

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 101, No. 1

JANUARY 1981

25p

BORN-AGAIN ATHEIST ATTACKS CHRISTIAN GOD AS A TYRANNICAL FIGURE

Claiming to be a "born-again atheist", Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, attacked the Christian god as more tyrannical than the soap-opera figure JR. Barbara Smoker was speaking at the Annual General Meeting of the NSS, held on 6 December 1980 at Conway Hall, London, on the occasion of her re-election as President. A new vice-President, Dick Condon, was elected. He said that, despite many obstacles, the ideals of the NSS are gradually becoming accepted.

Barbara Smoker said: Every human being ever born was born an atheist; and I was no exception. At a rather young age—eight days old, to be precise—I was subjected to an initiation rite by the ordeal of cold water on the head, to make me a member of the Roman Catholic sect of the Christian religion, no matter how loudly I screamed in protest. This was followed by two decades of brain-washing indoctrination at home, at school and in church.

Human reason, however, can survive even such a battering as that—and now, to adapt a fashionable tag from the Protestant camp, I can boast of being a "born-again atheist".

A few weeks ago, there was another presidential election in the news; and, during the weeks leading up to it, each of its major candidates claimed to be a "born-again Christian". What an indictment of a highly developed nation, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, that it should be judged advantageous, not to say essential, for any serious contender for the world's most powerful political position to subscribe to a set of unscientific, anti-intellectual beliefs that have been totally discredited by thinking people for more than two centuries past!

It has been said that when the USA catches a

cold, Britain starts to sneeze. If so, the National Secular Society and all libertarians must be prepared for an epidemic. We will certainly not be in search of a new role in the near future: our traditional role of opposition to religious superstition remains all too relevant.

Last century, Nietzsche announced the death of God. But the diagnosis was sadly premature. To the intellectual, God may indeed be dead, but in the popular mind he won't lie down. Like the indeluctable JR of the soap-opera Dallas, he has been given another lease of tyrannical life. And the Christian god causes such social and psychological misery as to make JR look positively benign by comparison.

Reactionary Pope

Putting the philosophical clock back to the days of fundamentalist Protestantism as represented by the 1980 American presidency would be bad enough. But the widespread adulation of a highly reactionary pope, with a social message that goes back not two centuries but half a millenium, is no less disturbing. Reiterating the 1968 papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which prohibits contraception among his hundreds of millions of followers in this era of disastrous over-population, Pope John Paul sugars his anti-Pill with personal "charisma" that owes a great deal to his early theatrical training.

The delight he manifests in small children is no doubt genuine enough, but that does not preclude an element of deliberate calculation in exploiting his natural love of children to rouse the multitude to the desired emotional response. Adolf Hitler used the same trick. And just as Hitler's sentiment stopped short of little Jewish children, so the pope closes his mind to the millions of children who are condemned by his birth-control strictures to lives

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CENTENARY YEAR

1981

made wretched by inevitable malnutrition and to early death.

If the pope is dragging much of the western world back to the dark ages, fundamentalist Islam is no less retrogressive in the countries where it holds sway, imposing its medieval ideas through the horrors of physical maiming and execution as well as the maiming of the mind.

Then there is the resurgence, especially among the young, of other irrational beliefs and practices that go back not hundreds but thousands of years — astrology, exorcism, magic (dignified by the quasi-academic term “the paranormal”) and all the rest of the occultist opium.

Revival of Unreason

Those of us who, in the midst of this revival of unreason, have retained or regained our sanity, as born-again atheists, must stand together against the murky flood-water of superstition. And to stand together we need such organisations as the National Secular Society, which is striving to keep the head of civilisation above the quagmire of religion, whether of the seventeenth century, of the dark ages, or of the ancient world.

Dick Condon said: My election as joint vice-president comes as the climax of 20 years active membership in the National Secular Society, during which time I have done a fair amount of writing and speaking on the society's behalf, and for the humanist movement generally.

When I joined, I was optimistic enough to hope that I might live to see the end of the political, legal and social powers and privileges of the churches. I don't think that now. The Established Church is still part of the apparatus of government. Religion still accounts for a large proportion of broadcasting time, and is still a major factor in our education system, in each case still at public expense.

It is still possible to find oneself in the dock at the Old Bailey, like a common criminal, for expressing a view on a religious matter, and we still suffer censorship of our reading and broadcasting material by religious enthusiasts self-appointed for the purpose. Humane proposals for law reform still have to fight religious opposition.

None the less, we make progress. The amount of law reform which has gone through is far from negligible. The churches retain their privileges, but every year they report declining memberships, and therefore a diminishing influence on people's thinking. Twenty years ago, nobody in the NSS apart from myself thought it worth while to apply for broadcasting time. At my suggestion, the society approached the BBC, and to everyone's surprise they allowed us 30 minutes on the air. Since then, NSS representatives have often taken part in debates on radio and TV.

In our schools, the religious clauses of the 1944

Education Act are honoured more in the breach than the observance. The London Borough of Havering, where I live, is about to adopt a new syllabus of religious education. The borough's advisory committee on religious matters now recommends a syllabus which, in their words, “aims to equip pupils with the skills and knowledge necessary to make informed and mature judgments for themselves”. I'll believe that when I see it, but what is interesting here is the tacit admission that existing syllabuses are indoctrinatory, as secularists have always maintained. It is a significant step forward when an education authority agrees with us on such a matter.

As for blasphemy, the *Gay News* case turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory for Christianity. The outraged reaction to the trial confirmed the truth of Sir J. F. Stephen's observation a century ago, that such scandalous prosecutions never benefit the cause they are intended to serve. There are signs that this lesson is beginning to sink in.

Mary Whitehouse, honoured by the Establishment and given a status approaching that of Inquisitor-General, probably represents few people outside the membership of her Viewers' and Listeners' Association, which one suspects consists largely of Mrs Whitehouse. At any rate, a play condemned by that lady is sure to enjoy full houses and a long run.

In short, the ideals for which the NSS stands are gradually becoming accepted. As a vice-president of the society, I shall of course continue to do whatever I can to spread those ideals further.

The Church of England is reported as keeping its investment income well abreast of inflation. Its income from the Stock Exchange and 170,000 acres of land is now £50 millions a year.

South Devon and West Cornwall police produced a poster to prevent crime. It showed a thief stealing the “Christ” part of the word “Christmas”, but it has been dropped because of fears that it was blasphemous.

Freethinker Fund

We thank the following for their kind and valuable contributions to the Freethinker Fund:

P. T. Bell, £2.50; D. Berman, £2; A. M. Booth, £2; E. F. Channon, £1; C. Chirico, £6; G. W. Coup-land, £2; P. A. Danning, £1; W. H. Headon, £1; E. Henry, £2; C. Honeywell, £1; C. L. S. Howard, £10; E. J. Hughes, £2; R. Huxtable, £1; N. Levenson, £2; M. McIver, £2; F. Munniksma, £2; C. A. Pugh, £7; A. Rathkey, £2; F. E. Saward, £1; D. Scarth, £6; C. J. Simmonds, £2; W. Steinhardt, £3; G. A. Vale, £7; O. Watson, £2; Anon, £7. Total for the period 21/11/80 to 15/12/80: £76.50.

The Right to Responsibility in Work: The Voltaire Lecture 1980

JAMES ROBERTSON

The Voltaire Lecture was established by the late Dr. Theodore Besterman to educate the public about humanism or related aspects of scientific or philosophic thought. It was given this year on 1 November at a weekend conference on Human Rights and Human Responsibilities held at High Leigh, Hoddesdon, Herts, and organised jointly by the British Humanist Association and the Progressive League.

James Robertson is author of "The Sane Alternative" and co-founder of "Turning Point". He spoke of rights and responsibilities in work and we print here his opening ideas and his conclusion, with a very brief indication of the remainder of the lecture. It has been printed in full by the British Humanist Association.

Voltaire played an important part in one of those transformative periods of history when an old order is breaking down and a new order is breaking through. He lived to see the American Revolution in 1776. He died eleven years before the French Revolution in 1789. He had helped to destroy the credibility of the old form of society dominated by royalty, nobility and the church. He had helped to usher in a new age of science and representative democracy, of industrialism and the nation state.

We today are living in an equally transformative period. After 200 years, the age of industrialism and the nation state is coming towards an end. We are moving into a post-industrial age¹ in which our focus will be global and local, as much as national; in which our concept of the state and the mechanisms of democracy will therefore be transformed; and in which the methods, objectives and results of supposedly objective, rational, scientific enquiry will increasingly be called in question. As the old order continues to break down, we have to prepare the ground for the new order that will take its place. We find, as Voltaire would have found had he been living now, that changes in the dominant concept of work, changes in the way work is organised and distributed, and changes in the rights and responsibilities we attach to work, will be an important feature of the transition.

Voltaire was first and foremost a demolition artist. As Thomas Paine said in *Rights of Man* (1791), Voltaire's "forte lay in exposing and ridiculing the superstitions which priestcraft, united with statecraft, had interwoven with governments. It was not from the purity of his principles, or his love of mankind (for satire and philanthropy are not naturally concordant), but from his strong capacity of seeing folly in its true shape, and his irresistible propensity to expose it, that he made these attacks.

They were, however, as formidable as if the motives had been virtuous; and he merits the thanks rather than the esteem of mankind."

Paine was a little too dismissive of what he regarded as Voltaire's frivolity and, as I shall later suggest, we should not underestimate Voltaire's constructive contribution to the new thinking of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in France. But there can be no doubt that Voltaire's first delight, if he had been living today, would have been in satirising many of our modern superstitions.

In place of the superstitions which *priestcraft*, united with *statecraft*, had interwoven with governments, Voltaire today would have exposed and ridiculed the superstitions of *economistcraft* united with *statecraft*. He would have scorned the notion that by calculating all the costs and benefits involved in some large project, like building a new airport for London, economists, armed with the mysterious knowledge of their craft and with magical aids called computers, could work out what course of action would be best from everyone's point of view. He would have regarded it as a matter of common sense to realise that every course of action will benefit some people and harm others, and that the important question is who is to get the benefit and who is to be harmed. He would have seen that to claim otherwise is to mystify, in the hope of persuading those who are to be harmed to accept it as all for the best.

Theology of Economics

Voltaire would also have had rare fun with some of the controversies that modern economists get involved in—for example, about the correct way to measure that metaphysical entity called the money supply, or about the relationship between inflation and unemployment. He would have found them extraordinarily reminiscent of the theological controversies which mystified people and darkened their lives in earlier times—for example, about how to measure the space occupied by angels, or about the relationship between the two natures, divine and human, of Jesus Christ.

Voltaire would surely have ridiculed our concern for Gross National Product, a man-made idol of which we have been persuaded that its size—which only economists know how to measure—is directly proportionate to the happiness of the people of the country over which it presides; an idol, therefore, which has to be faced—in ways which only economists know how to specify—in order to make it as gross as possible. We get an inkling of what Voltaire might have made of the fetish of economic growth

from the following passage by Hugh Stretton, which reminds us that the significance of GNP is closely related to the superstitious reverence given by economists to paid, as contrasted with unpaid, work. "How easily we could turn the tables on the economists if we all decided that from tomorrow morning, the work of the domestic economy should be paid for. Instead of cooking dinner for her own lot, each housewife would feed her neighbours at regular restaurant rates; then they'd cook for her family and get their money back. We'd do each other's housework and gardening at award rates. Big money would change hands when we fixed each other's tap washers and electric plugs at the plumbers' and electricians' rates. Without a scrap of extra work Gross National Product (GNP) would go up by a third overnight. We would increase that to half if the children rented each other's back yards and paid each other as play supervisors, and we could double it if we all went to bed next door at regular massage parlour rates. Our economists would immediately be eager to find out what line of investment was showing such fabulous growth in capital/output ratio. They'd find that housing was bettered only by double beds and they'd recommend a massive switch of investment into both. Don't laugh, because in reverse, this nonsense measures exactly the distortion we get in our national accounts now."²

Now Voltaire did not underestimate the significance of work. At the very end of *Candide*, for example, he puts the following statements into the mouths of his characters. "Work wards off three great evils: boredom, vice and poverty." "When man was put into the garden of Eden, he was put there that he might till it, that he might work: which proves that man was not born to be idle." "Let us work, then, and not argue. It is the only way to make life bearable." We may feel that these sentiments show a somewhat negative appreciation of the value of work, but at least we may conclude from them, and from what we know of Voltaire's own life, that he regarded working as a centrally important part of living. For that reason, if for no other, he would certainly have brought his scorn and ridicule to bear on some of our other modern superstitions about work. Imagine, for example, how scathing Voltaire would have been about the stupidity, as well as the cruelty, of any government which both propagated the harsh morality that all self-respecting citizens should find a job for themselves and, at the same time, took measures which made certain that some millions of citizens would be unable to find one. More fundamentally, Voltaire would surely have ridiculed the idea that full employment is a hallmark of the good society. He would have exposed the shallowness of the assumption that as many people as possible should be dependent on employers to provide their life's work. What, Voltaire would surely ask, is so good about

everyone becoming a wage-slave? I believe he would have seen the progressive society as one which encourages and enables a growing number of its citizens to take the right and the responsibility of defining and organising their own work for themselves, whether as individuals or in association with their fellows.

I said "progressive" society, and Voltaire believed in progress. It has been said that an optimist is someone who, like Dr Pangloss in *Candide*, believes that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and that a pessimist is someone who fears that we do. On this definition, Voltaire was neither an optimist nor a pessimist. He did not believe that the present state of affairs was good enough, but he did believe that it could be improved. It is a view which most of us probably share.

As progressives, I believe we need to be conscious of three things. First, there are people who don't believe in progress. They are happy with the way things are; they believe in business-as-usual. Or they think things are bound to get worse; they believe in disaster. Some even think that history is cyclical; they believe that things go round in circles and that there is very little any of us can do about it. We may disagree with them, but all these kinds of people are part of the situation in which progress is to be made. For practical purposes we should pay some attention to them, because they will have some effect on whether progress happens, what it turns out to be, and how it comes about. This applies to progress towards new ways of conceiving, distributing and carrying out work, just as it applies to progress in any other sphere.

Progress in Self-Development

Second, we progressives need to be conscious of the mainspring that underlies our notion of progress. For Voltaire and for many of his 18th century contemporaries the mainspring was the idea of Reason, and progress was progress towards an Age of Reason. Today, two centuries later, the emphasis has changed. Following scientists like Julian Huxley and mystics like Teilhard de Chardin, increasing numbers of us feel that progress is connected with the evolution of consciousness. We feel that social progress is to do with an increase in people's capacity for self-development, and we are coming to see a progressive society as one which positively enables its people and its communities to develop themselves. The mechanistic models of Newtonian science and utilitarian philosophy are losing their energising power as vehicles for the idea of progress. They are being replaced by the developmental models of biology, psychology and evolution. This affects our perception of progress in the sphere of work, as in other spheres.

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Paedophilia, Conspiracy and Sexual Liberation

JULIAN MELDRUM

A new book on paedophilia* and a current case in which members of the Paedophile Information Exchange are charged with "conspiracy to corrupt public morals" again bring this controversial subject into the public eye. "The Free-thinker" has no view on paedophilia, which raises complex questions of rights and responsibilities, other than that there should be no taboo on discussing the topic. In this article Julian Meldrum considers paedophilia and the implications of the PIE case.

In January 1981, at the grand climax of a disastrous five-year publicity campaign, Tom O'Carroll goes on trial at the Old Bailey in London charged with "conspiracy to corrupt public morals". Four other committee-members of the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE) face the same charge, which arises nominally from a page of box-number personal advertisements published in *Magpie*, the group's newsletter, putting adult members in touch with each other. The charge also refers to an article in an earlier publication, *Understanding Paedophilia*.

The offence of "conspiring to corrupt public morals" was invented in the Courts in 1961, and last used against comparable advertisements by homosexual men in the newspaper *International Times*. It has the advantage over the Obscene Publications Act that no defence of "public good" can be admitted. It is a bad law and should be repealed.

However, that "nominally" was significant. Present indications are that the PIE trial may be an exercise in mud-slinging to make Mary Whitehouse's prosecution of *Gay News* (for blasphemous libel) look clean and dignified. The evidence to be splashed over the yellow press could at worst consist of written fantasies exchanged informally between PIE members; seizures of "indecent" photographs "overlooked" to persuade members of PIE to testify; alleged sexual relationships treated in the same manner. Tom O'Carroll's home has been raided repeatedly and the police have twice taken away the notes used in writing this book.

At its height PIE certainly had less than 300 members in Britain. It should be obvious that even if it had been a gang of would-be child-molesters, any direct threat to children must have been very limited. I am convinced that the actual threats are firstly, to certain very fiercely defended ideas of how young people ought to want to behave; secondly, to a handful of "paedophiles" who have set themselves up to be scapegoated for a legacy of sexual

*PAEDOPHILIA: THE RADICAL CASE by Tom O'Carroll. Peter Owen, £14.95.

guilt and allied maltreatment both of adults and children; thirdly, to gay men and to gay male organisations.

This last threat is very real. The charge against PIE could be used with minor adaptations against almost any group that brings gay men together as gay men. Of course, paedophilia is not a homosexual trait. There are many more prosecutions even for technical "indecent assault" on girls than on boys. Most sexual contact between adults and children occurs within the family and little if any happens "on the gay scene". Tom O'Carroll like many other paedophiles does not regard himself as being gay. But at the same time we must recognise that in Britain most of the people who identify themselves as paedophiles have organised through the gay movement, that most of them are — like Tom O'Carroll — men attracted to boys, and that much of their lobbying has been aimed at gay male organisations. PIE began in 1974 as a breakaway from what is now the Scottish Homosexual Rights Group. Tom O'Carroll joined a few months later after he was told about it by lesbian colleagues to whom he "came out" at the Open University. *Gay News* listed PIE's address, along with hundreds of others, for a number of issues. *Paedophilia: The Radical Case* has four comments on the cover, supporting the decision to publish the book. All were provided by gay men who happen to be eminent in sociology or in education for social work, distinguished by their writings on homosexuality and the gay movement.

True Liberation

If gay people are threatened "from outside", by a more-or-less concerted attempt to portray homosexuality as a danger to children, there is also a threat that the issue will deepen the rift between gay men and lesbian feminists. In our male-dominated society, argue the latter, where men have economic power that massively exceeds that of women and children, where men are inculcated from birth with an aggressive, out-going view of their own sexuality, it is nonsense to talk of "liberation" when attacking the age-of-consent laws. Far from achieving liberation, any weakening of those laws would simply free the bodies of women and children to become sexual commodities for adult men, to an even greater extent than at present. Heterosexuality (or paedophilia) is not inherently evil, but is at best tainted by this social order. True liberation demands organisation by women, it demands profound changes in the education of children. Above all, it requires a surrender of power by men, in exchange

for which they will be able to regain their humanity, to relate erotically to women, to children and to each other as people rather than as sexual properties. Tom O'Carroll's book is inadequate in the way it addresses these issues: he dismisses radical feminism as "anti-erotic" and hopes that more women paedophiles will "come out"—as if this would resolve the problems raised by male paedophilia!

Tom O'Carroll was hounded from his job at the Open University, where he was employed as a Press Officer. He has been physically assaulted on at least three occasions and personally abused in the House of Lords. The most searing passages in his book refer to his experience of alienation, of rejection, of the destructive impact of the denial of expression to feelings that he passionately believes to be good. It should be emphasised that he, like the probable majority of paedophiles, has never been convicted of any sexual offence. He is forthcoming about his personal and political failings, about the blunders of PIE, about the debates inside PIE itself. He sees that the idea of paedophiles as "a group apart" is an obstacle to the social acceptance he craves. Yet that strategy of asserting an "independent identity" is precisely the one adopted by PIE, in the way members have "come out" as paedophiles, in the way they borrow "minority rights" arguments from the gay movement, in the way Tom O'Carroll avoids the discussion of incest and power within the family, to concentrate on the issues likely to arise at his own trial.

Yes, the book does tackle bravely and directly the meaning of "consent" and "willingness", power disparity in sexual relationships, the meaning of "maturity" and the limitations of various law-reform proposals including the ones advanced by PIE. As I have already suggested, he fails to tackle the issues raised by sex-role conditioning and the implications — which are very different — for heterosexual as against homosexual paedophilia.

I find some parts of the argument more convincing than others. The evidence that children are sexual beings in some sense from birth is conclusive. The evidence of gross injustice in the treatment of sexual relationships between adults and children is equally damning. On balance I believe that age-of-consent laws do more harm than good and should be downgraded on a par with the drinking and smoking laws — where people who are "under-age" are aware of being so, but do not risk gross interference in their private lives if they make a positive choice to engage in the activity. I believe therefore that humanists should support a movement for paedophile liberation, allied firmly to the liberation of children. But I am not persuaded that a movement of paedophile adults, organised through the gay movement, can ever advance this cause. To effect genuine change the movement must be far wider. It must include adult paedophiles, certainly. But it must also involve

parents, it must involve people who experienced and benefited from such relationships as children, it must involve educationists, social workers and youth groups. Where paedophiles have organised most effectively, as in Holland, they have done so by developing just such a coalition in the context of a general movement for sexual reform.

In the months to come, PIE will be roundly condemned for having given a voice to feelings that threaten some of our society's most sacred taboos. I for one will not join in that round of condemnation: there are, after all, few spectacles more ridiculous than the British public in a fit of morality — and anyone described as "the nastiest man in Britain" must have *something* going for him. Nevertheless, PIE would seem to have failed its members and I fear that its operation has placed dozens if not hundreds of careers in jeopardy. Only time will tell, but in any case Tom O'Carroll's book deserves its place in the library.

RELIGION IN US SCHOOLS

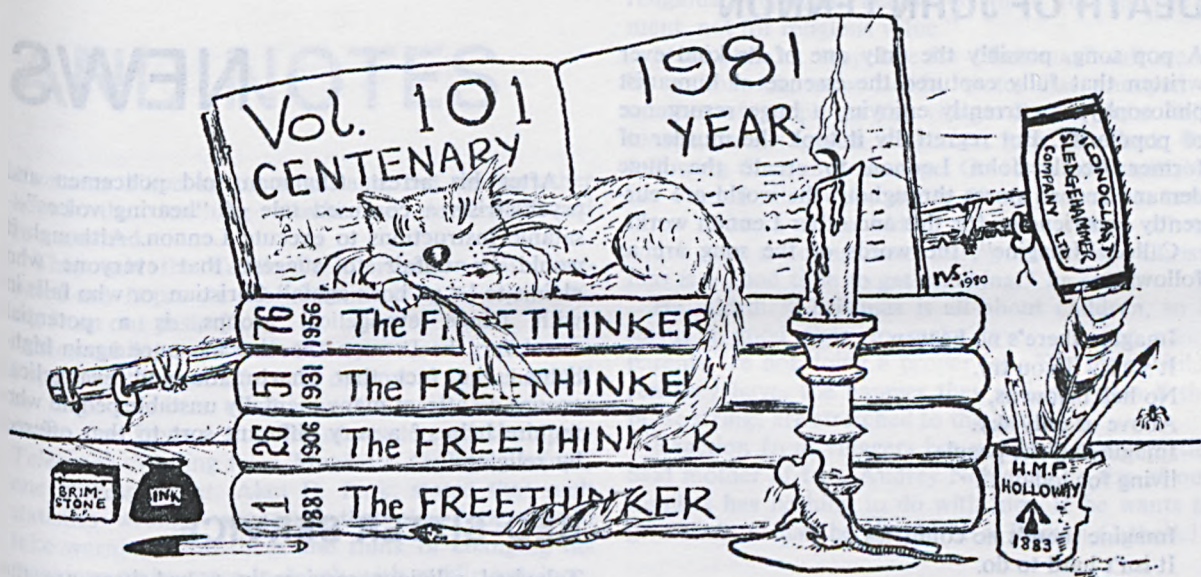
Religion in schools in America has received two significant blows—both of them delivered by courts. The first relates to a decision by the US Supreme Court that a Kentucky state law that requires the posting of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom in the state is unconstitutional. The second concerns a ruling by a Federal Appeals Court that a group calling itself Students for Voluntary Prayer may not hold prayer sessions in public classrooms in Upstate New York (Albany).

The issue in both cases involves the separation of church and state. In the Albany case, the court decision made it clear that religious activity under the aegis of government was not only to be discouraged, but barred. However, one judge sympathetic to the Christian issue, made a point of stating "we cannot be critical of the objectives of the Students for Voluntary Prayer. Introspective activity that seeks to strengthen the moral fibre of our nation's young adults deserves our support, but only in our role as private citizens."

In the Kentucky case, the Supreme Court ruled that the submission that the Ten Commandments were part of Western culture as well as part of Western religion could not save the state law. But dissenting Associate Justice William R. Rehnquist observed that the Constitution "does not require that the public sector be insulated from all things which may have a religious significance or origin".

HOLY NIBBLES

Church mice have eaten 500 communion wafers at a church at RAF Wattisham, Suffolk. Regular church-goers, according to a report, consume fewer than that number in a year.



As all *Freethinker* readers now know, this is the beginning of the *Freethinker* Centenary Year. The first issue was produced by G. W. Foote in May 1881, and it is in May of this year that we are concentrating our celebrations.

The first page of the first issue included a section entitled "Secular Policy", which set out the principles by which *The Freethinker* aimed to be guided. "Shaking off all Theological prejudices," wrote G. W. Foote, "we turn to nature as expounded by Science; to human society in its necessary elements and workings." *The Freethinker* still holds to its ambition of criticising and ridiculing theological prejudice, of looking at the universe in a scientific materialistic way, and of championing the attempt—never complete and not in a straight line—to reform and improve the workings of society. The centenary year is an opportunity to do this loudly and clearly and to increase our readership and influence.

The "Secular Policy" of G. W. Foote makes interesting reading today, and subscribers will find it in the free facsimile copy of pages 1 and 2 of *The Freethinker* Vol 1, No 1 which they will receive with the next issue. It will be available free only to subscribers, so please use this fact to encourage friends and acquaintances to become subscribers. In May we are producing a special centenary edition, which will be very much larger than usual and will contain contributions from such well-known figures as Sir Hermann Bondi, Brigid Brophy, Margaret Knight, Dora Russell and Baroness Wootton. (There will be no extra charge for subscribers.) Also on the evening of 16 May there will be a celebration in Conway Hall, London; more details later, but keep the date free. We are also intending to publish a booklet, outlining the history of *The Freethinker*, later in the year.

More details of all this will follow. It is an important year for *The Freethinker* and an excellent opportunity to publicise freethought. If you know of any local library or bookshop which might stock *The Freethinker* please approach them and send us details.

We also intend to publish extracts from *The Freethinker* of the past. A regular column in the early days was entitled "Acid Drops". Now that Sunday sport has become controversial, we print an extract from "Acid Drops" of May 1881:

SUNDAY play, however, is just what the Bible does not forbid; it only prohibits Sunday's work. Cobblers may play the fiddle on the Sabbath or dance a jig, but they mustn't mend boots. We are free to do whatever the Bible does not condemn. Scripture does not say we mustn't eat on the Lord's Day, so all good Christians eat. In like manner, it doesn't say we mustn't dance on the Lord's Day, so all good Christians may dance.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers:

Baroness Wootton
Antony Grey
Harold Blackham

21 March 1980

The Devonshire,
Bishopsgate, London EC1.

Further details from NSS.

702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

DEATH OF JOHN LENNON

A pop song, possibly the only one of its kind ever written that fully captured the essence of humanist philosophy, is currently enjoying a huge resurgence of popularity. But regretfully it took the murder of former Beatle John Lennon to create the huge demand record stores throughout the world are currently experiencing for this and other Lennon works.

Called "Imagine", the words of the song are as follows:

Imagine there's no heaven,
It's easy if you try.
No hell below us,
Above us only sky.
Imagine all the people
living for today. . .

Imagine there's no countries,
It isn't hard to do.
Nothing to kill or die for
and no religion too.
Imagine all the people
living life in peace. . .

Imagine no possessions.
I wonder if you can.
No need for greed or hunger—
a brotherhood of man.
Imagine all the people
sharing all the world.

You may say I'm a dreamer,
But I'm not the only one.
I hope some day you'll join us
and the world will be as one.

(Northern Songs Ltd)

When the song was first released, incidentally, there were strong moves in South Africa by Dutch Reformed Church ministers, as well as government officials, including the head of the armed forces, to have it banned. The song was variously described as "communitic" and "atheistic", and it was suggested that it advocated "pacifism", "cosmopolitanism", "socialism" and "hedonism" — elements wholly at odds with the odious Christian National philosophy of the South African regime.

Ironically, Lennon was killed by a man, who, although obviously deranged, had much of his thinking influenced by fundamental Christianity. Mark David Chapman's religious fervour can be traced back to his late teens when he became a "Jesus Freak" and underwent a sudden change in personality. He later complained about Lennon's remark that the Beatles were more famous than Jesus Christ; "Who the hell are they to compare themselves with Jesus?" he is reported as saying at the time.

NEWS

After his arrest, Chapman told policemen and psychiatrists a confused tale of "hearing voices"—satanic instructions to execute Lennon. Although it would be unfair to suggest that everyone who claims to be a "born again" Christian, or who falls in with fringe evangelical groups, is a potential murderer, the Lennon shooting has once again highlighted the fact that charismatic and evangelical groups do attract many mentally unstable people who require help of a very different sort to that offered by religion.

BED-SITTER SERVICE

Televised religious services in a bed-sitter are the latest device to attract viewers to religion—which broadcasters acknowledge is a "turn off", although they persist in churning it out. Viewers will be invited to place some bread, a Bible and a candle in front of their sets before the service begins. Surely this is taking adulation of the great god telly too far?

The series of services, breaking away from the traditional church service pattern, will use pop and jazz music and prayers based on items in the morning's newspaper to entice people into believing religion is "relevant". A simple act of breaking bread will unite nationwide audiences; what with the tax on drink and worry about the increase of alcoholism, perhaps it's just as well the nationwide congregation doesn't also have a communal tipple. Dr Morris, head of the BBC Religious Broadcasting, has stressed that it is not a proper communion service.

Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, asked about the screened services in a letter published in the *Guardian*: "But what about the traditional collection? Might TV detector vans fill that role?"

CATHOLICS AND CONTRACEPTION

A group of 27 members of the Guy's Hospital Catholic Society have accused Cardinal Hume and fellow bishops of "wanting it both ways" on the contraception issue. Their criticism, contained in a petition to the Cardinal, stems from the recent *Easter People* message from the bishops, as well as the Cardinal's intervention on contraception at October's synod of bishops. The bishops, they said, seemed to want it both ways because they supported

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Humanae Vitae on the one hand, but on the other hoped the teaching would be developed and re-examined.

They said the Cardinal's intervention has 'dissipated any hopes we cherished of clear, strong teaching from our pastor'.

Meanwhile, statistical surveys showing that the Pope's prohibition of birth control is not accepted by large numbers of Roman Catholics have come under fire from a number of readers of the *Daily Telegraph*. Writing from Magdalen College, Oxford, one correspondent, Alan D. Pink, stated that such statistics wrongly suggested that the Pope should take warning from them and think of changing his teachings to be more in touch with public opinion.

"This reduces the Pope from supreme pastor and teacher of his Church to the level of a politician unhesitatingly advocating 'restraint' and fearful of the number of votes he may lose. Such manifest nonsense is not, I hope, common among Catholics themselves, who will refuse obstinately to allow democratic principles to intrude into the mystical and hierarchical corporation which is the Church."

Mr Pink adds: "The individual has no right to choose what is right—that is already a datum and he had better listen to his teachers to find out what it is."

Fortunately, Mr Pink's views did not go unchallenged. Alastair Chambre of Middlesex, Harrow, wrote: "May I say that Mr Pink confirms my view, as a lifelong atheist, that organised religion is, with its inherent opposition to individual freedom of thought, essentially evil, and, surely, little different from political totalitarianism. I can see no justification for the acceptance of clerics as having any right to assume authority."

PARISH PAGANISM

A poster proclaiming "Put God back into Christmas" has incensed a Warwick vicar. "What drivelling rubbish," the Reverend Simon Godfrey wrote in St Paul's parish magazine. "Better by far to say 'Take God out of Christmas'." He went on to argue, quite correctly, that "it was a pagan festival before, and good luck to it".

But the Rev Godfrey did welcome the opportunity to eat, drink and be merry. What he was criticising, he stressed, were those people who turned to religion at Christmas and neglected it for the rest of the year. He also wrote in the magazine: "I cannot sanction carol concerts under the guise of

religious occasions. People do them for entertainment, not for religious value."

Meanwhile, a "copulate for Christmas" call made by a Barwick, now Leeds, rector has annoyed a number of people in the village. Rector John Wilkinson, in his parish magazine, gave his flock the following Christmas message: Go forth and multiply! He wanted all couples under 40 to produce at least three children—in a bid to save the village school which was suffering from falling numbers. "Christmas is a good time to get cracking," he said.

He added: "Christmas is all about children, so it seems a good time to make love. . . Too many parents are not doing a proper job. The more children they have, the happier they will be—even if the purse strings are stretched to the limit."

Reaction from villagers has not been sympathetic. Said mother of two, Audrey Noble: "The size of our families has nothing to do with him. If he wants to give such advice, he should be a Roman Catholic!"

ABORTION AND THE LAW

A High Court Ruling (reported in *The Freethinker*, December 1980) that nurses could not assist in abortion operations performed by injecting prostaglandin has been reversed by the Law Lords. The Five Law Lords have not yet given their reasons, but the Secretary for Social Services, Mr Patrick Jenkin, has lifted the suspension on a circular stating that nurses may assist in these operations.

A change in the Abortion Law, which might have been deemed necessary as a result of Lord Denning's previous ruling that nurses could not assist in these operations, may come from another direction. Tim Sainsbury, Conservative MP for Hove, has drawn first place in the ballot for the right to introduce private members' legislation. He has indicated that he is considering a Bill to amend the 1967 Abortion Act, but, unlike the Corrie Bill, one which concentrates on a single aspect, such as lowering the upper time limit for abortion or strengthening the conscience clause. Donald Stuart, Scottish Nationalist MP for the Western Isles, has also shown interest in legislation about abortion.

There has been a report that the manufacture of prostaglandin could in due course lead to do-it-yourself abortions. It is clearly not going to come onto the market for several years—if at all. There will need to be safety precautions: a consultant gynaecologist, Mr Mostyn Embury, said the drug might not be limited to hospital use, but medical supervision would be necessary, such as a woman visiting her doctor to make sure there were no complications.

Medical developments both in preserving the foetus at an earlier stage and in methods of terminating pregnancy will ensure that ethical arguments about abortion continue for many years.

BOOKS

AN ANTHOLOGY OF ATHEISM AND RATIONALISM; compiled, edited and with introductions by Gordon Stein. Prometheus Books (in co-operation with the Freedom from Religion Foundation). £9 approx (\$16.95 US)

At worst an anthology of freethought classics could be a disconnected slap-together; at best a systematic arrangement of carefully chosen items together with background notes. In this respect Dr Stein's compilation sets a very high standard indeed.

An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism is arranged into six broad sections, such as The Meaning of Atheism and Agnosticism, The Existence/Non-existence of God, The Historicity of Jesus, and The History of Freethought and Atheism; followed by a bibliography and suggested book list. We could discuss until the alleged Second Coming whether the editor should have included this item rather than that one, but I feel, overall, that an excellent balance and mix has been obtained; and we now have available in a compact volume numerous freethought writings which hitherto were available only as scarce pamphlets or obscure journal articles.

There is certainly something for everyone in this anthology: Charles Bradlaugh's "Plea for Atheism"; J. M. Robertson on "Godism"; E. M. Macdonald's "Design Argument Fallacies"; extracts from Chapman Cohen, G. J. Holyoake, Gerald Massey, Paine, Voltaire and many others. I thoroughly enjoyed G. W. Foote's "Bible Romances" and was amused by his comment: "Fifty years hence it will be difficult to find an opponent of Evolution". Foote was writing about 1900; it was as well that he did not say *eighty* years! The anthology includes R. G. Ingersoll at full literary throttle in "Some Mistakes of Moses", ending with a paragraph close to prophecy: "If the people were a little more ignorant, astrology would flourish—if a little more enlightened, religion would perish."

This volume is indeed a splendid source of notable quotes and quips, such as Chapman Cohen's "God was good on boils, but weak in argument"; or "A dethroned monarch may retain some of his human dignity while driving a taxi for a living. But a god without his thunderbolt is a poor object"; and Samuel P. Putnam's "There must be the press committed simply and solely to Freethought. . ." (Amen!) I was most impressed by W. K. Clifford's "Ethics of Belief" (what a pity he died so young); but, rather strangely, disliked Voltaire's "Books of Moses". (I doubt if this is an editorially unrepresentative choice; perhaps Voltaire's style of prose—in translation—no longer appeals to me.)

Although the present book was produced in the United States it contains a generous content of British freethought (no Australasian or South African, unfortunately). I was glad to see that Gor-

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don Stein chose to include G. H. Taylor's "Chronology of British Secularism", one of the few items in this anthology that is still readily obtainable—and an extremely readable and concise introduction to British freethought history. Useful adjuncts to this are J. M. Wheeler's "Sixty Years of Freethought" (also included), which gives a first-hand account of the early days of *The Freethinker* (Wheeler became sub-editor in January 1882); and a chapter from Putnam's *Four Hundred Years of Freethought*, dealing largely with the United States.

My only serious criticism of this volume is that it contains, especially in the first two hundred or so of its pages, a rather high proportion of typographical errors. These are excusable in cases where reprinting has been done from "heavy" nineteenth-century tracts, set in eye-watering miniscule type; but less so in the editor's introductory articles which were presumably set from typescript. On page 181, for example, a paragraph ends in mid-sentence, and two disconnected lines appear in the next paragraph. And while "Those whom the gods love die young", I am reasonably sure that Thomas Paine did not last out until "1909" (p.126). I would normally comment harshly on a serious freethought work that lacked an index; but such an omission is excusable in this case as the contents are so diverse in nature and origin, and the book has a thoughtful arrangement of contents. I was also rather surprised to see a rationalist editor (if it was the editor) use reverential forms such as "Jesus Himself" (p.242).

Dr Stein claims that this anthology "fulfills a long felt need". He is not only as good as his word, but has greatly enhanced the value of the material he has collected and reprinted by his excellent and satisfyingly detailed and accurate introductory passages for the various sections, authors and items. Just occasionally I wish that the editor had added explanatory notes where the reprinted text needed clarification. G. H. Taylor, for instance, writes of Dr Moncure Conway, "of the newly formed Ethical Society in London", for 1892, when in fact South Place Ethical Society had been established for a century and had merely changed its name. Similarly, Taylor could be read as giving the impression that in 1884 Joseph Symes was very active in British secularism, when in fact this was the year Symes arrived in Australia.

Even though some of the passages in it are a century old, this is a particularly important addition to the literature of modern militant freethought. It will not only save the newcomer to atheism and rationalism years of scouring through antiquarian bookshops, but will also provide an invaluable source

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of reference for anyone involved in campaigning, letter writing or debating in the freethought interest in the 1980s. I would like to see more publishing done in this vein, and of this quality, in the near future. I very strongly recommend this book for readers who take irreligion seriously.

NIGEL SINNOTT

THE BIRTH CONTROL BOOK by Howard I. Shapiro. Penguin £1.95
MAKE IT HAPPY by Jane Cousins. Penguin £1.25

The publication in a Penguin edition of these two books marks a considerable advance on the long radical tradition of fighting for information about contraception as part of the right to knowledge. 1877 saw Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh facing prosecution for printing Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*, and even today, the forces of censorship and reaction have succeeded in causing the Family Planning Association to dissociate itself from the promotion and sale of *Make It Happy*, to safeguard its government funding.

Yet this book manages to combine a straightforward, sensitive and personal approach with the most comprehensive and informative handbook on absolutely everything you ever wanted to ask as a teenager and never dared. It covers every sort of sexual act, orgasms (what it *feels* like, to him and to her), illnesses, contraception, emotions and ethical arguments, and has sections covering useful addresses, the law, a bibliography (with brief descriptions of the content) and an index. Latin terms are spelled phonetically the first time they occur, and I learnt more sub-cultural slang terms for intercourse and sexual organs than I'm ever likely to need! It sports a limited number of diagrams and photographs, and I could only fault it for its outdated Child Benefit data.

The Birth Control Book is aimed at a different readership (although perhaps the young lovers who succeeded in "making it happy" for themselves with Jane Cousins' book will mature to a more detailed consideration of their family planning needs and will curl up together with Howard Shapiro's manual). It is a masterly blend of a layman's read and a scholarly medical handbook. The author's bias is made clear in his preface where he says that "for too many years, male gynaecologists have been making vital decisions for women based on little more than their personal preferences and prejudices". This too is a comprehensive work, with chapters covering every current form of birth control, the information being presented in a question

and answer form. It is very detailed and also frank—this is the first time I have ever read an acknowledgement of the pain caused by insertion of intrauterine devices, or of saline abortions (which result in an actual labour). In fact, the chapter on IUDs terrified me—the countless risks and dangers suffered by women in controlling their fertility are simply appalling.

It is also an absorbing book to read and packed so full of information that it inevitably produces some very esoteric facts: I was especially taken with some of the terminology. Who would have guessed that "carunculae myrtiformes" are remnants of the hymen following childbirth, or that "spinnbarkeit" is the ability of the cervical mucus to stretch?

There is not only an index and an exhaustive bibliography of source material, but also a glossary of terms. Finally, it carries us forward to future developments and much needed improvements in birth control methods and chemistry.

It's all a long way removed from the pioneering days of the National Birth Control Association in Britain in the 1920's-30's and the forward impetus is unmistakeable and probably unstoppable. What is so sad is not just that the right-wing moralist backlash strikes out at all—we know they will never go away—that's why *The Freethinker* still needs to exist. No, it's that they choose to strike at enlightened and humane manuals that strip away mystique and guilt, and that place sex education in its proper perspective, and in the case of *Make It Happy*, that challenge the purely reproductive view of sex.

RITA CRAFT

SCIENCE AND THE SUPERNATURAL by J. C. Taylor. Maurice Temple Smith. £7.50

A quote from the last chapter of this disappointing book indicates that Taylor, once impressed by Uri Geller, no longer gives any countenance to the paranormal or supernatural:

"The supernatural has thus become completely natural. *The paranormal is now totally normal. ESP is dead.* Such disappearance of the supernatural is inevitable if we weigh it against science. I started my investigation with an open mind; the scales were not loaded on behalf of science. On the evidence presented in this book, science has won." (Author's italics).

I have to disagree: on the evidence presented in this book, no firm conclusions should be drawn at all about the supernatural by the reader. Moreover, s/he will learn little about sound scientific reasoning but may have grounds to speculate about the author's intentions and motivation. Indeed, without worrying about the fact that the fourth sentence in this paragraph is in one sense meaningless, it appears to pre-empt the whole purpose of the book and is

hardly consistent with the succeeding statement of 'open-mindedness'.

Whatever the author intended to say here, such carelessness and looseness is characteristic of this book. "There is presently great sympathy for not attempting to analyse psychic phenomena." This generalisation is "justified" by a single case of a "famous British faith healer" who tried to discourage Taylor from any physical investigation of faith healing. But what about the many people who are sceptical but believe that there must be something traceable at the roots of the paranormal, be it a hitherto unverified physical phenomenon or simply wishful thinking? As Taylor describes, there is active, government-funded research into the paranormal in America, Europe and Russia. How can he justify his statement?

Another vague and unsubstantiated generalisation: "Scientific method itself has come in for much criticism recently". We never learn why, by whom, and what relevance this has to Taylor's studies. While it may be unfair to pick on two statements, neither central to the author's case, they are symptomatic of the author's superficial approach; his central case is no better argued.

Taylor builds his book on a predominantly anecdotal structure of strange and unnatural occurrence followed by investigation and denouement. Employing what he describes as well validated cases, he gives examples of the principal aspects of the paranormal: clairvoyance, telepathy, precognition and psychokinesis. He outlines the more or less scientific tests that have been carried out in respect of each of these. He also devotes chapters to the "framework of the paranormal", giving examples of frauds, fantasies and tricks of memory, and coincidences.

Taylor (a professor of physics at Kings College, London) discusses his own scientific investigations, in very cursory outline. Convinced that the only known scientific mechanisms capable of lying at the root of these phenomena are electromagnetic in character, the author and his colleague Balinovski carried out laboratory measurements of faith healers, dowsters, etc, hoping to detect radio or other electromagnetic disturbances, without success.

Although Taylor does not provide any detailed descriptions of his work, I find it easy to accept his conclusion that the paranormal and electromagnetic phenomena are unrelated.

To the extent that the book aims to describe the various scientific aspects of paranormal and related scientific research, it succeeds. The difficulties arise when the author interprets the results of others' experiments and forces his negative conclusion down the reader's gullet in the face of contrary evidence. Three examples will suffice to make the point.

In a chapter concerning telepathy, Taylor describes experiments by two different scientists, one in the

US, the other in W Germany, to investigate the nature of dowsing. One, according to Taylor, published a "long series of papers" claiming that many people showed dowsing reactions when subjected to very low intensity magnetic fields. The German reported similar results with even smaller magnetic fields. As Taylor points out, these results are fantastic because the magnetic fields involved are very much smaller than that of the earth, which itself varies considerably in time and location. However, Taylor offers as evidence against this phenomenon the cases of one dowser, Balanovski, and Taylor himself, tested with equipment at Kings College. He concludes that "there is little likelihood" of a magnetic sensor in man. True, perhaps, but he has done nothing to undermine the opposing evidence itself, so no firm negative conclusion can be reached. Taylor seems conveniently to forget this by the time he reaches the last chapter.

A second example is that of the series of tests carried out at the Stanford Research Institute into telepathy and clairvoyance. Here, Taylor describes in detail a procedure where cards with well defined patterns are selected in one room while the "telepath" situated elsewhere tries to describe which cards have been chosen. The statistical success rate is apparently so favourable that the odds against the results being due to coincidence are millions to one against. Taylor points this out but, later, without any reference to the many people who have raised sensible criticisms of the Stanford Research Institute tests, dismisses the tests' results in the most extraordinary fashion: "It could well be", he suggests, "that there is a fault in some other part of the test. . .". Any scientific test can be doubted but doubt is different from falsification.

The most galling discrepancy occurs in the author's treatment of the Uri Geller affair, which sparked off Taylor's interest in the paranormal. Pointing out that Uri Geller, after initial forays into Taylor's laboratory, refused to attend other scientific tests as they developed in precision and refinement, Taylor also gives—in another context—a description of the most common means of forging the spoon-bending phenomenon. And yet, in his opening chapter, the author describes Geller's bending of a spoon, held by Taylor, in terms that rule out any such means of trickery; we are never informed how it was done, or even whether the method of forgery (for such, Taylor concludes, it must have been) was ever detected.

I have gone into the faults of the book in detail because in my opinion a book purporting to be a "scientific investigation of the paranormal" should be assessed particularly critically, and it is in the details of its advocacy that the book's weakness lies. As one whose view of the paranormal is extremely sceptical, I can only plead "save us from our friends".

PHILIP CAMPBELL

LETTERS

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND HUMANISM

The participation of BHA in the Religious Education Council's delegation to Baroness Young has precipitated a debate which I hope may clear up a number of confusions.

The fundamental question is whether or not Secularists, Rationalists and Humanists want young people to be given insights into what Humanism is about. If they do, then they had better accept the fact that this will only be achieved by an expansion of RE into an "objective, fair and balanced" presentation of the religious and naturalistic stances for living from which young people can select the orientation that makes most sense to them. This is the educationally valid approach.

This approach is obviously consistent with Nicolas Walter's request for "a system of genuine education about religion, philosophy and morality", which he stated in his letter to the Times Educational Supplement. It is what both the Religious Education Council and the Social Morality Council mean by RE.

I, with others, have been pressing for a change of name—say "Social, Personal and Religious Education". This will come. Using RE instead of Religious Instruction is already in breach of the 1944 Act, so why not go further?

The critics of the approach outlined above seem naively to imagine that, if time allotted to the consideration of life stances were abolished in our schools, the result would be to replace confusion among the young by the enthusiastic acceptance of Humanism. That is a delusion. For lack of help in framing their philosophies of life, young people are turning, not to Humanism, but to all sorts of odd cults, to alcohol, drugs, apathetic cynicism and other debilitating dead-ends.

Your leader in *The Freethinker* for December suggests, without actually saying so, that personal, social and religious education can be covered adequately within the traditional curriculum. What a hope! The majority of secondary schools are frantically pursuing narrow, academic goals, with barely a thought for the personal, social and emotional development of their pupils. Humanists can never approve of compulsory Religious Instruction and Acts of Worship in schools, but we must press for an education directed to full human development, and this requires a "genuine education about religion, philosophy and morals", though I would add "personal and social education" to Walter's list. An increasing number of schools are using the time allotted to RE for this purpose.

To suggest that the representatives of BHA have not played a significant role in reshaping the concept of RE is erroneous. While *The Freethinker* has been busy with its vigorous battle against bigotry and dogmatism, it has not, apparently, had time to keep in touch with changes in educational approach over the past decade. In these, the BHA Education Committee has been continuously and effectively involved.

JAMES HEMMING

In the twenty years I have devoted to fighting compulsory RE and religious observance in the schools I have often worked shoulder-to-shoulder (sometimes literally) with Bill McIlroy—giving out leaflets at conferences, lobbying in the House of Commons, participating in radio phone-ins, to give a few examples. But at no time, Bill, did you comment on my Chinese complexion and droopy moustache—although it now seems, in your latest outburst, that I am an "education manderin" (Jottings, December issue.)

It is a pity that when Bill puts pen to paper he abandons cool rational argument and turns to exaggerated, offensive abuse. It is not long ago that he wrote of the BHA Education Committee as "ham-stringing" the movement with "pussyfooting bland waffle" and accused us of "killing off" the Humanist Teachers' Association. I nailed this ridiculous piece of fiction by pointing out that the HTA was wound up by unanimous decisions of an HTA AGM and of its Committee—all of whom save one were members of the National Secular Society!

But he seems not to have learnt any lesson from this and is off again. As well as being a "mandarin", it seems that I am also a "Mrs Jemima Puddle-Duck". I and my colleagues, he tells *Freethinker* readers, are "outnumbered and outwitted" on the Religious Education Council. But I see that he makes no mention of the fact that Mrs Whitehouse had long letters in *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* complaining that the BHA had "captured" the REC!

But, of course, neither of these extreme views is true. There is a large number of people in education who recognise that RE and religious worship are wrong and who wish, with us, to see a new open approach to this area of school life. Bill uses ironic inverted commas in describing the REC as "liberal" but the Discussion Document they issued recommended that the subject "should be regarded as helping pupils to become educated about religions and other life-stances", that "it includes studying belief systems which have a supernatural referent as well as those which have not", and that therefore "some change of name would seem to be indicated" because "the term, religious education, is inappropriate, (and) offensive to some".

So calm down, Bill—and have the humility to recognise that there are other people in the movement who also have dedication and integrity. They may differ from you in their analysis of the situation and about the policies to follow—but that is no reason for the extravagant language and juvenile sarcasm of your attacks. Save your venom for the real enemies of us all—the Whitehouses, Andertons and Pinochets of the world—who are delighted to see the forces of humanity and reason dissipating their energies in such squabbling.

J. WHITE,
Chairman, BHA Education Committee

SOCIALISM AND HUMANISM

Having read Ken Wright's review in the November issue of *The Freethinker*, I took the trouble to read Tony Benn's "Arguments for Socialism". One of the book's most outstanding features is the influence of Christianity on Benn's thought. Nor is Benn unique. Despite the outstanding contribution to socialist thought of freethinking socialists from Shaw to Aldred and the stalwarts of the Stratford Dialectical and Radical Club, it remains true that the thinking of the British Labour Movement owes more to Christianity than it does to Marxism or any other form of humanistic, non-religious thought. This Christian influence results not only in some extremely confused thinking, but also in Labour MPs adopting reactionary positions on such issues as abortion and labour organisations being manipulated by undemocratic cliques of religious sectarians.

There is a long atheist tradition in the Labour movement dating back to the days when Richard Carlile was imprisoned for publishing Paine's "Age of Reason". Yet many of today's socialists have never had a chance to learn of this tradition. Nor will they until those socialists who are humanists, rationalists and atheists organise themselves to make the tradition

known and uphold its ideas in the current debates on the way forward to socialism. For many years well-organised groups of religious socialists have been propagandising for their point of view. Is it not time for socialist humanists to take up the challenge this presents and organise their own propaganda (as a start the republication of F. A. Ridley's excellent pamphlet "Socialism and Religion" would be most useful) so that the influence of reactionary, obscurantist religion on the thinking of Labour might be lessened and that of rationalist humanism increased?

TERRY LIDDLE

Your reviewer, Ken Wright (Freethinker, November 1980) may or not be correct in blaming the decline of Britain's Labour Movement on its Methodist roots. However, he is on shaky ground in suggesting that there can be any merit in a form of socialism based on the Marxist religion.

If he disagrees on this perhaps he can tell us of even one country where Marxism has come to power which still allows freedom of thought.

B. B. DALE

DEFINING MANKIND

Francis Bennion (Letters, November) labels all mankind as "fleshly spiritual" but I should like to offer him the definition I implement in the classroom as a professional humanist teacher of the truth. Man is an oscillation between a bundle of self-interests at his centre surrounded by a linguistic flux of about a hundred concepts expressed in innumerable words governed by metaphor, the guiding principle of language. When our translation exercises by means of the Basic Dictionary have taught us to interpret and use this century of concepts and their interdependencies as truthfully and accurately and logically as possible at this point in time, we have progressed as far as possible. We oscillate between the self interests and the degree of rationality we have attained. Our work is a permanent, but never terminable, development of comprehension.

S. B. WYNBURNE

ANIMAL EXPERIMENTS

The debate at the National Secular Society AGM on the total abolition of animal experiments, was conducted almost exclusively in terms of whether or not experiments to test the safety of drugs and preparations for human use could be justified. I feel that the present version of the practical objectives, which this motion sought to modify, is quite satisfactory, in that it stresses that experiments should be necessary, rather than asking for a total ban. However, the question is, necessary for whom? This question can be discussed in terms of human social classes or power groups, but I wish to make the point, for which species?

The point was made during the discussion, that experiments on animals did not permit categorical statements to be made on the likely results on humans after tests. It is evidently valuable for tests to be carried out on both humans and animals, in order to accumulate data and confirm theories in the science of comparative biochemistry. Would those who condemn experiments on animals be prepared to face two unpalatable choices; either to let animals live and die in unnecessary pain, because veterinary treatment was absent; or would they counsel the use of drugs or treatment which were obsolete or tested only on humans?

It will not do to reply that the opponents of animal experiments are themselves vegetarians, and opposed to the keeping of pets and the use of draught animals,

since, while everyone might be prepared to reduce their consumption of meat, they would not abandon the keeping of animals and would not abandon wild animals to their fate.

COLIN MILLS

(Voltaire Lecture)

Third, we progressives should have a clear idea of how progress is to be brought about. If our commitment to progress is practical, then we must see ourselves as practitioners of social change. We need to understand the dynamics of the process of social change, if we are to operate effectively on that process. In this context, Voltaire's position — Tom Paine described him as "both the flatterer and satirist of despotism" — has relevance for us. Voltaire denounced the heroic tradition in history and philosophy which, as in Machiavelli's thought, focussed on the power of princes and put its trust in them. Yet he continued to hope that enlightened despots like Frederick the Great of Prussia would provide the motive force for progress into the Age of Reason. These hopes were not justified, but they were understandable. After all, what practical alternative did there seem to be in mid-eighteenth century Europe?

We run a comparable risk. Increasingly we feel that progress requires us to throw off the domination of big corporations, big government, the mass media, the powerful trade unions, the professional monopolies (for example, in education, medicine and the law), the big money-dealers like banks and building societies — in fact, to liberate ourselves from excessive dependency on the whole complex of formal institutions which make up the over-developed, over-extended modern state. But, at the same time, we find it very difficult to imagine a different context for the reforming (or, if we are Marxists, revolutionary) action which will take us forward. We assume that we need political power, or money, or publicity, or legislation, or professional backing, in order to act effectively; and we are tempted to sink our energies, as Voltaire did, in manipulating the old system in the hope of helping a new one to come to birth.

John Robertson suggested that the concept of rights, which was seen by the Enlightenment as part of the natural order, is now more evolutionary. There has been a development from rights for citizens and slaves, to rights for women, for children, for minorities, for animals. . . Paine had pointed out that rights should involve, by reciprocity, duties as well. Robertson argued for a concept of the right to be responsible. A mature person or society will emphasise self-reliance and self-responsibility as opposed to dependence on large organisations or state welfare.

After looking at a variety of attitudes to work, including the Protestant work ethic, Robertson con-

sidered rights and responsibilities in relation to work. The last two hundred years have seen a considerable development in people's right to work, but the effect of this historical thrust has been to "restrict most people's independent right to choose how they will work, and to limit their responsibility for applying their work to their own perceptions of need and value". Work has become separated from any pattern of family or community life.

Changing patterns of work in the future, which would provide solutions to today's unemployment problems, were examined by Robertson. He envisaged a revival of local economies, a return to the household as a centre of work, a reconsideration of the separation of men's work and women's work and a spreading of demand for part-time work.

Conclusion

Let me now try to draw the threads together.

First, then, we are living, as Voltaire was living, at a time when a transformation of our society cannot be far off. Its dominant institutions have become absurdly overdeveloped, and we have become absurdly dependent on them. In no aspect of our lives is this more significant than in the sphere of work.

Secondly, we are living through a time when progress in establishing many new rights has, paradoxically, diminished our effective right to take responsibility for ourselves. As the institutions of modern society, such as the national labour market, become less able to deliver the goods we require of them, such as jobs, we shall find it necessary to take more responsibility to ourselves.

Thirdly, for several hundred years forces have been strongly at work in our society which have tended to deprive most people of an effective right to define for themselves, in accordance with their own needs and values, how they should use (and develop) their own capacity for work. One of the most exciting possibilities now confronting us is of a change of direction in this respect.

As and when we bring this change about (and we will have to take the initiative ourselves, not try to get the government and other institutions to do it for us), we shall open up the prospect of "good work" for many more people than have enjoyed it in the past. By "good work" I mean what E. F. Schumacher meant. First, it is work that provides necessary goods and services; it meets needs. Second, it is work that enables people to use and develop their abilities and aptitudes and experience; it contributes to human growth. Third, it is work done in service to and in co-operation with other people, thus liberating us from the limits of egocentricity; it contributes to the growth of people as social beings.

Good work, in short, contributes to self-development and the evolution of consciousness. Henceforth

good work will be an essential part of progress. It requires that we claim and exercise the right to be responsible.

1. The term "post-industrial" is not wholly satisfactory—for two reasons. First, it says nothing about what the age that comes after the industrial age will be like. Second, there are in fact two contrasting visions of post-industrial society. I have called them the hyper-expansionist (HE) and sane, humane, ecological (SHE) visions.

2. Hugh Stretton, "Housing and Government", Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1974.

AGM OF NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Among the motions passed at the Annual General Meeting of the National Secular Society on 6 December (see front page) was one supporting *The Freethinker*: "This AGM notes with pride and satisfaction that *The Freethinker* will celebrate its centenary in 1981 and pays tribute to those who, during the last 100 years, have contributed to this remarkable achievement. We urge the humanist movement and all who value *The Freethinker* to make special efforts, particularly during the coming year, to increase its circulation and influence."

Two of the motions passed related to education. One regretted the attempts of the Church of England to purchase existing schools in Solihull and Taunton, following their success in buying a school in Ealing, while another deplored "the call by the Religious Education Council for the allocation of further resources for religious education and regrets the unfortunate association of a section of the humanist movement with the proposals" and called for "the acceleration of the present trend away from RE, towards social studies".

An emergency motion which deplored "the successful legal action taken by the Home Office against the National Council for Civil Liberties concerning the release of documents to the press, both because of the serious implications for freedom of the press and because the costs of the case for the NCCL are a serious blow to its defence of civil liberties" was passed. A motion to include "the total abolition of experiments on non-human animals" was defeated after much debate. Motions to disaffiliate from the Anti-Apartheid Movement and to remove a large number of the Society's practical objectives, so that general aims other than combating religious superstition be excluded, were overwhelmingly rejected.

The practice of exorcism is more common now than at any time since the Middle Ages, according to a report on London Weekend Television's religious affairs programme, *Credo*.

SWITZERLAND

A new freethought society was founded in Geneva in September 1980. The association wants to revive the activities of the Freethinkers Society of the City of Geneva established in 1890. A tradition of a critical, undogmatic way of thinking has always existed in Geneva; two prominent men to take such an approach were Michael Servet (Serveto), burned at the stake in 1553 by order of the reformer Jean Calvin, and Voltaire.

The declaration of principles of the society include: freethought is related to reason and science; it is not a party and is independent of all parties; it is not a Church and accepts no dogma; it aspires to develop the spirit of free enquiry and tolerance.

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EVENTS

Belfast Humanist Group. Discussion: Survival in a World of Change. Thursday, 12 February. Secretary, Wendy Wheeler, 30 Cloyne Crescent, Monkstown, Co. Antrim.

Berkshire Humanists. Mr E. M. Brook: Proportional Representation. Friday, 13 February, 8 pm. Friends Meeting House, Northfield End, Henley-on-Thames.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Sir Hermann Bondi: Energy in the World. Sunday, 1 February, 5.30 pm. The Queen's Head, Queen's Road, Brighton. (Junction Road entrance, opposite Brighton Station.)

Harrow Humanist Society. John Shanley: The Philosophy of Marxism. Wednesday, 14 January, 8 pm. Gayton Road Library.

Leeds and District Humanist Society. Greville Needham: Quaker and Humanist. Tuesday, 10 February, 7.45 pm. 6B, Bainbridge Road, Headingley.

Leicester Secular Society. Robert Morrell, Secretary of the Thomas Paine Society: Thomas Paine and "The Age of Reason". Sunday, 1 February, 6.30 pm. Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate, Leicester.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Denis Cobell: We are Frying Tonight (psychological perspectives). Thursday, 29 January, 7.45 pm. Davenport Hall, Davenport Road, Catford SE6.

London Secular Group. (Outdoor meetings) Thursday, 12.30 pm at Tower Hill; Sunday, 2—5 pm at Marble Arch. (The Freethinker and other literature on sale.)

Merseyside Humanist Group. Dennis Green: Christian Humanism. Monday, 19 January, 7.45 p.m.. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead.

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1. Sunday Morning Meetings, 11 am. Dr Michael Chance: The Ethical Implications of Biology Lost Since Darwin, 18 January. Steven Lukes: Can a Marxist Believe in Human Rights?, 25 January. Dr H. Stopes-Roe and P. Cadogan: Directions and Descriptions, 1 February. Tuesday Discussions, 7 pm. January theme: Can Mankind Survive? Prof Richard Scorer: The Population Problem in Britain, 13 January. Eric McGraw: Population and Resources, 20 January. Sarah Buckmaster: Action to Conserve Resources, 27 January.

Tyneside Humanist Society. Cllr Mrs M. Murray: The 767th in a Row. Wednesday, 28 January, 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, 1 Archbold Terrace, Newcastle upon Tyne 2.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Ivor Russell: The Origins of Mediterranean Civilisation. Friday, 30 January, 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, Page Street, Swansea.

Worthing Humanist Group. Beatrice Clarke: Louise Michel—Passionate Humanist Turned Anarchist. Sunday, 25 January, 5.30 pm. Worthing Trades Council Club, 15 Broadwater Road.

Open University Humanist Society. Annual General Meeting. Saturday, 21 February, 2—5 pm. Artists Room, Conway, Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1.

Gay Humanist Group. Discussion: Paedophilia. Friday, 12 February, 7.30 pm. The Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square.

Humanist Holidays. Easter 1981. 15-22 April. £6 + VAT, half-board, Poole, Dorset. Summer 1981. 1-8 August. £63 incl VAT. St Leonard's-on-Sea, E Sussex. Enquiries to Mrs Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12 0NA. Tel: 01-673 6234.

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: £3.00 Six months: £1.75
U.S.A. and Canada: Twelve months \$7.00 Six months: \$4.00

(Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if the remittance is in foreign currency [including Eire] please add the equivalent of 55p or US \$1.00 for bank charges).

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