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FAMILY LAW DEBATE: "HOW CRUEL THE CHURCH CAN BE", SAYS LORD HOUGHTON

Last month the House of Lords rejected the Bishop of Birmingham's amendment to the Family Law Reform Bill in which he proposed the establishment of a central register of children conceived by AID. The Bishop urged that it was necessary for the Lords "to reject legislation which destroys the integrity and reliability of the birth register as a record of biological fact".

The Bishop informed the House that he was unavoidably absent when the question was discussed in Committee. He had invited all the Roman Catholic and Church of England bishops in the West Midlands to his home "in order to discuss important matters with them". He was therefore distressed to read in the *Official Report* "that the noble and learned Lord Chancellor had seen fit to describe my absence as the absence of the chairman of 'the board of social irresponsibility'".

Proceedings continued after the noble and learned Lord Chancellor tendered a suitable apology for having ruffled the prelatial feathers.

Lord Houghton of Sowerby congratulated the Government on the courageous and comprehensive way they had tried to amend the law of illegitimacy.

"How cruel the church can be", he added. "How cruel moralists can be on questions of this kind".

Lord Houghton asked whose interests they were trying to serve.

"It is the interests of the children", he said, "their desire for security and stability in their lives and to be able to face social prejudice and religious doctrine which often comes into matters of this kind".

He supported the Lord Chancellor's comment that this was not a religious matter. "It is somewhat misleading when right reverend Prelates on the Bishops' Bench rise to speak on matters and use their authority as bishops of the Church of England to express a point of view. We have to be careful".

Lord Houghton did not accept that there is any divine law or any fundamental law in our system of registration of births. The registration of a birth is what society wants it to be. Mostly it wants it to be a record of the parentage of a person who is born in wedlock.

"We have done some cruel things to children who are not born in wedlock", he added.

"When I think of the struggle that some people have made throughout their lives against the stigma of illegitimacy I wonder what board of social responsibility ever condoned what they were made to suffer. Ramsay MacDonald, Ernest Bevin and J. H. Thomas all had to fight against this stigma throughout their lives.

"It is much more important that a child should feel secure in its home and in its parents than that it should know in every case what is described by the right reverend Prelate as the biological fact. It is not fundamentally important that a child should know the biological fact if the registration of birth gives him or her a clean bill of legitimacy within the law and within the family. That is what children want. They do not want AID put against their names or a separate register of those who are born in some peculiar way. They want to feel that they were born properly of their mothers. After all, the mother is the person in birth.

"Social law and social habits have not worried too much in the past who the fathers were. The important thing was that a child should have a mother and a mother's care".

Lord Houghton said that all through the history of these social and moral issues we have had to resist prejudicial and religious dogma.

He recalled that a Bill to remove the ban on the marriage of a man to his deceased wife's sister had to pass through the House of Commons eleven times and was blocked eleven times by the bishops.

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NEWS

THE TORY FAMILY WAY

The fact that Roman Catholic bishops have no experience of married life and parenthood does not prevent them from constantly pontificating on the subject. But as they do not have to seek re-election every five years, it was safe to mention in a recent pastoral letter on "Marriage and the Family" that unemployment, poverty and bad housing are a serious blight on family life in Britain today.

There was no mention of such unpleasant topics in the first of Paul Johnson's *Daily Telegraph* articles on "The Tory Way Forward". The former *New Statesman* editor turned Right-wing propagandist was banging the "family" drum, arguing that Mrs Thatcher "should make her party standard-bearers for family life and traditional moral values". As the Iron Lady will not be able to launch her next general election campaign in the Falklands, she may accept Mr Johnson's advice. Simplistic slogans are often an effective antidote to reality.

During seven years of rule by the party of Victorian values, family life has been under considerable stress. Health, housing, educational and social services have been savaged. Much is made of pensioners' plight under the present Government, for which so many of them voted, but it is the young — husbands, wives and parents of the future — who are the real victims of Thatcherism. Thousands have been exploited in Government-sponsored cheap labour schemes; thousands more have entered their twenties without having been in permanent employment. There is a dire shortage of books and equipment in schools. Hundreds of children's hospital beds have been closed (Birmingham Children's Hospital has just closed 31 beds to effect an annual saving of £500,000).

Paul Johnson repeated the old tale that "the family" has always suffered under repressive political regimes. Dictators' power "was built on the smoking ruins of family love". In fact pre-war Fascist regimes in Italy, Spain, Portugal and other European countries were fervently Catholic and solidly pro-family. The Nazi Penal Code in Germany prohibited "public ridicule of maternity, and all propaganda in favour of birth control and abortion". British predecessors of Paul Johnson and the "pro-family" lobby commended the Nazi and Fascist concept of the family.

Lord Scarman, hardly a raving revolutionary, told a press conference last month that Britain is in danger of becoming a slum society. He added: "If the young can't move about the country and find on reasonable terms hostel or home conditions, as we

AND NOTES

enter the 21st century we will be on our way back to the Middle Ages, when people were tied by necessity to the place where they were born".

Lord Scarman was in fact describing the ball-and-chain society that "pro-family" and religious pressure groups are striving for. They don't give a damn about the quality of family life. And at the coming general election they will be rallying to the party of the Family, Traditional Moral Values, Cecil Parkinson, Jeffrey Archer. . .

Atheist Glynn Howells has been rejected as the next mayor of Downham Market, Norfolk. He refused to attend services and civic functions of "religious significance".

BIBLICAL STANDARDS

Christians' attitudes to AIDS range from genuine compassion to gloating over its victims. But clearly a large number of religious enthusiasts regard the disease as an opportunity for urging a return to "biblical standards".

The *Guardian* newspaper recently opened its "Face to Faith" column to the Rev Simon Dahlman, minister of the Platt Bridge Church of Christ, in Wigan, Lancashire, and an ardent advocate of biblical standards of morality. After paying tribute to that renowned humanitarian and self-proclaimed "instrument of God's judgement", the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, Mr Dahlam asserted that "human happiness is best met by biblical sexual standards of chastity or monogamy".

Has Mr Dahlman ever read the Bible? Let us refresh his memory about some of the goings-on in the very first book, Genesis.

The creation story — now being foisted on American children by the fanatically Christian Moral Majority — implies that the world was peopled by incest.

The great biblical hero, Abraham, marries his half-sister (Genesis 20, 12), and trades her in for valuables, first with Pharaoh (Genesis 22, 11-16), and then with King Abimelech (Genesis 20, 2).

Another divine favourite, Lot, offers his two daughters to a lustful mob (Genesis 19, 1-8). The daughters later make their father drunk and both conceive children by him. God makes these children the progenitors of great nations, Jesus being descended from one of them.

The story of Jonathan and David (1 Samuel 18,

1-4) may be regarded by gay Christians as confirmation of Mr Dahlman's assurance that God "isn't just out to spoil the fun". But it is unlikely that the minister of Platts Bridge Church of Christ sees it that way.

There is no end to cruelty, lust and violence in the Bible. We should be grateful that most nominal believers ignore the moral teachings of "the good book".

MARRIED BLISS

The Catholic Marriage Guidance Council's claim that television soaps can damage marriages has been endorsed by "morality" campaigners Victoria Gillick and Mary Whitehouse.

EastEnders, with 20 million viewers, is a particularly painful thorn in the flesh of religious carpers. They point to a noticeable increase in the numbers of women and men who attended marriage guidance centres following an episode in which Angie, landlady of the Queen Vic, considered discussing her problems with a counsellor.

The fact that many marriages are saved by counselling appears to have escaped the critics' notice. Do they think that discussion of unhappiness within marriage and the possibility of divorce should be confined to the confessional? Or perhaps they would prefer all married women to be like another long-suffering *EastEnders* character, Dot Cotton. Superstitious, gullible and intensely religious, she always makes excuses for her pig of a husband. When yet again he cheats, steals money from her purse and deserts her, Dot's response is: "Well, we are married until death us do part, and that's it". No doubt such forbearance wins the Gillick-Whitehouse seal of approval.

Victoria Gillick does not allow a television set in her home; she prefers her ten children to read and make conversation. And there has been plenty to talk about in the Gillick household of late.

Last summer daughter Beattie, 16, hit the headlines when she was photographed topless on a Greek beach with her boyfriend.

In October Mrs Gillick's 18-year-old son Ben appeared before magistrates on a charge of attacking a man with a knife. He was remanded on bail. Last month Long Sutton, Lincolnshire, magistrates cleared him of causing actual bodily harm, but imposed a fine of £125 for carrying an offensive weapon.

Televisionless Christian family is certainly crowded with incident.

The Rev Peter Cameron, of St Philip's Church, Edinburgh, is using alcoholic wine at communion services in future. Writing in the parish magazine he says that wine "gladdens the heart and represents good cheer and celebration". Amen!

PROPHETS AND PROFITS

James Anderton is not the only person who receives messages from God.

American televangelist Oral Roberts told viewers that a voice from on high had spoken to him on money matters. And the message — which sounded rather like a Mafia ultimatum — was that he had to raise four and a half million dollars by March — or die!

We should have thought that Oral Roberts could hardly wait to see the Pearly Gates. But like so many who preach about heavenly bliss, he seems reluctant to depart this vale of tears. Hence the fund-raising appeal to which “born again” gulls responded by forking out nearly two million dollars in a fortnight.

Back to the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester: his claim to be a prophet on the receiving end of divine instructions was made in a BBC Radio 4 religious programme. On the same day an interviewee related how doctors and family helped her to recover from hypermania. A symptom of this mental condition is the victims' belief that they are receiving instructions from God on which, regardless of the consequences, they must act.

HUMANISM ON DISPLAY IN GLASGOW

Over 1,600 people who attended the recent exhibition on humanism in Glasgow showed enough interest in the subject to take away leaflets. The exhibition was held in the social services department of the Mitchell Library, said to be the largest local authority reference library in Europe.

The duration of the exhibition was extended from six weeks to three months. It will also be on display during March at Hillhead Library, near Glasgow University.

Norman MacDonald, honorary secretary of Glasgow Humanist Society, said: “I feel that an exhibition of this kind is amply justified by the number of people interested enough to take away information. But it is naturally disappointing that all those seriously interested have been in older age groups.

“There has not been a student humanist society in Glasgow for about ten years, and it would be interesting to know the explanation of our failure to appeal to young people. Is humanism a natural background to their way of thinking? Are they like the majority of Christians who do not attend church yet regard themselves as believers?”

Floris Greenlaw, who was largely responsible for arranging the exhibition, hopes that it will be seen at other venues.

THE SOURPUSS FACTOR

Many readers will recall the occasion in 1974 when *The Freethinker* was forced to change its printers. The firm which did the job satisfactorily for 19 years had the misfortune to engage an employee who turned out to be an ardent Jesusite, and he took it upon himself to omit and alter articles which offended his religious feelings. The firm lost a contract and *The Freethinker* gained David Neil & Company.

Censorious activities of this kind are still not unknown, as publishers of *The Gay Humanist* quarterly recently discovered. The magazine was printed in London, but as its three editorial committee members live in Warwickshire they decided it would be convenient and less expensive to have the work done by a local co-operative. Terms were arranged and material for the Winter 1986-7 issue handed over.

Some time later a *GH* committee member was telephoned by a lady at the co-operative who informed him that one of the articles was not acceptable as it was “offensive to women”. The offending item was Brian Parry's amusing account of his visit to a gay bar in Spain last summer (it was first published under the title “Holiday Camp” in *The Freethinker*, August 1986).

The bar in question was disguised as a church, complete with background religious music and an altar with candles from which patrons lit their cigarettes. Two drag artists dressed as nuns added an authentic touch. Brian Parry reported that the Spaniards took “an almost childish delight in cocking a snook at one of their strongest institutions”. But the article, and Barry Duke's photograph of the “nuns”, were declared offensive by the censorious misery-guts.

The *GH* committee sensibly decided that they were not going to submit on this occasion or have their material vetted in future. They took their business elsewhere.

“Anti-sexist” Ms Grundys are the kiss of death to organisations and publications. Fortunately they and their male supporters of the Doormat Tendency are increasingly being defied.

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Divine Authority and Morality

NORMAN BACRAC

The National Secular Society organised a public meeting last year to debate the question of cruelty involved in the religious slaughter of animals. The platform included spokesmen for Judaism and Islam. The orthodox Jewish representative on that occasion, Rabbi B. Berkovits, subsequently wrote to the NSS justifying his assertion that morality is a meaningless concept in the absence of religious belief. The following reply was sent to him on behalf of the Society. Norman Bacrac is a member of the NSS Council of Management.

"If morality is not prescribed by a Divine authority", you ask, "who then determines what is moral? It cannot be 'the people', because, on the one hand there are so many disagreements between people as to what is right and what is wrong and on the other hand you would have to accept as 'moral' any position accepted by all the people (eg the Nazi genocide). The alternative is to follow the views of some wise man, or oracle (the Platonic idea). But then, who determines who the wise man is? You have merely replaced G-d (*sic*) with some human figure".

On the matter of the logical basis for morality, Socrates asked "Is an action good simply because the gods enjoin it?" You can answer (a) Yes or (b) No.

(a) This means "Whatever God decrees to be good is thereby good. We mortals have no way independent of God of determining the good so we just have to take it on trust that God is good and the only way we can be good is by obedience to his will".

We see insuperable objections to this. Quite apart from the sheer impossibility of demonstrating to all the presence of a unique God, and then extracting what he might have said from all extant "sacred" writings (and reaching universal agreement on the interpretation of his alleged wishes about every issue not dealt with explicitly in the sacred texts)—as if all this was not enough — what will you have achieved anyway? Merely the arbitrary assertion that morality consists in blind obedience!

We see no virtue in obedience as such — only in obedience to that which is seen by the person concerned to be right. We are thus led to answer "No" to Socrates.

(b) This means that the goodness of an action or of a being is not determined by fiat (even a divine one) but by its satisfying some chosen condition; eg for humanists, good actions would include those that reduce suffering. Each human being who wishes to act "morally" has no alternative but to set up his own criterion for good actions. God cannot be involved at this stage without reverting to answer (a). However, once you have decided the nature of

the good, God is superfluous. No act is good just because God (or anyone else) says it is.

Perhaps you think that God's readiness to reward and punish is essential to moral action. We would not wish to rely on this doubtful transcendental assistance even if we believed it was available. Actually, we find the extent of injustice and the very existence of gratuitous pain a strong indication that the world is not run by an omnipotent and benevolent deity. In any case, as all events and every human action are lawful steps in the evolution of the universe (except perhaps for sub-atomic randomness), they could not have been other than they actually were. Thus rational beings, accepting the inevitability of events which have occurred, endeavour to channel their emotional reactions solely towards the future, on which causal effect is still possible. Humanists generally stand aside as religious apologists heap ever more theological baggage on to that mythical camel they call "free will".

Thus your solution — morality based on "divine authority" — won't work because what is prescribed can only be *orders*, not morals. You say that people cannot determine what is moral because they cannot agree with each other. However, this possibility of disagreement is an inescapable fact of life and would occur even if everyone was religious and claimed to derive his or her morals from revelation. Why should anyone accept another's revelation? You do not accept the revelations received by the Mormon Elders now, but you do accept the *report* of a 3,300-year-old revelation! There are certainly many competing revelations in the world today and no chance that everyone will accept any one of them as authentic.

Your imputation that we would have to accept the validity of Nazi ideas because they were supported by "all the people" (actually they weren't) is quite false. You clearly do not know much about the NSS or Secularist history. Refer to J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) where he writes of "the tyranny of the majority". Morals can be determined neither by superior (or even supreme) power nor by majority vote.

To conclude. We regard the desire to inflict pain or suffering as pathological and hence quite impermissible. On the other hand, the desire to cause happiness is to be encouraged. Talking in this way about the effect of action on conscious beings is understood by all. It thus provides the vital common factor when people of diverse nationalities, religions, traditions and ideologies confront one another. Since this language of consequences appeals most naturally to humanists and to the compassionate, it often falls to such people to resolve disputes between rival groups of partisans.

Superstitions Ancient and Modern

STEUART CAMPBELL

I was surprised to read in a recent issue of *The Freethinker* that its founder pledged to "wage war against Superstition in general . . ."; I had assumed that it was only concerned with the "Christian Superstition" and its contents had not led me to think otherwise. Recently I gave a talk with the above title and most of my time is occupied dealing with one superstition or another.

The word superstition comes from the Latin *superstitio*, itself deriving from *superstare* (to stand over). This may originate from the fact that those who survived a conflict "stood over" their opponent in amazement at what they thought fate had accomplished. Therefore their amazement became a superstition and any amazement, any belief in the operation of fate, became a superstition. Modern definitions range from credulity regarding the supernatural (*sic*) to a widely held but unjustified idea of the effects or nature of something. My own definition is that a superstition is a belief justified neither by reason nor experience. This contrasts with my definition of science — "a set of beliefs that are justified by reason and experience".

Of course religion is the most widespread and pervasive kind of superstition, but here I want to examine other kinds. Man has always been superstitious and in ancient times *all* beliefs were superstitious ones. These ideas were crude attempts to make sense of the world and to ensure survival. Some of the ancient superstitions survive in modern customs. For instance the wearing of a wedding ring on the third finger (excluding thumb) of the left hand derives from the belief that that finger was connected by a nerve or vein to the heart (itself wrongly thought to be the seat of the emotions).

The period of Christmas and New Year is littered with the remnants of ancient superstitions concerning the return of the sun, the woodland gods and how to bring good fortune in the coming year (first footing).

The belief that it is unlucky to light three cigarettes from one match is particularly interesting; this derives not from the First World War (when it was believed that by the third cigarette a sniper had time to aim and fire at the light) but from a more ancient belief that it was unlucky to light three candles with a single taper.

The launching of ships with a bottle is a remnant of a blood sacrifice to propitiate the gods of the deep, which was later ritualized using red wine.

Surveys have shown which are the world's most popular good and bad luck superstitions. The four most popular good luck superstitions are as follows.

Touching wood. People say and/or do this after a boast or forecast which was originally regarded as

tempting fate, or the gods in whose hands fate was thought to lie. For rural peoples the gods inhabited trees and so to touch certain trees was to calm or placate the gods. Eventually any wood stood for the living trees, and later still it was enough to say 'touch wood'.

Wishing on a star. Since the sky was regarded as the abode of (some) gods it was believed that stars were gods (or heroes, or human souls). It is believed that good luck may be obtained by wishing when you see the first evening star (which of course might actually be a planet). The superstitious recite the following verse:

Star light, star bright
First star I see tonight
I wish I may, I wish I might (variations on this line)
Have the wish I wish tonight.

It is also thought to be unlucky to point to a star (or the Moon) or to count the visible stars. A falling star (meteor) is thought to foretell a birth or the release of a soul from purgatory.

Finding a four-leaf clover. This must derive from the rarity of such plants. Some believe that it was the only plant Eve was allowed to bring out of the Garden of Eden. Each year about one million four-leaf clovers are sold in Britain alone.

The horseshoe. The origin of this superstition is uncertain, but it may represent the arch of the heavens.

The four most popular bad luck superstitions are as follows.

Black cats. Except in Britain, where they are lucky, black cats are unlucky to have or to meet. Black represents the powers of darkness. In Yorkshire it is lucky to own a black cat but unlucky to meet one!

Breaking a mirror. Since it was believed that a person's reflection was the soul, breaking a mirror damaged the soul, which would need seven years to recover. Many superstitions centre on reflections, whether in mirrors or in water, probably because a reflection was not understood.

Unlucky 13. The origin is uncertain, but it may derive from a Norse legend in which twelve gods were joined by a thirteenth. It is unlikely to have originated from the Last Supper.

Walking under a ladder. This is regarded as unlucky not because something might fall on your head but either because the ladder, wall and ground formed a triangle, the symbol of the Trinity (in Christianity) or because the ladder represented that which led up to the gallows. In the former case God might be angry and in the latter case one placed oneself where the condemned hung. The bad luck acquired by walking under a ladder could be

counteracted by crossing the fingers until a dog (etc.) was seen, spitting three times through the rungs (or once over the left shoulder), spitting on your shoe or making the sign of the cross on the shoe.

While some ancient superstitions may disappear new ones are always appearing. A recent survey of US university students shows that belief in reincarnation, black magic, astrology and ghosts has been joined by belief in aliens visiting the Earth in the distant past (building the pyramids, etc), bigfoot (sasquatch), UFOs and the Loch Ness Monster. The last two are superstitions in which I have specialized. My book exposing the Loch Ness myth was published last year* and for years I have debunked and explained UFO reports. Other modern superstitions are belief in dowsing, ley lines and spontaneous human combustion.

With the growth and progress of science superstitions have modernized themselves. A modern superstition masquerades as a science (really as a pseudoscience). Thus beliefs in telepathy, psychokinesis, etc, are now described as parapsychology and ghost hunters arm themselves with batteries of instruments. Even the religious pretend that their beliefs are scientifically respectable and claim scientific evidence for their belief in the doctrine of creation. In a scientific age superstitions are more and more pseudoscientific and the teaching of sound science is more important than ever.

Superstitions are dangerous because they are based on the ideas that the world is under the control of higher unseen powers and that in some way the future is already fixed. Science has found the key that unlocks the door of the universe, but superstition would block-up the keyhole!

* *The Loch Ness Monster: the Evidence*, Aquarian Press £3.99

"Committed Christian" Supports Killer Leaflet

A deputy headmaster, described as "a very committed Christian", has expressed support for the ultra-Right British National Party leaflet, *Killing Homosexuality*. David Howard, who teaches at Archbishop Ilesley Roman Catholic Secondary School, Acock's Green, Birmingham, wrote to the BNP that he had "read with considerable enthusiasm your sheet . . . and found myself not only agreeing with most of it but delighted to find someone saying the things I have said so often myself".

Mr Howard, who is a member of Hall Green Conservative Association, admitted to meeting leading BNP members at his home.

Describing himself as "a traditionalist with Right-wing views", Howard denied that he is a racist.

OBITUARY

Mrs M. Clowes

Marion Clowes was a popular figure in Merseyside and London humanist circles. A Londoner, she was born of Polish Jewish parents in 1910. Her father survived the trench warfare of the first world war, only to die in the notorious 1918 'flu epidemic.

From early childhood Marion had very poor eyesight, and by the time she was ten it had deteriorated to an extent that deprived her of future formal education. She was practically blind until she was in her late forties when there was a sudden improvement in her sight. Following a successful operation, her name was struck off the blind register.

On her second marriage, to the veteran freethinker Sydney Clowes. Marion moved to Merseyside. She worked for the Citizens Advice Bureau, and was involved in the activities of other organisations, particularly War on Want and the local Labour Party. A staunch secularist, she was a member of the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association. She returned to London after her husband's death in 1981.

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

Mr A. Hall

Albert Hall, who died a week after his 80th birthday, made a significant contribution to Leicester's trade union and political life. He joined the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers (now the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians) in 1926, and nine years later was elected as the youngest ever member of its management committee. He became a full-time officer in 1946. A delegate to Leicester Trades Council for 40 years, he served two terms as president.

Mr Hall helped to found the Building and Social Housing Foundation and the East Midlands Housing Association, of which he was a former chairman. He was a governor of Leicester Polytechnic, former chairman of its Building Advisory Committee and actively involved in the Students' Housing Association. He was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Polytechnic in 1977.

Albert Hall held no religious beliefs. There was a secular committal ceremony at Gilroes Crematorium, Leicester.

Secular committal ceremonies took place at the following cremations: Mrs Herta Bell (Reading); Mrs Margaret Irene Buss (Coventry); Mrs Frieda Garson (South Essex); Arthur Keene (Coventry); Mrs Mary Lee (City of London); Eric Parsons (South London); Mrs Mary Ann Reynolds (Bath) and Captain Leslie Rothwell (Golders Green).

Robert Forder—Freethinker and Radical

ROBERT FORDER

Robert Forder was one of the few 19th-century freethought leaders whose origins were typical of the movement's rank and file. He was largely self-educated, and started his working life in the fields of Norfolk. He came to London as a teenager and soon established connections with reformers and freethinkers. He became a lecturer, publisher and the first paid secretary of the National Secular Society. The writer of this article — also Robert Forder — assesses his great-grandfather's contribution to British freethought.

To the best of my knowledge it is some 85 years since the name of my great grandfather appeared in the columns of this journal. Yet those who are familiar with the history of organised freethought in this country, and particularly the struggles of Charles Bradlaugh, know the name well. However, this acquaintance, and the feeling that he was fairly important, go little further. This short article is an attempt to put the record straight.

Robert Forder was born at Yarmouth on 14 October 1844, the son of a Norfolk labourer. By the age of eight he was at work in the fields for 15 hours a day and suffered at first hand the privations which were later to stimulate his interest in reform.

At the age of 16 he joined the great rural exodus of the mid-19th century and arrived in London penniless. He applied to join the army but as George Standing put it "was rejected as his chest was not broad enough to make a proper target for bullets". He then took employment with a firm of Deptford marine engineers as a labourer and during this time participated in theological and social discussions at Deptford Broadway and on Blackheath. At first, this was in opposition to the principles of freethought, although it seems that his ideas were quickly modified. In 1862 he met Charles Bradlaugh for the first time at an open air meeting in London's Hyde Park in support of Garibaldi. This was the start of an association which was to last until Bradlaugh's death.

By the time Robert Forder moved to Woolwich in 1865, to take up employment at the Arsenal, he had joined the Reform League; his small house at 37 Taylor Street was soon to become a committee room for reform purposes. By 1874 he was organiser of the Woolwich Freethought Association and in the same year, during the lock-out of farm workers, he became secretary of the aid committee at Woolwich, collecting £125 in penny donations. In 1876 he found himself in court with three others charged with riotous proceedings following demonstrations designed to save Plumstead Common from enclosure. Forder defended himself and was acquitted.

By this time Forder seems to have been both well known in the freethought movement and to have gained the trust and respect of "the Chief", Charles Bradlaugh. In 1877 he was appointed the first paid secretary to the National Secular Society on a part-time basis. By 1880 this had become a full-time post. In the same year he became honorary secretary of the Bradlaughite Land Law Reform League. As such, he was to be closely associated with the great struggles surrounding the publication of the Knowlton birth control pamphlet and Bradlaugh's admission to Parliament.

As an aside, there has always been a family legend that Robert Forder spent the night of 23 June 1880 in the prison room of the Palace of Westminster with Bradlaugh and several others. They stayed awake for most of the night due to the striking of Big Ben. Recently, I discovered a telegram dated 23 June at 9.38 pm in which Forder offered to come immediately to be of assistance. Certainly the relationship between Forder and Bradlaugh was sufficiently close for both Foote and Hypatia Bonner Bradlaugh to later deny that Forder had ever been Bradlaugh's "private secretary", although Foote added "his services were at the hero's command during the long Northampton struggle. It was only fitting that the NSS secretary should work without stint for the leader of English freethought". Perhaps it was fitting that Bradlaugh's last public address on "The Evidence for the Gospels" at the Hall of Science, London, on Wednesday, 10 December 1890, was on behalf of a testimonial for Forder. Throughout the 1880s and early 1890s Robert Forder appeared on many platforms as a freethought lecturer. He was one of ten NSS approved lecturers in 1883 with Annie Besant, Aveling, Hypatia Bradlaugh, Symes, Foote, Slater, Moss and Standing. Details of these lectures are fragmentary at best, but he visited the Leicester Secular Hall on a number of occasions lecturing on such subjects as "Mohammedanism" and "Is the Story of Jesus of Nazareth True?". One of only two pamphlets which he published solely in his own name is the text of a lecture delivered to the Portsmouth NSS branch. Its theme is the origin of the idea of the Devil, and the title "There Was War in Heaven".

He earned the reputation of being a good and fluent speaker, although he was handicapped by a weak voice. The generation which knew him are long dead, but jottings made by my father in his lifetime, which derive from the memories of those who did know Robert Forder, describe him as tall, intelligent, reticent and inoffensive with no temper and few enemies.

Most would agree that my ancestor's greatest contribution to the secularist cause was as publisher and bookseller. The premises at 28 Stonecutter Street, London EC, first came into the freethinkers' hands in 1877 when Bradlaugh and Besant acquired them to publish Dr Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*, the pioneering birth control tract. In her biography of Annie Besant, Gertrude Williams describes the premises as a "tumble down building . . . a hundred yards up Shoe Lane from Fleet Street, past Wine Office Court and Gunpowder Alley. The narrow lanes hummed with the clang of presses and the air was heavy with the sweetish smell of paper and printer's ink".

This address was also the birthplace of *The Freethinker*. To begin with, the manager was W. J. Ramsey, but in 1883 he was imprisoned with Foote and Kemp for publishing blasphemous material in *The Freethinker*. Forder took charge of the business. His association with this was to last until the end of the century, and in April 1890 he acquired the Freethought Publishing Company from Bradlaugh and Besant when they dissolved their partnership.

For readers of this publication it will be no novel observation if I state that the history of organised freethought in the United Kingdom is inadequately documented. The story of 28 Stonecutter Street would seem to be a notable example of a history which needs to be written. Let us take the Freethought Publishing Company's catalogue of February 1891 as evidence. By writing to Mr Forder, or calling at the premises, the eager reader could select from about 300 items published by the Company itself; over 250 items published by Thomas Scott, plus about 150 "special remainders". (Oh, for such a service today!) These publications ranged from pamphlets and leaflets to handsome cloth bound volumes and photographs of freethought leaders "fit for framing". I have even seen a leather bound copy of J. M. Wheeler's *Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers*. In taste they varied from Stonecutter Street originals by Bradlaugh, Besant and others, to classics written by Voltaire, Lord Bacon, Thomas Paine, etc.

After 1890 Robert Forder began to publish material in his own name and perhaps reveal his own interests. In particular, a catalogue of "Malthusian Literature" includes Allbutt's *Wife's Handbook*; Drysdale's *The Population Question*; the Knowlton pamphlet (new edition with footnotes and introduction by the publisher); J. M. Robertson's *Over-Population: Its Meaning and its Menace* and Richard Carlile's *Every Woman's Book*, with an introduction by the publisher. These are all collector's pieces now. So too are such works as George Bernard Shaw's *The Legal Eight Hours Questions* — one of his first political statements.

Such vigorous campaigning on issues such as contraception leads us to some thoughts about

Robert Forder's relationship with George William Foote. It is suspicious, to say the least, that Forder's resignation as secretary of the NSS on grounds of "ill-health" follows shortly after Bradlaugh's resignation as President and Foote's elevation to that office. He was not the only one to go. On Bradlaugh's insistence, Forder was to continue to carry the title of "honorary secretary", but he was to surrender all his former duties. Also, Forder seems to have remained loyal to Annie Besant longer than many of her former secularist allies, acting as her main assistant in the London School Board elections of 1889. In 1891, he was to stand as a Radical himself with a programme of secular education, trade union rates for all contracts and the provision of evening schools with practical classes. He just failed to be elected.

Nevertheless, as far as the publishing business was concerned, Forder and Foote seem to have worked together successfully up to 1899. What is more, there is not the slightest evidence that Forder was ever tempted to follow Annie Besant into theosophy. After Besant made her farewell address at the Hall of Science on 30 August 1891, Forder was the first to climb onto the platform to "correct" her picture of Bradlaugh's attitude towards theosophy. Possibly the difference was that Forder's freethought, while thorough-going enough, was a means to an end, and that end was social reform. For Foote, perhaps freethought was the end in itself?

In 1898 Robert's wife, Ellen, died suddenly at the age of 40. After this he seems to have gone into rapid decline and to have played little further part in the movement. He died in 1901 and *The Literary Guide* was to comment that the surroundings were "distressing". Foote delivered the address at the graveside in what is now Islington Cemetery, north London. Those attending included Charles Watts and Chapman Cohen. Foote described him as "a brave soldier in the war of human liberation". He left two sons, the eldest, my grandfather, was named Robert — like both my father and my son.

Robert Forder is interested in carrying out further research into the life of his ancestor and the publishing business at 28 Stonecutter Street. He can be contacted c/o the Editor of The Freethinker.

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BOOKS

THE BRITISH ETHICAL SOCIETIES, by Ian MacKillop.
Cambridge University Press, £25.00

In an obituary tribute to Lindsay and Mora Burnet some months ago, I observed that ethical culture was a "strand of freethought . . . perhaps . . . dismissed too lightly". One of the reasons I identified for this neglect was a lack of good journalists. I might have added a lack of good authors. Of course, many people — including myself — had referred to the British ethical movement and its luminaries as part of broader studies of the "unchurched". But only one special history of the movement had appeared: Gustav Spiller's *The Ethical Movement in Great Britain: A Documentary History*. It was rich in good things for those able to winnow wheat from chaff, but it was uncritical, dreary and very dated (1934). Better known was a lighter, brighter, more recent (1955) but more specialised *Story of South Place* by S. K. Ratcliffe.

Even as I was bemoaning this reticence, a new volume was going to press. Ian MacKillop's history is more critical and more philosophical than its predecessors, and differs from them also in being written by an outsider. Nothing is said about him on the jacket, but I would deduce he is a Cambridge-educated lecturer in philosophy at Sheffield University. The unlikely genesis of the study was his chance purchase at a furniture auction of a collection of books on moral education by a London County Council inspector of schools.

As Dr MacKillop concedes in a Preface, the inspector (Frank H. Hayward) and other figures are excluded from or passed over quickly in his book. These omissions are compounded by the curious way in which the index arbitrarily selects "ethicists" and others for listing. The author regrets limited reference to F. H. Bradley and J. A. Hobson, Mrs Stephen Winkworth and Joseph McCabe. I should have liked more about Moncure and Ellen Conway (even though South Place became an "ethical" society only after their first retirement), Sir Leslie Stephen, Cyril Joad and Gilbert Murray, and at least a mention of latterday appointed lecturers. The treatment of societies is also highly selective. Though a number of smaller ones are mentioned in a chapter on "the ethical movement", serious consideration is given to only South Place, London Ethical Society and West London Ethical Society/Ethical Church. The Moral Instruction League is set clearly in the context of the British educational system, but one would have liked more details of its actual syllabuses. Reference to manifestoes by the International Ethical Union (1896) and the International Humanist and Ethical Union (1952) could have illuminated the British movement, but a necessary

FREETHINKER

first stage in introducing these bodies should be to get their names right. Generally, however, the book is free from factual errors and those "howlers" so often found in histories by outsiders. And by concentrating on the major societies and personalities, the author has some chance — not fully realised — of producing a better "story line" than might result from an attempt to identify and evaluate the 42 societies claimed by Stanton Coit.

In earlier speaking of the British ethical movement as "one" strand of freethought, I was clearly guilty of oversimplification myself. MacKillop usefully identifies three strands of humanism at South Place: "simple" or secularist, "religious" or Protestant dissent, and "ethical" or autonomous. In arguing the last proposition during debates leading up to the High Court of Chancery action in 1980, Albert Lovecy said the society was not charitable because it was religious but religious because it was charitable. This paradox was in the tradition of Coit's dictum that ethicism proclaims "not religion as a duty but Duty as a Religion". Somewhat unconventionally, MacKillop repudiates the use of "ethical culture" to describe the British movement, even that wing of it associated with Coit, Felix Adler's disciple. Though Adler may have been Jewish and opposed to socialism, feminism, ritualism and denominationalism, while Coit was non-Jewish and supported all these isms, it seems to me perverse to derive the ethical church from Emerson rather than Adler.

Whereas early writings on ethicism (and other forms of freethought) have tended to deal with it in an ideological and sociological vacuum, the current work carefully traces its links with contemporary movements: Liberal Christianity, Unitarianism, Positivism, Reform Judaism in America, the Charity Organisation Society, the University Settlement Movement, the University Extension Movement, the Fellowship of the New Life, the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society. As ethicism seems reluctant to acknowledge its predecessors, there is little or no reference to the Society of Friends, Deism and Robert Owen's Rational Religion.

Ethicism also has something to do with ethics, and MacKillop invokes Plato, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Mill, Moore and a number of academic moral philosophers of the nineteenth century. While many texts for further reading are cited, and some useful insights are revealed, the author relies too much on a "battle of the books" without encapsulating their central arguments or the issues they are addressing. Indeed, in a book of this sort it is not safe to assume readers will understand the implications of philo-

REVIEWS

sophical idealism (or idealisms, as it comes in many forms), philosophical radicalism, utilitarianism, phenomenology and other terms bandied about without definition. Another possible criticism is less justified in that, in my view, it could be applied to the ethical societies themselves, and even to many moralists. This is a failure to address underlying philosophical problems while arguing about superficialities (and casuistries) like the true meaning of "a rational religious sentiment". To declare oneself for or against the "autonomy of ethics" (if against, one believes in external theistic or similar sanctions on the one hand, or the domination of psychological or social anthropological influences on the other) does not seem to address these problems. They are:

- (1) For those ethicists who embrace idealism and Hegel's theory of the State as an ethical organism (or Coleridge's, for that matter), what complaint or redress has one if it turns out to be an authoritarianism of the Right or the Left? Similarly, how can one justify any personal liberty in sexual or other mores?
- (2) For those ethicists who embrace utilitarianism, how do they square this pursuit of majority happiness with justice for unpopular minorities?
- (3) How can most ethicists and many moral philosophers identify and then dismiss the Hume-Moore "naturalistic fallacy" (viz, the supposed logical absurdity of passing from descriptive "is" to prescriptive "ought" statements). A solution to this impasse, which I attempted unconventionally in *Nucleoethics*, is essential to the survival of ethics.
- (4) If ethics does survive, how does society pass from it to morality (ie, the formulation of moral codes) and from that to moropractice (ie, individual compliance with moral codes)? Coit spoke of transcendent ethics and personal intuition, but how does one authenticate intuition? If, as many modern ethicists state, moropractice is all about rational behaviour, why should people who are not deranged be "irrational", and how can one *teach* rationality? On either assumption, how can ethicists come to different conclusions about the one issue, as they did at the turn of the century on feminism, imperialism and the Boer War, and a few years later on conscription? I suspect that the ethical movement did not collapse in recent years because of internal ideological contradictions, but took ill at a much earlier time. Probably the Hon. Secretary of Hammersmith Ethical Society, cited by Spiller, correctly identified apostates as "those who had lost heart

in any idea of progress".

Not only great issues but personality clashes determine the fate of organisations, and the British ethical societies are no exceptions. Generally the author recognises and relates these episodes. Those he overlooks or avoids include the "Great Conway Hall Plot" which led to the formation of the Progressive League, later half-hearted conspiracies (which, for the record, I discouraged) to take over South Place for its real estate or propagandist potential, an ongoing feud between Harold Blackham and Hutton Hynd for leadership of the British movement (fortunately, Blackham succeeded and Hynd went to America for some years) and some talk of legal action by traditionalists when the funds of WLES/Ethical Church were transferred successively to the Ethical Union and the British Humanist Association.

I have some misgivings over MacKillop's account of the relation between the Fellowship of the New Life and the Fabian Society, and the primacy of pamphlets from the Chicago Ethical Society or Coit's visit in the naming of London Ethical Society, but he may be correct. Indeed, my whole review may seem hypercritical; for the important thing is that his work has aroused and challenged me, and renewed my interest in a movement which, for all its faults, represented pioneering social work through neighbourhood guilds, interesting experiments in non-religious moral education, and a rock of moral stability in a sea of ethical relativism. Surely no book can do more.

DAVID TRIBE

COD STREUTH, by Bamber Gascoigne. Jonathan Cape, £8.95.

Bamber Gascoigne has written a delicious and intelligent satire on religion. The wicked, almost blasphemous, title — *Cod Streuth* — is strikingly to the point, for this is the story of a priapic religion, "Cod" being an Elizabethan epithet for the male organ of generation.

Just as *Gulliver's Travels* begins with very precise geographical and sailing details, so *Cod Streuth* is given an exact historical location. It is a translation of the writings on a bundle of tobacco leaves found in the broom cupboard of a library in Brazil in the mid-nineteenth century, published in the *Journal* of the Historical Society of Sao Joao and rediscovered by chance by a researcher in the British Library. Thus the gory and godless tale is given a pseudo-scholarly apparatus, with notes and appendix. The text was inscribed on the tobacco leaves in the middle of the seventeenth century by Jacques le Balleur, a French Protestant missionary and coloniser, who at the end of a series of surprising adventures found himself made king by a tribe of cannibals.

When told that the rich language of the King James version of the Bible indicates its divine inspiration, I have often pointed to the superb translation of more sceptical texts in the same century, such as Casaubon's Marcus Aurelius, Florio's Montaigne and Urquhart's Rabelais. Bamber Gascoigne pushes this point to its logical conclusion and in his tale 10 pages of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* become a religious text.

The Bible, which is sent for to complete the conversion of the tribe, is in the pocket of a man eaten by a crocodile, and only 10 pages of a four volume edition of Rabelais survive the need to patch shoes and the ravages of jungle diarrhoea. So by accident, or divine design according to Jacques who believes it is "better suited at this stage to their savage ways", the tribe assume the writings of Rabelais to be the awaited religious text.

From this follows a tale that is witty and full of asides that are far from complimentary to religious ideas and practices. Jacques is made king and interpretation of the text leads to an injunction to fornicate regularly with a growing band of wives. A leading follower jealously sticks to the true "word", and assembled tribesmen repeat phrases from Rabelais "in the manner of the toucan, a bird living in the jungle here which can easily be taught to speak good nonsense". (Could this happen in a more civilised religion?) In the initiation and development of a religion, we see the creation of disciples, of a leader eager to use "the word" for power, of ceremonies, of textual arguments, and of sacrifice.

In the account of events preceding Jacques' eminence among the tribe, there is a hilarious argument about transubstantiation between a reformed minister and a backsliding papist; this arose from the need for care in presenting the theology of communion to cannibals in such a way that they did not misunderstand it as an approval of their own eating habits. It would spoil the reader's pleasure to reveal more of the plot or jokes, but I am sure this Voltairean tale will be devoured with relish by freethinkers. In the Rabelaisian text the Cod is addressed with a list of adjectives including "Hand-filling C., Satyrick C., Formidable C., Sparkling C., Superlative C." — all but the first can be applied to *Cod Streuth*.

JIM HERRICK

Italian art historians have won a victory over the Ministry of Culture. For many years they have been demanding that the "naughty bits" of Masaccio's Florentine fresco, *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve* be uncovered. The Ministry has at last agreed to their request. The crudely painted fig leaves will be removed — carefully.

THE MISSION

"Exciting, exotic and brutally compelling". So runs the blurb to Robert Bolt's book, *The Mission*. Ringingly platitudinous, as befits a blurb, this description is not, in my opinion, accurate. The book is written in the stilted, well-meaning style, reminiscent of the historical novels I used to borrow from the Junior Library. It adopts a bemused, prissy condescension in its scrutiny of the Guarani Indians of 18th-century South America by an Irish Jesuit priest, Gabriel: "Gratified, he watched the women returning with wild vegetables for the tribe and observed their benevolence with the babies. . . He also brooded on their polygamy, their drunkenness and their sloth. When they had culled and caught all they needed for a single day, they were content to sit and talk, or sleep. . . The Guarani discovered him in the forest when he thought he was unobserved, praying and communicating with Christ, and this impressed them greatly". In a less stodgy book, this passage could be seen as ironical. But the book, and the film for which Bolt wrote the screenplay, lack both the intellectual rigour and the lightness of touch that make for irony.

Clearly, the fine minds of producers Fernando Ghia and David Puttnam grappled long and hard with the problem of creating a product that would seduce audiences and critics alike, a film unimpeachable in its street credibility, but one that would do "boffo business" at the box office. To this end, they have assembled a line-up of impressive, bankable names, ostensibly to warn audiences about the threat to the very existence of the South American Indians, a threat which is as real now as it was in the mid 18th-century. In fact the film tells quite a different story.

It was *Genocide*, an article by Norman Lewis in a *Sunday Times* Colour Supplement in 1969, that first brought to producer Fernando Ghia's notice the plight of South American Indians. Robert Bolt was approached to write a screenplay. Bolt's book recounts Gabriel's abortive struggle to save the missions that had been built in the jungle by Jesuits to serve the Indians as a refuge from slave traders. The Spanish and Portuguese were determined to wrest the mission territories back from the Jesuits. Gabriel's only recourse was to passive resistance, while Mendoza, a mercenary who had become a lay brother, was prepared to disobey Gabriel and pick up his rusty sword again.

The film paints a lyrical picture of life in the Mission, even though Norman Lewis has stated that the missions were ". . . little more than concentration camps. (The Indians) died in their tens of thousands from disease. The Jesuits even had some form of breeding experiments going in order to

produce slaves for the plantations". The Jesuits taught the Indians to play and sing church music, and their pupils' musical talent was regarded as proof that the Indians were not mere animals. The film shows Gabriel winning the hearts and souls of the Guarani, though his predecessor had proved less popular with them. A still from the film's opening sequence, in which that unfortunate missionary, tied to a cross by the Guarani, plunges over a waterfall, adorns the posters. It promises a feast of spectacular violence, and that promise, at least, is fulfilled.

Director Roland Joffé (his previous credits include *The Killing Fields*) yokes reassuringly lush production values (stunning cinematography, a score by the celebrated Ennio Morricone which is by turns stirring and intrusively bland) to his uncomfortable story of betrayal and moral choices. Robert Bolt is of course a writer for the stage as well as the screen (his stage plays include *Flowering Cherry*, *A Man for All Seasons* and *State of Revolution*). Unfortunately the earnest debates and furrowed brows that are the very stuff of "the play of ideas" sit strangely in a megabuck epic. *The Mission* seems to me a half-baked "buddy" film (the relationship between Gabriel and Mendoza is thinly realised). The wondrous Irish actor, Cyril Cusack, was

originally proposed for the role of Gabriel, but Joffé wanted someone younger than Bolt's book suggested, and chose Cusack's English son-in-law, Jeremy Irons. Irons has the attenuated, sickly-handsome looks of an El Greco Christ. His co-star is the American Robert De Niro (in my opinion the greatest living screen actor, but sadly wasted here). These two actors head a cast of adult actors representing the White man.

As for the Guarani, they are mainly represented by small children, anonymous throngs of them. With their gap-toothed, lispy smiles, these diminutive actors, well though they play, reduce the film to the level of a travelogue and the status of the Guarani to that of a people at once naive and cruel (That opening waterfall sequence lingers in the mind.) Of course they sing beautifully — or rather the Barnet Schools Choir does.

Fernando Ghia has stated that "I want people to feel guilty, and therefore to become responsible from tomorrow". What *The Mission* does is to give us a self-congratulatory sense of outrage at what happened two centuries ago, and to remind us that differences between the races are only skin deep. Even an Indian can sing Palestrina.

VERA LUSTIG

Mary Webb—A Natural Pagan

V. S. PETHERAM

There are many reasons that cause people to reject religious belief. Mary Webb is unusual, in that her absorption in the love of the natural world, its fields and flowers, birds and animals, led her first to reject the church she was brought up in and later to dismiss the idea of God altogether. Mary Webb, of course, is well-known as the writer of two novels, *Gone to Earth* and *Precious Bane* which made her famous in the late 1920s and 1930s and are still worth reading. Her reputation suffered a decline until recently; there has been a renewal of interest in her writings.

Mary's short and tragic life began on 25 March 1881 when, as Mary Gladys Meredith, she was born at Leighton, in Shropshire. This spot below the Wrekin on the Welsh Marches formed the background to most of her work. A plain girl, her appearance and personality was deeply affected by the development of a thyroid disease which eventually killed her. In 1912 she married a school-teacher, H. B. C. Webb, who encouraged her literary work. Mary Webb wrote, apart from poems and essays, five novels, two of which brought her critical fame; *Gone to Earth* (1919) and *Precious Bane* (1926), the latter winning the Prix Femina. Though acclaimed by many critics she did not succeed with the public. Disappointment, poverty and the failure of her marriage were all ended when

she died in 1928. Then a sad irony. Six months after her death, Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, who knew Shropshire well, praised her books publicly at a literary meeting and they became immensely popular. Such are the accidents of literary fame.

Mr Meredith was an earnest Anglican who took Mary, her brothers and sisters to church every Sunday and endeavoured to bring them up in the conventional God-fearing way. Dearly as Mary loved her father, a fissure appeared between her ideas and his beliefs. The doubts that set in she expressed in an early poem. Humanity was like a group of children waiting at their father's door on a birthday morning!

They only long to climb on father's bed
And cry their terrors out in father's arms.
And maybe, all the while, their father's dead.

What caused this doubt in Mary's mind? Strangely enough it was her deep love of nature. As a child she would sit quietly in the fields "watching the grass grow". Growing up, Mary was absorbed in the life of the Shropshire countryside. Nothing in nature seemed to be too insignificant to her alert senses as her beautiful essays bear witness to. In *Precious Bane*, the main character talks of exaltation and comments: "And even now when Parson says

it is the power of God working in you, I'm not sure in my own mind. For there was nothing in it of churches nor of folk praying nor praising, sinning nor repenting. It has to do with birdsong".

In one poem she wrote:

I worship the earth and the airs that blow!
Churches and creeds are nothing to me,
I have my church where the daisies grow
Under a whispering sycamore tree.

The essays on natural subjects are a revelation of an observant mind comparable to that of Richard Jefferies. Isolated as she was in a conservative countryside, it took some courage to reject the religion of her family and neighbours. The reading of Darwin, Huxley, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* all confirmed her views. As she said herself, these writers turned her into a pagan. They gave her a

rational background to an instinctive feeling she already possessed.

She wrote in one of her essays: "We know that we are not merely built up physically out of flower, feather and light, but are one with them in every fibre of our being. Then only do we have our full share in the passion of life that fills all nature, then only do we possess perfect vitality". Such a creed, in a civilisation that is being dominated increasingly by technology, may not come amiss.

Mary Webb was extreme in her enthusiasms. Often her writing is extravagant and lacks control. It was passion that moved her to revolt against suffering, gave her compassion for the poor and the unhappy. She had an eager spirit with a hatred of injustice. With an imaginative fire she identified herself with things in the natural world and saw no reason for an exterior creator.

LETTERS

DISAPPOINTED

I have been reading *The Freethinker* for about six months, and I must confess I have often been disappointed with what I have read.

Surely the point of the magazine is to adopt a humanist standpoint from which to oppose the physical and mental damage which religion is inflicting on our population. Instead of this, you devote article after article to humorous onslaughts on the lunatic fringe of religion. The point is that you don't have to be an enlightened freethinker to know that the Jesus Fellowship is a ridiculous organisation, or that the various apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Ireland are figments of the imagination — 99 per cent of Christians would agree entirely. Attacking these tiny minorities strikes me as being irrelevant and futile, rather like an anarchist magazine devoting all its space to show up the absurd politics of Screaming Lord Sutch's party.

I found the item, *Plain Speaking on AIDS*, December issue, particularly disappointing. The Catholics have launched a campaign to annihilate the younger generation by forbidding them to use condoms as an elementary protection against the disease. James Anderton has made a speech encouraging the persecution of AIDS sufferers as sinners, instead of sympathising with them as victims. Countless articles counsel us to restore a "moral dimension" to the AIDS debate, implying that there are moral absolutes by which we can judge our fellow men. These are the important religious factors which in future will help the spread of AIDS. But your editorial hardly touched on these issues. Instead it attacks "fundamentalist preachers and doorstep evangelists" for their attitude to the disease. Who cares what doorstep lunatics are saying? No one ever listens to them anyway. Freethinkers should be opposing the less extreme but equally wrong-headed mainstream Christians whose views have much credibility in society.

I am also puzzled by the vast coverage given in *The Freethinker* to the details of theology — articles like *Pagan Gods in Judaism*, the debate over the body in the tomb, the regular quotations from all kinds of religious tracts, etc. As an atheist I do not consider it important what happened to Jesus' corpse, nor am I

interested in knowing all the ins and outs of the world's past and present faiths.

To me religion is important only insofar as it is a harmful influence in contemporary society. Some *Freethinker* contributors display such an unhealthy fascination with every aspect of religion that I sometimes think they unconsciously have more faith in the existence of a creator than the average Christian.

E. CHAMBERS

PLAIN SPEAKING ON CARING

How profoundly regrettable that your secularism appears to be more important than your compassion (*Plain Speaking on AIDS*, December 1986).

Warning of the dangers of harmful "religiosity" could, indeed, help AIDS patients. Where Christians who are truly compassionate are caring for these patients surely their help should be welcomed, even by Humanists?

You accuse the Terrence Higgins Trust of having been infiltrated by Christians. Where there is a need for caring this should be welcomed when offered, regardless of whether the carer is religious or not. Would you prefer to see AIDS patients not cared for, rather than for them to receive loving attention from sensitive Christians? If not, perhaps you could show some appreciation of the value of true Christian compassion, just as Christians are able to appreciate Humanist care. It is the care that counts, not the creed, in the face of this tragedy.

(THE REV) RICHARD KIRKER, General Secretary,
Gay Christian Movement

CHRISTIAN INFILTRATION

Your editorial, *Plain Speaking on AIDS* (December 1986), reminds us that it is the lot of charities to be infiltrated and then taken over by the religious, at which point the original purpose becomes secondary to "salvation". This seems particularly nauseating in the case of the Terrence Higgins Trust.

I was interested because I received an appeal from Shelter whose president is a Cardinal. This set me wondering how we can find out whether charities which we wish to support are being misused for religious purposes and whether there are any charities which we can be certain are not.

N. H. WOOD

FREEDOM AND THOUGHT

Jef Jones (Letters, January) is, of course, entitled to his opinion that anyone who has the effrontery to disagree with Jonathan Sanders is a shabby, spiteful, small-minded misogynist and racist, and a hate-promoting "bigoted liberal" to boot.

I wonder what access a "bigoted liberal" would be given to a paper controlled by Mr Jones. Would a non-bigoted liberal be allowed a word or two, or is *rigor mortis* the only qualification for the non-bigoted label?

The sort of freedom *The Freethinker* values is the kind that prefers to search for truth rather than resort to slogans; that fosters fairness and generosity — even to the point of giving Mr Jones space to parade his doctrinaire contempt for the paper, its readership, and the causes and rights it promotes.

NIGEL SINNOTT

BY THEIR WORDS. . .

The letters by Jef Jones and Jonathan Sanders make my points (Letters, January) about the bigotry of the Alternative Moral Majority better than any further comments of mine could do. The threat it poses to the Progressive movement — in which I include humanism — especially the Left, is evident.

COLIN MILLS

THOMAS PAINE ANNIVERSARY

I have a United States postage stamp bearing Thomas Paine's portrait. I do not recollect the year it was issued, but it does remind us that he has been so honoured.

BEVERLY HALSTEAD

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

speakers include

ALASTAIR SERVICE

DIANE MUNDAY

DAVID YALLOP

NIGEL SINNOTT

BARBARA SMOKER

The Coburg Hotel,

Bayswater Road, London

Saturday, 4 April, 1987

6.30 pm for 7 pm

Vegetarians catered for

Tickets £12 each

NSS, 702 Holloway Road,

London N19 3NL, telephone 01-272 1266

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 1 March, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Ernest Seeley: *The Progressive League*.

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.

Harrow Humanist Society. Programme of meetings obtainable from Rosemary Bennett, telephone 01-863 2977.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Harold Wood. Tuesday, 3 March, 8 pm. Juvenile Delinquency (public meeting and film show).

Humanist Holidays. Information regarding future holidays is obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242-39175.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Institute, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Monday, 9 March, 7.30 pm. David Parker: *The Philosophy of Marxism*.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 26 February, 7.45 pm. S. E. Parker: *Why be Moral?*

Norwich Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone Norwich 47843.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 15 February, 11 am. Tony Smythe: *General Election 1987 — May I be Excused?* Sunday, 22 February, 11 am. Peter Heales: *Pragmatism — a New Look*.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 11 March, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Gerda Hanko: *Helping Pupils to Become Better Learners*.

Thomas Paine. 250th Anniversary Exhibition at the Ancient House Museum, Thetford, Norfolk.

Thomas Paine. 250th Anniversary Conference at Sheffield University, 10-12 April. Information obtainable from John L. Halstead, Division of Continuing Education, 85 Wilkinson Street, Sheffield, S10 2GJ.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday 16 February, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, 117 Pennard Drive, Southgate, telephone 044 128 3631.

"Saved" Hotel Owner Pays a Heavy Price

A Scottish hotelier's involvement with a Christian "miracle" worker, Jim Addison, has cost him over £100,000.

Ernie Anderson, owner of the St Andrew's Hotel, Buckie, Banffshire, and his wife Margaret attended a meeting of the Beacon Christian Fellowship where they were "saved". Mr Anderson was also baptised in one of his hotel baths.

Mr Anderson claims that for six weeks after the meeting he "was in a trance-like state.

"I was completely under their influence. I didn't realise much of what I was doing. I almost lost the entire hotel".

In fact he signed over the deeds of the hotel function suite, valued at £125,000, for only £25,000. It is now the Fellowship's meeting hall.

In addition he gave the Fellowship £22,500 in cash. He was being pushed to give more, but "suddenly realised what was happening and started to resist".

The hotel business suffered. Mr Anderson advised customers to attend prayer meetings. Restaurant, bar

and accommodation takings fell dramatically.

"But you cannot put a price on the damage to our family, our marriage and our beliefs", said Mr Anderson.

The Beacon Christian Fellowship was formed twelve years ago at a meeting in Jim Addison's house. Since then it has grown large enough to pay Pastor Jim, as he is known, £200 a week. It also maintains two other full-time workers.

Mr Addison claims that he has wrought hundreds of miracles since God conferred on him the power to heal. He is a strong believer in prayer, claiming to have cured cancer victims and brought hardened criminals back to the straight and narrow.

Critics assert that Pastor Jim's miraculous powers are confined to fund-raising.

"Incredible Inconsistency" of Sunday Trading Laws

Coventry magistrates have fined a local DIY store £2,000 for Sunday trading. Texas Homecare was prosecuted after environmental health officers visited two of its stores last April.

A spokesman for Texas Homecare said they had not opened on Sunday for some time. "If we could have our way we would certainly trade", he added.

A representative of another DIY company in the city said there was "incredible inconsistency" in the enforcement of the Sunday trading laws.

Many borough councils do not take action against Sunday traders unless compelled to do so by sabbatarian marks.

The *Coventry Evening Telegraph* described the City Council's policy on Sunday trading as "an inglorious hypocrisy".

It added: "The law is a mess. MPs sadly neglected public opinion when they bowed to the lobbyists by voting against Sunday opening.

"Until Parliament recognises that public demand has changed and permits freedom of choice on Sunday, we are stuck with an inadequate law".

The owner of a shopping complex in Liskeard, Cornwall, is planning to get around the Sunday trading laws by building a Buddhist temple on the site. Michael Robinson also wants his staff to become Buddhists.

Mr Robinson claims that nearly a quarter of his takings come from Sunday trading.

The Movement for the Reform of Infant Baptism, a new organisation set up by a group of Anglican clergymen, is to campaign for an end to "indiscriminate baptism". The Rev Alan Wright, Vicar of All Saints, Taunton, and organiser of the group, said: "I have been involved in the baptism of hundreds if not thousands of babies, and I've never seen a difference". Mr Wright would prefer children to be christened after the age of five. There is now a strong body of Anglican opinion in favour of adult baptism.

Children Beaten on the Rates

West Midlands police have been asked to inform Muslim religious leaders that beating children during lessons in Islam may be a breach of the law. The request by a social services review committee is a reflection of general concern about the beating of Muslim children by religious teachers.

Officials are meeting local Muslim leaders to discuss a complaint that children are beaten during private religious lessons held on school premises. The governors of Chuckery Wood Junior School, Walsall, made the allegation to the committee. Their chairman, Philip Wood, said: "There was considerable evidence of beatings. Head teachers observed bruising of some of the pupils, infant and junior".

About 1,500 Muslim children receive instruction in the Islamic faith for up to two hours after school hours in Walsall schools.

The newspaper, *Islamic Republic*, reports that three men have been executed for adultery in the Iranian city of Hamadan. They were buried up to their waists before being stoned to death.