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Free thinker

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'...and now let's pray that those damn priests never get their hands on her.'



DOG-COLLAR SEX SCANDALS

UP FRONT

with the Editor

Irish smell 'the reek of moral decay'

PASTORAL sexual abuse of the flock is as Catholic as Confession.

As a tradition of the Church, it is certainly as old as priestly celibacy (marriage has been forbidden to clergy since 1139, but marital sex after ordination was considered an *obscœna cupiditas* as early as 385).

Statistics and media stories reaching this office from all over the English-speaking world indicate that priest-parishioner bonking is almost as much a part of parochial life as bingo and the veneration of garish and crudely-cast figurines of God's mother.

Why, then, if it is so common, is it suddenly and universally front-page news that so many Irish priests lead often felonious sex lives?

Well, precisely because it IS news – because information about their activities is actually being published! Holy vows are *seen* to be quite as intellectually negotiable as my annual New Year resolution to give up smoking; parishioners' bovine trust is seen repeatedly to be betrayed by the dog-collared ones.

Until recently – until it became known that Bishop Casey had been supporting his bouncing boy with Church funds – such matters tended to smother in a squalid collusion of bishops, journalists, policemen, politicians, lawyers and similar undesirables. They all knew it was going on – but said nowt, except with a nod and wink over the ball of malt. The victims, recipients of offers they couldn't refuse, kept quiet.

It is, I suggest, an indication of the change which is taking place in Ireland that the

affairs of the Church now may be discussed so openly; that priests and bishops can be criticised without the roof falling in. It is a changing situation which should be borne in mind by those who oppose the inevitable uniting of Ireland because they fear "Rome rule."

But I run ahead of the story...

Bishops on the booze

OF ALL the articles on the current vicissitudes of the Irish Church which have appeared in recent weeks, the most brilliantly revealing was by Kevin Myers, of the *Irish Times*, which appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* on November 17.

Myers reported: "The sex abuse crisis into which the Catholic Church in Ireland has sailed this week has been sitting on the horizon for a long time. If the galleon had not been so leaky, some of the quarterdeck apparently drunk in command, and numerous petty officers in the fo'c'sle disporting themselves with unwilling midshipmen, the skipper might have been able to bring the vessel round.

"As it was, Cardinal Daly was too preoccupied – with a hierarchy which lists two bishops who have been recently treated for alcoholism and a third who fathered a child, and with a clergy about some of whom allegations of sexual abuse arrive almost every week – to take action before the storm hit."

The matter came to a head with the sordid Brendan Smyth revelations, which, says Myers, "reads more like a Paisleyite indictment than a well-documented affair."

A priest of the Norbertine Order, Smyth, now a guest of Her Majesty in the North of Ireland, was known to his superiors as a

recidivist pederast for more more than 45 years: "He none the less was able to engage in his hobby of child abuse – repeatedly, ruthlessly – for the best part of half-a-century. In 1968, he was accordingly given psychiatric counselling."

He was also given access to children. During his time in Belfast, he serially abused a number of children. Most of these are now adult – five known victims have broken marriages; two have attempted suicide.

At some stage, says Myers, the Catholic hierarchy discovered his career, but did not inform the police. Instead they sent him to the USA, where he abused children in Rhode Island and North Dakota. The Norbertines have since paid \$20,000 to one of his victims: "...one suspects that these are the first pebbles in an avalanche which could send the Order into financial liquidation."

Returning to Ireland, Smyth was given the job of chaplain in a children's hospital – where else? – but in the meantime a victim's family in Belfast, "after years of obstruction and inaction by the Catholic Church," informed the RUC, which sought his extradition from the Republic.

The extradition papers, for reasons as yet unstated, remained on file in Dublin for seven months – and we all know what happened to Albert Reynolds when *that* became common knowledge.

Episcopal high-jinks

RECENTLY, Kevin Myers reports, numerous other sex scandals have "surfaced like swamp gas, popping and dispensing the colonic reek of moral decay."

Never mind Bishop Casey and his episcopal high-jinks with an American barmaid. Never mind the aged priest who died in November in a Dublin homosexual massage parlour (happily, there was a brother priest on hand to administer the last rites). These cases were adult with adult.

But: "The yet-to-be-heard Madonna House affair involving possibly 100 alleged sex abuse victims in a home run by nuns is perhaps the largest case pending... In County Tyrone, a Servite brother was jailed for indecently assaulting three 11-year-old girls. A priest in Belfast was accused of indecent assault on several boys..."

And so on...and on...and on.

What is particularly galling to many Irish people is repeated proof that in the past the Christian response to such cases has been to protect the Church and to shelter its errant priests rather than to protect victims by the use of common law.

CHRISTMAS CHEEK

THE price of newsprint has gone up – again.

Such matters are beyond our control. We can respond only by increasing our income from sales and, of course, from the fund. In both areas we are almost entirely in the hands of our readers.

Lacking the resources for expensive promotion and advertising campaigns, we rely on those people who know that Britain *needs* an avowedly atheist, secularist, freethought journal to gain new readers and to make generous contributions to the fund which pays so many of the bills.

Dare we, as unbelievers, ask for a special Christmas box? Of course. We've the cheek for anything when it comes to ensuring the regular monthly appear-

ance of *The Freethinker*.

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

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Total for October: £240.

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UP FRONT

with the Editor

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As Kevin Myers says in his *Daily Telegraph* piece: "Cardinal Daly inadvertently admitted this when he wrote to the family of one of Smith's victims, 16 months after they had first complained about his activities: 'I am sorry to hear that the trouble continues...but Father Smyth is not governed by a bishop but by his own abbot, and only his own abbot can tackle the problem.'

"That sentence says an entire volume. Another agency could have tackled the problem of children being raped. It is called the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Cardinal Daly had no problem urging his flock to inform the police about political terrorism. With the sexual terrorism of a priest against infants, he took a different line."

But back to my point that fundamental change is taking place in Ireland. In *The Guardian* on November 19, another *Irish*

Times man, Fintan O'Toole, published a major article which suggested that the Dublin Government crisis had finally broken the hold of the Catholic Church and of Irish politicians who thought they could exercise power in private.

A quote or two from this front-line writer: "Quite simply, a young, highly educated and largely urban population is not prepared to accept that the exercise of power in Ireland is none of its business...The hypocrisies and failings which had always been present within the Church were now coming into the open. The failure of the Church to understand what was happening was revealed with stark clarity in the Smyth affair...The idea that the appropriate people to speak to might be the police rather than the superior of Father Smyth's Norbertine Order does not seem to have occurred to the Cardinal. Even in the 1990s, the Church had not grasped the fact that most Irish people now find such notions of unaccountable authority intolerable."

Professor Desmond Clarke, a philosopher who has studied the relationship between Church and State in Ireland, told *The Observer* (November 20): "Many individual citizens are going their own way and not following the guidance of the Church. People who can't have divorces just get new partners and live together. Many people who officially belong to the Church are ignoring Church teaching."

In other words, people are voting with their feet – and with other interesting parts of their bodies.

Church attendance has dropped by almost 10 per cent in the past decade. Religious vocations are falling: Professor Clarke opines that many of the applicants are likely to be the sort of people who are bringing the Church into disrepute: "They're failing to attract normal people. In the old days, if you took 100 people, about nine or 10 would be a bit dodgy. The problem now is that the other 90 are not applying."

Professor Clarke believes the hierarchy will adopt a low profile during the divorce referendum expected next year, but he claims that its reticence will be tactical.

"I'm willing to bet that the people will approve the divorce Bill, and the Church doesn't like backing horses which don't win. They've decided to put all their eggs into the basket of controlling education in the hope of shoring up their position," he said.

But even that cloud has a silver lining. Professor Clarke predicts that control of education will not be enough to save the Church from ultimate defeat: "The more the Catholic Church tries to exert its influence where it doesn't belong, the more it triggers an anti-clerical response. From now on, whenever the Church takes sides on one of these issues, it is bound to lose."

And, indeed, as another story in the same issue of *The Observer* notes: "Mr Reynolds said it was his ambition to be remembered as the leader who 'let in the light' on Irish society. This was interpreted by many people as a pledge to preside over a more open government and to adopt a liberal stance on social problems that had traditionally bedevilled Irish society because of the overwhelming influence of the Catholic Church.

"To an extent, Mr Reynolds succeeded in bringing his traditionally conservative party some way along this road. Homosexuality was decriminalised despite the opposition of the hierarchy. Contraceptives are now openly on sale. A referendum guaranteeing women the right to travel to Britain to have abortions was passed. But in terms of public cynicism about the relationship between Church and State, it is revealing that when rumours swept the Dail...that one or more bishops had made representations to the Government to stop the extradition of Father Brendan Smyth, they were generally believed."

Monkish habits

IN *The Independent* of November 21, James Fenton said of the sex scandals: "Well, the Catholic Church in Ireland is in a happy position as far as setting things right is concerned. If it wants to discourage these worse than monkish habits, all it has to do is put an end to compulsory celibacy and let the clergy know that they are subject to the laws of the land.

"Easy, isn't it? A mini-reformation in the South. And what a contribution to the peace process! The Catholic Church could try to reform itself a little. But it will not."

Mr Fenton is probably right: the Church will not try seriously to reform itself: it is too arrogant, too convinced of its own infallibility, *really* to believe that it needs so much as a *soupcçon* of reform.

And that is why it is being sidelined. Those who need to be classed as believers will continue to describe themselves as Catholics, but will grab the soft-centres from the Milk Tray of doctrine and ignore the hard, dark bits which don't suit their palate.

There are sound economic reasons for all this – the sex abuse scandals just happen to have been the catalyst which sparked public discussion and released unprecedented criticism. Revelations, say, of financial corruption in the Church might have served almost as well. The important point is that Ireland since the war has taken great strides along the road to industrialisation – and history shows that when you leave behind a peasant-based economy, you discard its peasant-based religion.

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Editor's address:

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Silcoates Park,
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NEWSDESK...NEWSDESK...NEWSDESK

ALL IN THE MIND: Near-death experiences, in which people claim to pass into Heaven or see bright lights or supernatural beings, may be nothing more than fainting fits, according to German research. Descriptions of near-death experiences matched those of people who were made to faint, reflecting a lack of oxygen to the brain rather than contact with the after-life, say Dr Thomas Lempert and colleagues from the neurology department of the University Clinic Rudolf Vichow, Berlin.

They noticed striking similarities between the hallucinations reported by fainting patients and those of near-death experiences. They induced fainting, lasting up to 22 seconds, in 42 healthy young volunteers by making them hyperventilate, then to breathe out with mouth and nose closed until they passed out. The subjects reported hallucinations, with a perception of lighter colours which could intensify to a glaring brightness, as well as landscapes and familiar people. They also reported out-of-body experiences, in which they observed themselves from above, and noises which ranged from roaring to screaming to unintelligible human voices.

The doctors say: "Most subjects described the emotional experience of syncope [fainting] as pleasant, detached and peaceful, making them unwilling to return. Some compared it to drug or meditation experiences. Two were reminded of an earlier post-traumatic near-death experience."

The Berlin team found 47 per cent of the syncope group said they were entering another world, compared with 32 per cent of near-death experience patients. Out-of-body experience was felt by 26 per cent of the near-death patients and 16 per cent of fainters; visual perceptions were seen by 23 per cent of patients and 40 per cent of the syncope group, and noises or voices were heard by 60 per cent of the fainters and 17 per cent of the near-death patients.

The only major differences were that 32 per cent of the near-death patients said they had undergone a review of their life, and none of the fainters had, and six per cent of the near-death group claimed knowledge of the future, whereas none of the fainters did.

The researchers conclude: "Our experiment confirms the potency of cerebral hypoxia [lack of oxygen] to induce near-death experiences rather than a glimpse into another life after life." SOURCES: *The Lancet* and *The Guardian*, both September 16, 1994.

OPPOSITE SECTS TALK: The Methodist Church has held talks with the Archbishops of Canterbury and York about rejoining the Church of England. The initiative, discussed at a meeting between the two Anglican primates and senior Methodists, is designed to repair a breach which began in 1784 when John Wesley started ordaining his own clergy. Senior figures in both churches believe reunion is inevitable and can be achieved as early as the year 2000. Dr Carey and the President of the Methodist Conference, Dr Leslie Griffiths,

are both in favour, while the departure of Anglo-Catholics from the General Synod following the ordination of women priests has removed a major obstacle. The move comes nearly 25 years after Anglo-Catholics in the Synod blocked a reunion scheme which had strong support in both the Methodist Church and the Church of England. Under it Anglican priests' orders would have been conferred on all Methodist clergy while some Methodist leaders would have become bishops. But Methodists who objected to the concept of priests and bishops would not have been forced to recognise their clergy as such. Similar proposals are likely to be on the table in the new negotiations, expected to begin next year. In the meantime both Churches are to hold "talks about talks." Methodist church membership fell from 635,000 in 1969 to 408,000 in 1993. SOURCE: *Daily Telegraph*, October 28, 1994.

MENTAL HEALTH NEWS: Christians have been warned not to drive while under the influence – of the Holy Spirit. Dr Patrick Dixon, a Christian doctor and writer, issued the warning in the wake of the so-called "Toronto blessing," which is said to make evangelical Christians fall over and laugh hysterically. Up to 4,000 churchgoers in the UK are believed to have been "seized" by the spirit, fallen to their knees and spoken in tongues since it appeared in Britain in January. Among those affected are a Chief Constable, an MP and senior bishops, according to Dr Dixon, who has spent several months investigating the phenomenon. Some people have been unable to walk after meetings and have been carried to their cars, he said in a new book, *Signs of Revival*.

"A friend of mine was clearly in no fit state to drive after one of these meetings and I had to drive him home," Dr Dixon said. "Some had to be carried to their cars and laid out in the back. I have heard of others being stopped by the police. If in doubt, people should not drive or there could be a most terrible accident."

Dr Dixon believes the experiences are altered states of consciousness but says this does not "negate the sovereignty of God." He concludes that the "Toronto blessing" is entirely consistent with historic Christian experience, noting that the early disciples were thought to be drunk when the spirit came at Pentecost. SOURCES: *Daily Telegraph*, and *Yorkshire Post*, both November 12, 1994.

SCHOOLS THE KEY: A prominent "Loyalist" on a tour of the US to promote the peace process supported the integration of schools in the North of Ireland. David Ervine of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) said schools were among the first institutions he would see changed to start building trust between Catholic and Protestant communities. However Gusty Spence, also of the PUP, favoured working with adults before changing educational institutions. "Before we start with the children, let's start with the adults, let's start with the educators," he said. SOURCE: *Irish Independent*, October 26, 1994.

BARBARIANS: Hands and legs of thieves and looters in Somalia are being severed on the orders of an Islamic court set up by Muslim fundamentalists. Muslim leaders say that, after four years of civil war and anarchy, Somalis are turning for guidance to a strict interpretation of the Koran. But critics of the new court fear that fundamentalist groups are trying to win control of any new government by exploiting the chaos in Somalia. The first court to follow Sharia, or Islamic Law, is in north Mogadishu, in territory controlled by the self-styled "President" Ali Mahdi Mohammed. He says the court's effect has already been felt: incidents of robbery and banditry are down and it is now safe on the streets after dark.

The hands of three thieves who stole more than the minimum limit of £1.50 have been chopped off on the steps of the court. Armed bandits are dealt with more harshly: their right hands and left legs are severed simultaneously.

Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Muhiddin, Chairman of the Committee for Islamic Sharia, said: "I don't believe the judgment of the Koran can be wrong. According to the Koran, there is no appeal at all, so sentences are carried out immediately." SOURCE: *Daily Telegraph*, October 29, 1994.

ABORTION REALITY: The number of Irish women having abortions in Britain is rising, it emerged as a former director-general of the World Health Organisation called on the Republic of Ireland Government to support non-directive counselling for those in crisis pregnancies. Latest figures obtained from Britain show 3,352 Irish women had abortions there in the first three quarters of 1993 – and were on course to exceed the total of 4,254 for all the previous year. The most up to date figures compiled by the UK's Office of Population Census and Surveys for July, August and September of 1993 showed 1,117 women with Irish addresses had abortions over those three months, compared to 1,035 for the same period the previous year.

Dr Halfdan Mahler, a former head of WHO, called on Irish political leaders to do "nothing to restrict the right of Irish women to seek or obtain non-directive pregnancy counselling care." He was introducing the Irish Family Planning Association's annual report which warned: "Years of interference and censorship have been marked by an increase in abortion statistics. The best thing we can do is to respond to this reality by putting in place mechanisms to support women's health." The report shows a substantial number of under-16s coming to the association for contraception advice, while a research study undertaken by MA student Catherine Conlon found 193 of 231 women who sought pregnancy counselling went on to have abortions.

Ms Conlon said: "The most disturbing, very sad statistic is that 69 women or 30 per cent of those attending the IFPA, had not told anybody about their pregnancy. Their experience can only have been one of intense loneliness, isolation and fear." SOURCE: *Irish Independent*, October 22, 1994.

Court challenge to eruv 'hijack'

NSS treasurer David Williams will run appeal fund

ENVIRONMENT Minister John Gummer's approval of plans for an eruv religious "boundary" in North-West London is to be challenged in the High Court by a secularist couple who claim their home has been "hijacked" to become part of the United Synagogue's scheme.

Spearheading the High Court objection are Elizabeth and Jeffrey Segall, of Cricklewood Lane, NW2.

And David Williams, treasurer of the National Secular Society and managing director of G W Foote & Co, publisher of *The Freethinker*, has been invited to administer the fund which has been created to help finance the appeal. NSS officers have agreed to the new headquarters at Bradlaugh House being the focal point of fund-raising. October's annual general meeting of the NSS unanimously approved a resolution which deplored Mr Gummer's action.

Mrs Segall said: "We congratulate Barbara Smoker on her clear and comprehensive summary of the eruv saga, published in the November issue of *The Freethinker*."

"We would be doubly affected by the Barnet eruv proposal in having a pole adjacent to our side fence, and having the side and front walls of our house used as part of the eruv boundary. Our declaration, as non-believers, that we do not give permission for such religious use of our property, was ignored by Barnet Council, the Planning Inspector and Mr Gummer.

"We therefore felt impelled to lodge a challenge in the High Court to the Secretary of State's decision to allow the eruv. A key point in our case is that the 'hijacking' of our house for a religious purpose violates our right to manifest our secular beliefs.

"Such legal action is very costly. Thanks to the support and encouragement of the NSS following our approach to its President, Barbara Smoker, an appeal for funds has been launched on our behalf, to be known as the Eruv Challenge Fund. David Williams has kindly agreed to be treasurer, and the account will be administered by him."

Mrs Segall warned: "It is no secret that the Barnet eruv proposal is a test case, and, should it be allowed to go ahead, applications for eruvs are ready and waiting to be launched in several other parts of the country.

"Our Court challenge is therefore not simply a local Barnet matter, but is also of national significance. We hope readers will give generously to help us to succeed in preventing the Barnet eruv being established."

unsightly, unacceptable in the conservation area, and unnecessary addition to street furniture, and hazards from wires); individual (loss of value of property, use of poles by intruders, aversion to living in a sectarian "domain"); religious (contrary to Jewish law, divisive between religions); and social (ethnic disharmony, demographic changes).

According to one estimate, only about 400 members of the United Synagogue would be relieved of the religious restrictions by the proposed eruv in Barnet. It is not needed by a majority of Barnet's Jewish community, as some do not observe the Sabbath prohibitions on carrying and pushing (some members of the United Synagogue, and non-orthodox and non-religious people) while others regard the proposed eruv as a violation of the Sabbath (the ultra-orthodox).

The proposed poles and wires do not have any intrinsic religious significance, and are considered to be part of "an actual, not a notional, boundary." They are therefore justifiably perceived by some as sectarian symbols of territoriality. For others, it is unacceptable for such structures to be erected to designate an area of the Borough as having special significance for the practice of any one religion.

The unfortunate rise of ethnocentricity in many countries should be a warning to us all, say objectors. Apart from the "ethnic cleansing" in former Yugoslavia, ethnic violence has been experienced in Germany and other European countries. And in the USA, explicit Jewish and black ethnocentricity has led to confrontations between these communities.

Britain has a multicultural tradition, which is well established in Barnet. Eruv poles and wires could threaten this, objectors insist. They would be potentially an incitement to anti-Semitism and to attacks on the structures, which could lead to the formation of eruv vigilantes. The situation could be exploited by racists who might instigate public violence. Ethnocentric effects on the outlook of the rising generation in Barnet are likely to develop.

But what of minority rights? This issue can be resolved by the recognition that rights and privileges also imply duties, which are incumbent on both the majority and minority groups. Just as the majority are sensitive to the welfare of minorities, who are welcome, so minorities ought to be equally sensitive to the feelings and interests of the rest of the community.

Objectors say a solution would be for the Chief Rabbi to issue for British Jewry a general dispensation from the Sabbath prohibitions on pushing and carrying when humanitarian or caring considerations exist.

Cheques and postal orders, made payable to Eruv Challenge Fund, should be sent to David Williams, NSS, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. (Any surplus in the fund after the appeal will be donated to UNICEF).

The Segalls explain that an eruv is a notional communal area ("domain") in which a section of religious Jewish people are absolved from observing Sabbath prohibitions on carrying (for example, house keys) and pushing (for example, pushchairs) outside their home.

The boundary of the eruv proposed in Barnet by the United Synagogue Eruv Committee would be defined mainly by the frontages of private houses and other buildings, railway embankments and motorway barriers. The boundary would be completed by the erection of poles between which wires would be suspended over highways and at other sites where the "existing boundary" is lacking. The eruv area would cover about 6.5 square miles.

Hazard

In February, 1993, Barnet Council rejected the Eruv Committee's planning application for the erection of the poles, but an appeal to the Department of the Environment succeeded.

Opponents of the Eruv Committee's original planning application who made specific objections to Barnet Council included: Corporation of London, Department of Transport, All Saints Church of England School, seven Orthodox Rabbis, Humanists, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (who say that fine wire is a significant hazard to flying birds), Hampstead Garden Suburb Conservation Area Advisory Committee, Finchley Society, several residents' associations and amenity groups, and more than 200 individual residents.

The objections covered a variety of concerns: environmental (poles and wires

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, January 8, 5.30pm for 6pm: Members' Forum and Welcome to 1995.

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

Chiltern Humanists: Friends' Meeting House, Berkhamstead (near The Lamb pub). Tuesday, December 13, 7.45pm: *Darwin Updated*. Introduced by Ralph Ison, scientist and Humanist. Details of group from 0296 623730.

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, December 19, 7.30pm: *The Sea of Faith Movement*. January 16: *The Arms Trade - the Ultimate anti-Humanism*.

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. 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.

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).

Lewisham Humanist Group: Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, December 22, 8pm: Winter Solstice Party.

Manchester Humanists: Information, telephone: 061 432 9045.

Norwich Humanist Group: Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich, 7.30pm. December 15: Linda Bishop (Director, RE Centre at UEA): *RE in Schools Today*. January 19: Paula Grierson: *Themes of Freedom and Beauty in Buddhism*. February 16: *Talking to the Quakers* (at Friends' Meeting House, Upper Goat Lane).

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, December 14, 8pm: Frank Abel: *That Was The Year*. Wednesday, January 11, 8pm: David Rogers: *Community Building*.

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, until December 13. 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 Opportunities 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. No meeting in December. Info: Mike Sargent, 0903 239823.

Freethought History:
Fascinating US publication is in danger of closing through lack of support. Subscription: \$10 a year to any address in the world. Details from Fred Whitehead, Box 5224, Kansas City, Kansas 66119, USA

THE MAN WHO INVENTED CHRISTMAS

A MAN and a woman are proceeding slowly down a rough country road. They are dressed in the manner of their nation. She is riding on a donkey and he is walking at the animal's head. They are deep in conversation.

She: "Joe, why do we have to go all this way?"

Joe: "You know very well! How many more times have I got to tell you, you silly moo? If I'm not to be done for too much tax I've got to obey the law and go and register at Bethlehem. I've very little wood left in the yard, orders are not exactly flooding in – and thanks to you I shall shortly have another mouth to feed."

She: "Oh Joe, you are unkind. You know there has never been anyone else but you. How can I help it if the Archangel Gabriel came to me?"

Joe: "Archangel my foot! It's that damned cousin of yours. I wish I'd never agreed to your visiting her. Elizabeth should know better. A woman of her age getting pregnant because she has some silly dream. She put ideas into your head and now look at you. You talk about dream messages. It's that damned goat's cheese she's always serving up late at night. I had a nasty dream myself the other night. Still, I don't blame you for that. I ate the stuff you brought back with you. Goat's cheese doesn't agree with me. Anyway, you're pregnant now and I still love you, so we must make the best of a bad job. But there's to be no more carrying on behind my back in future or else..."

The wind carries the threat away towards the hills.

The couple having started their journey late in the day, it is now dark.

She: "Oh look Joe – what a lovely star! Let's follow it."

Joe: "What do you think I've been doing for the past half-hour? It happens to be shining in roughly the direction I want to go. But I agree it's a lovely clear night and the stars are particularly bright. A good job, too, or it might be raining and we are going to find it crowded in town. I only hope we can find a place to stay."

They walk on for another hour before Joe peaks again.

Joe: "May, now that I'm over the shock of it all, I'd like to know who it was."

May: "What do you mean 'who it was'?"

Joe: "Oh come off it – you know damned well what I mean. You can't be that stupid. Who did you sleep with at your cousin's? I

know it gets cold at nights, but don't you think you went a bit too far? Had you had too much to drink?"

May: "I did have a glass of wine or two but, honest, Joe, I didn't feel a thing, and I did have this dream. Don't you believe in dreams? I do."

Joe: "Me? Believe in dreams? OK! You're not going to tell me, so I'll drop the subject. And anyway, that looks like an inn up ahead and it's getting late. I wonder if they'll have some nice mutton stew? I'm starving. They seem to have enough sheep around here to feed a multitude."

Joe and May enter the *Cock and Bull*.

Joe: "Ah landlord, have you a room for the night?"

The landlord looks suspiciously at May.

An alternative Nativity tale by Ralph Ison

Landlord: "Are you two married? Forgive my asking, only we have a lot of strange goings-on at this time of the year and I have the reputation of my house to think of."

Joe: "She is my espoused wife, but God did that to her."

Landlord: "Oh yeah? Well mate, I'm sorry I'm all full up in here, but you can shack up with your 'espoused wife' in the cow barn, if you like. There's some nice clean straw and the cows may still have some milk. Mutton soup? No, sorry mate – that lazy lot of shepherds up on the hill spend all their time star-gazing. Haven't seen sight nor sound of them for days, but they should be coming in shortly for supplies. I'll send them in to see you when they come. They may have some meat to sell."

Joe and May settle into the barn and only just in time. The bumpy ride on the donkey has been the straw on the camel's back for May, who gives birth with only poor old Joe to attend to her. I suppose it was just as well that he was a carpenter and useful with his hands and also that he had some knowledge of hygienic midwifery, as what would have become of poor May?

A little later on, the shepherds arrive at the inn and tell the landlord one of their

cock-and-bull stories – of seeing a multitude of the Heavenly Host.

Landlord: "Now come on lads, I don't see you for days and then you come in here with more of your larks. I've had a hard day and I've already had to deal with an man and woman out in my barn who believe that God is responsible for their new son. It beats me how daft you country folk can be. I would have thought you'd know more about nature and sex than you appear to do. Yes, you can go and see them, if they'll have you."

Joe has just settled down and nodded off to sleep when he is disturbed by some shepherds coming in and wanting to see the baby. They are crowding around May and appear to know her.

Joe: "What the hell do you think you are doing? May, who are these guys and what are they doing here? *Do you know them?*"

May: "Of course I don't know them – and don't be so rude! They've only come to see the baby because the angels told them to."

Joe: "I'm getting a bit tired of you and your angels. Why is it that I never see all these mysterious beings? I think something very funny is going on and I intend to get to the bottom of it. Now get rid of these people and let's get some sleep."

The shepherds leave and Joe once more dozes off – only to be roused by a loud hammering on the door.

Joe (to himself): "If I'd known what I was letting myself in for, I'd have married Rachel instead."

He goes to the door and opens it.

Joe: "May, there's three more geezers out here in fancy dress who say they've got some gold, frankincense and myrrh for the baby. That landlord must be telling the world about us."

May: "Oh do let them in, Joe. We can do with all the help we can get. The gold will buy that wood which you want, and the frankincense and myrrh will help to cover the smell of these cows."

Joe invited the strangers in, and while they spoke to May he went and lay down in the shadows. The night was nearly over and there could be no more thought of sleep.

Joe (thinking): "Perhaps May wasn't so stupid after all. Perhaps we're on to a good thing here. We've only got to tell people that daft story of May's and they'll bring us all we need. I might even be able to give up the carpentry business. Well, I don't know where it's all going to end – but it seems that Christmas has certainly come for me..."

Forward to basics, Sunday listeners told

NATIONAL Secular Society vice-president **Nicolas Walter** gave the Comment on the Radio 4 *Sunday* programme on October 30:

The media debate about standards in public life is curiously unreal, like so much in the media and in public life. The media don't just report but create events which seem more real than real events. And public life isn't just ordinary life in public, but a different kind of life which seems more real than private life. Mix the two together, and reality disappears.

What is the reality? The most obvious problems may not be solved, at least in the short term, but they must be faced. On one hand, the present government is too powerful and has been in power too long. A great advantage of parliamentary democracy is the chance to vote the scoundrels out from time to time, whoever they are, and 15 years is too long for anyone. On the other hand, many owners and employees of popular newspapers and broadcasting channels are just as bad as the people they build up and knock down, and are part of the problem rather than the solution.

Rebuild

People in power and people in the media use each other to create spectacles which are fun to watch but don't have much bearing on the true situation. What is the situation? On one hand, too many little people have no work or no homes or no hope. On the other hand, too many big people have no morals and no manners and no shame. What is to be done? All of us, whatever our beliefs, should work to rebuild a civil society from the bottom upwards. It's not a matter of getting back to basics; we must go *forward* to basics, and learn as we go along what we really believe and what we really want out of life, whether private or public. As the feminists say, the personal is the political; and the fight for better standards begins in our own lives. Let's get up and get on with it.

At least we can still protest, despite changes in the law; and we have plenty of opportunities. Next Saturday is Guy Fawkes Day. Perhaps this should be celebrated more seriously, and poor Guy should be turned from a villain into a hero – the only person who ever went to Parliament with honest intentions!

It's all do

ATHEISTS are sometimes asked why they join in Christmas festivities. The same question might well have been asked of the early Christians. Why did they join in the pagan celebrations of the Winter solstice? How many modern Christians know that, for the first five centuries of Christianity, there was no Christmas – no *anno domini*? No one knew, or pretended to know, when Jesus was born – not the year, still less the month and the day.

Some time ago a churchman, deploring the commercialisation of Christmastime, produced the pun:

CHRISTMAS SACRED CHRIST MASSACRED

This implies a claim by Christians to monopolise the season, claiming it as their own. But what is Christmas? Christians have the right to celebrate the Nativity, but have they the right to seize part of the calendar as theirs, as theirs alone?

From ancient times, the Winter solstice has been a festive time, passing the shortest day, anticipating Spring, crops regeneration and new life. For several days after December 17, the Romans celebrated Saturnalia, hanging greenery such as laurel leaves, lighting candles and exchanging presents. On one day, the masters waited upon their slaves – a custom still preserved in the British Army, where officers and sergeants serve Christmas dinner to the other ranks. The Romans also made New Year resolutions, and said "Jupiter bless you!" when someone sneezed.

Like Christmas, Saturnalia was a season of Good Will. Saturn had been the god of the long-lost Golden Age. The Romans credited their legendary

king, Numa Pompilius, with instituting the festival seven centuries before Christ. He was the successor of Romulus, and was regarded as a incarnation of Saturn because of the wisdom and benevolence of his reign.

In the 3rd Century AD there was a great rivalry between Christianity and Mithraism, especially for the allegiance of the Imperial Roman soldiers upon whose support the Emperor depended. In December the Mithraic soldiers celebrated the triumph of Good over Evil, and the Christians could not afford to appear at this joyful time. Early in the 4th Century, Constantine decided in favour of Christianity as the official religion.

If the early Christians thought about the birth of Jesus, they would probably have followed the Eastern association of the Nativity with the Feast of Epiphany – in which case they would have chosen January 6. "Epiphany" means "manifestation" and is associated variously with three events.

First, the manifestation of Christ's divinity. After Jesus is baptised by John the Baptist, God the Father's voice from Heaven declares him to be his son.

Second, the manifestation of Christ's natural power. The first miracle, at the Cana wedding feast, was once celebrated on a carved wooden panel in London off-licence:

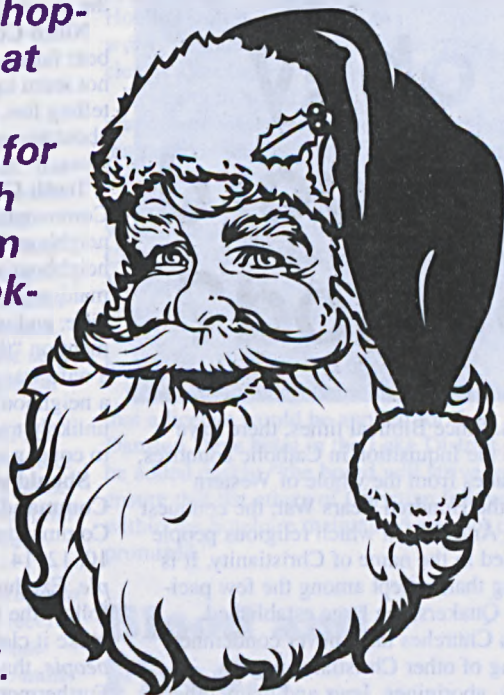
*It was a miracle divine
changed the water into wine.
God save us from the ways of men
who want to change it back again*

Third, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the Adoration of the Kings (the Three Wise Men being the first non-Jews to see Jesus).

It was the third of these, most closely related to the birth of Jesus, which linked the event to January 6. In the 1278 Cherry Tree Carol, the unborn Jesus, speaking from the womb, frightened Joseph:

own to Dionysius

outsore from Yule shop-
 ing? Dreading all that
 religious hypocrisy?
 infuriated by TV ads for
 expensive toys which
 our kids expect from
 Santa? Or simply look-
 ing forward to a
 break, good food, a
 few drinks?
 Whatever you think
 the season, the
 nap behind it all is
 Dionysius Exiguus,
 reports KARL HEATH.



sixth Day of Januar my
 pted birthday will be,
 Father the Stars in the Elements will
 him to tumble with Glee.

who did invent Christmas, the
 Christian Christmas?

The Western Roman Empire finally
 in 476 AD. An Ostrogoth Kingdom
 Theodoric was set up with Rome
 his capital. Living there, a mathe-
 matically-minded theologian,
 Dionysius Exiguus, in 525 AD com-
 menced a calculation of the date of
 Christ's birth which, although mani-
 festly false, has controlled our calen-
 der ever since. But there was no
 the year, no *Anno Domini*, until he
 invented it.

Dionysius, if they were still using
 the Roman calendar, the year in which
 he made his calculation would have
 been 1278 AUC. Calendars are usually
 based from events regarded as signifi-
 cant in the Jewish calendar from
 the creation, equivalent to 3761 BC, the

Ancient Greeks from the first Olympic
 Games in 776 BC, and Islam from the
 Hegira, the flight from Mecca, 622 AD.

The Romans dated from the founda-
 tion of Rome by the legendary
 Romulus. AUC stood for *Ab Urbe
 Condita* - "from the foundation of
 the city," supposedly equivalent to 753 BC.
 Dionysius calculated that Jesus was
 born in 753 AUC. Christian scholars
 today are agreed that he was wrong,
 believing that Jesus was born between
 8 BC and 5 BC. The Flight into Egypt,
 described in Matthew's Gospel, if it
 happened at all, must have happened
 before 4 BC, because King Herod,
 from whose Massacre of the Innocents
 Joseph, Mary and their baby were flee-
 ing, died in 4 BC.

But Dionysius was not content with
 naming the year: he chose the birthday
 December 25 - a choice apparently
 entirely arbitrary. There is a sugges-
 tion that some Roman Christians in
 354 AD celebrated the Nativity on
 December 25, but they may have been
 following a custom from 274 AD, when

the Emperor Aurelian, trying to
 replace Roman polytheism with Sun
 worship, proclaimed December 25 as
 the Sun's official birthday.

Since the time of Dionysius, a great
 variety of elements other than the
 Nativity have contributed to the
 Christmas festival. Some early carols
 were adapted from pagan folk songs.
 The Christmas tree came from mediae-
 val Germany. The Franciscans invent-
 ed the crib. The English added the
 boar's head and the goose. Yuletide,
 holly and mistletoe are associated with
 the Druids.

St Niklaus became Santa Claus. The
 Dutch may have taken him to New
 Amsterdam, which became New York.
 More likely, he was transported by
 Moravians to Pennsylvania, that haven
 for oppressed religious minorities. St
 Niklaus was a 4th Century bishop,
 patron saint of sailors and children. He
 was reputed to have restored to life
 three boys whose bodies had been
 chopped-up, pickled in salt and offered
 for sale by a butcher. He gave a poor
 man three bags of gold to save his
 daughters from prostitution. Later, the
 three bags became three golden balls
 and Niklaus became the patron saint of
 pawnbrokers. By 1809, Santa Claus
 had become established in New York.
 The American writer Washington
 Irving, under the pseudonym Diedrick
 Knickerbocker, published a comic his-
 tory of New York in which Santa Claus
 comes down chimneys, smoking a pipe
 at the same time.

All this makes it clear that Christmas
 is not just a Nativity, but a Miscellany.
 Some politically-correct Humanists
 may say "Yuletide," but this old atheist
 is happy to accept common usage and
 enjoy "Christmas."

One last calendar thought. Those
 millenarians who are expecting some-
 thing dreadful, miraculous or cata-
 strophic to happen in the year 2000 (or
 2001) should be informed that these
 dates do not exist in nature. They are
 arbitrary, artificial, man-made...and
 wrong!

HAROLD HILLMAN scrutinises the Ten Commandments – and finds they leave many questions unanswered, including...

FIRST and Second Commandments: “I am the Lord thy God...” is a statement of the authority of the Ten Commandments, and “Thou shalt have no other gods before me... thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...” are both affirmations of monotheism. “For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God... and shewing mercy unto the thousands of them that love...” both indicate a passionate God, although the First of the Forty-Two Articles of 1553 states that God is “without bodie, partes or passions” (Gibson, 1902, p.70).

“Visiting the iniquities of the fathers unto the third and fourth [generation] of them that hate me” is a very clear indication that responsibility for sin and crime is hereditary – that is, a great-grandson bears the guilt for the actions of his great-grandfather, and may expect to be punished for them. This is contrary to all modern concepts of justice, in which a child of a single-parent family is regarded with consideration and sympathy, rather than – as was the case as recently as the first half of the 20th Century – as a “bastard” and an object of obloquy.

Third Commandment: In a similar fashion to the First Commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” seems likely to be interpreted in the following way. You should not use the authority of God in vain, that is, in a way that he would not approve. The priests are obviously the only source of what is not in vain, so that this Commandment should be interpreted as an invocation to orthodoxy.

Fourth Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day” is probably the first statement in history that all people, including servants, should have a day of rest. In its time, it was a very advanced idea, and has remained an important contribution of the Judæo-Christian tradition from that date. However, evidently, it did not apply to all women – see below.

The idea that God made everything in six days is not accepted nowadays; the Earth is believed to be three to four billion years old. Fundamentalists give the following explanations: (a) the scientific evidence is wrong; (b) God changed the evidence so that wrong conclusions are drawn from it; (c) the apparent contradiction is a mystery.

Fifth Commandment: “Honour thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which God hath given thee” indicates, perhaps, that people will be rewarded for honouring their parents by being accorded a long life – rather than because it is the right thing to do.

Sixth Commandment: “Thou shalt not kill” is a clear Commandment without conditions or reservations. Nevertheless, the Old Testament tells us (Deuteronomy 7, 1; 20, 17) that God commanded the Israelites to destroy the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the

Should women obey the word of God?

Jebusites. Since Biblical times, there have occurred the Inquisition in Catholic countries, the Crusades from the whole of Western Europe, the Hundred Years War, the conquest of South America, in which religious people have killed in the name of Christianity. It is surprising that, except among the few pacifists and Quakers, the large established Christian Churches have never condemned the killing of other Christians, pagans, Moslems, aborigines, Jews and many others. Religious people have usually been able to do so by demonising their enemies, and regarding them as less than human. However, the Commandment does not sanction such attitudes.

It is also true that in many wars, chaplains on opposing sides have prayed to the same God for the victory of their own sides, because they were unable or unwilling to decide on the relative merits of either. In all cases, chaplains do not condemn killing; their presence sanctions it.

Seventh Commandment: “Thou shalt not commit adultery” is a Commandment ignored by King David and many medieval popes and kings, including the British monarchs. While a Commandment represents a religious aim, which every Jew and Christian could not expect to live up to, it would be reasonable to expect the heads of the churches – the main exponents of these Commandments – to adhere to them strictly.

Eighth Commandment: “Thou shalt not steal” is also unqualified. The Israelites looted the inhabitants of Palestine when they arrived. The Roman Emperors, including those after Constantine, looted the territories they conquered. The British Empire stole slaves from West Africa. The Conquistadores stole the silver and gold of South America. The British, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Germans, Belgians and Danes colonised the world, and then stole the wealth of their colonies.

Somehow, they made a distinction between stealing and exploiting the resources of those whom they conquered. These imperialists had the open support of the churches, which believed that the robbery could be justified by calling their victims heathens or pagans. How often did the churches say that stealing was condemned by the eighth Commandment? Of course, some imperialists did not conquer in the name of religion.

Ninth Commandment: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour” does not seem to be a general condemnation of telling lies, rather a prohibition of telling lies about someone to whom one is physically close.

Tenth Commandment: The Tenth Commandment, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant,” etc., puts the house before the wife, and other human beings. It also does not mention “thy husband,” indicating either that a wife was not considered capable of coveting a neighbour’s husband, or that she would be unlikely to do so, or that a wife was allowed to covet a neighbour’s husband.

Should women obey the Ten Commandments? In the preamble to the Ten Commandments, (Exodus, 19), verses 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17, 21 and 25, all refer to the *people*. Exodus, 20, verses 15, 17 and 18, which follow the listing of the Commandments, also make it clear that they were addressed to the *people*, that is both men and women. Furthermore, it may be assumed that the expression the “sons of Israel” (20, 19), usually translated as “the children of Israel,” included daughters.

The Commandment about the day of rest (Exodus, 20, 10 repeated in Deuteronomy 5, 14) states that “the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates.”

Since “thy wife” is not mentioned, but all other persons in the house, including thy daughter and thy maidservant, are mentioned, the obvious interpretation is that “thy wife” has been deliberately exempted from this Commandment. This view is reinforced later in the text (Exodus 20, verse 17, and Deuteronomy 5, verse 14), “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbour’s.” Since thy neighbour’s husband is obviously omitted, one must interpret this Commandment also as not applying to women.

The Commandments were announced to the people as a whole, and yet two of them clearly do not apply to women. Therefore, one must ask the question as to whether women

DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



JIM fluffed it for them!

EARLIER this year the God-botherers worked overtime beseeching The One Above's blessing on a crusade to revive religious faith among the indifferent British. But their pleas went unheeded, hence a sorrowful announcement in *The Church of England Newspaper*: "Many churches were left disappointed and disheartened after four evangelistic campaigns held in the spring and summer of this year failed to live up to expectations." The source of this encouraging news for secular humanists is a survey by the Evangelical Alliance.

Churches and organisations poured £7 million into JIM (Jesus in Me), On Fire, Another Look and *Minus to Plus*. The latter is a booklet by evangelist Reinhard Bonnke, a national mauldrop of which, with associated events, cost around £4 million.

Churches which participated in the *Minus to Plus* operation expected on average to receive 12 newcomers to their congregation; those sponsoring JIM expected 20. In fact the numbers were one and three respectively.

A representative of the Evangelical Alliance spoke of "dashed expectations." An organiser of the JIM campaign admitted that "none of the initiatives had shaken the nation." Except with laughter, of course.

And by the way – whatever happened to the decade of Evangelism? Just asking.

Methodists at sixes & sevens

METHODIST feathers have become somewhat ruffled of late. The Rev Dr Leslie J Griffiths, President of the Methodist Conference, has called on all church members to boycott the national lottery (the new one, not the Stock Exchange).

Dr Griffiths argues his case reasonably, even approving "the odd mild little flutter," presumably in aid of church funds. The Rev John Kennedy, spokesman for the church's Division of Social Responsibility, admits that the Methodist Church "now permits gambling on their premises when the aim is modest fund-raising or entertainment." Nevertheless he adds his voice to the call for a boycott of the national lottery. But one suspects that the reaction of the rank-and-file Methodists will be "in for a penny, in for a million pounds." Meanwhile, after months of heated debate in Methodist circles, there has been a retreat

from traditional opposition to the occasional tippie. Shareholders in Methodist Holiday Hotels Limited have voted to remove the word "temperance" from the company's articles of association.

This would not at all be to the liking of generations of Methodists who strictly adhered to temperance ideals. They were prominent in the various religious societies and pressure groups doing battle with the demon drink which, according to the Band of Hope Catechism (1894) "let the devil into the soul." Yet John Wesley, who was often more level-headed than his followers, described wine as "one of the noblest cordials in nature." He had a very poor opinion of tea.

Kenneth Holmes, chairman of MHH, said that a licence would be applied for their Damson Dene hotel in the Lake District. But, he added darkly, "the board will strive to ensure that the ethics of Christian fellowship within the hotel are maintained and not compromised."

Blood and Fired...

PSALM 46 opens with the assurance: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Not if you are in trouble with the Salvation Army, that is.

For 10 years Amanda and Graham Glasgow of Radcliffe, Greater Manchester, were envoys (unordained officers) in the SA. They received a modest salary out of which they paid tax and National Insurance contributions. Free accommodation went with the job.

Last May they were told that their services were no longer required. Furthermore, there would be no compensation as they had been "answering a call from God."

Mrs Glasgow said: "We put our heart and soul into the job. This has left us devastated." So much for the caring and compassionate image of the Salvation Army!

Describing the Glasgows' treatment as "absolutely outrageous," their solicitor said: "These people have no employment protection whatsoever." An industrial tribunal agreed, ruling that they had a "spiritual contract" with God, which has no legal standing.

The popular evangelical hymn *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* exhorts the faithful with a problem to "take it to the Lord in prayer." But the Glasgows are taking their problem to the European Court of Human Rights. Unlike a contract with the Lord, its rulings have legal standing.

Holiness and humbuggery

"HOW can we not lament the lack of discernment, which at times became even acquiescence, shown by many Christians concerning the violation of fundamental human rights by totalitarian regimes?" That question is delicately understated by Pope John Paul II in a letter outlining plans for the year 2000.

Could the Pontiff have in mind the record of his Church, and particularly the role played by his illustrious predecessor, Pope Pius XII? He supported and was supported by every Fascist dictator in pre-war Europe. Ironically, he came to be hailed as "the Pope of peace."

And what of John Paul II's own record? He has accepted adulation from some of the most unsavoury characters on the world stage. Then there is his enthusiastic approval of the sinister *Opus Dei* and its fiercely pro-Franco founder, Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer. There were few fundamental human rights in Franco Spain, where *Opus Dei* was set up. Yet this "church within the church" has been assiduously promoted and advanced by John Paul II.

Papal lamentation over the violation of fundamental human rights has a hollow ring.

Hic, Hic, Hooray!

THIS will not be a joyous Christmas for Keep Sunday Special campaigners and Lord's Day observers. With the Sunday Trading Act in place, shops and departmental stores will be able to open for business on Sunday – legally.

Until this year traders faced prosecution for opening on Sunday. Defiance of restrictions imposed by the Shops Act 1950 increased dramatically after the Shops Bill 1985 was defeated by a narrow majority in the House of Commons.

During the run-up to Christmas in recent years, millions of shoppers condoned law-breaking. Eventually, in the face of mainly religious opposition, reformers carried their campaign for Sunday trading to a victorious conclusion.

Gloomy forecasts that Sunday opening would mean a drop in weekday trade, loss of jobs and massive price increases, have not materialised. Even before the Christmas rush, shopping centres like Meadowhall in South Yorkshire were – unlike most churches – reporting excellent Sunday business.

And now a forthcoming Green Paper is expected to propose all-day Sunday opening of public houses and off-licences. Cheers!

YOU'RE TELLING US!

No more pussyfooting around

TEMPERAMENTALLY I agree with Eric Stockton (Last Word, November) that agnosticism is now redundant in the religious context. The beliefs that religious people ask me seriously to consider are so preposterous that after many years I am no longer prepared to pussyfoot around them – I am an atheist and that's that; I disbelieve the existence of god or gods. I have never encountered Eric's "commonly said" use of the word, that I should be able to disprove god/gods. I just would not bother, no more than I would attempt to disprove a lunatic's belief that the moon is made of green cheese. I do not consider it necessary to disprove any absurd idea that anybody dreams up at any time.

While throwing out agnosticism, why doesn't Eric throw out the Principle of the Excluded Middle? Although there are plenty of clearly defined instances in everyday life where it can be useful, it has surely founded this century as a theoretical principle. There are numerous undecidable problems and theorems of which Godel's is the most famous. So whether Eric likes it or not, there are going to be questions which cannot have a yes or no answer. In the wider context, agnosticism reigns supreme – life is full of "maybes." The great mathematician Hilbert is reported to have blown his top when he heard of Godel's results, but I guess Huxley would have had a chuckle.

By the way, I'm far from sure whether I'm turning grey or not: (a) some patches are still fair and (b) some individual hairs are white (but there are some odd black ones!). Taking an average, the best I could do is to estimate a point on a graph where one axis goes from black to white and a second axis follows the wavelengths of the visible spectrum. Hardly a yes/no answer, yet empirical and using fairly dependable sense data. Not a simple matter of fact at all, Eric.

I recently read a superb proposal that democratic government should be run with referenda based on fuzzy logic. In place of a simple Yes/No choice the ballot slip has Yes and No joined by a horizontal line on which the voter may make a mark. The voter then can easily cast his choice as "Well, I'm sort of mostly in favour, but not completely," and place a mark about four-fifths of the way towards the Yes end. A computer and scanner would make light work of the necessary arithmetic for millions of voters.

It is a regular complaint that our present political system does not reflect the complexity of modern life and does not offer the necessary choices.

PETER LANCASTER
Maldon

Tired ritual

QUITE recently on BBC *Songs of Praise* programmes, we have seen first the Metropolitan Police and then the military taking part in prayer and worship and imploring Almighty God for help in the maintenance of a certain brand of "law and order" which is compatible with the requirements of rapacious capitalism.

Both of these programmes featured the clergy in aiding and abetting, using religion, as usual, in a supporting role and as a boost to morale. Surely after two World Wars this sort of tradition is old-fashioned and outworn?

If there was another World War (with survivors) the same old ritual would be repeated for future generations, *ad infinitum*. I feel we are caught in a time-warp of senseless tradition of monarchy establishment, capitalism, war etc., from which death is the only escape. But even that is uncertain – as according to Christians there is a certain "Authority" sitting on a great white throne, dishing out orders, and there is even war in Heaven! Woe is me!

DAVID YEULETT
Greenwich

Vaccination

I REFER to the latest orthodox-medico inspired measles vaccination panic and commercial racket. The principles and ideas of the Catholics and Jesuits are not always of the best and sanest, but it can be taken as a happy accident that they are objecting to vaccination "against measles," if only on the grounds that some of the vaccine's choicest ingredients come from aborted dead bodies (and they think that abortion constitutes murder, as though you could murder a lump of clay).

Far more cogent and valid reasons for banning vaccination are: That the vastly lucrative racket of vaccine production and vaccination arose from the age-old mad superstition that the person who has cowpox will never contract smallpox, and that an ignorant farmer ventured to put this appallingly crazy idea into practice by forcing the poisonous matter from cowpox sores directly into the bloodstream. (since hardly anybody, however superstitious and ignorant, would care to drink the stuff out of a bottle).

The fact that the lunatic idea has been extended to "immunise" against just about any other malady that the revered orthodox medical profession cares to play with (and profit lucratively from) comes, of course, from the fact of the fierce phobia-inspiring propaganda and threat regularly and frequently churned out by the vested interested parties. Vivisection and vaccination are multi-million pound – nay, multi-billion dollar – commercial rackets.

Measles, like all diseases, stems from the two basic causes of malnutrition and dirt, which conditions have their origin in mistaken thinking.

The following are a few excerpts from the publication *Blood Poison – Vaccination*

Explained (Patrick Rattigan, 1990): "Babies, young children, teenagers, nurses, policemen, prison warders, overseas travellers, are being subjected to regular doses of powerful serum without any evidence that they work, and with no thought of the genetic damage due to the interaction of the vaccine, dormant viruses and human cells.

"As immune strength declines due to other medical measures, faulty nutrition, old age etc., the ever-worsening epidemic of vaccine-induced cancer, leukaemia, lymphoma, birth defects, asthma, eczema, convulsions, personality changes, multiple sclerosis, AIDS, arthritis, cot-death etc., will eventually bring the health services to a halt." It appears that hundreds of new diseases have smitten the human race since the deadly advent of vivisection and vaccination; there is no evidence that either has done a scrap of good.

F BACON
Mansfield Woodhouse

Conchies

IN REPLY to Alister Rankin (November), it is essential to distinguish between what actually happened in history and the interpretation we put on it. He is of course right that nuclear weapons have not been used in war since 1945 (hundreds have been exploded in tests and probably caused thousands of deaths from leukaemia and cancer). That there has been no global exchange may be good luck rather than good judgment – Gwyn Prins of Cambridge University has said we "muddled through" the Cold War. Nuclear weapons have certainly not prevented war all over the globe. They did not deter Argentina's attack on the Falklands or Iraq's on Kuwait. In the 50 years since World War II, 23 million have died as a result of war throughout the world.

War will be prevented by eradicating its causes – poverty, ignorance, over-population, the arms trade. Islamic fundamentalism feeds on all of these. Hitler would never have been heard of outside the beer-halls of Munich but for the slump in Germany as a result of the Versailles settlement.

Humanists should be the last to accept anything as a "lost cause." A hundred and fifty years ago we would have been told that the world economy could not possibly run without slavery. A thousand years ago there must have been very few who did not believe in a god or gods; today, according to the 1994 Britannica Book of the Year, 21 per cent of the world's population are atheists or of no religion.

(Dr) DOUGLAS HOLDSTOCK
Woking

MY letter in the September issue reminded Alister Rankin and Peter Brown that history did not begin when Hitler gained power.

Like all national leaders, Hitler was put in power by wealthy landowners, and businessmen, in cahoots with religious leaders, who

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fooled the public into thinking that it was in their own interests to vote for him. Millions of deceived voters died as a result of their own folly.

As a WW II fighter pilot, I am extremely fortunate to have survived to see through the deception. The 1956 Suez affair was the last straw for me, and I signed the Peace Pledge Union pledge never to take part in or support war again.

The answer to Peter Brown's specific question is that Hitler was defeated, mainly, by the Red Army. But watch out, Peter, his ghost is alive and well and living in this country, as were Hitler supporters before the war.

ERNIE CROSSWELL
Slough

I WAS 11 when WW II began and 16 when it ended. Thus I was never needed as a member of the armed forces. Both my brothers served; my father, recently recovered from meningitis, worked in an ammunition factory, and my sister, despite being a diabetic, joined the Observer Corps (as did my father in his spare time).

During 1940, with the U-boat menace sinking our ships and their cargoes of food and war supplies, buses still ran regular services and were used by three of our teachers, all young males, to travel to and from school. All food was rationed, much of it having been brought over here in merchant shipping. These same three young men never refused to draw their rations - yet all three were conchies, as we later discovered.

Their consciences didn't stretch so far as to schew taking food brought over by armed merchantmen protected by naval vessels - only so far as refusing to take up arms to defend their country from the enemy whose bombers crossed above our village, on their way to an airfield at Merseyside, where they bombed many of the ships which had escaped the U-boats. When fired upon by the few Defiant fighters from Borrass, near Wrexham, they didn't hesitate to jettison their bombs on our village, killing two old women in their smallholding.

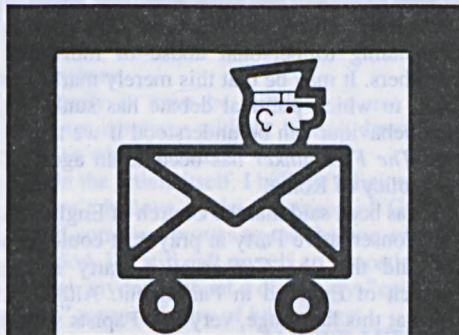
One of my next-eldest brother's friends joined the Merchant Navy, was torpedoed on his first voyage and spent 19 hours in the water. He survived, but as a cripple for the remainder of his life. He had been bringing food to these three, who were removed from teaching by the refusal of their pupils to allow them to teach us their particular point of view. In fact, they departed at a fast run, pursued by showers of stones!

We saw survivors from Dunkirk march through our village that same year...miles of men eight abreast with not a single rifle among them, guarded by a few Bren-guns who set up tripods to direct their fire upwards against German intruders. A sickening sight, since, unlike the majority of troops, up until that moment, none whistled at the village girls, or passed remarks. They just marched steadily

along in complete silence, glancing sideways, looking for cover in case they were machine-gunned as they had been in France.

Our country stood alone and these three imagined that by refusing to fight they could influence others to lay down our arms and meekly submit to the Nazis, who wouldn't have the least consideration for their views but would have shot them out of hand along with all our young men before carting us off for slave labour or worse.

Conscientious objection to war may be laudable as a concept - during peacetime conditions (Churchill, though often accused by



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

Hitler and others of warmongering, said he preferred jaw-jaw to war-war) but when the enemy is determined to exterminate you and your people actually on your doorstep, it is foolish in the extreme.

A G STEPHENS
Bradford

Criminal Justice Act

IT IS quite untrue that the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act abolishes an accused person's right of silence and assumes every British citizen will be guilty until proved innocent (Coun Ted Goodman's book review, November).

And it is highly irresponsible for anybody to make such an assertion.

The Act merely enables the prosecution to draw to the attention of the court the fact that such silence was maintained, so that it might draw its own conclusion. What law-abiding and right-thinking person would object to that?

Why all the fuss? For generations courts

have been told: "When charged and cautioned, the accused made no reply." What else can be said if the accused chooses to remain silent?

It should be remembered that every civil right is matched by a civil responsibility - a point ignored by some of our nation's anarchists.

HAYWARD LYNN MILLARD
Burnley

Hell's belle?

THERE is a happy explanation for the noises from down below in the Siberian oil drilling (Bill McIlroy, November). The drillers have penetrated one of Gaia's erogenous zones and she is saying "Ooh stop it; it's nice!" Perhaps they should go on drilling.

ERIC STOCKTON
Orkney

Feminism

I FIND it hard to understand feminists, and to comprehend the workings of their minds (letters, November). Women owe people like the suffragettes who fought courageously for women's rights an enormous debt of gratitude for their achievements. But what are present-day feminists seeking to achieve? Surely nothing is to be gained from belittling half of the human race on mostly far-fetched pretexts, creating hostility and accusing men of deliberately victimising women in every situation in our lives?

Now - Christmas, the Virgin Birth, etc. Debate on these matters among believers and non-believers and theologians of all denominations has been going on and still continues, probably since the church became established. The cult of the Virgin in the Middle Ages is well known, as well as among the poor and superstitious Roman Catholics in RC countries. We are also aware of the pagan origins of our Yuletide festival. Nevertheless, most of us, whether religious or not, have come to accept Christmas as a happy holiday, and especially as something our children all look forward to. How, then, are five and six year olds being "bribed, coerced, seduced" to take part in this "sexually disturbed Virginity Cult Ritual"? I think that only a sick (or feminist) mind could regard an infants' carol service or nativity play in such a light.

I have more questions: How has feminism become an "instrument for defending the self-interest of middle-class women"? What does that mean?

Where is it written that Humanism is more popular with men than with women?

And finally, I should have thought that all women with some education and ability to think would recognise the "intimate relationship between religion and rape" without it being pointed out to them by feminists.

EVERLYN STONE
London SW16

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Six Counties

WHILE I share Brian McClinton's distaste for deception (November letters), he is on shaky ground in invoking Democracy. Indeed, much of the talk on democracy relating to Northern Ireland is itself dishonest.

The democratic will of the majority in Ireland was ignored 70 years ago and large numbers were incorporated in the Province against their will to make it viable. And whose democratic will should prevail today? The Province? Ireland? The United Kingdom? And if one day 51 per cent in the Province favour union with the South, will we just abandon the minority?

When I suggested Croatian UDI would result in carnage, I made the point that where the divide is so great, traditional western democracy simply will not do.

If we are to have a united Ireland, then the Irish Government had better start thinking and explaining how it will resolve the problems.

On the matter of "population doomsday," I am surprised there has been little mention of capitalism in the debate. It was surely the needs of capitalism in the industrial revolution that fuelled the population explosion. It was, of course, given the stamp of moral approval by the religions etc.

Now that this period is over, the pressure to reduce populations is intense. Given history and that democracy is now little more than a device to sustain the rich and powerful and to protect the haves from the have-nots, it is very unlikely the problem will be solved other than by war, starvation and disease.

We have seen poverty increase in our own country. I expect that even here, the average life expectancy will go into reverse within the next 50 years.

NORMAN WOOD
Sutton Coldfield

Agent of Rome?

MANY of your readers must have been puzzled by the response of *The Freethinker* (October) to events in Ireland, and have wondered what was the drift of your intemperate and largely irrelevant attack on the British Government. On such occasions it often helps to see what issue has been omitted from the discussion that should have been included.

On this occasion, your tirade against the British Government has the effect of distracting attention from the fact that *The Freethinker* has not expressed a word of opposition to the handing over of a part of the United Kingdom to the dominion of the Church of Rome. This is not what one might expect from a periodical that is usually voluble in its opposition to appeasement.

Your readers can hardly be unaware that the influence of the Church of Rome has increased to a dangerous extent over the last 25 years —

to an extent, indeed, that makes me think that the surrender of Northern Ireland to Rome will be the signal for the attempted enslavement of Great Britain to the same superstition.

However, of late, *The Freethinker* has been very sparing in its warnings against the dangers of Popery. Even where it has not, as in the question of Northern Ireland, positively set out to advance the policy of Rome, it has done little to oppose that policy, preferring instead to devote its pages to petty brabbles about such matters as homosexuality and pornography.

This remarkable toleration of the Bishop of Rome has, however, been accompanied by a stream of violent and often scurrilous abuse of the present British Government, often enough descending to personal abuse of individual members. It may be that this merely marks the level to which political debate has sunk, but this behaviour can be understood if we accept that *The Freethinker* has become an agent of the policy of Rome.

It has been said that the Church of England is the Conservative Party at prayer; it could also be said that the Conservative Party is the Church of England in Parliament. Although, even at this late stage, very few Papists would say plainly that it is their policy to overthrow the Church of England and to set up the Church of Rome in its place, it is clearly in their interests to discredit the temporal arm of the Church of England by any means in their power, even if they have to use the services of ostensible unbelievers to do it.

I have said that the influence of Rome has increased to a dangerous extent over the last 25 years; and the attitude of *The Freethinker* to that increasing influence gives me cause for disquiet. We should remember the words of Richard Robinson in *An Atheist's Values* (1964): "the Papists in England now... are tolerant men. But the doctrine of their Church is fundamentally and irretrievably intolerant; and whenever it comes into power in a particular place it turns intolerant in fact."

R L STRATFORD
Hitchin

BRIAN McClinton writes: "First, I understood that Humanists believed in democracy." He seems to think that democracy is simply a matter of counting votes. One American has just spent \$20 million in an attempt to be elected; is that democracy? At our last election only 42 per cent of voters voted Conservative; yet the Tories claim a majority and seized power; is that democracy? In a Senate roughly divided 50-50 all power can be switched from one side to the other by a change of mind of just one Senator; is that democracy? Votes can be and are influenced and manipulated in a wide variety of ways. Democracy should mean governance in the interests of the total community; that means the Six Counties, Eire, the United Kingdom, the European Union and in these days the global community.

A modicum of genuinely free thought would surely conclude that geographically the Six Counties are part of the island of Ireland; ethnically and culturally they are part of Eire; eco-

nomically they survive as a separate entity only because a Tory government injects a massive subsidy (this by a government that claims to believe in the supremacy of free market forces and refuses to subsidise where subsidies are really necessary). Finally, guns and bombs never produce a satisfactory solution to any problem; they only create further problems. Ulster needs a Humanist solution but is unlikely to get it in present circumstances.

R G SARGENT
Cornwall

TO ensure peace in Northern Ireland, independent, objective political observers from North America especially and the EU are required to ask some blind british historic prejudice by asking effective questions.

What does the union with Britain mean when Northern Ireland is already in a wider area European Union with millions of Catholics including those in Southern Ireland?

Does the prime Minister expect to win peace by using a narrow Protestant majority referendum vote for no change? Does he expect peace to arrive on a no change formula?

How can peace exist in Northern Ireland unless a secular constitution exists? How is it that Britain has signed the UN Declaration on Human Rights, which includes an article on freedom of religion, but has no secular constitution? How can religious freedom exist in Northern Ireland and Britain if Britain has a Protestant state church?

Why must the hereditary Head of State be Protestant? Why must religious education and worship of a Protestant nature occur in state schools? Why does Britain not have a secular constitution like the USA's — which exists because Europeans faced Northern Ireland-type intimidation in Europe prior to emigrating to North America?

Why, if Northern Ireland is part of Britain, was Gerry Adams banned from travelling to the mainland?

Why is it not recognised that Protestant terrorist groups are just as strongly linked to Protestant political systems as the IRA is linked to Sinn Féin?

Why are the British taxpayers and the Southern Irish not to be consulted about Northern Ireland via a referendum?

Why does the British Government operate dual standards in Northern Ireland — for example, only the IRA must hand in its weapons?

Why are persistent efforts made to exclude observers from North America or the EU?

Why is it not recognised that for Northern Ireland to achieve peace, it must become an independent secular republic or a federated secular republic?

Why is it not recognised that North American Europeans were once terrorists with regard to the British monarchy, as the North American Indians were terrorists with regard to the North American Europeans? Why is it not recognised that many people have at times become "terrorists" in their own land?

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It is obvious that many questions need to be asked in public before peace can exist in Northern Ireland.

R AWBERY
Reading

I READ under Stop Press (November) that Richard Benjamin wishes the Government "...to explore acceptable ways of ending or minimising religious segregation in education" in "Ulster." This is because "...the danger there continues [of sectarian violence], due to the deep-rooted sectarian divide, which is being perpetuated, *inter alia*, by segregated schooling."

Does Richard Benjamin anticipate that an integrated educational system will, by being integrated, cease to inculcate Christian teaching into the minds of school-children? If not, which particular variant of Christian morality will be taught in the schools of the Six Counties? Whichever it is, is it likely to gain general acceptance among parents? Does Richard Benjamin have any reason to believe that the Department for Education intends to abolish religious instruction in state schools, and intends to secularise such belief-systems as may be taught in them?

Secularisation of the state system is a necessary precondition for the development of integrated education in the Six Counties, if integration is to happen, though I have to say that the arrogance involved in telling people how they ought to want to have their children educated militates against the effectiveness of the argument for it. It is not only the Department for Education which has to be convinced, after all, but also the parents.

To argue for reform of the educational system by removal of the religious influence in that system, to point out that there is morality outside of Christianity, is a proper activity for a Rationalist Humanist movement. If extraneous benefits can follow, that is to be welcomed. However, to argue that to abolish religious teaching in schools will lead to integration, to social cohesion, to social stability and to resolution of political conflict – which is what appears to be being argued for – is to argue for a chain of suppositions which are not logically connected, and is to obscure the real point at issue, religious indoctrination in schools.

The major problems of the Six Counties are political problems; they are not to be resolved by educational reform, if only because the bare reform advocated, shorn of its excrescences, in no way addresses those problems, contrary to the belief of its sponsors. I recommend both Richard Benjamin and Barbara Smoker to study the terms in which the interested parties to the conflict in Ireland conduct their debate.

D HARROP
Sheffield

reading *The Freethinker* for the first time made of Eric Stockon's November article "Agnosticism – a redundant word?" I shudder to think.

Realising I had not had a very good education, and thinking at first it was me being stupid, it took four readings to make sense of the article. An academic would probably have made sense of the article at the first reading. Most of the population are not, let's face it, academics.

Most Humanist groups seem to be mostly made up of retired school-teachers and academics of one kind or another. There's nothing wrong with retired teachers, but until bus drivers, milkmen, bakers and candlestick-makers join the Humanist movement it is not going anywhere.

Surely it must be possible to use a little plainer language without talking down to the not so well-educated?

On the article itself. I believe religion is evil. I don't believe in the existence of God. But until someone proves to me the non-existence of God, I'll still call myself an agnostic.

For anyone without a dictionary, "epistemology" means: theory of knowledge.

ALBERT MITCHELL
Bradford

Pornography

AVENDON Carol's letter (November) opened by stating that "it is disturbing that at least two of your correspondents appear to get all of their information about pornography from right-wing moralist groups and the tabloids." Sorry, Avendon Carol, but at least one of the two – myself – never reads the tabloids (will this open me up to a counter-accusation of narrowness etc?) and my contact with moralist groups is zero, unless you include encounter with doorstep evangelists when, I must admit, most of the verbal output comes from my side of the door. Which demonstrates the inadvisability of making assumptions about people, Avendon Carol.

This correspondent recalls her 'fifties childhood, when she saw violence and cruelty in the schoolyard that was never represented in any (please note, *any*) of the TV output or movies or comic books that were available. Surely not even Avendon Carol, who is obviously an avid researcher (as she mentions "all her years" of over-viewing pornographic materials), could not, as a schoolgirl, have seen each and every item produced at that time? I make no such claim in recollecting my 'thirties school-life, but to the best of my recollection (and admittedly recollection *is* fallible – mine and yours, Avendon Carol), I never came across the extremes of cruelty perpetrated by child-upon-child that we hear of today, nor do I recall hearing of any young person being driven to suicide by the sadism of his or her peers. Surely the influence of salacious and/or violent material cannot be discounted in this sphere (and, no, I did *not* attend a middle-class academy for young ladies, but an elementary school in a

Lancashire mill-town)?

Avendon Carol mentions "some clinicians" and the World Health Organisation, but is non-specific in giving names, actual quotes etc. No, I on my part offered no citations; unashamedly, I can only offer my own tough-processes, which – also unashamedly – I admit are influenced by my own emotional reaction to reports of the exploitation and abuse of other people – and of animals, also.

Finally, as Avendon Carol apparently writes on behalf of Feminists Against Censorship, does this designation mean exactly what it says? Does it advocate the total freedom to publish and transmit any kind of material or message whatsoever? Advocacy of hatred and cruelty against certain categories of persons? The exploitation of children? Violence and sadism against animals? If FAC does *not* support such permissions, then its name is a misnomer, and so is misleading. If it *does* want all barriers down, I for one would not like to see the consequences.

JESSIE BOYD
Gwent

Fascism

DAVID Tribe, in his obituary of Karl Popper (November), said fascism was discredited in 1945. Since that date, however, it has with some success been attempting to make a comeback: Le Pen in France, Nazi groups in Germany, the British National Party winning a seat in a strong working-class area during an election.

The Tory Government – while one cannot say it is fascist – seems to be adopting a strong dictatorial attitude with its recent Criminal Justice Act.

David Tribe goes on to say that many intellectuals refused to see what was going on in the Soviet Union during Stalin's reign had nothing in common with Socialism but a lot to do with Stalinism.

Socialism is a concept: it could become a reality if people wanted it.

J H MORTEN
London W9

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All academic?

WHAT on earth any member of the public

God the all-powerful bully

A FEW weeks ago, I enjoyed a pleasant day out in the Derbyshire Peak District, in the course of which I took a short-cut through a village churchyard which was full of old graves. The most striking feature of a number of the headstones was the dedication to a "merciful and loving God."

Religious belief has been slowly declining for well over a century, and the majority who admit to religious beliefs are only nominally Christian and do not attend religious services (possibly with the exceptions of baptisms, weddings and funerals), or even say prayers on a regular basis.

For many nominal Christians and their families, the epitaphs on the tombstones are probably no more than lip-service, pandering to cultural and traditional rituals and social expectations, or accommodating the few relatives who hold deeply-felt religious views. For the quasi-religious, lip-service to God may be little more than "insurance," just in case there is a Heaven, after all.

But what of devout Christians? Undoubtedly, the dedications are intended sincerely to reflect their belief in an omnipotent and omniscient creator of the universe.

LAST WORD

by Carl Pinel

Apart from the patently obvious fact that a number of people die prematurely, cut-off in their prime by painful or disabling illness, leaving partners and children devastated by their loss, many others live out their full span but have to cope with declining mental and physical abilities, which makes their last years burdensome to them and their families.

The distress of the terminal illnesses of many of those who have died is obvious for all to see. Dedications to a merciful and loving God are, therefore, misplaced in many instances. But devout Christians have even less excuse for inscribing such sycophantic dedications – for they read their Bibles and attend church services reg-

ularly. As a result, they must be aware that the God of the Bible is portrayed as capricious and cruel – destroying whole populations if they displease him; demanding human sacrifices; threatening people with eternal punishments if they disobey him.

It is easy for rationalists to dismiss the many unpleasant and far-fetched Bible stories as superstitious nonsense and to take stories such as that of Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt with an even bigger pinch of salt. But the point is that practising Christians actually believe in some of these fairy tales – even if they are tending to become increasingly selective about which stories are accepted as literally true these days.

The "evidence" of the Bible and the experiences of people's lives demonstrate quite clearly that the God they worship is far from loving, and if this is the case then the dedications on the tombstones are not sincere at all, but are knowingly and willfully false.

Bully

To understand why Christians pay homage to a God who is depicted as such a cruel, vengeful despot, one must understand the nature of power. George Orwell examined many of the ways that power is used and the effects that it had on its victims in an essay entitled "England Your England." Orwell said of the Nazi stormtrooper's goose step:

It is simply an affirmation of naked power; contained in it, quite consciously and intentionally, is the vision of a boot crashing down on a face. Its ugliness is part of its essence, for what it is saying is "Yes, I am ugly, and you daren't laugh at me," like the bully who makes faces at his victims.

Christians, therefore, are obliged to offer obeisance to the all-powerful bully who, according to their mythology, sees all, hears all, and knows all; for to do anything less than worship him is to risk the most horrific punishments.

This is the intellectual and emotional straitjacket in which Christians are trapped and with which, out of fear, they continue to brainwash successive generations.

When this irrational nonsense is cast aside, together with the pervasive climate of fear with which its authority is maintained, it will be a victory for commonsense, intellectual honesty and mental well-being.

Should women obey the word of God?

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are expected to obey these two. *A fortiori*, are they expected to be bound by any of the Ten Commandments?

The obvious answer is that, in all eras until the last half-century, women have been regarded as inferior to men. When the Ten Commandments were elaborated, women were not meant to abide by them. On the assumption that the omission of women from the necessity of obeying them was not simply a human error, all modern religious Jews and Christians who believe in the equality of the genders cannot simply ignore the omission. It would seem to me that they have a moral obligation to add such phrases to the Commandments as would make them binding on women as well as men.

Another possible, but unlikely, interpretation of the failure to mention women in the two Commandments on sabbath and coveting, is that these two only do not apply to women, but the other eight do. Unfortunately, neither

the preambles to, or the verses after, the Commandments, give any clue whatsoever either that the two Commandments are exceptional, or that the other eight only apply to both men and women, even though Exodus states several times that Moses was speaking to the whole people.

Equally unacceptable are the suggestions that the omission of reference to women in the Ten Commandments is a mystery, or is not significant. Nor would many modern religious Jews or Christians agree that women should not be bound by the Ten Commandments.

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