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Free thinker

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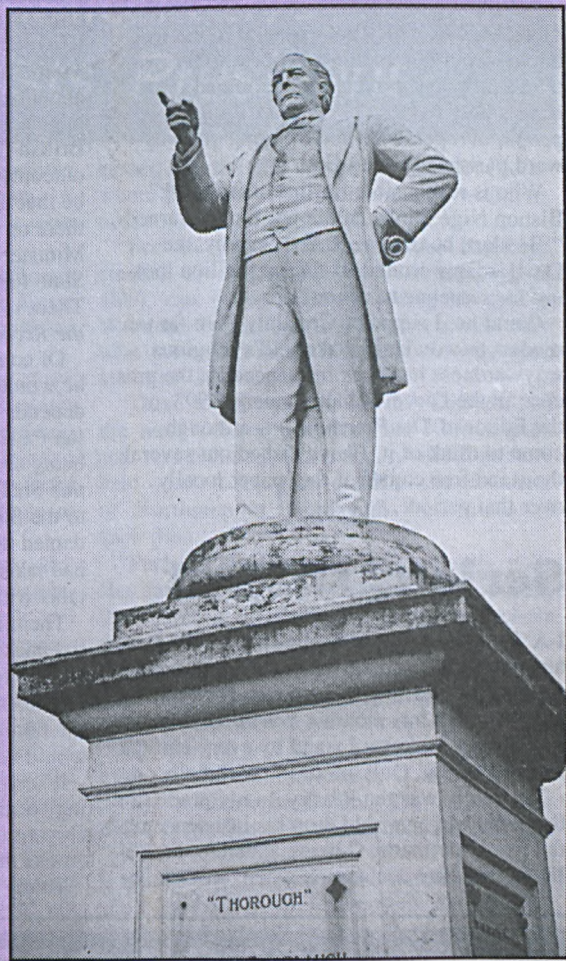
100 years on...

Bradlaugh

under attack

ALSO INSIDE

THEY'RE UP THE ERUV POLE!



UP FRONT



with the Editor

Godless in Wakefield

MORE people in the Wakefield diocese have turned away from God than in any other area in the country, reveals the Bishop of Wakefield, the Rt Rev Nigel McCulloch (*Wakefield Midweek Extra*, October 20).

He told a Diocesan Synod meeting: "Basic moral values, which are essential to the well-being of our communities, appear to be systematically and cynically undermined...we have a duty to be in the world calling our people to repentance and bringing our wayward parishes back to God."

Who is responsible for this backsliding? Bishop Nige thinks he knows, for he warned: "Be alert, be on watch. Your enemy, the Devil, roams around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

Could be, I suppose. Certainly I am far too modest to wonder if Wakefield's religious waywardness has been influenced by the presence in the Diocese since January, 1993, of the Editor of *The Freethinker* – although, come to think of it, I have dished out several thousand free copies of the 'paper locally over that period...

Serious subject

I AM invited by a correspondent to "have another go" at dealing with the "serious subject" of the North of Ireland (see last month's Up Front and this month's You're Telling Us). I am happy to do so: I stand by every comma of that column. Only more so. With bells on.

For barely was the ink dry on my prediction that John Major would drop his insistence on the word "permanent" being added to the IRA's ceasefire declaration when, on October

21, he announced that he was prepared to make a "working assumption" that the ceasefire was meant to be permanent and that there would be talks with Sinn Féin by the year's end (*The Guardian*, October 22).

Scarcely cool was the word-processor from churning-out my view that a United Ireland deal had been struck between the Brits and the IRA when, the Government having U-turned on its ban on Republican leaders travelling around this not-terribly-United Kingdom, Sinn Féin executive member Martin McGuinness came to London to announce that: "In March of last year, I did have a meeting with a representative of the British Government who said the eventual outcome of all Britain was trying to do would be that the island would be as one. He was there on the authority of the British Prime Minister John Major and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Patrick Mayhew. There is no doubt about that" (BBC TV *On the Record*, October 23).

Of course, Sir Patrick denied this but, then, he would wouldn't he? Current strategy depends on maintaining Orange hopes that Ian Paisley is wrong and the Prods are not being abandoned. (Incidentally, I wonder if *this* Sir Patrick Mayhew is in any way related to the Sir Patrick Mayhew who in 1993 hotly denied that Government talks with Sinn Féin had taken place – shortly after Government talks with Sinn Féin had...er...taken place?).

There is already the prospect of a substantial package of new measures and money for Ireland from the EC, and Major has lectured top business people to reassure them about the future – again, just as Up Front predicted would happen.

It seems like a deliberate "misunderstanding" of my column to suggest that I support Government by sell-out. I simply report matters as they are, and as they seem to me to be.

To my mind, the only realistic reading of

the present situation is that the Brits are on their way out of the part-Province because, for the detailed reasons I gave last month, they don't need it any more: if they wanted the place, if it still had shipyards and strategic value, for example, they would go in *really* heavily to nail it down.

Naive, bleeding-heart liberalism and simple faith in the assurances of our sleazy government will not alter this state of affairs. And, however much we might abhor the methods and the motives of the Government and the bombs of the IRA, can we deny that 900 years of Irish history show that the island will not be at peace until it is independent and united? It seems that – for as long as the English have been on the island – from periods of relative peace have emerged new generations of freedom-fighters/terrorists. Will any ceasefire be "permanent" until this fundamental change in the governance of Ireland is made?

But wait – the crystal-ball is pulsating again...I predict that by January, 1995, a release programme for both Republican and Unionist "political prisoners" will have been created...that the IRA will have agreed to hand-over at least its stores of Semtex...that leading "moderate" Unionist politicians will have accepted the notion of cross-Border bodies with executive powers...that the British military presence in Ireland will have been substantially reduced.

The Government is already planting media stories to remind us of the terrorist potential of the IRA (see *The Observer*, October 30). just in case support for its piecemeal changes in North of Ireland policy begins to wane.

It sounds a dreadful simplification – completely lacking in sophistication – but the people of Ireland will just have to learn to live with each other and without the "poison of religious hatred, bigotry and mindless flag-waving" which all readers of *The Freethinker* will agree is a major problem of the Six-County slice of Ulster. Who can suggest a practical alternative to this which is not pious wishful-thinking and which does not ignore the lessons of history?

The key, once we have accepted that political unity will come, like it or not, is in the schools – which is why it is so important to gain widespread support for the resolution on segregated schooling passed at the Annual General Meeting of the National Secular Society, reported left.

Saint alive?

TRY not to miss *Mother Teresa – Hell's Angel?* on Channel 4, Tuesday, November 8, at 9pm. Bill McIlroy who, when Editor of this journal, achieved a certain notoriety for his against-the-mush view of this woman. will be tuning-in on behalf of *The Freethinker*.

STOP PRESS

TWO emergency resolutions were approved at the AGM of the National Secular Society, held in London on October 29 (see centre pages for fuller report).

President Barbara Smoker moved that:

This AGM deplores the attempts of certain Catholic schools, supported by some Muslim leaders, to discourage parents from having their children immunised against rubella on the ground that the vaccine used was originally derived from tissue taken from a single aborted foetus in 1966. This historical fact is superstitiously set above the severe disabilities of many children who will be born to mothers who catch rubella in the early weeks of pregnancy.

It was agreed to send the following resolution, initiated by Richard Benjamin, to the Northern Ireland Office and the Department for Education:

This AGM welcomes the cessation for the time being of sectarian violence in Ulster. However, the danger there continues, due to the deep-rooted sectarian divide, which is being perpetuated, inter alia, by segregated schooling. We therefore urge the Government to initiate an inquiry, possibly through the National Foundation for Educational Research or the Economic and Social Research Council, to explore acceptable ways of ending or minimising religious segregation in education.



10-11-94

Vicar wants to topple Charles Bradlaugh

MORE than a century after the death of Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society, a Church of England clergyman has urged that a statue of Jesus should replace that of the atheist MP which stands in Abington Square, Northampton, the town which first elected him to Parliament in 1880. NSS President Barbara Smoker speedily responded to what she called the "crass and offensive" suggestion with a statement to the local evening newspaper, the *Chronicle & Echo*, which had publicised the Rev David Farey's kite-flying proposal. The *Chronicle & Echo* (October 21) reported that Mr Farey, of St David's Church, Kingsthorpe, had said in his parish magazine:

'Crass and offensive' suggestion says Secularists' President

"The statue stands there as a constant reminder and inspiration to the people of our town. 'A refusal to believe in God is honourable' is what it seems to say.

"This has encouraged the spirit of Bradlaugh and his lack of God to haunt our town. It has infiltrated its people subtly and surreptitiously."

Describing Charles Bradlaugh as "one of the most controversial public figures of the last century," the *Chronicle & Echo* reported that Mr Farey "wants the finger-pointing tribute to the town's famous atheist MP...to be replaced with a statue of Jesus, a saint, or nothing at all."

It further quoted the priest as having said: "The people of this town must have seen something honourable in Charles Bradlaugh and that same respect for his atheism is still apparent today in people's coldness."

He added that "many people put up their own statues to money, their careers, violence or greed," and: "The ultimate is a statue to the non-existence of God and that is represented by Charles Bradlaugh. Does our town really want such a travesty?"

Mr Farey admitted to the *Chronicle & Echo*: "I do not really expect the statue to be pulled down, but I would be happier if it were not there. I'm simply raising the question of whether it should be demolished and make people think about their heroes."

Alerted to Mr Farey's suggestion by George Broadhead, of Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists, Barbara Smoker immediately issued a statement which said: "So the Kingsthorpe vicar objects to a statue that seems to say 'a refusal to believe in God is honourable,' and would like to see Northampton's famous finger-pointing statue of Charles Bradlaugh replaced by one of Jesus.

"However, no one can deny that Charles Bradlaugh - an outstanding Radical Liberal of the 19th Century - really existed, whereas Jesus is probably no more historic than Aladdin or Peter Pan.

"Besides being a great orator, writer, social reformer, and hard-working representative of his constituents, Bradlaugh's zeal for the welfare of the people of the sub-continent of India

earned him the title of 'the Member for India,' where his name is still remembered with honour.

"For six years, Bradlaugh, who had been elected to Parliament for Northampton in 1880, was prevented from taking his seat at Westminster because, unlike other atheist MPs who pretended to be believers, he was open about his atheism.

"Three times between his first election and the next General Election, his Northampton seat was declared vacant and by-elections were held - but, to the great credit of the electorate of Northampton, Bradlaugh was re-elected each time.

"Perhaps Mr Farey has inadvertently done Bradlaugh's memory a service by reminding the people of Northampton of the man whom the statue portrays and the good work that he did for humanity - even if, in the vicar's book, good works are dishonourable in the absence of religious superstition."

The *Chronicle & Echo* seems not to take Mr Farey's outburst seriously. It editorialised, tongue-in-cheek, on October 21: "...The vicar has a point. He believes a statue should be a symbol of heroism. Quite right too. Perhaps it is a little late to question the statue now. After all, it has been up for generations. On the other hand we could pull it down. And erect one of the Bishop of Durham instead!"

And Mr Tony Marlow, Tory MP for Northampton North, told *The Freethinker*: "This was an individual's view. There is no general feeling that the statue should go - of course it should stay where it is."

Memorial lecture by Honderich

SOUTH Place Ethical Society's 69th Conway Memorial Lecture will be delivered by Ted Honderich, Grote Professor of Mind and Logic, University College London. His subject will be "Should we be Hierarchic Democrats?" Venue: Conway Hall, London, Thursday, December 8, 7pm. Admission free (collection).

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Daleks are little people, too!

HOW seriously does Patrick Harpur intend us to take this book? It's dedicated to "Merrily," and can't possibly be read with a straight face. Even the author, in a picture on the book jacket, seems to be smirking behind his hand. But we are informed that he has edited "a modern alchemical journal" (my italics), which sounds a little esoteric, and although he has a lot to say about imagination, he sometimes gives it a capital "I" and links it with the Soul of the World; and he has incorporated reality in the title.

He is also offering us a "field guide to the Otherworld," but that's a bit misleading, as may be judged from the illustrations. The fairy shoe made of moleskin was found in south-west Ireland, on a remote track, it's true, but in this world nevertheless. The three feet long black cat "said to have a rabbit in its mouth" was "snapped" in Cornwall (at a very long distance, I may add, so one certainly can't see the rabbit) and, although Joe Simonton claims that the pancake he is holding was given to him by spacemen, the presentation took place in his own backyard, and you can't get more mundane than that.

If these 300 pages are not tongue-in-cheek, therefore, the first quibble must be with the portmanteau term itself. Harpur believes the folklorists are wrong to "assume that the Otherworld has no reality because it has no literal reality."

Its "non-spatiality," he says, "is represented by multi-spatiality. It is, so to speak, everywhere and nowhere." "So to speak" indeed; so to speak is to speak meaninglessly.

And how does one use a field guide when, in a typically unrestrained passage, he tells us that in Celtic cultures, "The fairies were sometimes said to live underground and sometimes in the air; sometimes under the sea, sometimes on islands out to the West. These places also accommodated the glorious dead. Among the

Daimonic Reality: A field guide to the Otherworld by Patrick Harpur. Viking Arkana, £18.00. Review: COLIN McCALL

ancient Greeks, the land of the dead was imagined as Hades – underground but vast, and filled with air and light."

And he quotes Alexander Polyhistor: "The whole air is full of souls, who are worshipped as dæmons and heroes, and it is they who send dreams and omens." Whether Harpur's world is full of souls is not clear.

Clearly, though, he has a great love of paradox. To "people of imagination," he writes, "the Otherworld has also been in this one. For such people, to wake is, in a deeper sense, to fall asleep; to die, to live. There may well be an end to this literal world of ours, but there can be no literal end to it because it is continuous with that other world, without end."

Is that last sentence Harpur's view or that of "people of imagination" or both? Or, if I may be permitted a pun, does Patrick Harpur want to have the best of both worlds?

He is not, he says, against psycho-social readings of strange beliefs but he is against "the kind of prejudice which prevents an anthropologist from giving credence to his informants."

Which brings us to the crux of the matter. In Hume's incontrovertible words, "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact, which it endeavours to establish." The Humean principle is relevant here.

So, when Dermot MacManus "tells us" that "a friend whom he calls Miss Patricia" saw a fairy on Hallowe'en, are we to accept it? What about the "great crowd of little beings...who appeared like soldiers...dressed in red" to Mr T C Kermod, one October night when going to a party at Cronk-a-Voddy, in the Isle of Man? Or even those members of Harpur's family who "have seen" fairies? Are we to give credence to these informants?

Fairies, we are told, are nearer to the author "historically and geographically" than "alien" sightings. Not that he regards the latter as "all that new." We might "remember the shiny little metal-men – earth spirits and Kobolds – who haunted the mines and mountains; the hooded manikins called Cabiri who figure famously in Goethe's *Faust*; and the small but mighty Dactyls, gods of invention, who were known to the Ancient Greeks."

Notice the existential language: "haunted the mines and mountains," "known to the Ancient Greeks." Should we add the Daleks, "known" to British TV viewers? Why not, if Harpur can cite *Faust*?

He continues throughout weaving incompatible strands of myth, mysticism and his "mod-

ern" alchemy. And he supports them (if that be the word) with a remarkable collection of blurred pictures mostly taken (unsurprisingly) from the Fortean Picture Library. There's Bigfoot in California, the Loch Ness Monster (of course), footprints in the snow and several UFOs, roughly with the definition of ink blots.

Harpur doesn't like "the superior air which creeps into reports of UFOs" which have simple explanations. He wouldn't; he prefers to invoke Jung, another paradoxist: "we always think that the UFOs are projections of our own. Now it turns out that we are their projections. Make of that what you will: it means nothing to me.

At least we have clear pictures, or rather "pictograms" – whatever they may be – of crop circles, which the British press revelled in a few years ago.

"In the early hours of 12 July 1990," we read here, "all the dogs around the Wiltshire village of Alton Barnes began to bark. Roofs shook very slightly and tiles rattled. A late traveller's car engine cut out. Dawn revealed an extraordinary sight..." That sets the scene for a horror story, doesn't it? One wonders who checked that the dogs barked or whose engine cut out.

Not to worry: let's get on with the "ceremonial sight." It wasn't so eerie, really, though Harpur does his best to maintain the atmosphere: "a field below the neolithic barrow called Adam's Grave, an extraordinary configuration of circles, rings, lines and 'key' or 'claw-shapes' was imprinted on the corn." And Mary Killen from the neighbouring village of Hurdley declared that "there was no possibility of a human doing that, it was too geometrical and exact." I should have thought the contrary; the very exactness pointed to a human agency, but, if Mary Killen says not...

What's Harpur's view? "The phenomenology of crop circles entitles us to call them daimonic events," he says, and he turns again to Jung, with his concept of synchronicity or "causal connecting principle," instancing an aerial photographer, F C "Busty" Taylor when flying over a field, was thinking about a "quintuplet" of circles and "musing that they would be jolly" if they were joined by a ring to form a Celtic cross. Next day, lo and behold, his wish was jolly well granted. That's synchronicity for you.

"Now, if you will bear with me," Harpur continues, "I will try to show that the 'causes' of crop circles are images which are not only analogous to each other but which mediate between each other – and they include even the alleged natural causes."

And if you have borne with that, there is a whirlwind to follow. Gods don't disdain to appear as whirlwinds, which "can be said to mediate between plasma vortices and fairies...fairies are also related to whirlwinds through their manifestation as lights...So fairies can be said to mediate between whirlwinds and UFOs."

I wish someone would mediate between Patrick Harpur and me.

BOOKS

Death with dignity

MORE than a quarter of doctors (28 per cent) in New South Wales have helped patients to die at their own request, a new survey shows. Almost all the doctors believed they had acted correctly. Some have performed voluntary euthanasia more than once. In all, 59 per cent of doctors had been asked by patients to hasten death.

Australia's Federal Health Minister, Senator Graham Richardson, says a public debate should start now so that "we can get some laws that give some protection to doctors." *VES Newsletter*, No 52.

Charles Ward says

HUMANISM PRIZES PRIVACY

BIG Brother of George Orwell's 1984, while sending shivers down my spine, was, in a way, old hat

As a child, I was familiar with an unseen presence of much larger proportions – "God." He could, I was given to understand, be everywhere at once. Night was as clear as day to Him, and He could read your thoughts, even before you had them. There was simply no escape from this far from welcome attention.

I used to wonder, when in the loo, why I was being spied on by this invisible Person. There were Bible texts which plainly endorsed this appalling state of mental, if not indeed physical, exposure. Secrecy was not allowed, though you might merely be doing your "duty." I did not mind being watched over when asleep (a job delegated, I was told, to angels), but it was oppressing that I should be haunted all day long.

Intentions as well as deeds, were, I gathered, being meticulously recorded. Since my naughty thoughts would come, my fate was sealed. Though appearing to be mercifully remote, One Day – and worse than school Adams – would come a Reckoning.

As I grew older and more sceptical, I seem to have decided that "God" must have many better things to do with His time, or maybe I just became more reckless. At any rate, I ceased to worry about the All-seeing Eye. However, being of a philosophic turn of mind, I pondered much on the fact that, while unable to escape from divine scrutiny, we hide ourselves fairly successfully in another way. The *persona* we offer to the world can mask our real nature, of which we, too, can remain remarkably ignorant. A weird "subconscious" cannily takes over the management of such psychological interferences.

These perspectives are screwed up together in an infinite variety of permutations, no one's life being exactly the same as another's. To complicate matters further, they are not all screwed up in the same direction. Male and female do not represent the bifurcation of the species; it is, for example, also divided into outward- and inward-oriented.

This is not apparently just a question of mood, although in everyone's experience either aspect may be dominant on particular occasions. Scientists might be able to tell whether we are genetically biased in favour of one or the other. We certainly do not all seem to be built the same way.

An article on chemistry in *Oxford Today* yielded this interesting fact: *The difference between the smell and the taste of an orange and a lemon depends on whether the molecule in question, limonene, is right- or left-handed.* Symbolising outward-orienta-

tion by an orange, its opposite by a lemon, I have to describe myself as a lemon, because my appreciation of privacy is undoubtedly greater than the pleasure I do also find in company. Perhaps, for you, it is the other way round. We all share the gregariousness of our species, but, as individuals, are not socially-inclined in equal measure. Being extrovert or introvert comes naturally, not as a matter of choice.

Yet, in early times, when group survival took precedence, oranges – to continue with the metaphor – may have seemed to be the only fruit. Communal existence in caves and stockades was, in any case, not conducive to privacy.

But we are more than social animals. How did the private worlds now taken for granted, and which are the crucibles of individuality, come about? Did one of our ancestors lose grip on reality and thus was isolated, being found too much to bear? Perhaps moments of lucidity, or egregious outpourings, later drew attention and promoted wild imaginings of unseen presences and powers. Was this how the first *shaman* came to be?

Thespian

Or might it have been some clumsy oaf, whose lumberings created havoc and would allow their supper to escape, who became excluded from the hunting party and found restored respect in developing some individual skill? Or a Thespian character, who found means of expressing – in rhythmic sound or dance or mime – feelings not unknown to anyone around but, until then, formless, unacknowledged. Whoever it was, however it happened, a crucial change was initiated.

The process was gradual. Step by step, those who were screwed up to the left eventually won acceptance among their companions who were screwed up to the right. The herd, the tribe, could no longer be regarded as the be-all and end-all. Privacy had established a foothold.

But it often did not amount to much and was only attainable by those who could afford it, or exploit the labour of others to maintain it, as in the slave society of the Greek philosophers.

Countless people still do not know the benefits of privacy. Across the world, those who dwell in crowded, deplorable conditions, see, with understandable envy, only the material comfort and convenience, temptingly displayed, which modern technology has produced but they cannot buy. More important is freedom to think, plan, study, work, take rest or recreation, do whatever one feels drawn to do, perhaps to make a creative contribution to society, free

from the pressures necessarily involved in a world dominated by social traditions. (Secrecy, incidentally, is not an inevitable feature of privacy, although it is often assumed to be. It may not matter what others know about one's activities, provided there is no interference.)

For a great many busy people, the opportunity to enjoy a few moments of privacy is highly valued. For some on whom time hangs heavily, the contrary is no doubt true. Yet it is hard to imagine how anyone, having tasted the liberty it brings, should ever willingly renounce this privilege.

None the less, some turn their backs on privacy, joining a kibbutz, a nunnery, or some other community. There are those who find life in a dormitory or a barrack-room preferable to that in a self-contained flat or a family home. Of course, even when involved in a communal existence, there are times when one is by oneself and, on the other hand, it is a rare person who shuns all human society, although that happens also.

While the majority of people tolerate, with varying degrees of satisfaction, their personal lives being unevenly divided between public and private, the extreme choices made by a minority do show a surprising polarisation, considering that, at root, we are made of common stuff.

No man is an island. The dictum is frequently quoted. Whatever John Donne may have implied, the statement can appear, paradoxically, either as true or nonsensical. In the sense that, below sea level, continental masses link the individual projections above the ocean's surface, no island is an island. The substratum to which all human beings belong has been remarked upon by many poets, mystics, *literati*, philosophers, even by scientists.

Writing about the evolution of human consciousness, James Hemming observed: "Unfortunately, one of the inevitable effects of consciousness was to give Man an illusion of being separate from the whole" (*Instead of God*, pp 39/40).

True, but the holistic view, valid as it is, also runs a risk of over-statement. Just as it would be absurd to insist that no island is an island because of the substratum, so it would be foolish to deny the value of our experience as individuals. But there we need to see all aspects of human nature (for example: masculine, feminine, outwardly-oriented, inwardly-oriented) as arrangements of the same ingredients, not as opposing, but as essentially symbiotic or mutually dependent.

Hence to try to engineer the submergence of one aspect in favour of another is a mistake. That is where religions indulge a common

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

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, December 4, 5.30pm for 6pm: Katharina van Gend: *Hypnosis and Hypnotherapy*.

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

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

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Monday, November 21, 7.30pm: Public meeting: *What rights do Humanists give animals?*

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, Lymington, Exmouth EX8 5HN; 0395 265529.

Ealing Humanists: Friends Meeting House, 17 Woodville Road, Ealing W5. Meetings start at 8pm. Thursday, November 24: The Rev Martin Shipperlee OSB: *Why all Humanists are Really Catholics at Heart!* Details: telephone 081-422 4956 or 081-573 1235.

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. November 11: Barry Ryan: *What a Difference a Gay Makes*.

Havering & District Humanist Society: HOPWA House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Tuesday, December 6: *Report on British Humanist Association Conference and Humanist Thoughts for the Day*. 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.

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

Kent Humanists: Meet 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. Thursday, December 8: Irene Heron: *George Eliot - a Key Figure in Humanism?* Tuesday, January 10: Fred Davies: *The Influence of 19th Century Quakers on Modern Society*. Tuesday, March 14: Peter Millican: *David Hume - A Key Figure in Humanism?*

Leicester Secular Society: Details from the Secretary, Lyn Hurst, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB (telephone 0533 622250). November 13: Nesson Danaher: *Tom Barclay, Leading Leicester Secularist*. November 20: the Rev David Jennings: *Christianity and Socialism - Opposites or Equals?* November 27: Speakers

from Media Workers Against Nazis.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, November 24, 8pm: Denis Cobell: *What Brave New World?* (Aldous Huxley Centenary).

Manchester Humanists: Holyoake House, Hanover Street, Manchester. Friday, November 25, 7.30pm: Sir Hermann Bondi: *Seeking a Full and Worthwhile Life - Aspects of Humanist Education*. Tickets £1.50. Information, telephone: 061 432 9045.

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich, 7.30pm. November 17: BHA Conference, 1994. Cliff Johnson leads discussion of *Family Values*. December 15: Linda Bishop (Director, RE Centre at UEA): *RE in Schools Today*.

Preston and District Humanist Group: Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Peter Howells, telephone 0257 265276.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, November 9, 8pm: Barry Johnson: *Submission of Struggle - Unemployment into the 21st Century*.

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 071-831 7723). List of events obtainable from above address. Winter Evening Class 1994. Tuesdays, 6-30pm to 8.30pm, November 8 until December 13 (inclusive). Subject: *The Bible - an Introduction for Unbelievers*. Tutor: Daniel O'Hara.

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, December 14: Jean Davies, World Federation of Right to Die Societies: *The Case for Voluntary Euthanasia*. Wednesday, January 11: Hilary Leighter, BHA EC: *Equal Opportunitires for Women - a Humanist Concern*.

Tyneside Humanist Group: Meets on third Thursday of each month (except August), starting 6.45pm in the Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Ulster Humanist Association: Meets 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. Info: Mike Sargent, 0903 239823.

HUMANIST HOLIDAYS: YULE 1994

**Winchester: December 24 (dinner) to
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**Half-board (full board on December 25):
£160 (£165 en suite). All rooms have TV
and tea-making facilities.**

**Book by November 25 or further
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Knight of the Open Society

OBITUARY

by David Tribe

I was with great regret that I called one of the output of my pamphleteering days *The Open Society and Its Friends* (1971). Not because I regretted – or regret – the journalistic title or any of its content, but through fear that I might be thought to be satirising the biggest and best-known (though not, in my view, the best) work of a leading humanist philosopher. This was *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) by Emeritus Professor Sir Karl Raimund Popper, who died on September 17.

Karl Popper was born in Vienna in 1902. He gained a PhD from the University of Vienna in 1928 and published *Logik der Forschung* (*Logic of Enquiry*) in 1934. No absent-minded professor, he escaped Austria before Hitler's *Anschluss* in 1938 and gained his mastery of English at the University of New Zealand, which awarded him an MA in 1937.

In the last year of World War II he published *The Open Society* and was naturalised British. From 1949 to 1969 he was Professor of Logic and Scientific Method at the London School of Economics and published a number of books and scientific papers which have made a lasting contribution to the theory of knowledge. Chief of these were *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959) and *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963), all of which have passed into several editions.

After his retirement he continued to write. Most notable of these writings were *Objective Knowledge* (1972) and a *Postscript to The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1982-83) in three volumes edited by W W Bartley: *Realism and the Aim of Science*, *The Open Universe* and *Quantum Theory and the Schism in Physics*.

Not only was this great output of work influential in academic circles, but also it attracted honours from around the world. Popper was knighted in 1965, became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1976, was made a Companion of Honour in 1982 and has won awards, decorations, honorary degrees and memberships of learned societies in Britain, Austria, Germany, France, Italy, New Zealand, Canada and the United States.

While willing to be publicly associated with freethought organisations, Popper has been a philosopher in the tradition of Ludwig Wittgenstein rather than Bertrand Russell; that is, he was content to fight his intellectual (and in earlier years his socio-political) battles in the academic arena rather than in the general media and public life. Though he wrote an autobiography, *Unended Quest* (1976), which unfortunately I haven't read, one searches in vain through humanist and other literature for personal details by or about him. While this search may disturb sociologists of knowledge, the benefit is that his work hasn't been trivialised by *historia ad hominem*.

The most lasting aspect of this work is likely to be his falsification principle. When I was a science student the verification principle reigned supreme. This stated that the object of scientific experiment was to prove (or reject) theories by producing a result compatible (or incompatible) with them. Popper however was able to show that while an incompatible result might disprove a theory, a compatible one did not necessarily prove it, since rival theories might make the same prediction or lead to the same conclusion. Empiricism should therefore be based on experimental falsification.

Although a work of great scholarship, *The Open Society* stood alone among his works as a "tract for the times." It sourced the Marxism that prevailed in the Soviet Union and the Fascism that had recently prevailed in the Axis powers to totalitarian concepts originating respectively with Hegel and Plato.

Though very different in their proclaimed goals, these concepts had many similarities and not surprisingly produced similar results. Among the similarities were an application of what he called "historicism" (elaborated in a later book): a belief in "laws of history which enable them to prophesy the course of historical events." Other similarities were the use of myth to create tabus, the application of "utopian social engineering" and the effective creation of a closed society. What was needed was "piecemeal social engineering" and "the rationalism of the open society," based on

"open-mindedness."

In 1945 Fascism was already discredited, but many intellectuals obstinately clung to the panacea of Marxism and refused to see what was actually going on in the Soviet Union. At the same time, Allied war propaganda in favour of our "Russian brothers" and "Uncle Joe" had fostered the Marxist myth. But the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s boosted interest in *The Open Society* among all but the party faithful.

My pamphlet was occasioned by the growing use in 1971 of the slogan "open society" to portray the aims of the humanist movement, accompanied by snide attempts to ridicule and marginalise the National Secular Society as a group "who are fiddling sour old tunes regardless of what is really happening in Rome" (the aberrant Vatican II).

As the society's then President, I had to refute claims of its irrelevance. Furthermore, I was concerned by the elitist, intellectualist assumption of open-society advocates that if we were all fed the same information we'd all eventually come to the same (humanist) views; by the romanticising of Pericleian Athens (though admittedly better than Sparta); and by the socio-political absurdity of pretending that "society" or a "mind" could be absolutely "open."

As far as I know, Popper didn't object to my pamphlet. But he didn't believe in absolutes either.

TRIBUTE TO CYRIL MARCUS

CYRIL Marcus was born in Edinburgh on November 14, 1904. He went to Paris as a young man and so began a lifelong interest in the French language, culture and food.

In the 1930s, he became a market gardener in the South of France, growing peaches, melons and flowers. He was well-known to the British community and stirred up much interest with his non-religious views (he was Jewish by birth).

In his early thirties, he developed multiple sclerosis and returned to England before the war. This disability meant he used a wheelchair for the remainder of his life. But he was extremely adventurous and travelled widely, often crossing to France alone in his specially adapted vehicle.

His passionate interest in all things intellectual and his love of argument made him a much appreciated member of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Radio, taped books and newspapers were his lifeline as his sight began to deteriorate,

but he continued to write articles and debate issues right up until his death on September 30, 1994.

He retained his *joie de vivre* to the end.

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Rape for the glory of God

ISLAMIC extremists are raping and kidnapping girls in a campaign of "sexual terrorism" to force them to become Muslims, the *Sunday Express* reported from Cairo (August 28). "The zealots are targeting for rape girls among the Christian Copts – so they become outcasts because they have lost their virginity," the 'paper said. "Some girls have escaped from their captors only to be killed by their [Christian] parents because of the shame. Others have committed suicide. Hundreds have now converted and live as Muslims."

Sara, 17, said: "I was walking home...I turned and saw a car slowing. It was full of the bearded men we all fear – fundamentalists. I was grabbed and pushed into the back seat. I was then taken to a house and used by a man. Then some men held me down and poured acid into my hand to burn off the cross that all Copts have tattooed there. They made me wear a veil and read the Koran all day."

An unmarried girl found not to be a virgin for any reason risks death at the hands of her family, or at the very least ostracism, the Jubilee Campaign, the British human rights group, told the *Sunday Express* – a point borne out by Jane, 17: "Rape two years ago meant I was soiled goods. I did not even know what sex was when I was brutally raped. Now my parents regard me as dead."

Liberal and leftish folk tell us that we must respect the beliefs and cultures of others. The question is: which group do you most respect – the Muslims who rape girls into Heaven, or the Christians whose sexual "culture" condemns Islam's victims to a living death?

If, like the Editor of *The Freethinker*, you regard both "cultures" as equally contemptible and savage, to be opposed and exposed by us at every turn, you might like to contribute to the fund which is essential to the journal's very existence.

Please send cheques, POs, stamps to: G W Foote & Company, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: D S Austin, J Fawbert, P Fleury, A J Martin, M Palmer, R A Wood and B C Whiting, £2 each; M Carlyle, N Green, A Marshall and M Mason, £3 each; R A Burt, £4; C Archer, H Bondi, E Chapman, M Crewe, P Danning, R Delaurey, K Heath, G Jackman, K Mack, K MacLeod, H Madoc-Jones, H McIver, R L Plack, C G Price, F Saward, O J Scott, W Steinhardt and G Taylor, £5 each; K Ahlquist, J N Ainsworth, A E Ball, K Byrom, P M Housego, R Ison, M Kirby, J Lance, J Mehta, T Millington, E Muggridge, R Richardson, M Schofield and B Thorpe, £10 each; C Kensit, £15; E C Hughes, £18; W G Grainger, £20; J Burman and J Staniforth, £25 each; J Fenton and D W Plumb, £30 each; A G Stephens £40; J E Forte, £88.57.

Total for September: £551.57

UP THE

THE action of Environment Minister John Gummer in approving the creation of an *eruv* boundary in North-West London was deplored in a resolution which was unanimously approved at the annual meeting of the National Secular Society, held at Conway Hall, London, on October 29.

And in her keynote address to the meeting Barbara Smoker, President of the NSS, took up the theme, pointing out: "The Hebrew word *eruv*, or *erub*, was unknown to most of us until about two years ago, though it has long been familiar in a number of other countries.

"In the United States there are already dozens of *eruv*s – one of which embraces the whole of Capitol Hill, including the White House. But that does not make their construction reasonable.

"In fact, they are not only unreasonable, but utterly irrational. The Talmudic prohibition of any manner of work on the Jewish Sabbath is interpreted so strictly by some Orthodox Jews that, for instance, it is forbidden to push a wheelchair or to carry objects out of doors – and prohibited objects even include a handkerchief or a walking-stick.

"These divine prohibitions must be highly inconvenient for any strict synagogue member suffering from a head-cold or a walking disability; more gravely, they may even prevent his attending synagogue on the Sabbath.

"Common-sense solutions to the problem, such as modifying this interpretation of the Rabbinical laws, are ruled out by the United Synagogue. However, Jehovah would, it seems, allow the work prohibitions to be 'sidestepped' with impunity inside an area mystically designated for the purpose. Such an area, called an *eruv*, offers the only solution acceptable to the United Synagogue to this problem of its own making.

"Jehovah might be expected to recognise the designation of an *eruv* on a map, with the appropriate invocations – but no: he apparently lacks any imagination, so there actually has to be a physical boundary to the *eruv*, thus privatising public space. It is blatant trespass, required by nothing more than religious superstition.

"Why, it has been asked, cannot the whole of Great Britain be designated an *eruv* – the coastal water's edge serving as the boundary? But that is regarded as merely facetious.

"The first public *eruv* proposed for Britain is to encircle six-and-a-half square miles of the underground Northern Line, and Hendon – a middle-class residential area with quite a sizeable Jewish population. Only two per cent of the Jews, it seems, are in favour of the *eruv*.

"Part of the proposed 11-mile boundary is marked, innocuously, by existing fences along the underground Northern Line, and sections of the M1 motorway; but that leaves unmarked stretches to be filled in by head wires fixed to 85 sturdy poles. It is argued that these poles – some of which are to be placed in front of ordinary houses and public buildings (and, from the site of a C of E school), will be no more obtrusive than existing street furniture, such as street lamps, parking-meters, and telegraph-poles. But everyone recognises that street furniture are an important utility, and most people would even accept parking-meters as justifiable, while telegraph-poles have largely been eliminated by putting cables underground at extra cost.

Wires

"Very few people, on the other hand, would accept that there is any real need for the poles. 'Need,' however, is the very word used by those arguing in their favour.

"Members of the United Synagogue, especially those who are disabled or whose children they wish to take out in pushchairs, are said to 'need' the *eruv* in opposition to the poles and overhead wires, portrayed as gross discrimination against disabled people and parents with small children, prompted by 'anti-semitism.' Even if the opponents of the *eruv* are accused of being tainted with anti-semitism. And it is not only the Reformed and Liberal Jews in the United Synagogue who oppose the *eruv*; even some of the most orthodox mentalist Orthodox Jews, belonging to Hasidic sects, are among its opponents because they do not want any relaxation of the Sabbath laws. The main ground for Jewish opposition is, however, the social integration that the proposed *eruv* is seen in what has always been an harmonious multi-cultural area of London.

"As reported by Colin McCall in *The Freethinker* (April, 1993, page 55), the Council (Barnet) had at that time, after a lengthy discussion, refused planning permission for the *eruv*. But the United Synagogue

ERUV POLE!



Photo: The Guardian

– Barbara Smoker at NSS annual meeting

in September, 1994." The motion called on "those Catholics who use artificial means of birth control to formally repudiate the teachings of their church on this issue." It also urged "moderate Muslims to similarly reject the ideology of the Islamic extremists and participate fully in all rational steps to contain the burgeoning world population."

The annual meeting also applauded "the departure of John Patten as Secretary of State for Education" and called on the Government "to abolish the use of State Schools as part time places of worship, as a first step towards separating education from religion."

Retire

Barbara Smoker having informed the NSS Council of Management that she intended to retire from the Presidency at this AGM in favour of someone younger, the Council had decided to recommend to the membership a change in the nature of the Presidency from the actively involved executive role of the past to a non-executive "honorific" office. It was agreed that the gap would then be filled by greater involvement on the part of the two Vice-Presidents.

It was unanimously decided – "to my amazement," said Miss Smoker – that the honour should go to her. There were no other candidates, and the AGM accepted the Council proposal. The meeting agreed that Miss Smoker "be thanked for her many outstanding and successful efforts on behalf of secularism and the Society."

Denis Cobell and Nicolas Walter were re-elected Vice-Presidents of the Society. David Williams was re-elected Treasurer of the Society, and was acclaimed for his role in the creation of the new Bradlaugh House headquarters. Jim Herrick (who presided at the AGM), Surindra Lal and Daniel O'Hara were re-elected to the Council.

The meeting agreed that the NSS subscription, which was last increased in 1991, should go up from £4 to £5 a year, and that members of the NSS who are also subscribers to *The Freethinker* should be enabled to renew both subscriptions at the same time.

Synagogue's *Eruv* Committee, is quoted as claiming that the decision will enable 'thousands of mothers, children, the elderly and disabled to enjoy their Sabbath to the full.'

"On the other side, Elizabeth Lawrence, co-ordinator of the 2,000-strong Barnet *Eruv* Objectors Group, is now considering recourse to the law courts, costly though that would be. Anxious to widen the issue from a merely local controversy to a national cause, she contacted me to elicit the support of the National Secular Society – possibly with a protest meeting in Conway Hall. Hence, as an initial step, the motion before this meeting, condemning the planning approval given by Mr Gummer to the first public *eruv* on British soil.

Muezzin

"We might widen the issue even further by questioning the right of similar religious impositions on the general public – such as clamorous church bells within a few yards of people's homes, the amplified call of a muezzin, and the stomach-turning crucifixes on open display outside churches."

Other successful motions at the NSS annual meeting included condemnation of "the holy alliance formed by the Pope with Islamic fundamentalists at the Cairo Conference on Population and Development

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pealed to the Department of the
ment, whose inspector, David
decided that the municipality was
ified in its decision, since its main
s of opposition were social and reli-
gious harmony rather than purely devel-
opment planning considerations.
At the same time, he described opposition
as 'an unduly narrow approach to
the needs of minority groups' and denounced
the *eruv* as being 'in danger of infringing
the Race Relations Act.'

Barnet Council had, in his view, been
influenced in being swayed by irrelevant
considerations, it seems strange that he
showed no compunction in citing such consider-
ations against himself on the other side of the argu-

minority rights should certainly be
protected, but not at the expense of equally
important majority rights.

Environment Secretary of State, John
Major – himself a recent convert to a
Christianity faith in protest against the ordina-
tion of women priests in the Established
Church – accepted Mr Bushby's recommen-
dation and has given the go-ahead to con-
struction of the *eruv* – the only proviso being
that the Department of Transport should
ensure that power lines crossing highways.

Howard Black, spokesman for the United

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Keepers of our conscience

THIS excellent little book is required reading for anyone concerned about civil rights in the United Kingdom. With the overthrow of communism in Eastern Europe and the development of Tory authoritarianism here, this country is now the least democratic in the whole continent. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act now abolishes the right of silence, so every British citizen will be guilty until proved innocent! To its eternal discredit the Parliamentary Labour Party abstained when this pernicious measure was considered by the House of Commons. That shows why politicians cannot be relied upon and the National Council for Civil Liberties is vital. As quoted in this book, in 1951 the *Glasgow Herald* described the NCCL as "the unofficial keepers of the public conscience."

BOOKS

The book chronicles how these keepers have struggled through 60 years of penury and official hostility, achieving vital law reforms by publicising legal abuses. The United Kingdom is the only country in the world without a written constitution. Its citizens are thus merely subjects of the Crown without any guaranteed rights

enshrined in a constitution. NCCL therefore has to campaign all the time against unjust laws, which in other democratic states would be declared unconstitutional by the law courts. This book succinctly describes some of these campaigns.

Liberty in Britain 1934-1994. A Diamond Jubilee History of the National Council for Civil Liberties by Brian Dyson. Published by the Civil Liberties Trust. £4.50.
Review: Coun TED GOODMAN

A major one was that against the Mental Deficiency Act 1913, which statute allowed the indefinite detention by the State of "moral defectives," including single mothers. In 1951 the NCCL published a pamphlet entitled *50,000 Outside the Law*, giving details of the huge number of people detained under the 1913 Act who were neither mentally ill nor convicted of any offence. This started a campaign culminating in the Mental Health Act 1959, which introduced Mental Health Review Panels which had to include at least one lay member - that is, a non-government employee.

In addition, the book describes the selfless people who staffed and kept the NCCL going, despite few resources and constant

police harassment in the form of interception of mail and telephone-tapping. If we lived in a decent society, these campaigners for freedom would be honoured instead of, in cases detailed by the book, hounded to an early grave.

It is not, however, a hagiography, but an honest "warts and all" history. The mistakes are clearly chronicled. For instance, having denounced Defence Regulation 18B (detention without trial) in 1939, the Executive Committee of the NCCL in 1943 deplored the decision to release Oswald Mosley and his wife. This sudden and inconsistent *volte-face* led to resignations by ordinary members and the withdrawal of support by Harold Nicolson MP.

In addition the author is guilty, like all historians, of occasional errors of fact. For instance, the organisation adopted the new name - Liberty - without approval by an Annual General Meeting, but the book implies the reverse.

Debt

Also, there are omissions. The staff (especially General Secretaries) are rightly praised, but the financial risks borne by the members of the Executive Committee (all unpaid, elected volunteers) are not mentioned. These public-spirited people are each jointly and severally personally responsible for all NCCL's considerable debt to the bank! A small-print list of the names of successive members of the Executive Committee could, and perhaps should, have occupied the page following the names of major office-holders in Appendix 2.

The book is, however, scholarly, containing a good index, excellent source notes and a clear, concise chronology. It will certainly find its way into all good law, modern history and sociology sections of libraries. But will Members of Parliament read it, or will they continue to enact authoritarian legislation, while deluding themselves that they are not thereby destroying democracy, which they crassly equate with elective dictatorship not civil liberties?

Major asset to the C of E?

by Tony Akkermans

I OWE readers a follow-up report on two matters discussed in earlier issues of *The Freethinker*: the question of John Major's religious status (May issue) and my challenge to Mary Whitehouse (March).

It may be remembered that a rumour had been put about by the *Catholic Herald* that John Major may be a closet atheist. I think it important that voters should know where their political leaders stand on questions of faith, so I wrote to ask him. To keep matters balanced I left him in no doubt as to my own position.

In reply, I got a letter from a 10 Downing Street correspondence secretary, stating that Mr. Major is a member of the Church of England and tries to abide by the tenets of the Christian religion. The letter added that the Premier's faith is essentially a private matter and is not for public discussion.

A carefully worded, somewhat ambiguous reply, not throwing much light on the matter. I can only speculate that Mr Major is one of those nominally religious people who keep their vaguely religious notions on a back burner, quite prepared to fire them up a bit when

the occasion demands - for example, during the Gulf war.

As for religion being a private matter, not for public discussion, that is a bit rich coming from a Prime Minister whose government has just seen to it that Christian worship, far from being in the private arena, remains compulsory in state schools.

Regarding my challenge to Mary Whitehouse - that she has always been much more concerned about sex than about violence - I have had to exercise a lot of patience. Finally, after a two-month wait and three reminders, all the National Viewers and Listeners Association was able to produce in terms of action against violence was a report on monitoring violence on TV. No letters to the Press - certainly not a single action in court.

But, who knows, maybe I have done some good? When the NVLA recently had another complaint to make they actually mentioned violence first, not as the usual afterthought, linked perversely in a convenient phrase with public enemy number one - sex.

Monkey trick

A MONK aged 88 conned thousands of people into believing his hen had laid a golden egg. They flocked to his Buddhist temple to worship it and ask the egg to predict the winning state lottery number.

They also handed over generous donations. But suspicious police in Bangkok dipped the shell in turpentine and found it had been painted. Abbot Luangpu Khranthaworn is under arrest. - *The Sun*, October 14.



DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill Mellroy



Party games

HUMANISM, Liberal Democracy & You is a leaflet-cum-membership form which was issued by the British Humanist Association to coincide with the Liberal Democrats' annual conference in September.

Presumably, in the interest of even-handedness, other political parties will be targeted in due course. Can we look forward to *Humanism, Socialism & You* and *Humanism, Conservatism & You*?

Even if *Humanism, Liberal Democracy & You* attracts and holds enough recruits from Liberal Democrat ranks to justify it financially, the wisdom of a registered charity sailing so close to the political wind is questionable.

Liberal Democracy exists, we are informed, to "build and safeguard a fair, free and open society. Balance the values of Liberty, Equality and Community. Free people from poverty, ignorance and conformity... Humanists share these Liberal Democrat values." So do many other social, political and religious organisations.

However, Humanists are different in that "as atheists, we do not believe that there are 'god-given' rules to guide our actions, therefore we accept responsibility for our own lives.

Because we believe that the idea of an 'after-life' is really just wishful thinking, we seek to improve the here and now for ourselves and other people, as this life is the only one of which we can be certain."

Sound stuff, and a welcome departure from the obtuseness which flaws so much Humanist literature.

But from an historical viewpoint, the compiler of *Humanism, Liberal Democracy & You* is on shaky ground. There is a strong implication that the BHA alone has campaigned against school religion, has set up projects like the Humanist Housing Association, and is entirely responsible for the "massive growth" of non-religious ceremonies.

We read, for instance, that the BHA "was founded in 1963 to be a national voice for Humanism. Its roots go back to the last century, and the fight of Charles Bradlaugh to be accepted as an atheist Liberal MP." This statement gives the impression – inadvertently, no doubt – that no other voices were raised for the aforementioned aims and values before 1963.

In fact, the BHA derived mainly from the Ethical Union which was formed back in 1896. It derived partly from the Rationalist Press Association which was founded in 1899. And right back in 1866 the National Secular Society was founded (by Charles Bradlaugh, as it happens). They cleared the ground for,

and laid the foundations of, the modern Humanist movement.

The whizz kids who came into – or briefly passed through – the new Humanist organisation in the 1960s regarded its predecessors as institutional dodos and sneeringly dismissed Bradlaugh as "an old-fashioned Victorian rationalist." That attitude may have changed to some extent, but even now the BHA omits "Bradlaugh House" from its address. Indeed the mere mention of Charles Bradlaugh makes *Humanism, Liberal Democracy & You* something of a collector's item.

Islam's shadow

A CONTRIBUTOR to last month's Letters page expressed delight "to see that *The Freethinker* is now drawing attention to the dangers of the rising tide of Islam." In fact it has been doing so for many years.

Cavan McCarthy's article, *The Shadow of the Crescent* (January 1974), warned against "the menace of the cruel and vindictive Moslem religion, and its retrogressive threat to our hard-won so-called permissive society, our secular libertarian way of life and to the personal freedom and natural rights of the individual... As freethinkers we have always concentrated our attention upon the cruelties, absurdities, myths and delusions of the Christian religion. Perhaps it is time to look over our shoulder at the crescentic shadow which begins to eclipse the disc of our libertarian sun."

Over the years, *The Freethinker* has not shirked from criticising Islam and Judaic sects. Consequently it attracted the opprobrium of racism and intolerance. Rather late in the day, the Salman Rushdie affair and tragedies like Jonestown, Waco and Cheiry persuaded politically correct radicals to discard their rose-tinted spectacles.

Bill the Baptist

THE current *Focus*, published by the Sussex Baptist Association, carries a fulsome tribute to its President "for his vision and courage in going for 10 per cent growth in members by the year 2000." That worthy labourer in the Lord's vineyard is... Bill Mellroy.

Good grief! One's attitude to Christianity may have mellowed with the passing years, but this is ridiculous.

Our stout-hearted Editor has recovered from shock. And any readers who are fearful lest there is a religious cuckoo in the freethought nest can sleep peacefully. Your columnist resembles the President of the Sussex Baptist Association in name only.

True Blues?

CAUTION should be the Prime Minister's watchword. Yet although his Back to Basics clanger still resounds through the land, John Major has launched another crusade – this time against "yob culture."

Agreed, loutish behaviour is thoroughly objectionable. But it is grotesque for John Major to huff and puff about it. For it was during the Thatcher years, when his ministerial career took off, that drunken, foul-mouthed yobs caused mayhem on football terraces and streets. In the 1980s, that decade of Tory triumphalism, the flag-draped, chanting lager lout was Britain's ugliest export.

Mr Major made little of his new campaign at the Conservative conference in Bournemouth. Very sensible; pin-striped yobbery is never far below the surface on such occasions.

Then there is the yobbish image of the party's youth organisation. The Young Conservatives have been a long-standing embarrassment to grandees on the conference platform. Their declining membership and influence is a cause of quiet satisfaction to party managers.

But the YCs are by no means a spent force and many aspire to membership of local councils and Parliament. To that end, the organisation has produced an advisory paper on "public (sic) speaking." Quite appropriate, really. The Young Conservatives are noted for talking through a nether part of their anatomy.

Hell's bells!

NORTHERN Ireland's "born again" fraternity must head the league table of Christian loopiness in these islands. Trinity Free Presbyterian Church in Portavogie, County Down, is distributing a leaflet entitled *Soviets are Discovering the Reality of Hell*.

It asserts that geologists working on a drilling project in Siberia have located the whereabouts of Old Nick's abode. They refused to continue drilling "after listening devices heard human screams of damned souls in Hell, nine miles below the earth." The experience "turned those logically thinking scientists into a trembling ruin."

There appears to be a conspiracy of silence regarding this momentous event. The "trembling ruins" have accepted bribes to keep quiet about their "ghastly discovery."

The Free Presbyterians joyfully announce: "Hardened atheists in Finland and Norway became Christians after realising that Hell is for real!"

YOU'RE TELLING US!

Six Counties article 'appalling'

YOUR appalling lead story in the October issue cannot go unchallenged. A heading like "Six Counties Sell-Out" implies moral disapproval of such actions (as in "he sold out his pacifist principles when he joined the army"). In the Ulster context it can also be taken to imply a pro-loyalist position akin to that taken, for example, by Paisley's DUP.

Yet that was not the thrust of your article at all. Instead, you broadly support the "sell-out" actions of "the betrayer" on largely selfish, materialistic grounds. When British governments sell arms to dictatorships and lie in the House of Commons about their "sleazy" and corrupt dealings, they are rightly condemned by Humanists on the mainland. But when it comes to Northern Ireland trickery and deception are apparently justified in terms of pragmatic policy. Since when did Humanists believe that the end justified the means? From my perspective (as someone who believes ultimately in some form of united Ireland), a spurious unity based on death, destruction and doubletalk would not be worth "two balls of roasted snow," and would certainly not be remotely "Humanist."

Humanists in Great Britain must realise that it is not necessary to be a Protestant loyalist to oppose moves to Irish unity. I would make two points here. First, I understood that Humanists believed in democracy. The fact of the matter is that, rightly or wrongly, the majority of people in Northern Ireland do not want unification, and their wishes should be respected, not derided as if they were all Paisleyites or dupes of the British.

Secondly, the problem is essentially an internal, ethnic conflict heavily influenced by opposing religious beliefs. This means that the people in Northern Ireland must learn to live together without the threat of sectarian hatred. If they cannot live together in the province of Ulster, then they cannot live together as part of anywhere else. When that happens, and only then, they may finally be persuaded that the Irish Republic offers convincing incentives for unity. What British Humanists should be doing is giving Ulster Humanists every possible support in opposing the pernicious influence of religion in the province instead of making cynical pronouncements on the constitutional question.

The real "sell-out" in your article was its abandonment of the essentially ethical basis of Humanism. Can there be a greater "betrayal" in a Humanist journal?

BRIAN McCLINTON
Ulster
Humanist
Association

I BELIEVE most readers of *The Freethinker* would regard the subject of the Six Counties of

Northern Ireland to be one of great delicacy requiring very careful handling by you as Editor of the magazine. I also think that most of your readers would consider that in your choice of front page headline in the October issue, you failed to display sufficient care. The use of words like "sell-out" and "betrayal" are best avoided in this debate if one is trying not to say anything which might cause the killing and maiming to start again.

The 1985 editorial which you quoted last month was written at a time when the paramilitaries were still seeking a so called military solution, but to-day's situation is quite different, and your comments should reflect this. Let's suppose that your interpretation of the factors which influenced the British and Irish governments to produce the present set of proposals is broadly correct; this still leaves you with an editorial decision as to how you present your column. With a few minor changes of emphasis, and absolutely no resort to economy with the truth, you could have produced a coherent and valuable article. As it stands, your piece contains two apparently incompatible strands. On the one hand, you enthusiastically condemn everything to do with the peace process, and on the other, you are pointing out the possible benefits which might accrue.

It is perfectly possible that the promise to the Unionists is genuine. The "plot" might well have been that no constitutional change should occur until sufficient time had elapsed to bring about a change of mind among the Protestants. You also have no way of knowing what the detail of the final proposal for constitutional change to be offered to the people of the Six Counties might be.

I know that many of your readers will have found your column rather confusing. Personally, I would go much further than that. I think you should either have another go at dealing with this serious subject or you should resign as Editor.

JOHN CLUNAS
Aberdeen

I WONDER whether the front cover headline "SIX COUNTIES SELL-OUT" was altogether wise. The situation in those counties is now delicately poised and the misleading impression, that might be created, is that freethinkers support the ultra-unionist line on recent developments.

That said, the general content of your column – that the British Government's attitude to the problem is not one of principle but one of *realpolitik* – is certainly one that I would agree with. The probability is that Major and his masters have less economic and strategic use for Paisley than the 1920s politicians and their masters had for Carson. The Six Counties were not then deemed expendable; now they are so deemed but to see that requires more sophistication than merely to echo Paisley's cry of of "sell out."

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

Changing morality

D HARROP (October letters) does not understand my views on morality. I neither attempted nor intended a "definition," but rather an explanation of how morality arises. I accept that, on my view of social necessity, morality will change as history and society change. It is none the worse for that; nor can the change be avoided. Whether we like it or not, we human beings are ripples in a stream, fleeting events in space-time in a universal flux of space-time.

Religious people seek for absolutes, eternal, unchanging sheet-anchors to which to cling. Reason denies this illusory comfort to humanists and atheists.

But I deny that relativity detracts from morality. It does not mean that "the end justifies the means"; it does not mean cynicism; it does not mean consciously adapting morals to a changing society. Rather the opposite – the changing society is reflected in our moral judgements. This does not mean "trimming our sails to the prevailing wind." The totality of social experience is the only source of morality available to us, having rejected an external power. However individualistic our value-judgements may be, they are rooted in that social experience. Some judgements may prove, as time passes, to be more relevant to reality than others. There are clearly some moral judgements which have stood the test of time, and acquire the characteristics of absolutes. But they are still limited by time and space. A billion years after the inevitable death of the last human being, what will be the significance of cruelty and killing among humans?

But now our morality is as important relatively as it might appear to be absolutely. Our social experience has made us human, has made our thoughts human and provided insights into the human condition which it is natural for us to propound and defend.

The ancient Greek founder of relativist philosophy, Heraclitus (*Nothing ever is; everything is becoming*) is reputed to have been puritanical and austere in his private life.

KARL HEATH
Coventry

KARL Heath's article about the Christian Humanist vicar who got the push raises an interesting question for Humanists.

There is a form of Christianity that has nothing to do with any Church and it might well be called Christian Humanist. It is Gnosticism. It started in the first century AD in Upper Egypt, was persecuted as a heresy by the Christians of Alexandria, was driven into exile and then took a tortuous path via Bulgaria and Bosnia to Calabria and then to Provence where it was known as the faith of the Cathars and was massively assailed by the Pope's Albigensian Crusade.

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It became Europe's underground Christianity and flourished among the *Brethren of the Free Spirit* and the spiritual wing of the Franciscans (which might have been much the same thing) from the 13th Century – see Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*: "These people could be regarded as remote precursors of Bakunin and Nietzsche." Joachim of Fiore was among its 12th Century voices and Jacob Boehme and Winstanley in the 17th. What happened then is spelt out in some detail in E P Thompson's last book *Witness Against the Beast*, an account of the antinomian tradition as finally manifest in William Blake (and partly in Elhanan Winchester, the founder of what is now *South Place* and *Conway Hall* – so it is not so far from home).

Antinomianism is anti-Nomos, and Nomos is The Law, political, moral, judicial – laid on from on high. It involved the rejection of authority in the light of the dictates of the heart and of conscience. The Quakers came of this tradition.

Christian Humanists are modern heretics much as Unitarians were 200 years ago. They could use some friends.

Is it not time to ditch holier-than-thouism in the Humanist movement? If a Christian Humanist has, with Blake, come to the conclusion that "all divinity resides in the human breast" and has disposed of a "God-up-there," should he or she not be welcome in the ranks of Humanism? Should we not now recognise a new dispensation and make it welcome in company with the Big Four at Bradlaugh House?

PETER CADOGAN
London NW6

I FIND myself in the unusual position of having to support Karl Heath's concept of morality against those who would oppose it. The secular view is that the behaviour patterns that we call "morality" have evolved selectively, and are therefore part of the natural history of our species. By contrast, "the religionist believes that human values derive from absolute values" (Smoker, *Humanism*). What we secularists are trying to do, therefore, when we discuss ethics is decide what forms of behaviour will give us selective advantage in the future. In short, secular ethics is about picking winners.

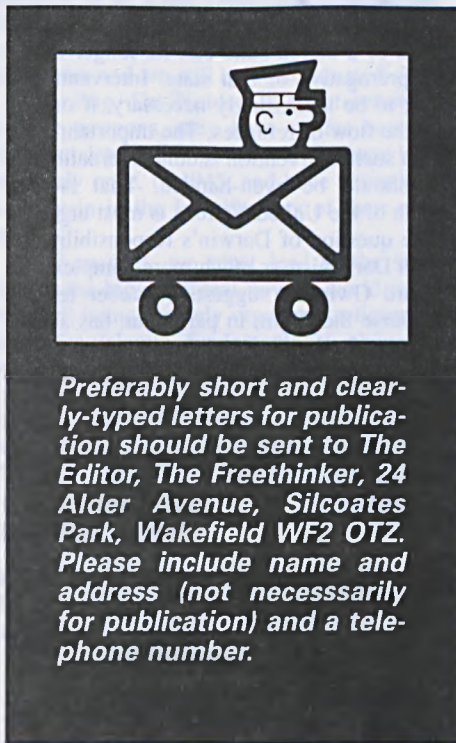
I think that where I part company with many Humanists, and possibly even Karl Heath himself, is in accepting certain implications of the secular view. For instance, a useful strategy when trying to pick a winner, is to study form. Like it or not, this forces us to go "back to basics" (to coin a phrase), for the classical Christian tradition can boast a fair number of successes over the years, while newer systems, such as Marxism, can offer none. More importantly, the secularist must be prepared to challenge all "absolute" human values; and even such ingrained principles as social justice must be tested from time to time against the biological imperative. It is evidently this implication

that has induced several of your correspondents to object to the idea of biological morality. Old absolutes die hard.

GLYN EMERY
London N1

Population doomsday

IN THE October letters, Nigel Meek ("Snag to Malthus") objects that the population doomsday has been prophesied many times, and each



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time food production has increased to cope with the extra mouths. This objection has been raised many times, and always some rather important considerations are left out:

- The food production is increased by dosing the land with fertilisers and endangering the water supplies, or by chopping down useful forests for a few years of miserable grazing. Large-scale monocultures are vulnerable to climatic change and genetic drift. There is a limit on this sort of strategy – we may even have already passed it.

- Those who mock Malthus would presumably want to see the developing world (since this is the meaning of the PC term) achieve living standards similar to the rest of us. It is up to them to show how they would deal with the consequent avalanches of pollution from sewage, waste and industrial effluvia.

- The assumption seems to be that huge populations are either desirable or necessary, or that the size of the population is mostly irrelevant. Elsewhere in the the same issue, there is an article about hell; hell is other people, as Jean-Paul Sartre tells us. Who can doubt that England, one of the mostly densely-populated countries in the world, would be a much pleas-

anter place with a population of around 25 million?

- Huge numbers of people are already living in parts of the world formerly considered barely inhabitable by reason of climate or fertility. Think of Bangladesh. Technology may be able to green some deserts for a short time, but we are a long way from weather control.

B THORPE
Cheshire

THE remarkable optimism of Nigel Meek is shakily erected on a very short timescale. I would be very unwilling to foretell the future in which an ever-increasing population is forever fully nourished, on the basis of the statistics from just 40 years during a very unusual period of our 10,000 year "civilised" history. It is precisely because over-population creates arguments about resources that famines occur as a direct result of war and tyranny.

The October 15 issue of *New Scientist* carries a special supplement on "The Future" in which the first paragraph of the first essay is a quote from J H Beadle in 1893: "All history goes to show that the progress of society has invariably been on lines quite different from those laid down in advance, and generally by reasons of inventions and discoveries which few or none had expected." Nonetheless it is prudent to consider the future in the light of current problems and trends. The *New Scientist* of October 3 carries three excellent essays covered by the title "The cupboard was bare – why tomorrow's world may starve." Pessimists and optimists alike agree: it's a race against time. Let's hope that the Nigel Meeks of the world in 50 years' time will have more to eat than their words. But that hope rests on thinking, planning and action now, not blind optimism.

I continue to enjoy *The Freethinker* after many years – keep up the good work. I like the new format. I like the range of articles. Contrary to some recent letters, I like to see articles knocking religion in all its disguises. The hypocrisy and cruelty of religion continues to sicken me after 35 years of atheism, so the monthly waft of sanity in *The Freethinker* perks me up no end.

PETER LANCASTER
Maldon

NIGEL Meek makes derogatory comments in reference to Malthus. In common with many others who make similar statements, he demonstrates a distressing ignorance of one of the important three Rs.

We read many statements claiming or denying that our food supplies are currently adequate for the present day world population. However, their accuracy or otherwise is largely irrelevant to the longer term situation in a world where official figures show a world population doubling every 25 years or so.

It is easy to forget that – over thousands of years – human populations grew very slowly. Malthus wrote his paper 200 years ago – presumably because about that time the rate of

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population growth began to show a noticeable increase.

The UK population in 1800 was about eight million. Had it then doubled every 25 years the UK population would by now be 2,000,000,000. Could we squeeze 40 per cent of the current world population – permanently – into the British Isles? *Pro rata* the world population would be 100 times greater at about 200,000,000,000! How could we feed such a population?

Few people seem to realise that even the smallest growth rates ultimately produce massive increases. A single pound invested at only one per cent compound interest at the time of William the Conqueror would now be worth £20,000. Invested at the claimed birth of Jesus, it would be worth now £400,000,000.

A one per cent per annum growth rate applied to the world population of 2000 years ago would already greatly exceed a million billion – 200,000 times larger than now actually achieved – with all land surfaces, including deserts and mountains, covered by people standing shoulder to shoulder!

I will not attempt to argue with Nigel Meek as to the reality or otherwise of a current problem. Nonetheless, no *finite* world can allow either population or food production to increase indefinitely. How much can improved methods increase crop production? How much can we extend the area of cultivated land?

Perhaps he could suggest when a starvation problem might occur given continued population growth at current or even much smaller rates? How long before that deadline should we start planning to reduce the birthrate? Presumably even he does not visualise a solution where the birthrate suddenly becomes zero?

The real question is whether we – as supposedly rational humans – think it worthwhile to plan for zero population growth *before* we become involved in the disastrous direct and indirect effects of ultimate widespread starvation.

R G SILSON
Herts

FOOD isn't the only problem (or non-problem, according to Nigel Meek) in this matter of over-population. Just imagine a day when the whole world is prosperous – and every adult owns a car...

VIVIEN GIBSON
Ealing

THERE will no doubt be an avalanche of letters criticising Nigel Meek's letter, so let me get in with some pre-emptive support.

It is clearly true that there have been some appalling destructions of parts of the world (for example, slash and burn in the Amazonian forest), and I am sure that we still throw away many things which could be used or recycled, but each case should be considered on its merits, as we Rationalists approach everything. For example, if it will take more energy to

recover a material from rubbish than to create it from the wild then recycling would result in an *increase* in the emission of carbon dioxide! As natural resources become scarcer, the equations will change and more material will be recycled (by those much maligned, but generally very rational people called traders).

Let us not forget that skilled human labour is also a scarce resource.

RICHARD SAGE
London SW5



Darwinism

NOW that we are a global village, the internal affairs of a nation state can no longer be the sole prerogative of that state. Intervention is going to be increasingly necessary, if only to stop the flow of refugees. The important thing is that such intervention is done internationally and should be even-handed. That is why reform of the United Nations is most urgent.

The question of Darwin's responsibility for Social Darwinism is much more complex than Edward Gwinnell suggests (October letters). Of course the Right, in particular, has abused his scientific theories, but they would not have done so without there being some basis within them. Ironically, the "survival of the fittest" is the part of Darwinian science now most in question; chance being a much more likely explanation.

NORMAN WOOD
Sutton Coldfield

Hard core, soft core

IT IS disturbing to see that at least two of your correspondents appear to get all of their information about pornography from right-wing moralist groups and the tabloids.

In your September issue, Brenda Able repeats the canard that the distinction between hard core and soft core porn is that hard core "as a general rule" involves "cruelty, uninformed consent, SM bondage leading to death, snuff, torture, bestiality, kiddy porn, etc."

Wrong. Hard core – entirely illegal in this country – is banned not because it is violent or degrading, but because it is explicit. That is, while it is legal to show people killing each other right on our TV screens, it is illegal to show people having sex with each other in the ways that we normally do. Hard core, then is material that depicts genital contact and/or penetration by a penis, fingers, or other objects.

Out in Europe and the rest of the English-speaking world, where the law does not concern itself with trying to hide sex from adults, the term "hard core" does not apply to mere explicit sexual material. It refers to that small category of sexual material that is less mainstream, which might theoretically range from pictures of very fat women or particularly hairy women to material dealing with paraphil-

ias – SM, foot fetishes, etc. Material aimed at gay men and at lesbians is also in this category.

Child pornography is extremely rare, despite the scare stories you hear from religious campaigners and vice cops who are desperate to keep their jobs (most of whom, by the way, are the same people). For example, virtually all cases of what is legally definable as "child porn" in the United States turn out to be *adult* porn from other countries where the age of consent is below 18 – not child porn at all. No one has ever found a snuff movie in any country in the world. Again, this is scare-mongering promoted by anti-porn campaigners, most of whom are from the moral right.

There is no restriction on the portrayal of violence in adult material in the United States. And yet, if you go into an American porn shop, you will not find images involved with "cruelty, uninformed consent, SM bondage leading to death, snuff, torture, bestiality, kiddy porn, etc."

Anti-porn campaigners seem to lust over descriptions of porn that include such violent and inflammatory images. Yet in all my years of over-viewing pornographic materials for my research, I have never found any actual pornography that is as violent and hateful as their own rhetoric.

Able further states that: "The persons in power in a domestic situation or renting situation are usually males." I can think of nothing more degrading to women than the assumption that the millions of women who willingly rent, purchase and view explicit pornographic videos in the United States and Europe are nothing but helpless bimbos who are terrorised into doing what their bestial husbands force them to do. The fact of the matter is that a considerable proportion of women (including lesbians) say they enjoy looking at porn, alone or with their partners. They are not all just mindless, obedient slaves to abusive males.

Jessie Boyd then asks, regarding the Bulger murder: "Is it credible that two such young boys could have conceived of, and carried out, with such calculated determination, an act of infant torture and murder without having been subjected to some potent external influence?" Perhaps Boyd should consider the well-reported influence that at least one of those boys suffered: he had been physically brutalised by adults.

The police made clear in the Bulger case that they had carefully looked for any influence from videos and found that the boys had not seen any videos that might have had such an influence. The judge, like many people who know nothing of the history of crime committed by children, was grasping for some explanation for this horrible outrage. If he had known the case histories of murderers of any age, he would have known that actual violence in the home was all the explanation he needed. Certainly, if he had studied crime dating back before the invention of video, he would have known that children have been killing each

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other for centuries.

Those of us who remember being children needn't look that far, of course. In the fifties, when I grew up, I saw violence and cruelty in the school-yard that was never represented in any television, movies, or comic books that were available.

Boyd also asks for sources that were not cited by Ted Goodman. Interestingly, Boyd has offered no citations for the assumptions made in her letter. (Meanwhile, is the World Health Organisation good enough for you?)

Finally, Boyd says it is a strain to believe that the unbalanced, violent pervert will be restrained, and not triggered into action, by the material. As a matter of fact, some clinicians are finding that some people whose fantasies involve illegal acts are indeed successfully using pornography as a substitute for committing those acts. But, more to the point, experts in sexual development and experienced criminologists point out that most serial killers and other violent sexual offenders come from backgrounds where sexual expression and information have been suppressed, and pornography specifically forbidden. The result is that their violence is triggered not by pornography but by the sight of women themselves.

From this, we can see that campaigns against pornography probably do more harm than good. Isn't it about time we stopped pretending that we can solve problems humans have suffered for thousands of years by censoring media that have only recently come into existence?

AVEDON CAROL
Feminists Against Censorship

Lise Meitner

ON the last page of the biography of the great scientist and lifelong Humanist Lise Meitner, the author concludes: "She died in Cambridge in 1968 and is buried in the South of England. On her gravestone is stated that that she remained, throughout her life, a Humanist."

For a long time, I have tried in vain to find the locality of her burial place. I am anxious to visit it and pay a token of homage to this genius and wonderful, awe-inspiring woman.

If any reader happens to know the place, please acquaint me with it: Walter Steinhardt, 13 Cedar Way, Slough SL3 7JX (telephone: 0753 543874).

WALTER STEINHARDT
Slough

Conchies

CONTINUING the debate on the effectiveness of conscientious objectors, I agree with Dr Holdstock and Mr Hetherington (October letters) that taking an active part in opposing and objecting to oppression and violence is a very commendable virtue, and I am in favour of it. But human nature being what it is, there is a

limit to how far this line of reasoning can go.

Through personal experience and the lessons of history, I am of the school of thought that you cannot always reason with the school bully, the casual or Attila the Hun. And you must be prepared to provide the alternative – namely, self-defence, retaliation or the threat of it.

Mr Chamberlain tried appeasement with Hitler in 1938, and see what happened. I am glad we had Winston Churchill to take his place.

Maybe one of the reasons there are not enough people objecting to war is that history proves it to be a lost cause: you will not stop Hitler, Saddam or Hamas without resorting to some sort of threat or retaliation. Objectors to them were and are still being eliminated.

Regarding Dr Holdstock's reference to nuclear weapons, they have so far been an excellent deterrent to global war and have been used only once, in 1945, and have never been used again in the last 49 years of their existence.

As Humanists, we must lead in the stand against the biggest threat now to world peace and well-being, namely organised religion, in particular Islamic fundamentalist claims to world domination.

I am prepared to try a common-sense and reasoned approach to this threat, but I will not sit idly by if I see it coming into effect: the alternatives are too horrendous to contemplate.

ALISTER RANKIN
Fife

DO your CO sympathisers think that Adolf Hitler was defeated by a band of jolly fellows making rude two-fingered gestures at him?

PETER BROWN
Glasgow

Christism

AS IT approaches the Yuletide festival, I am as usual failing to control my use of the word "Christmas." Now, most people in the movement probably think that I am being a little bit too puritanical, but for me it is not simply that I do not want to associate myself with religion and its festivals. To me it is the story and message of the Christism festival that I find myself at odds with. Let me say from the outset that this story and message is not unique to Christism, but is there to be found in all the other "isms" that were founded between one and three thousand years ago.

Twenty years or so ago when feminism was young, I had hopes that its ideas would do something to change the nature of our cultures. Before Germaine Greer told me that if an Islamic woman wanted to cover her head then it was OK. Before I heard a Catholic nun claim she was a Feminist. Before it became an instrument for defending the self-interest of middle-class women. I remember reading about how fairy tales like Cinderella and Snow White were giving to young children the wrong messages about how to value themselves.

But no one at that time actually looked at the

most propagandised fairy tale that we force down children's throats, this tale of the Virgin Birth. Now, I have to stop. Because it is up to Feminism to do the work. In the last year I have heard the rantings of those who would sacrifice freedom of speech and expression in the fanciful belief that making some types of pornography (whatever that word means) illegal would save lives. How about if we looked not at the periphery of culture and its neurotic symptoms? How about looking deeply into the errors of what we take for granted, as we used to? How about looking at the underlying causes?

How about feminists asking, why on earth do we allow small children of five or six to be forced, bribed, coerced or simply seduced into taking part in what amounts to a sexually disturbed Virginity Cult Ritual (and I think I am being mealy-mouthed with my use of language here)?

I know that there has been some work done by feminists on this subject, but is that what is being discussed by radical women? At best it is talk of nurseries and childcare and at worst it is the dangerous dreams of state censorship.

To put it bluntly, the reason why I think Humanism is more popular with men than with women, is that any literate man can see the intimate relationship between religion and war. That is self-interest. The day that women recognise the intimate relationship between religion and rape is the day that women will have grown up.

Finally, if you want a good message for your Yuletide cards, how about: *Virgins Don't Have Babies!*

CLARENCE M G WILSON
Harrow

HUMANISM PRIZES PRIVACY

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error. Devotees are induced to suppress, if not destroy, that which allows them to be themselves and thus to contribute truly to the community – their precious individuality. Instead, for them, the teaching of the chosen authority is taken to be what matters, fulfilment to be found in belonging, in conformity.

Of course, despite the fact that religions, or other ideologies, sometimes present the unpleasant prospect of a world inhabited and ruled by clones, attempts to suppress are doomed ultimately to collapse because they are essentially unnatural as well as anti-human. Nature, so to speak, has made room for variety, evolution and freedom. Because humanism, by definition, is concerned with being fully human, those who embrace it are impelled to take account of all aspects of that condition. Among these, for the reasons given, privacy is not least prized.

Agnosticism – a redundant word?

THEISTS believe in God. It is commonly said that an atheist is one who claims to disprove the existence of (any) god while an agnostic is one who does not know what to think, one way or the other, in this matter. My thesis is that these yes, no, don't know, formulations are facile and therefore misleading and should be abandoned – that, in particular, T H Huxley did us no lasting service in coining the word “agnostic.”

The truth is that we are, whether we admit it or not, strictly agnostic (without knowledge) about very many things that we often take as known and so the word is, strictly, of such general application as to have very little specific application. To illustrate this point – if I told my wife that I had met a neighbour in the street and conversed with him in prose then she might think I was being needlessly specific about the mode of my discourse at that meeting because people hardly ever speak poetry or sing arias or utter recitatives to one another when in casual conversation. (Actually, she would think I had gone off my trolley, and would probably say so, but that is by the way). I submit that “agnostic” is redundant in that same very practical sense.

To assert that xyz IS the case is, for most “values” of xyz, at best often something of a reassuring prop, something akin to whistling in the frightening darkness. Fundamentally, such assertions usually rest upon the assumptions that there is something *real* “out there” and that our senses, perhaps aided by instruments of various sorts, give us dependable

LAST WORD

by Eric Stockton

working knowledge of that presumed reality. But even without such metaphysical sophistication, even assuming (as most of us do most of the time) that reality actually is there and is accessible empirically, it remains true that usually such assertions rest upon less radical assumptions of which we are at best half-aware, tacit definitions that need reconstructing if they are not to lead us into confusion.

Barbara Smoker wrote in a *Guardian* letter recently – condemning the nonsense phrase “it is true for some people” as used by the more circumspect practitioners of Religious Education – that “a factual statement must be true or false; it cannot be both at the same time.” People with the intellectual discipline that is the necessary condition of fruitful free-thinking will not quarrel with this; on the contrary, they will proclaim it. But it does presuppose that we have dependable means of establishing fact, it does beg the question: *do we have adequate epistemology?*

Admittedly there are many simple matters of fact which can be held reasonably to be

true, or false as the case may be, on the sole assumption that sense-data are not inherently undependable means of accessing reality. It is empirically the case that *my hair is grey*.

There are many other simple matters of fact which can be relied upon and which we have to rely upon in practice but, of course, very many of these are things, like our telephone numbers, that have been contrived for human purposes and can be re-contrived differently if those in charge so decide.

But the simple (simplistic?) assumptions about reality and the access to it that our senses give us, and the perceived empirical truths and simple human contrivances that we credit on those assumptions, are not things that lay people often dispute. What they do dispute is truth claims that are not nearly so clear-cut *even on those assumptions* but about which strong feelings are held. God, or no god, is just such a matter of serious dispute generally conducted with scant regard to epistemology.

Even the most ardent evangelicals are now beginning to be hesitant about “proofs” of the existence of God and few of us would claim to be able to prove that no god of any kind exists. People now tend to see the god-idea as a belief as to fact rather than as fact itself – a belief that can be entertained, or not, according to one's estimate of the grounds offered for its acceptance.

The notion of *conceptual model* is more useful than any simple true-or-false approach to the god-question. The essence of the conceptual model idea is that it rests upon accepting that absolute knowledge is, at best, elusive but that we can, usefully, think along the lines of *perhaps it is as if reality were this rather than that then what we observe would make more sense to us*. Conceptual models are a normal part of the practice of natural science; indeed, without them, science would be a mass of unrelated facts and not much more.

The god-idea is part of a genre of conceptual models, of human life in relation to the totality of things, that some people find acceptable; alternatively, it is an idea that does not fit in satisfactorily with other conceptual models that other people prefer.

On this basis, the theist models that have come to my notice do not seem to me even to reach the credibility threshold – let alone grab my capacity actually to believe them. (The criteria according to which one can evaluate any offered conceptual model will be dealt with in a separate article). I therefore do without the god-idea, my beliefs are, literally *a-theist*.

I place the onus of proof upon those who would urge me to drop the “a-” from a-theist. I don't think they have made their case. It is not up to me to prove “that God does not exist.” I have no need to say that I am without absolute knowledge on the point; that goes without saying. “Agnostic” is, I suggest, a dated and redundant word. It applies to “them” as much as it applies to “us.”

Teachers into preachers

THOUSANDS of teachers throughout Britain are being turned into preachers by order of the Government, say Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists in a Press release.

“Over one quarter of the population are declared agnostics, atheists and Humanists,” said Mr Roy Saich on behalf of the Humanists, “yet the children of these millions of people are being cajoled by schools into adopting a religious faith.”

“Teachers are being asked to conduct Acts of Collective Worship in schools every day, and classes to promote religion have to be held about twice every week, apparently in the hope that youngsters will be converted. There seems little chance for pupils to avoid indoctrination.”

HM Chief Inspector of Schools, Mr

Chris Woodhead, for OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) has written to the Humanists telling them it is not necessary for schools to give proper free choices about religion, providing the school prospectus mentions the bare minimum legal requirement permitting withdrawal.

“The aim is to discourage the use of this right,” said Mr Saich. “For example, in Coventry the school prospectus for one school, Caludon Castle School, says ‘The hope of the Governors is that there will be no withdrawals’ and the Sacred Heart RC Primary School says ‘it is difficult to see how a pupil could be withdrawn.’”

“We believe the integrity of non-religious people should be recognised in all schools by allowing a proper free choice.”