

BARBARA SMOKER, born into a devout Roman Catholic family in London in 1923, was brain-washed by her convent education, which left her with the ambition to become a nun. But wartime service in the Womens Royal Naval Service in multi-credal Ceylon gave her the opportunity to re-think her religious assumptions. After the war she thought and read a lot about religion, and the more she thought and read the less she was able to believe. Finally renouncing Christianity in 1949, she joined the secular humanist movement, later becoming active in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Committee of 100, Vietnam and other war protests (including an illicit speech from the public gallery of the House of Commons), prison reform, squatting homeless families, womens equality, and gay rights. As president of the National Secular Society from 1971 to 1996, she represented the atheist viewpoint in print, on lecture platforms and soap-boxes, in speaking tours, in university debates, and on radio and TV. From 1981 to 1985 she chaired the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, and she compiled a book on that subject (published by Peter Owen). Other writings include Humanism - a book for use in secondary schools - first published in 1973 (6th edition, 2013); a book of satirical verse, Good God! (1977); a cassette script, Atheism on a Soap-Box; and a pamphlet on embryo research, Eggs Are Not People, which was distributed to all Members of Parliament in 1985. The same year she recorded a radio talk, Why I Am an Atheist, for the BBC World Service. This volume of articles, a personal selection from The Freethinker, covers three-and-a-half decades, from 1966 to 2002 (somewhat intermittently) -beginning with the final emergence of the authors mature views on religion and bio-ethics and continuing into her eightieth year. The contemporary scene on which she comments from that perspective includes unprecedented scientific progress, a remarkable transformation of the supposedly immutable RC Church, the decline of other mainstream Churches alongside the upsurge of fundamentalism, the rise of New Age cults, and the growing threat of extremism in Britain.

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