

The Freethinker

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CHRISTIAN DIRTY TRICKS DEPARTMENT STEPS UP ANTI-ABORTION CAMPAIGN

The anti-abortion lobby has acquired a celluloid successor to the scurrilous and discredited book, "Babies for Burning". James Pawsey, MP (Conservative, Rugby and Kenilworth), a Roman Catholic, is reported to be "spearheading a nationwide campaign for the showing of a video film which contains a visual recording of what happens inside the womb during the abortion of an 11-12 week foetus". The film is entitled "The Silent Scream", and it was made by an American, Dr Bernard Nathanson, who claims that he performed thousands of abortions before joining the anti-abortionists.

Diane Munday, Public Relations Officer of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, who has seen the film, says that she is in no doubt that it is not what it purports to be.

BPAS has provided abortion for around a quarter of a million women in the first three months of pregnancy. "Never has BPAS had to use the method shown in the film, although the pregnancy there is said to be of eleven to twelve weeks' duration", she added.

"Only part of the operation is shown on video, but it is enough to indicate that the complete abortion took around twelve minutes. BPAS needs only a third of that time".

One Professor of Obstetrics, well known for his anti-abortion views, has been quoted as saying: "I find it difficult to accept the interpretation of the foetal movements shown on the film. I think it may be the abortion instruments which are responsible".

Another eminent Professor, an expert on ultrasound, was so surprised to see a foetus apparently moving in an anaesthetised woman that he and his colleagues subsequently watched four abortion operations on ultrasound equipment. "We did not see any foetal movements at all in any of the operations, all of which were performed at eleven to

twelve weeks", he said.

Mr Pawsey asserts that "were the film to be shown to women with unplanned pregnancies, the abortion industry would go bankrupt in no time".

Diane Munday described the MP's comment and the film itself as an insult to women.

She said: "Like Mr Pawsey, the doctor who made the film says that if women see it they will not have abortions. This suggests that, despite being responsible for tens of thousands of abortion operations before he turned into an anti-abortion campaigner, he must have taken his patients' money and never listened to them.

"For in BPAS we know that women are not stupid or ignorant and they do realise what they are doing. We know that the vast majority of them agonise over the decision to request an abortion. And we know, overwhelmingly, from the women who say 'I was always against abortion until it happened to me/to my daughter', that theoretical considerations give way to practical necessity, however ferocious the emotional bludgeon of the anti-abortion lobby".

Catholic front pressure groups are employing all kinds of moral blackmail and emotional propaganda in their efforts to wreck the 1967 Abortion Act. This is linked to a campaign against sex education and contraception, both of which would do much to reduce abortion rates.

• The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin has described contraception as a contravention of "God's design for marriage and sexuality". Interviewed on Irish television, Dr McNamara said that artificial contraception was always wrong. He agreed that in some cases a married couple could not have sexual relations. Availability of contraceptives caused a "copulation explosion", he added.

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NEWS

BLIGHT ON THE SHAMROCK

Irish Catholics, unlike their dour Protestant brethren, have no qualms about enjoying themselves on Sunday. And as St Patrick's Day, 17 March, falls on Sunday this year, it will be celebrated with more than usual fervour by those who love their God and their Guinness.

The occasion will also be marked by a monumental piece of religious humbug. Leaders of the Church of Ireland, the Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist churches have issued A Call to Prayer in which they exhort their respective flocks "to make this . . . St Patrick's Day one of special intercession for this island and its people . . . confessing our shortcomings and rededicating ourselves to more Christian treatment of our fellow men and women of whatever creed or politics". Such worthy sentiments are unlikely to arouse much enthusiasm among the quarrelsome and vindictive followers of the "Prince of Peace". They will be rejected by the majority of Christian believers whose minds are warped by the religious fanaticism and bigotry that has been inculcated by the churches, Catholic and Protestant alike.

After referring to Ireland as "an island of saints and scholars", the church leaders admit that its history has "far too often been one of violence and division". They then have the gall to assert that the cause of this is "our Christianity has not been strong enough and deep enough". Let us be charitable and assume that these gentlemen are merely fantasising. The historical fact is that for many centuries religious belief has been too strong and too deep in Ireland. The supreme tragedy is that Christian malignancy has ravished generations of Irish people.

St. Patrick's Day is described as "a day for remembering Ireland's heritage. . . Today, as of old, it has been the mother of missionaries going out far and wide in the service of Christ and His Church". Sadly this is all too true. Unfortunately for the world, one of Ireland's chief exports has been missionaries and clergy who have proved to be the most industrious disseminators of Christian superstition. The balance has been redressed to some extent by literary giants like Shaw, Joyce and O'Casey, who emigrated rather than live and work in a censorious, church-ridden society.

Attempts by a few church leaders to reconcile the victims of religious indoctrination are commendable. Until very recently they would have scarcely bid one another time of day, being united only in fierce

AND NOTES

determination to resist social reforms and to defend a system of education that rigidly segregates children along religious lines.

The churches have done their worst to the Irish people: the Roman Catholic by keeping them in thrall to the Vatican; the Protestant denominations by acting as colonial agents; all of them by fostering religious fanaticism and bigotry. And it has been easy for Britain to exploit the ferocious intolerance inherent in Christianity in order to inflame hostility between Catholics and Protestants.

Northern Ireland and its Protestant minority will be abandoned by a future British Government that decides it is too costly to maintain a toehold on what was John Bull's Other Island. Future generations of Protestants, free from the siege mentality on which religious divisiveness thrives, can become a force for progress and reform as they were until the early days of the last century. That will be bad news for the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the Rev Ian Paisley.

The independence of Ireland will be complete only when the people decide to establish a secular Republic and to conduct their lives free from interference by church or clergy.

GOD IS ££££

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume. . . —Matthew 6-19

If the Bible and *The Times* newspaper, which recently published a survey on church wealth, are both to be believed, then Number 1 Millbank, London, should be the most moth-eaten and rust-ravished building in the land. For it is in that Anglican financial powerhouse that the Church Commissioners manage the mammon.

Over the years the Commissioners have amassed assets that have made the Church of England one of the country's wealthiest institutions and biggest landowners. They have an investment portfolio worth over £1,600 million. Their commercial, residential and industrial property amounts to £700 million. Farming and other land, 172,800 acres in all, is valued at £217 million. (Parishes and dioceses have also acquired assets valued at £280 million.)

The Church's residential property is situated in Bayswater, Maida Vale and south London. It also owns office blocks in the Victoria and City areas of the capital. The Commissioners have invested heavily in other countries, particularly the United States.

The Commissioners are not now so secretive about their affairs. The annual report states that although financial considerations are paramount, they do not invest in companies whose operations might cause "undue controversy". There is a total ban on South African companies and their subsidiaries. The Commissioners do not invest in tobacco, arms, drink or newspapers.

The Church Commissioners are not without their critics. Archdeacon Hayward, secretary of the diocese of London, has complained that this concentration of assets has caused "a dulling of a sense of mission and commitment among Anglicans". Maybe so. But with such enormous wealth and a wide range of privileges the Church of England would remain a powerful social and political force even if every church door were closed for good next Sunday.

The real scandal is that such a well-heeled religious institution (and it is only one of many) continues to derive enormous benefit from anomalous charity laws, and plunders the public purse to maintain schools and chaplaincies.

Dr Brian Nicholson, the new headmaster of Dartington Hall, the progressive school near Totnes, Devon, does not follow any creed and has urged pupils to shun religion. Dr Nicholson says that his aim is "to persuade the young people that just as religion is dangerous, so are drugs, alcohol and tobacco. The important thing is to explain why these activities are unintelligent, so that pupils will not return to them in later life".

FOR THE CHILDREN

Christian pressure groups are constantly complaining about children witnessing scenes of violence in the cinema and on television. But probably the longest established of them all, the Lord's Day Observance Society, has itself been exposing its young members to some very nasty bits from Christianity's horror comic, the Old Testament.

The current issue of *The Young Guard*, published by the Society's junior branch, includes a jolly little competition, Think and Do, in which the kiddies are asked to find the names of biblical characters, most of whom come to a sticky end. The clues are concealed in execrable verse: "First, name a famous man of might, Who by wrong-doing lost his sight". The answer is of course Samson: "And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. . ." (Judges 16-21).

Secondly, "mention one whose blood was spilled, 'Twas by his brother he was killed". The answer to that gory conundrum is Cain, who "rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him" (Genesis 4-8).

The competitors are then told to "search for one

whom God did smite, For doing that which was not right". That was King Uzziah who, for defying the priests, was smitten with leprosy, and "was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper dwelt in a separate house" (2 Chronicles—19, 21).

"And fourthly, name a man whose wife, Through disobedience lost her life". The man was Lot, whose wife looked back on the destruction of Sodom, "and she became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19-26).

The Young Guard, ever ready to enlighten members of the LDOS junior branch on important matters, informs its readers that there are 1,189 chapters, 31,173 verses and 3,566,480 letters in the Bible. Fascinating.

A machine has been constructed for cutting off fingers of thieves who have been convicted under Iran's Islamic laws. The machine was used recently to sever four fingers each from the right hands of four prisoners in Oasr Prison.

Freethinker Fund

The first list of contributors for 1985 is given below. A total of £273 — a notable increase on the amount for the same period last year — has got the Fund off to a good start. We urge individual readers and local groups to continue their support by donating to the Fund and endeavouring to increase the paper's circulation.

Anonymous and E. R. Palmer, £1 each; F. A. Avard, N. Bruce, G. W. Coupland, J. W. Darling, H. H. Fearn, R. Gerrard, R. Hall, J. Holland, J. T. Morrison, M. O'Brien, D. Redhead, D. A. Rickards and E. S. Row, £1.40 each; K. Evans, E. A. Napper and R. V. Samuels, £2 each; B. J. Buckingham, H. C. Harding, V. G. Toland and C. R. Wilshaw, £2.40 each; J. Galliano, £2.60; N. Barnes, K. R. Gill and G. E. Jaeger, £3 each; P. S. Neilson, £3.40; J. Lippitt, £4; J. K. Hawkins, E. M. Hay, V. S. Petheram, £4.40; G. L. Lucas and V. C. A. Mitchell, £5 each; Anonymous, N. L. Child, M. J. Jeeps, D. Lemon, Mr and Mrs Love, V. Thapar and A. E. Woodford, £6.40 each; I. Forrest, £8.80; J. J. Madden, £10; F. Howard, £15; J. Vallance, £16.40; Iconoclast, £100.

Total for the period 1 January to 5 February: £273.

A cruel disappointment has befallen the monks at Downside. The Downside Year Book for 1985 carries the following notice: "Sundays, 9.25 p.m.—Vespers, followed by Benedictine". Sorry, chaps—one of those printer's errors. Vespers will of course be followed by Benediction, not Benedictine.

Oxford and Thatcher—

The brouhaha which followed Oxford's very public, and democratic, rejection of Margaret Thatcher's nomination for an honorary Doctorate has obscured the important and logical reasons for that decision. Of course, it was a surprising and humiliating rebuff for the Prime Minister, especially coming from the University which has always been closest to Whitehall; and it was newsworthy as such. But the press response was hardly enlightening. "Spiteful grow the dons", said the *Daily Mail*; "ungracious, petulant and adolescent", said the *Daily Express*; "a nasty campaign which oscillated between political spite and logic chopping", said *The Times*.

Some of the pro-Thatcher dons invoked a Marxist plot, the anti-female attitudes of Fellows, and even spitefulness and self-importance as the causes of her, and their, defeat. Everyone in the Sheldonian Theatre knew that a vote against Thatcher was a break with tradition and a signal to Downing Street that Government policies were seriously damaging education. As Professor Pulzer commented, "To say 'no' is to send a signal to the Government that enough is enough". After using all the normal routes of protest to no avail, a stand had to be taken against the decimation of education. The lady was for spurning.

It is often forgotten that higher education has been under financial attack for a full decade. Labour's Shirley Williams was hardly a successful or generous Minister, and the few balances Universities had accumulated were all gone by 1979. Since Mrs Thatcher came to power, and Sir Keith Joseph decided to reduce staffs, almost 5,000 academic faculty have taken early retirement, and there will be more by the end of this academic year. This compares with the 32,000 reduction in numbers of school-teachers. But it has been different in its impact; first, because it has taken place against increasing demand for student places and not along with a declining pupil roll; and secondly, because the loss has been of older faculty groups and not related to educational replanning. Consequently, and particularly in minority subjects, faculty groups have often been unable to continue to teach their subject as before and curricula have had to be changed to suit this random depletion of staff. No wonder academics are depressed; especially when Sir Keith also plans to take away their already limited job security, presumably so that they can be more easily dismissed in the future.

It is difficult to put figures to the cuts, partly because the Department of Education and Science feeds selected, and adjusted, data to favoured newspapers. For example, *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, post Oxford, have said that the total education budget has gone up from £13.0 to £13.7 billion under this Government, and the Universities

the Kindest Cut of All

JAMES SANG

budget from £1.2 to £1.34 billion. This makes no arithmetical sense, as striking teachers know, and it does not make sense when the top University lecturer salary of £14,925 would be £17,645 if their 1979 salary had been uplifted in line with the Retail Prices Index. Money has obviously been saved for the Chancellor. No one has disputed Giles Radice's statement that the cash going to universities has been cut by 8.75 per cent (in real terms) between 1980-1 and 1983-4. And that is in line with the budget cuts imposed by the University Grants Committee four years ago, which docked 44 per cent from Salford at one end of the scale, and 4.5 per cent from Oxford at the other.

Everyone agrees, however, that university student intake has been reduced by between eleven and twelve thousand well-qualified candidates each year. Last year, for example, only about 77,000 of the 173,000 applicants found places. More 18-year-olds are pushed into the dole queue as they are displaced from other higher education places by the many who wanted to, but did not, get into universities. There are other troubles for applicants who are accepted. Their minimum award was cut from £410 to £205 last year, and parents' contributions correspondingly increased, so that parents are now paying £250 million per annum towards the higher education of their children. Unfortunately not all parents meet their obligation, and now the biggest problem in student welfare is coping with hard-up students who try to find spare-time jobs to make ends meet, and who cannot then give their full time to their studies, or who give up the struggle.

The same situation is true of university research where funding by the Research Councils has declined each year. As before, the Government claims the contrary and says that funding has increased by about six per cent in real terms. This is contradicted by its own plan to transfer £10 million to research by charging fees for higher education, a plan recently frustrated by its own MPs to Sir Keith's chagrin. Nor does it match what one sees around departments. For example, the Medical Research Council funded less than one in five of the applications submitted for its support last autumn, and the Agricultural and Food Research Council is shutting down some of its own laboratories, and retiring or terminating appointments of staff at others.

The implications of all this are more serious than might at first appear. For instance, one project on penicillins not funded by the MRC has meant the dissipation of a research group built up over a decade. It can never be rebuilt. Furthermore, research students associated with the group can no longer be supported by it and have had their research programmes radically revised. And there are dozens of

such cases. No wonder the Chairman of the University Grants Committee had recently to say that cash shortages now mean that "universities cannot really go on to retain a presence in every field of science".

The situation now is fraught with uncertainties. The Universities are trying to formulate what researches they might specialise in. The Government promises a Green Paper to give this guidance, and the spectre of elite departments and universities overhangs all. Meantime, universities are encouraged to set up science parks, where at least some of the work previously performed in a firm's own laboratories will be done; a kind of sideways step which save firms costs and may help to pay for university overheads and consumables. Similarly, they are encouraged to take overseas students who pay full economic fees. The criterion is always cash.

No wonder Mrs Thatcher wants everyone to be a good capitalist, to own his own house and shares. The heart of the matter is that the treatment of Universities reflects the Government's attitude to education as a whole, and to all public services. The difference, as an ASTMS sticker said is that "a nation which cuts University funds, cuts off its own head". Oxford proudly refused to be a party to that.

The Ponting Case

ROBERT MORRELL

The acquittal of Clive Ponting, to the astonishment of his supporters and the fury of the Government, brought to the fore the future of the Official Secrets Act, under Part 2 of which the prosecution had been brought. Despite official denials, the Ponting affair was a political show trial. It was designed not simply to punish Ponting himself but also serve to warn any other civil servants who developed qualms when discovering examples of Government lying being concealed not only from the public but also the House of Commons.

The outcome of the trial has been seen as a much needed boost for civil rights, already greatly eroded by recent legislation, particularly the extension of police powers. The euphoria generated in civil liberties circles, which want to see many civil rights given a concrete grounding in specific legislation, coupled with the media concentration upon a possible replacement of the notoriously controversial Official Secrets Act, could well lead not so much to greater civil rights, but fewer. I have in mind here the possible

removal of juries from trials which are said to involve official secrets or State security. For the Ponting verdict has shown, though not for the first time, that politically vetted juries do not always toe the line authority demands them to.

The jury system is not without fault, but it does allow the introduction of an element into the legal system over which an authoritarian-minded government cannot exercise total control. The judge in the Ponting case all but told the jury to bring in a verdict of guilty because the law demanded it; the jury decided otherwise. So, if politically vetted juries cannot be relied upon, the next step is all too obvious — get rid of them.

There are many who for the highest of motives sincerely believe that the removal of juries in trials involving secrets might not be a bad thing. But this thinking fails to take into account the possible extension of legislation allowing it to happen. We have seen in the miners' strike ancient laws designed for matters in no way related to industrial disputes being used to bring prosecutions. And we have also seen the police putting into practice measures of doubtful legality to control the movement of pickets, or what

they see as potential pickets, and the willingness of judges sitting without juries. More recently these measures have been extended and used against supporters of CND wishing to picket the second Cruise missile base.

In 1792 the then Government prosecuted Thomas Paine for seditious libel, a kind of a "catch-all" charge, because they took offence at remarks of a political character in his book, *Rights of Man* (Part 1). To be absolutely certain of a conviction the authorities not only took steps to see that the trial judge held opinions they approved of, but that the jury did too (vetting is nothing new). However, just in case qualms of conscience should arise in the minds of any jurors, they were told that a "not guilty" verdict would bring one guinea whereas a guilty verdict would bring two guineas and a free dinner! Paine was found guilty!

Now I do not suggest the present Government should take a serious look at such a precedent and apply it in any future case. But if they did I am sure that Saatchi and Saatchi would come up with a brilliant publicity gimmick to show it was not a form of bribery.

The Case Against VAT on Books MAURICE CRANSTON

Professor Cranston argues that imposition of Value Added Tax on books would be disastrous for writers, publishers and the reading public. Whether or not the Government is persuaded against such a move depends on the volume of public opposition.

Most people now know that there has been pressure on the Government to introduce VAT on books and publications. The arguments in favour of the policy are twofold. It would form a logical part of the policy, favoured by Mrs Thatcher's administration, of shifting the burden of fiscal impositions from direct to indirect taxes. It would also fit in with the EEC policy of harmonising the tax system of member states.

The arguments against putting VAT on books are more numerous, and, in my view, far more compelling. Books in the UK are already more expensive than in most other European states, partly because the British publishing and printing industry is taxed at points where the same industry is not taxed on the continent. The French, German and other EEC states, which impose VAT on books, subsidize literature and scholarship through cultural institutions which simply do not exist in the United Kingdom.

If VAT were introduced on books it would not perhaps injure the sales of popular paperbacks, but

it would have a ruinous effect on those categories which have relatively short printing orders—that is poetry, academic and serious books in general. The prices of such books would rise by more than the 15 per cent VAT to take account of reduced print runs. Many such books would simply not be published at all.

University and college libraries, which cannot recover VAT, would have to buy fewer books; and already their purchases have been much reduced as a result of cuts in their budgets. Students could not afford to buy even those books they can afford to buy today. Small bookshops would almost certainly be driven out of business.

In a debate in the House of Lords on 28 November 1984, the Earl of Arran, in his maiden speech, likened the imposition of VAT to the old Stamp Act which was universally condemned as a "tax on knowledge". He asked: "Are we to levy a tax on reading and learning and increase ignorance all for a few million pounds?"

After the defeat of Sir Keith Joseph's plan to make some parents pay part of the tuition fees of university students, Mr Norman St John Stevas predicted on Channel 4 Television on 5 December 1984 that the Government would have to abandon the idea of imposing VAT on books. But that depends on continued vocal public opposition to the scheme in the weeks leading up to Budget Day.

Eggs Are Not People

BARBARA SMOKER

Public hysteria in the face of new scientific knowledge and techniques has always thrived on ignorance fostered by religious superstition, but never more blatantly and absurdly than in the current furore over embryological experimentation.

Ten per cent of all married couples are infertile — and for many of them it is a distressing disorder. Not only do the techniques of *in vitro* (ie test-tube) fertilisation (IVF) enable many infertile couples to have children, but the choice of a normal embryo for implantation in the mother also precludes various congenital defects in the baby and averts risks to the mother's life. Moreover, laboratory observation of spare zygotes, both normal and defective, is opening up whole new avenues of medical research and practice, not only in obstetrics but also in general medicine. (It has, for instance, already produced the rubella vaccine.)

This field of science has been developing, in an atmosphere of open medical and moral discussion, over the past sixteen years, and the clinical treatment of infertility through IVF (now 35 per cent successful) has become widely available in the past five years. But Mr Enoch Powell — in company with many other public figures, parliamentarians, and church leaders — has apparently only just caught up with it. And unfortunately these busybodies have not acquainted themselves with the most basic biological facts of the situation before leaping to the defence of the poor little human zygote and whipping up a public outcry based on fairy-stories.

The fact is, of course, that the fertilised egg does not, at this stage of development — none has so far been developed artificially beyond fourteen days — have even the most rudimentary nervous system, so cannot possibly have any consciousness, let alone feel any pain or distress. Experiments on the test-tube embryo therefore cause no suffering of any kind. In this respect, embryological experiments are in marked contrast to animal experiments, which undoubtedly cause suffering to vast numbers of laboratory animals each year. Yet few of the people who are so vociferously opposing embryo experimentation also oppose animal vivisection, while many of them are actually demanding more animal experiments as a means of replacing embryo experimentation.

The French geneticist, Professor Lejeune, having thrown in his lot with the religious pro-Life lobby, has actually claimed that all the experiments now being carried out on human embryos could be carried out just as effectively on animals — meaning, of course, not animal embryos, but sentient animals. Speciesism can surely go no further. It is as though

Nazi concentration-camp doctors were to justify their vile death-dealing experiments on thousands of dark-haired Jewish children by proudly claiming that they had thereby managed to save a hair on the head of a fair-haired "Aryan" child.

The only genuine basis of moral status is that of sentience — that is, the possession of an inner life. Since an early embryo can have no sentience, it can have no moral status, and there can be no rational objection to investigating it for the benefit of the mother and her family or of humanity in general.

Supporters of Mr Powell's absurdly titled Unborn Children (Protection) Bill who do not oppose legal abortion are obviously confused, since they are opposing the destruction of the earlier and less developed entity and not that of the later, more developed one. On the other hand, those who oppose both are ignoring the fact that investigating fertilised eggs can help to avoid the unwanted, spontaneous abortion of a more developed embryo later.

Religious fanatics confuse the issue by talking about "the unborn child" and "little human beings". The embryo is not a child at all — only a potential child. The embryo is, of course, human, but not a human being — only a potential human being. And to equate a potential human being with an actual human being is sheer superstition. Certainly, the embryo contains the "blueprint" for making a complete human being — but so does a fragment of flesh scraped from a grazed knee! Even though the embryo has been "switched on" to put the blueprint into effect, it is just as remote from the baby it may one day become as a piece of frog-spawn is from a frog, or an acorn from an oak-tree. Yet there are doctors of medicine who, choosing to put their religious ideology before scientific fact, deliberately confuse these very different sorts of entity. One such — Dr Walter Hedgcock — was quoted in 1982 as saying that experimenting on fertilised human eggs was "like pinning a baby down on a board and doing experiments on it". The front page of *The Freethinker* for November of that year quoted my reply that this was "tantamount to saying that boiling a breakfast egg that has been fertilised is like throwing a live chicken into boiling water".

Opponents of even the moderate Warnock proposals include Lord Denning, who ought to know better — and who hasn't even the excuse of being a Catholic. He has actually declared that, from the moment of conception, a zygote must have the full rights of a human being.

During the first few days after conception, the embryo is no more than an undifferentiated cluster of cells, about the size of a full-stop. Not only is it incapable of feeling anything; it is not even an individual, but could still become twins, triplets, etc.

So much for the idea of an individual soul — which is the basis for the whole irrational outcry. The Catholic who maintains that an immortal soul could be present from the moment of conception has quite a problem to solve: if the zygote becomes twins or triplets or quads, are more souls created as required, or does the one already created divide with the physical cells?!

The number of individuals that the zygote is going to develop into is not finally determined until about the fifteenth day, with the development of the “primitive streak”. That is why the Warnock Committee recommended a statutory limit of 14 days — a limit which obviously errs on the side of caution, as a sop to the religionists. If only the period for embryo experimentation were extended to 30 days, which is still well before there is any possibility of consciousness, a much wider range of congenital diseases could be diagnosed and averted. And since brain death is rightly accepted as the criterion for organ donation, the reverse criterion of the start of the development of a functional nervous system — ie at about five weeks — would be rational.

Even at a later stage of development, the embryo is nothing like a human foetus, let alone a human baby. It has far less consciousness than a maggot — and we know how anglers treat maggots, without even the justification that the embryo experiments have of adding to human knowledge and solving problems of infertility, of miscarriages, and of congenital defects.

While the atheist ethical standpoint is consequentialist, and mainly Utilitarian, religious believers generally have an absolutist ethical standpoint, based on what they like to call “natural justice”. And that, essentially, is the difference between the two sides in the IVF argument.

All right-minded people — atheists and religionists alike — agree that there are moral limits to what we can do to a human being, whatever the benefits to humanity may be. But then we have to decide what sorts of entity constitute a human being; and that is where we differ.

Religionists — taking the absolutist line that all human life is sacred and in God’s hands — generally see no reason to look into the biological facts, but simply assert “Life begins at conception”. However, this is not so: life is a continuum. Life is present in the sperm and in the unfertilised egg. Fertilisation is just one stage in the human life cycle — an important stage, certainly, but not even an essential one; for cloning is possible, and the cloning of other mammals is already being carried out.

Some religious opponents of IVF, when they realise that life is thus a continuum, twist the argument to another absolutist one, saying that since there is no stage at which life can be said to begin we must accord it human rights at every stage. But this is patently absurd: in the name of common sense, we

should treat all life as it is, not as it might one day become, nor (to switch to the euthanasia situation) as it once was.

The disquietingly large free vote (238 to 66) in the House of Commons on February 15 in support of the Powell Bill indicates either an incredible degree of biological ignorance on the part of our legislators, or else their craven response to the Roman Catholic and fundamentalist Protestant lobby. Certainly, several of the 44 Labour MPs who voted for the Bill’s second reading represent constituencies with a large RC population or are themselves RC. Cardinal Hume circularised the whole House beforehand, urging MPs to support the Bill.

The Christian pressure groups, Life (led by Prof. Jack Scarisbrick) and SPUC (led by Mrs Phyllis Bowman), had been busy since November collecting signatures to a petition against “embryo abuse”. Bundles of petition sheets, said to contain two million signatures — if so, the largest petition since the People’s Charter 150 years ago — were presented to Parliament during the morning of 15 February by Mr Norman St John-Stevas (himself, of course, RC). He and Mr Selwyn Gummer and the 168 other Conservative MPs who backed the Powell Bill did so in defiance of the wishes of the Prime Minister herself, who is known to favour implementation of the far more reasonable (though still over-cautious) Warnock Committee’s Report, which would allow experiments on embryos up to the fourteenth day.

One of the Catholic Conservative MPs, Sir Hugh Rossi, went so far as to say he would have liked an even tougher Bill than Mr Powell’s. Presumably he meant one that would disallow all assisted fertilisation. Tragic though this would be, not only for thousands of infertile couples but for medicine in general, it would at least make more sense than the Powell Bill, as it stands. For that, if it became law, would make it a criminal offence to reject defective embryos, as is done at present. Instead, they would be required to be implanted in the mother, even though the result would be a miscarriage, or a seriously defective foetus (necessitating a later abortion?!), or infection of the mother with a fatal disease. Such protective legislation for the embryo at the expense of foetuses and human beings also ignores the fact that in nature most embryos are rejected — 60 per cent of them, it is calculated, before the mother even realises she is pregnant. If it is “playing God”, as they say, to reject abnormal embryos and choose a normal one to implant into the mother, then it must be “playing God” to preserve those that nature itself would reject.

Another requirement under the present Bill is that couples who wish to have children with the aid of IVF (because of some medical bar to conceiving them in the natural way) will have to apply beforehand to the Secretary of State (presumably through an official of the DHSS) for a permit to do so—surely

the first instance of statutory government interference with the right of a man and woman to procreate. And, even if granted, the permit will expire after four months, which may be too soon in some cases to complete the treatment. The penalty for failure to comply with this provision will be a prison sentence of up to two years.

Rationalists may have underestimated the need to counter the rabid religious propaganda on this issue with the widespread dissemination of factual information. Since no specific organisation seems to have been set up to do this work, perhaps it should be undertaken by the National Secular Society while the Bill is in committee. We need to educate not only the general public in the matter, but parliamentarians and others who will otherwise, out of sheer ignorance, interfere with the rights of individuals, restrict medical treatment, and halt scientific progress.

The week before the Bill was introduced, the RC Archdiocese of Glasgow organised a conference to discuss the Catholic response to the Warnock Report. "We need to give the embryo legal status to preserve its dignity" was the ludicrous message that Dr John Finnis — Catholic Reader in Law at Oxford University — gave the conference. Even more emotive was the speech delivered by Dr Teresa Iglesias — a Catholic research officer of the RC foundation, the Linacre Centre for the Study of the Ethics of Health Care (London). She declared: "If Warnock's findings are made law, the embryo, like the nineteenth-century slave, will not be seen as a real human being, but a thing with no soul of its own, to be used in any way for the benefit of humanity". And she went on to announce, categorically, that "God became an embryo".

Another speaker at the Glasgow conference was the director of the Linacre Centre, Mr. Luke Gormally, who, referring to the *Lancet's* description of this "vociferous minority", cried "We must make ourselves a vociferous majority". Though a layman, he seems to be far more extreme on this and other issues in the realm of medical ethics (such as voluntary euthanasia) than are some of his senior colleagues, such as the Rev Dr John Mahoney, SJ, MA, DD, who is a leading Catholic theologian and spokesman on medical ethics from a more moderate standpoint. In fact, it looks as though there are widening gulfs between members of the Linacre Centre. If so, three cheers!

With a superb sense of timing, another conference — the annual conference on medical ethics sponsored jointly by the London Medical Group and the Institute of Medical Ethics — which happened to begin the very evening that the Powell Bill was introduced, included one session on *in vitro* fertilisation. Dr Robert Edwards, the pioneer of this technique, was the medical speaker; Mr Scott Baker, QC, spoke on legal aspects; and Father Mahoney on ethical aspects.

When I first saw the printed programme, I was furious that the contribution on the moral status of the embryo should be handed over to a Jesuit priest — even though I knew him to be a fairly progressive one — and I wrote to the organisers to this effect. However, I attended that session of the conference, as an observer, and found that Fr Mahoney read a surprisingly rational and balanced paper on this highly topical issue. Catholic MPs could well profit from a course of instruction from him. He did, admittedly, end on the inevitable note of quite unwarranted caution, saying that it is necessary to know more facts before society can come to any moral conclusions in the matter. This is certainly not so, since we know full well what an embryo is at different stages of its development, and its moral status can be based only on its actual characteristics at each stage — but, for a Catholic priest, Fr Mahoney was not at all bad; and I was left imagining what sort of arguments must be going on these days behind closed doors in the Linacre Centre, and other centres of RC doctrine. As I've said before, the Catholic Church is no longer Catholic.

A Redundant Saint?

Another book, this time by a Roman Catholic historian, has caused consternation in the Vatican. Giordano Bruno Guerri's *Poor Saint, Poor Killer* has forced the Roman Curia to investigate the background of Maria Goretti's martyrdom in 1902 which led to her canonisation in 1945.

The popular story is that the 11-year-old peasant girl died defending her virginity. It has been suggested that in fact she encouraged her assailant. He was Alessandro Serenelli, the 20-year-old, impotent son of an alcoholic father and a mentally unbalanced mother. The two families shared a slum dwelling near Anzio.

Serenelli's confessions to the police and at his trial have always been suspect. It was admitted by a priest who promoted Maria's cause that her mother was "persuaded" to change her story several times. And when Serenelli was interrogated by a panel of Vatican officials, some of his answers were regarded as "unwelcome".

Serenelli was pardoned by the Goretti family but spent 27 years in prison. After his release he was an odd job man at monasteries. He became feeble-minded; in his last years he appeared to be playing a role, telling visitors: "I was lucky to have killed a saint". He died in 1970.

Maria Goretti provided Pope Pius XII with a showpiece canonisation ceremony for the first holy year after the war. Obsessed with the ideal of chastity, and alarmed by Italian girls' liking for foreign servicemen, he proclaimed Maria Goretti to be an example of purity.

BOOKS

BRITAIN'S UNKNOWN GENIUS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE-WORK OF JOHN MacKINNON ROBERTSON, by Martin Page. South Place Ethical Society, Red Lion Square, London WC1. £2.25

John Mackinnon Robertson (1856-1933) was one of the most important social, political, ethical and economic writers in Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet he is scarcely remembered today, even by freethinkers whose movement he served so well for so many years. Like those other unbelieving Johns — Morley and Burns — he became an important Liberal politician. But he was a more creative thinker than either and, unlike them, he never forsook his roots in freethought.

Martin Page's short survey of Robertson's life-work is therefore very welcome. Though brevity has necessarily forced Mr Page to give only a bald survey of Robertson's views on welfare, social reform, economics, free trade, imperialism, militarism, sociobiology, theology, philosophy, literature and education — the list is astounding in its breadth — what is provided in this excellently produced booklet by the South Place Ethical Society should whet many appetites for the fuller biographical study which Mr Page is now writing.

In the meantime freethinkers would do well to read this booklet, not only to gain a better appreciation of one of the greatest contributors to the modern movement, but also to enjoy the stimulus of Robertson's scholarly and probing intellect. Particularly to be commended is Appendix I, on Robertson's attitude towards socialism, in which Martin Page has taken extra space to explore more fully the complexities of Robertson's politics. Friends of the modern Labour Party will find there much evidence of Robertson's continued relevance on late twentieth-century issues.

EDWARD ROYLE

WOUNDS, CAPITAL, LONDONERS. Three Novels by Maureen Duffy. Methuen, £2.95 each

Published in 1969, 1975 and 1983, respectively, *Wounds*, *Capital* and *Londoners* add up to a kind of loose trilogy about London life. To make us see them as a whole, Methuen has brought them out in handsome uniform paperback editions.

Wounds is rather vaguely set somewhere in a seedy part of London. Another reviewer found it evocative of Clapham, but apart from a few references to a common, I miss the solid foundation in London that the other two volumes have. *Wounds* is like a radio play—like a shabby and urban *Under Milk Wood*. There are several distinctive voices:

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Irish, West Indian, camp-theatre, middle class, genteel ex-Liverpool, among others. There are seven or eight sets of people, mostly overlapping, on whose lives we eavesdrop over a period of a few weeks. A recurring refrain is the passionate love-making of a couple who met at a party given by the theatrical couple, who promote the dramatic aspirations of their handsome black paper-boy, whose mother is a nurse in the local hospital, where one of the patients is a girl who was hit by a car driven by another guest at the party. Other characters have as their thematic hub their local, The Sugarloaf. The view we get of these Londoners and their various inter-relationships is a view only available to us through fiction or a laborious sociological study. In a small town the inter-relationships may be even more tortuous, but they are much easier to see. In *Wounds* several ideas are played with in a satisfying way for example: both physical love and a love of place; injuries and wounds of various kinds; sexual ambiguity; and music and acting. There is not so much plot development or sense of movement in *Wounds*; it is more like random snapshots compared to the tighter structure of the later two novels.

The London of *Capital* is an awesome city that exists in several dimensions at once. It is at the same time the modern London of suburban trains and bedsitters and the scene of historic and pre-historic life. Instead of the near cacophony of many equally important characters, *Capital* concentrates on Mr Meepers, an amateur but knowledgeable archaeologist who lacks the right academic qualifications, and a university lecturer at "Queen's College" in the University of London. The lecturer is the editor of a scholarly history journal and has turned down an article by Meepers. Meepers then gets a job as porter at the lecturer's college and attends some of his classes. The eccentric Meepers is homeless because he has been priced out of the family home in a smart square in West London. He lives in a tool shed in this square and then a gardener's shed in Kensington Gardens. The Meepers sections of *Capital* have the effect of making you notice these little sheds dotted around London and wonder if anyone lives in them.

The third element is a series of scenes taking place in London, or on the site of the present city, beginning in the Stone Age. They are usually narrated by some nonentity in the flow of history, but a witness to historical events. So we have a common foot soldier at the Battle of Hastings and a prostitute in the stews of Southwark during the Peasants' Revolt in the reign of Richard II. The

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fractured vision between ancient and modern is enriched with clever anachronisms, like calling the Belgae "Belgians", or the colloquial modern speech of the 11th-century Jewish moneylender.

Londoners (reviewed in *The Freethinker*, April 1984) is set very precisely in West London around Earls Court with excursions through other parts of the metropolis. The one main character is the writer, Al, whose peregrinations we follow. Again the past and present are mingled, for Al is translating the poems of Francois Villon. Most of Maureen Duffy's work contains a strong literary thread. Even in the mostly kitchen-sink *Wounds*, the theatrical hopeful has read Marlowe and a production of *Edward II* is staged.

The reverberations among the three novels reveal new dimensions in the texture of each. (For example, in each novel there is another city that acts as a foil to London: Liverpool or Dublin in *Wounds*, New York in *Capital*, and Paris in *Londoners*.) Is Maureen Duffy trying to do for London what Joyce wanted to do for Dublin—to make it possible to reconstruct the city from his books? I think she has achieved that object as well as Joyce ever did, but whether that is the point or not, the novels are worth re-reading in the new context they make for each other.

SARAH LAWSON

THEATRE

WASTE, by Harley Granville Barker. The Pit Theatre, the Barbican, London

This Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Waste* by Harley Granville Barker at the Pit Theatre is a great surprise. It is astonishing to find that a play which has not been performed in the West End since 1936, when it received its only other West End performance although written by 1907, is, if not a masterpiece, at least a truly remarkable play. It is even more unexpected, for freethinkers, to find a play that revolves around the issue of disestablishment. Alas, the programme note is wrong to state that "the Church of England remains to this day Established but the issue is hotly debated".

The protagonist, Trebell, is a self-possessed, cool politician intent upon bringing a Bill into Parliament to disestablish the Church and plough the people's retrieved wealth back into secular education. He appears to be impelled more by a desire to reach political heights, perhaps even the premiership, than

a determination to liberate the country from the injustice of clerical privileges. I suspect that the 1926 version ironed out some of the more detailed discussion of disestablishment.

His very ambitious Bill would be successful, but scandal in his personal life intervenes. A brief liaison — hardly a love affair, more a momentary concession to the urgings of the flesh — with Amy O'Connell, leads to her pregnancy. She begs him to release her from the burden of maternity and find a reliable doctor who will give her an abortion. He refuses and she dies after resorting to a back-street abortionist. Barker's refusal to remove references to abortion led to the banning of the play by the Lord Chamberlain in 1907. (Unless we pride ourselves too much on our progress in abolishing theatre censorship, it is worth remembering, in the month when it is announced that the National's Cottesloe Theatre is to close, that economic stringency can be an even more effective barrier to productions than public censorship where at least we know what is being banned.)

Judi Dench, always a pleasure to see on the stage, gave to Amy a kittenish, brooding sultriness, but had almost too much weight for so frivolous a person. Daniel Massey powerfully conveyed Trebell as an ultra-efficient politician steeled by a cold idealism that fixes on grand causes and ignores particular individuals. Among a very strong cast Charles Kay was a sinuous, reptilian Catholic politician and Tony Church was consummate as a Prime Minister exuding political skill from his very finger tips and constantly oiling the "nicely balanced machine" which he thought the cabinet to be. (How impossible to imagine Mrs Thatcher balancing factions in a cabinet which she expects to come obediently to heel.)

The many themes in the play do not always quite congeal. The role of women is constantly considered: Lady Farrant, representing the Government elite in its drawing room sees herself as a power behind the throne; Trebell's sister is an intellectual and professional in her own right; Amy O'Connell is the old sexist figure of the *femme fatale* who prevents man from fulfilling his career. Barrenness and sterility are constant motifs: Trebell has an oddly mystical view of procreation, perhaps in Barker's eyes, as a substitute for the religion he does not possess.

Although he was a friend of the freethinking drama critic William Archer, according to Beatrice Webb, Barker said of Lord Milner:

A God and a wife would have made Milner . . . into a great man; without either he has been a true combination of success and failure. "He would have been made by being loved!" summed up G.B. [Granville Barker] as we rode away.

Trebell is Barker's portrait of a man who lacks God, a wife and love. His career is wasted and prematurely ended by suicide as he finds the political purpose which gave him meaning is destroyed. I think Barker

intends us to query the sufficiency of totally human purposes, but I would prefer to draw the moral that we are lost if we give meaning to our life through a single ambition which takes insufficient account of our human needs and the human beings around us.

Waste is not to be missed and I urge the Royal

Shakespeare Company to transfer it to an auditorium where a much larger audience than can be crammed into the Pit can see it. What a waste if this fascinating play is not performed for another fifty years.

JIM HERRICK

LETTERS

NOT AN INCH

In reply to Leslie Scrase (Letters, January): some readers of *The Freethinker* may perhaps sympathise with his feelings of irritation at its more fractious outbursts against what he terms "fringe and freak groups" — by which we suppose he means the Moonies and "Jesus freaks" of one sort and another. But it is impossible to sympathise with his hesitation in renewing his subscription or to agree with his apparent wish that *The Freethinker* should fall into line with the British Humanist Association and ease up on religion.

The *Freethinker* is still the spearhead of the rationalist attack on the superstitions that are so deeply embedded in the fabric of our society. However "negative and belligerent" its polemic against cant and hypocrisy, wherever they are to be found, it performs a unique service to the secular humanists, as distinct from the "religious humanists", just by refusing to give an inch.

We can to some extent understand his point about the need for "developing a dialogue" and "finding common ground" and all that. That is the BHA's line, which it pursues with no very conspicuous success as yet. We wish it luck, but we fail to see why its soft-line policy of fudge and compromise is necessarily "in the best interests of all of us", even for the purposes of getting our act together. A double act, involving endless double-think and double-talk, is hardly *The Freethinker's* scene. The mere idea is laughable.

Who are these "mainstream religious people" anyhow that Leslie Scrase is so anxious to get together with? The Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church and the innumerable Nonconformist Churches? These are the very bastions of "Christian Superstition" on which *The Freethinker* is pledged to wage relentless war, and has so done from the first paragraph of the first issue. If, as Leslie Scrase seems to think, it has clung too closely to its past, then Mr Valiant-for-Truth was just a figure of fun.

WYN LEWIS
F. R. EVANS

CHOOSING OUR ALLIES

Leslie Scrase (Letters, January) has revived the century-old bleat of reverent rationalists who find *The Freethinker's* tone a little too strident for the drawing rooms of "positive" humanists and ecumenical agnostics. Has it occurred to him that the qualities he regards as "negative and belligerent" may be the very reason why this paper is still "the most regular British freethinking magazine"?

To Mr Scrase *The Freethinker* clings to its past; to me it is inspired by a past that gives it colour and energy in the present, and relevance for the future. Each to his own.

Of course we have a lot of common ground with some religious people. It is news to me that the secular movement has been shy about exploring common ground in such areas as civil liberties, animal

welfare, homosexual law reform, capital punishment and disarmament.

What about religious people with whom we do not have common ground: the ayatollahs, the Meir Kahanes, the anti-contraception brigade, the creation "science" lobby, the limousined preachers of poverty, the celebrants with cyanide-flavoured cordial, and the fundamentalists with a nuclear Armageddon complex? Their influence may be irrelevant to Mr Scrase's daily life; he may forget their victims. But I want — unhesitatingly — to subscribe to a movement which will stand up to born-again bully boys and predatory mystics, not twitter out the twee, twilight theme of a tepid, shrinking humanism.

NIGEL SINNOTT

NO HESITATION

Why on earth does Leslie Scrase (Letters, January) "always hesitate before renewing his annual subscription for *The Freethinker*"? I never do, because (1) at a minimum subscription of £3.60 it is an absolute giveaway, (2) it makes such enjoyable reading; punchy, provocative and above all lively, (3) the range of articles presented accommodate the variety of viewpoints within the freethought movement, and (4) many of the articles, too numerous to mention individually, are absolute gems of information and so thought provoking.

No, Mr. Scrase please do not attempt to reduce *The Freethinker* into another sterile "theoretical" publication. For 104 years *The Freethinker* has known where it is going and its particular role on the journey there. You, Mr. Scrase, had better decide your role, because in effect as a freethinker you are opposing a body of people with about 1700 years experience, who never miss a trick. Please don't be divisive. We, as freethinkers, cannot afford the price of that.

FRANK PIDGEON

NOT SO GAY FOR SOME

Leslie Scrase complains that *The Freethinker* is negative and belligerent towards religion and suggests that the common ground between religionists and secularists is "enormous".

Would he care to explain what common ground he thinks a gay like me might have with the Pope who says "homosexuality is incompatible with God's plan for human love"; or the Archbishop of Canterbury who talks of "pansies" and says gay people are "handicapped"; or the Rev Ian Paisley and Cardinal O'Faich joining forces to defeat the first attempts at homosexual law reform in Ulster; or Church of Scotland clergy who approved a report which condemned all forms of gay sex; or the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland which stated "by its very nature homosexuality corrupts all around it"; or Councillor Gordon Collett, Chairman of Rugby Borough Council, who declared: "This country's principles are based on Christianity, and in my view homosexuality does not conform to Christian principles".

Are these examples of the "fringe and freak groups" he suggests we ignore? If so I beg to differ.

Maybe Mr Scrase can be confident of fair treatment in Rugby, despite the malicious Methodist's attempts

to bar gays from council jobs; maybe his favourite bookshop is not the target of a campaign by the authorities to drive it out of business; nor his local bar raided by the police at the drop of a hat. But some of us are made to feel like second-class citizens in this "free" country of ours — thanks largely to religious busybodies.

The Freethinker should stay belligerent. It is Humanists like Mr. Scrase who make me regret that I supported the suggestion that a group for non-religious gays bear the Humanist label. I would certainly be more inclined to adopt the Secularist tag now.

BRIAN PARRY

Editor: The Gay Humanist

OPPOSING THE BRAINWASHERS

I see Leslie Scrase is again attacking The Freethinker for being "belligerent", etc.

Readers may not know that Mr Scrase recently addressed the Ealing Humanist Association on the "character" of Jesus. This somewhat God-slot-type oration turned out to be a whole-hogging apologia for the supposed Jesus of the Gospels — an entirely speculative presentation that could have been delivered by a Sixth Form scripture teacher forty years ago. When Mr Scrase was challenged with the Wellsite findings that even Jesus's historicity is in doubt, he rejected this out of hand and refused to discuss the matter.

Nowadays, when Gerald Priestland is given freedom of the airwaves to spread his specious and illogical notions, and while the Pope is gallivanting around South America attacking atheism and peddling his reactionary and inhuman views on contraception and abortion, surely one may be allowed to adopt a position of hostility to such dangerous brainwashing.

I accuse Mr Scrase of intolerance. He recognises only one kind of humanist (his kind), and asserts that he has more scope for dialogue with various supernaturalists — people who cling to 39 Articles, Turin Shrouds and other shreds of mediaeval mumbo-jumbo. I think Mr Scrase ought to be seeking common ground with other secularists, atheists, rationalists and humanists. Even if he doesn't agree with them, at least they are fighting his battles.

Is Mr Scrase perhaps a crypto-Christian?

H. D. CORBISHLEY

MILITANT OPPOSITION TO RELIGION

Leslie Scrase should be more specific when he advocates dialogue with Christians. Perhaps he would state in detail the "enormous grounds" of common interest, and what it is in our common interest to develop. By mainstream Christians, does he include Roman Catholics? And what precisely does he want "quietly forgotten"?

What puzzles me is that humanists, particularly the British Humanist Association, put so much stress on discussion with Christians. If such discussions are so productive, why is the BHA not bulging at the seams with ex-Christians? And why are atheists still treated as second-class citizens?

Kid-glove treatment of Christians may suit some people, but others realise only too well that despite their dwindling membership, the mainstream churches still exercise an enormous influence on social and political life, and that many Christians use Bible-based laws to impose their narrow standards on others.

There is still a great need for militant opposition to religion. And with the present Government's "Victorian Values" policy, it will be needed more than ever in future.

JOHN F. SIMPSON

PRODUCTS OF POPYRY

If Leslie Scrase believes that there is a lot of common ground between the religious and the non-religious and that being anti-religious is now out of date, he should have listened to the anti-abortion debate in the House of Commons on 11 February in which two Roman Catholic-educated bachelors in their thirties took a vigorous anti-feminist part. I refer to Mr Edward Leigh (Conservative), an alumni of the Oratory School and a Director of the comic Coalition for Peace Through Security, and Mr David Alton (Liberal), lately of Edmund Campion School and a devout Roman Catholic who has fought to restrict the 1967 Abortion Act ever since he entered parliament.

Young men in their thirties do not normally occupy themselves too much with women's issues, least of all when they are themselves unmarried. Surely the somewhat weird determination exhibited by this pair to inflict unwanted pregnancy on women, can only be ascribed to their unfortunate education and indoctrination. A good enough reason for being a little sceptical about the influence of religion, don't you think?

MADELEINE SIMMS

HUMANISM: SECULAR AND OTHERWISE

Leslie Scrase claims that The Freethinker is negative and belligerent. He also implicitly praises the British Humanist Association for not being an anti-religious organisation.

The secular humanist tradition is one which is clearly and proudly non-religious; it is not ashamed to emphasise the differences between religious and secular ideologies. This emphasis on the part of secular humanists must entail criticism of religion.

Where the BHA has gone wrong is being afraid to emphasise the differences between religion and humanism: in other words, to attempt to have a non-ideological ideology. It has adopted uncritically Popper's doctrine of the Open Society, even after David Tribe warned in the 1960s that this doctrine is quasi-religious in nature, based as it is on the ideas of the religious thinker, Bergson.

However, the damage is done not so much by the ideas of Popper and Bergson, because many humanists seem, to those in a position to judge, not to have much understanding of those ideas except in a vulgarised form. The real damage is done by the vulgarisation of the ideas of original thinkers.

The vulgarisation extends also to the ideas of Marx and others. One need only look at the recently published Humanist Dipper, which contains the bigoted implication that Marxists are not humanists. Naturally, Marxists are not immune from bigotry or vulgarisation, but this hardly justifies characterising Marxism as a religion.

COLIN MILLS

DEFENDING CIVIL LIBERTIES

May I, in this letter, be permitted to kill two birds with one stone?

Regarding Leslie Scrase's criticism of The Freethinker for being "belligerent", I would have thought that there is a need today for a stridently anti-religious voice in view of the Prime Minister's strident support for "traditional moral values" and her attempts to create a police state to enforce such values and suppress all opposition.

Whatever Antony Milne and others may think, surely Orwell's 1984 can apply to both Left and Right-wing dictatorships? Although their inventors' aims

might not have been malicious, computers can be used for malicious purposes. The police can link their computer to that of the DHSS, and vice-versa, or to the computer of a bank. Thus anyone who pays by cheque for an adult contact magazine or an organisation like the National Secular Society would risk being harrassed as a "subversive". There is no end to the possibilities.

The Freethinker is a strong voice for civil liberties in this country. Long may its stridency continue.

R. W. WALKER

SOCIALISM AND TOTALITARIANISM

Both Michael Duane and Terry Liddle in their criticisms of my letter of January 1985 on Orwell's novel, 1984 (Letters, February), rather spoil their arguments by saying, in effect, that George Orwell would never have voted Tory.

I dare say. But Orwell was not writing about the Tory Party, or about Reagan's MX missiles, or about Lord Stockton. He was instead writing about the social realities of totalitarianism. Orwell, God rest his soul, has patently not got his message across, even to those who deem to interpret his work.

Mr Liddle, in saying that 1984 was directed against "any form of totalitarianism", leaves one wondering what other forms presently exist, other than Communism (apart, that is, from the Salisbury Review and its storm troopers, who will no doubt soon be knocking us up at 4 o'clock in the morning).

Orwell, of course, writing in 1948, was fully aware of the horrors of Nazism. But the good thing about Hitler was that, through what can only be described as "overkill", he destroyed utterly the credibility of Fascism, Nazism and even "nationalism". True, there still remain authoritarian states, but there is only one modern form of totalitarianism.

Certainly Orwell was a democratic socialist, a member of the ILP and all the rest. But what is puzzling is the obvious and unambiguous manner in which he parodied socialism (rather than, for example, Fascism, or authoritarianism, or statism) in *Animal Farm*. Furthermore, as a sequel, he quite blatantly used the words "English Socialism" (Ingsoc for short) in his novel 1984. To the simplest mind, therefore, socialism and totalitarianism become equated, and all other explanations for Orwell's motives cannot disguise this baleful fact.

No socialist has yet satisfactorily explained this to me.

ANTONY MILNE

ORWELL THE SOCIALIST

Unfortunately for Antony Milne, his allegation (Letters, January), that George Orwell's 1984 was an onslaught on socialism, is contradicted by the author of the novel himself. In a letter dated 16 June, 1949, written in response to a cable requesting clarification of his position from an official of the United Automobile Workers of America, Orwell stated: "My recent novel is NOT (capitals Orwell's) intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter), but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable, and which have already been partly realised in Communism and Fascism". Thus, pace Mr Milne, Michael Duane was quite right in asserting that 1984 was a critique of "false" or, in Orwell's own words, "perverted" socialism, and not of socialism per se, which Orwell believed in to the end of his life.

JOHN L. BROOM

"THE ENEMY WITHIN"

I have read Colin Mills's reply to S. E. Parker (Letters, January) and was interested in his concluding sentences about menaces to society threatening existing power relationships. "That is why such people", he says, "like picketing miners, socialists and so on, are vilified as 'the enemy within'".

This is news to me. I have heard some militant union leaders described as the enemy within, but I have never heard that socialists were included in that category.

Perhaps Colin Mills will quote the source on which his allegation is based. I gather from the tone of his letter that he would like to believe it.

JOHN L. HUTCHINSON

UNWARRANTED ATTACKS

I am so sick of tripping over the editor's personal anti-feminist crusade in *The Freethinker*. He is at it again on page 20 of the February issue, mocking the attempts of the West Midlands Tory Councillors to curb the kerb-crawlers, and actually believing what sounds like propaganda that a Committee budget was exorbitant and inappropriately spent and symptoms of sexism discussed. (That smacks of the anti-GLC campaign that had the GLC spending countless thousands on nothing but lesbian and gay groups.) And on the very next page, the editor has the chutzpah to be "confident that Freethinker readers will rally round to secure its future".

Men and women who oppose male violence and sexism in society also find themselves among the ranks of secularists, but must find his anti-feminist stance baffling and dispiriting. We won't be promoting the circulation of *The Freethinker* if it contains this sort of rubbish which certainly does nothing to promote and protect the best interests of women. Why does he find it impossible to comprehend that women's groups and committees are in the business of redressing the unequal balance of power and opportunity available to women, not of depriving men of "equal rights and opportunities".

Could it be too much to ask that the editor desist from these unwarranted anti-feminist attacks and confine his venom to attacking the entrenched forces of institutionalised religion, which is what I always thought the focus of *The Freethinker* was supposed to be.

RITA CRAFT

OBITUARY

Mrs F. Bryant

Florence Bryant, aged 79, was cremated at Parndon Wood Crematorium, Harlow, following a secular committal ceremony.

Mrs M. Burnet

Mora Burnet, who died recently, was introduced to the humanist movement as a schoolgirl when she attended meetings of the South London Ethical Society. In later life she was a member of humanist groups in Hampstead and Brighton.

Mora Burnet will be best remembered for her voluntary work in the Humanist Housing Association. She was one of the original group that launched what became a major humanist enterprise. In its early

days the various social and fund-raising activities were undertaken by committee members. She retained a keen interest in the Association to the end, although failing health prevented her from travelling to meetings in London.

A teacher by profession, Mora Burnet qualified in a year of the depression when not a single new teacher was taken on by the education authorities in London. Her first teaching post was in Leeds. After returning to London she devoted many years to teaching retarded children, and became warden of an approved school.

She was a Justice of the Peace and served on the Hampstead and Clerkenwell benches. A former chairman of the Hampstead Bench said of Mora Burnet: "As a colleague she was simply splendid — compassionate and sensible, with a lifetime's experience to back up her judgment. In her case wisdom had come and imbued her whole being, showing itself not only in what we had to do in court but also in relationships with her colleagues".

Mora Burnet had a long and happy married life with Lindsay, who survives her. There was no funeral. In accordance with Mrs Burnet's wishes her body was given for medical research.

Mr B. Carvill

There was a secular committal ceremony when the funeral of Brian Carvill, aged 62, took place at Putney Vale Crematorium, London.

Ursula Edgcombe

Ursula Edgcombe, the sculptor and painter, died last month at the age of 84.

She studied at the Slade, 1916-21, and became a sculptor in stone and wood. In 1945 she started painting in oils and exhibited regularly in London.

Ursula Edgcombe is survived by her husband, H. J. Blackham.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. The Prince Albert, Trafalgar Street (adjacent to Brighton Station). Sunday, 14 April, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Bob Potter: Why be a Jehovah's Witness?

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.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Harold Wood. Tuesday, 2 April, 8 pm. A Meeting.

Humanist Holiday. Easter at Buxton, Derbyshire, 4-11 April. Details from Betty Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12, telephone 01-673 6234.

Humanist Holidays. Exmouth, Devon, 20 July-3 August (either one or both weeks). Details from Betty Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12, telephone 01-673 6234.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Tuesday, 28 March, 7.45 pm. Terry Liddle: Disorder of the Golden Dawn.

Scottish Humanist Council. The Cowen Centre, Stirling. Saturday, 20 April, 10 am to 5 pm. Annual Conference: Details from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, telephone 0563 26710.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 10 April, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. A speaker from the Campaign for Freedom of Information.

Voluntary Euthanasia Society. Golden Jubilee Celebration, London, 13-14 April. Details from the VES, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8, telephone 01-937 7770.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 1 April, 8 pm. Humanism: Tape and Slide Show.

PUBLIC MEETING

FAMINE AND POPULATION

Speakers:

G. N. DEODHEKAR
(National Secular Society)

TREVENEN JAMES
(Population Concern)

Chair:

BARBARA SMOKER

Monday, 22 April, 7 pm

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1

Organised by the National Secular Society,
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL,
telephone 01- 272 1266

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers:

LORD WILLIS
BILL CRAIG
DIANA ROOKLEDGE
JIM HERRICK

Chair:

BARBARA SMOKER

Saturday, 23 March, 6.30 pm for 7 pm.

The Pavours Arms,
Page Street, Westminster, London SE1

Tickets £9 from the NSS, 702 Holloway Road,
London N19 3NL, telephone 01-272 1266

PUBLICATIONS

(postal charges in brackets)

Hardbacks

The Bible Handbook, G. W. Foote and W. P. Ball, £5 (35p); Did Jesus Exist?, G. A. Wells, £5.80 (85p); The Historical Evidence for Jesus, G. A. Wells, £8 (£1.05); Honest to Man, Margaret Knight, £3.75 (50p); Humanism, H. J. Blackham, £5.95 (70p); Religion in a Modern Society, H. J. Blackham, £2.50 (60p); Materialism Restated, Chapman Cohen, 50p (45p); President Charles Bradlaugh, D. Tribe, £4 (£1.50); 100 Years of Freethought, D. Tribe, £2 (£1.05); The Trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, Roger Manvell, £5.95 (65p); The Freethinker, 1978, 1981, 1982 and 1983, £7.50 each (£1.10); The Freethinker, 1984, £7.95 (£1.10).

Paperbacks

Atheism: the Case Against God, G. H. Smith, £3.50 (£1.10); The Philosophy of Humanism, Corliss Lamont, £3.50 (75p); Varieties of Religious Experience, William James, £3.50 (65p); The Humanist Revolution, Hector Hawton, 95p (45p); Humanist Anthology, Margaret Knight (Editor), 95p (40p); The Humanist Outlook, A. J. Ayer (Editor), 95p (65p); Humanism and Moral Theory, R. Osborn, 95p (40p); Common Sense, T. Paine, £1.50 (25p); Rights of Man, T. Paine, £2.25 (35p); Pioneers of Social Change, R. Pike, 95p (40p); Radical Politics 1790-1900: Religion and Unbelief, Edward Royle, £1.85 (35p); Britain's Unknown Genius: The Life and Work of J. M. Robertson, M. Page, £2.25 (35p); The Portable Voltaire, B. R. Redman (Editor), £2.50 (55p); The Dead Sea Scrolls, J. Allegro, £2.25 (30p); The Gods and Myths of Northern Europe, H. R. Ellis Davidson, £1.75 (35p); Origin of Species, C. Darwin, £2.25 (45p); On the Nature of the Universe, Lucretius, £1.75 (35p); Middle East Mythology, S. H. Hooke, £2.25 (35p); Mohammed, M. Rodinson, £2.95 (45p); Sociology of Religion, R. Robertson (Editor), £2.95 (45p); Controversy, Hector Hawton, 95p (45p); Causing Death and Saving Lives, J. Glover, £2.50 (35p); Pope John 23rd and the Cold War, F. A. Ridley, 50p (25p); Rome or Reason?, R. G. Ingersoll, 25p (20p); The Secret History of the Jesuits, E. Paris, £3 (50p); The Vatican versus Mankind, A. Pigott, 60p (35p); Lift up Your Heads, W. Kent (Editor), 60p (35p); The Dark Side of the Moonies, Erica Heftmann, £2.50 (35p); Boys and Sex, W. B. Pomeroy, £1.50 (25p); Girls and Sex, W. B. Pomeroy, £1.50 (25p); The Worm in the Bud: the World of Victorian Sexuality, R. Pearsall, £3.50 (65p); A Message From the Falklands, D. Tinker, £1.95 (30p); Vision and Realism: a Hundred Years of The Freethinker, J. Herrick, £2 (40p).

Bertrand Russell

A Free Man's Worship; Bertrand Russell's Best; £1.95 each (35p each); Unpopular Essays; The Conquest of Happiness; The Impact of Science on Society; The ABC of Relativity; On Education; £2.50 each (35p each); Political Ideals; Education and the Social Order; Principles of Social Reconstruction; £1.75 each (35p each); In Praise of Idleness; Why I am Not a Christian and other Essays; £2.95 each (35p each); Autobiography, £4.50 (70p).

Pamphlets

The Case Against Church Schools, P. Knight, 30p (13p); The Cost of Church Schools, D. Tribe, 25p (13p); Religion and Ethics in Schools, D. Tribe, 25p

(13p); Objective, Fair and Balanced, BHA, 50p (25p); What About Gods?, C. Brockman, £2.50 (25p); A Definition of Humanism, R. Fletcher, 25p (13p); An Introduction to Secular Humanism, K. Modat, 60p (13p); Humanism, Barbara Smoker, £1.50 (25p); A Chronology of British Secularism, G. H. Taylor, 20p (13p); An End to Belief? (the 1984 Voltaire Memorial Lecture), L. Kennedy, 50p (13p); Marriage: Sacerdotal or Secular?, G. C. L. Du Cann, 20p (13p); Birth Control, various writers, 15p (13p); The Rights of Old People, various writers, 12p (13p); The Right to Die, C. Wilshaw, 50p (13p); Thomas Paine, C. Cohen, 25p (13p); The Devil's Chaplain, H. Cutner, 25p (13p); William Morris and Hyde Park, L. S. Jones, 30p (13p); The People's Uprising, L. S. Jones, 75p (13p); The Nun Who Lived Again, Phyllis Graham, 10p (13p); The Mask of Anarchy, P. B. Shelley, 90p (18p); Life, Death and Immortality, P. B. Shelley, 20p (13p); The Necessity of Atheism, P. B. Shelley, 10p (13p); An Appeal to the Young, P. Kropotkin, 15p (13p); Our Pagan Christmas, R. J. Condon, 75p (13p); What is the Sabbath Day?, H. Cutner, 15p (13p); The Longford Threat to Freedom, Brigid Brophy, 15p (13p); Blasphemy in Britain, N. Walter, 25p (13p); Buddhism and Blasphemy, Sangharakashita, 60p (13p); The Open Society and Its Friends, D. Tribe, 15p (13p); The Future of the British Monarchy, F. A. Ridley, 40p (13p); Good God (verses), Barbara Smoker, 95p (25p); From Jewish Messianism to the Christian Church, P. Alfaric, 20p (13p); The Rise of the Papacy and Crimes of the Popes, G. W. Foote and J. M. Wheeler, 25p (13p); Frauds, Forgeries and Relics, G. W. Foote and J. M. Wheeler, 25p (13p); Our Celestial Visitor, F. A. Ridley, 30p (13p); Three Lunar Voyages, F. A. Ridley, 50p (13p); The Unpleasant Personality of Jesus Christ, C. Maine, 25p (13p); Why I am Not a Christian and Faith of a Rationalist, B. Russell, 60p (13p).

Pamphlets for the People

Morality Without God; Christianity and Slavery; Christianity and Ethics; Deity and Design; The Devil; Agnosticism; Did Jesus Christ Exist?; Giving 'em Hell; Freethought and the Child; Gods and Their Makers; Must We Have a Religion; Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch to Live; What is Freethought? Chapman Cohen's series of pamphlets, 15p each (13p up to 3 pamphlets).

Miscellaneous

The Freethinker, Centenary Issue, May 1981. Contributors include H. J. Blackham, Edward Blishen, Hermann Bondi, Brigid Brophy, Maureen Duffy, Barry Duke, Jim Herrick, Margaret Knight, Dora Russell, Barbara Smoker and Barbara Wootton. 40p (25p). National Secular Society Centenary Brochure, 1966, 50p (25p).

THE FREETHINKER

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