

# The FREETHINKER

Founded 1881

Secular Humanist Monthly

Vol. 96, No. 12

DECEMBER 1976

10p

## DEMONOLOGISTS ARE THE TRUE CHRISTIANS, SAYS NSS PRESIDENT

"While religion, as far as popular adherence in this country is concerned, has dwindled rapidly in the past few years, we cannot claim this as a total victory for freethought", Barbara Smoker declared in her presidential address at the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society which took place in London on 12 December. "Unfortunately", she went on, "its place has largely been filled by a sudden upsurge in occultism covering a wide range of superstitious beliefs and practices, some of which are far more dangerous than the general run of orthodox religion was—at least, since it gave up burning heretics and terrifying children with lurid descriptions of hell".

Miss Smoker told the meeting that superstition declined in the 18th century, but had a surprising revival in the late 19th century, with all the nonsense of astrology, hauntings, seances, clairvoyance, automatic writing, ouija boards, numerology, faith-healing, and so on. It declined at the turn of the century, but has suddenly become fashionable again in the past decade, and all the same old nonsense has come back (except for such completely discredited frauds as table-rapping and muslin ectoplasm), but with pseudo-scientific additions such as ufology and the 'Geller effect'.

The NSS president continued: "The mainstream Christian churches, having played down Satan and hell since the turn of the century, have destroyed their *raison d'être* and have seen their congregations melt away, while the fundamentalist and charismatic wing of the Protestant churches retained its hold on more people. Being now proportionately the strongest wing of Protestantism, the evangelicals have become more influential than formerly, and have forced the hierarchy to condone more primitive practices and beliefs.

"It is significant that the present archbishops of

Canterbury and York are far more evangelical than their immediate predecessors.

"The orthodox Christian churches which stood aloof from spiritualism and Christian Science during their Victorian heyday, have now started jumping on to the present bandwagon. A Church of England clergyman, the Reverend Trevor Dearing, who recently published a book on demonic possession and exorcism, combines what he calls 'the two ministries' of exorcism and faith-healing.

"He was eager to demonstrate both in a Birmingham television studio last month. I was invited to appear on the programme with him, as token opposition, and I found his performance, at a distance of three or four feet, even more sickening than I had expected.

### Female Fans

"In the hospitality room before the programme began, I listened to his female disciples chattering about him like lovesick schoolgirls. In the studio, I was amused to see that the camera crew had marked the floor not only with Mr Dearing's standing position but also with the spot on which the exorcisee, in a re-enactment, was to writhe and the candidates for faith-healing, in actuality, were to swoon.

"Mr Dearing has the advantage of good looks, which he enhances with eye-catching clothes and a carefully casual hair-style. But his greatest asset is his long, sexy fingers. While he presses the forehead of a client with the fingers of one hand and the back of her neck with the other hand, his congregation, well represented in the audience, sing, to an affective tune, 'He touched me, he touched me!' No doubt, if asked, they would insist that 'He' is Jesus. But the sexual connotation could hardly be more explicit. People suffering from neurosis often fall an easy prey to such exploitation.

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# Albany Trust Refutes Whitehouse Allegations

The Albany Trust appears to be Mary Whitehouse's latest target for a smear campaign. Speaking at a function arranged by the Christian Lunch and Dinner Club in London last month, she alleged that the Trust's work with sexual minorities, including paedophiles, was a misuse of public funds.

Antony Grey, director of the Albany Trust, retaliated the following day when he addressed the annual general meeting of Gaycon, an organisation of homosexual Conservatives. He said that the Trust had been subjected to a "vicious and irresponsible public attack by that paragon of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, Mrs Mary Whitehouse, who alleged, without a shred of justification, that the Albany Trust is using public funds to seek the 'normalisation', whatever that may mean, of sexual activity between adults and children, and that the Trust's youth work is linked with pornography.

"There is no truth in either charge. The facts are that we have been holding some conversations with paedophiles in order to find out more about how they see their own situation, and that we employ a youth officer, funded by the Department of Education and Science, whose task is to assist established teaching and youth work training courses by providing accurate information about sexuality in general and sexual minorities in particular.

"Our activities in each of these fields are being carried out with the full knowledge and approval of the Government departments concerned.

"I think it is high time that someone said of Mrs Whitehouse on a public platform—and I am delighted to do so to a Conservative audience—that far from being the torchbearer of virtuousness which Sir Keith Joseph has misguidedly pronounced her to be, she bears an increasing resemblance to the late, infamous Senator Joe McCarthy. Her smear campaigns against responsible sex education—of which this is but the latest example—grow in their

wildness and venom. Her shrill, incessant cries for more censorship become increasingly hysterical while her impudent insinuations that anyone who dares to disagree with her is part of a crypto-Communist conspiracy to undermine Britain's moral fibre have the sinister smack of totalitarian thinking about them."

Earlier this year Mrs Whitehouse and her friends conducted a Communist smear campaign against the British Humanist Association. A BHA spokesman at the time described her tactics as despicable.

## THEODORE BESTERMAN

*H. J. Blackham writes:* Dr Theodore Besterman died on 10 November at the age of 71. He had been in poor health for some time. He was perhaps the most remarkable bibliophile of his time, but of course best known for his prodigious labours on the literary legacy of Voltaire, which earned him a permanent name in scholarship. He made Voltaire's home in Geneva an intimate memorial as well as a museum, containing among other things the thousands of letters to be published in more than a hundred volumes. He also promoted interest in and further study of the Enlightenment, with the series *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* and foundation of the International Society of Eighteenth Century Studies, which holds periodic congresses. One of his last productions was the useful translation of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* in a special Penguin edition.

Although obsessively devoted to Voltaire, and lavishing money, time and energy on the creation of a modern industry in his honour, Besterman did have other interests, especially in the time before the war (he was even a Labour councillor in Hampstead!). Psychological research was one of these, and as a bibliographer he included Oliver Lodge and James Frazer. His own quarters were as tasteful as comfortable, adorned with Samuel Palmers (not by Mr Keatinge).

Besterman was a staunch if critical member of the BHA and the RPA, and he endowed the Voltaire Lectureship for the BHA. Long ago he was editing texts for Watts, e.g. Crawley's *The Mystic Rose*. He held more than one public appointment during the course of his life, but he was essentially a freelance and an entrepreneur. It would be interesting to have a biographical study of one who was so personal in his life-work and his life-style.

HJB

Paul Elek, the publisher, has died suddenly. He published David Tribe's "100 Years of Freethought" (1966) and "President Charles Bradlaugh, MP" (1971).

This is the last issue of "The Freethinker" which I shall be editing. Jim Herrick, who has been a tower of strength as assistant editor, will occupy the editorial chair from 1 January 1977. I take the opportunity to thank those who, despite many other commitments, wrote articles and reviews; readers who have been supportive and encouraging; our printers who have been thoroughly reliable; the Board of G. W. Foote & Company who let me get on with the job. "The Freethinker" is approaching its centenary, and I trust that everyone who values it as an antidote to irrationalism, and as a forum for free expression, will do everything possible in the coming period to increase its circulation and to widen its influence. W.Mc

# A Charitable Rejoinder

MILLIE MILLER, MP

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service recently sent what they described as "a charitable rejoinder" to the Abortion (Amendment) Bill Select Committee. Whether the work of that Committee merits a charitable response is doubtful, but certainly the BPAS Trustees present their case very effectively in their Memorandum.

It surely seems incredible that at a time when 60 per cent of the world's population has access to abortion and when family planning techniques are developing fast in an attempt to stem the massive population explosion which threatens the future of world peace, an official Committee of the UK Parliament appears dedicated to putting back the clock in this country.

Those behind the James White Bill are, of course, bent on destroying the 1967 Abortion Act and on branding those who support it as "pro-abortionists". In fact the Act itself was a compromise, and one which was found by the well-balanced Lane Committee after three years of investigation to be working well. There were certain defects which allowed exploitation by private medical profiteers. These have largely been dealt with by Government action last year, which is why those members of the first Select Committee, who could see the way that the minds of the rump were working, decided that they should withdraw at the end of last session.

This left the field open to the obsessive anti-abortionists whose recent Report seeks to undermine the 1967 Act and to impose conditions on the medical profession which would threaten their position in providing almost any gynaecological services to women. The effect of many of their proposals would be devastating to the service which is already working far from evenly in various parts of the country.

A number of suggestions in the Select Committee Report depend on new legislation, creating new offences. But, as the BPAS Report points out, direct licensing of abortion referrals is unlikely to be acceptable politically, especially as the Select Committee recommendations would deprive agencies giving advice of the right to appeal against refusal of licence. BPAS feel that regulations, plus Ministerial discretion involving certain rights of appeal could deal with any control necessary in this field.

The Select Committee also wishes to add to our heavy legislative programme by introducing new laws. By a variety of direct attacks on medical integrity, they would introduce a legal obligation on doctors to disclose confidential information to the police who would be given additional powers to

search out the facts in an area of human misery on which the World Health Organisation has already expressed concern. It has pointed out that "an important medical consideration is that wherever artificial termination of pregnancy is illegal there is likely to be a high rate of clandestine induced abortions performed under conditions offering a serious threat to the health and life of the mother."

The various attempts to destroy the charitable agencies offering non-commercial advisory centres and their own counselling and treatment are considered by the BPAS to be a direct attack on their organisation. The attempt to separate their functions, to introduce penalties against doctors, social workers and counsellors to whom payment is made, despite the fact that by their very presence the charitable bodies have forced down the "going rate" for abortion, is considered by BPAS to be "non-sensical, malicious and specifically intended to damage the work of charitable services."

On the other hand, the situation in the private commercial field has changed and is changing substantially. Even here, there seems to the BPAS to be no need for any further legal powers since it is already within the Minister's powers to provide adequate regulations to deal with any abuses.

## The Private Sector

It is interesting to consider, as the BPAS Report does, the difference in the approach of the Select Committee to their involvement and that of the "doctors with financial interest in an approved nursing home to treat their patients at that home . . .", whilst the charitable bodies would be denied the right to counsel and provide abortion within one organisation. The signing of an abortion certificate and the restrictive conditions proposed could equally have a deterrent effect on the attitude of the medical practitioner, in the guise of ensuring that they were preserving independence of decision.

What is conveniently overlooked by the Select Committee in its proposals is the number of women, running into hundreds of thousands, who have to resort to the private sector because of the refusal of treatment by doctors and anaesthetists who plead conscience on "religious, ethical or other grounds." It also ignores the over-riding professional duty of the health worker who is required to participate in treatment which is necessary to save the life or prevent grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of a pregnant woman, as laid down in the 1967 Abortion Act.

Regardless of this, many women are subject to

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# Postscript to a Bicentennial— The Other America

JAMES M. ALEXANDER

The celebrations are almost over, although somewhat muted by the presidential election ballyhoo, and the last toasts drunk to the Great American Way of Life with its military and political heroes from Washington to Nixon. But there are others who helped to shape the pattern of modern America. They are the men and women who kept alive the flame of freedom since 1776. Against religious and political oppression and persecution as vicious as any in Europe, they maintained the ideals of liberty, freethought and protest. In this article, the secretary of the Radical History Society surveys the role played by progressive opposition in American history.

The emergence of the United States as it is today was to a large extent determined by the fact of the early colonists being almost entirely drawn from ambitious, narrow-minded tenant-farmers, shopkeepers, craftsmen and unenfranchised traders from the growing towns. Unable to enter the ranks of the landed aristocracy in a still largely feudal England, unrepresented in Parliament, antagonistic to the Church and despising the common people, they sought freedom. But it was freedom only for themselves and their opinions, with the opportunity to exploit others, that the settlers really sought. The history of the Western world might have been very different if those colonies had been peopled by members of the aristocracy, or by the hordes of hungry peasants and working men who flowed in much later.

The record of the colonists is one of an intolerance almost as great as that which they left behind. The settlements of Puritan sects, Baptists, Catholics, Quakers, Calvinists, and other more weird versions of Nonconformity (with a few honourable exceptions) quickly became closed communities, and even theocratic dictatorships. Bigotry and oppression very quickly established themselves. Those who had sought religious freedom were soon denying it to others with different beliefs. The fanatical persecution of the Mormons, the burning of farms and murder of their leaders causing the great migration to Utah, was but one episode. There were many earlier ones, including the witch-hunts of Salem. The treacherous destruction of the native Indians and their homelands, with the tearing up of treaties made with these people were other examples. The mass introduction of Negro slavery with the consequent enrichment of the colonists, was the foundation of many fortunes. The reference to "All men"

in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence was, in reality, a reference to white Anglo-Saxon citizens only.

Thomas Paine who, more than any man, inspired the Declaration and the War of Independence, died unrewarded and almost forgotten by the nascent country he had helped to found. The pursuit of wealth and power had overtaken the "pursuit of happiness". Paine came to be denigrated by an imperialist-minded President Theodore Roosevelt as a "filthy little atheist"—false in all three respects. Nevertheless, the tradition of free enquiry engendered by Paine and others, was carried on by a dedicated minority.

## Beginnings of American Freethought

The emergence of organised freethought in America began in the third decade of the 19th century. This was primarily sponsored by British immigrants, who crossed the Atlantic as a result of political oppression following Peterloo, the Luddite risings, and the attacks on Press freedom. Active among these were Robert Owen, his son Robert Dale Owen, Frances Wright, Gilbert Vale and Benjamin Offen. Frances Wright was a remarkable woman, the first exponent of "Womans Lib" in America, and the first in that country to defy the Pauline injunction against female orators. Having freed the slaves on her own estate, she joined the Owens at the ill-fated community of New Harmony in Indiana. There she co-edited what became, following removal to New York, the first freethought journal in the States, *The Free Enquirer*. This weekly, transformed from a vehicle for Owen's social theories, became a lively anti-Christian paper with over a thousand subscribers. It lasted from 1825 till 1835. There were also native Americans like Charles Knowlton, author of *The Fruits of Philosophy*.

It is ironical that Robert Ingersoll (1833-99), the most celebrated American freethinker, is buried in the military section of the National Cemetery at Arlington. He came of an abolitionist Presbyterian family and fought in the Civil War though he hated it. He was a lifelong friend of Eugene Debs, first meeting when Debs as a young man in Terre Haute, Indiana, had booked him to lecture to the local debating society. Though he could not accept Debs' socialism, his opinions became more radical as the years passed. The inscription on his grave is a fitting one: "Nothing is greater than to break the chains from the bodies of men—nothing nobler than to destroy the phantoms of the soul." Although he always used the term agnostic to describe himself, as

his grand-daughter, Eva Ingersoll Wakefield, has pointed out he was most certainly an atheist.

Within the space of this article it is impossible to deal adequately with all the personalities who have played their part in opposition and protest movements in the States. But one fact emerges; there was a constant intermingling of various radical movements. Names of individuals known as freethinkers continually occur in other fields. The connection between freethought and what can loosely be described as the Labour movement is clear. The heyday of both seems to have been during the years prior to 1914, with subsequent decline from the 'twenties onward. This duality has been noted by the contemporary American historian, William Ryan, who says of J. A. Wayland's highly successful freethought-socialist publications: "... his periodicals combined the best interests of the socialists and the freethinkers to the point that, in the eyes of most Americans, the two were synonymous. Perhaps, for a time, they were. Christianity, with its Protestant work-ethic, had come to preach the state of grace as a measure of one's accumulated wealth, and the power that wealth could carry. The socialists, seeking an equality for all men, saw that equality as attainable only through the seizure of power first. The freethinkers sought to bring mankind the key to power—knowledge, through inquiry, science, and ultimate perfectibility. It was a marriage of minds: the socialists and freethinkers saw the fruition of their aims only through the dismantling of the God idea and the banishment of church power."

### Freethought and Politics

The small mill town of Girard, Kansas has become world-famous in progressive circles as the home of the Little Blue Books. In fact, a radical freethought publishing centre had been established there much earlier. In 1895 Wayland moved his small socialist weekly, *The Coming Nation* there from Indiana, and quickly launched his *Appeal to Reason*. By 1910 this had become the widest selling radical journal in the United States. Its message of secularism and socialism was carried throughout the land by the lecture tours of men like Eugene Debs—best loved of all American Socialist Party propagandists, and five times presidential candidate. His last campaign, in 1920, was conducted from jail where he was imprisoned for opposing the war. Despite this restriction, Debs polled almost a million votes.

The commercial success of the *Appeal* frightened the forces of reaction. Increasingly, there was trouble with the US Department of Justice. Prosecutions against the paper and its supporters mounted. Many of these were successfully defended by Clarence Darrow, best known in Britain for his part in the Dayton "Monkey Trial" of 1925. But the persecu-

tion and pressure became too great for Wayland. His health failing, he committed suicide on 10 November, 1912.

### "The Little Blue Books"

The death of Wayland led to the entry into the field of freethought publishing of Emmanuel Haldeman-Julius (whose biography Ryan is currently preparing). The ex-editor of a socialist daily, Louis Kopelin, continued the business in Girard. In 1914, the editor of the Sunday edition of the *New York Daily Call* (the ASP paper) joined him. The son of Jewish immigrants, he married Anna Haldeman, of the Addams banking family, and adopted the name Haldeman-Julius. He purchased the *Appeal* with its printing works, and in 1920 launched the "Little Blue Books", the first cheap, mass-produced paperbacks in America. (The RPA "reprints", already successful in Britain, were the first in the world). The titles not only included freethought and radical works, but also science, history, Shakespeare and other classics, poetry, and the then almost taboo subject of sexology. Among the authors was our own Joseph McCabe, who contributed several dozen works on a variety of subjects. Sales over the years reached a total of more than thirty million copies and represent the most successful radical freethought publishing venture yet achieved.

Disunity and quarrels based on personality defects seem to be a perennial preoccupation of progressive movements. American radicals have had more than their share. The very success of the Haldeman-Julius output with their advanced political slant aroused the hatred not only of religious groups and federal authority but also the jealousy of some fellow freethinkers. *The Truth Seeker*, the oldest surviving freethought journal in the USA, was founded in 1873 by D. M. Bennett. It had a long and honourable record which included legal battles against the Comstock Act. However, it was always somewhat elitist and stood apart from the mainstream of secularism. In the late 1940s under Charles Smith and Marshall Gauvin, *The Truth Seeker* became racist and indulged in scurrilous, anti-Semitic attacks on Haldeman-Julius and other freethinkers, causing wounds from which American secularism has never recovered.

The strong individualist streak running through American freethought can be exemplified in the case of Joseph Lewis who wore himself out with his lifetime efforts to rehabilitate the memory of Paine, and to gain for him the recognition Lewis considered his due. In addition to books concerned with the vindication of Paine, Lewis built up a large publishing house around the two subjects of freethought and sexology. He tirelessly travelled the world lecturing and collecting funds to erect memorials to Paine in America, France and Britain.

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# An Old Woman

R. J. CONDON

Charles Darwin's death-bed conversion, Thomas Paine's repentance of his religious heresies, Charles Bradlaugh's challenge to "God" . . . These are a few of the better known lies which have been peddled by generations of Christian preachers and writers. In this article, R. J. Condon recalls the edifying tale of a pious dame who routed Bradlaugh—if only in the imagination of evangelical propagandists.

The parish magazine of St Peter's Church, Harold Wood, Romford, recently presented its readers with a simple method of routing atheists. A speaker in London's Hyde Park, it appeared, was ranting in the manner of atheists the world over. "There is no God and no heaven", he proclaimed. An old woman in his audience interrupted with: "Yes, but are you happy?" Unable to answer, the atheist climbed down from his platform, folded it as the Arabs in the poem folded their tents, and as silently stole away—defeated by an old woman.

On reading this I reflected that as an active member of the National Secular Society I had known every atheist speaker in Hyde Park for nearly 20 years. Some, it must be admitted, were capable of uttering the words alleged, but if any of them had ever run away from an opponent I would surely have heard of it. Who, then, could the cowardly unbeliever have been?

I was soon to find out, for not long afterwards I happened to be re-reading *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of his Life and Work* by his daughter Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner. A chapter on the many pious fables circulated about her father includes the following, taken from the *Christian Age* for November 1871:

"The other day Mr Bradlaugh was lecturing in a village in the north of England, and at the close he challenged discussion. Who should accept the challenge but an old, bent woman, in most antiquated attire, who went up to the lecturer and said, 'Sir, I have a question to put to you'. 'Well, my good woman, what is it?' 'Ten years ago', she said, 'I was left a widow with eight children utterly unprovided for, and nothing to call my own but this Bible. By its direction, and looking to God for strength, I have been enabled to feed myself and family. I am now tottering to the grave; but I am perfectly happy, because I look forward to a life of immortality with Jesus in heaven. That's what my religion has done for me: what has your way of thinking done for you?' 'Well, my good lady', rejoined the lecturer, 'I don't want to disturb your comfort, but—'. 'Oh! that's not the question', interrupted the woman, 'keep to the point, sir; what

has your way of thinking done for you?'

"The infidel endeavoured to shirk the matter again; the feeling of the meeting gave vent to uproarious applause, and Mr Bradlaugh had to go away discomfited by an old woman."

Mrs Bonner comments: "From the *Christian Age* the story was passed on, evidently without the slightest examination or care for its accuracy. In 1872 it was repeated in large type by the *Methodist Visitor*, word for word, 'the other day' included. Mr Bradlaugh contradicted this idiotic story again and again; no such incident ever occurred at any of his lectures. In spite of all contradictions, however, the 'old woman' remained as lively as ever, and my father was confronted with her year after year, until I almost wonder he had patience left to write a civil denial of her existence."

## Christian Falsehoods

The "cob of coal" story, which had a miner turning Bradlaugh's audience against him by telling of an infidel colleague who had recovered his faith after being struck on the head by a fall of coal, was repeatedly published. Bradlaugh contradicted it at least 50 times, and it continued to circulate after his death. No doubt the Christians of the day considered the yarn to be both literally and figuratively a knock-down argument against atheism. Bradlaugh was accused, while his mother was yet alive, of causing her to die of a broken heart. Only a few days after his young son was buried he was asked to contradict a statement that he had deserted his wife and children. When the Prince of Wales was ill with typhoid fever, the London correspondent of the *New York Herald* accused Bradlaugh of introducing a "new and most subtle" poison into the contents of the Prince's pocket-flask. Nothing was too vile or too absurd to say about the most famous atheist of his time.

The manifold repetitions and variations of the "watch" story, in which Bradlaugh is said to have taken out his watch and given God so many minutes in which to strike him dead, earn it a chapter to itself in Mrs Bonner's biography. I heard it from my schoolmaster, an honourable man apart from his Christian readiness to believe and repeat a lie about an atheist. Never having heard of Bradlaugh before, I was duly impressed with the wickedness of the man. The "watch" story had been told of sceptics before his time, and was never true of any. In one version it was a gold watch; clearly no ordinary timepiece would do for such a challenge. Another embellishment had Bradlaugh throwing a Bible to the ground and stamping upon it.

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## SETBACK FOR THE BREEDERS' LOBBY

An organisation known as the Family and Child Protection Group has been rebuffed by the Charity Commissioners, following an appeal to investigate the Family Planning Association's activities with a view to withdrawing charitable status.

Catholic front organisations have been endeavouring to sabotage the work of the FPA for some time. This latest attempt to damage the Association was initiated by the rabid Right-wing Tory, Jill Knight, Conservative MP for Edgbaston, and Viscount Ingleby, who wrote to the Commissioners in August.

The Family Planning Association have been informed by the Commissioners that they have "considered carefully the points raised by the Family and Child Protection Group in their Open Letter to the Commissioners and the information and other evidence which you have supplied in that connection. On the facts at present before them, the Commissioners have come to the conclusion that the Family Planning Association has not ceased to be a charity."

Thomas Parker, Chief Executive Officer of the Family Planning Association, welcomed the decision from the Charity Commissioners and the support which it gives to the continuation of the Association's work. He commented: "The annual figure of 200,000 unwanted pregnancies indicates the need for more and better information and publicity services, and as a means of providing those services a new Family Planning Information Service is to be set up in January 1977 supported jointly by the Family Planning Association and the Health Education Council. Mr David Ennals, Secretary of State for Social Services has announced financial support for the next three years for the Family Planning Information Service, which will be aimed not only at the general public but also at family planning staff working within the NHS."

The Reverend Michael Meredith, vicar of All Saints', Hessle, Yorkshire, believes that the law of libel can be invoked against Jens Thorsen, the Danish film producer who is reported to be planning a film on the sex life of Jesus Christ. The present law states that a dead person cannot be libelled, but Mr Meredith asserts that "Our Living Lord" rose from the dead and can therefore be libelled. He consulted a solicitor who informed him that such an action would stand little chance of success as the libelled person would have to bring the action. Even Mr Meredith seems to accept that there is little chance of Jesus Christ descending from the Realms of Glory to initiate proceedings—without legal aid—over a film that has not even been made.

## Demonologists the True Christians

"A spiritualist medium recently stated in a newspaper interview that ministers of religion are unable to exorcise evil spirits. No doubt he objects to the churches suddenly poaching on the preserves of spiritualism, after a century of dissociation and denunciation. He went on to say that most cases of alleged demonic possession are cases of hysteria, though he was careful to leave the balance of cases unexplained and to avoid casting doubt on the possibility of demonic possession.

"During the past few years the entry of many clergymen, of various denominations, into the demon business has given considerable impetus to belief in demonic possession, and is the chief cause of recent tragedies, the most publicised of which have been two horrific murders. There was the murder of Christine Taylor by her husband after he had been subjected to a night of mind-bending medieval ritual presided over by C of E and Methodist clergymen. More recently there was the murder of eight-year-old Samantha Read by her father, while her mother and five-year-old brother looked on, because they believed she was possessed by a devil that threatened the salvation of mankind as the end of the world drew near.

"A similar case occurred in 1891, and was reported in *The Freethinker* at the time.

### Church Responsibility

"Not only the clergymen who have taken up demonology professionally, but also the churches as a whole must accept a large part of the responsibility for these appalling events. Although 65 leading theologians last year denounced the practice of exorcism today, there was only one bishop among them, and most C of E bishops merely counselled stricter rules for carrying out exorcisms. This implicit endorsement by the established church fanned the flames of popular credulity.

"The cinema may also bear some measure of responsibility, with such films as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Omen*. Films, however, would be unlikely to be accepted as anything more than spine-chilling entertainment if they were not backed up by institutional Christianity, which many people still take for real.

"It should not be forgotten that, despite the denials of more sophisticated theologians, belief in demonic possession is crucial to the Christian faith. The one justification for Christianity is its fight against the wiles of Satan and his wicked angels, from whose power souls must be redeemed by baptism and faith in order to gain eternal bliss.

"The demonologists are really the consistent, true Christians. So perhaps, after all, it is still religion itself, in its most basic forms, that is the chief enemy of rationalism and of humanity."

## SCHOOL DAZE

There is a fine old rumpus going on in North London following the action of a Jewish parent, Charles Yager, who has reported a Church of England school teacher to the Race Relations Board and to the Jewish Board of Deputies for indoctrinating his eight-year-old daughter with Christianity. Mr Yager claims that the teacher had specially selected his daughter Nicole for indoctrination, and that the child had been given religious instruction not only during the usual period, but also before school and in the lunch hour.

Mr Yager says that Nicole, who has been attending St Mary's Junior School, Hendon, was "incited" to rebel against her parents, and told them that unless they believed in and loved Jesus they would never know happiness. She came home one day and said: "God welcomes a Jewish child, particularly those who convert." She also made remarks about "parents walking in black darkness" and being "Satan's tools in Satan's world", words and phrases Mr Yager does not believe a child of eight can make up. He claims that the teacher, Shirley Mather, "feels it is her God-given right to convert."

Mr Yager's complaint would be more understandable if, like thousands of parents all over the country, he had no practical choice but to send his child to a Church school. But there are State schools in his area, and he must have known that when he sent his daughter to a C of E school she would be indoctrinated with Anglicanism, just like she will be indoctrinated with Judiasm if he sends her to a Jewish school and with Roman Catholicism if he sends her to an RC school.

Since these various doctrines are incompatible with one another, they cannot all be true, and may all be false. Consequently, at least some children who attend sectarian schools, and possibly all of them, are being indoctrinated with false doctrines, the taxpayer and the ratepayer having to heavily subsidise the inculcation of such falsehood. This is one of the great scandals of our time, and it continues with the connivance of politicians, bureaucrats and the media.

One of the monumental falsehoods that is perpetrated by indoctrinators who defend the religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act is that the majority of parents are anxious for their children to be instructed in a religious faith to which the adult community is largely indifferent. If, in fact, parents had strong feelings on this question, they would not mind proving their sincerity by making private arrangements with the Church to inflict dogmas on their offspring. Of course the religious indoctrinators are not so foolish as to believe in their own propaganda about parental concern for the religious wellbeing of their children; parents are, for the most part, much more concerned about practical matters like the size of classes, teaching standards, the price of

# NEWS

school meals and clothes.

Another Christian lie that gets an airing every time the question of school religion is discussed is that the "conscience clauses" of the 1944 Act enable pupils to withdraw from RI and acts of worship. This is quite untrue; only the parent or the guardian can request that a pupil is excused from taking part in this futile exercise. Unfortunately, many parents are neither imaginative enough nor strong-minded enough to make such a request. Consequently, thousands of mature boys and girls start the day by being bored, irritated or offended by religious guff.

How many adults would tolerate this situation? It so happens that a considerable number of them do—again because of the religious clauses of the 1944 Act. The legal age of adults was 21 when the Act was passed. It is now 18, and there are many pupils who remain at school after their eighteenth birthday. As adults they can vote, marry and sign contracts without seeking anybody's permission. But the law of the land decrees that they must obtain their parents' permission in order to opt out of school religion.

Is it too much to hope that some of the points raised here will eventually penetrate the current agitation about educational standards?

## RIGHT TURN

Iain Sproat, Conservative MP for Aberdeen South, successfully caught the attention of Fleet Street (and, no doubt, the party hierarchy) by accusing a group of Labour Members of being Communists in disguise, and thus securing election to Parliament by deceiving their constituents. His evidence for this remarkable claim is rather shaky; it appears that a local Communist Party branch in London advised its members to support Arthur Latham, the Labour candidate, at the general election.

Politicians who are bloody-minded enough to claw their way to Westminster do not need *The Free-thinker* to defend them against their less scrupulous opponents. But Mr Sproat's attempt to get a Communist smear campaign under way should not be shrugged off as a publicity gimmick by a smarty-boots on the make. If he should succeed, the witch-hunt will be extended to anyone who holds views that are not acceptable to the Monday Club, Scotland Yard and the Festival of Light.

Those who regard this warning as being unduly alarmist should read a new book entitled *Scoundrel*



# AND NOTES

*Time*, by the distinguished American playwright, Lillian Hellman. Miss Hellman was a victim of the Un-American Activities Committee that fomented the anti-Communist hysteria which swept the United States 25 years ago. But she was rich and famous, unlike thousands of unknown Americans whose lives were wrecked by Senator McCarthy and his henchmen (who, by the way, included an ambitious young politician named Richard Milhouse Nixon).

A political witch-hunt is seldom confined to the group against which it was initially directed. It spreads like an epidemic to which only narks, conformists and authoritarians are immune.

During the last three decades Conservative politicians, particularly when in opposition, have been prone to produce scapegoats when short of ideas. Aneurin Bevan, Michael Foot, Anthony Wedgwood Benn, students, miners, radicals, the trade unions, coloured immigrants and the unemployed are just a few of those who have been blamed for the nation's ills. Scapegoats are the stock-in-trade of those whose chief talent is the exploitation of ignorance and prejudice.

## INFLATION HITS "THE FREETHINKER"

*The Freethinker* enjoys an enormous amount of goodwill which is reflected in the unpaid work of all its contributors, donations to the Fund and the efforts of those who sell it at meetings and elsewhere. What is not obvious, except to those who are closely involved with editing and managing the paper, is our indebtedness to the printers, David Neil & Company, whose helpfulness and generosity are far in excess of what could be reasonably expected. They have always kept their charges to a minimum; despite swingeing increases in the cost of paper and other materials, there has been no increase to *The Freethinker* for nearly a year.

However, it has become necessary to charge more for producing *The Freethinker* and the reasons are outlined in a letter from the printers. They write: "The rapid and continued rise in printing costs during the last eight months, now reckoned in the trade as over 18 per cent, and the fact that we have had no less than four increases in paper prices since March, has finally compelled us to increase our charges.

"We realise only too well that continually rising prices can be crippling to journals like *The Freethinker*, and that is the main reason we have not passed on any increases in production costs since

last January. With that in mind, we are hoping to keep the increase for *The Freethinker* down to 9 per cent, just about half of the total overall increases, and hope that will be considered reasonable in the present inflationary conditions."

It is clear that *The Freethinker* is not going to break even in financial terms and that donations to the Fund must increase if we are to bridge the gap between income and expenditure. For the third successive month there has been an excellent response, with £73.83 being donated. But although the amount was very encouraging, less than 30 readers sent a contribution to the Fund.

*The Freethinker* enters its 96th year of publication in good heart for the continuing battle against religious superstition, privilege and repression. Its continuation depends on you.

The following readers sent donations during the period 22 October until 23 November. W. Armstrong, 60p; J. Atkins, £1; J. Bond, 25p; J. Cullen, 50p; E. Cybart, £1.15; F. Docherty, 50p; T. H. Ellison, £1.15; Mrs P. A. Forrest, £1.75; D. Harper, £5; E. Henry, 50p; E. S. Johnson, £10; E. C. Hughes, £1.44; E. J. Hughes, £1; Leicester Secular Society, 34p; N. Levenson, £3; N. Leveritt, £3.50; S. J. Mace, £5; K. Mack, £1.50; Mrs M. McIver, 50p; Mrs A. McLaren, 50p; G. S. Mellor, £1.40; T. Myles-Hill, £10; A. Rawlings, £5; R. Reader, 25p; Mrs Stupart, £3.50; E. Westman, £1; J. G. Wilson, £13.50.

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### *An Old Woman*

Probably the most persistent of the Bradlaugh myths is the one repeated in 1964 by A. O. J. Cockshut, in his book *The Unbelievers*. There we are informed of "the dramatic circumstances of his (Bradlaugh's) repeated election to Parliament, and his repeated rejection by the House of Commons for refusing to take the Christian oath." Shortly after this was published the present editor of *The Freethinker* showed me a copy of the New Testament. On the flyleaf Mrs Bonner had written that this was the Testament used by her father when administering the oath to himself in the House of Commons on 20 February, 1882. Bradlaugh never refused the oath; he was not allowed to take it, hence the desperate and of course ineffective device referred to by his daughter. Cockshut, incidentally, had before him Mrs Bonner's book, in which she refers to "the conduct of the majority of the House in preventing Mr Bradlaugh from taking the oath and his seat in the House."

Tales of infidel wickedness and folly are now firmly embedded in religious folklore, although the atheist of the "old woman" story must have been quite a decent chap really. He wasn't willing to tell a lie—a lesson lost on the Christians who resurrect these ancient canards.

# BOOKS

**MY FATHER BERTRAND RUSSELL** by Katherine Tait.  
Gollancz, £5.95.

This is really only half a book, the autobiography of Bertrand Russell's second child by his second wife Dora, looked at very lopsided indeed. Mrs Tait married an American and lives in the United States where she spent her teenage years with her brother, and with Russell and his third wife, Peter. She has learned the American penchant for "telling it like it really is" without realising that in so doing you never ever do tell it like it is, only how it appears to you. Actually, what is worse, she has realised that she has given a biased picture and has left it at that. The book she produced, she tells us, is not the book she set out to write. "I will tell the world what a great father he was, I said to myself, how wise and witty and kind, how much fun we always had. They must not think that he was always a cold and rational philosopher. So I thought and began to write, but it has not come out that way."

The result is a book which bears a grudge. It gives away points to all who want to say what was wrong with Russell, and tells little to those who might want to learn from his mistakes.

What we do learn is the deep truth contained in another American "Humanistic" saw "Who am I to think that I can change the world?" Russell had high ideals, and they kept his gaze at least partly averted from those nearest and dearest to him. And they were dear to him, as occasional flickers of goodwill show through the gloom of self-pity in this latterday teenage diary. And as if blackening the memory of her father and the reputation of her living mother weren't enough, Katherine Tait has venom to spare for her grandparents' generation: "My grandfather Amberley was a neurotic prig", and so on.

Being a Russell child must have been exceptionally difficult. Their father a near omniscient genius with a mind like a scalpel, a mother with enough energy for a small army and a determination to put to rights any wrongs which came to her notice, and both at odds with the cultural and political establishments, the children grew up to see themselves as exceptional outsiders. As long as they were lapped in the boundless love of their childhood home, nothing marred their state of Eden. The first break came, as with most children, when they approached the tree of knowledge and went to school.

Unfortunately however, the school was not just any old establishment, nor a traditional prep school for the ruling classes (hardly), but a new liberal school set up by their parents. And so a five-year-old boy and his three-year-old sister had suddenly to try to understand that the two individuals who had hitherto been a quite exceptionally loving

# FREETHINKER

mother and father were now something else as well, cool and efficient schoolteachers, lest there be any favouritism. Mrs Tait puts much of her subsequent insecurity and unhappiness down to the estrangement she says resulted.

Beacon Hill School is something of a legend to all who have followed the Russell saga, and something of a mystery still. The author extends and confirms the picture her mother gave in her autobiography, *The Tamarisk Tree*, of a courageous and adventurous pioneering effort, combining much of the best of "traditional" and "progressive" education. Perhaps the emphasis on plain hard food, fresh air and cold showers was overdone; but after all it was 1927. The curriculum was apparently firmly traditional, with importance placed upon learning a set of basic facts and acquiring certain skills.

The progressiveness lay in the emphasis placed upon the second of those two aims, and facts were learned through those skills—learning by doing. The children's interest was engaged and intellectual exploration was encouraged. It was an anticipation of the Nuffield method in fact, very different from the methods of their contemporary pioneer, A. S. Neill (although they shared with him their children's nudity and "bad" language).

The unhappiness and loneliness which were Katherine's for those seven years, which she mentions over and over again, have led her to ascribe to the school too important a place in her parents' affairs and relationship. It is true that Bertrand Russell wrote the project off in his autobiography, but that was at some years distance when his view was almost certainly coloured. At the time of their separation, Russell gave every encouragement to Dora to carry the school on, with all the good work which was their joint product. But then the author was still a child. She experienced their distress at second hand: "Large dark gestures of rage and grief loom above me, but the tragedy takes place offstage, and I do not understand it or know the details of its unfolding."

None the less, her insights into their clash of temperaments is telling, both equally fiery and intense, but he changeable and insecure, lack-love, while she (Dora) was steadfast and loyal, with as great a capacity to receive as to give love.

After his divorce from Dora, Russell married the lovely Peter, and it must have seemed as though his perfectionism, of which Katherine Tait complains, had found its foil. Peter took the dumpy, depressed teenager in hand, and tried to turn her

# REVIEWS

into a beautiful—but not too beautiful—swan. However, the new shiny exterior only served to emphasise the still shy and inadequate interior. Meanwhile the uncertainties of Russell's philosophic and financial affairs continued to provide a background of insecurity.

This is the episode of Russell's private life we know least about—he hardly touches on it at all himself. One has been left with the impression of Peter as a villainess. It is an unjust impression, as Mrs Tait makes clear. Poor Peter, married to a man so very much older, whose initial overwhelming passion faded and left her a stepmother on short rations in a foreign land.

After the war Katherine began to forge her own adult life, and after a year's disastrous and miserable shuttling between different households fled back to America to take a higher degree. She married and had children, and grew remote from Russell, who by then had reached the respectable stage in his life. She became a Christian and went with her missionary husband to Africa. Together with their three children they spent one summer with Russell, now married to Edith and living in Wales, and then Dora in her old home in Cornwall. Russell housed the Taits at his own expense in a hotel and showered grandfatherly love and wit on the children. Poor Katherine, however, as she more or less acknowledges, was still so busy coping with the powerful and mixed emotions of her unresolved teenage years, that she could not acknowledge at the time the love her father was so clearly demonstrating.

Finally her own marriage foundered, and in the misery which followed she at last realised how blind she had been to her father's true feelings, and how when she had recognised his affection, she had fended it off. Happily she was able to write to Russell a love letter "for once in her life". Then he was dead. She wept, and felt that the whole world wept with her.

The reader weeps too, for the reconciliation which might have been and the new life it might have given Katherine. How different this autobiography might have been! It is right that we should know the pain and suffering of Bertrand Russell's daughter, but wrong that we should have such a biased account of her whole life. Russell would have approved, as she says, of her telling the truth, but not, surely, of such a partial truth. This is a book which needed to be written, but did not deserve to be published. After all the book is not entitled *My*

*Life*, by Mrs Katherine Tait, but *My Father Bertrand Russell*.

There is, however, one great debt we owe Katherine Tait. Many people have wondered what the explanation might be for Russell's desperate search for love and his inability to accept it when he had found it. Ronald Clarke's recent biography hints that it was because he damaged his penis when a boy, and wanted to make sure that it worked properly. But one encounter alone would have proved that.

Mrs Tait points out what we should have seen ourselves: Russell's parents died when he was a child, his mother when he was two and his father a year later. (The description in *The Amberley Papers* of Viscount Amberley's death is one of the most moving passages I know.) This is a child's most vulnerable age, and Russell was quite obviously suffering from the effects of separation depression all his life. It is a pity that Katherine Tait's Christian charity did not extend to giving this more than intellectual recognition.

CHRISTOPHER MACY

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**THE CALL TO SERIOUSNESS** by Ian Bradley. Jonathan Cape, £4.95.

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The principal challenge to modern Freethought has been seen to come from the Roman Catholic Church, but during most of the last century the main "enemy" was the Evangelical movement. This book which is sub-titled *The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians*, offers a general study of those Evangelicals and assesses their work and influence during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The Evangelicals—proponents of "vital religion" within the Anglican Church—drew their inspiration from that same awakening of religious fervour which produced Methodism; but unlike the Methodists they operated more from within than from outside the existing political and religious establishment—and with great effect. In Parliament the generations of Wilberforce and Shaftesbury inspired a whole series of important humanitarian reforms, affecting slaves, child labourers, women and the poor in general. Beyond Parliament they helped shape a world of seriousness, morality and duty which replaced a more carefree but more vicious one.

The chief merit of the book lies in its balance. Partisan historians on both the Freethought and Christian sides have done scant justice to the Evangelicals: this book acknowledges both the good and the bad in them. The Evangelicals may have been otherworldly, but at the same time their keen sense of duty made them deeply concerned for and involved in the material welfare of their fellow men. The war against vice may have represented a serious challenge to individual liberty of expression, but it

was also a vigorous, sincere, and partly effective assault on the brutalities of life. Their emphasis on the family may have imprisoned many middle-class wives in their homes, but it also gave them closer and enriched personal relationships within those homes.

The general reader will read this book with profit and enjoyment; it is ably and fluently written, balanced in its judgments and sensible in its overall conclusions. Those of a more academic turn of mind, though, may be disappointed. The weight of the scholarship appears light; little is said which has not been said elsewhere, and the subject matter is more restricted than the title suggests. Dr Bradley knows most about Parliament in the early nineteenth century; least about how people outside the élite reacted, especially later in the century. Though there are hints that seriousness might have been giving way to hypocrisy and insensitivity by 1860, we are not told much more. The flower which bloomed so radiantly before 1850 was wilting rapidly: it survived dried and pressed, exhibited in a glass case in the parlour on Sundays only. This too was a part of the legacy of the Evangelicals to the Victorians.

EDWARD ROYLE

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**OSCAR WILDE** by H. Montgomery Hyde. Eyre Methuen, £6.95.

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Bernard Shaw, with his usual good sense, pleaded for an end to talk of the tragedy of Oscar Wilde: "Oscar was no tragedian. He was the superb comedian of his century, one to whom misfortune, disgrace, imprisonment were external and traumatic. His gaiety of soul was invulnerable . . ." Well, it is good sense; but I don't see how anyone could read this new and most thorough biography without weeping afresh for those cruel externalities. The gulf between what Wilde gave to the world, and what the world gave him in return, is so hideously wide. Very well, one has to make a distinction: there was the Wilde who *could* be imprisoned, *could* be disgraced, *could* be driven to early death, and there was another Wilde who was triumphant all the way. The evil hypocrisy of Victorian law had no hope of prevailing against the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But I would be uneasy about anyone who, even 80 years after those appalling trials—or after that moment when, being transferred in handcuffs to Reading, he was recognised and spat at on a railway platform—could think without pain about what was done to this remarkable human being, or indeed think of the affair as, in some way, closed. It cannot be thought of as a finished thing while unconventionality and wit and imagination, anywhere in the world, are made the victims of powerful hypocrites and moral philistines.

It's true, as Shaw pointed out and Mr Montgomery Hyde makes extensively clear, that Wilde, to the end, had "no pity for himself, playing for the laugh with his last breath." He would rather—he wrote not long before he died, a shabby refugee in Paris—have 50 unnatural vices than one unnatural virtue. In those last years he took up photography and, in a letter from Rome, asked his staunch friend Robert Ross if he could photograph cows well. "I did one of the cows in the Borghese so marvellous that I destroyed it . . . Cows are very fond of being photographed and, unlike architecture, don't move." Invulnerable gaiety, indeed: but this was also the man who was denied even a sight of his sons, and who had been cut dead by almost the entire world that he had loved to turn into an enchanted audience: this was the man who was not allowed a second's remission of his sentence: this was the man who, as he himself said, was quite destroyed by the vile cruelty of his first year of hard labour and near-total isolation, and yet remained most tenderly (and, as in so much, most practically) alert to the sufferings of his fellow-prisoners. Oscar Wilde, as well as being an invulnerable spirit, was flesh and blood only too capable of being wounded. And, for all the force of Shaw's plea, I do not see that we have the right to think easily, without anguish and emotion, about the case of Oscar Wilde, actual once-live human being.

I should do an injustice to Mr Montgomery Hyde's book if I suggested that he went out of his way to stimulate strong responses such as these. The anguish is my own. I don't mean that the biographer is heartlessly detached: but his concern is with the story, and the detail of it. One can readily believe that the detail has been 40 years or so in the accumulating—since the accident of Montgomery Hyde's having occupied Wilde's old rooms at Magdalen College, Oxford, and been visited there by Lord Alfred Douglas. It's a fully-laden book. He has amassed over the years a great deal of original material, talking to men and women who knew Wilde or some corner of the story: he was also the first to be allowed to examine the documents relating to Wilde's imprisonment. He comes as close as anyone could to recreating the young celebrity—Wilde on his American tours, not quite avoiding being overstretched like some too-much-advertised youngster of our own day: and then the man moving into full possession of his genius. I say Mr Montgomery Hyde comes as close as could be to bringing Wilde to life, because what is left out of the account of any artist's life is the work itself and the labour that created it; and in Wilde's case there's the complication, on which everyone in the story comments, that his talk was enchanting beyond description, his best achievement: and alas, though anecdotalists abound, he never had his Boswell.

Mr Montgomery Hyde believes it was the dis-

covery, after a couple of years of marriage, that the syphilis with which he was infected as an undergraduate was not cured (as he had been told it was, consulting doctors before he proposed to Constance Lloyd), that led him to homosexuality. Some mysteries remain unexplained and probably inexplicable. Wilde himself looked back on the couple of years before his downfall as a period when he was "suffering from the most horrible form of erotomania." It's true that he said so in a petition to the Home Secretary written when he had served little more than half his prison sentence: but it is not easy to believe that he made this accusation against himself as mere self-excusals. Was this fever inherited from his father (if it is something that can be inherited)—Sir William Wilde having been a man with a dramatically powerful sexual drive? To what extent was Wilde caught up in an exhilarating spiral of excitements which consisted as much of seizures and marvellous insolences of the intelligence and wit as of the body? Why, against all sensible advice, did he stay in England till the obvious disaster struck? These are clearly questions that will never be answered, in any incontrovertible way, but Mr Montgomery Hyde has provided much material for speculation to work on.

A fascinating book, with a first-class bibliography and account of manuscript sources. If it hurts a reader, that is what it should do. It has also much that's delightful to offer; for in the end, when the brutally broken flesh and spirit had gone, and Ross and Reginald Turner had washed the body and removed "the appalling debris", what was left was "the superb comedian of his century", the immense happiness of whose wit "shines through the blackest pages of *De Profundis* as clearly as the funniest epigrams."

EDWARD BLISHEN

## PAMPHLET

**DEATH WITH DIGNITY** by A. B. Downing, Antony Flew and Eliot Slater. Voluntary Euthanasia Society, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8, 20p.

Everyone working in health care services is not only in continuous touch with death but is surrounded by an astonishing number and variety of clichés on the subject. Few regard death as an admirable or desirable thing except in the case of the aged and the seriously disabled; for them "death is a blessing" or a "relief at last". He or she is "at peace after a terrible time", for peace more than anything else is what people desire for the dying and the greatest good luck is sudden and unexpected death, envied as "a lovely way to go." Acci-

dental sudden death is always regarded as unfortunate but the older person who does not die but simply "passes away" is an example of man's desired ideal.

It is unfortunate that for the great bulk of mankind, certainly in countries with developed health services, dying takes none of the desirable forms. It is often long, slow, painful, sometimes disgusting to the patient, troublesome to the relatives and to the professional people who have to watch the process, and often extremely costly to the community.

It is inevitable that man should ask if the best way of dying is that dictated by disease, the slow painful gasping for breath, the long lingering coma of many, the semi-conscious watching of one's biological processes breaking down. The Voluntary Euthanasia Society, in a brief pamphlet written by three of its most eminent members, advances *Death with Dignity* as a counter-blow to the Anglican pamphlet *On Dying Well* which was compiled by an imposing Working Party. But *On Dying Well* has no meaning in medical or social terms; and if it has any in a theology based on everlasting life in a glorious heaven, it would appear it should be by dying speedily and early so as to reach that heaven. But we need a better term than "Dying with Dignity" to advance the case and make acceptable the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia.

This VES pamphlet sets out the arguments on medical, legal and theological grounds and includes the views of a Christian member of the Society. The medical and legal arguments cannot be denied; but the theological ones, for or against, depend on exactly how one describes God and what rights and duties are attributed to him and as to whether they are binding on God and Man. But however that is answered, the VES writers say that ours is a pluralistic society and they are asking no more than the right of "those of different convictions—whether Christian or different non-Christian convictions—to act according to their own conscience and their own desire." The VES is a voluntary organisation asking for an extension of the rights of the citizen without any form of compulsion on anyone, and those interested will find this pamphlet full of excellent arguments.

D. STARK MURRAY

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# LETTERS

Derek Allen ("The Freethinker", November), is not to know that in the weeks that preceded the meeting of the National Party and the National Front in Conway Hall, I set up the situation, with the full knowledge and support of our General Committee, so that if either of these organisations put a foot wrong, i.e. were guilty of a prima facie breach of the Race Relations Act, the hammer would come down. The National Party got by, the National Front did not—and the hammer duly descended.

The National Front has now been denied access to Conway Hall three times, each time for a specific offence. This is how justice, properly understood, works. Those who would enter a general proscription against the freedom of speech and assembly are urging a path, that if taken, can lead only to totalitarianism.

All the Humanist societies of this country (certainly at the national level and also, so far as I know, at the local level) support the position of South Place Ethical Society on the freedom of speech. And that support is much appreciated.

Are we now being asked to admit a new phenomenon—a freethinker who does not believe in freethought?

PETER CADOGAN, General Secretary  
South Place Ethical Society

## THE LIFE OF JESUS

Ian Anderson asks what evidence I have for the claim that "fictional treatment of the Life of Jesus goes back to the Gospels" ("The Freethinker", November). I should have thought that the problem is to find evidence of fact rather than fiction in the Gospels, but never mind.

The four versions of the life of Jesus, which were produced in unknown ways by unknown writers from unknown sources between 40 and 100 years after the events they claim to describe, and which were later given ecclesiastical rather than intellectual authority over all the other versions, give no identifiable first-hand accounts, but several contradictory second-hand accounts of those events. Non-Christians have therefore argued for two centuries—and most Christians now agree to a greater or lesser extent—that the Gospels are religious rather than historical documents, and that not all the stories in them are factually true. If this is the case, some of the stories must have been invented by the authors of the Gospels or of their sources, which means that fictional treatment of the life of Jesus goes back to the Gospels.

Does Mr Anderson seriously suggest otherwise? If so, what evidence has he for his claim?

NICOLAS WALTER

Although Ian Anderson (Letters, November), does not give his source of revelation for the statement "Of course Jesus was attracted to the opposite sex", and although he is at odds both with puritans who have denied Jesus had sexual feelings and with trendy bishops who are convinced he was homosexual, I am willing to give way on this point. In future I will assume that Jesus lusted after women, but repressed his desires with cold showers (or the first-century equivalent).

BARBARA SMOKER

## CATHOLIC GUILT

It is obvious that David Tribe's game is to use the crimes of Roman Catholics, or Catholic Action, to bring other Christian denominations into contempt ("Religion and Warfare", November). He talks about Christians in general, but why does he not particularise? No honest or intelligent person blames Labour leaders for the malpractices of Communists.

It was Roman Catholics in Vietnam who tried to dominate the Buddhist majority there. It was a minority of Roman Catholics who tried to set up a Roman Catholic state in Nigeria. It is Roman Catholics in Lebanon (the Maronites accept the Pope's supremacy) who are fighting the Muslims there. Salazar, Franco, Petain (who introduced anti-Semitic legislation to Vichy France), Degrelle, Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Heydrich, Streicher, Kaltenbrunner (Eichmann's boss), von Papen, von Neurath, and Pavelic (murderer of the Jews and Greek Catholics in Yugoslavia), were all born and bred Roman Catholics.

Why blame the Salvation Army, Episcopalians, Baptists, Presbyterians and Methodists, etc. for the misdeeds of sons of the Pope? David Tribe knows perfectly well that in a non-Roman Catholic country the word Christian is taken to mean a non-Roman Catholic.

Mr Tribe speaks about the "extensive research" of Frank Ridley and Avro Manhattan. Why no mention of Joseph McCabe and Edmond Paris? Joseph McCabe preceded Ridley and Edmond Paris' book, "The Vatican Against Europe", is the best exposure of the Vatican's ties with the Fascist monsters, and of the Catholic Action origin of Fascism of every brand.

JAMES MCNAIR

## PEACEFUL DEATH

Charles Wilshaw's knowledgeable article about euthanasia mentions that in Roman Catholic hospices pain-killing drugs are given in doses which can eventually cause death. Doctors were no doubt thinking of this practice—officially sanctioned by the Pope—when 76 per cent of them agreed that some "help their patients over the last hurdle to save unnecessary suffering, even if that involves curtailment of life." So, unlike the recent National Opinion Poll results, this question and the percentage quoted by Mr Wilshaw is of no relevance if we are considering whether doctors give euthanasia at the moment.

However, the practice of the hospices goes much further than causing death from pain-killers. They openly admit that if a terminal patient gets pneumonia, they will allow this to take its course, instead of giving the patient penicillin. In other words, they deliberately decide to let someone die when they have the means to save them. If this is not euthanasia, it comes remarkably close to it.

NICHOLAS REED, Press Officer  
Voluntary Euthanasia Society

## GREETINGS

May I send seasonal greetings to all fellow-readers of "The Freethinker", and also thank the writers of the interesting and informative articles and reviews that appear in it.

These articles provide useful ammunition for letters to local newspapers, and the reviews are an excellent guide to books to order from the public library.

To fellow-readers who, like myself, are unable to contribute articles, I would suggest: send instead a donation from time to time to the Freethinker Fund.

ERIC WESTMAN

# Humanists Condemn Oath-Taking Farce

The futility of oath-taking was demonstrated last month by the farcical goings-on at Leeds Crown Court in which a seven-year-old witness was involved. The girl, Karen Whelan, told the judge that she had not been taught about God. Mr Justice Forbes decided that because of this defect in the child's education, she could not take the oath. He discharged the jury and adjourned the case for a week.

While the court was in adjournment Karen had to undergo a crash-course in religious instruction in order that she would know about God when the proceedings resumed. Appearing in a court case is in itself an awesome experience for any child. But it is intolerable that, in addition, Karen Whelan was intellectually assaulted by religious indoctrinators, and had to undergo the strain of trying, in the course of a week, to learn about a figment of the judge's imagination.

The British Humanist Association, National Secular Society and Rationalist Press Association issued a joint statement on the case, and the text is given below:

The humanist movement repeats its frequent protest about continuing discrimination against people who are not able or willing to take an oath in court, and repeats its frequent proposal that either non-religious affirmation should be made easier or the religious oath should be abolished altogether. The British Humanist Association, National Secular Society, and Rationalist Press Association, noting the latest in a series of cases when children have for various reasons been found unable to take the oath, and have for that reason been prevented from giving evidence in court, call for affirmation to be made the usual procedure for all witnesses.

A trial was stopped at the Leeds Crown Court on November 19, because a seven-year-old girl told the judge that she had not been taught about God and agreed that she would not know what it is to promise to tell God the truth. The case has been adjourned until November 26, while she receives instruction about the meaning of the oath.

This situation is absurd and unnecessary. For nearly a century witnesses have been able to make a non-religious affirmation if the religious oath is either contrary to or not binding on their conscience. Children should surely have the same right here as adults; a child who may possibly be unable to swear an oath will probably be able to affirm instead. If this is not already the legal position, it should be; and if it is the legal position, it should be made clear to all concerned.

The Magistrates' Association suggested as long ago as 1968 that the oath might be replaced by a simple promise to tell the truth, and that affir-

mation should become an unrestricted alternative to the oath. We prefer the traditional humanist demand for affirmation as a standard procedure, with the religious oath as an optional extra, and we condemn any religious discrimination in this as in all other areas.

## BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS

Copies of our list are available on request

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### *Postscript to a Bicentennial*

Yet, with his death in 1968, all this tremendous effort collapsed overnight, leaving a vast library of freethought literature, huge debts, and by now three rather tatty statues of Paine.

The names of those who have contributed to the Other America also include Luther Burbank, Daniel DeLeon, Upton Sinclair (whose *Profits of Religion* deserves reprinting), and Moncure Conway. The latter came to South Place Ethical Society in London when it was at a low ebb, and gave it a unique place in freethought and radical history at the end of the 19th century. There were those who helped build that remarkable organisation, the Industrial Workers of the World, with their folk-hero, songwriter Joe Hill. Many older freethinkers here in Britain will remember his anti-religious songs, *Pie in the Sky* and *The Preacher and the Slave*.

There was Susan Anthony, pioneer propagandist for women's rights, who endured years of abuse and denigration from religious bigots during her lecture tours. Margaret Sanger, the pioneer of contraception clinics in the United States, was an ardent freethinker and also politically active in the Socialist Party, where as chairman of the women's committee she helped organise many women workers in the slum-factories of New York. Elizabeth Gurney Flynn, and "Mother" Jones led many a battle on behalf of trade unionists and strikers. And, more recently, the partially successful struggle against religion in the state schools has been valiantly waged by Vashti McCollum, and by that remarkable personality, Madalyn Murray O'Hair.

These, then, are some of the makers of the Other America. We salute them all, the famous and the forgotten, the known and the unknown. They are the true heirs of the American Revolution.

## A Charitable Rejoinder

dreadful suffering or forced to seek medical assistance far from their homes because of those described in the BPAS Report as "intransigents on the Right". Even worse is the fact that in some cases doctors who may have genuine conscientious doubts, but who bring themselves to refer patients, may find themselves trapped by reactionary medical colleagues who hold key positions in local hospitals. These situations lead BPAS to suggest that the Minister and the NHS should be legally required to provide an abortion service for all who may need it, not merely half the number as at present. They also offer the view that it is in the public interest to require convincing proof of the genuineness of any claim of conscientious objection.

The other area of dispute is in the time limit for abortion. The Select Committee prefers an upper limit of 20 weeks but the WHO in 1974 went as far as accepting 28 weeks in some circumstances. The BPAS recommends 24 weeks. Bearing in mind that the greatest number of abortions are done between the ninth and the twelfth week, figures indicate that very few abortions would take place at such an advanced period, when the question of separate survival of the foetus might be involved.

### Attacks on Advisory Agencies

What over-rides all else in the Charitable Rejoinder is the revelation of constant attacks on the non-commercial agencies made by individual members of the Select Committee, culminating in a number of damaging proposals which would completely destroy both BPAS and the smaller Pregnancy Advisory Service, of London. Comments by Select Committee members leaves a nasty taste of serious discrimination against charitable organisations which justly compare their own function in abortion with that of the Samaritans, the British Red Cross, the NSPCC, Dr Barnardo's and the Family Planning Association in their chosen fields.

In referring to the activities of the anti-abortion groups LIFE and SPUC, an eminent member of the Expert Advisory Committee of the World Health Organisation has written to the Director of the lat-

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove. Sunday, 2 January, 5.30 pm. James Hemming: "Levels of Sexual Experience".

**Humanist Holidays.** Christmas at Brighton and Easter, 1977 at Southsea. Details from Mrs M. Mephram, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey. Tel: (01) 642 8796.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 16 December, 7.45 pm. Saturnalian Party.

**London Secular Group** (outdoor meetings). Thursdays, 12.30-2 pm at Tower Hill; Sundays, 3-7 pm at Marble Arch. ("The Freethinker" and other literature on sale.)

**Merseyside Humanist Group.** Lecture Room, 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Meeting held on the third Wednesday of the month, 7.45 pm.

**South Place Ethical Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tuesday, 14 December, 7 pm. Barbara Smoker: "Seasonal Myths and Festivals".

**Worthing Humanist Group.** Burlington Hotel, Marine Parade, Worthing. Sunday, 30 January, 5.30 pm. M. Cornwall: "Science and Religion Since the Renaissance".

### NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

MEMBERSHIP ENQUIRIES to the General Secretary,  
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

ter organisation: "The sticker issued by your society 'Abortion Kills Babies' is a non-sequitur and is as illogical as saying 'Riding or Driving a Car Kills Humans'." This reminds me that more people die in bed than anywhere else, but we have yet to hear serious proposals to make beds or bedmakers illegal. Would it be uncharitable to suggest that the Select Committee undertake a study of this phenomenon? At least it is a topic in which they will not be at risk, as they are now, of denying the right of women in distress, on grounds which reek of religious intolerance and repression, their right to seek aid within the law.

## THE FREETHINKER

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TELEPHONE: 01-272 1266  
UK ISSN 0016-0687

The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or of the Editor.

"The Freethinker" was founded in 1881 by G. W. Foote and is published mid-monthly. Material submitted (including Letters and Announcements) must reach this office by the 20th of the preceding month.

### SPECIAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Inland and Overseas: Twelve months: £1.50 Six months: 75p  
U.S.A. and Canada: Twelve months: \$4.50 Six months: \$2.25

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"The Freethinker" can also be ordered through any newsagent.