

The Freethinker

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HOME OFFICE COMMITTEE URGES END TO SUNDAY SHOPPING RESTRICTIONS

The National Secular Society, which, for the last 118 years has campaigned for a freer Sunday (and passed a resolution on this issue at its recent annual general meeting) has welcomed the recommendations of a Home Office committee that all restrictions on shop hours be abolished. Support for the committee's report has also come from the National Consumer Council, whose chairman, Mr Michael Montague, said: "The present legal restrictions make bad law. Sunday trading would allow more families to get about and enjoy themselves". The Consumers' Association has urged the Government to take action on the committee's proposals.

Barbara Smoker, president of the NSS, said that whilst sympathising with the anxieties of some traders and employees in face of the proposed lifting of statutory shop hours restrictions, it was felt that experience of the new freedom will show these fears to be unfounded.

"Some people's 'weekend' may fall from Tuesday to Thursday", she added, "but being in a minority can have its advantages. The main point is that leisure days should be a matter of choice — the choice of the worker, of the employer and of the customer — and not predetermined by the legend of a miracle said to have taken place on a Sunday nearly two thousand years ago, a miracle disbelieved by an increasing number of people, including bishops.

"In the days when there was unremitting toil for the masses, the idea of a sabbath was a good one; but now few people now work six days a week unless they choose to, and the four-day week will soon be normal. The National Secular Society is strongly in favour of work sharing and of more leisure for all, but can see no good reason why the majority should be forced by law to take the same day off.

"Those who wish to keep to the religious Sunday

should generally find it possible to come to some mutual arrangement with their colleagues, while the rest of us enjoy leisure on the days we choose".

The Shops Act 1950 has been widely disregarded and anomalies regarding Sunday trading have brought the law into disrepute. Breaches of the Act have resulted in the prosecution of small traders by local authorities, compelled to take action by sabbatarian informers.

The main churches have long since abandoned attempts to maintain the Victorian Sunday. And evangelical organisations, most notably the Lord's Day Observance Society, have lost one battle after another to impose Sunday observance on an unwilling and increasingly unbelieving populace.

The Home Office committee, chaired by Mr Robin Auld, QC, concluded that people's attitude to Sunday had changed.

The report said: "Although many people might claim a belief in God, few now take part in organised religion on Sunday.

"For a good many people, Sunday no longer has a predominantly religious flavour. Moreover, a growing number in this country belong to faiths other than a Christian one, and recognise a holy day other than Sunday. . .

"Increasingly Sunday has become a secular day, for most a day of leisure and recreation, and an opportunity to engage in family activities".

The Lord's Day Observance Society is sending a Christmas present to 10,000 inmates of HM Prisons. In view of the recipients' circumstances it may not be the most appropriately titled gift — the "Happy Day" Diary. The diary carries a scriptural quotation for every day of the year. Space is thoughtfully provided for such useful information as the telephone number of the local police station.

The Freethinker

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Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

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NEWS

A CALL TO REPENTANCE

The idea that a highly professional and totally committed Christian communicator like Gerald Priestland would actually put *The Case Against God* (the title of his BBC Radio 4 series) is quite laughable. For whether he is dealing with the hard-headed programme planners at Broadcasting House, or writing a weekly column for the soft-headed readers of the Roman Catholic *Universe*, the advancement of Christianity is always Mr Priestland's chief concern. As the Evangelical Alliance pointed out in a recent Press release: "Rather than demolish faith, Priestland says that his aim for the current series is to help people find 'God the Father' with the hope that they will go on to embrace a more fully Christian faith".

Gerald Priestland has nevertheless upset a large number of evangelical Christians. Already rawnerved after *The Sea of Faith* and the Bishop of Durham's controversial remarks in a televised interview, the very title of the Priestland series was enough to raise their fundamentalist hackles. No doubt our embryonic Moral Majority would prefer to see the likes of Gerald Priestland, Don Cupitt and Bishop Jenkins banished from the broadcasting studios.

Enthusiastic Jesusites are dab hands at letter writing and petitioning. Mary Whitehouse's followers showed the way by transforming a provincial schoolmarm into a national figure. Petition forms at church doors are signed with mindless alacrity by the faithful. And they have been kicking up a fuss about programmes like *The Case Against God*. However, the Evangelical Alliance reminds them that such activities can be self-defeating. It declares that "well intentioned but uninformed reaction to previous programmes has done us much harm". The excesses of the righteous are often an embarrassment to those who labour in the public relations departments of the Lord's vineyard.

Evangelicals are urged by the Alliance to face "the case against God". Moreover, it declares that they "need to treat the atheist case more seriously and with greater respect". They should also repent "for often appearing arrogant and defensive in debate, unwilling to listen and learn from others and at times simply to say 'I don't know'".

Atheists will regard this tribute from an evangelical organisation as being better than a smack on the ear with a wet fish. But it is exceedingly doubtful if the Evangelical Alliance's call to repentance

S AND NOTES

will be heeded in evangelical churches, meeting halls and training colleges. For those to whom it is addressed do not *appear* to be arrogant; they *are* arrogant. And given the opportunity they would be as dangerous and repressive as their counterparts in the United States. Evangelicals' beliefs are Jesus-centred, so it is not surprising that their attitudes are modelled on those of a religious fanatic with messianic pretensions.

Gerald Priestland believes that there is a need to resist the spread of "largely unconscious atheism" in our society. He combats it with a microphone, while evangelical Christians "fight the good fight" with twanging guitars, cream doughnut smiles and parrot-like assurances that Jesus Saves. It is up to the free-thought movement to galvanise the "largely unconscious atheism" that worries Gerald Priestland.

GOD'S TYRANT

It is remarkable how certain disagreeable types attempt to confer a spurious dignity on their motives and behaviour. Thus the saloon bar racists attempt to lard their xenophobia with pseudo-science; a minority of book-burning, men-hating feminists disguise their phobia with a warped libertarianism; and religious zealots who deliberately and systematically inflict pain on children claim to do so "out of love". An example of the last was heard recently at Wisbech Crown Court when a 39-year-old Cambridgeshire man was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment for ill-treating his daughter.

During a trial that lasted seven days, the 14-year-old girl told the jury how she and her brother and sister were beaten with a kettle lead, a bamboo cane and a leather belt for the slightest misdemeanour. Their father made them get up at six o'clock in the morning to learn passages from the bible. If they did not do so correctly, they were beaten until they pleaded for mercy.

When the accused decided that the children had misbehaved he forced them to pray on their knees for over an hour asking God for forgiveness. He frequently read passages from the bible to them, concentrating on the "rude bits". All the family went to church twice on Sunday and once on Saturday.

A detective inspector told the court that the father admitted he had made the children run a gauntlet of blows. When he interviewed the children they became terrified when their father's name was mentioned.

The accused man told the jury that he beat the children "lovingly". His daughter said that after the beatings "he would sit us on his knee and say: 'There, there, I did it because I love you'. He said he did it for our sakes and we were to honour our father and honour God".

The man, whose wife has now left him, was acquitted on a charge of indecently assaulting his daughter.

THAT'S "LIFE"

An example of what can happen to a woman in a country where medical ethics are determined by SPUCites and Lifers has been brought to light in the still priest-ridden Republic of Ireland. Brendan Hodggers, with support from the Irish Family Planning Association and others, is trying to bring a legal case to establish the right of patients and their families to be informed of the patient's condition, to be told what treatments are possible and to be consulted about what treatment is given. His action arises from the death of his wife, Sheila, in Lourdes Hospital, Dundalk, nearly two years ago.

Mrs Hodggers gave birth to a premature baby. It died immediately after being born. Mrs Hodggers died of cancer two days later. Mr Hodggers said of his wife's condition: "Sheila had tumours everywhere, on her neck, her legs, her spine. They had run rampant from lack of treatment".

The doctors had refused to treat her because the treatment might have damaged the foetus. Mrs Hodggers was denied pain killers in one hospital despite the fact that she was screaming with agony. Doctors would not even agree to have her X-rayed in order to determine the extent of her illness.

Mrs Hodggers had a history of cancer and it is likely that she would have died even if everything medically possible had been done. But her last days would have been much less agonising had she been given pain killing treatment.

One's attitude to religion has mellowed somewhat with the passing years, so it was rather disconcerting to read an editorial complaint in "The Humanist Theme" (November) that "The Freethinker" is too belligerent. That apart, issue number 17 of the "Theme" carries an assortment of interesting articles, poems, editorial comment and — er — jokes. "The Humanist Theme" is an example of private enterprise of which even Arthur Scargill would approve. Leslie Scrase edits, produces and distributes the magazine which has readers in the British Isles, Spain and the United States. It is free of charge, but a donation towards costs would not come amiss. Leslie Scrase's address is 38 Weston Avenue, East Molesey, Surrey, telephone (01) 941 2020.

ANOTHER VICTIM

The cruel and barbaric assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi illustrated once again the poisonous and irrational nature of religious faith. Consider the case of the Sikh bodyguard who fired the first shots at the Indian Prime Minister. A man of 33, he had been a member of her security staff for 15 years. Not so long ago if anyone had tried to injure Mrs Gandhi he would have done his duty and defended her without a moment's hesitation. And yet the very idea that Mrs Gandhi's ordering the army into the Golden Temple at Amritsar to clear out Sikh terrorists who had turned the building into a fortress was an act of desecration, so disturbed his mind that he put aside the respect he must have had for her and betrayed his trust with total disregard of the consequences. Religion is truly not only a soporific or a palliative; it is also the most virulent poison imaginable.

The rational view that sacredness lies in the minds of human beings, not in stones and mortar, is hardly likely to occur to the religious. Even so, most religious people should be able to see that fortifying a temple as a base for political terrorism must constitute an act of "desecration"; while the inevitable action to neutralize the fortress undoes the "desecration". A substantial minority of Sikhs is unable or unwilling to see this simple fact.

The violence that followed Mrs Gandhi's assassination, involving the loss of hundreds of lives, mostly Sikhs, has been described as a Hindu backlash. Later reports suggested that substantial sections of the Hindus who support the opposition parties had not participated in the violence. In fact some Hindu opposition MPs have also been targets of the mobs. Many Sikhs have been protected by their Hindu neighbours, friends and relations, and unity marches have been held in the Indian capital. In the short term there are sufficient moral resources within both communities to break the vicious circle of revenge and counter-revenge.

But in the long term only the complete banishment of religion from Indian political life will ensure that such tragedies are not repeated. Unfortunately, the path of wisdom is rarely the path of the religious.

Relations between Church and State in Italy are to be drastically revised for the first time since the Vatican-Mussolini Concordat of 1929. A commission has been set up and its proposals already include abolition of State payments to priests and bishops, making church institutions subject to common law and removal of tax advantages. At present a large proportion of the country's priests receive part of their salary from the Government. Under the new arrangements the parishes and dioceses will have to raise the money to pay them.

Lourdes Euthanasia

BARBARA SMOKER

Every year thousands of men, women and children — a large proportion in an advanced stage of illness — make a fruitless journey to the shrine at Lourdes. They are the pathetic victims of a lucrative and cynical confidence trick being operated by the Roman Catholic Church, the civic authorities and the tradespeople of the Pyrenees town where a peasant girl is supposed to have seen visions of the Virgin Mary.

"Built in 1973, the first Jumbulance to be built (Mark I), nicknamed 'The Lourdes Love Bus', has to be replaced", explains the double-page advertisement that has been appearing in recent months in this country in the Roman Catholic press, appealing for funds for the Across Trust, a charity which transports sick pilgrims from Britain to Lourdes in their multi-patient ambulance, "the Jumbulance".

The advertisement — addressed, fortunately, not to *Freethinker* readers but "TO THOSE WHO LOVE LOURDES, TO THOSE WHO LOVE OUR LADY" — is largely taken up with heart-rending photographs and case-histories of terminally ill patients, several of them children, who have been Jumbulance passengers during its 11-year history.

One might have expected at least some of these case-histories to have happy endings with claims of supposed miraculous cures.

Certainly this would have been so a few decades ago, in the days when faith in special divine intervention (aided by the incidence of mistaken medical prognosis?) was encouraged by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The famous Lourdes display of crutches left behind by cured pilgrims dates from that era — but even in those days, no one ever seems to have left behind a wooden leg; a fact which suggests limits to the type of physical cure that the intercession of the Blessed Virgin herself, haunting her favourite European shrine, was ever able to wheedle out of the deity.

But miraculous physical cures — whether on offer by market-place quacks or mainstream churches — are no longer in fashion, at least in the comparatively sophisticated West. (The private enterprise of fundamentalist faith-healers is another matter, and such practitioners find no shortage of credulous clients to boost their bank accounts.) Nowadays, the Lourdes pilgrim is supposed to look for spiritual favours only — though no one can prevent the individual from secretly hoping for something more, and secret hopes no doubt continue to keep up the pilgrimage statistics.

Ten thousand Jumbulance passengers and 1.5 million miles on the clock since 1973, so boasts the Across Trust, and we have no reason to query the accuracy of these figures. But we would have thought that, out of so many deserving candidates for divine favour, there could have been found one or two whose secret wishes appeared, however equivocally, to have come true.

Indeed, a first glance at the advertisement gives this impression, for the leading case-history is headed "Andrew's Dream Came True". But from the text it transpires that little Andrew, born tragically with spina bifida and hydrocephalus, died a few months after his pilgrimage to Lourdes on the Jumbulance. The only part of his dream that "came true" was being able to make that pilgrimage. Big deal, as they say.

But read on. Next we are introduced to the appropriately named Bernadette, mother of five children, who died only ten days after her "wonderful pilgrimage". And Ruth, a young woman who died actually in Lourdes, only 24 hours after her arrival there by Jumbulance. Another case-history is that of Wally, a double-amputee, who achieved three painful pilgrimages on the Jumbulance before death released him from his sufferings.

Poor little Angela, born with cystic fibrosis, showed such piety in her short life that she has been made the heroine of a sentimental free tract, "The Love of Little Angie". Twice she travelled to Lourdes with Across, and wrote: "At first I hoped God would make me better, but after I had been to the Grotto a few times, seen other people, and listened to the Masses, I found that I just could not ask Our Lady and God to make me well again. I felt I must do this for God". And she did: she died.

But the pilgrim to whose memory the new Jumbulance will be dedicated is David, who died of cancer at the age of 17, shortly after making the pilgrimage to Lourdes last Easter. As the Across advertisement puts it, "In his short span of seventeen years, David experienced more pain, disappointment and sadness, than most people experience in a lifetime". Even if, as the copywriter claims, "for David a special pleasure was to serve the Group Mass from his trolley-bed", was that really all that the pilgrimage so painfully undertaken was intended to do for him?

These sad case-histories, selected not by me but by the appeal organisers, make it clear that the round trip by sea and road to Lourdes (and occasionally the outward journey alone) sometimes contributes to the hastening of death — a fact which tempts me, as chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, to propose to its Executive Committee that a substantial donation be diverted from its funds to the Jumbulance appeal, since the Across Trust seems to have discovered a practical method, so far exempt from criminal prosecution, of cutting short the progress

of a distressingly slow terminal illness.

The final paragraph of the Jumbulance appeal reads as follows: "The list of those who have travelled ACROSS and are known to have since died numbers 2,000. Hundreds, mostly in terminal illness, were accepted but died before they could travel ACROSS to Lourdes. The suffering cannot wait, and the dying have no time to spare. The need for a Jumbulance Mark I replacement is obvious and urgent".

The logic there, I must say, I find rather difficult to follow. But maybe "those who love Our Lady" can be counted upon to use a different sort of thought process from the rest of us.

The Mother Superior of a convent at Hasselt, Belgium, has been sentenced to three months' imprisonment for defrauding the country's National Health Service. Mother Rafalle had equipped her convent with a luxury swimming pool, a bar and all mod cons. She raised nearly £3 million by cooking the books of a hospital attached to the convent and run by nuns.

Freethinker Fund

It is just possible that the 1984 total will reach £2,000. So if you have been thinking of sending a donation, reach for your cheque book. Our thanks are expressed to all who have contributed during the year, including those on the list given below.

Anonymous, £30, £4, £2; J. Anderson, £1.40; W. H. Brown, £1.40; K. Byrom, £1.40; J. M. Cardy, £1.40; E. F. Channon, £1.40; J. R. Crellin, £1.40; R. E. Davies, £20; A. Dyer, £5; O. Eigeldinger, £1.40; R. C. Everett, £1.40; G. A. Fleet, £1.40; T. Haas, £5.40; J. Hemming, £3.60; E. Henderson, £4; R. Hopkins, £1.40; A. Joiner, £1.40; B. N. Kirby, £3.40; P. L. Lancaster, £11.40; J. Lippitt, £5; J. Little, £20; G. L. Lucas, £5; B. Morgan, £1.40; F. Munniksma, £1.40; C. G. Newton, £3.40; R. H. Peters, £5; W. N. Ramage, £1.40; M. Robinson, £1.40; J. A. Spence, £1.40; G. Spiers, £6.40; W. G. Stirling, £2.40; M. A. B. Thatcher, £1.40; F. Walker, £2; K. Williams, £2.40; A. E. Woodford, £10.

Total for the period 4 October until 4 November: £175.20.

The remains of an unmarried mother, a famine victim who died over 140 years ago, have been removed from a roadside plot and given a Christian burial at Tynagh, Co Westmeath, Ireland. When the woman, known as Aine, was refused "spiritual assistance" on her death-bed, local legend has it that she cursed the priest and his successors in the Parish. Road widening plans have had to be abandoned because workmen would not disturb the grave.

Christian Christmas or Secular Holiday?

KARL HEATH

Every year we are exhorted by the clergy and others to "put Christ back into Christmas". But although Christians eventually settled on 25 December as the birth date of Jesus, the winter solstice was celebrated by our remote, pre-Christian ancestors. The author is a founder member of Warwickshire Humanist Group.

While it is not uncommon to celebrate the birth dates of the famous, this usually amounts to no more than a formal centenary recognition. A lengthy festival held every year would, if Nativity were the sole element, imply the birth of something unique, such as a God. So non-believers are sometimes accused of hypocrisy for celebrating Christmas if they do not acknowledge the divinity of Christ, or even His existence.

The answer to this charge is that Christmas is not just a Nativity, but more like a Miscellany in which all can join. The early Christians, for the first five centuries after Christ, had never heard of Christmas, but this did not prevent them from taking part in the pagan festivities of the season, for the simple reason that this was what almost everyone else was doing. There was, however, a minority of stricter, more austere, Christians who opposed the celebration of what was later to become Christmas. Indeed, after the Reformation, a thousand years after the first celebration of Christmas, similar restrictions were imposed in Scotland and the New England states in America until the 19th century.

The reason why the early Christians never celebrated the birth of Christ for the first five hundred years is that no-one knew, or even pretended to know, the day, the month or even the year of that event.

The last two weeks of December, however, had been a time of celebration throughout the ancient world in the Northern Hemisphere long before Jesus. It was associated with the Winter Solstice, the shortest day, after which one could look forward to the Spring, to crops, regeneration and new life. Among the Romans the festival of Saturnalia, which began on 17 December and lasted many days, involved the hanging of greenery such as laurel leaves, the lighting of candles and the exchange of presents. On one day the masters waited upon their slaves, a custom still preserved in the British army where officers and sergeants serve Christmas dinner to the other ranks. The Romans also made New Year resolutions and said "Jupiter bless you" when someone sneezed.

Like Christmas, Saturnalia was a season of

"Good-will". Saturn had been a God of a long-lost Golden Age. The Romans credited their legendary King Numa Pompilius with instituting the festival seven centuries before Christ. He was the successor to Romulus, the founder of Rome, and was regarded as a re-incarnation of Saturn because of the wisdom and benevolence of his reign.

In the third century AD there was great rivalry between Christianity and Mithraism, especially for the allegiance of the Imperial soldiers, upon whose support the Roman Emperors depended. In December, the Mithraic soldiers celebrated the triumph of Good over Evil, and the Christians could not afford to appear killjoys at this joyful time. Early in the fourth century the Emperor Constantine decided in favour of Christianity as the official religion.

It was not until 525 AD that anyone claimed to know the birthday of Jesus. In that year the claim was made by a mathematically-minded theologian living in Rome, by name Dionysius Exiguus. The Western Roman Empire had already fallen and Italy was part of the Kingdom of Theodoric the Ostrogoth. Rome itself, however, was enjoying a brief period of peace and prosperity.

Dionysius calculated that Jesus was born in the year 753 AUC in the Roman Calendar. AUC meant "ab urbe condita", or "from the foundation of the city", dating from the supposed date when King Romulus was believed to have built Rome. During the five centuries before Dionysius no Christian had talked about "the Year of Our Lord". No Christian had ever used the term "Anno Domini". No Christian had celebrated Christmas. All of these were the inventions of Dionysius, but it was not until much later that the Christian calendar replaced that of Rome. If the early Christians ever thought about the birth of Jesus, they probably would have followed the Eastern association of the Nativity with Epiphany. In which case they would have chosen 6 January. In *The Cherry Tree Carol* the unborn baby Jesus, speaking from the womb, tells the frightened Joseph:

*The sixth day of January my birthday will be,
When the Stars in the Elements will tremble with
Glee.*

Christian scholars today are all agreed that Dionysius was wrong. It is generally believed that Jesus was born between 8 BC and 4 BC. The Flight into Egypt, described in Matthew's Gospel, if it happened at all, must have happened before 4 BC, because King Herod, from whom Joseph, Mary and their baby were fleeing, died in 4 BC.

As for 25 December, the other calculation of Dionysius, this was sheer assertion and guesswork.

Neither he nor anyone else could have had a scrap of evidence that Jesus was born on that day. The only thing I have been able to discover that might have influenced Dionysius is that in the year 274 AD, when Roman Emperors were trying to replace ancient Roman polytheism with Sun-worship, the Emperor Aurelian declared 25 December to be the Sun's official birthday.

Since the time of Dionysius a great variety of elements, other than the Nativity, have contributed to the Christmas festival. Some early carols were adapted from pagan folk-songs. The Christmas tree came from mediaeval Germany. The Franciscans invented the crib. England added various foods such as the boar's head, and later the goose, also the yule log, holly, and mistletoe from the Druids, who, improbably, were thought to have invented the kissing under it. In 1740, Moravians from what is now Czechoslovakia settled in the Pennsylvania colony, that Mecca for religious minorities. They founded the town of Bethlehem, and introduced the tradition of St Nicholas (St Niklaus) who later became Santa Claus. This Saint is said to have been a fourth century bishop who performed miracles and became the patron saint of children and sailors. He

was reputed to have restored to life three boys whose bodies had been chopped up, pickled in salt and offered for sale by a butcher. He was also said to have given three bags of gold to a poor man to save his three daughters from prostitution. In the course of time the three bags became three gold balls, and Nicholas became the patron saint of pawnbrokers.

By 1809 we know Santa Claus had become established in New York, since in that year the American writer, Washington Irving, published a comic guide to New York, in which, for the first time, Santa Claus is described as coming down chimneys, though, strangely, smoking a pipe at the same time. So the Americans added Santa Claus to Christmas, as well as the turkey, borrowed from the November Thanksgiving, while, in England, Dickens and others were also embellishing the tradition.

In all, when we hear complaints about the commercialisation of Christmas, office parties and similar desecrations of a sacred season, we might well ask the Christians: "On what authority do you claim Yuletide to be yours and yours alone?"

By all means, let Christians celebrate Christmas in any way they choose. But they have no monopoly of the festive season.

Just Who is Leading Us to 1984?

MICHAEL DUANE

George Orwell's novel, "1984", has been treated as holy writ by those who are constantly warning "the free world" that peace, democracy and individual freedom are threatened by an alien philosophy. As the year 1984 draws to a close, Michael Duane examines the reality.

1984 was written in 1948, three years after the war. It grew out of the despair, felt not only by George Orwell, that the movement towards democracy, begun in the crude forms of equality in rations and death during the war and extended to common ownership of our national resources under the Attlee Government, was being betrayed. Deep rooted snobbery, the English disease, was already eroding the effects of those Acts which sought to democratise education and the major industries and services such as coal, steel, transport and health. The religious clauses were forced on an otherwise popular Education Act by the Tories who threatened to wreck it if the clauses were not included; Bevan had to buy off opposition to the Health Service Act from the upper echelons by "stuffing their mouths with gold". But the years after the war saw the steady erosion of the nascent worker participation in control and the reestablishment, through the élitism endemic in the

Civil Service, of social class divisions. Orwell, himself an old Etonian, knew well how the snobbery of the professional classes was used to undermine the democratic intentions of the Labour Government, and was well aware that the character-structure of so many upper-class "socialists" was vulnerable to the blandishments of their peers.

In *Animal Farm* he had already begun to explore how power corrupts, but because it was cast in the form of a fable it was more easily brushed aside as a child's story or dismissed as having little political relevance to "democratic" Britain. *1984* was therefore rooted firmly in the actual world of 1948 so that there should be no mistake about its intention. It sets out to show how, within a single generation, the symptoms of malaise already evident could become a total cancer that would destroy democracy — as had indeed happened under the Big Uncle Joe Stalin. *1984* is an indictment of the *false* socialism that uses the vocabulary of equality, love and brotherhood while maintaining the structures of class division under a façade of equal opportunity.

The story is played out against a background of endless war against Eurasia, a war used to justify the massive oppression of civil liberty in the name of patriotism. The people are bamboozled by Newspeak, the language that Orwell developed from the

war bulletins published by both sides during the early years of the 1940-44 war when, in order to raise morale or to dissipate discontent with the conduct of the war and its objectives, minor gains were trumpeted as overwhelming triumphs and serious defeats as small setbacks. Orwell drew heavily on evidence from the regimes of both Hitler and Stalin for this purpose.

Until the era of Hitler and Stalin it had been fondly supposed that the human spirit would withstand torture and the fear of death and that the love of freedom and democracy would survive. But Orwell was less optimistic, partly as a result of his experience in the Spanish Civil War when he realised that under a dictator the old concept of chivalry in battle was dead. He saw that for the totalitarian leaders the end justifies *any* means, however gruesome. *1984* is the story of how any glimmer of independence, sustained by dim memories from pre-war childhood, is steadily eroded by the mistrust and suspicion that sustains a dictatorship, and is finally suppressed by fear and torture:

O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast!
Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.

How accurate was Orwell's vision, not in the minute detail that no artist could be expected to foresee, but in depicting the spirit of the age and its hopes, fears and spiritual architecture? We are, at the moment not *actually* at war though we have recently had a small skirmish (a mere thousand or so dead and wounded) to bolster up the flagging leadership of Big Sister — who would dearly love to be Big Mother but that we have a competent and charming Queen already. Our other partner in Oceania has had rather larger wars with Eastasia — I mean, of course, the “communist hordes” of Korea and North Vietnam — as well as an actual invasion of tiny Grenada to keep their hand in, and a threatened invasion of Nicaragua, despite its recent and generally acknowledged open and fair elections.

Our partner in Oceania — America, or the US of A as they prefer — is led by Big Brother who has a close and intimate relationship with Big Sister over everything that matters except foreign policy and who will push the button for the Big Bang. Big Sister fumes over this in private but does not let the side down in public. Big Brother is, unhappily, somewhat aged and like all good old boys of advanced years whose brain cells are fast dwindling he drops off now and then in important meetings, or fluffs his lines or mis-reads the autocue. He is envious of Billy Graham's oratorical powers and Armageddon imagery, so he denounces the Soviets as “an evil empire”, though this naturally makes it difficult then

to persuade us and them that he is serious in wanting negotiations with them to reduce nuclear weapons. However all is possible with Newspeak.

Both Big Brother and Big Sister are expert with Newspeak. Both stress that their main objective in international relations is to have a sound *defence*, the Newspeak word for a massive arsenal of nuclear weapons designed to obliterate the Soviets and the rest of the Warsaw Pact countries at the touch of a button, and not once only but *14 times* over. Soon after Big Sister came to power she announced that the Health Services were “safe with us”. This means in Newspeak that the DHSS budget has been drastically cut back year after year so that not only are we grossly short of nurses and doctors, but clinics, wards and complete hospitals are being closed and services necessary for seriously ill people, such as dialysis, are being steadily curtailed.

Another Newspeak expression is “property owning democracy”. This means that councils were forced to sell council houses to their occupants, even in areas of high unemployment. Now, willing as they may be to “get on their bikes” to seek employment elsewhere, they cannot sell their houses except at knock down prices to property investors with enough money to wait for better days to make an enormous kill.

“Democracy” is perhaps the Newspeak word most used after “defence” by both Big Brother and Big Sister. It used to mean, “a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people collectively” or, more simply, “government by consent of the governed”. As Newspeak it means “an elected dictatorship (Lord Hailsham) which imposes law and order by means of a national police force armed with truncheons, equipped with riot gear and having plastic bullets and gas in reserve”. “The enemy within” means any body of citizens who react physically to harassment by armed police.

In *1984* constant supervision was exercised by the Thought Police. In the real 1984 we are much more subtle. With the proliferation of computers for holding records and with easy link-up of different systems held by banks, insurance companies, the vehicle licensing system, medical records, educational records, credit companies and building societies, the DHSS, the Passport Office and the police, information about any citizen can be instantly available. To escape the system you have to live like an outlaw, having no fixed home, without access to Social Security, education or medicine. Even then it will not be long before you are in the net. The gypsies are the living example of a people trying to live their own lives in their own way. The constant harassment to which they are subjected is an important index of the type of society in which we live.

Was George Orwell so far off the mark? Judge for yourself.

Is Malthus Dead?

EDWARD ROYLE

The Rev Thomas Robert Malthus (born 1766) died on 23 December 1834. A Church of England clergyman and social philosopher, his extensive writings on the population question resulted in birth control being described as "Malthusianism" or "neo-Malthusianism". In fact he did not advocate contraception, but sexual abstinence and the postponement of marriage as a solution to the problem of excessive child-bearing. Although Malthus's tenacious defence of "moral restraint" drew strong criticism from his radical contemporaries and pioneers of contraception, he is still remembered as an early advocate of population control.

Thomas Robert Malthus, Anglican clergyman, college don, and political scientist, died 150 years ago in the same year that the Poor Law Amendment Act publicly enshrined his most famous principles on the statute book. Though he wrote on many issues, he is chiefly remembered for and associated today with one concept — population — and his famous formulation that whereas the population expands geometrically, the means of subsistence grow only arithmetically. Human progress, he argued, would eventually be limited by famine, disease and war unless prudent checks (late marriage and reduced fertility) were adopted.

These views were first set out in a slim *Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1798 in response to the optimistic assumptions of Condorcet in France and William Godwin in England, and later much revised and expanded. The fundamental assumption in Malthus's reasoning was that population will expand to the limit of resources unless checked. An expansion in economic resources in itself can only delay the inevitable crisis; human improvement must therefore depend upon a rational human response to the problem.

This view appears extremely plausible, but it was — and is — highly contentious. It was — and remains — a characteristic of social theory that it presents ideology as an immutable law of nature. Classical political economy provided the tradition within which Malthus argued, and formed the basis of British Liberal thinking from the late eighteenth century until the early twentieth. Within this tradition the iron law of wages demonstrated the folly of strike action, and the law of population pointed out the error of optimistic social theory. (Darwin was to derive his ideas on the struggle for survival from a reading of Malthus.) During Malthus's lifetime, when the population and the poor rates were soaring, his ideas seemed self-evident. The poor were breeding too fast because the "Speenhamland" system of family allowances made additional resources avail-

able to them. Only by confronting the poor with the inevitable consequences of their excessive fertility would they be persuaded to conform to the dictates of the law of nature — or die. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act enshrined this belief; by basing the law of the land on the law of nature, the reformed Poor Law was made both theoretically correct and morally right. There was no alternative.

But if Malthus expressed views acceptable to the ruling classes, he was challenged on two fronts from below. First, there were those who argued that unevenness of distribution, not overpopulation, was the real cause of poverty, misery and vice. Thus Robert Owen believed that within the socialist utopia resources would be adequate to meet the future needs of the population. A second view accepted Malthusian reasoning, but advocated contraception rather than late marriage to reduce the number of births. This view was taken up by the freethinking radicals, Francis Place, Richard Carlile and — later in the century — Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant.

Nineteenth-century secularists, with their acceptance of natural law and economic individualism, were generally persuaded that poverty could be cured only by giving the poor the knowledge whereby they could limit their families. Malthus's original suggestion of late marriage would simply mean a resort by young men to prostitutes. Malthusianism therefore came to mean not the views of Malthus himself, but the advocacy of mechanical means of birth control for the reasons outlined in Malthus's theory. Bradlaugh took up this Malthusianism with enthusiasm and publicised the most complete mid-century work on the subject, George Drysdale's *Elements of Social Science*, but it was his re-publication of an earlier work, Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*, in 1877, which made Malthusianism a national issue.

The controversy surrounding Malthus's original views had, however, persisted. Bradlaugh was opposed by many old Owenites and new Socialists who complained that poverty was a consequence not of ill-planned consumption (too many children) but of ill-distributed production (social inequality). Was having children to be yet another privilege enjoyed only by the rich? In the early decades of the present century, the Malthusians were subjected to further criticism from Marie Stopes, who wished to separate the demand for birth control knowledge from the economic theories of Malthus. Contraception was for her a matter of individual freedom of choice, especially by women, and not a calculation derived from economic dogma.

(continued on page 190)

BOOKS

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CIVIL LIBERTIES —
THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS, by Mark Lilly. Macmillan,
£5.95

With the imprisonment of Sarah Tisdall, the ban on trade unions at GCHQ, moves towards a national, para-military police force and the exposure of Government plans for the internment of dissidents in the event of war, 1984 has been a very grim year for civil liberties. If there is a glimmer of hope amidst all this gloom it must surely be the continuing activity of the National Council for Civil Liberties — a voice for liberty in an age of ever increasing authoritarianism.

This year, the NCCL is half a century old and Mark Lilly's book is a short but fact-packed and exciting history of the struggle in defence of freedom during 50 turbulent years. Born out of disgust at the use of police provocateurs to incite unemployed hunger marchers to violence, the NCCL has defended the rights and liberties of men and women in many areas of life and political and social activity. Boy soldiers, homosexuals, travelling people, inmates of prisons and psychiatric institutions, trade unionists and opponents of nuclear weapons are just a few of those who have good cause to be grateful that the NCCL acts as a watchdog over the hard-won rights of the British people, defending them from attempts by the State, which all too often sees its subjects as "the enemy within", to negate them.

Particularly interesting in a book packed with interest is Mark Lilly's account of the NCCL's activity during World War Two. It seems to be an historical law that governments supposedly waging war in defence of freedom use this as an excuse to limit the freedom of their own subjects. The British Government during 1939-1945 was no exception. Hardly had the first shots been fired and an Emergency Powers Act placed on the statute book when pacifists, socialists and other critics of the war found themselves behind bars. It is a pity that Mr Lilly does not have more to say about the notorious Defence Regulation 18B under which the Secretary of State could intern anyone without trial for nothing more than their political opinions. Under this regulation, many people spent much of the war behind bars, often in dreadful conditions, solely because of their membership of such organisations as the British Union of Fascists.

Rightly, in the prewar years, the NCCL defended those unjustly prosecuted for opposing fascism; but one can't help feeling that the internment of anyone from whatever point on the political spectrum set such a dangerous precedent that even when it was BUF members who were being shut up the NCCL should have opposed it. As Mr Lilly points out,

internment was used against Irish Republicans in 1971 and it is a safe bet that plans exist for the internment of those listed as subversive by the Special Branch, a category which no doubt includes many *Freethinker* readers.

The police, both those in uniform and those like the Special Branch whose function is overtly political, are the State's front line troops. A constant theme running through this book is the use by the State of the police to intimidate and silence those it sees as a threat. This includes not only political and trade union activists but also those whose life style differs from the Judeo-Christian, nuclear family norm. As the recent raids on gay bookshops and the entrapment of gays in public places by "pretty police" provocateurs shows, homosexuals are often victims of this view. To its credit, the NCCL has defended gays against discrimination in employment and media bias and now has a Gay Rights Officer.

Even the *Daily Mirror*, hardly a voice of radicalism, has attacked appalling conditions endured by inmates of our crumbling Victorian prisons. It should come as no surprise that the NCCL is in the forefront of prison reform. It is presently campaigning for a reform of the parole system which at present subjects prisoners to unbearable strain, and for the incorporation of the prison medical service into the NHS. A particular worry here is the abuse of drugs, the so-called liquid cosh, to control difficult prisoners. When such abuses occur in the USSR there is a public outcry. But few seem to know or care that it is happening here.

Mental patients often enjoy fewer rights than criminals. It is therefore most gratifying to read of the successful campaign waged by the NCCL for a reform of the antiquated legislation governing mental health. However, much remains to be done in this area. It is still all too easy for a person to find himself confined in a closed institution and subjected to terrifying treatment against their will. How long, one wonders, will it be before people with unpopular opinions will, like their Soviet counterparts, be designated mad and upon that basis locked up indefinitely.

Other writers in *The Freethinker* have drawn attention to the threat to civil liberties presented by the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill currently before parliament. As the miners' dispute shows, the police are acting as if the draconian powers which the Bill will give them are already theirs. What will they do when the Bill becomes law? Already we are seeing on the streets of Britain scenes all too reminiscent of the Royal Ulster Constabulary's

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reaction to the Civil Rights Campaign 15 years ago.

Conditions which gave rise to the NCCL — unemployment, racialism and a Government which uses police action as a solution to social problems — are still with us. Indeed the situation is much the same in 1984 as it was in 1934. The future seems very frightening indeed.

Mark Lilly's book is a history of past struggles for freedom, an inspiration for the present and a hope for the future. It should be on every thinking person's bookshelf.

TERRY LIDDLE

ECENTRIC LIVES AND PECULIAR NOTIONS, by John Michell. Thames and Hudson, £9.50

The world's most colourful characters have always been those noted for the bees in their bonnets, to say nothing of bats in the belfry. *Eccentric Lives and Peculiar Notions* is a large volume, well written and researched, into which John Michell has packed so many obsessions that even a brief comment on each would make a very long review. Here then is one reader's impression of a selection of them, most of which have more or less close ties with religious beliefs. Indeed, the only overt unbeliever in the entire collection is the Welsh pioneer of cremation, Dr William Price, whose outrageous life-style did nothing to promote freethought.

Something quite trivial may precipitate a lifelong chase after a chimera. A chance remark by the poet Tennyson, who probably never meant it literally, that Ian Stuart-Knill had the blood of King Arthur in his veins, was enough to set him searching for the complete chain of descent. In this he was greatly assisted by his wife, a mystic who was in touch with Merlin and Queen Guinevere. Many hitherto unknown adventures of Arthur were thus brought to light and by 1973 Stuart-Knill had completed his own pedigree and that of Arthur too, through Joseph of Arimathea to King David. The gigantic family tree was put on display in the town hall at Glastonbury, where Arthur is said to be buried. There were sceptics, of course, for whom Stuart-Knill had a crushing answer — they had never studied the matter whereas he had spent 63 years on it.

The belief that the earth is flat was upheld by the Church until the 16th century and was not finally abandoned until Newton's cosmology won acceptance. But the bible still speaks of the four corners of the earth and as late as the 19th century there were Christians, clergy and lay, who refused to

accept "globularism". Through much of the century scientific battles were fought between flat-earthers and globularists, the main venue being the Old Bedford Level, a six-mile straight length of canal. From water level at one end, a bridge at the other ought not to have been visible on round-earth theory. But it was and photography proved it, giving the flat-earthers the victory. As John Michell says, there is need for more research at the Old Bedford Level.

About the time the earth was proved flat other experimenters used a similar method, this time on a beach in Florida, which showed that it is in fact concave. The earth is therefore a hollow ball inhabited on its inner surface. Dr Cyrus Teed led the group, whose motto was "We Live Inside". Teed founded a religion, Koreshanity (Koresh=Cyrus), and a colony with a capital called New Jerusalem. Teed died in 1908 but his virtually self-sufficient colony still flourishes, though little stress is placed on the hollow earth doctrine these days.

Conspiracy theory postulates the existence of sinister groups secretly plotting the downfall of society as a step to world domination. This notion was propagated by Nesta Webster between the two world wars. She proclaimed herself the champion of Christian civilisation in opposition to the powers of darkness, which included Grand Orient Freemasonry, Theosophy and international finance. Behind these she detected an occult power, responsible for the French and Bolshevik revolutions together with the spread of atheism and rationalism. Winston Churchill cited Nesta Webster's book *The French Revolution* in support of his belief in a Jewish-Bolshevik world conspiracy.

Spiritualism contributes its quota in the person of Baron Ludwig de Guldenstubbé, host to the first Parisian spiritualist circle. He had the bright idea of soliciting communications from the illustrious dead by leaving writing materials on their tombs or by their statues. The baron's friends knew what he was up to, which probably explains his astounding success — over 500 messages in 20 languages.

If the dead can communicate through their statues, detailed questioning might correct the mistakes of historians. A useful start could be made with the monuments of Shakespeare and Francis Bacon, hopefully to settle the authorship of the plays. It could be neither for the list of claimants is enormous, including a Frenchman and even an Arab. John Michell devotes a large section of his book to what is in effect a concise history of the case of Shakespeare versus Bacon and others, still going strong after a hundred years and thousands of volumes of theorising. So many cryptic messages have been found in the plays — one enthusiast published six books of them — that Bacon must have spent his entire life composing them. In 1920 a schoolmaster with the unfortunate name of Looney wrote a book in favour of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford,

starting a vogue which claimed Sigmund Freud among its supporters. For good measure Messrs Battey and Silliman have added their efforts, on behalf of Defoe and Marlowe respectively.

The belief that the Anglo-Saxon races are the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel has given rise to many strange obsessions and movements. The Puritans accepted it and Cromwell's parliament abolished the constitution in favour of the laws of Moses. It was expected that the English would convert the Jews to Christianity and lead them back to the Holy Land, where they would produce a new Messiah.

Similar notions led to the founding of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. In 1848 the Earl of Shaftesbury became its president, and his influence on his own and successive governments led them to work for the return of the Jews to Palestine, gradually paving the way for the modern state of Israel. The Society had little success in its work of conversion. The Jews were grateful for the material benefits showered on them, but became evasive when the matter of conversion was raised. One convert per missionary per year was the norm. The missionary in Morocco couldn't even claim that, but he had the consolation of reporting that fewer New Testaments were being torn up.

The belief that Britain is destined to lead the Jews to Christianity received a setback when that ungrateful people returned to Palestine unconverted. But the extremist British Israel World Federation still exists and even prospers. The Federation believes in the prophecies of Britain's inheritance of Israel found in the internal measurements of the Great Pyramid, and claims the Coronation Stone in Westminster Abbey to be Jacob's pillow. Human nature being what it is, it comes as no surprise to learn that the Federation has royal and other influential patronage.

If there is a lesson to be learnt from this book it is the tendency of oddball cults to attract the rich and great. They can and do influence powerful politicians and thus alter the course of history.

R. J. CONDON

STAYING POWER: THE HISTORY OF BLACK PEOPLE IN BRITAIN, by Peter Fryer. Pluto Press, £9.95

This book is a brilliant achievement — scholarly, sympathetic and politically only too painfully relevant, since injustice and discrimination against black people in Britain is still rife.

What emerges very clearly is the enormous contribution the vast profits derived from the slave trade made to the general prosperity and industrial advance of Britain. Britain owed her late status of "workshop of the world" equally to the transported Africans and the exploited children and other workers

of the early cotton mills. Both atrocities were justified on grounds of economic necessity. Necessary for whom is, of course, never clearly stated in arguments of this kind, but are still on the lips of Ministers every time Government action imposes additional burdens on the poorest.

Of particular importance is the chapter entitled "The Rise of English Racism". Peter Fryer draws a distinction between race prejudice and racism. Prejudice is a natural result of cultural isolation and ignorance, "relatively scrappy and contradictory". Racism is a much more serious matter. "Racism is to race prejudice as dogma is to superstition". Its "primary functions" are "economic and political". It is a more or less coherent theory concocted to justify the behaviour of those who profit by the subjugation of non-European peoples, in the first place the West Indian sugar planters. If you could convince the British public that Africans were sub-human, brutal to their children, rapists and cannibals, few would question your right to enslave them, and mistreat them in any way that seemed convenient to extract the maximum of work from them. Peter Fryer quotes a clergyman who, after working in Barbados and Virginia, summed the phenomenon up perfectly in 1680 in a work entitled *The Negro's and Indian's Advocate* by concluding that the planter class supported "that filthy principle. . . That whatever conduceth to the getting of Money, and the carrying on of Trade, must certainly be lawful".

To me the greatest surprise in the book was to learn how many people for whom I always had considerable respect were taken in by this nauseous rubbish disguised as science. Thus the philosophers Locke and Hume; Winwood Reade, whose *Martyrdom of Man* many freethinkers have spoken of as the book which first interested them in the free-thought movement; Charles Dickens and scientists such as Sir Francis Galton were all guilty of ignorant and cruel remarks about black people, and many of these eminent men justified the most appalling cruelties on these grounds.

One could laugh at such childish self-praise as the statement of the Swiss naturalist, Charles Bonnet (1764): "Let the flat-faced African, with his black complexion and woolly hair, give place to the European, whose regular features are set off by the whiteness of his complexion and beauty of his head of hair", were it not that this naive narcissism, with its "give place" led directly to unashamed genocide, of which the deliberate extermination of the people of Tasmania is only an extreme example. Hitler's atrocities follow in direct succession to the 19th-century English racial theorists. They did not limit themselves to vaunting European superiority, but confined their approval to Anglo-Saxons, rating Irish and Spaniards only a grade above blacks. Their viciousness is only matched by their abysmal ignorance of history.

How slowly things change! Is there discrimination against blacks in employment today? We find that in 1731 a Lord Mayor of London issued a proclamation barring black youths from apprenticeships. In 1919 when the post-war slump left many black British seamen stranded, the Ministry of Labour instructed Labour Exchange managers that "the majority of these are eligible for out-of-work donation, but they have apparently not realised this" — so don't tell them! The Claimants' Union still complains that deliberate secrecy aims at preventing the poor of all colours from knowing their rights. Another persistent theme is the hostility of the police and many magistrates to blacks who have always been liable to be treated as the guilty parties when attacked by white racists, and are still suffering from vicious harassment with minimal police protection.

Peter Fryer again tells the sorry tale of the recent Immigration Acts and their increasingly heartless administration. The 1968 Act excluding Kenyan Asians despite the solemn promises made to them at the time when power in Kenya was transferred to the African majority is surely one of the most despicable acts of betrayal in British history. When Peter Fryer describes "the mocking laughter of British officials when an 11-year-old girl burst into tears on being told that she could not have an entry certificate to join her mother, sisters and brothers in Britain", we recognise among ourselves the spirit that organised Hitler's extermination camps.

I have only one criticism. Peter Fryer quotes Southey: *I pity thee greatly, but I must be mum, For how could we do without sugar and rum?* — apparently unaware of the bitter satire of the poem. Southey was certainly far from "mum" about the slave trade. Peter Fryer seems to hold against Southey his friendship with the Rev John Newton, author of "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds" and a former slave captain. It should be noted that Newton's experience of the slave trade made him a determined and extremely useful abolitionist, whose first-hand knowledge was of great assistance to Clarkson, also an Anglican clergyman.

One is left wondering what of the future. The current economic situation, with worsening employment and housing situations, ruthless attacks on the living standards of the poor, the relentless tightening of the poverty trap affects black people in disproportionate numbers. On the other hand, most people of any intellectual standing would now be ashamed to endorse racist theories, and whereas in 1919 Toxteth, Liverpool, was the scene of horrific anti-black riots, in recent Toxteth riots black and white youth have made their inarticulate protest against intolerable conditions together.

Peter Fryer tells us that by the mid-1970s two-fifths of black people in Britain were born here. By now the proportion must be nearer half. Inter-

marriage goes on steadily. There can be questions but that Britain's future will be as a multi-racial society. A book such as *Staying Power* is a worthwhile contribution towards making that a happy one.

MARGARET McILROY

LETTERS

INVOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA

May I ask for a small space to reply briefly to the letters of R. W. Walker and Barbara Smoker on euthanasia (October)?

It is so often the misfortune of people who write letters to magazines to find they are being opposed for something they did not say at all, and in fact I agree with every word of Mr Walker's letter. I had used the words "assisted suicide" in what I assumed was their only and obvious meaning—overtly helping a person to kill himself or herself; I also feel it is a great pity to reduce the discussion to yet another atheism v. religion issue.

Miss Smoker (like Dr Beloff in his original article) agrees that any Act of Parliament may be abused, and here the German experience is not much help since it occurred under a dictatorship. But it is easy to see how the voluntary principle could be eroded in the case of euthanasia. It needs little imagination to envisage an extension of the Law to include persons incompetent to make a voluntary decision—such as children and the mentally handicapped. The Voluntary Euthanasia Society might disapprove, but many people, including some rationalists, might find this a logical extension. Even without this, it needs a very rosy view of human nature to assume that old, sick and handicapped persons could not be pressured to "volunteer" for euthanasia by selfish, weary, or distracted relatives—and would hard-pressed bureaucrats have the time or the ability to make a discerning judgment?

Most people have an instinctive feeling that it is wrong to allow a person to linger in hopeless and incurable pain and distress. But we should not blind ourselves to the fact that a law made with that laudable intention could be used in ways less laudable, just as the Official Secrets Act, introduced in 1911 for the laudable purpose of catching spies, has been used for—well, we all read the newspapers.

E. M. KARBACZ

NO OBLIGATION

In answer to Colin Mills (October)—my use of "justify" was in the sense of being morally accountable for my actions to others. If I was to contemplate suicide then I would certainly weigh the pros and cons before taking a decision, but this would involve no "justification" in the above sense any more than my weighing the pros and cons of travelling by train or motor coach. Since my criterion is my satisfaction I am subject to no fixed idea of obligation either to others or myself.

As for his rebuttal of the "hurt to others" argument, this is another form of the appeal to the egoism of others as a help to demonstrate one's own—and I thank him for it.

I am pleased Mr Mills rejects the "reification" of "society", that he denies, in other and plainer words that "society" is any more than a mere aggregation of individuals. His claim, however, that "social consequences" need only mean that (an) act will affect others" renders the term so vague as to be virtually meaningless and also takes it out of the context in

which it was originally used. The "social" to which I referred is something different. It relates to the "society" invoked by the judge when he intones that a guilty defendant is "a menace to society". It is the "society" which folk have in mind when they use such phrases as "the impact on society", "society should do this and not that", or "the sick society". "Society", then, as a supra-individual entity in whose name the interests of the individual must be sacrificed—"society" as a "spook".

S. E. PARKER

FREETHOUGHT AND FEMINISM

Edward Royle informs us (October) that "freethinkers value freedom above feminism". He goes on to commend the editor for not being afraid "to allow criticism of the ladies when their zeal become anti-libertarian". Earlier this year (June), the editor described feminists as "ensorious dowdies" an dindulged in personal abuse to ridicule feminism.

It would be more appropriate for freethinkers to welcome and support the liberation of women from a subjugation which has always been buttressed by organised religion. If there are differences over issues such as censorship of pornography and separate organisation, these should be discussed openly and tolerantly. Invective does not help, nor does the use of the condescending term "ladies" in what must be presumed an attempt to marginalise the issues raised by the women's movement.

A. WHITEHEAD

A GAY'S RIGHT

Anent the review of Andrew Hodges's excellent book, "Alan Turing: The Enigma" (November), may I ask Madeleine Simms what is "unsavoury" about picking up young men in public places? Heterosexuals pick each other up in public places all the time without adverse comment—and good luck to them.

As a gay man I can do without your reviewer's tendentious moralising. It is this attitude which, albeit from her woolly "liberal" viewpoint, continues to lend credence to the ludicrous belief that the sexuality of lesbians and gay men is intrinsically inferior to that of heterosexuals.

JOHN HEIN

A MODERN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

As Christmas approaches the spirits of the striking miners could be lifted by the stirring words which Thomas Paine addressed to Washington's troops just before the Battle of Trenton, Christmas Day, 1776. Cold, miserable and dispirited, without a swift victory in sight, the rebels heard Paine's words:

"These are the times that try men's souls.

The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country;

but he that stands it NOW,
deserves the love and thanks of man and woman".

The Americans went on to win their battle. They, like the miners, were fighting an authoritarian British Government which on that occasion was using Hessian mercenaries. In the miners' case the Government is using a national Riot Police Force, unconstitutionally, and possibly illegally, cobbled together by the Home Secretary.

KARL HEATH

THE JESUS HOAX

I am anxious to acquire a copy of Phyllis Graham's book, "The Jesus Hoax", which was published in 1974.

I should be most grateful if any "Freethinker" reader who has a copy to sell, or who knows where I can obtain one, would contact me at the address given below.

JAMES P. MILNE,
8 Warwick Mount, Montague Street,
Brighton, BN2 1JY, Sussex

Is Malthus Dead?

But was Malthus right? The Irish famine of 1846 looked like a classic case of the Malthusian crisis, and the Irish reaction of late marriage and reduced fertility was a copy-book response. The crisis in the Third World today, and the birth-control programmes of China and India, equally appear to confirm the Malthusian view and the validity of what has become known as the "neo-Malthusian" solution. Although freethinkers today usually proclaim the merits of contraception in the libertarian phrases of Marie Stopes, the ghost of their Malthusian past still frequently haunts their arguments.

The controversy also remains. The Irish famine was actually caused by crop failure and English economic policy, not the inability to produce enough food on a regular basis to support the population. The African famine of 1984 might similarly be attributed to drought, crop failure, and national and international economic policies in a world which overall produces a food surplus. The argument about maldistribution is as relevant today as it was in the 1820s and 1870s. Malthus's famous law about the rate of population growth was no more than a mathematical projection, and the relationship between resources and population growth has proved uncertain. In general, where living standards have risen, resources have been put not into larger families but into increased consumer spending on luxury items. Rising material expectations have proved a far more effective brake on family size than the dire threats of Malthusian logic. It can therefore be argued that a better distribution of the world's resources and a substantial increase in the material living standards of the Third World would check population growth more effectively than present policies based on Malthusian assumptions. As in Malthus's own day, birth control advice is something the rich give the poor as a substitute for justice.

Reflections on Malthus after a century and a half suggest that his funeral is long overdue. Family limitation is seen now as a means of enriching lives — particularly those of women — and maximising choice. It is not a necessary or logical policy for the solution of economic problems, the abolition of poverty and the transformation of society. For that we had better go back to William Godwin. Perhaps he, and not Malthus, was right after all.

All God's Children

DAVID SHAW

After reading a newspaper report in the *Hull Daily Mail* about a survey that showed that only 40 per cent of the population believe in God, and only 16 per cent went to church the previous week, a Christian objected: "The Queen believes in God. Was she asked? The Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the President of the Methodist Conference and the Ayatollah Khomeini all believe in God. Were they asked? Might not their view of the matter be of more weight, being based on knowledge? And since when did God depend on democratic vote to support belief in His existence?" Unfortunately the objector did not explain what superior knowledge is possessed by monarchs and popes; why that knowledge means that the beliefs of millions of lesser mortals should be classified as worthless and ignored; or why the Almighty Deity has not bothered to enlighten everyone with that knowledge.

The hostage-seizing (remember those Americans?), death-sentencing Ayatollah Khomeini does indeed believe in a god, but that figment of the imagination is not the invisible god the pope believes in, for wars have been fought between Moslems and Christians. In the Dark Ages, when Christianity was strong in this country, several armies of Christians tried to drive the Moslems out of the so-called Holy Land, but they failed even though their alleged god was on their side. If the god they believed in existed he could have destroyed Islam all by himself. But the infidels beat the Crusaders and Islam flourished. For more than a thousand years Mohammedanism has kept Christianity out of most of Africa and a large part of Asia — and now, in "Christian" England, unused churches are being bought by Moslems and converted into mosques.

Christians and Moslems are still fighting in Beirut. Also involved in that war are the devout believers in Judaism. Belief in gods does not stop men killing each other — it gives them reasons and spurious justification for killing each other. Imagine how much easier peace would be to establish in Ireland, Beirut and India if the people in those countries were not Catholics, Protestants, Moslems, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs. We need less religion, not more.

The contraceptive-banning, abortion-banning, marriage-for-divorces-banning and ordination-of-women-banning god the pope prays to is not the same one the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Methodists pray to. Christianity, like its rival religions, has always been a minority in the world, and when we examine what Christians believe we see that Christianity is made up of smaller minorities that are hostile to each other. Jehovah's Witnesses deny that Catholics are true Christians, Catholics deny that Protestants are true Christians, Church of England

clergymen warn people to beware of Jehovah's Witnesses, while Methodists reject Mormonism.

Christians are hopelessly and bitterly divided about the most basic fallacies of their religion. They cannot agree on when their mythical Son of God was born or when he died. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Christ was not born in December, and a rival crowd of fundamentalists advertise a free booklet entitled "The Resurrection was *Not* on Sunday". Quote: "Easter Sunday, shocking as it may seem, does NOT commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ was not resurrected on Sunday morning nor did he die on 'Good Friday'".

For century after century Christians tortured and slaughtered each other to prove that their brand of Christianity was the only authentic one, and today they are still split into opposing sects. Their most unifying factor is their fear of the growing indifference to and rejection of Christianity.

If the survey that the Christian reader obviously wanted suppressed had asked the minority for details of the different gods they believed in, the result would have been even more damaging to Christianity. The answer to one of his rhetorical questions is, as he implies, Never. No god has ever depended on democratic vote to support belief in his alleged existence. Democracy has never been part of any religion. All gods are arrogant bullies who demand obedience and worship. They want us, their creators, to fear them and grovel to them. While people degrade themselves by cringing to gods those supernatural dictators seem powerful, but when we ignore them we prove that we are the ones with the real power and that they are nothing but phantoms.

I am still waiting for somebody to explain precisely how anybody who believes in a god is better than somebody who spurns all religions and concentrates on having the best relationships he can with his fellow human beings.

The Rev Terry Cole-Whitaker, a 43-year-old female minister in California's Church of the New Christianity, has no time for the biblical "camel getting through the eye of a needle" nonsense. In her sermons she assures the congregation — most of whom arrive in chauffeur-driven Mercedes and Rolls-Royces — that "prosperity is your divine right. Being rich and happy doesn't carry a burden of guilt. If you are poor you are irresponsible". Remembering, no doubt, her followers' natural modesty, she tells them: "You don't need to change for the better. Simply realise that you are perfect already".

APE Mauls Creationist in Red Lion Square!

The debate between creationists and evolutionists has been going on for over a century and looks like continuing for many years to come. The latest round in this debate, which took place at Conway Hall on 27 October, was a resounding victory for the evolutionists. But there will have to be many more such debates before the faith of the creationists in the Genesis myth is finally shaken.

The subject around which the recent debate centred was the archaeopteryx, a species which became extinct several million years ago. Setting out to prove that this odd creature, which evolutionists see as a bridge between reptiles and birds, was proof of Genesis and thus disproof of evolution, was Gerald Duffett, a Cambridge biologist and member of the Biblical Creation Society. The BCS had urged its members to turn out in force, but mostly they were conspicuous by their absence. Perhaps they were unhappy about the debate taking place on "enemy territory".

Although on his own admission Mr Duffett had not seen the fossil remains of archaeopteryx, which was first discovered in Bavaria in 1861, he gave a very detailed analysis of the creature and raised many questions as to where it fitted in to the development of animal life. Which creatures, he asked, were its ancestors and which its descendants. Examining differing views, he claimed that the evolutionists' case was at best "not proven".

As the debate proceeded, Mr Duffett's line of argument—which at first seemed quite rational and scientific—became increasingly bizarre. Having presented the audience with what he called a "linkogram", which to his mind was proof of Genesis, he then came forth with such pearls of wisdom as "if creationists could prove creation they would prove the bible wrong", and "but for the fall of man sex

would be a more enjoyable experience". His view of God was of a kind of cosmic computer. What, one wonders, would IBM have to say about that. Finally, Mr Duffett revealed that what counted for him was faith and that reason and scientific objectivity mattered not at all.

Presenting the evolutionist case was Michael Howgate, a research student at London's University College and a founder of the Association to Protect Evolution (APE). Mr Howgate showed in a masterly and scholarly presentation that the creationists had no ideas of their own; they were leaning entirely on the bible; and in attempting to prove their case used the most dubious methods such as bombarding evolutionists with carefully selected questions drawn from areas where the evidence is contentious. He next demonstrated that Mr Duffett, in order to substantiate his argument, had taken bits from a number of contradictory theories and ignored evidence which disproved his view.

Drawing upon the fossil record, Michael Howgate showed how reptiles had evolved and how in particular the dinosaurs had become bipedal. Using the methods of scientific investigation and analysis, he pointed out the numerous features of archaeopteryx which showed it to be a link between reptiles and birds and thus proof of evolution.

Finally, Mr Howgate pointed out the demands made by creationist groups for members to brainwash their children into unswerving belief in the Genesis myth and the detrimental effect this has. Although small, APE has become a major headache to creationists and a most active opponent of fundamentalism.

• Information about APE can be obtained from Alan Lewis, 93 Comber House, Comber Grove, London SE5.

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, 6 January, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Beatrice Clarke: Travelling in Esperanto Land—an Exercise in Practical Humanism.

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, 9 January, 8 pm. Ian Leitch: The Work of Amnesty International.

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

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 31 January, 8.45 p.m. S. E. Parker: Equality—is it a Myth?

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 9 January, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. John White: Humanism and the Arts—a Fresh Look at our Cultural History.

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