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FREETHINKER TO THE RESCUE IN BLASPHEMY APPEAL COURT

"How 'The Freethinker' may save 'Gay News'" was the headline in the "Observer" on Sunday 19 February, following the week of the appeal in the blasphemy case. In presenting arguments about how the blasphemy law had been defined in the past, the case of J. W. Gott, who was the last person successfully prosecuted for blasphemy before "Gay News", was considered. But only a partial report of that case could be found. Thanks to "The Freethinker" of January 1922 the judges were able to peruse in full the comments of Mr Justice Avory in that case.

Judgement in the appeal of *Gay News* was reserved and will not be given before this issue of *The Freethinker* goes to press, so we are reporting other aspects of this stage in the case.

The appeal was preceded by a march and rally in Trafalgar Square on 11 February 1978 organised by the National Gay News Defence Committee. More than 5,000 attended the march and the National Secular Society banner was among the many groups displaying support for *Gay News* and opposition to blasphemy law. There were contingents from all over the country including Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Bolton, Birmingham, Oxford, Cambridge, Warwick and Brighton. On display were posters saying "No to Blasphemy" and placards depicting a grotesque Mary Whitehouse sweeping sex un-

der the carpet with a tidy, old-fashioned carpet sweeper. "Free Speech In, Whitehouse Out", was one of the chants as the demonstrators marched past the Saturday afternoon shoppers in Charing Cross Road and Oxford Street. Despite the almost arctic temperatures, it was clear that warm, good-humoured and determined support for *Gay News* had been created by Mrs Whitehouse's private prosecution.

Among the speakers in Trafalgar Square were Denis Lemon, Editor of *Gay News*, pop star Tom Robinson, who sang from his current hit "Glad to be Gay", and Bill McLroy, Hon Secretary of the Committee Against Blasphemy Law. There were
(Continued over)



Demonstration Against Blasphemy for Gay News Appeal

many messages of support read out, including one from Pat Arrowsmith, who had hoped to speak at the rally.

Bill McIlroy said that blasphemy law is an aspect of censorship. He added: "When Mary Whitehouse prosecuted *Gay News* for 'blasphemous libel', her action caused public astonishment, because the majority of people were under the impression that blasphemy prosecutions were a thing of the past. Blasphemy law has always been confused and uncertain, and it is this confusion and uncertainty which is being exploited by Mrs Whitehouse and her evangelical boot-boys.

"It is nearly 300 years since the civil courts inherited blasphemy laws from the Church. But right into the present century the Church has, through its privileged position and influence on the department of state, continued to use blasphemy laws to frighten and silence opponents.

"When the statutory laws against blasphemy were abolished ten years ago the job was not properly finished. Law reformers who innocently thought that the Christian leopard had changed its spots, made the fundamental error of regarding the common law offence of blasphemy as harmless.

"Since that time there has been an upsurge of evangelical, censorious pressure groups, all of them wanting to impose their narrow standards on the rest of us. They want to dictate to us what we can or can not publish; what we can or can not buy at a W. H. Smith bookstall; what we can or can not read.

"Should any of you believe that the Festival of Light, the Order of Christian Unity or the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association are groups of harmless cranks, let me remind you that there is usually a strong affinity between those who want to ban books and those who burn down bookshops.

"Whatever the outcome of the *Gay News* Appeal, the battle against blasphemy law must continue. For the common law offence of blasphemy will still be there, a dangerous weapon in the hands of informers, censors and authoritarians.

"We must destroy the last vestige of blasphemy law in order to ensure there are no more *Gay News* trials."

A picket outside the Royal Courts of Justice began on the following Monday morning. Maureen Colquhoun, MP, for Northampton West, attended the picket.

Nicolas Walter, Editor of New Humanist, who attended the appeal, writes:

Half of the trial of *Gay News* last summer was taken up with three days of legal argument in the absence of the jury, and the appeal last month added another four days of legal argument. The lawyers were the same as before—John Mortimer led for *Gay News*, assisted by Geoff Robertson,

and John Smyth represented Mary Whitehouse—and in place of Judge King-Hamilton were Lord Justice Roskill, Lord Justice Eveleigh, and Mr Justice Stocker.

Not very surprisingly, perhaps, the press took little notice of the events inside the court, apart from a bad article in the *Evening News* on 15 February and a good article in the *Observer* on 19 February. More surprisingly, however, the press took little notice either of events outside the court. A march through London and meeting in Trafalgar Square on 11 February, organised by the National *Gay News* Defence Committee and attended by thousands of people both inside and outside the gay movement, with a contingent following the National Secular Society banner was almost ignored. So was the appearance on the same day of a new edition of the offending poem by James Kirkup and illustration by Tony Reeves, as a leaflet published by 111 writers, artists, academics, performers, publishers and journalists, including such members of the freethought movement as H. J. Blackham, Edward Blishen, Edward Bond, Brigid Brophy, Bernard Crick, Maureen Duffy, Peter Fryer, John Gilmour, Jim Herrick, Margaret Knight, Colin McCall, Barbara Smoker, Tony Smythe, Maurice Temple Smith, Roy Wallis, Nicolas Walter, Angela Willans, and David Yallop.

This real live blasphemy didn't disturb the rarefied atmosphere in Court No 6 at the Royal Courts of Justice, where three barristers argued with three judges about dead old blasphemy, and in particular about Judge King-Hamilton's conduct of the *Gay News* trial. John Mortimer dropped some of the original grounds of appeal, such as the suggestion that the common law of blasphemy had been superseded and the exclusion of expert evidence on literary and theological aspects of the case. He spent some time on various minor issues, such as the prosecution of the poem under the law of blasphemy rather than obscenity, the failure of the prosecution to establish a *prima facie* case against the editor of *Gay News*, and King-Hamilton's emotive questions to the jury in his summing-up. But more than three days was spent on the major issue, whether King-Hamilton was right or wrong to exclude from the trial the element of intent and to insist that the only issue before the jury was the effect of the poem.

Since blasphemy is a common law offence on which Acts of Parliament have hardly touched and in which the legal textbooks largely repeat one another, the argument was mainly concerned with a series of cases ranging from 1676 to 1922, mostly involving freethinkers being persecuted by the authorities. The cast of offenders included many of our illustrious predecessors, especially in the cases of G. W. Foote and his colleagues on *The Freethinker*

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The Christian as Censor

ANTONY GREY

The Hon Secretary of the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society and former Director of the Albany Trust, Antony Grey, is opposed to censorship. But he considers that the arguments for it should be examined seriously. Here he discusses the pro-censorship arguments of Dr John Court.

Dr John Court, the clinical psychologist who is National Chairman of the Australian Festival of Light, has written a comprehensive statement* of the Evangelical Christian's belief in the social desirability of censorship which is urbane, sophisticated, civilisedly argued and, in short, a welcome change from the rabid outpourings of Mary Whitehouse and Britain's home-bred Festival-of-Lighters. *Law, Light and Liberty* is a book which deserves to be taken seriously and which, I believe, should be read carefully by every opponent of censorship.

Despite an obviously sincere concern for democratic values, Dr Court is an unashamed elitist and intellectual authoritarian. While he holds that "there is an idealism, unmatched elsewhere, in the Christian's refusal to accept good when the best is available", he believes that "given complete freedom to choose, people"—non-Christian, presumably—"will tend to select the bad rather than the good"; and that, because "the average man-in-the-street has neither the intellectual resources nor the inclination to make selective choices for himself and his family", it lies with those in authority to "assist" him.

They should do so, in Dr Court's view, through the "dispassionate" services of public officials analogous to public health inspectors who would exercise "quality control" (a term Dr Court prefers to "censorship" because of the latter's negative and unpopular connotations) by impartially evaluating the available scientific evidence of the potential harmfulness to the community of books, films, plays and magazines submitted to them prior to publication.

Politicians, says Dr Court, are unsuitable censors, because "our society is such that freedom from restraint now is generally preferred to assessing possible later consequences; hence, logically, political capital is derived from a liberalising attitude to censorship." Yet, paradoxically, Dr Court claims elsewhere that hefty majorities of the public favour some measure of censorship. The alternative of letting the community judge for itself is imprac-

ticable because if they were actually allowed to inspect the questionable material, the horse would have bolted. (As a recent reviewer in *The Free-thinker* remarked, "To the Christian a teenager is an infant, as an adult is a child.")

Painful inconclusiveness

Science itself is a less reliable guide to the influence of ideas upon behaviour and morals than it is in the area of physical cause and effect. Dr Court surveys most of the sociological and psychological studies of the effects of pornography carried out before his book was written in 1975, and admits their "painful" inconclusiveness. More significantly, he concedes that there is no such thing as scientific objectivity: all scientific experiments and reports involve value-judgements. Nor is there any such thing as moral neutrality—neutrality is itself a commitment to the winning side.

Faced with such a sea of subjectivity, Dr Court takes refuge in the absolutes of his faith—"the Bible gives every reason to predict that, without God, man will sink lower and lower". The Christian ethic is concerned with human relationships, the preservation of human dignity and, in particular, respect for women. It asserts that "I am not only responsible for the harm I have done, but I am equally responsible for the harm I could have prevented." This, Dr Court claims, is *not* paternalism, or busybodying in the affairs of others; it is "a high sense of social responsibility". Armed with it, and with the naive conviction that only committed Christians really understand the nature of evil, he sallies forth to protect the vulgar populus from themselves.

Now, Dr Court is obviously a sincere man, and one can fully share many of his pressing concerns about the deterioration in morals, integrity, courtesy and other much-needed ethical values in contemporary Western culture. Indeed, one of the things which makes his book so well worth reading is his passionate lament that so much which not only he, but everyone of goodwill, regards as essential to a civilised life seems to be increasingly threatened today. More's the pity that those of us who have not been vouchsafed the light of revealed certainty must part company with him and his allies because their very conviction that they KNOW the truth leads them to propose remedies which can only strike those who do not share their beliefs as intolerably totalitarian. Dr Court is half aware of this, and wriggles uncomfortably over most of the classical dilemmas posed by the theory of democracy like a winkle impaled upon a pin. It is to his credit that, unlike most of his British

**Law Light and Liberty* by John H. Court. (Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide. Obtainable from National Festival of Light, 21A Down Street, London W17 7DN. £2.50.)

brethren, he at least knows that the dilemmas exist.

Shared concerns

It remains a worthwhile task to identify those concerns I am able to share with him. A concern to strike a healthy balance between personal freedom and social responsibility; a concern to reduce the incidence of violence and alienation in society, so that everyone—and especially the younger generations—shall have a better chance of happiness and stability in their lives; a concern to reduce callousness and to increase compassion; a concern to redress the lopsided balance between the material, intellectual, emotional and ethical preoccupations of Western man. Surely these concerns are common to many people besides fundamentalist Christians—including the proponents of situation ethics, humanists, the National Council for Civil Liberties, Fabian socialists, and even some who are further to the Left, against all of whom Dr Court directs his invective.

What a pity, in fact, that he shares Mary Whitehouse's propensity to see a multitude of little red bogymen chipping away with their hammers and sickles—and their pornographs—at the foundations of our civilisation. Attractively simple as the conspiracy theory of "moral pollution" is (it is even attributed to Stalin!) it travesties the actual complexities of the situation—which Court however acknowledges elsewhere in his book—and dangerously so, because it lulls credulous minds to the increasingly real danger emanating from a pro-censorship lobby which identifies with the policies of the extreme Right.

All censorship is ultimately political, even though its originating force is moral concern. Dr Court should not forget the Nazis' early preoccupation with family life and moral purity.

The debasement of contemporary culture by the pornography of impersonal sexuality and hatred-breeding violence is indeed a depressing phenomenon. It may, however, well be that social aggression would be markedly reduced by the social acceptance of positive sexuality, as theorists such as Reich and Marcuse have postulated. I do not share Dr Court's pessimistic belief in the existence of an inevitable cultural Gresham's law by which most people habitually choose the worse instead of the better. But even if this were demonstrably so, would a more repressive censorship produce a preferable state of affairs? Might it not, indeed, turn out to be the greater evil? A more illustrious Puritan than Dr Court—John Milton—wrote: "He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexperienced and unbreathed . . ." (Areopagitica).

As Dr Court himself points out, a restricted book has the same "forbidden fruit" attraction to a teenager that an illegal drug has. As he also reminds us, pornography is a multi-million dollar industry, and prohibition, history shows, usually increases profits (which, as recent events at the Old Bailey have shown, do not all go to pornographers). In spite of Dr Court's more than usually persuasive advocacy, I remain unconvinced that a "quality controller" would be a different animal from, or less obnoxious than, a censor; and I have no desire to live in a twentieth-century theocracy, however much the apostles of revealed truth aspire to the tattered-emalium mantles of a Savonarola or a Calvin.

Opposition is being mounted by anti-abortion groups to the decision to grant money to extend the National Health Service facilities for abortion in the West Midlands area. The percentage of abortions carried out within the NHS is lower in this region than any other part of the country, being only 22 per cent in the West Midlands Region compared to 90 per cent in some regions.

Letters of support for the decision to provide better NHS facilities should be sent to Sir David Peris, Chairman of the Regional Health Authority, West Midlands Regional Health Authority, Hagley Road, Birmingham 16.

OBITUARY

LORD CHORLEY

Lord Chorley has died, aged 82. In an active public life he had devoted much time to supporting the humanist movement and humanist causes. He had been President of the Ethical Union, a Director of the Rationalist Press Association and a member of the British Humanist Association's advisory council. Active to the end, he recently signed a statement opposing blasphemy, organised by the Committee Against Blasphemy Law.

He had taken a keen interest in penal reform, being Vice-President of the Howard League for Penal Reform, President of the Haldane Society and President of the National Council for the Abolition of the Death Penalty. He was the author of a number of legal books.

On the occasion of the centenary of the National Secular Society he wrote: "The work of the Society, particularly during the difficult uphill years of the nineteenth century, has undoubtedly been one of the main factors in transforming the English attitude to orthodox Christianity. It led to the introduction of a great deal more rationality into religion, contributed largely to the general attitude of freethought in regard to these matters, and had the valuable and stimulating side effect of promoting our civil liberties."

The Deadly War of God's Chosen

BARRY DUKE

Every now and again sundry lunatics take it upon themselves to do what they imagine is God's will on earth. They range from cranks delivering apocalyptic messages to incurable do-gooders bant on interfering with free speech and thought. They are tolerated in most societies because they are considered either "quaint" or "relatively harmless". But occasionally, religion manages to throw up a really dangerous tyrant—like Ervil LeBaron, founder of the Church of the Lamb of God, who was recently being sought by US police for complicity in the alleged murder of between 13 and 20 people.

Ervil LeBaron's war of retribution against those who refused to accept him as God's chosen emissary on earth is said to have begun some five years ago. Among his victims was his older brother Joel who headed the rival Church of the First Born in the Baja California community of Los Molinos. Joel LeBaron established the church in 1963 for the benefit of polygamous Mormons. The set-up attracted more than 200 followers, of whom about half were excommunicated Mormons who refused to abide by their church's banning of polygamy in 1890.

Ervil LeBaron, father of at least 25 children by 13 wives, was second in charge of the Los Molinos community, but a rift between him and his brother developed over certain fundamental beliefs. Joel, for instance, held that a separation of the church and civil law was imperative. Ervil did not. Ervil wished to convert Los Molinos into a beach resort. Joel wanted to keep it a simple, self-sufficient community. They eventually split, and Ervil began a cult of his own. He set up the Church of the Lamb of God in San Diego and produced tracts in which he asserted his authority to execute anyone refusing to recognise him as God's earthly representative.

Two years later, in Ensanada, Joel was shot dead. Saying his brother was "an impostor and a false prophet", Ervil claimed responsibility for his death and urged the Los Molinos community to throw their lot in with the Church of the Lamb of God. It seemed there was a limit to even their religious zeal, and they kept away. Ervil was furious, and warned them to repent. When they failed to back down, a number of Ervil's disciples roared in trucks through Los Molinos the night after Christmas 1974, hurling molotov cocktails into huts, and shooting people as they tried to escape. The raid claimed the lives of two people. Twelve were injured.

In less than three years after the raid, at least ten other rivals of the Church of the Lamb of God

had either vanished or were found dead. In May this year Rulon C. Allred, who headed 2,000 polygamists in Utah, Montana and Mexico, became the latest victim. He was shot dead in his Salt Lake City office by two people, thought to be women. It appeared that Allred too had fallen foul of LeBaron.

A recent report in *Time* magazine says LeBaron "seems almost totally obsessed by his religion. Rather than accept his brother Joel's view of a charitable, merciful Christ, Ervil bases his belief on a preference for the wrathful God of the Old Testament."

The magazine reported polygamist Harold Blackmore of Utah as saying: "He's always preaching this blood and thunder stuff—you know, if people don't live the civil law of Ervil's God, cut their heads off."

LeBaron was arrested after Joel's murder and found guilty by an Ensanada court of being the "intellectual author" of his brother's death. He received a twelve-year sentence, but served only a year. The conviction was quashed on appeal. One of his followers boasted that Ervil was freed as the result of local officials being bribed. He later spent ten months in Mexican prisons awaiting trial for the Los Molinos attack, but he was again released when influential Mexican officials intervened.

LeBaron came to the attention of the US Secret Service in 1976, while still in a Mexican jail, via an organisation called the Society of American Patriots which threatened a number of prominent people with death if they did not help free Ervil. Among those who received death threats were Jimmy Carter and Evangelist Billy Graham. The letters were traced back by the Secret Service to two of LeBaron's wives.

Last year LeBaron was still free—hiding out somewhere in Mexico. The reason was that the authorities have very little solid evidence to link him directly with the murder conspiracies. And their difficulties are compounded by the fact that many potential witnesses, being polygamists, are reluctant to come forward to testify publicly. Also, a great many people are terrified of LeBaron, and would rather remain silent than risk being added to the already formidable list of people who have died violently because of one man's fanatical belief in God.

Essay Prize: Prizes of £70 and £35 are offered for an essay on "Work for Human Needs in a Just Society". (The theme of the 1978 International Humanist Congress.) Further details from BHA, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG. (Write enclosing s.a.e.)

WORLDWIDE

ISLAMIC LAW

The influence of strict Islamic laws is increasing in the Arab world. More countries are following the lead of Saudi Arabia and the extremist beliefs of Col Gaddafi in Libya, and reviving harsh laws for "sins" such as adultery. The recent example of the execution of a Saudi princess was widely reported.

Stoning is the punishment for adultery in the Quoran. Severe punishments for adultery are retained or being revived by other countries in the Middle East.

In upper Egyptian villages a father, brother or any other member of the family still enjoys the right of killing an adulteress or a girl who loses her virginity before marriage. The man is entitled to cut off her head or slit her belly as a symbol of "washing off the shame" and he may be considered a hero, even if the State later hangs him.

BRAZIL

A 16-year-old-girl crucified herself for 72 hours in the village of Rosario do Sul. Miss Barbosa had herself tied to a cross from Friday night to Sunday morning to "exorcise the demons and evil spirits", by which she felt possessed. Her father is likely to be prosecuted for cutting her hands and feet with a razor, though a doctor said the wounds were only superficial.

A vigil of up to 5,000 people was held around the cross on top of a desolate hill. Hot dog and beer stalls were selling to the faithful and crippled, who prayed on their knees and blessed each other with dabs of the girl's blood.

ANAND MARG—PATH TO BLISS?

The religious sect the Anand Marg, which means "path to bliss", has been implicated in a fatal bomb explosion in Australia. Two dustmen died when a bomb exploded outside the Sydney Hilton Hotel, where a twelve-nation Commonwealth conference was being held. The incident was greeted with great alarm as the first terrorist attack in Australia.

The Anand Marg, who have denied responsibility, are a religious sect originating in India (see *The Freethinker*, January 1978). Mr Desai, Prime Minister of India, is expected to face pressure to ban the fanatical sect, which is thought to have been involved in a number of attacks throughout the world. A campaign is being conducted to release the imprisoned leader of the sect, P. R. Sarkar, serving a life sentence for the murder of six defectors from the movement.

According to reports there are two wings of the Anand Marg, one devoted to political and violent activity, the other mainly spiritual. The militant wing is known as the "universal Proutist Revolu-

tionary Party" and a main aim is the release of their imprisoned leader, who regards himself as God incarnate.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

ANNUAL DINNER

Saturday, 18 March, 1978

6.30 for 7.00 pm

Pavlovs Arms, Westminster, London
(Page Street, SW1)

DENIS LEMON will be the Guest of Honour at the Annual Dinner. Denis Lemon, the Editor of *Gay News*, was the first person to be successfully prosecuted for blasphemous libel for 50 years; and he courageously stood his ground when faced with a private prosecution by Mrs Whitehouse. Denis Lemon has been Editor of *Gay News* since its beginning, and it is now highly regarded as a responsible paper concerning homosexual issues.

MAUREEN DUFFY will also speak. Maureen Duffy is a novelist, poet and biographer. Her most recent work is a biography of the outstanding seventeenth century woman dramatist Aphra Behn. Her contributions to *The Freethinker* have included "The Ballad of the Blasphemy Trial", last year.

BILL McILROY, Hon Secretary of the Committee Against Blasphemy Law, will propose the toast to the Society. Bill McIlroy, former Secretary of the National Secular Society and ex-Editor of *The Freethinker*, is admired as a tireless secularist campaigner.

G. N. DEODHEKAR, Hon Treasurer of the NSS, will respond on behalf of the Society.

BARBARA SMOKER, President of the NSS, will introduce the evening.

Cost £3.75

Vegetarians catered for

Cheques with reservations to:

The National Secular Society

702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

A police commander in South Africa, Col Johann du Randt, has been faced with a problem. A decomposed human head has been taken from the inside of a tiger shark, and there is no way of telling the race of the skull. The regulations state that whether it is buried in a white or black cemetery depends upon its racial origins.

JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

The death last month of Dr Letitia Fairfield will have evoked memories of battles that were waged 50 years ago on the question of birth control. Indeed it must have been something of a surprise to many people that Dr Fairfield, who was age 92, had not already claimed her heavenly reward for valiant efforts to thwart the nefarious family planners.

Dr Fairfield was a convert to Roman Catholicism, and like most converts was far more fanatical in her adherence to the Vatican than are many cradle Catholics. She was actively involved in the Guild of Catholic Doctors, and her appointment as the old London County Council's senior medical officer was a misfortune for thousands of working-class women whose lives were blighted by sexual ignorance and the fear of unwanted pregnancies.

During the inter-war years religious diehards fought a stubborn, but losing, battle to prevent the spread of family planning information and facilities. The Roman Catholic Church was in the forefront of this campaign against knowledge and freedom. Every time a new clinic was opened the professional celibates heaped scurrilous abuse on the project and its workers.

When the Salford family planning clinic was opened in 1924 the staff endeavoured to disseminate information about contraception to women in the area. The Catholic diocesan conference resolved "that access to such information should be forbidden by the State." It was also in 1924 that the Ministry of Health report on maternal mortality revealed that 3000 women—the majority in poor areas like Salford—died in childbirth every year.

The Catholic Church's main front organisation in the campaign against family planning was the League of National Life. It was mainly Catholic in composition but was supported by Anglican conservatives. In its propaganda the League thundered against family planning which, it warned, would lead to race suicide, the birth of fewer male babies and increased lunacy in women.

Dr Fairfield was prominent among those medical dinosaurs who became the League's most active members. They included fellow-convert Dr Halliday Sutherland who, in later years, was advocating the death penalty for contraceptive manufacturers; Dr Henry Corby, whose *bête noire* was sex education; and Dr Marie Scharlieb, author of a most inaptly entitled book, *How to Enlighten our Children*. She foresaw that family planning would lead to national degeneracy and thoughtfully suggested

that drill halls and tea gardens should be provided to keep young people's minds off you know what.

At times the opponents of family planning drifted into a fantasy world. The anonymous Catholic Woman Doctor who wrote *A City Full of Girls and Boys* enthused: "Our faithful Catholic mothers are doing a wonderful work for God. In time, if wrong methods of birth control continue to prevail amongst non-Catholics, their race will die out, and the Catholic race will prevail, and thus England will again become what it once was, a Catholic country. This is no fancy picture . . . What a vision for us who love our Blessed Lord, a Catholic England."

We cannot know if the Catholic Woman Doctor's encouragement led to more vigorous goings on between the sheets by pious couples who shared her vision of England as a Catholic country once again. If it did, their efforts were in vain. And it is now evident that Catholic couples cheerfully ignore their Church's strictures on contraception.

The League and the Church cruelly fostered ignorance, fear and guilt among men and women in order to prevent contraception becoming an accepted factor in sexual relationships. This unworthy tradition is being kept alive today by opponents of sex education and abortion.

* * * *

There has been a division in the ranks of Brighton Liberals on the question of blasphemy law. David Rogers, Chairman of the Liberal group on the East Sussex County Council, has become an Associate Member of The Committee Against Blasphemy Law and he wrote to all Liberal Members in the House of Lords last month urging them to vote for Lord Willis' anti-blasphemy law Bill at its Second Reading. He told them "that as Liberals we should be opposed to . . . encroachments on freedom of speech and publication."

On the other hand, Delia Venables, prospective Parliamentary Liberal candidate for the Brighton Pavilion constituency, published a rather muddled defence of blasphemy law in a local newspaper. She believes that there is "a very good case for incorporating the existing blasphemy laws into a Race Relations Act."

Delia Venables may not be aware that the leaders of many of the Black churches which have been established in London, the Midlands and elsewhere preach an extremely fundamentalist Protestant version of Christianity, embodying all the ignorance and arrogance of that creed. Muslim religious leaders are equally fanatical. If blasphemy law and race became intertwined and exploited by religious zealots it would be a disaster both for freedom and for race relations.

Anyway it is very likely that David Rogers will

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A leading spiritualist has resigned, after appearing before a special tribunal in Bristol to defend himself against accusations of rigging. The independent tribunal set up to examine the complaint did not find it proven that he had cheated, but it said that there were matters which gave rise to suspicions and he had been "unwise" in the way he acted.

Mr Gordon Higginson is a leading spiritualist and President of the National Spiritualists' Union. He has conducted regular seances throughout the country and given demonstrations at the Albert Hall.

The tribunal had to decide what occurred at a church seance in Grosvenor Road Spiritualists' Church, Bristol. Mrs Phyllis Simpson, President of the Bristol United Spiritualists Church, alleges that the session was rigged by obtaining names and addresses of those present from church lists. Mr Higginson was left alone for an hour in the church before the session, so that he could be quiet and "get the feel of it". It was suggested that he had access to the church healing book, library book, register and raffle list.

Mr Higginson called out seven names and addresses and invited the audience to respond. But the details came from the lists and not the spirit world, claimed the solicitor acting for Mrs Simpson. Her suspicions were aroused when an address was given and Mr Higginson said "I must have a wrong link."

Mrs Simpson said: "I was suspicious because in the world of spirits they know who's there or someone who's very close to them . . . If he gave names of one or two persons who were not on the list I would have no complaint."

Another member of the meeting claimed that he had received intimate details from Mr Higginson. The meeting was a sell-out, with 110 tickets sold for 50p each.

The case has caused a rift in the world of spiritualists, which presents very material elements of a power struggle. The furore has particularly arisen because of Mr Higginson's position as leader of the Spiritualists' Union, and Mrs Simpson has formed a break-away group, the Independent Spiritualist Association. She says that the Spiritualists' Union, which has provided many loans for the purchase of spiritualist churches, tried to close down her church.

The spiritualist religion has, according to Mrs Simpson, been turned into a "music hall act" by the activities of Mr Higginson. Even a supporter of Mr Higginson has said that he should submit himself to a properly tested, public seance.

Joseph McCabe in his booklet *The Fraud of Spiritualism*, written about 50 years ago, described the history of spiritualism as a religion and exposed numerous instances of falsification, fake and downright dishonesty. The surprise is not that such sus-

picious of rigging as those brought against Mr Higginson should arise, but that people go on so deeply wanting to believe in spiritualism that they take no precautions to ensure "authentic visitation".

BRAINWAVE MISFIRES

Another parliamentary attempt to amend the 1967 Abortion Act has been made. Sir Bernard Braine, MP for South-east Essex, brought before the House of Commons an Abortion (Amendment) Bill under the Ten Minute Rule on 21 February. Voting was 181 for the Bill and 175 against—by far the narrowest majority of the several recent attempts to restrict the working of the 1967 Abortion Act.

Sir Bernard Braine's Bill was a tactic that has misfired for the anti-abortion lobby. This "modest measure" stands little chance of gaining parliamentary time this session, and was aimed at demonstrating parliamentary opinion and putting pressure on the government to provide time for restrictive abortion measures. Parliament is now seen to be narrowly divided on the matter.

It is striking that each attempt to bring an amendment Bill has been more moderate and yet over the past four years each attempt has shown a smaller majority. James White's amendment Bill in February 1975 was given a majority of over 100, while William Benyon's amendment Bill in February 1977 was given a majority of 38. Now a majority of six shows how parliamentary opinion is being educated and swinging away from demands for any restrictions to the 1967 Act.

Diane Munday, Public Relations Officer for the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, has commented that the result shows the lack of credibility of the arguments for any restriction. "There is no support", she said "for the swingeing reforms being demanded by SPUC and LIFE."

Jane Roe, Secretary for the Committee in Defence of the 1967 Act, has reacted by saying that she is delighted with the result. "Sir Bernard Braine hasn't achieved the kind of publicity he was looking for."

The National Secular Society issued a press release opposing the Bill on the grounds that much of the parliamentary opposition is based on "misinformation, religious prejudice and deliberately engendered myths."

It continued: "Although the book which was the basis for much of this opposition—*Babies for Burning* by Michael Litchfield and Susan Kentish—has been discredited, the myths which it created live on. Allegations in this book which were thought to re-

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fer to the British Pregnancy Advisory Service were finally withdrawn in High Court on 18 January 1978. That withdrawal vindicates those who have consistently challenged the book, such as the National Secular Society, and demonstrates the gullibility of those anti-abortionists who swallowed its far-fetched tales.

"A question asked in the House of Commons on 30 January 1978 by Mr Thorne, MP, raised, as a question of privilege, the fact that the 1975 Select Committee on Abortion was deceived by Susan Kentish and Michael Litchfield. The Speaker, Mr George Thomas, whose fundamentalist religious outlook is no secret, ruled that the matter had not been raised early enough. Mrs Renee Short asked the Speaker "what remedies the House has for dealing with this pair of self-confessed liars?"

"Now that there is little evidence of abuse in the working of the 1967 Abortion Act, the arguments against abortion from religious groups will be seen more clearly as a fundamentalist refusal to examine the problem in a rational way. We hope that Members of Parliament will consider Sir Bernard Braine's proposals rationally on 21 February—and reject them.

"There is certainly room for improvement in the present abortion law—but to eliminate unnecessary restrictions and bureaucratic delays, not to increase them. Sir Bernard Braine's Bill to amend the Abortion Act can only be wished the fate it deserves—to be aborted."

REDUNDANT CHURCHES

Many church buildings are now redundant. The churches must now face up to this fact and work out satisfactory alternative uses for these buildings in the community. In the *Church Times* (27 January 1978) it was reported that the Honorary Director of Friends of Friendless Churches has opposed the conversion of redundant churches which, in his own words, "in any previous age would have been considered vandalistic and sacrilegious".

Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, pointed out, in a letter published in the 6,000 issue of the *Church Times* (10 February 1978), that "This harking back to a time when the churches would not have become redundant in the first place is surely what is behind the defeatist rejection of converting churches to purposes more relevant to today—not their alleged unsuitability for conversion."

Her letter continued: "As an example of one most successful conversion I would cite the Tufnell Park

St George's Theatre, which was previously the redundant St George's Church. And other old churches have become perfectly acceptable museums, community centres, warehouses, etc, without sacrificing any of our valuable architectural heritage.

"In other cases, unfortunately, the Church authorities have contrived to allow architecturally interesting churches to fall into such decay that local-authority conservation and planning committees have no option but to grant permission for demolition. The land can then be sold to the highest bidder, to the benefit of the Church Commissioners. But what could be more "vandalistic" than demolition?

"It may seem paradoxical that atheists are generally much more concerned about the demolition of architecturally fine churches than Christians are. But then we have no ill-gotten gains to get out of it.

"Yes I do mean ill-gotten; for these buildings do not morally belong to the Church at all. They were originally paid for by the whole community—largely out of compulsory tithe payments. So, at least when they become redundant, they should be returned to the whole community; and the whole community should have a say in the new purposes to which they may be put.

"The Friends of Friendless Churches should, in all honesty, be re-named Friends of the Church Commissioners, to whose high-street robbery they are accessories before the fact."

Freethinker Fund

We keep the costs of producing *The Freethinker* as low as possible, but we still have to contend with continuing inflation. Contributors to the fund therefore play an important part in sustaining the journal. Thanks are offered to the following: P. Barbour, £7.60; A. G. Brooker, £1.60; A. C. F. Chamber, £2.40; Miss P. A. Forrest, 60p; E. Greaves, £2.60; M. Groome, £3.60; J. D. Groom, £1.25; L. Hanger, 60p; E. W. Hewett, £1.60; W. Holland, £1.60; Miss S. E. Johnson, £25.00; J. A. Kane, £2.80; D. M. Linley, 25p; F. Lonsdale, £5.00; H. Madoc-Jones, £2.00; M. Moore, 60p; A. V. Montagu, £2.60; M. H. Nash, £1.00; D. Nickson, 60p; M. E. Nichol, £2.60; M. Russell, £1.00; W. Shannon, £1.10; Miss W. Shinton, £2.60; G. B. Stowell, £2.60; Miss K. M. Tolfree, £1.60; M. Villiers Stuart, £2.60; A. Vogel, £1.60; E. Wakefield, 70p; F. White, 60p. Total for the period 20 January to 17 December 1978: £79.70.

FAITH HOLING

"Evangelical Dental Surgeon, Wandsworth Common, requires like-minded Surgery Assistant. No previous experience necessary." (Ad in a recent issue of the "Wandsworth Borough News.")

BOOKS

THE FREETHINKER BOUND VOLUME 1977. (£3.60).

There is no doubt that 1977 was the "Year of the Blasphemy Trial", so far as *The Freethinker* was concerned. But then, that is hardly surprising: for a paper which was itself prosecuted under the old Blasphemy Laws in 1883, within two years of its founding, the fight against these laws has always continued. The year 1967 saw the removal of Blasphemy Law from the Statute Book, but it was the common law of Blaspheinous Libel, under which Denis Lemon and his paper *Gay News*, were sentenced in 1977. The fight to abolish this law continues, and will undoubtedly warrant more space in *The Freethinker* of 1978—so carry on reading!

Secularists and freethinkers are often castigated for fighting old battles against their religious enemies: it is suggested that many laws which can operate at the whims of religious folk are so archaic that no one would dream of using them. But such matters as religion in schools, Sunday observance and certain sexual practices are not as dead to the legal mind as one might suppose. It is in the pages of *The Freethinker* that these battles continue. The case of the Blasphemy Trial 1977 is illustrative of this situation. Anyone who wishes to follow the vagaries of this case, in years to come, may laugh, but can do so in no better place than this volume of *The Freethinker*. The opening headline in January was "Blasphemy Law Resurrected—Mary Whitehouse v. *Gay News*". The only minor change here was the legal presentation of the case demanded "The Queen v. *Gay News*", when the trial actually took place. Maybe one should allow the Queen this sling at a section of her subjects whom she probably has little taste for—after all it was her Silver Jubilee year! Thankfully references to this latter event were few in *The Freethinker*. Throughout the year blasphemy provided the main leading article on four occasions, and with a full report and poem on the trial by Maureen Duffy in August, I counted not less than 600 column centimetres in this volume devoted to the subject.

And what of the lady who first raised the dust in the Blasphemy affair? Needless to say, it wasn't really her own idea; the Home Secretary and the Archbishop of Canterbury put it into her head in 1976, by commenting that this common law still existed. There is also little doubt that Mrs Whitehouse was motivated by her hatred of homosexuality: she has made no move against the many other publications which have subsequently printed the poem in question. Mrs Whitehouse has personally reminded me that she is not anti-homosexual: I'm not convinced, and concur with William McIlroy in August's *Freethinker*, that this "should be taken with a pillar of salt."

FREETHINKER

One sometimes wonders whether Mary Whitehouse exists. Her name sounds an unctuous hypocrisy for opposing copulation and procreation: she is a "British Institution" of a peculiar, yet recurring, kind. Maybe she isn't real—she doesn't always look it! Perhaps she was a reject, from one of those Soho shops that sell inflatable dolls, as she wasn't quite up to the job? Certainly, she cannot be ignored, as the taste of success will only encourage her. *The Freethinker* has devoted not less than 265 column centimetres by my ruler, to comment and discussion about her, and there were even two short epistles from her in print. Oddly, Peter Cadogan of South Place, opposed the "endless front page publicity for free" that *The Freethinker* gave her; who needs enemies, when they have such friends?

As mentioned already, the Queen's Jubilee hardly featured in these pages in 1977. However, the renowned republican and first President of the NSS, Charles Bradlaugh, received commemoration in the May issue. Edward Royle's address to the meeting on "The Bradlaugh-Besant Trial of 1877" was reprinted. This trial, for publishing Knowlton's book on family planning, *Fruits of Philosophy*, is not without modern parallels. In the same issue of *The Freethinker* we were regaled with news of the publication of a new booklet on sex education. One of the authors was Dr Ernest Claxton, an old foe of progressives and humanists.

During the early part of 1977 the paper gave ample coverage to the Abortion Bill, which William Benyon sought to put on the Statute Book. This would have made it much more difficult for some women to get an abortion, and fortunately Parliament did not find time for the Bill to proceed. The Moonies have continued to exert their unpleasant influence. This religious sect—the Unification Church—was the front page lead in July, when a court decision allowed its fanatical adherents to evict a Wiltshire farmer.

The religious education, school assembly and church school issues were never far from the front-line in *The Freethinker*. These battles still wage on, with little sign of success at the moment. Where some schools had quietly dropped their obligation under the 1944 Education Act, which enforces daily acts of worship, some have had to succumb and accept the law.

Jim Herrick has done a fine job in his first year in the editorial chair. If for nothing else—its interesting reviews, philosophical and religious diversissements and controversies—this agitator of such august appearance is needed to get the laws and prac-

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tices of the land together. Most people live an entirely secular existence today: why should they put up with the hypocrisies and prejudices of the religious and puritan minority who would like to turn the clock back?

DENIS COBELL

CAUSING DEATH AND SAVING LIVES by Jonathan Glover. Pelican Books, £1.25.

This book comprises an exposition of the many causes of death and the evaluation of life in differing circumstances. It is written by a philosopher with a strict regard for rational thought and logic.

The work examines a wide range of activity and inactivity, expressions of opinion and traditional beliefs. It is concisely written, as indeed it needs to be, for the bibliography has over 400 references to books, articles and official reports. Readers who, like Omar Khayyam, eagerly frequent doctor and saint to hear great argument will come away with good value and through a different door than that in which they went. The book is divided into sections each concerned with a different aspect of life and death.

Opening with a discussion of "the sanctity of life" Jonathan Glover states that "We should reject the view that taking human life is intrinsically wrong, but . . . that most acts of killing people would be wrong in the absence of harmful side-effects." Disturbing terminal illness and distress for relatives are examples.

The question arises, do we value "life" even if irreversibly unconscious, or do we value life only as a vehicle for consciousness? Glover concludes "Permanently comatose existence is subjectively indistinguishable from death, and unlikely often to be thought intrinsically preferable to it by people thinking of their own future." However, consciousness varies in value depending on circumstances—the physical condition, mental attitude and the emotional state—which determine whether it has intrinsic value for the individual.

Glover asks, in turning to the question of "Autonomy and rights", "If it is directly wrong to kill someone against his will, is it directly wrong to keep someone alive against his will?" and concludes as a general principle that autonomy—a control of central decisions in one's own life—is paramount.

While looking at ends as means Jonathan Glover mentions that doctors are often in the perplexing state of having more patients requiring special treatment than there are appliances or time available

to treat. Therefore while most harmful acts are avoidable, some harmful omissions are unavoidable. It is in this situation that choice of treatment should be assessed on probability of maximum worth-while life.

Legality does not establish that something is morally justified. Doctors who feel justified in allowing someone to die rather than prolong a painful terminal illness, are aware of the risk of a murder charge if they administer a lethal dose of a drug: this is in part supported by the present conventional revulsion against "killing" in these cases. The conventional casualness about letting people die from hunger or lack of medical care in the third world is something largely ignored. Most beliefs, traditions and conventions are simply accepted without much thought. Any advances in civilised communities have depended on the vigour of incisive thinkers.

There is a section about abortion. Some opponents of abortion claim that the fertilised egg is the beginning of a person. The author considers "a fertilised egg is no more a person than an acorn is an oak tree, a caterpillar is a butterfly or a bowl of ingredients is a cake." The stage at which interference with pregnancy is justified is arbitrary; the boundary of viability is reached when the baby could survive independently; which makes a fine distinction between later foetuses and premature births. Only a baby that survives separately from its mother can strictly be termed an infant child.

Glover is firm that there should be as few unwanted children as possible. Because the side-effects are worse when abortion is late, it is wrong for either a mother or a doctor, deliberately and without a strong reason, to postpone an abortion until late. Glover regards abortion as a moral duty where it is known that the foetus is abnormal. Understandably, the author looks forward to the event of an "abortion pill" that would be safe without harmful effects, so that women would be able to manage their own abortions.

Glover introduces his section about infanticide with eight published letters from parents setting out the misery which distresses them when trying in good faith to support a severely handicapped child. Medical advances having made it possible to save more premature and abnormal babies than hitherto, many more mentally and physically handicapped children survive. Apart from the disregard of the quality of life, very few who defend this because of the "sanctity of life" object to killing in war.

Jonathan Glover asserts while looking at euthanasia that the justification for euthanasia should be determined on whether or not life is worth-while after all related factors have been taken into consideration. Although autonomy, as far as is practical, is favoured throughout the book, the author seems to favour a revised code of medical ethics to a formal procedure. This is at variance with the

proposals for legalising voluntary euthanasia in Britain. Leaving the practice of euthanasia to the whims of doctors would be a haphazard business. Glover's suggestion that we could first look at practice in other countries and then modify the law for a trial period here would not bring progress. If every country waits for the others to show the way, voluntary euthanasia will never get started. In view of Jonathan Glover's insistence on autonomy, it is surprising that he makes no mention of the individual's advance declaration which would be the overriding factor if voluntary euthanasia proposals were accepted in Britain. Until voluntary euthanasia is legalised, it is non-voluntary euthanasia which now concerns doctors. The alternatives to uselessly sustaining life as long as possible are passive, sedative or, at some risk, active euthanasia. The author concurs with the rational view that there is no case for keeping fatally ill patients alive indefinitely by use of extravagant techniques.

In considering socially accepted killing Dr Glover says that for capital punishment to be justified, it must be shown to have a deterrent effect not obtainable by less awful means. In the case of terrorists and assassins, it is less certain whether they should be spared the death penalty; as it is with kidnapers and political murderers. It is a gamble on the best bet: does it deter or excite further violence and incur or avoid greater loss of life?

"It is widely held that killing in war is quite different. It is not." "It is striking how casually most people accept the reasons offered by governments for acts of war. Even many of those who resist abortion, infanticide or euthanasia, on the grounds of a belief in the sanctity of life, sometimes acquiesce with only cursory thought when their governments embark on large-scale destruction of life in war."

In war normal reasoning goes to the wall. It is again a case of unthinking acceptance. The world over, it is patriotism—my country right or wrong—or a belief in an "ism" which is expected to achieve personal liberty, or prosperity or fair shares. "Private acts of killing are extremely hard to justify. Wars are killing on a large scale and are much harder to justify."

Pacifism is impractical unless universal—which is improbable. If adopted by peaceful communities only, it would be to the advantage of aggressors.

In conclusion human concern is considered. There is a psychological effect of distance in caring. Usually there is a greater surge of sympathy over an accident in a nearby home than for a disaster in another continent. Similarly, our psychological defence mechanism tends to spare us from the truly rational appraisal of motives and actions which would reduce our personal happiness.

This is an excellent, inexpensive, well considered survey.

CHARLES WILSHAW

A GOOD AGE by Dr Alex Comfort with illustrations by Michael Leonard. Mitchell Beazley, £5.95.

Dr Comfort is perhaps best known for his books about sex. Little is generally known about his great and pioneering work in the field of gerontology. He is more renowned in the USA as a gerontologist than here in Britain. He has a doctorate of science from the University of London as a result of such studies, has published an authoritative book on *The Biology of Senescence* and is the founder and editor of the magazine *Experimental Gerontology*. As a research scientist his main aim is the discovery of ways to slow down the ageing process, a science now in its infancy but promising good things for the future.

His newest book is all about the business of growing older; at being faced with the prospect of enforced retirement, living on a reduced income and, worst of all, discarded by society as expendable and useless. The retired citizen doesn't count any more, and is not expected to. He or she is a non-person. The real trouble begins when we accept the verdict of society and regard ourselves as "past it". What essentially ages people is this easy acquiescence in the verdict of our society.

One word coined by the author has now caught on. It is the word "ageism". Just as racism is discrimination on the grounds of colour or racial background, so ageism is discrimination against people who have reached a certain age. It is a widespread conspiracy to segregate older citizens and no longer to bother with them (except perhaps as charity fodder). They are supposed now to be feeble in body, no longer mentally alert, and to have no sex life. In short, they are finished.

It is Alex Comfort's aim to provide new inspiration for all of us who have reached the pensionable period of life, and to provide for others a warning of what is in store for them if they do not make adequate preparation.

In a sense, the book is a manifesto, stirring us to make a revolution. We've had "women's lib" and other such movements. Dr Comfort urges retired citizens to revolt *en masse* against the injustice of being discarded as non-persons. "Be bloody-minded", he says. "Stand on your dignity" and so on. In other words we must not let ourselves be simply put down and trodden on, or stowed away and forgotten in a conspiracy that is part political, part economic and part social (society as a whole appears to connive at this injustice). The author calls for "the militant exposure of society's stupid callousness . . . and to the hogwash by which that callousness is maintained."

The author aims at giving us a whole alphabet of information and "ammunition" as it were, and in fact the book is arranged in alphabetical order. After a stirring introduction, it begins with the heading "Ageism", and continues through a com-

prehensive alphabet until the word "Youth" brings the series to an end. In the course of this survey everything of interest to people in later life (except social services and purely mundane matters) is discussed. It is full of new insights as to most of the subjects mentioned, especially in dealing with the physiology of ageing and our ability to retain our creative faculties to the end. In addition to the text and as a further source of inspiration, there are marginal epigrams culled from the world's greatest authors. A large part of the attractiveness of the work is that it contains a whole picture gallery of portraits of men and women who continued to lead creative lives in their seventies, eighties, nineties and even at the century mark. These are expertly drawn by Michael Leonard. There is an appendix to the book, dealing briefly with the subject of diet.

On the subject of sex in older people the author insists that we can and usually do retain the capacity for physical sex up to and sometimes beyond the age of 80. It is "a highly undangerous activity" and we are likely to suffer more from being deprived of it or giving it up than from continuing to be sexually active. In some cases an extra "booster" such as the drug mesterolone is beneficial to men. Women too can be helped in various ways to enhance their lives sexually.

Well, there it is. What we have to do is to fight a whole lot of brain-washing (I refer to us pensioners) and to refuse to fulfil the non-role which society has chosen for us. Even the young are brain-washed about older people. Dr Comfort asks, "How many 20-year-olds realise that sexual capacity and normal intelligence are lifelong in healthy humans?" What we have to do also is to find meaningful occupations—not just hobbies—and really justify ourselves, retaining our individuality and self-respect. If we follow the author's advice we shall do just that. Incidentally, the book is dedicated to Dr Comfort's father, aged 93 and still going strong.

GEORGE JAEGER

BOOK STOCK

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT by Claire Tomalin. Penguin, £1.50.

Mary Wollstonecraft is usually remembered because she married William Godwin and was the mother of Mary Shelley. She was an individualist and writer who challenged many ideas with great determination. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was one of the first books to question the subservient place of woman in society. It brought her much notoriety and contact with the radical and literary circles at the period of the French Revolution. Before this she wrote one of the first polemical responses to Burke's comments on the

French Revolution—her *Vindication of the Rights of Man*.

Claire Tomalin, in this sympathetic biography places Mary Wollstonecraft in a historical and literary perspective: the book concludes "she spoke up, quite loudly, for what had been until then a largely silent section of the human race."

J.H.

Available from G. W. Foote & Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL (P & P 19p.)

LETTERS

Recently, in a discussion with a secularist friend, I suggested that there was nothing inherently implausible in the idea (popularised by Von Daniken) that homo sapiens is the result of genetic engineering experiments performed on apemen by extraterrestrial colonists, approximately half a million years ago. I also ventured to say that this idea of "prehistoric astronauts" can easily be reconciled with secularism, since it asserts that the "gods" worshipped by primitive and ancient man were simply deified spacemen. My friend dismissed the whole spectrum of "space-visitors" ideas as "utter rubbish" and expressed astonishment and dismay at my becoming so "credulous".

It seems it is not only religionists who are dogmatic—all the secularists I have mentioned Von Daniken's outlook to refuse to contemplate the possibility that much of it may be substantially correct. Of course, the idea that apemen were structurally and intellectually modified to become serfs of the astronauts is rather damaging to human pride, which prefers to think of man as the pinnacle of natural evolution, rather than the result of genetic manipulation. At the same time, it is ironic that secularists and fundamentalists are united in their rejection of Von Daniken's outlook.

GEOFFREY WEBSTER

JUROR'S RESPONSIBILITY

Francis Bennion upbraids me (February "Freethinker") for dodging jury service at the Old Bailey, seeing this as "a rather reprehensible abdication of social responsibility" because "someone has to decide the guilt or innocence of persons accused". As if there were any clear-cut division between guilt and innocence!

Mr Bennion apparently assumes (as befits a lawyer) that, if I did serve on a jury, I would dutifully "find according to the evidence"—even if this pointed to a verdict of Guilty, the probable consequence of which was a prison sentence. To do so, and simply to leave the outcome to the judge, would, in my view, be an "abdication of social responsibility" indeed, since experience shows that judges and prisons do far more harm than good. (For eight years I had a part-time job with the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency, which confirmed my view that imprisonment is likely to aggravate the prisoner's anti-social tendencies and damage his family, as well as costing far more in public resources than any other course of action.)

The whole notion that punishment somehow wipes out guilt or repays a debt to society is based on religion, not on reason. Not only do I reject this religious notion, I also reject the authoritarian attitude

that credits judges with superior wisdom in the matter of penology—or, say, bishops in the matter of eschatology. That is why I am a member of Radical Alternatives to Prison (the inaugural meeting of which, in 1969, I chaired), as well as of the National Secular Society.

Maybe it would have been better to take the opportunity of achieving a few perverse acquittals. However, as this entailed deliberately breaking my affirmation, it posed something of a moral dilemma. It occurred to me to take the bible oath, tongue-in-cheek, as I would have felt happier about breaking that than breaking the secular affirmation; but I also wanted to test the new law on affirmation, and, by affirming, possibly cause a few people to think. Next time, perhaps, I will opt for the perverse acquittals. Will that satisfy Mr Bennion?

BARBARA SMOKER

J. W. GOTT AND CHAPMAN COHEN

I was well acquainted with Chapman Cohen and on one occasion regret having caused him embarrassment, when he was speaking at Stratford East Town Hall. I was also acquainted with Mr Gott and heard him speak and witnessed his arrest (1921).

It was in Stratford Broadway as I and my wife were walking through that we noticed a well attended outdoor meeting and joined the audience. It soon became apparent that the speaker, whose very appearance and manner commended itself to me as that of an honest and unassuming person with a message for the people, was giving it, as we say, loud and clear. There were no ifs and buts about it—just a blunt exposure of dubious unsavoury passages of scripture some of which naughty children in school or Sunday school already knew about. My wife and I also being critical of Christian doctrine listened with sympathetic attention to Mr Gott's attack, delivered in quite ordinary everyday language offensive to nobody in their sound mind. We had just bought from him one of his papers, which he sold as he spoke, when a police officer came round the back of the meeting, tapped Mr Gott on the shoulder and motioned arrest.

Although so long ago, I can still see it—Mr Gott whispered to him to ask him to wait for a few moments. This the policeman allowed. So Mr Gott thanked his audience, took his bundle of papers and quietly went with him with no fuss or bother at all. My wife and I were astonished and followed. The officer turned, and seeing just we two, roughly asked what we wanted. I replied that we wanted to act as witnesses since there appeared to be no cause to arrest the gentleman. At this, Mr Gott, who was left by himself, turned back, and motioning us aside, told us it was unnecessary to come along to the police station as they would just give him a cell for the night. He thanked us nevertheless and so we parted. (I had bought "Rib-Ticklers" and had a good laugh.)

This then was we assumed how this worthy "Valiant for truth" went on his "Pilgrimage in this dark vale of tears down here below." Never more though for he was by now a well-marked man whom the saintly "Godites" had conspired to put out of action for good. I did not know what had happened until more recently a mention of it came in "The Freethinker", in connection with blasphemy trials.

Now to my encounter with Chapman Cohen. This happened at Stratford Town Hall, which the Secular Society had hired for his talk, at about the same period. We were a little surprised at what a good turnout there was. Chapman Cohen gave an excellent oration, as indeed he could, and sent a full broadside of more scholarly "Rib-ticklers" than could

our worthy Mr Gott. At question time I asked a question about whether Freethinking rights in his view ought to apply also in the case of the recent imprisonment of the twelve leaders of the Communist Party for calling upon soldiers not to shoot, if ordered, at workers on strike. I expected Chapman Cohen to denounce the imprisonment but he failed me.

All of a sudden there was a storm of protest because he defended the law. This amazed me until I realised the underlying cause. The meeting had been invaded by organised "Godites" awaiting a signal to do their stuff. I had unwittingly fallen for it. This lot was not a bit interested in problems of Freethought, but sought any old stick to beat the atheists—whether workers were shot or not was of no genuine concern to them.

It would be well for people to take some interest in the problem posed here, because it, or something like it, could happen again. Attitudes towards religion cut across party and class boundaries and bring in fundamental humanitarian considerations, as in the case here mentioned. Obviously Chapman Cohen had not sufficiently thought around this matter or he would have answered differently and saved the meeting which broke up in near disorder.

SID HENKE

I am an American author researching a story on aviation in the 1920's and 1930's.

I am particularly interested in anecdotes and biographical background on former Flt Lt W. H. Wood, who wrote extensively for the columns of "The Freethinker" in the late 1940's.

Any information would be appreciated.

JOHN G. FULLER

C/o The Reader's Digest

25 Berkeley Square, London, England

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Jottings

have the support of most Party workers in the town. He is a hard-working and conscientious representative who unseated the Conservative councillor in St Nicolas Ward, Brighton, at a time when the Liberals were generally having a thin time at the ballot box. He is therefore something of a hero, not only to fellow-Liberals but also to some Conservatives who were quietly pleased that their candidate got a bloody nose.

And of course David Rogers has a very obvious advantage over his less radical colleague. He has been elected to public office as a Liberal, whereas Delia Venables is as likely to be elected Liberal MP for Brighton Pavilion constituency as I am of becoming the next Archbishop of Canterbury.

PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE

- The Dead Sea Scrolls, John Allegro. £1.00 (15p).
 The Humanist Outlook, Ed: A. J. Ayer. 95p (26p).
 Religion in Modern Society, H. J. Blackham. £1 (29p).
 Herbert Armstrong and His Worldwide Church of God,
 J. Bowden. 25p (10p).
 The Longford Threat to Freedom, Brigid Brophy.
 10p (7p).
 Thomas Paine, Chapman Cohen. 15p (7p).
 Woman and Christianity, Chapman Cohen. 5p (7p).
 Must We Have Religion?, Chapman Cohen. 5p (7p).
 Pagan Christmas, R. J. Condon. 20p (7p).
 Women's Rights, A Practical Guide, Anna Coote and
 Tess Gill. £1.25 (19p).
 The Devil's Chaplain, H. Cutner. 10p (10p).
 Muslim Politics in Secular India, Hamid Dalwai. 50p
 (12p).
 Origin of the Species, Charles Darwin. 60p (22p).
 Bertrand Russell's Best, Robert E. Engar. £1.00 (26p).
 Fact and Fiction in Psychology, H. J. Eysenk. 90p.
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 The Bible Handbook, G. W. Foote & W. Ball. 65p
 (19p).
 Frauds, Forgeries and Relics, G. W. Foote and J. M.
 Wheeler. 15p (7p).
 Ten Non Commandments, Ronald Fletcher. 13p (7p).
 The Presumption of Atheism, Antony Flew. £3.50
 (26p).
 Causing Death and Saving Lives, Jonathan Glover.
 £1.25 (15p).
 The Nun Who Lived Again, Phyllis Graham. 5p (7p).
 Bertrand Russell: A Life, Herbert Gottchalk. 25p (12p).
 The Humanist Revolution, Hector Hawton. 95p (19p).
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Freethinker to Rescue in Appeal Court

in 1883, which established the right to publish offensive articles and cartoons about Christianity, and of the Secular Society in 1917, which established the right to leave money to anti-Christian organisations.

The last trial of J. W. Gott, at the end of 1921, which was also the last successful blasphemy prosecution before the present case, brought *The Freethinker* itself into court. For various reasons none of the lawyers involved could find a full account of the trial, so the bound volumes of the 1921 and 1922 *Freethinker* were brought from the Rationalist Press Association library, and for the first time we found ourselves quoted as a legal authority! This episode might even have been significant rather than just ironical, since it emerged that the judge's summing-up against Gott included the element of intent which John Mortimer was arguing and John Smyth was denying must be part of the crime of blasphemy.

But the impression gained by anyone who sat through the whole appeal was that legal arguments have very little to do with this or any other case involving so-called blasphemy, and that whatever the result of the appeal may be there are much more serious issues at stake.

EVENTS

Belfast Humanist Group. Meetings on the second Thursday of the month, 8 pm. 8a Grand Parade, Castlereagh. Secretary: Wendy Wheeler, 30 Cloyne Crescent, Monkstown, Co. Antrim, telephone White-abbey 66752.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Dr Julian Wahrman: "Humanist Counselling". Sunday, 2 April, 5.30 pm. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Roy Mason: "Electronic Technology and Automation". Tuesday, 21 March, 8.00 pm. Harold Wood Social Centre (Corner of Squirrels Heath Road and Gubbins Lane).

Leeds and District Humanist Group. David Porter: "Effeminacy". Tuesday, 14 March, 7.45 pm. Education Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Joan Read: "A Look at the History of Lewisham". Thursday, 30 March, 7.45 pm. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, SE6.

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

London Young Humanists. 5 March, 7.30 pm. AGM followed by Helen Buckingham: "Prostitution of Humanism". 19 March, Nick Adams: "Work as a Counsellor". 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W6.

Merseyside Humanist Group. Details from Secretary: Ann Coombes, tel 051-608 3835 or Public Relations Officer: Marion Clowes, tel 051-342 2562.

Muswell Hill Humanist Group. Mr Zissimoss: "The Work of the Islington Committee for Community Relations". Thursday, 16 March, 8.30 pm. 5 Leaside Avenue, N10.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1. Sunday morning meetings, 11.00 am. 5 March, Professor Antony Flew: Thinking About Thinking. 12 March, Dr Susan Budd: Identity and Ritual in the Humanist Movement. 19 March, Peter Cadogan: The Apocalyptic Humanism of D. H. Lawrence.

Tyneside Humanist Society. 7.30 pm, 1 Archbold Terrace, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Wednesday, 8 March: Gay Liberation. 15 March: Planet Earth. 22 March: Progress in Question. 29 March: Devolution—T. Dan Smith.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Margaret Chisman: "My Humanist Values". Friday, 31 March, 7.30 pm. Friends' Meeting House, Page Street, Swansea.

Humanist Holidays. Easter 24-28 March. Comfortable hotel near Great Malvern station. Hills, theatre. Breakfast and evening meal, approx £35-£39. August 5-12-19. Hotel by Derwentwater at Keswick, Lake District. Cost £60 per week, excluding lunch. Apply to secretary, Marjorie Mepham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey, telephone 01-642 8796. Also if interested to join small party at a Welsh cottage one spring week-end for walking and talking. Communal cooking, small charge. Another possibility is family camping on North Wales coast in school holidays.

Voltaire Bicentenary Commemoration Meeting. Tuesday, 30 May, Conway Hall. To commemorate the bicentenary of Voltaire's death. Further details to be announced.

THE FREETHINKER

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