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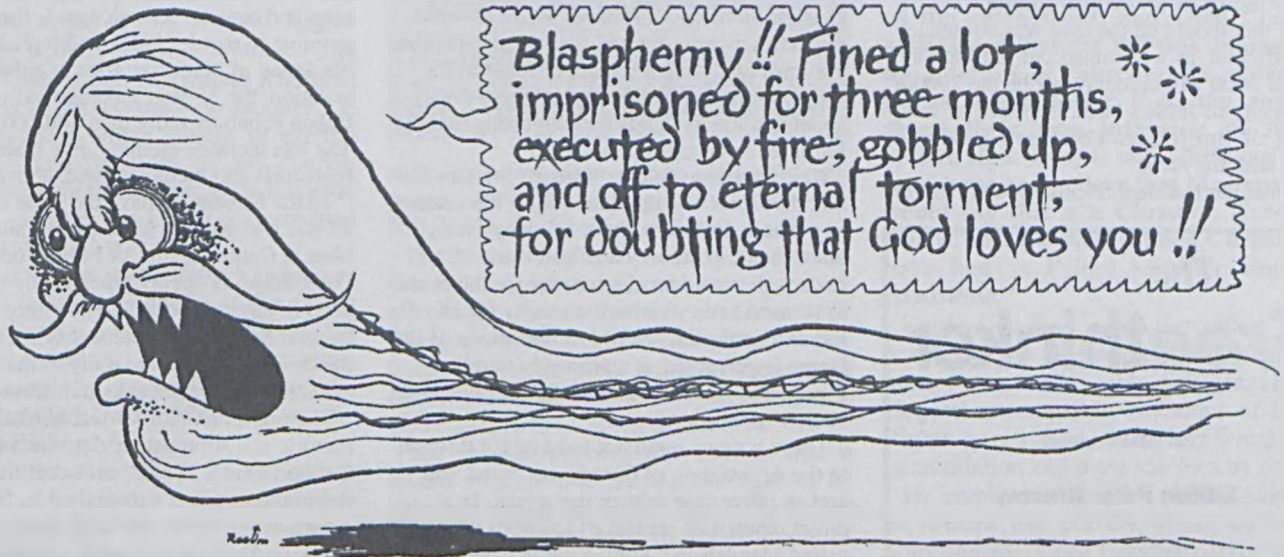
# Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



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February 1998



# Chamber of Horrors at Greenwich?

The Archbishop of Canterbury says the Millennium Dome should have "a display telling the Christian story". Naturally, this would need to be illustrated—and as a service to Dr Carey artist DONALD ROOUM makes this modest contribution. See Peter Brearey, Page 2.

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STATE AID FOR SCHOOLS 'APARTHEID': BARBARA SMOKER, PAGE 5

# Up Front

## Dome and gloom

AS A nation deep in post-Christmas gloom switched off the fairy-lights on January 6, Peter Mandelson sought to cheer us with the news that his £758m Millennium Dome would have "Christianity as its central theme."

Why this should be the case was not made clear: after all, as we pointed out last month, the year 2000 will certainly *not* be the 2000th anniversary of Jesus's birth, if indeed he was born at all. But you can't confuse a good spin-doctor with the facts.

Not that the National Secular Society didn't

try to do so ...

In a widely quoted media release, General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood insisted that if Christianity were to be the "central theme" of the Dome, it should tell the whole story:

"I do hope the Millennium Experience will be a *complete* experience with, for instance, the Crusades Salon to include Muslim heads impaled on spears, the Inquisition Pavilion where you will be able to torture and disembowel heretics, and perhaps, especially for the kiddies, the witch-burning experience—three old ladies an hour burned for your delectation. We must also have a section devoted to the suppression of scientific knowledge—how about Galileo in chains for suggesting that the Earth revolved around the Sun?"

Keith's release added: "Please remember that the Dome is being paid for by the country as a whole, including those of many faiths other than Christianity and also those of no faith ... It would be much better for the event to be used to emphasise inclusivity for all, rather than the exclusivity of Christians. If the Dome is perceived as a primarily religious experience, it will be shunned by millions—as church attendances testify."

These notions seem not to have got through to the Archbishop of Canterbury, mind you, and an interesting schism has arisen. In a direct rebuttal of several RC bishops who had called Mandelson's Folly a white elephant and opined that the cash should go to humanitarian causes, he said (*Daily Telegraph*, January 24): "It is pointless to demand that the money for the Dome go to the poor. The Dome is going to be built in any case; what we have got to do is make it a success and make sure that the Christian faith is prominent."

The Dome, Dr Carey went on, should include "a display telling the Christian story."

Well, for me, Donald Room's brilliant cartoon on this month's cover sums-up what humanity has gained from Christianity's how-ever-many-years of religious hegemony in the West. The drawing is surely a must for His Grace's "display".

And not only unbelievers like ourselves will appreciate Room's biting comment. I see from *The Independent* of January 9 that Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain, of Maidenhead Synagogue, is anxious that the "dark side of Christianity" be included in the Dome: "There should be a realistic appraisal which includes the suffering that has been caused internally to Christian heretics, externally to the Jews and in its battles against science as in Galileo and Darwin."

But, realistically, we must say to Keith Porteous Wood and Rabbi Romain and the Catholic bishops: fat chance! Mandelson would be too frightened of what the *Sunday Express* might say—let alone of the reaction of his boss, the superstitionist Tony Blair.

THOSE pictures of the Holy Father and a best-suited Fidel Castro apparently getting on like lodge brothers in Havana did trouble my tummy, I confess. But on being reminded that Fidel was educated by the Jesuits, I felt much better. He knew exactly what he was doing.

What the Cubans sought was papal condemnation of the US blockade which has brought deadly hardship to Cuba's 11 million people,

as I saw on my visit to that beautiful island. I guess the situation must now be even more desperate than it was two years ago.

Fidel got what he wanted. The Pope described the blockade as unjust and ethically unacceptable. He gave publicity and respectability to the Cuban cause.

The US embargo—its effects exacerbated by the loss of Soviet support—has created severe shortages of goods ... everything from spare-parts to toothbrushes, from pens and pencils to soap and cement. Run alongside the CIA programme to murder Fidel, and including US blackmail of other countries to enforce Cuban isolation, the 35-year embargo has cost the Cuban economy more than \$40,000,000,000. The ban includes clothing, raw materials, foodstuffs and medicines and, above all, oil.

To the Cubans, to have the Pope condemn all this was worth a Mass or two and a ritual blast at Communism. As I found on my trip, Catholicism is openly practised by those who need it, anyway, with Fidel arguing that Church-State rapprochement is necessary to the creation of national unity in the face of economic and political assault from the North.

The important thing is that behind the rhetoric is a strongly secular state in which Gallup found a 58 per cent belief that the Revolution's gains outweighed its failures. Abortion is free, on demand; family planning likewise. Divorce is simple; marriage tax means that many choose simply to live together. There are fewer than 300 priests in the country. Many Cubans have never set foot inside a church; Santeria, a form of voodoo, is probably more popular than Catholicism.

The Pope may think he has pulled a fast one on Castro; I think the papal slipper is on the other foot. His comments will have further influenced US attitudes, which are already changing.

EVIDENCE of this came just before the Pope's descent on Cuba.

Mentioning the growing number of people who visit Cuba on holiday, I wrote in *The Freethinker* (August 1995) that: "It is hardly surprising that some US business people are seeing themselves losing out to their international competitors on a considerable market—all those visitors would drink an awful lot of Coke, smoke an awful lot of Camels, and Cuba has many natural resources (sugar, fruit, tobacco, nickel and wall-to-wall sunshine spring at once to mind) which could make some enterprising souls a lot of money ..."

It is not unpleasant to be proved right. The *Independent on Sunday* (January 18) reported: "A coalition called Americans for Humanitarian Trade with Cuba, enjoying the support of Republican and Democratic members of Congress, leading businessmen and clergy, has proposed ending the US's blockade and resuming partial economic ties with the hemisphere's last Communist regime. The body announced last week in Washington that it would back a bill, recently introduced in the Senate, designed to lift the US embargo on sales of food, medicine and medical equipment ... Some members believe that, in commercial terms, all the US is doing is shooting itself in the foot."

Peter Brearey

The

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*It's only Round One, but ...*

# Human rights: Lords disaster averted

## Keith Porteous Wood reports from their Lordships' House

**T**HE House of Lords debated the report stage of the Human Rights Bill—which will enable the European Convention on Human Rights to be enforced in UK courts—on January 19.

An amendment which sought to exempt the officials and functions of *any church, religious denomination, mosque, synagogue or temple*—and also the C of E ecclesiastical court—failed by 82 votes to 93.

The outcome was particularly welcome as some news reports circulating as the debate was in progress had suggested that the amendment would succeed. The amendment was sponsored by Baroness Young, the (Roman Catholic) Duke of Norfolk and the (Anglican) Bishop of Ripon.

Shortly after this vote, the nine-hour debate was adjourned. An additional day has now been provided for the report stage, when several other highly pro-religious amendments will be debated. These include exemption from the Bill for religious or *ethical* charities and religious schools.

Reacting to the debate, Victoria Combe, Religious Affairs correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* told *The Freethinker* that “the implications of the Bill for religious organisations are enormous”.

**The recently ennobled Lord (Bob) Hughes of Woodside told *The Freethinker*: “The churches have a bad record on human rights all over the world and their special pleading has been rightly rejected. Baroness Young suspects that the Bill is an attempt to secularise society—if only it were!”**

Lord Hughes is optimistic that there will be no major reverses in the remaining debate. However, Stephen Jenkins, Press Officer for the Church of England, warned that “the debate is not over”. But he added that the C of E “is reasonably sanguine” about the outcome of the debate so far.

It does seem that the C of E is now distancing itself from Baroness Young’s unsuccessful and wide-ranging amendment.

In the opening minutes of the debate, after announcing that he was chairman of the All-party Humanist Group but was speaking for himself, Lord Hughes said he could not think why “any church should seek to exclude itself from the upholding of human rights”; this should be one of religion’s main functions. He referred to “peculiar religions such as the so-called Moonies ... Some of their practices ... are ... against the spirit and practice of this legislation. Would such religions be able to ... say ‘The law can’t touch us in our activities because we are excluded’? ... For the House to exclude religion on

such wide grounds would be extremely dangerous and highly damaging, not just to the Bill, but to the fabric of society.”

It was encouraging that during the remainder of the debate, Government pressure effectively ensured that a number of amendments to introduce blanket religious exemptions did not succeed. Some of these were even wider than Baroness Young’s and others related to the Church of Scotland.

But the Government did indicate that it would support one amendment (yet to be debated) which the Lord Chancellor hoped “will give satisfaction to the Church of England” and was proposed by Lord Williams of Mostyn, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office. It removes C of E Synod measures (including those precluding the ordination of women bishops) from the scope of legislation that Ministers can amend themselves if the measures are incompatible with the Convention.

Curiously, despite co-sponsoring and speaking in favour of Baroness Young’s amendment in the House, the Bishop of Ripon did not vote on it—and neither did any other bishops who were in the House. Could this have been in gratitude for the Government’s concession on Synod measures?

Baroness Young asserted that she was not against Human Rights and merely wished to maintain the *status quo*. She seemed particularly concerned that, unless her amendment was passed, a judge could require the appointment of a Humanist teacher—however qualified—as head teacher in a voluntary aided school even where the governors wanted a C of E communicant.

She also wished to uphold the right of a Christian hospice to refuse to permit views in favour of voluntary euthanasia to be represented on the premises.

The Bishop of Ripon assured the House that “the churches and other faith communities are profoundly concerned to support human rights in general”, but went on to say that the C of E was “anxious ... to be assured that the [Convention and the Bill] cannot be used to require us to act in ways contrary to our religious principles and beliefs, or the beliefs underlying Church bodies.”

The Bishop added that he was concerned about the Church being required to marry divorcees or homosexuals.

A number of Roman Catholics supported the amendment, and Lord Longford maintained that the Bill was damaging to the interests of churches. He stated that no-one knew better than the churches about their own interests: “I like to believe that [this] is still Christian country. I hope and believe that Mr Tony Blair would say this is a Christian Cabinet. I believe he is the most explicit Christian we have had as Prime Minister since Mr Gladstone.”

Lord Goodhart, on the other hand, described the amendment as misguided, unnecessary and possibly damaging. He catalogued unacceptable violations of Human Rights by religions—including female genital mutilation and mass suicides by cults.

He emphasised that for church schools to be exempt was gravely wrong and wholly objectionable. Lord Goodhart could not see why church courts should be exempted from the Convention requirement that courts be independent and impartial.

Summing up for the Government, the Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine of Lairg, maintained that many of the concerns raised by those supporting Baroness Young’s amendment were unfounded.

For example, the Convention did not give rights for someone to be appointed to a particular post, nor, he said, for same sex couples to marry. He specifically opposed the exemption of religious schools and charities.

Moving her amendment, Baroness Young dismissed those who supported mass murder and female mutilation as crank organisations.

**Earl Russell quickly retorted: “My Lords, the noble Baroness would be unwise to forget that the Emperor Nero regarded all Christians as cranks.”**

Somehow, from that point, the debate’s outcome was inevitable.

● Lord (David) Alton was clearly concerned about “endless litigation and debilitating campaigns against the Church by single issue groups and secular institutions.”

And keeping in contact with the Home Office and a group of like-minded peers (to whom it sent briefing papers), the National Secular Society *has* followed the passage of this Bill closely from the outset. Immediately before observing the debate, we met a number of sympathetic peers, including one of our Honorary Associates, Lord Sefton.

The NSS has also kept the media informed of its position; the Society’s views on the Bill appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* and news agency reports.



# Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

## Candle flame is guttering

DO YOU know any scientists who are unemployed? I do. I know others who are underpaid, and whose contracts will not be renewed when they run out. At all levels, Britain seriously undervalues science, which Carl Sagan likened to a candle in the dark of this "demon-haunted world".

If this country doesn't support a 10-year programme for satellites to investigate the origins of the universe, giant telescopes to study the birth and death of galaxies, and powerful particle-smashers to probe the nature of matter, its cosmology and particle physics—Sagan's specialist fields by the way—will wither and die. So warned *The Observer's* science editor, Robin McKie (December 21, 1997).

The Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council stressed that this was "not an unconstrained and unrealistic wish-list of hypothetical projects. Even if all were funded, they form an overall programme substantially narrower than that of any other major country".

The Council's cash has fallen by 17 per cent in the last 10 years, and scientists in different disciplines rallied to its support. "Science is not just useful", commented Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins. "If all we cared about was usefulness, we might as well all be dead. Fundamental science—such as particle physics and astronomy—helps us understand the universe into which we have been fortunate enough to have been born. It deserves money for the same kinds of reasons that the arts deserve money".

Geneticist Sir Walter Bodmer emphasised that Britain was a wealthy country which ought to be involved in outstanding research. And Denis Noble, Professor of Physiology at Oxford, described as "crazy" the idea that we should no longer pursue astronomical research. "Yet if we cannot afford to fund this very basic plan over the next 10 years, that will happen".

Knowing Tony Blair's Roman Catholic propensity, the Research Council might remind him that the Vatican is jointly building one of the most powerful astronomical observatories in the world at Mount Graham in Arizona.

## Aliens are in for it!

NOT that the Vatican's venture is unadulterated. Father George Coyne, director of the observatory, said, paradoxically, that its main work would be pure science, "albeit with a theological bias" (*The Sunday Times*,

December 14). "The incarnation of Christ applies to all human activity including astronomy".

The paper saw it as "vital" that the Church should maintain a team of astronomers "to prevent repeats of its past battles with scientists" like Galileo, but perceived dangers for Christianity in, for example, the possible discovery of alien life forms. It would have to be decided if Jesus' incarnation applied to aliens. That presented no problem for the observatory's English deputy director, Father Chris Corbally, however. "If civilisation were to be found on other planets", he said, "and if it were feasible to communicate, then we would want to send missionaries to save them, just as we did in the past when new lands were discovered".

Jesuit that he is, Father Corbally would use science to spread superstition. As if one demon-haunted world weren't enough.

## News of the Other World

IF *THE News of the World* is to be taken seriously—a preposterous suggestion, I know, but perhaps some readers do—Britain is haunted by spooks. Having carried a story with a questioning headline, "Is the little girl in this window a ghost?" and a typically blurred photograph on November 23, it asked "Have you got a spooky picture" (this time with no question mark) and gave a phone number to ring if you had.

"Chilling pictures reveal ghosts are haunting Britain" it announced as an exclusive the following week, above a number of further obscure photos, including "a shadowy onlooker as baby Zöe is snapped by gran Marion Shapcott"; "a shimmering light" above the head of Pat Dashwood after the burial of her brother (she and her husband agree that it's "her dead brother watching over us"), and the main story, the face of the Devil in the flames of Margaret Bowen's glass-fronted fire, which caused even Henry, her Labrador, to tremble.

But, according to Margaret, if you turn the picture upside down, "you can make out a sort of fuzzy-looking crucifix". How about framing it that way, then? Not that anyone else would detect either Jesus or the Devil.

## Daftness before Dawn

ONE of Britain's most eminent authors ... Possessed of a first-rate sceptical mind ... Two errors in the *Daily Mail's* introduction to an article by Colin Wilson, "Why I'm now convinced there are aliens in our midst"

(December 9), the second of which was noticed by a correspondent a week later.

"In his several books on the paranormal, he [Wilson] shows he believes in many things for which there has never been any convincing proof", wrote John Atkinson, of Douglas, Isle of Man. And, of course, the article itself, though of the at-first-I-was-sceptical sort, evinces the same credulousness with regard to UFOs, abductions by little grey men (aliens always seem to be masculine) who implant fetuses in the wombs of women, but take their unborn away after a few months to be brought up by the aliens themselves. Which strikes me as a rather pointless exercise, but who am I to say?

Another letter writer, Peter Davey, of Bournemouth, pointed out the similarity between the little grey or little green men of the UFO enthusiasts and the elves and goblins of our childhood. Or even the gnomes in so many of our front gardens? Incidentally, Colin Wilson's forthcoming book will be called *Alien Dawn*, for which his *Daily Mail* article was a plug.

## God helps fast movers

I OFTEN wonder, when I see Catholic athletes crossing themselves before a race, whether they think it will make them run faster; a God-enhanced performance? And what do they think after they have lost? "God has let me down" perhaps? And if a Christian is competing against a Muslim: is it a question of which god will win?

Some light was thrown on this, when I read in *The Independent* (December 4), that "Iran has a habit of blaming external enemies for its setbacks and [praising] God for its successes". And "divine intervention was credited by several passengers" on the plane back from Australia, for the two goals in Melbourne which earned Iran a place in next year's World Cup football finals in France.

So God gets credit for success, but no debit for failure. His account is always in the black.

## Crumbs - is that her?

NO-ONE would have called Mother Teresa a raving beauty, but I hadn't appreciated what an insult it was to detect her likeness in the "Tennessee bun" until this was pictured on the *The Guardian Guide* cover on December 27. Even the old nun deserved better than this, which resembled nothing less than a weather-beaten gargoyles.

BARBARA SMOKER condemns New Labour's decision to extend public funding for sectarian schools as being likely to widen divisions in society

# Educational 'apartheid' at the taxpayer's expense

**T**O DENY children a healthy range of nutritional food would be a serious form of physical child-abuse; to deny them contact with a range of views on important issues is surely a form of mental abuse that is comparably serious. Yet the Government is now encouraging this, with the first public funding of Muslim schools in line with those of the Anglicans and Catholics (and a handful of Methodist and Jewish schools).

I am unable to comment on the two institutions chosen to pioneer the new policy, but Muslim schools in general are likely to be far more restrictive, especially for girls, than Christian schools now are—and the decision opens the floodgates to a wave of applications from all manner of religious groups which it will be difficult to reject.

Though I am as concerned as anybody about the right of minority groups to pursue their own chosen lifestyle, I am also concerned about the rights of minorities within those minority groups (for example, their women and their children), and of the smallest minority of all (the individual). If families settle in this country, surely they should be willing for their children to become part of it?

Freedom of religious belief and practice must, of course, always be defended; but so must freedom *from* religious belief and practice. And in the case of communities which have come into the country fairly recently, pressures are exerted by their more fundamentalist members on the rest to conform to religious and cultural traditions.

The Labour Party is generally more conciliatory to Muslim extremism than Conservatives are, partly because the Muslim vote has always been almost entirely Labour and partly because of their commitment to the mythic ideal of "multi-culture" and their genuine concern about legal inequity between one religion and another. The inequity argument in the matter of denominational schools is closely paralleled by that used in support of the extension of the blasphemy law to non-Christian religions—and in both cases it is basically the argument that two (or more) wrongs somehow make a right.

In July 1989, the Labour Party's pledge of appeasement to the Muslim community was enshrined in an official policy document entitled *Multi-cultural Education*. Even before that, it was foreseen by the National Secular Society and *The Freethinker* that when the Labour Party got to power it would be likely to reconsider the Conservative rejections of specific applications for funding Muslim schools. We have therefore issued public warnings about it many times over the past few decades.

We did not, however, foresee the suddenness of it: we naively imagined that it would be preceded by a debate in Parliament, or at least discussion in the Cabinet—but apparently there



● Barbara Smoker

was no such semblance of democratic procedure. It was, it seems, simply a cosy agreement between Tony Blair and David Blunkett.

There has been virtually no media comment on the dictatorial nature of the decision. Indeed, apart from a few readers' letters in some papers, there was very little media comment of any kind on so important a social innovation.

Two exceptions were *The Guardian*, which ran a predictably blinkered article on it by Roy Hattersley, and *The Independent*, which allotted 33 column-inches to the subject but entrusted it to Trevor Phillips, who saw fit to digress from the schools issue, devoting much of his space to a diatribe against a BBC football commentator who had dared to say that he found it difficult to distinguish between one black player and another. It was a storm in a teacup, to be forgotten in a few weeks, whereas religious schools are likely to be causing psychological and social trauma—even violent conflict, as in Northern Ireland—for decades to come.

The Government's dictatorial announcement was made by a spokesman for the Education Secretary on January 9 "felicitously on a Friday in Ramadan," as the *Daily Telegraph* commented. On looking at the applications for public funding made in the past dozen years by two Muslim schools and one Hasidic school, Mr Blunkett had, we are told, found no "reasonable grounds" for adhering to the rejections of them made by his Conservative predecessors.

Reasonable grounds were hardly likely to come to light if he restricted his considerations to the applications themselves. Is it too much to suggest that he might also have considered the wider statement which, with the names of 23 distinguished signatories, was published in full

on the correspondence page of *The Guardian*, July 9, 1986? Since the signatories included Sir Alfred Ayer, Dr Cyril Bibby, Edward Blishen, Prof Bernard Crick, Lord Houghton, Naomi Mitchison, Dr Joseph Needham, Lord Raglan, and Lord Willis, one might have expected the letter to have found its way into the appropriate official files.

The letter was initiated by the NSS. As its President, I prepared the draft of it, then had to negotiate every word with all the proposed signatories. Not easy! Our original intention was to get the letter into all the broadsheets, but some of the Labour signatories refused to let their names appear in *The Times*, on account of a composers' dispute with the owners over redundancies, and we were finally reduced to the one outlet. It was reprinted in leaflet form, for distribution at the NUT conference and elsewhere.

Apart from the introduction since then of grant-aided status alongside voluntary-aided status for schools, the letter remains pertinent today:

*We are very concerned about a dangerously divisive factor in our educational system: the large number of voluntary-aided denominational schools that segregate children according to their religious background. The social divisiveness this causes is seen at its worst in Northern Ireland.*

*Voluntary-aided denominational schools have so far been confined almost entirely to Anglican, Roman Catholic, and a few Jewish schools; but we are now seeing the beginning of a proliferation to include various immigrant religions.*

*In April this year, a recommendation from a local authority (Brent) that a fundamentalist Islamic primary school in its area be allowed public funding, in line with denominational schools in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, was sent to the minister of state for education.*

*Whatever the decision in this particular case, it cannot be long, in the name of racial and religious equality, before a separate Muslim or Sikh (or Hindu or other religious) school is granted voluntary-aided status, thereby encouraging a general upsurge of immigrant denominational schools.*

*This may seem, superficially, a progressive step in line with current trends towards multi-racial education and bilingualism; but in fact it would mean for many children—especially girls—of immigrant families almost total isolation from the host community and from ideas at variance with those of the home background.*

# Educational 'apartheid'

◀ From Page 5

*This would not only be a disaster for these youngsters personally, it would also inevitably build up for future generations a greater degree of animosity and violence than we have seen even in Northern Ireland. There, children are segregated on grounds of religious background only; in this case there would be the additional divisive factors of race, skin colour, and sex.*

*And besides driving a wedge between immigrants and the host community, separate religious schools would import to Britain some of the religion-based bitterness and strife that exist on the Indian subcontinent. In the name of equity, however, it is manifestly impossible for the state to refuse Muslims and Sikhs the same right as Christians and Jews to state-subsidised schools of their own.*

*How, then, can this looming social tragedy be averted without blatant discrimination? Only by Parliament legislating without delay gradually to phase out subsidies to denominational schools of every kind. Besides encouraging integrated schooling, this would make good economic sense: at least 85 per cent of the capital cost and 100 per cent of the running costs of voluntary-aided denominational schools are financed from the public purse, and this dual system of education is notoriously wasteful. We cannot deny, however, that a Parliamentary decision to phase out subsidies to denominational schools will need considerable political courage, since it will inevitably lose votes. It demands an all-party determination to grasp the nettle.*

Needless to say, Parliament has never grasped the nettle of announcing an end to any new public funding of religious schools, to be followed by the phasing-out of the existing public funding. The inequity between one religion and another in this respect has therefore dragged on, only to be resolved now by extending the right to inflict educational apartheid at the taxpayer's expense.

The words "immigrant" and "host" in *The Guardian* letter, though approved at the time by our late (Indian) treasurer, G N Deodhekar,

sound rather dated, even patronising, 12 years later, since so many of the Muslims and Sikhs living in Britain today were born here. Besides, there is also an increasing number of indigenous converts to Islam, especially (amazing though it seems) among women. The foreboding voiced in the letter, however, is even more urgent and relevant and serious now than it was then.

Two years after the letter appeared, a new law aggravated the situation. This was the 1988 Education Reform Act, the religious clauses of which attempted to increase school religion (predominantly Christian) in the state sector. It faced educationalists with an unresolvable dilemma: on the one hand to force Christian teaching on children of non-Christian backgrounds, or, on the other hand, to provide separate religious teaching and assemblies for these children or to encourage their parents (some of whom would not be able to read or write English) to "opt them out" in writing—though the legal right of parents to withdraw their children from RE and the religious assembly has proved to be most unsatisfactory.

The former solution would mean complaints of proselytisation and increased pressure from non-Christian religious leaders for their own separate state-funded schools; while the latter would create unacceptable cultural, racial, and religious divisions within the school, as well as condemning many of the girls to lifelong oppression.

Why should the law create this appalling dilemma by forcing religious teaching and worship on our schools in the first place? Most other countries in the Western world have banned religion from their state schools. Parents who want their children to learn the tenets of a particular creed can surely carry out this teaching themselves, or entrust it to their own church, chapel, synagogue, or mosque—outside school hours. And there is no justification whatever for making school a part-time place of worship.

Many Muslims saw the 1988 Act as an attempt to christianise their children. To the mullahs, if there was one thing worse than the prevailing lack of religion in the state sector, it

was the wrong sort of religion. Though their fear was largely unjustified—for most schools contrive to get round the religious requirements of the law and rarely christianise even nominally Christian children—they have played on it as an additional argument for their own publicly-funded schools.

Insofar as religion is taught at all in the local authority schools, then certainly Islam should take its place alongside other world religions: provided, of course, that the teaching is objective and that alternative world views—disbelief (including Secular Humanism) as well as a range of beliefs—are accorded comparable time and respect. But we have always held that there is no need for a special slot for religion on the timetable—it should take its natural place in literature, drama, history, geography, sociology, art, and liberal studies. As for the corporate act of worship in state schools, that is an abomination to believers and non-believers alike.

The original intention behind the corporate religious assembly was, we were told, to inculcate a communal sense of cohesion; but separate assemblies for each cultural and religious community can only have the opposite effect.

Now that the first two Muslim schools have achieved state funding, further applications from denominational schools are to be expected—and not just from Muslim schools. Besides, parents who may prefer integrated schooling for their children, and previously had the excuse of high school fees, will now have more pressure put on them by the mullahs to send their children to the Muslim schools, which will then proliferate.

Where is it going to end? We already have continuing Muslim demands for the death of a celebrated British writer for "blasphemy". Eventually, mullahs in this country may well demand, in the name of religious freedom, that they be allowed to follow the Koran in the matter of judicial penalties—to chop off the hands of any members of their community caught stealing and to stone to death any of their women caught in adultery. What will be the New Labour response to that?

'Atheists  
are  
the  
new  
mystics'

THE author Jim Crace has won the Whitbread prize for novel of the year for his book *Quarantine* (Viking, £16.99), an extraordinary fantasy about the 40 days Jesus is said to have spent fasting in the wilderness. Despite his subject-matter, he is not a Christian. He explained in an interview in *The Independent* (January 6) that his father was an old-fashioned atheist socialist, that he has had to rethink his own views of atheism and religion, and that he has remained an atheist, though of an interesting kind, going by his remarkable thoughts about the two positions.

*The scientist says we are bound to feel something by the sea because we know human life came from some fishlike creature in the ocean. The lapping motion of the waves enters your chest and your heart starts to beat at the same rate as the sea. Even though I believe these scientific explanations, I don't have them to the front of my heart when I am moved by listening to the sea.*

*I now feel that atheists are the new mystics; you can enjoy greater transcendence not believing in God. Evolutionary theory is more mind-boggling, with more reason to wonder at the beauty, than seven days' creation. The mysteries of the universe are deepened by a recognition that the world is an inside job with com-*

*plexed explanations, rather than the simple idea that it is an outside one.*

*Even though I know love is a chemical event, it does not stop me loving or being tender. Whatever the true factual explanations for the universe, we still have the ability as creatures to do beautiful and moving things. Death for me becomes a greater mystery if you do not believe in God. Religion reduces everything, but if you are a scientific atheist you are obliged to recognise the depth of human mystery.*

*I've now started to seek a mysticism and transcendence of my own which is based on the natural world. Coming up to 52, I've found not a false accommodation between my aggressive scientific atheism and my natural tendency towards joy. My atheism has moved from something sad and inadequate, to where I take a great pleasure from landscapes, the natural world, and science.*

*I embarked on *Quarantine* expecting to write an atheist book. It was conceived as a confrontation between religion and science. My expectation was that science would be the winner and religion would fail, destroying 2,000 years of Christianity. But it did not happen; the book had a view and a narrative of its own. It was naive of me to believe a work of fiction would do anything else.*

## ASK THE PARSON (12)

by Karl Heath

# TIME TO APPLY THE SALE OF GOODS ACT TO PREACHERS?

**D**EAR PARSON: I am sure that you would regard a Creed as a very solemn declaration of belief. Would you also agree that the Articles of Faith should be clear in meaning, not allowing flexibility of interpretation? Would you agree that a Creed would be valueless if those who declare their faith in it could behave like Humpty-Dumpty, giving the words any meaning they chose?

The Apostles' Creed reads: *I believe in the Resurrection of the Body.* The Athanasian Creed reads: *All men shall rise again with their bodies.*

Are you happy with this?

"Body and soul" is a common expression, but how different are the two words. The word "soul" has nothing material corresponding to it in reality. It has no meaning other than the variety of interpretations which different users choose to apply to it. There is no external entity by which the different interpretations can be tested to ascertain which is correct. But the word "body" is very different. Bodies existed long before the word "body". The word "body", and its counterpart in every other language, is derived from the material structure it describes. Bodies exist irrespective of language. There is no doubt what a body is. Only a very foolish person, or someone determined to confuse or deceive, would pretend that a body is, or could be, completely different from what we all know it to be.

So, therefore, when the Creeds require belief in the resurrection of the body, how can you, in all honesty, pretend that the "body" means something entirely different?

A body has a nose, eyes, ears, mouth, teeth, hair, skin, blood, arms, legs, digestive organs, excretory organs, sexual organs. It also has a brain.

It walks, stands, sits, talks, eats, hears and feels.

It has developed on this little planet, Earth, breathing its atmosphere, eating its food, and accustomed to its gravity.

It reproduces itself, producing babies.

Above all, its mode of existence is constant change.

It grows older and eventually dies.

If anything remotely resembling the body were to survive death, it would require all the elements of the earthly environment to survive with it. The Resurrection of the Body would entail the resurrection of animals, vegetables, air, sunshine and rain—the resurrection of the planet Earth, or its substitution by a replica.

Or are you so reckless and profligate with words as to claim that the resurrection of the

body means something completely different, beyond our experience? If so, unless you can tell us what this "something completely different" is, are you being honest?

The Roman Catholics were ordered by Pope Pius XII in 1950 to believe in the "Bodily Assumption" of the Virgin Mary. The thought of this possibly elderly and possibly portly female body sailing upwards will, no doubt, induce pious thoughts in some and laughter in others.

Not so the fans of the American televangelists. They believe in the "Rapture". Before Armageddon the chosen, the "born again", will sail up in their naked bodies, leaving heaps of clothing behind.

Verily, a sight to behold!

But if you don't believe this, what do you believe?

St John, Chapter XI, tells the story of Lazarus in Bethany, near Jerusalem, He and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, are all friends of Jesus. Martha sends a message to Jesus, saying that Lazarus is ill, but Jesus arrives too late to save him. "Jesus wept". Nevertheless, Jesus proposes to revive Lazarus. Martha objects. Her brother's body has been in the tomb for four days, and Martha says "he stinketh". But Jesus revives him and a few days later all four have a meal together, served by Martha, while Mary uses her hair to rub spikenard into the feet of Jesus. But this is the last we hear of Lazarus. Did he go on to die a second time? Did he stink again?

And what of the body of Jesus after the Resurrection? It was revived still bearing the wounds which Jesus showed to Thomas. It walked and talked and ate fish and honey. But what happened to it after that?

St Mark says that Jesus went to Heaven and "sat on the right hand of God". This puzzled the small boy, who asked: "Please, miss, didn't it hurt? Why didn't He take it away?" When the teacher asked him what on earth he was talking about, he replied: "God, miss. You said that Jesus was sitting on His hand". The little boy was as good a logician as the other child, who asked: "Who made God?"

Is this not a mixture of spiritual concepts and familiar fleshly features? "Sitting" means bottoms and something supporting them. Is it intellectually honest to use these homely metaphors to make the transcendental more believable?

St Paul tries to tackle the problem in I Corinthians Chapter XV. He says that we will receive a spiritual body, incorruptible. "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God".

But, in that case, what does inherit the

Kingdom? Does the "spiritual body" without "flesh and blood" bear any resemblance to an earthly body? If not, why call it a body? If all the familiar attributes are taken away, what is left? Nothing. Or nothing except weird imagination.

Be honest. When you preach "everlasting life" are not the members of your congregation thinking of survival in bodily, fleshly and earthly terms? Are they really, are any of us really, capable of imagining survival in non-material, metaphysical, transcendental terms?

Your promises are in a sealed box. Your congregation puts imaginary contents into the box, drawn from their earthly experience. They are thinking of seeing, something to see with and something to see. They are thinking of thinking and something to think about. They are thinking about events, something happening.

Perfection, the end, a future existence without change, where nothing happens, would drive a human being insane before the end of the first day of eternity.

But if you say it won't be like that—what will it be like?

If Heaven is not a place, what is it?

Are you not better at negatives than positives? If your bill of goods was arid, empty metaphysics, would your congregation buy it?

Do you avoid prosecution under the Sale of Goods Act by refraining from actionable descriptions and allowing your congregation to describe the goods for themselves, from their own imaginations?

Some preachers induce these imaginings by filling their sermons with homespun platitudes. They are like jugglers keeping flesh and spirit, fact and fancy, reality and imagination, all flying through the air together. As with conjurers, the swiftness of the hand deceives the eye.

Unless you can tell us, in comprehensible terms, what you are offering, are you not offering nothing?

Non-material existence is incomprehensible.

Do you, yourself, believe in it?

If so, explain what you mean.

You ask your flock to have faith, to believe.

To have faith in what?

To believe in what?

Again I ask ... When will you say *I don't know?*

● **KARL HEATH** suggests that readers might put the questions posed in this series to their local clergy—and send any replies to *The Freethinker*.

NEIL BLEWITT insists that the Jesus of the apocryphal gospels

# Don't demean O ye of little

I HAVE always accepted the divinity of Jehovah in the Old Testament as unreservedly as I have that of his son in the New.

He who is recorded in Genesis as having created the Earth out of nothing from a point probably somewhere above the Arabian peninsula has as much right to be considered a god as, for example, Naruau who performed an identical feat from above the Pacific Ocean. Such an accomplishment requires no other qualification to validate a claim to a divine nature.

As for Jesus, he is, although not creative like his father, just as entitled to the designation of god, if on a slightly less exalted level (as fellows and associates in the professions) because he fulfilled sufficient of the other conditions prescribed for secondary deities.

A non-creative god is generally required to be born supernaturally at one end of his terrestrial career and rise dramatically to Heaven at the other. In between, he should be able to demonstrate a capacity to withstand temptations from devils and perform a wide range of miracles such as healing the sick without recourse to medicines, directing the elements and raising the dead including, preferably, himself. He should have the power to transform himself and others into any creature or object, dissolve into invisibility, and remain undetectable by any of the human senses, and reverse the process at a moment's notice. He should be related by birth, adoption, marriage or seduction to an existing god—although it is not normally necessary to emulate the ancient Greek gods in this respect where the divine direction of affairs became a substantial family concern; three related gods in one establishment are usually considered adequate. Finally, he should be more than 2,000 years old. For some reason, after the time of Jesus the number and quality of aspirants to the profession declined steeply and such as there were found it extremely difficult to gain acceptance.

Jesus was not unique, of course, in his divine attributes. Aesculapius was the son of a god. He, too, healed the sick and raised the

dead, and after he was slain rose from the grave and ascended to Heaven. Zoroaster was born of a virgin mother. He began his spiritual mission at 30, a popular age for the task, underwent temptations quite properly in a wilderness, healed the sick and rose to Heaven on his death in a flash of lightning. But Jesus' lack of uniqueness does not detract from his divine status. Indeed, I like to think that he would have felt comfortable in the company of gods like Aesculapius and Zoroaster.

But what is a source of bemusement to me is the difficulty some Christians experience in this matter. They seem either unable to comprehend or unwilling to assert that Jesus was a god. Many will not even say that he was the son of a god, simply because he did not claim the title for himself despite there being a nod to Peter on one occasion and a wink to the High Priest on another.

This attitude reminds me of the disciples who asked, when they saw Jesus still a tempter with a verbal formula gods reserve for these occasions, "What manner of man is this?" Man, indeed! Jesus had already been born of a virgin; he had raised the son of the widow of Nain; he had healed lunatics and lepers with no more than a touch or a word, and both his baptism and the conference he held with two ghosts on a mountain had been accompanied by his own father announcing their kinship from behind a cloud. What further proof could they need?

If one excuses the disciples because at that time they did not know the plenitude of his power, one can not extend such leniency to today's Christians for they do. Yet many will still say no more than that he was the Son of Man, or a distinguished teacher and healer. And this despite their acknowledgment of his divine origin every time they recite their creeds. One may fairly ask: "What manner of people are these?" The sorry truth is that they would not recognise a god if one stood before them and declared himself.

Because of this, I have always felt it something of a duty to try to strengthen the faint-hearted among them. I ask that, at least, they heed the evidence of the angel at the

Annunciation, the Ethiopian eunuch and the devils whom Jesus drove out of the bodies of the possessed. They all acknowledged him as the son of a god; surely Christians can do no less.

In any case, there are other indications of his divinity in the New Testament—not to mention the so-called apocryphal gospels. I have always disliked the use of this word. It is grossly unfair to the writers and their subject. The Jesus of the apocryphal gospels is quite plainly the Jesus of the canonical gospels, as anybody who reads them is bound to agree.

Let doubters turn, for example, to the Infancy Books which record that, even as a child, Jesus was demonstrating an aptitude for the performance of miracles. And it cannot be represented that these accounts are fanciful since, as I will show, many of his childhood miracles were replicated, in essence, in his manhood. The wonder is that these books were excluded from the canon in the first place.

St Thomas described how Jesus, at the age of eight, sowed one seed of wheat in the Spring and, at the harvest, reaped a hundred measures—sufficient for all the poor of his village and for his own family too.

The same apostle also recorded many instances of Jesus raising children from the dead—including, it must be said, one or two he himself had previously slain. But no matter. The principle stands that he was able to restore the dead to life.

Other authors record his many miracles of healing as a child, including one when he was still in his cradle. A woman who had been haunted by a dragon for many years was freed from her torment the moment she touched his swaddling clothes.

The attention of readers will not need to be directed to the parallels with the feeding of the 5,000 (and its encore—the 4,000), the raising of Lazarus from the dead and the healing of the woman with the issue of blood.

But even when earlier miracles were not replicated in his manhood they often bore a similarity to those performed by other well-



*gospels is quite plainly the Jesus of the canonical gospels*

# ean Jesus, ittle faith!

**Empedocles believed himself to be immortal as all *bona fide* gods are and, in an attempt to prove it, he threw himself into the crater of Mount Etna. The volcano, equally anxious to prove the contrary, contemptuously tossed out one of his sandals.**

established gods. A good example of this is the occasion when some children with whom Jesus had been playing hid in a cellar and he decided to turn them into goats. But Minerva, it may be recalled, turned Arachne into a spider and Dionysus some sailors into dolphins. Perhaps it should be added, in fairness to Jesus, that he did restore the children to their original form and they appeared to be none the worse for the experience. Not all gods were as considerate.

Accounts of his activities as an adult in the "apocryphal" books offer further indications of his divinity. I will not weary readers by elaborating on this overmuch, so perhaps two examples will suffice.

The Ethiopic Book of the Cock recorded that a little while before Jesus was arrested he sat at meat with some friends, and their hostess cut up a cockerel and placed it on a dish before them. At this point, Judas left the room and Jesus touched the cockerel which immediately became animated and stood up whole. He bade it follow Judas and report back on his movements, which the cock faithfully did, weeping the whole time. Jesus blessed it and sent it to live in Heaven for 1,000 years. (As a footnote to this episode, it ought to be said that there was no recorded sighting of the cock at the end of this period nor has there been one since, but I do not think we should allow ourselves to become too concerned. One assumes that he has been properly provided for.)

To believe that Jesus descended into Hell

after his death is a requirement of the Apostles Creed, but there is nothing in the canonical gospels about this journey. It is left to Bartholomew to remedy the deficiency in his Book of the Resurrection. He reveals that when Jesus was placed in his tomb, Death visited him with his six sons in the form of serpents, having been alerted to the fact that he was dead by a disturbance on the premises. Death asked Jesus who he was and when he merely laughed in reply, Death and his sons fled, whereupon Jesus mounted a chariot, which happened to be standing idle near by at that moment, and wrought havoc in Hell, binding such demons as were present and delivering Adam and the holy souls.

I could adduce further examples, but I think I have made the point that if Christians need evidence from sources other than the Bible that Jesus had divine attributes, it is there in abundance and only the most unreasonable among them could fail to be convinced by it. Indeed, I would go farther and assert that if these incidents do not demonstrate a god at work, so far as I am concerned the Ethiopic cock, to coin a phrase, is a bloater.

Before concluding I must return to the matter of miracles for a moment because of the uncertainty that often arises from records of persons other than listed gods performing them. What precisely, it is asked, is the status of people like St Francis Xavier, who called down fire from Heaven; St Macarius, who induced the corpse of a murdered man to

speaking out in defence of his suspected assassin; Sabinus, Bishop of Placentia, who delivered a letter to the River Po when it was in flood requesting that its waters subside forthwith and saw his petition granted; or Empedocles, who directed the elements and raised the dead 500 years before Jesus? (The cynic may add Cinderella's godmother, who transformed a pumpkin into a golden coach but, of course, I must reject that since, as is well known, it is but a fairy story.) But spectacular though these miracles were, they do not make their practitioners gods as the final moments of Empedocles illustrate. He believed himself to be immortal as all *bona fide* gods are and, in an attempt to prove it, he threw himself into the crater of Mount Etna. The volcano, equally anxious to prove the contrary, contemptuously tossed out one of his sandals.

The ability to perform miracles, then, does not of itself proclaim a god. It is but one of several attributes required to demonstrate divine status and the more important of them are listed at the beginning of this article. Jesus, it must be repeated, possessed them all except the ability to create a universe, although, to be fair to him, he did not have the opportunity since his father had completed the task before he was born.

So Jesus is a god and Christians should recognise the fact and not demean him by bestowing a lesser title on him. Chapman Cohen, a former Editor of *The Freethinker*, wrote in similar vein some 60 years ago when he detected what he saw as a serious backsliding among Christians as to the status of the founder of their religion. He exhorted freethinkers to proclaim the divinity of Jesus whenever Christians declared the contrary. It is a matter of regret that this backsliding continues still, and I find myself not only agreeing with Mr Cohen but also echoing Toytown's oldest and most respected citizen, Mr Growser, who on discovering other cases of lapses of intellectual or moral rigour among his contemporaries, would remark: "It is disgraceful and it ought not to be allowed!"

# Carl Sagan: concerned to the last for the planet

**T**HIS is a book to cherish. It is, as the subtitle has it, Carl Sagan's "Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium" and, as the author died in December 1996 from a bone marrow disease, myelodysplasia, it presents his final thoughts. For that reason it is a sad and very moving book. But it contains some of Sagan's brilliant scientific essays, which remind us of the US Academy of Sciences' citation when it awarded him its highest honour in 1994.

"No one has ever succeeded in conveying the wonder, excitement and joy of science as widely as Carl Sagan and few as well", it said. "His ability to capture the imagination of millions and to explain difficult concepts in understandable terms is a magnificent achievement." The same "wonder, excitement and joy of science" are here, as before.

"Billions and billions": Sagan never said it (it was too imprecise anyway) but it was attributed to him, so he chose it for his last volume, where he deals more precisely with vast numbers. "If you know a thing only qualitatively, you know it no more than vaguely", he says. "If you know it quantitatively—grasping some numerical measure that distinguishes it from an infinite number of other possibilities—you are beginning to know it deeply. You comprehend some of its beauty and you gain access to its power and the understanding it provides." To be afraid of quantification is "tantamount to disenfranchising yourself, giving up one of the most potent prospects for understanding and changing the world".

That last phrase epitomises Sagan's scientific outlook. We must figure out how to make our world a safe and balanced ecosystem. To do so we need "more scientific research and more technological restraint". We cannot expect "some great Ecosystem Keeper in the sky" to "reach down and put

*Billions and Billions* by Carl Sagan. **Headline, £18.**

**Review: COLIN McCALL**

right our environmental abuses". It is up to us.

Foolishly—one might say cynically—in response to the need to understand science and technology, the Republican Congress abolished its own Office of Technology Assessment; there are "almost no scientists who are members of the US Congress," and much the same is true of other countries.

Equally cynical, of course, are the multinationals whose profits depend on ozone-depleting chemicals. Du Pont took out advertisements in newspapers and scientific journals—and testified before Congressional committees—that the danger of CFCs to the ozone layer was "unproved, had been greatly exaggerated, or was based on faulty scientific reasoning". And the chairman of an alliance of CFC manufacturers complained that the banning of CFCs would have "horrendous consequences". Some industries would have to close down—"the cure could kill the patient". But, Sagan responds, the patient is not "some industries"; it might be "life on Earth".

Du Pont did announce in 1988, 14 years after the danger had been identified by Sherwood Rowland and Mario Molina of the University of California, that it would phase out the manufacture of CFCs, but it would not be completed until the year 2000.

We must begin to think and act, as Sagan says, "not merely in terms of our nation and generation (much less the profits of a particular industry) but in terms of the entire vulnerable planet Earth and the generations of children to come". He was prepared to work with churchmen to meet environmental crises, but he records the refusal of Roman Catholic delegates to a New York meeting in 1991, "not only to describing birth control

methods, but even to uttering the words 'birth control'".

Several of the essays in *Billions and Billions* are written in conjunction with his wife, Ann Druyan. On abortion, for instance, where it is noted that murder uniquely applies to the killing of human beings and not to the killing of chimpanzees, who share 99.6 per cent of our active genes; and that Martin Luther declared if women "become tired or even die through bearing children that does not matter. Let them die through fruitfulness—that is why they are there".

Ann Druyan also collaborated on Sagan's "Gettysburg and Now" speech for the 125th anniversary of the battle, when 51,000 human beings were killed or wounded. Some 58,000 American perished in South-East Asia, along with one or two million Vietnamese, Laotians and Kampuchians. Between the beginning of the Cold War in 1946 and its ending in 1989, the United States spent (in equivalent 1989 dollars) well over \$10 trillion in its confrontation with the Soviet Union. More than a third of this sum was spent by the Reagan administration which, we are informed, added more to the national debt than all previous administrations, back to George Washington, combined.

In an update, the authors tell us that the Clinton defence budget for 1995 was "some \$30 billion higher than Richard Nixon's defence budget at the height of the Cold War" and with Republican-proposed increments, it will grow in real dollars by 50 per cent by the year 2000. Well might they comment: "There is much left to do".

Carl Sagan, you will see, was concerned to the last for humanity and the planet on which we live. "Whether we will acquire the understanding and wisdom necessary to come to grips with the scientific revelations of the twentieth century will be the most profound challenge of the twenty-first", he says in his final general essay.

Then, in a personal account of his fatal illness, he describes his six previous confrontations with death. "I would love to believe that when I die I will live again", he says, but he knows of "nothing to suggest that it is more than wishful thinking". He would love to grow really old with his wife and see his younger children grow up. "There are scientific problems whose outcomes I long to witness—such as the exploration of many of the worlds in our Solar System and the search for life elsewhere. I want to learn how major trends in human history, both hopeful and worrisome, work themselves out ..."

It was not to be, and Ann Druyan tells us in an epilogue that, when Carl was dying "there was no deathbed conversion, no last minute refuge taken in a comforting vision of an afterlife ... As we looked deeply into each other's eyes, it was with a shared conviction that our wondrous life together was ending forever".

## FUNDS FOR FREETHOUGHT

THE FREETHINKER ... £1 per issue, and worth it.

Don't take our word for it—that's the comment of the journal *Freedom* in a January 24 review of publications available from its bookshop (they seem to have been particularly taken with our December nativity scene: "Christ almighty, Mary, you can't call him Darren!").

It's nice to be appreciated—but we must say that the £1 cover price mentioned doesn't even begin to meet the cost of our spreading the Freethought message.

We rely heavily on the generosity of our readers to help us pay the bills, so if you appreciate our efforts as much as *Freedom* does, please send a donation to: Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London

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**Total from December 19 to January 19: £395.50**

Terry Sanderson on the media

# RELIGION – GUILTY AS CHARGED

**I**F EVER you challenge a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew to explain how their religions can claim to be morally superior when such horrible atrocities are committed in their name, they will invariably reply—it isn't the religion, it's the politics.

They will patiently explain that the tenets of their good, kind and benign religions have been perverted by fanatics for their own ends. Genuine believers wouldn't dream of chopping off babies' heads or slitting the throats of entire communities (Islam, Algeria, ongoing), or bursting into a mosque and slaughtering 29 Muslims (Jewish, Hebron 1994), or killing 2,000 Palestinian Arabs (Christian Phalangists, Sabra and Chatila Camps, 1982).

No, the argument goes, these ghastly acts—and many others—were perpetrated in the name of political power rather than religion.

Now, at last, that idea has been comprehensively challenged. In a devastating article in *The Independent* (December 3, 1997) Robert Fisk bravely lays the blame for the mayhem squarely at the door of the mosques and synagogues and churches. He says that there is a desire to "avoid confronting a very frightening phenomenon, one that we desperately hope—and, if we have faith in any god, pray—is not true: that the bloodbath visited upon the Middle East may not be the result of religion used as a cynical tool for a political aim, but may spring instead from the religion itself. What we do not want to think about in the region—what we cannot accept—is that the three great eastern religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism may themselves bear some responsibility for the atrocities committed in their name."

He makes the point that the adherents to these faiths often seem more liberal the further away they are from their holy cities of Jerusalem and Mecca. "The English vicar, the liberal rabbi in London, the Muslim sheikh in Birmingham are folk we enjoy meeting." But, he says, "The moment we encounter the Christian right-wing pilgrims to Jerusalem, the Jewish supporters of Eretz Israel in the West Bank, or the Saudi religious police in Mecca with their absolute belief in Islamic sharia law (obligingly passed on to their chums in the Taliban in Afghanistan), the less attractive these religions become."

Mr Fisk points out that there is a double standard employed in the west when reporting the escalating horrors of the Middle East. Whenever some sickening mass murder takes place, committed in the name of Allah, the headlines invariably contain the words "Islamic extremists" or "fanatics" or "terrorists" or, as *Paris Match* put it, "Allah's lunatics." When the press report the equally bloodthirsty activities of Christian or Jewish groups (such as the slaughter of a hundred Muslim refugees in 1996 by Israeli troops at the Qana camp in Southern Lebanon), they do not write headlines about "Jewish terrorists" or "Christian terrorists". Yet each religion has its own dreadful—and recent—history of cruel murder, mainly of innocent people.

Fisk quotes from a book by Dr Israel Shahak, a retired professor of chemistry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The book, *Jewish History, Jewish Religion*, examines the history of Jewish fundamentalism and, going against

the prevailing culture of fanaticism that surrounds him, Dr Shahak tells the truth. He concludes that "there can no longer be any doubt that the most horrifying acts of oppression in the West Bank are motivated by Jewish religious fanaticism."

Dr Shahak quotes from an official exhortation to religious Jewish soldiers about Gentiles, published by the Israeli army, in which the chief chaplain writes: "When our forces come across civilians during a war or in hot pursuit or in a raid, so long as there is no certainty that those civilians are incapable of harming our forces then according to the Halakhah system (the legal system of classical Judaism) they may and even should be killed ... In no circumstances should an Arab be trusted, even if he makes an impression of being civilised ... In a war, when our forces storm the enemy, they are allowed, even enjoined by the Halakhah, to kill even good civilians, that is, civilians who are ostensibly good."

Robert Fisk concludes his article with this: "Religion is about ultimate truth and faith. And those who believe in such total truths—to the extinction of other, invalid 'truths'—live near their holy cities ... Are extremists—the killers and the racists or the eccentrics mere defects in the world of religion? Or are they an inevitable part of the Middle East? I fear the latter. Perhaps it is time we recognised this poison for what it is. For there is nothing so hard as the rock of belief. And nothing so potentially cruel."

And it is not only in the Middle East where religion's apologists try to excuse their faith from responsibility for inhuman brutality. In Northern Ireland, too, we constantly hear the same refrain: this is not a religious war, it's about politics.

Try telling that to Dorothy Creaney, a

Protestant who had the temerity to get engaged to a Catholic man, Larry Brennan.

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, Mr Brennan had been warned by Loyalist terrorists to break off the relationship. The Loyalist fanatics don't approve of "mixed" relationships.

The couple tried to stay apart, and managed it for six weeks. Mrs Creaney—who was just getting over the ending of a 25 year marriage—is quoted as saying: "Then we met again one night and we just knew we could not be apart." She had imagined she would "never find happiness again". But she did—with Larry Brennan.

The Loyalists then carried out their threat and shot Mr Brennan dead.

Nothing to do with religion, though.

I have always held that theology is the most useful of all the great academic subjects. After all, without it how would we know when it was OK to pick our noses? I refer to the story, reported in *The Independent*, of an ultra-Orthodox rabbi in Israel who declared that it was perfectly permissible to pick your nose on the Sabbath. Apparently there had been some misunderstanding. Originally it was thought that he had forbidden it because "tiny hairs inside the nostrils might be pulled out", which would contravene laws which say that the hair must not be cut on the Sabbath. Thankfully, this turned out not to be the case, and the rabbi had given it the thumbs-up.

I understand that the Rabbi Yosef is now to produce a book on the topic—*The Theology of Bogies*—which will ensure that all is absolutely clear. In the meantime, it has not been decreed whether Kleenex is a permissible receptacle for snot, or whether linen handkerchiefs must continue to be employed. Don't dare blow your nose until a decision has been made.

## Helping teachers understand the Humanist outlook

**OUR national education authorities make no provision for schools to include the systematic study of moral philosophy in the curriculum, and have decreed that Religious Education does not include formal teaching about any non-religious philosophical outlook, including that of Humanism, writes ROY SAICH.**

To help teachers, and all those involved in education at all levels, to remedy this deficiency, the Pink Triangle Trust, a Humanist educational charity, is producing a series of leaflets. A single copy of each leaflet is available free, if a stamped addressed envelope, at least 22 cm x 11 cm in size, is sent to PTT, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB. Six copies cost just £1 and payment may be made by sending a book of postage stamps. Sixty-five copies cost only £10.

Leaflet number six in the series is *A Few Words Introducing the Humanist Tradition*;

leaflet number seven is called *Make It Happy* and gives some suggestions as to how we can build happy lives.

### NSS at Nine!

ON the day that it was announced that Muslim schools were for the first time to be given voluntary aided status, the National Secular Society's views were sought on BBC1's Nine o'Clock News. In the interview, General Secretary Keith Porteous Wood said that the society had opposed state funding of religious schools for more than a century. He added that from a race relations perspective it was unsatisfactory for both Muslim pupils and other young people for them to be educated separately.

It is believed to be the first time that the NSS has been on this flagship news programme.

# SATAN RIDES AGAIN – AND THIS TIME HE’S A HUMANIST

**T**HIS new film, starring Al Pacino and Keanu Reeves, puts me in mind of something said by Mark Twain: “All religions issue Bibles against Satan, and say the most injurious things against him, but we never hear his side.”

Well, in *The Devil’s Advocate*, we certainly hear his side, and at great length. But rather than being a reworking of the Faust legend, it becomes more like an extended commentary on the moral implications of the O J Simpson trial.

The story concerns a hotshot young lawyer, Kevin Lomax (played by Keanu Reeves in his usual expressionless manner), who operates down in the boondocks of Florida. There he’s a big fish in a small pond.

We first see him in court defending an alleged child molester. In order to win the case he has to break down the young victim’s composure just enough to make the jury wonder if a teenage girl might have lied about her teacher’s slimy advances. Using his charismatic, hypnotic style, he manages to insinuate enough doubt into the jury’s mind to get the wretched man off. He celebrates his win—despite his own awareness that his client is as guilty as sin.

This is his 68th consecutive acquittal, and his success has not gone unnoticed. He is recruited by a big New York law firm which is headed by the urbane, all-knowing John Milton (Al Pacino).

Lomax and his cheery wife Mary Ann (Charlize Theron) can’t resist the prospect of the luxury living that this new job offers, and they up sticks without a second thought and move into the firm’s fabulous apartment block. Standing in the background, however, is Lomax’s pious mother, issuing dire warnings that New York is the nexus of all evil, and why doesn’t he come home to the Bible Belt where it’s safe?

He disregards her advice, and, once ensconced in his new job, Lomax soon finds he is rising rapidly through the corporate structure. The mysterious John Milton has taken a shine to the lad, and soon gives him a partnership in the firm and his biggest job defending a billionaire building contractor who is accused of triple murder.

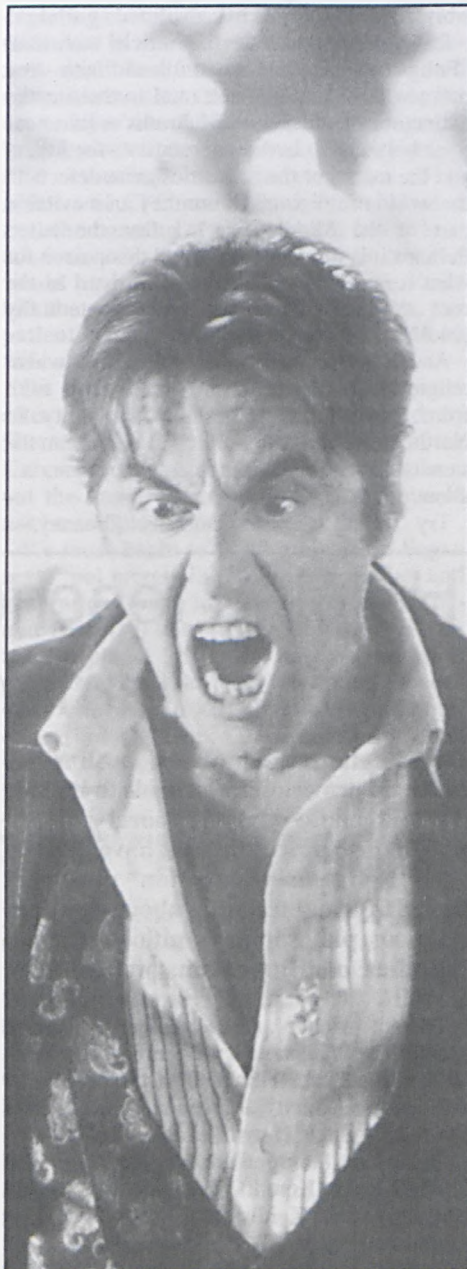
Lomax takes the job, but soon becomes convinced that his client is guilty—not only of this crime, but also of others even more heinous. But without a twinge of conscience, he sets about getting the murderer off. After all, that’s his job, and he’s ambitious. He’s been seduced by the material wealth that his dubious skills have brought him.

Meanwhile, his wife is having her own problems. Living in their sumptuous apartment, surrounded by the wives of other partners in the firm, she comes to realise that something is not right. She begins to see signs of demonology all around her—and soon her mind begins to deteriorate. It’s not clear what is driving her mad,

*The Devil’s Advocate* (Cert 18)  
Reviewer: TERRY SANDERSON

whether it is the fact that her neighbours occasionally transmogrify into gargoyles, or that she can’t find the right colour paint for the walls. Whatever the cause of her crack-up, Lomax has her committed to an asylum.

This slow build-up leads Lomax to realise that Milton is, in fact, Satan himself up to his old tricks. It isn’t such a surprise to the audience, though, as they’ve already seen him put his finger in a church font, causing the water to boil. The fact the subway is his favourite mode of transport should also have made our hero suspicious about his boss’s partiality to hell-holes.



● Al Pacino stars in Warner Brothers’ supernatural thriller *The Devil’s Advocate*.

Eventually Mr Milton reveals his true colours to Lomax, and it is at this point that the film implodes and becomes risible. Al Pacino who, up until this point, has presented John Milton as an intriguing, worldly character, suddenly turns him into a pantomime demon. He rants, he raves, he sings like Frank Sinatra and then he causes the fire to burn very bright.

It turns out that 30 years ago he had his wicked way with Lomax’s mother on her one and only visit to New York on a missionary weekend, and that Lomax is actually the Devil’s spawn. That explains why he’s so successful in court—he’s got Mephistopheles putting words into his mouth!

During a long exposition about the role of the Devil in today’s society, we get the impression that Satan took the form of a lawyer on this occasion because he considers the legal profession the perfect vehicle for evil. After all, in what other sphere can you ensure that so many evil-doers do not get their just desserts? The Devil tells his son that most of his younger recruits are now in law school, and they will create such a stench with their championing of the obviously wicked, that the fumes will rise to Heaven and gas the enemy.

During this speech, Satan makes a few very telling points about the contradictions inherent in religion and belief in God. He rails against God’s capriciousness and inconsistency. He makes quite a few arguments against religion that wouldn’t be unfamiliar or unacceptable to readers of *The Freethinker*. In fact, at one point he actually says (or shouts—everything in the last half-hour is shouted): “I’m a Humanist!”

The message seems to be—if you don’t think religion or God are necessarily good things, then you must be as wicked as the devil. According to this film, the opposite of belief is not atheism but wickedness. If you don’t love Jesus, you must have opted for Satan.

This message may suit the Americans, with their infantile religiosity, but it will grate mightily with those of a more sophisticated moral outlook.

*The Devil’s Advocate* is not a low budget production, and at well over two hours it isn’t a short one, either. It boasts some tremendous special effects, especially a distracting marble frieze depicting the lustful denizens of “that place downstairs” writhing in their wicked embraces, which suddenly springs to life.

Over all, though, it is an unsatisfactory movie on more counts than simply its philosophical vacuity. The acting is unconvincing (and in Al Pacino’s case, hammy), the thrills are not very thrilling, and as a horror film it doesn’t scare as much as annoy.

See it if you must, but be prepared for raised blood pressure.

# You're telling us!

## Muslim schools

THERE has been a recent decision by the Department of Education and Science to allow state financial support for two Muslim primary schools. I am in favour of this decision, because it removes a grave injustice to the Muslim community. While Christian and Jewish schools obtain state money, it is discriminatory to exclude Muslims from this arrangement.

It may be argued that schools separated by race as well as religion will be bad for race relations. In fact, Muslims, who have been hurt by the long wait for equal treatment, will regard this as an important step in being treated like everyone else in the community.

I think it is a minority of Muslim parents who will want to send their children to separate Muslim schools: there are about 50 private Muslim schools, not all of which are likely to gain state financial support. This affects a small proportion of the 1.5 million Muslim community. I think most Muslims want their children to grow up within the whole community, to get good jobs and to become full citizens in our society. They will be more ready to send their children to the non-religious state schools as long as they feel there is no discrimination and racism within these schools.

Within Muslim state-supported schools, there must be full coverage of the national curriculum and equal treatment for girls. Of course there will be teaching of Muslim culture and adherence to Muslim customs. But what about the custom of wearing hideous mauve blazers in some schools, or the learning of a "strange" language like Welsh in other schools, or the broadly Christian morning worship in many schools?

Despite the persistent newspaper headlines about Muslim extremism, there are moderate Muslim voices. We should encourage them to speak out. We should encourage them to feel part of society as a whole, for many have been born in Britain and are as British as I am. An article "Religious Liberty and Tolerance: a Muslim Perspective" by Abdulrahim P Vijapur (*The Radical Humanist*, India, December 1995) expounds the potential for tolerance within Islam.

If there were a serious campaign to phase out all financial support for religious schools, I would join it readily. But there is no such campaign, there has not been any serious attempt to launch such a campaign, and it would be extremely unlikely to be successful in the present climate of a religious Cabinet and popular parental support for church schools.

As a good secularist, I will enthusiastically work for a completely secular state, but for the meanwhile I feel I must accept the justice of offering financial support to Muslim schools.

**JIM HERRICK**  
London WC1

## Question of jobs

I WOULD like to ask your readers to question an assumption which is so common it goes unquestioned: that jobs are a good thing.

A job is a task or tasks which you do for someone in return for remuneration.

In my experience the remuneration is the key motivation. No-one likes being told what to do and often the task itself is arduous or repetitive or both.

Jobs invariably do not allow the individuality of the person to express itself and they effectively destroy creativity over long periods of time.

Jobs do not give an individual a sense of achievement. He is not achieving his own goal—he is achieving someone else's. The worker does the job simply because he must because he needs the money.

Why should I seek to question an institution such as the "job" which achieved mass acceptance with the Industrial Revolution (about 200 years ago)? I hope I have already answered that but will not have achieved an objective of mine unless I offer a better alternative.

The use of innovative techniques and the application of modern technology in the production processes of a free market economy result in higher profits, greater wealth and fewer jobs. The wealth generated can be redistributed by means of a simple, cheap, (no jobs involved), computerised taxation system.

So, more and more people can have the freedom from economic necessity and the time to pursue individual interests voluntarily.

Futurologists predict greater leisure-time. This is in accord with that. It is also fair.

**ERIC YAFFEY**  
Keighley

## Reply from a parson

KARL HEATH'S provocative article, "Arrogance Preaching to Ignorance" (Page 6, January), compels a response.

I am a retired minister of the United Reformed Church (Presbyterian and Congregational) and a regular reader of *The Freethinker*.

One of my problems with Karl Heath—and, indeed, with many of your contributors—is that he tars all Christians, particularly ministers, with the same brush and tends to overlook the wide variety of beliefs within the Church.

Mr Heath may be interested to know that throughout my ministry I have worked very hard at putting questions marks and commas where some, notably Biblical fundamentalists, would put full stops. Many of my colleagues follow a similar line, particularly when preaching. Apart from any other consideration—and in spite of Karl Heath's poor assessment of churchgoers—there are a considerable number in every congregation who would not tolerate any other stance. The Christian faith is one of the most complex, and ministers who never say "I don't know" or "Perhaps" or "Maybe" are not only exposing their own ignorance: they are also demeaning the Faith. The minister who has no doubts deserves to have his credentials questioned.

The Bible itself, as Karl Heath underlines, contributes to the complexity of the Faith. Some Christians accept every word of it as God-given, partly because they have a psychological need for an authoritative religion and

partly because they do not understand the cultural and historical backgrounds against which the various documents were written. On the other hand, many Christians realise that the Bible will always pose immense problems of interpretation: they also know that many of their serious questions will never be adequately answered by it. It occurs to me that humanists who share Karl Heath's views would do well to read *The Christian Agnostic*. The author, the late Dr Leslie Weatherhead, urges Christians to take a blue pencil to the Bible and cross out whole chunks of it, like the violent imprecatory psalms and other passages which contradict the Christian spirit. The fact that some Christians give the Bible an importance it was not intended to have while others regard it as a compass that points in a certain direction makes the Christian Faith interesting, exciting, believable and often amusing. Is it not possible that Christians in their diversity are very much more human than humanists?

Finally—though I could write more—I think Mr Heath is being a little too harsh when he criticises Professor Weitzmann for his gaffe during his broadcast talk. Obviously people who broadcast ought to prepare with great care but no one can expect to be proficient in every discipline. I recall listening to an address given by the Director of Education of one of our largest counties in which he referred to "all four sides of the triangle". His unfortunate mistake, however, did not in any way detract from his competence as a brilliant educationist. Perhaps it is also true to say that Christians who believe that perfection in any sphere is difficult to attain are being very much more earthy and realistic than some humanists.

(The Rev) **RONALD YOUNG**  
Stroud

## Determinism and free will

YOUR correspondent AJMizen, who discusses the question of free will in a letter on Page 13 of the January issue of *The Freethinker*, may find the following notes of interest, which I jotted down directly after hearing Mary Midgley speak at the Edinburgh Science Festival in the Spring of 1997.

"An omniscient (that is, all-knowing) being would be bound to know, completely and precisely, the cause of any particular action by any particular person. This statement derives directly from the meaning of the word 'omniscient.' In practice, however, omniscience, even only in regard to prediction, is totally unattainable, due to the inconceivable complexity of thought, decisions, events etc. On the other hand, omniscience would *theoretically* be possible, given that causality operated down to the most minute detail in everything that happened. People who accept that it does, must, in the final analysis, be determinists, because they recognise that any given event, thought or decision must be the *only possible* outcome of the set of events from which it arose and that it is, therefore, ultimately inevitable. Even in the case of human action the outcome is still inevitable, irrespective of whether the immediate cause of the action is an

# You're telling us!

◀ From Page 13

intelligent appraisal of the relevant circumstances and a conscious decision to take a particular path, or, alternatively, drives and impulses beyond the actor's full understanding and control. Furthermore, a valid concept of omniscience depends upon the inexorable way in which events unfold for, by definition, a random future cannot be known."

I hope that the foregoing helps to clarify the matter rather than add to the confusion!

NB: Mary Midgley is a philosopher to whom some scientists appear to be under-rating the role of consciousness in decision making.

**VERNA METCALFE**  
London NW3

THE only intellectual confusion between determinism and free will is in the use of words. It was Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* who said "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean..." An irresistible force meeting an immovable object is an example. When you leap out of the way of an oncoming car in a split-second, be thankful for your deterministic genetic inheritance. When you put your hand in your pocket and consider whether to give the seller of *The Big Issue* £1 or £5, you are exercising free will. If, however, you hand over £5 and walk away with a self-satisfied rosy glow permeating your being, your free will has been given a little push by deterministic forces. If, on the other hand, you walk away after handing over the £5 thinking "what an idiot I am, that extra £4 could have bought me a large box of chocolate" (or whatever you fancy), then your free will has been given a little push by genuine altruism—but the fact that you feel a bit disgruntled is back to determinism again.

In other words, you can't win, ever, in trying to separate so-called determinism from so-called free will. Their meaning hinges on the mythology from which they originate as words. We all come into the world with a pre-determined set of inherited genes, but our intelligence should be used to consciously overcome our innate tendencies and strive to achieve a behavioural pattern based on the Golden Rule—don't do to others what you wouldn't like others to do to you. At all costs, don't go praising or blaming God for your deterministic/free will actions, because God is the be-all and end-all in the mythology stakes.

**IAN KIRKLAND**  
Dundee

## Numbers game

I SEE from Up Front (Page 2, January issue) that Stephen Jay Gould has fallen for the fallacy that there ought logically to be a "year zero" to separate "AD" from "BC". I recall that Isaac Asimov fell for the same fallacy in a magazine article some decades ago. The fallacy, of course, is in trying to treat the numbers allocated to calendar years as cardinal numbers, pure numbers, mathematical numbers. They are not. You can't add, subtract, multiply or divide with them. (Well, you can, of course, but the answers you get will mostly be meaningless.)

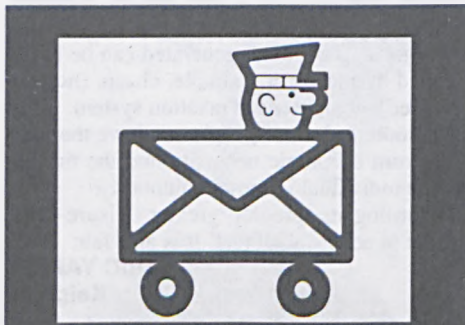
No, year-designation numbers are simply reference-numbers, ordinal numbers. The Year One of an era should really be called the First

Year of that era. It is only a label. If you wish to designate the thirteenth year as Year 12A, that's entirely allowable—or you can if you wish adopt the Chinese system and label them the Year of the Aardvark, the Year of the Wombat, the Year of the Armadillo and so on. (Yes, I know these animals are not Chinese—but the system is.)

So Year One of an era is simply the First Year of that era. Similarly, the year immediately preceding that year is the First Year Before the era. Trying to interpolate a Year Zero would be entirely illogical. In calendrical terms, Zero is not a year—nor any other unit of temporal duration. Zero is simply a fixed point—the point when the First Year begins and the First Year Before ends.

A Gould or an Asimov, once he had acknowledged the fallacy, could doubtless express this far more clearly than I can. But in the circumstances, you'll have to put up with me.

**ARCHIE MERCER**  
Cornwall



*Short and clearly-typed letters for publication may be sent to Peter Brearey, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. E-mail address: editor@freethinker.co.uk*

## Long-servers

IN the report of the Annual General Meeting of the National Secular Society (January), it is claimed that Barbara Smoker was President for longer than anyone apart from Chapman Cohen (1915-1949). Not so.

She was elected (after performing some presidential functions for a few months) in June 1972, and she was removed from office (the only person to be so) in November 1996: a total of 24 years and 5 months.

G W Foote (founder of *The Freethinker*) was elected (in succession to Charles Bradlaugh) in February 1890, and died in office (the only person to do so) in October 1915: a total of 25 years and 8 months.

**NICOLAS WALTER**  
Islington

## Presidential

AS AN ex-serviceman who was required to take an oath of allegiance to the Head of State,

and who has converted to republicanism, I agree with Roy Saich (November letters) that the thought of most ex-Prime Ministers as President is depressing.

What about restricting the choice of candidates to ex-Speakers of the House of Commons? They may be politicians, but by perception and training would be better than most.

I suggest that this President should be elected for life.

**EDWARD GWINNELL**  
Yeovil

## Disaster

I AM not surprised that Daniel O'Hara lost the debate at Durham University on the subject of Jesus Christ (Page 16, January). He met the opposition in their own never-never land of quotations from the Bible instead of facing them with irrefutable facts of history. Who *cares* what it says in the Bible?

In the name of Christianity, millions of people have died, been tortured, enslaved and segregated, and the more religious people are the less tolerant they become. There is the ideal example happening in Northern Ireland even today where, although it is the most religious part of Britain, Christians are still killing each other while the least religious—the English—are footing the bill.

Keep it plain, keep it simple, and we might get our message across to more people. Christianity has been a disaster for the world. History and the record says so.

**J BASSETT**  
Eastbourne

## Unlove

IT IS amazing that Christians regard Christmas as a feast about love. Whitewash! Jesus said we have to love God with all our strength (Mark 12:30). If God is unlimited love, we have to love him alone and love others for his sake, which is not loving them at all. This makes gratitude to other people and cherishing them evil. We need to be cared about to be happy and sane. When God's existence cannot be proven, it is an act of hatred against humanity to choose to love him alone.

Their God made us for his own benefit for it would be unjust for him to love us for he deserves all his own love. The result is a religion of purposelessness, unlove and slavery. If God made us, evil is the true good.

We can't even believe him because when the seemingly sane lunatic tells plausible religious lies he is pulling the strings.

If we always fall short of God's standard, as Christians say we do (1 John 1:8) then it is a sin to be happy. To be happy is to reward your sin and to punish yourself is bad for you don't need to adhere to your sin. This makes it bad for sinners to have feelings. It is a sin for the saint to nurture feelings in case she or he sins. If you are a Catholic and can't get rid of your sins until you find a priest, then it is right to abhor and reject all pleasure.

The Christian talk about Christmas joy is nauseous and the fondness of the secular world for the silly feast is just as awful.

**PATRICK GORMLEY**  
Co Donegal

# What's On...What's On...What's On...

**Birmingham Humanist Group:** Information: Tova Jones on 0121 4544692.

**Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group:** Information: D Baxter on 01253 726112.

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group:** Cornerstone Community Centre, Palmeira Square (corner of First Avenue), Hove. Sunday, March 1, 4.30 pm: Bill McIlroy: *Written Words—from the Free Inquirer to The Freethinker*. Information: 01273 733215.

**Bristol Humanists:** Information: Margaret Dearnaley on 0117 9502960 or Hugh Thomas on 0117 9871751.

**Bromley Humanists:** Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680.

**Central London Humanists:** Information: Cherie Holt on 0171 916 3015 or Hilary Leighter on 01895 632096.

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01296 623730. Wednesday, February 11, 7.45 pm, at The Friends' Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamsted: Joanna Cole: *Humanist Groups and National Policies*. Monday, March 9: AGM at Wendover Library, High Street.

**Cornwall Humanists:** Information: B Mercer, "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Telephone: 01209 890690.

**Cotswold Humanists:** Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ: 01242 528743.

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, February 19, 7.30 pm: Public Meeting.

**Devon Humanists:** Information: Christine Lavery, 5 Prospect Garden, off Blackboy Road, Exeter (01392 56600).

**Ealing Humanists:** Information: Derek Hill 0181 422 4956 or Charles Rudd 0181 904 6599.

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):** Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB; 01926 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Street, London WC1 (Library, 1st floor). February 13: Preview of Lesbian and Gay Film Festival by Brian Robinson, National Film Theatre.

**Hampstead Humanist Society:** Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. Meetings at Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch, from 8 pm to 10 pm. Tuesday, March 3: Dr Michael Kehr: *Doctors in Literature*. April 7: AGM and reports on BHA conference.

**Humanist Society of Scotland:** Secretary: George Rodger, 17 Howburn Place, Aberdeen AB1 2XT (telephone: 01224 573034). Convener: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; telephone: 01563 526710.

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Alan Henness, 138 Lumley Street, Grangemouth FK3 8BL. Telephone: 01324 485152.

**Edinburgh Group:** Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD; 0131 667 8389.

**Kent Humanists:** Information: M Rogers, 2 Lyndhurst Road, Broadstairs CT10 1DD; 01843 864506. February 22, 2.30 pm, at Seminar Room 11, Front Extension, Rutherford College, University of Kent, Canterbury: Les Wooldridge on ways of caring for the elderly, past and present. March 8, 2.30 pm, at 20 Trinity Place, Deal: *Humanists—who or what are we?* March 29, 2.30 pm, at Canterbury: Eileen Webb: *The Humanism of Amnesty International*. April 26, 2.30 pm at Canterbury: Forum: *What is Lacking in Humanism?*, introduced by Margaret Rogers.

**Lancashire Humanist Alliance:** Details from Steve Johnson, PO Box 111, Blackburn BB1 8GD.

**Leeds & District Humanist Group:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. All meetings at 7.30 pm, Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. March 10: Dr J K Elliott: *Myth and Legend in Christianity*. May 12: David Taylor: *United Nations—Fifty Glorious Years?*

**Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622250 or 0116 241 4060.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell, 99 Ravensbourne Park, London SE6 4YA (0181 690 4645). Meetings at Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6, 8pm. Thursday, February 26: Tony Milne: *The Pagan Right—Against Judaeo-Christian Internationalism*.

**Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607. Meetings at Friends' Meeting House on Mount Street, Manchester, on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30 pm. February 11: AGM.

**North East Humanists (Teesside Group):** Information: J Cole 01642 559418 or R Wood 01740 650861.

**North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):** Third Thursday of each month (except August), 6.45pm, Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN; 01362 820982. Meets at Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich, 7.30 pm. February 19: Vince Chainey: *Humanist Weddings*.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, March 4, 8 pm: Carl Pinel: *Radical and Sceptical Ideas in 19th Century Poetry*. Information: Gordon Sinclair: 01226 743070 or Bill McIlroy 0114 2509127.

**Somerset:** Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess on 01458-274456.

**Stockport Secular Group:** Information: Carl Pinel, 85 Hall Street, Offerton, Stockport SK1 4DE; 0161 480 0732.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 0181 642 4577. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton, at 7.30 pm. February 11: *Electoral Reform*: Bernard Black, Southampton University. March 11: AGM. April 8: Evening of poetry and music in celebration of Spring: John and Lucie White. May 12: former MP David Watkins: *Humanism in Politics*.

**Ulster Humanist Association:** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE (telephone: 01846 677264). Meetings second Thursday evening of the month at Ulster Arts Club, Elmwood Avenue, Belfast.

**West Glamorgan Humanist Group:** Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.

**West Kent Secular Humanist Group:** Information: Ian Peters on 01892 890485 or Chris Ponsford on 01892 862855.

**Worthing Humanist Group:** Information: Mike Sargent, on 01903 239823 or Frank Pidgeon on 01903 263867.

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# NEWS OF OUR WORLD

**D**ENIS COBELL, President of the National Secular Society, has issued a call to Secularists to protest against the Government's decision to grant state financial backing to two Muslim primary schools (see Barbara Smoker, Page 5).

He told *The Freethinker*: "Whatever the merits of the two schools in question, there is no doubt in my mind that the decision will open the floodgates to many other sectarian applications for state aid—and this must be bad news for those of us who wish to see all sections of society drawing closer rather than being forced further apart in a form of educational apartheid, the results of which we have seen in Northern Ireland.

"We do want equality for all children in our schools, which is why we say that state funding should eventually be withdrawn from *all* church schools and avowedly sectarian educational establishments—thus putting the Muslims on the equal footing with Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists and Jews which they demand and deserve."

Denis Cobell called on NSS members and readers of *The Freethinker* to raise the issue in branches of their political parties and in their trade unions, and to ensure that local Humanist societies also make their views known to the Department of Education and Science.

PETER BREAREY, Editor of *The Freethinker* and a Vice President of the National Secular Society, was guest speaker at the Annual Dinner of Sheffield Humanist Society.

He said that whenever he visited Humanist groups, in all parts of the country, he was impressed by the fact that so much of the work—organising meetings, writing letters to the media, officiating at funerals and ceremonies, popularising our ideas at public functions, arranging publications—was carried out by members of the NSS and supporters of *The Freethinker*.

He added: "It is true that we are not organised into branches these days, but there is a network of our kind of people, operating through organisations such as Sheffield Humanist Society, which ensures that what I choose to call the voice of militant Secularism is heard throughout the UK."

Thanks to the speaker were expressed by Hilary Cave. Bill McIlroy, a former Editor of *The Freethinker*, presided, thanking secretary Gordon Sinclair for his work in organising the function.

THE organisation Dravidar Kazhagam, based in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, is the largest atheist pressure group in the world. Founded in 1944 by the social reformer Periyar E V Ramasami to combat superstition, caste, poverty,

the oppression of women, discrimination and other social evils endemic in the Indian sub-continent, it has its headquarters in Chennai (formerly Madras), but with its strong political voice and its many thriving health and education projects, it enjoys the support of millions throughout the state and beyond.

Its annual convention, attended by tens of thousands of members and regional delegates, together with representatives of other organisations and leading politicians from all over India, takes place at the beginning of February, followed by a mass rally of hundreds of thousands of supporters. This year the rally is to include a special event, when the Dravidar General Secretary, K Veeramani, will, in a spectacular Indian tradition, be weighed against gold bullion—the equal weight of gold then to be used for charitable purposes.

Another special feature of the convention this year, at least as far as we in Britain are concerned, is its invitation to former NSS President Barbara Smoker to be the guest-of-honour. She was flown out to give the inaugural address to the convention on February 1, planning to compare and contrast Secularist aspirations in our two cultures and convey greetings and good wishes from Secular Humanists in this country to fellow Secularists across the world.

KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD, General Secretary of the National Secular Society, wrote to the Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine, on January 13, calling for the removal of all 26 bishops from the House of Lords.

The letter said: "The Society notes that you are about to start the process of reforming the House of Lords. We believe that top priority should be given to removing the Bishops' bench. It is unacceptable in a democratic secular society for the church to participate directly in the legislative process as of right. The 26 bishops' *ex officio* seats should be discontinued at the earliest opportunity."

Keith Porteous Wood added: "The bishops sitting in the Lords is an anachronism that contributes to Britain's image in Europe as being backward-looking and unwilling to embrace modern democracy. What right have bishops of the poorly-attended Church of England to legislate on all topics on behalf of the whole of the UK—those of all faiths and none?"

As we go to press (January 25), news comes that "The Archbishop of Canterbury wants Muslim, Sikh, Jewish, Roman Catholic and Methodist leaders to sit in a reformed House of Lords—without the Church of England losing its special relationship with the state" (*The Observer*).

Obviously, this now has all the mak-

ings of a major Secular Humanist campaign. And, as it happens, Barbara Smoker fired the first shots *before* the Archbishop's announcement. She dashed off a letter to BBC Radio 4's *Sunday* programme following a discussion of the issue: "The panel were right, of course, in saying that it is unfair that the C of E is the only religion represented by right in the House of Lords—but their solution would only make the situation worse. To give the leaders of every large denomination a seat in the second chamber would obviously give disproportionate influence to religion. The Secular Humanist viewpoint is held by more people in this country than that of any one religious group apart from nominal Anglicans, yet no-one suggested that non-believers should be treated fairly."

GAY and Lesbian Humanists have reacted angrily to a new report from the Evangelical Alliance UK which purports to deliver "a heartfelt apology" for the "homophobia" of the Church in the past.

However, the report makes clear that the Evangelical Alliance has not changed its policy in any meaningful way and still refuses to accept lesbians and gay men unreservedly. The report—*Faith, Hope and Homosexuality*—maintains that homosexuals who have loving relationships "still go against God's will", and it opposes the ordination of sexually-active gay men and lesbians and the blessing of gay partnerships.

The Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association's George Broadhead said in a media release: "Nothing has changed in the Evangelical Alliance's stance—it remains as bigoted as ever. The so-called apology is nothing but hollow cant posing as contrition. The churches have a long way to go to make up for the centuries of persecution they have heaped upon homosexuals. This is one apology we are not prepared to accept—simply because it isn't genuine."

RESPONDING to a feature which appeared in *The Independent on Sunday Review* on January 4, Nicolas Walter, of the Rationalist Press Association and *The Freethinker*, told the *IoS* Editor: "The investigation of the present state of religion in Britain was spoilt by the repeated equation of belief in God with 'spiritual health'. The unbelieving minority is just as healthy in every way as the believing majority, and indeed several of the accounts of believers seem to show that belief is not so much a sign of 'spiritual health' (whatever that means) as a symptom of mental ill-health."