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Religion, Humanism and Humour, *page 12*

Also in this issue:

Novelist Iain Banks becomes NSS Honorary Associate, *p3*

God gets a bashing at the Oxford Union debate, *p4*

Morals without Religion, *centre pages*

She was roughly the size of Tyson, and as she bore down on me I realised she was very angry.

"Do you know what those things do to you you?!" she bellowed in a deep southern US accent, jabbing a finger the size of a bockwurst at the cigarette drooping from the corner of my mouth.

I was so startled, I could not immediately think of a retort. When one did come to mind, it was too late to fire it at her. But, given that it was of a cruelly fatist nature, I am rather pleased I did not utter it. This particular member of the health gestapo could, with one blow, have laid me out cold.

The incident came to mind a week or so back during a *Radio 4* phone-in programme on the subject of longevity. Apparently some American scientists have claimed that reaching the age of 130 will soon be a possibility for millions of people, and Mr and Ms Great Britain were asked to call in and comment on whether they thought this was a good

or bad thing. A large number thought it was an excellent idea, and one young man from Oxford declared – *in all seriousness* – his intention to live to the age of 160!

A regime of exercise coupled with a multiplicity of vitamin supplements – and, I assume, a complete moratorium on fags, booze, drugs, sex and rock and roll – would help him attain his goal.

This obsession with longevity, I reckon, is the downside of rationalism's winning struggle against superstition: the growing realisation that, for better or worse, this is the only life we will ever experience has created in some people a desperate desire to hang on forever (or as near as dammit) to this mortal perch – whatever the costs.

And those costs are high. Already the so-called developed world is seeing a burgeoning number of elderly people whose continued existence is coming more and more to depend on taxation levied on a dwindling number of full-time workers.

We also know that many in employment either do not have private pension funds, or if they do, they are not salting enough away to provide for a period of retirement which, if the American scientists are correct, could span more than half a century.

Personally, I have no quarrel with anyone who wants to cling onto life for as long as possible; indeed, I like to think that I am actively helping them achieve their goal: by continuing to smoke and indulge in good whiskey and wine.

My reasoning is simple. Huge quantities of dosh are necessary to support the NHS and the social services' efforts to take care of the elderly. Cigarettes and booze are highly taxed. Ergo people should not be discouraged from using them. Legalise and tax cannabis and other drugs, and billions more will go into the coffers to take proper care of the devoutly abstemious in their dotage.

Despite the fact that it has no genitals, and is therefore asexual, that weird little critter known as Tinky Winky – one of an absurd quartet of gaily coloured children's TV characters collectively known as the Teletubbies – has been "outed" as being "homosexual" by the equally absurd (but nowhere near as cuddly) *National Liberty Journal*.

The mouthpiece of Liberty University in Lynchburg, USA (see *Down to Earth*, page 6), the journal's February issue carried an article which noted that Tinky Winky has the voice of a boy but carries a handbag.

"He is purple – the gay pride colour; and his antenna is shaped like a triangle – the gay pride symbol," the article said.

The British press – in a welcome departure from what had become a daily diet of genetically-modified food scare stories – went to town on the revelation, the source of which was identified as the Rev Jerry Falwell, founder of the now-defunct Moral Majority.

The *Sun*, in particular, had a field day. Under



Sweet ... Tinky Winky with his magic bag

the heading *Pinky and Pervy*, journalist Ally Ross declared: "You can find gays in any children's TV show ... if you look hard enough." The writer then proceeded to identify various "suspect" characters ranging from Bill and Ben to Andy Pandy – "Andy Pansy, more like," she declared.

It subsequently emerged that Falwell did not write the article; indeed, hadn't even read it until the controversy broke. But he did issue a statement supporting it. "As a Christian," he burred, "I feel that role modelling a gay lifestyle is damaging to the moral lives of our children."



And Sour ... Jerry Falwell

The company that licenses the Teletubbies in the US came out fighting. Tinky Winky's handbag (or "purse" as the Americans would have it) was in fact a "magic bag", said Steve Rice, a spokesman for the Itsy Bitsy Entertainment company. He added that Falwell was attacking "something sweet and innocent" to further his conservative political agenda.

"To 'out' a Teletubby in a preschool show is kind of sad on his part. I really find it absurd and offensive."

The first time I caught sight of the Teletubbies on TV, I was overcome by the urge to bring a fist down hard on each of their silly little heads. I'm now fighting the desire to place a half-brick in my "magic bag" and to hit Falwell in the teeth with it.

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Iain Banks

Top novelist becomes an NSS Honorary Associate

LEADING Scottish writer Iain Banks has responded positively to an invitation by the National Secular Society to become an Honorary Associate.

Banks, whose novels include *Whit* and *The Crow Road* (which was dramatised on BBC TV, and is now available on video), said in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* in 1996:

"I want to proselytise about the badness of religion, and to say that faith is wrong, belief without reason and question is just evil.

"Within the next two or three generations everything will be explicable in scientific terms. What's left for mysticism or religion?"

Born in Dunfermline, Iain Banks studied English at Stirling University and had a variety of jobs before moving to London in 1979. During his time there he came to public notice with his first published novel – *The Wasp Factory*, released in 1984 – and has gone on to become one of the most popular and acclaimed novelists in Scotland, to which he returned in 1988.

From his base in Fife, he writes fiction under the name of Iain Banks, and science fiction under Iain M Banks (he reveals that the M stands for Menzies – "pronounced Ming-iss by those wishing to be excruciatingly correct").

NSS has its say in Heaven and Earth

NSS SECRETARY Keith Porteous Wood was interviewed on the BBC1 religious magazine programme *Heaven and Earth*. He described the Society's objectives, some recent campaigns and voiced the Society's opposition to bishops sitting in the House of Lords and to the blasphemy law.

Also on the panel was evangelist Michael Ramsden, European Director of the Zacharias Trust, and Philip Davies, Professor of Biblical Studies at The University of Sheffield. Keith reconciled himself to being, as usual on such programmes, in the minority. Not so. Philip Davies caused quite a stir on the programme by coming out as a "born-again atheist" despite (or should that be because of?) his decades of Biblical scholarship.

BHA Vice-President (and NSS member) Jane Wynne Willson was interviewed on the same programme about her work on humanist ceremonies and her recent book on this subject. Jane described herself on the programme as "a third generation non-believer ... and I think my grand children will be non-believers too."

There was a telephone poll during the programme about whether or not viewers believed in God. Around 20,000 calls were received, a record for the programme. The result was that 85 per cent of callers said they believed in God and 15 per cent did not. Disappointing, perhaps, but given that this is a religious programme aimed at a religious audience, quite a creditable result.

Separate prayer area

THERE is to be a dedicated prayer area for Muslims outside the Millennium Dome in Greenwich.

A decision to set aside a special area for obligatory prayers (*salat*) was made following a meeting between Muslim representatives in the Lambeth Consultative Group, which deals specifically with the Spirit Zone, and the New Millennium Exhibition Company.

A separate outside area is deemed necessary because Muslims are forbidden to perform the *salat* in a place funded by lottery money. Furthermore, a Muslim representative argued, Muslims cannot pray in the same area as other religions.

**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**

US Baptist leader on trial for racketeering and grand theft

ONE OF the most powerful religious leaders in the United States, Reverend Henry Lyons, president of the National Baptist Convention, has been put on trial charged with racketeering and grand theft involving the defrauding of an insurance company and a firm of undertakers of several million dollars, as well as the siphoning of large donations.

Lyons has said he welcomes the trial as an opportunity to clear his name. He denies the charges, as does his co-defendant (who is also, apparently, his mistress). She is reported to be a "convicted embezzler with four bankruptcies and six aliases to her name".

Two other alleged mistresses are expected to be witnesses at the trial. Also at the trial is Mrs Lyons, who is reputed to have attempted to burn down the luxury waterside home Lyons had bought with his mistress. Mrs Lyons is reported to have said she "was drunk at the time".

— Report by Keith Porteous Wood
(Source: the *Guardian*)



**IN 1811, at the age of eighteen,
the poet Shelley was sent down
from Oxford for publishing –
anonymously – his pamphlet
The Necessity of Atheism.*
Oxford still predominantly
supports the deity,
but things have
changed a bit.**

THIS HOUSE No Longer Believes In God was the provocative motion debated at the Oxford Union on February 11. Oxford scientist Prof Peter Atkins and the NSS President, Denis Cobell, were invited to speak for the motion. Opposing were the Bishop of Oxford (Dr Richard Harries) and Father Albert Jones, the Sub-Prior of Blackfriars.

With all seats taken, students were sitting in passageways and on window sills – some even had to stand throughout the debate. The proceedings were lent a little theatre by the chamber's House of Commons style layout: opposing front benches, speakers standing at dispatch boxes presided over by clerks and a raised speaker's chair in which sat the Union's President.

Opening for the heathens, as he called us, Shaun Joynton of Ruskin described belief in God as outdated, invalid, eccentric and against the interests of mankind. He commended the National Secular Society's objects, which he listed. A speaker from the floor interjected that a study of theology was a study of nothing and that there is no evidence of a systematic creator at work.

Azeem Suterwalla, a St Anne's student and a Muslim, opened for the opposition. He described Professor Atkins as the most successful science professor in Oxford and stated that one of his books had been the second most popular book published by the University's Press, adding - to much amusement - that the most popular had been the Bible. Suterwalla opined that science cannot answer the big questions like the purpose of mankind, how are we here, who created the Universe and what happens to us after death. He maintained that even professed non-believers pray to God in time of trouble. Absence of proof, he said, is not proof of absence.

Denis Cobell opened by referring to a 1948 debate on The Existence of God between

**Report by Keith
Porteous Wood, NSS
General Secretary, and
Denis Cobell, the
Society's President**

Bertrand Russell and Father F C Coplestone, S J; they agreed to define God as "a supreme personal being – distinct from the world and creator of the world". Russell rejected the arguments in favour: first cause, natural law, design and from morality. Denis went on to quote Charles Bradlaugh, the Society's founder: "The atheist does not say 'there is no God' – but says I know not what you mean by God". Denis continued from Richard Robinson's *An Atheist's Values*: "All the evidence and argument offered for the existence of a god is injudicious, insofar as we mean by a 'god' a superhuman person, and do not use the word as a mere question mark to indicate an unknown something or other." He noted that Father Copleston had conceded that he "did not regard religious experience as a strict proof of the existence of God". Denis added that the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Runcie, recently wrote "In the end, belief about God can never be a matter for rational argument".

Exclusions

Denis concluded by listing some exclusions endured by those refusing to acknowledge God: being an unelected peer (the bishops may well be sole examples after the reform of the House of Lords); being able to have a legal humanist marriage ceremony with a celebrant of your choice; or being a speaker on *Thought for the Day*.

Father Jones played down the significance of Darwin's contribution, suggesting it "hadn't made much difference". He derided what he saw as the paucity of atheists' "beliefs": their simply believing that existence "just 'is'".

James Williams of St John's College asserted that God is a human creation and that religion relies on so-called revealed truth. He listed church privileges, including the bishops in the House of Lords, the blasphemy law, the funding of church schools and funding of the Church of England out of taxpayers' money. Bishop Harries (who sits on the Bishop's bench) robustly denied the last point.

James Williams criticised church errors, like their former insistence that the sun goes round

the earth. Student Dom Hughes of Jesus College challenged the relevance of this point by asking why the church errors cited by James negate the existence of God.

Asserting that 65 per cent of people believe in God, student Dom Hughes proceeded to characterise the atheist position as "the rest of the world is mad and I'm not". Dom did not consider that science had disproved the existence of God – a courageous point, given it was made to Professor Atkins who was, perhaps, about to examine Dom's doctoral thesis. He clearly believed in what he described as "sacred texts" and drew applause when he argued that the existence of religious privilege is not an argument against the existence of God. He emotively concluded that 100 per cent proof wasn't necessary for a belief in God because the stakes were too high. Indeed, several opponents had contended that because so many people believe in God, the onus of proof should lie with the non-believers to disprove the majority position.

Professor Atkins suggested that in primitive societies the purpose of sacrifice and prayer was to deflect fear, that it was an evil but understandable lie that understanding would be found in the afterlife. Many have been trapped into belief by responding to the cultural conditioning stemming from religion's taking over literature, art and music, with churches discovering and exerting the power of patronage. He added that in many respects we are still a primitive society.

"The faith of science can be tested on this side of the grave" he postulated, "unlike that of religion, which passeth all understanding". He expressed confidence that love, music, art – even bestial behaviour in places like Belsen – would become capable of explanation in terms of genetics, physics, and psychology.

In contrast to opponents in the debate who had favoured non-literalist approaches to the Bible, Professor Atkins reminded us that in primitive societies the Bible had been held to be unchangeable.

He concluded by observing that it was easy to see why people believed in God; religion asserted that human brains were too puny to reach understanding. Rationalists, he contrasted, respected the power of intellect, and anticipated achieving full comprehension.

The Bishop of Oxford gave several quotes including St John of Damascus: "It is plain there is a God, but he is incomprehensible and unknowable." Bishop Harries conceded that there are "enough good arguments against God" and admitted difficulty with the problem

(Continued on next page)

It's been a long time since a TV documentary grabbed my attention quite so fiercely as *Murder in Purdah* did last month. It was broadcast as part of BBC2's *Correspondent* series, and another, more detailed, version went out on Radio 4 as *From our Own Correspondent*. The reporter, Olenka Freinkel, visited Pakistan, to investigate reports of an increase in so-called honour killings.

"Men and women," said the leader of Pakistan's Islamic fundamentalist party, "must be kept apart - or society will descend into chaos. Women must stay at home and must cover their bodies so as not to excite uncontrollable passions." This, he maintained, was purdah, "and purdah makes women free."

Ms Freinkel said: "Under the guise of this apparent protection, I'd found women incarcerated, tortured and murdered in numbers so alarming that if it were happening to a racial minority the world would see it as a violation of human rights. Because it's women, it's judged cultural; and because it's Islam, it's sensitive."

Pitiful sights of young girls who had been burned and disfigured by their husbands and families provoked horror in the viewer, and

then fury that no one in authority appeared to take these crimes seriously. One poor child was shown writhing in agony in a hospital bed after her husband had poured acid over her while she was tied up and defenceless. She died the following day.

Olenka Freinkel said: "I always knew this

Human Rights Must Prevail Over Religious Cruelty

would be a difficult story to tell. And that I, as a white woman, would be vulnerable to charges of racism, paternalism or cultural imperialism. My first day in the country confirmed what Pakistan's Human Rights Commission has warned repeatedly: repressive interpretations of Islam now pose a threat to the country's women."

Ms Freinkel found that the perpetrators of these murders are rarely punished. If they go to jail at all, they can bribe their way out quite easily.

There is now a growing clamour in Pakistan for more, not less, Islamic law. Freinkel reported that thousands of women had been bussed in to a rally of Islamic fundamentalists in Islamabad to scream that they wanted to see sharia law introduced. She couldn't make up her mind whether these women really thought that such a development would benefit them and that purdah really makes them free. "I realised that, although we don't think of Islamic fundamentalism this way, this is the closest my generation has seen to living fascism."

The following week on the Channel 4 *Right to Reply* programme, the apologists for Islam were there in force. They claimed that Freinkel had been unfair in her representation of Islam. She had gone out into the deepest countryside where everyone but the Imam is illiterate. How could these people say that they were killing women because the Koran told them to - they couldn't even read it.

Meanwhile, the *Independent* reproduced a lecture given at London's Liberal Jewish Synagogue by Akbar Ahmed, a fellow of Selwyn College. In it he claimed that Islam is a religion of "tolerance and compassion". He said that where there was "Islamophobia" - fear and hatred of Muslims - there was, inevitably, anti-Semitism trailing in its wake. He cited the Balkans as proof of this. He said that Muslims should not be anti-Jewish, but at the same time couldn't help taking a pop at the Israeli Jews and their persecution of the Arabs in Palestine. By the time I

had read to the end of the speech I was livid at its sophistry. The Muslims and the Jews are committing atrocities against each other throughout the Middle East. I am all for peace initiatives, but for them to try to convince us that they are best friends is self-delusion, bordering on outright lying.

Over in the *Observer*, Andrew Marr was also making the case for not demonising Islam. "Radical, or militant, Islam in particular, really is a threat to Western liberalism. But the danger isn't the obvious one, it isn't military or cultural. The real threat is that Islamophobia can rob Western liberalism of its best self. It has been a long struggle to become wiser, freer, less easily frightened people. Bogeymen have always been the easiest lure back to simple-mindedness, from the monkey-Frenchman to the shaven-pated Hun to the Communist Jew. Now we're back there again, from slovenly tabloid hacks to Hollywood producers seeking all-purpose post-Communist baddies."

Marr says that although radical Islam is growing, the Muslim world is as divided as the West is, and its history is just as complex. The truth is, he said, that Islam provides the poor of the world with a rallying point against globalism. The Western religions are in retreat because the West is rich. Islam is on the increase because it provides hope for the poor. Marr says that poverty breeds extremism, but "the one thing we can't afford to fall into is the idea that we are fated to fight Islam, that our civilisations will soon be at war."

This does not solve the problem of the ghastly abuses that are committed in the name of Islam, and which are growing. In the following week's issue of the *Observer*, Carol Sarler replied at length to Andrew Marr. She told of her personal experience of three little girls "linked by nothing save their father's faith and the fact that I knew them". The first was 15 when her parents announced that she was being prepared for marriage to a much older man whom she had never met. Despite pleas from her daughter to hide the girl, Carol Sarler did nothing and the youngster hasn't been seen since. Another girl, a 16-year-old neighbour, was also married off to a stranger and made to stay at home, isolated. She hanged herself. Another, aged 14, was beaten into submission when she tried to make a break for freedom.

Sarler takes Andrew Marr to task over his warning that we must not fear Islam and become intolerant of it. "Fair enough," she writes, "save when, as here, this uplifting cry implicitly insists that we must tolerate the intolerable." She berates Marr for trying to

(Continued on page 14)

(Continued from previous page)

of evil and human suffering. His strongest argument seemed to be "Why have so many scientists in history believed in God?" and claiming that "religion has always been respectful to science". Time ran out before this astonishing assertion could effectively be challenged.

The proposition was lost by 202 votes to 478. The proportion of votes cast for atheists - at around thirty percent - was marginally higher than the last such Oxbridge debate in which the NSS was involved. However, in our opinion, it is unlikely that the proportion of non-believers at Oxbridge is as low as the debate results suggest; believers are more likely to turn out to defend their cause than non-believers theirs.

The previous debate referred to was at Cambridge (March 1997 *Freethinker*) and the motion was slightly more challenging: *This House believes the history of the Twentieth Century disproves the existence of a loving and personal God. The Cambridge audience was only a quarter or a fifth the number at Oxford.*

**The Necessity of Atheism* was recently reprinted as a *Freethinker Classic* by G W Foote & Co, £1.50 inclusive of postage.)

A right relationship

LIBERTY University, in Lynchburg, Virginia (Lynchburg, there's a name for you!) was founded by the American television evangelist Jerry Falwell, who is its chancellor. Not surprisingly it is "a proudly conservative Christian institution", where dancing, alcohol, tobacco and pre-marital sex are all forbidden to students, and the cheerleaders are required to wear knee-length skirts. Indeed, it is even to the right of the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, with which it has a close relationship. So close, that when Netanyahu visited Washington last January, he met Falwell privately a day before the Israeli leader was scheduled to meet Bill Clinton (*Guardian*, January 5).

Netanyahu's interests in the relationship are purely political. He is grateful for the American religious right's lobbying of the US Congress against Israel handing over West Bank territory to the Palestinians. Falwell's concern is religious. The security of Israel is essential at the Second Coming, when Christ will set up his kingdom in Jerusalem; and Netanyahu has invited Liberty University students to visit Israel, "not only to learn biblical history, but to see, touch, and live it". He could "think of no better way to start a college education than to expand one's view of the world through studies in our ancient homeland".

So Falwell is leading 3,000 students to the Holy Land this year, one of whom, "echoing the comments of others", told *Guardian* reporter David Cohen: "I'm not really going there to think about politics. It's just being where Jesus was that means the most. I know that this trip will change my life". But how? It can hardly make her more religious. Perhaps she will come back calling herself a "born-again Christian".

Sophisticated cheating

IN A discussion on BBC Radio 4, following the publication of Ludovic Kennedy's recent criticism of Christianity, *All in the Mind: a farewell to God* (See Terry Sanderson's review on page 10), a bishop told the author that he was treating the religion too simplistically. The same argument was used by the Rev Dr Michael Fuller of the Church of St John the Evangelist, Edinburgh, in a letter to the *Observer* (January 24).

"Those of us who choose to think about our faith and possibly give more sophisticated interpretations to traditional dogmas are dismissed as 'woolly', as somehow diluting the faith or as otherwise cheating," wrote Dr Fuller. It would be intriguing to see how

sophisticatedly Dr Fuller interprets the death and resurrection to his congregation next month.

Worst of kin

I HAVE not seen the controversial film *Hilary and Jackie*, based on the book *A Genius in the Family*, by the sister and brother of Jacqueline du Pré, and so cannot comment on it. What has been revealed by Jacqueline's friends the guitarist John Williams and Cynthia Friend, is that Hilary and her brother Piers "endlessly" told their cellist sister that the multiple sclerosis that tragically struck her was "God's punishment for leaving Christ" and converting to Judaism when she married pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim (*Observer*, January 24).

Just because I don't share a religion doesn't mean I am intolerant of it. I don't have a problem with someone carrying a cross on their shoulder at Easter. But if that someone says that MS is God's punishment, well that summons up a certain kind of picture in my mind. I find it creepy. Very creepy. Or as Cynthia Friend commented, "It's a bit sick really." It certainly is; sick and cruel in the extreme: two adjectives that go a long way to describing religious fundamentalism.

The rape that wasn't

I WAS raped by a ghost ran the headline in the *Daily Mail* (January 16), although I'm not sure that Josie Smith said exactly that, when she and her husband alleged at Derby Crown Court that the Lowes Cottage on the Derbyshire-Staffordshire border they had bought from two sisters was haunted.

But she did suggest that rape was the ghost's intention. "I felt the quilt being lifted up and my nightdress moving up my legs. It only stopped when I shouted 'No!'"

Other spooky things happened, and then a medium told the Smiths that the house was haunted by a young housemaid who had been sexually assaulted and murdered there in the 19th century. And in case you are wondering why a female ghost should want to lift Mrs Smith's nightie, the medium "explained" that the ghost "was just showing how she had died".

Judge exorcises haunted home and *Spirit of the law* were headings in the *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph* respectively on January 19, reporting that Judge Peter Stretton had rubbished the spectral stories. He was particularly hard on the Rev Peter Mockford, vicar of Blurton, Staffordshire, who had given evidence that "on balance there was paranormal activity at Lowes Cottage". The judge said the

vicar had failed to detect Mrs Smith's psychological problems and their link to the house, and had taken the couple's story on trust "after a half-hour conversation – hardly a rigorous examination".

Let's hope that the judge's ruling has brought Andrew and Josie Smith "down to earth".

A sensitive area

"I KILLED my daughter. She went off with a man, so I killed them both." So said a man who, with his son, was being taken into a police station in Lahore, Pakistan. He had told his son to shoot his 15-year-old sister, and the son was "proud" to do it; he was "ashamed that she dishonoured us".

Such "honour killings" occur all over Pakistan, in the countryside and in the cities, according to the journalist Olenka Frenkiel (*BBC Radio 4*, January 23); and the killers rarely go to jail, "and when they do they can bribe their way out".

And lest we forget, there are Islamic fathers in this country who force their daughters into conformity. Carol Sarler wrote movingly about three Muslim girls she knew: one who left school at 15 to prepare for her marriage to a strange and older man; another, aged 14, who was beaten by her father "to knock the Western stuffing out of her"; and a third who wasn't allowed to mix with other girls and hanged herself.

An insult to Morris

Like most of us, Alun Howkins, professor of social history at Sussex University, has never been able to reconcile the Prime Minister's professed admiration for Robert Owen and William Morris.

More likely inspirations, Professor Howkins suggested, would be the Methodist preacher John Wesley and 20th century Labour politicians Herbert Morrison and Hugh Gaitskell (*Guardian*, January 22nd). And, I would add, ultra-Conservative Margaret Thatcher. To invoke William Morris, the revolutionary socialist, is particularly insulting. Tony Blair couldn't hold a candle to him.

But let me end on a lighter note. May Morris recounted how, after her father had given a lecture on socialism at Leicester, a clergyman, the Rev J Page Hopps, remarked "That's an impossible dream of yours Mr Morris; such a Society would need God Almighty Himself to manage it."

Morris got up and, shaking his fist to emphasise his words, said "Well, damn it, man, you catch your God Almighty – we'll have Him".

Is Carey cracking up?

TWO SUNDAY newspapers raised the issue of the All England Primate's health with the headlines *Carey close to breaking point, says ex-aide* and *Church wars leave Carey 'emotionally exhausted'*. The claims were hotly disputed the next day both by Church House and an article in *The Times*. But A N Wilson responded in that night's *Evening Standard*. Seemingly indifferent to Dr. Carey's health, Wilson described Carey as "an untried buffoon whose reign at Lambeth Palace has seen the national church sink to depths of confusion and unpopularity unknown in its history". (This leads me to wonder whether, in fact, we should be doing all we can to persuade him to stay as long as possible). Wilson even suggested (presumably in jest, I can think of no other justification) that Anne Widdecombe would make a good successor. Failing her (I know not whether in jest or not) he suggested the Archbishop of York, who, Wilson says, is known in High Church circles as "Ena the Cruel".

Condom controversy

COINCIDENTALLY, the National Secular Society has just crossed swords with Ena, er, Dr Hope himself, over the sale of condoms at the Millennium Dome. According to the *Sunday Telegraph*, Ena finds the sale of condoms in the Dome "highly offensive and entirely inappropriate for an enterprise such as the Dome, which is trying to encourage families." (I cannot resist the cheap crack that, if nothing else, it will certainly encourage *larger* families). Curiously, the Dome's operators will only be selling condoms from kiosks, not lavatories (from which many more would be sold), and so far have refused to say why.

Given that the Dome will be the scene of one of

Reform of the House of Lords

The NSS has just established that, contrary to press reports, the Royal Commission on the Future of the House of Lords WILL accept evidence concerning the Bench of Bishops in the new Second Chamber. The NSS will therefore be making a formal submission, and has already commissioned academic research on the comparative situation in other countries which will be used as part of the submission.

Would any reader with specialist knowledge which she/he believes might be of assistance in compiling the submission please contact the NSS General Secretary as soon as possible on 0171-404 3126 (telephone, answer machine and fax).

the largest parties ever seen in this country and parties are notorious for provoking sexual liaisons, I have written to the Dome operators' Chief Executive about this decision and its effects. "If the motivation for the decision that has been made is religious, I would point out that the Millennium Dome is not a church and the amount of church money being spent on it is almost insignificant. Whatever the reason for the decision which your press office confirms has been made, I urge you to reverse it on public health grounds. Public health must come first and, whatever narrow-minded religious pressure is exerted on your company, you should ensure that condoms are made available in lavatories in the Dome, not only on the big night, but afterwards." (The baby dome will even be a rock concert venue.)

I concluded by cataloguing the churches' appalling record on contraception, which the Society had been fighting for much of its existence.

Disestablishment – Crown Commissioner's view

THE FOLLOWING extract from 25 January's *Hansard* suggests that little will happen in this direction for some time, despite the dire warnings of the results of inaction on the Church's behalf.

Mr Corbyn: Many people in this country think that it is wrong to have an established Church and that it would be helpful if England followed the example of Scotland and Wales and disestablished its Church, recognising that we are a multicultural, multi-faith society and that no religion or Church should be given pre-eminence over others. Would it not be prudent for the Church Commissioners to do their sums now so that when that democratic day dawns, it will not be such a shock for them?

Mr Bell (representing the Church Commissioners): I have always looked on my hon. Friend as a traditionalist rather than a moderniser and I am sure that he agrees that it is incumbent on the Church to modernise itself. We may quote the Bible from time to time, and the Bible tells us, "Physician, heal thyself." The Church of England has, through its parliament, passed a national institutions measure that created an Archbishops' Council. That council met on 21 January against a background of fresh figures showing a 10 per cent rise in new ordinands in the previous year. The Church does not need to be disestablished to be modern and vibrant and to play a full role in the nation's affairs. My hon. Friend said that this is a multi-faith, multicultural society, and that point is accepted not only by the Church of England but by the multiple faiths to which he refers.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many people think that the greatest feature of the established Church is that its services and ministrations are available to everybody, regardless of his or her belief, even the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr Corbyn) and

his constituents? Will the hon. Gentleman assure the House that he and those in the hierarchy of the Church of England are not at all attracted by the idea of disestablishment?

Mr Bell: I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that it is not the intention of the Church of England, through the General Synod or other means, to initiate proceedings to bring about a disestablished Church. I have it in writing from the Prime Minister – I have often referred to this correspondence – that it is not the Government's intention to take the Church in that direction. For the hon. Gentleman's benefit, I add that discussions have taken place at the request of Churches in England about establishment in the context of the search for visible unity among the Churches, but by no means all those present were pressing for loosening the Church of England's ties with the Crown and state. We do not for a moment believe that the established Church is outmoded in the multicultural, multi-faith Britain to which I have referred.

Mr Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I urge the hon. Gentleman to be less conservative. There is no better time to think of disestablishing the Church than when we are devolving power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and considering the reform of the second Chamber. Even if the Church is not yet persuaded of the merits of disestablishment, will the hon. Gentleman ask the Church Commissioners at least to give us the information to allow the House to debate whether disestablishment would be good not only for the Church, as I believe it would, but for people of all faiths and of none throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr Bell: That may be a party political broadcast for a future leader of the Liberal party. It is interesting that the Liberal Democrats feel that disestablishment is in our interests. In a future joint Labour-Liberal manifesto, those who believe in an established Church will have to take that into account. Whether we have a debate on the subject is a matter for the usual channels. I invite the hon. Gentleman to take that route, and would be very happy to participate in such a debate.

It's been another of those months

IT HAS been yet another of "those months" for the Church, world-wide. Our ecclesiastical grand tour starts in Scotland.

Roddy Wright was a senior member of the Scottish Cardinal Winning's flock as Bishop of Argyll and the Isles.

It now transpires that he has married divorcee Kathleen MacPhee, with whom he ran off two and a half years ago.

Also at the wedding on the Caribbean island of Antigua in June last year were two of Mrs MacPhee's children, but not Roddy Wright's teenage son, the son he neither saw nor supported for years.

(Continued on page 11)

Morals witho

Following the broadcast of the first of her two BBC talks in the 1950s, *Morals Without Religion*, Margaret Knight was attacked by most British newspapers. The now-defunct *Sunday Graphic* concluded a front-page rant headed *The Unholy Mrs Knight*: "Let's have no more of her twaddle. She's due to dish up a second basinful on Wednesday. The BBC should pour it down the sink." Here is the talk the paper wanted the BBC to scrap.

In my last talk, I suggested that orthodox Christianity is no longer intellectually tenable, and that Scientific Humanism provides the best answer to our need for a constructive attitude to life and for a code of conduct. I want here to deal with two questions that are of considerable practical importance to humanist parents: namely, what they tell their children about God; and what sort of moral training shall they give them?

We must, I am sure, tell children something about God; we cannot just by-pass the problem by not mentioning it. And for young children I would suggest, tentatively, something of this sort. We can tell them that everyone believed at one time, and some people believe now, that there are two great powers in the world: a good power, called God, who made the world, and who loves human beings and who wants them to love one another, and to be happy and good; and a bad power called the Devil, who is opposed to God and who wants people to be unhappy and bad. We can tell them that some people still believe this, but that most people now think there is not really a Devil - the Devil is something like the ogres and witches in the fairy-tales. And we can tell them that some people now do not think there is really a God, any more than there is really a Santa Claus - though we often like to talk as though there were. Then when the child asks what we believe, as he certainly will, we can say that we do not think there is really a God, but that many people think otherwise and that he can make up his own mind when he is older.

But what about Christ? May I say at once that I do not think it would be desirable - even if it were possible under the present Education Act - for children to grow up in ignorance of the New Testament. We do not want a generation who do not know what Christmas and Easter mean; who have never heard of the star of Bethlehem or the angel at the door of the tomb. These are part of the fabric of our culture; they are woven

into our literature and art and architecture; the child should hear them. All I urge is that he should hear them treated frankly as legends.

May I say, in parenthesis, that it is a mistake to think that unbelievers are all insensitive Philistines with no appreciation of beauty, no respect for tradition, no capacity for wonder and reverence, who would like nothing better than to pull down the cathedral at Chartres and erect a public wash-house on the site. I do not want to pull down Chartres, any more than I want to pull down the Parthenon; but I should like to see them treated rather more on a level. One can feel awe, and wonder, and reverence before the Parthenon without believing in the Greek goddess Athene to whose worship it was dedicated; and one can have similar emotions at Chartres without believing in the God of Israel.

So, I suggest, let children read and listen to New Testament stories in the same way as they read and listen to the stories of Greek mythology. And when they ask if the stories are true, they can be told that they are a mixture of fact and legend. There was a real Trojan war, and Hector and Achilles may well have been real people; but we do not now believe that Achilles was the son of a sea nymph, and that he was invulnerable because he had been dipped in the Styx. Similarly, there was a real Jesus Christ who preached to the Jews and was crucified; but we do not now believe that he was the son of God and of a virgin, or that he rose from the dead. Later, the child can hear more about Christ as one of the world's great moral teachers; but that leads to my second point - the question of humanist character-training.

To begin with a little psychology: at different times, very different views have been held about the nature of man. At one extreme was the view held by the philosopher Hobbes, that man is essentially selfish. On this view, all behaviour is self-interested - if we help our neighbour, it is just because we think it may induce him to help us later on. At the other extreme is the view, of which Rousseau was the chief exponent, that man is naturally unselfish and co-operative, and that if he behaves otherwise it can only be because his natural development has been interfered with. 'Man', said Rousseau, 'is naturally good. Only

by institutions is he made bad.'

Neither of these extreme views is correct; the truth lies between them. To start with a good resounding platitude, human nature is very mixed. It is natural for us to be to a large extent self-centred, and to be hostile and aggressive towards people who obstruct us in getting what we want; and it is also natural for us to co-operate with other people, and to feel affection and sympathy for them. In more technical terms, we have both ego-instincts and social instincts - which may pull us in different ways. It is arguable that civilisation depends largely on widening the scope of the social impulses. Primitive man is co-operative with-

"Warm-hearted and generous natures are developed, not primarily by training and discipline, important though these are in other ways, but by love"

in the family or tribe, and tends to treat everyone outside it as an enemy; the most civilised man may feel a certain sense of kinship with the whole human race.

I cannot pursue this further here.

But one thing is surely clear. In community life, and especially in the sort of highly organised community life that we lead today, it is desirable that the social impulses shall be well developed and the ego-impulses kept to some extent under control. Morality - moral codes - on the humanist view can best be regarded as an organised attempt to reinforce the social impulses. There is one principle which is common to all moral codes, in all types of society however different they may be; one moral axiom which is accepted by everyone, from a head-hunter in Borneo to a Jesuit priest; and that is: 'We must not be completely selfish; we must be prepared, at times and within limits, to put our own interests second to those of our family, or our friends, or of the group or community to which we belong.'

This does not mean that we must always be making sacrifices: we have a duty to ourselves as well as to others. But the essence of humanist morality is disinterestedness - not letting our own claims and interests blind us to other people's: the ideal so nobly exemplified in the famous story of Sir Philip Sidney at Zutphen;

out religion II

when, mortally wounded and parched with thirst, he handed the cup of water that had been brought him to a still more desperately wounded man, saying: "Friend, thy need is greater than mine". Disinterested behaviour can spring from various motives. One man may be disinterested on principle, after a certain amount of moral struggle; another may be disinterested because he is a naturally warm-hearted and generous person, who enjoys seeing others happy. Both types are admirable, but most of us would agree that it is the second that we admire more; it is the second that we should like our children to resemble if possible. So when we come to the practical question of child upbringing, perhaps the most important question to ask is this: "Is it in any way possible, by our methods of upbringing, to increase the chance that the child will grow up a warm-hearted and generous person?"

That is a question which can receive a refreshingly definite answer: and the gist of the answer can be conveyed in one word - "love". Warm-hearted and generous natures are developed, not primarily by training and discipline, important though these are in other ways, but by love. There is abundant evidence that if a child is brought up in a warm, happy, confident, affectionate home atmosphere, he has the best chance of developing into a well-balanced, secure, affectionate and generous-minded person. Whereas the child who has not got this background - the child who feels unloved, or who can never feel sure that he is loved - is the potential problem case. A high proportion of neurotics and delinquents are people who have been deprived of normal affection in childhood.

There was a deplorable theory current some time ago that it was not a good thing to show love for a child too openly, or to encourage the child to show it. I have seen a mother snub a child when he showed affection, and tell him not to be sentimental. That is a grave mistake. A small child can hardly have, or give, too much love. This does not mean that the parents should always be smothering him with demonstrations - although a small child's appetite for such demonstrations can be pretty insatiable - and it does not mean that they should urge the child to be more demonstrative than comes natural to him. But it is important to provide demonstrations when the child shows he wants them; and still more important to provide a firm, secure background of affection so that it never occurs to the child to doubt that he is loved and wanted. Psychological work with children

strongly suggests that so long as the parents provide this background they cannot, with a young child, go far wrong. Even though they make mistakes of judgment in other ways - and what parent does not? - these will not have any serious or lasting effect. Whereas if they do not provide this background, there is a problem child in the making. It is as simple as that.

But providing affection will not solve all problems. The child has a powerful outfit of ego-instincts, and these are bound to show themselves often, in inconvenient and sometimes unpleasant ways. For example, take that perennial problem of a child showing jealousy and hostility towards a new baby. It is a problem that can be reduced by tactful handling, but it does often arise, sometimes to the extent that it is not safe to leave the older child alone with the baby. If this does happen, it is important that the parents should not take up a shocked or heartbroken attitude. They should not suggest to the child, either by what they say or by what they do not say, that they had expected him to love the new baby and that they feel it is rather shocking and unnatural that he does not.

This illustrates a point that is of fundamental importance in bringing up children; that is, that though the child must be helped and encouraged to control his aggressive impulses, he should not be made to feel that it is wicked and unnatural of him to have them. We all have them; they are part of our instinctive heritage; and one of the great contributions of modern psychology to human happiness has been to recognise this fact, and to make it clear that, provided we control our more primitive impulses, there is not the least need for us to feel guilty because we have them.

Another related point: it is unwise for parents to set children an impossibly high standard of unselfishness. Sometimes parents do this, perhaps with the idea that it is best to ask for more than you expect to get, or you may not get anything. But it is a mistake. Let me give an example. That great child psychologist Susan Isaacs described somewhere how an obviously intelligent mother had put this problem to her. She had an only child, a little girl, and they lived in an isolated neighbourhood, where the only children available as playmates were rather rough and boisterous. Whenever they came to the house, some of the little girl's toys got broken; and, not surprisingly, she was beginning to be rather unwilling that they should come. The mother asked: would it be wrong - would it be encouraging selfishness - if, when these children came, the more breakable toys were put away?

The answer was that of course it would not be wrong; it is the obvious thing to do. Why should a little girl's sense of property not be respected as much as an adult's? If the mother had some cherished possession - say a new fur coat - she would not lend it to someone who she knew would be likely to spoil it; she would think it unreasonable if she were asked to. Why set a much higher standard for a child? Someone may say: "But that is different; the fur coat is valuable and the toys are not". But the toys may be just as valuable to the child, and it is expecting too much of human nature that she should not mind seeing them smashed if it gives other children pleasure to smash them.

So far I have been suggesting that the most important task of moral education is to encourage the social impulses. But it would be unrealistic to suppose that all social behaviour is the spontaneous outflow of social impulses. A great deal of it is the result of training; the person has been taught to conform to certain codes of behaviour that make for the general interest. This training is not moral education in the strictest sense, but it is a most important part of a child's upbringing. Early in life, he has to learn to obey various rules that make for the smooth running of the household. He has to go to bed at the right time without making a fuss; to respect other people's property; to come to meals in time; sometimes to refrain from disturbing adults when they are busy, and so on. This is a field in which there have to be definite rules and - let us face it - definite penalties.

There is a strange idea about, that modern psychology does not believe in rules and penalties; that, as a result of the discoveries of Freud, we now know that the right way to bring up a child is to let him do exactly as he likes, that, if we ever say "don't" to a child, or, still more, if we punish him, we risk damaging him for life. So may I say, as clearly as I can, that modern psychology says nothing of the sort? Freud said, in his *Lectures in Psychoanalysis*: "The child has to learn to control its instincts. To grant it complete freedom, so that it obeys all its impulses without any restriction, is impossible. It would be a very instructive experiment for child psychologists, but it would make life impossible for the parents, and would do serious damage to the children themselves ... Education has to steer its way between the Scylla of giving the instincts free play, and the Charybdis of frustrating them altogether."

Freud had six children - he knew what he was talking about!

Continued on page 13

Writing about the controversies that attended the publication of *Honest to God* in 1963, Ludovic Kennedy says: "The reason for the book's success was (as with most successful books) its timing."

He's right. Timing is everything and it is the timing which may seal the fate of his own book, the contents of which are disappointingly over-familiar. Kennedy, who is 80, says that he now feels himself to be waiting in the departure lounge of life knowing that the last plane is going nowhere. He recognises that he might have left it too late to write the book which he says has been on his mind for most of his life. Indeed, for most readers of the *Freethinker* its long trawl through the wrongdoings of Christianity over the ages will be well-trodden ground. Do we really need another book to remind us about the horrors of the crusades or the inhumanity of the witch burnings and heretic eviscerations? The evil of Christianity's "killing fields" (as Kennedy calls them) is self-evident to a modern mind. Most present-day Christians will readily declare themselves repulsed by the details of their gory history - indeed, the Pope can't stop apologising for them. The fact is, whenever religion is powerful it becomes cruel and oppressive; when it is weak, as Christianity is now, it becomes ineffectual, confused and - let's face it - rather pathetic.

Ludovic Kennedy is, regrettably, tilting at windmills that are already derelict - at least in Britain.

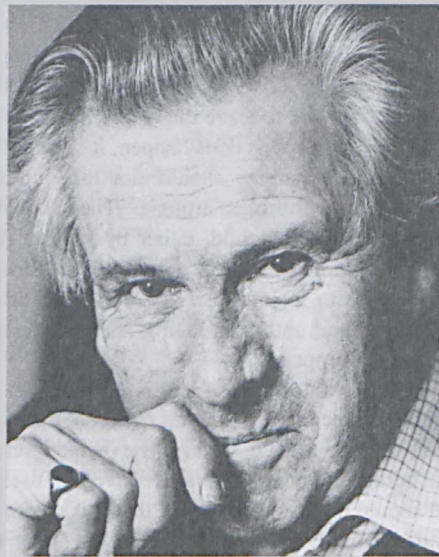
The reviews of *All in the Mind* in the national press have been almost uniformly hostile. Mind you, the literary editors have chosen their reviewers carefully; Roger Scruton, Paul Vallely and Robert Runcie among others are unlikely to look sympathetically on a book which presents itself as a dismissal of God and a recommendation of atheism.

Having dismissed God as a fiction, Kennedy then embarks on an interesting account of the growth of atheism from the Reformation to the present day. This will be of more interest to the general reader but, once again, to seasoned atheists it will be familiar territory. Kennedy traces the development of unbelief from its earliest roots, from the time when people who professed atheism or dared criticise religion were routinely killed, and when clerics stated quite confidently that atheism was an absolute impossibility - anyone who declared themselves an atheist was merely a dissembler or a pervert.

Then, post-Darwin, as Christianity lost its absolute stranglehold on the imagination of the Western world, non-believers became bolder, and gradually the punishments became less severe. Convincing arguments were put for-

ward about the silly and contradictory nature of the Bible, arguments with which more and more people were prepared to align themselves. Seeing the tide turning, the Christians, who have long practice in inventing ingenious

Terry Sanderson reviews
All in the Mind: A Farewell to God by Ludovic Kennedy
(Hodder & Stoughton
£16.99)



Ludovic Kennedy

explanations for the wilder absurdities of their beliefs, retorted by saying that the Bible was never meant to be taken literally. They began to claim that it should be seen as mostly metaphor and allegory. Paul Vallely in the *Independent* concludes that everyone but Ludovic Kennedy seems to have accepted this. He accuses Kennedy of overlooking the wonderful things that Christianity has achieved in its history, such as the great art, the music and the noble acts of humanity which belief prompted. But, of course, Paul Vallely (who is the paper's religious affairs correspondent) has his own agenda to push and is himself a dab hand at being selective, failing to mention that in large areas of the United States and Africa, the Bible is still being presented as literal history, and so-called creationist scientists are beavering away to prove that Noah's flood actually happened and that, indeed, the earth is only a few thousand years old. In some southern states of America Darwin is still regarded as the devil incarnate. Mr Vallely also fails to mention the wonderful art that sprang forth

with no religious inspiration. Nor does he explore the possibility that if man had never thought of God, then artists would still have been compelled to create. They would simply have found other sources of inspiration. Beethoven, Mozart and Bach would still have created choral masterworks, they just wouldn't have been called masses or requiems. There is, anyway, plenty of glorious secular music and poetry in existence to prove that art doesn't need God to be glorious.

In the end, though, these arguments were satisfactorily settled in the nineteenth century; they have only unconvincing echoes in our own generation. Consequently this is not the radical tract that Mr Kennedy had hoped it would be.

Having said that, the book is well researched, well-written and comprehensive. There will probably be something new to learn, even for old hands, and as a resource it is worthy of a place on any thinking person's book shelf. The best parts by far are the autobiographical moments, when Kennedy reflects on how his doubts arose and how long it took them to formulate in his mind into a philosophy that satisfied him. His biggest beef seems to be the persistent claim by religionists that morality and faith are inextricably entwined. Once again, this is quite patently untrue, but Ludovic thinks it worth rehearsing the arguments one more time. We no longer live in a Christian country and there are plenty of people who are obviously admirable and "moral" who make no claims to faith.

Ludovic Kennedy obviously wanted to create a furore with this book. He wanted something on the lines of the uproar that greeted Margaret Knight's famous broadcasts on the BBC back in the fifties. But that time has passed.

If Ludovic Kennedy really wanted an international outcry, his book should not have wasted its energy attacking a religion that is already on its death bed. It should have gone for one that is asserting itself with totalitarian ambitions. One that is still killing its opponents, its dissenters and its apostates. If his book had been called, say, "A Farewell to Allah: The Evil that is Islam", he might well have gone down in atheist history in the way that Galileo, Darwin, Hume, Bradlaugh (and latterly Salman Rushdie) have. He would have generated the kind of controversy that he clearly hoped for with this present volume.

He might also have found that his quiet Wiltshire home would have been no protection from the rampaging hordes of fanatics baying for his blood, who in former times would have been Christians.

HEAVEN: HOW TO GET IN by Denis Watkins

A COMPUTER-aided analysis of Genesis has revealed a discussion between God and the Devil shortly after the creation of the world.

God: I've decided that humans may enter Heaven when they die.

Devil: Who is going to inhabit Hell? Don't I get any?

God: Of course you do. I shall set a test for admission to Heaven and you can have those who fail.

Devil: Sounds fine as long as you don't make the test too easy. As I'm having the rejects I want a fair share. What do they have to do to get into Heaven?

God: The test is in two parts. I will expose them to superstitious nonsense and religious leaders will tell them that it is true and that they must believe it. At the same time I will give them intelligence and the gift of reason. I shall only admit to Heaven those who have the independence of mind to use their reason. You get those who fail.

Devil: What kind of things will they be asked to believe?

God: They will be told that there is one of me and three of me all at the same time. I'm myself and my son and also a kind of ghost. The son becomes human and is killed and because of that all the sins of humanity can be forgiven for ever.

Devil: Gimme a break! No one's going to believe that. You call that a test? I can't see how anyone could fail.

God: The religious beliefs will be conveyed

and interpreted by their priests who will claim to be my representatives. They will say that they know how I want humans to behave.

Devil: As if. Even I struggle to understand you and you know how far back we go.

God: If humans use their reason they will escape the prejudice and cruelty which will be the outcome of embracing superstition. To make the test even easier the priests will themselves often behave abominably - even torturing and killing those whom they judge to be unbelievers.

Devil: It's too obvious. None of them will fall for this. My place will be empty.

God: I don't want them to fail. But neither do I intend to admit to Heaven humans who spurn my supreme gift of reason. It's a fair test.

Devil: Fair for them, certainly, but what about me? What else will they be told to believe?

God: They will also be told that I have an insatiable need for flattery. They must lavish on me endless praise and worship regardless of how miserable their lives are.

Devil: A God clever enough to create the universe - including quantum physics which, incidentally, I still don't understand - would never ask them to believe this stuff. Even a human would be bored and repelled by endless flattery.

God: They will also be told that I am omniscient but that I sometimes change my mind if they ask me.

Devil: Despite the fact that you would know that they would ask you to change your mind when you first did what they don't like? No one's going to buy this. They will spot it for nonsense right away. Will they be given anything in writing?

God: Of course. And they will be told that the book with the guidance is my literal word and everything in it is true. However, their bible will be full of contradictions, absurdities and atrocities.

Devil: It sounds like my kind of book. I can't wait to read it. Give me an idea of what will be in it?

God: It will describe a flood, which covers the earth and destroys all life except that saved by a holy man. He will put two animals of every species in a boat so that they can breed and replenish the earth.

Devil: What? Animals from every country? Including polar bears?

God: Indeed. And the man who builds the boat has to include birds as well, particularly a pair of doves.

Devil: Doves? No, I won't ask. If I only get people who believe this stuff I'm heading for a lonely infinity.

God: I haven't even mentioned the contradictions and atrocities yet.

Devil: I've heard enough already and I don't think I'm getting a fair deal here. No offence, but if there was anyone I could appeal to about this I'd do it.

OVERVIEW: KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD REFLECTS ON CURRENT EVENTS

(Continued from page 7)

The son's mother, Joanna Whibley, has said that Roddy Wright led her to expect that when he left the Church, he would set up home with her.

Now, Wright has written a book about his exploits, appropriately - even courageously - entitled *Feet of Clay*, which the *Mail on Sunday* started serialising on St Valentine's Day. In it, he describes how he agreed to become a bishop while continuing to conceal the existence of his son. Wright claimed this said "something about his muddled mind"; I suspect *Freethinker* readers may be less charitable. According to the *Express*, to whom I am indebted for much of this information, despite Wright's behaviour, "his priesthood will never be taken away from him". Though, finding a parish that would welcome him might well be a tough nut to crack.

Another of Cardinal Winning's senior staff is in trouble; his press secretary, Father Noel Barry, has been dismissed. Barry has admitted to having fallen in love with an ex-nun - with whom he had spent the night in a hotel room. This information emerged during a court case when Barry and another woman, local primary school teacher Annie Clinton, sued the *Sun*. It had alleged an improper relationship between Barry and the school teacher. They will share damages totalling £165,000.

On the subject of RC Press Secretaries or spokespersons, readers may remember the reference in my column in the January issue to a case in Chester involving the jailing for eight years of a RC priest for various serious sexual offences. These included rape, serious sexual assault and eleven cases of indecent assault. The priest was none other than the spokesperson for the Archbishop of Wales. Now, the Archbishop himself has been arrested in connection with alleged sexual offences. This follows recent newspaper allegations concerning events in Peckham around 1960 and a girl then aged 7. He has been released on bail without charge and will face further questioning on 9 March. I emphasise that the Archbishop "vigorously denies these allegations" and is reported to have Basil Hume's full support.

Lest I am considered to be emphasising misdeeds (or alleged misdeeds) solely of the RC Church, let us turn our attention to high jinks in the Greek Orthodox Church. According to the *Observer*, there are claims of money laundering on a large scale by the Bishop of Limassol who has resigned following a Scotland Yard enquiry. There is alleged to be videotape evidence of two priests leaving a cabaret club and "colourful" stories of their exploits while inside it. Other claims are of an elder who "made

sexual advances to a novice, and passed on diseases to the nuns". One Orthodox priest complained of being "ashamed to walk down the street. The faithful are spitting at us". An Orthodox theologian maintained, revealingly, "Our spiritual leaders no longer give a fig about their pastoral duties; they are megalomaniac businessmen who, like secular autocrats, want to control huge wealth." Wasn't it ever thus?

We move on now to America, but, I'm afraid back to RC Church and their Salesian ("Salesmen"?) Sisters of St John Bosco. They share a problem with much of the rest of modern society: an increasing number of older people but with fewer younger people to support them. Unlike the rest of society, they have overcome the problem.

For a minimum of £60 you can adopt a nun at one of their 15 convents to offer up prayers on your behalf. They are not fussy; they will also take money from Protestants, Jews and Buddhists. According to the *Express* these nuns have made more than £850,000 from such praying and have 2,500 "subscribers", including prison inmates. "It's a business" according to Mary Rinaldi who runs the "programme". The *Express's* Dermot Purgavie claims from New York that "it is a development that seems to benefit all concerned". This is an old religious scam, of course, but you've got to give the sisters full marks for reviving it so successfully.

RELIGION, HUMANISM AND HUMOUR, by Arthur Chappell



DO WE take ourselves too seriously? Should we emphasise the humour in humanism more? What is fun? Laughter? Is there such a thing as the politically correct joke? What are we to make of controversial comedians like Roy Chubby Brown and Bernard Manning? Why are circus clowns so frightening?

Navajo Indians set great store by a baby's first laugh. The family are expected to throw a party the instant the baby laughs (usually at about forty days old) and the bill goes to whoever is believed to have made the baby laugh first.

Virtually every race and culture has a fairy story to tell of an unhappy princess figure whom everyone (kings, knights, noblemen, wizards, professional jesters, etc) fails to cheer up, before some nobody falls over and makes an unintentional fool of himself, thus making her laugh, gaining her hand in marriage and inheriting the kingdom.

Seduction as a prelude to intercourse often works best in a party atmosphere. This is why carnivals and street festivals have a high phallic content in float and costume designs. It is also guaranteed that your partner will be most inflamed with jealousy if s/he finds you laughing at someone else's jokes. Laughter lowers our inhibitions, and relaxes us.

It is generally accepted that laughter, like exercise, releases endorphins and enkaphalins – the body's natural pain killers, into the bloodstream. Most doctors also agree that laughter stimulates and relaxes the muscles, the nervous system, the inner organs, the respiratory system, and the heart.



American research scientist, Dr William Fry has suggested that 100 to 200 belly laughs a day are equivalent to "a ten minute jog." (*The House Of Mirth* by Andy Crawford in *Hotline*, the Virgin Trains passenger magazine, Autumn/Winter 1998).

Some faiths around the world believe the gods find us amusing. We see legends of gods debasing themselves to take part in human affairs; Krishna amused himself by stealing the clothes of the goat-herd girls as they bathed in the river. Zeus seduced mortal women and turned men into donkeys. In German, the word *selig* means both "silly" and "blessed" (Note the title of a Woody Allen film, *Zelig*, has its roots here).

The Bible has a few jokes in it; Cain's retort to God, who is looking for Abel, (killed by Cain); "What am I? my brother's keeper?" is

quite a put down line under the circumstances. Elisha sadly missed the joke in a passage seldom quoted in sermons for its intolerance (2 Kings 2, 23-5). "And he (Elisha) went from there to Beth-el: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city and said unto him, go up, thou bald head, go up, thou bald head." And he turned back and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the LORD. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood and tare forty and two children of them."

Being a slaphead, I sympathise with him, but his reaction was somewhat humourless, and those taking jokes badly fare badly. Shakespeare's puritanical Malvolio (*Twelfth Night*) becomes increasingly more the target of the vicious jokes of his household for his unsmiling sense of decorum.

In some towns, when jesters went dancing from and through each house in a town for alms, those refusing to co-operate, carrying on working or refusing to wear green garters and false but exaggerated genitalia in public were dragged to ducking stools and stocks for their lack of good cheer.

Too much praise grows irksome and contrived. The royal and wealthy households from the 15th to the 19th centuries employed permitted fools, who were able to mock and slander the wealthy quite freely even in public.

St Paul saw the value of clowning to the travelling missionary apostles of his day (1 Corinthians 4,10): "We are fools for Christ's sake." Many monks took this literally, especially Francis of Assisi who called his radical hippie order the clowns and fools of Christ. The Church, however, resented the fact that acting and buffoonery were taking over the sense of serious clerical duty. Some were even seen depicting Christ as a clown. The 1291 Council of Salzburg ordered that "the clergy must not be jesters, goliards or buffoons; if they pursue such disgraceful accomplishments for a whole year, they are to be stripped of all ecclesiastical privileges."

The ruling was often overlooked by those attracting laughing converts more than crying fearful ones. The mystery and miracle plays of France, and later Britain often had the austere crucifixion passion play preceded by sketches, skits and ballad performances of a humorous and bawdy nature. In these the jesters were the devils and the demons. Their excesses in sexuality and greed were excused as the audience knew they were damned. They got away with much that might have been censored. In one drama a devil attempts to steal a miller's soul via his backside, but unwittingly takes a lump of excrement to hell instead. The devils then agree to leave the smelly souls of millers alone forever.

Telling jokes in polite company is terrifying. We don't want to fail to amuse, any more than a comedian wants to lose a paying audience. It's pitiful to see a child trying to impress grown-ups with a joke and fluffing his lines. We also want to be seen to get and appreciate the joke. Many in the audience at comedy clubs laugh along with the crowd without really knowing what was funny. It seems taboo to do otherwise. The professional comic always tells the same story of his origins. He found that making people laugh and acting the fool won him respect and spared him the wrath of school bullies. Moral: if you can't fight, wear a daft hat.



Does political correctness neutralise the impact of humour? In many cultures the audience at a comedy event would be pelted with excrement and urine by clowns. Now, its custard pies and water substitutes. No one wants to offend too much. Bernard Manning may tell apparently racist jokes, but it is often those he insults – Pakistanis, Chinese, blacks, etc – who clamour for front row seats at his shows. Manning is more annoying when he tells every reporter he meets just how much unpublicised charity work he does as though that excuses his excesses in other areas. I'm not advocating that humanists revive mother-in-law and racial jokes here. I believe that comedians should know their audience better than Manning has been able to judge of late. Times have changed. His act seems dated.

Here is a typical uncensored Manning joke. A "Paki" goes to the job centre and asks for work as a conductor. They nail him to a chimney in Oldham. Absurdist, but openly appealing to deep rooted racial fears that Pakistanis are taking all the jobs. Such jokes are dangerous. That the Pakistani is seen to meet a violent death adds to its dangerous nature.

But writer and TV presenter Howard Jacobson argues that Manning serves a cathartic purpose with such jokes by lancing the boils of our prejudices and letting the hateful pus run free. Jacobson sees this as the duty of all humorists.



Sometimes I laugh at a joke and feel guilty at the same time. Is there a way out of such a trap? Interestingly, however, humour has rarely if ever been used in genuinely fascist and nazi and neo-nazi propaganda, which stays terribly serious about its vile mission. In fact, in many fascist states, including Hitler's Germany, comedians and humorists were among the first to be locked up, deported, and sometimes executed. Funsters, by their nature poke fun at everything.

Humour is by nature indiscriminate. Everyone gets it in the neck without exception. In police states, the humorist perishes. But if he can't laugh at the authorities too, his career is over. The comedian hates everybody, just as much as he loves them.

What of comedy's greatest dysfunctional family fun show for kids - Punch and Judy? What are the politically correct brigade who clip a comedian's claws to make of the greatest

wife-beating, baby-thumping, death, devil, police and sausage abuser of them all? Perhaps it should be updated so he attacks social workers as well.

The main source of research for this article was Howard Jacobson's *Seriously Funny* (Channel Four/Viking 1997).

Quotes from this include: "If comedy, in all its changing shapes, has one overriding preoccupation, it is this; that we resemble beasts

more closely than we resemble gods, and that we make great fools of ourselves the moment we forget it." And "Mirthless and clean, we vanish as though we had never been."

And: "Where are we most vividly alive? In our laughter.

"So what is death's greatest prize? The sound of our laughter.

"Therefore, in order to defy death, we must show that we can still laugh."

MORALS WITHOUT RELIGION

(Continued from centre pages)

Reasonable discipline never did children any harm - in fact, fundamentally, they prefer it. They need a stable framework for their lives; they like to know where they are, and know what is expected of them; they do not want to have to decide everything for themselves. The discipline should not be excessive - we do not want prohibition for prohibition's sake; and it must not be capricious - it is no use forbidding a thing one day and allowing it the next. But above all - the old point again - it must be maintained with affection. Parents should never say: "I won't love you if you do that ..." or: "If you do that you're not my little boy ..." The child should never get the impression that his parents' love is in any way conditional. As I have said, the fact that he is loved and wanted is something that it should never occur to him to doubt.

It does far less harm to spank a child than to tell him you do not love him any more. I am not exactly advocating spanking; but I am sure that the horror some people feel at the idea of it is unrealistic. If a child is fundamentally confident that Mummy and Daddy love him, an occasional spanking will do him no harm; and as a harassed parent once said to me, it may do a world of good to the spanker! Much more real harm can be done to children by a few high-minded and over-anxious parents, who would recoil from the idea of spanking, but who sometimes inflict mental punishment that is a good deal more severe, by taking up a grieved, heart-broken attitude if the child behaves badly; by using phrases like "I'm ashamed of you", "I'm disappointed in you", and so on. These things should never be said to a child. They are not as bad as "I don't love you", but they have the same sort of effect - they weaken his sense of security.

That does not mean that we should never make clear to a child that we take a poor view of something he has done. But - this is the important point - *condemn the act but not the child himself*. If he does something naughty - say, takes all his brother's sweets as well as his own - the line to take is: "That was a selfish thing to do - it's not a bit like you to do that", rather than to say: "Well, you are a selfish, greedy little boy". It may not sound all that different, but there is a world of difference in the implications for the child.

My time is running short; and the religious listener has perhaps been getting more and more restive. "This is all very well", he is perhaps saying, "but it has left out the one thing that's fundamental. What is the ultimate sanction of this moral training? What answer could you make if the child were to ask, 'Why should I consider others? Why shouldn't I be completely selfish?' What possible answer is there, except the religious one - because it is God's will?"

Why should I consider others? These ultimate moral questions, like all ultimate questions, can be desperately difficult to answer, as every

philosophy student knows. Myself, I think the only possible answer to this question is the humanist one - because we are naturally social beings; we live in communities; and life in any community, from the family outwards, is much happier, and fuller, and richer if the members are friendly and co-operative than if they are hostile and resentful. But the religious listener may feel that this is simply evading the point. So may I say in conclusion that the answer he would propose is not really any more satisfactory? His answer to the question "Why should I consider others?" is "Because it is God's will". But the sceptic could always answer: "Why should I do God's will? Why shouldn't I please myself?" - and that, surely, is just as much of a poser as: "Why should I consider others?"

In fact, it is a good deal more of a poser, in view of some of the things that the believer must suppose God to have willed. But we need not go into all that again, for in any case this question of ultimate sanctions is largely theoretical. I have never yet met the child - and I have met very few adults - to whom it has ever occurred to raise the question: "Why should I consider others?" Most people are prepared to accept as a completely self-evident moral axiom that we must not be completely selfish, and if we base our moral training on that we shall, I suggest, be building on firm enough foundations.

Bertrand Russell Society honours Taslima Nasrin

Controversial Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin, has been elected an Honorary Member of the Bertrand Russell Society, which is based in Alexandria, Virginia, USA. The Society publishes the quarterly Russell Society News. Its international membership includes many eminent thinkers.

FREETHINKER FUND

Many thanks to the following who have generously donated to the Freethinker Fund up to February, 11, 1999:

D Broughton £50; Anonymous, C Pinel £20; R Woodward £15; M Belo, G Clarke, M Farrand, T Fields, I Kirkland, T Morrison, M Sloan £10; C Harrison £6; J Burman, C Howard £5; A Murphy £2; V Gibson £1. Total for this period is £194.00

The final list of donations to the Peter Brearey Memorial Fund will appear next month.

Normal is "boring"

MR Carr's use of the word "unnatural" together with terms clearly intended to convey disgust (*Freethinker*, Nov/Dec) is odd. Is it natural to sit in a centrally-heated house and stroke a small, furry carnivore which is sitting on your lap? Is it natural to send hard-earned resources to distant climes in order to help rival gene-carriers who are in trouble? What is so bad about being unnatural? Or should the word be "abnormal"? It would be terrible to be abnormal like Einstein, Michaelangelo, Bryn Terfel, or Boris Becker!

I do not want to be natural. It is too cold in England. And I do not want to be normal. It is too boring. Can we not all delight in the rich diversity of mankind? Or is the rich diversity normal? Oh dear!

E. CARSON
Ipswich

Flat earth?

KEITH Porteous Wood's comments on the

Barnet eruv in the November/December 1998 issue reminds me that I've always been puzzled about how one decided which is the area enclosed by a boundary drawn on the surface of a sphere.

The edge of the eruv separates out two parts of the Earth's surface.

Topographically, however, there's no reason to say it's the small area which is bounded by the eruv rather than the (much) larger one including all the world outside Barnet. Unless, I suppose, the Jews still do believe that the Earth's surface is flat.

ERIC THOMPSON
London.

Bad karma

THE SACKING of Glen Hoddle as head coach of the England football team for expressing his religious beliefs is surely discriminatory.

His opinion that the misfortunes of the disabled are caused by bad karma carried over from previous incarnations is in accordance with the basic beliefs of hundreds of millions

of Hindus and Buddhists, and there are nearly half a million Hindus living in this country today. Yet these facts were conspicuously ignored by the media until a television *News Night* programme touched on the subject a week after his resignation.

News Night might have added that Buddhism is the only Asian religion currently gaining converts at the expense of Christianity.

The dogmas of those who follow these religions surely deserve as much - or as little - respect as those of Christians or Muslims.

The belief in karma is, after all, no more ridiculous than the Christian doctrine of original sin, and not dissimilar from the Jewish notion of a jealous God "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children".

And Hoddle's comments are hardly more offensive to the disabled than the domestic arrangements of Muslims are to women, or their book burnings and *fatwas* to those who value freedom of speech.

It seems, therefore, unfair that the Prime Minister and the Minister for Sport should have so roundly condemned a "medieval

TERRY SANDERSON ON THE MEDIA (Continued from page 5)

induce guilt in Western liberals who are concerned about the extremes of Islam. "And still (the 'still' that rankles), if any among us confess our unease - or ask only that the law for the protection of young people be implemented equally - we will be vilified as ignorant. Or racist. Or both."

She also rejects Marr's assertion that the "vast majority" of Muslims are moderate, hard-working and disapproving of the excesses committed in the name of their religion. "Where in that case, are the loud, proud, public voices of dissociation from the 'educated' Muslim or the 'majority' Muslim, denouncing debasing practice? Nowhere, that's where."

Well, that isn't quite true. In the *Independent*, the Muslim writer Jasmin Alibhai Brown was crying out for an end to the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM is euphemistically known as female circumcision). Her plea was prompted by the trial in Paris of an African woman who had been razoring the genitals of young girls at the request of the youngsters' parents. Although FGM is against the law in France, they wanted to follow the "traditions" of Islam.

Ms Alibhai Brown described the process involved in FGM, which she had observed on one of her students, Khatoon, who had been mutilated in this way: "Where the inner labia

or clitoris should be, was flat, scarred, barren, tight, tortured skin. Khatoon sobbed as she told me how her mother and grandmother held her down, singing her favourite songs, while two other women cut off the parts. "They tied up the hole with sharp sticks and threads. They left a small space for the blood of the woman later on and I was left on the bed with fever for so many weeks. Going to the toilet was like hell. Intercourse is impossible so the vagina has to be cut open on the wedding night. A razor blade is used by the husband. Childbirth causes untold suffering and complications."

Ms Alibhai Brown says that although FGM still goes on in this country, the authorities turn a blind eye to it rather than get embroiled in battles over cultural rights and racism. "The problem in Britain is that there is a fear of interfering with 'ethnic' cultures and a reluctance to impose norms. In general this delicacy is no bad thing, as it shows a greater respect for pluralism than our culturally more arrogant French cousins.

But when women and girls are being physically and emotionally brutalised, denied the right of education and treated like objects, then cultural difference be damned, I say to the people in power. Follow France. Do what is necessary, and what you would if these girls were white."

In France, the Mali woman who had performed the FGM's on 50 young girls, was jailed for eight years. Many of the parents of the children were also given sentences for colluding in the process. No doubt there will be cries from Islamic apologists that these sentences were unjustified and harsh, and that the French authorities had no right to interfere with "tradition".

What are we Western liberals to do in the face of such pressures? Educated Muslims say that Western ideas of human rights cannot be applied in Islamic countries, but I would like to quote from a letter to *The Times* by Ralph Wedgwood, a Cambridge professor of philosophy:

"There is a basic principle of human rights, which is accepted all over the world: the principle that it is wrong for governments to discriminate between classes of people without an uncontroversial and compelling justification...When a sectarian religious view conflicts with a universal principle of human rights, it is clear which of the two should prevail."

This is not a principle which is accepted in the majority of Muslim theocracies, as the women (and various minorities) who live there know only too well. But it is a principle which we, who are free of the yoke of religion, should never lose sight of.



superstition" from the Hindu/Buddhist tradition when equally repugnant and absurd doctrines are regularly propagated by Christians and Muslims.

Besides, Hoddle was employed as a football coach, not a moral philosopher. If our society is to tolerate - as it must - medieval superstition in its butchers, bakers and candlestick makers, surely it should extend its tolerance to all the major religions.

JACK HASTIE
Scotland

Intolerant and hypocritical

Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs believe in reincarnation with retribution in a subsequent life for crimes committed in a previous one. When the English soccer coach recently expressed such an opinion, however, he was dismissed because of his religious belief through publicly expressed pressure from the Christian lobby - including the Prime Minister and several bishops.

I asked a Sikh why no adherents of faiths believing in reincarnation had spoken up for Hoddle. The reply was "because we are a minority in this country and have to be careful". If, however, the coach of a foreign team was dismissed because of his religion. English Christians would sympathise with him.

All this demonstrates how intolerant and also hypocritical Britain remains on the eve of the new millennium. It condemns in others the religious discrimination it practises. The next England coach will have to be a Christian!

Yours for freedom of conscience (even for football coaches)

E GOODMAN
Redhill
Surrey.

Absurd - but irrelevant

Are all believing Hindus and Sikhs in this country now to be sacked from their jobs?

Belief that someone long dead can possibly be the same person as one alive today may be absurd - but what has it to do with managing a football team?

Anyway, it is hardly more absurd than belief in an after-life elsewhere - which is apparently compatible with being Prime Minister.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley
Kent.

"I'll never make Mayor"

A short while back I was elected as Councillor to sit on the Penzance Town Council for four years. The Deputy Mayor at the time, who will remain nameless, informed me that I would never be selected as Mayor due to my atheism. The reason given was that I would have to choose a chaplain who would go about his duties propagating the Christian myth during the Council meetings, and represent the Council in the religious pageantries held every month with other religious fanatics like the Scouts and the blue-rinse brigade.

This person was from my own party. He had been the major influence in persuading me to stand in the election and I had thought highly of him until I discovered his hostility towards my own personal beliefs.

It is the assumption by the religious that they have a monopoly on morality and respectability which I find most repugnant.

DAVID HASLAM

Preaching to the converted

As a new subscriber to the *Freethinker*, I have found recent issues enjoyable, informative, and amusing. However, I sometimes feel that contributors are attacking the wrong targets, "preaching to the converted", but not helping to promote the "best of causes". As atheists, humanists, or secularists, we have few platforms for our views, and we should therefore use the *Freethinker* constructively.

Articles about inconsistencies in the Bible are amusing, but tell us nothing new. Listing the flaws in the Bible is entertaining, but will not persuade believers to abandon their faith. Inconsistencies are easily dismissed as mistranslations, or metaphors. Also, detailed criticism of the Bible implies that it is a special case, unlike, for example, the "primitive" beliefs of heathens, infidels, and assorted benighted savages.

We would achieve more by considering the fundamental flaws in religious world views. The supposed existence of an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, (omnibus-driving?) God involves paradoxes. The existence of deities has never been proved to the standards required by scientists, civil or criminal Courts, or even common sense. Once we get beyond the point that all religion is superstition, the arguments become more complex, and I, for

one, would appreciate more articles dealing with this.

I am often disturbed by intolerant remarks about Christians, and members of other faiths. The proper targets for criticism should be the sects which exploit people, and the individuals who use religion to justify acts which harm others. By all means, attack the Pope, whose position relies on exploiting people trapped by their own gullibility, or the constraints of the society where they live; attack priests who assault Choir boys, telling them they will go to Hell if they speak out; condemn wife burning, female circumcision, and the stoning of adulterers. However, individual religious believers are either happy in their delusions, or they are victims of exploitation. In either case, it is wrong to snipe at them.

The test should be: would someone unfamiliar with the secular movement find the *Freethinker* informative and thought-provoking, or would they find it just a little too stridently anti-religious, rather than pro-secularist? Most people are *de facto* atheists, but taking the step of saying it out loud is a bit frightening - we are trained to believe in "something" from an early age. The *Freethinker* should be a key to help atheists out of the closet.

MIKE WILKINSON
Nottingham.

Humanist chaplains

NIGEL Sinnott (*Freethinker* Nov/Dec) expresses unease at the appointment of a humanist chaplain by the Mayor of Lewisham, and prefers the decision of the Mayor-elect of Rossendale not to appoint a chaplain at all.

In a 30-year career as a Local Government Officer, I have witnessed Christian prayers, led by a chaplain, taken for granted as an integral feature at the opening of Council meetings, in all the local authorities where I have worked. When a humanist does reach the top position in a local authority, it is an opportunity, which should not be wasted to provide much-needed public awareness of a humanist presence in public affairs.

If we don't proclaim our presence, we will never overcome religious privileges which are often still taken for granted in local government.

ROGER MCCALLISTER
Dawlish

Please address your letters (preferably typed) to Barry Duke, Editor, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. The E-mail address is iduke@compuserve.com. You can also fax a letter to 0181 305 9603

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 and April 11, 4 pm. Public meeting.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnley on 0117 9049490.

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 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, March 18, 8pm. Public meeting.

Devon Humanists: Information: Christine Lavery, 5 Prospect Gardens, off Blackboy Road, Exeter. Tel: 01392 56600.

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

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

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. March 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.

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.

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, 7.30pm. 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, March 25, 8pm. Chris Ormell: *The End of Cartesian Confidence in Science.*

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.

Rationalist Press Association: Centenary Conference at Westhill Conference Centre, Selly Park, Birmingham, June 25-27. Information: John Metcalfe, RPA, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP. Tel: 0171 430 1371.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, April 7, 8 pm. Derek Chatterton: *A Secular View of the Bible.*

South Place Ethical Society: Weekly talks/meetings/concerts, Sundays 11am & 3pm 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.

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.