 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD; 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, 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.

Hasving & District Humanist Society: HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Friday, August 5, 8pm, at HOPWA House: Robin Squire, MP for Hornchurch and Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education, will speak on his work with the Department. For further information, contact J Condon 0708 473597 or J Baker 0708 458925.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Details from secretary: George Rodger, 17 Howburn Place, Aberdeen AB1 2XT (telephone: 0224 573034). Convener: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; telephone: 0563 26710.

Kent Humanists: Meets at University of Kent, Seminar Room 11, Rutherford College, Canterbury. Details from

Secretary John Payne, telephone 0843 864 645.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, July 12: Summer Social Meeting, 4pm to 8pm, at 8 Kingswood gardens, off Street Lane, Roundhay. Tuesday, October 11: Peter Brearey, Editor of *The Freethinker*: *How Free is our Press?* Tuesday, November 8: Dr J McGuckin, Leeds University Theology Department: *The Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Leicester Secular Society: Details from the Secretary, Lyn Hurst, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB (telephone 0533 622250).

Lewisham Humanist Group: Saturday, July 16, 1pm to 6pm: Humanist stall at Lewisham People's Day, Mountfield Park, Station Road, London SE6. Saturday, July 23, 2pm, at Public Library, Lewisham High Street, London SE13: Barbara Smoker: *Morals Without Religion*.

Manchester Humanists: St Thomas's Centre, Ardwick Green. Public meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30pm. September 9: David Wilkinson: *Cosmology and Creation*. October 14: Group discussion on voluntary euthanasia. Information, telephone: 061 432 9045.

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 WC1. Telephone: 071 404 3126.

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, July 13, 8pm: Peter Jackson: *The South African Election - an Observer's Account*.

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

Stockport Secular Group: 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, July 13, 8pm: Susan Dorrell: *Trading with the Third World*. Annual Garden Party: Sunday, July 3, 2.30pm to 5pm: 15 Manor Road, Cheam. Wednesday, September 14: George Mepham: *World Population Prospects*. No meeting in August.

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. July 21: *Humanism and Current Affairs*. September 15: *Compassion in World Farming*.

Ulster Humanist Association: Meets second Thursday of every month, Regency Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast BT7. Details: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE.

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

Lead me into temptation - please! That's the cheeky slogan on a tee-shirt for freethinkers with a sense of humour produced by the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. The shirt is white with black or pink lettering (state preference; sizes medium and ex-large) and costs £8.50 (including postage) from GALHA, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2HB.

Starship Enterprise goes PC

ARTHUR CHAPPELL concludes his case for TV's *Star Trek* as a Humanist film-based show

ALAS, one current religious cult, Scientology, gives its members the impression that *Star Trek* is a true story, and makes Roddenberry a part of its absurd doctrines. Scientologists believe in reincarnation, and that some of their past lives were lived on other worlds. They think the *Star Trek* creators write up actual events from their own subconscious past-life experiences.

Aside from that extreme, *Star Trek* fans who attend conventions, and acquire all the available *Star Trek* merchandise are well aware that the programme is an imaginative production.

Star Trek was certainly flawed. Kirk had too many love interests. Though non-sexist in employing women, the first *Enterprise* crew was fond of nymphettes, and every planet had a bevy of scantily-clad, photogenic models.

Interestingly, however, in *The Next Generation* adventures mini-skirts were replaced by more practical uniforms, and even the famous split infinitive credit sequence speech on "boldly going where no man has gone before" was changed to a politically correct one of "going where 'no one' has been before. Some episodes forget the internationalism of the aliens invariably spoke perfect English.

In "The Omega Glory," Kirk finds a planet where the US Constitution has been misunderstood. He corrects this in the end by reciting it in great detail, which comes across as intensely patriotic. Roddenberry admitted that this was a mistake. He was taken by the Constitution opening with the words "We the People" and hoped to use it for the world as an international community in this episode, but failed spectacularly.

Some stories gain unnecessary notoriety, as with the maligned and very '60s "The Way to Eden," in which the *Enterprise* is hijacked by hippies looking for their own idea of Utopia. Roddenberry compared the group's leader to Charles Manson, even though his murders occurred in 1969.

The episode plays for laughs. The naive hippies mock the older generation's values; and yet the Utopian, communal, promised Eden-world proves too hostile to support the group who turn back to the *Enterprise* crew for advice, support and a way home. There is no Heaven.

Roddenberry's world evolves; and that is the continuation of it. The Klingons, being Space Opera creatures, much to the distaste of many sci-fi geeks, have been replaced by new villains: T'Pol and Q (based on "The Squire of Gothos"). In keeping with the Prime Directive, peaceful Klingons retain their own cultural

values and self-identity. They have not been colonised or suppressed, but accepted and tolerated.

Some critics argue that colonising other planets is to applaud traditional earthly colonial values. Not so! Where colonists have upset a planet's culture, the *Enterprise* and the Federation quickly puts matters right. See, for example, *The Next Generation* classic "Justice," in which a young crewman crushes a flower accidentally and is sentenced to die. The crew must rescue him without being seen to interfere in the planet's own legal processes.

The extent of the religious avoidance Roddenberry single-handedly introduced to *Star Trek* becomes clear in the occasional funeral scenes. In "The Tholian Web," Kirk – missing, presumed dead, but later to turn up safe and sound – is given a space burial service with no reference to religion (a Humanist funeral?), and a moment of silence.

Star Trek takes enormous risks and gambles. The biggest comes in the third film, *The Search For Spock*. Spock has killed himself so his friends can survive, an act based on the logical Utilitarian premise that "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one." Kirk and his colleagues discover that Spock may yet live (surprise, surprise). They steal the *Enterprise*, commit court martial offences, head to a forbidden zone of space and fight Klingons in defiance of Prime Directive rules.

Kirk's son is killed in the conflict, and – shock horror! – Kirk destroys the *Enterprise* itself. The *Enterprise* is an icon to the fans of the films and shows. NASA had actually renamed a space shuttle after it in response to a fierce letter-writing campaign. Now it was obliterated. Spock, found safe and well, understandably asks why. "Because the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many," replies Kirk – emphasising that the *human* thing to do and the *right* thing to do need not be logical or utilitarian, but must be compassionate. This

was *Star Trek* at its best: setting one human (or Vulcan?) life above all else in value.

Star Trek was a prophetic series; the first series ended just before the first moon-landing in 1969. In "Assignment Earth," the *Enterprise* crew help to prevent the American military of our own time from using a Star Wars (Strategic Defence Initiative, not Luke Skywalker) style military system, because they know from the future that it will fail and destroy mankind.

There is no space here to deal with the films, which revived interest in *Star Trek*. Suffice it to say that *Star Trek Two* and *Three* are among the first stories in science fiction to look at terraforming: making life on lifeless worlds, and the danger of men behaving like gods with such experimentation. (The terraforming device is appropriately called "Genesis").

The fifth film is a mess, in which William Shatner (directing) has the crew discover and convert to God only to find it is really an evil force that only thinks it is God. The crew resolves to go on searching. This is the worst ever *Star Trek*, and Roddenberry had only a limited advisory hand in it.

Reduced to an advisory role in the end, he found his ideas constantly ignored (cf. William Shatner: *Star Trek Memories*, Harper Collins, 1993). Shatner wrote that Roddenberry "lost final artistic control of his own creation."

The Next Generation adventures have been slow starters, rehashing plots from the first series, but now developing startling ideas and human values of their own, remaining close to Roddenberry's Prime Directive.

Imitative programmes have called themselves the new *Star Trek*, but they fail for having cardboard cut-out characters in uninteresting, implausible situations, but with great-looking gadgets and explosions. The most important assertion in Roddenberry's *Star Trek* is that humanity matters more than its own innovations and discoveries – something we should also remember in our own age.

Don't forget our holiday pay!

AS this issue of *The Freethinker* goes to press, millions are being wiped off share values in the City of London. We should have such problems! With us, it's a question of how we can save a tenner or so on the post bill or find a cheaper brand of envelope. Last month's special issue set us back a few hundreds which we can ill afford – but it was necessary expenditure, given the importance to the movement of the opening of Bradlaugh House.

Please – before you change your Summer holiday money into pesetas, dollars or punts – remember that the smallest contribution to *The Freethinker* fund helps to keep alive the voice of Freethought, Rationalism, Humanism, Secularism and, yes, as a correspondent to this month's letter pages points out, Atheism.

Cheques, POs, stamps to: G W Foote & Co., Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: R Paterson, £1; N R Smith and K P Shah, £2 each; Anonymous and B Hayes, £3 each; W H Simcock, £4; R J MTolhurst, C M Stewart, P J McDonough, R M Walker, N S Thompson, J Priest, H Madoc-Jones, L M Moore, J Gibson, J Glenister, D A Thompson, J A Blackmore, A Hamilton, H L Millard, G Wood, A McGovern, Havering Humanist Group, Penzance Humanist Group, Manchester Humanist Group and F M Holmes, £5 each; H Walkley, £8; R Ison, T L Ong, R M Kempe, Edinburgh Humanist Group, E Loughram, M A Shaikh and B Aubrey, £10 each; F N Fish and J E Fortes, £20 each; A Akkermans and D Crawford, £25 each; J Aragona, \$15.

Total for May: £283 and \$15.

Charles Ward peers into the abyss and p

A genuine new

AS AT no other period of our human story, Space engages the world's attention. This, however, for many people, does not as yet amount to much; interest is limited and spasmodic.

The reason is partly that those responsible for the information we receive – operators of the media – give little encouragement. Newsworthiness being largely based on sensationalism, this means that not everything is given the coverage it deserves. Scientific explorative work is going on all the time – by astronomers using the Hubble telescope, for example – but a good deal of it is not made public.

Those for whom Space is a matter of constant interest include not only astronomers, theoretical physicists and Space technicians the world over, but also writers and readers of science fiction, as well as of serious literature on the subject, and, in their wake, neurotic people obsessed with apocalyptic dreams of alien beings and forces.

The importance of the first-mentioned group is widely recognised, since they are responsible for the increasing amount of hardware which is littering our cosmic neighbourhood.

The usefulness of the second group should not be overlooked, because its members, if inadvertently, perform a vital function. They half-prepare themselves and others for what, I submit, is ultimately bound to happen – inescapable awareness of Space by human beings everywhere.

You may be among those who, reasonably enough, question that assumption. Why, you might ask, should we acquire a perpetual interest in what lies beyond

the stratosphere, when even that topic, unless we are airline pilots, is not likely to cross our minds very often?

The space between human ears might be regarded as a partial vacuum already too much cluttered with *débris*... fanciful fears and hopes – maybe contemporary, so-called New Age mythologies to take the place of, or to enhance, the ancient ones, which peopled our spatial environment, as then conceived, with angels, demons, heavens and hells, and weird goings-on between men and immortals. What advantage could there be in being more Space-aware?

From one point of view, it might seem that we are already too Space-conscious by half. That is only, I think, because we have not as yet, or at least very poorly, recognised that the continuum is our Environment. Thinking to feel cosily at home if we install familiar “mental furniture” – the beliefs and cultural impedimenta we have inherited – is certainly a mistake.

Propelled

Inescapable Space-awareness is, I am sure, on technical grounds now inevitable. How rapidly it will develop is anyone's guess. However, since it seems likely to take place within the lifetime of some now living, it deserves our attention. Still, it is true that, though our sky is daily scarred with vapour trails and our attention sometimes momentarily distracted by the sound of aircraft engines at low altitudes, we rarely give a second thought to the thousands of fellow-human beings who are continually being propelled in all directions above our heads. While we may be vaguely aware how incessant is this shuffling of the species, we go about our business, as

do these invisible flying bipeds, by the customary means of locomotion, on the allotted gravitational floor.

We may be likened to greenish rose-bush in a garden, unaware, or to be doubted, of bush, garden, or say adjoining house or street, being who is about to spray the self-interest with derris.

We tend to be preoccupied with mundane affairs, and nature, which conspires to keep things that are all know and love, are not to be. During that period few but astro- are likely even to think of the tence. *Out of sight, out of mind* seem to apply here.

At night we draw the curtains due course retire to bed. Thus, for those who live in cities where sparkling darkness is obscured by of artificial light, it is not to ignore our Surroundings. Last at least, there may be an uneasy escape a fear of vastness.

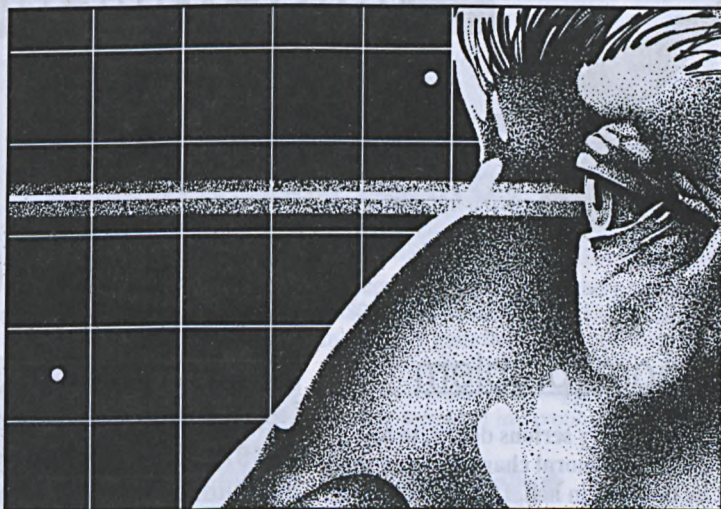
Contemplation of a clear night some, it is true, produces a beauty, peace, enchantment and Yet for many others the effect the converse – coldness, anxiety, sion, horror. There is a feeling alone and helpless, victims of forces beyond control. Of course don't want to, we need not those who react like this. the motion of the planet saves the constant indulgence in such rumination as

Up to a point, what is presented by the media, especially television, counters any attempt to shut out mos, occasional reminders of the situation being provided. When be shown in terms of fact or fiction makes little difference.

We live on a mere speck in space

and predicts...

new age



reminder that it is in process of moral evolution. Members of our species, whatever their cultural background, have comparable needs and desires, and most of them demonstrate at various levels what might generally be described as virtuous potentialities.

However, there are some people who, on the basis that the Universe is Nature to the *nth* degree and on the face of things indifferent to morals, consider it "natural" to feel no moral obligation whatever. If there be no divine reward for virtue, no punishment for evil, why – they demand – should they not do what they like, if they can get away with it, or do not care about the consequences?

They have become prey to the propaganda that there can be no morality without belief in "God," a mythology they have understandably disavowed. The cosmos displays no controlling Intelligence. Why not therefore pursue this "logic" to the conclusion that we should not betray any intelligence either? If the Universe is Mindless, why should we not indulge in "mindless behaviour"?

Those who, consciously or otherwise, are unfavourably disposed towards concepts of meaning and morality, blind themselves to these evolutionary truths:

● **Primal energy, manifesting in the form we call "life," in the course of the "complexification" to which it is subject, climbs against Time's cataract – the entropy of matter.**

● **The burgeoning intelligence that life produces, in its highest form to date adds a new quality – that of responsibility – to the amoral biosphere. Entropy remains, and so does amorality, but they do not**

frame, for observant minds, the cosmic scene. Meaningless lives can no longer be considered inevitable in a meaning-less Universe, and the brutishness of distant ancestors *red in tooth and claw* cannot be taken as a guide to human behaviour.

Many people are gloomily aware that the technical ability and the moral development of our species seem wildly out of sync. But, putting pessimism and optimism aside, let realism goad us into action which might help to bring our rational and sensitive propensities into productive harness.

Defaulters

Any Flat-Earthers left may disagree, but I'd say that we are now actually incapable of thinking, in practical terms, with regard to our world-view, in the way a person belonging to a pre-scientific culture thought. Unsuccessful attempts are made by the religious, who appear to want to be stuck in their several time-warps – for Christians are not the only defaulters in that respect. As Space technology intrudes more and more into human affairs, which it is bound to do, we – or our descendants – will simply not be able to avoid an increasingly persistent awareness of our Environment. This is likely to be expressed in terms at variance with our present desultory and fleeting recognition of a cosmic backdrop to our activities.

This inevitable revolution in human thought, it is safe to predict, will usher in a genuine new age.

Noble

Humanists who want to do more than creep through parted fingers at the Universe may also need to ask themselves: *are we ready to advance beyond a child's excitement to a more demanding awareness of the human situation?*

peering into the abyss of Space challenges us, because of the mind-stretching it presents, to peer into the abyss of human nature, with its capacity for moral strength and weakness, for unflinching inventiveness and social competition as well as for monumental stupidity such as internecine strife, to say nothing of the ill-treatment and destruction of our own life-support system.

The unpleasant fact that all too many human beings have been, or are, indifferent to noble aspirations is not a condemnation of the race, but rather a

No allies in the skies

The moral problem

THERE is one very serious defect, to my mind, in Christ's moral character, and that is that he believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ, as depicted in the Gospels, certainly did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to his preaching.

I think the doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty and it gave the world generations of cruel torture and caused an unspeakable amount of misery in the world.

I can not myself feel that, either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue, Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history. I think I should put Buddha and Socrates above him in those respects.

I do not think that the real reason why people accept religion is anything to do with argumentation. They accept religion on emotional grounds. One is often told that it is very wrong to attack religion, because religion makes men virtuous. So I am told; I have not noticed it. You find this curious fact, that the more intense has been the religion of any period, and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and the worse has been the state of affairs. In the so-called ages of faith, when men really did believe the Christian religion in all its completeness, there was the Inquisition with its tortures; there were millions of unfortunate women burnt as witches; and there was every kind of cruelty practised upon all sorts of people in the name of religion.

How the churches have retarded progress

YOU find as you look round the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step towards the diminution of war, every step towards better treatment of the coloured races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organised Churches of the world. I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion as organised in its Churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.

RUTH BLEWITT has abstracted this month's Blast from the Past from *Why I Am Not A Christian* by Bertrand Russell OM FRS (1872-1970), third Earl Russell, recipient of the Nobel prize for Literature. Philosopher, mathematician, controversialist, Russell was widely regarded as one of the greatest logicians of all time. The famous lecture was delivered to the South London branch of the National Secular Society in 1927 and was published soon afterwards by Watts & Co on behalf of the Rationalist Press Association. It was republished, along with other essays and lectures, by Alan & Unwin in 1957. Ruth Blewitt's edition was issued by the NSS, by permission of the RPA, with a foreword by David Tribe, in 1967. She writes: "I chose the piece because of Russell's vision for the future happiness and welfare of mankind, free from the constraints of religion."

There are a great many ways in which at the present moment the Church, by its insistence upon what it chooses to call morality, inflicts upon all sorts of people undeserved and unnecessary suffering. And of course, as we know, it is in its major part an opponent still of progress and of improvement in all the ways that diminish suffering in the world, because it has chosen to label as morality a certain narrow set of rules of conduct which have nothing to do with human happiness.

Fear the foundation of religion

RELIGION is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown, and partly the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing - fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand-in-hand. It is because fear is at the basis of those two things.

In this world we can now begin a little to understand things, and a little to master them by the help of science, which has forced its way step-by-step against the Christian religion, against the Churches, and against the opposition of all the old precepts. Science can help us to get over this craven fear in which mankind has lived for so many generations. Science can teach us, and I think our own hearts can teach us, no longer to look round for imaginary supports, no longer to invent allies in the skies, but rather to

look to our own efforts here below to make this world a fit place to live in, instead of the sort of place that the Churches in all these centuries have made it.

What we must do

WE want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world - its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is and be not afraid of it. Conquer the world by intelligence, and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it.

The whole conception of God is a conception derived from the ancient Oriental despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men. When you hear people in church debasing themselves and saying that they are miserable sinners, and all the rest of it, it seems contemptible and not worthy of self-respecting human beings. We ought to stand up and look the world frankly in the face. We ought to make the best we can of the world, and if it is not so good as we wish, after all it will still be better than what others have made of it in all these ages. A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past, or fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men. It needs a fearless outlook and a free intelligence. It needs hope for the future, not looking back all the time towards a past that is dead, which we trust will be far surpassed by the future that our intelligence can create.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



Burning questions - no 1

"You begin with a flame of faith and end up burning heretics"

WORDS of wisdom, those, from MP Tony Benn in a recent edition of *Sunday*, the BBC Radio 4 religious programme.

True, Christians can no longer burn heretics; but they can still murder truth, as a new pamphlet by Peter Masters, minister at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, makes all too clear.

The Cruelties of Atheism purports to expose "the harmful and unreasonable side of atheism" and show "how militant atheists campaign to win the masses by various manipulative means." Dr Masters assures readers that the purpose of his pamphlet "is not to direct hostility or ridicule at anyone." However, the milk of human kindness soon curdles; a few sentences on, he asserts that refusal to believe in his god is worse than murder.

Mary Whitehouse may have retired, but Dr Masters continues the crusade against the forces of darkness in television. He writes of a British society that "is brainwashed by non-stop television fiction, invariably written by atheists... There is no fear of God before their eyes... Atheism has taken over the media." (Presumably atheists are responsible for the hundreds of hours of Christian fiction broadcast every week by national, regional and local stations.)

Peter Masters does not let fact get in the way of alarmism and religious bigotry. "Have we ever wondered why there is so much more child abuse now than ever previously known?" he enquires.

Only the wilfully ignorant would pose such a question. Of all the stains on the social record of 19th Century Britain, abuse of children is the darkest and deepest. Child labour and prostitution, baby farming and infanticide, were rife in the era of Victorian values. Even children from middle and upper-class homes did not escape religious terrorism in the form of evangelical tracts vividly describing the fate of those who "died in their sins."

Peter Masters blames atheism for a contemporary wave of social disorder and law-breaking, including "crimes committed against children." He blandly ignores the evidence of police and court records in Britain, the United States, Canada and elsewhere which provides cast-iron proof that child abuse, in particular sexual assault, is frequently committed by

Christian clergy and lay workers.

I happily commend Peter Masters' sublimely awful pamphlet to all unbelievers, be they outright atheists or keep your-head-down agnostics. Instead of exposing "the cruelties of atheism," it demonstrates the intellectual bankruptcy of evangelical Christianity, affording delight and encouragement to opponents of religious superstition.

Burning questions - no 2

INVERNESS, capital of the Highlands, provides a wide range of public services, except in one department. When a cremation is to take place, mourners are faced with a stressful and expensive round journey of about 200 miles. It is not surprising that many feel the time has come for provision of a crematorium to serve the area.

So the public demand is there. The local council has funds. Planning permission has been granted.

Then the project can proceed? Not if Christian fundamentalist have their way. For Inverness is a stronghold of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Wee Wee Frees (who will not thank you for confusing them with their brethren in Christ, the Free Church of Scotland, aka the Wee Frees).

The Wee Wees have been campaigning to stop the crematorium being built. The Rev Dr Donald Boyd, minister at the Inverness Free Presbyterian Church, explains their objection: "The scriptural method of disposing of the dead is by burial. Cremation is unscriptural. We take the Bible as our guide."

Religious opponents of the proposed crematorium have no qualms about resorting to scare tactics and blatant lies concerning the practice. One example of their anti-cremation propaganda is a claim that the building would belch out repugnant smog and people living nearby would be breathing fumes emanating from burning corpses.

Of course, Dr Boyd and the Inverness Free Presbyterians have history and tradition on their side. From its inception, the Christian Church prohibited cremation. Britain's modern cremation movement was fiercely opposed by all the Christian churches. An Anglican bishop delayed opening of the first crematorium by several years. The Roman Catholic Church denounced cremation until 1963, and some Protestant sects still do so.

"The scriptures usually associated the burning of the dead with God's judgment,"

declares Dr Boyd. Furthermore, since the 1880s, "the resurrection of the practice of cremation has gone hand-in-glove with the decline of reformed Christianity."

Far be it from me to suggest that this is another argument in favour of cremation.

The right fantastic

WHY is it that so many religiously observant young Islamic males are sex-obsessed and yet seem to regard physical contact with women as an abhorrence? A complex question, but perhaps partly answered by the case of a 13-year-old Muslim who was suspended from his school at Chavley, in Berkshire.

The suspension was imposed because the boy refused, on religious grounds, to dance with girls. Dancing is part of a physical education session at the school. The headteacher – a Sikh, as it happens – said that if pupils were allowed to pick and choose, "it could possibly lead to chaos in the school with all sorts of requests not to attend classes."

The boy, who has had very little support from the local Muslim community, has now returned to school – but insists on being hidden from girls. So a sheet has been put up in the school hall for him to dance behind.

"He is to be applauded," declared an Islamic "education consultant."

Others will take the view that the boy is more to be pitied.

Announcement

ALBERT STANDLEY
Infidel, Socialist, Republican

MEMORIAL MEETING

Saturday, July 16, 3pm

The Library, Conway Hall,
Red Lion Square, London
WC1

YOU'RE TELLING US!

A parson writes...

WELL, I was surprised to receive a copy of the [May] *Freethinker* through the post, unfortunately with no acknowledgement who from. Was this sent to every church minister in the area, as a policy decision? Has the JIM campaign upset you so much? And I thought none out there was really bothered about the church any more!

Seriously, though, you plainly are bothered. I would have thought it more rational, if you really believe there is no God, and that "this universe is essentially a lucky accident" (p 75), to just dismiss it all with a shrug of your intellectual shoulders and ignore it. What's behind the tone of your magazine – hectoring, aggressive, scornful, dismissive? Could it be that you, rather than rationally sharing a conviction that there is no God, are actually emotionally angry with God and are trying to get rid of him?

One argument Freudians use against belief in God in that it is purely the expression of a wish for a dominating father-figure. The fatal flaw of this argument is, of course, that it does not turn on the question of whether this belief is true or false; my own father may have been a "father-figure" to me, but that has no effect on his actual historical existence. However, it is an argument that turns on its head quite neatly with Freud's thought: are atheists mere *œdipans* whose belief that there is no God is founded on a wish to assassinate their father? That would explain the angry tone of your magazine.

Finally, I would just like to point out that not all believers are stupid, gullible or pathetic, as your magazine suggests – and some of us actually like people.

[The Rev] COLIN GIBSON
St Lawrence Church,
Tinsley, Sheffield

Excellent Heath

THE Secular Humanists of Los Angeles (SHOLA) had the recent pleasure of hosting Karl Heath at a luncheon during his visit to this area. Mr Heath spoke to attending members of our group about the Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists and their work, as well as his fine article in your periodical, under the title "Christianity Is Evil."

His philosophical position, as one would expect from a fellow Secular Humanist, dovetailed nicely with the tenets held by our members, and we always appreciate knowing that our point of view is widespread outside the United States. Mr Heath, of course, is an excellent speaker and a fine representative of the movement in Great Britain.

We will be reprinting excerpts from Mr Heath's article in our monthly newsletter. It is good to know that *The Freethinker* has been

continuously published for such a long time; may it continue well into the next century.

EDYTHE M McGOVERN
Secretary, SHOLA

Babylonian

AFTER all the letters about the Humanism in *Star Trek*, I thought readers might be interested in an episode of the new science fiction programme *Babylon 5*, currently showing on Channel 4. The episode is called "Parliament of Dreams" and as a subplot features the alien races giving some demonstration of the dominant belief system of their planet. The human commander of the space station demonstrates Earth's dominant belief system by arranging for a very large group of humans to assemble, each representing a belief. The commander then introduces the aliens to each in turn. The interesting bit is that the first to be introduced is the human representing atheism!

GRAEME NATTRASS
Durham

Straight talk on being gay

I AM writing on behalf of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) in response to the letter from John Snowden (June). I would first like to inform Mr Snowden and all your readers that GALHA enjoys close ties and friendly relations with other Humanist organisations, both in this country and abroad. It is affiliated to the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and is a member of the UK Humanist Liaison Committee. It has held monthly meetings at Conway Hall Humanist Centre in London since its founding 15 years ago. Its committee meetings have been held at the British Humanist Association/Rationalist Press Association offices in the same building, and it will enjoy this facility in future at Bradlaugh House, recently purchased by the National Secular Society (NSS). Local Humanist groups like Cardiff and Birmingham have demonstrated their solidarity by affiliating to it.

Mr Snowden should also note that UK national organisations like the BHA and NSS, as well as those abroad and the IHEU, have official policies of unequivocal support for lesbian and gay rights.

Mr Snowden's letter amply demonstrates that he is as hostile to homosexuality as any Bible-thumping fundamentalist Christian, some of whose arguments he cites as reasons for Humanists to refrain from endorsing the gay lifestyle (lesbians are ignored). His hang-up about promiscuity is certainly one shared by the vast majority of Christians who believe that sex is only morally acceptable within a monogamous, heterosexual married relationship. Like most of the world's religions, Christianity is hostile to human sexuality as a

source of pleasure for its own sake, and it would seem that Mr Snowden is too.

Mr Snowden's denigration of gays, in particular on the grounds of promiscuity, is based solely on a survey of gay men in San Francisco some 10 years ago. Apart from this being an unreliable guide to the lives of the worldwide gay community (men and women), there is good reason to believe that promiscuous people, of whatever sexual orientation, are no different in their general behaviour from anyone else, and that the notion that they are all depraved, and a corrupting influence upon others, is nonsense.

In his publication *Promiscuity* (Gollancz, 1976), Michael Schofield, a Humanist who had undertaken a research project on homosexuality for the British Social Biology Council in the 1950s, concluded that there were positive aspects to a promiscuous lifestyle for those whom it suited temperamentally, and that promiscuous people did not differ significantly from the sexually more abstemious in their general moral standards.

In *The Sex Code: Morals for Moderns* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), Francis Bennion, also a Humanist, points out that "promiscuity may be vicious, but it may also be virtuous," and that those who are promiscuous should observe certain ethical rules. I suggest that Mr Snowden consults the section "The Ethics of Promiscuity" in this book, in which he will find a very different perspective on the issue to his own.

Finally, may I commend to Mr Snowden and other readers *Speaking of Sex* (Cassell, 1993) in which its author, Antony Grey (another well-known figure in the UK Humanist movement), declares: "Tolerance of, and respect for, benignly motivated mutual affection, however unorthodox, is surely a more reliable road to increasing human happiness than attempts to frighten and dragoon people into conforming to a way of life and a standard of values they disagree with."

GEORGE BROADHEAD
GALHA Secretary

IF John Snowden followed his own advice and tried being objective and rational about the evidence regarding homosexuality he'd not be writing such ignorant, ill-informed and offensive drivel that wastes over a column of space in your esteemed journal. His criticisms are all old and thoroughly discredited accusations, no more convincing than rational-sounding arguments about the intellectual inferiority of blacks compared to whites.

Lack of space and time prevent my going into detail, but he really ought to be aware that surveys of gays usually draw their subjects from the gay scene – hence the bias towards the promiscuous. (What's wrong with promiscuity anyway? Provided suitable precautions against disease are taken, it sounds jolly good fun!) All the closeted gays, gays trapped in heterosexual relationships, gays in stable relation-

YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 116

ships, gays in stable relationships, gays just not interested in the scene etc., are simply not counted.

To claim that heterosexual coupling is superior to gay coupling is pure arrogance with no evidence offered in its support. It is also very presumptuous of a heterosexual to think he is in a position to allege that gay people's unhappiness stems from their sexuality rather than society's attitude to it. I have yet to meet a gay person unhappy with his or her sexuality, but I know plenty who are thoroughly cheated off with the treatment they receive from society.

Has Mr Snowden ever been subjected to insults and abuse over his sexual orientation? I have. Has he been threatened by street thugs because of his sexuality? I have. Has he been physically assaulted for the same reason? I have. Does he have friends who've been thrown out of their home or sacked from work for the same reason? I have. Does he feel afraid of being threatened or attacked if he is seen leaving a pub frequented by others of his orientation? I do. Does he have to live with the fear of being disowned by bigoted family members, harassed by prejudiced neighbours or risking his career if his sexual orientation is found out? I do.

How dare he assert that unhappiness of gays is their own fault rather than society's? When gays complain of the unhappiness society causes them, they speak from experience. Mr Snowden does not and cannot and is in no position to contradict them.

Finally, he needn't think heterosexuality is so great. Does homosexual behaviour cause unwanted pregnancies or over-population?

STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

WRITING as both the President of the National Secular Society and a Vice-President of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, I would like to take issue with the homophobic letter from John Snowden (June). He insists that gays are intrinsically unhappy people. This makes a change from the usual Christian charge that they are intrinsically evil; but in my experience it is no less false.

In fact, it is an echo of the irritating response of many Christians to anyone who admits to being an atheist or agnostic: "How sad! You are denied the happiness of knowing Jesus!"

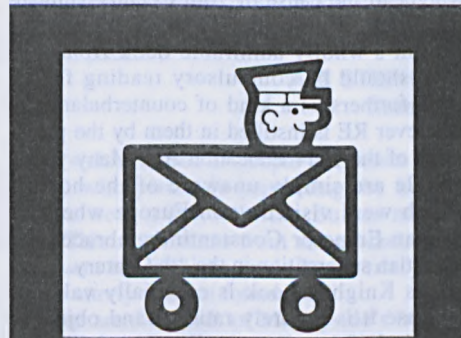
Mr Snowden should understand that people's tastes differ - not least in the sphere of sexuality - and it does not make for happiness to attempt to force everyone into the same totalitarian mould, either by law or social coercion. Besides, if everyone were heterosexual, the population explosion would be an even greater menace than it is.

I might add that the NSS, which upholds the rights of all oppressed minorities, passed a resolution at its last AGM supporting the demand for gay/straight parity in law with regard to the age of consent.

BARBARA SMOKER
London SE6

I SHOULD very much hope that it is "predictable" that most Humanists "side with the gays" (John Snowden's letter, June) but to suggest this is a knee-jerk response to the fact that "criticism of gays frequently comes from religion" is ridiculous. Most Humanists would see this as a question of equality and tolerance: people's sexuality is no one's business but their own, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else.

I wouldn't seek to *advocate* a homosexual lifestyle, any more than I would seek to *advocate* marriage, staying single or living in a cave in the Gobi desert: they are all possible routes to happiness (or the reverse). What I would promote is education to allow responsi-



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

ble, informed choice (not that sexuality is necessarily a matter of choice), and equality of opportunity and responsibility between people once they have freely chosen.

Incidentally, I think it will come as a surprise to many gay men to learn that their lives are "intrinsically unhappy" (gay women, for reasons we can only guess at, escape Mr Snowden's vitriol, and his letter fails to enlighten us on their rating in the happiness stakes).

By stark contrast, John Snowden's letter was immediately followed by Alan Mason's on population control. Wouldn't we be better advised to turn our united attention and energies to this issue, which is everyone's business, and is of unparalleled and immediate importance?

ALISON GOULDSTONE
Cardiff

I HAVE to agree with John Snowden on gays. In the San Francisco bath-houses frequented by gays, there were rooms where men lay face down on a bed with a jar of lubricant next to

them and took on all-comers. There were also orgies involving 50-100 people at a time. Brought to prominence when the AIDS epidemic appeared, gays admitted to having 30 or more partners a night. Love had nothing to do with it.

While I have nothing against what consenting adults want to do behind closed doors, I think that is where homosexuality should stay. Unfortunately, it does not. Having seen men kissing and cuddling in the streets of Cairo, I was propositioned several times, by men, in Egypt. The youngest was about 12, the oldest about 70, and even a group of teenage men. I've also been propositioned by men in other countries in Asia. I am 100 per cent heterosexual and have never given any man the "come on." And I dislike being touched-up by them in crowds.

And men's toilets! On my first visit to Tenerife, I saw a young man obviously standing on the toilet in his stall, looking into the next toilet. And I'm fed-up with having to check for holes in cubicle walls to see if anyone is trying to spy on me going to the toilet. And of reading homosexual messages on toilet walls. I've only recently moved to France from England and though my French is still poor, I am able to translate some of these gay sex messages.

I am surprised that anyone dare speak out against gays in Australia [which is where John Snowden lives]. The Hite survey, named after the woman who conducted it, showed that in this macho country more than 60 per cent of teenage boys had either masturbated together or had had sex together.

The *Freethinker* should not be the place for the promotion of homosexuality.

With regard to Jessie Boyd's letter on pornography: millennia before videos, sickos were abusing and killing little kids.

Pornography is a vague term. To Clare Short, it's topless women. To the church, it's what men and women do naturally. To the average man, it's some sick form of unnatural sex. I would guess that Jessie Boyd agrees with the church's definition. Most women do, which is why no law has been properly passed against pornography. How can what a man does with his wife or girl-friend be classed as sick and unnatural?

Black is crazy, but no one will ever know whether those sick videos which he watched caused him to murder or eased his cravings. Psychiatrists cannot agree on such people.

And Jamie Bulger? Read the serious papers! Neither the judge nor the police in the case said that *Child's Play 3* or any other video played any part in the case. Only papers like *The Sun* told lies on this to sensationalise the story.

Because one single sex-mad beast kidnaps two schoolgirls and forces them to watch porn videos, it means nothing because what about the normal sex-mad beast who just gets on with it and rapes them? One is an exception, not the rule. If Jessie Boyd travels abroad, she

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will find out how repressed Britain is and not write such nonsense in future.

MICHAEL HILL
Neufchâtel-en-Bray

Scotland's different!

CONGRATULATIONS on an excellent June issue of *The Freethinker*. However, I would like to bring to your attention the position of the Humanist Society of Scotland, which is a national Humanist organisation – that nation being Scotland.

The Scottish Humanist Council and the subsequent formation of the Humanist Society of Scotland came about because of the different laws, traditions and education that there are in Scotland. We are affiliated to IHEU and see ourselves, in many ways, the equal of the British Humanist Association.

The bringing together of the four London-based organisations is long overdue. The Society wrote on this matter to the relevant organisations some years ago, suggesting a closer union, and we are glad to see that this is now coming about. But the four organisations are English. They have members in Scotland but on all the issues they take up, it is the English law that they wish to change.

We have problems in Scotland that are similar to England and on many issues we can work together. However, for example, the Blasphemy law does not apply in Scotland, the position of the established Church (Church of Scotland) is different and the education laws vary. Whereas in England you have religious worship in state schools, in Scotland we have religious observance. Mr Patten has no jurisdiction in Scotland, thankfully. Our Sunday trading laws are more liberal and our Church attendance is higher!

We are a small organisation (about 250) but we have plans to try and expand. Our membership is made up of members in groups based in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Stirling, together with individual members throughout the country. We do use literature supplies from the South as well as our own, but I do feel that it is sometimes forgotten that we exist and that we represent a different country within the UK.

We hold an Annual Conference every April and the BHA is invited to send a representative to keep us informed of developments South of the Border. This they do, and hopefully they get some idea of what we are doing to progress Humanism. However, we get little feedback to show they are aware of what we are doing and with a name like "British Humanist Association," the media will think that they represent the UK. Your report on the bringing together of the four London-based organisations also gives that impression.

Like all Humanist organisations, we are a non-political organisation, with members rep-

resenting most shades of political opinion. All we ask is that people in the South remember that Scotland is different and that this should be borne in mind in any discussions and campaigns that you have and that the Humanist Society of Scotland exists. Readers may contact us c/o 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire HA3 2JD.

ROBIN WOOD
Convener

'Honest to Man'

MANY thanks for reminding us of the splendid contribution made by Mrs Margaret Knight to the cause of 20th Century Humanism (Blast from the Past, June). I believe Mrs Knight's wholly admirable book *Honest to Man* should be compulsory reading for all sixth-formers as a kind of counterbalance to whatever RE is instilled in them by the provisions of the 1944 Education Act. Many young people are simply unaware of the horrors which were visited upon Europe when the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced the Christian superstition in the 4th Century.

Mrs Knight's book is especially valuable because it is a purely rational and objective appraisal of the effects on Western civilisation of a very powerful authoritarian system of superstition which exercised supreme control over the minds and thoughts of men and women for many, many centuries. We have only to think of the Inquisition to realise how that control was exercised.

Mrs Knight's book is indispensable for every Humanist and I think a new edition is now urgently required.

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Malvern Wells



Conscientious objectors

I HAVE just read, and enjoyed, Bill McIlroy's June article on the unveiling of the Commemorative Stone, in Tavistock Square, to all conscientious objectors. I would like just to add the words, and their format, that are on the stone, which may interest some of your readers:

Around three edges it says: *To commemorate men and women/conscientious objectors to military service/all over the world and in every age.* In the centre, it says: *To all those who have established and are maintaining the right to refuse to kill. Their foresight and courage give us hope.* Across the bottom, it says: *This stone was dedicated on 15 May 1994 International Conscientious Objectors' Day.*

I think I would also like to add that there is a suggestion that each May 15 – or the closest Saturday or Sunday – we have a similar simple ceremony, plus a reception, with, maybe, music, afterwards. Further, that groups and individuals from different countries be invited

to participate. It would be useful and interesting to know who among your readers would be interested in coming to such an event, if it did get off the ground. They could write to me care of *The Freethinker*.

EDNA MATHIESON
London SE1

Cuban paradise?

DID I spot a piece of wicked satire in the June issue of *The Freethinker*?

Did Dorothy Blackwood adopt the tone of a naively enthusiastic child when writing "Our Woman In Havana" in order to underline ironically the shortcomings of the Cuban dictatorship by avoiding reference to them?

Her article could have been a parody of the sort of tendentious simplifications that used to be written by deluded fellow-travellers after trips to the former Soviet Union and its satellites before those régimes collapsed under the weight of their own lies. Dorothy slipped in all the old favourites: no crime, universal literacy, wonderful health service, smiling peasants etc., etc.

I'm so pleased that Dorothy's group was able to learn "a lot from discussing with university students about how and why the revolution is working for them." I don't suppose the group popped into any of the island's prisons to talk to dissidents about how the revolution is working for *them*. I also doubt whether the tour included a trip on a Cuban Navy gunboat patrolling the shores to prevent the escape of the many "ordinary citizens" who continue to take their chances with the sharks rather than remain on this earthly paradise. It would seem that, in the excitement of preparing for their journey to this "beautiful, unspoiled country," Dorothy and her group forgot to pack their critical faculties.

Am I indulging in similar simplification, casting the Cuban régime as representing the forces of darkness? I know from friends who have visited Cuba that there are aspects which are pleasing to the superficial eye. But those aspects represent little more than a few gold-fillings in a mouth full of decay. At the very least, the Cuban dictatorship embodies a system of belief which opposes the principles of the freethought movement.

I find depressing the fact that in the National Secular Society – a haven for those opposed to all forms of religious tyranny – there seem to be those who are willing to sympathise with tyrannical régimes so long as the tyranny is imposed in the name of Marxism, that secular religion for a particular type of holy atheist.

Thankfully, the same issue did at least carry a review of *Atheistic Humanism* by Antony Flew, whose work has helped show how it is possible to be an opponent of Marxism and a defender of an enlightened market economy, while also being an atheist and Humanist.

I think it's time that free-market sympathisers (and these days that category includes

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Labour Party supporters) in the NSS came out of the closet and proudly displayed themselves, with or without foreskins.

MICK McGOVERN
London E17

Ridley and McCabe

IT WOULD have been strange if F A Ridley – erudite though he was – had had a deeper understanding of the Catholic Church than had Joseph McCabe, formerly the Very Rev Father Antony (Up Front, June).

In fact, there was no real difference between their respective views of the Catholic Church and democracy. In the last edition (1951) of his book *The Papacy in Modern Politics*, McCabe makes the very same point as Ridley concerning the emergence of so-called Christian Democratic parties following the rout of fascism in World War II. The same had happened in the years immediately following World War I, but before the rise of fascism.

As McCabe makes clear, these manoeuvrings by the Vatican in no way reflected a change in the Catholic Church's essentially reactionary and anti-democratic character. Its objectives remained as intolerant and obscurantist as they had always been – very much a case of wolves in sheep's clothing.

On a different matter, congratulations to G N Deodhekar on his excellent analysis of the ghastly tragedy in what was Yugoslavia. Behind the torrent of lies to which, in the last two-and-a-half years, we have been subjected by leaders of public opinion in the West, are, ultimately, the pernicious ambitions of the Vatican, expressed in its centuries-old Eastern policy. No conspiracy theory in that!

And it owes its successes to the belief of powerful non-Catholic interests of God and Mammon that they are served by allying themselves with this *Drang nach Osten*.

R J M TOLHURST
Chelmsford

Pornography

DURING all the centuries up to the present one, horrific things have been done to children without the influence of literature, much less videos and films, since most people couldn't read and the cost was way beyond what the majority could afford.

Recently, in a local history book, I discovered that during 1875 children worked 12-hour shifts six days a week for 1s. Cottages to rent cost 7d a week but a bible cost £33!

The children began work aged six. If they mined coal, the pay was 1s 6d a week, but most miners died before they reached 51 years.

When Oastler, a local mill-owner, proposed

lowering children's working time by two hours, he had a hell of a fight on his hands before success came his way – although his workers' life expectancy was mostly 43, most of them dying from pneumoconiosis from breathing-in wool fibres.

How dare Ms Boyd state that pornography was the bullet in Black's gun which caused him to kill little girls after raping them? Black wanted to do these horrible things. He needed no prompting – and for far too long pornography has been blamed for influencing crimes.

If its effect is so persistent, why don't the millions who buy both soft and hard porn all rush out to assault, maim and kill children? Because it has no such effect on a sane person! To suggest otherwise, is just a convenient cop-out, encouraged by fundamentalist Christians and the police.

A G STEPHENS
Bradford

I AM sick and tired of people like Jessie Boyd (June) who persist in promoting the lie that videos were a factor in the Bulger murder case. This myth stems from some bizarre and irrelevant observations made by the trial judge and is utterly without foundation.

These are the words of Merseyside's Inspector Simpson: "We looked at all the videos in their [Thomson's and Venables'] houses and checked the lists of rentals from the shop. We did not find *Child's Play 3*, nor did we find anything in the list that could have encouraged them to do what they did."

In future, Ms Boyd will want, I am sure, to pay more than mere lip-service to the evidence.

DAN J BYE
Rotherham

AT LEAST your correspondent Jessie Boyd and I agree on one thing. Videos which involve children in sexual abuse should be outlawed. I know of no case ever being made for the legalisation of child abuse. The point about *The Freethinker* pornography debate is about whether pornography depicting CONSENTING (that's *CONSENTING*) ADULTS should be legalised for ADULTS to consume. Most people (I believe) would consider that making minors watch pornographic videos should be an offence punishable in law.

My recollection of the James Bulger case is that the videos in question were currently legal, adult certificated videos of a horrific nature, not intended to be sexually titillating, and which the police did not think played any part in the crime. That your correspondent links horror with pornography is interesting, but not relevant.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the case has already been made that it is the responsibility of parents, not the manufacturers of matches, to ensure that children do not burn the house down.

The implication still remains that without pornographic videos there would be less child abuse. This assertion is once again made without a single shred of evidence or comparison

with other societies where pornography is legal. Presumably there was no sexual or violent crime at all before the printing press was invented? Or are we to believe that the desire to rape and kill children was transmitted by folk song?

You would probably find that "sexual criminals" had a copy of, say, the telephone directory in the house, and had been known to look in it. Are we then to blame reading the telephone directory for the crime? The answer is clearly "no" because many thousands of people use the 'phone book and are not driven to sexual crime. Why then does this same principle not apply to porn? Of the many thousands of people who consume pornography, why is it that it drives a miniscule proportion of them to uncontrollable acts of sexual depravity? The conclusion that these individuals have been driven to their acts by the 'phone book is just as valid as blaming porn. Unless, of course, you know that it's "perfectly obvious" that porn is to blame.

Finally, the Secular cause is not being "hijacked by the pro-porn lobby," but it would be a pity if its open-mindedness was hijacked by the "Who needs objective evidence, any fool can see that [insert the belief of your choice]" brigade.

BOB HAMILTON
Portsmouth

Missing word?

I AM glad to know that Ms Barbara Smoker's "Four in One" dream has come true (June issue), with the organisations of Freethought, Secularism, Rationalism and Humanism under one roof at Bradlaugh House. I hope, however, that one day – not very far in the future – the slogan will be "Five in One," with the addition of the word *Atheism*!

K P SHAH
London NW3

Question of identity

THE Department for Education has sent many households, at tax-payers' expense, a booklet explaining about education, the Parents Charter and so forth. Included are many useful addresses to which one may write.

Unless it is forbidden to interfere with concepts of pædophiles' and renters' civil liberties, I should like to suggest the following action: interested parties should write to the DforE or associated agencies and enquire how many priests have come into sexual/abusive contact with children in Sunday schools, Church schools or similar: also what has happened to such priests. For example, have they been given a names and identities and sent to some other educational setting to continue as before?

B L ABLE
Croydon

Stepchildren of Abraham

MODERN Jews claim that they have a right to rule Palestine because this right was given by a promise made to their ancestor Abraham. It is worthwhile considering the validity of this belief.

Three thousand years ago, Palestine was divided between two kingdoms – Israel in the North and Judah in the South, separated by Jerusalem, which contained a mixed population of Hittites and Amorites. David's capture of Jerusalem and his conquest of Israel allowed him to instal his own high priest, Zadok. His claim was supported by his capture of the Ark, the most sacred relic of the Exodus. Israel, however, rejected David's grandson, and the two kingdoms became separated.

In 722 the Israelite capital, Samaria, was captured by the Assyrian King Sargon. Part of the population was deported to Mesopotamia, and Israel became an Assyrian province. It is often supposed that the entire population was deported, and there has been much speculation about what happened to the "Lost Ten Tribes." There was even a British Israelite Society, which believed that they had travelled to Britain.

Fortunately, Sargon's records have survived, and they give the number of deportees as rather more than 27,000, out of a population estimated at 750,000. Most of the people remained in Palestine, and retained enough of their tradition to organise a resistance movement which forced the Assyrians to send back a priest to preserve their traditional religion. Their descendants are called Samaritans in the New Testament.

Profitable

Unwisely, Hezekiah, King of Jerusalem, joined a revolt against Assyria organised by Merodach Baladan, King of Babylon, who survived by rebelling and then procuring a pardon by grassing on his accomplices. Hezekiah hijacked the Israelite revolutionary tradition, which was useful propaganda. In addition, it was profitable – for Hezekiah made it illegal to sacrifice anywhere other than Jerusalem; previously, since Jehovah was present everywhere, sacrifices could be made anywhere. Since every sacrifice involved a payment to the priest, this brought in a large revenue.

To legitimise these innovations it became necessary to rewrite the Israelite tradition. History was rewritten to make all the tribes take part in all the events; the story of the Exodus, for instance, originally the movement of a small group of Egyptian intellectuals, was transformed into the ridiculous picture of 600,000 people wandering across the desert. Secondly, Jerusalem, originally an alien city, was transformed into a place especially sacred to Jehovah, and its priests elevated above the

LAST WORD

by C R Wason

Levites, the original guardians of the Mosaic tradition. Finally, kings who endowed the priests of Jerusalem were whitewashed. It was not possible to abandon the well-known narrative, but these kings were praised for their fidelity to the Lord. The revision was not finally completed until the fourth century.

While subject to Assyria, the Kings of Jerusalem had to adopt the worship of the Assyrian gods. However, in 629 BC Josiah began plotting to join the conspirators who were planning revolt against the Assyrians. The symbol of revolt was the establishment of a national god, and this led to the recovery of the old tradition.

In 586 Jerusalem was captured by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, and most of the population was deported to Mesopotamia; the remnant fled to Egypt, taking with them the unfortunate prophet Jeremiah, who was much distressed because he could not persuade the women to abandon the worship of Ishtar.

In 539, Babylon was captured by the Persian Cyrus. The Mesopotamian Jews formed a fifth column to support Persia. In the middle of the night, unseen hands wrote subversive messages on the walls – a phenomenon not unknown at the present day – and a Persian agent, whose works survive in the later chapters of the book of Isaiah and who is called the Deutero-Isaiah, hailed Cyrus as the Messiah, the divinely-appointed king who had come to restore the Jews to their former glory.

From the first, the Persians planned the reconquest of Egypt, which had regained its independence from Assyria. The invasion of Egypt requires a secure base in Palestine. The best way to secure this base is to place in Palestine a persecuted minority whose survival depends on the protection of the imperial power. A similar situation arose in the middle of the 19th Century, when European powers were anxious to control Egypt because of its importance on the route to the East. France could intervene in Palestine to protect the Roman Catholics, and Russia could claim to protect the Orthodox Christians. Britain had no persecuted minority to protect, and to remedy the deficiency tried to encourage the settlement of Jews in Palestine, thus founding the Zionist movement.

The Persian government therefore encouraged the re-occupation of Jerusalem and provided lavish support, and the Deutero-Isaiah wrote of the glory of returning to Jerusalem, describing the ease with which the journey could be accomplished in phrases reminiscent of a modern travel brochure. In spite of these attractions, few exiles seem to have taken advantage of the opportunity. Most of them had prospered in their new home.

Only a handful returned, and when Nehemiah came to reorganise the community, in 448, Jerusalem was a ruinous village. He rebuilt the walls, and in 398 another Persian official, Ezra, brought a final revision of the Torah including further restrictions on marriage with other peoples.

The Jewish state was finally abolished by the Romans in 135 AD, after which no Jews were allowed to live in Jerusalem. But, long before this, the great majority of Jews lived outside Palestine; they are known as the Diaspora (Dispersion). After the fall of the Roman Empire, their numbers were greatly reduced by massacres, expulsions, and intermarriage, but they have retained their national identity. In 1960 their numbers were estimated to be half-a-million. They are known as Sephardim.

Palestine

East European Jews are known as the Ashkenazi (Scythians). They are not descended from the ancient Jews, but from a Turkish tribe, the Khazars, who embraced Judaism about 740 AD. Although many of them acquired a knowledge of Hebrew, they are not strictly Semites, since their native language is a dialect of German.

The curious conclusion of this history is that the Palestine Arabs have the best claim to be the "Children of Abraham," since the original population of Israel has occupied the country since the days of Moses, though it has been diluted by successive invasions.

All this is not of much importance. Human character is formed not by genetic but by cultural inheritance. In spite of the corruptions introduced by dishonest priests, the Jews have every right to be proud of the noble tradition of democracy and learning which was given to them by Moses. They may reasonably take an interest in the land where this tradition was preserved and feel proud if they are permitted to live in it.

But there is no excuse for them if they rob and oppress the legitimate population and justify this by the fraudulent claim that this was promised to them by a fictitious Jehovah.