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VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA: ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT FOR ATHEIST VIEWPOINT

"There is, as questionnaire surveys show, a far greater proportion of Rationalists in the voluntary euthanasia movement than in the general population", Barbara Smoker, chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society and president of the National Secular Society, told the World Federation of Right-to-Die Societies at its fifth biennial conference in Nice, 20-23 September. "But there are also of course many committed religious believers among its members and supporters", she added. "However, the opponents of voluntary euthanasia are almost exclusively religious believers. And the arguments they use against voluntary euthanasia are, however rationalised or overlaid with practical problems, based on religious belief; whereas the arguments in favour of voluntary euthanasia are based on common sense, compassion and the right to choose for oneself".

The conference drew an attendance of over 700 from 19 countries. Barbara Smoker was among the listed speakers in two of the three main sessions of the conference: the legal session and the ethics session. The latter included among the speakers the Bishop of Nice (giving the orthodox Catholic objections), a Muslim spokesman (no less hostile), the Chief Rabbi of Nice (only less so) and a Protestant pastor and editor of *Evangile et Liberté* (equivocal). Miss Smoker's arguments in favour of voluntary euthanasia, based on the atheist viewpoint, were enthusiastically received by the majority of conferees. She said that the rational choice of one's own time, place, and manner of death so as to round off one's life appropriately, completing its unique pattern with dignity and good sense, neither prematurely nor belatedly, can be seen as a sort of art form. "We talk about the Art of Living, so why not the Art of Dying? A phrase that Christians, and other religionists, are inclined to use against us is 'the

sanctity of life'. But what exactly does it mean? It has more than one connotation.

"It may imply that life has a supernatural aspect which makes it sacrosanct. But how can this be reconciled with the fact that earthquakes and other natural disasters take such a heavy and indiscriminate toll of human life? And if animals are also regarded as God's creatures, how can the sanctity of life apply when one animal cannot survive without eating another?

"In a different sense, however — the sense that human beings should have humane consideration, compassion and respect for one another — we Secular Humanists also accept the sanctity of life. And, of course, the very aims of the voluntary euthanasia movement are based on such consideration, compassion and respect. We firmly deny that people should always have to live as long as possible, whatever their condition. Our meaning of the sanctity of life cannot be divorced from the quality of life.

"Our religious opponents insist that human lives are a 'gift from God'; but is there no right to decline a gift when it is nothing but a burden? God alone, they tell us, is to determine our time of death; humans are not allowed to tamper with God's will. If that were so, then it would surely be wrong to intervene to save life, as well as to hasten death?

"But our case is primarily that what we want is merely permissive. We uphold the right of our opponents to decide against euthanasia for themselves, but not for us. They have no moral right to make laws that impose their views on others, who may not even share the religious beliefs on which those views are based. Believers who uphold the

(continued on back page)

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NEWS A

PLAIN AND SIMPLE

Why do some humanists spend so much time and effort attacking the humanist movement?

In the latest *Humanist News* (September) there is an article entitled "Closed Shop?" by Julia Pelling of the British Humanist Association's Executive Committee. She says that "we" (the BHA? the humanist movement?) "are fools", that "we are, in practice, a closed group", and that "all our habits and customs of speaking and writing tend to shut out 90 per cent of the population". She attributes this to the fact that "so many humanists keep harping on about what they are *not*", especially that they are "*not* religious". She wants us to concentrate on what "we *do* think worthwhile", and she is "quite happy to call . . . humanism a belief or faith or religion, or almost anything except a 'stance for living'". Admittedly "a stance for living" has not caught on even with BHA members, never mind the general public. However, there is no point in harping on about it; and it is surely misleading to call our humanism a faith or religion, or to hide the fact that we reject belief in God. The first principle of humanism is, or should be, honesty.

Julia Pelling says that "we cling to the rags of 19th-century secularism, hide our meanings in clouds of self-indulgent wordiness and arrogant intellectualism". This may be true of some humanists around the BHA, but not of most. Those we know who spend much time and effort speaking at humanist and other meetings, writing in humanist and other papers, participating in school and university debates and in radio and television programmes, are doing all she asks, and without attacking other humanists on the way. She says that "if a thing is worth saying, then say it simply", and she calls for "plain, punchy English". *The Freethinker* has been giving you all this for more than a century.

The 19th-century secularists have been constantly derided by "positive" elements in (or, more often, on the way through) the humanist movement. The plain speech of our Victorian forebears may cause genteel shudders on today's fork supper circuit; but it was their plain speech and hard spade-work that cleared the ground for important social reforms, and created a freer and more tolerant climate of opinion. What legacy will their detractors hand down? Were it not for their crass ignorance of the movement's history, critics would realise that the problem is not the rags of 19th-century secularism, but the tatters of dishonest humanism, afraid to say what it is and do what it says.

S AND NOTES

Next we come to the *Humanist Theme* (September) in which there is an article called "An Unspoken Contribution", by Grace L. Adams. She writes what she wasn't able to say at the BHA Annual Conference at Nottingham in July, mainly a definition of humanism. She sees it as "a Trinity of ideas", "the Three Rs", Reason, Reality and Rectitude. The last two are facts and morals, and attract little comment. Most of her comment is about Reason, and she seems to be against it.

Grace L. Adams says that Reason cannot move us to action or give us a code of values. The point is that it can clarify and evaluate the factors involved in a choice of actions or values. She says that slavery was defeated not by reason but by compassion. The point is that it was reason, as used by opponents of slavery from enlightened Greeks onwards, which went beyond mere compassion for slaves to argue that all human beings have equal status (the true basis of humanism) and that even the most compassionate slavery is against reason. The most important point is that all the arguments against Reason are based on Reason, because it is Reason itself which tells us that Reason cannot tell us everything. The problem isn't that humanists are too reasonable, as she implies, but that they aren't reasonable enough, and it is a waste of time and effort for them to attack Reason when there is so little of it around — even (or especially) in the humanist movement.

"OUTRAGEOUS AND BARBAROUS"

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has called on the Foreign Secretary to declare an Iranian diplomat *persona non grata* so that he can be expelled from Britain. The Society's demand followed the ritual killing of a sheep outside the South West London home of Mr Seyed Abolghassen Mokhtari, first secretary at the Iranian Embassy. He had just returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca.

A next-door neighbour described what took place outside the rented house in Ringwood Gardens, Roehampton. Mr Anthony Line said: "There were several men, women and children there when the poor animal was dragged out. One man poured water over its head and another man in a white coat slit its throat with an 18-inch knife.

"Its head was held over a drain and afterwards the blood was hosed down. I've seen this sort of

thing in Saudi Arabia, but you don't expect it outside your window in Roehampton".

The RSPCA commented: "It is bad enough any animal being killed without pre-stunning — to do it in the street without even the limited safeguards of the slaughterhouse is absolutely appalling. Judging by the reports of this incident, there is little doubt that the sheep must have experienced pain before it bled to death whilst still conscious".

The National Secular Society also protested to Sir Geoffrey Howe and urged him to take up the matter with the Iranian Embassy. The NSS said that such an incident will cause grave offence to a majority of the British public.

Mr David Mellor, MP (Conservative, Putney), demanded action over an "outrageous and barbarous incident". The Iranian chargé d'affaires was called to the foreign office and gave an undertaking that there would be no repetition of the incident.

It is to be hoped that public outrage over this affair will deter even the Ayatollah Khomeini's ghouls from performing their filthy religious rituals on a public highway.

* It is reported that the Attorney General, Sir Michael Havers, may commence criminal proceedings under the 1936 Public Order Act against "Imam", a monthly journal distributed by the Iranian Embassy in London. "Imam" has started to serialise the notorious "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", a work that was widely used by the Nazis as anti-Jewish propaganda. It is believed to have originated in Tsarist Russia and was exposed as a fabrication nearly 60 years ago. In an accompanying commentary, "Imam" claims that an international Zionist conspiracy has been responsible for spreading the ideas of Marx, Darwin and Nietzsche. It also alleges that keeping pet dogs has been encouraged by Zionist conspirators to undermine Western cultural values.

SUNDAY BAN CHALLENGED

Publicans in Northern Ireland are planning to defy a law passed over 60 years ago by opening their premises on an agreed Sunday. They will not serve drink, but their action is intended to be a first step towards ending the ban on Sunday opening of public houses.

Unionist (Protestant) controlled councils have gone to considerable lengths to preserve the six counties' gloomy Sunday. Cinemas, sporting and other facilities are closed, creating an atmosphere of uplifting dreariness approved by the Lord's Day Observance Society.

The religious groups now face a major challenge. The Vintners' Federation is throwing its weight behind the campaign for Sunday opening. A Federa-

tion spokesman referred to the unfair competition that publicans face. In recent years hundreds of clubs have opened and do a roaring trade. In border areas, many people cross into the Republic for their Sunday drink.

The pro and anti factions are, as is usual in Northern Ireland, divided along religious lines. The Catholics are in favour and the Protestants are against. Although many Protestants observe a code of strict temperance there is a strong element of hypocrisy among the majority on the question of Sunday opening. Protestants will drink in their own homes, and when on holiday in more enlightened parts have no qualms about Sunday drinking in public houses.

The Vintner's Federation's legal advisor commented: "What Northern Ireland needs is honesty and common sense from politicians and the population". That is expecting a lot. Hypocrisy, intolerance and double standards are too deeply rooted in that dunghill of fundamentalist Christianity.

CURES FOR CASH (ONLY)

West London police have become interested in the activities of Keith Abraham (also known as Baker), "faith healer" and proprietor of an outfit he calls The Most Scripturally Profound Apostolic Evangelical Movement in the World. He claims to be the world's "foremost authority on God's Truth and Power" and that he can perform miraculous cures.

Abraham has been operating in the Hayes and Southall area for the past three years. His posters carry biblical texts and in one leaflet he claims to have met Jesus Christ. Abraham writes of that encounter: "He plainly said to me, you shall lay my table and set my house in order before I come".

One of Abraham's miraculous gifts is his ability to extract money from gullible clients. And his "miracle cures" are certainly pricey. First of all there is the (non-returnable) consultation fee of £30. The "cure" can cost between £300 and £800. He says that if you want big miracles you have to pay big money. "I only accept cash", he tells clients. "Accepting cheques is against my religion".

Nevertheless the miracle worker encourages clients to accept his special cheques. These are called Jesus Cheques. The client is told to touch the card and say: "I believe in the power of this cheque card, I believe in the power of your name, I believe that God will shortly do a great financial miracle in my life through Keith Abraham". Another of Abraham's miracles is that he can keep a straight face while his dupes go through this rigmarole.

Publication of a newspaper article about the self-styled "international divine healer and life guidance consultant" encouraged some of his former clients to tell their stories. One of them said that Abraham

is evil and preys on the misery of others.

A 35-year-old father of four daughters wanted a son and paid Abraham over £400. Abraham said he would check the man's home for evil spirits. He carried out an exorcism by throwing pails of water around the kitchen and garden.

A woman who took her 15-year-old mentally handicapped son to see Abraham was asked for the usual £30 consultation fee plus £800 for a "cure". She said: "He took only cash, so I decided to withdraw my money from the building society and my other son also withdrew his money and together we managed to pay him". After seven or eight sessions she realised that Abraham could not cure her son, and she describes him as "a man who makes money out of other's people's tragedies".

Rajinder Gore, a polio victim now aged 18, was persuaded by Abraham to stay away from school for a year to undergo a "cure" which cost £300, plus expenses. That break in his schooling cost him his O-levels.

Mr Gore said: "Throughout the year he never used any medicine. He gave me some sort of oil and some sermons, and touched my legs. I was in the fourth year at school and he made me miss a whole year.

"Not only has this man cheated us out of money, he has almost wrecked my future. He must have made thousands of pounds from people".

A reporter from the *Ealing Gazette*, posing as a shopkeeper who was suffering from diabetes and going blind, visited Abrahams at his Birmingham headquarters. After being shown video films, he was introduced to Abrahams who said: "I can cure you with two or three sessions. The disease is the work of the devil. You have to give to God before he can give to you. You have to give me £450 to cure you".

When the newspaper later tried to contact Abraham about clients' complaints, his secretary said: "Your newspaper is not important enough to warrant a personal interview with such an important and famous person as Keith Abraham, Apostle of Jesus Christ".

Clients who have complained to Abraham that he did not cure them were told: "You don't have enough faith in God".

A representative of the British Medical Association commented: "There is no real evidence that faith healing is effective. Faith healing could be dangerous because if you have a disease it could get to the extent where it becomes incurable".

• The decomposed body of a 16-year-old girl has been found in a wooden cage at the home of Michel Govaers in the Luxembourg village of Bigonville. There were no signs of violence and it is believed that the girl died of starvation. Govaers is a faith healer who shared his house with the girl's family. He and her mother have been arrested.

ENCOURAGING FANATICISM

Tribune recently published a rather curious letter from Richard Balfe, a London Labour Euro-MP. After paying tribute to Mrs Gandhi "both in India and in the leadership she has provided in the Third World", Mr Balfe recalls the Golden Temple episode at Amritsar last July. He claims that by invading that and other religious buildings and placing under arrest 27 community leaders (a euphemism for religious zealots), Mrs Gandhi and her government were guilty of "a gross violation of human rights, unparalleled in that part of the world since the original Amritsar Massacre in 1919".

Mrs Gandhi is an unscrupulous politician whose record on human rights is decidedly sullied. However, Mr Balfe cannot be completely unaware of the campaign of terror organised by Sikh extremists who were entrenched with a substantial arsenal of weapons in the Golden Temple. We do not recall that the Vatican was taken over by armed Roman Catholics during the Second World War, or the Holy Sepulchre by armed bands of Christians, or the Dome of the Rock by Muslim extremists in Jerusalem. In fact when armed Muslims took over the great Mosque at Mecca, the Saudi army ejected them by force, as was to be expected. Despite their proven record of fundamentalist and fanatical attitudes, it is to the credit of the Muslims that they have not taken the irrational stand that a place of worship can be fortified and used as a base for militant activities and remain sacrosanct against army action to dismantle it.

The so-called Sikh moderates may find it expedient to inflame their more zealous co-religionists into further acts of unreason and aggression. But why should a Labour politician add fuel to the flames of religious fanaticism?

DIVORCE IN EIRE?

There are indications that the Republic of Ireland is heading for another bitter confrontation like the one provoked last year by the referendum which resulted in the Constitution being amended to include a ban on abortion. Bishop Hegarty launched the Catholic Church's campaign against moves to legalise divorce when he addressed pilgrims at Knock shrine last month.

An all-party report calls for a referendum to decide whether the ban on divorce should be scrapped. It is prohibited under Article 41 of the Constitution. Recent opinion polls show that a majority of the public are in favour of divorce being allowed.

The Knights of St Columbanus have announced that they will be actively campaigning against any attempt to remove the ban on divorce. Vincent Gallagher, the Chief Knight, declared: "We are

totally opposed to the introduction of divorce".

Senator Brendan Howlin (Labour) accused the Knights of being an "essentially sectarian and sinister organisation which is unrepresentative in any democratic sense".

The Church's campaign against free choice will not be helped by the private prosecution for bigamy that is being brought by Cornelius Sheehan against his former wife. When they were married in St Joseph's Church, Limerick, eight years ago, she had not told him of a previous marriage which had been annulled by the Church. But the Limerick ceremony was invalid under Irish law because of the ban on divorce. Mr Sheehan is also taking proceedings against Father Liam Boyle, who performed the ceremony, as an accomplice to the alleged bigamy.

The Sheehan case could not have come at a worse time for the bishops who have always been adamant in their opposition to divorce. For it highlights the Church's practice of granting annulments on its terms, while resisting a law reform that would benefit thousands whose marriages have irretrievably broken down.

• When Richard Quigley, who was killed when a bomb he was trying to detonate exploded, was buried in Derry City, he was described by Father James Shiels in a sermon as being "numbered with the saints in heaven. . . We know he has gone to be with the risen Christ. He was a young man who was foremost in the campaign for the preservation of life when the campaign against abortion took place in the South".

CREATIONIST DEBATE

Evolutionary theory is under fire again. This cornerstone of the world secular view is being attacked by literalistic fringes of fundamentalist Christianity both in the United States and Britain. Now a new group known as the Association for the Protection of Evolution (APE for short) has been formed to combat the dishonest and pretentious claims of the Creation Science nutters.

In the United States the creationists have built up a huge following among fervent bible believers on the basis of faked evidence, deliberate misinterpretation and downright lies. They exert enormous social and political pressure which has resulted in censorship of books, anti-evolutionary legislation and the introduction of biblical pseudo-science into education.

The British creationists are not nearly so successful as their American counterparts, but see themselves as the intellectual vanguard of the movement. They include several university professors and lecturers who seek to undermine evolution from within the academic establishment. One organisation, the Biblical Creation Society, was formed specifically to

recruit university students and postgraduates.

APE aims to expose the specious methodology and studied ignorance of the creationists, and to demolish their tenuous claims to scientific respectability. It carries the battle into enemy territory, something which the religious fundamentalists find rather disconcerting as they are accustomed to putting forward their case without challenge.

APE's first major confrontation with the creationists on secular soil will be at Conway Hall, London, on Saturday, 27 October, 2.30 pm. It should be an informative and amusing afternoon and APE welcomes the participation of *Freethinker* readers.

The Rev Brian Morris, Vicar of St Swithin's, Cheswardine, Shropshire, was so drunk at the funeral of a parishioner that he forgot the dead man's name. A Methodist lay preacher who was present took over the service. Mourners claimed Mr Morris swore at them and that he had to cling on to a headstone to stop himself falling down. A churchwarden said of the vicar: "He is not infallible".

GHG CELEBRATION

One of Britain's most enterprising humanist organisations has been celebrating its fifth birthday.

The Gay Humanist Group now has members in many parts of the country including Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as some abroad. It has been accepted as an associate member by the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

The group had its inaugural meeting at the CHE conference held in Brighton during the August Bank Holiday weekend of 1979 — a conference which gave rise to the usual outburst of hostility on the part of local religionists — and has since played its part in the continuing campaign for gay rights in addition to promoting an awareness and understanding of the rational, pro-gay Humanist outlook among the gay community.

For some time before the founding of GHG, a number of Humanist gays active in the gay rights movement had been contemplating setting up such a group. But it took Mary Whitehouse's private prosecution of the former *Gay News* for blasphemous libel to provide the necessary impetus.

Mrs Whitehouse claimed on several occasions that all the criticism levelled against her — and the growing conviction that her action had been prompted by her anti-gay sentiments — had been orchestrated by a vociferous "homosexual Humanist lobby". Of course no such lobby existed at the time, but out of her action the nucleus of such a movement was born.

The group has won support from some distinguished Humanists and campaigners for gay rights like novelist Sir Angus Wilson, now a GHG vice-

president, and arranges what one well-known journalist has described as "some of the most relaxed but stimulating monthly meetings in London".

• George Broadhead chaired GHG's birthday celebration in London at which the Humanist movement was well represented. Maureen Duffy cut the cake, and there were speeches from Harry Stopes-Roe (British Humanist Association) and Barbara Smoker (National Secular Society).

Freethinker Fund

This month the Fund has been given a hefty boost by a £100 donation from an anonymous and always generous supporter.

Now for the bad news: the new postage charges will mean an increase in editorial and distribution costs. It would be impracticable to accept paid advertisements and a false economy to charge more for the paper in order to off-set this increase in expenditure. Our writers' free services, readers' donations and dead men's money have kept *The Freethinker* in the black so far. But constantly increasing costs, together with the possibility of VAT being imposed on newspapers and magazines, means that everyone who values the regular publication of an independent journal promoting secularism and freethought should be thinking about its future.

Donations and bequests are vital if the paper's future is to be financially secure. So is advertising, sales promotion and a determined attempt to increase circulation. (On this last point it should be noted that 200 new readers could be enrolled without adding a penny to production costs.)

Individual readers and groups within the movement are urged to consider what they can do to assist *The Freethinker*. In the meantime we thank those whose names are listed below.

W. Aikenhead, £3; J. Barr, £6.40; P. Brown, £3; A. R. Cannon, £1.40; D. Cave, £5; A. M. Chapman, £1.40; R. J. Condon, £10; A. M. Crerar, £1.40; P. Cromelin, £6.40; M. Duane, £3.40; H. Edmunds, £2.40; D. A. Franklin, £3; N. Gibbard, £5; G. Glazer, £3.60; W. R. Gray, £5; H. A. Gurney, £2; L. Hanger, £2; D. Harper, £10; R. C. Hoare, £2.40; F. C. Hoy, £1.40; E. C. Hughes, £5; C. Jones, £1.40; P. Jones, £1.40; A. T. Lambert, £1.40; J. L. Lewin, £2.40; L. Lewis, £1.40; G. L. Lucas, £5; J. A. Milburn, £1.80; M. Morf, £6.40; A. M. Nicholls, £2; E. H. Peters, £6.40; P. Proctor, £1.40; E. M. Richard, £2.40; M. Schofield, £6.40; J. Simpson, £3; "Spartan", £100; A. C. Stewart, £1.40; R. G. Stubbs, £6.80; G. Williams, £1.40; D. Whelan, £1.40; P. D. Ward, £6.40; R. G. Wood, £2.40.

Total for the period 4 August until 5 September: £245.80.

A Majority for Armageddon?

TERRY LIDDLE

As the party political machines rev up for next month's American presidential election, a question which is being asked is: can the Rev Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority secure the re-election of born-again Christian, Ronald Reagan? Certainly, at the last election it was the votes won by Falwell from poor whites in the backward, rural, bible belt who would normally vote Democrat, which helped Reagan into the White House.

Falwell is a powerful demagogue whose radio and TV performances are reminiscent of those of the infamous pre-war "radio priest" and nazi sympathizer, Father Coughlin. Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour" is broadcast every week by 400 TV channels, while a sound version goes on the air every day from 500 radio stations. His writings, with such startling titles as "Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus", have sold in their millions placing him at the top of the best-seller list. It is this manipulation of the media which has won Falwell mass support and gained a vast income for his various enterprises. The Moral Majority newspaper claims a circulation of 500,000 and the strictly religious side of his operation has a budget in excess of 75 million dollars.

Falwell also has the ear of those in high places, often visiting the White House to discuss with Reagan such weighty matters as the exact date of the end of the world. Hardly surprising; his singular theology provides an ideological basis for much of Reagan's political activity. This theology is based on the ideas of early 19th-century British fundamentalist sects members of which emigrated to America. Central to it is the concept that we are now coming to the end of a 2,000-year Church Age begun by the Holy Ghost at Pentecost and characterised by the preaching efforts of Jerry Falwell and his ilk. The signs, which include everything from floods to feminism, are that this age is nearing its end and that the time of Tribulation is at hand.

The onset of Tribulation will be heralded by Rapture—the bodily transportation of Reagan, Falwell and his Faith Partners (those who contribute ten dollars a month) by God to heaven. Those left behind will be in for a tough time. In Europe the Antichrist will re-establish the Roman Empire while the Soviet Union will invade Israel and the battle of Armageddon will be fought. Falwell gets round the biblical claim that it will be fought with "wooden shafts" (the military technology of the ancient Jews) rather than with tanks by claiming that new missile developments will necessitate the reintroduction of wooden weapons.

Meanwhile, the non-believers will have flocked to Jerusalem to worship the Antichrist. There they will be destroyed by nuclear bombs and Jesus will

return through the firestorms and fallout to Earth.

For any survivors of the nuclear holocaust there will be a thousand-year Millennium of joy and holiness. However, at the end of it, Satan will break loose and spread confusion and deception. But he will be destroyed and there will follow eternal bliss for the holy and eternal torment for the rest. Hell will be overpopulated with gays, reds, feminists, peaceniks and other opponents of fundamentalism and Reagan.

Just how much the United States President really believes of this it is hard to say. But in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* Falwell claimed that Reagan does believe it. Certainly Reagan in his speeches has made numerous references to biblical prophecies and in a TV interview during the 1980 election campaign stated that "we may be the generation which sees Armageddon".

Even if Reagan doesn't believe a word of Falwell's rantings he is heavily politically indebted to the Moral Majority leader. And Falwell has made it clear that he will support Reagan only for as long as Reagan carries out the policies he approves. Thus Reagan declared 1983 "the Year of the Bible" and every year he has addressed the National Religious Broadcasters' Convention. It was there that he made his "Evil Empire" speech. Given the hypersensitivity and paranoia of the old men in the Kremlin, a repeat performance could bring Armageddon nearer than most of us would want.

Falwell-type theology is also playing a role in Reagan's Central American strategy. There, Protestant fundamentalist missionaries have converted many former Catholics. In El Salvador they have urged these converts to support the ultra-right Areana Party, an organisation so extreme that even British Conservatives have called it fascist. It would be bitterly ironical to see Catholics supporting Marxists, as they're currently doing in Nicaragua, in a war with Protestant fundamentalists.

Catholic theologians once accused Protestants of wanting to usurp God's function and bring about the end of the world. In an unstable era of weapons of mass destruction and political brinkmanship the likes of The Rev Jerry Falwell could do just that. It is unlikely that he and his followers would get to heaven, but all too easily the rest of us could find ourselves in a situation far too close to hell for comfort.

A company in the United States is marketing an object known as a Godbox, which has "a direct line to heaven". It costs the equivalent of £10, including printed prayer forms on which subscribers write their requests. There is no guarantee that there will be a reply.

The Faith all at Sea

BARBARA SMOKER

*Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.*

*The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar . . .*

A television feature series in six 50-minute episodes on BBC 2 under the title "The Sea of Faith" is now approaching the end of its first screening that began on 12 September. Written and presented by Don Cupitt, Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, it takes its title from Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*, in which the inexorable decline of Christianity, as perceived in 1860, is likened to the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the outgoing tide. And the beautiful opening shot of the drag of the Dover shingle not only made the metaphor literal, it was a promise of many visual delights in the series. It is certainly very well done, using the full range of production techniques to give philosophy and theology sufficient visual and aural interest for popular appeal. For instance, a small sailing-boat blown across a lake symbolises Jung's wish to let the mind wander, finding what it may.

Each of the six episodes depicts important thinkers (including atheists) in different sciences who have forced yet another transformation on Christianity.

The first of the six programmes, in which Galileo was portrayed sympathetically in his confrontation with papal authority, was screened the very week that Leonardo Boff was summoned to Rome to be interrogated by the successor to the Inquisition about his "liberation theology".

As with other major BBC series, there is an illustrated book of the same title (published by the BBC at £12.75) as an offshoot.

Unlike Matthew Arnold, who saw the sea of faith draining away for good, Don Cupitt sees the modern crisis of faith as just one of many outgoing tides, each followed by an incoming tide of theological reinterpretation. But when God has been reinterpreted a hundred times and weakened with each ebb and flow, what is there left? To Jung (one of Cupitt's heroes), God was "a power in the depths of the psyche", and Cupitt himself says that "God is the sum of our values, representing to us their ideal unity, their claims upon us and their creative power". All right—but why not just say "human values"? Why God? Isn't it rather like saying we'll

have bread instead of cake, but will call it cake? It might satisfy the public relations department, but the man in the street is not going to be fooled.

And the man in the street here includes the average churchgoer and even the average clergyman, who have until now managed to remain blissfully unaware that science and philosophy have gradually destroyed the credibility of the Christian creed in any sense other than pure metaphor. The more intelligent members of the clergy, who tend to become theologians (like Don Cupitt) or bishops (like David Jenkins, recently consecrated Bishop of Durham), consciously use the old Christian terminology in a metaphorical sense—but that is not how congregations generally hear them. And for some decades now there has been a far greater ideological gulf between the modern theologian and the average pious Christian than between the modern theologian and any atheist.

Shortly before his consecration, Jenkins made the mistake of answering a television interviewer honestly and without the usual ambiguity. All hell broke loose—and, according to many Christians, God wreaked his revenge on York Minster with lightning.

Now television has done it again. This time the revelation has been carefully premeditated, and skilfully leaves Christianity victorious at the end of every programme. With one bound, it is free. But each time it emerges less and less like the Christianity that is known and loved.

Don Cupitt eschews the supernatural; and the supernatural is just what most believers want religion for. Without an all-powerful God who really cares whether they pass their driving-test or whatever, and without the promise of an even better life hereafter, what's in it for them? So there is a public outcry, yet again. But most of the Christians who prefer faith to facts will soon dismiss what they don't want to know. Those who are receptive to objective fact may well learn from this series.

The theologians are doing our job for us these days—and doing it for popular consumption far better than we would be allowed the resources to do. The fact that Mrs Mary Whitehouse has tried to get the series banned is a recommendation in itself.

It must be quarter-of-a-century ago that I became acquainted with John Wren-Lewis, one of the pioneer spokesmen in this country for the new theology, who was saying very much the sort of thing that Don Cupitt is saying in these programmes. He was in great demand in the media, as he provided them with the desirable Christian label while avoiding the tedium of the old-style religion. But one day he announced that he now preferred to drop the

label Christian and call himself a humanist. That was the end of his television appearances. But the new generation of Wren-Lewises now have their cake and eat it: they are "Christian humanists".

I recently asked Don Cupitt if he could tell me exactly what made him a Christian humanist rather than a secular humanist like me. I knew, of course,

that he pooh-pooed such childish doctrines as the virgin birth and the resurrection—but did he, perhaps, believe in absolutes? No—he did not even regard it as a meaningful question. The only thing he could point to was that he liked to use ritual and symbolism. Religion, he says, is an "imaginative resource". Poor old God!

Are Christians "Nicer"?

T. F. EVANS

It was a Christian clergyman, Sydney Smith, who is reported to have said that he never read a book before reviewing it because it prejudiced him so. Such an eminent wit need not be taken too seriously but it is certainly dangerous to comment on an unread book. Nevertheless, when the contents of a book are given publicity and there is no reason to suspect misrepresentation, a few cautious observations may be permitted.

The book in question is *One Man's Faith*, by Lord Longford. It is the subject of a recent article in the *Church of England Newspaper*. The article takes the form of a talk by Lord Longford to Paul Handley about his book. Lord Longford asserts that "on average, Christians behave better than non-Christians — as indeed they ought to!" As one of his supporting arguments, he quotes the late Evelyn Waugh who "when asked why he wasn't 'nicer'", said: "You have no idea how nasty I would be if I were not a Catholic". Lord Longford claims that "certain qualities such as humility and forgiveness, are almost exclusively Christian".

It is difficult to know where to begin with such a line of reasoning. First, however, we might ask whether the qualities that Lord Longford mentions are thought to be absent from the lives of Hindus and Muslims, for example. If this is not meant, there is a large hole in the argument.

Secondly, it is not as easy as Lord Longford seems to think it is elsewhere in the article to sweep aside the view that many people without religious views behave just as well as those who ostensibly base their lives on some system of formal belief. Thirdly, and it is not so flippant a question as it might seem: could it be argued with equal truth that those who play a game which enjoins high standards, such as cricket, for example, behave better in their general lives than those who do not.

Many Christians who try seriously to put the tenets of their faith into practice are object lessons for their fellow citizens. Unfortunately, many are not. The only verdict on Lord Longford's contention has to be "not proven". As a corollary, it can be argued that, as between two people of good behaviour, one of them believes in the idea of supernatural sanctions and rewards, while the other does

not, there is much greater merit on the part of the latter. He who acts well towards his fellows because there is something inside him that tells him to, deserves admiration that cannot be wholly given to one whose behaviour is dictated solely or largely by the thought that he is going to do well out of it in this world or the next, if any. What it is inside ourselves that can make up for righteousness has always given rise to argument, and always will. But it cannot be distinct from the fact that we are all members one with one with another, and it is not necessary to accept the full theology of Christianity in order to be free to use that noble phrase.

Choice, Not Coercion

Not so long ago, there were just two ways for young women to feel if they were pregnant; they were either married and happy or single and desperate. Things have changed recently. Increased access to birth control, legal abortion as a fail-safe, and a change in attitude towards unmarried mothers have all widened the options open to girls. Some embark on sexual relationships freed by contraception from the fear of unwanted pregnancy, others go ahead and have their babies without seeing the need for a wedding ring, while still more marry but choose to remain childless, for a time at least. The important factor in each case is that the personal permutation should be a choice freely made in the full knowledge of the alternatives. No longer is there any excuse for girls to be thrust into untimely marriages doomed to failure, nor into single parenthood for hardship.

A new report into teenage pregnancy shows just how far and how fast things have changed for young people lately. Judith Bury, medical officer with the Edinburgh Brook Advisory Centre, has pieced together a vast array of recent research literature to provide a comprehensive picture of teenage sexuality. What emerges most strikingly from the study, despite the misleading use of statistics by doom-mongers representing the Moral Right, is that teenage preg-

(continued on page 157)

BOOKS

GOD FOR NOTHING, by Richard MacKenna. Souvenir Press, £7.95

This book is the work of a clear-sighted and courageous man who is curate of St James's, Paddington, an area of London racked by housing dereliction, poverty, disease, prostitution and violence. My grandmother would simply not have known what he was talking about; my mother, a natural if untutored anarchist, would have crowed with delight at those passages that make mincemeat of the Church's pretensions to be the servant of God and Mankind: "Servants don't sit on thrones". He has been likened to "someone who has returned briefly from the Somme to rage against the generals' merciless stupidity and the imperial purple of their garments" — the theme of the early part of the book.

As a committed Christian and clergyman the author could not be expected to engage in any sustained examination of what is meant by "God", though the second chapter, "Is there anybody there? said the traveller", offers the hope. The nearest he comes to a close look at the meaning is when he writes: "The first (quotation) is from Jung: 'Life is — or has — meaning and meaninglessness. I cherish the anxious hope that meaning will preponderate and win the battle'. The second is from Dag Hammarskjöld: 'I don't know who — or what — put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't remember answering. But at some moment I did answer yes to Someone or Something — and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal'".

Long ago I had a discussion with a Jesuit about the nature of God and was trying to get across to him the concept that our evolution makes us part of our own environment attuned to it in many and subtle ways, with perceptions that are themselves shaped not only by the external realities but by the range and limitations of our perceptive organs, our senses. I said to him, in some desperation, "If ducks could have a God it would *have* to be a duck!" Some weeks later he wrote to me: "On Sunday I started my sermon by saying, 'If ducks could have a God it would have to be a Duck'".

Communication between human beings has to take a sensory form — touch — or to use language or other symbols with socially agreed meaning. The vast literature about love testifies to the fact that it is we who endow physical events with meaning because our needs make us respond, not that meaning resides in those events.

What is this force, Arnold's "enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness"? Richard MacKenna seems to reject the materialist view if

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he equates materialism with the Soviet pressure to put the group before the individual. But materialism is more subtle than that, as Russian philosophers know well: the processes that we call thought — that systematisation of symbols that we know as language, art, music or mathematics, is as much an aspect of materialism as the interaction of molecules. The concept of God is no less a materialist concept than is "the oceanic feeling" that some claim to experience. MacKenna senses this when he quotes Iris Murdoch whose "brooding self with its hurt vanity" disappears as she observes a hovering kestrel. He might have quoted the Benedictine aphorism "Laborare est orare" as he refers to the nun who told him that "just walking in the country can be a meditation". A young novice, observing St Teresa of Avila tucking in with hearty relish to a well-cooked partridge, tentatively voiced the opinion that her gusto seemed not to be in harmony with the life of prayer and received the crisp correction: "When it's prayer time it's prayer time; when it's partridge time it's partridge time".

Meditation is not about contemplating "holy" or "good" things; it is about deepening our awareness of our own sensory responses to our world. During the war I met an old German Jew who would sit, sometimes for hours, contemplating a small flower. Before the war he had been a jeweller who worked for many of the European courts. The Nazis ordered him to join the Party as they wanted to use him. He refused, but they allowed him to continue his work in jewellery. He was a man of outstanding simplicity and directness but with a high intelligence that he could apply in many fields, as when he began to design houses for the mass of the people in the country, using local materials and needing the simplest skills.

"Where does the call of personal responsibility come from, if it is just [?not just M.D.] something conditioned into us by society or culture or parents. . .?" At this point the author seems to slip too easily into an assumption of "the other" — "something outside oneself" — when a closer consideration of the nature of human evolution would make it clear that the tendency of evolution, so far as Man is concerned, has been away from the autonomous individual, equipped with poison fangs, wings or armour for survival, towards a frail social creature, individually vulnerable at all stages, but equipped with language. Language is the tool that not only makes communication — and therefore, coordinated action — possible, but further, enables us to encapsulate experience in words and symbols and so to free every new generation from the tread-

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mill of starting human culture afresh.

The fact that Man is born, not with ready-made skills — instincts and drives — but with a powerful learning organ, the brain, means that we are not burdened with out-of-date knowledge and experience. We start to learn with the world as it is now, not as it was millions of years ago. Language is the *sine qua non* of transmissible memory: it puts individual experience at the disposal of the group and makes accumulated experience available to the young. Without language we cannot be human; without language there cannot be God. The “moral imperatives that drove men like Amos and Jeremiah, or that set a man like Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the road that led to his murder in a concentration camp” certainly did not come “out of thin air”. Those moral imperatives are as much part of Man’s evolution as his binocular vision or his upright posture.

They derive from the fact that man is a social being. Man’s physical frailty means that we must love one another or perish. Christ did not invent the doctrine of love; he recognised its importance in the early capitalism of the Roman Empire. Our present obsessive preoccupation with computers and robots is the direct outcome of material greed that is founded on spiritual emptiness and fear. Obsessive need for “control” is one sign of psychopathology. People, especially those whose work creates wealth, are unpredictable. They demand a fair share of the wealth they produce because they see on TV and in the Press how those who are already rich grow even richer, while they have to fight to maintain what they have. Robots would not strike, be late, demand higher wages, have children who must be educated, fed and housed. Sometimes we get the feeling that those who most loudly proclaim their belief in God and Christian values — the Thatchers and the Reagans of the world — are actually working to eliminate the poor and the starving and the working classes, so that the world may be peopled by the rich, their technicians and the robots. Hence the building of deep shelters for the few so that when the big bang comes Utopia without Wells’ Molochs can begin.

The need for “the other” is the spiritual counterpart of the inescapable fact that Man’s very existence depends on the maintenance of the physical world in its present form — the atmosphere in which lungs have evolved, the supply of proteins, carbohydrates and minerals to which his digestive system has adapted, the presence of other human beings without whom human culture would be unthinkable. It is the persistence of the young child’s need for a good parent to feed, protect and comfort — images

that abound in religious worship.

Richard MacKenna’s book is a brave effort — for those committed Christians who are troubled about the discrepancies between what the Church preaches and its daily practice.

MICHAEL DUANE

THE FREETHINKER, VOLUME 103, 1983. G. W. Foote & Company, £7.50

The Freethinker is now 103 years young and, although in its reduced monthly format it makes but a slim annual volume, the pages continue to be packed with lively, informative, controversial and — above all — independently freethinking articles.

Many of the topics written upon are familiar ones to readers of the paper over the years; irreligious journalism clearly has qualities of eternity! The issue of Disestablishment, like the Church of England itself, simply refuses to go away. In May, a report of Tony Benn’s lecture at St James’s Church in which he called for the privatisation of the State monopoly in Anglicanism was given two not wholly uncritical columns, and a public meeting organised by the National Secular Society a month later received full front page treatment in July.

Religious education in schools remained another staple concern of 1983. Whilst appreciating the irony of the outrage expressed in Christian and other circles at the demand of the “Ayatollahs of Bradford” for separate Muslim schooling, *The Freethinker* commendably did not gloat at the discomfiture of the Christians but instead deplored yet another example of religious separatism and intolerance. Unfortunately there were several examples of Christian intolerance during the year, the prize going to the Leamington headmaster who arranged corporate membership of the so-called “Responsible” Society for his school. Several informative articles came from Michael Duane during the year, and in August he sparked off an interesting discussion with a contribution on what schoolchildren believe.

Freedom of belief and action lies at the heart of *The Freethinker’s* philosophy, and this again led to several articles on censorship and the various kinds of control exerted over individuals by governments, churches and private individuals — though I was happy this year to find Mrs Whitehouse taking a back seat for a change. Our antiquated Sunday Trading Laws were attacked on two occasions, in March and December, but most space was rightly devoted in 1983 to the threat to civil liberties posed in the new Police Bill. The National Council for Civil Liberties certainly has a friend in *The Freethinker*. But the paper does not always follow an “orthodox” line, and in discussions of the censorship of pornography the conflict of freedom with

feminism roused a certain amount of dissention. It seems fair to conclude that freethinkers value freedom above feminism. Like his illustrious predecessor, G. W. Foote, the present editor is not afraid to allow criticism of the ladies when their zeal becomes anti-libertarian. David Webb threw down the gauntlet in June with his article, "Persons Against Repression Against Persons", in which he took "misguided militant feminist groups" to task for joining hands in spirit with the Festival of Light brigade and others who forget Heine's aphorism: "When books are burned, in the end people too get burned". "Why is *The Freethinker* so anti-feminist?" asked Brenda Able in one of several of her letters published during the year. Nicolas Walter had doubtless contributed to this question earlier in the year when he dared to challenge the "sectarian and separatist principles" of the peace women at Greenham Common. Freethinkers clearly walk where angels fear to tread.

In view of this the editor may have been somewhat surprised to be accused of "Left-wing bias" — though one would search in vain for an article commending Mrs Thatcher in 1983. The trouble appears to have been caused by the support generally given to CND, rather than a series of anti-Government articles from T. F. Evans. By December the correspondence columns were fairly sparkling with controversy. On reflection, the present reviewer acquits the editor of the charge — if only because he spared us the General Election in his columns. Though the Falklands War was generally condemned, Francis Bennion was allowed to support the defence of the islanders' freedom; two letters appeared not wholly opposed to capital punishment; an appeal was made to Conservative libertarians and to Conservative opponents of hunting; and Terry Liddle (hardly a darling of the Right) administered an even-handed criticism of Eric Heffer, David Alton and Shirley Williams as well as Mrs Thatcher.

In 1983 the Catholic Church retained its place as supreme enemy of *The Freethinker* and of freethought. Barbara Smoker again distinguished herself as the Pope's principal adversary in the paper. In January she gave us an amusing account of her experiences with Dominican apologetics at the University of Edinburgh; in March she produced a well-informed analysis of the new Code of Canon Law; and in June she wrote on the ecclesiastical scandal of the year, the affair of God's Banker.

Barbara Smoker's other campaign of the year has so far proved less successful. Describing herself as "a Rationalist, Personalist, Libertarian, Left-Wing, Secular Humanist Atheist" she embarked on a quest for a word to describe the freethought movement which has more content than the ubiquitous humanist label. Looking at the Events column, she is going to have an uphill struggle in Belfast, Brighton, Glasgow, Harrow, Havering, Leeds, Merseyside, Lewisham,

Warwickshire and Worthing. Whether "Atheist Liberation" will catch on remains to be seen. I doubt it.

It was pleasant to see during the year that those voices from Down Under — Nigel Sinnott and David Tribe — are still to be heard. One of the latter's essays reminded readers that 1983 saw the 150th anniversary of the birth of R. G. Ingersoll as well as of Charles Bradlaugh. The Bradlaugh celebrations on 26 September rightly dominated the October issue, with the luxury of two — not very flattering — photographs of speakers on that occasion. In the previous issue the editor permitted us an extract from Bradlaugh's own lecture, "A Plea for Atheism", which concluded with a reminder that theology is no substitute for bread.

The other major commemoration of the year was the death at the age of 80 of Margaret Knight, whose writings, lectures, and above all 1955 broadcasts on "Morals without Religion", did so much to bring a rational discussion of secular humanism before the general public. The news of her death brought a splendid obituary tribute from the editor, as well as several other tributes from those who knew and worked with her.

Each month I await with curiosity and pleasure the headlines which the hard-pressed editor concocts for his front-page article. It cannot be easy to inject a sense of news value into a monthly publication. My favourite headline in 1983 came in June: "Leading Freethinkers Denounce Solzhenitsyn's Rantings". It is commonplace in the West for Solzhenitsyn to be regarded almost reverentially; trust *The Freethinker* to point out that even gods have feet of clay. In this case the Russian author is taken to task for confusing oppression in the USSR with the natural fruits of atheism. Michael Duane then followed this up with a sensitive article under the less sensational heading, "The Tragedy of Solzhenitsyn".

Another thing which appeals to me in *The Freethinker* is the regular snippet, emphasised in dark type, from some report of local nonsense. The editor has a wickedly sharp eye for the absurd and the hypocritical. I liked the Chicago sermon on "Freedom from Futility" which was announced as "Freedom from Fertility", followed by the hymn, "O love that wilt not let me go". In this context of humour Fanny Cockerell produced a timely essay in September, "Let's Keep our Heads — and Our Sense of Humour". That must always be *The Freethinker's* motto, for this is the spirit in which the paper was born.

EDWARD ROYLE

A Christian convert on the Phillipines island of Mondora speared two women to death after they had been accused of practising black magic.

THEATRE

THE DEVIL AND THE GOOD LORD, by Jean-Paul Sartre. Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith

Goetz, the central character in Sartre's *The Devil and the Good Lord*, takes four-and-a-half stage hours to realise that he is an existentialist atheist, and it feels like a long time. The play is set in early 16th-century Germany, rent by wars, religious reformation and peasant rebellion. Goetz's epic attempt to be absolutely evil, and then absolutely good, in rivalry to the devil and the Lord, concludes with his final realisation that he, himself, is only human and that He isn't there at all.

Sartre wrote the play in 1951 and this is the first English performance. John Dexter brings all his imaginative skills to the production and has assembled as fine a cast as in any play in London, but it is impossible not to agree with the French theatre manager who begged Sartre, while he was writing the play, to make large cuts. Sartre was preoccupied with the idea that we are always acting a part for others, and Goetz is told by his mistress, "You ham, what could you do without an audience". Gerard Murphy gives a compelling performance of a man posturing, spluttering and declaiming to create his own role as a wicked, then good man. His principal opponent, constantly waiting for him to fail, is Heinrich, a priest who has lost his belief in everything except that emptiness which Sartre feared was at the heart of existence. Simon Ward makes Heinrich the most credible of a vast cast, human and vulnerable. Other characters seem designed to demonstrate the Sartrian idea that people should "leap towards existence", which tends to make his characters leap from one idea to another in an arbitrary way.

A sense of melodramatic unreality pervades the play, because the central characters are always debating momentous decisions: should the besieged city be destroyed? Should a Utopian community refuse to participate in a war between rich and poor? Should Goetz lead the peasants? These are special cases of a kind which are rarely found in daily life. The process of debate presupposes a self-aware, articulate choice, which is not how choosing takes place. The debates run through every possible point, and occasionally I longed to cry from the audience, "Let's move to the next motion".

Sartre wrote in *Existentialism and Humanism* that "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself". At the end of the play Goetz duly realises that "I want to be a man among men" and the last 15 minutes of the play are moving and dramatic. Underneath the abstract ideas, which weigh heavily upon the play, I detected in the conclusion the old story of a desperate man saved by a good-hearted

woman. The emotional commitment to fight with the oppressed, for all the arguments which precede it, ends up being an emotional, not a rational, commitment. The play contains lively and humorous moments, especially thanks to John Dexter's production; there is melodrama and passion; there are more philosophical ideas than can be easily digested in one evening. And even if Sartre could not make them all cohere, this is a fascinating, if not spell-binding, evening.

JIM HERRICK

Choice, Not Coercion

nancies are actually on the decline in this country. Between 1971 and 1981, the teenage pregnancy rate among 15 to 19-year-olds fell in England and Wales, from 63 to 44 per thousand — this despite the fact that teenagers were more sexually active than in the past. The decline was particularly sharp after 1974, when contraceptive services became freely available to all on the NHS.

For those teenagers who do become pregnant, the study reveals some changing patterns of dealing with the pregnancy. Shotgun weddings are fast becoming a thing of the past. Whilst in 1970, nearly half the teenagers who found themselves pregnant married before the baby was born, by 1980 fewer than a quarter did. This trend was reversed in the case of the abortion figures; pregnancies ending in abortion more than doubled from one to two in five, over the same period. Hence the increased abortion figures which provide so much ammunition for the "Right-to-Life" groups. What they often forget to consider is "right to what kind of life?" Life for an unwanted baby is of a very different quality from that of one planned and prepared for.

Despite the progress made in attitudes towards sexuality, contraception and young people, we haven't yet reached the stage where young people's behaviour always squares with their intentions. Judith Bury's report shows that misinformation is still far too common amongst young people; that contraceptive services are not always as available as they might be; that there is, at least for the younger teenager, still the bogeyman of confidentiality. Rather than have their parents know they are sexually active, many young people prefer to risk pregnancy. If they become pregnant, they may be ignorant of the benefits available to them, of the need to seek ante-natal care, and of opportunities to continue their education.

Until the perfect contraceptive becomes available, until its dispensers are paragons, and until all teenagers are rational thinkers, the problem of teenage pregnancy will not go away. What we can do as adults is to give as much help and support as we can, and as little pious judgement.

KAYE WELLING

LETTERS

SUICIDE

E. M. Karbacz, like many opponents of voluntary euthanasia, does not seem to separate the two kinds of assistance. Doubtless it would be dangerous to pass a law allowing one person to inject another with a death drug. But the existing law makes it an offence to advise someone on the most painless way to commit suicide. Surely this is taking matters too far.

It is also wrong for persistent failed suicides to be committed to mental hospitals. Psychiatry doesn't help everyone.

Those who condemn voluntary euthanasia tend to be fundamentalists who believe that suicide is wrong, even when assisted, on religious grounds.

R. W. WALKER

VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA

The letter from E. M. Karbacz (August) about hypothetical "abuses" if voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide were legalised is in the realm of horror fantasy.

The law would, of course, stipulate preconditions to safeguard both the voluntary element—ie a consistent desire of the patient over a minimum period—and the seriousness and incurability of the illness or disability that was the ground of that desire.

We do not seek a blanket repeal of the clause in the Suicide Act that makes assisting suicide a criminal offence, but would merely make it a good defence to any such charge that the patient had consistently requested euthanasia apparently for adequate medical reasons and that the defendant, being motivated primarily by compassion, had acted reasonably. In practice, this would mean that only in cases of doubt would the DPP bring charges, and in the final resort it would be for a jury to determine the facts.

All laws are liable to abuse if the authorities wish to abuse them. (As Miss Karbacz says, the Official Secrets Act is one example in this country.) But such abuses are not dependent on any law. When the Nazi regime in Germany called the murder of handicapped people "Euthanasia", this was not an extension of an existing euthanasia law—on the contrary, there had never been any such law, and Hitler was always strongly opposed to voluntary euthanasia.

There is no doubt that euthanasia, at least to the extent of curtailing a terminal illness, is widely practised by doctors in this country—but not on a voluntary basis, since the present law makes doctors frightened to raise the question with their patients.

The law we want is a permissive law—comparable with the laws passed in the 1960s on divorce, homosexuality and abortion. Does Miss Karbacz see any danger of these being made compulsory?

BARBARA SMOKER

(Chairman, The Voluntary Euthanasia Society)

SURVIVING IN SOCIETY

S. E. Parker (Letters, August) claims that suicide only needs to be justified when one's life belongs to another person or an abstract entity. Not quite; the ultimate act of self-destruction has to be justified to oneself even if one is selfish or egoistic enough to disregard the views or feelings of others. He does not attempt to rebut the point that in taking one's own life, one might hurt one's family or friends, even when he could easily do so by pointing out that continuing to live in pain might well cause them more anguish than one's suicide.

Mr Parker further implies that John Beloff has reified society—that is, converted an abstract entity into a concrete object. Whether Dr Beloff did in fact do so is beside the point. The word society means an aggregation of people, and to suggest that an act would have social consequences need only mean that that act would affect others, and not merely those who know the actor.

S. E. Parker does not realise that people aggregate themselves into societies—and other groups—because they have to do so in order to survive, and not to reify the group concept. If he feels that one's own satisfactions are the only valid criterion for one's life, then let him drop out of society entirely and see how long he lasts without it.

COLIN D. J. MILLS

Chairman, Socialist Secular Association

TARNISHED IMAGE

Barbara Smoker (in her "Visit to a Primitive Country", August) has allowed herself to gush so much over what she saw that she has failed to notice the cruel realities. The facts are that Madalyn O'Hair has alienated most of the atheists in the United States by her rude, crude and authoritarian behaviour. Most atheists in the United States will have nothing to do with her. She has lied about her meagre accomplishments so often that she perhaps does not know the truth any longer. I refer any readers who want a long list of her deceptions to the editorial, "Bluffing the Atheists", in the May/June 1984 issue of "The American Rationalist".

Briefly, that article shows that she has no legitimate right to call herself "Dr", that her scholarship is very shoddy, that she was not responsible for the US Supreme Court decision banning bible reading or prayer in the public schools, that she has hardly ever won a lawsuit for the rights of atheists, that she has given atheists back the bad name they had before hundreds of atheists laboured to undo that image; that she has refused to cooperate with any other atheist organisations in the US, that she has arbitrarily kicked out anyone she didn't like from her group, and that with leaders like her we don't need enemies.

I have not read the second part of Miss Smoker's article, but if it reflects the same blindness to the facts, I would urge your readers to take it with an extremely large grain of salt.

GORDON STEIN

(The Editor, American Rationalist)

DIVISION

Writing from the very Heart of Barbarism, New York City, I can appreciate many of the observations made in Barbara Smoker's article, "Visit to a Primitive Country". For a number of years now, I have confined my efforts largely to research libraries and my own study, as I no longer wish to expose my nerves to the anti-intellectualism, conformism, hysteria, vituperation, character assassination, etc. which are endemic in the various "movements" in this city.

On the division between gay and non gay atheists in the United States—this does not seem to be inherent in the movement, but rather the result of particular events. The basic split occurred among gay atheists in New York City. A group, calling itself the American Gay Atheists (AGA) separated from the Gay Atheist League of America (GALA). Charges of harassment, fascistic politics, and police agency were bandied about. The FBI began interrogating people.

It seems that Madalyn O'Hair felt she had to choose between the two contending groups. She aligned herself with the splinter group (AGA) and severed all

EVENTS

relations with the much larger and older GALA. A forced-choice alliance of this sort seems ill-advised—having to decide which group has the purest politics, the largest constituency, the best funding, the most appealing personalities . . . the fewest police agents. This almost military rigidity, this demand for orthodoxy and consensus, is inimical to the free expression of ideas.

When atheism and free enquiry become counterposed to each other, then our movement (if any) is in trouble. Long live Free Thought!

JOHN LAURITSEN

E. S. P. HAYNES

I was interested to see John Rowland's reference to E. S. P. Haynes in "Nostalgic Memories" (July) as a figure worth recalling.

Your readers might be interested to know that the Adam Smith Club, which in March of this year held a one-day conference on J. M. Robertson, the great liberal and freethinker, will be including a paper on E. S. P. Haynes in one of its future conferences on the classical liberal tradition.

Although not a genius and polymath on the scale of J. M. Robertson, Haynes was a penetrating and challenging thinker on political as well as religious issues. A noted writer and figure of his time, it is unjust that Haynes—like a number of other classical liberal and atheist thinkers—has been consigned to the intellectual "memory hole". Our conferences on the liberal tradition will, I hope, help to restore both him and other like-minded writers, to the intellectual attention they deserve.

CHRIS R. TAME
Secretary, The Adam Smith Club

SMOKING AND HEALTH

As a National Secular Society member and ex-smoker who has recently joined the supporters of Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) I would like to raise the question of tobacco smoking.

Smoking kills at least 50,000 people a year in this country, and affects the health of many more. One would have thought that religious leaders and the lower clergy could turn their position to practical use by warning their "flock" against the dangers of smoking; but they do not seem to do so, preferring to focus emotively on issues such as abortion. In the past, abstinence from tobacco tended to be linked with low church-inspired teetotalism, according to which alcohol was seen as the greater evil. It is perhaps for this reason that non-smokers are in some quarters still seen not only as namby-pamby health freaks but as puritanical ascetics, standing half-way towards "temperance".

It could be claimed that smokers have the right to commit a slow, lingering form of Russian roulette-style suicide. But hardly any of them are intentionally doing this: they are simply addicted to the drug nicotine. Nor does the right to smoke argument take into account the rights of non-smokers, who are irritated and sometimes even physically harmed by other people's smoke.

While it would be unreasonable, say, to insist that all secular humanists should become vegetarian, surely a strong case can be made for saying that the self-destructive and anti-social habit of smoking is incompatible with the humanist philosophy, which is based on maximising the quality of life. The NSS should adopt a position on smoking and incorporate it into its list of practical objectives. I am in favour of an eventual total ban on tobacco.

TIM THOMPSON

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, 4 November, 7 pm. Celia Mather: Nicaragua.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Annual Dinner, Langford's Hotel, Hove. Saturday, 17 November. Guest speaker: T. F. Evans. Tickets £6. Bookings: Fleur Jacot, 11 Slonk Hill Road, Shoreham-by-Sea, Sussex, telephone Shoreham 61404.

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

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

Harrow Humanist Society. Gayton Road Library, Harrow. Wednesday, 14 November, 8 pm. Barbara Smoker: Atheism.

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.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 25 October, 7.45 pm. Barbara Smoker: An Atheist's Impressions of America.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 14 November, 8 pm. Bernard Fisher: Acid Rain.

The 1984 Voltaire Memorial Lecture. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London. Monday, 8 October, 7 pm. Ludovic Kennedy: An End to Belief?

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

Worthing Humanist Group. Trades Club, 15 Broadwater Road, Worthing. Sunday, 28 October, 5.30 pm. Sam Beer: William Morris.

The Rev Ben Crockett, Vicar of All Saints', Mickleover, Derby, has refused to marry a couple this month because the wedding date clashed with the Derby County-Plymouth Argyle football match. Mr Crockett and his wife are keen County supporters and have season tickets for home matches. It has been his policy for many years not to conduct weddings after 1 pm on days when the team is playing at home.

principle of complete freedom of religion often fail to see that, in all logic, this must include freedom from religion.

"There is only one person who has the right to decide about euthanasia: in each case the decision must rest with the person most concerned, provided he or she is rational.

"However, no one is morally obliged to carry out active euthanasia for another, or assist in his or her suicide. Indeed, it would be morally wrong to do so unless the reasons for it were sufficiently serious and apparently incurable. Rationalism recognises that there is an important moral distinction to be made between assisting in a suicide that is reasonable and assisting in a suicide that is not reasonable.

"Christians often talk about a 'merciful release' when a distressing terminal illness ends in death: supporters of voluntary euthanasia simply want the merciful release to occur before the suffering has been uselessly prolonged, if that is the patient's wish.

"Everyone nowadays seems to agree that a life support system may be switched off when the brain stem is dead — and this has, indeed, become the accepted definition of death — but I would say that the criterion should be the death of the lobes of the brain that make consciousness possible. Not a contrived definition of death, but the possibility of any worthwhile life. And the main criterion for voluntary euthanasia should not be whether death is imminent anyway, but simply the incurability of an intolerable condition.

"Illogically enough, most religious believers contrive to make a moral distinction between active and passive euthanasia, as does the present law, though no moral distinction is made in any non-theological system of ethics between acts of commission and acts of omission — that is in this context, between killing and letting die — assuming the same intent and same motive. That there is no such moral distinction is argued irrefutably by leading moral philosophers.

"With regard to infant euthanasia — which though, of course, outside the brief of this conference, is closely allied to it — the British medical profession encourages its members to let seriously defective neo-nates die of starvation while sedated, over a period of several days, yet recoils in horror from any suggestion of giving these babies a quick lethal injection. But the idea that withholding sustenance from a baby is any less lethal, or any more moral, than a quicker form of euthanasia is manifestly absurd.

"Pope Pius XII, faced with the facts of rapidly advancing medical technology, declared in 1957 that 'extraordinary means' need not be used to keep people alive; but his Church has since extended this

in practice to include quite ordinary means, such as the normal administration of antibiotics when an incidental attack of pneumonia happens to offer a 'merciful release' from an incurable condition. The only discernible ethical distinction between withholding antibiotics (so as not to cure the pneumonia) and actually administering a lethal dose or injection (in the absence of pneumonia) appears to be the implicit principle that you must always give the Almighty a sporting chance!"

The conference, which was held in Nice's prestigious Palais de Congrès, attracted media attention in many countries, including Britain. In France, the host country, every important newspaper gave it front-page coverage, *Libération* devoting four pages to it and *France-Soir* the whole of its front page.

The event even made the Vatican paper *L'Osservatore Romano*, which carried a condemnatory article by a leading theologian and quoted the Pope as saying that members of the conference were advocating murder.

The third session of the conference was on the medical aspects of the subject, and then came the most celebrated speaker of all, Professor Christiaan Barnard, who was responsible for the degree of media interest. But he was less warmly received than the Dutch medical representative, who put more emphasis on the patient's right to choose.

Barnard, while strongly in favour of passive euthanasia and also advocating the legalisation of active euthanasia, thought it was really up to the medical profession to decide on the quality of life in each case. This professional authoritarianism was attacked by many of the participants in the ensuing discussion.

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Brighton magistrates have sentenced David Howkins, a member of the Divine Light Mission, to six months' imprisonment (most of it suspended) for using a forged rail pass. The police smashed a racket in false Inter-Rail cards after raiding the homes of DLM members. The forgeries, printed in the United States, were used by sect members travelling to meetings in Britain and on the Continent.