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FAMILY PLANNING CHIEF ATTACKS MYTH OF "GYMSLIP MOTHERS"

Dr John Dunwoody, chairman of the Family Planning Association, criticises opponents of family planning and sex education in the Association's annual report. During the year he visited the FPA's 11 regional offices to meet the professional staff and volunteers. He describes them as "people of many different types who realise the importance of family planning within the community. This perspective is vital because it illustrates the day to day importance that ordinary individuals attach to being able to plan their families, as well as to the wider issues of family planning related to health care and education in sex and personal relationships".

It also provides a sensible balance to the distorted picture of contraception and sexuality that tends to be presented in the Press, where all too frequently the subject is treated with sensational headlines and controversial reporting.

Dr Dunwoody gives as an example of such reporting the well publicised campaign by the ever-pregnant Mrs Victoria Gillick, a Roman Catholic mother of ten, over guidelines issued to doctors by the Department of Health and Social Security. She went to court seeking a ruling that her five daughters aged under 16 should not receive advice on contraception from a doctor — should they seek it — without her consent.

Dr Dunwoody comments: "A story like this has, of course, every possible virtue as far as the newspapers are concerned — and, as one must reluctantly expect, many of the reports extracted every gram of drama, whipping the highly vocal forces of 'moral rectitude' into a frenzy of outrage and hysterical comment that might lead one to believe that the number of 'gymslip mothers' is actually increasing and that every other 13-year-old girl in the country is receiving the contraceptive pill from a doctor set

on encouraging early sexual promiscuity.

"This, of course, is absurd and not at all borne out by the facts. But the clamour of self-righteous moral indignation that always surrounds these subjects—however well-intentioned it may or may not be—obscures the real issues, hides the true facts and actually prevents relevant questions to which adults should be addressing themselves, from being asked.

"This creates a very grave danger—the danger that available energy is being wasted in angry outbursts, instead of trying to understand why the problems exist and what can be done at a practical level to prevent them or help those few young girls who are at risk.

"Some of the facts that never emerge in these heated debates are that there are certain general trends that have been established concerning teenage girls who get pregnant. For example, not all—but many—come from disadvantaged backgrounds and 'problem families'. The majority of teenage girls newly into sexual relationships do not use a method of contraception — even though they know that methods exist.

"Moreover, many may not want to have sex at all but are, consciously or subconsciously, pressurised into it—not by the availability of contraception, nor of sex education, as is often inaccurately suggested—but by pressures from the society we live in—the media, advertising, the entertainment industry, their peers and although adults are loathe to acknowledge it, the examples set by adults, by parents, and by the ways in which their behaviour influences young people".

Sir Brian Bailey, chairman of the Health Education Council, in a foreword to the section on the Family Planning Information Service, says that

(continued on back page)

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NEWS

GAY HUMANISTS "INCENSED" BY VATICAN DOCUMENT

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education has issued a 36-page document which reiterates the Church's hard-line attitude to sexual and moral questions. It declares that moral values are more easily transmitted in the home and that schools should only "complete the work of the parents in sex education".

The Vatican document dwells at some length on questions like homosexuality and masturbation. Homosexuals, it declares, must be given understanding and hope of overcoming "their personal difficulties and their social mal-adaption". But it condemns homosexual practices and says that there can be no moral justification for them.

Members of the Gay Humanist Group say they are "incensed" by statements in the document. The GHG issued a Press release declaring that "unlike Roman Catholics and other people of religious faith, humanists do not base their moral values on directives from a supposed god or on a book of rules like the Bible.

"They believe that people should be free to adopt their own life-styles, provided they do no harm to others, and that homosexuality is no more moral or immoral than heterosexuality.

"This latest attack on gays, coming as it does only two months after the Pope told American bishops that 'the compassionate bishop will proclaim the incompatibility of premarital sex and homosexual activity with God's plan for human love' leads gay humanists to conclude that the Roman Catholic Church and its head are obsessed with the 'sin' of homosexuality and that, far from becoming more liberal, their attitude is hardening".

The GHG says that some gay people may think this is a matter of not much importance. "But regrettably", they add, "the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope exercise great influence on public opinion, so well-publicised hostile pronouncements of this kind are extremely damaging to gays whether they are believers or non-believers".

The Group has also sent a letter of protest to Cardinal Hume.

The Islamic Penal Code, which is based on Muslim beliefs and practices, has been imposed on the country by the Government of Sudan. At least one third of the citizens are non-Muslim. Under the Code, amputation of hands, crucifixion and stoning to death are the penalties for theft, brothel-keeping and adultery respectively.

AND NOTES

"NEWSPEAK" IN PRESS AND PULPIT

In the year when the National Secular Society commemorated the 150th anniversary of the birth of its founder, Charles Bradlaugh, it is appropriate that the Society's annual report is headed with his words: "I have deemed that I attacked theology best in asserting most the fullness of humanity. I have regarded iconoclasm as a means not as an end". The quotation highlights the two primary aims of the secularist cause—attack on theology and promotion of social reform.

The report draws attention to the fact that a range of opinion and free discussion is almost absent from the contemporary Press.

"While the scurrilous newsheets of the 18th century and the penny dreadfuls of the 19th century demonstrate that the gutter Press is not a new creation, the dominance in the mass media of trivia, scandal, bias and pap has become a serious obstacle to informed public discussion of current affairs. 'Journalist' has become a dirty word and television increases channels and coverage without increasing choice.

"For a Society such as the NSS, seeking to influence public opinion from a serious standpoint, the debasement of the tools of communication has become an increasingly serious problem".

Civil liberties were threatened under the previous Conservative Government whose Police and Criminal Evidence Bill was lost only as a consequence of the General Election. It had attracted hostile comment from groups as disparate as the National Council for Civil Liberties and the British Medical Association.

On the international scene the report states that "the cold war got colder" with assistance of sabre rattling by Mrs Thatcher.

"The arms race between NATO and the Communist block spiralled into a new phase. Despite differences of opinion about the means of obtaining disarmament, many secularists have sympathised with the renaissance of the peace movement".

During his highly publicised supertours, Pope John Paul II has spoken consistently about human rights. At the same time he opposes the right of women to opt for a career, or to choose contraception or abortion. Under the new code of Canon Law, automatic excommunication is the penalty for abortion at however early a stage of pregnancy, but not for the murder of a human being with the sole exception of the Pope.

Christians still arrogantly assume that their viewpoint should dominate public life. At the same time

atheists are subjected to bitter public attacks like that made by the Russian exile, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, during his speech in London after accepting the 1983 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

Deficiencies in the media are constantly referred to in the report. It recalls that in George Orwell's novel, *1984*, Newspeak is the language of distortion and misinformation.

"We do not yet have a Ministry of Peace which deals with War or a Ministry of Love which deals with Law and Order. But the language of newspaper headlines and Government pronouncements is heavily tinged with Newspeak . . . The preference of the Press and broadcasters for sensation rather than information, for hackneyed postures rather than original thought, takes us on the downward path".

The occupants of pulpits, like the manipulators in newspaper offices and broadcasting studios, are no strangers to Newspeak.

"They present a God of Love who creates viruses and floods, a living Christ who is supposed to have died, a glass of wine which purports to be blood, and a promise of heaven once our personalities have disintegrated".

The report includes an impressive list of activities during the year. Copies are obtainable (free) from the National Secular Society, 702 Holloway Road, London N19, telephone 01-272 1266.

A Dorset clairvoyant who charged a woman a £6 fee failed to predict the future, including the fact that her client — with the assistance of Trading Officers — would successfully claim for the fee to be returned.

KILLED BY RELIGION

The harmful influence of yet another exceedingly nasty Christian sect in the United States is reported in *World Medical News*. Warnings about the Faith Assembly have been given by Dr Maria Garcia, a pathologist, and are based on her observations of the sect's members and their offspring.

Dr Garcia's suspicions were aroused by two cases, one of which was that of a 37-year-old woman who died after giving birth to a stillborn baby. She had rejected advice to see a doctor and died of complications from septicemia. Dr Garcia later performed an autopsy on a stillborn baby whose mother had also refused to see a doctor, but later relented, thus saving her own life.

Two newspaper reporters became involved in the investigation and so did the health authorities of Indiana who initiated what is believed to be the first official inquiry into maternal and perinatal death rates among members of a religious group. It was

discovered that the perinatal mortality rate for babies born to sect members is 2.7 times higher than for the general population, while the death rate among mothers is at least 86 times higher.

In another American state, Illinois, the husband of a Faith Assembly member kidnapped her after she had been subjected to isolation, exhaustion, personality erosion and induction of fear about "displeasing God". Some of the methods used by the sect include the forbidding of talk with non-members, reading newspapers, watching television and listening to the radio. Members must listen to hours of sermons and join in sessions of hymn-singing, chanting and hand-clapping. Under this regime the kidnapped member had become "a mindless robot" and many others are driven over the edge.

The Faith Assembly is established in 17 American states but it is not known if the sect has yet reached Britain. But even Britain is vulnerable, as the success, albeit short-lived, of the Church of God, Divine Light Mission and the Moonies has demonstrated.

An American judge has refused a request by a young quadriplegic woman that she be allowed to starve herself to death in hospital. Judge John Hews said if necessary she could be force-fed to save her life by the hospital staff at Riverside, Los Angeles. His ruling came in the landmark right-to-die case by Mrs Elizabeth Bouvia, 26, a cerebral palsy victim since birth. Saying she no longer wanted to live with her severe handicap, Mrs Bouvia sued for permission to be allowed to starve to death in the hospital while receiving hygienic care and painkillers for her arthritis.

SPIES IN THE WARD

It has long been an open secret that religious pressure groups are recruiting spies in hospitals to betray patients' secrets. They seek out doctors, nurses and chaplains with access to confidential information, particularly in three areas: contraception for those under 16, late abortions and care of severely malformed babies.

Over 50 doctors and nurses signed a letter, published in *The Lancet* last month, condemning this activity. They wrote: "The suffering of parents whose severely handicapped infant has died is grievous enough even when decent conventions of privacy have been respected. . .

"Sexual abuse of an underage girl can be damaging in itself without being compounded by pregnancy. Late abortions carry their own traumas and publicity only adds to these.

"The well-being of patients is not best served by doctors and nurses continually having to look over their shoulders for informers. Treatment should not be prejudiced by the opinions of a strident and well-organised minority".

Freethinker Fund

There is still time for readers who have decided to give up making New Year resolutions to resolve to send an Old Year donation to the Fund. Warm thanks are expressed to those who have already sent contributions during 1983. The latest list is given below.

B. Able, £2; T. Atkins, £3.40; I. Barr, £4.40; D. H. Bowers, £2.40; J. M. Cardy, £1.40; J. A. Charman, £9.40; R. E. Davies, £5; F. S. Docherty, £1; J. G. Gerrard, £1.40; M. D. Gough, £4; D. T. Harris, £1.40; E. M. Hay, £4.40; H. Hilton, £1; C. G. Houston, £1.40; C. F. Jacot, £1.40; I. Leibokitz, £4.40; N. Levenson, £1.40; M. G. McIver, £2.40; A. J. Rawlings, £6.40; F. E. Seward, £2; W. Scott, £10; C. A. M. Sellen, £10; I. Shelat, £2; C. J. Simmonds, £1.40; A. E. Smith, £3.60; A. J. Sullivan, £1.40; G. A. Vale, £6.40; F. Walker, £2; J. A. Watford, £1; O. Watson, £1.40; A. Whitehead, £1.40; B. C. Whiting, £1.40; C. Wilshaw, £5.

Total for the period 7 November until 5 December: £107.60.

MORAL SUPERIORITY

Councillor Peter Shepherd, whose championship of Christian indoctrination in West Sussex schools was referred to in our last issue, is also an ardent supporter of fox-hunting. When a motion to ban this odious practice on all land owned by the Council was recently debated, he opposed it with considerable vehemence.

According to Councillor Shepherd opponents of such "sport" are "liberals with a small 'l' and mostly middle-class intelligentsia". The motion to ban fox-hunting was silly, irrelevant and time wasting. It was heavily defeated.

We hear a lot from the likes of Councillor Shepherd about the superiority of Christian morality and the virtue of individual freedom. Hunting a terrified animal to death for "sport" is not particularly moral and neither is the defence of the individual's freedom to do so.

The Labour Party, or rather its general secretary, Jim Mortimer, suppressed a Christmas card cartoon by Francis Boyle. The cartoon, one of four which Mr Boyle had been commissioned to draw for the Party, shows Mary and Joseph turning up to Bethlehem General Hospital only to find a notice announcing "Maternity Ward Closed". This has an all too familiar ring to it, but Mr Mortimer told the cartoonist that the card might offend some Christians, particularly in strict Methodist areas of the country. "Tribune", the independent Labour weekly, was not so squeamish about it and published the cartoon in its 16 December issue.

Honest to his God, to Others and to Himself

The name of Dr John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich from 1959 until 1969, became almost a household word when, in 1963, he published a small volume entitled "Honest to God". It caused a considerable flutter in the dovecots of the orthodox. Dr Robinson's controversial theology, together with his public support for organisations like the Homosexual Law Reform Society and his defence of "Lady Chatterley's Lover", did not commend him to the traditionalist majority. But he was unpredictable on some historical questions and defended the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin.

Law Reform Society for many years until succeeded by Lord Foot earlier this year.

In his latter years, as Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge, he enjoyed the opportunities for study, writing and travel. He was caring and supportive of undergraduates as indeed he was of everyone: I turned to him for counsel in more than one personal crisis. He loved country life, and spent as much time as he could at his Reigate home, moving with his wife Ruth in preparation for a retirement which, alas! has not lasted very long to Arncliffe in North Yorkshire, where he died. His exceptional courage and honesty shine through the sermon he preached there last August about his own impending death, in which he characteristically said: "In the pursuit of truth I cannot believe that a one-eyed approach is ever sufficient".

John Robinson was a sympathetic and stalwart friend, a fearless campaigner for what he believed in, a highly civilised person—a latter-day Renaissance man (he would have felt at home with Erasmus) who must have been dismayed as the tides of crude biblical fundamentalism and social reaction arose in the Anglican Church during the post-Ramsey years. Although not doctrinally a humanist, he was a great humanitarian and a fine human being.

ANTONY GREY

Whilst he was Dean of Clare College, Cambridge, John Robinson in discussions with John Gilmour, Director of the Botanic Gardens, was the occasion of the start of the Humanist Society there. The conversations had indicated that the division between them was likely to represent a difference within the University as a whole, which was worth exploring. (In the old days, there had been an Ethical Society formed by Henry Sidgwick.) Along with John Gilmour, J. Wedderburn (now Lord Wedderburn), Robin Marris and Jonathan Miller were active in promoting the new group. E. M. Forster at King's College gave it moral support and some help. Noel Annan, then Provost, showed a discreet and distant complaisance.

About that time, Robinson was invited to join a small group sponsored by the BBC for a weekend conference in the country in preparation for some broadcasts. I was a member of the group — and remember his new brown shoes, a replica of a pair of my own! The other thing I remember about him was his absent-minded preoccupation with his own thoughts. He had been invited for his known liberal Christian views, and had been fairly cast.

When he published *Honest to God* later on as Bishop of Woolwich, he related that the occasion of

John Robinson was my friend for more than 20 years, and the news of his death from cancer came as a sad shock. He was always youthful and vigorous, and it is difficult to realise that he has left us so soon, at 64.

John joined the executive committee of the Homosexual Law Reform Society in 1960, soon after becoming Bishop of Woolwich, at a time when the active support of such a prominent Anglican was a great encouragement and a welcome accolade of respectability. Then I opened the *Observer* one Sunday morning in 1963, and found that he had demolished the traditionalists' image of Jehovah. Oh, dear!

Typically, John's sudden notoriety over *Honest to God* deflected him not one whit. Equally typically, he seemed innocently unaware of the furore it was bound to arouse, or that it might well prove (as indeed it did) to be an adverse turning point in his career. He had been widely tipped as a future Archbishop of Canterbury, but never advanced from Woolwich. To him, the book was just a stage in the evolution of his theological ideas (he was a distinguished biblical scholar). To evangelical conservatives it was of course the very Devil, and he was from then on a marked man in their eyes.

John was not a conservative, biblically or politically. As time went on, he spoke out often on issues which seemed to him morally important, resigning from the Labour Party in protest at what he saw as the Wilson Government's lack of radical commitment. He had an eloquent command of the English language. As he was a shy person, his forthrightness in stating his views and his unflinching steadfastness in the face of vociferous hostility (mostly from his fellow-Christians) was all the more impressive. He rendered accounts honestly to his fellow men and women, as well as to his own images of God.

Believing that "the function of the law in society is not to prohibit but to protect, not to enforce morals but to safeguard persons, their privacies and freedoms", he gave consistently strong support to many social causes and was chairman of the Sexual

it had been a spell of illness which had given him time to reflect. He was no theologian, and his position in the book was heavily indebted to John Wren-Lewis, a research chemist with ICI, very well known to me (indeed, husband of my secretary at the time), who was making a name for himself in Left-wing Anglican circles. There was nothing at all in Robinson's book to attract special attention. The book was merely a *succèe de scandale* because its author was a bishop, before unorthodoxy in high places had become commonplace. There is a parallel with Margaret Knight's broadcasts, in the same climate of opinion.

Robinson returned to his academic work in biblical

studies, where he was more at home. He wanted to "de-mythologize" Christianity, but did not have the philosophic equipment of Rudolf Bultmann. In the hands of the most clever, subtle, and scrupulous thinker, anyhow, that is a risky enterprise, and doomed to failure. What *Honest to God* did, however, was to demonstrate John Robinson's own honesty, and his courage. It was in line with his appearing as witness in the Lady Chatterley case, and the manifest independence and courage tested by his stand in other cases and causes. Whatever his Christian credentials, he was a rare human being.

H. J. BLACKHAM

Watching Big Brother

MARK LILLY

1984 is here and it appears that nothing can prevent the Orwellian predictions being fulfilled. But there is a growing suspicion that those in positions of power and authority who have been shouting warnings about Big Brother themselves pose a major threat to personal freedom. This is also the year when the National Council for Civil Liberties celebrates its 50th anniversary. Mark Lilly, whose history of the organisation is to be published later this year, examines some of the issues which are of special concern to the NCCL in its Golden Jubilee year.

The NCCL was founded in February 1934. It was initially concerned to provide a distinguished observer corps to report on police harassment of the hunger marchers arriving in London in that year. After 50 years of work, the state of civil liberties seems now almost as dire as it was then, although the ground on which the battles are fought has changed in certain respects.

One of the least controversial areas of our current work is to do with prisons. Across the political spectrum, from Lord Whitelaw to Robert Kilroy-Silk, there is a broad consensus that the prison service is a disaster, that imprisonment is not only inhumane but inefficient in bringing about the aims for which it was designed. The high recidivist rate establishes that the system "reforms" nobody; and the brutalising regime within the prison walls means that, when inmates are eventually released, the streets are not, in the longer term, any safer than they would be with a less punitive sentencing policy. Prisons not only teach the practicalities of crime to the uninitiated; they also annihilate the dignity and self-esteem of offenders, who thereby become indifferent to what judges call "the disgrace of criminality" and are therefore more likely to re-offend.

The punishment of a prison sentence resides, in theory, in the fact that it denies freedom. Yet under the present system, the inmate has a second, parallel punishment, of being ill-treated whilst in custody. Letters are limited in number and subject to censorship; visitors have to be from certain categories (e.g. members of the family, long-standing friends) before they can see the prisoner. Access to legal advice is made extremely difficult and the internal disciplinary system administered by the prison governor or the Board of Visitors is grossly unsatisfactory in that prisoners are not accorded the facilities (proper rights to call witnesses, legal representation at the hearing) indispensable for an effective defence.

If so many features of the prison system do not conform to the basic tenets of natural justice, this is also blatantly the case in the administration of justice itself. To take a very recent example, the Home Secretary has now announced that those serving sentences for certain crimes (including offences involving drugs and violence) will not normally be considered for parole until they near the end of their sentences. Thus, someone sentenced before the new ruling to say, ten years, will suddenly find that the possibility of being released after four (a possibility taken into account by the trial judge in fixing the term of years) has been replaced with the near certainty of serving twice that time. It is tantamount to a retrospective and arbitrary increase in the original sentence.

The NCCL is once again active in opposing the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill. This fell in the last Parliament because of the General Election, and has now been re-introduced in a modified form. The earlier version of the bill resulted in almost unprecedented opposition, not only from radical pressure groups, but from the more conformist Law Society, the British Medical Association and most of the Anglican bishops. The Government is now trying to

pass off the new version as one posing no threat to civil liberties. But it still includes increased powers of stop and search for the police, and new powers of arrest for all offences (including the most trivial, such as dropping litter) if the arresting officer doubts the veracity of the name and address offered by the suspect. Like the old "Sus" law, this new power will soon be abused on a large scale; predictable victims will be gay people, political demonstrators and ethnic minorities. The NCCL is sponsoring the National Campaign Against the Police Bill, which is to hold a rally on 21 January.

Jo Richardson, MP, a member of the Council's executive and a long-standing campaigner for women's rights, has introduced a Sexual Equality Bill in the House of Commons, designed to remedy the gaps in existing legislation. The bill, drawn up in consultation with NCCL's Women's Rights Unit, seeks to make sexual harassment at work illegal; to introduce paternity leave as a right; to provide pro rata pay for part-time workers (most of whom are women); and to make discrimination against gay people at work unlawful. The Bill failed at its second reading on 9 December.

The Council is taking an increasing interest in the plight of welfare benefits claimants. With other interested organisations, it responded speedily to "Operation Major" in Oxford, by publishing an excellent account of the events (*Poor Law*, by Ros Franey). Its one serious weakness is an unaccountable exoneration of the magistracy for allowing many of the accused to be hustled through the courts without the benefit of legal advice or the time to prepare a proper defence. The result was that those whose cases were heard later and had had time to take advice did much better for themselves in the courts and received lighter sentences or acquittal.

Of the 283 people arrested for fraud in Oxford on 2 September 1982, some were not even claimants, but friends of those who were. Over a hundred people were released without charge, having been held in improper conditions, with the Judges' Rules governing the treatment of suspects being disregarded as usual. The police admitted after the incident that mass arrests of this kind operate on a hit-and-miss principle; in other words, they know for certain that a considerable proportion of those detailed must be innocent. The whole operation was "successful" in police terms because it had the craven acquiescence of large sections of the media.

A related issue which is also of concern to the Council is the use of the new DHSS fraud squads (called Special Claims Control teams), and in particular their intimidatory techniques. The squads underline the class-based nature of society's perception of crime; the poorest in the community are under microscopic scrutiny, whilst those responsible for most of the fraud and theft (middle-class business persons shuffling phoney papers across

desks) are left to their own devices.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act is to be replaced by a new bill which will, however, retain the most contentious elements of the old law. These include police power to detain suspects without charge, or access to a lawyer, for 48 hours; the Home Secretary's power to exclude individual British citizens from one part of the British Isles; the offence of withholding of information from the police. As NCCL's chairperson, Cash Scorer, an expert on Northern Ireland affairs, has written in a recent edition of *Rights*: "The Bill has in no way altered the NCCL's complete opposition towards emergency legislation of this sort. Like its predecessors, it severely undermines the principles of natural justice and the rule of law".

Orwell's novel *1984* concerned itself, amongst other things, with state surveillance of private communication. In the real 1984, the new Telecommunications Bill re-enacts (in section 44) the existing legal arrangements for the tapping of phones. Thus, the Home Secretary continues to issue interception warrants without their being any safeguards as to when, how often, and in relation to which offences, such warrants should apply. Since 1980, Lord Diplock has been supervising the practice of interceptions, but his powers are limited, and only his first report has been made public.

On the gay rights front, the NCCL has been concentrating on discriminatory immigration rules, and the difficulties lesbian mothers have in securing custody of their children. Sam Jenkins was recently appointed for 18 months (with a grant from the Greater London Council) to work at NCCL on a Gay Community Policing Project, which aims to record instances of police harassment of the gay community and also to monitor any positive developments as they occur.

The NCCL desperately needs new members if it is to continue the fight for a libertarian society. We cannot rely on the wholehearted support of political parties, which are only peripherally interested in civil liberties, that is to say, when they coincide with the class interests which they represent. Individual members are our life blood. And it is individuals, especially the weaker, the poorer, the less articulate, whom in the end we most seek to help.

As a past president of NCCL, the novelist E. M. Forster, wrote: "I think we should be chiefly concerned for the smaller people. Because when important people are thrown overboard they make a big splash. We all rush to the edge and say, 'my goodness we must make a row'. But the smaller people don't make a splash; they vanish silently and the injustice never comes to light".

• NCCL, 21 Tabard Street, London SE1, telephone 01-403 3888.

A Radical in Search of Respectability

JIM HERRICK

John Norman's new play is based on the life of George Jacob Holyoake, the 19th-century liberal, freethinker and pioneer of the co-operative movement. "Freethinker" readers may have an opportunity to see the play at a "fringe" theatre.

George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) coined the phrase "secularism", suffered harshly in one of the major blasphemy trials of the 19th century, and hovered on the edge of the freethought movement for more than half a century. Yet, he was ousted from leadership by Charles Bradlaugh, who became first President of the National Secular Society, and his memory has been honoured with marked lack of enthusiasm in the freethought tradition. This was due to his querulous and indecisive personality as well as his cautious views and his desire for respectability.

A new play, *Holyoake* by John Norman (recently performed at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, Surrey), provided a lively evening's entertainment and portrayed a Holyoake who betrayed his radical youth. The life of Holyoake was presented as a dialogue between the old man and the young man, with vigorous argument between the fiery youth and the compromising old man. The socialist perspective implicit in much of the play meant that it was Holyoake's compromise with Liberalism and failure to develop from a full-blooded Chartist to a fully-grown socialist which was condemned.

I admired the author's ability to turn a little-known life into a pleasant evening's theatre and the two actors' (Dominic Letts and Terence McGinty) ability to play an ageing and rejuvenating Holyoake together with a host of other characters from Robert Owen to Gladstone, but I question the play's interpretation of G. J. Holyoake's life.

Was Holyoake ever really a very energetic radical? Had the fire burned out, or was there only a wavering candle in the first place? Another weakness of the play in my view was the implication that involvement with the Liberal Party was necessarily a betrayal of radical politics, a weakness emphasised by the failure to mention Bradlaugh at any point in the play. Bradlaugh clearly did not betray his radicalism as a Liberal MP. Perhaps that was the only practical route to power at the time. Is it more of a sell-out to fine principles to achieve the position where some, but not all, of them may be put into practice, or to remain true to a utopian ideal which lingers in the world of dreams?

Holyoake's dislike of violence sprang from his observation of an outbreak of disorder in Birming-

ham in reaction to a rejection of the Charter by Parliament. Holyoake was always a "change of heart" radical with a belief in education rather than power as the panacea of the working classes. His true mentor was Robert Owen, caricatured only slightly unfairly in the play as a moralistic windbag. One of his first publications was a *Practical Grammar* (1844), which displayed his belief that education was necessary for progress, for it is "the despotism of ignorance and incapacity which makes every form of tyranny possible".

Whereas Bradlaugh graduated in the street platform and the army, Holyoake advanced stolidly through conversations with Unitarian acquaintances and the Mechanics' Institute to become an Owenite lecturer. He was always closer to Samuel Smiles than Karl Marx. His first lecture in Worcester was entitled "An Enquiry into the Incentives Offered by Present Society in the Practise of Honour, Honesty and Virtue". It does not sound like a programme to set the world alight and it is not surprising to read his own admission that "Neither my School nor my lectures were well attended".

From Platform to Prison

Holyoake's one moment of martyrdom, as a radical who took a resolute stand, was his prosecution for blasphemy in 1842. The play somewhat telescopes this incident suggesting that he was given orders to march to Bristol by Owen as soon as he became a lecturer. Holyoake gave a lecture in Cheltenham on the topic of "Self-Supporting Home Colonies". When asked by a local clergyman what he had to say of "our duty to God", he replied that "If I could have my way I would place the Deity on half-pay as the Government of the Country did the subaltern officers". After making the speech Holyoake continued on his way and when he heard that a prosecution was afoot, he returned to Cheltenham to attend a meeting on free speech. Was such uncharacteristic courage on Holyoake's part due to the pressure of other more militant freethinkers (not the kind of pressure to which he was usually amenable) or to a rather naive underestimate of the danger before him? Or simply a feeling that his hour had come and a desire to face it honestly?

The blasphemy trial was of great importance since Holyoake's reputation as a radical rested upon it; but it was not a typical event in his life. The hardship which he suffered in gaol and the extreme difficulty he had in earning a living upon release must have pushed him in the direction of wealthy liberals. The death of his infant daughter while he was in gaol was a wound which must have contributed to his anxiety to avoid any repetition of

martyrdom.

Holyoake's invention of "secularism" is dealt with rather cursorily by the play, which concentrates upon his association with the Liberal Party. A very entertaining scene depicts Holyoake meeting Gladstone before breakfast—the acme of his desire to hob-nob with the great. The charge against Holyoake that he was self-justifying, snobbish and inclined to quarrel with his friends on the pettiest of issues cannot be avoided. But it was not his attempt to become a Liberal MP and influence Liberal politicians, so much as his failure to do this with the persistence and force of Bradlaugh, which made him the lesser man.

The play is fairly harsh on Holyoake (no doubt as a cautionary tale for current radicals in danger of compromising with society), but there are grounds

for avoiding too ungenerous a judgement. His belief in education, morality and co-operation between religious and non-religious groups for social reform is perfectly honourable. For someone who struggled from forging steel to writing and public speaking and who endured hunger, prison and family tragedy en route, the hope of comfort and security, which may look like a betrayal of ideals in retrospect, is surely human and understandable. *Holyoake* is a play which merits a tour of the circuit of fringe theatres for it is full of memorable scenes; for instance, the sight of Holyoake taking elocution lessons had the audience in stitches of laughter. But I think it is not his failure to fall into the arms of socialism (to which he was more sympathetic than many free-thinkers) but his quest for respectability which has undone his reputation as a radical.

Further Thoughts on John the Baptist

R. J. CONDON

Some early Christian sects held that the gospel drama fabled to have happened on earth was really played out in the heavens. Orthodox Christianity repudiates this, yet the dates assigned to certain church festivals do seem to have astronomical significance. The author of this article takes another look at a subject which got him into hot water a decade ago, and sees little cause to modify the view he expressed then.

Ten years ago *The Freethinker* published an article of mine in which I suggested that John the Baptist might not have had an historical existence. Not the most exciting of subjects, I agree, but my arguments did call forth the vehement dissent of another contributor. Much of this centred on the genuineness or otherwise of the paragraph concerning the Baptist in Book 18 of *The Antiquities of the Jews*, compiled by Josephus around CE 93. This occurs in the middle of an account of a quarrel between Herod and the Arabian King Aretas, and it seemed to me unlikely that Josephus would have interrupted his narrative in order to insert matter of little importance to it. My critic, on the other hand, maintained that the paragraph is an integral part of the story. I might have conceded the point, but a vague doubt remained—the piece just didn't look right.

It is true that a case can be made out in favour of the disputed passage. The usual argument is that a Christian interpolator would have made it harmonise with the accounts of the death of John given in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, with which it is hopelessly at variance. But the writer may not have known those gospels. The passage was in Josephus at least as early as 250, when Origen

referred to it in his book *Against Celsus*, and it could have been inserted before the New Testament writings were in general circulation. In any case it is compatible with the gospels of Luke and John, which state only that the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded. Possibly the writer followed an apocryphal tradition of John no longer extant.

Over the years I have done a fair amount of reading in Josephus. He writes with clarity and straightforwardness which come over even in Whiston's pedestrian translation. Consider this sample from the paragraph under discussion: "Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing (with water) would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away (or the remission) of some sins (only), but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness". This is not the style of Josephus—I cannot find another such clumsy sentence anywhere in his writings, nor for that matter another split narrative apart from the one containing the notorious forged account of Jesus Christ.

The mythicist school of writers, J. M. Robertson, Arthur Drews, Gerald Massey and others, see John the Baptist as a non-historical figure derived from similar characters in pre-Christian mythology. My

(continued on page 15)

BOOKS

ELMER GANTRY, by Sinclair Lewis. Oxford University Press, £3.95

Sinclair Lewis carved out his own little niche in the genre of shooting fish in a barrel. *Elmer Gantry*, the inverted "Pilgrim's Progress" of a hypocritical evangelist, has been reissued 56 years after it scandalised its first readers and was banned in Boston, USA. Lewis, the 1930 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, was a kind of Jazz-Age Dickens, exposing the vulgar, upstart American Midwest in *Main Street*, *Dodsworth*, *Arrowsmith*, and most famously, *Babbitt*.

The novel opens with Gantry as a drunken college boy at the turn of the century. "Hell-cat" Gantry, the rowdy, not too bright football hero, discovers his power to hold an audience with his resonant voice. His "call" finally comes one evening when he reaches the philanthropic stage of tipsiness. He mugs up a few second-hand ideas and impressive phrases (which amusingly keep turning up through the rest of his career), and he is on his way as a crusader for all that is right and moral.

He is a rabble-rousing Baptist, preaching hell fire and damnation and doing some quiet fornicating on the side, when he joins a group of travelling salesmen for a binge instead of preaching an Easter service. In the ensuing scandal he is thrown out of his seminary. After two years as a salesman for farm machinery, the lure of public speaking and power attracts him again and he discovers Sharon Falconer, a partly intelligent, partly potty evangelist, inspired but crooked, as Elmer himself is.

There is much emphasis on the theatricality and artifice of evangelism in the Sharon Falconer interlude. When she eventually dies in a fire that consumes her "Waters of Jordan Tabernacle", the picaresque Elmer continues his awful career. He dabbles briefly in theosophy before lighting upon Methodism, a larger and richer denomination than the Baptists, and one offering more scope for his overpowering ambition. On his first assignment at Banjo Crossing, Elmer meets a likely young woman who he thinks will make a suitable consort when he becomes a bishop. Predictably, he is an unspeakable husband and father.

He moves up the ladder of larger towns and richer congregations until he reaches the Wellspring church in Zenith, the bustling but irredeemably vulgar city of Lewis's other novels. Here he steals rich parishioners from other churches, leads a crusade against vice and generally establishes himself as the embodiment of all that is virtuous. By the end of the novel he has abandoned the Rotary Club for a snooty country club, finagled an honorary DD for

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himself, narrowly escaped a scandal resulting from his affair with his secretary, and is about to become head of an anti-vice campaign and pastor of an important New York church.

Periodically Elmer reforms and vows to be good. He manages to give up tobacco and alcohol. He may genuinely believe in God. He seems to have a few good motives in spite of his ambition and ruthlessness, but in the end his ambition is chilling: he envisages becoming a kind of supra-political emperor of the USA by combining all the "moral" organisations and thereby controlling the elected leaders. The rather unnecessary introduction by Paul Bailey points out that Gantry's ambitions have parallels in present-day America.

Sinclair Lewis wrote *Elmer Gantry* mid-way through Prohibition in 1927, when speakeasies were common, bootlegging caused more crime than Prohibition prevented, and the country was full of evangelists of questionable integrity. Lewis has a knack of making almost any way of life seem vulgar and risible through irony and undercutting: a church in a college town is ornate because a zealous alumnus made a "strike in Alaskan boarding houses during the gold-rush". The mere manufacture of bathtubs or rubber overshoes is killingly funny to Lewis, and obviously anyone who participates in these ventures must be an *arriviste* and hopelessly vulgar. Finally Lewis himself becomes somewhat vulgar by endlessly pointing at the vulgarity of others.

Calculated bathos is everywhere. Any series or list infallibly ends on a wry, undercut note. So, when Elmer and another young man are officially ordained as Baptist ministers, the presiding preacher "summed up, for the benefit of Elmer Gantry, Eddie Fislinger, and God, the history of the Baptists, the importance of missions, and the perils of not reading the Bible before breakfast daily".

In case we should have any doubts about Lewis's point, the scene sometimes shifts to a minor, passing character, someone introduced mainly for the purpose of wondering out loud for our benefit. "Why is it", muses the wife of a retired preacher, "that it's only in religion that the things you got to believe are agin (*sic*) all experience?"

An evangelist in a private moment says, "Oh Lordy, Lordy, Lordy, I wish I had a good job selling real estate!"

Not every clergyman is a scoundrel. The Catholic priest, the rabbi and the urbane Episcopal minister in Zenith are intelligent and honest. Some of Gantry's

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colleagues of the Cloth realise what a crook he is, but with publicity, his theatrical knack, and a few powerful friends on his side, he is apparently invulnerable.

For all its creaky devices, *Elmer Gantry* is still a good description of a man smiling and smiling and being a villain.

SARAH LAWSON

ASSAULT AND BATTERY: WHAT FACTORY FARMING MEANS FOR HUMANS AND ANIMALS, by Mark Gold. Pluto Press, £3.95

Years ago one of the characters in *The Archers* objected to the introduction of factory farming at Ambridge, only to be silenced with the unanswerable statement: "They're not pets". Evidently an animal we choose to be our pet is the only one society recognises as having sensitivity, intelligence and needs. Most people are revolted by cruelty towards a dog, while finding it convenient not to think about the lives and deaths of the animals they eat.

No wonder we avert our eyes from the conditions on factory farms, just as the average German took care not to know what went on in Hitler's concentration camps. The German had more excuse than we, for if he took any moral stand he risked joining the victims. We are merely called upon to change some eating habits that are unhealthy for ourselves, and if we care enough, give a little time and money to a political campaign.

This book is a horrifying exposure of the cruelty involved in factory farming—millions of creatures as sensitive as any human baby, condemned to continuous discomfort and stress throughout their lives. Piglets kept on concrete floors develop ghastly sores on all parts of their bodies, sometimes within 24 hours of birth. Their end in the slaughter-house is almost always terrifying and frequently very painful. Slaughter-house workers on team piece-rates, often working with faulty stunning equipment, are unlikely to be over-scrupulous.

The book brought to my mind the parallel of the Atlantic slave-trade. Among slavers there was controversy between "loose-packers" and "tight-packers". Most opted for "tight-packing", filling every last inch of space with their human merchandise. Admittedly, more slaves died on their ships, but with reasonable luck enough of the extra victims would survive to make a fine profit. Clearly a slave ship

and a broiler house have much in common. It has been estimated that about 12½ per cent of slaves shipped from West Africa died during the crossing. The broiler chicken is usually killed at seven weeks, yet in that time a mortality rate of six per cent is usual.

But after all, humans must eat to live—millions are currently dying of starvation. Our food needs to include protein. Is it not true, as the food industry tells us, that without factory farming our diet would be poor and more expensive, and the plight of the hungry millions worse? No, it is not true, and Mark Gold explains exactly why. The same interests profit from both human and animal suffering. The pot-bellied wailing children and the staggering, half-feathered hens are parts of the same horrific picture. Factory farming makes the same contribution to human nutrition that the now-notorious selling by misleading advertising of powdered milk to Nigerian mothers did. It kills.

The basic fact is that an enormous and increasing amount of food fit for human consumption is fed to animals. But for this there would now be ample food for all the people of the world. Roughly, says Mark Gold, "cereals grown to feed direct to humans will produce five times more protein per acre than if the same were devoted to meat production, legumes ten times more and leafy vegetables 15 times more". Nor is it true that vegetable proteins are inferior to meat, if eaten in the right combination (pulses and grains together). Yet a steadily increasing proportion of food grown is fed to animals. The latest figures available for Western Europe show 70 per cent so used, and *Poultry World* has boasted that in 1981 "poultry and egg producers were customers for 50 per cent of grain grown in Britain".

That is bad enough, but, still more shockingly, large quantities of animal foodstuffs are imported by the developed from the undeveloped world. In addition, the multi-national companies that profit from factory farming are busy selling the system to some of the hungriest countries in the world. Thus the Government of Bangladesh has recently made a grant of £½ million to start the production of battery eggs and broilers. This can only lead to greater hunger, as food grains go to produce eggs and meat that only the rich can ever afford.

The rich countries enjoy, apparently, a rising standard of living as ever more meat is consumed. Television commercials are busy telling us so, in "What, No Meat!" and "farm" eggs advertisements. Even programmes like *Emmerdale Farm* reinforce the message, as when a character who was ridiculed for becoming a vegetarian was shown driven by hunger pangs to a secret meat feast at midnight. In fact, as Mark Gold points out: "It is accepted by even the most conservative nutritionalists that the average British diet is now at least 20 per cent deficient in roughage and also contains 15 per cent

more meat than is good for us. . . Evidence mounts that over-consumption of animal produce contributes strongly towards diseases of western civilisation, particularly obesity, heart disease and cancer of the bowel”.

There is a further danger to our health from anti-biotics, hormones fed to animals and chemicals put into carcasses. Anti-biotics increase growth rates and also check the infections that spread among animals kept in unhealthy and over-crowded conditions. They are used so extensively that there is a grave risk of anti-biotic-resistant disease strains developing in humans.

The great multi-national companies which profit from it claim that factory-farming is “economic”. It is indeed—for them. But only because of fiscal arrangements geared to their interests. Being classified as “agricultural” they do not pay rates on their buildings, nor are they subject to pollution control. They are allowed tax relief on capital expenditure and do not pay capital gains tax on animals bought and sold. They benefit from EEC intervention, which, at vast expense to the taxpayer, encourage them to produce foodstuffs they know to be surplus to requirements. A fiscal policy which corresponded to real social needs would render a very different type of agriculture “economic”.

There is a place for meat in a rational agriculture. Rough pasture land can properly be used for grazing; pigs and poultry can eat scraps and by-products unsuitable for human consumption. As in Chinese cookery, a little meat can flavour a lot of vegetables. If animals were kept on this basis there would be many less, they would not be kept under factory farm conditions, and if far fewer were slaughtered there would be more hope of ensuring for them a painless death. There would also be hope that millions of humans would not have to starve.

Even without any great disruption of present systems Mark Gold shows that much could be done to end the worst suffering of animals. Those veal producers who abandoned the use of crates because of public disgust found to their surprise that keeping calves in “straw yards” was actually cheaper. If public opinion turns sufficiently against the worst methods of egg, poultry and pig production, there are other systems that will doubtless soon prove themselves economic. Mark Gold’s final section on what can be done is particularly useful.

The traditional Christian view that animals were created for the use of man has much to answer for, and those modern scientists who, recognising man as an animal, use the concept not to raise the status of animals but to degrade that of humans, pile wrong upon wrong. Cruelty to animals and cruelty to humans are never far apart. A society that allows intolerable ill-treatment of animals is blunting its sensitivity to all suffering. The intellectual dishonesty involved in the current justifications of factory farm-

ing is both a symptom and a cause of the frightening level of violence in the world today.

MARGARET McILROY

AN INTRODUCTION TO SECULAR HUMANISM, by Kit Mouat. Gay Humanist Group, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, 70p (including postage)

This is an abridged edition of a booklet first published in 1972. It is written for people completely new to humanism and contrasts the humanist approach with that of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Although it was written before the birth of GHG it becomes clear from the first pages that this booklet was an ideal addition to the group’s literature: “No-one can expect people to base their lives on something they believe to be untrue. And Humanists know from their own experience and from history that it is not necessary to hold any religious beliefs in order to live happy and useful lives. Humanists also point out that the different Christian churches and sects differ so fundamentally in their views about vital issues like war and pacifism, sex and marriage, divorce and abortion, contraception and homosexuality, and even blood transfusions and the need for doctors, that it is impossible for anyone to know what specifically ‘Christian Ethics’ really are”. And later “Secular Humanists do not believe that anyone is automatically superior to anyone else because of colour, race, sex or beliefs”.

It is written in clear and simple language. Old arguments are re-stated in easy to understand chapters and the humanist outlook is made plain as in this example at the end of a chapter on “The Problem of Evil and Suffering”: “Humanists believe that we have to deal with suffering by trying to learn its causes, and then to take preventive measures wherever we can. And if we can’t prevent misery, then we are responsible for finding a cure. We can neither blame Providence nor rely on any deity to help us”. And this on a chapter in the bible—“The Humanist feels that almost any kind of behaviour can be justified by a biblical quotation if you spend long enough looking for it. . . Christians have excused slavery, the exploitation of the poor, cruelty to homosexuals and Jews, torture, poverty, anti-feminism and disease, wars and capital punishment by referring to the bible. In Hitler’s Germany the bible was a better best-seller than Hitler’s own book *Mein Kampf* . . . they (humanists) believe that today we need more merciful, more relevant and more reliable authorities on which to base our individual behaviour and our laws than the Christian bible”.

The booklet is a brief, inexpensive, simple explanation of what humanism is, which is summed up at the end in one neat sentence: “It is an attitude of mind which stimulates us to find out for ourselves

where we have been since the human race began, and to understand where we are now and why, and it encourages us to try and find a means of moving on to something better".

BRIAN PARRY

INSIDE OUTSIDER: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF COLIN MACINNES, by Tony Gould. Chatto and Windus, £12.50

For those of us who lived through the 1950s one of the social phenomena of the time was the emergence of the teenager. Just as Philip Larkin keenly noted that "sexual intercourse began in 1963", so it was Colin MacInnes who made us realise, in 1959, that children were not moving straight from childhood to adulthood, but were adopting a positive identity on their way between the two. In his novel *Absolute Beginners*, he charted the social forces, both economic and cultural, which created the teenager in the London of the 1950s, and at the same time presented us with one of the key novels of the period.

If Colin MacInnes did not exactly "discover" blacks, he nonetheless succeeded in capturing also this second feature of London's changing life in the 1950s and 60s, in his novel *City of Spades*. If anything this was a more remarkable achievement than his identification of the genus teenager, for MacInnes came from a privileged middle-class background (his mother was Angela Thirkell and Kipling a cousin) which should have conditioned him scarcely to notice that blacks existed.

In this sympathetic biography, Tony Gould puts his finger on the enigma of Colin MacInnes. "Like Orwell", he writes, "he 'went slumming', making forays into the nether regions while retaining a base above ground. Thus he would always remain an observer, a voyeur, a journalist, an outsider even—though he was, as he characteristically put it, very much an 'inside outsider'".

Thus it was natural that he should take a serious interest in anarchism. But as Gould points out, his most effective journalism, from an anarchist point of view, was not in the pages of the anarchist Press, but in such outlets as *Queen*, the *New Statesman* and *New Society*. And Nicolas Walter's view is that MacInnes did more than any other writer, outside the anarchist movement, "to turn the general libertarian revival into a specifically anarchist direction during the early 1960s".

Tony Gould's perceptive biography succeeds in capturing the subtleties of this multi-faceted and essentially lonely man.

TED McFADYEN

Newspaper reports are always required by "The Freethinker". The source and date should be clearly marked and the clippings sent to the Editor at 32 Over Street, Brighton, Sussex.

LETTERS

DISCRIMINATE KILLING

In response to Peter Chapman's letter (November 1983), I would like to assure him that there is at least one other humanist who shares his view on capital punishment. It would be logical if all deists were totally against killing, since God, who created everything, cannot make a mistake and has given every human being an immortal soul which must be preserved at all costs, even if only to allow time for repentance and entrance to heaven. Humanists presumably accept that nature (as with all living species) and free will (as with all apparently normally functioning humans), creates the good, bad and thoroughly evil. Therefore I see no reason to preserve the evil ones at great cost in the cause of "redemption".

I have always claimed to be passionately opposed to indiscriminate killing and am therefore an active supporter of peace movements, but I do think that discriminate killing may well be justified both logically and morally.

To those who say that the act of killing degrades or emotionally disturbs the one who kills, I would agree that for many people the latter is true and is reason enough to condemn conscription for war. Degradation may well exist only in the eye of the beholder. I have seen television programmes interviewing men who have admitted with equanimity and in some cases pride, to killing others. One benign-looking, softly-spoken old man sticks in my memory, when he casually tried to remember how many Black and Tans he had sniped. The fact is that when men kill with the approval of society, as in war, or as an official hangman, or from some compulsion of conscience (which may be quite irrational), it seems neither to disturb nor degrade them.

If capital punishment were to be restored, it would be not unreasonable to execute by a firing squad composed of a group of soldiers who, by their very trade, have faced the prospect of killing and not been unduly disturbed.

In order to keep this letter short I have dealt only with the general principle and not attempted to answer the many questions that naturally arise therefrom.

M. ANSELL

"NARROW POLITICAL PROPAGANDA"

Seldom indeed can a criticism have been as thoroughly justified by a reply (rather an apology of a reply) as the letter complaining of narrow Left-wing political propaganda in the November 1983 "Freethinker".

The reply appears latched on to CND. I see no specifically secularist significance to CND. Neither can the author of the article as he specifically points out supporters of CND include some Christians, pacifists, ex-servicemen and some of practically every group under the sun!

Then there are some snide personal remarks about Professor Flew and Mr Parker to the sarcastic effect that only "The Freethinker" mainstream Left-wing view is legitimate.

Finally there was the assertion that the critics hold widely differing views. This reflects no discredit on the critics but merely shows that discontent about "The Freethinker" is widespread, and the partisan propaganda is particularly narrow.

As the former Conservative Councillor mentioned I do not shrink from having allies from either the Left or Right provided I believe the view expressed to be

correct. The shame is not on me nor the other signatories but on those who continually digress from Secularism into narrow political propaganda.

Isn't it an apt consequence that Peter Chapman in another letter in that issue should ask whether he is the only NSS member in favour of capital punishment?

Let me assure him that despite the impression in "The Freethinker" I and doubtless many other members favour capital punishment, and agree with very few of the political opinions nowadays published in "The Freethinker".

GEOFFREY H. L. BERG

NON-PARTISAN CRITICS

At last a few National Secular Society members have protested against the political bias of "The Freethinker" (November 1983). But although their objection was reasoned and non-partisan, the authors find themselves attacked personally in the editorial and again in the title given to their letter. And the very issue in which their letter appears continues its personal abuse of the Prime Minister and its socialist party-political propaganda.

One might expect a paper called "The Freethinker" to support the cause of freethought, rather than the cause of those who attack the open society, from Galtieri to the Soviet military. There are plenty of vehicles for Left-wing political opinion; but we have only one "Freethinker", and it will not help our common cause to have freethought regularly associated with political extremism and to alienate those freethinkers who do not wish to support Left-wing political aims.

There should also be a warning in the letter from Mr Chapman, who asks whether his disagreement with "The Freethinker" line on capital punishment is consistent with his continued membership of NSS. Political questions must naturally arise in "The Freethinker"; but the movement must not commit itself regularly to the policy of one party and abuse those who favour another.

CARL LOFMARK

QUESTIONS FOR FREETHINKERS

Anyone to the Right of Neil Kinnock is bound to feel uneasy in the freethought movement from time to time, because of its "historical association with radicalism". But how far is the unease justified? Is there a necessary connection between atheism and progressiveism? Of course not. Independent thinking is what brought us into the movement, a conviction that issues of theism and religion must be faced with utter honesty and without kowtowing to this or that powerful creed or group. To imagine that atheism is necessarily connected with any other intellectual posture is an odious betrayal of our integrity.

I suppose this will be granted on all sides. But the real question remains—how far are freethinkers free to express political allegiances? This is a tricky one, because it is equally clear that it is a bad thing if a journal meant to air views on one subject gradually appears to express a quite different consensus. I would say (1) "The Freethinker" might be boring to read if it absolutely never discussed anything but religion; (2) journals are living things and they develop over the years; so who knows, perhaps it will be expressing a Right-wing bias a decade hence; (3) the very appearance of these letters shows that the rot hasn't gone too far; the Editor is actually at his post preserving some kind of balance and not living off brown rice near the Greenham Common perimeter fence.

No, Peter Chapman is not the only member of the National Secular Society in favour of capital punishment (Letters, November 1983). Perhaps there are even more of us lurking in the woodwork. If membership of the NSS outlaws such beliefs, tough luck on the NSS!

Surely orthodoxies are our main enemy. I despise kneejerk conservatism as much as automatic radicalism. An intelligent person weighs up each issue on its merits and ignores the expectations of his peer group, whether of the Right or the Left. So, just for the record, I am in favour of (1) capital punishment; (2) unilateral nuclear disarmament; (3) "The Freethinker"; (4) brown rice.

CHRIS TURNER

RELIGION AND WAR, SECULARISM AND POLITICS

I wish to reply to John L. Hutchinson's and Jim Herrick's letters ("The Freethinker", December 1983).

John L. Hutchinson seems to have misread what I was trying to say in my article, "The Christian God of War". If the Bible is to be believed, the ancient Jews were as much given to wars against their neighbours as their modern counterparts. I doubt if a state of war was, or is, natural. To me, it seems more natural to run away than to engage in a struggle in which one or both of the contestants can be seriously injured or even killed.

I have never thought religion to be the sole cause of war. But any reading of history, ancient and modern, will show that it is a major cause, and that the pursuit of power is very often a pastime of theocrats who exploit human weakness for their own ends. This was the point my article was trying to make.

The notion that socialists have taken over the National Secular Society or that the Socialist Secular Association is a faction trying to take it over is absurd. Amongst those voting for Barbara Smoker at the recent NSS annual general meeting were at least two SSA members. The point at issue was not how Left or Right the NSS should be, but how much power its Council of Management should have.

Yes, the history of secularism has been a history of support for "freedom, reform, ordinary people and internationalism". But there are not a few who, motivated by an intense dislike of socialism or a desire to be seen as non-political at all costs, want to forget this. They restrict secularism to a narrow critique of theology.

In view of this, perhaps it would be for the best if those with strong political views concentrated their efforts on building secularist pressure groups to influence the political party of their choice leaving the individualists and the non-political to do their own thing.

TERRY LIDDLE

SPEAK OUT!

Although a lot of people may be put off joining the secular humanist movement by Barbara Smoker's suggested new slogan, "Atheist Liberation", I welcome it. So many people still seem to be afraid to use the word "atheism" and prefer to call themselves agnostics ("no one can prove that God exists but I can't prove that he doesn't").

The impossibility of proving an honestly held belief should not prevent one from declaring it. So stand up and be counted—even if it does mean that in many areas of life in Britain today one will be regarded as a second-class citizen.

H. A. GURNEY

Further Thoughts on John the Baptist

earlier article followed Massey in equating John with the Egyptian god Anubis, otherwise Anpu or "John"-pu. Chapter 145 in *The Book of the Dead* has, as Massey points out in his *Ancient Egypt*, Anpu baptising the Lord (Horus) who thereupon becomes the "beloved son" of God the Father and goes off into the wilderness for his dispute with Set (Satan) "when victory is given unto him" (cf. Matthew chapters 3 and 4). On reflection I am not altogether happy with this, because Anpu is here but one of ten baptising gods and the other details are widely separated in this rather long chapter. It may or may not be a coincidence that Anpu also appears as a kind of John the Forerunner, one of his titles being Opener or Preparer of the Way.

Those who look to astronomical myth for the key to Christianity hold that the gospel story is an allegorical pantomime of the sun's annual passage through the twelve signs of the Zodiac. This was the view of Charles Dupuis and his follower Robert Taylor. In their system John the Baptist is the constellation Aquarius, the genius of January or "Johnuary" as Taylor puts it. Aquarius with his water pot is an appropriate figure of the Baptist. He pours a steady stream into the mouth of the Southern Fish, by which he becomes Jonah swallowed by the fish, and the fish-god Oannes of the Chaldeans who, like John, came neither eating nor drinking, teaching wisdom to men by day and retiring to his watery wilderness each night. Aquarius is Janus, god of streams and rivers, and the first great god of the Romans. Aquarius appears each January as the Forerunner, preparing the way for the true Light of the World, God the Sun, temporarily defeated by the powers of darkness but who will shortly rise again.

The births of John and Jesus occurred six months apart (Luke 1:36), on dates fixed by the Church as 24 June and 25 December. These are the final days of the summer and winter solstices, giving an astronomical significance to John's saying: "He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Jesus, as the sun, increases daily from 25 December. As Aquarius, John decreases from 24 June, getting gradually lower in the sky until 29 August, when he gets his head cut off by the horizon. 29 August in the Church calendar is the festival of the beheading of John the Baptist. Taylor has an interesting note on this: "John the Baptist is beheaded on 29 August, because at the fourteenth hour and a half of that day the bright Star of Aquarius rises in the calendar of Ptolemy, while the rest of his body is below; and as the direct adversary of Aquarius is Leo, whom I have shown to be none other than King Herod, so King Herod, every 30 August at half after two in the morning, annually repeats the operation of cutting off John Baptist's head" (*The*

EVENTS

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

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Queen's Hotel, Queen's Road (entrance in Junction Road, opposite Brighton Station). Sunday, 5 February, 5 pm for 5.30 pm. Jim Herrick: How Successful has Humanism Been in the 20th Century?

Gay Humanist Group. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Notable Gay Humanists series. Friday, 13 January, 7.30 p.m. John Addington Symonds; speaker: Stephen Coote. Friday, 10 February, 7.30 pm. E. M. Forster; speaker: Maureen Duffy.

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

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, corner of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Harold Wood. Tuesday, 7 February, 8 pm. A talk by the Borough Librarian.

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

Leeds and District Humanist Society. The Swarthmore Institute, Leeds. Tuesday, 14 February, 8 pm. Mary McDade: Human Rights in South America.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 26 January, 7.45 pm. Barbara Smoker: The Politics of Secular Humanism.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday meetings at 11 am. 15 January, Lord Fenner Brockway: 75 Years in Politics. 22 January, Jasper Ridley: Sir Thomas More—Saint or Fanatic? 29 January, Joyce Marlow: Women in British History.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House Annexe, Page Street, Swansea. Friday, 27 January, 7.30 pm. I. J. M. Williams: Morality and Real Life. Tuesday, 10 February, 7.30 pm. Forum on Environmental Planning.

Devil's Pulpit, fourth discourse). Jesus is truly made to say: "My kingdom is not of this world". His kingdom is in the heavens, where the gospel drama is annually played out.

Taylor and Robertson noted that parts of the gospel story read like the script of a play. What might be termed "Passion plays" are known to have been a feature of pre-Christian Mystery religions. There is evidence that Paul, the probable founder of Christianity, made use of such a play, for we read that the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ was "evidently set forth" before the eyes of the Galatians (3:1). And really, when one thinks about it, that was the only way it could have happened on Earth.

Church and State in Education Battle

Senor Jose Maria Maravall, Spain's Minister of Education, has launched a campaign which, if successful, could break the Roman Catholic Church's grip on the country's education system. He has introduced a "right to education" Bill in the Spanish parliament, and opponents accuse him of trying to abolish Church-run education.

More than a third of the primary and secondary schools in Spain are privately owned, mostly by the Church which receives State subsidies of up to a hundred per cent. The Church's control of education was consolidated during the Franco era. The bishops are determined to maintain their privileged position in educating the young in a country where nearly everyone is a nominal Catholic.

Senor Maravall and his supporters want to replace the Education Bill of 1979 which gave the Church considerable financial assistance for education with little supervision by the State. When the Minister of Education addressed a Socialist teachers' congress last month he accused the private sector of being in education for economic gain.

Father Angel Suertes, a noted Right-winger and chairman of the Federation of Primary Education Establishments, claims that the State has a constitutional obligation to finance his organisation. Owners of private schools are worried by Senor

Maravall's proposal that they should be supervised and that school councils, whose members would include parents and staff, set up.

The Spanish bishops, who believe they are backed by the Pope, are digging in. The Church aims to collect ten million signatures to a petition against Senor Maravall's plan.

National Secular Society ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers include
Patricia Hewitt
Christopher Price

Saturday, 24 March, 6.30 pm for 7 pm.

The Pavilions Arms,
Page Street, Westminster, London SE1

Tickets £8 from the NSS, 702 Holloway Road,
London N19 3NL, telephone 01-272 1266

"GOD IS GREAT"

Over 3,000 Islamic zealots assembled outside the Kober Prison in Khartoum last month to witness the first punishment carried out under the Sharia Law now being applied with great strictness in Sudan. Two men, aged 21 and 22, had their right hands amputated after being found guilty of stealing a car. The prison governor read a proclamation that the sentence had passed through all the judicial procedures and had been endorsed by the Court of Appeal.

The two men were led to a specially erected podium and tied to chairs which had been cemented into the ground. Male nurses bound their arms to suppress the flow of blood after amputation had taken place. The prisoners had been given a local anaesthetic and tranquillisers.

Two soldiers of the prison guards, carrying long, sharp knives, then approached the men. Holding the right hands at the palm they cut them off in an operation that lasted about a minute.

The crowd cheered while the amputations were being performed. When the severed hands were held aloft there were cries of *Allah Akbar* ("God is great").

• **President Nimeiri, the Sudanese leader who introduced the decree to enforce Islamic law last September, has been visiting Britain. On the day when these barbarities were being carried out in Khartoum he had a 50-minute meeting with the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street. Asked if Mrs Thatcher had found time to raise the question of human rights in Sudan, the Prime Minister's spokesman replied: "No comment".**

Myth of "Gymslip Mothers"

increasingly it is being acknowledged that good health is a total concept. "You cannot ignore any aspect of the human being if you are working for human well-being.

"For far too long, the reproductive, contraceptive, sexual and emotional health of men and women has been considered a taboo subject, and it is really only in the past decade that true advances in attitudes to one of the most fundamental areas of human health have been made", he declares.

Concern is expressed over the closure and threatened closures of family planning clinics in Oxford, Bath, Kingston and Esher.

The Secretary of State for Social Services has contributed a warmly commendatory foreword to the FPA annual report. Mr Fowler writes: "Nothing could be more important than responsible decision-making in the planning and spacing of families. . .

"The high incidence of marriage and family breakdown and its costs to all concerned in terms of human anxiety and distress are witness to the need for greater understanding and responsibility in this sphere. . .

"I am sure the Association will continue to make a major contribution towards this to be to the benefit of individuals, families and society as a whole".