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Freethinker

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Founded by G W Foote in 1881

OUTRAGEOUS!



Hindus call
for a ban
on this CD
cover

– see *Freethinking
Out Loud*, p2

Muslim issues a fatwa
against Terrence
McNally, acclaimed
author of the play
Corpus Christi

– See report on p5



Also in this issue:

Another successful year of campaigning by the
National Secular Society – see *centre page report*



A TV CREW, garnering comments on the subject of the millennium from people strolling along the Golden Mile in Blackpool, buttonholed me recently and asked: "what does it all mean to you?" "Absolutely nothing," was my reply. "In fact, given the choice, I'd like to drop into a coma and wake up only when the whole damn thing is over."

Only afterwards did it dawn on me that the millennium does have at least *one* very significant aspect: when January 1, 2000, dawns the *Freethinker* will have entered its third century of publishing.

For me, as editor, taking the *Freethinker* into a new millennium is an exceptional honour; for the magazine it is an extraordinary achievement – there are very few publications which have managed to keep going continuously for 120 years in the same ownership without ever missing an issue.

But does the world – which has changed so much in so many ways since G W Foote first launched the *Freethinker* in 1881 – still need a magazine dedicated to combating superstition?

Indeed it does – and to see why, you need look no further than a group calling itself American Hindus Against Defamation Coalition (AHADC).

AHADC first came to my attention when it led the protest against an episode of the cult American TV programme *Xena: Warrior Princess* because of its depiction of the god Krishna (see *Freethinker* report, August 1999). As a result of international Hindu pressure, the chicken-hearted producers withdrew the episode from international showing and repeat showings in the US.

Hindu deities, let's face it, look as if they'd been devised by Disney on acid. This, to my mind, makes them a lot more fun than the cruel, depraved and often sexually suspect images one associates with Christianity.

Take Ganesh, for example. Part man, part elephant, this four-armed god of good fortune is one of India's most popular deities – and his appearance suggests that anyone who worships him would be imbued with a fairly broad sense of humour.

Don't you believe it. Hindus take their gods very seriously indeed, and anyone who dares make light of them is in serious danger of attracting the attention of AHADC – which also got all in a lather over the inclusion of the Hindu Bhagwad Gita shloka (verse) in Stanley Kubrick's last film before his death, *Eyes Wide Shut*.

AHADC promptly mounted a protest against the use of the verse, and succeeded in having it expunged from the movie.

Not so successful, however, was their campaign to have Sony Music withdraw the cover of the rock group Aerosmith's CD *Nine Lives*, which features a doctored version of Lord Krishna having a bit of a to-do with the great serpent Kalinag.

"In place of Lord Krishna's face," howled an outraged AHADC, "Sony and Columbia artists have inserted the head of a cat. They have also altered the male chest of Lord Krishna to that of a female with breasts, wearing a woman's blouse ... this act of substituting a cat's head is not only outrageous beyond any measure, but also very insulting to the entire Hindu community world wide ... many Hindus feel that it is akin to depicting Lord Jesus Christ on a cross with the head of a cat, breasts and a woman's blouse."

Despite AHADC getting its knickers (or should that be knockers?) in a twist, *Nine Lives* continues to be sold. I got my copy at the Lewisham branch of Our Price Records.

But all of this is small beer compared to the *calculated* insult Hindus received from an even goofier band of religionists – America's Southern Baptists.

Last month the Southern Baptist Convention

– the US's largest Protestant denomination – launched a campaign urging its members to pray for the millions of Hindus "lost in the hopeless darkness of Hinduism".

In a booklet published to coincide with Diwali, the major Hindu festival of light, the Baptists called for the conversion of those "who worship gods which are not God."

The booklet claims that Hindus have no concept of sin or personal responsibility, and its editor, Louis Moore, concedes that its language is harsher than previous Baptist booklets calling for the conversion to Christianity of Jews and Muslims.

"There is a clearer definition that Hindus are lost – we are *all* lost without Jesus Christ," he bumbled, thereby portraying the messiah as some sort of cosmic global navigation system.

AHADC, no doubt, will be having a field day with this one. But because the Hindu creed is a cut above the Baptists' in that it is generally more tolerant of other people's beliefs and does not busy itself making conversions, the organisation is unlikely to launch a counter-attack with a booklet aimed at the millions "lost in the hopeless darkness of Christianity".

More's the pity.

I LIKE Archbishop Tutu of South Africa. Apart from possessing a wonderfully uninhibited laugh, he has proved himself to be a genuine humanitarian. Furthermore, he is one of those rare clerics who, far from being obsessed with the "evils" of homosexuality, has actively supported gay rights and helped spearhead legislation which gives South African gays greater rights and freedoms than in most other countries.

However, being a Christian, he does periodically lay himself open to ridicule.

On November 1, the Archbishop delivered a lecture at St Paul's Cathedral in which he claimed that "God wants to point to the flashpoints of the world – Kosovo, East Timor, Burundi, the two Congos, Sudan, Northern Ireland *et al*" – and said "South Africa had a nightmare called apartheid. It has ended – your nightmare will end."

This prompted *Evening Standard* columnist A N Wilson to observe: "It must be a great advantage if you are an Archbishop to have such ready access to the mind of the Almighty. No doubt Desmond Tutu will be too pious to point out to God something else about the 'flashpoints'. That is, that in almost every one, the reason that human beings are behaving so barbarously towards one another is because of religion ...

"Maybe God will suggest to the Archbishop, the next time they have one of their conversations, that the best possible recipe for defusing the tension of a 'flashpoint' is to popularise agnosticism and atheism."

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Family planning under attack as world population passes the six billion mark

RELIGIOUS right leaders and ultra-conservative Roman Catholics in the United States are claiming that – far from the world being over-populated – it does not, in fact, have *enough* people.

In calling for population growth, signatories to a full-page advertisement in the *Washington Post* in October determinedly set their face against birth control. Their statement declared: "Under-population, not over-population, is the greater threat to the world today ... The populations of the developed nations are not doubling today, but are static or declining."

The ad said: "Let us join together in celebrating the birth of Baby Six Billion. He or she is a sign of our future, our hope and our pros-

perity ... We are grateful that Baby Six Billion has come into the world. Baby Six Billion ... is not a liability, but an asset. Not a curse but a blessing."

In a less celebratory mood were the demographers and world population experts who responded to the advertisement by pointing out that rapid population growth has led to deforestation, soil erosion, famine, water shortages and the extinction of 200 species a day. While the religious conservatives insist in their ad that "humanity had never been so prosperous," scholars estimate that half of the world's six billion people have to scrape by on \$2 a day, and a quarter of the world's population has to live on a meagre \$1 a day.

Three deaths linked to "breatharian" cult

SINCE THE *Freethinker* first reported (July 1999) on the activities of the "international metaphysics teacher" Jasmuheen, three deaths have been linked to the "breatharian" movement masterminded by the former Australian bank clerk.

Jasmuheen is the name adopted by Ellen Greve, of Brisbane, who claims to be able to teach people how to live on air and light – for a mere £125 (£99 concessionary rate).

A leaflet circulated in London this summer – when Jasmuheen was conducting courses in the UK – declared that "since 1993 she has been a breatharian: she has not needed to eat food. She has been physically nourished by absorbing the universal life force of prana (liquid light) directly into her body".

Shortly afterwards, reports linking the death of three people who had become involved with the cult began appearing in the international press.

One disciple was a Scottish woman, Verity Linn, who, after beginning the course, set up a tent on the moors in bad weather conditions – reportedly to find her "spot", and to put Jasmuheen's living-on-air techniques to the test. She died of exposure and malnutrition.

In the face of mounting press criticism, Jasmuheen took up a challenge from the Australian *Sixty Minutes* TV programme to

prove her claim that she could survive without eating or drinking

During the course of the programme, made in October, her condition was monitored by the President of the Australian Medical Association in Queensland, Dr Beres Wenck, who reported that, after four days, Jasmuheen had suffered the same bodily deterioration as any other person would after going long periods without nutrition.

Dr Wenck said that Jasmuheen had lost 6kg, was severely dehydrated, and there was a danger of her kidneys packing up.

"She could not have gone on any longer," he observed.

So, what went wrong with the "universal life force of prana"? According to Jasmuheen, there was simply too little of it about where the filming took place.

She said the city air contained polluted nutrients. "I spent two days fighting carbon monoxide poisoning. Seventy per cent of nutrients come from fresh air. I couldn't even breathe in that place," she lamented.

In Brief

FEMALE employees of the Education Ministry in Jerusalem claim to be frequently harassed on their way to work by ultra-Orthodox Jews for wearing sleeveless dresses or even elbow-length sleeves and skirts ending just above the knees.

"Modesty squads" lecture women, call them "whores," curse and insult them, and sometimes even assault them. Some have been struck by bags of water, rocks, excrement, or garbage, and have had their cars vandalised.

TWO MEN accused in Afghanistan of committing acts of sodomy were crushed to death in October for their "crime". Their killing follows that of three men who were crushed under a wall in February last year. Under the Taleban's strict interpretation of Islam, people suspected of serious offences, including sodomy, are trussed up and laid next to a wall, which is then toppled by a tank or bulldozer. If the victim survives, he or she is declared innocent, but if the victim dies, he or she is deemed guilty.

A FLORIDA lawmaker has suggested the state crucify a death row inmate whose delusions of being Jesus Christ have helped delay his execution for 25 years. "I'd make him a cross and we could take it out and nail him up," suggested Howard Futch. "I'm tired of these murderers sitting there year after year."

A DUBLIN carpenter has failed to win a blasphemy case he brought against a newspaper which published a cartoon of a fat Roman Catholic priest chasing political leaders after the referendum in Ireland that supported divorce. The Supreme Court ruled that although the offence of blasphemy exists in Ireland, the crime is not defined in the constitution, nor by the Act of Oireachtas (Parliament).

Since the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869 and the establishment of a secular state in 1922 "...it is impossible to say of what the offence of blasphemy consists," according to Ireland's Supreme Court judges, who also noted that the case brought against *Gay News* by Mary Whitehouse in 1979 would not have succeeded in Ireland.

FREETHINKER BOUND VOLUMES

Bound volumes of the 1998 editions of the *Freethinker* are now available. The cost per volume is £25 inclusive of postage and packing. Please send your order, together with a cheque made payable to G W Foote Ltd, to *Freethinker/G W Foote*, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH.



THE LORDS SEEM to have religion badly at the moment. Only a fortnight after the ludicrous debate on Religion and World Peace, peers debated Religious Discrimination.

Lord Ahmed of Rotherham proposed that Northern Ireland's religious discrimination legislation be extended to the rest of the UK. He thinks that many in faith communities feel that they are second-class citizens because the law does not protect them—in England, Scotland and Wales.

He was concerned, he said, that "scores of people have difficulty in obtaining permission from their employers to celebrate religious festivals like Eid and Diwali. There are dozens of women who have been discriminated against because of the dress they wear." Lord Ahmed wants to enshrine in legislation the important message that religious identities are valued and respected throughout Britain's multi-cultural and multi-religious society".

He wishes to protect Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, the Buddhists and the Sikhs. I, however, saw no proposals by Lord Ahmed to protect the non-religious from discrimination, however. Such protection had been included last year in a Bill on religious discrimination proposed by John Austin MP which ran out of parliamentary time.

Lord Ahmed dismissed as "unfounded" fears about "obscure and extremist cults" gaining protection under his proposed legislation, the tentative wording of which will astonish many *Freethinker* readers. He felt that cults would be excluded if religion were defined as "that system of beliefs and activities centred around the worship of God which is derived in whole or in part from a book revealed by God to one of His messengers". He added: "If a definition of 'God' were also needed, perhaps 'the source and sustainer of the universe and all that exists' would suffice."

The Bishop of Oxford indicated he took "very seriously the difficult experience and wounded feelings of particular groups, especially some of the Muslim community, who feel that they suffer discrimination which is not picked up in race legislation. Where the existing law is clearly inadequate to meet these problems, we are in principle in favour of fresh legislative provision."

Lord Lucas's contribution was highly realistic: "Religion has been a potent source of division and hatred down through the ages. It has potential for generating disagreements over the tiniest of things which can lead, and have led, to members of my religion murdering their very close cousins in very large numbers. I suspect that the same is true of the Muslim religion. One can hope that we are moving towards—and should make efforts to move

towards—a time of religious tolerance and lack of discrimination. But there are times when it is right to discriminate on grounds of religion. Religion is not like disability or race or gender; it is something which a person chooses. My brother-in-law has chosen to become a Muslim. It is not something he was born to; it is an individual choice he has made".

He said he felt uncomfortable about, but nevertheless did not want to proscribe religious discrimination in areas such as: religious schools (including those in Northern Ireland); the preparation of food in accordance with religious dietary laws; and the employment of staff bringing up children.

Lord Lucas did however feel strongly about free speech. He did not wish "to be obstructed in any way from arguing extremely strongly on the subject of religion. I want to be able to argue bitterly with Catholics about their opinions on birth control and to do everything I can to obstruct the effect that I believe that has on world population and the health of the planet. I want to be able to argue on almost everything with [Scientologist] Lord McNair, and to do everything I can to obstruct his beliefs. I do not wish to be halted in that because I think that it is reasonable, within the law, to have views on what Scientology is. I do not think that one should feel that one is cut off by the law from expressing opinions in debate and in any other reasonable way that results from religious feeling." Lord McNair later objected to the remarks Lord Lucas made about him.

Noting that "some Christian sects ... are pretty unappealing in their beliefs", Lord Lucas thought that judges or even an ombudsman may be more effective than legislation in excluding protection from inappropriate religious groups.

Lord Dholakia felt that religious identity "must be translated into legislation in order that discriminatory treatment on grounds of religion is treated on a par with other factors, such as race, colour or ethnic origin." Rather than extending Northern Ireland religious discrimination legislation, he favoured extending race relations legislation to include religion.

Lord Warner rose "to express some scepticism": ... "We should exercise considerable caution before extending legislative protection of the kind that exists in the areas of race, gender and disability [which he supported] to the area of religious belief. We would not be able easily to produce legislation that protects only Muslims. It would need to be extended to a range of religious beliefs."

Lord Warner referred to research "published in the 1999 edition of Social Trends which shows that UK church membership, as mea-

sured by active adult members, is approximately 8 million out of an adult population of approximately 45 million. With great respect to those who have strong religious beliefs and support faith-based systems, we must take account of other people's views and their ability to challenge all belief systems in a free secular society. There would be many who would see legislation providing protection on the basis of belief systems as a move towards a context of inhibiting people's rights to criticise and to free expression."

Lord Warner continued: "I accept fully the need for racial and religious tolerance. The European Convention on Human Rights, now enshrined in the Human Rights Act, provides full protection for individuals to pursue and practise their personal religious beliefs. That is as it should be." Lord Warner was also worried about cults, noting that he believed there to be approximately 2,000 of them in Europe. On employment, Lord Warner was concerned that those appointing staff to family planning clinics, for example, should not feel pressured by the discrimination legislation to appoint those [such as many Roman Catholics] whose beliefs were likely to cause them to object to carrying out certain aspects their job.

Suggesting that Lord Ahmed's aims were misconceived, Lord Monson drew attention to the impracticability of achieving elsewhere the rough balance of multiple religious mix required by statute to be maintained between Catholics and Protestants by employers in Northern Ireland.

"Moreover, much religious discrimination is more apparent than real. Over 20 per cent of the prison population in England and Wales is Roman Catholic, even though Catholics comprise only 10 per cent of the population as a whole. Some might unthinkingly assume that that must stem from religious discrimination, but clearly it does not."

Lord Lester of Herne Hill, who had been closely involved in framing the Race Relations Act, described himself as a secular Jew and a humanist. He reminded the House that "almost every other Commonwealth and continental European country, as well as Ireland, have in their written constitutions guarantees of equal protection of the law without discrimination on any ground, including religion ... It is only because we do not have such constitutional guarantees that we have the incoherent patchwork of laws that act in their place." He believes that we are obliged by a number of international conventions to legislate on religious discrimination.

The Government's position was summed up

(Continued on p9)

Living Wills

by Graham Nickson

THE GOVERNMENT has issued a policy statement suggesting how medical decisions should be made when patients become mentally incapacitated and cannot make decisions for themselves.

It proposes that such decisions could in future be made by a friend, relative or carer appointed by the patient. Such proxy decision-makers may also be given the right (if that is the patient's wish) to make decisions about the withholding or withdrawing of life-preserving treatment.

At present, where a patient's treatment preference is not known, not even a close relative can make treatment decisions on their behalf. Doctors are, of course, required to act in the best interests of the patient when deciding how to treat them (or whether to withhold treatment). There is no legal requirement that doctors should consult relatives, although this is acknowledged good practice.

Patients can, however, make legally binding instructions as to how they are treated if they become mentally incapacitated. They can do this by making a "living will". Provided a living will is properly drawn up and applicable to the patient's situation, it is legally enforceable – but only under common law. The Government has declined to introduce legislation to clarify the common law position of living wills, apparently because it wants to await future medical and legal developments.

The Voluntary Euthanasia Society is concerned that to bring forward legislation for proxy decision-making and not for living wills could result in confusion detrimental to patients. It is not clear, for example, were living wills and proxies to conflict, which would prevail legally – and, without the answer to this question, patients will not know which would be more effective to protect their rights and dignity.

VES believes the Government ought to clarify the format and purpose of living wills in legislation in order to dispel doubt in the minds of patients about their wishes being respected.

If you wish to know more about the Voluntary Euthanasia Society's campaign for wider choice at the end of life, please contact Graham Nickson, Campaign Manager,

The Voluntary Euthanasia Society at:
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Fatwa issued against *Corpus Christi* author

AUTHOR OF the controversial play *Corpus Christi*, which depicts Jesus Christ as gay, has had a fatwa (Islamic death sentence) issued against him by London-based Sheik Muhammad.

The fatwa against playwright Terrence McNally followed an outcry by fundamentalists in the United States, where the play first premiered, and in Edinburgh and London. Performances were picketed by hymn-singing Christians who declared it "blasphemous" and tried to prevent audiences entering the theatres.

Justification for Muslim interference in a play about Christianity was provided by Sheikh Muhammad in a statement which declared: "The fatwa is to express the Islamic point of view that those who are insulting to Allah and the Messengers of God must understand it is a crime."

The Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) has added to the controversy by issuing a statement saying: "Whilst we are totally opposed to the sort of ban Christians and Muslims want to impose on the play, the idea

promoted in it that Jesus was gay is ludicrous.

"There is not a shred of evidence in the Gospels to support this. On the contrary, from Jesus' comments on sexual matters, it is clear that he took an extremely strict attitude to what he regarded as sexual 'sins'.

"He condemned adultery and divorce, going so far as to say that lustful looks were as culpable as adultery itself, and he advised his followers to mutilate themselves rather than give way to sexual temptation. Thus, even if he were gay, he would have been completely repressed and have had much in common with gay clergy who voted in favour of the homophobic motion carried at the Church of England's Synod, and opposed the ordination of women priests."

GALHA added that although the Bible records no condemnation by Jesus of homosexuality, it is absurd to conclude (as some gay Christians and their apologists do) that he would have taken a more liberal stance on homosexual practices than his contemporaries, or that he was himself gay.

Priests behaving badly

RUSSIAN Orthodox Bishop Nikon, Bishop of Yekaterinberg, has been removed by the church's supreme body, the Holy Synod, after being accused of sodomy and extortion. He allegedly demanded money to resolve disputes, and tried to seduce young men in his seminary.

KENYAN pastor Moses Kitembe of the Church of God has been arrested for beating to death Gladys Wesonga, 24, during a prayer session. Kitembe reportedly told police he was trying to drive demons out of the woman.

AMERICAN minister, the Rev John Jackson Sr, 71, of Riverside, California, was taken into custody for shooting his son in the head. The minister had shot his son before, about five years ago.

NEW MEXICO Minister Walter Grassie, 50, has been sentenced to 15 years in federal prison for setting fire to, or vandalising four Mormon churches.

TAMPA, Florida, church deacon Sam Smithers, 46, has been sentenced to death for the brutal murder of two prostitutes. In 1996 he choked and stabbed Denise Roach, 24, and dumped her body in a pond. Two weeks later he murdered Christy Cowan, 31, with an axe and a hoe. During his trial, the court was told that Smithers had suffered childhood abuse from his fanatically religious mother, and was extremely emotionally disturbed.

MICHIGAN retired Baptist minister Stewart Cuthbertson, 69, has been sentenced by a court to a year's home confinement after being convicted of possessing child pornography with an incest theme.

He is also prohibited from visiting his grandchildren alone.

CALIFORNIAN pastor Kerry Clyde Martin, 43, was given a 205-year and eight month prison sentence for raping a teenage member of his Temecula Baptist Church.

Negative treatment

IF BRITAIN'S militant Muslims have their way it will soon be illegal to criticise their religion. The danger, as Polly Toynbee indicated in the *Guardian* on October 29, comes from a proposed religious discrimination act which they - and possibly the courts - might well take to include exposure of the absurdities and practices of the faith. The confusion between criticism and discrimination was noticeable in a reply to Polly Toynbee on November 1 from Annie Harper of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

While Harper shared "to some extent...concerns about a proposed new law which would outlaw religious discrimination", she accused Polly Toynbee of demonstrating "exactly why more and more British Muslims feel that they need some sort of protection against the discrimination which they suffer due to the widespread and extremely negative views of their religion, views which are based largely on ignorance and fear". Islam, it seems, needs to be legally protected against negative views!

Mind you, Ms Harper understands why that religion conjures up "such negative reactions", and wants to educate us on "the difference between a small but violent element of political Islam, and the Islam that most Muslims believe in". So let us take two recent examples of some not-so-small Islamic elements' behaviour as reported recently in the press.

Jordan, whose Harrow-educated late king was always a welcome visitor to these shores, boasts a law which permits husbands and fathers who kill female relatives to go free if the victim has committed adultery (September 7). And in Saudi Arabia 87 people have been publicly beheaded so far this year (September 30).

You can't get more negative than that.

Discrimination in action

WHILE on the subject, we might notice the fatwa issued by our own "discriminated" Muslims against the playwright Terrence McNally for his play *Corpus Christi*, in which Jesus Christ, a "messenger of God" in the Koran, is portrayed as a homosexual (see full report, page 5)

Not content with that, Omar Bakri Muhammad, who signed the fatwa, accused the Christian churches of "blasphemy" for not taking action against the play.

However, he warned individual Muslims not to attempt the assassination themselves: it could only be carried out by an Islamic state. The advice to Terrence McNally, then, is to steer clear of Saudi Arabia.

Wooing the Hindu

HINDUS and Buddhists must look out, I said last month, because America's Southern Baptist Church was preparing conversion manuals for them. I was only just in time, so far as the Hindus are concerned; the campaign for their conversion to "the true" faith in Jesus Christ was timed to coincide with the Hindu festival of Diwali, which began on November 3. To complicate matters, Pope John Paul II arrived in India a few days later, announcing a mission to convert the whole of Asia to his brand of Christianity.

"Just as the first millennium saw the cross firmly planted in the soil of Europe, and the second in that of America and Africa, so may the third Christian millennium witness a great harvest of faith on this vast and vital continent", the Pope told a crowd in New Delhi (*Guardian*, November 8). But, added the rather pathetic, ageing pontiff, the missionaries would have to be "on fire with the love of Christ and burning with zeal to make him known, loved and followed".

Southern Baptists could hardly deny the vastness of India, but they didn't see much that was vital there. Bombay, for instance, was "a city of spiritual darkness" with eight out of ten people "bound by fear and tradition to false gods and goddesses"; while "Satan has retained his hold on Calcutta through Kali and other gods and goddesses of Hinduism".

I hold no brief for Hinduism, but here, surely, is a case for the Indians telling Protestants and Catholics a plague on both your houses, which I have no doubt they will.

No longer angry with God

CLIFF Richard's faith has apparently recovered from the shaking it received over the death of Jill Dando. You may remember ("Down to Earth", October) that he was "really angry with God" and "screamed and railed" at him. Now, with Christmas coming, God's negligence over the murder has been overlooked. Sir Cliff is again praising him in a new single, the *Millennium Prayer*, which was hyped by the *Daily Mail* and will doubtless be

played in churches up and down the country.

But the radio stations are less enthusiastic and, even without hearing it, I must say I can't blame them. It's described as the *Lord's Prayer* sung to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne*, which sounds like something from Radio 4's *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*.

No place at the table

I HAVE nothing against Tessa Sanderson or Bobby Charlton, and I enjoy Ronnie Barker and Diana Rigg, although I can't say the same about Margaret Thatcher. But that's not the point I want to make here. These, and another 350 or so, were the Queen's guests for luncheon at the Mansion House on November 2, described as the "most high-powered and celebrated" event of the 20th century, honouring "high achievers from every walk of British life".

Were there any scientists there?

As I wasn't present and haven't seen the guest list provided at each place setting, I don't know; but if so, the *Guardian* didn't consider them worthy of mention alongside Lloyd-Webber, Tim Rice, Lester Piggott and a host of others.

Either way, this is another example of British scientists' inferior status compared with the stars of sport and entertainment.

Invisible immensity

THE influence of the former chief rabbi, Lord Jakobovits, who died at the end of October, was "immense", if his successor, Jonathan Sacks is to be believed. Matthew Engel does not believe it (*Guardian*, November 2). Although Jakobovits held the grandiose title "Chief Rabbi of the United Congregations of the Commonwealth" for 24 years, he represented only the United Synagogue, one of at least seven main branches of Anglo-Jewry. And, said Engel, far more Jews had "opted out completely".

According to Rabbi Sack's office, there are now 285,000 Jews in Britain, half the number of 50 years ago. So, whatever "immense" influence Jakobovits had, it can't have been among his disunited Hebrew brethren.

Atheists and Death

At the end of his article, *Atheists and Death*, which appeared in the September issue of the *Freethinker*, Colin McCall ended with the words ... "Over to you, now, readers."

The response was so great that we have decided to draw together the various strands of thought in the letters we received on the subject, and will be publishing them in the form of an article early in 2000.

Stuff your prayers, have a good belly laugh instead

Having signally failed in their efforts to demonstrate that believers are more *moral* than non-believers, religionists – it would now appear – are changing tack by claiming that those who embrace faith are *healthier* in mind and body than the faithless.

This idea is equally ludicrous – but it has nevertheless taken hold in at least one area of the insurance industry. Earlier this year, a Swedish insurer Ansvar began offering discounts to “active church-goers” and non-drinkers, as these people are considered to live “responsible and positive lifestyles”.

At about the same time, surfing the internet, I came across a serious article in the normally satirical pages of the *Fearsome Atheist* web magazine which examined research carried out several years ago by Dr Harold Koenig of Duke University. This tended to show exactly the opposite was true, with Koenig stating that it was “far from clear whether religious beliefs and behaviour actually help to prevent or relieve emotional distress ... Psychiatric illness may be even more common among the religious, perhaps predisposing them to greater problems in later life...” (Koenig, *American Journal of Psychiatry* 1992; 149:1693-1700).

According to the article this study also noted that previous research had found that conservative, fundamentalist, or evangelical Protestants were, as a group, more likely to have “chronic health problems and physical disabilities”. (Koenig, *J. Geriatric Psychiatry*).

In a subsequent study, Koenig confirmed that “several studies have reported an association between psychiatric disorder and religious affiliation, with rates of disorder highest among non-mainline Protestant groups”. In fact, the study showed that this highly religious group had psychiatric disorders at a rate 50 per cent higher than that of the general public. (National Institutes of Mental Health, *Update on Mental Disorders*, 1993)

A more objective review of the data from this 1992 study also reveals that people who expressed strong religious beliefs were hospitalised with acute illnesses (such as cancer, heart disease, kidney disease, respiratory disease, and neurological dysfunction) at rates two to four times higher than those who expressed “no religious preference”.

It is likely that religious belief does indeed help some people feel better by suggesting that

they are wanted, that they are loved by a divine being, and if they just believe that God will make them better, the deity will make it so. In fact, it has been known for years that a positive attitude toward improving health does help you to get better.

However, this must be weighed against the fact that encouraging people to believe that faith-healing works produces the type of thinking that resulted in the deaths of six children

NSS registers a complaint against Ansvar

NEWS THAT Eastbourne-based Ansvar was offering discounts to believers on its House Connect Policy brought a swift response from the National Secular Society. In a letter to the Association of British Insurers, the NSS complained that this actually amounted to an unfair loading of premiums against atheists.

NSS General Secretary, Keith Porteous Wood said: “Our organisation has campaigned for over a century against religious privilege, and this is a blatant example of it. Even the Association of British Insurers doesn’t know of any statistics to support the idea that church-goers are a better insurance risk than others. The idea that the religiously-inclined automatically live more positive lifestyles because of their faith is an insult to the many morally upright atheists in this country who live very positive lives. Imagine the uproar there would be if the insurance company tried to disadvantage believers in this way. There would be court cases and demonstrations galore, as well as claims of religious persecution. The insurance policy is just plain discriminatory and has echoes of the huge premiums that were charged to gay men during the AIDS panic – whether or not they were HIV positive.”

Mr Porteous Wood continued: “There are other ridiculous elements to this policy, such as believers having to take out add-ons if they want cover that extends to acts of God. It seems that even believers can’t trust God not to send an earthquake or hurricane to destroy their houses. I expect they’ll write that off as being the price you pay for believing in God’s famously mysterious ways.”

in Pennsylvania from measles in 1991 because parents in a faith-healing congregation refused to allow them to be immunised. Dozens more would have died if the State had not obtained a court order to immunise the remaining children in the church. Parents of another faith-healing congregation in Pennsylvania are being brought to court for letting their 16-year-old daughter die of totally preventable diabetes complications. They used oil anointments and prayer instead of insulin, with decidedly deadly results.

The article went on to report that neurologist Barry Brittman, at an American Association for Therapeutic Humour meeting, presented a paper on the healing effects of comedy.

Blood tests on patients who watched comedy videos showed boosted levels of some immune system molecules (such as various immunoglobulins and natural killer cells). (*Scientific American*, April 1998).

This adds to the evidence that a person’s mood can alter the body’s physiology in ways that can affect its ability to fight diseases and heal – which is almost certainly how prayer may work.

“However,” the article concluded, “an interesting question is raised in what exactly the healing effects would be of having a comedian make fun of religion while people prayed for you – would it lead to doubled positive effects of health-improvement or would a bout of wrath from God cancel the two effects out?”

“In the same vein, we’ve always wondered what would happen, given that cats always land right-side-up and toast always lands butter-side down, exactly what would occur if you were to strap a piece of toast on a cat’s back –butter side up – then dropped the cat off a roof.

“One school of thought insists that the cat would land on its side – the logic behind this theory being that the toast would be inclined to fall butter-side down, thereby partially cancelling the cat’s ability to land on its feet.

“Others disagree, favouring the ‘perpetual motion’ theory – that is, the subject would stop, approximately one foot from the ground, and start spinning at several hundred revolutions per minute as a result of the cat’s rotational forces working in direct opposition to the rotational forces of the toast.”

The National Secular Society's latest Annual Report reflects a year of intense activity, the h

This was the year that the Church of England seemed, at last, to be giving serious consideration to disestablishment. Reports emerged of a series of "secret" meetings attended by senior C of E figures, royal advisers and academics. One of these, lasting three days, was held at Windsor Castle.

It was also the year that the Archbishop of Canterbury claimed that Britain has "an allergy to religion" and that the C of E was "with-in a generation of extinction".

Within these twelve months the Catholic Church admitted that attendances at mass were "haemorrhaging" and had hit new lows.

The Methodists now have so few worshippers that they are making overtures to the Anglicans with a view to a merger.

The year also saw a rekindling of interest in Darwinism in Britain, and a slew of excellent books has been published on the topic. Our Honorary Associate Ludovic Kennedy also brought discussion of atheism to the fore with the publication of his book *All in the Mind: A Farewell to God*. A N Wilson charted the decline in religious belief in this country in his book *God's Funeral*.

All good news, you might think, for those of us who consider religion often to be a malevolent force in the world, and wish to see it weakened to the point where it can do no more harm. Unfortunately, although religion may be dead for the majority of people in Britain, it won't lie down. It still has friends in high places. And its entrenched power – quite unjustifiable in terms of its popular support – is as strong as ever, and growing.

Beleaguered as it is, the religious establishment has found a powerful ally in the present Government. For the first time in living memory we have a Prime Minister who takes religion seriously and thinks that it has something worthwhile to contribute to the development of society, and Mr Blair is anxious that his enthusiasm for God be inflicted on us all.

As one of our Honorary Associates, Jonathan Meades, so cogently put it in *The Times*: "If you believe in the existence of fairies at the bottom of the garden you are deemed fit for the bin. If you believe in parthenogenesis, ascension, transubstantiation and all the rest of it you are deemed fit to govern the country."

Around the world, extremists continue their reign of terror, with endless massacres being perpetrated in Algeria, Kosovo, and latterly Indonesia. Those doubting the continuing baleful influence of religion on the world stage need only look at a few headlines gathered from the press this year:

"The silence of the imams while another child dies" – *Observer*; "Spice Islands hit by new religious violence" – *Guardian*; "Marchers in Pakistan demand Taslima Nasreen's death", "Tehran puts military on war alert" and "Israel warned of new threat to peace" – all from *The Times*; "Muslim rebels kill 35" – *Daily Telegraph*; "Algerian extremists kill 45 villagers", "Muslim mob kills eight in Indonesia", and "If our women are unfaithful, we kill them" – *Guardian*;

As Revd Michael Marshall wrote in the *Church of England Newspaper* in September 1999: "When religion and politics converge and combine their forces in a single-minded zeal to do what no lesser power than God himself has instructed them to do, then dive for cover. The unchecked crusading spirit in the name of religion has shed rivers of blood throughout history. Any review of contemporary newspapers would suggest that the danger from religious zealots, far from abating, is perilously and increasingly in evidence as we come to the close of the millennium."

The domestic situation in the United States gives cause for particular concern as the stranglehold of religious fundamentalists increases. Their Bible belt is increasingly in the thrall of televangelists such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

The role of religion in American politics seems to be growing at an alarming rate as the President is forced to consult preachers at prayer breakfasts about the best way to repent his sins of the flesh. And the candidates for the next presidential election are falling over themselves to prove that they are holier than their competitors.

Unfortunately, the only people whose opinions seem to matter any longer in the USA are the religious extremists. And they're becoming wilder and madder as their power-base expands.

Let us hope that Mr Blair is not taking the American political system as his model. Over there, suggestion of unbelief will destroy a career faster than committing murder.

The Governor of Minnesota was foolhardy enough to say in an interview that he thought that religion was a huge confidence trick perpetrated on the weak-minded. Within hours, his poll rating had fallen by 25 per cent.

With 97 per cent of the population claiming to go to church regularly, the USA is well on the way to becoming a *de facto* theocracy. The country has the highest murder rate of any Western nation. It executes more people (most of them black) than anywhere except Saudi Arabia. Although of course there are many

highly cultured individuals there, it is one of the most corrupt, crime-ridden, materialistic and shallow cultures in the world.

At least almost everyone there loves God!

OPPOSING EVERY INCH

The present Pope is obsessed with artificial contraception, and particularly condoms. He is prepared to see women, already living in extreme poverty, unnecessarily burdened with huge families. These could of course be prevented were the women to have free access to contraception and be taught how to use it. Pregnancy and childbirth in many poor countries are often perilous, yet women are denied the means of controlling their fertility at the whim of an aged religious fanatic in Rome.

Condoms have also been shown to protect against AIDS, a disease which is ravaging many African and Asian countries. The Executive Director of UNICEF, the UN Children Fund, told an Aids conference in Lusaka: "Aids killed two million Africans last year, ten times as many as those who died in armed conflict".

On this showing, we are inclined to support George Monbiot's call in the *Guardian* for Pope John Paul II to be indicted for crimes against humanity.

The most important campaign this year was our contribution to the debate on the reform of the House of Lords. The removal of the Bench of Bishops from the Lords is, of course, one of the core objectives of the Society.

The Royal Commission received some 1,700 written representations. Only a handful of these was selected to be the subject of oral evidence – and the NSS was one of these. We believe that our Submission may well have made the Government realise just how untenable the C of E's position is.

The Royal Commission is due to report before the end of 1999. A leaked early draft of their Report suggested that the Commission would not be recommending any extension of *ex officio* seats to other denominations and faiths, and that the Bishops' Bench should be reduced – but only by 10 places to 16.

If the final recommendations on religious representation correspond to the leaks, we can

Annual Report, published in November, the highlights of which are set out below

CAMPAIGNING

be pleased that our recommendations appear to have been heeded over any extension, and probably in principle about the C of E bishops.

As we enter the 21st Century it is shameful

RELIGION OF THE WAY

for the UK to retain religious representatives in its legislature – the only Western Democracy to do so.

Just after last year's Annual Report went to press, we launched a major campaign (endorsed *nem con* at the 1998 AGM) against the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860. This law is an example of religious privilege in that it is much harsher than breach of the peace legislation but only operative in places of worship and surrounding land. Peter Tatchell was charged under this Act for a human rights protest as the Archbishop of Canterbury was delivering his Easter sermon at Canterbury Cathedral. Fifty prominent names lent support to the Society's campaign. About ten of these, including the Bishop of Edinburgh, head of the Scottish Episcopal Church, endorsed our campaign in a letter published in *The Times* on the first morning of the trial. This media reaction caused millions of people to see or hear of the Society for the first time in the most successful publicity exercise for many years.

At least four Bishops have asserted that the BBC is neglecting its duty to broadcast religious programmes and has downgraded the religious output on television. We responded to their continuing campaign being waged in the newspapers. We were able to point out (in letters to *The Times* and *Guardian*) that there is a huge amount of religious broadcasting.

During last Advent and Christmas there were 50 hours of religious broadcasting, which included a Christmas Day radio service and a televised Christmas Eve service (surely more than adequate for those unable to visit a church themselves). We pointed out that, despite declining interest in religion, there is still 700 hours of radio and TV religious broadcasting each year.

Further pressure on the BBC is being mounted by a letter-writing campaign on religious broadcasting, orchestrated by a correspondent to the *Church of England Newspaper*

letters pages. This whole area is one we will be monitoring carefully. On the other hand, we have complained to the BBC about the uncritical presentation of alternative medicine and psychics such as Uri Geller in what purports to be a science slot on BBC Breakfast News.

We challenged the Chairman of the Advertising Standards Authority, Lord Rodgers, after reports that a clergyman had been appointed to its board in order to vet advertising with a religious theme. We even offered to nominate a representative of the NSS to join the Authority's governing body to ensure that freedom of expression was not compromised by the demands of "religious sensibilities".

This incident illustrates the increasing problem of religious people not only insinuating themselves into every aspect of public life but also using these positions to push a (sometimes disturbingly authoritarian) religious agenda. The Government is certainly not discouraging this.

The many quangos, advisory bodies and watchdog organisations that can influence public decision-making are being packed with religious activists. We need more humanists and secularists also to put themselves forward for such positions of influence.

The busy year for the Society – both on the domestic and international front – has helped to raise our profile in the media and gain a wider public awareness of our existence. The promulgation of secular humanist ideas and philosophy is more important now than ever

before, and in order to get our message over we have used every means of communication at our disposal.

During the past twelve months television, radio, newspapers and the Internet have all been exploited.

Religion has vast resources at its disposal, it has armies of volunteers all anxious to perpetuate the myths and increase the power-base; it also has a seemingly bottomless pit of money, some of it even sent here from the US.

We, on the other hand, are a small band, no less committed, but, in comparison, vastly under-resourced. It can seem an uphill task at times trying to speak out against the exploitation and self-serving antics of the various religious bodies.

It is some consolation that broadcasters and journalists are increasingly seeking our voice. Many of them are anxious that the over-mighty churches and the superstitious nonsense of the New Agers, for example, should not go unchallenged.

Although there are occasional references to the Society in the news pages, however, the letters pages of the *Daily Telegraph* remain closed to us, and will probably continue to be so as long as Charles Moore, an over-enthusiastic Catholic, remains editor.

The Times media editor reported that staff at the *Daily Telegraph* are becoming alarmed by that paper's over-emphasis on religion – it even gave away free copies of the gospels, and for a week devoted large parts of its editorial column to biblical quotations.

Religious discrimination (continued from p4)

by its spokesperson Lord Bassam of Brighton.

He noted that "the Human Rights Act is about balance: balancing one right with another and balancing rights with responsibilities."

"We believe in practice that most cases [of racial crime], which may appear to have a religious element, will also have a racial element. ... It follows that even if there is religious hostility, provided that part of the hostility is racist the offence is covered by [the Crime and Disorder Act 1998]."

He acknowledged that as a result of case law, Sikhs and Jews—as groups capable of being defined by their ethnic origins—are protected by the Race Relations Act 1976, unlike Muslims, Christians and other faiths. He opined, however, "that in the vast majority of cases discrimination suffered by followers of minority faiths is based on their ethnicity rather than their beliefs."

Like other speakers, Lord Bassam of Brighton, commenting on behalf of the Government, was not convinced that extending Northern Ireland legislation was the appropriate way forward. He did, however, give an assurance that careful consideration would be given to incitement to religious hatred.

"This is a complex and sensitive area and it would be wrong of the Government to legislate without first having a clear understanding of the nature and scale of the mischief that needs to be addressed.

I have made many references in my speech to the paucity of evidence on which the Government are prepared to act in this area. I hope that noble Lords will not think that we see such a lack of evidence as justification for pushing this important issue aside. Nothing could be further from the truth."

BOTH HERE and abroad, churches are this year preparing to celebrate two thousand years of Christian history. But not everything in that history fits into the picture clerical spin-doctors wish to present. Much is deliberately left out; most consistently chapters revealing negative aspects of the Christian experience. In the following I shall try to balance the picture by pointing out just a few of the many chapters of infamy and terror in the history of Christendom in Europe.

I shall by-pass the bloody mess of the original crusades and start in the early 13th century with the crusades against the Albigensians in the South of France, where thousands were slaughtered as a punishment for refusing to accept the doctrines of the Church. The crusades were officially launched by the Pope, and the ensuing massacres were carried out as directed by the Church.

Then there was the bloody week in late August 1572, when the Catholics in France found that "religious cleansing" was the right solution and went on to murder thousands of Protestants. The lowest estimate suggests at least 10,000 victims. Another estimate quotes 50,000 as a more likely figure.

Witches

Among the many curses brought upon the peoples of Europe by religious beliefs, the persecution of witches was clearly in the premier league, at least as far as viciousness and stupidity were concerned. Hundreds of thousands of innocent people, mostly women, were burnt alive as a punishment for "consorting with the Devil". In most cases the accused women would have suffered the most degrading treatment as well as cruel torture before meeting their death in the flames. As instigators and directors of these obscene and disgraceful proceedings we find, of course, the various Churches of Christ. I suppose most of the clergy involved saw themselves as executors of the Divine Will and thought that their actions were a Christian duty. Today's theologians will no doubt disown their colleagues from those days. What happened in the name of the Lord in the 16th and 17th centuries was not, they will say, the responsibility of the Christian God. There are, however, a couple of questions that will not go away unless, of course, the present God is a recent creation who was not yet around in the bad old days. The questions are:

1. Why didn't God clearly and unequivocally tell His ordained representatives on Earth that they were on the wrong path? As one "for whom nothing is impossible", He should have been able to manage that; and

2. Why didn't the Almighty do anything to protect and save the innocent victims?

"Simply because He never existed", would be my answer. But what would the Archbishops' answer be?

The 17th-century wars of religion had many aspects, but at the core was the aggressive use of military force to suppress the Reformation and re-establish Catholic control and domination in areas where people had turned their backs on Rome. These wars, where conflicting Christian confessions were the inspiration and driving force, lasted 30 years, caused widespread epidemics and starvation, cost millions of lives, inflicted terrible suffering on ordinary folk and left vast areas devastated.

Anyone tempted to dismiss these glimpses of the past as water under the bridge with no relevance to the present, should look to Northern Ireland, where for the last 30 years Catholics have been murdering Protestants and vice versa, often with no better pretext than the difference in religious allegiance.

And then look to Bosnia, where Catholics, the Orthodox and Muslims were slaughtering one another in their thousands for nearly four years. They are all of the same stock; they all belong to the same branch of the Slav ethnic tree and they all speak the same language. But one group, the Serbs, came in the distant past under the Byzantine Empire and Greek-Orthodox discipline. Another group, the Croats, came first under West-Roman and later Hapsburg control and were brought up as Catholics. The third group adopted Islam while they were under Turkish rule. Politically, Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims have been united through most of this century. But the curse of divisive religious beliefs, imposed by past imperial and ecclesiastical masters, continues to haunt them. Genetically, linguistically and in origin they are one and the same people, but they are split and mutually murderously antagonised by religion. If it hadn't been for

(Continued on page 13)

Making peace with the world

by Harold Hillman

ONE WOULD like to make peace, before one dies, with many people whom one might have wronged, or might believe that one has wronged. The Catholics have "Last Rites", but since they believe in a world to come, they may believe that living people can somehow communicate with the dead long after they are buried.

Of course, we believe that death is the end, so it occurred to me that we might like to make a particular statement to our relatives and friends.

This would cover the main elements of our relationships, to make the lives of the mourners easier, and to improve the feelings towards the dead person after his or her demise.

Such a statement would contain a number of sentiments, which the dying person would like to have expressed when their minds were clear, but were unable to do so in the medical and physiological circumstances of their demise.

The statement is not meant to be comprehensive, and it would be useful if it could be improved and added to. I would be very pleased to rewrite it completely as a result of other suggestions. However, even then, individual people on the occasion of their dying might want to leave out some elements of it, or add further ones.

- I am not afraid to die, because there must be space for future generations.

- I am sorry if my death causes pain, grief, loss, or inconvenience to anyone else.

- I wish to thank all those who have loved me, who have helped me, and who have been kind to me, especially...

- I apologise to those to whom I have been unjust, unkind or insensitive, whether deliberately or accidentally. I am also sorry if my personal or intellectual disagreements have hurt others. I would particularly like to apologise to...

- I ask my relatives and friends to look after those in my circle who need physical or moral support.

- I have not revoked the belief in the justice of any of the causes I embraced actively in the past, (except for)...

- I have made a will to distribute my property and assets, as I think justly.

- I say farewell to all my relatives and friends.

- I wish you all happiness and success in the future.

- I do not wish my death to be regarded as a solemn occasion.

Thank you and farewell.

THE BARMAID tops up my Guinness and passes it over the bar. There's something rather odd about it though. The motif impressed into the head isn't the usual shamrock; it's a pentacle. Now I come to look at her, the barmaid too is somewhat out of the ordinary: long black hair and flowing black clothes including black lace fingerless gloves. She's all in black in fact – as black as the Guinness except for ghostly white face and vivid red lips.

This is no ordinary evening in the pub. Our Goth-vampire barmaid has made a special effort in aid of Bristol's monthly Pagan Moot, a sort of social gathering for Addams Family rejects. Fittingly picturesque venue is the city's oldest (1606) pub, the Hatchet, once a favoured venue for rat-catching, cock-fighting and the like. Legend has it layers of human skin were found under the doorstep during one long ago refit.

I venture past the *Private Party – No Entry* sign near the CD juke box and go into the back bar, where activities are already under way, to seek out my chum the Satanist. Black also predominates the view here. Dyed black hair, black robes and black leather are the order of the day. Body piercings and extensive tattoos are also in evidence. Disappointingly, there's no sign of broomsticks or pointed hats though. Here and there the odd fairisle jumper or other conventional garb interrupts the general heavy-metal-concert-meets-Halloween-party theme.

My chum the Satanist has a shaven head and bottle-end glasses. Having renounced the Christian Scientist creed of his parents, he now likes to call himself the Second Most Evil Man in the World, but actually he's a lovely chap: hobbies are gardening, 78 rpm records and cut glass. He beckons me over to his group. Women dominate the numbers at the Moot, but he and a few male chums have a table to themselves in a corner. "It's just like apartheid," he complains when I point out the segregation to my chum. "The women Pagans don't talk to us much because we don't worship their Goddess."

"That's right," says a young man claiming to belong to the Knights Templar. Members of his faith worship a severed head in a box, apparently. A male severed head no doubt. "I used to be a Jehovah's Witness," he divulges later.

An Uncle Fester lookalike tells me that UFOs have been seen coming out of a hole in the ground in the Forest of Dean. He doesn't say what religion he's rebelling against. Perhaps he's one of several recovering Catholics I'm told are present.

"I'm a hedge witch," a large bearded man in a woolly hat informs me, in between sucks on a clay pipe. "That means I work on my own, doing a bit of healing with herbs and plants." The theory is that modern Pagans have tapped into Britain's pre-Christian roots, worshipping

our own indigenous Celtic deities of fertility, seasons and elements.

A Bristol University history professor is a world authority in this field, giving lectures with titles like *The Pagan Roots of Christmas*. Few of tonight's Pagans attend his talks, I'm told, preferring to derive their inspiration more from Hammer horror films and other modern popular cultural sources.

The level of conversation tonight is certainly more like a down-market women's magazine.

"What's your sign?" asks an elderly male astrologer as a few female Pagans eventually come on over. I invite him to tell me. After quizzing me, he takes eleven guesses to get it, to the amusement of female and male listeners alike. This is soon shrugged off however, the consensus being that there was a profound sort of negative accuracy in the wrongness of his guesses.

Our astrologer moves cheerfully on to the next table, where someone needs a dream explaining.

In 1973 a film named *The Wicker Man* shocked British audiences. Edward Woodward stars as a mainland policeman called to a private Scottish island to investigate a missing girl. Soon he is entrapped in a web of intrigue involving Pagan ceremonies, unbridled enjoyment of sex, and suspected human sacrifice.

Outlandish though *The Wicker Man* may have

seemed at the time, Paganism is now nothing out of the ordinary. It's as common as the mods and rockers, punks and skinheads of earlier times. On a walk up Glastonbury Tor recently I found a small posse of longhairs ostentatiously worshipping at the foot of the tower.

But up close and David-Attenborough-personal, the word that best sums up your modern Pagans is – tame.

The Moot is the place to show off your clothes, or plan the next visit to the tattoo parlour, that is when you're not trying to outdo your peers in the silliness of your professed beliefs.

The witches and warlocks present might do the odd bit of nudie dancing round the bonfire on Walpurgis Night for all I know, but on tonight's evidence they seem generally more preoccupied with Paganism as a sort of fashion accessory.

We used to have talks here, but now it's really just a socialising session," the Secretary-witch of the Moot admits as we prepare to leave at the end of the evening. She's a rotund housewife with two kids. "Have a copy of our newsletter; it's got our website address on it," she adds.

"See you next time," I reply, and I mean it too. I'll have to come back, as I seem to have been volunteered to be in a Pagan pub quiz team along with my Satanist chum and his pals. What next: jam-making or tea and cucumber sandwiches on the coven lawn?

Holy Clangers

by Bill McIlroy

ONLY THE most determined of Christian fundamentalists in places like Northern Ireland or the Bible Belt of the United States believe that the "word of God" is infallible from the first word of Genesis to the last dot of Revelation. What Gladstone described as "the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture" is, of course, a collection of writings and ravings by unknown authors at uncertain dates. It is on this mishmash of myth, legend, absurdities, contradictions and unfulfilled prophecies that the Christian faith rests.

Nevertheless the Bible is accorded inordinate respect and a privileged place in Parliament, courts of law and the education system. Wealthy groups like the Gideons place copies in hospital wards, waiting rooms and other public places.

Recently there was a moving plea in my local newspaper for a section of the Millennium Dome to be devoted to the Bible. But the question arises: which Bible? For although claimed to be the inerrant and unchanging word of the Deity, hundreds of translations and editions have appeared from the 1520s to the present day.

Christian sects publish their own versions, all divinely-inspired – and all different. But whatever their status, certain editions of the Bible will not be displayed at the Millennium Dome – or anywhere for that matter. They contain errors indicating that the Great Proof Reader in the Sky nodded off at times and allowed typographical errors to slip through.

For example, in what became known as the Fool's Bible, the word "no" in the first verse of Psalm 14 became "a" so that it read: "The fool hath said in his heart there is a God."

Worse still was the Adulterous Bible of 1641 – also known as the Wicked Bible – in which the vital word "not" was omitted from the Seventh Commandment. No doubt young bucks were delighted to read: "Thou shalt commit adultery."

A fine of £300 for this calamitous oversight put the printer out of business.

Atheists have got it all wrong; the missionaries were the *good* guys

I HAVE been reading recent monthly editions of the magazine and I found it at times sneeringly malicious, and at other times incredibly naive, confirming for me why I am not an atheist, but a believer in Jesus and the Christian cause. What prompted me to put pen to paper was a piece written by *Freethinker* editor Barry Duke (*FT* August issue) concerning an African missionary he encountered travelling through the Lewisham shopping centre.

What spunk! Mr Duke presented to the missionary "a magazine which says Christianity is rubbish". He then went on to lecture the missionary on what it's like to live "in Western liberal democracy where there is free speech ... absence of food shortages and terrible diseases" etc. He then pointed out: "We had learned the hard way that religion is a fatal impediment to social progress." He concluded his lecture, which could have been entitled *The Land flowing with Milk and Honey and Glorious Riches*, with: "So I would suggest that instead of trying to spread Christianity in Britain, you return to Africa and begin to reverse the terrible damage the British missionaries did to your continent." What spunk indeed!

Now let's examine whether this charge that "religion is a fatal impediment to social progress" is true of the Christian religion in every detail, and if other aspects of Mr Duke's free-flowing statements are factually accurate, or just another typical atheistic-designed optical illusion.



Florence Nightingale: was she really motivated by Christianity?

In the 1860s and 1870s, Dr Barnardo, pioneer social worker, founded homes for destitute boys and girls. William Booth, social reformer, established facilities to help the poor. A leading British Parliamentarian – one of a number – Lord Shaftesbury, persuaded Parliament to enact laws stopping five to seven-year-olds sweeping chimneys, working in factories, and down coal mines, and he achieved improvements to the water supplies, and sewer systems; he worked also for the abolition of slavery, and founded schools for poor children. John Wesley, clergyman, initiated a "loan fund" in the 1700s for society's unfortunate. Louis Pasteur's scientific discoveries

If "Christianity is rubbish" why have believers in Christianity been more philanthropic than any believer in atheism?

were of great benefit to humanity. Sir James Young Simpson, doctor, was credited with validating an anaesthetic which was helpful in child birth, while Jean Henri Dunant founded the International Red Cross. Florence Nightingale, a pioneer of modern nursing in the 1850s, founded in the 1860s a professional nursing school at St Thomas Hospital. Last but definitely not least, Elizabeth Fry, pioneer prison reformer, who aroused officialdom's conscience over their treatment of prisoners in general. Now tell me how were these people – who were not on the side of impediment, only progress – responsible for impeding social progress by their Christian actions? How can this kind of Christianity be described as "a fatal impediment to social progress?" Furthermore, if the evidence is undeniable that Christianity has inspired human compassion and progress around the world and over centuries, wherein then lies this "impediment to social progress?"

True, there were reactionary forces, both

religious and non-religious, standing on the sidelines carping for their own personal extravagant reasons. Nevertheless, despite the strength of feelings by certain among the non-religious against all Christians; and by certain among the religious against some, if not all, of these pioneering Christians, representatives of the Christian religion remained at the forefront of social reforms.

Even in education, right here in Britain, Christians have led the way. In his book, *Discussion in History of Education in Great Britain*, S J Curtis says: "In these days, when men are apt to associate education predominantly with the state, it is useful to remind ourselves and others that our English schools were the creation of the Church and took their rise almost at the same time as the introduction of Christianity into this island."

Today we find atheist blasphemers stalking our schools, colleges and universities trying to expunge all and any positive mentions of God or Christianity, as if it were atheism that first brought altruism into education. That's strange. Still stranger, atheists claim that atheist secularism has a place in such institutions, but Christianity definitely not.

Coming now to Mr Duke's comment to the African missionary: "So I would suggest that ... you return to reverse the terrible damage the British missionaries did to your continent." If he really believes that establishing schools, clinics, hospitals, and chapels constitutes "terrible damage" I wonder how he would have described British, Dutch and Portuguese colonisers and slave traffickers who were armed with guns, chains, whips, and evil intentions towards that continent's inhabitants. I would suggest that implements that cause death and terror in the hands of brutes were more capable of producing "terrible damage" than some lone missionary man or woman, armed with a Book, and the message contained within that Book. Genuine missionaries were not responsible for the very bad things Africa has incurred at the hands of white people, during or after colonisation.

Several decades ago William C Groves, of the Australian Natural Research Council, and researcher in Social Anthropology, looked into various charges brought by critics against missionary activities in general. He studied the Seventh Day Adventists, a Christian Protestant

denomination that had (and still does have) missionaries in the field. His report on his visit to Adventist missions in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea where white missionaries were in overall charge, was printed in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 1, 1934.

Groves reported: "...I could see no possible ill effects on their (the people of Mussau) social or economic lives. In fact, in the latter connection I found that under Naphtali's (a Christian Fijian teacher) leadership they had abundance of food, including varieties previously unknown ... improved housing and village hygiene may be expected as a result of the mission's example and teachings ... What a unique opportunity has the S D A Mission at Mussau starting in these days of educational enlightenment, to show all other organizations the way ..."

This is good testimony from an unbiased scientist. It shows that we have scientific proof



H L Mencken: a witness for Christ?

that missionaries have been a source for good, not evil. Turning to the testimony of one more witness – and you are not going to like this – a celebrated unbeliever writing in the 1830s in defence of "missionaries and missionary activity" and against their attackers:

"... Blame is attached to the missionary, instead of credit for that which he has effected. They forget, or will not remember, the human sacrifices, and the power of an idolatrous priesthood – a system of profligacy unparalleled in any other part of the world; infanticide, a consequence of that system – bloody wars, where the conquerors spared neither women nor children – that all these have been abolished; and that dishonesty, intemperance and licentiousness have been greatly reduced by the introduction of Christianity. In a voyager to forget these things is base ingratitude; for should he chance to be at the point of shipwreck on some unknown coast, he will most

devoutly pray that the lesson of the missionary may have extended thus far.

"The lesson of the missionary is the enchanter's wand. The house had been built, the windows framed, the fields ploughed, and even the trees grafted, by the New Zealander." – Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches*, pages 393, and 403.

Could we ask for a better witness than a famous unbeliever? Undoubtedly Mr Duke's brother in unbelief has demolished his "terrible damage" argument. If the success of missions is true in the South Seas, it's true of Borneo, China, or Africa. Charles Darwin is just the tip of the iceberg, for a number of others famous for their unbelief have also witnessed in print for the faith they had set their sails against. Amazing! Renowned unbelievers witnessing for Christ, the Bible, and for Christianity – men like H G Wells, Thomas H. Huxley, John Stuart Mill, William E H Lecky, Thomas Paine, Robert Ingersoll, H L Mencken, Herbert Spencer, George Romanes and others.

What is very interesting to me as a believer, is this: the vast majority of unbelievers – both past and present – know not that these men who had been fighting against Christianity for many years, and who are the heroes to many in atheism, wrote scintillating eulogies and admitted to having enthusiastic admiration for Christ, the Bible, and Christianity; and not just a line here or there, but whole paragraphs. Amazing! There is a further point of interest: there exists a minority of believers and unbelievers who know that these men wrote such things, but cannot understand why the majori-

ty of them didn't become Christians. That is to say, if they had placed strong reliance in their written statements, they *should* have become Christians. Why they didn't is surely one mystery that will remain a mystery, because they have taken the answer to their graves. Shame on them!

I conclude my comment on Barry Duke's gruelling of that African missionary, and his gleeful reporting of it in the *Freethinker*, with the thought that he was very presumptuous. He charged the Christian religion, then marched off as if the charge was proof in itself. I am therefore not impressed either by his taunts or the *Freethinker's* general charges against Christianity and Christians, for clearly they are born out of hatred, which makes such charges wholly unsound. If "Christianity is rubbish" why have believers in Christianity been more philanthropic than any believer in atheism?

Since Christianity truly has done good there must have been a time when it was never rubbish. If it was always rubbish as Barry Duke maintains, it could never have been good. But unbelievers admit Christianity did good, so if it did good, then there never was a time when it was rubbish. That's elementary.

I leave you with two words which passed the lips, during an unguarded moment on LBC Radio in 1997, of broadcaster, writer, and an extremely arrogant atheist, the late Benny Green who died of cancer last year. The words he used to conclude a conversation between him and a female caller to his programme were: "God Bless".

Time for Repentance (cont from p10)

NATO intervention, they would still have been busy cutting each others' throats. That's the blessing of religion for you.

For all too many centuries the Church was playing a dominant part in European history, suppressing and crushing intellectual freedom, blocking virtually all progress and keeping our part of the World in spiritual darkness and general stagnation.

As if that weren't enough, the Christian Church has by very far the longest record in criminal history when it comes to swindling gullible people out of goods and property.

To crown it all, the Church developed unsurpassed expertise at ruining people's peace of mind by keeping them in constant fear of Hell and Damnation.

Instead of being proudly celebratory, the Christian mood at the end of the 2nd Millennium should rather be one of humble repentance.

Atheist? Tell us why

IN THE NEW YEAR the *Freethinker* launches a *My Atheism* series in which people from all walks of life offer their personal accounts of how and when they came to reject religion.

We begin the series with a piece by the American writer John Lauritson.

If you would like to feature in this series, please submit your contribution – not exceeding 1,500 words – together with a photograph of yourself to:

My Atheism
The Freethinker
PO Box 26428
London SE10 9WH.

We are anxious to achieve a balance between young and old, and male and female contributors, and would particularly like to hear from members of ethnic communities.

Pope's positive attributes

I READ with interest Mr S C Chumbley's and Mr Keith Ackerman's criticisms of my defence of the Catholic Church (*Points of View*, November). Certainly though Pope John Paul II is too conservative regarding certain aspects of Liberation Theology in other respects he is sympathetic to it. Liberation Theologians have often quoted the Pope where appropriate to support their views.

Mr Chumbley believes the Church wishes there to be poverty so it can produce people like Mother Teresa of Calcutta to show mercy and compassion ... It is as absurd to argue that as it is absurd to argue that socialists wish there to be poverty so they can redistribute wealth.

I am not obscene in condemning abortion. If a man and woman freely have sexual intercourse and a living entity results it is murder to destroy it.

Keith J Ackermann argues Catholicism breeds antisemitism. Certainly Pope Pius XII did not condemn the Holocaust sufficiently. Lech Walesa, to his discredit, did not like Jews. Yet the present Pope has condemned antisemitism and says Judaism is the religion closest to Christianity. Unlike any of his predecessors he has prayed in a Jewish Synagogue

ANDREW HARVEY
Carlisle

Wicked institution

IT SEEMS to me that Andrew Harvey (*Points of View*, Oct) does not appear to understand that as well as being the greatest system of appalling superstition still surviving in the modern world, the Roman Catholic Church represents the most profoundly and shockingly wicked institution that has ever existed. The crimes of this church chill the blood and stun the intellect.

Let me hasten to add that I am not referring to the well-documented horrors of the Inquisition and the atrocities of the European Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th centuries, but the horrors that have been perpetrated in our own century.

I wonder how many people are aware of the horrendous crimes committed in Croatia between 1941 and 1944 by the Catholic Fascist terrorist organisation known as the Ustasa. This appalling Fascist movement was responsible for the forced conversion of some 240,000 Orthodox Serbs to Roman Catholicism and it was also responsible for the death of some 750,000 Orthodox Serbs. There was the closest possible co-operation between

the Catholic clergy and the Ustasa under Archbishop Stepinac whom the Vatican appointed in 1942 as the spiritual leader of the Ustasas. It has been documented that many monks and priests agreed to work as executioners in the concentration camps to which Orthodox Serbs were sent for mass execution by decapitation. The massacres and atrocities carried out in these camps were so shocking that even the Nazis protested against them and petitions were sent to the Vatican. However, Pius XII kept silent about these crimes – just as he kept silent about the Holocaust.

Archbishop Stepinac was sentenced to sixteen years forced labour for being the man who bore the greatest guilt for the massacres. When he was released on health grounds some five years later the infamous Pius XII actually promoted him to the rank of cardinal for his "great services" to the Church.

I believe I am right in saying that some time last year the present Pope actually beatified Stepinac in the first stage of the canonization process, and this revolting Nazi collaborator is presumably destined to join the ever-increasing army of saints which the present Pope is creating. The mind truly boggles at such shocking wickedness.

I strongly advise Mr Harvey to acquire a copy of the book *The Fourth Reich* by Magnus Linklater, Isabel Hilton and Neal Ascherson for a full description of the campaign of genocide carried out by the Ustasa in the years 1941/1944.

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Caldicott

Arguments older than creationism

I AGREE entirely with Carl Pinel's argument and conclusion in his excellent article, *Creationism and the Struggle for Power*; I also understand why fundamentalists are so frightened of Darwin's theory – it threatens the whole concept of biblical truth and the idea that man was created in God's image.

It is often overlooked, however, that there were older arguments which were to become equally damaging but which, because they did not appear to directly affect man, were accepted, or at least not opposed head on; these were the theories of men like Lyell who showed by geological argument that the earth was still developing.

According to the Old Testament, God made the world in six days and on the seventh rested having completed his task and declared that it was good. (Incidentally have you noticed that God never thinks, he always talks to himself?) Anyway, the Old Testament states quite clearly that the making of the Earth was ended, finished,

completed, end of story. Not only do we know that this is not the case but, unlike with the Theory of Evolution, we can demonstrate it quite easily. The theory behind Plate Technology is now well established. We can actually measure the movement of the continents, we can see the development of mountain ranges under the sea, we can illustrate to any fundamentalist with eyes to see that the hills are being eroded and rivers have changed course. We can even show the formation of new stars and galaxies. My point is that geology/geography/astronomy is a much easier battleground on which we can face the fundamentalists and I am surprised that it is not used more often.

DEREK CHATTERTON
Stockport

Smart move by creationists

FRED WHITEHEAD'S well informed optimism about the limitations of the recent decision by the Kansas State Board of Education needs, perhaps, to be qualified.

I am advised, by a friend who teaches biology in the USA, that the removal of evolution from examination questions is a rather smart move on the part of creationists. It does not do violence to the teachers' right to teach evolution but it does put pressure upon teachers to give the subject little or no prominence in what they present to their students; teachers will get no thanks for teaching something that, for purposes of passing exams, is perceived by candidates to be a waste of time.

There will also be aired the creationists' spurious claim that their line is scientific rather than religious and therefore that to teach creationism does no violence to the principle of Church/State separation.

Informed persons in Kansas and elsewhere will no doubt mount a good campaign for genuine science; we wish them well.

ERIC STOCKTON
Sanday, Orkney

Clairvoyant nonsense

FOR SOME time now the world has had to suffer outrageous clairvoyant nonsense, based on the following claims:

1. We all live in spirit after death.
2. The souls of dead people can travel anywhere in space and time.
3. Certain living people can communicate with the souls of the dead.

To test these claims I suggest a neat little trial for the crystal ball operators. It works like this:

First, when one of these clairvoyants is on radio claiming to speak to the dead you ring in



and ask whether they can send one of their spirits to your home. You then write a secret code on a piece of paper. It could be something like nikki, knakki, gooey, voeey – ding, dong, ding. 12,45, 45, 56, 122, 1233, 12, 45.

You then tell the clairvoyant to ask the spirit to read the code, then fly back to the radio station and communicate it to him (or her). If the claims are true, the clairvoyant should have no trouble in repeating the code over the air waves.

ERIC CARTMEL
Liverpool

Exorcism better than ECT

AS AN ATHEIST and psychiatric survivor, I agree with Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson (*Freethinker*, November) that exorcism and prayer may not be particularly effective treatments for “mental illness”.

However, opinion amongst service users, many mental health organisations and some of the more open-minded psychiatric professionals is that the orthodox treatments - neuroleptic drugs and ECT - are not in fact as helpful as is claimed by their proponents. Personally, I found alternative approaches (psychological, social, philosophical and political) to my problems to be far more useful.

The problem is that drugs and ECT, being seen as “cost-effective”, are now the only treatments offered in NHS psychiatric units. Unlike religious ministrations, these have demonstrable, quantifiable physical ill-effects on their recipients.

The application of electricity to the brain in order to cause a major epileptic seizure (ECT) was proved over fifty years ago to cause brain damage in monkeys, using far less current than presently used on human beings. Despite being outlawed in several European countries, ECT is still in widespread use in Britain. Research published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* last year concluded that neuroleptic drug treatment caused changes in the size and shape of the brain clearly visible on MRI scans.

Psychiatric patients who refuse these treatments for whatever reason are routinely given them by force, despite Mental Health Act safeguards and whatever the wishes of their nearest relatives.

The Health Education Authority report of which the NSS so disapproves represents a small triumph for the many user-focused (and predominately secular) organisations who have worked for many years to establish the idea that there are valid, effective and respectful alternatives to orthodox psychiatry which actually take into account the views and belief systems of the individuals diagnosed “mental-

ly ill”, rather than inflicting treatments that to many people are a violation of their humanity.

If I were held in a psychiatric unit under a Section of the Mental Health Act, and were offered exorcism as an alternative to ECT, I would accept it eagerly and with gratitude.

SANDRA SMITH
London

THE November 1999 edition of the *Freethinker* has both Terry Sanderson and Keith Wood upset about the use of exorcism with people suffering mental distress.

In both cases it appears that (with no sign of a disclaimer) they are in favour of traditional psychiatry as a method of treatment. They do not address the arguments of the anti-psychiatry movement which will assert that major tranquilizers serve only to contain the individual and that ECT kills off parts of the brain. So that treatment as currently offered is inhumane and administered with a hit-and-miss degree of certainty.

The mumbo jumbo of exorcism is matched by the social control ethos of traditional psychiatry. And should the occasion arise, I know which I would go for if offered an electric shock in my brain or some priestcraft.

MALCOLM REES
London

The infliction of pain

BEHAVIOUR, to be moral, ought to impose no pain. The reason given is that most people don't like the idea of having pain. To the extent that is a reason, we are to believe that the excellence of a citizen is in his or her living in such a way that, without permission, no pain is given.

So, what am I to make of animal rightists who knowingly inflict pain on me by keeping creatures that ruin some of my attempts to grow vegetables in my garden, creatures whose habits of marking territory also make it dangerous for children to mess about in the grass during a picnic? As it is only me that does the labouring in my garden, maybe the first point doesn't matter. But what am I to make of a magazine which attacks Islam and Roman Catholicism, partly because of their espousal of a programme whose incidental consequence would be that no pain is done to human foetuses? (Yes, don't kid yourselves; those embryos shrink from the knife.) And of the general acceptance from convenience or conviction or out of weariness of the worst inflicter of pain on humans, free marketology?

After sifting the anecdotal material, much of which will be contradictory, we are left with argument. We have to ask which god gave

human rights? Secondly, which god determines that, by extension, “human rights” means the same for all animals? In a word, which god determines that the logic of the survival of “the fittest” ends in the survival of vegetarian pacifists only and that even seagulls, magpies, foxes and crocodiles will come to know the error of their ways? For a back-of-the-envelope calculation indicates that, if law is a type of fiction and equity has to be grounded in something such as “natural law”, then either Darwin or cultural determinists win the argument.

I am used to the religious – and, of course, the press, *Daily Telegraph* not least – shifting with elan, not to say brazenly, from argument from “culture” to argument from “nature” and I am getting used to the Lib-Lab centrists of the *Freethinker* doing the same. But I am beginning to wonder which side is the more modest.

Incidentally, very young during WW Two, I never got used to eating flesh. I hardly ever eat flesh of any kind and, providing I am allowed to cultivate vegetables in reasonable comfort, wouldn't miss it from my diet at all.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Society of individuals

I AGREE with most of David Tribe's views (*Points of View*, November) except for one point.

He says “...communism (‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’) ... levelling down instead of up”. Surely to linguistic purists, needs and abilities are uncommonly diverse.

Charles Bradlaugh would have said that levelling up is as bad as levelling down: we are a society of individuals of almost infinite variety. How do I know? I have shaken hands with a man who shook hands with Bradlaugh himself.

R G SARGENT
Cornwall

Please address your letters
(preferably typed) to Barry
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E-mail:
editor@freethinker.co.uk
Phone/Fax: 0181 305 9603.

HUMANIST CONTACTS AND EVENTS

Bath Humanists: Information: Hugh Thomas on 0117 9871751.

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: Information: Ivor Moll, 6 The Brooklands, Wrea Green, Preston PR4 2NQ. 01772 686816.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information: 01273 733215. Cornerstone Community Centre, Church Road (corner of First Avenue), Hove. Sunday, December 5, 4pm. Speakers' panel and discussion.

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.

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. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Devon Humanists: Information: Margaret Siddall, 9 Smithay Meadows, Christow, Exeter, EX6 7LU. Tel: 01647 252113.

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

East Kent Humanists: Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

Essex Humanists: Information: Brian Whitelaw, 66 Linnet Drive, Chelmsford CM2 8AF. Tel:01245 265664. Monthly meetings, second Sunday, 7.30 pm.

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. (No meeting in December) Saturday, Dec 11, 20th Anniversary Dinner at the Square Wine Bar, Tolmers Square, London NW1. Details and booking form available. Tel: 01926 858450.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: NI 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. Press and Information Officer: 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.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. The Swarthmore Institute, Leeds. Tuesday December 14, 7.30pm: Robert Shallcroft: *Crime and Punishment*.

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 0181 690 4645. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, December 16, 8pm Winter

Solstice party.

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

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883. Quaker Meeting Hall, Penparcau, Aberystwyth. Sunday, December 12, 2.30pm Neil Jones: *Genetically Modified Crops*.

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

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Information: Christine Wood on 0191 2763123. Literary and Philosophical Society, 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle. Thursday, December 16, 6.45pm. Public meeting.

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.

Oxford Humanists: Information: Jean Woodman on 01865 760520.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, January 12, 8pm. Dane Bye: *The Archbishop and the Spooks*. Subject and speaker to be announced. Programme from Gordon Sinclair, telephone 01226 743070 or Bill McIlroy, 0114 2509127.

South Hampshire Humanists: Information: 11 Glenwood Avenue, Southampton, SO16 3PY. Tel: 02380 769120

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

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

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

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0181 642 4577. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, December 8, 7.30pm for 8pm. John and Lucie White: *Turn of the Year, Turn of the Century*.

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 on 01892 890485 or Chris Ponsford on 01892 862855.

Please send your listings and events notices to Bill McIlroy, 115 South View Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield S7 1DE.
Tel: 0114 2509127.