

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 103, No. 12

DECEMBER 1983

30p

SUNDAY TRADING LAW AND LICENSING RESTRICTIONS UNDER FIRE

"The Sunday trading law in England and Wales causes considerable annoyance to the population and amazement among foreign visitors", the National Secular Society asserts in a memorandum to the Shops Acts Committee of Inquiry. The law "is based on outmoded religious bigotry, with no regard for public choice or benefit", the NSS declares. "Since most people see it as unnecessary, confusing and unjust, it is largely unworkable and is in general disrepute". The Society poses the question: if Scotland manages without such a law, why must we have it in England and Wales?

During its 117-year history the NSS has campaigned for Sunday freedom. It argues that "in the days when most of the population of England and Wales was committed to Christianity, there was at least some excuse, if not reason, for imposing the Christian day of rest on the whole population.

"But now that we have a variety of religious creeds, with different rest-days, as well as a general decline in religious belief altogether, with an even greater decline in religious practice, there can be no excuse for this imposition.

"The National Secular Society therefore gives wholehearted support to the Shops Bill introduced by Mr Ray Whitney, MP, as a Private Member's Bill in the House of Commons, so as to make the Sunday trading law rational and workable, to eliminate its present anomalies, and to render it worthy of public respect".

There is one anomaly that secularists find amusing (although the Lord's Day Observance Society can hardly be expected to share the joke). While "girlie" magazines may be sold on a Sunday, bibles may not. But the NSS makes it clear that it is not in favour of the joke being perpetuated.

It is pointed out in the memorandum that many local authorities are willing to turn a blind eye to technical breaches of the obsolete Sunday trading law. But they are often forced to take legal action by Sabbatarian snoopers and informers.

"While some traders succeed in finding loopholes in the complexities of the law, others are penalised — often through genuine ignorance of the intricate provisos that relate to particular commodities and not to other, similar, commodities.

"When 15 traders were recently fined at Eastbourne for selling 'prohibited' household goods and sports equipment, some of the defendants stated that they had not realised that they were breaking the law, and one of the magistrates commented that the law was indeed 'a tangle'. If magistrates find it a tangle, how can traders be expected to understand it?

"Apart from the tiny, though vociferous, lobby represented by the Lord's Day Observance Society, there is no longer any opposition to Sunday trading on religious grounds, though this is the original basis of the law".

Reference is made in the memorandum to Mr Whitney's speech moving the Second Reading of the bill when he declared that opposition to it came from a "curious alliance between the Retail Consortium and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers".

"Curious, and also disturbing", the NSS declares, "since it is an alliance directed against the consumer. The reason that the Retail Consortium is a party to this alliance is that the owners and managers of departmental stores and multiple shops want to deprive small family businesses of any advantage.

(continued on back page)

The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

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). Unsolicited reviews should not be submitted.

Vol 103 No 12 CONTENTS December 1983

SUNDAY TRADING LAW AND LICENSING RESTRICTIONS UNDER FIRE ...	177
NEWS AND NOTES ...	178
The Good Shepherd; Sensible Comment; A "Moral Majority" Note	
PRIORITIES ...	180
Madeleine Sims	
OBITUARY ...	180
Mr P. W. Brooke, Mrs J. E. Charman, Mrs M. E. Hipsley, Mr D. Minter	
"BELIEVE—OR ELSE!" ...	181
Michael Duane	
A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS ...	182
John L. Broom	
TURGENEV—THE GENTLE GIANT ...	183
Sam Beer	
MORALS WITHOUT RELIGION—A TRIBUTE TO MARGARET KNIGHT ...	184
William Walker	
FREETHINKER REVIEW ...	186
BOOK	
Fungi: Folklore, Fiction and Fact, by W. P. K. Findlay	
Reviewer: Nigel Sinnott	
BERTRAND RUSSELL BOOKLET ...	187
LETTERS ...	188
R. J. Condon, John L. Hutchinson, T. F. Evans, Sam Beer, S. E. Parker, Colin Mills, Jim Herrick, R. L. Scrase	

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: £3.60; Six months: £2. U.S.A.: Twelve months: \$8.00; Six months: \$5.00. 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 60p or US \$1.20 for bank charges.

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

NEWS

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

We should not mock the afflicted, but Councillor Peter Shepherd, chairman of the West Sussex Policy and Resources Committee, has yet again been standing up for Jesus. Commenting recently on a religious education handbook being prepared for the guidance of teachers, he criticised people who "regard Christianity as on a par with other religions, which I would regard as foreign religions".

Councillor Shepherd's aversion to "foreign religions" is rooted both in characteristic Christian arrogance and a rather shaky knowledge of history. The origin of Christianity is still debated, but there is general agreement among scholars and historians that it did not have its beginnings in West Sussex (or even that part of the country outside West Sussex which Councillor Shepherd may regard as foreign territory).

It is accepted that the Christian plague was introduced to these islands around 597 by a band of foreigners led by an Italian monk, Augustine. Pope Gregory I, who ruled from 590 until 604, advised his emissaries to retain local heathen customs. Ancient festivals and celebrations were accordingly incorporated into the Christian year.

When quill-pushing monks had a monopoly on reading and writing it was easy to obliterate the heathen origins of many "Christian" rituals and festivals. But the oral tradition persisted. And evidence of our ancestors' heathendom, although banished from books by a foreign Church, is still writ large on the landscape.

Councillor Shepherd's displeasure with those who regard his particular brand of religious superstition as being only equal to other religions is no doubt motivated by a belief that the Christian deity is the "one true god". As secular humanists have pointed out, there are many non-Christian religions that are just as aggressive and divisive as Christianity. Some of them, like the Muslims, have realised that under the 1944 Education Act they are allowed to set up their own religiously segregated schools at State expense. That is one price we are paying for Christianity's privileged position in the education system.

Scores, possibly hundreds, of beliefs are represented in the nation's classrooms, and teachers are seeking ways to cope with problems arising from the 1944 Act. They don't need a sermon from Councillor Shepherd.

AND NOTES

SENSIBLE COMMENT

Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, made the "Comment" on the news on TV Channel 4 at peak-time, Tuesday, 1 November. Earlier that day, what is believed to be the first Cruise missile launcher was delivered at the Greenham Common base together with six lorry-loads of American paratroopers.

Miss Smoker said: "The delivery of Cruise missiles is not just an increase in the existing nuclear stockpile — it is the delivery, in the sense of birth, of a new generation of nuclear weapons.

"One of my particular interests happens to be the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, for those suffering from intolerable illness or disability that is incurable. The word 'euthanasia' means, literally, good death. But death by indiscriminate warfare is neither voluntary nor good.

"I am also a secular humanist, having no belief in a supernatural power to save humanity from its own folly—and no belief in any life for the individual beyond this one. A full life is, perhaps, particularly important to the unbeliever.

"The Cruise missiles, designed to avoid detection in flight, can only be intended as a first-strike weapon—which makes the 'Ministry of Defence' a cynical misnomer. The ability of Cruise to avoid detection will create fear in a potential enemy. And fear of attack can cause people to shoot first and ask questions afterwards.

"Cruise missiles will therefore make Britain vulnerable to the panic response of a pre-emptive strike by the Soviet Union, or whoever.

"The USA has cleverly exported all its wars this century to other parts of the globe: Korea and Vietnam had their turns as expendable battlegrounds; if Britain's (and Europe's) turn is to come, it could well be for a nuclear war. The people killed early on would be the lucky ones.

"What could possibly justify such a war? Even if the Russians really wanted to invade our country, that would be far less terrible than nuclear warfare. But in fact the only motive Russia might have to attack Britain is the threat posed by the use of our land as an American warship, its nuclear missiles pointing to the east.

"In spite of the past week's events in Grenada, a Parliamentary majority decided last night that we must simply trust the Americans not to launch a nuclear attack from Britain without first consulting our Government. In this the Parliamentary majority is clearly at variance with the country as a whole:

an opinion poll the other day showed nearly three-quarters against trusting the Americans in this matter, and only 20 per cent in favour.

"Nuclear weapons—especially these new, first-strike weapons—can play no part in national defence, only in national suicide—and for no good reason.

"Life is such a marvellous thing—and we each have one life. To prepare for a nuclear holocaust is a denial of the value of life itself. So let us live and let live—including those with different economic and political outlooks from our own".

A "MORAL MAJORITY" NOTE

We are always a mite suspicious of religious puritans who display an obsessive interest in pornography, homosexuality and paederasty. The suspicion tends to be intensified when such interest is shown by those who are in a position of authority over children, particularly when it is linked with enthusiasm for inflicting corporal punishment.

The Rev Harold G. Goff led a series of campaigns to banish pornography from the town of Marion, Indiana. His special concern was the protection of children from pornography.

The Rev Goff has been indicted by a grand jury on 15 child molestation charges. He has resigned as principal of the Temple Christian School, which he founded in 1972, and as minister of the Temple Baptist Church.

Freethinker Fund

Once again readers have responded generously to the appeal for financial support and maintained the flow of donations received during the year. We thank all those supporters who pay extra in order to keep *The Freethinker* financially sound. The latest list of donors is given below.

Anonymous, £30; G. A. Airey, £2; G. Beeson, £5; P. Brown, £4; J. Busby, £5.20; P. A. Byrom, £2; J. H. Charles, £5; R. J. Condon, £6.40; P. B. Cooper, £5; F. Courbrough, £1.40; P. A. Danning, £1.40; A. E. Garrison, £2; J. Gauley, £1.40; F. R. Griffin, £6.40; D. Harper, £6; E. Haslam, £2.40; F. C. Hoy, £3; Iconoclast (in memory of Allan Flanders, Edith Moore and Jack Walton), £100; K. G. Mack, £1.40; J. J. McNamee, £4; Mr and Mrs Neville, £6.40; W. N. Ramage, £1.40; W. G. Stirling, £2.40; D. Sallito, \$1.60; R. J. M. Tolhurst, £5; W. S. Watson, £1; B. Wycher, £1.40; V. Wilson, £6.40; A. E. Woodford, £10.

Total for the period 5 October until 6 November: £198.40 and \$1.60.

"New Society" reports that twice as many people in Britain visit museums during the year as go to church.

"Guy's Hospital is refusing to admit critically ill babies because it lacks the money needed to care for them, Dr Michael Joseph, a consultant paediatrician at the hospital, said last night. He told Mr Kenneth Clarke, Health Minister, on BBC television that some of the babies were dying after being refused admission as emergencies. . . I am very surprised that any government does not consider children to be a priority". *Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 1983.

"Girl of six dies after lack of funds ruled out bone marrow transplant". *Headline in the Guardian*, 26 October 1983.

Where, oh where, is the jet-setting Mother Theresa? Where is denunciatory Mrs Scarisbrick? Where is the fertile Mrs Gillick? Where is the chain-smoking Dr Margaret White? Where are the hordes of the Righteous from Life, SPUC and the other anti-feminist pressure groups? Where are the packed coaches rolling towards the capital from the 4,000 Roman Catholic churches all over the country? Where are the schoolchildren being given a day off to demonstrate, from parochial schools whose bills are footed by atheist ratepayers?

The answer, dear Reader, is—nowhere to be seen. Not even a spot on the horizon? For why? Because it is only foetuses that excite these grand campaigning passions. None of these "life" sanctifiers are going to utter a squawk of protest on behalf of real human beings.

So, how do these good people busy themselves in

the winter season? By collecting signatures for parliamentary petitions which are currently being presented to the House of Commons by a series of mostly very Right-wing Conservative MPs. These read: ". . . parents to be given statutory rights to be consulted before any contraceptive drug or devices be given to their daughters while they are under the age of consent. . .".

Rather than campaign to save real human lives, the energies of the anti-feminist lobby are now being devoted to trying to ensure that girls under 16 who are sexually active, have unwanted babies (punishment for sin) rather than wanted contraception (licentiousness). What a mind-boggling sense of moral values.

That, it appears, is what religion does for you. Fascinating, therefore, to read in *The Times* on 5 November that while 70 per cent of people believe in God, only 60 per cent consider themselves religious. This suggests that some people who believe in God, do not consider themselves to be religious. For a simple-minded agnostic like myself, who believes neither in God nor in religion, this is all rather confusing. Unlike Godfrey Smith in the *Sunday Times*, however, I cannot afford to offer a crate of champagne for the best explanation. But explanations would be welcome nonetheless.

JIM HERRICK

VISION AND REALISM—A HUNDRED YEARS OF "THE FREETHINKER"

Price £2 plus 30p postage

G. W. Foote & Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL, telephone 01-272 1266

OBITUARY

Mr P. W. Brooke

Mr P. W. Brooke, a *Freethinker* reader for many years, has died in Durban, South Africa. He was 96.

Mrs J. E. Charman

Joan Eva Charman, of Shipley, Sussex, died suddenly last month at the age of 62. Relatives and friends attended the secular committal ceremony at Worthing Crematorium, Findon.

Mrs M. E. Hipsley

Mary Eldridge Hipsley died last month after many years of illness. She was 55. There was a secular ceremony at Tunbridge Wells Crematorium.

Mr D. Minter

Donald Minter has died at the age of 62. There was a secular committal ceremony at Barham Crematorium.

Tehran's university has reopened nearly four years after it and 200 other centres of higher education in Iran were closed by the Khomeini regime. It has been reformed in line with fundamentalist Islamic beliefs. All women teachers have been sacked and girl students are separated from males by a curtain dividing the classroom. Talking to a student of the opposite sex can lead to imprisonment. Lectures begin with recitations from the Koran and agriculture undergraduates learn the proper prayers for rain, ceremonies required for securing good crops and psalms to be used for warding off the menace of locusts. Newton, Darwin, Einstein and Freud are condemned because their teachings destroy "belief in the true God by casting doubts on the truth of the prophets".

FROM: G. W. FOOTE & CO., 702, HOLLOWAY ROAD, LONDON N19 3NL.

Christian indoctrinators of schoolchildren may be in retreat, but the more tenacious of them continue to defend religious privilege in Britain's classrooms.

An article in the Catholic newspaper *The Universe*, by Joanna Bogle, "Chairman of Governors of a group of State primary and infant schools in a South London suburb" (I wonder when Committees of Management of primary schools became Governing Bodies), urges its readers to "Get Christianity back into our classrooms!".

Mrs Bogle opens by referring to the debates preceding the passing of the 1944 Education Act and claims that there was "a consensus view that it was essential to pass on to each new generation the values and ideals of Christianity". In the original draft of the Bill the wording of Section 7 reads: "It shall be the duty of the local education authority for every area, so far as their powers extend, to contribute towards the *spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community* (my italics) by securing that efficient education . . . shall be available to meet the needs of the population of their area"—no mention of religion!

But the Conservatives threatened to wreck the Bill, which up to that point had been welcomed by all parties, unless the religious clauses were inserted. Even if it had not been possible to unearth this notorious bit of horse-trading from those who took part in the debates, the late insertion of the religious clauses would have been evident from the change of style. Whereas the language and tone of the rest of the Act reveals a broad-based and, for that time, liberal view of education, the religious clauses are narrow and specific, leaving no room for interpretation according to local circumstances and embodying dogmatic assertion. Whereas, for example, the word "education" is used elsewhere, the word "instruction" is used in the religious clauses; a word with a very different connotation.

Joanna Bogle goes on: "The aim was to ensure that . . . Christianity . . . was to be retained". No question of democratic choice: it was to be Christianity or nothing—nothing being the right of parents to opt out of Christian indoctrination by removing their children from classes in Religious Instruction.

Anyone who has ever tried to exercise this right knows how difficult it is. Schools with several denominations among their pupils make no provision for, say, studies in comparative religion, the psychology of religion or ethics. Children who opt out have to sit in a corridor or join another class or

perform useful chores such as picking up litter, tidying up cupboards or carrying messages about the school. Older students may be allowed to get on with homework in the library. In general the impression conveyed is that the child or student is a damned nuisance for being so awkward as to wish to exercise agreed democratic rights. This impression is not altered by the two instances of which I have heard in ten years where a school has genuinely tried to make other provision for those who opt out, or where an attempt has been made to introduce studies in comparative religion.

This article repeats the arrogant assumption that only Christians maintain vision, ideals and moral values, though it reluctantly grants that the British Humanist Association is "great in influence". Statistical arguments relating to numbers of believers in different faiths are set down as "sizeable number", "substantial number", "large population" or "parents (how many?) wanted and expected their children to be taught about Christianity at school". Joanna Bogle has not, obviously, kept herself *au fait* with surveys of parents' wants such as those carried out by *Woman* or *Parents*.

This farrago of inaccuracy, tententiousness and mild hysteria has a familiar pattern that I have seen over more than 50 years since I left my Jesuit school to go to university, not only in the columns of *The Universe* but in the pages of religious journals of all kinds. The Jesuits at least taught me that if, after careful thought, I came to the conclusion that any particular belief (not excluding belief in God) was wrong, then it would be a "sin" to continue to adhere to that belief! But so far as run of the mill amateur philosophers are concerned it would appear that when religious faith enters, verifiable evidence and scientific accuracy are flung out of the window.

The National Association of Head Teachers is considering the position of its 22,500 members who are faced increasingly with problems over the content of morning assembly in their schools. It is generally accepted that thousands of teachers break the law every day by not meeting the requirements of the 1944 Education Act. It states that the school day shall commence with an act of worship and implies that the Christian deity is the one who is to be worshipped. But in some Birmingham schools science fiction heroes like E T and Luke Skywalker have replaced the characters of Christian mythology. And the Inner London Education Authority claims that nearly 50,000 of its schoolchildren between them speak a total of 147 languages. They probably worship as many different deities.

A Brief History of Christmas

JOHN L. BROOM

The Christmas celebration, like so many ancient festivals and rituals, was taken over by the followers of Jesus. But its origins are rooted in religions which pre-dated Christianity by many centuries.

When the early Christians began to celebrate the birth of their Saviour God is not precisely known, but the first undisputed reference occurs during the reign of the mad Roman Emperor Commodus (180-192), and there is a tradition that at the beginning of the fourth century Diocletian ordered a church in which Christians were commemorating the nativity of their founder to be burned to the ground with the worshippers inside. But in the early centuries the festival was not held on any definite day of the year, some Christians favouring January, others March, and yet others May. The eventual choice of 25 December as the fixed date of Christmas had nothing to do with the Gospel record or with historical fact.

Assuming he existed, no-one knows when Jesus of Nazareth was born, and the charming birth stories in Matthew and Luke (significantly, they do not occur in the earliest Gospel, Mark) belong to the realm of myth, not history. Indeed, some fascinating parallels have been drawn between the events surrounding the birth of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, and Egyptian mythology and ancient astronomy. As R. J. Condon has pointed out in these columns, the annunciation, the conception, the birth and the adoration, are all depicted in a painting on the walls of the great temple dedicated to the chief of the gods Amom-Re at Luxor built by the Pharaoh, Amenhotep III, while the three wise men have been identified with the three stars in the belt of Orion the Hunter, which is conspicuous in the eastern sky at midwinter. However, even if the Gospel stories were true, they preclude a December date, since that is the cold rainy season in Palestine, when shepherds do not watch over their flocks by night on the Judean hills, but stay sensibly indoors.

The choice of 25 December as the "birthday" of Christ (probably around 345 during the pontificate of Julius I) was in accordance with the early Church's practice of transforming pagan festivals into Christian holy days so that the customs and traditions of the masses should be disturbed as little as possible. From practically the first syllable of recorded time, people all over the northern hemisphere celebrated at, or just after, the winter solstice (21 December) the rebirth of the sun, the source of all life, after his sleep of death. In the form of Apollo, Adonis, Attis, Osiris or Astarte, he (or she)

would rise and save mankind and all living things from the darkness of winter by heralding the advent of another spring and summer. The two festivals in Rome in the early fourth century which probably most influenced the Christian Church in its choice of 25 December as the fixed date of Christmas, were those practised by the Romans themselves, and by the followers of the god Mithra.

The Roman festival was the Saturnalia, a time of great merrymaking and feasting, which began on 17 December and culminated on 25 December which was called the "Dies natalis solis invicti", the birthday of the Unconquered Sun. On that day, presents were exchanged, and masters waited on their servants, all in honour of the rebirth of the vegetation god, Saturn (the Greek Cronus) after whom, of course, the festival took its name.

The Christian Church was also very anxious to counteract the popularity of Mithraism, which was its most serious rival among the religions of the day. Indeed, if the Emperor Constantine had not been converted to Christianity in 312, Mithraism could well have been the predominant faith in the Western world today. Mithra was yet another sun-god, originating in Persia, and in Rome his temple stood on what is now the Vatican Hill. It was situated underground, and at midnight on 24-25 December the celebration of his birth took place, with lighted candles, priests in white robes, and boys burning incense. At the altar, the priests consecrated bread and wine and distributed them to the congregation, so that the whole ritual must have been remarkably similar to that of the Catholic Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. In another part of the city the many Egyptians in Rome at that time would also be commemorating the birth of their saviour-god, Horus, said also to have been born in a stable on 25 December. In their temple there would probably be a crib or manger, with Horus inside, and a statue of his virgin-mother, Isis, beside it.

In fairness to Christianity, however, the coincidences between it and Mithraism should not be exaggerated. Only males could join the latter sect, and its appeal was chiefly to those of higher rank, in contrast to Christianity, which, of course, derived its main support from the poor and dispossessed. Mithraism was also a very militaristic religion, and its devotees would have been profoundly shocked by the doctrine of passive resistance preached by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere. Most importantly, perhaps, Mithra, like the alleged founders of all the mystery religions, was not believed to have been born in a particular place or at a particular time, as the birth of Jesus was firmly located in Palestine during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Indeed, modern Christian apologists turn

the admitted parallels between pagan religions and Christianity to their own advantage by claiming that the very fact that these beliefs and customs occur in so many different cultures, proves that they correspond with the perception by these ancient peoples of some profound truth, and that they are Divinely-ordained foreshadowings of the incarnation of the supreme and final Redeemer in the person of Jesus Christ.

Although a few of the eastern congregations dissented, by the end of the fourth century 25 December had been generally accepted as the date on which the birthday of Christ should be celebrated. After the Reformation, however, Christmas came to be regarded in some countries as a blasphemous survival of popery and paganism. This was particularly the case in Scotland, where the Reformation took a much more extreme form, due to the influence of Calvinism and John Knox, than it did in England. Until well after the Second World War, 25 December was not a holiday in Scotland, and as a child in the Scottish Lowlands, I can remember the mail being delivered as usual that morning bringing the last of the Christmas cards, and my father going off to work after the presents had been opened. Even in England, during the Puritanical Cromwellian protectorate Parliament sat every Christmas day from 1644-56.

The advent in Scotland of London-based television in the early 1950s, with its almost month-long season of festive ballyhoo changed all that, and nowadays

Christmas is celebrated almost as fervently north as south of the Border, except in certain parts of the Highlands and Islands, where the Wee Frees and the Free Presbyterians still studiously ignore it. As one who detests Christmas and everything associated with it, I deplore my nation's almost universal regression to its commemoration, and every December wish profoundly I were in Stalinist Albania, the only European country in which the festival has been officially abolished.

Practically all the Christmas-tide customs are relics of our pagan past. As has already been pointed out, the exchange of presents goes back at least to the Roman Saturnalia, as does the decorating of houses and other buildings, while the mistletoe was the sacred plant of the Druids. The burning of the Yule log and the consumption of Yule sweetmeats (including the plum pudding) were practices introduced by the Teutonic tribes when they invaded Gaul, Britain and Central Europe, while the Christmas tree is the successor of the sacred oak revered by the worshippers of the Norse god, Odin.

The sending of Christmas cards began around 1843, the year of the publication of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. This celebrated work, and his subsequent series of Christmas books led directly to the commercialised abomination which the season has now become. Charles Dickens was a very great writer, but this particular legacy of his is one which, I suggest, we could very well have done without.

Turgenev—the Gentle Giant

SAM BEER

Ivan Turgenev, who died a hundred years ago, was the son of a Russian nobleman and is now regarded as one of his country's greatest writers. He played an important role in the struggle to emancipate the serfs and for this Oxford University awarded him a degree in Civil Law (1879). But Turgenev's radical views resulted in imprisonment and exile. According to his biographer, Pavlovsky, he "was a Freethinker and detested the apparatus of religion very heartily".

his *Sketches From a Hunter's Notebook* influenced the Tsar to enact the Emancipation decree in 1861.

In 1852 he was imprisoned for a month for praising Gogol. Nine years later he left Russia and spent the rest of his life with the opera singer Pauline Viardot-Garcia and her husband in an amiable *ménage à trois*.

Turgenev wrote six novels and nine plays, the most famous of which is *A Month in the Country*. The novels include *Rudin*, *Home of the Gentry*, *On the Eve*, *Fathers and Sons*, *Smoke*, *Spring Torrents* and *Virgin Soil*. Some of these are love stories but most deal with Russian revolutionaries of the 19th century.

Pushkin had already introduced the concept of the Superfluous Man (the aristocrat without function) in his *Eugene Onegin* and Turgenev made use of it. He also used the word "nihilist" in *Fathers and Sons* to describe Bazarov, a new type of revolutionary materialist who believes only in science and accepts nothing from authority. It is ironic that the idea of Bazarov came to Turgenev in a backwater of Victorian gentility, Ventnor, Isle of Wight.

In the novel, Bazarov, the young medical student,

(continued on page 188)

Russian literature really begins with Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) whose narrative poem, *Eugene Onegin*, is famous. Not so famous is his *Gavriliada*, in which God, Satan and the Angel Gabriel seduce the Virgin Mary. All 19th-century Russian literature depends on Pushkin, and this is true of Turgenev. But whereas Gogol, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky have (to say the least) an ambiguous attitude to religion, Turgenev remained an agnostic and a humanist.

Turgenev was by birth an aristocrat. But, when young, he was incensed by his mother's burial treatment of her serfs and swore a "Hannibal oath" to bring serfdom to an end. It is generally believed that

Morals Without Religion—a Tribute to Margaret Knight

WILLIAM WALKER

Professor Walker has succeeded Margaret Knight (1903-83) as President of Edinburgh Humanist Group. This article consists of extracts from his presidential address.

Margaret Knight was a psychologist by training and went straight for the kind of evidence that we should broadly consider as scientific, although I myself would consider her conclusions to be philosophically acceptable. This is important, for a criticism often levelled against humanists is that they rely too naively and exclusively upon scientific methods and evidence, whereas all really well educated people are well aware of the limitations of science. Let me say that the objections of humanism to the religious approach, to knowledge in general as well as to ethics in particular, do not rest particularly on the scientific methods or conclusions but on philosophic considerations.

Margaret Knight was no philosopher and did not consider herself as such, except perhaps in the broadest but maybe the most important sense. She was latterly disappointed in her own performance in *Honest to Man*, in which she filled out and summarised her views on morals in regard to religion.

Any approach to a critique of theological attitudes in favour of a rational and empirical system may perhaps itself easily become too empirical and anecdotal, making too many assumptions about good and bad. I was left with the impression that Margaret Knight felt that she had not tackled adequately the origin of moral values—why we should think in terms of good and bad at all—or had assumed too easily the basis for such thinking, and therefore not established it. She was not unsure of her conclusions but only of the case that she might have made for them—an honest and admirable feeling, and all too common a plight for protagonists of good causes.

Putting aside as she did, for better or worse, the cosmic speculations of the great names in philosophy, she invoked and described, with appropriate references to original work, an explanation for moral rules and behaviour based on the observation of several species besides the human, showing conclusively that actions that we regard as good are no less natural and spontaneous to various species than those we regard conventionally as evil. The thinking of many philosophers had suggested this conclusion even before the age of science, and I myself am persuaded like Margaret Knight that biological kinship in all of its manifestations from the family outwards to species and related sympathies is the

clue to what we call moral behaviour. Family is more important than the community, the local community more important than the nation, the nation more important than the species at large, the species more important than animals in the wild in various hierarchies, roughly down from the higher to the lower in development. Some we cherish, others we eat, some both.

Though this is very generally true, the rational and empirical moralist will sometimes alter these priorities. For example, in face of the nuclear peril, the species and life itself become more important than the nation-state and its supposed interests. Besides, at its broadest, the humanist feels kinship with and respect for life in all its forms, without regarding it as sacred. According to humanists, this biological kinship, with mutual or conflicting interests, is the best guide to moral behaviour, to what is good and bad, that we have. Is there any better? I myself believe not, but I may be wrong.

Margaret Knight gave a very clear answer to the question "Why should we behave with love and decency to each other, or other animals?" For the Christian, as for the other major religions except perhaps Buddhism, no such behaviour is possible without God, the creator of the universe who is also responsible for all good in it. Man's nature is regarded as essentially bad and of course in the case of Christianity this gives origin to the doctrine of original sin and the tortuous mechanism of salvation.

On the positive side Margaret Knight emphasised the capacity of human beings, and also of the lesser species, for acts of kindness, altruism and even self-sacrifice, and I think it is a characteristic, and a basic one, of humanists in general that they are impressed by these positive aspects of human nature while recognising the more harmful though equally natural capacity for selfishness, deceit, aggression and cruelty. To the humanist, she articulated this very well—these belong to the realm of nature, neither more nor less. And man is a rational animal who can consider the circumstances and results of these contrasting patterns of behaviour and form his moral codes accordingly. Margaret Knight is at her best at this naturalistic level, which after all may be the surest and most convincing level at which to study and argue these problems.

On the negative side, which was at least equally essential to her argument, no-one, not even Joseph McCabe, has dealt more incisively with the darker and even repulsive aspects of Christian teaching and hence of practice. I need not dwell on this, for it is all in *Honest to Man*, and it amazes me that Chris-

tians as a whole, and even those who deserve the term better because they have made some attempt to study their religion, take so little account of these aspects or find it so easy to explain them away by means which have to invoke the more abstruse and subtle mechanisms of philosophy, even to the extent of sophistry or "double-think".

Margaret Knight dealt in detail and almost exclusively with Christianity in a manner that was truly devastating, and could be in debate as well as on the printed page. I well remember an occasion in the middle Sixties when she took part in a joint meeting of the Aberdeen Humanist Group and a Christian study group, with two presumably well selected clergymen on the platform with her. General accounts were given and statements made on both sides, without at first much metaphorical blood being drawn. As the discussion, with the audience taking part, was beginning to draw to a close, Margaret Knight put a series of simple questions to the opposition about the basic tenets of their faith both metaphysical and moral. She did it most gently and politely, for she was a gracious as well as a beautiful woman. The less subtle of our opponents responded with a simple, defiant and emotional reiteration of faith, while the other became involved in the tortuous explanations and evasions to his own embarrassment and that of some of the audience. I thought then, as I often have, "How on earth can this faith be maintained, or appear to be?"

The Enemies of Knowledge

Margaret Knight exposed the specific defects of Christian morality in particular, both at the source as well as in Christian behaviour. But one other defect has struck me forcefully that is certainly not often mentioned specifically or clearly enough, even by the more destructive critics of this religion like Margaret Knight. This is its utter disregard of and contempt for what we should call knowledge and the search therefor.

From early times philosophers of many kinds and climes have extolled the pursuit and critical assessment of knowledge as the highest good, and this in most cases long before the age of science. Not so Jesus and the gospels, or St Paul or any of the earlier luminaries of the Church until the great mediaeval renaissance when Aquinas and the others tried hard to reconcile knowledge of the universe and reason with their faith. Indeed, as we all know and as Margaret Knight described so well, for a long time in the Western World pursuit of knowledge and the enjoyment of its fruits had to struggle hard against theological dogma and prejudice, and in some important matters it still does.

The reason of course may be obvious: there is no place for the study of nature, nor could there be, in the hectic closed circuit of sin and convoluted

redemption, of doubtfully universal love allied to conditional promises of heaven and threats of hell on the day of judgment, all to be fulfilled within a generation or so, or later at some unspecified time. This disregard for knowledge has been an increasingly serious disadvantage in Christian belief and practice, though it has been very cleverly if superficially circumvented by the process of double-think, again so well described by Margaret Knight. I have even heard a Catholic apologist claim for Christianity the credit for the enormous, wonderful achievements of Western science. I mention this matter of knowledge and the Christian attitude to it, shared more or less by other absolute faiths of this kind, not only because it is an interesting or useful debating point, but because it is full of relevance to moral views and practices not only of humanists, but of Christians and Moslems and Jews and Marxists, whatever basic ethical values they may hold or whatever they consider to be the origin of these values.

I shared a platform recently with a Catholic bishop, a good and deeply concerned and intelligent man. And so often, I found that many of our practical aims were the same but that our underlying beliefs and values, the path to the same specific attitude, were fundamentally different, in a way that may break out importantly in acute and practical differences when the particular issue is a different one from that under discussion—of peace and nuclear war. The bishop gave as the whole reason for his total resistance to the nuclear threat, for unilateral renunciation of these weapons, his respect for human life based in its "inviolable sacredness", including, and I quote him, "even before birth, all unborn life". To be ethically consistent, his opposition to the Bomb would have to be more than its relative, its disproportionate destructiveness, but to war itself; that is, his position was ethically pacifist. But what of his Church's doctrine of the "just war"—a piece of empirical and quantitative moralising if ever there was one?

It is an example of how, in practice, even moral absolutists reach their conclusions by empirical, rational quantitation of anticipated results. The same is seen in many "Christian" attitudes to medical dilemmas. My own view or stance in the matter of the Bomb is not a pacifist one, and I do not believe that human life is inviolable or sacred. I would not use this word "sacred" about anything, however worthwhile, including life, surely to be preserved and enhanced wherever possible.

The great difficulties and contradictions in applying absolute ethical values can be further illustrated in this same important one of the sacredness of life, even if this is arbitrarily restricted to human life. The self-styled pro-life or anti-abortion lobby, chiefly

(continued on page 191)

FUNGI: FOLKLORE, FICTION AND FACT, by W. P. K. Findlay. Richmond Publishing Company, Orchard Road, Richmond, Surrey, £3.75

The author of this book, an authority on wood-rotting fungi and a past President of the British Mycological Society, has endeavoured in recent years to popularise knowledge of fungi with books such as *The Observer's Book of Mushrooms, Toadstools and other common fungi* (which updated a similar work by the late Miss E. M. Wakefield) and *Wayside and Woodland Fungi*. The latter included coloured illustrations by Beatrix Potter who was as keen on depicting toadstools as she was the Flopsy Bunnies.

Although fungi have been enthusiastically studied for a long time in Britain, they do not enjoy great favour in the popular imagination. Philip Findlay quotes the herbalist Gerard as saying in 1638 that "few mushrooms are good to be eaten and most of them do suffocate and strangle the eater". British mycophobia stands in sharp contrast with the status of fungi in folklore and in the kitchen in continental Europe and most parts of Asia.

Dr Findlay takes pains to point out that all the so-called rules for telling whether a fungus is edible are useless (and indeed have occasionally led to tragedy). *Amanita phalloides*, the lethal death cap toadstool, peels easily and does not discolour a silver spoon. "There is", as the author says, "only one safe way, which is the same as with fruits and green plants, and that is to learn to recognise and identify the species." This advice will bear plenty of repetition. Philip Findlay mentions a couple of old methods of treating death cap poisoning, including a nauseating mixture using raw rabbit brains, but does not mention one which has so far proved efficacious: washing the patient's blood in an artificial kidney machine.

In a book containing little more than a hundred pages of text the author endeavours to cover a very wide field, from edible, poisonous and hallucinogenic fungi to their rôle in literature and history. He explains, for example, that when it started using imported timber for shipbuilding after seasoned English oak became scarce the Royal Navy was afflicted with the scourge of dry rot, and Samuel Pepys complained that he could gather toadstools as big as his fists from ships' timbers.

Dr Findlay gives an enjoyable account of fungi in fiction and poetry, particularly in the translations of eastern European poems in praise of them. However, I did not think that Crossley-Holland's translation of the lines from *Beowulf* about luminous fungi was a patch on that by Strong in John Ramsbottom's *Mushrooms and Toadstools*. It is a pity no

FREETHINKER

mention was made of "The Ardent Sporobolomycologist", a humorous but poignant apologia at the beginning of a volume of A. H. R. Buller's *magnum opus* on fungi.

Readers of *The Freethinker* will no doubt be interested in Philip Findlay's accounts of fungi in folklore and religion which have a lot to do with their phallic symbolism or their properties as ritual drugs. In Central America, for instance, toadstools containing an LSD-like substance have long been used to induce religious visions and have acquired the name of *teonanacatl* or "flesh of the gods".

The author mentions, of course, John Allegro's theory that Christianity arose from a mushroom cult based on the fly agaric, *Amanita muscaria* (the red capped, white spotted toadstool whose effigy is a standard companion of suburban garden gnomes and is a familiar ingredient of children's picture books). Philip Findlay does not consider himself qualified to comment on Allegro's philological evidence for a mushroom cult, but he is not at all satisfied that Allegro produced convincing evidence that, if there was such a cult, the sacred mushroom was the fly agaric rather than any other fungus. I came to a similar conclusion in a review of Allegro's *Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* in these columns (1970).

It is a pity Dr Findlay was not able to use coloured illustrations in this book, unlike his previous two. I have long held that monochrome photographs of fungi generally make poor illustrations and the present work has in no way changed my mind. Figure 3, supposedly of toadstools growing in a fairy ring, is a complete waste of a page, and figure 4, of the author collecting honey fungus in Scotland, does justice to neither man nor mushrooms. There are, however, some good pictures of South American fungus statuettes in stone and a splendidly priapic illustration of the stinkhorn, *Phallus impudicus*. The book includes a gruesome photograph of an Ethiopian child with gangrene resulting from poisoning by ergot, a fungal contaminant of grains such as rye and oats. (The author gives a good account of ergotism, or the "sacred fire", and its associations with St Anthony.) The photograph of Christopher Findlay holding a giant mushroom — "probably" *Boletus granulatus* — in Australia is quite effective, but although this species has been introduced to Australia the mushroom in the photograph is well outside of its size range. However, it strongly resembles an Australian native bolete whose name matches its size: *Phaeogyroporus portentosus*.

This book could, I suggest, have benefitted from more careful editing or proof reading before going to

REVIEW

press. Although typographical errors are fairly few, there is a disconnected quotation at the top of page 94 and inconsistencies of style are sometimes irritating. The text wanders at will from imperial to metric units, sometimes printed in full, sometimes abbreviated. On page 72 we have kilogrammes (kg) abbreviated as both "kg." and "Kg" on the same line and as "Kg" and "Kg." on page 73. On page 71 numbers are given as numerals in one paragraph and spelled out in full in the next. The author calls the Blackfellow's bread fungus "*Mylitta australiensis*" instead of *Mylitta australis*, but in any case the more correct name for it nowadays is *Polyporus mylittae*.

Although this is a short work, intended mainly for popular reading, care has been taken to provide a detailed index which enhances the book's usefulness.

Despite a little technical sloppiness in places, and the lack of coloured illustrations, Dr Findlay has provided within limited space a comprehensive introduction to the fascinating and at times bizarre world of the fungi.

NIGEL SINNOTT

The National Secular Society and the Rationalist Press Association have republished two of Bertrand Russell's most famous essays. "Why I am Not a Christian" is the text of a lecture to the South London branch of the NSS in May 1927. "The Faith of a Rationalist" was originally given as a radio talk exactly 20 years later in a BBC Home Service series entitled "What I Believe". Although the works have inevitably dated in a few minor details, they remain excellent summaries of the arguments for rejecting religion in favour of secularism and rationalism. A short extract from "Why I am Not a Christian" follows.

Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown, and partly, as I have said, the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing—fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand-in-hand. It is because fear is at the basis of those two things.

In this world we can now begin a little to understand things, and a little to master them by the help of science, which has forced its way step by step against the Christian religion, against the Churches, and against the opposition of all the old precepts.

BERTRAND RUSSELL

WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN

and

THE FAITH OF A RATIONALIST

Republished by the National Secular Society and the Rationalist Press Association

Price 60p plus 17p postage
(Special rates for quantities)

Obtainable from G. W. Foote & Co.,
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

Science can help us to get over this craven fear in which mankind has lived for so many generations. Science can teach us, and I think our own hearts can teach us, no longer to look round for imaginary supports, no longer to invent allies in the sky, but rather to look to our own efforts here below to make this world a fit place to live in, instead of the sort of place that the Churches in all these centuries have made it.

We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world—its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is, and be not afraid of it. Conquer the world by intelligence, and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it. The whole conception of God is a conception derived from the ancient Oriental depotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men. When you hear people in church debasing themselves and saying that they are miserable sinners, and all the rest of it, it seems contemptible and not worthy of self-respecting human beings.

We ought to stand up and look the world frankly in the face. We ought to make the best we can of the world, and if it is not so good as we wish, after all it will still be better than what these others have made of it in all these ages.

A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past, or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men. It needs a fearless outlook and a free intelligence. It needs hope for the future, not looking back all the time towards a past that is dead, which we trust will be far surpassed by the future that our intelligence can create.

Turgenev—the Gentle Giant

confronts the older, more literary generation in the brothers Kirsanov who are shocked by every word he utters. They claim to represent civilisation while Bazarov is “crude Mongolian force”. But he challenges them to name a single institution of contemporary life, private or public, which does not call for absolute and ruthless repudiation. Bazarov dies of a cut caused by carrying out an autopsy in the house of a country doctor without proper equipment.

Turgenev said that Bazarov was based on a Russian he met during a train journey. It was asserted that he originated in Turgenev's hero when young, Belinsky, while others said that Turgenev was trying to project a character opposite to his own gentle and very civilised temperament.

Turgenev wrote an essay, *Hamlet and Don Quixote*, in 1860. These two figures are the psychological poles of mankind. Hamlet is the egocentric Superfluous Man, Don Quixote the often misguided idealist. Turgenev's sympathies were with Don Quixote, but he recognised that very few pure specimens of either are ever found.

It is difficult to think of any English writer Turgenev had not either read or met. He visited Carlyle and quarrelled with Thackeray who denied there was any Russian literature worth reading. Turgenev replied with Gogol. In France he was friendly with Flaubert, Zola and Henry James.

Tolstoy seems to have disliked Turgenev from the beginning and it is surprising that they were eventually reconciled. Turgenev introduced Tolstoy's works to Western Europe, but he made some inter-

esting criticisms of *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, regarding psychology and history.

In 1860 there was a considerable Russian colony on the Isle of Wight, and they, with Turgenev, spent much time debating an education system for Russia. Turgenev also opposed capital punishment and wrote *The Execution of Tropman* after he had spent a night in prison before the murderer was guillotined.

The famous “going to the people” occurred in 1874 when thousands of young Russians went to live with the peasants. Turgenev showed his sympathy for the movement in *Virgin Soil*. Although he could not be called a violent revolutionary, the Tsarist Government always suspected him. In 1863 he was summoned to Russia but was allowed to return to Baden the following year.

Turgenev wrote a poem called *Croquet at Windsor* (1876) which unfortunately is not available in English. In it he satirised the attitude of Queen Victoria and the Disraeli Government towards Turkish atrocities in Bulgaria. The hero of *On the Eve* is a Bulgarian.

“He looks like a polar bear”, said William Morris when he saw the great Russian writer. But Turgenev was the gentlest of men.

Perhaps Turgenev's philosophy is best summarised in his own words: “I am first and foremost a realist, and am, above all, interested in the living truth of human physiognomy. I am indifferent to everything supernatural. I do not believe in any absolute or any system, and I love freedom above everything else”.

LETTERS

CHRISTIAN CONTRADICTIONS

In her apology for Christianity (“Religion and Powers of Discrimination”, November), Brenda G. Watson remarks that to dismiss anything without careful consideration is not a rational activity. She is evidently unaware that many freethinkers are former Christians who now oppose that religion precisely as a result of careful consideration.

The essence of Christianity lies in its supernatural claims, the evidence for which will not bear examination. Moreover, Christianity's own assessment of its goodness and usefulness is not in accordance with its history. These things are crucial to a rational decision; but then faith depends upon emotion rather than reason.

The old argument that evil-doers only pretend to be Christians is the perfect get-out. If valid, the religion can never be blamed for anything, so this too needs careful consideration. Christianity cannot divorce itself from the Bible, whose pages provide religious justification for almost every type of atrocity. To give but one example, “Compel them to come in” led logically to the Inquisition and the horror resulting from it. The inquisitors were not pretending—they never doubted they were Christians.

Now that the media have taken to giving us the religious backgrounds of the more spectacular offenders, we need to revise our opinion as to what constitutes “a small proportion of criminals”. The largest Christian sect, the Roman Catholic Church, is notorious for its excessive production of delinquents. In Britain, the proportion of Catholics in prison is nearly three times that in the population. Believers generally are not noticeably better behaved than atheists.

Christianity teaches a God of love, we are told. The same God has predestined most of humanity to eternal torment in hell. Christians may love or hate as they feel inclined, if the behaviour of Jesus is their guide. He bade others love their enemies, but cursed his own. He approved of torture and called for the slaying of any who would not accept his rule.

The names of St Francis and Mother Teresa are trotted out—yet again—as examples of genuine Christians. Francis was an extreme case of religious dementia—how crazy do you have to be to “really” follow Christ? Mother Teresa may be responsible for more misery than she alleviates. She opposes birth control and abortion, and even urges women in poor and overcrowded countries to have more babies. One hopes there are more useful Christians around than

these two.

In common with freethinkers, Brenda G. Watson opposes the indoctrination of children and would give them the skills with which to evaluate evidence. The result would be more predictable than she thinks, for questioning one's faith is the first step on the road out of it. From the earliest times to the present day strongly-held religious beliefs have led to fanaticism, intolerance and persecution. Their weakening would certainly help in building up the harmonious society we would all prefer.

R. J. CONDON

RELIGION AND WAR

When I read the article by Terry Liddle ("The Christian God of War", November issue) I asked myself: "How irrational can a rationalist get?"

He seems to assume that the ancient pre-Christian world was one of peace, but you have only to read the Old Testament to realise that a state of war was the natural one in those days.

No, the causes of wars be deeper than religious beliefs, deep in the human psyche, in the pursuit of power and in the human weakness to think that "I am right and you are wrong".

The arbitrary nature of the assumptions underlying our beliefs are, of course, often hidden and unrecognised.

JOHN L. HUTCHINSON

POLITICS AND THE PRESS

Many readers, in addition to myself, will have read with interest and pleasure the letter from S. E. Parker and others (November). It both draws attention to a problem and points the way to a solution.

The question of politics is always difficult for newspapers and magazines. The well-known newspaper, "The Times", may be taken as an example. It describes itself in works of reference as "independent" and it is hard to think of any occasion on which this description has been called into question. Yet, should "The Times" find itself in agreement with, or in opposition to, the Government of the day or any particular political party, it cannot reasonably be expected to refrain from fearlessly expressing its views on the ground that its pages might be thought, quite sincerely by a number of readers, to contain an increasing amount of political propaganda.

If, to develop the argument, I turn from consideration of fact to the realm of hypothesis, let it be supposed that a journal were in existence concerned to examine carefully all aspects of human life from one particular standpoint. One would expect the pages to contain numbers of articles written from that particular standpoint. It would not be surprising, however, if, now and again, writers in the paper were not so much to express their own views but to look at the views and opinions of others and point out their weaknesses. Indeed, sometimes, because different people find that different weapons come to hand, the views of others might be treated rather roughly, even with ridicule. For instance (and we are still in the area of hypothesis), supposing there were a political party which, by its frequent assertions of support for such bastions of orthodox religious thought as, say, the Church of England, the House of Lords and the Monarchy, were to show its adherence to one particular religious faith. If that faith, by one widely-held interpretation, were thought by many people to enjoin upon its followers such practices as a preference for peaceful means of settling international disputes and a tendency to care for the less fortunate members of

society, and if the political party were to advocate the accumulation of weapons of immense destructive power and to encourage the acquisition of great wealth by a small number of privileged individuals, it would come as no surprise to anyone if the hypothetical journal were to draw attention to what might be seen as a discrepancy or contradiction. Quite likely, it could then be accused of filling its pages with political propaganda.

As to the remedy, I assume that the pages of the great majority of periodicals are open to the full, free and frank expression of opinion, however controversial. May I, with my customary humility, make a suggestion? It is that, whenever S. E. Parker and his friends see anywhere a statement of political (or any other) opinion with which they are unable to agree, they should not content themselves simply with submitting a round robin of shrill protest, but they should reply with an article or letter of equal length putting the opposite point of view. By this means, the pages of any journal will be enlivened and, by the conflict of sincerely and firmly held opinions, many readers will find themselves substantially helped in the continuing search for truth.

T. F. EVANS

ATHEISM AND TORYISM

As Professor Flew and his colleagues were not courteous enough to supply readers with examples of "Left-wing political propaganda" in "The Freethinker" we will have to turn to the November issue of "Humanist News" for his comment on the National Secular Society: "How can they ask me, or any other freedom loving rationalist to stay in such an outfit which supports CND, which proposes to respond to the ever rising arms buildings of the Soviet Empire by one sided disarmament? I could never again look a Pole, or a Czech or any other subject of Soviet totalitarianism in the face if I thus betrayed the resistance of the world's worst tyranny".

Many "Freethinker" readers may not like the Soviet Union, but I doubt if any would describe it as the world's worst tyranny. There are countries in South America where good people have a habit of "disappearing" which their governments cannot explain. (Professor Flew should read "Cry of the People", by Penny Lernoux, written from a Catholic viewpoint.) These governments are backed by the United States, and for every dollar the USA puts into South America it takes three out.

President Reagan is a born-again Christian, supported by the Moonies, the Marines and Mrs Thatcher. Professor Flew is a "crisp" (his word) who enthusiastically supports Mrs Thatcher. We know, of course, that the USA is a lightly armed, helpless State which can attack only small islands without coming to grief. She has to bring her Cruise missiles to Britain for launching without damage to herself.

Admiration is due to Professor Flew or anyone who undertakes the uphill task of converting the Tory Party to atheism or even to humanism. He thinks that he has made one convert, David Hume (1711-76), but he is not too sure about John Stuart Mill (1806-73) and neither am I. If we recall the recent Tory Party conference his only convert to a more permissive society is Cecil Parkinson.

As Professor Flew is a philosopher he should appreciate the following extract from "Wealth of Nations", Book I, Chapter 2, by Adam Smith—the real Adam Smith and not the one invented by Tories. "The difference of natural talents in different man is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very



different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause as the effect of the division of labour. The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature as from habit, custom and education. When they come into the world and for the first six or eight years of their existence, they are perhaps very much alike and neither their parents nor playfellows could perceive any remarkable difference. About that age, or soon after, they come to be employed in very different occupations. The difference of talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarcely any resemblance".

If Professor Flew thought "The Freethinker" was becoming Left-wing why did he keep out of its columns for so long? Where will he publish his rationalist views now? Is he hoping to become an Archbishop in a privatised Church of England?

SAM BEER

BY THE RIGHT. . .

Your comment in the November issue on the protest initiated by me against Left-wing political propaganda in "The Freethinker" completely avoids the issue involved. Reference to the number of people attending a CND demonstration compared to the number of academics signing an anti-CND letter, or to the past or present political affiliations of myself and two other signatories are no answer. The first is irrelevant, and the second is not only irrelevant but a clumsy use of the old smear technique of "guilt by association". Why are you begging the question of whether "The Freethinker" should be a vehicle for the "Left" or a freethought organ which maintains a non-political stance?

S. E. PARKER

BY THE LEFT. . .

S. E. Parker and his colleagues criticise "The Freethinker" for a mythical Left-wing bias. In my view, there is far too little discussion of social issues and politics, though there is a place in its columns for the presently high standard of criticism of religion and the clergy.

S. E. Parker may say in the current issue of "Ego" that as an Egoist he has no use for such humanistic spooks as social values and so on (do the other signatories agree?), but secular humanism does not confine itself to attacking religion. It also aims at promoting the happiness and welfare of humankind, though the promotion does not have to be partisan.

It would be surprising and unhealthy if "The Freethinker" or the National Secular Society consistently adopted a party line, be it Marxist humanist, secular Socialist, secular Whig or secular Tory, because secular humanism is both an intellectual discipline and a social movement. It does not believe that movements for social reform such as socialism are conspiracies got up by the bishops from which it should distance itself. The NSS is already a joke, justifiably criticised as negative and timid. The letter should serve as a warning to secular humanists that the faction behind it will never be satisfied until the movement has been gelded by forsaking all pretensions to social conscience.

COLIN MILLS

AN EDITOR'S LOT

Those who complain that "The Freethinker" is too Left-wing and have complained elsewhere (in the British Humanist Association's Newsletter, for example) that the National Secular Society has been taken over by Left-wingers, should look at the facts. At the Annual General Meeting of the National Secular Society last month there was a contest for position of President. The result of a vote was five to Terry Liddle (a prominent member of the Socialist Secularist Association) and 37 to Barbara Smoker (more noted for her libertarian individualism than her affiliation to any political party). Facts speak louder than assumptions.

"The Freethinker" has always had a radical, but not specifically socialist, stance: its history shows it on the side of freedom, reform, ordinary people and internationalism. It has never been particularly enthusiastic about any establishment — and that includes Communist establishments in Eastern Europe (prominence has been given to the views of the humanist Russian dissident Sakharov). At a time of a Conservative Government it would be astonishing if some criticism of those in power were not to be found in "The Freethinker". Editors (as I know from experience) have always had to contend with criticisms of being too Right or too Left or too centrist.

Factions will ever bemoan an inadequate representation of their viewpoint: that's not news. But it might help the cause of secularism if Socialist secularists could persuade Labour MPs not to oppose a reform of the ridiculous restrictions on Sunday trading and Conservative secularists could persuade the present Government to remove the legal compulsion to hold a service of worship in schools every morning. The wide range of opinion within the secularist movement would help the cause of secularism more by such useful campaigning than by constant complaints about "The Freethinker" and the National Secular Society.

JIM HERRICK

A DANGEROUS ALLY

I never cease to be amazed by American diplomatic naivety. We are expected to condemn Russian aggression in Afghanistan and approve American involvement in Grenada. We are expected to condemn Russian involvement in the affairs of third world countries and be silent when the CIA plots the murder of leaders America doesn't like and the overthrow of governments of which America does not approve.

Is it any wonder that some of us are as worried by the fact that we are America's allies as we are by the possibility of confrontation with Russia? Is it any wonder that there is growing pressure for us to have control over any military presence or installation in this country? Is it any wonder that Russia remains suspicious and untrusting of the West when the West proves itself to be untrustworthy and belligerent?

Mr Reagan speaks of "Leftist thugs". Is there any difference between "Leftist thugs" and "Rightist thugs". Mr Reagan showed his colours during the McCarthy era in the States, and he has not changed. Under him, America behaves like a cross between Al Capone and John Wayne. Perhaps someone should tell him that he is no longer making films. Grenada is for real and has as much right to opt for Communism as the American people have to vote for Reagan.

R. L. SCRASE

EVENTS

represented by the Roman Catholic Church, has changed its interpretation from time to time in this regard. I think that once upon a time the embryo received the soul at 40 days or thereabouts, but now the fertilised ovum whether implanted or not is often regarded as sacred and inviolable, even though it is still a single cell or a tiny bundle of a few hundred undifferentiated cells. Its distinctive human qualities are potential rather than realised. The same of course might be maintained, quite logically and scarcely more fancifully, for the as yet un-united hundreds of ova and millions of spermatozoa, and what can the pro-lifers do about these? And what stance do the pro-lifers take on the Bomb or capital punishment?

This is a convenient place to comment very briefly on the "slippery slope" argument that is sometimes levelled against humanist morality, whereby of course man virtually makes his own values, and his moral rules accordingly. Could not this process all too readily decline, in the case of euthanasia for example, into abuse, exploitation and the horrors with which we are all too familiar in human behaviour? Of course it could, but then so could any form of human moralising and behaviour. It does no good to pretend that we are not in control, not our own judges in our own interests. The horrors that result from absolute moral systems such as are inherent in religious beliefs have been at least as terrible, and in history probably more numerous, than those resulting from neglect of religious prescriptions.

The failure of the humanist movement to take off and to achieve any mass impact probably has many causes, and we humanists can review the present state and influence of the humanist movement either optimistically or pessimistically depending on what we think these causes are. Margaret Knight, at least for a long time, tended to take a very optimistic view, regarding the battle as essentially won for reason and humanism although through social habit and established institutions many people would continue to go through the accepted motions, procedures and rituals for some time to come. In a way, this view was all of a piece with her character and her own clear-headed and convinced approach, supported by so much historical and circumstantial evidence. As an amateur philosopher and even more as an observer of human nature, with a lot of observation behind me, I am not so sure.

Faith remains a form of wishful thinking. If a thing works, it has to be believed; and vice-versa, if it is believed, it will work. As Karl Barth wrote, "Faith is that which believes in spite of all the evidence that contradicts it". We are not yet rid of the ages of faith and dogmatism.

Belfast Humanist Group. York Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast. Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month at 8 p.m.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Queen's Head, Queen's Road (entrance in Junction Road, opposite Brighton Station). Sunday, 8 January, 5 pm for 5.30 pm. Brighton for Freethinkers. Illustrated talk by the Editor of "The Freethinker".

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

Glasgow Humanist Society. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Norman Macdonald, 339 Kilmarnock Road, Glasgow, G43, telephone 041 632 9511.

Harrow Humanist Society. The Library, Gayton Road, Harrow. Wednesday, 11 January, 8 pm. David Flint: The Revolution in Information Technology.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, corner of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Harold Wood. Tuesday, 3 January, 8 pm. Eugene Levine: Evolution—the Continuing Argument.

Humanist Holidays. Christmas at Eastbourne and Paris. Easter at Llandudno, North Wales. Yugoslavia, 27 May for two weeks (jointly with the Progressive League). Details from Betty Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12, telephone 01-673 6234.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. The Swarthmore Institute, Leeds. Tuesday, 10 January, 8 pm. Annual General Meeting.

Leicester Secular Society. Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate, Leicester. Sunday, 18 December, 6.30 pm. Tom Bradley: Looking Back Over 20 Years as a Member of Parliament.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 15 December, 7.45 pm. Saturnalian Party.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday meetings at 11 am. 11 December, Gareth Stedman-Jones: The Language of Class. 18 December, Christopher Hampton: Literature and Appeasement in the '30s.

The Magistrates' Association passed a resolution at its Annual General Meeting in London declaring that the changes effected by the Administration of Justice Act 1977 (later incorporated into the Oaths Act 1978) failed to meet most of the objections to the law which were the basis of a resolution passed by the Association 15 years ago. "The changes have themselves created new problems. We therefore seek early legislation to implement the Association's aim . . . that 'the Oath as it is now taken in magistrates' courts should be replaced by a simple promise to tell the truth . . . and that breach of this promise should be perjury'".

The reason that USDAW is a party to it is fear that the already long working hours of shop-workers will be extended—but it is up to the Union to ensure that this does not follow, and there is no reason why it should.

“Many shop-workers welcome the opportunity to work on a flexi-time basis (as thousands already do in supermarket evening shifts), and the Sunday opening of some shops would increase this opportunity. Besides, a change in the law permitting Sunday opening could be combined with a statutory shortening of the individual working week for shop employees, together with protection for those few who might object to Sunday work on religious grounds. And all this would have beneficial effects on unemployment”.

With a staggering increase in unemployment and little prospect of securing jobs in future, many of the unemployed have been investing their redundancy pay and their savings in small businesses. Such ventures can succeed only if they are allowed to operate when customers are available.

Again, as the NSS points out: “Sunday antique markets, furniture warehouses and garden centres have been harassed in some areas through court action and threats of court action. But the involvement of families as a whole in the choice of purchases for the home or garden is surely something that should be encouraged, and Sunday is the only day that most families can shop together.

“Above all, the essential and overriding safeguard in the proposed reform is that it is merely permissive, not compulsory. There would be no compulsion either on shop-owners to open on Sundays or on customers to shop on Sunday. It would be entirely a matter of choice”.

Let the Public Decide

Two other national organisations have attacked laws which restrict Sunday trading and the opening hours of public houses. In its annual report, the English Tourist Board refers to “the need to amend archaic laws affecting the liberty of the individual, including Sunday trading, pub opening restrictions and the hours that restaurants may serve alcoholic drinks. These laws are a constant source of irritation to our own citizens, and of amazement and disbelief among visitors from overseas”.

When he officially opened The New Inn at Ironbridge, Shropshire, Michael Montague, chairman of the ETB, said “the idea that we are so weak that freedom is not permitted to us when it comes to drinking away from our own homes, or having a second liqueur at the end of a dinner in many restaurants, is absurd.

“If there is a great incongruity today, it should be

that I perform this ceremony contrary to an archaic law.

“It is three o'clock. Having performed the official opening, I shall pull the first pint, and if a charge were to be made for it, I would contravene a law which treats English people as lacking an ability for self-control”.

Mr Montague drew the attention of Members of Parliament to “the absurdity that visitors to this new tourist, industrial heritage Mecca at Ironbridge will, as with thousands of unique public houses throughout our land, have their opening hours controlled. . .

“It is the publicans and the public which should, within reason, determine the opening hours of public houses, not licensing benches, some of whom tell me privately that they are very embarrassed about the law they are required to administer”.

Mr Montague added: “Within sensible limits, our leisure time should contain the minimum of restrictions”.

An Unworkable Law

The National Consumer Council declares in its latest annual report that it is “concerned with getting rid of antiquated, unnecessary legislation” relating to shop opening hours.

The report says that the NCC would gladly see abolished “is that part of the Shops Act 1950 which prevents shops in England and Wales from opening at hours to suit themselves and their customers, and lays down a schedule of goods which may and may not be bought on Sunday.

“In 1982, Lady Trumpington’s bill to amend the Shops Act passed through the House of Lords but failed to get a Second Reading in the House of Commons, for lack of parliamentary time. Early in 1983, hopes were high for the success of Mr Ray Whitney’s private member’s bill on the same subject, introduced in the Commons. After a major public discussion of the issues . . . the bill was defeated by 205 votes to 106 at Second Reading.

“One thing that even the most determined opponents of the bill agreed was that the present law is unworkable. Where they differed was not on whether the law should be reformed, but how. This in itself is a big step forward, since the numerous previous attempts to change the law have usually met with a refusal to admit that anything at all is wrong with the present law”.

The National Consumer Council asserts that “only the Government can resolve the present situation”.

• More than 100 shops in Dieppe have decided to follow the example of Calais supermarkets and open on three pre-Christmas Sundays specially for day-trippers from England. The excursion fare from Newhaven is £8. “We expect a sell-out”, said Sealink.