

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 102, No. 2

FEBRUARY 1982

25p

POPE JOHN PAUL II: "ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS MEN"

The papal response to discussions at the international Synod of Bishops was published in English last month. It confirmed reports already received from Rome that Pope John Paul II has, if anything, strengthened his traditionalist views on Church teaching and family life. His Apostolic Exhortation on the Christian Family in the Modern World is the most hard-line and dogmatic declaration on the subject to emanate from the Vatican since "Humanæ Vitæ" in 1968. It will disappoint those Catholics who were hoping for a change in Church teaching on family planning, and alarm governments and organisations endeavouring to control the increase in world population.

In a commentary, the National Secular Society described the Pope as "a benign old man who loves children and puts women on a pedestal of purity". But he is also "one of the world's most dangerous men", declared the NSS.

"Lacking, as he does, the most elementary knowledge or understanding of family problems, the Pope declares that what people need when involved in such problems is 'a richer understanding'.

"Citing the Virgin Mary as 'a model of redeemed woman', he does not say in so many words how unfortunate it is that other women cannot manage motherhood whilst remaining virgins; but he obviously regards this as an inexplicable flaw in 'God's plan for marriage and the family'. He is quite clear, however, that a woman's 'maternal and family role' must always come before any public role.

"The National Secular Society cannot be alone in regarding this as the ultimate in male chauvinist piggery.

"However, the main danger in this 175-page pronouncement is the Pope's pig-headed insistence on maintaining the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine that the only permissible form of family planning is periodic chastity within marriage. He

is well aware that this cannot really work, and will inevitably result in millions of unwanted pregnancies, culminating in childhood starvation. What matter? In his view, family planning is generally based on 'an anti-life mentality'.

"Not satisfied with infallibility on matters of faith and morals, the Pope also claims that he can predict, better than any of the relevant experts, what effects will follow if the present global population explosion continues unabated. According to him, the ecologists and futurologists 'exaggerate the danger of demographic increase to the quality of life'. Not only is he pig-headed about sexual morals, he buries his head in the sand rather than face the facts of overpopulation.

"In the view of the NSS, this latest papal pronouncement is as menacing as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and more far-reaching. Hitler's policies once condemned seven million to death. Every year the Pope's policy of uncontrolled breeding condemns more than twice that number to a short, hungry existence. 'Human life', he insists, 'even if weak and suffering, is always a splendid gift of God's goodness'. This we utterly reject.

Catholics Ignore Church Teaching

"In a few months' time this totalitarian religious leader is to visit Britain. The National Secular Society does not intend to oppose the visit as such. But it intends to protest vigorously during the visit against the dangerous views which the Pope will be promulgating, and hope that even progressive Catholics will join with us in this".

Even if Catholics do not demonstrate openly against the Pope's "Apostolic Exhortation", thousands of them will ignore it. It is evident that

(continued on back page)

The Freethinker

Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

UK ISSN 0016-0687

The Freethinker was founded in 1881 by George William Foote and is published mid-monthly. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or of the Editor.

Articles, Reviews, News Reports, Obituaries, Letters and announcements should be sent by the 10th of the preceding month to the Editor at 32 Over Street, Brighton, Sussex. (Telephone Brighton 696425)

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Postal subscriptions, books orders and donations to the Freethinker Fund should be sent to:

G. W. FOOTE & COMPANY,
702 HOLLOWAY ROAD, LONDON N19 3NL,
(Telephone: 01-272 1266)

SPECIAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Inland and Overseas: Twelve months: £3.00;
Six months: £1.75. U.S.A. 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.

Please make cheques, etc, payable to G. W. Foote & Company.

Printed by David Neil & Co., South Street, Dorking, Surrey

NEWS

NO CAUSE FOR REGRET

In recent years a number of Roman Catholic theologians—most notably, Charles Davis—have resigned, their departure causing the Church more embarrassment than real damage. But the resignation of his holy orders by the Rev Michael Goulder, a contributor to *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977) and senior lecturer in theology at Birmingham University, is a serious loss to the Church of England, which is not overburdened with men of his calibre.

The *Church Times*, in a generous editorial tribute, described Dr Goulder as "a man whose sensitivity and integrity no one doubts". He had a long and distinguished career in the Church, and the Anglican weekly's plaintive speculation "that his continuing contact with religion as an academic subject will help bring Dr Goulder back to faith in God through Jesus Christ" is understandable.

We join with *Church Times* in wishing Dr Goulder well for the future. At the same time we emphatically oppose the paper's contention that for him, "with so many Christian memories, a godless world must seem bleak".

Life without the Christian or any other deity is far from bleak. Intellectual interests are not diminished by the abandonment of religion. Belief in a god is not necessary in order to appreciate the works of great artists, composers and writers. A cluster of primroses is as delightful to the eye of an atheist as it is to that of a Christian. Dr Goulder, although no longer an Anglican clergyman, will continue to enjoy the affection and respect of his friends.

The unbeliever's experience was succinctly stated by the late Phyllis Graham, herself a Carmelite nun for 20 years before rejecting Christianity, who wrote in her *The Jesus Hoax*: "Despite the many years of my life absorbed in religious devotion, I found no 'desolation of a godless void' in my experience as a non-believer. Once the new outlook is accepted by joint agreement of reason, intellect and will, there is little room left for the plaints of emotion or the ache of nostalgia . . . It is glorious to be free at last from the torturing necessity of trying to reconcile the savage facts of planetary existence with the fantasy of a wise and benevolent Creator".

Few who discard religious beliefs after serious consideration would exchange mental freedom for the tyranny of God.

S AND NOTES

CHRISTIAN CENSORSHIP

The Criminal Law Review is not usually included on our menu of weeklies and monthlies, but perusal of the December 1981 issue was extremely satisfying. The contents include an appraisal of the Law Commission's Working Paper number 79, *Offences Against Religion and Public Worship*, by J. R. Spencer, Fellow, Selwyn College, Cambridge, who pays a deserved tribute to the Commission "for taking a step towards what promises to be an excellent report". He urges them to recommend the complete abolition of the "crime" of blasphemy.

J. R. Spencer has scant regard for the argument that blasphemy law should be retained to protect the feelings of believers. He points out that we do not generally accept that the mere risk of hurting other people's feelings is enough to make it a crime for someone to say what he wants. Commenting on the Working Paper's reference to "the special feelings which many people undoubtedly have in regard to religious beliefs", Spencer comments:

This "special feelings" notion seems to involve a double assumption: first, religious feelings are superior in quality to other human feelings and therefore more deserving of protection, and secondly that religious people are more easily and more deeply hurt than others, and need a sort of egg-shell skull rule to protect them. But what is the evidence for this? . . . To the unbeliever, it all looks suspiciously like a more acceptable way of saying that some religious people have had the honesty to tell the Law Commission straight: that blasphemy must be punished as an insult to God, and because the public good requires the maintenance of their religion.

And what about the feelings of unbelievers? Religious propaganda sets many atheists' teeth on edge. Things are said and written about unbelief and unbelievers which can be quite as insulting as what rabid atheists occasionally say about religion.

Can it seriously be said that believers should be allowed to write books and distribute pamphlets vilifying atheists and atheism when atheists are not allowed to do the same in return? . . . Once again it looks like the ancient argument in disguise: blasphemous publications must be suppressed because the public good requires the maintenance of the Christian religion.

Mr Spencer claims that a look at the law in action completely demolishes the theory that the crime of blasphemy is needed to give believers a weapon with which to defend themselves. Actually the boot is on the other foot. Far from being the law under which Christians have defended themselves from persecution, blasphemy is the law which Christians have used to persecute unbelievers.

We will search the facts of every blasphemy prosecution that has ever taken place in England in vain for an instance where it was used by persecuted believers in self-defence. On the contrary, every blasphemy prosecution there has ever been in England . . . has involved believers or purported believers taking the offensive—using the law to attack and harass people whose offence in their eyes was to say to the world in general things which the believers in question did not think ought to be said.

Mr. Spencer may be a bit too pessimistic when he concludes that the chances of abolishing blasphemy law are small. He is certainly correct when asserting, as secularists asserted, that blasphemy law could have been abolished 15 years ago. But neither the legal profession nor the humanist movement, except the National Secular Society, was inclined to make a stand on the issue.

IRISH HUMANISTS POINT THE WAY

It is seldom that anything sensible emerges from that godly enclave, Northern Ireland. So it was particularly gratifying to read the first report which a sub-committee of Belfast Humanist Group recently submitted to the organisation. The content of the report may seem rather unexceptionable, even humdrum, to mainland humanists and reformers. But in the context of Northern Ireland, dominated as it is by ultra-fundamentalist Protestant and fiercely reactionary Roman Catholic churches, the humanist proposals are as a beacon in the murky, menacing gloom.

In a short introduction it is stated that individuals should be free to lead their lives as they wish, provided they do not impose harm on others. Improved knowledge and understanding should be encouraged to help people to make their own choices.

One of the specific proposals in the report is that "there should be no censorship by public bodies of entertainment or expression of opinion. Although individuals are entitled to have the right of access to whatever material they wish, the nature of such material, television or reading matter, should be made clear in advance."

In contrast to the anti-social attitudes of the Protestant and Catholic churches to sex and family life, the Belfast humanists declare: "There should be freely available contraceptive education and facilities, and positive publicity and education in favour of smaller families to limit or reduce the world population in view of pressure on resources.

"Women should have the freedom and facility to limit the number of children they produce. But the rights of individuals should be maintained and there should not be compulsory sterilisation, nor should inhuman or cruel methods be used to discourage large families".

Commenting on the situation facing homosexuals in Northern Ireland the report states: "Prejudice against homosexuals stems largely from Christian teaching which preaches that homosexuality is sinful and against the law of God. A person's basic freedom is infringed upon by an uncaring majority". It advocates that the law in Northern Ireland is reformed along the lines of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act in England and Wales.

The proposal that there should be no restrictions on Sunday entertainment, sport and drinking will not go down too well with defenders of "our Lord and his day". The cheerless Protestant Sunday in Northern Ireland is not as healthy as it was even 20 years ago; we look forward to hearing its death rattle.

Women should have the same rights and opportunities as men, and schools should not encourage the idea that some jobs are mainly for boys and others for girls. There should be some positive discrimination in favour of women, such as exists in the case of a woman returning to her job after pregnancy.

The sound arguments advanced by Belfast Humanist Group will, for the time being, enjoy only minority support. Voices of reason in Northern Ireland are drowned in a cacophony of hymn-singing, sermonising and the bellicose rantings of the Rev Ian Paisley. Anyone who imagines that his is not the authentic voice of Ulster Protestantism is living in a dream world.

The Roman Catholic Church is determined that the religious segregation of children in schools will continue. This is one of the few questions on which Catholic and Protestant churches agree.

It is in this atmosphere that members of Belfast Humanist Group live and work. They have undertaken a Herculean task in promoting humanist ideas in a society riddled with bigotry, intolerance and religious fanaticism.

THE COMPANY SHE KEEPS

The Order of Christian Unity is an extremely reactionary and prudish organisation within the network of Christian groups endeavouring to impose their "standards" on the community. It operates on a "you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours" basis with the Community Standards Association, National Viewers' and Listeners' Association and the Nationwide Festival of Light—a rather unsavoury crew on the whole.

The Order's membership is drawn from "Christians of all denominations, united by belief in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour and together upholding His Commandments, particularly in family life, education and medical ethics". In other words, it is vehemently opposed to liberalising legislation, parti-

cularly in relation to divorce, homosexuality and abortion. It also stoutly defends Christianity's privileged position in the education and broadcasting services.

Every year the OCU presents what it calls its Valiant for Truth Media Award, and Jon Snow recently received this treasure at a ceremony presided over by Lady Lothian, a veteran moral crusader of the Roman Catholic faith.

Those in attendance included Jill Tweedie, the *Guardian* columnist whose name is spoken in reverential tones by assorted wets, particularly "women's rights" campaigners. Although it is widely accepted that some journalists will go anywhere if a free booze-up is on the cards, Miss/Ms/Mix Tweedie's presence at this shindig caused many of her fans to swallow hard. What was their champion doing in such company? After all, no one who values life and limb would proclaim "A Woman's Right to Choose" at a gathering of the Order of Christian Unity.

But perhaps it is not really surprising that the name of prominent feminist should appear on the guest list of an organisation of petty, narrow-minded and intolerant bigots. For of such is a significant proportion of the "women's movement" at the present time.

HONOURING DARWIN

The year has got off to a bad start for the Genesis lot who believe that the world was created by a supernatural act about six thousand years ago. First of all they lost the battle of Little Rock. Judge William Overton ruled that the law introduced by the State of Arkansas, requiring public-funded schools to teach creation "science", violates the constitutional separation of Church and State.

Here in Britain, no less an institution than the Post Office is marking the 100th anniversary of Charles Darwin's death. A special set of four stamps will be issued on 10 February. Darwin is described in a Press handout as Britain's greatest biologist. He should be remembered "for the outstanding contributions he made to geology, soil science, the study of animal behaviour and experimental biology".

This official recognition of Darwin's great work will not go down too well in fundamentalist Christian circles. Although he was buried in Westminster Abbey, and stories of his death-bed "conversion" were related by generations of evangelical body-snatchers, Darwin is still blamed for the catastrophic decline in religious faith and acceptance of biblical "truths". Now he is represented on postage stamps together with giant tortoises, iguanas, finches and skulls.

"Soapy Sam" Wilberforce must be turning in his grave.

*I am a book
My blood is ink
And my limbs words.*

One way for an unknown writer to get published is first to get banned. Then Michael Scammell's journal *Index on Censorship* may include his or her work in its pages. The above translation of lines by a Syrian poet banned in most Arab states appears in an impressive special issue produced to mark the first ten years of *Index*.

Scammell would modestly deny that the journal is "his". Its publishers are a non-profit making limited company called Writers and Scholars International Ltd. It has a prestigious Board of Directors. Also it has an even more prestigious Advisory Board. The members of the latter include Lord Sainsbury and Mrs J. Edward Sieff. Financial help comes from the Arts Council and the US Fund for Free Expression.

Nevertheless much of the credit for *Index* does belong to Michael Scammell, who was its Editor for the first eight years. He tells us he chose the title as a reminder of the Catholic *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, but now considers it a thoroughly bad one. It leads to confusion.

Nothing is confusing about the role of the journal. This is to publish news about acts of censorship worldwide and to provide a shop window for banned work. The supply of such work is "Copious and inexhaustible", which must present the Editor with his own problems of censorship (or at least selection). Scammell tells of an early error he made. By publicising Castro's repression of writers (and particularly the so-called Padilla affair) before he got around to condemning the Right-wing regimes in South America, he put *Index* out of favour with Latin American intellectuals of the Left.

Index fulfils a useful function, and is to be congratulated on its anniversary. Suppression of the written word continues to be the pattern for humanity. The Malaysian Prime Minister is reported as telling journalists recently that freedom of the

George Melly has judged "The Freethinker" centenary cartoon competition. He chose D. W. Butter of County Cleveland as the outright winner, and the prize of £100 has been sent to him. Also commended by George Melly were entries from D. Tilbury of Buckinghamshire and D. Redhead of Tyne and Wear. Congratulations to the winners, and thanks to all the entrants. Our appreciation is also expressed to George Melly. We hope to publish the best entries in future issues of "The Freethinker".

Press is a myth invented by the liberal West to serve its own purpose. The Polish army arrested Solidarity members for possession of a printing press.

The writer suffers but, as the new Editor of *Index* points out, would-be readers suffer more. He quotes Nadine Gordimer: "Censorship is an act of repression against readers as well as writers". Censorship is not a thing in itself, but part of a much larger whole. It is but one aspect of the perennial desire of some groups to dominate the rest.

Index on Censorship is published six times a year. Subscription details are obtainable from 21 Russell Street, London, WC2 (tel. 01-836 0024).

FRANCIS BENNION

Centenary Appeal

During 1981 readers contributed nearly £4,000 to the Centenary Appeal. This magnificent response is characteristic of the loyal support that has ensured the paper's survival since 1881.

Donations large and small were sent by individual readers and local groups. They came from all over Britain and from readers living abroad.

The Freethinker enters its second century of publication facing many problems, not least of which result from increased costs. It is essential that readers support the Fund and remember the paper when making a Will if it is to continue monthly publication.

Our thanks are expressed to all those who sent donations during 1981, including those listed here. Anonymous, £5; G. H. Berg, £3; J. Bertin, £2; W. J. Bickle, £2; P. W. Brook, £28; B. A. Burfoot, £1.50; A. C. Chambre, £1; P. R. Chapman, £2; J. H. Charles, £2; N. L. Child, £2; M. Davies, £5; I. M. Davis, £5; A. H. Douglas, £2; In Memory of Len Ebury, £10; N. Ferguson, £1; D. Flint, £2; G. Galliano, £2; V. Gibson, £1; S. Halley, £5; J. Holland, £2; G. Jamieson, £1; J. Lippitt, £4; M. Lonsdale, £5; J. Massey, £1; F. and K. L. Munniksma, £6; F. Muskett, £3; F. H. and U. Neville, £15; F. T. Pamphillon, £3; J. G. Peace, £2; B. J. Reid, £2; E. M. Richard, £5; V. Sangharakshita, £3; R. T. Savage, £2; W. Shinton, £3; W. M. Shuttleworth, £10; S. Smith, £3; F. A. M. Stevenson, £10; J. Stopes-Roe, £2; D. C. Taylor, £3; V. G. Toland, £7; G. A. Vale, £7; A. Verlet, £2; E. Wakefield, £3; M. W. Welleman, £1; A. Woodford, £8; F. Woolley, £1; D. Wright (Ilford), £4; D. Wright (Ipswich), £2.

Total for the period 1 December until 31 December 1981: £201.50; grand total for Centenary Year, 1981: £3,933.25 and \$112.

Encircling Gloom: The Festival of Light Ten Years On

BARRY DUKE

Since the Nationwide Festival of Light was formed in 1971 it has attracted the support of petty-minded censors, religious weirdos and sexual oddities. It is therefore not surprising that a considerable number of better adjusted and more tolerant Christians have been frightened off and regard the NFoL as something of an embarrassment.

The Nationwide Festival of Light believes it has a Hot Line to heaven. When its members sink to their sanctimonious knees, their deity apparently drops whatever it happens to be doing, and, genie-like, delivers the goods. So what exactly do NFoLers pray for (and get)? Obviously not things like world peace, an end to starvation among millions of the earth's population, nor even a simple decrease in our unemployment figures.

No, theirs is a vindictive, petty little godling which responds, it would seem, only to requests to smite the enemy (humanists, homosexuals, intellectuals *inter alia*) hip and thigh, and use his "divine" powers to influence magistrates and judges in court cases dealing with "blasphemy", pornography, or simulated buggery at the National Theatre.

The latest example of just how nauseatingly small-minded your average NFoL member can be is contained in the organisation's Bulletin. Readers are informed in a letter that the Campaign for Homosexual Equality's last conference—the Gayfest at Durham last August—was "a disaster", thanks be to God. The writer gloatingly tells of how he and a group cronies "prayed for (a) administrative confusion; (b) financial disaster; (c) a falling apart of the leadership; (d) attendance by only a fraction of those expected; (e) a blanket on publicity; (f) a total ban on any public events; (g) an opportunity to preach to some of the delegates, and that one of the leaders would be saved. "I am happy to report that the only item outstanding is that of a conversion of a leader . . . praise God for this great victory," he wrote.

To set the record straight, I must point out that the Gayfest was far from being a disaster. There was, granted, administrative confusion, but there always is when CHE is involved. From the point of view of the Gay Humanist Group, the conference was, in fact, a tremendous success. The Group held both its Annual General Meeting and an open meeting receiving publicity in the local Press. So it would seem that prayers were directed at a deity

which was not merely malevolent, but ineffectual as well.

Is it fair to indict the entire NFoL on the childish antics of a coterie of evangelical prodnoses at Durham who patently had nothing better to do than work up a lather of indignation over something that ought to have been of no concern to them? Yes. Rational, well-adjusted people do not pray for the disruption of conferences, hetero-, bi- or homosexual. They correctly recognise that people are different, and that those differences—whether in respect of their sex, sexuality or skin colour—should be respected. But, if one considers the amount of time, money and energy the NFoL has spent over the last decade in its efforts to smear those who cannot or will not conform to its narrow views on morality, one is forced to conclude that it is not an organisation of rational, well-adjusted people.

Yesterday's Freaks—Today's Nasties

On the contrary, it has proved itself to be a bandwagon for the sexually stunted and maladjusted (sex-haters of their intensity must be maladjusted); "decency" freaks capable of sniffing out "porn" at ten thousand yards; mud-patriots and those anti-abortionists (they call themselves "pro-lifers") whose concern for human rights begins and ends with the foetus. Above all, it is an organisation comprising those who set little store by the truth, and who are prepared to manipulate facts in a most cavalier manner to get their own way.

Not surprisingly, those Christians who have a social conscience, and some regard for the quality of human life, will have no truck with NFoL, which they regard as an affront and embarrassment to their brand of faith. That embarrassment must be growing. When the NFoL insinuated itself into the British Way of Life in 1971, at the height of the Jesus Freak era, it staged a rally in Trafalgar Square, London, which attracted an estimated 35,000 people who gathered to protest against the "decline in public standards of morality." Five years on, a birthday rally in the Square attracted some 15,000 people. In September last year, their tenth anniversary in Central Hall, Westminster, was marked with an attendance of just 1,000 people.

These telling figures are provided in the January issue of *Crusade* magazine, which carries an extensive interview with the NFoL's Director, Raymond Johnston, under the headline: "Has the Government Got it Wrong?" It won't surprise you to

learn that Johnston believes it has, indeed, got it all wrong. Nothing to do with economics, social issues, inner-city decay or the nuclear weapon programme, of course. No, much more important than that—the state of the nation's morals. Johnston is peeved over the fact that even this administration has a philosophy which “works on the principle that there are certain issues which are matters for conscience, in which it is inappropriate for the Government to intervene by giving time or support to legislation.”

What are these issues that require legislative control? Euthanasia, abortion, obscenity and surprise! surprise! homosexuality. “A government that abdicates leadership in these areas is quite disastrous for the nation,” he opines, and complains that while Mrs Thatcher's instinctive sympathies in this area are right, she has been persuaded that non-involvement in matters of conscience is the correct policy to adopt. “To her these are minor matters. She has never sat down with anyone who actually believes that something ought to be done urgently.” This is rubbish. Anti-porn megastar Mary Whitehouse sailed past the portals of 10 Downing Street with considerable ease recently, while the way was firmly blocked to people concerned rather more with economic, than the “moral” collapse of the country.

Although Raymond Johnston doesn't actually come out and say it, the plea that emerges from the interview is for yet more legislation, aimed specifically at curbing “permissive” trends. What he would like to see, no doubt, is the emergence of a “Thou Shalt Not” evangelical theocracy, which will firmly exclude from positions of power and influence those whom he now sees as being in the vanguard of liberalising the laws governing moral behaviour.

Mr Johnston's “Hit List”

There are no prizes for guessing who the villains of the piece are: “smooth-tongued civil servants” who he thinks were responsible for the choice of members of the Williams Committee, thus ensuring its liberalising recommendations; church leaders who seem to have lost faith in moral absolutes; and the humanist lobby which he believes is intent on removing every bit of Christian content from our culture and our laws. In this regard he singles out, as examples, Professor Bernard Williams, for the recommendations of his Committee “which proposes a decisive relaxing of the obscenity laws which would be to the detriment of public morals”; and Lord Gardiner, creator of the Law Commission currently considering the question of blasphemy. The Commission was set up to remove anomalies in English law by making common law into statute law. Johnston fears that in the process, the law's “Christian

moral basis will be removed.”

For the most part there is nothing new, or particularly surprising about Johnston's reflections, apart perhaps from the opinions he expressed regarding the Moral Majority movement in the United States. “You can't be on the Christian address list of Moral Majority without receiving propaganda against tighter gun laws, the signing of the Panama Canal treaty, and other purely political issues which cannot be judged on a biblical basis. They have allowed themselves to be aligned with a particular political slant from which they will have great difficulty in disengaging themselves in the popular mind. Their leaders may regret it in time to come. We might envy them their influence, but the price they have paid would be unacceptable to us. We would lose our integrity, for instance, if we allied ourselves totally with Mrs Thatcher's policies,” he said.

A laudable sentiment, some would say, but to me it indicates a definite unwillingness on the part of the evangelical Christians to concern themselves with the multitude of practical, secular issues that govern the running of a modern, industrialised society. By saying that Christians should not concern themselves with issues that have no biblical basis, they are, quite simply, abrogating their responsibilities towards society.

Take the question, for example, of unemployment. Only once does Johnston allude to this problem. And he does so only in order to take swipe at homosexuals and prostitutes. He is concerned that the “sympathetic” way in which homosexuality and prostitution (one wonders why he links the two) are treated in television plays and documentaries, “can make it an option for many, especially when high female unemployment makes prostitution more of an attraction, and lonely, friendless boys from unhappy homes are potential recruits to the homosexual scene.”

If this is the sort of sloppy thinking the NFoL produces and encourages, it is not surprising that its membership is falling. There is a limit to the drivel even Christians are prepared to swallow.

Sheik Abdel-Aziz Bin Bay, Chairman of the Administration of Iftaa (Koranic interpretation) Enlightenment and Guidance in Saudi Arabia, has banned non-Muslim males who are employed as car drivers and servants in the kingdom. His ruling is based on Koranic interpretation and carries the full strength of the law. He has also stated in a newspaper interview that the driving of cars by women would be “fraught with a lot of depravity” and that women drivers run the risk of falling into incalculable sins. The depravity and sin include having their faces uncovered.

While most residents of a typical English country town prepared for Christmas, some of their neighbours were discussing the nuclear threat to Peace on Earth.

Around this time of year, 40 years ago, Francis Meynell sent me a timely New Year greetings card with these words:

Peace on Earth and mercy mild
Two for a woman and one for a child

The bombs which rained down upon us then must seem as antiquated bows and arrows to the young women and children of today.

As we leave 1981 behind us, with the Home Office planners advising that a nuclear attack on Britain could have the effect of 13,000 Hiroshima bombs, the prospect of peace on earth assumes a statistical quantification quite beyond the capacity of most human minds to carry. "If there are enough nuclear weapons now in Europe to destroy the continent 30 times over, what does it matter if one side can do it 14 times and the other 16?", asked Edward Thompson in the *Guardian* a couple of months ago. The World Disarmament Campaign in its *Give Peace a Chance* leaflet put the facts differently: "Is it right for the world to use up so much money—\$600 thousand million per annum, \$60 million per hour on sterile military spending?"

In one form or another we have put such questions with increasing frequency while collecting signatures on the WDC petition to the session on disarmament, opening at the United Nations in June. Perhaps it is appropriate now to look back over the past year to see how the peoples of Europe put their individual heard by and frighten politicians, East and West, and to see how the little squeaks of some of us voices together to make a noise loud enough to be contributed to the cacophony. I expect they are still deciding in Geneva, Washington and Moscow, and who knows where else, between Vodka and Cola sessions, how many war-heads to store in our back gardens, how much more Europeans can be squeezed to pay for more hardware—and who laughs last.

We did not laugh in East Grinstead when Alexander Haig said that he was thinking of staging his latest military science experiment somewhere in Europe. This was getting close, for many here remember that a bomb did fall on this sleepy country town and killed the best part of a cinema audience during the last war, so long ago. Nor could we forget the Guinea Pigs, the bomber pilots and bombed civilians alike, who had their faces rebuilt by the McIndoe-Gilles plastic surgery team at the local

Queen Victoria Hospital, still the town's pride and joy.

Apart from these historic quivers, the town is firm—parochial, churchy, diehard, incestuous—apathetic to national and international concerns and less literate than Tunbridge Wells, just about aware that the Christmas tree which appears in High Street each year is planted there by the local branch of Rotary International ("very nice gentlemen, really"). What East Grinstead thinks today, most thinkers forgot years ago.

It is a little difficult keeping in touch. We are rarely part of, let alone at the centre of things. There is Radio 4 and the BBC World Service—very loud, for it is transmitted not far from here—the *Guardian* and the *Observer* to stimulate our thinking. When recently London Weekend Television came down to ask us what we thought about television, what we thought was never heard, for the programme was scrapped—for technical reasons.

So perhaps we could say that East Grinstead is a kind of three-dimensional, coloured reflection of a projected image of what the media paint of the *Daily Mail Ideal Home* world; a typical, Western multi-national Sunday magazine stereotype.

Reaction to BBC Ban

I think it must have been the BBC's cancellation of Edward Thompson's Reith Lecture which made people aware that there was something which was being forbidden. Had the broadcast taken place few local people would have bothered to listen to it. Reith lectures are not reputed to attract the higher ratings. CND, a dirty three-letter word, became forbidden fruit. A local society invited Thompson to come and talk. He wrote a kind letter back, but said he could not come to East Grinstead.

Letters started to appear in one local paper; the other, owned by the *Daily Mail* Trust, avoided the subject. Local CND members, some Quakers, students from Emerson College—a Steiner establishment, with Schumacher disciples—some uncertain Christians, members of the constituency Labour Party and supporters of other peace organisations assembled at East Grinstead railway station on the morning of Saturday, 24 October last in such numbers that the ticket office staff could not cope with the demand, and money had to be taken on the platform.

Over a hundred extra passengers piled into the 9.46 train. In all, including those who joined the special Brighton train, who went by car and who were in London anyway, I calculated that East Grinstead must have added about 250 to the Hyde Park number.

Some of those who went had marched since the Aldermaston days. There were many reunions of old friends. There were also new faces and overseas visitors. One from Washington had taken part in anti-Vietnam and anti-nuclear rallies in the States. But none had been as big as this.

Hazel Archard, one of the organisers, put the total impression and meaning into a single sentence: "It was a great throng of people of all ages—family parties sharing out sandwiches—who had come to the park to make a stand for their future, which is no picnic".

Voices Against the Holocaust

A whole page was given to covering the event by a sympathetic paper, the *East Grinstead Observer*. The local Young Conservatives objected. The demonstration had been given somewhat excessive coverage, they wrote, at the same time assuring readers that not a single Young Conservative had attended the rally.

Then the local branch of the United Nations Association announced that they were organising a Peace Workshop. The speakers were Grace Crookall-Greening, the Rev Geoffrey Soper of the United Reformed Church and Professor Michael Pentz, of the Open University.

Eighty people turned up, mainly familiar faces, with a few new ones. Yet 99.5 per cent of East Grinstead was very visible elsewhere—shopping in the market, listening to recorded music in the High Street, buying bulbs for Christmas lights, going about its urgent DIY activity, watching Saturday sport on television, attending jumble sales and Christmas Bazaars, entirely unconcerned with the doom-laden future being planned for them.

"The insane suicidal logic of a credible first strike", thundered Michael Pentz, "assumes an acceptable base of 20 to 40 million dead; yet this is insignificant in relation to what is happening now in developing destructive power to kill everyone in Europe many times over". There was not a Young Conservative present to challenge his argument.

"What about the American churches and the Moral Majority which backs Reagan's militant Christianity?", someone asked. Grace Crookall-Greening felt that she could answer that one, for she had been talking to some visiting American Christians who had told her that the Moral Majority was not a real majority. And in any case it was not changing its attitude towards nuclear weaponry. It appears that the European peace movement was now being heard and that many Americans were re-thinking their objectives. It sounded very consoling—almost too-good to be true.

"I am not a Christian", said Professor Pentz, "I am an atheist and a humanist, but I also have morals". But time was no longer on our side and

morals did not always help. "Is it possible", he asked, looking at the rows of faces that seemed eager to do good, "that some initiative could be taken by Britain"?

One half of one per cent of East Grinstead was convinced of the facts. The problem was how to tell the others. Neither of the local newspapers published a report of the meeting, although both were given authoritative copy. It seemed as though the Young Conservatives had made their point.

But it was felt by supporters of the Peace workshop that this was not good enough. Not often did East Grinstead hear someone of such authority as Michael Pentz, former senior physicist at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, author of *Towards the Final Abyss* and now Dean of the Faculty of Science at the Open University. His talk was too important to forget.

So that is how it came to pass that space was bought in the *East Grinstead Observer* to publish an edited version of his talk for all to read—and how East Grinstead in a funny kind of way made its mark. With the Michael Pentz lecture, and the Christmas lights in the High Street, the sleepy town saw the old year out and the new year in—an example of compromise quite outstanding in an uncompromising world.

ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

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"Many gurus from the East bring superstition to Europe; I bring positive atheism", Mr Lavanam, Director of the Atheist Centre at Vijayawada, India, told a meeting in London last month. The Atheist Centre is renowned for its social work, opposition to caste division, educational activities and the rehabilitation of criminals. It organised a public event at which beef and pork were eaten in order to demonstrate that the taboos of the Hindus and Muslims are not sacred. They also organised a fire-walking display to show that it is not only holy men who can perform this feat. In his current tour of Europe Mr Lavanam has visited Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland where he attended the Congress of the World Union of Freethinkers. The London meeting was arranged by the British Humanist Association, National Secular Society and Rationalist Press Association.

THE POLITICS OF PROCRUSTES by Antony Flew.
Temple Smith, £9.95.

Political concepts of equality, and their relationship to liberty, justice and other fundamental aspects of social theory and practice, are the theme of Professor Flew's latest book. Provocative as always, he belabours a herd of fashionable sacred cows with verve and a sardonic humour which adds spice to a quiverful of serious and weighty philosophical barbs.

Is the pursuit of social and economic equality compatible with the preservation of communal and individual liberty? A distinguished tribe of libertarian socialists—Tawney, G. D. H. and Margaret Cole, Orwell, Titmuss—have held that far from being incompatible, equality and liberty are essentially complementary to each other; while on the Right, philosophers such as Hayek, Popper and Flew himself take the opposite view.

So frequently, much of the argument misses the point and trivialises itself through a failure to define precisely what meanings and assumptions are attached to the terms used. Not the least of Flew's merits is that he repeatedly draws attention to this linguistic sleight of hand and exposes the logical fallacies and misapprehensions involved.

He starts off by pointing out that "socialism", as a political movement, is inextricably linked with the doctrine of State ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange and that this has inescapable implications for freedom of choice. Any protestations to the contrary are, he maintains, disingenuous or self-deluded. What should worry us all (and not only rationalists) is the quasi-religious, mystical attitude of so many Utopian politicians to their "isms". Some of them pursue these will-o'-the-wisps with all the fervour of a blindfolded person in a dark room hunting for a non-existent black cat which they are quite convinced must be there. And not infrequently, they find a much less pleasant monster.

Flew next distinguishes between the different notions of equality that are commonly confused and taken for one and the same when they are in fact totally dissimilar and in some respects mutually contradictory—equality seen as a good-in-itself (and thus a moral obligation) even though the existence of various inequalities is conceded as empirical fact; equality of rights; equality of opportunity; and equality of outcome (i.e. the notion that, whatever the relative handicaps at the start, nobody ought to end up with widely differing benefits or unequal shares). It is this latter—and currently very popular—concept of equality which Flew perceives as the totalitarian beam in the collectivist's vision of the

world.

He has some provocative things to say about "the Book of Rawls" (*A Theory of Justice*) which, he protests, is not about justice as traditionally conceived in respect of rights and obligations, but is concerned with the jejune notion of "social justice" which Rawls maintains is about "fairness". This, says Flew, is like writing a book called *A Theory of Chastity* to promote the idea of "social chastity" as meaning poverty and obedience.

Another semantic confusion pounced on by Flew is that between "wants" and "needs", which provides a handy excuse for elitist planners to take it upon themselves to decide what everyone else's "needs" are—regardless of whether these are actually desired by those concerned.

As Charles Bradlaugh realised a century ago, when he debated socialism with H. M. Hyndman of the (Marxist) Social Democratic Federation, the interrelations between socialism and liberty, and between liberty and equality, are probably the most burning philosophical, political and practical issue of all. Depending on whether you are an individualist or a collectivist, you will find much to agree with, or to baulk at, in *The Politics of Procrustes*. But whichever side of the argument you take, I shall be surprised if you do not find it a stimulating read.

ANTONY GREY

THE REIGN OF KING HENRY VI by Ralph A. Griffiths.
Ernest Benn, £25.

This costly study of Henry VI's reign (from a child of nine months) claims not to be a biography. But even so its mass of detail on obscure officials, its chaotic construction and lack of chronological order must make it almost unintelligible to anyone who has not already, like myself, made a special study of the whole period.

Characters are introduced by name without any explanation or even identification: thus Henry Beauchamp, Duke of Warwick, and the later Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick (known as "the Kingmaker"), are both simply delineated as "Warwick" without any indication that the Warwick of page 696 is not the one previously referred to. There is constant reference to "Jack Cade's Rebellion", although no explanation of what this important people's revolt was about until a chapter devoted to it beginning at page 610.

Characters die or are executed and turn up two pages later still alive and well and harassing either

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the government or (more often) the unfortunate citizens. And although Richard, Duke of York (father of King Edward IV and King Richard III), is continually claiming his hereditary right to succeed Henry VI, we get no real biographical study of him until late in the book: when the character of this singularly moderate man, owed vast sums for his services to the State, is depicted as inspired by "ambition" and "jealousy".

On the other hand, to his credit, Griffiths does not spare the supposedly saint-like King Henry either, or the savagely grasping officials, earls and dukes whom he supported against York. Henry VI's saintliness indeed was built up by later Lancastrian propaganda; his piety did not preclude his strong advocacy of the burning of heretics (one such burning he watched), an early love of expensive dress and jewellery, or the support of viciously unruly and corrupt ministers.

"Some of the crimes which Henry pardoned were atrocious" and he "appeared to condone them", wrote R. L. Storey. And the periods of mental instability which came later, and allowed his French-born Queen, Margaret of Anjou, to seize power and help stir up civil war, cannot absolve him for a reign of utter incompetency and financial and social disaster.

The book is valuable on this; and its chapter on Cade makes clear that Shakespeare's revolutionary thug (engagingly, not unlike some future politicians, promising "seven halfpenny loaves" for "a penny") was probably a man of intelligence, well-spoken, and with some royal household members supporting him. Certainly he was welcomed into London by the citizens and even a majority of City councillors.

Nevertheless, this overlong and repetitive work still manages to omit completely one important revolt, that of the Bastard Fauconberg which, being aimed to release Henry VI from the Tower, almost certainly precipitated his murder (it is possible, though not probable, that he died a natural death).

Professor Griffiths takes the ominous view that the presence in the Tower at this time of the later Richard III (then 18 years old) is significant. He does not realise it was because of a Council meeting, attended also by his brother, Edward IV, and though the Council may have authorised Henry's death, Tower accounts continue to cite Henry's upkeep until May 23rd, two days after his reputed death, when both Edward and Richard had left for Kent. That Richard's murderous reputation was built up much later by his supplanters, the Tudors, seems unknown to him.

A reading of my own book, *The Mystery of the Princes* (1978), not listed in Professor Griffiths' bibliography, could have saved him from these omissions and the minor error that the Tyrell family came from Essex, not Gipping in Suffolk where their private chapel still stands.

AUDREY WILLIAMSON

RADIO

STREET GOSPEL, BBC Radio 4

The religious pressure groups forever lobbying the BBC could not have been entirely satisfied with the findings of this features and documentary programme. It started out as a perfectly serious programme that took the wrong—or could it be the right?—turning; getting more hilarious as it went along.

It is always possible to say something about religious faith, however little you know or however little knowledge you have to impart. There is a ready-made acceptance by the great majority of people—outside the vocal minority made up of numerous religious splinter groups who congregate in the market place—and a part of their natural thinking, through conditioning down the years, that religion, even the other fellow's, must be superficially respected, however unworthy of respect it might be. This attitude imposes an automatic taboo on free discussion when the subject crops up. How often is it said that Religion and Politics are not matters that should be openly ventilated if one wishes to keep friendships?

This is where the street corner orator, the subject of John Newbury's programme, has the edge on so many other kinds of public speaker. And although much of it was specious, and possibly in places a bit set up for dramatic licence (without conflict there is no drama), it was, on the whole, an objective look at the subject in general, trying hard to be fair whilst, metaphorically, stuffing a well worn hanky in the Narrator's mouth. It was right for radio. We could not see any smile—but that stifled laugh, at least, was heard by one listener, perhaps others, during the course of some of the most absurd happenings that took place along the programme's way.

Lord Soper, perhaps the best of all present day open-air speakers and the one who has been at it longest anyway, confessed that he thought his "message" was best put across in the open, and evidently preferred it to any of the more highly publicised outlets in the media. We heard him being given a bad time. ("Sod Israel, they can look after themselves", complained one determined

heckler in the snatch transmitted of the Rev Donald at work.) That was at Tower Hill; in Sydenham High Street a pastor was following the American rule of blending entertainment with heckling by making his audience of hecklers laugh, because "Jesus made us people laugh".

Of course there's more to it than some of the conclusions showed. Bunyan had been flung into prison for street preaching and Wesley's Church was founded by it.

Today the individual on his soap-box still weaves a spell through personal contact, despite the competition of current affairs programmes on all the TV channels as well as radio itself. Ingenious, moving, often barmy, there are many variations on this soap-box orator theme. "The approach can be formal or effusive, entertaining or argumentative. But the tradition is the oldest in the Christian world", said the Narrator of *Street Gospel*.

A documentary of this sort depends more upon its editing than the quality of the excerpts transmitted—some, I suspect, from the sound archives. The subject has been with us for centuries, with preaching carried on in the highways and byways. "We're doing what He did. Jesus brought out Truth"; "Atonement is just around the corner"; "When Jesus was on Earth, He gave us a commission to bring the gospel of Christ to them"—these were some of the statements made in various ways.

Yes, and not only at Tower Hill and Sydenham High Street, but at Hyde Park and Leicester Square as well. Off the Dilly, too, squeezed in between sex shops, rubber goods rooms, porn shows and book displays underneath the counter, can be found enthusiastic reformers from the London City Mission carrying "the word" to the lower depths. A very pretty girl—we didn't see her, but took the programme's word for it—named Sharon cried persistently, "Mr Worry, what do you worry about most?". Being interviewed, Sharon confessed to being terrified, but goes on and on and on . . .

Another who relished "saving" appeared to be a trifle masochistic about the number of times he had been beaten up, knocked silly and roundly abused for his efforts. One male City Missioner said: "They (the sinners) come to the West End for sex, vice and crime, but after conversion they go home with their tails between their legs, and with Jesus Christ"! For his reward this particular "saviour" gets arrested occasionally.

The Salvation Army (a different kettle of fish to the lone rangers who take on nasty crowds without benefit of any "strength in numbers" to warm their cockles) is now almost "a national institution"—that is, when it doesn't resemble a circus parade or a military tattoo. It, too, had periods in the wilderness and has been the butt of many dirty jokes.

The Church Army is occasionally nautical in its approach. Some glee-singing types, with banjo accompaniment, glide along the Norfolk Boards, amongst other places, attempting in song to convert, while a flag upon which a Cross has been stitched waves gaily in the breeze. Onlookers on summer-time beaches are entreated to "come to the waters to be saved" by the "Army" (or should it be "the Navy"?). A gentle programme, then.

Not like the Catholic Evidence Guild, which claims to have the most rigorous training for potential open-air speakers. The heckling that presumably goes on at CEG rehearsals is of the stage variety (rhubarb rhubarb rhubarb—like the crowd scene in *Julius Caesar*—they could well be snarling at those apprentices who were being made to jump through the street corner speaker's "hoop"). It is all mock stuff, of course, to prepare the novice for the veil, with Junior and Senior subjects being tackled. The former includes such items on the lecturer's agenda as *Confession* and *The Infallibility of the Pope*, whilst *The Trinity* and *The Incantation of Jesus* constitute subjects marked "senior". It seemed from an executive of the Guild that speakers were not permitted to discuss politics, only religion.

Back again to Lord Soper: "We want tub-thumpers taking the message to the market place". The Bishop of Woolwich heartily agrees, with a resounding slap on the Good Lord's back: "If they'd learned like Lord Soper; far more of our parsons would be better preachers if they'd done their training on the street corner".

This carefully researched and highly diverting programme at least dispelled the notion that anything in the way of oratory will do for the open air. Indeed it was no less a speaker than Soper who candidly conceded that in church you can "get away with more than you can outside".

It is true that down the years some of the finest orators—Chapman Cohen, Lloyd George and Soper himself—have been subjected to intense hostility and abuse. But the problem for the average street orator, bereft of any conspicuous talent but with a burning "message" to impart, is when nobody stops to enquire at all. The tub-thumper, inside or out of doors, is matched by dullards and bullies in the audiences who attend for the wrong reasons; not to ask questions, seek enlightenment or put the speaker right when they think he is wrong. They want to witness rows and join in wrangles.

Incidentally, the sole atheist I heard on this programme, despite a poor delivery that could have been caused by a speech defect, was mild and *devastating* at the same time. He asked a question quietly, received no satisfactory answer to it and, to judge by the fade out of sound at this point, equally quietly walked away.

PETER COTES

LETTERS

MICHAEL FOOT AND THE NSS

May I comment on your reference in "News and Notes" (December 1981) to my leaflet on Mr Michael Foot's support for the National Secular Society?

In your issue of December 1980, you reported that Michael Foot had attended the NSS Annual Dinner and had been described as a "beacon of rationalism". You implied that he was supporter of the NSS. I wrote to Mr Foot, enclosing a copy of "General Principles and Practical Objectives", asking him to indicate which of the 31 Objectives he still supported. No doubt, thinking I was a member, he confirmed his support for the NSS, but declined to indicate which, if any, of its objectives enjoys his support. I sent him a draft copy of the text of my leaflet, but he did not reply.

Since publication of the leaflet, he has stated in private correspondence to several persons that he does not support many of the 13 objectives which I listed. A sample copy enclosed. I have asked Mr Foot to inform the President of the NSS and me which of the 13 objectives he supports and which he does not support. But, again, he does not answer. The "beacon of rationalism" does not shine as brightly as the NSS would have us believe.

Capital punishment did not appear on my list because it does not appear on yours. I selected those which had to do with our Christian heritage, which you despise, and with the moral welfare of young people. To answer your implication that I have double standards on capital punishment, I can tell you that I believe that capital punishment for deliberate murder should apply to everyone, including policeman, prison warden or paediatrician.

You make a big fuss over my mistake three years ago of putting "Denis Lemon and his friends" instead of "Denis Lemon's friends". You misquoted the scripture in my leaflet but I do not intend to remind you of that three years hence.

As for my leaflet being "grubby", it left my office in perfect condition.

CHARLES OXLEY

The Editor replies: The National Secular Society is neither a rigid political group nor an authoritarian religious sect. It would be very surprising if every member agreed with every one of its objectives.

Charles Oxley cannot complain because many people regard those of his ilk of having double standards on the question of capital punishment. Among those who constantly yap about "the sanctity of life" when abortion or euthanasia is being debated are the hangman's most devoted fans.

One aspect of NSS policy which Mr Oxley believes "will cause great concern to many Christians" is that "the treatment of prisoners should be based not on punishment but on re-habilitation". It is understandable that this rational and humane attitude should stick in the gullet of one who worships a vengeful monster like the Christian god. Perhaps the NSS approach to criminality is inadequate, but at least it does not result in barbarities like the execution of Derek Bentley and Timothy Evans for murders they did not commit.

Mr Oxley admitted his "mistake", which could have had extremely serious consequences for Denis Lemon, only after months of prevarication. We acknowl-

edge, without hesitation, misquoting by one word the biblical text in Mr Oxley's leaflet. It was given in "The Freethinker" as: "Blessed is the nation whose joy is the Lord". It should have been: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord". We realise the gravity of misquoting even one word of the Bible which, as all Christians agree, has remained unchanged from the first letter of Genesis to the last dot of Revelation throughout the ages.

GOD AT 10 DOWNING STREET

Concerning the well-deserved rebuke to Charles Oxley in the December 1981 issue, it is interesting to note the religious affiliation, or lack of it of Prime Ministers during the present century.

David Lloyd George was a Baptist, not a Methodist as stated, according to H. A. L. Fisher's "History of Europe". Fisher was Minister of Education in a Lloyd George Government. Thomas Jones, Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet, makes it clear in the Dictionary of National Biography that Lloyd George was not really orthodox in his religious views. I suppose he did not disdain on occasion to attend Methodist services.

Whether Winston Churchill retained throughout his life his early rationalist opinions will probably be revealed in the final volume of Martin Gilbert's monumental biography. Certainly as Prime Minister he was not averse to invoking the Almighty (though not nearly as frequently as Adolf Hitler did).

According to Lord Elton in the Dictionary of National Biography, Ramsay MacDonald possessed "a streak of Rationalism". Joseph McCabe, who knew MacDonald as a fellow-member of the Ethical Society at the beginning of the century, stated that he was definitely an agnostic.

As "The Freethinker" article emphasised, there are no grounds from past practice to suppose that if Michael Foot were to become Prime Minister he would seek to impose on anybody his beliefs in matters of religion.

R. J. M. TOLHURST

WHY ATTACK MARXISM?

Like others I have been made aware by the Press and by television of the quite remarkable onslaught that has been made during the past year on the theory of evolution; on the ideas and memory of Charles Darwin; in particular, of the consciously anti-evolutionary rearrangements at the Natural History Museum, where Bishop Wilberforce seems to be alive and well.

But I do not see how a reply to ill-founded attacks on one part of secular scientific thought warrants the misrepresentation of another. Yet this is exactly what we have in Beverly Halstead's article, "The Attack on Science" (November 1981).

Dr Halstead describes Marxism as a religion, which, unequivocally, it is not. On the contrary, it totally rejects not only the specific theories, but the whole idealist notion of religion and faith. It is also alleged that it is from Marxism as well as from the ideological Right that the attack on Darwin comes. Marxists, it is claimed, have made intense efforts to prove that natural selection has had little importance. This is false.

Darwin himself would have asserted firmly that natural selection is not the only factor in the evolutionary process. No Marxist would deny the theory of natural selection; what is open to question is a simple, gradual process with no perceptible breaks. There is absolutely nothing in this that Darwin him-

self would have disagreed with.

Marxists, like other rationalists and freethinkers, have long been used to misrepresentation for obscurantist and reactionary ends. A lot of this misrepresentation comes from nothing worse than ignorance; a good deal comes from ill-will; some from fear. It is sad that such misrepresentation should appear in a journal which for a century has been devoted to spreading the light of reason.

RAY WATKINSON

"THE MOST INFLUENTIAL BOOK IN THE WORLD"

For 60 years I have read "The Freethinker" and for a like period I delved into "Das Kapital", the most influential book in the world, written by Karl Marx that is, by one man. His slogan, "Religion is the opium of mankind" could not be more deadly.

On production of Darwin's "Origin of Species", Marx was in such accord that he wrote to Darwin asking if he could dedicate "Capital" to him, Darwin declined the honour on the basis that he did not know enough of the subject, though it must be mentioned that the book found its place in Darwin's library.

So why do you defame such a man as Marx, who sought nothing but a humane world, by slurs on him in the article "A Scientific Scandal" in the December 1981 issue?

GORDON BEESON

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There are so many highly subjective remarks in R. J. Condon's letter (January) that I feel he must have a personal grievance against religion in general and perhaps Christianity in particular. This may well have been caused by the contact with a person who did not live up to his or her faith, or never had any in the first place. After all, the name of Christ and his teachings—unfortunately not having a copyright—are being used by many people for all sorts of purposes (the Christmas industry being just one example) which might have a very off-putting effect.

I respect Mr Condon's right to choose a life without religion; in a country with freedom of belief this is a privilege nobody is trying to take off him. But there should be equal respect for those who feel that "man does not live by bread alone" and seek for spiritual fulfilment. Jung, the great psychologist, once said, "Let the world think of religious experience as they please—he who has it owns a great treasure".

I could argue about every point Mr Condon makes, but what would be the use? We could carry on till the cows home without reaching agreement. Of course you can find fault with everything if you have a negative outlook on life. There is no such thing as perfection, and no person—Christian or otherwise—could claim that he is without blemish. We are all human.

Mr Condon's remarks regarding Hitler are dangerously off-key. (Having my roots in war-time Germany I know what I am talking about.) But I doubt whether I would manage to convince him. What is the point of an "I am right, you are wrong" kind of argument anyway?

But I simply must stick up for the belittled St Francis. Though I do not believe in saints in a Roman Catholic way, some of them have given wonderful guide lines and examples. St Francis made an immortal contribution with the famous prayer: "Lord, make me the instrument of your peace". The last passage in particular expresses what ought to be a

'Christian yardstick': "Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, not so much to be understood as to understand, not so much to be loved as to love . . ." What could possibly be wrong with that!

If you are reaching for your pen in order to say that this is what you also live by as an atheist, then you are an unconscious Christian. And my best wishes to you!

URSULA MACKENZIE

SAME POISON—DIFFERENT BOTTLE

I was intrigued by Ursula MacKenzie's letter ("The Old, Old Story", December 1981) which suggested a tarted-up form of Christianity as an answer to the "cult explosion".

Has it ever occurred to Mrs MacKenzie that Christianity itself was once a cult competing with other mystery religions from the East? It also seems reasonable to assume that the first Christians indulged in the same kind of tactics as those used by the Moonies. Did not Christ himself say: "The father shall be divided against the son . . . and the daughter against mother"?

Christianity cannot be made palatable merely by sweeping its most unpleasant aspects under the carpet. At heart it is illogical, mystical and occasionally meaningless (some of Christ's parables have baffled theologians for centuries). Of course some of Christ's teachings are admirable—but they are certainly not new, having their origins in the Old Testament or contemporary Jewish thought.

If there is anything to learn from the history of religion, surely it is this: mystical beliefs cannot cure the world's ills. At the present time we are faced by problems so great as to seem insurmountable—no wonder many people are seeking refuge in religion and pseudo-science. However, there are many who feel that the real world, with all its difficulties, is a better place than the spiritual paradise promised by both the mainstream and the fringe religions.

JULIA ATKINSON

COURT CIRCULAR

I am very amused at the reactions to my letter about the monarchy and your correspondents' letters ranging from the lecturing schoolmaster type to the silly sarcastic (December 1981).

It is not my intention to waste time replying in detail, but to comment on a few points.

I don't care a damn about the principles on which atheism etc., are founded. By my own simple thought processes and observations I have rejected all religions, but I am open-minded enough to allow other people to hold different views. So although I would never bother to attend any ceremony, Church or Royal, I believe that those who enjoy traditional ceremonies should not be denied them, and that they should not be allowed to die out. I also believe that the monarchy is a stabilising factor in the UK and the Commonwealth.

No one possesses a television set in Fiji because we have no service. We are a small developing country, with three common languages, the population scattered, except for the few cities and towns, in mountainous villages and a hundred or so islands. We realise that our limited funds should be spent on vital services and that although television could be used for educational purposes it would not reach those who would benefit from it. We couldn't afford to make our own programmes, and haven't the skilled

EVENTS

personnel either. We also realise that TV in developed countries has, in most cases, disrupted the lives of children and been used so much that it has become a social menace.

The damage caused to the UK, Australia and New Zealand by trade unions, backed by socialism, is so obvious that I am amazed anyone denies it. Just look at British Leyland and Fleet Street. The absurdity of nationalised industries is proved by their continual losses, borne by the taxpayer.

I am a poor man, not a socialist, so I do not begrudge the Royal Family their wealth. And no one will convince me that the recent wedding wasn't worthwhile from the trade angle and from the enjoyment it gave to millions.

Don't talk rot about people being "conned". The people of the world, certainly little Fiji, are not "conned" by the heritage of the UK. Perhaps the main faults of the humanist movement are its intolerance, its dullness and its refusal to forget its own heritage.

E. A. W. MORRIS

A PEACEABLE RELIGION

Albert Beale, in his article "Atheism and Pacifism" (November 1981), says that "a religious mentality" is "at root incompatible with pacifism". Whether Buddhism is a religion or not might be disputed since it is non-theistic but I wish to make it absolutely clear that pacifism is central to the Buddhist mentality.

So fundamental to Buddhism is the principle of non-harm that all Buddhists throughout the world recite daily, as the first of five ethical precepts, the words: "I undertake the training principle to refrain from harming living beings". Many Buddhists consider that this precept enjoins not only refraining from killing or harming human being but also from killing animals in order to eat them.

Alone among the major world religions, Buddhism stands out for its history of non-violence and toleration. No wars have been fought in its name, and persecution and forcible conversion are not features of its growth.

ALEX KENNEDY

Member of the Western Buddhist Order

Albert Beale replies: First, since Alex Kennedy says that Buddhism is non-theistic (and hence, in terms of my definition, not a religion) my arguments do not apply to it.

Secondly, even if some actual theists are committed to non-violence, all it shows is that they haven't thought the (il) logic of their position. (Perhaps that hardly needs saying if they're theists.) Anyway, if they use their theism as a basis for their pacifism then it's a rather dodgy basis for it. What are we to make of people who love one another only because they are following orders?

NEUTRALITY

Julia Atkinson's article, "The Virgin Mary—Paragon and Paradox" (December 1981), seems to be the work of a "Protestant Atheist", otherwise what is the point of her many references to the New Testament in comparison to Catholic legends?

The principle bone of contention between Catholics and many Protestants has always been the question of authority—does it lie primarily in the Bible as interpreted by individual conscience, or does it lie with the traditions of the Church as interpreted by its priesthood.

We are trapped in mythology if we lean to either of these arguments.

DAVID FORBES

Belfast Humanist Group. York Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast. Tuesday, 9 February, 8 pm. Victor Falayi: "Racism". Tuesday, 9 March, 8 pm. "Homosexuality—a Fact of Life". Speakers from Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Queen's Head, Queen's Road (entrance in Junction Road, opposite Brighton Station). Sunday, 7 March, 5.30 pm. Professor Richard Scorer: "The Role of the Individual in Times of Excess and in Times of Scarcity".

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

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.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 25 February, 7.45 pm. "Floods—From Noah's Ark to the Thames Barrier".

London Secular Society. (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. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Friday, 19 February, 7.45 pm. Annual General Meeting followed by speaker from Liverpool Sun and Air Society.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 14 February, 11 am. Jim Herrick: "Freethought and Humanism in War and Peace, 1900-1980".

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Details of activities obtainable from Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth; telephone Kenilworth 58450.

Worthing Humanist Group. Trades Club, Broadwater Road. Sunday, 28 February 5.30 pm. Dr. J. A. Graham: "The National Health Service".

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

ANNUAL DINNER

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6.30 pm for 7 pm

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Vegetarians catered for.

Tickets £7.50 each

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Religion the Cause of Violence and Tyranny

Although it is claimed that religion means "that which binds together", it is rarely mentioned that it can unite people for bad as well as for good. And throughout history the bad seems to out weigh the good. This telling point is made in the National Secular Society's annual report for 1981-82.

"In the Middle Ages, religion bound Muslims together against the Christians and the Christians against the Jews. It bound Catholics together against 'heretics' and then Protestants against Catholics. Today it is the cohesive force for unofficial violence in Northern Ireland and official violence in Iran".

Assassinations and attempted assassinations have constantly been in the headlines during the period under review.

"In May the tyrannical Ayatollah Kalikally was blown up by a bomb after personally ordering the execution of hundreds of citizens who opposed the Khomeni regime. In that case, much as we deplore assassination, our sense of outrage is muted, and this man's death might well have saved many other deaths.

"But we have no sympathy with the assassination attempts on the Pope and on President Reagan.

"More deplorable still were the unfortunately successful assassinations carried out against President Sadat of Egypt and the ex-Beatle John Lennon. Sadat's assassins were Muslim fundamentalist fanatics. The man who attacked and killed John Lennon had been a member of one of the proliferating American revivalist cults.

"Even people not in the public eye have fallen victims to murder because of the murderer's religious fanaticism. The mass-murderer known as the

Yorkshire Ripper had a strict Roman Catholic upbringing and claimed that he heard the voice of God speaking to him in a cemetery commanding him to commit his horrible deeds".

In a reference to the continuing sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, the report states: "We are constantly told that this violence really has nothing to do with the respective religious affiliations of those who perpetrate it.

"The aims of the terrorists on both sides may well be social and political. But their commitment is according to their religious backgrounds, and their methods are the methods of religious extremists through the ages. Such atrocities as burning alive at the stake, as cutting off hands and shooting knee-caps, have rarely been carried out except in the name of a god or deified leader, in accordance with the divine will as revealed in sacred texts of in the visions of fanatics.

"It surely requires a firm belief that one is acting as an instrument of a higher power to overcome human empathy to the extent of carrying out such inhuman acts".

ARCHBISHOP OF CANT

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, has come out in favour of blasphemy law being retained. In a statement to the Law Commission, he claims that such a law is necessary "to protect the fundamental sacred beliefs of all religious people from deep and hurtful attacks".

Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, said that secularists and others would be disgusted by the Archbishop's plea that blasphemy should remain a criminal offence in this country.

"Rather than lose this special protection of his Christian faith against the normal rough-and-tumble of life, Dr Runcie is even willing to have it extended to other religions and thus further erode freedom of speech. People would of course continue to be free to be as rude as they like about the sincerely held views of atheists. And atheists do not object to this as they favour the robust exchange of ideas.

"If the gods cannot hold their own in the free-for-all that applies to everything else, then gods are dead indeed", she added.

"One of the World's Most Dangerous Men"

vast numbers of Catholic men and women already defy the Church's teaching on contraception. These include the "conscientious and faithful sons and daughters of the Church" Cardinal Basil Hume had in mind when he spoke at the Synod of those for whom "natural methods of birth control do not seem to be the only solution".

Archbishop Quinn of San Francisco, speaking for the American bishops, told the Synod that those in opposition to *Humanae Vitae* included Catholics "whose lives are otherwise outstanding in their Christian dedication, and pastors whose faith, and dedication to the Church are beyond doubt".

Such voices were ignored, and the stubborn John Paul II had his way. But as Peter Hebblethwaite, the distinguished Catholic journalist, commented: "Time will tell whether it was a Pyrrhic victory".

THE FREETHINKER, 1980

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