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EVOLUTION DEBATE: ANOTHER HUXLEY TO THE DEFENCE OF DARWINISM

Sir Andrew Huxley, a descendant of the famous T. H. Huxley, spoke out in defence of Darwinism when he recently delivered his presidential address to the Royal Society in London. He told members that following a controversy in the scientific journal, "Nature", he found himself being asked by scientists—from the biological as well as the physical side—whether zoologists had ceased to believe in evolution. "I began to wonder", declared Sir Andrew, "whether I ought to take up cudgels on Darwin's behalf as T. H. Huxley did in his reply to Bishop Wilberforce at the 1860 meeting of the British Association".

He referred to Sir Edmund Leach's claim in a speech to the British Association last September that "many well-qualified scientists of the highest standing would today accept many of Wilberforce's criticisms of Darwin". The public is still being given the impression on all sides that scientists no longer believe in evolution.

"This is so far from the truth, and many of the arguments that have been used are so fallacious, that I have felt that I ought to take the opportunity of this address to put the record straight, in spite of the risks in speaking on a topic outside my own speciality, and of the risk that I may seem to be flogging a dead horse.

"Midway in the *Nature* correspondence, a letter from the Oxford zoologist, J. R. Baker, said: 'We have slipped back a hundred years: how long before letters signed Wilberforce appear?'

"Leach has come out as a champion of Wilberforce, and here is a Huxley answering the challenge".

Sir Andrew reminded his listeners that Bishop Wilberforce's criticisms of Darwin are to be found in the *Quarterly Review* of July 1860. They are probably much the same as he used in the famous debate at Oxford on 30 June of that year.

"Leach mentions only one of those criticisms, the apparent suddenness with which new kinds

of animals appear in the fossil record, and the corresponding absence of 'missing links'. Leach claims that this criticism is supported by the theory of 'punctuated equilibria'.

"I have already pointed out that this theory is in no way inconsistent with Darwinian evolution or indeed with Darwin's own writings. But even if it were, it would not support the criticism made by Wilberforce: 'punctuated equilibria' refers to micro-evolution, i.e. the formation of varieties, and of species belonging to the same genus, while Wilberforce was referring to much larger evolutionary steps.

"Concerning the missing links that 'were a worry to Darwin', Leach says 'they are still missing and are likely to remain so'. No reasonable person can expect that every step throughout the span of life on Earth will be found as a fossil, but the discovery of 'missing links' has gone on at an increasing rate from before the publication of the *Origin of Species* to the present day".

Wilberforce's Claim Demolished

Sir Andrew went on to say that on the relationship between man and the great apes, Wilberforce's only scientific argument was to quote the claim of Richard Owen that "Man is the sole species of his genus, the sole representative of his order and subclass".

"Owen made this distinction chiefly on the basis of some supposed structural difference in the brain. His claims were promptly demolished by T. H. Huxley and others, and have never been revived.

"Apart from this progressive reduction of the difficulties in evolution by natural selection, it is easy to forget the positive indications from the

(continued on back page)

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NEWS A

CATHOLICS AND CRIME

A report appeared in *The Times* last year on the disproportionate number of Roman Catholics who resort to crime, drug addiction and prostitution. It was written by the paper's Religious Affairs Correspondent, who is a Catholic, following publication of an essay by the Catholic Director of ROMA, a housing association which provides accommodation for drug addicts. But such considerations did not deter outraged readers, not all of them Catholics, from taking up cudgels in defence of the faith.

More thoughtful Catholics were aware that there was considerable substance in the report, and a conference of educationists, psychiatrists and social workers was arranged at Heythrop College, London. The proceedings have been summarised in *The Month*, a Catholic journal which sponsored the conference.

The report is characterised by the blunt realism of the opening paragraph:

Those who have worked in the courts and prisons of this country, in psychological medicine and rehabilitation schemes have been aware for many years of what seems to be an unduly high proportion of Roman Catholics among their clientele. These include serious offenders and recidivists, alcoholics and drug addicts.

While the statistics commonly quoted for Catholic deviants are open to question, "no one can ignore the feeling of so many doctors and social workers that Catholics, who ought to be exemplary, make a disproportionate contribution to the number of addicts and prisoners".

One speaker said that even if Catholics contributed to the crime statistics only proportionately, there would be no grounds for complacency. They ought to be under-represented if their religion meant anything at all.

The current impression among field workers is that Catholics, who constitute 10 to 12 per cent of the population, account for 25 per cent of prison inmates. They also make up about half of London's "junkies", and the authors of an Addiction Research Unit report have said that they expect an alcoholic to be a Catholic.

The conference considered a wide range of factors which could contribute to criminal and anti-social behaviour among Catholics. These included homelessness, poverty, unemployment and rootlessness. However, when all allowances have been made, "the fact remains that there are many Catholics in prison for whom the faith seems to have done very little".

Referring to the (mainly Catholic) Irish in Britain, research among battered wives has revealed Irish

S AND NOTES

women to be more at risk than many others.

It was felt that Catholics have tended to be schizoid in a number of ways.

Technical moral theology produced a form of casuistry which began by being compassionate but ended in legalistic unreality. . . . With statements of high moral principle there went a constant search for loopholes, with the result that the Catholic conscience was coarsened. . . . The special concern with sexual sin (with fear as the motive for avoiding it) also tended to concentrate on reproduction rather than human relationships in the use of the sexual faculty and in the whole field of dialogue between men and women.

This has often resulted in an inability to establish close relationships which is discerned in many recidivist prisoners.

Catholics in the United Kingdom are also schizoid about their origins. And it is admitted that there is in them "a broad streak of anti-intellectualism which still endures, and which encapsulates the faith in over-simplified, dogmatic abstractions".

Reference was made to a legacy of authoritarianism in the Church and to bishops, now safely dead, as being "very conservative, with a bias, in behavioural matters, towards punishment as 'treatment'".

The motivation offered to the offender has had more to do with fear, when the treatment really needed can best be described as "loving over a long time". In practice the Church has concentrated more on containing wrong-doing . . . than on facilitating growth and maturity, an area where secular society has often done better.

Opinions about the present bishops were either not expressed at the conference or have been omitted from the summary.

Many young people are abandoning Catholicism, "partly because they feel that prayer and the sacraments are meaningless or irrelevant to their daily living". They find it hard to make sense of the Church's sexual morality.

A certain sense of helplessness in regard to sexual problems leads to feelings of shame and an inability to cope with what seems to be an unattainable counsel of perfection, the more so as societal and media pressures favour casual relationships. No longer as submissive as they were, they give up the practice of the faith and discard its tenets, and are left alone with their consciences and without adequate maturity.

Young Irish Catholics in particular are often not just lapsed, but positively anti-Catholic.

Catholic education has played a large part in bringing about this state of affairs.

Even now the principle of "exclusion" applies in Catholic schools; the Church makes almost no provision for the maladjusted pupil, and provision for the educationally sub-normal and those with special learning defects (e.g. dyslexia) is minimal. Catholic orphanages were very bad and some still are. Catho-

lic approved schools were the worst in the country, with excessive dependence on corporal punishment, and, because they were run in separation from the national system, they did not keep pace with modern professional approaches, including psychological testing and assessment.

There have been improvements, "but it has to be faced that the middle-aged prisoners of today are the products of a mechanical, conformist and restraining regime, and that its legacy is still not exhausted in our schools".

It is evident that participants in the conference would like to see their Church adopt a more honest and humane attitude on social questions. However, they will not cut much ice with either the conservative hierarchy or the docile majority of Catholics. And the work of "progressives" within the Church will be considerably more difficult after the visit of the reactionary Pope John Paul II.

After watching a television discussion by evangelical Christians on Armageddon, Californian James Meeks, aged 24, murdered his baby daughter by burning her in a furnace. He also injured his young son. Meeks told the police that his children were devils and that the furnace was "the gateway to Hell".

NSS RESOLUTIONS

Resolutions on a wide range of topics were passed at the recent annual general meeting of the National Secular Society.

The meeting "viewed with alarm" the increasing use by the authorities of blanket bans on street demonstrations, considering "such bans to be a gross interference with the right of people to publicise peacefully their opinions". Such bans were discriminatory where demonstrations on social and political issues have been banned but religious demonstrations are allowed to continue.

A resolution was passed which called for "the immediate repeal of the legislation which makes homosexuality amongst members of the armed forces and the merchant service a punishable offence".

The Government was urged to extend the provisions of the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland, and to lower the age of consent for females there to 16. This would bring legislation in Northern Ireland into line with that on the mainland. The provisions of the 1973 Matrimonial Causes Act should also be extended to the Province.

The meeting expressed grave concern over persecution of people of the Baha'i faith by the Islamic regime in Iran. The British Government should "exert maximum pressure on the regime, economically and otherwise" to save these victims of religious persecution from virtual extinction. But the meeting wished it to be made clear that "the Society has no



greater hostility to Islam than to any other religion".

The meeting was also concerned with the undue influence of ultra-orthodox religious parties on the Israeli Government, which represented a threat to the liberty of the non-religious majority. The meeting also felt "that this influence will strengthen the bellicose and expansionist element in Israel and therefore is a threat to peace in the Middle East". The meeting pledged the Society "to do all it can to aid the development of secular humanist ideas and organisations among all residents of the State of Israel".

Noting that the Labour Party planned to phase out private education, the party was urged "to secularise the maintained sector of education at the same time".

The Society of West End Theatre, British Actors Equity and others concerned were urged to "resolve the differences between them which have so far prevented the Sunday opening of London Theatres".

The BBC and other organisations should "identify programmes emanating from their religious departments both before and after transmission".

The meeting recognised that "the aims of the humanist movement in general and the National Secular Society in particular would be furthered by persuading political parties to recognise humanist opinions and adopt humanist objectives as part of their manifestoes and programmes, particularly in government". It welcomed the formation of the Socialist Secular Association, and called on humanists supporting other parties to set up humanist groups, particularly in the Conservative, Liberal and Social Democratic parties.

The meeting drew attention of the Government to the fact that the inequality of age at which State retirement pensions are granted to men and women works in practice to the disadvantage of men. It called on the Government to "fix a date, not later than five years hence, when men and women will be granted pensions at the age of 60 or younger".

RESIST CLASSROOM CENSORSHIP

Andrew Davis, the prizewinning author of children's books, has called on school librarians to resist pressure to censor what pupils read. He told the annual conference of the School Library Association: "I favour no censorship about words at all. People should be represented as using words that would have been in character in real life".

Mr Davis said he understood librarians' difficulties about books touching on subjects like sex, violence and drugs. "But", he added, "I would resist suppression".

Attempts to censor school books have been made by several evangelical pressure groups. The Community Standards Association has been particularly

active, their targets including *Cider with Rosie*, *A Kestrel for a Knave* and *Chips with Everything*. Dr Graham Leonard, the new Bishop of London, is on the Association's list of supporters.

The Prince and Princess of Wales should have waited longer before starting a family in order to set an example to other young newly-weds, a senior lecturer in obstetrics at the London Hospital Medical School said last month. Dr Wendy Savage told a Socialist Medical Association conference that the fairy tale quality of the Royal romance and wedding would encourage young people, particularly girls, to imitate the Prince and Princess. But many young couples who have children immediately after marriage split up, thus causing misery to themselves and to their offspring.

Centenary Appeal

Donations continue to arrive at the office, and those received during the last three weeks of November 1981 include £100 from a reader who has already been very generous but prefers to remain anonymous. Members of the West Glamorgan Humanist Group organised a raffle in aid of the Centenary Appeal and their enterprise resulted in a profit of £61.

Sincere thanks are expressed to the latest group of contributors. J. Arkell, £5; T. Atkins, £2; R. H. Barr, £1; D. A. Bethell, £1.25; P. W. Brook, £28; E. Byles, £10; P. R. Chapman, £5; B. E. Clark, £1; P. R. Dent, £3; C. M. Drew, \$2; P. Forrest, £6; D. Fyfe, £1; J. G. Gerrard, £2; H. Goodall, £1; E. Henry, £2; C. Honeywell, £4.50; C. G. Houston, £2; N. Levenson, £2; R. De La Llave \$5; M. G. McIver, £2; K. K. Moore, £1; C. A. Pugh, £7; W. A. Rathkey, £2; R. H. Sandilands, £3; F. E. Saward, £1; D. Scarth, £8; C. J. Simmonds, £1; "Spartan", £100; W. Steinhardt, £2; G. Swan, £1; D. C. Taylor, £3; T. Wallace, £5; J. A. Watford, £1; O. Watson, £2; T. Watson, £1; West Glamorgan Humanist Group, £61; D. Wright, £4.

Total for the period 7 November until 30 November 1981: £281.75 and \$7; total for the year: £3731.75 and \$112.

A former sergeant major in the Salvation Army has been ordered to do 240 hours of unpaid community work after being found guilty of defrauding the Scottish Council for Spastics of nearly £240,000. Geoffrey Baker persuaded the Council to invest in a sales promotion scheme he claimed to be negotiating with BBC executives. But the deal was phoney, and an Edinburgh court was told that the charity had lost a vast sum of money.



Divide and Comfort

DAVID BERMAN

"Had the power of the priest been broken, had the Irish been mentally free, they would long ago have asserted and secured their civil liberties". Those words appeared in *The Freethinker* for 4 January 1891. The Catholic and Protestant clergy bear much of the responsibility for the serfdom of the Irish people. The Christian churches have actively fostered the religious hatred and bigotry that has poisoned the nation. Twelve years ago, in January 1969, the latest outbreak of hostility between Protestants and Catholics erupted. In the north of Ireland, a generation that has never lived in a community at peace is growing up.

Religious intolerance is one of Ireland's most serious social diseases. How then is it to be cured? Clergymen of all denominations agree that the remedy is to foster a more Christian attitude. The religious sickness is to be cured, in short, by more religion. With disarming inconsistency, they tell us that more Christianity can do much good but no harm. In fact, Christianity in Ireland has been demonically divisive. Only a few weeks ago we heard of a Belfast gunman who fired indiscriminately into a factory, because he knew that all the workers were Protestants. Some may call this "tribalism"; but what apart from religion distinguishes the tribes of Ireland?

Now I am not claiming that religion in Ireland has done no good. The widow of the Protestant factory worker will no doubt be solaced by her local minister. The Christian churches do provide comfort—opium as Marx put it—but they have also provided the disease. Their motto might well be "Divide and Comfort".

Sectarianism in Ireland does not have a significant economic base, as Marxists fondly believe. It is more firmly rooted in religious animosity. The cure proposed by the clergy is hardly better than the old method of treating syphilis by infecting the patient with malaria.

It is not religion but the weakening of religion that has brought about what toleration we now enjoy. The way to overcome religious antagonism is for Christians to take their Christianity less rather than more seriously. Healthy, vigorous religions—like Islam, Christianity and Judaism—are always intolerant. It is only when they become weak, moribund or tethered by the State that they "learn" toleration. When a vigorous religious communion sincerely believes that salvation and grace are to be achieved only by its sacraments and dogmas, then it will confidently coerce infidels into accepting its beliefs. This is the grim lesson of ecclesiastical history. If a reli-

gion is healthy enough, it will torture and kill its opponents. For why should heretics be given a chance to spread their damnable poison? For the sake of their own immortal souls, they should be tortured into recanting their errors and then killed, if necessary, before they can change their minds.

We have come a long way from this robust Christianity, but we need to go further. What is now called for is no religion, or, failing that, more religious indifference. That will not be easy here. Religion is insidiously habit forming, and Ireland's addiction has been particularly tenacious. Ireland has had virtually no atheism and little freethinking.

Yet there are a few bright beacons. There is, for example, the tolerant, deistic Christianity of Wolfe Tone. His cheerful prediction that "The emancipated and liberal Irishman . . . may go to mass, may tell his beads, or sprinkle his mistress with holy water; but . . . [he will not] attend to the rusty and extinguished thunderbolts of the Vatican" is encouraging, even though unfulfilled.

A lesser known but more serious champion of religious toleration was the Irish scholar John Toland. He knew at first hand the suffering caused by religious antagonisms. Born in County Donegal, he started life as a Roman Catholic, became a Presbyterian at 16, then a Deist, and finally a Pantheist (in fact, he invented the term). In his *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) he struck a blow for toleration by attacking the divisive elements in the Christian creeds. His book was promptly burned by the Public Hangman in Dublin.

Like many Irishmen, Toland looked to the past for inspiration; and he found it in the Gaelic religious life prior to the tenth century. That century brought a "stupendous change" to the Irish people; they became "barbarous", Toland argues, from a corrupt, foreign brand of Christianity. Before this the "Irish deny'd all communion with the [Roman] Church"; their "faith consisted in a right notion of God, and the constant practice of virtue." "These Western Latitudinarians", as Toland nicely describes them, had the "tolerating principle".

If the religious drug must be consumed—and it is difficult to kick a thousand-year habit—then I would recommend the milder stimulants of the ancient Gaelic Latitudinarians or the more modern United Irishmen. Even better would be the end of all religion in Ireland. Stendhal once said that God's only excuse is that He does not exist. Religion in Ireland has no such excuse.

References: Tone, *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (1791); Toland, *Nazarenus: or Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity . . . with a Summary of the Ancient Irish Christianity* (1718).

The course of the Iranian revolution has become an outstanding example of twentieth century zealotry. Antony Milne looks at the tragic plight of Iran ruled by religious extremists and with no apparent hope of a more rational government.

"Don't count on us to show mercy to wrongdoers: we shall not even spare nine-year-old girls," ranted the leading Islamic prosecutor in a recent Iranian radio broadcast. As this blood-curdling cry crackled through the ether in Farsi, a curiously guttural language, many Iranian citizens must have wondered why the future imperative had been used. Small girls, and indeed small boys and entire families had, during the previous two years, already died at the hands of semi-official vigilante groups, drunk with little more than religious obscurantism.

But this broadcast was made before the recent massive bomb explosion at the Islamic Republican Party headquarters in Tehran in which over 70 people had died, including nine Cabinet ministers and the Chief Justice Minister, Ayatollah Beheshti. Now a vengeful and repressive future must be the lot of most Iranians whom, we must remember, have had little or nothing to say in who is to run their hapless and disintegrating country.

While massive street demonstrations took place in major Iranian cities towards the end of the Shah's regime in early 1979 in favour of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic brand of republicanism, we should not fool ourselves into believing, as many western intellectuals would have us do (few of whom would show any preference for enforced religion in their own lives) that this was a "popular" revolution. True, millions of Iranians frequently griped about the autocratic nature of the Shah's corrupt and wasteful form of government, about SAVAK, about the glaring inequalities, about the superfluous luxury hotels built only for rich foreigners.

Religious Fanatics Take Over

Nevertheless, the Iran of 1953 to 1979 displayed erratic but sustained progress on the economic front, while the nature of the Shah's rule was little worse than many other Third World dictatorships. And it had one saving grace: it was pro-Western, and so by definition had its government and social institutions underscored by a rational, material, scientific ethos. Above all the Iranian clergy, the mullahs, had been relegated to paternalistic positions outside of the administration as in other Middle Eastern states.

However, towards the end phase of the Shah's rule vast numbers of religious fanatics, extremists and members of other ethnic and religious minorities took to the streets. They carried themselves forward on a tide of hysteria, spurred on by the skilful political manipulation of the powerful fundamentalists and Khomeini's broadcasts from Paris.

But history has shown that few revolutions are an expression of the democratic, majoritarian will—even if they are said to arise from "below". The only elections to which the Iranian populace have been grudgingly treated have been the Presidential Elections. It was significant that Bani Sadr, himself a devout Moslem and a confidante of the Ayatollah, won 90 per cent of the poll. This was surely because he was the only sane and relatively moderate western educated candidate on offer amongst a motley crew of uncompromising turbanned Islamic freaks. Now Bani Sadr is in exile.

And with the death of Ayatollah Beheshti there are now few hardline Islamic leaders remotely aware of the difficulties of running a modern state. As with the French and Russian revolutions the Iranian revolution has brought about a bitter struggle between rival factions, with the more extreme groups inevitably triumphing.

The Character of Islam

Things can only get worse. Hopes of a more just, more independent and honourable Islamic society must now be put in cold storage. Certainly there is no hope of democracy. The Islamic fanatics who are now in power will hold no truck for "democracy, liberalism and other western diseases". There will be no possibility of a return to the rule of law or political legality; the authorities would not hesitate to shoot hundreds of people "until the word of Allah is fully obeyed in this land". Neither will there be any chance of an improvement in Iran's faltering economy, since the IRP has largely rid itself of western educated economists and technicians.

There will not even be the hope of a united period of national co-operation, with chaos and civil war hovering ominously on the horizon. It is clear that the IRP is bent on a collision course with other Islamic and factional interests in Iran, including the middle classes and the civil servants. It is single-minded in its pursuit of a society based at all levels on cretinous obedience to Koranic doctrines. Iran will now probably become the world's first truly theocratic society, not excluding present-day Pakistan or Libya.

"The Bani Sadr (ie the relatively enlightened)

Sex Shop Censorship

Hardly had the controversy over the proposed opening in South-East London of shops selling occult materials died down when there arose an uproar over the opening of shops selling erotica and "marital aids". Voices raised against the so-called sex shops include those of fundamentalist Christians, radical feminists, headteachers of local schools and the Social Democratic Party MP for Erith and Crayford, James Wellbeloved.

The arguments of the fundamentalists who believe that their God ordained that the sole purpose of sex is procreation are familiar and need not be restated. Perhaps the headteachers are worried that the contents of the sex shops will prove more instructive than the woefully inadequate sex education provided in many schools, while the radical feminists regard sex as a male chauvinist plot to enslave women. Such is the SDP's lack of policies, that one can only speculate that Mr Wellbeloved hopes to retain his seat by pandering to the prejudices of the more reactionary members of the electorate.

The censors have found a powerful ally in the Greater London Council. The GLC has proposed that Parliament introduce legislation to licence sex shops. This proposed legislation is put forward as a measure to control the proliferation of sex shops in Soho and to regulate the conduct of such shops. In fact it would confer power on the GLC to totally eliminate all shops selling erotica. These powers would apply not just to Soho but to the whole of Britain.

Major points in the proposed legislation are: council authorities can set an unlimited fee for applying for licences, councils can impose conditions in the license; they could grant a licence subject to their approval of the items for sale; they revoke licences for reasons which are so vaguely defined as to be meaningless. Whatever this proposed legislation is designed to achieve it will in fact amount to censorship by the back door.

It is only a short step from the censoring of erotica to the censoring of political and social ideas. In the words of Louise Long, National Secretary of the Campaign for Freedom in Publishing: "Confiscation of girlie magazines is but a thin end of the wedge—if the State can establish its right to destroy photographs and magazines, then it's only a small step to the destruction of personal ideas and organisations on the supposition that they also deprave and corrupt". Already a Greenwich councillor has proposed that occult shops be licensed and this move has received backing in parliament from Peter Bottomley, Conservative MP for Woolwich West. Where will the censors strike next?

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episode is finished," declared the Speaker of the Majlis (assembly) recently. "Now we can show the world what Islam can do!" What Islam has done is to create a reactionary bloodbath of the first order, with scarcely any apparent redeeming qualities. Since the Shah was driven into exile thousands of men, women and children have been executed—without trial of course—as "enemies of Allah".

The fierce, punitive character of Islam, more redolent of historical images of seventeenth-century Arab countries, has emerged with surprising abruptness. The religious police are to be found everywhere. Men accused of moral offences such as adultery, homosexuality or cohabiting are executed or flogged almost to the point of death. Hands are amputated for theft. The purveyors and consumers of alcohol face savage punishment. The evenings and nights of most Iranians are already blighted by domestic boredom, since all theatres, night clubs, bars and cinemas have been closed for pandering to "un-Islamic" tastes stimulated by the decadent West. Since August 1979 the radio gives out a diet of recitals from the Koran, relieved by solemn Islamic music.

Women bathers must wear one-piece costumes on Iranian beaches or preferably ankle-length lightweight versions of the *chador*, the black attire prescribed for all women over 15. From last year all mixed sex bathing was banned, and even small girls are not allowed to swim with their fathers. Some while ago a 12-year-old girl unwittingly dived into a swimming pool reserved for males only. She was hauled out and given 30 lashes; becoming paralysed from her injuries. One recalls with irony the observation of Pierre Vergniaud that all revolutions tend to devour their own children.

A Grim Choice

The greatest tragedy of the Iranian situation, however, is the irrevocable foreclosing of the western secular path in any future development. Like so many Third World states the destiny of the country will be fought over by the despotic Right and Left. The Communist Party (Tudeh) is clearly hoping to present itself as the saviour of the nation from chaos. But if they achieve power they will just as ruthlessly impose their own logic upon the people; the present religious vigilantes will be replaced by ideological vigilantes, and the arrests and executions will continue.

The world is still full of people in pursuit of their vision of an ideal society, an El Dorado, in which the corruption and wickedness of the present order will miraculously disappear overnight, and every man, woman and child will be suffused with a new mystical virtue. History teaches them nothing. They all mean well of course; but then so did Hitler.

Challenge to Humanism

DORA RUSSELL

The dangers facing humanity in the nuclear age cannot be underestimated. Is it surprising that a generation that has grown up in the age of "the balance of terror" is highly critical of science, an attitude that is encouraged, for the wrong reasons, by religious fundamentalists. Dora Russell, a veteran campaigner for peace, women's rights and social reform, examines these questions.

As *The Freethinker* enters its second century, it and the National Secular Society meet challenges by antagonists who are likely to prove as daunting as the enemies faced by 19th-century pioneers like Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant and G. W. Foote.

The human race is confronted not only by the old struggle for freedom of thought but, under nuclear threat, for sheer physical survival. Humanity is now locked in a grim conflict that is being waged at all levels; in politics, economics, ideologies, religion, philosophy, science, ecology. Yet so departmentalised are our minds and our social structure, that contenders involved in one field are too often unaware that the same struggle, on precisely the same issues, is going on in all the others. Are humanists fully awake to what threatens us all, and how important it may be to give a lead, seek allies and sound the alarm to arouse the sleepers?

In the issue of *The Freethinker* for November 1981, some articles indicate the directions from which the attack is coming. There is the usual entrenched faith of the established Christian churches, observing, in the customary Armistice Day ceremonial, their adherence to the doctrine of just wars. Today there are many sincere Christians, already pacifists, who are joining CND. But despite their creed of brotherly love they would still not subscribe to the sentiments of John Lennon's song: "Imagine there is no heaven, no separate countries, no religions to die for."

On the contrary, President Reagan's "twice born" evangelical Protestants are out to crush the humanists and sweep the country in a vast conversion to faith in America as god's favoured nation, destined to rule the world. For these "creationists" the scientists' theory of man's evolution is so much nonsense, but science is splendid when devoted to preparations for war.

The non-Christian religions of the Middle East are newly athirst for killing and dying and persecuting; direct opposition to all that America stands for. Then there are the Marxist-Leninist believers with their varying sects in Russia and China.

In Britain, politicians, economists and trade

unionists are split on the dilemmas of disarmament; querying whether to spend money on nuclear weapons or welfare, war or peace, death or life. The clash between these two claimants on the national wealth is not new. It has merely reached its present critical stage because of the immense growth of the contending claimants. On the one side the hungry millions of the world (as well as our own now more demanding citizens); on the other, a vast number of ever more diabolical, scientifically ingenious and horribly expensive weapons with which wars may now be waged.

No country or people can now escape that ultimate war, to which persistence in our way of life and belief has brought the pursuit of rivalry, prosperity and power, supported by the expansion of scientific discovery and the resultant industrial technology.

Revolt by the younger generation against science is the natural outcome of the bomb on Hiroshima, followed by the mounting tension of the so-called "balance of terror". In addition, the young now realise that the boosted technology, with automation, is rendering human labour redundant; consequently not only they, but even their fathers and mothers, are out of work. In such times people tend to turn to the comforts of religion. And the holders of power are well satisfied that the populace should be distracted from the subversion that might otherwise result from their frustration and discontent.

Some believers return to the neglected churches. The religious teaching in the schools (to which agnostics and atheists justly object) may still indoc-trinate, but it no longer has an emotional appeal that inspires the young.

The Failure of Religion

Strenuous efforts are being made on television and radio to reclaim their parents. The BBC is very active. Three pages a week in the *Listener* offer to teach us about the remission of our sins, salvation and the mysteries of theology. Television provides us with the unedifying spectacle of masses of grown men and women bawling about Jesus while prancing and stamping like pop groups.

We are also shown the orgiastic antics (significantly blindfold) of those who follow a new religious practice taught by a guru, which for younger people appears to be a more popular outlet for the emotions and a means of saving your own soul.

It is with these young men and women, above all, that we should be concerned. What do their elders offer them but religions in which they can no longer believe, or faith in that rationalism and science which, in their view, have brought them

to the edge of destruction and do not even offer the minimum security of employment?

It is no use talking to young people about the wonders of electronics, or the splendid technology that is going on, to make some people, but probably not them, exceedingly prosperous. What they see is a society in which the best scientific brains—and the most money—are devoted to research and industry for war purposes, and an education increasingly concentrated on the limited amount of manpower that will be needed to serve the scientific elite. They may well ask the one vital question: "Since the statesmen and scientists are so clever, why do they not put an end to war?"

The young, and to some extent also their parents, are starved of expression of feeling, of creative outlets, colour, adventure, variety, change. With nothing but small subsidies from the State, how are they to fill their days of enforced leisure? Sex (for the most part perforce without parenthood), and the new style religions are all that they have left. Some, in desperation, take to violence in the streets; some take their own lives.

Fanny Cockerell, of the Progressive League, in her article (*A Dormitory of Bishops*, November 1981), touches on this problem of the need to have something to believe in and for the comfort of fellowship with other human beings. As one who supported the foundation of the League, who were welcomed for their conferences at my school, I am glad to know that *Plan* still lives and the League is still active. They, among those of us who are humanists, know well enough that we had to fight for our causes; free speech, birth control, divorce and abortion law reform—against brutal opposition from organised religion. We know too of the great benefits brought by science, however much overshadowed by the prostitution of science to war. We have consistently campaigned against armaments, and longed to see science in alliance with peace. All that we strove for is now clearly under attack by the organised religious hierarchies who will use every device of propaganda and repression to reimpose their authority, attributing all the world's evils to man's sinfulness and disobedience to god.

Ignoring Reality

The new religions—while perhaps some avoid postulating god, and discard sin—offer instead an almost sexual adoration of their human leader. They retreat into personal isolation, expressed in the quietism of meditation, or else in the deliberate discarding of all inhibitions and the fulfilment of the personality with a degree of self-indulgence which resembles—is perhaps attributable to—the intensely selfish individualism that is characteristic of the Western so-called free world. In that free world, even now, moves against democracy en-

deavour to repress and outlaw strikes, whilst in that so-called unfree world, the democratic right to strike is being asserted and defended.

With such social issues, with poverty, with the threat of nuclear war, the followers of the new religions are not at all concerned. Their argument that the self must first be fulfilled before feeling or showing concern for others is no more than pretence. In actual fact, relatives and friends soon find that absorption in the new religions is destructive of all other sympathy and ties.

What seems to me important is that we are, after all, social animals, and it is only by knowing and helping and being helped by others, that we ourselves realise what, in modern jargon, is called our potential. Religious communities, like convents and monasteries, have always existed for those who prefer to retire from the tumult of the secular world. But the soul-seekers of today should realise that the nuclear world is not like that of the dying Roman Empire. If, by chance, some survive the nuclear holocaust, on a tiny islet, the destroyed and poisoned land will be unproductive and uninhabitable. There is no escape.

God alone, the religious might say, can and will resolve the intolerable confusion which human beings have brought upon themselves. We might reply that the very notion of a god was evoked by men and women in order to evade their own responsibilities. It is time for humanity to reach maturity and at long last assume responsibility—as far as it in us lies—for creating a tolerable existence for everything that lives on our planet.

Humanity's Opportunities

In humanism I have always felt the warmth of association with all organic life, with our roots in the productive soil of our earth. My dissent from god and religion arose from its denial of this very life which animates plants, birds, animals and humans. If god created all this, then why are his worshippers commanded to reject it all, as savage, bestial, lust and sin?

Human beings have developed remarkable gifts of imagination and rational thought. These come from the living organisms that are ourselves and the energy that moves us, as it moves everything else, to grow, create, reach old age and die. With all our faculties we shape our image of the external world. Imagination serves our dreams and aspirations; it may also serve our fears, reason, our curiosity as to what is really real, which may also act as a bridle on our imagination. If we, and our statesmen, were to apply to international politics the long-suffering patience, imagination and honesty of purpose of the artist or scientist in their work, we could save our world from disaster and bring about some

(continued on page 15)

THERESE OF LISIEUX by Michael Hollings. Collins £6.95.

I first came across the name of the young St Therese of Lisieux, who died aged 24 of tuberculosis, in a dramatic way. From the gifted pen of Monica Baldwin, a spiritual highbrow among Contemplative nuns, I read: "I detested St Therese". And I was not surprised.

This young Carmelite nun spent nine years perfecting her particular brand of humiliations; Monica Baldwin, a former nun, passed 28 years enclosed, in similar pursuits, finally "leaping over the wall" to freedom in her fifties to avoid the complete atrophy of her personality. Her summing up of St Therese is decisive: "Little Flower indeed! 'Little Wedge of Iron' or 'Little Bar of Steel' would be nearer the mark!"

After visiting the church at Lisieux, Monica Baldwin warned her readers to be careful when selecting a life of this saint, "for at least half are as stupid and unrevealing as the pictures and statues which abound". She cautioned: "St Therese's appearance is rather misleading—a young, almost child-like figure in a rough brown habit and cream-coloured cloak, a simpering smile and one clumsily modelled hand clutching a bunch of cruelly deceptive roses to her heart".

This picture of the "Little Flower" is a popular one in England, and Michael Hollings's illustrated book does little to change that view. Not much has been published about her since the 1960s, so his portrait is marked by a disarming simplicity.

The author is a worldly Catholic priest, a linchpin in the Catholic propaganda machine. One immediately asks whether he had something else in mind when he wrote this book about St Therese. Was it in order to prod the Catholic young into a Contemplative life because there is a shortage of recruits? Does the Catholic Church want to cash in on the growing charismatic movement? Is a new television film on the saint's life in the offing?

Therese represents a strong personality who took the road of meekness and extreme humility ("I want to hide in this world; I want to be the last of all things") to attain her personal salvation. Her doctrine, commended by four popes, makes this a good time for the Catholic Church to bring her forward.

In the first half of the book, Michael Hollings relates in a straightforward and direct way the early part of her young life, tracing the background of her austerely religious family environment, and showing that Therese, even as a child, stubbornly practised mortification. It came quite early, her *idée fixe* the attainment of sainthood.

In the Catholic Church apparently the road to

sanctity lies in the severe test of extreme humiliations constantly practised; the ascetic Carmelite order in which her elder sisters had entered, was her goal too.

Obsessed with the idea of entering at the very early age of 15, she maintained a high pitch of agitation, overruling her local bishop's refusal, and finally persuading her father to take her to Rome to plead with the Pope! Her keen eye and ear in Rome did not miss the sight and sound of ambitious, emulous priests. On entering the Carmelite order she chose as her stated vocation, "to save souls and especially to pray for priests". A specialist role in the Catholic Church—women praying for the sanctification of priests!

Once launched on the road to martyrdom, the teenage Therese hit on new methods of total war on natural inclinations and desires—the more appalling and nauseating the better. What possible spiritual message to humanity resides in deliberately eating all scraps and left-overs offered her? Reason, logic, reflection were twisted and cast out. "A priceless treasure of love", she called the great distress in her family when their sick, beloved father, under mental disturbance, was removed to an asylum.

The world might never have heard of Therese of Lisieux. Michael Hollings clarifies the cause of her fame soon after her death and the unprecedented early canonization. Her private scribbles and letters, *'L'histoire d'une âme'* (*Story of a Soul*), written at the command of the Prioress—her real sister—instead of being regarded as cast aside floral offerings, were collected, adapted and published for the faithful. Photos taken on the eve of her death illustrate this book and this last-minute vanity confounds Therese's earnest desire "to hide".

BEATRICE CLARKE

THE SCIENCE OF HUMAN PROGRESS by Robin Holliday. Oxford University Press. £6.95

A new controversy between science and religion, likely to dwarf that stimulated by the *Origin of Species*, is probable when the methods that have given us a thorough understanding of the physical and chemical basis of life do the same for human development and behaviour. This is the view of Robin Holliday, who argues that this will come about as a result of the synthesis of the findings of molecular biology with new insights into the mechanisms of evolution.

He writes with the clarity and optimism of the

REVIEWS

eighteenth century Enlightenment to warn scientists and humanists of the danger that the strength and ubiquity of religious feelings in many parts of the world could lead to attempts to suppress the practice of science in order to prevent the demise of religion that a widespread acceptance of a scientific view of man would bring. If these pressures can successfully be resisted, he believes that a greater encouragement of fundamental research into the molecular basis of human development and behaviour will lead to the formation of a real human science that could provide the basis for the human progress for which humanists have striven with only partial success since the Enlightenment.

As he says, his book will be attacked by dogmatists like Christians and Marxists who think they already understand human nature, and by those who thrive on obscurantism and intellectual confusion. But it should be welcomed by all open-minded people seeking a common-sense and positive approach to life.

In comparison with much recent writing on the human predicament this short book shines with common sense and balance. The chapter on the scientific method is the best and most balanced brief account I have ever read. It will be valuable to laymen, students and scientists alike, though I fear philosophers of science may find it too simple and comprehensible. Perhaps only a biologist who has made important theoretical contributions to his subject—providing us with a molecular explanation of the breakage and rejoining of chromosomes that occurs during the formation of eggs and sperm, but who also does experiments, could achieve this balance. Much philosophy of science, like that of Popper, is too biased towards the physical sciences and towards theory to appear relevant to the average practising scientist who is most often an experimentalist.

Holliday believes that it is most important for non-scientists to appreciate the true nature of scientific method because two apparently opposing, but often linked, harmful social attitudes are greatly strengthened by the widespread ignorance of it. These are gullibility and unwarranted scepticism. They are also fuelled by ignorance of the findings of science as well as its methods, and he believes that more scientists should spend time popularising their findings in an effort to reduce the gulf of understanding between them and laymen.

A major problem in doing this is highlighted by his own two chapters where he presents the central ideas of molecular biology and evolutionary biology,

respectively. The problem is that however clearly the basic conclusions of science are presented and explained—and Holliday does this well—a non-specialist reader will be ignorant of the vast body of experiment and observation that backs it up and which gives it so much support that no informed scientist can seriously doubt its basic truth (even though details may require modification or elaboration). Such a layman reader will hardly be in a position to judge the validity of the conclusion or to make a real distinction between them and the superficially plausible story woven by a science fiction writer. To distinguish fact from fiction is the business of science. To make fiction appear as fact is the business of the fiction writer, the magician and the political and religious dogmatists, and proponents of a variety of cults that often achieve a tremendous following. Holliday is fully aware of this and believes that a better understanding of the nature of science and the basis for its conclusions is needed to provide a sharper boundary between concrete reality and pure fantasy.

He attributes much of the distrust of science, for example of genetic engineering, to people's inability to distinguish reasonable and justifiable fears from the pure horrors of science fiction. Another problem he feels is that people fail to distinguish between knowledge and power, and ignore the social context within which scientists operate. He points out that scientists have long had the knowledge to carry out all manner of experiments on people quite as horrific as anything dreamed up in science fiction, but they do not do so because they do not want to since they accept the ethical standards of the culture of which they are a part. Scientists are not generally in a position of greater power than anyone else. It is governments and the general values of society that mainly decide whether and for what ends scientific knowledge will be used. Holliday has much faith in people's common sense and argues that when provided with basic knowledge they generally make sensible decisions about their own health and welfare, and that the results of biomedical research have been and will be overwhelmingly beneficial.

A better understanding of the growth and development of living things and of the mechanism of the brain and human behaviour seem to Holliday to present the greatest challenges for, and to promise the greatest possible benefits from future biological research. He argues, justifiably, that a better understanding of the causes of mental illness, and of aggression and unreasonable and dogmatic attitudes, should make it easier to prevent them. But though I am sure that he is right that such fundamental understanding will have many highly beneficial effects, there are one or two important points that he overlooks or gives the wrong emphasis.

As a molecular biologist and geneticist he understandably emphasises the great importance of molecular biology and genetics. But he neglects other areas of biology that will be equally important for our future survival, notably ecology: problems of agriculture, food, epidemics, and conservation are profoundly ecological and will not be solved by molecular biology alone. Though he occasionally stresses the importance of research at higher levels than molecular, and of subjects such as ethology, in much of the book the achievements and importance of such research are not given due weight.

Much more important than this specialist's neglect of other areas of his subject than his own is the failure sufficiently to recognise that many of our most serious problems do not stem merely from ignorance, but from fundamental conflicts of desire. We do not all want the same things or agree on what is right and good. Problems of conservation, international conflict, education and so on involve not just differences of opinion about the facts and the causes of the present state of affairs—which can be resolved by scientific research—but also differences as to goals, which no amount of research will resolve. The fallacy that there can be “lasting solutions” to this kind of problem is widely held among natural scientists, as it is among believers in particular religious or political dogmas, and as it was among the eighteenth century *philosophes* who popularised the myth of a science of human progress. Unravelling how the human brain works will indeed transform much of philosophy and the human sciences but it can hardly remove the fundamental conflicts inherent in the human condition. However, a reader who seeks no final answers to these problems, but simply wants a lucid and highly readable outline of the philosophy, achievements, and future potential of modern biology will enjoy and benefit from Holliday's book.

TOM CAVALIER-SMITH

GOR SAGA, by Maureen Duffy. Eyre Methuen, £6.95

Maureen Duffy's new novel is a brilliant and thought-provoking story—an anti-Utopian picture of the not-so-distant future which calls for comparison with *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It portrays the Britain to which Thatcherism, with the aid of the scientific Establishment and the vivisectors, could all too easily lead us.

There is a rigid class division between people of “status”, whose lives are made comfortable by every refinement of technology, and “non-achievers”, for whom a job of any kind is a privilege, mostly kept alive on meagre social security, fed on repulsive processed foods, everything they use shoddy, ugly, synthetic. The price of water makes flushing the toilet a luxury. Social services have declined to the point where non-achievers must be tended by rela-

tives in “community hospitals”, and a charitable woman of status runs a library where pensioners are delighted to borrow tattered old books with pages missing. Agri-business has made a countryside of vast monotonous fields, guarded by electric rays which are death to animal or child.

A boy must take an examination to decide “whether he left to flop into a pool of unemployed teenagers or went on to college.” His father has never worked again (except in the garden he is fortunate enough to have) after a machine is introduced to do the work of 12 men, with just one, chosen by lot, to mind it. The wife earns, as long as her health is good enough, as “a maternal host, fostering the foetus of another woman in her body”.

Genetic engineering has enabled women of status to off-load the inconveniences of pregnancy and child-bearing on to the poor, but far more sinister is the genetic experiment which leads to the birth of Gor, our hero. He is bred by a geneticist who reflects, considering his wife's anxiety over their child: “He could run a group of humans and apes against each other for points of similarity and difference. It might give useful data on stress reactions among pregnant women with spin-off in psychological warfare and population control. If you threatened a subject group or nation with loss of its children how would it react. You could call it the ‘Herod Factor’”.

Maureen Duffy is concerned not only for the human victims of this repulsive character, but for his animals also. The conventional distinction between human and animal is called into question. What moral right have humans to cage and manipulate their fellow-beings who are far more like ourselves than we care to realise? How absurd the churches—represented by an extremely likeable and charitable priest—are when they divide otherwise indistinguishable beings into humans, with souls for whom Christ died, and others!

Maureen Duffy is a genial writer, most unlike Orwell and Huxley. And notwithstanding the monstrous things I have mentioned, her book is enjoyable—tense and dramatic, but without the quality of horror that makes reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a painful ordeal. Family feeling, mother-love and comradeship have survived. Most of her characters are decent despite their circumstances. Democracy has been destroyed—there is a property qualification for voting and the computer has everybody recorded—yet the nastier manifestations of a police state are absent. Massacres and torture are not features of Maureen Duffy's coming England. Perhaps this is the most unrealistic aspect of her picture of the future. Could Britain ever develop so many features of a banana republic without these too?

I can only recommend you to enjoy the book, and then think how you help stop this becoming our children's future.

MARGARET McILROY

THEATRE

AN EVENING WITH DAVE ALLEN, Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London.

Now playing at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, is the greatest one-man show on any stage anywhere on Earth! And if that sounds like the late Phineas T. Barnum banging his biggest drum—well, so be it.

For Dave Allen is more than a telly favourite, a pop performer, a mere Bible banger—the sort of daredevil Oirish lad who is made more reckless in his “blaspheming” by the likes of the Mary Whitehouses in his audience. The boyo’s an actor. Not for him the protean actor’s trappings—the wigs, changes of clothes, the props, settings and changes of light—that made R. A. Roberts and Owen McGivney so justly admired and applauded in their day. He can take on, also, the “great” stand-up comics of the present day, give them a start of 99 yards in the 100 and lick the hell out of them. Ken Dodd is the one possible exception, because he can sing in addition to being a very funny man.

But Dave Allen is a “natural”. He has nothing to help him except that “God (sic!)—given” talent that makes his audience aware that they are in the presence of Genius. Not the epic quality of a Rembrandt or a Chaplin, but a type of particular talent that keeps an audience transfixed and laughing throughout his two and a half hour “turn” that has only one interval of just under 15 minutes to break the spell. Never once the figure leaning against the mike (not sitting, as he does in his telly shows) show fatigue, or mistime, or crack gags that make many modern comics of much fame, and limited talent, bend double with laughter at their own jokes.

Oh he’s mighty clever is Our Dave, but not too clever-by-half as he debunks dieticians, sexologists, religion and the various tribes genuflecting before the totems and taboos, the scriptures, the warmongers and even the Bomb. Tasteless? Certainly. True? Without a doubt. How good? Brilliant.

Dave Allen’s unanswerable case is based upon Reason and acted with a timing that only comes with great comedians when they have an audience of all sorts and sizes, of believers and disbelievers alike, eating—metaphorically of course—out of their hands. Jack Benny and Bob Hope “timed” like that once upon a time, and George Burns, who was with another Allen (Gracie), could do it with his female partner as a “feed”. But Dave Allen has no “feed”. And whether he writes his own brilliant dialogue—salty, raw, funny, serious, crude and refined—is beside the point. It must be peculiar to the man; identified with this comedian and no other.

For there is no other. He has rare, almost unknown quality today of being funnier and even more serious, when he wishes to be, than his funny and

serious, in turns, material. And we sense we are in presence of an actor by the inhibitions that stem from a religious education or how the males of all shapes and sizes go to the lavatory. His mime, even with turned back and no expression to mesmerise his public, vies with the most delicate of pantomimists—Grock, Marcel Marceau and the great clowns of the living stage. (Chaplin is the sole, notable exception, because he dances as well, and must be considered the single most important Actor-Clown thrown up by the Film.) But dammit, Allen’s not on the screen or the telly now. I’m writing about a performer who holds a West End theatre audience of all, and no, denominations in his grip; that gentle grip, firm but assured, as he leans against the amplified screen box to which most of his fellow-comics are nowadays wedded in eternal marriage. He ambles on and off stage; taking his time to voice reason and doubt; tragical and comical; switching on and off; “ringing the changes” as he feels his audience coming towards him; resenting, admiring his skill and, against their will, his cold hard Reason.

This makes his act qualify for the title of, amongst other things, “The Thinking Man’s Comedian”—or should it perhaps be “The Comedian’s Thinking Man”.

This unholy smasher of superstition, to whom nothing that he ridicules is sacred, has no guile. His “case” is based upon a damning but loveable logic. When he describes nuns as “the Gestapo in drag” we see the picture through the snide, cleverly pointed description. As for the Pope’s infallibility: “Well, why didn’t he duck?”

Robert G. Ingersoll, the American rationalist, raised questions about the Bible which Dave Allen toys with then proceeds to dissect rather like a relaxed and genial pathologist with a corpse. The comedian acts out his “refutation” at the Haymarket with a disarming candour, a hypnotic theatrical skill that is the embodiment of what can only be called *Style*. And let us face it; this is something that it is too often our contemporary Theatre (with its self-conscious, self-indulgent actors and playwrights, aided and abetted by trendy directors) lacks.

PETER COTES

Ultra-religious groups in Jerusalem have forced owners of a large commercial building to display posters warning of a beam which operates an “electric eye” when someone approaches within two yards of the building. The religious zealots hold that even the accidental activation of the doors is a desecration of the Sabbath. Rabbis have declared that to switch on electricity is “a violation of the day God rested after creating the world”.

LETTERS

THE FALSE CLAIMS OF CHRISTIANITY

Ursula MacKenzie writes as a Christian who has never seriously questioned either the basic assumptions of her faith or its social claims (Letters, December 1981). Those of us who oppose Christianity do so because it is demonstrably based on a fable, and because it has done, and is doing, far more harm than good.

We are advised by Mrs Mackenzie to fight abuses, but not the ideologies which inspire them. This would be equivalent to treating symptoms while ignoring the underlying disease. "Young people turn to cult leaders who offer Utopia followed by exploitation." Cults, then attract youngsters for sinister purposes. This is why we must fight them.

Certainly a belief system can have a logical structure, but belief is by definition unverifiable. Since religions and sects contradict each other, not more than one can be true, while all may be false. Young people looking to them for "spiritual fulfilment" and answers to ultimate questions are wasting their time. The only honest answer to such questions is "We don't know". But this life we do know, and we should all be working to improve it.

Nobody would deny that individual Christians have contributed something to the well-being of mankind, just as individual atheists have, but what on earth is St Francis doing in this gallery? He was a religious maniac who preached the virtues of extreme poverty, his other claims on humanity's gratitude being his fondness for kissing the sores of lepers and taking his clothes off at every opportunity. Albert Schweitzer was an autocrat who treated black people like dirt, while Mother Theresa opposes birth control and abortion, at the same time exhorting women in poor and overcrowded countries to have lots and lots of babies. Such "philanthropists" have a vested interest in perpetuating human misery—they would be nothing without it.

Hitler is often represented by Christians as an extreme example of a godless persecutor. They forget, if they ever knew, that Hitler's rise to power was engineered by the largest of the Christian churches, which continued to support him until it became obvious that Germany could not win the war. Hitler lived and died a Catholic in good standing with his Church. His persecution of the Jews merely continued on a larger scale what Christianity had been doing for centuries.

It would have been better for the world if Christian influence had been kept out of education and medicine, for it was that religion which was responsible for the closure of the academies, universities, hospitals and medical schools of the Greek and Roman world. In exchange we got the Dark Ages.

Cardinal Heenan told the Vatican Council in 1964: "For over a thousand years no men besides priests and monks were literate. Schools and universities were founded by the Church, and the students were mainly ecclesiastics". In other words, Christianity promoted no more education than would ensure its own survival. Popular education was resisted by the clergy until comparatively recently. In Britain, the National Society's schools "for promoting the education of the poor in the principles of the Established Church" were meant to counter the influence of the network of secular schools already in existence. The claim so often made that the Church pioneered popular education is false.

For centuries diseases were treated mainly by prayer and the application of relics, doctors being reckoned unnecessary and put under severe restric-

tion by the Church. If Christianity had provided hospitals, no religion had a greater obligation to do so, for it has caused more carnage, pain and disease than and other system. Christianity never provided hospitals for the victims—hundreds of millions of them—who suffered as a result of its wars, crusades and inquisitions. It has created far more lunatics than ever provided with asylums. These things do not "pale into insignificance" beside the efforts of such as Mother Theresa.

It is hardly known at all to the general public that many facilities they take for granted, such as birth control, press freedom and cremation, were won by secularists in the teeth of religious and establishment opposition. Perhaps we should copy religionists and publicise our achievements. At least we wouldn't have to rewrite history.

R. J. CONDON

FROM OUR COURT CORRESPONDENT

The Lord Mayor of London's reaction to the Royal pregnancy was to declare that "babies are bits of star-dust blown from the hand of God".

This is about the standard of thought to be expected from religious fanatics. How could anyone, let alone the Lord Mayor of London, make such a stupid statement? The Prince and Princess of Wales's baby was conceived in the natural and normal way, and will be born like any other child.

Bits of star-dust indeed! It makes one want to spit.
JOAN WIMBLE

Sex Shop Censorship

Some GLC members are opposed to the proposed legislation. Labour member Ken Little warned: "We shall find ourselves in bed with the people who think sex is shameful and want to see everything to do with sex covered up". Former GLC Labour leader, Andrew McIntosh, warned that by attempting to ban erotica by underhand means, councils were trying to interfere with people's private lives.

Secularists have waged a long struggle for freedom of publication, a struggle which in the past has taken the advocates of freethought to jail. Once again freedom of adults to read what they choose is under attack. We should therefore support those GLC members opposed to censorship and to the Campaign for Freedom in Publishing which can be contacted at 2a, Perry Road, London, E11.

It is some six years since Maurice Yaffe, then a research psychologist at the Maudsley Hospital, announced his findings that erotica was harmless and in some cases of mental illness could be beneficial. The censors have ignored this. They have ignored the findings of the Williams Committee which after two years of research stated: "There does not appear to be any evidence that exposure to sexually explicit material triggers off anti-social behaviour". But then advocates of censorship have always ignored scientific, objective facts, preferring to stick to their own narrow-minded views and hoping all the while that they will have the power to impose them on other people.

TERRY LIDDLE

EVENTS

Belfast Humanist Group. York Hotel, Botanic Avenue. Tuesday, 12 January, 8 pm. Frank M. Maconaghie: "An Introduction to Homeopathy". Tuesday, 9 February, 8 pm. Victor Faley: "Racism".

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Queen's Head Queen's Road (entrance in Junction Road, opposite Brighton Station). Sunday, 7 February, 5.30 p.m. Professor C. Freeman: "Micro Electronics".

Hampstead Humanist Society. Saturday, 23 January, 2.30 pm. Oriel Hall, Oriel Place, London N.W.3 (Hampstead Underground). Professor Bernard Crick: "What George Orwell Thought of Individualism and Humanism".

Harrow Humanist Society. The Library, Gayton Road, Harrow. Wednesday, 13 January, 8 pm. Madeleine Simms: "Reflections on Irresponsible Societies".

Humanist Holidays. Easter 1982. Explore the Gower Peninsula; stay at hotel on Swansea sea front, 7-14 April. Details from Betty Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12, telephone 01-673 6234.

Gay Humanist Group. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meeting on the second Friday of the month, 7.30 pm.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 25 February, 7.45 pm. Terry Liddle: "The Impeachment of the House of Windsor".

London Young Humanists. The Adams Arms, 4 Conway Street, London W1. Sunday, 10 January, 8 pm. Diana Rookledge: "Equal Opportunity—Where is Britain Going?" Sunday, 24 January, 8 pm. Ian Cooper, Festival of Light representative.

Merseyside Humanist Group. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Friday, 15 January, 7.45 pm. Helen Power: "Sexism in Religion".

Worthing Humanist Group. Trades Club, 15 Broadwater Road. Sunday, 31 January 5.30 pm. Professor James Sang: "Darwinism Today".

The Nationwide Festival of Light has condemned the European Human Rights Convention's ruling that the law which prohibits homosexual acts in Northern Ireland is an unjustified infringement of personal liberty. According to the NFOl, the decision "is another step away from Christian values towards moral and social confusion which pluralism and atheism always introduces". Most Christian churches and clergy in the province are opposed to law reform, and known homosexuals have been harassed by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The complaint was brought by Mr Jeffrey Dudgeon, of the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association, with the backing of the National Council for Civil Liberties.

OBITUARIES

Mr B. Dickinson

Bruce Dickinson, of Chatham, Kent, has died suddenly at the age of 33. He and his wife had a wide circle of friends, most of them freethinkers. There was a secular ceremony when burial took place at Medway Cemetery, Chatham.

Sir G. Flemming

Sir Gilbert Flemming, KCB, a former Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Education, has died at the age of 84. He married in 1931, Virginia, daughter of Stanton Coit.

Mrs E. Hearnden

Estelle Hearnden has died at the age of 79. She was born in Russia and lived in Germany and the United States before settling in Britain. There was a secular committal ceremony at Eltham Crematorium.

Mr J. Hodder

Jack Hodder, a Humanist Housing Association resident at Tunbridge Wells, Kent, has died. He was aged 87. There was a secular committal ceremony at Tunbridge Wells Crematorium.

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Challenge to Humanism

tolerance, harmony and peace. At this time this is more important than detailed argument about our origins, or from where the force of creative life comes.

It seems to me as if, at present, fear is driving many to evade the issue. Radio and television provide another escape. The people seen and heard on the interminable television serials have become more real to those who watch them than their fellow citizens, or fellow travellers on this planet. We live in a real world, which is in great danger from our ignorance and foolish mistakes.

Humanism should be active. It has much to contribute. Above all it is not a new religion with doctrines, merely the plea that customs and beliefs are personal and never justify persecution or indifference to others. If we examine ourselves and reflect on what power-seeking, killing and fear have done to a world of plenty and great beauty and its peoples, we may learn how it is possible to live as human beings, and take courage to do so.

Curtain Rises on Stage Censorship Battle

A campaign has been started to close loopholes in the 1968 Theatres Act following the committal to the Central Criminal Court of Michael Bogdanov, director of the National Theatre production, *The Romans in Britain*. He will appear at the Old Bailey on 13 March charged with procuring "the commission by a man of an act of gross indecency with another man".

His committal followed a private prosecution brought by Mary Whitehouse last year. Mrs Whitehouse, who did not see the play, resorted to the 1956 Sexual Offences Act when the Attorney General refused to bring an action under the Theatres Act.

The Theatres Act ended the Lord Chamberlain's power of censorship. It is regarded in theatrical circles as a piece of great liberal legislation, protecting the theatre against interference over scenes which offend some members of the public.

Now the realisation that someone like Mrs Whitehouse can circumvent both the Theatres Act and the Lord Chamberlain has prompted the new campaign against stage censorship. It will be led by Howard Brenton, author of *The Romans in Britain*, Laurence Harbottle, chairman of the Theatrical Management Association and Andrew Leigh, administrator of the Old Vic.

Evolution Debate

great developments of biology during this century. . .

"The present position in relation to evolution seems to me analogous to the position which existed in physiology and biochemistry say 50 years ago; steady progress was being made towards explaining biological processes but there were enormous gaps, and a pessimist might have asserted that these would never be filled. But most of those gaps have now been largely filled— notable exceptions being the control of embryological development and the nervous events underlying complex behaviour—and progress is still accelerating".

Referring to cuts in university funding, the President of the Royal Society said it was important that opportunities for young people to enter academic positions be maintained. If universities spread the cuts indiscriminately it would be disastrous for the medium-term future, partly through its direct effects and partly through discouraging a generation of young people entering scientific research.

He added: "The financial difficulties in which universities find themselves are due in part to the withdrawal of monies representing a subsidy for overseas students, and the impossibility of making this up by charging full economic fees. No doubt a proportion of those who used to come were well able to afford such fees, and will continue to come. But there is a large number, especially from the developing world, who will be deflected from Britain to countries which do not make a comparable charge.

"I wish to add my voice to the many who have already expressed dismay at this drop in our contribution to development, and at the loss of goodwill toward Britain that this policy will entail in the long run. A highly effective way in which a

country like our own could increase its aid to the developing countries would be through selective support for undergraduate and postgraduate students to come to British universities".

FPA DENOUNCES SEXUAL IGNORAMUSES

Inadequate sex education and lack of parental guidance, together with high unemployment and economic difficulties, are key contributing factors in unwanted teenage pregnancies. Numbers of pregnancies and abortions, which were declining as a result of wider availability of contraception, are now rising again.

That is one of the warnings contained in the annual report of the Family Planning Association. The dissemination of information to those most in need is not made easy. Lack of finance prevents the advertising of local services, and at national level restrictions on family planning publicity and opposition from a vociferous minority prevent vital family planning information and advertising campaigns.

In a preface to the report, Barbara Davis, retiring Chairman, refers to "a small but active brigade of critics who obstruct efforts to educate and instruct individuals about sex and birth control.

"It reminds us that there exists in certain sections of our society a legacy of fear and prejudice governing the consideration of these matters. With the complexity of modern life adding to people's personal and emotional problems, it is more important than ever that the forces of fear and ignorance, which dominated a previous era and which today show some worrying signs of incipient revival, shall not return to a new dominance".