

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 105, No. 8

AUGUST 1985

30p

BLASPHEMY LAW: CAUTIOUS WELCOME FOR COMMISSIONERS' REPORT

The Law Commission, in its report, *Offences Against Religion and Public Worship*, has recommended abolition of the common law offence of blasphemy. They had already examined shortcomings in the present law in a Working Paper which elicited a response from a wide spectrum of organisations and individuals. Referring to the large number of submissions, petitions and letters opposing abolition, the Commissioners comment: "It is clear that a majority of those who wrote urging the retention of the law of blasphemy, or who signed petitions calling for this, did so in response to organised campaigns . . . petitions from various sources were printed and circulated, particularly in churches".

Organisations as diverse as the Catholic Union of Great Britain and the Protestant Reformation Society favoured retention of blasphemy law. Abolition was advocated by the Association of Chief Police Officers of England and Wales, the Society of Conservative Lawyers, the Free Church Federal Council Executive Committee and the Mother's Union (majority). A number of freethought organisations, including the British Humanist Association, National Secular Society and the Thomas Paine Society, also argued in favour of abolition.

The main reasons advanced in support of blasphemy law were that it protects religion and religious beliefs, together with society, public order and individual feelings. It was claimed that abolition of blasphemy law "will add further to the degeneration of our society".

The Commission recommended "abolition without replacement" of the common law offence of blasphemy. But two Commissioners, including the chairman, Mr Justice Ralph Gibson, while agreeing with the main recommendation, added a Note of Dissent to the report.

They state: "We agree with the substance of the

main criticisms of the existing common law offence of blasphemy and with the recommendation that it should be abolished. We attach particular importance to the defect in the existing offence that it affords protection to one religion only. Our views, however, is that in abolishing the common law offence of blasphemy the preferable course would be to enact a new offence which would be free of the defects of the present law".

The majority report has been welcomed by a number of freethought and anti-censorship organisations.

Commenting on the proposal to abolish blasphemy law, the Campaign Against Censorship (formerly the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society) declared that "any decrease in the number and confusion of the laws which restrict freedom of expression would be an improvement.

"A law against blasphemy in this country today is obsolete, discriminatory and dishonest.

"It is obsolete because the link between Christian belief and the social structure has almost broken. An attack on God is no longer an attack on society and therefore no longer a proper subject for the law.

"It is discriminatory because it relates only to one religion. If we really need a law to stop people insulting other people's gods, it should apply to all faiths.

"It is dishonest because, when a trial takes place, it quickly becomes clear that the work involved offends not against any god but against the sensibilities of a minority group of men and women. They are those whose view of human nature, and especially of human sexuality, are still Victorian; narrow, pompous and, underneath, fearful.

"It is high time that this means of forcing their views upon the rest of us was taken from them".

(continued on back page)

The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

The Freethinker was founded in 1881 by George William Foote and is published mid-monthly. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or of the Editor.

Articles, Reviews, News Reports, Obituaries, Letters and Announcements should be sent by the 10th of the preceding month to the Editor at 14 Coundon Road, Coventry CV1 4AW, West Midlands (telephone Coventry 20070). Unsolicited reviews should not be submitted.

Vol 105 No 8 CONTENTS August 1985

BLASPHEMY LAW: CAUTIOUS WELCOME FOR LAW COMMISSIONERS' REPORT	113
NEWS AND NOTES	114
Bitter Orange; Embryo Research: the Reality; Wee Frees go to the Barricades; Geldof Without God	
PRO-LIFERS' TALLY-HO	117
Barbara Smoker	
TWO CHEERS FOR THE LAW COMMISSION	119
J. R. Spencer	
MALTHUS: THE REPORT OF HIS DEATH WAS GREATLY EXAGGERATED (Part 3)	121
David Tribe	
FREETHINKER REVIEWS	122
BOOKS	
How Can We Know?, by A. N. Wilson Reviewer: Antony Grey	
Chaplin: His Life and Art, by David Robinson Reviewer: Peter Cotes	
VICTORIAN VALUES ARE ALIVE AND WELL	123
SCEPTICS' CONFERENCE	124
Jim Herrick	
LETTERS	125
BISHOP'S MOVE	128

Postal subscriptions, book orders and donations to the Freethinker Fund should be sent to:

G. W. FOOTE & COMPANY,
702 HOLLOWAY ROAD, LONDON N19 3NL
(Telephone: 01-272 1266)

SPECIAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

UK and overseas: twelve months, £3.60. (UK six months, £2). USA: twelve months, \$8. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$7 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$2.

 David Neil & Co Printers South St Dorking

NEWS

BITTER ORANGE

This year's "marching season" in Northern Ireland was the nastiest for a decade. Violence bordering on mayhem was caused by members and supporters of the Orange Order, following the Chief Constable's prudent decision to re-route a parade away from a predominantly Catholic area of Portadown. The town is a notorious stronghold of Orange zealots who regard themselves as being entitled to display their swaggering arrogance and flaunt their banners wherever they please.

The Orange Order is a murky, semi-secret society dedicated to upholding Christianity (or rather the Protestant version). Its principles are a mish mash of fundamentalist Christianity, Right-wing politics and extreme nationalism comparable to those of South Africa's Broederbond and the Ku-Klux-Klan. Although male-dominated, it has women's lodges. Worse still, there are junior lodges where children are indoctrinated. The process is continued in Northern Ireland's schools where they are strictly segregated along religious lines.

The churches in Ireland have always looked to their own interests, exploiting religious differences, promoting segregation and opposing social reforms. There is a higher proportion of church membership and attendance in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the UK. Of course a large number of clergymen belong to the Orange Order and take part in parades decked out in comic opera regalia. The Rev Martin Smyth, MP, is Imperial Grand Master (they are fond of highfalutin titles).

Generations have grown up in this atmosphere so it is not surprising that Northern Ireland has become Britain's major problem in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It is difficult to calculate the financial burden of the union and impossible to assess the damage it has inflicted on Britain's image in the world. The British people are baffled by the perversities of the situation in Northern Ireland and surveys show that they are becoming increasingly disenchanted with the connection.

The automatic response to any proposal for reform, particularly if it involves the Republic, is the threat of "a Protestant backlash". At this year's Orange demonstrations the threats were mingled with Bible-reading, hymn-singing and prayers.

The reaction of these valiant defenders of law and order if they don't get their own way is a threat to take the law into their own hands. This attitude stems from the fact that for far too long law and order was for the most part in their hands. A very

AND NOTES

significant remark was made last month by the Order's Imperial Grand Secretary who declared that the security forces "were the kith and kin of Orangemen". (Incidentally, does the law which in Britain prohibits the carrying of offensive weapons not apply to Orange lodge officers who carry swords at their demonstrations?)

The situation in Northern Ireland is the outcome of successive British governments' foolish and dangerous policies. By arming the Protestants in the years after Partition, Britain created a Frankenstein's monster that was always likely to get out of control. The police and other "security" forces have been openly identified with the Protestant interest from the start. The Royal Ulster Constabulary had its own Orange lodge, and presently a substantial proportion of policemen come from Orange-Unionist families. The riff-raffish "B" Specials were Orangeism's armed wing. No doubt when the force was disbanded in 1970 — for once a British Government called the "Protestant backlash" bluff — many of them found their way into the Ulster Defence Regiment. (Two UDR members were arrested during the Orange riots at Portadown.)

One section of Northern Ireland's population is imbued with "master race" delusions, while the other has no confidence in Whitehall's ability to protect it from discrimination and violence. The province has been likened to a bubbling cauldron of hatred, bigotry and fanaticism. It should be added that Christianity is one of the main ingredients of this poisonous brew.

EMBRYO RESEARCH: THE REALITY

During the recent House of Commons debate on Enoch Powell's Unborn Children (Protection) Bill, one Member of Parliament had a better reason than anyone to see it defeated. Dafydd Wigley, Plaid Cymru MP for Caernarvon, and his wife Elinor have endured grief that caused her to "want to get under the table and hide, or go into a corner and tear myself apart".

Death of offspring is the cruellest form of bereavement. At Easter the Wigleys buried their second son, 12-year-old Geraint, near to his brother Alun, who died at the age of 13 last Christmas. David and Elinor Wigley had known for ten years that their sons would die young. They had inherited a degenerative disease which affects the brain and liver, causing early death.

Mrs Wigley said: "I loved them so much I could never say I am sorry they were born. But I would tell other young parents I wouldn't want to bring another life into the world to see the suffering and the stress that I saw with my sons". Her husband is convinced that research must continue, including, if possible, "the choice of having eggs screened and then implanted if they are clear".

All medical research is threatened by the Thatcherite onslaught against the National Health Service. Research into foetal defects is also under attack by religionists whose objections are rooted in the nonsensical belief that a "soul" is created at conception and the embryo is a tiny human being.

The religious lobby, exploiting public ignorance, has been busily whipping up hysteria and concern. MPs have been showered with letters and petitions. There have been processions of assorted religionists, including celibates and schoolchildren who know nothing of the issues involved. The religious press has published scores of misleading articles on the subject.

Although Enoch Powell's bill was defeated the continuing threat to research and experimentation should not be ignored. The SPUCites and LIFers don't give up that easily. After eighteen years they are still trying to wreck the 1967 Abortion Act.

• Pro-Lifers' Tally-Ho, page 117.

WEE FREES GO TO THE BARRICADES

The sabbatarians have won a mighty victory for "our Lord and his day" at Stornaway, on the island of Lewis, off Scotland's west coast. Desecrators of the Sabbath were put to flight and the Free Presbyterian Church has called for "stern measures" by the Western Isle Council to prevent further outrages by the forces of darkness. A Wee Free minister, the Rev Murdo McLeod, has warned of "a deliberate attempt to undermine our beliefs".

The other Sunday a church member decided to take direct action. Brandishing a Bible, he charged and scattered the Lord's foes — a bunch of school children who were playing football! They were "outsiders" from neighbouring islands.

Mr Roy McIver, chief executive of the island Council, said that a complaint had been received from the Kirk Session. "We will look into the problem", he promised.

But the Free Presbyterian Church wants more than a vague assurance from Mr McIver. There are unconfirmed reports that the Wee Frees plan to take a leaf out of Elisha's book and bring a couple of ferocious bears to Lewis.

GELDOF WITHOUT GOD

Whatever the critics and cynics may say, rock musician Bob Geldof has harnessed a vast amount of goodwill and altruism by his fund-raising work for famine relief. His achievement in staging extravaganzas in London and Philadelphia, together with a worldwide television relay, caught the imagination and opened the wallets.

An Irishman with a name like Geldof may seem a bit unusual. Even stranger is the fact that he is unashamedly and publicly sceptical about religion.

During a recent interview, Bob Geldof related how after one of his concerts a clergyman rushed up, shook him by the hand and gushed, "Oh Mr Geldof, if Jesus were here on earth I know he'd tell you that the gates of heaven are open to you". The clerical gent was taken aback by the musician's laconic reply: "If Jesus was really here on earth I'd want to know why he wasn't in Africa".

Geldof admits quite openly that he enjoys being famous. No doubt he is equally genuine when he says: "I really do care about what is happening elsewhere in the world. I don't think it is flippant that millions of people should be condemned to starve to death.

"But I'm not a Christian, so I don't believe in turning the other cheek".

Geldof's rational comments are a refreshing change from the drivel we get from other pop stars who are always ready to do a turn at evangelical rallies. He is certainly a far greater humanitarian than Mother Theresa who swans around the world urging people to breed even more prolifically. She was in the United States last month, where she proclaimed to a meeting at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception that "Poverty is freedom". Like hell it is! Poverty is hunger, misery and degradation. And while individuals and organisations strive to alleviate the effects of famine and poverty, their work is sabotaged by professional celibates like Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II.

Bob Geldof says: "The day I lose my natural rebelliousness, then I'll give it all up". We hope that day never comes. The rock of Geldof is preferable to the Rock of Ages.

Following protests from Jewish leaders the Federal Government in Australia is to restore the medical rebate for circumcision. It was to have been discontinued on the advice of a medical panel. When the president of the Jewish Board of Deputies in the State of Victoria heard that the Government would continue to pay for circumcisions he exclaimed: "That's lovely!" The reaction of those most concerned, Jewish male babies, was not reported.

Freethinker Fund

The Church of England has enjoyed a record year in its Stock Exchange and property investment activities. Sir Douglas Lovelock, chairman of the Church Commissioners who manage the Church's assets of £1.6 billion, had good reason to announce with becoming modesty: "We think we've done rather well".

In contrast to the billions which are poured into the coffers of churches, religious institutions and pressure groups, the freethought movement — deprived for the most part even of charity status — scrapes along on limited resources. For over a century *The Freethinker* has survived on supporters' goodwill and generosity. Legacies and donations to the Fund have so far bridged the gap between income and expenditure. But rising costs are a constant problem for journals with a limited circulation and little or no advertising revenue.

We thank all readers who have donated to the Fund; the latest list is given below.

N. Sinnott, 50p; M. Gerrard, P. J. E. Paris and M. J. Shutler, £1 each; C. Begg, P. T. Bell, J. A. Blackmore, P. Brown, D. Cave, M. B. Clarke, H. G. W. Copeland, H. L. Dowd, J. F. Glenister, R. Grieve, W. C. Hall, B. A. Judd, K. M. Mason, S. D. McDonald, H. L. Millard, R. Orr, D. Shalbazan, W. Shaw, J. C. Smith, J. E. Sykes, J. D. Verney and A. W. Warren, £1.40 each; S. Rowe, £1.55; W. T. Ford, £1.80; C. S. Wilkins, £2.40; J. Martin, £3; J. W. Lewis, £3.40; C. Blakely, £3.45; L. Lewis, £4.60; R. Grindrod, R. J. W. Tolhurst and R. J. Tutton, £5 each; J. L. J. Lucas, £5.50; C. Bayliss, J. Gibson, E. J. Little, L. G. Packham, G. J. Robichez and A. Varley, £6.40 each; F. C. Hoy, £8.25; A. Akkermans, C. A. M. Sellen and A. E. Woodford, £10 each.

Total for the period 7 June until 9 July: £151.65.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

ANNUAL OUTING

Sunday, 15 September

Chichester — West Sussex

(including Fishbourne Roman Palace
and the Weald and Downland Open Air
Museum)

Cost, including fare and entrance fees, £6.

Details obtainable from the NSS,
702 Holloway Road, London N19
telephone 01-272 1266

Pro-Lifers' Tally-Ho

BARBARA SMOKER

A renewed Christian campaign against human embryo experimentation was launched in London last month. In this report, the President of the National Secular Society gives her impressions of the inaugural meeting.

The baying pack of "pro-lifers" under guest Master of Hounds Enoch Powell, MP, has no intention of giving up the sacred pursuit of its quarry, the research programme on human embryos. If they get a kill, it would (they are well aware) implicitly give the human embryo and foetus full human rights and so put the hated 1967 Abortion Act in serious jeopardy. They have never admitted that abortion was rife before it was legalised and that legalisation made it safe.

Though twice defeated by parliamentary tactics, the Unborn Children (Protection) Bill, initiated by the evangelical Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC), supported by their Roman Catholic counterpart (Life), and chosen by Mr Powell for his Private Member's Bill when he was lucky in the last ballot, will rise again. This was the concerted cry of a rally of almost 2,000 of the faithful that filled the large Westminster Central Hall on Monday, 15 July, and was the pledge made to them there by MPs from all the major political parties.

The meeting had been called to launch a new campaign in readiness for the next parliamentary session. Outside the hall was a vociferous picket, as it were, hunt saboteurs — mainly young women from the pro-abortion lobby. Though strongly on their side in the dispute, I could have wished them a little less vociferous and a little more conventional in appearance — which contrasted glaringly with the neatly dressed pro-lifers streaming into the building. Moreover, the chanted slogan "Free abortion on demand!" is ambiguous. Unless it refers only to reasonably early abortion, many of us on their side of the fence would, while certainly not crossing to the other side, hesitate to stand alongside them.

Of course, a slogan does not lend itself to qualification, but a less extreme slogan would be appropriate in the present situation. As long as the pro-lifers are proclaiming their extreme position in support of early embryos (with no functional nervous system), this irrational extremism enables us to adopt a moderate position on the other side; and this would have a better chance of persuading the majority in parliament and in the country that the pro-life lobby is inspired by utter unreason.

Accompanied by another member of the NSS, I entered the vast hall. Already, ten minutes before the advertised start of the meeting, it was difficult to find vacant seats downstairs, though part of the front area was reserved for cameramen.

The main draw, presumably, was the chief speaker, Enoch Powell. When he and the other speakers walked out on to the platform there was a standing ovation that went on for several minutes before the chairman could start the proceedings.

The chair was taken by the Rev Rabjohns, a C of E cleric who explained away, to some extent, the size of the audience by proudly announcing that it included coach-loads of people from Scotland, the North, Wales and the West. His reference to the presence of "a representative of the Royal College of Nurses" would be disconcerting if true, but he must surely have meant "member" rather than "representative". He spoke of the debt that Protestants owed to the initiative of Catholics, who had alerted other Christians to the need for the "embryo rights" campaign.

There was quite a sprinkling of nuns' habits in the audience — worn, presumably, by Catholic nuns. Though the meeting was organised by the Protestant group SPUC, it was certainly an ecumenical audience, as was evidenced later by the long, loud applause that greeted the name of Victoria Gillick. It did not seem to occur to Mrs Gillick's admirers that her crusade (so far successful) to deny young people at risk the contraceptive advice and help they needed would inevitably lead to more unwanted pregnancies and therefore more social abortions. As for the fact that Catholic girls already account for far more abortions in proportion to their numbers in the population than any other section of society, this is, of course, never mentioned.

Above the platform hung, like the rood-screen of a cathedral, a colossal photograph of a white-coated researcher putting a pinch of some mysterious substance into a sort of cage, inside which was suspended a nondescript parcel. The parcel was referred to by one of the speakers as "a trussed-up baby" and by another as "a foetus that had been kept alive for 45 minutes for experimental purposes". If either these descriptions were anywhere near the truth, I would join the protesters — but why on earth would a researcher experimenting on a living entity truss it up, and thus impede his observations?

There were six MPs in the line-up of speakers: Sir Bernard Braine (Conservative), Tom Clarke (Labour), Ann Winterton (Conservative), Alan Beith (Liberal), Dale Campbell-Savours (Labour) and Enoch Powell (Ulster Unionist). In common with every other MP in the House, they would have received, individually, a copy of the NSS illustrated pamphlet *Eggs Are Not People*, based on my March *Free-thinker* article of the same title — and, if they had bothered to read it, they must have been aware that much of what they were saying was, at the very least, scientifically dubious. One of them, ignoring the

scientific fact that life is a continuum — every egg being alive from the time its mother was herself a foetus — repeated the old chestnut, “Life begins at conception”. This lie was greeted with thunderous applause.

So was every reference to experiments on human beings carried out under the Nazi regime, equating them with embryo research (“purely to satisfy their curiosity”). But it was the rally itself that was reminiscent of the Third Reich.

The first speaker was Sir Bernard Braine, whose surname is as inapt as my own. He set the tone of the meeting by quoting (from the Old Testament) “Where there is no vision the people perish” and declaring that opponents of the Powell Bill are mistaken, therefore, if they imagine it has gone away. He then went on to equate the SPUC campaign with the late eighteenth-century campaign for the abolition of the African slave trade — claiming that both campaigns depended on respect for the dignity of human life, and actually raising the bogey of a powerful vested interest opposing both. Remembering that it was, of course, mainly the churches that opposed abolition of the slave trade and unbelievers that campaigned for it, one marvels anew at the gall of these people in claiming Christian credit for every historical social reform, however strong their opposition to it at the time.

With similar dishonest association, Sir Bernard went on to talk about countries where human rights are denied and there is imprisonment without trial. He made no moral distinction between late abortions carried out on social grounds and the use of early, undeveloped embryos, but described both as “evil”. He also castigated the Archbishop of York for his recent attack on moral absolutism with reference to embryo experimentation. (In an ecclesiastical debate in the pages of *The Times* on the subject, the Archbishop of York had taken the progressive consequentialist view and Cardinal Hume the unscientific, absolutist stand.)

Another speaker was Alison Davis — unexpectedly in this line-up, an atheist. Congenitally handicapped, she runs the SPUC Handicapped Division. No doubt she feels that had her mother been told she was carrying a defective foetus and therefore been given the option of an abortion, she herself would never have been born. One can understand the emotion aroused by this train of thought, but an atheist should be able to let reason and realism prevail objectively over emotion and fantasy. It is no more reasonable to oppose abortion because of the accident of one's own birth than to demand that every fertile person should copulate without contraceptives on the anniversary of the day one was conceived — or, indeed, as often as possible — because one's own conception might so easily never have occurred.

Referring to the embryo research programme's

aim of reducing congenital abnormalities, this speaker said that even had her own handicaps been prevented by such research she would not want to have it on her conscience that she had been helped by experimentation on her “fellow human beings”. How on earth can any thinking person regard a mere egg, and a microscopic one at that, as a fellow human being?

Besides, there is another philosophical difficulty: if embryo observation and selection had prevented a defective embryo from being implanted in the speaker's mother's womb, a different (normal) embryo would have developed, so that the resulting human being would not have been the present Alison Davis at all but a sister or brother of hers: a sister or brother who in actuality never (to use SPUC phraseology) had the chance of life — or, of course, any say in the embryo experimentation debate.

Ann Winterton said that the Warnock Committee had comprised “half-baked philosophers and second-rate thinkers”. Her own grasp of philosophy, however, was not even quarter-baked, as is indicated by her absurd phrase “the weakest member of our society, the human embryo”. She promised there would be another Private Member's Bill on the Powell lines in the autumn if any of its committed supporters in the House came high in the ballot, and they would demand sufficient parliamentary time for it. She was convinced (probably with reason) that the Government would flinch from introducing their own promised Bill to enact the Warnock proposals.

During one of his introductions, the chairman said they should be careful not to make this campaign a purely religious one, as it had to appeal to the non-religious majority. And he himself, he said, would be just as much opposed to embryo experimentation on humanitarian grounds if he were not a believer. It was unfortunate for him that the next two speakers put all the emphasis on religion.

The first of these was Raymond Johnston of CARE (Christian Action for Religious Education — formerly the Nationwide Festival of Light), who actually used the word “secularist”. But he seemed to regard it as a synonym for “Nazi”. He also spoke disparagingly of “the Utilitarian ethic”.

The Labour MP who was the next speaker likewise stressed his religious motives. However, he agreed with the chairman that, though the impetus of the campaign against “embryo abuse” was acceptance of the Christian view of “the sanctity of life”, it was important to widen it for Parliament and the general public, so as to win over the non-religious majority. “We must convince them that experimentation on the embryo actually threatens the future of civilisation”.

He had, he said, learned during the run-up to the passing of the Abortion Act in 1967 that religious objections were less effective than propaganda about pain caused to the foetus. The film “The Silent

Scream" had, he said, proved the worth of this to the cause. How this pain propaganda could possibly be applied to the new campaign on behalf of the early embryo he did not explain. However, a free SPUC leaflet I picked up apparently gives the answer: "Only 20 days from conception, the foundation of the entire nervous system had been laid down". Presumably few readers would think to ask "But was it functional at that stage?"

One of the regular SPUC speakers, a fanatical woman doctor of medicine, Margaret White, made one of her usual rabble-rousing speeches. Like Mr Johnston, she sees secularists as the great enemy. "Lady Warnock", she sneered, "may speak for the Hampstead and Highgate Humanists, but we speak to the ordinary, decent people, who know the difference between right and wrong". As a member of the secular humanist movement, aware of its size and force, I felt flattered.

Finally, of course, came the star speaker, Enoch Powell. His speech, however, was completely out of line with all that had preceded it. The other speakers had all been talking about embryo experimentation — but now the audience was told that Dr Robert Edwards, the pioneer of *in vitro* fertilisation, had firmly denied in writing that any experimentation on human embryos was taking place at all. If this were so, why, asked Mr Powell, all the fuss about threats

to discontinue it? If such experiments were as important as his opponents alleged, there should be an investigation as to why none was being carried out!

This enigma was left with the audience, no doubt to give them the idea that there were indeed embryo experiments being carried out but that they must be of too shaming a nature for the experimenters to admit to them. Few of those present would have read anything by Dr Edwards or heard him speak, as I had, and they would therefore be unaware that when he denies carrying out experiments it is clear from the context that he uses the word in a sense that excludes mere observation. What he means is that he has not deliberately mutilated any embryos, but has merely investigated those that were mutilated by nature (or God). But Mr Powell's Bill would, if enacted, put a stop to this — making it illegal for anyone to "have in his possession a human embryo produced by *in vitro* fertilisation" except with the Secretary of State's authority, which would be restricted to "enabling a named woman to bear a child".

Mr Powell did not actually say that the Frankenstein story was about to come true — but he hinted at it darkly. The uplifted campaigners then streamed out to their suburban trains and long-distance coaches.

Two Cheers for the Law Commission J. R. SPENCER

The Law Commissioners have recommended the abolition of blasphemy law. But J. R. Spencer, Fellow, Selwyn College, Cambridge, believes that a Note of Dissent signed by two Commissioners will provide the authorities with an excuse to shelve the report.

The common law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel were invented by judges in the seventeenth century to penalise anyone who attacked the doctrines of the Established Church. In the nineteenth century they were extensively used in attempts to suppress the spread of freethought: Carlile, Holyoake and Bradlaugh were all prosecuted, as was G. W. Foote, the first editor of *The Free-thinker*. Many late nineteenth-century judges disapproved of these prosecutions, however, and they redefined the offences to limit them to "vilification" of Christianity rather than mere contradiction; later still, they also added a requirement that the publication be likely to cause a breach of the peace. These limitations did not stop a further round of anti-freethought prosecutions early this century, which culminated in the repeated imprisonment of J. W. Gott for publishing his pamphlet

"Rib-Tickers, or Questions for Parsons", written in answer to an Evangelical pamphlet called "Questions for Infidels". When Gott died not long after his fifth trial in 1921, blasphemy prosecutions appeared to die with him. Notwithstanding the occasional bout of indictment-rattling there were no more serious attempts to prosecute for blasphemy, and in a lecture in 1949 Lord Denning said the crime of blasphemy was a dead letter.

Then in 1977 Mrs Whitehouse brought her celebrated prosecution against *Gay News*. She secured a conviction largely because Judge King-Hamilton — acting under divine guidance, as he later modestly described in his autobiography — bent the definition of blasphemy again, but this time to make it wider. This led to an appeal to the House of Lords, which split three to five in favour of upholding the conviction and the restatement of the law of blasphemy upon which it was based. The pro-blasphemy majority included Lord Scarman, temporarily flipping his wig, who overlooked both the history of the offence of blasphemy and the background to the case to pronounce himself in favour of an extended crime of blasphemy as a bulwark against the persecution of minority groups(!). In upholding the conviction, the House of Lords held it irrelevant whether or not a

person accused of blasphemy intended to attack Christianity, and also ruled that it was unnecessary for the publication to be seriously likely to provoke a breach of the peace. As a result, anyone who publishes anything which ten out of twelve jurors think vilifies Christianity is now guilty of a serious criminal offence.

In the outcry resulting from the *Gay News* case the law of blasphemy was referred to the Law Commission, which in 1981 produced a Working Paper provisionally suggesting that the offences be abolished, and invited comments. The Working Paper led to considerable discussion in the press, on the radio and on television. The Law Commission, which normally receives a small trickle of comments, was soon knee-deep in them. The Church of England officially opposed abolition, and so did a number of other religious groups, including the Jews and the Muslims. The Baptists and the Unitarians were for abolition, presumably remembering how they were formerly prosecuted for blasphemy in the interests of the Church of England, and so were the Methodists. And no views at all were received from Hindus, Buddhists and other non-Christian religions whom Lord Scarman and others wanted the existing offence of blasphemy extended to protect.

The police were all for abolition, and so were all the legal organisations, except for the denominational ones like the Christian Lawyers' Action Group. Of the 1,800 comments received, however, most came from individuals rather than organisations, and these were overwhelmingly against abolishing the offence. Well over a thousand people wrote to oppose the abolition of blasphemy, the majority apparently in response to campaigns run by Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, and other pressure groups. More than a quarter of the letters complained at length about bad language in broadcasting, which has little to do with the crime of blasphemy, but was much stressed by NVLA in its campaign literature.

This flood of post did not induce the Law Commission to change its mind, but it did succeed in washing it off course. Whereas the Law Commission in its Working Paper was for abolishing blasphemy without replacement, in its final report which was issued on 18 June it split on the matter. All five Law Commissioners agreed that the present law of blasphemy was vague, severe, and unfairly discriminatory in protecting only Christianity, and all agreed that the existing offences must therefore go; but only three of the five Law Commissioners now thought it should be abolished and not replaced. The other two now thought there should be a modern, streamlined, non-denominational offence of blasphemy enacted in place of the old, and signed a Note of Dissent to this effect.

The majority of the Commissioners — Trevor Aldridge, Professor Julian Farrand and Mrs Brenda

Hoggett — rejected all the arguments for retaining the present crimes or replacing them. Most of the individuals who wrote to the Law Commission wanted an offence of blasphemy "to protect Christianity, because this is a Christian country". This was the original reason for the creation of the offence in the seventeenth century, but not even the Church of England was prepared to rely on it today, and the Law Commission rejected it out of hand. "It is not . . . the policy of the law to seek to assert the truth of any particular religion".

The second argument was that a blasphemy offence was needed to protect public order. This was also summarily rejected: any blasphemous behaviour which is realistically likely to provoke a breach of the peace is always one of a number of criminal offences apart from blasphemy, and attempting to stir up hatred against a particular religious group, which is not, is not caught by any offence of blasphemy, present or future, because blasphemy consists of attacking not *believers* but *beliefs*; should incitement to religious hatred become a problem in England it should be penalised — as in Northern Ireland — by making it an offence as such.

The majority Commissioners rejected the argument that an offence of blasphemy is needed to ensure that religious debate is carried on with due reverence, avoiding scurrility and ridicule. If religion can be attacked at all, it ought to be legal to attack it with all the usual weapons of debate: they quote with approval the words of Professor J. C. Smith: "vilification, ridicule and contempt may be decidedly in the public interest. Should it not be possible to attack in the strongest terms religious beliefs that adulterers should be stoned to death and that thieves should have the offending hand lopped off, however offensive that may be to the holders of the belief?"

And finally, they rejected the argument for a crime of blasphemy which the Church of England put forward: that an offence of blasphemy was needed to protect religious feelings from outrage. People are normally free to say what they want, and it is not generally enough without more to make mere words a crime that other people hate to hear them or read them, or hate the thought of their being said. To make blasphemous words a crime purely on this account would mean accepting either or both of two propositions: (1) that religious people are more easily and more deeply hurt than others, and (2) that religious feelings are superior to other human emotions and therefore more deserving of protection. The majority Commissioners rejected both these overbearing claims.

In their note of dissent, Commissioner Brian Davenport, QC, and Mr Justice Ralph Gibson, the President of the Law Commission, accept the Church of England argument about the need to protect religious feelings from outrage, and propose a new

offence penalising anyone who publishes "grossly abusive or insulting material relating to a religion with the purpose of outraging religious feelings". This would reverse the *Gay News* decision by limiting the offence to the case where the publisher explicitly intended to cause offence, but it would be much wider than the present law because it would apply in favour of all religions.

Even when limited to the case where the blasphemer intended to cause offence, this offence has a number of obvious drawbacks. The first is that the requirement of intention is largely an illusory limit. In any situation where one person deliberately attacks the religious beliefs of others, however pure his ultimate motives, unless he is an idiot he knows that somebody's religious feelings are certain to be outraged; and people are generally held to intend a result which they know full well is certain to flow from their conduct. The second objection is that whatever the theoretical basis of any modernised offence of blasphemy might be, in practice it would probably be exploited by the more fanatical and

intolerant fringe religions to harass those who disagreed with them. And the third is that an offence of deliberately outraging people's religious feelings would be as discriminatory against atheists and freethinkers as the present offence of blasphemy, protecting only Christian beliefs, is against non-Christian religions. As now, Mr Gott's Evangelical opponents would be free to write religious tracts as offensive and vilificatory as they liked against atheists and atheism, and could then prosecute Mr Gott if he responded in kind.

Any attempt to abolish the criminal law of blasphemy is bound to be controversial now that Mrs Whitehouse and her allies see it as a usable weapon against all they consider evil in the modern world. Because patterns of belief and unbelief cut across party political lines, no government would be anxious to do anything about it if it could help it. By splitting 3:2 on what should be done about it, the Law Commission may unfortunately have given this and future governments the excuse they need for doing nothing at all.

Malthus: the Report of His Death Was Greatly Exaggerated (Part 3)

DAVID TRIBE

Banks sees the major determinant in terms of a cost/benefit analysis of children or young adults while still living at home. There is little idealism, but much good sense, in this approach. In agrarian societies children may be useful at harvest time almost as soon as they can walk, and the older they get the broader their range of usefulness. In the early days of the Industrial Revolution children were sent, with few limitations, down mines, up chimneys and into factories. Gradually, however, in Britain society restricted the benefits parents could derive from their children and thus altered the economic balance. From 1833 a series of Factory Acts regulated child labour, the Infant Life Protection Act was passed in 1872 and primary education became compulsory in 1876. At the same time — Banks says it was 20-30 years earlier — different social forces, but with similar economic consequences, were affecting the gentry and the professional middle classes. As the population of all classes grew but the land area stayed the same, younger sons of the landed gentry were forced increasingly into the professions, that were proliferating with the rising population, the growing complexity of society and the expanding empire.

Within the professions, patronage and other dubious practices tended to yield to meritocracy. In the Army the individual's right to plunder and ransom of prisoners were officially abolished, then

colonels' generous allowances for equipping their regiments, and finally (1871) the purchase and sale of commissions. In the Church the landed rector, prospering on advowsons and tithes while employing curates without prospects to tend the spiritual vineyard, was gradually displaced by the working vicar. In the Civil Service grace and favour declined till finally competitive examinations for entry were introduced in 1870. Hierarchies of progression were thrown open to those with the right "qualifications", and increasingly these turned out to be expensive public school and Oxbridge educations. Ambitious couples deferred marriage till the husband was established on the promotional ladder, and terminated their families when they had as many boys as they could afford to educate.

Banks has little respect for the life-assurance policy approach to children, which seems to me to be all-important. Parents everywhere have traditionally relied on their children to support them in their old age, and in many parts of the Third World still do. Naturally, since daughters go off to join other families, this duty devolves particularly on sons, who may also function as priests to perform funeral and other rites for their dead or dying parents. Within such a system it is of paramount importance to ensure that enough sons are born for at least one to

(continued on page 127)

BOOKS

HOW CAN WE KNOW? by A. N. Wilson. Hamish Hamilton, £6.95

By his own account, A. N. Wilson is a person of uncritical, impulsive enthusiasms. Youthful flirtation with a smorgasbord of "isms" — vegetable, pacifist, evangelical, atheist, Marxist, Maoist, Roman Catholic and "Toystoyanism" (*sic*) — gave way to a more fleshly infatuation with the staunchly Anglican girl he married when he was 20.

Now a best-selling novelist and biographer in his thirties, he sits grumpily in his commuting corner wondering how on earth he can possibly perceive all his unprepossessing fellow-travellers as loveable, yet wanting to practise the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount which he admits are perfectionist and fly in the face of common sense.

So what, he asks, *is* Christianity anyway? How can we know what Jesus meant by "The Way"? And even if it is possible to rediscover some of its meaning, how can we know if it is "true"?

This is the second book of apologetics which the editor has asked me to review recently. Once again, the most fundamental questions are posed about the nature of reality, the validity of religious experience and the meaning of truth. And once again the author who sets out to tackle these portentous issues utterly fails, I think, to do so in any convincing or coherent way.

Nonetheless, Wilson's is a well-written, sincere and at times moving book. He recognises (unlike Gerald Priestland) the intellectual obstacles to easy acceptance of the beliefs he espouses and does not discount them. Yet there is a curiously old-fashioned air about his defence of the faith; he is a religious conservative, sticking to the traditional accounts and accepting them not on grounds of probability but (as every believer ultimately must) out of a temperamental inclination to want them to be true. He is honest enough to admit that piety does not entitle the believer to shuffle off the hard questions, and that we shall never find the answer to his title question on this side of the grave. The best anyone can do, he thinks (with Pascal) is to live "as if" Christianity were true — whatever *that* means! The choice, for him, is not between ignorance and certitude, but between faith and despair.

My difficulty with religious people's efforts to explain what they mean by "God" is that they are no more meaningful or significant than Anna Russell's superb "Deep down inside each one of us there is something stagnant that is dormant", and are redundant anyway on the Occam's Razor principle. And Wilson begs the, to me, much more significant question of whether the various forms of Christian belief can still be regarded as socially

FREETHINKER

beneficial in this day and age. He obviously thinks the answer is "yes", but looking around at what religious people are constantly getting up to, I can only retort "by their fruits you shall know them".

ANTONY GREY

CHAPLIN: HIS LIFE AND ART, by David Robinson. Collins, £15

It has been left to a distinguished critic, David Robinson, to write the definitive life of Charlie Chaplin, the world's greatest clown and arguably the First Actor of the Film. Others have only pecked at it, but "the Daddy of Them All" as his old discoverer, Fred Karno, dubbed Charlie at the end of his own career in show business, requires much research and depth to do him even partial justice. Mr Robinson has done his subject more than that. He has seen that it was not only an abundance of talent that made him so special. Rather was it *feeling*, his heart that encompassed the world, that made him a monumental figure, as easily understood by duke as by dustman, by peasant as by professor, by fool as by genius. A world figure, he was at one time in the 20th century, the best known and certainly the best loved being in the world.

At the time the Cinema was emerging as the greatest source of popular entertainment, Chaplin was as familiar in the back streets of Peking, the outback of Australia and the mean streets of the London that spawned him, as he was in Germany, France and all the Americas. Before the advent of the "box" in the corner, in villages and hamlets, away from the towns and cities where live theatres represented the main attraction for the seeker after entertainment, Chaplin could be seen. The First World War Tommies sang songs about him as they marched, and he became the mascot of the fighting man. In the USSR they had a two-minute silence when he died, and in his lifetime the historian, Emil Ludvig, described him as the greatest (*sic!*) since Christ to grace the world for the benefit of humanity.

So much for that artist who numbered amongst his friends and admirers such folk as Bernard Shaw, Winston Churchill, Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells. According to my old friend, Fred Hornibrook, veteran secularist and regular contributor to *The Freethinker*, it was HGW who told him once when Chaplin's name cropped up that "those who belittle Charlie usually have an axe to grind; being more fearful of the influence that such a Little Fellow might exert, they show more interest in his politics

REVIEWS

than in his pictures, his penis than in his genius". From the beginning, through the famous two-reelers, up to the start of sound, thence onwards to the marvellous masterpieces, Chaplin's free expression, freethought, humanity, came brimming into everything he did as an artist. He castigated (and indeed frightened) by his message the modern money-changers, the vested interests, the smug and self-complacent, the uncaring and the greedy. Never an admirer of those "Victorian values" so beloved of our present Prime Minister, his plots were simple — too simple in their clarity for many of those who attempted to denigrate his work — his characters Dickensian. But if he was put into the beds of countless women by the tabloids and gutter politicians, thrown out of the United States by the machinations of the McCarthy Factor and the FBI, he was idolised by the masses.

The present work, a large and wholly admirable biography, helps to show the reason why. Not entirely, of course, for who can explain genius? Those who attempt to do so usually come unstuck, for it can come from the least likely source, and only the pontificators and self-lovers will ever attempt to intellectualise an artistic feeling that takes its audience in its grip and will never let it go. It is an experience that owes nothing to Lourdes. The background of the artist maybe, that monumental, *born talent*, backed by experience and an observant eye in a tragic youth? And for the rest, that special dedication to his craft and a tremendous capacity for hard work. But the genius of a great artist that makes the hairs on the neck stand out and induces a feeling of cold water running down the spine even when one is laughing hilariously or crying (sometimes simultaneously) must remain a mystery.

Deeply emotional as a man, socially-minded as a comedian, Chaplin was never afraid off-screen, as well as on, to stand up and be counted. As witness that Hollywood dinner party to which had been invited such eminent musicians as Toscanini, Horowitz, Barbirolli and Rachmaninoff. After the coffee and liqueurs came the philosophy. Charlie — the life of any party when he was a guest, but a listener along with others when he was the host as he was in this occasion — appeared reflective when Rachmaninoff started sounding off about the efficacy of Religion in Music; a point of view endorsed by all the guests present. A short pause after the nodding of heads in general agreement. And then the emotional rationalist who usually made his guests laugh upon such occasions, with impersonations of public figures, mock after-dinner

speeches, or charades in the form of one man shows, said quietly: "I am not a believer". Silence, before he continued: "I don't think we can be talking about the same thing". Another short pause before Rachmaninoff asked: "But how can you have Art without Religion?" Well, it was all a question of what your concept happened to be about art. "Mine is not dogma", countered Charlie, "rather is it a feeling, more than a belief".

Not even a book of close on 800 pages liberally illustrated with many hitherto unseen photographs, lovingly compiled and finely written, can fully explain that *feeling*. But David Robinson has a splendid try. His labour of love is also a critical appraisal of the first magnitude.

PETER COTES

JOURNALS

The summer issue of *New Humanist* (edited by Jim Herrick) is devoted to the paranormal. The contents include *Scepticism and the Paranormal* (Paul Kurtz), *The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal* (Roy Wallis) and *Science and Parascience* (C. E. M. Hansel).

There is a full account of the recent international conference organised by CSICOP, and a satirical look at astrology. Book reviews are contributed by H. J. Blackham, on Wittgenstein, and Beverly Halstead, on Darwin.

New Humanist is obtainable from the Rationalist Press Association, 88 Islington High Street, London N1 8EW, price £1 plus 22p postage.

Details of *Sceptical Inquirer*, the journal of CSICOP, are obtainable from 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ.

Victorian Values are Alive and Well

The magistrate in the Gay's the Word Bookshop case, in which nine defendants have been charged with conspiring to import "indecent or obscene literature", has reserved his judgment until 20 August. It will then be known if the accused will have to face a full Crown Court trial.

On the final day of the committal proceedings defence counsel Geoffrey Robertson told the court that the law under which the Gay's the Word case had been brought dated from 1876. It was passed by a Parliament alarmed by imports of "indecent" chess sets which found their way into girls' boarding schools!

Newspaper reports are always required by "The Freethinker". The source and date should be clearly marked and the clippings sent to the Editor at 14 Coundon Road, Coventry, West Midlands CV1 4AW

Sceptics' Conference

JIM HERRICK

Rumour has it that one recommendation for the appointment to the Chair in the Paranormal at Edinburgh University, for which funds were bequeathed by Arthur Koestler, was Arthur Koestler himself. According to the story, the University would await communication from Koestler as to how the salary should be paid! Another means of gaining money by paranormal activity was proposed at the recent international conference of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal, held at University College, London. Sceptics collectively scrutinised the paranormal for one-and-a-half days and £250,000 was offered for performance of various paranormal feats.

The money is an accumulation of individual offers for spiritualism, psychic powers, precognition, UFOs and other events. All you have to do is roll up and perform under agreed conditions. A super-Geller with diverse powers ought to be able to scoop the jackpot and take home the £250,000 with no trouble. But those with paranormal powers seem more coy than most in collecting cash. Astrologers will accept TV fees for their predictions, spiritualists will charge entrance fees to their corridors to the other side, psychics will lap up fees for finding missing people or locating off-course 'planes; everyone will take a backhander for giving an account of themselves to the press. Yet when it comes to demonstrating their powers *under agreed conditions* . . . ah well, paranormal powers don't lend themselves to use for profit and spiritual forces cannot bear the gaze of the sceptic. So even though the "amazing Randi, magician and investigator", carries a large cheque around in his pocket, claimants do not materialise and his generosity is thwarted.

CSICOP was founded in 1976 when its first meeting was held at the State University of New York, at Buffalo, under the sponsorship of the American Humanist Association. The chairman, Paul Kurtz, wrote in 1981: "Little did we know that we would grow so rapidly. We are now an independent non-profit scientific organisation; we have the cooperation of more than 200 investigators in the United States and eight in other countries; and we have established active UFO, Education and Paranormal Health Claims subcommittees". He continued: "We have insisted from the beginning, though we may be sceptical, we cannot prejudice paranormal issues but must submit them to objective examination, careful research and fair-minded analysis".

The conference was full of objective examination and fair-minded analysis. There were lectures on UFOs, reincarnation memories, astrology, fire-walking, parapsychology, the psychology of belief and fringe medicine. On close investigation most UFOs were found to have prosaic explanations,

recollections of previous incarnations recalled under hypnosis turned out to be forgotten memories of historical novels, astrology was shown to be unproven and inherently unlikely, and fire-walking was found to have an explanation based on physics rather than super-normal powers. Parapsychologists conducting experiments in "psi" to demonstrate the existence of phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition were seen to be sophisticated and genuinely serious, but flawed in practice and not as yet able to demonstrate the existence of such powers.

A speaker suggested that people's need to believe in a supernatural level came from their need to cope with uncertainty in an unpredictable and disturbing environment. Fringe medicine was said to be relevant to the conference because there was the same entrenched desire to believe without evidence and because it is often difficult to distinguish from the paranormal.

One of the most entertaining and lively lectures was given by James Randi, the magician whose book on Uri Geller demolished the spoon-bender's reputation. In describing how he investigated the Columbus poltergeist he demonstrated that sceptics' accounts of events could be riveting, and rather more sensitive and compassionate than that of the true believer. Essentially he found that a disturbed adolescent girl was breaking up her foster parents' home, by smashing all the glass objects and throwing around the room almost every mobile object she could lay her hands on. Adolescent tantrums and need for attention must be faced by many parents, but few youngsters are ingenious enough successfully to put all the blame on a mischievous ghost.

CSICOP needs more speakers with Randi's vivid powers of presentation, for one of the problems in putting forward the sceptical viewpoint is that it often seems dry-as-dust in comparison with the thrill of the unknown. The excitement of the complexity of human behaviour and the fascination of scientific research are failing to reach the public.

At the conference dinner the CSICOP "In Praise of Reason Award" was presented to Antony Flew, renowned philosopher and well-known rationalist and individualist. He was praised for his honesty in being prepared to debate with anyone anywhere. In his reply he said that he felt it was safer to debate Jesus with fundamentalists in Lynchburg than to admit to being a supporter of President Reagan and Mrs Thatcher among intellectuals. He gave an account of the development of his interest in parapsychology, and told us that we were dealing with a statistical phenomenon rather than any agreed reality. Professor Flew said he was disturbed by parapsychologists' lack of attempt to provide causal theories for

their researches.

The conference concluded with a remarkable performance by the famous television "man of mystery" David Berglass. He convincingly demonstrated precognition and clairvoyant reading blindfold in front of the most sceptical audiences imaginable. Then without giving away trade secrets, he revealed that it was all a conjuror's trick. His purpose was to demonstrate the ease with which people could be deceived.

Is it all worth exposing or investigating? Many of these phenomena are part of the entertainment industry and not really worth looking into; indeed they are given too much credence by serious research. But at a time when newspapers, magazines and television devote far more attention to these

matters than to science, and when there are said to be more astrologers than astronomers in America, it is surely necessary to cast a sceptical eye in this direction. The prosaic explanation is often less headline-worthy than the fantastic one. So it is up to sceptics and scientists to make their researches comprehensible and exciting for the general public.

The paranormal should not be treated as a single phenomenon; it is a range of phenomena, spreading from the obviously nosensical and fraudulent to the potentially plausible. At one end of the spectrum there may be important discoveries to make; when precognition is proved the bookies will have to shut up the betting shops, and when telepathy is no longer in doubt everyone with British Telecom shares had better sell them fast.

LETTERS

THE RESURRECTION MYTH

Although there is nothing inherently implausible in Stuart Campbell's attempted interpretation of the Christian resurrection myth in non-supernatural terms (The Freethinker, May), the need for such exercises depends upon establishing that Jesus really did exist and is not a composite figure created from the many would-be messiahs who, as Josephus shows, were active in Palestine during the period which saw the birth of what was to become the Christian religion. Palestine, Josephus noted, "was swarming with brigands and imposters who deceived the people". But however varied the claims of such messianic hopefuls were, they were one and all men, not godlings, and each claimed to be the anointed one, a term applied to temporal kings. Hebrew prophecies all point to this and popular traditions all confirmed it. If there are any historical fragments in the gospels (Mr Campbell does not say whether he has the canonical or non-canonical versions in mind, or both), one might well be the idea of the restoration of the political supremacy of Israel. A dead messiah was, in effect, a fake, and it is highly unlikely that tales of such a being having risen again would enhance his reputation or enthuse his followers, who, after all, had lived in expectation of a second David. I submit that the resurrection story was manufactured, or adopted, once the sect had become essentially a Gentile cult divorced from Judaism.

The first Roman reference to the Christian cult occurs in a letter from the Governor of Bithynia, Pliny, to Trajan. Dated sometime between 106 and 112 CE, it speaks of Christians worshipping Christ as a god in a pre-dawn ceremony, noting, also, that they met for another function in the evening, a form of communal meal. These facts are interesting, for they show that Jesus was at a very early date envisaged by some Christians as simply a god. It also shows that the time for worship was at night, and it is worth noting that pre-dawn rituals were commonplace amongst the religious cults of Egypt. To the ancients, the night, not the day, was the time of the mysteries; so we can see elements of mysticism had become evident in the Christian cult at an early date. The intermingling of various other cults and Christianity is also attested by Lucius Servianus, the elderly brother-in-law of Hadrian, who in a letter to the emperor dated 134, writes of Christians in Egypt being worshippers of Serapis, even "those who call themselves bishops of

Christ pay their vows to Serapis . . . there is no Christian presbyter who is not an astrologer, a soothsayer, a quack. . . They all of them have the same god, Money. Christians adore him, Jews worship him, all the Gentiles give him adoration".

Egypt was a major centre for the Roman wheat trade, so the spread of such confused ideas as definite Christian tenets would be easy. Irenaeus, Tertullian and Hippolytus fulminated against what they saw as the adulteration of doctrine by pagan concepts, yet if such doctrines had not been absorbed the Christian cult would have remained a minor sect within Judaism. Instead it challenged the major cults of the Roman empire by offering the same doctrinal concepts but eventually a far greater authoritarian structure which had political value to the State.

Mr Campbell wishes us to accept that Jesus saw himself as not one messiah but two. However, this certainly does not fit in with the Jewish conception of what the expected messiah was. He would be a political and military leader, not a god, for the term means anointed one. In Jewish history these were the kings of Israel, the religious figures were the prophets, and it was these people who anointed the individual chosen to be king. The notion of the suffering servant, instanced by Mr Campbell, has more in keeping with Mithraic concepts than Jewish; Mithra Tauroctonus, the Mithra who sacrifices himself in order to give divine life to the cosmos and therewith men. The Mithraic formula, "Viros servasti eternali sanguine fuso" ("you have saved men by the spilling of the eternal blood") could well be Christian, and it was taken over by the Church. Mithra, according to Plutarch, is the mesites (the mediator), who stands between heaven and hell. This is not Jewish messianism but it is Christianity. The resurrection drama of Mithra, coupled with the conditioning over many years brought about by contact and conflict with other cults, gave ample reason and opportunity to mould the image of Jesus away from a mere mortal to the immortal. I would suggest that the initial resurrection tale was borrowed from Egypt and completed with elements taken from mystery cults like Mithraism.

The tale of the resurrection, like that of the virgin birth and other paranormal events associated with Jesus are matched by similar tales relating to other gods or god-men. The world of scholarship treats such stories about the now discarded gods of antiquity with academic detachment. But when it comes to such stories about Jesus most historians run away, leaving it to the churchmen and their tame academics to babble on about his wonders and to defend the absurd. This

situation prevails because the Church still exercises great political influence, and has vast economic resources. This buys respect, and allows the ridiculous to be treated as though it was sober historical fact. One day historians will treat the Jesus fantasies in the impassionate manner they do those of Mithras, Horus, Thor and other gods and goddesses, and may well wonder why it took so long before the world treated Osiris and Jesus as identical myths, a product of primitive ideas nurtured by fear, ignorance and superstition aided by emotionalism. If Jesus ever lived he would be the most astonished of people if he could come back and hear what the various Christian sects now teach about him.

ROBERT MORRELL

JESUS: HIS BIRTH AND DEATH

Trevor A. Millar (Letter, June) is somewhat confused. Isaiah's prophecy has no bearing on the question of Jesus' historicity. Since the Gospel birth narrative is largely mythical and has nothing to do with the historical Jesus, the prophecy is irrelevant. In any case, Paine's interpretation is wrong; the Hebrew text does not use the word for a virgin — it uses the word for a young woman ("virgin" appeared in the Greek translation). Whatever Isaiah was saying, he was not concerned with a future Messiah. It is true that modern Christianity has absorbed many of the beliefs of other religions, but it does not follow that Jesus did not exist. If "rational atheists" wish to argue that Jesus did not exist then they must show that their hypothesis is the simplest explanation for the Gospels (let alone Christianity). I dispute that the Jesus myth theory is the simplest explanation.

May I ask Ted Goodman why he dates the Crucifixion to 31 CE? In 31 neither the 14th nor the 15th Nisan fell on a Friday, and as a result Jesus cannot have been crucified in that year. Experts agree that Jesus must have been crucified in either 30 or 33, the only years between 26 and 35 when the 14th Nisan fell on a Friday (15th Nisan did not fall on a Friday during those years). 33 CE was accepted by Renan and Ogg (the experts on this matter), and it is the year accepted by the Vatican.

I think that Roman soldiers accompanied the Temple guards for two reasons. The first is the description by John of the commander of the posse as *chilarchos* (18:12), the Greek for a Roman military tribune in charge of 1000 men (or even a legion). Of course John might have exaggerated his rank. The second reason is the fact that Caiaphas, the *de facto* High Priest, was an appointee of the Roman governor and undoubtedly his puppet and informer. The fact that Jesus was brought before Pilate the following day indicates that he was a prisoner of the Romans not of the Jews, even though Caiaphas may have been instrumental in arranging the arrest. In fact, I think it probable that the arrest was made by Roman troops, accompanied by Jewish guards.

Jesus cannot have been arrested "for blasphemy". It was not blasphemous to claim to be the Messiah, who was, after all, expected any time. It was considered blasphemy to speak the name of God (Jahweh), but Jesus knew better than to do that. The priests may, later, have considered Jesus' claim to be The Son of Man (the future ruler of the Kingdom) to be blasphemous, but he had already been arrested. Jesus must have been arrested on the charge for which he later stood trial and on which he was condemned to death. Since the crime was specified as claiming to be "The King of the Jews" he must have been arrested on that charge, necessarily by Roman troops.

STUART CAMPBELL

RADICAL, VICIOUS AND RUDE

Last year I decided that I would no longer contribute to The Freethinker magazine as I considered it was masquerading under an erroneous label. Instead of encouraging independent thought and tolerance, it was to a large part a magazine of the radical Left, expounding views with a viciousness and rudeness which was certainly not becoming to many of its contributors who undoubtedly are people of high intellect and learning. But I was heartened when I read some letters from readers who also aired my views about the politics of your magazine and I thought that probably there might be some change of direction, so that it would concentrate on espousing the cause of secularism in language which would be more in keeping with learned debate.

There is nothing which scares the pants off me more than people who are so sure they are right that they are determined to make other people conform to such views. In my opinion a good politician and a good magazine should aim to convert and not antagonise. If I were trying to influence my colleagues, both Christian and Islamic, I would certainly not leave The Freethinker on the table of our common room with such quite unnecessary insulting language about different religious denominations. Perhaps if the magazine attracted a wider range of contributors, both from the secular side and from the religious denominations, and engaged in informed debate in a somewhat more courteous manner, it would not have to appeal for extra funds from its small circle of readers, but instead would be known for its contribution to tolerant informed debate in making the case for secularism.

Having received the second reminder about my subscription I will give it one more chance.

JAMES BLUNDELL

A QUESTION OF CHOICE

If true, E. M. Karbac's witty remark that The Freethinker "surely contains more comment about Jesus than many religious publications" (July) would be an interesting observation on changes in some sections of the religious press. Nevertheless, the fact remains that The Freethinker was founded to "wage relentless war against Superstition in general, and against Christian Superstition in particular".

Christian origins, like theatre reviews and debates for or against Marxism, do not appeal to all readers, but if I had to choose I would rather endless argument about what really happened in the first century than that The Freethinker should end up "stressing the rationalist solution to today's problems". Whenever I hear the Brand X-ist solution to the world's problems, I wince!

There is no solution to the world's problems. There may be some solutions, and rationalists, if they set aside *folie de grandeur*, can offer a few of them. Sometimes, of course, what changes the world for the better is not having The Answer but asking an original question.

I do not share your correspondent's distaste for "wrangling about ancient origins and histories". I would rather the mentality of wrangling rationalists like Charles Darwin and T. H. Huxley than that of Big Brother. Without any critical interest in the past, biology, astronomy and physics would wither and ossify. We would return to a barbarous dark age where the official view of the past and the final solution for the future would be dictated to us by a stultified intellect remarkably like that of the "mediaeval churchman" to which E. M. Karbac refers.

NIGEL SINNOTT

survive to undertake these duties. Banks overlooks the many ways in which this system broke down in nineteenth-century Britain. Not only were non-contributory or contributory pension or superannuation schemes introduced for a growing number of professions, but commercial insurance schemes (including employers' liability in 1880) and cooperative friendly, benevolent and building societies were giving large sections of the working classes the security of home ownership and income in their old age or during life's crises (finally met by the introduction of State health and unemployment insurance in 1909), so that they lost most of their dependence on adult children. It is interesting that the cooperative movement was pioneered in the textile areas where family limitation began.

Malthus's principle was never intended as a precise formulation, and leaves scope for much debate on its *modus operandi*. But how can its reality be seriously questioned in academic, as distinct from political, circles? How can Dr Royle say that "reflections on Malthus after a century and a half suggest that his funeral is long overdue" — however distressing it may be to see newspaper photos of starving Ethiopians beside those of American grain gluts? I agree with him that there are both social justice and political expediency in "soaking the rich" nationally and internationally to give to the poor, but it is folly to imagine this will enrich all the poor and change their way of life.

The only historical conundrum that calls Malthusianism into question is the fact that for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in England, while the population rose, so did the standard of living. This has generally been explained by noting that, even without expanded farm acreages, food production has grown by animal and plant breeding and other advances in agricultural science not foreseen by Malthus. It could be added that this was supplemented by emigration to, and exploitation of the resources of, the British Empire. In particular, it was emigration that solved the problem of Irish overpopulation. Neither of these two devices is open to today's Third World. Buried in a note to his last chapter, Banks offers a valuable new insight. Following Malthus, we are accustomed to think of the simplest geometric progression for population growth: 1:2:4, etc. If food expands by the simplest arithmetic progression of 1:2:3, the population is distressed by the third generation. But if, through the childlessness of some couples and "prudence" of others, the geometric growth is reduced to 1:1.5:2.25:3.37:5.07, the population is only slightly worse off after the fifth generation. That is, it prospers for a century.

An important point missed by Royle may be called neo-neo-Malthusian. Both he and Malthus

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Details of summer programme obtainable from Joan Wimble, Secretary, Flat 5, 67 St. Aubyns, Hove, telephone Brighton 733215. The Prince Albert, Trafalgar Street, Brighton. Sunday, 1 September, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Speaker: Jim Herrick. Subject to be announced.

British Humanist Association. Summer School, Debden House, Debden Green, Loughton, Essex, 19-23 August. Details obtainable from the organiser: Don Liversedge, 25 Chandlers Road, Harrow, HA1 4QX, telephone: 01-861 1730.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of Forum meetings from the secretary, 59 Fox Covert Avenue, Edinburgh, EH12 6UH, 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, 15 Queen Square, Glasgow G41 2BG, telephone 041-424 0545.

Humanist Holidays. Christmas at Folkestone, Kent. Details obtainable from Betty Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12 0NA, telephone 01-673 6234.

Mora Burnet Memorial Meeting. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1, Sunday 8 September, 3 pm. Those intending to be present are requested to inform the Humanist Housing Association, 311 Kentish Town Road, London NW5, telephone 01-485 8776.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 11 September, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Report of the BHA Annual Conference.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 16 September, 7.45 pm. Jim Herrick: George Eliot, Victorian Agnostic.

were thinking only in terms of food production. I am convinced — and so are all thoughtful Third World leaders, whatever their political persuasions — that you cannot indefinitely feed their peoples on the uncertain surpluses of the First World, without structural changes to their societies in the long term and radical contraceptive programmes in the short. But put that aside. Increasingly the critical factor facing the World, First, Second and Third, is not food. What of pure water at an affordable price, fossil fuel and other non-renewable resources (despite their temporary glut), the capacity of the environment to absorb pollution, the integrity of wildernesses to preserve gene pools, the extent of natural areas and other components of biological living space to maintain — let alone enhance — the quality of life?

No, Malthus may be dead but he won't lie down.

Welcoming the Commissioners' main recommendation, a spokesman for the Writers' Guild of Great Britain said: "As an organisation which is fundamentally opposed to censorship, the Guild naturally approves of any move to clear away the ancient and archaic statutes which penalise or inhibit the free expression of belief and opinion. Recalling the circumstances in which this law was last used to circumvent the rights of a defendant to introduce expert witnesses, we think that its abolition is long overdue".

The National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts also welcomed the Law Commission's recommendations.

NCROPA's honorary director, David Webb, said that any laws which restrict freedom of publication and freedom of expression are anathema to the organisation. He added: "We have always made it clear that although our campaign is centred around the Obscene Publications Acts and is seeking their repeal, the repeal or fundamental amendment of many other relevant Acts would be an essential part of the success of our aims.

"Of all such Acts which proliferate in this censor-ridden country, the blasphemy laws are probably the most iniquitous. Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than when that appalling phenomenon, Mrs Mary Whitehouse, used them successfully to prosecute *Gay News* for publishing James Kirkup's homosexual poem, 'The Love That Dares to Speak its Name', in its June 1976 edition.

"Whilst NCROPA strongly urges that the Law Commission's recommendations are acted upon, in the light of the present Parliament's extremely repressive and puritanical policies (the passing of the monstrous Video Recordings Act 1984 is alone witness enough to that) and the depressing 'Victorian Values' mentality of the present Government, regrettably it does not hold out much hope for them to be implemented in the foreseeable future.

"On this matter, however, NCROPA very much hopes that it will be proved wrong and that Parliament will show considerably more enlightenment and tolerance than it has done throughout the past seven years".

Diana Rookledge, chairman of the British Humanist Association, said that blasphemy law was illogical and discriminatory. A wide range of religious views are adhered to in Britain, and there are growing numbers of unbelievers.

"Society does not need the protection of such a law. There already are laws under which behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace can be dealt with. The BHA is pleased that the Law Commissioners have recommended abolition of blasphemy law".

Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular

Society, commented that the Archbishop of Canterbury still demands protection of the law against abuse or ridicule of his church and its doctrines, the legal justification being to prevent breaches of the peace.

"Needless to say", she added, "we atheists have always had to put up with abuse and ridicule from Christians, but we have never breached the peace on that account. In fact, we have complained only about being tortured, burnt at the stake, and so forth, not about mere verbal abuse. On the contrary, we have always favoured the robust exchange of ideas.

"Are Christians so much less tolerant and peaceful than atheists that they cannot be trusted, unless given special police protection, under the criminal law, to keep the peace when abused or ridiculed?"

Nicolas Walter said The Committee Against Blasphemy Law welcomed the final recommendations of the Law Commission, especially the majority proposal that the present law of blasphemy be abolished.

"It notes with regret", he added, "the minority proposal that the common law offence protecting Christianity should be replaced by a statutory offence protecting all religions". But CABL also noted with relief the stipulations that such an offence would include the element of intent, and that any prosecution would have to be approved by the Director of Public Prosecutions.

• Two Cheers for the Law Commission, page 119.

Bishop's Move

A Roman Catholic church which for centuries has been the focal point of an anti-semitic myth has at last been closed on the orders of the Bishop of Innsbruck. The Pilgrims' Church stands on a hill called the Judenstein (Jew Stone). The site is dedicated to a boy who was allegedly sacrificed by Jews who purchased him from his parents.

The martyr is known as Anderl of Rinn. There is no evidence that he even existed and the Vatican dismisses the story of his murder as a myth. Nevertheless the local faithful claim that his remains are buried in the church in which a representation of his gruesome martyrdom was displayed.

The bishop issued instruction that the pilgrimages should be discontinued. And when the parishioners, incited by local Nazis, organised a demonstration, it was decided that the church would be closed indefinitely.

The Socialist Educational Association has drawn up a plan to integrate all voluntary schools into a single State system. It was approved at the Association's annual conference last month. The conference also voted for an end to religious assemblies in schools.