

Ethical Record

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EDITORIAL – WE CANNOT REWRITE HISTORY



Palmyra, destroyed by ISIS

Cecil Rhodes was certainly an imperialist, believing that Britons, owing to their superior culture, had a right and duty to lord it over those parts of the world allegedly inferior. Not all Britons believed in the innate superiority of the whites: a hundred years earlier, Thomas Paine had failed to persuade the Americans (eg Jefferson) to include slavery abolition in their new Constitution – because they wanted Independence but also wanted to keep their slaves. Our own SPES Appointed Lecturer, Fenner Brockway MP (whose statue is in Red Lion Square), opposed the Empire and campaigned for colonial freedom.

However, reactionary political and ‘wrong’ religious ideas cannot be retrospectively eliminated from history even by today’s Oriel College students who wanted to remove Rhodes’ statue. There is no logical distinction between removing a politically incorrect statue and the demolition of a religiously incorrect edifice.

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CONWAY HALL ETHICAL SOCIETY
Conway Hall Humanist Centre - www.conwayhall.org.uk
25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Trustees' Chair: Liz Lutgendorff; **Treasurer:** Carl Harrison
Editor: Norman Bacrac *Please email texts and viewpoints for the Editor to:*
normanbacrac@gmail.com

Chief Executive Officer:	Jim Walsh	Tel: 020 7061 6745	Jim@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Administrator:	Martha Lee	Tel: 020 7061 6741	admin@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Finance Officer:	Linda Lamnica	Tel: 020 7061 6740	finance@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Library/Learning:	S. Hawkey-Edwards	Tel: 020 7061 6747	sophie@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Hon. Archivist:	Carl Harrison		carl@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Programme/Marketing:	Sid Rodrigues	Tel: 020 7061 6744	sid@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Digital Marketing:	Katie Jones		katie@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Lettings Officer:	Carina Dvorak	Tel: 020 7061 6750	lettings@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Caretakers:	Eva Aubrechtova (i/c)	Tel: 020 7061 6743	Eva@ethicalsoc.org.uk
<i>together with:</i>	Brian Biagioni, Sean Foley, Tony Fraser, Rogerio Retuerma		
Maintenance:	Zia Hameed	Tel: 020 7061 6742	Zia@ethicalsoc.org.uk

AGM MINUTES

Mailed to CHES members with this issue are revised AGM minutes for 2014 (SPES and CHES) and those for the 2015 AGM.

THE HUMANIST LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

The Humanist Library and Archives are open for members and researchers on Tuesdays to Thursdays from 1000 - 1700. Please inform the Librarian of your intention to visit. The Library has an extensive collection of new and historic freethought material. When evening courses are running, the Library will remain open on selected evenings. These will be advertised on the website.

Tel: 020 7061 6747. Email: sophie@ethicalsoc.org.uk

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If you have any suggestions for speakers (their contact details are required) or event ideas, please get in touch with Evan Parker at evan.parker@warwick.ac.uk Tel nos 07403 607 046 (mob) or 0202 565 5016.

CONWAY HALL ETHICAL SOCIETY

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Founded in 1793, the Society is a progressive movement whose Charitable Objects are: **the advancement of study, research and education in humanist ethical principles.**

We therefore invite to membership those who, rejecting the supernatural, are in sympathy with the above objects. In furtherance of these, the Society maintains the Humanist Library and Archives. The Society's journal, *Ethical Record*, is issued monthly. At Conway Hall the educational programme includes Thinking on Sunday, discussions, evening courses and Sunday concerts of chamber music. Memorial meetings may be arranged.

The annual subscription is £35 (£25 if a full-time student, unwaged or over 65)

SCRAPPING OVER EDUCATION

Chris Bratcher

Thinking on Sunday talk to the Ethical Society, 13 December 2015

Fifty years ago, Labour's education minister, Anthony Crosland, issued a circular requesting Local Educational Authorities to convert their grammar and secondary modern schools into comprehensives. Grammar schools were of two types. There were more than 1,200 maintained grammar schools, mostly post-Victorian creations seeking to emulate the 179 older and highly academic direct-grant grammar schools, which were commonly independently endowed as well as being grant aided. The maintained grammar schools had little choice but to convert, though they survived in some counties, notably Kent. It took another ten years, and the return of another Labour Government, for grants to be stopped to the direct-grant grammar schools. Of the 179, 51 became comprehensive, and 119 become private.

In October, the Government approved a new grammar school in Tunbridge Wells; in management, if not reality, a so-called satellite of one in Sevenoaks. Re-introduction of grammar schools is a plank of UKIP policy. Listen to 'Question Time' on TV, and you will hear conflicted panellists guiltily lauding the education, and like as not, the entrée to Oxbridge, they obtained. I would do likewise: I was a beneficiary of a direct-grant grammar school.

The issue prompted me to dig out a self-styled Black Paper, "Fight for Education". It was not composed by Government, or in the manner of a White paper. It was an eighty page collection of some 25 reactionary – or, depending on your point of view, rightfully corrective - pieces, largely written in 1968 for other purposes, which the editors put together and sent to all M.P.s. It produced an enormous furore at the time; and support for it generated a 150 page follow up, Black paper II. I am sampling bits from them, to remind many of us what were the fears for education then, and to ask whether these fears were justified.

Centres of Excellence

What is common to the Black Papers is injured puzzlement. Why destroy the centres of excellence that they considered grammar schools to be? They saw it as iconoclasm borne of egalitarian dogma and envy. They thought that 'mixed ability' teaching would not work, and streaming in comprehensives would leave a greater sense of superiority and failure than the narrower range of abilities *within* secondary mod and grammar schools. The reaction was not confined to right wingers. Mrs June Wedgwood Benn (who went to a working class co-ed Grammar School) concluded her letter to the Editors: "we shall find our Direct Grant schools turned independent; and the Public schools, you bet, will be flourishing. There will be a bigger division than ever in our society and it is the clever working-class child who will miss the boat .. with teachers in his large comprehensive too busy quelling a riot to answer his questions. The teachers who love their subjects will long since have departed to greener pastures."

In many writers' view, the ending of grammar schools was symptomatic of a more general malaise: a seismic shift in power and direction away from the schoolmaster and don to the pupil and student, that was bringing about a

collapse in standards of education, imperilling the transmission of literacy, learning and culture. They considered the damage was already plain at every educational level. What is particularly interesting to me is that the same perception or fear of educational implosion is widespread today; but can be attributed to quite different causes.

Can't Spell, Won't Spell

Does this ring a bell? It is from the covering letter to M.P.s from the compilers, C.B.Cox (Prof. of English at Manchester), and A.E.Dyson (at the then new U. of East Anglia): "A successful businessman who had left school at fourteen recently expressed his surprise that when he hired staff with honours degrees in English, he sometimes had to teach them how to put sentences together and spell. An external examiner of Teacher Training Colleges writes that it is common to find many students who do not know the difference between 'their' and 'there' or 'where' and 'were', and who cannot punctuate..." *A Daily Mail* scribe is quoted on the same theme, and on the low standard of primary school reading books, to conclude: "yet more money is spent each year on educating our children. More reports are written, more committees sit, more recommendations made (and are forgotten) on this subject than in any other". Now't changes... including the sources.

Revolting Students

1968 was the high point of student militancy, and the Black Papers include several shocked and worried ventings on the matter. Was it to be the thin end of the wedge? Was it symptomatic of a trend of the young to reject authority of any kind?

G.F.Hudson, an eminent politics don of the time, commented "It must be emphasised that what is new is not the inclination of students to play a part in current politics or their fervent devotion to certain political causes. ... The hard core of student militants are real revolutionaries who aim at a fundamental transformation of society and seek to capture power in the universities as a means to that end in advance of any revolution in the state. Following Marcuse rather than Marx, they now see themselves and not the industrial proletariat as the great revolutionary force in society."

In America, students declining to take part in a demo were beaten up, and professors had their rooms ransacked and their research lost. What worried Hudson was that when the university called police on campus to evict the occupants, the decision to do so was widely condemned by liberal opinion. He feared that if university authorities tried to ignore the situation, then eventually the state would send in the police unbidden. Freedom to police their own house, as well as academic freedom, would be lost. At Berkeley, he was exhorted to picket the university senate in support of a demand that it condemn the involvement of the US in Vietnam. He felt "a nostalgia for a past that had never been mine". "Nobody in my undergraduate days (in the 1920s) in Oxford ever seriously thought of occupying the University Registry, besieging the Proctors in their office, or shouting insults at the Vice-Chancellor. Dons were still regarded with a certain instinctive awe. They were, after all, *in loco parentis*."

In his view, the change in what students dared do arose because “parental authority has been diminished *to an extent unprecedented in history*”. Further: “.. the demand for student control of institutions of higher education has been followed by an agitation for control of secondary schools by elected councils of their pupils..” , and he notes that the London Branch of the Association of Assistant Masters reports “an increasing and often violent defiance of teachers by children who appear to be possessed by a ‘hatred of any form of authority’.” The unspoken thought is, again, where will it end?

The vanguard of militancy in the UK was, predictably, the LSE. The Students’ Union representatives’ minority report to the LSE Machinery of Government Committee was explained by one of its authors in a March 1968 letter to *The Times*: “Student representation of governing bodies is only the beginning ... The *next thing* is for students to demand that they should run a particular part of a course: its content, how it is taught, and who teaches it. The *next step* is for students to appoint their own teachers and do some teaching themselves.” It generated a letter (reproduced in the Black Paper) to the Director of the L.S.E. from Imre Lakatos, the notable philosopher of science and mathematics there. He too distinguished demands for expression of student complaints and representation on matters of welfare, accommodation and the like, from demands for student *power*. Like Hudson, he feared that lack of resistance from the majority of students, and appeasement by the University, would cause a loss of academic autonomy.

50 years on, destabilising the State and raising revolutionary consciousness through ‘transitional demands’ that a university could not cope with seems pie in the sky, and a froth blown away by the onward march of government targets and the commercialisation of education as a business requiring bums on seats, marketing conjectural jobs as the lure. The writers’ fears were justified in a different way. The UK State *has* stormed campuses petrified by the rating game, not with uniformed police, but with ‘on message’ Vice-Chancellors espousing their ideology. Students protest as disappointed or mis-sold consumers in a market place, *joined by* staff disaffected by their powerless role in a commercial hierarchy. Neither won.

The UK State has also stormed state schools. Levels of measurement have reached heights undreamt of in the Black Papers. The requirement to demonstrate pupils’ continuous improvement at each ‘Key stage’ distorts what is taught when. The goal of mass achievement of high grades today in schools, whether by continuous assessment or exams, is inimical to truly educational experiences.

A Testing Question

Writers were also dismayed by the onset of continuous assessment in place of ‘finals’, and demands for no assessment at all. Cox quotes an student article in a Manchester Uni newspaper against *any* form of assessment or degree classification: “Why not let employers assess for themselves .. and leave the university to decide for itself those students it deems suitable for research: .. to make all students sit exams for that purpose [is] ridiculous.”

Cox very cogently sets out the weaknesses in continuous assessment. “It encourages students to grade themselves too early and too unambitiously for their own good... Bad marks near the start of a course can become millstones, and demoralising. They penalise the student who begins to master his subject and coursework requirements late on, who can shine in finals.” He mentions the US experience of being at the mercy of lazy or vindictive course module markers, and of university and student incentives to them to be over-generous. Cheating by plagiarism was already a Black Paper concern before the internet. The opportunities today are far greater.

He was not alone in concluding “To create an education system without examinations is to fail to prepare children and students for the realities of adult life.” That could be a 45 minute examination question (or topic) in itself. I am not convinced that the litmus test of “real life” helps his case. Examinations outside the professions are rare indeed, and work outside A&E departments, and life outside quizzes and Masterchef, *is* more often a rolling process of continuing assessment than ferocious hours and fortnights. In short, exams test some skills and not others.

Cox defended degree classification by citing the probity and care of examiners, whom he considered were trusted by society at large. Are they still so regarded? Nowadays, the concern, both in respect of secondary school and university grades, is classification drift. Employers have come more and more to assess for themselves in response to the plethora of degrees awarded, ironically just as the student article anticipated, examining job applicants with a battery of commercially orientated aptitude tests before anyone reaches the heights of a final interview. I suspect they would have come to do so whatever the degree regime.

Lost learning

Ancient and modern language teachers had a particular concern. They pleaded that a good grounding in grammar is a necessary competence, and that pupils enjoy gaining hard won skills in construing and composing in a foreign language. (I did so, and eventually came to love Latin.) They feared for their subjects, if not taught in language sets in grammar schools: but which usually meant sacrificing other subjects at a very early stage. Their fears have been borne out in the near demise of Classics, and a decline in pupils taking language ‘A’ levels, and our nation’s continued poor competence linguistically by comparison with other countries.

The most practical concern was the size of a comprehensive if it were to still have a sixth form (as we then called it) that could offer a full range of ‘A’ levels. This was thought to imply, for a grammar school, an intake of 120; and therefore, for a comprehensive, a yearly intake of at least 4 times that number – and hence an unmanageable school population of several thousand. The alternative to such factory farms, presciently, was seen as offering only some ‘A’ levels at any one school, and bussing kids to another to do others.

What price the Humanities?

There was dismay at a perceived emphasis on self-expression at the cost of

learning and competence in primary and secondary schools, and in universities' Humanities courses. The three educational stages, and subjects within them, are of course very different. C.L.Mowat, a History professor, said "Arts subjects and the social sciences too easily slip into a category where nothing but *talk* matter. Soon, nothing matters .. Hard knowledge is required." I had no idea that the rot had set in in Arts subjects so early (we already had suspicions of the social sciences); I was conducted at the time at university through every notable author and poet from Chaucer to James Joyce, and in philosophy (where 'talk' does matter) from the pre-Socratics to Wittgenstein!

I *have* been worried by the displacement of the transmission of the canon of literature at some universities by theory-laden studies of particular authors to unpick their cultural assumptions, sometimes from the premise that the text is only grist to a relativist mill, and literary appreciation of works for their art or inherent truth is no longer a valid exercise. This comes close to the 'nothing matters' concern that at the time of the Black Papers, seemed a preposterous fear. And am I the only person who shakes his head at what the current crop of University Challenge contestants do and don't know, and the change in fifty years of the sort of questions put to them?

The issue, I think, is what counts as hard knowledge, for what purpose, and for whom? Why should one – for want of a better word – *do* History or Literature? An answer for most of educational history, was to learn from example: Edmund Burke said "he who is ignorant of history is condemned to repeat it". Potential statesmen *ought* to take lessons from history, though the study of it, and current affairs, tells us that they don't; philosophers, as Santayana said, need to know the history of philosophy to avoid repeating it. Tyro writers might benefit from acquaintance with acknowledged masters.

Conveying heritage is another: there is still the Edwardian desire to tell children "Our Island Story". The move away from telling that particular story, to exploring how diverse people of ages past fared, has been a plus. A good example is Mary Beard's new account of Roman history, 'SPQR', that is more concerned to infer the condition of Romans of all classes, than to chronicle the campaigns of consuls and emperors. The attempt by the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, to inject his personal English history landmarks into the syllabus was rightly much mocked.

Terry Pratchett, on Education in and out of schools

Some of the fears of the Black Paper contributors have been met by the Internet. Fostering a habit of enquiry through this means is more realistic than attempting to cram more nuggets of knowledge into an ever expanding curriculum. But as Terry Pratchett wryly observed, "It's a wonderful tool, if what you want to learn is how to download other people's work straight into your essay"; and (on the basis of his fan mail) "On the internet, no one cares how you spell". In 1997, the Department of Education asked him and a dozen other writers, to give them an essay 'On Excellence in Schools' (reproduced in his book *A slip of the Keyboard*, Corgi, 2014). He wrote:

"First, you build a library, then build the school around it. You make

sure that the kids can read adequately, write coherently if simply, and have a good enough grasp of simple maths to know when a pocket calculator is lying. Then you show them how to use the library, and you *don't* let them loose on the net .. until they have grown up enough not to confuse data with information, otherwise they are just monkeys in a banana plantation.”

He should know about education for the masses; he was not put in for the II+ exam, crucially had his imagination fired on discovering for himself *The Wind in the Willows*; was insensitively taught, and dropped out of ‘A’ levels to spend more time exploring the contents of his local library. Lessons for us all.

WERE THE BLACK PAPERS *RIGHT* AFTER ALL?

Chris Ormell

Secretary of PER (Philosophy for Education Renewal) Group

Talk to the Ethical Society, 13 December 2015

The five Black Papers, of which the first two appeared in 1969, were regarded by their authors (and almost everyone else) at the time as a reaction against the progressivism which was transforming schools, especially primary schools. Brian Cox, the principal mover and voice behind them, was not, however, an archetypal reactionary. He claimed to be a ‘moderate progressive’ and he managed to recruit various authors such as Geoffrey Bantock, Iris Murdoch and Bryan Wilson who were similarly moderate in their general views. In spite of attracting much attention, the Black Papers were widely condemned in the media and came to represent a pretty strong anti-progressivist point of view. But progressivism didn’t progress after 1979, and this leaves the question hanging in the air whether the Black Authors were right after all.

Progressivism has now been a dead duck for more than thirty years, so there can be no doubt that the Black Authors were *right* when they argued that progressivism was an aberration and was not the way ahead. But this leaves open the question whether they just happened to be ‘right’ by the verdict of history, but for the wrong reasons. Progressivism had many sides and the Black Authors also represented a range of opinions: some of them were socialists like Iris Murdoch. They were also reacting against other changes, like the Labour policy of comprehensivisation and student unrest in universities.

The most ideological opposition, though, was against progressivism.

To disentangle this matter we need first to understand the background against which progressivism emerged and also why it came at that particular moment. The feature of the world of 1960 which is least easy to comprehend today is that mathematics was regarded at that time as the ‘senior’ and clearly the ‘most important’ subject in schools. It was felt that the mathematicians were the people most likely to be *right* about anything. The modern computer was beginning quietly to take shape, but there were very few of them around and an awareness of their power was only just beginning to dawn. The feeling of inherent problem-solving power we ascribe to IT (Information Technology) today was, at that time, still ascribed to mathematics. It was felt that maths would become

even more ‘important’ when it had the computer there to energize it. The mathematics community was fired-up by this general expectation and, as a result, became rather triumphalist.

Sputnik a Game-changer

A game-changing event had occurred three years earlier when the USSR launched the first satellite into space. This unexpected event caused consternation and panic in the USA. Informed opinion in the USA had always assumed that they were years ahead of the USSR in science and technology. Sputnik 1 showed how wrong they were. A great deal of heart-searching followed in America, and it quickly devolved onto the question “What is going wrong with science and math education in the US?” So the politicians went to the top and asked leading professors what was wrong with science and math education. The science professors had various ideas about what was wrong, but the math [US speak for ‘maths’. {Ed}] professors had a very distinct, punchy line. “*Everything math in the schools is totally out of step with our modern view of the subject.*” So it was decided to turn US school maths over to “Modern Math” and Congress soon found millions of dollars to finance the move. The result was a kind of uprising in school maths circles around the world.

Everyone wanted to be part of this revolution. The revolution soon spread to the UK and dozens of projects sprung up to teach maths in a new kind of way, starting with sets. There were local projects in Shropshire, Leicestershire, Manchester, Kent, SMP, MEI... to name a few. This development had a profoundly unnerving effect on the educational establishment. Before New Maths came along it had been an accepted wisdom that not even God could make $2 + 2$ be anything other than 4. Now Young Turks were going round with the astonishing mantra “ $2 + 2$ need no longer equal 4!”. $2 + 2$ could now equal 11, for example. [That’s in modulus 3 mode (rather than the usual modulus 10), which limits the numerals to 0, 1 and 2. So $4(3 + 1)$ has to be expressed as 11, ie one 3 and one unit. {Ed}]

The mathematicians were on a roll: they were regarded as the people who had created the computer and most wholeheartedly embraced ‘modern ideas’. This was the atmosphere within which stalwarts for progressivism — which had previously been confined to fringe schools like A. S. Neill’s (Summerhill) and Bertrand Russell’s (Telegraph Hill) — were emboldened to spread the sense of revolution across the board. So primary schools in particular began to switch-over to a progressivist approach, which was founded on various principles:

- 1) Schools are there for children to learn; teaching is merely one way towards this goal.
- 2) Children learn best when they are interested and involved.
- 3) Therefore children should have the main say about what they want to study.
- 4) The teacher is, in essence, only a facilitator to help them find their way.

These principles, like New Maths (to which they were immediately applied) were very attractive to many young (and old) teachers. They expressed a vivid idealism based on a slightly rosy-tinted view of childhood. At the height of the progressivist movement about a third of primary schools wholeheartedly embraced the

approach and about another third adopted it in part. About a third remained staunchly ‘traditional’. Progressivism in secondary schools was more patchy.

This was the phenomenon the Black Paper authors were determined to try to rubbish. The authors were probably mainly exercised by the quiet abdication of moral, cultural and intellectual authority implied by 3) and 4) above. In the early 1960s there was a feeling abroad that traditional attitudes and standards of all kinds were losing ground. These traditional attitudes were what the authors were determined to defend.

Managerialism Was Brought In

So what happened? Well, it turned out that the US professors and others who had backed New Math to the hilt were idiots. By 1972 the UK maths establishment disowned New Maths in schools, because they found it was having a bad effect on their undergraduates. In the late 1970s James Callaghan, the Labour prime minister got a phone call from his daughter saying that her children were learning almost nothing and couldn’t do something about it? The result of widespread progressivism in schools was a predominantly laid back, lazy generation (generation X). They had a great sense of their own importance, and little respect for the previous moral, cultural and intellectual norms of the society.

Prime Minister Callaghan asked Shirley Williams to instigate a Great Debate about education. Confidence among the public in the intellectual class (teachers, academics, mathematicians) hit rock bottom. This was a sea change in attitudes which produced what is usually described as the postmodern age. It meant that there was no longer — as there had been before — a general sense across society that *anyone* had real authority. The Right took power here and in the USA, and brought in a kind of knee-jerk, mechanistic schooling which is still being operated today. (This is called ‘managerialism’) There are many signs that it is not educating children to anywhere near the level needed in today’s society. It tries to be value-neutral, but the *effect* of this is to insinuate that money and commercial values are all that count.

Progressivism was a cruel con, because it led children to believe that they could get by with relatively little real effort or attention to the norms of the past... and this in an increasingly soulless, unforgiving society. However principles 1) and 2) of progressivism are correct. Principle 3) isn’t, and it has drifted further and further out of line, because today’s children can’t agree among themselves, and don’t know which are the keys which will unlock long-term interest and which will lead to long-term growth. The PER Group has produced a Report (*The Case for Radical Change in Education* 2015, £5 by hand) which outlines a radical alternative to both progressivist and managerial schooling, and the reasoning underlying this.

The Black authors showed insufficient awareness of the valid bits of progressivism, and they had no answer to the cultural decline which was happening all around them. They were nominally right in dismissing progressivism, but they were not prescient about the future, and some of them went on to support the wretched managerialism we have today.

PS. Q & A.:

Q. Why did Modern Maths turn out to have so little of the clarity-fostering and problem-solving power it was supposed to bring into classrooms?

A. Modern Maths was built round Cantor's ideas. Cantor was an intensely religious mathematician who tried to turn the word 'infinite' into a definite, rather than an indefinite, adjective. (God was an "infinite supermind", which only made sense if artificial 'infinite' was a definite description.) This was counter-historical, and was only achieved by introducing arbitrary rules. The result: a pervasive artificiality in so-called 'modern mathematics', which, after a while became evident in the classroom and turned students off.

VIEWPOINTS

How to Bring Peace to Syria

I read your front-page editorial in the December issue of *Ethical Record* with amazement and consternation. In the first paragraph you state: "The UN should now ideally mandate the UK to be its official executive in Syria ...", and in the final paragraph you refer to Cameron's "clever plan" involving "an imaginary army of 70,000". Are you really suggesting that a government which on your own admission has used deception in order to initiate war, should be entrusted to represent the UN in bringing peace to the country it is now bombing?

Furthermore, you admit that ISIS is "exporting oil through Turkey, thereby financing their world-wide death squads". So who is financing those death squads, if not Turkey? This isn't small-scale smuggling; this is a massive trade that Turkey has to be complicit in. But then later you write, "Turkey must also immediately stop the entry of ISIS oil tankers by impounding any that do manage to enter its territory. ISIS's source of funds must be cut off". But why should Turkey cut off ISIS oil supplies when that would mean that their source of oil will be cut off? Turkey is a member of NATO. It cannot be that all this is happening without the connivance of the CIA.

The US has claimed to be bombing ISIS intensively for much longer than the Russians have, and convoys of vehicles transporting oil from ISIS-held territories to Turkey must have been one of the easiest targets to aim at. Why hasn't the US military done what the Russians have now done in stopping those convoys? Why wasn't Russia thanked by the US for doing what they themselves failed to do? One cannot, surely, conclude that the US bombing raids were really directed at ISIS. One can only conclude that NATO is complicit with ISIS, and that the Russians are now bombing ISIS because NATO were only pretending to do so.

David Cameron's deception in the House of Commons was not limited to "an imaginary army of 70,000"; there has to be deception over ISIS, too. How can such an overwhelming army arise so quickly over a vast area out of nothing? What evidence do we see in the press and on television of that army even existing? We see a few posed videos that your average 15-year-old could have created in his back garden, but where is the real evidence? The last time the West was faced with such overwhelming force was in the Second World War. Then everyone had masses of evidence of the enemy forces, even without television

and the Internet. As soon as ISIS suddenly appeared out of nowhere, following the Commons vote against the bombing of Syria, it was clear to me that ISIS could be some sort of setup designed to give David Cameron an excuse for bombing Syria. That is now happening.

The Commons debate on Syria wasn't really a debate on Syria, but a bit of theatre designed to unseat Jeremy Corbyn. Everyone except the Cameron-Blair pro-war lobby was saying that Cameron's case did not tie up. Even Britain's highest profile pro-Establishment military historian Max Hastings said on Newsnight that Cameron's case was "bonkers".

I know people who believe in God who are not gullible enough to believe this sort of stuff. The way to bring peace to Syria is to begin by doing some proper research, in order to find out just what is going on. Russia was invited into Syria; NATO countries were not. We have a serious risk of Russia and the US striking against each other: Russia against Western-backed ISIS and the US against Russian-backed Assad forces. The dangers involved in this should be obvious to all.

Ian Fantom

The View from Catford

I have visited Minehead (The View from Minehead, *ER* Dec 2015, p15): it is a pleasant seaside town in Somerset, which I reached by vintage steam train, enjoyed local cider and sat in the sunshine on the sandy beach. However it seems D J Tazewell has his head buried in that sand. [But see his letter below. {Ed.}] Of course I would agree with some hopes expressed in the letter: "In conflict we destroy. In cooperation we can build a better future."

Unfortunately the history of much faith and belief denies this. Should we be surprised? Those who take scripture literally, of whom there are many, are confronted with ambiguity. If they note Christ's words there will be little room to work together: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword." (*Matt.10:34*).

Denis Cobell - Catford

"The Letter We Never Saw"

Unfortunately my letter printed in the December issue of *ER* had lost both its heading and its signature, and consequently is likely to be substantially misleading. It was certainly not intended as a statement of views of Minehead worthies. The letter was intended to express what one might have hoped to hear from national and international religious leaders, but if there was such a letter then I never saw it. That is why it was headed "The letter we never saw"- and signed "Alas for a letter that never was".

Maybe it is optimistic to hope for a move towards a rational common morality based on, or even that respects human welfare, but there are grounds for hope, a Pew Research Centre survey (March 2014) asking the question "Is it necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values?" got a 'No' at an average rate of 68% from European countries surveyed, and with a higher percentage amongst those under 30, and also those with college degrees. Even in the USA the trend was towards 'No'.

Jim Tazewell - Minehead

Let America Blow Donald's Triumphant Trumpet

Donald Trump has upset the apple cart for many, but most of his viewpoints make absolute sense in an America that has been manipulated and sits in the middle of a tornado that has been destroying the very dream that its founding fathers lived by. It would be a mistake, according to Donald, to take away guns and pull apart the second amendment. Jobs make better people in society and allowing so many people into the US but knowing nothing about them is a time bomb waiting to explode.

Donald Trump does not sugar-coat reality by taking a non-stop ride on Disney's popular "It's A Small World" sung by different cultures of dolls. He understands the danger of offering a handout to people without absolute knowledge of their intentions. Trump is encouraging when he talks about bringing jobs back from China and Mexico and deporting illegal immigrants, building walls and restricting free trade in order to improve the US economy.

His viewpoint on capital punishment is also quite simple. Donald said that it's uncivilized to keep murderers alive but that there is nothing uncivilized about capital punishment. He has stressed the importance of black lives but has also emphasized that a strong police force is imperative. Donald Trump doesn't need money in order to feed at the trough. He has his own funds and is not ashamed to say so. He is refreshing and confident. He's not here to try to fit square pegs into round holes or to molly coddle the public.

Donald has a lot of things to say that make sense and appears to be the only one brave enough to say them. He takes notice of things that are important and is fighting a huge battle as a candidate in our upcoming election with such a fickle population.

Donald Trump is a sober businessman and a realist. He is down to earth in his approach but is tough and his hair looks just fine. The American public may be far too weak to take a new step forward but regardless of the next election outcome, Donald should feel proud. After all, change can be daunting and all too often, the truth is overshadowed by denial and the need to be politically correct.

Tamara Sheriff - California

Trump a Symptom of Psychosis?

Donald Trump's policies are symptomatic of a deep psychosis in US society. In a free market economy, unemployment cannot be cured by erecting a wall to keep out immigrants nor can the homicide rate reduced by opposing gun control.

The emphasis has to be on policies of investing in social infrastructure and banning the ownership of guns if unemployment and the murder rate are both to be brought down. Trump's appeal to social atavism must be opposed in the name of progress and the principles of legality.

Chris Purnell – Orpington, Kent

The views expressed in this Journal are not necessarily those of the Society.

AN ATHEIST AND A MUSLIM IN CONVERSATION

Tehmina Kazi

Director of Media and Outreach, British Muslims for Secular Democracy

Address to the Ethical Society, 10 January 2016

I was raised in a liberal Muslim household, with a non-religious father and a semi-practising mother. Although we were taught the basics of Islam, such as how to pray, and kept a few fasts for the month of Ramadan, we never had any form of religious schooling, not even after-school classes at the mosque.

It was entirely our choice as to how much religion we wanted to incorporate into our lives, or even if we wanted to identify as Muslim at all. My brother, for example, is openly agnostic, and he is fortunate to be a member of a family where this is not an issue. I am acutely aware that many others do not have this luxury: a BBC Radio 4 programme called *Leaving the faith* talked to several ex-Muslims, many of whom had either not told their families about their change in beliefs, or had faced ostracisation -- even harassment -- for their choices.

Belonging Without Belief

The Christian sociologist Grace Davie talked about ‘being without belonging’, referring to Christians who believed in God without necessarily going to church, or partaking in other communal rituals. In Islam, we need to create spaces for belonging without belief, i.e. for people who have been shaped by the cultural accretions of a Muslim upbringing, yet depart from the orthodoxies of belief in a number of ways.

As for my own religious trajectory, I remained a believer, but had little to do with Muslim communities throughout my teenage years. Why? I was put off by the attitudes of Muslims I had encountered at my local mosque. Not just religious conservatism, which is inevitable in almost any mosque in Britain, but a combination of toxic attitudes.

These spanned the gamut from fatalism (the belief that everything is predestined, which undermines individual agency) to conspiracy theories (whatever IT was, “the Jews did it!”), to an obsession with petty externalities (being ticked off when a strand of hair was poking out of my headscarf), practices that run counter to basic notions of equality and human dignity (inadequate prayer spaces for women in a number of mosques) and an inability to subject intra-community injustices to either internal or external scrutiny (the prevailing attitude was “Don’t wash your dirty laundry in public”, which neglected to mention why, after so many years, a specific criminal offence had to be drafted on forced marriage, for example).

All this was worlds away from the kind of Islam that my mother taught me, which emphasised the path of balance and equilibrium in every walk of life and the sort of connection with God that enables you to relate to fellow humans and other living creatures peaceably.

Then, in my last year of a law degree, I joined an American Muslim social networking website. I was delighted to meet Muslims -- mainly from the US -- who were young, professional and practising, yet who managed to reconcile

their religious beliefs with progressive attitudes towards women, LGBT people and other religious minorities like Ahmadi Muslims (who are treated as heretics by the majority of Muslims). I read dozens of essays and book chapters on progressive Islam, and worked for a variety of human rights organisations after graduation. In 2009, I joined BMSD as its Director, and was able to combine my lifelong desire to promote secular values with initiatives that bring different communities together.

Some Still Cling to Tribal Positions

It's pretty clear that I'd have more in common with an atheist or agnostic -- who happens to be pro-women's and LGBT rights, and anti-sectarian -- than an individual who claims to be deeply religious and holds the opposite of these positions. In my experience, a lot of Muslims, who are not even religious in the traditional sense, still cling to tribal knee-jerk positions on issues like the Government's Preventing Violent Extremism agenda, rather than seeing this for the nuanced and complex set of policies and practices it really is.

My advice, if you are thinking of working in this field (either formally or informally), is to try and keep people united for a cause as long as they have roughly the same goals — they don't need to agree on everything 100%, but they do need to have integrity and a code of ethics. Try to put yourself in other people's shoes throughout, and don't let identity politics prevent you from challenging oppression, from wherever it emanates.

Note. The contribution to the conversation from Boyd Sleator on behalf of Atheist Northern Ireland will appear in the next issue of the ER. {Ed}

To all Members,

Please help us save cost on unnecessary printing and postage

In order to reduce the printing and postage costs for distributing the *Ethical Record* to our Members, the Trustees would like you to consider utilising the online version of the *Ethical Record*, which can be found at <http://conwayhall.org.uk/issue/> The online version contains individual articles, abstracts, book reviews, and notices as well as videos and past issues. The online *Ethical Record* will also continue to have the PDFs of the monthly *Ethical Record*.

However, if you would like to continue receiving the *Ethical Record* posted to your door, please email Martha Lee at martha@ethicalsoc.org.uk stating:

I would like to continue receiving the *Ethical Record* by post.

Alternatively, please write to **Martha Lee** at **Conway Hall Ethical Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL** stating:

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Please note that the closing date for your request to continue receiving the *Ethical Record* by post is 31st January 2016. This will enable cost savings to be introduced with the March 2016 edition onwards. February 2016 will see the last posting of the *Ethical Record* to every member.

Jim Walsh Chief Executive Officer

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Conway Hall Ethical Society, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, WC1R 4RL.

Tel: 020 7405 1818 Website: www.conwayhall.org.uk

Admission to Thinking on Sunday events is free for members of CHES and £3 (£2 conc) for non-members. For other events, no charge unless stated.

THINKING ON SUNDAY

JANUARY 2016

Sunday 24 **HOW TO BEAT BLUE MONDAY BLUES – positive psychology**
1100 **Elvis Langley**

LONDON THINKS WHY DO WE BELIEVE?

Monday 25 January 19.30

Samira Ahmed chairs:

Francesca Stavrakopoulou, Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Religion, U of Exeter;

Prof Richard Wiseman, Chair in the Public Understanding of Psychology, U of Hertfordshire;

Alice Herron, dissertation on *Psychological Factors in the Emergence of New Religious Movements*;

Bruce Hood, Professor of Developmental Psychology, U of Bristol.

Tickets: £10 standard, £5 for members of CHES, students (with a valid ID card) and unemployed/unwaged

Sunday 31 **THE INTERNET SHOULDN'T SCARE YOU** – the beginner's guide to digital inclusion and accessibility. **Liz Lutgendorff**

FEBRUARY

Sunday 7 **THE LOST NARRATIVE OF JESUS**
1100 **Peter Cresswell**, author of *The Invention of Jesus* (2013)

Sunday 14 **NEW ECONOMICS AS IF PEOPLE MATTERED**
1100 **Jonathan Essex**, Surrey County Councillor (Green Party)

Sunday 21 **SHOULD WE USE UNPROVED TREATMENTS DURING AN EPIDEMIC?**
1100 **Annette Rid**, Social Health and Medicine, Kings College London

CONWAY HALL SUNDAY CONCERTS

Artistic Director: **Simon Callaghan**. Ticket £10 (free for 8 – 25s)

Full details on: www.conwayhall.org.uk/sunday-concerts/

Concerts start at 1830 unless specified

January 24 **BADKE QUARTET**

January 31 **COULL QUARTET**

February 7 **FUJITA TRIO**

February 14 **VALENTINE'S DAY OPERA GALA**