

Freethinker

Registered at the G.P.O. as a Newspaper

Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

VOLUME 90, No. 8

Saturday, February 21, 1970

Sixpence Weekly

THE NEW ATHEISM

MRS MADALYN MURRAY O'HAIR, the foremost atheist activist in the United States, saw her plan to bring an end to the income tax exemption enjoyed by America's churches come one step nearer fruition recently. Anthony Beilenson, a 37-year-old California State Senator, succeeded in pushing a measure through the state legislature, compelling churches to list all their income derived from activities which are not religious. At the end of this year they will have to pay tax on it all. The new law will apply to the established Christian churches as well as to the innumerable fringe sects, who capitalise on income tax exemption.

Beilenson's objective was not so much to hurt the churches as to protect Californian businessmen, whose heavy burden of taxation makes it difficult for them to compete with "churches" which run laundries, hotel chains, canneries and food and wine factories. Nevertheless, a Bill on the same lines as Beilenson's has now been presented in Congress, which if passed will hit churches all over the US. The Bill leaves most Church income untouched, but its opponents are reported to be worried now that the flood gates are open. Mrs O'Hair, no doubt encouraged by the trickle now flowing through, has stepped up her campaign to wash the gates away altogether.

Her latest ploy has been to incorporate a tax-free church of her own. She has called it 'Poor Richard's

of ecclesiasticism is carried a step further by Mrs O'Hair's hagiography, which is headed by Einstein and Mark Twain. (In the second volume of his *Autobiography* Bertrand Russell recounts how he almost died in China and regrets that he did not, because he was so revered by the Chinese that, had he died there they would have erected a shrine to him and worshipped him as a God, which Russell wrote: "Would have been rather chic for an atheist". Mrs O'Hair has done her best to rectify this discrepancy by making "The Blessed Bertrand Russell" her latest saint.)

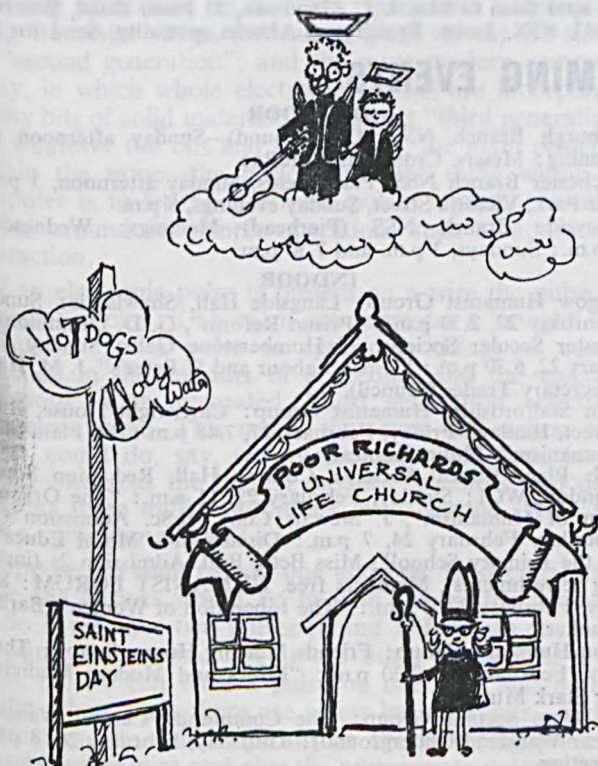
That the situation is in reality far from comic is best revealed by *The Wall Street Journal's* estimate that the income of the Roman Catholic Church in the US exceeds that of Shell Oil, Bethlehem Steel and Ford Motors put together. Mrs O'Hair quoted this in a recent statement to the press, when she also estimated that the Churches would have to pay annually the equivalent of the US National Debt—a figure which would save every family in the country £50 a year in taxation. "If the Churches lose these privileges", she said, "then we'll have hit them where it hurts—in the billfold. It will be the biggest blow ever suffered by organised religion in this country." More power to Your Grace's elbow, madam!

CATHOLIC RECRUITMENT

A FORTNIGHT AGO we reported that the Anglican church is suffering from a severe decline in the numbers of recruits to the priesthood. This week we are pleased to follow this up with the news that the Roman Catholic church is suffering from the same complaint. A survey of 41 Western countries showed that there were 146,996 seminarists at the end of 1968 compared with over 166,000 in 1965. This represents a drop of almost 20,000 in just three years.

The fundamental cause of this is, of course, the progress of science and the gathering momentum of world-wide disillusion with religion. A contributing factor, however, must be the Pope's continuing emphasis on priestly celibacy. There cannot be many young men nowadays who would consider that a person devoid of an experience which is at one and the same time the most basic, the most widespread, the most talked about, the most psychologically significant, and perhaps the most meaningful human activity, is qualified to work in a field, one of the most important qualifications for which must surely be an understanding of human problems. The Pope's inability to

(Continued overleaf)



Universal Life Church' and proclaimed herself a bishop. A better way of publicising the lunacy of American law regarding religion would be hard to find. 'Poor Richard' is Mrs O'Hair's husband, a 56-year-old painter. He has agreed to play the role of a prophet. The hilarious parody

Freethinker

Published by G. W. Foote & Co. Ltd.

Editor: David Reynolds

The views expressed by the contributors to FREETHINKER are not necessarily those of the Editor or the Board.

appreciate this is doubtless accelerating the decline of his church. Only last week he described celibacy as "a better incentive to the qualitative and quantitative recruiting to the priesthood". He considered celibacy a greater attraction to young men than a change in Canon law. Though a change in Canon law is not over-inspiring, when one considers the type of young men to whom the Pope is referring, the fact that their numbers are rapidly declining is particularly relieving.

Meanwhile, back in Holland, Cardinal Alfrink and his bishops continue to press the Vatican for dialogue on the celibacy issue. They received support last week from 84 German speaking theology professors from universities in West Germany, Austria and Switzerland, who issued a letter addressed to the 50 bishops in their countries calling on them to support the Dutch in their demands for dialogue with Rome.

IRVINE FAILS

MR GODMAN IRVINE'S attempt to sabotage the Abortion Act was unsuccessful last week. His Private Member's Bill was talked out in the Commons on February 13. It is a pity that the Bill was not voted upon, for there seemed little doubt that it would fail. Whether the prolonged debate was genuine or a result of Irvine's opponents' uncertainty as to whether they would defeat him in the voting, is hard to say. If the latter is so, it is again a pity in spite of the despicable tactics displayed on previous occasions by the anti-Abortion lobby led by Mr Norman St John Stevas.

Their failure on this occasion will be welcomed by one group of men directly concerned with the practical workings of the Abortion law, the nation's GPs. In a report of a survey carried out by National Opinion Polls, 47 per cent of family doctors thought the law should be left as it is. 19 per cent thought it should be altered to make abortions easier to obtain, and 28 per cent thought it should be altered to make them more difficult to obtain. This means that 66 per cent, or 2 out of 3, are either content with the existing law or want it liberalised further.

In answer to a second question as to whether they found the present facilities for obtaining abortions for their patients adequate or inadequate, a sizeable minority 41 per cent found them inadequate. In London, the South East and the West Midlands, those who found facilities inadequate were in a majority.

THE 1971 CENSUS

A LETTER in *The Times* last week from Dr Ernest Krausz made a plea that a question on religion be included in the next census, which is to take place in 1971. Dr Krausz welcomes the Registrar General's intention to include questions regarding the date of entry into this country of those born overseas and the country of birth of the respondents and their parents, as a means of finally putting to an end

"the unreliable estimates, which still abound, concerning the sizes of some ethnic minorities in Britain".

However, he goes on to point out that by failing to include a question on religion the Registrar General will be unable to distinguish between certain ethnic groups such as "the very different minority communities of Poles, Jews and Ukrainians". He also says: "A religion question would also tell us more exactly the proportion of Catholics in the British population and the extent to which we are becoming a secularised country".

While endorsing Dr Krausz's plea it seems pertinent to urge the Registrar General to include two religious questions. One to establish ethnicity and the other to establish belief or lack of it. To have only one question would resolve the ethnicity confusion but would give a distorted view of the extent of secularisation, since the majority of unbelievers tend to put the religion of their parents as their own, despite their having ceased to regard religion as of any importance.

It is essential that the real degree of support for the churches be known, since as long as they can lay claim to all those baptised, confirmed or whatever they will continue to be accorded a secular reverence far in excess of their due.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

National Secular Society. Details of membership and inquiries regarding bequests and secular funeral services may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High Street, London, SE1. Telephone 01-407 2717. Cheques, etc., should be made payable to the NSS.

Humanist Postal Book Service (secondhand books bought and sold). For information or catalogue send 6d stamp to Kit Moutat, Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.

Humanitas Stamps: Help 5 Humanist charities. Buy stamps from/ or send them to Mrs A. C. Goodman, 51 Percy Road, Romford, RM7 8QX, Essex. British and African speciality. Send for list.

COMING EVENTS

OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch NSS (The Mound)—Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs. Cronan and McRae.

Manchester Branch NSS, Platt Fields, Sunday afternoon, 3 p.m.: Car Park, Victoria Street, Sunday evenings, 8 p.m.

Merseyside Branch NSS (Pierhead)—Meetings: Wednesdays, 1 p.m.: Sundays, 3 p.m. and 7.30 p.m.

INDOOR

Glasgow Humanist Group: Langside Hall, Shawlands: Sunday, February 22, 2.30 p.m.: "Prison Reform", G. D. Drummond.

Leicester Secular Society: 75 Humberstone Gate: Sunday, February 22, 6.30 p.m.: "Direct Labour and St Peter's", J. M. Hardy (Secretary Trades Council).

North Staffordshire Humanist Group: Cartwright House, Broad Street, Hanley: Friday, February 27, 7.45 p.m.: "A Plain Man's Humanism", Philip Robinson.

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1: Sunday, February 22, 11 a.m.: "The Organisation of Humanism", J. Stewart Cook, B.Sc. Admission free. Tuesday, February 24, 7 p.m.: Discussion—"Moral Education in the Primary School", Miss Betty Bull. Admission 2s (including refreshments), Members free. HUMANIST FORUM: Sunday, February 22, 3 p.m.: "The Liberation of Women", Barbara Smoker.

Sutton Humanist Group: Friends Meeting House, Sutton: Thursday, February 26, 7.30 p.m.: "Ethics and Modern Medicine", Dr Stark Murray.

West Ham Secular Group: The Community Centre, Wanstead (near Wanstead Underground): Thursday, February 26, 8 p.m.: Meeting.

Worthing Humanist Group: Morelands Hotel (opposite the pier): Sunday, February 22, 5.30 p.m.: "Living with Crime", Derek Howard, JP (Writer and Broadcaster).

New Paintings by Oswald Blakeston. BH Corner Gallery, 34 Cathedral Place (opposite St. Paul's Cathedral), London EC4. March 5th until March 18th. Monday to Friday, 10.30 a.m.—6 p.m. Saturday, 10.30 a.m.—1 p.m.

WHAT IS A COMPUTER?

G. L. SIMONS

The first in a series of three articles in which G. L. Simons assesses the properties and potential of computers.

A COMPUTER computes, but so does a desk calculating machine—and the desk calculating machine is not a computer. The main difference between the two is the provision of a program in the computer which allows it to function in an automatic fashion. But first a bit of arithmetic.

We are all used to adding up in a decimal system, but before we can start we have to learn ten digits—0 to 9—which is a bit of a nuisance. Most digital computers only know two digits—0 and 1—which simplifies matters. There is of course no need for more than two digits, since various combinations of noughts and ones can be used to represent any numerical quantity. For example the equivalent numbers in the “binary” system, as it is called, for one to ten in the decimal, are as follows—1, 10, 11, 100, 101, 111, 1000, 1001, 1010. This means that if we have a series of two-position switches (with one position representing a ‘one’ and the other a ‘nought’) we can represent any numerical quantity we fancy. This is one of the basic features of the digital computer, though the switches are generally electronic and not mechanical, i.e. instead of having a little lever up or down, we have an electronic pulse present or absent.

The two main advantages of having electronic switches instead of mechanical ones are size and speed: electronic switches are very small and very fast. But they were not always as small as they are today. The first computers were built up of hundreds of thermionic valves, the old “bottles” still found in ancient radio sets. Computers made up in this way were said to be “first generation”; computers using transistor valves (instead of glass valves) are said to be “second generation”; and the most modern computers today, in which whole electronic circuits are incorporated in tiny bits of solid material, are termed “third generation”. But whatever the bits and pieces used, the main principles remain the same—the basic important thing within the computer is to let the electronic pulses represent numbers shifted around for simple operations such as addition or subtraction.

If an electronic pulse is present on a wire the pulse can represent a ‘one’, if absent it can represent a ‘nought’. The time taken for a pulse to appear or disappear can be reckoned in thousandths of a second, and the electrical behaviour in an integrated “third generation” circuit is even more rapid. This means that even the earliest computers could do, say, twenty thousand additions in one second—whereas the biggest modern machines can do as many as three million additions every second. Well, how does a computer add up?

Suppose we want to add one and one. In decimal arithmetic the answer would be two; in binary the answer is 10. So if we have two pulses (1 and 1) fed into our *adder* we want 10 to come out at the other side on, say, two wires, i.e. we can have a pulse on one wire and nothing on the other. Thus there are a few basic circuits—adders, subtractors, etc.—that operate on the incoming pulses in the way we require and give the appropriate output. These basic circuits are often referred to as the “building blocks” of the computer: all the more complicated calculating circuits of the computer are made up of the basic blocks, and one way of doing a complicated multiplication, for example, may be to add up over and over again. (For

example, we can do seven times eight by eight consecutive additions of seven—because electronic switches are so fast, the time taken for such a repetitive operation is often not important.)

Most of the building blocks are used in the central processor which does pretty well all the necessary computation. In addition to the processor, the computer has a store, a program, and input/output facilities. The store holds numbers that the central processor may or may not need for computation; one way of holding numbers is by means of magnetic rings made out of some suitable material—when a ring is magnetised by the passage of an electric current the ring may be said to hold a ‘one’, when demagnetised it may be said to hold a ‘nought’. The input/output facilities, often working in conjunction with the program, are basically provisions for getting necessary information—in the form of numbers—in and out of the computer.

The program is perhaps the most important feature of the computer and provides it with its unique flexibility and operational capacities. Basically a program is a set of instructions telling the computer what to do next: for example, a simple addition may require three instructions—take a number from one part of the store, take a number from another part of the store, add them together. Every single step has to be specified in the program.

The programs for modern computers are often so complicated that they cost as much as the rest of the computer equipment put together, and special bureaux exist for the sole purpose of providing programs for particular computers required to perform particular tasks.

The program information can be fed into the computer in a number of ways—for instance rows of holes punched in a paper tape can, according to some code, represent a series of instructions. The tape can pass under a light source impinging on a photoelectric cell: when the light passes through a hole in the tape the cell responds and emits a pulse; when there is no hole in the tape no pulse is produced. Thus a series of pulses representing the program instructions can be fed into the computer: some of the pulses may go to the store to bring out a number, other pulses may go to an adder in the central processor to prepare it for computation. When the computation has been performed the resulting series of pulses can be used to set a number of electronic switches (transistor valves, for instance) in the output equipment associated with the computer. If we want we can arrange for the computer to print out the results on a roll of paper or on cards.

The basic principles of computers are very simple. The complexity comes in arranging so many simple bits and pieces to do very complicated things; if you do a million simple steps in one second, it may seem that you have accomplished something quite miraculous, i.e. you may have done a very complicated sum in a very short time. But there are few people who could not understand the essence of the modern computer and the ways in which it accomplishes its remarkable results.

For me—and perhaps many readers of the FREETHINKER—much of the interest about the modern electronic computer derives from what it can teach us about human intelligence and other mental capacities. The computer is relevant to such things—and in the next two articles in this series I will consider whether a computer may be said to “think”, and whether a computer has “free will”.

ON BEING ACCUSED OF BEING ANTI-CLERICAL

KIT MOUAT

PERSONAL BLEATS and revelations are usually embarrassing, but I think that my own on this subject may be universal enough among atheists to be worth noting down. Anything to try and bring home to Christians what it feels like to be the victims of the established privileges of organised religion, and perhaps to persuade the non-militant among us of the value of militancy. The irritating comments we are all so used to from Christians are so frequent that one would imagine they would drop dead from exhaustion, but they don't. For instance the theory that morality is automatically part of our 'Christian inheritance'; my grandfather was a clergyman (albeit a Non-conformist) and if I show the slightest sign of a social conscience it is quickly suggested that this results from his influence, never mind that he died before I was two and my agnostic-scientist father did far more for the community than his father had ever done! I suppose one can always ask how the disciples managed with their pagan or Jewish backgrounds. My brother wore 'Freethinker' round his neck during the war, and so scrubbed floors instead of dozing through divine services. I didn't like scrubbing so chose 'Non-Con' for my identity disc, but it was quite a battle to try and get a non-Anglican clergyman for non-Anglican wrens, and even harder to persuade anyone that some of us had no Christian beliefs at all.

The Roman Catholic I was engaged to didn't take his faith seriously, and so long as we had an RC wedding (so as not to upset his parents) and brought the children up as Catholics, he was very tolerant of my unbelief. It is, in fact, thanks to the Vatican that I have been so fortunately married to a Protestant for twenty-one years. But even that had its problems, for although we decided on the church wedding which was obviously going to mean a great deal to my husband the vicar said that, as I wasn't baptised, he couldn't marry me without permission from the Arch-deacon, who refused it. After a lot of to-ing and fro-ing (while we waited to make plans) the Bishop of Chichester agreed to let my husband have the service of his own church and I was permitted to go along too. His letter to the vicar came to me by mistake, and before I re-addressed it I noted some phrase to the effect that it was hoped that 'this woman' would see the error of her ways. 'This woman' took the vow of 'until death us do part' with some trepidation, not because I could imagine not loving my husband but because I would have considered it immoral to take the vow a second time if he up-ped and left me to a divorce and I wanted a second marriage (men being such notoriously religious creatures, as we all know from history and TV!). I can't remember the service; only that it was an informal, happy day, and (having just been 'given away' by my father to my new owner) I signed with my husband's surname when I should have used the name I bore as a 'spinster of this parish'.

When our son was born I wrote to the vicar regarding his possible baptism. He replied: 'it is the husband who is ultimately the head of the family, and it is the right decision that he should have the choice . . .' And still I wasn't either a militant feminist or atheist; can you imagine! We had the boy baptised, and luckily he doesn't hold it against me.

As the wife of a diplomat abroad it was taken for granted that as I wasn't RC I would be willing to raise funds for the Anglican Church, usually by helping to run bazaars, organised for such altruistic purposes as buying

the vicar a new car (his only comment when he got one was that it was the wrong colour) or installing central heating in the vicarage. On at least one occasion the vicar ('chaplain') auctioned a bottle of duty-free drink, which was in fact illegal. After some years of dutiful submission according to St Paul (and encouraged by my ten-year-old son to have the guts to admit more openly that I was as atheist as he was) I insisted on limiting my do-gooding abroad to non-sectarian activities. This refusal to co-operate in helping to finance a Christian institution which I found as immoral as I found it uncharitable stimulated all manner of goading. 'I can't understand how you can be so bigoted . . .' said one kindly enough wife. 'Can you let us have a bottle of whisky for the raffle, Kit? Oh, sorry, I forgot you were anti-Christian . . .' and so on and on and on. Don't we all know the sort of thing well enough?

In Germany I found the best way of helping the non-German RC DPs who really interested me was through *Caritas*. When I left I was intrigued to leave a favourite and wretched Yugoslav in the joint hands of a RC priest friend and a Salvation Army Major, who, to their surprise, found themselves visiting the doss house together.

We returned to the UK and a village where the grass was green, the politics overwhelmingly blue, and I began to see red the way the clergy exploited a position that was positively feudal. 'Squires', it seemed, were only just out of fashion. The local paper was full of the pompous and petty paraphernalia of piety, and report followed report of church bunfights. I started to challenge the claims and absurdities, and at first the clergy answered back with more. Then they gradually retreated, leaving the field clear for the staunch (and nearly always male) correspondents. You know the saying that a discussion in the Navy is a statement, followed by a flat contradiction, followed by personal abuse? Well, the only difference here is that almost any question about Christianity leads directly to the abuse! I was a Humanist because I was 'spiritually adolescent', had been 'jilted by some clergyman', had 'no windows to my soul'. How could I be so cruel as to attack the 'faith of humble, Christian souls'? And of course I was as ignorant as I was deprived. Any Humanist who writes to the papers about religion knows the sort of thing. The editor began to accept all my letters (I sometimes wondered if it was to suggest that I was the only heretic in the area) and the clergy reappeared in a special column of their own from which they could attack the ungodly, denouncing our beliefs as leading inevitably to misery if not total depravity. Our society was sinking into a morass of sensuality, and it was all our fault. Muggerridge would be proud of them. When I attacked in the letter column the clergy still refused to reply; nor did they even dissociate themselves from the dreadful rubbish regurgiated in the name of Jesus.

When I asked a window cleaner friend who was an RC if I could help his Youth Club by washing up sometimes, he was delighted. But his committee made him write to tell me it wasn't possible, because (he told me later) I was an atheist. Humanism seems encouragingly catching, even from clean cups! A local self-elected VIP accused me over coffee-for-two of 'corrupting' the village, and of persuading a woman to change her mind about confirmation. Not only had I never met this woman, I had never even heard her name. This really was 20th century witch-hunting. I waited for somebody's cows to drop dead, and was glad the stake was no longer legal.

Direct contact with the clergy came in two ways: firstly by asking them for help when a non-Humanist came to me and I thought the Church could do more than I could, and secondly with my attempts to stimulate some sort of Humanist - Christian co-operation. *Amnesty* proved hopeless. One vicar who called was obviously only really interested in battery hens (which I admit came low on my list of priorities) and, when he realised I didn't believe in revelation or resurrection, he left the house literally shaking, with threats of hell fire and damnation. A Congregationalist Minister and I collected money (oddly enough) for the Methodist National Children's Home; when I enquired from the Home what would happen to the orphaned child of atheists I was told he or she would be brought up as a good Christian. This same Minister asked me for an article about DPs for his church magazine, but he was too liberal by half and was soon looking for another church. The only clergyman to suggest in the Forum that Kit Mouat's criticisms might be better taken seriously than used as a spur for emotional self-defence, has (I am almost sure) never been asked to write again. The only way atheists could be accepted was, of course, by Christians persuading themselves that we were 'believers without knowing it'. One woman patted me and told me that Jesus was a Humanist too, and I managed not to throw up. Another asked me to have the church choir to lunch, and was really surprised when I refused.

I have lectured about Humanism to a good number of groups now, and particularly enjoy my annual visit to a local secondary modern school, where I receive the most lively and intelligent questioning from the 5th forms. The children no longer ask me quite so anxiously if I am not afraid of dying, and when the staff took a vote last year, about half were 'on my side'. But I can still cause severe shock by suggesting that there is perhaps no after-life (one woman nearly fainted) and that I don't believe in a Supreme Being (a male member of MENSA found this intolerable). I stand respectfully if silently while Christians pray and sing hymns before and after my talks, as if to exorcise the anti-Christ in their midst, and wonder if it really is a coincidence that the words so often include something about the darkness of doubt! I enjoyed being asked to talk to a group of clergy of mixed denominations, and they treated me with kindness and courtesy. But I have learned one lesson thoroughly; never, *never* be polite back to the man who acts as Hospital Chaplain. Cut him, cross the road when you see him coming, spit as he passes, but *don't* let him think you are even 'just good friends'. When I went into hospital some years ago I had him sitting on my bed for half an hour before the operation, asking me what the trouble was. (Perhaps he thought I had come to have my tail and horns amputated . . .) As I had no intention of telling him, I played hostess, and we talked about his children and their schools. Soon after I 'came round' (and was feeling particularly inhospitable) there was the vicar (unpopular even with his own congregation), saying, 'I suppose you don't me to pray for you?'. I said that I didn't care what he did so long as he did it somewhere else. My husband wrote, demanding that he leave me alone, at least until I ceased to be a captive audience. I complained later to the hospital, but in spite of promises, nothing happened. I have had the misfortune to prove this recently. As the same chaplain approached us in the Day Room, I got up and walked out; as he passed my bed I rudely put up a book in front of my face, and as he reached the woman in the next bed, I even more rudely heaved myself over on to my side, my back to him. Within minutes he was leaning over me, on my shoulder, and saying he

'only came as friend'. You see what I mean? My husband spent half his last visit before the operation asking the Sister to tell the Chaplain to stay away in future, and when he did come the next week, I was able to nip out of bed and pull the curtains round. 'It's all right' the woman next to me comforted me, 'he never talks about religion'. Then why in the name of democracy should our NHS funds go to paying for his services, and how dare he or representatives of any other religion intrude upon the privacy (always in non-visiting hours) of the sick who need rest and sleep most of all? I had fun trying to explain to a very nice Indian doctor how my physical allergy to opium included 'pushers' of the opium-of-the-people who prevented me from resting or reading in the ward! When we had sorted out the language problem, he quickly saw the point, but then he was a Hindu, and Humanists can be particularly grateful for such immigrant medicos. So now I am again fighting the battle with the Ministry of Health and Social Security, who write that they have no doubt 'that the services of hospital chaplains are widely appreciated by the public'. Don't readers agree with me that it is high time some doubts were implanted in their little minds? I hope for support from the NCCL and the Patients' Association.

It's only fair to add that Methodist friends sent the most beautiful flowers, and their Minister showed genuine kindness, even driving me to Brighton for treatment, unnecessarily but thoughtfully without his dog collar! But then it is not such committed Christians who disapprove of Humanist militancy; it is much more often the 'don't knows' and agnostics, who flinch as coyly at a declared atheism as our modern Puritans flinch from sexual facts of life. Those who are so ready to accuse us of being anticlerical and who really mean that we are intolerant, should first consider just how anti-Humanist they and the clergy and our society are. There is no longer any doubt in my mind that if you want to meet Christians 'half way', you will probably find you have gone all the way before they begin to move, and once you are by their side, they'll decide to stay put. And why not? They are exceedingly well off where they are, and are only too glad of Humanist company; it makes them appear tolerant, and may well persuade a lot of people that no one suffers as a result of those privileges which are still enjoyed by established religion in this country.

OBITUARY

WE REGRET to announce that four veteran members of the National Secular Society have died.

Dr A. W. Laing (89) of Stockport attended his first free-thought meeting in 1895, and later became a friend of Chapman Cohen. He was keenly interested in the work of the NSS until the end of his life. His other interests included art and music.

Mrs Grace Tole (86) of Blandford, Dorset, has been a freethinker for most of her adult life. At one time she and her late husband, Cyril Tole, were members of Leicester Secular Society. She was also a devoted worker for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Captain Arthur W. Coleman (92) of Sheringham, Norfolk, was a very generous supporter of the Society's work. He recently donated £400 to the Secular Education Fund.

Although he had reached the great age of 97, Mr. E. C. Round of Radstock, Somerset, was a keen reader of the FREETHINKER until just before his death.

SCRUTINISING THE MIRACULOUS

A. J. LOWRY

BECAUSE OF the spectacular nature of their alleged circumstances, the miracles of the Bible tend to leave, in the mind of believer and unbeliever alike, a more definite and permanent impression than the history or theology of that book. We all like to hear of unusual things, and though our reaction to the Resurrection or the Virgin Birth may lie anywhere between the extremes of pious acceptance and hysterical scorn, the tales remain in our memories to be used for whatever purposes we think fit. Since one result of this would appear to be that both camps, in their polemics, tend to invoke the marvellous rather more often than might reasonably be expected, it is clear that a most profound confusion will not be long in clouding the debate unless at least one of the parties present has a clear idea of the philosophical implications involved in the analysis of such events.

To begin, therefore, it would seem obvious that the burden of proof must lie on the shoulders of the believers. The occurrences cited as miraculous must be, by their very nature, contrary to the established body of knowledge which we possess, or an explanation along scientific lines would rob the argument of its point that the event was sufficiently extraordinary to be evidence for the existence of a power over and above those recognised as purely of this world. If the believer is to convince us of the existence of God by the evidence afforded by miracles, he must therefore not only prove that an event took place contrary to all the known facts of science, but that the nature of that event was such that God's existence and only that could successfully explain its origin.

The first part of the believer's task is therefore one of historical enquiry, to ascertain that such a strange event actually came to pass. Because of the localised nature of the analysis, the issues involved often vary enormously between one alleged miracle and another, but the central point would seem to be that the believer must present sufficient evidence of the historicity of the event to convince the sceptic that believing the event took place requires a smaller step of faith than maintaining that the whole of the evidence produced is devoid of either truth or conviction. Because it is impossible to quantify faith, the point at which acceptance is granted must depend upon subjective feelings, and will hence vary considerably from one individual to another; depending, unfortunately, more upon the bias of the subject's predisposition than upon the operation of honest and dis-interested logic. Though the amount of evidence required must obviously vary with the improbability of the tale, even incredible stories must be accepted if the evidence is sufficiently impressive, since the existence of forces beyond the knowledge of modern science, is, if not certain, at least worthy of a serious consideration. Strict adherence to the principle of what cannot be explained does not exist, has led in the past to the refusal to accept phenomena now understood by such explanations as hysteria, and in the future it will no doubt continue to mislead those whose arrogance lies in excess of their desire to find the truth.

Though believers often make this point in defence of their position, once granted it quickly results in the destruction of the very argument which they are attempting to maintain. For granted that the past was ignorant of many natural forces known today, and that discovery, far from flagging, appears to be increasing with continued accelera-

tion, how might we be sure that any unusual event, historically established, might not become completely explicable by the discoveries of science tomorrow, or in five thousand years? To prove his miracle, the believer must show that the event cannot be explained by science now or ever, and since the latter assertion is, and must always remain, an act of unadulterated faith, the conclusion must be reached that it is philosophically impossible to prove that a miracle has ever taken place.

The usual conduct of such a debate in which the believer produces evidence for a strange event, challenges the sceptic to explain it, and concludes that he's proved it was a miracle if no explanation can be produced—is as dishonest as it is futile. Such reasoning might prove that the sceptic in question is an ignoramus, or that science does not possess the answer to all questions, but the first of these points is irrelevant, and the second obvious to all. The argument that what science cannot explain must be the work of God, is a sort of logical septic in the ideology of a depressingly large number of believers. Not only is this view without reasonable justification, but it results in a strategically disastrous policy of continuous retreat, with the conclusion that the invocation of the deity to supplement the knowledge of modern science, must one day be revealed as being equally wrong-headed as the introduction of Zeus to explain the phenomenon of lightning over the skies of archaic Greece.

The Christian who believes in God can obviously believe that God has worked a miracle, though he can produce not the slightest reason for anyone else believing the same. And if the existence of miracles, being unable to justify itself, can only continue as a consequence of belief in the existence of God, then to avoid a circularity of reasoning the existence of God must itself find other grounds for justification than those provided by the supposed existence of miraculous events.

The assertion of these divine interventions, far from convincing the unbeliever of the existence of the Almighty, raises a whole host of new difficulties for the theistic case. The argument from design, one of believers' favourite defences, is contradicted by the assertion of the miraculous, for it is clear that the Christian cannot honestly suppose that he might vindicate the existence of his divinity both by appealing to the regular order apparent in the universe and by maintaining that acts are the result of divine caprice. The argument from design depends for its appeal on the regular order of events, the arguments from miracles on the explicit contradiction of this statement. The arguments clash head-on, and if either of them are true it follows immediately that the other must be false.

But the defence of miracles brings other troubles than these. Having postulated an omniscient God who created a universe so imperfect that he was forced to continually intervene in its operation, the question might be asked why he does not dabble more. If God can cure the blind, why doesn't he? Any doctor refusing to use such power would rightly receive our execrations and contempt: what reason have we then to worship and adore a divinity who treats us in an equally indifferent fashion? And if an after-life is postulated to escape this difficulty, what reason have we to believe that God, who treats us with so little mercy in this life, should in any way be less sparing with us in the eternity to come?

Despite these objections to the belief, it is probably the miracles claimed by other religions which are the most difficult for believers in particular creeds to explain. The intervention of God into the Mormon, Catholic, Pentecostal, Christian Scientist and Spiritualist beliefs appear to have approximately equal evidence to support them, and if the miraculous will lead us to God, which of these mutually exclusive divinities is worthy of our devotion? To believe in them all is obviously absurd, and unless a criterion for believing only one could be produced the most reasonable course would appear to be in the explanation of the events along definitely non-theistic lines.

It is at this point that the whole theory begins to fall apart. Each sect's devotees must either apply more stringent tests to 'heretical' miracles than they do to their own, or attempt to explain them away as the result of diabolic manifestations. The first course is obviously unjust, and the second hardly less so, since it can easily result in mutual accusations of diabolism, without any constructive attempt to produce a means of distinguishing miracles of the devil from those rightly attributed to God.

The belief that the truth of theism may be demonstrated by the occurrence of miracles, is devoid of foundation, since there can never be a method of proving that such an event ever took place at all. If accepted in faith, the belief swiftly becomes more trouble than it is worth, since it not only calls into question the morality of the God it was designed to prove, but, by introducing the complication of diabolical miracles, proves a second time that there is no way of showing that any event is the result of the intervention of God. If the Almighty's existence is to be proved (which it is my sincere conviction it is not) the evidence must be found in fields other than that examined in this article; as the confusion such polemics produce raise even more questions whilst effectively proving nothing at all. The believers will have to do better than that.

Review

R. K. MEARS

Human Rights: Peter Archer (Fabian Research Series, 3s).

THE TERM 'Human Rights' has been used more and more frequently in recent years. This is largely the result of the upsurge of internationalism and 'Human Rights' have become associated with international law. In this excellent booklet Peter Archer, Labour MP for Rowley Regis and Tipton, barrister, member of the executive of the Society of Labour Lawyers and Vice-Chairman of Amnesty International (British Section), explains what the term means, how it has come into use, what provisions are made for its definition and subsequent enforcement, and what should be done in this field in the future.

Mr Archer opens by quoting accounts published elsewhere of the way in which people suffer in four countries, the United States, the USSR, Greece and South Africa. The implication is that these are examples of human rights transgressed, though it is quite clear that these are not the only countries in which such things happen. He goes on to give an excellent account of the build up of the theory behind the existing measures, both national and international, which are set up to safeguard human rights.

This is followed by an outline of the practice of safeguarding human rights on an international basis. The first instance of co-operation between governments was the treaty of London, signed in 1841 to combat the slave trade. This was followed in 1864 by the first Geneva Convention and the setting up of the International Red Cross. A great deal of lobbying eventually resulted in the adoption in 1948 by the newly formed United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Archer outlines the many defects in the legal position of the Declaration which suffers chiefly because it "contains no machinery for implementation". In 1966 the United Nations adopted a covenant on civil and political rights, which provides for the appointment of a human rights committee . . . which may hear complaints against any member state". Though this is of "vital importance" Archer shows only too clearly that its effectiveness is very limited, and also that the

government of the UK has not done all it might to put the covenant into practice.

Archer explains further how specific aspects of human rights can be safeguarded by the drawing up of written conventions on particular aspects of human rights which can then be acceded to by individual governments after they have altered their internal laws accordingly. Conventions have been drawn up on various topics including genocide, refugees and racial discrimination. Again these are important in that individuals in a country which has acceded can appeal to the UN. Again it is depressing to see that the UK is not displaying over-enthusiasm in acceding to conventions. Archer further evaluates the role of International Law on the question of the status of women, trade union rights and South Africa.

Archer takes next the promising development of regionalism and its effect on the implementation of Human Rights. In Europe this process has gone furthest and provides a superior alternative to the United Nations. A commission of Human Rights is in being which can be appealed to by individuals who consider their rights have been transgressed under the European Convention of Human Rights. The Commission can refer the case to the European Court of Human Rights which is empowered to adjudicate both between individuals and a state, and between two states.

Archer depicts "the way forward" in three categories: "the awakening of public awareness", an increased study of particular practices with reference to how to make governments more responsive and development of the international institutions to which victims can appeal. In particular Archer suggests that the UK should be more eager to lead the way in referring cases of infringement to international courts.

The booklet is concluded with a consideration of the individual in relation to human rights. Archer makes clear that "the test is whether we are opposed to persecution when our opponents are silenced, whether we believe in free speech for those who make our hackles rise, and whose every word turns our stomachs". He raises the question much discussed in the *FREETHINKER* recently, as to "where the borderline is to be drawn, for example, between incitement to racial violence and the rights of fascists and racialists to express their views". A most informative booklet on a most important topical subject.

Available from The Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth Street, London, SW1.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY COMING EVENTS

CAXTON HALL, LONDON, S.W.1.

(St James's Park Underground)

Thursday, March 5th, 7.30 p.m.

Profile on

BROADCASTING IN THE SEVENTIES

STUART HOOD

Former Controller, Television Programmes, BBC

HUGH JENKINS, MP

GEORGE MELLY

Television Critic, *The Observer*

DAVID TRIBE

President, National Secular Society

BENN W. LEVY (*Chairman*)

THE PAVIOURS ARMS, PAGE STREET,
LONDON, SW1

Saturday, April 4th, 6 p.m. for 6.30 p.m.

64th ANNUAL DINNER

J. S. L. GILMOUR (*Guest of Honour*)

RICHARD CLEMENTS

FANNY COCKERELL

NIGEL SINNOTT

DAVID TRIBE (*Chairman*)

Evening Dress Optional—Vegetarians Catered for
Tickets 28/6 each from the NSS

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY
103 Borough High Street, London, SE1
Telephone: 01-407 2717

LETTERS

When Should We Debate?

I HAVE READ Mr Simon's "When Should We Debate?" (January 31) with interest, but I am not convinced by him. Why should I not be able to debate racialism, atrocities or injustice? The only reason that he gives is that he disapproves of these things. His attitude is very much like that of those Christians who take refuge from awkward questions in "Thus saith the Lord thy God".

It is an old trick in debate to invoke an emergency situation—child-beating, old people starving—and try to extrapolate from the actions which may be expedient in that situation a general rule for behaviour in *all* situations. However we act in such a situation, this does not rule out debate concerning it. Unless, of course, one is a moral as well as a political totalitarian.

I suspect, however, that Mr Simons is a totalitarian. His overriding concern appears to be that *his* moral principles, *his* concepts of how we *ought* to behave, should be forced on all of us as soon as possible, as he makes clear in the last paragraph of his article.

One final point. Mr Simons claims that "social injustice is easy to define and easy to recognise" and he gives as an example of an "unjust" society one "in which the rich can spend more on their dogs than the poor can spend on their children". Suppose I do not regard such a society as "unjust", how would Mr Simons convince me that it was? The bare assertion that it is so would not be enough. But, in the absence of debate, how will I ever come to see that Mr Simons is right and I am wrong? The only way open to him, in the absence of debate, would be some kind of coercion by means of which I would be forced "to embody such principles" as he sees fit. *What*, indeed, in that case, is freethought?

S. E. PARKER.

Atheist or agnostic?

IN AN OTHERWISE commendable response to the questions, put by interviewer David Reynolds, Baroness Wootton (February 7) makes the erroneous comment, which so many other freethinkers make when asked about their choice of the terms 'atheist' or 'agnostic'. She says that "*intellectually one ought to say agnostic since there is no proof either way as to the existence of a deity*" (my italics). That, *philologically*, is not the issue, which is *not* the *existence* of gods or God that is in dispute but the *acceptance* (or *rejection*) of the idea of which godship exists. The agnostic stance is untenable in this context because one cannot *have* a god which may not exist, so one is, perforce, godless, which is the state of being *a=minus*, *the=god*. This is the simple and correct evaluation of the words as given in any reputable dictionary and should, by this time, be beyond cavil or dispute.

COLLIN COATES.

Moral Guardian?

IF, as Mr John Trevelyan claims in his letter (February 7) the Film Censorship Board has not for the past few years considered itself "a moral guardian of adults", why did it order cuts to be made in *Ulysses* in 1968 and *The Killing of Sister George* in 1969 before it would issue a certificate? In both cases the film makers refused to comply, with the result that adults in many towns and cities throughout Britain are denied the opportunity of seeing those critically-acclaimed films. If this is not "moral guardianship", what is it?

I suggest that film censorship should be completely abolished, and that the Board's sole function in future should be to recommend that certain films are unsuitable for children. The new "category system" would seem a quite unnecessary complication.

JOHN L. BROOM.

Definition

I AGREE WITH Charles Byass (January 31) that we present-day freethinkers have moved to a more positive position than that of my dictionary definition. We are all now freethinkers plus something else. Every humanist who has done his homework knows in considerable detail just what that something else should embrace according to top humanist opinion. I myself can readily accept 90 per cent of it. The other 10 per cent I find difficult. Other people probably have difficulties not identical with mine. What is

so badly needed is a clear definition (of freethinker or humanist as you wish) which embraces the basic, wholly acceptable, commitments but excludes those marginal subjects of personal difficulty. At present a humanist has difficulty in defending or expounding his creed when the first thing he has to admit is limited adherence to it. Take the question of crime and punishment: many humanists talk of genetic make-up, environmental influences, etc., and become so engrossed with the reclamation of the criminal and so readily, almost eagerly, convinced of the futility of punishment that they appear to lose sight of the whole question of public and police protection.

Others like myself possibly look too hard at the other side of the penny. What I do deplore is that fellow humanists so often seem to look upon us as inhumane persons quite outside the fold. In addition to my humanist memberships I am also a member of several animal welfare societies and on that subject would advocate more advanced legislature than anything ever yet proposed by anybody at any time.

With all possible introspection therefore I cannot identify myself as either a sadist or a back number with which I feel sure Mr Byass really classifies me.

JOHN BLYTHE.

Joseph McCabe

WITH REGARD to the Chapman/Page controversy, can either party establish as a fact whether the RPA's Report "reproduces the speeches in full" and gives a "full report of the events", or not, and if so state what evidence there is one way or the other?

MCCabe, for his part, states of the Report, "I have rarely read so untruthful a document", and that "Robertson's speech ("short and venomous") was much altered", that "A speech by F. J. Gould in my support was suppressed", and that "in the end when I proposed to make a short reply" the Chairman "replied that there was 'no time'" and "refused me a hearing". "It was more like a cowboy trial in the Old West than a grave inquiry among cultivated Humanists".

In default of any proof to the contrary that just about seems to sum up the level of the recent contribution to this subject.

JUDEX (Name and address supplied).

Misunderstanding

MAY I PLEASE correct an unfortunate misunderstanding that has arisen, I don't know how? My postal book-selling service is *very much alive*, and the Winter Catalogue will be out this month (6d to new enquirers). I continue to welcome orders, enquiries and offers of Rationalist books/libraries to sell. It is only the Humanist pen-friendship organisation—the Humanist Letter Network (International) which I have closed down. Some 400 'goodbye' Newsletters have been sent out, 110 abroad. Anyone interested in a successor to the HLN(I) should join the National Secular Society for only 5s which will give details. I had hoped to be able to hand over a final donation to a Humanist project, but (having been returning the fees of recent would-be-members but helping them as best I can), and with these final postage and duplicating costs, stationery, etc., I am afraid funds have all but run out. If there are any shillings left when I have finished answering the letters that keep coming in, they will go to the Swaneng School in Botswana. My thanks for all the appreciative letters I have been unable to answer; they are very good to have.

Mrs. KIT MOUAT.

FREETHINKER subscriptions

and orders for literature . . . The Freethinker Bookshop
01-407 0029

Editorial matter . . . The Editor, The Freethinker
103 Borough High Street, London, SE1 01-407 1251

POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

12 months: £2 1s 6d 6 months: £1 1s 3 months: 10s 6d

USA AND CANADA

12 months: \$5.25 6 months: \$2.75 3 months: \$1.40

The FREETHINKER can be ordered through any newsagent.