

The Freethinker

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NORTHERN IRELAND: BENN'S INITIATIVE TO END RELIGIOUS WAR

Tony Benn, MP, has released the text of a draft Bill which proposes British withdrawal from Northern Ireland at a date to be decided. It may be debated in the next session of Parliament. At the same time a MORI poll, conducted on behalf of London Weekend Television, has revealed that 45 per cent of the interviewees would end the union with Northern Ireland if there were to be an immediate referendum. Most of the polls carried out in recent years show that the majority of British people are in favour of a withdrawal from the province.

The reason why majority opinion on the Northern Ireland issue is ignored was highlighted by Mr Benn when he commented on his Bill. "One of the dominant reasons why Britain is still in Northern Ireland is strategic", he declared. Neither the present British or United States governments would accept the reunification of Ireland if it were to remain neutral, under the terms of the present constitution of the Republic. Britain was in Northern Ireland to protect NATO, not the community.

"If the Republic were ever to be persuaded to join NATO", said Mr Benn, "reunification would then be strongly urged, and possibly even imposed, by London".

The latest upsurge of violence in Northern Ireland was sparked off by the inept handling of a visit by Martin Galvin, publicity director of NORAID, to the province. James Prior took the blame for the political blunder, although it was the Home Secretary who signed the exclusion order. Having already announced his resignation as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr Prior could afford to be candid. The ambitious Mr Brittan, who may eventually replace the Iron Lady, maintained a fairly discreet silence.

Opinion is divided about the wisdom of banning

Mr Galvin — an experienced public relations operator — in the first place. If he had been allowed to enter Northern Ireland and make a few speeches he would have had little to show for his trip. As it turned out, he left the country in a blaze of publicity largely favourable to his cause.

There is wide agreement that it was an act of folly to turn the trigger-happy and mainly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary loose on the crowd. The Rev Ian Paisley and other unionists have been bellowing their condemnation of newspaper and television teams for not managing the news in a way that would have put the police in a favourable light. The Protestants have good cause to sing the praises of the RUC. For despite many cosmetic exercises, it remains the vicious and brutal force whose ferocious attack on a peaceful civil rights march was the starting point of a 15-year campaign of terror and violence.

Britain, to her cost, ignored past warnings by civil rights organisations about the role of the police in Northern Ireland.

Mr Benn says that millions of people in Britain and Ireland support the principle of withdrawal from Northern Ireland. The recent decision to end British jurisdiction over Hong Kong shows the way forward.

• Two of the latest victims of the religious war in Northern Ireland, a Protestant and a Catholic, were buried recently to the strains of the 23rd Psalm. Its mawkish opening lines have become a battle-cry in that outpost of Christian fanaticism. "The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want" has been quoted in scores of obituary notices over the last few years. No shepherd, actual or mythical, has had such a murderous flock as the Christians of Northern Ireland.

The Freethinker

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NEWS

CHARISMATIC MENACE

Much has been revealed in courtrooms and the newspapers about the harmful influence of imported religious sects like the Divine Light Mission, Children of God, Scientologists and the Moonies. But the Charismatic Renewal movement, being a development within the Christian churches, has been largely ignored, although it has blighted the lives of thousands who have fallen under its spell.

When the question of Charismatic excesses is raised, the more sedate and responsible elements among the clergy tend to smile uneasily and dismiss the whole business as a harmless and transitory phase in Church life. The Rev Peter Mullen, who combines his Anglican ministry with journalism, takes a different view about what he described in a recent *Guardian* article as an "efflorescence of exuberant mindlessness which finds its pedigree in Hippiedom, Jesus People and Pop-Fundamentalism".

This Yorkshire vicar was accompanied a file, two feet thick, "full of letters from people who have been driven to the edge of despair — and some beyond the edge — by this hocus pocus". He quotes several examples of the distress which the Charismatics have caused: "... the man I knew who was exorcised at a Charismatic Prayer Group because he said he didn't believe the Devil is a person. He ended up in a psychiatric ward.

"Or the woman who was told by a bunch of peripatetic healers that God would cure her terminal cancer of the liver. She died four days later, confusion worse confounded. . .

"Then there was the teenage girl, up at university for her first term, a bit lonely, naturally apprehensive, looking for company. She wandered into another Charismatic church where she became so involved that her parents, her brother and sister, no longer recognised her as the pleasant, reasonable person of her sixth-form days. Her mother, in anguish over the telephone, told me: 'We can't get her away from them. They've destroyed her. It's just like the Moonies'. She also told me that they had used that text on her daughter, 'Whoever does not hate his father and mother cannot be my disciple'".

Mr Mullen comments: "That woman was right. It is just like . . . a hundred other cults of irrationality which take unscrupulous advantage of people who are vulnerable through loneliness, marriage breakdown, or other personal crisis. The same psychology is there in Charismatic Renewal: the smiling welcome, the invitation to participate in

S AND NOTES

liturgies of programmed spontaneity, the hand-clapping, the togetherness, the psychobabble; but later the obsession with sexual guilt, demon possession, hell, conversion, and the perversions which attend the Charismatics' supposition that they are The Elect".

Churchmen like the Rev Peter Mullen who recognise the harmful and often dangerous nature of movements like Charismatic Renewal are in a dilemma. Traditional English Christianity is, he believes, "caught between the devil of Charismatic Renewal and the deep blue sea of bureaucratic ink". He deplores "the drab, spiritless bureaucracy of the contemporary church, riddled with synods and commissions". However, his Church of England enjoys the influence and power that comes from being a component of the State machine and one of the country's wealthiest institutions. Inevitably such a church will be bureaucratic and remote. But the Charismatic Renewal movement seems warm and inviting "to many ordinary men and women who have fallen (or else were beguiled) into its clutches".

The basic problem for thoughtful Christians who clash with such groups is that the fundamentalists have the bible on their side. Within its pages they find authority for their ludicrous teachings on conversion, hell, demons and miracle cures. Simple-mindedness is exalted, sexuality denigrated.

And whatever contemporary followers of Jesus may say, he *did* specify hatred of parents and family as a condition of discipleship.

ENTERTAINMENTS COLUMN

Billy Graham's Mission England show was generally well received by his critics. One factor in his favour is that he is far less crude than the unspeakable Luis Palau who was performing at a football stadium in West London.

But it was not all sweetness and light for Dr Graham. The day before his mission opened in Bristol a blistering message was received from a fellow-Christian, Pastor Jack Glass. He is the ultra-fundamentalist yahoo who presides over Glasgow's Zion Baptist Chapel.

Pastor Glass reproved the American evangelist in explicit terms. "I feel it is my duty as a minister of the Gospel", he wrote, "to accuse you of being the biggest traitor to Christ since Judas Iscariot. By your pro-Rome ecumenical evangelism you have demolished the wall of separation from apostasy built at

the Protestant Reformation. . .

"You are the Pope's puppet and the 'evangelical' monkey of the ecumenical organ-grinders, may God grant you the gift of repentance".

Pastor Glass and a party of Jesuites travelled to Bristol for the first of the Mission England rallies. They distributed copies of his execrable *Scottish Protestant Voice* which contained a prayer for Billy Graham, the apostate. (Pastor Glass appears to forget that his heroes of the Protestant Reformation were themselves accused of apostasy.)

There is little to be said in favour of Christianity except that from time to time the antics of its most dedicated adherents afford us a good laugh.

ISLAMIC TERRORISM

A family in Oxford has been terrorised by Muslims because 17-year-old Rhaila Kiane has eloped with a Christian. She married Thomas Singh, son of the Rev Balwant Singh, an Anglican clergyman of Indian descent. Mr Singh says that although the marriage is a matter between the two families concerned, "the whole of the Muslim community has joined in".

A mini-bus standing outside the Singhs' home has been destroyed by fire. The family is convinced that local Muslims, incensed by the marriage, are responsible. They have had telephone calls warning "next time we will burn down your house". The police have been informed of this and other threats.

A spokesman for local Muslims said that the entire Muslim community was affected by the marriage. "The marriage has infringed Islamic law", he told a BBC interviewer. Asserting that a marriage between a Muslim woman and a Christian or a Jewish man is null and void, he declared: "The girl will be deemed to be living in a state of adultery".

The girl's brother was equally adamant. He said: "The whole community is not very pleased about what she has done. She is going to come back. . . This is not the sort of thing that a girl like her can go and do".

It is high time that zealots of the Islamic faith realised that they cannot operate a reign of religious terror in a British city as they can in a Pakistani village. Many young Muslims who were born in Britain do not wish to have their lives programmed. Muslim girls are becoming increasingly unwilling to live in the shadow of male relatives. The community, in the case of Oxford Muslims a mob, is not at liberty to persecute those who decide to change, abandon or marry outside their religious faith.

Religious leaders have many advantages which make them dominant figures in the Muslim community. But they and other males are not permitted to intimidate those who prefer to live by a less rigid

code than that of their parents and grandparents. It is intolerable that a Christian family into which a Muslim girl has married should be harassed. And it is despicable that the insulting and slanderous remark about her living in a state of adultery was broadcast in a BBC programme.

"RESPECTABLE" CULTS

David Alton, MP (Liberal, Liverpool Mosseley Hill) is to introduce a ten-minute rule Bill in the House of Commons next month which aims to give the Home Secretary powers to ban religious organisations which practice deception and brainwashing of converts. Mr Alton, an ardent Roman Catholic, is concentrating his fire on groups outside mainstream Christianity. He says that various sects and cults "are spreading their evil influence all over Britain. I want legislation to control the activities of these pseudo-religious gangsters".

A prime target for such legislation will be the Church of Scientology which a High Court judge recently castigated as "corrupt, sinister and dangerous". During a child custody case Mr Justice Latey referred to the Scientologists' authoritarian methods as "grimly reminiscent of the ranting and bullying of Hitler and his henchmen".

Mr Alton has denied that he is seeking to restrict the choice of religious worship. Pointing out that certain "unwelcome" groups had been granted charitable status, he said: "It is ludicrous to afford them the badge of apparent respectability when they are engaged in tax evasion and using money to ensnare young men and women, turning them against their families and friends".

He is supported by Sir Geoffrey Johnson-Smith, MP (Conservative, Wealden), formerly MP for East Grinstead where the Scientologists have their British headquarters. Sir Geoffrey said that in view of Judge Latey's remarks he would ask the Home Secretary to order an investigation into the scientology organisation.

Citizens of Island Pond, a small town in Vermont, USA, are attempting to evict a strict Christian sect from their community. Local people were shocked by the revelation that sect members beat their children until they bled. State police removed over a hundred children from the Northeast Kingdom Community Church to investigate reports that they were beaten regularly with wooden rods. A church elder publicly defended child abuse. He declared: "If you wait until a child is able to reason then you have waited too long. Even little babies have a fallen nature and need to be disciplined. We are going to raise a lost generation of lost children unless they are properly disciplined and properly spanked".

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. The Prince Albert, Trafalgar Street (adjacent to Brighton Station). Sunday, 7 October, 7 pm. Jim Herrick: Diderot, Encyclopaedist Extraordinaire — How Diderot Earned the Gratitude of the Human Race. Readings by John White.

Gay Humanist Group. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30 p.m. October meeting, Dudley Cave: Where There's a Will There's a Relative.

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. Christmas at Bournemouth. Details from Betty Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12, telephone 01-673 6234.

Merseyside Humanist Group. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Friday, 19 October, 7.45 pm. Peter Banks: The Threat of Nuclear War.

National Secular Society. Annual outing (Surrey and Berkshire), Sunday, 16 September. Details from the General Secretary, 702 Holloway Road, London N19, telephone 01-272 1266.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 10 October, 8 pm. Kurt and Ann Marie Hoselitz: A Visit to India.

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

THE 1984 VOLTAIRE MEMORIAL LECTURE

LUDOVIC KENNEDY AN END TO BELIEF?

Monday 8 October, 7 pm
Conway Hall, Red Lion Square,
Holborn, London WC1

The Warnock Report

WILLIAM WALKER

The Committee of Inquiry Into Human Fertilisation and Embryology, chaired by Dame Mary Warnock, recently made its report. Religious opposition to the Committee's recommendations is intense, with the Roman Catholic Church and its "front" organisations leading the attack. Professor Walker concludes that the recommendations, although controversial, "are excellently balanced and humane".

There are two especially pleasing features of this report. One is the unusual lucidity and even elegance with which it is written, lapsing very rarely and when it does, surprisingly, into circumlocutory officialese. The other is its reasoned, pragmatic and generally liberal approach to moral decision which any humanist would surely applaud, whether he agrees or not with any one of its 63 specific recommendations. In the foreword the Committee claims that its views are based on argument rather than moral sentiment laid down as it were, with recognition that matters of ultimate value cannot be proved, and the claim seems justified. Indeed, so sustained are these two pleasing features that in many places the report reads more like a high-grade academic analysis than a prescription for government action, which it nevertheless most certainly is.

There is a valuable account of *in vitro* fertilisation and related embryological research, and of the treatment of infertility by these techniques. The rapidity of scientific advances, and of consequent changes in social attitudes, is acknowledged, with the difficulty that this may entail in framing precise proposals for the present. The Committee's ethical approach to the manifold problems posed by these developments appears to be utilitarian, heavily modified by the need for a high measure of social consensus. "Public concern" is a recurring phrase and a major consideration.

Artificial insemination by husband or donor (AIH and AID) and *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF) in its various forms, preferably for couples in a stable heterosexual relationship, are approved, and detailed recommendations made for their provision, including the various legal implications as well as the handling and disposal of frozen embryos. The "heavy burden" of decision as to who will be accepted for these treatments on the National Health Service is left to the medical consultants, with provision in the case of refused treatments for explanation and a second opinion. While this might seem fair and even inevitable, it leaves misgivings, if the arbitrary and prejudiced performance of some consultants in the related reproductive field of abortion is considered. In the West Midlands, for example, only one woman in five entitled to a legal abortion gets one on the

NHS. Consultant power in our medical services is a delicate but unavoidable issue, especially in the disposal of scarce resources and availability of treatment in the field of reproduction.

A majority of the Committee of 16 thinks that surrogate pregnancy should be completely outlawed, though a note of dissent by two members suggests that the door be kept ajar for surrogacy as "a last resort", where there was no commercial motive. There is much to be said for this dissenting view, especially where surrogacy took the form of an altruistic gift, as it well might.

Research on living human embryos, of particular value in the study and treatment of genetic defects, is approved again by a substantial majority, but only up to the end of the 14th day after fertilisation. This limit, based ultimately on the potential of the embryo under certain conditions to become a human person and specifically on the possibility of twinning before the 15th day (after which the potential "person" is unique), is acknowledged to be arbitrary, and though very "safe" is probably one of the least rational of the recommendations. After all, the sperm and egg have a similar general potential but no-one worries about failing to bring them together. The development of a functional nervous system, on the reverse analogy of brain death in transplant procedures, would set the limit more consistently at 30 or even 40 days, with great advantage to the knowledge which could be obtained and which is the justification for making the recommendation.

A note of dissent signed by three members would forbid all research on the human embryo, because of its status as a potential person. These signatories would also presumably wish to ban therapeutic abortion and also contraception by intra-uterine device, both very widely accepted in our community. A farther expression of dissent, with four signatories, would forbid research on human embryos produced specifically for that purpose.

The special status accorded by consent in these discussions to the human embryo is interesting to the humanist moralist. It reinforces his view that morality is biologically determined and purely human in origin, one's own species (or family or country or pets) coming first. There would not appear to be any general or absolute ethical principle that would justify this preference. In nature, or to God, a hamster's embryo might be just as important.

Most importantly, the Committee recommends with considerable detail the establishment of a statutory licensing authority to regulate both research and the infertility services recommended for control. It also suggests that a study be made

of the extent and nature of infertility, surely an important starting-point for the whole exercise. One wonders whether such a study could not have been commissioned by the Committee in its two years of activity. One cannot help wondering also about the wider priorities in health care, even in the field of reproduction itself. These were not within the Committee's remit, and its report justifies the services it recommends as treatment of a disability, pointing out that larger priorities are more concerned with the extent than with the bare provision of services. But one thinks of the Black report of 1980 on inequalities in health: better antenatal and perinatal conditions for poorer mothers would save thousands of wanted babies each year. And no account is taken of course of the paradoxical but related issue of overpopulation, which with its frightful implications dwarfs all of the others. Still, within its terms of reference, the report and its recommendations are excellently balanced and humane.

Not all will agree with this favourable conclusion, and debate both in Parliament and at large will be lively, as expected by the Health Minister, Mr Kenneth Clarke. The leader of the all-party Parliamentary Pro-Life Group, Sir Bernard Braine, has already fulminated at a Press conference against research on live human embryos. His case as described in *The Lancet* (28 July) seems to rest partly on a probably prejudiced view of available research methods but chiefly on the kind of powerful sentiment which the Committee rightly rejects as adequate in itself for moral reasoning.

In the Roman Catholic weekly, *The Universe* (27 July), Cardinal Hume made the report the basis for a swingeing and highly charged assault on what he calls "society's new morality" because it ignores his view of God and "the mystery that God is". He is vague about the specific features of the report but appears to oppose all of its positive recommendations. He offers no argument, only assertions. Once again we hear, repeatedly, about "the absolute sanctity of human life" and his Church's wish "to give absolute protection to human life in all its stages". One can but smile wryly when one thinks of the social record of that Church and its attitude to many social problems, including overpopulation and war.

The Cardinal obviously realises that the modern social consensus, arrived at not frivolously or destructively but supported by responsible and heart-searching thinkers of many faiths and none, is strongly against his Church and its long and ignoble tradition of repressing freedom of thought and social advance. That this realisation upsets and alarms him is obvious in this longish article, laden with the language of love and sanctity but mercilessly laying down arbitrary and unverifiable dogma that would deprive all others of freedom to reason and of responsibility for themselves and their actions. After all, no-one will force the Cardinal or his flock

to follow the report's positive recommendations.

Whatever view one takes of the origin of moral values, Cardinal Hume's immobile and absolute moral dictats, of highly questionable origin, are the enemy of human freedom, interest and progress. Once docilely accepted on authority, they are increasingly revealed as baneful examples, despite their sanctimonious sincerity, of unreason and superstition. In principle they are often unethical and in practice often immoral. How superior in reason and morality are the cool and compassionate paragraphs of the Warnock report.

Abolish the Oath!

Representatives of the Magistrates' Association, the Law Society and the Justices' Clerks' Society are seeking a meeting with the Lord Chancellor to state their case for replacing the Oath with a simple promise to tell the truth in court.

In a brief statement, the societies assert that "the taking of an oath is for the majority of people an out-of-date ritual with little or no meaning". It makes an insignificant contribution to the obtaining of truthful evidence.

Casual and cavalier attitudes are displayed towards taking the oath which are offensive to people with religious beliefs. Many who take the oath would deny making any religious commitment in so doing.

The societies confirm a long-standing suspicion that "those who affirm may be discriminated against because they are differing against what the court appears to accept as the norm, and juries in particular may treat their evidence as of less weight than evidence given under oath.

Freethinker Fund

After going through a rather bad patch the Fund has perked up in recent weeks. We thank those readers listed below and hope that others will join them in helping to keep *The Freethinker* on a sound financial footing.

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Total for the period 7 July until 3 August: £132.20.

Mary's Mission

BRIAN PARRY

Readers of *The Times Educational Supplement* were recently treated to a feature on our old friend Mary Whitehouse. She was visited by Nick Baker who gave an account of the meeting which is full of facts already well known to readers of this journal but interspersed with a few interesting oddments.

We all know by now that the young Mary had a futile crush on a married man which was followed by a close encounter with the Christian Oxford Group and her subsequent recruitment into the ranks of the religious rabble-rousers. But did you know it was probably because she failed her school scholarship exams at the first attempt that Mary ended up in the teaching profession? Apparently the bursarship she won on her second attempt carried the condition that she had to become a teacher. Thus was she transformed from "slapdash Mary", as she calls her younger self, into the slap-'em-down Mary of censorship fame. If only she had passed the first time — or failed the second!

According to Nick Baker her first campaign effort was one with which we all sympathise: an effort to raise aid for German civilian war victims. But then sex reared its head. During the 1960s, we learn, Mrs Whitehouse had to teach sex education classes at Madeley Secondary Modern school in Shropshire. And in 1963 she had to deal with some youngsters who were reported for "doing what they shouldn't".

The excuse made by the children, all aged 14, was that they were imitating what they had seen on television. This, together with a couple of similar incidents, appears to have been enough to set her on a crusade to rid television of all the naughty bits. She launched a "Clean Up TV" campaign, which gained nationwide publicity, and was soon forced to choose between teaching and campaigning. Her choice was our loss, for she chose the latter. "Not to have carried on the campaign would have been like letting the kids down", she assured Nick Baker.

Mrs Whitehouse does not agree, writes Mr Baker, that she "has a mission to reform". Yet at the time of the "Romans in Britain" trial (in which she brought a private action, at public expense, against National Theatre director Michael Bogdanov), she wrote in her diary: "All the great reformers, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and others saw and used the law for the maintenance and upholding of God's will". Having apparently seem some parallel in Wilberforce's campaign against slavery and her own attempts to put people like Bogdanov and, earlier, Denis Lemon of *Gay News*, behind bars, she then claims not to see herself as anyone special!

She does, however, agree that she has a talent for gaining public attention, be it in the media or the courts, and although she claims rarely to mention

her religious convictions in public speaking, she informs Nick Baker that the "Judaeo-Christian faith is so involved with western democracy that one can't survive without the other. . . You see glimpses of the breakdown of democracy at the moment with what's happening on the miners' picket lines", she tells him. "Does she mean that the picket line violence is caused by a religious rather than a political breakdown?" the cheeky journalist asks, reasonably.

According to Mr Baker his interviewee began to choose her words with great care at this point: "In a democracy it's the quality of the character of individuals that decides the quality of that democracy. Historically, our character is the Judaeo-Christian faith". So it would seem that the present troubles in the coal industry are not political or industrial in origin — they stem from a lack of Christian faith.

At the moment her main complaint against TV is over the "gratuitous use of bad language" and the showing of "unsuitable" feature films. She asks what sort of effect the bad language and violence, used albeit for serious intent, might have on young people watching. In her mind, writes Mr Baker, the dangers involved in TV's impact on young people outweigh arguments about what adults can be allowed to watch. But the advent of video and cable television seems to have distracted Mrs Whitehouse and her National Viewers' and Listeners' Association from the joys of television bashing for the time being. The "hotter" issue has encouraged the NVLA to push for a new definition of obscenity. They would like to change it from one which demands proof of "a tendency to deprave and corrupt" to one which would define obscenity as "any material of a sexual nature or any material portraying violence which tends to harm a reasonable person of mature years". Mr Baker comments: "I can't help feeling that this definition, were it to be enacted in law, might be difficult to enforce". Sentiments we've heard before — in regard to blasphemy law for instance.

Readers of the article might have gained the impression that Mary Whitehouse is just a well meaning woman trying to protect the interests of children. But it is written somewhere "by their fruits shall ye know them", and the fruits of her work are illustrated by the comments of a taxi driver quoted at the end of the article. "She's a very nice lady", he tells Nick Baker. "Mind you, when I drive her we never talk about her work. And before she gets in the car I always turn the radio off, just in case she hears something she doesn't like. . .".

In Mary's Eden, taxi drivers — and the rest — have to be careful what they talk about and only listen to what she approves of!

The author of this article spent her childhood in a Scottish convent where she was taught by Irish nuns. The experience scarred her and should be a warning to parents who foolishly believe that a religious establishment is a suitable place for their children to be educated.

I was six years old when I started school at a sex-segregated Roman Catholic convent. Throughout my school days, but more especially between the ages of six and 14, I was exposed to such a punitive, intimidating regime, that most of the self-esteem and self-confidence I originally had gradually disappeared.

Before starting school, my parents were not especially punitive to me, but they were ardent, unthinking, practising Catholics. When I left school at 18 years old, I was unable to think independently about anything and didn't know the meaning of intellectual honesty.

My most vivid memory goes back to the time when I was seven years old. Every school day started with Catechism, which we learned by heart, not understanding most of it. The greatest stress was laid on the answer to the Question: "Where will they go who die in mortal sin?" Answer: "They who die in mortal sin will go to hell for all eternity". We repeated, again and again, "Go to hell, go to hell, for all eternity, for all eternity". It was explained to us that "Hell" was a place where you burned in a fire, and it went "on and on". I didn't understand this, but I supposed that, God being all-powerful, he could make it happen, and that the punishment would never end, and I was terrified at the thought of it. At this time, I was only seven years old and the mortal sin that was stressed particularly was "missing Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation".

As I grew older, other "sins" were mentioned—most of which I didn't understand—backed up by a constant threat of punishment. This "punishment ethic" made me very afraid of adults, particularly male adults. I used to think perhaps male adults could be just as cruel as God—since God was a man too. I remember thinking God was cruel and vengeful to people who didn't believe in him. He didn't give them a chance, I thought, he didn't want them to think for themselves. I kept all these thoughts to myself—tried hard to stop thinking about them, but even then I somehow thought that God's teachings were something to do with being a girl, a female, and certainly when I read the true history of Christianity, which I have done fairly recently, when I study the Gospels, not selectively, I

know that my young, unformed thoughts on this point were not far wrong. All this didn't affect my behaviour; I was much too well indoctrinated.

In one respect I suppose it did affect my behaviour adversely; I never felt very close to my father. I was afraid of him, although he was never physically cruel to me. But I constantly thought he might be, so I acted in a cringing, submissive way to him. No matter what he told me to do, I would have done it, and I was labelled "very good", which was quite the wrong label. I was just "very afraid" most of the time; a female human being without any spirit whatsoever. And so I grew up.

This continual indoctrination by fear, with talk of "black marks on your soul", the devil — how powerful he was — led me to being frightened of my own shadow; frightened to go upstairs alone in case this all powerful devil caught me, threats of terrible punishment, and fear of such punishment, persisted throughout my school life. I remember it was quite common to be punished twice for the same offence. For instance, I was locked in a small room and also taken out of a play I was in — much to my grief — because I ran in a corridor. I was eight years old.

From that time, deep within me, I hated the school and the nuns. But physical attack was not ruled out either; as I stood up to answer a question my desk seat squeaked. I was called out, slapped on the ear, my glasses fell on the ground and broke. I was about 14 years old. When I told my parents, they said I must have done something wrong. I remember how forsaken I felt.

I was so terrified most of the time, that I developed the habit of telling lies frequently, even over the most trivial things. I had been told that "adults" were taking God's place and, therefore, in my mind, they also could punish me, not in hell-like God, but maybe in other terrible ways. It was many years before I could stop this bad habit.

As I grew to adolescence, I started to go to Confession more and more often, even making up "sins" in the hope that going so often to Confession would save me from burning in hell for ever. I became completely obsessed with my own "salvation" and consequently became more and more a selfish uncaring human being. When I look back on myself at this time of my life, I'm horrified at the kind of person I was. All this fear and the feelings of inferiority I had affected my social behaviour too, and any creative intellectual ability I had vanished. I had no confidence whatsoever in my own ideas, thoughts or feelings. I found it impossible to express any opinions about anything, even to friends or my family. Deep down I felt extremely aggressive.

I longed to be able to voice my opinions. But I was afraid. I also found it very difficult to write freely. I had a feeling that I didn't want "them"—whoever they were—to know what I was thinking, just in case it was wrong. Anyway, I wasn't sure if "thinking" wasn't a mortal sin too.

The impression I got from my school religious teaching, and I think I was right, was that God really didn't think much of women, unless they were completely docile and non-thinking. So I became like that. My recent studies of the Gospels give ample evidence of the truth of this.

One awful thought which sometimes even now gives me nightmares, is that the intimidation and indoctrination I received was so complete that I was very frightened of authority. I shudder to think what I would have done under a "Hitler-like" authority. Luckily for me, I was not exposed to it.

Then, I suppose, luck played a part in my life. I met, in a friend's house, a Polish man who had been imprisoned by Hitler. He impressed me by his wonderful concern for other people, his tolerance, and how his wide knowledge and wisdom were always tempered by a loving gentleness. Subsequently, when we married, I was on the way to throwing off the effects of my earlier oppression.

For me it was like being in another world, without fear, without lies, without pretence, and very gradually I began to join the human race again, as a thinking human being trying to develop some independence of thought and speech; trying, as it was difficult, to have the kind of open heart and open mind I saw in him. This education by fear and hatred that I was exposed to I now know is the worst possible for any child. An education without fear is not difficult to create, but even today many children don't get it.

My late husband told me his youth was not spent in a constant state of fear like mine; he was not educated in a Church school. But I also think the different experience can be partly explained by the particularly virulent hatred of, and cruelty towards women, which is evident in the Gospels and also between the fourth and ninth centuries of Christianity.

This gradual change in me was also helped by my beloved daughter. Quite unknown to her, she taught me so much. She was not exposed to religious intimidation and I never ceased to wonder at her openness, her marvellous honesty. As a young child she just did not lie at all. On occasion, if asked did she do this or that, she answered fearlessly—yes or no—whichever was the case. She was an only child, but contrary to general opinion, her behaviour with other children was a joy to see. Quite recently, a friend of my daughter's said to me, "I admire Ann's straightness; she will not compromise on a principle. In fact, I've never met anyone with her honesty—especially intellectual honesty".

I confess, on hearing this, I felt quite envious, knowing how different it was in my youth. My daughter is now a sensitive caring, tolerant young adult, with a shining honesty, which sometimes doesn't make life all that easy for her. She is just the kind of young adult I would like to have been, and maybe might have been, if I had not had to endure the agonies of fear and punishment throughout my childhood and youth; which agonies were administered by a Church supposed to be reflecting a "Good and Gentle God".

The male-controlled Church has a lot to answer for. In it's early days it taught the extreme wickedness of women and, in that way, the Church sanctioned and laid the foundation for men to believe it was their right to persecute women. The horrendous witch-hunts were just a logical extension of existing religious beliefs. The more developed Christian ideology became, the more women were deprived of their power and their full humanity.

When I was a young married adult I came to teach in England. I was very perturbed, as I had got a job in a non-Catholic school, and in Scotland I had been educated in a Church school. Even in State schools in Scotland there was strict segregation between Protestants and Catholics. My husband was astonished when I expressed fear as to how the Protestant teachers would behave towards me because I had been used to hearing my uncle saying: "No Protestant will ever put his foot over my threshold". My reaction had been then: "Don't think about it", which is not surprising since my whole life up until the time I met my husband had been a preparation for producing a non-thinking, docile, submissive human being. It is not surprising that Church schools are a very divisive force in society, and, while they exist, conflict will continue.

Those days are over now, but I'm still angry with those who combined throughout my long education to make me such a weak, vacillating, terrified, young human being. I still feel very aggressive about my past oppression and continue to find it difficult to talk in a calm way about it. I want badly to be able to do so, in the hope that, by spreading the knowledge of what terrible damage religious indoctrination can do—how it can enslave the mind and coarsen the feelings — I can help to prevent it happening to other young people.

Of course, there is the wider field—what damage, physical and mental, is being done all around us in the name of religion, in the East, in the West, with atrocity piled upon atrocity. This is a not unexpected legacy — from Christianity and all other religions — of their absurd, supernatural, superstitious doctrines and dogmas, and their teaching based on fear and hatred, all of which has been poured into the ears of children for centuries.

Bertrand Russell truly said: "Religion prevents children from having a rational education".

BOOKS

IN GOD'S NAME, by David A. Yallop. Jonathan Cape, £9.95

In the course of an article, "The Menace of Freemasonry" (*The Freethinker*, April), I drew attention to the unholy alliance between the Masons and their erstwhile enemy the Roman Catholic Church in the incredibly complicated affair of Italy's Banco Ambrosiano and the Vatican Bank, the IOR. The Chairman of the former was Roberto Calvi (found hanging from scaffolding under Blackfriars Bridge, London in June, 1982) and of the latter Bishop Paul Marcinkus (nicknamed "The Gorilla"). The interlocking fraudulent activities of these two Banks had, in all probability, led directly to the murder of several individuals (including, it is almost certain, Calvi himself), but in this thought-provoking book, David Yallop makes the astonishing claim that the chief victim was none other than Albino Luciani, otherwise Pope John Paul I, who died with startling suddenness during the night of 28-29 September, 1978, after occupying the papal throne for only 33 days.

Yallop argues that there were three compelling reasons why Luciani had to be got rid of quickly. First, he was about to begin an investigation into the highly dubious financial transactions of the Vatican Bank. Secondly, he had found out that not only were over a hundred priests, bishops and cardinals on the Vatican Staff clandestine Freemasons (which, at that time, involved instant excommunication), but that some were even members of the illegal, Mafia-controlled Masonic Lodge, "Propaganda Due" (P2). These he intended to expose and dismiss. Thirdly, he was known to disagree strongly with Pope Paul VI's encyclical "Humanae Vitae" which, ten years previously, had decreed that all forms of artificial contraception were immoral, and therefore forbidden to Catholics. The conservatives within the Vatican feared that Luciani was planning to reverse this ruling, and noted with dismay that on 24 October, he had arranged to have a private audience with a delegation from the United States Congress to discuss birth control.

David Yallop lists six principal suspects. They are Bishop Marcinkus, who is now virtually a prisoner within the Vatican; Roberto Calvi, who was Chairman of the Banco Ambrosiano and whose criminal activities had been under investigation since April of that year by the Bank of Italy; Calvi knew that if Luciani's proposed examination of the affairs of the Vatican Bank went ahead, the close connection between it and his own Bank would be exposed and he would face ruin and certain imprisonment; Michele Sindona, Sicilian financier

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and Mafia member, who was in New York fighting to prevent himself being extradited to Italy where the Government wished to put him on trial on charges of corruption and fraud. Sindona was well aware that his struggle would certainly be lost if the Vatican Bank's activities were uncovered by Luciani. Licio Gelli, known as "the Puppet Master" because he controlled "P2", and through it Marcinkus, Sindona and Calvi. The downfall of the three "marionettes" as a result of Luciani's investigations, would obviously pose a direct threat to him as well, and Yallop believes he was at the heart of the conspiracy to murder the Pope. Cardinal Jean Villot, the Vatican Secretary of State and a staunch supporter of Pope Paul VI, who was alarmed by the new Pope's liberal attitude towards birth control. He also strongly disapproved of Luciani's proposed radical changes among the Vatican personnel. Cardinal John Cody of Chicago, probably the most unpopular prelate in the world, because of his refusal to reveal the sources of his huge annual income, his despotic, inhuman behaviour towards the clergy in his arch-diocese, and his blatant racialism. According to Yallop, Cody received word in late September from his informants inside the Vatican that Luciani intended to sack him.

Granted that all of these people had plausible motives for disposing of Luciani, what is the quality of Yallop's evidence against them? Unfortunately, because of promises made before he entered upon his researches three years ago, he cannot name the sources of his information within the Vatican, but he assures us that he has checked and double-checked them, and is convinced of their veracity. The evidence, by the very nature of the case, must be almost entirely circumstantial, but, as Yallop points out, many murderers have, in the past, been convicted on testimony of this kind.

The cause of Luciani's death was, according to the Vatican, "myocardial infarction", i.e. a heart attack. But Yallop shows fairly convincingly that Luciani had no history of heart disease or any other serious illness, and that all the stories subsequently circulated by the Vatican officials that he had only one lung, had suffered previous heart attacks, that he suffered from phlebitis, and was a very heavy smoker were completely untrue.

Moreover, the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the body certainly look, on the face of it, highly suspicious. The Vatican authorities first announced that the body had been discovered at 5.30 am on 29 September, by the Pope's personal secretary, Father John Magee, and that His Holiness

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had in his hand a copy of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. It later transpired, however, that the discovery was, in fact, made by a nun, Sister Vincenza, at 4.45 am and that in Luciani's hand was a sheaf of papers, probably those detailing the proposed Vatican staff changes. In an interview with Yallop, Sister Vincenza described how she had found the dead Pope, sitting up in bed, holding the papers, and with his teeth bared in an expression of agony. Other items in the bedroom and papal study adjoining it at that moment were, according to Yallop, a bottle of medicine, Luciani's slippers, and his last Will and Testament. But after Cardinal Villot had visited the apartments around 5 am, all these, plus the papers and the Pope's spectacles, had mysteriously disappeared and were never seen again.

Furthermore, the two brothers who embalmed the body told Yallop that, because of the absence of rigor mortis when they originally examined it, death must have occurred sometime after 4 am on the 29 September, and not at 11 pm the previous night as the Vatican doctor claimed. The authorities would not allow any blood to be drained from the corpse (which might have revealed the presence of a poison, such as digitalis) and no autopsy was performed, although, as a result of pressure from the Italian media, a partial medical examination was carried out on the eve of the funeral. Predictably, everything was said to have been to be "in order".

It is a pity, that having such a plausible case, Yallop somewhat spoils it by reproducing conversations between Luciani and various people which neither he nor anyone apart from those directly involved could possibly have heard. In his preface he attempts to justify this device by stating that nothing within the Vatican is completely private, and that he has reconstructed the conversations from "secondary sources". However, he would have run less risk of his bona fides being challenged by hostile critics had he omitted these obviously invented dialogues.

Each reader of this fascinating book must make up his or her mind whether or not Yallop has established his thesis that Pope John I was murdered, and if so, by whom. Assuming the unfortunate Luciani was slain, I feel that the evidence against Marcinkus, Calvi, Sindona and Gelli is much stronger than that against Villot and Cody. In a court north of the Border the jury would return a verdict of "not proven" on even these four. However, as every Scot knows, this can mean either "We genuinely cannot decide whether you're guilty or not", or, "We know you're guilty, but we can't prove it".

JOHN L. BROOM

Kit Mouat has done us all a service, sick and well alike, in describing how she and a group of other cancer sufferers have confronted the dread illness and emerged at least triumphant over the fear it breeds, if not always free of its advance, in every case. Her book covers in 160 pages and eight chapters a series of personal stories from nine sufferers and one relative, gives a description of orthodox and alternative remedies, touches on the place of food and diet in contributing to the pool of carcinogens in our bodies, and describes fully how her support group Cancer Contact came about, how it functions and how you can set up the same sort of network yourself. There are plenty of useful addresses (usually difficult to find), a glossary of terms and a very full book list.

For cancer sufferers, or those immersed in the care of friends and relatives disabled by it, this is a marvellous, up-cheering, Cancer-Fighter's Handbook. By the end of it you could imagine that it didn't necessarily have to be a death sentence. Kit Mouat has demystified the whole area, and especially the word "cancer" itself.

I learnt from this book that cancer is not one but many diseases affecting the whole person—"a failure of the immune system within an environment beset with carcinogenic influences" (p. 101). As such, a variety of aspects of the illness and our lives need attention. Orthodox therapies have traditionally concentrated on relieving the symptoms (the methods are surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy), with their horrendous side-effects, and leaving untouched the need to improve the sufferers' immune system. Kit Mouat argues that the orthodox oncologists have created a "conspiracy of silence" (p. 93) over the real value of alternative therapies and that research in this field has been obstructed and resisted.

In her chapter covering the alternative approaches, the author explores an astonishing range—some sounding really rather quaint: e.g. Dr Bach's Flower Remedies, Evening Primrose Oil, Iscador (a preparation of mistletoe), urine therapy (you drink it—quickly). There are also more familiar therapies such as homeopathy, acupuncture, osteopathy, and herbalism. Cancer Contact itself grew out of the Mid-Sussex Homeopathic Group during 1982.

Inevitably, as we would expect from a former and much-respected *Freethinker* editor, Kit Mouat refers to the conflict experienced by the secular humanist with medical remedies requiring "faith" of one sort or another. "Be not deterred by the fact that many alternative therapies are closely linked with the religious or philosophical beliefs of their originators", she advises. And she reminds us that even today, apparently rational, scientifically-based doctors still take the Hippocratic Oath: "By Apollo the

physician, by Aesculapius, by Hygeae, by Panacea and by all the other gods and goddesses . . ." (are they hedging their bets)?

Kit Mouat assures us that there is a place for the genuine sceptic, padding around among the huge variety of unorthodox approaches to human health and harmony. Indeed the faith induced in us by orthodox doctors should itself be resisted for its tendency to foster negative, pessimistic thinking, and a surrender of control over the progress of your own illness. Kit Mouat is plainly encouraging cancer sufferers to accept nothing without question and to seek remedies in hitherto despised places.

The essence of this intelligent and encouraging book is robust optimism. Cancer Contact shares problems, discusses symptoms and treatments, gives mutual comfort and support: "Cancer was a nuisance, it could be an overwhelming nightmare, but it could not be submitted to. It had to be fought, and when we could fight no more for ourselves, we had friends who would fight for us". (p. 20).

This book should give hard-headed, rationally-based inspiration and courage to all who are in contact with cancer, a major life-threatening disease. Buy a copy, for there's sure to come a day when someone you know is going to need its fighting spirit.

RITA CRAFT

GLASGOW: SELECTED POEMS, by Peter Kearney. People's Publications, 8 Wyvil Avenue, Glasgow. 75p

A *Freethinker* contributor has brought out a selection of poems, together with photographs and an article on the Marxist cooperator John Maclean, mostly relating to Glasgow. They reflect the granite and the grime, the colour and the cussedness, of that indomitable city.

As most of the verse is written in dialect, although I can deduce the meaning I cannot adjudicate on the literary merit. Alas, even with Rabbin Burns, I cannot decide whether most dialect poetry is profundity stripped to directness or platitudes dancing about in doggerel. Non-Scottish readers will probably prefer Peter Kearney's "English" poems.

DAVID TRIBE

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Dora and Naomi: A Formidable Twosome

After an impressive opening, in which we were treated to two formidable octogenarians as a kick-off, the series "Women of our Century" (BBC TV2) every Friday night between June and August provided a third subject which was a bit of an anti-climax.

Perhaps Dora Russell and Naomi Mitcheson were so exceptionally good, and so well interviewed by Bel Mooney and Leonie Caldecott respectively, that the professional actress who was to follow them, appeared to be artificial in comparison to what had gone before. I doubt whether it could have been the fault of Joanna Lumley — who took quite a drubbing in some quarters for asking so many obvious questions of Dame Flora Robson, since deceased — because she was left with no option in the matter; having only an interviewee who was obsessed by ugliness (her own) when in truth none of us could be much interested in the fact that this octogenarian was sorry for herself (or appeared to be) and her interviewer was more than somewhat good-looking. I have an idea, without being present, but knowing a bit about how such telly meetings are set up by the powers-that-be, that Joanna was getting more stick about her script — if it was her script — than she properly deserved.

On the other hand, Dora and Naomi must have

been grand folk to tackle, bonnie fighters both of them. Their natural good nature, quiet bravery, immense intelligence shone through each interview like the proverbial shaft of light. And that's what we got from both of them, with their interviewers rising to the level of their subjects and not being compelled to ask questions that were unworthy of those being interviewed. There can be few readers of *The Freethinker* who are not conversant with the writings of both Dora Russell (Bertrand's second wife) and Naomi Mitcheson, whose output has been both controversial and prodigious. It was truly said that the latter was 40 years ahead of her time when she first started writing from the woman's point of view about life and love; and Dora's life was a blazing blend of love, education and continued struggle, that she still persists in fighting for now aged over 90.

It is a mark of their individual accomplishments that related to notable men (Dora to Bertrand, Naomi to J. B. S. Haldane) each woman had the energy and strength of character to be thought of for herself and to break through the social conventions. Certainly the series, started by these two freethinkers, provided viewers with a departure from the TV "silly season".

PETER COTES

A Rejoinder to "Freethought Bibliography"

GORDON STEIN

Nicolas Walter has continued his attack upon my book, *Freethought in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth*, in his article in *The Freethinker* (May, p 78-9). While he claims that his motivation is merely scholarship, and not malice, his own past words about the book give proof otherwise.

In the May article, Nicolas Walter points out a total of seven "significant errors", plus some "significant omissions" (65 he says). I will deal with the omissions later. There may actually be seven factual errors, but fewer if you realise that the RPA's "first year" of existence can well mean (as I did) its first calendar year (i.e., 1899). Let me grant for the sake of argument that everything Nicolas Walter says is an error is indeed an error. I admit that I am not perfect, and that there are some errors in the book. However, when you consider that there are over 10,000 factual statements in the book, the amount is quite small when compared with the total amount of information presented correctly. Yet, in spite of this, Nicolas Walter says (*The Freethinker*, October 1983) that ". . . there are many other glaring howlers". This is after he mentions the ones he repeats for us in the May issue.

Now let us move on to the "significant omissions". Nicolas Walter and I have disputed this list before, both in private letters and in print. As I pointed out to him in a letter of 10 February 1983, in order to be included in the volume, a publication must have been by a freethinker, been published by the movement, and been about freethought. I defined freethought as "organised opposition to organised religion". While he claims that many significant freethought works of the 20th century were overlooked, I have replied that, after looking at his list (*New Humanist*, Summer 1982) of so-called "omissions", which includes Darwin, Tyndall, Haldane, Keith, John Morley, T. H. and Julian Huxley, Maugham, Laski and Buckle (among others), that the list fails the test of the books being about freethought. While Haldane, Shelley and many others who were omitted were definitely freethinkers, and many of their works were published in editions by the movement, they were omitted because the books were about economics, science, literature, non-atheist history, or some other topic not itself freethought. Since my book tells the history of freethought through the publications of the movement (it is a descriptive bibliography), the lack of mention of a publication is grounds for the lack of mention of an author of that publication.

Nicolas Walter misunderstands me when he says (*New Humanist*, Winter 1982) that I am wrong about these works not being freethought works because they were published by the RPA. I merely

meant that many non-freethought publishers issued Shelley's, Darwin's, Tyndall's and the others' works as well. In any case, the omitted works were not freethought works by my definition in that they were not about freethought. This includes Darwin's *Autobiography*, which Walter brings up again, even though the book, in its un-expurgated version, does deal, in small part, with some of Darwin's views on religion.

In his initial review of my book (*New Humanist*, Summer 1982), Nicolas Walter says "There is good coverage of writings published by the freethought movement itself, but poor coverage of those published by individual freethinkers who have contributed so much to intellectual progress in this country". I am not certain what he means, as he later claims that "the movement" did publish many of these works, but a list follows. The list again fails the "by freethinkers about freethought" test. Besides, how can the long list of titles which were included, by such individual freethinkers as Bradlaugh, Besant, Watts, Foote, McCabe, Cohen, etc, be considered "poor coverage"? Almost every important freethought book which meets the test is included, with the possible exception of some publications of the past 20 years, about which history has yet to pass judgement.

Nicolas Walter also says (*New Humanist*, Summer 1982): "There is a low level of historical accuracy in the treatment of the various freethought organisations" in my book. The examples given are the same ones we have already counted among the seven errors mentioned by him in his May *Freethinker* article. Surely seven errors in the entire book, while regrettable, does not make it (as he claims in the same issue of *New Humanist*) a book which ". . . should be used with great care; indeed it may be safely opened only by people who already know the subject well, and they will hardly need it".

No other reviewer, including David Tribe (*The Freethinker*, September 1983) had such unkind words or sweeping condemnations to make about a book with as few errors about as many facts as this book has. Certainly I tried to minimise errors, but as I acknowledged in the very statement which Nicolas Walter deceptively quotes only in part (*The Freethinker*, May 1984): "In a work involving as broad a historical and geographical scope as the present volume, mistakes are bound to escape unnoticed. Although each factual statement has been checked several times, errors are still possible. It would be greatly appreciated if any errors are brought to my attention". (*Freethought in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth*, page 9).

Visit to a Primitive Country (Part 2)

BARBARA SMOKER

The President of the National Secular Society visited the USA this year for an extensive speaking and broadcasting tour, from early April to late May. She now continues her account of that visit and of her impressions of America and its people, from an atheist viewpoint.

After our four-day car journey (for which no sympathy is due to me, since I had the back of a Cadillac Fleetwood to myself with a foam pillow thrown in), we arrived at the hotel venue in Lexington, Kentucky, for the 1984 American Atheist Convention — “we” being the notorious American atheist, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, her second son, Jon, and myself.

The pavement outside the hotel was the scene of a bizarre religious exercise, with two young men spending virtually the whole weekend on their knees, in prayer against the evil influence of the convention. Another young man spent Good Friday afternoon carrying a heavy cross (apparently made from telegraph poles) through the town — a large photograph of this activity appearing on the front of the *Lexington Herald* above a lengthy report of our convention.

Among our own weekend activities was a Good Friday banquet, at which I made an after-dinner speech — saying that I was there on an exchange visit with Billy Graham, and economically re-using some of the jokes I had told at the NSS Annual Dinner the previous month. The following day was taken up mainly with hour-long talks, of which I will egotistically mention the one by me on the religious and secularist scene in Britain, on which there was no shortage of questions.

Easter Sunday began with a large buffet brunch (a widespread American Sunday custom), followed by a short journey by coach for the wreath-laying ceremony at the grave of Charles C. Moore — 19th-century atheist writer and publisher, whose hometown had been chosen by the American Atheists for their 1984 convention in commemoration of the centenary of the launching of his atheist magazine there.

In the afternoon there were presentations of various atheist awards, films of atheist events, an edited video amalgam of some of Madalyn O’Hair’s more memorable television rejoinders, and more speeches.

After a gargantuan dinner, I bade everybody goodbye, and, with a month’s Greyhound Bus “Ameripass”, given me by the American Atheists, I set out on my lone travels, travelling mostly at night

so as to save time and hotel bills.

Every towpath or footpath throughout the country was occupied with joggers. Health is a big industry, and while half the people are overeating, the other half are on a raw spinach diet and a handful of pills. It is symptomatic of American extremism in everything.

After visiting Richmond (Virginia) and the restored colonial town of Williamsburg, I spent three days in Washington, DC, staying with a friend whose apartment windows look on to the ill-famed Water-gate, and visited the shockingly huge Arlington National Cemetery for war veterans, including the assassinated Kennedy brothers. Then on to New York City, to spend the weekend at my nephew’s apartment by Central Park.

He and his wife put on a dinner party for me on the Saturday, and my casual avowal of atheism caused quite a scene at the dinner-table. One very elegant and sophisticated woman in her thirties, who owned a successful advertising agency and was one of those trendy adherents of mutually incompatible oriental beliefs about consciousness and the cosmos, just could not accept the word atheism. She spent the next five hours (till 2 am!) directing scarcely veiled verbal barbs at me. As she became the worse for drink and I remained my usual sober self, I was able to reciprocate with increasing superiority. Fortunately, my nephew and his English wife could see the funny side of it.

On one of my Greyhound journeys, a woman passenger asked the reason for my visit to the States, and when I told her that I had come to take part in an atheist convention, she could hardly believe her ears. “You mean you don’t believe in God?!” “That’s right”, I replied — whereupon, looking round at our fellow passengers for all to share the joke, she started laughing. And could not stop laughing for several minutes.

One day, I went into a bank wearing one of my “ATHEIST LIB!” lapel badges, and the young woman behind the counter asked incredulously, “Is that for real?!”

The word “Humanist” did not meet with the same sort of response as “Atheist”. Even my nephew’s dinner guest said she could accept the word “Humanist”, and would be pleased to call herself a Humanist — “but Atheist is so negative”. “You mean, negative like ‘independent’, for instance?” I asked. However, I soon discovered that negativity was not the real bugbear: in most American people’s minds, the words “Atheist” and “Communist” are synonymous. This seems to stem from the “Un-American Activities” era, when McCarthy used the

phrase "Godless Communist" so often, and to such effect, that the two words became inextricably linked in the popular mind.

From New York I took a coast-to-coast flight, across three time zones, to San Francisco — where my first meal comprised a traditional buffalo (no longer from the wild) stew. A couple of hours later the local GALA group (Gay Atheist League of America) put on a big buffet reception for me, and the following day I met some of the "straight" American Atheists — separately, as the two groups had quarrelled. (I tried in vain to heal the breach.) Such divisions were all too common, I found on my travels.

After three delightful days in San Francisco — including an amazing university production of that devastating play about convent education, *Sister Ignatius Explains It All* — I travelled overnight by Greyhound to San Diego, where I was met by two GALA members to drive the eighty miles east to their mountain-side ranch (equipped with all mod cons), 4,800 feet above the desert. There, among the mountain lions and coyotes and the beautiful flowering cacti, I spent another memorable three days.

After a few hours' sightseeing in San Diego (where I passed the McDonalds that was to be the scene of mass-murder a few weeks later), I set off for Flagstaff, the starting-point for the Grand Canyon.

I had to change buses during that evening; but, for once, the Greyhound people put me on the wrong bus — and, moreover, put my baggage on a different wrong bus. So, instead of arriving at Flagstaff for the Grand Canyon, I landed up in the Nevada "city of sin", Las Vegas!

The first sight of its illuminations at 3 am was one of life's major experiences, and compensation for being unable immediately to retrace my steps to visit the Grand Canyon since I was expected two days later in Salt Lake City.

My three-day stay in Salt Lake City — "the Vatican of the Mormons" — was altogether enjoyable. The first evening, I was taken on a conducted tour of the Mormon Tabernacle, and saw the amazing quasi-Gothic exterior of the Temple (to which entry by non-believers is forbidden). This was followed by a restaurant dinner-reception that had been arranged for me to meet and speak to members of the local chapter of the American Atheists. The second day, I had a radio phone-in programme (on which there were several impassioned attempts to convert me to Mormonism); and the third morning, a television interview — just in time for which the lost-baggage computer reunited me with my clothes.

While Mormonism (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) is the majority religion in Salt Lake City, it is even stronger in the rural areas of Utah, and, with its all-American appeal, has been spreading

rapidly in several other States. (Less understandably, and despite its disprovable historical claims, it is also on the increase in Britain.)

I was shown the artificial caves that had been made by the Mormons to house their archival material — after, they declared, being given supernatural guidance as to the best place for perfect humidity and so on. Unfortunately, the unusually rapid thaw this year turned stretches of the Utah desert into a flood, and flood-water was being pumped out of the divinely selected archival caves.

My next port of call was Denver — where I stayed with the family of a barber and signmaker. They were poorer people than those I had met elsewhere, and seemed to have none of the fear of being known to be atheist that I had encountered in many of the others. Not only did my host make magnetic signs with amusing atheist slogans for the American Atheist Center and its various chapters, but he had the signs lying about his shop quite openly. They included straightforward ones like "RELIGION IS THE PROBLEM NOT THE ANSWER", irreverent ones like "SAVE YOU? — JESUS CAN'T EVEN CURE ACNE", and slightly naughty ones such as "EAT A BIBLE AND PASS THE WORD".

I was worked harder in Denver than anywhere. A Sunday afternoon open-air party was held for the local atheists to meet me, at which I gave a talk and answered dozens of questions — almost half of them from one bright young man aged eight. Then I was whisked off by car to Colorado Springs, some eighty miles to the south, to take part in a local radio talk-show for two hours. The woman interviewer was herself a Humanist, and we got along very well. We had supper together after the show, then I was driven back to Denver for a couple of hours' sleep before taking part in another two-hour radio talk show (from 1 am to 3 am) — this time on a more powerful transmitter, with calls coming in from all over the country. I had another couple of hours in bed before going on yet another radio show.

This time the interviewer, though supposedly a Humanist, was far less sympathetic, and seemed very preoccupied. Again we were on quite a powerful transmitter, but, strangely, had no phone calls. Afterwards, I was told that this was because the telephone lines had been blocked throughout the programme by people phoning and then refusing to speak. At first I assumed they were hostile Christians, but now I have reason to think it may have been a personal vendetta against the host rather than against me or atheism.

During one of the commercial breaks, instead of talking to me about our next topic, he seized the studio telephone, obtained an outside number, and spoke urgently: "Keep all the doors locked till I get there". I decided that either he or the person he was phoning was paranoiac. However, it was pro-

bably a quite rational fear, for soon after returning to London I received a letter from Madalyn O'Hair, who, recalling that I had mentioned being interviewed by this man (whom she knew herself), told me that that morning's newspapers reported his murder: he had been shot with a .45 outside his "condominium" (American for a leased apartment) at point-blank range, and died instantly.

This sort of thing is a daily occurrence in the States — not surprisingly, since in many towns there are large shop signs announcing guns on open sale — but when the victim is someone with whom you recently spent two hours in conversation, it makes more impact.

My next Greyhound journey was southward, alongside the Rockies, via Santa Fe to Albuquerque (New Mexico), where a local woman atheist gave me hospitality for 24 hours — for much of which I slept, washed clothes, and wrote postcards. And she introduced me to a variety of bread named, believe it or not, Ezekiel 4/9.

Before leaving Albuquerque, I went up to Sandia Peak by aerial tramway ("the longest in the world"!), staying there till dusk, in spite of the cold wind, so as to see the city lights twinkling far below.

Then, because I really could not leave the country without seeing the Grand Canyon, I spent the night on a west-bound Greyhound to Flagstaff (Arizona), and the next day took a bus to the southern rim of the so aptly named Grand Canyon, which plunged to a depth of a mile below me.

The following morning, back in Flagstaff, I made the acquaintance of an Indian who, a few months earlier, had been mauled by a wild bear. Thanks to his lethal hunting knife, he had lived to tell the tale — backed up with newspaper cuttings. After having his wounds cleansed and stitched in the white man's hospital, he had gone to his family reservation for the special sing-song that is traditional for one who has been bitten by a bear, and he told me this bestows healing powers. . . .

My next port of call was the modern city of Phoenix, then Tucson, and, after another Greyhound night, the border town of El Paso — my objective being the spectacular Carlsbad Caverns, deep in the Guadalupe Mountains, about eighty miles north of El Paso. I had been advised on no account to miss these caverns, and I was very glad I heeded that advice, for the beauty of their colossal stalagmites and stalactites, in a variety of colours, exceeded everything else I saw in America, even including the Grand Canyon.

The "Big Room" in the caverns measures fourteen acres, and I took nearly two hours to walk round its perimeter, gawping every step of the way. Afterwards, I was also fortunate enough to witness the famous evening bat flight from the mouth of the Bat Cave — a flight which, according to the rangers, happened to be the best of the year.

Although there were plenty of visitors to the caverns that day, I was the only one to arrive by public transport. The bus which ran to the caverns from White's City (named after the inquisitive cowboy, Jim White, who discovered them in 1903) not only made the journey just for me, but conscientiously called back for me in the evening. The driver was a friendly young American, but when I admitted to being an atheist his manner changed, and he left me without a word of farewell. My connecting bus back to El Paso was driven by a Mexican Catholic, and we talked religion the whole journey. Although emotionally committed to the faith, he had thought a few things out for himself, and rejected many of the orthodox R.C. doctrines. But whenever I went too far for him in my arguments, he said "You only say that because you have become an atheist". "No", I replied, "I have become an atheist because I say it — and I say it because it is so". We parted the best of friends.

The following morning I took a local bus across the Rio Grande into Mexico. The border town of Juarez is topographically part of El Paso — but the two are so different, the river frontier might be the Berlin Wall. Since El Paso is largely Catholic, is bilingual, and serves Mexican food in most of its cheaper eating houses, I had expected Juarez, only a river's width away, to be much the same; but Juarez is not bilingual — it was difficult to find anyone there who spoke English. Somehow, even the sun seemed hotter south of the border — possibly there was simply less shade. And economically, the difference was very marked. In the United States (apart from Las Vegas), everything except for petrol ("gas") and soft fruit was considerably more expensive than in Britain; but in Mexico everything was a fraction of the price.

I returned to El Paso for an overnight Greyhound to Texas — arriving in San Antonio for Sunday brunch, as I had done five weeks earlier. I was then taken for a drive round the city — the most beautiful city in America. The old buildings are now (albeit belatedly) being restored, and a disused quarry has been turned into a lovely Japanese sunken garden. But I would not like to live there; already, in mid-May, the temperature was in the eighties. If I were to settle in America, I would choose the grey skies of San Francisco.

From San Antonio it was only a couple of hours' bus ride back to Austin and the American Atheist Center. The following afternoon I was airborne for the flight back to London.

I had had a most enthralling — and exhausting — six weeks. I had found the American people very warm, generous, and full of vitality; but also provincial (even parochial) and conservative, superstitious and gullible, fanatical and intolerant, righteous and punitive, quarrelsome and prone to violence. In brief — primitive.