

# The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 99, No. 4

APRIL 1979

20p

## CHALLENGE OF COMPUTERS MUST BE FACED SAYS RENÉE SHORT AT NSS DINNER

Renée Short, MP for Wolverhampton North-East, said at the Annual Dinner of the National Secular Society, that we are "on the verge of a revolution that will affect all our lives profoundly". She was referring to high technology micro-processors and micro-electronics and said they would present "problems of paramount importance that will bring about greater changes to our society and way of life than the invention of the steam engine or electricity".

Renée Short was Guest of Honour at the National Secular Society Annual Dinner held at the City Volunteer on Saturday, 24 March. Proposing a toast to Renée Short was Diane Munday, Press Officer of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service. Barbara Smoker, President of the NSS and taking the chair, pointed out that Diane Munday was a well-known activist in the cause of a woman's right to a legal and safe abortion and had done much to implement and fight for the retention of the 1967 Abortion Act.

Diane Munday said she was not there because she was good at witty after-dinner speeches—and this was not what she proposed to offer. She was also not primarily there because she was a personal friend of Renée Short and her husband, though in passing she emphasised how important was the support of Mr Short. This was nothing to do with an attitude of "She would never have got where she is but for the little husband at home", but because for those who are prepared to champion unpopular causes the support and understanding of those near to them is very important.

Mrs Short had represented her Wolverhampton constituency for fourteen years and was remarkable as an MP who held firmly to her beliefs without fear or compromise. "She had been prominent among that very small handful of MPs who have steadfastly stood by what they (along with most of us in this room) believe is right despite popular

opinion. From the days of her active membership in CND to her current brushes with judges over sentences given to rapists, Renée Short has not been afraid to espouse unpopular causes if she believed what she was doing was right."

It was vitally important that people such as her counteracted the Whitehouses and Mugeridges who would have the media believe they speak for us all. This was why she was here and paying tribute to Renée Short.

Her concern with human issues has been given recognition by the Government and as Chairman of the Select Committee on Expenditure she has recently been in charge of investigations into Preventive Medicine and into Peri-natal Mortality. These matters and also her interest in nursery education and the Equal Opportunities Bill might be regarded by some as "women's concerns". No doubt all MPs (regardless of sex) should be working in these areas—but it was a hard fact of life that women MPs often feel they have to act as honorary men and even to "outmen the men". Renée Short had the strength not to follow this pattern.

It is easy to forget, now that liberal opinion accepts the right of a woman to obtain an abortion, that in 1965 this was not the case. She initiated the preliminary Ten Minute Rule Bill in 1965, and since that time has never missed an opportunity to speak out on the subject. "I and countless other women and their families owe you an immeasurable debt of gratitude for this."

### Impact of Social Reform

Diane Munday continued by suggesting that the ordinary everyday lives of people have been more changed by, for instance, the social reforms of the 60s—laws relating to homosexuality, divorce, abor-

(continued over)

tion, capital punishment and so on—than by the so-called major issues of the day, such as membership of the EEC. Although social change was left to pressure groups and Friday afternoon in the House of Commons, history recognised the importance of social reform and would remember the small group of people who had stood up and been counted. For this reason she toasted Renée Short for the work she had done and the work she would do in the future.

Renée Short thanked Diane Munday for a stirring account of her “nefarious parliamentary activities”. Taking up the question of women MPs, she reminded people that there were only 27 women MPs in Parliament and that more were needed. It was a reflection on the political maturity of the country that so few women were representatives in the Commons.

The fight to retain the right of abortion was certain to be resumed in the next Parliament, in her view. And she recalled that from personal observation of the results of illegal and unskilled abortion, she had before entering Parliament determined that she would try and do something to legalise abortion.

On the broader front of women’s opportunities she pointed out that we were incomplete as a nation if women didn’t have equal opportunities. We would be poorer as a nation if a large number of able women were lost to public life.

### Technological Revolution

Renée Short then spoke of the new technological revolution of micro-processes. The changes which they would bring about were not being discussed enough. She had put down over 300 parliamentary questions relating to the issues and not one of them had been reported in the daily press. Just as there had been opposition from landowners threatened by industrial change 200 years ago, there was now opposition to further technological revolution from those whose jobs were threatened by it.

“Some workers in low technological industries oppose it because by definition it is not labour intensive. It is opposed by the surviving owners of low technology industries because they see a challenge to their position. It is opposed by many who hold favoured positions in society because it presents the challenge of a new meritocracy and a threat to their interests.”

It is no good behaving like Canute—“unless we face this crisis and develop where we have the lead, we shall be overtaken and as more industries succumb more people will lose their jobs and great damage will be done to our economy.”

There was a need to face the fundamental challenge to our education system. “Are we training teachers who will inspire and enthuse the young who will be the designers and producers of new micro-electronic equipment? Are we providing enough money to equip all our comprehensive schools with

computers in order to familiarise our bright youngsters? The French are!”

“We must devote adequate resources to research into the production and application of the new technology and at the same time think urgently about new additional employment and opportunities for those whose jobs will disappear. We must press on now.”

Barbara Smoker in introducing Lord Raglan, said he was from the other place—not heaven or hell, but the House of Lords. Lord Raglan was a secularist who had raised important matters in the House of Lords, in particular a pioneering Bill relating to voluntary euthanasia in 1969.

Lord Raglan, recalling that he had spoken at an NSS Annual Dinner in 1969, said that that had been the end of a decade and the end of the life of a Parliament. That Parliament of the 60s had been one of great change. He remembered those exciting days, the endless talks about the philosophy of the issues and the earnest huddles discussing tactics. When he had been involved in approaching members of the House of Lords to create the Humanist Parliamentary Group he had not found one Conservative peer prepared to admit to not believing in God. But he felt that the desire for radical change had been found in all parties and this had contributed to the achievements.

He compared his own Bill relating to voluntary euthanasia introduced into the House of Lords in 1969 and defeated by 61 to 40 votes with Barbara Wootton’s more recent Bill which was defeated by a much greater margin. This was not due to changes of opinion but to the tactics of a group of Catholics which led to the vote coming much earlier than had been expected. But there had been much public discussion of the issue and it was clear that public opinion had moved a long way.

He said that, as someone who had thought a great deal about voluntary euthanasia, he felt it was a matter which should be approached with caution. In many letters of support for voluntary euthanasia from elderly and unhappy people, he saw pleas for help not for easeful death. His view was not that we should establish the legal right for voluntary euthanasia and then sit back content. He considered it was more or less the rule that when euthanasia had to be used it was an indication of insufficient care and inadequate training in the care of the dying. Euthanasia was an adjunct and not a solution to this serious topic.

### Hereditary Atheist

Lord Raglan continued by referring to his secularist background as a hereditary peer and a hereditary atheist. His father had been a well-known rationalist, who continued as a church-warden, considering the one an intellectual attitude and the

(continued on back page)



# A Right Wing Atheist's Perspective

GEOFFREY H. L. BERG

This article, by a local councillor from Manchester, criticises what appears to him the blinkered anti-church views of freethinkers, arguing that it is the unfair privileges and not the actual work of the churches that should be attacked. The piece also condemns secularist attitudes to human rights, pointing out that individual liberties can be more alive in religious states than in so-called secularist states.

"My country is the world, and my religion is to do good"—Thomas Paine. Such words, written in the 18th century, should even now inspire all freethinkers with their boldness, universality and forcefulness. Yet if that be our text, if that be our vision, I cannot help feeling that *The Freethinker* is falling short of that ideal at present. Great is my sorrow that the journal of the NSS—and perhaps many freethinkers as well—has fallen into factious and parochial expression. Yet even greater is my belief that there can be a clearer vision, a more meaningful expression, and a greater monument to our attitudes, supposedly distinguished for their truth, reason and freedom.

Perhaps I ought to vent my dissatisfaction with some present tendencies before I aim to be constructive. Briefly, what I really object to are:

- a) The all too frequent failure of freethinkers to see the wider vision.
- b) The simplistic but eternally repeated belief that churches hinder social progress.
- c) The church baiting that is usually so arbitrary in *The Freethinker* as to be intellectually laughable.

Too often contributors to *The Freethinker* seem to be motivated by hatred of the religious more than by any genuine intellectual (rather than emotional) rejection of the substance of religion.

I will not rest content merely to state these beliefs, but will elaborate them, concluding with what I take to be a wider vision.

How can I suffer in silence so many articles ranting in favour of the latest left-wing pet grievances, usually accompanied by an intolerance of outlook and arrogance that most religious zealots could be proud of?

I hope I may be forgiven if I use an article ("Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of the Times"—Mike Parker, *The Freethinker*, December 1978) as an illustration. Self-righteous, arrogant and intolerant that article certainly was; abounding in needless statements such as "the unbalanced and hypocritical Christian mind attempting to justify the unjustifiable", "offending the offensive Mrs Whitehouse", and innuendo such as "our expensive fox-hunting

monarchy", it culminates in describing a passage in *The Times* as "can only be viewed with astonishment, distress and rage by all rational people. . . It is stupid, insensitive and I believe plainly dishonest". What a comment to make about a statement which argues that human life cannot be equated to animal life, a point which I and I believe millions of atheists would happily applaud.

I have dealt with how I see *Freethinker* issues to be double-edged. Other issues where—as often happens — I am in basic agreement are more double edged than contributors admit. Nor is it ever admitted that opponents (clerical or otherwise) of their views are campaigning quite legitimately, if sometimes misguidedly—for the good of society. Granted, some of them do think that everyone else is a helpless idiot in need of the sort of protection that can only be provided by their good selves. But if they seem to over-react at times it is because most of them only believe in a responsible society — a concept seemingly alien to *Freethinker* contributors. Yet they grasp the fact that a responsible society helps the weak who are least able to fend for themselves in a free-for-all, whether it be the unborn child, the young against the permissive society, the impressionable against pornography, or even the poor and the aged. What I myself object to is treating people like fools where it is not justified, instead of laying emphasis on the fact that we are each independent entities. Worse still is the imposition of restrictions on people for no apparent reason other than tradition.

## Arbitrary Attacks

As I indicated earlier I grieve at the attitude we take to the Church. For example, in one issue of *The Freethinker* (October 1978) different contributors attacked churches as follows: "Every school run by the Church allows the (South African) regime to spend more on arms etc." and "One ought not to be in the least bit surprised at the Salvation Army's decision to withdraw from the World Council of Churches because of the WCC's decision to donate £45,000 for food, clothing and medical supplies for the Rhodesian guerilla movement, the Patriotic Front . . . the Salvation Army has emerged as a thoroughly reactionary band of white supremacists". Can the Churches do nothing right?

In general the game is to attack churches and religion for every supposedly outrageous event within them, but to neglect all mention of the good they do. Imagine how any cleric could attack atheism by these means. He just has to look at any atheist country, the Soviet Union, China, Democratic Kampuchea, and see the inefficiency, the misery, the degradation, and above all the absence of human



rights, to denounce us. What is worse, we cannot point to any officially atheist country where there is freedom, still less where it is a humanist paradise. I for one would condemn those atheist/Marxist countries—not as much as the Churches do, but more so. For at least the churches in modern times, albeit often on pain of eternal damnation, preserve the right to dissent and debate, a luxury not afforded by Marxist states.

Yet *The Freethinker* in 1978 confined its attention to attacking the Church. It did not mention human rights (so much of an issue everywhere else in 1978), let alone uphold the universality of those rights.

### Constructive Suggestions

What should we do? I have attacked much of what we are doing. Can I make constructive suggestions? I think so. I believe the National Secular Society and *The Freethinker* ought not to divide atheists and agnostics against each other but so far as is possible to unite them, especially when there is so much in our common interest and common belief still to be fought for.

First and foremost we still have to win the minds of most of the nation. Christianity has lost adherents to apathy and doubts, but not to secularism and truth. Rationalists have weakened religion, they have not destroyed it, least of all the residual elements of Christianity to which most people in this country adhere. We should make every effort to renew the intellectual challenge against religion. We should get to grips and force Christians to reconsider their basic beliefs; we should at least make them understand the logical consequences and if possible the illogical nature of their faith.

Second, we should fight not the churches in particular—as they are people who often do good—but the excessive privileges they hold. Why should they have privileged and disproportionate access to official media, including religious broadcasts? Why should they have privileged and disproportionate representation on official bodies, particularly as unelected representatives on education authorities and school governing bodies? Why should the local vicar in my parish be on the governing bodies for three sets of schools, when I as an elected representative am on one school governing body? He is apparently interested in education. So am I. The difference is that I fought and won an election on my views, he did not on his. Why for that matter have religious observance in schools? Surely schools should be concerned with teaching true knowledge? Yet the only compulsory subject in schools, to most people's minds, is to a greater or lesser extent a myth. Most dangerous of all, it is a myth taught as if it were truth. And of course, why should the state and every ceremonial aspect of it be linked with the Church? The disestablishment of religions should be the cause we lead, rather than have the secularist movement

tagged on the backs of other supposedly progressive causes about which freethinkers are entitled to disagree.

Unlike the Churches, who ask for a specifically Christian state, or the Marxists who demand a specifically atheist one, we want a free state. We have the faith that with a little encouragement from us and a great force of reason behind us, given the option to choose most people would quite freely be on our side. If not, we and not the institutions of the state would have failed.

Finally, if there is a role for a specifically secular society that goes beyond denouncing religion and religious privilege, it must be to keep freethought alive and to throw our shield over those who dissent (not disrupt), whether we agree with them or not. In the face of ever more terrifying means of coercion and ever greater centralisation and concentration of power, we should keep the individual thinker alive and well. After all, we live in a society, and although we derive advantages and responsibilities from the society it is not the society which has life but each individual within that society. It is those individual lives and their diversity that we should believe in most of all. In the end—and let it be engraved on my tomb when the time comes—the individual is everything or life is nothing.

## NOT WORLDWIDE

The South African censors have banned an issue of *The Freethinker*. Notice of the banning of the December, 1978, edition was given in the South African Government Gazette of January 19. Banning means that it is illegal to distribute or import the item without government permission. No reason was given for the censors' action, other than that a committee had decided that the publication in question was "undesirable within the meaning of the Publications Act of 1974".

It is believed, however, that the censors had taken exception to a report in *The Freethinker* of a meeting in Brighton at which Barry Duke, an executive member of the National Secular Society, and an expatriate South African journalist, spoke on the role of the churches in South Africa. He had been highly critical of the Dutch Reformed churches as well as the English churches in that country.

In the same month the censors banned Dennis Herbststein's "White Man, We Want to Talk to You" an account of the Soweto uprising of 1976, and believe it or not, the well-known classical statuette entitled *The Wrestlers*.

An organisation called *Contraceptive Action Programme* has been set up in Ireland. The aim is to fight a Bill which legalises contraceptives, but makes them available only by prescription to married couples.



# The Fight for Plant Rights

FRANCIS BENNION

The importance of animal rights has been hotly debated by freethinkers. But should we stop at animals? Or should we start elsewhere?

News that the plant liberation movement is spreading like a forest fire has checked criticism levelled at me for starting it. Some people ridiculed the movement as taking the craze for "liberation fronts" too far. Others have attacked me for distracting attention from causes they think more worthwhile, such as humanism or animal rights. The time has come to put the record straight.

The plant liberation front (or Veg Lib as it is popularly known) dates from the moment when I watched horrified as workmen cold-bloodedly felled a grove of majestic oak-trees to make way for a council housing estate. Other people objected to this on the ground of damage to amenity. I saw through their protest as a man-centred approach. Being living creatures, the trees had rights of their own. To fell them in this way, merely to make way for the housing of homeless people, struck me (if I may adopt the language used by Brigid Brophy in advocating *animal rights*, in *The Freethinker*, June 1978) as one of the most atrocious assaults ever committed by humans on fellow creatures of a different species. For all I knew, these mighty trees suffered bewilderment or even fear. I determined to act.

Now that I have researched the subject thoroughly I realise that there is an overwhelming case for Veg Lib. Man has closed his eyes to it for centuries, selfishly using the vegetable kingdom for his own ends. This period of wanton exploitation is nearing its close. Plants are fighting back! They are doing this through the medium of the spirits who inhabit them. Animists have known and feared these spirits for centuries. They act by impinging on human consciousness, making their wishes directly known to our minds. Nothing else can account for the amazing spread of Veg Lib.

The more refined among us, particularly the poets, have known for a long time about the souls of plants. In "The Sensitive Plant" Shelley wrote of the rose unveiling her glowing breast till "the soul of her beauty and love lay bare". That the love of plants could be returned by humans was recognized even by that gross man W. S. Gilbert, with his reference in *Patience* to "a sentimental passion of a vegetable fashion". He could see the purity of such love:

"Though the Philistines may jostle, you will rank as an apostle in the high aesthetic band,  
If you walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily  
in your mediaeval hand.  
And everyone will say,

As you walk your flowery way,  
If he's content with a vegetable love which would certainly not suit *me*,

Why, what a most particularly pure young man  
this pure young man must be!"

Back in the seventeenth century the poet George Herbert wrote "I read, and sigh, and wish I were a tree", while everyone knows the noble words of Joyce Kilmer:

"Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree."

To adapt a well-known phrase, What God has made let not man put asunder! Remember the revelation in Genesis that the source of the knowledge of good and evil is located not in man or any other animal, but in a *tree*.

Modern man wrongs the vegetable kingdom in innumerable ways. Purely for selfish pleasure, plants are kept potbound and stifled in centrally-heated rooms. Owners try to alleviate the plants' anxiety by talking to them. Some plant "experts" even hint that soothing conversation encourages growth (see "How to make your house plants die more slowly" by Percy Throwup). We are all aware of the wanton cruelties practised on helpless pot plants. I personally know of a case where a party-goer stubbed out a cigarette on the leaf of a rubber-plant, whereupon the whole plant instantly wilted and died. In the



"Knowledge of good and evil is located not in man  
—but in a tree"



face of that true story how can anyone say that plants lack feelings—even a soul?

Plants are subjected to the grossest indignities. Their growth is forced, to satisfy unnatural cravings for early rhubarb or hothouse tomatoes. They are fed on unpleasant fertilizers and sprayed with noxious chemicals. They are subjected to gross overcrowding. (Whoever first hailed as a benefactor the man who produced two blades of corn where one grew before has much to answer for.) Plant eugenics are interfered with by people who develop hybrids to line their own pockets. (Linnaeus would scarcely recognise the vegetable kingdom if he returned to earth today.) Living plants are uprooted and moved to new positions to gratify the whim of their "owners" (this even happens to mature trees). Hydrangeas suffer the crowning indignity of having their *colour* changed by soil additives. The list of abuses is endless.



*"Owners try to relieve their plants' anxiety by talking to them"*

Adopting the language of the defenders of animal rights, I say we should ask not what is the value of a mistreated plant's life to some human being, but what is its value to the plant? (answer: invaluable, because unique and irreplaceable). Echoing this, I say that the vegetable rights movement is taking off in tremendous moral force and is beginning to shake the public conscience. I uphold Veg Lib because I do not see how any secularist who agrees that evolution took place can find it in his conscience or his reason to do otherwise. Admittedly,

so far as eating goes I have a thin time. Since I cannot be expected to support more than one liberation front at once, I eat meat freely (in other words I am a flesharian). Vitamin C I get from pills, so by nibbling the odd leaf blown down by the wind I get by.

There is a long way to go before Veg Lib triumphs and vegetation once more enjoys uninterrupted growth. There are hopeful signs however. Only this morning I received a pledge of support from the Ancient Order of Foresters, while the Mandrake Society have been a constant inspiration. Many teething problems remain. Demarcation talks with the Animal Liberation Front on whether insectivorous plants should be allowed to pursue their natural proclivities unchecked have been deadlocked for weeks. The Department of Health and Social Security are threatening us with an injunction over our attempts to restrain interference with the free growth of deadly nightshade. Several Veg Lib supporters have been successfully prosecuted under the Weeds Act for allowing noxious growths to spread from their property. These are just examples of our problems.

### Rights of Cockroaches

We are not in as much difficulty as the animal rights people however. For liberationists the working difference between "animals" and "plants" simply depends on whether there is the capacity for locomotion — a somewhat arbitrary distinction it is true. We are committed of course to the "universalist" approach. It would be presumptuous in the extreme for man to decide which species deserved protection and which did not. The idea that all living creatures deserve equal respect for their life and identity gives rise to more difficulty however where there is capacity for locomotion than where there is not. Many of these difficulties are of course exaggerated by opponents — see for example the absurd fuss recently made over a plan to encourage the breeding of cockroaches. One newspaper correspondent had the bad taste to point out that cockroaches are carriers of harmful pathogenic organisms and are at home even in sewers, "where they are sustained on moisture and faeces" (*The Times*, 12 August 1978). Completely ignoring the inalienable right of the cockroach to live and multiply in its own way, this person went on to assert that it "defiles all forms of foodstuffs it comes into contact with by depositing its own disease-laden faeces on the surface. It is a serious health hazard." One more man-centred approach: not a word about the hazard to the health of cockroaches in the use of man-made pesticides!

Despite such obstructive attitudes, we liberationists are determined to stand firm and win through. After all, our reputation as humanists and secularists depends upon it.



# JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

The Nationwide Festival of Light's obsessive interest in violence, pornography and other people's sexual activities is to be expected from a Bible-based, evangelical pressure group that campaigns for "Christian standards in social life". A preoccupation with children is also evident in statements that emanate from Down Street, all of which may account for the organisation's contribution to the International Year of the Child.

It took the form of a rally at All Souls, Langham Place, London, on 23 March, when the Rev Eddy Stride, Canon Harry Sutton, Lady Lothian, Raymond Johnston and Jill Knight, MP, did their stuff. Advertising material posed the question: *What Does the Bible Say to the International Year of the Child?*

Although unable to attend this momentous event one can confidently assert that the star turns were able to demonstrate to their listeners' satisfaction that the Bible has "something to say" to the International Year of the Child. Those who are given to bibliolatry can find passages in "the good book" which are appropriate to every occasion, whether it be a vicarage tea party or the declaration of war.

The Bible is a hotch-potch of contradictory stories, legends and doubtful history, well spiced with neuroses of its compilers. All tastes are catered for in its pages; mass murder, rape, incest, sadism, castration and bestiality are jumbled together with lofty and generally useless moral precepts.

It is, however, highly unlikely that the cosy atmosphere at All Souls, Langham Place, was disturbed by any reference to the fact that children get a rough passage in the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament they are slaughtered and sacrificed on all sides, usually at the instigation or command of a loving God. In the New Testament, Jesus stipulates hatred for offspring as a condition of discipleship.

Throughout history the Christian church has fostered outbursts of religious fanaticism and hysteria in which the young have suffered greatly. The Children's Crusade is one example of such folly. The religious wars which befell Europe during the period of Christian power did not discriminate between adults and children.

It is impossible to assess with accuracy the numbers who died during the witch-hunting mania that swept Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries. This horrifying episode was Christian in origin and the witch-hunters' activities were sanctioned by the biblical injunction: *Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*. Children were often the victims. Hundreds of

boys and girls died at the hands of the Christian witch-burners. Some of the children were only eight or nine years old.

For centuries the revolting Christian doctrine of eternal punishment has inflicted misery and terror on the young. Specific statements in the Bible about hell-fire have been supplemented in millions of books, pamphlets and tracts, often published by censorious, evangelical organisations like the Nationwide Festival of Light. The reality of hell is one of the few subjects on which all the Christian churches and sects have been in agreement over the last four hundred years. Their rantings about hell and the devil have darkened the lives of millions of children.

*Jesus loves me, this I know,  
For the Bible tells me so.*

The Bible is Christianity's horror comic. If Festival of Lighters believe their own propaganda about the effects of literature on children, they would lock the Bible away with poisons and other nasties which are regarded as a danger to the young.

\* \* \*

It is curious how the pious defenders of law and order rallied to one of their number who was found guilty in a Crown Court of acting illegally during the Ilford North by-election campaign in March, 1978. Phyllis Bowman, national director of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC), has been treated as a heroine by the religious press.

The *Catholic Herald* (16 March) reported that SPUC would have no problems about paying the full costs of the case as the Knights of St Columba had already raised the money for this purpose. Norman St-John Stevas, MP, wrote in the same issue: "Mrs Bowman incurred costs of £500 which are to be defrayed by the Knights of St Columba".

Father Alan Rabjohn, chairman of SPUC, issued a statement declaring that "the evil of abortion came into Britain through political action and it can only be removed by political campaigning and activity".

I hope that *Freethinker* readers and others will join me in drawing the attention of the Charity Commissioners to the foregoing. The Knights of St Columba, described in the *Catholic Directory* as "a fraternal order of Catholic men", is a registered charity. Even the Charity Commissioners, who strongly favour religious organisations, can hardly deny that the Knights of St Columba appear to be financing a blatantly political organisation.

**Those who wish to write to the Charity Commissioners should address: Charity Commission, 14 Ryder Street, London SW1.**

---

Penguin Publishers have launched "The Shroud of Turin" by Ian Wilson for big paperback sales. Barbara Smoker's leaflet "No Shroud of Evidence" is available from 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL (sae please).



## RELIGION AND BLASPHEMY

A formal complaint has been lodged with the European Commission of Human Rights in Strasbourg, following the failure of the *Gay News* blasphemy case in its final appeal at the House of Lords. *Gay News'* lawyers have submitted that the old common law offence of blasphemy discriminates on the grounds of religion, since only the Church of England is given protection. If the European Commission finds the case admissible it will take several years for the matter to proceed through the European Courts.

The Law Commission is now working on a consultative document about blasphemy law as a preliminary step to making recommendations. They are inviting comments from the general public. It is a good opportunity to point out that blasphemy law as it stands gives special status to material relating to religion. There have been calls from many quarters including Lord Scarman, one of the Law Lords, for blasphemy to cover all religions. If this were to happen not only major religions such as Islam and Buddhism but also groups like the Moonies, Transcendental Meditators and Druids would be given special protection. What an absurd proposal!

Readers can write with their views to: W. A. B. Forbes (Law Commissioner), 37-38 John Street, London WC1.

## CASH AND RELIGION

"There were many red clerical faces — especially episcopal ones — when it became public that clergy pay was going up. Many of them knew this even during the strikes, which they were calling 'greedy' and 'inconsiderate'. It is rumoured that one Church leader withdrew his strike statement when he realised the rate of clergy pay rises."

This comment in *Christian World* (15 March) opened an article which gave a run-down of clerical pay. Although in the past clergy have lived luxuriously from fat livings, it is more relevant to criticise clergy today for being no use than for being over-paid.

Average clerical pay in the Church of England is £2,900 to £3,250. Free churchmen can earn even less, with Baptist ministers starting at £2,560. Catholic priests are paid in a quite different way with small incomes of around £1,000 and other provisions such as "bed and board" coming from the church.

Even if the clergy are not in general the rich of the country, they are adequately provided for and have strong support when in difficulties; it ill behoves them to criticise the low paid for striking for increases at a time when they themselves are being offered a 15 per cent increase (10 per cent above the government guide-lines, so what brand of produc-

# NEWS

tivity deal has been negotiated—an increase of hot air?).

The churches are clearly aware of the tax benefits of combining lowish pay with other provisions. All clergy are given free accommodation—which can vary from modern to rambling to palatial; thus by keeping salaries lowish (and not highly taxed) and receiving equivalent of accommodation (untaxed) they pay less tax. An appreciable advantage when multiplied throughout the country.

The shrewd ability of the Church Commissioners to harvest their wealth is further indicated by their attitude to rents for the considerable property they own. Mr Arthur Latham, Labour MP for Paddington—an area with many tenants in church property—has attacked the Archbishop of Canterbury in the House of Commons. He accused the Archbishop of "personally endorsing and condoning greed by the Church". He claimed the Primate was responsible for "excessive rent increases" charged by the Church Commissioners.

The Church Commissioners have commented that the decision on property was taken by an assets committee, and that the latest rent increases amounted to about 40 to 45 per cent. They said: "We have about 6,000 tenants in Paddington. We act in the same way as any other landlord in that our rents come within the Rent Act."

Mr Latham concluded his Parliamentary attack by suggesting that Lambeth Palace should be used as a centre for the low-paid—"or a refuge for those suffering from excessive rent increases in my constituency".

## ETHICAL RELIGION

The South Place Ethical Society is launching an appeal for £25,000 to cover costs in a case expected to be brought in the High Court later this year. The case will raise important issues both for Charity Law and for the legal definition of "religion".

The history of the case goes back more than ten years. The 1960 Charities Act required all existing charities to re-register. The SPES, in common with other humanist groups, was eventually denied charitable status (and consequently all the tax relief that charitable status allows). In appealing against the loss of charitable status, it was then alleged that the SPES could be in breach of its original trust. In the matter both of charitable status and of breach of trust it is alleged that SPES is no longer a religious body. In appeal to the



# AND NOTES

Charity Commissioners the Society has argued that ideas change with the times and that to evolve from Unitarian beliefs to religious ethicism is a reasonable development.

In the matter of breach of trust, the Society's original Trust Deed of 1825, which referred to "one God, even the father", was amended in 1902 and 1930 to allow for agnosticism. The amendments are being challenged.

The Society's case will rest partly on the argument that it is in effect a religious society, although it has been agnostic about the supernatural since the mid-nineteenth century. Peter Cadogan, General Secretary of SPES, has described the Society as unique in being "a non-supernatural religious foundation". And on the marble foyer at Conway Hall are the objectives "the study and dissemination of ethical principles and the cultivation of a rational religious sentiment".

Presumably this is the kind of definition of religion referred to in a Schools Council Working Paper: ". . . some who hold to a religious view, will take worship to mean, more simply, the celebration of that which is finest in human experience". (Quoted in *Assemblies in County Schools*, see p63).

The columns of *The Freethinker* have debated before whether there is such a thing as religious humanism and some freethinkers would find the concept either a confusing use of language or a ludicrous attempt to cling to the trappings of religion once the substance has been abandoned. Intellectual argument about the question may be valuable and interesting, but spending thousands of pounds for the courts to debate the matter is to demonstrate the law to be even more of an ass than usual.

It is surprising that the SPES is not claiming charitable status on the grounds of public benefit or educational function, rather than proposing that a Sunday morning lecture constitutes an act of worship. Nevertheless, the case may have important implications. The British Humanist Association, which does not possess charitable status, has an Educational Trust, the charitable status of which remains questionable. And that question is in abeyance pending the result of the SPES case.

Though the implications of the case are significant — and we wish SPES well in its battle — the prospect of lawyers spending lengthy periods in court disputing "When is a religion not a religion" or rather "When is a non-religion a religion?" is about as futile as debating the number of angels which could dance on the point of a sword. It

will only be profitable to the lawyers who are paid to do the arguing. Doubtless lawyers, carefully establishing that "religion" covers a variety of gatherings not involving worship or a deity will remember the words of Humpty Dumpty, "When I make a word do a lot of work like that, I always pay it extra".

## ATHEISM AND RELIGION

Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, took part in the Radio 4 programme "About Face" on Sunday, 18th March. The 45-minute programme gave two people who had completely changed their beliefs an opportunity to debate their viewpoints. Barbara Smoker, who moved from being a Catholic brought up in a convent school to being an atheist, confronted Brian Wicker, a lecturer in English, who once described himself as an agnostic and logical positivist, but then became a Catholic convert. Robert Kee chaired the discussion in which Barbara Smoker was able to expound secularist views at much greater length than is usual in a radio programme.

---

*"Good God!—a string of verses to tie up the deity"*  
by Barbara Smoker. Available from G. W. Foote & Co, 95p plus 12p postage.

---

## Freethinker Fund

Our thanks to contributors for this month's total, maintaining the healthy trend of the last few months. B. Able, £1.60; R. W. Aldridge, £7.60; M. Armstrong, £1.00; A. Ashton, 60p; B. Aubrey, £5.00; N. C. W. Barr, 60p; S. W. Beer, £3.60; V. Brierley, £8.00; D. Bresson, £2.60; J. L. Broom, £2.60; L. B. Cordesse, 60p; Mr & Mrs Eadie, 60p; B. A. Evans, 60p; D. Fyfe, 20p; M. J. Garner, 60p; W. J. Glennie, 60p; Mrs O. Grubiak, £3.60; G. Goldman, £2.60; P. Harding, £3.75; J. K. Hawkins, 60p; J. G. Hillhouse, £2.60; D. J. Holdstock, £1.60; E. J. Hughes, £1.00; A. Jenkinson, £2.60; Miss S. Johnson, £25.00; A. Lambert, 28p; J. G. Lewis, £1.20; A. J. Martin, £1.00; G. S. Mellor, £2.60; M. Mephram, £2.60; A. V. Montagu, £2.60; C. Morey, £2.60; C. G. Newton, 60p; M. E. Nichol, £2.00; A. Oldham, £7.60; K. C. Orr, £7.60; M. O. Morley, £2.60; K. Pariente, £10.00; F. J. Pidgeon, £2.60; T. Stevenson, £2.60; R. Stubbs, £2.20; J. G. Tugwell, £2.60; V. Wilson, £2.62; J. Walsh, £1.00; Mrs A. Woods, £1.60; in memory of Isaac Yettram, £25.00; D. Wright, £3.00; Anon. £2.54; Anon, 60p; Anon, 30p. Total for the period 27 February to 23 March: £179.69.



**CRITIQUES OF GOD: A MAJOR STATEMENT OF THE CASE AGAINST BELIEF IN GOD** edited by Peter Angeles. Prometheus Books, USA.

This is a useful anthology, although it would have been even more useful had the editor cast his net somewhat wider. Certainly the second piece by Ernest Nagel could profitably have been replaced by Bradlaugh's "Plea for atheism", the atheistic portion of Shelley's *Refutation of deism*, or a chapter from Holbach's *System of nature*. The omission of these texts is regrettable not merely because they are atheistic classics but also because, unlike most of the essays in this collection, they are primarily pro-atheistic rather than contra-theistic. My impression is that both believers and unbelievers would find these earlier robust works more relevant than the later indirect criticism in John Dewey's "Religion versus the religious", or Corliss Lamont's "The illusion of immortality". Furthermore, in order to appreciate the present battle-lines between believers and unbelievers, one should know something of the important battles of the past — or one will be doomed to refight them.

In pointing to these gaps I do not wish to detract from the richness of the collection. The critical essays by Paul Edwards and William Matson on the cosmological and teleological arguments are both appropriate and impressive, as are the second-line defences of Antony Flew and H. J. McCloskey on the problem of evil. It is, however, somewhat surprising that there is no essay specifically on the ontological argument, since it is, according to Kant, the most formidable of all the traditional proofs of the existence of God.

But the most serious omission is highlighted by the contribution of Richard Robinson, who is still fighting Shelley's battles with the more defective of Shelley's weapons:

"We are (writes Robinson) perpetually being urged to adopt the Christian creed not because it is true but because it is beneficial, or to hold that it must be true because it is beneficial . . . this is a grossly immoral argument . . . It is always wicked to recommend anybody to believe anything on the ground that he or anybody else will feel better or be more moral or successful for doing so, or on any ground whatever except that the available considerations indicate that it is probably true." (p.119)

Robinson, like Shelley, is a militant rationalist: the truth must never be sacrificed to expediency. But why not? Because, according to Shelley, the truth will always prove useful. This is his article of faith: there is a providential connection between what is true and what is right and useful. But there is, in fact, nothing self-evident about this. We can all imagine occasions where it would be desirable

# FREETHINKER

to be ignorant or deluded. If, for instance, a man were to become momentarily deranged, it would surely be better for him not to know the location of his gun, or to believe — falsely — that it was not loaded.

Suppose, also, that a group of scientists was about to discover a super atomic weapon, the discovery of which would instantly and irresistibly make them want to cause the most suffering to the greatest number of people. Would it really be "grossly immoral" to wish these scientists to believe things that were not true, if such falsehoods could preclude their discovery? Is truth really, as in this case, more valuable than the happiness of humanity, or — for those ecologically minded — the existence of the natural world as we know it? I doubt if Robinson, or many atheists, would place *that* high a value on truth. I certainly would not. But let us suppose that there are a few hardy and thorough-going rationalists who would. Could we describe them as humanists? If truth for them is really more important than the prosperity of this world and its inhabitants, then have they not erected Truth as an other-worldly idol or god: have they not become devastatingly religious? And might it not, in these circumstances, be preferable to submit oneself to a benign Pope who would decree: "What God has joined, let no man (or scientist) split asunder"?

Now it will not do to dismiss my thought-experiment as far-fetched; for what is at issue is not a probability but a principle, namely, that it is *not* always wicked to believe or propagate a falsehood. I can see no reason why a thorough-going rationalist *must* be a humanist, or *vice versa*. The belief in their necessary connection is probably an unconscious inheritance from our religious past: a good and wise God would hardly create a world in which there were pernicious truths or beneficial falsehoods.

I have not raised this spectre of truth for its own sake or to frighten Robinson, with whose rationalistic atheism I am very much in agreement. My main purpose is to call attention to a new battlefield which is only dimly recognised in the essays in this collection. As we should not forget old victories, neither should we evade new contests by calling their terms of reference "wicked" and "immoral". *Why is falsehood or deception blame-worthy?* Robinson's emotional approach begs this question; it is like charging a speculative atheist with blasphemy for denying the existence of God. Nor are the extracts from Freud and Kaufman, which relate to this question, very satisfactory; although those of Fromm and Scriven come nearer to the mark.



# REVIEWS

The basic issue between unbelievers and their opposite numbers amongst the Jungians, Wittgensteinians, Nietzscheans and Bultmannians, does not concern the rational truth of atheism or agnosticism. That is implicitly and quietly conceded. The real issue is whether the rational and scientific standards of truth are to have primacy over rival standards, such as those based — as in Jung — on powerful and widespread subjective ideas. To say that the former standards simply *must* hold primacy, and that it is “grossly immoral” to think otherwise, is facile. The issue is too complicated for such a reply. Developments such as the Darwinian revolution, the breakdown in religious and other absolutist ethics, and the horrific application of atomic science, have made the issue a deadly serious one. A more informed reply will have to draw on, among other things, our general commitment to scientific rationalism in such matters as air-travel and medicine, where we are certainly not prepared to substitute strong feelings for objective truth. But the war over the value of truth, as Nietzsche saw, will be neither easy nor short.

It is good to have this collected “statement of the case against belief in God”, even if it proves to be an interregal statement.

DAVID BERMAN

*David Berman lectures in philosophy at the University of Dublin.*

## **1968 AND AFTER by Tariq Ali. Blond & Briggs, £5.25.**

Tariq Ali was born in Lahore in pre-partition India in 1943. He was educated in Pakistan and sent by his land-owning family to Oxford in 1963. At 22 he was President of the Oxford Union and was appointed as a member of the War Crimes Tribunal promoted by Bertrand Russell.

1968 was the year of the student revolt in Paris, the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, Vietnam Solidarity Campaigns all over Western Europe and America. As one of the leaders of this international revolutionary upsurge, Tariq Ali was in the eye of the storm. He is a member of the International Marxist Group which is a section of the Fourth International. In the thirties and forties, everything said by the Trotskyists was drowned in the euphoria of the United Front led by the Communist Parties. With the denunciation and exposure of Stalin by Khrushchev and the rise of Chinese and Euro-Communism, an analysis of political events from the Trotskyist standpoint is of great value. It must be said at the same time that Tariq Ali writes not from Trotskyist dogma — I suppose there are dogmatic Trotskyists—but with flexibility and with in-

trospection. He devotes a chapter each to the events in France, Czechoslovakia, Chile, Portugal and Britain.

Tariq Ali writes with great facility, even persuasively. The book will be of use to the serious reader who wishes to recapitulate events in retrospect even if he is not a socialist. To socialists, it must be regarded as compulsory reading. It is equally valuable to the broad radical readership which is genuinely concerned with the problem of whether and how socialism can be combined with political and individual freedom. *The Sixth Thesis of the Fourth International on Socialist Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* adopted in 1977 is printed as an appendix. It rejects the idea of a single party of the working class and calls for free political and theoretical debate and activity of the working class. It rejects the idea of according monopoly position to Marxism through administrative and repressive measures by the state and asserts that Marxism can only flourish in an atmosphere of full freedom of discussion. Whether Trotskyist practice corresponds to these noble ideals is a matter for each one of us to decide and presumably our Trotskyist friends and acquaintances will be willing to listen to criticism.

Lastly if you have a friend who shouts “go back to Pakistan” every time Tariq Ali appears on your television screen, tell him (or her) to go and borrow this book from the local library.

G. N. DEODHEKAR

---

## **NOISE POLLUTION by Antony Milne. David & Charles £5.95.**

---

The problem of noise — its impact both through annoying people and affecting their hearing capacity — is largely one of industrialised society. Alongside pollution of the air, earth and water, mostly by chemicals, the ill-effects of noise have probably received least notice. The most newsworthy aspects of noise pollution stem from airport siting: the more common effects of noise in factories are usually relegated to specialist reports with little publicity in the mass media.

Before the industrial revolution and factory production of goods the problem of man-made noise was confined to metal working and gunpowder explosions in battle. Such sudden loud sounds may be more deafening for a short period, but most danger and irritation comes from the continuous lower level cacophony that many of us have to endure in cities as part of our daily life. However, Antony Milne mentions in his book that Julius Caesar once tried to have daytime chariot racing banned because of the noise produced by the thud of horses' hooves and the rattle of speeding wheels.

Today, we might welcome the noise created by horses' hooves as a pleasing diversion from the noise of motors and aircraft: that “great white elephant



of the skies", Concorde, has been the centre of much controversy on account of the sonic booms it leaves in its trail. These booms occur as a result of shock wave production in air currents, and as anyone who has experienced them knows, they are extremely disturbing.

At a more mundane level, noises from ice cream vans, discotheques, and just noisy neighbours, present a problem that legislation is limited in its ability to control. One might think a little more thoughtfulness was all that was required to prevent annoyance.

In industry, one of the main factors preventing noise control is cost. It is very expensive to stop noise emission in most factories. Workers can often be protected individually by ear plugs; but if noise extends from factories to dwellings beyond their perimeter, this may call for more costly insulation. A vacuum is really the only effective non-conductor of sound, but obviously not a sensible solution in halting large scale noise production in factories.

Antony Milne outlines in some detail the risks to hearing, and early deafness, following prolonged exposure to very loud noise. There is some argument about the acceptable decibel level that can be regularly sustained without damage to hearing. It may not come as a surprise for readers to learn that pop band musicians suffer loss of hearing range after several years' exposure to their own noise! Psychological tests have revealed that noise can affect concentration, and thus a child's ability to learn.

As a humanist, Antony Milne is rightly interested in the social and moral issues associated with making and controlling noise. Other books on this subject tend to keep to the technical and physiological aspects but Mr Milne looks to see where the support for pressure groups, like the Noise Abatement Society founded in 1960, comes from.

Noise pollution is a modern problem, and all the literature and specialist agencies are of recent date. Designing for the future must look more closely at noise pollution. In constructing motorways, the study of acoustics may prevent damage to the hearing of residents along its path. It is when Mr Milne enters the debate of environment v. industry that he takes his most controversial stand. He is not opposed to growth nor to our modern consumer-good oriented society. He argues that consumers must be offered choice, and accept some of the "dis-benefits" of noise in the process, but he does reject "the thoughtless squandering of irreplaceable natural resources". However, his work "is not intended to be an oblique criticism of capitalism". This is hardly surprising—his book started as a thesis on noise abatement, written with the help of a NATO scholarship.

DENIS COBELL

Although there has been some delay in producing the bound volume of "The Freethinker" for 1978, it will soon be available—with the innovation of an index.

## CINEMA

**THE LAST SUPPER (1976).** Directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. At the Academy 2, Oxford Street.

A Cuban sugar plantation at the end of the eighteenth century, on the Wednesday before Easter. Sebastian, one of the Negro slaves has just made yet another attempt to escape. He is recaptured and brought before the overseer, Manuel, who summarily cuts off his ear while the Count, the plantation's middle-aged owner, teeters off to be sick.

The next day, in an access of philanthropic zeal, the Count washes his slaves' smelly feet, a task he clearly does not relish. In due course comes the fitting climax — he invites twelve of the slaves to share his supper. The seating arrangements are predictable. Undeterred by his disciples' uncouth table manners and by Sebastian spitting in his face, the Count asks them about their working — and living — conditions, opining that they are indeed blessed, as "our pain is the only thing we can truly call ours" and that we should offer it up to Him, with joy in our hearts, and so on. The Count is moved to tears by his own rhetoric, but his hearers are for the most part unimpressed, cutting in with their own folk stories, jauntily narrated, as crisp as the Count's conscience-salving is flatulent. It is sad to reflect that Christ's teachings, before "Christians" began to bandy them about in a game of Chinese Whispers, might have had all the immediacy of those Negro fables. Thus religion exploits and is exploited.

The Count falls victim of his own charity. At the supper he had freed an aged slave and promised the others a day off for Easter, but is away hunting when Manuel tries to flout these orders, provoking a revolt. By the time the Count returns, the killing and burning are well under way; and he calls in the troops to quell the uprising and to make an example of the insurgents. On finding the lout, Manuel, lying dead, his neck and wrists clamped in a pillory, he realises with awe that he had died at exactly the same hour as Our Saviour. One person emerges unscathed, the industrious Frenchman in charge of the refinery, who had neither patronised his slaves nor ill-treated them. Manuel is buried with pomp; the rebels' heads are impaled on spikes, while Sebastian lopes through the forest, dreaming of liberty.

This is a shapely piece of art, flawless in every way. The script and acting are impeccable, the film hugely enjoyable and pleasing to the eye and ear. Despite the largeness of its themes, however, "The Last Supper" is a miniature, with no loose ends or disturbing resonances. It is as though Alea had entered the wicked, musty world of the great director Bunuel, and thrown open the shutters, letting light and birdsong pour in.

VERA LUSTIG



# LETTERS

## HUMANISM AND NUCLEAR POWER

I worked for over six years as the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence (1971-77), and I am proud to have done so. I thoroughly recognise that the problems of security are difficult, and that different people may well reach different views (cf David Davies lecture, text obtainable from the David Davies Institute). Your correspondent, Albert Beale ("The Free-thinker", February), shows no such doubts or tolerance. He feels certain (by revelation?) that his conclusions of anti-militarism and anti-nation-statism (to use his terms) are the only possible ones for a humanist to reach. Being committed to living in this, the real world, and not in some futuristic dream world, I have reached a different conclusion, find my humanism wholly compatible with it, and am proud to have lived in accordance with my conclusion.

The problems of nuclear power and the threat of proliferation of nuclear weapons, to which both your correspondents refer, are indeed very worrying. I am conscious of this, but on balance believe that we are making the right choice in favouring nuclear power, albeit with every effort to improve its safety and security. I do not know of, and certainly do not share, an allegedly "common" belief of scientists that everything technological is good, but as a humanist I profoundly believe that hunger and poverty are bad.

Successful opposition to nuclear power in the developed world is bound to lead to a greater demand for other energy sources, which is going to be hardest on the poorest countries. This is a fact however hard we try, as we ought, to reduce our energy consumption. Policies free of danger do not exist. If other people, after balancing risks, reach a different conclusion from oneself, it is ill-advised to ascribe ulterior motives to them or regard them as lacking in humanity.

HERMANN BONDI

Professor Sir Hermann Bondi, KCB, FRS

May I add some more points of detail to Peter Cadogan's defence of Hermann Bondi? The discussion of energy is an important matter for two reasons: first, the topic is important; secondly, humanists have an interest in the quality of discussion and debate—we care about fair-mindedness and decent argument.

For a humanist approaching the energy question two of the basic issues are conservation and safety. In both respects nuclear power is to be preferred to the relevant alternative, coal. No-one supposes that the "renewables" are sufficient to render both these unnecessary, so we must use one or the other.

As to health and safety, coal fired electricity will kill at least ten times more people than will nuclear powered electricity; probably substantially more, but no-one knows how many will be killed by the sulphur dioxide from coal. The hypothetical large accidents of nuclear power are dwarfed into insignificance by the steady, certain, toll of coal mining. And then there is the "greenhouse effect" of the carbon dioxide from coal: no-one knows how serious this will be, but the indications are that it could be so catastrophic as to demand serious reduction in coal use.

Conservation, too, is important to humanists, for we are very much concerned about future generations. There are two points here: first, that uranium is relatively more plentiful than coal, if it is used properly and efficiently; second, that coal has fundamental uses other than the crude production of energy, in particular as a chemical feedstock and (when converted into liquid fuel after oil is gone) for aircraft. And one might

mention pure conservation of the environment: the environment damage done by coal mining in the Vale of Belvoir (which is unavoidable) and elsewhere in the future. Incidentally, the fears of the long-term nuclear waste are out of touch with reality: there is as much long life radioactivity put into the environment by burning coal as by burning uranium, for given energy generated.

Fears of terrorism and of the proliferation of nuclear weapons are troubles on the nuclear side. A sense of proportion is a basic humanist virtue—relevant to the former of these fears in particular. Terrorists have been very effective without plutonium, and they will continue to be, until we can establish a more humane—and more sane—society. Relatively moderate protective measures on nuclear facilities would keep terrorists off them and on their other drugs. It is hysteria that exaggerates this target.

Concerning nuclear weapons, one thing is certain: the Carter policy would have served American commercial, political and military domination. It could not have been accepted; but, having been tried, it has set back real negotiations. It is the use of nuclear weapons that really concerns us, and our goal should be a genuine disarmament, with proper inspection—only that can give us lasting security. The world will need nuclear power, in the not very far distant future, and the de-stabilising effect of lack of energy could be catastrophic. In this connection one can point out that the "I'm all right Jack" attitude of the self-styled "conservationists" is incredible. Britain has vastly much more than its share of world reserves of coal—we are sitting pretty. It is not acceptable for us to say "We will burn the coal—you can just burn".

The arguments on nuclear war are totally speculative, one way or the other. The arguments on conservation and health are solid, and in favour of nuclear power. Surely humanists would not yield to the mythical threat of blackmail to prevent them doing what the evidence suggests to be right?

HARRY STOPES-ROE

Senior Lecturer in Science Studies,  
University of Birmingham

## BASIC ENGLISH

It is true that today, when over half of the budget of the Common Market is spent on translation, the need for an international auxiliary language is greater than ever, but it is astonishing that any one as rational as Barbara Smoker usually shows herself to be should suggest there are any grounds for exhuming Basic English.

Ogden's system did not die because he managed to persuade the British Government to pay him a small fortune for it but simply because it did not work. There is no evidence, in spite of vast amounts of propaganda and vast sums of money spent on Basic English, that anyone ever succeeded in learning to speak it.

Although in the heyday of the Orthological Institute there were a number of articles and even books published in Basic English, I have never seen one, out of the many which I have studied, which succeeded in producing a coherent passage using only the 850 words in the Basic list.

In fact, an analysis published by the University of Toronto Press in 1934 listed the words used in three key Basic Publications (the Basic words, the Basic Dictionary and Basic by example) and showed that to learn Basic English it would be necessary to learn not 850 but nearly 4,000 items, a far greater number than that in, say, Palmer's 1,000-word English or any of the other schemes of English with a restricted vocabulary.

As we approach the year 1984, would-be dictators may relish the idea of Basic English as a form of



thought control because paucity of concept could be a help in stamping out heretics—but Orwell blew the gaff on Newspeak long ago.

Basic English could not even be regarded as a stepping stone to learning normal English as so many of the words which even a beginner would need are missing (such words as "me" or "it" or any numerals).

Furthermore, because of Ogden's unreasonable prejudice against verbs, anyone wanting to learn Basic English has to learn a number of idioms which are far more difficult than any words which they replace. For instance even if one learns the Basic words "put", "up" and "with", one still finds it as difficult to learn the meaning of "put up with" as to learn a separate words such as "tolerate".

If Miss Smoker still thinks that there is any merit whatsoever in Basic English, may I challenge her to attempt to translate her own book review using only the 850 words in Ogden's list.

S. R. DALTON

## GAY RITES

If you are concerned about marriage ceremonies for single-sex partners, you must couple this with a campaign to make it possible for such partnerships to include the adoption of children where this is desired. At the same time, you will need expert advice concerning the effect on children who may be adopted in this way.

The words marriage and wedding can be quite easily avoided and the ceremony should have its own distinctive style. A ceremony of this kind should not be thought of as a gimmick or a ploy. It should be a positive first step in obtaining full rights for homosexuals of either sex to live freely and openly in the manner they choose.

If ceremonies are considered, there must be thought about break-ups and new partnerships, about social activities, and so on.

Like everyone else, homosexuals would still have obligations to society to live and act morally and responsibly, i.e. in their dress and behaviour. With common sense, society would accept them because homosexuals are to be found in all levels of the community. They are not a section apart.

BILL BROWN

John Watson's letter in the March "Freethinker" so disturbed me that I was stimulated to write this reply.

The letter says a lot, I feel, about many secularists who have become preoccupied with what is "acceptable" and "respectable". Christian dogma, in the main, still decides the "correct" attitudes and behaviour in our society. The heterosexual and monogamous marriage is a foundation stone of our society, especially in terms of economics and social control. A "gay marriage", which John Watson suggests, would be a horrible parody, and extend one of the most powerful agencies for social control to gay people. Surely as secularists we should be fighting Christian indoctrination, not advocating measures to shore up the tottering edifice of the present Christian system. Gay liberation advocates the freedom to choose alternative lifestyles, not the adoption of social camouflage.

DAVID NICKSON

## INFLUENCE OF RELIGION

As I strongly disagree with the letter from Michael Rubinstein, ("The Freethinker", December 1978) I would ask how a convinced atheist (for want of a better name) can be either worried or confused because of his conclusion that there is no God, or that in any way he should need to be sustained by faith.

Surely no atheist holds such irreversible tenets frivolously, but must have progressed from an enquiring agnosticism, questioning the logicity of any form of deism and making a study of the facts of geology, biology and science generally. The mounting evidence assimilated, given time to study the subject, becomes so overwhelming that one is just as convinced as to what is the square of four.

The remarks of such an intellectual nonentity as our "Blundering Prince" are hardly worthy of comment. To attempt to seek and retain popularity he has to be "All things to all men".

As Mr Rubinstein would discount all church, school and military parades and religious propaganda organisations as counter-productive, would he also discount the often insidious press and radio propaganda and religious indoctrination in schools.

My experience over 60 years has been the opposite and I have found that most children brought up with a strong religious background remain supporters of the church. Long service police and servicemen, whatever their other good qualities, after years of indoctrination are invariably conservative, royalist, contemptible of foreigners in general and coloured ones particularly.

Can anyone deny that Nazi propaganda amongst German youth was the main reason they fought so tenaciously and committed such crimes? Nor that the indoctrination of Soviet youth with a more idealistic philosophy gave them a strength of purpose which in Churchill's words "Knocked the guts out of the German army".

W. E. CHAPMAN

## GREEN LIGHT

The Rev Ian Paisley has strongly attacked a Bill in Parliament to give a better deal to prostitutes. The Protection of Prostitutes Bill was introduced by Ms Maureen Colquhoun, who said the present laws were "an invitation to treat all prostitute women unjustly and have attacked their civil liberties and lost them their human rights".

In lambasting the proposals, the Rev Ian Paisley said: "I believe that in all sections of this House there is a concern that the standards that have made this nation and protected its womenfolk in the past are in serious jeopardy". It was clear that this was a scheme "to undermine all the laws at the very heart of the moral fabric of our society". What has the Rev Paisley done to prevent religion, which he so fanatically proclaims, from undermining the peace and security of the citizens of Northern Ireland?

If the Bill were allowed through it would be, in Mr Paisley's eyes, "A green light for many people". (Laughter in the House.) "Those who are laughing know the colours of prostitutes — I must plead ignorance."

The play "Whose Life Is It Anyway" by Brian Clarke about euthanasia (see "The Freethinker", April 1978) is proving a worldwide success. It is being produced in several European countries, North America and Japan, suggesting that the topic is regarded with great interest throughout the world.



## MORNING ASSEMBLIES

One aspect of the 1944 Educational Act which secularists would most like to abolish is the clause insisting that the day "shall begin with collective worship on the part of all pupils in attendance at the school. . ." A new pamphlet\* *Assemblies in County Schools*, produced by the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, suggests this clause should be interpreted as liberally as possible.

The pamphlet considers some of the problems of holding a service at morning assembly these days: since 1944 social attitudes to religion have changed, the population of some areas has become multi-racial and multi-credal, many members of staff have reservations about assembly, and "children may lack understanding and interest in such assemblies, since their parents may have an entirely secular outlook".

Put more bluntly, as is well-known, a collective act of worship every morning is either impossible or a farcical routine. The pamphlet admits that "in a substantial sample of secondary schools drawn from all parts of the country a very great majority are in one way or another in breach of the strict requirements of the Act". It is therefore suggested that we abandon the idea that "school assembly ought to be an act of Christian worship in the commonly accepted sense".

The Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education recommends an assembly which does not require belief or commitment. The assembly should take very varied forms and include aims such as "to widen the pupils' repertoire of appropriate emotional responses to such areas as human need and compassion or to beauty", or "to demonstrate the values which are not controversial and upon which democratic society depends". The humanist approach of *Wider Horizons* (published by the British Humanist Association) is approved: "human achievement and the mystery of human existence are focussed in such themes as courage, achievement, love, compassion, wonder, imagination, joy, suffering and hope".

It is good to see a religious committee admit that it is well-nigh impossible to keep the traditional school morning service going. However, the vague, good-willed dose of morning get-together (something between a drama lesson and recipe-for-living demonstration) may be acceptable to some: but why pretend that it has *anything* to do with religion? Why not scrap the clause and let schools devise corporate activities by the same process of discussion and experiment with which they prepare the sporting or academic activities. (The absurd current notion that you can teach "implicit religion" as something like a psychotherapy for deep experiences needs dealing with at greater length on another occasion.)

Although a liberal high-minded committee may put forward progressive proposals, the average staff

room may not carry them out. There is an inexorable pressure in the day to day hurly-burly of school life to do what has always been done and to do that which involves the least trouble. So the old hymn, reading and prayer will probably go on, however many pamphlets suggest "breaking boundaries by some common element, such as is found in festivals of light". (Thank heavens the capitals are not there. This will presumably be organised by optics experts in the physics department.)

*Assemblies in Schools* says that "An assembly that is concerned with an aspect of school organisation or discipline should be seen to be quite separate from a normal assembly". How many head teachers who follow "Amen" almost automatically with "Will those caught pushing on their way to assembly this morning please. . ." will take any note of this?

While the clause relating to acts of worship remains unaltered any bigoted teacher or evangelical parent has a strong weapon for protesting about assemblies whose religious content is marginal.

\* *Assemblies in County Schools*, Inner London Education Authority, County Hall, London SE1. 30p.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

### FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

A PUBLIC MEETING TO BE HELD ON  
24 MAY, AT CONWAY HALL

CLEMENT FREUD  
CRISPIN AUBREY

Further speakers to be announced

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

(founded 1866)

Membership details from

NSS, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

"Rentaprecenta" begins a small ad in which Canon Joseph Poole, retired precentor, offers his services (literally). He claims that there could be a big demand for his experience in arranging ceremonies and choosing liturgy. When will the "Rentacongregation" ad appear?



other a responsibility to established institutions. He was not himself a church-warden—but he could see the value of change being brought about under the cloak of the establishment.

He thought of himself as a secularist of a not very aggressive kind. His mildness as a secularist derived from it being a quiet, deep conviction, from the fact that he thought the Judeo-Christian tradition too deeply a part of our culture to be quickly eliminated, and because atheism was now a respectable position to hold.

The increase of superstition, at a time when the churches were declining, was a serious matter. He hoped *The Freethinker* would continue to counter magic and debased religion. In toasting the National Secular Society he advocated a "mildly aggressive approach".

Barbara Smoker, in thanking Lord Raglan, said she herself was more than "mild" in her opposition to religion. She then introduced Barry Duke, a South African journalist, who was replying on behalf of the Society.

Barry Duke described his experience of life in South Africa as a "closet-atheist" in a repressive society. He told how on arrival in England he had heard a broadcast in which Barbara Smoker was speaking and realised that "his spiritual home lay somewhere within the NSS". He concluded that as long as religious bigotry and humbug continued "we will continue to need the support of distinguished people such as the members speaking this evening".

## 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 Whiteabbey 66752.

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** AGM. Sunday, 6 May, 4.30 pm. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove.

**Havering and District Humanist Society.** Mr G. Sacha: "Sikhism". Tuesday, 17 April, 8 pm. Harold Wood Social Centre (Junction of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road).

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism—a talk. Thursday, 26 April, 7.45 pm. Unitarian Meeting House, 31 Bromley Road, Catford.

**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.)

**Merseyside Humanist Group.** Anne Robinson: "Buddhism—an Atheistic Religion". Wednesday, 18 April, 7.45 pm. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Further enquiries 051-608 3835 or 051-342 2562.

**South Place Ethical Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1. Sunday Morning Meetings, 11 am. 8 April, James Hemming: Jesus Revaluated. 22 April, Richard Holme: Values and Constitutional Reform. 29 April, Sir Hermann Bondi: Energy. 6 May, Harold Blackham: Fables. Sunday Forums, 3 pm. 8 April, Barbara Smoker: C. K. Ogden and Basic English. 22 April, John Burbidge: Mondragon and New Methods of Industrial Organisation. Tuesday Discussions, 7 pm. 10 April, Dr J. A. M. Martin: Problems of the Late Talking Child. 24 April, Dorothy Coleman: Identifying and Understanding Gifted Children.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Jim Herrick: "Religious Cults—Harmful or Helpful?" Wednesday, 11 April, 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton.

**West Glamorgan Humanist Group.** Colin Campbell: "Humanism in a Post-Industrial Society". Friday, 27 April, 7.30 pm. R.I.S.W. (Museum), further information contact Walter Grainger, 24 Glangyrafon Gardens, Sketty.

**Worthing Humanist Group.** Francis Bennion: "The Limits of Permissiveness". Sunday, 29 April, 5.30 pm. Burlington Hotel, Marine Parade, Worthing.

**Humanist Summer Course.** Dartmouth House, London, 3-10 August, 1979. Talks to include: Beata Bishop: Shifting Authority from 'out there' to 'in here'. Victor Serebriakoff: Intelligence and permissiveness: do we need a standard? Barbara Smoker: Permissiveness: progress or pendulum? Details from Margaret Chisman, 41 Penn Road, London N7 9RE.

**Humanist Holidays.** 11-25 August 1979. Accommodation at Lowestoft, Suffolk. About £64 per week. Camping and caravan possibilities. Details Mrs M. Mephram, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey.

## THE FREETHINKER

Editor: JIM HERRICK

702 HOLLOWAY ROAD  
LONDON N19 3NL  
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: £2.40 Six months: £1.25  
U.S.A. and Canada: Twelve months: \$6.00 Six months: \$3.00

Please make cheques, etc, payable to G. W. Foote & Company. (Foreign subscriptions by cheque or International Money Order.)

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