

FREE THINKER

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SEARCH ME! (BUT NOT IN THIS CLIMATE)

THIS isn't a crossword puzzle clue. But puzzle there is. It has been estimated that 9 out of 10 people don't mind the idea of everyone having to have their fingerprints taken, but the ten per cent react vehemently, and talk about "the first step in the creation of a police state". The *Guardian* stressed that one of the simplest safeguards is that fingerprint evidence should never by itself be treated as conclusive. "It can corroborate. It cannot alone warrant a conviction. That ought to be made plain by statute". Michael Frayn in the *Observer* took what is perhaps the rationalist view, and quoted Sir James Frazer: "The notion that a man may be bewitched by means of the clippings of his hair, the parings of his nails, or any severed portion of his person is almost widespread . . ." Could the dread of allowing our fingerprints to fall into the hands of strangers (asked Mr Frayn) be linked with the old superstitious fears of primitive men that a man can be lamed by someone who gets hold of his footprints?

Well, if Christians turn round and say "it's" all our fault, they will be right inasmuch as Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914) the French criminologist, who had so much to do with the identification of criminals, was a Freethinker, as was his anthropologist father.

As for being searched, a childhood reminiscence of adults laughing when they thought the children were out of earshot concerns a woman who was searched and asked to strip at the customs and then detained for many hours. The "joke" lay in the fact that she had recently covered a lavatory seat with a piece of newspaper, and bore the imprint in mirror writing. She had to be decoded before she was allowed to continue with her journey.

More seriously, if the fear of having our fingerprints taken is basically superstitious, the dislike of being searched will surely continue so long as our Christianity-conditioned society confuses unorthodoxy and scriptural "sins" with crime. If homosexuals were not criminal in British law, the Russians might not have been able to

recruit Vassall by blackmail. Men would not be afraid of being considered suspect from the contents of their pockets. Presumably women going to Malta often smuggle contraceptives. This would not be necessary if the Maltese government did not count Catholic "sins" as illegal.

The Christian commandment about "adultery" must have added considerably to the sum of human dishonesty. In the Humanist view, a husband and wife might be considered capable of deciding whether or not they can tolerate each other's extra-marital relationships, and, so long as the other individuals involved are also willing, we would say that it is no one else's business. What is sordid about adultery is not so much the relationships as the cheating and deception. The fear of "being found out" may even be accompanied by the incentive to "live dangerously". Just as prohibition of alcohol in the States resulted in a great deal of alcoholism, the Ten Commandments may actually have encouraged more "sin" than they have prevented. And so men and women who are forced to have secrets fear to have their secrets discovered.

Some Secularists have been saying recently that it is not the purpose of our Movement to try and reform social injustice, and that this is much better left in the hands of organisations such as the Abortion Law Reform Association, the Howard League of Penal Reform and so on. This makes sense. But Secular-Humanists have a vital task here and now, and that is to contribute towards the change we so urgently need in **the climate of opinion**. This can be done not only by the lobbying of the different Humanist organisations, but by individual Humanists and Freethinkers in their daily lives. In the way they react to all those Christian assumptions we hear from our neighbours, over the air or on TV and see written in the press. Best of all it can (and must) be done through education, family and school, by which children are taught to ask questions, to challenge and to choose wisely their authorities, and to reject the old and cruel definitions of Sin. When the time comes that the Anglican Church is disestablished and Roman Catholicism ceases to be fashionable, then it may well be the Christian who fears most to express his, by then, "shocking" views. At the moment, however, it is still the Secular Humanist who has to prove that his convictions are not only positive and kind, but vital for our society.

When the climate of opinion *has* changed, then perhaps the only people who will mind being searched (having their phones tapped or fingerprints taken) will be those who are genuinely "at war" with society and with mankind, who have guns, drugs, flick-knives or the propaganda of hatred to hide.

INSIDE

THE FUNDAMENTALISTS	Denis Watkins
HOW I BECAME AN ATHEIST	Lilian Middleton
NUCLEAR WEAPONS: SOME MORAL IMPLICATIONS	W. Bynner
THE DECLINE OF METHODISM	John Shaw
FOSTERING—FOR REWARD?	Beryl A Fisher
NOTES AND NEWS	: LECTURE NOTICES
BOOK REVIEW	: REVIEW : LETTERS

THE FUNDAMENTALISTS

Denis Watkins

DESPITE THE PRESENT mellow religious atmosphere fundamentalists cleave uncompromisingly to an arid faith which sits like a blight on its victims. For them a strict adherence to the tenets they have elected to obey constitutes radiant virtue. They do not yield in discussion, admit no error and censor dissenting views where they can. Fundamentalists have a total conviction that they are right; others who do not share their views must be wrong.

Their faith is often as bleak and cruel as their contentions are absurd. Jehovah's Witnesses are obliged to decide that their children should die rather than have a blood transfusion. Fundamentalism therefore causes the deaths of victims who have no opportunity to opt either for or against the beliefs for which they must die. Exclusive Brethren divide husband and wife, brother and sister and mother and child where they feel their faith demands it.

Oasis of virtue in a desert

The fundamentalist is confidently self-righteous. Surrounded by the Sodom and Gomorrah of society he, at least, is a haven of purity and sanity. But can anyone who has met these authoritarian and narrow people say that they saw much that was admirable? Rather one sees a travesty. They are people in which ordinary feeling has become bound within a rigid framework which crushes and distorts. In the wastes of fundamentalism there is little that matures.

The fundamentalist is effectively protected by his beliefs against healthy influences. He knows from the outset that others are in error. Often he sees them as agents of the devil. In his eyes logic looks like blasphemy. Words lose their impact for he gives them his own meaning. Biblical phrases evoke a Pavlovian response which is often very different from that which the accepted meaning of the phrase would produce. Any attempt to inject accepted meaning into these phrases is likely to prove a frustrating and unsuccessful experience. The fundamentalist will hear only what fits his thesis. What he cannot adapt to fit his beliefs he will reject. His conditioning has been excellent and as a subject he has, for many reasons, been quick to respond.

The pay-off

Such people have their own self-satisfying eschatology. Their reward for a life of unthinking devotion to stern precepts is an eternity in a blissful heaven. Any suggestion that the reward crazily outweighs what went to achieve it, just as an eternity in hell would be an unjustifiable punishment for any kind of wrongdoing, will not be considered. The fundamentalist is confident of attaining a heaven which is like a caricature of the most infantile of clerical imaginings through the years. His heaven has a full complement of big-winged angels and full-size harps.

These people see God at work around them. They receive His signals from time to time. A shower of rain, a random remark in a conversation or a phrase which the eye lights on in the Bible can all have a special significance, a sign of divine disapproval or divine acknowledgement of a recent prayer. They are convinced that God is constantly curing the incurable who put themselves in His

hands. Most fundamentalists will produce tedious lists of authenticated cures which have been miraculously wrought in the presence of unnamed doctors. The fundamentalist in the full flow of putting over his message can intimidate by the sheer volume of his words. The same boring, foolish arguments and stories are repeated till the listener is brought to the point of nausea by the tedium of it all.

Trial to friends and relations

Fundamentalism affects not only those who embrace it but also friends and relatives. Children have needless burdens of sin and guilt placed on them. They are helpless victims forced to live in a harsh hellfire world. Fundamentalists, who ostensibly seek to achieve the goal of boundless love, are frequently uncharitable to a frightening degree towards those whose weakness (or natural instincts) lead them into apostasy. It is ironic that virtues such as love, forgiveness, compassion and charity, which they allegedly cherish, are often most conspicuously lacking in their treatment of erring relatives and friends.

Fundamentalists say that they are happy. They may be. But if they are it must surely be happiness based on some distortion of the normal means of obtaining satisfaction. For who could find simple pleasure in their puritanical world? They live within a system which seems to squeeze humanity dry and which imposes brutally rigid precepts in place of mature flexibility. Kindness, tolerance and understanding lose their ordinary meaning and become warped. Where the individual steps outside the brittle fundamentalist framework his friends see righteous wrath as the most appropriate attitude. These people illustrate that in contemporary society the teachings of the Bible can still be used to justify what one will. Perhaps their most fruitful function is to serve as a warning and a pathetic object lesson.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

CENTENARY LECTURES THE MEANING AND VALUE OF FREETHOUGHT

Chairman: DAVID TRIBE

Friday, July 8th

FREETHOUGHT AND LIBERTY
TOM SARGENT AVRIL FOX JAMES SHEPHERD
MARTIN ENNALS

Friday, July 22nd

FREETHOUGHT AND SOCIAL WORK
PETER FRYER KERSTINE RICHARDS

Friday, August 5th

FREETHOUGHT AND THE ARTS
OSWELL BLAKESTON PETER COTES JOAN MILLER
JOHN CALDER KATHLEEN EWART

Meetings commence at 7.30 p.m.
CONWAY HALL, RED LION SQUARE, LONDON, WC1

HOW I BECAME AN ATHEIST

I AM EIGHTY-FOUR YEARS OLD and I have been an atheist for many years. As a young girl, however, I was very religious. I went to church twice on Sundays, and to Early Communion after I was confirmed into the Church of England. My parents rarely went to church, just for social occasions like weddings and christenings, like so many of the middle class. But of course the young had to go not only to Church regularly but also to Sunday School if they were to grow up good little boys and girls.

It was not until I was over twenty-one that I began to have doubts. These began with the dreadful feeling that I could not possibly connect God's actions with a Kind and Loving Father. Why did Christ have to die that awful death? Surely some other way could have been found to save us all. And why had He made animals eat one another? The Lord's Prayer worried me too. "Lead us not into temptation" . . . fancy having to ask a kind and loving Father not to *lead* us into temptation. No kind parent would deliberately do such a thing. And what about the dreadful floods and volcanic eruptions that had killed thousands? If God had created everything, then He must have created Evil.

I was mad on reading anything I could get hold of. I remember being given Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol* one Christmas when I was twelve, and by the end of the year I had read all his books. And then I found to my amazement that other people also had doubts, well known and respected writers like Huxley, Bertrand Russell, Bernard Shaw and many others, and they did not drop dead as I had been told would happen if I denied God. I read, too, about Evolution and how we really started, and it certainly sounded more likely than the Garden of Eden. I wondered why we had to believe things just because someone had said them a thousand years ago, and I realised that we young people were not using our minds at all, but were just accepting without question what the Christian Church told us was true.

To my joy a great burden fell from my shoulders, like

Lilian Middleton

Christian in the *Pilgrim's Progress* but in reverse. I no longer had to believe what I could not. But I have to confess that I was a coward. I kept my secret for quite a few years, although I never missed an opportunity of asking religious people very awkward questions. And although I never started religious discussions myself, I was always ready to join in. All my children were christened, as my husband was a typical middle-class Christian. We never discussed religion, and he would have been horrified if he had known of my views.

Disbelief acknowledged

It was really not until after my husband's death seven years ago that I felt free to come out into the open and to try and get other people to bring their *minds* (and not just their emotions) to bear on the religious question. I wrote letters to different national newspapers, although they were not often published. One paper, however, said that although they were sorry not to be able to print my letter, they were interested in my views and would always be glad to hear from me. So, I thought, *someone* reads them anyway, and now I write whenever I can, as on the subject of the teaching of religion in schools.

Commitment

So now I am a Hot Gospeller for Atheism! I think it is essential that people should think about these things for themselves and that they should realise the awful hypocrisy of some Christians. This is especially important for the young, who are taught so much that they will have to throw out when they get older and so risk rejecting many good things as well. I hope that these young people will never have to go through my own awful experience when I first had doubts about religion, and I welcome any paper or organisation that helps them.

[Next week in this series of six articles, D. Molyneux describes how he "Became a Humanist" at the beginning of the century.—Ed.]

NUCLEAR WEAPONS: SOME MORAL IMPLICATIONS

W. Bynner

ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO I was studying the report of a working party appointed by the British Council of Churches to advise on the Church's attitude to a nuclear weapons defence policy and published under the title *Britain's Nuclear Deterrent*. I had hoped to find a statement of Christian ethical principles by which the working party had arrived at their conclusions. They had before them a resolution adopted in July, 1963, at the Delhi Conference of the World Council of Churches: "That the use of nuclear weapons is unjustifiable in any circumstances", but this was ignored by the majority in arriving at their conclusions. I looked in vain for the ethical principles which one might expect from a church body. I looked deeper into the theology of the Roman Catholics, to find the doctrine of the "Just War" openly acknowledged.

The views of the minority of English churchmen are probably represented by Canon Stanley Evans and others who publicly refuse to condone any reliance on nuclear weapons. In other words a minority are guided by their consciences rather than by considerations of expediency.

Since then I have given the matter some serious thought,

trying to elucidate in the simplest terms, for myself as well as for others, the ethical principles underlying the political and other questions involved. It immediately became apparent that the Ten Commandments have no relevance. This is an entirely modern situation brought about by men's own ingenuity, the implications of which are not yet fully realised.

A chance meeting with Maurice Hill at the 1965 BHA Conference at Keele led to the first draft of the letter which appeared in the *Humanist News*, May, 1966. Our principles can be summarised as follows:

As inhabitants of this earth we are by reasons of our mortality only tenants for life. Our generation demeans itself if it fails to leave the earth in as good a condition as it was left to us by previous generations. We are trustees for future generations, both in respect of our own actions, and, to some extent, of the actions of others. To override this responsibility is to be guilty of excessive pride.

These principles do not necessarily support the outright Pacifist position. We regard the abolition of nuclear weapons as the first important step.

NEWS AND NOTES

THE RECENT HONOURS LIST paid tribute to two eminent Secular-Humanists: **Professor Ritchie Calder, CBE**, professor of international relations at the University of Edinburgh, has been made a baron, and **Harold Pinter**, playwright, member of the NSS and outspoken advocate of secular education, has been awarded the CBE.

Another change in the window dressing

THE VATICAN has abolished its "Index" of forbidden books; or, rather, Catholics will no longer be *excommunicated* for reading books which their church considers dangerous to their faith or morals. However, it will still be a Catholic's duty to avoid reading those books which the bishops declare are immoral. In some cases the Holy See will "benevolently invite" authors to correct works which are "offensive". If they refuse, the Holy See reserves the right publicly to condemn the book.

Vital statistics . . .

SINCE 1960 the world Catholic population has grown by 60,355,004 to 572,488,059 but the number of priests has grown in those six years by "only" 16,250 making a total of 425,815. The proportion of priests to laity which in 1960 was one to every 1,254 is now only one to every 1,344 (*Catholic Herald*, June 17). Priests, however, are rather easier to count than the laity which consists of baptised RCs, even if lapsed or officially "ex" Catholics. **The income of the C. of E.** in 1964 was £45.25 millions, of which £16.5 millions was provided by the Church Commissioners and £2.75 millions by the laity. £1.5 millions more than in 1963. "A big sigh of relief" has gone up from Catholics following an assurance that Mr Callaghan is to give 100 per cent refunds to charities which pay the Selective Employment Tax. These will include RC schools and churches as well as "charitable institutions".

Roman Catholic self-criticism

A PRIEST who has dealt with Maltese immigrants is reported in the *Catholic Herald* as saying,

"I wouldn't say *all* the Maltese young men are bad . . . They are all Catholics. They are escaping from a 9,000 unemployment figure in a total working population of 83,000 and they are coming from a restrictive Church State into a permissive Welfare State . . . almost invariably the working men were bitter against the Maltese Church's stand against the Malta Labour Party. In fact they blamed their emigration on the Church because, they said, if it weren't for the Church Mr Dom Mintoff, the MLP Leader, would now be in Government. And he has promised to eliminate the 9,000 unemployment figure."

Shares in "sin"

THE *Observer* reports that a Rome Communist newspaper has disclosed that the Vatican's financial group, "The Special Administration of the Assets of the Holy See" has large shareholdings in a concern organising the production and sale of contraceptives. The *Observer* (June 19) reported:

"This is causing considerable embarrassment to the 16 cardinals and bishops of the 'inner cabinet' of the Papal Commission on Birth Control."

A brave woman

EVERYONE who has read Dr Anne Biezanek's *All Things New* must applaud her courage and battle for sanity. News that she is now seeking a divorce can only increase our sympathy for her personal problems. Two years ago she wrote of experiences which led her to believe that she could not "trust in man". Let us hope that now

she will find that she can. The Biezaneks were married in 1949, and there are seven children.

Another papal blow to "Holy" Matrimony

POPE PAUL has authorised marriage "in exceptional cases" of boys of 15 and girls of 13. Does he really imagine that young people (who ought still to be at school) are able wisely to choose a mate with whom to spend 60 years with perhaps 40 of those years childbearing for the women who have no rights over their own bodies? Perhaps he should also alter the marriage vow from "until death . . ." to "until suicide or mental sickness do us part". This is not a new "liberalism"; it is surely another attempt on the part of the enforced celibates to make marriage intolerable.

Cruelty in Britain too

THE NSPCC has for some time been reporting cases of "battered babies" and small children who are brutally injured and even killed by the psychopathic parents. But is it really any good putting such parents in prison for six months or making them pay a fine (maximum £100)? The urgent need is clearly for more education in parental responsibility, child care, and, of course, contraceptives. The birth of children should no longer be condoned as a punishment for those who risk conceiving them but cannot offer love and security. "Battered parents", too, need help. Catholics may be forced to obey a cruel moral code. We are not.

Some progress . . .

THE LORDS have passed the Sexual Offences Bill by 78 votes to 60.

Strictly for Theists: preferably churchgoers

THE SCOUT promise will continue to include "duty to God", even if made in long rather than short trousers. The new directive demands that Scout leaders should be active members of a Church (not chapel) and district commissioners are allowed no discretion in the matter.

Glutton for punishment

THE *Guardian* reported that Mr L. S. Rao, a Yogi aged 76, recently plunged into a tank of water when he tried to "emulate the biblical act" and walk on water. He had already succeeded in eating glass, swallowing nails and tacks, drinking a cup of nitric acid and walking across a bed of red hot coals. Secularists realise that even this would be easier for many people than facing the fact that such bible stories are not true. And, after wholehearted religious indoctrination, most people would rather eat glass than try.

READERS' READING LIST

"The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist" by Robert Tressell (London, Panther: 7/6). The story of Owen, an atheist with a vision of a just society, who tries to arouse his workmates from apathy. Near-starvation and tragedy occur, but Owen keeps his faith. The book is written in a readable style and an ultimate belief in the dignity of humanity. A true story and an exposure of religious humbug and hypocrisy. (John Sutherland.)

A **Match to Fire the Thames** by Ann Stafford (Hodder and Stoughton, 21s). The story of the Great Dock Strike of 1889 and the inspiration and impetus given to the dockers and their leaders by the Match Girls' strike of the year before. Here we read about the stalwarts of oratory, Trade Unionism and Socialism in such persons as Annie Besant, John Burns and Benn Tillet. And we read, too, how Cardinal Manning negotiated "the Cardinal's Peace". (Kenneth Ead)

THE DECLINE OF METHODISM

John Shaw

John Shaw (b. 1922) is a Sales Consultant. He is an ex-Methodist, and now a member of the NSS and BHA (Birmingham).

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE in this country have been through Methodist Sunday schools in their childhood. What is happening to Methodism now, the largest non-conformist church in Britain?

A glance at a current issue of the *Methodist Recorder* gives startling news. "A continuous steep decline in membership" reports the Rev. Richard Oliver of Oldham, and "the blunt, brutal fact is that we do not know how to stem the decline". "Anyone else got a remedy for poor old Methodism? There's something wrong with it", says Andrew Coulson of Trinity College, Cambridge.

"Poor old Methodism" sums up the feelings that many ex-Methodists have for their earlier days, the memories of which will never fade. Anyone who has been processed through Methodism in childhood will recall their Sunday school with the little groups of eight to ten children per class, supervised by teachers only a few years older than the scholars themselves; the yearly release of the Sunday school outing, with each scholar equipped with a paper bag of food to last the day, all eaten by 10 am; the intense excitement of sitting on the platform at the Sunday school anniversary, singing anthems, practised *ad nauseum*, to a packed chapel; the exquisite, fruity smell of the Harvest Festival, with bunches of grapes, huge melons and bread baked in peculiar shapes hung around the pulpit; the advance to church membership preparation, the shivering mysticism of the first Communion, the shock of hearing the minister saying: "this is my blood which was shed for you, drink . . ."

Nor can ex-Methodists forget the abject feelings of inadequacy at not feeling saved, when all those around professed that they were; the insistence that even raffles were gambling and sinful; the early and continuous promptings to sign the Pledge never to drink; the guilt and shame of going into a shop on Sunday.

As one grew into the 'teens, the stalwart senior chapel members of childhood shrank to ordinary men and women split by petty bickerings, some not speaking to other church members for years, even when occupying adjacent pews. The certainty and assurance of the minister answering questions at the Bible fellowship become, in the privacy of his study, an apology that the virgin birth, the ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit, even the resurrection were symbolic—one did not need to believe that they actually happened. "Poor old Methodism" indeed.

Methodist Sunday schools today have the same small groups of classes led by thirteen and fourteen year olds; the same hymns are sung, the anthems, a little more modernistic, are struggled through at Anniversaries; "this is my body, take, eat . . ." is still murmured over bowed teenage heads. All appears outwardly the same, but is it?

Obsolete weapons

The Rev. Lord Soper sees it as a war in which Methodism is losing. "We are losing engagement after engagement in the intellectual field", he says, "and after each engagement perhaps the most serious impact is the number of our own regular forces captured by the enemy."

Secularists nowadays do no need to rejoice over this state of affairs in the way that Bradlaugh would have been

entitled to one hundred years ago. When the NSS was founded in 1866, the Methodist Church was at its zenith. Chapel society dictated the pattern of life for millions. The minister was a holy man of God, utmost respect was given him, chapel and school three times a Sunday was accepted as the only way to spend the Lord's day. All human problems were answered by the Bible. The greatest tragedy to befall a man was for him to lose his christian faith, and atheism was the very depths of wickedness and evil.

To look through a 1966 copy of the *Methodist Recorder* is to see what Secularism has done to Methodism since those days. Can one conceive a Methodist of 1866 saying:

"Christians do not deny that it is possible to be moral without belief in God."

"Religion owes something to Huxley for ridding it of unnecessary or superstitious accretions."

"The war will not be won by a recall to the Bible" (Soper).

"Methodism is fighting for its life."

"Why does the emancipation of women progress more slowly in the Church than in the secular world?"

"Is christianity the final religion?"

"Methodists who are not clear as to what is meant by conversion . . ."

"We are witnessing the disintegration of the Methodist Church as we have known it."

All this is said in one week's issue of the *Methodist Recorder*, dated May 26, 1966.

Methodism now has no comparison with its former self. It is no longer a force in the country. Its abject retreat is the more telling because there is no hostile government persecuting it. It has been defeated in the field of ideas, and by common-sense rationalism.

Its position is worth studying by Secularists, because it represents generally the position of all non-conformism. It is doubtful whether there will be a Methodist Church one hundred years hence, because strong self-preservation forces within it are seeking to return it to the established Church of England, which itself is engaged in exploratory dialogues with Rome. Secularism is on its way to the defeat of non-conformism, which in time seems likely to exist only as an historical church period.

Let the Rev. Lord Soper have the final word:

"In the ecclesiastical world in 1966 no victories in the field of liturgy, no triumphs of ardour, no alliances between denominational forces—no, not even a rededicated ministry can compensate for a failure to defeat the forces of agnosticism."

Charles Bradlaugh—the victory is yours!

"Pride of intellect surely abides with those who insist on belief without evidence."

HARRIET MARTINEAU (1802-76)

"It is said that we make God after our own image, and it is true that so we have done . . ."

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE (1820-1910)

FOSTERING—FOR REWARD?

THE NEWSPAPERS, of late, have treated us to a spate of stories involving foster-children. There was the scandal at Gaunt's Common, and, the to my mind, greater scandal of the Home Office Inquiry which found mostly nobody guilty, when in fact mostly everybody was, and the whole social system to boot. There was the boy sent at public expense to a fee-paying boarding school so that he would not feel "different". Kent County Council is threatening to take a number of children into care, against everybody's wishes, by evicting their mothers from a hostel for the homeless. The Berkshire Children's Officer, in order to find a "good, loving" foster home for a family of six, advertised payment over the odds to the tune of £55 per week; and the father of the children, who, when in full employment, earned £20 and failed to pay the rent, was also described as a "good, loving satisfactory parent".

Can loving homes be bought?

The only constructive idea that emerges from this welter is that of obtaining better foster homes by paying more money for them, in sharp distinction from the practice in adoption where applicants are carefully screened for their ability to cope financially with what they undertake. This policy may have effective results in some cases, particularly those of a temporary sort; but the hard core of children in care are deprived children, deprived in Bowlby's sense of individual mother love and personal loyalty; and this, I firmly maintain, cannot be bought even with the rate-payers' money.

For myself, I took the opposite view. So far from approaching it as a job for reward, I thought it necessary to make myself financially independent before applying; and in these taxridden times that is not easy and takes more than year or so to achieve. I found it expedient to conceal my annoyance when casually told by a girl half my age that I was really far too old for that sort of work but as a special concession she would consider my application. With great effort I had built a home, and there was a vacancy in it, and there were children in institutions who had no home to go to. It did not matter much to me whether I should adopt or foster; that could depend on circumstances, the individual needs of the child or merely on the difference between *de jure* and *de facto*.

The case "Miss A." considered for me was that of a ten-year-old boy who had been in a dozen places already and thrived in none of them, a difficult assignment; but after meeting the child I decided that it was possible and took it on. Miss A. was to supervise. There were many occasions after that when from expediency or for the sake of peace I concealed my real feelings from her; for she and I had mentalities which were dynamite to each other. The circumstances which led to the final show-down need not concern us here; with such uneasy yokemates it was bound to come. When it did come three years later, she was legally superior and she showed no mercy. Acting, presumably, on orders from her superiors, she removed Peter from my home and pushed him right back into the institution from which he had originally emerged. By that time I was really angry, and so was the youngster. Between us we lashed out right, left and centre, and the commotion that we made came to the notice of no less a person than the Children's Officer himself. The letter which I received from him is such an amazing document

that I quote it in full:—

"Dear Mrs Fisher, I am sorry to hear from Mr B. and Miss C. of the difficulties they have experienced with you and your failure to co-operate with them concerning Peter's welfare. I am aware that Mr B. has already made it clear that Peter would not be returning to you, and following a full discussion I have no alternative but to advise you that your contact with Peter must be completely terminated. I must be quite emphatic about this and I would add that I am satisfied that this decision is the right one for Peter in all the circumstances and designed to help him."

Mr B. was the Superintendent of Institutions, Miss C. the Area Officer. I never met either of them. All they can possibly have known of me and of my home must have been gleaned from the reports of Miss A., in whom it was impossible to confide. When, much later and after great difficulty, I managed to get almost within earshot of the great chief, I was curtly given to understand that what he did was right, it was right because he did it and I was not the sort of person he could discuss it with. So as a foster mother I stood condemned on secondhand evidence without any chance to speak in my own defence.

Peter makes his own decision

To cut a long story short Peter contrived, with the aid of less exalted persons, to get himself back home to me again, where he has remained ever since; and now, grown up and out of care, he still continues to live in my house, which, if the tax sharks do not get in first he will one day inherit.

As he settled and became less demanding, I turned my thoughts towards taking on something else. By that time relations with the Local Authority were so strained that it was impossible to work with them at all, so I undertook fostering by private arrangement, and found myself acting pseudo-grandmother to homeless babies, the mother's need as desperate as the infant's. Success is hard to gauge, and certainly qualified, but I find the job both absorbing and satisfying, and it presents a diversity of human dilemmas sufficient to exercise the resources of any freethinker.

Clinic proves helpful

As a last word I would like to add that in contrast to the obstacles put in my way by the Children's Department, the people at the local baby clinic have been entirely helpful and considerate; which goes to prove, if any proof is necessary that, in our day and age strictly medical matters are much better understood and far more adequately dealt with than psychological ones.

"As children in blank darkness tremble and start at everything, so we in broad daylight are oppressed at times by fears as baseless as those horrors which children imagine coming upon them in the dark. This dread and darkness of the mind cannot be dispelled by the sunbeams, the shining shafts of day, but only by an understanding of the outward form and inner workings of nature."

LUCRETIUS (c. 98-55 BC), *The Nature of the Universe*

"I certainly had no idea how little faith Christians have in their own faith, till I saw how ill their courage and temper can stand any attack on it."

HARRIET MARTINEAU (1802-76)

FREETHINKER

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SUSTENTATION

Despite rising costs the FREETHINKER is making valiant efforts to hold its price at the traditional 6d. This can be done only with the help of a greatly increased circulation and donations from those who can afford it. Please help all you can.

LECTURE NOTICES, ETC

Items for insertion in this column must reach THE FREETHINKER office at least ten days before the date of publication.

OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch NSS (The Mount)—Sunday afternoon and evening: MESSRS. CRONAN, MCRAE and MURRAY.
Manchester Branch NSS (Car Park, Victoria Street), 8 p.m.: MESSRS. COLLINS, WOODCOCK, and others.
Merseyside Branch NSS (Pierhead)—Meetings: Wednesdays, 1 p.m.; Sundays, 3 p.m. and 7.30 p.m.
Nottingham Branch NSS (Old Market Square), every Friday, 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

INDOOR

Humanist Housing Association, Sunday, July 10th, 3 p.m., Blackham House, 35 Worple Road, Wimbledon. Garden Party.
Unity Theatre, 1 Goldrington Street, London, NW1. "Inherit the Wind" by ROBERT E. LEE and JEROME LAWRENCE. Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 7.45 p.m. until July 17th. Tickets, 3/6, 5/- and 7/6. Members only (membership 7/6 per year). Box office, EUSTON 5391.
West Ham and District Branch NSS (Wanstead and Woodford Community Centre, Wanstead Green, E11). Meetings at 8 p.m. on the fourth Thursday of every month.
World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, Conway Hall, London, September 1st-5th. Interpreters and other helpers urgently required. Please contact Mr C. Bradlaugh Bonner, 23 Streathbourne Road, London, S.W.17. Telephone: BALHAM 3508.
Humanist Letter Network (International): send s.a.c. to Kit Mouat, Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.

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THE BRADLAUGH STATUE - PUBLIC MEETING

CENTENARY RALLY

NORTHAMPTON

SUNDAY, JULY 17th

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REGINALD PAGET, QC, MP DAVID TRIBE
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REVIEW

David Tribe

LET'S GET A DIVORCE (a week or two more at the Mermaid) is fun. First performed in Paris in 1880 and London in 1882, *Divorçons* is from the pen of prolific Victorien Sardou, who produced 76 works in some 40 years of active life. The second half of the nineteenth century is not generally thought of as a fun epoch. We think more of melodramas and high (and low) tragedy; but Sardou was a sparkling river in a weary plain, though he did not confine himself to comedy.

But under the glitter there is a moving current of social comment that is surprisingly modern in outlook. Like Brigid Brophy, the dramatist is saying that marriage is immoral if it uses the law to bind and "duty" to prompt. It is only when there is the possibility of divorce that existential man can choose love and devotion. The plot concerns a young wife, two years married, who is about to be unfaithful to her elderly husband because, as she eloquently puts it, he has sown all his wild oats, become an exhausted wreck, and then looked round in a convent for an inexperienced girl. Instead of revealing his jealousy the husband proves that years have brought discretion and that there's still life in the old dog. Simulating *amour impropre*, he outmanoeuvres and discomfits a young adventurer. As Bernard Shaw pointed out, the play is untidily constructed and most of the characters are not essential to the plot, but they all contribute delightful dialogue, well captured in the translation by Angela and Robert Goldsby.

Costumes, set, direction and acting are equally stylish. A special word must be said for Fenella Fielding as the wife, who over the last few years has magnificently shown that those of us who thought there could never be a syrup voice to match Joan Greenwood's were wrong.

LETTERS

General Assembly

EVERY YEAR about this time a strange performance takes place in Edinburgh called "The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland" complete with a Banquet and Garden Party at Holyrood, inspection of Kilted Guards of Honour, Pipe Bands, etc., none of which seems to have much relevance to Religion.

For three weeks about 1,300 "Ministers" talk continually and not one idea of any value ever comes forth. As would be expected there is a lot of talk on finance and various means of extracting more money from reluctant congregations. Some seem to think that the Church is on the verge of a revival, others admit to failure, over 6,000 have left the Church in the last two years so the talk goes round and round! In fact, never did so little come from so many!

(Mrs) M. WATSON

Now, medical segregation

A "CATHLOIC NURSES CONGRESS" has just been held in Brighton. Why Catholic? What is so special about such nurses that they must be singled out for what really amounts to a form of "apartheid"? The nursing profession should be international without reference to race, creed, or political bias—solely humanitarian. It is unfortunate that a certain section of this noble profession should be so segregated, and subjected to the subtle propagandist talk of Cardinal Heenan, who flatteringly told the members that he returned from Rome especially to speak to them as he considered them more important than his work there! Why do women swallow that sort of talk? Surely if any job calls for a Secular/Humanist outlook that of nursing does.

ELIZABETH COLLINS

Atheist Provost

MR THOMAS HYSLOP, chemist, has again refused to attend the kirkin' at Denny, Stirlingshire, because of his "atheist beliefs", as reported in *Daily Record*, Scotland's national newspaper, which circulates throughout the whole of Scotland and Northern England. That a Provost (equal to a Mayor in England) should publicly declare himself to be an Atheist is surely something unique in this strict Presbyterian country. The *Record* has a nation-wide circulation and this news is bound to come as a shock to many of its religious as well as its not so religious readers. Mr. Hyslop is highly respected and the councillors will not "allow" him to retire. The council consists of an equal number of Protestants and Catholics.

J. HUMPHREY

A year to remember—1881

THE FREETHINKER was founded the year I was born, and it is 40 years since a friend of my husband introduced me to it. A dear friend asked me last week how I (once the wife of an organist and singer) could be a Freethinker. I said, "By studying the Bible and all its absurdities and statements which are an intellectual crime to those who think and meditate". For successful living we must be: too large for worry, too brave for anger, too strong for fear and too broad of mind to permit the presence of trouble. The more one sees, the more one wants to see, and the more one wants to learn.

MARY BEESLEY

Plea for Freedom

HAVING READ Mr Huxley's letter published in your issue dated June 3, I find myself at a loss to understand him. To me, freedom means freedom of both thought and action for everyone, regardless of race or religion, age or sex. And equally of opportunity is a prerequisite of a free society. I am sorry if Mr Huxley decides to cancel his order for the FREETHINKER. I disagree emphatically with what I consider to be his muddled opinions, but I don't mind reading them, and I wish that he didn't mind so much reading mine.

ADELE PAUL

I WAS SHOCKED to read the letter of Mr Huxley in today's FREETHINKER. Its racist overtones were quite unmistakable, and abominable in any rational person. Racism in any form is logically unjustified and morally repulsive.

Mr Huxley contemplates ceasing his subscription. Let him. If the FREETHINKER depends upon his sort of support the sooner it becomes defunct the better. If a similar amount of space is given in future to sentiments such as he expressed I shall immediately terminate my support.

G. L. SIMONS

"Taken aback . . ."

AS ONE who admires the pungency in the articles written by Phyllis K. Graham I was rather taken aback by her *Racism* in her "Easter in Seville". What is this particular virtue in being English? Didn't England go to war to destroy the nonsense called "Herrenvolk" claimed by Germans? Or was it a case of *desputing* the claim? "Un-English" sounds too much like "un-American" and we know what awful crimes that term covered—in the "Land of the Free". Phyllis is rather naive in thinking that England was twice caught napping in 1914 and 1939 as the late Col. A'Court Repington has confirmed in his two volumes (*Diary of the First World War, 1914-18, 25s each*).

CHARLES DORAN

I WAS very interested in F. H. Amphlett Micklewright's article "How It Is Done" in which he explains how Roman Catholics operate by means of the "occasional remark"—slipping in a few words which are supposed to discredit an opponent. What interested me most of all was that the article "Easter in Seville" by Phyllis K. Graham contained a fine example of such a technique. She talks about how we British have been "caught napping" in two world wars with "a gun and a half to defend ourselves with" and this is because of "our easy going tolerance", "our incurable belief in 'the other chaps' essential decency". In other words—all foreigners are a rotten lot while we British are utterly noble and superior to all lesser breeds. This is a Herrenvolk outlook. Colonel Blimp would have loved it. But I think that the unholy alliance between nationalism and liberal humanism will ultimately destroy the latter. What we need most of all today is World Government and anti-foreign insinuations won't help us to get it.

The truth is, of course, that it wasn't "easy going tolerance" or belief in the "other chap's decency" that caused us to go into the two world wars unprepared. It was sheer inefficiency on the part of our military authorities.

As regards Charlotte Smith's letter; I certainly think Secularism should move with the times. But her attack on the "Old Guard" goes too far. I don't agree that "attacks on religion . . . are no longer needed". Religious prejudice is still strong and organised. And if the Old Guard think that certain characters are mythical they have a right to say so. It is not "arrogant" of them to do this. I shall be sorry if we have no more explosions from Mr H. Cutner.

I. S. LOW

Details of membership of the National Secular Society and inquiries regarding bequests and secular funeral services may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High Street, London, S.E.1. Telephone: HOP 2717.