

The Freethinker

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SURVEY REVEALS TEENAGERS' INDIFFERENCE TO CHURCH AND BIBLE

A research study of teenagers' attitude to the churches has revealed that "interest in church quickly and consistently declines during the teenage years". The survey was initiated by the British Council of Churches and conducted by Dr Leslie J. Francis, a social psychologist and Anglican clergyman. It is based on information in detailed questionnaires completed by 1,326 churchgoers between the ages of 13 and 20.

One religious weekly headed its review of the report: "The Menacing Outline of Adolescent Religious Decline". This headline may have been inspired by an introductory paragraph in which Dr Francis states an uncomfortable reality.

He writes: "Walk into a comprehensive school on a Monday morning and try to discover how many of the pupils went to church the previous day. As you go up through the school from the first year to the fifth, so you will find the percentage of churchgoers decreases. By the time of the school leaving age, very few young people would still be claiming allegiance to the Christian churches".

Dr Francis goes on to say that at any conference of clergy and church workers the problem of greatest concern is that of work among teenagers. Even the limited success among those of pre-teen years is often transitory.

"The sadness for the minister is to recognise how the child once regular at Sunday school or faithful at children's services fails to grow into a teenage church attender, taking his or her place alongside the adult members of the worshipping community".

The questionnaires were completed by teenagers who attend Baptist, Church of Christ, Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Society of Friends and United Reform places of worship. Even among

committed young churchgoers there is widespread rejection of basic Christian beliefs. Generally speaking, those who belong to the Free Churches are more conventional and conservative, but there are shocks in the report for traditionalists of all denominations.

Only 15 per cent of Roman Catholic teenagers regarded contraception as wrong, compared to seven per cent of those in the Free Churches. A small minority of Anglicans (four per cent) are opposed to contraception.

Free Church teenagers are generally more conservative than those in other churches. While 32 per cent of young Roman Catholics and 28 per cent of young Anglicans believe that sex outside marriage is wrong, 55 per cent of Free Church teenagers think so.

The same proportion (19 per cent) of Anglicans and Roman Catholics say that homosexuality is wrong. On this question, too, the Free Church teenagers are more conservative with 54 per cent of them condemning homosexuality.

But the Roman Catholic Church's stand on abortion is supported by 74 per cent of her 16-20 year olds. This compares with 49 per cent of Free Church members and 40 per cent of Anglicans in the same age group who think that abortion is wrong.

More than twice as many Free Church teenagers (66 per cent) against other young Christians believe it is wrong to become drunk. The figure for Anglicans and Roman Catholics is 31 per cent and 29 per cent respectively.

The use of marijuana is condemned by 88 per cent of the Free Church teenagers, 64 per cent of the Anglicans and 56 per cent of the Roman Catholics.

The surveys reveals that the Church of England

(continued on back page)

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Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

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NEWS

BIRTH CONTROL: DUKE OF NORFOLK TOUCHES THE CHURCH'S "RAW NERVE"

"While the Duke of Norfolk was inevitably criticised publicly for his remarks about contraception and the Church, it was amazing (or alarming, according to one's point of view) to notice how many people privately agreed with him". Thus the *Catholic Herald* columnist, Gerard Noel, summarised the controversy that followed the Duke's speech to the annual conference of the Catholic Teachers' Federation in Birmingham last month. Mr Noel said the Duke "hit on a nerve so raw that almost everyone in the Church at an official level shudders when it is suddenly exposed".

The Duke of Norfolk, Earl Marshal of England and the country's leading Roman Catholic layman, described his Church's teaching on birth control as "nonsense", and added for good measure how he told Cardinal Hume that *Humanae Vitae* (the 1968 Papal Encyclical which denounced contraception as "intrinsically evil") was nonsense too.

The Duke found it "quite extraordinary" that the Church permitted family planning "by the thermometer and studying your wife's periods, but you are not allowed to do it by pills or French letters or whatever.

"How can you ask a married couple to do it by thermometer and what not. My wife and I did it that way. It didn't bloody work!"

The Duke's onslaught obviously caused much consternation in the ranks of the notoriously conservative Catholic Teachers' Federation. The general secretary and national treasurer were joint signatories to a letter in the *Catholic Herald* in which they referred to "an embarrassed silence" that greeted the Duke's remarks. The Rt Rev Joseph Gray, Bishop of Shrewsbury, is reported to have said that he would not have attended had he known what the Duke was going to say. But the traditionalists were not anxious to debate the issue, and a former master at Ampleforth sorrowfully commented, "of my fellow teachers in the audience only two could be found with the courage to rebuke him in appropriate terms".

There have been many expressions of support for the Duke's statement. One *Catholic Herald* reader, who described herself as "a Catholic, a midwife and a person involved in social problems", wrote: "I go along with all he says". The *Guardian* newspaper published a Catholic reader's letter welcoming the description of the Church's teaching on birth control

AND NOTES

as nonsense. "Many of us have been saying that for years and many more have accepted it in practice.

"Of course the Catholic Teachers' Federation supports traditional teaching on birth control. A Catholic teacher who has the courage to state unorthodox views on the subject finds it almost impossible to be appointed to a Catholic school however well qualified he or she may be".

The celibate-ruled Church's condemnation of birth control is a cause of widespread misery and frustration among its followers. One victim, who signed her letter to the Catholic weekly *Universe* "Confused, Tired Mother", expressed her agreement with the Duke of Norfolk's opinion of *Humanae Vitae*.

She wrote: "After having five children in seven years, using the Rythm method, I tried the Billings method and now have eight children aged between two and 14 years.

"I have been criticised for having so many children. I have also been told by fellow Catholics that I should use more self-control and, because I was so upset by my last pregnancy and had feelings of not wanting my eighth child, was told by a priest that I was selfish.

"Then I read in *Humanae Vitae* about 'Responsible Parenthood'. The Church expects the impossible from me. . .

"My husband and I have a good happy marriage and I feel that it is we who have to cope and care for our children and should we choose to use artificial methods to avoid having any more then we have the right and reason to do so".

The Duke of Norfolk's wise and compassionate speech on the subject of birth control will not commend him either to the Church hierarchy or the Compulsory Pregnancy Lobby. It is bound to influence and encourage many more Catholics to reject their Church's teachings on sexual ethics. And by doing so, the Duke of Norfolk has contributed more to human happiness and welfare than a dozen Mother Therasas.

• A flock of 40 sheep owned by the Duke of Norfolk have had to be removed from the burial ground of Arundel Cathedral to new pastures following an anonymous threat to kill or maim them. Father Anthony Whale, administrator of the cathedral, said: "The Duke allowed us to use the sheep to keep down the grass because we could not afford to pay anyone for cutting it. We received an anonymous typewritten letter threatening drastic action if they were not removed. We have given in to blackmail, but we did not have any option".

A VERY HOT GOSPELLER

Although the Christian churches continue to foster hopes of eternal bliss, they now prefer to ignore the blisters. Yet the doctrine of eternal punishment has never been rejected by them. Not long ago Roman Catholics were reminded by their pontiff that hell is a real place; and Luis Palau, the superstar Protestant evangelist currently performing in London, recently expressed his belief that anyone who has not found the Christian faith is going to hell. But most of the clergy in Britain eschew lurid descriptions of "down below" and the torments of the damned which were the mainstay of their predecessors' repertoire.

However, there are still those who not only believe such nonsense but actually preach it. An example of current hell-and-damnation rhetoric appeared in last month's issue of *Scottish Protestant View* ("Scotland's Own Protestant Newspaper"). Pastor Jack Glass, who ministers to the elect at Glasgow's Zion Baptist Chapel (and also edits the *View*), is the author of a venomous, hate-filled tirade that was inspired by a passage from the Sadist's Handbook. He proclaims that unbelievers, the ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches "and all those who would never dream of attending a good old-fashioned Separatist prayer meeting today" are damned for all eternity.

Those destined for the lake of fire include "kings of the earth, the dictators and all political rulers, princes, officers, military generals, rich men, commercial and industrial leaders, capitalists, men of power in religion and education, and the working class". Most Christians play with words and try to soften the slaughter-house image of their religion and its most horrible doctrine. But Pastor Glass has no such reservations.

"See the agony on the faces of Christless men", he thunders. "Hear their shrieks and groans. There is no formalism, no saying of the rosary, no genuflections, no liturgy, no read prayer or ceremonial. All this paraphernalia is forgotten. The men who mocked at the doctrine of hell believe it now, but it is too late . . . their cry of torment will be an endless one, for it will continue throughout eternity".

And there is no playing with words about biblical teachings being wrongly translated or hell being a mental state. "Hell is a terrible place, the devil is a terrible person . . . hell is the ultimate destination of the Ecumenical Ship. It is at present sailing on the Sea of Rome but it is bound for the Lake of Fire". Pastor Glass's final exhortation is: "Turn or Burn".

Fortunately the majority of British Christians have been educated or shamed out of believing in the doctrine of eternal punishment. But a religion that can spawn even one specimen like Pastor Jack Glass deserves to perish.

THE NEW CENSORS

Having failed in their campaign — which included slogans like “Dead Men Don’t Rape”—to persuade all and sundry that rape is a national pastime, a men-hating minority which misleadingly describes itself as the women’s movement has embarked on a new crusade. Hardly a day passes without some new protest about “sexist advertising” which allegedly degrades women. And now after 12 months of badgering by its women’s committee, the Greater London Council is to restrict advertising of underwear on London Transport stations and vehicles. According to Mrs/Miss/Ms/Mz Valerie Wise, posters of models in stockings and bras “could put a notion in a man’s head”.

Top model Debi Brett denies that the advertisements degrade women, and points out that no one forces models to take part. They are adults who have voluntarily embarked on a professional career and neither seek nor welcome the “protection” of prudish busybodies.

Perhaps the next demand by the arrogant prodnoses at County Hall will be for the introduction of segregated bathing at GLC-owned swimming pools; and after that the banning of men from ballet performances in GLC-subsidised theatres.

The GLC women’s committee are not the only ones who are trying to make women “cover up”. The management of an Iranian bank in London has been trying to compel its women staff to wear head scarves and long sleeves, and not to use cosmetics. “Every so often they make attempts to make it more Islamic”, one employee commented. But the 50 women at the bank’s Moorgate branch have defied the order which a member of staff described as “discriminatory, mediaeval and degrading”.

Good luck to bank employees, models and all women who oppose attempts by religious zealots and censorious dowdies to impose their prim dreariness on others.

Social workers in Essex have removed an 11-year-old boy from a foster home after receiving complaints that children in the care of the Rev David Warner and his wife had been subjected to excessive religious observance. Last year a teenage girl complained to the authorities that she had to take part in bible studies. The Warners’ next charge, a ten-year-old boy, objected to being taken to church five times during an evangelical week. The social services organisers wrote to Mr and Mrs Warner: “We have regretfully decided that we will only be able to place children with you who are happy to practice your religion”.

CHILD ABUSE

The Spring issue of the American journal, *Free Inquiry*, published by the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, includes a long article entitled “Ultrafundamentalist Sects and Child-Abuse”. The author is Lowell D. Streiker, executive director of the Freedom Counselling Centre in Burlington, California, which has helped over a thousand families whose lives have been disrupted by religious sects and cults.

Dr Streiker gives many examples of religious fanaticism and gullibility that have resulted in tragic consequences for child victims.

The first case is that of Faith Aliano, aged ten, who died a year ago of complications resulting from untreated diabetes. Her parents, who belonged to a religious sect, hid her body and held daily services praying for her resurrection. Two months after the child’s death her partly decomposed remains were found by the police.

When the parents appeared in court they refused to comply with an order to have the body buried. Her father told the judge: “God said she will come back and that is what I believe. When the people see her come back to life, I trust they’ll begin to believe in God again, because as sure as we’re sitting in this courthouse, God is going to raise her”.

Larry Hamilton, pastor of the Church of God of the Union, in La Follette, Tennessee, told an appeals court that he would go to the Supreme Court if necessary to prevent his 12-year-old daughter, Pamela, from receiving medical care. Doctors testified that the girl, who is suffering from cancer, will die within a year if she does not receive treatment.

An Oklahoma jury acquitted a couple charged with the manslaughter of their nine-year-old son who died from a ruptured appendix. The parents, members of the Church of the First Born, argued that their religion prevented them from seeking medical help. The jury’s decision was based on the judge’s ruling that the State’s decree concerning religious exemptions from child abuse laws should apply in this case.

Roch Theriault (also known as Moses) was sent to prison for two years for being concerned with beating a child to death and castrating a member of the religious sect he founded.

Stuart and Leslie Green, who lived at a Christian commune in Kebletown, West Virginia, were convicted of the involuntary manslaughter of their two-year-old son. The court was told how adult members and other children in the commune stood in a circle and watched while the mother held the child and the father beat him with a wooden paddle.

At another religious commune in Rensselaer, Indiana, Larry and Lucy Lonadier beat their three-year-old son to death. A third member of the commune told them: “If you don’t discipline your child,

he will probably go to hell".

Dr Streiker quotes other cases of child-abuse, although he has met "loving, devoted and nurturing parents involved in every type of cult, sect, commune, self-help commune and political cell.

"But", he concludes, "cult and sect groups are largely governed by the whims of manipulative and powerful figures, to whom all commitments other than to the mandates of the leader are of secondary

importance. Friction between the standards of such authoritarian subcultures and the ethical norms of mainstream society are unavoidable".

• "Free Inquiry", which is published quarterly, is now available by subscription payable in the United Kingdom. Subscription rates and other information are obtainable from Michael Hutchinson, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex (telephone 01-508 2989).

Doctor in the Dog-house

BRIAN PARRY

The editor of "The Gay Humanist" reflects on the arrest of Dr Keith Hampson, Conservative MP and Parliamentary Private Secretary to Defence Secretary Michael Heseltine, for allegedly assaulting a police officer in a gay theatre club.

The irony of Dr Keith Hampson's arrest a few weeks ago has not been lost on Britain's gay population, many of whom have had considerable difficulty in suppressing expressions of glee. Theirs was the same sort of delight, I imagine, that a fox might demonstrate were it to witness a hound sink its ivories into a huntman's hindquarters.

For what happened here was a classic case of an Establishment figure falling into a trap built by bad lawmakers and baited by pretty young policemen (oh, they most certainly do exist) who, one might imagine, have better things to do than sit in gay strip clubs and invite the occasional grope.

The amusement that typified gay reaction to arrest arose not so much from the fact that A Somebody had been nicked, but that Westminster and Fleet Street chose to treat the whole issue as if the use of *agents provocateurs* was a new, and not altogether savoury method of policing. This is amusing because the use of so-called "pretty police" to entrap gay men has definitely been going on in London for several years now, and numerous complaints have been directed at the police and Members of Parliament—without, apparently, anyone paying a blind bit of attention to this practice.

But because Someone Important got himself arrested for allegedly "indecently assaulting" an *agent provocateur*, what we have been treated to over the past month or so has been an astonishing display of outrage in the House of Commons from members representing all parties. Virtually all (if Radio 4's "Yesterday in Parliament" programme is to be regarded as a fair reflection of the mood of the House) were horrified that such tactics should be used to entrap gay men—*particularly as homosexual acts between consenting adults is not against the law, and has not been so for 17 years.*

The sense of outrage expressed in the House has rippled outwards with immense speed, and public opinion appears to be solidly behind those who want the police to put an immediate halt to this, or any other form of entrapment. Furthermore, the attempt by Eldon Griffith, spokesman for the Police Federation in the House of Commons, to confuse the issue by suggesting that police action was "demanded by worried parents concerned for the welfare of their children", was very quickly recognised as a deliberate attempt to tar gays with the child-molester brush. Fortunately, this sort of smear is no longer accepted by intelligent people, of whom there are several in the House, and Mr Griffith's suggestion was dismissed by the most vocal of these, including some Tories, as absolute rubbish.

Somewhere between the gloating and the cynicism surrounding the case lies a measure of optimism. For nothing in recent years has concentrated the minds of our legislators so closely on the absurdity and the injustice of the laws governing the behaviour of the millions of homosexual men in this country.

Suddenly the climate seems right for reform—albeit for all the wrong reasons.

A memorial service for Sir Noel Coward was held recently in Westminster Abbey. It is doubtful if many of those present knew that the actor playwright held very firm and uncomplimentary views about Christianity, expressed in an entry in his diary for 10 April, 1955. He wrote: "Everything I have read lately has confirmed a long-held suspicion that Christianity has caused a great deal more suffering, both mental and physically, than any other religion in the history of mankind. The jolly human sacrifices of other earlier faiths were nothing compared to the implacable cruelties and struggles between various Christian sects. A wretched virgin being sliced up occasionally on a ritual altar seems small beer compared with the endless succession of tortured, oppressed, Puritan-ridden generations that have resulted from that unfortunately over-publicised episode at Jerusalem 1,955 years ago. I must say it is a little hard on Jesus Christ to be for ever associated with such a monumental balls-up".

The Video Inspector Cometh

DAVID WEBB

The campaign to censor video cassettes has been carried to Westminster and is receiving little opposition in either House. The Honorary Director of the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publication Acts asks why libertarian champions of "freedom of speech and publication" have allowed this latest imposition of censorship to pass virtually unchallenged.

I suppose that, given the hypocrisy, bigotry and self-righteousness that so pervades the Establishment of this country, it was inevitable that the advent of the video cassette recorder would initiate the predictable, nauseating hue and cry we have witnessed throughout most of the past year and which is being currently perpetuated by their lordships in what was once thought of as the home of radical causes.

The campaign against the free availability of video cassette recordings for home consumption—that is against consenting adults being free to choose for themselves what they view in the privacy of their own homes—originated, again predictably enough, in the ranks of the "Puritan Brigade", aided and abetted by assorted religious groupings, and especially by an absurdly fanatical and dishonest Press campaign unleashed in the columns of the *Daily Mail*. In no time at all, Mrs Thatcher had joined in the clamour, "Victorian Values" the while proclaiming, and had promised, if re-elected in the June 1983 General Election, firm Government action on "video nasties" (whatever they are) in the Conservative Manifesto.

Mr Graham Bright, Tory MP for Luton South (ironically, my birthplace), practically fell over backwards to ingratiate himself with the Leaderene by offering to put his fortuitous first place draw in the Private Members' Bills Ballot at her disposal and introduce what we now know to be one of the most monstrously repressive and authoritarian pieces of legislation to have come before Parliament in modern times.

Mr Bright, and of course the Home Office (for this is, in effect, a Government Bill), have claimed throughout that its aims are merely the very limited ones of preventing children from buying or hiring video cassettes of "a violent and horrific nature". This is outrageously untruthful, as those of us who have been present in Parliament for most of the passage of the Bill thus far, know only too well. Even its title is untruthful. It should rightly be called the Video Censorship Bill. Not only will the Bill as originally drafted require virtually all videos to be certificated by the State Censor (for even the exemptions are so vague and arbitrary as to be dangerously uncertain), but many will be refused certi-

ficates and will be banned altogether. Furthermore, many amendments have been and are still being tabled seeking to strengthen and extend the Bill's powers still wider and a number of these have already succeeded.

For the first time since the repeal of the 1843 Theatres Act, as a result of the passing of the 1968 Theatres Act (an Act "to abolish censorship in the theatre", as its preamble states), the concept of pre-censorship by the State will be introduced into this country. Even television programmes already transmitted by the two public service broadcasting authorities, the BBC and the IBA, and consequently already subject to the very rigid scrutiny and codes of conduct imposed by those august bodies under the various broadcasting Acts, even they are not to be exempted from certification by the new State Censor. Finally, even when a video has received a certificate from the "designated authority", as the official State Censor will euphemistically be called, that video and its suppliers will still not be immune from possible prosecution under the provision of the extant and monstrous Obscene Publications Acts.

One would have thought that such a Bill, with its chillingly Orwellian overtones, and the kind of viciously authoritarian measure we usually associate in this country with the totalitarian régimes of both extreme Left and extreme Right-wing dictatorships, would have invoked a storm of protest and outrage from our MPs, or at least from those who claim to champion civil liberty causes. Out of 650 Members of the House of Commons, not a single one has had the courage to declare publicly what we know many believe privately, which is that this Bill is a nonsense and that it has been conceived in hysteria, and to vote against it. True, MPs like Robert MacLennan (SDP, Caithness and Sutherland) and Matthew Parris (Conservative, Derbyshire West) did express some grave reservations about the Bill whilst in its Commons Committee Stage, but both voted for it at its Second Reading and Report Stages.

On 22 February the National Council for Civil Liberties published a full page advertisement in the *Guardian* to celebrate its 50th anniversary, and nearly a thousand people put their names to a Charter of Civil Rights and Liberties. Article Seven of that Charter pledges to ensure and safeguard the defence of the "essential right" of "freedom of speech and publication". Amongst those signatories were 65 MPs. Where on earth had they all been, I wondered, throughout the passage of the Video Recordings Bill through the Commons, and how could they possibly reconcile their public endorsement of "freedom of speech and publication" with their support, loudly proclaimed by some, of a piece of legislation so blatantly an erosion of such a freedom? I wrote to

all 65 of them. Of the 19 replies I received, the gist of most of their answers was that they saw nothing inconsistent in the two diametrically opposed actions they had taken. It seems that words like "principle" and "rational debate" lose all meaning, even to otherwise sane minds, when the emotive issue of censorship raises its frequent and ugly head in this country. Two and two make four, apparently, but three and one do not, it seems.

The only real voice of sanity to make itself heard in this otherwise lunatic debate, as it has done on so many previous occasions to strike a blow against intolerance and repression, has been that of 85-years-young Lord Houghton of Sowerby. What a shining example he is to us all, but how disheartening it must be for him to receive so little real support for his courageous and unswerving stand on these matters, especially from his younger colleagues who should know better.

Lord Houghton wanted to know in the Lords Committee Stage Debate on 27 April "why is there

concealment of the real truth of this Bill in the short title; the long title and in the manner of approach to Clause one, which is interpretation?"; and he later went on to say, "This Bill is really dealing with some of the fundamental principles of our liberties and our freedom". I fear, however, that his wise words will fall on deaf ears, even those of the sixteen Members of the Upper House who also signed the NCCL Charter. There seems precious little hope of any substantial changes for the better in the Lords, and often considerable danger that the Bill's provisions will be made even more draconian. Perhaps the best bet for libertarians like myself is to welcome the passage of the Bill into law. Maybe when "Big Brother Brittan" and his State Censors actually begin to go into action, the full horror of the Bill's implications will at last be realised by the docile, long-suffering British public and their lily-livered legislators, and they will wake up to the fact that it really is 1984 and the Video Inspector really cometh.

Anyone for Dragons?

TERRY LIDDLE

It is a safe bet that if there is anything from which people can derive pleasure, some narrow-minded member of the clergy will want it banned. The latest example of this clerical passion for prohibition is the popular fantasy role playing game called Dungeons and Dragons, a cross between the make-believe of Lovecraft and Tolkien and board and dice games such as Monopoly and Cluedo.

Dungeons and Dragons draws heavily for its heroes and villains on a number of pre-Christian mythologies, including those of the Indians of North and Central America, China, Babylon and Scandinavia. Among the characters in the game are clerics and followers of ancient gods and demons. They are expected to proclaim the "truth" of their particular religion, as well as eliminating imaginary enemies and taking their treasure. For this reason, it seems, some churchmen are claiming that the game is transforming young people who play it into "Satanists".

One critic is the Rev John Hollidge, of Gold Hill Baptist Church in Chalfont St Peter, Buckinghamshire. In a letter to parents and schools he stated: "This is indeed only a game, but it is a game of life and death! Satan is real and he wants your child's mind". He goes on to deplore the use of alleged Satanist symbols in the game and alleges that one character is seen making a sign known to black magicians as "The Goathead". He forgets to add that variations of this two-fingered gesture have over the years been used as a symbol of victory, a sexual insult and even as a Christian blessing. However, for the Rev Hollidge the game remains a problem and demons are fact not fantasy.

Mr Don Turnbull, managing director of TSR (UK), which sells over 30,000 Dungeons and Dragons sets a year, replied that the game, which is American in origin, had been on sale in Britain for a decade. There had been no reports of psychological upset resulting from playing it. He added: "Saying that Dungeons and Dragons leads children to occult practices is a bit like saying that playing Monopoly can turn children into Rachmans".

This view was largely substantiated by Dr Andrew Sutton, a child psychiatrist at Birmingham University, who said that the kind of fears which might be aroused by the game were a part of the normal growing up process. My own son and many of his friends play the game regularly and it has no more made them Satanists than attending classes in Religious Instruction at school has made them Christians. But then unlike many of the clergy, they can tell the difference between reality and fantasy.

So too could H. P. Lovecraft, on whose writings in the pulp fantasy magazine *Weird Tales* the game is in part based. While some occultist cranks claimed that the demons and grimpires of which he wrote were real, he always maintained they were the product of his writer's craft. He remained a staunch rationalist all his days.

Meanwhile, religious fundamentalists in both Britain and America continue their attacks on Dungeons and Dragons, and several education authorities have dropped it from their evening classes.

If the clergy want to fight evil there is no lack of it in the shape of ignorance, fear and superstition to fight. But they concentrate their energies on attacking a harmless game enjoyed by many young people.

Promised by Whom?

DAVID TRIBE

Accusations of anti-Jewish prejudice have been directed at "The Freethinker" from several pro-Israel quarters in recent times. The present editor throws this slander back into the accusers' teeth, and a former editor argues that the secularist movement "has a prime responsibility to consider Zionism".

Like another ex-editor of *The Freethinker* now living in Australia, Nigel Sinnott, in recent years "I have largely confined my contributions to these columns to distant, safe, historical subjects". Moreover, the impact of a journal is more than a perception of words on a page read a world away, but derives from discussions among groups of readers or in organisations associated with it. Such inputs are now denied me. I do not, therefore, feel able to contribute to the general theme of possible *Freethinker* deviations from some imaginary line of editorial centralism, and can merely regret the factionalism that has recently appeared (or, perhaps I should say, reappeared) in secularist circles.

In the paper's April issue, however, some points are raised in a letter by B. Goshen, relating to one issue of alleged Left-wing bias, which appear to refer to myself and call for an answer. As the substantive theme (and not the issue of bias) is of world importance, a reply of some length may be warranted.

My involvement with *The Freethinker* came about in three ways. In the late sixties and early seventies I was chairman of the companies financing and publishing the paper. For a short time in 1966 I was editor. Overlapping both periods I was president of the National Secular Society, empowered to speak on topical issues in the name of the society (though always punctilious in seeking subsequent ratification by the executive committee) and frequently quoted in *Freethinker* pages. Unless the position has changed in recent years—and I don't believe it has—save for the most basic issues of principle the paper's board has no editorial policy; the paper's editor may publish articles or letters with which he/she personally disagrees; and the Society's members are not expected to subscribe to every—or any—public statement on the passing scene issued by its officers or executive or even its annual general meeting.

An editor or president will, of course, have personal views but, if wise, will moderate them in the light of perceived consensus within a readership or an organisation. To mix a metaphor, it must be added that in most cases a consensus can be discovered only by flying a kite. If I am regarded by Mr Goshen as the originator of a "longstanding . . .

policy" of criticising Israel, I freely admit that I undertook the NSS presidency and *Freethinker* editorship with the avowed intent of commenting on "political" issues, and one of the issues on which I felt strongly was the threat to world peace posed by Zionism and the unhappy plight of the Palestinian Arabs. I am happy to say that most NSS members and *Freethinker* readers seemed to agree. In the mid-sixties it wasn't easy to find public support for this view, and leading humanists like Professor A. J. Ayer (as he then was) were loud in their thick-and-thin support of Israel.

Why do I think Mr Goshen refers to me? Looking up my files to recall the "furious *Freethinker* comments" following the six-days war in 1967, I was surprised to find only my conciliatory "A Middle East Solution", derived from an NSS media release. It chided the Arab states for being "prepared—one might have thought anxious—for a war with Israel" and urged them to accept the partition of Palestine as a *fait accompli*; and it reminded Israel and her supporters that "some of the most Zionist elements in Britain are extremely Right-wing and would, if they could, pack off all Jews to the 'Jewish national home'". There followed a number of practical suggestions which were, unfortunately but not unexpectedly, ignored. I had, and have, made more "furious" criticisms of Israel and pleas for the Palestinians, but had discovered at meetings where Arabs were present that sympathy for their position was easily misinterpreted as an unrealistic commitment to unscrambling the Middle East omelette. Commonsense had to prevail on both sides.

Before unleashing further "fury", let me comment on the relation between attitudes to Israel and Right/Left-wing political views, with special reference to B. Goshen's statement that "Freethinkers, like Christians, can tolerate individual Jews, but not a Jewish national liberation struggle". If Mr Goshen will cast his mind back before 1967, he may recognise that most Christians did not tolerate individual Jews but blamed them as a people for crucifying Christ. Ghettoes and pogroms are within living memory. In the modern age, as distinct from the Middle Ages, most Christians have not approved of such treatment, but most did nothing to prevent it and themselves exercised more subtle discrimination. On the other hand, it was the freethought movement that constantly reminded the world of the remarkable contribution of Jews to learning and culture through the ages, urged potential host countries to accept and integrate Jewish refugees from persecution, and elected leaders like Chapman Cohen.

Till recent times the issue of a "Jewish national

home" had not arisen. A handful of Jews were living peacefully in Palestine beside their Arab neighbours under successive empires. To Jews of the Diaspora, "next year in Jerusalem" was a mere ritual formula, and the "Promised Land" and the "Messiah" were officially interpreted in mystical terms. At the turn of the century, however, a coincidence of renewed pogroms in Eastern Europe and emergent nationalism in Western Europe stimulated a literal Zionism within segments of Jewry. In ensuing years, apart from some religious fanatics its main support probably came from the sentimental Left, both Jewish and Gentile, who saw a new state as providing a new opportunity to experiment with communes (*kibbutzim*), which had proved such a disastrous failure in the first half of the 19th century.

Understandably, this feeling was strengthened after the Second World War and the Nazi holocaust. It was fortified by a widespread guilt complex among people of all political persuasions in the Allied nations, most of whom neither knew nor cared anything about the past problems of the Jews or the likely future problems of the Palestinian Arabs. And so the state of Israel was created, together with other independent states in the region, under the auspices of the United Nations and with safeguards for the indigenous population. History cannot be rewritten. The world community must now recognise the state—and also the safeguards.

Circumstances make strange bedfellows. It is interesting to note that the main champion of Israel today is the United States. Here there is an unholy alliance of affluent Jews who would do anything for Israel except live in it, "redneck" Gentiles who won't let Jews join their local golf club but see the state of Israel as a useful Western bastion in the oil-rich Middle East close to the borders of the Soviet Union, and Christian fundamentalists who view the "gathering in" of Jews to Israel as a prelude to Armageddon and the Second Coming.

Since 1967, outside this hardcore support, concern is growing over how the Israeli Government interprets "Jewish nationhood and statehood" for "Jews in their historic and biblical land" (Mr Goshen's letter). I understand that Israeli maps show "Israel" and "Greater Israel" (does the distinction ring a bell?). A glance at biblical maps confirms that the Promised Land, as settled by the Twelve Tribes, included not just the West Bank but the East Bank of the Jordan River, and Jerusalem: an important chunk of the state of Jordan. Others say the "Promised Land" was intended to include Lebanon and Syria. Where will dreams of Zionist expansion end? And at what cost to neighbouring peoples and world peace?

What, some may ask, has this to do with the secularist movement? Surely, they say, it is a political question and the proper concern of secularism is to combat religion. Even if the latter concern were

conceded as the sole aspiration of secularism—and I contend it is not—the movement has a prime responsibility to consider Zionism. It is not a political philosophy like oligarchy or socialism—subject to rational debate. Little is known about the "historic" Israel from the impartial record of history, which notes only a handful of the later kings. Even in its heyday it was hardly a "nation" in the modern sense, but a confederation of tribes briefly united, then split, conquered and largely dispersed. It is well described as a "biblical land", since the bible is virtually our only source of "knowledge". Biblical criticism — a mainstream freethought activity — portrays the scriptures as at best an historical romance and at worst a chauvinist fabrication. But even they do not pretend that the land was "promised" or "covenanted" to the Jews by the indigenous Canaanites and Amorites. No. Israel owes its credentials to Yahweh, and is as credible as he is.

Whether or not the Jews have any historical claim to nationhood and statehood, should Israel be granted a special right to define its own borders? Such a "right" is entirely outside the ambit of international law and can derive only from a God-given status as the "chosen people". Are secularists expected to recognise such a status? Or anybody else, if it comes to that? It must here be pointed out that, while freethinkers have always supported the right of people to be "different" and of ethnic sub-cultures to live in peace, Semitism has largely contributed to anti-Semitism. Even that is a misnomer, for if the Jews are not a nation-in-exile they are equally not a race; since Arabs are also Semites. Other groups dispersed 2,500, or fewer, years ago have been happily assimilated. It is regrettable that Jewish exclusiveness, with none but biblical credentials, discouraged intermarriage.

Regardless of historical claims, was there any secular reason for Israel to be created in 1948? I have already cited reaction to the holocaust as a motivation. But are national frontiers a guarantee against oppression, especially when these frontiers are continually being redefined unilaterally? Jews were not the only group to suffer from Nazi aggression and Western appeasement. It is the business of us all to see such tragedies do not recur, wherever we may live. Certainly there are no sociopolitical reasons to establish a state along credal lines. If communistically inclined, people do not have to go to Israel to establish a *kibbutz*.

In the modern world, there is really no convincing religious argument either—as most Jews have demonstrated by voting with their feet. Few celebrate the sabbath today in an entirely Orthodox way; and with most people in the West working a five-day week, it has never been easier for anyone so desirous to do so.

(continued on page 93)

THE INTELLIGENT UNIVERSE, by Fred Hoyle. Michael Joseph, £12.95

The first point to make is that nobody can find this book boring. Hoyle is at his brilliant, scintillating best. Yet the book immediately makes me recall how, some decades ago, after Fred had given a talk at a university seminar and a questioner said he had found the talk interesting but not convincing, Fred retorted that he had not wanted to convince anybody, he had just told them what he thought!

Thoughts certainly there are in plenty, some expressed very clearly, others less so; some very appealing, others less so; but every one of them stimulating and indeed disturbing.

The book starts with a brief description of our present understanding of the nature of life followed by attacks first on Darwinian (and neo-Darwinian) evolution, and secondly on current thoughts on the terrestrial origin of life. The criticism of Darwinian evolution seems to me misplaced in the book (Hoyle does not require to discredit Darwinian mechanisms until much later in the book, by which time the reader will have become more friendly), not well argued, and does not deal with evolution that has occurred in our time (DDT-resistant mosquitoes, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, etc).

Then come the beautifully argued and most impressive sections on the evidence for life in meteorites and in interstellar dust. This is an area of science to which Hoyle and Wickramasinghe have made major contributions, and the aura of direct involvement gives these chapters an air of authority not evident in the rest of the book. Everything scientific said in these chapters is clear, well-argued and persuasive, including the discussion of the Viking lander experiment on Mars (though here, as elsewhere in the book, I find Hoyle's social psychology distinctly unimpressive).

This is the core of the book, which is well worth reading just for this section. Like any well-presented, good science, it raises questions in one's mind. To me it has always seemed most odd that all the life we know has the same screw sense, turning the plane of polarisation to the right. Has Hoyle any thoughts as to whether this is true throughout the universe? How would we recognise organisms with the opposite chirality? Does the rain of micro-organisms descending through the atmosphere occasionally contain left turning ones? These, and similar questions, seem to me vital topics of discussion, more fascinating than some of what follows, though perhaps less sensational. In subsequent chapters Hoyle gives a good discussion of the peculiar property of life of creating order out of disorder, something that is most striking to physicists. Yet, I did not feel that his argumen-

FREETHINKER

tation, good as it is, equals that of Schrödinger in *What is Life?* published 40 years ago.

Again, it is good to see the idea of life as information capable of being given physical expression in more than one way.

Yet the most startling issue in the book is Hoyle's conclusion that neither the origin of life, nor its evolution on Earth can be accounted for except through invoking an intelligent control. There are two quite separate questions that this outcome raises: Are Hoyle's conclusions correct? If correct, where does this lead one in the debate between freethinkers and the religious?

The first question is in fact a scientific question, one that needs discussion by many minds where decisive arguments for or against Hoyle's conclusion will not be found overnight. Yet, far as this is from my own field of science, I have my preliminary feelings which are that the mechanism of terrestrial evolution without intelligent guidance is not far from becoming credible, though of course much work still needs doing, but I feel much more uncertain about the origin of life wherever this may have taken place.

Yet how does this strike me as a freethinker? For many years I have said that I like to describe myself neither as an atheist nor as an agnostic, but as an anti-revelationist. What I mean by this is first that I find it idle to deny what has not been defined. The vacuous nature of many ideas about God does not deserve the honour of being denied which can only give it substance. (I am reminded of the great physicist, Pauli, who said of a paper that it was so very bad because it was not even wrong.)

To me the repulsiveness and arrogance of religion arises from belief in revelation, in "another way of knowing" not open to all, in the inherent feeling of superiority of the true believer over all not so blessed, in the very thought that some people have a private wire to the office of the Almighty. This is the core, at the least of western religions.

Take away revelation, and only some nebulous verbiage remains. Our hostility should surely be directed at those who claim to have the right to dictate to others, because they have some special knowledge of God's will. This sickening presumption needs to be fought.

Hoyle's ideas, wherever they may lead one, show no sign of taking us to belief in the Bible or the Koran, no sign of giving authority to some at the expense of others. Thus it becomes us to discuss and examine them calmly—as some of the many provisional and hypothetical conclusions of which science exists.

SIR HERMANN BONDI

REVIEWS

THE ROBERT TRESSSELL PAPERS. Workers' Educational Association, South Eastern District, 4 Castle Hill, Rochester, Kent. £2

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists is a novel that has a special place in literature and history. In the so-called "century of the common man" it is a book written about "common" men, that is, about ordinary workers, by one who had worked with them. Robert Tressell (to use the name by which the author was best known, although it was not his real name: what that was still seems uncertain) did not become a professional writer and thus run the risk, which has overcome so many, of leaving the life about which he had come to write, with the result that he would be unable to catch the genuine flavour of the environment in which he started. Tressell, however, was never a full-time writer. There are many mysteries, still unsolved, about his origins and his life. What is certain is that he wrote the novel while living and working in Hastings from 1902 to 1910. He died in 1911 and the book was not published, and then in abbreviated form only, until three years after his death when the outbreak of war came to bring new horrors to the lives of the depressed classes which he had made his subject. As far as can be ascertained, he was 40 when he died.

The interest of the novel, described by Alan Sillitoe as "the first great English novel about the class war", caused an "amateur biographer" named F. C. Ball to devote an enormous amount of time and energy to finding out all he could about Tressell and the circumstances in which he came to write the novel. The result of these efforts was not one biographer but two, *Tressell of Mugsborough*, published in 1951, and *One of the Damned*, which appeared in 1973. That the interest is still continuing is shown by the publication of *The Robert Tressell Papers* which is described as an exploration of the novel and a companion for its readers.

This compilation is the product of the Robert Tressell Workshop, a group of members of the Hastings branch of the Workers' Educational Association. It contains an introduction by Fred Ball, who writes on his attempts to discover the truth about Tressell, and papers on the social and political background against which the novel was written. Some other features of the lives of working men of the time were incorporated into the story.

Hastings, the "Mugsborough" of the novel, apart from its historical connection with the landing of William the Conqueror, is known today as a pleasant and popular seaside resort. The novel

shows the reality behind the surface of middle-class comfort and respectability. Owen, the Socialist who joins the workers in the painting trade and tries to organise them to protect against their conditions, finds apathy when he preaches a vision of a better future. In a chapter in which Owen tries to explain to his fellow workers "the great money trick", whereby the workers have no money because the capitalist either pays low wages or has no work to give the men, the capitalist is made to tell the unemployed that they were to be honest and not insolent; "if they were not careful he would have their faces battered in for them by the police, or if necessary he would call out the military".

One of the chapters in the *Papers* is called "Unemployment, Poverty and Charity". It is worth reading even today when assistance for the unemployed is forthcoming, although there are those who resent public money being used for such purposes and suggest that plenty of those now out of work could find work if they were prepared to look hard enough.

There is a tendency, which is understandable, to place *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* higher than it might otherwise deserve as a novel, precisely because it is a novel by a working man about working men. Thus, the novel has always had a special appeal to adult students who wish to read books that tell them something about the development of society. The occasional half-gibe, half-serious comment is made about courses in literature which consists of Shaw, Wells, Galsworthy and *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, as if there was no other writing that could cast a light on English society from a non-middle-class standpoint. The fact that Tressell's book can be mentioned in this company is not without significance but it is true that it can be valued, not for the wrong reasons, but with the wrong emphasis.

It is worth reading, and so are these *Papers*. They represent an attempt by a group of present-day adult students to collaborate in work of constructive enquiry, which in some other quarters is called research. They do honour to the WEA, still in the forefront of adult education for all, and to the memory of the elusive Tressell.

T. F. EVANS

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Looking for Answers

PETER COTES

The recent television series, "Jesus: the Evidence", raised a number of fundamental questions about the man regarded by Christians as saviour and God. The transmission of this programme, in defiance of protests by believers, may mark the emergence of a less deferential and unquestioning attitude to Christianity that has predominated since the early days of broadcasting.

Jesus: the Evidence was a television programme consisting of three one-hour films on Channel Four, querying the "facts" that go with the Gospel story and questioning a number of others. Shown on Sunday evenings, the third episode was screened two hours earlier than the first two. Whether this decision to alter the times had any significant reason to commend it, following the rather stormy passage the series endured at the hands of a hostile Press, I have no way of knowing. What can be said, without fear or favour, is that in tackling such a thorny subject in the time allotted (with trivial commercial breaks included) the producers of the series displayed a disregard for any prejudiced or thoughtless members of a Sunday evening audience with a courage that was commendable and quite unique.

The programme makers attempted to find answers to such questions as whether Jesus existed and, if he did, was it his intention to found a Church or claim to be the Messiah. Did he have a twin brother? Were the Gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Did the miracles actually happen? If people really were healed—or appeared to be—can such happenings be explained by hypnosis?

In looking for answers to so many queries posed by the old, old story, the Channel Four team felt compelled occasionally to take short cuts. They were anxious, too, to adopt an even-handed attitude, thus precluding their detractors—who regard any representation of Jesus as blasphemous, except when seen on stained glass windows—from charging them with blasphemy.

Hollywood vulgarity and deference to organised religion have been the order of the day throughout film history. The odd exceptions include the depiction of the priest in *On the Waterfront*, the late, great Wilfred Lawson's performance as *Pastor Hall*, several Bunuel films of rare distinction, and *The Nun's Story*. The television output, consisting of religious "epics" first seen on the big screen and now transferred to feed the voracious appetite of its junior partner, "the box", has been shameful.

Both versions of *The Ten Commandments* and such celestial choir pieces as *The King of Kings*, *The Robe*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *The Sign of the Cross* demeaned the tale they presumed

to tell, insulting our intelligence at the same time as we were being made bilious by their poisonous treacle.

In modern times it was left to an atheist, Pier Paolo Pasolini, to produce on a shoestring budget with his *Gospel According to St Matthew* (seen on Channel Four late on Good Friday) what is arguably the best film ever made about the bible story. Ironically enough, Pasolini had earlier been arrested for making a film said to be insulting to the Church. It was this artist's genius, and possibly his free-thought, that enabled him to separate the man from the institution, treating Jesus not as a magician but with simplicity and understanding for the zeal of one who, if he existed, had both pity and compassion. The whole work possessed an immediacy that was refreshing, together with an eloquence, artistry and grandeur completely devoid of the parsonic cinematic reverence that has disgraced so many reels of celluloid since movies first began. However, Pasolini never permitted any caricaturing to spoil his simple story line and true characterisation. This was, perhaps, more than could have been felt unqualifiedly about *Jesus: the Evidence*, although its investigative quality was instructive and when the knowledgeable Professor G. A. Wells was on camera it was very good.

In a predictable type discussion programme, following the first episode, one devout Tory MP thought it impossible that cloistered academics might know anything about the mystery of "revealed" truth! But as Bernard Levin (deputising the role of *The Times* "Religious Correspondent"?) was even later to write, "it is certainly not bad that the programme should be made and shown". Such patronage from the Patron Saint of Grays Inn Road seemed to suggest that Jeremy Isaacs, Head of Channel Four, need not, after all, be consigned to the flames for putting on *Jesus: the Evidence* in the first place. After that it was a relief to have the same newspaper's television critic finding the same programme "hilarious" in places; comparing the small part players in the roles of the Egyptians who found the Oxyrhynchus papyri with two impersonations by the late Peter Sellers.

In addition to some anticipated snideness from a number of other reviewers there was also a fair deal of genuine anxiety in other quarters that the ethical teachings of Christ were being ignored by a too sceptical approach to Christianity. However, these champions of fair play for all might care to reflect that any serious study must be objective, and I could find no evidence to support the charge that either Jeremy Isaacs or his earnest production team were being other than conscientious in their approach to

Opus Dei Under Fire

A world-wide petition urging the Pope to investigate Opus Dei is being supported by a Poole, Dorset, woman who believes that her 18-year-old daughter has been brainwashed by the organisation. Mrs Sylvia Loffler's daughter, Caroline, came into contact with Opus Dei through a careers talk at school when she was 15. She went on a course at the organisation's headquarters in Hampstead.

Mrs Loffler says that since her daughter became involved with Opus Dei she has become "secretive and introverted".

Last May a BBC "Everyman" programme on Opus Dei, based on the evidence of Dr John Roche, who had been a member for 14 years, caused considerable disquiet, not least among Roman Catholics. It was revealed that members handed over their wages to the organisation. More seriously, it was alleged that members, including young girls, were being brainwashed and practiced mortification.

John Horrigan, Press officer for Opus Dei, denies there is brainwashing. A few members do practice mortification as a penance.

In 1981 Cardinal Hume issued guidelines in which it was advised that no person under 18 should make a long-term commitment to Opus Dei. But a year later the Pope established Opus Dei as a Personal Prelature, thus strengthening and extending the influence of this sinister organisation.

Promised by Whom?

If they are not accused of anti-Semitism, critics of Israel are frequently chided with: "Why do you criticise the only Western-style democracy in the Middle East and say nothing about its undemocratic neighbours?" Well, I don't think freethinkers can be accused of being quiet about the ayatollahs' Iran and those who try to emulate them elsewhere. But is Israel really a Western-style democracy? I've never been to Israel (and probably wouldn't be allowed inside), but I imagine most Western tourists in Tel-Aviv would immediately feel at home. Closer examination would however show that the country is a theocracy. Not only are non-Jews in the occupied territories denied a vote, but all social and civic life is organised on a confessional basis, adulterers and sabbath-breaking cars are stoned in Orthodox areas, and prolonged religious indoctrination in schools makes the British education system seem humanist by comparison. Should secularists keep quiet about all this?

"Now these be the last words of David"—not, I fear, "the sweet psalmist of Israel". Whether they are Left-wing or Right-wing I leave to the judgment of better politicians than myself.

the study of whether Jesus was or whether Jesus wasn't. Certainly, a great many good people have *believed*; only religious bigots or *religious* atheists—those who are not freethinkers—can honestly withhold respect and gratitude to those like David Sheppard, Donald Soper, Trevor Huddleston and Joost de Blank. But they represent only a fraction of the numbers game. On the side of the sceptics, from Bruno and Galileo to Thomas Paine and Marie Curie, down the centuries to our own time, we must honour the scores of men and women who acted bravely against the tide of popular opinion. The flat earthers were proved wrong: the world is round. Other voices in the wilderness aren't always right (or, for that matter, invariably wrong).

Sifting preconceived evidence is always a struggle, and *Jesus: the Evidence*, even if not all the technical tricks were as highly skilled and professionally executed as some of us would have liked, at the very least explored fresh ground on the small screen that few others had ever covered. The fact that Pasolini's film was finally shown on Channel Four on Good Friday night, albeit late, during the period when *Jesus: the Evidence* was being screened, augurs well for that most maligned of television channels. As the *Daily Telegraph* critic, Richard Last, was quick to infer in his criticism, any religion as old and a powerful as Christianity must be able to defend itself against attack.

Certainly if religion can be held responsible for any social and individual good, it cannot be unjust to say that it has also to answer at the Bar of civilisation for an appalling amount of evil. It was the respectable agnostic (not a "wicked atheist") Julian Huxley who reminded us that "the feelings of sanctity and worship aroused in the religiously-minded man, make it difficult for him to . . . imagine that his own religion may be capable of achieving a great deal of harm, or even actually doing so at the moment".

In fact *Jesus: the Evidence* was a worthy project to produce at all by any TV company. Channel Four stuck its neck out by ignoring the ratings and tackling over three consecutive weekends this three-part series in which mythology was dissected and closely examined alongside religious *feeling*; for that fact alone they are owed the gratitude of the intelligent person's guide to the offertory box.

A Bill passed in Malta's Parliament making all schooling free will seriously weaken the Roman Catholic Church's grip on the island's education system. The Church has offered free education only to children whose parents cannot afford to pay for it. Prime Minister Mintoff has threatened to take over church schools if they do not agree to provide free tuition for all.

LETTERS

"THE FREETHINKER" AND ISRAEL

Mr B. Goshen (Letters, April) claims that "Freethinker" assaults on Israel "are not recent but are longstanding and appear to be a matter of policy". He goes on to say that he is "old enough to remember" furious comments in this paper when Israel beat Egypt and Syria in 1967 and he further adds that when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in 1973 the paper "had nothing to say". His conclusion is that "Freethinkers, like Christians, can tolerate individual Jews, but not a Jewish national liberation struggle".

I suggest that Mr Goshen should be old enough to get his facts right instead of indulging in misrepresentation and muddle. First of all it is ridiculous to imply that freethinkers cannot be Jews or vice versa when one considers the splendid contribution of Jews to the freethought movement. Secondly, there is no monolithic unanimity among Jews in general about Zionism: attitudes vary from indifference to passionate support or to strong disapproval. I see no reason, therefore, why Christians or freethinkers should be unanimous about Zionism either. During the last 20 years I have met Jewish freethinkers who were staunch Zionists, and others who were strongly opposed to Israel and its policies.

I had no idea that, since at least 1967, "The Freethinker" had an official anti-Israeli policy. If so, it was most careless of the publishers to appoint a pro-Israeli editor—myself—in 1971, and not to dismiss me without a reference when I slapped Swinburne's poem, "On the Russian Persecution of the Jews", all over the front page of the 29 January 1972 issue, together with an editorial on "The Sport of Czars"—a plea on behalf of Jews wanting to leave the Soviet Union for Israel. The publishers also failed to discipline me when I wrote numerous editorial articles against Idi Amin, a bitter enemy of Israel in particular and of humanity in general. Amin now enjoys the protection of that darling of the lunatic Left, Colonel Gaddafi.

Perhaps I should mention that G. W. Foote, the founder of "The Freethinker", also published the same poem by Swinburne in January 1882. Later on Foote chose as his amanuensis and successor a character called Chapman Cohen. But I suspect that Cohen's views on Zionism would find little favour with Mr Goshen.

Mr Goshen's allegation about "The Freethinker" and the Yom Kippur War serves well as a warning against the wearing of blinkers. This war began soon after I ceased as editor of the paper: the first attack on Israel occurred on 6 October 1973 which must have been about the deadline for my successor, Christopher Morey, to get out his first issue of "The Freethinker". This meant, in effect, that the earliest issue in which the new editor could have made detailed comment on the war would have been the November 1973 issue, by which time the Israelis had counter-attacked with their usual brilliance and all was over bar the shouting. Mr Goshen says "The Freethinker" had nothing to say. I must be hallucinating, for I have the November 1973 issue open in front of me and on page 163 there is a half-column editorial item on the "Middle East Conflict". Mr Goshen would not have liked it, and it is not quite the way I might have commented on the war, but that is not the point: I simply claim that it is there in print.

Like Mr Goshen, I do not always find my views fully reflected in the pages of "The Freethinker"—come to think of it, I would probably be disappointed if they were. However, I assume—and I think I do so on

rational grounds—that what is printed on issues like Zionism, socialism or nationalism (we even have readers who disapprove of any form of nationalism) represents the private views of the editor of the time and of those readers who take the trouble to contribute their opinions.

Mr Goshen, I submit, is guilty of abusing the hospitality he has received from these columns and of factual inaccuracy. I can understand his finding "The Zionazis" (August 1982) a tasteless headline, but he has not disposed of the contents which amount to saying that Jewish Right-wing louts are no better than any other Right-wing louts. I would only suggest that Left-wing louts are no better either.

Mr Goshen can atone for his errors by taking himself off to a good reference library and looking up the "New Statesman" for 16 August 1947. He should read—very carefully—Arthur Koestler's poignant defence of Zionism entitled "Letter to a Parent of a British Soldier in Palestine". If he cannot find a copy, he can borrow mine.

NIGEL SINNOTT

GULLIBLE SCIENTISTS

I fear that Mr Antony Gray is being unduly optimistic in regarding the fight against Creationism as principally "to get across to the scientifically illiterate . . . that Creationism is intellectual garbage" (Reviews, May).

It is both more important and more difficult to get it across to the minority of the scientifically literate who hold these absurd views. And it is important to persuade scientists to give up views that are patently absurd because the general public often look to the scientific community for guidance.

Why scientists sometimes take up laughable beliefs such as Creationism is not obvious. I suspect it is because their training covers only the critical analysis of scientific problems, not the critical analysis of philosophical problems. If so, the occurrence of religious scientists will persist until philosophical analysis is included as part of their scientific training.

PETER LLOYD

EGGSACTLY!

"Gulls' Egg", the story from Doncaster of the Easter egg that wept, "amazing" teachers and "stunning" a school (May), made most entertaining reading. Soon after the appearance of this story in the "Sun" I had been told, in all seriousness, by a young Roman Catholic that this tearful egg was a sign that the end of the world was near.

I was reminded of a remarkable "hen" incident reported in Derek Cooper's admirable "The Gullibility Gap" (Routledge and Kegan Paul). In 1806 Leeds (not all that far from Doncaster) was besieged with terror when a hen laid an egg bearing the legend "Christ is Coming"—clearly yet another Signal for the Beginning of the End.

As Mr Cooper remarks in another section of his splendid book, we all have a great yearning to be astonished and titillated.

J. T. BAINS

FROM VOLTAIRE TO RUSSELL

Having just finished "Bertrand Russell's Best", two statements in particular stay in my mind.

He is perplexed because governments have no difficulty in finding money to spend on weapons that kill people, but have difficulty in finding it to keep

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, 1 July, 7 pm. Annual General Meeting.

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

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, 27 June, 7.45 pm. Bertrand Russell (tape recordings and discussion).

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Thursday, 31 May until Thursday, 5 July, 6 pm. Problems in Religion. Tutor: I. H. Deardon.

Sutton Humanist Group. Garden Party, Sunday, 24 June, 2.30 pm at 15 Manor Road, Cheam, Surrey.

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

them alive. Voltaire, in his Philosophical Dictionary, makes almost exactly the same statements—over 200 years ago. So much for that "progress" we hear so much about.

In his "superstitious" moments, Russell is tempted to believe that God has decided we have come too near to the "ultimate secrets" and intends to let us exterminate the human race. Many fundamentalists believe that a nuclear holocaust could be part of the "divine plan". So for once the Christians and freethinkers are agreed—or so it would appear!

A. T. LAMBERT

INDIVIDUALISM OR FREETHOUGHT?

To criticise myself and S. E. Parker for seeking only to "look after number one" (Letters, April), Christopher Brunel, shows that many secularists miss the point of the exercise. We are only individualists because we do not wish to be sacrificed to a wider abstraction such as "the will of God", or to the cruel and monolithic belief systems erected by the Hegelians of the Left.

For this reason we do not believe that the protest groups that some secularists wish us to align with are in fact "progressive". Many groups have borrowed our linguistic clothes while rejecting much of the scepticism and liberalism of the freethought movement.

If Mr Brunel wishes to change the world he should join an appropriate political movement. Having done so he would then have to ask whether he could still call himself a freethinker.

ANTONY MILNE

This correspondence is now closed.

Pakistan's top Islamic scholars have declared that men without beards are sinners. The official Council of Islamic Ideology said in a statement to an inquirer: "To shave one's beard is a sin and persistently doing so is a major sin".

Freethinker Fund

Although fewer contributions are listed this month there has been an increase in the amount received. This is partly due to donations of £16.40, £20, £21.40 and £40, from I. Campbell, an anonymous supporter, J. E. Rupp and Glasgow Humanist Society respectively. All donations, large or small, help to keep *The Freethinker* on a sound financial footing.

Anonymous, £20; Anonymous, £1.40; H. K. Bell, £1.40; H. L. Bevan, £1.40; P. Brown, £3; I. Campbell, £16.40; H. G. Easton, £1; D. Eaton, £1.40; P. L. Gamgee, £1.40; Glasgow Humanist Society, £40; O. Grubiak, £6.40; D. Harper, £4; C. Honeywell, £6.40; B. Humphreys, £2.40; L. James, £1.40; L. Keen, £2; P. Kennedy, £3.50; N. J. Martin, £1.40; G. McGhee, £3; H. M. Merrill, £1.40; C. J. Morey, £6.40; A. F. Pendry, £1.40; T. J. Peters, £6.40; E. Ponting-Barber, £3; J. E. Rupp, £21.40; R. Savage, £1.40; J. Stopes-Roe, £2.80; J. C. Tugwell, £2.80; J. D. Verney, £1.40; J. E. Westerman, £1.40.

Total for the period 4 April until 3 May: £167.70.

1713 — 1784 DENIS DIDEROT COMMEMORATION MEETING

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BARBARA SMOKER

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1

Monday, 16th July, 7 pm

National Secular Society, 702 Holloway Road,
London N19 (telephone 01-272 1266)

When former SS Colonel Walter Rauff was buried in Chile last month, three other elderly fugitives gave the Nazi salute at the graveside. He was wanted for wartime atrocities, including participation in the gassing of 200,000 Jews. Rauff escaped to South America in 1947 after being sheltered for 18 months in the Vatican.

loses more of its teenage members than the other churches. A large proportion, 75 per cent, drop out before they reach the age of 19. The losses in the same age group for the Roman Catholic and Free Churches are 55 per cent and 50 per cent respectively.

There is a considerably higher level of church-going among young Roman Catholics, with 81 per cent of them committed to weekly attendance. This compares with 67 per cent in the Free Churches and 50 per cent in the Church of England. Half of the Roman Catholics find Sunday services boring. So do 31 per cent of the Anglicans and 16 per cent of the Free Church worshippers.

Thirty-three per cent of Roman Catholics in the 16-20 age group would never discuss their problems with the clergy. Neither would a high proportion of Anglicans (25 per cent) nor even many in the Free Churches (12 per cent).

Many of the report's conclusions will cause consternation in the churches. In the section on "traditional disciplines of spirituality" it is stated that the bible is read by only five per cent of the 13-15 year olds. The bible remains a closed book to 37 per cent of the Roman Catholic, and 19 per cent of both the Free Church and Anglican interviewees.

It is also revealed that some of the teenage churchgoers (nine per cent attending Roman Catholic, 21 per cent attending Anglican and 13 per cent attending Free Churches) call themselves agnostics or atheists. Thirteen per cent of the young Christians interviewed do not believe that Jesus was the son of God while 23 per cent do not believe that he rose from the dead. No less than 40 per cent of them do not believe in life after death.

A section of the report consists of character studies of five young people who completed the questionnaire.

Elizabeth, 14, lives in Lancaster and has been going to an Anglican Sunday school since she was four. She attends church regularly and is a member of the confirmation class. However, "she finds herself becoming more and more impatient with the life of that church. . . Sunday services she attends are old-fashioned, boring. . . She cannot imagine any of her friends who do not usually go to church being able to turn up to one of these services and getting anything out of the experience at all".

Martin, who is now 15, started going to the Baptist church with his parents when he was five and admitted into membership at the age of 11. He does not feel involved in the life of his local church, "and what is more, he has no desire to become more involved. . . He finds the services dull, and the sermons boring . . . he does not feel that the services have any relevance for his daily life".

Carole, 17, worships regularly at an ecumenical centre and "has no doubt about her religious beliefs. She is clear about her belief in God. She firmly believes that Jesus really rose from the dead and that Jesus is the Son of God. . . Of course she believes in God as the creator of everything, but does not accept as literally true the Genesis account of God making the world in six days and resting on the seventh". With her strong religious faith she has a fairly conservative set of moral values. But she does not condemn contraception and is uncritical of homosexual practices.

David, 19, is an Anglican who has been attending Sunday school and church since the age of four. He joined the youth club and church-sponsored scout group, and attended classes for six months before confirmation. He sings in the choir and rarely misses attending church at least once every Sunday. On social questions he is critical of abortion and euthanasia. But he believes that contraception is morally right, does not consider it wrong to have sexual intercourse outside marriage nor to practice homosexuality. He is critical of drunkenness, but does not think it wrong to use marijuana.

Mary, 18, belongs to a strongly Roman Catholic family and was brought up strictly in the faith. She was educated at Catholic schools, was confirmed at the age of 11 and attends church regularly. But her views are unorthodox and she "happily rejects the Genesis story of the way in which creation took place. . . She no longer believes that it is wrong to have sexual intercourse outside marriage. She is no longer willing to condemn the practice of homosexuality as morally wrong. She is very clear of her rejection of her church's teaching on contraception".

The report is entitled *Teenagers and the Church* and is published by Collins Liturgical Publications at £7.95.

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