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**The**

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# Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



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I am not a TV soap opera devotee, but occasionally do find myself enthralled by a particular plot. One such story-line, still to be concluded at the time of my writing this piece, surfaced recently in *Coronation Street*. It concerns the character Zoe Tattersall who falls into the clutches of a manipulative religious sect which acts to turn her against her family and friends.

So far the plot has been chillingly convincing – mirroring in many ways a horrible brush I had in the early 1970s with a nasty little group called the Children of God, which had set up shop in Johannesburg, South Africa.

I encountered the CoG via one of my closest friends, Tony Lewin, who arrived at my home one day glassy-eyed and in a state of great excitement.

I knew that Tony – a record company executive in his late twenties who had recently inherited a great deal of money and property from his father – periodically used recreational drugs, and I assumed that he was high either

on dope or amphetamines.

When I asked him what drug he was on, he said it was one that had given him his best ‘trip’ to date, and he wanted to share it with me and our friends. The ‘drug’ turned out to be Jesus, who had “entered his life” at a gathering of some “wonderful people” he’d met.

I was stunned. Tony had never showed the remotest interest in religion in all the years I had known him, and on occasions had demonstrated outright hostility towards the church.

So what had changed him so dramatically? The only way I would find out, he insisted, was to accompany him to a CoG gathering.

I attended one meeting – and was subjected to a technique I later learned was called “love-bombing”.

Tony, a shy outsider who found social interaction difficult unless he was either stoned or a bit drunk, had fallen in with a sect who gave him a sense of belonging and a feeling of self-worth. Showered with affection by people who, until recently, had been complete strangers, he had come out of his shell and was displaying a degree of self-confidence that was entirely out of keeping with his personality.

This bothered me. Such a quick turnaround in character was disturbing. More disturbing still was the attitude he adopted when I refused to attend another CoG meeting. Tony turned aggressive, and warned me that my scepticism would lead me to Hell. He went further: my lifestyle, he said, was sinful and my friends evil. Only the Children of God could save me from eternal damnation.

I asked Tony to leave my flat, and told him not to return until he had come to his senses.

Shortly afterwards I was contacted by his mother. She was distraught. She had just discovered that Tony had given up his job, donated the bulk of his inheritance to the CoG, and signed his house over to the organisation.

A week later I saw Tony again. He was standing on a street corner, loudly inveighing against the evils of drugs and homosexuality. He looked emaciated and quite ill.

Within six months Tony was dead. He committed suicide by taking a drugs overdose.

In Britain, the CoG cult is also known as The Family. Members follow the teachings of the late David Berg, whose apocalyptic interpretation of the Bible promoted the practice of “flirty fishing” involving female members recruiting as “hookers for Jesus”.

The Family predicts the Antichrist will rule the earth before 2000 via a worldwide computer credit system which will brand people’s foreheads with the number 666. (Could this be the reason why so many people walk away

from cash dispensers with a worried look and a hand clamped to their foreheads?)

Whereas the *Coronation Street* story-line served to revive memories of Tony’s tragic end, a fax I received in December from Sheffield-based Bill McIlroy, former *Freethinker* editor, underscored the fact that soap opera characters are assuredly not the only ones in mortal danger of cults.

Bill’s report concerned a 29-year-old man whose body was recovered recently from the River Don near Sheffield city centre. Mark Correia had been involved with the Jesus Army and had attended one of its services five days before his apparent suicide.

A local newspaper’s description of the Jesus Fellowship Church, which controls the Jesus Army, as “a cult” was denied by John Campbell, its communications officer.

He claimed the outfit was “an evangelical Christian church ... welcomed and respected by other Christian leaders”.

“John Campbell,” reported Bill, “is economical with the truth. The Jesus Christian Fellowship is regarded by many religious groups as the unacceptable face of evangelism. Both the Evangelical Alliance and the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland severed links with it in 1986.”

Mark Correia is not the only person associated with the Jesus Army who met a tragic end. In 1976 Gavin Hooper disappeared from the Fellowship’s headquarters.

A week later his half-naked body was found in a snow-covered field. Stephen Orchard also disappeared and his mutilated body was found on a nearby railway track. An inquest ruled that the injuries were consistent with the victim having placed his head on the line.

The body of another young man, Mohammed Majid, was found in a water tank on the Fellowship’s New Creation Farm.

Jesus Army foot soldiers, added Bill, are encouraged to adopt a lifestyle of sacrifice and simplicity.

“But when it comes to money, there is nothing simple about the Jesus Christian Fellowship. It is basically a vast commercial concern, with a network of business interests.

“Through its pathetic dupes in the Jesus Army, it targets vulnerable and socially inadequate young people, a potential source of cheap or unpaid labour.”

Bill concluded: “It is somewhat ironic that in Sheffield, where Mark Correia ended his life, the Jesus Army holds its Sunday services at the Institute for the Blind.”

(See *When is a Cult Not a Cult?*, pages 8 & 9)

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# Saluting the girl who refused to salute the flag

IN THE United States, every day in every public (ie publicly administered) school begins with the compulsory collective ritual of a religious Pledge of Allegiance to the flag.

Also in the United States, most of the organisations in the freethought movement give annual awards for distinguished service to the cause.

In October 1998, the 20-year-old Freedom from Religion Foundation at its annual convention in Madison, Wisconsin, gave its "Freethought Heroine" award to MaryKait Durkee, a 15-year-old schoolgirl in San Diego county, California. Earlier in the year she refused to stand up for the daily Pledge of Allegiance and was bullied by teachers, pupils and administrators until the American Civil Liberties Union took legal action, which was then settled out of court.

Her acceptance speech described her experiences and then concluded as follows:

## Another bout of humourphobia from the Church

THE MANUFACTURERS of Tango – well-known for their off-the-wall advertising campaigns – succeeded in getting right up religious leaders' noses in December with a series of Christmas ads.

The nationwide poster campaign featured children praying for Tango beneath the Star of Bethlehem.

The wording above the two kneeling children was: "Please Lord let it be Tango."

The company, which had already raised religious hackles for its Regent Street, London, Christmas decorations with the greetings: "Tis the season to be Tango'd", said it was leading an attack on "crap Christmases" and was simply being honest by shamelessly exploiting the festive season – unlike other multi-national companies which it accused of hypocrisy.

But the Roman Catholic Church condemned the use of religious themes to sell products as "obnoxious and offensive when it involved exploiting religion or treating it flippantly" and the Church of England called the ads a failed bid to shock.

"For seven years at the beginning of each school day I stood facing the United States flag and said the Pledge of Allegiance with my hand over my heart. I never gave it a second thought. Then one day in late March I thought about what it meant. It seemed to be hollow and absurd.

"I have several problems with saluting the flag, or even standing for it. The biggest problem I have with the Pledge is the phrase 'under God'. I don't believe in God. Fallbrook High is a public school. And I think to have a phrase encouraging the belief in one benign god in a ritual carried out by students at a public school is inappropriate. I think it should be omitted

### Nazi Germany

"I don't want to pledge my loyalty to the country I live in in an oath. That worked for Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperialistic Japan, but it won't work in America.

"I am not comfortable stating a flat-out lie that there is liberty and justice for all in this country. I personally think there is only liberty and justice for the powerful and rich. If there were liberty and justice for all, the people who act, dress, think and look different would be an acceptable part of society instead of being

## NSS members call for abolition of the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860

AT ITS Annual General Meeting on November 28 the NSS passed *nem con* the motion "This Society calls for the repeal of the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860 because it gives special privileges to religious worship and the penalties under it are unduly harsh.

"Furthermore, the Society deplores that Peter Tatchell is being charged under the 1860 Act and that he may have to serve a prison sentence if found guilty." (See pages 12 and 14).

At the same meeting, Dan Bye was elected an NSS Council member. Dan, who is 28, is an active member of Sheffield Humanist Group, and is their newsletter editor.

ridiculed for not blending with the crowd.

"I don't like the idea of worshipping a piece of cloth. A lot of people thought I should at least stand in respect to the American flag, and it was argued that many Americans fought and died for the flag. But they fought to protect the Constitution and our freedom, not to keep the flag waving. It just seems so trivial.

"After making these conclusions, I couldn't do it any more. I couldn't just go along with something I so strongly disagreed with. I knew from the start that I could sit while everyone else stood and not be doing anything wrong. I didn't want to be disruptive. I didn't want a confrontation. But if I stood with everyone else it would contradict my principles and make me a weak person for going against what I believe is right.

"I never questioned whether my decision not to stand was right or not. I have always known it was right for me. All I wanted throughout the spring and summer was to have my rights respected.

"Unfortunately my school does not encourage independent thought or actions. Other students rejected me for my resolve. I was continually told to 'Stand up or shut up'. Other students continually said the Pledge of Allegiance loudly when I walked by them between classes. In June my locker was covered in home-made stickers that said things like 'Respect', 'Stand up or shut up', and 'One nation under God'. Sadly, the Fallbrook High students followed the bad examples set by the school's administration.

"On the other hand, a couple of true friends and my family supported me throughout the experience, and I received a great number of supportive and encouraging letters from all over the country, some of which came from your organisation.

"I know that I am not alone in my opinions or in my conviction that the true meaning of patriotism is the defence of the Constitution and its guarantees of personal and intellectual freedom. And that is why it gives me great pleasure to accept the honour that you have bestowed upon me this evening. Thank you."

A Freethought Heroine, indeed, who would have made the freethinkers and libertarians who helped to win what freedom there is in the United States feel they had not fought in vain, and who should give encouragement to those who continue the fight.

– Report in *Freethought Today*,  
November 1998





## No foretelling

EACH month *Horoscope* magazine features the "astrological chart" of a well-known person and, in the November 1998 issue, reprinted in the *Editor* (October 31, 1998), it was the turn of Hillary Clinton to be assessed by astrologer Frances McEvoy.

Or rather, re-assessed, as it was not clear whether Hillary was born at 8 o'clock in the morning or 8.00 in the evening. She, herself, thought it was the latter; Ms McEvoy favoured the former, but added to the confusion by telling us (square brackets included) that Hillary's mother said she "had gone into hospital soon after midnight [on October 26, 1947] and Hillary was born early next morning". "Next" or "same"? As if it would make any difference, except to her birth certificate.

Hours, however, are important when gauging the relative positions of the far-distant heavenly bodies and their influence on us puny mortals, and the new chart, based on an 8.00 am birth, apparently "fits the first lady like a glove". In Frances McEvoy's gobbledegook, "Hillary has a stellium in Scorpio including the Sun, Chiron, Venus and Mercury [which is] quincunx retrograde Uranus in Gemini in the eighth house". Mercury quincunx, by the way, is the "genius aspect", enabling Hillary Clinton "to see around curves" – but to what degree, we are not told.

As for the future, Ms McEvoy is scarcely revelatory in predicting "shocks and surprises for the Clintons", and there is apparently no astrological guide as to how this "powerful drama" will end. All we are told is that "Uranus will keep testing Hillary's strength". Now Mrs Clinton may have many things to worry about, but Uranus isn't one of them. According to my *astronomical* chart, even at its nearest point, the planet will be some 1,605 million miles away.

## Unwanted congregation

BATS in the belfry of England's medieval churches are driving church wardens mad. James Puntan's first job in the morning at the Grade 1 listed church of St John the Baptist in Clayton, West Sussex, is to sweep up the flying mammals' fatty droppings, but he has to be careful. If he tries to brush them off the 12th century wall paintings, it only causes further damage. And the urine is even worse: it "etches brass and bronze, leaves irremovable stains

on stones, and eats through wood" (*Guardian*, November 13, 1998).

The human congregation at St John the Baptist numbers between 30 and 40, but it's a regular meeting place for the bats, which stream in during the night, even under locked doors, and seem to urinate on entering and leaving the building. Mr Puntan may well ask "Have we just built ourselves a lot of medieval bat roosts?"

## Believing is seeing

AMERICAN housewife Nancy Fowler is not only the latest Marian visionary, but intends to be the last. "Our loving mother gave me this message," she told the thousands of pilgrims visiting her wooden Georgian farmhouse: "My dear children, I have come for the last time this way. The next time I will see you will be in heaven."

Nancy apparently receives the Virgin in an "Apparition Room", where no food, drinks or pets are allowed but, while the fireside chats with Our Lady might have been exclusive, the visions weren't, judging by Paul Davison's account in the *Independent* (October 15, 1998).

"There she is," someone shouted. "See, it's the Virgin. She is holding Jesus, in that cloud, and she's moving". All eyes, including Davison's turned towards "a single puffy white cloud in a hazy blue sky", but he reported that he could see nothing unusual. Marguerette Nixon, from Texas, declared that the sun was spinning as "it always does when the Virgin appears"; but once again it was a phenomenon that escaped Paul Davison's gaze.

There's nothing like an emotionally-charged atmosphere to induce mass audience hallucination.

## A rare priest

A SEVENTY-year-old Italian priest in Genoa, Father Andrea Gallo, although "unambiguously opposed to abortion", admitted that he had opted for it as the "lesser evil", when pregnant teenage prostitutes had sought his help (*Guardian*, November 24, 1998). When one of them came to him and said "Help me. Otherwise my pimp will kick me in the belly until I abort." What was he to do? On such occasions he had directed the girls, who came from Albania, to a doctor to have their pregnancies terminated.

But Father Gallo is a rare priest. Four years

ago he sanctioned the distribution of condoms to prostitutes in the rundown area where he works. The rather more orthodox Father Oreste Benzi, who also has experience in the pastoral care of prostitutes, condemned Father Gallo for making himself "an accomplice to the killing of children".

Ah, that's more like it.

## Falling standards

PITY the poor Greek priest having to wear those long black robes, a stovepipe hat and overgrown beard. No wonder the head of Greek's Parish Priest Union, Father Efstathios Kollas should call for modernisation of the dress code. He said it was inappropriate, and unattractive to women. Of the 11,500 registered priests, nearly half are monks or "clerics plucked out of retirement", and only 3,000 are married (*Observer*, October 25, 1998). Indeed, to Helena Smith, the paper's Athens correspondent, both congregations and priesthood appear to be "in terminal decline".

But while many clerics would like to wear trousers and cut their hair and beards, Archbishop Christodoulos, the Church's new leader, will have none of it. "I have noticed standards have begun to slip", he said in his enthronement speech. "Some priests have strayed by trimming their beards, cutting their hair, wearing trousers and sunglasses, and even smoking in public."

It could be said that, socially, standards are slipping rather more seriously. Last October a monk was charged with assaulting a Canadian tourist as she slept on the deck of an island-hopping ferry.

What's more, "rumours of orgies between monks and male visitors at monasteries have been rife".

The Archbishop blamed "evil foreign forces" for such behaviour. "Attempts to make Greece exclusively part of the European Union are leading to perdition and destruction", he said. I don't think our own anti-Marketees would go quite that far.

## Geoff wants Hell

*Freethinker* reader Geoff Worrall of Sheffield is trying to obtain a copy of a sermon about Hell, delivered by the 19th century preacher, the Rev Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Anyone who might be able to supply a copy (or photocopy) of the sermon can contact Geoff on 0114 2685406.



Around the end of December each year, Christians try to hijack the media in an attempt to convince us that they should be paid special attention just because it's the supposed birthday of the founder of their religion. A bishop writes to the papers saying that it's a disgrace that there is no televised "act of worship" on December 25. Another complains that a quiz show is planning to give away a million pounds on that day, which he considers an insult to Christianity.

Let them moan. People can still call the winter solstice "Christmas" if they want to, but the seasonal festivities have little to do with a johnny-come-lately religion like Christianity. The pagan origins of these celebrations have been re-embraced and it has become once more a season of ribaldry, over-indulgence, reunion and present-giving, as well as a thanksgiving that the sun is returning. It makes more sense and it's what most people want. We've voted with our feet and the message is clear: Christianity – at least as far as the West is concerned – has just about had its chips.

Needless to say, the moaning minnies and religious apologists were out in force, weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth about the commercialisation of the season and the loss of its religious significance. Roger Scruton, who considers himself to be some kind of strict "moral philosopher", says that we need religion in order to keep social order. Without religion there is no real morality, he says. Without the ethical structure of religion, man becomes a selfish monster, routinely giving into all the base instincts that human nature is heir to. Even if religion isn't true, he argues, we should behave as though it is. We should regard it as a "noble and necessary lie" that cements our

society together. The problem is that Mr Scruton's general philosophy is so unpleasant and inhumane that it becomes repellent. It is suffused with rejection, censure, punishment and disapproval. A far greater thinker, Albert Schweitzer, thought that "nothing human is alien to me", but Roger Scruton seems to think that everything human is base and low.

Libby Purves argued in a similar vein in the *Independent on Sunday*. She asserted that if we are a country of atheists now, Christianity's ethical and social legacy will be lost, and we'll all be floundering in a sea of self-indulgence and exploitation. Yea verily, unless we return to church immediately, then the end is nigh. Or so Ms Purves seems to think.

It has been frustrating to see this idea being promulgated over and over again in the newspapers. We get rid of religion at our peril, they keep saying. We need it, even if we don't believe it.

What a relief then that a thoughtful atheist should put paid to the idea once and for all (certainly as far as I'm concerned) in the *Independent on Sunday*.

In a brilliant letter to the editor, Heon Stevenson of Brighton wrote: "If Christianity's metaphysical component is not true, it follows that all the good we have done – including that done by religious figureheads and their followers – has, in fact, been done by us alone. The interesting question for an evolutionary psychologist is whether, in the absence of proof one way or the other for the existence of any deity, there is any non-religious way in a Western context that we can release that part of our potential for good which, owing to a quirk

of our culture or evolved nature, has hitherto needed the stimulus of religion to excite it.

"An atheist might say that we were mistaken about the existence of God but fortunate in that our mistake caused us to discover beneficial ways of living and relating to each other. Religion having proved to our "context of discovery", the question then remains: if we have been good without God, can we continue to be good knowing that we are without God?"

With the possible exception of those who are kind to others only on condition that they are rewarded with some kind of enormous metaphysical dog biscuit when they die, I believe we can.

Belief in God may have enabled us to discover human truths, but that does not imply that, if we abandon (or "dis-invent") God, we are obliged to abandon those truths too. Useful bathwater is useful bathwater, whether or not the baby exists."

This seems to me a much more profound insight than the knee-jerky maunderings of Libby Purves or Roger Scruton. What Heon Stevenson shows is that we atheists are the true optimists – despite being constantly accused of nihilism by Christians.

It is Mr Stevenson who should have been given the whole page to expound his ideas, and Libby Purves who should have been given a few sentences to make her over-familiar case.

Nevertheless, our ideas are much more welcome now in the media than they have been in the past, and we should make the most of this new openness. *Freethinker* readers have some superb arguments, and these should be given a much wider platform. We should all discipline ourselves to reply to religionists when they annoy us or when they say in print things which are palpably silly.

This also turns the tables on religionists. If you look at newspapers like the *Daily Mail* and the *Telegraph* you get the impression that the world is a terrible place.

More teenage pregnancies! More scientific developments that usurp the role of God (cloning! genetics! life-extending medicines!). More divorce, more social ferment

It's all because we've given up God, say these papers.

Rubbish, say I. Society has been in a state of flux throughout history. At least we aren't engaged in a bloody civil war now, as we were when Christianity was at its zenith in this country. And it has been repeatedly noted that street crime and violence, the exploitation of children and racial minorities was much worse in the good old pious days. As far as I can see, the further away from God we get, the more civilised we become.

## FREETHINKER FUND

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Donations received after December 14 will be acknowledged in the February edition.



The October 1998 issue of the *New Humanist* contains a four-page article under the above title by Daniel O'Hara, based on a talk he gave to the Manchester Humanists a year earlier. It raises important questions for the secular movement and, as it includes a slightly uncomplimentary reference to the *Freethinker*, I think it deserves consideration here.

Mr O'Hara, I should mention, is a former clergyman who lost his faith, left the Church and, indeed, became president of the National Secular Society for a regrettably short time, before resigning for personal reasons. His article is, in turn, a reflection on a piece by a Dr R J Hoffmann entitled *Yesterday's Humanism Today: An Introduction to Critical Studies* which, in the rather lengthy paragraph quoted, described contemporary humanism as "quaint" and "a movement out of step with the times it has helped to create": arguing *inter alia*, that "Liberal theology has successfully supplanted humanism as the Church's most effective critic".

Daniel O'Hara has some sympathy with this argument or at least with liberal theology because, I suggest, it had a profound influence upon his own intellectual development. He tells us of the disturbance caused in the Church of England, first by the Bishop of Woolwich's *Honest to God* (though its ideas were not new), then by the largely American "Death of God" school and, later, the heresies of David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham, and the Cambridge theologian Don Cupitt.

No doubt these and similar criticisms had their effect on wavering Christian ministers like Mr O'Hara, but they could scarcely offer a satisfactory substitute for the average church-goer, used to singing the praises of Our Lord and Almighty God. What prayers could be offered to John Robinson's God, described as "the ground of our being", or to Jesus as "the man for others". And what is the person in the pew to make of Cupitt's declaration that "Truth is no longer out there"?

Hoffmann accused humanism of re-fighting old battles it has already won. And, although he immediately conceded that such battles "must constantly be re-fought to stay won", he declared that we often fight "an enemy whose faith and tactics have changed" with "weapons that are quaintly suited to the armories (and squabbles) of the nineteenth century".

"Quaint" and "quaintly" are favoured words of Dr Hoffmann and amusing enough, although Daniel O'Hara takes them more seriously than I. He feels "bound to say that near-

ly every issue of the *Freethinker* carries some contributions which substantiate the use of "quaintly" in the last paragraph. But neither O'Hara nor Hoffmann (at least in the quoted extract) makes any recommendation for our new "armoury". Not surprisingly, perhaps, as the basic weapons don't change. We rely, as ever, on the use of reason, supported by the findings of science, which are continuously developing in our favour, and are continually evoked in our columns.

At this point it is pertinent to ask who is the enemy, who exactly are we fighting or re-fighting? Not so much the Robinsons, Jenkinsons and Cupitts, I would suggest, although, in the interest of clear thinking we must criticise them. The main enemy, as always, is organised religion, particularly in its most virulent forms. According to Hoffmann, the "face and tactics" of the "enemy" has changed. He may be right about the face, but that is superficial; there has been no change of nature.

The Pope may "apologise" to the Jews, to Galileo and even for the Inquisition, but he still claims infallibility in faith and morals. Fundamentalist Christians in the United States still use every stratagem to prevent the teaching of evolution in the public schools, and to close abortion clinics by threats and sometimes murder. Muslim extremists can be even more callous and murderous, not only in Afghanistan, and treat women as chattels. Daniel O'Hara also instances the religious aspects of the Northern Ireland, Bosnian and Palestinian conflicts. Quaint is hardly the right word in this context.

And while it is true, as Mr O'Hara says, that the more cogent criticisms of humanist thinkers may have less effect than "the rather more confused and ambivalent criticisms of a controversial bishop", because they receive less publicity, he acknowledges that the "more radical and fundamental criticisms of a Gibbon, a Hume, a Voltaire, a Paine or an Ingersoll tend to be

more enduring". "Radical", "fundamental", "enduring", you notice; no quaintness here.

O'Hara also defends the movement against Hoffmann's assertion that we are "snottily content with ineffectually small 'societies'," and he praises the efforts to provide secular alternatives to the religious rites of baptism, confirmation, holy matrimony and Christian funerals. But he thinks that our existing national organisations are "often afflicted with inertia, a lack of vision and a sort of institutional conservatism which prevent them making a really effective contribution to a more widespread and enthusiastic acceptance of a thorough-going secular humanism".

I can only speak for the National Secular Society, which has vigorously campaigned on topical issues. The Society has a presence on the Internet, and representatives such as President Denis Cobell, Secretary Keith Porteus Wood, and accredited speaker Terry Sanderson, have appeared on radio and television in 1998 more often than ever before. And I, for one, am sorry that Dan O'Hara hasn't been able to participate. Sorry, too, that he should regard the present secularist, rationalist and humanist organisations as "old, tired and sadly ineffective". At least he feels "some residual loyalty to them".

What he and we have to contend with is the amazing capacity of human beings to love "mysteries" and to be bamboozled by self-appointed gurus of every possible variety. It is alarming but true that, as we approach the twenty-first century, astrologers far outnumber astronomers and faith healers abound. There are many contributing factors to this widespread gullibility, of which religious upbringing is the worst, with the behaviour of the media by no means the least. As a mature student at Glamorgan University complained to the *Guardian* (November 17, 1998), he disliked *The X Files* because the scientist was always wrong and the mystic always right.

In conclusion, though, I might mention that Dr Hoffmann's piece appeared in the first issue of the grandly-titled *Journal for the Critical Study of Religion, Ethics and Society* which, Mr O'Hara tells us, "was associated with the ill-fated and short-lived experiment of trying to contain a secular humanist Centre for Critical Enquiry within the framework of an old-established Methodist institution, namely Westminster College, Oxford, long known primarily as a teacher-training college". "Ill-fated", "short-lived"; could this mean that Dr Hoffmann himself is "out of step with the times"?

**If you would like to submit a news story or feature you think might be suitable for the *Freethinker*, please contact the editor, Barry Duke, on 0181 3905 9603  
E-mail: [iduke@compuserve.com](mailto:iduke@compuserve.com)**



AS THE SON of a god, Jesus was born with the standard miraculous powers appropriate to one of his station. They were first demonstrated not at the wedding at Cana as is stated in the service for the solemnisation of holy matrimony, but during the flight into Egypt when, using enchantments known only to the initiated, he subdued dragons, lions and leopards which had beset the holy family. Indeed, when Jesus, knowing that his parents had lost their way, requested the beasts to set them right. They responded readily and indicated the shortest route to their destination, bowing reverently the while.

These powers were also invested in his garments and were revealed long before the woman with an issue of blood was healed simply by touching his robe. Salome, who has a withered hand, saw it restored to normality the moment she touched one of his swaddling clothes within hours of his birth.

Items associated with his passage through his terrestrial life from that moment until he made his final footprint on earth immediately before his ascension into Heaven – an impression protected quite properly by a church being built over it – were, in the centuries that followed, sought and preserved for veneration and their remarkable powers of protection and healing.

### The Holy Ghost

The cross on which he was crucified was high on the list of coveted relics, although it was not until the fourth century that it was located. Helena, the mother of Constantine, was directed to it by the Holy Ghost – an adequate guarantee of its provenance – but, in doing so, the Spirit, mischievously perhaps, introduced a complication. For at the site it indicated she found not one cross but three. Not in any way discomposed by this, however, she reasoned that two of them must have belonged to the malefactors who were crucified with Jesus. But the question remained: which had borne him?

Helena readily and ingeniously solved the riddle, so proving herself to be more than a match for the Holy Ghost. She confronted a sick woman – some reports say she was of noble birth – with the crosses in turn. The first rendered her almost insensible, the second took her so near to death's door that its very hinges were heard to creak, but the third, amid much rejoicing, restored her to full health and vigour.

It was clear, therefore, which of the three had supported Jesus. Further proof of its miraculous properties was not long in coming. When, later, it was made more generally avail-

able by being reduced to smaller, more manageable portions and sold, the sum of its parts was soon found to amount to more than the original whole. Its contact with a divine body had, of course, endowed it with the power to multiply itself – a fairly common prodigy among holy relics, in fact, and one which Helena herself was in turn to share since her body after death was found to be lying simultaneously at more than one location.

The blood of Jesus, too, was found to possess the capacity to proliferate, for it was reported as being present at over a hundred different sites at one time, although it does not seem to have had the additional power to liquefy and solidify at the behest of properly qualified priests in the same way as Januarius' does to this day. Januarius, it should be added, is not always compliant, and even the most able of priests sometimes fail to persuade his blood to change its nature, the most notable occasion occurring comparatively recently when Naples elected a Communist mayor. Quite obviously Januarius keeps abreast of current affairs and is perfectly capable of letting his opinion be made manifest whenever it becomes necessary.

That there are several crowns of thorns in existence does not necessarily mean that the original had the power to replicate itself. There is a body of opinion which asserts that this has more to do with the meticulousness of the Romans who insisted on fabricating a crown of the correct size and discarding earlier, ill-fitting ones. These were then most likely retained by the high priest whose philosophy anticipated that of Arthur Daly. One can visualise him passing the surplus crowns to a favoured young relation, recommending him to "hang onto these, my boy; they'll be a nice little earner one of these days!"

Helena must have established a good rapport with the Holy Ghost since she was directed by it not only to the true cross, but also to the nails by which Jesus was attached to it; his seamless robe; Matthias' bones, and Mary's house at Nazareth which was later transported to Loreto by angels, its authenticity being confirmed by Mary herself – miraculously, as she did so some twelve centuries after her death.

Joseph of Arimathea may have had similar lines of communication for he was directed to the Holy Lance and the Holy Grail, and numbered among his most prized possessions two cruets containing, respectively, the blood and sweat of Jesus. But this is largely supposition, for a second account states that he acquired the Holy Grail after the Last Supper, while a third rejects that he played any part in its preservation at all, contending that angels, no less, brought it from Heaven and entrusted it to a

body of English knights to guard in their mountaintop fastness. Not too well as it happened since it subsequently disappeared and, as it was believed to vanish only when persons of imperfect purity approached it, the angels, one feels, ought to have inquired more diligently into the credentials of the custodians they appointed.

Just as Helena was directed to the true cross, so Peter Bartholomew was directed – though in his case by St Andrew rather than the Holy Ghost – to the place where the Holy Lance had lain hidden for centuries, presumably since it had been mislaid by, or stolen from, Joseph of Arimathea. But its long interment had not diminished its power to initiate miracles, for at Antioch in 1097 its display at the head of a handful of crusaders drew from their tombs a ghostly army of saints led by St George himself. This was the first miracle on that morning; the second was that the crusaders were able to identify the saints; the third that at the sight of them the Turks fled in disarray. Such is the potency of sacred objects.

### Phillip of Spain

Small wonder that those relics were much sought after, and the demand was met by an ever-increasing supply. Personal articles once belonging to Jesus and his family were unearthed with wondrous speed and the number of them in general circulation soon ran into tens of thousands. It was said that Phillip of Spain possessed 7,000 of them alone, including the miraculously preserved girdle of Mary the Virgin which prompted G W Foote to enquire if it was the very one unloosed by the angel Gabriel.

Louis IX of France had an equally enviable collection which boasted Jesus' baby clothes from one end of his earthly life to the sponge on which vinegar was offered to him at the other. Similar collections offered the Pillar of Flagellation, the milk on which he was suckled, his hair and even his foreskin, which, like the cross and the blood, had awesome powers of replication, evidenced by the fact that it was exhibited in several countries simultaneously. It is surely a sign of the authenticity of the foreskins that they remained in pristine condition for so long.

There are many other relics in existence which once belonged to personalities from both the Old and New Testaments. An inventory would be far too lengthy for presentation here, but a selection will give a good idea of the variety of items that became available: John the Baptist's head (and the claim is easily upheld as nobody has proved an alternative

*(Continued on page 13)*



**A** while back, I outraged some readers of a gay newspaper when – in a letter to the editor regarding Christian homophobia – I described Christianity as “a nasty little death cult”. I was unrepentant over having said it then, and, in the light of the suicide of Mark Correia (see page 2), I stand by that description now.

Of those who challenged my assertion, only one raised a point worthy of consideration: “What do you mean by the word ‘cult’?”, she inquired.

My use of the word was clearly perjorative, and intended as such. Indeed, whenever “cult” is used in a religious sense both by secularists and members of mainstream faiths, it is invariably deployed in a negative way. So disparaging has the word become that cults spend a great deal of time and energy trying to convince us that they are not cults at all.

So what is a cult?

In a contemporary context the term is generally applied to new religious movements – what the Americans call NRMs. So it would appear that my use of the word was invalid. But I would argue that I used “cult” in the traditional sense as defined by the *Oxford Concise Dictionary*: “A system of religious worship; devotion, homage to person or thing.”

**F**or the purpose of this article, I will use “cult” to cover NRMs, for it is these which excite the greatest interest, and create controversies which have reached right into the heart of government, as demonstrated by various debates currently taking place in Europe.

At a meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) last year, a paper concerning the “cult issue” was presented by the Human Rights Without Frontier (HRWF) organisation.

The HRWF pointed out that, in the last few years, official inquiry commissions had been set up, with France being the first to create a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on cults.

“Its methodology,” according to the HRWF, “was very controversial and was heavily criticised by sociologists and historians of religions. The French parliamentary report led to the creation of an Observatory of Cults, and in October 1998 an Interministerial Mission on Cults began implementing a more aggressive policy towards them.

“Two laws were to be voted by the National Assembly. The first one was meant to control the finances of cults more strictly. The second one was to control the practice of home schooling of children of members of cults.

“On April 28, 1997, the Belgian Parliamentary Commission on Cults released

its report containing a list of 189 ‘controversial movements’, including some inside the Catholic Church. In the recommendations, it was even proposed to introduce into the Penal Code an article providing for a sentence of two to five years in prison and/or a fine for those who use beatings, violence, threats or psychological manipulation to persuade an individual of the existence of false undertakings, imaginary powers or imminent fantastical events.

“On June 19, 1998, after two years’ work, the German Inquiry Commission passed its report with a large majority. It was surprisingly less negative than it had been feared after the interim report.

“The German Commission was also the first

**Secular opposition to cults is referred to as the anti-cult movement and the non-secular as the counter-cult movement**

to approach the issue from the viewpoint that it is the State’s duty to protect consumers against illegal or unfair practices of cults and psychogroups. The Commission also recommended keeping Scientology under observation but, in its conclusion, it stated that cults and psychogroups do not represent any danger to the democratic State.

“Another positive point was that it strongly recommended dropping the terminology ‘cult’ or ‘sect’ because of its bad connotation. The European Parliament unsuccessfully tried to draft a report of its own but on two occasions in a six-month period it was rejected by the plenary session.

“The Council of Europe is also preparing a report on cults but in September last year it was rejected and sent back to the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights for further examination. After the failure of the European Parliament’s report, it now seems that the Council of Europe does not know what to do and where to go with its report.

“Since the creation of parliamentary commissions, the publication of their reports and the setting up of observatories of sects – the mandates of which are ambiguous and open the door to dangerous and harmful deviances – a number of media have been libelling minori-

## Barry Duke seeks

ty religions, circulating rumours and false information, and inciting religious intolerance with total impunity.

“Against this background, a threefold pattern of real persecution is developing.

“First, minority religions have been marginalised, stigmatised and attacked.

“Second, we now see ‘unpopular’ minority religions isolated from all the others and targeted by fiscal administrations.

“Third, it is feared that plans are being carried out to crush and kill minority religions one by one.

“Despite this dark description of the process of deterioration of religious liberty in the European Union, two recent events may encourage all those who are concerned about the future of religious freedom on our continent.

“Two reports, published in Sweden in Tessin, a canton of Switzerland, both reproach France and other countries for waging war against their minority religions and ‘making common cause with the anti-cult movement’.

“The Swedish Parliament has chosen to move in the opposite direction by promoting dialogue between the State and society on the one hand and minority religions on the other.

“The way is now open to a new generation of reports on cults and to new more peaceful strategies. Let us hope France, Belgium, Germany and others will give up their aggressive attitudes towards cults and listen to the voice of wisdom coming from Sweden,” the HRWF concluded.

**T**he reference in the speech to the “anti-cult movement” provides an opening for a brief analysis of the work of those who oppose cults. Such opposition can be divided into two main categories, secular and non-secular.

The secular movement is referred to as the anti-cult movement and the non-secular as the counter-cult movement. The two groups are divided in their goals, backgrounds, and strategy, but have the common practice of referring to all groups that threaten their ideologies unilaterally as “cults”.

The counter-cult movement is the older group. It began long before the eruption of the 1970s cult controversy. It initially challenged nineteenth-century sectarian movements such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists, and other groups deemed heretical



# Cult not a cult?

● FEATURE: CULTS ●

## Works out the answer

in nature.

The counter-cultists focus on doctrinal differences between NRMs and established religions. Thus their opposition has a theological basis. Counter-cult groups draw membership primarily from conservative Christian denominations, and seek to delineate the differences between their own beliefs and those of NRMs. In doing so, they seek both to dissuade potential converts and to unify the faithful.

The anti-cult movement grew out of the late 1960s cult phenomenon. Frightened parents, seeking to remove their children from the elusive cults they feared controlled their children, began an informal network of information. Their attempts quickly grew from kitchen-table efforts into a professional network of organisations.

**T**he anti-cultists believe that the coercive nature of cults is so dangerous that it is necessary to rescue those who have come under their influence. What's more, they see themselves as providing an important public service in assisting persons who have been victimised by cults, and educating the general public about the ever-present threat of cults in our midst.

Anti-cultists are insistent that brainwashing is used to control young converts to NRMs and counter the mind-controlling techniques of cult leaders with "deprogramming".

"Brainwashing" was the term coined by British journalist Edward Hunter to describe the process of alleged "mind control" used by Chinese Communist agents during the Korean War. Hunter asserted that the Chinese were able to develop powerful methods of "thought reform" which they used to alter beliefs, thought processes, and consciousness.

A small number of mental health professionals including Margaret Thaler Singer have used the brainwashing theory to support the anti-cult movement.

Singer's *Theory of Systematic Manipulation of Social and Psychological Influence* (SMSPI) claims that cults have developed sophisticated means of changing behaviour such as subterfuge (secret or deceptive techniques of influence) and that converts are therefore incapable of making rational decisions for their own well-being.

This view of "mind control" led courts to grant conservatorship of adult children in cults to their parents and served as an effective

defence against charges of kidnapping on behalf of deprogrammers.

Anti-anti-cultists claim that neither Singer nor any scholars have ever offered empirical evidence to support the SMSPI theory.

The anti-cult movement entered a new phase in its strategy against NRMs during the late 1970s. It attempted to prosecute NRMs for the employment of mind control techniques. Early cases in the United States were highly successful. They gained public sympathy because of concern over Jonestown and other highly publicised cult disasters. The high cost of litigation resulted in bankrupting some of the smaller, less established NRMs.

However, judicial sympathy began to shift and anti-cult movements began to realise that litigation could be a double-edged sword. The brainwashing defence, and attempts like New York's Leshner Bill to expand the limits of conservatorship (to help parents remove adult children from cults), failed to gain acceptance.

**Anti-cultists believe that the coercive nature of cults is so dangerous that it is necessary to rescue those who have come under their influence**

Legally, the anti-cult groups were placed on the defensive. Recently, decisions against anti-cult groups and independent deprogrammers have diminished the influence of the anti-cult movement. One of the most significant decisions involved deprogrammer Rick Ross and the Cult Awareness Network (CAN).

The two were sued after Ross attempted to forcibly deprogramme an adult male who was a member of the United Pentecostal Church International. Rick Ross and CAN were found guilty of conspiring to violate the victim's constitutional right to religious freedom. The damages awarded to the victim forced CAN into bankruptcy.

Then – in a bitterly ironic twist – the CAN name, logo and other assets were acquired by a cult: the Church of Scientology.

CAN has since been reopened under the guidance of the Scientology movement, and – confusingly – retains its original name. CAN's

new mission statement purports to "promote religious tolerance, good will and understanding."

The bankruptcy of the original CAN leaves the American Family Foundation as the major anti-cult organisation in the United States.

The President of AFF is Herbert Rosedale, a New York attorney, and the organisation maintains a executive office in Florida. The organisation reports that requests for their services doubled in the two years following the closing of CAN. AFF offers telephone consultants, makes referrals, and publishes *Cultic Studies Journal*. AFF also maintains a significant website.

**I**n the UK the main anti-cult organisation is the Cult Information Centre, which has educational charity status. It has been operating since 1987 and was granted charitable status in 1992.

The CIC, which also has a website, says it is concerned about the use of deceptive and manipulative methods used by cults to recruit and indoctrinate unsuspecting members of society. It believes that these cult methods present a threat to the well-being of the individual and the family.

Consequently the CIC sees the need for gathering and disseminating accurate information on cultism and aims to meet that need.

The CIC says that the granting of charity status "was a tremendous achievement since it had never been given before to an educational organisation clearly focusing critical concern on the harmful methods of cults" and that the organisation "is now eligible for greater funding than was possible before".

Ian Haworth is the General Secretary and main representative for CIC. He has worked full-time as a specialist in cultism since 1979. Initially he worked in Canada before returning to Britain in 1987 when he helped to start CIC. He learned about cults the hard way, having once been a member of one.

He has handled over 20,000 enquiries and delivered over 1,200 talks on the topic, and has acted as a consultant to police, social agencies, and educational and religious institutions, as well as being called as an expert witness in cult-related trials.

The CIC says it has established an international network of reliable cult-aware contacts, particularly in the Western world.

This network of people, knowledgeable in cultism, comprises individuals from a variety of disciplines and includes other specialists in cultism, mental health professionals, clergy, relatives of current cult members, and ex-cult members. This network, it claims, has proved invaluable to those with loved ones embroiled in a cult in a foreign land.



## It's looking bad for the "bleeding" Church

DR CAREY was telling the World Council of Churches the truth when he declared: "For much of this century the Western Church, especially in Europe, has accepted decline as the inevitable result of secularisation." Dr Carey, speaking at the WCC conference in Harare, added that some sections of the Church "are bleeding to death ... We must not be lured by such craven acceptance of death". He then told the *Daily Telegraph* that "[The churches] need to remember we are a spiritual body, not a social agency nor a political party."

Dr Carey seems to have forgotten his own self-serving role leading his bishops and the rest of the House of Lords to water down human rights in the Human Rights and Crime and Disorder Acts. As to the "social agency", the C of E's work in this area is probably where it does more good than anywhere else. Where better than Westminster Abbey, the Coronation church, to see examples of the Church's attempts at being a spiritual body?

Reserving particular venom for political correctness, Dr Carey told the World Council that the Church could fall under the weight of division, controversy or suspicion. He feels that "homosexuality, homelessness, church maintenance and Third World debt were in danger of

becoming the be-all and end-all of life".

After fifty years, unity still eludes the Council to the point that its very existence is uncertain. The RC church is not a WCC member, and the Orthodox churches are clearly reluctant and "semi-detached". The only bright spot in the conference seemed to be a visit by South African's President Nelson Mandela who received tumultuous applause.

## The Millennium Dome's Spirit Zone

YOU MIGHT have expected a stunning show in the Millennium Dome's Spirit Zone, with its being the showpiece for all the world's religions and being subsidised by a substantial contribution from the fabulously wealthy Hindu Hinduja Family.

Not a bit of it; every estimate for the cost of this Zone is lower than the one before, and at a paltry £3 million, it is now set to be the cheapest of all the zones in the Dome, according to *The Times*. Stripped of its garden and fancy building, the Zone is reduced to a paper thin tent. After the Millennium exhibition, the Zone is expected simply to show the various religions' approach to birth, marriage and death. Maybe, after all, the Zone's organisers decided to play it safe after reflecting on the NSS's

suggestion at the beginning of 1998 that if they were to tell the Christian story, they should tell it all – including the crusades, witchburning, Spanish Inquisition, suppression of science, etc.

## Priest's misdeeds

MOST MONTHS, we could fill the *Freethinker* with tawdry details of clerical misdeeds, but normally we spare you from them. December, however, has been such a bumper month in this respect that the media have been phoning up the Society to ask for comments.

Particularly distressing was the case of an RC priest jailed for eight years at Chester Crown Court on 13 counts of rape and indecency committed over 25 years.

There is a bad apple in every barrel, they say. I accept that many priests behave themselves, but why should anyone be surprised at the unrelenting revelations of sexual miscreants among church staff, particularly in the Catholic Church?

Priests are invested with such reverence, especially in the eyes of the young, that when enjoined to "keep our little secret" they will heed the priests' command not to whistle-blow, even if the child is old enough to understand what happened, and that it was wrong. Any child contemplating revealing their expe-

**M**y first impression of the Pearly Gates was disappointing: the paint work was peeling and some of the letters were missing from the sign, making it read *Pe r y G tes*.

The scruffy, gum-chewing attendant leaning against the turnstile looked bored. A large sign carried a warning: PERMIT HOLDERS ONLY. ANYONE WITHOUT A VALID PASS MUST GO TO HELL.

Once through the gates, I was directed to a large, draughty barn-like building bearing the sign Heaven Help Us Employment Agency and told to wait until my turn to be interviewed. Inside, I could hear someone protesting at having to work. He asked about "Manna from Heaven", but that had only been for the children of Israel, not Islington. Apparently "Manna" was really marmalade, purchased from a shop in Cairo before the trek through the desert. He was also curtly told that Heaven wasn't a charity and everyone had to work hard to make ends meet. The translations of the Bible were notoriously unreliable and the

angel expressed amazement that anyone still took them seriously. With what I considered to be undue sarcasm, it was said that if he was looking for Paradise then he should have gone to the Bahamas. By this time I wanted to go back; even Stockport seemed a better place. I briefly thought I would be better off in Salford or Oldham, but quickly dismissed the idea as foolish. Surely Heaven couldn't be that bad.

God was fatter than I imagined and engrossed in playing chess with the Devil, which surprised me. An elderly angel cautioned me to be quiet. Apparently God was a bad loser and, to make matters worse, his old prostate trouble had flared up. The frequent visits to the toilet didn't help his concentration. The Devil wore a smart light grey suit and I couldn't help observing that he seemed more cheerful than the miserable inhabitants of Heaven. Years of churchgoing had made the Christians bored and unhappy. They had forgotten how to enjoy themselves but, as the angel explained, Christianity is a sado-masochistic cult, and they would only be mis-

erable if they were happy. By now even Milton Keynes was looking attractive by comparison.

The angel warned me about Jesus, an unpleasant young man with a skinhead haircut, lurid tattoos proclaiming "The Pope likes Dope" and "I love Ghengis Khan", and a safety pin through his nose. He had never been the same since his trip to Earth.

He agreed to being crucified, but didn't know about the circumcision, fasting in the desert (when all he could think about was bread-pudding instead of his ministry), the flogging, and the crown of thorns – not to mention the impotence, acne and the haemorrhoids. Indeed, Our Kid, as he called himself, had made all the sacrifices whilst Big Daddy and Spooky had it cushy in Heaven. As he constantly complained, some parts of the Trinity were more equal than others.

I couldn't see the Holy Ghost, although everyone insisted that he was around somewhere. He didn't seem to take much part in events after impregnating the Virgin Mary. I wanted to ask where Jesus was before the



rience(s) will be discouraged by the knowledge that they are unlikely to be believed. Those bravely disclosing their "little secret" despite this impediment and succeeding in persuading church authorities of the facts have often been met with a cover-up and closing of ranks. Offenders are frequently just moved to another parish to re-offend, rather than being expelled from the church and the police informed. The man convicted, according to the *News of the World* "could become the first clergyman in Britain to be booted out of the Catholic Church".

In the above case, the first victim to raise allegations was clearly distraught: "The knowledge eats you up. I wanted to speak out to save others, but they wouldn't believe me ... they just weren't interested." She eventually went direct to the police who said: "We owe this lady an immense debt of gratitude for exposing this monster. He thought that nobody would believe such allegations against a man of God. He was wrong."

So, rather than being the recipients of "Christian concern", kindness, perhaps counselling and some compensation, the whistle-blowers have not infrequently been put under renewed pressure to keep quiet. It defies belief that in the quarter century that this man was abusing children, no one in the Church knew, or at least guessed what he was doing. In my eyes, those that covered this up are almost as

guilty as the convicted man.

This is a world-wide problem; in Ireland, it is almost a joke, and in the USA huge payouts have been made, as recently reported in the *Freethinker*. I believe there are other powerful reasons than the ones given above why institutionalised church paedophilia is such a problem. The cruel and stupid celibacy vows and the same-sex institutions are significant factors. Even those with low or non-existent sex drives may end up being frustrated with only associating with those of the same-sex. The problem for those with sex drives is too obvious to catalogue. Furthermore, the church pressurises adults to marry; those unable/unwilling to do so may be tempted to take the obvious exit route offered by the Church, a vocation within it. A proportion of these people will be unsuitable to work with children.

### And it isn't just priests

NEARLY half a million pounds is estimated to have been spent in legal fees in a public – and highly undignified – fight in which Westminster Abbey's former organist Dr Neary sought to overturn his dismissal by the Dean. The grounds of dismissal were the making of secret profits by a company controlled by Dr Neary in connection with performances of the Abbey choir. Neary appealed to the Queen. Her Majesty's Special Commissioner

found him guilty of a difficult childhood. He muttered something about if he had his way he would put Diderot with the Jehovah's Witnesses as a punishment for writing: "And with the guts of the last priest, let us strangle the last king."

God picked up my file and I could see that he was considering a particularly unpleasant job for me to do. But just then the Devil announced checkmate and blew some more smoke in God's face. The ensuing fit of coughing and his weak bladder sent God scurrying off to change his trousers, muttering that spending too much time visiting Heaven and mixing with Christians had made the Devil sneaky.

The Devil offered me a place in Hell and gave me thirty seconds to choose. I was unhappy; I didn't want to be dead in the first place. As I agonised over the choice, the seconds ticked away – three, two, one – BBBRRR. My bedside alarm clock woke me with a start. It was all a dream: Heaven and Hell didn't exist.

I looked through the window; it was raining and there was rubbish in the streets and I knew I was still in Stockport.

Perhaps it wasn't such a bad place after all.

Lord Jauncey of Tullichettle (no, I didn't make this up) upheld the dismissal, though he rated the Dean "gamma minus" in natural justice. The Church's PR machine must have been working better than usual in that it was decided not to evict the organist and his wife from their accommodation near the Abbey until after the festive season.

Dr Neary's wife told the *Sunday Telegraph* that the preceding eight months had been a nightmare and they had both been snubbed by staff in the Cathedral and their families. This experience had apparently shaken her faith. I have resisted the temptation to send her an NSS application form.

### Papal Bull

THE POPE has issued one of these (or should I have said some of this?) reviving the practice of indulgences. RC doctrine is that, after dying, all except saints have to do a spell in purgatory on their way to Heaven. Indulgences allow this stage to be bypassed. Even the *Daily Telegraph* admits indulgences are associated with "the worst examples of corruption, exploitation and hypocrisy in the Roman Catholic Church" and was a factor leading to the split with Luther. St Peter's in Rome was reputedly paid for by sales of indulgences. It seems this time the indulgences are not to be sold by the Church, but "paid for" in pilgrimage, prayer, abstinence and giving to the poor. Apparently the Pope's Bull has been greeted with some embarrassment by British Catholics. In the *Daily Telegraph* a leading RC spokesperson described indulgences as "associated with childish superstition".

### Let us pray, virtually

The C of E has launched its own website. Ruth Gledhill, Religion Correspondent of *The Times*, observed: "The content of the website is an indication of how secularised the Church feels the nation has become. It compares the discipline of praying to dieting, or weeding the garden."

The website confirms that one can pray anywhere and in any position and it helps to focus on something like a feather. It even suggests that each finger has a special significance in prayer – I'll spare you the details, it's too embarrassing, even for consenting adults.

by Carl Pinel

"Virgin Birth", but questions were discouraged. The angel explained that Christians had spent their whole lives avoiding asking pertinent questions about their religion. It wouldn't be fair to them to have a rational discussion about their beliefs now. Besides, Heaven would be empty if people started to think seriously about the supernatural.

When my turn came to be interviewed I protested that, as an atheist, I shouldn't be there. I complained that I didn't even believe the place existed. The Devil looked up from his game of chess, blew a puff of smoke from his cigar in God's face and laughed. It seemed that Anglicans didn't believe that Hell existed either, but quite a few of them were down there. And a dreary lot they were too. When God recovered from his bout of coughing he agreed to review my case. The Devil chuckled that to be denied rational conversation for eternity was too ghastly a punishment. God's face brightened for the first time at the thought of this and I could see that he had lost none of his vindictiveness. I wondered if he had had a dif-



## ● ECCLESIASTIC COURTS JURISDICTION ACT/TATCHELL TRIAL:

ALTHOUGH one of the objectives of the campaign against the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860 was to gain publicity to raise the NSS's profile, the level of coverage was far greater than it could have reasonably hoped.

While there had been some coverage in the *Independent* and *Guardian* before the trial, the first major coup was a letter supporting the NSS's campaign in *The Times*, which the NSS's Secretary had arranged to be signed by high profile supporters, led by the Bishop of Edinburgh and including signatories (omitting

titles) Hermann Bondi, Edward Bond, Hugh Jenkins, Harold Pinter, Claire Rayner and Ludovic Kennedy. Responses to this letter a few days later covered a quarter of a page as the lead subject. One of these letters was from Tony Akkermans of Leeds & District Humanist Group who wrote that the film footage of Tatchell's removal from the pulpit reminded him of the Mosley riots (see *You're Telling Us*, page 14). All the serious papers covered the trial, most mentioning the NSS campaign and/or distinguished supporters; even the *Daily Telegraph* could not avoid men-

tioning the Society. *The Times* wrote specifically about the campaign and several newspapers ran features on the subject - the *Evening Standard's* was a whole-page. Most religious papers covered the trial and supporters of the NSS's campaign; some, like the *Tablet*, mentioned the NSS specifically.

Tatchell was given the derisory sentence of £18.60 (the date of the the Act in pennies - widely interpreted as a signal from the magistrate about the absurdity of this law). The magistrate said of Tatchell: "You have a clear commitment to your cause and a belief in non-

## ● ECJ ACT/TATCHELL TRIAL: Nicolas Walter comments ●

NOW THAT the Canterbury Cathedral demonstration case is over, it is easier to have an open discussion of the attitude taken by freethought organisations and papers to such episodes. I wish to contribute some general remarks and also some particular questions about the involvement of the National Secular Society, as expressed in the General Secretary's report (October) and in his reply to Daniel O'Hara's letter (November/December), and as reflected in the media.

Certainly the NSS - like all freethought organisations - should comment on current events and take the opportunity not so much to raise its own profile as to put the secularist message. And certainly the NSS - like all freethought organisations - should intervene when a current event raises the issue of the legal privileges of religious organisations. It has done this work for nearly a century and a half, and the General Secretary is quite correctly if rather carelessly following a long and honourable tradition. Yet surely the NSS should take care in issues which concern matters outside its central interest - not just gay rights and illegal demonstrations, but war and peace, abortion, animal rights, party politics, and so on. It is silly to raise a profile if it looks the wrong shape, and it is sensible to mobilise maximum agreement for any publicity. I don't want to comment further on this general problem, but I do want to add a couple of complaints about this particular case.

I consider it unwise to exaggerate religious privilege, and in this connection the facts about the law against church demonstrations. The relevant section of the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860 isn't really "archaic" or "arcane" or "harsh" or "oppressive", nor does it give either "privileged and sinister powers of suppression to the churches" or "unique and sweeping powers to suppress dissent". It is directed against interruptions of religious services, just as other laws are directed against

interruptions of public meetings, especially election meetings, burials and cremations, proceedings in law courts and in both Houses of Parliament, and also such things as trespass in private dwellings. This law may be objectionable, but it favours the Church of England in no way over other denominations and it favours religious functions hardly at all over other activities, and it is absurd to pretend that it is a major issue. Anyway its administration is the responsibility not of the churches but of what may be called the secular arm of the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, and the courts, so it was absurd for the NSS to issue a public challenge to George Carey to forgive Peter Tatchell. Certainly it would be desirable to harmonise these laws so that there is no question of religious (or any other) privilege, but surely it is reasonable for religious services to have similar protection as other occasions deemed to be solemn or sacred. We have nothing to lose and much to gain from observing the facts of every case we intervene in and from advocating fair treatment of all sensitive problems. I do hope that the NSS will be more careful in future.

And, as someone who has himself broken this law, I consider it unwise to distort the facts about previous cases. The NSS publicity about the Canterbury case stated that the law had last been used in this way to imprison "a former vice-president" of the NSS in 1967. When I was shown an early draft I commented that this reference was inaccurate and irrelevant. The Brighton church demonstration case was heard not in 1967 but in 1966, against not one but eight demonstrators, of whom not one but two were imprisoned; I was not a former but a future vice-president of the NSS - at that time not even a member of the NSS; the case had nothing to do with secularism or religion, but concerned a political demonstration against the Labour Government, so the allusion to the NSS was both inappropriate and misleading. In that

case we weren't sure what law we might have broken, and we argued that the church service at the beginning of the Labour Party Annual Conference was not a genuine religious service and that our behaviour was not indecent; however, we lost our appeal to the High Court in 1967, when it was established that any unauthorised interruption to a religious service counts as indecent behaviour - a point stated in every relevant legal textbook for 30 years.

My comment was ignored, and I wasn't shown copies of NSS material circulated to the media. As a result, the coverage of Peter Tatchell's trial at the beginning of December, including reports in respected BBC news programmes and quality newspapers (and even including interviews with the General Secretary himself), mentioned the NSS to the extent that it was understood that the NSS had something to do with the Brighton demonstration (and even inferred that it organised it); and I had to waste a lot of time and took a great deal of trouble trying to correct errors rather than continue arguments about the case.

I do feel that my own experience was misused on this occasion.

We are all relieved that Peter Tatchell wasn't imprisoned, but it should be recognised that the Canterbury demonstration (like the Brighton demonstration) was neither "peaceful" or "non-violent". It was not only physically aggressive but deliberately offensive and unquestionably illegal, and those who take such action should accept the consequences (as we did). If freethought organisations wish to participate in such actions, even as long as thirty years later, they should at least get the facts right.

We all make mistakes in this area - I have made many during the past 40 years - but we should try to learn from them. Perhaps a public discussion of these issues would be a good idea before freethinkers get involved in the next case.



violent protest.”

Much of the coverage was critical of the Act, and there were calls for its repeal. The *Independent* even ran a large cartoon depicting a coffin marked “Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860, forgotten but not gone”.

It is likely that the NSS’s repeated calls for the Archbishop to indicate he did not want Tatchell to be jailed forced him into doing so, belatedly. From the Church’s perspective, the whole episode was a public relations disaster, although it would have been even worse for them if Tatchell had been acquitted or impris-

oned. Quite apart from the hundreds of press releases the Society sent out criticising not only the law but the Archbishop, Tatchell was given a platform for his views both inside and outside the court and on numerous programmes afterwards, including the *Sunday* programme on Radio 4 in which he described himself as a secular humanist. The Secretary too was going backwards and forwards to Broadcasting House. He was interviewed about a dozen times on several different channels, including the *Today* programme and the *Jimmy Young Show*. For the first time, the BBC

linked the NSS website to theirs and as a result in one day alone the NSS site was visited 500 times. At the peak of activity there were three people working solely on NSS media issues. As well as the NSS Secretary taking part in interviews, Terry Sanderson was co-ordinating media enquiries and giving some interviews, including one to Australia (where Tatchell was brought up) and the recently-retired Elizabeth Hillman was sending out faxes. It is difficult to imagine any similar prosecutions being made in future, certainly while this episode remains in the public consciousness.

## FEATURE: The Fragments that Remain, by Neil Blewitt

(Continued from page 7)

owner); two of Peter’s fingers (though, as they were taken after his execution, it is not clear if they were uplifted in blessing or as a final, defiant gesture to Nero); Luke’s painting of the Madonna (and how modest of him, Mark Twain observed, not to mention his talent in his gospel); Aaron’s rod; Elijah’s mantle; the tip of Lucifer’s tail; the stones which slew Stephen; Zechariah’s shoes. and some dust that Adam’s creator had left over. One wonder how different we should all look if it had been used.

My earlier reference to the blood of Januarius will have indicated that the collecting of relics was not restricted to those whose careers are related so vividly in the Bible. The bodies and property of saints from the earliest days of the Christian church down to our own time have also been preserved for veneration and their ability to heal all manner of ailments – even the raising of the dead as in the case of Stephen’s remains. Indeed, such are the curative properties of saints’ relics that I have long wondered why the National Health Service has not acquired sufficient of them to stock every hospital in the land. Doctors would then need to be employed only as diagnosticians so that the appropriate relic could be applied to the patients most likely to benefit from it.

Not all relics, it should be appreciated, will cure every disease; some specialise. Milburga’s, for example, cure leprosy; Genevieve’s ergotism; Hermes’ lunacy, and Cuthbert’s paralysis. Thomas Becket’s remains were reported soon after his death to be curing 70 patients a year no matter what their ailment, while Thomas of Hereford’s supporters lost count of miracle cures after the first 400. Clearly Canterbury and Hereford were the places for a healthy life. Nor would it be necessary for the sick actually to touch a relic for a cure to be effected. It was reported that when

Stephen’s coffin was opened the aroma emanating therefrom had sufficient potency to heal 73 disease-ridden persons on the spot.

But the use of relics today need not be confined to the NHS. Some would be of inestimable value to the police when, for example, they were confronted with a baffling murder. It has already been stated that Stephen’s relics have the power to raise the dead (and we have St Augustine’s authority for that). A police officer could apply one of Stephen’s bones to a murder victim’s body and, when the miracle had been wrought, inquire as to the identity of the murderer. This might come as something of a shock to the victim, but an approach could be devised to minimise it; perhaps: “I’m sorry to disturb you sir, but would you mind telling me who did it? The truth is we don’t have a great deal to go on at the moment.”

Robert of Newminster provides another example. His relics have been proved to protect people from falling down ladders. What a boon they would be for steeplejacks and window-cleaners to carry in their pockets.

Then there is Modan whose relics have the power to bring rain. This would be of considerable benefit to water companies, gardeners and farmers, always providing, of course, that their requirements could be reconciled with those of holidaymakers and home launderers.

The possibilities are endless.

While preparing this article a desire arose within me to travel to the Middle East and seek some relics for myself. There are many Biblical personages and many articles not catalogued in reference books as having been discovered, so they must be lying buried somewhere.

If, therefore, nothing of mine appears in the *Freethinker* for a while and readers become concerned as to my well-being and whereabouts, I hope they will not be unduly alarmed. It will probably be that I have gone to pursue

my study of relics further in the field – yet still retaining, I hope, a healthy scepticism. Perhaps I may suggest that readers keep an eye on the national press, and if they observe headlines similar to the following they will know I may have met with some little success.

### CANAA WINE IN CAVE

Atheist “speechless and resting” after find

### NOAH’S ARK TRACED

Missing lynx in hold

### BURNING BUSH DISCOVERED

*Freethinker* writer reports “Get me out of here” cry

### FREETHINKER PRESENTED WITH FEATHER FROM HOLY DOVE

“How tickled I am” comment

### GOLD, FRANKINCENSE AND MYRRH FOUND

Atheist queries “gift-wrapped at Harrod’s” label

### ADAM’S APRON MYSTERY

Atheist asks: “What’s behind it all?”

### JESUS’ FOOTPRINT CLAIM

Remarkable find on Sea of Galilee



### NSS can be proud of its stance

I READ with interest the letter from Daniel O'Hara, and the reply from Keith Porteous Wood about the Peter Tatchell case, and the outrageous homophobic comment from E W Carr of Worcester (which I will not stoop to answer).

I gave evidence as a character witness at Peter Tatchell's trial along with Tony Benn, and written testimonials were submitted by the Bishop of Edinburgh and others.

In my view the point being made by the Defence Campaign was not that Mr Tatchell committed no offence (although that may still be arguable on the grounds of "just cause", but that it was inappropriate to prosecute under the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act of 1860. A Public Order charge would have been more appropriate, and it seems clear that the prosecution was brought under the stringent 1860 Act in order to deliver a greater punishment for the disruption than would apply to the disruption of a secular meeting of equivalent importance.

Fortunately, the magistrate agreed with me and not with Mr O'Hara, because not only did he not imprison Mr Tatchell, but gave him a derisory fine of £18.60 (1860 ... gerrit!?) and indicated that in his view this was the wrong Act under which to have brought a prosecution.

I think that the National Secular Society can be proud of its stance and its effective campaign in this case.

**DR EVAN HARRIS MP**  
Lib-Dem

Oxford West and Abingdon.

### Memories invoked of Fascist rallies

WHEN EARLIER in the year I saw Peter Tatchell unceremoniously dragged down from the pulpit in Canterbury Cathedral by Christian heavies I was immediately reminded of scenes of Fascist rallies in the thirties when protesters interrupting Oswald Mosley rants were jumped upon by brown shirts and summarily dealt with. When I subsequently heard that Tatchell was to be prosecuted, I felt sufficiently angered to write a letter of protest to the newspapers. This must have struck a raw nerve because all three of the broadsheets I had approached were intending to publish. I found this out when *The Times*, as is their habit,

insisted that I withdrew from other publications.

Apart from the Mosley comparison I had suggested that it would have been more charitable of Dr Carey to have bidden Peter Tatchell welcome in his house, to have invited him to take a pew and to have heard him out. But church services and discussion are mutually exclusive. One may wonder why churches put "All are welcome" signs outside their buildings when clearly the welcome runs out very quickly once you start disagreeing with anything you are being told. Their signs should be re-phrased to read: "All are welcome provided you bring your nodding donkey accreditation." By invoking a sense of mysticism, the presence of God, the Holy Spirit and Uncle Tom Cobley, religious services have put a stop to normal human interaction, thus creating fertile ground for unopposed indoctrination. With help from the State they have even managed to reinforce this cosy monopoly with belt and braces legal protection. Daniel O'Hara (letters Nov) clearly thinks this is acceptable, but then you may forgive an ex-priest for taking this view.

In a follow-up to the Keith Porteous Wood interview on the Jimmy Young show I was asked the much recurring question: "would there not be anarchy if everybody took to disrupting other people's meetings to air their views? How, for instance, would you like it if Christians came to interrupt your Humanist meetings?" The reply; that we don't shun debate and certainly would not drag anybody into court provided they didn't break any heads or furniture, must have come as a surprise to most religious people who seem to have great difficulty in having any of their sacred cows milked in public. In any case it is not an exact analogy. Humanist meetings do not subscribe to rules and ethics that are highly discriminatory to certain minorities in the population. If we did we should rightly be challenged at every opportunity and in all our gatherings, private or not. Churches, on the other hand, have a long history of advocating illiberal and discriminatory doctrines. Statements, for example, that slavery and servitude were God-ordained conditions; that abortion was wrong in all circumstances; that contraception was immoral; that divorce should not be allowed; that women could not qualify for the priesthood; that there should be no shopping on Sundays. Due to outside pressure the churches have had to give way on all these points. One of their remaining bastions

of prejudice is homosexuality and Peter Tatchell is doing what Martin Luther King and the Suffragettes before him had to do in order to bring about progress. And he certainly has a case. The Bible is to homosexuality what *Mein Kampf* was to the Jews.

### Homophobic freethinkers

REGARDING E W Carr's letter printed in the November/December issue of the *Freethinker*, I suppose I should not be surprised that there are homophobic freethinkers, just as there are some non-homophobic religious believers. However, I find it interesting that Mr Carr's opinion of gay people ("the unnatural, promiscuous, insanitary, AIDS riddled lifestyle they have chosen") should so exactly follow the rhetoric of the religious anti-gay lobby. Can Mr Carr, as a freethinker, provide a rational, scientific basis for his views, particularly his opinion that gay people have somehow "chosen" their orientation? It would seem to be increasingly at odds with a growing body of scientific opinion. Otherwise, it does seem that Mr Carr has an irrational hatred of gay men which, rather in the way religious believers seek to impose their hatreds on others, he is attempting to impose on your magazine and the Humanist movement as a whole. I challenge Mr Carr, in the scientific, rational spirit that has always been the foundation of the Freethought movement, to provide factual justification for the sentiments he expressed. Otherwise, he should perhaps start reading the *Daily Mail*, where opinions such as his are more commonly expressed.

**MR S C CHUMBLEY**  
Herne Hill  
London

### Ill-informed attack

THANK YOU for printing E W Carr's bigoted letter regarding Peter Tatchell's lifestyle, as it allows me to put a contrary view. Though I wonder if you would have printed such a blatant, ill-informed attack had it been made upon women, or ethnic minorities, or the disabled, or anyone other than homosexuals.

E W Carr accuses Tatchell and his friends of an unnatural, promiscuous, insanity, AIDS riddled lifestyle. Does the writer understand the meaning of words? Homosexuality has existed throughout the history of humankind, has occurred in every single type of society as far

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as we know, and occurs with a significant minority. Same-sex attractions also occur in many other species. Homosexuality may be something E W Carr dislikes, or even hates, unnatural it is not. It occurs naturally through nature.

Promiscuity is not confined to homosexuals, and neither are all homosexuals promiscuous

AIDS riddled? What is the evidence that Peter Tatchell and his friends are AIDS riddled. AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, it attacks homosexuals yes, but heterosexual as well, young and old, male and female. The vast majority of AIDS sufferers in the world are heterosexual, not homosexual.

The lie that homosexuals choose to be homosexual has to be nailed. I did not choose to be homosexual. Indeed I spent far too long trying to choose to be heterosexual, only to fail. Since admitting my sexuality to myself, rather than becoming insane quite the opposite has occurred.

I live a fuller, more balanced and enjoyable life. I make a greater contribution to society than I did, and enjoy much firmer and fuller relationships. Trying to be something I could never be just screwed me up.

But my real concern is what such bigotry does to the young. Just recently the national press has yet again reported the suicide of a fifteen-year-old boy, who killed himself because of just the kind of homophobic taunts that E W Carr delights in. The next time this person reads in a newspaper that a young man has killed himself through homophobic bullying, or some young man has been knifed outside a gay pub, maybe, just maybe, he or she might stop long enough to ask whether their bigotry contributed in any small way to that cruel and unnecessary death?

ALAN BAILEY  
Welshpool  
Powys

### Against unfair privileges

I REFER to Father Kieran Conry's letter published in the October issue of the *Freethinker*.

I feel he misunderstands the attitude of most Humanists, and have written to him, making the following points:

Humanists are of the opinion that most religious beliefs are based on superstition and dogmas which we cannot accept.

Almost all of us would, however, respect his wish to hold such beliefs if these are of comfort to him. Indeed, most British Humanists,

like myself, have Christian family backgrounds and get on fine with our Christian relatives.

The Christian attitude to Humanists is not always so sympathetic. In my town, the local Baptist church has a display window in the town centre, and has distributed bulletins with the local paper, both containing statements claiming firmly that those who do not accept Jesus as their saviour are condemned to an after-life of punishment in hell.

What we are against are the unfair privileges that religion holds in society and its efforts to use these to indoctrinate. Such privileges in Britain include an Established Church (why should the position of head of our multi-faith State have to belong to a particular small Christian sect?); the wording of our National Anthem; reserved seats for bishops in the House of Lords; continuing indoctrination in schools through Christian worship, and the dominance of religious services at major ceremonies.

ROGER MCCALLISTER  
Dawlish  
Devon.

### Mutual respect

KIERAN Conry of the Catholic Media Office says that he can more readily accept atheists than those who have given the subject greater thought and become members of the British Humanist Association.

He says that he respects the view of the average atheist who chooses to be a non-believer and in return expects the same respect for his own theistic belief. If Kieran Conry and his like really did show such reciprocal respect I doubt whether I would have bothered to become a card-carrying Humanist.

It is precisely because organised religion does not respect the views of non-believers that I joined those who are trying to achieve a balance of views expressed in the media and in our schools. Why does the Catholic Father see this as being anti-religious?

May I give an example? Suppose through some miracle of policy change the BBC decided to give *Thought For the Day* exclusively to Humanist speakers. In such an event Kieran Conry would have me and fellow Humanists on his side fighting the BBC to ensure a fair balance of speakers. Currently, of course, the BBC will not permit non-believers to comment in this slot.

Will Kieran Conry join with me now in fighting the BBC on this issue, even if only to

demonstrate his "respect" for atheists?

ALAN STUART  
Beenham Village  
Berkshire

### Catholic interference

FOR SEVERAL years I have campaigned for the decriminalisation of doctor assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia (for the past three years I was chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society's Executive Committee). And, while gradual progress is being made, it is obvious that the main opposition globally is the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, and those who support them.

I have no problem with the Pope and his senior colleagues expecting their uncritical followers to accept the party line on so many social issues (from personal choice on abortion to voluntary euthanasia), but I really get angry when the RC leadership worldwide tries to impose its views on non-RC communities. Outside of the NSS, I wonder how many people realise that the Vatican is as much a political organisation as a religious one?

For example on December 10, 1997 (UN Human Rights Day), I remember my MP (Alan Clark) telling me, as we walked into the House of Commons, that he was opposing Joe Ashton's private member's Doctor Assisted Dying Bill because, although there would be a free vote on this proposal that day, a "Catholic whip" was being imposed.

The Vatican/Holy See was able, like Switzerland, to be classified by the United Nations, years ago, as a "non-member State" in that international organisation.

Around the world, Roman Catholic Papal Nuncios are given full ambassadorial status (some stay so long at their posts that they become the dean of the local diplomatic corps).

Do Freethinker readers know that there is even a Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Pablo Puente, in Britain (his office is in south-west London), alongside Cardinal Hume, keeping a RC eye on our political leaders and their actions?

I would like to work with other NSS members in studying and exposing the political influences of the foreign RC state on our national lives. And I invite anyone interested to contact me at Suite 621, 28 Old Brompton Road, South Kensington, London SW7 355.

MICHAEL IRWIN  
London





## HUMANIST CONTACTS AND EVENTS

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

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

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Group:** Information: 01273 733215. Cornerstone Community Centre, Church Road (corner of First Avenue), Hove. Sunday, February 7, 4 pm. Phillip Carr-Gomm: Druidry.

**Bristol Humanists:** Information: Margaret Dearnley on 0117 9049490.

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01296 623730

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

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

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. January 21, 8 pm. Brian Nichol: *Proofs of the existence of God*.

**Devon Humanists:** Information: Christine Lavery, 5 Prospect Garden, off Blackboy Road, Exeter. Tel. 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. Tel 01926 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. February 12: Robin Baker (National Film Theatre) previews London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

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

**Harrow Humanist Society:** Information: 0181 863 2977. Monthly meetings, December – June (except January).

**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, Feb 2: *Reminiscences of a Magistrate*, a talk by John Fowler.

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

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

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

**Kent Humanists:** Information: M Rogers, 2 Lyndhurst Road, Broadstairs CT10 1DD. Tel. 01843 864506.

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

**Leeds & District Humanist Group:** Information Robert Tee

on 0113 2577009. The Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. January 12: Martin Schweiger – *World Development*. February 9: Bob Smith – *The Uses and Abuses of Counselling*.

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 0181 690 4645. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, January 28, 8pm. Derek Lennard – *The Wit and Wisdom of Robert G Ingersoll*.

**Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: Arthur Chappell. Tel. 0161 681 7607. Monthly meetings at Friends' Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

**Musical Heathens:** Monthly meetings for music and discussion (Coventry and Leamington Spa). Information: Karl Heath. Tel. 01203 673306.

**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), 6.45 pm, Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle.

**North London Humanist Group:** Monthly meetings. Information: Anne Toy on 0181 360 1828.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, February 3, 8 pm Hilary Cave: *Humanist Ethics*. Information: 01226 743070 or 0114 2509127.

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

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

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 0181 642 4577. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton, at 7.30 pm. Wednesday, January 13: Roger Eden – *The Humanist Tradition*. Wednesday, February 10: Barbara Smoker – *Humanism and I*.

**Ulster Humanist Association:** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel. 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. Tel. 01892 890485 or Chris Ponsford on 01892 862855.

**Please send your What's On notices to Bill McIlroy, 115 South View Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield S7 1DE. Tel: 0114 2509127.**

