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Freethinker

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Jesus the profit



illustration by Jonathon Baker

In this issue:

The disestablishment debate hots up – page 3

Down to Earth with Colin McCall – page 5

God gets a make-over – page 7

Moral without Religion – pages 8 & 9

Letters – pages 14 & 15

I am not a Laura Ashley kinda guy. My taste in soft furnishings, wallpaper and stuff like that is way too off-beat ever to allow me to introduce anything quite so chintzy into my home.

But the thought of actually supporting a boycott of Laura Ashley products with the same zeal as I did South African goods during the apartheid era, and Chilean produce after Pinochet took power in that country, did not cross my mind until I received a press release last month from the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.

GAHLA had got themselves into a right old fizz – and quite rightly so – over the news that the ailing company – 40 per cent of which is owned by one Dr Kay Peng Khoo – has appointed Pat Robertson as a non-executive director.

Pat who?

Marion 'Pat' Robertson is an American televangelist, multi-millionaire and failed presidential candidate – a charismatic Pentecostal Christian who loathes gay people

with the same passion as he does atheists, Hindus, Muslims, feminists and everyone else who doesn't share his mission, and that of America's Christian Coalition. That mission is "to mobilise Christians – one precinct at a time, one community at a time – until once again we are the head not the tail, and at the top, not the bottom of our political system."

This quote was one of a number gleaned from an anti-Pat Robertson/Christian Coalition website, and serves to give a taste of the man's deliriously paranoid mindset.

There is more – and lots of it. Here are just a few examples:

"Just like what Nazi Germany did to the Jews, so liberal America is now doing to the evangelical Christians. It's no different. It is the same thing. It is happening all over again. It is the Democratic Congress, the liberal-based media and the homosexuals who want to destroy the Christians. Wholesale abuse and discrimination and the worst bigotry directed towards any group in America today. More terrible than anything suffered by any minority in history," the deeply persecuted Robertson, who is worth an estimated \$140 million dollars, bleated in an interview with Molly Ivins in 1993.

And while on the subject of Nazi Germany, here is another gem: "Many of those people involved with Adolph Hitler were Satanists, many of them were homosexuals – the two things seem to go together," he told the 700 Club in 1993.

"When I said during my presidential bid that I would only bring Christians and Jews into the

government, I hit a firestorm. 'What do you mean?' the media challenged me. 'You're not going to bring atheists into the government? How dare you maintain that those who believe in the Judeo-Christian values are better qualified to govern America than Hindus and Muslims? My simple answer is: Yes, they are'," our Pat wrote in his book *The New World Order*. A page further on he elaborated: "If anyone understood what Hindus really believe, there would be no doubt that they have no business administering government policies in a country that favours freedom and equality ... can you imagine having the Ayatollah Khomeini as defence minister, or Mahatma Ghandi as minister of health, education and welfare? The Hindu and Buddhist idea of karma and the Muslim idea of kismet, or fate, condemns the poor and the disabled to their suffering ... it's the will of Allah. These beliefs are nothing but abject fatalism, and they would devastate the social gains this nation has made if they were ever put into practice."

In calling for a boycott of Laura Ashley products, GALHA's George Broadhead said: "We are horrified that a well-respected company like this should invite such a homophobe to be a director."

Having familiarised myself with the murky workings of Pat Robertson's mind, I have no hesitation in urging you to chuck out your Laura Ashley chintz, and don't go buying any more until this odious creature is thrown off the board.

The anti-Pat Robinson website is at: (<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/702/PatRobinson.html>)

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At last, disestablishment, almost a “holy grail” of the secularist movement since its inception, is now on the agenda at the Palaces of Buckingham, Lambeth and Westminster – but not in Downing Street. Anglican Bishops were discussing little else at a recent dinner in York, according to the *Independent on Sunday*. The Archbishop of York is understood to be an observer in a consultation group of leading clergy and academics examining the form of the next coronation service and almost certainly the future relationship of Church and State.

News of disestablishment being seriously considered first emerged in the *Sunday Times* in mid January. It reported leaked accounts of a November meeting between senior representatives of the C of E, Methodists, Baptists and United Reformed Church. The meeting’s timing is significant, coming shortly before talks on unification with the Methodists which would be much harder, if not impossible, to achieve while the C of E maintains its established status.

There are two principal factors which are a likely stumbling block for the Methodists – and already a source of irritation to some leading Anglicans. One is the role of the State in ratifying Church of England legislation agreed by the General Synod. For instance, last year Parliament rejected Synod legislation empowering bishops to remove church wardens from their posts; this was the first time for over fifty years that Parliament exercised its right of veto in this way. The other is the increasing involvement by the Prime Minister in Church affairs. He caused consternation in Church circles last year by refusing to confirm either of the Church’s nominees for Bishop of Liverpool; and then calling for alternative nominees.

Mr Blair has stated that he will not initiate disestablishment, but he is not expected to oppose it. He and other Government front benchers are members of the Christian Socialist Movement (CSM). CSM’s Chair, Anglican Chris Bryant, maintains that “Reshaping the relationship between the State and the Church of England is as important a part of a new Labour agenda for change as the reform of the House of Lords...”. As well as the CSM, New Labour think-tank Demos supports disestablishment as, perhaps to a lesser extent, does the Movement for Christian Democracy. Even Clifford Longley, the *Daily Telegraph*’s highly conservative religious columnist has written in favour. The breadth of support for (or at least acceptance of the inevitability of) disestablishment is consid-

erable – and growing. Indeed, there are few detractors; I have only come across three negative views in the media. One was attributed to Prince Charles, another was a columnist in the arch-reactionary *Daily Mail* and, finally, the highly unrepresentative Lord St John Fawsley. He believes it would be “a great error to disestablish” and he would particularly object to the monarch “saying that all religions are equally important or true”.

Protagonists clearly feel that, for the Church, the alternatives to welcoming disestablishment are bleak. Bryant believes the Church will be “unable to sustain its spiritual authority, given privilege beyond its level of popular support [only 700,000 take communion each week], its bishops’ placelings of government and its governance at the whim of MPs”.

Many in the Church believe that disestablishment will bring them significant benefits. Bryant thinks it will “free itself from the chains that bind it to privilege and unaccountable power”. Both he and Colin Buchanan, Bishop of Woolwich, a long-time disestablishment campaigner, share a conviction that disestablishment would, somehow, *per se* revitalise the Church. To many secularists this will seem wishful thinking. The Church in Wales is thought in church circles to have benefited (presumably at least numerically) from its disestablishment, which was in 1920. However, the statistics for the last two decades suggest no benefit at all; membership of the Church in Wales has declined by 34 per cent over this period, compared to 29 per cent for the C of E.

However, on a more practical level, disestablishment may enable the Methodist amalgamation to take place and make economies possible which will go some way to mitigate the effect of steadily decreasing church attendances, a particular problem for the ‘traditional’ (non ‘happy-clappy’) churches. Also, only by becoming fully disestablished will the Church of England become autonomous and be able, without external interference, to decide its own policy and appoint its own managers.

What form should the Church take after disestablishment? Clifford Longley favours a situation similar to the Church of Scotland’s which he describes as having “a fond link with the Crown, but not as its head. It makes its own laws, independent of Parliament. It chooses its own leaders. It neither has nor wants any seats in the Lords”. However, as will be seen below, it could well be offered them.

The current pace of change for Parliament

and the establishment is without precedent for centuries and it just might be that, with so many traditions being radically revised, disestablishment will simply be regarded as just one more change and will be allowed to proceed unimpeded. Even if this happens, though, disestablishment is likely to be by degrees and will probably take many years, if not decades, to achieve. However, if it receives enthusiastic support in Parliament and the Church, the process may well be accelerated.

Let us examine some of the changes. One element is the far-reaching legal changes arising from the Human Rights Act (to take effect in 2000); this will effectively require courts to observe the European Human Rights Convention as well as our own laws and precedents.

Another element of this change is the devolution of power to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. One of the many awkward questions this highlights is why solely Anglican bishops should form part of the UK legislature, giving it an English bias.

Yet a further element of the change includes the proposed abolition of hereditary peers’ voting rights. Former Bishop of Durham David Jenkins wrote in the *Independent on Sunday* “If hereditary peers are undemocratic, what of the Lords spiritual? If you abolish hereditary peers, what of the monarchy?” Anti-monarchists have newly-revived hopes that after disestablishment and the abolition of hereditary-based powers – so far solely of peers – the abolition of the monarchy may not be an impossible dream after all.

Some feel that Mr Blair intends to go no further than abolition of the hereditary peers – and it could be he is only embarking on this path to emasculate the peers’ ability to delay Commons’ legislation. Those of this persuasion generally believe Blair to be a monarchist and the limit of his ambitions in this direction will be to ‘modernise’ the monarchy. On the other hand, others feel that, while the monarchy is neither threat nor hindrance to him, he is biding his time; indeed he seems to be developing an almost presidential style. Maybe, later on, and if he is confident that the electorate will back him, he will want to remove the monarchy’s reserve powers and rein back further some of their allowances.

Chris Bryant, to his credit, concedes that the Lords Spiritual are “loaded with power and influence they have not earned”. To many secularists, one of the most potent symbols of the UK not having separation of Church and

(Continued on next page)



(Continued from previous page)

State is the presence of the Anglican bishops in the Lords and in the past it was widely assumed that the 26 bishops would automatically be removed from the Lords if the Church were disestablished. However, as already noted in the *Freethinker*, both the Prime Minister and the Lord Chancellor are reported to want to extend religious representation in the Lords, regardless of disestablishment. Baroness Jay, Leader of the Lords, is now reported to have joined Chancellor Irvine in wanting Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Roman Catholics (although this would be against current RC policy) to be represented, as well as Anglicans. Sadly, these are not lone voices, they are echoing what has become Government policy; we will be very fortunate indeed to avoid a far greater religious presence in the Lords than hitherto. According to the *Times* report on the newly-published white paper, *Modernising Parliament: Reforming the House of Lords*, "The Government recognises the multi-cultural nature of British Society and 'shall be looking for ways of increasing the representation in the Lords of other religious traditions', in particular the established Church of Scotland."

Given that, normally, there is only the odd duty bishop or two in the chamber, the current angst within the C of E as to how many, if any, of its 26 seats to concede is depressingly irrelevant.

The National Secular Society has already made, and will continue to make at every opportunity, representations on the need to convert what will become the Second Chamber into a 'religious appointee-free zone'. We are preparing a formal submission to this effect to the Royal Commission on Lords' reform and to assist with this have commissioned research on comparative situations in democracies in Europe and leading countries world-wide.

I have seen no suggestion in any recent media coverage of the Church being disendowed as a consequence of disestablishment, although there is a compelling case for this. Historically, much of the Church's assets arose from the dissolution of the monasteries and receipts from the Crown. Huge sums were also raised from the population at large – believers and non-believers alike – with the force of law by the C of E in its privileged role as the established church. This money was extracted until the last century in the form of compulsory tithes, death duties, rates and taxes levied. Indeed, we have even come across isolated examples of 'voluntary' rates still

being levied by the Church from businesses quite legally, but with the Church concerned wrongly claiming that the voluntary rates were not in fact voluntary.

Should secularists attempt to start a debate as to how much, if any, of the billions of pounds of church assets should be given up on disestablishment? Were disendowment to be the price the Church had to pay for disestablishment, I strongly suspect that the current support for disestablishment (both in the Church and organisations like the CSM) would dissolve to the point that disestablishment would be shelved for the foreseeable future.

There are, however, historical precedents from the time of the dissolution of the monasteries and chantries in the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. Some of the sale proceeds from the dissolution of church property were used for educational purposes. King Edward VI grammar schools resulted from such disendowment.

About the best chance we would have (and even that would be a slim one) of putting disendowment on the agenda would be if it were relatively modest and proposed that any money given up were "ring-fenced" for manifestly worthwhile purposes.

Disestablishment will be a highly complex process. There are many more issues and questions involved than there is space for in this article. One example of which is: would the common law offence of blasphemous libel, which protects the religion as established by law, be deemed to lapse were the C of E to be disestablished?

Secularists' views and sensibilities have been largely ignored in the discussions about disestablishment and its consequences, not only relating to the bishops in the Lords, but also to the monarch's position in relation to the

Church and the form of the next coronation (assuming there is one).

Given the public knowledge of his personal relationships – past and present, and his proclaimed wish to be Defender of Faith (rather than *the* Faith) Prince Charles would seem more of a liability than an asset to the C of E, if he succeeds the Queen as its supreme governor.

There is wide acknowledgement that there must be changes to the coronation oath, the taking of which is really only consistent with the monarch being an Anglican believer. As well as "maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel" the Queen swore to "maintain in the UK the Protestant reformed religion established by law" and "preserve ... the C of E ... as by law established ...". Bishop Jenkins is not alone among bishops in acknowledging that "the days when it was assumed that states exist under the sacred canopy within which religious authorities are responsible under God for legitimating power, morality and civil order, have long since passed."

He wants future monarchs to be inaugurated or installed in "a *secular* ceremony to which contributions were made from the traditions of all faiths". However well-meaning, this is clearly a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, there is widespread expectation among those whose views were sought in the media over disestablishment that the coronation service would become a multi-faith event, and that the communion and some of the specifically Anglican ritual would be dropped.

Columnist A N Wilson alone came to the rescue of neglected secularists in an article in the *Evening Standard* on 18 January headlined: *That crowning moment to bring out your atheists*. After making disparaging jokes about Jenkins' theological credentials, Wilson memorably describes Jenkins' proposed form of inauguration for the Monarch as "a register office coronation". Wilson then poked fun at the senior bishops' idea of a multi-faith coronation.

He suggested that while Charles "takes his vows to the Leader of the Moonies, receives the chrisom from the Imam of Woking and has the crown placed on his head by the Chief Rabbi, we will have only one reservation. Is he being sufficiently sensitive to those who do not have any faith at all?"

It is at this point in the ceremony, he continues, that the former Bishop of Durham and "Famous Atheist" Ludovic Kennedy will step forward to ask the new king to make his wholly secular affirmations.

And so say all of us.

The complete separation of Church and State and the abolition of all privileges granted to religious organisations are key objectives of the National Secular Society. You can support the work of the Society by taking out membership (£10 pa). Membership forms and further information will be sent on application to the General Secretary, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Tel: 0171 404 3126

A recurring phenomenon

I HEAR that Teilhard de Chardin has resurfaced – in America and on the Web (*Guardian Online*, December 10, 1998). Forty years ago the French Jesuit priest, who had been mixed up in the Piltdown Man forgery, produced a highly successful book, *The Phenomenon of Man*, which received the surprising endorsement of Sir Julian Huxley, and the most scathing scientific criticism I have ever read from Sir Peter Medawar, in *Mind* in 1961.

Such was Huxley's fascination with Teilhard that he not only wrote an introduction to the English edition of the book, but cited it frequently in a collection of essays he was then editing under the title *The Humanist Frame*. One distinguished contributor to the volume told me he was amazed to find a reference to *The Phenomenon of Man* in his own piece, as he wasn't acquainted with the work; and my suspicions are that he was not alone. Huxley was not a hands-off editor.

However, it seems now that Teilhard has helped Jennifer Cobb in her *Search for God in the Digital World*, the sub-title of *Cybergrace*, where she follows his path towards the Noosphere, the "centre of centres", the global consciousness, a potentially sacred place animated by divine energies. The Net, Ms Cobb suggests, is a step on the way to this goal.

She sounds a suitable disciple. Teilhard was fond of energies. Evolution was "the continual growth of 'psychic' or 'radial' energy, in the course of duration, beneath and within the mechanical energy I called 'tangential'"; it was "an ascent towards consciousness" and it must have a "precise orientation and a privileged axis" at the topmost pole of which is man, "a direct linear descendant from a total effort of life". Oh yes, and "By a tangential increase, the 'radial' was turned back on itself and so to speak took an infinite leap forward ... consciousness was now leaping and boiling in a space of super-sensory relationships and representations..."

It is hard to see how Huxley could have fallen for this sort of moonshine but, as he did, we shouldn't be surprised that it appeals to Ms Cobb.

When is a myth not a myth?

WHEN Dreamwork Pictures released *The Prince of Egypt*, their animated version of the Exodus story, both *Time* and the *New Yorker* carried articles doubting the existence of Moses. And, as Karen Armstrong acknowl-

edged in the *Observer* (December 13, 1998) there is not a shred of evidence for the exodus or for Moses himself, let alone the competitive conjuring by which he is supposed to have demonstrated the superiority of Jehovah: the rod that had once been a snake swallowing the other rods that had been snakes, and so on.

But to treat the Moses story as myth does not, in Ms Armstrong's view, mean it is not true. Like the biblical writers, we should be more "interested in what an event had meant than in what actually took place". And she rambled on in this vein for several columns. Not without contradiction, though. Having rightly condemned "You shall not have any other gods before me" as intolerant, she then commended "the spirit of the Ten Commandments which [the mythical] Moses brought down from Mount Sinai" as "affirming the sacred rights of all human beings". Bless me, Ms Armstrong, have you, in the course of a few lines, forgotten the first of the Ten?

Telling the judge

JUDGE Michael Argyll QC is dead, and there will be no hypocritical grieving on my part. Instead I will quote from what I regard as the most irreverent debunking of legal fatuity that I know: the testimony of comedian Marty Feldman in the notorious *OZ* case of 1971, probably the longest obscenity trial in history, over which Judge Argyll presided.

Having been told that he must either take the oath or affirm, Marty said "Okay, I'll affirm".

"Why do you wish to affirm?" asked the judge.

Because, replied Marty, "I think there are more obscene things in the Bible than in this issue of *OZ*. Anyway I don't practise any religion that you would approve of".

A variety of demons

"THERE are very different understandings of demons," according to the Rt Rev Dominic Walker, Bishop of Reading, who co-chairs a Church of England study group looking into demonic possession.

"Some would see them as some sort of evil spirit," he said, "some would see them as an unhealed part of the human consciousness." You will notice that Teilhard was not the last Christian to talk tosh.

Nevertheless, the bishop's study group is aware that Christian clergy are increasingly being called upon to cast out ghosts and the like (*Guardian*, December 30, 1998), an increase which the Rev Peter Irwin-Clark of Brighton attributes to "the acceptability of the

paranormal in popular culture". He hasn't seen "full-scale demonic possession" himself, but he has seen "demonic affliction when an area of a person's personality has been gripped by an evil spirit or a fallen angel". Sometimes when he has been praying downstairs, upstairs his own children have awakened screaming and his wife has had to "claim Christ's protection before they calmed." Mr Irwin-Clark didn't say whether he thought that the exorcised demons had entered his children.

The revolutionary Jesus

"DISCOVER the real Jesus", we are urged on the new Che Guevara-look-alike poster, with only a crown of thorns to distinguish it. "We want people to realise that Jesus is not a wimp in a white nightie or someone who is a bit of a walkover, but a strong, revolutionary figure," said the Rev Tom Ambrose of the Churches in Advertising Network. But, lest we should carry it too far, the Rev Peter Owen-Jones stressed that "We are not saying that Jesus was a communist, but that he was a revolutionary". I'm sure Che would be relieved to know that.

Dirty work at the Vatican (2)

AS I mentioned in this column in October 1998, there was suspicion of a Vatican cover-up over the murder, last May, of the newly-appointed commander of the Swiss Guard, Colonel Alois Estermann and his Venezuelan wife, Gladys Meza Romero. That suspicion has been compounded by a letter left for his mother by the alleged culprit, Lance-Corporal Cedric Tornay (*Guardian*, December 29, 1998).

The official line, which was expressed with undignified haste and seems to have been endorsed by an investigation led by an Italian lawyer who holds the papal post of "promoter of justice", is that Tornay vengefully killed the commander and his wife, then turned the gun on himself.

In the letter to his mother, Tornay claimed to be acting for the other guards and the Catholic Church.

"I swore to give my life for the Pope and that is just what I am doing."

But the NCO was about to leave the Swiss Guard and it is puzzling that he should care enough to kill his superior and, more especially, the commander's wife. His mother has cast doubt on the authenticity of the letter, which was addressed to her in her maiden name, which her son never used.

Dirty work at the Vatican was the heading to my previous piece, and I see no reason to change it now.

Rationalists run 'holy' men out of town

Several hundred villagers in northern India watch enthralled as a long haired sadhu, or holy man, dressed in saffron robes, draws ash out of thin air, explodes huge stones with "mental power" and turns water into blood.

Captivated by his supernatural deeds – an offering to the gods to bring prosperity to the village in the state of Haryana, 130 km from the national capital New Delhi, and ward off the evil eye – the simple folk want to give generously to the "divine power" facing them.

But as the awe-struck audience members reach into their pockets, the holy man whips off his saffron robes to reveal himself as the local college science teacher.

He then repeats his performance, except this time showing his audience how he achieved the "miracles" through sleight of hand and a few chemicals.

Such events are part of a movement launched by the Indian Rationalist Association across 18 of India's 25 states to expose thousands of "godmen" who deprive village folk of large sums of money after impressing them with "supernatural acts".

"Charlatans have a strong hold on villagers

and exploit their fears with feats that are a matter of elementary chemistry," said spokesman Sanal Edamaruku, at the Indian Rationalist Association headquarters in New Delhi.

He said Association volunteers had visited thousands of villages across the country for more than two years, demystifying "miracles"

A report from *The Australian* by Rahul Bedi

simply by telling people how they were performed. The Association claimed its campaign had led to villagers in several states stoning holy men and chasing them away.

Association members said standard tricks used by the holy men included setting objects alight through "mind energy", eating glass, walking on fire, piercing their flesh with a steel trident and even levitation.

One trick that never fails to inspire awe is a small explosion caused by sprinkling "holy drops" on a stone, easily achieved by pouring water on scattered sodium crystals.

Similarly, setting fire to a candle and piles of dry grass through "mental power" is executed by using chemicals that ignite on exposure to sunlight. Piercing the body, on the other hand, is done with specially built tridents bent at strategic points to give the impression of deep penetration.

Walking on fire, swallowing ground glass, producing ash out of the air and levitation can all be executed through a combination of chemicals, craftily erected apparatus and deft manipulation.

"These holy men have a rudimentary knowledge of chemistry," said an Indian Rationalist Association activist. "And, with their flowing beards and flamboyant robes," he added, "they create an ambience of mystique and magic for simple rural folk, which scare them into parting with their money."

The Association, whose membership has swelled to 86,000, was launched in the late 1940s by a clutch of scientists and intellectuals in the southern states of India. Over the years, however, it has spread across the country. All of its activists are volunteers and it is funded by donations.

No room for religious decisions in schools

THE British Columbia Supreme School has ruled that school boards in British Columbia cannot use religion as the basis for deciding what material can be used in the education of children.

Madam Justice Mary Saunders handed down her decision following an attempt by a Surrey BC school board to ban books that depicted same-sex couples and families.

A request by Surrey primary school teacher James Chamberlain to introduce the books – *Asha's Mums*, *Belinda's Bouquet* and *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* – was rejected by the largely Christian board of trustees on the grounds that they were "inappropriate".

With the help of supporters – including another teacher, a student and the BC Civil Liberties Association – Mr Chamberlain took the matter to court.

In handing down her decision, Justice Saunders sided with Mr Chamberlain, and said

that school boards cannot use religion as the framework to make decisions. Rather, the moral code they must adhere to is Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the British Columbia Human Rights Code.

"This decision is based upon a very old provision of the School Act enjoining religion or overt religious influence in the conduct of the schools," Judge Saunders said in her 44-page decision. "Freedom of religion includes freedom from religion."

Lawyer Chris Sanderson, who represented the BC Civil Liberties Association, said the decision means that parents who want their children taught values in line with a particular religious faith must send them to a religious school.

The lawyer who represented Mr Chamberlain, Joseph Arvay, added that the decision would have an impact across the country. It further pushes religion out of public schools. "The court has said the school board

cannot use religion as a basis for banning books, whether it's the religion of the trustees, or the religion of the parents or the religion of the people in the community."

The decision is binding on all school boards in British Columbia, but Mr Arvay said other jurisdictions across Canada can look to it for legal guidance.

The board of trustees, dismayed by the judgment, argued that religion did not enter their decision to ban them. Trustee Gary Tymoschuk argued that the decision was based on the feelings of parents and trustees who thought they were inappropriate for children as young as five and six.

Mr Tymoschuk insisted that discussions with young children about lifestyles and sexuality should take place at home and not at school.

But in her ruling, Judge Saunders said the books did not raise inappropriate sexuality issues.

The Vatican spin-doctors have decided that God needs another re-launch. In religion (as elsewhere) there are two ways – the way of belief, and the way of disbelief – but (as elsewhere) there is also a third way. Instead of either believing or disbelieving in Christianity, you can half-believe in it, or else revise it so that it no longer means anything which must be or can be believed.

This practice now extends as far as the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II is rigid in matters of behaviour and discipline, but flexible in matters of theology and philosophy, and during the 20 years of his reign he has diluted many Catholic dogmas. Recently he admitted that there is no reason for celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25, though he hasn't yet added that the same is true about celebrating the 2000th anniversary of it in AD 2000.

On the contrary, he takes the Millennium very seriously, and despite failing health he hopes to live to make the most of it next year. As part of the preparations, following years of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, he has proclaimed 1999 the year of God the Father, and on January 14 he issued a statement on this difficult subject in an audience granted to 6,000 pilgrims in St Peter's.

He stated that the God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is not a patriarchal deity, that it is wrong "to imagine the Divinity with anthropomorphic traits which reflect too much the human world", and in particular that God should not be depicted as "an old man with a flowing white beard living in the sky". He acknowledged the long tradition of God as a "father figure" or "paternal human image", but alleged that Christian iconography representing him as such derived not from the Bible but from Greco-Roman representations of the father god Zeus or Jupiter, as did the idea of God having human emotions.

He was immediately supported by many tame scholars and journalists, Protestant as well as Catholic, some even claiming that the Bible doesn't describe God as a father and indeed doesn't describe God at all, and quoting Paul: "Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face" (1 Corinthians 13). It is notorious that the leaders of the churches used to discourage lay people from reading the Bible, but it is noticeable that now they don't seem to read it themselves. It is true that in the New Testament two passages attributed to John the Evangelist say, "No man hath seen God at any time" (John 1 and 1 John 4); and in one of the Epistles God is described as one "whom no man hath seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6). Yet, as usual, several other pas-

sages in the Bible, whether Jewish or Christian, say quite different things.

At the very beginning of the Old Testament, the first of the two creation myths gives an account of the creation of man with clear allusions to the human appearance (as well as the plural and bisexual nature) of God: "And God said, Let us [sic] make man in our [sic] image, after our [sic] likeness. . . . So God created man in his image, in the image of God created he him; male and female [sic] created he them [sic]" (Genesis 1). It is worth remembering that in these passages "God" is a translation of the Hebrew plural "Elohim". In the second creation myth, man is made first, and woman added as an afterthought.

But today such images of God and man and woman are embarrassing to all the denominations of a religion whose leaders want to seem mature and modern, or even post-modern, so a new image is needed. The churches have accepted that Darwin, like Galileo, was right, that humanity is the outcome not of a single moment of supernatural creation six thousand years ago, but of millions of years of natural evolution. Now the churches feel they must add that God is not so much a person as the principle of creativity, the spirit of existence, the origin of life – perhaps the ground of our being, or some such nonsense. It has been said that Christianity is always being adapted into something which can be believed; the truth is rather that since the Reformation it has been adapted into something beyond belief or disbelief.

However, the trouble is that Christianity is based on the Bible, and the Bible tells a different story. It may contain few specific descriptions of God, who is repeatedly described as being invisible and a spirit, and who normally appears in the form of a voice or a dream, or a fire or cloud or wind, or through an angel or messenger in human shape; yet it does also contain passages in which God himself is given human and even physical attributes, including a few in which some men do actually see God.

After the creation, God rests on the seventh day (Genesis 2); and in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve hear his voice as he walks in the cool of the day (Genesis 3). God appears to Abram in the form of three men (Genesis 18). God actually wrestles with Jacob, and beats him only by a foul; afterwards Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Genesis 32). God first appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush: "And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God" (Exodus 3).

But later, while the Israelites are wandering

in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan, Moses and other leaders are summoned to mount Sinai. "And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved walk of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. . . . They saw God, and did eat and drink" (Exodus 24).

Moses alone is called to the summit. "And a cloud covered the mount. And the glory of the Lord abode upon mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the midst of the cloud." There he stays for forty days and nights, receiving the various laws and commandments from God (Exodus 24).

While there, Moses asks God: "I beseech thee, shew me thy glory." God replies: "Thou canst not see my face; for there shall no man see me, and live." But a way is found: "And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock; and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen" (Exodus 33). The offensive illustration of this episode in the Christmas number of the *Freethinker* in 1882 was one of the items in its editor's conviction for blasphemy.

Other prophets in the Bible have visions in which they see or feel as well as hear God. Isaiah says: "I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. . . . Mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6). Jeremiah says: "Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth" (Jeremiah 1). Other prophets add detailed descriptions of God. He isn't said to be an old man, but he is said to be the image of a man (or vice versa). He isn't said to have a white beard, but he is said to have white hair. He has other strange features, mostly mineralogical or meteorological.

Ezekiel sees "the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it", with "the appearance of fire" and "brightness", which is "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezekiel 1). And "an hand was sent unto me; and lo, a roll of a book was therein" (Ezekiel 2). Later "I beheld, and lo a likeness as the appearance of fire: from the appear-

(Continued on page 13)

Morals with

These talks are addressed to the ordinary man and woman, whose attitude towards religion is that they do not quite know what they believe. They were married in church; they have had the children baptised; and they still on rare occasions go to church, though mainly for social reasons; but they do not pretend to believe the creeds they repeat there. Their general feeling is that it does not much matter what views a man holds on the higher management of the universe, so long as he has the right views on how to behave to his neighbour. And they are not at all troubled about religion, except for one thing: what shall they teach the children?

For where intellectual doubts are concerned, this ordinary parent's feeling is: 'Who am I to judge? I find these doctrines hard to believe, but many very able men believe them – men who have studied the subject much more fully than I have.' Furthermore, parents are repeatedly told that Christianity is the only alternative to communism, and that there can be no sound character-training that is not based on religion. When juvenile delinquency increased after the war, they heard on all sides that this was the inevitable result of the decay of religious belief and the lack of sound religious training in the home; and in 1944 a new Education Act was passed, by which daily prayers and religious instruction were made compulsory in the state schools. So, on the whole, our ordinary parent thinks it is best to take no risks. When the children are older they can decide for themselves; meanwhile, better bring them up in the orthodox way – talk to them about God; teach them to say their prayers; take them to church occasionally; and try to stave off awkward questions.

I want here to make three suggestions: first, that the doubts the ordinary man feels about religion are justified, and need not be stifled or concealed; second, that there is no ground for the view that Christianity is the only alternative to communism, or that there can be no sound character-training that is not based on religion; and, third, I want to make some practical suggestions to the parents who are not believers, on what they should tell the children about God, and what sort of moral training they should give them.

The first thing I want to do is to define "religion", for it is a term that is used in a great many senses. Sometimes when people say they "believe in religion" they turn out to mean little more than that they believe in a moral standard, or that they believe there are more important things in life than money and worldly success. I need scarcely say that I have no quarrel with religion in either of these senses. But this is not really a correct use of the term. The

Interviewed recently on Radio 4 about his new book *All in the Mind: a Farewell to God*, written in 1953, C. S. Lewis, who was a member of the Church of England, referred to two radio talks given in the 1950s by the late Margaret Knight. These talks were given in 1953 and 1954, and were taken away from belief in God. The talks were hugely controversial, and Mrs Knight, who was attacked and reviled in both the popular and serious press. One paper, the now defunct *Sunday Graphic*, published a scathing review of the first of her two talks. Almost half a century has elapsed since those talks were delivered, but *Freethinker* is publishing them in two instalments. The second of her talks, together with a

Oxford Dictionary defines "religion" as "Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship". That is the sense in which I shall use the term religion in these talks; and by "Christianity" I mean over and above that, the beliefs essential to the Christian religion – that is, at least, that this "unseen power" is omnipotent, and wholly good; that Christ was divine; that he rose from the dead; and that human beings survive bodily death. That is a bare minimum of Christian belief: there is far more than that in the official creeds of the Churches.

I am not out to destroy the Christian convictions of people in whom they are deeply implanted and to whom they mean a great deal. And I am sure that nothing I say here will have the slightest effect on believers of this type. But what I do want to argue is that, in a climate of thought that is increasingly unfavourable to these beliefs, it is a mistake to try to impose them on children, and to make them the basis of moral training. The moral education of children is much too important a matter to be built on such foundations.

In any religious argument, one is sooner or later reminded that "science isn't everything" and that "logic isn't everything". That is perfectly true; there are many human activities – art, music, poetry, for example – to which science and logic are more or less irrelevant. But religion is not in this category, for religion, unlike art and music and poetry, is a system of belief. And a system of belief that is to be acceptable must satisfy the ordinary criteria of reason: the beliefs must be consistent with each other and not obviously in conflict with fact. Orthodox Christian beliefs, I suggest, do not satisfy these criteria.

I will just take one point which I think is crucial. Orthodox Christian theology is completely inconsistent with the facts of evil. This was not so obvious in the old days when people believed in the Devil. To regard the universe as a battlefield between God and the

Devil, with the odds on God, so to speak, at least did not do violence to the facts. But now most Christians have ceased to believe in the Devil; and the orthodox view is (as indeed it always was, but the Devil got slipped in somehow) that the universe is controlled by a single, all-powerful and wholly benevolent Power, and that everything that happens, happens by his will. And that raises insuperable intellectual difficulties. For why should this all-powerful and wholly benevolent Being have created so much evil? It is no answer to say that evil is just a means to good. In the first place, there is no reason to believe this is always true; and in the second place, even if it were true it would not be an answer; for a Being who was really all-powerful would not need to use evil means to attain his ends. It is no answer to say that God is not responsible for the evil – that evil is due to man, who has misused his freewill and defied God's edicts. Because it is not true that all the evil in the universe is due to man. Man is not responsible for leprosy and gangrene and cancer, to take a few obvious examples.

Some Christians, when they are faced with these facts, try hard to convince themselves that illness and pain and misery are not really evils; they are desirable states, blessings in disguise, if we could only see it. But, if that is really so, why do we try to cure illness, and think it wrong to inflict pain? Why did Christ heal the sick? But in any case we can leave human suffering out of the argument, because animal suffering sets a still greater problem. Why should an omnipotent and benevolent Power have made animals prey on one another for food? Why implant in the cat the instinct, not merely to kill mice, but to torture them before it kills them? There is no possible answer to the dilemma that so troubled St Augustine: Either God cannot prevent evil, or he will not. If he cannot, he is not all-powerful; if he will not, he is not all-good. This difficulty arises for all religions which hold that there is an omnipotent and benevolent power in control of the universe.

out religion

l, writer, broadcaster and honorary associate of the National Secular Society, Ludovic
These, he said, played a large part in secularising Britain, swinging large numbers of people
as attached to the Psychology Department at Aberdeen University, was almost universally
phic, carried a front page headline: *The Unholy Mrs Knight*, following the broadcast of the
d, but they are as pertinent today as they were then, and it is for this reason that the
th a review of Ludovic Kennedy's book, will be published in the March issue.

The specifically Christian doctrines raise still further difficulties, on which I need not enlarge. I do not suggest that these doctrines have been disproved – most of them are not susceptible of disproof. But it is undeniable that in the present scientific climate of thought, belief in these doctrines is becoming more and more difficult to maintain. Just as, to take what I should regard as a parallel case, it is now almost impossible for anyone to believe in witches, though I do not imagine any scientist has ever disproved their existence.

Actually, there is not much attempt today to defend Christian dogma by reasoning. The fashionable attitude among orthodox believers is a defiant anti-intellectualism. The popular Christian apologists are men like Kierkegaard – who made the famous pronouncement “Christianity demands the crucifixion of the intellect”, as though this were a great point in Christianity's favour. It is surely pessimistic to suggest that doctrines which even their own adherents describe in such terms provide the natural basis for morals and the only alternative to communism? The position is more hopeful than that.

However, as regards the moral training of children, I realise that a case can be made, and is sometimes made; even by unbelievers. So let me try to state this case, as it has sometimes been put to me. People say: “Of course I realise that these beliefs are not literally true. But then children are not literal-minded, they think naturally in terms of symbol and legend. So why not make use of this tendency in character-training? It is no use giving the child cold-blooded lessons in ethics – moral teaching has got to have colour and warmth and interest. So why not give them that by the means that lie ready to hand – the myths of religion, and the moving and beautiful ceremonies of the Church? The child will cease to believe in them as he grows older, but that won't matter – they will have served their purpose.”

I agree that moral training cannot be coldly

rational. There must be colour and warmth and interest. One of the best ways to give that is to give the child plenty of models that he can admire and imitate. Tell him plenty of stirring stories about courageous, heroic, disinterested actions – stories that will move and excite him, and make him think that that is the sort of person he would like to be. This may be far more effective, even at the time, than tying up the idea of goodness with the Church, and religion: and there is not the same risk that, later on, if the child leaves the Church and casts off the religion, he may cast off the morals as well.

But let us consider the young child first. If he is brought up in the orthodox way, he will accept what he is told happily enough to begin with. But if he is normally intelligent, he is almost bound to get the impression that there is something odd about religious statements. If he is taken to church, for example, he hears that death is the gateway to eternal life and should be welcomed rather than shunned; yet outside he sees death regarded as the greatest of all evils and everything possible done to postpone it. In church he hears precepts like “Resist not evil”, and “Take no thought for the morrow”; but he soon realises that these are not really meant to be practised outside. If he asks questions, he gets embarrassed, evasive answers: “Well, dear, you're not quite old enough to understand yet, but some of these things are true in a deeper sense”; and so on. The child soon gets the idea that there are two kinds of truth – the ordinary kind, and another, rather confusing and slightly embarrassing kind, into which it is best not to inquire too closely.

All this is bad intellectual training. It tends to produce a certain intellectual timidity – a distrust of reason – a feeling that it is perhaps rather bad taste to pursue an argument to its logical conclusion, or to refuse to accept a belief on inadequate evidence. And that is not a desirable attitude in the citizens of a free democracy. However, it is the moral rather than the intellectual dangers that I am con-

cerned with here; and they arise when the trustful child becomes a critical adolescent. He may then cast off all his religious beliefs; and, if his moral training has been closely tied up with religion, it is more than possible that the moral beliefs will go too. He may well decide that it was all just old wives' tales; and now he does not know where he is. At this stage he could be most vulnerable to communist propaganda, if a communist were to get hold of him and say: “Well, you've finished with fairy-tales – now you're ready to listen to some grown-up talk.” Far from being a protection against communism, tying up morals with religion could help to drive people into its arms.

On the subject of communism, it is a mistake, I suggest, to think of Christianity and communism as the two great rival forces in the world today. The fundamental opposition is between dogma and the scientific outlook. On the one side, Christianity and communism, the two great rival dogmatic systems; on the other, Scientific Humanism, which is opposed to both. To try to combat communism by reviving Christianity is a hopeless task. It is like – what shall I say? – like trying to combat the belief in flying saucers by reviving the belief in witches riding on broomsticks. I do not want to press that analogy too closely – but what I mean is, it is trying to drive out a new myth by reviving an old one, instead of going forward to something sounder than myth. Scientific Humanism – that is the constructive answer. By calling it scientific I do not mean that it is crudely materialist, or that it thinks nothing is important but what happens in laboratories: far from it. But scientific in that it does not regard it as a virtue to believe without evidence; scientific in that it deals with hypotheses, not dogmas – hypotheses that are constantly tested and revised in the light of new facts, rather than with alleged immutable truths that it is heresy to question. And humanist because it is concerned with human beings and with this life, rather than with supernatural beings and another world; because it believes that the primary good lies in human happiness and development – men and women realising to the full their capacities for affection, for happiness, and for intellectual and aesthetic experience – and regards these things as more important than any ideology or abstraction, whether it is the Church, or the state, or the five-year plan, or the life hereafter.

In this first talk I have inevitably been rather negative. But in the next I hope to be more constructive; to present Scientific Humanism in its positive aspect, and to return to the question I raised at the beginning of this talk, namely, how should the humanist parent set about the moral education of his children?

OVERVIEW: BROADCASTING, by Keith Porteous Wood

HOWEVER loosely, all the issues this month have some connection with broadcasting.

New Honorary Associate

WE ARE pleased to announce that Brian Sedgmore MP has accepted an invitation to become an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society. Some readers may have heard him taking the secularist position in radio broadcasts.

Christmas day service on tv?

THE BISHOP of St. Albans complained in the press that there was no service of worship on BBC television on Christmas Day, and on the strength of this even called for the BBC's role to be reviewed. Curiously, he omitted to mention that the service had been withdrawn six years ago, almost certainly because of poor viewing figures. His views were echoed by the Archbishop of York.

The NSS put its case against this service being reintroduced to both Chris Smith, Minister of Culture, and the BBC's Director

General. The last sentence of our letter was "*Thought for the Day* should also be presented by non-believers. Neither morality nor thought is the exclusive preserve of those who believe." Predictably, we have not got very far with this, but we're working on it.

Scottish Parliament Prayers

REPORTS emerged on Boxing Day in Scotland that Alex Salmond of the Scottish National Party had written to the various denominational heads to suggest that the new Parliament starts its daily proceedings with prayers, and that these should be taken by different denominations on a rota basis.

I ensured that the NSS's contrary view, that there should be no prayers at all, was broadcast on both BBC and independent TV channels in Scotland.

The Bishop of Edinburgh, who was so helpful in the Ecclesiastical Courts Act campaign, devoted his contribution to BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* in early January to this issue. He attacked the divisiveness of the rota system proposal and concluded that it would

be better to have no prayers at all.

Bare cheek

THERE was a convivial but modest (bring your own food and wine) Solstice staff party at Bradlaugh House again this year.

But we clearly have a thing or two to learn in this area from our ecclesiastical colleagues at the BBC who have brought an entirely new meaning to the phrase "Religious Affairs".

At their Christmas do, 34-year-old producer Abigail Saxon ran three times around a Spanish restaurant clothed only in a pair of socks, apparently to win a £100 bet offered by one of the executives. According to the *Daily Mail*, Abigail's boss, the Rev Ernie Rea, Head of the Religious Affairs Department, is reported to have "gone ballistic" and statements were taken from everyone who attended the party. The *Sun*, never yet known to have omitted to mention anything of national importance, devoted a whole page to its campaign to save Abigail's job. Whether thanks to the *Sun's* involvement or not, Ms Saxon has survived the disciplinary proceedings.

HUMOUR: KISSING HANK'S ASS, from *Funnybone Magazine* – submitted

This morning there was a knock at my door. I answered it to a well groomed, nicely dressed couple. The man spoke first: "Hi! I'm John, and this is Mary."

Mary: "Hi! We're here to invite you to come kiss Hank's ass with us."

Me: "Pardon me?! What are you talking about? Who's Hank, and why would I want to kiss his ass?"

John: "If you kiss Hank's ass, he'll give you a million dollars; and if you don't, he'll kick the crap out of you."

Me: "What? Is this some sort of bizarre mob shake-down?"

John: "Hank is a billionaire philanthropist. Hank built this town. Hank owns this town. He can do whatever he wants, and what he wants is to give you a million dollars, but he can't until you kiss his ass."

Me: "That doesn't make any sense."

Mary: "Who are you to question Hank's gift? Don't you want a million dollars? Isn't it worth a little kiss on the ass?"

Me: "Well maybe, if it's legit, but..."

John: "Then come kiss Hank's ass with us."

Me: "Do you kiss Hank's ass often?"

Mary: "Oh yes, all the time..."

Me: "And has he given you a million dollars?"

John: "Well no, you don't actually get the

money until you leave town."

Me: "So why don't you just leave town now?"

Mary: "You can't leave until Hank tells you to, or you don't get the money, and he kicks the crap out of you."

Me: "Do you know anyone who kissed Hank's ass, left town, and got the million dollars?"

John: "My mother kissed Hank's ass for years. She left town last year, and I'm sure she got the money."

Me: "Haven't you talked to her since then?"

John: "Of course not, Hank doesn't allow it."

Me: "So what makes you think he'll actually give you the money if you've never talked to anyone who got the money?"

Mary: "Well, he gives you a little bit before you leave. Maybe you'll get a raise, maybe you'll win a small lotto, maybe you'll just find a twenty dollar bill on the street."

Me: "What's that got to do with Hank?"

John: "Hank has certain connections."

Me: "I'm sorry, but this sounds like some sort of bizarre con game."

John: "But it's a million dollars, can you really take the chance? And remember, if you don't kiss Hank's ass he'll kick the crap out of you."

Me: "Maybe if I could see Hank, talk to him, get the details straight from him..."

Mary: "No one sees Hank, no one talks to Hank."

Me: "Then how do you kiss his ass?"

John: "Sometimes we just blow him a kiss, and think of his ass. Other times we kiss Karl's ass, and he passes it on."

Me: "Who's Karl?"

Mary: "A friend of ours. He's the one who taught us all about kissing Hank's ass. All we had to do was take him out to dinner a few times."

Me: "And you just took his word for it when he said there was a Hank, that Hank wanted you to kiss his ass, and that Hank would reward you?"

John: "Oh no! Karl's got a letter Hank sent him years ago explaining the whole thing. Here's a copy; see for yourself."

John handed me a photocopy of a handwritten memo on *From the desk of Karl* letterhead. There were eleven items listed:

1. Kiss Hank's ass and he'll give you a million dollars when you leave town.
2. Use alcohol in moderation.
3. Kick the crap out of people who aren't like you.
4. Eat right.
5. Hank dictated this list himself.
6. The moon is made of green cheese.
7. Everything Hank says is right.
8. Wash your hands after going to the bathroom.
9. Don't drink.
10. Eat your wieners on buns, no condiments.

THIS is a good introduction to secular humanism. It purports to "discourage credulity and to open closed minds". Beyond this, I'm not sure that the title is inviting; but the layout and form in which it is presented provide an excellent approach for school students, in a manner with which they will be familiar.

Since it is set out in this manner it is a shame that it does not go far enough. Questions and answers at crucial points would be useful. Comprehensiveness in this direction would make it a more widely marketable text. Though in justification it must be noted that it has been produced for the Greater Manchester Humanist Group.

There are a number of quotations, many of which will be familiar to secularists. But although there are references, these are incomplete, and there are some misprints. There is a rather selective glossary, suggested further reading, but no index.

The sub-title – a critique of the supernatural – more accurately describes the intent and content of the book. The title may be misleading in terms of the anticipated readership; *Criticism of Religion* would be far nearer the

mark. One feature I particularly enjoyed was the evidence for the Golden Rule as featured in all major world religions and beliefs. Humanists ought also to be reminded that, apart from difficulties of interpretation, the Golden Rule is a simple application of good

**Review by NSS
President Denis Cobell**

social sense. Unfortunately, we know that the maxims and ideals of both humanists and faith followers often fail. But this is the nature of being human: doubt and uncertainty have to be lived with. Explanation through ignorance will never succeed.

Different religions all have a supernatural element as a common thread. This is where secular humanism differs. Nevertheless, we have to recognise that humans are never all going to agree. To feel superior is all very well, but not always a path to peace and toleration of those with whom we cannot agree.

There are long themes on the existence of God or gods, with which most readers will be familiar. The *Freethinker* editor from 1915 to

1952, Chapman Cohen, is quoted at some length on the subject of prayer. The alternative view from a "highly respected theologian" is also presented: "Without prayer there would be no religion." Cohen is also favourably quoted from one of his popular pamphlets criticising the links between Christianity and slavery.

This booklet points to the opposition to change that has characterised the ardent followers of religious institutions. This is still the case.

The author states: "As recently as 1925 the teaching of Darwinian evolution was banned in the State of Tennessee USA." Although the widening of denominational schools in this country is included, the fact that Seventh Day Adventist schools today teach biblical creation stories as the truth – with funding from the State to do so – is not mentioned.

Nevertheless, SACREs should be made aware of this book – for their students.

***Reflections on Religion*, (48 pp, £5) available from Derek Chatterton, 25 Abingdon Road, Bramhall, Stockport SK7 3EZ.**

mitted by Martin Ward

11. Kiss Hank's ass or he'll kick the crap out of you.
 Me: "This would appear to be written on Karl's letterhead."
 Mary: "Hank didn't have any paper."
 Me: "I have a hunch that if we checked we'd find this is Karl's handwriting."
 John: "Of course, Hank dictated it."
 Me: "I thought you said no one gets to see Hank?"
 Mary: "Not now, but years ago he would talk to some people."
 Me: "I thought you said he was a philanthropist. What sort of philanthropist kicks the crap out of people just because they're different?"
 Mary: "It's what Hank wants, and Hank's always right."
 Me: "How do you figure that?"
 Mary: "Item 7 says 'Everything Hanks says is right' – that's good enough for me!"
 Me: "Maybe your friend Karl just made the whole thing up."
 John: "No way! Item 5 says Hank dictated this list himself. Besides, item 2 says 'Use alcohol in moderation,' item 4 says 'Eat right,' and item 8 says 'Wash your hands after going to the bathroom'. Everyone knows those things are right, so the rest must be true, too."
 Me: "But 9 says 'Don't Drink', which doesn't quite go with item 2, and 6 says 'The moon is

made of green cheese', which is just plain wrong."
 John: "There's no contradiction between 9 and 2 – 9 just clarifies 2. As far as 6 goes, you've never been to the moon, so you can't say for sure."
 Me: "Scientists have pretty firmly established that the moon is made of rock..."
 Mary: "But they don't know if the rock came from the Earth, or from out of space, so it could just as easily be green cheese."
 Me: "I'm not really an expert, but I think the theory that the Moon came from the Earth has been discounted. Besides, not knowing where the rock came from doesn't make it cheese."
 John: "Aha! You just admitted that scientists make mistakes, but we know Hank is always right!"
 Me: "We do?"
 Mary: "Of course we do, Item 5 says so."
 Me: "You're saying Hank's always right because the list says so, the list is right because Hank dictated it, and we know that Hank dictated it because the list says so."
 That's circular logic – no different than saying Hank's right because he says he's right."
 John: "Now you're getting it! It's so rewarding to see someone come around to Hank's way of thinking."

Me: "But...oh, never mind. What's the deal with wieners?"
 Mary blushes. John says: "Wieners, in buns, no condiments. It's Hank's way. Anything else is wrong."
 Me: "What if I don't have a bun?"
 John: "No bun, no wiener. A wiener without a bun is wrong."
 Me: "No relish? No mustard?"
 Mary looks positively stricken. John shouts: "There's no need for such language! Condiments of any kind are wrong!"
 Me: "So a big pile of sauerkraut with some wieners chopped up in it would be out of the question?"
 Mary sticks her fingers in her ears: "I am not listening to this. La la la, la la, la la la."
 John: "That's disgusting. Only some sort of evil deviant would eat that..."
 Me: "It's good! I eat it all the time."
 Mary faints.
 John catches her: "Well, if I'd known you were one of those I wouldn't have wasted my time. When Hank kicks the crap out of you I'll be there, counting my money and laughing. I'll kiss Hank's ass for you, you bunless cut-wienered kraut-eater."
 With this, John dragged Mary to their waiting car, and sped off.

Last month I commented on the way that religious writers in the press repeatedly tell us that society is breaking up because we have given up faith. If the pious doom merchants could only get us to believe that since we abandoned church we have become a nation of moral reprobates, then they might also persuade us that we need a strong leader who will tell us what to do – some strongly moral individual who would restore to us our long-lost, marvellous religious heritage.

The latest example of this thinking came when *The Times* ran an excerpt from a book called *Moral Evasion* by David Selbourne. Alarm bells started ringing when I saw that the book was published by the Centre for Policy Studies, which sounds very important, but is in fact a right-wing think-tank held in high regard by Baroness Thatcher. Anyway, David Selbourne began his rant with a catalogue of modern moral turpitude. "Is it an old or a new moral thing that there is now an arson attack in at least three schools every day?" he asked. "Or that one in three churches can expect to be the target of an attack of some kind – theft, vandalism, arson – each year? Or that malicious vandalism is now the biggest cause of railway accidents? Or that 86 per cent of alarm calls in the Metropolitan Police area are shown to be false? Or that trees and shrubs planted in memory of the Dunblane victims were stolen within three days from the local cemetery? Has there ever been before such violence directed in a time of peace by youth against the frailest and most elderly, so that even women in their eighties come to be raped?" And so on and so on.

We've all done our share of tutting over these things, I suppose. "What is the world coming to?" we ask as we hear of some other act of savagery directed towards an innocent person, or some disgraceful piece of vandalism in our local park.

David Selbourne puts it all down to "the modern cynicism that dwells in moral darkness and deepens it".

There are arguments aplenty to throw back at David Selbourne, but he cleverly rebuts them before they can be put. Mr Selbourne says he hears eleven common responses to his idea that we have "lost the sense of right and wrong". These are: "There is nothing we can do about it, or not much"; "it has never been any different"; "there is no quick fix"; "this is the price of a free society"; "everything is changing and you must move with the tide"; "it's no use turning the clock back"; "the problem is much more complex than you think"; "the problem is beyond the reach of the law"; "you are focusing on the wrong issue";

"people in glass houses shouldn't..."; "everyone does it so how can you object?"

Mr Selbourne says that the effect of these "evasions" is to paralyse debate, and if all their other arguments fail, objectors to the present moral climate can be dismissed as "moral crusaders", "puritans", "moral authoritarians" or simply "right-wing".

Having thus taken all possible weapons of argument from his opponents' hands, Mr Selbourne says that "evasion and falsehood are widely employed to give the slip to the idea that common moral rules can and should exist."

But common moral rules do exist, and are widely observed. They just don't happen to be the common rules that Mr Selbourne would like to see enforced. Religious rules (for that is what he is promoting) are often arbitrary and inhumane as well as being irrelevant to our society that has evolved since the rules were framed in the Palestinian Bronze Age. The religious rules that coincide with common sense are the ones that people tend to embrace. Don't kill, don't steal, look after your children etc. Naturally in a free society of tens of millions of individuals there will always be backsliders and criminals. Fortunately they are still in a very small minority, although the inconvenience they cause to the rest of society is considerable.

And Mr Selbourne didn't escape unscathed from freethinking readers of *The Times*, either. In a letter to the editor, Charles T. Ross of Bath wrote: "No one can be complacent about the failures in our society which he lists, but Jeremiahs all seem to compare today's inadequacies with some mythical lost paradise of yesteryear. Take his first point about the way some old people are regarded as commodities by private care homes; this compares not so much with a past in which every elderly couple lived in the

bosom of a caring, loving, extended family, as with the terror, even in living memory, of the workhouse. He cites the number of arson attacks in schools. Fifty years ago some 20 per cent of our children received a reasonable education – now, perhaps 70 per cent do.... In this century we have achieved universal suffrage – so we begin to influence how we are governed; deference to a static hereditary system is on the wane. We have created a welfare state. The National Health Service may have its faults but it is a bastion of civilisation. More than half the population have jobs that give them genuine satisfaction and the percentage rises annually. Of course there are problems, there always will be, but we get into the new millennium better fed, in better health, better clothed and housed, less superstitious and better educated to enjoy our knowledge, art and culture. We may not do it in the name of religion, but our community is increasingly tolerant, generous and compassionate."

If David Selbourne thinks that religion is going to rescue us from our "moral wasteland", I would refer him to events in the Islamic world, where religion and "firm rules" are taken extremely seriously. Over the past two years in Algeria there have been countless massacres, many of them committed by Islamic extremists. We are not talking about children starting fires in their schools here, but of grown men walking into villages and slitting the throats of all the inhabitants, women, children, the elderly - everyone.

I recently saw a documentary on Channel Four which featured video footage shot immediately after one of these nocturnal attacks. The programme made no attempt to censor the images, and what it showed was horrific. Small babies had been beheaded, old ladies with white hair lay in pools of blood, young children were piled in a corner, their bodies ripped apart by bayonets.

This is a moral wasteland if ever there was one. But, hey, everyone believes in God.

**South Place Ethical Society
73rd Conway Memorial Lecture
Philosophical Ideas in Politics:
Bentham, Blair and Beyond**

The Case for the Modern Relevance of Bentham's Utilitarianism

given by Fred Rosen Ph.D
Bentham Project, University College London
Thursday, February 25, 1999

7pm – free admission
Conway Hall Humanist Centre, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL
Nearest Tube: Holborn.

Continued from page 7

ance of his loins even downward, fire; and from his loins even upward, as the appearance of brightness, as the colour of amber. And he put forth the form of an hand, and took me by a lock of mine head; and the spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven. . . And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there" (Ezekiel 8).

Daniel says: "I beheld until the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of Days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool" (Daniel 7). "I lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and behold a certain man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with fine gold. . . His body also was like the beryl, and his face as the appearance of lightning, and his eyes as lamps of fire, and his arms and his feet like in colour to polished brass, and the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude"(Daniel 10).

One of the Psalms describes God when "he was wroth": "There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it. He bowed the heavens also, and came down: and darkness was under his feet. And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind" (Psalm 18).

If it is argued that these are simply survivals of primitive paganism in early Judaism, it should be added that the tradition continues into the New Testament. When Jesus is baptised by John the Baptist and later when he is transfigured, according to the Synoptic Gospels a voice comes from the sky or from a cloud saying, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." Stephen, the first Christian martyr, "looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the son of man standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7).

The author of the Apocalypse or Revelation has similar visions. John sees "one like unto the son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like under fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength" (Revelation 1).

Later "a door was opened in heaven", and John is told, "Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter." "And,

behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald" (Revelation 4).

Similarly, if it is argued that these explicit passages should be interpreted as metaphors or parables, it should be added that God is frequently stated to have such human emotions as jealousy and anger and vexation and vengeance, as well as love and kindness and compassion and mercy, and that he not only creates and commands human beings but then judges and rewards or punishes them, and repeatedly inflicts various smitings and sufferings even on his chosen people. And according to later doctrines, including Christianity, after our time on earth he sends us to heaven or hell, to rejoice or suffer for ever.

Indeed the founder of Christianity, Jesus himself, who almost always calls God

"father" and whose best-known prayer is addressed to "Our father", seems to have seen God as a real person and heaven as a real place and salvation as a real process.

But old Christianity (like old Labour) will no longer do. New Christianity (like new Labour) must take its place. God must have a new image for a new century and a new millennium. Christian leaders have long been so embarrassed about hell that they have virtually abolished it. Now it is not just eccentric bishops or scholars but the head of the largest single Christian denomination who is doing the same with God, whether father, son or holy spirit, inventing an image which is no virtually image.

In the end, perhaps, they will all catch up with the freethinkers who saw long ago that the whole thing will not do. The truth is not that God is not this or that or the other, but that God is not.

GOD'S IMAGE: Radio 4's follow-up

THE DAY after the Pope's pronouncement on God's image, Radio 4's PM programme sent reporter Angus Crawford in search of the answer to the question: "Who is God, or, more precisely, what does God look like?"

He began by asking several children who, by and large, presented him with precisely the sort of image the Pope wants to get away from: a patriarchal, bearded Santa Claus-type character. However, two provided a more thoughtful response, the first being:

"He's half-black and half-white, and wears a cloak."

A second child replied: "He can look like whatever you want him to look like."

Crawford then turned to two adults, former nun Karen Armstrong, author of *A History of God*, and Catholic actor Frank Kelly (Father Jack in the Father Ted TV series).

Ms Armstrong (who thinks of God neither as 'he' nor 'she' but 'it') said the "trouble is that our God began life in the early books of the Bible as an irredeemably and hopelessly male character, with no female traits whatsoever – a God of war, very masculine – and that has coloured the whole of the tradition".

Asked what image of God youngsters should be given nowadays, she replied: "Children should be taught to see God as a personality, and to think of God as our Mother as well as our Father."

She then pointed out that Christianity has "more difficulty than any of the other world religions in seeing God as female. "Look at the

enormous difficulty we had in the Church of England over the ordination of women priests. There are immense neuroses surrounding the notion of women representing God at the altar."

Frank Kelly, who, as a Catholic "felt cheated" by "a very surprising utterance from such a conservative Pope", said his image of God was coloured by his early education, which had implanted "medieval images" in his mind. But in the light of the Pope's statement he would now try and update his view of the Almighty.

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 305 9603 E-mail: iduke@compuserve.com

Response to attack

AS I have been slagged off twice in the last few months in the *Freethinker*, I'd like a chance to reply, if only in the interests of balance.

Resident fanatic Karl (Marx) Heath seems to be in almost every issue, and I can find nothing worthwhile in Bill McIlroy's letter (Nov/Dec, 1998, issue) that made it worth printing. Did you have a space to fill?

It was a shame to see Bill McIlroy, once proud left-wing editor of the *Freethinker* reduced to a childish insult against myself when his party (New/Old Labour) is busy wrecking the country.

In reply to Karl Heath's challenge (letters, September 1998) to list the works of Marx or Engels I have read, I assert that I don't have to read a load of dusty old books to see that Marxism/communism has wrecked every country which has practised it. Therefore it is trash.

MICHAEL HILL
Gillingham
Kent

Define your terms

WHEN embarking on discussion, first define your terms. Freethinkers often break this elementary rule of debate (You're telling us, *Freethinker*, August 1998). I myself have often found it unpalatable to be in a movement agreed upon freethought in matters of religion, but not agreed upon other issues of political or social importance. (These days I wonder whether it is me who is becoming more moderate in my old age, or freethinkers are becoming more bigoted.) However, given our small size, it is impractical to insist that freethought be explicitly socialist, or explicitly repudiate socialism.

Nigel Meek, and others, object to what they see as the socialist or left-wing bias of the *Freethinker*, either not defining socialism at all or defining it in a way which suits their argument. Keith Ackerman describes Eric Blair (aka George Orwell) as anti-socialist, and describes 1984 as "a thinly veiled attack on the 1945 Labour government". Nonsense, Comrade Ackermann; Orwell was anti-Leninist, and his work contained numerous attacks, veiled or open, on Leninism and Leninist societies - what Paul Bennett describes as collectivism. Without carrying

any brief for Orwell's dealings with British spymasters, I submit that those he shopped were either Leninists or too little aware of the dangers of Leninism. I should be very interested to read from Ackermann a cogent explanation of how socialism was actually implemented in Leninist societies. I concur with Paul Bennett's view that Leninist societies have nothing at all to do with socialism; it is not socialism that has failed, but Leninism.

Ackermann might find it useful to read R.N. Berki's *Socialism* (J.M. Dent & Sons, 1975) in order to clarify his thoughts.

Many freethinkers hesitate to apply to themselves the words "humanist" or "agnostic", seen as "moderate" labels. Nicolas Walter has done an excellent job in conducting a survey of the various uses of the word "humanism", but regrettably he has contributed to the confusion caused by the misuse of the word agnostic. He defines agnosticism as "the assumption that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, and that the universe is not only queerer than we think, but queerer than we can think". I claim that Nicolas is the only person who uses agnosticism in that way, and I call upon him to produce evidence that anyone else has used it so, or cogent argument that it is useful to change the meaning of the word.

The *Oxford Current English Dictionary* defines it as "one who believes that nothing can be known of the existence of God or of anything beyond material phenomena", an epistemological statement about what can or cannot be known. There is nothing "moderate" about agnosticism; it is not an assertion about our current state of knowledge, either personally or as a society. Agnostics are in fact atheists: knowing that evidence for the existence of God cannot exist, they apply Occam's Razor and disavow belief in God or heaven.

COLIN MILLS
Amersham
Bucks

Wrong in many respects

DANIEL O'Hara (Letters, November) is wrong in many respects and I am not going to regurgitate any of Keith Wood's response in that same issue. What concerns me however is Daniel O'Hara's condescension that "there is a time and a place for lawful protest" and, by implication, there can be neither time nor place for unlawful protest. The history of struggle

against bad laws is littered with flagrantly illegal actions and the Freethought movement has played a proud and significant role in many of those battles. One such has been the fight to maintain and advance what is nebulously called free speech and that is the issue which prompts my writing.

Our letters page is headlined "You're telling us" but in this instance it looks more like "we're telling you" - and at twice the length! Wrong as Daniel O'Hara may be, surely we can afford to have it stand in its own right to await responses from the rest of the readership. Keith Wood could then play his part in that democratic process without the privilege of instant response.

If one correspondent is to be dealt with in that way why not all? Therein rests the hazard of stifling that very debate in our pages which the editor so rightly describes as lively.

BARRY JOHNSON
Chesterfield

Don't use false analogies

In a letter (*Freethinker*, January 1999) entitled *Memories invoked of Fascist rallies* an anonymous writer* makes many admirable points concerning the Peter Tatchell affair. However, he commences his letter by making a comparison between what happened in Canterbury Cathedral and what happened at "Fascist rallies."

I should like to ask whether I am alone when I suggest that this comparison is not valid. In the one case an Archbishop is speaking to a homogeneous group of people (apart from the Tachell intruders) in a building known by the community for what it is so that a choice may be made as to whether one enters it or not. In the other case Oswald Mosely is standing on a platform in a public place "ranting" to a heterogeneous group of people of all races, religions and political allegiances some of whom, no doubt, being prevented from going about their lawful business in a public place. Whatever the rights or wrongs of the other arguments used in the Tachell debate, freethinkers who pride themselves on their rational approach should not use false analogies?

R E ISON
Farnham Royal

* The letter referred to was written by Keith Ackermann, whose name was accidentally omitted. We apologise to Mr Ackermann.



Gender has never been an issue

IF, AS Sue Lord felt (Letters, Nov/Dec 1998), the *Freethinker* is too "male orientated", why is this the case? There has never been a conspiracy to exclude women, but they cannot be compelled to write for the magazine.

Sue Lord's "feelings" about male orientation are rooted in a preconceived notion rather than on fact. Having been involved with the publication for many years, including three terms as editor, I maintain that acceptance of material for publication has never been conditional on the writer's gender.

In addition to Barbara Smoker's, outstanding contributions have been made to the *Freethinker* by Brigid Brophy, Margaret Knight, Sarah Lawson, Vera Lustig, Diane Munday, Dora Russell, Madeleine Simms and Barbara Wooton.

Another of Sue Lord's "feelings" is that the *Freethinker* is controlled by what seems "rather like a gentlemen's club". Does she seriously believe it is for the honour and glory (or because they have nothing better to do) that mere males voluntarily write, research, raise funds, endeavour to increase its circulation and otherwise actively support the paper?

The *Freethinker* needs commitment and constructive criticism, not carping, to carry it forward.

BILL McILROY
Sheffield.

Hate-mongering implication

KEITH Porteous Wood (*Freethinker*, September) is sorry the *Church Times* did not publish the last sentence of his letter, which read: "Christianity manages to attack itself very effectively indeed, without the need for hate-mongering from this society."

I am rather pleased they did not publish it, because though I agree with its substance I think it could be interpreted as implying that if Christianity did not manage to attack itself then there would be a need for hate-mongering from the NSS.

DAVID SIMPSON
Lusaka
Zambia.

Worth the candle?

A WELCOME announcement by Christian churches is the first practical act of millennial

celebration in this country. The magnanimous gift of a 30p candle to every household (even those of atheists) will help offset the trauma of any power cuts caused by computer bugs.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley
Kent.

Ours will be returned

WE HAVE just been listening to *Songs of Praise* (BBC1, Sunday, January 1999). We don't like religion but we do like music - sorry! With reference to the Prayer and candle we may receive for Dec 31, 1999 courtesy of the United Reformed Church *et al*, my suspicions have just been confirmed. When asked about it, a clergyman on the programme declared that the lit candle to be placed in the window would represent "the light of Jesus throughout the world" - you just can't trust them. We'll be sending ours back!

JOHN C WRIGHT
& **ELIZABETH M TROUSDALE**
Gloucester.

Same old political crap

AS A lifelong atheist - and I mean lifelong - but never a political agitator, I do not like my non-belief being paired with any far left fanaticism or, for that matter, far right extremism.

I am now 75 years old and have taken and read the *Freethinker* for many years, enjoying its anti-religious content but not its political bias.

Take for instance Karl Heath's wonderful series *Ask the Parson*. Although these are almost politically uncontaminated, his letter in the September issue trots out the same old political crap. You just cannot win.

I wonder if you realise how many subscribers and members you lose by making atheism concomitant with left-wing politics.

ROY A COBB
South Luffenham
Rutland.

Co-operate rather than compete

Sorry to disappoint Denis Watkins (Letters, August), but I was completely serious in advocating a moneyless, classless society.

My confidence that such a system will work is based not on any fundamentalist kind of faith, but on the view that it is more natural and

congenial for people to co-operate with each other rather than compete. Also, I believe that we do not need either the monetary system, which involves a colossal amount of waste, or a ruling class who exploit the rest of us.

Denis's "experience and common sense" is just his unconscious prejudice in favour of the present social set-up.

PAUL BENNETT

Capsicum miracle

ONE continually reads reports of images of Christ and other divinities in ordinary objects like dusters and tomatoes. I used to sneer at them until I had a similar inspiring experience eight years ago. A slice of a red pepper I was preparing for a salad fell on the floor. It was an exact replica of Samantha Fox's bum.

GRAHAM LYONS
York.

Gay primates

IF homosexuality is "unnatural" as E W Carr imagines (letters Nov/Dec), then is it not odd that homosexual behaviour is rampant amongst some of our closest animal relatives?

Some 20 varieties of primates exhibit it in the wild, the behaviour ranging from anal sex in rhesus macaques to the notoriously promiscuous bonobo, the females of which achieve more orgasms with other females than with males (the males in turn are enthusiastically bisexual).

As primate expert Paul Vasey, of Montreal University, remarked, "homosexual behaviour reflects a normal facet of the sexual repertoire of primates". Primates include humans.

Since Mr Carr appears to equate "unnatural" with "bad" perhaps he'd like to abandon the unnatural benefits of modern civilisation - from central heating to hi-tech medicine - and don animal skins and lead a natural life, grubbing about for roots and worms.

He could even indulge in such wholesome natural pursuits as rape, cannibalism and incest.

Finally, in view of the fact that, globally, most AIDS is heterosexually transmitted, it would appear that the lifestyle the heterosexuals have chosen is also promiscuous and insatiable.

STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington
Cheshire

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, March 7, 4 pm. Public meeting.

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. Thursday, February 18, 8 pm. Public meeting.

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.

East Kent Humanists (formerly 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. Tuesday March 9, 7.30 pm. Granville Williams: *Freedom of*

Information v Privacy.

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, February 25, 8pm. Tony Milne: *Is the Universe Too Intelligent?*

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, March 3, 8 pm. Mike Granville: *From Religion to Rationalism*. Information: 01226 743070 or 0114 2509127.

South Place Ethical Society: Weekly talks/meetings/concerts, Sundays 11am & 3 pm at Conway Hall Library, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0171 242 8037/4. Monthly programme on request.

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, 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.