

# The Freethinker

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## ANGLICAN CHURCH "WRONG ON ALMOST EVERY ETHICAL ISSUE"—LORD PAGET

Lord Jenkins of Putney, moving the Second Reading of the Suicide Act 1961 (Amendment) Bill in the House of Lords last month, recalled that nearly a quarter of a century ago the Conservative Government decided it should no longer be a crime to take your own life. To minimise the opposition, "which naturally enough any progressive move must expect to encounter", the Government introduced a completely new offence — that of aiding or counselling or procuring the suicide of another, which carried a penalty of up to 14 years' imprisonment. "There was no provision for any defence", he added, "so it became a new crime to assist in bringing about what was no longer a crime".

Lord Jenkins said that in the course of time it was realised that to help another to leave this world was not necessarily a criminal act.

"Indeed, there were circumstances in which a reasonable person might regard it as brave and compassionate. . .

"*The Sunday Times*, no less, gave outright and unequivocal support to voluntary euthanasia a year ago, arising from the committal of Mrs Charlotte Hough to nine months' imprisonment for assisting, or attempting to assist, an old friend to leave this earth when, for very good reasons, she urgently desired to go".

Opposition to the Bill was led by the Earl of Cork and Orrery who moved an amendment which, as he informed the House, would effectively kill the Bill.

After promising that his speech would not be a long one he proceeded to outline a hypothetical situation.

"Let us imagine an unmarried daughter in her middle or late thirties living with her mother. Her mother is ill, housebound, demanding, dependent entirely on her daughter, who, in the straitened circumstances which this family seem to enjoy, has

no life of her own. She can scarcely go out. Her whole time is devoted to the needs of her mother, who puts great burdens upon her.

"She sees her life fading away and all chances of leading any form of worthwhile life receding into the distance while her mother becomes more and more difficult but has a considerable span of life ahead of her. About this she can do nothing. Then, lo and behold, suddenly in what I insist is my imaginary story, there comes upon the statute book and to her ears this Bill from her noble benefactor, the noble Lord Jenkins. The clouds roll away. She can acquire a drug — it is not difficult to do that — which will provide the happy dispatch for her mother".

Lord Paget of Northampton commenced his speech by challenging another Member's assertion that when he was a young man suicide was regarded as the second greatest crime after murder.

He said: "The crime next to murder, as juries were constantly told, was abortion. Now abortion is State-subsidised. Ethics change with experience. We have to consider life as it develops. The need not to bring unwanted children into an already overcrowded world has been recognised, and our acceptance of crime changes.

"I base my case upon the question of human rights. Of all animal creation, man alone has been given the right, the privilege, to decide whether he lives or dies. That is man's decision given to him as it is given to none of the beasts. The ox lives because he must. Man lives because he chooses, and to deprive him of that choice is to me an invasion of human rights and I should like to see it taken to the Court of Human Rights.

"Having said that, it drives me to say that it is very much the experience of people I have known

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# The Freethinker

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Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

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# NEWS

## PRAY SILENCE

The British Council of Churches made its fatuous contribution to the debate on the Anglo-Irish Agreement by inviting prayers for its success. The Council's appeal for "Christian forbearance" must rank high among the sick jokes of the year.

Northern Ireland is one of the few remaining outposts of flourishing Christianity in the British Isles. It is a society divided strictly along religious lines. In a city like Belfast a person's religion can be ascertained by the name of the street he lives in. Institutional discrimination and terrorism by the police and paramilitary groups against Catholics enables the Church to play the role of their protector. The priesthood exercises almost complete control over Catholic education, political, cultural and social life.

On the Protestant side, the poisonous influence of the Orange Order and most of the churches has fostered hatred and bigotry that is incomprehensible to the mainland Britisher. It is notable that Irish people can live in harmony together anywhere but in Ireland itself.

Until the middle of the last century relations between Protestants and Catholics were reasonably good, particularly in Belfast, then an oasis of liberalism. That state of affairs ended when three Protestant clergymen — the Ian Paisleys of their day — launched an anti-Catholic crusade of unprecedented savagery. The Orange Order grew in strength and influence, the religious ghettos developed and the seeds of today's problems took root. A century ago Lord Randolph Churchill discovered the Orange card; politicians and religious zealots have been playing it since.

Of course the likelihood of the Anglo-Irish Agreement solving the Northern Ireland question is rather remote. It is already under fire from the Nationalists for not recognising the need to abolish the artificial geographical boundary that was imposed in 1920 against the wishes of the majority of Irish people and is maintained today against the wishes of the majority of British people.

The Unionists claim that the Agreement was drawn up without their participation and is therefore unfair to them. Maybe it is, but they must face the facts of 20th-century life. The sun has set on the British Empire, and the mother country is not in the business of being fair to her few remaining colonial subjects. This may be something of a shock to Ulster "loyalists", generations of whom have been a source of cheap labour and — particularly during the first World War — willing cannon fodder.

# AND NOTES

Post-imperial Britain is cutting her losses, and they are immense in Northern Ireland. While the mainland educational, health, housing and social services are denied adequate funding, some £1,500 million a year goes to subsidise the mini-statelet across the Irish Sea. In addition there is the cost of maintaining the army in Northern Ireland which is estimated to be between £100 and £120 million annually.

On top of this crippling financial burden Britain's reputation in the world is not enhanced by the union. Mrs Thatcher has met her match in the abrasive and abusive Rev Ian Paisley; uncharitable elements say that they deserve each other. His insulting tirades against the Prime Minister may run like water off a duck's back. But this Christian demagogue who, like it or not, is the authentic voice of the majority of Ulster Protestants, is infuriating and embarrassing Government Ministers and top civil servants. It is not surprising that they prefer to talk with the Republic's more dignified and civilised representatives.

For centuries religion has played a crucial role in Irish affairs. But for the churches' baneful influence the country would be united and peaceful today. The British Council of Churches should now have the decency to mind its own business.

## THE BELIEVERS

Tim Lenton, the Christian Weekly Newspapers columnist, has once again got the hump over an item in *The Freethinker*. On this occasion he comments: "However exciting, unpredictable and ephemeral the world we live in, one thing can be relied upon. The secular humanist monthly, *The Freethinker*, will continue its tireless attacks on what it thinks is Christianity".

The clear implication in Mr Lenton's jibe is that *The Freethinker* and freethinkers do not know what Christianity is. True, mere unbelievers are sometimes flummoxed over this particular brand of theism. But then ask 20 people coming out of morning service next Sunday what *they* think is Christianity; it is very likely that you will receive 20 different answers.

Christians are no longer able to butcher other Christians over doctrinal differences, but the fundamental disagreements and divisions remain. They worship the "one true God" in hundreds of separate churches, sects and groups. Their beliefs and teachings are Bible-based and they are Jesuitic sycophants one and all. But even in these ecumenical times many of them are scarcely on speaking terms,

being supremely confident that their church/sect/group alone knows what is Christianity.

Since 1881 this publication has battled against not what it "thinks" Christianity is, but what experience and history shows it to be — a manifestation of superstition with a record that is one of the greatest disasters in the human story. Tim Lenton is right in one respect: *The Freethinker* will continue its tireless attacks.

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Charles Herman Prince has died after following biblical advice on snake-handling and drinking poison. The fundamentalist preacher was bitten by a rattlesnake during a sermon at Greenville, Tennessee. After being bitten he refused medical assistance and drank strychnine. He died in agony 38 hours later as his followers prayed for a miracle cure. They have vowed to continue with the snake-handling ritual "in the name of Jesus".

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## SHOP EARLY FOR CHRISTMAS

The Most Reverend and Indignant Derrick Childs, Archbishop of Wales, was so "appalled and incensed" over a series of naughty Christmas cards on sale this year that he has called for a police inquiry.

One card shows the Virgin Mary in bed with the Archangel Gabriel. She is starkers and he is asking: "What time did you say Joseph gets back from his woodwork class?"

On another card Mary is again in bed saying: "As a conception, that was immaculate".

The Archbishop said he was shocked that such cards were on sale in a Christian country. He added: "I thought the Archbishop of Canterbury should be aware of the problem".

A representative of the Rickmansworth firm which produces the cards declared that they would not be withdrawn from sale. Miss Hilary Spooner agreed that the cards are naughty, "but if people don't like them they should just not buy them". The National Campaign for the Repeal of the Obscene Publications Acts congratulated the firm on refusing to withdraw the cards "despite pressure from the Anti-Sex League".

Clergymen who complained about the naughty Christmas cards refused to say which shops were stocking them. Spoilsports! But *Freethinker* readers who wish to stock up early for Christmas may like to know that the cards are obtainable from Emotional Rescue, 24 Ebury Road, Rickmansworth, Herts.

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Two expatriate Indian workers have been sentenced to death in the United Arab Emirates for committing adultery. The court directed that they should be stoned to death, according to Islamic law.



## ELECTION WINNER

In its "On This Day" series, *The Times* recently reproduced the forged Zinoviev "Red Letter" which was first published in the *Daily Mail* just before the 1924 General Election. The letter, headed "Very Secret", was allegedly written by the president of the Communist International to the British Communist Party. There is no doubt that it contributed to Labour's electoral defeat that year.

Perhaps *The Times* should also have reprinted its own editorial of 7 March 1928 on the subject. When the Labour Party demanded an investigation into the forgery, the Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, refused. *The Times* declared: "No reason seems to exist why the demand should not be granted. The refusal might confirm some lingering suspicion that the present Government has something to hide".

No doubt the Government had plenty to hide regarding the Zinoviev Letter. Forgery it was — by a White Russian emigré named Druzhelovsky who was working for the Polish Secret Service. Crude it was — headed "Third Communist International" when there was never such an organisation. The Third International, as it was then, later became the Communist International. The address "British Communist Party" would never have been used by the protocol-conscious Russians for the "Communist Party of Great Britain". It was signed "Kuisinen, Secretary", when the Secretary was Kolarov.

The name McManus, presumably Arthur McManus, a British Communist who was in Moscow at the time of the letter's date, appears on one of the two letters received by the *Daily Mail* as a signatory, and as a recipient on the other. On 26 October 1924, Arthur McManus, speaking at the Ardwick Picture Theatre, Manchester, challenged the authorities to prosecute him. They never did.

No original of the "Red Letter" was ever produced, only typed "copies".

The mysterious role of Captain J. D. Gregory, of the Foreign Office, Mrs Bradley Dyne and Conrad Donald im Thurn was never investigated.

Later, after being dismissed from the Foreign Office, Captain Gregory wrote: "It doesn't matter in the least whether the Zinoviev Letter was a copy, or a facsimile or a clever imitation". Quite! It served its electoral purpose.

During the following decade the *Daily Mail* was lavish in its praises for Mosley's Fascists, as it now is for the party of Victorian Values.

**Stephen Heath, an atheist, has won the 250-year-old Scatonian Prize given by Cambridge University for sacred poetry. The entries, on the subject of Moses and Aaron, were submitted anonymously. The winner, who received £500, said he expected that the university Establishment would be shocked. "But they find most things I do shocking", he added.**

## Sunday Shopping:

An attempt by the Bishop of Birmingham and other leading Christians radically to alter the scope of the Shops Bill failed when the Bill came up for Second Reading in the House of Lords last month. The Bishop moved an amendment to the Bill "that the law should be amended so as to rationalise restrictions on trading hours without such extensive deregularisation as the Bill proposes". His supporters included the prominent Methodists, Lord Soper and Viscount Tonypandy. Their case was based largely on a propaganda leaflet issued by a pressure group known as the Pro-Sunday Coalition. Its sponsors include the British Evangelical Council, CARE Campaigns (formerly the Nationwide Festival of Light) and the Lord's Day Observance Society.

Moving the Second Reading, Lord Glenarthur, Under-Secretary of State, Home Office, told the House: "The first restrictions on Sunday trading date from 1448 but, in more recent times, until 1936, the relevant statute was the Puritan-influenced Sunday Observance Act 1677".

He said that all should have freedom of choice and that the views of some, however well intentioned, should not lead to statutory restrictions on others. It was not expected that Sunday trading will become anything like universal.

"Many shops in sectors like do-it-yourself and gardening are already open, legally or illegally, and we do not expect a very great increase in Sunday trading. A survey by the Polytechnic of London has suggested that 20 per cent of shops might open regularly on Sundays, with more widescale opening near Christmas and on other special occasions. In Scotland, where there has been no operative prohibition of Sunday trading for many years, a survey of shopkeepers showed that only 16 per cent currently open or intended to open on a Sunday".

Baroness Trumpington, Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Security, made a scathing attack on the Bill's critics.

"The dreadful so-called consequences of changes have absolutely no basis in reality, despite what the Bishop of Birmingham said", she declared.

"Let us think of all the things that we can do on a Sunday now. We can go to a theatre, a cinema, a restaurant, a pub, an ice rink and a swimming pool. We can, if they chose to open, go to a bank, a post office, an estate agent or the Stock Exchange.

"If there is any force in the argument that shops should be statutorily closed, why not pubs and cinemas", she asked.

Baroness Trumpington then gave some examples of the "tremendous amount of humbug and hypocrisy over this Bill". Reminding Church representatives that people in glass houses should not throw stones, she said that visitors to the Bishop of

# Bishop's Move Defeated at Westminster

Birmingham's cathedral will find its shop open on a Sunday, "selling church literature and various souvenirs, including key rings, pens, cards, books and diaries.

"We come to Canterbury Cathedral where goods presently on offer include the Bible, two other books, colour slides, ties, gramophone records, and strangest of all a book entitled *Pubs in Kent*, a comprehensive guide compiled by the Kent branch of the Campaign for Real Ale.

"How many of those items fall within the exemptions listed in the Fifth Schedule to the Shops Act 1950? Apart from Southwark Cathedral, which has no Sunday shop, it appears that the majority of the large well-known cathedrals in the United Kingdom are open on a Sunday and have no hesitation in selling all types of goods.

"I hope that I shall not be struck by a fiery bolt if I say that as the law stands the deans and chapters of those cathedrals are guilty of criminal offences in being open for the sale of those objects, and it is at least arguable that the most reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury himself is guilty of at least aiding and abetting in the commission of those offences. The most reverend Primate would of course be joined in the dock by my right honourable friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, responsible for illegal trading on Sunday by the Tower of London, all of which goes to show how crazy the present situation is".

Referring to the position of shopworkers when deregulation takes place, Baroness Trumpington said that "all shopworkers in employment on the day before the commencement date of this new Act, provided that they have not agreed to work on a Sunday, will be able to refuse to work on a Sunday. If they are subsequently sacked this will be regarded as automatically unfair and they will be able to appeal to an industrial tribunal to be reinstated and receive financial compensation.

"They will also be able to appeal to an industrial tribunal if an employer attempts to pressurise them to work on Sundays through refusing promotion or training opportunities. Our proposals will cover shop assistants and other employees engaged in the operation of a shop; for example, managers, lift attendants, delivery drivers and cleaners.

"We are also aware that a relatively high proportion of shopworkers are part-timers, and to ensure that they have the same protection as full-time employees all existing employees, irrespective of how long they have worked for their employer, or how few hours they work in a week, will be able to claim these rights.

"These are important and effective safeguards for

existing shopworkers, and existing employees need no longer be worried that they may be forced to work on Sundays".

The National Consumer Council expressed its opposition to the Bishop of Birmingham's amendment. In a submission sent to members of the House, it answered some of the objections raised by opponents of the Shops Bill. It was absurd to make shopkeepers criminals because they opened at times to suit their customers.

Commenting on the objection that Sunday trading would damage the quality of life, the NCC said that all the evidence suggests the contrary.

"People will have more choices. Those who want to go to church will continue to do so. In Scotland more people already go to church on Sunday than in England and Wales. Those who want to have a restful day or visit the family will do so".

It described as "nonsense" the claim that Sunday trading will mean an increase in prices.

"The economic analysis carried out for the Auld Committee demonstrated that, if anything, there will be a slight reduction in prices. In Sweden, shops which open on Sunday have lower prices than those which stay closed".

Small shops can survive in competition with larger ones only by providing their customers with additional service.

"Removing restrictions on shop hours will help them to do that legally, as many are currently doing illegally".

The National Consumer Council stated that the Shops Act is violated thousands of times every weekend.

"The Church of England trades on Sundays. So does the Government.

"The law is self-evidently absurd. The Auld Committee concluded that its continued existence brought the law into disrepute. Opinion polls show that the majority of the British public agreed. Local authorities cannot enforce it. . .

"Parliament should sweep away this socially harmful and unnecessary piece of legislation".

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Mohammed Riaz was fined £150 by Wakefield Magistrates' Court last month, after pleading guilty to a charge of parking his car on the hard shoulder of the M1. The court was told that when police pulled over they found Riaz on a prayer mat beside his car. He informed them that he had to pray five times a day. Pleading guilty, Riaz told the court: "If I did not stop to say my prayer, time would have passed for that particular prayer. We must say prayers before the time ends".

Comedians are joining their rivals, the politicians; the Established Church, once dubbed "the Tory Party at prayer", is branded "Marxist"; much of the television violence about which Christian pressure groups complain is imported from the land of the fundamentalist Moral Majority. T. F. Evans examines some of the paradoxes in British life today.

It created considerable interest a short time ago when a leading comedian took part in a party political broadcast. He was running a risk because some viewers think that this type of programme is something of a joke anyway, and for a professional funny man to be the leading figure in such a presentation would be an implied admission that it was never really meant to be serious. Moreover, there were some unkind, not to say spiteful, enemies of the party in question who said that as the party itself was known to be a laughing matter; it was a simple statement of the obvious to have this fact made public by a licensed jester.

The argument could be stood on its head, of course, and we could say that politicians in general take themselves so seriously and are, for the most part, so lacking in humour in relation to their public position that the logical development would be for comedians and politicians to change places for a long spell.

The enjoyment to be gained from all these paradoxes is endless. Thus, on more or less the same lines, we have noted recently that a well-known and highly successful novelist has been appointed to a responsible position in a political party with the duty, it seems, of "selling" that party to a somewhat apathetic electorate. Although this may seem striking out on a new line, it is certainly not without precedent for an imaginative writer to set himself up as a guide to society in a more direct way than in his fiction. The name of Tolstoy comes to mind. If it may be objected that to mention Tolstoy in the same breath as the best-selling Mr Jeffrey Archer is not only to introduce a somewhat unfortunate Russian element into the discussion, but also to display a grave error of taste, then apologies are offered to anyone who may think they are due.

The idea of a cobbler deserting his last and setting himself up in a new trade has been put before us in another way. The good old Church of England has started something with its discussion document, *Faith in the City*. Here is a religious body which ought to be concerned with the next world actually having the effrontery to show an interest in the present one. It is difficult to say who were the more surprised. The humanists who thought in words once

used of the House of Lords that the Church did "nothing in particular and did it very well" — although they might have sought to qualify the latter phrase — were now forced to admit that perhaps what the late Poet Laureate, Sir John Betjeman, called "our dear old C of E" had something to say after all.

Of course, we might have thought of it for ourselves. After all, while the Ten Commandments begin with essential doctrinal matters which deeply concerned the children of Israel under Moses, they go on to touch matters that are not without some contemporary social relevance. To take the last of the ten as an example, coveting of one's neighbour's oxen and asses may have gone out of fashion lately. Yet, with all the current agonizing about the Stock Exchange and its self-regulation, bulls and bears could take the place of the domestic animals mentioned in the highly respected decalogue.

When we come to the New Testament, humanists who cannot abide the supernatural element have nevertheless thought that there was something valuable in the precepts about our duty to our neighbours. So generous, indeed, are humanists that they might have expected that the implications of *Faith in the City* would make them think that many of us, who have thought we were going in different directions from our fellow citizens, were on roughly the same track after all.

Disillusion was swift. Before the document had been read, it was thrown in the rubbish bin. One politician, whose name mercifully was not given to the world, called the report "Marxist". The nation's heart missed a beat. Uneasy little groups on street corners and in those taverns where the makers of the country's wealth are apt to solace themselves in the long weary days of striving to solve the Chancellor's problems, sometimes under the shadow of St Paul's Cathedral itself, asked themselves whether it could really be true. The guardians of the people's faith, those who could be relied upon to organise a Coronation more successfully even than the Royal Command Variety programme at the London Palladium, and put on a thanksgiving service for success in arms, skilfully, if incomprehensibly, involving the Prince of Peace in the proceedings — could these same people be "Marxist"? The question rang around the old streets of the Square Mile and in the clubs of the West End. Then it was naturally taken up by those other guardians of the spiritual health of the nation, the Press.

Just as some people were beginning to ask if the word "Marxist" had any meaning except as a convenient term of abuse, we were told that perhaps the first reactions had been a little hasty. Perhaps the report was not really evil, just mistaken. Still, we

have been left with the strong impression that, if the Church falls so far out of line as to worry about the state of affairs in the middle of our great cities, instead of sticking to strictly non-controversial spiritual matters, dreadful things might happen. What they might be, we know not. Perhaps the bishops, or those whose thinking is known to be dangerously independent might be unfrocked. Perhaps the Church might be disestablished. Perhaps the result might be to push us all back to those often praised Victorian values.

After all, we were told not so long ago that it was all very well to put a contemporary gloss on the parable of the Good Samaritan, but we should remember that he had to have money in his pocket first, before he could carry out his, no doubt valuable, if slightly idiosyncratic, mission of mercy. In connection with that particular piece of guidance from on high, nobody has pointed out that the observation is itself a kind of return to Victorian values. No less a figure than Charles Dickens (and what greater Victorian can be called to our aid) pointed out that, in the opinion of one of his characters, an upright man, properly concerned with the making of money, the Good Samaritan was a bad political economist. The only trouble is that the context suggests that Dickens did not really believe this himself. Some of our present rulers do.

The spectacle of the spiritual power sticking its ecclesiastical oar into matters that it should ignore, is matched in a most satisfying symmetrical way by the sight of the temporal power seeking to have a greater say in matters that, were things a little different, ought to be left to the individual judgment of the citizens, just as they ought to be left to interpret their religion in any way, or not at all, as they choose. In short, the temporal power is seriously thinking of making some inroads into the liberty of the subject. Highly suggestive remarks have been made by some of those in high places to the effect that the greater part of our present difficulties, including, it seems, the rise in crime, the decline of the inner cities, the collapse of manufacturing industry, the degeneration of the education system at all levels and anything else that can be thought of may all be attributed to the wave of "permissiveness" that swept through the country in the 1960s.

That there were many features of the "culture" of those days that received far more than the proper level of praise can hardly be denied. To take one example only — the attempt, in some places, almost to canonise such figures of minor talent as Mr Mick Jagger and the late John Lennon, suggesting that somehow they were guiding lights for the age, was, at the very least, misconceived. Yet the enlargement of personal freedom, particularly in the area of marriage and sex, that took place in the 1960s cannot be reversed. The pendulum might swing, but the clock continues to push forward.

It is going too far to give the State the right to impose on all people the limited views of a group of politicians, of whatever party, who happen to be in power at the moment and who might, you never can tell, be out of power a few moments hence. Crime of all kinds, including crimes of violence, must cause deep concern to all responsible people.

It is hard to believe, however, that the problems will be solved by some of the more extreme measures of repression now being openly considered. Many will agree, for example, that there is too much violence on television. Yet another ghastly paradox — and these thoughts are full of paradoxes which appeal to a sense of ironic humour but present appalling challenges — is that the greater part of violence on television, especially in connection with police and criminals in so-called entertainment programmes, comes from the United States. This is a country where the Puritan work-ethic is still highly regarded and where the progressive ideas of Europe and our own forms of permissiveness have not really taken a hold. The United States is still a country where the individual can stand on his own feet, get up and go, fashion a life for himself (with the help of Wall Street and big business) rather than waiting for the State to do everything for him. It would be foolish to deny that there are good things in this as well as some that are not so good. Yet, it is a society in which violence and crime have flourished on a more spectacular scale than here, and where the "drug culture" has taken root in stupendous proportion. We have some way to go, but we appear to be catching up.

It is not entirely a coincidence that these remarks, which began with a reference to television, have come back to that subject. A committee, not marked for the wide range of opinions represented in its members, is considering the possibility of financing the BBC in whole or in part by revenue from advertisements. Grave fears are being voiced. The most pessimistic see broadcasting passing firmly into commercial hands with a probable disastrous fall in standards and the Reithian principles on which BBC programme policies have been based for so long being replaced by interminable quiz shows offering to anyone who can guess the capital of France untold riches in the form of washing machines, music systems and video recorders. Truly, television is dominating our lives.

At the same time — and here is another paradox — as much thought is being given to what to keep off television as to what to put on. "Out of sight, out of mind", is the slogan. Give the people quiz shows and rewards but do not let them see what is going on, or what we do not think is good for them. If we keep some things off our television screens, perhaps they might go away. A funny thing is that the South African government has the same idea.

# My Path from Rome

BARBARA SMOKER

A slice of autobiography from the woman who, having thought her way from Catholicism to atheism in the late 1940s, has been President of the National Secular Society for the past fourteen years.

Oh, yes — I once had an orthodox creed. I was brought up in a devout Roman Catholic family, and had an old-style convent education — and throughout my childhood and adolescence I was a steadfast believer. That was in the days (before the Second Vatican Council) when the Catholic Church was still Catholic and the Pope was infallible — so I was given absolute certitude about God and the universe and my place in it. But in the end — and it took me a very long while — I grew up.

Whenever I mention my Catholic childhood, people tend to assume that the reason I have rejected religion so completely is that an extreme version of it was drummed into me as a child — but it wasn't like that at all. No one needed to drum religion into me: I lapped it up like a thirsty puppy. Of course, I must have been given the taste for it first of all, but I cannot remember as far back as that. What I do remember, though, is that my four younger sisters and one younger brother were coaxed to say, as the first syllables that ever passed their lips, not "Mama" or "Dada", but the far more difficult "Jesus" — so presumably I was equally precocious. Anyway, by the time the good nuns got hold of me, at the age of four, I was hooked on the supernatural.

At home I was regarded as the pious one of the family — which is saying a great deal — and the nuns at my first convent school seem to have cast me in the rôle of a future saint. Whenever there was any school entertainment, I was given some religious poem to recite, and once, when they put on a little play in which Jesus appeared, I was given that rôle, without any competition — though, admittedly, my auburn curls may have contributed to the choice.

There was a large sentimental painting on our classroom wall of a guardian angel hovering protectively over a child on the edge of a precipice — and I accepted it quite literally. I never got on a bus or a train without quickly reminding my guardian angel to keep an eye out for danger.

At home, as in most large families, we were always playing competitive games among ourselves — and Rule Number One, which became standard for any competitive family game, was "No praying". This was at the insistence of the others, who thought that praying would give me an unfair advantage.

On one occasion, when our family, together with a number of aunts, uncles, and cousins, were spending Sunday afternoon at Grandma's, our uncle priest offered a shilling to the best behaved child at the tea-table. When, after a tea-time of unusual restraint, the children were told they could leave the table, I was the only one who remained to say my grace — and that, of course, won me the shilling. The others protested that they too had remembered to say their grace after meals — but quietly, with a less ostentatious sign-of-the-cross. This, however, was apparently not believed. To this day, half a century later, some of my cousins still hold this shilling against me — maintaining that I cunningly planned the whole thing: but it is really not so. I would simply never have thought of eating even a biscuit without saying a grace both before and after.

My gullibility embraced not only the supernatural and miraculous, but also the magical. Amazing though it may seem in these days of advanced childhood knowledge, I was actually ten years old by the time I realised that Christmas presents were not really left by an old red-coated gentleman coming down the chimney. When I upbraided my mother for having told me such lies, she protested that Santa Claus did, in a sense, exist — as the spirit of generosity and giving. But it was too late to give me a metaphorical explanation. I had accepted it literally for too long.

Empathising with younger children on whom the same confidence trick was being imposed, I embarked on a crusade around the neighbourhood, telling all the kids that there was no Santa Claus. This reached the ears of the father of a neighbouring family, who reproved me for spoiling it for the little ones. Spoiling it! I could not understand what he meant. To my mind, they were being made fools of, and I was only saving them from this indignity.

I now see this as the beginning of both my loss of faith and of my persistent missionary zeal in proclaiming scientific truth — but it was many years before Jesus was to go the way of Santa Claus.

As my sexual urges developed, I got all my sexual kicks out of contemplating the sufferings of Jesus and out of the masochism engendered by Christianity—as exemplified in mediaeval art—but, of course, I would have been horrified had I realised that this had anything to do with feelings associated with parts of the body that one was supposed not to notice. At that time, never having experienced orgasm in any context other than prayer and religious meditation, I interpreted it as one of the "consolations of religion"—a phrase which I had often come across in the lives of the saints. Indeed, I still think that that is precisely what most of them meant by it.



And when those of them who had taken a lifelong vow of chastity wrote in mid-life about "the dark night of the soul", I think it was really the body they were referring to. Nowadays it is commonplace to say that religious emotions are akin to sexual feelings: but they are not just akin to them — in my experience, they are indistinguishable.

At my secondary school — also a convent — the other pupils laughingly referred to me as "the saint", but I was fortunate in that somehow my piety did not make me unpopular. Eventually, however, even the nuns told me to spend less time in church and the convent chapel, and more time in study.

But they played on my masochism, and were always lending me devotional books and pamphlets about the religious vocation. My favourite book for years was the autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul* — which I now regard as utterly sick, and sickening.

By the time I was fourteen, I had no wish to be anything but a nun — not in a teaching order, but in the Carmelite (enclosed) order. I was already saving up half my pocket-money towards my dowry — and I would gladly have entered at 15, as St Thérèse did. But my mother said I must wait until the age of 19, and then see if I felt the same. She said the same to one of my sisters who, similar to me in temperament, is nine years younger than I — but whereas the second world war started when I was 16, and I then left school and went out first into the world of work and then into the Women's Royal Naval Service, my sister, in the post-war years, remained at school until the age of 19, and then went straight from one convent as a pupil into another as a novice, with no time between to change her mind. She is still a nun.

In my last year at school I was awarded the religious knowledge medal by the diocesan inspector because, when he unexpectedly departed from the set catechism questions and asked for a proof of Christ's divinity, I was the only student ready with an answer. To me it was obvious that God would not otherwise have given Jesus the power to perform miracles, since this would mislead people as to his divine claims. It did not occur to me at the time that it was an unproved assumption that the gospel stories were true. And no one pointed this out.

On other occasions, I would ask the nuns quite probing theological questions — but, of course, my teenage naivety was no match for their comparatively sophisticated replies, and so, though generally of a questioning turn of mind, I accepted the Catholic creed *in toto*. Indeed, in those days of papal authority it had to be all or nothing; and I remember how amazed I was to hear of a Catholic who had given up practising and yet had remained a believer in Christianity. For me, there was never any possibility of a halfway house between the Catholic Church and atheism.

At the same time, I must already have begun to fear a loss of faith, for I remember praying daily that this would never happen to me. It took ten more years to complete the process.

At the age of 19, when, at my naval training camp, I found that there was no provision for Catholics to hear Mass on 1 January (the Feast of the Circumcision) or 6 January (the Epiphany), which were then holy days of obligation, I successfully requested special 6 am "liberty boats" for that purpose. How my fellow Catholics must have hated me for forcing them to go out on dark, wet mornings, instead of having another two hours in bed!

A year later I was in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where I served king and country for the next 18 months. There I not only mixed with non-Catholic Christians, with some of whom I used to discuss moral theology, but I also visited Hindu temples and Buddhist shrines, and so widened my perspective on religion. Consequently, by the time I returned home after the war, I was no longer sure I wanted to be a nun, though I was still a staunch believer. However, my theological doubts now began to build up, and became more and more insistent.

In confession, I was told that I was suffering from intellectual pride. Who was I to pit my puny intellect against the teaching of Holy Mother Church? I saw the force of this argument — especially as there were important Catholic writers I admired, such as G. K. Chesterton, who, though obviously far more intelligent and learned than I, apparently had no difficulty in accepting doctrines that seemed to me to be irrational and at odds with the world around us. Now, of course, I realise that many people of undoubted mental ability manage to cling to their supernatural beliefs by keeping them, as it were, in different mental compartments from everyday knowledge, not subjecting them to the same sort of scientific scrutiny or rigorous evidence that they would demand for anything else.

As for the accusation of intellectual pride, surely the boot is on the other foot. Atheists don't claim to know *anything* with certainty — it's the believers who know it all.

At school, we were taught that there is no such thing as an atheist — and to some extent I think the nuns were right in this, because they took the word "atheist" to mean someone who categorically denies the existence of any kind of god. Obviously, it must depend on the definition of the word "god", which can mean anything from the very human and immoral Old Testament god, Jehovah, to some sort of abstract god, such as Bernard Shaw's Life Force, or even something as indisputable as the whole of existence. The only objection one can make to that last god-concept is to the confusing use of the word "god" as a synonym for everything.

(continued on page 14)

**MORAL PANICS AND VICTORIAN VALUES**, by Kate Marshall. Junius Publications, BM-RCP, London WC1N 3XX, £1.50

There was a school of Victorian poetry that would have recognised Kate Marshall immediately as a true soul-mate. In it, the poets demanded the reader's attention for page after page of agonised observations, only to finish their verse with last lines like "I know not why" and "Who can say?" Having spent the 58 pages of her booklet talking about what she and her fellow-thinkers in the Revolutionary Communist Party think is wrong with the conditions of women and the family today, she offers her own last lines: "What will life be like under Communism? What kind of sexual relationships will occur? The answers to these questions cannot be given now. All we can say is that things will be better because we will be free from the chains of material deprivation".

Basically, her booklet is an attack on the Labour and Conservative support of the family as a desirable way of life. She sees the current Government's Family Policy Group as repressive and reactionary — a return to the worst hypocrisy and prejudice of the Victorian age: "The aim was to strengthen individual identity and break down the influence of class politics".

To her, individual responsibility is bad enough, but the concept of happy families offers more horrors: "As atomised individuals, workers are not a threat to the system. The Establishment aims to make the family a mechanism for the self control of the working class".

The Tories' revival of Victorian values must be fought, she says. One turns the pages, hoping for radical solutions reflecting real life in the 20th century, but only to find the top-hatted and frock-coated figures of those two most eminent Victorians — Mr Engels and Mr Marx.

This is the central failure of the booklet. The questions she chooses to consider are all very valid ones — family values, the role of women, the changes of direction within the women's movement, the emergence of "New Right" morality, censorship, abortion and contraception, embryo research and sexual minorities. But, where there should be thought, argument and suggested solutions, there is only dogma. Consider: "In fomenting prejudice against gays, the ruling class and its allies try to turn workers' frustrations at the poverty of their emotional and sexual lives away from the real cause. They are turned against another section of workers. The real cause of workers' sexual frustrations is the capitalist system. The way forward to a fuller sex life for all lies through resistance to reactionary

# FREETHINKER

attempts to divide and weaken the working class movement by turning heterosexual people against gays and fight for a system which can allow the fullest expression of sexual inclinations". It is one of the few surprises in the booklet to learn that homosexuality, which for years was thought of as a rather upper or middle-class way of life is, in fact, an exclusively working-class preserve.

Kate Marshall's little pink book is a very fundamentalist tract. To her, the single cause of *all* suffering in the West is capitalism, and the only solution to *all* problems is communism. Reading it is rather like trying to discuss comparative religion with someone who is on their fiftieth automatic mumbling of "Hail Mary, Mother of God". It is a booklet to read while waiting for the little man with the megaphone to tell you when next to shout "Out! Out! Out!" at the latest demo. But don't expect it to even attempt to answer street-chant number two: "What do we want?" There are no answers here, just an efficient and predictable trotting out of the Party catechism.

Her arguments are neither coherent nor convincing, and you would be justified in asking why bother to read such a book. Perhaps the best reason for doing so is the time we live in. More and more people, particularly the young, are surrendering their individuality and abdicating any attempt at self-determination to the unquestioning warmth of the group. Kate Marshall's book is another tiny addition to the accumulation of propaganda that is manipulating such a surrender. It is a sad historical fact that all such groups — political, religious or commercial — have always left too many dead or too many live bodies in their wakes. It is a further irony that all such groups that start with high ideals that everyone is equal always seem to finish in dictatorship. Whether the dictator is a president, a pope, a bhagwan or the head of United Chemicals makes no difference to the lot of those whose unconsidered allegiance put them there. This is an irony that the author cannot see or, more likely, is cynically aware of.

Having read this booklet, I could quite happily face a future made up of families and individuals. I am less sanguine about one based on "collective action". Such collectives, led by their power-seeking elite, have already left millions dead in Mr Marx's name in Russia, China and Kampuchea. The commercial variety has produced its Bhopals. And the religious type is supporting an aged medievalist to bring his message of no birth control to the overpopulated and famine-wracked areas of the world.

DEIRDRE FARNFIELD

# REVIEWS

**RESTLESS BONES: THE STORY OF RELICS**, by James Bentley. Constable. £9.95

The concept of "mana", under that name or another, is found among primitive peoples the world over. This notion that spiritual power is inherent in inanimate objects finds expression in the veneration of relics, still a prominent feature of Catholic Christianity and Buddhism. James Bentley is sympathetic towards the cult of relics, in fact he admits to having a passion for them. But he cannot resist — who could? — poking gentle fun at the absurdities inseparable from relic worship.

For a short history of its subject, *Restless Bones* packs in a large amount of information, though the author's half-belief in the miraculous powers of relics, at least of those considered genuine, is a minor irritant. Of the liquefying blood of St Januarius at Naples, Mr Bentley says we must find an explanation or continue to believe in the possibility of miracles. Well, there are chemical mixtures that would do the trick. Alban Butler, in his *Lives of the Saints*, asks if "so many most holy, venerable and learned" priests would have lent themselves to such fraud. Perish the thought!

Old favourites are well represented — the Holy Foreskin gets four richly comical pages — together with many likely to be unfamiliar to the reader. A flame from Moses' burning bush and a few rays of the star of Bethlehem are pleasantly whimsical, but what kind of mentality could have prompted the forging of the golden haemorrhoids of I Samuel chapter 6?

Anecdotes and curious customs are here in abundance. For example, after St Thomas of Canterbury was assassinated he was found to be wearing a hair-shirt swarming with vermin. The hair-shirt became a relic but the fate of the holy vermin is not known. We learn that charter fairs, of which many survive, arose out of the need for a quick sale of the food and other perishable offerings made by the huge crowds at relic festivals. As the author says, relics were big business and generated an enormous economy of their own. If pilgrims were slow to visit their shrines the relics were taken on fund-raising tours. Not content with displaying fake relics, the monks attached to them fake papal bulls authorising the tours. Communities lacking relics became jealous of those that had them, and they often stole them. The thieves claimed they had the approval of Jesus, or that the relics themselves consented and wished to be stolen.

By the time of the Reformation the papacy was so firmly identified with the relic cult that to oppose

the one was to oppose the other. In his treatise on relics, John Calvin found plenty of scope for his considerable powers of irony. Martin Luther's attack on relics was braver than Calvin's because his patron, the Elector Frederick, doted upon a collection of some 5,000 holy bits and pieces. Frederick was annoyed with Luther, and continued increasing his hoard until he had more than 19,000, calculated to be good for almost two million years remission of purgatory. Germany at that period was particularly well endowed with saintly cadavers. According to Luther no fewer than 18 of the Twelve Apostles lay buried there.

Relic worship is far from extinct. The gullible still flock to gawp at holy coats and shrouds when these are put on display. When the Turin shroud was shown to the public in 1978 it attracted more than three million pilgrims, not all Catholics by any means. The Anglican bishop John Robinson, of all people, was so moved at the sight that he took Catholic communion.

There are secular as well as religious relics. Somebody, somewhere, cherishes what is delicately described as a "mummified tendon" of Napoleon, cut off after death by his chaplain. Oliver Cromwell supplied another relic. At the restoration of the monarchy, Oliver's corpse was exhumed and subjected to various indignities. His head became a vulgar peep-show and was not reburied until 1960. Jeremy Bentham, whose own carcass, stuffed and mounted, can be seen in London's University College, advocated that every man should be his own statue after death. One's softer parts, he wrote, could be used for dissection, while the outer framework would become an "auto-icon", to be varnished and deposited with others row upon row in the churches, edifying the living and cheating the undertaker to boot.

The book has a few oddities of its own apart from its subject material. A promised discourse on the itinerant corpse of Charlie Chaplin fails to materialise. A transposition in the birth date of St Simeon Stylites gives that lunatic a life-span of 150 years. Repeated references to the Holy Navel of Jesus surely mean his umbilical cord? And it is doubtful if the Emperor Valentinian, whose backside was miraculously roasted by St Martin of Tours, would have described the holy man as "extremely kind". But it would be churlish to dwell upon such things in a volume as entertaining as this.

R. J. CONDON

## THE HUMAN STORY

An exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute,  
Kensington High Street, London,  
until 23 February,  
is reviewed overleaf.

# EXHIBITION

**THE HUMAN STORY.** Commonwealth Institute, Kensington High Street, London, until 23 February

The displays in this exhibition focus on the evolutionary history of human beings, and bring into perspective the ages of man in the context of the age of the Earth. Divided into seven "time boxes", beginning with the Big Bang origin of the universe, the geometry and formation of the solar system is portrayed — the changing patterns of the continents and early forms of life and rapidly followed by the eras of fishes, reptiles and mammals.

Passing through a "time box", the story leaps forward to a line of ape ancestors of 35 million years ago. Maps showing the fossil finds, replicas of fossil skulls and restorations of these higher primates, all contribute to conveying an accurate idea of the beginning of the ape lineage. From the cat-sized *Aegyptopithecus* inhabiting the dense forests covering Africa, there emerged *Proconsul* 20 million years ago. The later Asian *Sivapithecus* and *Ramapithecus* (twelve and ten million years old respectively) diverged from the human line and probably gave rise to the orang-utans.

A gap in the fossil record precedes the sudden appearance of bipedal apes, the australopithecines, four million years ago. The australopithecines were adapted to increasingly changing environments and inhabited savanna grasslands. A range of different types of skull illustrates the range of variability, while pictures and diagrams concentrate on the inferred way of life. A visual display unit attempts to demonstrate the overall pattern of the australopithecine way of life, but the slow graphics and poor sound quality impair the usefulness of the programme.

The next section is devoted to early humans who appeared alongside the australopithecines two million years ago. Full scale replicas of skulls and skeletons demonstrate the changes through time in three species of *Homo*. The first, *Homo habilis*, had a brain only 350 ml in volume. He used crude tools and lived mainly on fruit and vegetables. The appearance of the large-brained *Homo erectus* coincided with that of more complex tools. The range of tools fashioned is illustrated with selected replicas.

Next came "Archaeic" *Homo sapiens*, or Neanderthal man, 400,000 to 40,000 years ago. The global distribution and migration routes spread north to Europe and Asia, and then to north and south America. These more sophisticated humans became adapted to the extremely hostile environments of the Ice Ages.

One of the features of this exhibition is that any discussion of the process by which one species evolved into another is carefully avoided. No details

of evolutionary theory are hinted at, nor is there any reference to the recent debates as to whether human evolution was a gradual process or had proceeded by a series of jumps or leaps. However, for the past 30,000 years there seem not to have been any significant physical changes; rather they have been cultural and behavioural changes that have dominated human history. This aspect is emphasised by well chosen examples of cave art and sculpture from many different cultures.

The exhibition concludes with a glimpse into the future, and the visitor is presented with some of the key questions with which man is now faced. These include pollution and over-population. *The Human Story* succeeds in bringing to public attention mankind's development through time, and provides an important perspective in which he can see himself and his possible future.

After the exhibition closes in London it will tour Europe and Africa.

COLIN PITCHER

## OBITUARY

### Mr B. Collins

Brian Collins, of Kenilworth, Warwickshire, has died at the early age of 27 following a distressing illness. He held no religious beliefs. There was a large gathering of relatives and friends at the secular committal ceremony which took place at Canley Crematorium, Coventry.

### Mr G. Dimmick

George Dimmick, who died suddenly at the age of 79, was a lifelong freethinker and socialist. There was a secular committal ceremony at Mortlake Crematorium, London.

### Mrs K. Pariente

Kay Pariente's death, although not unexpected, has saddened her many friends, particularly in Sussex where for many years she played a prominent role in the humanist movement. She was a former secretary of Brighton and Hove Humanist Group and later became the Group's extremely capable treasurer.

Mrs Pariente was 89, and very active until she was involved in a street accident four years ago. Her health deteriorated, and she spent the last years in a Nottingham nursing home, near her relatives.

She was a member of several national humanist organisations and a keen supporter of *The Freethinker*.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Bramcote Crematorium, Nottingham, and a memorial meeting in Sussex.

# Shadows of Doubt

BARRY DUKE

South Africa is hardly a country one would look towards for a good belly laugh, but for those with a strong sense of irony, and a leaning towards black humour, several events have occurred recently in that tyrannically Christian neck of the woods which are enormously funny.

The first concerns a small group of Dutch Reformed Church dominees who decided, no doubt through long-overdue feelings of self-preservation (rather than a deep sense of remorse, which would be more apt), to creep out of the laager and enter Zambia to have talks with the outlawed African National Congress, thus following in the footsteps of the visit earlier this year to Zambia by a party of South African businessmen.

The first visit annoyed the Botha regime intensely. But when the DRC party announced their intention to engage in talks with the ANC, the regime went apoplectic, and promptly announced that the group would not be allowed to leave the country to talk to "the enemy".

What is so amusing about this episode is the reason volunteered for the intended visit by a clergyman named Smith, who explained his desire to hold talks with the ANC (during a Radio 4 telephone interview with Robin Day). Apparently he and several other ministers had suddenly reached the conclusion that the concept of Apartheid, originally spawned by the Dutch Reformed Church, was no longer valid and could not be supported by scripture. Which, as everyone knows who has had the misfortune to come into contact with Dutch Reformed thinking on this subject, is pure heresy. After all, the Church spent years pointing out the theological justification for separating the races, and it was upon this theology that the Nationalist regime has spent close on forty years constructing the most evil political system since the Third Reich.

Why they had reached this conclusion is anyone's guess, but one can be forgiven for cynically believing that this sudden turnabout was prompted by the thought that a future Black Government might just decide to treat the whites in precisely the same way as the blacks had been treated under white rule. Nothing concentrates the mind quite as much as fear.

That same fear has no doubt prompted another, much larger, group of Afrikaners, to decide to set up their own "Homeland" in a red-necked, Bible belt section of the Transvaal. There, by dint of prayer and hard work carried out entirely by themselves (an entirely alien experience for most Afrikaners who have always depended on near-slave labour on the part of blacks), they plan to set up an independent "Afrikanerstan" in order, according to one of the group's spokesmen, to "prevent the suicide of

the Afrikaner nation".

Many would argue that this is one suicide that should be actively encouraged, but the "Afrikanerstan" concept is a brilliant one, and should be enthusiastically supported. Drawing most of the Republic's racists, bigots and Christian fundamentalists into one small land-locked area would be like lancing a large and noxious boil. It would allow the rest of the country to get on with the long-overdue process of dismantling the black homelands and townships, and undoing all the damage four decades of theologically-inspired, institutionalised racism has wrought, while the "Afrikanerstan" inhabitants are left to amuse themselves with such favourite past-times as blacking out television news, burning books, quoting scripture and playing rugby.

But one nagging question remains: how they will indulge in their most popular national sport — dragging people out of their beds in the early hours of the morning to harrass, assault, rape or murder them?

## LETTERS

### A DANGEROUS ATTRACTION

I found James Hemmings' review of *Cult Controversies* (December 1985) very well written and expressing a deep understanding of the cult scene and the underlying problems. Not having read the book, I am at a disadvantage. But it appears to me that Dr Hemming must have studied the issues prior to reading *Cult Controversies*. Some of his comments may be his own thoughts and insights.

I very much agree with your review that condemnation of the cults is in itself quite useless. There is great need for exploring and defining the root causes and then trying to do something about them, rather than only dealing with the surface manifestations.

For example, it is a fact, that many a disillusioned cult member on leaving his/her group returns to "Square One" and promptly gets enmeshed in another cult, sometimes going from bad to worse. Psychiatrists have labelled these people "seekers". What is it they are looking for? Is it spiritual fulfilment or the wish to belong, or both? It does not affect only the misfits of society. There is no real immunity to cult involvement since it appears to get at young (and not so young) people who are temporarily vulnerable and at odds with themselves.

The bait of the cults is the initial contact with the group, a display of warmth and caring which envelops the newcomer in a sense of false security. This group fellowship attracts like a magnet and may, on the surface, fulfil some basic needs of any human being: to be taken personally, to matter, to be wanted.

Later, when faced with the harsh realities of cult involvement and possibly wishing to leave, the new member has to cope with fear: fear of returning to the shallow impersonal world he has left behind, fear of missing out on salvation to which only the cult in question is said to have access, and in many cases fear of a future holocaust which supposedly only the members of the group are privileged to survive.

Yes, there is too much complacency. It has been said that the evil in the world can succeed only because too many good people are doing nothing. If there were more caring in society in general and the offer of spiritual experience, without chains attached, the cults would find less fertile ground.

One point I do not agree with: I have met and known personally about 40 Moonies, most of whom are still in the movement after about 10 to 12 years' membership. The high turn-over may be among those who were never fully committed. If members were likely to leave after just one year there would hardly be so much concern about the problem.

This concern is justified, as any parent/friend/relative of cult members will confirm. Hysteria will help nobody, but sitting on the fence or in ivory towers helps even less. It is a problem which could affect any of us, and readers may be well advised not to think that it only happens to "other people".

(Mrs) N. MacKENZIE

### CORRESPONDENTS WANTED

We should very much like to correspond (and perhaps exchange holidays) with British freethinkers. We are both teachers and have two sons of 13 and 10 and one daughter of three. The eldest is studying English. Please write to us at: Angelard, Comprégnac, 87140 Nantiat, France.

M and Mme MICHEL VOL

### BOOK WANTED

I wish to purchase a copy of Robert G. Ingersoll's Lectures and Essays. Information, including the price, should be sent to me at 274 Waterloo Street, Newcastle-on-Tyne, NE1 4DJ.

A. HENDERSON

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### *My Path from Rome*

However, the one function that most gods seem to have in common is to give human existence some ultimate purpose — and, while it is not possible to disprove an ultimate purpose, there is no evidence for it. This is not to say, of course, that there is no purpose in life at all: as well as the collective purposes of human society, we all make our own individual purposes as we go through life. And life does not lose its value simply because it is not going to last for ever.

For most believers, however, the important thing is that death is *not* the end, either for themselves or for their relationship with close friends who have died. Most of us, probably, would find it comforting at times to believe that — but the fact that a belief is comforting obviously does not make it true. And I suppose, in common with other atheists, I just happen to be the sort of person who cannot derive comfort from a belief that lacks supporting evidence.

In fact, all the evidence is *against* personal survival of death: it just doesn't make sense. How could anything that survived the death of the body still be the same person?

As for the idea that the universe was deliberately created, which is intended to explain existence, it

manifestly fails to do so — for one is still left with the question of God's existence. It is less complicated to suppose that particles of matter and waves of energy have always existed than to suppose they were made out of nothing by a being who had always existed.

Besides, the idea of deliberate creation raises the moral problem of all the suffering there is in life — for so many people, and also for animals. I am ashamed, in retrospect, that I ever found it possible to worship the supposed creator of over-reproduction, sentient food, disease, and natural disasters. If I still believed in an omnipotent creator, I would have to heap curses on him — or her, or it. But if there is one thing to be said for this creator-god, it is his evident non-existence.

In the late 1940s, however, I was still trying to reconcile belief in his existence with the nature of the world around me — of which I had become more aware. Remembering from school theology lessons that Thomas Aquinas had said it was possible to come to faith through reason, I thought I would give my faith a boost through reason stimulated by a course of reading. So I read book after book — mainly books written by Catholic apologists, but also some by atheist philosophers. And the more I read, the less I could believe.

Finally, one Saturday morning in November 1949, actually standing by the philosophy shelves of my local public library, I suddenly said to myself, with a tremendous flood of relief, "I am no longer a Catholic". And that, for me, meant I was no longer a Christian or a theist of any kind.

After so much mental turmoil, I did not imagine at first that I had really come to the end of it: I expected to go on having doubts — doubts now about my disbelief. But in fact this never happened. I have never for one moment found any reason to suppose that my decision that morning 36 years ago was a mistake.

Cautiously, though, until the mid-1950s, I adopted the label "agnostic" — only to find that this was generally misunderstood as meaning that I was still sitting on the theistic fence: a position I had found so painful, and was so relieved to relinquish in 1949. So I began to declare myself an atheist and a humanist — which suited me much better.

That is not to say that I have not sometimes hankered after my old childhood comforter — but it is no more possible for me to go back to believing in a god and a heaven than it is to go back to the belief that an old red-coated gentleman climbs down chimneys with presents on Christmas Eve.

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**Monks, friars and nuns who are not fully maintained by their orders are entitled to supplementary benefit, the House of Commons has been told in a written answer by Social Security Minister, Tony Newton.**

# Freethinker Fund

The final list of contributors to the Fund in 1985 is given below.

J. G. Gerrard, £1; R. I. Baldwin, D. H. Bowers, J. P. Coubrough, G. Coupland, P. Danning, R. Delaurey, J. M. Doughty, H. Hilton, P. N. Irving, P. Jones, N. Levenson, D. R. Love, J. MacDonald, T. A. Millar, D. Moore, B. Morgan, F. Munniksma, B. Premand, B. J. Reid, R. T. Savage, A. Standley, E. Urwin and F. Woolley, £1.40 each; G. A. Airey, J. L. Broom, G. Newlove and D. Wright, £2 each; A. L. Boyle, E. A. Napper and T. J. Peters, £2.40 each; J. Paterson and C. P. Tott, £2.50 each; J. Dobbin and S. Jones, £2.80 each; W. M. Shuttleworth, £3; B. E. Clarke, £3.40; C. Maine, £3.50; G. Robichez, £4; J. Galliano, G. Swan and S. Trent, £4.40 each; J. van Slogteren, £4.60; B. Able, O. Kaplan, T. V. O'Carroll, F. E. Seward and R. J. M. Tolhurst, £5 each; S. Smith, £6; J. H. Charles, N. L. Childs, M. Duane, F. G. Evans, G. Grieg, R. Hoare, J. McDonald, R. M. Miller, A. J. Rawlings, M. Schofield and L. H. White, £6.40 each; D. Campbell, F. Campbell, W. Steinhardt and J. Watson, £10 each; P. Stielh, £17; M. A. Violin, £19.50; W. Scott, £21.40.

For the second successive year the Fund total has exceeded £2,000. During 1985 donations large and small, from individuals and local humanist groups, reached the splendid total of £2,365.25 and \$21. We are very grateful to all who contributed, and feel confident that readers' generosity and support will enable *The Freethinker* to survive, come what may.

The paper's readership is limited at present. But in addition to its subscribers *The Freethinker* is received by key people in the media, politics, radical and religious circles. Many new subscribers have been registered during the year and a particularly encouraging development has been the work of readers to promote circulation figures.

As always, those who contribute articles and reviews are deserving of our warm appreciation. So to all *Freethinker* financial supporters, writers, readers and of course our ever helpful printers — a very happy 1986.

## EVENTS

**Belfast Humanist Group.** York Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast. Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month at 8 pm.

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 2 February, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Public Meeting.

**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. Friday, 14 February, 7.30 pm. Bob Perks: Humanism in Northern Ireland—a Forlorn Hope.

**Glasgow Humanist Society.** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Norman Macdonald, 15 Queen Square, Glasgow G41 2BG, telephone 041-424 0545.

**Havering and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Harold Wood. Tuesday, 4 February, 8 pm. Julia Pelling: Food Allergy.

**Humanist Holidays.** Easter at Leamington Spa, Warwickshire. Details from Betty Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12 ONA, telephone 01-673 6234.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 30 January, 7.45 pm. Greenpeace.

**South Place Ethical Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on Sunday, 11 am. 19 January, Mrs Scorer: Towards the Abolition of Criminal Justice. 26 January, D. McDonagh: The Eccentric Christianity of Joseph Priestley.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 12 February, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Annual General Meeting followed by Keith Gimson: Humanist Organisations—Local, National and International.

**West Glamorgan Humanist Group.** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, 117 Pennard Drive, Southgate, telephone 01-828 3631.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday 20 January, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public Meeting.

**Worthing Humanist Group.** Programme of meetings obtainable from Bob Thorpe, 19 Shirley Drive, Worthing, telephone 62846.

National Secular Society

### ANNUAL DINNER

*Speakers include*

JO RICHARDSON, MP,  
CHRIS MOREY

**The Coburg Hotel,**

Bayswater Road, London W2  
(Bayswater and Queensway  
Underground Stations)

**Saturday, 5 April**

6.30 pm for 7 pm

*Vegetarians catered for*

*Tickets £10.50 each*

National Secular Society,  
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL  
(telephone 01-272 1266)

# Faith in the City: NSS Has Reservations

The National Secular Society has welcomed the Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission, both for its concern about the plight of our inner cities and for its honesty in acknowledging that the Church of England is today relevant to only a small proportion of the population, with fewer than one per cent of those in inner-cities actually attending a C of E church.

However, the NSS points out, "the Report makes

## Anglican Church Wrong

and loved and who have died, that it is not a question of human pain. Pain is terminal; pain can end. It is the moral deterioration involved — the loss of courage which goes through the decaying of the body; the indifference to the burdens that are being imposed upon the living, and the loss of self-respect.

"The noble Earl gave us an example of the old woman who continued carrying on a life which was hopeless and the price of which was ruining her daughter's life. Would she really have taken that decision when she was *compos mentis*? Would she have started the relationship of having her life carried on by a daughter whose life was being destroyed in the process? That she went on accepting that can only be the result of a moral decay that comes from dying, and it is that to which I refer".

Lord Paget then registered a "mild protest" at being lectured on ethics by the Anglican Church.

"The Anglican Church is now a very minority sect. It has told us in a recent report that in the inner cities it is down to one per cent. I doubt whether it is much higher anywhere else. I think the number of practising Anglicans in this country at the moment is probably below the level of that of the Mohammedans, if one measures in terms of the number of church-goers.

"I think it has very much lost its position because its ethic has been rejected. Indeed, one is sometimes suspicious of a church which finds itself in a position in which, when it has to appoint new bishops, has great difficulty in finding one who believes in God.

"I do not accept lectures on ethics from a church which, in war and peace, has been wrong on almost every ethical issue which has emerged and changed".

Lord Paget concluded by saying that the Bill aimed to bring the law into relation with reality.

Predictably enough, opposition to the Bill was rooted for the most part in religious superstition. The opponents' attitude was neatly summarised by Lord Robertson of Oakridge who declared: "My fundamental reason for disliking the Bill is that it treats God-given life as if it were disposable".

The amendment was carried.

no mention of the fact that the C of E retains its huge investments and its thousands of under-used buildings on prime sites — many of which were originally paid for by compulsory tithes or by donations from the ancestors of unbelievers, and all of which have been subsidised out of the public purse ever since. Not only is the C of E, like other religious bodies, exempt from direct taxation, but their churches are, by statute, totally exempt from local rates and their ancillary buildings exempt from half the local rates.

"Yet the Report does not suggest that the C of E should voluntarily pay rates like the rest of us, so as to help local authorities to restore social services depleted as a result of Government cuts. Nor does it suggest that redundant churches should be given back to the local communities rather than be sold to the highest bidder".

While endorsing much of what the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission is saying, the NSS calls on the C of E to accept the rational conclusion that, as a body, it has a moral obligation to redeploy its vast wealth to meet the needs of the community as a whole. The Society also calls on Parliament to disestablish the Church, to divest it of its anomalous historical privileges, and to see that it gives back to the people at least that proportion of its inherited wealth and real estate to which it has no moral right.

## Referendum May End Ban on Divorce

Support for divorce law reform in the Republic of Ireland has increased dramatically despite strong opposition from the Roman Catholic Church.

In the latest opinion poll, 73 per cent of the interviewees declared in favour of divorce "in certain circumstances", while 24 per cent said it should never be allowed. The widest support for removing the ban on divorce was in the Dublin area, with 61 per cent in favour.

The Labour Party has spearheaded the campaign for reform. But supporters are to be found in all the political parties.

It is thought that the Government will hold a referendum on the question next autumn. Prime Minister Garrett Fitzgerald is known to be in favour of a referendum within two years. He commented recently that the only reason for holding a referendum was to remove the ban.

The Church is certain to oppose the introduction of divorce. Surveys show that opposition to reform is strongest in rural areas where priestly influence is most dominant.