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The

Secular  
Humanist  
monthly

# Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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## Animal rights and religious wrongs

**T**HE mobilisation of such an enormous number of "respectable" citizens in dockside demonstrations against the export of live animals – and their actual, solid successes in curtailing the shameful business – must be welcomed for the animals' sake.

The spin-off from media coverage of these ordinary folk among so much violence and even tragedy – on at least one occasion actually being attacked by a near-rioting constabulary – has been to bring home to millions what barbarities are involved in the meat trade.

Freethinkers, Rationalists, Humanists and such may be permitted to see the events at Brightlingsea and elsewhere as something more, however: as another little victory over superstition – as further proof

that the writ of Hebrew tribal law carries an ever-decreasing force. But while battles are being won, the war continues.

The cruelties which Christians, Jews and Muslims continue to inflict upon animals is "justified" in Genesis, in which humankind is authorised by God to enjoy "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." Further – as Dave Godin points out in his provocative article on Page 18 – it is a well established fact that animals do not possess immortal souls. On both these counts, Mankind has *carte blanche* to behave abominably to animals – and it does.

What is more, we know that the Christian fundamentalist view is that this state of affairs should continue.



Being an animal can be a hanging offence. A bull is hoisted from a wagon to the quayside.

(Picture: Compassion in World Farming)

➔ Turn to Page 20



# UP FRONT

with Dave Godin

*In order that the saints may enjoy their heavenly happiness more richly, a perfect sight is granted them of the punishments of the damned: St Augustine.*

APART from the catalogue of misery and suffering that religious superstition has unleashed on human beings throughout time, we seldom stop to consider how much suffering religion has occasioned for the rest of "God's" creation. All religions (with the possible exception of the Jains and the more esoteric reaches of Judaism) have a shocking record of indifference towards those other creatures that their god created alongside us, and, since the Council of Trent decided in 1545 that animals do not have souls, they have been seen merely as things for our use, and as a means of anticipating and augmenting St Augustine's heavenly vision.

Since rationalists rightly argue that none of us have souls, it has often struck me as odd that many rationalists still adopt such an entirely Catholic view towards animals when non-possession of an eternal soul should trigger an increased awareness of the inviolability of all life.

The recent demonstrations over the ill-treatment and inhumane condition of veal calves is both profoundly interesting and heartening. Although some dismiss it as "sentimental nonsense," that at least is an advance on ridicule or simple ignoring of the issues, and although we may still be too close to actual events to see it this clearly, I think in time we will realise that over the last 20 years or so, a profound sea-change has come over the way people perceive our world. It may still be muddled and not yet fully thought out, but it is definitely up-and-running.

What is also equally remarkable is that this change has come about without any "leadership"; without any one ideology dominating its direction; and without any support from those who claim to be the guardians of earthly morality or have a direct hot-line to the Sweet Bye-and-Bye. Although many commentators trot out the old cliché about people caring more about animals than they do about humans, these same journalists, to prove their own caring credentials, have not been particularly militant in following up allegations that the police at Brightlingsea were using their truncheons on children, and throwing them bodily over fences!

One assumes that nearly all atheists adopt a Darwinian or Lamarckian viewpoint which (for the very same reason these ideas so upset Creationists) should draw us closer to the concept of kinship with other sentient beings. When we encounter primates, this is quite simple, but for those of a more stern disposi-

## Animal rights, religious wrongs and 'hard-hearted' rationalists

tion it seems that the dividing line is irrevocably drawn on the ability to speak a language and therefore to reason. Certainly, non-human beings do not share our power of speech, but should this be any criterion by which we judge them worthy of a place in things? Had people of colour through some evolutionary fluke not developed the power of speech, no doubt bits and pieces of them would now fill the Sainsbury's freezer cabinets. In fact, as Marjorie Spiegel points out in her book *The Dreaded Comparison*, the arguments put nowadays against animal rights are chillingly similar to those put against the emancipation of black and subjected races. At the risk of filling the letters pages of *The Freethinker* for months to come, I would assert that many "rational" scientists and other hard-heads are actually perpetuating the myth afforded us by religious superstition.

If we as human animals do have a unique and special quality which appears to set us apart from the rest of sentient beings on this planet, it is the power of imagination and, in our dealings with other creatures, it is this particular "divine spark" (as religionists would have it) that has been so spectacularly lacking. But, too, many a rationalist has also been equally bereft in being prepared to sacrifice compassion, gentleness and tender-heartedness in pursuit of "knowledge." Descartes mocked those who were concerned about the agonies of dogs which he had nailed to boards and proceeded to vivisect, saying that this was a mere mechanistic reaction on the creatures' part – just as, subsequently, learned experts assured us that black people were far less sensitive to pain and hurt than their delicate, white, Christian owners.

It has always struck me as odd that if we do genuinely believe that Darwin or Lamarck were right, why do so many of us appear to assume that evolution stopped dead in its tracks the day the theory was published? (As religionists think everything ground to a spiritual halt the day we were expelled from

Eden). Because animals lack the ability to speak, it seems to me that often even rationalists hark back in their attitudes to the basic religionist scenario – that because we are "God's last word," we can do more or less as we please with sentient beings, which are self-evidently not as evolved as we are. But there is a dreadful heresy in this attitude because it lacks the wisdom of humility which Darwinism should bring in its wake. (And whoever in their born days ever met a humble religionist?) It also at the same time signals a somewhat nauseating subtext which implies that, because we've come top in the evolutionary struggle, we're going to make darned sure nothing else is ever likely to complete the course and join us.

But the tragedy of this "Lords of Creation" thinking filters daily into our socio-economic system and corrupts it: "talent should be rewarded," "the winners' circle," "the high-fliers," "the able and gifted," constantly differentiate the way which we set out to reinforce our personal pecking-order position over the less able. Certainly there is nothing more "special" about being an atheist than in being a religionist, but surely it is how this conviction affects our behaviour and sets us clearly apart from superstitionists that is important. Since the religionists' way is essentially the way of death, I see many advantages in letting all sentient beings live out our little lives a best we might, with the more able helping the less able, and making assumptions which only affect one's own personal autonomy.

I quite enjoy being a sensual and sensitive little animal – and since we know we aren't going to live forever, this seems an overwhelmingly powerful and rational argument in favour of doing the best we can in the short time we have to do it in. And I'm dead sure Cock Robin would agree with me if he knew how – even if it does delay St Augustine's ultimate hard-on.

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# Alternative thoughts for the day

by Barbara Smoker

**T**HE Radio 4 weekday morning current-affairs programme, *Today*, is deservedly popular; but at 7.50 am it has an inappropriate three-minute god-slot, Thought for the Day – for which its six million listeners form a passive captive audience, very much like children at school assembly.

To switch it off without missing the weather report or news headlines would require such trouble and ingenious timing that BBC radio's Religious Broadcasting Department has always regarded this slot as more important, by far, than the full-length Daily Service, which is optional. Besides, the "Thought" is generally tolerated because it is rarely of a fundamentalist nature and most days it makes fairly easy listening.

It gives a voice to a range of religions and sects, ostensibly in line with the BBC principle of "balance" – except that (a) the viewpoint of a third of the population is

strictly excluded, and (b) Rabbi Lionel Blue is on it more often than the country's entire Jewish population would warrant, statistically, even if there were never any other Jewish contributors.

The reasons for LB's being such a regular contributor are not difficult to see: an amusing speaker with a relaxed manner and a warm timbre to his voice, he is able to communicate *joie de vivre* and love of good food (with recipes thrown in), so the listeners are ready to put up with the few words of religious homily that he may work into his item of entertainment, and real "thought" is the one thing he leaves out. But supposing he were to announce one day that he no longer believed in God? Although losing none of his listener-appeal, he would never be allowed on the programme again.

Until 24 years ago, the same slot was called Lift Up Your Hearts; then, following deputations from freethought organisations to the BBC about this and other religious bias in broadcasting, the name was changed to Thought for the Day – which, we were told, would allow in an occasional non-religious "Thought." But this never happened, and has been entirely lost sight of over the years.

In fact, there was a shrill outcry in the press in mid-December when, following similar deputations by members of the media committee set up jointly by the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Press Association nearly two years ago, the news broke that the BBC was considering broadening the range of contributors to this item and to open it to non-believers. However, it seems that this "news" may have been concocted by evangelical sources, with the idea of whipping up anti-secularist hysteria.

"The BBC is giving in to the godless," announced the *Sunday Times* front page on December 18, with a cartoon of a horned devil broadcasting. And it quoted the response from Tim Bradshaw (Dean of an Oxford college): "Atheists on Thought or the Day would be a bridge too far; it is already biased towards the radical, liberal end of theological thinking." There was also a comment in the Culture section of the same issue, describing the proposal as "a considerable error." However, two weeks later the paper did publish a letter signed jointly by a number of representatives of the secular humanist movement, saying: "The question is simply whether it is right and proper for non-religious people to have the same access as religious people to a slot designed for serious reflection on topical issues in a daily news programme."

On December 21, *The Guardian* published a letter from Rabbi Julia Neuberger objecting to secularists and atheists being allowed access to Thought for the Day, but

saying that she would not exclude humanists from it! On the 28th, the paper published a reply from me, in which I asked: "As a life member of the British Humanist Association and President of the National Secular Society, where would her peculiar semantic discrimination leave me?"

On December 22, the *Daily Express* quoted the Rt Rev Hugh Montefiore on the subject: "I think it would be a retrograde step because most people in this country belong to a church and associate this programme with Christianity." (A puzzling comment for a convert from Judaism; and what about Lionel Blue?)

The same paper gave the reaction of William Westwood, Bishop of Peterborough: "I'm saddened that this may happen, but it is further evidence of a nation in spiritual decline. It is up to the public to indicate that the BBC has got it wrong."

That word "spiritual" cropped up again and again. As pointed out in my *Guardian* letter, "It is a word that enables believers to oscillate between the supernatural and the aesthetic – or even the moral – without indicating their shift of ground. While eschewing the supernatural, atheists (secularists, freethinkers, humanists, rationalists) have a high moral sense and no less aesthetic sense than anyone else."

The deadline for the BBC's Head of Religious Broadcasting, the Rev Ernest Rea, to submit his considered proposals for the future of religious programmes (for the sake of higher ratings and to fall in with the new policy of more outside programming) to the BBC's Director General, John Birt, was said by the press to be January 10; but, if so, the content has been kept a close secret, without even a leak.

Unless there is a change of policy soon for Radio 4's Thought for the Day, it will look stubbornly out of kilter with similar slots on other BBC radio stations: for instance, humanist agony aunt Claire Rayner has recently been invited on to Radio 2's item Pause for Thought and even the Comment slot on the Radio 4 religious programme, *Sunday*, has been handed over to Nicolas Walter several times in the past few months. But hearsay from the Religious Broadcasting Department is that there is unlikely to be any such imminent change of policy for Thought for the Day, though David Craig, executive producer of religious broadcasting on the BBC's World Service, has independently indicated his willingness to open up to secularists its similar slot, Words of Faith – which is repeated several times in the day and boasts a regular audience of 20 million. In readiness for this, the decision has been made to change its title to Reflections. Let us hope that it does not stop at the change of title, as in the case of Lift Up Your Hearts.

## THE FREETHINKER

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# Adding confusion to confusion

**T**HE introduction to this book states that Richard La Croix “explores the conceptual intricacies of the Judæo-Christian tradition”; and this is precisely what he does – he explores these intricacies within the framework of the peculiar concepts of traditional theology; and, indeed, within this framework he does expose some inherent contradictions between different claims about aspects of God’s nature. However, he notably fails to step outside this framework and confront the basic questions about the *real* world and what its constitution would reveal about the nature of any Being responsible for its creation. He carefully examines, for instance (in Chapter 18, “The Paradox of Eden”) the clearly mythical story of Adam and Eve, and concludes that God acted unjustly in punishing them irrespective of whether they “knew” that to disobey Him was wrong or whether they did not. Although it is quite easy to understand why La Croix thinks the punishment was unjust if the offence was committed in

ignorance, his reasons for thinking it was unjust in the opposite case are peculiar and obscure. He writes more or less as follows: If Adam and Eve already possessed the knowl-

**What is God? Selected Essays of Richard R La Croix. Prometheus Books. £30.50. ISBN 0-87975-739-6.**

**Review: RONA GERBER and VERA METCALFE**

edge of good and evil, God, through his omniscience, would know this and hence would also know they “would not very likely be tempted to eat the forbidden fruit because they would have nothing to gain by disobeying God.” (The quotation marks indicate La Croix’s exact words). So since God’s command to them not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was an inadequate and unfair test of the righteousness of Adam and Eve, God acted unjustly in issuing this command.

How can anyone make head or tail of such reasoning? Yet it is by no means untypical of La Croix’s foggy way of writing. He often leaves considerable gaps in his arguments which need to be plugged by inference on the part of the reader. Additionally, this chapter begs the important question as to whether obedience could rationally be taken as a fundamental moral virtue. La Croix seems to have forgotten the insight of Socrates that it is only

if God’s commands are *good* that it is good obey them!

The book also displays a bewitchment in language which is unhelpful in resolving questions about the real world. For example, confusion is added to confusion over the possibility of an effect preceding its cause (see Chapter 17 “Omnipresence and Divine Determinism”). An omnipresent God would hold everything in mind simultaneously. Causes and effects would thus co-exist, since neither would precede the other in Divine Understanding. However, there is a way in which a work of art already exists *as such* if it is present in the Mind of God, whereas its human author, although fully realised as an *idea* in the Divine Mind, does not actually come into existence as a human being until the appropriate historical moment. If there could be an omnipresent God (which is a sticky, incoherent notion anyway) the argument implies therefore that an effect (the work of Art) can exist before its cause (its human creator). One is tempted to say: So what? This is not in fact helpful in solving any puzzles which might arise about the nature of cause and effect in the real world.

In the last chapter (Chapter 21, “The Problem of Evil, Augustine’s Free Will, and Divine Grace”) La Croix confronts the extraordinary theological outpourings of St Augustine. One wants to know is why Augustine’s verse and wicked arguments are taken seriously enough to deserve careful and particular attention and refutation – they are so clear, monstrous and bizarre, particularly his pronouncements on justice. He subscribes to the view that “no nature which is less than divine can be hurt unjustly,” and that “whatever is cannot be evil.” From these two premises it follows that human suffering is not unjust not evil!

To this Richard La Croix gives an uncharacteristically spirited response: “I call his view on the subject of human suffering grotesque, and because, on his view of divine omnibenevolence, absolutely no example or quantity of human suffering would count as a counterexample to God’s goodness, and, it follows from his view, that the heirs of Adam do no more suffering than they merit.” Further, at the end of the chapter, La Croix shows that St Augustine’s own account, God chose to bestow on Adam the less desirable of two sensible forms of Grace, and it was this that issued in The Fall and its terrible consequences, which, in itself, falsifies the claim that God is omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent. Unfortunately La Croix never clearly articulates his own moral principles to set against the moral assumptions he criticises, and this gives his criticisms, even the more forceful ones, a curiously insubstantial quality.

This is an academic book in the old tradition of theological argument (despite its heterogeneous conclusions) and is unlikely to be of interest to any but a small and select group of theologians.

## BOOKS

## Animal rights

◀ From front page

Just one example: in her *What Johnny Shouldn’t Read* (Yale University Press), a depressing report on textbook censorship in America, Joan Delfattore tells of Christian parents objecting in court to children’s stories about kindness to animals being read in State schools: “...Little Jon’s sympathy for the doe offended them [the Christian parents] because the Bible says that God created animals for humans to exploit, so nothing anyone does to them could possibly be wrong. Besides, since God demanded animal sacrifices in the Old Testament, teaching sympathy for animals might turn children against God.” This is from a serious deposition made to a US court in April, 1986, and it is only one of many pitiless examples of current Christian thinking on animals.

Self-described Christians who work in the animal welfare, animal rights movement – and there are many – do so despite their churches, which still with varying degrees of enthusiasm

acknowledge the Bible as the Word of God, and which approach the facts of evolution with loathing, fear or condemnation, according to the “liberality” or otherwise of the sect.

The movement for animal rights and animal welfare is rooted firmly among the sceptics. As G W Foote, founder of *The Freethinker*, noted in March, 1904: “Darwin and his successors have demonstrated the kinship of life, and thus the lowliest of organisms that swim, or creep, or fly, or run, are brought – at first negatively, and then positively – within the scope of the spirit of brotherhood...Let us be humane to each other, and the spirit of humanity will naturally extend itself to the whole kinship of life.”

In the same lecture, Foote declared: “I am strongly in favour of the most drastic regulation of the slaughterhouse and the cattle-ship.” As with so many of the demands of the Freethought pioneers – birth control, abortion rights, the liberation of Sunday, to name but a few – we’re making progress on this one, too.



# DIY VIRGIN BIRTH IRKS CHRISTIANS

by Barbara Smoker

THE tabloid press made a big story out of the birth of a 6-lb. baby girl, Ellesse, on January 17 to a young woman, Natalie Wilson, who has never copulated with a man.

The *Sun* newspaper, for which it was an "exclusive" on January 18, not only sensationalised the story with a double spread, but also lifted its editorial hands in judgmental horror at a lesbian couple having a baby – especially as Natalie and Denise were on invalidity benefits at the time. That made them "scroungers" who had no right to have a baby at the taxpayers' expense – although they have both worked for years as geriatric carers, and will go back to work as soon as they can. Would married heterosexual couples be castigated for having children while jobless through sickness?

The *Daily Mail* compensated for being a bit late with the story by publishing an interview with the couple on the 19th, and was thus more sympathetic. Radio and TV coverage followed over the next few days. What was not surprisingly, most of the shocked comment came from the religious lobby – although it concentrated on such non-relevant criticism as the unemployment aspect and the likelihood of the baby's growing up to be lesbian. (Even if that were true – which is by no means certain – so what?)

Having officiated at about 50 lesbian commitment ceremonies, I knew that it is not nearly so unusual as the media seemed to think for lesbians to have children, although most of them have had them through copulation, either in a former marriage or with an accommodated male friend, and a few have resorted to artificial insemination with donated deep-frozen semen. Natalie and her partner, Denise, had considered the latter method, but the cost and the failure rate were both too high, so they decided to do it themselves. A 19-year-old gay male friend moved into their home so that, at the crucial time each month, he could provide fresh semen, with which Denise was to impregnate Natalie, using a syringe.

This DIY method seemed to me unusually ingenious, but I have since met another lesbian couple who had successfully used the same method, and I have been told of many others. Instead of a medical syringe, however, several of them have used a culinary gadget – to wit, a turkey baster!

I was invited to Birmingham by Central Television on January 20, to present a Secularist viewpoint on the lesbian birth for their *Weekend Central*. I always like this programme because it goes out live, which means I cannot be censored. My chief oppo-

nents on this occasion were an evangelical Protestant MP, Harry Greenaway, and a Catholic spokesperson, Lynette Burroughs (who is almost a clone of her sister, Victoria Gillick). I decided to have some fun.

Mr Greenaway's opening diatribe was mainly concerned with the procedure being "unnatural" (though, of course, it is natural to wear clothes and to cook food) and against the divine will, to which he is apparently privy. Asked to respond to him, I remarked: "I find it puzzling that Christians should be so hostile to the idea of a virgin mother." The reaction from the studio audience was a mixture of laughter and consternation, while Mr Greenaway accused me of "blaspheming."

I went on to make the point that if every baby were so precious to its parents as Ellesse, we would have a more healthy society.

A fundamentalist clergyman who spoke against me from the audience came up after the programme to upbraid me once more for "blasphemy."

I asked him why a virgin birth is supposed to be good in Christian mythology but bad in reality. He insisted that the lesbian mother was not a virgin in the same sense, and that anyway the Christian nativity story was reality – whereupon I asked him if he also believed in Father Christmas. However, we walked to our hotel together amicably enough.

● Barbara Smoker is President of the National Secular Society.

## The Freethinker fund

# A refreshing change

A LONG-TERM patient at a Liverpool hospital writes: "I recently received an issue of *The Freethinker*, which I found a refreshing change to all the Christian rubbish in the form of magazines, books etc, that are continuously left lying around throughout the hospital by all the 'born agains' who fill this place...I am pleased to say that I have 'converted' a few of the Bible-pushers in here.

"I don't feel any inclination to seek an escape from death by thinking of sitting on a cloud playing a harp! There are no gods, spirits, telepathic supernatural powers. All we have is the here-and-now and that is all the comfort or knowledge I need to find happiness."

Our correspondent may be in hospital – but he certainly has a healthy attitude towards religion! Of course, we have arranged for him to receive a parcel of back numbers of our "refreshing" paper – and we have put him on the mailing-list.

But this sort of thing costs money

– and we are doing it all the time – in addition to the day-to-day bills. Please, enable us to continue the fight against the "born agains." Send cheques, POs, stamps to G W Foote & Co, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: A Pinney, £1; J E Dyke, G W Edwards, C R Keys, J S Murray and F T Pamphilon, £2 each; M Dearnley, £3; J F Chadwick and D Parker, £4 each; B L Able, S H Burton, J R Case, N Ellicott, M D Hallett, D W Hildred, J D Kay, S G Lee, J N Lloyd, M Mahmoud, E Napier, S W Rayment, M J Skinner, L E West and J Yeowell, £5 each; R A Sage, £6; C Minary, £7; A Green, £8; C Burnside, M E Bush, J R Craddock, M Fox, M J Essex, R J C Fennell, P Hosier, A W F Negus, M J Wilson and W R Wingham, £10 each; N Ratcliffe, £15; N Everitt and APRA Books, £25 each.

**Total for December 1994: £283.**

**Grand total for 1994: £4,169.80 and \$15.**



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

**Birmingham Humanist Group:** Saturday, February 18, 11am to 4pm: University of Birmingham Theology Day School: *The Roots of Morality - Christian or Humanist?* Harry Stopes-Roe debates with a moral theologian. Prior payment (£10 or £7 concessions) to School of Continuing Studies, University, Birmingham B15 2TT. Monday, February 20, 7.30pm, Martineau Centre, Balden Road, Harborne: David Green: *Jesus Versus All The Christians*. For information about 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, March 5, 5.30pm for 6pm: Pamela McKeown: *Voluntary Euthanasia*.

**Bristol Humanists:** For details, please contact John Smith on 01225 752260 or Margaret Dearnaley on 01275 393305.

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Details of group from 0296 623730. February 28, Wendover Library, 7.45pm: Peter Atkins, Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford: *The Limitless Power of Science*.

**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, February 20, 7.30pm: Jane Wynne-Willson: *The International Humanist Movement*.

**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, Lympstone, 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, March 7, 8pm: Tim Feakins, Deputy Head of Dycorts MLD School: *Dealing with Different Kinds of Learning Difficulties*. Tuesday, April 4: AGM followed by sale of books and plants. 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 4JH; 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. Meetings at 7.30pm. Tuesday, February 14: Peter Wrigley: *Overseas Aid - a Hand-out or a Hand-up?* 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). Meetings start at 6.30pm. February 19: Ellis Hillman: *F A Ridley: Writer and Secularist*. February 26: Richard Whitmore: *Women's Suffrage in Edwardian Leicester*. March 5: Doug Holly: *Campaign Against the Arms Trade*.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, February 23, 8pm: Tony Milne: *Nationalism, Internationalism and Culture*.

**Manchester Humanists:** Information, telephone: 061 432 9045.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** February 16, 7.30pm: *Talking to the Quakers* (at Friends' Meeting House, Upper Goat Lane). March 16, Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich: March 16, 7.30pm: Speaker from Pottergate Office: *The Matthew Project*.

**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, March 1, 7.30 for 8pm: Jenny Street: *Eritrea, Conflict of Values - How the War has Affected Religious Belief*.

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

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

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, March 8, 7.30pm for 8pm: AGM followed by Yvonne Bracken: *Raising the Profile of Humanism in Sutton*.

**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. February 16: OXFAM speaker on Third World Development Issues. March 17: Professor Sir Hermann Bondi: *Humanism as the Only Acceptable Basis for Ethics*.

**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:** Info: Mike Sargent, 0902 239823.

## TASLIMA NASRIN

Her novel *Lajja* (Shame), published by Penguin Books India (ISBN 0 14 024 051 9), is distributed in the UK by SOMA, 38 Kennington Lane, London SE11 4LS; telephone: 0171 7352101. It costs £5.95.



Clearly and concisely, **NICOLAS WALTER**, the Managing Director of the Rationalist Press Association and a Vice President of the National Secular Society, has expressed what *The Freethinker* suggests is the definitive Secularist attitude to religious worship in State schools. Both *The Independent* and *The Times* published versions of the article in January.

# Opium of the pupils

especially in places with large Asian communities. This may seem a minor problem – it is a simple matter to arrange non-Christian worship, and anyway non-Christian religions are followed by only three per cent of the population – but it means that worship is a divisive force in many schools. Many more people have no religion. This is a major problem – it involves about a third of the population, and it isn't a simple matter to arrange non-religious worship: if indeed there can be such a thing. Some progressive educationists – including Humanists concerned with education – propose a non-religious interpretation of worship in its original sense of “worship” (the recognition of worth or worthiness); but this usage has been obsolete for several centuries, and etymological casuistry can't alter the fact that the standard meaning of worship is “reverence or veneration paid to a being or power regarded as supernatural or divine,” as recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary and recognised in courts of law. Many teachers have followed the same path in a pragmatic way, replacing religious worship with various kinds of secular assembly; however desirable such developments may be, they are technically illegal. Isn't it a bad thing for good teachers to have to break the law?

A more serious question is whether religious worship is an educational activity at all, any more than political meetings would be. Many educational and religious experts think not. More and more teachers and schools are unable or unwilling to organise worship, and more and more religious leaders are unhappy about it. Sincere Christians know that compulsory worship is a contradiction in terms, and strict Christians should know that public prayers are explicitly and authoritatively condemned in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, Chapter 6).

What about the fact that school worship may actually do more harm than good to Christianity? The worship forced on most schoolchild-

ren probably does more to alienate them from religion than any other single factor. Cynics may rejoice, but responsible unbelievers agree with responsible believers that this is not how to treat a serious matter.

*The answer is not to try to improve school worship, and certainly not to bring ministers of religion in to do so, but to accept that worship doesn't belong in school at all. If school-children should experience worship, shouldn't they do so at home and at church? And if they should observe worship, shouldn't they have proper visits to places of worship?*

What about the fact that most parents and politicians, and many commentators, say they want school worship? Well, how many of these people go to church themselves or even say prayers at home, and how many would welcome compulsory worship at their place of work? After all, fewer than half the people in this country ever voluntarily take part in any religious ceremony, and only a tenth do so regularly. Most people don't really think about school worship; it's felt to be a good thing – for other people – so it's prescribed as an opium of the pupils.

Anyway, what kind of society are we? This isn't a Christian or even a religious country any more, and school worship can neither keep nor make it one. Other believers and unbelievers are just as good citizens as Christians. The most Christian part of the United Kingdom is Northern Ireland, where religious education is one of the main factors in the polarisation of the communities. Several Christian countries have secular education; and the United States, which is far more Christian than Britain, has a constitutional ban on religion in State schools. School worship is said to be part of our national heritage, but isn't a more valuable part of our national heritage the religious freedom we won three centuries ago, and doesn't freedom of religion include freedom from compulsory religion? We are a plural society, and the State schools should serve the whole community, bringing children together rather than driving them apart.

What should be done with the present system? Freethinkers have opposed it from the start, and the Liberal and Labour parties used to do so.

*Surely a partial reform is necessary, at least to make school worship genuinely voluntary. Pupils could opt in rather than opt out, like trade-unionists; worship could be practised only outside the formal timetable, like other voluntary activities; worship and assembly could be separated, as in higher education. But a total reform would be preferable, repealing the law and releasing schools to work out their own answers.*



# Eruv appeal

THE National Secular Society Treasurer is administering the fund set up to help finance the High Court challenge to Environment Minister John Gummer's approval of plans by the United Synagogue to create an *eruv* religious boundary in North-West London. Full details of the case were published in the December issue of *The Freethinker*, copies of which are obtainable at £1 each, post paid, from G W Foote & Co, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

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.

Donations to the fund are invited from those who have religious, environmental or social objections to the *eruv*. Cheques and POs should be made payable to *Eruv* Challenge Fund and should be sent to the NSS at Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

## Opium of the pupils

From Page 23

The removal of the legal straitjacket would bring a breath of fresh air to the whole area of education about religion and other forms of belief, about morality and society, politics and culture. It would also bring a burst of creative energy to assembly, freeing teachers and pupils to make it a true centre of school life, and it could at last become a genuinely educational experience.

Will this happen? Not here. Like so many bad laws, the imposition of school worship will continue to exist, despised and defied, until its origins are forgotten and its functions are gone. In the end it will go the way of all the laws which have tried and failed to protect religion from the march of progress. If only a rational solution were possible!

# England tyranny

*'The Scriptures belongs not to us, neither are they any rule for us to walk by'*

THE Bible was central to the whole of life in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, accepted as the ultimate authority in politics as well as religion and morals. It was, as Christopher Hill says, "a huge bran tub from which anything might be drawn." This mattered little, so long as interpretation was in the hands of the church and heretics could be forcibly controlled.

Once the Bible was available in English the situation changed drastically: it "became a battlefield," with radicals and royalists using it for conflicting purposes. The latter used Romans XIII,1, for instance, in defence of the status quo; the former, particularly in the seventeenth century context, found that good kings were rare in the Old Testament.

Hill cites Deuteronomy XVII.14-20, where God warns his people that, if they insisted on a king, they must impose very strict conditions on him; and 1 Samuel VIII.6-19, which repeats the warning and lists the awful things that kings would do to their subjects.

And he points out that, in 1597, Thomas Beard "observed that of forty kings of Judah and Israel only ten pleased God, and one of these was doubtful." God "is able (when he please) to bring princes to nothing." The young Oliver Cromwell had sat in Beard's congregation.

Fifty-two years later came what Hill calls "the turning point of the English Revolution," the execution of Charles I, for which "the Bible was primarily responsible."

Regicide split the Parliamentarians, "aligning conservatives with royalists; and it split the radicals, dividing constitutional democrats like the Levellers and way-out communist Diggers from godly millenarians."

After 1660 regicide was denounced by those whose opinions mattered, as the ultimate in social and political wickedness.

Charles had been condemned in Biblical terms as a "Man of Blood," the relevant text being Numbers XXXV.33, "Blood defileth the land, and the land cannot be cleansed but

by the death of him who caused shed." And John Cook, prosecutor in King's trial, argued that the court sentenced him foreshadowed the Judgment, when the saints would judge the world.

No one was more disillusioned than at the collapse of the English Revolution. The background for *Paradise Lost, Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* is says, "the defeat of the cause" in which poet "had believed so profoundly which he had sacrificed so much." In the preface to *Of Christian Doctrine* attacks "those two repulsive and tyranny and superstition"; he pleads for discussion and inquiry, "without which grace alone prevails"; and considers it graceful and disgusting that the religion should be supported by violence. Milton cannot have had much hope of discussion or religious freedom after Hill comments. "*Eikonoklastes* and *of the People of England* were burnt at the public hangman, and *Of Christian Doctrine* was unprintable."

For Milton, each man was "his own tyrant" of the Scriptures, and he was of those who consider the decalogue less moral code."

Gerrard Winstanley, too, rejected the Commandments and suggested that angels who visited Abraham, and Samson's parents were material men, their vanishing...no other but their nature...when they had done the work were sent about." He noted textual variations and declared that we must throw away the tyranny of the Bible.

Hill refers to many other seventeenth century sceptics. John Davies, of Hereford, confessed the difficulty of determining will by his word, which can be so interpreted; and like many others shaken by Bartholomew Legate's publication by burning at Smithfield. Lord Brooke subjected the Bible to criticism, and Sir Thomas Browne noted that "there are in Scripture stories do exceed the fables of poets."

The Leveller John Wildman



# chrows off the n of the Bible

**The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution**, by Christopher Hill. Penguin. £8.99.  
**Review: COLIN McCALL.**

**Thomas Beard "observed that of forty kings of Judah and Israel only ten pleased God, and one of these was doubtful." God "is able (when he please) to bring princes to nothing." The young Oliver Cromwell had sat in Beard's congregation. Fifty-two years later came what Hill calls "the turning point of the English Revolution," the execution of Charles I, for which "the Bible was primarily responsible."**

(Picture of Oliver Cromwell: Hulton Deutsch Collection)

Fenstanton Baptist church in Huntingdonshire (1650-53), telling us that lapsed members of the congregation, Mrs Robert Kent, Mrs Hare, Sister Pharepoint and many, many others of both sexes valued conscience or "the Spirit" more than the Bible; and that "Mrs William Austin looked upon the Scriptures as nothing, trampling them under her feet."

After the restoration, Samuel Butler also thought that the Bible was not the Word of God, but "he was more prudent than to publish his views."

The materialist philosopher Thomas Hobbes quoted extensively from the Bible, but subjected it to rigorous criticism, showing that the Pentateuch could not have been written by Moses and that many other books are riddled with anachronisms and interpolations.

Hobbes also rejected the Bible-based belief in witchcraft, though on philosophic, not humane grounds. And Hill tells us that "Six years before Oliver Cromwell's birth, his grandmother was believed to have been killed by witchcraft: a woman was hanged in consequence," and "Oliver's grandfather endowed an annual sermon to be preached in Huntingdon on the subject."

"Not everybody accepted the scepticism of *Leviathan* after 1660, and few indeed of those who did dared to admit it; but the Bible lost its ascendancy as the prime source of political ideas," says Christopher Hill.

"With the restoration of the monarchy, Church of England and censorship...the intellectual climate changed." And "*Because* the Bible could be all things to all men, a book for all seasons, it ultimately lost its usefulness as a guide to political actions."

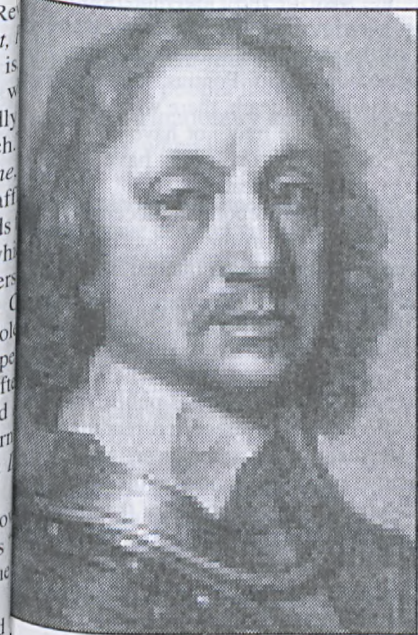
The importance of the seventeenth century, as Hill sees it in regard to this book, is "the emergence of radical/critical social attitudes. All serious English political theory dates from this period - Hobbes and Harrington, Levellers, Milton and Winstanley. To explain this we must study the society rather than - as well as - the Bible."

"The end of Biblical literalism and certainty was a European phenomenon."

Indeed, Hobbes and Spinoza were often linked together as irreligious. And for political radicals at the end of the eighteenth century, "Paine had succeeded the Bible as their handbook."

This engrossing book closes with that thought. Christopher Hill has abundantly and fascinatingly shown how the Bible provided revolutionary texts, was used in the national war against "Antichrist and his armies," influenced the great literature of the period and was dethroned. There are appendices on "God the Highwayman" and on liberation theology.

As Keith Thomas has remarked, "Hill must have read more of the literature written in and about seventeenth century England than anyone who has ever lived." And he certainly knows the Bible in its Geneva and Authorised versions.



think that anyone doth speak for God" merely because "he says what he speaks is of God"; William Erbery is described as denying the divinity of Christ; and in 1656, John Weve reported that "Many thousands in these nations count the Scriptures mere inventions of wise men, to keep the simple in under their rulers."

In the same year, Alexander Agnew was charged for "denying among many other things, that the Scriptures are the Word Of God." And the Ranters were accused of saying that the Bible was "a bundle of contradictions...the cause of all our misery and divisions, both in religion and civil affairs... there would never be peace in the world till all the Bibles were burned...The Scriptures belongs not to us, neither are they any rule for us to walk by."

Hill has also tracked down records of



# Death of a blaspheming brigand

**E**NOCH POWELL has produced a book claiming that Jesus was executed by stoning, not by crucifixion. I have not yet read the book, but since both summaries and criticisms have appeared in *The Times*, it is perhaps worth suggesting two reasons for accepting the traditional account.

In the first place, death by stoning is unlikely, because it breaks several traditional principles of Jewish law. It was illegal to hold a trial during a festival, and after a death sentence several days had to elapse before the execution. Although these rules are not documented earlier than the Mishnah, they were probably in force earlier. It is also unlikely that the Jewish court could have carried out a death sentence without Roman permission.

Moreover, the traditional story is entirely consistent with the political situation. After the death of Alexander (323) Palestine had become part of the Greek world, and the upper classes had been strongly influenced by Greek culture. This made them intolerant of many of the strict regulations of Jewish law. The lower classes had been greatly oppressed by their rulers, and their resentment had taken the form of a demand for the strict observance of the Jewish code.

In 167 BC Mattathias Hasmonæus started a rebellion which was carried on by his five sons, led at first by Judas Maccabæus. It was a forlorn hope; a country the size of Wales was taking on the whole of Western Asia. But Greek disunity and Jewish courage brought victory, and finally Jewish independence was recognised, the Hasmonæans ruling as hereditary high priests.

The Hasmonæans rapidly became brutal tyrants. In 64 BC rival claimants appealed for support to the Romans; this made Judæa a

## C R Wason argues that Enoch Powell has got it wrong on the manner of Jesus' death

Roman protectorate. The Hasmonæans were eventually eliminated by an Edomite adventurer, Herod, who died in BC 4. In 6 AD Judæa was placed under a Roman Prefect.

This is the situation which faced the rulers of Judæa. The population of the city is looking only for a faint chance to rebel. Into the city on a feast day rides a man, who by this action claims to be a king. As he rides through the city, palms are strewn in his way, and there are shouts of "Liberate us!" He organises a riot which destroys the commercial centre of the city, the Temple. Were the rioters so strong that they could overpower the strong Jewish guard, or, even worse, did the guard join the rioters? We are approaching the greatest anniversary in the Jewish year, when they remember how they escaped from the Egyptians. What does the rebel plan to mark the day?

If the Roman Governor arrests Jesus the city will rise *en masse*, and the Roman garrison will be overrun. If the nominal rulers, the Jewish priests, arrest him, they will be lynched.

The two branches of government act together. Jesus is kidnapped by night, without too much fuss. His credentials are then examined by the Sanhedrin. They are not, of course, trying him; they are merely testing his qualifications to lead a revolt. Hired evidence, and perhaps some unguarded replies to their questions, convict him of blasphemy. Clearly the Sadducees cannot accept his leadership.

Pilate, too, is off the hook. He is condemning

not a shining leader, but a blaspheming brigand. Naturally, he plays his game cautiously, showing reluctance to condemn a popular hero, requiring repeated assurances that the man is really a charlatan. The forces of order prevail without a stain on their characters.

There is a second possible reason for believing in the crucifixion. The Roman Empire was an elaborate bureaucracy, depending on reports in triplicate. Whenever a Roman Governor engaged in official business, the proceedings were recorded by a secretary, and one copy eventually reached the archives. The archives could be inspected by qualified persons such as historians, and by others if they paid a search fee. Some of the earliest accounts of Christian martyrs used this source; in one case the manuscript records that the search fee was 200 demarii.

A few copies of these reports have survived in Egypt, and they record such earth-shattering events as the visit of the Governor of Kom Ombo to the local sports centre, and his approval of the appointment of its new director. It is certain that if Pontius Pilate condemned a criminal to death, there was a report in the archives. Pilate may not have reported the truth, but his report must have been approved by the Jewish leaders..

The existence of this report was accepted by both Jews and pagans in the second century, but the Christians showed no interest in it and did not publish it even after 312, when they gained control of the archives. However, in 311 the Eastern Emperor was still trying to suppress Christianity, and he produced the original report of Pilate; this was published in a large edition and made required reading in schools. He died in the same year, and the Christians suppressed the report on the ground that it was a forgery. As no copies of the report survive, we do not know if they were right.

But there is one curious point. The Christians claimed that the report was forged because it dated the crucifixion to 21 AD, whereas by the 4th Century the Christians had agreed, without any hard evidence, on a date about AD 30. The text of the historian Josephus dates the appointment of Pilate as Prefect in AD 26, which makes the earlier date impossible. But there is some reason to believe that the text of Josephus has been altered, perhaps accidentally, and that Pilate was actually appointed in AD 18. One reason is that Josephus lists among the events of Pilate's time a scandal which took place in Rome in AD 19.

This is not conclusive, but it does make one ask why the report gave the earlier date when the Christian documents were easily accessible. One would have thought even an inexperienced forger would have had more sense.

All this does not deny that the Gospels are essentially works of romantic fiction. But the crucifixion of popular leaders was a common event under the Roman Empire, and it is at least possible that a genuine memory has been buried in a historical romance.

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# DOWN TO EARTH

with Bill McIlroy



## Shephard's pie in the sky

WHEN, in 1964, the National Secular Society initiated a new campaign against Religious Instruction – as school religion was then known – Christian indoctrinators appeared to be unassailable. But five years later, the then NSS President, David Tribe, could write in a preface to the second edition of his *Religion and Ethics in Schools*: “Religious scepticism abounds... The ‘protest movement’ which began in universities and art colleges is filtering down into the sixth form, making young people increasingly resentful of indoctrination by an adult world, particularly when it doesn’t itself subscribe to the views projected.”

Secularists who spearheaded the movement for change can feel gratified by recent developments. The Government is at loggerheads with teachers, parents and religious groups. Worse still for classroom worship, its staunchest defender is Dame Barbara Cartland.

Announcing an impending revision of the religious syllabus in Welsh schools, John Redwood, the Thatcherite Secretary of State for Wales, said he wanted to signal “a real strengthening of the Christian element in religious education... too many children are taught more comparative religion than Christianity.”

Jeremy Taylor, Chairman of the Professional Council for Religious Education, said Mr Redwood’s remarks appeared to be based on prejudice, bearing no relation to reality. The National Association of Head Teachers told the Department for Education that the Government’s edict on “predominantly Christian” religious education and collective worship is “dogmatic and insensitive.”

But it was the Archbishop of York’s off-the-cuff remarks during the North of England Conference on Education that caused most controversy. Dr John Habgood, regarded as a liberal, called on the Government to reconsider the question of school religion in consultation with teachers. He said it would probably be advantageous to have less collective worship and added: “It must be absolutely clear that schools do not create Christians and should not be expected to.”

Even more surprising, the conservative Evangelical Alliance has issued a briefing paper describing Government policy on school religion as “unworkable in an increasingly secular society.” It proposes that acts of

collective worship should be held twice weekly instead of daily as at present.

George Oliver, convenor of the EA Coalition on Education, commented: “For many teachers and pupils the act of worshipping in praise and prayer to God is simply not feasible.”

Such views are widely endorsed, but Gillian Shephard, Secretary of State for Education, is adamant that the Government will not change its policy. Rejecting Dr Habgood’s suggested review, she said: “Collective worship can help the moral and spiritual development of pupils.”

After the post-“back to basics” sex and finance scandals, the Education Secretary might be expected to maintain a diplomatic silence on matters spiritual and moral. Teachers deserve better than being lectured on morality by a politician from the party of greed, sleaze and hypocrisy.

Mrs Shephard warned: “I would expect those in charge of schools to observe the law.” Of course, this is exactly what many school heads are not doing, either on principle or for practical reasons. It is increasingly being realised that sometimes the only way to deal with an outmoded law is either flouting it or breaking it.

Religious leaders are withdrawing their heads from the sand. The Education Secretary should do likewise.

## No sex, please, we're barmy!

BACK in 1992, American researchers Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf published *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary*, a useful path-finder through a linguistic minefield laid by the men-hating sisterhood in the nation’s universities and colleges.

Beard’s and Cerf’s latest compilation, *Sex and Dating: The Official Politically Correct Guide* (HarperCollins, £4.99), is an indispensable handbook for innocent males who think that going on a date with a member of the opposite sex is simply a matter of enjoying an evening together. Far from it: there are numerous pitfalls a man must negotiate in order to avoid being accused of discrimination or charged with sexual harassment.

For example, a philosopher named Marilyn Frye asserts that opening the door for a lady is an impermissible breach of sexually correct etiquette, as it implies that “women are incapable.” And Professor Alison Jagger, University of Colorado, describes acceptance of hospitality from a man as “prostitution.”

A gift of flowers is denounced by the high

priestess of political correctness, Andrea Dworkin: “The traditional flowers of courtship are the traditional flowers of the grave, delivered to the victim before the kill.”

Thinking of taking your lady friend to a restaurant? Think again. Sally Kline, author of *Women, Celibacy and Passion*, complains that restaurant tables are automatically laid for two, thus symbolising “society’s onerous insistence on coupledness.” And male students at the University of Maryland must remember that “holding or eating food provocatively” is a violation of “campus policy on sexual harassment.”

A concert, perhaps? Not if the programme includes Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (The Choral). Susan McClary, a “feminist musicologist” at the University of Minnesota, warns that the first movement of this great work contains “one of the most horrifying moments in music.” There is a recapitulation of the principal theme during which “the carefully prepared cadence is frustrated, damming up energy which finally explodes in the throttling murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release.” Phew!

Minnesota’s “feminist musicologist” also detects “themes of male masturbation” in the music of Richard Strauss. Could Ms McClary possibly have in mind the composer’s celebrated Horn Concerto? Just a thought.

## Hair-raising

SHOULD Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf produce a politically correct guide to gender and religion, they will unearth a rich seam of barminess.

A new Bible published in the United States will soon be on sale in Britain. Politically correct theologians have been at work and as a result we have the Word of a genderless, ambidextrous deity, suitably cleansed of racially suspect terms like “Jew” and “the forces of darkness.”

St Valentine’s Day (February 14) is now ignored by many religious feminists. The patron of “lovers and engaged couples” has been replaced by St Uncumber. Readers will know that she was a Portuguese princess who prayed ardently to become physically repellent to men. Overnight, she grew a luxuriant beard and moustache, which just goes to show the efficacy of prayer. St Uncumber is invoked by “maidens wishing to be rid of an unwanted suitor.” Her day (July 20) has an honoured place in the feminist calendar.

Our investigators will also discover that gender-free Christians now refer to their deity by a variety of names, including “our maker, Sophia.” Sophia? Why not Karen or Tracy, you may be wondering? All in good time!



## YOU'RE TELLING US!

## God and rabies

I VERY much doubt whether you will publish a more absurd letter this year than that from Mary Skelton (January) in which she attempted to take David Yeulett to task for his reference (October, 1994) to the alleged existence of the Christian God *vis-a-vis* the existence of the rabies virus.

Ms Skelton directs our attention to Genesis, presumably the verse which reads: "God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." We are told that the earth was made for Man to control and enjoy its perfection. I was instantly reminded of Robert G Ingersoll's essay *The Gods*, from which the following passage is extracted:

"What would we think of a father who should give a farm to his children, and before giving them possession, should plant upon it thousands of deadly shrubs and vines; should stock it with ferocious beasts and poisonous reptiles; should take pains to put a few swamps in the neighbourhood to breed malaria; should so arrange matters that the ground would occasionally open and swallow a few of his darlings; and, besides all this, should establish a few volcanoes in the immediate vicinity, that might at any moment overwhelm his children with rivers of fire? Suppose that this father neglected to tell his children which of the plants were deadly; that the reptiles were poisonous; failed to say anything about the earthquakes, and kept the volcano business a profound secret; would we pronounce him angel or fiend? And yet this is exactly what the orthodox God has done."

Perhaps Ms Skelton can be persuaded to inform us as to the way in which Man "mis-managed" the planet in 1902 which resulted in the eruption of Mont Pelee on the French island of Martinique which killed 26,000 people in *three minutes flat*, leaving one survivor who was lucky enough to be a prisoner in the thick-walled underground prison?

I strongly urge Ms Skelton to reflect deeply upon the Ingersoll passage quoted above before writing further letters in a similar vein since otherwise she will merely cover herself in ridicule.

**MARTIN O'BRIEN**  
Malvern Wells

H'MMM! Mary Skelton does not like "stubborn, single-minded" men like David Yeulett doesn't she? I am not surprised. The Bible is full of imprecations against the "stubborn" and "stiff-necked." Authoritarian ideologies much prefer qualities like humility, cringing and simple-mindedness.

If "we are not worthy of the honour" of being on this planet, then Mary Skelton's God was a darned poor judge of the character and quality of livestock – allegedly created in his own image. Perhaps we have been listening too much to instructions to control and subdue, and to go forth and multiply!

But even an unregenerate misanthrope like me knows it is jaundiced to blame human beings for all the ills of the world. Deterioration, for example, is not the result solely of human perfidy, it is a normal process in nature. An elderly forest tree degenerates and rots, but in doing so provides food and shelter for the healthy growth of a myriad of other organisms. If the world embodied perfection, as Mary Skelton supposes, there would be neither deterioration nor improvement: these processes would be superfluous.

Human beings certainly cause a lot of pain by their arrogant blundering and greedy meddling, but there is plenty of suffering in the world caused by non-human agencies. Wild animals, for example, suffer terribly from starvation, predation, diseases, parasites, and "acts of God" like bush-fires.

Either suffering is an illusion (a divine joke to fool the stubborn?) or a supposedly omniscient, omnipotent and all-benevolent God is a figment of Christian imaginations. Suffering looks real and widespread enough to me.

David Yeulett was spot-on about the rabies virus!

**NIGEL SINNOTT**  
Alexandria, Vic., Australia

THE issue of whether there is a God or not is too important to involve a wrangle over personalities. Mary Skelton takes me to task and accuses me of double-think through my denying the existence of God, on the one hand, and, on the other, allegedly upholding the theory of his existence as the creator of the rabies virus.

This is not true. I do not proclaim the theory of God – it is the religious people who do so. As a militant member of the National Secular Society, I am an outspoken opponent of *all* religious – in both public and private.

Mary Skelton's accusation is unjustified. What I said in my October letter was: "Surely the final and irrefutable argument against the theory of a kindly and loving god is the very existence of the rabies virus." Nowhere in that statement did I affirm the existence of God! Rabies virus – yes. God – no.

Ms Skelton advises me to read the Book of Genesis. I did that many years ago. It proved to be nonsense then, and no doubt it is still nonsense to anyone capable of exercising their critical faculties.

Finally, she suggests that "God made the world and all that is in it." If this were true, then "God" would be responsible for the ravages of the rabies virus!

**DAVID YEULETT**  
Greenwich

IN her incoherent letter inspired by her distorted reading of an earlier letter by David Yeulett, Mary Skelton describes herself as a "freethinking Christian."

"Freethinking," according to the OED, is "the free exercise of reason in matters of religious belief unrestrained by deference to authority." She suggests that David Yeulett reads Genesis, one of many Creation stories. Clearly, she regards Genesis as authoritative –

thus contradicting her "freethinking" claim.

Millions of Christians would be angered by her suggestion that Genesis is a "symbolic" description of the Creation. On whose, or on what, authority does she come to that conclusion? Her own?

**RAY McDOWELL**  
Co Antrim

## Sinister forces

TASLIMA Nasrin is a very courageous person and you are right to devote your cover to her (January issue). It is hard for us in the West to appreciate the extent to which religious tyranny affects the lives of people unfortunate enough to live in countries where mullahs are given a free hand to impose their fanaticism on a helpless society.

We too are living in a country where state and religion are closely interwoven, but over time the C of E, like the monarchy, have become so much of an irrelevance and the butt of so much ridicule that at times it is almost easy to feel sorry for them. But new threats are always looming and we have to stay ever vigilant. The sinister forces of fundamentalism are busily at work, spreading its tentacles until a climate is reached where opposition becomes increasingly difficult and futile.

In warning about the threat posed by Islam, the Editor bravely leaves himself open to the twin accusation of racism and religious persecution. So strongly entrenched are these two red herrings that unless particularly courageous people are prepared to speak out we shall be saddled with all the creeping liberties that organised religion tends to take, before we know what is happening.

Barbara Smoker, too, very courageously ventures out into the cauldrons of religious dogmatism that many of the debating societies of our colleges and universities seem to have become. It is worrying that our seats of learning should still be dominated by these anti-intellectual forces long after the scientific arguments have been well and truly won. She deserves particular praise and admiration from all people concerned with personal freedom for the cheerful but dedicated way in which she has tackled religious oppression over the years.

**TONY AKKERMANS**  
Leeds

## Democracy

IN Northern Ireland, the British Government says, the democratic process should prevail. The first problem is that the Government is biased, due to its low majority and to the political debts it owes to Ulster MPs. The second problem is that the British Government itself is not democratic, due to the fact that not all its political components are elected.

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## YOU'RE TELLING US!

From Page 28

The House of Lords should be elected by MPs or the public, or be abolished. The taxpayer may think that 1,200 members are redundant, while Euro MPs exist. The continuation of the Monarchy should be decided when the Government is elected, on a yes-no basis. If it ever fails, it should be out forever.

The reason why the Monarchy (one-rule) should be elected in this way is because in non-elected form all Monarchies are inherited dictatorships, no different from an inherited caste system.

The primogeniture (first male born) concept should also go. If Monarchy is retained, then children of the Monarch should be elected to actual office according to their suitability. This would also encourage good behaviour.

The Government should be seen to be in total control relative to the Monarchy. Parliament won the battle with Monarchy at the time of Charles I and there has not been a re-match. In a democracy, only the people can represent the people. In a global economy, only the consumer can represent the consumer. This means that the people are the sovereign components of the political system and should elect the people to represent them.

The role of Monarchy should be reduced to that of a ceremonial function, like that in Sweden. The silly hat called a crown should be confined to a museum (crowns seem to be a social invention derived from ancient Iraq, before 2000 BC). The existence of a non-ceremonial Monarchy is a reason why a written constitution defining the powers of the political system and a Bill of Individual Rights does not exist.

The absurd nature of our political system can be seen in that British people are citizens in EU but subjects in Britain! The monarch is a citizen in the EU! Even the pro-Monarchy 19th Century Constitutionalist Bagehot said that educated people do not need a Monarchy: surely near the 21st Century his prediction will be fulfilled? The Henry VIII time-warp which is the British political system seems worse than a QE2 1994 refit!

In the modern state in the 21st Century a participative democracy could use hole-in-the-wall machines similar to those in banking. They could be used to collect on-going views and votes. In the age of the Human Genome Project, we cannot be dominated by a political system which is concerned about what bed a particular individual called a potential Monarch is born in. The Genome Project implies that all humans are equivalent and that all life on the planet shares a common genetic code.

**ROBERT AWBERY**  
Reading

## Barrier to action

ARTHUR Atkinson's piece in the January issue - "Humanism a recipe for happiness" - was too evangelical for my taste. I do not

believe that all non-Humanists are *per se* either fools or knaves, and many liberally-minded theists fully subscribe to the Humanist idea of an open democratic society and honestly try to build a well-informed consensus in order to secure that objective. Personally, I would much rather try to seek common ground with a liberally-minded Christian, Jew or Muslim, than with some Humanists I can think of.

Arthur Atkinson claims far too much when he calls Humanism "A recipe for happiness" and he makes no mention of the many non-religious, and profoundly anti-Humanist, forces which exist in the modern world. Nationalism,



**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.**

tribalism and economic imperialism are no more benign than religious fundamentalism, and all employ thought control to some extent.

To see "religion" as the main obstacle to progress in the world to-day is not only narrow-minded in the extreme, but it is also a barrier to creating the kind of consensus which is a prerequisite to positive action. I believe that members of the the broad Humanist movement should be giving all their energy to building an effective pressure group in support of causes like that of Taslima Nasrin which you covered in your excellent editorial, rather than trying to bring "the comforts of Humanism" to benighted believers. We will be banging tambourines next.

**JOHN CLUNAS**  
Aberdeen

## All Catholics?

G MILLER (January) tells us that "All the IRA are Catholics." How did he come by this interesting information?

**JOHN EVERS**  
Surrey

## More on conchies

PETER Brown (January) asks me to tell him what contribution was made to Hitler's defeat by conscientious objectors.

He obviously misunderstands the role of COs, which is to refuse to take up arms on behalf of, or against, any government, religion, "revolutionary" movement, or individuals.

COs are committed to stand alongside the powerless, defenceless half of humanity - children and their mothers.

We may be thin on the ground, but so are committed secularists. Come and join us!

**ERNIE CROSSWELL**  
Slough

I HAVE been saddened to read the strong prejudice shown by some of your readers against "conchies." In particular Mr A G Stephens shows no sympathy for the desolation and spiritual confusion of the 'Thirties.

Britain did not "stand alone." Our leaders encouraged Hitler to turn eastwards and then left the Red Army to bear the brunt of his attack. "Appeasement," however, had started long before. As early as 1935, Chamberlain had negotiated the London Naval Treaty, which permitted Germany to build submarines again. The British Foreign Office gave moral support to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, to the German-backed adventurer Franco in Spain, and they pressurised the Czechs into surrendering the most defensible frontier in Europe.

Throughout this time, Britain had been assisting various "white" (that is, fascist) régimes to invade the Soviet Union. Our negotiations over "collective security" against Hitler were a farce, which must be the chief reason why Stalin found it necessary to buy time with the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact.

Instead of condemning "conchies" in such a facile way, Mr Stephens would do well to study the 'Thirties - a time of unemployment, slump, strikes and wage cuts, such as the Geddes "Axe." My father, who, together with his two brothers, had obeyed the call of Kitchener's Finger in August, 1914, and who spent five of his best years at the Dardanelles, Salonika and in Egypt, then returned home to find Lloyd George shaping up for yet another war over Smyrna. After two further futile decades, he saw his son conscripted to fight in an avoidable war. The campaigns that I served in can only be regarded as strategic blunders: Algeria-Tunisia and in Italy - though the latter was "sold" to the British public as the "Soft Underbelly" of the Axis.

I'm afraid I have given up hoping that "humanists" can be relied upon to be more tolerant and humane than others. Mr Stephens' letter shows that the lessons of Passchendaele have been wasted. I do not blame those who joined the Peace Pledge Union in the 'Thirties.

**H D CORBISHLEY**  
Ealing

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## YOU'RE TELLING US!

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IT APPEARS to me that there is a note of personal antagonism in the replies to any letter I send for publication on the part of Mr Ernie Crosswell, who was a WW2 fighter pilot, a position to which he had to volunteer. Granted, he could be pressed to join the RAF – but he had to volunteer for aircrew. I wonder, facetiously, did he bombard his aerial opponents with copies of the Pacifist weekly, or otherwise communicate that he had no intention of shooting at them, being a dedicated pacifist?

If Mr Crosswell, and others of a like mind (anti-gay) would only take the trouble to read what I actually wrote they would understand that the main point I wished to get across is that it is easy to hold pacifist or conchie views, while sheltering behind the armed determination of soldiers, sailors and airmen to resist the enemy's onslaughts. Knowingly accepting full rations which had been imported through a sea full of U-boats intent on sinking them, or dive-bombers and long-range aircraft. If they wanted to be conchies, fine – but not at the expense of men, civilians like themselves, who laboured in the face of enemy action from the first day of the war to ensure that the general population of Britain did not starve. If such conchies had grown their own food, and helped their afflicted fellow citizens, instead of passively accepting everything imported as a right, fine. But in addition they advised their fighting neighbours to lay down their arms, actively helping the enemy who, had we surrendered and, going on Hitler's treatment of German conchies, would have sent the conchies to KZLs to be murdered through overwork and deprivation.

I fully agree with Mr Crosswell that wars solve nothing and lead to bitterness, shattered lives and destruction of civilised society. I agree that wars lead towards a determination not to join in the next conflict engineered by politicians and arms manufacturers (who ensure they are far from the fronts or remain buried beneath several feet of concrete, to emerge, richer and more powerful when the collective madness ends due to utter exhaustion on all sides).

But to return to my original argument that Pacifism doesn't work... as a boy and young man, I passively accepted that it was the lot of gay men to have stones, filth and imprecations hurled at them constantly, without an overt move on my part. Later, gays got organised and fought back – and by this stance won from reluctant governments the limited freedoms we now enjoy. These governments were quite happy before to allow morons who happened to be heterosexual free licence to persecute gay men, and rape gay women with impunity, in the the fond belief that it would induce said women to change their orientation. That those gay women and men could not change into heterosexuals after such persecution never entered their minds, any more than such tactics could change a left-handed bias to the more common right-handedness.

What I've never understood, especially

amongst subscribers to Freethought, is the firmly-held belief that difference is in itself evil, rather than an opposite approach to the same set of circumstances, especially in the light of today's understanding of genetic destiny. Genes dictate what we will become and are already in our bodies. We merely follow the in-built blueprint, and if it states a bias towards being gay we merely obey its diktat.

A G STEPHENS  
Bradford

## Pornography

IN HER letter published in your January issue, Vivien Gibson writes about pornography – a continuing British obsession. (On the Continent it is lawful and causes no comment. In this country it is illegal and causes constant comment, even in the columns of your monthly secularist organ).

She states that she and her "friends" find it boring. That is as it should be! Pornography is for male consumption, because men need stimulation to achieve erection. As they say in France: *Vive la difference!*

Yours for freedom of expression,

Coun E GOODMAN,  
Campaign Against Censorship

## Thou shalt believe

IT ALWAYS amazes me that the notion of "belief" as a religious phenomenon (or more correctly, "religion phenomenon" since only people can be religious) is deemed credible by grown men.

The very use of the word "belief" betrays the subconscious absence or lack of certainty. At best it derives from an hypothesis, an intellectual plaything, providing for the avid searcher challenges to the imagination, and opportunities for appealing intentions of plausible "final" solutions to the "eternal" spiritual mysteries.

Historically, men with an authoritative turn of mind and appetite for power could, without recourse to military might, deliver to the unschooled and exploitable masses what their hearts yearned for: the freedom from fear of the dark unknown. Presented to them as the Truth, they eagerly lapped it up, suspending their native wit, in the welcomed relief of "belief" they were urged or persuaded by the powers-that-grew to accept.

It is barely believable (sic), the readiness, still, of the gullible, nominally educated, so mindlessly to subscribe to a "belief" so liable to affect the brain that a group of bishops (educated, yes, but in an environment of ignorance) once debated on how many angels could dance on the point of a pin! Now their successors do much the same in Synod, debating as to whether half the human race, famous for their skill in caring for the world's young, are capable of performing the role of pastor to groups

of their fellows.

Jesus Christ's call to "love they neighbour" was no obstacle to the Inquisition for whom "Belief" was Law, and *un* believers, or dissidents burnt at the stake.

So it should, in these potentially enlightened times, be the rational norm that naked "belief" is a nonsense – an insult to educated intelligence. It has played havoc, over the centuries, with humankind, corrupted by arbitrary unnatural thought implants, to engage in internecine conflicts and actual warfare - in the name of religion with its mere "beliefs."

NOËL RATCLIFFE  
Buxton

## Divine write?

LIKE many other inveterate-writers to newspapers and magazines, I have often wondered how some individuals seem to have divine rights of publication. Perhaps the best-known is one Keith Flett in *The Guardian*.

Having received a few copies of *The Freethinker*, I find that a Mr Crosswell seems to have similar access to its pages.

DEREK ROBERTS  
Mitcham

## Sexual freedom

I HAVE been following *The Freethinker* debate on "population" with growing alarm, but it was Connaire Kensit's letter (January) that provoked this intervention.

The Humanist movement has rightly supported reproductive freedom, and the availability of birth control, in the teeth of religious opposition. But population control violates the principle of women's control over their own bodies. Giving up your sexual freedom to State sterilisation agencies is no better than giving it up to the Catholic Church.

Connaire Kensit claims that China has "saved millions from miserable death" (this is either a bad joke or blind ignorance of reality) through its brutally-enforced one-child, one-couple policy. A Communist Party secretary, speaking in 1979, said: "...the interests of the individual must be subordinated to the interests of the State. Where there is a conflict between the interests of the State in reducing population and the interests of the individual in having more children, it must be resolved in favour of the State." (Quoted in *A Mother's Ordeal: One Woman's Fight Against China's One Child Policy* by Steven Masher). This sentiment is identical to German National Socialist doctrine. The pro-eugenics Nazis were not noted for their respect for individual rights.

Yet far from being subjected to "intense vilification" from the West (the Vatican notwithstanding), the fascistic Chinese programme has won United Nations awards and "deep appreciation" from UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar.

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## YOU'RE TELLING US!

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## Man-made fantasies

The implication of some correspondents' comments about the alleged "population problem" is that if people are too irresponsible to restrain their own fertility, then governments (either theirs or someone else's) will step in and make them.

I would urge pro-population control Humanists to re-examine their enthusiasm for State-imposed birth control. We should stay on freedom's side at all times – and not fall into the compulsion trap after spending so many years fighting to liberate men and women from reproduction tyranny. Do we believe in reproductive rights or not?

In 1986, Ceausescu said: "The foetus is a Socialist property of the entire society... those who deliberately refuse to have children are deserters trying to escape the laws of national continuity." Brian Kingzett (January) says: "Optimum regional populations have to be agreed, soon, if confrontations are to be avoided." Spot the difference!

DAN J BYE  
Rotherham

I ONCE heard on a BBC programme: "Jesus said about himself, 'I have been given full authority in Heaven and on Earth.'"

Does this mean that Jesus is responsible for all atrocities, murders, killings of so-called witches, world wars and continuous mini-wars, frauds, the 2,000-year-old apartheid (a thousand times worse than the South African variety) against Harijans ("Untouchables") in India, etc., etc?

Recently in Russia, the Archbishop of Canterbury said that the Church "is never merely a human institution. It has been created by God himself." If it were so, how come the Church of England lost £800 million on its property investments? How come that omnipotent God allowed this to happen to his own Church? Or is it that he does not possess the power his followers attribute to him? Or that he does not exist and has been created in the

imagination of men?

Whatever the answers, one thing is clear – that churches and, for that matter, all religious institutions, are man-made in the same way as chambers of commerce, trade unions, political parties and the like.

On a separate topic, in the *Daily Telegraph* of September 9, it was stated that the Pope believes that the bullet which entered his body when he was the subject of an assassination attempt in 1981 was miraculously deflected on its course through his body by the intervention of the Virgin Mary. Thus it missed his vital organs.

How come, then, when he recently suffered serious illness he did not rely on the Virgin Mary to help him?

He had to rely on many doctors and their assistants, some of whom could have been non-believers.

Believing in the Virgin Mary and God is nothing but fantasy.

K P SHAH  
London NW3

## Humanists forge closer links

by Nicolas Walter

AT THE beginning of 1994 the National Secular Society bought Bradlaugh House as a Humanist Centre for the whole freethought movement. The experience of the first year has been almost entirely positive, especially on the personal level, though there are still a few minor problems with the physical detail of the building and the formal relations between the organisations using it.

Bradlaugh House is administered by a Joint Management Committee, comprising representatives of the British Humanist Association, National Secular Society, Rationalist Press Association, and South Place Ethical Society; the practical management is in the hands of the NSS Treasurer and the routine maintenance is in the hands of the Conway Hall staff.

Joint policies and activities are co-ordinated by a Humanist Forum, comprising representatives from the same organisations, with the inclusion of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association and in consultation with the Humanist Society of Scotland. There is much overlap between the two committees, as there is between the organisations themselves.

The Humanist Forum has replaced the Humanist Liaison Committee, which was formed in 1976 and revived in 1985, and it may become the Humanist Council, following the body with that name which co-ordinated the freethought organisations from 1950 until the formation of the British Humanist Association in 1963. The prevail-

ing mood in the Humanist Centre is for these bodies to bring the Humanist movement together at the centre, just as it is brought together by Humanist individuals and groups all over the country, without attempting to force any kind of false unity on anyone. The NSS is playing a full part in all this work, with several officers and Council members serving on the various committees.

The first major step in this process of co-operation was, of course, to bring the organ-

isations together in Bradlaugh House, whose official opening ceremony was enjoyed by many people in Conway Hall on June 21, 1994. The next practical step is to bring together the regular social functions of the organisations into a single annual dinner. The first such gathering has now been arranged at Conway Hall on Saturday evening, May 6, 1995, when the main guest of honour will be Polly Toynbee, the journalist and broadcaster.

Further details will be announced as they are settled, but now is the time to note the date and place.

## GALHA briefing on gay sex

THE Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) has launched itself into the New Year by publishing a briefing document describing the different moral stance taken on lesbian and gay sex by Christianity and Humanism.

Entitled *Lesbian and Gay Sex: Contrasting Moral Views*, the eight-page briefing contrasts the repressive Christian view of homosexuality with the enlightened, rational Humanist view.

GALHA secretary George Broadhead explained that the briefing had been produced mainly to meet the increasing number of requests the association receives from pupils and students doing projects on homosexuality, and who often want specific information about the Christian and Humanist stance.

The briefing was also timely, Mr Broadhead said, given the ever-increasing amount of

homophobia coming from Christian sources over the past year or so. These have ranged from evangelicals like the Jim Challenge and the Courage Trust to the mainstream churches and institutions like the Roman Catholics and the Church of England's Children's Society.

The briefing will be widely distributed to lesbian and gay groups, especially those at colleges and universities. Mr Broadhead said, adding: "We think that lesbians and gays should be made fully aware of the inherent homophobia of the Christian religion and the liberating alternative which the Humanist outlook provides."

Copies of the briefing – which is being widely publicised in the North East by Tyneside Humanists – can be obtained by post, price 70p including p & p, from GALHA National Office, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, CV8 2HB.



# HOW EQUAL IS EQUAL?

ONCE asked a white, Muslim convert – a gentle, charming man – what happened when a Muslim husband and wife disagreed about some course of action. He said the husband's decision would automatically be final. I wondered how he could square this imperative with his frequently stated concern for the dignity of women.

I once listened to Yusuf Islam (the singer Cat Stevens) explain that in Islam women and men must play different roles in society. He stressed that these roles were "equal" – but they were not interchangeable. I wondered how he could applaud such rigid sexual stereotyping.

In the words of one Egyptian Muslim cleric: "Women are the exact equals of men. Of course, a woman cannot leave the house without her husband's permission except in emergencies. A woman must obey her husband."

There are constant demands for the state to fund Islamic schools. If Islamic schools were to inculcate the above attitudes concerning women's place in society, how could they comply with the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975? To teach, for example, that compliance with rigid sex roles is a moral imperative is hardly compatible with freedom of choice and equality of opportunity.

MP Tony Worthington has said that people have to be empowered by education. It is difficult to see how Islamic girls would be "empowered," in the fullest sense of the word, if they were taught that their primary duty was to be married and bear children, and that their fate would ultimately always be in the hands of some male figure of authority.

It is reassuring to learn that men and women are deemed equal before God. It is not reassur-

## LAST WORD

by Jane Marshall

ing to learn that, within the family, men are a degree above women – especially since marriage is a religious duty – nor that one of the husband's responsibilities is to make the decisions, while one of the wife's duties is to obey her husband (and if she fails in her duties, her husband has the right to beat her).

But maybe the proposed Islamic schools would be progressive rather than orthodox. Maybe they would approve of women like Benazir Bhutto, as Labour's Jack Straw seems to assume they would, rather than denounce them (as Pakistani Imams have done: she is not a true Muslim; "God's wrath will fall on Pakistan if a woman is allowed to rule"). Maybe they would agree with Olympic athlete Hassiba Boulmerka that she can still be a devout Muslim even though she wears shorts and races in front of men, rather than sympathise with Iran which was the only one of 173 states in the opening ceremony of the last Olympics which refused to march behind a woman.

Maybe the educational provision would not have different agendas for boys and girls.

Maybe girls' careers would be considered equally as important as boys' careers – and the Koran's "Men are in charge of women because God hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women) would not be considered to be of universal relevance in modern times.

Unfortunately, even if the schools were run by "liberals," traditional sex-role assumptions would not necessarily be jettisoned.

Darlene May, an academic and convert to Islam, wrote in 1980 that the Muslim women's movement was in sharp contrast to the Western women's movement. For, unlike the latter the former avoided "inciting its members to wrest from men their position in family and society." Even though the status of women in the Islamic world had been changing, there had been no disruption of existing male-female role patterns. The prevailing view was still that "male domination of the female has been mandated by God."

If Islamic schools were to teach that the authority of men over women is immutable, the inculcation of this one precept would be a more fundamental obstacle to the realisation of sexual equality than the possible failure of schools to implement guidelines on matters such as the curriculum or careers advice.

In an article in *The Times Educational Supplement* (September 25, 1992), Michael Barber advocated the state funding of Muslim schools. He admitted that the equal opportunities issue was perhaps "the most sensitive element of the whole debate," and mentioned the critics' point that boys would receive an education in religious leadership while girls would be brought up for a life of subservience. He still argued, however, that religious minorities "are entitled to see their cultures respected" and that the authorities should not dictate what practices particular religions should adhere to.

Of course the state should not dictate religious practices. But the issue here is whether the state should fund the teaching of a code of law which positively advocates sex discrimination. The rights which women possess have not been gained easily. They should not be casually brushed aside when they happen to conflict awkwardly with the aims of some other group. The advocacy of rigid sex roles and the ultimate authority of the male should not be afforded any kind of legitimacy by the state.

Other religions also have their fundamentalists and their patriarchal hangovers. But the most vociferous spokesmen in favour of overt sexual conditioning are Muslims, and it is Muslims who have been in the forefront of the demand for their own state-funded schools.

Any group whose explicit teaching makes it impossible for it to comply with the equal opportunities legislation should not be granted funds for its own schools.

## Humanist holiday

*HUMANIST Holidays have organised an Easter stay at Hereford from Friday, April 14 (dinner) to Tuesday, April 17 (breakfast). Half-board: £138 shared, £148 single. All rooms have private facilities, TV and tea-making. The hotel is in a central but quiet location with its own parking.*

*Hereford is a small, pleasant, historic city, with plenty to see both there and in the area.*

*Further information from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, Glos. GL52 5AA (telephone: 0242 239175).*

*Last date for bookings: February 26.*