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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION: WHITEHALL WILL RESIST REFORM

"Propaganda and secrecy go hand in hand down Whitehall", said Michael Cockerell, the award-winning BBC "Panorama" reporter, when he spoke at the annual general meeting of the Campaign Against Censorship in London on 9 May. "And this Government has shown itself fiercely determined to use all the cumbersome apparatus of the Official Secrets Act against unauthorized leakers of information like Clive Ponting, even when the information has no national security implications but is merely politically embarrassing", he added.

Mr Cockerell said that like other Prime Ministers and Presidents all over the world, Margaret Thatcher has her own "good news" machine in 10 Downing Street.

"The world's leaders, whether they rule by the bullet, the ballot or the Politburo, have a vested interest in being liked by their people. But what distinguishes dictatorships from democracy is the extent of government control over the news media and the range of alternative sources of information freely available to the public that differ from the official versions of the truth.

"In the Soviet Union, there is only a single source: the word *Pravda*, the title of the Communist Party's mouthpiece, means 'truth'. In Britain, the Government's techniques of managing the news are, naturally, more sophisticated. They have flourished over the years in a culture—unique for a democracy—that combines profound administrative secrecy with compliant political reporting. They are techniques which have reached new levels under Mrs Thatcher—yet she has been acting squarely in the traditions of her predecessors in Downing Street.

"All British governments seek to manage the news: to trumpet the good, to suppress the bad and to polish the image of the Prime Minister".

Mr Cockerell said public access to official information, open debate and free press, radio and television

are essential features of a genuine democracy.

"Yet in a vital sense our democracy is a sham, because British governments refuse to trust the people with the facts.

"To reform the system requires the repeal of Part 2 of the Official Secrets Act and the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act and a transformation in journalists' own working methods. Reporters must sharpen their own defences against the increasingly skilled techniques of image building and news manipulation by the Prime Minister, her advisers and her political opponents.

"Political journalists must not allow themselves to be used as adjuncts to media campaigns or as accomplices to concealment of official information".

Michael Cockerell warned his audience that reform will be no easy task.

"It is recognised more keenly in Downing Street than anywhere else in Britain that knowledge is power", he concluded.

The Campaign Against Censorship was formerly the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society which grew out of the Free Legal Fund. The fund was established for the defence of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. A primary aim of the organisation was the assistance of authors, publishers, writers and artists threatened by censorship.

The main principle of the Campaign's work is opposition to censorship for adults. It endeavours to combat the activities of pressure groups working to restrict freedom of speech and expression.

To this end the Campaign Against Censorship has embarked on a programme to create greater awareness of the need for intellectual and artistic freedom.

Michael Cockerell is joint author with Peter Hennessy and David Walker of *Sources Close to the Prime Minister*, published this month in paperback by Macmillan.

The Freethinker

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Vol 105 No 5 CONTENTS May 1985

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION: WHITEHALL WILL RESIST REFORM ...	65
NEWS AND NOTES ...	66
Evangelical News; Pope Off the Box; Abortion, Illegitimacy and Irish Catholicism	
POPULATION: HUMANITY'S GREATEST CHALLENGE ...	68
MUSLIM TYRANT OUSTED ...	69
AGAINST THE FAITH ...	70
Jim Herrick A PREFACE TO THE PREFACE ...	72
T. F. Evans THE EMPTY TOMB AND THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTIANITY ...	73
Steuart Campbell FREETHINKER REVIEWS ...	74
BOOKS The Case Against God, by Gerald Priestland Reviewer: Antony Grey Freedom and Morality, by A. J. Ayer Reviewer: H. J. Blackham	
A FABLE ...	75
Michael Duane THE CASE AGAINST THE CASE AGAINST EUTHANASIA ...	76
Barbara Smoker LETTERS ...	77
OBITUARY ...	80

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NEWS

EVANGELICAL NEWS

There was dancing in the streets when the Rt Rev Stanley Booth-Clibborn, Bishop of Manchester, declared on the Channel 4 programme, *Credo*, that non-Christians will also go to heaven.

But the Bishop's pronouncement was not joyfully acclaimed by everyone in the Christian community. For a start he is, biblically speaking, on shaky ground. And the Church of England also has its "exclusives" who are miffed at the idea of unsaved squatters occupying the heavenly mansions.

Several of the Bishop's critics are from his own diocese. Jean Dinesdale, a member of Holy Trinity Church, Platt Field, Manchester, described the Bishop's statement as "a denial of everything that Jesus Christ claimed for himself when he said 'I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to God but through me ...'. And it is a denial of New Testament scripture certainly". Rick Fellingham, another member of the same church, was equally adamant. He said that Church of England bishops should be the last people to suggest that non-Christians will also be saved. Mr Fellingham added that it is not for bishops to say that there are alternative methods to that of being "born again".

The Manchester fundamentalists' views about who can enter the Pearly Gates brought to mind Susan Marling's Sunday *Observer* account of the born-againers she met in the United States. Describing their moral McCarthyism as repellent, she commented: "It's a regression into the dark, bigoted side of the national character ... A fundamentalist believes that those without Christ are lamentably bound for hell, while those that have seen the light will be 'rap-tured' away to heaven before the final Armageddon".

British fundamentalists are certainly less awful and have far less political clout than their American counterparts. But that may change following the injection of virulent religious enthusiasm into the evangelical movement. A new outfit known as the West Indian Evangelical Alliance was recently initiated by Bishop Arnold of the New Testament Church of God. (His title, Chief Overseer, has unfortunate connotations for black Christians whose forebears were slaves—owned, bred and sold by white Christians.)

Announcing the new organisation, the Evangelical Alliance press release stated that "90 per cent of the British population never go to church and are non-Christian". It is to be fervently hoped that this estimate is accurate.

AND NOTES

POPE OFF THE BOX

The Pope's Easter number, *Urbi et orbi*, is no longer top of the pops. Indeed as far as BBC Television is concerned it is a long way down the charts. Last year only 200,000 bothered to tune in, a far cry from the days of resurgent Catholicism when the viewing figures for the papal gig in St Peter's Square topped the five million mark.

Pope John Paul II, dressed in gold robes and wearing a gold-encrusted mitre, as befits a stern critic of materialism, spoke of those who are suffering through want and malnutrition. He gave the repetitious "to the city and the world" greeting in 46 languages.

A spokesman for the BBC said the decision against a live transmission from Rome was not taken on financial grounds. It was a question of broadcasting standards, and from a visual point of view the Pope's address was dull.

Of course the BBC decision provoked squeals of protest from some Roman Catholics, notably Norman St John-Stevas, MP (Conservative, Chelmsford and the Vatican), who accused the Corporation of having "insulted not only millions of Roman Catholics in Great Britain but Christians of all denominations by this foolish decision". But he offered no explanation concerning the millions of "insulted" Roman Catholics and other Christians who did not switch on to Pope John Paul II last Easter.

In fact the Pope's Easter greeting, which had been broadcast since the days of Pius XII, had become yet another Church privilege, hence the chagrin of Catholic zealots over the BBC's decision to axe it.

No doubt the faithful will dutifully send in their petitions and letters of complaint. Perhaps on this occasion the broadcasting authorities will not be unduly influenced either by instant protests from the pew fodder or the vapourings of Norman St John-Stevas.

The Rev Graham Oakes, vicar of an Anglican church in Halifax, was taken aback when he received from the printer a supply of cards listing Holy Week services. The Easter Vigil, known as *The Service of the New Light*, was printed as *The Service of the Neon Light*.

The baneful effects of Roman Catholic social teachings are becoming increasingly evident in the Republic of Ireland where the Church is conducting a fierce campaign to prevent contraception facilities becoming generally available. There has been such a dramatic increase in births outside wedlock that the Government is planning to introduce a bill to abolish the status of illegitimacy. About eight per cent of births recorded in a recent quarter were to unmarried mothers. And in one of Dublin's largest maternity hospitals more illegitimate than legitimate births were recorded during one week.

The increase in illegitimacy figures is only one result of Church meddling in personal matters. If the present trend continues over four thousand Irish women will travel to Britain for an abortion in 1985. That is the official estimate; the actual figure will be much higher because many of them will give fictitious addresses in Britain.

These statistics are disturbing. But they are predictable in a country where sex education is usually imparted by celibate priests and nuns.

Because of Church influence divorce is prohibited under the Republic's constitution. The law can be changed only if Parliament is given majority support in a referendum. The Labour Party favours a Church-State showdown, but the Government is reluctant to challenge the hierarchy, being aware that proposals for reform will be denounced from every pulpit in the land. The recent appointment of the hard-line Kevin McNamara as Archbishop of Dublin is an indication of the Vatican's determination to stem the tide of liberalism in Ireland.

For it is evident that the Church's grip on the country has weakened over the last thirty years. A number of factors have contributed to the Church's declining influence. The advent of television has brought radical ideas and opinions right into people's homes. It was comparatively simple for the Church and its pressure groups to get books banned from shops and public libraries. But it is much more difficult to prevent people watching programmes on television sets for which they have paid good money.

The convenience of air travel now enables Irish people living in Britain and elsewhere to return to their native land several times a year. They bring with them their two or three well-fed, well-clad children, and as likely as not an adequate supply of contraceptives. The lesson is not lost on their fertile relatives and friends.

Perhaps the most hopeful sign for the future is the 1981 census return which showed that people of no religion—possibly as many as 50,000 of them atheists—are now one of the largest minorities in the Republic of Ireland.

Population: Humanity's Greatest Challenge

Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, chaired a meeting on Population and Famine which the Society held in London last month. She said that while disagreeing with the Rev Thomas Malthus's proposed solutions to the problem, we should acknowledge the value of his historical role in bringing to public attention the dangers inherent in the population explosion.

She pointed out that the founder of the NSS, Charles Bradlaugh, was also instrumental in pioneering contraception in this country, through the extensive newspaper coverage of his and Annie Besant's trial for publishing *Fruits of Philosophy*.

Miss Smoker introduced Trevenen James, an active member of Population Concern and a widely travelled author and lecturer. He has lived in over a dozen countries, half of them in the Third World, and is researching for a book a possible title for which is *The Other Bomb*.

Mr James said that although birth rates are declining in most countries, world population is expected to continue growing until at least the end of the next century. "The reasons for this apparent contradiction are that there are today more fertile men and women living on planet earth than ever before, and nearly half of them are aged eighteen and below, with all their reproductive lives ahead of them", he added.

Mr James examined some of the implications of this explosion of people upon our fragile and already crowded earth.

He said: "Both the hungry poor and the industrialised rich have for decades been destroying the forest cover of the earth at a far greater rate than it can be replenished.

"Three quarters of the world's living matter is contained in the great rain forests, so that a threat to them is a threat to life itself. Disappearing forests, combined with expanding cities, over-grazing and over-farming, result in erosion and desertification of areas of agriculture required desperately for the production of much more food for many people.

"People who say that there is enough food in the world for everyone forget that nearly half of the world's grain is fed to animals, and that another quarter goes to waste in transport and storage. Transporting what surplus may be left from one continent to another involves high costs which someone has to pay.

"Ethiopia's present food crisis is due not only to civil war, bad administration and drought, but also to the fact that she is adding more than one million hungry mouths to her population every year".

Mr. James recalled that A. L. Rowse, writing in *The Times* in 1983, pointed out that "at the back of all wars of the 20th century has always been the

pressure of people". Maynard Keynes believed this to be true of the first World War.

"The population of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran will all double in the next twenty to thirty years. Nicaragua's population will double in only nineteen years; that of Vietnam and Laos during the next thirty years. India with a population of 746 million has suffered four wars since independence".

Mr James concluded by saying that solutions to the extraordinarily complex and increasing problems caused by exploding populations are not beyond the reach of our present civilisation. But they present it with probably the greatest challenge it has ever had to face.

"We can only hope to find and implement possible solutions in time, provided that both developed and less developed worlds from now on give far higher priority to damping down the present dangerous rate of explosion of the population bomb".

G. N. Deodhekar, a member of the NSS Council who recently visited India, spoke about three main sources of opposition to birth control.

First and foremost there is the Roman Catholic Church, he said. "The Church is opposed to all forms of birth control which it denounces as the anti-natal mentality.

"Other Christian churches and sects have a history of opposition to birth control, right from the days of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant. But their position has changed while the Roman Catholic Church remains adamant, basing its arrogant claim on the alleged possession of knowledge of some 'natural law' which forbids the use of artificial means of contraception. . .

"The rhythm method which the Church condescendingly permits is only a sabotaging concession".

The second source of opposition to birth control is situated on the Left of the ideological spectrum, Mr Deodhekar added.

"This is the confusion caused by the socialist argument that the ownership of all means of production by the community is the only solution to the problem of poverty and famines, and that birth control programmes are a reformist diversion. This argument needs to be answered in Marxist or socialist terms.

"It should be recalled that the early Marxists were opposed to communist participation in the trade union movement on the grounds that it was reformist, fighting only for a greater share of the cake rather than the overthrow of capitalism. It was Lenin who castigated this as 'Left-wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder'. He pointed out that working people had a right to demand socialist participation in the immediate struggle to alleviate distress and better their conditions.

"This same argument applies both to famine relief and to the birth control campaign.

"The ideological confusion and prejudices of the Marxists delayed acceptance of a birth control campaign in China. As a result, the Government has been forced to adopt a drastic 'one child per couple' policy.

"The fact that famine rages in Marxist Ethiopia ought also to open socialist eyes. Maturer socialists. I think, will agree that they must participate in population control programmes now, even under capitalist systems, so that they inherit a manageable population when their day arrives".

Mr Deodhekar described the third source of opposition to the population control campaign as "based on the radical, liberal, anti-Imperialist conscience which urges westerners that they must not tell people in the Third World that their families are too large.

"This is an insidious argument, because of its self-deprecating humility.

"The point is that the West does tell the Third World all kinds of things, like how to grow more food, how to install telephone and television systems, how to control death and disease. But when it comes to the complementary problem of how to control life and overpopulation, the western liberal conscience 'freezes'.

"This is an unconscious reflection of the Roman Catholic argument, and I hope that humanists, secularists and indeed all thinking people will repudiate it".

Muslim Tyrant Ousted

Christian democracy in the west has lost a valiant ally with the overthrow of General Nimeiri, the American-backed tyrant of Sudan. It was Nimeiri who imposed on the country the strict Islamic legal code under which thousands were imprisoned, tortured and executed.

The most publicised execution was that of a 76-year-old "liberal" Muslim leader, Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, who had been convicted of heresy. His execution was personally sanctioned by Nimeiri, and the old man was harangued at the gallows by a religious fanatic.

Nimeiri's puppet masters in Washington remained strangely silent on the question of human rights in Sudan. And on the very day that two prisoners were publicly mutilated in Khartoum before a cheering crowd of Nimeiri's supporters, he was being feted at 10 Downing Street by Margaret Thatcher.

The Greek Orthodox Church wants the Government in Athens to prohibit the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in schools. An appeal was made by Bishop Nikodimos on behalf of the Holy Synod during a televised service attended by President Karamanlis. The Church recently organised a march on the Parliament building and demanded "an end to atheist teachings in school". It insists that man descended from Adam and Eve.

generosity readers have enabled the paper to reach its 104th birthday this month. Two local humanist groups — Edinburgh and Sutton — are among the latest contributors. We thank them and all those listed below.

M. D. Powell, £1; M. A. Aitchison, W. Aikenhead, T. Cornish, R. J. C. Fennell, N. Gibbard, W. J. Glennie, F. Greenlaw, S. Halley, D. J. Goldstock, I. R. Jones, A. G. Jowett, M. Mephram and F. White, £1.40 each; R. J. Hayne, £2; E. Cecil, E. C. Davis, D. J. Gibbard, A. F. Pendry and N. Stevenson, £2.40 each; N. A. Blyth, £2.80; D. T. Nickson, £3; E. Eadie and C. W. B. Lovett, £3.40 each; F. A. M. Stevenson, £3.90; D. Baker, G. F. Clarke, G. L. J. Lucas, I. Shelat, G. Swan and R. J. M. Tolhurst, £5 each; B. Able, N. C. Baguley, P. Barbour, R. E. Davies, J. G. Hillhouse, H. J. Jakerman, G. S. Mellor, F. J. Pidgeon, G. B. Stowell and R. K. E. Torode, £6.40 each; S. Bonow, £7.30; C. Blakely and Sutton Humanist Group, £10 each; B. A. Burfoot, £11.40; V. Brierley, £20; J. E. Rupp, £21.40; Edinburgh Humanist Group, £25; Anonymous, £35; P. Moon, \$5.80; R. Peterson, \$10.80.

Total for the period 6 March to 3 April: £283.30 and \$16.60.

Freethinker Fund

Ask the leader of any religious sect or pressure group who provides the money and almost certainly the answer will be that it comes from God in answer to prayer. To which there can be only one reply: "Pull the other one"!

No doubt Mary Whitehouse and her cohorts were praying hard that she would win her case against the Independent Broadcasting Authority. (It will be recalled that the IBA had the temerity to allow the screening of a film she did not like.) But the Appeal Court was unmoved by divine urgings and Nanny was landed with a £30,000 bill for legal costs. It was not paid in "pennies from heaven" but with a cheque from an unnamed source.

There is always plenty of money to finance bad causes like censorship, authoritarianism and religious indoctrination. But raising funds to promote "the best of causes"—freethought—has never been easy. *The Freethinker* endeavours to provide an antidote to the superstitious nonsense and mischievous social policies of the churches and their front organisations. We do not expect a cheque for £30,000 in the next post, but by their consistent

Against the Faith

JIM HERRICK

Jim Herrick's *Against the Faith: Some Deists, Sceptics and Atheists* was published on 1 May. It is a history of the enduring conflict between religious dogma and free enquiry, told through the lives of many of the principal participants on the anti-dogmatic side from ancient Greek times down to the present day. The author, who was editor of *The Freethinker* from 1977 to 1981, introduces his new book.

The subject of this book is those who have placed themselves "against the faith", in other words those who have opposed the prevailing religious faith of their time. Such opponents adopt this position for a wide variety of reasons and in many different ways. They are sometimes fiery activists hammering against leaders and leading ideas and at other times are quiet, contemplative sceptics questioning all knowledge and all orthodoxy. They can be immersed in the politics of their time, like Bradlaugh or Thomas Paine. They can be poets like Heine and Shelley, historians like Gibbon, playwrights like Büchner, or novelists like George Eliot and Mark Twain. They may be scientists like Huxley, or philosophers like J. S. Mill. They may be most at home on the public platform, like Ingersoll, or in the study like Pierre Bayle. They can be relaxed men of the world like Hume or temperamental outsiders like d'Holbach. They may lead quiet and little known lives like the freethinker Collins or the clergyman Meslier, or they may be outstanding polymaths of their age, like Voltaire or Bertrand Russell.

This book covers deists, sceptics and atheists. Without attempting to be comprehensive, I have tried to show that there is a spectrum between the three. There has often been close contact between deists, who gently criticize the Christian faith, sceptics who question all knowledge, and atheists, who detach themselves from any belief in God. Occasionally individuals have held all these positions at different periods of their lives. Furthermore the distinction sometimes made between the respectable philosophic sceptic and the disreputable agitating atheist is not clear-cut: philosophers sometimes agitate and frequently rub shoulders with activists and reformers and campaigners often think quite deeply.

Since this book in the main covers Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the faith opposed is Christianity. A history of opponents to Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism would provide fascinating parallels, but that book has yet to be written. It is a mistake—and one to which opponents are particularly prone—to imagine the "faith" as a monolithic entity, rather than an accumulation of

various traditions. There can therefore be opposition to the faith from within as well as without and heresy and heterodoxy have sometimes been not far apart. (The road from Luther to humanism is a direct one.)

Between an introductory background sketch and some concluding general considerations on the twentieth century, I have chosen a number of individuals and clusters of individuals who illustrate the variety of personalities and range of ideas within the freethought, rationalist, humanist perspective. (The three adjectives have different emphases, but much in common.) I also hope that the selection provides a history of the development of this strand of thought, although neither complete nor exhaustive. My own interests have to some extent dictated the choice, but there are three ways in which I have deliberately limited myself. I omitted Darwin, Freud and Marx, about whom tomes have been written, since, while their thought indirectly undermines Christianity, they took the decline of religion for granted and the greater part of their work covered issues other than religion. I did not include the anti-clerical tradition, particularly in France and Italy, since this seems to me to be largely primed by political and economic motives rather than general philosophical considerations. I did not concentrate upon those whose anti-religious reflections led them to nihilistic and pessimistic conclusions (the most obvious omission here being Nietzsche) since the freethought-humanist tradition is essentially an optimistic one, allied to purposeful social reform.

Certain general directions in the history of freethought opposition to religion have fascinated me. I was interested in what Lecky called "the declining sense of the miraculous", the removal of mystery from religion, which led to the abandonment of belief in miracles and supernatural events. This was accompanied by a move to a naturalistic picture of the universe, associated with the Renaissance emphasis on man and the rise of a scientific world picture. At first pantheists and deists saw the world of nature as essentially ordered and benevolent. Later such a perspective was superseded by a depiction of the cosmos as random and impersonal, and confident atheism and anguished agnosticism succeeded polite deism. Another interest was the transition from belief in a God mediated by revelation, or by the authority of priest and sacred book, to belief authenticated by individual interpretation and individual conscience. A further concern was the way in which unbelievers, contrary to the accusations made against them by the faithful, were anxious to create a morality based on truth for its own sake and the golden rule of reciprocity, rather than divine punishment and obedience to a divine code. A changing view of man's place in time led to

the development of the historical perspective: history as the unfolding of God's divine plan or even as a source-book of moral fables gave way to an attempt to understand the nature of society and of change within it. This meant that the historical accuracy of religious claims came into question and the history of religion began to be looked at from the point of view of the function it served in explaining the unexplained and in giving cohesion to society or power to particular groups. Since Christianity has held a position of power in European society, opposition to its beliefs has often also involved opposition to the alliance between "kingcraft and priestcraft"—to use Paine's famous phrase. Social reform also becomes a theme in writing about those who prefer an emphasis on the human to the transcendent. Much of the book concerns the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the philosophical radicalism of the nineteenth century.

I do not wish to disguise my personal sympathy for those "against the faith", but I hope that this strand of history will be of interest to people of many persuasions. Although "progress" is a word much used by many of the figures in this book, I have tried to avoid painting a picture of a steady progress from the dark hegemony of religious domination to the enlightened heterodoxy of the humanist reformer—to caricature a freethought view. History is more complicated, the twentieth century has given a jolt to views of progress, and the human story has (we hope) many more chapters. I recognize the limitations of the optimistic belief in the power of reason to solve all problems: I do not underestimate the fact that the emotions of love, joy, wonder and excitement are an essential part of a complete human life. Nevertheless I do believe that the idea of progress has some meaning. Most people no longer doubt that drains are better than ditches, that satellite weather forecasts are better than horoscopes, that problem solving is better than prayer, that meditation is more useful as a means of relaxation than as a route to another plane of existence. I also hope that the continuous inequality, injustice and unhappiness of the human condition can be modified, if not eliminated, by social reform. That, I will be told, is my "faith". Perhaps. But I doubt whether it is the prevailing orthodoxy of our time.

The chapter titles of *Against the Faith* are as follows:

1. **Pierre Bayle and Jean Meslier: Open Scepticism and Covert Atheism.**
2. **The English Deists: Removing the Mystery From God.**
3. **Voltaire: "Ecrasez l' Infâme".**
4. **Diderot and the Encyclopedists: The Mastery of Knowledge.**
5. **D'Holbach: "Raining Bombs on the House of the Lord".**

6. **David Hume: The Saintly Infidel.**
7. **Gibbon: The Decline of God's Historic Role.**
8. **Thomas Paine: The Age of Reason.**
9. **Heine and Büchner: Atheism and Revolution.**
10. **Shelley and Carline: Printing Against the Creed.**
11. **Bradlaugh and Secularism: The Province of the Real.**
12. **John Stuart Mill and George Eliot: A Religion of Humanity.**
13. **Thomas Huxley: Religion and Science.**
14. **Emerson, Ingersoll, Twain: Three Secular Preachers.**
15. **Bertrand Russell: A Passionate Rationalist.**

JIM HERRICK

AGAINST THE FAITH

SOME DEISTS, SCEPTICS
AND ATHEISTS

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A church leader in Northern Ireland told the annual general meeting of his Vestry last month that he was horrified by a statement that appeared in *The Freethinker*. The Rev Dr J. C. Combe, Rector of St Mark's Parish Church, Armagh, was referring to the sentence: "The supreme tragedy is that Christian malignancy has ravished generations of Irish people" (Blight on the Shamrock, March issue). He asked his parishioners: "Whenever we read an indictment like that, can we do otherwise than fall down on our knees and implore God's forgiveness?" Dr Combe added: "The really hurtful thing about this scathing comment, 'Christian malignancy', is that it contains a substantial element of truth".

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A Preface to the Preface

T. F. EVANS

The 100th edition of the Church of England Year Book has recently appeared. As usual, there is an anonymous Preface in which the events of the year are considered. Delays are unavoidable in a work of reference of this kind, so the year under review, 1983, must seem a little out of date. With the object of giving the comments in the Year Book a more contemporary note, its editor invited (or might have invited) our contributor, T. F. Evans, to present some thoughts of his own.

The Preface begins with comments of a domestic nature, including references to changes in several high positions, notably that of Archbishop of York. It continues with a passage on Church and Nation. This is concerned with what is called "the Bomb debate" in the General Synod. Among other fascinating items, it records that Mr John Selwyn Gummer, MP, chairman of the Conservative Party, contributed to the debate "by supporting the Thatcher position 'in a well-argued and powerfully delivered speech' ". According to the *Year Book* editor, "the Synod accepted the 'no first strike' principle without really going into its implications". Moreover, "the significance of accepting was that it enabled the Synod to reflect its unease about the Government's policies without having to go to the unilateralist extreme".

In spite of the equivocal nature of such words, the editor is convinced that the Synod has a special responsibility to comment on immediate public issues, precisely because the Church of England is the Established Church. There are those who think, with or without malice, that the position of an Established Church enjoins upon it the responsibility neither to comment nor to criticise, but simply to support.

Moreover, when the same Mr John Selwyn Gummer rebukes the bishops, as he does frequently and not always in speeches that impress all listeners and readers as "well-argued and powerfully delivered", he is speaking as more than a mere debater but as an aggrieved owner who is surprised when a pet parrot reveals a mind and opinions of its own.

There is great historical interest in reading that the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther was celebrated in 1983, with the fascinating reminder that it was for his stand against Lutheranism that "Henry VII acquired for the Monarchy the title Defender of the Faith". It must make the coins of the realm burn holes in honest Anglican pockets when their owners reflect that the letters F.D. stand for a distinction conferred by the Pope of Rome. There are references, too, to the 150th anniversary of Keble's Oxford Assize Sermon "which

triggered off the Oxford Movement". Nevertheless, these facts can hardly be said to be of everyday interest in 1985 when, as Ludovic Kennedy reminded us in his recent Voltaire Memorial Lecture: "Statistics since the turn of the century show a continually dwindling number of baptisms, confirmations, communicants and clergy, and one has only to use one's eyes to observe the number of city churches that have been turned into warehouses, dwelling-places or bingo halls, and the number of country churches where services have either ceased or are held but occasionally".

What the present-day reader has the right to expect is some indication of the advice that the Church of England may have to offer to the Government, and indeed to the entire community, on some of the serious social problems which now confront us. Truth to tell, the Preface has very little to offer. There is a note of pride in the fact—if fact it be—that the Synod recently excelled in "its handling of public issues, tending to justify the gibe of 'the SDP at prayer' ". If this is so, it is not clear that it is wholly to the credit of the Church.

It is, of course, far better that the Church should not be thought still to represent the Tory Party at prayer because, as even some Tories are prepared to admit, such a formulation indicates strongly an identification of the Church with the more comfortable and complacent elements in society. The SDP, of course, includes many who oppose such an identification. Yet among the wide range of diverse views that make up the "policy" of the SDP, an opposition to the Tories is accompanied by a dislike of the smell of the working classes, and particularly of the trade unions.

It has been gratifying to read in the more recent past that the Bishop of Durham has drawn attention to what he considers are the increasingly divisive effects of the Government's economic policies and the tendency towards a police State in which the wealthy are protected against the growing numbers of the poor and dispossessed. It is good that there should be some bishops who are prepared to say such things, even if not everyone will agree wholly with all the sentiments of this particular cleric.

There is little evidence in the *Year Book* Preface that the wider social problems really occupy the collective and official mind of the Church. There is a word of congratulation for the appointment of "the first woman to hold senior judicial office in the Church", but the reader will look in vain for any serious comment on problems of sexual equality and discrimination on grounds of sex, race, colour or creed.

It is clear that there are some stirrings, and these are warmly welcomed, in thoughts about "the

problems, secular and ecclesiastical, of urban areas—areas of blight, deprivation and disadvantage”. An Urban Priorities Commission is looking at this problem, and it is thought that the findings, when made public, will “provide the Church, if it so wishes, with the opportunity to release resources and mobilise energies for better directed and more effective witness both in service to the whole community and in the proclamation of the Gospel”. It is hard to quarrel with such unexceptionable sentiments, so blandly expressed, but there are hints of combined caution and even menace in “if it so wishes”.

As a tentative conclusion, it may be suggested that the Church of England would have two possible choices. It can continue to worry about points of doctrine—the truth or otherwise of the supernatural element in its beliefs—or it can strengthen its claim to be the conscience of the entire community.

It is unlikely to succeed wholly on either path. The latter is, however, relevant to the needs of the time. If it does not go along that path, the Church of England's future is uncertain. It may remain Established, but it will not be firmly based in the

life of the community. Indeed it could find itself under increasing threat.

We cannot blind ourselves to the fact that numbers of what were thought to be solid edifices of the British “way of life” are passing into non-British ownership. To name only a few: *The Times*, Harrods, the Dorchester and some hospitals are now in non-British hands. Many of our large corporations have passed into private hands or will shortly do so. Private buyers can easily become private sellers, and there are Americans, Australians, Japanese, Egyptians, Koreans and many others waiting to grab the rich pickings that could result from the present outburst of “privatisation”.

Is there any reason why that great and wealthy corporation, the Church of England, should be exempt from developments which, we are told, are infusing new life-blood into the economy? St Paul's Cathedral, privately owned and managed, could do wonders for the tourist trade.

These and allied problems will no doubt occupy the Synod in future, and we hope to have the opportunity of commenting on the resulting deliberations and reports.

The Empty Tomb and the Origin of Christianity

STEUART CAMPBELL

Body Missing — Reports of Resurrection! So might a popular Jerusalem tabloid for 17 Nisan 3793 (CE 33) have described the disappearance of Jesus. It might have continued:

Jesus bar Joseph, leader of the Nazarenes, was arrested early on Friday morning in the Garden of Gethsemane by a squad of Temple police accompanied by Roman troops from the Antonia garrison. He was interrogated by the High Priests and later tried by the Governor on a charge of sedition (claiming to be The Blessed). Unaccountably he condemned himself by admitting the charge and was sentenced to death by crucifixion, the penalty being enacted the same day. Because of the Passover, he, and others, had to be despatched quickly, but it was found that he was dead already! He was buried by Councillors Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, and put, temporarily, in Joseph's own tomb, which was sealed on the eve of Sabbath. However, early yesterday it was found that the tomb was open, and empty, and there are unconfirmed reports that he has been seen alive! He had prophesied that he would rise again from the dead.

So Christianity began, but, as the Bishop of Durham has pointed out (to the acute embarrassment of the Church of England), an empty tomb is not proof of resurrection, although, perversely, he still believes that Jesus was resurrected.

Since the Gospels are propaganda they cannot be relied upon to tell us what happened, but it is likely that they contain historical fragments. The problem

is to distinguish between propaganda and truth. Occam's Razor was devised to deal with such problems; it tells us to prefer the simplest hypothesis unless the data force a more complicated one.

There are those who believe that the story of the empty tomb is an invention devised to explain later reports of Jesus' appearance in Galilee. However, this does not seem to be the simplest hypothesis; there are too many indications in the Gospels that Jesus planned to be arrested, that he expected to suffer crucifixion, and that he expected to rise again. Essential to such a programme was preservation of his body in a secure tomb. As Hugh Schonfield long ago pointed out, there are signs of a plot to enable Jesus to survive crucifixion. That there was a tomb and that it was found to be empty is consistent with other internal evidence which makes no sense if there was no tomb. In this case the simplest explanation must be that the body was removed by “person or persons unknown”; after all the door of the tomb was left open.

So who took the body? It must have been natural for the priests to blame the disciples and the record to this effect is surely historical. Yet how were the priests to spread this account if the theft had not

(continued on back page)

BOOKS

THE CASE AGAINST GOD, by Gerald Priestland.
Collins, £4.95

Maybe I am not the best person to review this book, because I find Gerald Priestland's radio chatsports so unctuous and fatuously condescending that he is easily my most unfavourite godbothering windbag. Perhaps, though, he writes more sensitively and intelligently than he talks? And *The Case Against God*, reminiscent of that intellectually rigorous exposition of *Atheism: The Case Against God* by George H. Smith (Prometheus Books) of which Priestland, typically, doesn't appear to have heard, holds out interesting possibilities.

I was, however, disappointed (or not, as the case may be). This is a thoroughly meretricious book. Priestland has devised "a daring new approach to the question of God's existence", gushes his publishers' blurb. "In the guise of devil's advocate . . . he takes very seriously the claims that God may be a delusion and faith an elaborate game of wish-fulfilment".

He doesn't, though. What he does is to carry out an ostensibly impartial inquiry that's loaded against his godless "witnesses" from the start, discounting their opinions and patronising them in his artlessly contemptuous way for their lack of a spiritual dimension, whilst siding, regardless of the lack of solid evidence they can produce, with the believers in assorted faiths with whom he talked.

Priestland gives his game away on the first page of his introduction. "I have approached [the question of God's existence], rather aggressively, as the case *against* God for several reasons but primarily because I think it is the best way of showing the case *for* Him. I do not want the reader to think, however" (he adds disingenuously). "that the case has been rigged from the start". Well, this reader did, for one.

Why? Because Priestland doesn't define what he (or anyone else) means by "God". He can't, of course: God is, by definition, indefinable. Inscrutable and incomprehensible, too, because his purposes are unfathomable by mere mortals such as you and me—and Priestland. Priestland does, it's true, mention some of the classic objections to traditional Christian concepts of God, such as the irreconcilable contradiction between his omnipotence and his benevolence, but he doesn't add to one's understanding of the ways believers contrive to gloss over such awkwardnesses, or persuade me, at any rate, that belief is more rewarding than rejection of the whole intellectually shoddy bag of tricks. He simply ties himself up in inconsistencies and fallacies of which he usually seems sublimely unaware. In the end, he solemnly assures us, "it is the Communion of Saints that convinces us that God exists".

If this is the best that a journalistically

FREETHINKER

experienced religious populariser can do, the once rigorous profession of Apologetics has fallen into a pretty decrepit state.

ANTONY GREY

FREEDOM AND MORALITY and OTHER ESSAYS,
by A. J. Ayer. Oxford University Press, £15

Philosophers write for philosophers; it is a necessary part of our modern professionalism. Why should anyone else read their books? Many/most will not. But thoughtful people want to think, need to think, and everyone tries, however feebly, to improve his game. Is it the traditional problems of philosophy, which a hundred generations of philosophers have discussed ingeniously and inconclusively, that bother thoughtful people? Probably not; but if they want to make sense of the world about them, sooner or later they are forced to face some of them. Mervyn Jones, who comments on Radio for *The Listener*, said about the Reith Lectures, Professor John Searle's "Minds, Brains and Science": "Not being a scientist or a philosopher, I base my ideas on science and philosophy on commonsense as I conceive it, but don't hold them with impregnable confidence. When told by a thinker of repute that commonsense has got it wrong, I'm grateful to him for extending my horizons. I wasn't grateful to Searle for telling me at length that commonsense is right because we all think it is, and in particular that we have free will because we think we have free will. There must be more to this intricate and endlessly debated problem than that—but not, apparently, to the Professor of Philosophy at Berkeley".

Professor Ayer would certainly think that this is the reasonable attitude of an intelligent person. On free will, he allows commonsense its share, but discriminates kinds of determination and kinds of choice. It is this close discrimination that is the main characteristic of philosophy, as an unusually persistent attempt to think clearly. There are philosophers and philosophers, but with Professor Ayer there is nothing to prevent the ordinary thoughtful person from reading him with profit, no technical alienation, even though what he is dealing with most of the time is what other philosophers have said.

The title of the book is too dominant, and therefore misleading. It refers to the first three essays, which are bracketed and run to 50 pages in 177. The other topics have to do with perception, causality, self-evidence, Ryle's *Concept of Mind*, and Wittgenstein on Certainty. The last chapter is his account of

REVIEWS

the Vienna Circle. A great deal of this is concerned with a proper distribution of what belongs to the nature of things and what to our ordering of them in preconceptions and projections, which are necessary but not necessarily justified.

The close reasoning of these pages is sinuous and subtle, but not technical. Although the argument has been prepared and thought through, one feels the pulse of the thinking and not that one is being sold a product. What is developed is a climate of thought in which questions can be reopened or second thoughts offered, so that what is arrived at in revision remains provisional, but is not left to be endlessly inconclusive. If there are untidy ends or unsatisfactory conclusions, so be it, if that is the way things seem to be—at present. So that if these essays are chips from Ayer's workshop, they are samples of his candour and openness, representative enough to offer entrance into the world of contemporary philosophical thinking.

The prize of the collection is in the last chapter on the Vienna Circle. This famous fertile school was the exciting formative influence on his own early thinking. Gilbert Ryle, his tutor, arranged for him to go there for a spell after graduation, before he began his lecture courses. He gives an account of its background and antecedents in connexion with Ernst Mach and William James. There follow descriptions of the prominent personalities in the Circle, with their ideas and preoccupations, and footnotes on the fate of both men and ideas. His own first book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 1936, was generally regarded at the time as a brash statement of Logical Positivism, perhaps an attempt to popularize the classical position of the Vienna Circle, with its outright rejection of Metaphysics and its reliance on logical analysis to solve all genuine philosophical problems. These essays are evidence of less blithe confidence, of the more empirical and piecemeal approach to problems, readier to illuminate than to announce definitive solutions, which in general has succeeded the first phase of Logical Positivism. Commonsense is given a constitutional position. But Ayer is still willing to be called a logical positivist. He concludes: "But their spirit still triumphs. A strain of what I can best describe as woolly uplift was banished from philosophy—I daren't say never to return, that would be too optimistic—but where it survives or reappears, it has at least to face criticism of a keenness which we owe very largely to those heroes of my youth". The implication may not be fully fair to the generation of Idealist philosophers (Kantian or Hegelian) who succeeded

the long domination of the Utilitarians in this country, the generation influential in forming the Ethical Movement—on the autonomy of ethics, which Ayer acknowledges. In most cases, the texture of their reasoning is far from woolly. It is not philosophy that determines one's temperament and the bent of one's mind: rather, the reverse. And in this readers of *The Freethinker* stand without doubt with Professor Ayer.

H. J. BLACKHAM

Londoners will have another opportunity to see the Royal Shakespeare Company production of Harley Granville Barker's rarely performed play, *Waste*, which transfers from the Barbican to the Lyric Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, for a strictly limited run (24 May to 27 July). Reviewing the production in *The Freethinker* (March), Jim Herrick described *Waste* as "a truly remarkable play . . . that revolves around the issue of disestablishment". Judi Dench and Daniel Massey will continue in the leading roles, and the play is directed by John Barton.

A Fable

Once upon a time an old and battered pewter pot fell into a river along with other rubbish that had been left on the bank. It sank to the bottom and settled into the mud. Over many years the pot gradually filled with a fine silt that drifted down the river with the movement of the water. In time the silt filled every nook and cranny and every indentation of the old patterns that had been hammered into the pewter by the craftsman who had made it.

From time to time a swirl in the water would knock a pebble against the pot. The almost imperceptible vibration caused the silt to settle even more snugly so that after many eons the very molecules on the surface of the silt matched closely with those on the surface of the pewter almost as if they were part of the same substance.

One day the piece of sedimentary rock, for that is what it had become, took stock of itself and of its environment. It saw that every hollow and every bulge in its own form, however minute, married perfectly with the corresponding projection or indentation in the pewter pot and it said to itself: "What a wonderful artist was the man who made this protective cover to fit me so perfectly. Only someone with infinite knowledge could so comprehend both the complexities of my being and the nature of my protecting cover. He must therefore be someone very like me".

MICHAEL DUANE

The Case Against the Case Against Euthanasia

BARBARA SMOKER

Last month we published Karl Heath's article against euthanasia legislation. Mr Heath is a humanist, and in this article is answered by another humanist who is chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society.

In his article, *The Case Against Euthanasia Legislation*, Karl Heath raises as many non-existent bogeys as a medieval monk.

After a superfluous side swipe at abortion (saying that, while acknowledging an individual's right to choose, he regards it as "a messy alternative to contraception" — with which no one, surely, would disagree), Mr Heath goes on to dismiss the word "voluntary" in the phrase "voluntary euthanasia" as itself superfluous, since, unless euthanasia were voluntary, it would be "murder, manslaughter, capital punishment or war". Not so. There is such a thing as non-voluntary, as well as involuntary, euthanasia. What about infant euthanasia, for instance? That has to be non-voluntary, since it is obviously impossible for a new-born baby to make any such decision on its own behalf.

But Mr Heath's main argument is that legalising euthanasia would give the State "terrifying new powers over the lives of its citizens". If this were indeed the case, no one would be more opposed to legalising euthanasia than I — but the true effect would in fact be just the reverse. The present law involves the State, in that it denies people the right to die when they wish to do so for good reasons. What the advocates of voluntary euthanasia seek, by merely *permissive* legislation, is to remove this State interference with personal choice.

An analogy is the homosexual law reform of 1967. Far from increasing State involvement in this personal matter, that permissive change in the law has largely eliminated the monstrous police harassment to which gays used to be subject. Nor has it proved to be "the thin end of the wedge", as Mr Heath so illogically prophesies for legalised euthanasia. I have yet to hear that heterosexuals are being forced by the State into homosexual activities!

Mr Heath points to laws which have been extended by governmental re-interpretation to bring in practices which were not envisaged when the relevant statutes were first passed. But these were all laws that increased governmental powers, whereas the proposed euthanasia legislation would restrict them. So it would require a different law altogether — one that the Voluntary Euthanasia Society would neither sponsor nor support — to legalise involuntary euthanasia (of the old, handicapped, etc.).

When the Nazis introduced "euthanasia" (as they

erroneously termed it) on an involuntary basis, this was not an extension of any existing law that had previously allowed voluntary euthanasia. On the contrary, voluntary euthanasia was illegal throughout the period of the Third Reich. Hitler disapproved of it strongly — presumably because it smacks too much of personal freedom.

Paradoxically, the main effect of the present law is to ensure that most of the euthanasia now carried out — and we know that euthanasia (active as well as passive) is widespread in this country — is either involuntary or non-voluntary, for the law naturally makes doctors fearful of raising the question with their patients so as to ascertain their wishes. (In a statistical national opinion poll of doctors carried out in 1965, 76.2 per cent agreed with the statement that "Some medical men do in fact help their patients over the last hurdle in order to save them unnecessary suffering, even if that involves some curtailment of life". It would now be higher still.) The plain fact of the matter is that the only alternative to involuntary euthanasia is not a total ban on euthanasia, as at present, but the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia.

Karl Heath talks about "entrusting euthanasia powers to it" (the Government) as though he envisages ministers of the crown, rather than members of the medical profession, administering drugs or giving intravenous injections!

Another red herring is his argument that many elderly people, while not wanting to die, might feel they ought to request euthanasia if it were legal, because they think they are not wanted or fear they are a burden on others. Sick people ought not to be in the care of relatives who do not want them, and society at large should be able to relieve any such burden by increasing the availability of community support, domiciliary nursing, sheltered housing, hospice care, and hospital beds — all of which would, in any case, automatically become more available if so many of the resources were not taken up by people who would genuinely prefer to die than linger on, however good the standard of care provided for them may be. In order to be genuinely voluntary, the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia must obviously entail adequate social services for the sick and elderly — and the euthanasia movement emphasises this very strongly.

Finally, Mr Heath's contention that such people could well "arrange their private suicides, informally, without involving the State" overlooks the fact that the present law of the State actually prevents many of them from doing so, by rendering anyone who provides them with assistance in the act (even

with mere advice as to what would be a lethal dose of a particular drug) guilty of a criminal offence (under section 2 of the Suicide Act 1961) that carries a penalty of up to 14 years' imprisonment.

This means that, while the Suicide Act allows physically fit people to take their own lives, it denies the same right to those who are unable to obtain the means to do so, or are, say, physically incapable of lifting a glass to their lips, or are even totally paralysed. For this very reason, every year there are many premature suicides by people who, having (or fearing they may have) degenerative illnesses, know that if they delay too long they will no longer be in control of their own destiny. Besides, why should anyone who takes his or her own life be forced to die in isolation from others, for fear of incriminating them? And even for the most able and knowledgeable, suicide can fail: an elderly woman doctor who took what she judged to be a lethal dose succeeded

only in causing further damage to herself. The only certain, quick, and painless method requires someone else to administer an injection and monitor its effect.

• To mark its Golden Jubilee this year, the Voluntary Euthanasia Society commissioned National Opinion Polls to conduct a survey on attitudes to voluntary euthanasia. The question asked was the same as in a poll conducted in 1976: "Some people say that the law should allow adults to receive medical help to an immediate peaceful death if they suffer from an incurable physical illness that is intolerable to them, provided that they have previously requested such help in writing. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with this?" Of those who declared themselves Church of England, 75 per cent were in favour, while 54 per cent of Roman Catholics agreed. Atheists were 89 per cent in favour.

LETTERS

CHRISTIANS AND APARTHEID

As a Humanist and a Liberal I must air my opinion that your article on "Christians and Apartheid" in your January issue (which has only just reached me) is unfortunate to put it as mildly as I can, and will do the cause of liberalism in South Africa a disservice.

First you say "...the majority of white Christians in the country who wholeheartedly support the repressive measures used by the Nationalist regime to maintain white supremacy." You choose to neglect to point out that 60 per cent of white South Africans are Afrikaans-speaking and only 40 per cent English-speaking, more or less because there are small minorities of Greeks, Portuguese, German and so on many of whom also support apartheid. Of the 60 per cent Afrikaans-speaking whites many support the Government because they are Nationalists, not because they are a specific brand of Christians.

You also choose to neglect to mention that there are many Afrikaans-speaking South Africans who are profound Liberals — our Opposition Leader, Frederick van Zyl Slabbert is one of many Liberal Afrikaners whom I know personally; our Afrikaans poet, Uys Krige, another. Perhaps I should also list heart surgeon Christian Barnard.

It is, of course, true that the strength of the National Party comes from the bulk of Afrikanerdom, plus a goodly support from the English-speaking community and other white minority groups. But that support is not absolutely monolithic and there are liberal elements there too. These are increasingly making their views known which, in South Africa, often takes some courage — as does an admission of humanist philosophy.

The 60-40 ratio of Afrikaans to English is also a factor in your statement that "...an analysis of crime statistics in South Africa shows that the greatest amount of violence against black people is inflicted by the strongly Christian Afrikaans section of the population".

I should like to see your statement "Afrikaans clergymen and policemen are the worst offenders"

against the "across-the-colour-bar" sexual relationship Act substantiated and set in its proper context. It is because they are what they are that they are more newsworthy, in such circumstances, and therefore tend to hit the headlines more than the ordinary bloke, especially in the opposition press. But can it be statistically shewn to be true? Also, please note that there is a very strong movement afoot at the moment to repeal this legislation among the Nationalists themselves.

To say that the Afrikaans clergy and police "spend half their lives braying about God's plan for the separation of the races and fulminating about the evils of liberalism and communism; and the other half assaulting blacks or devising means of humiliating them" is so much emotive poppy-cock! They spend about one third of their lives, just like the rest of us, sleeping. And, make no mistake about it, a big proportion of the other two thirds in downright hard work because the Afrikaner, whatever his other faults, is an industrious and diligent worker. And of course a lot of his life is devoted to rugby! This kind of stupid, uninformed and one-sided reporting does no-one any good.

I bear no banner for apartheid: it is anathema to me as to many other South Africans, white, brown and black, but your kind of "helpful" criticism we can do without because you obviously have no real insight into the problem in South Africa or into the minds and spirits of the people, black, brown and white who make up our population.

PETER van WERMESKERKAN

NO ATTACK

Rita Craft's letter (March) on the alleged anti-feminism of the editor sent me scurrying to peruse again page 20 before I gave the issue away. I found the paragraphs informative and the language restrained. I failed to notice any attack, warranted or otherwise. May I suggest that the editor was merely exercising his function as an observer and writer?

Let us hope that he can continue to rely on the support of readers.

HAROLD I. BAYFORD

NEGATIVE, BELLIGERENT, OFFENSIVE

After the torrent of criticism aimed at Leslie Scrase (Letters, March), I would appreciate the opportunity of saying a word in his favour.

Mr Scrase has every right to his opinion that The Freethinker tends to be negative and belligerent, a view which is shared by many people I have met. I think that we must accept that some people just do find The Freethinker and its attitude offensive. No magazine can cater for all tastes. Personally I find it a bit narrow and a bit critical at times but I feel that the good outweighs the bad. So I remain an avid reader.

Nevertheless I, like Mr Scrase, wish The Freethinker would not harp so on the black side of religion when there is also a good side to be seen. The impression given is that all religion is bad and all atheism is good. Would The Freethinker ever publish stories like mine, of how my childhood and my life were wrecked by cruel atheist parents and of the scores of kind, caring, sincere religious people I met after I was grown up? I suspect not.

Why is it that so many people seem to resent Mr Scrase's ability and desire to understand the opposite point of view? F. R. Evans and Wyn Lewis in particular seem anxious that we should "wage relentless war", and although their use of the word "war" is no doubt figurative, it does indicate an angry and intolerant attitude towards those who do not share their views. Humanists can be just as bigoted as the religious people they so freely criticise.

What is so wrong with Mr Scrase's wish to find common ground with religious people? Most of what is wrong with the world today stems from the inability of people of differing beliefs to cooperate for the common good. Humanists should be setting an example. No doubt Mr Evans and Mr Lewis will not understand or support the venture which is about to take place in Swansea (in their group and mine), which involves Humanists and Unitarians (the dreaded "enemy") cooperating to raise money for the Third World. I suspect it is this kind of venture which Mr Scrase has in mind—and why not?

Finally, Mr Evans and Mr Lewis are so scathing about the British Humanist Association and its wish to find common ground, stating that the BHA has had "no conspicuous success". Have these gentlemen not yet heard of the unprecedented success the BHA has had in getting humanism accepted in many parts of the country as part of the education system? It is easy to criticise something you don't understand. Yet I do not notice the BHA rushing to be negative and critical of The Freethinker. They obviously realise it is better to try and get on with other people and other organisations.

GEORGINA COUPLAND

THE GOOD THINGS IN CHRISTIANITY

I can understand the pain Brian Parry suffers as a result of the misguided attitudes of some Christians to homosexuality (Letters, March). I must confess that I was surprised and saddened to find the Archbishop of Canterbury among their number since he is normally a very humane person.

When Popes or Archbishops speak, there is justification in assuming that their attitudes are representative of their denomination. The same is not true of Councillor Collett of Rugby. For an authoritative Methodist view of homosexuality you need to check on the pronouncements of the Methodist Conference or the Christian Citizenship Department of that Church. It will be found that they are less misguided and intolerant than the views of many other Christians.

The generality of Christians are as embarrassed by people like Councillor Collett and Ian Paisley as we are hostile.

The only other letter I wish to comment on is that of H. D. Corbishley since he so blatantly distorts my share in the evening at the Ealing Humanist Association. He states that my talk was on the "character" of Jesus. It was not. He states that when I "was challenged with the Wellsite findings that even Jesus's historicity is in doubt", I "rejected this out of hand and refused to discuss the matter". In fact, I paid tribute to the scholarship of G. A. Wells, but pointed out that he was not the only scholar to have examined the evidence for the historicity of Jesus. I said that my own view was that a human being called Jesus had lived and the New Testament contains what is known of his life and teaching. If Mr Corbishley had listened to what I had to say, instead of merely picking out the bits he disliked, he would have heard as much in criticism of the contents of the gospels as there was in praise.

Mr Corbishley has every right to accuse me of intolerance. Those who know me will judge whether it is a fair accusation. If he were closer to Christians of the present day he would find that they do not cling to the 39 Articles and so on. We shall not move them further away from these things and towards our own position by becoming intolerant ourselves, nor by shouting as loud as Ian Paisley. If humanism is to commend itself to Christians or to any others who are not humanists, it will be because humanists themselves are worth knowing as people, and because their position is carefully thought out, reasonable and willing to recognise those good things which other teachings contain.

LESLIE SCRASE
Editor, The Humanist Theme

A BUDDHIST'S VIEWPOINT

The correspondence in The Freethinker on Humanism: Secular or otherwise, is serving a useful purpose if it continues to expose conditioned Christian attitudes and sentiments still lurking within the humanist movement in Britain, or anywhere else for that matter.

That Christianity is, and always has been, inimical to individual human growth and development must make it one of the greatest evils ever to have befallen humanity. For any person to make claims on behalf of a divine authority, or to claim divine intervention, or to subscribe to any theistic doctrine whatsoever, is needlessly imposing upon themselves, and others too, unfortunately, a restricted world view, besides devaluing the uniqueness of human life itself. As a Buddhist I am therefore happy to join with the secularists in pointing out the futility of embarking upon any dialogue with Christians. How, one may ask, is it possible for lions to talk to sheep?

I would also point out that Buddhism is not a religion in the generally accepted sense of that term. Its many practices and teachings have only one purpose; that of encouraging all individuals, with full self-awareness, and under the best possible conditions, to continue the process of evolution far, far beyond what we have become today.

BUDDHADASA
(Who Needs a Christian Name?)

CHRISTIANITY A DELUSION

I agree with all the letters in your March issue defending what Leslie Scrase calls the "negative and belligerent" policy of The Freethinker. I would like to challenge his claim that "Where religion is concerned

EVENTS

we need to draw a distinction between being critical and being hostile". What gives him that strange idea?

All religions, especially Christianity, are based on ignorance and fear. It requires the chumps who believe in it to close their eyes to reality and degrade themselves by worshipping a supernatural Big Brother whose alleged existence is an insult to our intelligence. Christianity requires believers to delude themselves into imagining that death will not be the end of them but that they will somehow be rewarded with Eternal Life in a cloud-cuckoo land of bodyless people, and to make that dream world attractive priests drivel about another fantasy realm in which non-believers will suffer.

Religion is as harmful as it is absurd. Its influence in all fields of human activity is pernicious. All gods are myths. Religion is anti-democratic, anti-Socialist and anti-working class, for by wasting their time with gods, angels and other intellectual rubbish, people deny themselves progress in the real world. Except, of course, the con-men who claim to be chosen by a god to spread his word, and thereby become rich by exploiting the gullibility of people whose lack of knowledge of atheism makes them vulnerable to that deception.

Hostility is the only rational attitude one can have to the costly superstition that is religion.

DAVID SHAW

DIFFERENT ROLES—SAME AIMS

I was interested to read the response engendered by Leslie Scrase's letter in the January issue. May I take up some of the points made by him, and other correspondents, about the British Humanist Association. I have been a member for 20 years or so, and in all that time I've been convinced, and still am, that I belong to an anti-religious organisation.

Of course our two organisations are, and should be different. It would make little sense for the BHA to try to be a pale copy of the National Secular Society and The Freethinker. From your early beginnings you have followed the straight path of direct confrontation with clarity and consistency, and also with humour. Long may you continue to do so!

The BHA on the other hand, has a different ancestry. I suppose you could say we started on the path of reform, rather than confrontation. So our path has often been far from straight. For reasons I won't go into now, it had almost reached a dead end at the end of the 1970s. However, we are beginning to come through again, and what we need now is constructive help and encouragement. We also need consensus action.

The one thing that did keep going throughout the Seventies was our "dialogue" with various bodies concerned with religious and moral education. Rightly, in my view, the BHA had decided that the only way that children at school were going to be properly educated, was if they heard our views. And ten years ago, the only way we saw of achieving that was to get ourselves a place in the religious education syllabus. Much as we may shudder at hearing humanism mentioned alongside a list of religions, we have to be pragmatic—at present that's the only slot we've got. The endless hours of "dialogue" are beginning to pay. The study of non-theistic life-stances is now included in the syllabus of at least thirteen education authorities. The ILEA has gone further and includes humanism. Three more have invited humanists onto their Syllabus Conferences. Those humanists involved in this "dialogue" have not had an easy time. There was no cosy meeting of minds. They've had to fight for every word, and still aren't turn their backs on their achievements. They know these are still far from being secure.

I agree with Colin Mills when he says that we should

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, 2 June, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Janet Sly: The Green View of Peace.

Conway Memorial Lecture. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Thursday, 23 May, 7 pm. H. J. Blackham: The Way I Think.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of Forum meetings from the secretary, 59 Fox Covert Avenue, Edinburgh, EH12 6U11, telephone 031-334 8372.

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.

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 30 May, 7.45 pm. Chris Tame: An Introduction to Individualist Anarchism.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 12 June, 7.45 pm. Jeff and Jenny Bellamy: Meeting the Challenge of the Centralised Curriculum.

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

be attempting to have a non-ideological ideology, but many people still find this difficult. I don't agree when he says that the BHA has uncritically adopted the Bergson and Popper doctrine of the Open Society. If we have, we shall certainly fail. The Open Society, whatever it is, is a long way in the future, and will probably be something quite different in detail to anything which could be visualised by 19th or early 20th century thinkers. If the concept is going to be of any use, it must be relevant to the here and now, and will have to change continuously in the light of a changing world. I personally think it's a waste of energy, though it passes a pleasant evening, to try to produce a blueprint. But though I shall be accused of sloppy thinking, I do find the general idea, vulgarised though it may be, a useful tool in helping others as well as myself to pinpoint what is definitely not the Open Society.

What I should like to see us doing, rationalists, secularists and humanists, is working together much harder, to change those things which quite clearly belong to the Closed Society. And the BHA, just as clearly as the NSS, sees religion as part of the Closed Society.

DIANA ROOKLEDGE,

Chairman, British Humanist Association.

This correspondence is now closed.

been reported by the night watch at the Damascus Gate? Only by bribing the watch to give such an account. But then it would be asked why the watch took no action to prevent the theft; consequently it had to be "admitted" that the guards were asleep at the time (probably a common occurrence). However, the guards needed to be assured that their jobs were still safe. It is a naive account, devised for dullards; if the guards were asleep they cannot have seen those responsible for the theft.

The priests' accusation cannot have been correct. If the disciples as a group were responsible they could never have preached Jesus' resurrection; if one or two of them were responsible, the others must have learned of it and lost respect for their master. No, the simplest explanation is that the body, dead or alive, was removed by those who put it there — described in the Gospels as Joseph of Arimathea, a *secret* disciple, and Nicodemus. Why did the priests, who must have seen Joseph ask for the body and place it in his own tomb, not ask him what *he* had done with Jesus? Perhaps they could not find him; Pharisees were not on good terms with the Sadducean priests and he could hardly have wanted his actions made public.

But why was the body removed in secret? Moreover, why was Jesus removed before the expiry of the period (three days and three nights) which he forecast he had to endure "in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12, 40)? If it was believed that he would be resurrected on the Monday morning, why was the tomb not left sealed until then?

Again we must apply the simplest hypothesis, which is that something had gone wrong. Now what could possibly go wrong with a resurrection? The only reason for someone to remove Jesus from the tomb prematurely is the knowledge that resurrection was not possible. Yet how could they know that? Clearly they did not expect a supernatural revival; they were expecting Jesus to make an entirely *natural* recovery. But this would mean that he was not dead, or that he was not supposed to be dead.

Here we are forced to complicate the hypothesis by supposing that Jesus took a drug (probably opium) which caused the appearance of death; this would account for his early collapse on the Cross. If Jesus knew that he had the means to survive crucifixion, and believed that it was necessary for him to go through that ordeal, then we can see why he admitted guilt to Pilate. Now there is motive to go with the evidence that he planned his own arrest and trial.

But why did he have to do all this? Again we must complicate the hypothesis by accepting that Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the historic role of *two* Messiahs: the first The Suffering Servant whose sacrificial death expiates the sins of his people, and the second The Son of Man who would rule the

Kingdom of Heaven. Apparently Jesus planned to "die" as the first Messiah and "rise" as the second.

But something went wrong during the Crucifixion. Either he was actually killed or he was mortally wounded by the execution squad, perhaps by a spear thrust as John records. Either way those who buried him in haste, before the Sabbath, knew that he could never walk out of the tomb as the King of Israel. To spare embarrassment they had to remove Jesus in secret.

If Jesus lived a few more days that could explain his appearance to the disciples in the Upper Room, where he assured them that he was no spirit. It seems unlikely that the disciples would have gone preaching in his name if they had not seen him at least once after the Crucifixion and unless they had been instructed to do so. Jesus can have commissioned them only *after* his revival, because it was that revival that they were to preach.

OBITUARY

Mr L. W. Evans

Laurence William Evans, who has died at the age of 63, was closely associated with the University of Warwick since its foundation. He played an important role in developing the university's language laboratory.

Mr Evans held no religious beliefs. There was a large gathering of colleagues, friends and relatives when a secular committal ceremony took place at Canley Crematorium, Coventry.

Mr D. Kepper

Douglas Kepper, a *Freethinker* reader since the 1930s, has died. An activist in peace and socialist movements, he was a former editor of the Independent Labour Party's *Socialist Leader* and secretary of the London Committee of 100. Mr Kepper was a campaigner for many causes including the rights of prisoners and mental patients.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Golders Green Crematorium, London.

Mrs C. A. Morris

Constance Ann Morris of Stratford-on-Avon has died at the age of 84. She and her husband ran a business in the town for many years. Mrs Morris was an unbeliever. There was a secular committal ceremony at the Mid-Warwickshire Crematorium, Leamington Spa.

We regret the lateness of April and May issues of *The Freethinker*. Delays were due to industrial action at postal sorting offices.