

# The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly founded 1881

Vol. 99, No. 7

JULY 1979

20p

## MR CORRIE, MP, CONCOCTS A NEW AMENDMENT TO THE 1967 ABORTION ACT

After 11 years during which the general public and the medical profession have come to accept the value of the 1967 Abortion Act, Parliament is now likely to face another private member's Bill which will seek to limit the possibilities of women who choose an abortion. There can be no doubt that the Catholic anti-abortion lobby, despite its unrepresentative nature, has long sought this move. If it succeeds it will prove one of the worst modern examples of religious groups wrecking social progress.

John Corrie, Conservative MP for Ayrshire, drew first place in the private members' ballot, thus gaining the opportunity of putting forward a piece of legislation of his own choosing. He has made it clear that he intends to use his chance to bring an Abortion Amendment Act. At the time of going to press he has not revealed any of the details. (Indeed the two weeks which he has spent hawking about what Bill to introduce makes one ask if he needed careful briefing on a subject about which he was not very knowledgeable.)

The most likely change is to limit from 28 to 20 weeks the time during which an abortion is legally permissible, perhaps with an exception of 24 weeks for those fetuses likely to be deformed. So late abortions may be a particular target. Other likely measures are a tightening of the licensing of private clinics, and a strengthening of the conscience clause for nurses to opt out on religious, moral and other grounds. There is also a possibility that the grounds for abortion will be made altogether more rigorous and severe. The Bill could therefore become a hotch-potch re-run of attempts by James White, MP, and William Benyon, MP, to limit the scope of the 1967 Abortion Act in the past. A novel aspect could be the introduction of more rights for the father (shades of the Paton case).

Madeleine Simms of the Birth Control Trust com-

mented that any legislation would be an "act of desperation". She said "There have been 11 years for the public to choose not to use the 1967 law, and on the contrary the public has widely accepted it". Suzie Hayman of Brook Advisory Centre said that "Attempts to limit the Act could hit hardest those with social problems, or the young, and increase the likelihood of people going abroad for abortions". Diane Munday of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service has commented that she hopes people will write to their MPs making it clear that they are satisfied with the present working of the 1967 Act.

### Reduction of Upper Limit

The reduction of the upper time limit from 28 to 20 weeks would particularly hit vulnerable groups, although it would not affect a large proportion of those at present obtaining abortions. Under one per cent of abortions are later than 20 weeks. Young people, according to Suzie Hayman, are especially prone to present themselves late for an abortion. This is because they are most loth to admit they are pregnant, have most difficulty in communicating with parents or doctors and are least able to face up to the situation.

It is widely acknowledged that it is preferable not to abort as late as 28 weeks, but a new Act once launched could cause distress by enforcing rigorous conditions. If attempts are coming to make the grounds for obtaining an abortion more severe, there are dangers that we could reach the situation where a woman has to have a certificate from a psychiatrist before she can have an abortion.

Any attempts to limit the private sector would be extremely ironic at a time when the new govern-

*(Continued over)*

ment is giving support to the expansion of private medicine. The private sector's contribution in the area of abortion is one of its most efficient aspects, and is used by all sections of the community. Some people prefer the private clinic because they fear that National Health Service nurses will be critical of them, and because there can be much greater delay in the NHS. There would be a more acceptable argument for lowering the upper time limit and reducing the private sector if the NHS provided an effective, quick and regionally consistent service to people. This is not everywhere the case.

There is no evidence that the public want restrictions to the operation of the 1967 Act. On the contrary, a considerable proportion of the population would like to see grounds for abortion made easier. A National Opinion Poll in February 1979 showed that 59 per cent of the respondents agreed with the statement "Abortion should be made legally available for all who want it". (An increase from 52 per cent when the question was asked in 1975.)

Two Roman Catholic candidates stood in the General Election with opposition to abortion as their main platform. In Sutton and Cheam, John Smoker stood as a pro-life independent, with his emphasis on abortion. He received 128 votes. In York, Francis Radcliffe ran as a Christian to Stop Abortion Candidate and received 569 votes. Almost all National Front and Ecological Party candidates received higher proportions of the vote than these two—and none of them received many votes. Even Mr Fox, standing for the Silly Party, gained 638 votes!

As important as the acceptance by the general public is the changed attitude of the medical profession. Leading members of the British Medical Association, who were dubious about an abortion act in the sixties, have become convinced that it alleviates suffering and is not used as a method of contraception. Although individual GPs and consultants retain their objections (as is their right), there is now widespread acceptance of the 1967 Act by the medical profession.

### Catholic Influence

So why, given the nature of public opinion and the views of the medical profession, are there continual attempts to amend the 1967 Abortion Act? The answer must be the Catholic lobby: and in particular the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child and LIFE, which, while not solely Catholic organisations, are heavily supported by the Catholic hierarchy. It is also interesting to note the high proportion of Catholics in key positions in the new government. The leader of the house, who is in a strong position to give parliamentary time to an anti-abortion Bill, is Norman St John Stevas, who has long intermingled his Catholicism and politics and wrote a regular column for the *Catholic Herald* until recently. Other strong opponents of abortion

in the cabinet are Humphrey Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and Sir Keith Joseph.

Another factor about the new parliament is that it contains so few women—and it will be remembered what a crucial role women such as Renée Short, Maureen Colquhoun and Audrey Wise played in opposing the Benyon Bill. The world's media has commented with excited astonishment on the first British woman Prime Minister; but there has been less comment on the reduction of the number of women MPs from 27 to 19.

### Myth-Mongering

A recurring factor in the attempts to bring an abortion amendments is the myth-mongering which always precedes such efforts. The myths of *Babies for Burning*, vigorously exposed in *The Freethinker*, played an important part in swinging the views of MPs in the past. During the run-up to the recent election, not surprisingly, a number of news stories broke giving weight to anti-abortion arguments, especially grisly tales about live foetuses. The story about an aborted baby "crying out" in a Wanstead hospital came out at the time of the fall of the Labour government—but the alleged incident had taken place months earlier. The press was able to build up a quite unjustified picture of frequent late abortions by women who change their mind at the last minute, whereas in fact almost all abortions would take place within the first 12 weeks if facilities were adequate.

When the details of Mr Corrie's proposals are clear, it will be most important that MPs are contacted by members of their constituencies who do not want a change. The first vote will be on July 13 and by then MPs—many of whose views are as yet unknown—must make up their mind on the proposals. The proportion of the vote in the House given to Corrie's Bill is most significant since it will determine the character of the Select Committee—and that is the stage at which much more radical restrictions could be introduced if the Committee is packed with anti-abortionists. Jill Turner wrote in *New Society* (21 June 1979) that "John Corrie's private member's Bill to amend abortion law is a very hungry wolf in sheep's clothing". It will be at the Committee stage that this suggestion will be tested. (Remember SPUC and LIFE would like ultimately to completely remove the right of a woman to choose an abortion.)

History and social studies show that legislation cannot stop abortion. It can only remove it from public view—abroad, to the back street, to the back ditch (in the more distant past). But the Catholic Church, having effectively failed in its battle over the use of artificial contraception, seems determined to fight the abortion issue — as a way of retaining credibility, perhaps?

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# His Grace Hare Krishna Das and Her Logic Miss Barbara Smoker

JIM HERRICK

A public debate took place in Conway Hall on 18 May 1979 between a leader of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the President of the National Secular Society. Barbara Smoker had been invited by His Grace Hare Krishna Das to publicly defend atheism. The occasion was in some respects bizarre, and in the tradition of nineteenth century public debates between atheists and Christians. One member of the audience addressed his question to His Grace Swami Das and Her Logic Barbara Smoker.

The bright lights glared onto the platform. The camera for making a video film was poised, pointing at the protagonists. Swami Das, ceremonially robed and with monkish shaven head, sat opposite Barbara Smoker, resplendent in colourful poncho. (Despite his Eastern garb, Swami Das was a forceful young Dutchman with noticeable accent.) Between them Geoffrey Webster, an occasional contributor to *The Freethinker* and frequent attender at the Temple of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in Soho, prepared to chair the debate in Conway Hall.

An audience of more than 200, most of whom were Hare Krishna supporters, eagerly prepared to listen to a conclusive demonstration that atheism was logically and scientifically impossible. The key points to be debated, according to the posters proclaiming PUBLIC DEBATE, were "Life does not originate from chemicals", "God is both scientifically verifiable and logically admissible", and "Human suffering does not contest the existence of God".

However, the debate, though energetically pursued from seven to ten in the evening, was intellectually disappointing, above all because Swami Das appeared determined to repeat the same arguments endlessly without recourse to discussion or ability to meet the points Barbara Smoker put to him with great perseverance and patience in an atmosphere of hostility. In a high-technology environment — whirring cameras, flashing cameras — the protagonists sat before gleaming microphones. The crowds of Hare Krishna supporters enthusiastically cheered and clapped His Grace Das whenever he triumphantly or harshly raised his voice, as though intellectual victory depended upon vocal power. Indeed, there was an unhappily pugilistic air in the hall, hardly conducive to open debate.

The two speakers both opened with a 15-minute outline of their position. First Hare Krishna Das argued that there was scientific evidence for the existence of God. Since none of the chemical elements themselves possessed a quality of consciousness, there was no way in which they could com-

bine together to create conscious beings without the existence of some other spiritual energy.

He attacked the theory of evolution, which he assumed was essential to the materialist philosophy. His criticisms of evolutionary theory were threefold. Firstly, creation of living cells could not be scientifically explained. Secondly, genetic mutation could not be the mechanism of evolution, since most mutations are regressive and lead to degeneration; he proudly quoted a little known mathematician who had demonstrated the impossibly high odds against favourable mutations occurring on a sufficient scale to produce complex creatures. Thirdly, the principle of natural selection could not lead to complex organs, such as the eye, something which had even astonished Darwin, as he quoted. The impossibility of evolution in his view proved the existence of a spiritual force in the universe responsible for creating fully developed creatures and acting as a guiding, integrating force.

Barbara Smoker, in presenting her position, countered some of these arguments. She referred to the history of philosophical argument about dualism since Descartes, and accepted that, of course, human consciousness existed. Consciousness, she explained, was a quality developed from the central nervous system and the brain was the seat of consciousness. Although consciousness looking at itself could not totally explain itself, nothing was gained by speculating on "a god of the gaps" to explain what is yet inexplicable.

## Origins of Life

The fact that living cells had come from energy, which did not possess consciousness, did not destroy the materialist case. There was serious scientific speculation that at an earlier period in the earth's history, when conditions were different, complex amino acids had emerged, which in their turn could develop into DNA chains which replicate themselves (in a way admittedly not yet completely understood).

Mutation, which related to adaption to the environment, was visible in the time-scale of our lives. Insects, for instance, changed colour in grimy cities, and rabbits had taken to trees in Australia. She said that to quote Darwin's astonishment at the complexity of the eye, was absurd, since there was no question of the complete eye evolving suddenly with no previous development. More primitive eyes existed, which could only distinguish light and dark.

Barbara Smoker pointed out that different elements could combine to create qualities which they did not separately possess. When hydrogen and oxygen combine they create a quality of wetness. By the Swami's argument God was "the great wet

in the sky". (Hints of humour were not appreciated by the audience.)

Atheists, Barbara Smoker concluded, value the scientific method and its careful examination of facts and evidence.

After a break the debate turned into a more continuous exchange. The arguments about evolution, probability, consciousness, and scientific method went round and round, with cheers that bore no relation to the circularity of an argument in which positions were continuously restated. Cries from Hare Krishna disciples such as "Science is religion" did not add to the intellectual level of the debate. (Although such a catchphrase indicates clearly how Hare Krishna devotees are impressed by scientific jargon without any desire to undergo the rigours of comprehending scientific theory.)

After about an hour the arguments were becoming repetitive and the few secularists requested a more open discussion with questions and contributions from the floor. The Swami firmly refused until the last half hour. Barbara Smoker in a subsequent letter to him referred to "Your reluctance to permit adequate audience participation (even though my supporters were obviously outnumbered by yours)" as an indication that "you lack sufficient faith in your arguments to allow them to be exposed to a free and equal discussion and debate."

The Swami's insistence on spending such a disproportionate amount of the three hours debate on the refutation of evolution and an attempt at "scientific proof of God" perhaps arose from his determination to continue until his arguments were seen to be conclusive. This point was not, of course, reached.

### Problem of Suffering

Later the problem of the existence of suffering in a world created by an omniscient, beneficent force was discussed. The ISKCON theory is that suffering is a consequence of behaviour in a former life, so that those who suffer are being punished for previous misbehaviour. Barbara Smoker asked if this meant that someone born with a physical defect, such as a spina bifida baby, was being punished for misdemeanours in an earlier life and was told "Yes". "Then your God is a big policeman," she said—a concept about which the audience were rapturously enthusiastic.

The objections to this explanation of suffering were explained by Barbara Smoker. There was no way in which identity could be said to survive and pass into another being, so that it could not possibly be the same person who was suffering as the one who had misbehaved. (It might be asked—how can moral growth come from punishment for behaviour of which the person has no memory?) Barbara Smoker said of the Hare Krishna concept of God that if she met him or it "Far from worshipping him, I'd spit in his eye". This produced a gasp of horror

from the audience.

During the shortish question session at the end of the evening there was an unexpected moment. In asking a hypothetical question one of the audience said "This is a gun here and if I were to shoot you, why would that matter if there is no meaning to life?" (Barbara Smoker has told me that she experienced momentary alarm, so unusual was the atmosphere of the evening.) To this piece of play-acting, Barbara Smoker pointed out that like all creatures she had a strong instinct for survival. Something which she had amply demonstrated throughout the evening.

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As an epilogue, I mention a visit which Barbara Smoker and a couple of secularists took to the Hare Krishna Temple in Soho Street, at the invitation of Swami Das. Observing the conclusion of one of their ceremonies gave me a headache. The chanting, jumping, swaying, and electric organ, cymbal clanking and drum bonking was not unlike a disco—people seemed to be enjoying it, but I don't personally much like noisy discos either. At the end of the room, instead of a strobe light show, were colourful hardboard deities, wafting incense, and an occasional wave from a whisk that looked like a hybrid of a giant feather duster and Ken Dodd's tickling stick. From time to time food—a milk bottle, or the unknown contents of a paper-bag—was placed in front of the deities. The contrast between primitive and modern was highlighted by electric wires (as yet connected to nothing) dangling around a room filled with images of primitive gods.

After the ceremony and a lecture by Swami Das, Barbara Smoker continued her discussion over a wide range of topics in a more informal and amicable way than before. On their home ground the Hare Krishna people were—whatever the strangeness of their beliefs—at least warm and friendly to guests.

### Value of Public Debate

Well, was it all worth it? In every age it has been important to challenge the deist claims of religious groups. Today debate with Christianity is rather like unravelling wool, or—to change metaphors—arguing with a chameleon: now the incarnation of Jesus is a myth, now it isn't; now hell is a negative state of mind, now it is a positive tug into the forces of evil. The more fundamental religions—Eastern as well as Western—at least put forward some propositions which have sufficient consistency and clarity to debate. And they are less inclined than established Christians to assume that their vague beliefs need no defence.

The age of public debate has given way to the age of television debate in the privacy of home. But watching TV is so passive an experience, discussion

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# Disastrous Precedent of New Church School

The speakers at a meeting on the topic of Church Schools held by the National Secular Society in Conway Hall on 14 June were Mr Martin Maycock, Secretary of the Ealing High Schools Defence Campaign and John White, Chairman of the British Humanist Association Education Committee. In the chair was G. N. Deodhekar an Indian secularist and teacher. The meeting considered both the situation in Ealing, where a secondary school is likely to be sold to the Church of England, and the general question of the role of church schools in society.

A resolution passed at the public meeting stated: "This public meeting called by the National Secular Society expresses its opposition to the proposal to close Twyford High School and sell it to the Church of England to be used as a voluntary aided church secondary school.

"It regards the closure of a multi-faith school and its replacement by a denominational school as damaging to community relations and as constituting a disastrous precedent.

"It calls for the greatest degree of public debate and a formal public inquiry under the terms of the 1944 Education Act if the proposals are made under Section 13."

Mr Deodhekar opened the meeting with two questions: do we need more or less church schools? and what can be done about the sale of a school to the Church of England in Ealing?

Mr Maycock, who has two children at Twyford school, described the background to the proposed sale of this school. It was clear that he cared passionately about the future of education in the borough. Much of the background has already been outlined in *The Freethinker* (June 1979) and further details may be obtained from the Ealing High Schools Defence Campaign.

He stressed a number of very important aspects of this special case. Twyford school has been pioneered as a downtown comprehensive, which has successfully promoted standards of excellence and created an atmosphere of racial harmony in a multi-racial area. Teachers, pupils, parents—who had a strong affection for the school—were bound to suffer from the sale of the school.

The rationale for a Church of England secondary school came from a low-key demand from some Anglican parents in the borough. But there had not been sufficient strength of feeling about the need for a church secondary school in the area at the time of re-organisation five years earlier for the Church of England to put in a bid for a school at that time. A survey had indicated some support for a church school, but the question which had never been put

to all the parents in the borough was—do you want your children educated separately according to religion?

There had been outstanding reluctance on the part of the Tory controlled borough to discuss the matter fully with community relations' groups, teachers' groups and parents' associations. The public discussion and consultation which we expect in public life was not taking place.

The Ealing High School Defence Campaign would now make every effort to lodge objections with the Minister of Education and there was provision—but not precedent—for a public inquiry, if sufficient public concern could be mobilised.

It would be a disastrous precedent to have an expansion of the voluntary aided sector at a time of falling school roles, because this could re-establish a two-tier educational system. Mr Maycock, himself a member of the Society of Friends, declared that the creation of denominational islands within the educational system was morally objectionable—even some Anglicans in the area agreed with this.

John White exposed some of the continuing defects of denominational schools. He quoted an advertisement for a teaching post which insisted that the applicant must be a Roman Catholic and said that there was no other area of employment where this kind of discrimination would be allowed.

The whole movement of education in recent years had been away from dogmatic teaching towards an open-ended approach. So that those church schools which retained the attempt to purvey their own doctrine—in-doctrination—were working against the surge of educational opinion favouring open-ended teaching.

John White explained that the Ealing sale, if successful, would seriously undercut the arguments of moderate religious leaders who were tempering the demands within ethnic communities for separate schools. Northern Ireland showed us how harmful and divisive separate schooling could be in creating misunderstanding and antagonisms.

Some examples of the deplorable narrowness with which church schools could still operate were given by John White. A colleague of his who had applied for a position as Head of a History Department in a Catholic school had been told that in teaching about the Reformation she would be expected to make amends for 400 years of misrepresentation about the Catholic Church. His own experience as an Examiner in English Literature had shown him that some schools, which he assumed were church ones, could lay down doctrinaire interpretations of literature, which prevented that very sensitivity and thoughtfulness which was the aim of literary study. He

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## POT AND KETTLE

Freethinkers mostly had mixed feelings about the Pope's triumphal visit to his native Poland last month.

Standing, as we do, for freedom of thought and speech, and tending to favour a people against a state, most of us could not help rejoicing at the discomfiture of a totalitarian government which, agreeing reluctantly to the papal visit, obviously did not bargain for its enormous success. On the other hand, of course, the RC Church itself has been a totalitarian power that oppressed the people of Europe for more than a thousand years.

John Paul had the good fortune of sunny weather for his visit. Without that, the crowds would certainly have been far smaller and less exuberant. Among the traditional peasant costumes was a sprinkling of Western jeans, some worn with T-shirts bearing the motto "JP II". And many of the people camped out overnight to see and hear the Pope again and again—thus adding to the impression of their number.

He once trained as an actor, and in this real-life drama he was able to stage-manage his part for all it was worth — at times, a lone, white-clad figure, arms outstretched, striding across a wide arena, surrounded by many thousands of devotees; at others, being pressed close by them, and hugging children emotionally. And all the time symbolising in his person the spirit of old Poland—which, like auld Ireland, is very much identified with the Catholic faith.

The crowd was his orchestra and he their conductor. He made them laugh and cry and pray. And when they broke into song he would harmonise in a strong baritone. He was undoubtedly a great theatrical success.

And success bred success. The Pope's sermons and speeches, which were on the level of cautious diplomacy at the start of his visit, became bolder day by day, with denunciations of religious oppression and censorship and the indoctrination of children—denunciations that come ill from the successor to a long line of religious tyrants and censors and indoctrinators. In fact, it is a clear case of the pot calling the kettle black.

Yet, with only one or two exceptions, the press and media in this country reported the visit so uncritically as almost to undo the Reformation. A forthright exception was Peter Forster, who wrote in the *Evening Standard*:

"All very well to dithyramb on about the Pope's return to Poland, which was indeed a very remarkable visit by a very remarkable man, but its significance for those who are neither Catholic nor Polish has to do plainly with testing whether there is metal fatigue in the Iron Curtain. Had they been black peasants walking across the fields to hear the holy man I suspect *The Observer* would have noted their

exploitation by mumbo-jumbo, and when the ITN voice throbbed about proof of the Church's hold on Poland, many may have reminded themselves that such a hold rests upon dogma as unpalatable as Communism."

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(*New Church School*)

knew of a case where children in a junior school had been invited to bring a book of their own choice to read one afternoon, and a child had been told on opening a book about evolution never to bring such a wicked book into school again.

The much vaunted cry of parental choice was not always valued by church leaders, who used it to justify the existence of church schools. He quoted a church leader who had said "The Church and God have rights which override those of parents". (In the International Year of the Child perhaps we should ensure that the rights of the child are not overridden by Church or God.)

John White asked if Twyford school, when the property of the Church of England, would exhibit any of these failings. He said that when he had described the situation in Ealing to teachers and parents in other areas of London, they had not been able to believe what was about to happen.

The chairman, Mr Deodhekar, pointed out that the ethnic communities were at present mild in their requests for separate schools, but that the sale of Twyford could prove a turning point and develop a clamour for segregated schools of many religions. He also said that Asian groups, who placed a very high value on educational achievement, would deeply resent a two-tier system in which excellence appeared to be preserved for church schools from which they were effectively excluded.

John White had concluded his talk by quoting a letter by Tyrell Burgess in the *Guardian* (12 June 1979): "At a time when organised religion has lost voluntary support it has turned to raiding the public purse. Every change in the 1944 settlement has been in favour of the churches, and it is hard to see that they have given anything in return. It is time to call a halt and Ealing is as good a place to start as anywhere."

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**Delicate matters have thrown bishops into such a pother that they are holding secret sessions before the next General Synod. The controversial issues of the Church of England's report on homosexuality and the right of overseas women priests to officiate when in England will be discussed behind closed doors. The House of Bishops' meetings, normally open to the public, will be private for debate on these topics.**

**It's understandable that bishops should not want to wash their dirty linen in public, but secrecy ensures suspicion that the linen needs washing.**

# JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

For the benefit of those readers who are unfamiliar with the Lourdes legend let it be recalled that in 1858 a 14-year-old girl named Bernadette Soubirous claimed that she had encountered the Virgin Mary in a grotto near the French village where she lived. Like most vision-spotters, Bernadette was an illiterate peasant who lived in an area where the priest had considerable authority and influence. Just before the sightings—she “saw” the Virgin Mary on 18 occasions—Bernadette had been going to the nuns for instruction in preparation for her first communion.

She would fall into a trance while praying at the grotto and before long crowds were assembling to watch her. On one occasion she scraped the ground and water appeared (which was hardly surprising as the grotto was close to a river). Soon she attracted the attention of the local Church hierarchy, and after questioning the girl they accepted her story and permitted Lourdes to become a place of pilgrimage.

Bernadette entered a convent at nearby Nevers where she died young, having been in poor health since childhood. She is now numbered among the saints. Perhaps an early death was a factor which helped to put her in the superstar bracket with St Teresa of Avila and St Catherine Labouré. For pointing fingers and wagging tongues could not harm Bernadette, whereas other visionaries, after the initial furore had subsided, went on to lead lives that neither inspired piety nor commended them to the Church authorities.

When Bernadette Soubirous scratched the ground in ecstasy she produced not just a trickle of muddy water but a river of gold. For over a century the Church and its agencies, together with the wily shopkeepers, hoteliers and the citizens of Lourdes, have exploited hopeful pilgrims who arrive in their millions from all parts of the world to visit the shrine. Lourdes is no longer a village but one of the richest towns in France.

Most of the pilgrims come to Lourdes seeking a cure, and the spectacle of thousands of victims of illness, accident and deformity praying for a miracle is a stark condemnation of those who exploit human frailty and gullibility. Of course many cures have been claimed; crutches and other aids adorn the grotto wall, an exhibition which prompted Anatole France to enquire: “What, no wooden legs?”

This year’s pilgrimage had elements of farce and a lack of peaceableness that would have sent the Virgin Mary winging back to the celestial realms in

double-quick time. At one stage there was a real danger of violence when a group of pilgrims clashed with Archbishop Lefebvre’s followers who were holding a service on the basilica steps. Other pilgrims intervened just in time to prevent a very nasty and embarrassing holy shindig.

Ironically, it was an “act of God” that led to this confrontation. Acting on the precept that whom he loveth he chasteneth, the all-loving God smote the sick pilgrims with thunderstorms and torrential rain, flooding the grotto and forcing the organisers to transfer the ceremonies to an area by the basilica. This caused the rebel archbishop’s followers and their Romanist brethren to meet eyeball to eyeball.

The Archbishop of Lourdes had previously denounced the unauthorised service, declaring that it would delay proceedings and cause great suffering among the sick. The archbishop’s chagrin with Lefebvre’s traditionalists is understandable, but surely he was being rather hypocritical when expressing concern for the sick pilgrims. The Archbishop of Lourdes must know that an incalculable amount of human suffering is caused every year by the cures and relics industry. Church leaders join forces with commercial interests in encouraging people to undertake a journey which undermines their already precarious state of health, raises false hopes and depletes their financial resources. How many deaths are accelerated by the stress of a pilgrimage to Lourdes and all that it entails?

The faith of our own Catholic hierarchy in miracle cures was illustrated by Bishop Langton Fox, who accompanied the Welsh National Pilgrimage and suffered a slight stroke while at Lourdes. Did the bishop rely on the Virgin Mary and St Bernadette in his hour of need? Not likely; he flew back to Britain and entered hospital for medical treatment.

The bishop’s condition is reported as being “comfortable”—which is more than can be said for most victims of the Lourdes racket.

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Graham Bright, MP (Conservative, Luton East), was mightily upset by the refusal by some Labour Members of Parliament to pick up the Bible during the recent swearing-in ceremony at the House of Commons. He declared that “a tremendous number of Socialists . . . have an affirmation without the Bible. It was staggering.”

It is most gratifying to hear of the insistence on affirming by a “tremendous number” of MPs, although perhaps we should, out of humanist charity, feel sorry for Mr Bright who got the staggers so early in his parliamentary career.

The episode of which the Member for Luton East complained prompts a number of questions. First, did every Conservative MP who dutifully lifted the Bible during the ceremony really believe that its contents, from Genesis to Revelation, are the infallible

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## BANK STATEMENT

Lloyds Bank holds an Annual Church Service (presumably to celebrate the text "to them who hath shall more be given"). This year a service was held in May at St Michael's Church in the City of London.

Outside, a leaflet was distributed by the Chile Committee for Human Rights, pointing out that Lloyds Bank has played a considerable part in giving financial support to the Chilean military Junta. Lloyds claim to be politically neutral, but the Chile Committee for Human Rights accuses the bank of giving loans which have kept in power a junta which violates human rights. They say the Chilean military dictatorship has implemented vicious tactics, repeatedly condemned by the United Nations, which have resulted in over 30,000 dead, 2,500 disappeared, 1,000's tortured and imprisoned, and press censorship.

The manager of Lloyds Bank City Trust Branch, 39 Threadneedle Street, said he found the group's actions provocative and was irritated that "people are always so ready to condemn repression from the right and so rarely to expose it on the left".

In a letter to the Chile Committee for Human Rights he wrote:

"I am most grateful for the illiterate pamphlet handed to me as I entered St Michael's Church yesterday evening.

I was previously unaware of the extent of this Bank's involvement in Chile and was delighted to have this information. As a committed Christian, I wholeheartedly approve of this support for the present anti-Marxist Government."

## SECULARIST MYTH

Myths die hard. Even myths about secularists. On "University Challenge" a question about Annie Besant was answered with the statement that Charles Bradlaugh refused to take the Oath required to take his seat in Parliament. This was accepted as correct: but the "University Challenge" quiz setters need challenging.

Barbara Smoker, the current heir to Charles Bradlaugh as President of the National Secular Society, pointed out in a letter to London Weekend TV Ltd, that Bradlaugh "asked if he might make a solemn Affirmation instead of the religious Oath, as this would be more decorous", but when this was denied him he agreed to take the Oath "although to me including words of idle and meaningless character" and "a form less solemn to me than the affirmation I would have reverently made". He said he would consider himself "bound not by the letter of its words but by the spirit which the affirmation would have conveyed".

# NEWS

The letter continued: "It was his fellow MPs (by a vote of 275 to 230, with Queen Victoria backing the majority behind the scenes) who then refused to allow Bradlaugh to take the Oath, which he had been willing to take, and for five years he was denied the right to take the seat to which he had been elected. The persistent story that it was his own choice is simply propaganda. It was, in fact, a classic case of Catch 22."

## NEW SECULARIST GROUPS

Two new secular humanist groups have recently been formed.

The Open University Humanist Society held an inaugural meeting in Birmingham, with members attending from all corners of the country. The meeting unanimously endorsed its objects: to promote secular interests; to provide a rational alternative to religious groups and ideas within the Open University; and to encourage contact between those within the Open University wishing to promote these objects. The Society has affiliated to the National Secular Society and intends to publish a regular newsletter.

Students at the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology have formed the UWIST Secular Society. The secretary, Dave Robbins, writes that he was most anxious to "counter the activities of the college's highly active and influential Christian Union". The Society hopes to "promote the ethical principles of scientific humanism", to propagate "impartial knowledge of comparative mythology and religious history" and to counter the "irrational claims of religious organisations".

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The "superstar" pope, John Paul II, whose photogenic facility gives him a very modern air, may have difficulty insisting on the conservative Catholic principles to which he clearly intends to cling.

A Gallup poll survey of Roman Catholics in Scotland shows opinion to be significantly in favour of some liberalisation. More than 50 per cent of those interviewed agreed with birth control by artificial means and almost one quarter did not oppose abortion. Official attitudes to marriage are also not accepted. It was thought by 58 per cent that Catholics should be allowed to divorce, and 80 per cent sympathised with priests who leave to get married (a matter about which the Pope has made particularly stern pronouncements).

# OBITUARY

## JOHN CLAYTON

John (Jack) Clayton, a well-known lecturer and worker for the freethought movement in the north of England died recently aged 85, after a short illness. Mr Clayton was also former president of the North-Western Esperanto Federation. He is survived by a wife, son and daughter. A secular funeral was conducted at Burnley Crematorium.

## Freethinker Fund

Although the total is lower than sometimes (as tends to happen in the summer months) we much appreciate these donations. Thanks to: W. Aikenhead, £1.00; C. K. Bilbrough, 60p; F. Bradford, £1.60; I Campbell, £7.60; P. R. Chapman, £1.00; T. H. Ellison, £10.60; J. Gibson, £2.60; R. J. Hale, 60p; S. D. Kuebart, 60p; J. Lippitt, £3.00; J. Little, £2.06; W. F. Lockett, £2.60; H. Lyons-Davis, £1.00; T. W. Marsh, £1.00; J. P. A. Pattenden, 60p; A. R. J. Pitcher, 60p; A. M. Williamson, 25p. Total for the period 24 May to 18 June: £37.71.

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A Gay Humanist Group is being initiated by a group of gay humanists. The GHG will be offering leaflets during the Gay Pride Festival and an inaugural meeting will be held in Brighton in September.

The Gay Humanist Group aims to promote an understanding and awareness of humanism among gay people and to further an understanding and awareness of gay people among humanists. The group hopes to protect and promote the rights of gays and humanists and to oppose all forms of social oppression on the grounds of sexual orientation.

For further information contact, GHG, 45 Telford Avenue, London SW2.

# AND NOTES

## WORLDWIDE

### ISRAEL

The Mayor of Jerusalem, Mr Teddy Kollek, plans to build an Olympic-size sports stadium in northern Jerusalem. According to a report in the *Jewish Chronicle*, religious zealots have warned him that he will be cursed in a Cabalistic ceremony if he continues with his plans.

The 700-year-old ceremony heaps every curse "from Moses unto the present" upon the head of the victim. At the same time a black candle is lit and a black shofar is sounded.

### IRAN

Many former supporters of the Shah of Iran are being tried and executed by the new Islamic rule of Ayatollah Khomeini. Islamic law extends its range further—and mercilessly: three sexual offenders were executed in Iran at the end of May. One faced the firing squad for raping his nine-year-old niece. Two men were executed for homosexuality and offending public morals. Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Tribunal has announced its intention of purging Iran of corrupt elements.

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The Secretary of the National Secular Society, Jim Herrick, has resigned from the end of July (though he will remain "Freethinker" Editor). His successor has been appointed—Terry Mullins, a long-standing member of the Society.

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**THE FREETHINKER. 1978 Bound Volume. G. W. Foote & Co. £4.50, plus 36 p & p.**

The habit of designating particular periods of time (they are not even always a year) "the Year of Some Good Cause" has become bit of a bore. 1978 was, I think, International Anti-Apartheid Year, albeit a crucial world issue, as reflected in the amount of news and comment on southern Africa in *The Freethinker*. But for freethinkers the period covered by this volume can only be dubbed the Year of the Blasphemer and the Bigot. During 1978 *The Freethinker* carried nearly twenty items on the appeals in this case and the campaigns surrounding them. The repeated warnings of freethinkers were unfortunately vindicated, that seeming desuetude is no protection to freedom of expression while archaic offences lurk in the lumber room of the criminal law. *The Freethinker* even had the dubious distinction of contributing to the "administration of justice" by providing the only extant record of the judge's summing up in the last previous successful prosecution in 1922.

Along with the rest of my post *The Freethinker* gets picked up off the mat on the way to work. It is very handy, fitting easily into pockets to be pulled out and read at the inconvenience of London Transport. This means, however, that the copies tend to wander far from home. The bound volume has, therefore, long been for me an indispensable substitute for filing the monthly issues. But, in addition, a bound volume (provided it is not too large) provides a pleasure in use that a pile of loose parts never can. Be it for reference (what were the issues in the unsuccessful *Council of Love* blasphemy prosecution), or for browsing (how did Toms Foods Ltd come to appoint an Anglican clergyman) *The Freethinker* bound volume is a treasure house.

In 1978 readers will have particularly welcomed the return of former editor, Bill McIlroy, in a new regular series of "Jottings" in his usual trenchant, witty style. Another former editor, Nigel Sinnott, contributed a number of noteworthy articles, mainly on early secularism in Australia. It is a mark of *The Freethinker's* achievement that even the book reviews are of continuing interest, as will be realized when it is remembered that 1978 gave us Blackham on Ayer, Scorer on Hoyle, Blishen on Duffy, Bennion on Wistrich, Tribe on Blanshard—to name to most obvious. 1978 also saw the deaths of Len Ebury, Rose Bush and Phyllis Graham, whose impressive, though very different, services to the movement were recorded in substantial memoranda. An innovation in the 1978 bound volume is the provision of an index compiled by Francis Bennion, himself a regular contributor. This will further enhance its reference value.

# FREETHINKER

The pages of *The Freethinker* are the strongest argument against those who maintain that secularists are still fighting yesterday's battles. Blasphemy took up many thousands of words in 1978, just as nearly a century ago it brought notoriety to the journal, putting its founder editor and printer in gaol. The privileges of the Church of England and the extravagant claims of Roman Catholicism are still with us, no less dangerous or difficult to counter for (in general) being propounded with a little more circumspection and tending to dissolve into a generalized, vapid religiosity. Irrationalisms of all kinds and their anti-social consequences are as prevalent as ever. *The Freethinker* is the record of the struggle against these, a record of successes and set-backs, sometimes horrifying, sometimes entertaining, always rewarding.

CHRISTOPHER MOREY

**EDUCATION AND THE DEATH OF LOVE by Roy Stevens. Epworth Press, £2.50.**

Roy Stevens, says the blurb, is a "fringe Christian": presumably because his values are essentially humanist values. It's a long time since I read such a passionate, heartfelt book which had me cheering on almost every page.

Our education system is dehumanised and dehumanising, Stevens says, and it serves the false gods of a soullessly materialistic age dedicated to money-grabbing, corruption, violence and war. The upholders of "social discipline" in State, Church and education are mostly lickspittle toadies of a lousy system. They prate of "moral pollution"—meaning extramarital lovemaking—while turning a blind eye to the sick greed, callousness and mounting murder all around us. Yet children are expected to grow up respecting these Pharisees!

Stevens has his pet hates, most of which I share: cruelty to people and animals, ecological lunacy, environmental desecration, motorway madness, the shibboleth of economic growth, blind pursuit of profit, smoking. He harps on a bit about some of these, and is prone now and then to conspiracy theory; but his basic thesis, that most education is failing to sensitise youngsters so that they will question and challenge these and other retrograde trends in society, is spot-on. "We cannot begin a proper theory of education until we know that we stink," he says. The soulless grind of the examination system should give way to teaching and learning that is a genuinely shared experience. Real education should be about loving, caring, celebration, creativity, spontaneity, individuality, choice, *self-discipline*, relaxation, peace, pleasure. It needs to be

# REVIEWS

shared in groups, leading to richer inter-personal relationships: "To make people happier in the deeper sense is an end in itself, more important than academic success or national pride or industrial development". He calls for a Campaign for Humanity in Education to sweep away the notion that to be effective learning has to be unpleasant, tense or boring.

Puritans will derive scant comfort from this book. Stevens castigates them for being false prophets and self-deceivers: "Very oddly, evangelists who rely most heavily on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a force to change the hearts and minds of men, and involve themselves often in highly emotional and charismatic forms of group-experience, seem to have no faith at all in a creative spirit which might recreate truth anew in each generation and is not bound to a series of once-for-all rules which are inept in modern life". Such groups usually see ethical behaviour exclusively in terms of sex, pornography and drugs; they "often have the powerful financial and moral backing of business men whose own attitudes are belligerent, competitive and warlike". Yet "the central pornography of today is the Pornography of impersonal and insensitive violence".

Social and sexual stereotypes are what industry wants. And "the purity/sex syndrome forms a very useful smoke-screen which operates to prevent people from seeing the sheer lack of control, the raging, unchecked, legal, acceptable, bloody awful selfishness outside". Puritanism has always been a useful weapon in the hands of the war party. Distaste for the natural functions of the human body, and above all a morbid fear of touching and of intimate contact, still characterise much Christian thinking about morality. Conventional Christians are outraged by the candid depiction of physical lovemaking, "yet there is hardly a squeak from the world of religion or education about the continuous mental bloodbath of violence and war. . . Why do our film censors appear to prefer riddled corpses and burning towns to healthy, joyous sexuality?" "We really must stop being afraid of love. Love is a good thing, desire is a good thing; love and desire and pleasure, not competition and violence, cross frontiers and bind together the human family."

Stevens, in fact, hasn't much more time for organised religion than for the education system—though he somewhat naively imagines that "if a campaign for a new humanity in education could have the backing of one or two bishops . . . we might be more than half-way towards success". Christians, he feels, should recognise that "the church flower festival/coffee morning/whist drive

syndrome" is not enough, and get off their haunches into the fray. The trouble is that when they do, most of them usually head off in directions which Stevens would diametrically oppose—such as lavishing enormous concern upon unborn foetuses whilst overlooking the agonies of already-born terrified, screaming, bereaved, wounded or lonely children. Hosts of people need skilled, sympathetic counselling — but the world prefers to throw its resources down the bottomless pits of hot or cold warfare.

It's not difficult to nit-pick over trifles in a book like this. But its scored bulls-eyes far outnumber its minor inconsistencies and exaggerations. It's a brave attempt to pinpoint the shams, hypocrisies and rottennesses which underly so much contemporary social thinking, and to bring educationalists face to face with their real responsibilities for what's happening. I read it three times, with increasing gratitude. I hope you will read it too. And if anyone feels like sending our new Prime Minister a small congratulatory gift, she—as a former Minister of Education—might be glad of a copy. At any rate, it would be a very good thing if she read it.

ANTONY GREY

## THE FAMINE BUSINESS by Colin Tudge. Pelican 95p.

World hunger is often blamed on the population explosion. This is a convenient alibi for those who mismanage the world's food supplies, for although population increase contributes to many social problems, and if continued indefinitely would lead to a real food shortage, it is technically quite possible with today's knowledge and resources to feed a population much larger than the present one.

This Colin Tudge shows in *The Famine Business*, explaining why people in poor countries die of hunger plus a variety of diseases resulting from malnutrition, while people in rich countries suffer from obesity plus a variety of diseases resulting from eating the wrong food.

The obstacle to proper nutrition is not simple ill-will (although remembering how Nestles dressed women as nurses to advertise in Africa powdered milk, whose substitution for breast feeding contributed so spectacularly to infant mortality there, one may be excused for thinking so). Alas, the logic of competitive industrialism is such that one can only survive by making a profit, and the highest profits are often made by the worst actions.

From the point of view of the food industry—"the famine business" — a largely self-sufficient peasant family, enjoying a healthy diet off its own land, selling little and buying little, is a dead loss. Better somehow to get the people off the land, plough it all up with a super-tractor and turn it over to producing soya for cattle. The land feeds fewer people, its former occupants are part of the social problem of some miserable conurbation, the whole process has become dependent on dwindling fossil

fuels. But agri-business, landowners and users have done well. That is progress—and profitable.

Of course the products of the food industry must be sold. And since people's capacity to eat is limited, as much "value" as possible must be added between the farm and the consumer. Thus the more highly refined, processed and packaged the food is before it reaches the consumer the better. It is more profitable to take the best out of wheat and sell it as animal food or as expensive dietary supplements than to make wholemeal bread, which in any case is more filling as well as more wholesome, so people buy less of it. People must be persuaded to eat powdered potato. It hasn't the same food value or taste as the real thing; the difference in price is such that the labour saved in the kitchen has been costed at £5 an hour; but its use represents an increase in production and living standards as measured by official statistics. (Incidentally, what could be more inflationary than persuading people that if they cannot afford such stuff they are unacceptably poor?)

Obesity is a natural result of a diet of refined foods. Remove all the fibre and too many calories have been consumed before the stomach is comfortably full. Refined sugar is one of the greatest dietary menaces. Television advertising of confectionery at children's peak viewing times, and the strategic placing of it at supermarket check-out points where mothers are forced to queue with toddlers, undermine the health of the next generation.

Clearly civilisation has taken a wrong turn somewhere, and the achievements of science seem to have turned sour on us. But Colin Tudge does not merely explain the problems. In his final chapter he outlines a plan for "rational agriculture" by which every country could deal with its own problems. (For Britain the first requirement would be to stop feeding two-thirds of the cereal we produce to animals.) It will be difficult to find the right institutional framework, but we must find it for, as Colin Tudge says, the world cannot long continue on its present course.

I recommend *The Famine Business* to everyone. Whether your concern is for the hungry people of the Third World, for Britain's wellbeing, for your own health, or for all these equally, you will find this book most enlightening and practical.

MARGARET McILROY

## THEATRE

**CLOSE OF PLAY** by Simon Gray. Lyttleton, National Theatre.

**DISPATCHES** by Michael Herr, adapted by Bill Bryden. Cottesloe, National Theatre.

Family conflict as the focus for a play about dying can be Shakespearean. It can also be an unmitigated

bore. Simon Gray's play suggests depth, but ends by skimming the surface. The drama he generates is about as appealing as a family squabble, one from which we would sooner be absent.

There is something decidedly nasty about using a father as a father confessor and subjecting an audience to a two-hour confessional. The characters seem to make it an excuse for a good wallow, their guilt or whatever being dangerously close to self-pity. The sons confront the old relic with their failure, their wives present half-filled chamber pots for his inspection. His own wife harangues him breathlessly about the family's indifference to her efforts to maintain a spotless house. Throughout the long afternoon the old man remains abject, saying nothing, apparently patience itself, but perhaps really dead—of boredom, one suspects.

Waste is also near the play's centre, not least in the abundance of acting talent gone up the spout. Who, after all, would employ the likes of Sir Michael Redgrave merely to make brilliant facial expressions? And Michael Gambon, too often restricted to comic roles, is here very sympathetic as a self-effacing G.P., saving lives by *not* answering house calls. But waste, too, in the play's few effective moments, such as the scene between Marianne, mother of three who admits to occasionally wishing her children dead, and Margaret, who has had two abortions. Each regards the other as a criminal against her sex, and they both display women's indomitability. If only Mr Gray had invested every character with similar strengths and given us an entire play as electrifying as that scene. If only he had not forecast its early demise in the title!

By contrast, *Dispatches* touches individual nerve ends through a subject that could hardly be more public. Based on an American journalist's account of a year's experience in the combat zone in Vietnam, the play depicts the horrors of war from a new perspective. We are made to feel the anguish of apathy, the numbness of shell shock, when soldiers without a sense of purpose lose themselves in drug addiction in order to deaden the pain of their non-existence.

If the futility of Vietnam can be seen in this philosophic framework, then it is possible to see it all the more as timely. What the play does is remind us of the press's part in ending the war. Only when the American public were shown action replays of the slaughter on their evening news programmes did they become convinced of the insanity of the effort. We need to remind ourselves, too, that the men who fought in Vietnam were not college educated, but those unfortunate enough not to get a deferment from military service: the poor whites and blacks whose families could not afford the sky-high university fees or those immigrants, like the Cuban in the play, who went to Vietnam on the threat of being deported.

And so they were killed or left permanently

maimed, and today's Americans are in danger of forgetting their veterans as rapidly as they have forgotten Watergate.

A notable feature of the production is the way in which military operations are left undefined. We are given next to no indication of where the troops are at any one time, of the losses they have sustained and inflicted on the enemy. Bodies are carried in on stretchers throughout the action, and the wounded are similarly transported. All this is intended to reflect the general lack of direction in the battle campaigns, best summed up by the reference to the daily press briefings as "the five o'clock follies". The difference between the Marines and the boy scouts, according to one GI, is that the boy scouts have adult leadership.

This production is a triumph of stage management and company execution. The actors, many of whom take on more than one role apiece, know where they are every minute and give the play a cohesion that the fighting lacks. The attention to detail is splendid, right down to the soldiers' cigarette lighters. Jack Shepherd as 'The Correspondent' and Michael Feast as a "combat happy" veteran give perhaps the most striking performances, Shepherd tireless in trying to fathom some semblance of meaning, Feast only stressing the meaninglessness of it all through his hysterical hunger to extend his tour of duty. A four-month extension means he can leave the Marines that much sooner, though he is destined never to get out of the jungle alive.

There is, one must add, a good deal of gore in the play, and anyone anxious about seeing mutilated bodies should be warned that the evening is as blood-stained and loud as any in the theatre, and the Cottesloe puts you in close proximity to it all. The play's most effective moment, however, occurs in its closing moments when Shepherd is seen wheeling an English journalist badly crippled by action round a pond and the Englishman delivers a bitter diatribe about the timeless glory of war. The irony of his words is almost unbearable, burning its way into the memory in a way that those of us who have never experienced combat cannot afford to forget.

JAMES MACDONALD

## CINEMA

**THE LEFT-HANDED WOMAN** directed by Peter Handke. Camden Plaza.

There is an old Austrian tale of a man who rode his horse across a snowy expanse, only to be told on reaching his destination that he had in fact crossed the frozen Lake Constance. At the thought of what would have happened to him if the ice had cracked, the horseman died of shock. His story has been turned into an adage. "A Ride Across Lake Constance" is also the title of a play by the leading Aus-

trian writer, Peter Handke, which was performed in London some years ago. The characters, like clockwork puppets, act out rituals of domination, cruelty and seduction, while under their feet the dark water eddies. The play was given a mixed reception. Like most great writers, Handke is years ahead of his time.

With *The Left-Handed Woman*, he has turned his hand to film direction, and a very impressive début it is. Edith Clever and Bruno Ganz play a well-off German couple living in the Paris suburb of Clamart with their junior-school-age son. After a seemingly idyllic night together in a hotel, Clever tells Ganz that she has received an "enlightenment" — he must leave her for a while. After three months of painful isolation and growth, she is ready to live with her husband once more, concluding that in this world you have to make room for yourself, by yourself.

What distinguishes this film from other Mid-Life-Crisis-Affluent-Angst pictures is its great subtextual richness. Any realist can show us the humdrum; any escapism-merchant can offer flight from it; but it takes a great artist like Handke to *point* the everyday, to extend it and create from it a language. His is the genius for throwing the shadows of grief and terror across a drowsy suburban garden.

So we have a film whose characters converse with laconic formality, where noises break into the heroine's mute introspection—trains, dogs barking, 'planes. Some of the sounds are unintentionally intrusive (too much soundtrack music for my liking); some of Handke's images jar (closeups of flowers shedding petals, hands peeling fruit). More often though, they are haunting. Clever lurches frenetically about her sitting-room on her son's stilts; a man jumps from an upstairs window in the night; Clever and her visiting father have their photos taken in a booth and then move on . . . cut back to the seat still revolving in the empty booth.

Clever herself is remarkable. Her taut, naked face seems to hold back years of sobbing. There is something of Japan about the sparsely-furnished interiors, the gnomic dialogue and the formal, choreographed movement. There is something, too, of the Japanese woman about Clever's bowed posture — at once obeisant and watchful.

In so many "Women's Films" or "Feminist Films" (such self-conscious terms!) men are portrayed as being pompous, immature, lecherous, insensitive, merely peripheral, or too good to be true. My accolade, then, to a film which allows the woman and the men—son and his fat, bespectacled friend, husband, infatuated actor, and, most moving, Clever's father, living stoically alone in Bonn—to grow, to interact and to be.

VERA LUSTIG

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**The age of ignorance commenced with the Christian system.—Thomas Paine (1737-1809)**

# LETTERS

## WHAT IS SECULARISM?

There is much that is undoubtedly true in Harry H. Pearce's simplistic article "What is Secularism?" (March "Freethinker"). Yet in equating secularism with science he gives too narrow a view. He says that science is the only alternative to religion, but science is not an alternative to religion. Even if one takes religion in a narrow sense as meaning revealed religion, science is only an alternative to the part of it which purports to explain the universe.

Moreover science is only an alternative even to that part if one makes the large assumption that human brainpower and the resources of this planet are adequate to discover all the facts about the universe. In saying "there are no mysteries, only problems waiting to be solved" Mr Pearce makes this assumption, I believe unjustifiably.

Even if the assumption is justified there is a large gap between what we know now and what we are still waiting to discover. If it is not justified, part of that gap will never be filled. In these circumstances it is unrealistic to suppose that man's questing mind will not speculate. Nor do I see why, if it is recognised as such, speculation should be thought undesirable. Mr Pearce is wrong to accept "how?" but forbid "why?". Justly regarded, they amount to the same thing. The primitive tribe who ask why the gods have ruined a crop in fact destroyed by disease will be answered if a scientist explains to them how the disease originates and operates.

A further point. Mr Pearce says there is no absolute or ultimate code of conduct for humanity. From this he concludes that all moral rules are based on expediency. Once again there is a gap in his argument. Some moral rules go beyond expediency, and derive from the essential nature of man. Perhaps all do, if they are valid.

While science is not a substitute for religion, secularism or humanism ought to be. Otherwise it will fail.

FRANCIS BENNIC

## VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA PLEAS

As an active propagandist for voluntary euthanasia, I would disagree with Lord Raglan when he suggests that the many letters from elderly and unhappy people are a plea for help, rather than a genuine desire for easy death. Perhaps his views on this subject are unconsciously coloured by his own present circumstances?

Many older people prefer to be alone, prefer their human contacts in later life to be superficial and temporary. They are often people with a lifetime of personal involvement behind them—a long series of personal relationships usually ended by the separation of death. They find themselves unwilling to enter into too much human contact, find, indeed, since human experience is obviously limited that human company can be boring and that the necessary daily routine can become extremely tedious.

Many such find solace and pleasure in contact with nature—landscape, plants and often domestic pets. Sadly, our proliferating species is making such consolation an ever decreasing possibility as time goes on.

When physical deterioration makes physical and mental pleasure impossible and self-willed function is lost and there is no prospect of restoration to such a state of being—then Lord Raglan must accept the fact that no matter how well-intentioned other people are it is impossible for them to give "help" which is adequate.

Many of us older people of independent disposition do not want help. We want to lead a self-supporting life—with our own sense of purposefulness. When this is no longer possible we should be able to choose "nothingness" if we wish. At which point, if voluntary euthanasia were legalised, this is when a little help would be greatly appreciated and the knowledge of its availability would be of enormous comfort to a great many worried elderly people today.

This is a problem which will increase in the future—with the decline of religion there will be many more people who will demand "Why should I be expected to suffer at the end of my life, or yield my person into the care of strangers for an indeterminate period — WHAT FOR?"

PEGGY LEJEUNE

Lord Raglan, speaking at the Annual Dinner of the National Secular Society on voluntary euthanasia, said "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". But surely, Lord Raglan must know that there are those who just would not wish to prolong their dying, no matter what skills were available. I am at a loss to find printable words to express my disgust at the fact that when we are dying and in a completely helpless state, we are at the mercy of the medical profession, and with no legal rights to call upon.

He also said that "His view was not that we should establish the legal right for voluntary euthanasia and then 'sit back content'." It will be a very long time before we are able to "sit back content" when it comes to caring for the dying. This area of medicine just does not seem to occupy a place in the medical schools. Is it not time that this was altered, and at the same time let us have a bit more action in getting that adjustment to the law which would permit voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide. People and circumstances vary so widely, that I feel there is a need for both.

I was, to say the least, very disheartened at Lord Raglan's attitude as, after Baroness Wootton's Bill was defeated, he made what I thought, was a very encouraging speech, saying that he would like to see the whole question studied by a Select Committee. Are we any nearer to getting this done?

May I add that I thought it despicable that a group of Catholics had to resort to "tactics" which led to the vote coming much earlier than had been expected.

GLADYS WITHERS (Mrs.)

## POPE AND POLAND

As I write the press and radio are full of the Pope's visit to Poland. What are we to make of this? Does it signify a real return to religion in Eastern Europe?

What came out of the radio comments was rather interesting. The new Pope had been an actor. The Curia was watching his performance very closely. Alistair Cooke said the Americans had always regarded the Poles as clowns, as people here think of the Irish. (The American police now contain a large number of Eastern Europeans.) Poor Archbishop Coggan was slammed for not putting up a similar show in East Germany.

Two points should be made. Most of us know less about Poland than we do about Russia. We may have heard of Chopin, Paderewski, the poet Mickiewicz and the novelist Sienkiewicz. The language is a serious barrier, although the Pole Zamenhof did his best by inventing Esperanto. And this means that the country has been isolated from Western Europe.

The other point is—what if the Pope now decides to visit Southern Ireland?

SAMUEL BEER

## HOMO RELIGIOSUS

This is where we came in, three years ago, with Peter Cadogan asserting rather than arguing that man is essentially religious and that humanism must therefore be religious too.

He now claims that "homo sapiens is different from all other species in that he is a religious animal and has been so from his beginnings several million years ago" (June). There are many important differences between our species and others, but religion is not one of them. Anyone who has kept pets knows that some cats and especially dogs show strong religious feelings towards their owners, and a large but growing minority of normal human beings have no religious feelings at all.

Despite his confident tone, there is no reliable evidence about the religious or any other beliefs of our species for the first 99.9 per cent of its existence, and although he says just as confidently that no extant religion "dates back for more than a mere 2,500 years", there is no reliable evidence about that either. No one knows how "religion began", though we can guess, and again there is no reliable evidence about what happened to it "some 10,000 years ago". Similarly, no one knows what the "original natural character" of religion is, and there is no reason to believe that the Golden Rule is a religious doctrine.

He says that he will "leave the rest to the readers' imagination", but it would have been better if he had restrained his own. His recommendation that we should now "rediscover our religious relationship with nature and our own kind and restate transcendentalism in terms of the cosmos and our high aspirations" is a purely imaginary solution to our problem, and is indeed part of our problem. His belief that his argument "puts the traditional secularists in a rather invidious position" is the reverse of the truth, which is that it puts religious humanism into the invidious position of becoming the target of the secularist, rationalist critique previously concentrated on traditional religion. Our movement is against all forms of unreason, including the dishonest ones.

NICOLAS WALTER

Peter Cadogan tells us that "homo sapiens . . . is a religious animal". This is a statement like "water is a mobile liquid"; it is a partial description assuming the terms "mobile" and "liquid" are sufficiently understood. Such a statement is extremely incomplete and seriously misleading if taken alone, as gospel. Anyone struck by a chunk of ice, or scalded by steam, will realise there is scope for additional description!

Likewise, in reality few of the people we meet seem at all like the hypothetical religious animal. That dear old Golden Rule, too, can be a real teaser when one is faced with a liar or a cheat, let alone cases of racism or bully-violence on the gang scale. So what is the use of pretending to look back 10,000 years, or even 1,000, for present guidance?—except to point out what we have since learned to avoid.

Although now an enlightened ex-Marxist, Peter Cadogan still confuses politics with religion, churning them up together with a good lacing of select mythology. Writ large, this is a classical recipe for tyranny. So even in the smallest print, it remains alien to the whole tradition and purpose of South Place Ethical Society. After his "nine years in the saddle" surely he can tell a horse from a fairycycle?

DR. A. L. LOVECY

religion. I wonder what argument in favour of religion he thinks requires challenging. I do not know of one which has not been thoroughly demolished.

Even the case put forward recently by Dr Thomas Torrance, the former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, is not really new, although he won the Templeton Foundation Prize in 1978 for his contribution to progress in religion largely for it. He uses Einstein's theory of relativity to explain that the only knowledge we have of God is what He has chosen to give us through revelation and the person of Jesus. Our position relative to that of God precludes us from scientific enquiry into His nature. In other words we cannot transcend the laws of nature but God can. Humanists will readily recognise this old theory, which has been used to explain the miracles and the resurrection, even when it is disguised in the modern terms of relativity.

Unfortunately religion is still strong even though there is now no respectable argument to support it. I think this requires us to challenge it on its own terms—in emotional terms and in the terms of its consequences—as well as the privileges of its institutions, which are scarcely known to the general public. We should promote humanist ethical standards and the system of thought which produces them by relating them to current social issues without worrying whether we are regarded as left wing or right wing.

ROY SAICH

I was very pleased to read Geoffrey Berg's article ("The Freethinker", April) having often been distressed by your contributors' frequent assumption that atheist equals left-wing socialist. Being an atheist does not preclude one from Liberal, Democratic Socialist or Conservative views on the economy and other subjects.

Similarly in foreign affairs life is not so simple. I find myself with a great deal of sympathy for those Catholic priests in South America who try to stand up against right-wing tyrannies and also for the Christian believers in atheist Communist states. The human right of free thought means a lot more than just the right not to be a Christian in a democratic society.

CAROLINE MATTHEWS

*We have received both praise and criticism of Geoffrey Berg's article "A Right Wing Atheist's Perspective". Although there is no logical connection between atheism and progressive causes, there is a strong historical tradition associating secularism and radical reform.—Ed.*

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## ATHEISM—RIGHT OR LEFT?

In his article ("The Freethinker", April 1979) Geoffrey Berg says that one of the main priorities of the NSS should be to present an intellectual challenge against

### *(Abortion Amendment)*

Around one-and-a-quarter million women have obtained an abortion since the 1967 Act. If only one quarter of them were to write to the MP explaining that they are grateful the Act was passed in 1967 and hope it will not be changed, there could be no hope for Corrie's anti-abortion concoction.

**STOP PRESS.** Increasingly it looks as if Corrie will present his Bill as a very moderate, tidying-up piece of legislation. A Select Committee packed with anti-abortionists could introduce tougher clauses, so the vote in the House of Commons on 13 July is very important. A lobby of MPs is being organised from 4 pm on 9 July. If you are able to be at the House of Commons, write to your MP first. For fuller details contact the NSS office (01-272 1266).

### *(Hare Krishna Debate)*

is reduced to the level of gossip and the time-span is often so short as to prevent arguments being followed through. Also TV, with its mildly hypnotic effect, moves so swiftly from one topic to the next that all merges into a bland babble, where the ability to pause and think and question what is being said is lost. So perhaps there should be a revival of the public debate, with arguments pursued at length and full questioning.

Who knows even one of the Hare Krishna supporters may have stored away one or two of Barbara Smoker's points at some level of consciousness, and where secularism may sow seeds of questioning it has accomplished an important task.

### *(Jottings)*

and inspired word of the Christian deity? Secondly, is there not a single unbeliever or doubter among all the Conservative MPs at Westminster? Thirdly, how many of Mr Bright's fellow-Conservatives who took the oath on the Bible were not motivated by faith in the precious word but by fear of the old ducks in their constituency associations?

\* \* \*

Audrey Williamson was right to praise courageous Christians who opposed the Nazis (Letters, June). But she evidently misunderstood my "Jottings" item

(May issue) to have said I wrongly claimed that Billy Graham, the American evangelist, "only became converted against the Nazis when he visited Auschwitz last Autumn".

I made no such claim. There is fundamental difference between writing about Dr Graham as a self-proclaimed "late convert to the peace movement" (which I did) and of his conversion against the Nazis (which I did not).

## EVENTS

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

**British Humanist Association.** Annual Conference and Annual General Meeting. July 27-29 at Felixtowe Court, Bristol Polytechnic, Bristol. Theme: "The Micro Processor Revolution". Further details from B.H.A., 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG.

**Havering and District Humanist Society.** Kalyan Sircar: "Economics—Your Questions are NOT Answered". Tuesday, 17 July, 8 pm. Harold Wood Social Centre, Junction of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road.

**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.** Mike Hodges: "C. S. Lewis: Chinks in the Christian Armour". Monday, 16 July, 7.45 pm. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead.

**Muswell Hill Humanist Group.** F. Frost: "Cultural Change in Britain". Monday, 16 July, 8.30 pm. 46 Windermere Road, N.10.

**South Place Ethical Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1. Sunday, 15 July, 11 am. 50th Anniversary of Conway Hall: Foundations and Future of South Place.

**Tyneside Humanist Society.** T.V. Review by those present. Wednesday, 11 July, 7.30 pm. 1 Archibald Terrace, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2.

**Humanist Holidays.** Trip to Malta at Christmas fully booked. Further details of future holidays: Mrs Betty Beer, 58 Wier Road, Balham, London SW12 0NA. Tel: 01-673 6234.

**Humanist Housing Association.** Annual General Meeting, followed by talk and slide show by Camden Association for Mental Health. Thursday, 19 July, 6.30 pm. 254/256 Camden Road, NW1.

## THE FREETHINKER

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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

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