

# The Freethinker

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## RITUAL SLAUGHTER: "DISTRESS AND PAIN" CONDEMNED BY RSPCA

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has issued a policy statement declaring that the slaughter of food animals without pre-stunning is "not acceptable". This practice is allowed on religious grounds in the United Kingdom, but the RSPCA contends that "the rituals required by some religions could equally well be performed after pre-stunning; this would eliminate all possibility of inflicting pain and terror".

The Slaughter of Animals Act, 1933, now incorporated in the Slaughterhouses Act, 1974, required that all animals should be stunned prior to slaughter. Pre-stunning renders them deeply unconscious.

However, local authorities are compelled by law to allow the Jewish and Muslim methods of slaughter, without the animal being stunned, to be carried out. This involves turning the animal on its back and restraining it with considerable force so that the neck can be fully exposed. This procedure causes the animal a great deal of distress and physical pain.

It is usually claimed that there is instantaneous loss of consciousness once the throat has been cut. The RSPCA says: "There is now abundant scientific evidence to indicate that this is not so. In practice the period is about 40-45 seconds and it can be as long as 90 seconds".

Defenders of ritual slaughter often argue that a minimum amount of pain is involved. The RSPCA comments: "Unfortunately the two most useful behaviour patterns that indicate an animal is suffering pain are not applicable in this form of slaughter. The first, vocalisation, cannot take place because at the time blood vessels are cut so is the trachea, and hence no noise is possible. The second is the 'escape reflex'. Because of the restraint required, any movement of this type is impossible to observe accurately".

ately".

Another argument that is put forward against pre-stunning is based on the theory that an animal that is conscious will bleed better than one which is unconscious. The RSPCA not only argues that the theory is wrong but says there is some evidence to show that stunned animals will bleed out more efficiently.

The RSPCA does not seek to "oppose any Islamic or Jewish religious ritual associated with the slaughter of animals so long as the animal is rendered unconscious by an approved stunning method before the act of slaughter". The distress and pain at present inflicted on animals is unnecessary for religious observance. The RSPCA says it bases this contention on opinions expressed by some Islamic authorities.

If pre-stunning is made compulsory it will not make religious life impossible for Muslims. This claim is supported by the experience of Sweden, Norway and Switzerland where religious slaughter without pre-stunning is not allowed.

The RSPCA accepts criticism of some pre-stunning techniques used in abattoirs. It agrees that there is need for improvement.

• Last month Richard Page, MP (Conservative, Hertfordshire, South-West), unsuccessfully sought leave to introduce a Bill in the House of Commons to amend the Slaughterhouses Act, 1974. He wanted a code of practice in abattoirs under which animals would be "correctly stunned before slaughter". David Alton (Liberal, Liverpool, Mossley Hill), attacked the proposals which, he claimed, "would prevent many Muslim and Jewish people from exercising their religious rights and practices". The killing of fully conscious animals is "carried out by men who have undergone several years of religious training and study".

# The Freethinker

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# NEWS

## JESUS: WHAT EVIDENCE?

In one respect at least, the followers of Jesus are quite predictable. Given the opportunity, they are certain to make asses of themselves. Just over 20 years ago a publishing firm printed 5,000 copies of a theological work for the British market. But the storm of protest that emanated from fundamentalist circles made the late John A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God* an international best-seller. Mary Whitehouse's prosecution of *Gay News* (1977) alienated many of her supporters and alerted non-secularist libertarians to the existence of the common law offence of blasphemy. Many other examples of Christians' self-defeating activities could be cited.

Last month the Channel Four television series, *Jesus: the Evidence*, provoked another outburst of hysterical arrogance from the faithful. A book could—and probably will—be written on reaction to the programme.

Simon Coombs, MP (Conservative, Swindon), wrote on behalf of a group of MPs and Peers urging that screening of the programme be delayed for six months. The reason given was that showing it during Lent, Holy Week and Easter would cause "grave offence" to Christians. No doubt people of Mr Coombs' outlook would find the programme just as offensive in October as in April. But the six months' breathing space would have given the Christian censors time to mount a campaign for its total suppression.

Anglican Sir Norman Anderson, a former chairman of the General Synod's House of Laity, said that the programme was "both one-sided and, frankly, biased". Steve Goddard, editor of the evangelical magazine, *Buzz*, accused the producers of being "hell-bent on knocking Christianity".

Both these points were answered by the National Secular Society in a Press release welcoming the screening of the programme. The NSS described the accusation that the programme was unbalanced as "preposterous, in view of the fact that all other broadcasts on religious subjects, from every TV channel and every radio station, are actually paid to be biased.

"The BBC alone pays out £7 million of the license fee to its Religious Affairs Department. The religious broadcasting departments, under the scrutiny of the Central Religious Advisory Council, all have special budgets and time slots for religious propaganda. There is, of course, no specific budget allocated or time provided for the alternative viewpoints of agnostics and atheists".

Ian Wilson, the Bristol University historian and author of the book that accompanied the series, also



# S AND NOTES

complained about a lack of balance. It was Dr Wilson who wrote a book on the Shroud of Turin and was so impressed by the evidence for the relic that he abandoned agnosticism for Roman Catholicism. He still adheres to his faith in the Church but not in the authenticity of the Shroud. Fr John Wijngaards, writing in the Catholic weekly *Universe*, gave short shrift to both the programme and the book: "The TV series is abominable; the book is not much better".

Jean Claud Bragard, researcher on the programme, was born in Uruguay and brought up as a Catholic. He is now an atheist. "The researcher ought to be shot", was Fr Nicholas Murphy's comment in his diocesan magazine.

Christians may yet discover their profound mistake in relying so heavily on the New Testament Jesus. It is plain nonsense to claim, as one commentator did, that G. A. Wells is the only man in England who believes that Jesus never existed. Other scholars have come to the same conclusion and future research may reveal that Jesus, like so many wonder-working saints, cannot be seriously regarded as an historical figure.

Those who do not wish to become embroiled in the historicist-mythicist debate have nevertheless good reason to question the extravagant claims that Christians make about the uniqueness and perfection of Jesus. His personality, if the Gospels are to be believed, is not particularly attractive. Fanatical, intolerant, vindictive and superstitious, it is hardly surprising that he has appealed to moral majorities over the centuries.

The agitation of Christians increases as one biblical myth after another is deposited in the dustbin of history. Tall tales like the creation story, the virgin birth and assorted miracles are increasingly being rejected by nominal Christians and regarded as an embarrassment by the shrewder ones. This is one reason why fundamentalists, Roman Catholic and Protestant, are ultra-sensitive to any questioning of the traditional view of Jesus the moral teacher, saviour and son of God. They have little else left to cling to.

So the hoo-ha over *Jesus: the Evidence* was not surprising. Any suggestion that Jesus was not divine, but just one of many itinerant preachers and teachers, makes Christians behave like an impoverished dowager duchess on hearing from Sothebys that the family Rembrandt is a Tom Keating.

• "The Historical Evidence for Jesus", by G. A. Wells, price £8 plus 95p postage. G. W. Foote & Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19.

## SERVING THE CHILDREN

During a recent *In Perspective* homily on Radio Four, Rosemary Harthill, the BBC's Religious Affairs Correspondent, declared: "Right from the days of the founding of the earliest church schools, in the Middle Ages, they were set up for two reasons — first to serve the children of the nation, and second to provide a Christian education". This is a good example of how listeners and viewers are subjected to misleading Christian propaganda.

The last thing the Church ever had in mind was to "serve the children of the nation" by educating them. Inspired by biblical exaltations of ignorance, early Christians were, at best, suspicious of learning. Where they achieved a position of dominance, the independent schools and libraries were usually closed down and their contents destroyed.

In the monasteries those monks who were literate devoted their energies to copying sacred texts and serving a Church hierarchy that played an even more active role in affairs of State than at present.

Later, it was only children from politically and religiously "safe" families who had any chance of being selected for the grammar schools. Teachers and tutors were likewise screened. Under the 1662 Act of Uniformity, teachers had to affirm that they would "conform to the liturgy of the Church of England" and would not "endeavour any change or alteration of government either in Church or State".

In the early years of the 19th century it was the bishops who balked every attempt to establish a system of popular mass education. When they realised that it would be set up despite their opposition and delaying tactics, the National Society was founded. Its aim was "promoting the education of the poor"—not in grammar, mathematics, history or science, but "in the principles of the Established Church". Dedicated teachers who genuinely sought to serve the children of the nation were treated as lackeys by their clerical overseers.

Under the 1944 Education Act teachers are not just expected, but legally compelled, to act as part-time missionaries to captive audiences in the classroom. Fortunately, many of them manage to by-pass the Act's requirements, thus avoiding the indignity of being hypocrites. But Christian zealots in the House of Commons — where only a tiny minority of members attend prayers — are constantly calling for more religious indoctrination of schoolchildren.

Two of them recently urged Robert Dunn, Under-Secretary of State, to ensure a stricter adherence to the religious provisions of the 1944 Act and to recruit more "religious education specialists" — a popular Christian euphemism for religious indoctrinators. Peter Bruinvels (Conservative, Leicester East), asked Mr Dunn if he will give more "encouragement and emphasis to the need for local education authori-



ties and schools to give religious instruction very definitely and accurately". Harry Greenway (Conservative, Ealing North), thought it is a scandal "that we are short of at least 1,000 teachers of religious education and that 60 per cent of the children in our schools are not taught by RE specialists".

Mr Dunn was reassuring. He told the House: "The allocation for initial teacher training in 1983-85 was intended to secure an adequate supply of teachers of religious education within the total number of teachers being trained.

"That involved an increase in the proportion of entry places devoted to religious education".

Provision for religious "education" is given priority treatment at a time when schools are seriously understaffed, expenditure on books and equipment is being slashed and the school meals system discontinued. So the Christian tradition of serving the nation's children is being maintained in the House of Commons and promoted by the BBC.

• The National Secular Society has just published a leaflet entitled "Say 'No' to Denominational Schools". It criticises the proposal in a recent Church of England report that Church schools should be handed over to Muslim and Sikhs for a limited period. Rather than increasing segregation of children, the NSS proposes that subsidies to all denominational schools be abolished. The leaflet is particularly suitable for distribution at meetings of teachers and others involved in education. Free supplies are obtainable from the NSS, 702 Holloway Road, London N19, telephone 01-272 1266.

## A NASTY LOT

When the Exclusive Brethren discovered that one of their members stole nearly £14,000 they imposed their own form of punishment on him. The story of how Stewart Cockburn, a 40-year-old book-keeper, was expelled from the sect and separated from his family emerged during the trial at Warrington Crown Court last month.

Cockburn was employed by an electronics firm whose senior partner, also a sect member, had helped him get the job. His wife, Andrea, a sect member since childhood, said: "Stewart stole the money because we were living beyond our means, doing a lot of entertaining for members of the sect. When they found out, he was sacked and told he would be 'withdrawn'. We were very upset and distressed, but we decided to go along with it in the hope we could pay back the money and things would be all right again".

Mr Andrew Moran, defending, told the court that the sect preferred to deal with such matters on an internal basis rather than inform the police. Cockburn was ordered to leave his wife and children and

live alone. After six months his wife found the strain unbearable and asked him to come home.

On his return he discovered that his mother had died while he was an outcast. He apologised for what he had done and promised to pay the money back. The Exclusive Brethren responded by expelling his wife and informing the police.

Mrs Cockburn said: "I could not believe it when the police were told. It was as if we were being punished all over again".

She is glad to be out of the Exclusive Brethren which does not allow its members to have friends outside the sect.

Cockburn was sentenced to two years' imprisonment, with 18 months suspended. It was stated in court that the punishment he received at the hands of the Exclusive Brethren was worse than being in prison.

## GULLS' EGG

Last month the *Sun* newspaper published a report on the miracle of "the Easter egg that wept", an occurrence so sensational that it shared the front page with a court case headed *Sexy Spies Probe*. It happened in a Doncaster, Yorkshire, school where pupils entered a competition for decorated Easter eggs. Naomi Drury, 11, brought along one on which the face of Christ had been pencilled. A miniature crown of thorns provided an authentic touch.

When the egg was put on display with 160 others it started to "weep" minute tears from the right eye. The teachers were "amazed", the school was "stunned" and a member of the Archbishop of York's staff pronounced it "a most strange phenomenon". Mr Trevor Whitehead, the teacher who first noticed the egg's symptoms of distress, described it as "a most unnerving experience".

A spokesman for the Eggs Authority was not put off his stride by the tearful egg. He explained: "When eggs are boiled an air space occurs between the membrane which contains the yolk and white and the shell. This can fill with water. Eggshells are porous and it is possible that the water could seep through a pore and form a tiny droplet".

However, Naomi was not going to be deprived of her miracle by the silly old Eggs Authority. "I think it was a miracle", she protested. "No matter what anyone says, that is my belief".

Her friend, Ann Schutterlin, 26, who actually decorated the egg, was even more forthright. "I prayed someone would see Jesus through the egg", she said. "I had drawn it with a message of Easter in mind. What has happened is divine intervention".

It is worth mentioning that both Naomi and Ann are Salvationists. But we will resist the temptation to remark that sometimes it is not only eggs that are cracked in Doncaster.



# Victoria Gillick: Our Lady of the Prolific Womb

DEIRDRE FARNFIELD

Victoria Gillick's challenge to a DHSS leaflet advising doctors that they may give contraceptive advice to girls under 16 without their parents' consent has made her a heroine of the Compulsory Pregnancy Lobby. During the High Court case against the Department which she brought last year, Mrs Gillick commented: "The knowledge that Mass was being celebrated for the success of the hearing gave me great strength". However, this typical Catholic wife and mother from Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, is no stranger to controversy—and some of her present allies may be decidedly lukewarm about the campaign she conducted a decade ago on another issue.

upholding more than just Victorian sexual values in trying to keep the British Empire white. In August of that year, she published a letter in the *Eastern Daily Press* under the heading, "Problem of Ugandan Asians". She wrote of her utter depression and frustration at the proposal of the Government "to bring yet more coloured aliens for settlement into Great Britain".

"It is so immoral and unjust to crowd our once beautiful cities with peoples whose culture and pattern of life is different from our own. It is so wrong to tell us . . . that we must not have any more of the children we want because Parliament is allowing more immigrants in instead. . . These immigrants must be repatriated".

Not content with penning such gems, Victoria offered her and her husband's aid to Powelllight, an extreme Right-wing group at that time campaigning against immigration. The Gillicks arranged the printing of cards and car stickers—some of which she herself displayed. She alternately denies such an involvement, or claims amnesia. It's funny how demands for high moral standards do not seem to extend to an insistence on not telling lies.

Roman Catholics themselves could be termed aliens, although not coloured ones, in our nominally Protestant but actually secular Great Britain, since they at present only form ten per cent of the population. It makes me wonder whether Victoriana's whole campaign is actually a cunning plot to outbreed the Black Horde.

The British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing support the *status quo* on the grounds that the present law and the guidelines issued by the DHSS, far from encouraging promiscuity or a split between parent and child, merely allow a doctor to respond as she or he sees fit to each individual patient. In some cases, contraception will be the lesser of two evils, the alternative not being chastity but unwanted pregnancy. Even the parents Mrs G claims to represent agree; *Woman's Own* and *Woman* magazines asked for their readers' opinions on contraception for sexually active teenagers and received a majority vote in favour of safety rather than pregnancy.

Victoria the Good also claims that her cause is sanctified by the Church and Mrs Thatcher—somewhat hopeful and premature claims. Although the Vatican is still insisting that pre-marital sex, masturbation and homosexuality are "grave moral disorders", the Church of England has just published a booklet giving advice about marriage in which pre-marital sex is accepted as a fact of life. And

Bigotry and dogma lead to very strange bedfellows. We all know about the stalwart Victoria Gillick—aptly named for one with the battle-cry, "Back to the good old days". Our Lady of the Prolific Womb (ten children at the last count) is at present valiantly waging a one-woman campaign on the behalf of loving and responsible parents everywhere, to prevent the wicked mandarins of the DHSS forcing doctors to roam the streets at night cramming oral contraceptives down the unwilling throats of every pubescent girl they find. Ms — whoops, MRS Gillick insists that her religion — she just happens to be Roman Catholic — is irrelevant. And so it may be. Fundamentalism, however, is not.

John Golding, Labour MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme, in presenting a petition he had received from some of his constituents supporting this good lady's cause, pointed out that not only was it signed by the area chairman of the Catholic Women's League, but was identical in wording to all the other "spontaneous" petitions flooding into the Home Office. The parliamentary correspondent of *The Lancet* drew attention last November to the work of the Knights of Saint Columbia and the Catholic Mothers Union in hawking petitions around the streets. It is hardly difficult to get signatures if you ask parents to agree that the family is "the natural and fundamental group unit of society", prime your local priest and wait outside the church on a Sunday.

In addition to Christian values, Mrs Gillick is now leading a parade which includes Muslims and Afro-Asians. The Union of Muslim Organisations of the United Kingdom and the Afro-Asian Caribbean Standing Committee have both pledged their support. The cream of the joke is that if Mrs Gillick had had her way, all these coloured foreigners would have been sent home on a returning banana boat 12 years ago! Because, back in 1972, Victoria was

Cardinal Hume, whom she claims wrote a supportive letter, in fact said: "The particular issue that you have brought before the Court, has, however, as many have recognised, wider implications for the role of law, medical practice and social welfare in a pluralistic society".

Claims that Mrs Thatcher plans to order a withdrawal of the circular have been dismissed as "rubbish" by 10 Downing Street and DHSS officials. It is hardly conceivable that a British Prime Minister would not claim, as Mrs Thatcher has done in a letter to Mrs Gillick, that "the Government itself endorses fully the wish to uphold and strengthen the family and parental responsibility and has every sympathy with the feelings which lie behind the points which have been made". Sympathising with feelings, however, is a far cry from agreeing with actions.

Any intelligent person with commonsense and access to statistics on teenage pregnancy knows that laws such as Our Lady would like to have passed

will not strengthen any loving bonds. What such a law would do, of course, is create more little souls for the (White) Kingdom of Heaven. Ann Lovett, a 15-year-old convent schoolgirl, just recently demonstrated the inevitable results of an authoritarian approach to the young and their sexuality. Ann was not a victim of the BMA, the Royal College of Nursing, the Family Planning Association or Brook Advisory Centres. Ann did not have the Pill forced on her. Ann was not seduced from the loving care of her parents by wicked birth controllers. Ann instead had sex without the protection of contraception, and when the inevitable happened she hid her pregnancy, crept away during labour and gave birth to a baby boy in her local graveyard. Both died—two more for Jesus.

Mrs Gillick seems to be well on the way to populating the beautiful and fruitful Cambridgeshire town of Wisbech. Or is she just trying for her own private soccer team? Heaven forbid that she should take up rugby.

## Humanist "Service" For Legal Fraternity

The opening of Melbourne's 1984 legal year was somewhat different to the usual pattern. The ceremony usually involves judges dressing up in bright red drag, barristers donning wigs and gowns, court staff their uniforms and solicitors their best suits. Then they troop off to listen to sermons on the relevance of law to religion. No one seems to notice — or mention — the contrast between the logic of law and the superstition of religion.

At a Jewish service the rabbi spoke of the divine origin of law. The Roman Catholic archbishop claimed there was a tacit assumption about a power in the affairs of men beyond the "merely human".

At the Greek Orthodox service the archbishop said they were thanking God for the valuable services received from the legal profession.

But there was a welcome innovation in this year's proceedings. For the first time, the non-religious among the legal fraternity had their own "service"—a luncheon organised by the Victorian Rationalists and Humanists. Mark Plummer, national president of the Australian Humanists, and himself a solicitor, spoke at the godless function. He told the gathering of barristers, solicitors, lecturers, clerks and legal aid workers that the official legal year organisers presumed all practitioners were religious.

"This is a presumption that permeates the law", he said. "Every time a person enters the witness box the court presumes he will be swearing on the bible. If a witness elects to make an affirmation it will cause raised eyebrows or even interrogation as to his or her beliefs. This occurs in a country where at least ten per cent but more likely 25 per cent of the population have no religious beliefs. An observer in court would assume that 99 per cent of our police force are Christian by the number of them who eagerly clutch the bible to give their evidence".

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Special arrangements were made at the Vatican last month when the Pope received Pramukh Swami, an Indian spiritual leader who has not seen a woman for 46 years. All women, including nuns, were kept out of sight in case he inadvertently laid eyes on one.



# Racism and the Polarisation of Israeli Society

ADAM KELLER

The forces of racism and religious fanaticism are rampant in Israel. But increasingly the danger signs are being recognised. Adam Keller reports from Tel-Aviv.

Recent months have seen an alarming spread of the incidents of racism in Israel. In Upper Nazareth, a racist organisation is active under the slogan "Don't sell your flat to an Arab!", using violence in its efforts to expel Arabs from the towns. In Jaffa, some Jewish residents opposed the sale of flats to Arabs and were backed publicly by a rabbi, Ephraim Zalmanovich, who claimed that segregation is ordained by Jewish religious law. At Ya'ara, a Galilee settlement where Bedouins have been living side-by-side with Jews for over 30 years, some Jews suddenly claimed that "they have too many children and are becoming too numerous—something must be done about them". A Jewish underground group calling itself TNT planted grenades in a West Bank Arab village and in Muslim and Christian institutions in Jerusalem. The Muslim cemetery of Jaffa was desecrated and when a boy from Haifa was murdered and sexually mutilated, the Right-wing press and some senior police officers were quick to accuse the Arabs on no more evidence than that of the body found near an Arab village.

Nor are Arabs the only victims of racism: in the western part of the town of Safad a "Neighbourhood committee" was organised to oppose the entry of black-skinned Ethiopian Jews because of their "primitive culture" and "primitive mentality". The authorities continue to pester the "Black Hebrews", a harmless religious sect whose members — unlike most American Jews—care enough about Israel to want to come and live here. And in a fashionable Tel Aviv bar, the attendants have been instructed not to admit anyone of Oriental appearance.

Of course racism is not a new phenomenon in Israel; the Upper Nazareth racists were telling the truth in claiming that Ben-Gurion's Government, which founded the town in 1956, intended it to be purely Jewish. Nevertheless, there is a big difference: in the last few years, racism is coming more and more into the open and the racists are no longer trying to hide the true import of their actions.

In part, this can be attributed to the economic crisis; all over the world racism is some people's response to deteriorating economic conditions. But this is not the whole answer. The spread of open, unashamed racism is part of the process of polarisation which Israeli society is undergoing.

For many years, the citizens of Israel have been taught, and most of them sincerely believed, that Israel seeks peace with its Arab neighbours, and that if peace doesn't come, it is only because the Arab side doesn't want it. As a result, occupation in the West Bank or discrimination against the Arab citizens of Israel were regarded as a regrettable necessity "for security reasons", a temporary phenomenon that will disappear when the desired peace is at last achieved.

## Time for Decision

This kind of thinking is no longer possible. The citizens of Israel realise that their country is standing at the crossroads, and must make its decision. Some people, faced with a clear-cut choice, opt for abandoning all hope or desire for peace, and for either creating a South African-type apartheid state, deporting all the Arabs to create a "pure Jewish state", or a combination of the two (for example, deporting all the Arab leadership and intelligentsia and retaining the broken remnant as a cheap work-force).

In a way, these outright racists serve a useful purpose: the television appearances of Alexander Finkestein and other Upper Nazareth racists have horrified many Israelis belonging to the political centre who for the first time realised the true depth of the abyss into which racism can plunge them. This was reflected in wide public support for the new "Committee Against Racism and For Coexistence", even from conservative organisations who usually stay far from radical politics.

In the long run, the racists can't win. In the second half of the 20th century a society such as they envisage cannot endure. Before they are defeated, however, they can cause a lot of suffering, to Arabs and Jews alike. Fighting them is one of the most important tasks of the Israeli peace movement.

• The Israeli Supreme Court has ruled that a corpse should be re-interred in the Jewish cemetery of Rishon Lezion. Orthodox extremists exhumed the body of Mrs Theresa Angelovitch, who died more than a year ago, because they claimed she was a Christian. The body, wrapped in a plastic bag, was found by children. The family of Mrs Angelovitch, who emigrated from Romania, maintain that she lived and died a Jewess, and is entitled to be buried in the cemetery. Orthodox parties refused to support a motion in the Knesset calling for the reburial of Mrs Angelovitch in her grave.

# Church and State: the Modern Churchman's Dilemma

T. F. EVANS

Those who argue that Church leaders should keep out of politics are faced with the dilemma arising from Church-State relations. The Church will not willingly abandon the privileges arising from Establishment. But the bishops' role in the House of Lords would become more decorative than effective if they refrained from speaking on political and social questions. T. F. Evans considers some of the issues raised in Dr Edward Norman's recent Suntory-Toyota lecture at the London School of Economics.

Gerald Priestland, formerly the BBC Religious Affairs correspondent, is a journalist whose writings may be read with both pleasure and enlightenment, even by those who would not normally consider themselves particularly interested in "religious affairs". In a recent issue of *The Listener*, he reviewed a book by Edward Norman and said that Norman's "ecclesiastical journalism is stimulating but tendentious". As it happened, the appearance of this article almost coincided with the publication in *The Times* of an extract from a lecture given by Edward Norman. The title which *The Times* gave to the extract, prominently printed on the page facing the leading articles, was only a little less striking than the illustration which accompanied it. The title, *Four Wrong Roads to God*, was immediately above a caricature of a bishop, almost certainly meant to be the present Archbishop of Canterbury. Archbishop Runcie, if indeed it is he, is shown as bearing in his right hand a crook of sorts, the lower part of which becomes a black, neatly-rolled umbrella while he carries a brief-case in his left hand. The description of the article at the head of the page is "Edward Norman on the state's bequest to the modern church: democracy, collectivism, secularism — and bureaucracy".

Dr Norman is Dean of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and is well-known as a scholar and writer on Church history and such problems as the relations of Church and State and Christianity in the modern world. It is also believed that he is an adviser to the present British Government, though on exactly what subject or subjects it is not known. His name is often mentioned, however, in reference to a small "think-tank" of academics and others, to whose views the Prime Minister is thought to give special attention. To say this is not, of course, to suggest that Norman is expressing anyone's views but his own in the lecture, but it gives the impression that the things that he says may not be far away from

the kinds of thought that may be found in other influential minds in the country at the present time. It is well worth while, therefore, to look at what appears in the article.

The first contention, in the opening paragraph—and it is made with no supporting examples or argument—is that "Christianity has always taught that the State is a divine institution"; and this is followed by the charge that the leaders of the Church in England today "are sceptical, to say the least, about identifying the modern British State as a divine institution". A complaint then follows to the effect that the "leaders" have such a strong desire to be seen as critics of the existing economic order that the Church "does not any longer regard itself as the spiritual dimension of the State as the organised basis of the State's moral sense". The main body of the extract then goes on to discuss the shortcomings of the modern church under the headings given in the note at the head of the page.

First, "modern churchmen" see themselves as challenging the State on some of its policies as well as involving themselves in various activities of a more international kind. These tendencies which Edward Norman treats as part of "the democratic process", and he does not seem to use the word "democracy" as meaning something which is essentially commendable, shade into a condemnation of the increasing bureaucracy of the establishment of the Church of England. Without a closer knowledge of the internal workings of the government of the Church, a commentator is no doubt treading on dangerous ground if he takes issue with such a charge. Nevertheless, there are some things that can be said.

It is an old criticism of the workings of the British system of government that true power has passed from the elected members to the executive and even further to the permanent officials in the Civil Service, thus giving rise to the charge of bureaucracy levelled against the secular working of the state machine. Norman's views on the Church seem to be on similar lines. He declares: "In the synods it is the influence of the episcopate which has most suffered—effective powers of decision now usually going not to the assembled laity or the lower clergy, but to the new bureaucracy attached to the permanent offices of the General Synod". Here again, it could well be that the deeper implications of Edward Norman's comments may only be understood by those who are well informed on the way in which the synods of the Church work and decisions are reached. Still, the extract from the lecture appears in the pages



of a daily newspaper and anyone is free to read it.

The first comment that comes to mind is that the lecturer has little faith in the bishops themselves who have allowed these things to happen. Secondly, if there is any really violent concerted feeling of protest among the clergy and the laity of the Church about the doings of the apparently all-powerful bureaucracy, that feeling must be strictly defined to very quiet Church circles themselves because it does not reach the ears of the general public.

A deficiency which Dr Norman lays at the door of the Church is "an adhesion to the doctrine of collectivism". This is explained as the expression of moral concern in collective terms, or the equating of religion with communal action for social justice and social compassion. The Church and contemporary Christianity are becoming "politicised" and "the churches have been undergoing a process of internal secularisation". Norman has no doubt that this is the outcome of a "desire to adjust to contemporary society". The Church has steadily lost influence in the direction in which, he says, it ought to be exercising influence. Consequently "the bishops do not act in the Lords as spokesmen for the Church and the Christian morality". The end result of all these tendencies, which the lecturer finds so disturbing, is for "the churches to act more as moral agencies and propagandists for social reform than as the authentic vehicles of spiritual mysteries". The extract from the lecture ends with the declaration that "people expect religion to do something for them". They want it "to give meaning to their lives". What is lacking, in Edward Norman's concluding words, is "transcendence (*sic*) for its own sake, as a necessary feature of existence, and an impression of the awful majesty of God".

The many direct quotations from the text of the lecture, as given in *The Times*, are printed out of an anxiety not to misrepresent Edward Norman in any way. However, unless the purport of his remarks has been seriously misunderstood, what he has said is not likely to give rise to a great deal of enthusiastic support either from active members of the Church of England, or of other denominations, or of those who, for whatever reason, take an interest in the kinds of problems with which he is concerned, even if they are not adherents of any particular religious group. One of the great difficulties is that he is trying to have it both ways. (This is quite a common failing, so to say this is not a charge of moral turpitude; it does however considerably weaken the force of his argument.) Thus, to take one example: if the recent activities of Church "leaders" (these guilty men are never specified, by the way) take them so much into the world of political and social policies and if the bishops (all of them?) "have characterised the present political leaders as exponents of individualism and critics of collect-

ivism", it is not exactly clear what the bishops would have to do in the House of Lords to be saved in Edward Norman's eyes.

It would be extremely difficult for bishops in the House of Lords to speak "as spokesmen for the Church and Christian morality" without treading on Norman's forbidden ground of social and political problems. The contribution that the bishops could make to the debates in the House of Lords on the subject of "transcendence" would be very limited. In any event, the House of Lords is part of the legislative and government machinery. That machinery is concerned with social and political problems. If Edward Norman accepts that bishops should be there, it is a contradiction to say that they should not express views on the greater part of the business of the House. Very probably, of course, he does not mean this at all.

It was probably a coincidence that around the time that Edward Norman was preparing and delivering his lecture, a Member of the present Government, John Butcher, MP, Under-Secretary for Trade and Industry, made a demand that churchmen should keep out of politics and concentrate on spiritual matters. Other voices are raised in this particular refrain from time to time. Lord Hailsham, the most party politically-minded Lord Chancellor of modern times, is always ready to lecture his fellow-peers as well as anyone else on their duty as Christians but, in almost the same breath, to declare that there is a very clear dividing line between what is the province of the State—that is, the government and those somewhat remote and unpractical matters of "spiritual mysteries" with which the churchman or woman may rightly be concerned.

Unfortunately, the dividing line cannot be so clearly drawn. The pages of *The Times* are a rich hunting ground for those who wish to read homilies on how the truly religious people should keep away from political matters, leaving them, it is clearly implied, to those whose proper province they are. (This ignores the fact that those who advocate this view are almost all to be found on the extremist wing of one particular political party.) Such an attitude is adopted by another writer in *The Times*, Clifford Longley, who tells his readers that social problems, like that of the young mother deserted by her husband and having to go out to work to maintain herself and her child, but unable to leave the baby, cannot be helped by "secular political remedies". Social workers, he says, are "part of the problem not part of the solution". There is the usual swipe at bureaucracy (unaccompanied this time by the usual proviso that we cannot afford to waste public money and must see that welfare benefits go to the right people only — measures that

(continued on page 76)



# BOOKS

**MY LAST BREATH**, by Luis Bunuel. Translated by Abigail Israel. Jonathan Cape, £8.95

My heart warms to a man who can sit through the "Star-Spangled Banner" and the "Marseillaise" with his feet on the table and then reply to someone who tells him that his behaviour is unconscionable that "nothing is more unconscionable than national anthems". I have never stood for a National Anthem since my teens, being like Bunuel a respecter of neither God nor any monarch supposed to be protected; but I have immense respect for Bunuel's extraordinary skill and imagination as a film-maker. His many films have shocked churchmen for their anti-clerical tone, outraged governments because of their focus on poverty and injustice, and will always delight cinema-goers for their compulsive story-telling and convincing surrealism.

Bunuel's autobiography is compelling, too. It may disappoint those seeking a detailed account of his life—but someone who claims the best memorial is oblivion will hardly care about providing information for the future. Originating from conversations with a friend, this memoir has the rambling, humorous charm of the speaking voice.

Bunuel was born in Spain at the beginning of the century. Spain was still in the Middle Ages and he was taught by the Jesuits and educated by his own reading of Spencer, Rousseau, Marx and Darwin, which resulted in a loss of faith "at the same time that I lost my virginity, which went in a brothel in Saragossa". At university in Madrid he and his student friends embarked upon bizarre adventures and japes. His first "experience of American innocence" came when he guided a party of tourists round an art gallery and told them that one painting was superb because it contained a hundred and fifty characters and "as everyone knows . . . the value of a painting depends to a certain extent on the number of people in it".

He went to Paris, became involved with the surrealist movement and, almost by accident, made his first film, *Un Chien Andalou*, which was a *succès de scandale*. His account of his life follows his experiences during the Spanish Civil War, in Hollywood and New York, and in Mexico after the Second World War, where he finally gained the opportunity to make many films. Not until maturity did he create the masterpieces *Nazarin*, *Viridiana*, and that extraordinary tryptich, as rich as late Beethoven quartets, *The Milky Way*, *The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoise* and *The Phantom of Liberty*.

*The Milky Way* is one of my favourites. Two pilgrims on the way to Santiago da Compostella encounter representatives of all the major Christian

# FREETHINKER

heresies: who else could combine scrupulously exact theology with humour on the screen? Incidentally, he shows how Christianity has never been a fixed body of ideas, but has constantly had to redefine itself. And, as he points out, "the film is above all a journey through fanaticism, where each person obstinately clings to his own particle of truth, ready if need be to kill or die for it".

A chapter wryly entitled "Still an Atheist . . . Thank God!" sets out his beliefs. "What am I to God? Nothing, a murky shadow. My passage on this earth is too rapid to leave any traces; it counts for nothing in space or in time. God really doesn't pay any attention to us, so even if he exists, it's as if he didn't. My form of atheism, however, leads inevitably to an acceptance of the inexplicable. Mystery is inseparable from chance, and our whole universe is a mystery. Since I reject the idea of a divine watchmaker (a notion even more mysterious than the mystery it supposedly explains), then I must consent to live in a kind of shadowy confusion. And insofar as no explication, even the simplest, works for everyone, I've chosen my mystery". He adds: "Fortunately, somewhere between chance and mystery lies imagination, the only thing that protects our freedom, despite the fact that people keep trying to reduce it or kill it off altogether".

He finds a book on insect life, Fabre's *Souvenirs entomologiques*, "infinitely preferable to the Bible when it comes to a passion for observation and a boundless love of living things". A passage from the Apocryphal Book of Wisdom (II i-ix) is quoted as an exciting alternative to religion:

"Let us crown ourselves with roses, before they be withered: let no meadow escape our riot.

"Let none of us go without his part in luxury: let us everywhere have tokens of joy: for this is our portion and this is our lot".

Enjoying a return to Spain in the 1960s he saw a sign on the door of a Carmelite convent: "Traveller, if your conscience is troubling you knock and we shall open. No women". Life imitates surrealism (and the *Guardian's* "Naked Ape" column).

For all his hatred of medieval clericalism with which he grew up, he does not much care for the modern world, especially detesting science and technology. He is "a fanatical anti-fanatic" committed to an acceptance of that part of us which is contradictory, irrational, imaginative. He loves life, but only while it can be enjoyed. Aware of his own frailty, he regrets that "In the name of Hippocrates, doctors have invented the most exquisite form of torture ever known to man: survival". He contemplates a last joke: "I convoke around my deathbed



# REVIEWS

my friends who are confirmed atheists, as I am. Then a priest, whom I have summoned, arrives; and to the horror of my friends I make my confession, ask for absolution for my sins, and receive extreme unction. After which I turn over on my side and expire". Happily, before expiry he left us his films and the inimitable self-portrait of *My Last Breath*.

JIM HERRICK

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**ABUSING SCIENCE: THE CASE AGAINST CREATIONISM**, by Philip Kitcher. MIT Press, \$15

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I become increasingly convinced that a positive evil aspect (in the sense of a disservice to humanity) of religious belief is that it fosters a credulous irrationalism which sometimes amounts to anti-rationalism and frequently justifies mental dishonesty and double standards of morality (one yardstick for the initiate, another for the outer multitude) on the specious principle that the end justifies the means.

Scientific thought, on which our Western civilisation is still somewhat precariously based, relies upon rational thinking verified by systematically tested observation; although the wise scientist acknowledges that science does not have, and probably never will have, all the answers to the mysteries of the universe. Scientists are, in fact, much more humble than the religiously certain persons who "know" all about God and how He created the Universe either intuitively or (if they are biblical fundamentalists) because He wrote it in a book.

For the esoterically inclined, no farrago of nonsense is too fantastic to be believed: even secularists are not always immune, as the sudden conversion of Annie Besant to the mind-boggling inanities of Theosophy bears witness.

Faced with over a century of Darwinian biology and neo-Darwinian geology, the vociferous "born-again" Christians who—especially in "God's Own Country", it seems—abhor the notion that human beings might be related to apes instead of being the spitting image of the Almighty Creator (if male, that is) are straining every nerve to foist what they call "Creationist science" onto the American school curriculum as being entitled to equal treatment with the Darwinian hypothesis.

Professor Kitcher's book provides a comprehensive and scathing demolition of their ideological raggabag which has the added merit of giving a clear account of scientific method and of evolutionary theory that is fully comprehensible to lay readers. This blurb—much too optimistically—says, "it will astonish many readers that this case must still be

made in the 1980s". It doesn't astonish me. In fact, the strain of paranoid fantasy which fuels the Creationists' claim that "evolution is the root of atheism, of communism, nazism, behaviorism, racism, economic imperialism, militarism, libertinism, anarchism, and all manner of anti-Christian systems of belief and practice" is all too wearisomely familiar.

The Creationists are fertile publicists, prolifically producing such tracts as *The Fossils Say "No!"* to the great brain robbery which these obsessional bigots are endeavouring to perpetrate. Already, two states in the Deep South Bible Belt—Arkansas and Louisiana—have passed "balanced treatment" laws, requiring "Creation science" to be given equal time with evolutionary theory in high schools. Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell's immensely popular television spectacular "Old Time Gospel Hour" peddles the propaganda of the Institute for Creation Research and claims that in the name of free speech it is only "fair" that Creationist nonsense should be given equal status in schools throughout America with scientific sense. Kitcher fears that even if the Creationists continue to lose in the courts, they may still succeed in wreaking havoc upon science education and ultimately upon the standards and practice of professional science, with potentially disastrous results for society.

Is such a lopsided exploitation of tolerance true tolerance? Ideas, like people, must earn respect; and the pedigree of Darwinism is much more firmly grounded in contemporary scientific method than the claims of Creationist "science", which is more akin to medieval astrology and alchemy, or to pre-Copernican flat-earth astronomy, than to present-day scholarship. Genuine intellectual tolerance is rooted in a desire to discover the truth: it recognises the possibility that previously accepted doctrines may be mistaken and welcomes the discussion of alternatives. Yet respect for truth does not require us to take every crackpot idea seriously just because it is widely believed or assiduously promoted.

That, of course, is the rationalist, scientific approach. Creationists, on the other hand, don't want a careful, systematic scrutiny of their hodge-podge of beliefs; in the last resort they demand uncritical assent on religious grounds. It's clear from Kitcher's thorough demolition of their pretentious edifice that people who live in Creationist glasshouses shouldn't throw methodological stones and that Creationism should be used in education, if at all, only as an egregious example of fallacious, pseudoscientific rationalising. But it's equally clear from his account of their indefatigable ingenuity that strenuous efforts are going to be required, not only in America but also on this side of the Atlantic, to get across to the scientifically illiterate and too-credulous public that Creationism is intellectual garbage.

ANTONY GREY



Many years ago I reviewed in *The Freethinker* a novel, *The Alabaster Cup*, by F. Tennyson Jesse. It was based upon the early life and loves of the novelist herself, its principal character being her old childhood nurse, a character she called Nare. It was simply and tenderly written, with all the delicacy and charm for which Tennyson Jesse was so justly famed. In her heyday, those years between the wars, such fine works as *The Lacquer Lady*, *A Pin to See the Peepshow*, *Tom Fool* and *Act of God* (with its rationalist credo), made her one of the country's best known as well as most truly notable novelists.

In this biography it is the novelist's secretary, Joanna Colenbrander, who writes about the woman she served so well and faithfully during the latter, highly eventful, years of her life. The copious (Tennyson) family papers, diaries, letters, massive scrapbook and sketches for an autobiography, were inherited by Joanna Colenbrander. They tell the story of a lifetime of intellectual high living in London, New York, Hollywood and various parts of France. Fryn's biographer recounts the consequence of a tragic mishap and a curious feature of an otherwise happy marriage to H. M. Harwood. He was a dramatist, impresario and owner of London's Ambassadors Theatre where many of their plays were first produced.

Both Fryn and Tottie (her nickname for him) had rational minds, and to her famous Notable British Trials — six volumes which she edited and wrote brilliant Introductions to — and the work on matters criminal through which she is perhaps best known, *Murder and its Motives*, she established herself as a boldly original thinker on countless aspects of human (and inhuman) behaviour. But to freethinkers, perhaps the best known of all her works was *Act of God*, about which Fryn quoted Lord Young's inscription on the flyleaf, "*Act of God* is something which no reasonable man could expect".

The work itself must surely be one of the great satirical novels of the century, to be ranked alongside Sillone's *Fontemara* in our own day. Its attack on the Oxford Group, Moral Rearmament and the miracles of Lourdes, proved devastating when first published. Even the believing (but liberal) Hugh Walpole was moved to write that although "one love experience, at least, in my life has proved to me that some sort of immortality lies at the root of poor human nature, that doesn't matter: the book is lovely. And the technique, wisdom, knowledge — wonderful". Chapman Cohen commented in *The Freethinker*: "One occasionally comes across powerful and penetrating criticisms of current religious assumptions. A case in point is *Act of God*. Few who have read this scathing satire on Lourdes and Fatima

are likely to forget it".

When Fryn died in 1958, Rebecca West wrote that she had been in her youth "one of the loveliest girls of her time, far surpassing all the more advertised beauties". And when she was cremated, without any religious service, I was at Golders Green, with two others only, to see her off to the strains of Irving Berlin's "Because I Love You" and "All Alone"; specially ordered up by Tottie, who was now all alone and ill and shortly to die as well. Tottie had stayed away from the disposal proceedings — having no heart for such goings-on and doubtless preferring to remember his beautiful and talented wife as she had been. And recalling, also, that inscription to him in the Tauchnitz edition of *Act of God*: "From Fryn, who knows more of act of man than act of God — and who loves Tottie — to him". Yes. a lovely tribute.

PETER COTES

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*Church and State*

involve greater bureaucracy rather than the reverse) and the article leads to the conclusion that a priority is "helping the poor to take responsibility for their own lives".

Not even writers in *The Times* mean to be callous, but there is no other way to interpret this particular series of observations than by the implication that nobody else should presume to take any responsibility for the young mother in the article. In so many examples of the kind of thinking represented by Edward Norman, the spiritual injunction to remember that we are "members one with another" is conveniently forgotten in the interest of either political ideology or the doctrine of transcendence. This means that the deity is not to be confused in any way with the world in which we live, but which he created, apparently, because this is where the doctrines lead, in a fit of absent-mindedness.

To come to a matter of social significance with which the Church, in whatever role, certainly has no wish to diminish its concern, the question of marriage and divorce should be seen in the context of the Norman school of thought. In his lecture he deplors the fact that while the canons of the Church prohibit any violation of the principle of indissoluble marriage, the Church nevertheless has taken a prominent part in advising the Government



## Freethinker Fund

on divorce legislation. Because the Church has failed in its latest attempts to resolve the difficult problem of the remarriage of divorced persons, a leading article in *The Times* at the end of February says that the Church of England could "return with renewed self-confidence to its traditional witness to the Christian ideal".

Ronald Butt, in the same paper a few days later, says that the climate of the day holds that compassion "lies in freeing people from the consequences of their actions". He thus questions the laws that make abortion easier or loosen the marriage commitment. The argument is that the Church is now being influenced by the non-Christian general opinion of the day as well as by theological criteria. General opinion, for good or ill, has moved against rigid rules that some churchmen would like to maintain.

There seems to be a choice that the Established Church will have to make. It cannot continue to claim a special place for itself (running the coronation for example, blessing the armed forces and weapons of destruction, giving the bishops special places in the legislature, or keeping to its own view on marriage), and at the same time declare that it is not concerned with politics. It must be one thing or the other. Disestablishment cannot be far away. It need not be a disaster for the Church. It is a paradox that, while the French state is officially atheist—the President does not have to be invested by an archbishop—religious feeling is far stronger in France than in this country. The demonstrations in Paris in favour of Church schools (admittedly a very doubtful case) show that there is great strength in organised religion even if it is not established by law. In the other direction, the Irish bishops are seeking ways of reducing the theocratic power of the Catholic Church in the Republic as a step on the road to better relations with the North.

Of course there would be strong objections to disestablishment. In his book, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), T. S. Eliot, a prominent Church of England layman, said that to disestablish the Church would mean "the deliberate recognition of two standards and ways of life . . . the Church's abandonment of all those who are not by their whole-hearted profession within the fold".

Yet, at present, there are the two standards and ways of life. Samuel Butler's analogy, in *Erewhon*, of the currency issued by the musical banks, is as valid now as ever it was. Disestablishment would not make things worse. By removing falsity in the present state of affairs it could make things better. This is the kind of problem which should occupy the mind of such intelligent observers as Edward Norman, instead of his complaints against bureaucracy, which, after all, is inseparable from any large organisation. It is quite likely that traces of it can be found in the University of Cambridge itself.

With this issue we complete another year in the life of *The Freethinker*. It was in May 1881 that G. W. Foote and his colleagues launched the paper "to wage relentless war against Superstition in general and against Christian Superstition in particular". Those of a superstitious disposition may feel that its survival for 103 years is something of a miracle. Actually it is due to the voluntary efforts of supporters who have sold, subsidised and written for it.

Christianity may have taken many hard knocks since 1881 but it continues to influence and blight the lives of thousands. Other cults, with the help of the Charity Commissioners, have wrecked educational and career prospects of young dupes, while militant Islamic elements are trying to extract financial and other privileges from the State and local authorities.

So *The Freethinker* has plenty to do as it enters its 104th year. It is still fighting fit, but the financial burden of producing a 16-page monthly, without advertising revenue, does not get lighter. Every reader who values the paper can help to ensure its continuation by sending a donation to the Fund. We thank all who have contributed in the past. The latest list of contributors is given below.

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Total for the period 6 March until 3 April: £158.80.

The European Parliament's approval of a report calling for a population increase on the continent has been described by one British MEP as "daft". Derek Enright (Labour, Leeds), commented: "The Parliament is calling on the people of Europe to be like latter-day Adams and Eves and go forth and populate the world". He said the report revealed "the shams and pretensions of pompous politicians who think that they can play God and Father of all".



# Freethought Bibliography

NICOLAS WALTER

Gordon Stein's letter (*The Freethinker*, February 1984) forces me to reply at some length. He says that he is "really tired of reading (my) groushings about (his) book *Freethought in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth*", but he has only himself to blame. He asked me to review it two years ago, and I did so (*New Humanist*, Summer 1982). In the preface he says that "it would be greatly appreciated if any errors are brought to (his) attention", but he reacted very differently to my criticism. In personal correspondence he accused me of "a one-man campaign to impeach (his) scholarship" which was not "motivated exclusively by a search for the truth", and in his published letter he now describes my criticism as "unfair and malicious". In the circumstances I owe it to your readers to explain the matter.

*Freethought in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth* is described as "A Descriptive Bibliography" which "attempts to tell the history of the freethought movement in the United Kingdom and in the British Commonwealth largely through the publications of that movement". It defines freethought as "thought that is free of the assumptions of religious dogma" and the freethought movement as "a movement in opposition to organised religion". My criticism concentrates on two main defects — significant errors, and significant omissions—and I shall discuss them in that order.

Stein says that when he asked me for examples of his errors, all I could offer was the date of publication of a book, which he doesn't accept. The story is more complicated than this, and it begins with his account of the early publications of the Rationalist Press Association. Stein says that the RPA's first book, Joseph McCabe's *The Religion of the Twentieth Century*, was first "published in 1900" and "was the only one published during the RPA's first year of existence", and that "in the second year" of the RPA "the publications" were J. M. Robertson's *Christianity and Mythology* and *Studies in Religious Fallacy* (which he dates 1900) and Joseph McCabe's translation of Ernst Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe* (which he dates 1901).

The true situation is easily discovered from such contemporary evidence as the *Literary Guide* and the RPA Annual Reports. The RPA was formed in May 1899. Its first books were published as follows: Joseph McCabe *The Religion of the Twentieth Century* (December 1899), J. M. Robertson *Studies in Religious Fallacy* (January 1900), F. J. Gould *Will Women Help?* (February 1900), W. Glanville *The Web Unwoven* (April 1900), J. M. Robertson *Christianity and Mythology* (July 1900), Ernst Haeckel *The Riddle of the Universe* (October 1900), Charles T. Gorham *The Ethics of the Great French*

*Rationalists* (November 1900). There were also two pamphlets published in November 1900. In addition the RPA inherited a score of publications from the Rationalist Press Committee, and Watts was producing several other freethought publications before and after the RPA's formation.

When I drew some of these facts to Stein's attention, he ignored them and insisted that *The Religion of the Twentieth Century* was published in 1900 because his copy contains advertisements for two books published during 1900. Against this is the following evidence: its title-page is dated 1899; the *Literary Guide* of December 1899 says that the RPA "has issued" it and that it is "now ready"; the first RPA Annual Report (presented to the first Annual General Meeting in February 1900) says that it was "published last year" and "appeared late in the autumn"; it was reviewed in January 1900 by monthly papers such as the *Literary Guide* and the *Reformer* and in December 1899 by weekly papers such as the *Ethical World* (16 December) and *The Freethinker* (10 December); it was listed in *Literature* (the weekly predecessor of the *Times Literary Supplement*) as one of the books of the week on 9 December, 1899, and in the authoritative *English Catalogue of Books* as being published in December 1899. I suggest that there is really no doubt that the book was first published in 1899, and I suppose that Stein's copy was a reissue bound with advertisements for later books (a common practice in those days).

All this is pretty unimportant; what is important is that in a bibliography whose compiler claims that "each factual statement and date has been checked several times" the bibliography of the first publications of a leading freethought organisation is inaccurate and incomplete. Other inexplicable errors in Stein's account of the RPA include the date of the annual dinner, the dates of editors of the *Literary Guide*, the basis of the dispute between the RPA and Joseph McCabe in the 1920s, the date of the maximum membership (1947 instead of 1965/66), the chairmanship, the dates of recent presidents, and my own position. These errors may be trivial; glaring errors include statements that *The Freethinker* is "the official publication" of the National Secular Society, or that Peter Cadogan "succeeded H. J. Blackham" as secretary of the South Place Ethical Society.

As for omissions, I listed 65 "authors of significant freethought works who have been omitted". He replied in a letter (*New Humanist*, Winter 1982) that, with one exception, "none of the authors' works mentioned as omitted . . . were published by the movement or affiliated with it". In fact more than one-third were personally involved in freethought



# In These Times . . .

Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, who presided at the Society's annual dinner in London, opened the proceedings by welcoming guests from many areas and representing a wide range of organisations. She mentioned that the function was taking place on the 150th anniversary of the birth of William Morris, atheist and socialist pioneer. But 1984 is the Golden Jubilee year of the National Council for Civil Liberties, so it was appropriate that civil liberty was the dominant theme of the programme.

Patricia Hewitt, the guest of honour, was until last year the NCCL's dynamic general secretary. Tony Smythe, who proposed the toast, also made a great impact during his tenure in the same post.

Tony Smythe said that the participation of secularists and humanists in civil liberties issues was of great value. All pressure groups knew that it was useful, for prestige reasons, to have God on their side. "But that is often difficult to arrange", he added.

He paid tribute to Patricia Hewitt as a person of steel and energy who had done much to ensure that the NCCL was a very important extra-Establishment force in this country. He said it was rare for politicians and political parties to grapple with the fundamental global issues of environment, poverty, disarmament, freedom and democracy. He hoped that in her future political career Patricia Hewitt would do this.

Patricia Hewitt responded and referred to the case of Sarah Tisdall, the young civil servant who had the previous day been sentenced to six months' imprisonment for handing over documents to the *Guardian*. The material did not affect national security but was merely an embarrassment to Michael Heseltine. The judge had said that "in these times we have to mark the gravity of the offence". Exactly what is meant by "in these times", Patricia Hewitt asked.

"We mean times when Duncan Campbell, a journalist on the *New Statesman*, falls off his bicycle, is concussed, and comes around to find that his documents have been taken and a warrant has been issued to seize goods from his house.

"We mean times when loyal civil servants in Cheltenham are told that they can no longer belong to a trade union.

"We mean times when members of the National Union of Mineworkers, moving around the country to take part in pickets, peaceful pickets for the most part, are stopped and searched at the county border and turned back.

"We mean times in which the Government is introducing a Bill to abolish elections for the Greater London Council and the Metropolitan

organisations and more than one-half were published by freethought publishers, especially the RPA; thus my list contained 15 Honorary Associates (together with four directors and three presidents) and 20 authors included in the Cheap Reprints or the Thinker's Library (together with five currently published by the RPA). I agree that the case of Charles Darwin is marginal, since his main work was scientific (though several of his books have been published by the RPA), but his *Autobiography* surely counts as a significant freethought work.

I think that it is fair to point out such errors and omissions, and I must add that I have no malicious or other improper motivation. I am concerned only with the truth about a book which looks impressive but may be misleading, and I can't see why my factual statements about it should be described as "grousings".

## 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 Head, Queen's Road (entrance in Junction Road, opposite Brighton Station). Sunday, 3 June, 7 pm. Pauline Crabbe: The Work of Brook Advisory Centres.

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

**Hampstead Humanist Society.** Community Centre, 78 Hampstead High Street, London, NW3. Monday, 21 May, 7.30 pm. Why a Jewish Humanist Society?

**Humanist Holidays.** Scarborough (25 August for one or two weeks) and Poole (Christmas). Details from Betty Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12, telephone 01-673 6234.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London, SE6. Thursday, 31 May, 7.45 pm. Discussion: Back to Victorian Values? Humanism and Thatcherism.

**Merseyside Humanist Group.** 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Friday, 15 June, 7.45 pm. Ray Freeman and Norris Harvey: This Country Should Retain its Independent Nuclear Deterrent (Debate).

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 13 June, 8 pm. Keith Gimson and George Mephram: Humanist Ceremonies.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Details of activities from Roy Salch, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, telephone Kenilworth 58450.

**Worthing Humanist Group.** Trades Club, 15 Broadwater Road, Worthing. Sunday, 20 May, 5.30 pm. Annual General Meeting.



Councils across the country.

"We mean times in which virtually every week in Belfast self-confessed terrorists are being sent out of the country with new identities in return for evidence which convicts people one suspects are quite innocent.

"We mean times when the Government is putting through the House of Commons a Bill which will permit the transfer of confidential medical information from the Department of Health computers to computers run by the Special Branch and even MI5.

"We mean times in which the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill, another new piece of legislation, will give the police powers to hold suspects for up to four days and the power to subject those suspects to intimate body searches".

Patricia Hewitt went on to say that these civil liberty disasters are symptoms of a graver illness. We live in a period of unemployment even worse than when the NCCL was founded in response to a concern that hunger marchers be treated fairly. Growing inequalities, sharpened by inequalities of race and sex, have produced outbreaks of violence.

"The consequence has been that we are seeing the marginalisation of millions in our society. The police are now being used to deal with these margins.

"The Government requires public consent or demand for more authoritarian policing. This kind of public opinion has been created by an irresponsible manipulation of real fears about increase in crime. The violence of the pickets, however deplorable, has been magnified by the Press. The Greenham Common women have been presented as a threat to civilisation itself".

She recalled that in 1940 the NCCL launched a Liberty Campaign. It has been re-launched to alert the public on issues which were relevant when the NCCL was founded 50 years ago. These include justice in the courts, conduct of the police, freedom to associate, freedom of information and of individual privacy.

Patricia Hewitt concluded: "A Government which claims to defend freedom abroad and to extend freedom at home should not be allowed to abuse that rhetoric in order to conceal the reality of repression. We must demand that a Government which proclaims allegiance to human rights actually lives up to those ideals".

H. J. Blackham paid tribute to the succession of brilliant NCCL secretaries. He pointed out that they had no light assignment, since pressure group leaders had to learn how and when to put on the pressure. And they had to earn the respect of those they wished to confound.

In proposing a toast to the NSS, Mr Blackham said that it still astonished him that many first-class minds can still find it possible to believe incredible

doctrines.

"No longer is the Church the only hope of an educational life out of the mud for a poor boy with brains. No longer is the Church an institution that can offer positions of power and influence. No longer does social pressure persuade people to a show of religious conformity. And the two main general reasons that used to hold people to the faith have worn too thin to hold at all—an explanation of the universe; a resource and a recourse, an ever present help in trouble.

"On rational and social grounds there seems nothing left to induce belief. But if you are sophisticated enough you can come to terms with anything.

"All the same, whatever hold remains, the old guard are not in occupation of the commanding heights of knowledge and power. Belief, slowly if surely, is on the way out in our culture".

Mr Blackham said that the cultural traditions in Britain have eroded, are eroding and will continue to erode the foundations of Christianity. But it was worrying to see how in other countries the political, territorial and racial divisions were being fortified by fundamentalist traditional doctrines.

"The events in Lebanon, in the Iran-Iraq war, in India, and nearer home in Ireland, are a recrudescence of religious wars. You can say that these conflicts are not caused by religion, but religion is such a cementing force in creating intransigence that they are in effect wars of religion. Wars of religion are the biggest stain on history. . .

"In moving this toast to the National Secular Society I would say that we should be more aware of the situation around the world. We should be aware of and reaching out to secularist organisations in, for example, Israel and India".

Terry Mullins, general secretary of the NSS, responded on behalf of the Society. He referred to the campaigns which the NSS continued to conduct, and made particular emphasis on the need to prevent the creation of more sectarian schools if the Church of England should lease schools to Islamic groups.

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The British director of an outfit known as Campus Crusade for Christ caused red faces at Leeds University by suggesting that Hitler's extermination of the Jews might have been a result of their rejection of Christ. When John Arkell was asked during a question and answer session why God had allowed the murder of millions of Jews in Nazi Germany, he replied: "I wonder sometimes whether there was some element of judgement there — that they had rejected Jesus". On hearing that he had put the Crusade's work in jeopardy at the University, Mr Arkell withdrew the statement.